

Archaeology of the Hispanic churches of the 10th century: the circulation of architectural and decorative models

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This research project was granted in 2012 by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competiveness (*Reference HAR2012-35222*), developed between 2013 and 2015 and led by the author of this note. During this working period, our main goal has been to study the circulation of architectural and decorative models, its introduction, keeping, alteration or copy in the Iberian Peninsula architecture attributed to the late 9th and early 10th centuries, this one commonly known as “Mozarabic” within the traditional Hispanic research (Gómez-Moreno 1919, updated in Sastre and Utrero 2015). According to our understanding, transmission of architectural and decorative models depends on the architectural knowledge, both theory and practice (technology), on one side, and on those transfer media (patrons, artisans and documents) which make it possible, on the other. It is therefore that both aspects (knowledge and media) were proposed to be studied in order to approach this topic.

The analysis of the acquisition, losing or, on the contrary, survival of the architectural knowledge has been based on the archaeological analysis, but also on the decorative, documental, geological and structural studies of three ecclesiastical constructions, which are, a priori, similar and coetaneous (late 9th-early 10th centuries), and thus selected to be a coherent “analytical laboratory”, namely the basilicas of San Miguel de Escalada (Leon; Fig. 1) and San Cebrián de Mazote (Valladolid), in the Northern Iberian plateau, and the half rock-cut church of Las Mesas de Villaverde (Malaga; Fig. 2), in the southern area. This last example has been mainly identified with the settlement of Bobastro mentioned in the written records (Acién 1994).

Fig. 1. San Miguel de Escalada, view from the southwest
Fig. 2. Basilica of Las Mesas de Villaverde, view from...

The analysis of the media of transmission of the models (patrons, artisans and documents, after Grabar 1975) has been based both on the results obtained thanks to the analysis previously mentioned and on the study of the related written documents (textual and epigraphic sources, both Arabic and Latin), which contain references about them. This documental repertoire is highly rich in these three churches, compared to other coetaneous examples, which justifies its election to be objects of study.

Archaeological, decorative, documental, geological and structural analysis have been carried out by different specialists (archaeologists, historians, art historians, geologists and architects), who compose thus a multidisciplinary and international scientific team (see below). The archaeology has been however the main disciplinary frame of this project, by applying the methodology of the Archaeology of Architecture to the above mentioned standing constructions. Based on a previous detailed photogrammetric drawing survey of each building, undertaken by the company Urbe por Orbe in Las Mesas de Villaverde and Mazote (this one funded by the regional government of Castilla y León), this method has revealed the stratigraphical sequences of these churches. The typological approach of the fabrics, of the architectural elements and of the sculpture used and reused in the current structures, but also housed in several museums and collections (such as the Archaeological Museums of Leon, Palencia and Valladolid, among others), provides, along with the stratigraphical study and the structural exam of the structures (mainly in Escalada), a new understanding of the building projects and processes, apart from always discussed chronological data. Technology, defined as the practical knowledge encompassing artefacts, materials and

techniques used by artisans (Mannoni 2007), have been thus traced. Besides this, the petrological characterization of those building and decorative materials and the fieldwork undertaken to find out those possible quarries exploited to obtain them help to improve the comprehension of the building planning and opens as well venues of research of an unexplored topic, that one of the early medieval Hispanic quarries. Furthermore, the revision of Arabic and Latin documentary accounts recording, for instance, donations for the building of (monastic) churches and migrations of artisans, on one hand, and the contextualization of the main outputs, on the other, have helped to convert the stratigraphical sequences into historical sequences and the constructions into material culture, going beyond the boundaries of its traditional conception as mere monuments.

All in all, identifying and understanding models have made possible to consider traditional methodologies and hypothesis. Firstly, preliminary results allow revising and questioning the traditional comparative method which tends to establish formal relationships, both shown as influences and parallels, between the mentioned constructions and others, like those belonging to Umayyad Andalusí culture. This method had not hitherto explored the media of transmission, which we have taken as essential in order to know and understand those relationships (Utrero 2015). In others words, making visible the commissioners and the artisans and their roles within the demand and production of constructions are key to better understand (western and eastern) early medieval architectural culture. Secondly, this project has made possible to approach how the social and economical context determines the circulation of models, by understanding demand and patronage through the technological, constructive and productive characterization of these buildings. All in all, these outputs will make possible in the long term to renew the concept and interpretation of the ecclesiastical architecture dated to the Early Medieval period.

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