

## THE DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE OF BRACARA AUGUSTA AND ITS EVOLUTION

Fernanda Magalhães

CITCEM, Universidade do Minho

### ABSTRACT

The excavations carried out under the rescue “*Project of Bracara Augusta*” have generated significant amounts of data that enabled the reconstruction of Bracara Augusta urban evolution and the characterization of its buildings and blocks. This paper aims to enhance the existing data related with the domestic architecture of the roman town, which was mainly represented by the houses of *domus* type.

### INTRODUCTION

Our knowledge regarding the roman *modus vivendi* is inherently rooted in the study of the cities particularly increased by the development of urban archaeology after 1970s. One of the major contributions of the urban excavations is precisely associated with the increased knowledge of the roman domestic architecture in the cities of the western provinces of the Empire, which generated new research perspectives in the study of the social and economic structures of the Romanised territories and their inherent urbanization processes. These new research perspectives include spatial analysis, such as the inclusion of houses within the urban setting, the enhancement of construction techniques and used materials and the overall improvement regarding the functionality of urban spaces contributing towards a better understanding of the complex urban world, where houses may be valued both as residential and social units<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the roman house may be understood as an experimental microcosm that intertwines italic stereotypes adapted to regional constraints of technical, social and cultural origin. The reason behind this logic is the fact that there aren't two houses alike, however they all present similar traits amongst themselves<sup>2</sup>. This paper aims to contribute to the knowledge of roman urban private architecture of Bracara Augusta through the

presentation of a group of selected excavated examples of *domus*.

### THE DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE OF BRACARA AUGUSTA

The first references to the existence of roman houses in Braga dated back to 1960s, although more exact knowledge only emerged from 1976 onwards with the start of the rescue Project of Bracara Augusta, under the responsibility of the Unit of Archaeology of the University of Minho.

Up to now several *domus* have been identified with a chronology between the Flavian period and Low Empire<sup>3</sup>. The known remains enabled us to confirm the reproduction of the italic house model with an *atrium* and peristyle, some of them with private baths, generally surrounded by *porticus* and occupying built areas of 1 *actus*<sup>4</sup>. However and despite the abundant remains of *domus*, they present a rather fragmented character inherent to urban archaeology constraints. Only in the case of Carvalheiras *domus* it has been possible to excavate and full area of the house, which still stands as a paradigmatic example of the roman domestic architecture in the city<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 1).

The Carvalheiras *domus*, built at the end of the first century AD, was located in a residential area at the northeast part of the roman town close to the *forum* area. This house occupied a whole block and was bounded by four streets that enabled the access to the

e-mail: b3872@uaum.uminho.pt

\*Research Fellow (PTDC/HIS-ARQ/121136/2010)

<sup>1</sup> Uribe Agudo, 2004: 191.

<sup>2</sup> Fernández Vega, 1999: 454.

<sup>3</sup> Martins, Delgado, 1989-90: 11-39.

<sup>4</sup> Martins, Fontes, 2010: 116.

<sup>5</sup> Martins, 1997/98: 23-45.

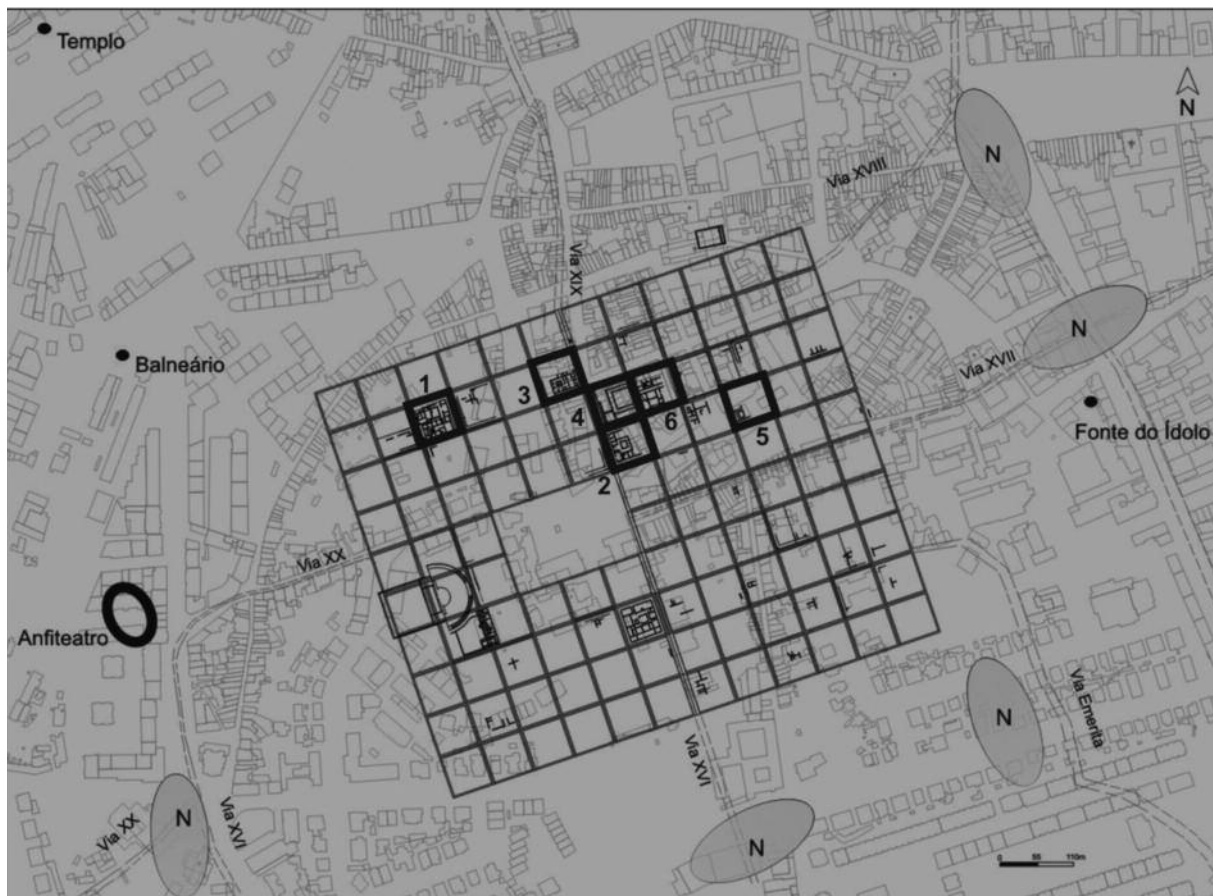


Fig. 1. The *Bracara Augusta* urban wall with the location of the archaeological areas with *domus* remains (UAUM archive). 1. Carvalheiras; 2. Ex. Albergue Distrital; 3. Escola Velha da Sé; 4. Frei Caetano Brandão and Santo António das Travessas; 5. Seminário de Santiago; 6. R. Afonso Henriques.

porticos and *tabernae* existing in the ground level. In fact, we are dealing with a *domus* with an *atrium* and a peristyle, with a quadrangular shape, which has occupied an area of around 1152 square meters (110 x 120 feet).<sup>6</sup> The house was organized in two platforms, a solution addressing the problems presented by the local topography. The upper platform included the *atrium* and the surrounding compartments, while the lower platform housed the peristyle, which was a wide open area around which several other spaces unfolded (Fig. 2. 1). A staircase linked both areas. In the first half of the second century, the structure of the *domus* was changed with the construction of a small public thermal complex located on its northeast side and measuring around 190 square meters. This reform also ensured the adaption of the previously existing peristyle to the thermal complex *palaestra* area with the surrounding compartments being converted into *tabernae*<sup>7</sup>.

Another ‘*domus*’ with a peristyle has been identified in the archaeological site of the Ex. Albergue Distrital. It equally occupied an urban block located in a noble part of the roman town around the *forum*. Its western façade of the house surrounded by a *porticus* opened up to the *cardus maximus* (Fig. 2. 2).

The remains from another *domus* with peristyle built in the first century AD have been identified in the archaeological site of the Escola Velha da Sé. Similarly to its precedents, the house occupied a roman block and was bounded by the *cardus maximus* on its eastern façade (Fig. 2. 3). This *domus* was subjected to a major reformation at the end of the third/early fourth centuries associated with the construction of a private thermal complex that changed the western part of the house alongside all the peristyle area<sup>8</sup>.

Another *domus* with a peristyle has been identified in the archaeological site of the Frei Caetano Brandão

<sup>6</sup> Martins, Ribeiro, Magalhães, Braga, 2012: 29-69.

<sup>7</sup> Martins, Meireles, Fontes, Ribeiro, Magalhães, Braga, 2012: 63.

<sup>8</sup> Magalhães, 2013: 13-30.

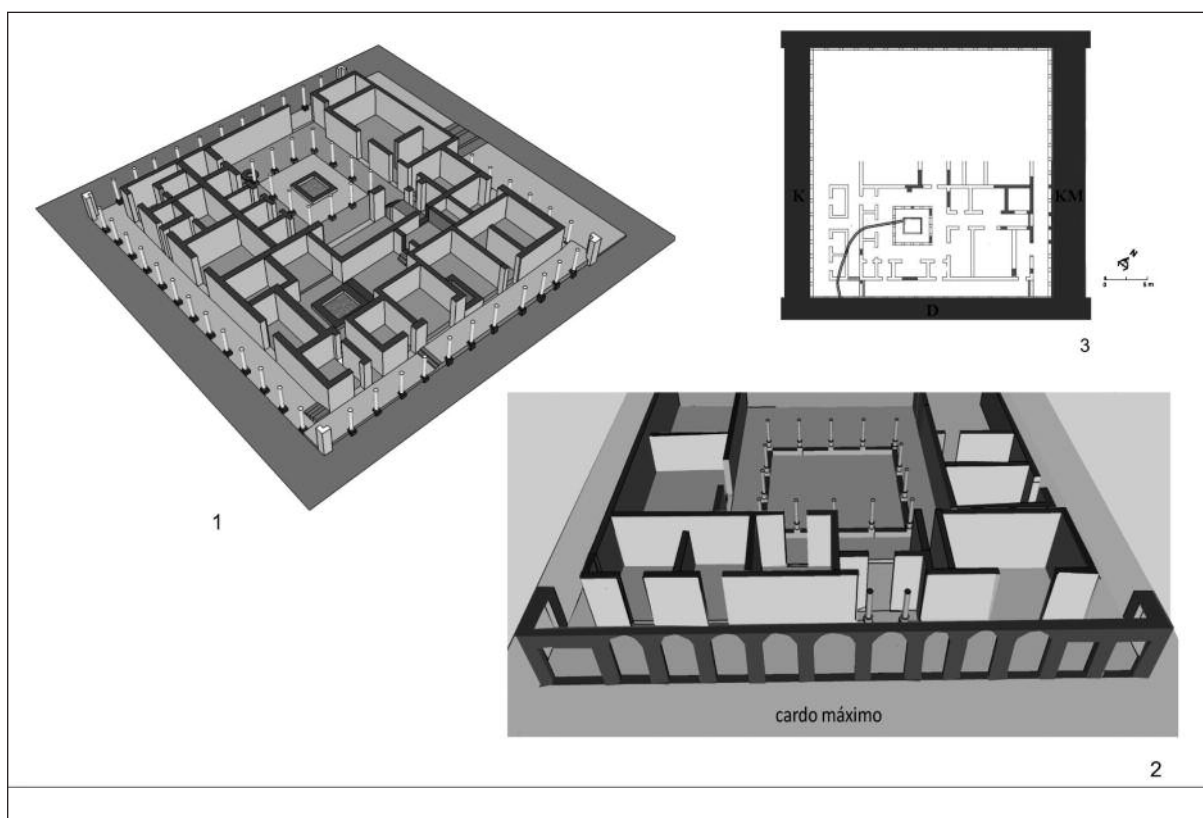


Fig. 2. 1. 3D reconstruction model of the Carvalheiras *domus*; 2. 3D reconstruction model of the Ex. Albergue Distrital *domus*; 3. Escola Velha da Sé *domus* interpretation plan.

street/Santo António das Travessas. It is believed it was built in the first century and demolished in the second century for a wide public thermal building to be erected. This house was bounded by the *cardus maximus* on its western side and occupied a whole roman quarter from which only the southern part is currently known (Fig. 3. 1).

The remains identified at the Seminário de Santiago cloister also refer to a '*domus*', built at the end of the first century, presenting a courtyard. At the end of the third/early fourth centuries the house endured a reconstruction in its open area, which was then turned into a peristyle, at the centre of which a tank was built covered by a mosaic decorated with maritime fauna figurations<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 3. 2).

The excavations that took place at the numbers 42 and 56 of the Afonso Henriques Street allowed the identification of part of another *domus* with a peristyle (Fig. 3. 3). Built in the mid first century AD, this house is located on the northern side of the *decumanus maximus*. In the second century, the

house was demolished, in order to construct a public thermal complex<sup>10</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Available archaeological data point towards significant reforms taking place in the *domus* structures throughout all the fourth century. Some of them benefit from the introduction of private baths and from the reorganization and widening of representative spaces (*triclinia*, *exedrae*) located around the peristyles. Equally, there was a widening of the house areas thanks to the occupation of the previous porticos, which were closed and included within the house structure. Simultaneously, the *domus* were the object of sophisticated decoration programs that embellished the walls with painting stuccos and the pavements with mosaics. These reforms corroborate the economic prosperity of Bracara Augusta throughout the fourth century and equally

<sup>9</sup> Magalhães, 2010: 89.

<sup>10</sup> Ribeiro, Fernández, Cunha, Martins, Magalhães and Braga, (forthcoming); Martínez Peñín, R, Cunha, A, Magalhães, F, Martins, M. (forthcoming).

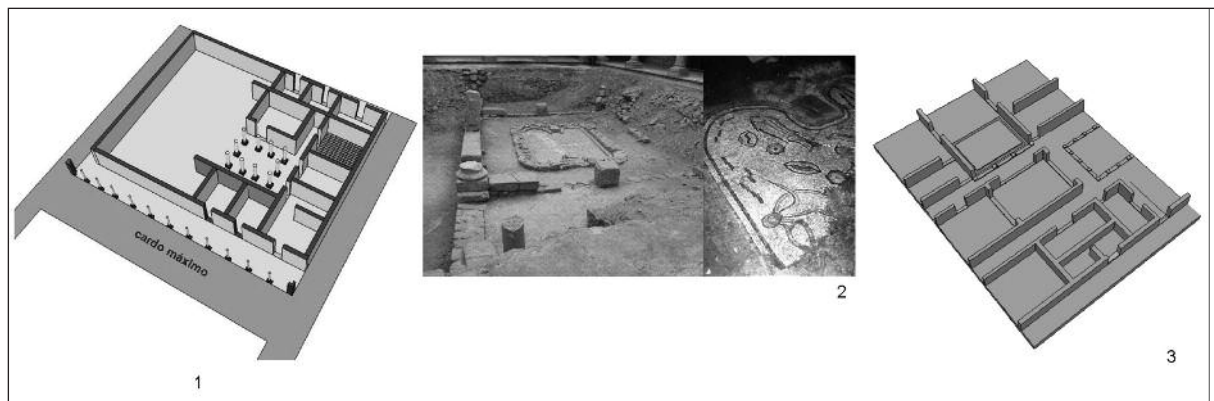


Fig. 3. 1. 3D reconstruction model of the Frei Caetano Brandão/Santo António das Travessas *domus*; 2. Peristyle and mosaic remains of the tank of Seminário de Santiago *domus*; 3. Reconstruction plan of the Afonso Henriques *domus*.

document the city occupation by wealthy social groups, who were likely associated with the new political and religious administrative functions held by the city as capital of the 'Gallaecia' province and diocese headquarter.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

FERNÁNDEZ VEGA, P. A. 1999: *La casa romana*, Ediciones Akal. Madrid.

MAGALHÃES, F. 2010: *Arquitetura doméstica em Bracara Augusta*, Universidade do Minho, Braga: <http://hdl.handle.net/1822/13619>.

MAGALHÃES, F. 2013: "Arquitetura doméstica em Bracara Augusta", *Interconexões*, Nº1. Braga: 13-30.

MARTÍNEZ PEÑÍN, R, CUNHA, A, ET AL. forthcoming: "La secuencia tardoantigua y medieval de la zona arqueológica Afonso Henriques 36/40 y 42/56: una contribución al estudio de la cerámica medieval de Braga", *Actas del II Congreso Internacional de la SECAH-Ex Officina Hispana*, nº 2. Braga.

MARTINS, M. 1997/98: "A zona arqueológica das Carvalheiras. Balanço das escavações e interpretação do conjunto", *Cadernos de Arqueologia*, 14 /15. Braga: 23-45.

MARTINS, M., DELGADO, M. 1989-90: "História e arqueologia de uma cidade em devir: Bracara Augusta", *Cadernos de Arqueologia*, 6/7. Braga: 11-39.

MARTINS, M., RIBEIRO, J. ET AL. 2012: "Urbanismo e Arquitetura de Bracara Augusta. Sociedade, economia e lazer", M. Ribeiro y A. Sousa (coords.), *Evolução da Paisagem Urbana: Sociedade e Economia*. Braga: 29-69.

MARTINS, M., MEIRELES, J. ET AL. 2012: *Água. Um Património de Braga*, UAUM/CITCEM. Braga.

RIBEIRO, J., FERNÁNDEZ, A. ET AL. forthcoming: "A cerâmica romana do Balneário da rua D. Afonso Henriques. Estudo preliminar da sequenciação cronológica e ocupacional do edifício", *Actas del II Congreso Internacional de laSECAH-Ex. Officina Hispana*, nº 2. Braga.

URIBE AGUDO, P. 2004: "Arquitetura doméstica em Bilbilis: la Domus I", *Saldvie*, nº 4: 191-220.