Books of Spells or Sacred Revelations?

The Torre Turpiana relics

After nightfall, four men are walking with great stealth through the Moorish silk bazaar in Granada towards the gate of Jelices, from which point they can observe the construction works for the new cathedral. No one works in the silk markets at night, and all is quiet except for the voices of the cathedral guards. The old minaret of the mosque rises before them, no longer needed since the magnificent new bell tower has been built. It is half-way through demolition, stone by stone, from the top downwards so that its old ashlars can be reused, and to avoid damaging the flooring of the cathedral. The men scrutinize the tower carefully, attentive to the conversations and laughter drifting towards them from the guards in the central part of the building. One of the four is holding a casket hidden under his cloak, and, while his three companions create a disturbance to distract the guards at the other end of the cathedral, the man with the casket enters the tower through the old minaret and climbs a narrow inner staircase, finally emerging at the top, from where he can see the Alhambra and all of the city lying beneath him in the darkness. ‘Allah is great!’ he whispers, searching hurriedly in hope of finding a stone loosened by the demolition. He is in luck, and hurriedly removes the stone and mortar, setting the casket in the empty hollow before replacing the stone carefully and descending the stairs to retrace his steps through the silk bazaar and calm the feigned dispute his friends are embroiled in.

This tense, exciting episode is taken from Part 3, chapter 52 of the contemporary Spanish novelist Ildefonso Falcones’ recent bestseller, La mano de Fátima [The Hand of Fatima].1 His fictional protagonist's involvement in the Torre Turpiana affair which took place in Granada in 1588.
is one of the central plot strands of this 950-page novel, and the scene I have paraphrased above is cleverly constructed and entirely plausible. It is, alas, probably as close as we may get to reconstructing the manner in which the relics found their way into the ancient tower, in the absence of any new documentary evidence. But life is at times as strange as fiction, and the fact is that on 19 March 1588 a lead casket covered in bitumen inside and out was discovered amid the rubble of the demolished minaret. Inside the casket, covered in a piece of protective cloth, were the panel bearing the image of the Virgin Mary, a piece of linen which appeared to be half of another larger square of cloth, cut from corner to corner, the small bone, the blue-black sand and the rolled parchment referred to in Chapter 1. The presence of the first item, the picture of the Virgin, is only known from the accounts given at the subsequent investigative proceedings; it disappeared mysteriously soon after it was discovered, presumably stolen by some opportunist. But the bone, the piece of cloth and the sand did not seem so immediately interesting. It was the parchment which caught the attention of the people of Granada, and, in the light of what it said, the other three items suddenly became very interesting indeed!

However, it was some time before the contents of the parchment were able to be revealed, and this was preceded by a series of significant actions taken by the Archbishop of Granada, don Juan Méndez de Salvatierra. When he first heard about the discovery, he immediately informed Pope Sixtus V and the Spanish King Philip II, requesting permission to conduct authentification proceedings according to Tridentine rules. He also convened the meeting of a Great Council or Grand Junta, one of whose members was the celebrated mystical poet Saint John of the Cross [San Juan de la Cruz], the Prior of the Convent of the Martyrs at that time, to seek information about the possible authenticity of the finds. The Council decided unanimously in favour of the antiquity of the contents of the casket. Just five days later the President of Granada, Fernando Niño de Guevara, wrote to the King's secretary, Mateo Vázquez Lecca, recommending that part of the relics should be placed in El Escorial, Philip II's monastery and palace near Madrid. He also sent him two copies of the parchment, the first to leave the confines of Granada. This all seems to have been jumping the gun, since no one had a clear idea of what the text of the parchment contained at that stage. The cathedral chapter took the decision to commission three translators to decipher the Arabic text on the document. The first translator was Luis Fajardo, former professor of Arabic at the University of Salamanca, who initially claimed he did not have the skill to carry