Hallenkirchen and Spanish Gothic Architecture: Historiographic Invention and Architectural Imitation

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In the second half of the fourteenth century, the great building lodges of the Holy Roman Empire and Central Europe revitalised the Gothic architectural idiom that had been developed in twelfth- and thirteenth-century France, enriching its formal repertoire and seeking greater spatial integration. In this essay I will focus on a similar process in the Iberian Peninsula, most notably the rejection of the basilica plan in which a high central vessel was flanked by lower aisles. I will consider the earliest Castilian examples of hall churches or Hallenkirchen in the fifteenth century, their possible German origins, and the evolution and development of this typology in Iberia in the centuries that followed. I will also explore the economic advantages of hall churches and processes of copying and emulation in parish churches.

The German Model and Historiography

The Hallenkirchen, built in Germany from the middle of the fourteenth century, not only dispensed with the traditional staggered heights of the nave and aisles associated with the basilical plan and ad triangulum sections of French High Gothic churches, but also pulled together the nave and aisles into one integrated spatial unit. Projecting transepts and ambulatories with radiating chapels were also abandoned, so that plan, elevation, and section were all designed ad quadratum. As the nave and aisles were of equal height, windows could be placed only in the aisles and, in some cases, at the west end and in the eastern apse. The result was more even lighting, but less of it. Externally, the architects of these churches emphasised their volumes and flat surfaces by dispensing with the staggered massing, protruding forms and rich ornamentation associated with Gothic churches in thirteenth-century France.

Some of these characteristics appeared already at the church of Saint Elizabeth in Marburg (after 1235), Minden Cathedral (1267–1290), the Dominican church in Colmar (1283 until the second quarter of the fourteenth century), Heinrich Parler's church for Schwäbisch-Gmünd, and in the work of his son, Peter, at Prague Cathedral. In the fifteenth century this typology was further developed in the apse of the Franciscan church in Salzburg (begun in 1406), the church of Saint Lawrence in Nuremberg (1439–1477), and in Saint George in Dinkelsbühl in Swabia (1448–1499), and was employed with particular brilliance by Benedikt Ried (1451–1534), especially in his designs for the church of Saint Barbara in Kutna Hora, now in the Czech Republic. It is surely significant that the German church in Rome, Santa Maria dell’Anima, was begun in approximately 1431 with a plan that follows the hall church, even if it was built with a largely classical architectural vocabulary (Fig. 10.1). The same plan was chosen for another church in Rome, Santa Maria della Pieta, begun in 1501 in the German Cemetery.1

These innovations were clear to travellers to Germany in this period. Several of those who attended the Council of Basel (1431–35), for example, commissioned new works on their return that were clearly inspired by the buildings they had seen. The clearest example of this is Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II (r. 1458–64), who commissioned the architect Bernardo Rosellino to build a cathedral in Pienza (Italy) similar—as he wrote in his correspondence—to those ‘beautiful and luminous’ churches he had seen in southern Germany.2 Construction of the Castilian church in Rome, Santiago de los Españoles, built between 1450 and 1458 and the first hall church linked to Castile, was also connected to Rosellino and to Pius II (Fig. 10.2).3 Alonso de Cartagena, who was appointed bishop of Burgos in 1435, was present at the Council of Basel from 1434 onwards. His trip to northern Europe has long been associated with the arrival in Burgos of Juan de Colonia, who was entrusted with the completion of the cathedral’s western spires, supposedly inspired by north tower of Basel Cathedral, amongst others.4

From the work at Pienza and Burgos it seems that high spires and hall structures were considered the most interesting new elements of Gothic architecture in Central Europe. The new type of decoration associated with these structures—quite distinct from French Gothic traditions—presumably moved the second Count of Tendilla, Íñigo López de Mendoza, when in October 1505 he wrote to the master mason of Seville Cathedral, Alonso Rodríguez, to request that the decoration of the tomb of Cardinal Diego Hurtado de Mendoza (Íñigo’s brother) in this cathedral should ‘mix nothing French, German or Moorish, but should be only Roman’.5
It was the German scholar Georg Weise (1888–1978) who, in three seminal publications, first systematically investigated hall churches in Spain. His work was fundamental in underlining the tremendous vitality of this type in the peninsula, and belongs to a historiographical tradition that interpreted Hallenkirchen as a ‘symbol of German identity’. The idea was Romantic in origin, and can be traced back to Wilhelm Lübke’s Die mittelalterliche Kunst in Westfalen (1853), in which the term Hallenkirchen was first coined. Lübke’s ideas were subsequently developed by scholars from the Vienna School in the context of their praise for the final phases of styles, such that the spatial integrity of hall churches came to be understood as a northern parallel to developments in Italian Renaissance architecture of the same period.

Kurt Gerstenberg and Georg Dehio further consolidated the argument that Hallenkirchen represented an expression of the national German spirit, and it was Gerstenberg’s notion of a ‘special Gothic’, the ‘deutsche Sondergotik’, that especially inspired Weise. For Gerstenberg, and consequently for Weise, German Gothic was special because the Hallenkirchen epitomised the idea of unified space, as opposed to the hierarchical spaces of so-called ‘classic’ French Gothic churches and the basilical plan. According to this model, space flowed uniformly through the church, with all vaults at the same height rather than separated by transverse or longitudinal arches, and with no hierarchy in the organisation of supports. Churches with these characteristics could be found across Germany and beyond. This typology was seen as an expression of German spatial perception and became an epitome of national Germanic identity, an ‘indigenous stylistic development’ that could even be traced back to German Romanesque churches. For French scholars, by contrast, this type of church was nothing more than a modified basilica, a ‘nave without windows’, and thus derived from French rather than German roots.

Weise’s understanding of Late Gothic architecture in Spain—and its connections to Germany—was premised on the idea that neither Spain nor Germany had created their own architectural styles (unlike France or Italy), but had instead assimilated and transformed styles that originated elsewhere. But at the end of the Gothic period, according to Weise, Spain and Germany reinvented Gothic architecture to create their own variant of Gothic. Weise was in fact the first scholar to use the term ‘Late Gothic’ to describe late medieval architecture in Spain.

Professor of the History of Medieval and Modern Art at the University of Tübingen, Weise was in 1933 accused by the National Socialist authorities of rejecting Germanic art, and instead favouring art from elsewhere. These accusations were based on Weise’s frequent trips to Spain, at a time when he was chiefly interested in sculpture. Thereafter Weise cancelled his trips to Spain, and only returned in the 1950s, when, as Claudia Ruckert has suggested, Spain’s new political situation attracted a revival of interest from German scholars. As Ruckert has argued, this political context strongly influenced Weise’s scholarship. He began by cataloguing different types of hall church, tracing their evolution and distribution across Spain. By his account, cathedrals and monastic churches were almost never built as hall churches, but the type flourished in parish churches. Most importantly, he distinguished between churches with plain piers and no impost, characteristic of churches before the sixteenth century, and churches with moulded cylindrical supports, constructed in the first half of the sixteenth century. Weise’s claims of German influence found support in Vicente Lampérez y Romea’s seminal Historia de la arquitectura cristiana en la Edad Media según el estudio de los elementos y los monumentos (1908), in which the Spanish scholar and architect had already connected Late Gothic architecture in Spain to the migration of German and Burgundian artists to Castile. Supported by such distinguished scholars from Spain and Germany, the hypothesis that German architects had brought the German Hallenkirchen to Castile soon became fact.

This is not the place to create an alternative historiographic invention, this time powered by Spanish nationalism. But it is important to understand that studies of hall churches have developed considerably since the 1980s, complementing and nuanced Weise’s pioneering studies. On one hand, Spanish scholars have uncovered documentary evidence that now makes it possible to date quite precisely certain buildings that were hitherto only very loosely dated. And on the other hand, the possible means of transmission of hall church designs to Castile has been much more closely analysed. Two divergent models have been used to understand transmission. One connects transmission to the migration of foreign masons to Castile, and thus underlines the German origins of hall churches. The other emphasises a long Spanish tradition of spatial unification in church architecture, from which hall church designs may have emerged. This second line of explanation, which in many cases also acknowledges the first, underlines the widespread trend in the fifteenth century to raise the aisles to the same height as the nave, as had happened earlier in Santa Ana in Triana (Seville), Santa Cruz in Medina de Pomar (Burgos) and in Catalan Gothic churches, such as in the aisles of Barcelona Cathedral.

Much more is known now than in Weise’s day. He measured and photographed 150 Spanish hall churches. Today, more than three hundred pre-1700 hall churches have been recorded, scattered across Spain, except in Galicia, Catalonia, Baleares and Valencia.
and with scant presence in territories such as Asturias, Navarre and Extremadura. Two areas boast more hall churches than any other: the ecclesiastical provinces of Toledo and Burgos. Contrary to Weise’s suggestions, a number of cathedrals and monastic churches have also been identified as hall churches.

Origins in the Crown of Castile?

As suggested above, in the thirteenth-century church of Santa Ana in Triana and parts of Barcelona Cathedral built in the fourteenth century, the aisles rise to almost the same height as the nave. But Seville Cathedral offers perhaps the most striking example of spatial unification in peninsular Gothic architecture. There, the double aisles are of equal height and approach that of the central vessel; on these grounds it has been related to Hallenkirchen. Its design is owed to foreign artists not from Germany but from France, and especially Normandy. It was begun in 1433 to the design of Isambart, Master Ysanbarte, or Isember, who worked in Seville in 1433 and 1434, and was probably a Frenchman christened as Isambartus. He was a versatile, seasoned architect whose work is documented in numerous Spanish cities, beginning with Lleida in 1410. Since he was well-versed in structural matters, he was summoned to Zaragoza in 1417 as a designer and director of works for highly complicated chapels. He demonstrated his skill in Daroca, near Zaragoza (1417–22), and directed major works at Palencia Cathedral from 1424 to approximately 1437. The next master mason who is documented as head of the lodge in Seville is Master Carlín—Charles Gautier from Rouen—who was Ysanbarte’s former superior at Lleida and was paid as head of the team of stonemasons and labourers ‘who cut stones and took them to the new works’ at Seville in 1435. Following Carlín’s disappearance (he probably died in 1458), continuity of the works was guaranteed by the wardens who stayed on. The first of these was another Frenchman, Jean Normant, his name rendered in Castilian as Juan Normán, master mason from 1454 until his retirement in 1478.24

By the 1470s, it was already clear from the height of its aisles that Seville Cathedral would not follow the traditional basilical model of Gothic cathedrals. It must have been around this time that a plan of Seville Cathedral was drawn up. This plan is now in the archive of the convent of La Santísima Trinidad de Bidaurreta, Oñate, Guipúzcoa. The heights of all the freestanding piers are written beside them, with ‘XV’ repeated on those in the nave and transepts (including the crossing), and ‘XII’ on the remainder (Fig. 10.4). The result was a cathedral which resembles a hall church, quickly imitated nearby in such fine examples as the churches of Utrera, Carmona and Aracena.

According to Paul de la Riestra, the first church in the crown of Castile to be a true hall church was Astorga Cathedral, León. It is also the only Spanish hall church to be attributed to a German master, Juan de Colonia. The theory exposed by De la Riestra holds that Colonia designed the cathedral in approximately 1471 on the model of a hall church, a plan that was subsequently altered, but only when work on the presbytery had advanced considerably. The interrupted buttresses in the lateral apses (Fig. 10.5) and the absence of transepts (Rodrigo Gil would add them later) suggest that the cathedral of Astorga was planned as a hall church, possibly related to the Mortizkirche in Halle an der Saale in Saxony, Germany. The possibility that Astorga was designed by a German master cannot be confirmed through written sources, however, and Juan de Colonia’s early works in Castile scarcely resemble Astorga Cathedral. It is hoped that further investigation may shed light on this early example of a Spanish hall church.

Recent research has also enhanced understanding of Zaragoza Cathedral, traditionally thought to be the second true hall church in Spain, its nave and double aisles raised to the same height at the end of the fifteenth century. It is now known that in the fourteenth century a new Gothic church was begun to a basilical plan, and with single aisles. The additional aisles were added after 1490, and in 1519 new vaults were added to the nave, below the level of the fourteenth-century vaults. Zaragoza’s hall church design was not planned from the start but followed multiple interventions, including the addition of a transept. For this reason, it cannot be considered one of the earliest hall churches in Spain.

At Plasencia Cathedral there is clear documentary evidence that the chapter wished the nave and aisles to be of the same height. The cathedral was begun in 1498 by Enrique Egas, architect of Toledo Cathedral, and work continued under Juan de Álava, architect of Salamanca’s New Cathedral. In 1522 the chapter demanded that Juan ‘raise the transepts to the same height’ as the capilla mayor and to keep this height for the remaining parts of the church, all of which indicates that reference was being made to the hall model. The architect further reinforced the cathedral’s spatial continuity by using fascicle piers without
capitals, emphasising the continuity of ribs and responds from the ground to the vaults.

If the example of Plasencia shows that cathedral chapters took an interest in hall churches, then the case of Salamanca demonstrates that this was also a concern for architects. In 1523 a conference in Salamanca drew together architects from the great lodge at Toledo (Enrique Egas and Vasco de la Zarza), from the employment of the Constable of Castile (Juan de Rasines), and from Salamanca itself (Juan Gil de Hontañón and Juan de Álava) to consider how to terminate the nave and aisles of the new cathedral. In those discussions, and in others from 1531 and 1533, the possibility of finishing the cathedral as a hall church was raised.30

It should be noted that all the protagonists at this conference were born in Castile, and that many had experience of hall churches in the construction of parish churches—arguably the most important field of experimentation with this typology in the Iberian Peninsula. Hall churches are especially common in the most ambitious collegiate and parish churches: the collegiate church of San Antolín in Medina del Campo, built by Juan Gil de Hontañón from 1521 onwards (Fig. 10.6); the collegiate church of Berlanga de Duero in Soria, begun by Juan de Rasines in 1526; the parish church of Villacastín (Segovia), begun in 1539 by Rodrigo Gil de Hontañón; the church of Yepes in Toledo, begun by the Renaissance architect Alonso de Covarrubias in 1534; the parish church in Haro (La Rioja), where Juan de Rasines was active in 1534; and the parish churches of Briones (La Rioja), Roa (Burgos), and numerous others (Fig. 10.7). Indeed, as John D. Hoag notes, ‘During the first half of the sixteenth century parish churches of the two Castillas that were not conceived as hall churches with three equal aisles are rare’.31

Economy and Imitation

Direct imitation of other churches can very clearly be discerned amongst parish churches, subject to two key factors. On one hand, this imitation can be understood in the context of the socio-professional environment of those who erected the churches, notably the unusually cohesive group of masons from the northern part of the peninsula who clung to the same technical solutions for generations. In this respect, erecting vaults at the same height created minor complexity for the master in the use of templates (montes and plantillas), and it was cheaper than cut stones for a basilical church that requires more templates. It has long been noted that Cantabrian and Basque masters played an important role in the diffusion of hall church designs in the sixteenth century and part of the seventeenth.32 But it is also now possible to emphasise the special role of certain Cantabrian masters in the construction of hall churches. The workshop of Juan Gil de Hontañón played a particularly important role in diffusing the type across Castile: his son, Rodrigo Gil de Hontañón, built no fewer than fifteen churches of this type, while Juan’s disciple, Juan de Rasines (followed by his son, Pedro, and grandson, Rodrigo), also spread the model, especially at parish level.33

The second reason for the success of hall churches was economic. As numerous sources make clear, hall churches offered clear economic and structural advantages. In
favouring this solution for Salamanca’s New Cathedral, Juan de Rasines and the sculptor Vasco de la Zarza declared:

If the work is done in this way it will be much stronger and smarter, since we see every day the omissions and errors in the old works because the nave and aisles are of unequal height, and how, if the aisles stay lower than the nave, the arches break and the arcades crack, as we can see every day in many parts. If it is done in the other way, the building remains very strong and safe and does not need any flying buttresses, and moreover costs are considerably reduced.34

The same advantages were also described by Rodrigo Gil de Hontañón in the manuscript that informed Simón García’s famous late seventeenth-century Compendium of architecture and symmetry. In a section on hall churches, García claimed:

When [the aisles] rise to a single height it means that such a body is headless; all is strong and good, being well-made and planned and conceived … the building that rises to a single height is thus stronger because each part supports the other, which does not happen when the central vessel rises higher because the side aisles provide support to the central vessel, while the thrust of the aisles is met only by empty space, and is met instead by flying buttresses, and thus it cannot rise to a single height, to the detriment either of costs or lighting, which, were it of a single height would make one appreciate only the one aisle.35

In the end cathedral chapters proved relatively hostile to hall churches because they lacked the authority of the basilical model adopted by the great cathedrals such as Toledo and León. Enrique Egas, the royal architect from Toledo, summarised this position when he complained in 1533 that hall churches ‘resemble a warehouse rather than a church’.36 It is probably for this reason that the hall church model was ultimately rejected for the cathedrals of Astorga, Salamanca, Segovia, and Las Palmas, Gran Canaria. Nevertheless, it was accepted in Plasencia, as we have seen, in Barbastro (Juan de Sariñena, ca. 1518), and in an important group of Andalusian cathedrals (Guadix, Baza, Baeza, Jaén and Almería)
Francisco de Colonia's interventions can perhaps be detected in the main planned at the end of the fifteenth century with a basilical plan and apse, but in a second as the model for a whole series of churches along the River Odra in the diocese of Burgos. Patrons—in other words, everyone involved. For example, the parish church of Villahoz, in the early modern period. It was a phenomenon of rapid imitation, in which parish architects assuredly played a key role in church design, but in Burgos to the son of an inhabitant of Burgos—in the dissemination of the model of hall church came about as the result of the economic efforts of whole communities and persons with diverse agendas: designers and patrons were both concerned with questions of safety, rapidity, efficiency, tradition and imitation. The arrival and dissemination of hall church designs in Castile can only be understood by combining these factors.


29. "Qué alegre es el cuño en el mismo alto que la capilla, de manera que miren las fachadas de la capilla y del cuño de un alto y la ordenanza fuése como el paralelogramo, por el que habrá podido nuevo supuesto para adelante", See Ana Centro Sastre, "El problema de los trazos de la Catedral de Plasencia, in VIII Centenario de la Diócesis de Plasencia (Plasencia: Obispado de Plasencia, 1990), pp. 467-66. 2.


34. ‘Habrá sido de esto para la obra, será muy más fuerte y más galante por cuanto vemos cada día las faltas e errores que no se pueden remediar e que se pueden hacer en la obra nueva’. See Simón García, El Gótico Español de la Edad Moderna, pp. 267-68. 6.

35. ‘El modello ‘hallenkirchen’ in la arquitectura religiosa de los templos conforme podrán dar que gozase más de la una nave’. See Simón García, Compendio de arquitectura y simetría de los templos conforme podrían dar que gozase más de la una nave. 5.

36. ‘porque la iglesia no quedaba alumbrada como convenía, y pasando antes otra cosa que iglesia... y a vos iglesia de un nuevo que miren las dos horneras y de la de un medio de una altura y en verdad, que tiene más corte de bodega que no de iglesia. Europa’s contemporary writer gives an eye to the discussions regarding the design of Salamanca Cathedral, two years earlier. Diego de Riaño claims that hall churches were not suitable for the cathedral, instead using five or six (architectures), the more that it says that in Spain, that says that with some iglesias of good quality’. See Alonso Ruiz, Arquitectura tardogótica en Castilla, pp. 134-35.


39. ‘Ignales abatidos modernos suelen mirar el geométrico en que ay en el tal pueblo, y si es de razón que tenga entendido que se supriman, y conforme a la regla de garantías, de 10 a 20, o de 30 por 100, Suelen dividir la grandeza dando a cada vecino una quinta parte de 7 y 3 de ancho, y más otra tercia parte de los que no salen. Supongo que es para un pueblo de 100 vecinos, que son 500, que se aumen tas 30, son 150, pues cada uno de 7 de largo y 3 de ancho, son 5 600 quadrados, habiéndoles añadido la una tercia parte para la disposición y pasó a pocos de manera se podrá ver que hay que tener un templo para el tal pueblo, porque si hayas de paralelogramos, ¡piedern de saber qué pie cuadrados tiene y a la longitud y cortesía que a respetar!... los que en la calidad pisos de ancho y 120 de largo no le u a ubo, y más un tercio de por; en otro no se pueden mirar otros mismos. Así que por esta regla se podrán hacer otros cuidados’. See Simón García, Compendio de arquitectura y simetría de los templos conforme podrían dar que gozase más de la una nave. 6.

40. ‘en un inicial phase, at the end of the 16th century’, Melgar de la Hermandad had a plan with a nave, aisles and transept. See Elena Martín Martínez de Simón, ‘Arquitectura religiosa tardogótica en la provincia de Burgos (1446-1511)’ (PhD diss., University of Burgos, Spain, 2016), pp. 149. At the same time, the church of San Esteban de Los Balbases began a structure with a nave and aisles of five bays, later modified with the addition of an apse, crossing, and the setting of the first three bays of the transept at a different height. 8.


43. ‘y para que no se pudiere al un alto, porque con medios de ganar de pies la BASE, que es bueno en los caminos no podrán dar que ganen más de una nueva’. See Simón García, Arquitectura tardogótica e simetría de los templos conforme podrían dar que gozase más de una nave. 2.

44. ‘Por cuanto van a un alto significa que el tal cuerpo es un cabal; todo es fuerte y buen estado hecho fabricado e troncado e ondulado... tendrá en un alto el edificio más fuerte, tiene en este cuerpo más resistencia de lo que en los demás, y de más a la base de todo mucho más se resiste porque desde que desde la columnata e le de fuerza a levantarlo e desde otra otra de la columna, lo cual se da con armonía y se que así no se puede subir a un alto, o por menos de medio de ganar de pies la BASE, que es bueno en los caminos no podrán dar que ganen más de una nueva’. See Simón García, Compendio de arquitectura y simetría de los templos conforme podrían dar que gozase más de una nave. 2.

45. ‘y para que no se pudiere al un alto, porque con medios de ganar de pies la BASE, que es bueno en los caminos no podrán dar que ganen más de una nueva’. See Simón García, Arquitectura tardogótica e simetría de los templos conforme podrían dar que gozase más de una nave. 2.

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Photograph from Georg Dehio and Gustav von Bezold, Die kirchliche Baukunst des Abendlandes: 2.1

Photographs from Georg Dehio and Gustav von Bezold, Die kirchliche Baukunst des Abendlandes: 2.2, 2.3

Photograph from Dieter Kimpel and Robert Suckale, Die gotische Architektur in Frankreich 1130-1270 (Munich: Hirmer, 1985), after a drawing of Emile Bœswillwald: 2.10

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From the dazzling spectacle of Burgos Cathedral to the cavernous nave of Palma Cathedral or the lacy splendour of San Juan de los Reyes, Spain preserves a remarkable variety of inventive but little understood Gothic buildings. Yet Gothic architecture in Spain and the Spanish kingdoms has traditionally been assessed in terms of its imitation of northern European architecture, dismissed for its ‘old-fashioned’ or provincial quality, and condemned for its passive receptivity to ‘Islamic influence’. But did imitation really triumph over invention in the architecture of medieval Iberia? Are the two incompatible? Can inventio and imitatio offer useful or valid analytical tools for understanding Gothic architecture? And to what extent are invention or imitation determined by patrons, architects, materials or technologies? This essay collection brings together leading scholars to examine Gothic architecture from across Iberia from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, and provides the first significant account of Spanish Gothic architecture to be published in English since 1865.