REGIONAL STUDIES
THE URBAN DOMUS IN LATE ANTIQUE HISPANIA:
EXAMPLES FROM EMERITA, BARCINO AND COMPLUTUM

Javier Arce, Alexandra Chavarría and Gisela Ripoll

Abstract

This paper examines the characteristics, evolution and decline of the late antique domus of Spanish towns, using case studies from three cities: Augusta Emerita, Complutum and Barcino. It discusses how, during the 4th c. A.D., urban town houses were dramatically renovated and lavishly redecorated according to the tastes of their owners, the urban elites. These domus, which frequently replaced the public buildings and open spaces of the Early Roman era, acquired large, apsidal and basilical spaces, in many cases decorated with mosaics and paintings. This study also charts the decline of these domestic buildings, when, from the late 5th, and in some cases the 6th c., they were re-built using poorer materials, subdivided, or re-used for agricultural or funerary purposes.

Introduction

Whilst the rural habitat of Late Antiquity has been the object of extensive studies in the Iberian Peninsula, the late antique urban housing has been generally neglected. Despite scattered references to the domus in the archaeological record and literary sources for Hispania, there is no overall study (unlike other parts of the Empire) devoted to late antique housing in this region. Consequently, themes such as the architecture, decoration, evolution and disappearance of residential structures, have been neglected. Nevertheless, the subject is obviously

1 Gorges (1979); Fernández Castro (1982); Arce (1997a); Chavarría (2005); Chavarría (2007).
2 The doctoral thesis of Prof. Balil had a similar approach, but it has never been published (see however Balil 1959 and Balil 1972–74). See also La casa urbana hispanoromana (1991) and Beltrán Lloris and Mostalac Carrillo (1997).

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