

Palaeochristian churches around Barcelona – Santa Margarida of Martorell

Rosario Navarro

Late Antiquity; archaeology; architecture

Presentation

The archaeological excavations carried out in the church of Santa Margarida of Martorell (Barcelona, Spain), by the Centre of Estudis Martorellencs, especially the campaigns between 1987 and 1995, discovered the internal structures of the church, as well as a long stratigraphic sequence, which starts in the Visigothic period and goes beyond the Middle Ages. On the other hand, the perimeter of the walls of the building, in Romanic style, from the end of the 12th century, although most of them supported by the Paleochristian work, are the witnesses and the record of a long history that confirms the continuity of this place, which always had very good conditions for the human settlements, until the 20th century. This situation and the discovery of a milestone, attributed to the Magnenci emperor, have allowed to speculate about the identification of Santa Margarida as the *mansio Ad Fines*, mentioned in the itinerant ancient sources. Other remains, such as the *sigilata* ceramics and a lot of blocks of stone used again, not only in the Paleochristian temple, but also in the medieval one, prove the Roman occupation along the centuries and could suggest the existence of a mausoleum.

But, the purpose now is to talk about the church from the foundational period or Paleochristian tradition. We do not have an exact foundational date, but it is possibly the second half of the 5th century or the beginning of the 6th. First, we will present a small synthesis about Christianity and the existence of other important churches in Barcelona and its territory.

The Christianity of Barcelona city and territory

During the Goths' domination, Christianity already existed in Barcelona, a leading city since the late Empire with great political events, which then became the monarchs' seat. The written sources have shown evidence of famous Christian celebrities, such as the bishops Pretextat and Pacià and his son Dextre, or Paulí of Nola's correspondence with Ausoni master. This is a good example of the society, culture and economy of the city at that time. The Christianity from the 6th and 7th centuries is a powerful Church, which in the bishops' hands obtained some tax and administrative functions during the Recaret period, as the famous document *De Fisco Barcinonensi* (589) shows. For that time, the archaeology presents a strong evidence of the construction of the Episcopal buildings (6th century). In fact, it consists of a re-building of old structures (baptistry and "Episcopal hall" and the non-excavated basilica, probably under the Romanic/Gothic cathedral) and an extension of the north-west area of the city, which will imply the incorporation of new buildings, such as the new church with a cross plan and some new rooms for the Church's needs (Bonnet I Beltrán de Heredia 1999).

Apart from Barcelona, the written sources establish with documentary evidence a second Episcopal see, *Egara* (Terrassa), a subsidiary of the previous one, acting from 450 until 693. Its foundation was possibly due to the religious needs of the countryside communities, which inhabited a land similar to the current region of the Vallès Occidental and its surroundings.

Here, the archaeological data show obvious signs of life through the transformations of the late phases of the villages and rural settlements (Can Bosch de Basea, Can Solà del Racó, L'Aiguacuit and other more).

Until quite recently, the first remains of the Episcopal see of Egara were almost unknown, because the first interventions from the beginning of the 20th century only worked on the group of Romanic churches of Sant Pere. Fortunately, other excavations more methodical and systematic started again since the nineties and are still continuing. They let us confirm the existence of the Episcopal group from the 6th century, over previous remains and in the middle of a necropolis. Later on, there is the possibility of recording, if there are, the remains of the urban settlement (Moro/Tuset 1999).

Besides the Episcopal sees, the necropolis around and inside the buildings for religious purposes were spread over the rural territory. They let us recognise the density of the population and the Christian world, which was organised for funereal reasons, according to the Church's rules related to the *sacra*.

First, we should remember the funereal temple (non martyrial) of Sant Cugat del Vallès, dated between the second quarter of the 4th century and the 7th century. It is known from old excavations, recently reviewed and extended. From the two constructive periods we are interested in the second one, because of the apse plan with an inner horseshoe arch and an outer polygonal one in the same style of Santa Margarida's; however in our case it is inserted and not exempt. Both buildings have a unique nave, but in the second one, it is divided into two parts because there is a corridor for the clergy (Riu 1999).

The church of Sant Menna (Sentmenat) also has a unique nave, with a small room on the north lateral side, as it is in Sant Cugat. The Sant Menna's apse has a rectangular plan. The stratigraphic sequence has two different phases: the first one dated between the first half of the 5th and the 6th centuries, and the second one between the 6th and the 8th centuries. (Roig I Buxó 1991)

The typology of the tombs in rural and urban necropolis are, broadly speaking, the same.

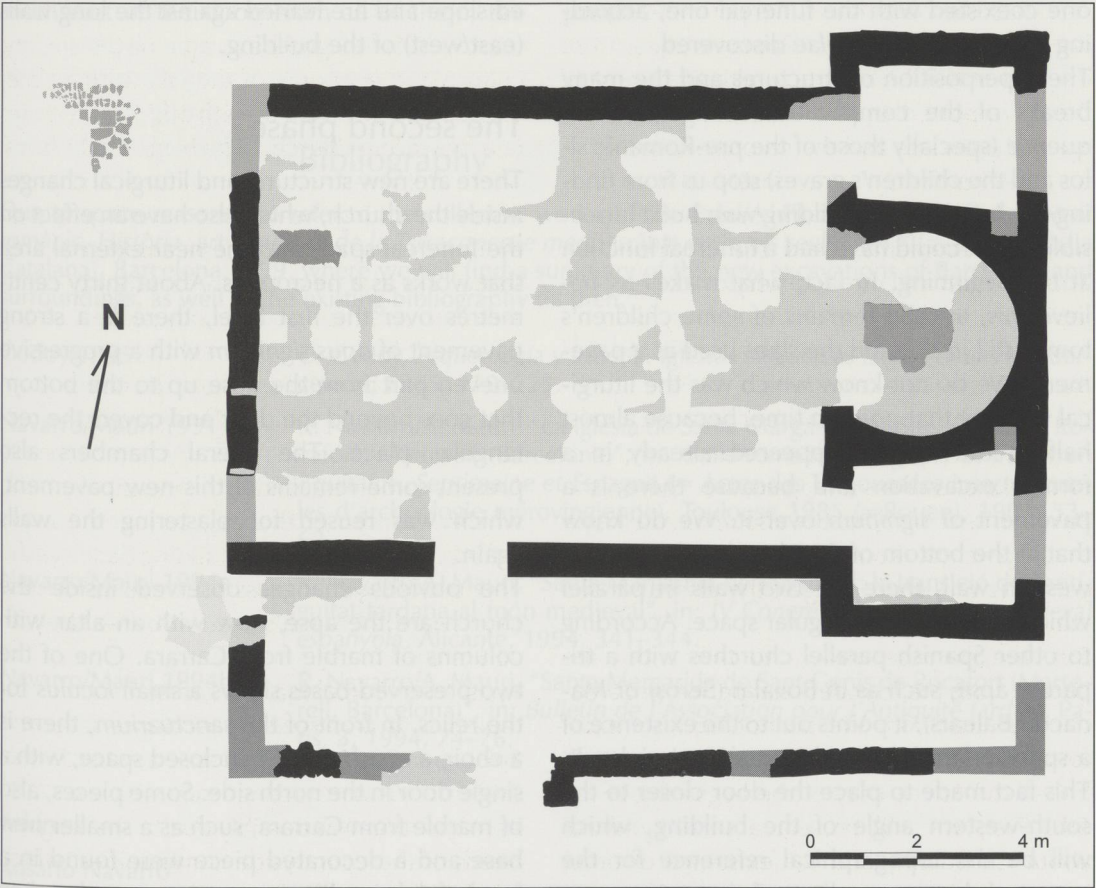


Fig. 1: Church of Santa Margarida.

The ones of *tegulae* and *imbrices*, with a burial mound of *opus signinum* on the cover prevail. There are also some of *tegulae* and masonry with plaster inside.

General characteristics of the church of Santa Margarida First phase

Since the beginning (5th century) and until the end of the Romanic work (end of 12th century), the church of Santa Margarida consisted only of a nave with a tripartite apse with a T cross section, due to the two lateral rooms that jutted out from the building. They flank an apse with an inside horseshoe arch and a trapézoidal one outside. The three spaces are inserted in the wall that closes the apse, or eastern wall. Where the lateral chambers meet this wall, there are some quadrangular empty spaces which could work as cupboards and would hold the liturgical objects. This circumstance and the fact that both chambers opened only into the nave, let us assure that they worked as a sacristy. And the northern one coexisted with the funereal one, according to the tomb of *tegulae* discovered.

The superposition of structures and the many breaks of the complicated stratigraphic sequence (specially those of the pre-Romanic silos and the children's graves) stop us from finding out how the first building was, but it is possible that it could have had a funereal function at the beginning. In fact, what makes us believe this, are the remains of some children's tombs still *in situ* and the slabs used as a pavement. We do not know which was the liturgical usage at that point in time, because almost half of the apse disappeared already in a former excavation and because there is a pavement of *signinum* over it. We do know that at the bottom of the church, in the inside western wall, there are two walls in parallel which shape a quadrangular space. According to other Spanish parallel churches with a tripartite apse, such as in Bovalar (Serós) or Manacor (Balears), it points out to the existence of a space related to the funereal/martyrial cult. This fact made to place the door closer to the south-western angle of the building, which will be the topographical reference for the area and the necropolis until the roman construction. According to the evidence, it is a

door with a horseshoe arch, built with big blocks of stone, some of them from previous buildings. This technique is used again during this period, in the corners of the building. The rest of the walls are built with smaller stones with mortar, combined with short rows of *opus spicatum*.

The funereal area

Before the second phase, there is a rectangular space outside the church, parallel to its southern façade with a door opposite to the main door. The constructive technique is based on rows of small quadrangular stones of red clay. Until the medieval period, this area had a funereal role, apart from being a crossing area from north to south and possibly from east to west. In the stratigraphic sequence we can see up to two levels of adults' tombs. The one under the *signinum* pavement of the second phase is the most interesting, because the tombs show a burial sign on the surface. Apart from a tomb of masonry, inserted in an angle of the southern chamber, the rest of them are tombs of *tegulae* and *imbrices* with a two-sided slope and are leaned against the long walls (east/west) of the building.

The second phase

There are new structural and liturgical changes inside the church, which also have an effect on the funereal space and the near external area that works as a necropolis. About thirty centimetres over the first level, there is a strong pavement of *opus signinum* with a progressive uneven part from the apse up to the bottom that goes beyond the door and covers the rectangular place. The lateral chambers also present some remains of this new pavement, which was reused for plastering the walls again.

The obvious changes observed inside the church are the apse, now with an altar with columns of marble from Carrara. One of the two preserved bases shows a small *loculus* for the relics. In front of the *sanctuarium*, there is a choir, a quadrangular enclosed space, with a single door in the north side. Some pieces, also of marble from Carrara, such as a smaller new base and a decorated piece were found in a level of debris, allowing us to assume that they were part of the closing wall of the choir,

which is obvious because of the perimeter of its shape.

At the foot of the nave there is no choir, and there is a door in the south-western angle that connects with a new space which should be a baptistery according to the liturgical sequence of the churches with a tripartite apse, such as Bovalar or Son Peretó. Although the remains of the northern perimetral wall have been found, the stratigraphy that could have corresponded to the swimming pool was too altered as a result of a previous excavation, and we cannot identify it with certainty. In any case, this area is still in an excavation process and we cannot exclude it definitively.

In the funereal area, there are other tombs on the right side of the door of the church. They follow the late-Roman model of flat and curve *tegulae* with a triangular cross section, but there is a huge cover of masonry around them, whose top seems to be a mound and levels the pavement of *signinum*. If they had been exempt ones, we would have thought about a small mausoleum, such as the *vila* of Barquera (Perafort, Tarragona).

Other monumental tombs were found at the south-east of the door. From all of them, the

closest to this point is a grave (*cista*) of stone with a cover of *signinum* and a box of *tegulae*, which shows a buckle and a small tongue of a belt dated between the second half of the 6th and 7th centuries.

After these two phases of the Visigothic period, there are new structures and changes inside the church. The preservation of the pavement of *signinum* which separates the choir and the nave, the change of an altar with multiple feet into a monolithic one, as well as a row of pillars of stone at the longitudinal axis of the nave with some adobe benches leaned against the northern wall. The lateral door at the foot of the church will be closed. The latest transformations before the Romanic construction will be the excavation of several children's graves, some silos and a metallurgic smelting furnace.

In spite of having difficulty in dating the periods properly, due to a lack of enough records of grey pottery which could belong to the 8th and 9th centuries, the relative continuity of Santa Margarida is clear, because it kept the initial strategic role and was able to transform it into a Christian symbol when worked as a parish.

Bibliography

Due to space reasons, we refer to the collective work of P. de Palol/A. Pladevall (eds.), *Del romà al romànic. Història, art i cultura de la Tarraconense mediterrània entre els segles IV i X* (= Enciclopèdia Catalana), Barcelona 1999, where we will find a summary of the new excavations of Barcelona and surroundings, as well as the existing bibliography till then.

- Godoy 1995 C. Godoy, *Arqueología y liturgia. Iglesias hispánicas (siglos IV al VIII)*, Barcelona, 1995, 219–223.
- Navarro/Mauri 1991 R. Navarro/A. Mauri, "La iglesia de Santa Margarida de Sant Genís de Rocafort, Martorell (Barcelona)", in: *Gallo-romains, wisigoths et francs en Aquitaine, Septimaine et Espagne* (= Actes des VII journées internationales d'archéologie mérovingienne), Toulouse 1985 (=Rouen), 1991, 53–62.
- Navarro/Mauri 1994a R. Navarro/A. Mauri, "Santa Margarida de Martorell: la transició de l'antiguitat tardana al món medieval", in: *IV Congrés d'arqueologia medieval espanyola*, Alicante, 1994, 341–344.
- Navarro/Mauri 1994b R. Navarro/A. Mauri, "Santa Margarida de Sant Genís de Rocafort (Martorell, Barcelona)", in: *Bulletin de l'Association pour l'Antiquité tardive*, Paris, 3, 1994, 74–76.

Address

Rosario Navarro
Pl. Salvador Riera, 1, 1r. 1ª, E-08041 Barcelona
cem@medievalweb.org