The royal foundation of *Recópolis* and the urban renewal in Iberia during the second half of the sixth century

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In 578, King Leovigild had only just achieved a territorial cohesion of the Visigothic Kingdom, through a series of victorious campaigns against the Byzantine Empire, against several indigenous towns of the peninsula, the aristocracy and against the peasantry. As a consequence of this success, Leovigild – taking the Byzantine Empire as a reference – created a centralised state, of which Toledo became the capital. Similarly, for the first time in the Visigothic Kingdom, he adopted royal gear and attributes, coining his own currency and, in order to support all this, imposing a system of tax collection.¹

The foundation of *Recópolis* in 578 constitutes a clear example of the power of the state in the moment of the foundation of the Visigothic Kingdom. The scantiness of the written sources for the Visigothic period contrasts with the importance that they give to the foundation of the city, as well as the references in the documentation of the Islamic and Christian periods.²

Essential hereby is the piece of news that John of Biclaro transmitted in his *Chronicon*, regarding the events that took place in 578:

“Livigildus rex extinctis undique tyrannis, et pervasoribus Hispaniae superatis sortitus requiem propiam cum plebe resedit civitatem in Celtiberia ex nomine filii condidit, quae Recópolis nuncupatur: quam miro opere et in moenibus et suburbanis adornans privilegia populo novae Urbis instituit”.³

Further along, Isidore of Seville reported of the chronicle of the event in his *Historia Gothorum* which says: “Condidit etiam civitatem in Celtiberia, quam ex nomine filii sui Recopolim nominavit”.⁴

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¹ Olmo Enciso 2001b, 380-382.
² Idem 1995, 212.
³ John of Biclaro, 88.
⁴ Isidorus of Seville, 51, 10.
Recópolis in the Visigothic age: the archaeological investigation

The first archaeological excavations were made in Recópolis between 1945 and 1946, where the church and a large-dimensioned building were discovered (Fig. 1). They already dated from that time and were interpreted as belonging to a palatine complex.5 The excavations did not restart until the end of the 70s of the past century and, with intervals and due to modest means, the excavations followed one another in the course of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s. Finally, in 1996, the current investigation was started (Fig. 2).

As an urban centre, Recópolis had a dynamic life, in the Visigothic period (from the end of the sixth century until the beginning of the eighth century), developing with two documented phases6 and in the early Islamic period (from the beginning of the eighth century to the first half of the ninth century) with three phases.7

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The two phases of the Visigothic period show an urban environment, which is neither static nor homogeneous and, therefore, exposed to transformational tendencies. Moreover, as I have already defended in other works, these are connected with the process of changes taking place within the social structure of the period.8

First Phase (from the end of the sixth century to the first half of the eighth century)

*Recópolis*, extending over an area of 33 ha, is placed upon a hill, one of its parts surrounded by the Tajo River. The topography of this landscape facilitated the realisation of an urban plan which was organised in different terraces. The archaeological excavations made in the last years show – for the first of these phases: the foundational phase – the existence of an urban plan defined by a regular layout and the hierarchisation of the urban space (Fig. 3).

A group of palatine buildings was located in the upper area of the city. This group consisted of a series of buildings placed round a big square (Fig. 4.A1, A2, A3). The main constructions had two floors, with the upper floor being the main one, as can be

8 *Idem* 2001a, 386, 390, 392.
Fig. 3. Plan of Récopolis

seen in its pavements made in opus signimum and with which an extent of ornamental remainders are associated.

In the east side of this complex, we can find the church excavated in the 40s of the last century (Fig. 4.B). It is a building with a cruciform floor inscribed in a rectangle, constituted by a central nave and a transversal one, by way of transept with a semicircular apse to the inside and a rectangular one to the outside. The central nave is framed by two collateral naves which communicate directly with the transept and another one placed by way of narthex, where the main entrance is located. There is a rectangular room that has been interpreted as a baptistery, in the foundations of which the coin hoard of tremisses was found. This church must have possessed a significant amount of decoration as can be told by the large amount of sculptural fragments. A gate (Fig. 4.C) functioned as the entrance to this palatine group and it also indicated the connection point with the main street of the city, which began here.

The whole city was surrounded by a wall, flanked by square towers in which the entrance gates opened towards the city (Figs 3 and 5). The wall measures 2 m in width.

The royal foundation of Récopolis

Fig. 4. The excavated buildings

and was built with two faces, both made by ashlar and an internal stone filling joined through mortar. The towers, built in the same technique, measure 6 m a side, with an external and internal projection. At present, the highest remaining height is 5 m. The only excavated gate is the square entrance, flanked by two towers. The wall was plastered completely with white lime mortar.

Similarly, remains of the aqueduct of the city have been discovered outside the urban area, as well as the quarries where the stone for the construction was extracted. Recópolis possessed a mint where at least four Visigothic kings coined currency: Leo-vigild, Reccared I, Suintila and Witiza.

The recent archaeological excavations

The archaeological investigations carried out during the past few years have discovered a series of spaces and buildings on a new ground plan, of which only the foundations remain (Fig. 4.D, E). However, they are very affected by the reuses and the functional changes taking place in the course of the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries, as well as
by the later agricultural uses of the soil until the twentieth century. These new spaces and buildings, planned and built in pieces of land where no kind of activities existed before, date from the end of the sixth century AD, the moment of the foundation of Recópolis ex novo. Therefore, they are a part of the urban planning characterising the first phase of the city.

The main street was the backbone of this part of the city. It originates from the gate of the palatine complex in the north and leads to the south. Its pavement was made of clay mixed with lime. At the eastern side, there was a passable upper platform forming the sidewalk (Fig. 4.G, H).

On both sides of the street and, following its layout, the remains of two large buildings have been excavated, used for commercial and craft activities. These buildings were divided into modules with the same spatial division and were constructed in stone, above which the mud walls and a tiled roof were erected. These buildings with a square ground plan – the biggest one measured 54 m in length and 12 m in width, the smallest one 25 m in length and 12 m in width – were divided into modules. The composition of these modules consisted of a passage with access to the street, flanked by to square rooms measuring 4 m in length and 3 m in width, thus they can be interpreted as shops. Furthermore, it consisted of a bigger room with a likewise square ground plan, measuring 9 m x 9 m that could be used as a workshop, officina, or for warehousing (Fig. 4.D, E and Fig. 6.).

In this respect, the presence of a furnace (Fig. 7) placed in the eastern building is worthy of attention. It corroborates the existence of a glass-production workshop, as well as material in the form of fragments and tries represented in the stratigraphic contexts belonging to this period. The presence of North African amphorae, a common ware of the Balearic Islands, in another module of this building, confirms that products from the Mediterranean area must have been sold in these buildings. Likewise, linked to the eastern

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10 Idem 2001b, 385.
building, bivalve moulds have appeared (Fig. 8) for the manufacturing of objects such as earrings and rings, indicating the use of these rooms by craftsmen.\textsuperscript{11}

At the south of the main street, a cistern for the public water supply has been found. It consisted of two rooms: one of them contained the cistern itself, a pit excavated to the geological level, 7 m x 4 m with a depth of 1.5 m. The other room can therefore be seen as having been related to the access to such infrastructure (Fig. 4.I).

Up until now, the area of the excavated houses shows how some houses were conceived in Recópolis. They consisted of two rectangular rooms with different functions and were spaced around courtyards, some of which may have been roofed (Fig. 4.F).

\textit{Recópolis} in the context of urban revitalisation in the second half of the sixth century

During the phase of the formation and consolidation of the Visigothic State, developing in the second half of the sixth century, there is proof for a recovery of the building and urban politics linked exclusively to the Church and also to the new state.

Solely the role of the Church as an important protagonist of town planning in this period had been appreciated until now. Concepts such as “Christianisation of the urban topography” reflect the transcendent role of the Church in the society of the period. However, they do not represent the only element that characterised the city. In fact, I think that the importance of the Church must be analysed by paying attention to the place it occupied within the process of transformations taking place in this period and, therefore, it must be clarified as a concept and socially contextualised.\textsuperscript{12}

In the sixth century, but especially in its second half, as well as in the beginning of the seventh century, the written sources and the archaeological research documented important building activities by the Catholic Church in some of the most important cities of Hispania.\textsuperscript{13}

As a result of these activities, an episcopal complex in Tarragona from the beginning of the sixth century and a martyrdom basilica from the second half of the sixth century in the ancient Roman amphitheatre could be verified.\textsuperscript{14} On the other hand, in the middle of the sixth century a basilica was built in Cordoba, identified as the Cathedral, whose remains are beneath the Ummayad Mosque, near the Palace of the Visigothic Governors.\textsuperscript{15} In the middle of the sixth century, the city of Valencia experienced the

\textsuperscript{11} Olmo Enciso/Sanz Paratcha/López Fraile/Gómez García/Agustí García/Gómez de la Torre Verdejo/Esquinas Rodrigo 2004, 327-329.
\textsuperscript{12} Olmo Enciso 1998a, 111.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 112-113; idem 2001, 387-390.
\textsuperscript{14} A.A.V.V. 1990, 234-235, 241; Macías i Solé 2000, 265-269.
\textsuperscript{15} Marfil 2000, 123-130.
outstanding construction of the cathedral taking place in the area of the ancient Roman Forum; becoming the origin of a great episcopal complex at the beginning of the seventh century.\textsuperscript{16} The city of Mérida provides an example of renewal undertaken by the bishops with the construction of a cathedral, the bishop’s palace, the basilica and a xenodochium.\textsuperscript{17} At this period, the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh century, the city of Barcelona also went through an enlargement and a monumentalisation of the episcopal complex and a new episcopal palace was built.\textsuperscript{18}

In many of these cities, the archaeological investigation of the period provides eloquent details on how these activities undertaken by the Church are also related to the process of contemporary urban dynamism. In Cordoba, contemporary to the building of the Basilica of San Vicente, the construction of a series of suburban buildings, such as churches and monasteries, but also vici and palaces for the aristocracy, begins.\textsuperscript{19} During the sixth century and the first half of the seventh century, a dynamism of the city is found in Valencia. Some examples of this dynamism are the vitality of the commercial contacts with the Byzantine territories of the Balearic Islands and of the North of Africa.\textsuperscript{20} In the second half of the sixth century, in different parts of the city of Merida we can observe a process of transformation from the ancient Late Roman domus to common houses related to the community; as well as a progressive tendency within the new houses to occupy a part of the streets.\textsuperscript{21} This phenomenon has been interpreted as a consequence of a growth of population in the city of Merida during this period.

In Barcelona, the process of reforms, enlargements and new constructions carried out between the sixth and the beginning of the seventh century are related to an important urban development of the city. The chronology of this process corresponds with a

\textsuperscript{16} Ribera i Lacomba/Rosselló Mesquida 2000, 171-185.  
\textsuperscript{17} Mateos Cruz 1999; Mateos Cruz/Alba Calzado 2001, 150-153.  
\textsuperscript{18} Bonnet/Beltrán de Heredia Bercero 1999, 74-93.  
\textsuperscript{19} Acién Almansa/Vallejo Triano 1998, 109.  
\textsuperscript{20} Ribera i Lacomba/Rosselló Mesquida 2000, 151-164; Rosselló Mesquida 2000, 207-217.  
\textsuperscript{21} Alba Calzado 1999, 391-404.
document entitled *Epistola de Fisci Barcinonensi*, a valuable source showing the assignment to the bishops – on the part of the government – for the power and competence in the matter of tax collection. These politics of constructions and tax collection on the part of the bishopric of Barcelona, dating from the reign of King Reccared I at the end of the sixth century, would be more a consequence of the agreement between the state and the church established by the Third Council of Toledo. In fact, these constructions of Barcelona represented an outstanding example of their economic advantages.

The state and the foundation of cities

A new and important aspect of this period is the participation of the state in the process of improvements in the urban landscape and in the foundation of cities. This royal policy of foundation or rehabilitation of cities is characteristic for the first phase of the Visigothic Kingdom (until the middle of the seventh century) and, thus, it is confirmed through both the written sources and recent archaeological research. In this context, besides *Recópolis*, the city of Victoriaco was founded in 581 and also the walls of Italica were restored in 583 during Leovigild’s reign (569-586). Similarly, during Suintila’s reign (621-632), the city of Ologicus was founded. Archaeological research likewise provides data on the foundation of other new urban centres, located in strategic areas for the introduction of the Visigothic State in the last quarter of the sixth century.

23 Olmo Enciso 1998a, 111.
This policy of foundation and renovation of cities should be connected with the capacity of tax collection of the Visigothic Kingdom of Toledo at the time of its foundation as is reported by the written sources. Among other sources, Isidore of Seville gives evidence of this capacity by telling us how Leovigild enriched the revenue and increased the funds of the treasury by plundering the citizens and through the deprivations of the enemies.\(^{25}\) Also, the reports on the foundation of Ologicus show how this event took place through tributes imposed on the Basques. Within this policy of creation of a state based on a controlled and centralised tax system, it is necessary to include the beginning of the currency coinage on the part of King Leovigild.\(^{26}\) This context helps understanding the causes that facilitated the great urban foundation of this period: the city of Recópolis.

All the aforementioned urban policy of the Visigothic State was carried out during its consolidation phase, within approximately half a century – between the last quarter of the sixth and the first quarter of the seventh century – and it should be interpreted as an example of the initial success of this state.

But besides these examples documented by the written sources, at the present time the archaeological research also provides us with examples of new foundations. This is the case for the new foundation of El Tolmo de Minateda that – although being a small city – was the headquarters of an episcopal see and is the most remarkable example of a phenomenon of urban revitalisation that took place in the south-east region.\(^{27}\) This urban revitalisation in this area of Iberia is interpreted according to the will of the Kingdom of Toledo to control, in an effective way, a region close to Byzantine territories.\(^{28}\) Therefore, this new foundation and the other cases should be understood as a further example of the participation of the state in structuring and consolidating an entire region that was also of strategic importance for the success of the Visigothic State itself.

\(^{25}\) Isidorus of Seville, 51, 5.
\(^{26}\) Olmo Enciso 2001b, 384.
\(^{27}\) Gutiérrez Lloret 1996.
\(^{28}\) Abad Casal/Gutierrez Lloret/Gamo Parras 2000, 196.
In the peninsula, although outside the political territory of the Kingdom of Toledo, we come across another two illustrations of this policy of participation of the state in the shaping of the urban landscape. On the one hand, Cartagena is the best documented centre, as a consequence of being the capital of the peninsular Byzantine territories.\(^{29}\) In the Suevic Kingdom, we also have evidence of the participation of the state in this policy of urban revitalisation in the second half of the sixth century. On the Hill of Falperra that dominates the city of Braga, capital of the Suevic Kingdom, several buildings protected by a wall were located. Soon after the investigations in Recópolis and because of functional and topographical similarities, this place has been identified as a palatine complex dominating the city with its acropolis.\(^{30}\)

Naturally, all these urban impulses – where both the church and the state were involved from the middle of the sixth century on – reflect the importance of the city in the structuring of the society of the time. In this sense, the urban landscape will be the main centre of attraction of an important part of the social conflicts that developed in this period. In fact, the political and economic power that the Catholic Church possessed as of the middle of the sixth century – for which its building policy is a clear example – meant a threat for the attempt to create a centralised state controlled by the monarchy. This state further tried to merge ideologically by declaring the Arian Church to be the official one. I believe that this should be analysed as an attempt to diminish the power of the Catholic Church and, possibly, as a way of depriving it of its prerogatives of social and administrative control. In this sense, it must be remembered that until that time there is no news reflecting conflicts among Catholics and Arians. The recognition of the Catholic Church as a social protagonist by king Reccared I (Third Council of Toledo) reflects the necessity to incorporate this church into the own structure of the state. This means the recognition of the role of the bishops in the government of the cities, as well as their scopes in regard to tax collection.

In this period, i.e. the second half of the sixth century, during Leovigild’s reign a series of representative figures of the city government were installed: on the one hand, the comes civitatis as well as his subordinates, the vicarius, the iudex loci, and the defensor civitatis. This policy was to increase with King Reccared I with the incorporation of the bishops into the structure of the city government, promoted by the state.\(^{31}\)

Therefore, during the phase of formation and consolidation of the Visigothic State, we attend a revitalisation of the constructive, urban and legislative policy related to the city. Everything points out the role of the city as a fundamental centre of the social and political structure of the time and of the growing state. The large urban centres analysed here (that is, Mérida, Córdoba, Valencia, Tarragona, Barcelona, Recópolis...\(\)) are

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\(^{29}\) Ramallo Asensio 2000, 579-611.
\(^{31}\) Olmo Enciso 1998a, 110-111; idem 2001b, 382-383.
economic centres and bases of the tax system, as can be seen in the fact that all of them own a mint, or the diversification of their archaeological materials (import products, craftsmanship and commercial areas, markets, etc.). All of this should be related with the process of a strengthening of the structures of the state, the church being involved in this process, mainly from the agreement with the monarchy implied by the Third Council of Toledo in the year 589. It is at this time, when a series of episcopal groups was enlarged – whose construction had begun in the middle of the sixth century – in Barcelona, Tarragona, Valencia and Mérida.

In this whole process, the foundation of Recópolis constitutes a clear example of the state’s power at the moment of the consolidation of the Kingdom of Toledo, as well as the real expression of the growing state’s ideology. In this sense, the intention of Leovigild of becoming similar to the Byzantine Empire is evident, in an *aemulatio imperii*, through the foundation of a city *ex novo*. With the foundation of Recópolis, named after a member of the king’s family, his son Reccared, Leovigild compares his actions with the practices of the Byzantine emperors. But it is also a clear example of a dynastic statement that reflects the king’s intention of consolidating a state ruled by his own dynasty.

The foundation and the first phase of the occupation of Recópolis is the most valuable example demonstrating a participation of the state in the urban planning through the foundation and improvement of the cities. In addition, it presents an example of the urban conceptions of the period, showing how these hold characteristic features in respect to the Late Roman cities. The rest of the cities analysed here, as well as the new magistracies, show how in this second half of the sixth century as a consequence of a social frame a new urban landscape was being formed.

Together with the period of consolidation of the Visigothic State, a process of crisis followed, during the rest of the seventh and the beginning of the eighth century. This crisis of the Visigothic State is the fundamental factor when analysing the process of decrease of the urban activity taking place within this period. In fact, the reasons that gave rise to this process are different, depending on whether they are related to the state or to the church, although inserted into the same process of social transformation.

Regarding the state, we face a weakened structure with a tax system in crisis. The weakening of this system was to affect the city in a decisive way with the resulting crisis of urban activity on the part of the state. This produced processes of urban de-structuring, which seems to be documented in some cities of this period, like in the case of Recópolis, Mérida, Córdoba, Barcelona and Valencia.32

In Recópolis, this period was to be characterised by a process of transformations affecting the urban landscape of the city. This meant a transformation of the urban landscape of the foundation period, evidenced by a process of occupying of open

areas, the closing of open spaces and the construction of buildings of inferior quality therein. This process seems to verify a loss of the original function the commercial buildings were once constructed for. Several spaces were now transformed into housing areas. Nevertheless, this process of transformation does not imply the decline of any productive activity, since the areas dedicated to glass production expanded in this phase. In this period, it seems that the city transformed from a planned one, similar to the Byzantine urban programmes characteristic for the foundation and conception of Recópolis to an urban settlement that, although maintaining some aspects of its productive and commercial activity, were not as diversified as the ones that characterised the foundation phase.\textsuperscript{33}

Likewise, the ecclesiastical building activity in the cities declined considerably in this period. Unlike the state, the church – a great owner of goods and partly encouraging and beneficiary in this period of the crisis of the tax system – continued its building activities, now in the rural environment, through the construction or restoration of churches and monasteries.\textsuperscript{34} This abandonment of urban activities in benefit of rural ones constitutes a example of how the church participated in the defence of a model of feudal society, unlike its position in the previous phase. In regard to this activity, it followed the example developed by the aristocratic landowners in this occasion, of which Pla del Nadal offers a good example.\textsuperscript{35}

Therefore, from the investigation in Recópolis, it has been demonstrated that the period of consolidation of the Visigothic State lasted from the second half of the sixth until the first decades of the seventh century. During this period, the already analysed phenomenon of urban revitalisation took place. During the rest of the seventh century and the beginning of the eighth century, a period of crisis was to follow that was also reflected in the city.

Of course, the process of urban revitalisation exposed here affected a great number of cities; however, at that moment, it could not have become widespread among the whole peninsular setting. In fact, this process affects important cities for their administrative, fiscal and economic function even until now. But the urban reality of the peninsula is not only defined by this type of cities. The examples of other centres of smaller dimensions point to a non-homogeneous urban phenomenon, defined rather by the cultural and socio-economic characteristics of the territory in which they were located.

\textsuperscript{33} Idem 2002, 471-472; Olmo Enciso/Sanz Paratcha/López Fraile/Gómez García/Agustí García/Gómez de la Torre Verdejo/Esquinas Rodrigo 2004, 329-331.
\textsuperscript{34} Olmo Enciso 2001a, 392.
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CHAPTER II

EMPORIA IN THE NORTH AND THE CAROLINGIAN EAST