The ‘Sumptuous Style’: Richly Decorated Gothic Churches in the Reign of Alfonso the Learned

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There are few periods in the Middle Ages in which the vegetal and anthropomorphic forms of architectural ornament exhibit the same variety and artistic quality as in the later thirteenth century. Capitals and friezes of Gothic churches of this period are full of naturalistic leaves that vividly and seductively suggest the empirical discovery of nature. That this moment of apparent naturalism was far from inevitable is demonstrated by the new stylisation of artistic forms that emerged in nearly all European countries from the beginning of the fourteenth century. Considering the particular importance of naturalistic ornament in the thirteenth century, studies of the phenomenon are surprisingly rare. This is probably due to dominance of geometrical patterns in Gothic architecture in the same decades in which naturalistic foliage was flowering. This new system of the so-called style rayonnant—the most famous example being the royal Sainte-Chapelle in Paris—was characterised by technical boldness and by geometrical designs, especially in window tracery, as a result of advanced planning methods and as an expression of the intellectualisation of architecture.

The style rayonnant, elaborated in France under the reign of King Louis IX, generated a system of planning and constructing that became the dominant model for church building throughout Europe. Outside France the technological prerequisites for such systematic geometrical planning existed only in a reduced form. In other European countries, we find that only isolated formal motifs derived from the Rayonnant system were integrated into local building traditions. Examples include Westminster Abbey in England; the cathedral of Regensburg and the parish church of St. Marien in Lübeck, both in Germany; and the cathedral of Uppsala in Sweden. In my view, there are only two ‘pure’ examples of Rayonnant architecture outside France: the cathedrals of Cologne in western Germany and of León in northern Spain (Fig. 2.1), of which only the latter was finished in the Middle Ages.

Indeed, the cathedral of León, built from 1255, can be considered an export work of the French Rayonnant style, because its structure does not show any traces of Spanish traditions. Its first architect, Master Simon (mentioned in 1261), probably came to Spain together with a squad of skilled stonemasons from Champagne. This is confirmed by comparisons with several churches from that region: the plan of León Cathedral recalls that of the cathedral of Reims; the façade shows analogies with Saint-Nicetase at Reims, the inner structure with Saint-Jacques in the same town. The closest similarities are with the cathedral of Châlons-en-Champagne (ca. 1230–1260), and it is possible that Master Simon had been trained in its workshop. The architect included, moreover, references to French royal buildings such as Saint-Denis and the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris.

In this essay I will focus not on the geometrical systems of the style rayonnant, but instead on its rich sculptural decoration and naturalistic forms. Returning to the earliest phases of Gothic architecture, we find the substitution of the rich compositions of figurative scenes, leaves and ribs that characterise late Romanesque decorations with standardised vegetal capitals in the form of buds, so-called crochets. But in the second quarter of the thirteenth century there evolved a more complex world of naturalistic foliage, including the precise imitation of particular kinds of leaves as a result of empirical studies of nature. This fascinating new process was pioneered at Reims Cathedral (Fig. 2.2), and several churches in Germany, such as Saint Elisabeth’s in Marburg or Naumburg Cathedral (Fig. 2.3), exhibit famous examples of Gothic imitatio naturae. Naturalistic foliage of the same type is found in some English buildings of the early Decorated Style, most famously the chapter house of Southwell Minster, built in the 1270s.

To some extent such exuberant naturalistic foliage sits awkwardly with the refined geometry of Rayonnant buildings, and in most cases such ornament was restricted to discrete areas of the church, such as portals. If we disregard the special cases of Italy and England, where the French Rayonnant system was never adapted completely, there is only one group of buildings that combines rich vegetal decoration with the architectural system of the style rayonnant. These are the ecclesiastical buildings created in the third quarter of the thirteenth century in the kingdom of Castile, buildings that represent a specific artistic current in the reign of King Alfonso the Learned (1252–1284). The most important examples are the cloister of the cathedral of Burgos, the presbytery of Toledo Cathedral, some portals in the abbeys of Las Huelgas de Burgos and Cañas (Rioja), and the triforium in the nave of the cathedral of Cuenca. These monuments have been examined thoroughly by various authors, but the lavish decoration of Spanish style rayonnant buildings has never been comprehensively studied.
The most important sculptural and ornamental ensemble of this group is the cloister, the Claustro Nuevo, of the cathedral of Burgos (Figs. 2.4 to 2.9) – part of a complex programme of extension realised after the consecration of the cathedral in 1260. The result is one of the most striking Rayonnant ensembles of anywhere in Europe, and an unusual one in view of its high degree of ornamentation. The architecture of the cloister of Burgos Cathedral corresponds to a great extent to the technological and aesthetic system of the French style rayonnant, as demonstrated by the similarity of the window tracery (Fig. 2.4) to that of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. Vegetal decoration in the Sainte-Chapelle is also quite rich, and on occasion strikingly naturalistic, but in the cloister at Burgos vegetal decoration has colonised a far greater proportion of the architecture than in other Rayonnant buildings. Leaves of remarkable plasticity not only fill the capitals of the piers but also the arches that reinforce the outer walls of the cloister in two parallel lines (Figs. 2.5 and 2.7). Indeed, such is the opulence of the foliage that the geometrical logic of the arches is almost hidden. The leaves are elaborated to such a degree that numerous botanical species can be distinguished. In her important study of the cloister, the Swiss scholar Regine Abegg identifies vine, ivy, holly and other plants. Various busts, human heads and grotesque figures also nestle amidst these leaves and in those of the consoles supporting the cloister’s figural sculptures. As these consoles course with the walls of the cloister behind them, it is clear these little anthropomorphic figures were executed by the same sculptors responsible for the foliage elsewhere in the cloister.

Most scholars dealing with the Burgos cloister sculptures have focused on the sculpted figures on the outer walls and on the corner piers, some of which are of an extraordinarily high quality. The complex questions of their attribution to different artists or workshops cannot be treated here, but I have suggested elsewhere that they relate to Alfonso the Learned’s imperial pretensions. There are several interesting parallels between a number of sculptures in the cloister and western towers of Burgos Cathedral and the famous founders’ statues in the cathedrals of Naumburg and Meissen in Germany. I have argued, thus, that the statues of Emperor Otto I the Great and his wife Adelheid in the cathedral of Meissen, dating from the 1250s, served as relatively precise models for the commemorative sculptures of King Ferdinand III of Castile and his wife Beatrice of Hohenstaufen in the cloister at Burgos (Fig. 2.6). The latter’s wedding in 1219 in Burgos’ old Romanesque cathedral underpinned the imperial pretensions of their son, Alfonso X the Learned, who was elected Roman (German) king in Frankfurt in 1257. In the period of German-Castilian interchange that followed, a workshop of German sculptors must have been employed in Burgos Cathedral. The artistic connection between Saxony and Castile has recently been supported by the observation that several masons’ marks on the wall behind the statues of Ferdinand and Beatrice at Burgos are identical to those in the choir of Meissen Cathedral.

Let us turn now to the decorative sculpture of the cloister at Burgos. Regine Abegg has already observed that those areas with the highest-quality figural sculpture, especially in the western wall of the cloister, are decorated with the coarsest and most repetitive vegetal ornament (Figs. 2.6 and 2.7). In contrast, very rich and finely elaborated and differentiated foliage can be found in the cloister’s southeast corner and parts of the north walk, precisely those areas that are most distant from the cloister entrance, and where the figure sculpture is of lower quality and significance (Figs. 2.8 and 2.9). One important conclusion can be derived from this at first sight paradoxical
observation: two different workshops worked independently, one responsible for the foliate decoration and small decorative figures, and another for the figure sculpture. They may have worked simultaneously, but according to their own plans and rhythms.

In the cloister of Burgos Cathedral two different teams must then have been active, both directed by Master Enricus as the *magister operis* of the whole construction: on the one hand, the figure sculptors, divided into different teams and specialised in the artistic representation of human figures on a monumental scale; on the other, the decorative sculptors, also split into teams responsible for the ornamentation of capitals, consoles and arches. This latter group can be classified, as we will see, as a specialised branch of stonemasons that created in the cloister of Burgos Cathedral a whole microcosm of plants and little figures, often of a grotesque character.

It is difficult to prove this ramification of professions through documents. All those who worked in stone—and not wood, the work of the carpenters—belonged to the branch of masons (pedreros in Castilian) regardless of their particular function, and often received the same salary. There are cases in which stonemasons who worked on highly ornamented pieces were better paid, but it does not seem to have been a general rule. Clear evidence for this is provided by the *Livre des métiers*, written by Etienne Boileau around 1268, exactly the period under discussion. In this statute of the crafts and trades of Paris, we find a distinction between the professions of *imagiers-sculpteurs* on the one hand and *tailleurs d’images* on the other. This seems to correspond to the difference between figural and decorative sculptors.

The famous lower scenes of the Saint-Chéron window in the great northern chapel of the ambulatory of Chartres Cathedral are very instructive. They show bricklayers, stonemasons and sculptors. The activities of a bricklayer, who controls the regularity of a wall with a plum line, and of three stonemasons, who carve simple and profiled ashlars, are gathered in the left scene, while the right is reserved for the sculptors of tall reliefs of kings. Stonemasons and sculptors are not distinguished by their dress, but the right scene gives a more relaxed impression because one sculptor is treating himself to a glass of water or wine, perhaps an indication of the higher social rank of his artistic profession. In any case, the scenes show a clear distinction between the work of stonemasons and sculptors. So in which category did the sculptor of decorative pieces, such as capitals, belong? A stained glass image in the Lady chapel of Saint-Germer-de-Fly (Fig. 2.10), a masterwork of Rayonnant architecture erected between 1259 and 1267 (and thus contemporaneous
with the cloister of Burgos), is very instructive in this respect as it implies that capital carving was one of the activities of stonemasons. This is one more indication that the artisans who created the foliage and miniature figures at Burgos were classified as stonemasons, and should be distinguished from figure sculptors.

A history of ornamental or decorative sculpture, in which sculptors had considerable artistic freedom but not the particular skills required for figure sculpture, has yet to be written. Like certain other artistic genres, such as wooden reliefs in choir stalls or manuscript marginalia, ornamental sculpture offered a space where artists could experiment inventively with different subjects and iconography. Thus, not only can busts of angels be found on the pilasters of the cloister of Burgos, but also numerous head sculptures as well as animals and monsters, which are at least partially conceivable as genre representations or grotesques. The decorative sculpture of the cloister determines the overall impression to such an extent that the technological character and geometric aesthetics of the Rayonnant architecture have been considerably reduced. On the other hand, as the space most closely associated with the cabildo, the cathedral chapter, the cloister enjoys a splendour which is not found in comparable buildings in France.

Having recognized the autonomy of the workshop responsible for the decorative sculpture in Burgos Cathedral’s cloister, it seems logical that the same workshop was active in another building project that was underway at around the same time on the outskirts of Burgos: the completion of the royal abbey church of Las Huelgas. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the church of this royal Cistercian nunnery was erected hurriedly in the first two decades of the thirteenth century, making it the first High Gothic building in Castile. The nave of the church was left semi-finished, however, with unfinished piers, uncarnved capitals and no vaults (Fig. 2.11). The ribbed vaults of the nave were added in the second half of the thirteenth century, sometime before the documented consecration of the church in 1279, and probably in the context of the burial of the infante Fernando de la Cerda, who died in 1275. As well as the tomb of Fernando de la Cerda in the north aisle, a new main portal was constructed in the northern transept façade around the time of the consecration of 1279. Three portals in the main cloister (now known as the cloister of San Fernando) that lead into the south aisle and sacristy, were built a little earlier, probably around 1270 (Fig. 2.12), and show close parallels with the cathedral cloister. For example, segmented arches—unusual in French Rayonnant architecture—are employed both in these portals and in the entrance to the cathedral cloister. The very dense and naturalistic foliage that covers the archivolt and tympana of the abbey portals was certainly made by members of the decorative workshop active in the cathedral cloister.

The naturalistic foliage of the two Burgos cloisters is developed further at the Cistercian convent in Cañas (Rioja), constructed in the last decades of the thirteenth century with forms that derive directly from Parisian Rayonnant architecture (Fig. 2.13). Raquel Alonso has noted that the vegetal decoration of the entrance portal of the chapter house at Cañas (Fig. 2.14) closely recalls the foliage of the Las Huelgas portals. They cannot, however, have been carved by the same workshop: the leaves of the Cañas portal lack the plasticity and density of the foliage of the cloisters of Burgos Cathedral and Las Huelgas; instead each leaf is more clearly isolated and stylised—part of a wider tendency in several European countries at the end of the thirteenth century.

As mentioned above, the cathedral of León is an exception within thirteenth-century Spanish architecture insofar as its constructional system is fully in line with the French style rayonnant as it was adopted in the churches of the Champagne region. This means that the conception of the walls, pillars and windows in León is shaped by clear geometrical forms and does not even come close to the decorative richness of the cloister of Burgos. In contrast, the portals of León Cathedral, which are equipped with elaborate sculptural programmes, have an abundant vegetable and heraldic ornamentation. It is no coincidence that these portal complexes, which are hardly connected to the cathedral’s core structure, all refer to the model of Burgos Cathedral: the central southern portal is nearly a copy of the Puerta del Salmeral, and the central northern one of the Burgos cloister portal. In all likelihood, this connection can be traced back to Master Enricus, documented in his year of death in 1277 as the magister operis of both the cathedral of Burgos, where his family lived, and that of León. The most interesting example of lavish decorative sculpture with a clear relationship to the cloister of Burgos Cathedral is the triforium of the cathedral of Cuenca, at the southeastern border of the kingdom of Castile—a considerable distance from the old Castilian capital. Work there was interrupted following the construction of the choir and transepts in the first quarter of the thirteenth century, so that the two-storey nave was erected only in the second half of the century (Figs. 2.15 and 2.16), Various parts of the cathedral, such as the circular windows in the aisles, refer to the model of the
abbey church of Las Huelgas and ultimately to Gothic buildings in the Parisian region, such as the church of Arcueil.31 Most interesting is the nave triforium, which incorporates the clerestory windows. Here a particular tracery form was employed that consists of an oculus set over two trilobed arches. Sculptures of angels are attached to the mullions (Figs. 2.16 and 2.17).32

The inclusion of monumental sculpture in the combined triforium and clerestory zone is unique in Gothic architecture: an extremely ambitious solution, it was probably realised under Bishop Pedro Lorenzo, who governed the diocese of Cuenca between 1261 and 1272 and was a close confidant of King Alfonso the Learned.33

The combination of tracery and statues in Cuenca's triforium recalls the galleries over the façades of Burgos Cathedral, especially that over the south transept, with statues of angels that ultimately derive from those at Reims and Saint-Denis.34 The ornamental richness at Cuenca is comparable to the cloister of Burgos, but the elaboration of details differs somewhat and must be the responsibility of a different workshop. In the triforium of Cuenca the eye is caught by lines of rather curious elements, like rolled up leaves or snail shells, sometimes ending in minuscule grotesque heads. The trilobed arches are set with rows of buds, clearly imitating the crockets used widely in thirteenth-century architecture in France. The numerous ornamental heads at Cuenca resist iconographic interpretation and can perhaps be best understood in terms of the grotesque. Similar lines of ornamental heads had been used in the triforium of the cathedral of Burgos from about 1230 onwards, and they appear again in the presbytery triforium of Toledo Cathedral in the 1250s (Fig. 2.19). 35

The most interesting feature of the architectural and decorative system of Cuenca Cathedral is the combination of tall sculptures of angels with the ornamental sculpture that almost entirely covers the delicate Rayonnant architecture. In this case, I would suggest that there was no separation between ornamental and figural sculptors. In contrast to the angels in the transept gallery and

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Henryk Karge

Fig. 2.12 Abbey church of Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas, Burgos, western portal from the Claustro de San Fernando, ca. 1275.

Fig. 2.13 Abbey church of Santa María de Cañas, La Rioja, presbytery vault (late thirteenth century).

Fig. 2.14 Cuenca Cathedral, view from the southwest (2007).

Fig. 2.15 Cuenca Cathedral, view from the north (2007).
the kings and bishops in the cloister of Burgos Cathedral, the angels of Cuenca do not appear monumental, despite their size. Their members are not worked out organically, nor do they generate the impression of corporeality. Comparisons between the heads of the statues of angels and the small decorative heads around them demonstrate clearly that all these figures were made by the same workshop. In this special case, a workshop of decorative sculptors, accustomed to producing leaves and isolated heads, had to create complete sculptures of monumental size, and the result is not entirely convincing.

If we regard the phenomenon of a highly decorated Rayonnant architecture in Castile from a wider perspective, we can also take into account the Islamicate decorations of Toledo Cathedral. These include the complex triforium decoration in the presbytery and the subtle plasterwork decoration of the tomb of the alcalde Fernán Gudiel (d. 1278), in the chapel of San Pedro on the south side of the nave (Figs 2.18–2.20). The Arabic-style decorations include complex geometrical patterns that are fundamentally different from the structural logic of the style rayonnant, and in Toledo’s presbytery they were incorporated within the Rayonnant system so that they appear like images of a foreign aesthetic culture exhibited within a modern architectural frame that was shaped by French models. The combination of both systems produced a level of artistic splendour that trumped any cathedral in Spain or France.

In his monograph on Toledo Cathedral, Tom Nickson developed the convincing thesis that the star-shaped vaults of the presbytery, generally considered as an addition of the late fifteenth century, were in fact built in the early 1270s as the last part of the cathedral chevet. Indeed, the profiles and ornamentation of the ribs match the decoration of the presbytery walls, and the Y-shaped triradials of the high vaults, which include not only tiercerons but also liernes, are a logical continuation of the vault system of the two ambulatories, where tripartite and quadripartite vaults alternate regularly (Fig. 2.21). This means that it was in Toledo—and not in England—that Europe’s first lierne vaults were developed and built. What is more, the star patterns that result in the two presbytery vaults effectively crown the uniquely complex architectural system of the chevet, and increase its highly decorated appearance, transforming architectural structure into image and surpassing in richness all other cathedrals in France and Spain.

The presbytery of Toledo Cathedral thus belongs to a group of important and lavishly decorated church buildings in Castile that to some certain extent transformed the system of the
Fig. 2.19
Toledo Cathedral, presbytery, straight bay, triforium and clerestory (1250s).

Fig. 2.20
Toledo Cathedral, Saint Peter chapel, west wall with the tomb of Fernán Gómez (d. 1278).
style rayonnant adapted from French models. Geometrical purity was sacrificed for the sake of decorative splendour, which was surely regarded as a sign of the special dignity of the churches, and as an expression of magnificence. One could call it a ‘sumptuous style’, consistent with the terms of the papal indulgence issued in 1223 to allow Burgos Cathedral to rise ‘nobly and indeed sumptuously’.40

It is no coincidence that this sumptuous style of architecture and decoration is characteristic of some of the most important cathedrals in Castile, or parts of them, built in the reign of Alfonso the Learned (1252–1284) (Fig. 2.22). The Castilian bishops, decisive promoters of cathedral construction, were dependent on the royal court to a higher degree than in other countries of Europe. They passed considerable parts of the year in Alfonso’s court instead of their dioceses. Indeed, the two archbishops of Toledo who were responsible for the spectacular completion of the cathedral chevet, Sancho I of Castile (1251–1261) and Sancho II of Aragon (1262/66–1275), were even members of the royal family.41 Above all, Cuenca seems to have been a staging post for ambitious clerics at the royal court. Pedro Lorenzo, former archdeacon of Cádiz, was bishop of Cuenca between 1261 and 1272—the period in which the lavish triforium of the cathedral was constructed—and at the same time was recognised as ‘the king’s closest collaborator’.42 Several of his predecessors and successors left the see of Cuenca to continue their careers, often in Burgos, and occasionally even made it to the archbishopric of Toledo. This was the case of Gonzalo Pérez (‘Gudiel’), an important collaborator in the literary enterprises of Alfonso the Learned. Having served as the king’s notary between 1270 and 1272, Gudiel became bishop of Cuenca in 1273 and of Burgos in 1275; at the end of his career, between 1280 and 1299, he was archbishop of Toledo, becoming one of its most important archbishops in the Gothic period.43

It should also be mentioned that Alfonso X enjoyed a close relationship with Martín Fernández, who, as bishop of León between 1254 and 1289, oversaw construction of a cathedral distinguished not by sumptuous architectural decorations but by very close adaptations of French Rayonnant models.44 In 1263, the king even sent the Leonese bishop to the papal curia in Rome to defend his imperial pretensions, but, having been forced into exile at the end of Alfonso’s reign, Fernández turned against the king.45 On the other hand, Bishop Fernando de Covarrubias of Burgos (r. 1280–1299) remained a loyal supporter of Alfonso right up until his death in 1284.46

The royal court was obviously a place where ecclesiastical careers were planned and probably where projects of representation, such as the construction and decoration of cathedrals, were discussed. This does not mean that the sumptuous decorative style of Castilian churches was centrally planned in the court of Alfonso the Learned, but it must be assumed that the strikingly decorative qualities of these cathedrals and of the royal abbey of Las Huelgas stem at least partly from a climate of cooperation and competition at the royal court.

Alfonso’s court was, after all, the court of the elected king of Germany, which is to say the court of the Holy Roman Emperor, the highest secular dignity in the Christian world. It is true that Alfonso’s expensive and futile efforts to achieve recognition as emperor by the papal court...
and the electors of Germany ultimately cost him the support of the Castilian nobility and several previously faithful bishops. But the reorganisation of the royal court that followed Alfonso's election did include the establishment of a special imperial notary, staffed with officials from Toledo and Cuenca, or those close to the king (Burgos cathedral and Las Huelgas) may be understood as attempts to project a particularly high level of artistic formation, as appropriate to the representation of the Roman emperor.

Some of these buildings were obviously intended to impress royal guests from abroad: Alfonso was the favourite place for royal weddings, which occurred either in the cathedral, where the new cloisters was the perfect place to commemorate the conjugal connection between Alfonso the Learned's father and Beatrice of Hohenstaufen, or in the royal monastery of Las Huelgas. Of particular importance were the wedding of the English heir, Edward, with Alfonso's sister, Eleanor, in 1234, and the marriage of Alfonso's son and heir, Fernando de la Cerda, with Blanche, the daughter of the French king Louis IX, in 1260. The latter was celebrated precisely fifty years after the Hohenstaufen wedding in the old cathedral on which the imperial pretensions of Alfonso X were founded. We should not underestimate the importance of ecclesiastical buildings in the staging of such royal ceremonies, and this political importance obviously called for a high degree of decoration that surpassed the geometrical purity of the style rayonnant.

4. There are some cases in which there is a differentiation between palace and artifice that are not defined in the sense of artifice, for example in the day Suegur, abanot Saint-Denis written by the monk César; see Victor Morley and Paul Coudchamp, Recueil de textes relatifs à l’histoire de l’architecture et à l’histoire de l’artifice en France, au moyen âge (séculé 11/12 siècle) (Paris: Picard, 1929), esp. pp. 86-88, esp. p. 87.
57

46. See note 33.
47. See the important monograph by Hernández and Lincham, The Mozarabic Cardinal. Also see González Ruiz, Hombres y libros de Toledo, pp. 297-348, and Nickson, Toledo Cathedral, pp. 98-100. The epithet ‘Gudiel’ was not documented before the sixteenth century, but it has developed a particular historiographic tradition.

49. It is significant that the cope of the Toledo archbishop Sancho II of Aragón, still preserved in the sacristy of the cathedral, shows the German imperial eagles together with the Aragonese bars and the castles and lions of Castile and León. See Nickson, Toledo Cathedral, pp. 124-125 and Fig. 65. Archbishops Sancho I and Sancho II were members of the royal family but had relatively independent positions at court. See O’Callaghan, ‘Alfonso X and the Castilian Church’, p. 428. An image of Alfonso X as an emperor with the imperial eagle is found in one of the windows of the cathedral of León: see Estepa Díez et al., Catedral de León, p. 282.


Henrik Karge

p. 152 for models in the Loire region); Tom Nickson, Toledo Cathedral: Building Histories in Medieval Castile (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), p. 84, Figs. 43 and 47.

36. See Nickson’s fundamental work, Toledo Cathedral, pp. 76-94.
38. See Nickson, Toledo Cathedral, pp. 88-91, 116-120.
40. Luciano Serano, Don Mauricio, Obispo de Burgos y fundador de su catedral (Madrid: Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan, 1922), p. 65.
42. See note 33.
43. See the important monograph by Hernández and Lincham, The Mozarabic Cardinal. Also see González Ruiz, Hombres y libros de Toledo, pp. 297-348, and Nickson, Toledo Cathedral, pp. 98-100. The epithet ‘Gudiel’ was not documented before the sixteenth century, but it has developed a particular historiographic tradition.

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