

## **TRANSFORMATIONS AND CREATIVITY IN VISIGOTHIC-PERIOD IBERIA**

SALLY GAREN

### **RESUMEN**

Hay un número de motivos en el arte peninsular del siglo séptimo que tienen contrapartes en el arte sasánida y temprano islámico. Estos motivos particulares no son evidentes en el arte ibérico y deben de haber venido del arte sasánida de la primera parte del siglo siete y entonces del arte islámico del fin de este siglo y antes de la conquista de la Península en el año 711.

**Palabras clave:** arte ibérico peninsular, arte sasánide, arte islámico temprano, conquista, 711.

### **ABSTRACT**

There are seventh-century Sasanian and Muslim motifs that can be found in the contemporaneous, seventh-century, art of Iberia. That is, there is evidence of artistic contact between these two regions, the land that was once the Persian empire and that of the Iberian Peninsula. It can be demonstrated that there was an emanation that passed from east to west, that certain distinguishably seventh century forms which were developed in the east subsequently appeared in the art of Iberia during that century.

**Key words:** art of Iberic, seventh-century, sasanian art, muslin art.

There are seventh-century Sasanian and Muslim motifs that can be found in the contemporaneous, seventh-century, art of Iberia. That is, there is evidence of artistic contact between these two regions, the land that was once the Persian empire and that of the Iberian Peninsula. It can be demonstrated that there was an emanation that passed from east to west, that certain distinguishably seventh century forms which were developed in the east subsequently appeared in the art of Iberia during that century. This prompts the question of, by what means did this contact take place? An answer can be provided by analyzing the Iberian art to see which motifs were adopted, how they were interpreted, and into what syntax were they were placed.

Comparing one of the plump, quail-like fowl from Quintanilla de las Viñas with a peacock rondel from Ctesiphon (Sarre, pl. 103; Erdmann, fig. 44), we see the two to be similar in a number of ways. Each is a relief, although the former is part of a stone frieze and the latter a stucco plaque. Each bird is fitted into a circular frame; the entire body of each bird is covered with incised feathers; the wings are marked by a change of plumage at the shoulder; and both birds have rounded bodies, bear a crest, and are taking a short step on simplified, arched feet. The rondel from Ctesiphon is not one-of-a-kind. Near mirror-image counterparts, also from Ctesiphon, can be seen in museums in Berlin and New York (Zizichwili, pl. 7; Ghirshman, no. 274; Pope, pl. 177B). Similar birds are also familiar in metalwork of the late Sasanian to early Islamic period (see Smirnov, pl. 72, no. 128). The Ctesiphon rondels would, of course, predate the Spanish reliefs, for Ctesiphon realized its heyday in the sixth to seventh centuries (Lenzen, cols. 212, 219, & 220), while Quintanilla is dated to the end of the seventh and turn of the eighth century.

East of Ctesiphon at Taq-i-Bustan, carved into the living rock, and dated to the reign of Khusru II (591-628) are other bird forms with half-circle tails that recall another bird type at Quintanilla (Sarre, pl. 97; Herzfeld, pls. 48 & 63, see p. 71). Taq-i-Bustan thus provides one point of reference in time —around the year 600— for birds of this type.

Another such bird with a half-circle tail can be seen on a Sasanian silver plate in the Hermitage (Erdmann, fig. 74; Pope, pl. 215B). In this instance, of course, the Sasanian bird is on a portable, as opposed to immovable, object. The format of this plate with a central animal in profile, enframed within a circular band and vegetal rinceau, is common for Sasanian plates (cf. Pope, pl. 215A).

The central figure on the Hermitage plate and the Quintanilla birds with half-circle tails are closely similar in silhouette, stance, and detail. Both focus upon a central bird viewed in profile, within a medallion, in association with a leafy rinceau. And examination of the band of hearts encircling the central figure on the Sasanian plate reveals that there are two framing rope bands as well as the heart band, ropes that could have suggested the rope frame to the carvers at Quintanilla.

The relief technique at Quintanilla, however, is unlike that of the Hermitage plate, for at Quintanilla the figures are sharply raised from the background with a right angle cut. In addition, Sasanian courtly attributes —the diadem that the bird holds in its beak, its crescent crown, its flowing neck scarf, and its outer ring of hearts— do not appear at Quintanilla.

The carver at Quintanilla was adapting, first of all to a monumental surface demanding greater legibility from a distance and therefore greater contrast. Second, he was also eliminating that which would be incomprehensible in this new setting, allusions to an eastern courtly tradition.



FIGURA 1. *Quintanilla de las Viñas exterior friezes, detail of the north wall of the apse.*



FIGURA 2. *Stucco relief plaque with a bird, from Ctesiphon, redrawn after Sarre, pl. 103.*

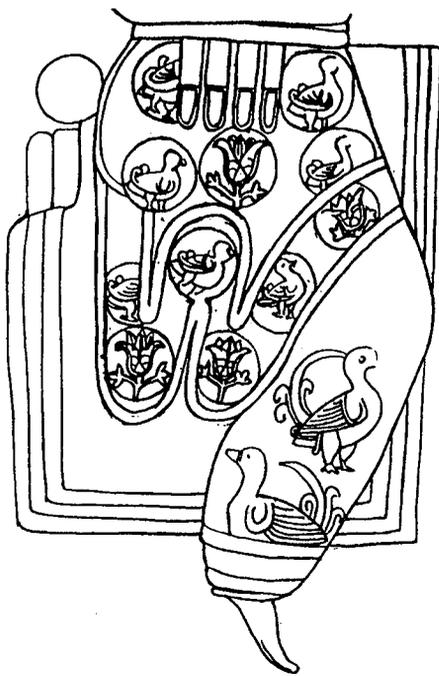


FIGURA 3. *Taq i Bustan relief, garment detail, redrawn after Sarre, pl. 97.*

In this same frieze on the north wall of the apse at Quintanilla, there are a number of trees in rondels. One of these is quite similar to a tree of life cut from sheet bronze that adorns the beams of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (Creswell, pl. 4b), dated to the 690s (Creswell, 69). Both trees (that at Quintanilla and that at the Dome of the Rock) are crowned by five-part flowers that sprout from a central stalk. Beneath this are two sets of symmetrical foliage. The upper, outward curving, branch of the Quintanilla tree even resembles the Sasanian wing motif on the upper branch of the Dome of the Rock tree.

Within that same frieze at Quintanilla, two nearby tree-filled rondels bear simplified tree forms, with less complex outlines. Above, a simpler leaf replaces the winged form; on the branches below, one rondel bears what might be a flower, while grape clusters dangle in the other rondel. In comparison with the Sasanian tree forms, the Quintanilla configurations are additive as well as reductive: not only is there some simplification from the Sasanian type tree, but also the basic form has been transformed by the addition of parts familiar from a Greco-Roman decorative repertoire.

As we ponder the mode of transmission for these forms, we do not see the hand of an eastern carver; we do not see an immigrant craftsman. This plant, unlike the bird, with its courtly allusions that would be obscure in a distant land, this plant did not have to be modified for the sake of comprehensibility. Rather, the changes can be better explained as the product of an Iberian craftsman working from unfamiliar, exotic motifs. The Quintanilla carver did not recognize the nuances of the eastern form nor feel any compunction to repeat them with precision. His very lack of inhibition in juxtaposing and recombining motif parts indicates that he was a stranger to, not a perpetrator of, an eastern tradition.

Together, the Dome of the Rock and Quintanilla de las Viñas provide an instance of eastern motifs with Iberian parallels. It is worth noting that the material of the eastern object is metal, a substance and form that could easily be shipped and, in the case of bronze fittings, could even have been applied to a building in Spain.

While the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim construction, dates to the last decade of the seventh century, an earlier, Sasanian, variant of the tree of life can be seen on a different kind of metal object, a silver ewer in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (Erdmann, pl. 76). The tree of life on this ewer has a more complex profile than that on either the Dome of the Rock or Quintanilla, but it does share one compositional element with Quintanilla: the tree is flanked by two animals. This is a common format for Sasanian ewers or vases—a central tree of life beneath the spout, with profile animals to either side (cf. Erdmann, pl. 78). This format in which two parallel birds flank a tree of life is the basic compositional element of the bird frieze at Quintanilla. The bird frieze at Quintanilla may well represent an adaptation in stone from not just motifs but whole compositions on Sasanian metal ewers.

The uppermost, quadruped, frieze at Quintanilla also has Eastern affinities, as can be seen in comparison with a frieze from the seventh century Syrian fortress Kharbet el Beida (Vogüé, pl. 24; Cattaneo, fig. 24). At both Quintanilla and Kharbet, prancing animals are encircled by a rinceau, and there is a secondary frieze of vine leaves and grape clusters. Some of the animals turn to glance backwards. At Quintanilla the entire composition survives. There are ten rondels comprising two symmetrical, mirroring parts of five rondels each. Unlike the Kharbet el Beida animals, none of the animals at Quintanilla overlaps a plant form. Rather, vegetation serves as filler beneath the bodies and between the animals' legs. The Quintanilla artist did not come from a landscape tradition, and he rejected its suggestion of layered space. This Quintanilla



FIGURA 4. Bird motif from a Sasanian footed cup in the Hermitage, redrawn after Smirnov, pl. 72.



FIGURA 5. Sasanian silver plate in the Hermitage, adapted from Pope, pl. 215B.



FIGURA 6. Dome of the Rock bronze tie beam tree motif, redrawn after Creswell, pl. 4b.

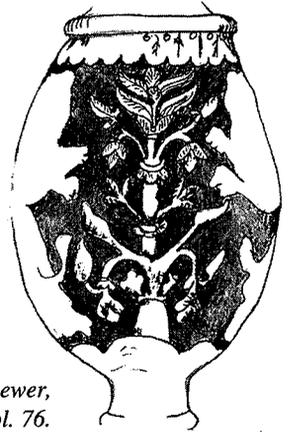


FIGURA 7. Sasanian silver ewer, redrawn after Erdmann, pl. 76.

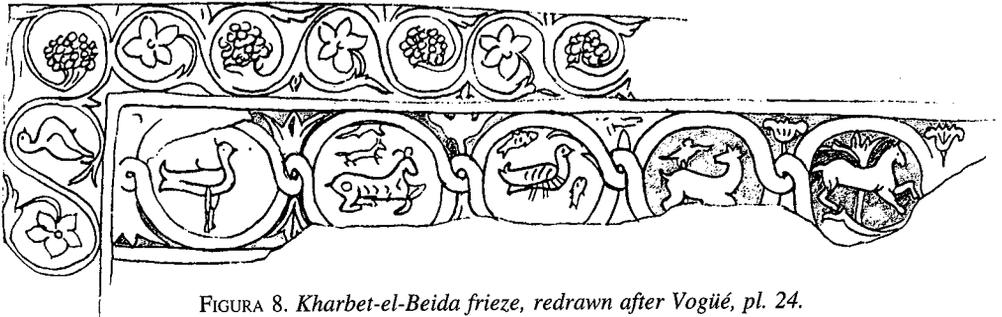


FIGURA 8. Kharbet-el-Beida frieze, redrawn after Vogüé, pl. 24.

frieze too is not the product of a Syrian immigrant carver. Rather, it reflects a pool of seventh century Sasano-Muslim ideas. Eastern forms were utilized, but not copied exactly, in Iberia by Iberian stone carvers.

There are some tell-tale motifs on friezes from San Pedro de la Mata, now in the Museo de Santa Cruz in Toledo. These friezes bear a leafy rinceau that encircles alternately lotus-like and heart-like motifs. The lotus or tulip-like motif, which is distinguishable from the ubiquitous Iberian trefoil by its bulbous base, has a number of parallels in Sasanian art and can be seen in the relief at Taq-i-Bustan as well as at the Dome of the Rock. But because the lotus is widespread in the Eastern Mediterranean and has a long, complex history, we will focus instead on its heart-shaped associate.

The heart-shaped motif has, near its stem, spiral-filled lobes. Horizontal wrinkles fill its narrowing, pointed portion. This motif too is known from and could have been transmitted by means of Sasanian metalwork. On a gilded silver plate from the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., this motif grows from a vine, as it does on the friezes from San Pedro de la Mata (Gunter & Jett, no. 16). It appears to be a schematized leaf, the horizontal wrinkles having derived from the veins of the leaf. The motif can be seen again on a Sasanian bowl in the Arthur M. Sackler collection, likewise in Washington (*Ibid.*, no. 30). This motif has been introduced to Iberia. It appears on Iberian works of the seventh century, but not of the sixth century or earlier. There is no evidence of indigenous Iberian development.

This motif is common on frieze fragments from Toledo. There are over 15 fragments from several sources in the museums of Santa Cruz and San Roman. In addition, there are also a number of uniquely Iberian variants to the motif. For example, in a segment from Guarrazar, the wrinkles are replaced by little balls, as if the shape has become a container for the very grapes with which it was originally associated (San Roman cat. no. 138; see Schlunk 1947, fig. 282). Once again we see a foreign element adopted into Iberian art with a great deal of freedom.

The motif is not confined to Toledo but also appears in the north at San Pedro de la Nave, where it serves as the bud of a flowering bush (see Corso, fig. 145). And the motif—likewise with a bush—can be seen on a fragment from Idanha-a-Velha, Portugal (Almeida, fig. 102). Once again we see that a motif has excerpted from its original context and given a novel application. The motif does indicate Sasanian input at San Pedro—but not necessarily direct input, for the art of Toledo may have served as an intermediary.

It is revealing of the nature of copying that the illustrations in one book on San Pedro de la Nave depict the motif on this plant inaccurately (see Mateos and Esteban, 114). The twentieth century illustrator inadvertently misinterpreted the horizontal wrinkles of the heart-shaped motif as balls, thereby once again converting this motif into a grape cluster such as seen at Guarrazar and reenacting the process of 1400 years ago, though perhaps with less force of intent.

For the most part, the birds at San Pedro de la Nave are of a different species from those at Quintanilla, leaving one wondering why there was not more sharing of ideas, more communality, if both were responding to Sasano-Muslim sources. But the two churches do have elements in common. Reminiscent of Quintanilla, at San Pedro there is one frieze segment with birds paired around a tree and another with paired, backward-turning quadrupeds that have plant filler at their feet. There is a plump, partridge-like bird in the frieze of the sanctuary that recalls one Quintanilla variant (see Corso, fig. 154).

And it is quite likely that the pinecone-like or pineapple-like cross-hatched fruit that can be seen in a number of places at the crossing of San Pedro de la Nave has Sasano-Muslim origins.



FIGURA 9. *Quintanilla de las Viñas exterior frieze, the east wall of the apse.*



FIGURA 10. *San Pedro de la Mata frieze fragments, Museo de Santa Cruz, Toledo, nos. 23398 & 23395.*



FIGURA 11. *Freer Gallery of Art Dionysiac plate detail.*

Similar fruits appear on the Dome of the Rock tie beams, which beams, it was noted, likewise bore similarities to Quintanilla (see Creswell, pl. 28b; cf. pl. 29d; and Smirnov no. 274).

A very exciting point of reference for this whole discussion is a gold belt tab from the Dumbarton Oaks collection in Washington, D.C. (see Ross II, no. 43). Ascribed to the seventh century and found in Syria, this belt lappet is very small, 4.5 cm long. It has three scenes of birds. At the top is two birds flanking a plant. The bird on the left is vigorously stepping into the picture; his foot breaks through the frame. Beneath this are two birds, one above the other, each encircled by a loop of rope. The middle bird twists its pliant neck to look backwards. This quail-like creature has wing feathers that recall those at Quintanilla, for the shoulders are clearly demarcated as separate from the lower, longer wing feathers, and its overall profile is the same as at Quintanilla. Both of the two lower birds are crested, hold objects in their beaks, and have detailed, incised plumage.

Both iconography and purpose reveal this belt tab to come from a Sasanian courtly tradition. The bottom bird is a familiar Sasanian type: crested, with upwards turning tail. It takes a forward step, bears an object in its beak, and sports the familiar Sasanian flowing scarf. The very nature of this object, a lappet or gold sheath for a leather strip that would dangle from and embellish a belt, is a Sasanian accouterment. A comparable set of Sasanian belt lappets can be seen at the Sackler Gallery (Gunter & Jett, no. 42). And this type of object is depicted at Taq-i-Bustan, hanging from the rider's belt (see Sarre, pl. 97, or Herzfeld, pl. 48).

Birds similar to the backwards turning quail can be seen throughout the friezes at the crossing of San Pedro de la Nave (see esp. Schlunk 1947, fig. 314, or Schlunk & Hauschild, pl. 138a). The San Pedro birds and those on the gold tab share the same definition of chest, upper wing, and lower wing feathers as well as forward marching stance. At San Pedro we see exactly the same transformation as occurred to a tree at Quintanilla: an attribute that would have no meaning for the Iberian artist has been replaced. The leaf in the Sasanian bird's beak has, at San Pedro, become a grape cluster, just as a grape cluster was added to the tree of life at Quintanilla. The birds at San Pedro now peck at grapes that sprout from the encircling rinceau.

Whereas on the Sasanian belt tab the birds are encircled by a single cable, note that the rinceau at San Pedro de la Nave is simultaneously a rope and the grape vine that feeds the birds. This is a biological impossibility: a living rope that grows grapes and leaves. We see the same thing on the quadruped frieze at Quintanilla, where a rope rinceau grows a curled leaf.

It is intriguing that at San Pedro there is one impost block with birds that are cruder and more awkward in execution than the birds elsewhere at San Pedro (see Schlunk, 1970 MM, pl. 60a; Corso, fig. 150). This impost, on the western side of the «Daniel» capital, shows two confronting birds around a central plant. It is disconcerting that these two figures should be as anatomically weak and abrupt in movement as they are. On the Dumbarton Oaks tab it is this very scene of birds facing a plant that is smallest, most poorly defined, and most difficult to discern. On the Dumbarton Oaks lappet, this scene does not bear enlargement; there is not enough detail, and the anatomy of the birds is not sufficiently clear. The difference between the two types of bird at San Pedro—one with a fluid profile and evincing anatomical understanding in the leg, the other with abrupt junctures of body parts and a leg that looks like a plank—may be due to differences in the model. The Dumbarton Oaks tab may come very close to representing the model for the differing types of birds at San Pedro.

Positing, then, that portable metal objects from Sasanian, then Muslim, lands served as models for a number of seventh century Iberian reliefs, a comparison of the eastern objects and



FIGURA 12. *San Pedro de la Nave* impost with plant, eastern side of the northeastern crossing column.



FIGURA 13. *San Pedro de la Nave* relief blocks in the transept, northeastern corner of the crossing.

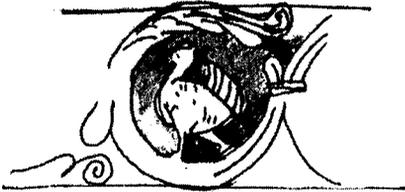


FIGURA 14. *San Pedro de la Nave* bird motif from the choir friezes, redrawn after Corso, fig. 154.

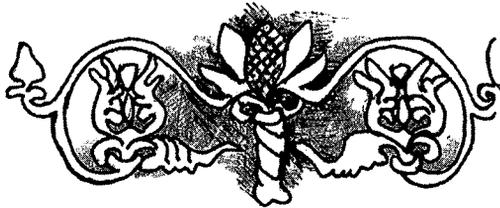


FIGURA 16. *Dome of the Rock* tie beam motif, redrawn after Creswell, pl. 28b.



FIGURA 15. *San Pedro de la Nave* southwestern crossing capital, after Schlunk AEA 1970, pl. 4

their Iberian variants indicates that the Iberian artist generalized, substituted, and juxtaposed. His goals did not include staying true to natural forms, for he would fuse the animate with the inanimate. Yet he may have preserved the composition of the foreign model, as at Quintanilla, where the bird frieze depends upon repetitions of the unit of three figures.

Whereas the Quintanilla relief suggests the prototype of a vase, the relief of lions and plants at the Museo do Carmo in Lisbon suggests a flat dish with a single central animal in profile (cf. Schlunk & Hauschild, pl. 116b, with Pope, 228). This is because, even though the Lisbon relief has a three-figure unit, a tree and two animals, as at Quintanilla, the composition does not have Sasanian symmetry. The two Lisbon lions are in different poses, which is atypical for Sasanian originals. Furthermore, the anatomy of the lion on the left is weaker than his counterpart on the right. His body lacks the convincing curves of his counterpart on the right. And his protruding paw does not even come out of his body; it originates somewhere beneath his chest. The animal on the left looks like a crude replica of the one on the right, an attempt to achieve a Sasanian-like composition.

Other Iberian reliefs also evince a revised syntax. The Igreja do Carmo pier of stacked griffin rondels, also in Lisbon, is another probable elaboration from a plate with a single centralized medallion (cf. Pope, 227). And the frontal bird that appears to be an eagle in the rinceau of the choir at San Pedro de la Nave (see Corso, fig. 154) is a likely appropriation from the popular frontal eagle in the middle of Sasanian silver plates (see Grabar, no. 42; Trever, pl. 3).

An eastern metalwork model may even lie behind the imaginative ornament of the seventh century credo plaque from Sta. Leocadia in Toledo (Aragonese, 299-300; Schlunk, 1970 *MM*, 180-181, 184, & 186; Schlunk & Hauschild, 72 & pl. 97b). This plaque bears a «lotus» between two outward-spreading leaf fronds, which is similar to a configuration at the Dome of the Rock (Creswell, pl. 28a). A close relative of the Sta. Leocadia decoration is the chancel fragment from the mid-seventh century San Juan de Baños, Recasvint's foundation in Palencia and ostensibly the product of Toledan workmanship (Palol 1964, 19; Schlunk, 1970 *MM*, pl. 55; Schlunk & Hauschild, 209; Gil, 92). Here there is a «lotus» between two *inward*-spreading leaf fronds. These two Iberian motifs not only look similar to each other and reinforce a mid seventh-century date for each other, but their eastern counterparts can be seen side by side, in alternation, at the Dome of the Rock.

The Dome of the Rock tie beams lack the crowning shell motif of the Iberian reliefs. This shell-plant combination calls attention to itself because shells belong to the animal kingdom and to marine life, whereas such leafy plants belong to the plant kingdom and to dry land. A shell even grows from a plant at the crossing of San Pedro de la Nave. And one is interjected into the vine frieze at Quintanilla to mark the entry to the sanctuary (see Schlunk & Hauschild, pl. 134b).

The shell has further unique treatment in Iberia where it was developed into a sanctuary window hood. Only in Iberia was the shell aedicule of antiquity converted into a shell-capped opening. And the shells splashed over the attic story of a flamboyant shell niche with Eucharistic vine at the Museo de San Roman (no. 117) in Toledo makes all its aedicular precursors look tame. In Iberia the shell has become an exclamation, an asterisk, a declaration of venerated context.

In addition, the plant growing a shell reflects the same artistic mentality as the rope that is growing leaves. A surreal juxtaposition transforms decoration into liturgical allusion.



FIGURA 17. *Dumbarton Oaks belt lappet, redrawn after a photograph from the Byzantine Visual Resources, 1993, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.*



FIGURA 19. *San Pedro de la Nave impost at the western side of the Daniel capital, redrawn after Corso, fig. 150.*



FIGURA 20. *Museo do Carmo lion relief block.*



FIGURA 18. *San Pedro de la Nave impost over the Daniel capital, redrawn after Schlunk, 1947, fig. 314.*

The Iberian sites in which Sasano-Muslim motifs can be found are widespread, not localized. They have been found in a wide geographical swathe, from what is today Lisbon to Palencia to Burgos Province to Toledo. With the exception of one simplified griffin block, Mérida is largely outside of these developments, which reinforces María Cruz's observation concerning Mérida, that «en el siglo VII parece ser que perdió el carácter de foco difusor primordial que tuvo en siglo VI.» (Cruz, 431).

The writings of Ildefonsis, archbishop of Toledo from 657 to 667, make mention of a good many species of plants and animals. In *De itinere deserti* he refers to the eagle, dove, hen, pheasant, partridge, deer, goat, horse, lion, and sheep (chs. 31-71). Yet, apart from the vine of the Eucharist, when these motifs do appear in Spanish reliefs, they do not reflect the symbolic content outlined by Ildefonsis. To Ildefonsis, for instance, the hen stands for caring of the young, while the partridge and pheasant are flighty. Even though some of these birds seem to appear at Quintanilla, they are not given any distinction that indicates a message developed in conjunction with exegeses from Toledo. Putting together the fact that the new motifs were widely spread geographically with the absence of reference to church decor in the writings of the Iberian church fathers, we can suspect that the symbolic content of this art was being worked out in the provinces, probably by artisans in conjunction with local bishops.

In conclusion, we can identify eastern motifs in the art of seventh century Iberia, but simultaneously we see differences due to individual models. Thus, for instance, we can see that the artists at San Pedro de la Nave and Quintanilla de las Viñas were responding to similar stimuli, even while we can trace different particular models for the two churches.

In addition, there is no evidence of eastern artisans working at this time in Iberia. The Iberian reliefs are not composed of the repeating units of Sasanian or Muslim stucco revetments. Eastern ideas arrived piecemeal, and the Iberian artist created a new context for them.

The entire church of Quintanilla de las Viñas epitomizes this process. Quintanilla is unique in the world, *sui generis*. There is no other building so decorated—like an ornamented box, with the walls themselves converted into banded fabric. Quintanilla does not represent the Greco-Roman tradition of architrave-crowned walls. Nor does it anticipate Romanesque ornament that outlines architectural features. Quintanilla is the child of this process of mixing sources and thinking anew. It can be fully appreciated only by comprehending this process. Sasano-Muslim work is the necessary background foil for recognizing the new contexts being created in seventh century Iberian art.

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FIGURA 21. Ornament from the Sta. Leocadia, Toledo, credo plaque, redrawn after Schlunk & Hauschild, pl. 97b.



FIGURA 22. Chancel ornament from San Juan de Baños, redrawn after Schlunk MM 1970, pl. 55.



FIGURA 23. Dome of the Rock bronze tie beam section, redrawn after Creswell, pl. 28a.

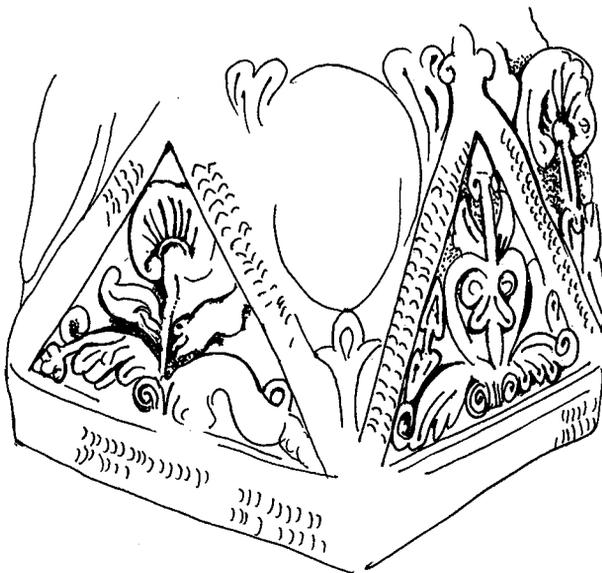


FIGURA 24. San Pedro de la Nave crossing, southeastern column base.

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