

THE CATHEDRAL OF TOLEDO EXHIBITION

1. INTRODUCTION

The 800th anniversary of the beginning of the construction of the Gothic Cathedral of Toledo constitutes the guiding thread of a commemoration of exceptional historical and cultural significance. On the occasion of this milestone, the Chapter of the Holy Primatial Cathedral promotes the travelling exhibition *The Cathedral of Toledo*, conceived as a means of reaffirming the historical and contemporary role of the Primatial See. From an interdisciplinary perspective, this anniversary invites reflection on the original meaning of the cathedral and on the evolution of the primatial seat within the broader context of Spain's ecclesiastical and cultural history.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The construction of the Cathedral of Toledo began in 1226, during the reign of Ferdinand III and under the decisive patronage of Archbishop Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada. This prelate, a key figure in the political and ecclesiastical thought of his time, conceived the see of Toledo as the symbolic and historical centre of Christian Hispania.



Far from being an isolated event, the commencement of the works must be understood within a broader process of artistic and spiritual renewal of European scope, whose influence gradually spread across the Iberian kingdoms. During this period, Castile was asserting itself as an emerging power following the annexation of the Kingdom of León and the consolidation of territorial conquests from Islam, with the sole exception of the Nasrid Sultanate of Granada.

The construction of the new Gothic cathedral took place on the site previously occupied by the former congregational mosque, whose demolition was carried out progressively as the building campaigns of the Christian temple advanced. Despite certain significant interruptions in the process, the overall design of the cathedral had already been defined by 1381. Nevertheless, work on the chevet and its chapels progressed with notable speed: by around 1238 these structures were largely completed, at which point Archbishop Jiménez de Rada appointed new chaplains for the altars of the apse.



The archiepiscopal ambitions are reflected both in the imposing scale of the building and in its proportions, whose spatial design consciously recalls the monumentality of Constantinian basilicas. This reference was not coincidental, as the prelate had personally encountered such structures during his participation in the Fourth Lateran

Council in 1215. Likewise, the new cathedral incorporated elements characteristic of northern French Gothic architecture. Rodrigo, educated in Paris, witnessed the final phase of construction of Notre-Dame Cathedral and possibly also of other churches such as Bourges Cathedral, whose chevet with double ambulatory aisles of increasing height closely resembles the scheme projected for Toledo.

This design was executed under the direction of Master Martín, documented in the city as early as 1227 and likely of French training. In the absence of comparable precedents in the Iberian Peninsula, the Toledo project necessarily drew upon technical and stylistic solutions developed in France. French influence is also evident in the vaulting of the ambulatory, comparable to that of Notre-Dame de Paris, as well as in similarities with the structural treatment observed at Le Mans. Overall, the early stages of construction of the Cathedral of Toledo reveal an eclectic approach, resulting from the selective assimilation of various European references.

3. EXHIBITION PROJECT

A cathedral is not merely an architectural space. It is also the result of a complex network of religious, artistic, political, and social elements that engage in dialogue with the period in which they emerged and with the historical transformations that have shaped their identity over the centuries.

Within this context, the travelling exhibition The Cathedral of Toledo has been conceived as a proposal aimed at bringing to the public the origins and evolution of the Toledan see in dialogue with other major Spanish cathedrals. The initiative seeks to encourage reflection on cathedral heritage from historical, architectural, artistic, and religious perspectives, while also highlighting the spiritual and cultural links that connect different episcopal sees across the Iberian Peninsula.

The exhibition will travel to spaces of particular significance for understanding this network of historical relationships. Santiago de Compostela Cathedral will offer the opportunity to address the shared apostolic dimension of both sees, rooted in the foundations of the Hispanic Christian tradition and in the spiritual legitimisation of their respective primacies. Burgos Cathedral will provide an ideal setting for analysing the spread of Gothic architecture in the Iberian Peninsula and the dynamics of royal

patronage that supported the construction of both cathedrals. Finally, the Cathedral of La Almudena in Madrid will allow for an in-depth exploration of its historical ties with the Primatial See of Toledo and of the importance of Marian devotion associated with the Virgin of La Almudena.

From this perspective, the exhibition project goes beyond a strictly diocesan scope to acquire a national and even European dimension. At the same time, the commemoration invites reflection on the challenges faced by major cathedrals in the twenty-first century: heritage conservation, the sustainability of their management, cultural dissemination, and the need to balance their touristic dimension with the preservation of their sacred, liturgical, and communal character.

4. CONTENT OF THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition is organised into six thematic sections designed to contextualise the significance of the anniversary and its projection within the cultural and religious framework that gave rise to the Primatial See. In this way, the exhibition is conceived as a means of reaffirming its historical and contemporary importance, while also seeking to awaken renewed interest in the significance of its legacy within the Hispanic world. To this end, it will travel across major Spanish episcopal sees, including Santiago de Compostela, Burgos and Madrid.

The Cathedral of Toledo and its 800th Anniversary

The construction project of the Gothic Cathedral of Toledo emerged during a period of profound artistic and religious transformations on a European scale, which also extended to the Iberian kingdoms, particularly Castile, which was then undergoing a phase of political consolidation driven by the advance of Christian conquests against Islam.

The early years of construction progressed unevenly; nevertheless, from the outset the ambitions of the archiepiscopal see were evident, both in the scale of the project and in its international projection. The cathedral was conceived as the principal ecclesiastical seat of the kingdom and as a temple closely linked to the monarchy. This institutional significance was reflected in an architectural language that embraced the

innovations of French Gothic architecture, both in technical and aesthetic terms, while adapting them to a distinct and clearly Hispanic identity.

Apostolic Succession and Primacy: Santiago de Compostela and Toledo

The expression “apostolic succession” refers to the doctrine according to which the Apostles appointed legitimate successors to continue their ministry within the Church. Within this doctrinal framework, the relationship between the episcopal sees of Toledo and Santiago de Compostela must be understood, both of which were shaped as essential pillars of the Hispanic Christian tradition.



Following the conquest of the former Visigothic capital in 1085, the metropolitan see of Toledo revived its aspirations to primacy, grounded in a tradition tracing its origins to Saint Eugene, regarded as the city’s first bishop and a disciple of the Apostle Saint Paul. These claims coincided with the ambitions of the Compostelan bishop Diego Gelmírez, who promoted the elevation of Santiago de Compostela as a see of European significance and the foremost apostolic centre of the West, thanks to the custody of the relics of the Apostle James.



The relationship between Toledo and Compostela highlights the spiritual dimension of both cathedrals and their structuring role in the religious, cultural, and political configuration of Hispanic Christendom. In this context, both sees shared references linked to apostolic legitimacy, while the growing Jacobean devotion was incorporated into the symbolic programme of the primatial see from the early thirteenth century onwards. A chapel dedicated to the Apostle was then founded in the ambulatory of the new Gothic cathedral.

History and Art of Castilian Cathedrals: Burgos and Toledo

The construction of Burgos Gothic Cathedral began in 1221 on the site of the former Romanesque church. This moment coincided with the reunification of the kingdoms of León and Castile and a period of economic and demographic expansion. The new temple of the *Caput Castellae* played a prominent role in the representational culture of the Castilian monarchy, which is why the Crown supported both the rapid pace of its construction and the richness of its decoration, inspired by models of French Gothic architecture.

The foundation ceremony of the new Gothic building was attended by the king, Bishop Mauricio, and other prominent ecclesiastical dignitaries, including Archbishop

Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, who initiated the construction of Toledo Cathedral from 1226 onwards. This connection is not coincidental, as Mauricio had previously served as archdeacon of the primatial see and, like the Toledan prelate, had studied at the University of Paris.

Royal patronage made both cathedral projects possible. Their architectural and symbolic significance turned the cathedrals of Burgos and Toledo into key landmarks within the Hispanic context, in a period marked by the convergence of spiritual, political, and cultural aspirations. In this regard, the devotion to Saint Casilda is particularly noteworthy, as tradition places this saint of Toledan origin in the lands of Burgos. As a result, both sees shared a similar iconographic programme within the medieval artistic and religious imagination.



Origins and Construction: Toledo Cathedral and Its Historical Roots

The configuration of the Iberian dioceses during the High Middle Ages was closely linked to the advance of the Christian kingdoms against Islamic power. Within this context, the restoration of the metropolitan see of Toledo in 1086 is situated, conceived as the recovery of the former Visigothic Church. To legitimise this process, the papacy confirmed to its prelates the historical rights over the dioceses traditionally belonging to

the Toledan see. From then on, a close link was established between Toledo Cathedral and the ancient town of Madrid, a shared history whose origins date back to the Christian conquest of the city under the reign of Alfonso VI.



The foundational document of the restored Cathedral of Toledo explicitly mentions the dedication to Saint Mary, a circumstance that strengthened the growing Marian devotion promoted by the Primatial See. Within this framework, spiritual ties were consolidated with other important Iberian centres; indeed, accounts of the miraculous apparition of the Virgin of La Almudena contributed to the rise of popular religiosity in Madrid. Its early church of Santa María la Real became the most prominent in the town following the Christian conquest.



Among the numerous representations that reinforced Marian devotion, the image of Mary, Queen of Peace, located on one of the piers of the southern transept of Toledo Cathedral, is particularly noteworthy. Its Gothic typology closely resembles the model used for the sculpture of the Virgin of La Almudena, highlighting the close artistic and devotional links between both sees.

The Jubilee of the 800th Anniversary

Within the tradition of the Church, there are jubilee destinations that allow the faithful to obtain the plenary indulgence granted by the Pope, places recognised as centres of particularly significant spiritual devotion. Alongside these, the Pontiff may also proclaim extraordinary and temporary Jubilee Years linked to major commemorations. In this context, the 800th Anniversary of the Primatial Cathedral must be situated, a milestone of exceptional significance that will turn the Toledan temple into a focal point of international projection and a prominent “place of welcome” and pilgrimage.

On 25 October 2026, the Jubilee Year of the Primatial Cathedral will begin with the solemn opening of the Puerta de Reyes, a symbolic act inaugurating a time of grace granted by the Holy See. Throughout this period, each day will offer the faithful and visitors the opportunity to experience spiritual renewal in close connection with the living history of the cathedral. At the same time, the city of Toledo will consolidate its position as a major destination for those wishing to engage with its extraordinary historical, artistic, and cultural heritage.



The Jubilee Year will conclude in October 2027 with the closing ceremony of the Holy Door. Although this act will mark the visible end of the commemoration, the significance of the anniversary will continue to project outward the relevance of a legacy built over eight centuries. Both Toledo Cathedral and the city that witnessed its construction will continue to strengthen their role as cultural, religious, and historical references, preserving a heritage that remains in dialogue with the challenges of the present and the future.

Toledo Cathedral Today: A Living Legacy Looking Towards the Future and Its 800th Anniversary

The commemoration of eight hundred years of the living history of Toledo Cathedral responds to the need to preserve in collective memory those events that have shaped the spiritual and cultural development of a community. However, far from being merely a monumental construction, the cathedral stands as a symbol: a harmonious network of religious, artistic, cultural, and historical elements, articulated in close relation to a context that transcends its chronological and geographical boundaries.

The significance of the 800th anniversary of the Gothic Cathedral of Toledo offers an exceptional opportunity to re-evaluate its foundational moment. With the aim of deepening understanding of the cathedral's original meaning and its evolution within the ecclesiastical and artistic history of Spain, the Primatial Chapter has designed a carefully structured programme of activities around this milestone. Among them is an exhibition proposal focused on the historical, artistic, and liturgical aspects of the building's origins, alongside various initiatives aimed at reinforcing its devotional dimension.



Finally, this occasion also invites profound reflection on the challenges facing such monuments in the twenty-first century: conservation, management, sustainability, and dissemination, within a context in which heritage and tourism must be balanced with their sacred and communal nature. Ultimately, the aim is to foster a deeper and more rigorous understanding of the cathedral universe.

THE CATHEDRAL OF TOLEDO EXHIBITION

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