

# Recent Archaeological Research at Asturica Augusta

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Iunguntur iis Asturum XXII populi divisi in Augustanos et Transmontanos,  
Asturica urbe magnifica (..) (Pliny NH 3.28).

OVER THE LAST 10 YEARS, as the result of the delegation of the management of cultural affairs to the Autonomous Community of Castilla y León, uninterrupted rescue excavations have taken place in the town of Astorga, Roman *Asturica Augusta* (Vidal 1986a and 1986b; García and Vidal 1990; Vidal *et al.* 1990, 259–63; García and Vidal 1993; Tab. Imp. Rom. 1991, 27–9; Vidal 1993, 309–12; Fernández 1993, 227–31; García 1994). At the same time, rescue excavations have also taken place at León, although on a smaller scale, the camp of the Legio VII Gemina (Vidal 1986c; Miguel and García 1993). A total of more than 50 building sites have been subject to archaeological investigation, ranging from simple watching briefs to more-frequent open-area excavations. In some cases the excavated remains have been preserved beneath newly constructed buildings and incorporated into public spaces<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1).

From all of this somewhat frenetic activity an enormous body of historical information has been derived, which has still to be studied in depth.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless it allows a new picture to be presented of one of the least well-known of the towns of Roman Spain.<sup>3</sup>

## Literary sources

*Asturica Augusta* is mentioned in classical literature on a number of occasions. The earliest reference, cited at the beginning of this paper, is by Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79), *procurator* of the province of Hispania Citerior Tarraconensis at around AD 73, during the reign of the Emperor Vespasian. In this it appears as a town of the Astures. Later, Ptolemy

(c.AD 90–c.168), in his *Geographia*, includes it as one of the towns of Asturia (Ptolemy II.6.35), capital of the Amaci.

On a number of occasions the Antonine Itinerary mentions the town as a *mansio* of the various roads which converge on it and which are then directed towards other towns in north-west Hispania, such as Lucus Augusti or Bracara Augusti (Wesseling 1735; Roldán 1975). For its part, the Ravenna Cosmography alludes to the town in one of its itineraries (Ravenna Cosmography IV.45) (Figure 2).

In the third century, references to the town are to be found in the letters of Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (c.AD 200–258: *Epistulae* 67 tit). There are later references in Hydatius (c.AD 388–470) (*Hyd. Cont. chron Hieron.*, 173, 186, in Mommsen 1894; *Olymp. CCCVI. 130: XXI* in Grosse 1947, 63; *idem. Chron.*, 138, 186 in Grosse 1947, 77–8), Isidore, Bishop of Seville (c.AD 560–636) (*Historia Gothorum* 21 and 16, in Mommsen 1894, 279–280 [267–295], and in Jordanes, a historian who lived at around AD 550 (*Iord. Get.*, XLIV, 232, in Mommsen 1894). Finally, the signature of different Asturican bishops appears in the Acts of several Church Councils (Serdica, I of Zaragoza, III and IV of Bracara and the III, IV, VII, VIII and X of Toletum).

### Epigraphic sources

In total 83 inscriptions are known from Astorga, to which one must add the 21 discovered in the vicinity of the town and 7 from other parts of Hispania which relate to the town, its inhabitants or the *Conventus Asturum*. The earliest of those found in the town date to the first century AD and deal with military matters, making particular reference to soldiers serving with the *Legio X Gemina* (5 examples). Most of the remainder date to the second and third centuries AD, and two of them use Greek letters. Those dealing with governmental and administrative posts mention *Praeses Provinciae*, *Legati Iuridici*, *Procuratores Augusti* (the most frequently mentioned post) and one *Augusti Dispensator* (Mañanes 1982; Diego 1986; Rabanal 1988).

### Geographical situation

Astorga is situated on a hill (868 m above sea-level) at the interfluvium of the rivers Jerga and Tuerto. It lies at the north-western limit of the northern Meseta, on the edge of lands of varying topography: the Mountains of León and the Sierra de la Cabrera to the west, and the alluvial plains of the north-western Duero basin to the east. This privileged strategic position commanded a genuine communications node in the north-west

of the Peninsula, and has underwritten its importance throughout the twenty centuries of its existence.

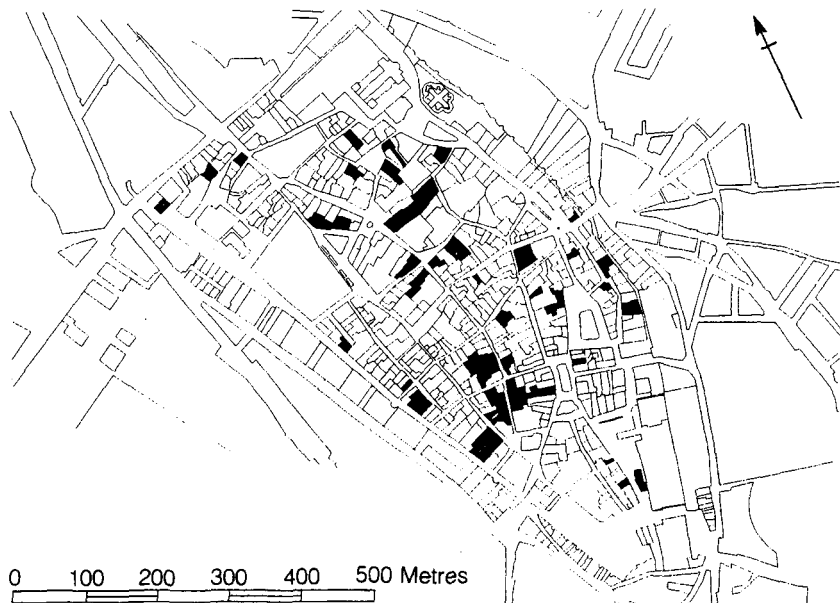
### The origins of Asturica Augusta

Traditionally Astorga has been thought to have originated as a native centre, since there is nothing in its present-day street plan to suggest that it had an ordered urban layout (García y Bellido *et al.* 1987, 39). This opinion has been defended by other authors (Luengo 1962, 152–3; Pastor 1976, 70–3; Palol 1976, 270). However, although several Iron Age settlements are known in the region, recent excavations have revealed nothing to suggest that the town had pre-Roman origins.

The most probable scenario is that Asturica originated as a Roman encampment, as did *Lucus Augusti* (Mañanes 1983, 36–9; Tab. Imp. Rom. 1991, 27). Various inscriptions relating to soldiers of the *Legio X Gemina*, which together with the *V Alaudae* and *VI Victrix* intervened in the war against the Astures, suggest that its origin is to be sought in the context of those wars. More recently, the analysis of ceramics, particularly *terra sigillata italica*, 'vogelkopflampen' lamps and coins (Alegre and García 1989, 381–94; 1990, 45–51) from the town, find close parallels in the military camp of the *Legio IIII Macedonica* at Herrera de Pisuerga (Palencia) (Pérez 1989; Morillo 1992; Morillo and Pérez 1990, 443–61). A military installation at this time might be related to the presence of Agrippa in the north-west at the close of the Cantabrian Wars (Le Roux 1982; Roldán 1986; Fernández 1993, 227–34).

Direct archaeological evidence for this hypothesis was, until recently, lacking. However, archaeological excavations have now provided a major discovery which may be thought to offer proof in its favour. It comprises two parallel ditches at the edge of the scarp of the hill, backfilled with archaeological material which seems to date to the very beginning of the first century AD. Provisionally these have been identified as the *fossae* belonging to the defensive system of a *castra*. This discovery seems to confirm the military origin of the town.<sup>4</sup>

But which military unit was stationed here? The supposed presence of the *Legio X Gemina* at the site creates some problems given that its permanent encampment was located in the Vidriales Valley, some 45 km to the south of Astorga (Martín and Delibes 1980, 120–2). However, it is very possible that this legion, or one of its vexillations could have occupied the hilltop site temporarily, before being moved to Petavonium, which was to be its permanent home in Hispania until AD 63 (Roldán 1974, 205–8).<sup>5</sup>



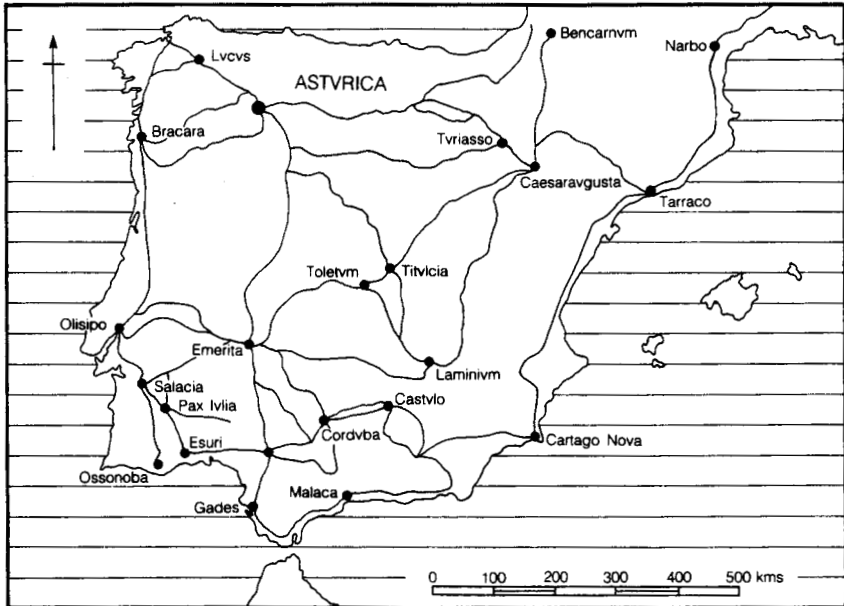
**Figure 1.** Plan of the modern town showing the location of sites where excavations have taken place.

## The town during the early Imperial period

### *Administrative organization*

The military settlement at Asturica seems to have been transformed into a town as the result of politico-administrative decisions taken by Augustus, and developed by his successor. The clearest evidence of this was the creation of three urban centres at Bracara, Lucus and Asturica. This may have been the moment when the town acquired the rank of *municipium* together with Lucus Augusti. Relevant to this development is the *Tabula Lougeiorum*, a controversial document in which there is the sole mention of a *Conventus Arae Augustae* (Santos 1986, 116; Dopico 1986, 55–63). Once the conquest of north-western Hispania was complete, the *Ara Augusta* would have been chosen as the seat of a *conventus iuridicus* in AD 1 and paved the way for the development of the town of Asturica Augusta. Recently, however, A. Canto has doubted the authenticity of this *Tabula Hospitalis* (1990, 267–75).

The preliminary results of archaeological excavations suggest that from the Flavian period onwards the town, as centre of the *Conventus Iuridicus Asturum*, experienced a great period of building activity which continued throughout the second and the beginning of the third centuries, by which

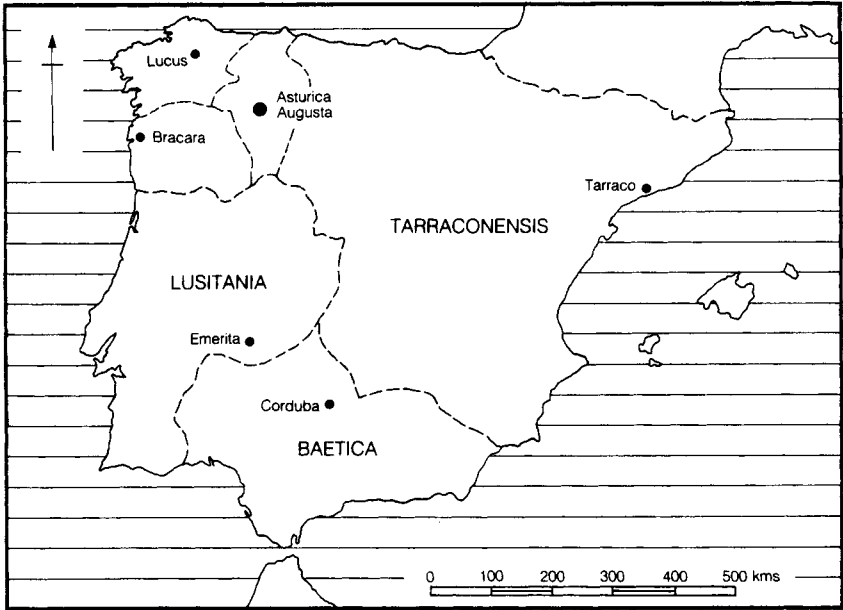


**Figure 2.** The road network of Hispania with the Antonine Itinerary marked (following Roldán 1975).

time the town seems to have become capital of the *Provincia Hispania Nova Citerior Antoniniana*. This evolution followed the development of gold-mining on a large scale in the region (Sánchez Palencia 1983, 81; Domergue 1986, 33). The importance which the town acquired during these centuries is reflected by its divinization (Mangas and Vidal 1987, 14–15) (Figure 3).

#### *Urban layout (Figure 4)*

The discovery of much of the drainage network together with stretches of streets, has contributed to the understanding of the urban layout of Asturica. The earliest reported discoveries of the drains date to 1835. However, it was not until the end of the nineteenth century, and particularly during the 1940's (Luengo 1953, 143), that a clear idea was built up about their pattern within the town and the constructional techniques employed (Rodríguez 1909, 528, 800–1). Construction varied, especially in respect of the roofing of the drains which consisted of both vaults and flat-coverings. Until a detailed study has been undertaken it is unclear whether these constructional differences have technical or chronological signifi-



**Figure 3.** Situation of Asturica Augusta and the administrative divisions of Hispania with the *conventus iuridici* of the north-west.

cance. It was, however, noted, during some recent excavations, that flat-coverings were replaced by vaulted drains in some stretches.

Securely identified streets suggest that they conformed to a relatively uniform width of between 4 and 7 m. Some may have been slightly wider, although none would have been wider than 9 or 10 m. There were two basic kinds of street. The more elaborate was reserved for the more important thoroughfares and consisted of a surface of large irregularly shaped quartzite blocks (*strata*), with small pebbles and tile fragments between. The best-preserved stretch is the road which delimited the western side of the forum. Here it can be shown that earth, displaced during the digging of a foundation trench for the great vaulted drain which ran beneath, was used as a preparation for the road itself. The second kind of street was rougher with metalling of pebble and tile fragments in a clay matrix. In some cases the two kinds of road-surfacing were used together. Little is known about side-walks. It is logical to suppose that they existed even though, in some cases like that of the road which delimited the Casa de la Muralla, they seem to have been absent.

Another characteristic of the Asturican streets is the presence of porticoes, at least along one of their sides. This was a custom common to a large number of towns in the eastern part of the Empire. It had the dual

function of protecting pedestrians from the weather and providing an ideal location for commercial and artisanal activities in *tabernae*. This seems to have been the case at the Calles de López Pelaez, Puerta Obispo, Obispo Grau and the Plaza de Calvo Sotelo, where there were small square or rectangular spaces defined within the porticoes.

Both elements, streets and drains, indicate that the town was laid out on an orthogonal grid. In large part this was probably derived from its origins as a military camp, although it was not applied rigidly to the site but adapted to the topography of the hilltop. This also conditioned the layout of different structures in various regions. The tendency towards a more regular layout in the western sector is reflected in its street and drainage pattern, which runs in a north-west/south-east direction. This has enabled the presence of various *insulae* with regular proportions to be detected. Several of them, possibly four, were occupied by the Greater Baths (Termas Mayores: Figure 4, no. 1 and Figure 5). A large *frigidarium* and four associated rooms have been identified. Three, heated by means of a hypocaust, were probably the remains of the *cella tepidaria* and two circular *laconica* or *sudatoria*, while the fourth was paved with a large bichrome mosaic (*apodyterium?*). The complex was datable to between the mid first and mid third centuries AD (Vidal 1986a, 265–75; Regueras 1991, 133–6; Blázquez *et al.* 1993, 17–18).

In other cases the building plots were taken up with private dwellings, some of which were provided with *tabernae* facing onto the porticoes mentioned earlier. It is as yet impossible to discern their function although it is easy to imagine that they were used by artisans making pottery lamps or bone objects. It may also be significant that, so far, their activity has only been attested in this part of the town.

The first known private building at Asturica was the House of the Pompeiian Paintings (Pinturas Pompeyanas), which was discovered by J.M. Luengo (Figure 4, no. 6) in the Plaza de Santocildes (1962, 167–74). Two complete rooms and parts of another three can be distinguished. Its particular importance is that some of the walls retain, *in situ*, some of the best examples of painted decoration in Iberia, and can be dated to the first half of the second century AD (Abad 1982 [1], 137–42, 293–5).

Close to the Greater Baths was located the House of the Large Peristyle (Casa del Gran Peristilo) (Figure 4, no. 2 and Figure 6), which covered an area of over 2000 sq m and must have occupied more than one whole *insula*. Its earliest phase, which is datable to between the Julio-Claudian period and the third quarter of the first century AD, consists of a series of structures the function of which is unclear owing to the destruction wrought by building in the subsequent phase. Nevertheless a surviving small rectangular area has been identified as an *impluvium*; the remains





of the atrium would have acted as the coordinating element of the various rooms.

During the second phase of the house, this central role was occupied by a large porticoed peristyle in the centre of the *domus*. This was apparently square in shape and was defined by six columns along each side. The line of the portico was further marked by a gutter, edging an *opus caementicium* structure of which only the northern half has survived. Its formal characteristics suggest that it may have belonged to the basin of a quadri-lobed monumental fountain dominating the whole of the porticoed area. The elevation of the small exedras would have described small alcoves. Around the covered portico were arranged a series of rooms whose construction would have required major terracing operations, of the kind known only in the north-eastern sector.<sup>6</sup> The house was organized on three planes, although its orientation suggests a certain axial symmetry.

From the third century onwards, the *domus* seems to decline, a fate typical in this kind of building. Some rooms were later restored, although they were now subdivided by walls.

At the extreme east of the town was found the House of the Wall (Casa De La Muralla) (Figure 4, no. 22). This was partially uncovered and revealed two clearly-defined construction phases. The first could be dated to the end of the first or beginning of the second century AD and involved the demolition of a series of earlier structures of uncertain function. It seems that in the second century AD, the *domus* underwent a major rebuilding although much of the earlier arrangement was retained. The existence of a room heated by a hypocaust suggests the possible existence of a thermal area to the east. Adjacent to this was an open service area from which the *prae-furnium* would have been maintained. The function of the remaining rooms is more difficult to establish, although there is some evidence to suggest that the small room to the west could have been the *culina*, while the area to the north could have served as a passage or corridor. Another of the rooms retained part of its wall-decoration *in situ*. This was in the Third-Style, consisting of red panels separated by a black band, with imitation mottled marble on the base.

**Figure 4** (facing page). Hypothetical plan of the Roman town in which are included the most important discoveries to date: 1. The Larger Baths (Termas Mayores); 2. The House of the Large Peristyle (Gran Peristilo); 3. The House of the Opus Signinum Floor (Pavimento de Opus Signinum); 4. Baths of Padre Blanco (Calle Padre Blanco); 5. The House of the Painted Columns (Columnas Pintadas); 6. The House of the Pompeian Paintings (Pinturas Pompeianas); 7. The so-called 'ergastula' (= portico); 8. The Basilica; 9. The House of the Mosaic of the Bear and the Birds (Mosaico del Oso y los Pajaros); 10 and 24. *Domus*; 11 and 12. Possible *Domus*; 13. Public Building (Baths?); 14, 15, 16 and 17. Possible artisanal buildings; 22. House of the Wall (Casa de la Muralla); 23. Roman Gate; 18, 19, 20 and 21. Other buildings.

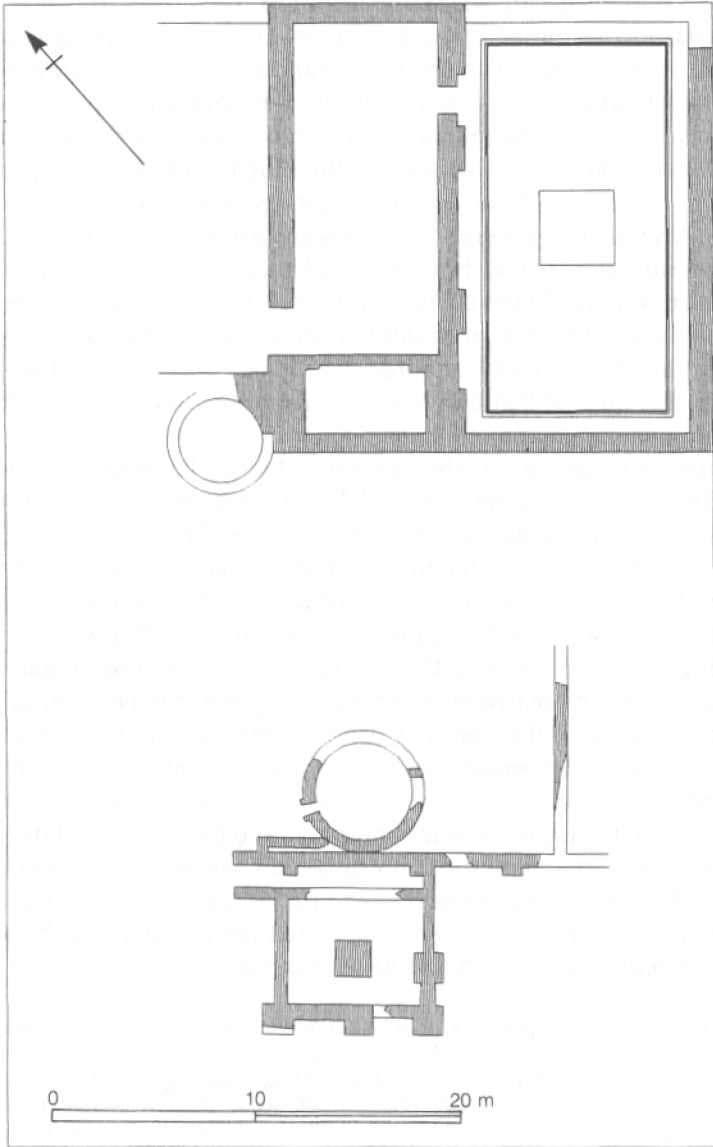
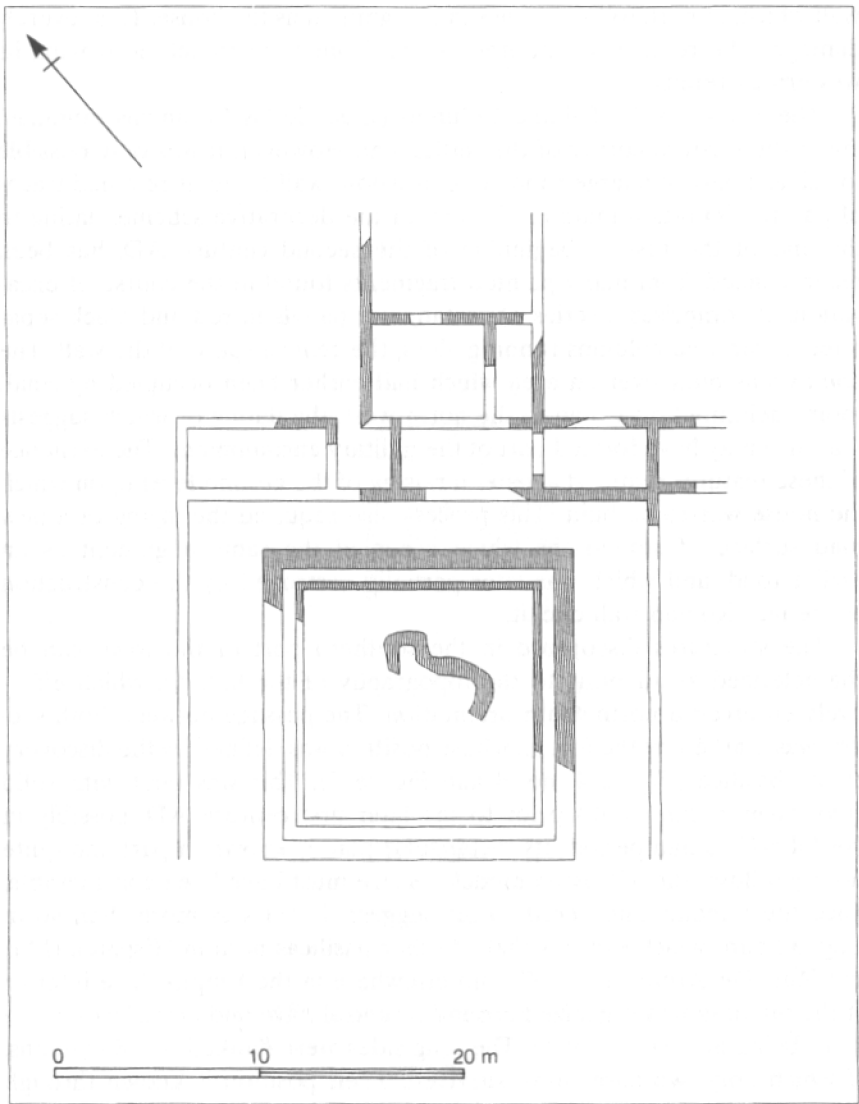


Figure 5. Plan of the Large Baths.



**Figure 6.** The House of the Large Peristyle.

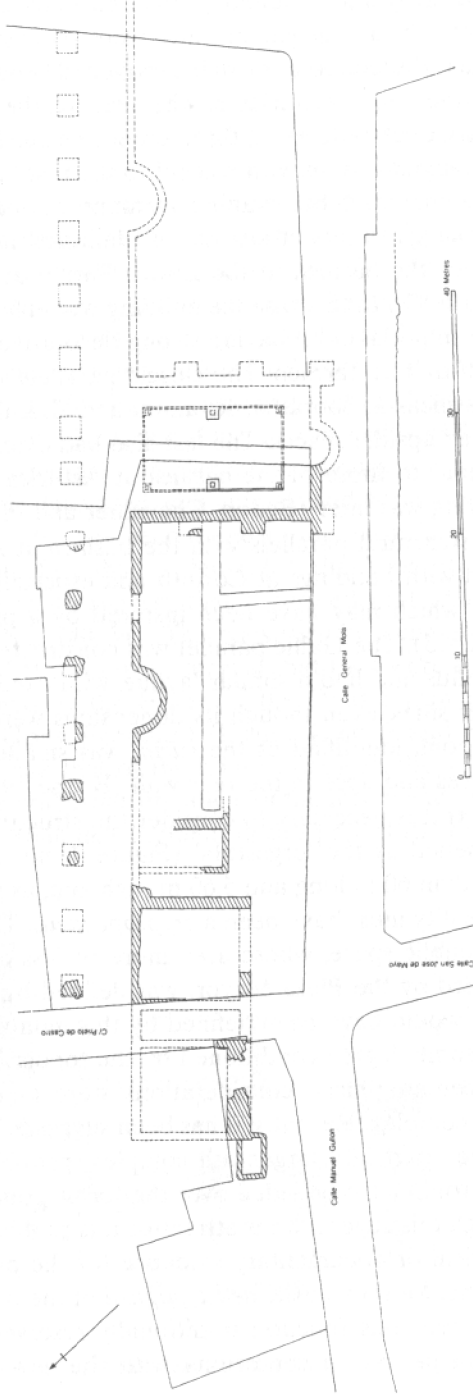
The south-western limit of the *domus* was defined by a street 5.50 m in width, the excavation of which revealed three successive phases, which can presumably be related to changes in the house. In the middle of the third century, the house and street were destroyed, accidentally or deliberately, leaving them buried under rubble. At the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century AD, building work began on the town

wall which, in part, followed the same alignment as the house. This severely damaged the remains of the *domus*, the foundation trench destroying its western extremity.

The House of the Painted Columns (Casa de las Columnas Pintadas) lay in the western corner of the settlement. However, it was only possible to salvage part of a large room, one of whose wall footings retained traces of painted imitation marble. The rest of the decorative scheme, dating to the end of the first or beginning of the second century AD, has been reconstructed from many painted fragments found in the course of excavation. It comprises a series of rectangular panels in red and black separated by striated columns running along the central space of the wall. The *domus* was built over an area which had earlier been occupied by small rooms delimited by a road to the north-west, the dating of which suggests that they may have formed part of the military encampment. The existence of these features required a general raising of the ground level upon which the house was to be built. This process also required the laying of a new road surface of stone-slabs which occupied the same alignment as an earlier road, and which was later partially destroyed by the construction of the late Roman wall circuit.

The structures discovered in the southern part of the town can be characterized as adapting to the topography of the hillside, which effectively enforced a north-south orientation. The passage between both sectors was marked by the forum, whose position was defined by the discovery of the basilica (Figure 4, no. 8 and Figure 7). This was built with solid *opus caementicium* walls prior to the later first century AD, possibly in the Julio-Claudian period. Its rectangular plan is known in part and quite closely follows the Vitruvian model. Its size must have been considerable, since the remains uncovered so far suggest that it was more than 90 m long, a figure which exceeds that of other basilicas both in Hispania (Mar and Ruiz De Arbulo 1987, 37) and elsewhere in the Empire. The interior of the building was organized around a central nave and *ambulacrum*, the latter being almost 4 m wide. The long sides were flanked by 18 columns, of which only two bases have survived. Their position is known through the discovery of seven of its foundation *podia* which were 3.37 m apart. One of the long sides was pierced by two semicircular exedras 4.70 m across. Comparison between this and other basilicas, where the lesser wings usually only have four columns, suggests that its width would have been 24.85 m.

A further rectangular room (14.75 x 10.10 m) opened off the western side of the building, occupying a central position which respected its lesser central axis. A semicircular apse with a diameter of 3 m was let into the rear wall of this room. The structure had been known for some time from



**Figure 7.** Remains of the Forum Basilica known to date.

descriptions given by J.M. Luengo (1962, 155). Access between the two zones was effected by a large gap in which were arranged two new columns *in antis*, of which the bedding for one survived. The walls of the building were built of the same material as the rest of the basilica and were reinforced by six thick buttresses, three on each side. The privileged position of this rectangular room with respect to the rest of the rooms, further enhanced by having a rich but simple pavement<sup>7</sup> of *opus sectile* (Regueras 1991, 136–40), suggests that it should be identified as an *aedes augusti*, similar to that of the basilica in the Lower Forum at Tarraco (Mar and Ruiz de Arbulo 1987). In this case the building would have been connected to the incipient imperial cult,<sup>8</sup> having strong decorative and chronological similarities with that at Tarraco. The closest parallels, however, are to be found in the basilicas at Sabratha, Iuvanum and Grand where there were axially positioned apsidal spaces. The last also had external buttresses and dimensions similar to those of the basilica at Asturica (14.12 x 13.87 m), although its dating was later (Bedon, Chevallier and Pinon 1988 [1], 224).

The closest structural parallels with the basilica at Asturica, however, are to be found with buildings at Corinth and especially at Boutae (Les-Fins-d'Annecy) which may have been inspired by a prototype at Rome (Balty 1991, 412–15). The Gallic parallel was constructed during the reign of Marcus Aurelius and had a similar layout, with exedras situated along one of its longer sides, even though its dimensions were smaller (46 x 22 m). The axial room, identified as the *curia*, was smaller, and lacked the external buttresses and apse in the rear wall (Broise 1968, 33–4).

In this context it is necessary to consider the structure which has been traditionally labelled as the 'ergastula' (Figure 4, no. 7). It is a vaulted gallery of more than 60 m long and 5.60 m high and, as suggested by Balil (1987, 145), in reality must have been a *cryptoporticus*. Thus, if the western side of the old public space, whose area more or less coincided with the area now occupied by the Plaza Mayor, was defined by the basilica, then its opposite side would have been defined by this monumental gallery. Its location was to some degree conditioned by the topography of the site. It is likely that 'scenographical' considerations were in the minds of the architects of this complex. Recently, it has been suggested that this building could have formed part of a larger cult complex, possibly the *temenos* of a temple which would have presided over the forum complex (Balty 1991, 616–17). Although this suggestion is attractive it is problematic since there is no archaeological or documentary evidence for the presence of such a distinctive building. Moreover, the *aedes augusti* of the basilica could have provided for the religious function traditionally reserved for the temple in the Republican period, in conformity with the new politico-religious

developments which characterized the reign of Augustus and of his successors (Jiménez 1987, 175).

The *operae privatae* were also well developed in this sector. The beginning of systematic excavations in the area revealed the *domus* of the House of the Bear and the Birds (del Mosaico del Oso y los Pajaros) (García and Vidal 1993, 28–30) (Figure 4, no. 9 and Figure 8). Its plan is partially known and bears witness to various structural changes. The most important of these occurred at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century AD and must have coincided with the wholesale transformation of this part of the town. In this way the thermal part of the *domus*, which was located to the west and was characterized by a strictly linear arrangement of *frigidarium-tepidarium-caldarium*, extended across the remains of a disused public drain, suggesting that the house was enlarged at the expense of a public space. One of the residential rooms which formed part of the thermal complex of the house was outstanding on account of the mosaic decorated with animals and floral motifs, which give the house its name. This has been dated to the early Severan period. Its composition and the fact that it decorated the floor of a room which opened on to a peristyle suggest that it formed part of a *triclinium* or *oecus* (Regueras 1991, 140–54). The construction technique of rooms in the southern part of this complex suggest that they were service areas.

The area occupied by the House of the Opus Signinum Floor (Casa del Pavimento de Opus Signinum) (Figure 4, no. 3 and Figure 9) must have been greater than that of the house discussed above. It was located in the vicinity of the north-western angle of the forum and its plan provides an insight into the urban development in this part of the town throughout

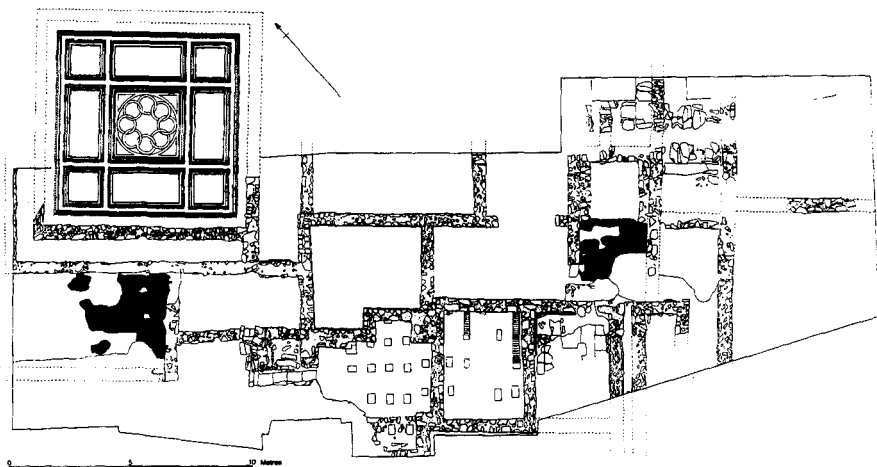


Figure 8. Domus of the Mosaic of the Bear and the Birds.

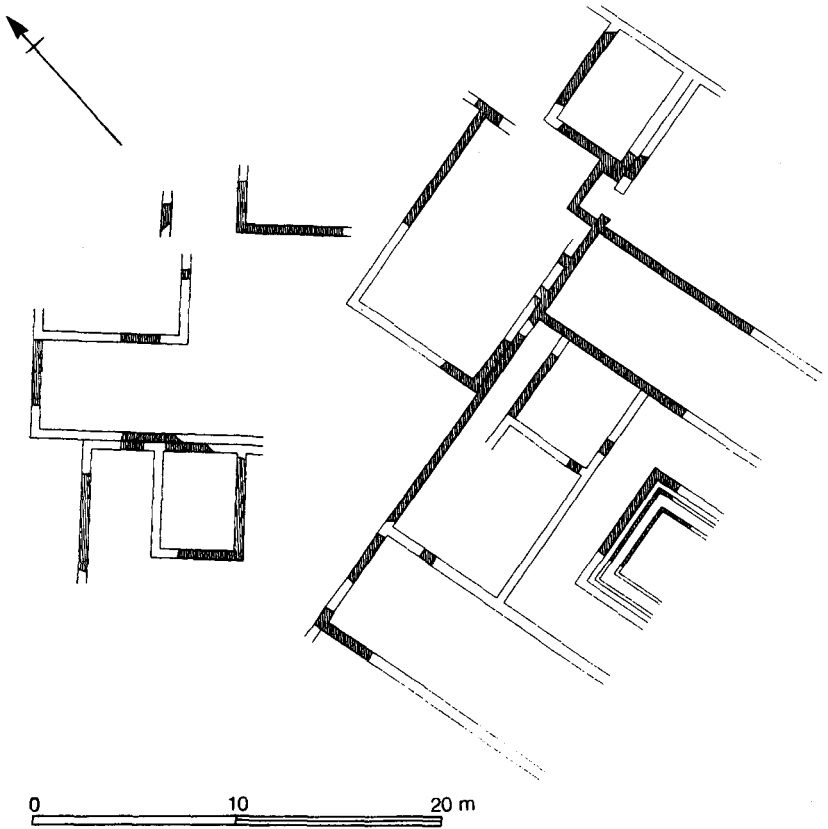


Figure 9. House of the Opus Signinum Floor.

the first century AD. The earliest rooms were located on the south side and, like all of the buildings in the western sector of the town, were clearly orientated in a north-west to south-east direction. This arrangement had its origins in the layout of the encampment which preceded the town and persisted until the middle of the first century, as the early plan of the house suggests.<sup>9</sup> One of the rooms dating to this period retained fragments of an *opus signinum* floor. These are well known in eastern Spain and the Ebro valley (Lasheras 1984, 165–70), although this is the northernmost example known in Hispania to date. Its decoration was simple and consisted of small cruciform motifs spaced at regular intervals, with a more complex motif at the centre of the mosaic.

The construction of the forum marks a clear change in the largely north-south orientation of extant buildings in this zone. The second stage of residential occupation began at the end of the first century AD, with buildings adapting to this new planning arrangement. Rooms were almost



symmetrically disposed around a porticoed peristyle and flanked on two of their three sides by what appear to be wide corridors. The modifications to the *domus* continued through time, with the addition of a possible thermal area to the east and the decoration of two rooms of the second phase with figured pavements.

It remains to mention those buildings attested in the south-west of the town. The orientation of these is somewhat different and, like the drainage system (Luengo 1953, 143–52), follows the topography of the hillside. This arrangement is clearly visible in the small baths discovered in the Calle Padre Blanco (García 1994) (Figure 4, no. 4 and Figure 10). They were situated at the foot of the scarp and their construction involved some terracing. They had a complicated structural life, with at least three building phases, the latest of which was characterized by the use of a new system of heating, the *concameraciones*. The excellent state of preservation of this building has meant that it is possible to establish the function of

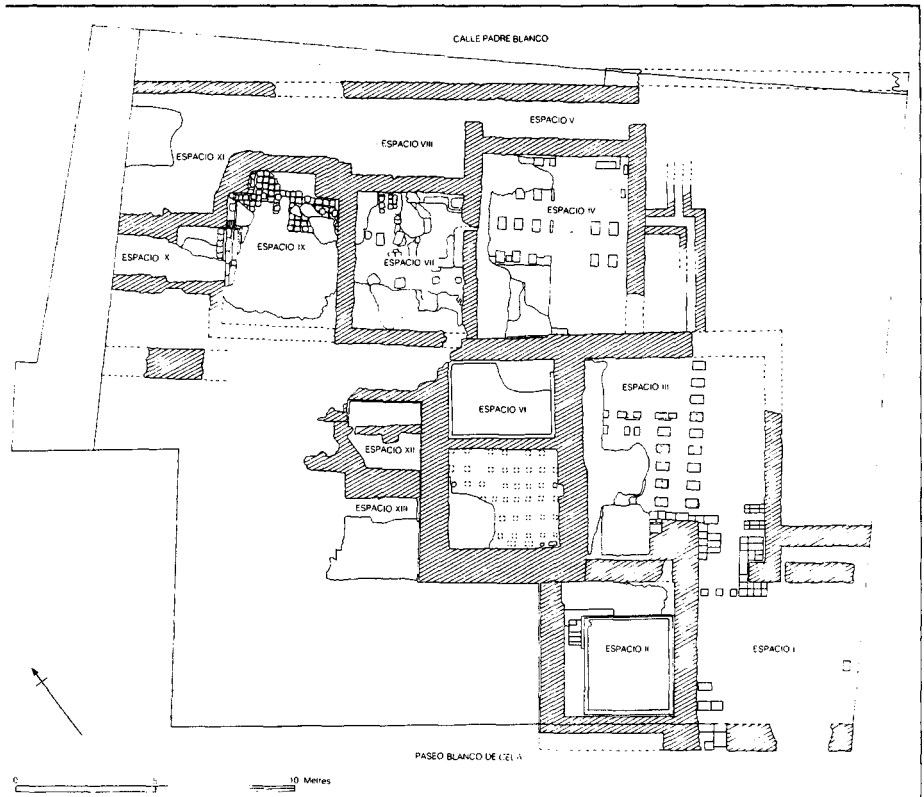


Figure 10. Plan of the small public baths discovered in the Padre Blanco Street.

each room in the bathing sequence: *frigidarium*, *tepidarium*, *sudatorium* and two *caldaria*, as well as a series of service rooms including those to house the *praefurnia*.

The basic arrangement of these rooms was linear, as is typical of small thermal suites throughout the Empire. However, it is possible that the baths might have belonged to a complex designed to serve the requirements of a specific clientele rather than a general public use. The clientele might have been a *collegium*, or possibly a sector of the town, as has been documented in other towns (Meiggs 1960, 416–17; Yegül 1979, 110).

### *The water supply*

The nature of the supply of water to the Roman town presents one of the serious *lacunae* in our understanding of the archaeology of Asturica. No remains of any above or below ground aqueducts have been found in its vicinity. Wells for the extraction of drinking water, similar to those found in the vicinity of the *domus* of the Opus Signinum Floor (Pavimento de Opus Signinum), may have satisfied the greater part of domestic demand. However, the volume of water necessary for supplying the thermal establishments would have required water to be brought in from outside the town. There is only the vague reference, by J.M. Luengo, to thick lead pipes in a path between the Venta de Penicas and Valdeviejas, which he interpreted as the remains of the water channels which would have supplied the town (Luengo 1962, 159). At the beginning of the century, the local newspaper mentioned some ruins at the Fuente del Mayuelo which were labelled as belonging to a 'subterranean pagan temple'. This is suggestive and may indicate the existence of a structure related to the storage of water for supplying the town, or a cistern. One of these, possibly medieval, is still preserved on the outer face of the north-western stretch of the town wall.

### *The cemeteries*

Outside the walled enclosure there is ample evidence for the importance of the Roman settlement. Reference must be made to the various cemeteries, like that located in the vicinity of the Puerta de Hierro, where various burials were found with abundant grave goods (Gómez 1931, 11). The location of other burial areas is recorded by Luengo (1962, 159–64), such as the discovery of a tomb at the Prado Otoño. This consisted of a mortar-built tomb lined with tiles within which was an oval lead box containing a globular-shaped glass cinerary urn. To judge by the published photographs there was a rich assemblage of grave goods consisting of

various glass containers. In 1935 various tombs with grave goods were uncovered in a zone known as the Moldería Real, which was close to the road which linked Asturica with Legio.

Luengo's reference to the existence of a possible late Roman cemetery near the junction of the León road and the cemetery is less reliable. This site was close to the Monastery of San Dictinus and the stone sarcophagi to which he refers could have belonged to the medieval cemetery (1962, 159-63).

In 1982 excavations for the building of a new pavilion on the site of the Colegio Santa María Madre De La Iglesia, near the Las Vegas de Fuente Encalada road, uncovered a funerary inscription (Mañanes 1982, 106, Lam. XXXVI, no. 100) associated with various pottery vessels containing ashes. Next to these were fragments of *terra sigillata Hispanica*, coarse pottery, lamps, thin-walled wares, glass unguentaria, etc., many of which would undoubtedly have accompanied the cremation burials.

### *Rubbish dumps*

Rubbish dumps have been discovered at various points around the walled enclosure of the town. One of them, situated in the Calle Bastión at the foot of the southern wall, has been known for many years (Luengo 1962, 159). The most notable dump was located in the place known as 'Las Lolas' at the intersection of the León and Comarca de La Cepeda roads. The dumps were not located randomly. Sites with natural depressions seem to have been chosen so as to concentrate the dumps and level out the topography around the town as far as possible.

### *The periphery*

The undertaking of major earth movements in preparation for building the industrial estate of Astorga in 1990 uncovered a Roman structure which was rapidly excavated. A large number of millstones were discovered in association with it, suggesting that it was an installation for the manufacture of products for the town. The chronology of the finds suggests that its main period of activity was between the second half of the second and the early third centuries AD.

### **The town during later antiquity**

The undoubted urban vitality of Asturica seems to have come to an end in the middle of the third century AD, coinciding with the end of mining activity in the region (Domergue 1986, 38-42) and were widespread events

affecting the Empire. From this moment onwards the town embarks upon a period of gradual decline which continued throughout the fourth and fifth centuries AD, not alleviated by its role as a bishopric. It is too early to attempt to understand the nature of its urban, social, administrative and economic structures during this period. It is known, however, that many of the public and private buildings were progressively abandoned.<sup>10</sup> In many instances, construction work was restricted to the occupation or remodelling of earlier buildings, and involved the re-use of earlier material.

Nevertheless it was during this period that a great wall was built to surround the greater part of the town. There is little doubt, however, that the urban area enclosed was smaller than that of its early Imperial counterpart. The existence of the wall raises interesting questions as to the true rôle of the Roman town during the last centuries of its existence, given that in itself the wall seems to be an echo of its former vigour. The only known Roman gate in the wall of Asturica dates to this period. It is located at the north-eastern edge of the town (Mañanes and García 1985, 181–219) and consists of a gap some 4 m wide flanked by two semicircular towers built in *opus quadratum* from granite blocks.

It is also important to note the rise in the ground level in large areas of the town caused by an accumulation of debris pre-and especially post-dating the construction of the defensive circuit. Much of this probably originated in the forum area, which seems to suggest that during the early Imperial period its pre-eminent position was the result of terracing. Clearly this would also have determined the location of the 'ergastula', mentioned above.

The existence of a large amount of late Roman material also suggests that Asturica was a population centre of some importance, even though this was a far cry from what it had been earlier. The town had been the hub of the enormous mining operations developed by Rome in the north-west of Iberia, and now became an enclave directly involved in cereal production centred at the great villae in the Duero valley, such as those located a short distance away at Quintana del Marco or the Milla del Río. As Morillo has recently suggested (1991, 181), the fortification of Asturica may have had more to do with supervising and controlling routes to the Cantabrian ports used by the *annona militaris*, than the real fear of an invasion.

## NOTES

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the Junta de Castilla y León, with the collaboration of the Excmo. Ayuntamiento of the town of Astorga.

2. Two research studies are currently being undertaken: *The Urban Evolution of Asturica Augusta in the Early Empire*, by Dna Milagros Burón Alvarez, and *Roman Coarse Pottery in Asturica Augusta*, by Dna Rosario Suarez Vega, the amphorae by César Carreras and lamps by A. Morillo Cerdán.

3. Reports on the archaeological excavations undertaken in Astorga over the last ten years are deposited in the Servicio Territorial de Cultura y Turismo of the Junta de Castilla y León, in León.

4. We would like to thank María Luz González for permission to cite this unpublished information.

5. Archaeological excavations carried out in 1992 at a property in Cruz Street uncovered two ashlar blocks bearing the inscription L.X.G. and may have belonged to a public building.

6. According to information from D. Augusto Quintana Prieto, a historian specializing in the history of Astorga, a hypocaust was discovered to the north-west of the site where this *domus* was uncovered. This is important since it suggests that the house, like that of the Bear Mosaic (Mosaico del Oso) or that of the Opus Signinum Floor (Pavimento de Opus Signinum) had a thermal area, as its area and richness would suggest.

7. The footings of the walls must have been decorated with imitation mottled marble, as seems to be indicated by a small pictorial fragment found *in situ*.

8. The existence of the imperial cult at Asturica Augusta is well documented in works by Etienne (1958, 177-95) and Mangas (1986, 57-8).

9. Various badly preserved remains possibly belonging to the encampment were found beneath the earliest levels of the *domus*. The orientation was similar to that of the structures which sealed them.

10. The process of ruin was such that many buildings degenerated into building sites. This may be illustrated by the rubbish dumps discovered in the excavations of the *domus* of the Calle Manuel Gullón, the baths of the Calle Padre Blanco or the buildings uncovered in the Plaza de Santocildes.

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**VICTORINO GARCÍA MARCOS<sup>1</sup> & JULIO M. VIDAL ENCINAS<sup>2</sup>**<sup>1</sup>*Ayuntamiento de León. Arqueología, Pl. S. Marcelo, 24071 León*<sup>2</sup>*Junta de Castilla y León. Cultura, Avda. Peregrinos s/n, 24071 León***Recent archaeological research at Asturica Augusta**

In recent years the Roman town of Asturica Augusta (Astorga) has been the object of a series of rescue excavations which have begun to transform our understanding of one of the most important towns in the north-western corner of Hispania Tarraconensis. It now seems certain that the town was a military foundation with the Legio X Gemina, or one of its vexillations, being temporarily stationed here in the Augustan period. Soon afterwards the site was transformed into the town of Asturica Augusta. Excavations have revealed some evidence for the nature of the Augustan town, and point to the influence of the military origin of the town in the street pattern and drainage system. However there is little doubt that the Flavian period is the key to our understanding the monumental development of Asturica. This is particularly true of the forum and basilica, which were built at this time. Other public buildings uncovered in recent years include a set of public baths. Excavations have also revealed a number of private residences, of early Imperial date, some of which were richly decorated with mosaic floors and painted wall-plaster. The urban vitality of the town seems to have come to an end in the middle of the third century AD. A wall-circuit was constructed around the town and public and private buildings were progressively abandoned, even though the town remained an important population centre during later antiquity.

**Investigación arqueológica reciente en Asturica Augusta**

En los últimos años, la ciudad romana de Asturica Augusta (Astorga) ha sido objeto de una serie de excavaciones de urgencia que han alterado la concepción que se tenía sobre una de las ciudades más importantes del sector Noroeste de la Hispania Tarraconensis. Parece evidente que la ciudad fue una fundación militar con la legión X Gemina, o al menos una de sus vexillatios, temporalmente asentada aquí en época de Augusto. Poco después, el lugar fue transformado en la ciudad de Asturica Augusta. Las excavaciones han revelado algunas evidencias sobre la naturaleza de la ciudad augustea, y tanto la planta de las calles como la disposición del sistema de alcantarillado muestran la influencia de este origen militar. No obstante, no existe ninguna duda de que el periodo Flavio es clave para entender el desarrollo monumental de Asturica. Es sobre todo cierto en el caso del foro y basilica, que fueron construidos en este momento. Otros edificios públicos descubiertos en los últimos años incluyen unos baños públicos. Las excavaciones, además, han revelado la existencia de un número de residencias privadas, del periodo altoimperial, algunas de las cuales están ricamente decoradas con mosaico y pinturas. La vitalidad urbana de la ciudad parece finalizar a mediados del siglo III d.C. Se construyó un circuito de murallas alrededor de la ciudad y los edificios públicos y privados fueron progresivamente abandonados, a pesar de que la ciudad continúa siendo un importante centro de población en el Bajo Imperio.