Symbolic Forms from the Iron Age
in the North-West of the Iberian Peninsula:
Sacrificial Bronzes and their Problems

XOSÉ-LOIS ARMADA – ÓSCAR GARCÍA-VUELTA

1. Introduction. Research problems and methodology

Despite the contributions made in the last few years, research into the symbolic and ritual world of societies in the north and north-west of the Iberian Peninsula during the Iron Age still poses problems, many as yet unresolved. From an archaeological viewpoint, the fundamental questions are those related to the identification and characterisation of the forms and the material elements related to them.

Archaeologists in the Peninsula have known for some time of certain bronze pieces of unknown purpose, characterised by symbolic iconographic motifs mostly related to animal sacrifice (Plate I) (SEVERO 1899; LEITE DE VASCONCELLOS 1905: 289–93; OBERMAIER 1921; GARCÍA y BELLIDO 1943; CARDOZO 1946; MALUQUER 1952; BLANCO 1957; BLÁZQUEZ 1957; LUENO 1964; GÓMEZ-TABANERA 1966; ALMAGRO-GORBEA – LORRIO 1992: 424; PENA GRAÑA 1994; GARCÍA QUINTELA 2004: 49–50; LORRIO – OLIVARES 2004; MARCO 2005: 319–20). Geographically, they are distributed in the north-west of the Peninsula (Fig. 1); chronologically, they seem to date from the late Iron Age.

Research into these pieces has been conditioned by a variety of factors. Among these are the absence of reliable information about their origin, archaeological context and circumstances of discovery; their dispersal in different museums and private collections, which has limited the publication of information based on direct, detailed analysis of the material; and the lack of documentation for study of their state of preservation or degradation.

In an attempt to remedy this situation, our proposed project was divided into various stages:

1. Historiographic and documental approach
2. Study of materials, including:
   2.1. Study or forms: size, motifs, function...
   2.2. Topographic study: technics, degradation...
   2.3. Graphic documentation
   2.4. Analytic study: X-Ray fluorescence
3. Interpretation, including:
   3.1. Iconographic approach
   3.2. The role of the pieces in discussion of Iron Age ritual and symbolism in NW Iberia
   3.3. Comparative study within the framework of Indo-European societies

Preliminary results of the research were published in a previous article (ARMADA – GARCÍA-VUELTA 2003), where a more detailed description of the objects may be found.

2. Brief description of the bronzes

1. Castelo de Moreira (Celorico do Basto, Portugal) (Fig. 2, Plate I.1). Piece with a rectangular roped central body, probably solid, with a bull’s head at one end and a moulded ring at the other. At the top there is a series of four animals: a ram, a goat, an unidentifiable animal and a pig. One side shows a cauldron and an anthropomorphic figure with an axe on its shoulder; the lower part shows an incomplete torc, towards which the figure making the sacrifice points his arm. Size: 11 cm length.
Plate 1. Sacrificial bronzes from the north-west of the Iberian Peninsula:
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1. Celorico do Basto (Castelo de Moreira, Portugal) (nr. 1 in catalogue); 2. Carriño (A Coruña, Spain) (nr. 6 in catalogue); 3. Lalín? (Pontevedra, Spain) (nr. 5 in catalogue).

Fig. 2. Iconographic motifs on the bronze from Celorico do Basto, according to J. de Pinho (after LACERDA 1942).

The piece was found accidentally by a peasant-woman; at the end of the nineteenth century it belonged to the collector Manuel Negrão. Its present whereabouts are unknown.


2. Piece of unknown provenance (kept in the Instituto Valencia de Don Juan, Madrid) (= IVDJ) (Fig. 3, Plate I.2 and II). The surface of the base is rectangular in outline, rounded at one end, with a ring; the other end has a bull’s head. The edges of the pieces are decorated with a roped motif, interrupted near the bull’s muzzle by an axe-shaped appendage with lateral cords.
Fig. 3. Iconographic motifs on the bronze in the Instituto Valencia de Don Juan. Drawing: O. García-Vuelta.

The upper surface shows a scene of sacrifice with the following elements (Fig. 3): 1) small bear with a rope round its neck, being dragged to a cauldron by a human figure; 2) unidentifiable animal, probably a large bird; 3) incomplete human figure, probably dragging the bear; 4) small unidentifiable animal; 5) large goat, held down by the neck by a person performing the sacrifice; 6) small pig or wild boar; 7) sacrificer without torc and apparently naked, holding down figures 5 and 8; 8) large boar or pig, with tusks and large ears; 9) small animal, possibly a piglet; 10) human figure with torc, his sword pointing to the neck of ram number 11, which he is holding down with his left hand; 11) large ram; 12) human figure with torc, one hand holding down the ram and the other resting on the cauldron; 13) large torc lying flat on the ground; 14) detailed representation of a cauldron, with four rings, partially preserved.

Size: 16.7 cm length, 3.1 cm wide. The surface has now been considerably altered.

References: OBERMAIER 1921; BLANCO FREIEIRO 1957; OLMOS 2002: 38, fig. 4; ARMADA – GARCIA-VUELTA 2003.

3. Piece of unknown provenance (kept in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid) (= MAN I) (Fig. 4, Plate I.3 and III.1–3). Piece with a structure similar to the previous one, though more simple. It ends with a bull’s head with an axe-shaped appendage below it, while the rest of the base structure is imitative of cording, suddenly cut off at the end opposite the bull. The elements shown are (Fig. 4): 1) zoomorph with twisted horns, possibly a ram; 2) zoomorph with horns, perhaps a goat; 3) unidentified zoomorph without horns, possibly with a tusk; 4) pair of probably anthropomorphic figures; 5) possible anthropomorph, one arm extended towards a cauldron; 6) cauldron; 7) bull’s head. There are many faults in the casting. Size: 7.9 cm length. The seller of this piece said that it came from the Valladolid area.

4. Piece of unknown provenance (kept in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid) (= MAN II) (Plate I.4 and III.4–6). Piece consisting of a solid prismatic body, plano-convex in section, the ends
Plate III. Museo Arqueológico Nacional I (nr. 3 in catalogue) (1-3); Museo Arqueológico Nacional II (nr. 4 in catalogue) (4-6). Details. Photos: O. García-Vuelta and X.-L. Armada.

finished with heads of a bull and of a ram. One side of the central part depicts a torc and an axe; these were probably repeated on the other surface, though they have almost disappeared. The upper part shows a cauldron. In the central section there are several chiselled lines. Size: 10.5 cm length.


5. Lalín? (Pontevedra, Spain) (kept in the Museo de Pontevedra) (Plate I.5 and IV.1–4). The outline of the basic structure resembles a curved knife blade, ending with a ram’s head. It is decorated with cording; on the right side is an axe-shaped appendage, now broken, with lateral cords and a torc lying flat on it. At the same height on the base structure there is a cauldron with a carented body and highly-detailed rope decoration; next to it is a schematic zoomorph, probably bovine. Size: 15.9 cm length. The provenance of the piece is unknown.


6. Cariño (A Coruña, Spain) (kept in the Museo Arqueolóxico e Histórico de San Antón, A Coruña) (Plate I.6 and IV.5–8). Axe-shaped piece, ending in a realistic bull’s head. One side depicts a torc, while the
Plate IV. Museo de Pontevedra (from Lalin?) (nr. 5 in catalogue) (1-4); Cariño (nr. 6 in catalogue) (5-8). Details. Photos: X.-L. Armada and O. García-Vuelta.
other has a circular motif with a central button, which has been interpreted as a caetra, patera, or spiral with concentric circles. There is a plaited cord on each side of these motifs. The piece has four rings, arranged as in a statera. Size: 17 cm length. It was found by accident on the beach at Cariño in July 1961.


3. Iconographic considerations

The bronzes characteristically repeat six iconographic elements (torc, axe, cauldron, zoomorphic head, figures of animals and an interwoven motif); their appearance in each individual case is summarized in Table 1. In the first three pieces these elements are combined in a scene of sacrifice, while in the other three they form a static composition.

Table 1. Iconographic motifs on the sacrificial bronzes.

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All the iconographic elements together – those which are repeated and those which are not – can be grouped into four basic categories: anthropomorphic motifs, zoomorphic motifs, objects, and other elements.

Anthropomorphic motifs appear in the three examples with sacrificial scenes. They can be interpreted as people making sacrifices, and are depicted schematically but with varying degrees of detail. In some cases they are carrying weapons related to animal sacrifice (an axe from Celorio and a dagger in IVDJ) or symbolic elements, such as the torc carried by the figures in the bronze IVDJ.

Zoomorphic motifs can be classified as animal heads and figures. The heads were cast with the central body of the pieces; in four cases the animal shown is a bull, while in the piece from Lalín it is a ram and in MAN II a ram and a bull.

The animal figures are found on the base of the pieces, in varying numbers and arrangements; they are not found in MAN II and Cariño. Bovines and goats are the most common, together with pigs or wild boar, arranged in a row in the centre of the objects. The figures vary in their degree of detail; in some cases they are so schematic that it is difficult to identify them, while others are highly detailed, showing the genitals and whether the creature is young or full-grown.

The objects most frequently shown are axes, cauldrons and torcs. The axe is clearly an instrument of sacrifice. These are directly hafted axes, amply documented in the archaeological record of the northwest of the Peninsula. They probably had a variety of functions, but their symbolic connotations are difficult to determine.

The cauldron is a powerfully symbolic object throughout Europe (LE ROUX 1955); this is seen in our region too, for example in the gold jewellery from Moines (Plate V) (MARCO 1994; GARCÍA-VUELTAS – PEREA 2001). The cauldrons found in the area are usually in fragments, which makes it difficult to study their morpho-typological characteristics. However in some cases, as in the examples from A Peneda, the large size, as suggested by the remains, indicates ceremonial and collective use (ARMADA 2003). There
are also many fragments of *situlae* with rope decoration intertwined in S shapes with a central boss and other motifs which recur in *Castro-Culture* material (jewellery, pottery, etc.) (CARBALLO 1983).

The torc is shown on all the pieces except MAN I. In all cases it resembles the basic shape in this area, with a C-shaped ring and large, usually pear-shaped terminals; only in the IVDJ bronze are they discoid or with double moulding. The torcs are closely associated with axes and cauldrons, and are also shown around the necks of the figures performing the sacrifice in the IVDJ bronze. In the bronze from Celorico, the torc is lying at the feet of the only anthropomorphic figure, whose arm is reaching towards it. The link between axe and torc, although shown in various ways, is very clear in the bronzes from IVDJ, MAN II, Lalín and Cariño.

Lastly, our fourth group includes other elements, symbolically more complex. An example is the concentric circle motif with a central boss from the Cariño piece; this has generally been identified as a castra or shield, but it could also be related to the spiral or circular motifs with central boss, which are found in Castro-Culture objects and are very common in torcs and situlae. Finally, the symbolism of the rope-like motifs or structures, found in all the pieces except MAN II, is yet to be determined.

![Plate V. Diadem/belt from Moñes (Piloña, Asturias). Detail. Photo: O. Garcia-Vuelta.](image)

4. **Bases for an interpretation**

Study and interpretation of the bronzes is under way, with various proposals and possibilities open for consideration. They are certainly one of the most interesting material representations for the study of the ritual and ideological aspects of these Iron Age societies, since they bring together a series of symbolic elements (torc, cauldron, axe, etc.) and emphasise the active role these played in rituals of sacrifice. At the same time they highlight the iconographic and symbolic links in the Peninsula between the northwest and the northern Meseta, where there are bronzes in some ways similar to those we are studying here.

There is a variety of evidence on the characteristics of sacrificial rituals in the region. The bronze cart from Vilela (found by chance next to a roasting spit) shows, on a longitudinal bar, a procession of fourteen human figures arranged symmetrically in pairs; the two people at the end of the parade of
warriors are about to sacrifice a ram (Fig. 5) (CARDOZO 1946; SILVA 1986: 208, est. XCVII). The date of
this piece is difficult to determine, but the type of spit found with it (ARMBRUSTER 2000: 181, 205, Taf.
64.8; VILAÇA 1995: 346–47) suggests an early date, certainly before the 5th century BC. Ends of objects
in bull’s head shape appear in other pieces of obvious ritual significance, such as two knife-handles from
the Palencia area, in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional (Plate VI) (BLANCO 1957: 508–10, lám. V). The
bronze simpula from the northern Meseta have a handle ending in a bull’s head or horns (Fig. 6) (Martín
Valls 1990); the only well-contextualised example with a bull’s head end is dated to the beginning of the
1st century AD (AMO 1992).

We should also mention the well-known text by Strabo (III, 3, 7), where he relates that these people
had hecatombs in the Greek manner, sacrificing to the gods male goats, prisoners of war and horses.
There are also two Lusitanian-language inscriptions in the Latin alphabet, giving written confirmation
of multiple animal sacrifices offered to a variety of pre-Roman deities, demonstrating the survival into
Roman times of traditional indigenous rituals. The inscription at Cabeço das Fráguas (Pousalofes do
Bispo, Sabugal, Guarda) may be translated: “A sheep for Trebopala and, a pig for Labbo, a calf (?)
for Iccona Loimmna, a sheep for Trebarune and a breeding bull for Reve Tre...?” (Fig. 7); a possible
translation of the inscription at Lamas de Moledo (Castro d’Aire, Viseu) is: “Rufino and Tiro bore witness. The Veamminicoros give the angom Lamaticom to Crougea, the Maga to Reicus Petronius and
the radom porcom to Iovea Caelilobrigoi” (RODRÍGUEZ COLMENERO 1993: 99–105).

The interpretation, translation and date of these inscriptions have been widely discussed (TOVAR
225–42; MARCO 2005: 296, 318), but there is a consensus that they refer to sacrifice. Another Roman
inscription in Portugal, from Marcos (Penafiel, Porto) and dating from 147 AD, also testifies to such
The numerous rock sanctuaries and sacrificial altars in this region should also be considered. The most important example, however, is in Celtic Beturia, in the hillfort of Capote (Higuera la Real, Badajoz) (BERROCAL-RANGEL 1994). Excavations at this site show that there was an altar-table with a long bench, opening onto the main street of the settlement; around this structure there have been found knives, a roasting-spit, a grill and other implements connected with sacrifice and the subsequent cooking.

Fig. 5. Votive cart from Monte da Costa Figueira (Vilela, Paredes, Portugal). Museo de Guimarães. After SILVA (1986).
of the victims. The bones found indicate that 23 or 24 animals were sacrificed on this altar, in groups similar to those shown in the bronzes; afterwards, the animals were eaten in the main street in a large

Fig. 6. Simpula from the northern Meseta. (A) Paredes de Nava type; (B) Palenzuela type. Different scales. After SCHÖLE (1969) and MARTÍN VALLS (1990) (reproduced from LORRIO – OLIVARES 2004).

Figure 7. Lusitanian rock inscription at Cabeço das Fráguezas (Pousalofes do Bispo, Sabugal, Guarda, Portugal) (after BLAZQUEZ 1996).
5. Conclusion

Study of this group of bronzes with sacrificial motifs shows that there was a clear relationship between some elements of the material culture—torcs, cauldrons and axes—and the symbolic environment and ritual practices of these societies. Furthermore, the data indicates that there were concepts and practices shared by the peoples of the north-west of the Peninsula, the northern Meseta and even Celtic Beturia; at the same time, they underline the close link between sacrifice of groups of animals and communal feasting. Support for these similarities comes from the identical moulds for *situlae* found in hillforts such as Castrelin de San Juan de Paluezas (Borrenes, León) and Forca (A Guarda, Pontevedra), geographically distant and showing obvious differences in other areas of their material culture (FERNÁNDEZ-POSSE et al. 1993: 210–14). The fact, confirmed by analysis, that the Paluezas moulds were made locally, proves that there was proximity on the ritual and symbolic level which was not carried over to other aspects of daily life (FERNÁNDEZ-POSSE et al. 1993: 212–13).

In recent years, archaeological studies have shown increasing interest in animal sacrifice and rituals of feasting in the Iron Age societies of Western Europe (DIETLER 1990; MURRAY 1995; ARNOLD 1999; POUX 2000). The bronzes considered here provide a suitable basis to extend this type of research to the north-west of the Iberian Peninsula.

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