

## PALEOCHRISTIAN ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN PLANNING IN THE MAYA AREA: DISTRIBUTION AND USE OF THE NEW RELIGIOUS SPACES

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The term Paleochristian refers to the early period of Christianity, in other words, to the time elapsed between the emergence of the cultural-religious event, its imposition as the cult of the empire during the ruling of Emperor Constantine around the mid-IV century, and its subsequent generalization to the entire territory occupied by the Roman tradition. This had an effect on a dense and complex period of history which features material traits that combine the forms and symbols typical of the new cult with the material, human and conceptual resources of the culture that was being superimposed. Aspects so much relevant as the way of conceiving the space for the cult, or a novel iconography, or the generalization of values that were different, entailed an entire program where the new and old forms blended to generate a different and syncretic model.

The term Paleochristian architecture has an effect on the form or forms of conceiving space and on the materialization thereof, taking advantage of the existing tradition but imposing a new vision of reality, and crucially, of the relationship between individuals and divinity as a source, a reason and an incentive to deal with life.

### THE PROPOSAL

The paper presented in this event is intended to examine the Paleochristian architecture in a wide sense, considering as such the earlier European and Asian expressions of the III century AD, and the new proposals featured in the American continent 1500 years later.

It is not our purpose to compare the material resources, the cultural backgrounds or other undoubtedly complex aspects that would exceed the space of this article. We think it is interesting, from the historic, cultural and sociological point of view, to examine how, in different periods but in similar contexts –taking the Roman cult and the indigenous cult as a basic substratum- several similar forms or responses were generated. The architectural strategies, in association with the power that was to be imposed, implicitly carried an evident way of thinking, conceiving, structuring and manipulating the space as an excellent tool to spread new ideas and forms of understanding the relationship between man and his environment, and among them, man's religious bonds, no matter which ones they were.

## **METHODOLOGY OF WORK**

Architectural production carries within two complementary phases; in the first place, the theoretical programming as a response to needs that are customarily defined by ideological and religious guidelines, and subsequently or in parallel, the enforcement of such ideal forms. At the same time, architectural production constitutes the material response to a theoretical reflection influenced by the economic, political and military conditionings at the heart of which they are developed. In order to accomplish this modest analysis, the investigation has been unfolded as of two complementary angles.

In the first place, the compilation of the existing documents on the primitive religious buildings of the Old World, understanding as such the territories occupied by the Roman Empire since the mid-II century AD, examining their forms, characteristics, distribution, etc. Within this section, liturgy constitutes a basic element of explanation which reasons and justifies each one of the parts of a construction, its functions, and the changes suffered throughout the first centuries of expansion and consolidation of Christianity. Likewise, we have searched for architectural models in Hispania that would allow us to visualize the construction forms and space distribution as a reflection of the traits that define the new cult.

Also, a study has been conducted of the constructions built under the lower empire and the upper Middle Age using perishable materials, as a technical resource used in periods of economic recession and drop in technical specialization. This has been considered of interest, inasmuch as often times these types of constructions are those that define the existing models for the period under study, and are a clear reflection of the historic realities at different times. It has as well being considered of interest to succinctly develop this second aspect, inasmuch as a good portion of early colonial constructions in the Maya area combine perishable materials with masonry-built sections, being therefore relevant to search for possible antecedents or similar European models of this type of constructions, which may be defined as temporary.

Once the traits that define the Paleochristian constructions in the so-called Old World are identified, the focus was placed on unveiling how, the Mesoamerican specificities in general and the Maya ones in particular, endow the original model with an idiosyncrasy of its own, making it possible to speak of a Paleochristian-Maya architecture with significant formal variables where initially, classic forms with contributions of the medieval tradition intertwined, together with indigenous features of the Classic and Postclassic tradition.

## **THE FIRST CHRISTIAN CONSTRUCTIONS**

The earlier archaeological evidences of spaces dedicated to the Christian cult were documented in the II century AD, and were, in fact, an adaptation of certain household spaces to a new religious practice. These early evidences are defined as

*loca ecclesiastica*, *domus ecclesiae* or *domus dei*, and are community cult spaces that are part of homes, with no visible outer construction trait. It seems clear that the introverted and secret character of the Christian religion within the Latin tradition was a part of an amalgam of cults absorbed by Rome during its process of military expansion and Romanization or acculturation.

By the end of the III century AD, or early in the IV century, specific spaces dedicated to the Christian cult already existed. In Rome, the *titulus* or parishes constituted in a titular *domus* (house) are documented. In some cases, these are spaces decorated with paintings that clearly show Christian iconographic motifs. The most evident case of such a construction model is that of *Dura Europos* near the Euphrates, where one may see how, around a central patio, a large room, a smaller room with a baptistry and rooms in the upper floor were arranged (Figure 1). The chapel has adobe walls and the frescoes depict motifs such as Adam and Eve, the Good Shepherd, David and Goliath, all characters that no doubt represent clear referents for the faithful. At Quirg-Bizze, in Syria, and adjacent to a Roman villa, a Roman church was built with a new floor plan. Later, a cult complex with a church, an open space with porticos, and a church with a *martirium* were programmed and built.

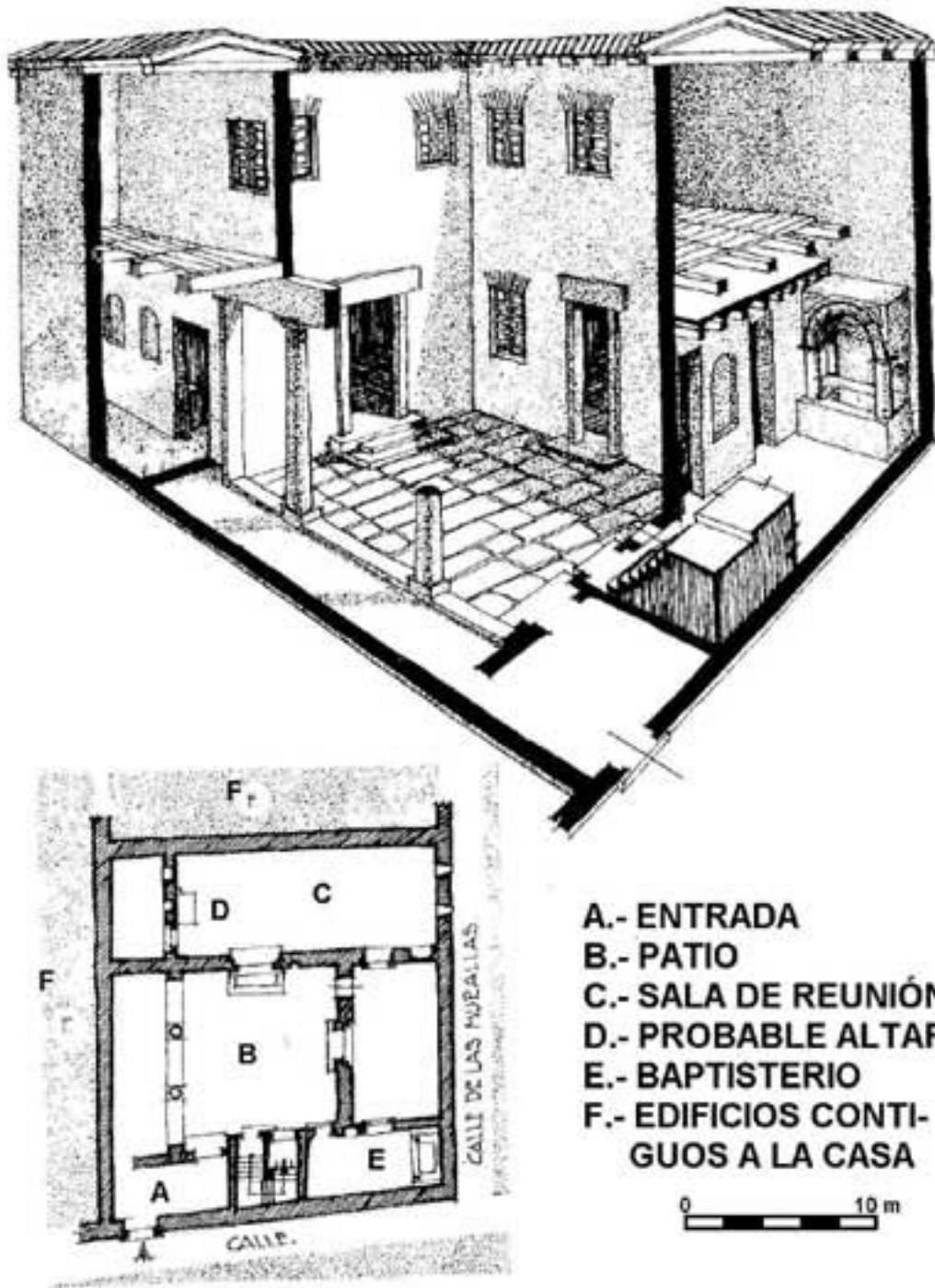


Figure 1. Dura Europos. First Christian religious spaces (Iñiguez 1977).

The accession to power of Emperor Constantine in 313 AD, transformed the Christian cult, which was clandestine at the time, into the official religion, rescuing as a religious space the basilica of Latin tradition. The new construction was to respect several conditions: it was to be spacious and bright, it was to have visibility, a large capacity, it should allow for the compartmentation of the devotees and the placement of the shrine inside the complex.

## LITURGY AND ITS ARCHITECTURAL REFLECTION

It seems evident that even though archaeological terminology does not often differentiate among the architectural and liturgical aspects at the time of establishing the different types of spaces and their functions, this aspect should be taken into account, for the benefit of accuracy, with the specificities typical of the space language applied to the primitive Christian cult. From a liturgical point of view, the two functions defining a space in the Christian cult are the Eucharistic *sinaxis* and baptism, while great relevance is given to the cult of martyrs in regions such as Hispania. Also, and within the liturgical framework, the lateral entrance of churches symbolizes the wound of Christ at one of his sides, one that flowed water and blood, symbols of the sacraments: baptism and Eucharist.

From the liturgical viewpoint, the collective cult of Eucharist, though introverted in nature, for being unfolded inside an enclosed and well delimited space, contrasts with baptism, a personal ritual where the family introduces the new member to the community, and to that aim, the action takes place in a more introverted manner. Both activities may take place at the same time though always in a closed space. Both rites are complementary, as they entail the introduction of the person to a collective that was to entitle him/her to interact with others in the Eucharist ceremony of which he/her was to participate for the rest of his/her life.

From the architectural point of view, the basilical space of Roman tradition is structured in the *sanctuarium* destined to the altar, the *presbiterium* reserved to the clergy, and the aisle or space occupied by laymen. The separation between the area occupied by the clergymen and the parishioners is established through ironwork gates or short walls. It is also evident that in the materialization of the different spaces one may see the clear hierarchical organization of people or groups that occupied the different parts of the temple. The partition of the spaces adjacent to the altar, the baptistry and the presbytery undoubtedly outlined the differences and relevance of them, structuring as well the space occupied by the believers, the aisle we mentioned above.

The altar is the axis of the building, a fact that is clearly established even from the outside of the construction, where one may observe the greater height of this area, and also when one enters the church, marking a visual gradation. However, the Scriptures do not show any reference regarding location norms or the characteristics a church was supposed to have. References to the altar are focused on its localization in the *sanctuarium* or *sancta sanctorum*, as referred to in the proceedings of different councils held in the VI century AD, in addition to reiterating the importance of praying towards the east, being this latter trait one of the features that define the orientation of the constructions and the redistribution of the urban space of towns. Moreover, the significance of orientation had an effect on the celebrant, who up to the Vatican Council II presented its back to the attendants during the ceremony, a meaningful fact, no doubt, as his position practically prevented any explicit dialogue among the parties that participated in the rites.

The baptistry is the materialization of one of the basic aspects of liturgy. Being the axis of the introduction of the faithful into the collective, the presence of altars has at times been corroborated, traits which may be associated with brief ceremonies or peregrinations made for the introduction of neophytes in the new religion. Usually, it is located close to, or adjacent to, the altar and the presbytery, being, therefore, one of the basic spaces in religious constructions.

*“Patristic testimonies seem to agree on the fact that the first communion of the neophytes was conducted inside the church, because it was the official introduction of the new members to the rest of the community. Thus, the neophytes would attend for the first time the celebration of the mysteries they were not allowed to attend before, as the catechumen were dismissed right before the offertory”* (Godoy 1995:54).

The term presbytery is associated with the spaces that embrace the Episcopal throne, after an encyclopaedic definition, but in ecclesiastic literature the term is not referenced. Usually, it is the space destined to the priest for the celebration of religious ceremonies. The chorus, initially reserved to clergy members (or either to mendicant orders) and celebrants, seems to respond to a larger extent to the area occupied by the groups of singers that usually participated in Eucharist ceremonies. Considering we are referring to a human group that participates in the ceremony, its localization responds to the needs or possibilities of each particular construction. Even when it seems not too relevant, such evident resources as the collective singing of certain texts and songs were commonly used as a pedagogic tool for learning some of the more relevant aspects of Christian religion. In this sense, the acoustic value of the constructions was by no means negligible.

*“Psalm chanting is one of the ceremonies that have given us the more abundant proofs regarding its antiquity in liturgical assemblies”.* (Godoy 1995:60).

The aisle is the church area occupied by the attendants and is divided into three parts, which in the case of Son Bou, in Minorca, respond to the continuity of the sacred ironwork gates of the *diaconium*, the baptistry and the presbytery, with no interior communication; they are the only passageway, together with the church aisle. In the case of Empuries in Girona, the aisle is a unit which has no partitions, while the sanctuary of the church features the presbytery with the altar and the chorus in an apsidal space and the sacristy located at one side (Figure 2). The models taken as a reference may be placed between the end of the IV century AD and the beginning of the V, representing a clear evidence of the variety of the architectural forms available for responding to similar liturgical needs.

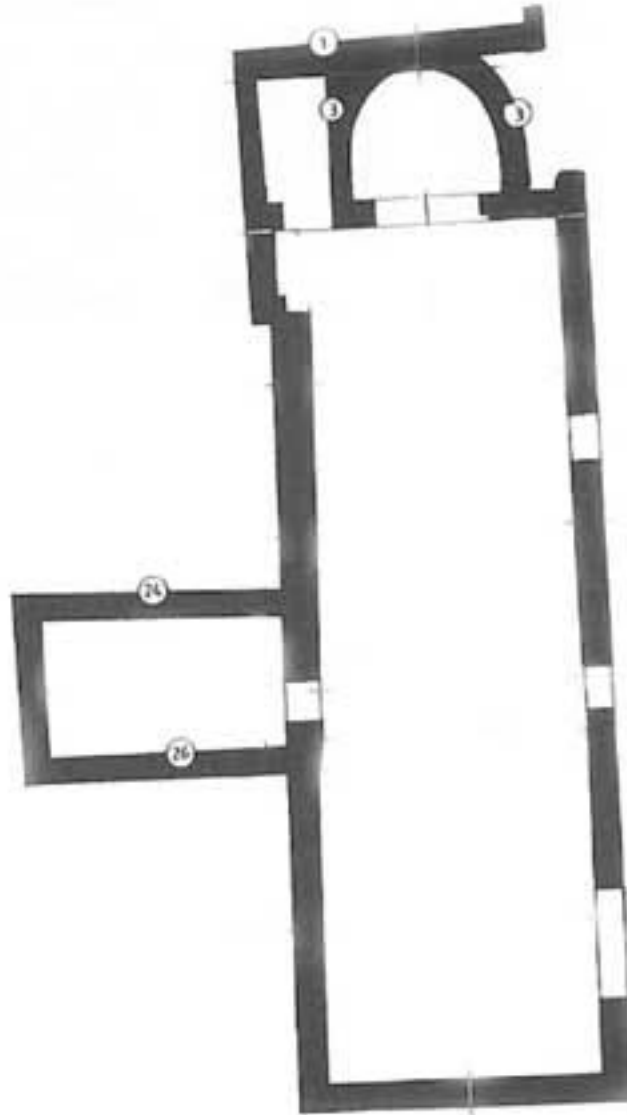


Figure 2. Empuries, ground plan of the Paleochristian basilica (Nolla and Sagrera 1995).

## CONSTRUCTIONS WITH PERISHABLE MATERIALS

In European archaeological tradition, constructions totally or partially built with perishable materials are defined as cabins, back cabins, or domestic architecture, the latter term being much more precise and devoid of the pejorative meaning conveyed, in Spanish, to the term cabin, in the sense of something coarse, plain and poor in technical resources. These kinds of wooden constructions are documented in rural settlements of the small village type, with chronologies dating to the V century AD, associated to structures for storage and the stabling of cattle. The alternation of wood and clay and the short stone walls resembling plinths, grant these structures different functionalities, ranging from domestic use to workshop spaces, or production activities areas.

Also for this period between the V and VII centuries AD, the presence was observed of semi-excavated constructions in the natural sediments, with a cover of wood,

mud, etc. In several Italian areas, the presence of this type of construction was observed, as a phase previous to the more stable architectural programs that were to use stone. It is also evident in the archaeological record that these vernacular construction forms were originated in earlier periods, like the final phase of the bronze period in the first millennium before Christ, this late generalization being, therefore, a return to previous models.

The presence of structures simpler, from the point of view of construction, than those typical of the preceding Roman tradition, is no doubt a reflection of the reality that defines this period. The purpose here is trying to figure out how the response given by a society that generated architectural manifestations in wood, wattle and daub and straw, adapted itself to such a major productive transformation, considering that the different specialists who participated in the construction activities, the communication roads that allowed for the access to the different materials, and the economic support of the authorities to conduct major architectural programs, had ceased to exist.

*“From this point of view, the resource of this architecture is the one that adjusts the best to a social sphere composed of peasant communities or family structures, where social hierarchies do not exist, or where the leading groups are unable to concentrate enough surplus to allow for the existence of specialized craftsmen in the territory” (Azcárate and Quirós 2001:20).*

Uniformity at the time of building, observed in many sites examined in the Iberian Peninsula may be an evidence of the presence of work teams, groups of designers and masons who in an itinerant way, built the same models in different settlements. No doubt, the presence of these groups was more than usual in periods where human and material resources were limited and their optimization represented a very relevant issue. These shortages were also expressed in the evangelization process of the American territories, mainly in those areas that were unattractive for generating a migration that qualitatively and quantitatively allowed for carrying on such evangelizing activity, with one of the most significant cases being the territory occupied around the mid-XVI century by the Maya culture.

The resemblances between the diversity of the construction models that occurred during the late antiquity –V-VII centuries AD- and the upper medieval period –VII-X centuries AD- in the Iberian Peninsula and the early colonial architectural manifestation present in the Maya area were focused on the degree of adjustment of the needs and resources at hand. These were forms of organizing the domestic and religious space that in part were the heirs of their ancestral cultural backgrounds, but which largely responded to novel historic situations that implied remarkably different scales of value.

## **PALEOCHRISTIAN COLONIAL MAYA ARCHITECTURE**

No doubt, for a purist of classic Paleochristian archaeology, the association of the terms Colonial Maya and Paleochristian may sound awkward and hard to understand, if the various cultural traditions existing in an American indigenous



cultural context as of the first quarter of the XVI century is not taken into account. Nevertheless, and risking to incur in such a terminological insolence, one should be etymologically-wise coherent, so, if the primitive European Christian and Asian expressions are referred to as Paleo-Christian, their parallels in the American continent should also be framed in the same group. Jordi Gussinyer, a professor in the University of Barcelona, has examined in depth the early colonial architectural development in Mesoamerica (Gussinyer 1997: 143-165).

This is a situation, the one in America, where a small number of persons, in addition to imposing a new political, economical and social order, want to introduce and generalize a cult very different from the local one. In the Old World, primitive Christianity emerged in a clearly hostile environment for a monotheistic cult, despite the fact that the Roman tradition took on deities, rituals and cultural forms from very different places of the empire as their own.

In the American continent, the new faith also constituted a minority within a religious context that was different in forms, liturgies, iconographies, etc. However, the high degree of religiosity of the American indigenous population, the capability of adapting the Christian cult to the native tradition in different aspects (the assimilation of saints and virgins with domestic deities, the symbolism of colorations, the functionality of the spaces, the ritualizations, etc), and the high degree of permeability or the possibility of camouflaging certain indigenous forms with an external Christian look, are some of the traits that define the expansion process of Christianity in the Mesoamerican area, one that in many territories could be defined as a much superficial one.

## **THE ADAPTATION OF THE CHRISTIAN CULT TO THE INDIGENOUS IDIOSYNCRASY**

The religious reality of the XVI century in the Maya area was being defined by a group of friars who belonged to different mendicant orders supposed to evangelize an abundant indigenous population, heiress of a millenary tradition, with a way of conceiving the world, with a language and its many variants, and no doubt, not in the least interested in this religious offer, which to begin with, they did not even understand. Besides this situation, outlined by some general traits, the poverty of the territory from the point of view of the presence of metals or other economic resources clearly made this area unattractive for conquerors, officials, *encomenderos* and friars. Thus, and at all times, the lack of human and material resources would be a circumstance that would define both the process of military conquest and territorial consolidation, and control over the people. Likewise, the traits that characterized the form of extended disposition in the territory made it difficult to exert a quick administrative, fiscal and religious control.

These circumstances explain why, prior to beginning the evangelization and acculturation process, an intensive activity of eradication of the dispersed population had to be carried out, to concentrate them in new villages or on pre-existing centers.

*“Thus, a long relocation process of indigenous groups was initiated, where western economy, concealed at times by the pious zeal of the evangelizers, convulses and alters the indigenous forms of settling, causing disturbances whose seriousness achieved, in multiple occasions, the degree of a genocide, which in spite of not being intentional, was no less real”.*

It seems to be evident that the connotations accompanying the constructions constituted one of the most important components in the process of evangelization and acculturation of the Maya indigenous population, both in urban and rural settings. Some external issues such as the location of the new religious building, the dimensions, shape, external decoration, and its relationship with other adjacent constructions, are some of the basic aspects of prehispanic urban planning, now rescued in colonial times. Likewise, the internal distribution, the localization of each feature inside the building, the use of certain built areas as pedagogical areas, the carrying out of pilgrimages or peregrinations inside and outside of the constructions, or the representation of values corresponding to the Christian tradition, are other components that explain the significance of the building as a tool, as an instrument for spreading the new faith.

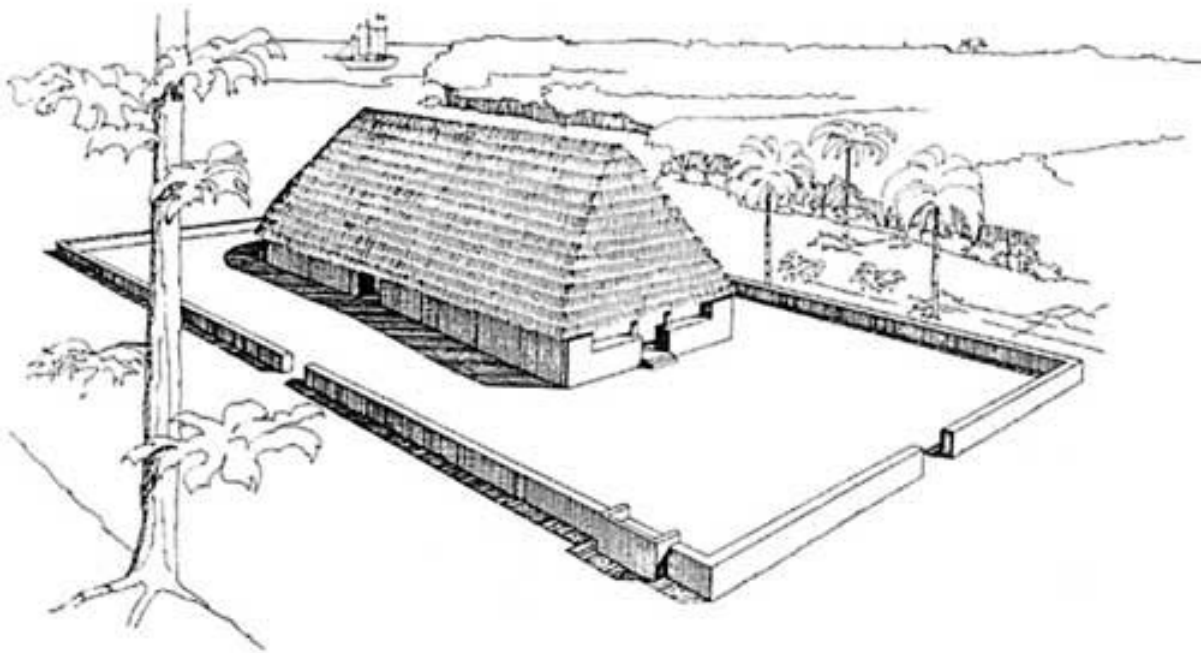
The visualization of a new space, the fact of becoming a part of the architectural and symbolic landscape of a town was essential to incorporate the meaning of it at the light of the new ideological guidelines, a fact that was further stressed whenever the new construction was erected on top of, totally or partially destroying, a meaningful earlier building, as was the case of Izamal, Yucatán. Nevertheless, the first religious constructions in the Maya area were much simpler than the conventual complex of Izamal was. The initial architectural programs were no doubt the best solution to face the issue of evangelizing an important population, lacking the necessary staff and dealing with individuals with strong religious convictions, all in a rarefied atmosphere for the Hispanic commuted population.

The archaeological study of some of the churches built between the mid-XVI century and the first quarter of the XVII made it possible to establish a number of models which responded to different stages of the evangelization process, but which unfolded almost in a contemporary manner. They were a clear reflection of the lacking previously mentioned, but at the same time, they were an example of the degree of adaptation of the Hispanic to the indigenous, as a strategy to facilitate the incorporation of the guidelines corresponding to the new religion.

Since the initial constructions –the bowers built entirely with perishable materials- the process of integration of masonry, mortar, barrel vaults and arches was observed, like construction resources that allowed for the generation of spaces with forms and functions similar to those discussed for classic Paleochristian architecture. Obviously, there is no archaeological evidence of the initial constructions, merely defined by vegetal roofs supported by beams which probably created, in some cases, itinerant forms to celebrate the ceremonies in different areas inside the villages, well placed on platforms or prehispanic buildings or else in open spaces, *“... and having arranged the hut or shed that would be used as the first church”* (Ximénez 1965:183), for the case of the first foundation of the city of Santiago de los Caballeros, in Guatemala.

On the contrary, there is material evidence of those constructions in which stone gradually achieved a greater significance within the architectural group. In this sense, Andrews' classification (1991:355-374) comprises the following:

- the ramada chapels, where only the perimetral walls or atrium walls are masonry built (Cozumel, Tancah, Xcaret or Tipu; Figure 3).



**Figure 3. Ideal reconstruction of the Xcaret chapel (Andrews 1991).**

- the open ramada churches, where only the spaces relevant to the cult were stone-built (Calkini, Dzibilchaltún, Oxtankah, Tecoh or Chalamte; Figure 4).
- the enclosed ramada churches, where the perimetral walls of the aisle and the sacred spaces were built with stones (Bacalar, Ecab, Xlakah).
- the undetermined ramada churches, where the cover of the shed becomes a vaulted one, making uniform the use of stone in the whole construction (Izamal, etc).

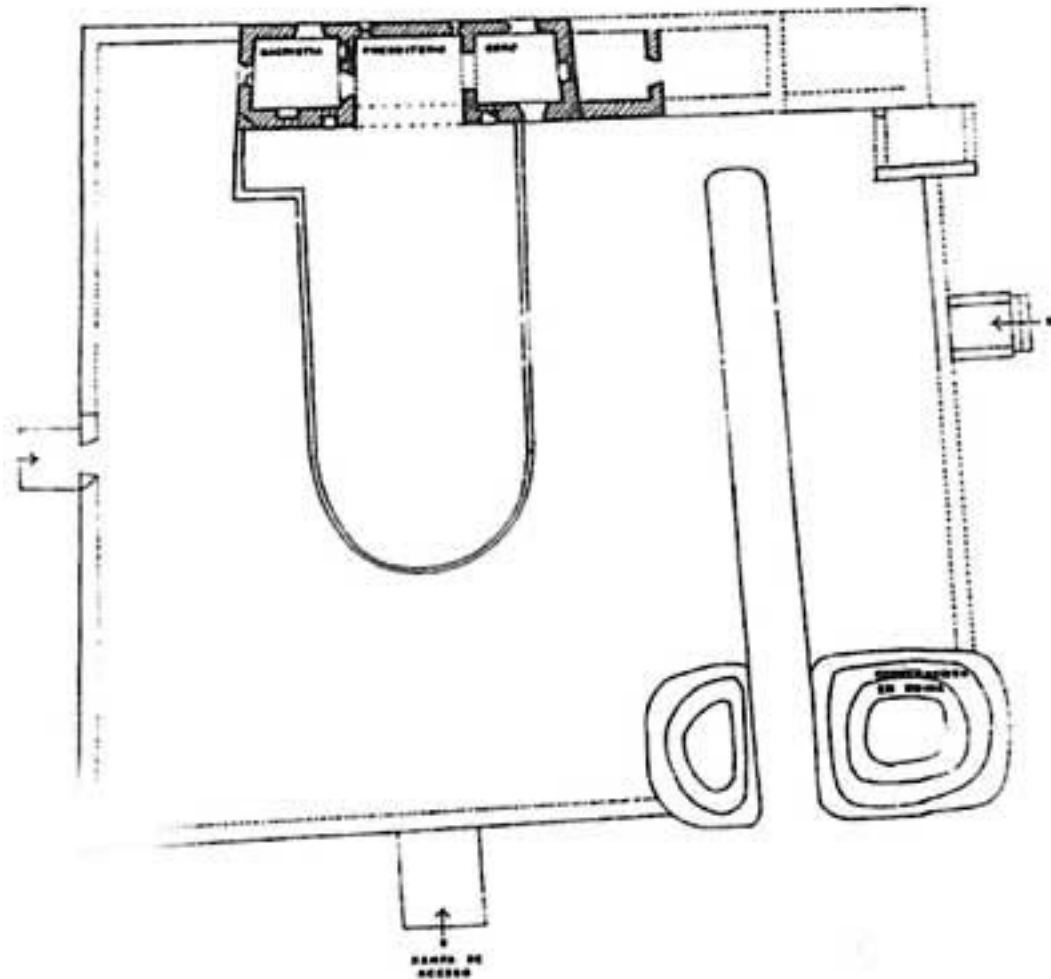


Figure 4. Archaeological plan of Chalamate (Millet and Burgos 2001).

*“In the ramada, the townspeople gather to hear the sermon and mass, which is celebrated in a large chapel placed at the beginning of this same ramada: it is celebrated by the Indians from the chorus, located at one side of the chapel, where also the font is usually found, while the sacristy is on the opposite side. This is the way it is in every village of this province, there where a convent is found as well as there where there is no convent; this is necessary for the excessive heat of the place, though in a few villages they have the baptistry in the chapel itself, and in others, they have it in a private room and hall”,* making reference to Tizimin.

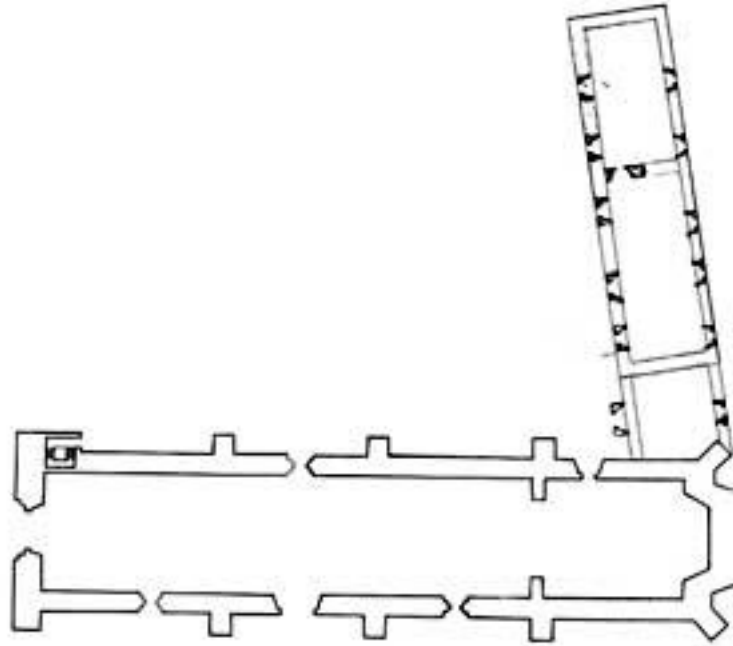
In those areas where the foundations of the mid-XVI century have survived to our days, it is much more difficult to define the formal traits of the early constructions. Nonetheless, the written references in some cases are very meticulous in regard to major constructions, be it for their architectural relevance or for the significance of the place in the evangelization process of territories such as the Chiapas or Guatemala areas. There are extended and minute descriptions of the church and convent of Izamal, of Chiapa de Corzo, and of Ciudad Real (Chiapa de los Españoles).

Nonetheless, it is clear that in the historic, architectural and archaeological literature of this first moment of contact between both cultures, the church has received the greater attention of researchers, because as the axis of the new villages, it summarized the values of the Maya society generated as of the second half of the XVI century (Artigas 1983; Andrews 1991; Bretos 1992). Nevertheless, the examination of the primitive conventual groups is also extremely relevant, as they feature many of the general guidelines of the subsequent architectural programs, which, in addition to their importance as centers for the cult and dissemination of the new faith, were autarchic sustenance centers, schools, spaces for the formation of indigenous religious personnel, place for the learning of languages or peregrination centers.

The final portion of this paper presents a succinct comment on the architectural traits that define one of the early conventual structures. In this sense, the study accomplished by Torres about the homes of the priests in Yucatán is significant, as it establishes different models based on some plain formal traits such as location with respect to the church, or the existing room or rooms, thus allowing for the quantification of a whole series of constructions commonly considered to be of secondary importance.

*“The construction of the casas curales was accomplished following the style of the common house of the Spanish in colonial times, that is to say, masonry walls of one half vara, approximately 45 centimeters in width, roofs with wooden beams and square small beams or else, logs, dirt floors or floors made with stone tiles, finished with a mix of lime and several types of flagstones...”* (Torres 2001: 62-71).

This annotation defines very clearly the models from northern Yucatán, examples like those of Tecoh or Ecab; however, there are architectural assemblages which despite being simpler in that which concerns the materials used, are much more complex in their internal distribution. In some cases, the house of the friars, as the origin of the multi-functional conventual spaces, is placed against the church creating a structural unit, like in the excavated colonial settlements of Coapa and Coneta in Chiapas (Figure 5), or as may be sensed from several descriptions of early religious assemblages found in the same Mexican state.



**Figure 5. Archaeological ground plan of the church and convent of Coneta (Markham 1984).**

The description made by Francisco de Ximénez of the first Dominican conventual structure in Ciudad Real, which could be dated sometime between 1536 and 1539 has been taken as a reference (Figures 6 and 7). Obviously, the spaces described were modified by subsequent reforms. However, it represents an interesting example, as it allows for examining the material and religious reality from several different perspectives: the materials listed, the spaces and functions described or merely generically outlined, and other aspects that emerge from an overall description of the structure.

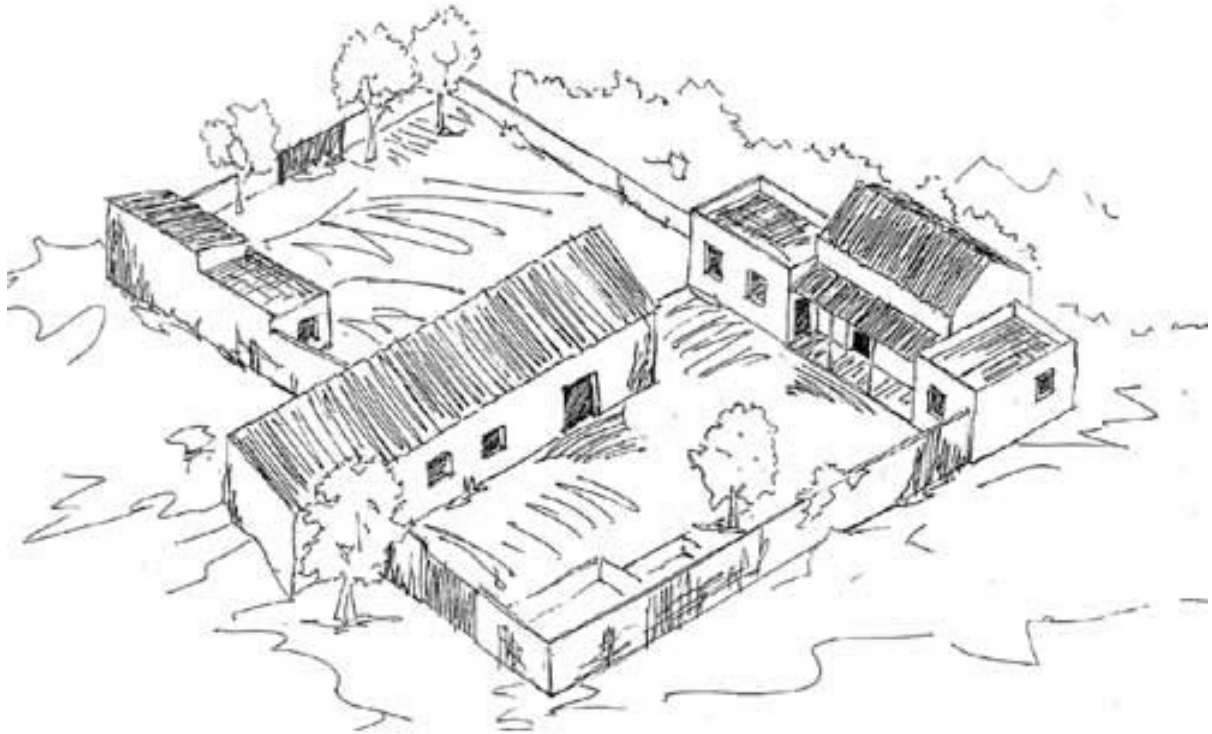


Figure 6. Ideal reconstruction of the convent at Chiapa Real (drawing by R. Round).

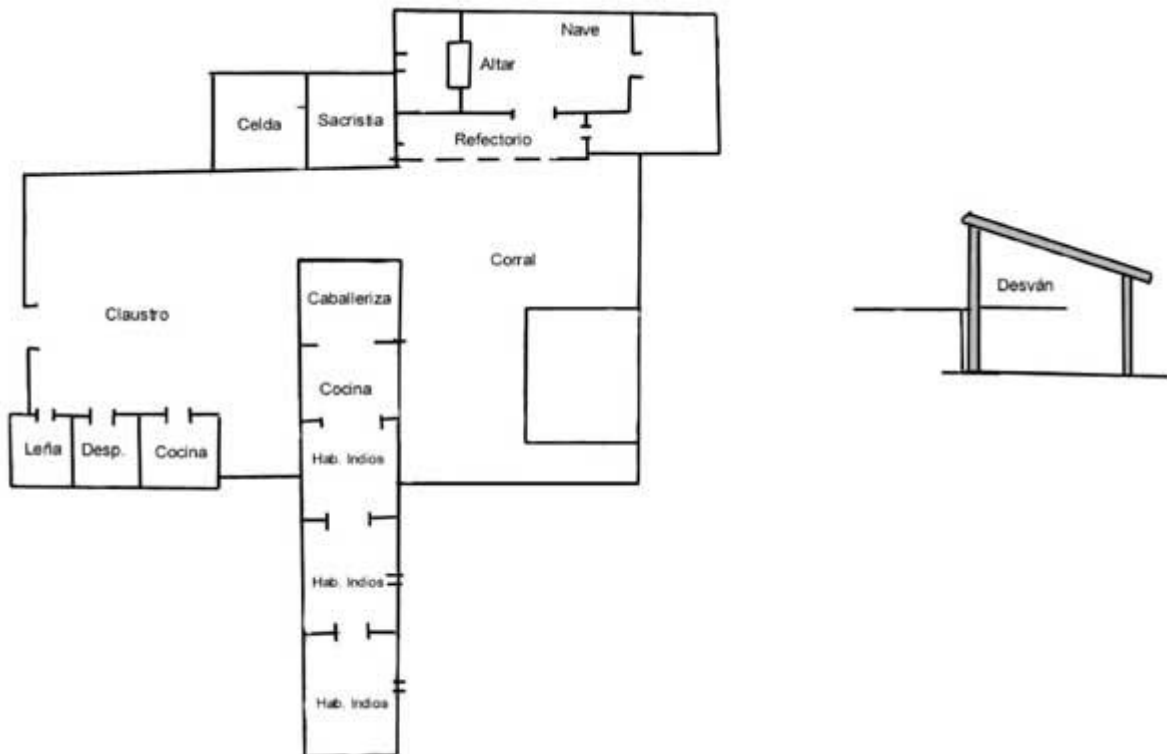


Figure 7. Architectural ground plan and sketch of Chiapa Real (drawing by R. Round).

*"The house was built with pitchforks and staffs, covered with mud: it was very deficiently erected, because beyond being a vile matter, it had been abandoned for years; it had a yard at the entrance where we hanged the bells, and this yard was closed at night; even though the walls could be knocked down with a push; it had a lounge and a chamber that was a shortcut to the lounge; we removed this shortcut where we built an altar between the gratings and the gradins of the altar six or eight feet, and despite this there hardly was room for all of us around the altar: it had two additional small chambers, of which one was used as a sacristy and other one as the priest's cell, where we placed the clock and made doors to this purpose; on the opposite side of the lounge there was a chamber and we closed the door and built it elsewhere, and even though it was very narrow, with several rotten planks tied with strings we made a shortcut so that it could go into the bedroom, and the rest was the refectory, so narrow and dark that we hardly could get inside; the house had an additional room with a stud and a kitchen and small chambers that probably were a pantry and quarters where the Indians spent the night. Everything was very dark and filthy and black and full of soot; on top, there were some attics made with staffs and plenty of mud on top, and as it was so very much rotten, garbage would not stop falling from above and we feared it would collapse and catch us below.*

*All of these rooms had a door to the yard found at the entrance I mentioned before: but the lodgers closed it and from the inside, they opened doors from one room to the other, and through this passage of the refectory they were all built: the bedroom was placed there, the saddest and poorest one you could possibly imagine, and I believe that in several ways this was the same poverty our father Saint Dominic and Saint Francis endured and recommended to us. The cells were separated from the bedrooms and from one another with some bars, except for the partitions that previously existed between one room and the other: when a candle was lit in one of the cells the others became visible, at least those that fell in one of those rooms; they were forced to remain in their cells, very disciplined, because there was no secret place: all those passing by would see him, the doors were simple mats, the windows a hole to the countryside, the doors of the window another mat; ten cells were made here, three ended up at the stables and were those of Tomás de la Torre and Friar Domingo de Ara and Friar Gerónimo de San Vicente, and even though they removed all the dung they found, it smelled so bad that after a few days Friar Tomás decided to finish his, and removed eighteen loads of dung only from his cell; the other fathers had the dung on top of them, specially those of the kitchen, because soot was abundant and fell on them; our house also had a pigsty at the back and one day the authorities commanded that all the market people were to go there and clean it all, and then it was used as a cluster. There, they placed a door to the countryside which was the porter's lodge, and there the laymen negotiated everything they talked to us about, and the Indians would go to the chorus through the same way and there we would seat to take our meals and there we conversed with one another. There were some huts in this pigsty where the pigs slept, the friars cleaned them up, three shortcuts were opened, one to the kitchen and another one to procure from the pantry, another one for firewood and domestic trinkets, and at one side they made some .....*

*This was our first monastery where we dwelled in Ciudad Real de Chiapas, and though poor and insignificant, we were very happy there, and that was all we wanted*



*and I truly believe it was full of prayers and sighs and good deeds that were accomplished there in great silence and retreat, like, without lying, in the golden monasteries with very tall fences” (Ximénez 1965: 871-874).*

Ximenez’s description shows the reality of extreme poverty that characterized the first evangelizer friars, who were a part of the military contingents of the conquest, or either had initiated their pastoral work immediately following a military victory not fully consolidated. The materials associated with this building were the usual ones in the constructions of the early evangelization period: clay, mud, poles, pitchforks, staffs, ropes, wooden planks, mats probably made with cotton, clear proofs of their precarious situation. The external image it probably presented was not much different from other descriptions made by authors like Ciudad Real or Cogolludo for many of the churches and convents of this period, across the peninsular territory.

*“The convent is small, rooms are low, made with daub and covered with wattles, the church had wooden planks as a frame and the cover was also wattle”.* This is the description of the Zamayac convent in the Lake Atitlán region.

As to the internal spaces, references made to the areas destined to the more domestic conventual activities are significant (bedroom, refectory, pantry, kitchen, cells, the indigenous’ quarters, yards, studs). The presence of studs suggests the itinerant activity of the friars when they preached in the more or less nearby villages, *“all the errands for the altar were portable and a very small chest could accommodate the altar, the chalice, the vinegar bottles, the alb, the cross, the chandeliers and the altarpieces”.*

There are also significant the allusions to the sacred spaces associated with the ritualization or the liturgy, such as: the lounge and the chamber, the altar (with gradins), the sacristy and the chorus. In the same line of forced austerity, reference is made to bells as valuable objects and auditory reference to summon the new devotees, and to clocks, an object that is neither associated to the descriptions of the Relaciones Histórico-Geográficas, nor to the other chronicles of the area.

Also, the arrangement of the altar on gradins elevated with respect to the visual plane should be outlined; the sacristy, as a space where to store the material objects of the ritualization and the differentiated space where the priest prepared the internal ceremonies for the community and the external strategies.

The chorus was a relevant space, an area originally destined to the friars but one that as time went by, was gradually transformed in a space destined to the groups that coordinated the chanting that accompanied most religious celebrations. Of great significance were the singer friars or the chapel teachers in the Maya area, as those who were in charge of churches (ornaments, services, bonds with the children, etc.).

Finally, in this short review of the interesting description made in the early XVIII century regarding the construction of the second third of the XVI century, it is of interest to mention the quarters where Indians spent the night, a circumstance that appears to be common since the beginning of the evangelization works. The best way to introduce religion in the new communities was to physically, ideologically and

even economically, attract the children of the local chiefs to churches and convents, as an inducement or example for the rest of the community. This way of acting was not only a logical one, but it also responded to the Spanish policies concerning religion, it was sanctioned by the legislation, and theoretically, should have been complied with (Real Cédula, AGI Lima 566, Libro 4, Folio 258: 1541. *So that the necessary steps are taken to build the houses where the children of the natives are to receive their instruction*). I could mention as well the indigenous that were at the service of the Dominican friars for the construction, maintenance, and service of these precarious initial premises.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The paper submitted is not intended to forcibly compare the results of two processes separated by more than one thousand years in time, and in cultural contexts existing ten thousand kilometres apart. On the contrary, what we want is to see how, before situations that were broadly similar the material responses, like the architectural ones in this case, had points in common. The hostility of the environment, the paucity of human and material resources, the possibility of making use of the existing cultural background and the development of a process of cultural and religious generalization with constant progresses and drawbacks, were, no doubt, some of the aspects that made both processes similar to one another.

This Paleochristian architecture largely reflects the material and human shortages, but it is, simultaneously, a clear reflection of the degree of syncretism among the propagators of a new cult, introverted and focused on enclosed spaces and a large population used to rites held in open spaces, extroverted, where communication was more common. The monumental constructions at the north of the peninsula (non-closed spaces) and the reminiscences maintained in the large conventual programs (sheds, posa chapels, etc), are some of the contributions of the Maya tradition to these new colonial, viceregal and Paleochristian architecture.

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- Figure 1 Dura Europos. First Christian religious spaces (Iñiguez 1977)
- Figure 2 Empuries, ground plan of the Paleochristian basilica (Nolla and Sagrera 1995).
- Figure 3 Reconstruction of the chapel at Xcaret (Andrews 1991)
- Figure 4 Archaeological ground plan of Cahalmte (Millet and Burgos 2001)
- Figure 5 Archaeological ground plan of the Coneta church and convent (Markman 1984)
- Figure 6 Ideal reconstruction of the Chiapa Real convent (drawing by R. Round)
- Figure 7 Architectural ground plan and sketch of the Chiapa Real convent (drawing by R. Round).