

TOURING TOLEDO



TOP TEN SITES IN TOLEDO

EL TRANSITO SYNAGOGUE

This magnificent synagogue was built in 1355 under the patronage of Samuel–ha- Levy by special permission from Pedro I although we ignored the name of the architect who built it. The synagogue now houses the Sephardic Jews Museum. The vast main prayer hall has been expertly restored and the Mudéjar decoration and intricately carved pine ceiling are striking in part thanks to the arches that allow the entrance of light and its



plaster cast polychrome friezes. Exhibits provide an insight into the history of Jewish culture in Spain, and include archaeological finds, a memorial garden, costumes and ceremonial instruments. This construction is the perfect example of the mixture of cultures that were coexisting in Toledo at the time the Christian, The Jewish and the Muslim to which we owe its decoration, the

light technical elements employed and the scarce decoration in the outside of the building. Toledo's former *judería* (Jewish quarter) was once home to 10 synagogues and comprised some 10% of the walled city's area. After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the synagogue was variously used as a priory, hermitage and military barracks.

THE BURIAL OF COUNT ORGAZ BY EL GRECO

The Burial of the Count Orgaz is universally considered his greatest masterpiece. Some even claim that this is the most beautifully crafted religious painting of all times. Ever since El Greco completed the painting in the late 1500s, people have been flocking to the Santo Tome church in Toledo, Spain, where the impressive 16 by 10-foot. When the Count of Orgaz was alive, he donated a large sum of money to the Santo Tome church. After his death however, the officials in the town ignored his request to bequeath the money -for over 200 years. Then came along Father Andres Nuñez, a humble priest at the Santo Tome who filed a lawsuit in 1569 and won back payments of the Count's original endowment. The priest decided to use this money to decorate the church in honor of the Count and on March 15, 1586, he chose El Greco as the man



for the job. The theme of this painting is a historical-mystical series of events surrounding the death of local hero Count Orgaz, who died in his native Toledo in the early 1300s. The Count was said to be a pious man, a philanthropist, and a

knight. After the Count died in 1312, he was interred by the Cardinal and a host of clerics. The story goes that during this ceremony, the heavens erupted spontaneously and friends and mourners witnessed a sky filled with images of Jesus, the Virgin, St. John, and several other saints and angels. Legend explains that Saint Augustine and Saint Stephen appeared to reward the Count for his generosity to the church by burying him with and dazzling all those present. Being a pious Toledan himself, El Greco chose to recapture this remarkable legend, painting both the mortals and immortals in attendance at Count Orgaz's funeral.

Paying Tribute: By way of thanks for this commission, El Greco painted Nuñez into this masterpiece (located in the far right of the image). Furthermore, as a tribute to the aristocracy of Toledo, El Greco honored various prominent Toledan social figures by immortalizing them in the painting. El Greco even allegedly painted himself, as the figure looking straight out toward the viewer next to Saint Stephen. In addition to immortalizing Santo Tome's priest and several prominent men of Toledo, El Greco also honored his own son in *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*. The young boy looking directly at viewers from the bottom left hand corner of the painting is Jorge Manuel, El Greco's beloved illegitimate son.

Inscribed on the handkerchief in his pocket are both El Greco's Greek signature and the date of his son's birth 1578. El Greco's inspirations for this painting are a great topic of debate among contemporary art critics. Some say that he was inspired by Byzantine art, as evidenced by his earlier work, *The Dormition of the Virgin*. Others point to Renaissance and other Mannerist artists as particularly influential. In addition to paintings and artists, El Greco was also inspired by the fine churchmen and influential members of Toledan society, the Count himself, and God, who served as El Greco's primary influence and inspiration throughout his life.

Composition: This image painting is clearly divided into two parts: heaven above and the mortal burial scene below. Above in the heavens swirl unearthly clouds of ice and elongated phantomlike saints and angels in El Greco's typical Mannerist style. Below terrestrial scene is painted in normal proportions. Because the painting lacks ground, horizon, and perspective, it achieves supernatural space and creates a strange species of harmony.

Color palette: The composition is brought together through rich gold and red colors, which produce a royal and ceremonial character, making the image more cohesive. The figures' varied participation in both the earthly and heavenly events and the torches and cross stretching upward from the terrestrial scene help create harmony in the image. Several areas of this painting shimmer and dance with an unmatched glow. El Greco put so much care into the detail of this work, that even the brilliant garments of his figures are masterpieces in their own right.

THE MOSQUE OF THE CHRIST OF LIGHT Bab al Mardum Mosque (CALIFAL MOSQUE FROM THE X CENTURY)

The mosque is situated next to one of the wall gates and it is one of the most important monuments of Spanish-Moorish and Mudejar architecture in Spain. Just like a small gem, this priceless thousand-year-old building is a unique example of the survival of Al-Andalus art: a mosque or small oratory built in the Caliphate period. Two centuries later it was transformed into a church and an apse was added, following the style of the old building, which led to Mudejar art, a perfect combination and symbiosis.

A MAGNIFICENT COMMISSION

The inscription, discovered in 1899, showed that the building was built in 999 AD and that it was linked to the prestigious Banū l-Hadīdī family:

'Basmala. Ahmad ibn Hadidi ordered the construction of this mosque, paid with his own private wealth, to gain Allah's reward after death. It was finished, with Allah's help, with Musa ibn Ali as the architect, and Sa'ada too, in Muharrag in the year three hundred and ninety'. (Foundation inscription, 13 December 999 / 11 January 1000 AD). However, we do not know if the mosque was ever the family's private residence or if it was built as a devout gift for the whole town. It was built in an important district where palaces belonging to important people have been discovered, because it is very near to the Alcazaba, called Al Hizam or Ceñidor, next to one of the main entrances to the town and opposite to one of the gates. The original building was outstanding because it was so magnificent. This was because it was freestanding and it rose above street level, with a little square on the north side and some steps to enter.



School or mausoleum?

It is very possible that this mosque, as other Fatimi mosques in northern Egypt with a similar plan, was used as a school, or madrasa, because the space is perfect for halgas, students gathering round the teacher. Scholars also say the building could have had funeral purposes and could have been used as a mausoleum.

The history of its names

The mosque was called the Arabic name 'Bab al-Mardum' because it was near the gate with the same name. This is what it was called when King Alfonso VI conquered Toledo (1085). A century later it was owned by the knights of the Order of St John and was called Santa Cruz Chapel. However, its most common name is Cristo de la Luz. There are different stories that explain its name but no documents to support them. They belong to the Christian Reconquest tradition and the only testimony of the different stories is an image called Christ of Light, which is currently kept in Santa Cruz Museum, and also an image of Our Lady of Light, now disappeared.

PLAZA DE ZOCODOVER (ZOCODOVER SQUARE)

It is the main square of Toledo, and its very heart. It was the ancient Arabian market (zocodover means "place of animals"). This square is near the highest point of the old city, in the north-east corner, just a few metres from the Alcazar. Traditional markets, such as the famous "Martes" (Tuesday market) still take place in this square. Great bullfights, fiestas and macabre executions have also taken place here. During the Muslim era this was the location of the old cattle market ("Tulaytula") built on top of the ruins of the Roman wall.



TOLEDO CATHEDRAL

Toledo Cathedral stands on the site of the Great Mosque of Toledo, which itself had replaced a Visigothic church. Built from 1226 to 1493, the long process is reflected in Toledo Cathedral's variety of styles. Many historic events have been hosted in the cathedral over the years, including the proclamation of Joanna the Mad and her husband, Philip the Handsome, as heirs to the throne of Spain. The primarily 13th-century architecture of Toledo cathedral was inspired by the Gothic cathedrals of France such as [Chartres](#), but the squat proportions give it a Spanish feel, as do the wealth and weight of the furnishings and the location of the elaborate choir in the center of the nave.



THE SYNAGOGUE OF ST MARY THE WHITE IN TOLEDO

No one knows for certain when it was built because we have scarce documentary information taken from inscriptions elsewhere. Based on this information some historians claimed that this is the so called New Yosef ben Susán Synagogue who died in 1205. Others suggest that it could be the so called Yosef ben Susán Synagogue, backed by David ben Salomón Abí Darham in 1271.



However, most of today's scholars, based on the building's grandiose architecture and the archaeology's results say that this is the Main Synagogue of the Toledo Jewish Quarter. It was built at the end of the 11th century by Ibn Alfache,

advisor and ambassador to Alfonso VIII, who was openly sympathetic toward Jews. After a fire in 1250, the synagogue was rebuilt.

Recently, attending to his profuse decoration similar to the Nazarí art some investigator pleads for carrying his origin back in the time and dating the construction in the 14th century.

ARCHITECTURE An original style

The building is considered to be an incomparable example of Mudejar art in Toledo. It is the symbiosis of techniques inherited by Muslim master builders. The architectural characteristics of what has been preserved, including the octagonal pillars, for many, belonging to Almohad art, are closer to Castilian buildings from the late Middle Ages. On the other hand, the complex decoration of the lower part with discs on the arch spandrels and pine cones on the chapters separated by the basket lead researchers to associate the decorative style with Nazarite architecture of the kingdom of Granada and Merinite architecture from 14th century Morocco.

Its floor is an irregular quadrangle. Its sanctuary is oriented toward the East. Its measurements vary between 26 and 28 meters in length and 19 and 23 in width. This is somewhat odd and unusual. It seems to have been built upon earlier buildings. Their foundations were made use of and the South and East walls might have been altered or added during different building campaigns.

The main entrance, at the foot of the building, is through a large wooden door with Mudejar decoration with ten point star ornamental bows. It was installed during the reforms at the end of the 19th century, and it is protected by a small roof. The entire complex provokes contemplation and dumbfounded praise, just as it did for centuries with the Jewish people. It is divided into five naves separated by horseshoe arches on octagonal pillars. The central nave is wider than the side naves and the side naves are wider than the end naves. A second set of multifoil arches was built on top of the horseshoe arches. They were originally open and have been walled for some time. The central nave measures 12.50 meters, the middle naves measure 10 meters and the end naves measure 7 meters. They are covered by wooden larch frames: with a coupled and collar-beam roof supported by thick beams.

The synagogue's lovely grounds are surrounded by a wall enclosing an old garden filled with cypress trees. The building can be seen at the very end. Its walls are whitewashed brick and mud.

WOMEN'S AREA

The inherited space currently leads to proposing the possibility of placing the women's area somewhere in the side naves. However, after the most recent studies, we can affirm that women would have been at the foot of the central nave in a high wooden tribune. This tribune no longer exists. There are, however no Spanish references of this arrangement on the same axis as the hejal (Holy Ark) and the bimá (ambo). The foundation study and the fact that the last for chapters adjoining the south wall are slightly different to the rest, as well as the mural paintings found that provide evidence of the addition of a new space, lead us to believe that after the fire of 1250, this last section could have been added to the naves to house the women's tribune.

PAINTINGS PRAYERS ENGRAVED ON THE WALLS

The 16th century improvements made to the sanctuary destroyed the most important and richest part of the synagogue. This area held the hejal or niche for the Torah. We conjecture that there might be an inscription alluding to when the building was founded. In this main chapel, researchers have discovered the first building's original pointed horseshoe arches. There must also have been inscriptions painted with psalms or fragments of the Bible on all of the walls. Inscriptions of this nature can be found in the neighboring synagogue of Samuel

RICH AND LUXURIOUS DECORATION

The beautiful stucco chapters stand out due to their decoration. They give the pillars a finish of wooden ribbons, scrollwork and pine cones. The pine cone is a Middle Eastern traditional element. It is related to unity of the people of Israel. Christianity would later take it up because of its symbology of communion. Volutes formed by palmettes run above the arches. The arches' spandrels have disks with multiple geometrical compositions. Vegetation and geometry the image of the work of the Creator in the cosmos and nature are recurring themes in areas of worship for Jewish and Muslim iconoclasts. Above them are alto-relief shells or medallions associated with water and new life as well as holders between them for storing the sacred texts that would be painted which we have lost entirely. Above that are friezes with very simple eight sided stars before the decoration of disks between arches. These may very well have belonged to the building's first construction phase, along with the naves' body. The extension of sections, decoration between arches and possibly the roofing were added to this body.

ST JOHN OF THE KINGS IN TOLEDO

THE FOUNDATION: A building for devotion and commemoration

San Juan de los Reyes Monastery was commissioned by the Catholic Monarchs in the town of Toledo, to honour the victory in Battle of Toro in 1476. This battle put an end to the War of the Succession in favour of Princess Isabel, sister of late King Enrique IV and wife of Fernando. They were fighting against the supporters of Juana, daughter of the king's illegitimate marriage, who was also Isabel's niece and goddaughter. Isabel defended her own right to the throne because she believed it was legitimate and good for Castilla.



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A century later, the Order's chronicler, Brother Pedro Salazar tells us that the monarchs also built the monastery 'because the prince was born, whom they named don Juan', and that the Queen tried to build a collegiate church 'for her own burial'. At first the architecture and decoration were designed for the monarchs' tombs. The

crossing is heavily decorated, which leads us to think that this was the area that was built for the monarchs' tombs, years before conquering Granada, which is where they were buried in the end. However, decades after that, she stated clearly in her will that she wanted to be buried in San Francisco de la Alhambra Church, in Granada, 'the town I love more than my own life', as she put it. Today the Catholic Monarchs rest in the Royal Chapel in Granada, next to the cathedral. Their grandson Carlos V moved them there, as well as his parents' bodies, Juana of Castilla and Felipe el Hermoso.

Isabel, Catholic queen

The Pope Alexander VI gave Isabel and her husband the title of Catholic Monarchs because they zealously promoted Catholicism. The Queen was always a good Christian in her political and personal life. She always sought justice for her subjects, 'big and small alike'; she protected the American Indians: 'do not let any persons be hurt or have their possessions taken away from them'; and she boldly dealt with death of her only son Prince Juan, of her dearest eldest daughter Isabel, and her grandson Miguel, heir of Castilla, Portugal and Aragon. Her Christian faith determined the condition of her subjects, and this led her to make the difficult decision of restricting residence permits for non-Christian subjects in her kingdoms, as well as setting up the Holy Office Court to correct any deviations of Christianity.

Isabel was a spiritual woman and was devoted to Jesus Christ: 'I owe him my everything – all spiritual and material blessings that I, his unworthy servant, have received.' She gave money to the poor – this was found out later – and she also gave a different and priceless tithe to God: her time. She spent over two hours a day praying.

Devotion to the blessed St John

The Queen was always especially devoted to St John the Evangelist: 'Because I have been very devoted to St John the Apostle and Evangelist and to the Franciscan Order of Observance, and I still am, I have decided to build a house and monastery in the very noble and very loyal town of Toledo.' I, the Queen.

In 1479 the monastery was called 'San Juan de Portalatyna', in honour of St John the Evangelist – according to the legend, he suffered martyrdom under Domitian by being immersed in a vat of boiling oil in front of the Latin Gate in Rome. The Queen requested for and was granted a special jubilee for St John's Day ante Portam Latinam. Afterwards the monastery was named 'De los Santos Juanes'. Later on it was called 'San Juan de la Reina' because it had been the Queen who had promoted that day. In the end the monastery was called "San Juan de los Reyes'.

A home for Franciscans

The collegiate church was not built in the end, probably because there was already a cathedral in the town. As they were very devoted to the Franciscan Order, they decided to give the monastery to the observant Franciscan monks who had been in San Antonio de la Bastida's Convent for fifty-seven years. There were monks living there already when Cisneros came to power in 1486. Fifteen years later, they commissioned the restoration of the other Franciscan monastery in the town, and the non-observant monastic monks who lived there were sent to the other monastery. The old building, located underneath the Palace was given to St Beatriz de Silva for the Order of Concepción or Conceptionists, which she had just founded.



ISABEL AND FERNANDO OF CASTILLE

BUILDING THE CHURCH AND THE CLOISTER

The construction works started in 1477 with the architect Juan Guas. Ten years later the chancel, nave and vaults were finished. That is why the pomegranate does not appear in the large shields on the crossing because it was added after the kingdom of Granada ('pomegranate') was conquered in 1492. Traveller Jerónimo Münzer tells us that the construction works were virtually finished by 1496. They hired Juan Guas again to finish the cloister – this time they paid him on a fixed piece rate – but he died and Enrique Egas took his place. Juan Guas died and Enrique Egas replaced him. There are funds for the cloister during the first decades of the sixteenth century. Treasurer Ruy López's accounts show that they spared no money on this construction. These accounts show that the amount of money spent on the monastery was similar to the money that was spent on the war of Granada. Documents show that they spent about 200,000 ducats. The large amount and variety of documents that are kept confirm that the Queen was directly involved in the project.

AVATARS OF HISTORY

A fire during the French invasion in 1808 destroyed the original altarpiece, the important library and community building that had another plateresque cloister. After the seizure of church property in the nineteenth century, when the monks were expelled, the church was turned into San Martín de Tours Parish Church. The ruins of the old temple were knocked down and the cloister was given to the Monument Commission to set up a museum. In 1954 the building was given back to the Franciscans and in 1977 church life was restored in San Juan de los Reyes.

SCULPTURE

THE YOKE, THE ARROWS AND THE 'TANTO MONTA'

St John the Evangelist's eagle with a halo is holding a coat of arms, under two lions facing each other, which is a symbol of royalty. The lion and castle symbolise the kingdom of Castilla and the bars symbolise the kingdom of Aragon, which also owns the kingdom of Sicily, which is represented by the eagles with crowns. Underneath are the symbols of the yoke and the arrows. Isabel chose the arrows to symbolise the union of kingdoms, and because the F (for 'flecha', 'arrow') was the initial of her husband's name. Fernando, knight of the Order of the Golden Fleece, chose the yoke as a symbol of combined efforts, and because the Y was the initial of his wife's name. You can find the 'Y' and the 'F' on the slender and majestic stands on the pillars, which undoubtedly were places saved for the monarchs. The 'Tanto monta' currency that would go with their emblem was proposed by the great Latinist Antonio de Lebrija, which refers to Alexander the Great when he arrived in Gordión, where a yoke with a complicated knot symbolised the promise to conquer the East. Alexander cuts the knot with his sword and exclaims: 'tanto monta', which means, 'it makes no difference'. This currency shows that the king and queen ruled on equal terms in each of their kingdoms.

The cloister: Paradise on earth

The cloister has a garden that symbolises paradise on earth, which is full of species to depict the Garden of Eden. Today you can find myrtles, cypresses, orange trees, pomegranate trees and other kinds of trees that fill the air with their scent and give attractive colours to the stone. It is divided in four parts that symbolise the four parts of the earth, and in the centre there is a well that recalls the hortus conclusus or enclosed garden, an allegory of Mary's virginity. The ground floor is covered with German cross vaults, where the ribs do not cross in the centre. There is an array of figures of saints, the most venerated ones in Castilla in the late fifteenth century, which shows deep catechism: St John the Evangelist holding the chalice, Mary Magdalene with her jar of ointment, St Catherine of Alexandria with the wheel and sword, St Anthony of Padua holding baby Jesus in his arms... Between them there are ribbons with plant motifs – the typical thick thistle leaf – and animal motifs. The Renaissance steps, designed by Covarrubias, take us to the top floor where four halls start with mixed line arches and continue with nineteenth-century wooden ceiling.