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The episcopal buildings of Empúries and the Late Antique nucleus of Santa Margarida. First reflections following the discovery of a hoard of coins

Recent archaeological research carried out in the Santa Margarida d'Empúries area has led to important developments concerning Late Antique Empúries. As a result, the historical account can be completely renewed and reinterpreted, and the discoveries would seem to confirm that this area housed the episcopal buildings of Empúries (Castanyer *et al.* 2021; Castanyer *et al.* 2019)¹.

The site, located a few hundred metres north of the Sant Martí d'Empúries turning on the road joining Orriols and L'Escala (fig. 1), was named after the remains of an ancient chapel dedicated to Santa Margarida. The church, whose nave and apse walls still remain, was a suffragan of the parish of Sant Martí d'Empúries and was open for worship until the end of the 18th century.

The earliest reports of archaeological remains in the area were a number of accidental finds, such as the front of a sarcophagus with a Christogram, and the alpha and omega signs (Pella, Forgas 1883, p. 274, and plan between pp. 202 and 203). These led, in 1957, to a first archaeological intervention inside the church, which discovered a square-based structure in the middle of the nave that has been interpreted as a baptistery (Palol 1967, pp. 154-155; Almagro, Palol 1962, pp. 37-38).

These remains in the subsoil of the church appear to have been part of a group of buildings that stretched as far as the land to the west of the current road that leads to Sant Martí; it is also clear that, in some periods, they extended as

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¹ This project, titled "Les àrees portuàries de l'antiga Empúries" (2018-2021) (CLT009/18/0089), enabled two successive digs to take place in 2020 and 2021. This project, now with the title "*Emporion, Emporiae*, Empúries: diacronia de les seves àrees portuàries" (2022-2025), is currently being renewed. It aims to carry out four further interventions in the Santa Margarida area. The excavations have also benefitted from the support of the project "*Ager Mutabilis II: la explotación del territorio de Emporiae y Gerunda durante el Bajo Imperio y la tardoantigüedad*" (2020-2023) (PID2019-105759GB-I00) and the L'Escala town council.

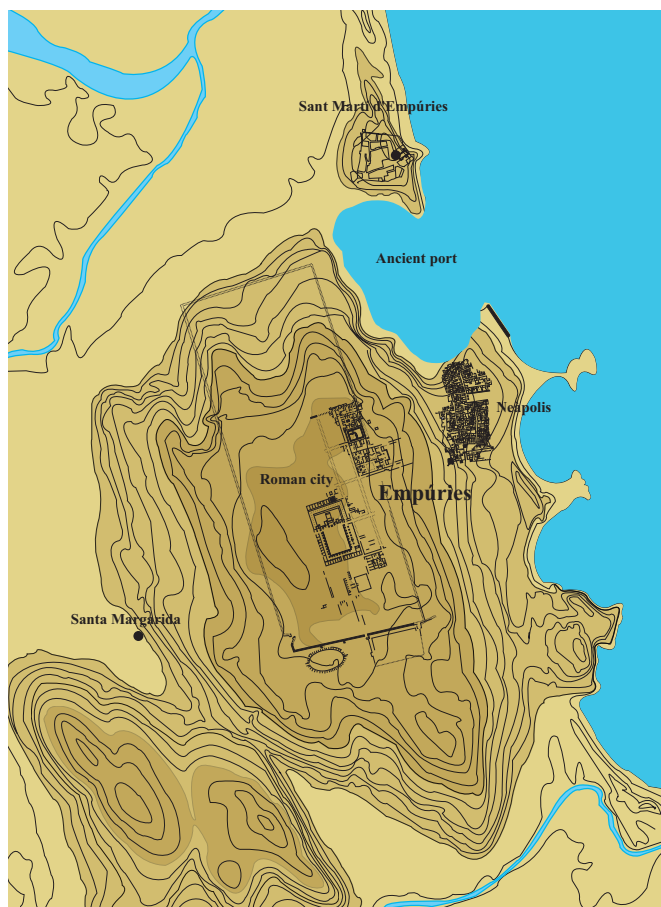


Fig. 1. Ground plan locating Empúries and the main areas of the site explained in the present article.

far as the hillside of Empúries (Casas *et al.* 1995, p. 142, fig. 101; Llinàs *et al.* 1997, pp. 75-79; Llinàs 1999, pp. 149-169).

While the existence of remains in the Santa Margarida area was well-known, the reinterpretation of the site began with the excavations of 2003-2005 under the auspices of the Museu d'Arqueologia de Catalunya-Empúries and the University of Girona (Nolla *et al.* 2015, pp. 79-94, 219-285). This work, which principally focused on the interior of the church, made it possible to define a long evolutionary sequence that took place over a number of stages; through these, we can follow the development of the site between the 3rd and 4th centuries AD and the 10th century, when the church that still stands and which gives its name to the site was built.

With regard to this work, we would like to highlight the identification of a baptismal building that formed part of a group of religious buildings that would also have generated a new population centre which, over time, extended into the sur-



Fig. 2. General view of the excavation carried out during the years 2003-2005 inside the chapel of Santa Margarida. In the central part, a view of the baptistery remains and, in the foreground, some of the sarcophagi are arranged around it.

rounding area. At the centre of the baptistery was the font, partially unearthed during the 1957 work. The baptistery was enclosed by a perimeter wall and possibly covered by a *ciborium*. A monumental tomb, covered by a *lauda* that was added early in the life of the church and dated to the start of the 5th century AD, would suggest that the baptistery had been relatively recently built.

This intense occupation of the Empúries area during Late Antiquity is also clear from the remains of another important architectural complex, Santa Magdalena, close to Santa Margarida. Excavations undertaken between 2003 and 2005 showed that the earliest occupation was an octagonal-based Christian mausoleum, built at the end of the 4th century, around which other funeral chambers were placed, along with a small chapel (fig. 2). Later, probably in the 6th century AD, this funerary monument underwent substantial alterations, becoming a church, with a cemetery alongside. The final modifications gave the church the shape of a Latin cross, and point to its continued use until the 8th-9th centuries AD (Nolla *et al.* 2015, pp. 94-106 and figs. 98-100).

The great importance and historical interest of the Santa Margarida and Santa Magdalena buildings led years later, taking into consideration signs detected through aerial photography (Casas *et al.* 1995, fig. 101), to an ambitious project of geophysical prospection (both magnetic and geo-radar) and geologi-

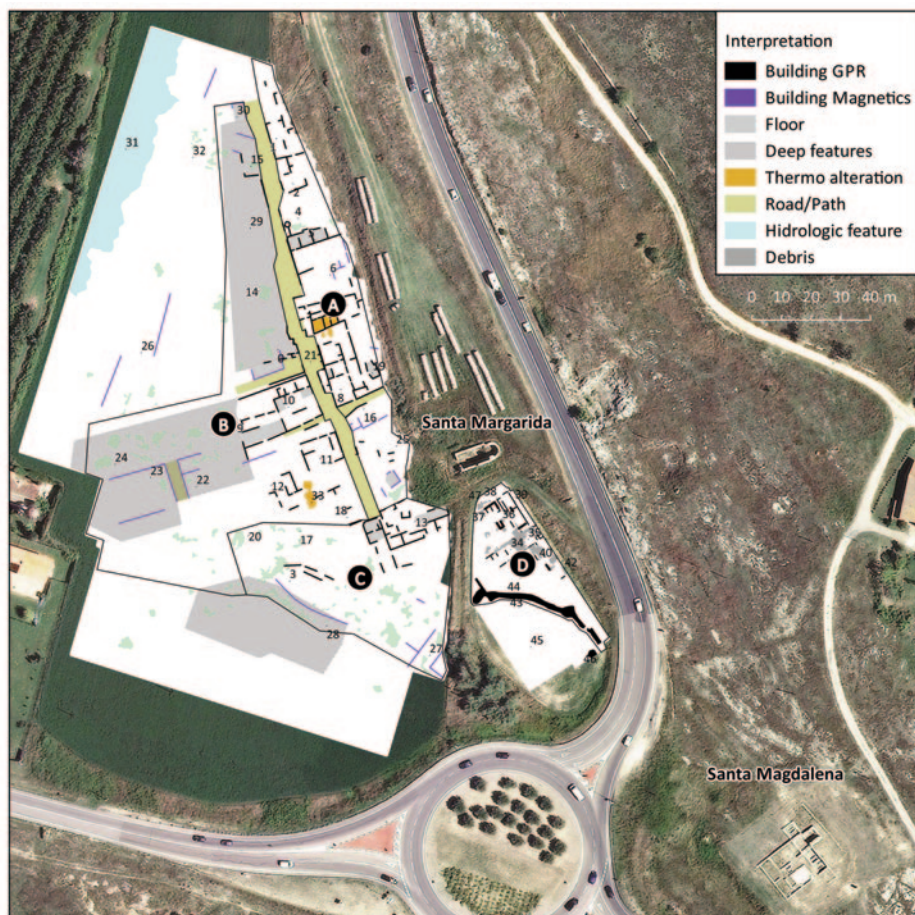


Fig. 3. Interpretative ground plan of the anomalies detected in the geophysical sounding of the area of Santa Margarida (SOT Prospecció arqueològica).

cal sounding, with the aim of increasing the range of research results. It also assisted in improving the planning of future archaeological interventions. This work showed the existence of an important set of buildings, spread in separate groups over an area of almost two hectares. One of the most interesting finds was a path or road running from north to south on the lower level of the hill; we can surmise that it may well have continued towards Sant Martí d'Empúries, thus joining the area's two main Late Antique population centres (Castanyer *et al.* 2019, pp. 149-151 and figs. 3-5; Castanyer *et al.* 2021) (fig. 3).

Finally, the geological soundings, as well as C14 dating, are vital in understanding and contextualizing the data resulting from digs and geophysical prospections. Soundings in the western part show the existence of a flooded

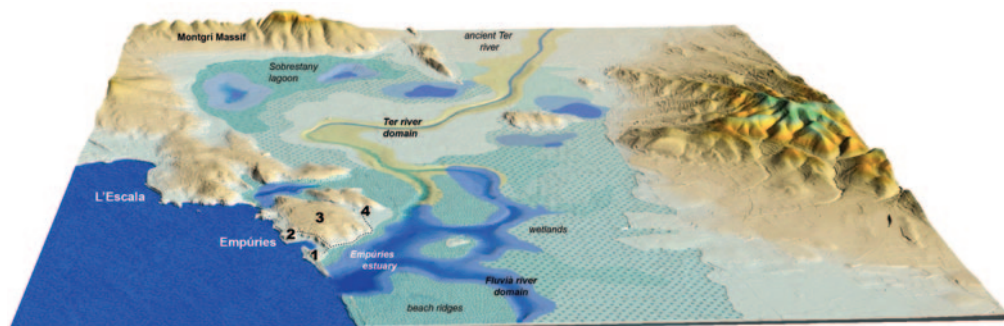


Fig. 4. Paleolandscape of the coastline in the environment of Empúries *circa* 600 AD, with the distribution of the main graveyards and population centres: 1- Sant Martí d'Empúries, 2- Basilica and graveyard of the "Neapolis", 3- Santa Margarida, 4- Santa Magdalena.

zone at the limit of the area which, in light of new paleolandscape interpretations, we can link to the Empúries estuary existing at the time and which permitted direct access to the sea (Castanyer *et al.* 2019, pp. 151-152 and fig. 6) (fig. 4).

1. The archaeological excavations in 2020-2021. New evidence of the Late Antique episcopal buildings in the Santa Margarida sector at Empúries

New excavations took place in 2020 and 2021 (fig. 5) based on the previous archaeological work and the positive results of the geophysical soundings, which showed the existence of an important population centre in the Santa Margarida area. These formed part of a series of actions planned for the quadrennial archaeological research project organized by the Museu d'Arqueologia de Catalunya-Empúries, scheduled to continue over the coming years (2022-2025).

Recent interventions have discovered a new area of some 300 m² just to the north of the chapel of Santa Margarida. This area showed great stratigraphical potential as it had been occupied over many centuries from around the 4th century until the 18th century AD (fig. 6).

The oldest stage of the site saw some burials in a 4th century necropolis that occupied a large part of the western side of Empúries, known as the Estruch necropolis (Almagro 1955, pp. 305-320; Llinàs *et al.* 1997). The excavations of 2003-2005 showed that a baptistery had later been built above the cemetery. This formed part of a group of religious buildings that would have generated a new population centre that, over time, extended into the surrounding area. We especially know the central part of the baptistery where the font was located; it was surrounded by a perimeter wall and may well have been covered by a *ciborium* (Nolla *et al.* 2015, pp. 80-88, fig. 83-86). While there is no firm date for its construction, as mentioned above, the presence of a monumental tomb added



Fig. 5. Aerial view from the west of the Santa Margarida area, with the hill of the Roman city and the sea in the background.

early on and covered by a *lauda* would suggest that it was built at the latest at the end of the 4th and the start of the 5th centuries AD.

The interventions of 2020-2021 now enable us to begin to complete the ground plan of the baptistery, given that we have been able to discover the wall that marked the northern limit, which would complete the already located eastern and western limits (Nolla *et al.* 2015, fig. 83, phase II). This fact, and the probable central location of the font, leads us to picture an almost square building with sides of around 13 m. The font, which was also square, each side measuring 2.5 m, would have been framed by a *ciborium* held up by four small columns in the corners, of which the four foundation blocks are preserved. Excavations of the baptistery's interior have shown that it underwent a complex series of alterations; evidence of this is provided by a number of repavings of the building, with modifications to the font and an increasing use of the space as a privileged funerary area from the start of the 5th century until the building was finally abandoned.

Leaving aside the detailed study, we would like to highlight the final era of the baptistery, marked by a series of burials of infants that occupied any free spaces. Shortly afterwards, the entire area underwent a profound transformation,



Fig. 6. Orthophoto of the excavations carried out in 2020 and 2021 in Santa Margarida.

linked to the construction of a small church, possibly dedicated to Santa Margarida, and dating from the pre-Romanesque era. The construction of the new church, which was surely motivated by the desire to keep alive the memory of the old baptistery and those buried therein, involved levelling the ground in order to raise it above the old structures (Nolla *et al.* 2015, fig. 83, phase VII). A horse-shoe-shaped apse was added towards the end of the 10th century and this shape has remained unchanged to the present day.

This baptistery is located immediately south of another building that is only partially unearthed. Our hypothesis is that this may have been the basilica or

cathedral for the whole episcopal group of buildings in Empúries, or a funerary church that would have formed part of the same complex. This construction, which is on a west-east axis, would have been sizable, but the only remains discovered for now are the apse and part of the central and south naves. We can suppose that it had three naves, divided by identical rows of columns, of which only the bases remain. While further digs will be required to discover the complete floor plan, the existing data suggest that the central nave would have been practically double the width of the two lateral naves.

Special attention should be paid to the discoveries made in the altar area. They link the construction of the building with the presence of two exceptional tombs of great symbolic value to the religious community. These are two monolithic stone sarcophagi, with the characteristic gable cover and acroterions, on both sides of the altar. The sarcophagus located to the south is interesting in that the cover has a hole in the upper part, which was sealed by a little stone, probably to enable people to touch the relics within. The outer part of this sarcophagus bears the inscription *SECVNDVS*. The covers of both sarcophagi were moved and then replaced many centuries ago, probably to exhume the remains and rebury them in another spot. The base of the *mensa altaris*, destroyed in ancient times, was made from the stone pedestal of a statue from the forum of the Roman city of *Emporiae*, with an inscription dedicated to *Manius Cornelius Saturninus*; an identical one was also found in Empúries in 1900 (IRC 75-76, Pl. XXII, no. 41).

The archaeological works have enabled us to identify a number of stages linked to the use of this basilica. Evidence is provided by a series of renovations and alterations that did not substantially change its internal layout or function. As with the baptistery, there were a number of changes made to the floor, and it became more frequently used as a funerary area, following the *tumulatio ad sanctos* process. This happened between its construction, at an undetermined time between the end of the 4th and start of the 5th centuries, until it was finally abandoned. The finding of a hoard of coins at the entrance of the apse, the study of which is the main objective of this work, will allow us to raise various hypotheses regarding its possible relationship with the function of this building.

Future research will either confirm or reject our interpretation, but for now it seems that the general sequence of events in the baptistery, and basilica or funerary church, would have been all but identical. The end of their use was marked by a string of burials of infants in unoccupied spaces. Shortly afterwards, the whole area underwent a profound transformation, linked to the construction of a small church, with an identical floor plan to Santa Margarida, and also dating from pre-Romanesque times. Once more, we see the construction of a new church as an attempt to keep alive the memory of the old basilica and of those buried therein.

For the moment, the evolution of both baptistery and basilica seem to follow common patterns regarding their construction and the end of their use. If our interpretations are correct, at the latest at the end of the 4th and the start of the 5th

centuries, the Santa Margarida sector saw the building of the main elements of the Empúries episcopal complex. This was located in the middle of a population centre, near a kind of central square or open area. The basilica and baptistery were to the east, while to the south there was another building that still has to be excavated. It is already known that written information regarding the Empúries episcopal see is limited to the lists of Bishops in the records of some of the Hispanic councils of the 6th and 7th centuries, and no documentary reference exists after the Saracen invasion. Archaeological data show that the process of abandonment and transformation started then. We believe that this process became definitive following the retaking of the territory by the Franks towards the end of the 8th century, since Empúries would only regain its status as a political and administrative capital, losing its earlier ecclesiastical power on becoming part of, and subject to, the bishopric of Girona.

2. The discovery of the hoard. Stratigraphic context

The excavations of 2021 in the Santa Margarida sector led to important developments regarding overall interpretation and, in particular, the discovery of part of the possible basilica associated with the episcopal complex. Beyond any primary general conclusions, we would like to focus on the discovery of a hoard of 176 coins found in the step that separated the central nave from the basilica's apse, and on its possible interpretation (fig. 7).

The discovery of such a sizable amount of coins inside this religious building raises a number of questions. The first is regarding the nature of the location of the hoard itself. Was it linked in any way to the use and function of the basilica? Perhaps there was no direct relation with the building and it was stored here as an incidental, one-off action.

In order to answer this question, we should first consider the stratigraphic context and the characteristics of the discovery in relation to the documented series of events that took place there. Archaeological works have, both stratigraphically and constructively, established a number of stages or phases, which we will summarize below.

As already mentioned (fig. 8, I), the original church was built following the plan of a Roman basilica, oriented from west to east. We have prior knowledge of the apse, part of the central nave, and part of the southern aisle. Although later alterations considerably changed the original building, it is possible to make a hypothetical link between the various spaces and their liturgical use (Godoy 1995, pp. 45-53). This interpretation takes into account the different levels of the floor and the possible use of chancel screens to separate and delineate the different areas.

These considerations enable us to identify the choir in the central nave, reserved for those taking part in liturgy and for the clergy. The area is paved with



Fig. 7. Aerial view from the north of the sectors excavated in 2021. The red star marks the place of discovery of the coin hoard.

opus signinum (UE-1471), and a small step would have raised it above the level of the southern aisle (UE-1169). A further step is documented to the east of the choir (UE-1474), separating it from the presbytery, which would then have been in the apse. In the central part of the *opus signinum* presbytery floor was the cavity of a pillar or chancel screen, which would have formed a symbolic and physical boundary of the entire apse area (UE-1472).

To the east of the presbytery there was yet another step (UE-1469), which gave onto a raised part of the apse; it was also paved, with a third *opus signinum* (UE-1325). Above this was the altar, with two graves with sarcophagi at the sides. As we have already mentioned, the *mensa* was supported by a pedestal from the Roman forum, dedicated to *Manius Cornelius Saturninus*.

This initial state of the church soon underwent some small alterations, above all in the area that separated the choir from the presbytery (fig. 8, II). Possibly at

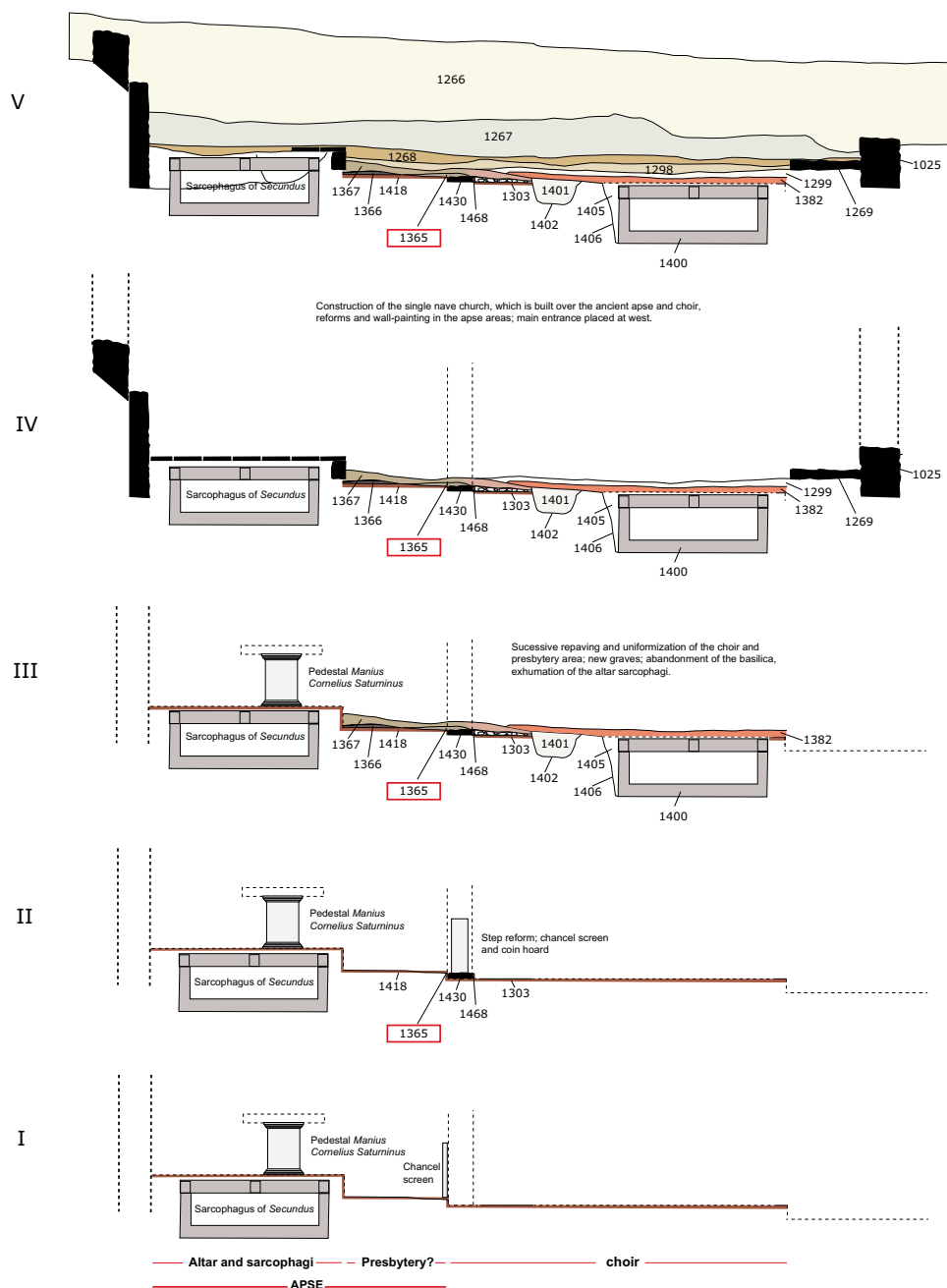


Fig. 8. Stratigraphic section reconstructing the basilica or church of the episcopal complex of Santa Margarida. It shows the location of the coin hoard related to the stratigraphic sequence: 8. I – Initial stage, 8. II – reform of the step that separated the choir and the presbytery, 8. III – destruction and levelling of the step, 8. IV- construction of the pre-Romanesque church and abandonment.

the start of the 5th century, the step and chancel screen were levelled with the construction of a new step (UE-1430) of regularly placed stones, in front of the previous one, covering it with a fine layer of *opus signinum*. This was a one-off alteration that in no way changed the layout, leaving the original floor of the choir and presbytery as they were.

The old chancel screen or central pillar was changed for another two elements, possibly with new supporting pillars, located either side of the central aisle. This interpretation is based on the stratigraphical documentation carried out during the archaeological intervention, which showed evidence of a small hole (UE-1364) at the easternmost point of the new step (1430) that would correspond to the plundering of the cited element. It was during the excavation of the earth filling this hole (UE-1365) that the 176 coins we present in this work were discovered (figs. 9 and 10). The location of the coins, spread over the base and walls of the hole and even above the presbytery floor level suggests that they had not been hidden; they were not all grouped together, neither were they in a bag, nor completely hidden or protected. The most probable hypothesis is, therefore, that the hoard was the result of the plundering of an item, perhaps a bowl used to collect alms, placed there during phase II. The extraction of this would have led to the dispersal of the coins at the bottom of the hole and in the surrounding area. Support for this interpretation would be the fact that the five coins discovered in the layers that covered the presbytery floor (UE-1366 and 1367) are of the same type and chronology as the hoard found in the hole. These are preliminary thoughts: the final interpretation regarding the hoard will be dealt with in the conclusions of this study.

Stratigraphically, therefore, the coins seem to have been left there between the destruction of the step (UE-1430) and the levelling layers formed there subsequently, that raised and levelled the floor between the choir and the apse (fig. 8, III). These layers are most concentrated in the presbytery area (UE-1366 and 1367) and the west of the step (UE-1473), and formed the base of the new floor of *opus signinum* (UE-1324) that would reduce the original unevenness of the choir, presbytery, and altar area floors, leaving a slightly sloping floor. Henceforth, we believe, the choir would have been limited only by chancel screens and the south and north aisles.

These alterations must have taken place after the second half of the 5th century, as can be concluded by the *terminus post quem* of the coins, and the presence of a few pottery shards in the levelling layers. We note, as an example, the discovery in stratum 1367 of the rim of a TS *Africana* D plate, similar to Hayes form 59, of around 420 AD.

The most recent evidence regarding the functioning of the church points to a final repaving of the central nave, and possibly of the side aisles, with a new floor of *opus signinum* (UE-1382). It is currently difficult to place an exact date at which the church fell into disuse, and we are awaiting the results of C14 dating for some of the tombs excavated in the area adjacent to the apse. However, we



Fig. 9. Detail of the finding of the coin hoard.



Fig. 10. Most of the coins appeared in a little hole made during the plundering of the element placed in the south part of the step that separated the apse from the central nave.

believe that when the church was abandoned, the *mensa* and *stipes* inscribed *Manius Cornelius Saturninus* was looted, the two tombs located at the foot of the altar were exhumed, and the covers replaced, which is why the human remains were not found when the tombs were excavated. We note the discovery inside the sarcophagus on the northern side of the upper half of an amphora, possibly made in Ibiza (Vizcaíno, Noguera, Madrid 2020, pp. 116-118, fig. 10), with a *titulus pictus* on the neck that indicated its capacity. While this may be a residual piece, such amphorae would indicate a chronology around the 7th century or later for the exhumation of this tomb.

Although we will have to wait for the results of new excavations to determine the date the church fell into disuse, the memory of this church or basilica remains, thanks to the construction, over the choir and apse, of a small pre-Romanesque church, whose altar was deliberately placed above that of the old Christian building (fig. 8, IV and V).

3. Composition and characteristics of the hoard

As already mentioned, the hoard discovered in Santa Margarida d'Empúries comprises 176 bronze coins, as well as eight small metal fragments whose weights range from 0.01 g to 0.27 g and are not taken into account statistically². Of the 176 coins, 60 are *nummi* and Ae3 (34% of the total), 85 are Ae4 (48%), and 31 are what are referred to as *minimi*³ (18%). In general terms, such a composition follows the circulation patterns of low-value bronze coins documented in the far north-eastern corner of the Iberian Peninsula (Bouzas 2019, pp. 272-285).

3.1. Chronology of the coins

The oldest piece is a *nummus* in the name of Constantine I, dating from 316 (RIC VII Lyons 51), whilst the most recent piece that has been credibly dated is probably from a proto-Vandal or Vandal issue that can be plausibly dated to the first half of the 5th century. Despite the poor condition of the piece, the obverse shows the bust of a man wearing a diadem facing right, while there is a cross on the reverse. We believe that this may be of a type similar to Ladich's type 10 (Ladich 2013, p. 27). It may also correspond to the type of cross coined by Theodosius II (RIC X, 275, n. 440-452). Both types show similar chronologies, even though the latter type cannot be truly considered to be a Vandal issue.

² A detailed work is currently being prepared and will be published in the next issue of *Nvmisma* journal.

³ In using the term *minimi*, we follow the description proposed by Adelson and Kustas (1964) for coins with a very small diameter (generally under 11 mm), and roughly produced.

Most of the coins (114) have been identified as having been issued in the 4th century, particularly between 348 and 364. Most of the coins from this period correspond to issues bearing the legend FEL TEMP REPARATIO, which has also been documented across the Iberian Peninsula (Ripollès 2002, p. 211). The other 47 pieces are principally issues imitating model Ae4 and *minimi*, and must be from the 5th century.

There is some historiographical debate regarding the chronology of coins that imitate 4th-century models. While some believe that they were contemporaneous with the imitated models, and cannot date from later than 364 (Brickstock 1987, pp. 112-119; Cabarrot, Nony 1980, p. 55), others suggest they date from the 5th century (Marot 1991, p. 417; Marot 2001, p. 136). Other possibilities have also been suggested, such as that the less well-produced coins are from the 5th century (Vasic 1975, pp. 81-82), and others believe that the weight of the coins showed a change over time, the heaviest imitations being contemporaneous with the originals, and the lighter ones from the 5th century (San Vicente 2017, pp. 327-331).

While most of the coins were minted in the 4th century, it should be noted that many of these issues circulated for centuries afterwards. The circulation of Late-empire coins through the Late Antique period is a well-documented and accepted fact (Marot 2001, pp. 133-160; Ripollès 2002, pp. 211-214; Lledó 2004, pp. 581-594). The *nummi*, Ae3 and Ae4 continued to circulate during later periods and were also hoarded⁴. Imitation coins are also to be found in the study of other contexts in the region (Bouzas 2019, pp. 262-271). Examples of this are the archaeological site in the Citadel of Roses (Bouzas 2018, pp. 161-180) and the Pla de Palol Roman villa (Bouzas, Burch, Nolla 2021, pp. 13-57). “Residual” coins, in some cases from the early empire period or even older, were commonly circulated or hidden in Late Antiquity in a number of places across the Empire⁵. However, in the case of the collection of Santa Margarida, 4th-century coins were an essential part of the circulating coins and were in no way “residual”. All the above data allow us to situate the final chronology of the Santa Margarida hoard in the 5th century.

Furthermore, despite there being just one piece in the whole collection that can be dated from the Vandal or proto-Vandal era, this fact, along with the large number of 4th-century and imitation coins and the absence of archetypal Vandal and Byzantine coins, strengthens the proposed dating from the first half of the 5th century. At this point, it is necessary to repeat that this coin may also be struck under Theodosius II or even Valentinian III. In any case the main idea to retain is that the coin belongs to a 5th century chronology. While Vandal or Byzantine coins from the 5th to early 6th centuries are commonly found in circulation⁶ or

⁴ For example, MORA 2007, pp. 191-212.

⁵ See MATTINGLY 1983, pp. 245-301; CALOMINO, MAURINA 2017, p. 170; BURRELL 2007, p. 236. In some cases, the traces of late-empire coins lasted until the Islamic period (DOMÉNECH 1996, p. 292).

hidden, the scarce presence of such coins in Santa Margarida would suggest that the hoard was from an earlier date.

Regarding the chronology of the low-value imitation coins, the *minimi*, we believe that they have to be situated in the 5th century. The documented reverse sides of these coins correspond to two main types. The first is the helmeted soldier to the left, shield on the left arm spearing a fallen horseman (legend FEL TEMP REPARATIO). This reverse, the result of Constantius II's reforms (Depeyrot 1992, pp. 63-66), was originally issued in Ae3 and Ae4 module between 348 and 358 AD (RIC VIII 32-49). It was later widely imitated and present in Hispania, principally in the 5th century (Marot 2001, p. 135; Rifà 2004, pp. 257-258). The other kind of reverse present on the *minimi* is that of the Emperor in military dress standing right holding a globe and a spear (legend SPES REI PVBLICE), which were originally minted in 357 and 363 AD (RIC VIII 32-49). While these have sometimes been classified as Vandal⁷, we concur with the general opinion that it is an imitation reverse widely circulated across Hispania (Marot 2001, p. 135). In any case, such pieces can be ascribed to the 5th century.

As we have just mentioned, only one piece of the hoard appears to be a Vandal or proto-Vandal issue. It has a Greek cross on the reverse and can be dated from the early to mid-5th century. Taking into account the presence of this coin in the hoard, as well as the high percentage of imitation *minimi*, and the stratigraphic results, we would date the set of coins found in Santa Margarida from the early to mid-5th century.

3.2. Composition of the hoard: mints and issuing authorities

Once the chronology of the hoard has been established, we must mention where the 128 non-imitation 4th century coins were minted. The mints of about 60 coins have been identified. Most coins were issued in *Arelate* and Rome, although we have also identified coins minted in *Lugdunum*, Treveris, Thessaloniki, *Sirmium*, Constantinople, Siscia and Cyzicus.

Discoveries in the surrounding area (Bouzas 2019, pp. 260-262) show that the highest proportion of coins were from the empire's western mints, such as *Arelate* and Rome, which were geographically closer to the territory. In fact, His-

⁶ Marot has studied the 6th-century circulation in the eastern part of the peninsula (MAROT 2001, pp. 139-153) and the Punta Cullera site in Valencia (MAROT, LLORENS 1996, pp. 151-180). Another significant find is that of two proto-Vandal pieces in a tomb in Empúries itself (MAROT 1997, p. 164). It is worth citing the Byzantine-era conserved archetypes studied by Adelson and Kustas (ADELSON, KUSTAS 1964, pp. 159-205; ADELSON, KUSTAS 1962, pp. 2-90; ADELSON, KUSTAS 1960, pp. 139-188). Recent studies also show evidence of the presence of all this currency, as well as Visigoth coins, across the peninsula in Late Antiquity (PLIEGO 2020, pp. 125-154). In all these cases, coins that are clearly Vandal and Byzantine appear later.

⁷ Whilst this classification is no longer applied, it is worth remembering that Wroth attributed this reverse to the Vandal period (WROTH 1911, Pl. 3. Tip. 29).

pania supplied itself mainly from the Gallic mints, in particular that of *Arelate* (San Vicente 2017, pp. 324-325), and then of Rome (Ripollès 2002, p. 212). It should be noted that three of the imitation coins copied marks from the *Arelate* mint, and one from *Lugdunum*. This shows that the models they imitated were thus marked on the exergue. This enables us to locate the office that minted the imitations in an area where this mark was very common.

Regarding the issuing authorities, these have been identified in almost 80 coins. Mostly they were issued by Constantius II but several other emperors have also been identified: Constantine I, Constantine II, Constans, Magnentius, Constantius Gallus, Julian II, Gratian, Valens, Valentinian I and Valentinian II. There is a clear weighting towards those issued under the name Constantius II, which were minted in large numbers and circulated widely around Hispania (Ripollès 2002, p. 211; Abad 1994, pp. 161-162), as has also been observed in the region near Empúries (Bouzas 2019, pp. 211-214). Also noteworthy is the absence of any coin posterior to Valentinian II, who died in 392. There are no official coins from the Theodosian dynasty. While this does not provide any reliable data, it should be considered when interpreting the circulation and composition of the hoard, since although there are no official pieces from the end of the 4th century, irregular issues have been found dating from the 5th century.

In summary, we have a hoard formed exclusively of low-value bronze coins. While most of the pieces date from the 4th century, the final chronology can be definitively situated from the early to mid-5th century, principally because of the discovery of a proto-Vandal piece and also very small module imitation coins. The distribution of the issuing authorities and the mints is similar to that already known in the Empúries territory and across Hispania in general.

4. Final reflections on the interpretation of the coin collection

Taking into account the stratigraphic context of the discovery, as well as the nature, composition, and dating of the collection, we believe we can discard the possibility that the coins were hidden or hoarded. The location of the find, immediately beside the steps that led to the apse, would not, on the face of it, seem the most adequate place to hide money. The area was reserved for liturgical use, but was highly visible and evident. Neither of these facts would have made it easy to hide the coins or recover them later. Further evidence of this is given by the fact that the coins were scattered around the bottom and walls of the hole, and not stored together in a bag or box (figs. 9 and 10).

Furthermore, the date at which we place the end of the hoard, from the beginning to the mid-5th century, does not appear to coincide with a general context of instability and danger in the area, which would have been a reason to hide

the coins. They were close to the surface, covered with a handful of earth, providing yet more evidence against them having been deliberately hidden. Had there been a danger from without, hiding them precisely in the church of the episcopal complex seems barely credible.

Another argument against the theory of hiding or storing is the composition of the hoard itself: all the coins were of little value, basically Ae4 and *minimi*, and there were no other valuable objects or liturgical elements present⁸.

After discarding this theory, few options remain. One could be that they were part of a foundational rite, or linked to an important event in the life of the church or the community that worshipped there⁹. Once again, the stratigraphy and the characteristic of the hoard play a role in discounting this option. As we have said, the coins were not placed there in an orderly fashion, and were unprotected. The coins were deposited after the step that gave access to the apse was renovated; we can thus discount the theory that they were connected with a rite carried out on the founding of the early church. The only possible interpretation as a foundational rite would be in the case that the hoard of coins were placed under the new element or pillar placed at the southern end of the new step. By this hypothesis the plundering of the above mentioned element would have revealed the coins. In this case, it would allow us to date the reform of the step to the first half or middle decades of the 5th century.

Given the arguments expounded above, one last hypothesis we see as credible is that the hoard was directly related to the use and function of the space. In this case, we believe that the hole where the coins appeared was the result of the plunder of an element in which the coins would have been deposited or stored. This would explain both the irregular shape of the hole, which affects the southernmost part of the step and partially the floor of the presbytery and choir (UE-1303 and 1418), and the fact that the coins seem to have been left haphazardly at the bottom and in the walls of the hole, and not in a perishable bag or recipient¹⁰. The presence of a further five coins, which originally would have formed part of the same group and were found in the levelling layers that covered the floor of the presbytery (UE-1366 and 1367) made at the same time as the hole, would support the theory that they were scattered during the plunder of the element that contained them (fig. 8).

⁸ Valuable objects and jewels were frequently hidden in the 3rd and 4th centuries (KROPPF 2007, pp. 78-86).

⁹ An example of this kind of rite, not always with a religious context, is found in the Basilica of Torre de Palma in Portugal. During the excavations of the site, ten coins were found embedded in a floor in a zone near the altar. These ten coins were all late Roman bronze coins and, according to the interpretations presented, they were placed there by the workers that built the floor as a signal of protection (HUFFSTOT 1998, pp. 221-226).

¹⁰ For example, and while not in an ecclesiastical context, mention should be made of the case of a cache discovered in Sardis, where fragments of the textile wrapping were still present (BURELL 2007, p. 235).

Thus, the thread of our argument contemplates the presence of an element in the southernmost part of the step, and placed there at the same time as the reform (fig. 8, II); this would have been plundered prior to the reflooring of the choir and presbytery area (UE-1324) on the same level and which saw the flattening of the old separating step and also of the ancient floors (UE-1303 and 1418) (fig. 8, III). However, the nature of the element itself is less clear. Conclusive evidence is lacking, but we believe it likely that it may have been a stone bowl, or a wooden box or casket. Alms may have been placed there, or they may have formed part of a votive action, the coins being left there as an offering.

In fact, the presence of hoards of coins in religious contexts in Late Antiquity is well known. Several examples are mentioned by Perassi, who notes the importance of coins in Antiquity as part of rituals or apotropaic elements, as well as the discovery of coins in baptisteries in Milan and Malta, where small hoards of coins linked to baptisteries have been documented dating from the late 4th and early 5th centuries (Perassi 2005, pp. 1237-1243; Perassi 2017, pp. 49-67). Coins related to the tombs of saints in Late Antiquity have been found in Vicenza and Milan¹¹, and have been interpreted as being offerings; the coins date from the 4th and 6th centuries respectively (Saccocci 1997, pp. 83-89). We would also highlight the case of the Museo Nazionale di Ravenna, which exhibits a hoard of 1891 coins dating from the 4th-6th centuries, discovered in the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe, that are linked to the saint's tomb and the devotion it inspired. A similar interpretation is given to the group of over 100 coins found in the church of San Cristoforo ad Aquilam (Colombarone, Pesamo), in what has been classed as a *gazophylacium*, where offerings to the saints were stored (Chavarría 2021, p. 107).

These examples show some important similarities with the case of Empúries, especially if we take into account the presence of the two tombs below the altar. They would have been the tombs of notable people in this early stage of Christianity in Empúries, such as Bishops, or the relics of some foreign saints. This hypothesis is perfectly supported by the existence of a circular hole in the cover of the sarcophagus of *Secundus*, sealed by a round stone that could easily be moved, as well as the remains being exhumed when the church was definitively abandoned.

We find the interpretation that the coins were possible evidence of offerings made to honour a person or people who were examples of virtue and mediated with God to be perfectly plausible. When such offerings were made is not known, perhaps the coins were deposited on the site as a votive offering by visitors who approached the tombs of the presbytery, as a demonstration of their visit.

If our suppositions are correct, then we imagine the container was emptied regularly in order to avoid excessive accumulation (Chavarría 2021, p. 107). The

¹¹ The tomb of Saint Ambrose case is also studied by L. Travaini and the author remarks that the coins were of low value, as documented in most graveyards (TRAVAINI 2004, pp. 161-162).

coins would then have gone into free circulation. The hypothesis of an element in which to deposit alms and donations also fits with the fact that most of the coins found in Santa Margarida were of little value. This is no coincidence, and follows a trend seen in donations made in other sanctuaries, where such coins are over-represented when compared with the official issue of coins (Kemmers 2017, pp. 193-201)¹². To this end, the offering should be seen to be part of a liturgical act and with a symbolic value. Lastly, the low value of the coins would explain why some of them were scattered and not gathered up during the plundering of the element that had contained them.

While it is impossible to know whether our interpretation is correct or not, we believe it to be the most plausible one when reviewing the archaeological and numismatic evidence, as well as the parallels that can be drawn to other sites with characteristics similar to those of the Late Antique episcopal complex of Santa Margarida. We hope that planned future excavations will contribute to our knowledge and interpretation of this interesting period of the history of Empúries, which provides a direct link to its Greco-Roman past.

Abstract

The site of Santa Margarida constituted the epicenter of a new inhabited settlement built after the abandonment of the *municipium Emporiae* around the end of the 3rd century AD. Of this episcopal complex we now know the baptistery, which has a square-shaped base and a baptismal font in the center, and part of a basilica, an imposing construction of three naves situated immediately north of the baptistery. In this article we analyze the archeological finding of a coin hoard made up of 176 coins. The coins are dated approximately to the mid-5th century AD and were found at the entrance of the apse. Based on the characteristics and nature of the findings the different possible interpretations are hypothesized and argued.

Keywords: Empúries, Late Antiquity, church, coin hoard, sarcophagi.

Il sito di Santa Margarida costituì l'epicentro del nuovo nucleo abitativo che sorse dopo l'abbandono del municipio di Emporiae attorno alla fine del III secolo. Si conoscono il battistero a pianta quadrata con una piscina centrale per il rito del battesimo e parte della basilica, un edificio d'imponente costruzione a tre navate ubicato a nord. In questo articolo si presentano i risultati delle analisi riguardanti la scoperta di un deposito di 176 monete rinvenuto nell'entrata dell'abside, con un arco cronologico compreso tra la prima metà e la metà del V secolo. Attraverso le caratteristiche del rinvenimento si espongono e argomentano le diverse ipotesi d'interpretazione.

Parole chiave: Empúries, tarda antichità, chiesa, tesoretto monetale, sarcofagi.

¹² The same idea, that low coins are the ones preferred to deposit in burial and religious context can be read in L. Travaini's works (TRAVAINI 2009, pp. 163-165).

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