

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN BASILICAN COMPLEX OF TORRE DE PALMA (MONFORTE, ALTO ALENTEJO, PORTUGAL)

*Stephanie J. Maloney
Allen R. Hite Art Institute
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky, U.S.A.*

In September 1955 João Lino da Silva wrote to Manuel Heleno, director of the excavations then in progress, to describe the substantial constructions being uncovered around the remains of the so-called «Ermidas» located on the north side of the extensive Roman villa known as Torre de Palma. Once excavation of the area of the «Ermidas» was complete, an entire Christian complex had been uncovered (figure 1).

Enclosed within a precinct wall is a large church consisting of two double-apsed structures placed end to end with an elaborate baptistry projecting from the south side, as well as an enigmatic apsidal structure to the east. Outside the precinct wall are two cemeteries, one to the northwest containing two mausolea and numerous tombs, and a second smaller one to the southwest which partially occupies the site of an earlier Roman building.

Manuel Heleno never published the church although he did mention it and include drawings of the large baptismal font in his publication of the villa.¹ In fact, this important monument remained virtually unknown until Pedro de Palol published an unofficial plan of the church in 1967.²

Additional work was done on the church by Fernando de Almeida who revealed the first official plan of the church at the VIII Congreso Internacional de Arqueología Cristiana in Barcelona in 1969.³ He

subsequently published a preliminary discussion of his investigations⁴ but was unable to publish a more extensive excavation report before his death. Relying upon Almeida's plan and careful observation of the surviving remains, Thilo Ulbert, in his monograph on the double-apsed churches in the Iberian peninsula, provides a thorough discussion and thoughtful interpretation of the church⁵ but, because of the lack of firm archaeological data, had to rely on stylistic evidence for dating and other elements in his discussion.

Theories propounded by the various authors concerning the basilica of Torre de Palma remained to be confirmed and important questions remained to be answered, including: 1) What was the original form of the basilica? 2) How many phases of construction are represented in the building? 3) What is the date of the first phase of construction and of subsequent alterations to the building? Such information is essential if one is to

4. ALMEIDA, F. DE., 1972-74. Torre de Palma (Portugal), a basílica paleocristã e visigótica, *Archivo Español de Arqueología*, 45-47, pp. 103-12.

5. ULBERT, T., 1978. *Frühchristliche Basiliken mit Doppellapsiden auf der iberischen Halbinsel*, Deutsches archäologisches Institut, Archäologische Forschungen, Band 5 (Berlin: Gebr. MANN VERLAG), pp. 92-105. The church has also been discussed by DUVAL, N., *Les Églises Africaines à deux absides*, II (Paris: E. de Bollard, 1973), pp. 391-393; GÓMEZ-MOREN, M., 1966. Primicias del arte cristiano español, *Archivo Español de Arte*, 154-155, p. 116; SCHLUNK, H.; HAUSCHILD, T. 1978. *Hispania Antiqua*, (Mainz am Rhein: VERLAG PHILIPP VON ZABERN), *passim*, esp. pp. 172-176; GEAN-GERARD GORGES, 1979. *Les Villas Hispano-Romaines*, (Paris: Centre Pierre Paris), pp. 145 and 465-66; MALONEY, S., 1980. Early Christian Double-Apsed Churches in Iberia: Some Considerations, *Art History*, 3, pp. 129-143, *passim*.

1. HELENO, M., 1962. A villa lusitano-romano de Torre de Palma (Monforte). *O Arqueólogo Português*, séries 2, 4, pp. 313-338.

2. PALOL, P. DE, 1967. *Arqueología Cristiana de la España Romana* (Madrid: CISC), p. 80, fig. 84.

3. ALMEIDA F. DE; MARTINS DE MATOS, J.L., 1972. *Actas del VIII Congreso Internacional de Arqueología Cristiana*, Barcelona 1969, p. 241.

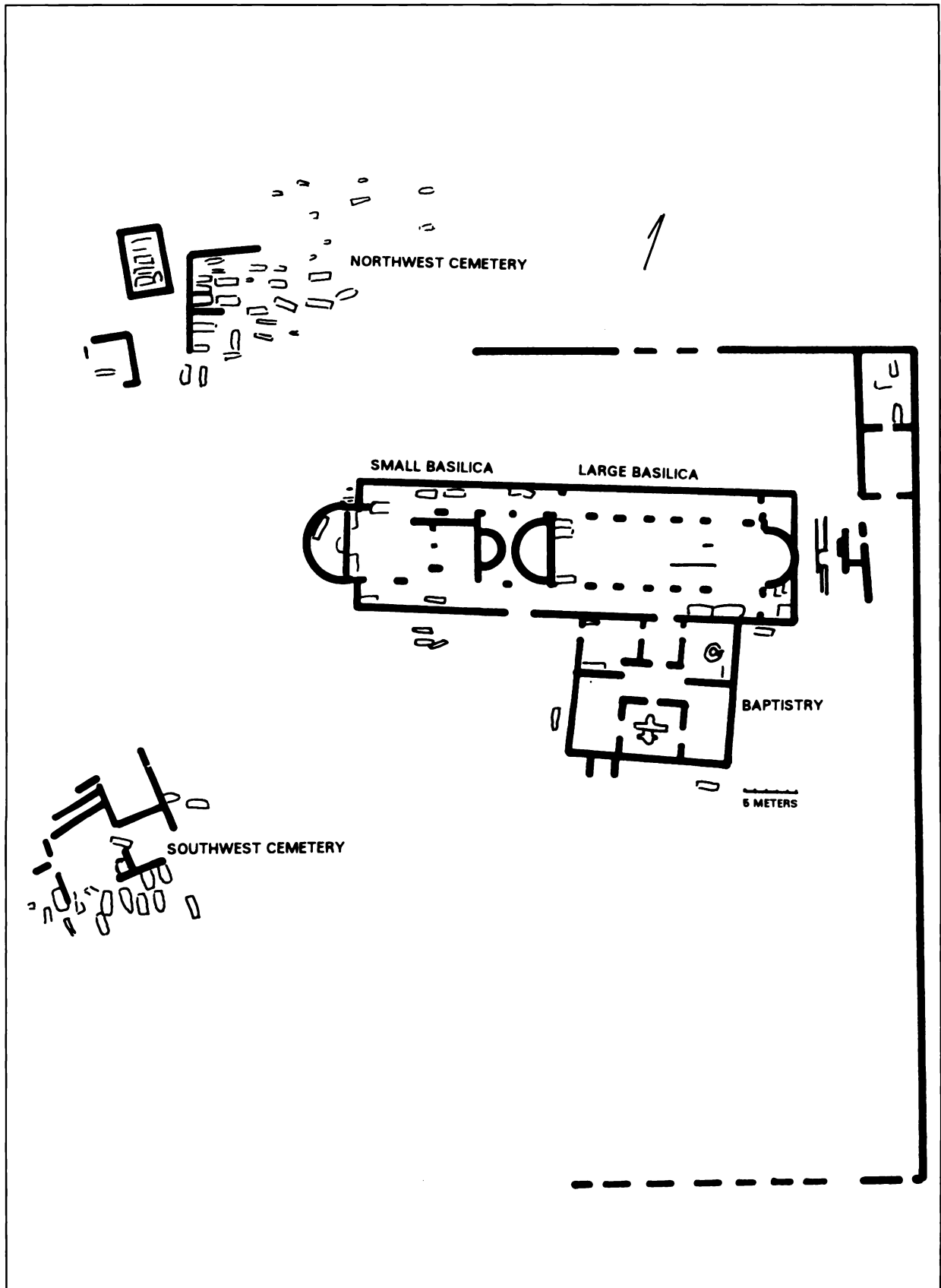


Figure 1. The Early Christian complex of Torre de Palma.

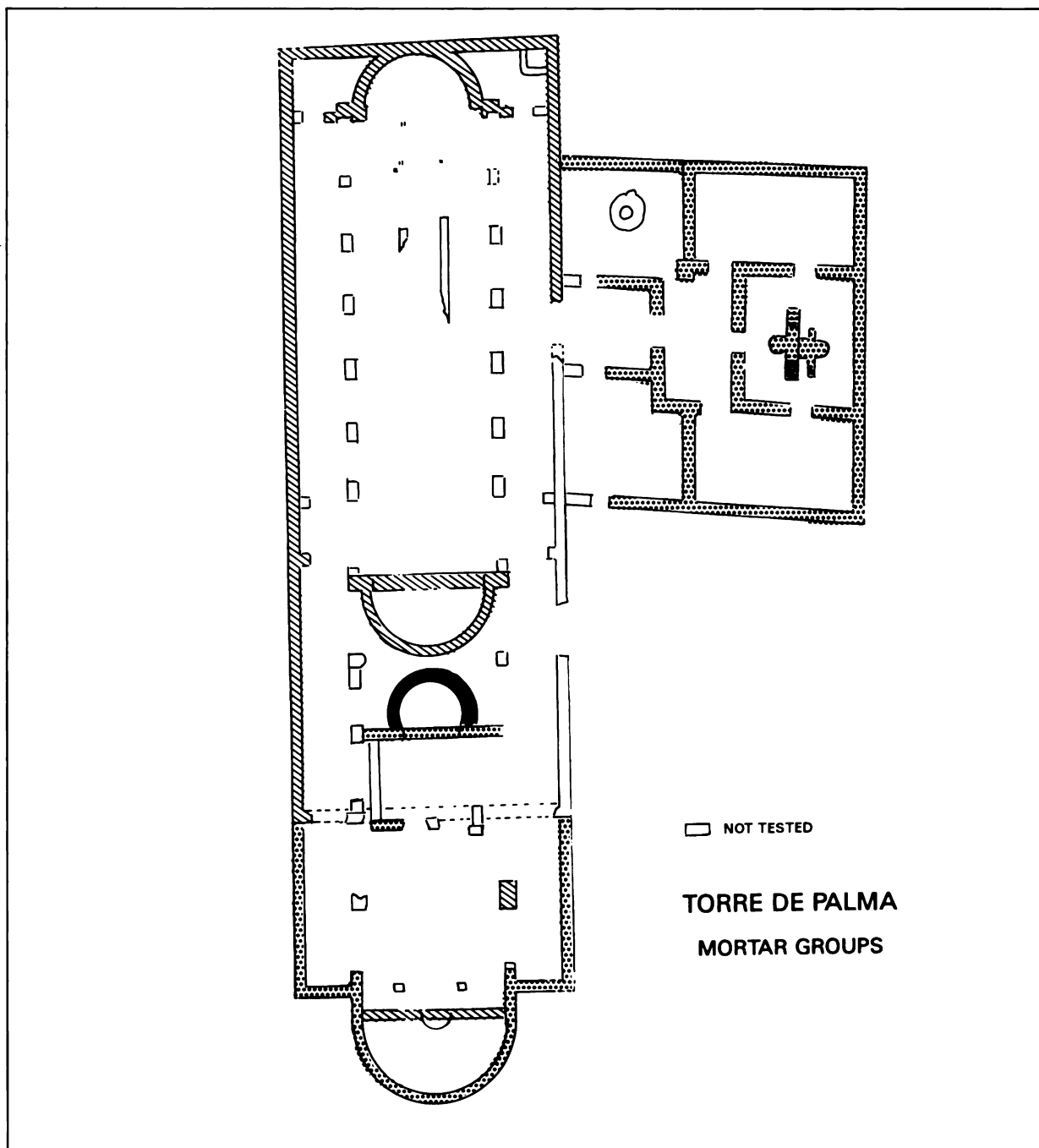


Figure 2. Areas of the basilica with similar mortars.

place the church of Torre de Palma into its appropriate place in relation to other double-apsed churches in Iberia (Casa Herrera, El Germe, San Pedro de Alcantara and perhaps Alconetar) and North Africa. In order to answer these and other questions, a team of archeologists and other specialists from the University of Louisville (Kentucky, U.S.A.) undertook re-excavation of the Christian complex at Torre de Palma between 1983 and 1986.⁶

6. The project was conducted with the cooperation of archaeologists from the Serviço Regional de Arqueologia, Região do Sul and the University of Évora, and with the help of the Câmara Municipal de Monforte and the Cooperativa de Torre de Palma. Funding for the project was provided by the United States National Endowment for the Humanities, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the University of Louisville, and from private donors.

Little documentation of this complex exists from previous excavations. Because the complex, exposed to the weather for more than a generation, was gradually being destroyed by natural forces, it seemed urgent to provide complete documentation of the extant remains. In order to do this the entire complex was thoroughly cleaned, drawn, and photographed. In addition, limited laboratory testing, confined to the analysis of mortar samples taken from walls in various parts of the church and baptistry (figure 2), was undertaken.⁷ Results of this analysis have proved helpful in determining those parts of the complex which belong to the same phase of construction and, in most cases, have confirmed judgments made on the basis of other archaeological evidence.

The second phase of the re-investigation of this monument involved the excavation of test trenches in various parts of the complex in order to recover whatever limited stratigraphic information was available from areas not already taken down to bedrock. As a result of these investigations five major phases have been identified, one pre-Christian and four Christian. The relative chronology for most of the site is clear and dates can be assigned to the first and fourth Christian phases on the basis of datable artifacts.

For convenience in discussing this monument, the eastern double-apsed structure is called the Large Basilica and the western one the Small Basilica. Apses are numbered from one in the east to four in the west.

The earliest structures on the site belong to the pre-Christian era. Excavation of squares in the east end of the Large Basilica revealed the foundations of an earlier building. These foundations, which formed three uneven spaces, were constructed by digging a trench into the bedrock and filling it with large uncut stones without mortar. This foundation was found to cross the full width of the church and to form the foundation for the east end of the Large Basilica (figure 3). Unfortunately, no materials were found associated with this foundation, making dating impossible.⁸ During the earlier excavations of the villa an altar dedicated to Mars was found,⁹ leading Heleno and other scholars to name a large building to the southeast of the

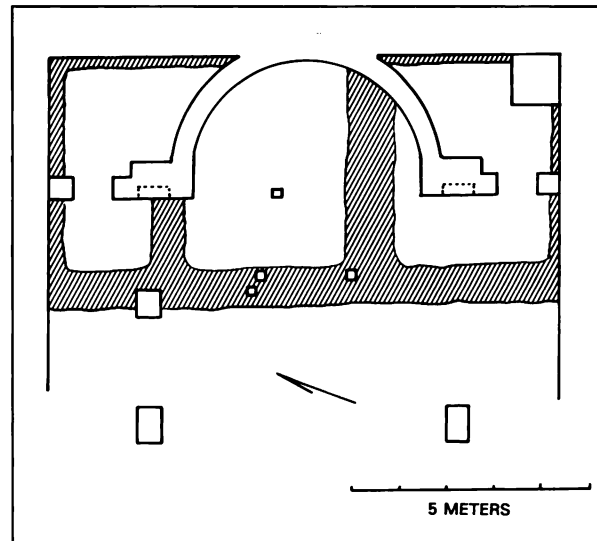


Figure 3. The foundation of the older building beneath the east end of the basilica.

church the Temple of Mars. Since that building appears to be domestic rather than religious, it is more probable the building underlying the east end of the Large Basilica was actually that temple. The very strong foundations suggest the building was substantial and it may have been the source of the granite blocks now found at the corners and intermittently in the walls of the basilica.

Apse 3 is the most enigmatic structure within the entire basilican complex. The mortar in its walls is the strongest of those tested and its foundation, consisting of a series of ashlar blocks partially set into the bedrock, is unique.¹⁰

The west ends of the apse wall are irregular and appear to have been broken off before the wall which passes in front of the apse was added. Analysis of the mortars in these two walls indicate entirely different recipes were used. The mortar in the apse wall is the strongest found while that in the wall to the west is among the weakest, clearly suggesting the two are not contemporary. Study of materials in the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia e Etnologia suggests the presence of a Roman cemetery in the area of the church and it is possible Apse 3 was originally a small round mausoleum which was retained when the basilica was built and which was later modified to form the apse of a small chapel.

7. Analysis of mortars was done under the direction of Dr. K. Lal Gauri at the geological laboratories of the University of Louisville.

8. Re-excavation of the villa has been underway since 1987. To date, no buildings with foundations dug into the bedrock have been identified. Consequently it is not even possible to associate this building with a particular phase in the villa.

9. For an illustration of this altar see Heleno, Est. xxvii.

10. As with the foundation of the earlier building beneath the east end, no foundations similar to those of Apse 3 have yet been found in the villa.

The first Christian phase (phase 1) consists of the Large Basilica, a narthex in which the round mausoleum stood, and perhaps a small atrium (figure 4). The orientation of the church, from northeast to southwest, was determined by that of the older building beneath its head.

Apse 1, the floor of which was 0.10-0.15 meters above the original floor in the nave,¹¹ was paved with white marble slabs set into a very hard white cement above a bed of small flat stones set in pink plaster. The aisles and nave, including the area immediately in front of the altar, were paved throughout with fine white plaster. Four marble posts stand upright in front of Apse 1. One stands on the chord of the apse. A second post, which once stood on that same line to the south, is visible in a photograph in Almeida's publication even though it is not shown on his plan. Three other posts stand 1.85 to 2 meters to the west. Two of those post are held in place by rubble and mortar. In contrast, the third, on the northwest, was simply placed in a hole in the ground. Because its placement is so different from that of its neighbor, this post may not belong to the first phase of the basilica. No evidence for a matching post on the southwest was found. All four of the surviving posts were either slotted or notched, probably to secure some kind of railing. The cuts in the two well-secured posts in front of the apse are on the west side, while those in the second northwest post and in the north post on the chord of the apse are on the north.

The floor of Apse 2 was raised about 0.45 meters above the floor of the nave and was also paved with white plaster. Three semi-circular steps decorated with incised geometric designs provided access to Apse 2. Aisles were separated from the nave by six free-standing and probably two engaged columns on each side. Surviving evidence suggests short walls projected eastward on each side of Apse 2, thus completing the line of the arcade. Existing column bases are all different and appear to have been taken from then-abandoned structures in the villa. They rest on reused granite blocks above bedrock.

Small chambers flank Apse 1 on the north and south. The northern chamber, which probably served as a sacristy, has no special architectural features. A small, nearly square baptismal font is

11. The remains of the original white plaster floor in the nave are too irregular to permit a precise determination of its original level.

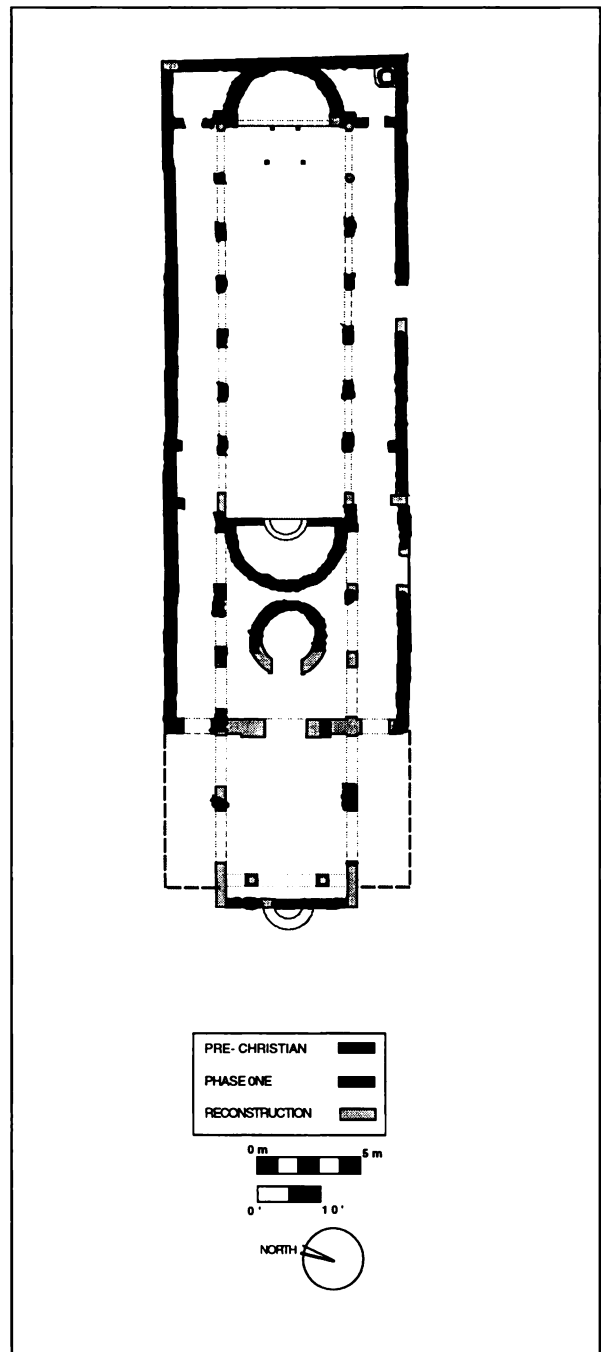


Figure 4. Christian Phase I.

located in the southeast corner of the south chamber. This font clearly belongs to the original phase of the basilica as fragments of the white plaster floor pass over its edges and the plaster on the inside of the font is integral with the plaster on the walls above it.

All archaeological evidence points to the contemporaneity of Apse 1 and Apse 2. The construction of the well-mortared walls is identical in

appearance, mortar recipes are nearly identical,¹² and similar layers of flat stones just above the footings in Apse 2 and below the marble floor in Apse 1 are at the same elevation.

The basilica was preceded on the west by a large narthex which was also aisled. Still evident turns in the north and south walls and the foundation of the west wall itself, which survives in fragmentary condition for the entire width of the building, marks its western limit.

The basilica was entered through doors on either side of Apse 2 and one opening into the center of the south aisle. There was a door, the threshold of which is still in place, on the south side of the narthex. Although there is no conclusive evidence for the existence of doors on the west side of the narthex, it is probable there was at least a central doorway on that side and possibly smaller doors opening into each aisle.

Mortar samples taken from a pier or column base to the west of the narthex and from the wall closing off the east side of Apse 4 suggest there was an additional extension of the church to the west. A matching base is partially preserved on the north side and a third is clearly visible running beneath the southeast wall of Apse 4.¹³ This possibility is further supported by the fact that the semi-circular steps leading up into Apse 4 appear to have been built originally as steps leading up from west to east. In addition, two bases in front of Apse 4, now partially covered by later tombs, appear to belong to this phase. It is clear the surviving walls of the west end of this building do not belong to this phase as they are much less well-constructed and the small amount of mortar used in them is inferior to that in the Large Basilica and its narthex. Nothing survives which provides information about the outer walls of the atrium.

The next phase of construction (phase 2) includes the addition of a large baptistery complex on to the south side of the basilica and some remodeling of the Large Basilica (figure 5). The baptistery complex, which could be entered from the south aisle of the Large Basilica or from outside the church, includes seven rooms, one of which may have originally been open on the east side. The actual baptistery contains a complex cruciform

font lined with gray and white marble, and preserves evidence of pink, gray, and white marble floors and gray and white marble revetment. Although very little of the marble floor survives the pattern of the slabs is clearly visible in the remaining cement base.

This coloristic use of marble is similar to that found in a marble pavement which overlies the white plaster floor in front of Apse 1 and that floor was probably laid about the same time the baptistery was built, the two perhaps forming parts of a single enlargement and remodeling project. Two of the rooms in the baptistery have brick floors and a similar floor overlies the white plaster floor in the aisles of the Large Basilica. Broken tile and ceramics were used to patch holes and level sections where the plaster floor had slumped in both the chancel area and the aisles before the new floors were laid.

During this phase the stairway in Apse 2 was closed, the apse was repaved with *opus signinum*, and the floor in front of the apse was raised and similarly paved. Also belonging to this phase are the two fragmentary walls which occupy part of the east end of the nave of the Large Basilica. The southern of these two walls clearly passes above the original white plaster floor. The walls were in place, however, when the brick floor to the south was laid. Although there is no archaeological evidence for the continuation of these walls to the west, it is possible they did in fact exist, thus forming a *solea* or enclosed walkway connecting the eastern and western apses. Such a solution would create an arrangement similar to that at Casa Herrera where it belongs to the original construction (figure 6).

Determining the arrangement of the sanctuary is difficult; although several solutions are possible none are entirely borne out by the archaeological evidence. The posts in front of Apse 1 have sometimes been interpreted as the legs of the altar. Such an interpretation is possible although an altar approximately two meters square would be overlarge for a church of this size. Such a solution would also be unique among Iberian churches where the altar is invariably in the apse.

A second possibility, also otherwise unknown in Iberian churches, is that the existing posts supported a baldacchino or ciborium over a smaller altar. Such arrangements are common in Aegean churches such as Mastichari on the island of Cos and in important Roman churches such as St. Peter's where the baldacchino is in exactly the position suggested for Torre de Palma. Ciboria are

12. Comparing all cementing agents/clastics, Apse 1 yields 52%/48% while Apse 2 yields 51%/49%. Comparing acid soluble/water soluble cementing agents, the results are 45%/9% and 41%/10%, respectively.

13. There is probably a base beneath the northeast wall as well but a tomb made of large granite blocks makes it impossible to confirm that base's existence.

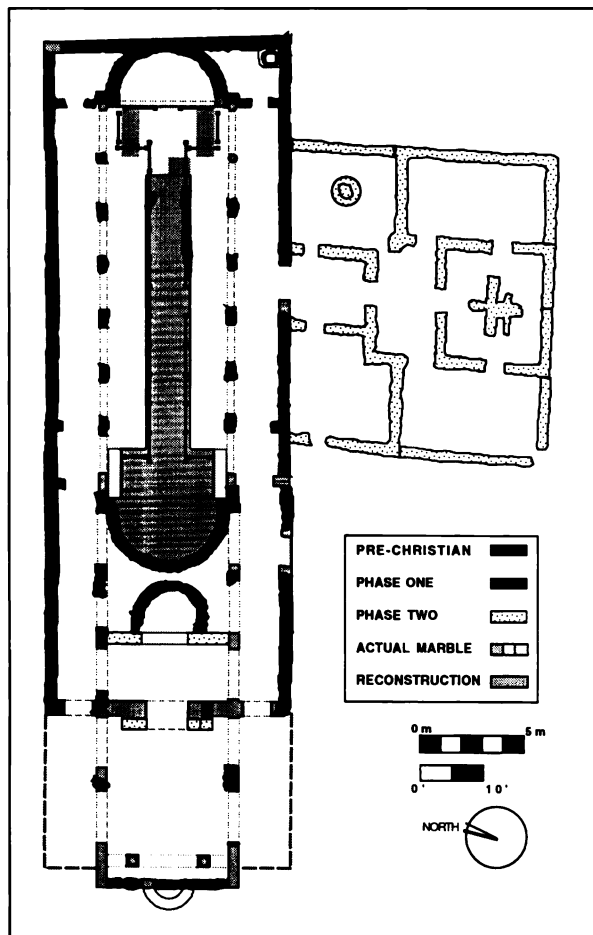


Figure 5. Christian Phase 2.

common over altars in North Africa as well, though there the altars are invariably further from the apse.¹⁴

If the slots in the posts in front of the altar were indeed meant to hold something in place, one must hypothesize the existence of chancel panels enclosing this area similar to arrangements found in some other Iberian churches such as Bobalá (Lérida), Son Peretó (Mallorca), Es Fornás de Torelló (Menorca), and Casa Herrera. In fact, a single chancel panel was found beside the church during earlier excavations and was published by Fernando de Almeida.¹⁵ Unfortunately, there is no evidence for the other posts which would have been necessary to support such panels. In this arrangement, the altar would probably have been

14. For example, at Mactar, Basilica II; phase II of Basilica I at Sbeitla; Sbeitla, Basilica IV; Haidra, Basilica I; Haidra, Basilica II; and El Asabaa.

15. ALMEIDA, fig. 11.

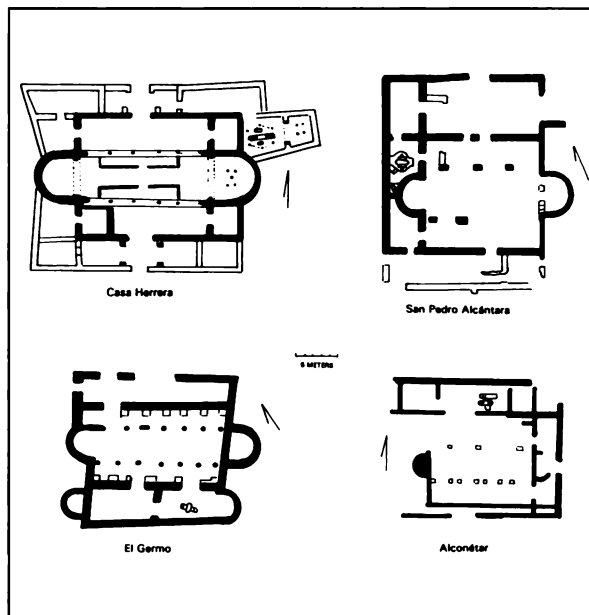


Figure 6. Other double-apsed churches in Iberia.

in the apse itself with the area in front of the apse serving as a choir or presbytery.

Results of the analysis of the mortars and details of construction suggest it was during this phase that the round building standing in the narthex was converted to an apse with walls projecting to the north and south. At the same time, a short wall was added on the outside of the west wall of the narthex, perhaps supporting a pedimented aedicula decorating the central doorway.

The construction of the baptistry and the fourth apse are significantly different even though the mortars are similar in composition. Apse 4, then, must represent a third phase of construction (figure 7). At this time the wall closing off the west end of the narthex was removed and the new apse, larger than any of the other three and projecting from the west end of the building, was constructed. The floor of the apse was raised and the structure of the steps which originally led into the atrium was modified to form a semicircular step into the apse. The area in front of Apse 3 was also modified. Walls extending westward were added on the north and south joining the short Phase 2 wall which had been built against the original west wall of the narthex.

Overlying most of the Small Basilica, and obscuring some of its features, is a small chapel (phase 4) the sanctuary of which is in Apse 3. Of that chapel, only the fill which raised the floor in the apse and a portion of the north wall, above and offset to the north of the Phase 3 wall, actually remained in 1983. A more complete plan can,

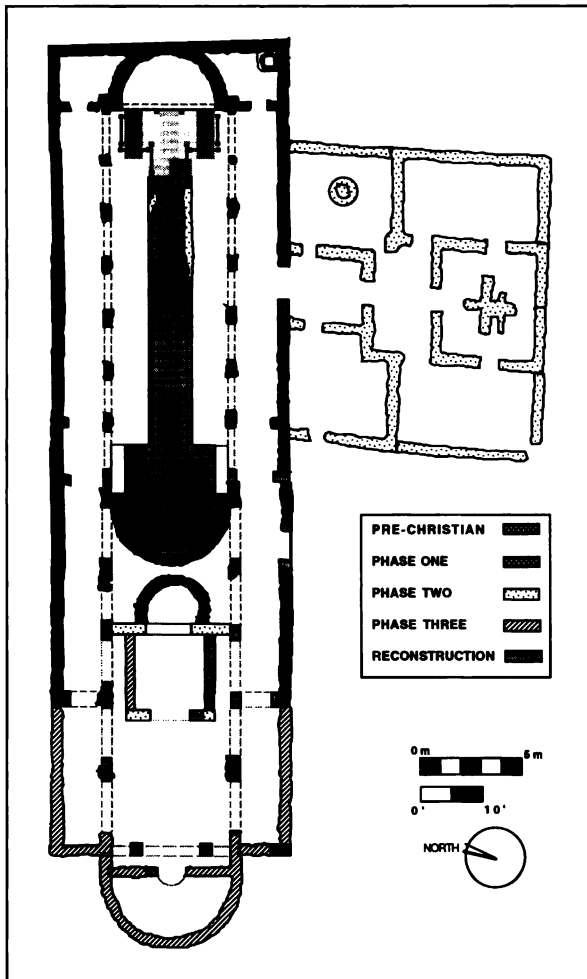


Figure 7. Christian Phase 3.

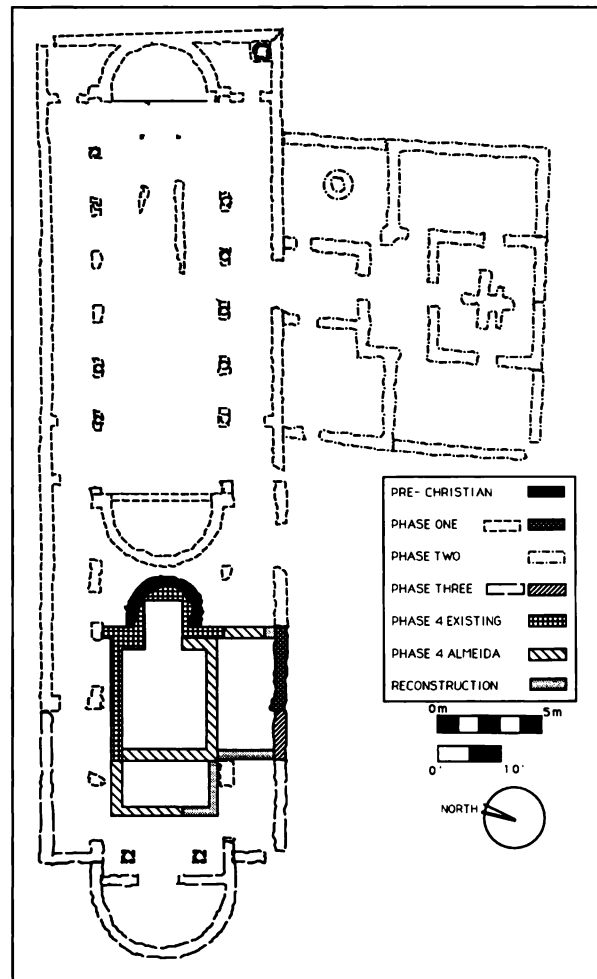


Figure 8. Christian Phase 4.

however, be reconstructed on the basis of Almeida's plan and photographs taken during the original excavation campaign (figure 8). That chapel, dedicated to St. Dominic,¹⁶ was rectangular, measuring about 11.8 by 4.9 meters. Apse 3 was modified on the inside to form a rectangle. The floor, at least 0.40 meters higher than the original Early Christian floor, was paved with bricks. There may have been a small narthex or porch on the west and a rectangular chamber on the south. Several medieval burials of infants and children were uncovered in and immediately west of the apse of this chapel in 1984. None of the skeletons was in a sarcophagus or coffin. Coins found in and around these burials date from the reign of Sancho II (1223-1248) through that of João III (1521-

16. ALMEIDA, p. 106.

1557)¹⁷ suggesting this chapel was built some time after the reconquest of this area in 1139 and was in use well into the sixteenth century. It is probable that the outer walls of the entire Early Christian basilica were still evident and may have served as a precinct wall during this period as some of the tombs found above the earlier floor are not characteristically Early Christian.

The date of the Early Christian complex, and especially of the first basilica, has been problematical. Although never actually assigning a specific date to the church, Almeida suggests an early one, perhaps fourth or early fifth century, for the original construction of the church. He argues that the villa only survived into the early part of the fifth century and assumes, probably correctly, that the

17. The coins, which are now on exhibit in Monforte, have been carefully studied by John Huffstot. I am indebted to him for his careful and detailed analysis.

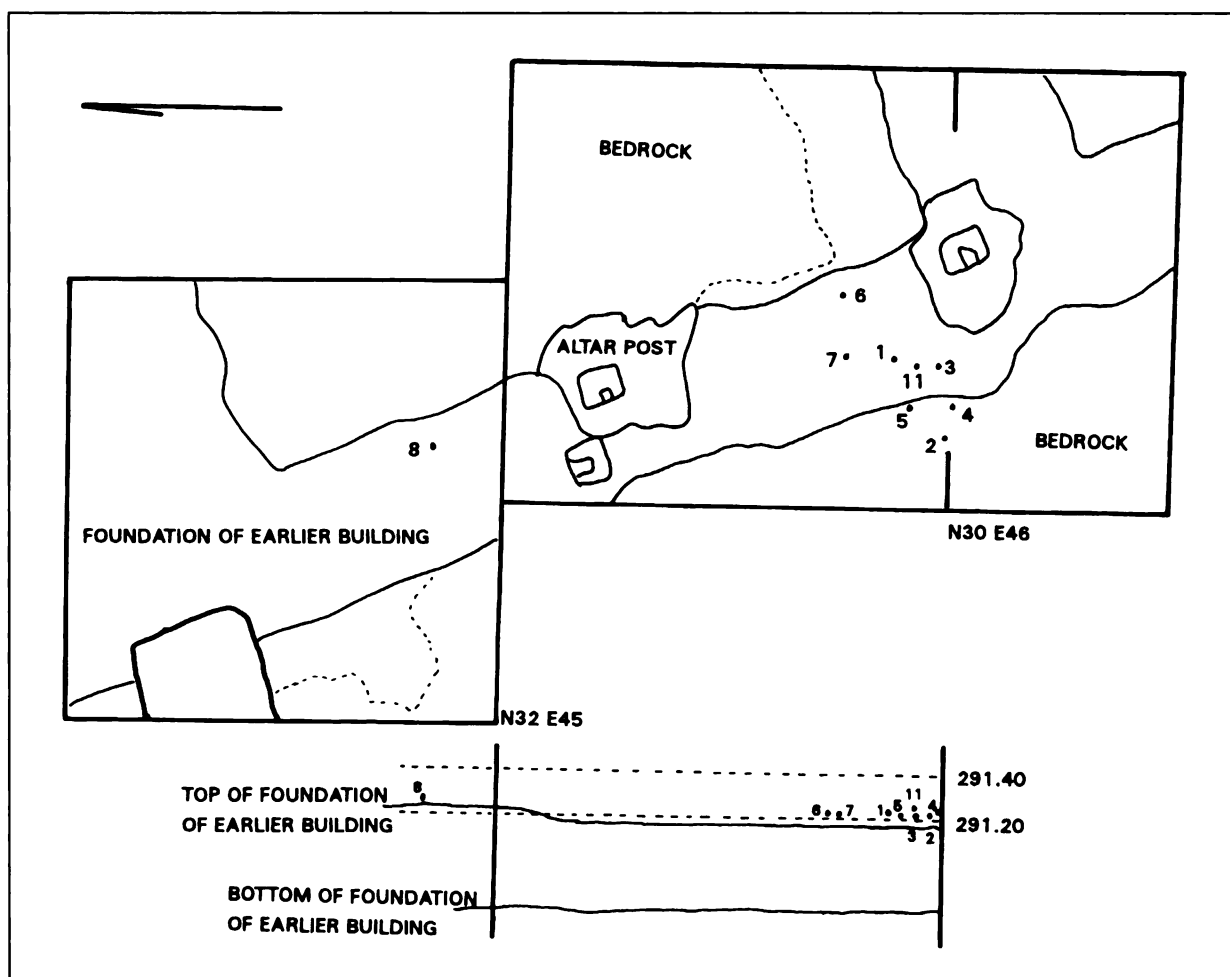


Figure 9. Location of the coins found in the white plaster floor in the east end of the basilica.

church was originally constructed as a part of the villa complex.¹⁸ Palol does not date this church with certainty but leaves open the possibility of the fourth century.¹⁹ Schlunk and Hauschild assign the church a sixth-century date but do not explain their reasons for doing so.²⁰ Ulbert, basing his date on similarities in construction and treatment of the east end with Casa Herrera, suggests c. 500 for the original construction of the basilica at Torre de Palma, a time in which the villa was either abandoned or was functioning at a much reduced level.²¹

As a result of the current project, a much firmer date can be established for this important church. When work began in 1983 the area in front of

Apse 1 was paved with slabs of gray, pink, and white marble. Those slabs rested above, but were not set into, the white plaster floor found in fragmentary condition throughout the rest of the Large Basilica. Nine coins were found embedded, apparently intentionally, in that plaster floor (figure 9). All nine are from the house of Constantine with reverse types ranging from 335 to 357. The fact that not a single post-Constantinian issue is included suggests they were deposited during the reign of Constantius II (A.D. 337-361) or soon thereafter, placing the construction of the first church in the last third of the fourth century.

How then does the basilica of Torre de Palma compare with other Early Christian churches in Iberia and with Roman building practices? Few of the other early churches in Iberia enjoy the regularity of plan found at Torre de Palma. In fact, it is an anomaly even when compared with the other known double-apsed churches (figure 6). It

18. ALMEIDA, pp. 104 and 108.

19. PALOL, pp. 79-81.

20. SCHLUNK and HAUSCHILD, p. 174.

21. ULBERT, p. 182.

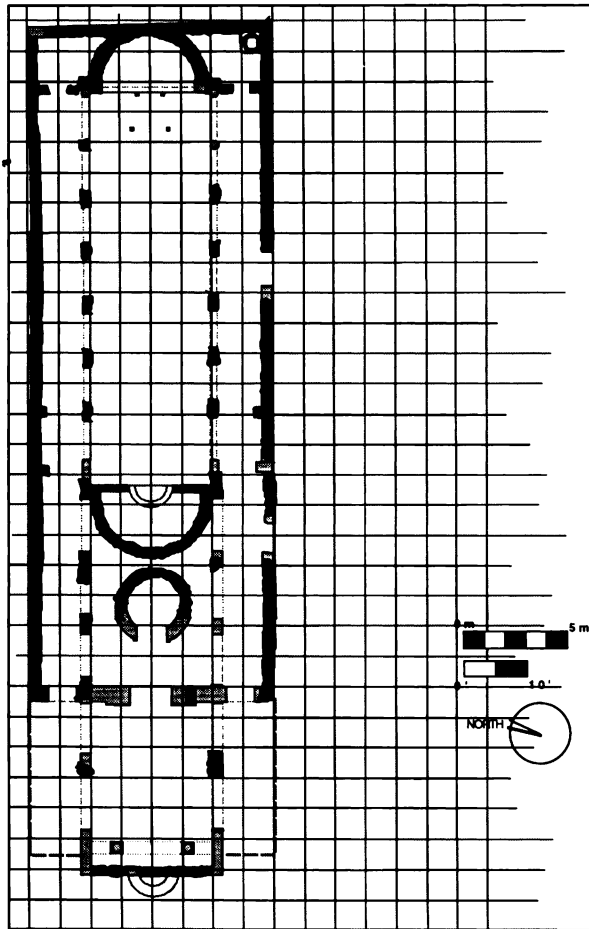


Figure 10. A grid of five Roman feet superimposed on the plan of the first phase of the basilica.

follows basic Roman principles of planning, having apparently been laid out on a grid of five Roman feet (figure 10). It is, in fact, more regular than most of the rest of the buildings in the villa in which true right angles are almost unknown. The original basilica fits within rules for basilicas set forth by Vitruvius according to whom the width should be not less than one third nor more than one half the length and the aisles one third the width of the nave.²² Similar proportions are common in fourth century churches throughout the Early Christian world but there is an increasing tendency to widen the aisles at the expense of the nave in the fifth and sixth centuries. So, the proportions are in keeping with an early date. The small square font, too, is appropriate in a fourth

22. VITRUVIUS, 1960. *The Ten Books on Architecture*, MORRIS HICKEY MORGAN, trans. (New York: Dover Publications orig. published 1914, Book V, Chapter, 1, paragraphs 4 and 5.

century building. While it is true there are no other known double-apsed churches securely dated to the fourth century, it must be remembered that the fourth century was one of experimentation, and various local, and often elaborate, solutions to liturgical problems were developed throughout the late Roman world. Iberian Christians were creative enough to have their own particular heresy and were undoubtedly creative enough to join the rest of the Christian world in experimenting with new architectural forms appropriate to a still developing liturgy.

The date of the second and third phases of the church rests on stylistic evidence, primarily the form of the large baptismal font. It is generally agreed that these more complex forms are late, and date from the sixth century or perhaps later. Fragments of ceramics found in the patches and leveling fill between the white Phase 1 floor and the Phase 2 brick floor in the south aisle have tentatively been identified as Visigothic (fifth-seventh century) and the surviving chancel panel finds its closest parallels in Visigothic sculpture from Mérida²³ and elsewhere. This evidence reinforces a sixth or seventh century date for the modifications to the church.

The unexpectedly early date of the basilica of Torre de Palma belies a direct link between the double-apsed basilicas of North Africa, all of which are later than the fourth century, and suggest an early and independent liturgical development in Iberia. Evidence for dating the other double-apsed churches in Spain and Portugal has generally been interpreted conservatively by assigning the latest possible date allowable by the materials found. It is now time to reevaluate that evidence.

23. MARIA CRUZ VILLALÓN, 1985. *Mérida Visigoda. La escultura arquitectónica y litúrgica*. (Badajoz: Colección Roso de Luna), numbers 57, 121 and 122.