

# The Hermitage of Santa Marina in Villamartín de Sotoscueva (Burgos) as a Refuge for the Community: To Protect a Building with Writings and Paintings in 1456 — A Secondary Publication

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**Abstract:** The Marina was built by the council of Villamartín de Sotoscueva (Burgos) in 1456, according to the inscription painted on its apse. This paper states that this hermitage was built in a violent environment by the nobility's onslaught against the council powers, and the neighborhood protected its interior and exterior with a series of surprising mural paintings of an apotropaic nature, as well as the roof, through a tile inscribed with verses from the Poem of Fernán González, contemporary to the building. All of this responds to concepts inscribed in the popular culture of the medieval imaginary, expressed through visual and written clues.

**Keywords:** Inscribed tile; Poem by Fernán González; Foundational inscription; Apotropaic; Visual culture

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## 1. The hermitage, a council building, erected in 1456

Villamartín de Sotoscueva, a village with a current census population of less than twenty people, is nestled in a valley between spectacular limestone outcrops with peaks reaching 1,500 m, and an average altitude of between 680 and 750 m, in the heart of the Ojo Guareña National Monument, one of the best-known karst complexes in Europe. It is barely twenty kilometers from Villarcayo, to the northwest, to whose judicial district it belongs, and almost one hundred kilometers north of the city of Burgos. It is on the northern border of this province and forms part of one of the merindads of Sotoscueva, one of the seven historic merindads of old Castile.

This territory was inhabited in pre-Roman times by the Autrigones and has a long early medieval history. At the beginning of the 9th century, Count Gundesindo, governor of this land, donated Sotoscueva, among other villages, to the duplicate monastery of Fiés-toles (Cantabria)<sup>[2]</sup>. Canonically, it first depended on the diocese of Valpuesta (Burgos), later passing to the diocese of Burgos. In this region for the first time, at the end of the 9th century, *Castella Vetula* is mentioned, in a clear allusion to its growth towards the south. Today, the municipality borders Cantabria, although it is also very close to the provinces of Álava and Vizcaya.

A little more than two hundred meters from the parish church of San Esteban, already inexistence in the 12th century, is the hermitage of Santa Marina, at one end of the village (**Figure 1**). This construction has barely aroused any interest and is only vaguely mentioned in popular works or scientific articles that deal with it collaterally, always citing it with reference to the appearance of the tile incised with verses from the *Poem of Fernán González* (PFG).

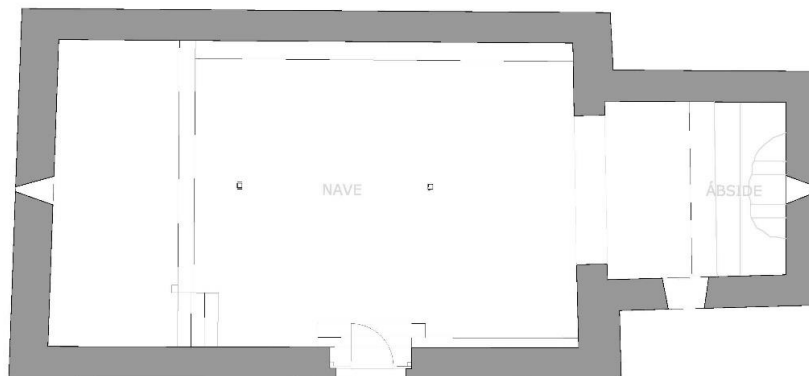


**Figure 1.** The hermitage of Santa Marina from the south.

The demolition of the nearby constructions has left the building in an immediate natural setting. Remains left to the northwest of the hermitage from the demolition of the old house “del santero”, so called in the bibliography, where its owner, Ángel Ruiz Sainz, discovered the roof tile in 1950 in a hidden place in the kitchen, called “la secreta”<sup>[3]</sup>. None of the half-dozen people questioned, linked to the village of Villamartín, had ever heard of the existence of these “secrets”, either in the village or in the surrounding area.

The hermitage of Santa Marina is a building with a single nave, with a straight chevet on both the exterior and the interior, today with no differentiation of heights between the two bodies in the elevation on the ridge line. It is built in masonry, with ashlar on the corners and the doorway, which is located to the south, being the only access. A small ashlar masonry staircase with a single embrasure crowns the pinion of the western gable.

There are two openings in the chancel (**Figure 2**). One, axial, in the headwall, in the form of a slender loophole (10 cm wide). Another, later, on the southern side. Both are enclosed by ashlar. The third window, tiny and made of four ashlar that leave a hollow in the center, opens in the axis of the western headwall.



**Figure 2.** Plan of the hermitage (with the collaboration of the architect Inés Santa Olalla)

The interior of the upper part of the apse wall is occupied over its entire width by a red inscription in large-format letters of very good palaeographic/epigraphic execution (**Figure 3**).

It reads:

“This church held the council in honor of Sennora Sancta Marina/date 6 days of July 1000 / cccc and lvi years.”



**Figure 3.** Apsidal inscription

At the same time, the rest of the pictorial program was carried out on the interior of the walls of this building, of debatable technical quality, and also on the exterior of its only doorway and the area around the axial window. The feeling is that what mattered was to leave a record of what the inscription proclaims. The plastic expressions came in addition, or rather, the same team (not particularly gifted) was employed to finish off a task whose main objective had already been achieved. The inscription date is sixteen days before the death of the archbishop of Burgos, Alfonso de Cartagena, under whose pontificate the chapel was erected.

From the end of the 13th century onwards, the Fernández de Velasco family must necessarily be mentioned. The first significant one was Sancho Sánchez de Velasco (1315), who became Justicia Mayor of the King's House, Adelantado Mayor of Castile, and Adelantado Mayor of Andalusia. He received the rents of the martiniega of the marinated of Old Castile and from there increased the family territory<sup>[4]</sup>. They were considered to be the “new” nobility, destined to triumph, especially with the advent of the Trastámara family.

Some data allow us to reconstruct the context of this land in the 14th and 15th centuries. The *Becerro de las Behetrías* (or *Libro de las Merindades de Castilla*), written in 1351, is the most important direct source for understanding the legal-administrative reality of this region and shows how this lineage took advantage of the position to support its particular feudal interests, a collision that provoked a violent and bandit atmosphere in the north of Castile. In 1366 the king handed over Briviesca to the Velascos and three years later Medina de Pomar. These strategic points allowed the lineage to control the routes between Castile and the Cantabrian Sea through the valleys that connected them, including Sotoscueva. In 1367/1368, Henry II granted the title of merino mayor of Old Castile to Pedro (I) Fernández Velasco in gratitude for his support in the fratricidal war he had with his deposed brother, Pedro I. In 1419, taking advantage of the death a few months earlier of the merino Juan de Velasco, who sowed the area with fortresses, and the minority of his son Pedro (II), several councils of the merindad of Old Castile, including Villamartín, sent a memorial to King Juan II complaining about the actions of the Velascos in their role as royal merinos. The climate of violence and terror under the nobility was becoming unbearable, but the support of royal power for this lineage continued<sup>[5]</sup>. In 1431, John II himself granted Pedro (II) Fernández de Velasco (1399–1470) the title of “Good Count of Haro” and “all the yantares, martiniegas, infurciones, fonsaderas and any other rights that in grain, maravedís or other species belonged to His Majesty” in 41 places, including Villamartín. This concession excluded alcabalas, tercias, and “other things” belonging to the royal domain<sup>[6]</sup>. Later he would add the title of Lord of Frías (1446) and, in 1473, that of Constable of Castile, an honor inherited from Pedro (III) Fernández de Velasco (1425–1492),

married from 1436 to Mencía de Mendoza (1421–1500), daughter of the Marquis of Santillana.

Medina de Pomar, the epicenter of the Velasco lordship, was only twenty-five kilometers from Villamartín, less than five leagues away. A booklet almost contemporary to the construction of the chapel of Santa Marina lists the list of these buildings that the powerful Velasco family had in the merindades of Old Castile, one of them in Espinosa de los Monteros, even though the town did not belong to the lord, barely fifteen kilometers from Villamartín <sup>[7]</sup>. The Velascos continued to erect or repair towers and fortified houses, such as the one at Quisicedo in the merindad of Sotoscueva and other villages, some of which today dot the landscape and are tourist attractions (**Figure 4**). Such buildings fulfilled a triple function: the obvious defensive, fiscal (by controlling the goods in their area from the Meseta to the Cantabrian Sea), and symbolic <sup>[8]</sup>. Stone, a lot of stone, its height, the massiveness, the fence, the weapons, the vassals belonging to each tower, the feared commanders, were to play an important role in the collective imagination of the people who lived in nominally free councils, but who saw how they lost their liberties and were increasingly overrun by the Merino's armies (the same ones who joined the royal army when the king requested it), which were becoming stronger and stronger. Perhaps it was with some peace of mind that they saw the center of the Velasco lordship move away from Medina de Pomar to the city of Burgos when in 1473 Pedro (III) de Velasco was appointed Constable of Castile. Twenty years after the council of Villamartín had signed "the church of Santa Marina", the capitulado de Vitoria (1476) was signed, which would have a fundamental influence in the north-east of Castile when it came to the reforms encouraged by the Catholic Monarchs in the municipal system which, among other changes, would lead to the transition from the open council to the closed, less participatory council <sup>[9]</sup>. The siege was tightening.



**Figure 4.** Restored apsidal transept, with the inscription and other paintings

This inscription is unique because there are not many such signs documenting council patronage in the medieval period, and even fewer framed in complete buildings that have survived to the present day in religious spaces <sup>[10]</sup>. Some examples from Zamora (11th and 12th centuries) show this interest in reflecting the council's initiative in the construction of churches, parish churches in this case. The church of San Cipriano in the capital displays two well-known inscriptions on stone on the outside, from which I extract the translation of the part that is of interest here: "Ildefonso with the help of the whole council and the master builder Raimundo put the roof on", and the church "was finished with the help of the rest of the council and with the help of the master builder Sancho and Raimundo." For its part, in the church of Pobladura de Aliste (Zamora), an inscription on the outside and carved on the ashlar of its masonry states: "In the year 1120 the presbyter Martín made this church together with the council" <sup>[11-13]</sup>. The very different chronological context (11th and 12th centuries in Zamora and 15th century in Villamartín), geographical (from the west of León to the north of Castile), and canonical (parishes and hermitage) prevents us from establishing direct links or coherent lines of epigraphic traditions but proves that it was not trivial for a council to promote the construction (alone or with other institutions or persons) of a religious building. In the case of Burgos, the council itself came to compete with the local oligarchies, who used the religious spaces as a favorable framework for extolling their lineages and perpetuating iconographic messages or symbols that publicized their power and influence.

This private nature of the church of Santa Marina (it would have to wait 127 years, until 1583, for a brotherhood to be constituted to administer and manage the building) seems to be the reason for the erection of this temple, expressed by the epigraphic monumentalization of this fact. The finish of the decoration of this space, a brushstroke with a simple mock-up of ashlar in the vaulting of the chancel and the thread of the arch of glory, rather than plain, conferred on it the greater dignity with which the council was able to endow it. The part that was to receive figurative paintings (chancel gable and nave) was not painted.

It cannot be proved that the council met in this hermitage (church, according to the inscription), but what is certain is that it was erected, labeled, and used, so everything points to it being the meeting place, and hence the council's interest in "marking" its legitimate ownership of the building that had been constructed, and that this was proclaimed with an advertising deed in the form of an inscription painted on the main space, the apse <sup>[14]</sup>. The sign was executed by a team of specialists in this task, who were familiar with the codes of writing on parchment or paper and of putting it on the wall, and who, incidentally, would be commissioned to do the rest of the paintings.

It was probably in the 16th century that the building of the old parish church of San Esteban was completely rebuilt, and its venerable foundation inscription, dated 1176, was replaced <sup>[15]</sup>. The new building, of diocesan impulse, follows a Gothic model following the aesthetics of the new large buildings <sup>[16]</sup>. In contrast, the hermitage of Santa Marina, built at the expense of the neighborhood, is heir to a building tradition that was already clearly archaic, anchored in a Romanesque aesthetic that had been fulfilling its function for three hundred years. Its original plan is interchangeable with that of hundreds of Castilian Romanesque temples, in size and proportion between its parts, although the thickness of its walls (70 cm, about 2.5 feet) is considerably thinner than the Romanesque (usually about three feet). Stylistically, the chevet is the part that best reflects these characteristics, with its straight plan on the inside and outside, narrow loopholes in the axis of the eastern wall, and ashlar barrel vault.

This epigraph seems to date both the ownership (or construction) of the hermitage of Santa Marina and the making of the pictorial cycle itself. The formula FIZO is used and not others ("fecit", "fieri iussi", "mandó hacer", for example). Proudly, the council wished to record its commission, in the same way as private patrons had done for centuries everywhere. As could not be otherwise, the language used was Romance, the language understood by the people, and not Latin, which had been relegated to church and university people. The day of this "inauguration", in the manner of the consecrations, took place on a Sunday. If the inscribed stone of the

parish church reflected in its inscription the day of the dedication, the advocatio, the episcopal intervention, and the year in which it occurred, the hermitage of Santa Marina will proclaim the dedication in a titulus pictus, the day and year of erection and the intervention of the council. The epigraphic content of the old parish stone is emulated (there was a venerable model to draw inspiration from) and, at the same time, the independence of the initiative from both religious and noble powers is pointed out.

The decision to build the hermitage was probably taken at the town council meeting that brought together the people of Villamartín under a sacred oak tree located in the Alto de Concha, near the cave of San Tirso y Bernabé <sup>[17-18]</sup>. The assemblies would later move to this building in the post-medieval period. This popular component, which response to magical or mythical thinking, was very present in 15th-century society and its survival in the area has been documented in recent times. The toponymy near Villamartín bears witnesses, on the other hand, to the fossilized presence of ancestral beliefs that have come to constitute universal *topoi*, and which in this case is linked to the great number of *oquedades* (hollows) that give rise to the very name of the Sotoscueva valley <sup>[19-20]</sup>. The paintings of the hermitage of Santa Marina may bear witness to this worldview.

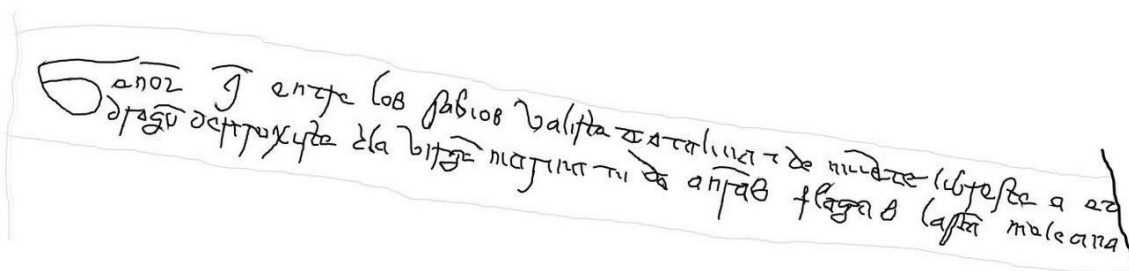
The years before 1456 must have been a bad time for the council of Villamartín. The Velasco lineage was gradually taking control of the territory and its people and was building the aforementioned threatening towers and fortified houses. The neighborhood could not compete constructively with such a powerful lineage but decided to defend itself, in turn, by erecting its building (the hermitage) with humble masonry, which was protected not with ashlar or merlons or scaffolds or machicolations, but iconographically with images of saints who overcame evil because they entrusted themselves to God and an extensive collection of salutary, prophylactic signs, those that also protected their grandparents and their grandparents' grandparents. We reach this conclusion from the dedication of the temple, the pictorial universe represented and the text transcribed on the tile found next to the hermitage.

## 2. A tile with verses from the Poem of Fernán González: The hypothesis of its date

The inscribed tile from Villamartín alludes to Saint Marina and it has already been mentioned how it appeared out of context, but carefully preserved, as it was not discovered in the context of the roof of the hermitage or as part of archaeological fillings. It seems reasonable to think that this tile, which someone took the trouble to preserve, must have once formed part of the roof of the hermitage itself, hence the reference to the saint of the same name <sup>[21]</sup>. Thus, together with the paintings inside and outside the church, a program of prophylactic intent was completed with the protection of the upper part of the church, the roof (**Figure 5**).

On the tile is written pre-cultural and inserted in a succinct pattern a mention of Saint Marina belonging to the so-called “Oración de los fugitivos”, “Ritual de los agonizantes” or “Oración de los castellanos” <sup>[22-23]</sup>:

“Lord, among the wise, you saved Catalina and freed Esther the queen from death. You destroyed the dragon of the virgin Marina, you give to our plagues the holy melecyna.”



**Figure 5.** Overdrawing of the Prayer of the Fugitives in the verses quoting Saint Marina (own elaboration)

This quotation is located in couplet 106 of the PFG, a tetrastic poem dedicated to the three female characters, Catherine, Esther “the queen” and the aforementioned saint (**Figure 6**). The poem was written in the 1250s, although the only verified copy in quaternary via that has come down to us (Biblioteca del Escorial, Ms. B-IV-21) dates from the end of the 15th century, probably made in Burgos around 1470-1480<sup>[24]</sup>. The version of the verses of the tile is very close to that of the Escorial manuscript<sup>[25]</sup>.



**Figure 6.** Inscribed tile, found in the vicinity of the hermitage in 1950 (image provided by the parish priest of Villamartín de Sotoscueva, Don Carmelo Olmedillo Arranz, through José Antonio San Millán Cobo)

The litany is also pronounced by Doña Jimena in the *Poem of Mio Cid* before Rodrigo Díaz left for exile, but the *Ordo commendationis animae* was also prayed for the dying sick, in the face of uncertain futures, or for those who had to leave on a journey (one of the activities subject to dangers of various kinds). For this reason, it is worth remembering that Villamartín tiles were historically baked in distant tile kilns and there was also travel involved. Some Villamartín resident, at a given time, may well have carried a minute with the prayer written by a local scribe or a member of the council, or entrusted to his memory (which seems more likely) the verses that a third party was to write on the fresh tile clay before the tile-maker baked it. As the hermitage was finished in 1456 and its construction must not have begun much earlier, nor is there any evidence to suspect that there was a pre-existing building or that the hermitage moved from another location, the tile could not have been inscribed much earlier than 1456. The prayer had become popular (as evidenced by so many written Romance versions and the tile’s variants on the PFG), and it was certainly being repeated and invoked in the 15th century, at the time of the construction of the church<sup>[26-28]</sup>. The users of the chapel of Santa Marina likely knew that at least one of the pieces of its roof protected it not only from the inclemency of the weather. It was “holy melecyna” against the “dragon”. It is not very adventurous to think of the lineage that could be equated with the beast.

According to the editor of the text of the tile, it belongs palaeographically to a pre-Cortesán Gothic cursive script, comparable to “albalae writing” and chronologically ascribable to the 14th century, although she does not rule out, due to some later features, that it may date back to the 15th century, conclusions accepted

by later historiography <sup>[29]</sup>. The first edition of the text of the tile was dated to the early 14th century which, if confirmed, being before the Scurialense manuscript preserved with the PFG (*ca.* 1480), could indicate that the PFG was originally versified in Alexandrines <sup>[30-32]</sup>. If the tile is from the 14th or early 15th century, as the editors would have it, this piece would not have been fired to cover the hermitage of Santa Marina, as it would predate the building. In my opinion, this is a remote possibility, because it is no coincidence that the fragment chosen to appear on the tile is precisely the one that alludes to Saint Marina (patron saint of the building) in the context in which she defeats the dragon, reinforcing that function of protection which, in the popular imagination, roofs have.

It is difficult for palaeographic criticism to determine dates in very short periods, as would be the case here. On the other hand, and this is more than just a detail when dealing with a text such as the one on the tile, which is more diplomatic than bookish, we must take into account the medium on which it is inscribed, which necessarily alters the palaeographic characteristics (cursive or small strokes) of the pen. Clay (that will have to be fired later, with the necessary changes that will occur on the written surface) is not a conventional writing material, and even less so for someone who appears to know the characteristics of writing on paper/parchment well. Changing the pen for a stylus condition of the stroke. The same text written on each of these media will have to be different, as the less spontaneity and speed of execution will probably lead to a more careful, and probably more archaic, typeface. Similarly, the advertising writing painted on the apse cannot be compared with the humble writing inscribed on the tile, as they are so different in nature, since one (on the tile) was made without expecting it to be read, and the other (painted) falls into the category of advertising writing.

At the end of the verses transcribed on the tile, there is a notarial sign, a surprising detail. In written documentation, it served as an element of validation that ensured the guarantee of authenticity of the document itself, as was regulated in Law LIV of Title XVIII of the third Partida (“the deeds by which lawsuits are proved”), which prescribed the obligatory use of the notarial sign, the outline of which was recorded in a register (**Figure 7**). This rather conventional notarial sign, whose design derives from Solomon’s seal, was also used by various notaries linked to Villamartín, starting with the one who validated the ordinances of the Brotherhood of Santa Marina in 1583, but also by others. A notary to whom the council went possibly wrote the agreed text in a minute (or wrote it on the fresh clay), and validated with his signature the fulfillment of the order. It was certified that he wrote what he had to write, and not something else. This, I believe, is the true meaning of the notarial sign written on the tile, simpler than other explanations, which are very meritorious but excessively convoluted and not very “economical”, that have been made to explain this scatocolo.



**Figure 7.** From left to right, notary seals: on the roof tile, on the Ordinances (ADBu, Book of the brotherhood of Santa Marina, n.d., last folio 1583), and documents of notaries of the area from the 16th century: AHPBu, Protocolos. 2987-5, f. 30v, 2976-2, f. 54r and 2976-6, f. 10r

Although I have not been able to examine the tile directly, only using photographs, it is quite possible, as critics have established, that the tile predates the Scurialense manuscript which contains the oldest known version in poetic form of the PFG, but as this end date is established in the third quarter of the 15th century,



this does not influence the dating of the tile, because in any case it would always be earlier. Another thing is that, if the writing on the tile shows characteristics of the beginning of the 15th century, the workmanship of the text and of the tile does not necessarily have to be contemporary to those features, for the reasons mentioned above. It would not be too much of a stretch to date the writing and firing of this piece to the mid-15th century, the period of construction of the hermitage of Santa Marina, which was roofed before the interior cladding and paintings were undertaken.

We do not know if the hypothesis is correct, or how long the tile remained in place, although we do know of others (dated) that have remained for several centuries on the roof of other historic buildings <sup>[33–34]</sup>. If the hermitage's documentation documents any action to satiety, it is that of the re-roofing of the building, as in all historical constructions, as these continuous maintenance operations are a condition for survival. In some of these re-roofings, the inscribed tile was removed (perhaps already broken at one of its corners, before it was further affected and the text was lost and, with it, its protective quality) and it was decided to keep it, probably when the text was no longer understood, which was the least of it, as the writing here fulfills more of an ex-voto function than a communicative one. All the details of this process, intentions, and vicissitudes are hidden from us, but it was done because the precious material testimony to which writing was inextricably linked was important. It was not just another shingle. It was an exorcism that protected the building and the community.

### 3. A singular invocation, Saint Marina

Santa Marina is an infrequent dedication in Castile, although the cathedral of Burgos dedicated a chapel to this saint in 1346, erected on the south side of the transept by the Bishop García Ruiz de Sotoscueva, whose pontificate lasted from 1327 to 1348, who chose it as his burial place, a sign that such a cult already existed in the diocese and that it would help to strengthen it <sup>[35–40]</sup>. The toponymic surname may indicate an ancient devotion in the Sotoscueven valley to the holy virgin and martyr to whom, also a century later, when her chapel was demolished in the capital of the archdiocese, a hermitage was erected in the village of Villamartín.

The world of confraternities and welfare groups for mutual support, articulated and structured a large part of the social life of the Ancien Régime. In the archdiocese of Burgos, the most famous were those of the Vera Cruz and the Rosary, but some were also dedicated to Santa Marina <sup>[41]</sup>. The parish books of the church of San Esteban in Villamartín include the oldest of the hermitage's preserved books, the *Libro de la cofradía de Santa Marina*, with documentation dating from 1583 to 1921, and another of Santa María, Santa Marina, and Santa Eulalia (1709–1938). The first ten pages of the *Book of the Confraternity of Santa Marina* contain its ordinances, signed on 13 March 1583, with its formal articles (conditions for joining the confraternity, obligations, protocols to be followed in the event of the death of a sister or brother), and begin as follows:

“The rule and ordinance of the confraternity and chapter dedicated to the service of the Most Holy Trinity and the honor and reverence of our lady the Virgin Mary, mother of God and our Lord... of all the saints and saints of the court of heaven and especially of the blessed lady Saint Marina, for whose protection and protection we ordain this rule for the confreres and brothers of this place of Villamartin.”

There is no documentary evidence of the previous existence of this confraternity, but it cannot be ruled out either, so the invocation does not serve as a reliable chronological argument for dating the tile. In any case, its legal constitution was written down at this time, probably in the heat of the Council of Trent, which encouraged the written registration in books of the institutions, real estate, movable goods, accounting, and sacramental entries linked to the parish factory.

#### 4. Permanence and identity, or how the people defend what belongs to the people

The building was decorated at the time of its construction with some surprising mural paintings, halfway between the pictorial and graffiti traditions, present on the interior walls and also on the exterior voussoirs of the facade. It is not possible to speak of the existence of an iconographic program as such, but rather of an extensive anthological collection of prophylactic signs and symbols (to a lesser extent, animals) inside and outside the temple, where, together with immense and spectacular crosses created from Solomon's knots, protective *maniculae*, consecration crosses, we find pentalfas, trisqueles, dance scenes, and painted inscriptions with a monumental vocation, situated in anomalous locations, which cannot be interpreted according to the keys of the history of Art (**Figure 8**)<sup>[42-48]</sup>.



**Figure 8.** Glory arch in 2015, with amazing paintings on its shoulders, before the intervention

Part of the apse inscription was covered in the Baroque period by a small main altarpiece (two other side altarpieces, on either side, did not reach it), of which there is no documentary evidence but there are traces on the wall and some pieces that have been recovered (**Figure 9**). The altarpiece and the ancient decoration and mural inscriptions coexisted and remained visible for more than half a millennium. This is a circumstance that needs to be explained, as it is unusual for a building with continuous religious use not to undergo decorative modifications to its interior plasterwork. Not even when the height of the nave of the church was reduced was the decoration brought into line with contemporary aesthetic canons. On the contrary, the part that did not need to be touched was respected; nor was any attempt made to reproduce what was in the new parts when the western enclosure of the church was altered. It does not seem to have been repainted either, because it was not necessary. The hermitage even had a special period at the beginning of the 19th century, when it replaced the parish church during the time the latter was being “cobbled”, and divine services were held in the hermitage, although its walls were not white-washed either. The significance of what was seen there must have remained to some extent active in popular culture so that no one found its presence intolerable and it remained so until the end of the life of the confraternity in the first decades of the 20th century, and up to the present day.



**Figure 9.** Detail of the paintings on the keystone of the Arch of Glory

I link this historical conservation of the plasterwork to a sense of identity of the users of the Villamartín chapel, its neighborhood, and, as a representative of the confraternity that had administered it since 1583. The same did not happen with many other hermitages in the town, which simply fell into ruin and disappeared. There has been, for centuries, such an attachment to the hermitage with its original decoration that it has not been understood that it had to be modified (**Figure 10**). This conservatism is the expression of a sense of belonging and community that materialized inside the church and was updated generation after generation, a feeling anchored in that part of the most ancestral collective unconscious.



**Figure 10.** Inscription and paintings on the arch of the south doorway, contemporary with those on the interior

The hermitage created a link with the community that has been passed down through the centuries, even if the reason for this relationship was forgotten. The building's liminal spaces were protected: the facade, through paintings; the roof, through tiles, and the interior was filled with prophylactic and apotropaic signs and symbols. Furthermore, its location, practically within the urban perimeter of Villamartín, has probably spared it from any use other than liturgical ones, thus helping to preserve the fragile plasterwork. Likewise, the fact that it was never a "rich" hermitage also contributed to the maintenance of the original decoration. We do know that it is there, with a decoration on the shoulders of the nave and eastern gable that has remained intact over the centuries, as well as on the entrance doorway. This feeling of belonging would be the same one that caused the premeditated conservation of the inscribed roof tile, since it is not in vain that it belonged to the same impulse and, in our opinion, to the same founding moment. The scrupulous historical respect for this original ensemble is shocking.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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