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COMISARÍA REGIA DEL TURISMO.

SPAIN.



LEÓN
AND
ITS PROVINCE.

PAMPHLET-GUIDES TO SPANISH ART
AND HISTORY.

~~Publicaciones~~

JT - F 2891



T. 1263935

C. 71717787



R. 161955

León and its Province.

THE ancient CAPITAL of the kingdom of LEÓN is, by reason of its past, one of the most august cities of Spain, though for centuries it has given small sign of life and knew decay long before its Castilian rivals. A strong



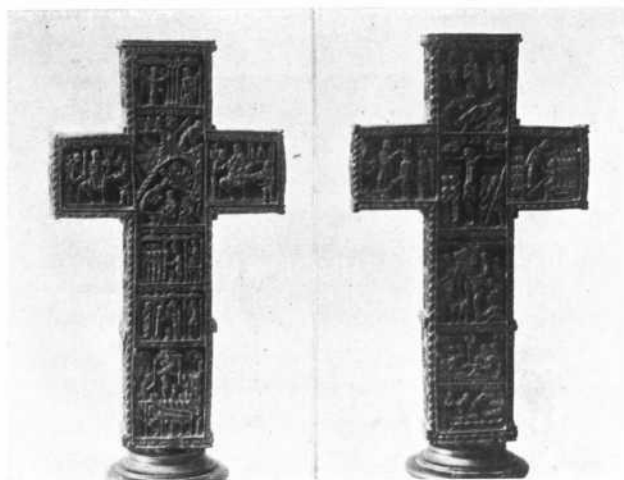
IVORY CRUCIFIX, LEÓN MUSEUM.

military station under the Romans, its walls made it a point of vantage, and a great day in the history of the Reconquest was that on which Ordoño I. of Asturias took it from the Moslem and thus established the Cross in a strong

position well South of the Cantabrian mountain barrier, which for a century and a half had afforded shelter to the descendants of the Visigoths. Further victories of Alfonso III. made the city safe enough to be converted into the rising Christian kingdom's capital early in the tenth century, only to be destroyed by Almanzor some four score years later. It was at once rebuilt, however, and knew great prosperity for a space of two centuries. Fernando III., the Saint, who definitely united the crowns of León and Castile, inherited León thirteen years after the other kingdom came to him, and he perhaps turned his back with regret on the ancient seat of the monarchy. For this reason he may have endowed León with the mighty cathedral that is renowned the world over, thus pensioning it off with a grand title, as a king might send some aged minister into retirement.

Standing on its bare plain just below the mountains, León preserves two great monuments, both of them of deep significance in the history of Spanish civilisation. The collegiate church of SAN ISIDORO EL REAL has attached to it the PANTEÓN DE LOS REYES, the burial place of the ancient kings, queens and princes of the blood, which by extraordinary good fortune has been preserved untouched throughout the

ages. No country that has had the same capital from early times on could possibly have preserved a royal foundation of the eleventh century almost intact ; these two buildings mean for Spain what Edward the Confessor's church at Westminster would for England. They were begun by Fernando I. (1035-1065), and completed under his reign ; though



WOODEN CROSS, LEÓN.

the church was partly rebuilt in the following century, at which period the extraordinary frescoes that adorn the vaults of the Panteón were executed. The time that saw their erection was one when conquest was in the air. The Khalifate of Córdoba had come to an end and an active ruler was striving with

all his might to drive the Infidel below the mountain-chain that borders León and Castile to the South. Christian Spain suddenly found itself grown out of a number of petty mountain principalities into a vast country, ready to take its place in the sisterhood of European nations. This meant, in the eleventh century, that León and Castile must go to school to France, the centre of Western activity in the arts of civilisation.

All this is reflected in San Isidoro and the Panteón, for when they were begun, building in this part of the world still followed traditions that had been preserved in Asturias from Visigothic times on, almost if not entirely unmodified by foreign influences, though they had developed within their own boundaries and by means of their own resources. Of this Asturian or Cantabrian style, to see the earlier examples of which you will have to travel towards Oviedo, the Panteón and the transept of San Isidoro are the latest and most advanced products. How much more it might have achieved no one can say, for its career was interrupted by the importation of far more highly organised architecture from France, the full-blown Burgundian Romanesque that built the nave of San Isidoro, at a time when French queens, bishops and religious

orders were lording it in Castile, and a French dynasty was established in Portugal.

Several of the finest objects in the Archæological Museum in Madrid come from San Isidoro, but a few early works of art of the greatest interest still remain there. Supplement them with the contents of the MUSEUM installed in the



LEÓN CATHEDRAL.

fine sixteenth-century ex-convent of SAN MARCOS, and you will gain a fair view of what remote times have left behind them in this region. Notice especially the second and third century tombstones with horse-shoe arches used on them as a decorative motive, and a very beautiful Romanesque ivory crucifix.

The CATHEDRAL of León, dedicated to Santa Maria de la Regla, is one of the three great Gothic churches built—though not entirely completed—during the reign of Fernando III., the Saint. It is later in style than either Burgos or Toledo, and even more closely related than they to the architecture of Northern France. One of the strangest of all the



LEÓN CATHEDRAL, INTERIOR.

strange happenings which enliven the course of Spanish history is the appearance of this French thirteenth-century church, with its beautiful French sculpture and glass, hundreds and hundreds of miles from the country between Amiens and Rheims to which it by rights belongs. There is a little exag-

generation here, for the backward town that León had become by the end of Fernando III.'s reign could not get the money together to build rapidly, and there is a notable falling off in the later portions of the sculptured decoration, so much so that it is easy to tell where the work of the men trained in the French school stopped. The non-



LEÓN CATHEDRAL, TOMB OF KING ORDOÑO II.

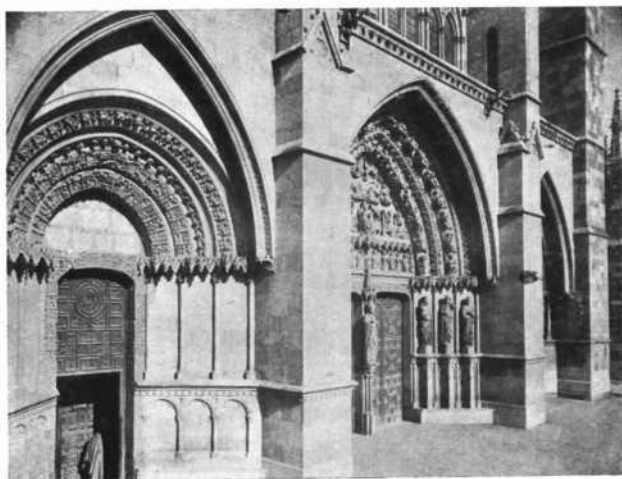
Spanish character of this diaphanous church, all windows and glazed triforium, is well illustrated by the fact that it had no influence at all on the contemporary architecture of the country. Unlike Burgos, León found no imitators, but has stood apart and aloof without entering in the least into the life of the country of its captivity,

On the railway line from León to Palencia lies the ancient town of SAHAGÚN, which is remarkable for its churches of SAN LORENZO and SAN TIRSO, good examples of the Romanesque brick architecture that was developed in parts of Spain where stone was lacking or of unsatisfactory quality. And some five miles away is the convent of SAN PEDRO DE LAS DUEÑAS, another Romanesque brick church that is nevertheless related to San Isidoro.

Away from the railway, and some distance from a good road, so inconveniently placed that it is well to allow two days for the journey there and back, is the church of SAN MIGUEL DE ESCALADA, founded and built by refugee monks from Córdoba in the tenth century. Its history is well known, and it is of great importance because of the evidence it possesses as to the style of building used at that period by the Christians at the seat of the Khalifate. It would be too much to say that that style was in no way affected by the Moslem art, the greatest monument of which was being built at the time in Córdoba itself, but the resemblance between San Miguel and the surviving Visigothic monuments is nevertheless very striking, and may be taken to prove the great part played by the Visigothic tradition in the forma-

tion of the succeeding Spanish styles, Moslem and Christian alike. On the same journey that takes you to San Miguel you may also arrange to visit the Cistercian nunnery of GRADEFES, though only part of it is accessible to the stranger.

Abandoning León and its neighbourhood, you will find in the Western part



LEÓN CATHEDRAL, SOUTH DOOR.

of the province a region called EL VIERZO, very beautiful and wild and containing a few monuments of great interest. On the way thither from León, stop at ASTORGA, a finely walled town with a late Gothic CATHEDRAL that boasts of a big Renaissance altar-piece, the work of Gaspar Becerra. For head-

quarters in El Bierzo, choose either VILAFRANCA or PONFERRADA, or, better still, visit the two places one after the other. They are both delightfully situated and picturesque, and admirable centres for excursions. A few minutes' walk from Ponferrada stands the little church of SANTO TOMÁS DE LAS OLLAS, a circular construction with



ROYAL FUNERAL CHAPEL, SAN ISIDORO, LEÓN.

horse-shoe arches that appears to date from the tenth century. Another example of the same rare class, SANTIAGO DE PEÑALBA must be the object of a much longer journey, but it is thoroughly worth while, presenting as it does peculiarities of plan that make it one of the most curious buildings in Europe, with

its four apses at the ends of the nave and transept. The style known in Spain as Mozárabe, that is built by Christians under the Moslem dominion, has three of its best products in Escalada, Santo Tomás de las Ollas and Santiago de Peñalba, and if you decide to see the two latter, wild hills and trout-streams



SAN MARCOS, LEÓN.

will prove to you that El Bierzo is one of the most enchanting corners of the earth.

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