SOCIAL ASPECTS OF A LUSITANIAN LATE ROMAN CITY - MYRTILIS (THE EVIDENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN CEMETERY) S. V-VII AD

MARIA MANUELA ALVES DIAS

Mértola lies on a small cape, on the right bank of the Guadiana river, where it meets the small Oeiras river. Although the town is about 37 miles away from the river mouth, the sea's influence is still considerable, and the high tide can be felt there[1].

Due to Guadiana's navigability at this point, the town's fluvial port is an exceptionally good harbour. Mértola, as an inland port, provides both easy protection and easy access to ships sailing upriver[2].

Thus, to understand Mértola in a territory which, although it is not particularly fertile, guaranties self provisioning, we must consider the region's economic resources. We should consider, particularly, the possibility of mining for gold and silver, which appear as residual minerals in the so-called gossan of Alentejo's belt of pyrites. It must have attracted settlers, who came to live there permanently.

Epigraphic evidence in southwest writing[3] points to the presence in this port of one of the first Hispanic communities with writing. The town's monetary coinage, dating from the period of the wars between Pompey's and Caesar's partisans, proves, according to some authors, that Myrtillis took Pompey's side[4].

Its natural defences were enhanced, in an indeterminate period, by a huge wall, built with blocks, 79 inches thick, of local schist. This wall spanned the high ground of both sides of the river, and some parts of it can still be seen nowadays[5]. On the Guadiana river they built large piers[6], one on each side of the river, no doubt to prevent the boats' progression. A long, strong metal chain probably linked these piers. They were entirely built with Roman materials, among them whole funerary monuments, stone altars, barrel shaped tombs and funerary columns. The use of old materials made it possible to date the piers as belonging to a Late Roman Empire epoch, or slightly more recent.

The Late Roman Mértola, considered by Cláudio Torres as the last Mediterranean port[7], was useful as a way out for the products of its territory and for those of the nearby regions. A road connected the town to Beja and another one leaded to Mérida, Lusitania's religious and political capital, witch shared the same river – the Guadiana – but which was not as easy to access. Mértola must have functioned, thus, as Mérida's port, and it might have caused the seamen's arrival there[8], which is

1. Above Mértola, dating from the Middle Ages, we know of a series of mills, which benefited from tide generated energy.

2. On the town and its territory, see TORRES, C., "Topografia antiga do Baixo Alentejo. Alguns problemas de topografia histórica", *Arqueologia Medieval* 1, 189-202.

3. See FARIA, A.M., "Uma inscrição em caracteres do sudoeste achada em Mértola", *Vipasca* 3, 61-63.

4. See GRANT, M., *From Imperium to Auctoritas*, Cambridge, 1968, 24-25.

5. See map number 1 taken from MACIAS, S., "Um espaço funerário", AAVV, *Museu de Mértola, Basílica paleocristã*, Oporto 1993, 31-62.

6. These constructions were considered, before, to be the remains of a bridge, or the support for a large scoop-wheel. See ALMEIDA, D. F., "As ruínas da Chamada ponte romana de Mértola (Portugal), *MM* 17, 1976, 295-300. In the exhibition of the so-called Roman Nucleus, these piers were reconstructed as supports for a big chain.

7. TORRES, *o.c.*

8. For the first epigraphic reference to populations coming from the sea and settling in Mérida see, RAMÍREZ SÁDABA, J.L.; MATEOS CRUZ, P., *Catálogo de las inscripciones cristianas de Mérida*, Mérida 2000, n. 178 and 182, see also GIL, J.; "Epigrafía antigua y moderna", *Habis* 12, 157-158, and DELGADO, M., "Cerâmicas romanas tardias de Mértola originárias do Médio Oriente", *Arqueologia Medieval* 1, 125-133 for the presence of Late Roman C ceramics.

mentioned in the town's Greek inscriptions, namely people from *Libissa* (a town near *Nicomedia*), of whom we have representatives in both Mértola and Mérida[9].

The Early Christian basilica was located in Mértola, in Rossio do Carmo, where inscriptions have been found since the 19th century. The size and the quality of this site's epigraphic collection, with about 40 dated inscriptions, make it possible to determine a chronological amplitude, which goes from 462 to 706. The basilica's site was later occupied by Muslim period graves, overlaid by some more recent tombs. The Early Christian burials *in situ* show a sequence of graves, which rise to different heights, without, however, exceeding 3.9 inches maximum. The graves cover the whole ground of the basilica, leaving narrow corridors between them, which did not allow one to walk, neither on the original ground nor on the graves themselves. The orientation of the graves from the last Early Christian level is not uniform, either, as one can still see today. The impossibility to walk in this basilica excludes, at least in the last phase of occupation, the practice of the daily cult, and advises us to see it as a basilica exclusively used as a cemetery. In Mértola, not far from Rossio do Carmo, near the river and close to a small road, parallel to the place, another cemetery was discovered. Although no epigraphic vestiges were found, it was surely occupied by Christians, as the *chrismon* shaped pendant found in one of the graves proves[10]. The diggers of this cemetery think it may have functioned as a transitional graveyard, still with Roman funerary practices alongside the presence of Christianity, and that it continued to be used as a cemetery in the Middle Ages. Still according to them, the big Roman cemetery was certainly located further down the river, near the road, which leads outside Mértola, in the slope which goes down from the Early Christian basilica to the river[11].

Despite the great quantity of Early Christian burials in the basilica of Rossio do Carmo, and of a long chronological sequence guarantied by the

absolute dating of the gravestones, it is not advisable to apply statistical methods to this material. Those who know the circumstances of the discovery of most of the gravestones, know that many were found reused in the same cemetery, as construction material for new tombs. What remains of them does not guarantee a significant sample of the cemetery's inscriptions. Only an archaeological intervention, which dismantled all that is left of the monumental set, would provide an approximate statistical evaluation, and, even then, limited to the graves with epigraphs. In the graves left intact, we can see that not all of them are marked by gravestones, and that some are marked by a gravestone left blank (with no epigraph) on purpose, since the stones, albeit inserted in the mortar which covers the grave, were not even prepared to be written on. We know this because of the inexistence in the supports of previously drawn lines, to guide the writing, and of any traces of painted texts or markings of guide lines or characters.

We have, thus, in the same cemetery and in tombs of the same size, graves marked with a stone with no epigraph, and unmarked graves, side by side with graves with funerary inscriptions. It does not seem likely that the lack of material with epigraphs over the graves should be due to the different economic situation of the deceased alone. In fact, the epitaph, inserted in the covering mortar, comes mostly from reused marble from the coverings of Roman monuments, usually a grey marble plate, which can be about 0.98 to 1.37 inches thick, with carboniferous veins. These covering plates can frequently be found inside the graves as well, some with epigraphs, reused as filling material. The fact that, albeit the abundance of possible supports for epigraphs in a grave, it was not marked (with a gravestone), or, having been marked by a gravestone, the fact that it does not bear an inscription, makes us wonder about the criteria for the use of inscriptions in graves, in this cemetery. Besides the errors in the analysis of the palaeographic evolution of the group of stones with epigraphs, the use of statistical methods in the evaluation of the burials in this cemetery would thus completely mask the question of the ability to assume individual representation, in the "collective whole", which this cemetery undoubtedly constitutes.

And while the written sources can provide some explanation for the common practice of more than one burial per tomb[12], they say noth-

9. On the origins of some of the Greek elements of these two towns' populations, see ALVES DIAS, M.M., "A propósito de uma inscrição grega de Mértola (I.C.E.R.V. 524) e a possível origem Mediterrânica oriental das colónias de comerciantes gregos no baixo curso do Guadiana (Portugal)", *Miscellanea epigrafica in onore di Lidio Gasperini*, Roma 2000, 23-28.

10. LOPES, V.A.M., "A Necrópole da Achada de S. Sebastião", LOPES, V.; BOIÇA, J., *A necrópole da Achada de S. Sebastião*, Mértola 1999, 79-91, on the study of the pendant and of an oil lamp with a chrismon, from the same cemetery.

11. See map 82.

12. See GARWIN, J.N., *The Vitae Sanctorum Patrum Emeritensium*, Washington 1946, IV, X, 9, which mentions the burial of

ing about the criteria, which might justify the presence or absence of funerary inscriptions on the graves. However, as we know from Late Empire juridical texts, the political power was well aware of the value of the written word publicly expressed, and even claimed that those who made undue use of it should be punished[13]. To assume that placing epitaphs on the graves or not is irrelevant and a trivial question may come naturally to us nowadays, but this was not at all the case in Antiquity. St Augustine, a fierce apologist of the uselessness of the grave for the deceased Christian, also found dispensable the resource to individual commemoration; the individual should only be remembered collectively, as part of the Church community[14].

On the one hand, then, the fact that the set of epigraphs from the cemetery of Rossio do Carmo is one of Hispania's largest and better-preserved collections cannot serve as an argument for the use of purely positivist methods of analysis in it, in which the evaluation of the "how many" would mask the meaning of the "how". On the other hand, however, we cannot fail to consider the usefulness of the chronological references in this collection.

But let us look at the inscriptions:

CRISTIAN INSCRIPTIONS FROM MERTOLA[15]

DAT	IDENTIFICATIO	TEXT
462	unnamed	[---]r vi/[xit --- r]equi/[evit---]idus /[---]D
462?	Stefanus	⊂ arcu [crux arcu ?]⊃ / Stefan[us famu]/lus De[i vixit annos] / LX re[quievit] / in pa(ce) d(ie) [---] / Nov[embers] / era D
465	Donata	⊂chrismon crux⊃ / Donata puel(la) XPI / vixsit ann(os) XXII / requievit in pace / D(omi)ni d(ie) III N(ona)s Iul(ias) / era DIII
470	Faustinianus	⊂columba alpha chrismon [omega] columba⊃ / Recessit Fa/ustia[us / in pace die / VII ⊂ hedera⊃ Iduum / Novembr/ium era / DVIII
482	(menorah)	[---] / [vi]xit ann[os] / [--- de vel re]cessit i[n] / [pa]ce die quar/[tas N]onas Octo/[bre]s era DXX / ⊂ menorah⊃
489	Satyrio	⊂sub arcu alpha chrismon omega⊃ / Satyrio pr(es)b(ite)r minis/travit in pr[e]sbiterio / ann(os) XIII recessit in / pace Domini n(ostri) IHS XPI / d(ie) VI N(onas) Martias / era DXXVII memb/[ra] requiescet / ⊂ alpha crux omega⊃
494	Mannaria	⊂columba crux columba⊃ / ⊂ in circulo alpha chrismon omega⊃ / Mannaria / famula XPI / vixit annos / novem men/ses quattu/or requievit / in pace d(ie) XVI / Kal(endas) Apriles era / DXXXII
503	Orania	⊂chrismon crux⊃ / ⊂litterae in corona⊃ / Orani/a p(a)m(u)l(a) D(e)i vixit / ann(os) t<r>es requievit / in pace d(ie) Idus / Novemb(res) er/a DXL as
507	Pierius	⊂alpha chrismon omega⊃ / Pierus <in> s(ae)c(u)l(o) / famulus / D(e)i vixit an(no)s / LXII requi/evit in pace / d(ie) VIII K(a)l(endas) F(e)brua(rias) / era DXLV
510	Auriola	⊂columba crux in circulo columba⊃ /Auriola / honesta / femina vi/xit ⊂hedera⊃ an(nos) ° XXVII / requit ° in pace ⊂ hedera⊃ / IIII ⊂ hedera⊃ Id(us) ⊂hedera?⊃ Maias / era DXLVIII
510	Fistellus	⊂ palma in vaso crux in circulo palma in vaso⊃ / Fistellus ⊂hedera⊃ v(ir) hon(es)t(us) ⊂hedera⊃ / vixit an(nos) ⊂hedera⊃ LXX ⊂hedera⊃ req(u)i/evit ⊂hedera⊃ in pace ⊂he-dera⊃ d(ie) ⊂hedera⊃ VIII ⊂hedera⊃ / Kal(endas) ⊂hedera⊃ Decemb(res) ⊂hedera⊃ era ⊂hedera⊃ / DXLVIII ⊂crux⊃
512	Possidonius	⊂columna palma hedera palma columna⊃ / ⊂crux⊃ / Possidonius / pre(s)b(i)t(e)r vixit / annos plus m(inus) / quinquaginta / requievit in / pace D(omi)ni d(ie) / XII Kal(endas) Sep/temb(res) era / DL ⊂hedera⊃

bishop *Felix* in the same sarcophagus of his uncle *Paulus*, who preceded him in the episcopacy. We should bear in mind that bishop *Felix* was imposed by *Paulus*, and that his appointment was at first contested by the community. After his death, the same community buried him in the same grave as his uncle, thus maintaining, in the public representation of his death, in the sacred space, the relationship of dependance, which had brought him to power.

13. JANVIER, Y., *La legislation du Bas-Empire romain sur les edifices publics*, Aix-en-Provence 1969, 85 (=*Digesta*, L, 10).

14. See Aug., *De Cura...*, 6.

15. This table is a selection of inscriptions taken from ALVES DIAS, M.M.; GASPAR, C., *As inscrições paleocristãs do território português*, Lisboa 2006.

DAT	IDENTIFICATIO	TEXT
512?	unnamed	ccolumna crux in circulo sub arcu⊃ / [---] / B--- / ---E--- / XVII Kal[endas] / era DL (?)[---]
518	unnamed	[---] / famula Dei / vixit an/nos LXX chedera⊃ / p(lus) chedera⊃ m(inus) chedera⊃ requi/evit in pa/ce D(omi)ni diae/ pridiae Kal(endas) / Februarias / era DLVI
522	Romanus	csub arcu crux in circulo⊃/ Romanus presb(iter) / famulus Dei chedera⊃ / vixit ann(os) LXXV / requievit in / pace D(omi)n(i) di[e] / XV Ka[l(endas) ---]s / [e]ra DLX[---]che-dera⊃
523	Restitutus	cvestigios de decoração não identificada⊃./ Rest[itu]tus fa/m[ulus D]ei v/[ixit an]n[os] / [plus] minu[s ---] / [requ]ievi[t in] / [pac]e sub d[ie] / [---K]alenda[s] / Sept(embres) era / DLXI
523	unnamed	c [columna] columna⊃ / [---] / [---] vixit / [---] requievit / [in p]ace D(omi)ni d(ie) IIII c signacula⊃ / [Kalend]as Martias c signacula⊃ / [era] DLX as c signacula⊃
524	unnamed subdiácono	cin circulo crux⊃ / [---]rus sub[diaconus?] / [famu]lus De[i vi]/[xit p]lus mi[nus ---] / [---]evit in pa[ce ---] / [---] Se[p]tem[bres] / [era] DLX de(pundius)
524	Aianes	ccolumba crux columba⊃./ Aianes hon(esta) fem(ina) / fam(ula) D(e)i vixit annos / pl(u)s m(inu)s XXVIII requi/evit in pace D(omi)ni d(ie) V Non(as) Iulias / era DLXI as chedera⊃
525	Andreas	calpha chrismon omega⊃ / Andreas famulus / Dei princeps can/torum sacrosan/cte a[e]cli-siae mer/tilliane vixit / annos XXXVI / requievit in pa/ce sub d(ie) terteo / Kal(endas) Apri-les / aera DLX tri/sis calpha crux omega⊃ / Ch[---]
526	unnamed	[---]s / [famulu]s D(e)i / v[ixit an]nos / XLV r[eq]u[i]ev/it in pa[ce] d(ie) / XII K(a)l(endas) Dec(e)mb(res) / era DLXIIII
526	Leopardus	ccolumna sub arcu columba crux in circulo columba columna⊃ / Leopardus / famulus Dei / vixit ann(os) L duos / d(ies) XXXVI recesit / in pac(e) d(ie) VI Kal(endas) Ian/uarias era DLXIIII
527	Fortunata	c sub arcu crux in circulo⊃ / Fortunata / famula Dei / vixit annos / XII requievit / in pace d(ie) V Kal(endas) / Iannuarias era / DLXV cchrismon⊃
527	Festellus	csub arcu crux in circulo⊃ / Festellus fa/mulus Dei vi/xit annos VI / sex requiev<i>t in / pace d(i)e VII Ka/lendas Mar/tias era DLXV / hora pro / me csignacula⊃
527	Exuperius	ccolumna sub arcu crux in circulo columna⊃ / Exuperius / ostiarius / fam(u)l(us) D(e)i vixit / ann(os) LXX requ(ievit) in pa(ce) / d(ie) VII Id(us) Iuli[(as)] era DLXC
529	Abundantius	Abundantius / fam(u)lus Dei vixit / annos XXVII requi/evit in pace d(ie) VIII / Kal(endas) Februarias era / DLXVII
537	Cyprianus	ccrux in circulo⊃ / Cyprianus / famulus Dei / vixit an/nos XXX re/quievit in / pace die VIII / Kal(endas) Septemb(res) / era DLXX quinq(ue)
537	Simplicius	ccolumna sub arcu crux in circulo columna⊃ / ccrux monogramatica⊃ Simplicius / pr(e)bs(iter) chedera⊃ famu/lus D(e)i chedera⊃ vixit / an(nos) chedera⊃ LVIIII che-dera⊃ / requievit in / pace D(omi)ni chedera⊃ d(ie) / VIII Kal(endas) Septem/bres che-dera⊃ era / DLXXV chedera⊃
544	Amanda	ctransenna circulo in quo crux transenna⊃ / ccrux monogramatica⊃ Amanda famu<l>a XPI vixit / annos plus min<u>s / XXXII menses V requie/vit in pace D(omi)ni sub d(ie) VII / Kal(endas) Mart(ias) era DLXXXII
544	Εὐτύχες, Πατρίκις and (?)	ccrux⊃ Ἔνθα κατά/κιτε Εὐτύχ/ες ἀναγνόσ/τες Λιβισιντε/ους υἱὸς Ζωσ/ίμου Εἰσιδωρ/ίτου ἔζεσεν / ήτη κα' ἐρα / Φπβ' ccrux⊃ Ἔνθα κατά/κιτε Πατρί/κις υἱὸς Γερα/σίμου πρεσ(βυτέρου) [ccrux⊃] Ἔνθα κατάκι/[τε ---]νδων / [ιος? ζήσ]αντι / [---]ω / [---]ι
546	Britto	ccrux in circulo⊃ / ccrux⊃ Britto presb(iter) / vixit annos / LXV requievit / in pace D(omi)ni d(ie) / Nonas Agustas (!) / era DLXXXIIII

DAT	IDENTIFICATIO	TEXT
556	Vincentius	⊂crux⊃ / Vincentius / famulus Dei / vixit annos / LVI requievit / in pace d(ie) VII K(a)l(endas) / Novemb(res) era / DLXLIIII
566	Senatrex	⊂crux patea in circulo sub arcu⊃ / Senatrex famu/la D(e)i vixsit an/nos XVIII requ(iev)it / in pace Do(mi)ni d(ie) ter/tio decimo Kalen/das Martias era / DCIIII
566	Glandarius	[G?]landarius fa/mulus Dei vixsit / annos plus minus / XXXVIII requievit in / pace Do(mi)ni d(ie) tertio / Kalendas Iunias / era DCIIII
566	Tyberius	⊂crux⊃ / Tyberius licto/r (!) famulus Dei vi(xi)/t annos plus min/us XIIII men(se)s quinq/uem requievit in pace / Domini die XIII Kalenda/s Iunias era DCIIII
566	Hilarinus	Hilarinus / fam(u)l(us) Dei / vixit an(no?) / uno m(enses) V / d(ies) V req(u)i/evit in pa/ce d(ie) Non(as) / Iunias era / DCIIII
566	unnamed	[---] / [---]r[---] / [--- i]n pace / [---]I Kal(endas) Iuli/[as er]a DCIIII
571	Antonia	⊂crux sub arcu in circulo crux⊃ / Antonia fa/mula Dei vix(i)t / annos XLVIIII / requievit in / pace Do(mi)ni ter/tio Nonas Ag/ustas (!) era DC/VIIII
587	Rufina	⊂crux in circulo crux in circulo⊃ / ⊂crux⊃ Rufina / relegiosa famula / XPI vixit an(nos) p(lus) m(inus) / XXXXV requievit / in pace D(omi)n(i) d(ie) V Kal(endas) / Octob(res) era DCXXV
662	Silbanus	⊂crux⊃ / Silbanus / famulus D(e)i / infas vixit / II an(n)o(s) uno / mense (!) V / d(ies) o(bi)it er/a septi/genten/sima (!)
706	Afranius	⊂crux⊃ / Afranius pr(es)b(iter) / decessit ⊂hedera⊃ in pa/ce ⊂hedera⊃ D(omi)n(i) n(ostri) IHS XPI / d(ie) V Id(u)s Febr(uarias) era / DCCXLIIII m(embra) r(equiescet)
s/d	Adiutor	Adiu/tor fa[mu]/[lus De]i requie[vit] / [i]n pace di[e] / [---] Id(us) Ma(ias) / [---]
s/d	unnamed	[---]XX / [--- requievit in] pa/[ce D(omi)n(i) vel D(e)i --- Ka]l(e)nd(as) / [---e]ra / [---]
s/d	Vincentia	⊂crux in circulo⊃ / [Vin]centia fam(ula) D(e)i / [vix]it an(nos) XI ric(ess)i[t] / [in pa]ce d(ie) V Kal(endas) [---] / [--- era —]LVII
s/d	Sabastianus vel Sabastius	Sabas[-tianu vel -tiu]/s famu[lus] / [---]
s/d	Exsoderus	⊂columna sub arcu columna columba crux [columba ---] columna⊃ / ⊂ crux⊃ Exsode/ru[s?] pres(by)t(er) / vixit a(nnos) / LXXXV r/[eq]uit in / p[a]c[e] <die> IIII Kal(endas) / [---]
s/d	Stefanianus	⊂ corona⊃ / Stefa[nian]/u[s famu(lus)] / Dei vixit [an(nos)] / LXIII r[e]qui[evit] / [i]n pace d[ie ter]/[t]io Kal(endas) [---] / era [---]
s/d	unnamed	[---] famu[lus vel la] / [--- vixit a]nn(os) ⊂ hedera⊃ X [---]
s/d	unnamed	[---] / [---vixi]/t a[nnos ---] / X [-] rece[s]/sit in p[a]/ce d[ie---] / [---]
s/d	unnamed	[---] / [--- f]am/[ulus vel -a D(e)i infan?]s / [vixit ann]os / [---]
s/d	unnamed	[---] / [--- f]amu/[lus vel –a Dei vixit a]nn/[os plus minus -]XI / [---]
s/d	unnamed	[---] / [--- f]am[ulus vel -a] / [D(e)i vi]xit ⊂ hedera⊃ [an(nos)] / [---]XXVIII / [re]quiev[it ---] / [---]
s/d	unnamed	Qui[---] / LN[---] / VI?[---]
s/d	unnamed	[---] / [--- re]quiev/[it i]n pa(ce) d(ie) ses / [Ka]l(endas) Ian(uarias) / [era ---]IIII
s/d	unnamed	[---] / [--- pa]ce / [d(ie)] XVI Kal(endas) ⊂ hedera⊃ / [N]ovemb(res) / [era] DXL[---]V?
s/d	unnamed	[---] / [---] die / [--- ka]l(endas) Iulias / [---]XXV
s/d	unnamed	[---] / [---] Dei [---] / [---]XXX[---] / [--- i]n pa[ce ---] / [---]
s/d	unnamed	⊂ crux? in circulo⊃ / [---]ius vel -lus [---] / [---]
s/d	unnamed	|[------]|| / ora pro me
s/d	unnamed	⊂ crux in circulo⊃ / E[--- h]onesta / [femina ---]EN / [---]X?X / [---] / [---]⊂ hedera⊃
s/d	Filex	Recessit / in pace / Filex / XII Kal(endas) Iuli/as

Looking at this table, it is easy to detect, when one is familiarised with Early Christian funerary epigraphy, besides the excellence of this cemetery's material, nearly all dated, some relevant characteristics.

One of them concerns the notation of the dates, which appears in some of this cemetery's inscriptions, exclusive of Lower Guadiana's basin. They replace the last numeral by the corresponding weight value. This particularity has already been signalled by J. Gil[16], who recognised the regional character of this practice and determined the numerical value of these notations. In Mértola, this notation system appears in inscriptions dated from a short period, in the early 6th century. It is interesting to observe that, although it is limited in time, this practice cannot be understood solely as the fashion of a period. In fact, in the same cemetery, we have other inscriptions encompassed by the same time-span, in which the notation of the last numeral employs the numerical sign. The reason for this practice is still not clear and the evaluation of the "socio-religious quality" of the deceased does not help to solve the problem. For, while it is true that this practice is present in most of the civilians' inscriptions, it also appears in the epitaphs of some of the Church members. Civilian *versus* religious should not be, thus, an operative criterion to solve the problem. One must look for the solution in the "social quality" of the town's inhabitants of the period.

Another very easily perceived aspect is the high rigidity of the funerary discourse. This rigidity is all the more intriguing if we remember this is the cemetery of a large river port. One would expect greater fluctuation in the formulas, reflecting the variety of influences characteristic of towns with ports. The presence of Greek speaking people and of their epitaphs is the only breach in the formulas' monotony. If we compare the formulas of Mértola's epitaphs with those of Mérida's, we realise that in Mérida, the Episcopal seat, the formulas' variation in greater than in Mértola. The reason for this apparent contradiction, expressed in the monotony / variability of the formulas, can be explained. Not by the profile of these two towns' populations, but by the ability to have public representation of the individual in each of them, within the frame of the community constituted by the Church.

I mean to say, thus, that in Mértola, for a long time, the Church conditioned and functioned as a reference frame for civil society in terms of funerary discourse. The monotonous formulaic discourse system was more necessary in a heterogeneous society, as a way to help creating institutional unity. In a town like Mérida, on the contrary, the bishop's presence imposed itself socially on the community's everyday life, thus leaving no opportunity for the variations in the formulas to be understood as an excess of autonomy.

Yet another interesting aspect of Mértola's cemetery epigraphy is the existence of references to the social quality of *vir honestus* and of *honesta femina*.

Hispania's Christian funerary epigraphy records the designations *vir honestus* and *honesta femina* socially qualifying the first name of some of the deceased, in the epitaphs. The same expression, spelled *bir onnestus*, appears again in a graffito on a ceramic vase from Valencia[17].

a. 510	*Auriola*	*honesta femina*	Mértola	ICERV 488
a. 510	*Fistellus*	*v(ir) hon(es)t(u)s*	Mértola	ICERV 487
a. 517	*Sabinianus*	*v(i)r h(onestu)s*	Silveirona	ICERV 497
a. 524	*Aianes*	*hon(esta) fem(ina)*	Mértola	FE. 121
a. 596	*Acantia*	*honesta femina*	Córdoba	ICERV 165
[s.d.]	[unnamed]	*[h]onesta [femina]*	Mértola	ICERV 104
[s.d.][18]	*[...]ratus*	*bir onnestus*	Alicante	M.M. 12

17. Buchner, E., "Eine neue Christlische inschrift aus Alicante", *MM* 12, 1971, 195-201 Texto da inscrição: *[...]ratus / bir onnestus / commane(n)s / aput* (chrismon) *u[i]am*.

18. Martinez Morella, V., "Hallazgos paleocristianos en el término municipal de Alicante", *X Congreso Nacional de Arqueologia (Mahón, 1967)* Zaragoza 1969, 457-459, thinks this finding comes from a church from the 4th/5th century.; Buchner, *o.c.*; to this author, the inscription must date from the 6th century, judging by the shape of the characters p. 201.

16. See Gil, J., "Aera....as depundius, etc.", *Cuadernos de Filologia Clásica* X, 1976, 375-384.

It is interesting to see that the geographical distribution of the so-called *viri honesti* / *honestae feminae* shows they predominate in the south of Hispania. Mértola counts the higher number of records. Alicante and, especially, Cordoba, with *Acantia*'s inscription, are other towns[19], which should be mentioned. The Roman *villa* of Silveirona, with *Sabinus's* inscription, contradicts the idea of the exclusive use of this qualification on the epitaphs of urban cemeteries. In fact, it brings foward a case happening in a community, which, demographically, seems to be limited to the population of a rural *villa*.

The dating of the gravestones makes it possible to establish a chronological limit for the use of this designation, between 510 and 596 AD. In Hispania the time-span of the use of the formula lasts longer than in Rome, where, according to E. Diehl[20], it goes from 362 to 543 AD. Mértola has the most ancient dated Hispanic vestige.

Among all this information, Cordoba's inscription deserves our attention. On this gravestone with *Acantia*'s epitaph, we have, on the other side, the epitaph of *Calamarius*, dated from 608 AD. It is followed by another one, which refers to *Acantia*, and which Vives[21] understood to be the transcription *ad sensum* of the text from 596 AD. By reusing the support, the older text was hidden, and the new users chose to recopy it. The two texts are:

ICERV 165 (a. 596)
> + *Acantia honesta / femina famula Dei / vixit annos XXIII se/mis recessit in pace / sub die X K(a)lendas / Martias er(a) dCXXXIIII*

ICERV 166 b (a. 608)
> + *Acantia famula Dei / vixit annis [vigenti] et / tres semis recessit in pace / die X k(a)l(endas) M[artias...]*

The differences between the two are considerable and the most interesting fact is that the qualification of *honesta femina* no longer appears in text 166 b, although the copy preserved the qualification of *famula Dei*, along with the remaining formulas. It would seem, thus, that *ad sensum* it made more sense to keep the formulas with clear religious connota-
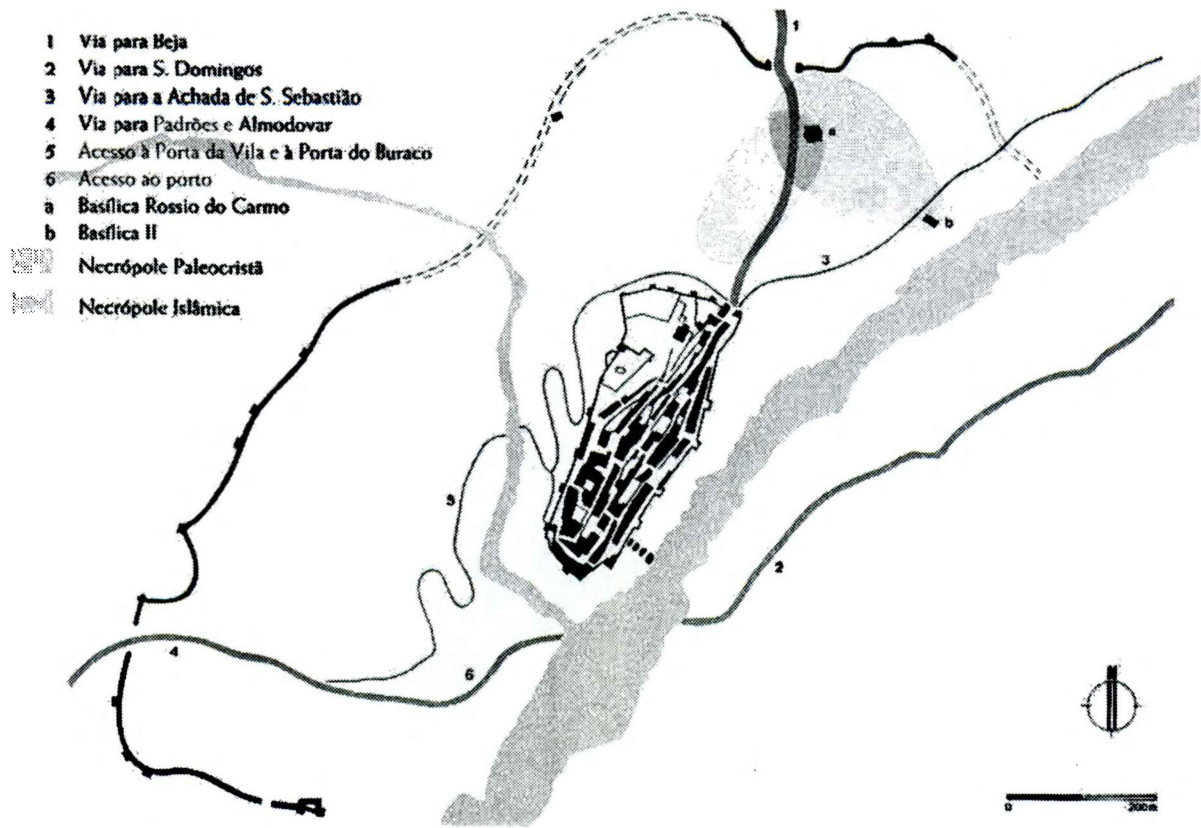
tion, even if they were more common, than the designation *honesta femina*, which is the only one found in this town until today, and that even then would surely not have gone unnoticed by the copyists. At least, the attitude seems strange, not as much by the infidelity of the copy as by the explicit erasure of the mark of social prestige, which the designation meant. Unless, in the 12 years that went by before the gravestone was reused, the reference to this quality of *Acantia*'s ceased to be socially relevant, and became useless. Or maybe its reference was socially inconvenient to the memory or to the family of *Calamarius*. Or, perhaps, between 596 and 608 AD, there came about within Cordoba's Christian community a cultural process of criticism against the public exhibition of "mundane expressions" of vain social glory, like *honesta femina*. What we must admit is that the "social punishment" falls upon the title, and not upon the person who used it.

With Recaredo's conversion to Catholicism (587 AD), the Church returns to the political power the control of the social structure, which, inherited from the Roman Empire, it had kept, thanks to its undisputable ideological power, in times of political uncertainty. The people who moved upwards in the social scale within a late Roman system, and who were not able to see their situation clearly defined within the Roman institutional frame, cannot find a place in this new Visigothic social system. The senatorial elites now candidates to court nobility, on the contrary, can face, near the Visigothic kings, the replacement of their lord, whereas the local elites and non-senators will find no social equivalence for themselves within the structure of the Visigothic kingdom. This impossibility to approach power finally casts them aside from the political game and, as they loose social prestige, so do their titles loose their efficiency and disappear from the gravestones. This can be the explanation for the disappearance in epigraphy of the references to the category of *vir honestus* and *honesta femina*. We cannot think, given the town's strategic location, that Mértola's port ceased to be important under the Visigoths' rule. The cemetery's last inscription dates from 706 AD, and mentions *Afranius*, a local church presbyter, but the social composition was surely affected by the events of 587 AD. A more detailed study of the epigraphic material and its necessary insertion in a historical context will no doubt tell us more, about the events witnessed by the deceased buried in this cemetery.

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19. It is not certain that Alicante's inscription is, like those of Mértola, in a clearly urban context. The findings of Font. Calent are about 5 miles away from the centre of the present day town. Besides this nucleus, in 1987 there were also the Early Christian vestiges from the town in Benalua, Condomina and Banacantil.

20. Diehl, E., *ILCV*, inscriptions n. 301 and 335, respectively.

21. Vives, J., *ICERV*, n. 166.

1 Via para Beja
2 Via para S. Domingos
3 Via para a Achada de S. Sebastião
4 Via para Padrões e Almodovar
5 Acesso à Porta da Vila e à Porta do Buraco
6 Acesso ao porto
a Basílica Rossio do Carmo
b Basílica II

Necrópole Paleocristã

Necrópole Islâmica

Map nº 1: Mertola and the river.