

História Antiga: Relações Interdisciplinares.

Paisagens Urbanas,
Rurais & Sociais

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CALCULATING THE POPULATION OF A ROMAN PROVINCIAL TOWN (CONIMBRIGA, PROV. LUSITANIA, PORTUGAL)¹

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ABSTRACT - Conimbriga (prov. Lusitania, current municipality of Condeixa-a-Nova, District of Coimbra, Portugal) is a Roman city of indigenous roots known since the sixteenth century, the subject of excavations and various publications since 1890 and, since 1930, the place of systematic archaeological excavations that have exposed the site and saved it as a major Roman site in the Iberian Peninsula.

A method for calculating the population number of a Roman town is presented, based on the study of the domestic architecture of the c. 20% of excavated area. The method allows to go beyond the mere number of inhabitants and to suggest some reconstruction of the structure of the population. Conclusion point to a small town (c. 5500 inhabitants) and a deeply stratified structure, with almost a third of slaves and dependents and a small decurionate class, not exceeding c. 7% (around 40 families).

KEYWORDS - Roman population; municipal elites; domestic architecture

1. INTRODUCTION

Among various research projects on Conimbriga, a recent one can be mentioned, which dealt with the systematic study of the domestic architecture of the town, which although often referenced, particularly because of the preserved mosaics, had never been the subject of systematic treatment.

This situation is paradoxical. The archeological research in Conimbriga began with the domestic architecture. This is a feature that Conimbriga shares with towns such as Pompeii, Herculaneum and Ostia, but not with many other archaeological sites in the orb of the Roman empire.

The first four moments of city research, namely, the small excavations triggered by an occasional finding, in 1873, the first major excavations of 1899, the excavation of the site by the Faculty of Letters in 1930 and the excavations from 1929 to 1944 by the DGEMN, exposed, all of them - temporarily the first two, definitely the others - domestic architectural fragments, and none of them, public monuments of significance². The Late Empire city-wall, a public monument of substance, has never been subject to thorough research,

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² About the excavations of 1873, Gonçalves 1903: 359-365; For all other excavations. DGEMN 1948: 5-29 and Correia 1941: 257-267.

its chronological interpretation was always based on the mistaken idea of its identification with the true edge of the city and the restoration itself that was developed without an archaeological investigation worthy of the name³.

In fact, down to the French-Portuguese excavations that started in 1964⁴, the domestic architecture was all that was known of Conimbriga. It is therefore somewhat paradoxical as from that moment on, this domestic architecture was relegated to a secondary role in the investigation of the town.

After the French-Portuguese excavations, archaeological excavations in Conimbriga stagnated. In the late seventies and throughout the eighties of the XX century, some work in the street called “of the patera Emanuel” was carried out and, due needs of conservation, interventions in the House of the fountains and at the House of Cantaber⁵ as well as late-medieval graves were excavated in the palaeochristian basilica, but none of these interventions was integrated in a true research project and has never been the subject of systematic publication.

2. PROBLEMS OF CHRONOLOGY

The history of the research of domestic architecture of Conimbriga strongly determines the context in which this can be studied, this being mainly due to a factor: the extent and detail of our knowledge of the chronology of each of the buildings⁶.

The date of construction of a building is not the main thing to observe, but because the timescale of urban development and genetic links between the elements that compose it, in what the domestic architecture (or any other architecture) is concerned, are essential elements in the understanding of the social and demographic development underlying urban dynamics. The overview of this topic in Conimbriga is not particularly encouraging.

Until 1944, the archaeological excavations carried out in Conimbriga had no stratigraphic concern. As a rule, the excavation was limited to the exposure of the Roman buildings to the height of their pavements (determined by previous surveys). The rigor of the collection of materials is unknown, but appears to have been limited to a few relevant items and to have systematically neglected the collection of small ceramic fragments, and the reference of those collected items does not mention the house or building of origin (to ask for a minimum information), but only the fact that it comes from Conimbriga.

From 1953, excavations began to be carried using a system for collecting materials and maintaining their context references, as to associate them with the compartment of buildings where they were retrieved. However, a stratigraphic

³ DGEMN 1948: 31 (V) and references on pp. 7-9.

⁴ Alarcão & Etienne 1977: 65-84, 135-142, 155-164.

⁵ Correia 2001: 83-140.

⁶ On this issue Correia & Alarcão 2008; Correia 2013: 23-31.