

RECONSTRUCTING THE LATE ANTIQUITY EPISCOPAL COMPLEX OF VALENTIA

The Almoina Archaeological Center was built on the most important excavation area in Valencia. Thanks to the old buildings, it is an authentic interpretation center of Valencian urban history. This space of 2,500 m² is more than a simple complex of archaeological ruins, because there are also extraordinary finds directly related to relevant historical events of the city, like, for example, the place of the Saint Vincent's martyrdom and several evidence of the foundation of the city and the beginning of Christianity in Spain (ESCRIVÀ, RIBERA, VIOQUE 2010).

Among the different excavated buildings, which are opened to the public, there is a wide range of typologies. Most of them could be considered standard ones, because they appear also in other sites. Instead, others can be classified as exceptional examples within a large geographical context, i.e. the Episcopal Complex with the Cathedral, the Baptistery, the Mausoleum and the peculiar Visigoth necropolis (RIBERA 2005, 2008).

1. THE BEGINNINGS OF THE CHRISTIANITY. THE SITE OF THE MARTYRDOM

St. Vincent was martyred in Valencia in 304 AD, being part of the great persecution against the Christianity started by the Emperor Diocletian. He had a special and universal veneration in early Christian times. On the ruins of the prison, where he supposedly suffered the martyrdom, a horseshoe apse was erected. This is the only remaining testimony of the building, perhaps a small church, commemorating the sacred place. The ground floor has been well preserved, but just with little elevation. Its rugged construction system contrasts with the careful technique used in buildings of the Episcopal area during the previous phase. Indeed, the small width of the walls, 60 cm, is far from the 100 cm of the Baptistery. And also the shallowness of its foundation, 30 cm, indicates that it was a short and weak construction, more symbolic than monumental. Inside there was a regular layer of lime, the basis for a more consistent pavement despoiled in the Islamic Age. This floor sealed a well filled with abundant material since the late 6th or early 7th century AD, which allowed to get a dating for its construction. The room of the supposed prison would be below it, forming part of a public building erected at the end of the 3rd century AD and destroyed in the 5th (RIBERA 2008). A carved glass bowl made in Rome in the late 4th century AD with a decoration of biblical motifs appeared among the ruins. This object is a liturgical piece, the oldest Christian object of Valencia, which demonstrates the early Christianization of the area (ARBEITER 2002).

The surroundings of the site of the martyrdom were used extensively as a cemetery for four centuries by the worshippers. They wanted to be buried next to the sacred place (*ad sanctos*) where the martyrdom of a very revered man had befallen (ALAPONT 2005; ALAPONT, RIBERA 2008a, 2008b). On the amphitheatre of Tarragona there is a similar building, erected on the site of the Martyrdom of Bishop *Fructuosus* and two of his deacons.

2. THE BIG EPISCOPAL COMPLEX

In the first half of the 6th century AD, the most iconic Christian buildings were built following a wide and ambitious urban project, which overlapped the Roman religious and political center. Thus, a large episcopal complex wanted by the Bishop Justinian emerged (Fig. 1) and the space was related to the episode of martyrdom suffered by Deacon Vincent in 304 AD.

Since that time the Christianity was the guiding and driving force of the urban life. The ancient pagan and civil buildings, with solid constructions, failing their original functions, became quarries or were re-used with other functions, as happened to the *curia* and the Sanctuary of *Asklepios*. The Baptistry and the Mausoleum annexed to the Cathedral were built on the Roman *via Augusta*. That supposed a clear break between the previous Roman pattern and the new Christian topography. However, the successive repairs and resurfacing in the northern section of the road manifest the partial continuity of this way, as well as the *decumanus maximus*.

The Episcopal Venue would be a great church with basilical ground plan, with three naves with a developed transept, probably topped by a dome or a lantern tower, whose size would be 50×36 m. It had a big polygonal apse in the exterior and circular in its interior. This Cathedral was built with large stones recovered from the Roman buildings and topped by solid exterior buttresses. Its lateral naves would connect to the annexes, a funeral one with cruciform plan (the southern) and a baptistry with a larger cruciform plan, built with big reused blocks (the northern). The main reason for its identification as a baptistry is the existence in the northern wall of a water drainage canal that poured to the street, probably to some kind of fountain where the worshippers collected the holy water. Cruciform plan baptisteries are not very usual, but there are some cases as the Cathedral of Pola (Croatia), similar in size and shape to the Valencia's one. However, there were no fixed rules for the construction of these buildings. The most common was to place them in the foot of the cathedral. There are also some examples of baptisteries located next to the apse, isolated or connected with the church. Its exterior preservation is very good, but the interior was completely emptied in Islamic Age, coinciding with the disaffection of the Episcopal area. The same process also affected the Mausoleum located S of the Cathedral's head,

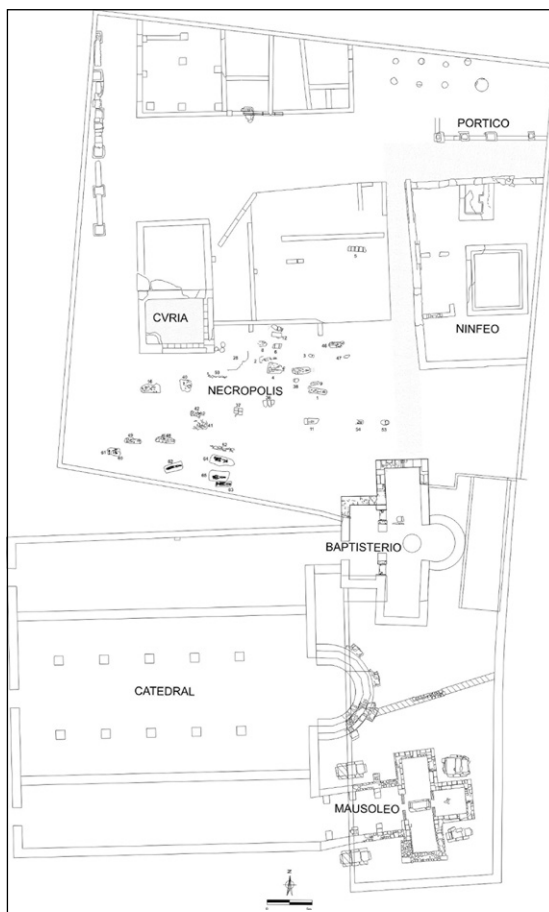


Fig. 1 – Episcopal Complex around 650 AD. Archive of SIAM (Secció d'Investigació Arqueològica Municipal, València).

which became the Arab baths in the 10th century AD. However, the strong Baptistery was not dismantled and it was joined to the fortified enclosure of the Alcazar since the 12th century AD. It endured even more, as the pointed Gothic arch made between their walls shows, which indicates its presence during the 14th century AD.

The building located to the S, traditionally known as “Jail of St. Vincent”, has a crossed plan and square-shaped interior and exterior apses. The naves are covered with a barrel vault, while the central section has rounded arches that supported the lantern tower. The transept is separated from the nave and



Fig. 2 – Episcopal Complex reconstruction, 2003 version. Archive of SIAM (Secció d'Investigació Arqueològica Municipal, València).

the apse by a double line of carved limestone fences, sustained with bars. It has been identified as the Mausoleum dedicated to St. Vincent. Bishop Justinian would probably have moved the martyr's body from his original grave on the outskirts in La Roqueta to the apse. The tomb inside the Mausoleum, located in the center, should belong to the bishop himself. Therefore, this funeral building became an important center of pilgrimage around the figures of a highly revered martyr and a bishop considered a saint.

In the late 6th or early 7th century AD the building with a small horseshoe apse on the supposed site of martyrdom was erected. That, precisely, would commemorate the sacred place.

Nothing is known about the location of the palace or other common quarters of the Episcopal Complex (RIBERA 2008; RIBERA, ROSSELLÓ 2014).

3. RECONSTRUCTING THE EPISCOPAL COMPLEX

The spectacular archaeological finds of the Almoina site have turned Valencia into a place where you can study and explain the long evolutionary sequence of a Hispanic episcopal complex, in this case closely related to the great martyr Vincent. Even if we know a big but incomplete (we do not have localized the bishopric palace) part of it, little by little this important quarter of the town has been reconstructed infographically. The virtual reconstruction project of Valencia has begun in 1999. In that year we showed the first proposal of the reconstruction of Roman Republican, Roman Empire and



Fig. 3 – Reconstruction of inner Baptistry, 2014 version. Archive of SIAM (Secció d'Investigació Arqueològica Municipal, València).

Late Antiquity cities. New and actualized versions with new archaeological remains and the applications of technological advances were made in 2003 and 2007 (Fig. 2).

In this dynamic workflow, we have followed always the same methodology. After the archeological documentation is finished, the first part is the development of architectural and modulation studies based on the archaeological remains. Archaeologists and architects work together before deciding on the basic lines to reconstruct the old buildings.

So, we can now present the last reconstruction (2016-2017) focused on the exterior and inner aspect of the main important quarter in Valentia around 600 AD (Fig. 3).

All these reconstructions have been profusely utilized in scientific and didactic presentations.

The study of the Cathedral is necessary to the restitution of the Baptistry. Indeed, the cruciform building was part of the church, as an annex located in the north-eastern side, as well as the Mausoleum, that is named “crypt of Saint Vincent”, a smaller building, but similar in plan, located on the SE.

We can establish the total width of the church because of the preservation of part of the northern wall, as well as the central apse and the southern limit of the access to the crypt of Saint Vincent, that must be the southern wall.

The reconstruction of the structure and disposition of the Baptistry apse is more difficult. We could apply to the northern building, the Baptistry,

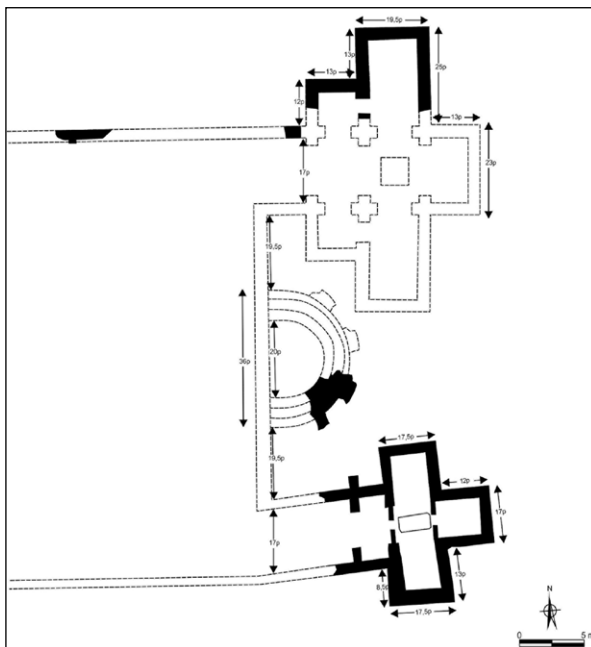


Fig. 4 – Modulation and restitution of the Baptistry. Graphics: Isabel Escrivà.

the scheme and proportions used on the southern one, the Mausoleum, to reproduce the width of the access to the tomb and the distance from it to the central apse. Regarding the access, we only know archaeologically the measures and disposition of the northern wall. Anyway this information gives more reliability to the hypothesis. Despite its good preservation, it is not possible to move the model plan of the crypt of Saint Vincent to the northern building, because the structure of both buildings seems a little different.

For the restitution of the Baptistry we used as reference the width of access obtained from the neighboring crypt of Saint Vincent (17 ft) and playback, the remaining part of the northern side of the Baptistry (19.5 ft), on the southern side. Thus we can obtain the nearly complete plan of the Baptistry and we can confirm the use of the Roman foot in the modulation of the building. However, it is not possible to establish the original baptistry header width, although it might well be similar to the access width (17 ft). This measurement would determine the structure of the central area and its covers, which would require two pillars that defined the cruiser (Fig. 4). We think that the discovery of a fragment of wall separated from the north-western angle of the Baptistry could confirm their existence.

4. THE MEDITERRANEAN CONTEXT OF VALENCIA

The architecture of these great buildings features deep Mediterranean roots and it is easy to see contacts with other areas, especially along both sides of Adriatic. Influences of Ravenna and other cities in the maritime environment have been detected (Pula, Padua) as well in the continental part (Milan, Vicenza). Because of its dating, these contacts would be already assimilated before the Byzantine invasion of Italy and Hispania, and it would coincide with the time of Ostrogoth control of the Iberian Peninsula.

Unfortunately, in Hispania there are very few references of similar constructions. For their entity and logical and innovative interpretations, only the case of Barcelona could bring up and would serve to complete some elements yet unknown in Valencia, as the Bishop's Palace (BONNET, BELTRAN 2004). The findings of the likely *Elo* episcopal complex, with its basilica and the baptistery (GUTIÉRREZ, ABAD, GAMO 2005) are of extraordinary interest, although they belong to a small fortified city, which only eventually would be a surrogate, that is the episcopal seat of *Ilici* held by the Byzantines.

5. EPILOGUE: THE END OF AN ERA

In the settlements integrated into the Muslim orbit the usual urban development of the Episcopal centers was cut, and it was replaced by another reality. This was the case of Valencia for 500 years, between 713 and 1238 AD.

But the sudden collapse of the Visigoth Kingdom was not a quick breakup of society, since the inevitable Islamization was as continuum as slow, culminating in such emblematic places as Cordoba only in 10th century AD. In much of the Valencia territory, thanks to the covenant signed with the newcomer Arabs by the last Visigoth Governor Theodemir, former lifestyle remained fairly unchanged until the middle of the 8th century AD. In that moment, abundant Arab contingents were settled, which partly joined the old Hispanic-Goth elite and the Visigoth Christian endurance finished (RIBERA, ROSSELLÓ 2009, 2011).

Theodemir managed to negotiate a Pact in exchange for tributes. He kept the control of seven cities and a vast territory (LLOBREGAT 1973). He should be the Governor of the *provincia Carthaginensis maritima*. Six of these cities are concentrated in the provinces of Alicante, Albacete and Murcia and the last, *Balantala*, has not been identified with certainty yet. We think that must be Valentia because of the big toponymic similarity and the not excessive distance with the remaining towns. Moreover, all the cities belong to the old province *Carthaginensis*. Besides, this assimilation would relate to this character with the "Pla de Nadal" Palace, 14 km from Valencia. An anagram (*Tebdemir*) and an inscription (*Tevdinir*), which allude to a name similar to that of the Governor, have been found there (RIBERA, ROSSELLÓ 2009; RIBERA *et al.* 2015).

In 778-779 AD Valentia was destroyed in a civil war. This episode would mark the end of the Late Antiquity city and the beginning of the Islamic one. However, we have scarce archaeological evidence for these moments of transition (8th-9th centuries AD).

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ABSTRACT

In Valencia, near the Cathedral, the Almoína Archaeological Center is the most important excavation area in the city. The buildings dated to Late Antiquity found here were the main ones of this period. The Cathedral, the Baptistery, the Mausoleum, the Memorial of Saint Vincent martyrdom, some reused Roman buildings (*Curia*, *Asklepieion*), some necropoleis and other minor constructions have been identified. We are also aware of a large but incomplete Episcopal Complex (we have not yet identified the bishop's palace). Little by little this important quarter of the town has been reconstructed infographically. The virtual reconstruction project of Valencia was begun in 1999. In that year we presented the first proposal of the reconstruction of the city during the Roman Republican, Roman Empire and Late Antiquity periods. New and up-dated versions with new archaeological remains and the applications of technological advances were made in 2003 and 2007. For this work, which is still in progress, we have always followed the same methodology. We are now able to present the latest proposal (2016-2017) about the exterior and interior appearance of the main important quarter in Valentia around 600 AD.

