The Development of the Horseshoe Arch in Christian Spain

Introduction

The horseshoe arch is based on the semicircular arch, but its lower ends are extended further round the circle until they start to converge. The first known examples were carved into rock in India in the first century AD, while the first known built horseshoe arches are from Ethiopia and which date from around the 3rd or 4th century. An example in pre-Islamic Syria, at Mar Ya’qub at Nusaybin (Nisibin), also dates from the 4th century. It is a small baptistery. In Cilica, Turkey, the ruins of Alahan Manastirī still stand. A 19th century drawing of this 6th century church shows that the horseshoe arch was already part of the Byzantine architectural repertoire. The form was to be seen in the 3rd century on a sarcophagus from Villa Mattei, in Rome.

Alahan Monastirī, Cilicia in the 19th C (left) Sarcophagus from Villa Mattei, Rome (right)

The earliest Islamic monument with horseshoe arches is the Grand Mosque of Damascus where the arches of the sanctuary are of a slightly horseshoe form. The present mosque was built between 706 and 715 AD.
Damascus – Grand or Umayyad Mosque

However, the area where horseshoe arches developed their characteristic form on Islamic buildings was in Spain and North Africa, where they may be seen on the Great Mosque of Cordoba and the Great Mosque of Kairouan. The Mosque at Cordoba was originally the site of a Christian church, built in the early 600s. But the present mosque was begun in 784. The Mosque of Kairouan was built after 800.

Cordoba – Great Mosque or Mezquita
Kairouan – Great Mosque

However, this article will look at the origins of the horseshoe arch in Christian Spain and show how its form would both develop within the architectural structure of churches within Spain and how that form would spread beyond the Pyrenees. We will also look at the adoption of the form in decoration in other media, in particular manuscripts and ivories that were produced in Spain for the Christian church.

The Visigoth Kingdoms

In 410 the Visigoths crossed the Pyrenees from Gaul into Spain. Whilst it was to take them several decades before they had secured the greater part of the peninsula their hold over it was sufficiently secure within a decade as to ensure that there was no significant contender for power to threaten them except for brief sallies by Franks from Gaul and a short-lived occupation of a coastal strip in the South-east by the Byzantine Empire. The inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula at the time of the Visigoth invasion were Hispano-Romans. They were Catholic Christians, except in the North-west where paganism was to survive for a further three centuries. The Visigoths had adopted Christianity before their migration West out of the region of the Lower Danube in 370 AD, but they were Arian Christians. It was not until 587, with the conversion of the king to Catholicism, that they became Catholic as a people and Aryanism declined.

The Visigoth churches were small buildings, but frequently the plan of the basilica was employed. The remainder had a cruciform plan. The interiors were usually constructed so as to create small pockets that served their liturgical requirements to keep clergy and laity separate and also, where applicable, to separate priests from deacons. Thus there were many with chancel screens and even a barrier at the chancel. Most Visigoth churches were constructed using roughly hewn stones that were laid without mortar. The arches within them are often horseshoe-shaped. The Romans were familiar with the rounded arch but there is no evidence that they ever used the horseshoe arch. Why the Visigoths should have adopted the horseshoe arch is unclear. The dates for the first churches are
significantly earlier than the date for the Grand Mosque in Damascus. There was significant trading between the Iberian ports and those of the eastern Mediterranean; so that it is a possibility, albeit a small one, that the form was brought from Syria and the early churches there.

There are a small number of churches mostly in the North of Spain and Portugal that remain from the 7th century, and which are therefore of Visigoth origin. These were, in part, modelled on earlier paleo-Christian churches. None of these have survived except as ruins. There is some disagreement amongst experts as to which elements are wholly or partly from that period and which elements are the results of later restoration. The earliest one that survives is San Juan de Baños, in Palencia. It has an inscription that records its construction in 661.

San Juan de Baños – West door (left), nave and South aisle (centre) choir (right)

The horseshoe arch is evident throughout the building at San Juan. It is very probable that the one on the West door has been rebuilt but that at the entrance to the choir and those on the sides of the central nave are almost certainly in their original form. Near Zamora stands the church of San Pedro de la Nave. The date for this church is around 670 to 680, a couple of decades before Santa María de Quintanilla de la Viñas, near Burgos, which was built around 890; however, only the apse remains from Santa Maria. There is some uncertainty as to whether the church at San Pedro is as authentic as was once supposed. Nonetheless, within the interior are several examples of the horseshoe arch. Other examples may be seen at São Pedro de Balsemão and São Gião de Nazaré, both in Portugal, and Santa María de Melque, South-west of Toledo.
Mozarab

In 711, following an invasion from North Africa by Arabs and Berbers, the Visigoth Kingdoms were overthrown to be replaced by Islamic rule that was to last in some parts of Spain until the 15th century. The Moors permitted the continuation of Christian (and Jewish) worship initially, though such freedom was subject to restriction and financial penalty. From the middle of the 8th century the restrictions increased and the remaining Christians were pressured to either covert to Islam or leave the territory. There is disagreement amongst authorities as to what exactly was the community embraced by the term ‘Mozarab’. In the context of this article the Mozarabs are those inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula who remained under Moslem rule but who, for whatever reason, left the area occupied by the Moors and moved to the Christian Kingdoms that had developed in the North and North-west of Spain. They had retained the Visigoth forms of worship and liturgy and took with them a style that was a fusion of that of the Islamic conquerors and their own style derived from their Visigoth and Hispano-Roman heritage.

San Miguel de Escalada is situated in a valley to the East of León. It dates from 913. It is perhaps one of the finer Mozarab works. It was built on the site of an earlier Visigoth church that was abandoned when the Moors invaded. It was monks who had fled the increasing religious persecution in Córdoba who were responsible for the reconstruction. It comprises a church with a triple nave in the form of the basilica with a wooden roof. Each aisle ends with a short, almost circular choir that resembles a mihrab, the central one being slightly wider then the outer two. The central aisle alone is separated from the nave by a tribune supported by two slim columns that form a horseshoe arch; these once contained small screens that would have obscured the view of the choir from the nave. This concept recalls the enclosed chancels of the Visigoth period. Each side chapel has a narrow central window. The aisles are divided by slim columns topped by a capital that is
a variant of the Corinthian capital. On these rest horseshoe shaped arches. Along the South side of the exterior of the nave runs a gallery that is of a slightly later date than the church. It is enclosed by columns and Corinthian styled capitals supporting similar horseshoe shaped arches. These arches resemble of the arches of the mosque at Córdoba but, as we have said, the form pre-dates the Arab invasion and it was very familiar to the Visigoths. The overall form along with the style and proportions of the arches is reminiscent of San Juan de Baños.

San Miguel de Escalada – South porch and North aisle

San Miguel – Crossing and a window (within an alfiz)

Also founded by monks from Córdoba is the church of San Cebrián de Mazote, in Castile. This dates from not earlier than 940. The interior of the nave is constructed using slim columns to divide the aisles. These are topped by Corinthian style capitals which are linked by horseshoe arches. The combination of these has a lightness that we saw in the nave of San Miguel de Escalada.
High in the mountains to the West of León is the village of Santiago de Peñalba. The church was once part of a small priory founded at the start of the 10th century and consecrated in 930. The plan is a compact cross. Unlike the previous churches that we have looked at it has a single nave with a rounded chapel at each end that is entered through a narrow horseshoe arch. But the South door with twin horseshoe arches, known as an *aljimez* door, with an *alfiz* moulding (the moulding that binds the arches of the window) that indicates its Mozarab and Visigoth pedigree; a smaller door on the North side has a similar though single arch.

At the East end of the Pyrenees the recapture of Barcelona from the Moors in 801 provided increased security to Christian worshipers. The little church of Sant Julia de Boada, situated between the Pyrenees and Barcelona, was first recorded in 934. It has a single nave and a short apse that is sited off-centre to the South. The South door and the arch at the entrance to the choir both have the familiar horseshoe shape; however, the South door at Sant Julia is of modern construction.
The lands of the Count of Barcelona extended North and East along the littoral of the Mediterranean towards the Rhone estuary. The Mozarab influences were to follow the same path. In Roussillon and Languedoc a number of churches remain that show such characteristics. In the early part of the 11th century the Abbot of St Michel de Cuxa, North of the Pyrenees, was also Bishop of Ripoll, to the South. The church at Cuxa retains Mozarab style arches in the nave and the North side chapel. Two 10th century small chapels in the hills to the North of Roussillon, near Sournia, that were dependencies of Cuxa, display similar characteristics.
The Mozarab influences had penetrated deeper into France. Examples of that influence survive in two chapels in the Aude, St Martin de Puits and at St Aubin du Pla, to the West of Fitou, (a chapel that has been restored).

Mudéjar

The horseshoe arch was to linger on as an architectural form in Spanish church architecture until some time during the 13th century. It was no longer described as Mozarab, but as Mudéjar. This term is associated with architectural works that were created by Muslims who remained after the Catholic reconquest and who created
buildings with strong Moorish styles that blended with Christian styles. One of the best examples with the horseshoe arch is the former synagogue of Ibn Shushan, in Toledo, which was to become the Catholic church of Santa Maria la Blanca in the early 15th century. The synagogue was built in the last decades of the 12th century or the first decade of the next century.

Toledo – Former synagogue of Ibn Shushan, now church of Sta María la Blanca

The church of San Román, Toledo, was built in the middle of the 13th century. The church now houses a Visigoth museum. This church, however, represents the twilight of the use of the horseshoe arch as an architectural feature in Spanish churches.

Toledo – San Román

Pilgrimage

Though the use of the horseshoe arch as an architectural feature was declining by the 12th century, the form was given a lease of life as a decorative form. By the middle of the
9th century the great pilgrimage movement that drew tens of thousands of pilgrims from across Europe towards Galicia and the Cathedral church of Santiago de Compostela was in full swing. This river of humanity carried with it masons and sculptors and, more importantly, ideas and styles; the movement was not only from the North-east and East towards Galicia but also the reverse as pilgrims returned home. One of the decorative features that is closely linked to some churches along the pilgrimage route across Northern Spain and to others on the West side of France between the Pyrenees and the Loire at Tours is the cusped arch. This arch was to decorate doors and windows of churches and the Cathedral at Santiago de Compostela. Whilst the form of the arches varied slightly the majority narrowed slightly to create the familiar narrower neck. There is little doubt that the form was taken from models found in Spain where it was adapted for decorative use. Returning pilgrims then carried the model North into South-West France. It was not a motif that was to continue in church decoration beyond the end of the 12th century.

Santiago de Compostela – Windows over South door
Manuscripts

An important vehicle for this diffusion of style was the manuscript. Of special importance were copies of the ‘Beatus de Liébana’, a commentary on the Apocalypse. First produced in the late 7th century by a monk of Asturias, over 30 copies were made over the subsequent five centuries; several contained illuminations of buildings that had a distinctive Mozarab style. These show details of doorways and sanctuaries in forms that were to be replicated in churches from Asturias to Catalonia and across the Pyrenees into the area once known as Septimania. One of the earlier surviving copies is the Beatus Pierpoint Morgan from the former abbey at San Miguel de Escalada, now held in the United States. It dates from between 926 and 960.

More striking examples that might well have provided models for masons are to be seen in the Beatus Girona which dates from 957 and Beatus D’Urgell, which is from 970.
Strangely, the incorporation of horseshoe arches into the illustrations of other Spanish manuscripts seems to have been uncommon. Examples where they have been used is in the Codex Vigilanus, a text completed in 976, and in the Ripoll Bible of 1027.

That manuscripts provided models for the masons and sculptors of the Middle Ages is well established. It is therefore probable that the illustrations in the Beatus de Liebana provided models for horseshoe arches constructed in the 11th and 12th centuries.
Ivories

At San Millán de la Cogolla, in the wilds of Rioja, there are two monasteries. One, Suso, is the older with elements that date from Visigoth and Mozarab periods. The other, Yuso, retains the casket that contained the remains of San Millán. The casket, which dates from the 11th century, had 22 small ivory panels with sculptured reliefs that illustrated the story of the Saint’s life and miracles as recorded by Braulio, a 7th century bishop of Zaragoza. The casket was first placed on the church altar in September 1067. Some panels were stolen after the looting of the abbey by the French in 1809; some of these are now in museums across Europe. Amongst the small ivory panels still in situ are several that have horseshoe arches carved on them. The panels cannot be described as Mozarab; however the tradition and styles of the Mozarabs were familiar to the craftsmen who created this casket.

San Millán de Yuso – Casket of San Millán
In the Museum of Art, Girona, there is a small casket that was once a reliquary at the abbey of Sant Pere de Rodes. It was found by chance in the early 19th century beneath the main altar after the abbey had been abandoned. It was made in the 9th century. On the front side of the casket four small horseshoe arches have been carved into the main panel. However, this casket is not of local manufacture; it was probably made in Andalusia by Moorish craftsmen. Andalusia was the heartland of Moorish culture and the style, of which the horseshoe arch was a significant visible symbol.
Summary

The story of the horseshoe arch in Christian Spain is short. Like a river in some desert country, it seems to suddenly appear in the 6th century. Its source is difficult to identify: it is possible but not very likely that it was inspired by an early Christian building in Syria. It pre-dates the Islamic use of the arch in places like Damascus. Having flourished in Spain for the next five centuries this attractive and distinctive architectural and decorative feature seems to have disappeared from the repertoire of builders, masons and artists into the sands of time during the 13th century.

References consulted

Note. This article should be read in conjunction with the articles ‘From Visigoth to Gothic’ and ‘The Cusped Arch on Romanesque Churches’ to be found at www.green-man-of-cercles.org and (click on tab Peter Hubert)

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