

Alexis OEPEN, Villa und christlicher Kult auf der Iberischen Halbinsel in Spätantike und Westgotenzeit. Spätantike – Frühes Christentum – Byzanz Bd. 35. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag 2012, 592 S.

Alexis Oepen's monograph *Villa und christlicher Kult auf der Iberischen Halbinsel in Spätantike und Westgotenzeit* appeared in 2012 as volume 35 in the series *Spätantike – Frühes Christentum – Byzanz. Kunst im ersten Jahrtausend. Reihe B: Studien und Perspektiven*, edited by F.A. Bauer, B. Brenk, J.G. Deckers and A. Effenberger and published by Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag in Wiesbaden. The publication is based on Oepen's doctoral study which he defended four years earlier at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität.

During the last decade interest for the Late Antique Iberian Peninsula and in particular for its private housing has substantially increased. This is reflected in recent PhD studies and publications dedicated to – mainly rural – Late Antique domestic architecture and to expressions of Christian religion and cult practices in the houses of the 4th-7th centuries AD.¹ In line with these recent developments and topics *Villa und christlicher Kult* forms a major contribution to the study of ancient private housing on the Iberian Peninsula focusing on a particular aspect: Christian cult practices as attested by private cult buildings on Late Antique and Visigothic villa sites. However, by discussing the entire transition from Late Roman times into the Visigothic phase, the author goes a step further than most of his colleagues working on Late Antique housing in Spain and Portugal. The broad time frame opted for offers a wider diachronic picture than is usually obtained and creates the possibility to point out elements of continuity, change and development throughout a longer period (4th-8th centuries AD). This approach undoubtedly gives the work an extra value, making it an important source of information on private housing and related religious practices in both Late Roman and Early Medieval times.

¹ These include among others contributions by K. Bowes and A. Chavarría Arnau, such as K. Bowes (2000) *Villa sacra: the transformation of domestic space in some Late Roman villas of Hispania*, in *Actas do 3. Congresso de Arqueologia Peninsular*, Porto, 587-600; K. Bowes (2005) 'Une coterie espagnole pieuse': Christian archaeology and Christian communities in fourth- and fifth century Hispania, in K. Bowes/M. Kulikowski (eds.) *Hispania in Late Antiquity. Current Perspectives*, Leiden/Boston, 189-258; K. Bowes (2008) *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge; A. Chavarría Arnau (2005) *Villas in Hispania during the fourth and fifth centuries*, in K. Bowes/M. Kulikowski (eds.) *Hispania in Late Antiquity. Current Perspectives*, Leiden/Boston, 519-552; A. Chavarría Arnau (2006) *Villas en Hispania durante la antigüedad tardía*, in A. Chavarría Arnau/J. Arce/G.P. Brogiolo (eds.) *Villas Tardoantiguas en el Mediterraneo Occidental*, *Anejos AEspA 29*, Madrid; A. Chavarría Arnau (2007) *El final de las villae en Hispania (siglos IV-VII D.C.)*, *Bibliothèque de l'Antiquité Tardive 7*, Turnhout.

The work starts with an **introduction (pp. 13-26: Einführung)**, in which the author sketches – based on archaeological and literary source material – the development of Christian belief on the Iberian Peninsula, especially focussing on the Late Antique villa and its link with the Christian cult. Oepen stresses that most evidence for Late Antique Christian cult buildings on the Iberian Peninsula, which appeared from the 4th century AD onwards, has not been found in an urban context, but on the countryside, particularly on villa sites or their immediate environment. In the 5th century AD a large part of the villa owners had presumably become Christian and started to build oratories (*domestica ecclesia*) and small churches, which formed the scene of cult activities for the villa owner's family and functioned as storage places for relics. Besides, for several upper class members villa estates became preferred retreat places. Some of the cult places were linked with the grave of a person who received special veneration and became known as martyria. The churches on the rural villa estates seem to have been administrated by the bishops and to have been part of the organisation of the dioceses. However, since they were – together with other buildings – considered private property of the landowner and could, for instance, be inherited, conflicts with the episcopal authorities frequently occurred.

The author strongly rejects the assumption that villas and estates stopped to exist in the course of the 5th century AD when the area was invaded by Germanic tribes, since the available archaeological data clearly reflect settlement continuity and economic prosperity. He also points out that even after 711 AD, when the Visigoths were defeated, a year which is often considered a breakpoint, there was a certain continuity. Villa estates were either eventually given up or were further occupied or re-settled by Islamic or Christian owners.

At the end of the introduction the author refers to the complex phenomenon of proprietary churches (*Eigenkirche*), which will be more extensively discussed in a separate section further in the book.

The introductory section is followed by the **state of the art** of the research carried out on the Christianisation of the Iberian Peninsula, as well as on private villas and their relation with the Christian cult (**pp. 27-44: Forschungsgeschichte**). The author underscores the ideological and romantic approaches that have coloured the study of Early Christian Spain and its villas for a long time. Besides, he rightly remarks that the focus in villa research has mainly been on the luxurious ornamental elements of elite villas, such as mosaics, wall paintings and statuary. Consequently, excavations have frequently only revealed the representative parts of the buildings, while the functional wings of the upper class complexes, including stables and workshops, as well as

more simple rural dwellings have hardly received attention. In addition, apart from some late grave contexts with nice finds, Late Antique and Early Medieval remains have often been dismantled in order to reach so-called more interesting earlier structures. As a result, only exceptionally archaeological evidence pointing to Christian cult can still be placed within its archaeological and architectural context. Just recently this situation has started to change thanks to new large-scale excavations paying attention to the different occupation phases of villas. In particular during the last two decades resumed research of earlier excavated villa complexes, as well as new investigations have added a lot of evidence on the villas of the Iberian Peninsula. Although the attention has still primordially gone to mosaics and other decorative aspects, scholars have gradually focused more on the socio-economic aspects of the villas and their insertion in their broader context, taking all building and occupation phases into account, including Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

After these general remarks, the author offers a chronological overview of the studies dedicated to villas and to Christian cult buildings in villa contexts, starting with B. Taracena's work of 1944 on rural constructions in Roman Spain and ending with K. Bowes' dissertation on Late Antique private worship published in 2008. In this useful *status quaestionis*, which includes works specifically dealing with the Iberian Peninsula, as well as general villa studies and publications dedicated to written sources, Oepen critically evaluates the discussed contributions.

This state of the art is followed by a chapter on **proprietary churches** (pp. 45-60: **Zum Phänomen der Eigenkirche**), a topic already briefly touched upon in the introduction. These churches served as cultic buildings for the villa owner and his family, as well as for his dependents, and formed an important additional income for the private owner. The known examples of this type of churches, which were often combined with a baptisterium and a cemetery, date back to the 6th and 7th century AD.

In the discussion of the phenomenon of proprietary churches the critical evaluation of U. Stutz' early 20th century study on Medieval German proprietary churches and the relationship between the private church owner, who had all the rights (e.g. sale, inheritance ...) of the church and its possessions, on the one hand and the episcopal power on the other takes a central place. In line with some other authors Oepen rejects here the idea that the proprietary church on the Iberian Peninsula had its origin in Germanic examples or in Arianism. Attention is further paid to the work of later Spanish jurists, who started to have a scientific approach to the topic from the mid 1920's onwards.

The next chapter focuses on the religious **councils and synods** that were organised in Spain between 306-314 (Synod of Ilberis-Iliberri) and 694 AD (17th Council of Toledo) and are known via acts (**pp. 61-85: Konzilien und Synoden in Hispanien**). Apart from being religious meetings, these councils and synods, which were not organised according to a fixed and regular schedule, had a secular legislative character. For each council/synod Oepen summarizes the main topics of the meeting, discusses the participants and places the event in its broader political and religious context (e.g. late 4th-early 5th century AD: danger of Priscillianism). In particular, the author pays attention to canons related to the growing independence of private church founders in respect to the episcopal power.

Proprietary churches and private church founders did not only appear in the acts of councils of synods, but also took an important place in other **legislative texts**. The next chapter (**pp. 86-92: Eigenkirchen in Gesetzestexten**) extensively discusses references to private churches in 4th-6th century AD legal documents, including the Codex Theodosianus and the Codex Iustinianus.

After this, a section on the **literary and epigraphical sources** related to Late Antique and Visigothic private church buildings is added (**pp. 93-95: Literarische und epigraphische Quellen**). The chapter subdivision here feels a bit artificial. It would have been more logic to group this very short section together with the previously discussed legal texts and the synod and council acts in a common section (subdivided by means of subtitles) in which all 'written evidence' could have been gathered as a supplement for the archaeological data presented in the following chapter.

This next chapter, which forms the main component of the volume, consists of an extensive **catalogue**, comprising 63 villa sites (**pp. 96-471: Überblick über die Monumente auf der Iberischen Halbinsel**). Oddly, in between these individually discussed sites an overview of the entire province of Gallaecia is inserted. The organisation of the catalogue is geographical, starting from southwestern Lusitania and, subsequently, moving from southern Spain to the north. Unfortunately, the presentation of the catalogue items is not really reader-friendly. It would have been extremely helpful if the individual villa sites as well as the related illustration material would each have got a number, corresponding with the site numbers used on the general map on Taf. 1. This would have allowed the reader not only to find the sites immediately back on the map, but also to consult the catalogue in a much easier and quicker way than it is the case with the current arrangement.

In spite of the somewhat unclear organisation of the material the catalogue is an extremely rich source of information. The discussion of each individual villa starts with the location and topographical characteristics of the site, followed by an overview of its research history. Interwoven with this the author offers a detailed description of the architectural characteristics of each villa, including building-technical aspects, and decorative elements (wall, floor and ceiling decoration) discussed according to the chronological development of the complex, which often reaches up to the Islamic conquest. In addition, parallels for the architectural and decorative features taken from inside and outside the Iberian Peninsula, including examples from the Eastern Mediterranean, are integrated in the description. The rich footnotes with numerous references to an exhaustive list of publications dealing with the individual villa sites reflect the thorough research that lays at the basis of this systematic overview of villa sites with references to Christian cult.

After the presentation of the material remains of Late Antique and Visigothic villas and related Christian cult buildings, the author comes to some concluding remarks (pp. 472-490: **Schlußbetrachtung**). In general he points out that, parallel with the expansion of the Christian belief on the Iberian Peninsula, the number of rural churches, which were always closely connected to villas, rural estates or villages on the countryside, increased. The foundation of oratories and graves was the result of either the personal initiative of individuals and their families, or groups of Christians. However, since each church founder had other needs and ideas, and, moreover, had to take preexisting structures into account during the construction of cult buildings, the available evidence is very heterogeneous. This heterogeneity is reflected in the disparate character of the topics Oepen brings up further on in the conclusion (e.g. churches, graves, decorative elements, inscriptions, re-use of abandoned villa sites). In spite of the individual features of the different villa sites he puts together some important shared aspects.

Several of the common elements Oepen points out here are related to wrong interpretations and identifications by earlier researchers. For example, in the past basins, belonging to private baths or workshops of villas, have frequently – without any evidence for cult activities – been interpreted as baptism basins or baptisteria. Another misunderstanding is that the presence of graves or extensive cemeteries on villa sites is a clear proof of Christian cult. However, several Christian burials were frequently arranged in the ruins of abandoned villa sites, using spolia from the villa for the grave construction, and can, consequently, not be used as evidence.

Furthermore, in the conclusion Oepen pays attention to references to Christian belief in villa contexts apart from the actual cult buildings. Examples discussed in the catalogue include mosaics with a chrismon (as attested in the Villa de Prado – p. 386; Taf. 47 Abb. 2 and the Villa Fortunatus near Fraga – p. 426-427) and figurative wall mosaics (e.g. Villa of Centcelles – p. 450-454; Taf. 58). Within the context of this monograph on Christian cult in rural private contexts the reader actually expects – alongside the churches, baptisteria and martyria – a more extensive discussion of ‘Christian’ markers in villas on the Iberian Peninsula already higher up in the book. The presence of a Christian iconography on floor and wall decoration and objects, such as pottery and silverware, make clear that – even in villas where clear architectural cult buildings are lacking – decorative elements should be taken into account for the study of Christianisation and cult activity in villa contexts. Although the author includes decorative elements with a Christian character in his catalogue and concluding discussion, references to this type of evidence for Christian belief are not discussed in detail in the introductory sections and could have been the focus of a separate chapter.

Apart from this, in the conclusion the author mentions some research aspects that have not yet or not sufficiently been studied or documented until now. For instance, more attention should be paid to the investigation whether the Christian cult buildings were constructed in still inhabited villas or in abandoned sections of villas, since this must have influenced the shape and orientation of the buildings (e.g. due to the re-use of earlier representative rooms cult buildings could not always be oriented to the east).

After the conclusion the volume ends with a list of ancient sources (**p. 491: Quelleneditionen**) and an extensive and up-to-date bibliography (**pp. 493-519: Abkürzungen**).

The descriptive sections of the catalogue are illustrated with plans of the individual villas, overview images and detail pictures, all in black and white (**Tafeln – Taf. 1-61**). However, several of the maps are presented without scale and indication of the north. For instance, on Taf. 2 the north arrow is missing, while comparison between the images on Taf. 3 and the descriptions in the catalogue make clear that the north on this plan is located at the bottom side, which makes the description in the text confusing. Since the author reproduces plans from earlier publications, the quality and degree of precision and detail is inevitably differing from plan to plan. However, the reading and interpretation of the plans could have been facilitated by indicating the north and the scale.

With his monograph on villas and Christian cult in the Late Antique and Visigothic Iberian Peninsula Alexis Oepen has delivered a major contribution to the study of this aspect in the region. The book, and especially its catalogue, offers a detailed insight in several aspects, including architectural features of the villas and the related cult buildings, ornamental aspects, chronological development of the complexes and attestations of Christian belief. Moreover, the integrated chronological approach applied in the study, combining evidence of both Late Antiquity and the Visigothic Period, forms one of the major pluses of the volume.

Although the chapters preceding the catalogue offer a broad and well written framework for the villa complexes from a religious point of view, the focus is clearly on proprietary churches and their legal context. Consequently, it might have been better if the title – possibly by means of a subtitle – would have referred more clearly to private churches, covering in this way better the subject of the study than it does now. Alternatively, the very rich data set offered in the exhaustive overview of villa sites deserved to have been accompanied by some extra fully-fledged chapter(s) and concluding remarks on other aspects of Christian belief and cult, which remain now a bit underrepresented (e.g. cult buildings other than churches and tombs, Christian iconography in wall and floor decoration and objects).

Nonetheless, Alexis Oepen's detailed and in-depth study can be considered a most valuable addition to an important aspect of private life during two interesting time periods of the history of the Iberian Peninsula. The detailed entries given for every villa site under discussion no doubt form a basic catalogue for further studies on different – and not only religious – aspects of villas on the Iberian Peninsula.

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