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Christian Landscapes in the Iberian Peninsula: The Archaeological Evidence (Fourth–Sixth Centuries)

Alexandra Chavarría Arnau

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter traces the material evidence for the spread of Christianity in the Iberian peninsula (including Spain and Portugal) between the third and seventh centuries, focusing on a critical review of traditional interpretations and identifications frequently based on inconsistent chronological references, fragile and poorly surviving materials, and often contradictory textual and archaeological evidence. The result is a new perspective on the subject that is much more comparable to that seen in other areas of the Mediterranean. The chapter will analyze the development of Christianization in cities and the countryside, taking into account when churches were built, who built them, and the political, economic, and social context in which Christian topography was created.

Keywords: early Christianity, Iberian peninsula, archaeological evidence, countryside, churches

Alexandra Chavarría Arnau

Introduction

CHRISTIANITY, in contrast to pagan polytheistic cult, identified itself from the beginning as a holistic religion and ideology that permeated the life of the faithful, from entry into the Christian community by baptism to their death. By involving its members in a series of ceremonies, the church consolidated the individual's sense of belonging, partnership, and distinction in a pluralistic society.

With the help of written sources, archaeology sheds light on the ways in which Christian leaders imposed their presence and constructed sacred landscapes. The process began with the diffusion of a symbolic iconography in the private sphere of houses and

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cemeteries that was wholly distinct from the urban and rural spaces dominated by Roman public buildings. From the fourth century onward, the construction of monumental churches slowly led to the formation of a Christian topography in cities and the countryside. Significantly, archaeology and texts together have allowed scholars to identify the participants and especially the leaders in the processes of Christianization.

In this chapter, I will trace the material evidence for the spread of Christianity on the Iberian peninsula (including Spain and Portugal) between the third and seventh centuries. The topic is one with a full history. The study of Late Antique and Early (p. 624) Medieval churches especially has been a favorite subject of Spanish researchers since the monumental work *España sagrada* by Enrique Florez in the eighteenth century and the nineteenth-century research of José Amador de los Ríos, Manuel Gómez Moreno, and Josep Puig i Cadafalch. In the early twentieth century, scholars such as Pere de Palol, Helmut Schlunk, and Jacques Fontaine made notable contributions to the study of churches. Over the last half century, the field of early Christian archaeology has benefited from significant research by scholars such as Luís Caballero Zoreda, Isidro Bango, Thilo Ulbert, Teodor Hauschild, Cristina Godoy, Achim Arbeiter, Elena Quevedo-Chigas, and Maria de los Angeles Utrero, among many others (see Ripoll and Carrero 2009 for a research overview). Nonetheless, despite two centuries of sustained scholarship, few works have approached churches and Christianization in Spain over the entirety of the early Christian period or made archaeological evidence the focal point of their syntheses.

The challenge of producing a synthetic study of early Christianity in this region is to understand the process of Christianization in the longe durée and within its historical context. Some previous interpretations and identifications will also be discussed in order to demonstrate that often they are based on inconsistent chronological references, fragile and poorly surviving materials, and contradictory textual and archaeological evidence. Apparent contradictions between written sources and archaeological evidence in their representation of the Christianization process, therefore, should not surprise us. This chapter considers different classes of evidence on their own terms, allowing interpretations to follow from the examination of each kind of source.[1]

The Earliest Christian Evidence and the Cult of the Dead

The death of a person, the preparation and burial of the body, the fate of the soul, and hopes for salvation and the final judgment on the day of *parousia* were important aspects of early Christianity and are essential to understanding the earliest Christian archaeological evidence (Stancati 2006). For this purpose, we must remember that the main message contained in the New Testament was eschatological, and early Christians believed that Jesus accomplished his mission of redemption and salvation not only with

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prophecies, miracles, and signs but also, first and foremost, with his death, burial, and resurrection.

For this reason, one of the first priorities of bishops, evident from textual sources, was the acquisition of land and the organization of Christian cemeteries where the faithful could bury their loved ones and fulfill funerary rites. These cemeteries probably existed in (p. 625) Spain by the third century, since a letter signed by Bishop Cyprian of Carthage (254–255) reprimanded the bishop of Augusta Emerita (Mérida) for burying his "sons" in a pagan *collegium*, among profane tombs, and following pagan customs (Sotomayor 1979, 44). This reference agrees with other written sources from Rome and North Africa that attest to the existence of Christian cemeteries during the third century.[2]

Before the Churches

The oldest archaeological evidence for Christianization in the West relates to funerary cults—in particular, sarcophagi, mosaics, paintings, and objects used in cemeteries depicting Christian subjects, symbols, and formulae relating to death and the life beyond. The oldest Christian cemeteries in Spain may date as early as the third century (see discussion of the Christian quarter of Tarragona later in this chapter), while the earliest sarcophagi, catalogued by Manuel Sotomayor in the 1970s (Sotomayor 1973, 1975; see also Ripoll 1993), date to the fourth century. Often depicting scenes of the Old and New Testaments, these sarcophagi have generally come from suburban cemeteries of the main cities (Córdoba, Italica, Tarragona) and are expensive, high-quality pieces mostly of Italian origin, connecting them to the highest levels of urban society. This series of sarcophagi starts in the Constantinian period and, in some cases, may already be linked to early cult buildings (probably *memoriae* rather than churches), but this is impossible to confirm from the existing evidence.

Scholars have tried to find the places where Christians met before the construction of monumental churches, but the possibility of clearly identifying the remains of a pre-Constantinian *domus ecclesiae* (a term that never appears in sources before the fourth century) is very rare (Adams 2013). Moreover, the presence of a Roman house under a church could have a wide range of possible interpretations (such as being property bought by the church or donated by a private individual) apart from the house having been used as a religious meeting place. The subject invites further research, since it is difficult to imagine that organized Christian communities, such as those suggested in Cyprian's letter to the bishop of Augusta Emerita or in the canons of the early fourth-century Council of Elvira, were not meeting in places designed to accommodate Christian cult practices and rituals.[3]

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(p. 626) Constructing Christian Urban Landscapes

Martyria appear across a range of fourth-century textual sources, perhaps most prominently in Prudentius (e.g., *Crowns of Martyrdom*), and are scarce but not invisible in the archaeological record. This evidence indicates that the creation of a Christian urban landscape in the main cities in Hispania began in the fourth century and was in full development during the fifth. During this time, cities had already been endowed with a "mother church" (*ecclesia mater*, later called "cathedral") and at least one suburban funerary church, likely built to commemorate the place where a martyr had been previously buried.[4]

Fourth-century urban structures that suggest the activities of Christian cult include a primitive squared baptismal font in Barcelona, in the same area where the monumental baptistery was later to be built (Figure 32.1) (Beltran de Heredia and Bonnet 2007, 775, fig. 1). The first church structures in Egara (today Terrassa) seem also to belong to the fourth century (Figure 32.2) (García, Moro García, and Tuset Bertan 2009). There was probably a cathedral in Mérida by 380 (Figure 32.3), when pro-Priscillianists attacked supporters of the bishop Hydatius. This church was probably at the same location as the current cathedral, where an inscription decorated with an alpha and omega from 388 was found (and is unfortunately lost today) (Ramírez Sádaba and Mateos Cruz 2000, 114–15, 271 n. 65).

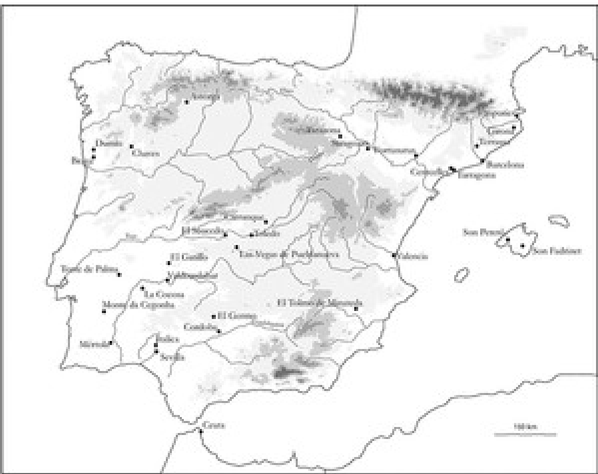

Figure 32.1 Map of main cities and sites noted in the text.

(Alexandra Chavarría)

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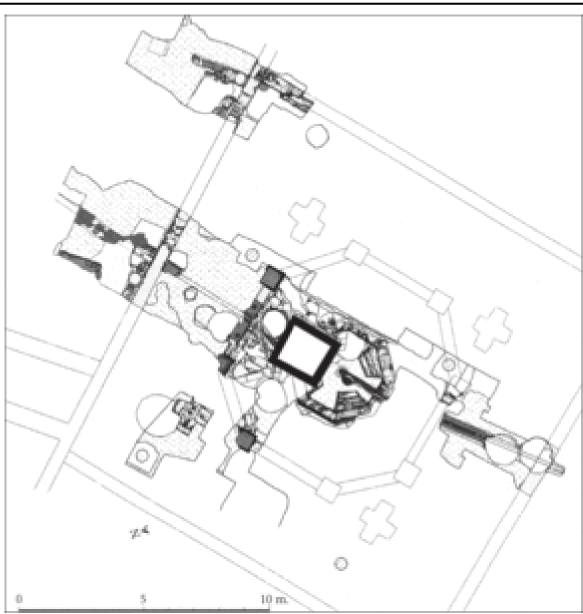

Figure 32.2 Plan of fourth-century squared baptismal font in Barcelona.

(Beltran de Heredia and Bonnet 2007, 775 fig. 1)

Figure 32.3 Plan of fourth-century church structures in Egara in modern-day Terrassa.

(Alexandra Chavarría)

Other attributions to fourth-century buildings are generally very doubtful. Recent studies on the amphitheater of Córdoba (Figure 32.4) link a series of three "apses" (located against the wall separating the *cavea* from the arena) with a fourth-century martyrial church built in the place where the martyr Acisclo died at the beginning of that century. No evidence of a Christian use (such as liturgical material or graves) has been found, and it is probable that the "apses" are some kind of structural reinforcement for the building (Hidalgo 2012). Only further excavations in the area will shed light on this identification. Similarly, the interpretation of intramural burials as evidence for the existence of early churches is problematic, since graves may occur in urban areas without the presence of any kind of Christian building (although Late Roman burials were initially uncommon within city

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walls and tended to be located in suburban areas: see Lambert 1997 for a wide analysis of the evidence from Italy).

Figure 32.4 Plan showing church topography of Mérida in the fourth and fifth centuries: (1) Cathedral; (2) Santa Eulalia; (3) *Xenodochium*.

(Alexandra Chavarría)

The existence of a significant chronological disjunction between written sources—which as early as the fourth century refer to bishops and churches—and much later archaeological evidence is common to other areas of the Roman Empire such as Italy and has not yet (p. 627) been completely resolved, although it can be attributed in part to gaps in the ways we are dating and interpreting the archaeological record. Detailed excavations and attention to scientific dating of early structures will be essential in the future to solve this problem.

Intramural Churches

The process of Christian monumentalization of urban space universally started with the construction of a main church inside the city walls, followed shortly thereafter by the founding of funerary and martyrial churches in suburban areas.[5] This process seems to have started in the fourth century. Some scholars have recently claimed an inverse perspective that interprets the existence of suburban cathedrals as a characteristic feature of Spanish Christianity (Gurt i Esparraguera and Sánchez Ramos 2011, 278). As we will discuss later in this chapter, however, this proposal is not supported by either written sources or archaeological evidence (Chavarría Arnau 2010).

(p. 628) The person mainly responsible for these architectural programs was the bishop, although he could count on the munificence of civil authorities and private Christians who aided the episcopal authorities by contributing either property or cash. Urban elites and bishops were generally part of the same social group and had similar interests, collaborating with each other when necessary.[6] Already by the fifth century, written (p. 629) sources reveal the interests of local *potentes* in controlling episcopal sees, something that was to continue during later centuries when bishops became the main interlocutors between the local population and central government.[7]

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(p. 630) Extensive excavations in late Roman urban cathedrals have occurred only in Barcelona, Valencia, and Mértola, but knowledge of the churches themselves is fragmentary. Tarragona and Córdoba have seen only limited archaeological work. In Mérida, Toledo, Zaragoza, and Seville, among other places, archaeologists can only surmise the location of the cathedral from textual references and sparse archaeological material (such as inscriptions and sculpture). Precise archaeological evidence for fourth-century intramural churches comes from a few cities such as Barcelona and Terrassa, while written sources refer to Christian communities but rarely to architectural contexts (only for Illiberris and Mérida). The number of references multiplies in the fifth century: Hydatius mentions cathedral and martyrial churches in Astorga, Braga, Chaves, and Tarazona (*Chronica* 449). According to Consentius and a letter sent to St. Augustine, there was a cathedral with its *secretarium* in the city of Tarragona by 420, although the first archaeological evidence can only be dated to the end of the fifth century. The letter does not mention the monumental martyrial complex that already existed by that time in the suburbs, which is a reminder of how haphazard written sources can be.

(p. 631) Consistent archaeological evidence for cathedrals emerges by the middle of the sixth century, when church structures become numerous and monumental. While the precise dating for these transformations is generally difficult to determine, dating of mortars in Barcelona and of skeletal remains in Valencia, when combined with the analysis of the building techniques and the stratigraphic sequence, points to an important expansion phase during the second half of the sixth century.[8] Of extraordinary significance is the discovery in Mértola of two monumental baptisteries located at a short distance from each other (Figure 32.5) (Lopes 2014). Both were being used during the sixth century, and they may indicate the presence of an Arian bishop and a Catholic one. The ways in which Arian communities developed their religious activities when settled in Roman Catholic cities during most of the sixth century deserves further investigation.

During the following centuries, the construction of new churches and monasteries with a larger and more complex variety of promoters and founders completed and enriched this developing Christian topography.

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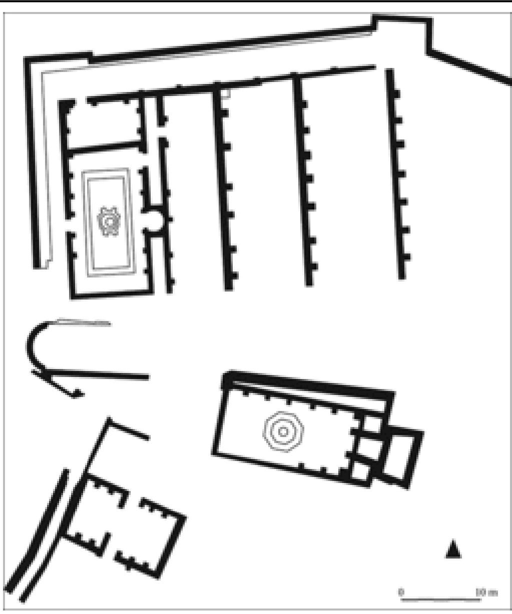

Figure 32.5 Plan of monumental baptisteries excavated at Mértola.

(After Lopes 2014)

Suburban Funerary Christian Complexes

The characteristics of the funerary churches built in the suburbs are better known, mainly because many of them have been unearthed in recent decades due to urban development.

There is a long history of research in the suburbs of Tarragona (Figure 32.6), where a large Christian quarter has been excavated some 700 meters west of the city walls (López 2006). It originated from a suburban residential quarter that was later reused as a cemetery in the third century and included the burials of the martyrs Fructuosus, Augurius, and Elogius. During the third and the fourth centuries, the cemetery developed with thousands of tombs, including mausolea, sarcophagi, mosaic slabs, and inscriptions, all with a strong Christian character. A church with baptistery was constructed by the year 400 (López 2006, 250–51). In the fifth century, a larger funerary basilica (24.00 by 15.20 meters) with a monumental atrium (20.75 by 17.50 meters) and a number of subsidiary buildings, was built to the north of the first Christian buildings.[9] The characteristics of this enormous Christian complex and its sequence—residential suburban area, Christian cemetery from the mid-third century, funerary church in the fourth, and new Christian buildings in the fifth—reflect those of other suburban martyrial complexes in cities such as Rome, Cimitile, Tours, and Arles, among others. These sites developed as *vici christianorum* during the Early Middle Ages due to the bishops' emphasis on (p. 632) Christian burial areas and the cult of relics.[10] Tarragona was therefore endowed from the beginning of the fifth century with a Christian topography, including an intramural cathedral and a suburban martyrial and funerary complex, and

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was enriched in the following centuries with new churches inside and outside the walled city area.

Figure 32.6 Plan of Christian quarter excavated in the suburbs of Tarragona.

(After López Vilar 2006)

(p. 633) (p. 634) The same can be said for Mérida, where the important martyrial complex devoted to St. Eulalia was located in the northern suburbs (see Figure 32.3). In this case, the texts also underline the close connection between the development of this Christian area and the power of bishops. The area was used as a Christian cemetery with Christian inscriptions and monumental mausolea (Mateos Cruz and Sastre 2009) by the middle of the fourth century; it developed, as at Tarragona, from a residential suburban area abandoned around the end of the third century or the beginning of the fourth. Excavations have also confirmed the information given by Prudentius (*Crowns of Martyrdom* 3.39) about the tumulus of the young martyr (dated to the fourth century) and by the *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium* (*VSPE*) on the monumentality of the church built in the second half of the fifth century and later enlarged by two towers in the sixth century (*VSPE* VI.7).[11] Linked to this basilica were several monastic structures dated to the seventh century and also documented by epigraphic data (Ramírez Sádaba and Mateos Cruz 2000), and a large building that has been identified either as the *xenodochium* built by Bishop Masona (Mateos Cruz 1995) or an otherwise unknown residential building (as suggested by Arce 2002, 187 n. 39). The basilica was extensively used for privileged graves including the Emeritan bishops as well as some of the main individuals mentioned in the *VSPE*, among them the archdeacon Eleuterius, who died in 604, and the *uir inlustris* Gregorius, who died in 492.

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Suburban Cathedrals?

The heterogeneity in the quantity and quality of Spanish archaeological data and the clear imbalance between knowledge of suburban areas and that of extramural ecclesiastical complexes are probably why some researchers have identified martyrial funerary churches as cathedrals and consequently attributed to Spanish Christianization a "singular" suburban character. Those who support this proposal refer to "parallels throughout the Empire of cathedrals constructed in the suburbs" (Gurt i Esparraguera and Sánchez Ramos 2011, 278, 274), particularly in Italy, referencing sites in Cornus, Canosa, Arezzo, or Velletri. However, for years Italian researchers have raised doubts about these suburban locations for different reasons. The most significant critique is that the *ecclesia mater* (cathedral) signaled a place where urban communities gathered and prayed together under the leadership of the bishop, and this would be inconsistent with a suburban location, where it would appear that churches served other, completely different purposes.

In Spain, the identification of suburban "cathedrals" (in Girona, Empuries, and Ceuta, among other places) is generally based on unverified assumptions about where the cathedral should have been built, or arguments based on the existence of bishops' graves or bapitisteries. These elements, however, are completely compatible with martyrial suburban complexes. At Córdoba, recent research has identified the fourth-century (p. 635) cathedral with the archaeological site of Cercadilla, located in the western suburbs of the city (Marfil 2000). Leaving aside the complex identification of this monumental building (Arce 1997, 2010; Hidalgo 2014; Hidalgo and Ventura 1994), there is no evidence at all that this site had any Christian use in the fourth century and still less that it could have been the residence of Bishop Osius, as some have proposed. At a certain moment, probably during the sixth century, a church was built over the ruins of the building, and it was associated with a funerary area where at least one bishop of the city was buried in 549 (Hidalgo 2002). Rafael Hidalgo identifies this church with the sanctuary devoted to St. Acisclus, which, according to Isidore, stood in the western suburbs of Córdoba when King Agila profaned the site in 549. Prudentius (*Crowns of Martyrdom* 4.19–20), however, mentions the cult of St. Acisclus at the end of the fourth century, when Cercadilla was still a residential building and lacked any traces of Christianization. It is more likely that the sanctuary of St. Acisclus was south of the amphitheater and in front of the western gate of the Roman city, as other Cordoban scholars have proposed, and that the Christian use of Cercadilla started during the sixth century.

There are some exceptional examples of non-urban cathedrals, but they were limited to very unusual circumstances rather than a common pattern. One example includes the monastery of Dumio in northwestern Spain, which became an episcopal see when the abbot of the monastery was appointed as a bishop (Fontes 2015, 402–3). Another exception is the Visigothic king Wamba, who created non-canonical bishoprics, including

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one in the suburban church of Toledo dedicated to the Apostles (Canon 4, Toledo XII [681]). However, contemporaries emphasized the exceptional nature of this event, and the situation returned to normal quickly.[12]

Christianizing the Countryside

The creation of an ecclesiastical network in the countryside was a complex process that occurred across a range of different periods and involved a variety of figures who collaborated, succeeded each other, or competed for support and recognition. Generally, the Christianization of the countryside in western Mediterranean areas was intimately linked to the destiny of the cities in these regions, since the cities were the sees of the bishops and the residences of the civic elites, and both of those groups were responsible for the building of churches.

The twenty-first canon of the council, held at Agde in 506, distinguishes between *parrocias* (churches linked to the diocesan authority of the bishop) and *oratoria* (private buildings whose function was subject to certain restrictions). It is nonetheless clear that rural churches could have served many different functions at different times such as pastoral care, funerary space, centers of private cult, commemoration, or devotion, and (p. 636) the needs of monastic communities. Only in respect to these different functions can one understand their place within the territory and their association with settlements. In other instances, their existence is linked to the management of large properties (sometimes of monastic or royal origin) or to places in the landscape that had a particular significance for people, beyond the context of a nearby settlement.

These functions sometimes changed through time. A recent reinterpretation of the church called El Gatillo, in Cáceres (Figure 32.7) (Caballero Zoreda and Sáez 2009), shows that the first building, which was small in size (11.95 by 6.00 meters) and dated to about 500, had probably been conceived as a funerary monument, since graves were located close to the presbyterial area. In a second period, this funerary character continues with the addition of two funerary annexes, one in front of the façade and the other attached to the southern perimeter wall. Not until the third phase was a monumental baptistery added to the main building. This example demonstrates the difficulties for archaeologists in establishing a precise chronology for the various phases of a complex, including both the original construction and later additions. Yet an exact dating for such phases is fundamental to understanding the meaning of the transformations in relation to their political, economic, and social context. An extensive campaign of carbon-14 dating of mortar samples offers one way to solve this problem by providing an assessment of chronology independent of diagnostic artifacts or particular architectural styles.

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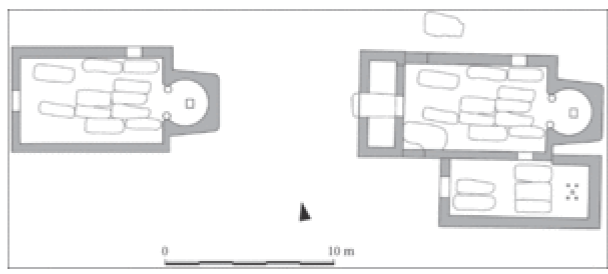

Figure 32.7 Plan showing chronological sequence of the church called El Gatillo de Arriba (Cáceres).

(After Caballero Zoreda and Sáez 2009)

According to the First Council of Toledo, at the end of the fourth century there were already Spanish churches built in a wide variety of different settlements. The fifth canon refers to priests who celebrate mass “in the place where there is a church: a castle, a village, or a villa” (*in loco in quo est ecclesia aut castelli aut uicus aut uillae*), an enumeration that reveals the main types of rural settlements where a church could be built. Even though there has been intensive discussion about the meaning of these words (Carrié 2012, 2013; (p. 637) Isla Frez 2001), this classification corresponds quite accurately to the different kinds of settlements found in Spanish territory in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. It is a more difficult task, however, to link the construction of churches to these sites during the sixth century.

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Churches and Villas

Although there are already significant signs of Christianization linked to villas during the fifth century, such as Christograms in villa pavements, the biblical scenes on the vault of Centcelles, and a clearly Christian mausoleum in Las Vegas de Pueblanueva, there is currently no direct archaeological evidence for the construction of churches within villas in the Iberian peninsula.[13] Earlier interpretations of rooms with semicircular walls as chapels are today generally dismissed in favor of their identification as monumental triclinia with *stibadium* furniture. Churches built into villas or adapting previous mausolea tend to be dated from the end of the fifth century onward and therefore postdate the abandonment of these residential buildings, which apparently occurred during the fifth century. Occasionally stratigraphic excavation reveals that churches were built when the villas were already in ruins or had been reused by new squatter occupants (see Bowes 2008 and Chavarría Arnau 2007 for different views, and the balanced interpretation in Fiocchi Nicolai 2018). In these cases, it becomes difficult to link the Christian buildings to a particular founder, whether a private owner or a bishop. Written evidence points to multiple possibilities, the most common of which includes a private property owner donating his house to the bishop for the construction of a public church.

While many fourth- and fifth-century Spanish villa owners were clearly Christians and could have adapted a room in their house for private prayer, identifying such use remains difficult and relies largely on assumptions about the relationship between a church phase and an earlier villa at the same site (or its mausoleum). For example, at the villa of Monte da Cegonha (Alfenim and Lopes 1995), a fragment of molded marble related to liturgical furnishing, which was found reused in a grave during a later period, has been interpreted as evidence of a privately owned church of fourth-century date (Bowes 2001, 324). The building has three aisles separated by columns and a baptistery located to the south of the apse. However, a sixth-century marble reliquary casket beneath the altar of the church suggests a date to the second half of the sixth century, long after the villa had been already abandoned and reused as a funerary area.

Without very accurate excavation (and good luck), it is impossible to establish the chronology of the church and the abandonment of the villa to understand the relationship (p. 638) between the buildings. Another example is the villa of Torre de Palma (Monforte, Portugal) (Maloney 1995; Wolfram 2015) (Figure 32.8), a large residential and agricultural building extending more than 13,000 square meters in the fourth century. One hundred meters north of the villa and adjacent to a funerary area, a large church was built, dated by archaeologists to the second half of the fourth century on the basis of a group of coins under the opus signinum pavement (Maloney 1995). This pavement, however, is not associated with the church walls and could belong to a previous building, perhaps a mausoleum that only later was transformed into a church (Lancha and André 1999; Ulbert 1978, 105). By the end of the sixth century, according to the carbon-14 dating of mortars (Maloney and Ringbom 2000), builders had enlarged, redecorated, and embellished the structure, and endowed it with a large baptistery with a cruciform pool.

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The relationship of the church to the villa remains unclear, although it seems that the residential buildings may already have been abandoned in the fifth century. The construction of a new house close to the church in the late sixth-century phase, associated with a new balneum, is significant because there is very little archaeological evidence for new residential elite construction in villas after the fifth century.

Figure 32.8 Plan of Christian complex and Late Roman villa at Torre de Palma in Monforte, Portugal.

(Alexandra Chavarría)

The same sequence can be found in many other "villa churches," which seem to have been built later, well into the sixth century, such as Fortunatus (Fraga), El Saucedo (p. 639) (Talavera de la Reina, Toledo), La Cocosa (Badajoz), and Carranque (Toledo), among many others. If these churches do not belong to the fourth and fifth centuries, as appears likely, they cannot be linked to the villa prestige culture and the Late Antique aristocratic apparatus (cf. Bowes 2008, 181).

A different problem concerns churches connected to later rural residences of the Early Middle Ages. Churches such as El Gatillo (Cáceres), El Germo northeast of Córdoba, Casa Herrera (Mérida), and Valdecedabar Olivenza (Badajoz) were built in the vicinity of structures that have been identified as residences (see the extensive analysis in Oepen 2012). The main difficulty in these cases is to define the exact chronology of the buildings, understand the nature of residence, and identify their relationship to larger settlements. In all these examples, though, the existence of baptisteries seems to exclude the idea of a private church.

Churches in *Vici* and Larger Rural Settlements

Many churches were probably built in relation to regional communication networks, next to the main roadways that crossed the territory, and in the vicinity of agglomerated settlements that written sources call *vici* and which we can envisage as hamlets or villages. It is possible that some structures close to the churches that are currently identified as residences but which are in the vicinity of roads could instead be interpreted as practical buildings serving the communication network, such as *mansiones* or *stationes*. This interpretation has recently been proposed for some rural churches excavated in the Balearic Islands (Mas Florit and Cau Ontiveros 2013). Large sixth-century buildings such as Son Peretó and Son Fadrinet, with baptisteries and many

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annexes (used for habitation, stock raising, and production) could be what the texts call *parrociae*, public churches linked to rural settlements. A similar chronology and plan characterize the churches of El Bovalar (Fraga) and El Tolmo de Minateda (Albacete). In spite of the interpretation of the buildings proposed by the excavators, they could correspond to *parrociae* in relation to agglomerated settlements such as villages or fortifications (Figure 32.9). Recent research on the territory of Mérida also seems to point to the connection between churches, *vici*, and the road system even for the Christian buildings apparently linked to villas but which in fact developed after the villas had already been abandoned or transformed (Cordero 2015).

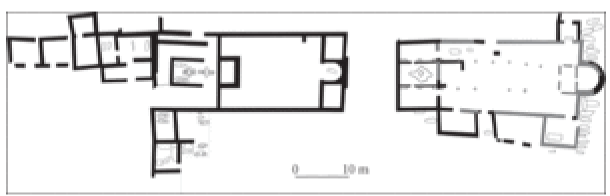

Figure 32.9 Plans of the churches in the settlements of Son Pereto (Balearic Islands) and El Tolmo de Minateda (Hellin, Albacete).

(Alexandra Chavarría)

In northwestern Spain, the study of rural churches has been primarily based on the text called *Parrochiale suevum* (a title the text does not attribute to itself), dated to the second half of the sixth century (probably between 572 and 582), in which the thirteen episcopal sees of that territory are listed, as well as “the churches that are in their territories” (*ecclesiae quae in vicino sunt*) (Díaz 1998; Sánchez Pardo 2014). Toponymic analysis has enabled the reconstruction of a dense network of churches and their intimate relationship with the communication system and the villages. At present, none of the settlement contexts have been researched archaeologically.

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(p. 640) Conclusions

Christianization in the Iberian peninsula developed in two completely different stages. During the first four centuries, Christianity expanded in a context of frequent conflict with central authorities, who reacted with periodic repressions that, in turn, produced martyrs' cults. It is not surprising, therefore, that evidence from that time concerns mainly funerary contexts although some churches must have existed before Constantine. During the second stage, after the Constantinian peace, the new religion was imposed over polytheistic religion as well as the different Christian confessions. In this second phase, Christianity moved from the private to the public sphere and became increasingly traceable in material evidence.

Defining the social context in which Christianity developed is a necessary part of this investigation. There is no doubt that cities were episcopal sees and therefore the locations of some of the elites who continued to lead the organization of the provinces and, later, the new barbarian kingdoms; these included primarily the bishops but also *potentes* and other members of the leading classes. Because they were mostly Roman landowners, it is quite possible that their residences alternated between town and country (as had always been the case) and therefore any aristocratic role in the Christianization of the countryside started from the cities. Archaeological data clearly show that churches began to be built mainly in the cities in the fourth century and in the countryside probably during the fifth.

Extensive monumental evidence dates mostly from the second half of the sixth century, in the cities as well as in the countryside. Although the subject warrants further investigation, it is quite possible that the multiplication of churches during this particular period may be due to the rivalry between Arian (Visigothic) and Catholic (Roman) factions, which could have led to a particularly active building period. This tension was resolved only with the 589 Council of Toledo and the acceptance of Visigothic kings into the Catholic creed, although some conflicts still remained in the years following.

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Notes:

([1]) For a wider analysis with a broader chronological span of Christianization in the Iberian peninsula, see Chavarría Arnau (2018).

([2]) Rebillard (2009) denies the existence of Christian cemeteries during the third century, but scholars have strongly debated that denial. They have criticized the interpretations of some of the textual sources cited by Rebillard, and pointed to the archaeological evidence, which indicates the existence of Christian cemeteries at this time (Duval 2000, 448–57; Fiocchi Nicolai 2016; Guyon 2005, 235–53).

([3]) For all the Spanish councils quoted in this chapter, see vols. IV–VI of the Colección Canónica Hispanica.

([4]) The best textual evidence is from the Council of Elvira, held in *ecclesia Illiberritana* at the beginning of the fourth century, whose acts were signed by the bishops of Acci (Guadix, Granada), Cordoba, Sevilla, Tucci (Martos, Jaen), Epagro (Aguilar de la Frontera, Cordoba), Castulo (Cazlona, Jaen), Mentesa (La Guardia, Jaen), Illiberris, Urci (Pecina, Almeria), Emerita, Zaragoza, León, Toledo, Calagurris, Fibularia (Loarre, Huesca), Ossonoba (Faro), Ebora, Eliocroca (Lorca, Murcia), Basti (Baza, Granada), and Málaga.

([5]) This has been established by the French team of the *Topographie chrétienne des cités de la Gaule des origines au milieu du VIIIè siècle* and confirmed by ongoing research in other areas of the western Mediterranean such as Italy or Spain (see a synthesis in Chavarría 2009).

([6]) Bishops in Hispania remained oriented to urban centers in Late Antiquity and had as much power as other civic elite. Spanish bishops, for example, were capable of constructing monumental churches in their cities by the fourth century. In the few instances in which Spanish bishops could not construct monumental churches, as in the case of the Eastern bishops of Mérida, this oddity is clearly underlined by the sources. Local elites, moreover, continued to take part in urban life and administration, as textual

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sources indicate (generally, see Wickham 2005; for a similar context in southern Gaul, see Mathisen 1992).

([7]) See *Epistulae Romanorum pontificum genuinae* XVI, 1, a letter written by Pope Hilarius in 465 referring to a communication of elite citizens written in defense of Silvanus of Calagurris: honoratorum et possessorum Turiassonensium, Cascantensium, Calagurritanorum, Varegensium, Tritiensium, Legionensium et Birovescensium ciuitatum.

([8]) In Barcelona, AMS dating suggests a date range of 545–595 (Bonnet and Beltran de Heredia 2004, 155–80); in Valencia the reconstruction of the whole cathedral with two cruciform annexes in the eastern side can be dated to the middle of the sixth century (Alapont Martin and Ribera i Lacomba 2006).

([9]) Next to the basilica there was a Late Roman residential building, but its chronology shows that it never functioned alongside the church: it was built in 333–50 and abandoned before the fifth century.

([10]) It is hard to agree with Kulikowski (2004, 233), who sees the complex as a private foundation donated by a private property owner residing across the street from the church. As established earlier, it is more likely that the Christian cemetery had been organized by the bishops of Tarragona, who continued to control the evolution of this important Christian devotional area in the centuries that followed.

([11]) During the first half of the fifth century, the area seems to have been destroyed and exploited for spolia (Mateos Cruz 1999, 112–39). These destructions have been related to the Suevic incursions of 429 that, according to Hydatius, included the profaning of Eulalia's tomb by King Heremigarius (*Chronica* 80).

([12]) Gurt i Esparraguera and Sánchez Ramos (2011, 276), affirm that "the fourth canon of the Twelfth Council of Toledo offers a clear reference to how usual it had become, by the seventh century, for bishoprics to be created with no reference to the *civitates*" (but there is no clear evidence for this in the council canon).

([13]) The well-known Christograms in villa mosaics at Prado (Valladolid), Fortunatus (Fraga, Huesca), and Quinta das Longas (Alentejo) probably date to the second half of the fourth century or the beginning of the fifth. More recently this symbol has been documented in burial contexts in the villa of Veranes, near Gijón (Fernández Ochoa, Gil Sendino, and Salido 2013) and El Jardin (El Pelicano, Arroyomolinos) (Vigil-Escalera 2015, 167–69).

Alexandra Chavarría Arnau

Alexandra Chavarría Arnau, Associate Professor of Medieval Archaeology, University of Padova, Padua, Italy.

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