

Sacred Landscapes in the Hinterland of Toledo (Spain) during the Late Antiquity (6th–7th Century). The Case Study of Los Hitos

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Introduction. Location and Historical Context

With a strategic geographic location closed to the main Roman roads in the middle of the Iberian Peninsula, Toledo was the Visigoth capital from Theudas in 546 to the collapse of the Kingdom in the early 8th century. Evidence of power urban architecture is slim, and most of the well-known structures linked to new local elites, i.e. the monasteries and burial memorials such as Los Hitos, are in the hinterland of Toledo.¹ This work presents new approaches to the archeological research related to the local Visigothic elites as the key to understand the landscapes's transformation during the 5th century

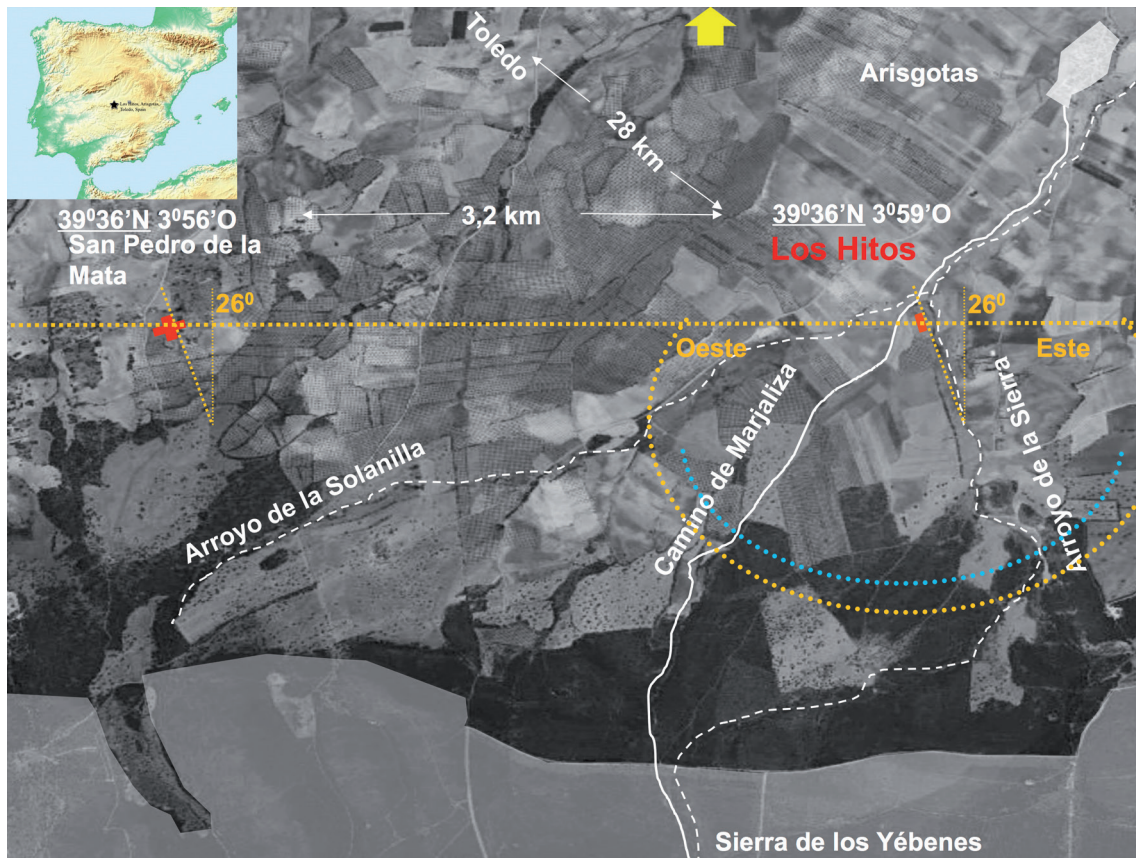


Fig. 1: Location of the archaeological site of Los Hitos in the territory of Toledo (Arisgotas, Orgaz, Toledo, Spain).

and 7th century.² As far as we know, it is highly likely that Los Hitos was the burial place or mausoleum for a member of the high nobility of Toledo and his family on a *latifundium* that could also have held an important religious centre.³ The archaeological site of Los Hitos (Arisgotas, Orgaz, Spain) is located in a geographical area called Matabueyes where the Arisgotas and Sierra Gorda streams converge. This place stays in the foothills of the Yébenes Mountains in the Sisle region (Montes de Toledo) (fig. 1).

According to written sources such as Ptolemy's *Geographia*, Orgaz may have belonged to the ancient Carpetanian *Barnacis* on the opposite side of the River Tagus in the pre-Roman period. From the Roman period, the *Via Flaminia* traversed this region, connecting *Toletum* with *Consabrum*, *Murum*, and *Laminium*, and from there, with *Emerita Augusta* and *Colonia Patricia Corduba*. In addition, other secondary roads from Toledo to Los Yébenes, Toledo to Córdoba, and Orgaz to Mora also ran through this area.⁴ The most significant finds from this site are the six Roman granite and marble altars of either a funerary or votive character, connected to an unknown ancient temple or sanctuary, and a funerary monument. The piece discovered in the fields of St Barbara (Arisgotas) has been reused as a pedestal for a Christian altar. Most significant was the discovery of a funerary mausoleum with a crypt so-called *El Torrejón* on the road to *Manzaneque* that was integrated on a rural necropolis in the late Roman period.

The location of Los Hitos near the Roman road that connects Toledo with Córdoba would be the perfect setting for a residential compound for the aristocracy. The etymology of the place (Los Yébenes) enables us to propose that this compound could be identified with the monastery *Deibensis uillula* founded for virgins by Bishop *Ildefonsus* of Toledo, in a family-owned property. As C. Martin and J. Arce indicated, the diminutive form used by the chronicler (*uillula*) does not mean a small *uilla*, but instead refers precisely to the centre of a large territory owned by nobility and is also a synonym for a villa owned by a lord. In this context, the *uillula Deibensis* is comparable with the *uillulae* cited in other texts of the time, such as *Gérticos*, the *uillula* where the Visigoth King *Recesvinto* died, or *Aquis*, the *uillula* where King *Wamba* established a short-term Episcopal see.⁵ Written sources also provide more useful information about the religious complexes around the countryside of Toledo. There were also several monasteries under the patronage of St Cosmas and Damian, known as *Agali* or *Agaliense*, *St Felix quae est in Tatanesio*, *Saint Michael*, *Holy Cross*, *Saint Vincent*, and *Saint Eulalia* of Mérida. Actually, the *coenobium Cabensis* whose location is unknown had been one of the most famous monasteries founded in this territory.⁶ Given the archeological, textual and epigraphical references, other paradigmatic monuments in the territory of Toledo are *St Maria Melque*, *St Pedro de la Mata* and *Guarrazar*.⁷ The site of *Melque* is a unique building that represents one of the best early medieval ecclesiastic complexes studied in Spain, especially those conducted by L. Caballero since 1980.⁸

Background, New Fieldwork and the Methodological Approach

The first excavations in the late antique rural complex of Los Hitos were carried out by L. J. Balmaseda between 1975 and 1982 revealed a large building (20 m long × 7 m wide) built in ashlar and stone masonry. The building is divided into three areas: the central area being larger than the lateral areas (12 m long), with buttresses and external supports that would presume a certain height or the existence of an elevated floor. The main tomb faces east and is in line with one of the doorways. In the annex to this main space, a lengthy inscription was found which has been interpreted as monastic in character, given that the final verses allude to the construction of the church by an unknown figure (fig. 4).

This archaeological site is currently the subject of a multidisciplinary project conducted using several approaches and a variety of methodological resources within the excavation in order to identify new potential structures located underground. One of our methodological priorities is to apply the building archeology approach and remote sensing technologies (photogrammetry and drone) within the excavation, and field equipment for registering archaeological records in order to understand the topography and chronologies. In 2014, fieldworks were concentrated in cleaning and making the archaeological site suitable for visitors, creating a new topographical survey by aerial photography (fig. 2), and a 3-D recreation of the partially excavated complex. The images obtained using the drone equipped with an infrared photographic camera have been used to propose a representation of the complex extension (fig. 3).

New finds have resulted from the 2016 excavation such as the discovery of a large portico on the north side of the rectangular floor plan already documented. A large number of tombs both inside, and several outside of the same building have been documented. The remains are currently under anthropological study to determine factors such as the sex, age, diseases, diet, and family ties. The excavation has also confirmed the existence of a large architectural complex on a small hillside flanked by two streams, which extends beyond the mausoleum documented by L. J. Balmaseda. The orthophotograph revealed that the field is situated on the top of a small bedrock formation from the Pleistocene sedimentation of the Sierra and the Arisgotas streams. Moreover, the late antique complex is lined by a fence that surrounds its entire perimeter and seems to have its main entrance to the south, with secondary accesses, that have already been documented, to the east between the pavillion-mausoleum and the church.⁹ The archaeological records have proved that the main building was conceived as a pavillion or a prestigious rural residence, within a greater compound of buildings that would have had some religious importance. This would also explain the presence of the metric funerary inscription and the pagan altar reused as a Christian altar that is preserved in the parish church in Arisgotas. The presence of supports or butresses in order to elevate the height of the building overlooking a vaulted archway, or the construction of an upper floor is also very significant. Examples of this equal architectural pattern have been preserved



Fig. 2: The first ortophotograph of the architectural complex took in 2014.

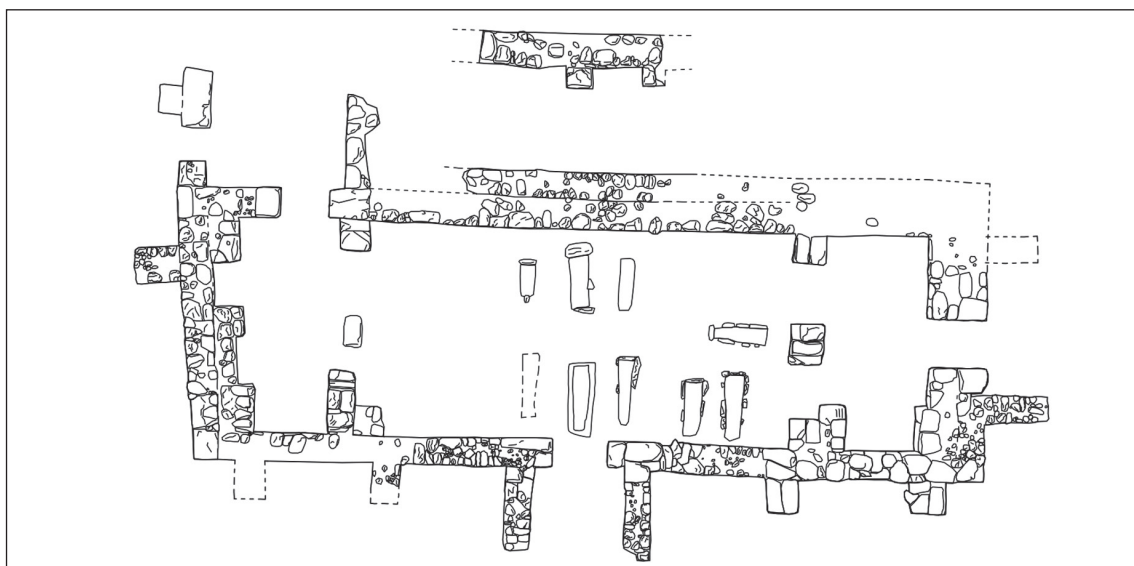


Fig. 3: Plant proposed of the main building of Los Hitos after the 2014 first aerial photograph.



Fig. 4: The 7th century inscription documented by L. Balmaseda during the excavation of the mausoleum: HEp 11, 2001, 577 (<[http://http://eda-bea.es](http://eda-bea.es)>).

in different urban and rural places such as Toledo and Valencia (Pla de Nadal) in the 7th century, but also as far away and influencing the Asturian power architecture since the 8th century onwards.¹⁰ Actually, the layout of Los Hitos has been overlapped to the St Maria del Naranco palace's floor plan. Results have showed a precise match in measurements and composition in both buildings. Los Hitos differs because it is built outside the model floor plan, whereas St Maria del Naranco is inside (fig. 5). A similar phenomenon between St Maria de Melque and St Comba de Bande churches was documented and described by L. Arias Páramo.¹¹ These buildings share the same cultural DNA belonging to the early medieval architectural archetypes.

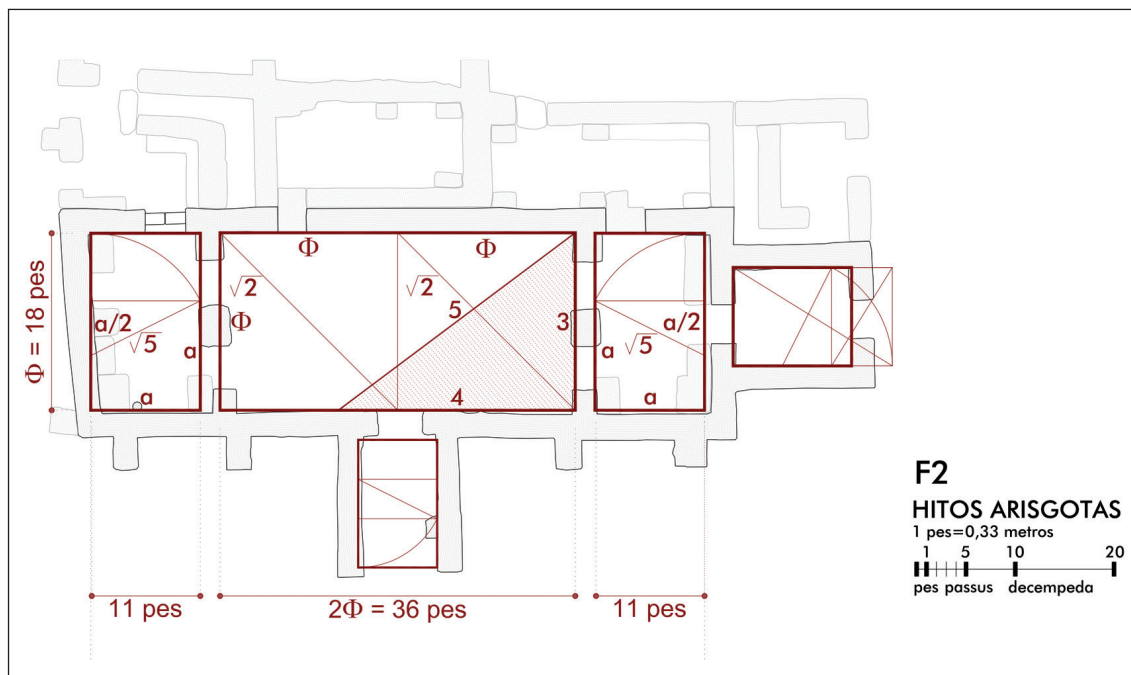


Fig. 5: A numeric study showing the Carolingian feet as the main unit of measurement, and the floor plan restitution proposed. Design confirms that architecture basic composition used classical complex systems to organize forms.

Discussion of the Privileged Funerary Space

The funerary space is laid out in two rows clearly organized around an alabaster sarcophagus oriented east-west that is located in the middle of the rectangular floor plan of the building. This is the main grave that coincides with the principal entrance through the east portico. However, it should not be ruled out that this entrance might have been sealed off at the time the space was used as necropolis. And, the north portico that was added during the transformation documented in the 2016 excavation houses three tombs too (fig. 6). Thus, the privilege burial must have belonged to a distinguished member of the Visigoth elite who planned it within the framework of a Christian architectural project with the characteristics described. There are also upwards of 40 burials: 24 graves stand inside the building with east-west orientation, and 16 tombs are documented outside. Some of the tombs placed in the central space are double, and even there are some structures that had been reused in different times; for instance, up to eight burials have been recovered from one grave. As it is said before, the preserved conditions of the human bones are poorly and an anthropological study is developing. Given the presence of both child and adult remains of both sexes, we should speculate that the building was used for a family group, which would justify the transformation of the pavilion into a mausoleum. The principal funeral structures are stone



Fig. 6: Burials documented inside the mausoleum during the 2016 excavation.

boxes with a rectangular floor and plaster of mortar, covered by large slabs of slate. All of the tombs were sealed with a homogenous *opus signinum* floor. The surrounding *opus signinum* pavement covering the burials is perfectly integrated into the coating of the building, and their physical connection between both indicates that they were built at the same time.¹²

The fragments of common ceramics, some pendants, a belt buckle and the four-petal cloisonné rivets, which was found in the tomb of a young girl in the north portico, suggest the building dates around the 7th century. The most relevant elements that support the 7th century chronology too, are the funerary inscription, the architectural stone decoration, and the overseas trade pottery. Some *spatheia*, a kind of small amphorae, imported from the north of Africa in the 7th century are also recovered in an abandonment level between the church and the pantheon. These artefacts also demonstrate the existence of commercial exchanges between Byzantine Africa and the Visigoth cities located in the central Iberian Peninsula (fig. 7). These types of elements appeared for example in Reccopolis (Guadalajara) and Góznquez de Arriba (Madrid), demonstrate the

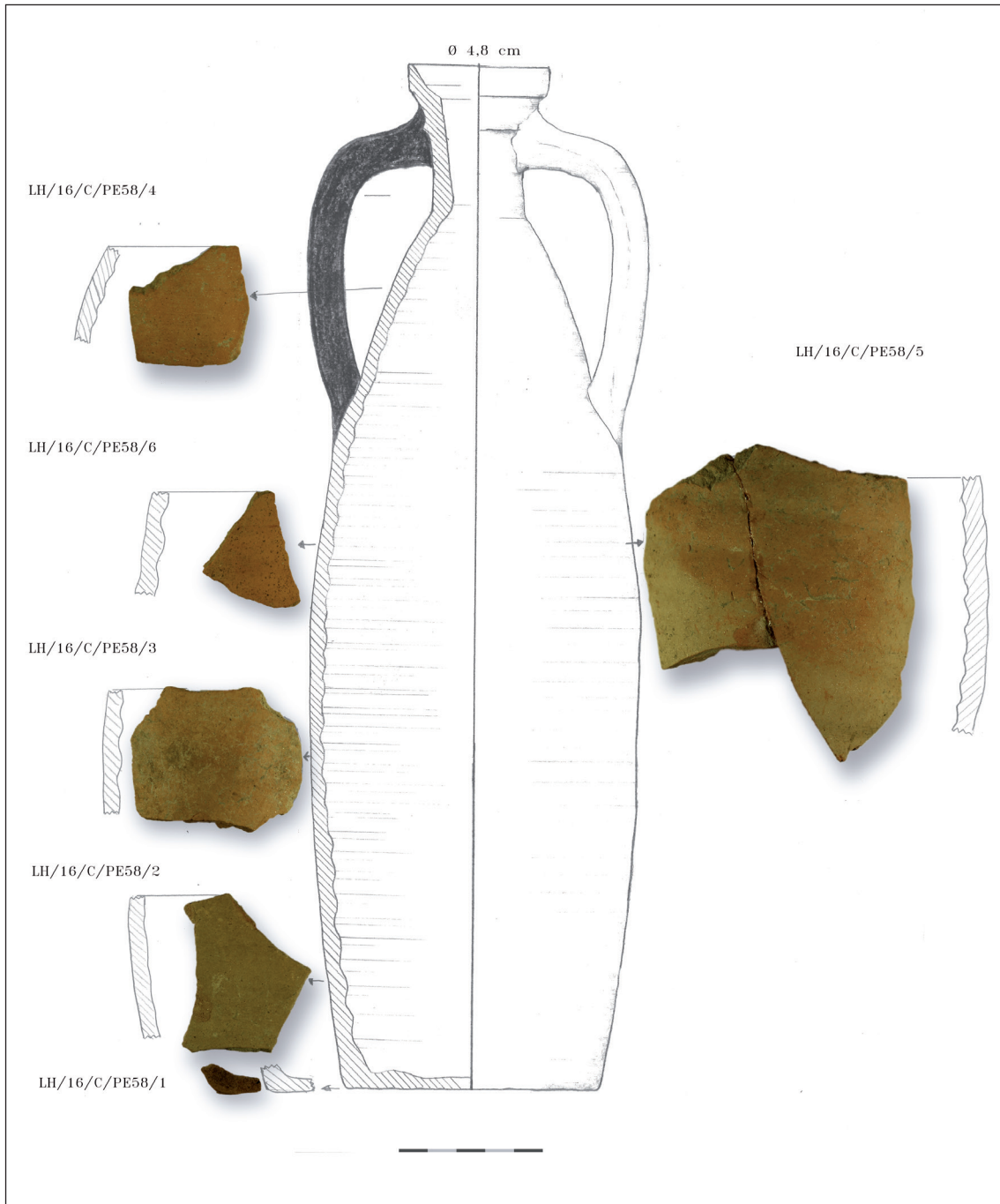


Fig. 7: Fragments of one of the small African amphorae (*spatheia*) dated in the 7th century.

continuity of the commercial routes from the Mediterranean during the pre-Ummayyad, to supply the demands of the elite on inland settlements, beyond their usual recognition in the port cities such as Tarragona, Valencia and Cartagena.¹³

One of the archeological problems resolved by the 2016 excavation was confirming that the privileged burial space took advantage of an existing structure, originally planned to be a residence or pavillion, and later turned it into a mausoleum. The original building had its main entrance situated in the portico of the east façade that was either closed by a wall at the time the first funerary installation happened with an alabaster sarcophagus. The second phase of the spatial and functional transformation of the latifundium also involved the construction of a church in the southern side of the mausoleum. Both buildings are connected through an open corridor below which one canalisation was established. In addition, other buildings similar to the church that would have formed part of a greater civilian compound defined by an enclosure are still under excavation.

Conclusions

Moving towards an interpretation, until excavations in the area of the church will be finished, and the whole of the late antique complex will be explored, it is pretty difficult to pronounce about the typology and destination of the funerary building and the church recently documented. It could be a private funerary church since there is not an access from the west side, and any baptistery has been found yet. The C14 carbon results are expected from the human samples, and the constructive coating analysis of the walls and the pavement are in progress too. The appearance of a *titulus sepulchralis* that commemorates the burial of a landowner in a sacred place proves highly significant after this church has been documented (fig. 8). By written sources, the well-known practice of residences-turned-churches in the rural landscape, or perhaps privileged churches used as burial spaces, confirm the transformation of former estates of the secular aristocracy into the foundations for both parish and monasteries during the 7th century (keeping save the local economic). Then, buildings in the territory of Toledo as Los Hitos and St Maria de Melque, they were not only simple funerary monuments, and they illustrate the enormous social and economic power of the late antique owners of the Visigothic Capital.¹⁴ An interpretation of the floor plan of Los Hitos enables us to confirm that it is a building dated in the early medieval period whose morphology, construction, measurements, composition, function, symbolism, and heritage, are the classical paradigmatic archetype for civilian architecture. It shares similar features with other prestigious residential constructions that have been documented in the late antique Iberian Peninsula and characterized by a tripartite floor plan, the appearance of buttresses and the existence of an elevated representative chamber¹⁵ (e.g. Reccopolis, Falperra, Barcino, Minateda, Pla de Nadal and the so-called 'building A' of Morerías in



Fig. 8: The ortophotograph taken at the end of the 2016 excavation.

Mérida). Then, this pattern was very likely adapted to different contexts even by the Asturian architecture from the 8th century.

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Summary

This paper presents the current state of the fieldwork carried out during the last years in a large late antique funerary building located in Los Hitos (Orgaz, Toledo, Spain). The site of Los Hitos is an important rural and sacred complex related to the local elites of the Visigoth capital of Toledo. The Regnum Gothorum in the Iberian Peninsula was consolidated in the middle of the second half of the 6th century. A perfectly designed ambitious cultural and legislative program was implemented in order to reach the new unification of ancient Roman Hispania. Archaeological and documental records reveal the monumentalization process of Toledo and its territory throughout the 7th century. The material evidence documents the collapse of the ancient territorial model of the Roman Empire, based on large Roman *villae*, and its substitution by a genuine Visigoth model in which monastic and sacred complexes e.g. Los Hitos, Melque and Guarrazar, linked to the elites of Toledo acquired a marked preference. Architecture was especially influenced by this, and consequently transformed into the clearest image of the court and the religious elites, which explains its subsequent influence on the development of art in the Asturian Kingdom.

Notes

¹ Castellanos – Martín 2005, 10.

² Sánchez 2013, 160; Sánchez – Shapland 2015.

³ Barroso et al. 2015, 47.

⁴ Carrasco 2012, 156.

⁵ Martín 2003, 32–40.

⁶ Balmaseda 2007, 208.

⁷ Velázquez – Balmaseda 2005, 137–149; Balmaseda 2007, 208; Eger 2010, 565.

⁸ Caballero 2007; Barroso et al. 2011, 57–63.

⁹ AA.VV. 2012.

¹⁰ Arbeiter 2000, 251–253.

¹¹ Arias 2012, 383–385.

¹² Several samples of the construction mortar used in the walls and vaulting in Asturian architecture have been analyzed from the oldest constructions built of Santa Cristina de Lena, Valdedios, and the C14 results suggest a timeframe situated between the mid-7th century to mid-8th century (Rojo 2015).

¹³ Bonifay – Bernal 2008, 112.

¹⁴ Chavarría 2007, 127–146.

¹⁵ Escrivá et al. 2015, 40.

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Abbreviations

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