



*Islamic Castles In Iberia*  
*Peter Burton*

### Islamic Castles In Iberia<sup>1</sup>

#### Origins

When the invading Muslim army arrived in the Iberian Peninsula (modern day Spain and Portugal) in AD 711 they found a country largely ruled by Visigoths who had themselves occupied the area after the fall of the Roman Empire. It was a Christian land and even today substantial remains of Visigothic churches, monasteries and religious artefacts can still be seen.

Of the military buildings of the pre-Islamic period however, little now survives. What is clear though is that resistance to the invading Muslim army was slight. Largely because of the fragmentation of a central authority in Iberia and the absence of any co-ordinated response to the arrival of the Muslims their initial success quickly spread throughout the peninsula.

The speed with which the Muslims from North Africa established both military and economic dominance was spectacular. Within thirty years of their first landing on Iberian soil (reputedly at the southern coastal port of Tarifa in Spain)<sup>2</sup> they had spread virtually throughout the peninsula leaving only the extreme northwest still under Christian lordship. In this early colonisation stage the Pyrenees Mountains were hardly a barrier and incursions and brief occupation of what is today southern France occurred.

The political, social and economic situation of the time that made such an astonishing conquest possible and the factors that limited the expansion of the Muslims northward is a fascinating story, but not an area we will be exploring in the present paper.<sup>3</sup> An almost total dominance of the area by Muslim lords inevitably meant that the Islamic religion and culture also became the dominant drivers in local society. Settlement by agricultural workers and their families from North Africa quickly followed the military conquest bringing alternative meth-

ods of cultivation of the land and a variety of new crops (e.g. lemons and other fruits, etc)

The military organisation required to achieve such a rapid and complete conquest was of the highest order. The use of fortifications to hold territory gained and to garrison troops for onward conquest into new regions was an important factor in the colonisation.

The first Muslim colonisers of Iberia originated from Syria, Egypt and other eastern areas displaced by internal political discord within the Caliphate (leadership of all Muslims in the Middle East) and settling in North Africa. Eventually they would form a new, breakaway Western Caliphate based in Cordoba in Spain.

This history brought the architectural and military traditions to Iberia via North Africa.

We should note before going further that the Muslim occupation of Iberia and therefore the story of Islamic Castles, is a long one. This period lasted almost 800 years, much longer than the period from the final reconquest of Spain by the Christians at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the present day.

The most significant period for the study of castles and fortifications of Iberia was during the periods of first the Almoravid and then Almohad invasions of Spain. These two strong dynasties originated in the Berber regions of southern Morocco and were militarily strong with powerful religious conviction and were prodigious castle builders.

The Almoravids ruled in Spain from the mid 11<sup>th</sup> century to be replaced by force of arms by the Almohads from about the mid 12<sup>th</sup> century. Under these powers some innovative castles were created.

Clearly over such a lengthy period of Muslim occupation the changes in social, cultural and architectural styles will be varied and complex and one only has to consider the changes between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century in

one's own country to consider how long that was.

### Design and Construction

Remains of Islamic Castles are to be found throughout Iberia save for the extreme north west of Spain where Muslim occupation, interestingly, didn't quite extend to the Celtic land between the Cantabrian Mountains and the sea. A common thread to the architecture of these buildings was the use of rammed clay, mud brick or 'tapial' in the construction of the vast majority. Stone built and especially ashlar built Islamic castles are far from being the norm but stone was used, sometimes on an immense scale where it was available and where the prestige, the strength or simply the need to impress was greatest.

Tapial as a form of masonry was traditional in the Arabic speaking world, originating as it did, from areas where timber was not plentiful and might it be considered as the common method of construction, comparable in some respects to the widespread use of timber construction techniques used in northern European architecture. (*photo 01*)

There are many examples of Islamic castle construction using a combination of Tapial and stone with the latter being used for structural details such as doorways, wall junctions, towers etc.

A surprising number of Islamic castles were built upon Roman fortress foundations suggesting that military considerations of defensive position was paramount in the siting of the castles.

As a point of interest, there is a good deal of discussion in UK castle studies on the reoccupation of Roman sites for the construction of castles from the time of the Norman Conquest and later. These discussions tend to follow a theory of the castle builders invoking memories of the imperial Roman past and by reusing the same sites

and especially by incorporating Roman masonry (e.g. the keeps at Colchester and Chepstow or the banded masonry at Caernarfon) can thereby assume all of the imperial connotations for themselves.

The Spanish examples of Roman site occupation do not appear to show any of these deliberate imperial connotations and the sites would seem to be reused because they were the best available and gave the Islamic builders a head start using the existing remains as a basis.

The early castles from the 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards were purely military structures. Their general purpose was to create an enclosure of strong walls to house a garrison, their horses and equipment and accommodation for the commander or lord.

The construction of fortifications at this period as purely military establishments is reflected in other parts of the Muslim world (e.g. Syria).<sup>4</sup> The administrative and residential centres of the regions were usually in separate palaces, themselves often fortified.

A good example of an early castle is to be found at Banos de la Encina and dates from the 9<sup>th</sup> century. This castle is in Andalusia north of Jaen. The curtain walls are of Tapial construction with evenly spaced square, open backed, interval towers. The entrance gateway is a simple horseshoe shaped opening. The survival of this building with little in the way of later alteration is remarkable.

One of the largest enclosure castles in Spain is that of Gormaz near the Duero River frontier area of Castile, an area that remained an active border between Muslim and Christian from 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The castle itself was founded in the mid 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Gormaz is built on a high ridge, visible for miles around and dominating the surrounding landscape. It has walls of 1200 metres circumference around a great encl-

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*Photo 01. Tabernas Castle, SE Spain nr. Almería. Tapial construction on hilltop site.*



*Photo 02. Fortaleza de Gormaz, Spain. Huge enclosure castle*

sure within. A castle on this scale not only was able to house a considerable army but also the local inhabitants and their livestock in the event of border warfare. (*photo 02 & 03*)

Gormaz is built of stone and ashlar construction with 26 square interval towers, crenellated parapets and an inner citadel with its own defended walls and originally separated by a dry moat.

These early castles had simple gateways into the enclosure, some of elaborate Moorish horseshoe shape others more simple arched opening but no sophisticated gateways were constructed at this early period. The doors, although strong and well made of wood were barred internally but little else to add strength, beyond the location and external defences. (*photo 04*)

Islamic castles were usually provisioned with elaborate and often very large water storage cisterns. The use of water within the Muslim world beyond simply its life sustaining properties is well known and the builders of many castles went to great lengths to collect and retain water. The terrain and position of many Islamic castles meant wells were often not practical so cisterns were constructed.

These were usually contained within the curtain walls and could be deep underground with linked storage chambers



*Photo 04. Forteleza de Gormaz. Double horseshoe entrance gate.*

and long access staircases. Other types were above ground in specially constructed buildings. The use and management of water resources for agricultural purposes of the period are renowned in the Muslim world and this applied to water management within castles too. (*photo 05*)

As settlement became more permanent the castles were places of safety and refuges for the local village that inevitably sprang up below the walls. As with castles of the Christian countries there was no one size fits all as each castle had its unique position

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*Photo 03. Forteleza de Gormaz. Hilltop site. Distant view.*



*Photo 05. Caceres, Extremadura, Spain. Underground water cistern or 'Aljibe' in Arabic*



*Photo 06. Castillo de Biar, Spain. Islamic tower or keep, mid-late 12th century.*



*Photo 07. Villena Castle, Spain. Islamic rib vaulting in keep/tower, similar in date and style to one at Biar castle nearby*



that in turn affected its design, its local purpose and social requirements.

Islamic castles that were first established towards the second half of the Muslim period begin to adopt some of the features seen in Christian castles. In particular great towers or keeps (towers of homage in Spanish) begin to appear. The Islamic castle of Biar built on the border of the long established Islamic territory of Zaragoza in the southeast was built with a great tower from the outset. This tower still stands with only minor later alterations. *(photo 06)*

It is of Tapial construction on the outer walls and rises to three stories. The ground floor chamber is vaulted with a simple barrel vault but the first floor chamber (the main chamber of the tower) possess a magnificent rib-vaulted masonry ceiling of an Islamic decorative design and clearly was a room of some status. *(photo 07)*

### ***Alcazabas or Walled Towns***

Some of the most important towns in Islamic Spain were walled and defended by strong gates. These towns were called Alcazabas and were often built on a huge scale in the south of Spain. Good examples of these in the south are to be found at Malaga, Almeria and of course Seville. *(photo 08)*

There are many others scattered about the peninsula with an excellent example, continuously occupied from the earliest period, being the city of Toledo. This city



*Photo 08. Castillo de Almeria, Spain. Walled town and castle or 'Alcazaba' in Arabic*

was one of the most important towns and strongholds in the Islamic world from the 8<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> century, and a cultural and artistic centre at the heart of all medieval cultures in Spain – Muslim, Christian and Jewish. Toledo has large stretches of medieval walls and gateways still in excellent condition. The Christians took the city in 1085 and stretches of Islamic town wall from before this date are still to be seen. *(photo 09 & 10)*.

The dates of the walls range from 11<sup>th</sup> century to 13<sup>th</sup> with the earlier stretches made up of massive stone blocks and impressive gateways in parts, tapial walls in others and highly decorative gates of the later peri-

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*Photo 09. Toledo, Spain. Bisagra Gate and town walls.*



*Photo 10. Toledo, Spain. Bisagra Gate (detail). c.1050.*



*Photo 11. Toledo, Spain. Puerta del Sol. Gateway into town – 13<sup>th</sup> C.*

od. The post 1085 walls are made in the Islamic styles and Moorish artisans were almost certainly involved in their construction (*photo 11*)

From the time of the Almoravid occupation of Iberia from the mid 11<sup>th</sup> century the defensive circuit of walls was becoming more elaborate. In particular, impressive gateways into the town were being constructed. These gateways were often embellished with decorative patterns in Tapial, stone or brick, often with gateways shaped with 'Moorish' or horseshoe arches but also with increasingly sophisticated defences.

The use of the turned entrance through the gateways was becoming the normal arrangement whereby the visitor had to turn through 90 degrees once and sometimes twice, before entering the open space inside. The gateways were defended by strong gates at each turn very often and were covered by defensive firing positions above and in front of each door. (*photo 12*)

An inner defended castle was usually present within the walled town enclosure, often at the highest part of the site, where the lord and his palace was located.

Once again the trends we see in Iberia were reflected in other parts of the Islamic world and the siting of royal or dynastic palaces within the enclosure of a fortified town from the late 11<sup>th</sup> century can be found elsewhere (see ref 3 above).

### **Tapial masonry**

A characteristic feature of Islamic castles everywhere, and no more so than in Iberia, is the use of Tapial or rammed earth. This word applies to the type in Spain but many countries have their own name for the material (Pise in French speaking areas, Adobe in some other countries and there are others).

Tapial is made from clay and earth taken from the site and mixed with water, lime and hard loose material such as pebbles, wood, brick and other stone.<sup>5</sup> The walls were made between wooden boards in sections, into which was pressed the mixture as described. This was left to set after which time the retaining boards were removed and repositioned to continue the walls construction.<sup>6</sup>

The hard set but rough surface produced would then be plastered over to create a smooth and solid wall. It has been convincingly argued (see ref 5 above) that the size of the wooden boards corresponded to the reach of a mans arm and no more as the plastering over process was conducted from above each section of wall as it grew in height. A larger wooden board would mean the lower section of rough wall was beyond the reach of the plasterer.

In Tapial walls remaining today the exterior plaster render is often missing revealing the very hard core (some are over 1,000 years old) and also the regularly spaced holes where the wooden retaining bars were placed onto which the exterior wooden boards were fixed. The holes were left in situ (i.e. not filled in) to allow expansion and contraction of the fabric.

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### **Influences**

It is difficult to propose specific stylistic antecedents when examining Islamic military architecture in Spain in other than the most general terms. There is ongoing research into this area. The first builders of military architecture in Spain came to the peninsula with ideas and techniques from other parts of the Islamic world, notably the Middle East (especially the areas of present day Syria, Iraq and Egypt). Research into early Islamic military architecture in that area shows a number of similar styles and techniques<sup>7</sup> in use in the wider Muslim world such as the use of Tapial construction, 'dog-leg' entrance gates, decorative gateways etc. But without doubt by the 11<sup>th</sup> century a particularly Iberian style was developing that was the result of many influ-



*Photo 12. Toledo, Spain. Town Gates by medieval Alcantara Bridge, the main entry point across the river.*

ences combined with an Andalusian creativity and therefore unique.

As the greatest period for the building of castles and military structures generally in Spain was during the Almoravid and Almohad periods (late 11<sup>th</sup> C to mid 13<sup>th</sup> C) and as these two great dynasties originated in Morocco it might be reasonably presumed that some influence arrived in Spain from that area.

However, there is no obvious evidence for this, and the building of Kasbas and other mud built structures bear no relationship to the structures found in Spain. Indeed the sophisticated early structures that are to be found in Morocco, such as the tower of the Al Kutubiya mosque in Marrakesh (mid 12<sup>th</sup> C) is clearly in the Andalusian style and although this tower predates the similar Giralda tower in Seville they are both of the same influence.<sup>8</sup>

It seems that Almoravid and Almohad Berbers from Morocco, once settled in Spain, absorbed some of the sophisticated scientific and cultural Islamic society that had long existed under the Caliphate from the 8<sup>th</sup> century and brought this back to Morocco.

An interesting building of note in Morocco is the Almoravid fortress of Dar al-Hajar in Marrakesh that still has some excavated remnants visible today. This building was constructed towards the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and before the Almoravid invasion of Spain. It is unusual in that it was constructed of dressed, quarried stone. As we have discussed above the common building material for Islamic castles in Spain was Tapial, not stone, but clearly not from any lack of capability.

The Christian reconquest of Spain brought northern castle building techniques into the Andalusian Islamic sphere and some influences undoubtedly occurred between the two traditions. The visible re-

mains we see today lean to a view that Christian architecture in Spain was influenced by the Islamic people they conquered rather than the other way around – the Christians in Spain for example adopted the detached or albarrana towers (see later).

### Developments

As elsewhere in Europe and the Middle East there was no progressive development of castle architecture of one style or feature leading to another. Castles and fortresses were built for many reasons and by many people and no evolution of military architecture existed.

As we have seen the Islamic architecture of the area developed into its own unique style as a result of the varied set of circumstances and influences that existed within Iberia.

One unique feature of Islamic military building in Iberia, found nowhere else, was the use of detached mural towers along the exterior walls of the castle. These towers are referred to as 'torre Albarrana' or Albarrana Towers.<sup>9</sup> The use of these detached towers in some Iberian castles gives an immediate identity to the buildings and marks them out instantly as being of the area. (*photo 13*)

The introduction of these particular features was during the Almohad period of occupation with the first known detached defensive tower most likely being the Torre de Espantaperros in the town of Badajoz and was constructed in the year 1170. It must be said that there is not universal agreement on this and a number of other examples are sometimes championed as the first albarrana tower particularly the tower of Guzman el Bueno at Tarifa on the southern coast of Spain and at Merida, a town not far from Badajoz. Dating evidence is uncertain but are all from around this time give or take a few years.

The purpose of the albarrana towers was to provide flanking cover to defend the exterior walls or gateways from attackers. Defenders could gain access to the top of the

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*Photo 13. Badajoz, Spain. Detached or 'Albarrana' towers along the town walls.*



*Photo 14. Caceres, Spain: Torre de la Yelba. 12<sup>th</sup> C Muslim town walls*

detached tower via a moveable wooden bridge and be able to fire down onto attackers from behind. If taken or brought down the defenders could retreat back to the wall walk of the castle leaving the detached tower isolated with no fear of the main fortress being accessible nor of the mural walls being breached by its collapse.

They also, as we have said, made a striking and impressive feature to any onlooker.

### Frontiers

The Islamic occupation of the Iberian Peninsula gradually withdrew southwards over a long period of time. From the 10<sup>th</sup> century to the 15<sup>th</sup> century the contraction of the occupied areas left frontier zones between the Muslim and Christian held land.<sup>10</sup> The frontier areas were in a varied state of flux from being rather fixed for very long periods (e.g. the frontier formed by the River Dureo in north-central Spain that remained fixed for many decades). Frontiers in other times were often more fluid with the actual frontier being ill defined and changing with the ebb and flow of local political and military situations.<sup>11</sup>

Castles were built in the highest densities along these frontier zones and areas where the frontiers were stable (e.g. the Dureo River) had numerous substantial castles at regular intervals along the frontier. In addition to the great castles a large number of stone watchtowers were built. These were often constructed on high ground, mountain passes, hilltops etc and were used as additional outposts of a fortification nearby. Many survive to this day. The frontier zones were not always turbulent hostile areas as many such frontiers within Spain during these 800 years were settled and peaceful for many generations. An interesting frontier zone that has a number of fortified farmhouses and small fortresses still remaining is in the area of Torredelcampo in the south of Spain and these are of Islamic origin.<sup>12</sup>

### Reconquest and Departure

The great Islamic Iberian empire that occupied virtually the entire peninsula in the 9<sup>th</sup> century was reduced to the tiny but still significant Kingdom of Granada by the 15<sup>th</sup>. Occupying the most southerly part of Spain the Kingdom was centred on the city of Granada itself but also included the important coastal stronghold of Malaga in the west. The castle and walled city (alcazaba) of Malaga was strong, sumptuously provided with gardens and other luxuries and was only marginally less magnificent than the remarkable stronghold, palace and final flowering of the Muslim culture in Spain, the Alhambra in Granada.

The Alhambra embodies all of the culture, artistry and sophistication of late medieval Islam but it was also the heart of a military complex and walled city. Many of the defences of the castle and walled town still remain and can be traced through the heart of Granada today.

The whole area contains a rich history of medieval Islamic architecture most notably in its castles and palaces but also in the domestic architecture of the towns and villages. The Kingdom of Granada was the final home of Muslims in Spain and strong links were maintained with the Muslims or 'Moors' across the straights in Morocco (it is interesting to see how the village houses in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco are precisely the same as those in the Alpujarra Mountains south of Granada in the Sierra Nevada of Spain – even to this day).

The reconquest of Islamic Spain by the Christians was completed in 1492 when Granada was finally taken and the Moors expelled from the country. This brought an 800 year history of Islamic castle building and society in Iberia to a close.

*Peter A Burton*





Photo 15. Castillo de Biar, Spain. Outer curtain, gateway and corner towers - post-Islamic period replacements.

<sup>1</sup> It is always difficult to find the most appropriate terms for this area. Iberia was a Roman word for the peninsula. At the pinnacle of Islamic rule the peninsula was referred to as Al-Andalus. Spain as we know it today was a series of independent kingdoms until after the medieval period. Portugal gained independence from Castile in the mid 12th-century as a separate kingdom. Most of this article covers the modern country of Spain.

<sup>2</sup> The main force landed at Algeciras in Autumn 712. See D W Lomax, *The Reconquest of Spain*, Longman, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> For a full account of this story see Hugh Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal*, Longman, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> See Tabba, 'Defending AyyubidAleppo: The Fortifications Al-Zahir Ghazi' in *Muslim Military Architecture of Greater Syria*, Hugh Kennedy (ed.), p. 177. Brill 2006.

<sup>5</sup> See article, *Construction History Society Newsletter 69* (July 2004), Archie G. Walls, 'Arabian Mud Brick Technology: Some thoughts after the Bam Earthquake'.

<sup>6</sup> The use of the same earth on which the castle stands would give the structure a natural colour and blend into the landscape. It is interesting to conjecture if these smooth finished, plastered surfaces were painted externally. The author has no evidence for this. Tapial constructed buildings used until very recently in the Islamic world, the Kasbas of Morocco, were not painted externally but were usually painted on the inside.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Kennedy (ed.), *Muslim Military Architecture in Greater Syria*. Brill 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Parker, *A Practical Guide to Islamic Monuments in Morocco*, Baraka Press, 1981.

<sup>9</sup> See Peter Burton, 'Pontefract and Castles in Spain' in *Castles Studies Group Journal 19* (2006), pp. 239-244.

<sup>10</sup> See Lomax, *The Reconquest of Spain*, Map 3, p. ix.

<sup>11</sup> See Angus Mackay, 'Religion Culture and Ideology on the late medieval Castilian-Granadan Frontier', in Bartlett and Mackay, *Medieval Frontier Societies*, Oxford U. P. 1989.