

Urban vernacular architecture in the Middle Ages in Galicia, Spain

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Abstract

The emergence of the first urban settlements during the High Middle Ages in Galicia allowed the appearance of a typology of half-timbered houses with very heterogeneous characteristics according to the different Galician regions. Its general characteristics were a ground floor made of rammed earth, granite or schist stone and an upper floor made with a wooden framework system used as structural closures with different fillings (clay, straw, stone, brick or decking). The urban fabric of these settlements has been analyzed, studying the survival of the medieval lots. A small number of half-timbered houses of medieval origin have been found. The extension of this typology throughout the Galician geography allowed us to rethink part of the existing imaginary about vernacular construction in Galicia and contextualize the medieval Galician urban phenomenon within the European context.

Keywords: Half timbers; Galicia; urban architecture; Middle Age.

1. Introduction

This research aims to highlight the importance of Galician urban medieval housing through the study of a number of housing units, heirs of medieval types, which appeared during the High Middle Ages and are still preserved with different levels of transformation at the present time.

Main Galician vernacular architecture monographs (De Llano, 1996; Bas, 2002; Caamaño, 2006) focused their attention on the rural constructions that were gradually consolidated during the 18th and 19th centuries which had stone as their main building material. They hardly showed examples of urban constructions or half-timbered constructions as pioneers of Galician material culture had previously done (Lorenzo Fernández, 1962; Otero Pedrayo, 1927, López Cuevillas, 1973).

Urban vernacular areas have been rarely studied in Galicia, with only a small number of historical studies examining popular urban constructions. Some articles which described medieval urban housing features in general leaving out their typological evolution or their different types were referenced in the bibliography (Sorraluce Blond, 1998; López Carreira, 1999). Similarly, there is hardly any bibliography about Galician half-timbered constructions, only a few studies in the province of Ourense could be found (Lorenzo Fernández, 1962; Rodríguez, Romero, 2000).

1.1. Resources used

This research is based on an exhaustive cadastral revision and field work in main medieval Galician settlements with field visits to private ancient properties when allowed by their owners. In addition, a selection of urban local historical works were consulted.

Interviews with civil servants from City Council Rehabilitation Offices and technical and local experts as well as the use of Google Maps when and where possible, were fundamental to locate medieval urban housing.

1.2. Limitations of the research

The scarcity of Iberian half-timbered medieval construction studies and the lack of half-timbered medieval housings has required a careful search in historic urban settings in order to find examples of well-preserved and distinct typological elements. A large part of this heritage was destroyed in the last two decades without being documented by technical services that carried out the works. Due to the scarcity of investigations about medieval urban Galician architecture, it was necessary to search references from elsewhere in the north of the Peninsula.

2. Galician popular urban medieval housing

Urban life reemerged in Galicia between the 9th and the 13th century. The new boroughs of the main cities of the Roman, Suevian and Visigoth periods were consolidating, (Lugo, Ourense and Tuy), with the addition of the episcopal cities of Compostela and Mondoñedo (López Alsina, 1976) and the new foundations of Allariz, Ribadavia, Monterrei and Verín in inland areas and a series of villas on small port establishments (Ribadeo, Viveiro, Ortigueira, Ferrol, Betanzos, A Coruña, Noia, Padrón, Pontevedra, Baiona, A Guarda and Salvaterra) (Solano Fernández-Sordo, 2010). In just two centuries the Galician territory would create a series of nodes to control the territory to which the small enclaves linked to pilgrimages (Palas de Rey, Portomarín, Leboreiro, Arzúa, Melide, Sarria, Triacastela and Fonsagrada) and seaports (Portonovo, Rianxo, Cambados, Vigo, Cangas de Morrazo, Muxía, Laxe, Cedeira, Neda, Pontevedra, Muros, Caldas de Reis, Redondela and Foz) must be added.

2.1. The new half-timbered houses

The new city foundations in western Europe implemented new housing typologies that can be found, with 2dentic variations, throughout the north of the Iberian Peninsula including Galicia (Flores López, 1973; López Carreira, 1999).

Building plots were small, between 30 and 35m² with spans for 4 to 5 metres long (López, Alsina, 1976; Álvarez Pérez, 2021). They had a backyard garden called *eixido* and a well (López Carreira, 1999).

Two main types were appearing in Galicia:

- A modest type with a ground floor of stone called *chá* house
- A half-timbered house type called *aso-brallada*, with stone foundations, a ground floor of stone or rammed earth, depending on the availability of the material, and one floor called *sobrado* where the wooden structure overhang the street or was supported by pillars forming a porch. Originally, half-timbers did not have fillings but, due to the continuing fires that were occurring in these cities, they began to incorporate different fillings (brick, stone or earth).

2.2. Medieval settlements analysed

This research analysed 41 settlements of medieval origin. More specifically, the study included bibliographic searches, planimetric analyses of cadastral maps and field work in different settlements in various counties.

- In Rías Altas 2denti: A Coruña, Betanzos, Pontedeume, Ferrol, Neda and Cedeira.
- In the Cantabrian coast: Ortigueira, Viveiro, Foz, Ribadeo and Mondoñedo.
- In Rías Baixas 2denti: Muros, Noia, Padrón, Caldas de Reis, Pontevedra,

Redondela, Baiona, A Guarda, Tui y Salvaterra.

- In the southern interior area of Ourense province: A Cañiza, Melón, Ribadavia, Ourense, Allariz and Verín – Monterrei.
- Along the Pilgrim's Way to Compostela: Santiago de Compostela, Arzúa, Melide, Leboreiro, Palas de Reis, A Fonsagrada, Sarria, Samos, Triacastela. Portomarín and Chantada.
- Along the Sil River route: Monforte de Lemos, A Rúa and O Barco de Valdeorras.

Many small medieval coastal towns of medieval origin (Portonovo, Rianxo, Cambados, Muxía, Cangas do Morrazo and Laxe) were discarded because of their peripheral location, their small medieval fabric size or an insufficient documentation.



Fig. 1. Scheme of 41 medieval settlements analyzed, (Source: AFP).

2.3. Methodology

Firtly, local historical studies about different villas and cities were collected as in the case of Pontevedra (Armas Castro, 1992; Álvarez Pérez, 2021), Tui (Vila-Botanes, 2001 and 2009; Gonzalez Soutelo, 2007), A Coruña (Velo Pensado, 1992), A Guarda and Baiona, (Sánchez Carrera,

1997), Pontedeume (Couceiro Freijomil, 1971) Neda (Vázquez Rey, 1994; Yáñez, 2008), Ferrol (Vázquez López, 2001), Betanzos (Fernández de Rota & Monter e Irimia Fernández, 2000), Cedeira (López Díaz, 2007), Mondoñedo (Mayán Fernández, 1994; Vigo Trasancos, 1999), Ribadeo (López Alsina, 1976), Santiago de Compostela (Tellechea Idígoras, 1965; Vigo Trasancos, 1995; Rosende Valdés, 2005; Costa Buján, 2015), Viveiro (Cal Pardo, 1985; Durán Villa, 1986; Novo Guisán, 1997; García Oro & Romaní Martínez, 1989; Novo Guisán & Martínez Arias, 2012), Ourense (López Carreira, 1986; Gallego Domínguez, 2001); Monforte de Lemos (López Carreira, 2009), Verín (Taboada Chivite, 1949).

Additionally, the various urban medieval fabrics were analysed locating foundational city areas, studying the continuity of medieval urban lots and identifying potential medieval houses.

In this second study, two settlements were discarded because of the medieval fabric fragmentation (Palas de Reis) or destruction (Portomarín).

Furthermore, most attention was focused on nearby urban áreas, close to the main medieval streets, which have not undergone significant changes in its urban configuration. Interviews with local agents were also fundamental to locate medieval urban housing.

3. Localized case studies

Several medieval types were located in the distinct areas studied:

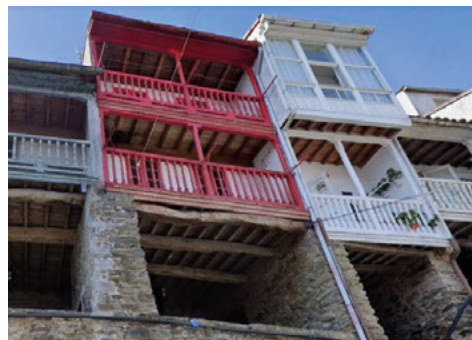


Fig. 2. Half-timbered houses in Betanzos (2018), (Source: AFP).

- In the Rías Altas region, in the towns of Betanzos and Neda different preserved houses were located as well in Pontedeume. In A Coruña, no constructions were found, but bibliographical references showed the city was erected with half-timbered houses until the 16th century (Velo Pensado, 1992). At the end of this century, new legislations to build with stone or half-timbers with earth were introduced because of the proliferation of fires, the increase of wooden prices and the lack of wood.



Fig. 3. Group of half-timbered houses in Neda (2021), (Source: AFP).



Fig. 4. Group of half-timbered houses in Neda (2021), (Source: AFP).

- In the Cantabrian coast, many examples were founded in Ribadeo and Viveiro, where half-timbers were filled with stone. The identified consulted provides examples in these settlements (López Alsina, 1976) as well as already studied in Mondoñedo (Fernández Palicio, 2020).



Fig. 5. Detail of the half-timbered wall with stone in Viveiro (2021), (Source: AFP).



Fig. 6. Group of half-timbered houses in Viveiro (2021), (Source: AFP).

- In the Rías Baixas region, medieval types were collected in Muros and many references in Pontevedra (Armas Castro, 1992; Álvarez Pérez, 2021). Currently, it is possible to locate various constructions heirs of medieval types but erected with stone.



Fig. 7. Group of half-timbered houses in Pontevedra (2018), (Source: AFP).



Fig. 8. Half-timbered house in Muros (2018), (Source: AFP).

- In Ourense province, a lot of cases were already located in the city of Ourense (Gallego Domínguez, 2001; Fernández Palicio, 2018). Moreover, important groups of half-imbred houses were identified in Ribadavia and Melón, and many types in Allariz and A Cañiza.



Fig. 9. Group of half-timbered houses in Ribadavia (2019), (Source: AFP).



Fig. 10. Medieval type house in A Cañiza (2022), (Source: AFP).



Fig. 11. Group of half-timbered houses in Melón (2022), (Source: AFP).

- Along the Pilgrim's Way to Compostela, medieval types were found in Chantada and Arzúa, in addition to Santiago de Compostela which was already studied. (Fernández Palicio, 2020).



Fig. 12. Group of half-timbered houses in Árzúa (2021), (Source: AFP).



Fig. 13. Medieval type house in Chantada (2013), (Source: Googlemaps).



Fig. 14. Group of half-timbered houses in Chantad (2013), (Source: Googlemaps).

- Finally, along the Sil river route many medieval houses were recognized in Monforte de Lemos, A Rúa and O Barco de Valdeorras.



Fig. 15. Group of half-timbered houses in O Barco de Valdeorras (2022), (Source: AFP).



Fig. 16. Medieval type house in A Rúa (2013), (Source: Googlemaps).



Fig. 17. Group of half-timbered houses in Monforte de Lemos (2010), (Source: AFP).

4. Implications for vernacular heritage imaginary

The previous and important studies carried out on the vernacular constructions in Galicia created a necessary collective imaginary about vernacular architecture. However, typological and material constructive variations over time and Galician vernacular architecture evolution received less attention. This fact favoured a perception of linearity and continuity which has partially distorted the enormous wealth of the diverse adaptive processes which have taken place in Galicia with greater or lesser success.

Thus, the wooden cities stage (Soraluze Blond, 1998) is unknown by the population and construction professionals. Vernacular heritage popular perception is frequently understood as a continuous process between the Neolithic stone housing and the modern age stone dwelling.

The current regulation about built heritage reflects this imaginary and feeds it back. Regulations define cultural heritage items and materials to preserve. Medieval half-timbered buildings are not included. Thereby, in addition to preserve built heritage, current regulations purge it, decreasing its variety and richness.

5. Conclusions

Galician vernacular half-timbered constructions are not localisms or particular cases. The extent of its territorial coverage across the whole of Galicia and its survival over more than five centuries in the majority of Galician urban settlements reflects a construction system with significant impact of which there are hardly any remaining examples.

The knowledge of this forgotten stage allows for expanding the imaginary and the field of vision about Galician vernacular heritage.

Therefore, vernacular heritage is understood as an adaptive process and not as forms associated with certain materials.

This unprejudiced approach allows for facing the future of vernacular construction as an adaptive and non linear process. This is a lesson to be applied in new sustainable constructions which wish to become heirs of vernacular heritage.

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