Archaeology of Architecture and Archaeology of houses in Early Medieval Europe

Arqueología de la Arquitectura y Arquitectura doméstica en la alta Edad Media europea

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Abstract
This paper aims to introduce the «Archaeology of Architecture and Household Archaeology in Early Medieval Europe» dossier, the object of which is to explore the different approaches, methodologies and themes analysed in the study of early medieval architecture in western Europe. More specifically, in what follows, analysis is undertaken of the contexts which explain the recent development of studies on this topic, as well as the main contributions of the seven papers which form this dossier. In addition, the main historical and archaeological problems raised by the analysis of this material record are also discussed.

Key words: Building Archaeology, Household Archaeology, Processual approach, Postprocessual approach, Longhouse, Sunken-Feature Buildings.

Resumen
En este trabajo se presenta el dossier «Arqueología de la Arquitectura y Arqueología de la casa, Procesualismo, Posprocesualismo, Longhouse, Fondos de cabaña».

1. Some years ago I prepared a monographic dossier dedicated to the study of medieval building techniques for the fourth issue of the journal ‘Arqueología de la Arquitectura’ (Azkarate, Quirós Castillo 2005). The objective was to collect together a series of articles which stimulated analysis and debate in relation to one of the most interesting topics then being tackled by the archaeology of architecture, and to propose a platform from which the instrumental reductionism with which some then treated the discipline might be overcome. The project underlying our journal, after its subsequent renovation, has been notably consolidated and enriched, incorporating new themes and experiences, as readers of our most recent editions will have been able to observe. The motivation behind the preparation of this dossier has been that of broadening the questions that the journal approaches so as to include ‘other architectures’ which have not until now featured greatly in its pages, and of stimulating the analysis of domestic material registers not characterised by their monumentality, from a broad European perspective. Ours is not an isolated case, and, for example, for some years now in Italy the term ‘Archaeology of architecture’ has been substituted by that of ‘Archaeology of architectures’, with the aim of embracing other building systems which periodically escape conventional analytical frameworks. In some archaeological traditions, indeed, the very notion of Archaeology of Architecture is primarily identified with the study of domestic architecture (e.g. Steadman 1996; Sánchez 1998; Zarakin 1999).

With the aim of delimiting and giving coherence to the contents of this dossier we have chosen as our chronological framework the early Middle Ages (5th to 10th centuries), given that it was a period in which a profound transformation took place both in forms of dwelling and construction; this selection has been made in order that the study of its architecture can help us to put to the test the conceptual and methodological instruments of historical and archaeological analysis applied elsewhere to the analysis of other architectures. Our study deals, moreover, with a subject matter that currently lacks a Europe-wide synthesis, although national and regional studies have demonstrated the existence of strong patterns that act on a very wide scale (e.g. Klápště, Nissen Jaubert 2007, 85 ss.).

On the other hand, in the last few years a multiplication of studies on the domestic architecture of this period has been produced, due, amongst other things, to the notable development that the practice of preventive archaeology has achieved, and to the undertaking of large archaeological projects against the backdrop of a phase of...
The bibliography is abundant, although amongst recent studies which deserve mention are: Peytremann 2003 for the north of France; Hamerow 2002 for the northwest of Europe; Hamerow 2011 y 2012 for Anglo-Saxon England; O’Sullivan et alii 2010 and Jones 2012 for Ireland or the work of Donat 1980 and Zimmerman 1992, 1998 for the German area. For central and eastern Europe see Buko 2010 and Klášťov 2002.

In Portugal, on the other hand, the first finds coming to light truly are ‘invisible constructions’, given that houses and other such spaces characterised by domestic material vestiges are being identified but such cases lack material elements which allow us to demarcate buildings (plinths, channels, post-holes) (Tente 2011).

2. The dossier is composed of a total of seven studies which have been commissioned with the aim of providing a broad geographical representation of western Europe by way of territorial syntheses, but also in order to offer a wide and multifaceted framework with regard to theoretical approaches, analytical methodologies and results obtained.

Greater weight has been given to Iberian examples, given that this is the territory that currently lacks studies aiming at synthesis. The three studies included here (on Iberia) demonstrate, in paradigmatic form, the richness of approaches that characterises the study of this architecture.

2 On the excavations in Lunar, Ward-Perkins 1981; on domestic architecture in Italy see the work of Brogiolo 1994; Galeri 2011; Franz 2011; Santangeli Valenzani 2011, all of which utilise prior studies.


4 See, for example, Azkarte, Quirots Castillo 2001; Vigil-Escalera Guitrado 2003; Quirots Castillo 2011.
The structuralist approach followed by Sonia Gutiérrez proposes to undertake an analysis of the early medieval and Islamic domestic phenomenon on three different levels (morphological, syntactical and semiotic) and offers intriguing results when it comes to our conception, in diachronic and cultural terms, of the formative processes of domestic spaces in the Iberian Peninsula. In his study of the north-western quadrant of the peninsula, Carlos Tejerizo processes and systematizes, for the first time, results obtained from an important number of preventive archaeological interventions, and he makes recourse to a materialist approach when interpreting the diversity of systems of construction that he detects. Equally suggestive is the contribution of Alfonso Vigil-Escalera, centred on hearths and ovens, which proposes an analysis of domestic space and dwellings not solely defined by vertical structures, walls and plinths, but by interactions engendered by the functioning of daily activities⁵.

The rest of the contributions are structured with reference to much wider territorial syntheses. Giovanna Bianchi, in her discussion of early medieval Italian dwelling spaces dedicates much space to typological and constructive aspects, but her reflections on the forms of dwelling and her analysis of domestic architecture in social terms both lend the piece an assuredly innovative attribute. The apparent contrast manifested by the homogeneity of types of construction with social diversity, as evidenced by various sources, is explained in convincing fashion by the central significance given to the forms of dwelling as opposed to the forms of building, which has been the preeminent approach of the practitioners of archaeology.

Edith Peytremann, the author of an seminal doctoral thesis on the rural settlement of northern France (Peytremann 2003) organises her study in three parts; first, she undertakes a critical evaluation of the historiography; second, she considers the principal themes analysed in France (the tradition of studies on rural architecture; the birth of the village; the integration of bioarchaeological registers; the ‘social reading’ of the register in hierarchical terms; new approaches to domestic space) and lastly she suggests some case studies by way of example.

Mark Gardiner firstly discusses the five approaches that have been followed in Great Britain in the study of this architecture (the regressive approach, the study of waterlogged structures, the reproduction of woodcraft, experimental reconstruction and the study of archaeologi-

⁵ This centrality has been equally emphasised in the study of prehistoric domestic architecture (Vela Cossío 1995, 260-261).
sort of material evidence (S. Gutiérrez, A. Vigil-Escalera, E. Peytremann). The very nature of early medieval domes-
tic architecture, characterised by relatively short periods of
use, transformation and re-use, by its distribution over
wide surface areas generating a low intensity of vertical
stratigraphy, and by the use of fragile materials and simple
techniques, means that its material attributes are very
different to those from other periods, and, moreover, that
they present certain similarities with protohistoric domes-
tic architecture. Post-depositional processes also condition,
in large measure, the levels of conservation of these
buildings: in the case of abandoned sites, the mechanisa-
tion of farming practices has caused notable destruction,
while many sites which have been occupied until contem-
porary times have been affected by more recent building
activity.6 Due to all of these disturbances it is very often the
case that floors or original levels of occupation of such
buildings have not been well conserved, or that original
levels have been lost entirely, with the changes of surface
colouration that have been preserved allowing us to identi-
fy the position of posts or paraments of various sorts. This
being the case, the conditions of conservation of domestic
deposits determine the sort of analyses which can be
undertaken, as the work of Alfonso Vigil-Escalera, dedica-
ted to hearths and ovens, or the work on Portuguese
domestic architecture already discussed, makes clear. One
can thus establish a direct relationship between the im-
provement, in qualitative terms, of archaeological practice
that has taken place in recent decades, and the evaluation
and study of this sort of architecture, given that it is our
method of working which determines the visibility of the
material evidence and our capacity to understand critically
the formative processes of archaeological deposits, or the
integrated study of the bioarchaeological record, which
together allow us to offer certain social or functional
hypotheses. Accordingly, the archaeological visibility of
architecture and of associated domestic deposits are the
factors that determine the sort of interpretations that one
can make in each case.

Thirdly, it is striking that the greater part of the
syntheses on domestic architecture have been dedicated
substantially to material related to forms of construction,
extended to include morphological, taxonomic, and tech-
nological aspects, and, in the second instance, to the
functional aspects of architecture (e.g. Brogiolo 1994, 7-
11; Hamerow 2002, 12-51; Peytremann 2003, 274-295;
Tipper 2004; Brogiolo 2008, 10-19). Beyond the under-
standable need to identify and systematise different types
of structure, I believe that this prevalence could be ex-
plained – at least in part – by the fact that many
archaeological schools in western Europe, especially in
the south, are very influenced by materialist theoretical
approaches, the roots of which tap in to processualist
anthropological approaches which emerged in the 1970s,
the foundational phase of postclassical archaeology in the
Mediterranean.

Fourth, while bearing in mind the existence of nota-
ble geographical and chronological diversity, it is nonethe-
less surprising that certain techniques and types of domes-
tic constructions are found in practically all of western
Europe, although there are also lacunae and differences
which are very significant. Almost all studies show that
wood was the dominant building material throughout the
early Middle Ages, with the exception of the most souther-
ly areas of Italy or Iberia. The use of clay and stone was also
frequent, although differences in this respect are best
brought out on a regional scale. Although in some Europe-
an areas buildings with plinth foundations and stone
elevations identify churches, palaces, or elite spaces, as is
the case in the well known two-storey buildings in Italian
cities (Santangeli Valenzani 2011) or British and German
churches, in sites such as El Tolmo de Minateda this sort of
material is used in ordinary dwellings.

Equally compelling is the pre-eminence of dwellings
built with supporting frame posts situated at floor level
and the notable frequency of Sunken-Feature Buildings,
which have been recognised in all of the territories ana-
ysed, although their presence is as of yet less frequent in
southern sectors, such as those that were under Byzantine
domination (Arthur, 2010; Quirós Castillo 2011). On the
other hand, large buildings known as longhouses, very
common in central Europe, seem to be absent from more
peripheral continental areas, given that they are unknown
in Great Britain, only furnish three examples in Iberia (in
the Basque Country) and the few Italian examples we have
are located in Tuscany alone. However, in the absence of
systematic phosphate analysis it is not always easy to
identify the specific function of these large buildings
located in the south of Europe. It is for this reason, for
example, that Giovanna Bianchi proposes in her study to
analyse some of these buildings with regard to their
communal aspect as opposed to an interpretation which
identifies these buildings as elite residences. This notwith-
standing, our Iberian examples seem to allow us to defend an interpretation along these lines of social hierarchy (Quirós Castillo 2013).

This is, in fact, another of the principal problems we face when we undertake a comparative analysis of this sort of architecture on a European scale: namely, the construction of archaeological frameworks and of common categories of analysis. It is beyond doubt that we still lack systematic collections of data and that the majority of archaeological interventions carried out in recent years remain unpublished. For this reason the writing of studies aiming at more global syntheses is so very relevant and necessary, a good example of which is that of E. Peytremann on northern France (Peytremann 2003) or recent Ireland studies (O’Sullivan et alii 2010). But we also need to remain cautious, S. Gutiérrez confronts in her study a risk which derives from the use of simple morphological descriptive terms when building social models. It should be evident that formal analogies need not necessarily provide social and interpretative analogies, and it is thus essential that we build dense archaeological records which integrate bioarchaeological records and other forms of material evidence so as to allow us to define, in all their complexity, forms of dwelling and lifestyle practices in social terms (Quirós Castillo 2013).

And this reflection leads us to another fundamental consideration; the identification of the residences of elites and the archaeological analysis of the social hierarchies of the early Middle Ages via the prism of the architecture of the domestic sphere. Specialists are largely in agreement that social hierarchies of the early Middle Ages were more fluid and to some extent ambiguous (even opaque); this had much to do with the absence of strong states, and, as a corollary of this, the opportunity to move through the ranks, gaining social ‘promotion’ (Wickham 2005). In architectural terms, a profound imbalance is observable between aristocratic rural residences, such as the palace at Pla de Nadal in Valencia (Juan 2007), Anglo-Saxon halls (Hamerow 2011, 141-143) or longhouses, and the houses of the rest of the population (e.g. Santangeli Valenzani 2011 64-66). Did the middling sort disappear? Did houses not constitute a barometer of social status in the early Middle Ages? Is it possible to tell the difference between the house of a free peasant and a dependent peasant? How might we explain the apparent invisibility in material terms of social hierarchies? There is no simple answer to these questions, although written documentation (where it has been conserved) indicates that early medieval societies were complex and highly structured.

Giovanna Bianchi suggests in her study that we go beyond the analysis of building methods and pay more attention to dwelling, given that «the value of architecture resides, above all, in its interior». This author maintains, moreover, that in technological terms this sort of architecture is the fruit of selected cycles of production, which permits the creation of a productive space, and methods of material self-promotion, which are much less rigid and normatized when it comes to the display of certain social markers or types of building.

On the other hand, not all archaeological markers have the same value and although scholars have frequently paid more attention to the representation of power than the exercise of power (Quirós Castillo 2013), definitions of aristocratic lifestyles must take into account the differences which allow us to understand social logics and actors (methods of storage, patterns of consumption, methods of managing non-agrarian production) (Loveluck 2011).

In sixth place, another consequence to derive from the apparent homogeneity of early medieval systems of domestic building is that of the existence of different ‘traditions of construction’ in Mannoni’s terms which apparently acquire notable protagonism in the post-Imperial period. Inevitably this debate is intertwined with that which questions the role of ‘barbarians’ in the transformation of early medieval societies. Many are the authors who have associated and continue to associate the distribution of certain types of building, such as Sunken-Feature Buildings or longhouses, with the presence of non-indigenous groups (e.g. Brogiolo 2008, 2011; Fronza 2011). Mark Gardiner, Edith Peytremann and Rainer Schreg all draw attention in their studies to the difficulties inherent in this sort of interpretation, given that the evidence is often contradictory and «ethnic traditions» not very visible. In fact, many authors have emphasised the existence of similar types of constructions from the pre-Roman and Roman periods, or in areas not subject to the overlordship of «barbarians» (Arthur 2010; Santangeli Valenzani 2011; Hamerow 2011; Quirós Castillo 2011). Sometimes the chronological and spatial distribution of these types of construction does not appear to cohere neatly with the distribution of German peoples. But in reality what is at stake is the viability and the usefulness of an historicist paradigm as a means of interpreting the architectural record in archaeological terms.

And so we turn to our seventh and last point of analysis. The study and interpretation of domestic architecture has, as one would expect, important theoretical implications in light of the fact that, as some authors have
signalled, «archaeologists excavate the dwellings and domestic artefacts, not the social units» (Wilk, Rathje 1982b, 618). Throughout this text the theoretical implications of this subject matter have steadily come to the fore, as have the assumptions made with regard to early medieval domestic architecture; furthermore, proposed in many of the studies collected herein have been interpretations which stress a transfer of focus from the study of forms of building to the analysis of forms of dwelling. It is certain that the early medieval domestic architectural record often presents specific limitations which make it more difficult to posit hypotheses, but in any case it remains important to analyse these constructions while bearing in mind the conceptual baggage that archaeology has acquired in recent decades.

In the study of domestic architecture a whole series of very heterogeneous epistemological and disciplinary traditions converge, which can be identified in the approaches common to the history of architecture, vernacular architecture, historical geography, anthropology, ethnography and of course archaeology. And even though the archaeology of architecture is «in fact…the oldest form of archaeology» (Morris 2000, 6), the explicit conceptualisation of an archaeology of domestic architecture and of the domestic environment can only be traced to recent decades, and especially to Great Britain, insofar as scholarly research is concerned 7.

Since at least the 1980s processual archaeology has conceptualised an archaeology of the domestic environment (household archaeology) understood as a micro-scale analysis via which it was possible to overcome «the existing mid-level theory gap in archaeology» (Wilk, Rathje 1982a, 617). At the Society of American Archaeology's 1981 conference dedicated to 'household archaeology' certain seminal studies were presented, which included, for example, contributions of a clearly functionalist bent inclining towards the identification of general principles that underlie processes of production, distribution, transmission and reproduction (Wilk, Rathje 1982b), and also studies influenced by historical materialism (Rathje, McGuire 1982). And although household archaeology continues to be marginal to the practice of processual archaeology (Tringham 2001, 6928), the former has managed to create a dense and complex notion of ‘the domestic’ which has served to guide a large number of investigations in such a way that they have been able to integrate the analysis of architecture into a broad and ambitious interpretative framework.

Nonetheless, the most significant contributions have emerged, since the 1990s, from post-processualist paradigms. One of the most prolific areas of the study of historical domestic architecture in recent times has been the study of vernacular architecture. In issue 28 of the journal 'Vernacular Architecture', Christopher Dyer painted in historical terms an intriguing picture of the contribution that the study of vernacular architecture has had, underlining in particular social, economic and mental aspects (Dyer 1997). It was M. Johnson, however, the author of several fundamental studies on late and post-medieval English domestic architecture, who proposed in a short and brilliant article published in this very journal a definitive guide titled «principles of Vernacular Architectural Studies», on the back of which a dense plan of future research, strongly post-processualist in character, was built (Johnson 1997). His later works have developed these approaches and drawn attention to concepts such as performance, materiality and agency (Johnson 2010).

Other approaches have not enjoyed, thus far, a significant influence in the study of domestic architecture. One of the most promising avenues is South American social archaeology and others Marxism's traditions, which is making important theoretical contributions, conceptualizing architecture as a technology of power, and analysing post-medieval and contemporary contexts (e.g. Funari, Zarankin 2002; Sweitz 2012). Similarly, in the 1990s, three important volumes on household archaeology were published, introducing new structuralist, contextual, neo-marxist and symbolic perspectives to the study of domestic spaces (Kent 1990, Samson 1990, Allison 1999). But, as was the case with regard to the processualist paradigm, household archaeology has also not managed to become one of the central prisms of analysis until recent years (Pluckhahn 2010, Carballo 2011), given that, for authors come P. Allison «archaeological data are not always capable of answering the kinds of questions which anthropologists and social historians might ask of their own data» (Allison 2008, 1457).

In short, the archaeological analysis of domestic architecture has set about building a whole series of analytical categories and conceptual mechanisms in recent decades with the aim of overcoming the material aspect of buildings, of stressing the social activity that developed at the domestic level, and of analysing the village ecosystem to which R. Schreg refers in his study, or, to call it by another name, to pay as much attention to forms of dwelling as to

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7 The bibliography is vast; here only summaries on 'household archaeology' are cited (Steadman 1996, 54 and passim; Tringham 2001; Allison 2008).
forms of buildings. Many of these tools, still not applied in systematic fashion to the analysis of early medieval domestic architecture, are very useful in our effort to overcome the risk — indicated by Edith Peytremann — supposed by the growing accumulation of high quality records, which share substantial similarities. Urban archaeology is a mirror in which we can observe ourselves so as not to commit the same mistakes again.

4. To conclude these notes I would like to underline that the texts collected herein confirm that archaeology finds itself at a true crossroads. The collapse of the post-processualist paradigm, buried by the difficulty implied by the negotiation of subjectivism and the atomisation of narrative, and by a model of the organisation of cultural heritage which tends to produce repetitive documents without fostering mechanisms of control which promote less frequent and better interventions within a responsibly planned framework, threatens to bring to an end one of the most prolific periods of archaeological praxis in western Europe. The development which early medieval domestic architecture is currently experiencing is the fruit of this period which now seems to be grinding to a halt. Almost all of the studies that comprise this dossier suggest new avenues and approaches; a situation which reflects the dissatisfaction provoked by the meagre knowledge we still possess with regard to the houses of this period, and by the limits of some of the approaches which have been followed hitherto.

I believe that the practitioners of the archaeology of architectures must also be willing to broaden their methodologies, their areas of intervention and their ways of thinking. In the same way that architecture is much more than a few walls that demarcate an area of space, the archaeology of architectures — which has been developed in the south of Europe in close relation to a certain conceptual and cultural framework — must push us to rethink the very notion of architecture and of the built environment in multidimensional terms, for as P. Bourdieu has underlined, «the house is not only a physical space, but a space whose use varies with time» (Bourdieu 1972).

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