

*Spiral staircase
inside the
Magisterial Cathedral
of Alcalá de Henares*

The “Stairs to the Skies” of Madrid

A cosmic route
through the region, proposed by
Javier Sierra



**Comunidad
de Madrid**



For the winter and the summer,
In Madrid alone are good,
From the cradle to Madrid
And from Madrid to Heaven

Dance of winter and summer

Luis Quiñones de Benavente (1581-1651)

¹⁰ And Jacob went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. ¹¹ And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. ¹² And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.

Genesis 28, 10-12

Space, the sky, the imagination

Few situations test us more than travelling does. If our destination is new and we have no one to guide us, something inside us awakens and forces us to keep our eyes well-open. I hope you're in this situation and these lines have made their way into your hands by this inexplicable magic that is inherent in the commonplace. Or the apparently commonplace.

I'm not just asking you to explore the Region of Madrid in search of monuments or surprising places. What I'm asking you to do is to explore this territory by mixing three infallible ingredients: a space full of History and stories, a sky that has been imitated countless times in art and in legends; and an imagination —yours— that will surely surpass my words.



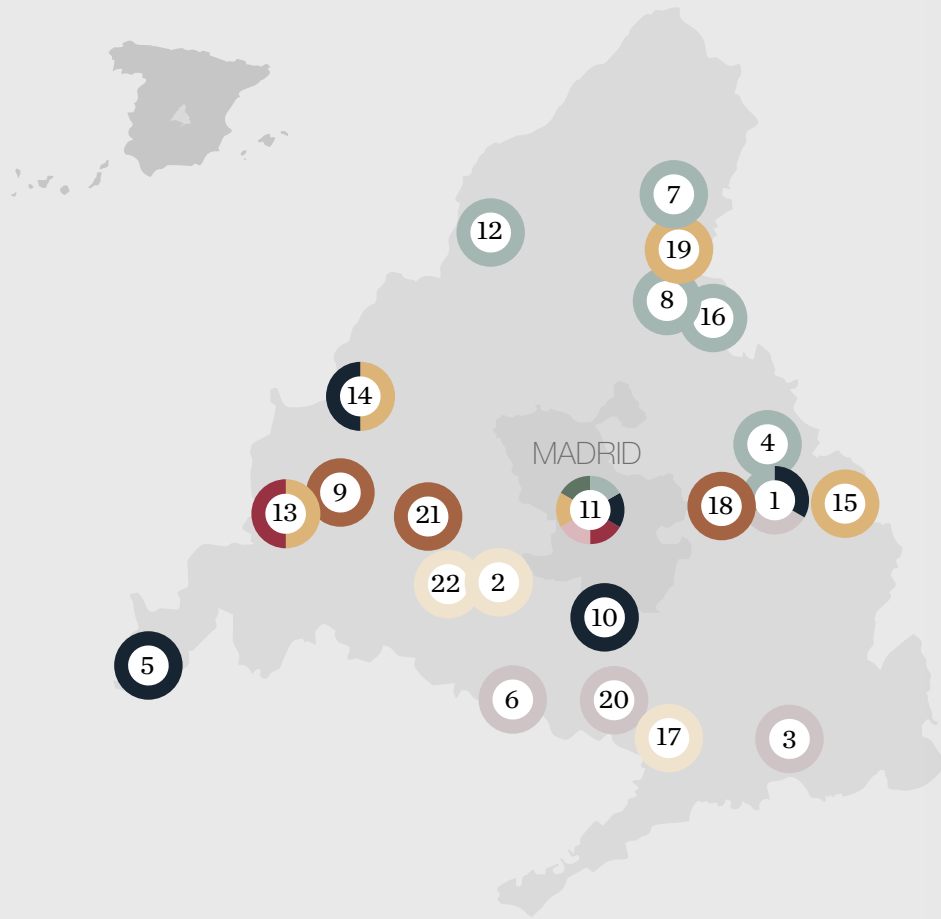
Don't go looking for another guidebook like this. You won't find it. It's so personal that only you can enjoy it as much as it deserves. And when you put it away in your pocket, remember the Arabic proverb that has guided my steps: "He who lives, sees much. He who travels, sees more".

Will you come with me?



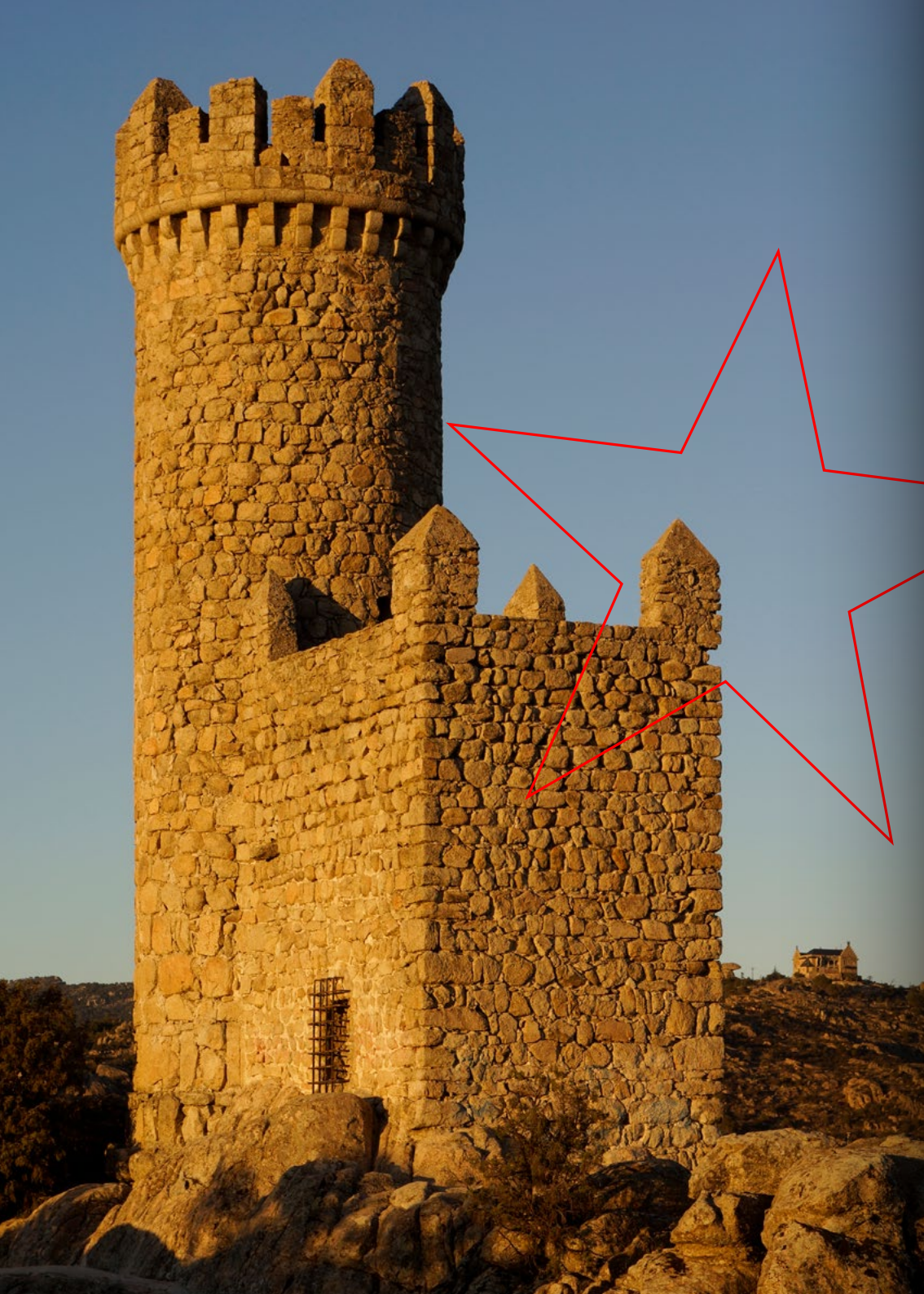
Fabius

A cosmic route through the region proposed by Javier Sierra



- 7 ● A cultural justification for a cosmic route through the lands of Madrid
- 19 ● Roads and stairs to the skies
- 31 ● Rocks from the moon
- 37 ● Other cosmic stones
- 43 ● Cosmic town squares of Madrid/Cosmic landmarks
- 49 ● Astronomical roofs and paintings of Madrid
- 61 ● Some phenomena of Madrid's skies
- 67 ● Madrid, the cosmic capital
- 73 ● The other skies of Madrid

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Alcalá de Henares | 9. Fresnedillas de la Oliva | 17. Titulcia |
| 2. Alcorcón | 10. Getafe | 18. Torrejón de Ardoz |
| 3. Belmonte de Tajo | 11. Madrid | 19. Torrelaguna |
| 4. Camarma de Esteruelas | 12. Rascafría | 20. Valdemoro |
| 5. Cenicientos | 13. Robledo de Chavela | 21. Villanueva de la Cañada |
| 6. Cubas de la Sagra | 14. San Lorenzo de El Escorial | 22. Villaviciosa de Odón |
| 7. El Berrueco | 15. Santorcaz | |
| 8. El Vellón | 16. Talamanca de Jarama | |



A cultural justification for a cosmic route through the lands of Madrid

**Of astronomers, astrologers,
mystics, and visionary artists.**

Ancient historical references refer to our land as an “axis mundi” where the skies and the earth are closely linked.

*The Watchtower
of Torrelodones*



● **A cultural justification for a cosmic route through the lands of Madrid**

1. Alcalá de Henares,
Regional Archaeological Museum and University
2. Camarma de Esteruelas
3. Talamanca de Jarama
4. El Vellón
5. El Berrueco
6. Madrid. Parque de Roma
7. Rascafría.
Monastery of Santa María de El Poular

There's an old aphorism that dates back to when the Greeks were in control of Ancient Egypt that explains Nature and its laws by stating that "as above, so below". That is to say, the world we inhabit is no more than the reflection of a higher, cosmic world that looms over our heads. With this "hermetic idea" (of Hermes Trismegistus) in mind, I propose a stroll through the Region of Madrid where you'll discover these "cosmic clues" that connect the centre of the Iberian peninsula to the sky.

It's no coincidence that the first identifiable inhabitant of Madrid was a Muslim astronomer and astrologer. His name was Abu Maslama and he was known throughout History by the epithet of "El Madrileño." His texts which were written in an age when astronomy and astrology had not yet become separate disciplines, were highly influential not just among mages and occultists all over Europe, but also among architects and town planners.

It is to him and his little-known text, *Picatrix*, and his descendants, that I owe the inspiration for these trails that I now reveal to you.

*Monastery of Santa
María de El Paular,
Rascafría*



**The Madrid of
Abu Maslama
“El Madrileño”
and the Picatrix**

Abu Maslama is perhaps the first historical inhabitant of Madrid that we know of. He was a Muslim scholar and astrologer who founded in 1004 a school of mathematics and astronomy in what was then a small settlement on the banks of the River Manzanares.

Today, he is an important figure of our History. There's even an exoplanet named after him, Majriti, that orbits the star Titawin, 44 light years away from us in the Andromeda constellation.



*Ceramic section
of an 11th-century
caliphate-style door,
Regional Archaeological
Museum*

*Coffered ceiling of the
Paraninfo auditorium of
the University of Alcalá
de Henares*



The presence of a scholar in that remote Madrid isn't as surprising as it seems. Back then, our Region was a border area frequented by Muslim ascetics and mystics who left (few) vestiges of their presence which may still be seen today. Some of them are:

Camarma de Esteruelas

(13th century Mudejar church of St. Peter)

Talamanca del Jarama (9th century Islamic city wall, the coffered ceiling of the Mudejar church of St. John the Baptist)

El Vellón, El Berrueco, Venturada, Torreldones and Arrebatacapas (10th century Islamic watchtowers, the defensive structures built by Abd al-Rahman III).

Coffered ceilings of the Paraninfo auditorium and the Chapel of San Ildefonso in **Alcalá de Henares** (16th century) **Regional Archaeological Museum (MAR)** with 9th-10th century pottery.

There's disagreement regarding the origins of the name "Madrid". On one hand, we have the word Mayrit, which consists of Mayra (mother, parent) followed by the suffix It (place): "the parent place" On the other hand, we have Magerit (fortified). Experts have been unable to agree on which of the two may have been the origins of our name... but I prefer the first.

Seven hills.
Seven stars.

Madrid by the way, has an unmistakable stellar symbology, which invites us to turn our gazes skyward.

Beyond the popular Spanish expression “**From Madrid to heaven**” — which may still be read beneath the footbridge linking Parque Roma and Moratalaz —, the capital and its surroundings are full of starry legends.

The one depicted on the FLAG OF THE REGION is perhaps one of the most bold representations. Its seven stars have been linked to the Big Dipper (the Great Cart, in Spanish) of the Ursa Major constellation, which has led not a few symbologists to draw a connection with the bear (actually a female bear) that shakes the strawberry tree on the city’s coat of arms, and whose origins may be found in the military standards of the battle of Navas de Tolosa (1212). The Ursa Major or the Big Dipper may also be linked to the Carpetani people who inhabited the centre of the peninsula before the Romans, as *carpetum* in Latin specifically means “cart”.

The flag was designed in 1983 by the painter and sculptor, José María Cruz Novillo.

*What if the seven stars in our flag were a reference to the seven rival “schools of astronomy” that existed in ancient Madrid, in Islamic Spain? As Clara Tahoces states in her work *Guía del Madrid mágico (A Guide to Magical Madrid) (1998)*, at the height of the Cordoba caliphate, these lands were home to learned Muslim scholars in subjects ranging from medicine, mathematics, astronomy, to chemistry. One of them was, of course, Abu Maslama “El Madrileño”. That small Madrid dating back to the 9th and 11 centuries constituted a modest landmark in the world of knowledge.*



Monastery of Santa María de El Paular, Rascafría

Monastery of Santa María de El Paular

Much before Cruz Novillo created the emblem of the Region of Madrid, a collection of paintings housed in the **Monastery of Santa María de El Paular (Rascafría)** foreshadowed it. They are a series of canvases depicting the life of St. Bruno of Cologne and the founding of the Carthusian order, on display in the cloister.

These works — a total of 52, which have recently been restored by the Prado Museum and returned to their original location — were painted by Vicente Carducho, a contemporary of Velázquez. They are large paintings measuring 3.45 x 3.15 metres and are fitted into the cloister walls.

One particular painting which holds special interest for us and which the visitor should pay special attention to is the one of St. Hugh asleep with seven stars forming banners of light in the sky above him. Their layout is not that of the flag of the Region but they arise over a landscape that appears to have been inspired by the hills of the Sierra de Guadarrama.

El Paular and its four cosmic clocks

Visitors to the Monastery of Santa María de El Paular should watch out for the four sundials located in the central section of the monastery's cloister. In the upper section, three vertical dials tell the solar hour. The fourth dial is situated above one of the lower doors, that of mid-day. There you can see a strange "moondial" which actually shows the Babylonian and Italic hours, and in ancient times calculated the hours from sunset to sunset (Italic) and from dawn to dawn (Babylonian). This was a practical tool for pilgrims back then in the Sierra de Guadarrama.

The man of Hiroshima

Speaking of his frequent visits to the monastery, the filmmaker Luis Buñuel unleashed an anecdote that still makes the rounds of El Paular today. He suggested that the monastery's cemetery was the final resting place of an American citizen connected to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, perhaps an advisor of the president Truman. Advisor, pilot, crewman, or whoever it may have been, the fact remains that the Benedictines have always denied the presence of any such individual in this area.

If you're a lover of literature, you'll be excited to know that it was here in El Paular that the paper for the first printed edition of the first part of Don Quixote was made. The paper used for the most famous novel of our times came from the mill at Los Batanes which was built before 1396 when it passed into the hands of the Carthusians. In a manner of speaking, this paper was the first "stairway" that took the imagination of millions of readers soaring into the literary sky of Miguel de Cervantes.



*Detail of grooved decoration
Regional Archaeological
Museum*

Cosmic traces of our Pre-History

In the Museum of San Isidro and in the Regional Archaeological Museum of **Alcalá de Henares** are several glasses and fragments of pottery with grooved decorative motifs from the Chalcolithic and Bronze Age. These and other pieces do show that since prehistoric times human beings in the region of Madrid have always looked to the skies. Certain cave paintings of the Region of Madrid also contain these motifs.



Museum of San Isidro
Regional Archaeological Museum

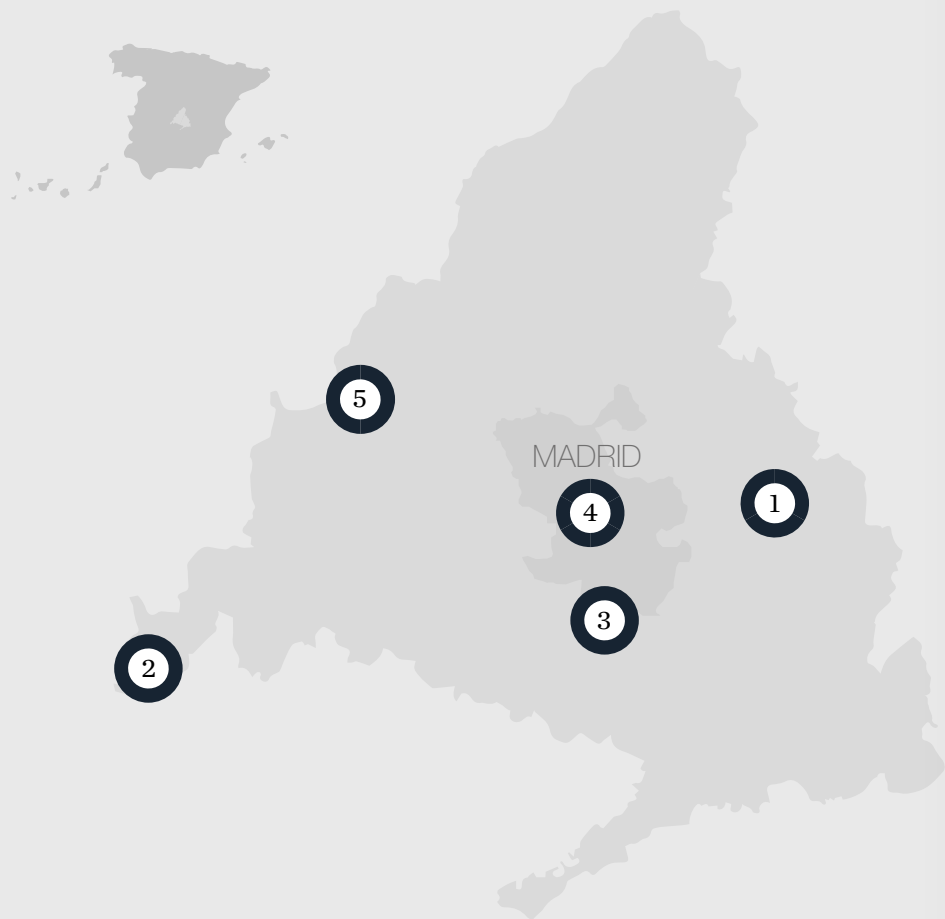


Roads and stairs to the skies

In search of watchtowers that bring us closer to the stars

For thousands of years, a unique and ancestral human instinct has marked trails and landscapes where visitors feel a special connection with heights.

*Chair of Philip II,
San Lorenzo de
El Escorial*



● Roads and stairs to the skies

1. Alcalá de Henares. Magisterial cathedral
2. Cenicientos. Stone with Writing
3. Getafe. Cerro de los Ángeles
4. Madrid. Cerro de Garabitas,
Prado National Museum and Royal Parish
Church of St. James and St. John the Baptist
5. San Lorenzo de El Escorial. Chair of Philip II.

The St. James Way in Madrid

Though mostly unknown, there are two extensive pilgrimage routes from the Region of Madrid to Santiago de Compostela. As is the case with better-known sections of the St. James Way such as the French Road, pilgrims from Madrid used the stars in the night sky and their sense of direction to orient themselves and not lose their way. “Compostela” comes from the Spanish expression “campo de la estrella” or “the field of the star” and it refers not only to the legend that the body of the apostle James was discovered in the 9th century after seeing a star that marked his burial spot, but it also evokes the image of stars as guides for travellers. This clearly establishes a literal as well as a metaphorical “connection” with the sky.

The Route from Alcalá de Henares or the Camino Complutense

One of the sections most commonly used by pilgrims from Madrid to Santiago begins at the Magisterial Cathedral of the Saints Justo and Pastor in Alcalá de Henares (La Magistral) and extends for more than a hundred kilometres through the Region of Madrid until it joins the main route of the so-called Camino de Madrid, in Segovia. Hikers on this trail must pay attention to their surroundings and plan their route before starting. The different itineraries of this Camino de las Estrellas or Route of the Stars may be consulted in different hiking sites such as these:



[Rayyrosa](#)
[Wikiloc](#)



Royal Parish Church of St. James and St. John the Baptist

The Route from Madrid

If you'd like to make your way to Compostela from Madrid, the most conventional route is from the Church of St. James and St. John the Baptist (Calle de Santiago, 24. Near the Royal Palace). On your trip of nearly 700 kilometres, you can stop in several Madrid towns that hold the remains of old Roman roads later used by livestock herders, such as Colmenar Viejo and Cercedilla.

You can find more information at www.turismomadrid.es



The Saint James' Way from Madrid enters Sahagún (León) and from there links up with the so-called French Road. If you're up for it, you'll travel a distance of 684 km to Compostela.

Cerro Garabitas, the “celestial stairway” of Casa de Campo

A popular belief of unknown origin states that the souls of the dead in Madrid head to this promontory (the highest in **Casa de Campo** at 677 metres above sea level, a sort of “Everest” within the capital) to make their ascent to Heaven. A curious piece of information is that during the Spanish Civil War, this unique “stairway to the skies” was where the artillery guns used to shell the capital were located. Nearby is an archaeological site that dates back to Roman times. Today, it is part of a hiking route and holds a forest watchtower.

Chair of Philip II in San Lorenzo de El Escorial

We have a literal “stairway to the skies” here. A great place for watching the sky and the land. Though it was probably a Vettone sacrificial altar, *anemeton*, this site is better known for the legend linking this rock with carved stairs to Philip II. According to a widespread belief, the king who commissioned the monastery of El Escorial would monitor the progress of the building works from this place.

Situated above the forest of La Herrería, its location on a promontory makes it a privileged place for stargazing. As far as I’m aware, there are no archaeo-astronomical studies of this site but a recent hypothesis (1999) links this place to a version of the Roman god Mars, and therefore, there appears to be a certain astronomical connection.

Learn about this study here:



[Archive
Celtiberia](#)



*Cerro de Garabitas,
Madrid*

The “physique” of this type of enclave is easily comprehended: sacrificial altars in mountains or at the tops of buildings or pyramids were meant to hasten the journey of the victims’ souls to the abode of the gods. They are, therefore, actual “stairways to the skies”.

Want to learn more about places of power in the Region of Madrid? Don't miss “Guía del Madrid mágico” (A Guide to Magical Madrid) by Clara Tahoces, “Un Madrid insólito (An Unusual Madrid) by Jesús Callejo, the two-volume “Madrid oculto” (Hidden Madrid) by Marco and Peter Besas, or “Enigmas y misterios de Madrid” (Madrid Enigmas and Mysteries) by Álvaro Martín Pérez.

Sculptures in Cerro de los Ángeles, Getafe



Cerro de los Ángeles, Getafe

The monument of El Cerro de Los Ángeles hides a curious “ascent secret”. Apart from being the geodesic centre of the Iberian Peninsula, it was here, first in 1919 and later in 1965, that a large statue of the Sacred Heart was placed as a sort of “talismanic protection” for the country as, according to popular belief, earth and sky were linked at this “axis mundi”. As a matter of fact, the stairs that lead up to the monolith supporting this famous Christ have stone depictions of important personalities from Spanish History “climbing” the heights..., because the place makes it possible.

Depending on which side of the stairs visitors climb, they may find themselves accompanied by Columbus, Santa Teresa de Jesús, Queen Isabella I of Castille, Hernán Cortes, Pelagius of Asturias, the author of the Book of Revelations, or even Native Americans with their sacred totems.

The mysterious “stone with writing” in Cenicientos

What no one remembers is that the sacred nature of this location dates back to earlier centuries when an image of the Virgin was found at its peak and which, according to legend, disappeared after it was taken to Pinto, only to mysteriously return to its original site. There is documentary evidence that in 1610, this image was taken to **Getafe**, and worshipped as Our Lady of the Angels.

Situated in a rural area of **Cenicientos**, not far from the famous towers of Guisando, is an enormous granite stone with three sculpted figures in the centre. If the latest archaeological interpretations are accurate, then what we have here is an impromptu sanctuary dedicated to the goddess Diana and therefore a sort of altar to connect the devotees’ prayers to their celestial gods. It is perhaps the oldest site of worship in Madrid (datable between the 2nd and the 4th centuries CE) and therefore, the oldest “door to heaven” in our territory.

Read more about this sanctuary in the following article:



[Research article](#)



"Jacob's Dream" (1639) by José Ribera. Prado National Museum

Other "stairways to the skies" in Madrid art



Madrid's considerable artistic heritage holds several examples of art depicting this myth of the "stairs to the skies". We invite you to take a look at some of them.

[Prado National Museum](#)



"Jacob's Ladder" (16th-17th century) by Frans Francken. Prado National Museum

"Jacob's Dream" (1639) by José Ribera.
Prado National Museum

"Jacob's Ladder" (16th-17th century) by Frans Francken.
Prado National Museum Not on display.

"Jacob in the Well" (17th century) from the workshop of Pedro de Orente.

Prado National Museum Currently in the Almodín Municipal Museum (Játiva)



Rocks from the Moon

Discover Madrid's selenite treasure

The Region of Madrid played an essential role in the human exploration of our moon. This is why it holds several minerals brought back from the Moon, an authentic treasure.

*Madrid Deep Space
Communications
Complex - INTA-NASA.
Robledo de Chavela*



● **Rocks from the Moon**

1. Madrid. Naval Museum
2. Robledo de Chavela.
Madrid Deep Space Communi-
cations Complex - INTA-NASA.

What if we were to recollect the relationship between certain celestial bodies and our Region? Beyond the meteorite fragments held in some of our Museums, Madrid can boast –but it doesn’t– of possessing more moon rocks than any other region in the world. Here are two examples:

The moon rock of the Naval Museum

The **Naval Museum** in Madrid holds the “goodwill rock” sent by the US President Richard Nixon after the Apollo missions to the then-President of the Spanish Government, Admiral Carrero Blanco, in 1973. It was mounted on a small setting of walnut wood and was accompanied by a small Spanish flag that had also travelled to the Moon. It contained the following inscription: “This fragment is a piece of rock from the Taurus-Littrow lunar valley. It is given as a symbol of the unity of human effort and carries with it the hopes of the American people for a peaceful world”. It is therefore a rock brought to Earth by the last manned lunar mission: Apollo 17.



Naval Museum

Moon Rock of the Naval Museum, Madrid



Madrid Space Station, NASA. Robledo de Chavela

Robledo de Chavela

The stone is one of 270 that the US Government distributed to countries all over the world after the end of the Apollo programme. The whereabouts of 160 of these stones are unknown today.

In 2011, NASA gave a fragment of lunar rock obtained by the Apollo 15 mission, for exhibition at the **Visitors' Centre of the Space Station of Robledo de Chavela**. It is a large rock fragment weighing nearly 10 kilos, from the edge of the Hadley Rille lunar crater.

Before Carrero Blanco received the Naval Museum's moon rock from Kissinger, Franco received another which has disappeared today. It was handed over to Spain on 11 July 1973 in a ceremony at the Royal Palace of El Pardo and it was one of the rocks brought back by the Apollo 11 mission from its visit to the Sea of Tranquility, in 1969.



Other cosmic stones

The skies of our region have given us more than one mystery.

Although there are no impact craters caused by meteorites in the Region of Madrid that we know of, we do have some cosmic rocks that you can see.

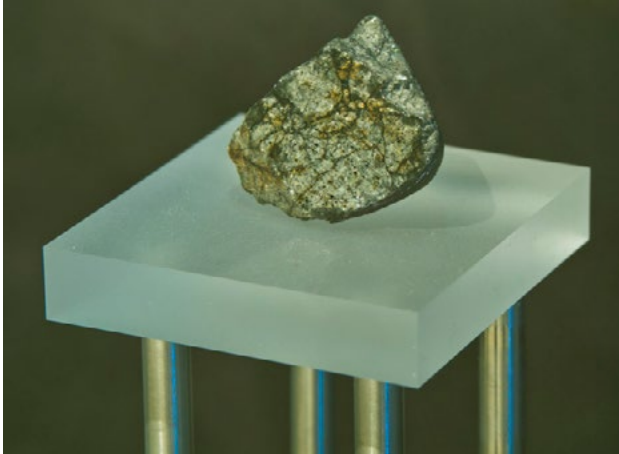
*Geo-Mining
Museum, Madrid*



● Other cosmic stones

1. Madrid. National Museum of Natural Sciences and Geo-Mining Museum

National Museum of Natural Sciences, Madrid



National Museum of Natural Sciences

On 10 February 1896, “a” meteorite was recovered from the centre of Madrid after an explosion that was heard in the entire Region and as well as in Guadalajara, Toledo, Cuenca, Albacete and Ciudad Real. It was an olivine chondrite that is kept in this Museum. It is part of a collection of 21 out of 23 meteorites that have fallen in Spain over the last three centuries and includes 300 samples from the rest of the planet.



[MNCN](#)

Geo-Mining Museum

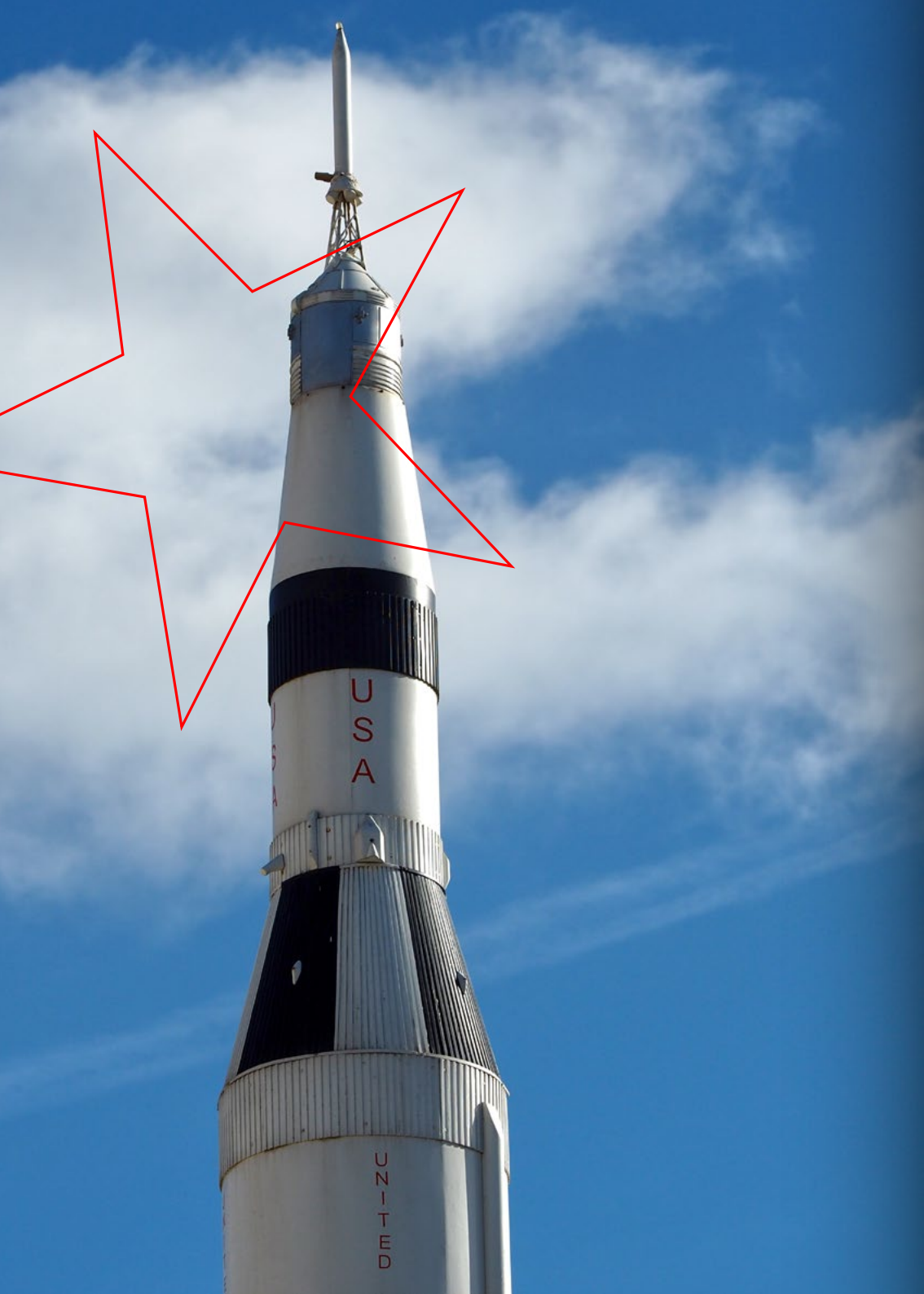
The Geo-Mining Museum houses a large collection of meteorites (none from the City or Region of Madrid). Consult their catalogue here:



[IGME](#)



National Museum of Natural Sciences



Cosmic plazas of Madrid

**The region can boast of an open
channel with the universe.**

Discover the scientific installations that have
contributed to the exploration of the universe.
You'll be surprised by how close they are.

*Lunar Museum,
Fresnedillas
de la Oliva*



● Cosmic plazas of Madrid

- 1. Fresnedillas de la Oliva Lunar Museum
- 2. Torrejón de Ardoz Centre for Astrobiology (CSIC/INTA)
- 3. Villanueva de la Cañada. European Space Agency (ESA)

European Space
Astronomy Centre
(ESAC), Villanueva
de la Cañada



Fresnedillas de la Oliva

The town hosts a small Lunar Museum which is worth a visit. A lot of space race “memorabilia” and mementoes of the years when there were monitoring antennae in this town for NASA missions.

In **1965, in Fresnedillas**, the first photo taken by a human spaceship on the surface of another planet was received. It was Mariner 4 and it sent the photo from Mars.

Its website is



[Lunar Museum of Fresnedillas de la Oliva](#)

This is the first photo of another planet that was taken by human beings... and it was taken from Madrid! It is one of 12 that were taken on 15 July 1965 on Mars, after an eight-month flight. Scientists at Fresnedillas were the first to see it.



Photo of Mar's surface
Archives of Javier Sierra

Villanueva de la Cañada

Beneath its 15th-century fortification lie several radio telescopes of the European Space Agency. It is the European Space Astronomy Centre (ESAC), the old Station for Satellite Tracking (VILSPA). These telescopes study black holes, supernova explosions and other cosmic mysteries and monitor missions such as “Mars Express” or “Rosetta”.

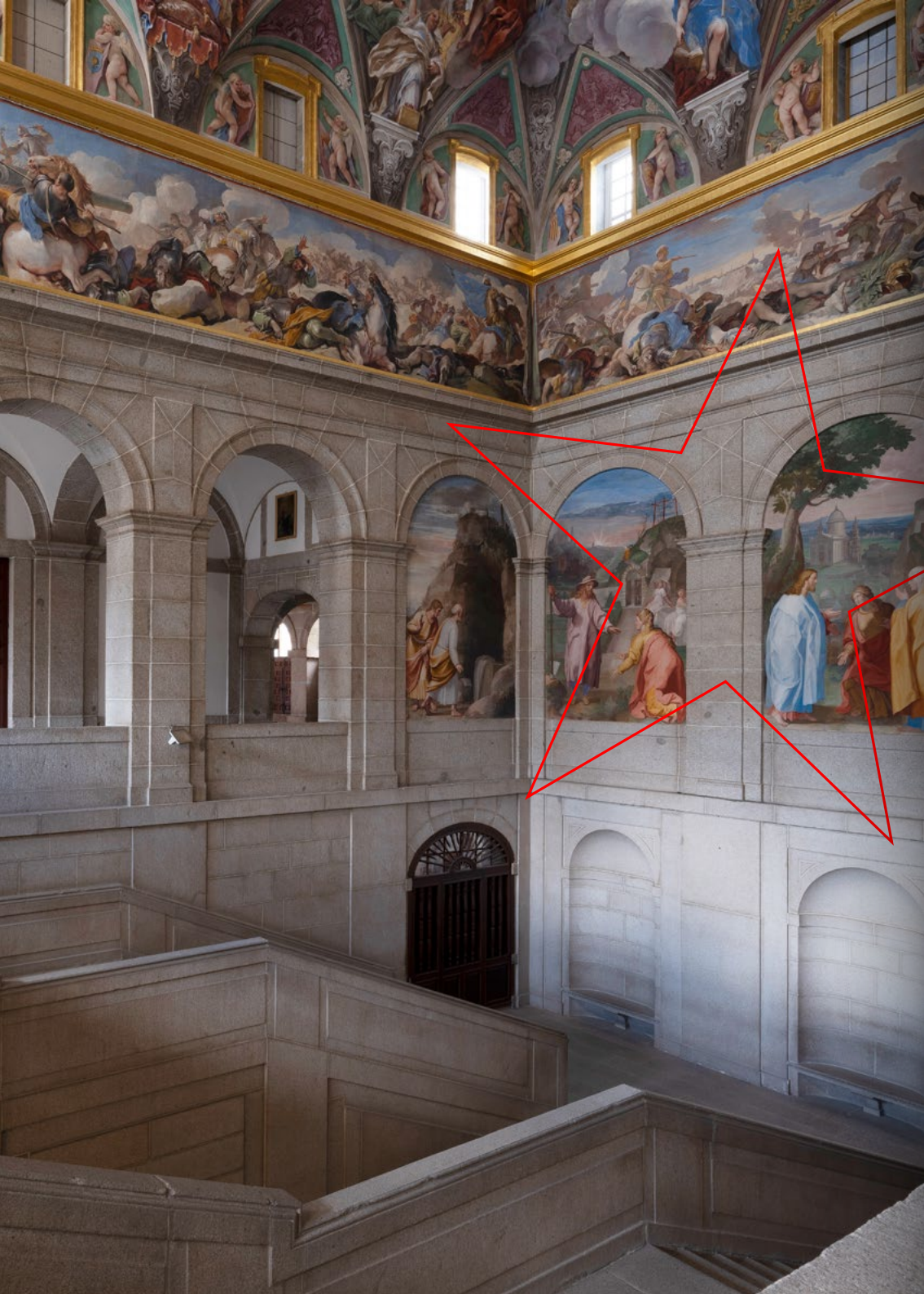
In 2019, it was opened to the public for the first time and visitors could look at the Sun through the telescopes or take virtual photos of themselves in the ISS (International Space Station). Connect with:

✉ comunicacionesac@esa.int

Torrejón de Ardoz

Centre for Astrobiology (CSIC/INTA) It is one of the world's most important centres dedicated to seeking out life beyond our planet. Although not open to the public, they hold open-door sessions twice every year and conduct guided school tours over the course of the academic year. Tours may be arranged by writing to:

✉ divulgacion@cab.inta-csic.es

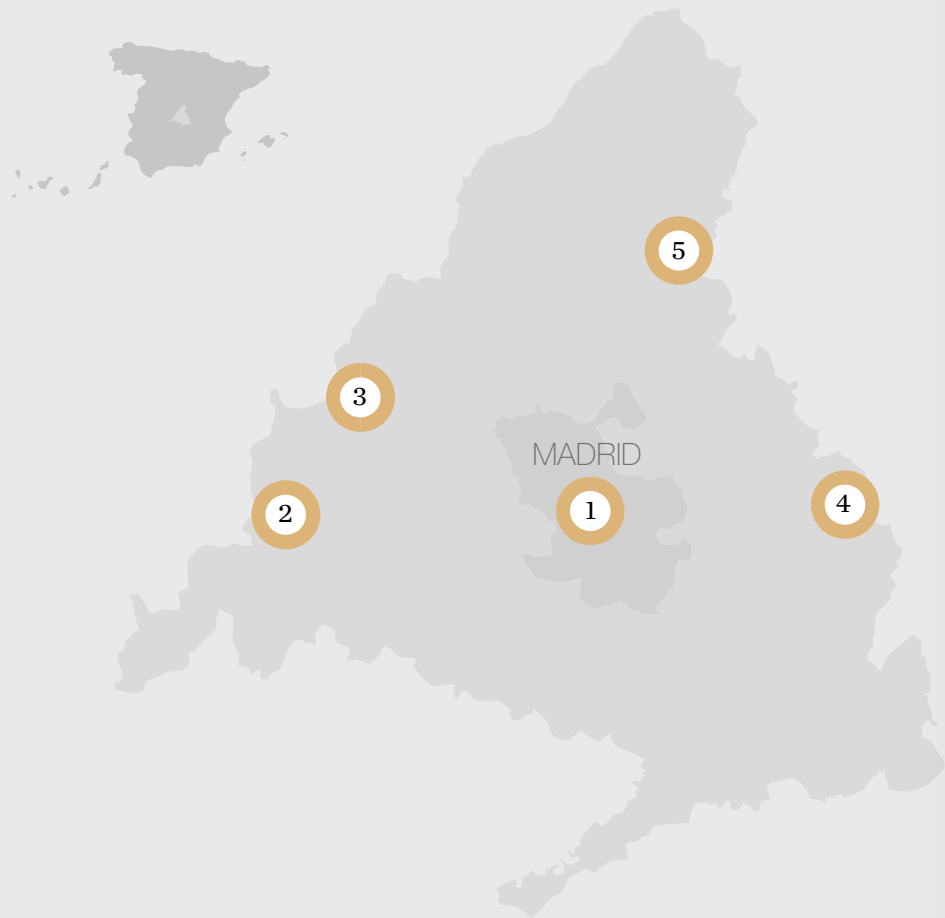


Astronomical roofs and paintings of Madrid

**Be amazed by the stone vaults
that speak to us of the skies.**

Our Region has some of the best and most
astounding cosmic roofs in the world. Discover
their key features and enjoy their starry lessons.

*Royal Monastery
of San Lorenzo
de El Escorial*



● **Astronomical roofs
and paintings of Madrid**

1. Madrid. Madrid Athenaeum,
Casón del Buen Retiro,
Faculty of Physical Sciences, UCM
2. Robledo de Chavela.
Church of the Assumption of Our Lady
3. San Lorenzo de El Escorial.
Royal Monastery
4. Santorcaz. Castle of La Torreemocha
5. Torrelaguna.
Church of Saint Mary Magdalene



Assembly Hall of the Madrid Athenaeum

Madrid Athenaeum

Although the ceiling of its Assembly Hall, designed by Arturo Mérida y Alinari in the late-19th century has been the subject of Masonic and Theosophist interpretations, it also has a clear astronomical reading. The artist's brother José Ramón Mérida was an archaeologist and eventually became the director of the National Archaeological Museum. He might have been the source of some of the mythological and cosmic iconography of this roof. The roof is situated along the Sun's axis (East-West) and the Greek god Helios is the central figure, flanked by Athena and Hermes. The twelve surrounding images are reminiscent of the twelve hours of the day, although they are associated with knowledge disciplines here.



[Madrid Athenaeum](#)

Castle of Torremocha, Santorcaz

This castle is believed to have been built by Templars in the 13th century. Experts such as Rafael Alarcón Herrera -author of a large number of essays on the most-celebrated order of the Middle Ages—state that the roof of their chapter hall had metallic stars that imitated star positions.

Today, a part of this ceiling of the **castle of Torremocha in Santorcaz** may be seen at the Salón de Reyes, in the Laredo Palace, the seat of the Císneros International Centre for Historical Studies in Alcalá de Henares.

Paseo de la Estación, 10
Alcalá de Henares



[Blog on magical Alcalá Town Hall of Santorcaz](#)
[Town Hall of Alcalá](#)

Royal Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial

The astrological library

The library of the Royal Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial is an inexhaustible source of cosmic mysteries. And I don't just mean its books, but also its decorations. The frescoes that embellish it are by Pellegrino Tibaldi and represent, across the hall's length of 54 metres, the seven liberal arts and among them, astrology (*quadrivium*). The frieze that runs all around the hall contains highly significant scenes in this regard. In one scene we see the king Hezekiah accompanied by the prophet Isaiah who shows him a sundial where the shadow has retreated by ten degrees. This is the well-known miracle of the "Sun's retreat" (Kings 2, 20). Another scene depicts Dionysius the Areopagite and Apollophanes observing the solar eclipse that darkened the crucifixion of Christ, also described in the Bible.



[Royal Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial](#)

Astrology is explicitly represented as a woman holding a compass and a celestial sphere. A label specifies who she is, leaving no room for doubt.

Look at the figure of Alfonso X the Wise on the right-hand side of the seventh lunette. His inclusion in a series of paintings dedicated to astrology is a reference to this monarch's scientific interests through the books *Los libros del Saber de Astronomía* (*Books on the Knowledge of Astronomy*) and *Las Tablas Alfonsíes* (*The Alphonsine Tables*), that are kept in this library. You can see the king with a half-opened book containing a celestial quadrant. The table at the base depicts constellations such as Ursa Minor and Ursa Major, and the North Star.

As if this wasn't enough, away from the books and paintings in the centre of Library is a beautiful armillary sphere, crafted by Antonio Santucci as an impossible map of the skies of Madrid.

Remember that the Library of the Royal Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial holds several royal horoscopes. They belonged to Philip II. The "Planet King" liked to view these cosmic paintings that displayed key traits of his character and his destiny. The most famous one is the "Prognosticon" by Matías Haco Sumbergense, although there are others such as the one by Francesco Junctino, no less significant, which reveals the importance given to the stars in this place and in these times.

The celestial meridian of the Dining Hall

After the Library, if you explore the rest of the monastery, pay attention to the floor of the dining hall. One of its corners has a line crossed with astrological signs. It extends unnoticed over the clay flagstones today, but it was once used to tell the time of day and the months of the year. A hole in the wall, now sealed, allowed a ray of light to precisely indicate the "cosmic hour".

Library of the Royal Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial



Between the Hall of the Ambassadors and the Promenade Hall

Two beautiful marquetry doors by Bartolomé Weisshaupt (16th century) and gifted by the Emperor Maximilian II to Philip II, hold another curious "cosmic clue": above the lintel several polyhedric objects and different books are carved on either side of an armillary sphere similar to the one in the Library. They remind you of the hidden stellar nature of this space.

Casón del Buen Retiro, Madrid

It is one of the most astounding astrological and mythological ceilings that I know of. In 1697, Luca Giordano painted the ceiling vault of this palace, which now houses the Prado Museum's Library, to extol the Spanish monarchy. What intrigues me the most is one of its corners, alongside the image of the Muse Urania. There you can see a cherub holding an open book with a horoscope or star chart, but we don't know who it refers to. Could it be the "cosmic portrait" of Charles II? Of the artist? Of Spain, perhaps? Nobody knows... yet.



Visits to the Casón del Buen Retiro,

Faculty of Physical Sciences, Complutense University of Madrid

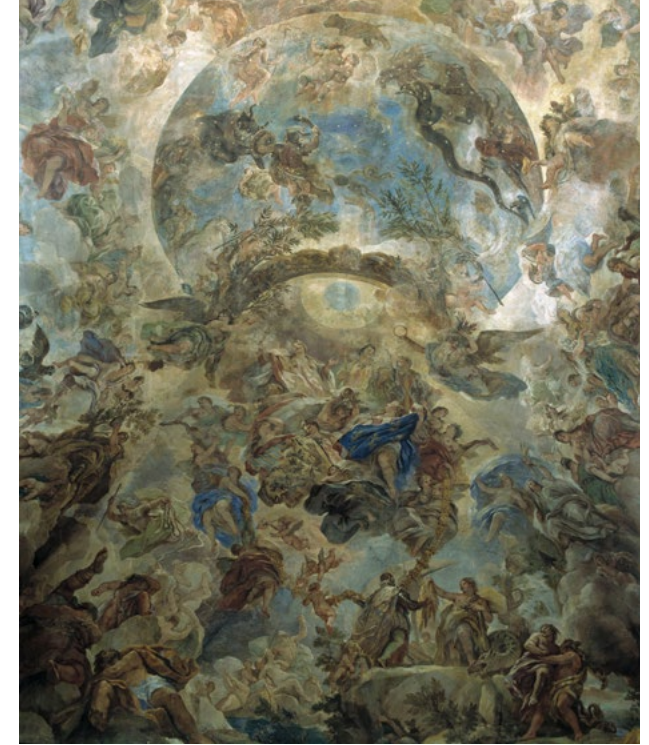
The Faculty of Physical Sciences of the Complutense University of Madrid houses several paintings that are the property of the Prado National Museum and were painted by Francesco Bassano in the 16th century. This Venetian painter created a series of large paintings (1.5 m high x 2.5 m long) dedicated to the months of the year and the signs of the zodiac. They constitute one of Madrid's "hidden picture treasures". The ones that are displayed in the faculty are Gemini, Scorpio, Libra and Leo, and their corresponding agricultural tasks. The zodiacal sign appears precisely in the centre of the sky in each painting.

Other paintings in this series are housed in the Royal Academy of Jurisprudence and Legislation (Capricorn and Scorpio) and in the Madrid Royal Economic Society of Friends of the Nation (Taurus).



Detail of the vault painted by Luca Giordano

Vault painted by Luca Giordano in the Casón del Buen Retiro. Madrid



Parish Church of Saint Mary Magdalene, Torrelaguna

In the high altarpiece of the chapel of San Gregorio o de los Vélez, you can see two fabulous depictions of the Sun and the Moon in the upper left and right sides of the composition. The latter is depicted as passing in front of the Sun, creating a partial eclipse. The authorship of the work is unknown, but it is generally attributed to a follower of Juan de Borgoña (16th century). This church is a magnificent example of Late Gothic architecture and is a Site of Cultural Interest.

It is also the final resting place of the poet Juan de Mena, of Córdoba, who fell down from his donkey in Madrid on his travels through Spain and died and was buried here.

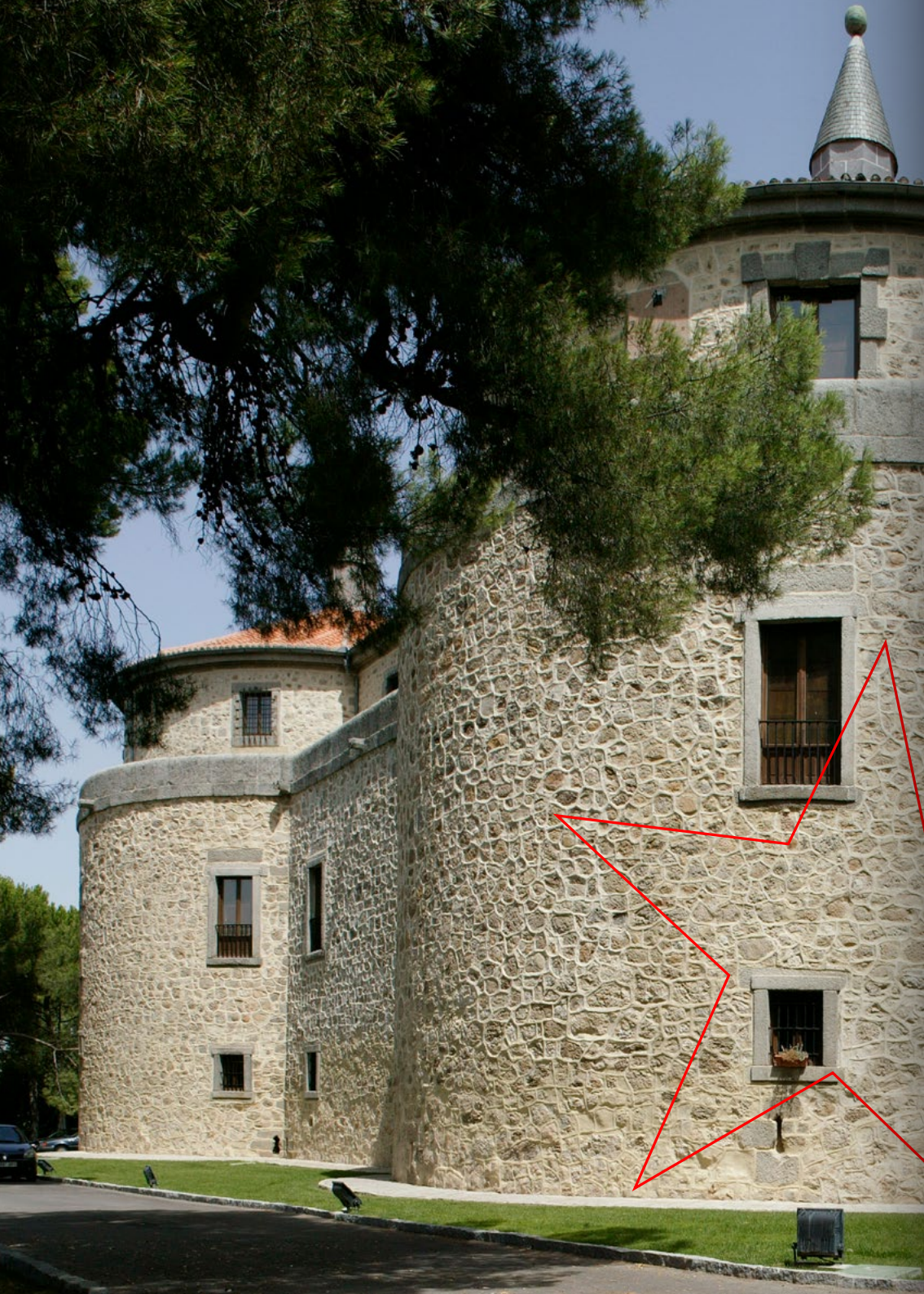


*Church of the
Assumption of Our Lady,
Robledo de Chavela*

Robledo de Chavela

During the recent restoration of the ceiling of the church of **Robledo** (the sky of this temple), a collection of painted dragons was revealed in the vault, the largest in all Spain.

They consist of 80 dragons of various shapes and colours, circa 1500. Perhaps they represent how dragons protect the Christians living below the skies (the roofs).

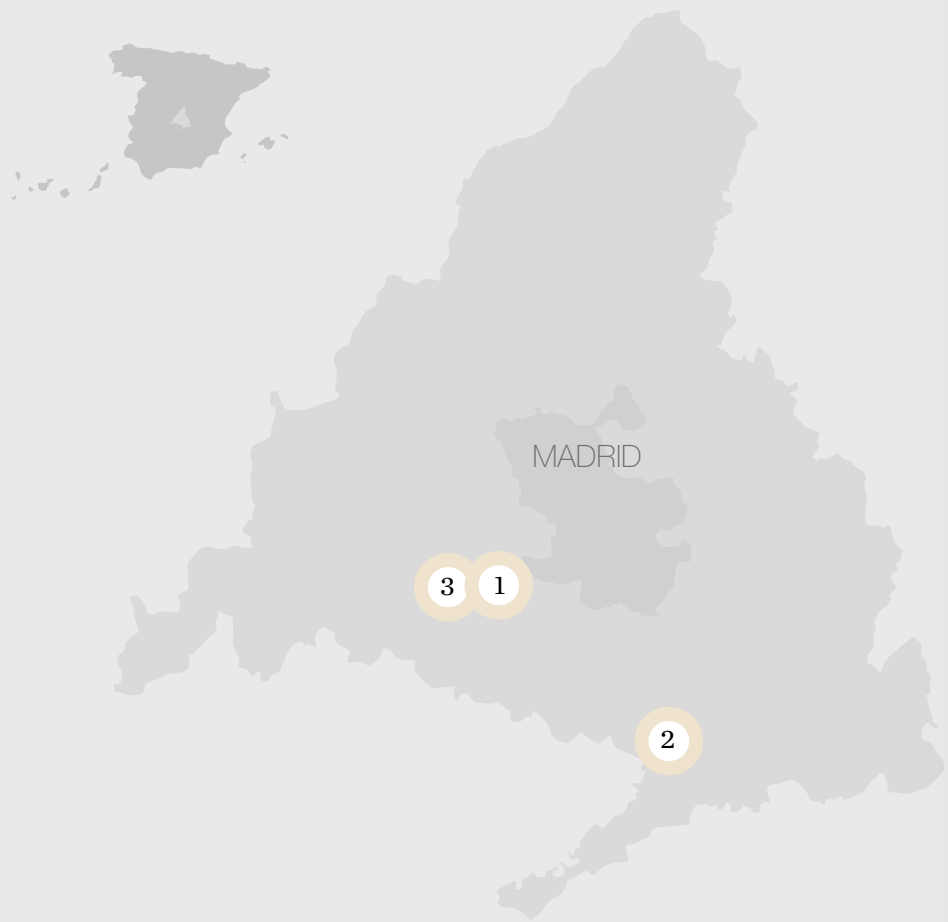


Some phenomena of Madrid's skies

**Our chronicles are full of
mysterious celestial visions.**

There was a time when all that crossed our
skies and could not be explained, was
attributed to a divine sign. An omen. Here, we
look at some of them.

*Historical Archive
of the Air Force
in the castle of
Villaviciosa de Odón*



● **Some phenomena
of Madrid's skies**

1. Alcorcón. The castles of San José de Valderas.
2. Titulcia
3. Villaviciosa de Odón. Historical Archive of the Air Force

Villaviciosa de Odón

On 16 May 1851, a strange luminous cross appeared in the sky above **Villaviciosa de Odón**. It was seen by nearly all the inhabitants. It was enormous, with defined borders and emitted several bright flashes. It lasted only a few minutes, but that was sufficient to record it as a celestial event. Today, some experts believe it to have been a “moon halo”, a rare but not unsurprising weather phenomenon, given that the Moon was behind that cross.

If you visit Villaviciosa, you should know that its 15th century castle holds the Historical Archive of the Air Force (Avenida Madrid, 1). After they were declassified in 1992, the original Spanish military documents related to UFO sightings have been stored there. Digital copies of these records, which include mentions of strange sightings from 1968 until now, may be consulted on the website of the Ministry of Defence.



[Ministry of Defence](#)

Castles of San José de Valderas, Alcorcón

1 June 1967. There are several photos of a flying saucer with the castles in the background, that were circulated all over the world and constitute a “classic” for fans of these mysteries. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be anything “extraterrestrial” about them as they were forgeries made to deceive a group of UFO watchers who had been meeting in those days in the Café Lyon in Madrid. Today it is an ideal place to remember that story...



Reproduction of the supposed UFO at the castle of San José de Valderas



Main façade of the Castle of San José de Valderas

Titulcia

Its famous “Cave of the Moon” –an underground structure of unknown origin that may be accessed by visitors—appears to have been inspired by the cardinal Cisneros' strange vision of crosses in the town's skies on **28 January 1509**. The cardinal was on his way to Orán from Alcalá de Henares when he had this vision and he ordered a shrine dedicated to the Virgin of Solitude to be erected there. The shrine has disappeared today and it may have been situated in the place under which lies the famous cave.

A painting depicting Cisneros' vision “The Cardinal Cisneros at the Taking of Orán” (Anonymous, 1690-1710) is in the possession of the Complutense University of Madrid. A copy of the painting is on display at the restaurant *Mesón de la Cueva de la Luna*, at the entrance to the cave in **Titulcia**.

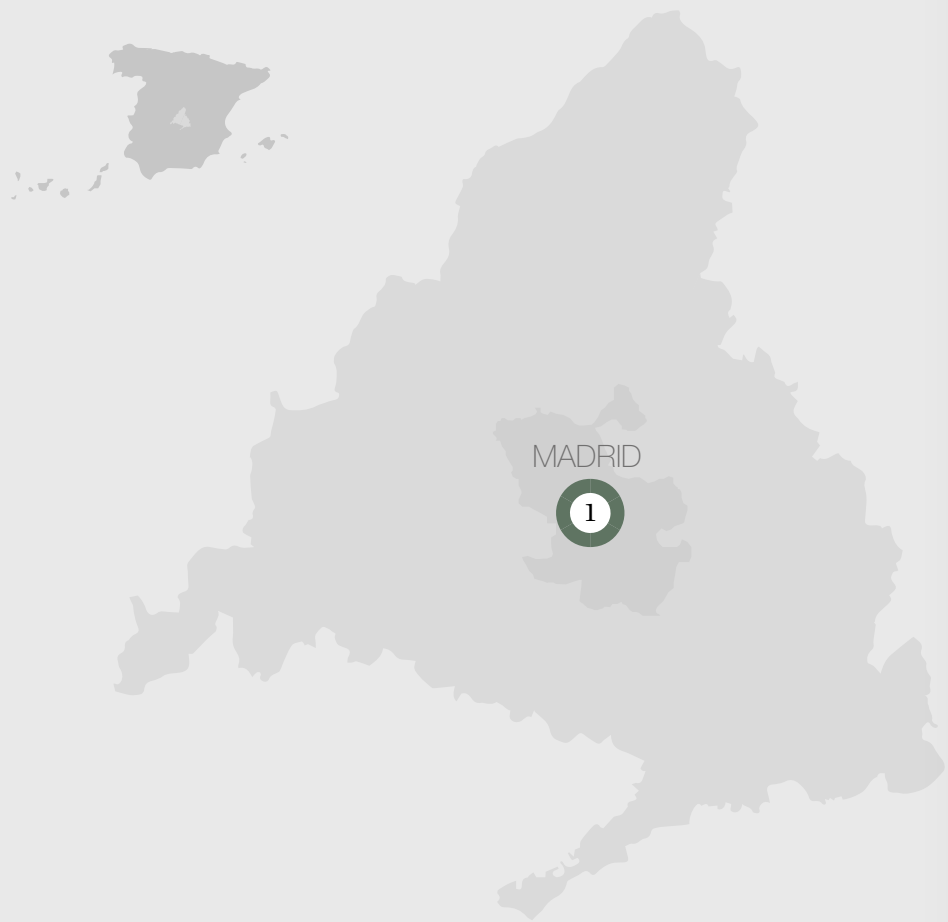


Madrid, cosmic capital

The names of some of Madrid's streets hide stories of stars.

And if we were to ask the plaques that name our city's streets about the origins of some of these names? Several of them hide tales connecting them to the sky and its secrets.

*Puerta del Sol,
Madrid*



● Madrid, the cosmic capital

1. Madrid. Calle de la Estrella
Madrid. Calle Perseo
Madrid. Calle de la Luna
Madrid. Puerta del Sol
Madrid. Calle del Reloj
Madrid. Avenida de la Institución Libre
de Enseñanza

Calle de la Estrella

The Street of the Star, a small street in the neighbourhood of Centro appears in Pedro Teixeira's map of 1656. It is thought that its name comes from the hill on which in 1445, the astrologers of that age met to study the movement of a long-lasting comet in the sky. They observed a comet that was taken to be an ill-omen heralding the plague that year. This promontory became known as the "hill of the star".

Barrio de la Estrella, Retiro

Construction began on the neighbourhood of La Estrella (The Star) in the 1950's, under the insurance company Seguros La Estrella. This is where we find the streets Perseo (Perseus), Piscis (Pisces) and Estrella Polar (Pole Star).

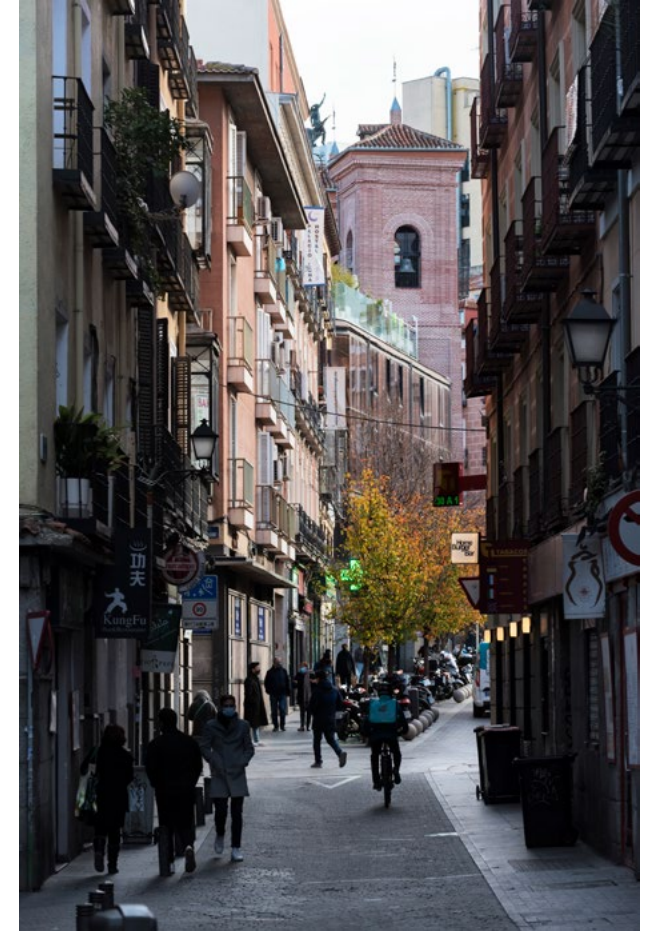
Calle de la Luna

The Street of the Moon is located near the Calle de la Estrella (or Street of the Star). It is said that a duel was fought on a moonlit night between Don Álvaro de Córdoba and Francisco Crispi Daura during the rule of the Catholic Kings.

Puerta del Sol

Its name comes from an ancient door decorated with a Sun that looked to the East, where the sun rises.

A magnificent reference work for all who wish to learn more about the origins of the capital's streets – as well as their traditions, legends, architecture and culture – is the "Enciclopedia de Madrid" (Encyclopaedia of Madrid) by Pedro Montoliú Camps.



Plaque of Calle del Reloj, Madrid

Calle de la Luna, Madrid

Calle del Reloj

The Street of the Clock once held a sundial at the site of Number 14, now depicted on the street plaque.

Avenida de la Institución Libre de Enseñanza

It hosts a "solar monolith" which was inaugurated in 2018 and represents the exploration of the Solar System. It was inaugurated by Pedro Duque, first an astronaut and subsequently Minister of Science, who grew up in this neighbourhood, between San Blas and Canillejas.



The other skies of Madrid

The sky as a place of veneration is also “visible” from Madrid

The story of the Region of Madrid is not removed from anecdotes of surprising appearances, interpreted by reasons of faith. This is the other sky that we are interested in learning about.

*San Lorenzo
de El Escorial*



● The other skies of Madrid

1. Alcalá de Henares. Shrine of Our Lady of the Valley
2. Belmonte de Tajo
3. Cubas de la Sagra
4. Valdemoro. Parish of the Assumption of Our Lady

In 1997, the folklorist, Jesús Callejo, and I published a sort of "Michelin Guide" to the mysteries of the Iberian peninsula, which we named La España extraña or Strange Spain. In this essay, we speak at length of not just celestial enigmas but also their religious sources. A more metaphorical source perhaps, but one that, paradoxically, has left a more physical, discernible mark on our times.

With this spirit, I revive some places linked to "celestial appearances" in the Region of Madrid, briefly recovering their history... and the mark they left behind.

The Virgin of Alcalá de Henares

1184. A labourer from Alcalá was rescued from the river by a female figure. Months later, an alabaster figure of the Virgin with the baby Jesus appeared at the site of the rescue. They tried to take it to another location but the image would always disappear and reappear at its original position next to the river. Today this "restless" image is housed in the **Shrine of Our Lady of the Valley**.

The forgotten "Lourdes" of Cubas de la Sagra

1449. For seventeen days in March, the Virgin appeared to a child in **Cubas de la Sagra**, who was called Inés Martínez. The visions of a "small child dressed in gold" –this was how the Virgin was described— took place in the outskirts of the village, where today lies the Convent of Santa Juana. This case was named the "unknown Lourdes of Madrid". The memory of these events is kept in the aforementioned convent which, however, isn't consecrated to Inés but to Santa Juana, a nun who, many years later, would swear to having seen the Virgin once again in that place. There's even a statue at the door commemorating this event.



Sculpture representing the appearance of the Virgin in Cubas de la Sagra

You can also visit the Shrine of the Virgin of the Moon in Cubas de la Sagra, a sister church to another with the same name in the province of Córdoba. What's interesting is that a prayer card of one of these Virgins, that of Pozoblanco (Córdoba), accompanied the astronauts of the *Apollo 11* mission --Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins-- on their historic moon landing in 1969. As proof, a letter of gratitude from NASA is stored in these village in Córdoba.



Detail of "Appearance of the Virgin to Saint Julian, bishop of Cuenca" in Valdemoro

The appearance that was the best painted by Goya in Valdemoro

"Appearance of the Virgin to Saint Julian, bishop of Cuenca" is the technical title of a large painting (262 x 107 cm.) by Goya hung in the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption in Valdemoro. The way in which the painter depicts the supernatural aspect of the Virgin, without feet and elevated over a mist, draws our attention. The church is like a small museum which also contains works by Claudio Coello and Bayeu.

An astronaut in the roundabout

Also of a "celestial" –in this case, "cosmic"– nature is the 4-metre high statue dedicated to an astronaut, created by the Galician sculptor Francisco Leiro Lois (2001), which may be seen at the roundabout Glorieta del Univer-

so, in the neighbourhood of El Restón, without exiting Valdemoro. The statue, built of carbon, appears to be walking on the surface of the moon. In some ways, it has become a modern emblem of the town.

Church of Our Lady of the Star, Belmonte de Tajo

This curious dedication to the Virgin is reflected inside this charming 16th-century church, which houses a modern painting of the Virgin with a crown and sceptre of stars, on an 18th-century altarpiece fragment.

About the author

Javier Sierra

(1971)



Follow his work on these websites, among others:

www.JavierSierra.com
www.LasPuertasTemplarias.com
www.LaCenaSecreta.com
www.LaRutaProhibida.com
www.LaDamaAzul.com
www.ElAngelPerdido.com

And on social networks:
Twitter: @javier__sierra
Facebook: javiersierra.fan
Instagram: @javiersierracom

Writer based in Madrid since 1987.

Awarded the Premio Planeta for best novel for his work titled *El fuego invisible* (*The Invisible Fire*) (2017). His most international work, *La cena secreta* (*The Secret Supper*), has been published in more than 40 countries, making him the first Spanish author -and until now the only one- to make it to the *top ten* list of *.bestsellers* in the United States.

He has also published four essays on historical and scientific enigmas, in addition to other bestselling novels such as *La Dama Azul* (*The Lady in Blue*), *Las puertas templarias* (*The Templar Doors*), *El ángel perdido* (*The Lost Angel*), *El maestro del Prado* (*The Master of the Prado*) and *La pirámide inmortal* (*The Immortal Pyramid*). In Spain, Javier Sierra is well-known for his frequent media appearances. He directed and presented for Telemadrid the programme *El otro lado de la realidad* (*The Other Side of Reality*) (2004-2005). Although his latest audiovisual production is the series *Otros Mundos* (*Other Worlds*) for Movistar+, he began his career at the age of twelve in his birthplace, Teruel. After graduating in Journalism from the Complutense University of Madrid he developed his professional career, and founded monthly magazines such as *Año Cero* (*Zero Year*) (1990) or editing others such as *Más Allá* (*Beyond*) (1998-2005).

He has been awarded the honorary title of Hijo Predilecto of Teruel and the Cruz de San Jorge or St. George's Cross, (the highest distinction awarded in this territory). The public library of his city bears his name and holds copies of all his works.

Currently he lives in Madrid, is married, and has two children.



Tourism of the Region of Madrid

www.turismomadrid.es

Photos

Photo archive of the General Directorate for Tourism of the Autonomous Region of Madrid: 55

© Amador Toril: 18, 23, 25, 71, 77

© ASF Image: 6, 10, 15

© Belén Martínez Imaz: cover, 72

© Carlos León: 60

© David Ruiz Polo: 66

© David Serrano: 30, 35, 41, 42, 46, 65

© Juan Baraja: 48

Photo archive of the General Directorate of Cultural Heritage of the Autonomous Region of Madrid:

© Juan Carlos Martín: 82

© Miguel Ángel Camón: 62

Photo archive of the Town Hall of Alcalá de Henares: 13

Photo archive of Javier Sierra/Antonio Ribera: 26, 46, 57, 65, 81

Photo archive of the Regional Archaeological Museum of the Autonomous Region of Madrid: 12, 17

Photo archive of the National Museum of Natural Sciences: 40

Photo archive of the Geo-Mining Museum: 36

Photo archive of the Naval Museum: 34

Photo archive of the Prado National Museum: 28, 29

Photo archive of the Madrid Athenaeum 52

Image database

© GTRESONLINE: 57

© REVISTA QUO (Sofía Moro): 81

Year of publication 2021



**Comunidad
de Madrid**

