Church-Fortresses on the Border with Castile

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Mahoma Rami, Master Craftsman

Church of the Virgin, façade and tower, Tobed.
This itinerary takes us through the province of Saragossa, through valleys carved out in between the hills. This is an ancient fruit-growing area, documented at least since the 15th century. The valley of the River Jalón – the largest tributary of the River Ebro on the right-hand bank – is the most important Mudéjar area in Aragon. Various minor tributaries such as the Rivers Grío, Perejiles, Jiloca or Ribota, which flow into it, are included in this itinerary, as well as the Jalón itself. These lands of the ancient community of Calatayud had large Mudéjar and Morisco populations before their eviction in the 17th century, a historical circumstance which no doubt explains the density of Mudéjar monuments in these valleys to the south of the River Ebro. The objective of this itinerary is to present Mudéjar as a valley culture, developing as one main theme and two complementary themes. The main theme, approached from the beginning with the Church of the Virgin in Toled, forms the backbone of the whole itinerary. The purpose of it is to examine in depth a unique architectural typology, a genuine creation of Mudéjar art in Aragon: the fortified church. This formal model has no equal in Spain. Although we frequently find churches that had a defensive function, there is no other case where there is a similarly crystallised architectonic solution equivalent to that of the Mudéjar in Aragon. This constructive typology integrates in a particularly effective way the forms and structures of a church in the interior with a fortress on the exterior.

Two factors can be pinpointed, which, from a historical point of view allows an explanation of the creation of this architectonic typology. The first is the important role that the Military Orders played in the Christian repopulation of the territory of Aragon. In this particular case, it
was the Military Order of the Holy Sepulchre, which established its main base in the territory of Calatayud, to which Tobed belongs.

As we know, the singular Will and Testament of King Alfonso I el Batal- lador (1134) bequeathed the Kingdom of Aragon to the Military Orders, and in compensation for the annulment of this they were given important lands in Aragonese territory. The Knights of the Military Orders that were established in Aragon – the Knights Hospitallers, Templars, Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, of Santiago (St James) and of Calatrava – were the lords of important estates. They encouraged Mudéjar architecture in their domains, following the example of the kings, Pope Benedict XIII and the archbishops, as already seen in the previous itinerary. It seems reasonable, therefore, that the Military Orders should have been the patrons of architecture, which exactly fitted the double function of the Knights – as monks and as soldiers. An example of this is the work undertaken by the Order of the Holy Sepulchre in the Church of the Virgin in Tobed.

As well as this historical factor, there is another equally important reason for the creation of the Mudéjar model of the fortified church. This was the fierce Frontier War that Pedro I of Castile (Pedro the Cruel) and Pedro IV of Aragon (Pedro the Ceremonious) waged against each other, with the first skirmishes starting in 1356 lasting for 13 years. Between 1357 and 1366, Aragon was at times in an utterly chaotic situation, and on more than one occasion, it seemed that the Castilians were certain to gain a definitive victory. The war affected especially the cities of Calatayud and Tarazona. The Military Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Calatayud took an active part in the war, resisting the Castilian troops in the Castle of Nuevalos. In reprisal, when Pedro I took the city of Calatayud in 1362, he razed...
both the castle and the archives of the Military Order of the Holy Sepulchre to the ground.

Today, after five centuries of territorial unity in Spain achieved by the Catholic Monarchs in 1492, it is difficult to imagine these lands of the ancient community of Calatayud as frontier territory with Castile. However, the conception and development of the Mudéjar fortified church in the territory of Aragon coincides with the historical moment of the war with Castile and is the result of the impression that it left in the collective consciousness.

The other two motives to consider during this itinerary are equally interesting, although complementary. One of them emphasises the authority of the Muslim masters of works, some of whose names have survived to the present day in monumental inscrip-

V.1 TOBED

V.1.a Church of the Virgin

Visits can be arranged through the Town Hall. Tel: 976 629101.

This church shows two different stages of building. The first began on 1st April 1356, at the beginning of the frontier war with Castile, when the Prior of the Holy Sepulchre in Calatayud was Fray Domingo Martínez de Algaravi and his commander in Tobed was Fray Juan Domingo. In this first stage, the chancel and the first two
sections of the nave were built. The work must have been finished three years later, since on 3rd June 1359 the Archbishop of Saragossa, don Lope Fernández de Luna, gave his arbitral verdict against the pretensions of the Episcopal jurisdiction of Tarazona in favour of the Priors of the Holy Sepulchre of Calatayud. The sentence adjudicated to the latter the ownership of the church built in Tobed and the altars built in its sanctuary in honour of the Virgin, St John the Baptist and St Mary Magdalen and the corresponding income from them.

The last part of the foot of the church was built in the second stage, which was started in 1394, the year when Pope Benedict XIII was elected, and his arms decorate the keystone of the vault in this section and the ceiling of the upper choir. From the formal characteristics of this last part, it can be supposed that Mahoma Rami was the master craftsman. The chronology of this last part is corroborated by the information that on 8th August 1385 the Canons of the Holy Sepulchre of Calatayud decided to dedicate all the income and donations from the sanctuary of Tobed to the finishing of the building, since “the work is not yet completed in its building”.

The church’s magnificent west façade and end wall was hidden partially until 1984 by the Town Hall building, which adjoined it. The present state of the façade, which is comparable in its decoration of brick and applied ceramics only to the exterior wall of the parroqueta of San Miguel in the Seo in Saragossa, is the result of the restoration begun in 1985 by the architect Úrsula Heredia.

The Church of the Virgin in Tobed is the best example of the architectonic model of the fortified church in Aragon. The building has one single nave with a rectangular chancel and triple chapels at the head. The nave
has three sections, all covered with simple ribbed vaulting, alternating with other shorter spans, which are covered with pointed barrel vaulting and counterbalanced on the outside by buttress towers. Between these at ground level, the side chapels, three on each side of the nave, are covered with pointed barrel vaulting. Above the side chapels and the three chapels at the head of the chancel is a gallery or tribune that opens to the outside through pointed arcades to form a passage similar to a military parapet, which is accessible from the interior of the church through the buttress towers.

Structurally speaking, this is a very solid building, perfectly reinforced both lengthwise and crosswise by the pointed barrel vaulting, which is linked together by the buttressing towers. The interior area has a unity that conserves the original Mudéjar decoration. This, seen in the painted brick design and the painting on the walls, in the vaulting and plasterwork on the windows and oculos – not forgetting the decorated wood of the keystones of the vaults and that of the alfárje, or flat wooden ceiling of the upper choir, at the end of the nave. With this profusion of ornamental elements, an effect is achieved of Mudéjar interior space that has altered very little over the years.

This same spatial effect can be perceived in the other Mudéjar interiors in this itinerary.

From the outside, in contrast to the decorative interior, the building has a compact and unornamented appearance – except for the west façade, built in the second phase as we saw above, when the war with Castile had already been forgotten – which gives it an extreme military air. This military appearance is emphasised by the buttress towers, four on each side of the nave, and by the open passageway with pointed arches between the towers, like a parapet or sentry walkway, which, from the outside, appears more appropriate for a fortress than for a church.

To judge from the successful spread of this model throughout the whole of Aragon, represented so magnificently in the Church in Tobed, and which will be found throughout the itinerary, it was seen as a satisfactory way to solve the technical and functional problems of architecture at the time.

**V.2 BELMONTE DE GRACIÁN**

(optional)

**V.2.a Tower of the Parish Church**

26 km on the A1505. If the church is closed, contact D. Leoncio. Tel: 976 892093.

The Parish Church of Belmonte de Gracián is a magnificent example of a five-sided Mudéjar apse, without buttresses, profusely decorated with brickwork in relief, forming a diamond shaped network. The church is late Mudéjar, from the beginning of the 17th century. Building was interrupted after the construction of the apse and the rest of the building continued in a Classical Occidental language.

Nevertheless, the objective of our stop is not this apse, but something much older; the square-based 14th-century tower that stands somewhat separated from the church itself,
on the south side. This tower comprises two parts, the lower with an internal structure of an *alminar* and the upper completely hollow part, which is the belfry. The materials used in this tower are rubble and plasterwork in the lower part, and brick and applied ceramics in the upper section.

From its ornamental characteristics, the tower can be related to the Tower of the Church of Santa María in Ateca and to the no longer extant Tower of the Church of Santa María in Maluenda. Together, these comprise an autochthonous group with its own strong personality, especially because of the presence of a herringbone pattern, an ornamental motif seldom used. The tower in Belmonte also shares other decorative elements with the one in Ateca, such as the series of interlaced pointed arches or the use of applied ceramics both in the form of discs or bowls and of shafts.

The volumetry of this Mudéjar tower with two parts one over the other, the upper one of smaller proportions, has reminded some historians of the *alminares* there used to be in the area although here the second part corresponds to the design and function of the Christian bell tower. As in many other cases in Aragon, this is not a former and re-converted *alminar*, since the reconquest of the valley of the River Ebro was very early – in this area of Calatayud and Daroca it was in 1120 – but rather Christian bell towers built by Muslim craftsmen following the tradition of the *alminares* of the area. In fact, Mudéjar art is nothing else but the survival of the Islamic artistic tradition in Christian Spain.

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**V.3 MALUENDA**

The village of Maluenda had three extremely beautiful Mudéjar churches, built at the same time (in the last decades of the 14th and the early 15th centuries), which form a group with its own powerful artistic personality. This is due in part to the material used – puddle or gypsum mortar – obtained directly from the hills, which dominate the valley. The Church of San Miguel, perched on high, is at present not consecrated and in ruins, but the other two (Santa María and Santas Justa y Rufina), situated at opposite ends of the village, are still intact and in use.

**V.3.a Church of Santa María**

14 km on the A1504 until the N-II and then turn on to the N 234. Visits can be arranged through the Town Hall. Tel: 976 893007.

This church has one single nave, with a polygonal, seven-sided apse and three sections covered with ribbed vaulting, side chapels between the

![Church of Santa María, detail of the Choir ceiling, Maluenda.](image)
master who made it, Yuçaf Aldolmalih, who belonged to a Mudéjar family from Calatayud, and who added an inscription in Arabic with a shahada or Islamic profession of faith. This inscription in Maluenda, according to the translation of Professor Fernando de la Granja reads: “There is no god but the one God (and) Mahomet is the messenger of God. There is not … except God”. This is a unique and extremely eloquent example of the social condition of the Mudéjar masters of works, some of whom were alfaquíes or Muslim Doctors of Law.

V.3.b Church of Santas Justa y Rufina

Visits can be arranged through the town Hall.

Very similar to the Church of Santa María, although it has a west front that emulates European Gothic, flanked on high by two towers, the work on this church was not completed until the year 1413, according to the inscription under the choir loft, at the foot of the nave. In the interior, there are two notable works in carved plaster: the pulpit, which is contemporary with the building of the church, and the archway at the entrance to the Rosary Chapel, which is from the early Renaissance period. The magnificent altarpiece over the high altar, dedicated to the saints who gave the church its name, and painted by Domingo Ram and Juan Rius between 1475 and 1477, is perhaps the most successful example in the whole of Aragon of the integration of Mudéjar space and Gothic painting.
V.4 MORATA DE JILOCA

V.4.a Church of San Martín

13 km on the N 234. Visits can be arranged through the Town Hall. Tel: 976 894022.

Although we lack any documentary information in relation to the building stages of this parish church, a formal analysis allows us to differentiate between two different phases. The first stage occurred in around 1400, when the main Mudéjar building was constructed, including the great, decorated monumental façade. The second stage took place 200 years later at the beginning of the 17th century, when the change in the orientation and in the head of the church were carried out, and the upper gallery of double semicircular arches which crowns the monument was built.

The most interesting thing about the Church of San Martín is that although it still corresponds to the model of the fortified church, its structure was completely hidden and masked by the exuberant decoration of the exterior. Once the difficult times of the war with Castile had passed, the exterior of the church abandoned the sober, austere character of this model to glory in its ornamentation of brickwork in relief and glazed ceramics on the whole of the side wall. There are only a few similar examples, such as the wall of the Parroquieta of the Seo in Saragossa and the west front of the Church of the Virgin in Tobed.

In this church in Morata de Jiloca the doorway is outstanding above all, with its tympanum dedicated to the titular saint (St Martin on horseback, dividing his cloak to share it with the beggar). In it, there is a splendid integration of Oriental and Occidental forms, with the archivolts enclosed in an alfiz with arcos mixtilíneos, in the most felicitous combination of a Gothic portico and the façade of a mihrab.

A recent restoration has recovered the original orientation of the church, restored the triple chapel of the chancel, which corresponds to the singular architectonic typology of the fortified church, and installed a beautiful Gothic altarpiece painting, which came from a shrine in the area.

Church of San Martín, doorway, Morata de Jiloca.
Saragossa, the city came under Christian domination, and the resettlers installed themselves at the foot of the five promontories overlooked by the great Muslim castle from the 9th and 10th centuries. The medieval centuries saw the building of numerous parishes in the Mudéjar style, some of which have disappeared, such as the Churches of San Martín and San Pedro Mártir, this latter demolished in 1856. In spite of such unfortunate losses, the itinerary through the city still allows a glimpse at the splendour of its Mudéjar past.

V.5.a Church and Tower of San Pedro de los Francos

22 km on the N234. In calle de la Rúa, 16. At present, the church is under restoration.

This church takes its name from the Franks of Bigorre in Gascony who had collaborated with King Alfonso I (1104–1134) in the conquest of the city and then settled in it, taking advantage of the decree of 1131. In this church, and in that of San Andrés, the Council held its meetings until the Town Hall was built during the Renaissance. The Aragon parliament was held under its roof in 1411, which preceded the famous agreement of Caspe, which in June 1412 gave the crown of Aragon to don Fernando, Infante of Castile. The present building, with its three aisles, is earlier than the war with Castile, and its tower served during the war as atalaya or a watchtower. The top of the Mudéjar tower, which was leaning over at a considerable angle, was lopped off in 1840 on account of the presence in the city of...
the royal party who were staying in the Palace of the Baron of Wersage, just opposite. This amputation of the monument ensured that the governing Queen, Maria Cristina, lost no sleep. It is also missing its original Mudéjar cloister.

As well as its magnificent broad projecting eaves, which protect the great monumental façade, in the interior of the church there is a notable organ casing from the late 15th century, a unique and extraordinarily high-quality work of Mudéjar carpentry from Calatayud.

V.5.b Church and Tower of San Andrés

Plaza de San Andrés. Guided tours arranged by the Tourist Office. Tel: 976 886322.

Historically this has been the rival Parish Church of Santa María and the building has undergone recent restoration. It was just about to disappear, like other Mudéjar churches in Calatayud, because of the decision of the Town Council of 10th March 1870, a decision fortunately overturned by the Diputación Provincial of Saragossa.

In the church, there is evidence of two different construction stages; one that took place in the 14th century and the other in the 16th century, at the sanctuary end. The nave and two side aisles are the oldest and most interesting parts, with the central nave higher than the others and all roofed with ribbed vaulting, displaying great simplicity and purity of structure.

The Mudéjar tower, which stands out above the whole complex, is octagonal in ground plan, and situated at the south-west corner of the church; its ground floor is used as the baptistery. A decision to build a tower was made on 2nd February 1508, following the design and shape of the Tower of Santa María, in the rival parish. However, the Tower of San Andrés turned out to be more slender and delicate, not only because its proportions are smaller but also because of some of its decorative elements, which give it an Oriental air: intimate and withdrawn.
A cupola was erected over the transept in 1611, and the new altarpiece was put in place behind the high altar in 1614. Predating this complete renovation of the three aisles is the great doorway in the style of a Renaissance retable, a work contracted on 5th February 1525 by the sculptors, Juan de Talavera and Esteban de Obray. The Mudéjar cloister adjoins the north front of the church, an elongated rectangle with nine spans on the long sides and five on the short. In the south-west corner of the cloister is the old Chapter House, which can be dated, the same as the Mudéjar work of the cloister, to the last decades of the 14th century. The Mudéjar cloister was certainly already in existence in 1412, when Miguel Sanchez de Algaraví founded a Chair of Theology in the precinct. An unfortunate restoration in 1967, with Rafael Mélida Poch as architect and Sabino Llodo Aranzábal as quantity surveyor, completely distorted the original appearance, closing the archways of the patio with false latticework with six-pointed geometric decoration.

In addition to the cloister, the magnificent Mudéjar tower is also noteworthy. Eight-sided and with solid buttresses at the corners, it is without doubt the most interesting tower in Aragon since the New Tower in Saragossa was demolished in 1892. Its plan with a chapel inside the base and two towers – one inside the other above the chapel – was used as a model for the Tower of San Andrés, as has already been mentioned. As was the usual practice, it was built in different stages: the lower part corresponds to the end of the 15th century and the bell tower to the second half of the 16th century.
Sierra de la Virgen
Some 20 km from Calatayud to the south of Moncayo, at an altitude of 1400 m., the Sierra de la Virgen has a forest of cork oaks unusual at this latitude. This is an indication of the older and wider distribution of the forests of cork oaks in the peninsula. To visit, take the forest track that starts in Sestrica and walk 6 km.

V.6 TORRALBA DE RIBOTA

V.6.a Church of San Félix
10 km on the N 234. A visit can be arranged through the Town Hall. Tel: 976 899302.

The town of Torralba de Ribota had an exclusively Christian population and was an important centre for the production of bricks and roof tiles. According to López Landa, the Bishop of Tarazona, don Pedro Pérez Calvillo, had the Mudéjar church built on a high flat spot overlooking the town in 1367 at a time when the war with Castile was still not completely over. This circumstance undoubtedly caused him to choose the architectonic typology of the fortified church, closely imitating the Church of the Virgin in Tobed. The pace of work was slow since a substantial part of it was still ongoing during the Bishopric of don Juan de Valtierra (1410–1433). It is precisely to this second decade of the 15th century that the upper choir and the west gable-end flanked by two towers corresponds, a work probably directed by the master Mahoma Rami, once the second stage of San...
Pedro Mártir in Calatayud had been completed in 1414.

The church has undergone numerous restorations during recent times, notably the one carried out by Fernando Chueca Goitia in the second half of the 20th century. The plan and structure correspond to what has been described already above in the Church of Tobed, although here the nave is shorter as it only has two spans. The interior plan of the two towers on the west front is interesting, as they have a cylindrical central core. This system, atypical in the Mudéjar of Aragon, is found only here and in the tower of the Mudéjar church in Quinto de Ebro. The church has conserved a magnificent series of painted Gothic altarpieces, which again offer evidence of the perfect coexistence of the Oriental and Occidental languages – the Mudéjar spatial one and the Gothic pictorial one.

V.7 **ANIÑÓN**

V.7.a **West Wall of the Church and Mudéjar Tower**

7 km on the N 234. Visits can be arranged through the Town Hall. Tel: 976 899106.

The square Mudéjar tower is earlier than the present building of the Church of Nuestra Señora del Castillo of which it forms a part. Although the extraordinary beauty of the brickwork in relief of the lower of the two sections is noteworthy, the main interest of the tower is the system of vaulting that covers the staircase, which is unique in the genre. The usual system in the Mudéjar style of Aragon is for the vaults formed by converging courses of bricks. Here, however, these are formed with sections of superimposed barrel vaulting. Without any precise documentary
evidence, it has been dated to the first half of the 14th century, nearer 1300. The second interesting element is the great gable or west front of the church which faces the village, the final flourish of the work carried out between 1568 and 1594, the date when the Bishop don Pedro Curbuna proceeded to bless the completely renovated church. With its ornamental motifs in brickwork and applied glazed ceramics, this magnificent wall reaches its greatest formal beauty for a few brief moments when the setting sun glows on it.

V.8 CERVERA DE LA CAÑADA

V.8.a Church-Fortress of Santa Tecla

9 km on the same road. Visits can be arranged through the Town Hall. Tel: 976 899222.

On top of the hill with the village on its slopes, and with a stone tower that was part of the former castle, the Church of Santa Tecla is an appropriate way to end this excursion, since in it, just as in the last bars of a symphony, we can hear all the themes developed during the time.

Back in 1923, José María López Landa transcribed the Gothic inscription that runs round the railing of the choir loft at the end of the church. It says that the church was finished in the year 1426 when the jurados, or elected elders of Cervera de la Cañada, were Pascual Verdejo and Juan Aznar; the regidores, or governing councillors, Antón and Miguel Morant, Antón Cuñillo and Mateo Cubero; the procurator was Miguel Fraire and the master craftsman the famous Mahoma Rami, architect to Pope Benedict XIII.

This church building has caught the attention of the architects, Francisco Íñiguez Almech, who produced a study devoted to it in 1930 and Fernandeo Chueca Goitia, who was in charge of its restoration. The restraints of the previous building have given it a particular personality within the typology of the fortified church, since it only has one chapel in the apse, and this chapel is fitted with an appreciable deviation into the space available between a round and a square tower. On the outside, it has a military air with its great round towers and galleries.

The treatment of the interior space, with the walls painted to look like bricks, the decoration with plasterwork on the windows and railings and the painted decoration of the flat alfajer, supporting the upper choir, allows us to relive an ornamental system from the Islamic tradition. It was the perfect solution to the religious needs of the Christian population in the ancient community of Calatayud.
The activity of the Muslim master craftsman Mahoma Rami is documented in Aragon during the first quarter of the 15th century, between 1403 and 1426. Because of the transcendence of the works carried out under his direction, this craftsman is considered one of the most important Mudéjar master craftsmen of all time. According to the documentation published by Manuel Serrano Sanz in 1916, on 24th February 1403 a meeting of master craftsmen was held, summoned by Pope Benedict XIII, to determine how the work was to be done on the sanctuary of the Cathedral in Saragossa. Among others, Mahoma Rami attended that meeting and the solution he presented was accepted unanimously. In 1923, José Maria Landa López revealed a document from the Archive of the Crown of Aragon, provided by don Andrés Giménez Soler. According to this document, in October 1404, King Martín I of Aragon requested some Muslims be despatched from Saragossa to carry out works in his house in Valldaura in Barcelona, while at the same time warning against disturbing Mahoma Rami, since he was working on the Seo in Saragossa by order of the Pope Benedict XIII. The work to the Cathedral in Saragossa consisted of raising three Romanesque apses to counterbalance the new cimborrio that was planned, since the old one, built by the Archbishop don Lope Fernández de Luna, had collapsed. A new piece of documentary evidence unearthed by Serrano Sanz,
mentions that on 26th February 1409 the master Mahoma Rami took on the whole of the decoration of the new cimborrio of the Seo himself, once it had been rebuilt.

On the other hand, Ovidio Cuella has considerably widened the documented information available on the master Mahoma Rami, by demonstrating the accounts of the work to extend the Church of San Pedro Martir in Calatayud carried out between 1411 and 1414. Although this church in Calatayud was demolished by a brutal and mistaken decision of the Town Council in 1856, graphic evidence remains to confirm its extraordinary artistic interest.

The last information we have on Master Rami again was brought to light by López Landa, and refers to the inscription in the plasterwork that decorated the upper choir at the foot of the Church of Santa Tecla in Cervera de la Cañada, which says that the work was finished in 1426, with Mahoma Rami as the master. This signature of the work is clear proof of the self-esteem and high social acceptance that the Muslim master craftsmen enjoyed in Aragon.

Various other outstanding works in the context of Mudéjar building in Aragon have been attributed to Mahoma Rami. These are buildings included in our itinerary, such as the final section of the Church of the Virgin in Tobed, the house of the Luna Family in the calle Mayor in Daroca, or the finishing of the Church of San Félix in Torralba de Ribota. Although there is no documentary evidence to prove that they are his work, the attribution to him is based on the formal resemblance they have with other work known to have been done by him.