

Arabic script Adorns church towers in Spain

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The visitor to historic sites in Spain is surprised to see that Arabic calligraphy and Islamic motifs adorn even the Christian churches and palaces, specially their towers. This phenomenon is observable today on most of the old buildings. But more ironic is to find the phrase: "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the messenger of Allah" on a church. So, I invite you on an enjoyable tour to discover these beautiful places and to see the Arabic scriptures.

It is common knowledge that Muslim architects were the masters of architecture and art in Spain for hundreds of years. They supervised the planning and construction of churches, palaces and fortresses and were very close to the kings and clerics. Historians have mentioned the names of several famous Muslim architects from that era, including Mohamed Rami, one of the great architects of the province of Aragon in the 14th century, who was a friend of the priest Luna Papa. Among his works is the great

Seo Cathedral in Zaragoza and Luna Palace in Daroca. We found his name engraved in a church in the city of Cervera.

In the town of Tauste, near Zaragoza, we find an old church called Santa Maria, dating back to the 13th century with a round red brick built by Muslim architects. On top is a band containing Kufic calligraphy. The Spanish historians, Ramirez Martinez and Usón Villalba, indicated that there is an Arabic sentence on the tower revealing an Islamic creed, which is difficult to read

because of overlapping letters. A Muslim thinker, originally from Spain, told me that this phrase is "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the messenger of Allah". In scrutinizing the writing, we could read "There is no God but Allah". The wording may be subject to various interpretations. It may mean either "No Winner but Allah", a slogan of Bani Al-Ahmer, which became widespread in Andalusia.

In the town of Romanos, in Aragon, there is the church of San Pedro which has a ▶



Seo Cathedral

كاتدرائية سيو



San Roman

سان رومان

beautifully decorated Moorish tower and a band resembling that of the Church of Tauste. In the town of Montalban, in the province of Teruel, there is a church called Santiago de Mayor, which has on one of its walls decorations made of brick and ceramics, with Kufic calligraphy, which can be read from various angles. These writings are also found in the old churches of Tobed, Torrealba de Ribat, Navarrete de Rio, Belchite and others.

There are also Arab scriptures inside the Seo Cathedral, Santa Maria de Teruel Cathedral and the Palace of Doncel in Sigüenza in the province Guadalupe. It appears that the palace belonged to one of the Arab emirs. I saw the Islamic inscriptions, with an Arabic phrase written in Moroccan kufic.

This calligraphy surrounded the hall of the palace. During my visit to this city and its cathedral, I met the person in charge with whom I had a conversation about Muslim heritage. He asked me a question about Islamic calligraphy written inside the cathedral, telling me that he had asked some heritage experts but they could not help. I was able to decipher the name "Allah" (God), engraved in gypsum, written in floral Moroccan, letters ending with flowers. The Muslim calligrapher managed to hide this word in the middle of the decorations for hundreds of years.

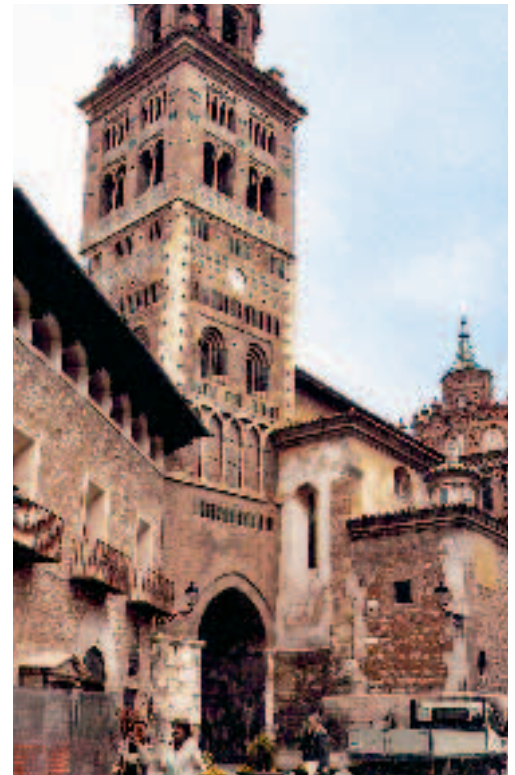
This same pattern with the word "Allah" is in the city's museum which houses a large number of Muslim heritage documents. I also found it in the Palace of Doncel. The city was dominated by the Arabs for more than four centuries, and then fell into the hands of Christians in 1124. I was astonished by its beauty and wonderful heritage, the movement of people within its borders, and its tourism industry. Among its assets, there is the old Arabic fortress, transformed today into a hotel for tourists, after its restoration. There are restaurants, cafes, and an information office. Then there is the great cathedral, with an architecture that is a mix of Gothic, Roman, and

Mudejar. It is believed that it was originally a mosque which was converted into a cathedral.

In Toledo, there are Arabic calligraphies in many churches, including the Church of San Roman and its beautiful Mudejar tower. The architecture is Islamic with arcades, beautifully decorated bands with Arabic calligraphy such as "There is no God but Allah", which is repeated on the walls of the large hall, besides the Christian symbols. This indicates that the church was a mosque. Similarly, there are Arabic calligraphies in the church of Transito, which was built by the Muslim architect Amer Ali or Abu Ali.

The presence of Muslim calligraphy and designs in Christian churches and palaces provides an indication of the power of Islamic civilization at that time when it imposed its supremacy and will over Europe. We can explain this as follows: Firstly, most of the old churches were originally mosques, built and decorated according to Islamic style. After the fall of Muslim cities into the hands of Christians, these mosques were converted into churches and they added elements of Christian character. But some churches have retained Islamic designs and calligraphy as in the case of the church Buitrago in Madrid, and Bab Al-Mardoum in Toledo.

Secondly, the architects who supervised the plans and construction of religious and civil buildings were mainly Muslims or Moorish Muslims who remained attached to their beliefs despite their conversion to Christianity. They mix in their work Islamic and Gothic Christian art called "Mudejar". They embedded in their work, without the knowledge of the church and the authorities, some of their Islamic beliefs in Arabic motifs. These calligraphies were very complex and therefore difficult to read and decipher. It was an ingenious method to escape any punishment. Thus, this calligraphy survived for several centuries and still decorates most of the churches and civil buildings in Spain, including church towers. ■



Santa Maria de Teruel Cathedral كنيسة ساننا مارية في طرول



Tobed

توبيد