Article

The Architectural Christian Spolia in Early Medieval Iberia: Reflections between Material Reuse and Cultural Appropriation

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Abstract: The reuse of construction materials has been a consistent practice throughout the history of architecture, especially prevalent during periods of transition when it was preferred for its ability to simplify installation and reduce construction costs. This practice was particularly common in late Roman urban contexts, where construction materials, especially ashlar and sculptural elements, were abundant following the abandonment of temples and public buildings. However, there are occasions when the use of spolia, or reused materials, goes beyond simple material recycling. The reuse and display of certain pieces carry complex implications involving symbology, cultural appropriation, or collective memory exercises that convey messages through new buildings. In this paper, we focus on the unique case of Hispanic Christian architectural sculptures that were "recycled" in new buildings during the first centuries of Islamic domination of the Iberian Peninsula, specifically within places of worship. Through a general analysis and review of some examples, we aim to reflect on the motivations and intentionality behind the use of certain sculptural pieces and their placement in new buildings, which is not arbitrary.

1. Introduction

It is quite common to encounter remnants of ancient structures repurposed in more modern buildings. A stroll through our historic centers often reveals recycled materials incorporated into walls, portals, towers, and bell towers, among other spaces. We tend to attribute this phenomenon to the evolution or transformation of urban complexes over the centuries. However, the deliberate placement of these recycled materials in buildings different from their original context suggests that they may convey a message—or perhaps not.

These reused materials, such as stones, columns, or even decorative elements, carry with them a historical narrative. Their integration into new buildings can serve multiple purposes, from practical reuse due to scarcity of resources to intentional preservation of cultural heritage. Sometimes, these materials are positioned in a way that emphasizes their historical significance or connects the new structure with the past, acting as a bridge between different eras.

However, not all instances of material reuse are deliberate. In some cases, practical considerations or convenience may be the primary factors behind their incorporation into new constructions. Yet, even in these cases, the mere presence of recycled materials can evoke a sense of continuity and heritage.

The use of spolia in architecture is a widespread phenomenon throughout history. Spolia refers to building materials that were once part of an earlier structure and are later reused to construct new complexes, often several centuries afterward.

In this study, we delve into the intentionality behind the reuse of construction materials, particularly focusing on the second life given to pieces from late antique and Visigothic

Christian temples in oratories and mosques during the first centuries after the Islamic conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. We aim to elucidate the real intentions behind this reuse.

We pose questions regarding who promotes the reuse of these pieces, and whether the intention is primarily practical, aesthetic, or if there is a deeper message intended by the promoters of these buildings. Specifically, we investigate whether the reuse is driven by the desire to utilize construction materials of lower cost and effort than new materials, or if it serves aesthetic purposes instead. Additionally, we explore whether there is any underlying message intended to be communicated to the public.

For this analysis, we do not intend to create a catalog of reuses or provide a comprehensive approach to the problem. Instead, we focus on different case studies that, when analyzed in detail, allow us to extract certain ideas and reflections. These ideas and reflections ultimately form a proposal for a general perspective on the reuse of late antique and Visigothic spolia. Through our examination, we aim to shed light on the various degrees of intentionality that existed in the reuse of these materials. These range from their reuse as mere construction material to instances where the reuse holds more significant implications, such as cultural appropriation, religious resignification, or the stigmatization of the defeated, among others.

For this partial analysis, we have chosen some of the most significant examples of reuse of these types of late sculptures in the peninsula, such as the Alcazaba of Mérida and its fortified cistern/oratory, the rural mosque of Almonaster la Real, the mosque of Córdoba itself, as well as the multiple uses that were given to these types of pieces within the historic center of Toledo in a diachronic perspective, from the Islamic conquest until beyond the early Middle Ages (see Figure 1)[1].
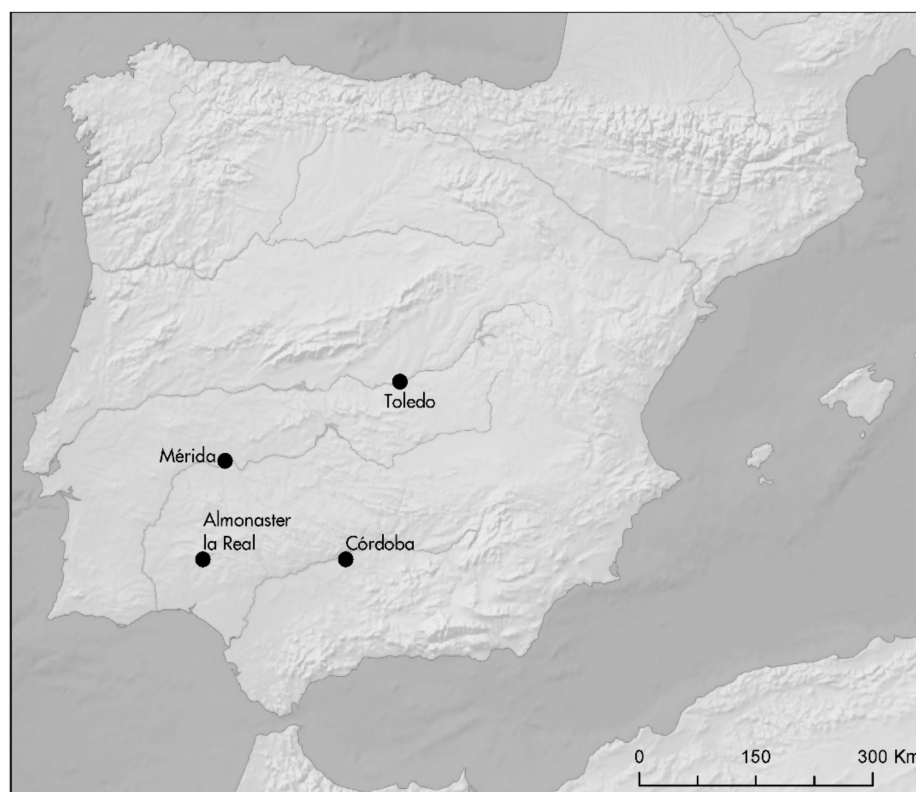
Figure 1. Locations of the buildings mentioned in the text (Enrique Daza).

2. From Reuse to Appropriation

During late antiquity, the urban landscape underwent significant changes, leading to the alteration of the Roman urban ideal. This transformation involved the gradual modification of roads and the abandonment of ancient classical monumental spaces, such as forums and temples. Concurrently, the process of Christianization within the imperial

political and administrative structure began, eventually resulting in the demolition of many "pagan" buildings after the Edict of Milan (313 AD). New temples dedicated to Christian liturgy, which became a matter of state, were constructed in place of these demolished structures (Brenk 1987).

From the late 4th century into the beginning of the 5th century, pagan sanctuaries began to be dismantled and demolished, although not those dedicated to the imperial cult. Consequently, the materials from these structures began to be reused in new buildings, particularly churches, especially those large buildings planned in the mid-4th century (Buenacasa Pérez 1997, pp. 25–50). The importance of these resources led emperors to legislate on how the demolition of pagan temples should be conducted and how their materials should be reused, as outlined in the *Codex Theodosianus*, a compilation of the laws of the Roman Empire under the Christian emperors, published by a constitution on 15 February, 438 AD, which went into force across the entire empire on 1 January, 439 AD. This legislation highlighted the lack of control in these matters, revealing uncontrolled destruction in regions like Egypt or Palestine. The state sought to control both the construction materials and the temple properties, as they were considered state property. The law stipulated that permission from the emperor was required for any closure or destruction, as pagan temples and their assets were owned by the State and acted as intermediaries in their transfer to the Church (Buenacasa Pérez 1997, p. 34).

In some instances, the transformation of these temples occurred without demolition, a process also regulated by the Roman State. In this context, the materials from the desacralization of pagan temples were used for the construction of Christian buildings, particularly from the beginning of the 5th century when the temples and their materials were declared of public utility. It was authorized to dismantle them to use their materials in other public buildings, mainly for repairs (López Quiroga and Martínez Tejera 2006, p. 134).

However, despite being a matter of imperial ownership, there were numerous instances of spoliations that were not controlled by the State. In fact, there was a market for the sale of construction materials and sculptures, allowing them to be repurposed in other contexts (Murga 1979).

In the Hispanic context, the destruction of temples began relatively late in the 4th century, and the use of their spolia occurred notably later, especially in the 6th and 7th centuries. This reuse is well-documented first in urban centers such as Barcelona, Valencia, or Mérida, and later in inland cities and rural areas (López Quiroga and Martínez Tejera 2006, pp. 135–38).

The reuse of certain significant sculptural pieces at least had a clear ideological component. It aimed to demonstrate the subjugation of paganism under the new religion, which, after ceasing to be persecuted, was firmly on its way to becoming the official cult of the State.

Up to this point, we have discussed the plundering of pagan temples and the reuse of their materials. But was there a similar plundering of peninsular churches for the construction of the first mosques in al-Andalus from the 8th to 10th centuries? According to Jorge Elices Ocón (2021), who compiled a documented historiographic development on this subject, there has been a shift from the traditional view which suggested that Islam rejected or showed disinterest in the pre-Islamic past and the material remains of previous religions. Instead, it has been increasingly recognized that Islam made use of pre-Islamic spolia, including Christian symbols, not only for aesthetic reasons to enhance spaces (Cressier 2001) but also due to technical difficulties in accessing new materials (Utrero Aguado and Sastre de Diego 2012).

Moreover, it has been suggested that the use of pre-Islamic spolia and Christian symbology served to materialize certain ideological discourses. This is exemplified in the case of the Mosque of Córdoba during its emiral phases, as discussed by Antonio Peña Jurado (2009, 2010). We will delve deeper into this aspect later.

The Umayyad taste for ancient remains has been extensively documented in the East and should be seen in conjunction with its counterpart in the West, particularly evident

from the second half of the 8th century in. In our view, both in Córdoba and in other peninsular examples, the Umayyad dynasty's legitimizing intentions in al-Andalus are equitably combined with the idea of justifying their legitimacy in front of the Abbasids. They achieved this by using the same cultural and legitimizing roots found in the Roman spolia in the East. This was made possible by their availability and because, according to the legislation from the 4th and 5th centuries, their use and distribution were exclusively a state competence. Therefore, displaying their use served to manifest their status as a state power.

Moreover, the transfer of marbles and capitals from Mérida to Córdoba for the construction of the extension of the Abd al-Rahman II's mosque (Peña Jurado 2009, pp. 255–56) underscores this exclusivity and the Umayyads' ability to execute it. The voluntary and intentional use of these materials becomes evident when, despite the option to use ashlars from plundered Roman works in the city of Córdoba for the foundation of the columns, they opted for newly quarried ashlars (Azuar 2005, pp. 152–53). In this case, there was no urgent need or constructive haste, such as the repair work on the Córdoba bridge in earlier years, which justified the dismantling of walls to provide materials. Instead, the choice of quarry work highlights the availability of suitable quarries, tools, and craftsmen capable of performing these tasks (Daza Pardo 2024).

The same idea, albeit occurring later in time, can be seen in the reuse of more than 120 capitals from Madinat al-Zahra in the minaret of the Great Mosque of Seville, among other buildings, constructed by the Almohads at the end of the 12th century (Rodríguez Estévez 1998). Here, not only is an idea of legitimate continuity between a new caliphate, the Almohad, and the emulated and legitimate caliphate, the Andalusian Umayyad, manifested through the transfer of these capitals from the ruins of the old palatine city, but it also represents the power to carry it out as an exclusive resource of state power.

With all the above, we can see the great variety of destinations of these materials and, above all, the variety of meanings that we can try to extract from their reuse, particularly political and legitimizing discourses. However, it is important to note that while many of these reliefs are on public display, there are also many that have been documented in places that do not have a public exhibition. Therefore, we must reconsider whether some exercises of reuse have a message behind them or are simply valued for their aesthetic sense as sculptural pieces.

3. Case Studies

3.1. The Citadel of Mérida (Badajoz)

The citadel of Mérida stands as one of the most significant examples of the reuse of building materials for the period in question. This significance stems from the variety of materials, locations, and the significance of each element that composes it, ranging from the sturdy construction of its walls and towers to the symbolic importance of the cistern.

Initiated by the Emirate of Córdoba after suppressing continuous revolts by the *emeritenses* in the first decades of the 9th century, the construction of the citadel was a central part of the modification of the urban topography, serving as punishment to the local population. Following the end of these uprisings in 835, one of the most drastic modifications was the dismantling of the city wall, including the upper walks, to eliminate the protection they provided to the *emeritenses*.

Another significant modification was the construction of the citadel itself. Materials from the wall were repurposed for this purpose, particularly from the lining of the wall built during the Visigothic period, which consisted of ashlars from temples and public works. Thus, after quelling the uprisings, Emir Abd al-Rahman II erected a formidable fortress controlling access to Mérida via the bridge over the Guadiana. It served as a formidable deterrent against future uprisings, although such events were not long in coming.

The alcazaba project included the construction of an element that carried all the symbolic weight of submission to the emir—the cistern. Positioned within the alcazaba, it sits in the western sector, near the southwestern wall. The cistern occupies a significant

space within the fortress, situated in the public area next to the ruins of the Roman wall, away from administrative spaces and troops cantoned in the eastern part.

This watering point may have been the only source of water accessible in the entire city after the Emirate conquest of 835, making its significance clear to the subjugated city, and particularly to the Christian population. The cistern provides access to the water level of the river and various springs that filter water from the river, resulting in high-quality drinking water.

In 1999, several actions were undertaken in the area around the cistern with the aim of restoration. During this process, the backside of the galleries leading down to the cistern was documented (see Figure 2). These galleries penetrate the water margin of the Guadiana and are constructed with materials—primarily well-squared ashlars, granite parallelepipeds, and other pieces of Roman construction tradition—that were reused as hauling material, devoid of any symbolism or message.
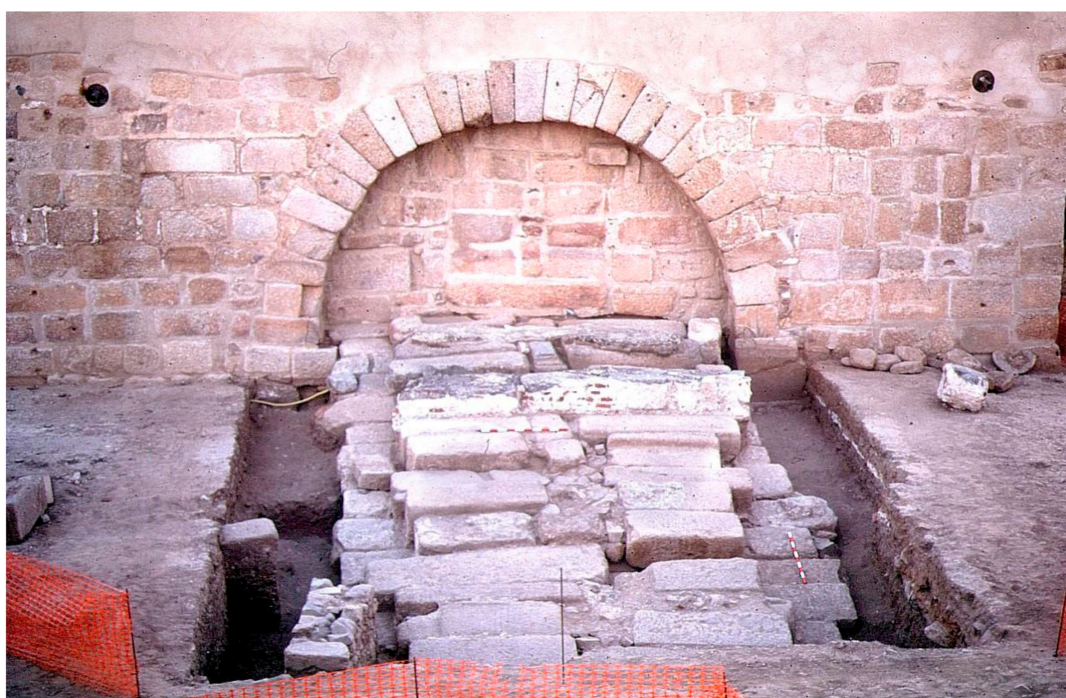

Figure 2. Exterior aspect of the excavation of the backside of the galleries descending into the cistern of the citadel (Feijoo Martínez 2001).

The cistern has two entrances, one to the northwest and the other to the southeast, allowing access to the vestibule, from which two corridors descend to the cistern. In this upper body, several decorative pilasters with Christian iconography of great sculptural quality were reused, likely from some emblematic Church of Emerita (see Figure 3). The exterior pilasters exhibit significant metric and iconographic resemblance to those documented in the xenodochium (Mateos 1995, pp. 309–16), while the gray marble ones are suggested to have originated from residential spaces associated with the bishops of Emerita (Franco Moreno et al. 2020).

The deliberate placement of the exterior accesses and the threshold of the descending corridors as jambs is highly significant. It signifies the plundering of sacred elements from the vanquished and their reuse in something mundane, such as the necessity for water, which they are forced to access. These elements served not only practical purposes but also constantly reminded the conquered of the conquerors' message (Valdés Fernández 1995).

However, the significance goes further. On the upper body of the cistern, a small oratory was erected, equipped with a mihrab with a horseshoe-shaped floor oriented towards Córdoba. This oratory was accessed by a masonry staircase from the outside.

Externally, a reused shell-shaped relief located at the southeast access completed the iconography of the Christian spoliation exposed here, indicating the position of the mihrab to the outside. This enabled the orientation of the prayer, resembling a *musalla*. Some suggest there were even more upper floors and that on the terrace, there was a signaling mirror and a minaret (Feijoo Martínez and Alba Calzado 2006).

Figure 3. Locations of the spolia in the cistern of the citadel of Mérida. (**A**) Southeast facade, with two marble pilasters from the Visigothic period with the probable Roman band above the door, indicating the location of the mihrab. (**B**) Northwest facade, with two marble pilasters from the Visigothic period. (**C**) General view of the cistern vestibule from the northwest, with two gray pilasters reused as lintel of the access to the descending galleries and a white one as a pillar. Another pilaster is visible at the turn of the corridors at the bottom of the cistern, which also reuses a Roman capital. Images: Creative Commons.

Therefore, the reuse of Christian reliefs in the construction of the cistern/signal tower of the citadel of Emerita reflects the materialization of the idea of subjugation of the vanquished, as previously indicated, within a building that serves multiple functions. This suggests that although Christian materials were reused, they do not prominently feature crosses or other unmistakably Christian symbolism. Instead, they may signify more of an appropriation of the sacred, serving to sacralize the new religious and military structure. This perspective diminishes, to some extent, the retaliatory and oppressive idea against the Christians population proposed by Fernando Valdés Fernández (1995).

It is important to remember that the Umayyads of the Emirate, and specifically the governor responsible for the construction of the citadel of the Emirate, Abd Alla b. Kulayb b. Tala'a, had a penchant for admiring and collecting marbles seen in the city, often reusing them in their works (Barceló 2004, pp. 68–69; Arce Sainz 2020, pp. 665–66; Franco 2020, pp. 660–61).

This fact enhances the purely aesthetic values of the pieces and aligns more with the proposition of Feijoo Martínez and Alba Calzado (2005, pp. 579–80), who suggest that the use of this cistern was exclusive to the citadel and the troops, and it was not accessible to the city's population as domestic wells were still in use. Therefore, it would involve the sacralization of a space through the transfer of elements that render the place sacred, along with the implementation of an oratory with an exterior projection to serve as a *musalla*.

According to Feijoo Martínez and Alba Calzado (2006), this space, which combines religious and military functions, could be considered a ribat, although we cannot confirm this beyond certain analogies with buildings in Tunisia.

3.2. The Almonaster la Real Mosque (Huelva)

The small rural oratory of Almonaster la Real is considered one of the best-preserved Islamic worship buildings in al-Andalus. It is a modest-sized structure, organized around two distinct rooms, namely the *sahn*, which still contains the fountain for ablutions and facilitates access to the temple, and the worship space itself, along with a minaret located on the north side of the building but segregated from it. Situated in the highest area of the town, the complex holds a prominent position, both for its visual dominance over the surroundings and for being one of the most recognizable landmarks in the area.

It is often believed that its location is determined by the reuse of a site that may have been occupied by a previous monastic complex built in the Visigothic period (Franco-Sánchez 2015), from which the spolia documented in the mosque would theoretically come. However, apart from the potential origin of the toponym in that Visigothic monastic complex, there is little more than speculation, as there is no evidence today to certify this correlation. Archaeological work in the area has not confirmed the existence of a settlement prior to the Islamic conquest. In fact, the origins of the population remain obscure until well into the 9th century, when it is first mentioned in 822 in relation to tax collection.

Although it is assumed that the mosque's foundation dates to the early 10th century (Jiménez Martín 1975, 2005), its exact dating is not entirely certain. The lack of systematic archaeological work on the building and its immediate surroundings currently hinders any possibility of confirming both the plausible Visigothic origin and the exact date of the mosque's foundation.

It is also crucial to clarify the relationship between the graves located inside the building and its chronological development. In the most comprehensive work to date dedicated to the mosque, it is only mentioned that the graves appeared devoid of human remains (Jiménez Martín 1975, 2005). The fact that none of them appear to be cut by any of the structures that make up the mosque—neither by the perimeter walls nor by the columns and pilasters supporting the system of arches—seems to suggest a chronology after the building. However, it cannot be excluded in the current state that both the tombs and the mosque are organized based on a preceding building that would largely determine the arrangement of both.

Therefore, the set of tombs could belong to a previous building from the Visigothic period, to which the set of spolia used in the factories of the 10th century could be attributed. A specific intervention aimed at clarifying the stratigraphy of the subsoil of the building and the set of tombs seems to be the only way to corroborate the temporal assignment of the tombs and their exact relationship with the building in which they are located.

Regarding the building, the walls are constructed from a mixed framework where masonry and brick dominate, with the occasional use of ashlar primarily restricted to the elevation of the supports of the naves' arches and, on rare occasions, the articulation of the walls themselves, such as in the external corners of the perimeter walls. Its structure is organized based on five naves parallel to the axis of the mihrab, which occupies the central space of the qibla wall (see Figure 4). The building largely conforms to a rock outcrop serving as its foundation and even for the elevation of the walls in a large part of it, resulting in a trapezoidal floor plan. Consequently, the naves do not offer homogeneous lengths; rather, they exhibit highly variable dimensions, with the narrowest ones located on the east and west flanks, while those in the central space have more standardized widths.

Figure 4. Interior appearance of the prayer room of the Almonaster Mosque, with a view towards the qibla (Photo: Raúl Catalán).

The elevation of the naves is articulated by a series of arches supported by columns and pilasters, using a mixed system in which both columns themselves are used (supported directly on the floor, or sometimes on bases configured with granite ashlars) or through pilasters built from granite ashlars. Both these and the column bases appear to have been reused from a previous building, but it is impossible to determine whether it is the same building from the Visigothic period to which the capitals belong or whether it is from a previous, independent building, possibly from the Roman period. The roof does not have any type of vault, except for the small space occupied by the mihrab.

After the Christian conquest, in the late medieval and modern times, the building was renovated to fully adapt it to Christian worship, with the addition of an apse and a sacristy on its eastern side and several annexed rooms on the north side. Despite these modifications, the original masonry of the mosque still constitutes the vast majority of the structure existing today.

Among the spolia used to build the structure, there are materials ranging from the Roman period to pieces from the Visigothic kingdom, although not all of them appear in their original positions. Some, like the Visigothic altar table, are displayed within the structure without a direct relationship to the building itself. Notable among the former are elements such as Corinthian order capitals, possibly supplemented by granite ashlars that often appear as part of the pilasters supporting the system of arches in the naves.

In this context, Susana Calvo Capilla (2014, p. 614) emphasizes that the spolia documented in front of the mihrab are chosen materials for that location, significantly more prominent than those in the rest of the building. However, due to their characteristics, it is impossible to rule out that they were part of the walls of the Visigothic building from which the other documented spolia came, or even that the Roman materials themselves were used by it before being jointly employed in the construction of the mosque at the start of the 10th century (see Figure 5).

Regarding the Visigothic period materials, the group preserved in situ consists of capitals, columns, and cymae, along with other elements that are now decontextualized, such as altar tables, decorative plaques, and funerary tombstones from the 6th and 7th centuries.

The small Islamic oratory of Almonaster clearly demonstrates the duality with which all these elements were used. While the ashlars seem to show an essentially utilitarian reuse, serving as reinforcements for the corners of the perimeter walls and supporting the structure of the arches, the same cannot be said for the decorative elements, where their aesthetic and symbolic values seem to prevail in their reuse.

One of the most notable aspects is that the Christian symbology of certain pieces has been maintained without alterations, as demonstrated by one of the cymatia reused as a capital. In this piece, the four crosses with laurels that constitute one of its faces are maintained without any alteration in size, which is uncommon in the reuse of such elements. This circumstance is exceptional, but the fact that it is a non-figurative element may have worked in its favor. Essentially, if stripped of its meaning as a Christian symbol, the crosses are geometric and not representations of figurative elements, whose meaning within a Muslim cult space would have been less fitting than a series of inscribed crosses.

In essence, this piece highlights the intention to emphasize both its aesthetic values and its religious meaning, giving it a new interpretation within the Islamic context in accordance with its values and connecting with the cult memory that undoubtedly persisted since the beginning of the 10th century.

Indeed, the socio-political context in Almonaster differed significantly from that of Córdoba during the same period. Unlike Córdoba, where the dominant Islamic faith of the ruling elite required the deliberate removal of Christian symbols from reused pieces to emphasize Islamic authority, Almonaster had a different dynamic. Here, the need to highlight Islamic faith was not as pressing, and there may have been less motivation to remove or alter Christian symbols in reused elements. Consequently, these Christian symbols were allowed to survive in the small oratory, reflecting a more tolerant or indifferent approach towards the coexistence of religious symbols in the local context.

Figure 5. The details of one of the pillars in the mosque, featuring a chain of crosses inserted in circles (Photo: Raúl Catalán).

3.3. The Aljama Mosque of Córdoba

As reflected in a recent work on late sculptures in the Córdoba area (Vedovetto 2022), the Mosque of Córdoba has, to its credit, the largest number of pieces reused in an Islamic building within this framework, with a total of 95 spolia. Naturally, delving into detail about all of these pieces far exceeds the scope of this work, but given the importance of the Mosque of Córdoba, it is essential to make a series of clarifications regarding the use of spolia in this construction[2].

First and foremost, it is important to highlight that until very recently, there was doubt regarding whether the numerous pieces reused in the earliest phases of the building could be linked to the existence of the old Visigoth episcopal seat in the area (Arce Sainz 2015; Moreno Torrero 2021, p. 278). The argument stemmed from the archaeological evidence uncovered by excavations within the mosque itself, which failed to definitively establish the existence of a preceding structure to which this collection of elements could be attributed. None of the interventions appeared to confirm the presence of buildings of sufficient importance in the area that could have supported the placement of the famous Basilica of San Vicente near the mosque. Given these findings, it was reasonable to question whether the significant amount of spolia found in the Umayyad oratory could indeed have originated from the hypothetical Visigothic basilica. Consequently, its source may need to be found in other buildings within the city of Córdoba itself.

However, recent archaeological findings have contradicted these arguments. Excavations carried out in the courtyard of the mosque have unveiled a monumental building of late Roman and Visigothic origin, which experts identify as potentially part of an *episcopium* (León Muñoz and Ortiz Urbano 2022). Although certainty regarding whether this structure represents the episcopal complex from the Visigothic period is lacking, further excavations are necessary to fully comprehend its layout and stratigraphic sequence.

Nonetheless, the association of this building with an episcopal complex is highly plausible based on the characteristics of the recovered remains. The transformation of a Christian space by the Umayyad dynasty would not be exceptional but would rather add to the documented examples in the East by the first caliphs of this dynasty (Gonzalez Gutierrez 2022).

Though it cannot be definitively confirmed that the unearthed remains belong to the basilica mentioned in Islamic sources, it is evident that this was a monumentalized building likely adorned with numerous sculptural pieces, possibly including spolia. Recent excavations have shown that this structure was systematically dismantled following the Islamic conquest, with the ground level being raised to its current state. By reevaluating previous excavations and analyzing the stratigraphic sequence of the newly discovered building alongside the arrangement of spolia elements within the mosque, the authors propose that much of this material, displaying unmistakably Christian symbolism, originated from this earlier structure.

The authors argue that the reuse of these elements, many of which exhibit mutilations such as defaced crosses, and their placement predominantly in the central naves and patio facade of the Islamic oratory, served a clear symbolic purpose (León Muñoz and Ortiz Urbano 2022). We concur with this interpretation, as we believe that the intention behind reusing these elements was to ideologically reinforce the new authorities both religiously and politically. From a cultural standpoint, the continuity of spiritual use within a space of Christian origin, now repurposed for Islamic worship, served to bolster the legitimacy of the new rulers in al-Andalus, assuming the accuracy of transmitted historical sources.

Moreover, the political implications of reusing elements from the episcopal complex should not be understated. During the Visigothic period, the bishop held significant political authority, not only locally but also within the kingdom's organization. Therefore, the reuse of these elements would have conveyed a powerful political message.

Furthermore, it is crucial to consider the temporal, spatial, and sociopolitical context surrounding the reuse of these spolia. This context includes the significance of the mosque aljama as a space for the representation and projection of the emir/caliph, who held the highest political and religious authority in al-Andalus. It is conceivable that meticulous efforts were made to eliminate explicitly Christian symbols from the building, reinforcing the image of the leader as wholly committed to the Islamic faith and eliminating any doubt about his orthodoxy. The presence of the emir leading Friday prayers in a structure containing Christian elements may have sparked controversies that were preemptively addressed through their removal (Peña Jurado 2009, 2010; Calvo Capilla 2014).

Lastly, it is essential not to overlook the local context that, despite being the capital of the new Umayyad state, Córdoba boasted a significant Christian community. This community, beyond its sheer numerical strength, included members of the Hispano-Visigothic aristocracy, whose resources were undoubtedly considerable, as evidenced in subsequent years. The expropriation, destruction, and reuse of elements from the episcopal palace, along with the deliberate mutilation of its Christian features, served as a clear message from the emir regarding his allegiance to the burgeoning Islamic state. This message resonated not only from a religious standpoint but also held immense political significance. As seen in the case of Toledo, albeit in a different context, the spolia and their strategic utilization appear to have served as a potent tool for advancing demands that, originating in the religious realm, transcended into elements of political pressure.

Finally, we cannot conclude our analysis of the use of spolia in the Córdoba Mosque without addressing their utilization in the initial phase of the building. This aspect is crucial for comprehending the entirety of Hispanic decorative sculpture from the 7th and 8th centuries, particularly amid the ongoing debate between proponents of traditional/Visigothic theories and those advocating for the predominance of Umayyad/Mozarabic influence (See Figure 6).
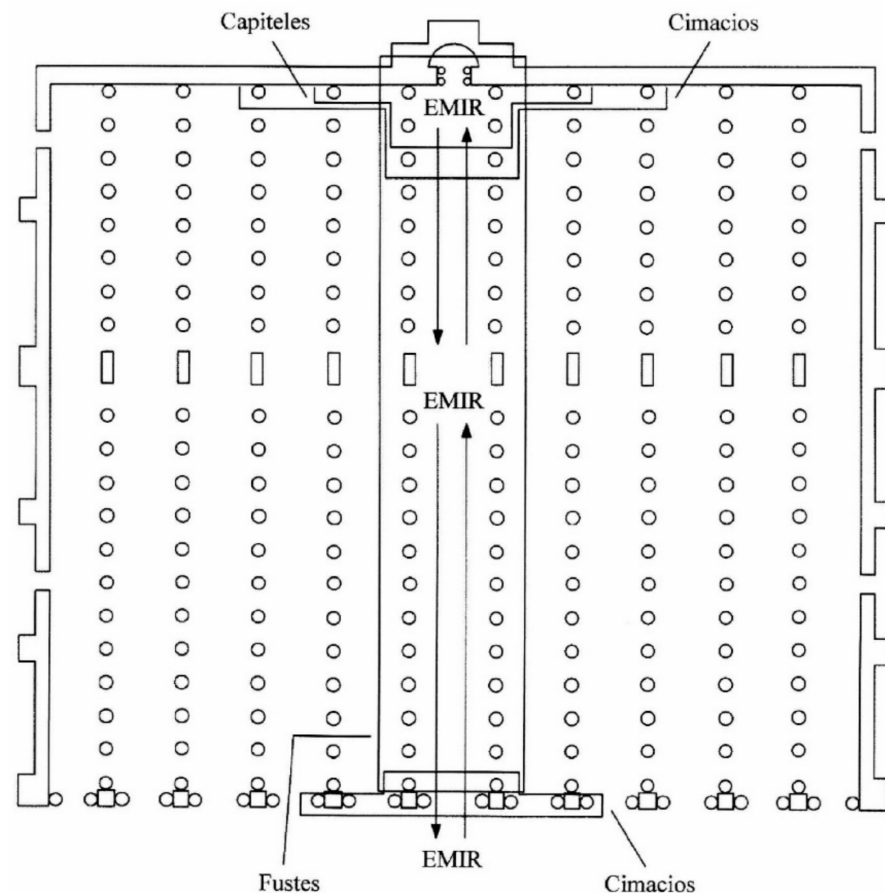
Figure 6. Plan of the Mosque of Córdoba, in its pre-Caliphate phase, with the location of the Roman and late antique spolia reused in the factory, according to Antonio Peña Jurado (2009, p. 267, Figure 14).

Recent archaeological discoveries in the courtyard of the mosque, confirming the existence of a substantial pre-existing complex, likely dating back to the Visigothic period, significantly challenge the coherence of the Mozarabist approach. Chronologically and documentarily, it becomes exceedingly difficult to reconcile these data within the Mozarabic framework. Rejecting the notion, as some proponents of this perspective do (Arce Sainz 2015), that the documented set of cymae in the early phases of the mosque, nine in total, originated from a nearby or underlying structure, forces the conclusion that they must have come from another edifice elsewhere in the city, predating the construction of the Islamic oratory around 786 AD.

Moreover, following these arguments, the hypothetical influx of Umayyad influences observed in early medieval Hispanic sculptures could not have occurred until the arrival of this dynasty on the peninsula in 756 AD. Therefore, the structure to which the spolia of the mosque are attributed cannot predate this date. This leaves a narrow window of merely thirty years for the construction of a Christian building that was subsequently dismantled before 786 AD thus justifying the presence of its reliefs in the initial phase of the mosque (See Figure 7).

The primary challenge presented by this scenario lies in the absence of documentary evidence supporting the existence of a Christian building dating back to around 756 AD, nor do historical records mention the dismantling of such a structure to supply materials for the mosque. Additionally, the notion that the demolition of the building itself, presumed to have been erected post 756 AD according to the Mozarabist thesis, contradicts the essence of this theory. The Mozarabist perspective posits a flourishing of Christian constructions under Islamic rule without restrictions imposed by Islamic authorities.

Figure 7. Cymae of the emiral phases of the Córdoba Mosque displaying Christian symbolism (crosses) that have been intentionally eliminated (Photos: http://marcelodelcampo.blogspot.com, accessed on 20 April 2024).

While authors like Fernando Arce Sainz (2015) suggest that the principal Christian structure in Visigothic Córdoba was the Church of San Acisclo, situated within the Cercadilla complex, and propose it as the origin of the elements reused in the mosque, this assertion lacks corroborating evidence. Conversely, there are accounts, albeit belated, documenting the dismantling of a Christian edifice situated on the mosque's grounds by the first Umayyad emir. This narrative aligns seamlessly with the latest archaeological findings in the courtyard of the complex, lending credence to both a strictly archaeological interpretation and a textual approach.

In conclusion, while it is theoretically conceivable that a Christian temple could have been constructed shortly after 756 AD only to be entirely dismantled by the mid-780s, the utter absence of any mention of such a structure, coupled with the emergence of what unmistakably appears to be the Visigothic episcopal complex beneath the mosque's courtyard, unequivocally undermines this theory. Both written and archaeological sources lend strong support to the "Visigothic" theses, which posit the existence of a pre-existing complex predating the construction of the mosque which was largely utilized as a source of materials for the mosque's construction.

3.4. The Different Uses of Late Ancient and Visigothic Spolia in the City of Toledo

In the case of Toledo, we encounter various instances of the reuse of late antique religious sculptural material, with particular emphasis on pilasters, capitals, niche plaques, and reliefs, featuring diverse motifs such as vegetal chains, geometric patterns, scallops, and crosses. These materials have been repurposed in a range of buildings, including former mosques and Mozarabic churches within the urban area. Additionally, there is a proliferation of small fragments adorning walls, some bearing particular symbolism, showcasing aesthetic reuse in most cases, though exceptions exist which we will explore later.

It is important to highlight the meticulous localization and study efforts that have been ongoing for decades, particularly given the challenges posed by the placement of many pieces in inaccessible spaces or their small size. One notable contribution is the *Regia Sedes Toletana* compilation, published in 2006. This extensive cataloging project, overseen by Rafael Barroso, Jesús Carrobles, and Jorge Morín, and sponsored by the Provincial Council of Toledo and the Royal Foundation of Toledo, comprehensively documents all known remains up to that time (Barroso et al. 2007).

3.4.1. Sculptural Remains from the Visigothic Period in Mosques

The identification of mosques in the historic center of Toledo poses a significant challenge. While historical documents reference many mosques spanning over four centuries, only a few are currently confirmed. A similar challenge arises with minarets and bell towers, where a deeply ingrained construction tradition complicates the distinction between

different chronological stages dating from the 10th to the 15th centuries (Izquierdo Benito 2006; Ruiz-Morote Tramblin 2018).

In this regard, Juan Manuel Rojas Rodríguez-Malo (2006, p. 54), drawing on references from Pavón Maldonado (1988, pp. 77–79), proposes three groups of towers (A, B, and C). Group A comprises solely the El Salvador tower, recognized as the only Toledo bell tower considered a minaret constructed before 1084. It is also associated with the remains of a partially preserved mosque in this parish, featuring intriguing spolia, which will be discussed later.

Similarly, the second group (B) includes the towers of the Churches of Santiago del Arrabal, San Bartolomé, and San Andrés. These constructions present a complex chronological adjustment, as they were likely built with the functionality of Christian bell towers but exhibit a conception akin to minarets. Rojas suggests their construction probably dates from the late 11th century to the early 12th century. However, as no remains of a mosque have been documented in the temples adjacent to these towers, their classification as minarets has become less certain (Rojas Rodríguez-Malo 2006, p. 55).

In Toledo, there is substantial evidence of mosques in various areas of the city's topography. Among these, notable examples include the Tornerías Mosque, Bab al-Mardum[3] or the Cristo de la Luz Mosque, and the San Lorenzo Mosque. Additionally, Santa Justa and Santa Rufina, San Ginés, San Sebastián, and the previously mentioned El Salvador are noteworthy additions to this list. These mosques are characterized by abundant late antique and Visigothic sculptural remains within their structures (Rütenik 2009, p. 453; Calvo Capilla 2014, pp. 424–57).

The Church of Saints Justa and Rufina stands out as one of the most notable examples of potential mosques documented in Toledo's old town, featuring the presence of materials from Visigothic chronology reused in its structure. Within this church, a veined marble pilaster adorned with plant decorations serves as a jamb in a blocked-off entrance to the temple, interpreted as functional during its time as a mosque. This entrance comprises a well-preserved horseshoe arch constructed from excellent sandstone ashlar, still showcasing vegetal plaster decoration on its rear side.

According to José Amador de los Ríos y Serrano (1845, pp. 160–64), the church was originally founded as a parish during the time of Atanagildo (circa 554 AD), making it one of the oldest identified parishes in documented sources alongside Santa Eulalia. However, certain Latin poems attributed to San Eugenio and San Ildefonso, collected by Jerónimo Juan de la Higuera in the late 16th century, cast doubt on this assertion: "[...] Caenobium Eulaliae Rex Athanagildus et aedem/Noster avus Justae, sed prius instituit [...]".

The Visigoth pilaster was unearthed by Ramírez de Arellano in 1912 (Ramírez de Arellano 1921, pp. 161–63), underscoring the antiquity of the temple and its probable use as a mosque. Notably, during the complete discovery of the pilaster, the horseshoe arch it supported before its closure was also found. This finding aligns with the parallels established by Helmut Schlunk (1971) in his study on the pilaster of El Salvador, which will be discussed later.

During restorations conducted around 1990, further insights into the pilaster were gained, revealing reliefs on at least three of its faces. The primitive use of this space as a mosque is supported not only by the slatted horseshoe arch—dated by Leopoldo Torres Balbás (1957, p. 615) to the late 9th century or early 10th century—but also by an Arabic epigraph discovered over the same facade where this entrance was located (De Juan García and De Paz Escribano 1996). The epigraphic plaque, uncovered during the 1990 restorations, dates back to the 11th century (Pavón Maldonado 1990).

The old Church of San Ginés, notable for its northeast facade adorned with a plethora of Visigothic spolia of various types (see Figure 8A), had not been previously considered as an Islamic oratory until recent times. Its transformation into an exhibition space has allowed for the proposition that its original design resembled that of a quadrangular mosque with nine spaces, similar to the mosques of Bab al-Mardum or Tornerías (Passini 2002, pp. 69–78; Tsiolis 2009, pp. 41–62). Similarly, in the Church of San Sebastián, another medieval

Mozarabic parish akin to Santa Justa and Santa Rufina, several spolia are found within the temple, notably including capitals and columns dating back to the late Roman period.

Figure 8. (**A**) Details of the spolia of the northeast facade of the possible mosque of San Ginés (photo: arcoologiatoledo.blogspot.com) and (**B**) the details of the pilasters and caliphal arch of the old mosque, of the parish of Santas Justa and Rufina de Toledo (Photos: Creative commons).

Within this list, it is crucial to highlight the Church of El Salvador, perhaps the most prominent example. Consecrated in 1159, this temple preserves one of the finest collections of spolia—recycled marble material from the Visigothic period—in later constructions.

Firstly, the presence of various Visigothic decorative reliefs with vegetal and geometric motifs distributed across three of the tower's facades is noteworthy. Inside the temple, alongside some late Roman capitals, stands a pilaster crafted from gray veined marble, adorned with profuse Christian iconography. This pilaster, repurposed as one of the main supports of a gallery within the temple, is sculpted on all four sides, featuring geometric and vegetal decorations. On its main face, it showcases several scenes depicting the miracles of Christ, such as the healing of the blind man, the resurrection of Lazarus, the Samaritan woman, and the hemorrhagic woman (see Figure 9).

It is important to note that this pilaster has undergone alterations, including the scraping of human effigies from the scenes. This act has been interpreted as part of Islamic aniconism, possibly reflecting the presence of this marble within the prayer room of a mosque. Despite these alterations, it is worth emphasizing that numerous transformations of the building, as well as restorations carried out in the early 20th century, have partially modified the original layout of some elements, and may have even altered their intended meaning. For instance, the pilaster depicting the hemorrhagic woman was rotated 180° during a restoration by Francisco Iñiguez Almech in 1950, with the aim of enhancing the visibility of the figurative scenes (Schlunk 1971, p. 238).

Figure 9. Pilasters of the parish of El Salvador on its four faces (Schlunk 1971, lams. I and II).

Indeed, as mentioned earlier, three churches—San Andrés (See Figure 10), San Bartolomé, and Santiago del Arrabal—have been occasionally suggested as possible mosques between the 11th and 12th centuries (Izquierdo Benito 2006; Rojas Rodríguez-Malo 2006). The case of the Church of San Andrés, situated south of Toledo's old town, is among those parishes where the proposition of it being a mosque lacks definitive evidence. However, its bell tower is one that could have been constructed shortly after the Castilian conquest.

Within the temple, where medieval and post-medieval phases converge, an abundance of recycled materials from various periods is evident. Notably, there are Islamic funerary cipes and Visigothic sculptures featuring distinctly Christian iconography. Among these artifacts, a recycled cymatium serving as a capital deserves mention, displaying a cross placed at the center of a geometric garland. Additionally, a decorated pilaster, similar to that of Santa Justa, is located on the columns of the north facade of the building.

Externally, during restoration work, a marble niche plaque resembling others found in the city was discovered in the facade factories. This plaque has since been transferred to a museum for preservation and further study.

Regarding the Mozarabic churches of Toledo, historical evidence suggests that there were six such churches that persisted through the Middle Ages. However, today, only San Lucas, San Sebastián, Santa Eulalia, and Santas Justa and Rufina remain, with those of San Marcos and San Torcuato no longer extant (Izquierdo Benito 2010, pp. 401–12). Both San Sebastián and Santa Justa and Santa Rufina, which have also been suggested as possible mosques prior to 1085, as we have seen, exhibit late antique spolia in their structures (Rütenik 2009, pp. 433–37).

Figure 10. Spolia from the Visigothic period from the Church of San Andrés. The niche plaque (**A**) stands out, which appeared next to the entrance to the north facade, and which is currently in the Museum of the Councils and Visigothic Culture of Toledo. Inside the temple, the pilaster (**B**), and the cymatium with the cross (**C**) are currently preserved. Photos: Cultural Heritage of Castilla-La Mancha.

3.4.2. The Use of Spolia from the Visigothic Period in Toledo after the Castilian Conquest (11th–12th Centuries)

Beyond the period under consideration, it is pertinent to analyze the continued use of spolia from the Visigothic period in Toledo after the year 1085. In our view, the significant

symbolic value often associated with these elements underscores their suitability as a means to assert the preeminence of a particular community based on its ties to a prestigious past. We believe that the incorporation of spolia into many churches constructed between the late 11th century and the first half of the 12th century was not merely incidental or lacking in ideological foundation. On the contrary, it reflects a deliberate intentionality, contextualized within the shifting power dynamics brought about by the Christian conquest of the city in 1085.

For some authors (Barroso et al. 2009, pp. 171–97), the incorporation of Toledo into the parameters of the emerging Christianity stemming from the Gregorian reform, alongside the imperial ideals of Alfonso VI, signified the advent of Cluniac influences and Romanesque architecture in the kingdom of León–Castilla and, by extension, in Toledo. They argue that the utilization of Visigothic spolia within the group of churches erected in the decades following the Castilian conquest is a peripheral occurrence. According to these authors, the construction principles of these churches align with Andalusian architectural traditions, possibly involving the arrival of Mozarab builders from the South. Their objective may have been to bolster the claim of the spiritual primacy of the Toledo see over Tarragona or Santiago de Compostela.

From their perspective, the utilization of Visigothic spolia emerges as a phenomenon entirely detached from any royal initiative. Instead, it is depicted as a residual tool primarily serving episcopal power and diverging from emerging European currents. They emphasize that the reuse of Visigothic materials should be interpreted more as a celebration of Andalusian heritage rather than an attempt to align with the Visigothic kingdom. Hence, they refute any endeavor to connect the new buildings with the ancient pre-Islamic era, fearing it might signify a perilous regression to prior ideological constructs. Such a stance would oppose the prevailing trends linked with the Burgundian house and consequently conflict with the political and religious agenda of the Crown itself.

The reasoning provided can indeed be understood and accepted in other cities of the kingdom, such as Segovia, Salamanca, or Ávila. However, the architectural reality of Toledo does not fit into this scheme. The total absence of Romanesque buildings in the old Visigoth capital contrasts sharply with the relative abundance of them in cities like Segovia. Furthermore, the overwhelming weight of Mozarabic construction traditions in Toledo during this period, with origins that are fully local, has been confirmed. The construction of churches such as El Salvador or Santo Tomé (see Figure 11) does not represent a break with Toledo's architectural past before 1085; rather, it signifies the continuity of local architectural traditions embodied in buildings like the Mosque of Tornerías or Bab al-Mardum (Cristo de la Luz).

Moreover, it seems contradictory for the Toledo episcopal power to use elements from a Visigothic or Andalusian past to legitimize its position on a peninsular scale, especially considering that the monarch quickly imposed an archbishop of Burgundian origin, Bernardo de Sedirac, who was formerly the abbot of the San Benito de Sahagún Monastery. Despite allowing the Hispanic liturgy to be maintained in some Toledo parishes, Don Bernardo was evidently much closer to the theses of the Gregorian reform than to Mozarabic traditions. This was reflected in the conflict caused by the introduction of the new European liturgy to the detriment of the Mozarabic Visigothic rite after the archbishop's death.

The frequent use of Visigothic spolia in the churches of the 11th and 12th centuries, in our opinion, must be understood within the context of the clash of legitimacy between the Mozarabic world of Toledo and the new Christianity promoted by the Castilian royal house, which was founded on the principles of the Gregorian reform. This clash was not merely a liturgical or spiritual problem but extended much further, as it involved the balance of power between two distinct Christian aristocratic groups.

On one hand, there was the Toledo Mozarabic oligarchy, deeply rooted in the local traditions and culture of Toledo. On the other hand, there was the Castilian nobility, closely associated with the crown of Castile, which had recently taken control of the city from the

Andalusian political sphere. The utilization of Visigothic spolia in church construction during this period can be seen as a symbolic assertion of the Mozarabic heritage and a form of resistance against the influence of the new Christian order being imposed by the Castilian royal house.

The imposition of a Frankish bishop in the episcopal see of Toledo rather than a local candidate, followed by the gradual introduction of the Gregorian rite at the expense of the Mozarabic, likely appeared to the Toledo Mozarabic oligarchy as a direct threat to their longstanding position of preeminence within the local Christian community. In response, asserting themselves as heirs to the Visigothic past would have been a crucial strategy to bolster their legitimacy. The use of Visigothic spolia within the liturgical framework of churches served as a tangible expression of this claim.

Figure 11. Niche plate on the east facade of the tower of the Santo Tomé Church (Photo: Raúl Catalán).

Throughout the 12th century, numerous examples of spolia reuse can be observed, particularly in the form of capitals, cymae, and columns in many churches. Notable among these are unique pieces like the pilaster adorned with scenes from the life of Christ in the Church of El Salvador, as well as the niche plaques and inscribed crosses found in the tower of Santo Tomé Church. These elements served as powerful symbols of continuity with the Visigothic heritage, reinforcing the claim of the Toledo Mozarabic oligarchy to their historical preeminence.

A thorough analysis of the placement of many of these elements confirms that they are strategically positioned in areas with excellent visibility. For example, there is the documented frieze on one of the facades of the Santa Eulalia tower, as well as the significant

collection of plunder reused on the south facade of the church tower of San Bartolomé (see Figure 12). These are specifically situated on sides that command visual preeminence from the outside. This pattern is also evident in instances such as the niche plaque and the inscribed crosses already mentioned in the Church of Santo Tomé.

Figure 12. Spolia set in the Church of San Bartolomé (Photo: Raúl Catalán).

It is particularly interesting to examine the relationship between many of these elements, especially the inscribed crosses and niche plaques, and their placement in certain church towers. This becomes even more compelling when considering the tale of King Wamba, depicted as the restorer of the Toledo walls, and the utilization of spolia [*marmora*] in projects sponsored by the monarch in the late 7th century. This narrative is recounted in various medieval historical sources, though they all draw from versions of the *Chronicle of 754*. According to these accounts, Wamba refurbished the city walls using marbles he had specifically brought in from outside the city, inscribing prayers on the access doors of the fortifications with the clear intention of invoking divine protection.

Interestingly, some later sources that echo this tale, such as the *Abridged Chronicle* of Don Juan Manuel, alter the narrative minimally, placing emphasis on the utilization of bell towers as a means to convey propaganda messages, whereas earlier accounts only mentioned the door turrets (see Table 1).

Considering the inherently religious nature of such materials, it is highly likely that they incorporated decorative elements where Christian symbolism played a significant role. Therefore, if we trace the presence of spolia, possibly adorned with Christian symbology, back to the end of the Visigothic period itself, it is plausible that the Mozarabic community viewed it as a legitimate means to connect with their Visigothic heritage, thereby legitimizing their position. Additionally, they may have sought divine favor during a particularly critical period for them.

Table 1. Comparison between the account of the repair of the wall of Toledo by King Wamba in the *Chronicle of 754*, both in the Latin version and translated into Spanish, with that of the *Crónica Abreviada*, by Don Juan Manuel (Old Spanish).

Chronicle of 754 (Latin)	*Chronicle of 754* (Trans. Ed. 1980)	*Crónica Abreviada* (Ed. 1983)
Qui iam in supra fatam eram anni tertii sceptra regia meditans ciuitatem Toleti mire et eleganti labore renobat, quem et opere sculptprio uersiuicando pertitulans hoc in portarum epigrammata stilo ferreo in nitida lucidaque marmora patrat:	During the aforementioned era, in his third year of exercising royal power, Wamba undertook the admirable and meticulous task of restoring the city of Toledo. As part of this endeavor, he crafted a dedication in verse which he inscribed on its doors:	En el LXXIII capitulo, que fue En el III anno de su regnado, dize que entro el rey Banba en Toledo mucho onrrada mente. E fizo labrar los muros dela cerca de muy buena obra e pusso estos versos en vnos marmoles blancos encima dela puerta dela villa:
"Erexit factore Deo rex inclitus urbem Uuamba sue celebrem protendens gentis honorem" *In memoriis quoque martirum, quas super easdem portarum turriculas titulauit, hec similiter exarauit:*	"With the help of God, Wamba, a distinguished king, restored this city, Spreading the illustrious glory of his people." Likewise, he composed the following inscription in honor of the martyrs, which he placed on the same door turrets where the previous dedication had been inscribed:	[Erexit factore Deo rex inclitus urbem Vamba, sue celebrem protendens gentis honorem.] Que quier dezir: «El nonbre del rey Banba alço e mejoro la cibdat de Toledo con ayuda de Dios e por acrecentar la onrra e la nonbradia de su gente» Otrossi dize que fizo escrevir estos versos enlas torres delas iglesias:
"Uos, sancti domini, quorum hic presentia fulget. Hanc urbem et plebem solito saluate fabore".	"You saints of the Lord, whose presence shines here, In this city and among this people, Protect them with your customary guardianship."	[Vos Domini sancti quorum hinc presencia fulget, hanc urbem et plebem solito saluate fauore.] Que quier dezir: «Vos, santos de nuestro Sennor, que ssodes onrrados en este logar, saluat e onrrat este pueblo e esta cibdat por el poder que avedes.»

It is worth pondering whether the inclusion of spolia in other parts of the city, such as its walls, can be explained in a similar manner. For instance, the inscribed cross on the side facade of one of the towers of Puerta del Sol, or the three white marble plaques with sculpted scallops on the corner tower of the Alcántara bridge and gate complex, aligned and oriented to the passage of the bridge, so that they could be seen when crossing the river to enter Toledo. However, given the context, it is reasonable to assume that the Christian apotropaic (protective) value would outweigh any hypothetical connection with the Visigothic past in these cases.

In summary, the arrangement of all these elements is not arbitrary; rather, it carries significant symbolic weight and serves as a potent legitimizing tool. It allows the Toledo Mozarabic oligarchy of the 12th century to connect with both its own past and that of the city, which was once the capital of the Visigothic kingdom. This connection contrasts the Mozarabic community with the broader Castilian Christianity—reformist and European— in portraying it as a foreign and imposed entity. This was particularly crucial at a time when there was a risk not only of losing religious primacy within the city but also of diminishing political power and social relevance.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, we observe a wide array of purposes and intentions behind the reuse of these spolia. While it is conceivable to propose a classification based on aesthetic, symbolic, or religious significance, as well as on values of cultural appropriation and rupture, such categorization can be intricate.

One characteristic that has been consistently observed is the duality between the practical necessity for reuse and the intentional use of a specific piece to convey a particular message (Cressier 2001, p. 311), a phenomenon evident in examples from both Mérida and

Córdoba. This prompts us to consider whether, in cases where there is significant symbolic significance attributed, it is the researchers who interpret that significance, rather than it being inherent to the original intention behind the placement of the stone block. As Elices suggests, "There is also a tendency to attribute ideological value to examples of reuse that offer more doubts than certainties and respond to a mere need rather than a deliberate choice" (Elices Ocón 2021, n. 1). Intentionality is largely relative, contingent upon whether the recipient of the message comprehends it or not.

An interesting perspective on the lack of intentionality in the display of spolia arises from their placement in certain locations that are not readily visible, whether due to limited access or height. Additionally, we must consider the impact of restorations, particularly older ones, which may have altered the original meaning of a spolia, transforming it from something intentional or of minor significance to something entirely different. For instance, consider the repositioning of the pilaster of El Salvador, as contemplated by Francisco Iñiguez Almech. Furthermore, the construction process of the building in question is often unknown, leaving us uncertain whether these recycled materials were intended to be visible or hidden by rendering and plastering, potentially diminishing the significance of their reuse.

The only circumstance that could lend credence to the possibility of symbolic meaning in the concealment of spolia would be if the construction process aimed at hiding these sculptural remnants, which held significant cultural value for the defeated, was public and conspicuous—a detail that we cannot confirm. The citadel of Mérida serves as an illustrative example, where Roman sculptural materials were repurposed alongside hauled ashlar of various types to cover the galleries leading down to the cistern, a part of the complex that was not intended to remain visible. Conversely, pilasters and columns with clear Christian significance, potentially removed from a temple expressly for this purpose, were intentionally left exposed. It is worth noting that the pieces used to cover the galleries of the cistern do not feature iconography that can be classified as Visigothic or Christian.

With the prevailing trend in restoration favoring the removal of coatings and the presentation of walls in their raw materiality, it raises questions about whether many recycled elements on the walls were intentionally placed to be visible, or if they were simply regarded as construction material without any deeper significance.

On one hand, we have discussed instances where the reuse of late ancient Christian sculptural material conveys a clear symbolic message, such as those evident in the materials from the first phase of the Córdoba Mosque. In contrast to examples like those in the citadel of Mérida, where the invisibility of certain elements suggests a lack of intentional placement, the arrangement of the elements and the deliberate mutilation of Christian symbology in the Córdoba Mosque indicate a clear intention behind their reuse.

Additionally, noteworthy are the reuses found in Toledo from the 11th and 12th centuries, where sculptural material from Visigothic chronology appears on the facades of churches and parish bell towers. This continuous pattern of reuse and prioritized exhibition aims to establish a connection between the Hispano-Visigothic world and the Mozarabic world of Toledo through these pieces. Throughout the high Middle Ages, Toledo's identity and the collective memory of the Mozarabic community were profoundly significant, serving as a strong opposition to Córdoba's control and later against attempts by the Franks and Castilians to impose the European Roman rite.

When considering both the Córdoba example from the 8th century and the Toledo example after the Castilian conquest, separated by centuries and under vastly different circumstances, they reveal a common thread, that is the importance of the immediate historical context in which the reuse of looted material occurs. This phenomenon transcends not only chronological barriers but also religious and cultural ones. In many cases, the reasons behind plundering may not be found in grand generalizations but rather in a detailed study of the chrono cultural context at a local level.

Furthermore, both examples demonstrate that the reuse of certain Christian pieces as vehicles for articulating a symbolic message is only feasible when acknowledging the

potent symbolic significance these elements hold. As a culmination of this analysis, we propose a progressive gradation of reuse (see Table 2), from mere construction material to ideological reuse, with the aim of informing future approaches to the subject.

Table 2. Proposal for classifying Christian spolia according to the type of reuse in sacred spaces.

Functional reuse	It would be one in which only material values prevail as simple masonry resource.
Aesthetic reuse	Reuse of sculptural elements without purposes of appropriation or political significance, stressing just a decorative sense.
Ideological reuse	**Continuative:** Continuity of a sacred place. No traces of Christian symbols are detected.
	Apotropaic: Transfer of pieces and exhibition with a prophylactic sense.
	Appropriative: Transfer of legitimacy or sacredness. Occasionally, it displays the destruction of previous sacred motifs.
	"Destructive/disruptive": The intentional use of large pieces imbued with Christian religious meaning, always deliberately erased, serves to ideologically destroy their significance.

Notes

[1] We would like to express our gratitude to the reviewers of this article for their thoughtful comments and suggestions aimed at improving this manuscript.

[2] Beyond the spolia from the Great Mosque of Córdoba, the city features various examples of architectural material reuse from the Roman, Late Antique, and Visigothic periods. Relevant to the topic of this study, it is worth noting the reuse of small Visigothic monolithic columns in the decorative frieze of the southwest facade of the San Juan minaret, built during the Emirate period (Gonzalez Gutierrez 2022, pp. 92–93).

[3] It has been proposed that some of the columns and capitals in the central nave of this mosque are spolia from the Visigothic period (Calvo Capilla 2014, pp. 424, 672).

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