



# THE ROMAN NECROPOLIS OF ALGARVE (PORTUGAL)

ABOUT THE SPACES OF DEATH IN  
THE SOUTH OF LUSITANIA

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## **Abstract**

We intend to disclose some of the results of the analysis of the spaces of death from Roman times that were excavated in Algarve for over a century. The conclusions obtained do not fit, as it is understandable, in a summary article on the topic. However, it is important to disclose some that denounce the status and religion of the people who inhabited the South of the Roman province of Lusitania.

We have particularly emphasised the problems related to the transition from the cremation rite to the rite of inhumation of the corpse and the possible visibility of the first signs of Christianity in the tombs of these necropoleis. Arguments that favour and refute either situation were weighed, which cannot be fully expressed here, but are better exposed in the doctoral thesis of the author.

**KEYWORDS** – ALGARVE; ROMAN NECROPOLIS; FUNERARY RITUALS; LUSITANIA.

## **Resumo**

Pretende-se dar a conhecer alguns dos resultados da análise dos espaços da morte de época romana que foram escavados, no Algarve, ao longo de mais de um século. As conclusões obtidas não cabem, como é compreensível, num artigo de síntese sobre o tema. Porém, é importante a divulgação de alguns que delatam o estatuto e religião das gentes que habitaram o Sul da província romana da Lusitânia.

Sublinhámos sobretudo as problemáticas que rondam a transição do rito de cremação para o rito de inumação do cadáver e a possível visibilidade dos primeiros indícios de Cristianismo nas sepulturas destas necrópoles. Foram pesados os argumentos que favorecem e refutam uma ou outra situação, que aqui não podem ser expressados em toda a sua plenitude, mas que estão mais bem expostos na tese de doutoramento do autor.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** – ALGARVE; NECRÓPOLES ROMANAS; RITUAIS FUNERÁRIOS; LUSITÂNIA



# 1. Introduction

Although archaeology has been greatly developed in recent years, the spaces of death in Roman times were always given less attention. In other words, since the middle of last century, research on these contexts almost stalled, consisting merely on emergency works during the recent decades. Fortunately, this disinterest in funerary contexts, perhaps preconception, is tending to disappear gradually.

The Algarve (Fig. 1) has always been a region that has attracted the researchers, although giving more importance to other periods and contexts (Arruda & Pereira, 2013, pp. 139-140). Abel Viana was the last to exponentially explore the region. However, Estácio da Veiga remains an unavoidable name in the Portuguese Archaeology. We owe him a large part of the collection that currently rests in the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia (National Museum of Archaeology), in Lisbon.

FIGURE 1 – LOCATION OF ALGARVE, SOUTH OF PORTUGAL.

However, the objectives of the work that resulted in the doctoral thesis of the author were not only the study of the contexts which hitherto were being marginalised, of materials that remained unpublished or the need to revise others already published. The importance of this project was particularly evident in the study of beliefs, mentality and religion of the people who inhabited the South of the current Portuguese territory. The necropoleis play an important role in the analysis and understanding of the societies that built them. If, on the one hand, they concern rituality and human mentality, a theme, itself, difficult to approach, on the other hand, these are the realities that offer safer and better preserved contexts, which allow more precise datings and, often, clarifying associations.

Although we have approached more than one hundred funerary spaces, the difficulties encountered were enormous, mainly because almost all the sites were excavated, at least, over fifty years ago, with little information remaining from those interventions. The results obtained for each site are, therefore, also quite different.

Construction of an urban, suburban and rural funerary landscape of the West; transition from a rite of treating the body into another (*crematio* and *humatio*); monumentalisation of the funerary spaces (when and how it happens); typology of the funerary architecture (on the surface and underground); association of the most frequent funeral furniture; understanding of the necropoleis as consumption spaces and identification of equipments of the Roman necropoleis (public or private), were the most important issues to which we sought to obtain, or at least envision, a resolution. It is clear that, implicit in each of these objectives, there are more specific ones.

## 2. Death of a Preconception

Although we may think the Romans feared death, for any Roman citizen, governed by the *ius pontificium*, the most feared was not dying, but to not have a dignified death or the right to the due funeral rites (Vaquerizo Gil, 2010, p. 13). If a citizen was not buried according the rules, he would be destined to wander forever, having thus the eternal rest taken from him, tormenting their descendants who did not meet his desires in life. Out of respect or pity, the relatives of the deceased complied with their obligations. Pay due homage and ceremonies to the deceased was, indeed, a duty, as well as provide them with memorials to speak for them for eternity (Vaquerizo Gil, 2011, p. 95), although wood was often used as epigraphic support, a material that deteriorated relatively quickly.

The concept of death in Roman times has, however, not an easy and even less consensual definition, given that the actions of the living do not allow taking the phenomenon of death in a generalised way (Róman Alcalá, 1996, pp. 126-127). If the fear of being judged for not offering more to the ancestor (Blázquez Martínez, 2006) explains the appearance of tombstones that demonstrate the frustration of those that could not offer a memorial worthy enough of their predecessor (*filia ut potuit / non ut voluit*, CIL I2, 3449, Carthago Nova, Hernández Pérez, 2001, p. 184), we also find situations where family members usurped a *locus religiosus* so they could bury another individual, even though it would correspond to a funerary enclosure with *indicatio pedaturae* (Vaquerizo Gil, 2011, pp. 95-96).

Preconception toward death is therefore not an actual or Christian reaction. It should be noted, moreover, that, with Christianity the burial areas seized the inner parts of the cities, combining two worlds that were separated until then. Such a preconception, however, is contradicted by the fact that Christianity worships death, not in the sense of enjoying it or revering it, but for the courage that is shown by those who face it for a religious cause.

The actions of each individual towards death depend on several factors that inevitably influence the understanding of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, the separation between the world of the living and the world of the dead, in Roman times, could only be forgotten in exceptional cases, for characters of great social and political importance (Toynbee, 1993), which somehow sets the concept of Roman city. Only with the Emperor Leo I (457-474), when it is understood that the Roman cities come into crisis, the areas of cadaverous accumulation penetrated inside the walls (Bartoloni & Benedettini, 2008).

Consequently, the *pomerium*, if we consider that the wall integrates that designation, was also built as a prophylactic and limiting barrier between space of the living and the space of the dead, an area piling with graves, *ustrina* and *puticuli* (Varrão, *De Lingua Latina* V, 4; Pérez Maestro, 2007). These were often frequented by prostitutes, indigents, beggars and also semi-wild animals, which roamed dumpsters, eating even corpses that weren't well buried. It is well known the anecdotal story of Gaius Suetonius about the dog with a human hand in its mouth, that passed by Vespasian while he was eating (*Divus Vespasianus* 5.4).

The Roman society was, above all, concerned with the hygiene of their cities. By making use of the superstitions and beliefs of the citizens, it kept at a distance that which could, somehow, pollute the city life. But, even though the suburbia have been seen as baneful, they were spaces fully integrated into everyday life, also occupied by routes and access roads to other cities, *villae* or *vici*, aqueducts, buildings for shows and even industrial areas.

There are several reasons that could support the investigation about the death, but the one that most seems to justify such an investment is based on the fact that the phenomenon of death, coupled with the suffering (Fig. 2), stimulated the human imagery, fostering the creation of an idealised parallel world. Such idealisation should have its roots in prehistory, but it metamorphosed, reaching our days in such a complex form, still revealing heritages from the most varied cultural matrices.



FIGURE 2 – DETAIL OF RELIEF REPRESENTING THE DEATH OF MELEAGER (LOUVRE MUSEUM, PARIS).

In this sense, it is highly stimulating to notice that the burial process in Classical Antiquity is very similar to that which existed until very recently, and that can still be seen in some Portuguese rural areas, which corroborates the fact that some traditions were maintained, even after the spread of a new religion. In this context, it must be said that the success experienced by Christianity owes much to the assimilation of other religious practices, which enabled it to recruit followers who saw in the new religion similarities with the old ones. For this reason, it is also a mixing of a wide variety of beliefs that varied from region to region. It was, above all, a smart way to approach the majority of the population and to convince them into following the new faith, which, although preaching new ideals, did not represent an abrupt rupture with the pagan religious practices.

The necropoleis were not just spaces of cadaveric accumulation. The integration of the necropoleis in the everyday lives of the citizens is proven by the testimonies of Plutarch (*Tiberius Gracchus* 8, 10; [Rodríguez Neila, 2008, p. 308](#)), when he mentioned that the monuments were often used as a support for paintings of political advertising, announcements of shows or graffiti about various topics. They were also used as latrines, a practice condemned by several witnesses ([Rossetti, 1999, pp. 235-236](#)). This permanent coexistence between the living, mostly indigents, vagrants and prostitutes, and the dead fostered the increasingly blatant plea of the deceased, through the epitaphs, to those who frequented or inhabited the cemeterial areas. In the epigraphic supports, often made with organic materials or mortar, as demonstrated by the recent discovery of a votive memorial (*ara*) in the area of Lagos<sup>1</sup>, it was beseeched not to be forgotten, but it was also asked to be respected and that no one destroyed or violated them. Indeed, *violatio sepulcri* (Fig. 3) was the outrage most feared by the Romans ([Remesal Rodríguez, 2002, p. 374](#)), because the necropoleis had the signs of their lineage, the family symbols and the most prevalent individuals (*gens*) of a city.

FIGURE 3 – DE SEPULCHRO VIOLATO (ROMEYN DE HOOGHE, 1695).

Besides ensuring their memory, stimulated by a set of complex rituals, with a solid and inviolable tomb and a memorial worthy of their virtues and accomplishments ([Bendala Gálan, 2002](#)), the Romans had themselves almost always accompanied by funerary furniture and one or more coins, placed inside the mouth, on the chest or in the palm of the hand (Propertius, *Elegiae* IV, 11, 7; Apuleius, *Psyche et Cupido* VI, 18 *apud* [Poux, 2009, p. 36](#)), author who concludes that this practice is an obvious import of the Greco-Roman world (*Ibidem*). During the late second century and the third century, they were also placed in scallop shells (Fig. 4). They were intended as a payment to the ferryman Charon, who was in charge of transporting the newly arrived souls to Hades, across the rivers Styx and Acheron, which separated the world of the living and the world of the dead. It is curious to note that this mythological separation is often evident in the organisation of Roman cities or *villae*. We often find necropoleis that are separated from the residential areas by small watercourses, as the necropolis of Terrugem, in Elvas ([Viana, 1950](#); [Wolfram, 2011](#)), Casal do Rebolo, in Sintra ([Gonçalves, 2012](#)), and also being possible to admit this situation for the one of Amendoal, in Faro, recently excavated, or the Eastern one of the city of Balsa, Torre d'Ares in Tavira.

FIGURE 4 – BURIAL OF THE AMENDOAL NECROPOLIS, IN FARO, WITH A COIN IN A SCALLOP SHELL, LOCATED AT THE FOOT OF THE CORPSE. PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN BY MIGUEL BARBOSA.

Christianity brought a radical transformation of the city and the mentality during Late Antiquity, since the city, mainly residential during the High Empire, eventually received the funerary function as well. In contrast, the suburb, previously mainly funerary, although also residential, would end up being used as a cultural area par excellence, which materialised itself in the construction of new buildings of a religious nature. In fact, at first, Christianity was unable to unbind itself from the pagan funerary spaces, which were not polarised around the main churches, which only came about from the fifth century on.

<sup>1</sup> Information obtained from a Congress poster, which remains unpublished, written by Amílcar Guerra and Tiago Nunes (9<sup>th</sup> Archaeology meeting of Algarve, held in Silves, Portugal).

### 3. Some Data About Death in the South of Lusitania

One of the issues that needed more attention was the moment when the transition from cremation to inhumation in the Southern province of Lusitania happened. This transition, starring the deceased but practiced by the living, seems to have occurred quite early on. Indeed, from the middle of the second century on, if not before, inhumation becomes the main ritual of deposition of corpses, though it happens at slightly different moments in the cities, the countryside or the suburbia. In fact, some necropoleis of higher cadaveric concentration have increasingly evidenced a transition that we place between the late first century and the middle of the next.

This change in how the corpse started being deposited in the ground may not be a result of the introduction of new cults (we are referring to the Eastern cults). Such an assumption is extremely risky, especially if we notice that, despite the bodies having started to be buried, they continued to be accompanied by a high amount of funeral furniture (Fig. 5) and the first signs of Christianity occur, as we shall see, later on. Only later, after the third or fourth quarter of the second century, we witness a gradual reduction of the grave goods, reduced to functional artefacts of the everyday life of the deceased or a coin placed in the hand or in a scallop shell, goods that completely disappear during the third century. We insist, however, that this change seems to have occurred at slightly different times in the country/city/suburb. Furthermore, the former existence of inhumation in some peninsular areas, as is the case of Cordoba (Vaquerizo Gil, 2010, p. 288), has been attributed to the Italic populations, thus contradicting the possibility of its implementation being related to the spread of Christianity. One can admit that both phenomena coincided chronologically somewhere in the Empire, however, that does not seem to be the case in the South of Lusitania.

FIGURE 5 – INHUMATED BURIAL WITH THE RITE OF PORCA PRAESENTANEA, ROMAN-REPUBLICAN NECROPOLIS OF CALLE QUART, VALENCIA, SPAIN (RIBERA I LACOMBA, 2010).

It seems important to note, within this context, that the cost and time required for one rite and for the other must have had some weight. In other words, incinerating a body should require a huge effort, which only few could afford. The time required gathering the fuel, the weather conditions, the construction of the funeral pyre, the time required for the “consumption” of the corpse and the high pollution resulting from the combustion (Nutton, 2000) must also have been responsible for the increasing change of ritual. All these tasks were bypassed by simply depositing the body directly in the ground, thus allowing the family to channel these expenses to other public demonstrations of power. In this context, the sarcophagi, made of stone, lead or other materials (Fig. 6), gained special relevance. They were designed to deposit the body, but at the same time they also served as a form of public ostentation in death. However, later on, the preached simplicity in death becomes increasingly evident as these sarcophagi fall into disuse, during Roman times.

FIGURE 6 – RECONSTRUCTION OF A INHUMATION IN A LEAD SARCOPHAGUS OF ASTIGI (VAQUERIZO GIL, 2010, p. 72), Écija, SPAIN, PARTICULARLY EMPLOYED DURING THE SECOND HALF OF THE SECOND CENTURY AND THE FIRST OF THE THIRD.

It is curious that the very same arguments of simplicity and cost reduction of the *funus*, although on other facts and words, have already been used to justify the Roman funerary landscape of *Emporiae*. There, although the coexistence of cremation and inhumation may be somehow related to the inherited rites of its Greek past (López Borgoñez, 1998), the latest studies have shown an almost absolute predominance of inhumation since the end of the first century (Nolla Brufau et alii, 2005, pp. 247 ff.). But the similarities between the funerary world of the *ager* of *Emporiae* and the one of Southern Lusitania do not stop here, since also in the second century there were monumental tombs in this area that have received incineration burials, proving, in some way, that in this period only the *gens* with economic power could practice the incineration. As in Algarve (Portugal), the funerary contexts of

the Republican and the Julio-Claudian periods are also unknown. It is increasingly evident that the Roman funerary world is not strict or equal in all areas of the Iberian Peninsula, but these similarities between two areas as far apart do cause some perplexity, there being, for the moment, no arguments that justify them.

Directly or indirectly related to the incineration, lies the question of the visibility of the funerary spaces. As of the reign of Augustus it seems evident that there was a change in the visibility of the funerary world and its coexistence with the world of the living. Until then, in the West of the Iberian Peninsula the necropoleis were devised to cloak themselves in the landscape, which explains the contrasting knowledge of necropoleis known from before and after this time. The violation of sacred spaces in times of war was perhaps one of the main reasons that led to the concealment of necropoleis in the first centuries of Romanisation, a reality that only seems to have changed over a long period of peace. The demoralisation of the defeated, when they saw their necropoleis violated by the victors, even in situations of siege, since they were outside the walls, may justify the simplicity, above ground, of many of the Roman-Republican necropoleis. Indeed, these phenomena of violation of sacred spaces must have occurred both during the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula and consequent Romanisation, and during the civil wars that had this area as a stage. Moreover, the phenomenon of invisibility may also have, understandably, some relation with its placement in pre-existent indigenous burial areas, also of poor visibility, at least in the Algarve.

It is possible that the current territory of Southern Portugal has also witnessed the desecration of the necropoleis of Roman-Republican period. Monte Molião (*Laccobriga* ?, in Lagos) currently constitutes one of the sites where the debate ([Arruda & Sousa, 2012, p. 130](#), [Pereira, 2014a, p. 437 ff.](#)) on the political, economic and administrative situation becomes possible, after having sustained the well-known siege of Metellus (Plutarch, *Sertorius*, VIII, 13). This historical event may explain the unawareness of its Roman-Republican necropoleis, as these strategies of town siege and destruction of sacred spaces are well described by *Marcus Antistius Labeo*, later reproduced by Justinian in *Digesta* (XLVIII.12.1.11). Despite this possibility, quite plausible in our view, the fact is that this unawareness may also result from the contrasting visibility of the spaces of death that we noticed before and after the reign of Augustus, which, in any case, may not be incompatible with the formulated hypothesis. Unfortunately, the data that we were able to compile does not allow more than making proposals for work on this subject.

During the High Empire, the reality denounced by the network of occupation of the current territory of Algarve is, as might be expected, virtually the same as that observed in the world of death (Fig. 7). The main population clusters were towns (*Ossonoba* and *Balsa*, Faro and Torre d'Ares respectively), true political and administrative centres that concentrated most of the population. In rural areas the reality seems to have been slightly different, although the Roman *villae* corresponded to expansions of the city itself in the countryside ([Bernardes, 2005](#)). Perhaps because it was the urban elite who owned and administered those *villae*, they corresponded to an urbanity in the countryside. However, it was a disguised urbanity, at least in the funeral world. Their owners imitated the urban way of life and, actually, it was in the rural world that they could express to the utmost the funerary monumentality, like in Cerro da Vila or Milreu. However, this monumentality contrasts with the simplicity with which their dependents were buried, in different parts and further away from the inhabited area. Admittedly, they were also accompanied by remarkable funerary furniture, but it was morphologically distinct and of much lower quality than the individuals governed by the *ius pontificium* or even the freedmen.

#### FIGURE 7 – ROMAN NECROPOLEIS OF ALGARVE, SOUTH OF PORTUGAL, DURING THE FIRST AND SECOND CENTURY AD.

Despite these statements, we must admit that the state of knowledge on High Imperial Roman necropoleis, especially those of the first century, still lacks an amount of data that allows attesting these realities in a far more precise way. Only a few necropoleis have allowed to obtain data on this

early period (about eight from the first century and fifteen from the second century), and most do not allow to speak confidently about the spaces of death in rural areas. Nevertheless, the evolution obtained for these areas of the Roman *villa* of Milreu, Estói, Faro, seems to be a pattern to take into consideration in the South of the province of Lusitania.

However, this High Imperial funerary landscape, denouncing a population network predominantly urban and coastal, would change substantially from the third century on. From then on there seems to be an increasing tendency for dispersion, which led to the formation of small rural towns around the urban centres. However, the major changes during this period, third and fourth century, happen not so much in the population network, but in the mentality of the people and in their religion, where a mutation is now becoming increasingly evident. This phenomenon, we insist, is not directly related with the replacement of incineration by inhumation, because, as we have seen, it happened at an earlier moment, at least in this part of the Empire.

If we do not have facts that can prove that the replacement of the body treatment is directly related with the arrival of Eastern cults, specifically with Christianity, the same cannot be said about the aforementioned changes in settlement. Even though the news about such evidences are scarce for this part of the Empire, we know that in the third century there was already an important Christian community in the capital of the province of Lusitania, Mérida, Spain, information that came to us in a casual manner thanks to a letter sent by Cyprian of Carthage to the communities of Astorga and Mérida (Epistola, LXVII, I, 1 *apud* [Sánchez Ramos, 2006, p. 156](#)). The existence of these communities should compel us to ponder the existence of others located in other cities, especially the coastal ones. During the fourth century, the news about Christian communities, bishops and their dioceses, persecution of Christians and martyrdoms are more abundant. But once again, regarding the West are faced with an awkward silence, only contradicted by some indirect information about bishops who attended Councils (Fig. 8).

**FIGURE 8 – EPISCOPAL SEES OF LUSITANIA, ACCORDING TO MARTÍNEZ TEJERA (2010).**

Despite the obvious limitations that the lack of documentary sources imposes, we are aware of some facts that we can relate indirectly to a Christian presence in the South of Lusitania, specifically the sending of bishops of the dioceses of Évora and Faro to the peninsular Council held in *Elvira*, current Granada ([Dias, 2003, p. 20](#)). Reflecting on the presence of a bishop in the city of *Ossonoba* (Faro) in the first decade of the fourth century, it is not unreasonable to think that the presence of an ecclesiastical representative postdates the existence of a Christian community, specifically during the second half of the third century. On the other hand, we do not know since when was the Bishop mentioned in the Council's documents, Vicente of *Ossonoba*, exercising his functions or even if he had succeeded to another, or more than one, bishop of the same diocese/bishopric. Fact is, since then, this diocese did not stop practicing this religion, which is evidenced by the succession of other bishops to Vicente still during the fourth century, namely Itácio Claro ([Azevedo, 1967](#)).

The wide documentary gaps about Christianity in this geographical area must therefore be filled by the archaeological information that can only be achieved through a proper and continuous methodology. Furthermore, we believe that it is in death that we find the first and earliest evidence of Christianity. Initially, Christianity was unable to unbind itself from the pagan funerary spaces and it is the study of these necropoleis that can contribute decisively to an analysis of the earliest Christianity. The appearance of the first architectural and epigraphic traces is surely a later phenomenon, which becomes more evident after a late stage of the fourth century.

It is curious, however, that was it was not in the urban areas that we could confirmed these traces of Christian practices, but in the suburbia, some more evident than others. We admit that the cities were the main diffusers of this religion, but it was there that the pagan elites were based, who repelled the practitioners of Christianity to the suburbs, a reality that we situate around the third century. Only

later, when also the elites began to join the new religion, perhaps during the end of the third century, it begins to timidly introduce itself in the cities. Indeed, the advancement of Christianity in society was a long and slow process. When the first Christian buildings arise (Pereira, 2014b), Christianity was already practiced in a furtive manner, being more visible in the graves of those who had joined the new religion. Only when it became a widely accepted religion, a religion of masses, did the first buildings constructed in durable materials begin to arise.

In this sense, we believe it is possible to support the idea that the presence of scallop shells in burials from the late second century and third century, usually with bronze coins inside, might be one of the oldest traces of Christianity. We admit, however, that this rite is not enough to defend the existence of an increasingly Christianised community, but the presence of the jar next to the head must correspond to a Christian rite (Giuntella et alii, 1985, p. 55; Saxer, 1987, pp. 173-205), inclusively because it appears later. However, also considering the simplicity in death that Christianity proclaimed, and which can be understood from the absence of funeral furniture in the graves, we notice a certain chronological evolution between these rites, which, although it is a risky proposal, we take into account (Fig. 9). Therefore, the first, and oldest, is the placement of the scallop shell with a coin inside, which can be understood as an association between paganism and Christianity. That is followed by a complete lack of funerary furniture during a period centred in the third century, culminating with the placement of the jar next to the head of the deceased, a rite that has been associated with baptism, which some catechumens reserved or accepted at the end of life, in a time when Christianity was still in clear progression.

FIGURE 9 – PROPOSAL FOR THE CHRONOLOGICAL EVOLUTION OF THE BURIAL RITES MENTIONED.

Despite the bold readings of the spaces of death of Algarve, which, as mentioned, were mostly suburban but also rural, this pattern does not apply to all the spaces of death. The urban necropolis of *Ossonoba* (Faro) seems to refute this evolution, primarily because during the third century the presence of rich funerary furniture is still particularly evident. However, we also know that it is in urban areas that Roman necropoleis achieve maximum diversity, with monumentalised areas, others with mere graves with common memorials, but containing rich goods, yet others destined to the most simple people, and, certainly, there were also funerary *colegia*, for those who could not afford a tomb, or *puticuli* to where many of the slaves, indigents or convicts corpses were simply thrown. Thus, the readings on the urban spaces of death may vary depending on the areas that are excavated.

In parallel to this evolution of the funerary rites, increasingly visible forms of Christian propaganda started being developed. Just as the suburb seems to have been the stage in different *funus* rites, it also seems to have been it for a cult functionality materialised in the construction of the first religious buildings that must have represented an attraction to new practitioners. Some may even have had originally a funeral functionality, as with the primitive construction of Santa Eulália in Merida (Fig. 10). We are referring to the *Martyrium* or *Memoria* (López Cuevas, 2011, p. 3).

FIGURE 10 – MARTYRIUM OF SANTA EULÁLIA IN MÉRIDA, SPAIN, AND HIS IDEAL RECONSTRUCTION.

The *Martyria* correspond to monumentalised tombs of martyrs, upon which the worship centralises, as exemplified by Santa Eulália of Merida, in Spain, or to buildings that end up containing their remains after a *translatio*. The *Memoriae* relate to buildings or enclosures built on a key-site related to the life or work of a martyr, usually without any relics or his mortal remains. The *Martyria* and the *Memoriae* must be the oldest buildings built in honour and memory of the defenders of Christianity, having, some of them, become authentic spaces of worship, evolving into *Eclesiae* and *Basilicas*, having as a good example the case of Torre de Palma (Monforte, Portugal) (Maloney, 1995; Wolfram, 2011, p. 29). Some others may have been forgotten, especially those that were the primitive place of the tomb and later subjected to *translatio*, or those that were further away from the cities.



We are not surprised with the location of these buildings in the *suburbia*, or even further away from the cities, especially if we think about the prohibition of burial within the cities, still enforced at this time, and the persecution of Christians, which only ended in 313 with the Edict of Milan. Furthermore, as shown by the preliminary data from the necropolis of Faro (*Ossonoba*), the progress of Christianity was particularly halted in the cities. Perhaps because they were located in the suburbs, further away from the city and were not absorbed into the urban fabric, many of these buildings eventually underwent a transfer of the cult to the inner city and were then abandoned.

It is possible to support the presence of these in the Algarve, although it is not always possible to distinguish between *Martyrium* and *Memoria*. The two samples in Algarve are located in the Roman *villae* of Quinta de Marim and Milreu (Fig. 11) and display an architecture exactly equal to that observed in the original *Martyrium* of Merida, in Spain. Most of these structures, with chronologies from the fourth century, particularly from the first half, have been increasingly related with this functionality, proven by archaeological data and, sometimes, supported by sources. These structures have been defined as Constantinian Mausoleums (Martínez Tejera, 2006).

FIGURE 11 – BUILDINGS FROM ALGARVE SIMILAR TO THE CASE OF THE PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN BUILDING OF SANTA EULÁLIA, LOCATED IN THE CAPITAL OF THE ROMAN PROVINCE OF LUSITANIA.

Although the cases of Algarve have been classified as pagan temples, it is increasingly evident that they may have been the first Christian buildings dedicated, perhaps, to martyrdom worship in that area, around which *ad sanctos* burials were later developed. Some of these buildings may have evolved into basilicas, although most appear to have been abandoned at a time when Christianity was focused in the cities. We should also not discard its use as *ecclesiae*, before its evolution into basilicas.

We can not fail to remark that which seems to be the key moment for the free development of Christianity, the first half of the fourth century, although it is possible to support evidence of its existence before that. It was the neutrality of the State in relation to Christianity, the development of the cult to the martyrs, unobstructed in the meantime, and a considerable renewal of the *villae*, begun by Constantine I and later stimulated by a Hispanic emperor assumedly Christian, Theodosius I, that enabled, from this moment on, a greater visibility of Christianity.

The major difference between these two *villae*, Quinta de Marim (Olhão) and Milreu (Faro), resides above all in the longer survival of one in relation to the other. Effectively, a greater continuity can be understood in the case of Olhão, which gradually developed the Christian cult, eventually receiving the designation of *Statio Sacra*, a terminology to which some authors have proposed an origin during the Late Antiquity or the Byzantine period by taking support in its absence in the *Antoninum Itinerary* (Tovar, 1976; Alarcão, 2005, pp. 301-303; Graen, 2007, p. 276). Indeed, the typology of some of the known buildings explored by Estácio da Veiga relate to significantly later realities, associated with some funeral steles clearly Paleochristian (Dias & Gaspar, 2006, pp. 221-224). Unfortunately, the state of knowledge on this key site for the development of Christianity in the South of Portugal is too deficient, not even allowing to establish a clear evolution of the spaces of death.

The building of Milreu appears to have been used for a longer period, evidenced by a constant remodelling, which may have changed its initial appearance, contrary to what was verified in Quinta de Marim, where the construction of a larger cultic building must have been justified, we refer to a basilica (Graen, 2007). However, it remains to be determined whether or not the reality proposed to Quinta de Marim was the result of an increasing affluence of believers to a space that was private and then was considered public.

However, this difficulty in relating certain remains with an emergent Christianity was not only observed in this *civitas*, even when there are written sources that allow it. Such reality was already noticed in the case of Mérida, to which there are documented sources that corroborate a fast Christianisation, still during the third century. However, their verification through the archaeological remains does

not always provide evident elements that relate them with the Christian community of the third or even the fourth centuries (Arce, 2002, p. 173, Sánchez Ramos, 2006, p. 157). In fact, this period, in the capital of the province of Lusitania, is characterised by a duality of pagan and Christian remains and, for the latter case, it is precisely the necropoleis that show the existence of such community, which has its maximum exponent in the *Martyrium* of Santa Eulália (Mateos Cruz, 1999) and in the Christian necropolis that was created around it.

The similarities with the cases of the capital of the Roman province (*Augusta Emerita*) seem to be more than mere casual coincidences. The same architectonic typology of these buildings, perhaps with the same functionality, the same sequence of funerary spaces and the same evolution of Christianity itself, apart from slight chronological disparities, seem to certify such readings. The only difference we found between both *civitates* and the cultic buildings lies in the greater distance of the buildings of Algarve in relation to the city. Thus, despite the South of the West of the Iberian Peninsula showing a close business relationship with the province of *Baetica* during the third and fourth centuries, testified by the extremely high amount of archaeological materials with that origin, it simultaneously transpires a strong influence of the main cities of the province it belonged to (Fig. 12). On the other hand, these testimonies are not exclusive of Lusitania. The Italian peninsula also has an abundant amount of Mausoleums with these characteristics (Fornari, 1916; Tolotti, 1982; Perinetti, 1989; González Parrilla, 2002; Baldassarre, 2002; Sacchi, 2003; Tommasi, 2004; Cuscito, 2007), and not only (Bassani, 2007), and the Eastern part of Hispania also witnessed their existence, as is the case of the Plaza Antoni Maura of *Barcino*, where an identical cultic building was uncovered, around which a necropolis was laid out (Ripoll López & Arce, 2001; Heredia Bercero, 2010, pp. 382-383).

FIGURE 12 – ROMAN PROVINCES IN HISPANIA, ACCORDING TO JORGE DE ALARCÃO (2002).

It has already been advanced that the martyrial building of Santa Eulália of Mérida may constitute the hub that spread this type of building in the Iberian Peninsula (Cerrillo Martín de Cáceres, 1995, pp. 365-366), a proposal which we share, although the chronology of construction of these buildings is, in most cases, too identical, which hinders a chronological distinction that reveals the dispersion direction. Perhaps the ecumenical meetings that were being held may also be held responsible for the spread of this new funerary and, mostly, cultic image.

It is undisputed that this phenomenon (Christianity) ended up completely changing the notion of space of death, first transferred to the vicinity of many of these buildings that we talked about, and then to the inside of the big cities, once political and administrative centres and from then on also religious centres where ecclesiastical sees were located, as is the case *Ossonoba*.

## 4. Reflections

For a long time the Roman funerary rites and rituals were adapted to the religious doctrines, beliefs and myths, often altering the archaeological realities. However, it is increasingly evident that it is precisely the funerary rituals that define the religious doctrines of Antiquity. These increasingly reveal themselves as the fundamental accusers of the beliefs of the deceased and, yet, difficult to interpret. We must not forget that these rituals had a strong component of social and power ostentation, especially during the High Empire, which can give a wrong image of the corpse social status, as many became in death that which they had not been in life.

In recent years archaeologists have addressed the issues associated with the funerary rituals in a fashion increasingly oriented towards the practical sense of the ritual as a human action, used as a tool to denounce social symbolism and dominant ideologies. Thus, the funerary rituals stopped being wrongly adapted to the most convenient religious doctrines, tampering information that should be free from any tendency. In fact, the rituals are more than mere reflections of the society that built and idealised them ([López García, 2006](#)), they are authentic political and social instruments that were meant to display the power and the existence of every individual or every family. Nevertheless, sometimes these manifestations are extremely subtle, when condemned by the State, as is the case of Christianity.

The concern with understanding these rituals, free from any tendency, has been growing in recent years, unfortunately not at the same pace in Portugal, accompanied by new techniques of excavation redefined to detect and document in greater detail the delicate ideological manifestations of a particular burial. But this detail is only possible due to an aid from other disciplines, such as Anthropology ([Miguel Ibañez, 1999](#); [Zapata Crespo, 2004](#); [Buikstra & Beck, 2006](#); [Macías López, 2007](#)).



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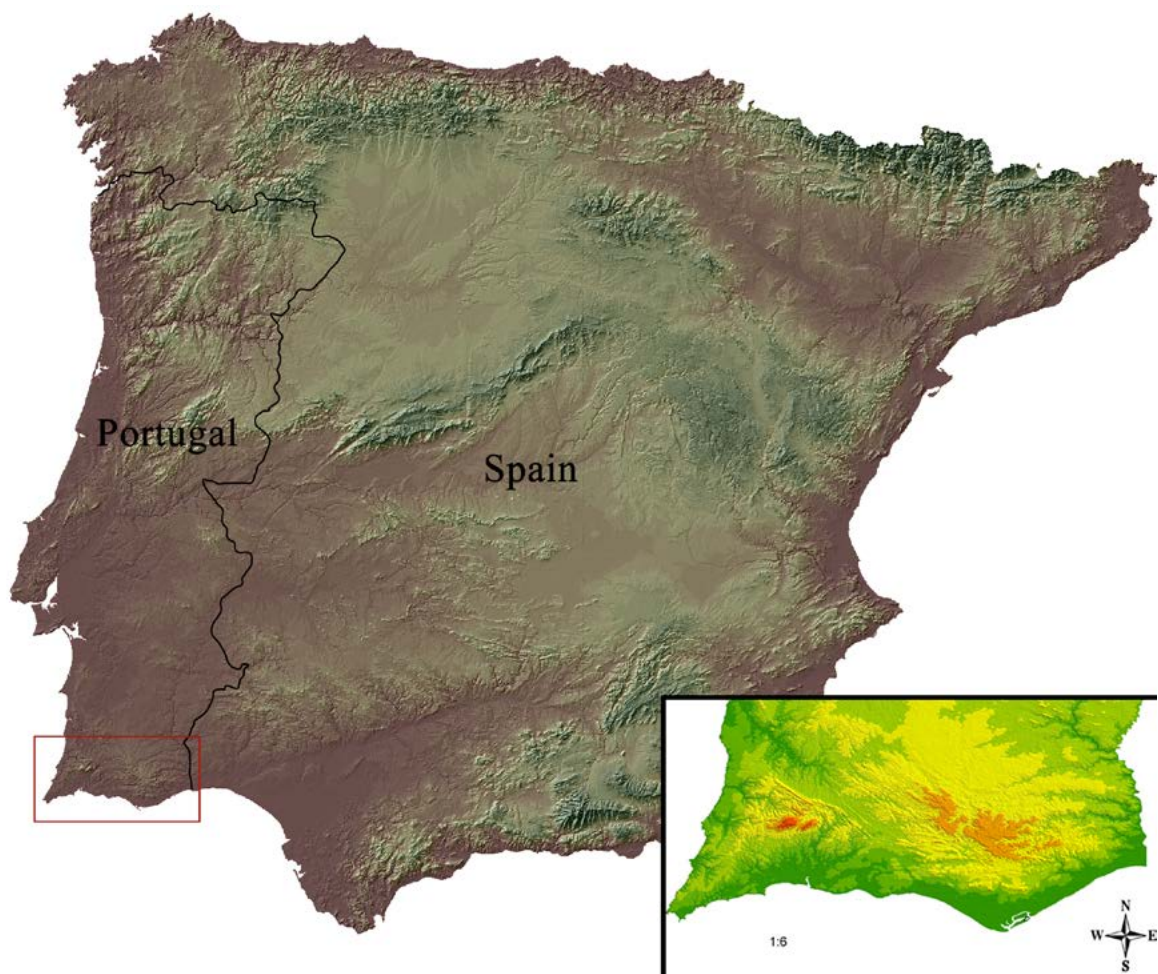
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**FIGURE 1 – LOCATION OF ALGARVE, SOUTH OF PORTUGAL.**



**FIGURE 2** – DETAIL OF RELIEF REPRESENTING THE DEATH OF MELEAGER (LOUVRE MUSEUM, PARIS).





FIGURE 3 – *DE SEPULCHRO VIOLATO* (ROMEYN DE HOOGHE, 1695).



**FIGURE 4** – BURIAL OF THE AMENDOAL NECROPOLIS, IN FARO, WITH A COIN IN A SCALLOP SHELL, LOCATED AT THE FOOT OF THE CORPSE. PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN BY MIGUEL BARBOSA.



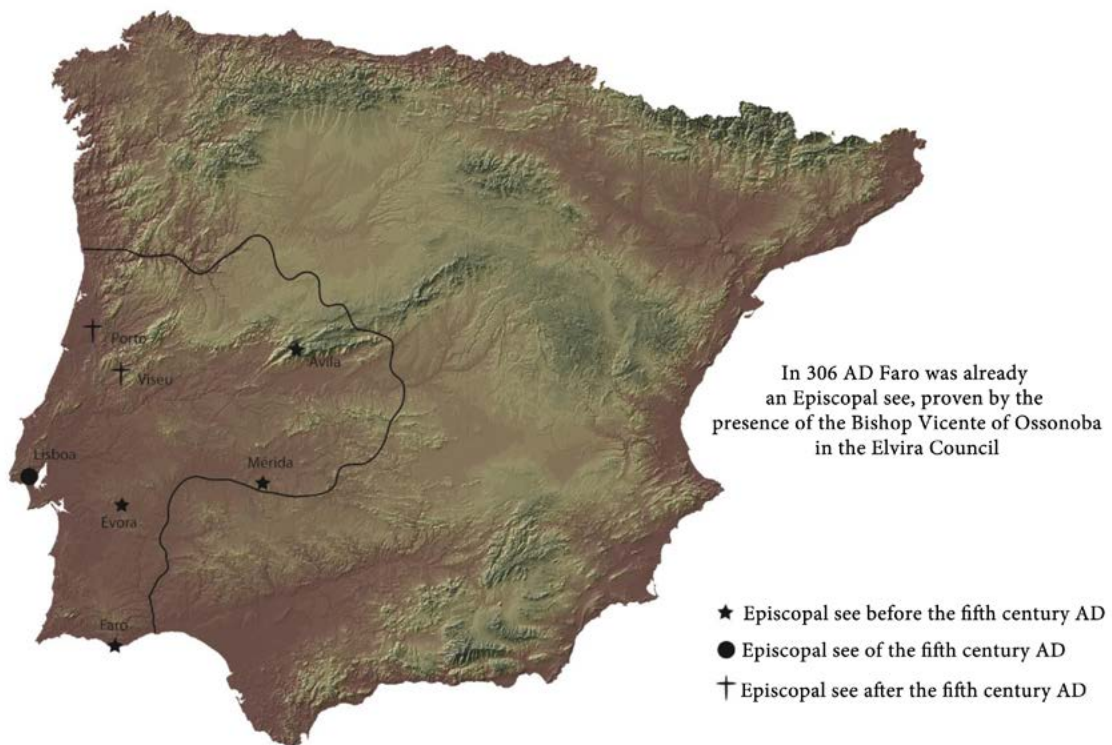
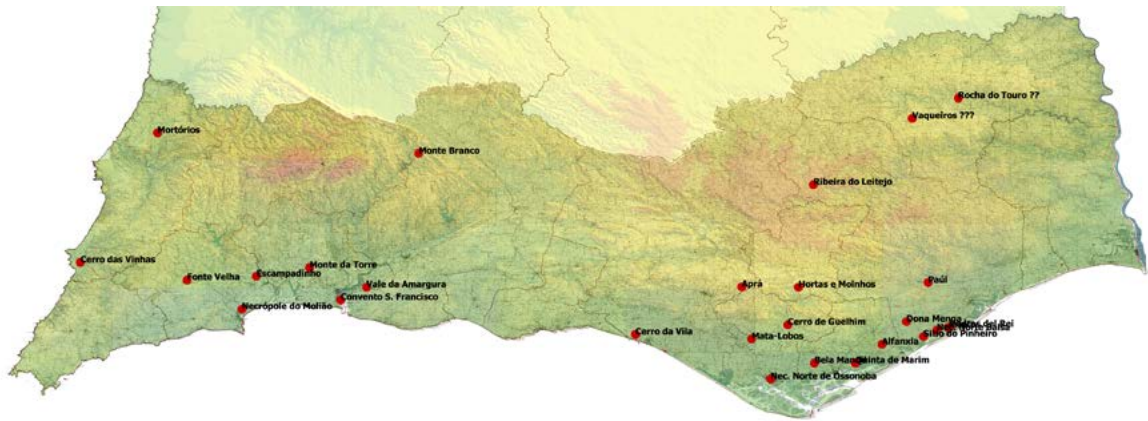
**FIGURE 5** – INHUMATED BURIAL WITH THE RITE OF *PORCA PRAESENTANEA*, ROMAN-REPUBLICAN NECROPOLIS OF CALLE QUART, VALENCIA, SPAIN (RIBERA I LACOMBA, 2010).

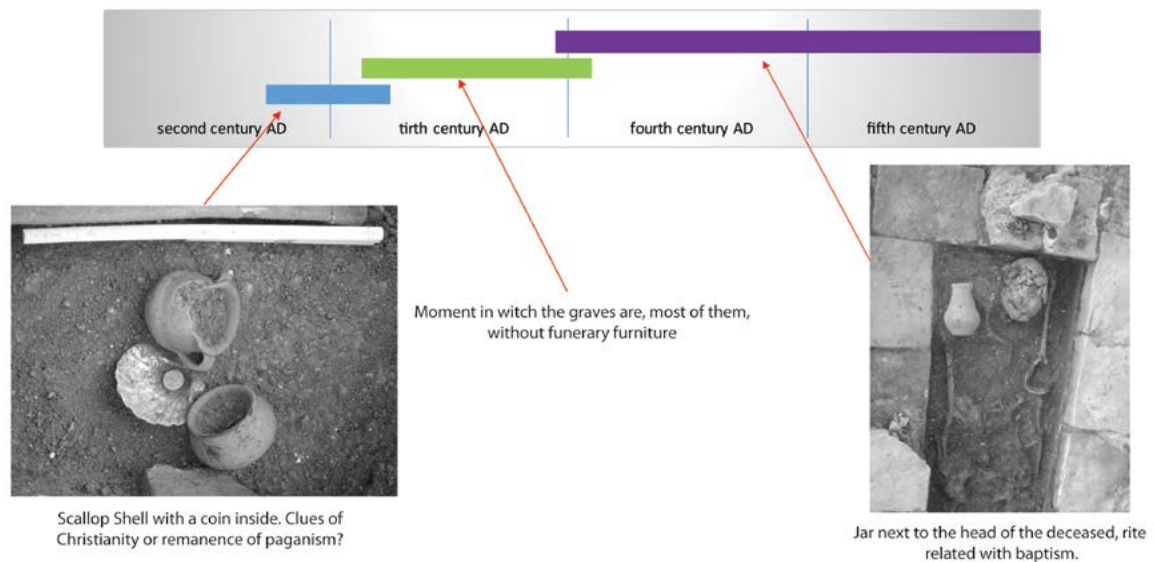




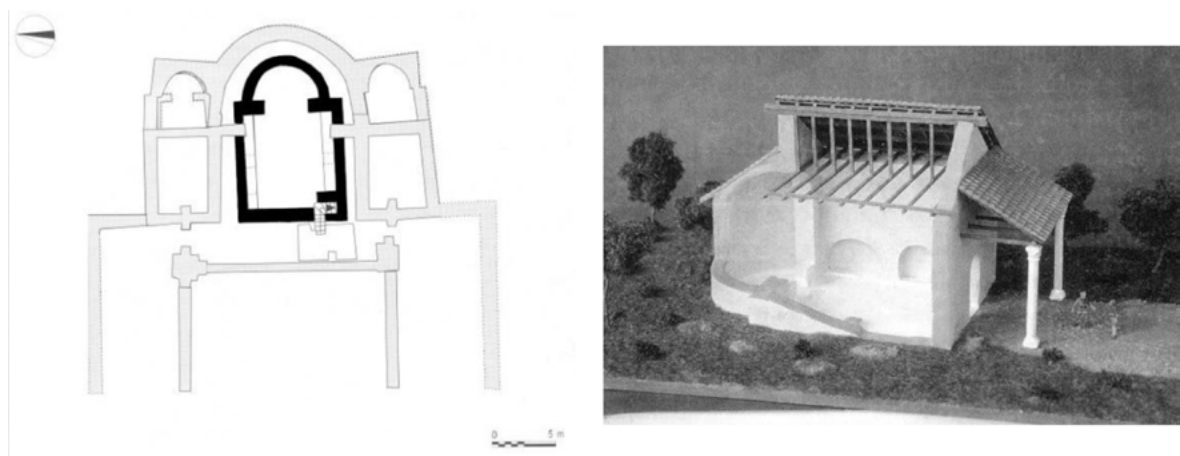
**FIGURE 6** – RECONSTRUCTION OF A INHUMATION IN A LEAD SARCOPHAGUS OF *ASTIGI* (VAQUERIZO GIL, 2010, p. 72), Écija, SPAIN, PARTICULARLY EMPLOYED DURING THE SECOND HALF OF THE SECOND CENTURY AND THE FIRST OF THE THIRD.







**FIGURE 9 – PROPOSAL FOR THE CHRONOLOGICAL EVOLUTION OF THE BURIAL RITES MENTIONED.**



**FIGURE 10 – *MARTYRIUM* OF SANTA EULÁLIA IN MÉRIDA, SPAIN, AND HIS IDEAL RECONSTRUCTION.**

