

## Article

# Shaping Urban Religious Topography in the Iberian Peninsula between the Fourth and Sixth Centuries: “Coopetitive” Rivalry and Social Power

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**Abstract:** This study analyses the reshaping of the religious landscape of the cities of Hispania, from the disappearance of polytheistic sanctuaries to the construction of Christian churches, from the fourth to the middle of the sixth centuries CE. The focus is placed on the agents who financed these complexes and the motivations behind their euergetic activities. The study highlights that the configuration of places of worship in the urban landscape was a contingent process often dependent on individual (layperson) initiative, challenging the widespread assumption that the Church and its bishops were the main promoters of urban redevelopment in Hispanic cities during this period.

**Keywords:** late antiquity; Hispania; cities; churches; temples; bishops; coopetition; religious buildings

## 1. Introduction



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Around 325 CE, Eusebius of Caesarea completed the last edition of his opus magnum, *Ecclesiastical History*. In the tenth and last chapter of the work, Eusebius included a sermon composed for the consecration of the new church in Tyre. The text, written as a panegyric dedicated to the bishop Paulinus, who had been responsible for the construction, contains the earliest surviving literary description of a building for Christian worship (Eus. *HE* 10.4). The ornate complex—with its bronze doors decorated with reliefs, its ceilings of cedar wood, its sumptuous seats and its marble floors—is presented as the supreme and most splendid building of all those in the Phoenician region (Eus. *HE* 10.4.36–45).

The construction of the Church of Tyre reflects the right granted to the Christian authorities to modify and renovate urban spaces from 324 onwards—a result of the “peace granted us by God”, as Paulinus himself puts it, in a clear gesture of flattery towards the emperor Constantine (Urciuoli 2020, p. 145, who, following Lefebvre, uses the concept of “right to the city”). Such peace started to result in the consecration and repair of numerous churches throughout the Empire with unprecedented architectural grandeur, following Eusebius’ propagandistic and triumphalist overstatements (Eus. *HE* 10.2–5).

That which had become a legal right in 324 became a privilege in the following decades, resulting in the implementation of building programs, which proclaimed the wealth and power of the Church through monumental architecture and its capacity to transform the city. According to Emiliano R. Urciuoli, the basilica, or quasi-basilica, communicates a sense of rootedness and spatial anchorage, which could ensure the temporal survival of Christianity and its territorial diffusion, creating a visually stunning physical environment not only to reinforce the faith of believers but also to awaken it among those sceptical of the new religion (Urciuoli 2020, pp. 146–48).

Polytheism had until then dominated the urban topography, through the construction of majestic temples overlooking large public squares, the celebration of religious festivities throughout the streets, or the consecration of *ludi*, which had an enormous

emotional impact on the audience. However, during the fourth century, there was a decline in the physical manifestations of polytheism, with religious practices leaving hardly any material remains in the urban space, often being relegated to the private sphere (Busine 2015, p. 11)<sup>1</sup>, and with cult sites undergoing the processes of “temporary sacralisation” (Rüpke 2020, pp. 20–21). Meanwhile, Christianity, which for the first three centuries of the Common Era had survived as a religion “di quartiere” (Urciuoli 2020), where Christians met in private houses for their congregational meetings, would soon begin to dominate the urban space.<sup>2</sup> Yet, this transformation had its own dynamics in each of the provinces of the Roman Empire.

## 2. From the Decline of Temples to the Rise of Basilicas

In the Iberian Peninsula, the Christian communities only began to transform the urban environment towards the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth. Until then, Christian meeting places would have been either *domus ecclesiae* or places for the veneration of martyrs in the *suburbia* (Ripoll and Arce 2015, p. 343; Arce 2018, pp. 26–27). The lack of any distinct architectural features prevents us from clearly identifying them in the material record.<sup>3</sup>

This situation has indirectly given rise to a historiographical narrative where the Christianisation of urban spaces is believed to be the direct result of the elimination of pagan sanctuaries. According to this hypothesis, “pagan” religious practices would have continued without substantial change until the fifth century, when Christian monumental building begins to appear (e.g., Arce 2018). Yet, the excavations carried out in a number of cities in Spain and Portugal in recent decades have shown that the sanctuaries that once dominated the urban planning of towns such as Corduba, Munigua, Carthago Nova, Segobriga, Clunia, Baelo Claudia or Ampurias were abandoned during the third and early fourth centuries (López-Gómez 2021, pp. 225–27). Only in two of the three early imperial provincial capitals—Tarraco (Tarragona) and Augusta Emerita (Mérida)—is there evidence that the civic religion of the Early Empire continued to thrive up until the second half of the fourth century. Consequently, we cannot posit a direct causal link between the abandonment of civic temples and the construction of Christian churches, and we instead have to distinguish two chronologically differentiated processes motivated by different causal factors.

The reasons for the abandonment, removal and reuse of the civic and religious structures in many cities in Hispania during the third century have been analysed in detail by several scholars (Andreu Pintado 2019, pp. 30–31; Romero Vera 2020, pp. 208–10; López-Gómez 2021, pp. 227–30). In brief, the deteriorating economic conditions in many regions in the third century, combined with the declining interest of the elite in religious building projects, which no longer guaranteed the same prestige and social influence, resulted in a downturn and eventual halt to the construction and repair of monumental temples. This also affected the dedication of religious inscriptions, the funding of costly sacrifices, the sponsorship of *ludi* (games) accompanied by religious processions, the provision of public feasts (*epula*) and even the occupation of priesthoods due to the associated financial burden. As a result, by the fourth century, the local elites in many cities of Hispania had ceased to invest in religion as an instrument of social promotion (López-Gómez and Alvar 2021, pp. 21–22).

It was precisely the lack of funding and/or interest of the civic authorities in the maintenance of sanctuaries and all their paraphernalia, which explains the lack of material evidence left by Christianity in the cities of Hispania during the fourth century.<sup>4</sup> Christian communities did not possess the means to transform the city through monumental architecture,<sup>5</sup> while the elites found no advantage in investing their capital in Christian building patronage, since Christianity had not yet established itself as an accepted avenue for political and social promotion.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, with a few exceptions, the large sanctuaries were being abandoned, dismantled or left to deteriorate, and none of them was converted into a Christian church or

destroyed by acts of violence. Nevertheless, we must assume that polytheistic practices continued to predominate in the cities of Hispania, even if they were carried out in a diminished form, which left no material remains in the urban planning.<sup>7</sup> In such circumstances, funerary spaces, located in suburban areas, are virtually the only arena where we can distinguish religious activity during the fourth century in the archaeological record, where funerals and cult practices celebrated at the tombs, such as banquets and libations, continued to form part of the most recurrent strategies of communication with meta human agents.<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, and despite the efforts of the Christian authorities to control and limit the religious practices associated with cemeteries (*Conc. Ilib.*, c. 34 and 35), it was in precisely these places that the first monumental Christian basilicas appeared.

The earliest instances of Christian monumentalisation within urban areas can be identified in the outskirts and in burial grounds. Even so, the available data are limited, primarily focusing on densely populated centres of exceptional political, administrative and religious importance and frequently connected to revered martyrs and prestigious *loca sanctorum*. In these locations, both the laity and ecclesiastical elites played significant roles in shaping and altering the urban landscape (Diarte-Blasco 2013, pp. 39–43). However, this process did not start in Hispania until the end of the fourth century, when the local elites seemed to rekindle the euergetism, which had projected their political and social power in previous centuries. However, as highlighted by several recent authors, the studies focusing on the evolution of urban planning during this period often overlook the actors involved in driving these transformative changes (Diarte-Blasco 2020, p. 352; Lewis 2021, p. 10). This is understandable, given the scarcity of references in our source material available for the identification of the commissioners of these projects.

Due to this silence, it has often been assumed that, since the most important new public buildings to appear in the archaeological record of the cities from the fifth century onwards were built for religious purposes, the main patrons would have been the Church and its bishops, who rose to prominence in the cities during a period where the decay of Roman power and the gradual consolidation of the post-imperial kingdoms were taking place. However, as Ward-Perkins noted, the distinction between “religious” and “secular” motivations when analysing the phenomenon of Christian building activity in late antiquity is quite artificial, since this kind of patronage appealed to both lay and ecclesiastical sectors, both as an effective means of self-representation and as a medium for religious communication, which placed the patron in a privileged position with the divine (Ward-Perkins 1984, p. 84). Accordingly, the promoters of these works need not have been confined to bishops alone but may have also included the lay aristocracy, who had revived a weakened euergetic tradition, endowing it with an ideological force similar to the euergetism of the Early Empire and channelling it through the construction of religious buildings (Ward-Perkins 1984, pp. 66–70).<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The “Coopetition” between Laypersons and Bishops for the Christian Building Projects

The construction of Christian buildings by laypersons is amply attested in cities such as Ravenna, Rome and Constantinople, where one can find numerous examples instigated by provincial governors, the senatorial aristocracy and the imperial administration. In Ravenna, Galla Placidia financed the construction of the Church of St John the Evangelist in gratitude for having been saved from the dangers of the sea (*liberationis periculorum maris*) (CIL XI 276). Half a century later, the Ostrogothic king Theodoric built the Churches of S. Apollinare Nuovo and S. Andrea dei Goti, as well as some baths, aqueducts and a series of buildings for spectacles (Ward-Perkins 1984, p. 241). However, this type of work was not limited to members of the domus Augusta or post-imperial monarchies: an individual named Primus Iulianus, a banker by profession, also built the Church of S. Vitale for a sum of 36,000 solidi (CIL XI 288; CIL XI 292) and that of S. Apollinare in Classe (CIL XI 294) in the first half of the sixth century.

In Rome, out of the 25 parish churches (*tituli*) mentioned in the written sources of the fifth century, 16 were financed by lay members of the city's aristocracy (Fiocchi Nicolai 2007, p. 107). Although it is assumed that these churches would be under the direct control of the Roman episcopate, we know that in practice, their economic and liturgical management fell to the presbyters selected by the donors themselves (Bowes 2008, pp. 68–71). In fact, the autonomy enjoyed by some private individuals in the control of ecclesiastical personnel, funds and even liturgical celebrations in these churches generated such concern among the senior leaders of the Roman Church that Pope Gelasius (492–496) expressed frustration at the existence of basilicas at his metropolitan area, which had been consecrated, without episcopal permission, by the owners of the buildings who conducted religious ceremonies in honour of the patrons buried there (*Epist. Rom. Pontif.*, I.14.25).

In Constantinople, the autonomy enjoyed by the aristocratic churches, which populated the city's neighbourhoods, was, from the economic, liturgical, personnel and doctrinal point of view, even more pronounced than in Rome and remained so at least until the time of Justinian (Dagron 1989; Bowes 2008, p. 115).

There is nothing to suggest that the situation was very different in the cities of the provinces, where examples of Christian building funded by wealthy aristocrats are also abundant throughout late antiquity. In Ferentino, the wife of a certain Valerius Gallius financed the reconstruction of the local basilica in the fourth century (CIL X 5902). In Fondi, the governor Meropius Pontius Paulinus financed the construction of a church—probably the cathedral—dedicated to St. Andrew and St. Luke (Fiocchi Nicolai 2007, p. 117).

In the north African city of Haïdra, we know that the major renovation of one of the martyrial churches was paid for by the *illustris* Marcellus, while the mosaic floors were paid for by two private citizens named Candidus and Adeodata (Baratte et al. 2014, pp. 311–12). Likewise, at Matifou, the remains of a monumental church could correspond to the one mentioned in an inscription of Flavius Nuvel, *vir perfectissimus*, who, at some point in the fourth century, commemorated in an epigraph the construction of a basilica in fulfilment of a vow, using a formula redolent of the phraseology found in early imperial *vota* (CIL VIII 9255; Gui et al. 1992, pp. 52–56).

In Gaul, the evidence suggests that bishops played a significant role in the promotion and construction of churches from the fourth century onwards, although this may be misleading, deriving as it does from hagiographic sources where the prelates tried to claim an outsized role in the patronage of Christian building programs.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the few epigraphic texts commemorating the construction of such buildings, such as those from Narbonne in the mid-fifth century, cast doubt on the episcopal narrative. These inscriptions indicate that it was actually a group of lay patrons who, with the support of Bishop Rusticus, contributed to the reconstruction of the main basilica (CIL XII 5336; Marrou 1970, pp. 331–40). Likewise, under the prelature of this same bishop, a church dedicated to St. Felix was erected in the suburb, with funding provided jointly by certain members of the clergy and affluent laymen (CIL XII 5335; AE 1928, 85; Marrou 1970, pp. 340–44).

As Joe Lewis has argued, bishops, especially in the fourth and fifth centuries, seem to have been operating as “impresarios” who sought to attract donations from all strata of society to finance the construction of cathedral complexes, funerary basilicas or charitable buildings in order to assert their authority on a local and regional level (Lewis 2021, pp. 122, 138).<sup>11</sup> This was a coherent policy, given that most of the episcopal sees did not have, either in the fourth or the fifth century, the resources to finance the great episcopal complexes and the sumptuous funerary and martyrial basilicas, which were beginning to populate the suburbs of the cities. The bishops therefore had to develop an attractive religious offering, which would enable them to attract the small donations of the middle and lower classes and, above all, the large gifts of the landowners, in order to begin to transform the religious landscape of the cities and also to accumulate a wealthy patrimony (Brown 2012, pp. 72–75; Wood 2022, pp. 121–23, 128–35, 145). As a corollary, the control, which the prelates could exercise over some of the urban churches financed by wealthy

patrons, was often restricted to the ecclesiastical needs of consecration and confirmation of the staff. This situation would continue in certain places until at least the beginning of the sixth century, based on the prescriptions set out in canon 17 of the Council of Orleans in 511<sup>12</sup> or canon 3 of the Council of Lerida in 546.<sup>13</sup>

The Christianisation of the urban topography of some of the cities of the Roman West would not have been possible without the successful reception of Christianity among the elite from the late fourth century onwards—a phenomenon, which revived the enfeebled euergetic system and channelled it through donations to the poor and the construction, embellishment or renovation of churches. There were numerous motivations for ecclesiastical and lay elites to expend substantial sums of money in this endeavour. Some complexes constituted an act of piety, the donor expecting that he and his family would obtain “treasure in heaven” (Brown 2012, pp. 83–88, at p. 83). On other occasions, it was merely an act of thanksgiving for divine intervention in a situation of personal crisis (Ward-Perkins 1984, pp. 70–71; Wood 2022, p. 25). The donors of these types of buildings also aspired to display their personal and family prestige in a privileged space, which, in addition to hosting liturgical functions, was normally intended to house the burial of the benefactor and his relatives (Ward-Perkins 1984, pp. 73–78).<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the opportunity to claim the protection of a prestigious saint through the financing of a church to house his relics and his cult became a strategy used by powerful families to facilitate access to prominent civil and religious positions (Wood 1983, with an analysis of this situation in Clermont). Indeed, commemorating the construction of churches in inscriptions, where the secular patrons showcased their titles and honours and celebrated their piety and their munificence, demonstrates that these acts were used strategically to enhance their reputation and status (Fernández 2016, pp. 529–36). In addition, the lay elites sought to gain worldly benefits from the economic control (including personnel) of these sacred places and tried to limit the episcopal appropriation of Church goods and lands, which they had donated, which seems to have been a widespread reality in Gaul and Hispania (Wood 2006, pp. 12–15).<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, bishops, in their quest for prominence and authority within their communities, leapt into the arena of Church financing and control. Bishops needed Christian basilicas where they could carry out their liturgical, sacramental and doctrinal work, so they benefited from the donations of aristocrats. However, in addition, through the construction of funerary basilicas, they sought to maintain their privileged position and to guarantee the acquisition of prestigious civil and ecclesiastical positions for members of their own family.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, by promoting churches dedicated to saints and martyrs, they sought to obtain symbolic capital and to regulate the behaviour of their congregations, trying to attract the faithful to the shrines and basilicas sponsored by themselves and not to those, which had somehow escaped their control (Lewis 2021, pp. 79–89). This is why bishops tried to arrogate to themselves the exclusive power to consecrate churches in order to legitimise and ensure greater control over them—a practice, which was far removed from reality (Wood 2006, p. 12; Poveda Arias 2023b). In addition, the proliferation of sumptuous basilicas in the same urban centres served as a means to reinforce and display the status of a city and its ecclesiastical hierarchies on a regional level. This engendered conflicts on a larger scale (as exemplified by the rivalries between Arles and Marseille in the fifth and sixth centuries), as cities vied for greater influence and the attraction of more devotees (Lewis 2021, pp. 68–70).

Consequently, the success of the “Christianisation of urban topography” was underpinned by a spirit of competition (which, as we have seen, could also manifest as intense collaboration) at different levels. On the one hand, in the local context, the different aristocratic groups competed for symbolic and social capital, which would provide them with spiritual and worldly benefits, as a guarantee for the attainment of prestigious positions within the ecclesiastical hierarchy or the local administration. On the other hand, groups belonging to different religious confessions—as occurred between the Donatists and Catholics in Africa in the fourth and fifth centuries or between the Arians and Nicenes in sixth century Ravenna—sometimes competed fiercely for control of the largest number

of places of worship and worshippers (Sotinel 2005a, p. 428). Finally, at the supra-local level, the rivalry between urban centres to claim an authority and prestige superior to that of neighbouring cities and to attract the faithful and the money they brought in the form of pilgrimages and donations, is crucial for understanding the proliferation of churches in the topography of late- and post-imperial cities (Ward-Perkins 1984, pp. 72–73; Lewis 2021, p. 68).

Unfortunately, the evidence illuminating the conditions behind the appearance of the first Christian churches in Hispania is very scarce and, apart from a handful of written sources, the information derives mostly from archaeology, which, without inscriptions, makes it impossible to identify the patrons of the basilicas dating to the fourth and fifth centuries. However, given the above considerations and assuming that in the process of Christianisation of the cities of the Roman and post-Roman West, a decisive role was played by competition (as well as cooperation) between the different groups and individuals who lived in diverse social nuclei in terms of cultural production, labour relations and power dynamics at different scales (Urciuoli and Rüpke 2018, p. 125), there is no reason to believe that the cities of Hispania were unaffected by this process. On this basis, I will offer some reflections on the possible agents involved in the process of Christianisation of the urban topography of the cities of Tarraco, Barcino and Augusta Emerita.

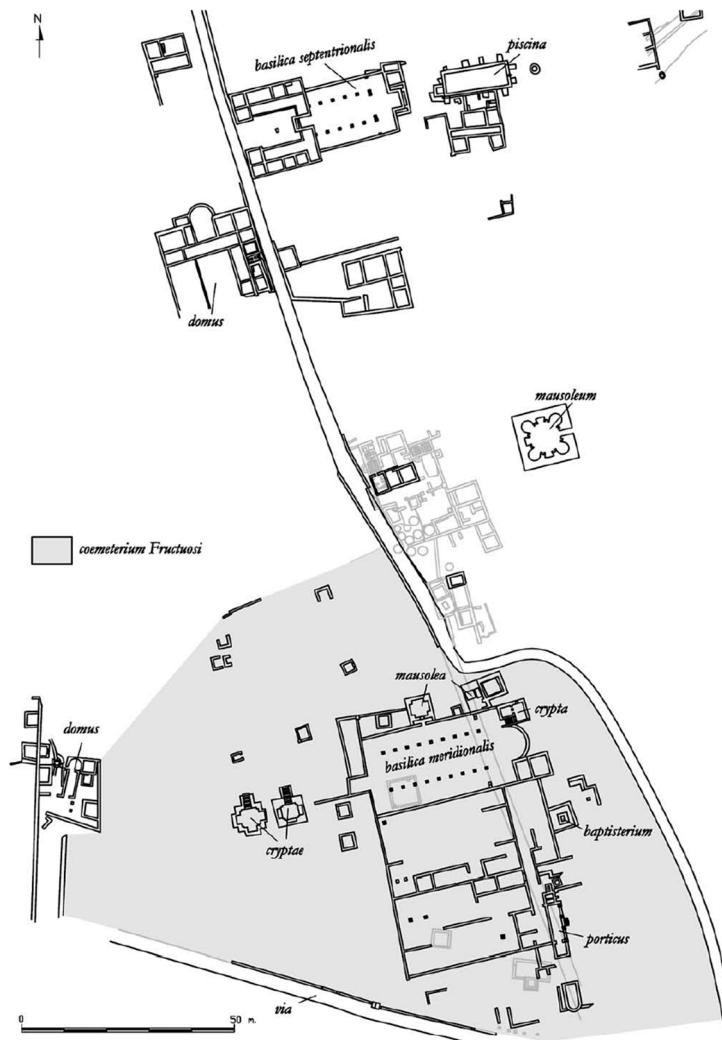
#### 4. Tarraco, Barcino and Emerita in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries: Local and Regional “Coopetition”<sup>17</sup>

##### 4.1. Tarraco

In Tarraco, the capital and metropolitan seat of the province of Tarraconensis from the late fourth century, the earliest known large Christian building complex emerged in a western suburb of the city, in an area containing distinctively Christian burials from the fourth to sixth centuries (Figure 1). The area was monumentalised around the year 400 with the construction of a basilica consisting of three naves, a semi-circular apse flanked by two rooms with funerary and sacristy functions, and a counter apse on the western side, where a monumental tomb was found. Near the apse, but in a room separate from the church, a small baptistery was built (López Vilar 2006, pp. 205–19). It was undoubtedly a funerary basilica built on the site where the *memoria* of the martyrs Fructuosus, Augurius and Eulogius were located. This is confirmed by inscriptions, where we find the names of the martyrs and some formulae clearly related to a place *ad sanctos* (ICERV 321; CIL II/14 2090–2093). Both inside the church and in its vicinity, there were numerous graves, as well as some ornate mausoleums no doubt built for the lay and episcopal elite of the city (López Vilar 2006, pp. 205–29; López Vilar et al. 2016, pp. 433–34). Among the most remarkable is the epitaph of Senator Avellinus (RIT 946) or the sepulchral mosaic of Optimus, who was buried inside the basilica at the beginning of the fifth century. His tomb was marked by a mosaic on the pavement of the building, which memorialised both his epitaph and his effigy, depicting him as a middle-aged man with a beard, dressed in a tunic and toga *contabulata*, and holding a *rotulus* in his left hand (CIL II/2 14 1085; Arbeiter 2006, p. 272). The fragmentary nature of the text unfortunately makes it impossible to identify the rank of the deceased, although the clothing indicates that he was perhaps a lay aristocrat (*dominus*) rather than a bishop (*antistes*) (Arbeiter 2006, pp. 273–74, against the interpretation of Gómez Pallarés 2002, pp. 107–9).

About 130 m north of this complex, a second, much more modest basilica was erected at the beginning of the fifth century. The building had three naves, with a transept marked on the ground plan, a counter-apse and a quadrangular apse on the northern side off which there were two side rooms (Figure 1). The building was accessed through a porticoed atrium with a series of rooms on the north and south sides (López Vilar 2006, pp. 109–18). Almost 200 burials were found inside the basilica and in part of the atrium, although almost no funerary inscriptions were discovered.<sup>18</sup> The basilica was built on the right side of a Roman road, which crossed the entire necropolis sector towards the port located in the suburb. On the other side of the road, the remains of a large *domus* were identified, dating

to the same period as the different phases of use of the basilica. Near the cult building, farm structures were found, which could have belonged to the church (López Vilar 2006, p. 270).



**Figure 1.** Early Christian complex in the eastern suburb of Tarraco. In the south, the martyrial basilica with the necropolis and other associated buildings. In the north, the funerary basilica and the domus on the opposite side of the road. Reprinted with permission from López Vilar (2006, Figure 314).

While these two basilicas of a martyrial and funerary nature were built in the suburbs, it is generally agreed that the episcopal complex of Tarraco would have been built within the walls, although there are no reliable archaeological data in this respect (López Vilar 2006, pp. 257–58; Chavarría 2010, p. 446).<sup>19</sup>

As Jordi López Vilar has already pointed out, there is a striking difference between the martyrial basilica and the church, which stands a little further north: while the former generated an immense necropolis of more than 3000 graves, the latter, which seems to have a much more private character, contained barely 200 burials, all of which were concentrated either inside the nave or in the atrium (López Vilar 2006, p. 250). Unfortunately, the identities of the individuals responsible for the construction of these two nearly contemporaneous basilicas remain unknown. Some scholars have linked the martyrs' complex to the construction activity of the bishops of Tarraco (e.g., Chavarría 2010, p. 447; Pérez Martínez 2019, pp. 50–51, who also associates the northern complex with the bishops), while others have suggested a connection with the euergetism of urban oligarchs (López Vilar 2006, p. 270; Kulikowski 2004, p. 223).

Given the role that competition (as well as cooperation) between the different groups and individuals played in the Christianisation of cities, I believe that the construction of these two basilicas was informed by similar motivations, but with certain qualifications. The martyrial basilica was intended to monumentalise a place of worship *ad sanctos*, which had already existed since the fourth century.<sup>20</sup> The bishops exploited this space by converting it into a baptismal church, where they could carry out their liturgical, sacramental and doctrinal duties. They were thus able to exert considerable control over this space. However, given its chronology, it was probably the lay aristocracy who actually financed the sumptuous construction of the complex as a display of their munificence, as well as to secure a privileged burial place and to store up good will with the saints. This is indicated by the epitaphs belonging to individuals from the local oligarchy found in the excavations.<sup>21</sup> It is quite likely that the bishops of Tarraco at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth centuries acted as “impresarios”, appealing to the laity to aid them in monumentalising and adorning this space.

The basilica in the northern complex appears to have been built by a member of the aristocracy to display his wealth and as a burial ground for himself and his relatives. This basilica was in fact apparently built on a private plot of land (perhaps belonging to the owner of the house located opposite the religious complex) (see Figure 1), which was transformed into a space for public worship with liturgical celebrations for the spiritual wellbeing of the patron and his relatives (López Vilar 2006, pp. 272–75; Godoy 2013, pp. 166–67). The layout of this building recalls certain Italic churches founded by private citizens on their land, such as the fifth century Church of Mola di Monte Gelato, where the basilica building was situated next to the road network to attract the faithful (Bowes 2008, pp. 135, 158–59; Fiocchi Nicolai 2017, pp. 224–26). As such, it would not be unreasonable to assume that this basilica would have been subject to greater control by the family which funded it. The position of the northern basilica in the suburb of Tarraco was strategically advantageous in various respects. It was situated in a dynamic economic zone in a socially exclusive area, as indicated by the presence of newly constructed houses belonging to the local elite (Remolà and Lasheras 2019, p. 79). Additionally, its proximity to the martyrial basilica made it highly appealing from a religious perspective. However, the northern complex was considerably less successful than the southern one, as new graves stopped appearing within a matter of decades, and the complex had been completely dismantled by the beginning of the sixth century (López Vilar 2006, pp. 251, 274; López Vilar et al. 2016, pp. 434–35).

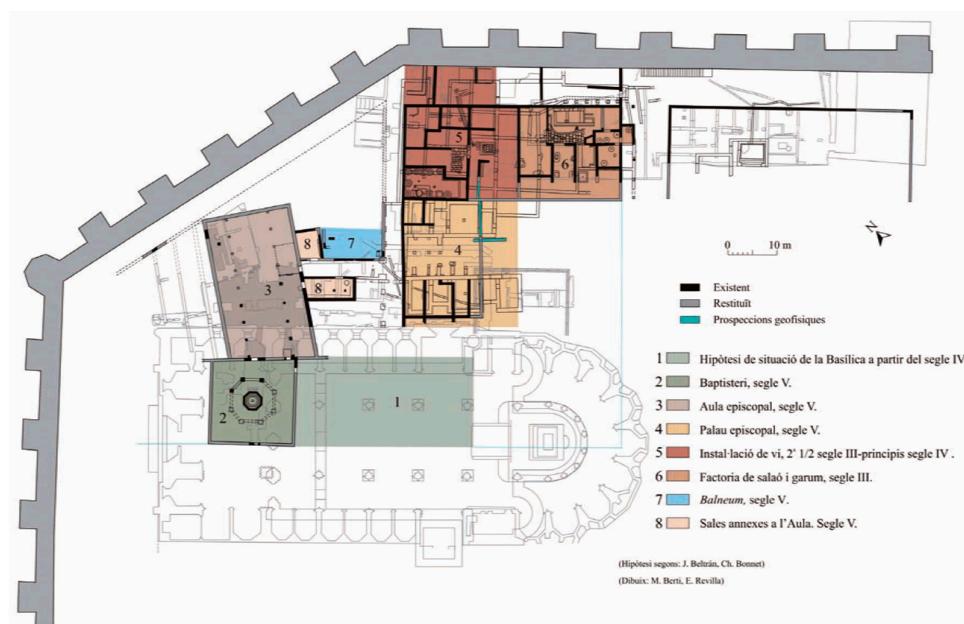
It was also from the end of the fifth century that burials in the area of the basilica dedicated to the martyrs Fructuosus, Augurius and Eulogius decreased at an increasing rate until the mid-sixth century. The reasons behind this remain unclear, but various theories have attempted to explain it. One possibility is the potential relocation of the martyrs’ relics to another site, such as the newly constructed basilica in the amphitheatre at the end of the sixth century or even to the new cathedral (Muñoz 2016, p. 107; see Godoy 2013, pp. 170, 173).<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, the introduction of baptism in the amphitheatre basilica may have overshadowed the southern church in the suburb, which indeed saw its baptistery covered under soil precisely at this time (Godoy 2013, p. 170). Moreover, the construction of a new basilica on the site of the local saints’ martyrdom would have solidified its position as a central pilgrimage site for martyrs to the detriment of the southern basilica in the Tarraco suburb (Godoy 2013, p. 170; Godoy and Muñoz 2019, p. 69; contra Pérez Martínez 2019, p. 52, who suggests that both basilicas could have formed part of the liturgical topography, as occurred in Arles). In any case, it remains uncertain as to the exact date when the suburban basilica was definitively abandoned, and there are indications that it may have remained active until the seventh century (López Vilar et al. 2016, pp. 434, 438–39). The construction of a new church in the amphitheatre roughly aligns with the putative development of a new episcopal complex in the upper part of the city. However, the limited evidence has led to intense debate regarding its precise location in this area (López Vilar and Muñoz 2019, pp. 39–40; Salom 2019, p. 59).

All of this suggests that it was not until the sixth century that there was a significant increase in the power of the bishops of Tarraco. This was initially secured through the consolidation of their metropolitan authority over the entire province during the first half of the sixth century (Pérez Martínez 2023, pp. 144–45). Their power was then further enhanced by monopolising the symbolic capital of the relics and the city’s places of worship. This was achieved in the second half of the sixth century through the reshaping of the local religious landscape, the arrangement of processional and seasonal liturgy, the promotion of the martyrs’ cult and total control over the locations housing their relics.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4.2. Barcino

About 100 km northeast of Tarraco, in Barcino, the first monumental Christian building project was also undertaken at the beginning of the fifth century. However, in this city, no martyrial basilica has been discovered, but rather, the episcopal complex, which was erected in the northern corner of the urban perimeter, next to the city wall.

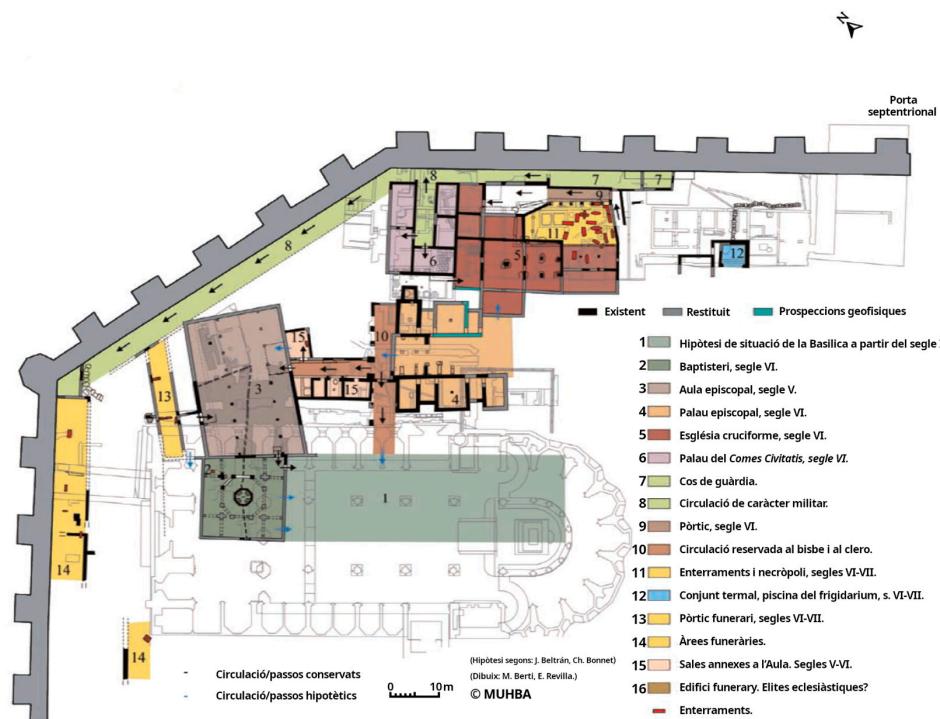
The complex included the residence of the bishop, built over a Roman house (of which only a set of rooms were scarcely identified), as well as an elongated space divided into three aisles with a raised section in the southeast, which could be related to the *salutatorium* where the bishop carried out his functions (Beltrán de Heredia and Bonnet 2005, pp. 156–57; Beltrán de Heredia 2013, p. 30; 2018a, p. 82). The complex also encompassed an octagonal baptistery. No traces of the basilica from this initial stage have been found, although it is inferred that it would have been situated to the east of the baptistery, beneath the current cathedral (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Plan of the episcopal complex of Barcino in the fifth century, according to the proposal by Julia Beltrán de Heredia and Charles Bonnet. Reprinted with permission from Beltrán de Heredia (2013, Figure 14).

As in Tarraco, in the second half of the sixth century, the whole complex was extended through the renovation of the episcopal palace and the baptistery (where four pillars were built around the pool to support a dome over it), together with the construction, to the east, of a cross-shaped church with a slightly elongated rectangular apse with an adjoining burial area (Beltrán de Heredia 2013, p. 38; 2018a, p. 88). Additionally, in this area, a U-shaped monumental building appears, which has been identified as the seat of the representatives of civil power in the city (Beltrán de Heredia 2013, pp. 38, 42). Likewise, near the episcopal complex, to the southeast, the remains of a frigidarium belonging to a thermal complex

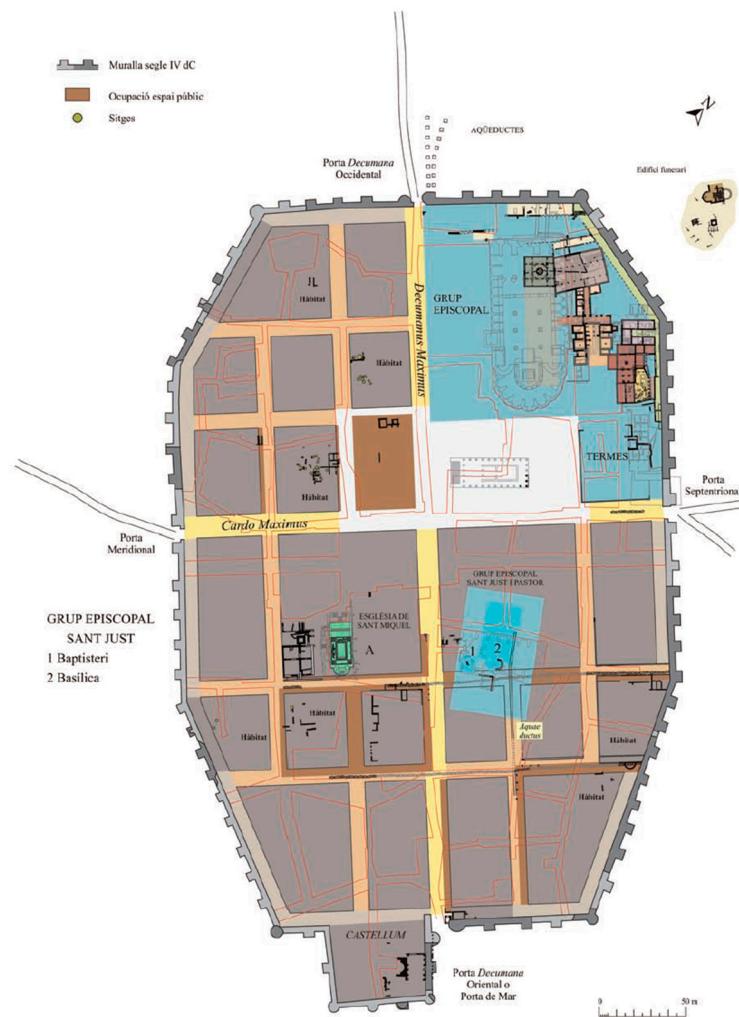
dating back to the sixth century were located. This too has been linked to the episcopal construction activities (Beltrán de Heredia 2013, pp. 42–43) (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Plan of the episcopal complex of Barcino in the sixth century, according to the proposal by Julia Beltrán de Heredia and Charles Bonnet. Reprinted with permission from Beltrán de Heredia (2013, Figure 24).

The dating of the first palace at the beginning of the fifth century is a symptom of the exceptional economic power, which the bishopric of Barcino had attained in just a few decades. The written sources confirm that the see of Barcino was indeed occupied by some of the most important prelates of fourth century Hispania. These included Pacianus), an individual probably belonging to the senatorial aristocracy,<sup>24</sup> and one of the figures referred to by Saint Jerome (*De Vir ill.* 132). The bishops of Barcino, who were certainly involved in financing and managing the funds for the construction of this palace, must have either received generous donations or themselves possessed large sums of money to acquire the land to the northeast of the old forum and build a complex on this scale.<sup>25</sup> However, as in Tarraco, the sprawl of Christian places of worship affected both the intramural area and the suburbs of the city, indicating the existence of various groups in Barcino striving to increase their social capital.

One of the sites presumably Christianised at the beginning of the fifth century were the public baths located under the current Plaça de Sant Miquel, where there used to be a church with the same name until its demolition in 1868 (Figure 4). Based on the results of the archaeological excavations that have been conducted at the site at various times during the 20th century, it has been assumed that the frigidarium of the baths was adapted to contain the nave of a church built in the fifth century, which would have reused the second century mosaic as a pavement. The chronology has been established through the dating of a funerary inscription, which mentions the Christian faith of the person who commissioned it (IRC IV 315), as well as the dating of a seal bearing the inscription “Petrus/Paulus”, which was intended for marking liturgical bread (IRC IV 313; Beltrán de Heredia 2001, p. 233, no. 304; 2018a, p. 83). If the interpretation of this space is correct, the individual who acquired this property consciously chose what was probably still perceived in the collective memory as a social meeting point,<sup>26</sup> so as to convert it into a funerary basilica where the Eucharist was administered and masses were celebrated for his benefit.



**Figure 4.** Plan of the city of Barcino in the sixth and seventh centuries, according to the proposal by Julia Beltrán. Reprinted with permission from [Beltrán de Heredia \(2013, Figure 33\)](#).

As in Tarraco, the suburbs of Barcino were also spaces appropriated by wealthy laymen and bishops as sites for self-representation where they could conspicuously display their munificence through the construction of basilicas and extravagant mausolea to distinguish themselves among their contemporaries and to secure safe passage to the afterlife. In the case of Barcino, the archaeological evidence is much more scattered. In the eastern suburb, in the vicinity of the medieval Church of Santa Maria del Mar, an extensive necropolis has been unearthed. It contains burials, occasionally overlapping, from the fourth to the ninth century. Unfortunately, no evidence has been found of the expected martyrial basilica dedicated, according to tenth century records, to Saint Eulalia, which would have given rise to the entire burial ground ([Beltrán de Heredia 2010](#), pp. 366–73). In the western suburb, in the area around the Church of Santa Maria del Pi, another suburban church has been located through the discovery of a grave dated between the fourth–fifth century and the presumed reuse of some pedestals from the old Roman forum as supports for altar tables, but here too, the remains of a basilica have not been found ([Beltrán de Heredia 2010](#), p. 373). The same can be said of the presumed Christianisation of the *villae* in the archaeological sites of Sant Pau del Camp and Sant Cugat. The discovery of a vast necropolis associated with a lavish mausoleum has raised the possibility that private basilicas or monasteries might have been established within these grand estates during the fifth century. However, once again, the available evidence remains inconclusive ([Beltrán de Heredia 2010](#), pp. 378–84). In any case, as in Tarraco, the appearance of liturgical places of worship in the suburbs of Barcino seems to have increased during the fifth century as part of the process of competition between the

lay and ecclesiastical groups for social prestige, the appropriation of the cult of the martyrs and authority over the faithful.

One of the largest Christian building projects identified in Barcino took place at the beginning of the sixth century. Excavations under the present Gothic Church have uncovered the remains of a monumental religious complex, which included a basilica, a cruciform baptismal pool and a series of subsidiary rooms.<sup>27</sup> Yet, only a part of the triple-sided or triconch head and a signinum pavement, which belonged to the presbytery, have survived from the ecclesiastical complex (Figure 4). Within the eastern apse, an underground area has been identified and interpreted as a *confessio* designed to house relics and/or the tomb of a prominent personage, the interior of which was visible from a window communicating with the outer part of the church. Between the baptistery and the basilica, in a room adjoining the apse, and within the areas, which were to be used exclusively by the clergy, there was a tomb built at the same time as the building. The person buried there must have been a prominent member of the Barcino community and perhaps the sponsor of the complex (Beltrán de Heredia 2018a, p. 102).

According to Julia Beltrán, this second basilica complex was the seat of the Catholic bishopric of Barcino, whose church was consecrated to the martyrs Justus and Pastor, while the first episcopal complex, located to the northeast of the city (where the residence of the *comes civitatis* was also established), was occupied by Arian bishops after the installation of Visigothic power in Hispania in the sixth century, Barcino having been selected as a *sedes regia* (Beltrán de Heredia 2018a, pp. 90–91, 108–9, 114–17).

This hypothesis is suggestive and would allow us to assume for Barcino the same kind of conflict, which occurred in Milan in the time of Ambrose or in Ravenna in the sixth century as a consequence of the competition between political and ecclesiastical factions for the control of the churches. However, Beltrán's interpretation should be taken with caution for two reasons. On the one hand, the very identification of Barcino as a centre of royalty is questionable: after the disappearance of the kingdom of Toulouse, the Visigothic rulers did not immediately establish a stable territorial centre of government but adopted a system of control through an itinerant court, which did not settle down until the rule of Theudis (531–548) or Athanagild (555–567) (Poveda Arias 2018, pp. 473–76, 506–9). On the other hand, the monarchy never implemented a policy of seizing Church assets, nor were Arian bishoprics established until the reign of Liuvigild (568–586). Had such a policy existed, the councils of Gerona, Barcelona, Lérida or Valencia, convened in the first half of the sixth century, would have faced the appropriation of the Church's property by Arian newcomers in some manner. In fact, the evidence seems to indicate the opposite, namely that relations between the Visigothic monarchy and the Catholic episcopate were characterised by a high degree of interaction and collaboration (Gesalec even founded a Catholic monastery in Asan) in the pursuit of certain interests by the representatives of both institutions (Poveda Arias 2018, pp. 593, 615–18, 628–32, with many examples).

Crucial to Beltrán's hypothesis is an Arian bishop named Ugnas in Barcino, who converted to Catholicism at the third Council of Toledo. The theory assumes the existence of a (undocumented) lineage of Arian bishops dating back to the early sixth century (Beltrán de Heredia 2018a, p. 109). However, the presence of Ugnas in Barcino must be understood within the broader context of Liuvigild's religious policies, since he was the first monarch to implement a strategy to impose, control and gradually undermine the foundations of the Hispanic Church (Mathisen 1997, pp. 684–86). Prior to Liuvigild, the Arian Church never had a territorial structure, and its *sacerdotes* were a sort of priestly collegium that merely accompanied the king and performed duties for him (Mathisen 1997, pp. 681–95). The *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium* indicates that the Arian bishopric of Emerita was inaugurated by Sunna under the direct protection of this king (VSPE V. 4), and there is no evidence of an Arian community existing in Emerita prior to Liuvigild (Thompson 1960, pp. 16–17). It appears that the situation in Barcino mirrored that of Emerita. Bishop Ugnas was dispatched by Liuvigild to wrest control of the local Church's places of worship and its property. His success in this endeavour is demonstrated by the fact that, following his

conversion to Catholicism, he maintained exclusive occupation of the bishopric of Barcino until at least 599, as confirmed by the records of the Second Council of Barcino. The absence of other bishops operating in parallel within the see of Barcino among the signatories of the acts of the Third Council of Toledo even raises doubts regarding the existence of two episcopal sees within the city during the final years of Liuvigild's rule. However, it is possible that the other bishop based in Barcino had passed away around the time of the council (Poveda Arias 2018, p. 635).

Given the above considerations, the construction of a monumental new basilica within Barcino at the beginning of the sixth century appears to align more closely with the documented dynamics witnessed in various other cities across the western Mediterranean. Cities such as Tarraco, Valencia, Mérida, Arles and Marseille (Lewis 2021, pp. 68–70) saw bishops, who already possessed considerable resources by this time (Wood 2022, pp. 127–28, 132–35, 145), undertaking the construction of monumental churches or renovating existing ones. Their objective was to secure advantages in the intense competition for control over episcopal seats and to showcase the status of their city and ecclesiastical hierarchies on a regional scale. It can indeed be argued that this inter-regional rivalry motivated the substantial enlargement of Barcino's cathedral complex towards the end of the sixth century, particularly given that dioceses such as Tarraco or Valentia had recently seen lavish remodelling projects on their own episcopal complexes on an unprecedented scale.

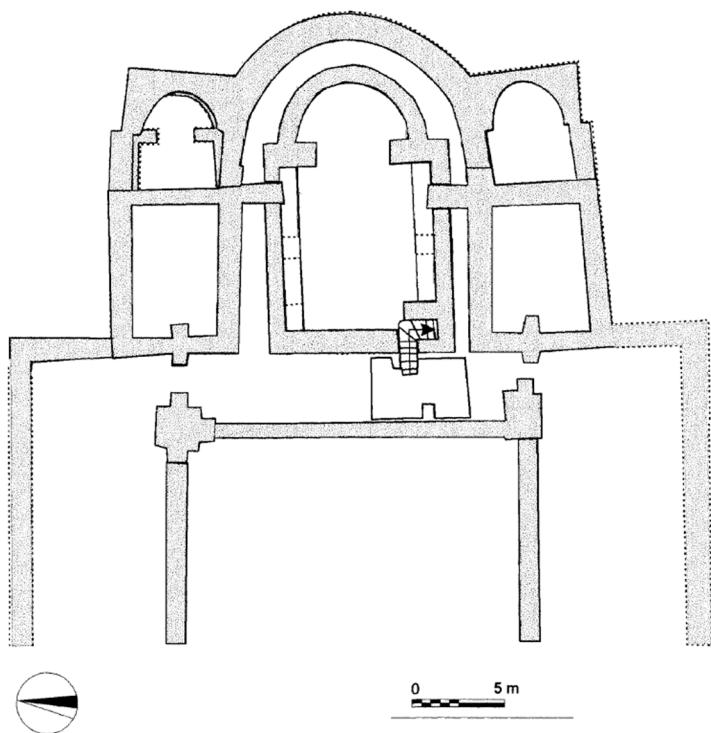
The sixth century is therefore the time when the episcopal sees of Hispania managed to accumulate a sufficiently secure patrimony to begin to finance, with greater autonomy, the construction and/or extension of basilicas, monasteries and charitable buildings. The bishopric of Augusta Emerita represents the pinnacle of this wealth accumulation and provides us with our final case study.

#### 4.3. Augusta Emerita

In Augusta Emerita, the capital of the *diocesis Hispaniarum*, the first indications of Christian influence on the urban topography date to the fourth century. These were located in the northeastern suburban area, where a necropolis, which likely housed the martyrium or *memoria* containing the relics of Saint Eulalia, started to thrive (Mateos 1999, pp. 112–38). Interestingly, the construction of a basilica structure in this particular area is not documented until the latter half of the fifth century. This development followed the demolition of the funerary structures in the vicinity in preceding decades (Mateos 1999, pp. 71–89).<sup>28</sup> However, the basilica reused the apsidal structure of the previous funerary building, resulting in a church with a square layout, divided into three aisles, featuring a transept, which preceded a tripartite end terminated with semi-circular apses (Mateos 1999, p. 200) (Figure 5).

Apart from the martyr complex of Saint Eulalia, we have no knowledge regarding the distribution of Christian monumental buildings within the urban layout of Emerita throughout the fifth and sixth centuries. However, we do know, thanks to the *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium*, that the city of Emerita and its surroundings were gradually filled with funerary and martyrial basilicas, hospitals and monasteries. In the urban centre, near the forum and likely in the vicinity of the current cathedral, stood the Cathedral of Saint Mary, previously known as Saint Jerusalem (referred to as the *ecclesia senior*), which had a baptistery dedicated to Saint John, as well as an episcopal palace (VSPE IV. 9.2–8). However, the physical remains of this complex have not yet been identified (Mateos 1999, pp. 190–92; 2018, p. 150). On the outskirts of the urban centre, there were two monasteries associated with the basilica of Saint Eulalia. One of them housed monks dedicated to the maintenance of the basilica, while the other accommodated a community of nuns, who in the year 661 were under the leadership of an abbess named Eugenia (Mateos and Caballero 2011, p. 516). Additionally, the *Vitae* mention several suburban churches, including those of St. Faustus, St. Lucretia (VSPE IV. 7.5), St. Lawrence, St. Cyprian (VSPE IV. 10.4) and St. Quintisina (VSPE I. 25). However, the exact locations of these churches remain a mystery (Mateos 1999, pp. 193–94).

We do not know who the commissioners of all these works were. As in most of the hagiographies from late antiquity, the *Vitae* extol the numerous virtues of Bishops Fidel and Masona, but they also underline the intense building activity, which they carried out in the city of Emerita, with the restoration of an atrium belonging to the episcopal palace or the cathedral (VSPE IV. 6), the construction of a *xenodochium*, the enlargement of the basilica of Saint Eulalia (VSPE IV. 6.8) or the construction of other basilicas and monasteries (VSPE V. 3.3). Financially speaking, such projects were made possible as early as the sixth century, when the bishopric accumulated an enormous fortune thanks to donations of land, which Bishop Fidel received from a *vir inluster* (VSPE IV. 2.15–18). From that time on, their euergetism and philanthropy were extensive, demonstrating a generous and selfless commitment to helping the poor. In doing so, they sought not only to alleviate the suffering of the most disadvantaged but also to strengthen their reputation as pious and exemplary leaders in the community.



**Figure 5.** Reconstruction of the plan of the first basilica of Santa Eulalia de Mérida dated to the fifth century. Reprinted with permission from [Mateos \(1999, Figure 29\)](#).

However, based on the evidence found in other cities, it is open to doubt whether it was the bishopric of Emerita that financed the construction of all the funerary and martyrial churches documented in the literary sources, some of which date back to the fifth century. In fact, epigraphy has shown that at the end of this century, the lay authorities collaborated with members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the provision of civic infrastructure, as evidenced by the inscription commemorating the repair of the city walls and bridge by the *dux* Salla and the Bishop Zeno in 483 (ICERV 363). This fits well with the model of “coopetition” used by authors such as Joe Lewis (2021) to define the interpersonal relationships at work in the patronage of Christian cult buildings in the cities of Gaul, where secular and religious authorities often cooperated in different areas, such as the improvement of the urban infrastructure (as in the case of Emerita), while competing for hegemony and authority at both the local and regional level.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, the *Vitae* themselves bear witness to some of the conflicts in which the bishops of Emerita found themselves engaged against the different ecclesiastical and lay factions that existed in the city, in the general struggle to promote their respective interests. For example,

Fidel had to face fierce opposition spearheaded by certain sectors of the local ecclesiastical hierarchy who opposed his accession to the prelature (VSPE, IV. 5.1–4). However, it was during Masona’s episcopate that the bishopric had to deal with threats from the court of Toledo itself, since King Liuvigild tried, by means of bribes and intimidation, to convert the bishop of Emerita to Arianism. In response to Masona’s refusal to change his creed, Liuvigild sent an Arian bishop named Sunna. Through this strategic move, the king was able to establish a counter authority in the city, ultimately undermining the influence of the Catholic bishop, to the extent that the Arian prelate managed to take control of some churches in Emerita with surprising ease (VSPE V. 5.4).<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, Sunna failed in his attempt to bring the martyr basilica of Saint Eulalia under his influence, no doubt due to the entrenched patronage, which the Catholic bishopric exercised over it (VSPE V. 5.7–9). This situation suggests that the authority of the Catholic bishop was not unchallenged and that there were various opposing forces within the city (Poveda Arias 2018, p. 638; Grotherr 2023, pp. 69–71).<sup>31</sup> In the process of local competition for attracting the faithful and capitalising on the economic and social benefits derived from controlling religious buildings, even the influential prelates of Emerita—who by the sixth century seem to have established a firm patronage on the whole liturgical, doctrinal and ecclesiastical apparatus of the city—faced difficulties in maintaining complete control over the religious landscape of the city and its surroundings.

## 5. Conclusions

This study has examined the factors behind the transformation of the religious landscape in the cities of Hispania, spanning the decline of the civic model of the Early Empire (fourth century) and the development of Christian cities under the patronage of post-imperial kingdoms (sixth century). However, this task is made especially difficult by the scarcity of surviving documentary sources and the impossibility of identifying the agents involved in the financing of the monumental churches, which began to emerge in the urban topography of Hispania. Accordingly, what has been proposed in this paper are some general reflections on the processes which may have determined the evolution of the religious topography of Hispanic cities through the interpretation of the material and literary record and drawing parallels from analogous regions in the Roman West, where comparable economic, social and religious circumstances may have prevailed.

During the fourth century, in most cities of the Iberian Peninsula (except in cases such as Emerita or Tarraco), the religious landscape of Roman civic polytheism had become partially or totally unstructured as a result of the decline in civic euergetism. The old sanctuaries had been or were being abandoned, dismantled or reused for purposes unrelated to religious praxis. Nevertheless, this process had no correlate in the proliferation of Christian places of worship, which might have been able to satisfy the demands of a population faced with the religious vacuum resulting from the collapse of civic religion. The prevalence of non-Christian religious practices during this period can be assumed, but we can barely approach them due to scarce literary and archaeological evidence. Consequently, what we observe is a totally unstructured polytheism, reduced to private practice, to funerary cult or to places of collective worship still in use but hardly detectable archaeologically due to the decline in oligarchic euergetism.

The same causes that led to the decline in Roman civic religion also explain the negligible monumental footprint left by Christianity in the fourth century. Although fully established episcopal sees existed in Hispania from the end of the third century—some occupied by notable figures, such as Ossius of Cordoba, who served as an advisor to Constantine and participated in the Council of Nicaea—the urban populations were only just beginning to embrace Christianity. These communities appear to have concentrated their *loca sacra* in the martyrial necropolises and in the episcopal or aristocratic *domus ecclesiae*, although these structures are undetectable in the archaeological record. Despite the “peace of the church”, Christianity was unable to manifest its increasing wealth and influence through monumental architecture that could visibly transform the city. This is

simply because the construction of monumental churches was not in the scope of the “urban aspirations” of the secular and religious elites of the fourth century.<sup>32</sup> The spaces where the urban leaders invested their wealth were instead to be found in the great imperial capitals, where the real centres of power were concentrated, or in the lavish city mansions and majestic country estates, which appeared in the cities and the countryside of the provinces of the Roman West. Public investment in the old provincial cities lost much of its appeal, leading to a decline in euergetism, which had a significant impact on the role of civic religion in shaping the topography of the city.<sup>33</sup>

From the end of the fourth or the beginning of the fifth century, a shift in the situation became evident. Lay elites and now also bishops seemed to revive the dormant classical euergetism, which resurfaced with a renewed ideological emphasis on eschatological promises and channelled it through the financing of cult spaces and monumental urban burial sites. The new aspirations of these individuals and groups, who were caught up in profound political and social upheaval, will have been one of the main drivers of change. As a result, local and regional competition for power, influence and control underwent a gradual resurgence. However, at times, this rivalry gave way to cooperation, so that the use of the concept of “coopetition” is a useful epistemological category to study a process marked by the capacity of actors to cooperate and compete simultaneously.

Indeed, in the fifth century, bishops had a limited capacity to effectuate significant transformations within their area of influence. With a few exceptions, they lacked the necessary funds to undertake large-scale city-wide building programs and so relied on donations from the laity to expedite the process of Christianising the urban landscape and securing authority over their congregations. For their part, the wealthy members of the laity sought to reinforce their status and obtain spiritual benefit through this type of euergetic action. Consequently, it was predominantly these citizens who financed the construction of the first large basilicas and funerary complexes in which they could display their status, their wealth and their *amor civicus*. However, the bishops, invoking their ecclesiastical authority, asserted their oversight over the construction and consecration of these complexes in an effort to establish legitimacy and influence. Simultaneously, they also made efforts to contribute financially and serve as sponsors for such edifices. The collaboration between these groups would turn competitive when bishops, lay founders and their heirs asserted claims over various aspects of staffing basilicas or managing the endowments tied to the buildings they had funded. This dynamic becomes apparent in the imperial capitals and in the provisions of councils, such as Orléans or Lérida, held in the first half of the sixth century. These instances reveal how frequently the bishops struggled to maintain control over the patrimony, personnel and even the liturgical practices of many churches, which had begun to appear in rural areas, as well as in cities and their *suburbia*.

This process defined a completely new urban religious topography, which in the fifth century had two main focal points: the suburban belt, with its martyrial churches and funerary basilicas dotted around the outskirts of the cities, and the cathedral complexes in the urban centres. In the process of shaping the Christian city, the aim was to avoid recycling or converting the old pagan sanctuaries, and thus perpetuating the religious markers of Roman urbanism (they were instead dismantled or repurposed), but rather to define a new reality whose main markers were conditioned by two main factors: on the one hand, by the consolidation of the new *loca sacra* (sites of martyrdom or sites associated with a saint); on the other hand, the more random element, which depended (a) on the availability of building space for episcopal complexes or (b) on the location of properties belonging to the wealthy elites where they chose to erect their funerary basilicas.

Yet, the episcopal authorities, building on the foundations of this sacred topography of the fifth century generated by this process of “coopetition”, gradually consolidated greater control over the sites of worship through the selection of the personnel, the authority over the seasonal and processional liturgy of the city and the economic management of the basilicas located in their diocese. It is possible that, in many cities, this situation did not eventuate until the second half of the sixth century, when the episcopal sees began to amass

considerable wealth and gained greater economic control over the *tertia* collected in local churches (*Conc. II Brac.*, c. 2). As a result, they not only had the capacity to establish systems of charity and benevolence—garnering immense support from the general population (as narrated by the *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium*)—but they also engaged in building programs, which allowed them to expand or construct their own basilicas, as observed in Tarraco, Barcino, Valentia and Emerita. It was from this point that the bishops could reshape the religious landscape of Hispanic cities according to their desires, following a predetermined and regulated plan. This situation enabled them to become one of wealthiest and most powerful institutions in post-imperial Iberia.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Aude Busine discusses the process of “secularisation” of the pagan city after the collapse of the civic religion, following (Brown 1995, p. 52).

<sup>2</sup> On the domestic spaces of Christian worship in the first three centuries of the era, see (Bremmer 2020, pp. 48–74). On the ongoing vitality of Christian private worship in the houses of the Roman aristocracy throughout the fourth century, see (Bowes 2008, pp. 99–103).

<sup>3</sup> One of these *domus ecclesiae* may have been identified in Augusta Emerita (Mérida); however, the evidence consists solely of a non-dated *chrismion* painted on the wall of a cistern within the house. This alone is not compelling enough to conclusively identify this space as a *domus ecclesiae* (Sastre de Diego 2011, pp. 568–69).

<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the Iberian situation, the African churches began to amass a rich heritage from the beginning of the fourth century (Buenacasa 2004, pp. 500–9), reflected in the archaeological and literary record, with the documentation of dozens of Christian basilicas dating back to the fourth century, e.g., (Gui et al. 1992, passim; Leone 2007, pp. 89–96; Baratte et al. 2014, passim). This spread of religious buildings was also associated with the competition between the Donatists and Catholics over the control of basilicas (Lander 2017, pp. 87–89, 119–29).

<sup>5</sup> The prevalence of private churches in shaping Christian religious topography in Rome and Constantinople during the fourth century has been brilliantly analysed in (Bowes 2008, pp. 62–124). She convincingly argues that the Roman aristocracy, as in previous centuries, continued, to a large extent, to capitalise on the city’s religious offerings, outside episcopal oversight and control (p. 80). Similarly, in fourth century Aquileia, there may have been intense rivalry between aristocratic families and bishops over the control of Christian relics (Sotinel 2005b, pp. 67–71).

<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that some intellectuals—already in fourth century Hispania—were acting as “religious entrepreneurs” (Rüpke 2018, p. 324), instrumentalising the religious capital offered by Christianity to provide an attractive liturgical and doctrinal offering. The paradigmatic case is that of Priscillian.

<sup>7</sup> This is reflected in the anxiety shown by the bishops in the records of the Council of Illyberis (early fourth century) before the problems they had to face in what was a largely “pagan” society.

<sup>8</sup> On this phenomenon in north Africa, see (MacMullen 2009, pp. 57–59).

<sup>9</sup> According to (Ward-Perkins 1984, p. 70): “It is clear that for most of the propertied classes the construction of churches was a wholly new venture into public building, or a venture into it after several decades of inactivity”. To this renewed euergetism, (Peter Brown 2012, p. 88) adds the innovative element of eschatological reward: “For each gift opened up a path that led directly from earth to heaven”.

- 10 This is highlighted by (Lewis 2021, p. 122, figs. 5 and 10). The problems arising from these documentary sources are acknowledged by Lewis throughout his work, and he admits that it is highly probable that the participation of laymen is under-represented (pp. 124, 138, 267).
- 11 The same phenomenon is analysed in Rome by (Bowes 2008, p. 72). On the important role which small donors played in the embellishment and provision of goods for local churches, see (Brown 2012, pp. 39–42).
- 12 “Quant à toutes les basiliques qui ont été construites en divers lieux et se construisent chaque jour, il a paru bon, conformément à la règle des canons antérieurs, qu’elles demeurent sous l’autorité de l’évêque sur le territoire duquel elles sont situées” (Conc. Aurelian., c. 17, ed. Gaudemet and Basdevat 1989, p. 83).
- 13 “[...] Y si algún seglar desease consagrar una basílica edificada por él mismo, no se atreva en modo alguno a apartarla del régimen general de la diócesis, bajo el pretexto de que se trata de un monasterio, si no viviere allí una comunidad religiosa bajo una regla aprobada por el obispo” (Conc. Ilerd., c. 3, ed. Vives 1963, p. 56).
- 14 John Chrysostom in his homily 18 encouraged the *domini* to build churches in their states because of the many benefits that this would provide them, such as their personal enhancement through gaining an appropriate mausoleum for themselves and their families or the guarantee of a permanent evocation of their memory through the hymns and prayers sung there by the faithful. Martínez Maza (2021) has recently highlighted how the Christianisation of rural areas in Hispania during the fourth and fifth centuries would have been orchestrated mainly by the lay *domini*, through their own doctrinal and liturgical strategies.
- 15 The canons of the Hispanic councils from the sixth and seventh centuries seem to reflect a moral and economic competition between the laymen and bishops over the control of the churches and their goods. For example, in canon 3 of the Council of Lerida in 546, and citing canon 17 of the Council of Orleans, the bishops of Tarraco tried to prevent the loss of control of the goods of the basilicas founded by laymen, since they were fraudulently trying to pass these foundations off as monasteries. The case of the designation of Valerius of Bierzo (under episcopal confirmation) as priest of the Church of Ricimiro in Ebronauto, upon the proposal of the landowner himself, is one of the most symptomatic cases of the control which private individuals could exercise over their private churches (*Ordo Quer.* 10). On this subject, although oriented towards rural properties, see (Díaz Martínez 1986, p. 300; Fernández 2016, pp. 536–37; Fiocchi Nicolai 2017, pp. 218–22).
- 16 Sulpicius Severus (*Chron.* 1.23; 2.32 and 51) castigated the power struggles between bishops and urban ecclesiastical factions, which were partly responsible for his monastic retreat to his villa in *Primuliaccum*.
- 17 On this concept, which seeks to define political and social interactions as a combination of cooperation and confrontation, see (Brandenburger and Nalebuff 1996).
- 18 Particularly noteworthy is the epitaph of *Thecla*, an elderly “virgin” from Egypt, who was buried in this complex (CIL II/2 14 2150).
- 19 This must be the complex that appears in Letter 11 of Consentius to St. Augustine, which had a church and a *secretarium* (Aug. Ep. 291, 9). This letter also alludes to the existence of a monastery in the city founded by Fronton at the beginning of the fifth century, although, as Arce points out, it would have been a simple cell where Fronton, in extreme poverty, would have lived in isolation (Arce 2005, p. 224).
- 20 Prud. *Perist.* 6.122–135, if this is the place to which Prudentius refers, as (Pérez Martínez 2019, pp. 50–51) suggests.
- 21 On the embellishment of the martyrial churches of Rome by wealthy laymen and various members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to obtain privileged burial spaces, see (Spera 2012, pp. 42–45; Luciano 2021, pp. 89–90, 96–101).
- 22 For an architectural description of the basilica of the amphitheatre, see (Guidi 2010; Muñoz 2016, pp. 113–24).
- 23 On the boom experienced by the Tarraco episcopal see in the second half of the sixth century as a result of local economic prosperity, see (Pérez Martínez 2005, pp. 272–343; Muñoz 2016, pp. 107–13). On the *Orationale Visigothicum* and its influence on the development of the martyr cult and processional liturgy in Tarraco, see (Godoy and Muñoz 2019).
- 24 Vilella (n.d.), <http://dbe.rah.es/biografias/17154/paciano> (last consulted on 2 March 2023). Pacianus was the father of Nummius Aemilianus Dexter, who held the position of proconsul of Asia (379–387) and prefect of the praetorium of Italy (395).
- 25 The case may have similarities with the property donation received by Amatus, bishop of Auxerre, at the end of the sixth century from the *vir clarissimus* Rupilius for the construction of a new cathedral at the town’s hearth (*Vita Amat.* 3.18–21).
- 26 On the role of the baths as places of social encounter and as spaces of religious experience, see (Steuernagel 2020). Cf., also Urciuoli’s reflections on the advantageous location chosen by Justin, who established his domestic school on top of one of the baths at Rome, (Urciuoli 2020, pp. 71–76).
- 27 According to (Beltrán de Heredia 2018b, pp. 21–22), the complex was built upon a temple from the early imperial period. However, the remains—the angle of a possible podium—are not clearly identifiable with those of a temple, nor does the stratigraphic sequence support the interpretation of a conversion of the building, as there is a gap of almost a century between the abandonment of the space found under the basilica and the construction of the church at the beginning of the sixth century.
- 28 On the possible causes of this destruction, see (Arce 2011, p. 498; Mateos 2018, p. 140).
- 29 (Poveda Arias 2023a) has also recently applied this concept to illustrate the power dynamics between lay elites and ecclesiastical authorities in the cities of the Visigothic kingdom.
- 30 On the implications of this conflict, see recent work by (Grotherr 2023).

- <sup>31</sup> Indeed, after the death of Liuvigild, when Masona returned from exile imposed by the crown, a section of the city's lay elite, led by Bishop Sunna and some nobles such as Witteric, hatched a conspiracy against Masona and the Nicene policy of Reccared (*VSPE*, V. 10–11).
- <sup>32</sup> On the use of the term “urban aspirations” as applied to the religious attitudes of different groups and actors living together in a city, see ([Rüpke 2020](#), pp. 99–100).
- <sup>33</sup> On this process, which shares close parallels with certain regions of Gaul, see ([Loseby 2006](#), pp. 79–83; [Lewis 2021](#), pp. 237–39).

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