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Eileen P. McKiernan Gonzalez
Berea College

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Local and Imported: Conjunctions of Mediterranean Forms in Romanesque Aragón

By Eileen P. McKiernan González, Berea College, Kentucky*

The Hospitaller monastery of Santa María la Real de Sigena, founded as a royal burial site for the kingdom of Aragón, represents a stylistic crossroads that reveals the conflation of distinct traditions from Iberia and the Mediterranean. Sancha of León-Castilla (d.1208) founded Sigena in 1188 at the same time that Gothic architectural forms began appearing in new foundations along with the expansion of Cistercian reform on the peninsula.¹ Yet Sancha and her builders chose the distinctly *retardataire* Romanesque style for the construction of Sigena's church.² (fig. 1) Further, in contrast to these more popular architectural trends, Sigena's planners made structural and decorative choices for the chapterhouse that included Byzantine, Islamic, and Peninsular elements. By

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- This paper uses research from my dissertation "Monastery and Monarchy: The Foundation and Patronage of Santa María la Real de Sigena and Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas" (The University of Texas at Austin, 2005) and from the opportunity provided by the NEH Summer Seminar: Medieval Mediterranean and the Origins of the West (Barcelona, 2008) to further my research and revisit the site.

¹ The date of foundation has at times appeared as 1183. While a document of foundation exists for 1184, the later date of 1188 is likely the moment when construction was underway and the monastery was habitable. Luis García-Guijarro Ramos, "Las cartas fundacionales del monasterio hospitalario de Santa María de Sigena, 1184-1188," *Aragón en la Edad Media* 19 (2006), 201-212. The Cistercians provide the earliest consistent use of Gothic forms on the peninsula. For a discussion of this see Eileen McKiernan González, "Monastery and Monarchy: The Foundation and Patronage of Santa María la Real de Sigena and Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas" (The University of Texas at Austin, 2005), 125-165.

² In two recent conferences (International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo 2004) and Byzantine (College Art Association, Los Angeles 2009) the usefulness of broad stylistic terms of Romanesque have been called into question, preferencing the use of more clearly defined geographic, chronological, or dynastic terms. For this paper I will use both of these terms precisely for their breadth of meaning.

examining the disparate stylistic choices made at Sigena by the queen and her advisors, I will show that this building project presented a radically different approach to monastic



Figure 1. Santa María la Real de Sigena (Photo: Author)

decoration – one that linked the site to pan-Mediterranean forms and reflected the cosmopolitan nature of the kingdom.

While the analysis of the site has been complicated by its destruction by fire during the Spanish civil war, photographs of the chapterhouse survive thanks to Josep de Gudiol's 1936 photographic survey that included the paintings of Sigena's church among the Romanesque frescoes of the region.³ Gudiol's black and white photographs of

³ The photos have been published in a variety of sources. The most complete is Walter Oakeshott, *Sigena: Romanesque Paintings in Spain & the Winchester Bible Artists* (London, 1972). The remains of the cycle, primarily the spandrels, are on display at the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya. http://www.mnac.es/colleccio/col_romanic.jsp?ambit=21&lan=003

Sigena's chapterhouse, on the other hand, provide for us a window into the syncretic approach to several styles popular in the Mediterranean. **(fig. 2)** The pointed diaphragm arches are embellished with a Sicilian Byzantine fresco cycle and Mudejar *artesonado* (highly intricate wood interlace marquetry).⁴ It is this combination of Romanesque and Byzantine paintings and Mudejar decorative elements that articulates the expansionist tendencies of the reconquest kingdom of Aragón and the patronage goals of its queen, Sancha.

⁴ Mudejar comes from the term *Mudajjan* – denoting Muslim peoples under the rule of Christians in Iberia. There have been several overviews of Mudejar architecture including Rafael López Guzmán, *Arquitectura mudéjar: Del sincretismo medieval a las alternativas hispanoamericanas* (Madrid, 2005) and Gonzalo Borrás Gualis' *El arte mudejar* (Teruel, 1990), which are the broadest in scope and look at the issues surrounding historiography. Jerrilynn Dodds has also looked at the complex nature of the term *Mudejar* in "Mudejar Tradition and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain*. eds. Vivian B. Mann, Thomas F. Glick, and Jerrilynn D. Dodds (New York, 1992), 112-31 and "The Mudejar Tradition in Architecture," in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*. Ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Vol. 2. (Leiden, 1992), 592-98. Juan Carlos Ruiz Souza in "Architectural Languages, Functions, and Spaces: The Crown of Castile and Al-Andalus," *Medieval Encounters* 12.3 (2006): 360-87 reconsidered some of the broad assumptions of Mudejar, particularly the general sense that it is identifiable through Islamic decorative forms that are subordinate to Christian structures. By considering the use of the *qubba*, a central plan structure with a square base, he reframes the discussion adding the possibility of Gothic decorative forms in an Islamic architectural body.



Figure 2. Chapterhouse, Santa María la Real de Sigüenza (After: Josep de Gudiol, published in Walter F. Oakeshott. *Sigüenza: Romanesque Painting in Spain and the Winchester Bible Artists*. London, 1972)
Sancha was the daughter of Alfonso VII of León-Castilla (r. 1126-1157) and his

second wife Ricca of Poland (d. 1185). **[Appendix I: Genealogy]** Sancha's early life is rather obscure.⁵ Her youth was spent in León with her aunt, the infanta Sancha (d. 1159), also of León-Castilla, after her widowed mother married Ramón Berenguer II of Provence (r. 1144-1167) and joined him in France. By the time of her marriage to Alfonso II, king of Aragón, Sancha was living in Castilla at the court of her nephew Alfonso VIII (r. 1158-1214). Her construction of Sigüenza and active involvement in its affairs is likely indebted to the influence of her aunt and her grandmother, Queen Urraca of León-Castilla (r. 1109-26).⁶ Both of these women are known for their patronage of

⁵ Mariano de Pano y Ruata's study of the queen's life still dominates the literature in *La santa reina doña Sancha, fundadora del monasterio de Sigüenza* (Zaragoza, 1944).

⁶ The significant power of the infantazgo has been studied by Therese Martin most recently in "Hacia una clarificación del infantazgo en tiempos de la reina Urraca y su hija la infanta Sancha (ca. 1107-1159)," *e-Spania*, 5 (2008) <http://e-spania.revues.org/index12163.html>. The infanta ruled over her own lands, and

San Isidoro de León, a site that was closely affiliated with the Leonese monarchy from its foundation by Sancha of León (d. 1067) and Fernando I of León-Castilla (r. 1035-63).

San Isidoro took on the role of royal burial site for a new combined kingdom incorporating León and the county of Castilla.⁷

Sancha's Architectural Sources: San Isidoro and San Salvador de Palat del Rey

In the century of construction that followed at San Isidoro, the Leonese monarchy consistently patronized the site and converted it from a small mozarabic church to a Romanesque masterpiece upon the pilgrimage road to Santiago de Compostela. A royal palace also remained adjacent to the site until the infanta Sancha transformed the double monastery into an Augustinian canonate in 1148.⁸ The infanta released the palace to the canons of San Isidoro as well.

Two particular features employed at San Isidoro are important to consider in the comparison of that site to Sigena and in light of Sancha's role in its design and construction. These are the use of the polylobed arch and the extensive fresco cycle. At San Isidoro the incorporation of polylobed arches in the transept was an unusual feature

appears prominently in her brother's documents, even with the title of queen. She has even been the subject of historical fiction in Angeles de Irisari's *La reina Urraca* (Madrid, 2000) told from the infanta's perspective.

⁷ Therese Martin, *Queen as King: Politics and Architectural Patronage in Twelfth-Century Spain* (Leiden, 2006), 158. Sancha entered a similar situation in Aragón, where a smaller kingdom was unified to a powerful county poised for greater expansion. Like her predecessor in León-Castilla, Sancha attempted to define royal burial and dynastic affiliation through her patronage of Sigena.

⁸ Among the many studies on San Isidoro de León, four scholars have looked at issues of patronage, iconography of the fresco cycle, and architecture: Martin, *Queen as King*; Rose Walker, "The Wall Paintings in the Panteon de los Reyes at Leon: A Cycle of Intercession" *Art Bulletin* 82.2 (2000): 200-25; Susan Havens Caldwell, "Urraca of Zamora and San Isidoro in Leon: Fulfillment of a Legacy" *Women's Art Journal* 7.1 (1986): 19-25; and John Williams, "San Isidoro in León: Evidence for a New History" *Art Bulletin* 55.2 (1973): 170-89.

for the region at the time. Therese Martin analyzed the use of this type of arch as a referent to Islamic architecture, and particularly to the now-destroyed Great Mosque in Toledo.⁹ This association linked the queen to her father Alfonso VI's conquest of Toledo in 1085, which had been a major turning point in the balance of power on the peninsula where Alfonso VI inhabited and built Islamic palaces. The polylobed arch was systematically used in this earlier architecture, and such usage furthered the site's visual language of reconquest, and presented an early example of Mudejar forms in León.

San Isidoro also had a lavish fresco cycle in the lower narthex, referred to today as the Panteón de los Reyes. The cycle's iconography is Christological; it would also find echo in the chapterhouse of Sigena.¹⁰ The patronage of the cycle has been attributed to Fernando I, the infanta Urraca (sister of Alfonso VI), queen Urraca, Alfonso VII, and the infanta Sancha.¹¹ Having lived at the court of León, queen Sancha [founder of Sigena] would have been witness to and have understood not only the political importance of the patronage programs of these royal women, but the visual implications in the importation of motifs and styles associated with other geographic areas and political alliances.¹²

The syncretic style that characterizes the amalgam of elements found at San Isidro appears to have left a mark on Sancha as she modeled her patronage of Sigena on the

⁹ Martin, *Queen as King*, 105-111.

¹⁰ Two articles have analyzed this burial tradition: Rose Walker, "Images of Royal and Aristocratic Burial in northern Spain, c. 950 – c. 1250" in *Medieval Memories: Men, Women and the Past*, ed. Elizabeth van Houts (Harlow, 2001) and Raquel Alonso Álvarez, "Los enterramientos de los reyes de León y Castilla hasta Sancho IV: Continuidad dinástica y memoria regia," *e-Spania*, 3 (2007), <http://e-spania.revues.org/document109.html>.

¹¹ The current debate about patronage centers on the infanta Urraca (whom Walker preferred) and the queen Urraca (preferred by Martin).

¹² The basilica at San Isidoro was consecrated in 1149, just four or five years before Sancha's birth. Her aunt willed extensive property to the canonate. The connection was so close that the thirteenth century chronicler, Lucas de Tuy, referred to Sancha as the "bride of San Isidoro." Martin, *Queen as King*, 154.

actions of her female relatives at San Isidoro. She incorporated not only an appropriated style in the use of *artesonado*, as her grandmother had done with the Mudejar arches, but also a fresco cycle attributed to the patronage of women of her line. Falling out of step with these women, however, Sancha founded not a double monastery, as was the case at San Isidoro, but a women's house. This is particularly interesting in that she planned this woman's house as a royal pantheon, in replication of the function of San Isidoro. For this too she looked to a Leónese tradition that had begun with the Mozarabic monastery of San Salvador de Palat del Rey.¹³ Like San Isidoro and Sigena, San Salvador was the foundation of a woman – Elvira Ramírez of León (d.c. 986), daughter of Ramiro II (r. 931-950), who, like Sancha, was a princess, an abbess, and finally a regent.¹⁴

Sancha, further, established her women's house in reconquered territory and under the rule of the Hospitallers, thereby stating very pointedly her affiliation with the ideology of the Christian reconquest.¹⁵ The lands Sancha chose had been conquered by Alfonso I (r. 1104-1134), and were among the lands given to the Hospitaller and Templar orders by Ramón Berenguer IV (rules as prince 1137-1162) in reconciling Alfonso's will.¹⁶ A document from 1184, indicated that an exchange of land for churches was

¹³ Four or perhaps five kings were buried at Palat del Rey: Ramiro II, Ordoño III, Sancho, and Ordoño IV, and possibly Ramiro III. The establishment of San Isidoro by Sancha's great-great-grandparents, Sancha and Fernando, followed in the footsteps of this Leonese tradition, which dated back to the kings of Asturias. For a groundplan and discussion of the architectural framework of Palat del Rey see Jerrilynn Dodds, *Architecture and Ideology in Early Medieval Spain* (University Park, 1990).

¹⁴ Ricardo del Arco, *Sepulcros de la casa real de Castilla* (Madrid, 1954), 13-15.

¹⁵ The unique situation of Sigena within the military order has been considered by Alan J. Forey in "Women and the Military Orders in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries." *Studia Monastica* 29 (1987): 63-92; and by Luis García-Guijarro Ramos, "The Aragonese Hospitaller Monaster of Sigena: is Early Stages, 1188-c.1210" in *Hospitaller Women in the Middle Ages*, edited by Anthony Luttrell and Helen J. Nicholson (Aldershot, 2006), 113-141.

¹⁶ Alfonso I left the kingdom to the military orders. While his will was not upheld, his brother Ramiro II, the monk (r. 1134-1137), succeeded him, the Hospitaller and Templar orders had to be compensated. Ramón Berenguer IV, as prince of Aragón through his marriage to Petronila (Ramiro's daughter),

necessary as the land, town, and churches were divided between these two orders.¹⁷ In the foundation document of 1188 Armengol de Aspa, Maestre de Amposta – head of the Hospitaller order in the Crown of Aragón – accepted the incorporation of the nuns at Sigena into the order.

As was the situation for her ancestors, Sancha's position of power and her monastic patronage on the peninsula derived originally from her royal Leonese family; yet, for Sancha, this was further enhanced by her inter-Iberian marriage, to Alfonso II of Aragón (r. 1162-96) in 1174, shortly after his knighting and coming of age, and she ruled by his side for twenty-two years, after which she was named regent for their son Pedro II (r. 1196-1213). Documents of her political maneuvers during this time show Sancha to have been an effective powerhouse, and she was also known to be well-educated and highly pious.¹⁸ Sancha and Alfonso's court was renowned for both its learned and expansionist tendencies.¹⁹

negotiated the settlement of lands. See Elena Lourie, "The Will of Alfonso I, 'El Batallador,' King of Aragón and Navarre: A Reassessment," *Speculum* 50/4 (1975): 635-651.

¹⁷ Luis García-Guijarro Ramos discusses the early documents of Sigena, specifically the complicated land transfers between Sancha, the Templars, and the Hospitallers. At the core of these was the land for the monastery, most of it either Sancha's or the Hospitaller's. Two churches, however, in the towns of Sena and Sigena, were on the land, but were property of the Templars. García-Guijarro Ramos placed these in the context of the land donations of Ramón Berenguer IV of Barcelona (prince of Aragón) to the Hospitallers and Templars in his reconciling of Alfonso I of Aragón's will. He also explored the evidence that Sigena was habitable by 1188. García-Guijarro Ramos, 201-212. The wording of the document suggests that while the site was complete enough for the installation of the nuns, the church was probably built after the dormitories, chapterhouse, refectory, and cloister, all of which were uniform in their structure.

¹⁸ Contemporary troubadour Pierre Vidal described Sancha in song as: "the valiant queen in Aragón, who is a truer queen than any in all the world . . . for she is honest and loyal and gracious, loved by all the people and to God agreeable." Cited in Martí de Riquer's "La poesia d'Alfons, dit El Cast" in *VII Congreso de Historia de la Corona de Aragón, 1-6 October 1962*, 1: Crónica y ponencias (Barcelona, 1962), 123-140.

¹⁹ José María Lacarra y de Miguel, "Alfonso II el Casto, rey de Aragón y conde de Barcelona" in *VII Congreso de Historia de la Corona de Aragón, 1-6 October 1962*, 1: Crónica y ponencias (Barcelona, 1962), 95-120.

It is from within the context of her own family's traditions, as well as those of her husband's court, that Sancha came to see the ideological expediency of a site that would integrate geographically the political kingdom of Aragón with the more-worldly county of Barcelona, whose political connections tended toward the French Midi.²⁰ As the first king of the combined kingdom and county, thereafter called the Crown of Aragón, Alfonso had to balance the varying legal and political structures of his different administrations. His documents present him as a king on the march, appearing monthly in different cities and regions.²¹ The documents associated with Sancha, on the other hand, link her actions substantially to Aragón and the old seat of power in Huesca.²² While appearing to leave her interests in León-Castilla aside, these documents also show her acting independently of her husband.

²⁰ Alfonso not only patronized troubadours, but also wrote poetry himself. In recent scholarship he has been titled the Troubadour because of this, but early documents entitle him the Chaste (since he is not known to have had any illegitimate children, although he was tied to several women in addition to Sancha). Irénée Cluzel, "Princes et troubadores de la maison royale de Barcelone-Aragón" *Boletín de la Real Academia de Buenas Letras de Barcelona* 27 (1957-58): 321-73. Alfonso's rule further extended into the Midi after he incorporated Provence into his kingdom at the death of his uncle Ramón Berenguer II, count of Provence in 1167, in effect seizing control from Sancha's mother and half sister Douce. Ricca went on to marry Raymond V of Toulouse. Sancha's daughter Leonor married Raymond V's son Raymond VI, placing grandmother and granddaughter in succession as countesses of Toulouse.

²¹ Ana Isabel Sánchez Casabón has compiled the documents of the king in *Alfonso II Rey de Aragón, Conde de Barcelona y Marqués de Provenza: documentos (1162-1196)* (Zaragoza, 1995). See also Jaime Caruana Gómez de Barreda, "Itinerario de Alfonso II de Aragón" *Estudios de la edad media de la Corona de Aragón* 7 (1962): 73-226.

²² Sancha's documents reveal much of her patronage thanks to documentation practices of Aragón. As opposed to León and Castilla, where the formulaic construction of king, queen, and heir obscures agency, Aragonese practice provides Sancha's agency in donations and land transfers. No comprehensive study has been made of Sancha's disparate documents. In Sánchez Casabón's compilation of Alfonso's documents she appears only where she signs her husband's documents. McKiernan González, 38-54.

The Politics of Geography

The distribution of Sancha's wealth and her political involvements paint a picture not only of her agency, but of her vision of herself as a queen who could link the various factions represented within the court of her new kingdom. Given the clarity of this picture, it is my contention that her choice of location for Sigena within the old kingdom of Aragón, her desire to designate this site as the royal pantheon in the manner of the foundations of her Leonese ancestors at San Isidoro and San Salvador de Palat del Rey, and her active role in its design and decoration deliberately marked out in physical form a royal vision that balanced the patronage traditions of her own family with the Aragonese expansionist tendencies in her choice of a military order. As such, Sigena signals a dramatic moment in the propensity toward the pan-Mediterranean in the Crown of Aragón. The diverse forms and styles incorporated there illustrate a unique awareness of the political and ideological meanings imbedded in differing geographical associations.

The importance of geography is implicit in the siting of Sigena. Sancha placed the complex in territory associated with the conquests of Alfonso I el Batallador (r. 1104-1134).²³ His expansionist tendencies to north and east were continued through the reigns of Alfonso II's son and grandson, to the point where, at its height, the Crown of Aragón included control of Majorca, Sicily, southern Italy and parts of Greece. In terms of the Pan-Mediterranean adoption of forms at Sigena, it is important to note that these more far-reaching sites were to be referenced in the décor of the monastery's chapterhouse.

It is also important to note that the political alliances on the Iberian peninsula varied over time, shifting between the kingdoms of Castilla, León, and Navarra. With

²³ The Battler was Alfonso II's granduncle and Sancha's step grandfather. See genealogy appendix.

this in mind, it is significant that the monastery was positioned at the crossroads linking the four most important cities of the period in the Crown of Aragón: Huesca, Barcelona, Zaragoza, and Lleida. The monastery also lay on the Catalan pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela. Reflecting the cross-peninsula awareness that would have been possible by way of this popular thoroughfare, records show that Alfonso II went on pilgrimage in 1196, the year he died, stopping in all the regions of the north to consolidate an alliance linking the Christian kingdoms.²⁴

Situated on the pilgrimage road from Barcelona to Santiago de Compostela, Sigena was in relatively close proximity to the fortresses of Monzón and Barbastro, both of which had played significant roles in the reconquest push of Alfonso I, and Montearagón where he chose to be buried. This placed the monastery squarely in the transitional zone between the kingdom of Aragón and the county of Barcelona, mediating the political and geographic space. The association with these fortresses and Sancha's choice of a crusading order for Sigena, indicated the level of Sancha's support of reconquest ideology.

The siting of the monastery was coupled with its proposed function in Sancha's goal to bring the political ideology in line with the geography. Following the familial model, Sancha's first goal was to establish the Leonese custom of royal burial in her new kingdom of Aragón. Because of the alliances that spanned the Iberian kingdoms associated with various family members, this was not as straightforward as a simple site designation. Foremost, Sancha wished to have her husband buried at Sigena. Alfonso II,

²⁴ His death meant that this alliance would not reach fruition until over a decade later in the decisive battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212) where his son Pedro I (r. 1196-1213) played an instrumental role. Antonio Ubieto Arteta, "La peregrinación de Alfonso II de Aragón a Santiago de Compostela" *Estudios de la edad media de la corona de Aragón* 5 (1952): 438-452.

however, had several choices of burial location. He could follow his father who had promised his body to the Monastery of Ripoll, in keeping with the tradition of the counts of Barcelona. Looking to Aragón, San Juan de la Peña was also a traditional site for the king's burial. In Sigena, Sancha gave him a new option, one that would have tied the borders of his two most important territories. Ultimately, Alfonso took a more politically neutral route in choosing the monastery at Poblet, thereby privileging the Cistercians above a consideration of geographical allegiance.

Although Sancha did not succeed in convincing her husband to be buried at Sigena, she did acquire her son Pedro's promise of burial, which he affirmed after his father's death in 1196.²⁵ This history shows that the foundation of Sigena as a royal burial site was an attempt to address the complicated genealogical relationships of the Iberian peninsula, as well as the political necessities of Sancha's new kingdom.

Sancha's active involvement with the day-to-day affairs of the monastery after its completion suggests a similar oversight of the monastery during its construction which influenced the choice of its style. Unlike at Poblet or Valbona de les Monges, two contemporary monasteries of the region erected in an early Gothic style, the stylistic combinations at Sigena, are unusual enough to suggest a deliberate use of style to identify the monastery's royal patronage and unique stature among the queen's foundations.²⁶

²⁵ Sancha and her children (Pedro, Leonor, and Dulce) were the only royal burials there for two centuries. While royal burial moved to the county of Barcelona, privileging the Cistercians at Poblet and Santes Creus, Sigena became an important burial site for the Aragonese aristocracy.

²⁶ Sancha also patronized other Cistercian monasteries, and she had a Cistercian as a close advisor, Ricardo, bishop of Huesca, who wrote a customary for Sigena. Known as Sancha's rule, the customary expanded on the Augustinian rule that the Hospitallers followed. The full text can be found in Agustín Ubieto Arteta, *El real monasterio de Sigena (1188-1300)* (Valencia, 1966), 18-40. The customary has been translated into English by both Marian Horvat, "Queen Sancha of Aragon and the Royal Monastery of Sigena" (M.A. Thesis, University of Kansas, 1994), 125-162 and by Karl Frederick Schuler, "The Pictorial Program of the Chapterhouse of Sigena" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1995), 253-263. Interestingly Sancha did not favor to the same degree the monastery of Casbas, the local Cistercian foundation for women. Alfonso's

Style and Geography in an Age of Transitions

The dominant style of the monastery at Sigena is in keeping with the fortress churches of the Hospitaller order in Aragón, the fortress churches of the French Midi, and the church of San Isidoro de León.²⁷ Broad unarticulated walls of ashlar masonry, the consistent use of arches, both in the vaulting – usually a barrel vault – and in portals and windows characterize this architecture. The ground plan of the church at Sigena is consistent with a single nave church that incorporates a clerestory, transept, and an apse with side chapels.²⁸

While the pointed barrel vault was the primary component used in the church, it was not carried throughout the complex at Sigena; instead diaphragm arches dominate the rest of the structure. **(figs. 3 and 4)** These arches were an alternative technique used effectively in both religious and secular spheres, although generally not in the church

patronage of the Cistercians has been well documented by Sánchez Casabón and María Jesus Sánchez Oson, in “Alfonso II y el Cister en Aragón” in *El Cister: Órdenes religiosas zaragozanas* (Zaragoza, 1987), 17-34.

²⁷ Sheila Bonde’s *Fortress-Churches of Languedoc: Architecture, Religion, and Conflict in the High Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1994) provided an overview of this development in the Languedoc. Unfortunately there is no comparable study of Hospitaller sites. A site-by-site analysis is necessary. For further discussion of the late Romanesque in Aragón see Eileen McKiernan González, “The Persistence of the Romanesque in the Kingdom of Aragón,” in *Church, Vellum and State: Essays on Medieval Spain in Honor of John Williams*, eds. Therese Martin and Julie Harris (Leiden, 2005), 443-478.

²⁸ Jacques Gardelles, “Le prieuré de Sigena aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles: Étude architecturale” *Bulletin monumental* 133.1 (1975): 15-28.



Figure 3. Nave, Santa María la Real de Sigüenza (Photo: Author)

proper or the primary audience halls of palaces. For these spaces, either barrel vaults or ribbed vaults continued to dominate. These fully vaulted structures are more stable, but require more stone and labor. The diaphragm construction allowed for transverse arches to create a frame that could be covered with lighter materials, generally wooden beams. At Sigüenza these arches allowed for less-expensive vaulting, quicker construction, and space for embellishment.



Figure 4. Dormitory, Santa María la Real de Sigena (Photo: Author)

Artesonado: Islamic Decoration as a Royal and Conquering Signifier

The chapterhouse's diaphragm construction (**fig. 2**) is distinct from both the standard in the kingdom of Aragón and that in the county of Barcelona in that the ceiling above the arches is flat beamed, rather than pitched as seen in contemporary constructions at Poblet and Santes Creus. The flat ceiling extended the space of the spandrel of each diaphragm arch, thus opening the space for painting. For my purposes, the use of these arches is important because they also opened the space for elaborate

artesonado ceilings. Often ignored at Sigüenza, the Mudejar artesonado depicts a level of complexity and variety that moves far beyond a simple wood covering. Associated with Mudejar structures, the elaborate artesonado was common in Castilla and Andalusia, however, this elaboration was relatively rare in Aragón and is visually distinct. In Castilla, artesonado tended to be elaborately carved and heavily painted, whereas in Aragón and Barcelona simple cross beams, as seen in the dormitory of Poblet, were generally preferred. **(fig. 5)**

An Islamic source for the artesonado can, though, be found in Aragón, namely in the Taifa kingdom of the Banu Hud, which was centered in Zaragoza.²⁹ The rapid incorporation of Taifa ruled lands beginning with Alfonso VI of León-Castilla's conquest of Toledo in 1085, and furthered by Alfonso I of Aragón's conquest of Zaragoza in 1118, had the double benefit of not only expanding the boundaries of these kingdoms, but also expanding the stylistic choices available along with availability of knowledgeable craftsmen. As the Taifa rulers built lavishly, these forms were appropriated into the Christian realm.

Documentary evidence suggests that Alfonso VI not only inhabited these lavish sites, but had palaces built in the style of the conquered. By the end of the twelfth

²⁹ Castilla-León continued to appropriate this Islamic style into the fifteenth century; In Aragón it remained a regional style and does not generally ascend to the heights of a courtly style. Taifa is a term derived from the Arabic *muluk al-tawa'if* (kings of factions or groups). After the splintering of the Umayyad Caliphate, these smaller kingdoms arose and dominated southern Iberia until the arrival of the Almoravids from Morocco. Hugh Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal: A Political History of al-Andalus* (London: Longman, 1996), 130.

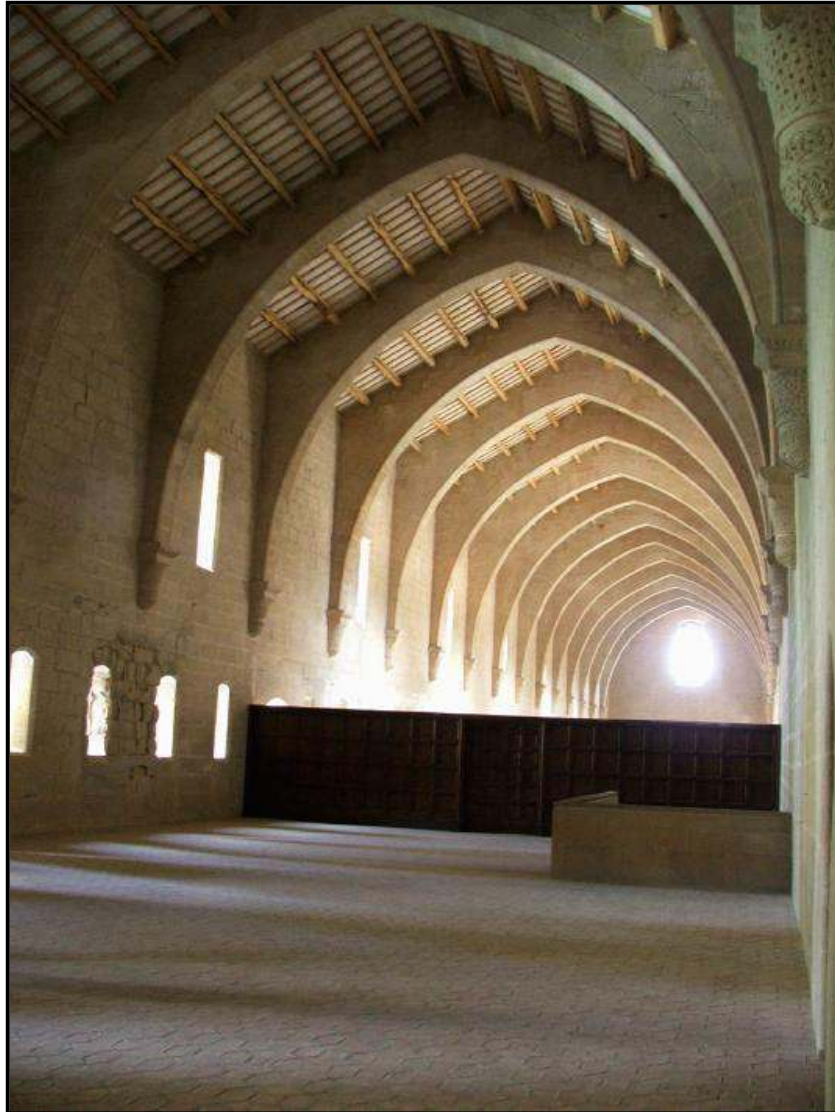


Figure 5. Dormitory, Poblet (Photo: Author)

century Mudejar elements began to appear prominently in palace structures and in monastic sites, suggesting an increasingly pervasive use of the style in noble circles. An example of this is the Mudejar chapel of La Asunción in the Cistercian monastery of Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas in Burgos.³⁰

³⁰ Gema Palomo Fernández and Juan Carlos Ruiz Souza have analyzed the consistent approach to Mudejar forms at Las Huelgas in “Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas de Burgos. Escenografía funeraria de Alfonso X para un proyecto inacabado de Alfonso VIII y Leonor Plantagenet” *Goya* 316-17 (2007): 21-44.

Alfonso I, on the other hand, did not patronize architecture in the same way. Indeed, his rule and the subsequent regency of Ramón Berenguer IV of Barcelona left these Aragonese territories without substantial construction until the rule of Alfonso II and Sancha. At Sigena, in contrast, the Islamic forms referenced the conquered Taifa kingdom of Zaragoza, and specifically the fortress palace of the Aljaferia, rather than the contemporary Almohads.³¹ The architecture was heavily embellished with carved stucco walls and wood beams that combined geometric designs, floral patterns, and calligraphy. Sigena's chapterhouse ceiling reflects this style of deeply carved geometric designs.

Eight of the twelve panels of Sigena's chapterhouse artesonado ceiling survive in photographs. **(fig. 6)** These images show a deeply carved format in a rigorous geometric frame.³² As Karl Schuler has shown, the configuration of the Mudejar ceiling should be

³¹ Alfonso I actually conquered the kingdom in 1118 from the Almoravids who had taken control from the Banu Hud (Taifa rulers of Zaragoza) in 1110. Their control of the city was short-lived and the connection to place remained with the Banu Hud's architectural exploits. The Aljaferia was the royal palace constructed under the Banu Hud. Gonzalo Borrás Gualis, 63-65. The Almohads, like the Almoravids, were a Moroccan dynasty. They were noted for their austerity and religious zeal. Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal*, 154-161, 196-200.

³² Borrás Gualis, 65. The dating of the chapterhouse was argued as much later by José Galiay Sarañana in *Arte mudejar aragonés* (Zaragoza, 2002 facsimile of 1950 publication), 191-192. Galiay Sarañana identified the craftsmen as French, but the program is clearly Mudejar. He also dated the artesonado to c. 1410 based on documentation. The subprioress of the time refers to the expansion she made of a room off of the chapterhouse, probably referring to the small mudejar chapel on the north side of the chapterhouse whose decoration fits with the mudejar preferred by the Trastámara dynasty of the period. Borrás Gualis dated the chapterhouse artesonado by style to the first quarter of the thirteenth century – contemporary with his dating of the fresco cycle. It is clear from documentary evidence that Islamic craftsmen worked at Sigena. Alfonso transfers possession of his "Saracen" Cicrino to Sancha and Sigena in 1193. Cicrino appears again in Sancha's will in 1208, although the specific work he did for Sancha is unclear. Ubieto Arteta, *El real monasterio de Sigena*, 44-45, 85.



Figure 6. Mudejar artesonado, spandrel frescoes, and intrado ancestor figures, Chapterhouse, Santa María la Real de Sigüenza (After: Josep de Gudiol, published in Walter F. Oakeshott. *Sigüenza: Romanesque Painting in Spain and the Winchester Bible Artists*. London, 1972)

considered in a discussion of Sigüenza’s fresco cycle. Often ignored, the Mudejar artesonado depicts a level of complexity and variety that moves far beyond a simple wood covering. Each of the twelve panels was unique and rigorously laid out in intricate geometric patterns. Schuler also pointed out the significance of the Arabic calligraphy in the foliate patterns, including phrases such as “Sovereignty belongs to God,” and “Blessings and Prosperity.”³³ While generally associated with Quranic text, these phrases are not contrary to Christian belief, and appear in Christian settings where a

³³ Schuler, 143-144.

combined Christian and Islamic workforce was present.³⁴ The adaptation of the artesonado and the use of calligraphic phrasing signified the recent conquest of the Taifa kingdom. It was a reference that would have been recognizable and appreciated by the Aragonese courtiers.

Sicilian-Byzantine Frescoes: Byzantine Decoration as an Imperial Signifier

Going beyond this political reference, the artisans at work in Sigena adopted an even more foreign style of a different magnitude. Unlike the frescos painted in the church at Sigena, which were of a style consistent with late Romanesque found elsewhere in the region, Sigena's chapterhouse was covered with lavish Byzantine frescoes that had no parallel in Aragón, the county of Barcelona, or even the remainder of the Iberian Peninsula. Bringing to mind the Christological iconography of the program at San Isidoro, the paintings of the chapterhouse articulate a cohesive program from Genesis through the Life of Christ in this imported style.³⁵ **(fig. 7)**

The program begins on the diaphragm arches, which directs the viewer's attention across the arch from left to right following the narrative of Genesis, beginning with the Creation of Adam and ending with the anointing of David. **(fig. 8)** Along with this narrative sequence painted in a Byzantine style, the frame and point of the spandrels included marginalia of flora and fanciful fauna in a local style.³⁶ **(fig. 9)** The program

³⁴ Denise Fairchild Ruggles discusses a similar construction on the façade of the Alcazar of Sevilla, though granted at a later date, in "The Alcazar of Seville and Mudejar Architecture" *Gesta* 43.2 (2004): 87-98.

³⁵ San Isidoro's program moves from infancy, to Crucifixion, to Maestas Domini. While Old Testament figures appear in the capitals, Enoch and Elijah are their sole representatives in painting. See Rose Walker and Therese Martin for discussions of these images.

³⁶ Oakeshott, 74. The creation, fall, and punishment of Adam and Eve took up the first seven spandrel views, Cain and Abel the next three, Noah four, the Sacrifice of Isaac one, Moses five, and finally David is



Figure 7. Chapterhouse frescos, Santa María la Real de Sigena (After: Josep de Gudiol, published in Walter F. Oakeshott. *Sigena: Romanesque Painting in Spain and the Winchester Bible Artists*. London, 1972)

extends then to the walls and rises from the base of the diaphragm arches to the artesonado ceiling. Because the walls were whitewashed over time due to changing styles and water damage, several gaps in the program are irretrievable, although the consistency of the program presents some logical choices within the established Christological plan.³⁷ (**fig. 10**)

anointed. The intrados of the arches presented the ancestors of Christ with two distinct programs. The surrounding walls depict the scenes of Christ's life from Incarnation to Resurrection. There are significant gaps in the wall program due to later whitewashing.

³⁷ Barbara Zeitler cautioned against assuming a straightforward transfer of iconography from East to West in "Cross Cultural Interpretations of Imagery in the Middle Ages," *Art Bulletin* 76.4 (1994): 680-694. In particular she found textual and visual moments of misinterpretation of iconography. Sigena's program integrates and alters Byzantine iconography for a Western audience of nuns and royal household. The



Figure 8. Labor of Adam and Eve, Second spandrel, Chapterhouse, Santa María la Real de Sigüenza (After: Josep de Gudiol, published in Walter F. Oakeshott. *Sigüenza: Romanesque Painting in Spain and the Winchester Bible Artists*. London, 1972)

The two central scenes on the south and north walls, the Nativity and the Crucifixion, bring the cycle of Christ's earthly existence from birth to death. Each of these scenes dominates the center of its respective wall by its extended width. In terms of Byzantine iconography, the one major inconsistency is in Genesis, especially given the Norman Sicilian variant. The programs at the Cappella Palatina, the Martorana, and Monreale all begin their sequences with Genesis 1: 1-31, the separation of light from

different iconography of the Byzantine and Western European programs makes it difficult to reconstruct with certainty what may have been portrayed in the remaining five whitewashed panels. It seems plausible that what is missing is the Angel at the Open Tomb, Anastasis, Pentecost, Ascension, and either the Trinity or a Last Judgment, although the shape and size of the space available makes the Last Judgment seem less likely.

darkness, and move through the seven days of Creation. The program at Sigena skips this first chapter of Genesis and moves directly to Chapters 2 – 9, and then briefly to Genesis 22, Exodus, and finally to 2 Samuel 2: 5-7. In this, the iconographic program was specifically tailored to the space at Sigena. Ending the program with the anointing of David as king, would have been entirely appropriate for the royal foundation.



Figure 9. Centaur battling a Dragon, Chapterhouse, Santa María la Real de Sigena (After: Josep de Gudiol, published in Walter F. Oakeshott. *Sigena: Romanesque Painting in Spain and the Winchester Bible Artists*. London, 1972)

It has been widely accepted that the style of Sigena's frescos follows the Norman Sicilian Byzantine style that has also been identified with the *Winchester Bible*.³⁸ The figures are

³⁸ Oakeshott, 90-97, suggests the Morgan Master as the painter at Sigena, although the connections with the work of the Gothic Master are also quite persuasive.

linear but with enough volume and contrast of light and dark to suggest a level of naturalism. The softened lines create a level of dynamism to the figures. Unfortunately, due to the fire in 1936, the color of the narrative panels does not survive



Figure 10. Nativity, south wall, Chapterhouse, Santa María la Real de Sigena (After: Josep de Gudiol, published in Walter F. Oakeshott. *Sigena: Romanesque Painting in Spain and the Winchester Bible Artists*. London, 1972)

for a more detailed formal analysis. The only color that survives appears in the archivolt of the entry arch into the chapterhouse. (**fig. 11**)

Dating the fresco cycle has proved even more difficult than reconstructing the iconographic program; on the basis of style alone, scholars have suggested dates ranging from the 1190s to the 1230s.³⁹ Two differing approaches to dating dominate: either the

³⁹ Oakeshott and Otto Pächt challenged the traditional dating of the 1230s by connecting the cycle to the Winchester Bible and particularly to the Master of the Morgan leaf. Otto Pächt, “A Cycle of English Frescoes in Spain” *Burlington Magazine* 103 (1961), 166-75. Schuller, 197-218, summarized the debate over dating of the cycle. His conclusions placed it between 1190 and 1200, and most likely between 1190 and 1194. In this Schuller agreed with the findings of Freya Probst, “Die Wandmalereien im Kapitelsaal

cycle was done shortly after the establishment of Sigena in the 1180s and 1190s – immediately following the close of work on the *Winchester Bible* – or after Sancha’s death, pushing the dating to the 1220s. These two scenarios, as with the fresco cycle at San Isidoro, identify two women as patrons: Sancha, the foundress, or her eldest daughter Constanza, then queen of Sicily.⁴⁰



Figure 11. Archivolt on entry into Chapterhouse, Santa María la Real de Sigena (After: Josep de Gudiol, published in Walter F. Oakeshott. *Sigena: Romanesque Painting in Spain and the Winchester Bible Artists*. London, 1972)

des Klosters S. Maria in Sigena” (Ph.D. diss., Friedrich-Wilhelms Universität, Bonn, 1985). Pächt, Oakeshott, Schuller, and Ernst Kitzinger, “The Byzantine Contribution to Western Art of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 20 (1966), 25-47) have analyzed this cycle in connection to Winchester Bible. Unfortunately, no surviving documents mention the frescoes and Gasol Fargas’s scientific analysis of the remaining frescoes’ structure and materials did not shed new light on this problem. Gasol Fargas’ dating confirmed that used by the Museo Nacional d’Art de Catalunya of 1190-1200. Rosa M. Gasol Fargas, “Study of the Original Technique of the Wall Paintings of the Chapter House of Santa Maria de Sigena, Spain (1190-1200)” *ICOM Committee for Conservation Triennial meeting (12th), Lyon, 29 August - 3 September 1999* (London, 1999), 467-72.

⁴⁰ Angel Sicart has been the primary proponent of Constanza’s role in “Las pinturas de Sijena” *Cuadernos de arte español*, 39 (1992): 30.

Connections among the kingdoms of England, Sicily, and Aragón certainly existed during this period of Crusade. Both Alfonso II and Pedro I had dealings with Henry II and Richard the Lion on the one hand, and William II and Constance of Sicily on the other. Furthermore, Henry II's daughter Joanna became queen of Sicily in 1174 when she married William.⁴¹ She departed from Winchester with her cortege at a time when the bible's illumination was coming to a close. Alfonso II also attempted to gain an allegiance with William in order to begin the conquest of Majorca in the early 1180s.⁴² Pedro in his quest for papal support, betrothed his sister Constanza to Frederick II of Sicily in 1208.

Constanza had reason to favor Sigena, both as a way of honoring her mother, and also to aid the community that had housed her for the five years between the death of her son Ladislao and her second marriage to Frederick.⁴³ The marriage solidified connections between Aragón and Sicily.⁴⁴ After her departure to Sicily, Constanza appears only twice in the surviving documents of Sigena, but her patronage there even after her installation as the new queen of Sicily is feasible.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Oakeshott, 142.

⁴² The conquest of Majorca would wait until his grandson Jaume in 1231.

⁴³ It appears Constanza also lived in Sigena for two years prior to her first marriage to Emeric of Hungary. Alfonso II left a dowry to Sigena for his eldest daughter; although Constanza is not named, it is clear the reference is to her. Ubieto Arteta, *El real monasterio de Sigena*, 55-56.

⁴⁴ At the time of their marriage in 1208, Frederick was fifteen and Constanza twenty-five. Constanza's only child to survive into adulthood was Henry VII. The marriage reached an uneventful end with Constanza's death in 1222.

⁴⁵ Ubieto Arteta, 99-101 and 129-30. In 1212 Pedro compensated the monastery for the gifts given by his parents and Constanza that he had not honored, and in 1217 the prioress acknowledges receipt of four documents pertaining to Constanza's dowry.

Sicily was a cultural crossroads under Norman rule.⁴⁶ The Norman conquest of the island in 1061 had maintained much of the Kalbid administration and approach to rulership. Norman Sicily in the 12th century presented a lively court in terms of literature and the arts, and Frederick would extend this under his own patronage. This is the court that Constanza entered shortly after her mother's death; having come from an active literary court, Constanza likely fit easily into her new court.

The interconnections across the Mediterranean have been the focus of Anthony Cutler and Eva Hoffman in their analysis of portable luxury objects.⁴⁷ The close affinity of luxury arts, particularly in terms of gift exchange, has reframed the ideas of contact and shared experience. Hoffman's "Pathways to Portability" argued for the presence of not a single center of artistic production with multiple peripheries, but rather, within a courtly Mediterranean world, multiple centers or a "pluritopic" model. Using the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, Hoffman looks at the integration of Fatimid, Byzantine, and Roman forms extending the argument from portable objects to stable structures. **(fig. 12)** Her pluritopic model posits multiple centers that create recognizable, yet interconnected, styles borrowing from different regions for a luxury court, rather than one specifically defined by faith tradition.

⁴⁶ Norman Sicily has been a focal point of multiple studies. William Tronzo's *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo* (Princeton, 1997) brought together the disparate styles and inheritances of this center of artistic production in the generation before the construction of Sigena.

⁴⁷ Anthony Cutler, "Gifts and Gift Exchange as Aspects of the Byzantine, Arab, and Related Economies" *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 247-78; and Eva Hoffman, "Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century" *Art History* 24.1 (2001): 17-50.



Figure 12. View of the side aisle of the Cappella Palatina, Palermo (Photo: Author)

The kings of Aragón and counts of Barcelona had focused their attentions on southern France and Castilla-León, but had begun to look eastward.⁴⁸ Sancha's incorporation of syncretic Mediterranean forms differs from the classic Mudejar examples of Castilla-León. The twelfth century presents Christian Iberian kingdoms entering into this pan-Mediterranean world balancing it with their association with Europe north of the Pyrenees. While the monarchs of Castilla, caught in their struggle against the Almohads, focused their attention on Islamic decorative forms, the queen of Aragón opened her eyes beyond the local courtly competitor to Imperial Byzantium.

The connections between Sigena, Winchester, and Sicily in different mediums of paint are evocative of a tremendous exchange of Byzantine forms in the Western Mediterranean and England in the late twelfth century.⁴⁹ As Ernst Kitzinger showed, an appreciation of these forms opened up rather dramatically to the Western Mediterranean due to the successive crusades of the period.⁵⁰ The syncretic approach to Sigena's

⁴⁸ Another example of this is the betrothal of Alfonso II to Eudoxia Comnenos, princess of Byzantium. Waylaid by a storm at sea, she found Alfonso married to Sancha upon her arrival in 1174. She then married the count of Montpellier and her daughter Marie would later marry Sancha's son Pedro II. Antonio Ubieto Arteta, "Un frustrado matrimonio de Alfonso II de Aragón" *VII Congreso de historia de la corona de Aragón*, vol 2, Comunicaciones (Barcelona, 1962), 263-267.

⁴⁹ Oakeshott, 113. Oakeshott posited illuminators – who had likely been trained in Sicily earlier, possibly even at the Cappella Palatina – traveling in search of work as they headed back to Sicily. This scenario works as long as the training of the painters allowed their work in different media: trained in mosaics, working primarily in miniature, but able to return to the large scale for frescoes. Both mosaics and frescoes require an understanding of the drying of plaster and work on a large scale. This scenario leaves the question of a deliberate importation of a style to a casual appearance of craftsmen on the horizon. The complexity of the program, however, is too intentional and expansive. The similarity to the stylistic balancing act at the Cappella Palatina suggests an awareness of this program. Alan Borg's caveats regarding the interpretation of the fresco cycle pertain today. Alan Borg, "Review of *Sigena: Romanesque Paintings in Spain and the Winchester Bible Artists*" by William Oakeshott *The Burlington Magazine* 116.850 (1974), 49. Frescoes from Aragón do not survive in great quantity, leaving the question of whether this was a unique occurrence of the Sicilian style unclear. Given the paucity of contemporary examples and the lack of a strong presence of this style in other media, it is clear, however, that there was no explosion of the Byzantine style in the region. The exact dating of this cycle can only be approached through style as no documentary evidence survives identifying either craftsmen or patronage. What is more significant, though, for our purposes, is how this site connects the Aragonese crown to the pan-Mediterranean world and Sicily in particular.

chapterhouse posited an imperial vision that conflated Byzantine and Mudejar forms, and in so doing placed the monastery in a sphere of influence that extended well beyond Aragón.⁵¹ The connections between Sigena's chapterhouse and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo are particularly evocative of the power dynamics of place and shifting boundaries. Sancha's patronage placed Sigena at the forefront of this movement.

Conclusion

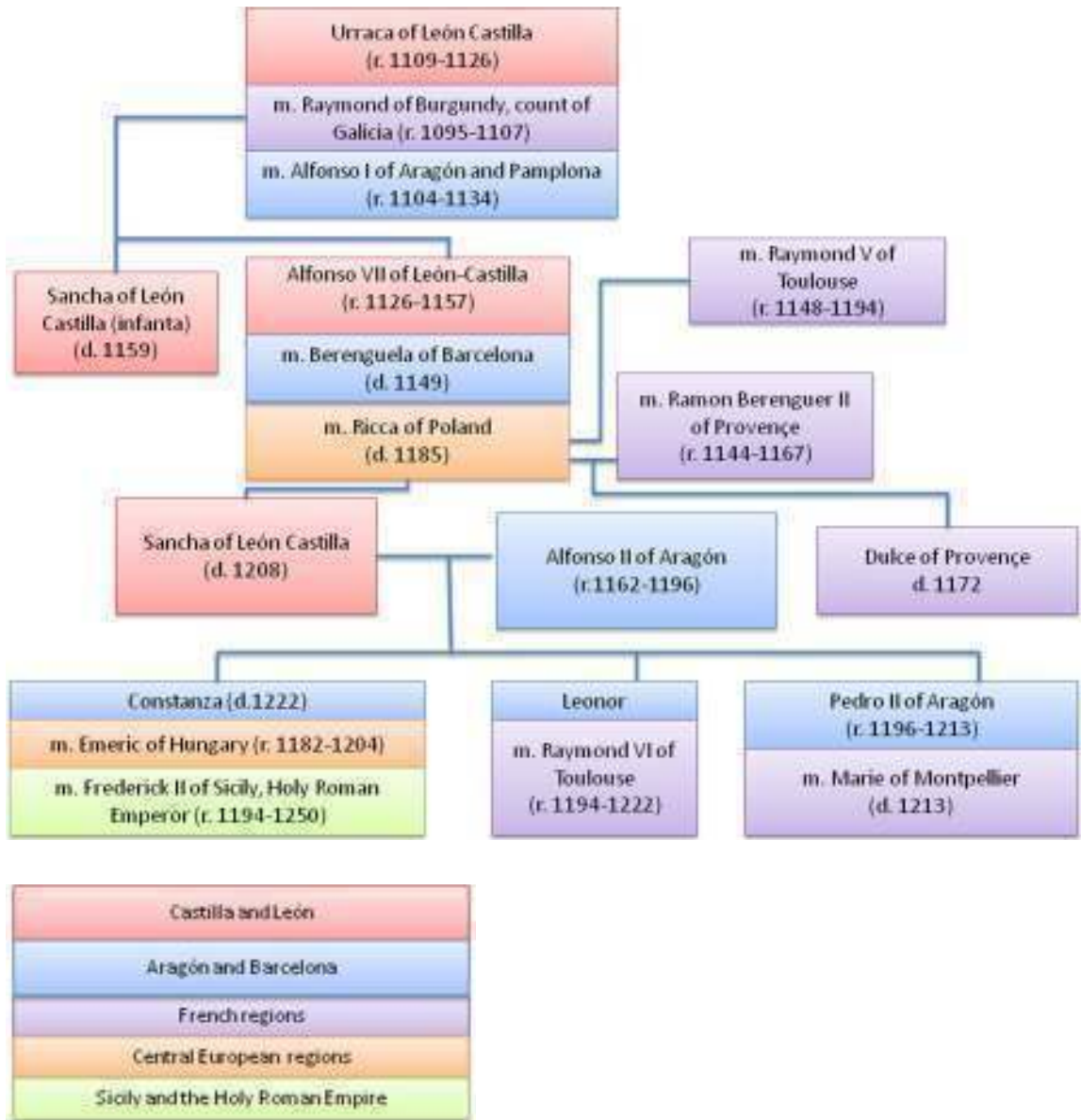
Sigena reveals both local building traditions and imported forms. The chapterhouse's combination of Sicilian-Byzantine, Islamic, and local "Christian" forms in the combination of a Byzantine fresco cycle, Mudejar artesonado, and local diaphragm vaulting posited a new courtly style to articulate power and authority. The construction of this site slowed the adoption of the Gothic in Aragón and linked the kingdom to the broader world of the Mediterranean.

⁵⁰ Kitzinger, 42.

⁵¹ Cutler also reframed the question of the stylistic connections between Byzantium and the West in "Misapprehensions and Misgivings: Byzantine Art and the West in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries" *Medievalia* 7 (1981): 41-77. This analysis was a reassessment of Kitzinger's approach to the subject in 1966 and Otto Demus's *Byzantium and the Medieval West* (New York, 1970).

Appendix I: Genealogy

Includes only those who appear in text.



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