A late antique rural community in Mérida: the site of Casa Herrera

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ABSTRACT This paper presents the contextualized results of the latest excavations at the site of Casa Herrera (Mérida, Spain). Casa Herrera is one of the best examples of a late antique site in the Iberian Peninsula, not only because of the degree of preservation of the remains but also because of its long chronological sequence, which runs from the first to the ninth century. The excavations of the surroundings of the funerary basilica and the Roman aqueduct have unearthed the remains of a handful of buildings that could be linked to a rural monastic community from the late Roman and Visigothic periods. The site has an Umayyad phase where settlement clusters around the basilica before being finally abandoned during the ninth century.

KEYWORDS Mérida, rural site, monastery, basilica, aqueduct, Visigothic period, ceramics

{p. 54} The city of Mérida (ancient Augusta Emerita) is one of the main points of reference in late antique and Visigothic studies, not only for its urban monuments and its well-studied archaeological sequence, but also because of the written accounts collected in the seventh centuries and the numerous inscriptions that are

still being discovered to this day.[1] Its territory has received similar attention, but amongst the known rural sites, one stands out. The site of Casa Herrera, famous for its funerary basilica, has been for many years one of the best examples of early Christian, rural architecture in Spain. While the {p. 55} basilica has been thoroughly studied and excavated, very little was known about its surrounding context, and most discussions were focused on its architecture and decorations. Small but selective excavations carried out between 2007 and 2013 under the auspices of the Consorcio de Mérida (the public entity that manages the archaeological heritage of the city and its territory) and the Oxford Classics Faculty, however, focused on the buildings that surround the basilica. These digs have revealed a number of structures coeval with the basilica and remains of one of the urban aqueducts, casting new light on the peri-urban landscape of Mérida and on rural Christianity in the Visigothic period.

In this paper, we will present and analyze the results of the Oxford-Consorcio 2012-2013 campaigns. This will include a discussion of the structures and the chronological sequence and the finds. It will be possible to give an overall and preliminary interpretation of not only Casa Herrera as a suburban rural settlement linked to a monastic community, but also as a multi-period site during the late antique longue durée which includes a Roman, a Visigothic, and an early Islamic phase.

[1] Daniel Osland, *Urban Change in Late Antique Hispania: The Case of Augusta Emerita,* PhD Thesis (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 2011); idem, "Text and context: patronage in late antique Mérida," *SLA* 3.4 (2019): 581-625; Isaac Sastre de Diego, *Mérida capital cristiana. De Roma a al-Andalus*, Cuadernos Emeritenses 41 (Mérida: MNAR, 2015). Isaac Sastre de Diego and Miguel Alba Calzado, "Bajo la protección de la mártir: Mérida en la antigüedad tardía (siglos IV-VII)," in *Urban Transformations in the Late Antique West: Materials, Agents, and Models,* eds. André Carneiro, Neil Christie and Pilar Diarte (Coimbra: University of Coimbra, 2020), 203-30.

The early excavations at Casa Herrera

Located on a gentle slope in one of the hilly valleys that surround Mérida, the site of Casa Herrera is 6 km NE from the Roman city, along the unpaved road to Mirandilla (fig. 1). The site was discovered and first excavated in 1943 by José Serra i Rafols, the then commissar for excavations at Mérida. His excavations unearthed not a Roman villa (as he expected) but a double-apsed church linked to a small necropolis, and while he never published his results, in his notes he suggested, as we do here, that the site could have been a monastery.[2]

The basilica itself is a double-apsed building, a type usually highlighted as a North African type, but with a strong and older tradition in the Iberian South-West, including the basilicas of Torre de Palma and Mértola (both in Portugal) and El Germo and San Pedro de Alcántara (both in Andalusia).[3] In its first phase the building was 25 m long and 15 m wide with a central nave and two side naves separated by columns (fig. 2a-b). The perimetral walls are {p. 56} 0.8 m wide, and made of mortared rubble. The outside was limewashed and the inside was decorated with carved marbles, both reused directly from Roman buildings and re-worked Roman pieces. The roof was tiled, and the floor was paved in *opus signinum* (water proof mortar).

The main (eastern) apse held a liturgic altar in its centre, identified by the imprints of a central *ara* and four corner *stipites* on the floor, although the broken remains

[2] Tomás Cordero Ruiz and Isaac Sastre de Diego, "El yacimiento de Casa Herrera en el contexto del territorio emeritense (siglos IV-VIII)," in *Espacios urbanos en el occidente mediterráneo (s. VI-VIII)*, ed. Alfonso García (Toledo: Toletum Visigodo, 2010), 211-8, at 211.
[3] Sastre de Diego, *Mérida capital cristiana*, 133.

of one of the *stipites* has been found *in situ*, still bound to the *opus signinum*, probably broken off when the basilica was dismantled in the Umayyad period. As with the rest of the sculpture of Casa Herrera, this altar was made entirely in white (recycled) marble in the local Mérida workshop (the most important carving centre in the late antique Peninsula).[4] Besides the in situ remains, an altar slab excavated in the 1940s has been found recently in the magazines of the National Museum of Roman Art in Mérida.[5] {p. 57} Its shape (rectangular with a triple frame), follows the Roman tradition of the *cyma inversa*, and its iconography (with a leaf in each corner of the slab) belongs to one of the most popular typologies of early Christian Iberian slabs. This apse formed, as in most late antique Hispanic basilicas, the sanctuary, {p. 58} into which only ordained members of the congregation were allowed. It was separated by marble chancel screens, following the rules set down in late antique Hispanic church councils.

The counter-apse held not a liturgic altar, but a memorial with a sigmatic *mensa* (fig. 3). The sigmatic slab is another example of local production in local Borba marble,[6] and while the shape imitates East-Roman patterns, the carved decoration of an arch on columns is typical from the Mérida workshop. Serra i Rafols left in his unpublished notes the sketched drawing of a stepped, trapezoidal base found next to this slab. We have been able to identify this piece, made in the same marble,

[4] Luis Caballero Zoreda and Thilo Ulbert, *La basílica paleocristiana de Casa Herrera en las cercanías de Mérida (Badajoz),* Excavaciones Arqueológicas en España 89 (Madrid: Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, 1976), 73-104.

[5] Isaac Satre de Diego and Rafael Sabio, "Escultura arquitectónica y litúrgica en la basilica tardoantigua de Casa Herrera (Badajoz, Mérida). Novedades aportadas desde la revisión de los fondos del MNAR," *Anas* (i.p., 2021).

[6] The marble quarries of Estremoz (Portugal) were opened under Augustus, and according to ongoing research by André Carneiro (University of Évora, pers. comm.), there was still some degree of quarrying in the Visigothic period.

hidden in the magazines in the Museum,[7] and it is clear now that it probably supported the sigmatic *mensa*. This would make the altar of the counter-apse the first example of type widely known elsewhere in the West but until now unknown in the Iberian Peninsula.[8]

{p. 59} The apses were located at either end of the central nave, which had a double colonnade, and which was filled with burials, clustering around the memorial *mensa*.

The chronology given to this first phase is *ci.* 500, as suggested by the presence of fifth-century ARS pottery and the *ante quem* dates given by the dates of the inscriptions, one of which, that of one Asella, gives a date of *VIII id(us) Septem/bres (a)era DLX/a* = 6th September 523 CE.[9]

In the sixth century, the basilica went through a phase of renovation and expansion, in a process which has traditionally been linked to the reinforcement of episcopal power during the period of Visigothic state formation.[10] Two more lateral naves were added (increasing the total to five, even if the outmost ones seem to have been used as separate rooms) to a full width of 22 m. In the NE

[7] Sastre de Diego, *Mérida capital Cristiana*, 130, fig. 36.
[8] Isaac Sastre de Diego, *Los altares de las iglesias hispanas tardoantiguas y altomedievales, un estudio arqueológico*, BAR IS 2503 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2013), 424-5, EX5, fig. 233. For other comparanda, see Matthew McCarthy, "Beyond models and diffusion, centres and peripheries: religious art in Roman Africa," in *Roma y las provincias: modelo y difusión*, eds. Trinidad Nogales and Isabel Rodà (Mérida: MNAR, 2011), 439-48.
[9] Caballero Zoreda and Ulbert. *La basílica paleocristiana de Casa Herrera*. See: José Luis Ramírez Sabada and Pedro Mateos Cruz (eds), *Catálogo de las Inscripciones Cristianas de Mérida*. [=ICM], Cuadernos Emeritenses 16 (Mérida: MNAR, 2000), no. 18. Three other inscriptions were found in the basilica (*ICM* 2, 51, 52), and are of similar chronology.
[10] Javier Martínez Jiménez, Isaac Sastre de Diego and Carlos Tejerizo García, *The Iberian Peninsula between 300 and 850: an Archaeological Perspective*, Late Antique and Early Medieval Iberia 6 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 168-78.

corner, by the main apse, another, smaller altar and a stepped, immersion baptistery were built. The baptistery was framed by six marble pilasters that held a small cupola. One of these pilasters is a failed attempt at creating a rounded column out of a recycled, prismatic, Roman block.[11] The central nave was, furthermore, modified so that the intercolumniations were blocked by low walls, creating a third liturgical area next to the sanctuary that formed a corridor connection both apses, perhaps linked to processions.

Serra i Rafols dated the abandonment of the basilica to the Visigothic period, but his excavations had only focused on the inside of the building. In the 1970s the site was excavated again, in this case by Luis Caballero and Thilo Ulbert, who focused on the burials inside the basilica, paying more attention to the later phases.[12] These excavations discovered evidence for an Islamic, Umayyad phase, during which the basilica underwent further transformations. After being partially dismantled, and its doorways blocked, the nave seems to have been turned into a secluded and {p. 60} self-enclosed space. The presence of kufic Arabic graffiti datable to the ninth/tenth centuries (fig. 4), inscribed on the shafts of the columns of the central nave show at least six different hands writing complaints, including a hypothetical 'there is no salvation/hope' (3.7: *lā khalāṣ*) and a more certain 'may God have mercy on Amin, son of Fityan ib[n…]' (4.10: *t-r-ḥ-m Allāh Amīn / Ibn*

[11] Sastre de Diego, *Mérida capital cristiana*, 189; Javier Martínez Jiménez and Patricia González Gutiérrez, "Knowledge and specialised trades in the late antique West: medicine vs engineering," *Journal of Late Antique Religion and Culture* 11 (2017): 38-58.
[12] Caballero Zoreda and Ulbert. *La basílica paleocristiana de Casa Herrera*.

Fityān I- / -bn), which have led researchers to suggest that it was turned into a prison.[13]

The German team carried out further narrow sondages around the basilica in the early 1980s which confirmed that the large stones that could be seen littered around the site belonged to other buildings,[14] although it was impossible with that method to go into any elaborate interpretations. More recently, larger sondages were carried out again in 2007 and 2008 by Tomás Cordero and Isaac Sastre, who identified traces of walls linked to three structures (B3-5) similar to those briefly discussed by Ulbert.[15] The {p. 61} identified structures (fig. 5) were small, rectangular buildings, roughly 6 x 5 m, of which only the foundations (set directly on the natural clay) had been preserved. The earliest structure (B5) can be dated to the late-fifth century, and the two others (B3 and B4) to the sixth/seventh century. There was evidence for an early Umayyad (eighth century) phase, but this was inferred from later layers without any associated structures. It was not possible to define what the purpose of these rectangular structures was, as no archaeological deposits associated with usage were identified. These excavations also unearthed a section of a Roman aqueduct.[16]

[13] Carmen Barceló Torres, "Escritos árabes en la basílica paleocristiana de Casa Herrera (Mérida)," *Madrider Mitteilungen* 43 (2002): 299-315. Our English translation from C. Barceló's Spanish version. We thank Edward Zychowicz-Coghill for his assistance with the Arabic text.

14 Thilo Ulbert, "Nachunterschungen im Bereich der Frühchristlichen basilika von Casa Herrera bei Mérida," *Madrider Mitteilungen* 32 (1991): 185-207.

[15] Cordero Ruiz and Sastre de Diego, "El yacimiento de Casa Herrera", 212.

[16] Mercedes Gómez de Segura, Pedro Dámaso Sánchez Barrero, Nuria Sánchez Capote, and Isaac Sastre de Diego, "Las conducciones romanas de Mérida. Nuevos datos para su conocimiento," in *Aquam perducendam curavit. Captación, uso y administración del agua en las ciudades de la Bética y el occidente romano*, eds. Lázaro Lagóstena Barrios et al. (Cádiz: University of Cádiz, 2011), 129-46.

The 2012-13 Oxford campaigns: structures and sequence

With the information from previous excavations, in 2011 we put forward the main lines for a research project, which served as the basis for a small set of excavations over the summers of 2012 and 2013 in three areas which we {p. 62} recognised as having the best archaeological potential to diachronically explain the site and what role the basilica played in it.

Area 1

The first area (Area 1) included two small sondages, one behind the eastern apse (where no archaeology other than a pile of *tegula* fragments) and another behind the counter-apse (both 5 x 5 m), hoping to identify burial remains.[17]

The stratigraphic sequence of the western (counter-apse) trench was simple, due to its shallow depth. Under the thin topsoil there was a homogeneously dark ploughed soil that sealed the trench, in which there were finds ranging from the first to the nineteenth century. (This plough soil sealed also all of the other excavated trenches.)

Under this layer, a 5 m long and 0.8 m wide, NW-SE wall was found, almost parallel to the short side of the basilica but truncated by an E-W robbing trench (fig. 6). This wall was made of two faces of large, unworked stones bound with lime and clay mortar (fig. 7). It continued the line of some remains identified in one of Ulbert's test pits, although the overall shape of the structure cannot be guessed. Collapsed remains of this wall were found towards the SW, following the slope –

[17] Burials were identified both by Serra i Rafols and by Ulbert and Caballero, and the anthropometric analyses were published in detail by the latter (Caballero Zoreda and Ulbert, *La basílica paleocristiana de Casa Herrera*, 237-48), but it has not been possible to obtain a permit to obtain samples from those to carry out stable isotope analyses.

this might also indicate where the inside of the building was, suggesting that this was a wall enclosing a building separated from the basilica rather than a construction butting against it. The collapse and the robbing event must post-date the ninth century as the backfill of the robbing trench contained mixed pottery from both the Visigothic and Umayyad phases.

Under debris of the collapse there were two main layers. The earliest one was found on top of the natural soil and butting against the wall. This layer was a dark brown silty clay, and its finds suggest a sixth-to-seventh century date. On top of this and under the collapse there was another layer in a sandier and lighter-colour matrix that can be dated with certainty to the ninth century (red-gloss wares). The nature of the finds of these two layers (overabundance of table wares, cooking wares and animal bone) suggest that this was an area of food preparation and consumption, and most likely part of a dwelling structure. Chronologically, the finds suggest that the building had {p. 63} an extended period of use, that it was most likely in use during the later Visigothic period (coinciding with the second phase of the basilica) and that the dwelling function was preserved into the Umayyad phase.

This chronology is further confirmed by the presence of two carved marble items in the wall and the collapse debris. The first one is a small, {p. 64} rectangular, hollowed box measuring 21.5 x 16 x 9 cm, with a 4 x 10 cm hole (fig. 8), and the chisel lines and irregular surfaces on all its sides show that it was never finished and it was then turned into construction material. This suggests that at least the last stages of marble carving for the decorative sculpture of Casa Herrera was done on site. Because of its dimensions and material, this piece seems to have been a

loculus for an altar, the 'relic box' in which the sacred remains were deposited as part of the consecration rite.[18] Its rectangular shape and small dimensions allow us to propose such liturgical function, probably to be hidden under the base of one of the altars. This type of reliquary has been found in late antique churches across the Peninsula, like those of El Berrueco (Madrid), Las Tapias (La Rioja) or Monte da Cegonha (Portugal).[19] A marble slab and a stepped, trapezoidal base, both damaged, broken, or unfinished, were also reused as building material. The presence of these recycled fragments would suggest that this structure was built at the same time as the basilica was extended.

{p. 65} Lastly, it is worth mentioning that this main wall was built atop the razed foundations of a previous structure. The previous wall was only preserved as broken tiles and smaller stones imbedded into the natural clays, forming a curved wall, barely 0.3 m wide, that can only be dated as preceding the second phase of the basilica and only perhaps coeval with the first one.

Area 2

Area 2 is located 60 m S of the basilica and 10 m to the NE of the 2007 excavation, where one large monolithic granite threshold was visible on the surface (fig. 5). We identified the remains of two different structures with three overall phases, mirroring the sequence identified in the 2007 intervention.

The chronological sequence of Area 2 is best understood horizontally rather than vertically because ploughing has removed almost all the stratigraphic sequence. The identified structures are preserved only at their foundations, and their

[18] Sastre de Diego, *Los altares*, 88-95.
[19] Sastre de Diego, *Los altares*, M1, RJ1, P6.

sequence is clear because they appear butting and truncating each other. Similarly, all the sealed contexts under the ploughed soil are layers trampled into the natural clays that can be best interpreted as floor preparations. As such, the finds only offer a date for the construction of each associated building. The lack of use and abandonment layers limits the extent to which we can interpret the functioning of the site beyond their construction.

The building with the granite threshold (B1a) was a small, rectangular structure, measuring 10 x 6 m, with less than 0.1 m of its height preserved. The perimetral walls of this building were 0.6 m wide and made of mortared rubble and occasional tile, although it is likely that the rest of the wall was built in pisé. Considering the large numbers of *tegulae* and *imbrices*, both reused Roman (16 fragments) and new, late antique types (460 fragments), B1a most probably had a tiled roof. The 1.8 m-wide granite threshold (fig. 9) was located at the middle of the NW wall, and it gave access to a central room as wide as the steppingstone which ran for the full depth of the building. The threshold has two square slots at either end, and the left one is truncated by a straight, diagonal groove. This room served as a distribution hall onto which two sets of side rooms (roughly 2.5 x 2 m) opened on either side. The rooms were separated by walls or rubble bound by clay (not mortar). The presence of a posthole in the north room butting the partition wall would suggest that the building had a pitched roof following the central, longitudinal axis. The finds retrieved from the trampled layers that can be {p. 66} typologically dated are overwhelmingly fifth-century in date (CH 7, 29A, 35, 48) with a couple of residual earlier Roman forms (CH 5, 37, 73). It should be noted, however, that a dozen sherds belonging to coarser wares found in this building may be (because of the

clays and the inclusions) roughly dated to the fifth/sixth century. This may, overall, suggest a *ci*. 500 date for the construction of building B1a and the likely implication is that the this structure was built at the same time as the basilica, especially since the construction technique (use of high-quality lime mortar to bind two-faced, hewn rubble foundations) is the same – barring the dimensions, and B1 does not seem to reuse any of the larger voussoirs of the aqueduct's vault. This, in turn, would also correspond to the earliest structure of the 2007 excavation (B5), with which it is aligned.

B1a was extended at a later stage (B1b), when an extra room was added, abutting the SW wall whilst B1a was still standing (and, presumably, in use). The finds from the layer contained by its walls are still mostly fifth-century in date, but there is an increasing number of coarser wares, which may suggest a later chronology, perhaps in the sixth century. As B1a, the foundations of this extension are made of mortared rubble. This extension was later {p. 67} truncated by a new building (B2), which is built following a slightly different alignment and does not use lime mortar as the binding element. Sequentially, this building might be either later Visigothic or Umayyad in date (mirroring the more complete sequence of B3-4-5), but there was no material culture associated with it to confirm this suggested date.

Without clear layers of occupation, it is difficult to guess what the purpose of these structures was. There are two pieces of evidence, however, that may indicate that these were storage or working spaces rather than dwellings. First is the concentration of amphora remains in B1a. These fragments are very eroded and broken, and clearly are part of a secondary deposition (in the floor levelling layer), but may still reflect reused waste from the settlement. Second is the significant

presence of slag on an ashy bed in the central hall of B1 (context 2013). It should be emphasized that the layout is comparable to storage buildings found in other late Roman rural sites from the Iberian Peninsula, found for example at El Pelicano and Loranca; a type that continues into the Visigothic period in sites like Gózquez.[20]

Area 3

Area 3 was opened in 2012 and expanded in 2013 (Area 31). It consisted of a 5 x 5 m trench, dug next to the 2008 trench that had unearthed a section of the aqueduct, and within sight of the remains visible in the road-side ditch beyond the site's fence. Area 31 was excavated 10 m further up the hill towards the ENE, and it occupied an area 4 x 4 m (fig. 10).

The aqueduct itself is built by cutting a flat-based, levelled trench into the bedrock (fig. 11). The construction ditch is 1.75 m wide at the top, narrowing down to just 0.75 m, which is the width of the aqueduct built inside a boxed-cut trench, into which the *specus* was built. This is made of two different walls of faced rubble (0.3 m wide each), on top of which the top-quality *opus signinum* lining was added once the right gradient had been calculated and established. The *specus* itself is rectangular in profile (0.24 m wide and 0.28 m deep), and its bottom corners are reinforced. On top of the side walls, but apparently not on top of the *opus signinum* lining, two other walls of mortared rubble were built, upon which sat the vault. These walls have only been identified in Area 31, as the vault does not fit perfectly

[20] Alfonso Vigil-Escalera, "Primeros pasos hacia el análisis de la organización interna de los asentamientos rurales en época visigoda," in *La investigación arqueológica de la época visigoda en la Comunidad de Madrid*, ed. Jorge Morín de Pablos, Zona Arqueológica 8 (Alcalá de Henares: Museo Arqueológico Regional, 2007), 367-72.

upon them. {p. 68} The vault itself was made with *opus caementicium* and large, unworked stones (the likes of which appear reused in the walls of the basilica) fitted as rough voussoirs 0.3 m thick. The vault itself was later covered with a mixed backfill of rocks and clay, perhaps to protect the vault from damage. The aqueduct was built together with a parallel road of beaten earth and metalled with gravel. It is impossible to calculate the full depth of the vaulted conduit because we do not have a full cross-section, however, the calculated height difference between the extrados of the vault and the base of the *specus* is 0.8 m.

Despite its apparent small size, it is most likely that the aqueduct was part of the public urban supply network of Mérida. Our current understanding is that the Casa Herrera conduit was one of the four main branches that tapped into the northern aquifers and that converged into the one conduit now known as the San Lázaro aqueduct. The *caput*, furthermore, has been identified as a perennial spring 1.3 km towards the NE.[21]

At one point during the Roman period, a longitudinal crack, 3 m long (probably due to a bad curing of the mortar) appeared on the vault. This was {p. 69} later repaired (at an unknown date) by the smothering of a dark orange, very clayey sandy-lime mortar (fig. 12). The lack of sinter concretions on the *specus* walls in an area of very hard water suggests that the aqueduct was undergoing cleaning and maintenance until the conduit went out of use.[22]

[21] Elena Sánchez López and Javier Martínez Jiménez*, Los acueductos de Hispania. Construcción y abandono* (Madrid: Fundación Juanelo Turriano, 2016), 254-7.

[22] Sinter limescale was visible in the abandonment layer inside the conduit, though mixed in the clayey matrix – perhaps detached from other sections of the conduit further upstream.

One of the most interesting findings was that the robbing and dismantling of the vault started somewhere in the fifteen meters that separate Areas 3 and 31. The backfill inside the robbing trench is a mix of late Roman and Visigothic period material, but overall of sixth/seventh century date (types {p. 70} CH 12, 17, 32). The context in which these are found (3014) is an orange-ish brown, malleable, and sticky silty clay, which suggests that it was formed by flowing water carrying sediment rather than by the result of deliberate dumping of rubbish. This would point towards a last moment of unregulated water flow through the aqueduct into the sixth century, perhaps coinciding with the construction of the basilica.

After this spoliation and siltation of the conduit, a thick (0,4 m) dark, abandonment layer sealed the remains of the conduit, with materials that suggest a ninth century date, consistent with the abandonment of the other areas of the site.7

{p. 71}

The finds of the 2012-13 campaigns

Ceramics: classification and chronological overview

The ceramic finds were cleaned on site and processed after the campaigns were over. The sherds of each context were first separated, after a preliminary visual assessment, between common wares, Samian wares, amphorae, and building material. Considering the limited stratigraphy and the lack of absolute chronologies, we opted to follow the well-developed typological sequence of the

late antique forms of the urban sites of Mérida.[23] This chronological classification was based on a visual and tactile assessment of a number of characteristics:

- Early Roman (1st-4th c.): include finely decanted clays or with small, measured inclusions worked with a fast wheel, and fired to a high temperature, ranging in colour from orange to brownish grey and creamy brown. Includes all mould-made red gloss (Samian) productions. The fragments present regular break lines and have a dull metallic sound. Walls tend to be slipped, although painting also appears.
- Late Roman (5th-early 6th c.): lines and angles on lips, feet, and bases are still sharp, and walls tend to be straight – both as a result of being thrown on a fast (foot-powered) wheel. However, the mineral inclusions in the clay tend to be bigger and noticeable. The firing is still homogeneous, but at lower {p. 72} temperatures, which results in browner and darker fabrics and irregular break lines. Slips are less frequent.

[23] Miguel Alba Calzado and Santiago Feijoo Martínez, "Pautas evolutivas de la cerámica común de Mérida en épocas visigoda y emiral," in *Cerámicas tardorromanas y altomedievales en la Península Ibérica*, eds. Luis Caballero Zoreda, Pedro Mateos Cruz and Manuel Retuerce Velasco, Anejos de Archivo Español de Arqueología 28 (Mérida: CSIC, 2003), 483-504; Miguel Alba Calzado and Sonia Gutiérrez Lloret, "Las producciones de transición al mundo Islámico: el problema de la cerámica paleoandalusí (siglos VIII y IX)," in *Cerámicas hispanorromanas: un estado de la cuestión*, eds. Darío Bernal Casasola and Albert Ribera Lacomba (Cádiz: Universidad de Cádiz, 2008), 585-613. Macarena Bustamante Álvarez, "Las cerámicas comunes altoimperiales de Augusta Emerita," in *Cerámicas hispanorromanas II: producciones regionales*, eds. Darío Bernal Casasola and Albert Ribera Lacomba (Cádiz: University of Cádiz, 2012), 407-33. For comparison, see, Raúl Aranda González, "Una aportación al conocimiento de las producciones cerámicas de época visigoda: el conjunto cerámico de la parcela R3 de la Vega Baja (Toledo)," *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma: Serie I* 6 (2015), 381-450 and, more generally, Iñaki Martin Viso et al. (eds), *Cerámicas altomedievales en Hispania y su entorno (siglos V-VIII d.C.)* (Valladolid: Glyphos, 2018). For the Umayyad period, cf. José Cristobal Carvajal López and Peter Day, "Cooking pots and Islamicization in the early medieval Vega of Granada (Al-Andalus, sixth to twelfth centuries)," *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 32.4 (2013): 433-51 and Victoria Amorós Ruiz, "Entre ollas y marmitas: Una reflexión sobre la producción cerámica entre los siglos VII y IX en el sureste de la península Ibérica," *Arqueología y Territorio Medieval* 27 (2020): 11–36.

- Post-Roman (late 5th/early 6th-mid 8th c.), including Visigothic and Visigothic/Umayyad transitional wares. Walls become thicker, and clays are unrefined, with many mineral inclusions (quartz and especially mica). Shapes are curvier, tending to globular. Rounded bases appear. Irregular and mixed firing (including mixed oxidation and reduction) become the norm, and fabrics are range from very dark orange to grey, but mostly brown. Pots can be thrown either on a wheel or by hand. Walls are either untreated or polished. Combed and spatulated decorations. Handles are thick and curve downwards from the rim.
- Umayyad (mid 8th-9th c.): Reintroduction of professionalized techniques, including fast wheel, refined clays, and high-temperature kilns. Walls become thinner and straighter, resulting in slenderer and forms with clearly marked angles. Table wares are decorated with dark-red slips. Handles are thinner and curve above the edge of the rim.

After this preliminary classification, the potsherds were separated into non-diagnostic walls and significant fragments (including bases, handles, rims, and decorated walls), out of which diagnostic sherds were later chosen. Non-diagnostic fragments were counted and grouped by rough chronology; significant sherds were photographed, numbered and indexed, while diagnostic sherds were also drawn and classified (CH = Casa Herrera types, see table 1).

Early Roman ceramics are surprisingly numerous, but when they appear in sealed contexts, their presence is very clearly residual and eroded; the vast majority of these appear in the plough soil (59% of the 270 datable sherds come from the abandonment layer of Area 3, mixed with later materials). In total, 24.3% of the

common wares and 34% of the CBM can be dated to this phase.[24] Fifteen of these shards were deemed diagnostic. Half of these would seem to be table wares (bowls, plates), while the other half seem to correspond to cooking wares. Regarding early Roman Samian wares, eight very worn and eroded fragments were retrieved, mostly South Gaulish or Hispanic (as the color of the clays suggest).

{pp. 73-6 are for table 1}

{p. 77} The material for the **late Roman** phase is the second most numerous, and it consists overwhelmingly of common wares. With a total of 290 fragments (26.1% of the total), 76 of these were significant and 28 were deemed diagnostic. These sherds tend to appear in better state, and they show a wider variety of types. While bowls and cooking pots are the most numerous, we also find jugs and bottles of this chronology. Over a half of this material (55%) came from Area 2, mostly from the floors of B1a. One fragment of late Hispanic red-gloss (*terra sigillata hispánica tardía*) and one fragment of imitation red-gloss (*cerámica de imitación de sigillata*), both dated to the fifth century, represent the only two examples of late Roman fine wares.

It should be noted that 61 fragments of amphorae were found in the excavations. They have pinkish-orange clays with mineral inclusions (incl. white quartz, reddish specks, and mica) and a cream-coloured exterior. Of these, only one sherd (type CH 71) was diagnostic, a rim that suggests that it might have been of late antique date. The other fragments were also small, and probably belonged to late-antique *spatheia*. The presence of these imported amphorae clearly point towards the

[24] See below for the dating of the CBMs.

connection between the site and the city; probably the latter supplying the former rather than the inhabitants of Casa Herrera directly participating in long-distance trade.

The ceramics of **Visigothic** period, including those of the eighth century that follow up with pre-Umayyad traditions, sum a 22% of the total, with 242 fragments, 55 significant and 30 diagnostics. The types of this phase mirror those of the fifth century: table wares (bowls, plates, jugs, trays) and cooking pots, but also larger storage vessels. The fragments dated to this phase are evenly distributed between Areas 1 and 2.

Lastly, **Umayyad** sherds are the most abundant (305 fragments, 27.5% of the total), all but two of which come from Area 1. 77 fragments were significant and 30 of those were diagnostic. The standardization and professionalization of productions in this period is evident in the narrowed range of repeated typologies of this phase. Bowls are limited to closed, angular types; drinking cups and mugs are straighter; cooking pots have flat bases and long necks.

The Casa Herrera typologies

Typologies for common wares in the late antique and early medieval periods are not always useful for cross-chronological comparative purposes because of {p. 78} the extremely local (and, often, amateur or domestic nature of the productions).[25]

[25] Francesca Grassi and Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo, "Arqueometría y arqueología de la cerámica medieval en España. Balance crítico y perspectivas de futuro," in *Arqueometría de los materiales cerámicos de época medieval en España*, eds Francesca Grassi and Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo (Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco, 2018), 23-38.

The classification of the excavation's ceramics, however, is still relevant to understand the evolution of Casa Herrera throughout its main phases.

Bowls and cups

We used "bowl" and "cup" to designate a large variety of forms linked to the individual consumption of liquids (which could include drinking but also stews and soups). Closed forms (CH 1-5), for instance, are abundant in the late Roman period and probably into the sixth century, only to become dominant in the Umayyad period, particularly CH 1, the red-slipped truncated-biconical bowl (fig. 13). Open forms (CH 6-10) are absent from the last phase, but are as common in the late Roman as they are throughout the Visigothic period (fig. 14). A number of smaller examples, better described as cups have been found (CH 11-17), and while not a full profile was found, Visigothic types CH 13 and 15 probably could belong to the same form: a lipped cup with a narrow base and a carinated shoulder. Roman and late Roman cups would have had a footed base (figs. 15-16).

Plates and basins

Plates and trays are far less common than bowls (CH 18-20), and they are all residual, Roman or late-Roman examples (fig. 17). When compared to the overabundance of bowls, this might indicate a transition in eating patterns, moving on from sharing food from platters to having individual portions.[26]

Similarly, each phase has produced at least one type of wide, open, thick-walled vessels (CH 21-26). Their shape would indicate that these are not for storage, and

[26] Martínez Jiménez, et al., *The Iberian Peninsula*, 232-3.

it is likely they were basins of various description. Some might have been linked to washing or bathing (CH 22), others perhaps were trays or mixing bowls (fig. 18).

Cooking pots

The widest range of forms belongs to cooking pots (fig. 19). One of the main types of cooking pot are the S-shaped or long-necked pots (CH 27-28), which begin in the late Roman period and continue to appear in the ninth century (fig. 20). Umayyad examples can develop quite elongated necks and narrow mouths. Short-necked pots {p. 79} (CH 29-31), on the contrary, are mostly late Roman in date, linking back to earlier, professionally made forms (fig. 21). Pots with triangular or almond-shaped rims appear both in the fifth (CH 34-35) and the eighth centuries (CH 32-33), the former still tapping from Roman, short-necked types, but the latter seem to be a modification of the S-shaped, long-necked cooking pot (fig. 22).

Regarding bases (CH 41-52), the most interesting development is the abandonment of the moulded foot typical of Roman types (fig. 23), which disappears in the fifth century, at which point rounded (as opposed to flat) bases become more common, as outlined earlier (figs. 24a-b). While there were Roman examples of rounded cooking pots, they tended to either start {p. 80} from a moulded foot or spring at an angle from the base (CH 48-50), but in the sixth and seventh centuries bases tend towards the curve, making pots more globular (esp. CH 42 and 46B). In this period, the corner of the pot also tends to be thicker, something that is preserved in later, Umayyad bases in the form of a slight lump around the base (CH 46A and 47). The rounder shapes of cooking pots in the early medieval centuries can be linked to the shift from built-up kitchens to cooking around hearths

Jugs and bottles

The collection of table wares from Casa Herrera is completed with jugs and bottles. Handled jugs of varying sizes (CH 53-65) appear in all periods, although the most remarkable seem to be those of Umayyad date (figs. 25-26). Some examples (CH 56, 62) can {p. 81 = figs. 15 & 16} {p. 82} be linked to water jugs, while some of the ninth-century examples (CH 57) seem to be the characteristic drinking mugs of the Umayyad period with a straight lip and a rounded body (fig. 27).

Caballero and Ulbert's excavation of the necropolis produced a large number of complete small votive jugs, many of which are exposed in the National Museum in Mérida (fig. 28), but none of these late antique votive types seem to correspond to the forms identified in the excavation of storage/dwelling areas.[27]

{p. 83} At least two types have been identified as bottles of late Roman date (CH 66-67), which follow the earlier Roman tradition of wide-bodied bottles with a narrow neck (fig. 29).

Storage

The excavations also produced remains of many large vessels, probably linked to storage (types 68-70) of Visigothic and Umayyad date (fig. 30). These types of storage vessels substituted the *dolia* which had been the most common large ceramic container in the Roman period.[28]

Amphora, glass, Samian

Beyond coarse ware types, there were diagnostic sherds of glass, Samian wares and amphora (fig. 31). The one amphora rim (CH 71), could be a fifth- or sixth-

[27] Caballero Zoreda and Ulbert. *La basílica paleocristiana de Casa Herrera*, 229-31.
[28] Bustamante, "Las cerámicas comunes", 421.

century Palestinian LRA 4.[29] While fragments of late antique green glass have appeared in Areas 1 and 2, the only identifiable fragment is the neck of what could be a small unguentarium (CH 72). Lastly, Gaulish and Hispanic Samian sherds appear very worn and eroded in fifth-century contexts. While CH 74 could be identified with late Hispanic type Paz 83 (dated post-470s),[30] CH 76 could be a Dragendorff 37. In any case, they all seem to be part of bowls or cups, used along the coarse tableware.

{p. 84}

Other finds

Ceramic building material

The abundance of brick and tile on site, especially in the abandonment layers of the buildings of Area 2, would confirm that the late antique and early medieval structures had tiled roofs, acknowledging also the fact that broken fragments of brick and tile appear to have been used in the construction of the walls of the basilica. The one thing of note is that the ceramic building material assemble of Casa Herrera is an imbalanced mixture of early Roman *tegulae* (249 fragments), and more abundant new, late antique *tegulae* and *imbrices* (478 fragments). These later tiles are characterized by {pp. 85-86 = figs. 21-4} {p. 87} their uneven or irregular (ox-red) firing, heterogeneous thickness, irregular lips, and large, mineral inclusions (mostly quartz) in the clay. Contextually, it is probable that these tiles

[29] Paul Reynolds, et al. "Almagro 54," in *Roman Amphorae: a digital resource [data-set]*. (York: Archaeology Data Service, 2014). https://doi.org/10.5284/1028192.

[30] This is a bowl which imitates either Hayes 87A or 61A. Juan Ángel Paz Peralta, "Las producciones de terra sigillata hispánica intermedia y tardía." In *Cerámicas hispanorromanas: un estado de la cuestión*, eds. Darío Bernal Casasola and Albert Ribera Lacomba (Cádiz: Universidad de Cádiz, 2008), 497-540.

are fifth or sixth century in date, but there is nothing in the typology that can refine that broad chronology (fig. 32).

{p. 88}

Coins

Four coins in total have been found in the 2012 and 2013 excavations, and all were small-denomination, late Roman, copper alloy coins. The presence of late Roman small change in later contexts is not unusual, but even to this day these *numi* or *minimi* are difficult to come across in rural contexts {p. 89 = figs. 29-30}, {p. 90} as mostly have been found in urban areas, where monetary exchange was perhaps more common.[31]

Three of the coins come from the sealed contexts of Area 2:

- 8265/2001: Roman emperor facing right with diadem, possibly a Valentinianic coin of the *Gloria Romanorum* series (364-375). Very worn. Copper alloy, weight 5.4 g, diameter 29 mm. VA[LE---?
- 8285/2106: Illegible, but possibly a winged Victory with Dea Roma. Copper alloy, weight 2.6 g, diameter 17 mm.
- 8265/2017: Illegible, but probably fifth-century *numus*. Copper alloy, weight 2.4 g, diameter 16 mm.

{p. 91} The only readable coin comes from Area 3, and was found in the abandonment layer that seals the spoliation trench.

[31] Ruth Pliego Vázquez, "The circulation of copper coins in the Iberian Peninsula during the Visigothic period: new approaches," *The Journal of Archaeological Numismatics* 5/6 (2015-16): 125-60; eadem, "Rethinking the minimi of the Iberian Peninsula and Balearic Islands in late Antiquity," *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 12.2 (2020): 125-54.

- 8265/3001: Antoninianus of Probus (276-282), *Romae aeternae* series. Obverse: IMP(ERATOR) PRO BVS AVG(VSTVS), emperor facing left with a radiate crown; reverse: ROMAE [AETERNAE?] with frontal view of a temple. Copper alloy, weight 2.7 g, diameter 28.1 mm.

Casa Herrera after the 2012-13 seasons: a late antique monastery?

The lack of proper deposits associated with the use and abandonment of the main structures make interpretations of the development of the site in the long run difficult, but the 2012-13 excavations, small as they were, confirmed the constructive sequence of the site: a first Roman phase represented by the aqueduct, two late antique phases (one dated to ci. 500 and the other to the late sixth century) that correspond to the basilica and its {p. 92} ancillary buildings (perhaps including the undatable structure on Area 1), and an early medieval (ninth century) phase dismantling, abandonment, and possible prison reuse.

Despite the lack of a previous early Roman settlement on site, the late antique complex of Casa Herrera was not built into a virgin landscape. From a broader perspective, the territory of Mérida had been centuriated and distributed in its entirety during the Augustan period.[32] But, from a narrower angle, the complex

[32] Dio Cassius, *Historia Romana* 53.26.1, ed. and transl. Ernest Cary (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1917); Agennus Urbicus, *De controversiis agrorum*, ll. 9-15, ed. Karl Thulin, Corpus Agrimensorum Romanorum 1.1 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913). Cf. Enrique Ariño Gil and Josep María Gurt Esparraguera, "Catastros romanos en el entorno de Augusta Emerita," in *Les campagnes de la Lusitanie romaine. Occupation du sol et habitats*, eds. Jean-Gerrard Gorges and M. Salinas (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 1994), 45-66.

was built on that hill because of the aqueduct and the road that had been there, probably since the Flavian period.

The importance of the aqueduct in the location of the Casa Herrera complex is double. Firstly, because it provided good-quality building material on site. The vault that sealed the conduit (which was accessible from ground level) was made of large voussoirs bound with mortar, and considering the mismatched and reused marble bases and columns of the basilica, it would not be surprising if the vault had been dismantled and recycled for the construction. Secondly, dismantling the vault gave access to the aqueduct's water: the chronological overlap between the construction of the basilica (ci. 500) and the eventual siltation of the conduit (during the sixth century) suggests that water was still flowing when the vault was dismantled. By that time, it is unlikely that the aqueduct still fed the city,[33] so usurping unkept public infrastructure was probably not much of an issue. In fact, the structures of Area 2 are built in parallel but beyond the aqueduct 'exclusion zone' defined in Roman law,[34] so it is possible that the city council had a say in the matter. Considering the large amount of water consumed in mortar construction (and there is a lot of mortar in the walls and floor of the {p. 93} basilica),[35] this water would have been an asset at that stage. Then, once the construction was

[33] Javier Martínez Jiménez, *Aqueducts and Urbanism in post-Roman Hispania*. Gorgias Studies in Classical and Late Antiquity 26 (Piscataway NJ: Gorgias, 2019), 197-201.
[34] Frontinus, *De Aquis* 2.127, ed. and transl. Charles Bennett and Mary McElwain (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1925); *Codex Theodosianus* 15.2.1, ed. and transl. Clyde Pharr, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952) = *Codex Iustinuaneus* 11.43.1.
[35] Javier Martínez Jiménez, "Water in ancient construction," in *The Role of Water in Production Processes in Antiquity, Panel 3.19*, ed. Elena Sánchez López, Archaeology and Economy in the Ancient World 21 (Heidelberg: Propylaeum, 2020), 11-20.

over, the aqueduct could then have been turned into a water point for the community that settled on the site.

The basilica existed not as an isolated monument in the countryside, but as part of a building complex of which we have only a very partial view. There is little we can say about the razed wall of Area 1 other than it is pre-seventh century and most likely coeval with the first phase of the basilica. The same can be said about B1 and B3 in Area 2: their fifth century chronology in an otherwise and until-then open field suggest that they were built together with the basilica as part of a larger complex. In any case, the ongoing burials in the basilica and the extension of B1a with B1b would suggest that the complex was constantly in use during the sixth century. Later on, B3 was obliterated by the construction of B4 and B5, which have been dated to the sixth century, but because these are perfectly aligned with B1 and its extension, it is very likely that B1 was standing and in use during this second construction phase. This most likely coincided with the second phase of the basilica and the construction of the main building of Area 1. Furthermore, surface finds and satellite photography suggest that the buildings of Areas 1 and 2 formed a larger, L-shaped structure. This was not necessarily a single construction, though, but rather a series of buildings set along those main axes as a late-sixth century complex (fig. 33), and further excavations will help clarify this proposal.[36]

[36] The basilica is built following its own liturgic alignment: César González García and Juan Antonio Belmonte, "The orientation of pre-Romanesque churches in the Iberian Peninsula," *Nexus Network Journal* 17 (2015): 353-77.

The existence of these buildings next to the basilica suggests that Casa Herrera was a monastic complex, or at least that it became one during the second late antique phase.[37]

The presence of the basilica is enough evidence to rule out the identification of Casa Herrera as a village or a farmstead: post-Roman peasant communities (especially at this early date) were not focused on churches or parishes, which represent the presence of an urban, elite power unrelated to the type of peasant communities that have been identified elsewhere {p. 94} in the Peninsula.[38] Funerary basilicas, furthermore, belong to urban burial traditions, rather than rural ones – which favoured row-grave cemeteries.[39] The ancillary structures (especially B1) do have parallels in coeval, storage structures from peasant villages, but we must see in these an example of rural architecture, not something specific to peasant communities.

In its first late antique phase, the site might have been part of an aristocratic estate, on which a private funerary complex (perhaps linked to the *familia* of Asella or Sabinianus the charioteer, both named in the inscriptions) that comprised a basilica and B1 and B3 was built.[40] The large size of the nave (nearly 190 m^2) would have been part of the design, to allow for more burial space. It could,

[37] Cf. Tomás Cordero and Bruno Franco, "El territorio emeritense durante la Antigüedad Tardía y la Alta Edad Media," in *Visigodos y omeyas: el territorio*, eds. Luis Caballero Zoreda, et al. Anejos Archivo Español de Arqueología 61 (Madrid: CSIC), 147-69 at 157-8.
[38] Carlos Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades campesinas en la Cuenca del Duero durante la Primera Alta Edad Media* (Bilbao: University of the Basque Country, 2017), 220. But cf. The approach for the Balearic Islands: Catalina Mas Florit, Miguel Ángel Cau Ontiveros, and Silvia Alcaide, "Buildings of faith: early Christianity in the countryside of the Balearic Islands," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 33 (2020): 271-90.
[39] Andreia Arezes, *O mundo funerário na Antiguidade Tardia em Portugal: as necrópoles dos séculos V a VIII* (Lisbon: CITCEM, 2017), 182-7.
[40] See above, note 9.

equally, have been built by the bishops (who were, in any case, {p. 95} landholding aristocrats) in order to keep a close eye on dispersed rural populations, adding a parochial purpose to the basilica without necessarily linking it to a specific, village-like, settlement.[41]

While layout and the structures of the site does not fit with later perceptions of land-holding monasteries, recent research into the archaeologies of early monasticism in the West unequivocally underlines that, at the time of the construction of Casa Herrera, no firmly established building or settlement type could be labelled as 'monastic'. In fact, it is clear from the sources that any religious complex could have an associated community, which includes pilgrimage sites, hospitals, and even episcopal complexes. Private funerary complexes with a secluded religious community also fall within this category. Communal monasticism in the fifth and sixth centuries was in a phase of experimentation, and in the West this was strongly promoted by urban aristocrats; this first phase could be one of these private, unregulated religious communities which acted as monasteries outside direct ecclesiastical control.[42]

The phasing is key here. There is no reason to suggest that the late-fifth-century basilica and the late-fifth-century surrounding buildings were not part of the same constructive effort.[43] Such a pre-designed religious complex would fit perfectly as either a private or an episcopal foundation, following the patterns visible in North

[41] Cf. Mas Florit, et al., "Buildings of faith", 286.

[42] Francisco Moreno Martín, "La configuración arquitectónica del monasterio hispano entre la tardoantigüedad y el alto medievo. Balance historiográfico y nuevas perspectivas," *Anales de Historia del Arte*, extraordinary issue (2009): 199-217. Cf. Albrecht Diem, "Merovingian monasticism: voices of dissent," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World*, eds. Bonnie Effros and Isabel Moreira (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 320-343.

43 Sastre de Diego, *Mérida capital cristiana*, 126-30.

African monasticism (a movement that had a brief but notable influence in the Iberian Peninsula).[44]

This chronological sequence would also fit the historical context. In Mérida in particular, the late fifth century was a period of monumentalization after the civil wars and the Gothic-Suevic conflict. This is famously exemplified by the inscription that commemorates the reconstruction of the walls and the bridge by the Visigothic *dux* and the bishop, but also with the second phase of the Saint Eulalia suburban complex and the construction of {p. 96} the rural basilica of San Pedro de Mérida.[45] It is in this political context that can explain the construction of Casa Herrera as an attempt to reinforce the control of the *territorium* of the city by the urban elites.

This argument for a private monastic enterprise, is further supported by the nature of the second phase of the site. The expansion of the basilica in the late sixth century, the creation of new cult spaces and the addition of a baptistery are all clear signs of direct episcopal control (only bishops could do baptisms). The expansion of episcopal power into the *rus* was done to consolidate the Church's control, integrating into the urban ecclesiastical hierarchy both rural populations and the various, private monastic enterprises that had emerged in the previous decades.[46] This happens also in a period when the Church is first seen directly

[44] Sastre de Diego, *Mérida capital cristiana*, 175, 197. Like Abbot Nanctus – *Lives of the Fatthers of Mérida* 3.2, ed. A. Fear (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 55.
[45] Osland, "Text and context"; Sastre de Diego and Alba Calzado, "Bajo la protección de la mártir"; *ICM* 10.
[46] Moreno Martín, "La configuración arquitectónica", 169; Sastre de Diego, *Mérida capital cristiana*, 173-7; cf. Merovingian Gaul: Pascale Chevalier, "Merovingian religious architecture: some new reflections," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World*, eds. Bonnie Effros and Isabel Moreira (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 657-92.

managing rustic properties, many of which had been obtained through wills and donations that were handed over to be managed by monastic communities.

The spatial organization of the second phase may be further evidence for its monastic nature. The ancillary buildings of the site do not only appear to form an L-shape; they also open towards the inside, away from the road. There is not enough evidence to speak of a cloister, and the date is also too early to label it as such (perhaps it is better to see this area as a half-enclosed courtyard), but there is, in any case, a separation between the access to the site (on the aqueduct road) and the buildings that were for the community. This separation already provides the degree of privacy and seclusion that is visible in other monastic structures of this period (in fact, this separation of public and private areas is one of the defining characteristics of early monastic communities).[47] While a physical enclosure (a wall or fence) circling the site has not been identified, the visual separation between the inward-looking, L-shaped complex and the open road might have been enough to highlight this separation of spaces. During the second phase, moreover, a second entrance was added to the basilica, an entrance to the corridor that led to the baptistery and that gave {p. 97} an alternative access to the basilica. These could have been, hypothetically, an entrance for the monastics (entering from the North, from the open courtyard formed by the ancillary buildings, and around the counter apse) and another for the lay public (which would have ran along the back of the ancillary buildings and directly towards the road). Inside the basilica, they would have been segregated already from the first phase, but the

[47] Francisco Moreno Martín, "Espacios públicos y espacios de uso común en los primeros monasterios hispanos (siglos V-X)," In *Oeuvrer pour le salut. Moines, chanoines et frères dans la péninsule Ibérique au Moyen Âge*, eds. Amélie de las Heras, Florian Gallon and Nicolas Pluchot (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2019), 165-86.

blocking of the intercolumnations in the second phase would have made this separation more evident.

This seclusion was also partly geographical. Casa Herrera is not in the wilderness (the 'desert' being a key element in the idea of monasticism) inasmuch as it is in the rural and centuriated hinterland of Mérida, but it is off the main roads. The metalled road of Area 3 was linked to aqueduct maintenance, it was a minor path that branched off the suburban streets of Mérida, not one of the main highways.

It should be noted that the very experimental nature of monasticism in this period means that comparisons are of little use. Francisco Moreno's detailed survey clearly shows this.[48] In his catalogue, all but one of his archaeologically-identified, fifth-century monasteries are urban or suburban, and the one rural example (Cap des Port in Menorca) consists of a cluster of buildings butting a baptismal basilica with associated productive sites.[49] Other sixth-century sites of probable monastic nature and certain chronology, like Punta de l'Illa (Valencia) or the more recently-excavated site of Els Altimiris (Lérida), on the contrary, share with Casa Herrera a number of separated buildings surrounding a basilica.[50] Neither of these sites has a clear public/private division, but, on the other hand, they were located in far more remote locations with fewer lay visitors (and the lack of baptismal pools would indicate that they were not associated with a lay, rural population). The territory

[48] Francisco Moreno Martín, *La arquitectura monástica hispana entre la Tardoantigüedad y la Alta Edad Media*, BAR IS 2287 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011). Cf. Mateu Riera Rullán, *El monacat insular de la Mediterrània Occidental. El Monestir de Cabrera, segles V-VIII*, Studia Archaeologiae Christianae 1 (Barcelona: ICAC, 2017), 76-7.

[49] Moreno Martín, *La arquitectura monástica*, 196; Mas Florit, et al., "Buildings of faith".

[50] Moreno Martín, *La arquitectura monástica*, 207; Marta Sancho Planas, "Evidencias arqueológicas de un monasterio de los siglos VI-VII en el Prepirineo catalán: Santa Cecilia de Els Altimiris," in *Monastères et couvents de montagne : circulation, réseaux, influences au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 2019).

around Mérida was, in the sixth and seventh centuries, full of monasteries known through the written sources, but other than generic mentions to storage rooms, gardens, cells, and a monastic school these {p. 98} are not particularly helpful.[51] Of course, it is from the seventh century onwards when we find the most famous monastic sites of the early Middle Ages. But of those known archaeologically, many of them have completely different layouts (Los Hitos), some of them are not fully known (Guarrazar) or are much later (El Trampal, Melque).[52]

Lastly, we should mention the final transformations and abandonment of the site. The dismantling of the basilica and its transformation into a possible prison took place during the ninth/tenth century (as dated by the handwriting), but none of the domestic ceramic types identified in the building of Area 1 can be dated beyond the ninth. The correlation between these two events is not clear, but it is likely that the basilica and the building were dismantled at the same time. If the pottery under the debris is of any indication, then the sixth/seventh-century building of Area 1 was used into the ninth century. By that period, the aqueduct had been long ago backfilled, but it is probable that the buildings of Area 2 were still in use, or else that new buildings were built up there (B2). This last phase of

[51] *Lives of the Fathers of Mérida*, 2.8-14 (pp. 52-3, Fear ed.). Cf. Isaac Sastre de Diego, Tomás Cordero Ruiz and Pedro Mateos Cruz, "Territorio y monacato emeritense durante la antigüedad tardía," in *Monasteria et territoria. Elites, edilicia y territorio en el Mediterraneo medieval (siglos V-XI)*, eds. Jorge López Quiroga et al. BAR IS 1720 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2007), 141-62.

[52] Moreno Martín, *La arquitectura monástica*. Cf. Luis Caballero Zoreda and Francisco Moreno Martín, "Balatalmelc, Santa María de Melque. Un monasterio del siglo VIII en territorio Toledano," in *Lo que vino de Oriente. Horizontes, praxis y dimension material de los sistemas de dominación fiscal en al-Andalus (ss. VIII-IX),* eds. Xavier Ballestín and Ernesto Pastor, BAR IS 2525 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2013), 182-214; Juan Manuel Rojas Rodríguez-Malo, "El primer año de trabajos en Guarrazar. La confirmación de un importante yacimiento arqueológico," in *VII Jornadas de Cultura Visigoda* (Guadamur: Ayuntamiento de Guadamur, 2013), 37-66; Also, with caution, Jorge Morín de Pablos and Isabel Sánchez Ramos (eds.), *Los Hitos. Arisgotas –Orgaz, Toledo. De palacio a panteón visigodo* (Madrid: self-published, 2015).

Casa Herrera can be compared to the Minorcan site of Son Bou and to the basilica of El Gatillo (Cáceres), both of which were partially dismantled and reoccupied without religious purpose in the Umayyad period, the former by the late eighth century but the latter in the late ninth.[53]

It is thoroughly documented that monastic foundations continued active in the Umayyad period and that the conquest did not cause the end of monasticism. Considering this, Casa Herrera might have continued to {p. 98} function as a monastery into the ninth century. It is impossible to determine if there is a causal link between the abandonment, the quarrying, and the "prison" phase, but it is clear that these events all took place during the ninth century. Of course, in the early ninth century the city of Mérida was in political turmoil with constant local (Christian) rebellions against the increasingly stronger Umayyad authorities.[54] The end of Casa Herrera as a Christian site does not necessarily imply an episode of religious repression, but it does reflect the urban political conflict and the turning tide for the local Christian aristocracy and the episcopal elites.

Conclusions

For almost a century, Casa Herrera has been a point of reference in what was once termed early Christian archaeology as one more example of basilical architecture and late antique burial customs, but the recent excavations around the basilica

[53] Mas Florit, et al., "Buildings of faith", 282; Luis Caballero Zoreda and Fernando Sáez Lara, "La iglesia de El Gatillo de Arriba (Cáceres). Apuntes sobre una iglesia rural en los siglos VI al VIII," in *Visigodos y Omeyas 4: El siglo VII frente al siglo VII. Arquitectura*, eds. Luis Caballero Zoreda, Pedro Mateos Cruz, Mª Ángeles Utrero Agudo, Anejos de Archivo Español de Arqueología 51 (Madrid: CSIC, 2009), 155-84.

[54] Martínez Jiménez, et al., *The Iberian Peninsula*, 276-82.

demonstrate that the site was not just an isolated monument, but a larger building complex with a rich history closely related to the old Roman capital of Hispania. From this perspective, Casa Herrera has much more to offer and it can become a paradigmatic site to understand the development of both rural settlements in the late antique period and the development of early monasticisms in the West, and how these were connected to episcopal power. Its location outside a main urban centre like Mérida adds to its relevance and explains its continuity, and it could be used as a point of comparison not only for other cities in Visigothic Spain, but for other peri-urban sites of the post-Roman Western Mediterranean.

Our interpretation as a monastic site is still hypothetical (especially considering the limited area of the 2007-2013 campaigns), and it will only be confirmed with further excavations. Still, it is possible to re-create a full interpretative sequence for Casa Herrera, one in which it is established as a private funerary basilica managed by a religious community, one of the types of experimental and yet-undefined monasticisms that dominate the late fifth century, established by a member of the urban elites. Then, during the sixth century, the site and its community would be transferred to the Church of Mérida, the type of donation wealthy families are seen to be doing in coeval sources like the *Lives of the Fathers of Mérida*. The Church, in turn, used Casa Herrera as one of its focal points to extend its {p. 100} control over the rural populations, as the presence of the baptistery would demonstrate. At any rate, it is almost certain that the site's late antique second constructive phase was linked to a better-defined monastic community. Even if in that period there was still no standardized layout or form, the basic principles of exclusion and seclusion that inherently define monastic

communities, are potentially there. The site ceased to function as a Christian complex after the Umayyad invasion, although this was, most likely, not in the immediate aftermath of the 711 invasion but of the political turmoil of the ninth century.

In terms of material culture, Casa Herrera's assemblage matches the sequence of the many urban excavations of Mérida dated to this period. The types and the fabrics clearly show a deep interrelation between the city and the site in a way that rural peasant communities elsewhere in the Iberian Peninsula do not. Casa Herrera might have been located in the countryside but it was part of Mérida's urban world.

Overall, Casa Herrera is a unique example of the archaeology of the late antique and early medieval longue durée, and even if it is located in the countryside, it is a perfect reflection of the evolution of the city of Mérida. With a chronology that ranges from the early Roman into the Islamic period, it is a site that improves our understanding of the privatization and dismantling of public infrastructure in Late Antiquity, exemplifies the development of new nucleated rural settlements (potentially through monasticism), and it illustrates the expansion of ecclesiastical power beyond its urban hubs. Many questions still remain unanswered, but we hope that Casa Herrera can feature in more discussions on urban-rural relationships in the post-Roman West.

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