

# A REPORT ON THE TOMBS AND HUMAN SKELETAL REMAINS AT THE PALEO-CHRISTIAN BASILICA OF TORRE DE PALMA

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Since the discovery in 1947 of extensive Roman and Paleo-Christian remains at Torre de Palma in Alto Alentejo, approximately one hundred tombs have been identified in the northern sector of the archaeological reserve. Geographically the tombs comprise three clusters: 39 tombs in and around the basilica-baptistry complex; 40 tombs in a partially walled cemetery northwest of the basilica (including five grouped inside a rectangular stone mausoleum); and 18 tombs in a southwestern cemetery built around the remains of an earlier Roman house. In addition, one isolated tomb was found in the field north of the basilica, and a second even more remote tomb was found in the garden quarter of the villa, the only known example of a burial having been located south of the natural drainage channel that divides the basilica zone from that of the villa.

Chronologically the human burials at Torre de Palma also fall into three clusters. The earliest is a group of cremations from the pagan Roman period, with the ashes and incinerated bones placed in urns. Local informants state that one of the large tombs in the northwest mausoleum was found by the original excavators to hold not skeletal remains but pottery vessels, so it is possible that some of the tombs may have been constructed during the pagan Roman era as repositories for funerary urns.

By far the largest group of burials is associated with the Paleo-Christian era, ranging from late Roman occupation in the fourth century to Visigothic occupation in the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries. The tombs and cemeteries dating to this era are discussed below.

A few burials of adults, youths, and infants may be attributed to re-use of the site by medieval

Christians following the Reconquest. In the excavator's view these later burials are distinguishable from the mass of Paleo-Christian interments by the following three criteria. 1) All are located along the central axis of the basilica in or between the western three apses. 2) None were buried in constructed stone or tile tombs, but instead they were dug beneath the raised floor of the post-Reconquest chapel or *capela* of S. Domingo—apparently the only part of the ancient structures visible or in use during the medieval era. 3) Some include medieval Portuguese coins which would have enabled the deceased to pay admission (to Saint Peter?) for entry into heaven.

The subject of this report is the second or Paleo-Christian phase of burials at Torre de Palma. The aspects to be considered include the structural types of the tombs, their orientation, their contents, issues relating to chronology within the sequence, their influence on later burial tradition, and some observations on the human skeletal material from the Paleo-Christian era.

As is natural in a site where the bedrock lies so near the surface, the Paleo-Christian tombs were constructed above or just below ground level. The largest of the more elevated tombs approach the status of architectural features, the outstanding example being the monumental tomb of granite slabs with concave headstone and tile floor which lies just inside the west end of the basilica. This large tomb is exceptional in being free-standing, since the norm at Torre de Palma consists of tombs whose sides are supported by pre-existing walls (in the case of those built above ground level) or by the surrounding earth (in the case of those dug down into the ground). Without exception the Paleo-Christian tombs take the form of rectangular

boxes originally intended to hold a single inhumation. The source of building materials for the tombs was certainly the earlier Roman villa complex to the south. Favored materials include brick and tile, blocks and slabs of marble, granite, and schist (including lintels and thresholds), and broken sections of concrete floors and gutters. Tiles were especially popular in the construction of small tombs for infants, nine of which have survived. Most of the tombs have been robbed of the flat stone lids which must have covered them in antiquity. One might have expected the tombs to be sealed with plaster in order to combat the stench of decomposing flesh, but no traces of such a custom were found.

Eighty per cent of the tombs can be assigned to six structural types or categories.

I. *Brick wall* tombs, in which the sides of the tomb have been built up in courses of brick or tile after the fashion of a free-standing wall. The eleven examples of this type were located predominantly in the northwest cemetery (four tombs) and around the external walls of the basilica (five tombs), with single examples found inside the basilica and in the baptistry complex. Two of these «brick wall» tombs were only the length of two tiles and were intended for infant burials. The fragments of ceramics associated with these tombs were insufficient to suggest a date.

II. *Tile box* tombs, in which the sides are formed of tiles set upright on edge. The twenty examples of this type (including seven tombs for infants) exhibited a distribution pattern similar to that of the «brick wall» tombs. Most were located in the northwest cemetery (twelve tombs) or around the external walls of the basilica (five tombs) while one such tomb was found in the center of the southwest cemetery. The only examples of the tile box type encountered in the basilica itself were two infant tombs near the east end. The associated ceramics suggest that a majority of these tombs should be assigned to the fifth century.

III. *Stone block with tile cap* tombs are found in the northwest cemetery (three tombs), inside the basilica (one tomb) and in the field north of the basilica (one tomb). They appear to represent a hybrid form intermediate between types I and II and types IV and V.

IV. *Granite slab* tombs in which the sides, head

and foot are constructed of massive granite blocks, slabs, thresholds, and lintels from the Roman villa. The sixteen tombs of this type are found especially within the basilica (seven tombs) and the southwest cemetery (five tombs) with three also found in the northwest cemetery (five tombs) with three also found in the northwest cemetery and one in the baptistry complex. In the case of these tombs the associated ceramics suggest that a majority were constructed in the sixth century.

V. *Stone kerb* tombs reminiscent of the old Celtic tradition in which a shallow grave is outlined with an irregular border of stones, which may include dressed masonry set along side field stone. The twenty-three tombs of this type parallell the distribution of the «granite slab» tombs, being concentrated in the southwest cemetery (nine tombs) and within the basilica (seven tombs) with the remainder located in the northwest cemetery (three tombs), in the baptistry complex (two tombs) and around the external walls of the basilica (two tombs).

VI. *Marble sheet* tombs, having sides formed of thin sheets of white marble veneer. This rare type is found only in the northwest cemetery (two tombs, one being in the mausoleum) and in the basilica itself (one tomb).

The remaining twenty per cent of the tombs at Torre de Palma represent hybrid types, or have been too damaged for any identification to be made. It is noteworthy that two types of tomb associated elsewhere with the Paleo-Christian tradition do not occur at Torre de Palma. These are the sarcophagus and the tile tomb with a triangular «lean-to» cross-section rather than a lid. Both types are found as nearby as Merida.

The orientation of the Paleo-Christian tombs is predominantly east-west, with the head usually placed at the west so that the corpse may be thought of as facing toward either Jerusalem, the altar of the basilica, or the morning sunrise. However, very little is needed to counteract this east-west tendency, and many of the tombs derive their north-south orientation either from the slope of the land or from the line of the nearest building or wall, a situation particularly noticeable in the southwest cemetery and around the external walls of the basilica. A striking example of such a north-south tomb is found within the basilica lying athwart the open east end of the second apse, where a large tomb with a covering of limestone slabs was dug down below the floor of the church. Except

for a few bones of the foot of a tall robust male, the skeletal material had been carefully removed from this central tomb in antiquity, suggesting that it may have been the resting place of a martyr, saint, or founder.

As is common in the case of Paleo-Christian burials the artifacts found in the tombs constitute an exceedingly meager collection. Only bronze earrings, bronze and iron belt buckles, pins, and a few iron nails were recovered, all the artifacts being of types customarily designated «Visigothic» rather than Roman.

Since old tombs were sometimes re-used as ossuaries, no firm chronological connection can be drawn at Torre de Palma between the date of tomb construction and the date of death of the human remains within the tomb. The skeletal remains may be contemporary with the tomb in which they were found if they represent a primary burial, or they may be more recent than the tomb in the case of a secondary inhumation, or they may actually be older than the tomb itself in the case of an ossuary being deposited in a tomb constructed later than the original burial dates of some of the displaced skeletons. Artifacts such as rings and other ornaments tend to settle to the floors and corners of tombs and may remain after the bones of their owners have been removed.

With regard to human skeletal remains at Torre de Palma, again approximately one hundred individuals (by coincidence) have been identified in the collections recovered from the Paleo-Christian tombs and ossuaries. Based on preliminary study of these bones the population was extremely mixed and heterogenous, as shown by the variations in stature and cranial form. Females slightly out-number males. The extremely young average

age at death (circa 28 years) coupled with simultaneous multiple burials in tombs originally designed for a single body suggest that the community may have been afflicted with a plague or other fatal epidemic at the end of its period of occupation at Torre de Palma. Two of the males exhibit broken bones and cranial injuries that may be associated with warfare.

The tombs at Torre de Palma thus exhibit all the elements typical of the traditional burial practice of Christian Iberia (except for inscriptions) and which indeed have established the pattern for burial in this region right down to the late twentieth century. These elements include 1) tombs set on or under the floors of churches; 2) tombs grouped in cemeteries lying outside settlement areas; 3) family groups in stone mausolea within cemetery precincts; 4) variations in location and construction material reflecting the social status of the deceased; and 5) concept of the tomb as an imperishable box in which the body rests until Judgement Day, rather than as a «House of the Dead» furnished with grave goods or a shrine at which descendants may communicate with or sacrifice to their deceased family members. Additional elements of the burial complex at Torre de Palma include 6) burial by inhumation; 7) burials with clothing (including pins, buckles, rings, ect.) but without other grave goods; 8) subsequent removal of skeletal remains by the sexton or other religious official (in spite of element no. 5 above) so that the tomb may be used for the burial of a new occupant; and 9) the creation of ossuaries to hold the bones of bodies that have been thus displaced. In modern practice this removal of bones may take place when a family has died out or has ceased to tithe to the church.