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The Tripartite Qibla Wall as a Visual Form of Embodied Belief: From Al-Andalus to Mudejar and Morisco Mosques in Exile—Memory and Identity

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Abstract: The maqṣūrah commissioned by Caliph al-Hakam II in the 10th-century Mosque of Córdoba epitomizes the blend of sacred grandeur and political symbolism in Islamic architecture. This structure enhances aesthetic experiences, allowing worshippers to connect with divinity during Friday prayers. A distinctive feature is its qibla wall, divided into three parts, with a central empty miḥrāb symbolizing sacred force. This spatial organization, reminiscent of Late Antique basilicas in the Iberian Peninsula and the Mediterranean, persisted in peninsular mosques even after the Christian conquest of al-Andalus. Mudejar Islamic communities replicated this design in smaller mosques, perhaps to preserve al-Andalus's memory amidst growing repression. Following the 17th-century expulsion of the Moriscos, similar architectural elements appeared in Testour, Tunisia, built by Morisco exiles. These visual codes, shared among Hispanic Islamic communities, reflect the enduring memory of the exile.

Keywords: qibla wall; memory; Islam

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1. Introduction

Studies on the iconography of architecture have allowed access to a series of messages of different natures beyond the visual, where spiritual meaning and emotional character become important. Understanding architectural elements helps to delve into aspects that previous historiography, prior to these studies on the iconography of architecture, had overlooked.

The architecture of worship spaces constitutes one of the best and most varied examples of how the cooperation between different forms and elements encodes a space whose purpose is to convey a series of messages that affect the perception and activation of the observer's senses. The aim of the environment, of the entirety of the sacred place's design, is to generate an approach to the concept of the sacred and to experience spirituality. Religious architecture delineates an expanse beyond earthly reality. Therefore, it is also useful for hosting the fulfillment of certain rituals or liturgies, repeated in their perfection, which aim to bestow antiquity and legitimacy on each of the actions practiced within, whether individual or collective. Similarly, in the worship space, repetitions of visual elements can also be found, which consolidate memory, remembrance, and identity, perpetuating their presence during the religious celebration.

This paper presents various hypotheses on the repetition of a singular design related to mosque architecture: the qibla wall that marks the direction of prayer in Islamic liturgy, divided into three spaces. This design of the qibla wall is striking when compared to most of the preserved examples in antiquity and medieval mosques in the Mediterranean. The qibla wall with three openings or rooms appears monumentalized for the first time in the expansion of the Great Mosque of Cordoba during the government of the second caliph al-Ḥakam II (961–976 a.c.e.) when he built the maqṣura area. According to previous studies, this division of the sacred wall was common in earlier religious buildings that were part of the monumental landscape of both the Iberian Peninsula and the Mediterranean basin,

linked to Byzantine and Visigothic architecture. Besides the form, the symbolic content of the design is also important since the iconographic messages related to the tripartite design of the place towards which prayers are directed sought to reproduce the embodiment of the most sacred belief. This form brings together different symbolic messages of an identity nature for purposes of legitimization and perpetuation of memory, as indicated by the research of Calvo (2008, 2014), Dodds (1992, 1994), Ruiz (2001, 2004, 2021), and Cuenca (2024).

However, it seems that the assimilation and understanding of this tripartite qibla wall design did not end with the fall of the Caliphate of Córdoba or the Islamic period of al-Andalus. During the period of incorporation of Islamic Hispanic territories, mainly into the Castilian or Aragonese crowns, the Islamic population underwent a process of adaptation to the new circumstances. The Andalusi Muslims were able to continue practicing their religion in the minority, giving rise to the Mudejar period. In this period, which extends variably between the 11th and 16th centuries, the Mudejar Islamic communities kept their mosques open, small Islamic worship spaces known through archival documentation. However, some of these mosques have been completely preserved, and there are examples where the architectural concept of the qibla wall divided into three sections seems to have been recovered. This investigation into the reconstruction of the spiritual life of these minority Islamic communities must ask why their religious reference buildings have this singular aspect since the Mudejar mosque has usually been described as a small and discreet place (Miller 2008, p. 132). A design of these characteristics, aspiring to monumentalization, may signify something more: the embodiment of identity belief as an exercise of memory.

Finally, a stage filled with much more drama is also mentioned, related to the expulsion of the Moriscos in 1609. The exiled families settled in various locations in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Urban examples designed and built anew have been found, such as the case of Testour. In this small Tunisian town, a considerably sized mosque was built where a tripartite qibla wall reappears.

2. Theology and Architecture: Embodied Belief through the Three Spaces

The appearance of a qibla wall divided into three spaces in monumental andalusi religious architecture, as seen in the 10th-century expansion of the Great Mosque of Córdoba, seems to have its origins in the continuity of designs carried out during the Late Antiquity Mediterranean period from the 6th to the 9th centuries.[1] These were primarily temple architectures for Christian liturgical use, which took strong root in the late Roman and Visigothic Hispano context (see Dodds 1994).

This section briefly refers to this phenomenon and relates to a new way of understanding the concept of the sacred in a predominantly Christian environment. However, it is within this Romanized cultural context that the birth of Islam should be included as another consequence of the philosophical and spiritual thought that surrounded the circumstances of that time (see Colete 2024; González 2013). This overview serves to establish a continuous study that helps connect the visual relationship and the use of similar architectural and iconographic resources between worship spaces of different belief systems—Christianity and Islam—on a contextual level, without the intrusion of the different orthodoxies and their exclusionary mechanisms.

2.1. The Theology of the Void and the Manifestation of the Sacred Mystery

As indicated, the development of the Christian temple in the Mediterranean, codified as the dwelling place of the sacred, crystallized around the sixth century thanks to various theological debates[2] that had been evolving over time (see Brown 1971; Cameron 1998). Its highest monumental expression can be found in the completion of the Hagia Sophia basilica in Constantinople during the reign of Justinian I and Theodora. As early as the fourth century, some longitudinal Christian basilicas featured a monumental apse, the center of liturgical activity, with a dome presiding over the presbytery, accompanied by the opening of two lateral rooms on either side, known as the prothesis and diaconicon.

Krautheimer (2005, p. 346) noted that, in addition to practical reasons, these rooms had a symbolic function in the overall configuration of the worship space. According to the cited author, in the sixth century, the prothesis and diaconicon gained particular importance as they helped to deepen the Mystery of the Eucharist, one of the primary purposes of the Christian temple from that moment onward. From this perspective, both pastophoria adapted their original function as custodians of offerings (Krautheimer 2005, p. 345) to create a more intimate atmosphere through the privatization of spaces within the presbytery, accessible only to the patriarch, officiants, and occasionally the emperor (Cortés 1999, p. 46). This practice would be repeated in the Friday communal prayer—*salat al jumu'a*—during the era of Caliph al-Hakam II, as discussed in the following section. In both cases, the space becomes a performative site that elicits various emotional and sensory responses from the faithful located in the prayer hall (see Cuenca 2024). The community of believers could only partially glimpse what occurred in those closed spaces, which accentuated the mysterious nature of the sanctuary. This aspect was also reflected in some examples of hymnographic literature from the period,[3] as well as in the descriptions by chroniclers who documented the symbolic significance of the worship space (Grabar 1967, p. 60 and ff.).

From the sixth century onward, the purpose of the temple evolved significantly. It transitioned from being a mere gathering space to a medium for expressing the principal spiritual ideas of the faith through aesthetic values while also serving the propaganda of imperial power. Regarding the tripartite division of the liturgical wall filled with symbolism, there are various perspectives: Grabar (1967, pp. 62–71), McVey (1983, p. 121), and Schibille (2014, p. 81), among others, focus on the apse as the primary ritual interest. This temple area is seen as the sanctuary of divinity, symbolizing what the Sancta Sanctorum of the Jewish temple signified as the Divine Abode. Its main characteristic was the constant light that bathed this space (see Roitman 2016). One of the symbolic attributes of the divinity established by the First Council of Constantinople (4th century) was precisely the consubstantiality of the Trinity, which could be symbolically reflected in a tripartite apse with specific functions.

Grabar (1967, p. 62) and Krautheimer (2005, pp. 345–47) also link the tripartite solution of the apse to a series of liturgical needs requiring specific spaces endowed with new significance. As previously discussed, Grabar (1967, p. 71) asserts that the auxiliary rooms on either side of the apse adopt the same recovered function they had in the Jewish temple: the northern room, or prothesis, is equivalent to the biblical temple's Hall of the Proposition, where Eucharistic species are prepared; the southern room, considering the east-facing apse, is known as the diaconicon and serves as a sacristy, housing some relics and the book of the Gospels.

Furthermore, Schibille (2014, p. 155), following the texts of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and Elsner (2004, pp. 81–83), suggests that the Byzantine ritual is developed as a metaphor for the tripartite ascent linked to Moses' climb up Sinai. This mystical ascent reaches progressively higher levels of abstraction to the point where the observation of God's Glory is the concealment of His face, a characteristic found in the Old Testament (Ex. 33, 22–23. See Roitman (2016, pp. 44–47)). For this reason, the apse space is often presented as an empty place filled with intense light. This performance of the ascent, for the believer, should culminate in the mystical union with the divinity, necessitating an initial ritual of purification or preparation. The presbytery, where the Eucharistic species were prepared in the dim light of the pastophoria, with a sanctuary closed to most attendees and accessible only to the officiant, similar to Moses' ascent on Sinai, manifested as a truly unknown and mysterious place where these preparations took place, allowing an approach to the understanding of the sacred (Schibille 2014, p. 155).

The second author agrees with Grabar that, in addition to the symbolic function contained in the number three, the tripartite solution of the apse responds to the needs of the Byzantine liturgy (Krautheimer 2005, p. 345). The author delves into the ritual of the Greater and Minor Entrances: the Minor Entrance accompanying the book of the Gospels and the Greater Entrance accompanying the Eucharistic species. Both rituals required prior

preparation carried out within the lateral rooms or pastophoria (Cortés 1999, p. 42). By the seventh and eighth centuries, this presbytery space in the monumental cult architecture of the Eastern Roman Empire gained unprecedented prominence, with interior processions occurring between the sanctuary and the pastophoria and exits through the iconostasis to the presbytery to partially reveal the book of the Gospels and the Eucharistic species to the faithful community.

During this period, the figurative representation of the sacred with human forms, deeply rooted in the classical context, evolved towards total abstraction, where light became the main source of approaching divinity. The temple itself, with its liturgical elements, plasterwork, colors, and light effects, would express the grandeur of the sacred.

2.2. The Symbolization of the Triumph of Faith: The Triple Arch

The role of the temple underwent a substantial transformation in the sixth century, evolving from a simple meeting place to a medium for conveying the core spiritual tenets of the faith through aesthetic principles. These principles, intricately connected to imperial authority, were developed between the fourth and sixth centuries (Grabar 1967, p. 60). To emphasize the sacred nature of the temple, along with the development of complex rituals and architecture that supported them, a well-known visual code from antiquity was employed: the triumphal arch with three openings (see Figure 1). Ruiz (2001) argues that the triumphal arch with three openings also structured a large part of the spaces comprising the maqṣūrah of al-Hakam II, a topic that is explored in the following section. Subsequently, the architectural context prior to the caliphal design is analyzed.

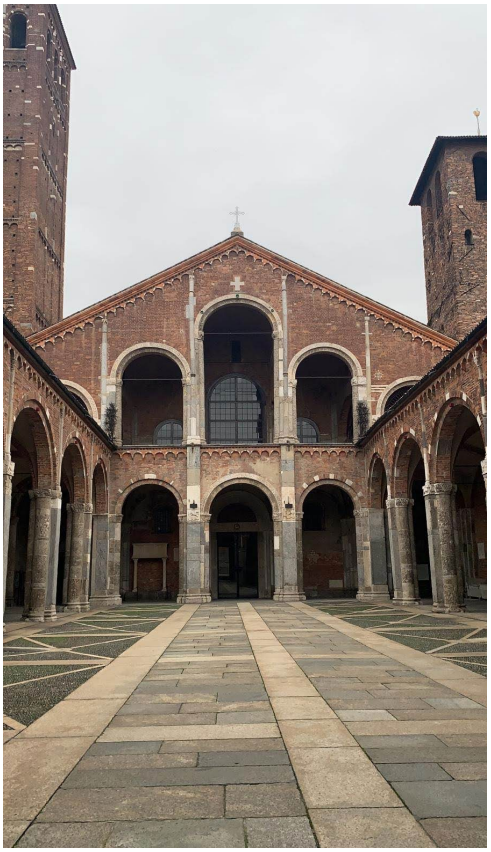


Figure 1. Façade of Saint Ambrosius, 4th century, Milan (picture by author).

The monumental constructions carried out during the reign of Emperor Constantine in the fourth century had a significant impact on the configuration of the monumental landscape of the newly restructured empire. A crucial moment in the art historiography of Late Antiquity is marked by the construction of the Arch of Constantine (Melucco 2001, p. 113).

This design serves as a bridge between antiquity and what is known as the architecture and art of the Early Middle Ages.

Krautheimer (2005, pp. 79–81) notes that the changes between these two periods were gradual. However, the former great cities of the empire transformed into prominent religious and architectural centers. For the commemoration of significant events related to the promotion of the new Christian faith, the architectural forms of the past acquired a new iconographic meaning. One notable element is the recurrent use of the triumphal arch to highlight privileged areas within Christian worship spaces. The main purpose of the temple, located in the city center, is to symbolize the triumph of the new faith (Ousterhout 2010, p. 252), along with an iconography linked to the public display of the emperor's figure (Parada 2013, p. 861). In this context, the revival of the triumphal arch structure takes on a new iconographic significance, appearing both on the facades of buildings and at the entrance to the presbytery, leading to the sanctuary, with a tripartite structure consisting of a large central arch flanked by two smaller ones. This scheme is ideal for the design of the presbytery with the altar at the center of the temple, oriented to the east, flanked by the *pastophoria*, and concealed by the iconostasis.[4]

This tripartite architecture also facilitated the development of the complex ritual of the three entrances, which began to standardize the worship during the reign of Emperor Justinian at Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (Schibille 2014, p. 230). This ritual involved the preparation of the Eucharistic elements in the *pastophoria*, concealed behind the iconostasis, and the entrance and exit through the three doors of the same. The intention was to briefly show the community of believers both the Eucharistic elements and the Gospel book, always kept in the most intimate part of the temple (Cortés 1999, pp. 42–43).

The structure of the triumphal arch at the entrance, with its recognizable meaning of triumph from antiquity, seems very appropriate to support the consolidation of the political–religious power of the new sovereigns. They, along with the religious authorities, are the only ones who can access the invisible contemplation of the glory of God at the peak of the liturgy. The temple, through these visual codes comprehensible to the participants, develops as a microcosm representing each individual's place in the new social order (Grabar 1967, p. 63). During the religious ceremony, the community of believers was relegated to the darkness of the temple's side aisles, a space that recalls their position in the world. They participate in the pursuit of sacred knowledge from this peripheral position. However, the imperial couple, along with the religious leaders, are positioned in the center of the main nave, visualizing the entirety of the Mystery, the triumph of faith, and standing in the midst of the sacred light that bathes the entire space. Above them is the dome representing the Universe, at the center of which is the Throne of God (Grabar 1967, pp. 65–67). In essence, the temple transforms into a performative territory where each participant experiences a series of emotions that connect in the contemplation of the divine in its most abstract, luminous form.

It is important to note that this transformation and iconographic assimilation of temple architecture will have significant consequences in the definitive consolidation of the Byzantine temple in the 9th century (Bango and Borrás 1996), as well as in the Islamic architecture developed between the 7th and 10th centuries (see Grabar 1973).

3. Performative Architecture in al-Andalus: The Great Maqṣūrah in Córdoba and the Tripartite Qibla Wall

3.1. The Iconography of the Triple Apse in Hispanic Basilicas (6th to 9th Centuries)

Between the 7th and 9th centuries, the Iberian Peninsula witnessed an assimilation of forms and symbolic content related to the new changes in the conception of Christian worship spaces. This phenomenon is crucial to understanding why the Umayyad dynasty, once established in al-Andalus, continued the monumental landscape as a visual symbol of its own legitimacy (Rabasco 2023, pp. 31–35).

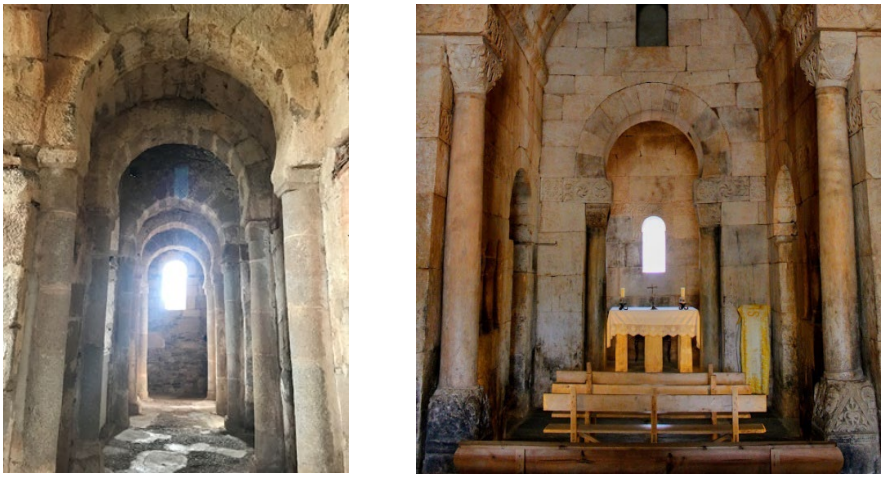
The basilical hall model, characteristic of early Christian architecture, also manifested in the Iberian Peninsula, following a design like that of other Mediterranean buildings.

Initially, the first Christian buildings in the region were linked to the funerary domain, similar to the rest of the Mediterranean (Muñiz 2008, pp. 96–100). Notable examples include Santa Eulalia of Mérida and Santa Eulalia of Bóveda in Lugo, which were likely constructed during the Roman period and adapted to Christian worship in Late Antiquity through the incorporation of ritual elements (Caballero and Feijóo 1995, pp. 52–60). This transformation and consolidation are dated between the 4th and 6th centuries. The artistic language in these architectures followed Roman models but gradually acquired new symbolism (Bango 2012, p. 57).

The first buildings identified as basilical halls for Christian worship appeared in large architectural complexes, such as the basilica of the Villa of Carranque in Toledo in the 4th century, although their specific function is still debated (Rodá 2001, p. 111). From the 5th century onwards, the basilical hall model consolidated in the Iberian Peninsula as the architectural model for Christian worship, maintaining the Roman constructive language. Generally, these spaces were divided into three naves and ended with a semicircular apse, although there were variations in the shape and closure of the apse—polygonal, horseshoe-shaped, flat, etc.—as well as the incorporation of other spaces influenced by Eastern or North African Roman architecture. In some basilicas, such as those of Vega de Mar, Son Bou, or Gerena from the 6th century, a flanked apse by two lateral rooms can be observed.

However, from the 7th century onwards, the complexity of the apse space increased with the tripartite head, preceded by a dome or vault, initiated in the symbolic architecture of the Christian temple found in Hagia Sophia of Constantinople and spreading throughout the Mediterranean (Grabar 1967, p. 74; McVey 1983, pp. 91–121). The division of interior spaces in the basilical hall, along with the use of ephemeral architectures such as screens or curtains and the regulation of light usage, created a hierarchical architecture of the worship place that served to recreate the Mystery within (Dodds 1994, p. 17). The central nave was reserved for high-ranking political and religious figures who could directly view the sanctuary during the liturgy, while the faithful occupied the lateral or rear naves of the basilica. Nonetheless, the sanctuary remained hidden behind screens, where the Eucharistic species were prepared, and the Mystery was represented.

This complexity of the peninsular worship space intensified during the Visigothic monarchy, especially after Recaredo's conversion from Arianism to Catholicism in 587. Significant changes in Visigothic religious architecture were observed from this point onwards. Some churches pre-existed, while others incorporated elements that promoted intimacy within the nave. Examples include the churches of Santa Comba de Bande and Santa María de Melque—with centralized plans—or the churches of San Juan de Baños, San Pedro de la Nave, or Santa Lucía del Trampal (see Figure 2A,B).



(**A**) (**B**)

Figure 2. (**A**) Santa Lucía del Trampal interior, 8th century, Cáceres (picture by author). (**B**) San Pedro de la Nave interior, 8th century, Zamora (picture by author).

In all these cases, a clear separation between the triple apse, the choir, and the rest of the nave is evident (Dodds 1994, p. 17), whether they maintained a centralized plan or the longitudinal basilical hall. These changes in the form and content of the temple, like the Eastern Roman Empire context, are related to the liturgy of salvation and the exaltation of the Eucharistic Mystery to achieve the heavenly Paradise in an architectural context filled with light and shadow and walls adorned with symbolic images. Additionally, the visualization of regal power during the liturgy reinforced the image of the sovereign as the guardian of the faith, linked to the concept of divine knowledge developed during Late Antiquity (Schibille 2014, p. 146). In a vertical relationship, the ruler, positioned under the dome, could more directly capture the essence of divinity in its symbolic form as an incarnated belief. This understanding was much more difficult for human comprehension, as reflected in the position of the faithful on the periphery of the temple's central space.

During the 8th and 9th centuries, the process of Arabization and Islamization of the Iberian Peninsula occurred. The churches mentioned continued in use during the Emirate period, and new spaces were constructed, which are considered direct antecedents of the caliphal maqṣūrah of al-Ḥakam II. In the 9th century, religious buildings such as the church of San Miguel de Escalada (see Dodds 1992, 1994), San Cebrián de Mazote, the church of Bobastro, or San Julián de los Prados (Morán 2009, pp. 337–39), spread throughout the Iberian Peninsula, reproduced compartmentalization of spaces based on the number three (see Figure 3). It can be observed how, at the entrance to the sanctuary, a facade resembling a triumphal arch with three openings is placed, perpetuating the monumental apse flanked by two lateral rooms.

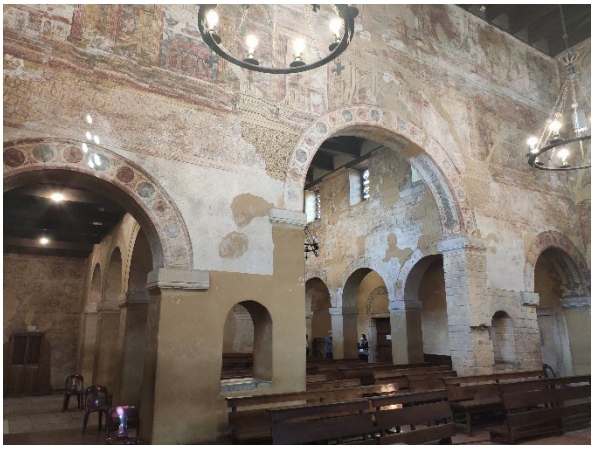


Figure 3. San Julián de los Prados, choir entrance, 9th century, Oviedo (picture by author).

3.2. The Triple Structure of the Maqṣūrah of al-Hakam II

Previous research by Dodds (1992), Ruiz (2001), Momplet (2012), Calvo (2014), and Cuenca (2024) has highlighted the phenomenon of the maqṣūrah of al-Hakam II as a kind of "basilica within a mosque". The private space designed by al-Hakam II as a maqṣūrah, concealed from the gaze of the faithful attending Friday noon prayer, is codified in the Mosque of Córdoba as a ceremonial place that generally symbolizes the consolidation of caliphal power (Calvo 2008, p. 90). It is plausible to assume that access to the most sumptuous part of the temple would be through a monumental façade, as proposed by Ruiz Souza in 2001 in his article on the luminous façade that provided access to the maqṣūrah of al-Hakam II. Currently, only the large central arch remains, which was located where the previous miḥrāb from the time of Emir Abd al-Rahman II stood (Abad 2009, p. 12). This central access arch is distinguished by the combination of a large horseshoe arch with a polylobed arch that overlaps the former (Ruiz 2001, p. 436). The presence of some architectural remnants at this access to the maqṣūrah suggests that the other two large polylobed arches, located to the east—Royal Chapel—and west of this central arch, corresponding to the beginning of each of the three naves of the maqṣūrah, would result in

a tripartite monumental structure very similar to Roman triumphal arches, as illustrated in the hypothetical reconstruction of the façade proposed by Ruiz and drawn by Sobrino (Ruiz 2001, p. 436).

This tripartite façade (see Figure 4) could have been inspired by the metaphor of triumph, fittingly symbolizing a transitional space between the old emirate mosque and the new structure celebrating the triumph of the independent Caliphate of Córdoba (Ruiz 2001, p. 440), imbued with symbolism and studied in-depth by Calvo (2008). As previously noted, there are numerous precedents for this symbolically charged architectural design in both the Mediterranean and the Iberian Peninsula. Ruiz's hypothesis also proposes a vestibule crowned with three domes at the entrance leading to the three naves that extend toward the qibla wall. Only one of these domes has been preserved. However, the author points to various reasons to believe that there were two others on either side (Ruiz 2001, pp. 438–39). The main naves comprising the basilical hall of the maqṣūrah culminate in another tripartite space. This area is accessed through another screen of polylobed arches preceding the qibla wall, where three domes have been preserved, monumentalizing the place (Hillenbrand 1994, p. 132). This architectural solution has a similar precedent in the spatial arrangement preceding the sanctuary designed for the mentioned church of Santa Lucía del Trampal (Ruiz 2004, p. 20; Cuenca 2021, pp. 271–76).

Figure 4. Main access to al-Ḥakam II's maqṣūrah. Current appearance with the central arch and the left arch (picture by author).

During the Friday prayer, the caliph positioned himself beneath the central dome, higher and wider than the two lateral ones, giving him a privileged position to lead the prayer. The three domes precede the qibla wall, articulated into three openings: the central one corresponding to the miḥrāb chamber, to the right the door accessing the sābāt and the location of the minbar, and to the left the treasury room. This results in a comprehensive articulation of space serving as a symbolic representation of God's power and the triumph of the Islamic faith. This triumph is assured by the caliph's actions and visually reflected through forms and concepts known since ancient times.

The triple structure of the maqṣūrah of al-Ḥakam II aids its transformation into a space of metaphor and visualization of the sacred during the communal Friday prayer. The performative character acquired by the maqṣūrah of al-Ḥakam II is manifested not only as a representation of Paradise but also as a metaphor for the process of ascending to said Celestial Paradise. The new structure built inside the Mosque of Córdoba seems to participate in a symbolic tradition that enhances the capacity to sensibly perceive the divine through the materialization of certain ethereal elements embodied in an artistic and aesthetic language (Schibille 2014, p. 155). The expectation generated in the participants'

gaze during the liturgy revolves around the possibility of contemplating access to the Celestial Paradise in Neoplatonic terms, as well as the promise of salvation established by God for the souls of good believers who will enjoy eternal pleasures (Moreno 2005, p. 52; Silva 2011, pp. 39–41). The blessed, according to the sacred texts, are those who maintain the covenant with God and submit to His will. This is explicitly stated, for example, in the right impost of the arch leading to the miḥrāb of the maqṣūrah of al-Ḥakam II: "This Paradise has been given to you as an inheritance for what you did in earthly life" (Calvo 2008, p. 92).

In accordance with the continuity that appears to manifest itself both in the physical form and in the liturgical act, as well as in some aspects mentioned in the first section of this paper regarding the late Roman ceremonials of the Christian context, certain relics were also displayed in the Hispano–Caliphal Islamic ritual of Friday prayer. The caliph would enter the maqṣūrah from the sābāt door to the right of the miḥrāb. Subsequently, a copy of the Quran known as the muṣḥaf of ʿUthmān would be placed before the great miḥrāb, carried by chamberlains from the treasury door to the left of the miḥrāb (Calvo 2008, p. 94 and ff.).

4. The Triple Qibla Wall as a Visual Code of Embodied Memory: Post-Umayyad and Mudejar Periods

The space of the maqṣūrah of caliph al-Ḥakam II, with its luminous architecture, mosaic decoration, and the eloquent void of the miḥrāb, represents the pinnacle of embodied belief. The Islamic theology of salvation and the possibility of attaining the Celestial Paradise by fulfilling the precepts of faith and obedience to the Prince of the Believers is continually recreated within the caliphal maqṣūrah and extends throughout the building of the ancient mosque founded by the Umayyad emirs (see Calvo 2008; Cuenca 2024). Certain visual codes that had reached their zenith in this caliphal architecture, along with other symbolic elements, seem to have radiated and spread across the peninsula, appearing in the iconographic programs of the 11th-century taifa kingdoms (Rabasco 2023, p. 21). As confirmed by the author, the new Muslim rulers, such as the kings of Toledo, aimed to embellish their kingdoms by drawing inspiration from the arts promoted by the caliphs of al-Andalus, in addition to incorporating prestigious elements from other parts of the Mediterranean through intense trade contacts with Egypt and Italy (Rabasco 2023, pp. 26–35). Much of the Islamic visual language permeated the visual culture of the Christian kingdoms as part of the medieval Hispano monumental landscape from the 12th to the 15th centuries (see Ruiz 2021) and also exerted clear influences on North Africa, as evidenced by examples of mosques from the Almohad period (see González 2018). This section proposes different hypotheses seeking to find continuity between the Mudejar period and the maintenance of the memory of al-Andalus through certain visual elements, such as the triple qibla wall.

4.1. Triple Qiblas in Almoravid and Almohad Monumental Religious Architecture

The presence, although scarce, of triple qiblas found in the mosques of the minority Islamic communities after the conquest of Andalusia territories could be explained by the continuity of this element from the Andalusi Umayyad Caliphate, where this form was codified and the will to keep alive the memory of the Islamic period by the religious groups that resisted in spaces gradually becoming Christianized. The complexity of explaining this phenomenon lies in the long span separating these two periods: the late 10th century and the 15th century. Therefore, it is essential to find intermediate examples.

There are preserved examples of architectural remnants belonging to Islamic worship spaces that may have taken as reference various artistic forms consolidated and radiated from the maqṣūrah of al-Ḥakam II during the taifa period. Susana Calvo (2014, pp. 117–25) indicates that in the capitals of the taifa kingdoms, mosques were expanded due to population growth or the need to improve their condition. Examples include the cases of the main mosques of Toledo, Granada, Zaragoza, and Seville. The author focuses on the case of the Aljama Mosque of Almería due to the reform it underwent in the 11th century around the miḥrāb and the qibla wall:

> "In the taifa period, two naves were added, one to the East and one to the West, wider than the existing ones. The decoration of the miḥrāb that appears due to the Almohad could equally correspond to the end of this period, with blind tumid arches in the central panels (common from the expansion of al-Hakam II in Córdoba) and shells over the lintelled niches of the chamfers, like those appearing in the interior of the lateral sections of the Cordoban maqṣūrah in the Aljafería of Zaragoza, and later in Almoravid architecture". (Calvo 2014, p. 121)

González (2018, pp. 6–9), along with Calvo, notes that during the period of Almoravid emirate and Almohad caliphate domination in al-Andalus, some architectural elements present in the design of the maqṣūrah of the second caliph continued precisely as a discourse of legitimacy (Calvo 2014, p. 136). Both authors rely on the remnants of the monumental maqṣūrah divided into three sections, inspired by the Cordoban model, in the Kutubiyya Mosque of Marrakech (Calvo 2014, p. 171). This interpretation is based on the Arab Chronicle of the Almoravid, Almohad, and Marinid dynasties (*al-Ḥulal al-mawšīya*), translated by Ambrosio Huici in the 1950s. However, González (2018, p. 9) acknowledges that the chronicle's text might be referring to the Kutubiyya Mosque 1, built by the Almoravids. The importance of these Almoravid and Almohad expansions in the main mosques of Algiers, al-Qarawīyyīn in Fez, Marrakech, and some Andalusi cases, such as Málaga, Mértola, Lorca, or Niebla, lies in the prominence the mosque gains as a place for preaching the new doctrines,[5] a characteristic also found in the smaller later Mudejar mosques (Miller 2008, p. 132). Consequently, due to the religious practices of the Almoravids and Almohads, the minbar or portable pulpit became an indispensable element, located in a niche to the right of the miḥrāb, the same place it occupied in the maqṣūrah of caliph al-Ḥakam II in the Mosque of Córdoba. The *al-Hulal al-mawšīya* chronicle attests that in the Kutubiyya Mosque of Marrakech, reformed by the Almohads, the caliph built a new maqṣūrah with a room to store the minbar. It also had a passage, sābāṭ, through which the Almohad caliph would appear, initiating the communal prayer. This replicated the ceremonial development in the Mosque of Córdoba during the Umayyad caliphate (Calvo 2014, pp. 171–72). In the Almohad case, the previously mentioned relic, the muṣḥaf of ʿUthmān, which belonged to the Cordoban Umayyads, was also displayed. It seems plausible that this same physical and liturgical structure was also present in the Almohad Aljama Mosque of Seville and subsequently in the Almohad peninsular mosques of the 12th and 13th centuries.

Finally, it can be inferred that during the rule of the taifa, Almoravid, and Almohad sovereigns, the miḥrāb niche retained some particular characteristics attributed to it during the expansion by caliph al-Ḥakam II. Among these is the monumental aspect of a centralized hall accessed through a horseshoe arch (see Calvo 2008). This monumentalization of the miḥrāb, where light and void acquire sublime and symbolic connotations linked to ritual, memory, and the legitimacy of the Umayyad dynasty as rulers of the Islamic West, accompanies the walls of later constructed triple qiblas, as seen in some examples of Mudejar oratories.

4.2. Mudejar Mosques: Spaces of Spiritual Struggle and Perseverance in Faith: The Crown of Aragon and the Kingdom of Valencia

Mudejar mosques or oratories constitute a religious and urban reality that has been less intensively researched (Villanueva 2020, pp. 3–6) compared to the mosques of the Andalusi period. These constructions, intended for the worship of Islamic communities that continued their practices during the Christianization of al-Andalus territories, are characterized by their heterogeneity. Information about them is known mostly thanks to archival documentation, which allows for their localization. However, the examples that remain intact are few, as will be seen with the cases proposed below, but some of them maintain the layout of the triple qibla wall, including the monumental miḥrāb with the typology of the qubbat accessed through a horseshoe arch.

It is essential to highlight that the Mudejar period does not begin simultaneously in all territories of the Iberian Peninsula. This phenomenon is due to the gradual advance of Christian powers incorporating Andalusi territories into their kingdoms. Thus, the Andalusi Muslim population had to adapt to new political forms emanating from Christian sovereigns and decisions from the Church authorities (see Echevarría 2003; Catlos 2021; Calvo 2016; Bernabé 2021; Cuenca 2022). Each peninsular Christian kingdom had a different way of including the Mudejar Muslim population and their practices within the legal framework of their administrations. By the 13th century, when the Crowns of Aragon and Castile intensified their presence heading south and conquered the most important Andalusi capitals such as Zaragoza, Seville, Valencia, Córdoba, Jaén, or Murcia, the documentation offering interesting data on Mudejar rights in these settings becomes more abundant (Barceló 1984, pp. 95–102; Ferrer 1987, pp. 75–78; Echevarría 2003, pp. 58–61).

Regarding religious practices in the mosques of this Islamic minority, Kathrynn Miller (2008) highlights the proliferation of sermons and their importance for the community of believers to persevere in their Islamic faith (Miller 2008, p. 131). She defines it as a form of spiritual jihad, an individual and collective spiritual struggle against evil supported by the defense of faith in a hostile territory. Another interesting form of jihad was the maintenance of daily practices linked to the memory of al-Andalus (Miller, p. 129). Thus, the mosque, whose interior was respected by the Christian authorities, was the space where Mudejar scholars could exert the most influence in these terms through the preaching of faqihs, observing the community's reactions, and acting as spiritual guides.

The Mudejar mosque existed both in urban contexts and rural areas. In the city, it manifested as a small, modestly structured building used for prayer, teaching, listening to sermons, and as a place for debate (Miller, p. 131). As noted, the sermon was the essential element of what happened inside the mosque as a method of religious instruction. In archives, the most common Mudejar sermons in the Crown of Aragon are known as liturgical khuṭbas in Arabic, Romance, and Aljamiado (Miller, p. 141), composed for Friday prayer or Islamic festival days (Miller, p. 140). Consequently, it is possible that in the Mudejar mosques that acted as aljamas, the minbar or pulpit was part of the furniture extracted for the communal Friday prayer.

From the Mudéear period—which at certain moments in the 12th and 13th centuries coincided with the Almohad domination in the southern peninsula—no portable minbars have been preserved, which would have been much more modest than the Andalusi ones (Calvo 2014, p. 396). Tripartite qibla walls with a central miḥrāb and two side rooms have been preserved, suggesting that following Andalusi tradition, the room to the right of the miḥrāb would have been used to house that furniture. This is seen in the cases of the mosque of La Xara (Simat de Valldigna, Valencia) and the mosque of Tórtoles (Tarazona, Zaragoza). Both oratories have a very similar design, which is analyzed below.

The mosque of La Xara—now the church of Santa Ana—is an example of a mosque that acted as an aljama in a rural setting that grouped six hamlets in what is known as the Vall d'Alfàndech, now the Valldigna. The building is located at the epicenter of several roads connecting important inland cities, such as Xàtiva or Alzira, with the coast—Gandía—and northward to the kingdom's capital, Valencia. There is little agreement on whether an Islamic oratory existed before the 15th century (see Torró 1995; Calvo 2014, p. 697). What can be confirmed is that the mosque of La Xara would have been an Islamic oratory in use during the Mudejar period.[6]

Besides having a curious minaret, the peculiarity of this worship space is its tripartite qibla wall, which is oriented to the southeast (see Figure 5). The central room, accessed through a horseshoe arch inscribed in an alfiz (Torró 1995, p. 541), corresponds to the miḥrāb and is flanked by two lateral rooms, the right one being higher, wider, and deeper than the left. This suggests that the right room was used to house the minbar (Calvo 2014, p. 397), maintaining characteristics of caliphal architecture assimilated and perpetuated by the later Hispano–Islamic visual culture. This articulation of the qibla may suggest an Almohad origin for the mosque of La Xara (Calvo 2014, p. 697) and a reconstruction in the 15th

century respecting the traditional forms of the sacred wall, in an exercise of memory and visual legitimacy by the Valencian Mudejar communities. In fact, the architectural forms of this mosque, such as the use of the horseshoe arch, were uncommon in the 15th century. Therefore, it seems there was a clear intention to maintain a visual code linking this Islamic space to the Andalusi period.

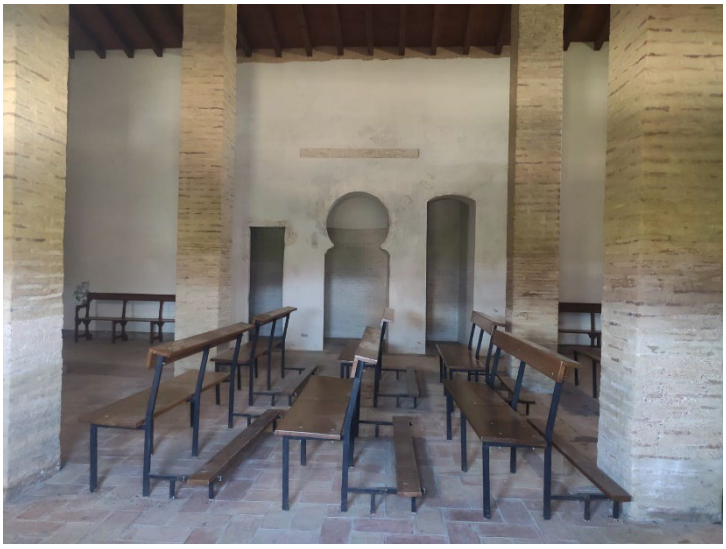


Figure 5. Qibla wall, Mosque of La Xara, Simat de Valldigna, 15th century (picture by author).

The mosque of Tórtoles appears to have its beginnings in the first half of the 15th century (Ibargüen 2017, p. 119; Labarta and Barceló 2019, pp. 26–28). Like the previous one, it is a rural Islamic oratory. Despite its transformation into a Christian worship space, it retained part of its mosque structure: the qibla wall with the miḥrāb in the center and the right-side room. Ibargüen (2017, p. 120) states that the articulation of its tripartite qibla wall in this mosque is due to "a reflection of community (Islamic) reaffirmation". Again, the access to the miḥrāb room consists of a horseshoe arch framed by an alfiz, simulating the model radiated from the maqṣūrah of al-Hakam II. It complies with the orthodox Andalusi orientation towards the southeast. To the right of the miḥrāb, there is a room 250 cm in height, which could correspond to the space for storing the minbar (Ibargüen 2017, p. 121). In this example, the left-side room of the miḥrāb has not been preserved.

As observed, examples of triple qibla walls in Mudejar mosques are not too numerous at present. Many of them, especially those located in large cities, have disappeared. However, the monumentality characterizing the sacred wall of some worship buildings, which were supposed to be as inconspicuous as possible, is striking. Another case, partially preserved, is in the Cortijo del Centeno in Lorca (Murcia). Remains of a room for storing the minbar have appeared on the qibla wall, and its construction during the Almohad period has been confirmed (Calvo 2014, p. 396).

5. Identity in Morisco Exile: The Qibla Wall in the Great Mosque of Testour

To conclude this extensive review of the architectural transformation of the sacred wall in the Mediterranean and its integration and assimilation by mosque designs—especially in the West—as a visual code of legitimacy and understanding of the sacred linked to previous traditions, we must make a brief stop in North Africa, specifically, Tunisia, which served as a refuge for the Morisco population expelled from the Iberian Peninsula between 1609 and 1611 (see Bernabé 2009). The Mudejar population in the Crown of Aragon was forced to convert to Christianity between 1521 and 1524 (see Benítez 1996), marking the beginning of the Morisco period, which lasted until 1609. Therefore, for almost a century, Hispano–Islamic cultural aspects adopted unique forms of expression in a hostile and Christianized environment.

After King Philip III's decree expelling the Moriscos, some cities and regions of refuge were founded by the Moriscos, where they naturally left their cultural imprint (see Bahri 2009), as seen in the case of Testour, Tunisia. Besides the urban layout and the appearance of houses, which were grouped following orthogonal models typical of Castilian or Aragonese distribution (Bahri 2009, p. 274; Souissi ben Hamad 2021, p. 735), the great mosque of the small town also shows a series of Iberian particularities (Souissi ben Hamad 2021, pp. 731, 738). The design of the mosque is attributed to Muhammad Tagharinu, a Morisco master builder originally from Aragon, around 1631. It employed architectural and decorative elements related to Hispano–Renaissance architecture, a peculiar case precisely because earlier Mudejar mosques, as observed, used andalusí elements such as the horseshoe arch framed by an alfiz to monumentalize the miḥrāb and maintained the Cordoban visual code. In the Testour mosque, a rectangular minaret typical of Andalusi Islamic architecture was also constructed.

This mosque also presents a floor plan related to the traditional andalusí mosque structure and even incorporates spolia from Roman materials. It features an entrance courtyard—less common in Mudejar mosques, for example—and a prayer hall with aisles perpendicular to the qibla wall. This manner of arranging the aisles perpendicular to the qibla is also characteristic of the Mosque of Córdoba (see Calvo 2008). The central axial aisle and the one preceding the qibla are wider than the rest, replicating the T-shaped plan characteristic of the Umayyad and Andalusi mosques. The qibla wall features, once again, a tripartite design with a monumental miḥrāb in the center flanked by two side rooms (see Figure 6). In the right recess, the minbar is located. The qibla wall of the Testour mosque displays an aesthetic and decorative canon linked to the 17th-century Hispano style, distinct from the andalusí canon and, arguably, more akin to the appearance of some Iberian Christian buildings of this period imported to Tunisia (Souissi ben Hamad 2021, p. 738).

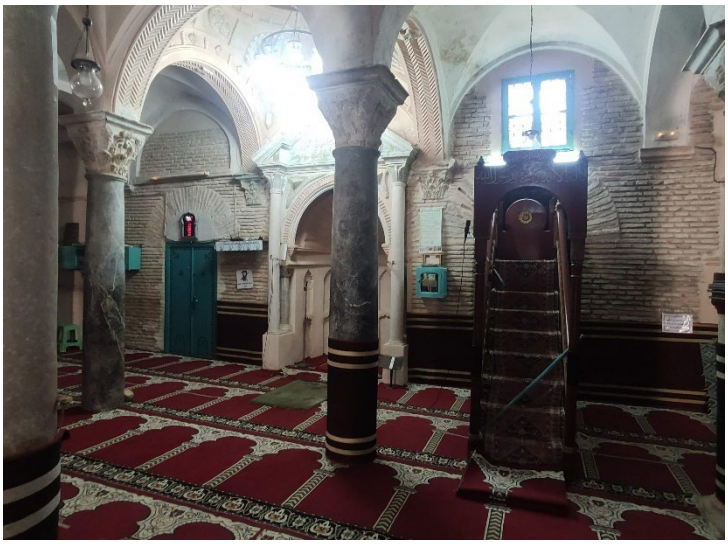


Figure 6. Qibla wall. Great Mosque of Testour. 17th century (picture by author).

6. Conclusions

In this paper, we conducted an exploration that allows us to observe the continuity of certain visual codes that appeared during Late Antiquity in the Mediterranean region and remained alive during the Islamic Andalusian period. Specifically, we addressed the issue related to the arrangement of the sacred wall—not only the Islamic qibla—divided into three parts. As observed, this phenomenon begins to materialize with the liturgy of the Byzantine temple and the internal complexity of the spaces where the divinity resides. Thus, the image of the triple triumphal arch, used in the Roman world, is assimilated by Christian religious architecture to commemorate and highlight the areas of the temple that house the essence of the Sacred, such as the entrance to the presbytery. In this space, the contemplation

of belief is enacted through light and the emptiness of space, characteristics also adopted by the miḥrāb. This visual code transcended the borders of Byzantium and reached the Iberian Peninsula, specifically in late Roman and Visigothic basilical architecture. This influence extends to what would later be known as Islamic architecture in al-Andalus, which incorporates various visual elements from ancient art and reinterprets them. These elements are adapted and evolve within the Western Islamic context.

This phenomenon has been highlighted by various researchers regarding the design of the caliphal maqsurah built in the 10th century in the Mosque of Córdoba. The monumental qibla wall, with its three spaces, is unusual in mosque architecture but very appropriate for the cultural context in which it was developed. It reappears assimilated in the taifa architecture in their Muslim religious spaces and by the Almoravid and Almohad African dynasties. All of them adeptly adapted this triumphant language, which was radiated in an Islamized form during the era of the Caliphate of Córdoba.

The use of this architectural iconography by the Almoravid and Almohad dynasties, driven by the importance of the word, the recitation of sermons, and the need to perpetuate the minbar, enabled Muslims who continued their customs during the Mudejar period to exercise a memory of al-Andalus. Although Mudejar mosques have been partially preserved, the examples that remain, even if discreet, exhibit qibla walls imbued with meaning, identity, and monumentality. In this sense, much work remains to be conducted and much to be investigated. The Mosque of Testour, dating back to the Morisco period and located outside the Spanish borders, opens a very interesting path on how this Islamo-Christian community, in exile, sought to preserve their memory through a visual code with more than a thousand years of history.

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Notes

1 This broad time span was chosen following Brown's (1971) criteria. The author includes the period of Late Antiquity as the time of the formation of Islam, which extends from the 7th to the 9th century.

2 The period between the 4th and 6th centuries was marked by theological reflections on doctrinal issues, culminating in the four most significant ecumenical councils in early Christian history. These councils highlighted various interpretations of Christ's nature. Additionally, this era saw the structuring of patriarchal sees. Bishops played a crucial role as defenders of orthodoxy within this context. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 is historically recognized as a pivotal moment where the distinction between Christ's human and divine essences was proclaimed (see Brown 1971, p. 173; Cameron 1998, p. 23). This decision prompted a reaction from Monophysite Christianity, which viewed Christ's human nature as sharing a single essence with divinity. Following Christ's example, it was believed that humans could transform both behaviorally and spiritually in earthly life to achieve eternal salvation. The message of salvation found in biblical literature, along with Platonic philosophy as a path to wisdom, was a significant impetus for the new meaning codified in Byzantine temple architecture. This temple became a metaphor for the path to the Heavenly Paradise. See (Ousterhout 2010, p. 225).

3 A good example would be the Syriac Hymn of the Cathedral of Edessa, *Sogitha*, which fully reflects the meaning of each part of the temple. See (McVey 1983).

4 See Isometric Diagram Hagia Sophia in Thesaloniki. https://projects.mcah.columbia.edu/medieval-architecture/htm/related/ma_thessalo_niki_01.htm (accessed on 12 June 2024).

5 Fierro Bello argues that during the period of Almoravid and especially Almohad domination (12th and 13th centuries), there was a proliferation of sermons composed by famous Eastern preachers and orators. Both dynasties used them to spread their religious doctrine (see Fierro 1997, pp. 503–20).

[6] Some researchers, such as those from the ATARAL project (Atlas of Almohad Architecture), CSIC, consider that the Xara mosque was built by the Almohads when they conquered the Šarq al-Andalus in the 12th century. This core could have been abandoned with the conquest of Jaume I in the 13th century and repopulated by Mudejars in the 15th century when the mosque was recovered. There are doubts about whether this building was built from scratch or recovered from its Almohad remains. See https://www.ataral.es/ (accessed on 23 May 2024).

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