

Two Churches in Soria

Situated next to the Aduana Vieja and opening onto a small square in the centre of Soria is the church of Santo Domingo. Some local residents still refer to it by its old name of Santo Tomé. The West façade, and that is the main interest for this church, is best seen towards late afternoon when the evening sun sets the yellow and reddish stone aglow. The façade is wider than it is high, with a stepped central doorway that is set between groups of four blind arches that span the width of the façade. Above the doorway is a line of corbels with a small statue at each end; beyond these two small figures are further groups of blind arches. Finally, above the line of corbels is a superb wagon wheel window; (no, it is not a rose window; they were introduced at a later date).

Although Soria is deep into Castile, this church seems out of place here; this huge façade is quite unlike that of any of the other churches from the period that may be seen in Soria or, indeed, in North-west Spain. The style of the façade is modelled directly on churches of the period in the Saintonge, that area of Aquitaine that is around the town of Saintes. The explanation for it lies in a royal story of love. The King was Alfonso VIII, who inherited the throne in 1158 at the age of three. Inevitably there were pretenders, including the King of León, Fernando I, who sought to usurp the throne. Alfonso was taken to Soria for safety, pursued by Fernando who sought to persuade the people of Soria to hand over the child-king, in vain. The king was hidden under a knight's cloak and Fernando was chased away. In later years Alfonso sought to reward the Soria people for their loyalty each time he had opportunity. Alfonso's marriage provided such an occasion. He was engaged to Leonor, the daughter of Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine. Thus it came about that the façade of the church of Santo Domingo was built as an expression of Hispano-french love.

The façade, which dates from the second half of the 12th century, is superbly decorated with fine sculptures in the Saintonge style. The sculptures on churches, whether on façades or on interiors or around cloisters, provided instruction on bible stories and the activities of saints and evangelists for the common people who were unable to read the Bible in Latin for themselves. The layout of the façade resembles that of many of the larger churches to be seen in West France; a particular example is that of Notre-Dame-la-Grande, in Poitiers.

Because such façades are not always easy to read some explanation may be helpful. Starting with the West door, it has a fine tympanum. This shows God the Father holding the child, Jesus, whilst on a throne that is set within a mandorla, around which is a supporting cast of angels, Joseph and Mary. This superb work is in the character of another tympanum in Soria that was on the church of San Nicolás and is now over the door of the church of San Juan de Rabanera. To the sides of the door are capitals, three of which illustrate the creation of man and the Garden of Eden from the Book of Genesis.

Over the doorway are a series of sculptured arches that have rank upon rank of small figures, mostly illustrating scenes from the Bible. In particular, there are the twenty four wise men from the Apocalypse, the massacre of the innocents, illustrations from the life of Christ from his nativity to his death by crucifixion. The whole is a masterpiece of great quality. The wagon window, with its spokes ending in a small capital, has similar decoration around the rim. Here we see hunting scenes and animals from this world and that of fantasy. Finally, on the façade are the two small statues. To the left stands

Alfonso and across to the right is his spouse, Leonor, for whom this masterpiece was created.



Santo Domingo – West façade and West doorway

The interior of the church is more typical of the region. There is a nave with four aisles. These are of the same period as the façade. It is clear that they were not completed. The East end is what remains of an earlier church which was being demolished as the new construction progressed from the West towards the East. It would seem that the money ran out and work stopped, never to restart. This early church dates from the first decades of the 12th century. So those inhabitants of Soria, who still refer to the church by its old name, have resisted the name change for a thousand years!

Mention has already been made of two other churches in Soria, San Nicolás and San Juan de Rabanera; both are most interesting, though the former is in ruins. More remarkable is the former monastery of San Juan de Duero, which is on the outskirts of Soria, looking down on the Ribero del Duero below. The church dates from the 12th century but is unremarkable except for one feature; there are two ciboriums. These ciboriums were a feature of the very early Christian churches especially in Byzantium; changes in liturgy led to them being largely discarded from the start of the 11th century; their presence today is an astonishing record of survival. They are small, square structures with, at the four corners, small columns topped by elaborately sculptured capitals. These support a cover or canopy over an altar. One canopy is conical; the other is in the form of a hemisphere. On the South side of the church are the remains of the cloisters. These form a rough square. Sadly, the galleries are without their roof vaults; this detracts from the quiet sense of peace that the visitors so often feel as they drift down a shaded cloister gallery looking into the restful green centre of the space. However, despite this loss, the cloister has a special feel. Unlike almost all other cloisters that were built in one short period, as this was, the cloisters are a surprising mixture of architectural styles and forms. There are conventional Romanesque arches divided by slim columns topped by capitals of sculptured acanthus leaves, there are long sections of interlocked arches that are without sculptures and there are, at two of the corners, plain horseshoe arches that show a distinct Moorish influence. Because the cloisters were built in a couple of decades, it must be assumed that the introduction of the mixture of styles was deliberate. It was also highly unusual.



San Juan de Duero – Church interior and cloister

In the villages and towns all around Soria the churches of the Romanesque period show a faithful retention and development of styles that were indigenous to Spain with their artistic roots in the early Visigoth churches and their development by Christians living under Moslem rule. Here in Soria we see two churches whose builders have turned towards distinctive foreign styles and motifs. It makes these churches especially interesting to students of art history.