

# ICONOGRAPHIC INFLUENCES OF ROMAN ARAS IN EARLY CHRISTIAN ALTARS. PREVALENCE OF FORMAL AND CONCEPTUAL ELEMENTS IN *HISPANIA*

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## *Resumen.-*

El acervo cultural de la Antigüedad Clásica ha perdurado en el tiempo, siendo el periodo medieval su primer canalizador y difusor. El de lo cristiano fue uno de los principales ámbitos de conservación de las antiguas costumbres y celebraciones paganas. Este hecho puede observarse en multitud de asimilaciones formales e iconográficas tempranamente codificadas por una religión que paradójicamente estaba decidida a acabar con cualquier signo de paganismo. Ya en los primeros siglos, el altar cristiano será uno de los soportes donde mejor puede encontrarse esa asimilación pagana: las antiguas aras romanas son reutilizadas sistemáticamente como altares cristianos; y si no su diseño es el imitado.

## *Abstract.-*

The immense cultural heritage of Classic Antiquity has survived throughout centuries, with the medieval period logically being the first means to channel and spread this vast culture.

The Christian sphere was one of the most important areas to conserve ancient pagans practices and celebrations and images associated to them. This fact can be observed in a variety of formal and iconographic assimilations codified from the most early stages of a religion which, paradoxically, had set its mind on eradicating any sign of paganism as best it could. Ironically, the altar of Christ was the best support where this pagan assimilation could be found, to the extent that the ancient aras were being systematically reused as Christian altars.

*Palabras clave:* aras paganas, altares cristianos, pervivencias formales, pervivencias iconográficas,

*Key words:* roman aras, Christian altars, continuity, iconography.

In the Late Antiquity, the paganism-Christianity dichotomy, which at first sight might seem contradictory, was however one of the most important areas to conserve ancient practices and celebrations and the images associated to them. The fact that a

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pagan culture with pagan, polytheist traditions – formed by a variety of idols and images that spread throughout every aspect of daily life (fig. 1)– formed part of the early Christian mentality, is a usual sign that can be easily observed in a variety of formal and iconographic assimilations codified from the most early stages of a religion which, paradoxically, had set its mind on eradicating any sign of paganism as best it could. The first Councils, both ecumenical and provincial ones, reflect the forcefulness of the anti-pagan actions. However, their persistency also shows the tremendous difficulties that the Church had to face when dealing with this matter. A good example of this is the letter written by Pope Gregory the Great to Abbot Melitón in which he almost assumes the daily difficulty of putting an end to pagan idolatry. In modern day terms, the letter’s conceptual message is saying “if you can’t beat them, join them”.

It is even more shocking that in the first centuries of Christianity the main element of the Christian church, the altar – in which the sacrifice of Christ is celebrated and commemorated – was the best support where this pagan assimilation could be found, to the extent that the ancient aras or altars dedicated to the gods and goddesses of the Roman pantheon were being systematically reused as Christian altars; while they were not reused directly, their designs are definitely an imitation, as is the case with the so called “altar tenante” from Visigoth Spain. It is even possible to trace back some iconographic traits that have survived and are present in both pagan and Christian altars. These motifs speak of two very different beliefs yet share the same cultural and iconographic tradition.

This evidence sheds light on a reality that is radically different to what we are used to thinking about the end of paganism and the beginnings of Christianity: the existence of a strong and direct continuity, not only formal but even conceptual, between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

Traditionally, the types of altars that either reuse or imitate old Roman aras have been considered to be one of the most antique incarnations of Christian altars with a strong presence throughout the Mediterranean<sup>1</sup>, as is recorded in the classifications of the first studies on the primitive Christian altar<sup>2</sup> (fig. 2).

R. de Fleury looks for the origins of the Christian altar not only in the Roman one, but also in the Greek examples, or what is the same, in the meaning of the altar in the culture and religious practices of Classic Antiquity. He does so by searching for influences in the consecration act of altars, in the presence of chancels or even in the

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<sup>1</sup> Duval, N., “L’autel paléochrétien: les progrès depuis le livre de Braun (1924) et les questions à résoudre”, en: *The altar from the 4th to the 15th century*, *Hortus Artium Medievalium*, vol. 11, Zagreb 2005, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> See the next publications: de Fleury, R., *La messe. Études archéologiques sur ses monuments*, vol. I, 1883; Cabrol, F./ Leclercq, H., *Dictionnaire d’Archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, vol. I-XV, Paris 1924; Braun, *Der Christliche Altar in seiner geschichtliche Entwicklung*, München 1924.

shape of liturgical instruments. In this sense, we could find interesting and numerous relationships with primitive Christianity in the French author's description of Olympia Pausanias' altar: "the precinct where victims are presented is enclosed by a balustrade that women and children could approach, but which could only be trespassed by men who were accessing the altar". This is something similar to what happened in basilicas of the Early Christian era, where chancels were used to delimitate the space that housed the altar. Only those initiated in the mysteries of Christ were allowed to access this space – the *sancta sanctorum*. Canons such as number XVIII of the V Council of Toledo – year 633 –<sup>3</sup> prove the often archeologically ratified existence of this liturgical and spatial division between priests and seculars in Hispanic churches during the Late Antiquity and the High Middle Ages<sup>4</sup> (fig. 3). The presence of chancels or other type of delimitation devices is documented in the rest of the Mediterranean in numerous churches, apparently with the same intention of keeping the non-initiated part of the congregation away from certain spaces. Dourthe<sup>5</sup> quotes Saint Agustin's sermon titled *eiusdem de oboedientia* to explain how the intention of these barriers was to try to avoid any incidents caused by the desire of the faithful to be closer to the altar by approaching the most sacred area of the church.

Fleury goes on to compare ancient sacrifices with the celebration of mass, finding, as he calls them, "prophetic similarities" between sacred wine and libations, which are found in the patera, the piece that is so usually sculpted on the marble of pagan aras and which, to his judgment, seem to have served as iconographic models for Christian patens and trays<sup>6</sup>. He also makes a comparison between the relics of Greek altars, so talked about by Pausanias, and Christian martyr relics, which with time became almost mandatory to possess in order to be able to consecrate any altar, serving as the pure essence of such spaces<sup>7</sup>. All this analogies come to demonstrate how

<sup>3</sup> Vives, J., *Concilios visigóticos e hispano-romanos*, Barcelona-Madrid 1963, 198: "(...) eo videlicet ordine sacerdos et levita ante altare communicent, in choro clericos, extra chorum populus".

<sup>4</sup> For the Hispanic domain, consider the following churches as valid examples: Santa Lucía del Trampal, El Gatillo and Casa Herrera, the three of them located in Extremadura, see Mateos, P./Caballero, L. (eds.), *Repertorio de arquitectura cristiana en Extremadura: Época tardoantigua y altomedieval en : Anejos de AEspA*, 29, 2003; Santa María de Melque y San Pedro de la Mata, in Toledo, see Caballero, L./Latorre, J.I., *La iglesia y el monasterio visigodo de Santa María de Melque (Toledo). Arqueología y arquitectura. S. Pedro de La Mata (Toledo) y Sta. Comba de Bande (Orense)*, en: *Excavaciones Arqueológicas en España* n° 109, Madrid 1980.

<sup>5</sup> Dourthe, P., "Les déplacements liturgiques dans une basilique paléochrétienne. Casa Herrera en Espagne": *La Maison-Dieu* 197, 1994, 65.

<sup>6</sup> One of the most complete studies about these objects in Hispania in Palol, P., *Bronces hispanovisigodos de origen mediterráneo I: Jarritos y pátenas litúrgicos*, Barcelona 1952.

<sup>7</sup> "(...) Nous en dirons autant d'une stèle trouvée à Carthage dans le temple de Tania, où nous voyons, debout devant un autel surmonté d'un personnage qui étend le bras gauche et tient de la main droite un vase sacré" (de Fleury, *La messe...*, 1883, 94-95).

Christianity also participated in the use of symbols, ceremonies and liturgical traditions that were common to all the other ancient religions of the Mediterranean. Evidently, as Brown<sup>8</sup> very well points out, the first Christians were, as well as Christians, Roman citizens inevitably impregnated with millenary Roman, or even Mediterranean, culture and customs; it is from this cultural baggage that they would pick up the necessary elements and symbols for their new religion.

As an anecdote, it is interesting to observe a doubly contradictory fact in ancient Christian religion whose main character happens to be the use of wine. On the one hand, vines, bunches of grapes and wine craters are well established and recurrent decorative motifs on Christian iconography since very early dates – as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century – personifying either Christ himself or his sacrifice. However, and in contradiction with this, in this same period it was common to hear critiques from well established Church figures and hermits – who exemplified the vital experiences closest to those of Jesus – who condemned wine as a pagan temptation capable of deviating the best of man from a wholly path<sup>9</sup>. A funerary inscription of the late 4<sup>th</sup> century or early 5<sup>th</sup> dedicated to a certain *Pascentius*, serve of God, was found in Pueblonuevo del Guadiana (in Badajoz, Spain). In the statement we find a description of the type of life he chose to lead, renouncing to the material world: “Pascentio, lover and faithful servant of God, left this world at 28 years old. As soon as he heard Christ’s word, he renounced to the world and its perishable pomp, to festive life and the intoxicating cups of Bacchus, to allow his sober spirit to contemplate the celestial kingdoms. Having battled this fight with strength and joy, God wanted to take him to a prosecuting jury to award him with the palm, the stole and the crown. Those of you who read this and find comfort in the futile hope, learn about what justice really is...”. The text has quotes from Latin authors, both pagan and Christian ones, such as Virgil and Tertulian<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries we see that communities in the andalusí Hispania maintain both points of view that have existed

<sup>8</sup> Brown, P., *Il culto dei santi. L’origine e la diffusione di una nuova religiosità*, Torino 1983.

<sup>9</sup> On wine among the hermits of the Egipcian kellia and on how the abbot defends the brother who tried to escape the temptation of drinking a glass of wine, see Mottier, Y. (coord.), *Les Kellia, ermitages coptes en Basse-Egypte*, Genève 1989-1990, 34.

<sup>10</sup> Salas, J. et alii., *Inscripciones romanas y cristianas del Museo de Badajoz*, Badajoz 1997, 87-88: “*Pascentivs amator dei cvltorqve fidelis ex hac lyce migravit annorvm XXIII / Protinvs vt vocem avribvs percepit carmini cristi renvntiavit mvndo pompisqve tabentibvs eivs feralemqve / Vital temvleniaqve pocvla Bacchi sobrius vt animvs specvlaretvr aetheria regna cvm in isto certamine fortis / dimicaret acleta placvit namqve vt evm arciret abte tribvna datvrvs ei palmam stolam / (a)dqve coronam. Vos qvi haec legis adqve / spe delectamini vana (de)sit et ei ivstitiam m... / ...olite c...*”. Currently kept at the Museo Arqueológico Provincial de Badajoz. See also Ramírez, J. L., “La inscripción de Torrebaja (Pueblo Nuevo del Guadiana, Badajoz) original modelo de la epigrafía cristiana”: *Antigüedad y Cristianismo VIII*, 1991, 89-98.

since the presence of the first Christians, the pleasurable<sup>11</sup> and the more pejorative<sup>12</sup> one, together with the use of wine as a fundamental part of Christian liturgy. At the same time, a new religion, the Islamic one, was looking with mistrust and even with fear the use of wine amongst the “unfaithful”<sup>13</sup>.

But there wasn’t only a Greco-Roman influence. The Old Testament tradition and the traditions of both the Hebrew culture and that of the Near East also intervened in the configuration of the concept of the Christian altar. We can find the condensed symbolical meaning of an altar in the passage of Jacob’s dream<sup>14</sup>, the same meaning that betilos (stones) have in these ancient cultures, that is, an earthly object, usually a stone, where the worshipped and feared God shows his presence, making the object itself turn into the house of God on Earth. It is very possible that both concepts appear in the reusing of the Roman aras, specially during the first centuries, but it is very difficult to determine to what degree this is true.

The direct influence between the *mensae* of pagan banquets – circular and sigmatic – and the martyr *mensae* built by the first Christian communities seems to have been proven. The former developed during the late imperial period, spreading both to the funerary and the royal and private spheres. Although its origins were situated in the eastern parts of the Empire, their existence has been documented in all of the western provinces. However, it is a very complicated typology when it comes to ascribing a role to it. We know that sigma-shaped and circular tables existed in Hispania in a moment where a large part of society was already Christian and that their chronology is framed between the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century and the entirety of the 6<sup>th</sup>. We also know that their geographical dispersion can be reduced to port areas in direct contact with the Mediterranean and eastern commerce (or interior areas that were well communicated with the ones previously mentioned). However, to insure that some of them had a liturgical or even Christian role is fairly complicated

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<sup>11</sup> Christian poems of the 9<sup>th</sup> century have remained in which wine is described as a beauty of nature. For Colbert, it is common in mozarabic poets of this time to describe the beauty and grandeur of nature in association with the subject of the power of God: “The remaining seventy-three lines of verse are divided among eleven poems, mostly epitaphs, eight by the Archpriest Cyprian and three by the Abbot Samson. All come from the Azagra Codees ... Unusual in this collection is a three-line piece by Ciprian expressing a *caper diem* philosophy: “Cease your weeping, you see the green fields, birds sin sweet songs, and let wine flow into the mouth of the fearful” (Colbert, E. P., *The Martyrs of Córdoba (850-859): A Study of the Sources*, Washington D.C. 1962, 165-166.

<sup>12</sup> Eulogio points out the very little wine that a monk was drinking, having arrived to Córdoba from Palestine, as an example of what should be the model of a strict monk, who puts more water in the wine mix to dilute its effects. Among the virtues of this religious figure, the martyr from Córdoba highlights his sobriety and abstinence; see “*Eulogi Memoriale Sanctorum*”, in: Gil, J., *Corpus Scriptorum Muzarabicum* II, CSIC, Madrid 1973.

<sup>13</sup> Colbert, *The Martyr...*, 128-130.

<sup>14</sup> Gn 28.10-22.

even though this shape was the one chosen to embody figuratively the first representations of “the last supper”<sup>15</sup>. More recently, N. Duval recalled that this same shape – *stibadium* – with the *mensa* in its center and about a meter in its diameter, is the same shape that was adopted in funerary tricliniums, as well as in the banquet halls of the Roman *domus* from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onward, becoming more generalized during all of the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>16</sup>. We can find Hispanic examples of this type of usage of the *mensa* within the funerary sphere in the late-Roman necropolis of Troia, Tarragona, Cartagena or Mérida. J.C. Márquez had already pointed out the implied danger of assuming the Christian dimension of sigma tables, which were almost always found out of their original context. The consequence of their speculative use is not minor: to drag along a priori the interpretation of a building like a church without any archeological argument. On the other hand, Christianizing this *mensa* shape does not entail that it needs to be tied to a specific role within the Christian liturgy. The amount of different functional contexts to those of the Eucharistic altar in which they have been found are numerous<sup>17</sup>. When N. Duval refers to the *mensae martyrum* of northern Africa, he doesn’t consider them as altars per se, but as a type of table meant to be used at funerary banquets or for funerary offerings in the first Christian cemeteries, which could also be found inside the actual church. The inscriptions that are engraved in some of these boards, such as lists of Saints and dates with their anniversaries, do not necessarily have to mean that this device housed real relics in its interior. Duval proposes that this might have just been a call or plea of devotion to such objects<sup>18</sup>. Only two of the pieces found in Hispania present epigraphs and they are, precisely, local Hispanic productions. The Christian dimension of both seems certain: the “Casa Herrera” (Mérida, Spain)<sup>19</sup> and Rubí (Barcelona, Spain)<sup>20</sup>. Both pieces are carved out of white marble and present a series of original iconographic characteristics which make them have no identical parallel in all the rest of the Mediterranean. The “Casa Herrera” (fig. 4) board has its border decorated with relieves with a “pearl lace” arch, alternating elongated oval shapes between two round pearls; it is held by two columns of attic base with several

<sup>15</sup> The most famous examples are the frescos conserved in Roman catacombs, specially the mosaic in San Apolinar el Nuevo in Rávena.

<sup>16</sup> Duval, “L’autel paléochrétien...”, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Including the ones which were found on the bottom of christening pools, as is the case of the famous *mensa* from Tébesa (Argelia), which has made some authors wonder whether its use had some sort of relationship with the meaning of martyrdom and sacrifice more usually associated with these shapes and applied in this case to the rite of baptism; see Duval, “L’autel paléochrétien...”, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Duval, “L’autel paléochrétien...”, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Caballero, L./ Ulbert, T., *La basílica paleocristiana de Casa Herrera en las cercanías de Mérida (Badajoz)*, en: *Excavaciones Arqueológicas de España* 89, 1976, 100. Currently kept at the Visigoth museum-storage of the Museo Nacional de Arte Romano de Mérida, inventory n. 16717.

moldings and a very schematic capital of two leaves which open in a V shape. The inscription, which is only partially conserved, is organized in two lines in a frieze-like band located in the lower area, with a straight side, of the surface of the board<sup>21</sup>. The Rubí board has its superior side framed by a triple molding which, like in the case of the Herrera House, leaves the central plane on a lower level. The lower side is unpolished and also has a molded border. It has an inscription<sup>22</sup> all over its side, flanked by freezes with oval shapes divided by pairs of vertical beads. This decorative originality is not without importance when we're referring to a product – sigmatic boards –, which is strongly standardized and directly dependent on the Byzantine State. Why then these peculiarities in composition in particularly Hispanic sigma boards? Where they local imitations, modified from well known manufactured goods that were desired, but affordable to very few for their high material and transport costs? Their discoverers consider that the function of martyrial commemorative altar, derived first from the Roman-pagan funerary banquet celebration and later from the Roman-Christian one, is the most accurate of all the possibilities that have been suggested<sup>23</sup>. There is another Hispanic example of an exceptional interest, in this case circular, known as the “Quiroga chrismon” (fig. 5). This piece of over 0,90 m. in diameter and made from grey swirled marble, was found in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, where it had been reused at the Hermitage of Our Lady of Quiroga (Lugo, Spain), where it served precisely as a board to the altar until it was transferred to the Museo Diocesano de Lugo<sup>24</sup>. There has been a constant debate around its function since its discovery – with opinions discussing whether it is a decorative plaque or a *mensa* of liturgical character – as well as around the inscription that runs along its border. It seems clear, however, that it dates from the 5<sup>th</sup> century and that its sacred character survived throughout the centuries to the point that still in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was considered to embody a magical quality. For this reason, many followers and congregation members would scrape the marble to use the powder in the preparation of remedies and concoctions that were said to be miraculous, curative and apotropaic. It is not unusual to find these cultural assimilations in Galicia between the ancient, almost pagan-

<sup>20</sup> Vives, J., “Un nuevo altar romano-cristiano en la Tarraconense”: *Analecta Bollandiana* I, Bruxelles 1949.

<sup>21</sup> (—)RSVS NO(—) (—)+SER(—).Caballero proposes as hypothesis to the interpretation of this epigraph, the name of the Mérida martyr *Servandus* (Caballero/ Ulbert, *La basilica paleocristiana* ..., 215).

<sup>22</sup> + FELICI MISERO PENARVM PONDRE PELLE +XXPE DS PER CVNCTA PIVS QVI SCLA REGNAS HIC SCS SEMPER SEDITO HIC ABITATOR ADESTO + FELICI MISERO TOTA TV TRISTIA TOLLE.

<sup>23</sup> Caballero/ Ulbert, *La basilica paleocristiana* ..., 100-102.

<sup>24</sup> Castillo, A. del, “Un crismón del siglo V”: *Boletín de la Academia Gallega* 15, año 20, 1926, 227-234.

magical, and the Christian religious elements. It is worth mentioning that the Northwestern region of the Iberian peninsula is by far the area where more pagan aras have been reutilized as Christian altars, from the late-Roman period until the full medieval era and even later. This region is characterized by the reuse of aras dedicated to Jupiter and also to some indigenous deities which were at some point Romanized<sup>25</sup>. One of the most known cases is probably that of the high altar from the Santiago de Padrón church (Coruña, Spain), where an ara dedicated to Jupiter Optimo Maximo is conserved, measuring over 1,67 m. high by 0,75 m. of width and thickness. We don't know when it was reused, whether it was during medieval or modern times, although it presents a long historiography that relates it with the cult to St. James<sup>26</sup> because tradition has for long considered it the big rock or "pedrón" to which the boat with the apostle's remains was tied. Apparently, a cross was added in the 16<sup>th</sup> century<sup>27</sup>, but it might have already formed part of the first church. On the center of its main side, a hole has been carved with a shape resembling a circle and which meaning is impossible to interpret. As C. García<sup>28</sup> tells us, together with this rock and also under the high altar, there was a headstone (0,97 x 0,39 m.) dedicated to bishop Gelmírez and dated in 1133<sup>29</sup>. This headstone was later built into of the church walls.

It is therefore from these experiences – pagan aras and banquet *mensae* – that the early Christianity will nurture from to celebrate its rites. However, these two elements would take different paths during these first centuries of testing and codifying of the uses and rules of a brand new and triumphant religion. The circular and sigmatic shape of the *mensae* would not survive in the West over the beginnings of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, even though its concept of reunion around a table to share a commemorative banquet is basic in the Christian liturgy. However, the second typology, the solid prismatic block of the pagan ara, consolidated as a fundamental part of the characteristic shape of the Christian altar throughout all of Late Antiquity and the high Middle ages, either through imitation of its volumes or directly through reusing an ancient Roman ara. However, Christian altars would soon be introduced to a new

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<sup>25</sup> Pioneer work on this matter in Caballero, L./ Sánchez, J.C. "Reutilizaciones de material romano en edificios de culo cristiano": *Cristianismo y aculturización en tiempos del Imperio Romano, Antigüedad y Cristianismo VII*, Murcia 1990, 431-485. This subject is currently being studied in our doctoral thesis.

<sup>26</sup> Rodríguez Colmenero, A. *et alii*, *Miliarios e outras inscricións viarias romanas do Noroeste Hispánico (Conventos Bracarense, Lucense e Asturicense)*, Santiago de Compostela 2004, 598, n. 522.

<sup>27</sup> It is at this moment when we find the first literary references to the ara, compiled by Ambrosio de Morales in his *Viaje Santo*, see Bouza, F., "Sobre el ara de Padrón y las deidades marítimas de la Galicia romana": *BRG* 25, n. 297-300, 1953, 431-436. This author considers that the letters of the first line under the cross correspond to IOM, reason for which it would be an ara dedicated to Jupiter.

<sup>28</sup> García, C., "*De re epigraphica*": *BRAG* 164, 1924, 185.

<sup>29</sup> García, "*De re...*", n. 164, 1925, 186.



element in their composition, disconnected from Roman pagan religious manifestations and related, as we have just mentioned, to the concept of the banquet *mensae*: the introduction of a rectangular board placed over the ara<sup>30</sup>, which was probably related to the memory of the Last Supper recalled through the Eucharist or Holy Communion<sup>31</sup>. We can therefore infer that its presence in Christian liturgy is more than justified by the increasingly complex number of steps and rites which happen throughout mass, which implied the use of different objects, specially during the Holy Communion – books, wine jugs, trays for the bread, etc. –, and requiring a larger space than the surface of Roman aras could provide. This need of space and the weight that the board caused on the support if it was a single one, worried Íñiguez Almech<sup>32</sup>, who thought some altars couldn't have had a single support. The images of altars reproduced in the *Beatos* (manuscript codices) and Mozarabic bibles such as the one from Gerona, as well as a few examples conserved in situ or currently still being used – as the one conserved in a chapel of the co-cathedral of Santa María de Mérida – allow us, however, to prove that a prismatic block such as an ara or cipo with measurements of 0,35-0,40 m. on the side and 0,90 m. high, could in fact easily support a rectangular board of over 1 m. x 0,50 in its sides. Furthermore, the width of the board used to be quite thin, around 0,05-0,07 m. during the late antiquity period and somewhat thicker in the high Middle Ages – ca. 0,15-0,20 m. It is possible, however, that it is in this increasing surface where we can find the origin of the addition of a minor support – a little column or pilaster – in each of the columns of the board. In this way, the typology of the table with five supports with a central support-ara gained great profusion in the late antiquity and high medieval Hispania.

One of the main problems that stems from reusing pagan aras as Christian altars is being able to determine the level of conscious Christianization of the former ancient element, which was “heretic” in its origin. Reusing aras, and with this, the problem of knowing their religious intentionality would not rise to the surface until the agitated end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Before this moment, it is quite difficult to propose the existence of conversions of pagan aras into Christian altars and that they might have functioned as such in the first churches, given that both circles, the Christian and the “pagan” one,

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<sup>30</sup> Roman Hispanic iconography conserves one of the most representative examples of celebration of rites over aras: the Oñate patera in Guipúzcoa. According to Blázquez's proposal, we can find two different rites represented in two different aras: one of them shows a libation, while in the other we can see an elderly man sprinkling myrrh over it. See Blázquez, J. M., *Diccionario de la Religiones Prerromanas de Hispania*, Madrid 1975, 44/ 146, fig. c. The pagan ara, whether it be circular or prismatic, never has a board over it, it never acts as a support to any other elements and is only the receiver of libations and all the other necessary elements for the various rites.

<sup>31</sup> De Fleury, *La messe...*, 1883, 94.

<sup>32</sup> Íñiguez Almech, F., “Algunos problemas de las viejas iglesias españolas”: Cuadernos de Trabajo de la Escuela Española de Historia y Arqueología 7, 1955, 9-180.

had their own, defined fields of action. The Christian authors of the first centuries strived to mark clear differences between ones and the others, opposing and clearly distinguishing the characteristics and uses of their rites. In the period of the apologists, Tertullian († c. 220), one of the writers who was to become more successful, wrote the following: “Christians don’t participate in the cult of pagan gods because these gods are just men who have died and their images are material and inanimate”<sup>33</sup>. It would finally be the laws passed by the emperors of the last third of the fourth century, which would increasingly suffocate the rest of the ancient religions in favor of Christianity until it was officially proclaimed the main religion of the Roman Empire. After the laws compiled in the *Codex Theodosianus*, temples and entertainment buildings in cities were no longer sacred by removing all god statues and altars<sup>34</sup>. Honorio and Arcadio so confirm it in an order promulgated in 399 according to which entertainment acts are allowed, but deprived of any religious, cult-related or sacred pagan sign. A constitution that had been dictated that same year prohibited the destruction of pagan temples as long as they had previously had all their idols and altars removed<sup>35</sup>. This situation had two main consequences: on a short term, the frontal encounter between those who defended the ancient beliefs and the apologists of the new Faith. It all turned into revolts, destruction and a lack of attention towards the ancient temples, as well as the beginning of the prosecution of all that was considered heretic. On a medium-long term, once the new status quo of the Church was more stable throughout the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the consequence would be different: Christianity’s intention of assuming every corner of pagan religiosity, with no other solution than assimilating and superimposing itself over the ancient remains of paganism that were so rooted in large sectors of society. It is precisely at this point where reusing ancient pagan aras and their intentional conversion into Christian altars has sense.

Something similar happens in the case of churches that appear to be superimposed over previous pagan cult sanctuaries. It is highly likely, there are texts to confirm it, that many Christian temples were deliberately Christianizing a site of a strong cult and sacred tradition rooted in the inhabitants of the surrounding territories and which the Church tried to assimilate by re-directioning their sacred character. This intention is made clear in Juan Crisóstomo’s commentary and in the letter that Gregorio Magno wrote to Abbot Melitón in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>36</sup>. In Hispania, we know the mention that

<sup>33</sup> Quasten, J., *Patrología I*, Madrid 2004, 556-557.

<sup>34</sup> *Cod. Theod.*, XVI.10.17.

<sup>35</sup> A recent and in depth study in the doctoral thesis of Jiménez Sánchez, J.A., *Poder imperial y espectáculos en Occidente durante la Antigüedad Tardía*, Barcelona 1998, 520-521.

<sup>36</sup> Compiled in Iñiguez Herrero, J. A., *El altar cristiano. I De los orígenes a Carlomagno (s. II-año 800)*, Pamplona 1978, 303. Also commented on by Caballero/ Sánchez, “Reutilizaciones de material romano...”, 433.

Valerio del Bierzo makes about a church dedicated to St. Felix, built at his request on the site of an ancient pagan temple. As Isla gathers in his writings, Christianization didn't change the already sacred value of the site, since people kept going to the same site when in search of healing and recovery<sup>37</sup>. Unfortunately, archeology has documented very few of these Christianization processes in the Iberian Peninsula. There are proposals to study the churches of San Miguel de Mota (Portugal)<sup>38</sup> and San Juan de Postoloboso (Ávila, Spain)<sup>39</sup>, both sanctuaries dedicated to the indigenous god Endovélico. The possibility of Christianization has also been considered in the case of the church of Santa Lucía del Trampal (Alcuéscar, Cáceres, Spain), in this case situated over a sanctuary dedicated to Ataecina, another indigenous deity assimilated to the Roman Proserpine. In all of these cases, the main motif, given the lack of superimposed structures, has been the great quantity of found aras dedicated to these deities, many of them having been reused for the Christian building.

In the case of San Miguel de Mota, it is interesting to observe how, of the various aras found in the sanctuary, the one that was chosen to be reused as the Christian altar is precisely the one that presents a better and more detailed decoration of two sculpted winged genies in its lateral sides<sup>40</sup> (fig. 6a). Whether the iconographic motif and the angel-like dedication are related in certainly suggestive, but somehow difficult to determine. Peres<sup>41</sup> had already related the pagan cult to Endovélico with that of Archangel St. Michael as the main archangel of medicine. The type of *loculus* (fig. 6b) of its main side –0,11 m x 0,11 x 0,10; step: 0,02 m. wide – indicates that its Christian use corresponds to Late Antiquity or the High Middle ages. In the church of Santa Lucía de El Trampal (Cáceres, Spain), some of the stelae consecrated to Ataecina were reused as thresholds to the chancels that delimited access to the head of the church, the most sacred area, while others were used as construction materials; however, no remains were found as part of them having being reused to form the altar. The fragments we conserve from the Eucharistic altar show that it was a five support altar, with the central one being an ara-support of cross pattée, while from the possible altar or Northern apse table we conserve only is the base and part of the support with a plain shaft. There is therefore no proof of the use of Ataecina-dedicated aras having

<sup>37</sup> *Replicatio*, 1, in Isla: "San Pedro del Esla, una iglesia en la historia", in Caballero (coord.): *San Pedro de La Nave*, 2004, 280, note 21.

<sup>38</sup> Peres, D., "Arte visigótica", en: *História de Portugal*, vol I, quinta parte, Lisboa 1928, 376.

<sup>39</sup> Analysis in Caballero/ Sánchez, "Reutilizaciones de material romano...", 442-448.

<sup>40</sup> Its dimensions are 0,95 m x 0,48 x 0,38. It is an ara or Roman pedestal of prismatic shape and rectangular section. In one of its wider sides it has an inscription dedicated to the god *Endovelico*. Both lateral sides are filled by the relief of a full-bodied winged genie. The top is broken but conserves the *loculus* done in the center, with a rectangular shape, with rounded corners and a considerable steep step. Currently kept at the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia in Lisboa (n. 988.3.4).

been used as a Christian altar in high medieval churches. If there was, there is no way of knowing.

These examples point to how difficult it is to know whether we are witnessing a practical use of materials that were found in construction sites or in the most immediate surroundings, or if, on the contrary, they are purposeful intentions of transforming the religious sign of a site and its most sacred objects. The use of Roman materials related to Christian cult elements is a constant through time and can be manifested in different ways. In Campanario (Badajoz, Spain), there is a cult to the Virgen of Piedraescrita (the Virgin of “Writtenstone”), an image of the Virgin from the 13<sup>th</sup> century which, according to tradition, was found buried under a Roman funerary stela which was since then, used as its main support<sup>42</sup>. In the place of the discovery an hermit was built, dated in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Every Easter Monday a pilgrimage in its honor was celebrated<sup>43</sup>. We can also find a Roman ara used as a support for the image of the Virgin in the church of Santa Bárbara de Granja (San Miguel de Trasminas, Vila Pouca de Aguiar, Portugal)<sup>44</sup>. These are examples that demonstrate how throughout the centuries Roman elements have acquired several roles in their new Christian context. In that case, how can we know when there is a Christianizing intention in their reuse and when not? This question applied to our particular topic of study generates another issue, all Roman aras used later as part of Christian altars where used with that re-conversion intention? What is the criteria to differentiate those that were used for that purpose and those that weren't? In those that were, can we trace iconographic remains?

Epigraphy is one of the factors that can be valid to help make this distinction, given that Archeology cannot, so far, be of much help in this particular case. The reuse of ancient aras or Roman cipos in Hispania –with a conscious sense of Christianization in which the *damnatio memoriae* of its ancient pagan sense occurs and where its new meaning is specified through writing – is only documented with certainty in Bética, and more precisely in its central-western area. In these aras, the commemoration of the act of deposition of relics by the bishop is accompanied by the removal of the prior pagan inscription, which is erased or is left inverted in the back side. The action of bishop Pimenio (mid 7<sup>th</sup> century) is worth mentioning, who documented his liturgical activity up to three times in three different aras: Medina

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<sup>41</sup> Peres, “Arte visigótica”..., 376.

<sup>42</sup> *CIL* II<sup>2</sup>/7, 958. Currently in the southern wall of the hermit. Information from H. Gimeno, center *CIL* II.

<sup>43</sup> Blasco, J., *Guía de Fiestas de Interés Turístico Regional*, Badajoz 2003, 66-68.

<sup>44</sup> *CIL* II 2392; *ILER* 6569.

Sidonia -630-<sup>45</sup>, Vejer de la Frontera -644-<sup>46</sup> and Alcalá de los Gazules -662-<sup>47</sup>. In addition to these three aras, Pimenio had chosen in another occasion the altar board as a place to commemorate a dedication -642 o 648-<sup>48</sup>. The piece was found in Salpensa (Faciálcazar, Sevilla, Spain), a region that would have been beyond his jurisdiction<sup>49</sup>. Its whereabouts have long been unknown, but it was for some time extremely popular among international researchers. Braun considered it the model of pre-Carolingian altars<sup>50</sup>. Twelve years after Pimenio's first dedication, other bishop from Gaditan territories, bishop Theoderacis, dedicated an ara kept at Vejer de la Miel – 674 –<sup>51</sup> also using an ancient pagan ara. This fashion or liking for the epigraphic capture of solemn acts spread around those same years to other nearby dioceses, like in *Egabro* (Cabra, Spain), from where another pagan ara consecrated as altar by bishop Bacauda came from – 660 –<sup>52</sup>, or the one in *Acci* (Guadix, Spain), consecrated by bishop Justo – 652 –<sup>53</sup>. These are activities that are very close in time – hardly two generations of bishops – and space, originated in Pimenio's see and extended to nearby venues. It is therefore a restricted phenomenon that belongs to a specific moment of the 7<sup>th</sup> century and is limited to some venues of the peninsular South. Outside of this area, there are hardly any examples of Christianized aras with epigraphic messages, with the exception of the altar of Játiva (Valencia, Spain) which is dated in the moment of the biggest expansion of the southern group during the third fourth of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. We won't find Christian inscriptions in altars again until the High Middle Ages, but this time concentrated in the northern are of the Peninsula.

This doesn't mean that the phenomenon of re-using didn't happen in the rest of the Iberian Peninsula. On the contrary, if there is a typological unity of altars in Hispania, at least from the 7<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the High Middle Ages, that would be in the use of Roman elements as part as Christian altars. The parish church of Arisgotas (Toledo) conserves a roman ara in white marble<sup>54</sup> of which its pagan *focus* was reconverted sometime during Late Antiquity or the High Middle Ages into

<sup>45</sup> *ICERV*, n. 304.

<sup>46</sup> *ICERV*, n. 305.

<sup>47</sup> *ICERV*, n. 309.

<sup>48</sup> *ICERV*, n. 306.

<sup>49</sup> According to H. Gimeno, the location of this piece is very problematic: "it's form the 'Cortijo de la Higuera' and if that property was the same that exists today close to Utrera, it would nowadays fall into the area of Villamartín Cádiz". Accordingly, if this was really the location of the discovery, it could have well been under the jurisdiction of Pimenio.

<sup>50</sup> Braun, *Der Christliche Altar...*, 303.

<sup>51</sup> *ICERV*, n. 310.

<sup>52</sup> CIL II<sup>2</sup>/5, 299 (*ICERV* n. 308).

<sup>53</sup> *ICERV*, n. 307; *CILA* 137. Thought to be lost. In the storage of the Guadix City Hall, there is a large block of stone, according to someone on staff, but we couldn't see it.

<sup>54</sup> 0,87 m x 0,38-0,31 x 0,34-0,26.

the Christian *loculus* – 0,18 m x 0,18 x 0,025; box: 0,125 m x 0,125 x 0,09 depth –. It doesn't have a Christian inscription and from the original pagan one we can only see the initial letters of the dedication to the Manes gods – D M S –<sup>55</sup>. The rest was intentionally erased. One of the sides of the patera is also conserved, a motif which, together with a small jar for libations, used to decorate these type of aras. It is possible, as Fleury suggested in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, that the patera “didn't interfere” too much with the new Christian function of the piece since, after all, it could assimilate perfectly with the liturgical instruments used for the Eucharistic service<sup>56</sup>. Similarly, the presence of the letters D M S could have taken a new meaning in its Christian context like, for instance, “*dominus*”.

In the areas of Toledo and Mérida, two of the most important and thriving cities of late-antiquity Hispania, there are a series of aras of Christian altars which Spanish historiography has named “altar-tenante”, and which are almost always ascribed to the Visigothic period with very well defined technical and iconographic characteristics: made of marble; prismatic shape; fixed composition scheme, although flexible in its details, with a plain plinth, a molded base, body decorated with cross pattée's with a finish of one or two rows of stylized acanthus leaves; main side with rectangular locus and step; and a total height of 0,90 – 1,35 m (fig. 7). This way of standardizing speaks of a production workshop or several ones, which would work for the most powerful churches in Hispania, with capability to distribute their products throughout all of the territories controlled by their bishops, extending even to neighboring dioceses. It seems that Mérida was the center where this altar started to be developed. Decorative sculpture of the moment was made to a great extent by reusing the great quantity of marble that survived from Roman times in a city, the ancient Augusta Emerita that had been the capital of Lusitania. But the main material was not only Roman marble. The shape of these pieces is very similar in dimensions and design to pagan aras. The difference is in the decoration of the cross on the main body, but the molding of the base, the composition scheme of base, body and header is the same than in its Roman predecessors. There are even some decorative “licenses” that make us wonder about the possibility that they might have been copying directly over specific models of pagan pieces. This is the case with the birds that appear in the top part of some of these

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<sup>55</sup> Lecture by Dr. H. Gimeno, with whom we could see and analyze the piece. For Mangas and Carrobes (“Nuevas inscripciones latinas de la provincia de Toledo. II”: *MHA* XVII n° 4, 1996, 247-248) the epigraphic area was “intentionally crushed” making it “useless to reflect four/five crosses scattered through the epigraphic area”. Furthermore, they consider that the Hermit of Santa Bárbara “could have been built over an ancient Roman temple. There are no remains from the hermit on the surface, except for several pieces of construction materials”.

<sup>56</sup> In other cases, such as in the ara of Caecilia Marina found in the church of Sao Romao de Sao Brás de Alportel (Faro, Portugal) the jar and paten are kept. This piece also presents *loculus* in its superior face, confirming its Christian reconversion. *CIL* II 5142.

supports, such as the ones conserved in the same city of Mérida<sup>57</sup>, and which are reminiscent of other birds represented in similar ways and which are precisely characteristic of Roman aras from Lusitania<sup>58</sup> (fig. 8).

These are some material examples that state how iconography and the semantic value of Roman pagan aras, either through their direct reuse or through the conceptual assimilation of shapes into new manufactures, persisted in a more or less intense way in the Christian religion, at least during its first centuries of existence. This persistence becomes even more relevant when we find it in the main element of Christianity, the altar, which personifies Christ himself. Through these same examples, the possibility has emerged that this persistence had gone even further, having even in some cases – such as in San Miguel de Mota – being able to relate new dedications with ancient ones through iconography, and with it, all its popular devotion; or as in the case of the so-called “tenantes” of Mérida, imitating specific iconographic motifs, like the doves, which come to symbolize certain values of eternity and communication with the afterlife which are very similar to those that were already represented in ancient culture<sup>59</sup>.

#### **CORPORA.**

CIL II = STYLOW, A., GIMENO, H. (coord.), *Corpus de Inscriptioes Latinas II*, Centro CIL II-Universidad de Alcalá de Henares.

CVHR = VIVES, J., *Concilios visigóticos e hispano-romanos*, Barcelona-Madrid, 1963.

ICERV = VIVES, J., *Inscriptioes Cristianas de la España Romana y Visigoda*, Barcelona. 2<sup>a</sup> ed. 1969 con supl.

<sup>57</sup> Cruz Villalón, “Últimos hallazgos visigodos en Mérida”: *Norba-Arte* V, 1984, 293-298; *Mérida visigoda. La escultura arquitectónica y litúrgica*, 1985, 98, n. 191.

<sup>58</sup> As an example, see CIL II 5171, where in the other side there is a bunch of grapes. In Figueira dos Barros (Avis, Portugal) we can also see the bird motif related to the vineyard, in this case a dove over a vineyard tree, all represented in the same side, see Cardim, J., (coord.), *Religioes da Lusitania*, Lisboa 2002, 540.

<sup>59</sup> I want to be grateful to María Nicanor for the translation of this text from Spanish.



Fig. 1. Roman patera with pagans aras (Oñate, País Vasco, Spain) (Blázquez, J. M., *Religiones prerromanas*, 1975, lám. 161).

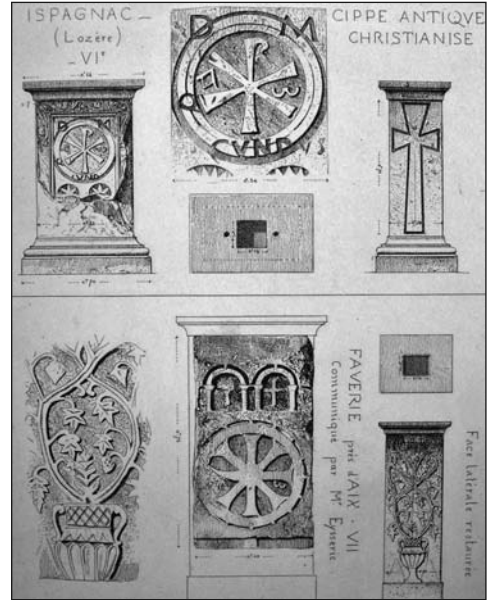


Fig. 2. Early Christians altars (de Fleury, R., *La Messe*, Paris 1883).



Fig. 3. Santa Lucía del Trampal (Cáceres, Spain), 8-9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Interior.



Fig. 4. Christian board in sigma form (Casa Herrera, near Mérida, Spain), 6<sup>th</sup> century.





Fig. 5. “Crismón de Quiroga” (Galicia, Spain); 5<sup>th</sup> century (Museo Diocesano de Lugo).



Fig. 6 a-b. Roman *ara* consecrated to the *Endovelicus* god reused as Christian ara in the Late Antiquity (San Miguel de Mota, Portugal) (Leite de Vasconcellos, *Religioes da Lusitania II*, Lisboa, 1905, p. 139, fig. 21, and S. Lambrino, *O Arqueólogo Português*, 1967, pp. 178-179, n° 105).



Fig. 7. Visigothic altar (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Badajoz, Spain), 7<sup>th</sup> century?

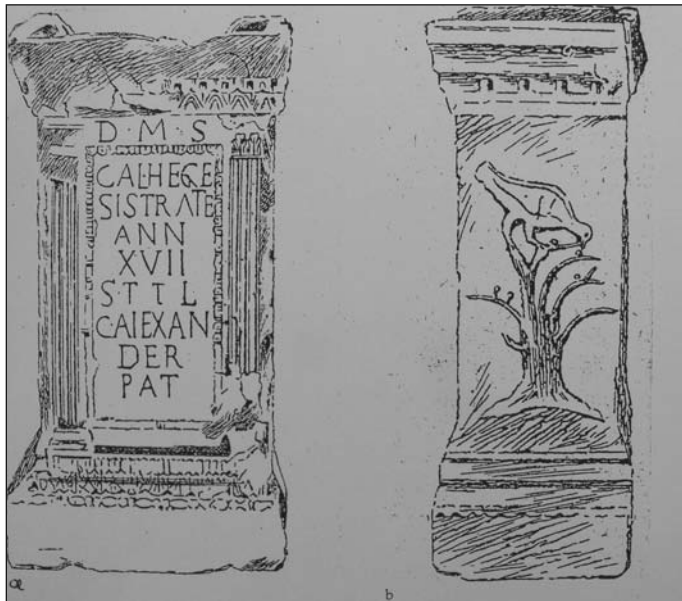


Fig. 8. Roman ara from Figueira dos Barros (Avis, Portugal)  
(Gamer, G., *Formen röm. Altäre*, Berlin 1989, Taf. 90).