



The pre-Pyrenees of Lleida in Late Antiquity: christianisation processes of a landscape in the *Tarraconensis*

El Prepirineo ilerdense en la Antigüedad Tardía: procesos de cristianización de un paisaje en la Tarraconensis

We try to perform a state of the question about the first christianisation occurred in the pre-Pyrenees of Lleida, where it has been detected a remarkable monastic activity which coincides in space and in time with a series of Late Antiquity religious sites. We analyse the probable relationship of these sites with the historical routes of transhumant livestock in this area and, at the same time, the possible link of these routes with rural monasticism and with the Episcopal sees of *Ilerda* and *Vrgellum*, both flanking the studied territory and strategically located at the beginning and at the end of the westernmost transhumant axes of Catalonia (with *Ilerda* controlling winter pastures and *Vrgellum* the summer ones). We connect this fact to the enigmatic *Vrgellum* breakthrough in the political and territorial scene, since up to that moment, and as Roman nucleus, had not shown any significance or legal entity. Establishing these connections, we close a circle around transhumant livestock, which experienced a noticeable boom in Western Europe during Late Antiquity, as we know from various sources.

Key words: *Vrgellum*, *Ilerda*, Episcopal sees, monasteries, transhumance, pre-Pyrenees.

Se procede a realizar un estado de la cuestión del primer cristianismo en el Prepirineo ilerdense, donde se detecta una notable actividad monástica al coincidir en el espacio y en el tiempo una serie de yacimientos tardoantiguos de carácter religioso. Se analiza la probable relación de estos yacimientos con las rutas históricas de ganadería trashumante de esta área y, a su vez, la posible relación de estas rutas con el monacato rural y con las sedes episcopales de *Ilerda* y *Vrgellum*, que flanquean el territorio estudiado y se hallan estratégicamente emplazadas al inicio y final de los ejes trashumantes más occidentales de Catalunya (con *Ilerda* controlando los pastos de invierno y *Vrgellum* los de verano). Este hecho lo ponemos en relación con la enigmática irrupción de *Vrgellum* en el panorama político-territorial, ya que hasta aquel momento, y como núcleo romano, no había mostrado ningún tipo de importancia ni de entidad jurídica. Cerramos así un círculo en torno a la ganadería trashumante, la cual sabemos, por varias fuentes, que experimenta un notable auge en la Europa occidental durante la Antigüedad Tardía.

Palabras clave: *Vrgellum*, *Ilerda*, sedes episcopales, monasterios, trashumancia, Prepirineo.

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The chronological framework of this investigation³ will be mainly based in the period between sixth and eighth centuries, as we have no previous data concerning the christianisation of the microterritory that we are about to dissect. These centuries, as it's well known, correspond to the Visigothic domination of the Iberian Peninsula and with the Muslim invasion, and this historical context will not pass unnoticed nor for the archaeological sites, nor with regard to the organization of them that we will propose to try to shed some light on the christianisation of the area.

Once consolidated the new religion in the cities over the fourth and fifth centuries, the subsequent three centuries carried out an intense christianisation of the country, as we know from written sources. There was an intensification of the construction of churches and monasteries,⁴ but it cannot be ignored that there were also important forms of pre-Roman pagan cults surviving, as the same Christian sources remind us insistently.⁵ Hence, is licit to think that the situation would be not much different in more than one corner of the Lleida pre-Pyrenees, but the archaeological reality that we face is that in this piece of land, of approximately 4,000 km², we only have clear hints about premedieval Christianity in eight points of the landscape. This relatively lack of data may only be attributable, to our understanding, to a shortfall of archaeological knowledge of the area and to the systematic failure to provide surveys, as it has already been highlighted by other authors who preceded us. But this shortage, far from making us become discouraged, leads us to formulate countless questions (most of which will not be discussed here) that can even extend into the field of research of the

medievalist foreign to antiquity: what explains the almost spontaneous emergence of a so dense network of monasteries and parish once expelled out the Muslim (IX-X), if not for a significant precedent substrate?⁶

Furthermore, the specific written sources that will be later brought up in this article will draw an outlook of the surrounding or neighbouring areas in which monasteries become focus of christianisation and economical organization of the territory and the landscape; surrounding areas in which we will also find two Episcopal sees that will play a key role in our study.

All this —the study of the archaeomorphological evolution of the ancient and high-medieval road network in relation to the sites, late antique literary sources, the well-known situation of pre-Pyrenean early medieval Christianity and the existence of two ancient Episcopal sees flanking on the North and the South the pre-Pyrenean area of Lleida— will help us to propose a new interpretative hypothesis of the few, and often poor, archaeological remains which we will explain below.

Roman nuclei, communication network and Episcopal sees: an administrative framework for eight paleochristian sites⁷

Within the limited scope of our study area (figure 1), we can only speak of a known Roman nucleus: the *municipium* of *Aeso* (Isona). In the vicinity of this perimeter, some settlements were established: in the northeast, the enigmatic *Vrgellum* (La Seu d'Urgell) and *Iulia Libica* (Llívia); on the southwest *Ilerda municipium*; in the southeast, the *municipium* of *Sigarra* (Els Prats de Rei) and the *municipium* of *Iesso* (Guissona); to the east, there are no known settlements, and in the west, the nuclei of *Labitolosa* and *Barbotum*, of which has not been retained any memory of its legal entity. With the exception of *Labitolosa*, which seems to vanish as an urban entity towards the second-third century (even though its territory is mentioned during Late Antiquity⁸), and *Iulia Libica*, the rest of these Roman nuclei were christianised before the Middle Ages, and *Vrgellum* and *Ilerda* even became Episcopal sees. For *Aeso* there are currently no sure data, but it is reasonable to assume that it was also christianised, even if we have no archaeological evidence of this process, nor

3. This text grew out of a lecture entitled “El Prepirineu lleidatà durant l'Antiguitat Tardana: una mirada a través de la cristianització del paisatge”, given by one of us —J. Sales Carbonell— as part of the *II Jornada d'estudis històrics i patrimonials de la Vall d'Àger i l'Alta Noguera* (Àger, July 2012). The complexity of transhumant routes and roads as a historical evolution factor; essential arguments for some of the proposals to be developed in the following lines, encouraged us to seek the participation of Natalia Salazar Ortiz, since in the latest work she has published (in the context of the completion of his PhD thesis on the evolution of the landscape and the territory around the Roman *municipium* of *Sigarra*) deals with this issue in relation to the christianisation of the landscape.

4. In previous centuries (fourth and fifth centuries), probably, but to a lesser extent, Christianity was already present in rural areas of the Iberian Peninsula. Hardly archaeological traces of this Christianity remain although it is often referred in literature. For this first Hispanic monasticism of Roman chronology, of which we have any evidence in the area we study, see Marcos 2002: 231-266.

5. To give an example, we can refer to evangelising activity of Martin of Braga in the Cantabrian mountains (mid-sixth century) and his *De correctione rusticorum*, where he relates how the *rustici* of the place worshiped different natural elements like trees or rocks. The crossroads where already venerated in the Greek world as narrated by Theophrastus in *Caract.*, XVI. And in an earlier time (fourth century), in the neighboring Gaul, Martin of Tours built a chapel next to a lake with intent to christianise some pagan pilgrimages the saint had failed to eradicate —Sulpicius Severus, *Vita s. Mart.*, 5—. These then can be some of the reference points christianised in rural landscapes.

6. The question of the existence of an important Christian substrate from the Visigothic era has already been highlighted by authors like Abadal 1969: 366-368 and, more currently, by Bolós and Hurtado 2006: 52-53, although archaeology, all too often, has chosen to ignore this historical reality, which, in our view, has limited many results of archaeological excavations in medieval churches.

7. In our text, when using the adjective “paleochristian”, we are talking about all those Christian material manifestations prior to the Muslim invasion of the early eighth century. Also, for us, late antiquity extends from the Roman Empire until the beginning of the eighth century. Not all the Hispanic literature takes this approach and there is a remarkable confusion in this regard— see Sales 2012: 39-42—.

8. Vincentius Osc., *Donatio*. See Ariño and Díaz 2003: 234.

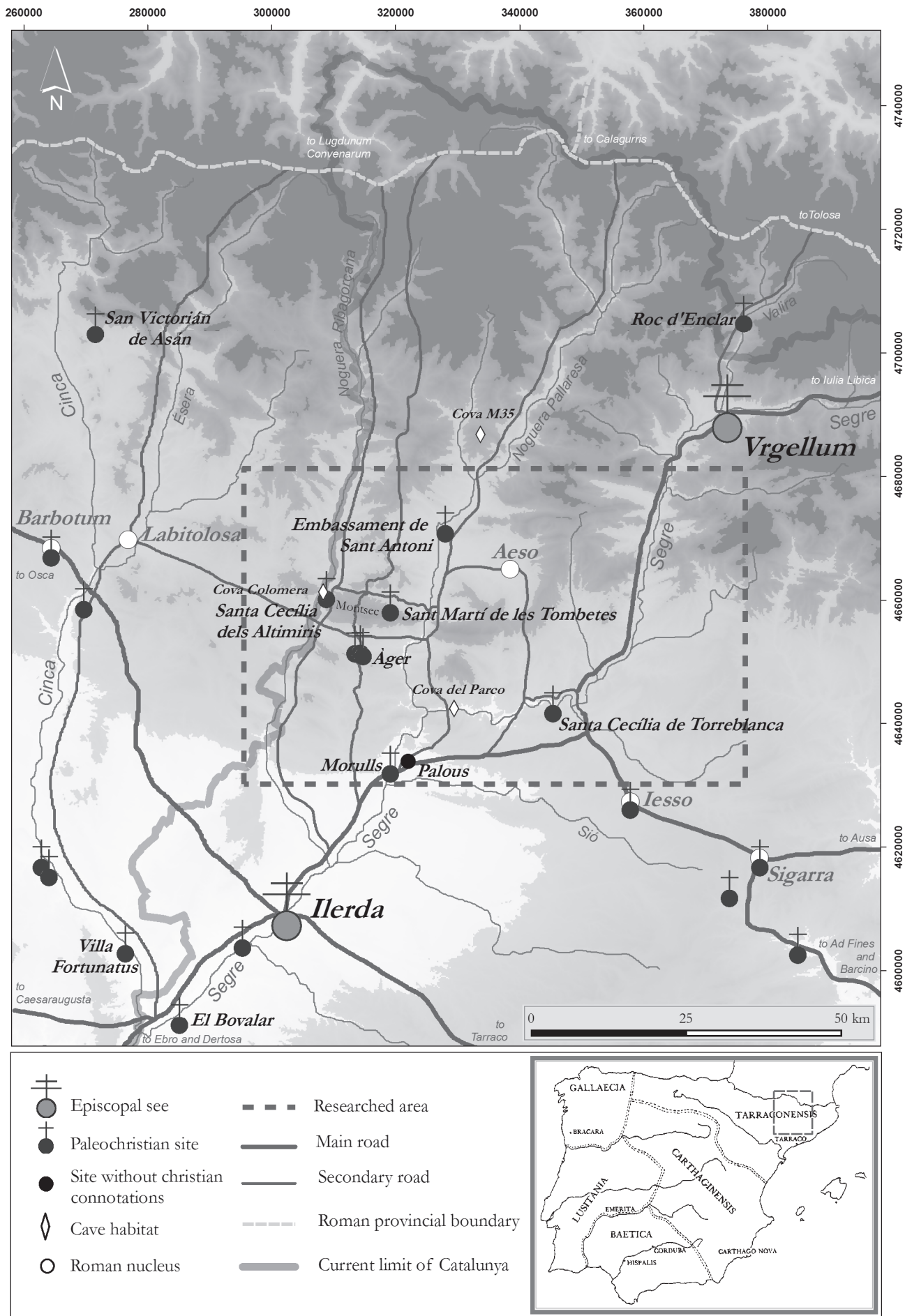


Figure 1. Geographic and administrative contextualization of the paleochristian analysed sites including the late antique Episcopal sees of Ilerda and Vrgellum, in relation to the Roman road network and to the main Roman nuclei of the oriental Tarraconensis.

any late mention in any sources.⁹ Finally, we document some Roman villas in the plain (on the south of our rectangle) and close to *Aeso*, but—to date, and as far as we know—none of them shows any sign of christianisation except for a possible case in *Ponts*. We should travel to the not very far away *Villa Fortunatus* (Fraga, Huesca) to find an explicit example of this reality.

Thus, taking a first glance at the map of the Roman Empire, the position of the nuclei of *Ilerda* and *Vrgellum* discloses that they are both built at leading crossroads of main routes, which were following natural steps opened by the river valleys. Moreover, these roads were long-distance roads, *id est*, they enable communication between Roman provinces within the Roman Imperial communication network. Undoubtedly, the relevance of the geo-strategic aspect of their situation will be one of the factors that will attract the foundation of Episcopal sees in both settlements in Late Antiquity. In this way the pre-Pyrenean area of Lleida got framed within the influence of these two sees: *Ilerda* in the south and *Vrgellum* in the north, each one controlling one of the edges of the river Segre and its tributaries. Following those foundations, this river basin became a main axis for the christianisation on this geographic area coming to be, at the same time, a communication nexus for these two towns and for the paleochristian sites we are about to study. And as well, with the available data we have, we see at first glance that the first signs of Christianity seem to concentrate more on the western (in the Noguera Pallaresa basin) to the detriment of an empty eastern PrePyrenean of Lleida (upper basin of the Segre river), where we should descend to *Iesso* or go up to *Vrgellum* to find again some evidence of this early Christianity. Probably, again, we suffer from a problem of lack of knowledge for this sector.

Retaking the argument of the two documented Episcopal sees, we can point out that they both are the westernmost mitred nuclei of Late Antiquity in the nowadays Catalonia, but in relation to the entire Diocletian *Tarraconensis*, these sites occupy a rather eastern position. *Ilerda* enjoyed its municipal status since the time of Augustus, and it is in this *municipium* where the main Roman roads from the provincial and interprovincial road network¹⁰ converged. It appears that, despite the reduction in its urban area after the third century, *Ilerda* acquired a remarkable vitality

9. Archaeological evidences for *Aeso*, township founded in the late second century BC or early first century BC, do not go beyond the fourth-fifth centuries—Equip PRAMA 1993: 182—but, one way or another, the town would survive through the Visigoth centuries, as demonstrated by the continued existence of population in early medieval period.

10. In the most recent maps of the Roman road network—De Soto 2010: 125-126; Rodríguez 2012—*Ilerda* is confirmed as a highly relevant hub within the imperial network road. It appears mentioned as a *mansio* in the Antonine Itinerary, connecting Rome with the northwest of the peninsula. Likewise, in *Ilerda* meet the routes communicating with the coast (*Dertosa*, *Tarraco*, *Barcino* and *Emporion*), with Gaul (*Ruscino*, *Lugdunum Convenarum*), always following the river Segre and its tributaries, and with the peninsular inland (*Octogesa*—current Mequinzenza—*Caesaraugusta* and *Osca*).

during Late Antiquity. For example, the abundance of imported pottery from the fourth and fifth centuries reveals the dynamism of its economy, while literary sources thoroughly state the existence of its see, at least at the beginning of the fifth century, though presumably it could have been a bishop there since quite time ago.¹¹ Even in 546 a council was held in the city. Such vitality would explain that during the Muslim occupation *Ilerda* became one of the most important centres of the district of the *Marca Superior*—Ath-Thaghr al-Alà (أث عأل ر غثلأ)—.

On the other hand, the old Roman nucleus of *Vrgellum* was located under the current town of La Seu d'Urgell, beside the crossroads of two important Roman axes: on one side, the Roman road linking the towns of *Iulia Libica* (today's Llívia) and *Ilerda*, following the Segre river upstream and going through *Vrgellum*,¹² and on the other side, the road running alongside the Valira river, coming from El Roc d'Enclar and arriving to its junction with the Segre at the foothill of Castellciutat,¹³ an elevation in which—most likely—in a moment of Late Antiquity the people of *Vrgellum* was concentrated and fortified. We do know nothing of the legal situation—if it had any—of this little known nucleus during Roman times.¹⁴ This fact constitutes the exception to the argument that the presence of an Episcopal see serves to measure the towns who kept their importance after the crisis of the third century. This observation, made by A. Perez,¹⁵ is of greatest interest when studying the evolution of Roman nuclei, as it makes us wonder if we should seek the late origin of the *ciuitas* of *Vrgellum* in the foundation of an Episcopal see. We think that the answer to such question is that, administratively, this was the origin of the town, and that this was in the interests of controlling a livestock economic activity, as we are going to argue later.¹⁶

The first certain literary new about *Vrgellum* appears on 531, when its illustrious bishop *Iustus* signed the acts of the Second Council of Toledo.¹⁷

11. An updated summary on late antique *Ilerda* in Sales 2011: 82-88; Id. 2012: 283-289, where the foregoing bibliography is gathered.

12. Although not explicitly mentioned by the ancient sources, historiography has related the use of this route with the passing through the area of military expeditions led by characters such as Hannibal, Caesar or Wamba. Furthermore, the localization of different archaeological vestiges of road infrastructure in several of its sections has resulted in the confirmation of its antiquity—Padró 1982: 61-87—.

13. Llovera *et al.* 1997: 90, 106.

14. The various theories and questions on the pre-Roman and Roman *Vrgellum* as well as archaeological findings and the literature that precedes us, are synthesized and collected again in Sales 2011: 113-118; Id. 2012: 280-283.

15. “De todos los actuales catalanes es el único [obispado] que presenta la originalidad en cuanto a su origen de no contar con un antecedente romano claro, o mejor, no tiene por sede una de las colonias o municipios que contaron con status de tales desde el Alto imperio, y ello a pesar de que la Iglesia, como es natural, se sirvió de la organización administrativa imperante para hacer lo propio con la suya” —Pérez 1996: 153—.

16. Other authors have suggested the possibility that the creation of the see of *Vrgellum* was due to military reasons—Llovera *et al.* 1997: 101—.

17. *Iustus in Christi nomine ecclesiae catholicae Vrgellitanae episcopus*—*Conc. Tolet. II, subscript.* (n. 8)—.

From this information we can draw two aspects that are significant to us: on the one hand, this first mention of *Vrgellum* is the latest of all the news we know about ancient Episcopal sees of *Tarraconensis*, along with those of *Pampilona* and *Auca*, which are also documented for the first time in the alluded Council. On the other hand it is at least curious that this Episcopal see, of apparently small entity, was occupied by an important personality of the time as was *Justus*, renowned ecclesiastic and writer, as well as an influential member of a dynasty of four brothers, all of them prominent bishops: himself, Nebridius of *Egara*, Elpidius of *Oscá* and Justinian from *Valentia*.¹⁸ From all this data, we can infer that, more than likely, *Vrgellum* was much more important in the sixth century than both the archaeology and the written sources hint at.

After 800, following the short period of Muslim occupation of the area, sources alluding to the episcopate draw up a picture where the multiplicity of ecclesiastical networks, territorial interferences and attempts to absorb temples and parishes conducted by both the ecclesiastical and secular aristocracy are common events. This situation is, in our view, a clear indicator of a powerful Visigoth substrate, as we can assume that it was in the Visigothic era that they would have built the most part of the numerous monasteries and churches appearing on the documentation of the late eighth century and early ninth century, as R. d'Abadal remarked long ago. But then again, it appears the question of the practically non-existing historiographical correspondence of this reality with the archaeological data, so we should not lose sight of this when dealing with the study of archaeological sites.

Paleochristian sites in the pre-Pyrenees of Lleida

Within our study area there are located more than a few archaeological sites, but only eight of them will be useful to illustrate the christianisation of the landscape. South to north, we find: Morulls (Os de Balaguer), Santa Cecília de Torreblanca (Ponts), Santa Maria del Pla, Santa Coloma, and Santa Maria la Vella (all three in Àger), Sant Martí de les Tombetes (Sant Esteve de la Sarga), Santa Cecília dels Altimiris (also in Sant Esteve de la Sarga), and Embassament de Sant Antoni (Trepmp).

Morulls: In the decentralized municipal entity of Gerb (belonging to the municipality of Os de Balaguer) in an area called Morulls, it has been found a site that in recent years has proved to be very important, both for the quantity and the quality of its findings because, in summary, it consist on a stunning necropolis of sixth-seventh centuries. At first, and only on the basis of superficial findings and data, the site was defined as a Roman villa almost destroyed¹⁹ with the presence of sarcophagi. There were also found in this site four capitals (figure 2), and as it has always



Figure 2: Capitals of the baldachin of a baptistry found in Morulls and currently preserved at the base of the altar of the church of Sant Salvador de Gerb.

been assumed, they would be part of the canopy of a baptistry.²⁰ Further studies highlighted the history of the various interventions of diverse depth made by different agents in the site, and recovered the news about some enigmatic structural remains which were interpreted as a probable Visigothic basilica of late Roman origin.²¹ Unfortunately, most of these remains have not been conserved.

During the summer of 2007, while some farm work was done in the area, they appeared more sarcophagi. During a visit to the site we had occasion to observe seven of them, which, by the typology of their monolithic and four slopes covers, we can classify as Visigothic (sixth-seventh centuries), since they are identical to those dated these centuries, found in the nearby Basilica of El Bovalar. In the same year, a team from Balaguer Museum made an intervention in place by geophysical methods, identifying what seemed to be a possible three-apsed-structure. The installation of a pipeline in 2009-2010 led to a further excavation that brought to light some 160 tombs of different types: slabstone, of *tegulae*, and about sixty monolithic sarcophagi.²² During these latter excavations they did not found the structure with three apses suggested by the 2007 geophysical survey. However, carefully observing the overall drawing of the excavated sepulchres and a few walls that have also appeared, it can be perfectly seen, in our opinion, the presence of a rectangular basilica with a rectangular apse:²³

20. Pita 1973: 83-84. The capitals are now preserved as part of the altar of the church of Sant Salvador de Gerb (Os de Balaguer). A description of the parts in Giralt 1994: 408 and in Díez-Coronel and González 1996: 59-61.

21. Díez-Coronel and González 1996: 48.

22. We thank Ms. Carme Àlòs, from the Museu de Balaguer, her kindness for accompanying us to the site and for her valuable comments regarding these archaeological works.

23. We had the opportunity to identify this more than likely basilica during the slideshow of communication "Els Morulls (GERB)", read by Anna Camats in the context of the *II Jornada d'estudis històrics i patrimonials de la Vall d'Àger i l'Alta Noguera* (Àger, July 2012). We look forward to the publication of this plant so that the concerned public can confirm or refute our interpretation. Meanwhile, the mapping is included in the unpublished memoir of archaeological intervention: Camats 2012.

18. Teja 1995: 29-39; Vilella in process.

19. Pita 1973: 83-84. Also Díez-Coronel and González 1996: 58.

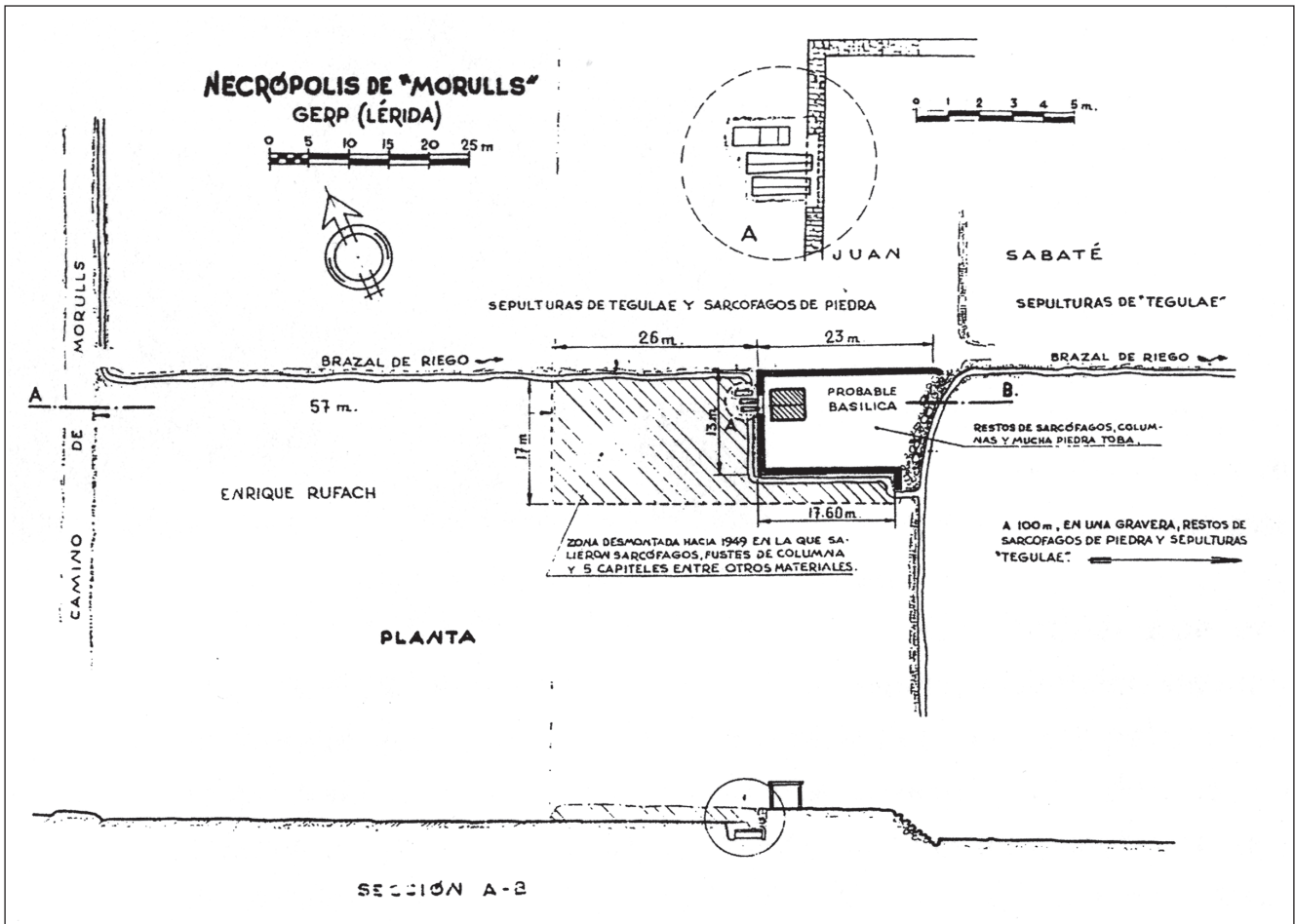


Figure 3: Interesting sketch of the more than likely basilica of Morulls, partially excavated by Díez-Coronel (Díez-Coronel and González 1996: 48).

indeed, the arrangement and concentration of these tombs perfectly define a large rectangle (apparently with no conserved structures) oriented *grosso modo* east to west, with three walls conforming a smaller rectangular structure, as an apse, attached to the east side of the larger rectangle suggested by the arrangement of the sepulchres. Reached this point, we bring up again the enigmatic fragment of rectangular structure previously referenced, defined as “possible basilica” by Díez-Coronel, since as shown in the croquis (figure 3) done by this researcher (position in relation to the road to Morulls and to the irrigation channel, dimensions and orientation), the structure would be superimposed to the space that we have also defined as a basilica, taking this conclusion from the floor plant of the excavations carried out in 2009.

Considering plant type and dimensions —also for the aforementioned sarcophagi and the possible presence of a baptistery inferred from a probable canopy— that of Morulls is emerging as a basilica very similar to the already referred of El Bovalar. In fact, we have recently identified the site of El Bovalar, located just a few kilometres south of *Ilerda*, as a probable Visigothic monastery, in contrast to its classical interpretation of a town around a church.²⁴ We

wonder, therefore, if according to these parallelisms we should confer a hypothetic monastic character to Morulls. Furthermore, we note that both sites (El Bovalar and Morulls) are connected by the course of the Segre river, through a route that came from *Dertosa* to link in *Ilerda* with the one that headed to *Aeso*, following the course of Noguera Pallaresa river. The episcopate of *Ilerda* is located between El Bovalar and Morulls, and could therefore have exercised an ecclesiastic and administrative control over these two possible monasteries.

Actually, the location of El Bovalar serves to confirm the importance of geostrategic component in the ecclesiastical or monastic foundations under review in this study. The importance of being well connected and dominating transport routes along which goods circulate, gives the monastic foundations a character of governing centres for economic and administrative matters that certainly has traditionally been relegated to a second plane in favour of highlighting the spiritual and anachoretic nature of these centres (*ora*) above the working aspects (*labora*). The late antique site of El Bovalar is located upon an elevation on the banks of the Segre, dominating the confluence of this river with the Cinca, and where, very close, in the current village of Massalcoreig, there is also documented the crossroads of three main Roman

24. Sales 2013 in press.

routes: first the way *Dertosa-Ilerda-Aeso*. Second, the road that going up to the Cinca and heading north, getting through *Villa Fortunatus* going to *Osca* or either to *Barbotum* and *Labitolosa*, or either heading to *Caesaraugusta*. And third, the one that headed towards the peninsular centre following the course of the Segre to the south, searching the Ebro river.

Morulls is located in a place that has a so overwhelming match with El Bovalar in terms of their landscape and geographical features that it cannot come about by chance. It also dominates a *triuium* of roads formed right at the confluence of the Segre with its tributary the Sió, where they coincide the pathways coming: from *Aeso*, on the North, following Noguera Pallaresa basin; from *Vrgellum*, from the northeast in parallel with the upper Segre; from *Ilerda* on the South, and *Iesso* and *Sigarra* on the east. We should not forget that it also has its passage through this geographical point the transhumant route that following the upper Segre heads up from the plains of *Ilerda* to the Pyrenean summer pastures which are distributed even today around the town of La Seu d'Urgell, the Roman *Vrgellum*.

In relation to the same hub of communications, a few kilometres to the Northeast and on the opposite bank of the river Segre, we can find the necropolis of Palous in Camarasa. We believe it timely to make a brief reference to this necropolis, even though a priori, it does not show explicitly any sign of Christianity, but among the funerary offerings found in one of the tombs, dated between seventh and eighth centuries by the dating of a belt buckle and a belt plate, it has been found a peeler²⁵ as well. This piece is a specific tool for leather working, for small leather in this case. This tool is identical to those located in the aforementioned and possible monastery of El Bovalar. These tools, for their little dimensions and morphology take us back to the world of parchment making. Therefore, the geographical and chronological proximity of this tool from Palous with those of El Bovalar, as well as the stylistical closeness of the buckle type and the belt plate appeared in both sites, forces us to bear in mind this necropolis, since it is evident in our study that both places are related, even though today, and with a very little extension of Palous excavated, we don't know yet what was the scope of this relationship.

Santa Cecília de Torreblanca: Near the village of Torreblanca, located next to a knot of Roman roads that eventually led to the present town of Ponts, and where they also converge different branches of the transhumant route linking the winter pastures of the Plana d'Urgell with the summer ones in the Pyrenees of Cerdanya, we find this tiny —it's said to be the smallest of Catalonia— and circular church of Romanesque appearance (figure 4). In this area intersected the route linking *Ilerda* with *Vrgellum* passing to the northeast direction by Artesa de Segre and Ponts, with the route *Ilerda-Ad Fines* (Martorell) that went to the east and, after Ponts, passed through the Roman towns of *Iesso* and *Sigarra*. Furthermore, the church



Figure 4. The tiny church of Santa Cecília in Torreblanca. With circular structure and Romanesque appearance, it is considered the smallest of Catalonia.

of Santa Cecília is seated over a site from Roman and Late Antiquity period, as recorded in the *Inventari del Patrimoni Arqueològic de Catalunya*. During levelling work of some farmland, it came to light a necropolis consisting on *tegulae* tombs and stone sarcophagi, some of which showed sculpted reliefs. In the near-



Figure 5. Two of the stone sarcophagi with four slopes cover discovered in the necropolis of the church of Santa Cecília in Torreblanca, currently being preserved in a nearby farmhouse called Mas de n'Olives.

by Mas de n'Olives there are preserved two of these sarcophagi (figure 5) dated between Late Antiquity and early medieval era.²⁶ Although the necropolis has never been the subject of a systematic archaeological excavation, some authors have established (from the typology of the sepulchres discovered there) parallels to those documented in El Bovalar, assigning to the necropolis a timeline between the sixth and the seventh centuries.²⁷

26. Maluquer de Motes 1986: 19.

27. During the aforementioned farm work it was recovered a belt buckle that Maluquer de Motes published as belonging to

25. Solanes and Alòs 2003: 345-350.

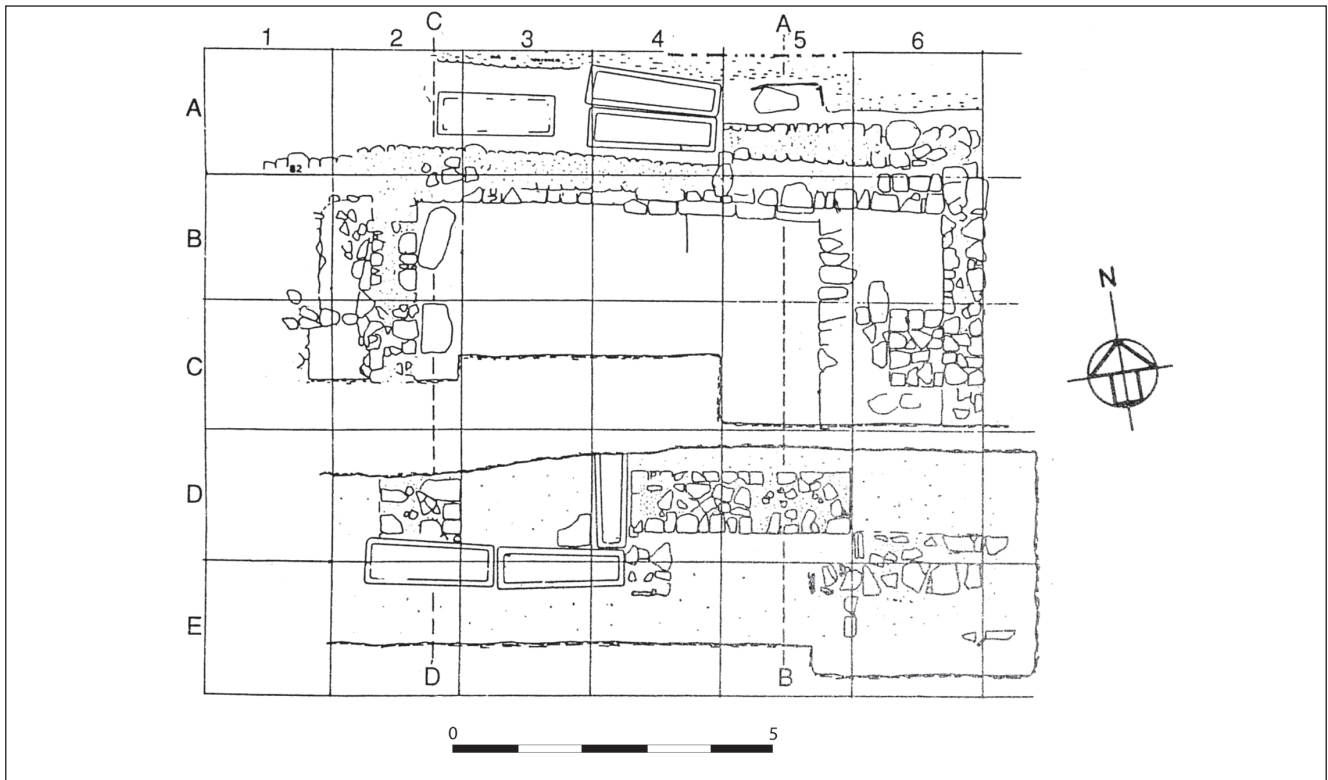


Figure 6. Church of Santa Coloma d'Àger. General plan of the late antique building and its necropolis, according to P. Bertran and F. Fité (Adell and Fité 1994: 139).

In the village of Àger we find together three significant Christian late antique sites. All of them are located at the foot of an ancient Roman crossroads where two long distance routes intersected: on the one hand, the Roman road that came from *Ilerda* and which through Àger traversed the Montsec by the Coll d'Ares, to address to Sant Esteve Sarga (in that municipal district we find two more of the sites of Late Antiquity on which we will deal with later: Sant Martí de les Tombetes and Santa Cecília dels Altimiris). The route of this Roman road fully coincides with the path of one of the medieval transhumant routes²⁸ which enabled the movement of livestock between the Plana de Lleida and the western Catalan Pyrenees, providing contact between the sphere of influence of the episcopate of *Ilerda* and the area that was under the influence of the episcopate of *Vrgellum*. On the other hand, in Àger also converges the road that connected the Roman nuclei of *Aeso* and *Labitolosa*, a path going through the Àger valley from east to west and connecting the basins of the rivers Noguera Pallaresa and Noguera Ribagorçana.²⁹

Santa Coloma: Behind the present-day cemetery of Àger, in the eighties of the twentieth century were carried out some archaeological interventions

the seventh century —Maluquer de Motes 1986: 19—. Recently, the interpretation of that piece has been revised —Alòs *et al.* 2007: 159-160—, proposing a new dating between the eleventh-thirteenth centuries on the basis of the comparison with the medieval chronology buckles documented in the necropolis of the Plaça de Sant Salvador in Balaguer.

28. Nolasco 1997: 136.

29. Llovera *et al.* 1997: 90, 106.



Figure 7. Late antique necropolis in the subsoil of the Romanesque church of Santa Maria del Pla (Àger).

that allowed to discover the plant of a late antique church associated with a necropolis (figure 6), the latter already partially known thanks to the work J. Puig i Cadafalch³⁰ at the beginning of the century. The church revealed by the excavations —in use until the eighteenth century— is only documented

30. The excavation was carried out between 1983 and 1984, following the extension of a road near the current cemetery and the dismantling of an olive grove, actions that left exposed a site of which is preserved an archaeological stratigraphy with a capacity of approximately 0.80 m —Bertran and Fité 1984-1985: 455-456; Adell and Fité 1994: 140—.

in written sources from the year 1048.³¹ It is described as a temple of a single nave, facing east, with a bench attached to the north wall and the access on the west,³² preceded by a possible narthex.³³ It is also described a chevet perhaps tripartite protruding on the sides. Dated in the seventh century, it has been argued (bringing up the survival of Mozarabic communities in the Àger valley) that this church continued into use during the Muslim domination.³⁴ Such persistence is also inferred by the study of the phases of the necropolis, which cover the same chronology of the church use.

Santa Maria del Pla: Also in Àger, and less than half a kilometre of Santa Coloma, in the place known as Santa Maria del Pla, we find a country house that hides within its walls the remains of a Romanesque church.³⁵ Even more interesting is the finding of a burial necropolis at the same place (figure 7), which in 2010 has undergone a small emergency archaeological intervention because of renovation works into the house. While awaiting the publication of the results, as we have observed *in situ*, at the site appear at least three monolithic sarcophagi with four slopes cover. These sarcophagi are of the same type than those found in the aforementioned Morulls and El Bovalar, both Christian sites, datable between the sixth and the seventh centuries and not very distant geographically of the one that is being analysed. They also appear some tombs in slabstone boxes, so typical of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Apparently also would have appeared a fragment of wall dated previous to the Romanesque building.³⁶ Therefore, it seems to be likely the presence of a late antique church in Santa Maria del Pla, that would be the precedent of the Romanesque church which would be partially preserved integrated in the structure of the house. This hypothetical eldest church would give meaning to the late antique sarcophagi described, although the proximity of this place to Santa Coloma means we cannot exclude that we are actually talking about an ensemble. Should this be the case, it would have a significant extension and would correspond to a late antique Christian population of which has not remained any documentary trace in known sources.

Santa Maria la Vella: At the top of a small hill overlooking the present town of Ager and controlling the



Figure 8. At the highest point of the village of Àger we find the monument known as Col·legiata de Sant Pere d'Àger. In its crypt they are located the remnants of the primitive church of Santa Maria la Vella.

ancient aforementioned crossroads —where we found Santa Coloma and Santa Maria del Pla— stands the monument known as Col·legiata de Sant Pere d'Àger (figure 8) with Roman or Muslim background visible in part of the masonry wall surrounding the whole.³⁷ The crypt of the collegiate church —actually an earlier church precedent to the presently overlaid, called Sant Pere— is known as Santa Maria la Vella. In this crypt or original church, apparently built in the Early Middle Ages, R. Pita stated to have observed many Corinthian capitals of Roman and Visigothic period which, according to him, would be reused elements of a Christian late antique church located on the same site where we find the current temples.³⁸ However, the paucity of data provided by Pita does not help to clarify the nature of the association between the hypothetical ancient constructive remains (of which he failed to provide any picture) and the present structures. Fortunately, coming from the same site there are preserved at least four capitals recently catalogued as late antiques by F. Fité.³⁹

Moreover, Fité had already noted some time ago that actually, the crypt of Santa Maria la Vella has some similarity with the old models of tripartite chevet used in the sixth and seventh centuries, bringing up parallels in El Bovalar and in Santa Maria del Priorat de Sant Genís de Rocafort,⁴⁰ even though is currently only accepted a high medieval chronology for this latter plant.⁴¹ Finally it is worth noting that in the parish church of the town is conserved a Roman sarcophagus, from mid-third century, that was used as a baptismal font in Sant Pere, as related by Father Villanueva in the early nineteenth century in

31. Adell and Fité 1994: 139. This example serves to show that many churches of late antique origins often do not appear in written records until three or four centuries after its foundation, as in the present case, either for lack of information or by the loss of it.

32. Bertran and Fité 1984-1985: 455.

33. Adell and Fité 1994: 139.

34. Bertran and Fité 1984-1985: 455; Adell and Fité 1994: 139-140.

35. To judge from the toponym of the place, surely this is the church of Santa Maria del Pla that appears in medieval documents and whose ruins were still visible in the nineteenth century, before the construction of the country house. We thank Cristina Masvidal, archaeologist and owner of the farm, her generosity and kindness to make us aware of this fascinating discovery and for opening the doors of her home.

36. Information provided by Òscar Trullàs during his lecture "Santa Maria del Pla" as a part of the *II Jornada d'estudis històrics i patrimonials de la Vall d'Àger i l'Alta Noguera* (Àger, July 2012).

37. In the decade of 90's of the twentieth century, Santa Maria la Vella was the subject of several archaeological excavations whose results, unfortunately, and as has become customary in Catalan archaeology, have never seen the light.

38. Pita 1973: 71.

39. Fité 2010: 142-143. They are two Corinthian capitals preserved in the Museu de Lleida Diocesà i Comarcal; a third capital, also Corinthian preserved in the parish of Sant Llorenç de Lleida, and a fourth the location of which is not indicated.

40. Fité 1992: 117.

41. Adell 1994: 117-124.



Figure 9: Church in the “site in height” (monastery?) of Sant Martí de les Tombetes (Nolasco 2003: 158).

his *Viage literario á las Iglesias de España*.⁴² Although the subject is not closed, the data presented allow us to think in a late antique origin for this emblematic Christian church of Àger.

Sant Martí de les Tombetes and *Santa Cecília dels Altimiris* are located flanking by the east and by the west respectively the Roman way (also a transhumant route) that runs south to north through the Montsec mountains coming from Àger and passing by the Coll d’Ares. Also we have documentary evidence from the eleventh century⁴³ of the path that communicating the Congost de Mont-Rebei with Mur castle, from west to east, going through both sites. The crossroads of the two routes was located where it is currently the village of Sant Esteve de la Sarga, roughly equidistant to both settlements.

Sant Martí de les Tombetes: A few kilometres north of Àger, on a hill of some 800 m, it is situated this location defined as “site in height”. Recently excavated, though not entirely, it consists on remnants of a fortification, a necropolis, a small church (figure 9) in a central position and other structures associated with a village. The site had its origins in the Iberian period, and would have been abandoned prior to the tenth or eleventh centuries.⁴⁴ To archaeologists the necropolis would be dated between fourth and ninth centuries and the church, though preserved under medieval buildings, would also trace its origins in Late Antiquity.⁴⁵ Among the most striking findings in this site, we note the discovery of tessellated fragments, made with very rough stone tiles which would allow documenting the presence of late Roman mosaic sepulchral slabs,⁴⁶ remarkable artistic expression in this context if we bear in mind that funerary mosaics in Late Antiquity, in *Hispania*, are more typical on urban areas. It is also important to emphasize that they are usually Christian, as evidenced by its iconography and epigraphic formulas. The closest case, for timeline and geographic coordinates, are the Christian sepulchral *laudias* dated on the second half of the fourth century or the beginning of fifth century

found in Coscojuela de Fantova (Huesca), about 50 kilometres west of Sant Martí de les Tombetes, in the place identified as the Roman nucleus of *Barbotum*.⁴⁷

Both regarding to Sant Martí de les Tombetes and to the neighbouring site of Santa Cecília dels Altimiris —on which we will discuss below— those who carried out the excavations highlighted some aspects: their location in the north side of Montsec d’Ares, in an elevated position over the valley, at the top of inaccessible rocky massifs and distant from the more suitable lands for cultivation. The only passable pathways in both sites are protected and controlled, either by an excavated moat either by a wall.⁴⁸ We think that these features might be in relation with livestock passage, and we will return to this question in the conclusions.

Santa Cecília dels Altimiris: This second “site in height” is located only 12 km in a straight line from Sant Martí de les Tombetes, in one of the buttresses of the north face of Montsec, atop a gorge (867 m) at the foot of which flows the Noguera Ribagorçana river. Excavated since 2004, it is defined as a settlement with more than 9,000 m², with origins in the sixth century and ending in the eighth century or early ninth.⁴⁹ In the centre of the site a church has been identified (figure 10), and around it, part of a wall, a cistern, several hut funds and a quadrangular area paved with *opus signinum* defined as a possible “space for collective use”.⁵⁰ The basilica, in all likelihood under the patronage of Saint Cecilia,⁵¹ has a single nave and semi-circular apse inscribed within a rectangle, and its outside measures are 13/14 × 6 m. The temple is built with stone blocks partially worked, tied up with a good mortar of lime and sand. The apse is oriented eastward, with a slight deviation. Inside, successive repairs of the lime and tile flooring are documented, as well as the presence of building fragments which may correspond to a triumphal arch, remnants of a chancel, and the base of an altar.⁵² The finding of an isolated burial on the outside of the south wall of the church led to think, at first, that there was located a late antique necropolis. But further investigations using the radiocarbon method allowed the dating of this burial in the eleventh century, when the basilica and the settlement had already long time been in disuse.⁵³

The parallels of this settlement with the nearby site of Sant Martí de les Tombetes⁵⁴ have been high-

42. Villanueva 1821: 129.

43. Nolasco 1997: 132.

44. Nolasco 2003: 147-158.

45. Sancho 2009: 275-287.

46. Nolasco 2003: 150-151.

47. Gómez 2002: 35-40.

48. Sancho 2009: 275-287.

49. Sancho 2010: 69; Alegría and Sancho 2010: 228, 233. The most archaic element located in the site is a coin of the Emperor Gratian, from the mint of Nicomedia (late fourth century), corresponding to a long-circulating type, while a remarkable diversity of late Roman pottery is widely represented throughout the site —Sancho 2010: 79-81—.

50. Sancho 2010: 73-76.

51. Alegría and Sancho 2010: 233. Authors connect, correctly in our opinion, the nearby hagionym of the passage of Santa Cecília with the patronage of the ruined church.

52. Sancho 2010: 77-78.

53. This information was released by Professor Marta Sancho during the aforementioned *II Jornada d’estudis històrics i patrimonials de la Vall d’Àger i l’Alta Noguera* (Àger, July 2012).

54. Alegría and Sancho 2010: 232. Only 12 kilometres away in a straight line.

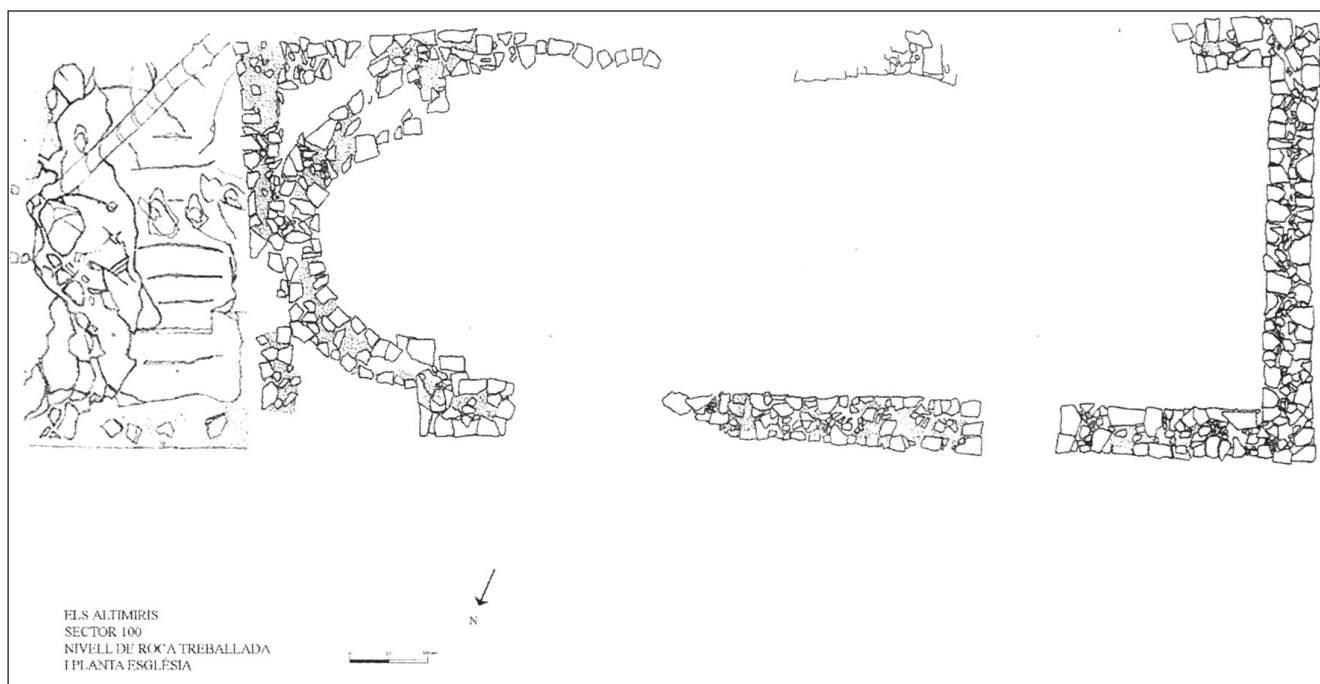


Figure 10: Church in the “site in height” (monastery?) of Santa Cecília dels Altimiris (Alegria and Sancho 2010: 224).

lighted and it has been proposed —rightly in our view— the likely identification of both deposits with hermit-cenobitic communities,⁵⁵ on the basis (among other arguments) of the contrast of the construction of a stone church with the austere hut funds documented; *id est*, it is not reasonable to assume that a secular peasant community, living poor lifestyle in an isolated and shadowy location, spend a significant part of their resources building a stone basilica in the central position of the habitat. This dichotomy between austerity and greatness is shocking unless, of course, if we are facing a monastic community. If that is the case, all arguments put forward make sense. Something similar might be argued for Sant Martí de les Tombetes. We point, too, that the cult of Saint Cecilia is documented in several high medieval monasteries of the Catalan area.⁵⁶

Following this line of argument, and to provide further elements of reflection and debate, it seems appropriate to bring up an interesting bit of text of M. Sancho: “observamos que los dos yacimientos que

55. Sancho 2010: 83-85, 87.

56. The worship of Saint Cecilia, martyred during the first half of the third century and regarded as the most popular of the martyrs of Rome with Saint Agnes, hatched with the composition of her *passio* in the late fifth century and reaches the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the sixth century —García 1966: 167-169—. From the data we know so far, it appears that in the easternmost area of late antique *Tarraconensis* the impact of this avocation was limited since except in Altimiris, we just document (and not entirely certain) in the disappeared church of Santa Cecília, extramural of *Illuro* (Mataró) —Sales 2012: 190—, and perhaps also in the chapel of Torreblanca (Ponts) which is discussed above, both sites without any known indication of monastic character. However, from ninth and tenth centuries several monasteries under the patronage of Saint Cecilia are well documented, for example, in Montserrat or in Urgell.

presentamos [the author is referring to Altimiris and Tombetes] nos indican una sólida presencia de la iglesia desde el mismo momento de su fundación. El templo se encuentra ubicado en el centro del poblado y a su alrededor se vertebra un hábitat [...]. Si comparamos esta realidad con las de los asentamientos del período posterior (s. x-xi), nos damos cuenta que en su mayoría la iglesia se encuentra ubicada fuera del núcleo de hábitat, hecho que se ha interpretado (Bolòs, 2004) como un retraso de la presencia de la institución respecto de la fundación del asentamiento”.⁵⁷ Regarding this working hypothesis and on the basis of the new data presented, we propose a different interpretation, and we wonder whether this centrality of the church in Late Antiquity sites *versus* the eccentricity of medieval churches in the villages could be explained from a different perspective: not from chronology, but rather from religiosity. That is, given that in medieval times actually there were still a certain kind of villages with a church in the central position —that is, the monasteries— so why do not think that Els Altimiris and Tombetes are also monasteries, as in fact have already suggested those who excavated these sites and as we also believe? In summary, for the rural settlement cases we are studying and with the data we have been able to consider, we do not recognise any chronological evolution of religious topography: in any case, and as long as we understand, there are monasteries with central church on the one hand, secular settlement nuclei with eccentric church on the other, both in Late Antiquity and —so much better documented— in the Middle Ages.

57. Sancho 2009: 284.

Embassament de Sant Antoni: This site is the northernmost of our list, and nowadays is covered by the waters of a dam. In 1945, following a severe drought, the reservoir was almost dry,⁵⁸ leaving exposed a late antique necropolis and other associated structures.⁵⁹ The discovery took place in the month of February, and spring rains again covered the site, which could not come to be excavated at that time.⁶⁰ During his visit to the place, Maluquer de Motes noted the presence of several tombs —he do not specify how many— which “aparecían en las inmediaciones de restos de un edificio antiguo indeterminado y como rodeándolo”.⁶¹ They presented two different types: there was a group of slab tombs and sepulchres which combined *tegulae* and slabs.⁶² The absolute lack of archaeological material seems to suggest that *loculi* contained no grave goods.

These are the only witnessed descriptive details, which, despite being minimal, are significant, since the association of the tombs (whose types range from the third to the eighth centuries) with the remains of an ancient building is of the most great interest, because, as Maluquer de Motes himself stated: “la mención de los restos de un edificio y la existencia de sepulturas a su alrededor nos hace creer que se trata de una necrópolis paleocristiana y que los restos del edificio corresponderían a una iglesia, quizá una basílica”.⁶³ Moreover, assuming that indeed the remains of the building could belong to a late antique church, it is conceivable to think in a Christian building and in a Christian necropolis for a rural settlement, then being *Aeso* the Roman nearest nucleus. Not surprisingly, this necropolis is located next to the Roman road running from *Ilerda* to the Pyrenees through *Aeso* and following the course of Noguera Pallaresa river, also coinciding with another of the transhumant routes that would communicate *Ilerda* territory with the territory of *Vrgellum*.⁶⁴

Results and some conclusions

The overview of the map we have drawn up —with the precise location of every point showing signs of early Christianity in the study area— reveals a number of features in common for the dealt sites which leads us to pose different issues and an interpretative overall hypothesis.

Firstly a gap is evident in the easternmost part of the pre-Pyrenees of Lleida, that is, it appears that there is virtually no premedieval Christian life in pre-Pyrenean basin of the river Segre as compared

with Noguera Pallaresa, the basin of which seems to concentrate the majority of known sites. We have no doubt that, once again, we are facing a problem of lack of archaeological surveys and shortfall in knowing and identifying specifically early Christian sites.

With regards to the known sites themselves, is remarkable the possible or likely monastic character radiating out from a large part of them, as has been pointed when it has been the case. Such was the case, with a certain probability, of Santa Cecília dels Altimiris and Sant Martí de les Tombetes and possibly in Morulls, and we cannot rule out a similar nature for a site as large and important as Santa Coloma d'Àger along with Santa Maria del Pla. In all other sites, the meagre data known do not allow major approaches, but it is worth noting the dedication to Saint Cecilia for the church in Torreblanca, as we have seen this patronage is often linked to monastic world. However, for the necropolis of the *Embassament de Sant Antoni* we cannot extrapolate this argument, because despite being Saint Anthony a patron of monasticism, this hagiotoponym, in the location concerning us, it seems to come from a Romanesque church in the area which, originally, was under the avocation of Saint Mary and Saint John, being dedicated to Saint Anthony only from the nineteenth century.⁶⁵

These signs of primitive monasticism do not appear strange to us, since written sources of the surrounding territories documented them at some length: in Asán, in the neighbouring Aragon Pyrenees, a monastery founded by Felix evangelised the area through the establishment of other monasteries.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the Council of *Ilerda*, held in 546, mirrored so well the problems that occurred because of the many monasteries that had multiplied, some of which are penalised by the canons for escaping Episcopal authority.⁶⁷ Literature, then, draws a scenery of proliferating monasteries, panorama certainly far from what archaeology has offered us so far.

Nevertheless, there is a third way that allows us to suggest new lines of work for the case of monasteries and Episcopal sees in the current Lleida region: a possible relationship (or at least, topographic coincidence) of our sites with some of the traditional or historical transhumant routes, and in turn, the proven relationship of these livestock routes with the later medieval monasteries (figure 11). Indeed, if we look at the general map of historic transhumance in Catalonia developed in 1958 by Joan Vilà i Valentí, it appears that the westernmost transhumant axis is aligned

58. The dam was built between 1913 and 1915.

59. Maluquer de Motes 1947-1948: 293.

60. Maluquer de Motes 1947-1948: 294. There have been no more archaeological interventions in the site until 1998. The 1998 surveys have encompassed a limited scope and it has not appeared any data on the Late Antiquity that could be useful to our research. We thank Eva Solanes for updating this information.

61. Maluquer de Motes 1947-1948: 294.

62. For Maluquer de Motes, these *tegulae* “no dejan lugar a dudas sobre su carácter romano [...] es el tipo normal de *tégula plana*” —Maluquer de Motes 1947-48: 295—.

63. Maluquer de Motes 1947-1948: 295.

64. Vilà 1973: 88-89.

65. Adell and Benito 1993: 470-471.

66. Sales 2012: 86-87 (notes 482 and 483).

67. “De monachis uero id obseruari placuit quod synodus Agatensis uel Aurelianensis noscitur decreuisse; hoc tantummodo adiciendum, ut pro ecclesiae utilitate quos episcopus probauerit, in clericatus officio cum abbatibus uoluntate debeant ordinari. Ea uero quae in iure monasterii de facultatibus offeruntur, in nullo diocesana lege ab episcopis contingantur. Si autem ex laicis quisquam a se factam basilicam consecrari desiderat, nequaquam sub monasterii specie, ubi congregatio non colligitur uel regula ab episcopo non constituitur, eam a diocesana lege audeat segregare” —*Conc. Ilerd.*, 3—. About this *concilio*, see also Vilella in process.

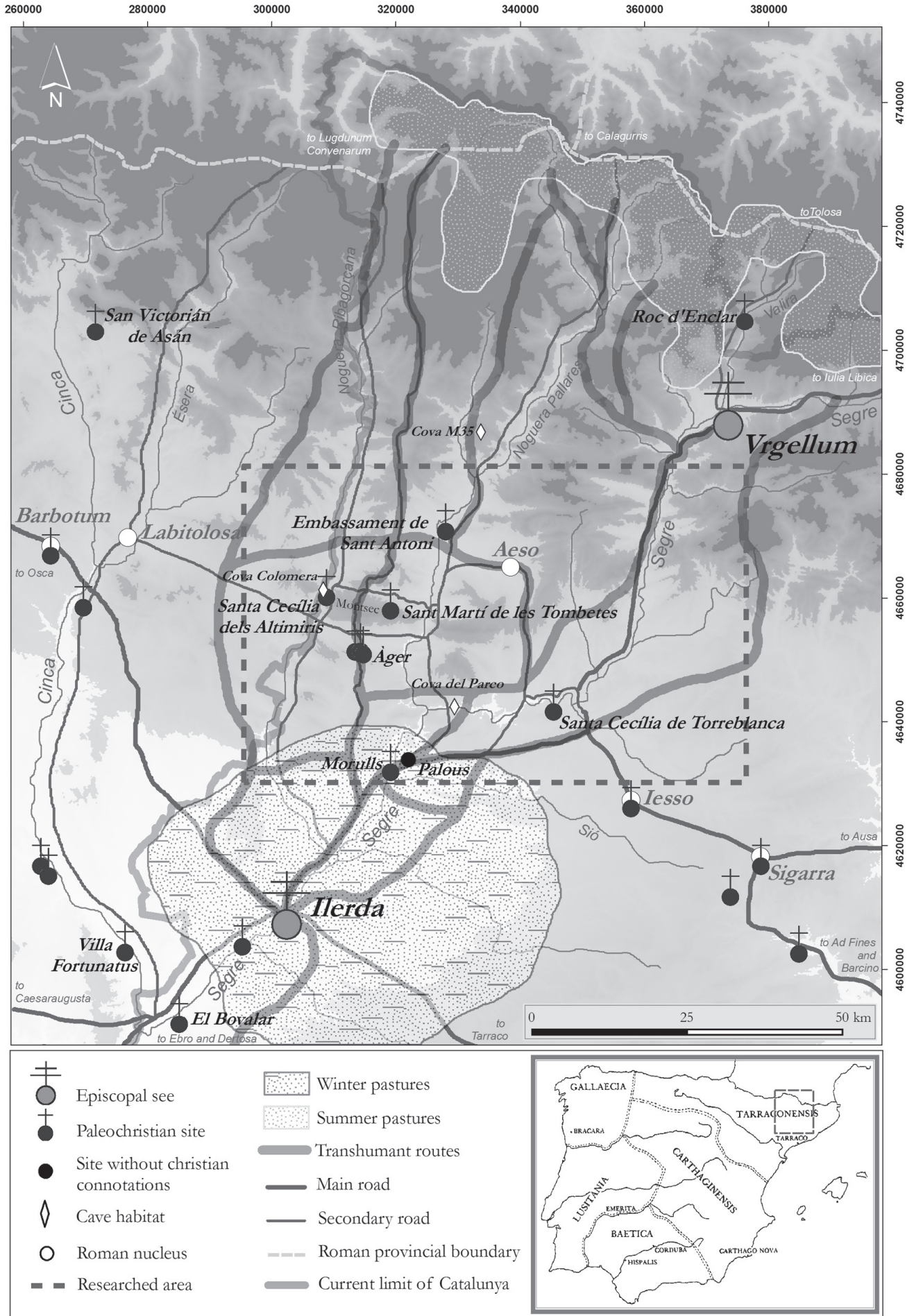


Figure 11. Location of the studied paleochristian sites with respect to the pasture zones and the historic transhumant routes documented in the sphere of influence of the late antique Episcopalian sees of *Ilerda* and *Vrgellum*.

with our sites, or whatever is the same, it is in line with the river Noguera Pallaresa. Only Santa Cecília de Torreblanca escapes from this line, although it remains significantly positioned on the axis of another transhumant route. Actually, if we look at the detail of these routes on the most updated map showing all the historic branches,⁶⁸ and we superimpose the studied sites, the result, to our mind, is very telling: all the settlements we have detected and showing signs of primitive Christianity are located very close to (when not literally on top on) of one of the branches of traditional transhumance axes. Thus, it makes sense and gets explained that position on these livestock axes, which went down from the summer pastures of the high Pyrenees to the winter pastures on the plain, where the see of *Ilerda* and the likely monastery of El Bovalar were located. Regarding Els Altimiris it is more than meaningful that in the passage of Santa Cecília there are two ways converging, one of which coming from the pasture area located on the top of the mountains of El Montsec d'Ares.⁶⁹ These grasslands, directly connected with Els Altimiris very likely would have meant a stop on the way for the seasonal movements of the mentioned transhumant herds. From this line of argument, the two Episcopal sees flanking the territory —*Ilerda* and *Vrgellum*— would play their role, and in fact they are placed at the beginning and at the end of the most western transhumance routes of Catalonia, controlling, as we have already said, the winter and the summer pastures. Maybe this fact might explain the legal birth of *Vrgellum* on the basis of the need to set a livestock checkpoint.

Reached this point it is necessary to make a brief parenthesis to explain the evolution of transhumance in the Iberian Peninsula: it was born during Prehistory, had great importance until the Romanization, when intensive livestock based on housing would replace in large part the millenary transhumance. Later, the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the gradual collapse of the economic system that had been occurring for some time represented a return to countless traditional economic activities, including transhumance. Actually, there has been a significant anthropic process of deforestation during Late Antiquity in the Catalan area, a phenomenon that has been put in connection with the recovery of livestock,⁷⁰ a resurgence which entailed the retrieval,

68. Trepát and Vilaseca 2010.

69. Sancho 2010: 69.

70. There are several studies in which the relationship between the results of the archaeological and paleoenvironmental data reveal a series of deforestation in the Northeast Hispanic landscape that relate to an important transhumant livestock development in Neolithic times, its rebound in Late Antiquity and its definitive expansion in medieval times. Pollen analysis of sediments accumulated in Pyrenean lakes has highlighted a first episode of conscious deforestation of medium and short entity, in order to enlarge the area of summer pastures already about 4,000 cal BP —García and Valero 1996-1997: 38-39—. Thereafter in Late Antiquity and for the same area, other proposals indicate the increasing of the fires, compared to the Roman period, in order to gain again open spaces for pasture —Gurt and Palet 2001: 300-328; Pélachs and Soriano

recovery or the simply empowerment of some of the pre- and protohistoric transhumant routes, certainly adding and amortizing the economic and administrative substrate structured by the Romans, starting from the geostrategic network of communications bequeathed to Hispanic territory by the Romans, perhaps including new axes, perhaps ignoring others.⁷¹

We close this parenthesis to verify that the set of data that tell us about early Christianity in the Pyrenees of Lleida allows us drawing a circle around the economic activity of livestock. That is: the first documented Christianity in this area appears linked to the resurgence of transhumant herds which traced axes between the winter pastures of the plains and the summer pastures of high mountains, pastures geographically controlled (probably also economically) by the respective Episcopal sees, *Ilerda* and *Vrgellum*. These sees —data so permit to suggest— would have had a series of monasteries located in highly strategic points (El Bovalar, Els Altimiris and Tombetes, for instance), dominating key nodes of Roman roads encompassing provincial and interprovincial scope which, in Late Antiquity overlapped the main transhumant routes linking the winter pastures of the *Ilerda* plains with the mountain summer pastures of *Vrgellum*. The episcopates would benefit from the help of these monasteries in the management and control throughout the territory of such economic activity, whereas the monasteries would benefit from their own resources and raw materials provided by the livestock. It comes to our mind, by way of example, the sheep and goat skin used for the preparation of parchment, and we can think of Palous necropolis and the probable monastery of El Bovalar, both places where they have found tools for producing parchment. And, from here, there are no greater arguments needed for linking parchment with writing, writing with *scriptorium*-library and *scriptorium*-library with monastery, where there was produced the most of the written documentation in the Iberian Peninsula during the Visigothic centuries.

2003: 158; Riera *et al.* 2009: 270—. Finally geomorphological studies of the erosive processes in the peninsular northeast state that deforestation were carried out on a massive scale from 1000 —García and Valero 1996-1997: 40-41— precisely parallel to the expansion of monastic orders, especially the Benedictines and Cistercians, who, according to written documentation, and already from the tenth century, based their economic system in transhumance and the control of its routes —Vilà 1973: 87-90—.

71. In his studies of the historical origin of the livestock trails controlled by the Mesta, Joaquín Gómez-Pantoja offers several examples of transit through them already in Roman times concluding that: “No se sabe con seguridad la antigüedad de las grandes cañadas delimitadas por el Honrado Concejo y reconocidas periódicamente por sus visitantes, ni si éstas vienen a coincidir con la red viaria tradicional o si los pastores mesteños acabaron fijando rutas paralelas a las habituales. Considero muy probable que, debido a los poderes jurisdiccionales y de supervisión otorgados a la Mesta, las cañadas pastorales que conocemos resultarían de una acomodación de la red viaria tradicional” —Gómez-Pantoja 1995: 502—. We have recently approached from a similar perspective the study of a transhumant route of possible prehistoric origin with high points of use in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, in relation to the ancient road network documented around the Roman town of *Sigarra* —Salazar 2012: 55-82—.

As a counterpoint to this argument, we will leave merely pointed the presence of another type of site which, in one way or another, and for its chronology, would be related to the foregoing: in cave habitats, documented significantly from fourth-fifth century, just prior to the first christianisation detected on the area. These caves, according to the archaeologists that excavated them, can be related with grazing, and in the pre-Pyrenees of Lleida are specified in the caves named Cova Colomera and Cova M-35.⁷² Some have prehistoric substrate, no odd thing if we think about how old transhumant routes are. The case is whether the occupants were shepherds, as the data seem to suggest, and if this is the case we wonder if they were another cog in the wheel controlled by Episcopal sees and monasteries, as it seems to be likely from the sixth-seventh centuries.

We have already said that the preserved Visigothic texts illustrate monastic activity the Pyrenean and pre-Pyrenean area. In these sources appear as well a number of residential buildings of Church members, among which they appear as remarkable to us the so called *pratis* and *pasuis*. We are talking again of the *donatio* that the monk Vicente de Asán performed in favour of the see of *Oscá* (Huesca) in the mid-sixth century (551), a document that specifies that some of these *pasuis* (pastures) are “summer pastures”,⁷³ explanation which would implies that there were also winter pastures, and, therefore, the link between the two types of grasslands: transhumant axes. The document reveals very clearly how the Church is undergoing a process of acquisition of rural properties, in this case those belonging to a member of an important monastery who will end up being bishop of *Oscá*. We believe that there is no more telling example to illustrate this perfect symbiosis of episcopates, monasteries and rural world. Remember that a few years earlier (in 546) the Council of *Ilerda* anathematized those monasteries operating as free riders, hence beyond the control of the new productive paradigms, or what is the same, beyond the Church taxes.

Therefore, our archaeological map would be reflecting the origins of the economic stranglehold exercised by the church on some transhumant routes, a situation which, once through the subsequent Muslim invasion would have been strongly resumed (we must bear in mind that Muslim invasion would have involved in our area a certain break on the routes linking Pyrenean pastures and those on the plain, and that perhaps would explain the abandonment of some of our sites, as they would lose their function as a part of the system). This situation is expressed, among other ways, in the form of land tenure in the area by many Catalan medieval monasteries, to the point that the disentailments of the mid-nineteenth century in the Lleida region show, more than eloquently, the magnitude of this reality: a high percentage of pasture land, at a so recent time of our history, was still in the hands of the Church.

72. Oms *et al.* 2008; Pérez *et al.* 2012. Maybe also the Cova del Parco, where two Visigothic coins have been found —oral information given by M. Angels Petit—.

73. Vincentius Osc., *Donatio*, fol. 1, col. 1, 31, 34.

Indeed, in Catalonia, from the tenth century, we have a remarkable documentary collection about this extremely important transhumant livestock activity.⁷⁴ The role played by the great monasteries and their involvement in the process of repopulation or shaping of the territory that allowed the union of the so called Catalunya Vella (the northernmost and hence rich in summer pastures) and Catalunya Nova (the southernmost and rich in winter pastures) will lead to the consolidation of a network of livestock routes, much of which can be traced, quite possibly, up to Prehistory.⁷⁵

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74. Fortunately we have collections of documents that provide numerous evidence on the management of Pyrenean summer pastures possessed both by the episcopates and monastic orders, Benedictine (monastery of Santa Maria de Ripoll) and Cistercian (monastery of Santes Creus) in the geographic area we analyse here. See Baraut 1978; Chesé 2011; Papell 2005. These documentary collections have been studied in relation to transhumant livestock and from a historical perspective in Riu 1961; Bolòs 1999-2000; Papell 1999-2000; Riera 2004.

75. This text, originally written in Spanish, has been translated to English by Sandra Núñez Fernández.

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