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'The House Which Samuel Built': Negotiating Jewish Identity in the Mudéjar Synagogues of
Medieval Toledo

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The Jewish presence in Spain in the Middle Ages has long been a subject of considerable interest and study in a variety of fields.¹ Remarkably, a handful of synagogues from this period survive to the present. Toledo, in particular, is home to two such structures: The El Transito synagogue of the 14th century and the Synagogue of Santa Maria La Blanca from the early 13th century.² Both were built under Christian kingship and are stylistically Mudéjar, meaning that while they were built after Toledo was reconquered and did not have Muslim patrons, the structures contain notably Islamic visual forms in their design and decoration. While Mudéjar certainly appeared in contemporary Christian and secular buildings, Toledo's Jews used it with particular zeal and claimed it as their own visual language for holy places and community centers. Noted scholar Jerrilynn Dodds has convincingly argued that Spanish Jews of this period saw Islamic culture as their own, and by building in a visual style that reflected it they reaffirmed their own cultural traditions.³ This paper seeks to further investigate this multilayered connection between Mudéjar style in the synagogues of Toledo and the Jews that constructed them. Ultimately, I will argue that, more than mere affirmation of their own culture, the specific Toledan Jewish use of Islamic visual forms separated Jews from the Christian culture that surrounded and overpowered them and, furthermore, subverted that power.

In order to understand the complex nature of the multiethnic culture of Toledo wherein these two synagogues were built, one must first consider the history of the city in the Middle

¹ Meir Ben-Dov, *The Golden Age: Synagogues of Spain in History and Architecture*, trans. Shmuel Himelstein (Jerusalem: Urim, 2009), 10-11.

² Rachel Wischnitzer, *The Architecture of the European Synagogue* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1964), 19,30.

³ Thomas F. Glick, Vivian B. Mann, and Jerrilynn D Dodds, "Mudéjar Tradition and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain* (New York, New York: George Braziller, 1992), pp. 113-131, 114-128.

Ages. Toledo, which had been a Christian territory since the Roman era, was conquered by Muslim Arabs in 711. Muslim rulers were, on the whole, far more sympathetic to the Jews of Spain than the previous Visigothic kings had been, and under their leadership Toledo's Jews became prosperous and a rich culture thrived. After three centuries, Toledo was reconquered by Christian forces in 1085, and in the centuries that followed held the largest Jewish population in Christian Spain.⁴ Of some 37,000 people living in Toledo at the end of the 11th century, perhaps as many as 12,000 were Jewish.⁵ In addition to the sheer size of its Jewish population, Toledo, of all the cities in Spain, was the most important center of Jewish culture in the land.⁶

Despite the populous nature of this single community, the lives of Jews were certainly fraught and uncertain under Christian kings. The poet Judah ha-Levi, who was born in Toledo before the reconquest, made oblique reference to the persecution of the period by referring to himself as being from "Edom," the "Land of Esau", an expression which had stood to refer to a land and dominant culture hostile to Jewish people since the Talmudic era.⁷ A variety of evidence exists of this less-than-perfect relationship between the Christian leadership of Toledo and its Jewish population. In 1108 there was a massacre of the Toledan Jews on the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. As an example of Toledo's anti-Semitic legal codes, Christians who murdered Jews and stole their possessions during this massacre were pardoned and absolved of

⁴ Jonathan Ray and Jane S Gerber, "The World of Samuel Halevi: Testimony from the El Transito Synagogue of Toledo," in *The Jew in Medieval Iberia 1100 - 1500* (Boston, Massachusetts: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 33-34.

⁵ Norman Roth, "New Light on the Jews of Mozarabic Toledo," *AJS Review* 11, no. 2 (1986): pp. 189-220, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0364009400001690>, 197.

⁶ Norman Roth, "New Light on the Jews of Mozarabic Toledo", 189.

⁷ Rachel Wischnitzer, *The Architecture of the European Synagogue*, 19.

their sins.⁸ Such violent and anti-Semitic interactions between Christians and Jews continued in the following centuries.

Despite this oppression, however, Toledo's Jews were not a mere downtrodden minority suffering under the yoke of their Christian masters. From the reconquest in 1085 until the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the two groups coexisted and did business with one another, and the Jewish community continued to thrive culturally in spite of the political tensions. Many Jews, provided the right international connections and skills as financial advisors and political agents, became influential in the service of those in power. This prosperity is demonstrated by the construction of some 119 synagogues in Medieval Spain.⁹ It was in this complex and multilayered political and social climate that Mudéjar style emerged and the synagogues of Santa Maria La Blanca and El Transito were built.

What precisely constitutes *Mudéjarismo* has become more and more nebulous in recent scholarship. For the purpose of this paper, however, it is broadly defined as the art created after the Christian reconquest of Castile which incorporated local forms of design, as well as Islamic ones which had flourished under the previous Muslim rule.¹⁰ 'Mudéjar', from the Arabic 'Mudajjan' meaning 'tamed', initially referred to Muslims who continued to live in conquered territories in the Middle Ages. In the 19th century, however, it came to be associated with the style of architecture and decoration particular to Iberia that employed the visual culture of Muslim Al-Andalus, but was adapted for Jewish and Christian patrons. Early scholarship on the

⁸ Roth, 199.

⁹ Rachel Wischnitzer, *The Architecture of the European Synagogue*, 19.

¹⁰ Gonzalo M. Borrás Gualis, "Mudéjar: An Alternative Architectural System in the Castilian Urban Repopulation Model," *Medieval Encounters* 12, no. 3 (2006): pp. 329-340, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006706779166075>.

topic explained this atypical combination of cultures by suggesting that Mudéjar buildings had simply been designed and built by Muslims still living in Iberia who continued to work within their own ancestral forms, however, scholars now agree that both Muslims and Christians worked in the building of structures now considered Mudéjar. Architectural forms typical of Mudéjar style include polylobed arches, geometric design, muqarnas, and horseshoe arches as seen here. Remarkably, it was specifically in Toledo in the 13th century that Mudéjar style first emerged.¹¹

At the center of this emergence, then, lies the Synagogue of Santa Maria La Blanca, also known as the Ibn Shoshan Synagogue, which may be roughly dated to the year 1200.¹² The patronage of the synagogue is not well known, although it may be linked to Joseph ben Meir ben Shoshan, a finance minister in the court of Alfonso VIII.¹³ After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, it was converted into a church (hence the obviously Christian name it is known by now), before being used as an armory for a period of time, and then a warehouse before being ultimately turned into a national memorial site in the 19th century. As a result of this repurposing, as well as 19th century restoration, a great deal of the original decoration has been lost.¹⁴ Despite this, the building's Mudéjar style is apparent. It is constructed in brick and stucco, with a plain exterior, something typical of Mudéjar buildings.¹⁵ Magnificent horseshoe arches sit atop

¹¹ Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain* (London: V & A Publishing, Victoria & Albert Museum, 2010), 77-79.

¹² Rachel Wischnitzer, *The Architecture of the European Synagogue*, 19.

¹³ Thomas F. Glick, Vivian B. Mann, and Jerrilynn D Dodds, "Mudéjar Tradition and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, 115.

¹⁴ Meir Ben-Dov, *The Golden Age: Synagogues of Spain in History and Architecture*, trans. Shmuel Himelstein, 118.

¹⁵ Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1985), 331.

octagonal piers with extravagantly carved stucco capitals (Fig. 1 and 2). In addition, elaborate stucco reliefs that adorn the walls contain geometric and natural forms.¹⁶ While Mudéjar, these Islamic design elements are linked to particular Islamic styles and are considered Almohad or Umayyad in their influences.¹⁷ The Umayyads and Almohads were respective Muslim ruling dynasties in parts of Spain, with the Umayyads reigning from 756 to 1031 and the Almohads from 1160 to 1238.¹⁸

As a result, the Islamic presence is deeply felt in the design of Santa Maria La Blanca. But what does it mean that Toledo's Jews were building in a style reflective of their historic association with Islam more than a century after they had become subjects of Christian kings? It might be argued that Mudéjar style was simply the vernacular architecture of the period, given that churches and civic buildings were commonly built in this style.¹⁹ This argument lacks nuance, however, in that it fails to account for the fact that Jews in Toledo had a distinct culture and experience of the world and, as Dodds argued, it is likely that Islamic traditions of design took on different meanings in Jewish contexts than in Christian ones. Dodds also posits that Toledo's Jews had come to see Muslim culture as their own and therefore used it in affirmation

¹⁶ Thomas F. Glick, Vivian B. Mann, and Jerrilynn D Dodds, "Mudéjar Tradition and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, 116.

¹⁷ Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain* (London: V & A Publishing, Victoria & Albert Museum, 2010), 82, Thomas F. Glick, Vivian B. Mann, and Jerrilynn D Dodds, "Mudéjar Tradition and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, 116-117.

¹⁸ Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain* (London: V & A Publishing, Victoria & Albert Museum, 2010), 82, Thomas F. Glick, Vivian B. Mann, and Jerrilynn D Dodds, "Mudéjar Tradition and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, 19, 38.

¹⁹ Gonzalo M. Borrás Gualis, "Mudéjar: An Alternative Architectural System in the Castilian Urban Repopulation Model," *Medieval Encounters* 12, no. 3 (2006): pp. 329-340, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006706779166075>.

of their own culture.²⁰ It seems wholly implausible that Christians, as external conquerors, would have the same cultural relationship to and view of Islam and the art and architecture that surrounded it as would a conquered Jewish community which had been present for centuries of Muslim rule. Indeed, I argue that this cultural integration into Islamic design forms does not merely constitute an affirmation of Iberian Jewish culture, must also imply a resistance to or rejection of the Christian societal hegemony.

While Mudéjar architecture had certainly been adopted for parish churches and a variety of secular buildings, it is worth noting that Toledo's contemporary cathedral, which towers at the center of the city was Gothic in style and, furthermore, the former Friday mosque (that had by then been converted into a church) was destroyed to build it on the site.²¹ This evidence suggests that, despite Christian willingness to build in the Mudéjar style and to adapt pre-existing Muslim buildings to their purposes, Gothic architecture was still the visual language of Christian European power in Toledo. It is then all the more noteworthy that Toledo's Jews chose to build in styles so disassociated from Gothic style and this gives credence to the idea that their use of Islamic visual forms was more than mere affirmation and assertion of their own culture, but rather also served as a subtle rejection of the Christian structures of power that now encroached upon them.

The argument that the style of Toledan synagogues was a conscious choice is strengthened in the context that Santa Maria La Blanca was not merely a single anomaly of synagogue building, but rather likely part of a type, given that a synagogue of similar plan and

²⁰ Thomas F. Glick, Vivian B. Mann, and Jerrilynn D Dodds, "Mudéjar Tradition and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, 116-117.

²¹ Tom Nickson, *Toledo: Building Histories in Medieval Castile* (Penn State University Press, 2015), 37-38.

decorative design was also built in Segovia, another part of Castile, at this time. Though the Segovia synagogue no longer stands as it was destroyed in a fire in 1899, its existence suggests that Santa Maria La Blanca was part of a type of Castilian synagogue in the late 12th and early 13th century.²² If Santa Maria La Blanca is one surviving example of a synagogue type, it seems more plausible to ascribe cultural significance to its architectural choices and therefore the notable lack of Gothic design elements, something associated with Christianity and thus the powers at be, is all the more conscious.

The second surviving synagogue in Toledo is the El Transito Synagogue, also known as the Synagogue of Samuel ha-Levi (or Abulafia), who was its patron. Ha-Levi constructed the synagogue in the 1350s as an ornate private chapel for himself and his family. He was Chief Treasurer to King Pedro I of Castile and his wealth and prestige are fully apparent in the structure.²³ It is also worth noting that ha-Levi, beyond his importance to the king, was also a leader and notable figure among Toledo's Jewish community, and it is thus plausible that his choices of design reflected broader sentiments among the Jewish community.²⁴

The El Transito synagogue is somewhat smaller than the Santa Maria La Blanca synagogue, however, it is still of incredible scale and grandeur for a building built for the personal use of Samuel ha-Levi and his family, as it was attached to his home.²⁵ In plan it is simply a rectangular nave, though it also contains niches for the Torah scrolls and a women's

²² Thomas F. Glick, Vivian B. Mann, and Jerrilynn D Dodds, "Mudéjar Tradition and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, 116.

²³ Rachel Wischnitzer, *The Architecture of the European Synagogue*, 30.

²⁴ Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain*, 82-83.

²⁵ Rachel Wischnitzer, *The Architecture of the European Synagogue*, 32.

gallery. Its decorative scheme is lavish with an incredible amount of stucco relief in Arabesque forms.²⁶

As a result of close contact between Castile and Granada in this period, Mudéjar style in the court of Pedro I had shifted to include a Nasrid style of Islamic influence, as opposed to the previous Almohad style observed at Santa Maria La Blanca. In the El Transito synagogue, this style includes such ubiquitously Islamic forms as polylobed arches, muqarnas, mosaic tiling, and sekba (Fig. 3-5). In some respects, this design reflects ha-Levi's close connection to Pedro I, given that it is consistent with the court style of Pedro's reign and was built by court artisans.²⁷ Indeed, it is clear that ha-Levi identified himself with this court connection, given that the decorations bear the arms of Castile and Leon, indicative of the King.²⁸

However, as Jerrilynn Dodds has proposed, it seems unlikely that such a court style would have the same meanings to Samuel ha-Levi as it did to Pedro I. If the appropriation of Nasrid architecture was meant to be a sign of a Christian king's appropriation of a conquered culture's power, what, then, did it mean to Jews who had flourished under both cultures? Dodds theorized that for ha-Levi, the visual association with Islamic culture in the El Transito synagogue at once affirmed of ha-Levi's Jewish culture and referenced the Nasrid court style. The style thus reflected the multilayered place ha-Levi himself occupied in Castilian society.²⁹ I propose, however, that this argument be pushed further: Despite the obvious connection to Pedro I's court,

²⁶ Thomas F. Glick, Vivian B. Mann, and Jerrilynn D Dodds, "Mudéjar Tradition and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, 124.

²⁷ Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain*, 83.

²⁸ Rachel Wischnitzer, *The Architecture of the European Synagogue*, 34.

²⁹ Thomas F. Glick, Vivian B. Mann, and Jerrilynn D Dodds, "Mudéjar Tradition and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, 127.

the El Transito synagogue, much like the Santa Maria La Blanca synagogue, contains evidence of a tangible Jewish rejection of Christianity and Christian visual culture by way of association with Islam, which merely needed to be camouflaged in order to be acceptable to the Christian court.

It should be plain that Samuel ha-Levi's position was tenuous enough to require him to tread lightly around assertion of Jewish power or resistance to Christian hegemony. As a Jew, ha-Levi could never be a noble, regardless of his influence, while legal codes restricted the building of synagogues from anything on the grand scale of churches.³⁰ While some Jews, Samuel ha-Levi among them, prospered within this climate, they were still not legal or societal equals to their Christian fellows, and their positions were thus precarious. The ultimate proof of this is, of course, that within a handful of years after the completion of the El Transito, Samuel ha-Levi quickly fell from the King's favor and was tortured to death at Seville.³¹ Assertions of Jewish identity and, furthermore, distinguished identity from Christianity, would necessarily be veiled for the safety of those that made them.

Like the synagogue of Santa Maria la Blanca, the El Transito synagogue contains many signs of the deep absorption of Islam and Muslim culture into its design. There are the many inscriptions that adorn the walls, which notably are in both Hebrew and Arabic. It is no surprise that verses from the Torah should embellish the walls, however, well-wishes in Arabic are a distinctly Islamic touch.³² Far more surprising (and far more blatantly connected to Islam), are

³⁰ Daniel Muñoz-Garrido, "The Prevalence of Islamic Art amongst Jews of Christian Iberia: Two Fourteenth-Century Castilian Synagogues in Andalusian Attire," in *Synagogues in the Islamic World: Architecture, Design and Identity*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 127-144, 132, Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain*, 83.

³¹ Rachel Wischnitzer, *The Architecture of the European Synagogue*, 30.

³² Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain*, 83.

the passages from the Qur'an that are inscribed in the walls of the El Transito Synagogue along with quotations from the Torah.³³ While Arabic writing itself was a feature of Mudéjar style, the inclusion of actual Qur'anic text seems to extend the connection between Toledo's Jews and an Islamic visual vocabulary beyond the claiming of a shared culture. By including Muslim holy text in a Jewish holy building, the El Transito synagogue connects itself to not only to Islamic architectural and decorative vocabulary as a part of common Mudéjar style, but rather to Islam itself. In a Christian kingdom, even one which often appropriated Islamic symbols of power, this cannot help but be notable. So bold an alliance with Islam should be read as more than an affirmation of the Toledan Jewish existence and culture, it represents a subtle subversion of the powers at be.

That power was being claimed for Samuel ha-Levi, at least, can be in no doubt. Not only did he build this grandiose personal chapel for his particular use, its dedicatory inscriptions do him great honor:

And the House which Samuel built,
 And the wooden tower for the Reading of the Written Law,
 And its Scrolls of the Law and the crowns thereto,
 And its lavers and lamps for lighting,
 And its windows like the windows of Ariel.
 And its courts for them that cherish the Perfect Law
 And seats, too, for all who sit in the shade of God,
 So that those who saw it almost said, 'This Semblance,

³³ Thomas F. Glick, Vivian B. Mann, and Jerrilynn D Dodds, "Mudéjar Tradition and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, 125.

Is as the semblance of work which Bezalel wrought.’

Go now, ye peoples, and come into my gates

And seek the Lord, for it is a House of God even as Bethel.³⁴

‘Samuel’ in this context refers to Samuel ha-Levi, rather than any biblical Samuel, and the text which follows refers poetically to an illustrious list of biblical holy places including the Temple of Zerubabel, the Temple of Solomon, the spot where the Lord promised Jacob the Return, and the Tabernacle of the Wilderness.³⁵ By glorifying Samuel ha-Levi through the use of Hebrew Biblical sources, ha-Levi’s personal ambitions are connected intrinsically to his Jewishness. This connection between Jewishness and ambition makes clear the subversive nature of his claim to power. A comparison with the contemporary dedicatory inscription on the synagogue at Cordova highlights the grandiosity of the one on the El Transito Synagogue. The inscription on the synagogue at Cordova reads simply: “Isaac Mehab, son of the honorable Ephraim, has completed this lesser sanctuary and he built it in the year 75 as a temporary abode. Hasten, O God, to rebuild Jerusalem.”³⁶ This is, in comparison to the glory in which Samuel ha-Levi portrayed himself, incredibly subdued. Therefore, it follows that built into the El Transito synagogue are the ambitions of its patron. This is only made more apparent by other wall inscriptions, one of which refers to ha-Levi as “prince among the princes of the tribe of Levi”.³⁷ While certainly figurative, the reference to himself as “prince” is of particular note given that nobility was a

³⁴ Rachel Wischnitzer, *The Architecture of the European Synagogue*, 34.

³⁵ Rachel Wischnitzer, 34.

³⁶ Rachel Wischnitzer, 28.

³⁷ Thomas F. Glick, Vivian B. Mann, and Jerrilynn D Dodds, “Mudéjar Tradition and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony,” in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, 128.

status reserved for Christians in Toledo, one which Jews could never achieve under the Castilian legal system.³⁸

That Samuel ha-Levi, a prominent leader among the Toledan Jewish community and an influential member of gentile society as well, constructed a monument to his own ambition and, indeed, a monument to his own Jewishness in this way is a compelling evidence for the idea that a subversive assertion about Jewish identity, one which separated it from the Christian authority all the more plausible. As a high-ranking member of Pedro I's court and public figure, ha-Levi had to maintain the appearance of glorifying and paying respects to his king. At the same time, as a Toledan Jew, he likely not only saw Islamic culture as his own, but employed it as an assertion of an un-Christianized Jewish identity.

The Mudéjar style present in the El Transito synagogue is contextually part of a Nasrid inspired court style associated with Pedro I's reign. At the same time, through a particular connection to Islam, El Transito's design is one which not only affirms Jewish identity, but subtly distances it from Christianity and the dominant Christian culture. In its muqarnas, polylobed arches, arabesque stucco, and immaculate Kufic Arabic script, El Transito makes an elaborate visual claim for an assertion of influential Toledan Jewry's disconnect from the increasingly hostile Christianity that surrounded them.

In Toledo, Mudéjar architecture was adopted by Christians and Jews alike, for both religious and secular building purposes.³⁹ Unlike the city's Christian inhabitants, however, Toledo's Jews fundamentally saw Islamic culture as something truly their own, and Mudéjar

³⁸ Daniel Muñoz-Garrido, "The Prevalence of Islamic Art amongst Jews of Christian Iberia: Two Fourteenth-Century Castilian Synagogues in Andalusian Attire," in *Synagogues in the Islamic World: Architecture, Design and Identity*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 127-144, 132.

³⁹ Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain*, 78.

style something reflective and affirming of their own culture.⁴⁰ This affirmation, however, comes with another meaning: Toledan Jews associated themselves and their visual culture with that of Islam, because by so doing they distanced themselves from Christianity, a religion whose adherents often acted as their oppressor. The synagogues of Santa Maria La Blanca and El Transito must therefore be understood not only as documents of Jewish identity, but of a Jewish identity which sought to remain un-assimilated into a dominant Christian one. Mudéjar was a comingling of multiple visual traditions and yet Mudéjar to the Jew took on different meanings in their social and political context than it had to the Christian aristocracy.

⁴⁰ Thomas F. Glick, Vivian B. Mann, and Jerrilynn D Dodds, "Mudéjar Tradition and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, 125.

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Images

Fig. 1, Santa Maria La Blanca, Interior, Arches

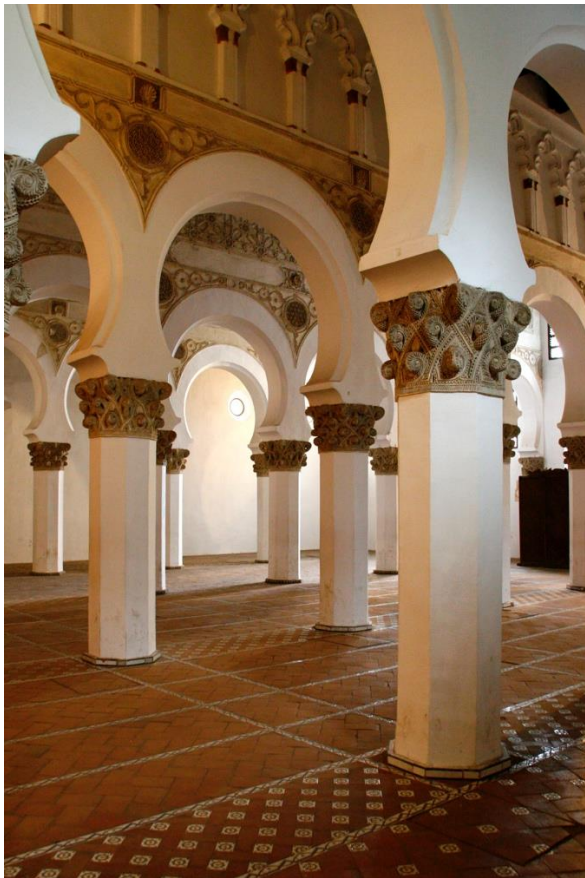


Fig. 2, Santa Maria La Blanca, Interior, Detail



Fig. 3, El Transito, Interior

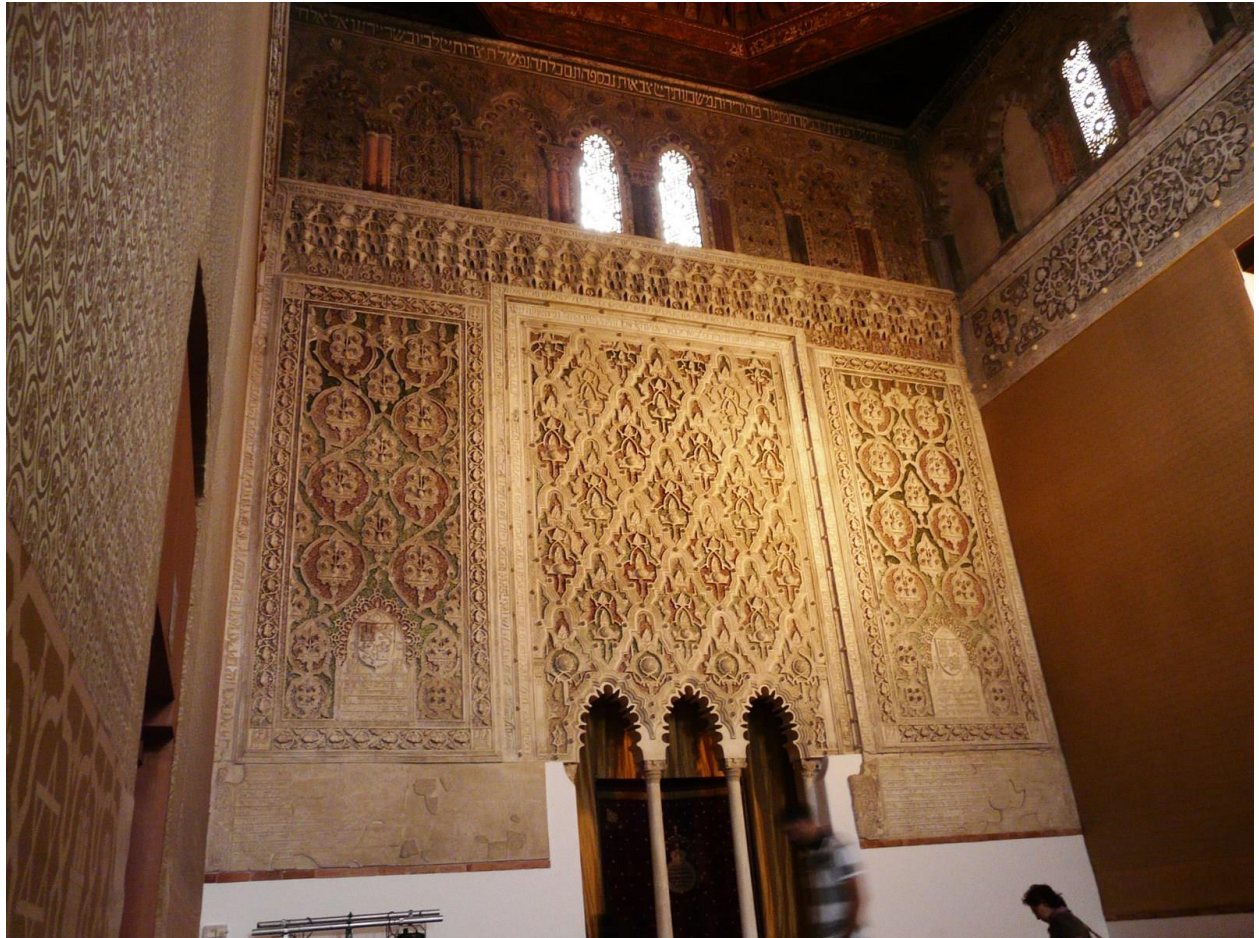


Fig. 4, El Transito, Interior 2



Fig. 5, El Transito, Interior 3



