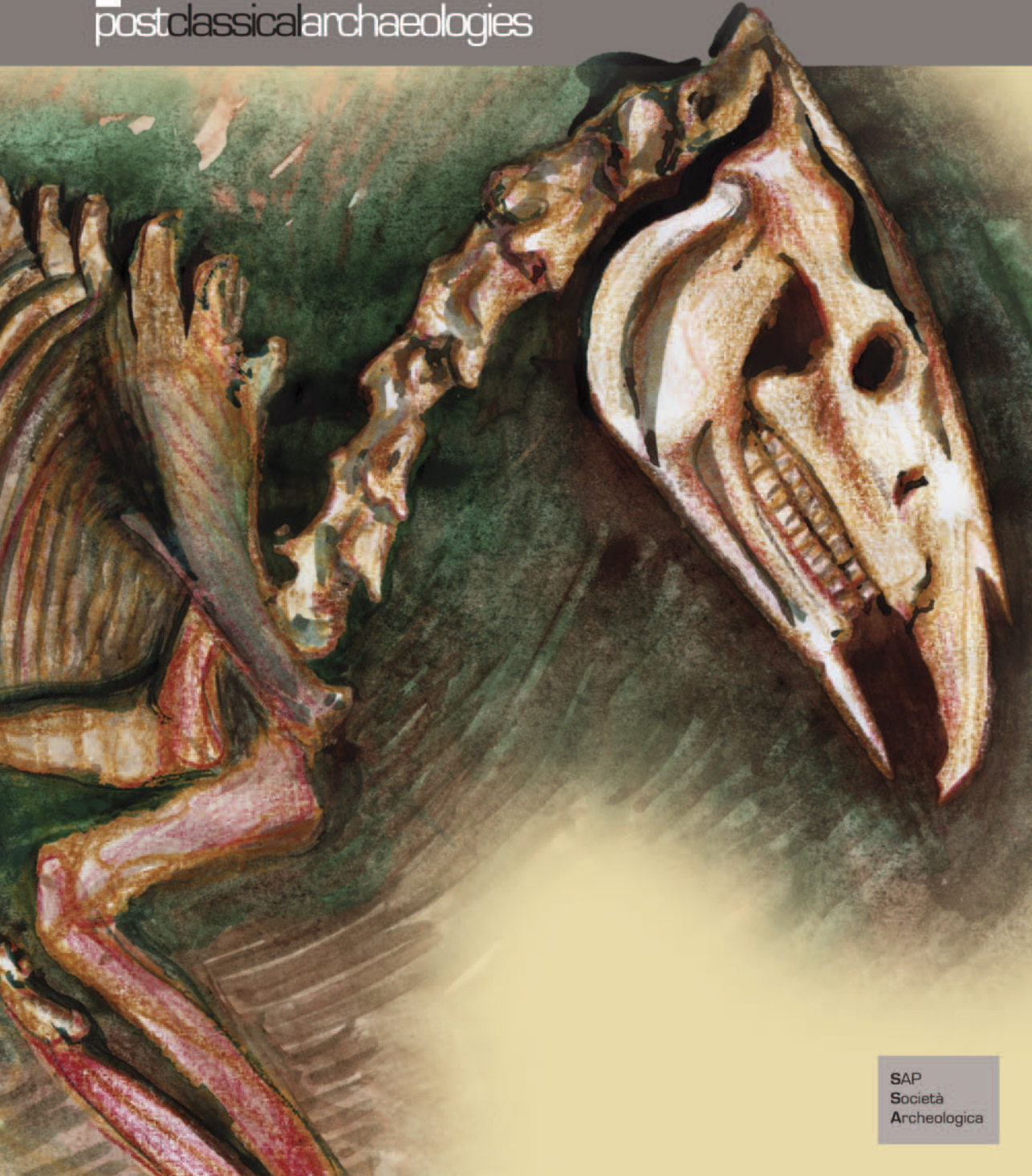


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Sergio García-Dils de la Vega*

From *colonia Augusta Firma* to *Astigi*. Urban transformations and Christianization of space in Late Antique *Écija* (Seville – Spain)

1. Introduction

Late Antique *colonia Augusta Firma* continued to be a fundamental center in *Baetica*, demonstrating the available evidence that the city does not reflect any sign of decadence or decline in this period. On the contrary, the archaeological interventions carried out in the city's central square, the Plaza de España, have revealed an unprecedented view of this phase, which shows an intense transformation of the Roman Imperial urban layout, being the densification of the city and the consequent greater demographic pressure in it the most notable features of this dynamic (García-Dils 2015, pp. 489-493).

Literary sources have provided us with some scattered information on the ecclesiastical history of this bishopric¹. Absent from the acts of the Council of *Iliberris*, so that it cannot be confirmed that the city already had episcopal status at that time, the first news of the existence of a Christian community in *Astigi* dates from the middle of the 5th century AD. Indeed, there is some epigraphic evidence from this date (*CIL* II²/5, 1272), as well as the splendid limestone sarcophagus with biblical scenes and texts in Greek recovered from the church of Santa Cruz, which show the vitality of Christianity in the city and its acceptance among the urban elites of the time². Subsequently, only the brief news of the conciliar activity of some of its bishops allows us to know a few episodes of the history of the bishopric of *Astigi*, which in the Visigothic period was a suffragan diocese of the metropolitan see of *Hispalis*³.

* UNED – Sevilla, sergarcia-dils@sevilla.uned.es.

¹ LAMBERT 1930, s.v. *Astigi*, col. 1179-1189; SÁNCHEZ 2018, pp. 173-191. On the territorial extension of the bishopric of *Astigi* in Late Antiquity, *vid.* GARCÍA MORENO 2007, pp. 451-452; MARTÍNEZ MELÓN 2008.

² *IHC* 370 = *ICERV* 427. About this exceptional sarcophagus, *vid.* SCHLUNK 1962; VIDAL 2005, pp. 65-68; BELTRÁN *et al.* 2006, pp. 194-197, n°62.

³ On the bishops of the see of *Astigi*, *vid.* GIL 2002, pp. 23-24. To the list provided by historiographic

The scarce news of the Astigitan prelates are reduced to claims about irregular emancipations of servants of the church – the case of Gaudentius in the I Council of Seville in 590 (*Conc. I Hisp.*, c. 1-2, *ap.* Vives 1963, pp. 151-152; Castillo 2012) –, and the resolution of territorial and jurisdictional disputes – the case of Fulgentius at the Second Council of Seville in 619 – which affected the dioceses of *Astigi* and *Malaca*, on one hand, and *Astigi* and *Corduba*, on the other (*Conc. II Hisp.*, c. 1-2, *ap.* Vives 1963, pp. 163-164). The pious Astigitan tradition used to link with Ecija St. Florentina, sister of Fulgentius, Isidore, and Leander, who would have professed in a monastery located in the city, a circumstance that cannot be confirmed by any convincing argument, being more logical the location of this monastery in the surroundings of Cartagena or Seville. At the 3rd or 4th Council of Seville and the 4th and 6th Council of Toledo, a serious question concerning the leadership of the See of *Astigi* was dealt with, the *Iudicium inter Martianum et Auentium episcopos*, an obscure internal affair that led to the accusation and deposition of *Marcianus* and his subsequent rehabilitation in 638. Apart from other matters, like the important presence of names of Germanic etymology among the characters involved in the plot, which represents the greatest documentation of this type of onomastics in Baetica, this episode provides some insight into the organization of the Astigitan Church at the time, in a setting that included bishops, deacons, subdeacons, presbyters, and clerics, surrounded by a large group of lay people including diviners and slaves (Castillo 2007; Castillo 2008, pp. 390-392). Of other 7th-century prelates, *Stephanus*, *Theudulfus*, *Nandarbus*, and *Aruidius*, we only know of their mere attendance at successive councils between 646 and 693. The Astigitan mitre would continue to exist at least until the 10th century, when, with the progressive disappearance of the Mozarabic communities in the region, its last occupant is documented in *Seruandus* (Sotomayor 2002, p. 484).

Fortunately, we have nowadays material evidence that allows us to decisively broaden the limited panorama presented by literary sources.

1. The Christianisation of urban topography: a Roman *porticus* transformed into a Christian cemetery

One of the main findings that have taken place in the archaeological excavation of the Plaza de España in Ecija was the discovery of a Christian funerary complex located next to the Roman forum, which constitutes to date the most

sources, we should now add the early Christian bricks and ceramic plates distributed in the provinces of Cordoba, Seville and Jaen, interpreted as possible allusions to bishops from this diocese: *Flavius Chionius*, ca. 5th c. (*CIL* II²/5, 56a-b, 206, 461-463, 559, 923, 980, 1000, 1349, 1350; *Hep* 2012, 280); *Amazonianus*, ca. 6th-7th c. (*CIL* II²/5, 922, 1131, 1275; *CIL* II²/7, 194); (*H*)*imerius*, ca. 6th-7th c. (*CIL* II²/5, 905); *Ausentius* (*CIL* II²/5, 469, 472). On this assumption, *vid.* STYLOW 1996; GONZÁLEZ 2003, pp. 80-87. A general overview on Christian bricks and ceramic plates in CHAVARRÍA ARNAU 2018b, p. 158; RUIZ, ROMÁN 2023.

notable Late Antique building complex documented in the city (García-Dils *et al.* 2011b).

As a new Roman foundation in the Augustan period, *colonia Augusta Firma* was built on the basis of a Hippodamian plan, with the characteristic network of *kardines* and *decumani*. In the Plaza de España, the *kardo maximus* and the *decumanus* 8 intersected⁴, delimiting an extensive open space in the southeast quadrant where a temple on a podium of Augustan chronology stood (García-Dils *et al.* 2007). In the Flavian period, this crossing point was the object of a notable urban development project, which began with the delimitation of the *temenos* by means of a powerful *peribolos* built in *opus quadratum* with cyclopean blocks of calcarenite, in whose north wall, at its western end, an access door has been documented. This door opened to the outside to an area paved with large slabs of micritic limestone, in which two alignments of foundation footings have been documented that would have supported a *porticus*⁵, which, with its 10 m width, is configured as monumental covered access to the *temenos* from the *decumanus maximus*, which ran further north, outside the limits of the excavated area (García-Dils 2015, pp. 204-206).

From the Flavian period onwards, the *porticus* became one of the most emblematic spaces in the city, constituting, as *uia tecta*, an obligatory passage both for accessing the *temenos* and for entering the southern sector of the city from the *decumanus maximus*. Then, ca. 197-211, the *porticus* underwent some kind of renovation or repairs due to the deterioration it had suffered since its construction, according to the text of a fragmentary marble plaque found next to the access to the *temenos* (García-Dils, Ordóñez 2015). It would seem that the restoration will allow the building to remain in good condition until the Late Antique period. Prior to this, at the end of the 3rd or beginning of the 4th century, there was a major remodeling of this space, which became an enclosed passageway. The façade of the dwellings located to the west of the *kardo maximus*, where the so-called House of *Oscillum* was located (García-Dils *et al.* 2009), will be used as the western limit of the structure, while to the east the wall [9874]⁶ was erected, which will completely close off *decumanus* 8, leaving it amortized from this point onwards to be occupied by the southward extension of the domestic structures located on the northern flank of the street. The wall [9874] was built in such a way that the emerging elements on the foundation footings⁷ were embedded in its western face in the form of pilasters (fig. 1).

⁴ Concerning the numbers assigned to *kardines* and *decumani*, *vid.* GARCÍA-DILS 2015, pp. 109-153.

⁵ Five foundation footings were detected to the west and four to the east, all of them consisting of an outer brick box with a massive infill of rubble – mainly bricks and *tegulae* – cemented with lime mortar. Their dimensions were 2.29-2.55 m, west to east, by 1.52-1.77 m, north to south, with a depth of 0.93-1.10 m.

⁶ The numbers assigned to the stratigraphic units are shown in square brackets to facilitate their location in the planimetry (figs. 1-2).

⁷ On the western flank of the *porticus*, these are infrastructures [32153], [13330=32150], [13329=32148], [13021=32146] and [32154].

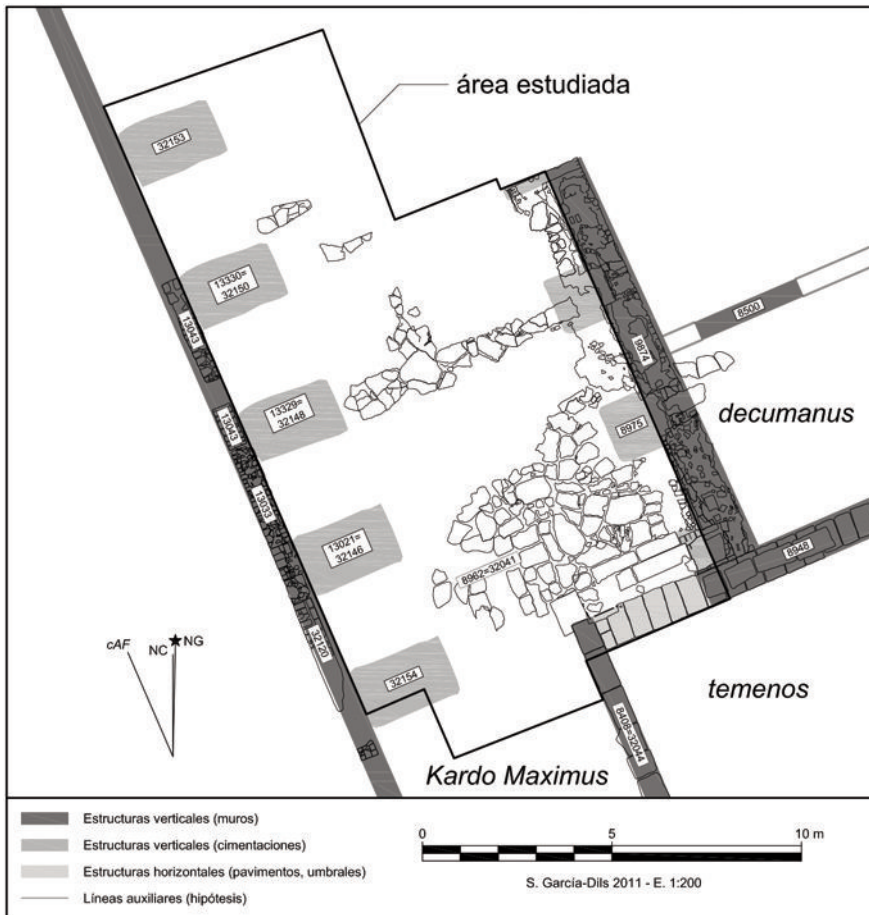


Fig. 1. Plaza de España. The access *porticus* to the *temenos* in the late 3rd or early 4rd c. (S. García-Dils).

From the 5th century onwards, this unique building was converted into a Christian funerary enclosure. In general terms, the intervention carried out on the *porticus* for its conversion was very limited. The eastern limit was marked by the wall [9874], by then deprived of the marble cladding and decorative elements it had originally had. The north-western access door to the *temenos* will be closed with wall [13064], built with reused ashlar. To the west, parallel to the façades of the dwellings located there, there are occasional sections of independent walls, which possibly had a structural function of supporting the roof of the enclosure. The northern boundary could not be archaeologically recorded as it was outside the excavated area. To the south of the enclosure was located the structure [32048], which will be mentioned below.

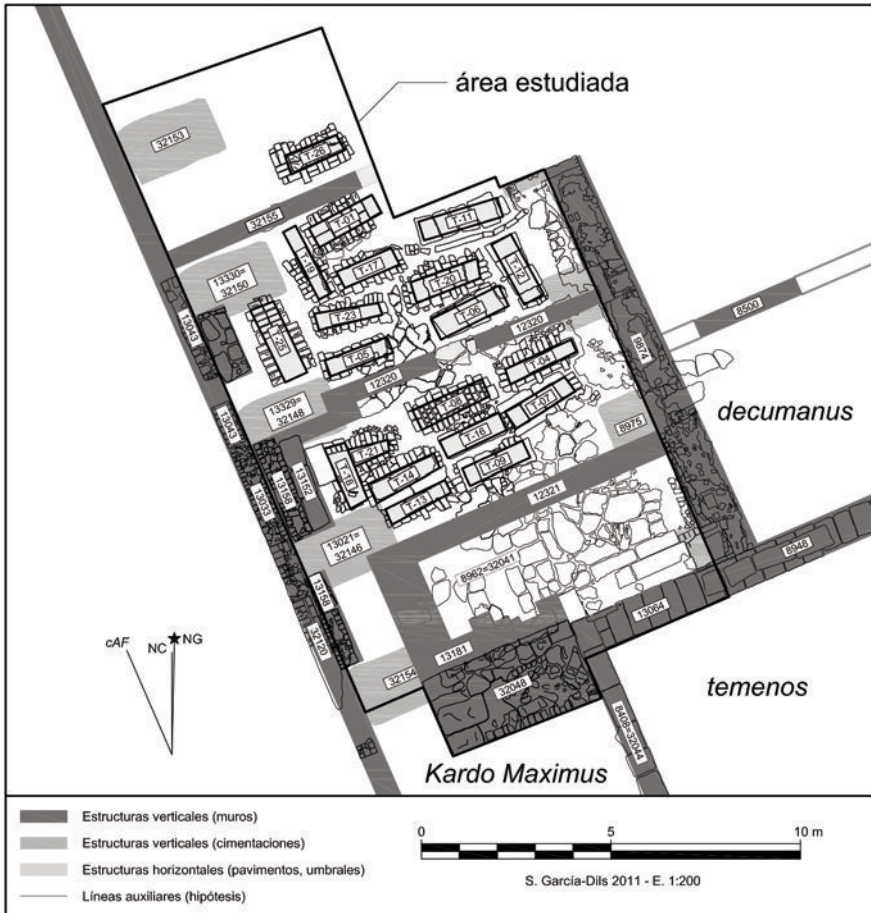


Fig 2. Plaza de España. The Christian funerary enclosure from the 5th c. onwards (S. García-Dils).

The interior dimensions of the documented part of the building were, therefore, a total of 10.00 m from west to east, by 17.40 m excavated from north to south, to which should be added the aforementioned foundation located to the southwest of the building, which means a space of 162.88 m² (fig. 2). Inside the old *porticus*, the walls [32155] and [12320] were aligned from west to east, with the purpose of establishing three interior compartments of similar dimensions, designated South, Central, and North, with respective dimensions of 10.00 x 3.80 m, 10.00 x 4.70 m and 10.00 x (3.90) m, being logically aligned with respect to the colonial street network. The new structures were built without foundations, directly on the limestone slab paving [8962=32041] of the *porticus*; reused materials were used for their construction, basically calcarenite ashlar from nearby

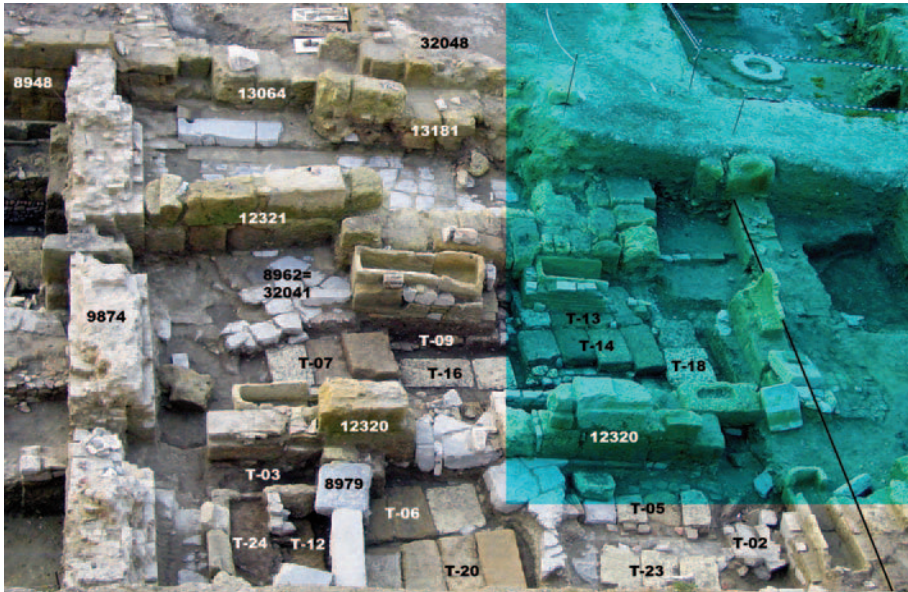


Fig. 3. Plaza de España. General view of the Christian funerary enclosure from the north (S. García-Dils).

public buildings. The walls maintained the compartmentalization previously marked by the pilasters attached to the inner walls of the *porticus* (fig. 3). A third structure, the L-shaped wall [12321], framed an enclosed space with no tombs or any other element that would allow us to establish its functionality.

As already mentioned, to the southwest of the funerary enclosure was located the solid foundation [32048], with a rectangular plan and dimensions of 2.25 m (N-S) by 4.24 m (W-E) and a preserved height of 1.46 m – three courses of ashlar – on the surface of the *kardo maximus*, whose slabs were removed for the construction, excavating a foundation pit 1.55 m deep (fig. 4). This structure was built on the outside with major rubble material, mainly ashlar and singular architectural elements reused from the neighboring *temenos*, with an interior fill composed of a core of rubble cemented with lime mortar. It was razed to the ground in the 15th century when the area was leveled for the construction of the city's Plaza Mayor – today Plaza de España –. It has been proposed that, due to its constructive characteristics and its location with respect to the funerary enclosure, we are possibly in the presence of the base of a tower whose chronology, based on the ceramic materials recovered in its foundation pit, must be placed after the middle of the 5th century (García-Dils *et al.* 2011b, p. 273). As has been said, at the time of excavation, the preserved elevation of this tower was one and a half metres high, so that it can be deduced, based on the type of work, the known development and the foundations laid, that it must have had a more than considerable height.



Fig. 4. *Plaza de España*. Foundations and first courses of ashlars of the tower of the funerary enclosure, built in the 5th c., before (a) and after (b) the excavation of the *kardo maximus* (S. García-Dils).

Very little information has been found to establish the circulation within the enclosure. The main entrance would have been to the south, over the old *kardo* and flanked by the tower. To the right there would be a space, apparently without access, the L-shaped wall [12321], the only one without tombs, which could have been used as an enclosure to contain sarcophagi, although we should not rule out the possibility that it was part of the tower itself, to which it was attached. The

corridor generated by the tower and the west wall of the South Chamber constituted the southern access to the funerary enclosure. In the north wall of this room there was an opening that allowed entrance to the Central Chamber, also a funerary space filled with burials, both under the floor and in raised pantheons with sarcophagi. The data available for the northernmost part of the excavation are scarcer, but everything suggests the existence of another funerary space, similar to the previous ones, but in a worse state of preservation.

The polygonal limestone slabs that formed the original paving of the *porticus* [8962=32041] continued to serve this function when the building was converted into a funerary enclosure. At those points where the funerary structures were excavated, the slabs were replaced by brick floors with a uniform surface that followed the orientation of the chambers. Up to 26 intact pantheons were located under these slabs, including the one of the *famulus Dei Sapatio*, the only one that had an inscription (García-Dils *et al.* 2005). Most of them were aligned from west to east, following the orientation of the interior partitions of the funerary enclosure; due to space limitations, only six of them were arranged transversally from north to south, taking advantage of the gaps left by the other funerary structures.

A wide variety of materials were used in the construction of the pantheons, most of which were reused, from bricks to ashlar and even a Roman funerary ara. In sixteen of the recorded cases, the tombs were constructed solely of reused bricks, arranged in courses of varying numbers, and cemented with earth; in another ten cases, ashlar or slabs of limestone or calcarenite were used, whether or not combined with bricks. Some tombs had their interior walls lined with lime and sand mortar. Finally, all tomb roofs had a flat exterior surface, almost all of which consisted of three or four slabs of calcarenite – sometimes limestone or marble – laid transversally to the structure; the brick paving slabs referred to above were laid on top of them (fig. 5).

Most funerary structures functioned as pantheons. The last individual buried in the supine position was accompanied by one or more secondary burials, deposited above the head or at the feet and sides of the lower limbs of the individuals in the primary position. There was no evidence that wooden coffins were used in the burials. With regard to the sex and age characterization of the 53 individuals buried, of which 25 were in primary position and 28 in secondary position, the predominance of adult women – 13 of them in primary position, 10 in secondary position – over adult men – 6 in primary position, 10 in secondary position – is noteworthy. In the case of women, in two instances they were accompanied by children (fig. 6).

Given the state of preservation of the enclosure as a whole, there were very few remains of architectural and liturgical decoration, which were nevertheless very significant in terms of proposing interpretative lines for this burial space. One of these elements was a limestone corner piece (fig. 7), which, given its size, material, and archaeological context, seems to have formed part of the

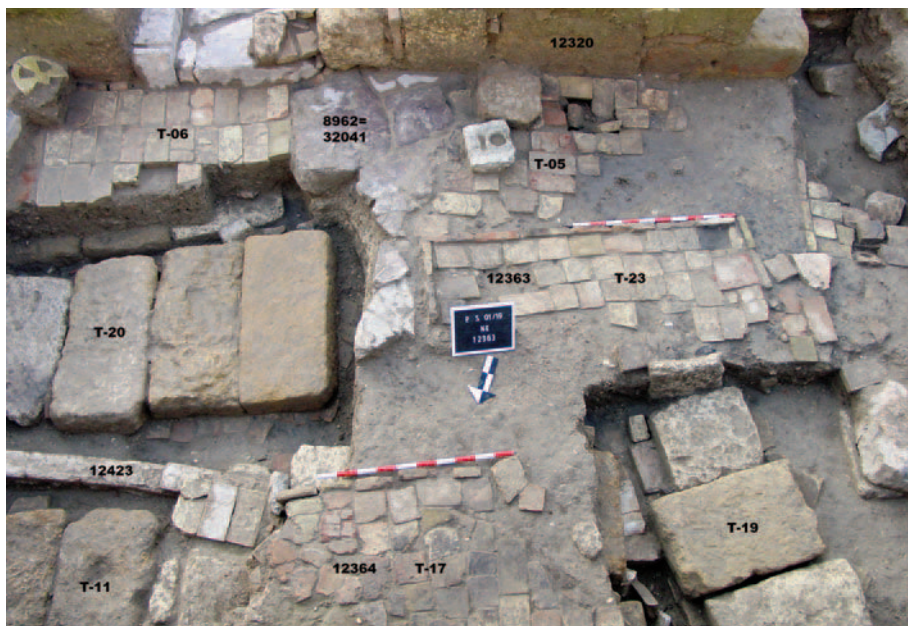


Fig. 5. *Plaza de España*. View from the north of the central chamber of the funerary enclosure, in the excavation process. (S. García-Dils).



Fig. 6. *Plaza de España*. View from the north of the central chamber of the funerary enclosure, after the aperture of some of the pantheons (S. García-Dils).



Fig. 7. *Plaza de España*. Corner element (S. García-Dils).

structure of a singular tomb-mausoleum, a type of monument well represented in some basilicas of the western Mediterranean, such as those of Sbeitla, San Felice a Cimitile (Nola) or the Rue Malaval in Marseille (Duval 1971, pp. 179-203; Moliner 2006; Chavarría Arnau 2018^a, pp. 164-165, 169, 214). Also significant were the findings of the fragments of two crosses encircled by laurel wreaths which, due to their format, possibly occupied the crown of the roof of the tower or of the funerary enclosure (fig. 8).

The funerary enclosure has provided only two epigraphic testimonies of Late Antique chronology, a bronze ring with α and ω , and the epitaph of the aforementioned Sapatio, buried in tomb n^o1, the context of which has already been the subject of specific study⁸. The inscription was dated 9 February 659, making it one of the most chronologically advanced examples in the provincial epigraphic corpus. Concerning the grave goods, most of them consisted of ceramic and vitreous vessels of various types, which have been dated to between the end of the 6th century and the beginning of the 8th c. (García-Dils *et al.* 2011b, pp. 278-282).

As recent excavations in Eciija are showing, the city, unlike others, did not experience a contraction of the urban perimeter in Late Antiquity. On the contrary, it has been archaeologically verified that certain areas of the city underwent a clear process of densification, with old *domus* reformed and their old peristyles converted into living areas, and which continued to operate during the 7th century. It is in this general context that we must situate the transformation of this singular and emblematic space, the Roman *porticus*, into a necropolis, which was

⁸ *HEp* 15, 2006, 324; GARCÍA-DILS *et al.* 2005, pp. 266-269. Other epigraphic evidence of earlier chronology has been found inside the enclosure, such as a Roman metrical funerary inscription (CARANDE *et al.* 2013).

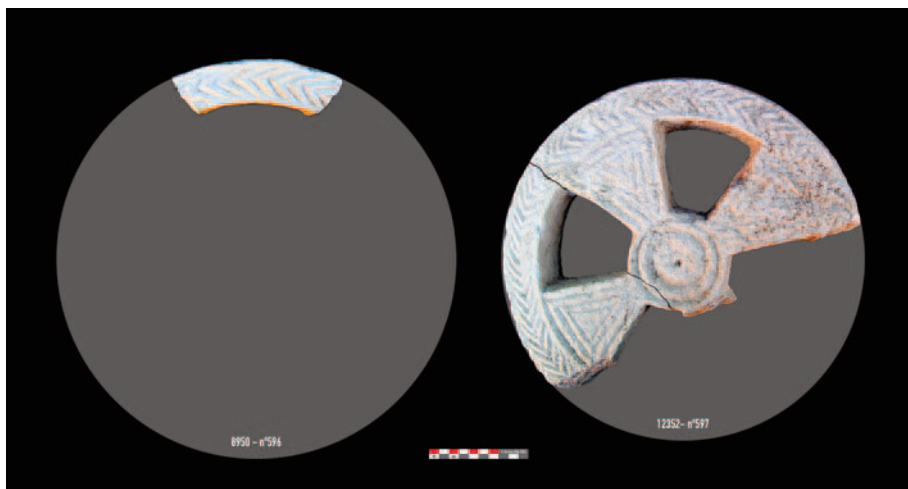


Fig. 8. *Plaza de España*. Fragments of crosses (S. García-Dils).

not only located within the walls of the Late Antique city but also occupied a central and privileged place in it⁹. This is the first time in *Baetica* that a section of an imperial forum has been reused and Christianised, being this cemetery also the most important intramural necropolis in the province, with a very high density of occupation and a high level of monumentality in its burials.

It is also the first time in Andalusia that the existence of a tower associated with liturgical-funerary contexts has been confirmed by an archaeological excavation. Although these structures had been employed in Italy since the 4th century (Piva 2010, pp. 109-114), in Hispania it was not until the 6th century that this phenomenon became generalized, with the first literary mention in Hispanic sources being found in the two towers built by bishop Fidel of Merida for the basilica of Santa Eulalia (*VSPE* 5.3.3-9)¹⁰. However, in the case of Ecija, the tower of the funerary precinct had a much earlier chronology, almost a hundred years before that which can be attributed to the one in the capital of Lusitania.

Late Antique intramural cemeteries are scarce in Hispania (Chavarría Arnau 2018^a, pp. 203-223; Chavarría Arnau 2018b, pp. 130-142), although more or less isolated burial sites have been found, as can be seen in *Barcino* (Bonnet,

⁹ Concerning the phenomenon of occupation of the *porticus*, with several case studies, see RUIZ BUENO *et al.* 2020. There are very few explicit references to the reuse and adaptation of *porticus* for worship and/or as funerary enclosures. Examples are the small church of St. Justina *in capite porticus* in Ravenna or the cathedral of Ephesus, built inside a monumental *stoa* (VAES 1989, p. 303).

¹⁰ For the archaeological evidence, *vid.* MATEOS 1999, pp. 157-158; MATEOS 2003, p. 81; CHAVARRÍA ARNAU 2018b, pp. 84-86. About the church bell towers in *Hispania*, *vid.* ARBEITER 2010.

Beltrán de Heredia 2001, p. 84) and *Valentia* (Calvo *et al.* 2000; Alapont 2005). In terms of size, monumentality, and location, the Astigitan necropolis surpasses those found around the forum of *Clunia* (Barral 1982); similarly, in *Valentia* (Ribera 2007), both the reuse of *kardo* and *decumanus maximus* and the erection of an important necropolis next to the *episcopium*, both on the site of the old imperial forum, show clear similarities with the monumental complex documented in Ecija. The necropolis of the forum of *Carteia* (Bernal 2006, pp. 436-437, 462-463), which is of considerable size and surrounds the old temple of the city, could also be adduced as a parallel, and it has therefore been assumed that it was reused as a church at a later date, although the evidence in this respect is, so far, very weak.

In any case, it is essential to advance in the research of the necropolis of *Astigi* to determine whether we are dealing with a specific and limited use of a specific space or, on the contrary, whether it is rather part of a more ambitious program of Christianisation of the most emblematic areas of the ancient city, perhaps related to the erection of a *basilica*¹¹.

2. Some notes on urban evolution in Late Antiquity

Is well known by the researchers the continued vitality of the Baetic cities from the beginning of the 5th c. (Ordóñez *et al.* 2013). In subsequent times, in line with what can be observed in other surrounding communities, and especially from the mid-6th century onwards, the regional context of conflict between Visigoths, Imperials, and local powers led to the appearance of some new developments in the polyorctic field. As a general rule, throughout Late Antiquity, the cities of the West were walled, something that literary sources will not fail to point out as an essential and defining feature of their urban reality (Riché 1996). The walled enclosures were, more logically, the object of particular care and concern in those conflictive or frontier environments, such as the case of *Astigi* and in general that of the cities of the intra-Baetic territory, inserted in a highly strategic area for the Visigothic and Byzantine powers, in a struggle for the control of these lands. This is why many of the cities in the south were strengthened (Salvador 2002; de Man 2017; Fernández Ochoa, Morillo 2020). Literary sources confirm this for Leovigild's *Italica* and Comenciolus' Cartagena and take it for granted for Hermenegild's besieged *Hispalis* from the *castrum Osset*. Although we have no clear archaeological evidence for the moment, the size of the walled enclosure of Late Antique *Astigi* is reported in Arab

¹¹ For an overview on the subject of the Christianisation of the urban space in Late Antique Hispania, see CHAVARRÍA ARNAU 2018b, pp. 65-96.

sources in relation to different war episodes that took place between the conquest of 711 and 913, when the then Emir of Cordoba, Abd al-Rahman III, captured the rebel city and ordered the demolition of its walls (García-Dils 2015, pp. 101-108).

With regard to the urban street network, once again, it has been the extensive archaeological excavation carried out in the Plaza de España which has provided valuable information on their evolution in the Late Antique period. In this respect, there are several aspects that should be highlighted. In the first place, the occupation of streets by neighboring dwellings and the consequent densification of the urban area is not so much due to a presumed decadence of civic institutions as to a real need for space which is evidence of a flourishing of urban life, directly linked to the rural exodus which can be seen when it is analyzed the Late Antique settlement patterns in the area around *Astigi* in this period, in which numerous sites were abandoned. In this sense, it is clear in any case that the urban level remained unchanged throughout Late Antiquity, with the streets remaining in use, with numerous repairs in different parts of the city (García-Dils 2015, pp. 109-153). Finally, it should not be forgotten that the sewage infrastructures, *cloacae* built during the early imperial period, continued to be used until the Arab invasion, in some cases even afterward, and not a single example of a cesspit has been documented in Late Antique Ecija¹².

Concerning domestic spaces, the Later Roman period entailed intensive compartmentalization of rooms and the occupation of interior courtyards, which seems to be alleviated throughout Late Antiquity, when the possibility of enlarging the dwellings at the expense of the adjoining roadway allowed a return to high-imperial domestic schemes. An example of this would be the House of the *Oscillum*, in the last phase of which its large uncovered interior courtyard was cleared, returning to the structure of a house organized around an atrium-peristyle (García-Dils *et al.* 2009). It is also worth mentioning that, at the beginning of the 5th c., the houses in the center of the city continued to be decorated with mosaics with mythological themes, as in the case of the House of *Okeanos*, located immediately adjacent to the Christian funerary space discussed above. It is specifically a mosaic with the representation of *Okeanos* and a Bacchic triumph with a band of Dionysian decorative elements – kraters, felines, etc. –, dated thanks to archaeological evidence at the beginning of the 5th c. Throughout the following two centuries, these pavements were still in use, without the location of this dwelling next to the Christian enclosure being an obstacle (García-Dils *et al.* 2011a) (figs. 9-10).

¹² Indeed, for both Roman and Late Antique times, no cesspools for wastewater discharge have been documented in the city, a practice that would become the norm after the Umayyad conquest and would be perpetuated until contemporary times (García-Dils 2015, pp. 109-153).



Fig. 9. Plaza de España. Mosaic with Bacchic motifs, early 5th c. (S. García-Dils).



Fig. 10. Plaza de España. Mosaic of Okeanos, early 5th c. (S. García-Dils).

3. A possible monastery in the suburban territory of Astigi: *La Palmosilla Baja*

At 9 km north of Ecija and along the banks of the Genil is located the important settlement of *Isla del Castillo*, identified with the ancient *Segouia*¹³. The place traces its origin as a population center at least to the orientalizing period, although literary sources recall especially its role in some episodes of war during the republican period, particularly the one that referred to the civil wars. Until the end of the 1st c. AD would appear as one of the *ciuitates stipendiariae* of *Baetica*, being promoted to the municipality in the Flavian period, as can be deduced from its ascription to the *Quirina* tribe (*CIL* II 1166 = *CILA* Se 4), a municipal statute whose confirmation is also found in another inscription, which will be discussed below. Regarding the continuity of the habitat in the Late Antique period, the discovery of coins of this chronology corroborates the extension of the population of the place during these dates, even reaching the Andalusí and late medieval times (Durán, Padilla 1990, p. 95). However, it is not known how large the settlement was at that time, and whether it could still be considered a city at that time (Durán, Padilla 1990, p. 95).

In 1997 and 1998 two excavation campaigns were carried out at a specific point of the site, on the western bank of the Genil River. The first of these allowed us to document that what had initially been interpreted as a dock actually corresponded to one of the perimeter walls of a massive construction made of a combination of *opus quadratum* and *opus caementicium*. The building had not been discovered in any of the previous surveys of the area; this can be explained as an effect of the recent fluvial dynamics, which has meant that the site has been under the waters of the river until very recently. As an added consequence, it should be noted that there is practically no ceramic evidence in the stratigraphic sequence – exclusively composed of fluvial silts and sands –, which has prevented us from advancing in the functionality and chronology of the building, which in any case seemed to be located in late Antiquity.

In principle, because of its dimensions, typology, and location with respect to the central nucleus of the urban settlement, this large structure seemed to be identifiable with a fortified suburban *uilla*, similar in typology to the one existing in *Centum Cellas*, in Belmonte, Castelo Branco, in the Portuguese Beira Alta (Guerra, Schattner 2010). The original elevation of the building was preserved practically in its entirety on the first floor, including the jambs of the entrance door, four windows in the form of linteled apertures, and the openings for the beams that supported the first-floor slab, all built using large monolithic blocks of

¹³ HERNÁNDEZ DÍAZ *et al.* 1951, p. 77; THOUVENOT 1973, pp. 136-137; TOVAR 1974, pp. 113-114; WIEGELS 1985, pp. 55-56; SILLIERES 1990, p. 185; DURÁN, PADILLA 1990, p. 95; *CIL*, II²/5, p. 366; SÁEZ *et al.* 2006, pp. 155-157.



Fig. 11. *La Palmosilla Baja*. General view of the building complex, in the excavation process (S. García-Díls).

calcarenite. The ground floor of the structure was located at a much lower level than the current one, around three meters below it, which is, on the other hand, very relevant data to establish the level at which the *Singilius*¹⁴ ran in Roman times. The second excavation season expanded the area of study around this building, although the inclement weather and the constant floods, which literally submerged the study area, made it impossible to advance in the understanding of the whole, except for the fact that the river had almost completely swept away the structures attached to the main body of the building, also built in *opus quadratum* (fig. 11).

The excavations covered a total area of 320 m², corresponding to the southwestern limit of the building complex. The excavated buildings open towards the northeast, distributed with their backs to a steep slope, which was also archaeologically explored, by means of geoelectric survey and diagnostic soundings, without locating any type of structure. It is certain that the complex extended to the north and east since numerous large ashlars have been found in the vicinity, still visible in the dry season.

In terms of construction technique, the complex was built with calcarenite ashlars of different modules, with maximum dimensions of 1.20 x 0.80 x 0.50 m,

¹⁴ The commonly accepted denomination, *Singilis*, is based solely on the authority of Pliny (Plin., *HN* 3.12), while other authors, geographically or temporally closer, mention it as *Singilius* (Isid., *Hist. Suev.* 85), *Singillius* (Iulius Honorius, *ap.* RIESE 1878, p. 36) or *Singillio* (Hyd. 114). For a complete argumentation on the matter, *vid.* SÁEZ *et al.* 2010.



Fig. 12. *La Palmosilla Baja*. Building B. Detail of the construction techniques. Hole for a beam (left) and lintel of the entrance door (right) (S. García-Dils).

well squared, dry-jointed, and reinforced with fragments of bricks, *tegulae*, and amphorae. Occasionally there are level courses of bricks cemented with lime and sand mortar, also layers of *opus caementicium*, as well as structures of amphora fragments cemented with lime and sand mortar (fig. 12).

The excavation revealed three separate buildings (fig. 13). Building A was oriented east-west, with a façade wall of 1.20 m, and the rest of the structure was 1.00 m wide. The floor plan was rectangular, but apsidal to the west. It had an access door located to the east, 1.00 m wide, covered by a lintel of *opus caementicium*. The maximum exterior dimensions were 7.50 x 6.00 m, while the maximum interior dimensions were 5.30 x 4.00 m (19.50 m²). Between buildings A and B there was a corridor 1.00 m wide, with a linteled roof of calcarenite blocks, with a total length of 2.50 m.

Building B was oriented northeast to southwest. The façade and apse walls were 1.00 m wide, while the side walls were 0.50 m wide. Like building A, the ground plan was rectangular, although apsidal to the southwest. It had an access door located to the northeast, 2.00 m wide, with lateral recesses suggesting that it was covered by a wooden lintel. An interior wall of 0.80 m wide compartmentalized the building into two independent spaces, with a communication opening of 2.00 m wide between them. The maximum exterior dimensions were 11.45 x 7.00 m, while the dimensions of the abscised room were 4.20 x 5.00 m

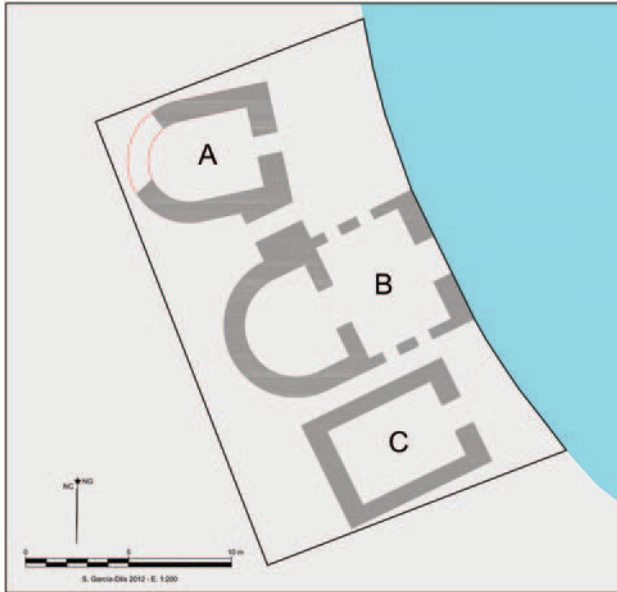


Fig. 13. *La Palmosilla Baja*. General plan of the funerary buildings (S. García-Díls).

(18.25 m²). On the other hand, the rectangular room is 4.45 x 6.00 m (26.70 m²), with lateral openings of 0.75 m wide, covered by monolithic lintels of calcarenite. In the interior of the rectangular room, there were traces of apertures that indicated the presence of four main beams of 0.40 x 0.30 m of edge, aligned from Northeast to Southwest, which would be served as support for an undetermined number of secondary beams, transversally oriented, of 0.10 x 0.10 m. This data shows that the interior of the rectangular room would have a flat slab that would serve as a roof. Between buildings B and C there is a 1.00 m wide corridor, but it is not possible to determine whether it was covered or not.

Building C was oriented from northeast to southwest. The facade and rear walls were 1.00 m wide, while the side walls were 0.80 m wide. The ground plan was rectangular, with an access door opening to the northeast, 1.0 m wide. The exterior dimensions of the building were 7.60 x 5.60 m, while the interior dimensions were 5.60 x 4.00 m (22.40 m²).

It is difficult to establish the chronology and functionality of these buildings, mainly due to the problems associated with their difficult documentation process. In principle, the construction technique, reusing systematically construction elements – including fragments of *caementicium* –, could be ascribed to the Late Antique period. On this basis, the analysis of these interconnected buildings, located successively at the foot of a hillside, invites to think of a group of medium-sized funerary monuments, built in the area expressly for some reason, which, as will be seen later, must be linked to the proximity of a church. Ho-

wever, with the present data, it is not possible to affirm that it is an *ad sanctos* burial. The only building of the three clearly oriented would be building B, whose apse oriented to the west allows supposing its non-functional ascription to a church, to which we would have to add dimensions and internal structure not very adequate to the liturgical functionality. Therefore, everything seems to indicate that these possible mausolea were entered from the east and oriented to the west, placed together, forming a more or less heterogeneous group of solid constructions, but made with reused elements.

Examples of this type of group of buildings, clearly defined as mausolea, can be found in numerous places in Hispania and the Mediterranean, especially linked in the Late Antique period to the immediate proximity of an important religious center. Thus, for Hispania, the best-documented area is in the sacred area of Francolí, in Tarragona, where a series of mausolea are closely related to a basilica complex and a possible monastery, in a large complex that seems to be dedicated to an important local martyr, St. Fructuosus (López Vilar 2006). The episcopium of Egara also has a large funerary building in the center of the complex – the current church of Sant Miquel – (García Linares *et al.* 2009), and other small mausolea associated with the different basilicas built there, used as burial places by the ecclesiastical and civil elites of the area. Regarding *Baetica*, we have in *Hispalis* the necropolis of the *Carretera de Carmona*, its mausolea, and its hypothetical link to the commemorative basilica of St. Justa and St. Rufina (Ordóñez *et al.* 2013, p. 331).

The Mediterranean examples are better-known thanks to the historical continuity from the earliest times to the Romanesque period (Dey 2010). Thus, large martyrial and/or monastic complexes such as San Felice in Cimitile, San Vincenzo al Volturno, or San Pietro del Vaticano in Rome itself had important mausolea and associated funerary areas, where the elites sought burial.

A particular aspect of the epigraphic evidence of this municipality, specifically that which concerns the inscription *CIL II²/5, 1292 (AE 1997, 829 = HEp 7, 1997, 836; Ordóñez, Sáez 1996, pp. 100-103)*, provides unexpected and relevant data to propose a specific functionality to this complex. This inscription records the tribute paid in honor of Clodia Sabina by a freedman, Epaphroditus, authorized by the municipal senate of *Segouia*, in a public and civic environment. The piece, today in the Municipal Archaeological Museum of Ecija, was found in the mid-1980s in the place of *Casa Ariza*, in the area of *La Palmosilla Baja*, in the bed of the Genil River, next to some large ashlar well squared and forming alignments from the shore towards the center of the river, about 200 m from the nucleus of the *Isla del Castillo*. Therefore, it can be affirmed that the inscription was integrated into the building complex referred to above. Until now, the main interest of the text of this inscription was to confirm the municipal status of this community in the 2nd c., the date of the piece according to the paleogra-



Fig. 14. *La Palmosilla Baja*. Pedestal of *Clodia Sabina* (S. García-Díls).

phy used. However, a closer study of the support has brought to light an aspect hitherto not appreciated by any of the editors of the text, which adds value to the interpretation of the piece and the archaeological context in which it was placed.

The base of the altar is practically square, with dimensions of 0.78 m wide by 0.74 m deep (fig. 14). The surface of the base was originally slightly roughened, only to guarantee the stability of the support of the pedestal, so it was logically done in a careless manner. At a later time, a recess was made in its center, this time in a careful manner and with a correct finish, with three rectangles or squares inscribed successively one inside the other in decreasing depth (fig. 15)¹⁵.

We are undoubtedly dealing with the reuse of a Roman statue pedestal as the base of a Christian altar on which a table would be placed, which, judging by the size of the reused piece itself, must have been of considerable dimensions. The phenomenon of reuse of Roman honorific altars and pedestals is very common in *Baetica*, where there are numerous examples that, at least in some cases, can be dated, such as those altars consecrated by bishops Pimenius or Bacauda, in *Asido* (*ICERV*, 304, 305 and 309) and *Egabrum* (*CIL* II²/5, 299), respectively, around the second half of the 7th c. They would correspond to group A1a of Sastre's study of these liturgical elements (Sastre 2009).

However, the phenomenon of the conservation of the inscription being inverted and/or "condemned" to a secondary position is very rare. One of the few examples of altars with an inverted inscription is one of the altars of San Pedro de Balsemão, where the Roman text was relegated to the back of the Christia-

¹⁵ The dimensions of the opening from the surface towards the inside, looking at the piece from the front – that is, with the viewer facing the inscribed face – are as follows: (1) 27.0 x 22.0 cm and 3.0 cm deep; (2) 10.5 x 10.0 cm and 2.0 cm deep; (3) 7.0 x 7.0 cm and 6.0 cm deep.

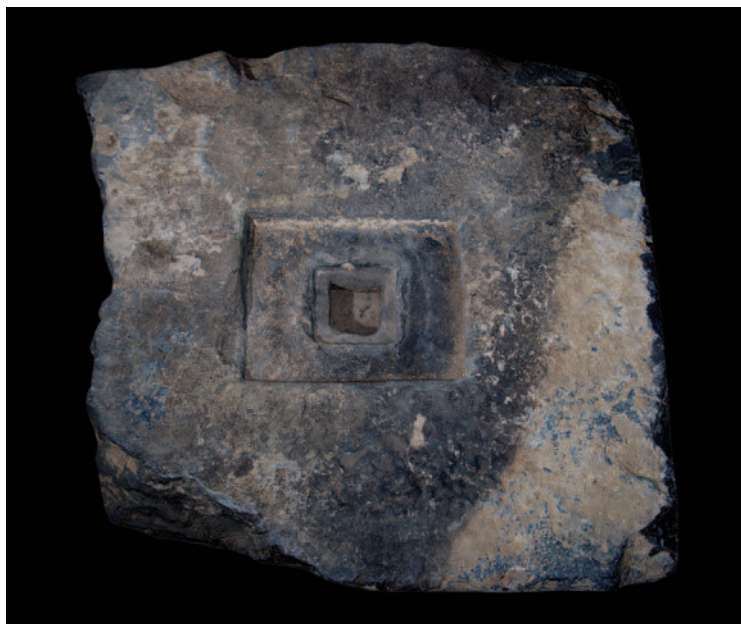


Fig. 15. *La Palmosilla Baja*. Pedestal of *Clodia Sabina*. View of the *loculus* made at the piece's base (S. García-Dils).

nized piece (Sastre 2009, cat. no. P45). In all of Western *Baetica* there is only one other case of inversion of a Roman inscription: *CIL* II²/5, 389, a cylindrical pedestal found in the ancient city of *Ipsca* (Sánchez *et al.* 2009, p. 146). The presence of this clear liturgical element leads to thinking that the building complex with which it was related must have had some religious function that made the presence of such an altar necessary. Given that by this time nothing indicates that the ancient *Segouia* maintained its urban functions and would have disappeared, the possibility arises to interpret the set of *La Palmosilla Baja* as an enclosure of religious functionality that, by the entity of the remains, can be identified with a monastic community that had an annexed sector of monumental mausolea.

Abstract

This paper offers an overview of the transformations experimented by the urban structure of *colonia Augusta Firma (Hispania Baetica)* in Late Antiquity, based on the results obtained in the archaeological excavations carried out in the last two decades in the city of Ecija (Seville). Also, the archaeological evidence concerning an architectural complex located north of Ecija is presented and its possible identification as a Christian monastery.

Keywords: *Astigi*, Late Antiquity, bishopric, necropolis, monastery.

Questo articolo offre una panoramica sulle trasformazioni della struttura urbana di colonia Augusta Firma (Hispania Baetica) nella tarda antichità, sulla base dei risultati ottenuti dagli scavi archeologici realizzati negli ultimi due decenni nella città di Ecija (Siviglia). Vengono presentate anche le evidenze archeologiche riferite a un complesso architettonico a nord di Ecija, forse interpretabile come un monastero cristiano.

Parole chiave: *Astigi*, tarda antichità, vescovado, necropoli, monastero.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AE = L'Année épigraphique

CIL = Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum.

CILA = Corpus de Inscripciones Latinas de Andalucía.

HEp = Hispania Epigraphica.

ICERV = Inscripciones Cristianas de la España Romana y Visigoda.

IHC = Inscripciones Hispaniae Christianae.

VSPE = Vitas sanctorum patrum Emeretensium.

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