Research Articles and Updates

Urban Landscapes of Power in the Iberian Peninsula from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages (ULP.PILAEMA Project)

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Abstract

Debates surrounding late antique societies have attracted renewed interest from an archaeological perspective. Attention given to this period between the fifth and the eighth centuries reflects present-day issues closely related to urban landscapes and long-term change in the human occupation of space. The aim of the ULP.PILAEMA Project is to examine the interaction of new elites on urban life between the late Roman and early Middle Ages through the study of the main components of townscape. The project is articulated around a series of key Spanish case studies selected on the basis of the quality of their architecture and topography and the reconstructions that this evidence facilitates for late antiquity. Taken together, the examples chosen present a coherent and up-to-date perspective of how cities transformed as symbolic places. The goal of the project is to explore ways in which topographies of governance were configured and to identify urban patterns to compare with other places and regions in Western Europe. Understanding the rise of bishoprics, monasteries and official buildings and their built environment as an expression of social interactions has

allowed us to explain the origins and development of early medieval centres of power in Spain.

Introduction and context

Transitional periods such as late antiquity (450–800 BCE) are generally understood as the result of crises induced by traumatic events, such as wars, invasions and natural disasters, or of gradual but intense adaptation to situations that lead to new social, urban and cultural configurations. The major migrations involving so-called barbarian societies that impacted upon the economic systems of post-Roman Western Europe make it an attractive period to study (Halsall 2007). After the failure of the political and economic model established by the Roman Empire, administrative, ideological and physical conflicts broke out among Mediterranean societies in order to re-establish a balance between resource exploitation, trade, territories and populations (Wickham 2005). A city's architecture as a representation of power has long been used intentionally to define relationships among individuals, groups, cities and governments (Jong and Van Rhijn 2001). Christianity also was one of the long-term phenomena involved in the transformation of Roman urban societies and their territories (Aldenderfer 2010, 77–94).

Material expressions of governance are reflected in the topography of many late antique Iberian cities through the transformation and planning of new spaces in this period revealed by archaeological investigations. Landscape archaeology provides the theoretical and methodological framework for this project (Williamson 2003), while its principal methods draw upon archaeological survey (Chavarría and Reynolds 2015) and comprise computer-based mapping and remote sensing technology. Thus topics and themes included in this project encompass Christianisation, urbanism, elite architecture and governance, studied within a geographic information systems (GIS) environment.

Changes in the urban fabric in the Iberian Peninsula are broadly comparable with the urban evolutions in other Western Mediterranean regions between the Roman and the early medieval periods. Former urban centres continued as the principal economic and administrative locations, although the rectilinear grid characteristics of Roman town planning changed considerably and, in some cases, disappeared to the extent that new skylines of urban space, with a wide range of local variations, emerged (Bowes and Kulikowski 2005). This focus on new urban features formed the basis around which the European medieval city was structured. This transition is first reflected by various stages of abandonment, reuse and even reoccupation of the Roman public and private buildings. It then led to the appearance of new forms of housing, productive areas and, above all, the consolidation of emergent enclaves representing local authorities.

The six Iberian settlements involved in this project (Barcelona, Toledo, Valencia, Idanha-a-Velha, Recopolis and Oviedo) retained religious administrative functions and thereby remained distinctively urban in terms of their monumental buildings and the service and administrative functions required by the bishoprics and Visigoth Kingdom (Lavan 2001; Christie and Augenti 2012). Furthermore, major port-cities strategically placed in the Mediterranean, near the Atlantic Ocean and inland, were involved in maritime trade and the control of natural resources. With the exception of Recopolis, founded in the sixth century and abandoned in the tenth century, all the cities in our case studies are historic cities founded in the Roman period that have been continuously occupied until the present day.

The aim of this article is to present the rationale and progress of this research project based at the UCL Institute of Archaeology under a Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant. The investigation explores the interaction of Iberian local elites (bishops) and the central power (Visigoth state) on urban life and attempts to explain how late Roman cities were transformed via new symbolic places under the patronage of Visigoth leaders. Consequently, it covers some of the well-known episcopal complexes in the Iberian Peninsula (Barcelona) and other cases studies where the archaeological evidence is more difficult to assess (Toledo) that became temporary or permanent Visigothic royal seats.

Background

The twenty-first century has seen a new breed of scholars focusing on the topics under study in this article. The view of late antiquity as a period of complete urban dereliction with a selection of urban areas subsequently re-settled from the seventh century onwards is an out-dated, inaccurate and overly simplistic view. New evidence, along with new ways of interpretation, points to dynamic, changing townscapes that reveal a continuity of life within them. This model of historical development was largely a product of the 1960s, but has since been directly challenged by scholarship. Two major developments in archaeological research have made possible an empirically better-grounded approach, capable of yielding a much more accurate picture: (1) the vast increase in excavated evidence from historic towns; and (2) the use of quantitative technologies for the analysis of archaeological data of entire townscapes. Scholars generally approach late antique urbanism in terms of the Christianisation of the ancient classical townscape. The idea that episcopal infrastructure was predominantly an urban phenomenon can be maintained, as concluded at the fifteenth International Congress of Christian Archaeology held at Toledo in 2008 (AA.VV. 2013). Late antique cities in Britain, Gaul, Italy and Hispania were also administrative, tax-collecting and military centres of the late Roman Empire. Their other role was to house the new urban benefactors: bishops and imperial officials.

Nowadays, ever-increasing archaeological data and refined methods of analysis have enriched the view of urban developments, with theories that move beyond the rigid framework that promoted Christianity as the only explanation for the success of urban configurations in the early Middle Ages. Studies of English and French cities and of topographies of power have been re-ignited thanks to M. McCormick (McCormick et al. 2012, 169–220), C. Hills (1998, 177), A. Reynolds (2006, 133–60), M. Carver (1993), F.K. Haarer (2014) and many others.

The late antique townscape of Spain is difficult to assess. The organisation of new political powers has been the focus of much scholarly reappraisal in the last few years (Castellanos and Martín 2005,

1–41), but not sufficiently to explain the realities of power that can be seen from archaeological data for the diverse territory of the Iberian Peninsula. Despite the disintegration of the traditional model of urban development, revitalised urban centres began to appear at the very end of the fifth century, with Spanish cities Christianised only very slowly.

The cities involved in this research have undergone sufficient fieldwork so that meaningful patterns of evolution can be traced. Idanha-a-Velha, where the IdaVe Project that I lead has conducted excavations from 2012 to 2018, is exceptional as there has been limited scientific investigation until recently following the excavations led by F. Almeida in the second half of the twentieth century (Sánchez and Morín 2019). Establishing the functions of ecclesiastical and residential buildings at Toledo, Recopolis and Idanha-a-Velha represent a difficult task, owing to a lack of reliable chronologies and the limits of a stylistic approach. Aristocratic patronage of structures at these places is suggested by their location inside the city walls, their physical type and the quality of their construction techniques and decoration. Further research is required on the proportions of high-status private buildings and official public buildings in the sample cities to obtain a meaningful and thorough description of the building features and to determine traces of continuity or innovation of architectural models. Detailed analysis and comparisons of archaeological and above-ground structural records will generate significant scope for painting a comprehensive picture of power configurations in the cities studied.

Goals of the ULP.PILAEMA Project

The research strategy of the present project is to study architecture and the main topographic phenomena related to power, the Christianisation of society and the strengthening of new Visigothic elites that influenced the emergence of late antique urban landscapes. Thus it is important to understand late Roman urban topography since earlier settlements heavily influenced subsequent developments. This study takes advantage of existing archaeological data from Spain to understand urban evolutions using interdisciplinary

methods and approaches. More specifically, it intends to achieve the following objectives, which are to:

1) assess the changing nature of Roman cities through detailed evaluation of archaeological, epigraphic and historical data in order to rethink spatial topographical transitions, their associated societies and urban networks

2) categorise the varied usages of urban occupations related to aspects of change and continuity and assess their socioeconomic significances across time (i.e. the creation of bishoprics as a new device to manage taxation and the territorial administration)

3) consider the impact of evolving religion and power structures, and assess the evidence for the evolution of Roman societies via the emergence of new religious elites

4) re-interpret functionalities, chronologies and architectural typologies of local buildings associated with governance and Christianity by applying structural analysis to reconstruct the history of existing buildings, identifying materials, techniques, continuities and gaps in occupation as traces of the passage of monuments through different historical periods

5) model data using GIS to illustrate the spatial configuration of settlements and their focus of power

Methodology

The research combines a range of archaeological data involving interdisciplinary collaboration to cover the specific objectives. The project not only entails a review of the data sources, but also develops an archaeological approach that includes analysis provided by new cartography and remote sensing techniques. The methodological design places great importance on standardised quantification and documentation of data. Methods that have been applied are:

1) setting up a database to manage diverse information (archaeological, textual, epigraphic, architectural, cartographical and photographic (aerial) from fieldwork, archives and collections)

2) excavating and doing fieldwork annually at Los Hitos (Toledo)

3) drone surveying to generate aerial orthophotos of Idanha-a-Velha and other architectural complexes in the region of Toledo (Los Hitos, Melque and La Mata) and Valencia (Pla de Nadal), using a photogrammetric digitation system (Figures 1 and 2)
4) using GIS data to generate a cartographic database to manage information of different categories to read urban patterns and transformations. Map-based analysis is still in progress and will allow for an overview of landscape developments relating to sites, buildings and excavations

The tasks carried out on this project have prioritised fieldwork with non-invasive archaeology, such as aerial photogrammetry, laser scanner or optical macroscopy of mortars, in different urban and rural settings. Works have been particularly intense on the hinterland of the Visigothic capital of Toledo (the churches of saint Maria de Melque and saint Pedro de la Mata), with annual excavations at the archaeological

Figure 1   Aerial orthophoto of the late antique Episcopal complex of Idanha-a-Velha, Portugal. (Image credit: ULP.PILAEMA Project)

Figure 2   Aerial orthophoto of the late-seventh-century palace of Pla de Nadal, Valencia. (Image credit: ULP.PILAEMA Project)

site of Los Hitos. Additionally, some cases have been studied on the western (Idanha-a-Velha) and eastern area of the Iberian Peninsula (Pla de Nadal), alongside other Iberian territories with a dense urban network such as the ancient Roman provinces of Baetica and Lusitania.

Conclusions

Reflections on the principal research questions addressed in this project can now be summed up. First, the relationship that the Visigoths maintained with the Roman past suggests a tendency towards *imitatio imperii* given the supremacy of the Roman heritage itself rooted in the Iberian aristocracy and ecclesiastical elites in the episcopal fabric. The foundation of cities such as Recopolis, the urban evolutions of Toledo as the capital of the kingdom and later the foundation of Oviedo complete this imitative fashion. Without the survival of the Roman legacy, it would be difficult to conceive later revivals, such as the Austurian and

Carolingian kingdom in Western Europe and the Anglo-Saxon kingdom consolidated by Alfred the Great in Britain. Second, material evidence from the Iberian Peninsula as regards ecclesiastical public architecture enables us to define the 'episcopal group' (Idanha-a-Velha, Valencia) as the main topographical and architectural reference in the landscape required by the Catholic Church from the late Roman period onwards. This feature is immediately identifiable due to its dominant position in relation to the surrounding environment over which it exercised control. Episcopal architecture reflected the prestige of the episcopal see and the ecclesiastical elites of late antiquity. Third, this overview of the relationships and influences of the presence of the Visigothic court on the cities of Hispania reveals the difficulties that one must appreciate: principally that archaeological traces of a transformation linked to Visigothic power are minimal. These difficulties are obviously due to the vagaries of archaeological discovery, but it is also likely that the Visigothic kings took possession of the buildings of the former late Roman civic administration and still-standing elite housing. It is a challenge in this case to distinguish traces of modification directly attributable to the presence of new leaders. Finally, dualism in religion (Arianism versus Catholicism) and its impact on the landscape provides an exciting avenue for future research in late antique archaeology.

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Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interests with this work.

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