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The End of Iron Age Societies in Northwestern Iberia: Egalitarianism, Heterarchy and Hierarchy in Contexts of Interaction¹

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Abstract:

In light of new thinking about Iron Age societies, the authors propose an analysis of the political and territorial characteristics of Northwestern Iberian societies at the end of the Iron Age and the beginning of Roman dominion (2nd and 1st centuries BC). This essay documents the emergence in that period of large settlements that replaced the traditional dispersed, small-scale Iron Age *castros* (small fortified agrarian settlements). Territorial analyses reveal that these new settlements entailed a change of scale, but reveal no evidence for centralized structures, and offer no strong qualitative differences from the previous *castros*. By analyzing the characteristics of these late Iron Age settlements, this essay focuses on the variety of interactions fostered by Roman military presence in the region, and the relevance of heterarchical approaches for understanding evolving power flows and material culture.

Key words: *castros*, third space, Northwest Iberia, Late Iron Age, Gallaecian Warriors, Roman dominion.

Carole Crumley is one of the most influential researchers in the renewal of European Iron Age studies. Crumley's work synthesizes the historical study of societies' spatial dimensions (landscapes), the multidisciplinary of historical ecology, an emphasis on the diversity of past societies, and a commitment to social welfare. Her approach aims "to bridge the gulf dividing Snow's two cultures" (i.e. the physical and biological sciences *versus* social sciences and humanities) (Crumley, 2006:2-3; Snow, 1959). Drawing on the concept of "heterarchy" from neuroscience and artificial intelligence, Crumley (2006; 1979:145) stresses the multiple horizontal and bottom-up relationships that often work within, or instead of, expected hierarchies.

Such approaches to the history of European landscapes emphasize diversity within the Atlantic and Mediterranean social systems and ecosystems (Crumley, 1995a). Likewise, the concept of heterarchy also fosters a spatial approach. Landscape studies transcend older foci on a single settlement unit inside a static spatial framework. An analysis of settlements as isolated dots on a map is now replaced by an interest in interrelationships between settlements. Hierarchical views of territory focus spatial studies on settlements, so that territorial analysis is limited to "hinterlands." Conversely, the recognition of heterarchy implies an understanding of the different elements which define the landscape, taking into account the diversity of their interrelationships. Crumley's concept of heterarchy is based on

multifaceted understandings of societies and aids the examination of power in decentralized social formations.

The authors are a part of the research group *Social Structure and Territory, Landscape Archaeology* which shares these approaches, particularly a multi-disciplinary approach to landscape. Landscape is the result of a dynamic synthesis between social relations and the environment, which both change through time. This means that spatial relations are the basis of any understanding of how ancient societies worked and modified themselves over time. Our main objective is the study of historical processes affecting both Iron Age and Roman communities of the northwestern Iberian Peninsula, in particular during the transition from the pre-Roman to Roman periods, as well as during the Early Empire. The group concerns itself with both the integral study of the archaeological record (from geoarchaeology to material culture) and the available contemporary written record.

In this paper, we will deal with the archaeological record relating to the initial phase of Roman domination (2nd-1st centuries BC) and consider how these societies constructed space throughout time. We will try to show why the heterarchical approach is highly inspiring for understanding this Late Iron Age record, which is marked by intercultural interactions with Romans under the imperial expansion. We use heterarchy as a lens through which to look differently at the archaeological record.

Centralization, Agglomeration, Coalescence, Complexity and Social Change

Crumley's work came at a moment of great dynamism in the study of the European Iron Age when social formations were first being analyzed using decentralization (even de-urbanization) models. The volume *Celtic Chieftoms, Celtic States* (Arnold and Gibson eds., 1995) is indicative of these changes. A critical revision of Celticism was accompanied by approaches that aimed at a larger challenge: to provide support for the presence of decentralized non-state forms of hierarchy, such as chieftoms, and for resistance as an active social factor.

Crumley proposed the notions of democracy and heterarchy as characteristic of "Celtic" power relations (developed further by Thurston, 2010). Such socio-political arrangements correspond to rural, dispersed settlement, which is counterposed to Roman landscapes based on cities. Consequently, the urban character of the large indigenous settlements (*oppida*) of the European Iron Age is denied by Crumley. These sites are defined merely as fortresses, and they are not considered as population centers (Crumley, 1995a). Heterarchical Atlantic Iron Age societies are then characterized by their existence in a highly changing environment, the flexible negotiation of power relations, and democracy. Crumley stated that "Hierarchical socio-political organization does not necessarily imply a settlement hierarchy and "complexity" is not necessarily synonymous with "hierarchy" (1995a: 29-30). Such a perspective highlights the differences between the Late Iron Age and the Roman eras: in the latter, the classic city appears as a symbol of centralization and autocracy (interestingly, the *populus* as a citizenship body with voting rights does not qualify it as a "democracy").

The concept of heterarchy emerged simultaneously with other studies that underline the relevance of resistance in analyzing power relations (Paynter and McGuire, 1991). Power can no longer be defined as something exerted over society; rather, it is a capacity which is distributed or polarized among groups within a society: "power permeates social life" (Paynter and McGuire, 1991:6). This "de-institutionalization of power" or "heterogeneity of

power” (Bowles and Gintis, 1986:23) with its corresponding “heterogeneity of resistance,” (Paynter and McGuire, 1991:12) permeates all social relationships. The relevance of heterarchy, the “relation of elements to one another when they are unranked or when they possess the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways” (Crumley, 1995b: 3), is thus clear. Traditional views require social complexity to be forged through the union of technological progress and demographic growth inside high density population centers (cities). Heterarchies, contrastingly, indicate complexity in a society’s very flexibility in managing power relations and in adaptability to changing environments.

This is now a widely accepted concept, thanks to the consolidation of two academic approaches: collective action and political economy. The latter “emphasizes the struggles among members of society over the exercise of social power” (Paynter and McGuire, 1991:1). Collective action approaches emphasize “self-organization” and attempts to “disentangle the motivations and institutions that foster group cooperation among competitive individuals” (Carballo, 2013:3). Both perspectives have promoted bottom-up approaches which have challenged long-standing linear interpretations and have opened the door to a broad array of possibilities which include either collective and corporate systems, or hierarchical and autocratic power relations or even both forms of social relations in different social spheres (Gyucha, *in press*; Jennings and Earle, 2016). In this way, historical interpretations which had traditionally been considered development failures may now be seen as alternative or divergent historical processes. Decentralized chiefdoms, peasants with mindsets resistant to economic exploitation, anarchic power relations and the fissioning and atomization of social processes have become subjects for anthropological and archaeological studies.

The relation between population aggregation, urbanization and the emergence of the state has also come under new scrutiny. The case study presented here examines such matters in direct relation to the emergence of large settlements. Their very existence has normally been considered proof of hierarchization and state formation. The processes of urban aggregation are, however, no longer directly correlated with ranked or hierarchical societies, but can be the consequences of complex or variegated social organizations. Contrary to a long established vision, many authors now argue that “the earliest cities may have grown largely unstructured by state institutions [...] organized for generations through dynamic, heterarchical relationships that linked together neighborhoods in collective actions, such as for mutual defense, construction of irrigation facilities, or major religious events” (Jennings and Earle, 2016:478).

These authors also suggest that

“having many people in one place tends to make hierarchical control more difficult to assert and maintain, and leaders must depend on positive attractions, such as ceremonial elaboration, rather than on cruder means of control through the political economy [...]. Cities are thus not the harbinger of the state that theories of cultural evolution have long assumed. These sites may instead represent one of the hardest settlement types in which to control people, because of their fluid and faceless (to administrators) character [...]. Early state formation was often more difficult in urban settings...” (Jennings and Earle, 2016:485).

The indices used to measure the interaction between social tension and population growth – such as Rappaport’s Irritation Coefficient or Johnson’s Scalar Stress (Bandy, 2004) – show that the likelihood of conflict is heightened during processes of population aggregation. Johnson (1982) analyzed the correlation between group size, information flow and decision making: it is noted that the communications load “geometrically increases as the number of individuals increases, becoming unmanageable beyond a certain threshold” (Alberti, 2014:1). Following Rappaport, “if population increase were taken to be linear [...], the increase in some kinds of dispute might be taken to be roughly geometric” (Rappaport, 1968:116). What must be emphasized now is that this conflict may have acted against social hierarchization (Bandy, 2004). The viability and continuity of these cities and other aggregated settlement patterns, which imply an end to the previously ongoing fission that was characteristic of communities, require mechanisms for conflict control. The existence of hierarchy has normally been considered as the only mechanism that can achieve this. However, recent research has identified alternatives for constructing communal relationships. Some authors distinguish for example between centralization and integration. Following Johnson, Stephen Kowaleski and collaborators (1983:37) state that “centralization might increase or decrease with scale, depending on *which* connections between *which* components were modified. Hence the relationship between integration and centralization is not likely to be simple in real systems.” For Gary Feinman, the development of communal relationships is not a matter of size, but of “interconnectivity” (2011). Examples of the possibilities might include Çatalhöyük, a settlement with 3500 to 8000 people, characterized by its “fierce egalitarianism” (Hodder, 2014:5), or “nucleated clusters” as at Jenné-jeno (Mali), which extends to 12 to 33 hectares (McIntosh, 1999:75). Both present a “variation on nucleation” which indicates that sources of power “rather than being centralized and consolidated, are counterpoised among different segments of society” (McIntosh, 1999:75). Involutionary historical processes -those processes that seem to reverse the evolutionary line towards greater complexity- have also been analyzed. Fargher and others, following Kowalewski, consider that “in situations of severe pressure and threat, disparate groups may join together for mutual benefit and in the process develop new social formations. Often, Kowalewski points out, this involved a change in which centralized authority gave way to more inclusive councils while, at the same time, myth-making justified hierarchical control (Fargher et al., 2010). This has been called an “egalitarianism turn” by the same authors.

New Forms of Communalism: Large *castros* during the Republican Late Iron Age

Scalar stress produces social change through conflict. The appearance of institutions and practices designed to manage internal conflict can be considered social innovations. The institutions that appear to handle such change successfully, however, do not necessarily empower rulers. By communalism we refer to the social tools used to manage the conflict for the benefit of the group's viability as a corporate unit and against centrifugal tendencies that favor the emergence of unequal access to power. Examples of communal features for resolving scalar stress are the monumentality of Pueblo villages (Adler and Wilshusen, 1990) or the public ceremonialism of settlements of the southern Titicaca lake (Bandy, 2004:330).

Social innovations related to population concentration levels, as a way of overcoming scalar stress, is one way to understand changes in aggregated settlement patterns. Innovations are something contrary to tradition, albeit taking root in the previous reality. Innovations can also appear dialectically, based on decisions taken precisely in order to avoid change within new contexts. Jason Ur has reflected on this form of social change based on work regarding

“eventful archaeology” carried out by Sewel: in this perspective “events are creative reproductions of existing structures by purposeful actors that have great social ramifications” (Ur, 2014:16; Beck et al., 2007; Sewel 2005).

In Northwestern Iberia we identify one of such events in order to explain social change: Roman dominion. We consider that large *castros* are the evidence of social changes caused by an attempt to maintain communal relationships in the context of the Roman conquest during 2nd and 1st centuries BC. Iron Age *castros* (8th-3rd c. BC) are community-based small-scale societies (Fernández-Posse and Sánchez-Palencia, 1998; Sastre, 2008; Currás, 2014), but Roman military pressures provoked changes in *castros* (Currás, Sastre and Orejas, 2013). The most visible novelty is settlement aggregation into large *castros* [Fig. 1]. Our hypothesis is that these new communities tried to manage changes by deploying traditional communal cultural tools (all those which militate against hierarchy in small castros like segmentation of the inner space by households, control of surplus production... Sastre 2008; Currás 2014), but inside aggregated settlement patterns this inadvertently provoked the appearance of a new social arena with unpredictable innovative possibilities. The chronology of this process is controversial, but the latest excavations in San Cibrán de Las have allowed researchers to determine with great precision the moment when large *castros* appear (Álvarez González et al., 2017). Carbon-14 locates an *ex novo* foundation possibly at the end of 2nd c. BC and clearly by the middle of 1st c. BC.

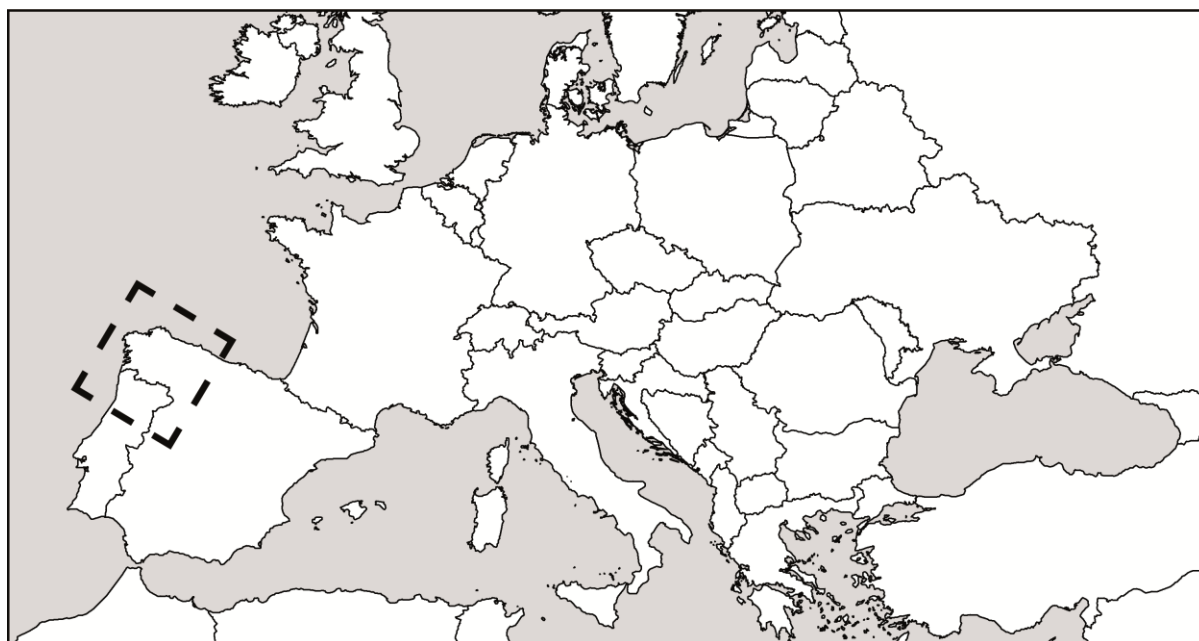


Fig. 1 The Northwest Iberian Peninsula.

The logic of the spatial model of earlier small *castros* in the Iron Age landscapes of Northwestern Iberia entails an equilibrium which makes control over production and over settlement growth possible (Fernández-Posse and Sánchez-Palencia, 1998; Sastre, 2008; Currás, 2014). [Fig. 2] Social stability was marked by the homogeneity of small settlements and households. Both were characterized by their lack of differentiation, by political independence, and by economic self-sufficiency. We define this social model as “segmentary.” However, a change begins in the 2nd century BC. In the southern and coastal

regions of Northwestern Iberia, large settlements emerge. These are quite distinct from the previous Iron Age settlement form and pattern. This social aggregation fosters a new context of innovation and change. Large *castros* provide evidence that Iron Age communities stopped being what they were and became something else. They are not characteristic of the Iron Age in general, but rather demonstrate the opposite: they are exceptional, they are different. [Fig. 3]

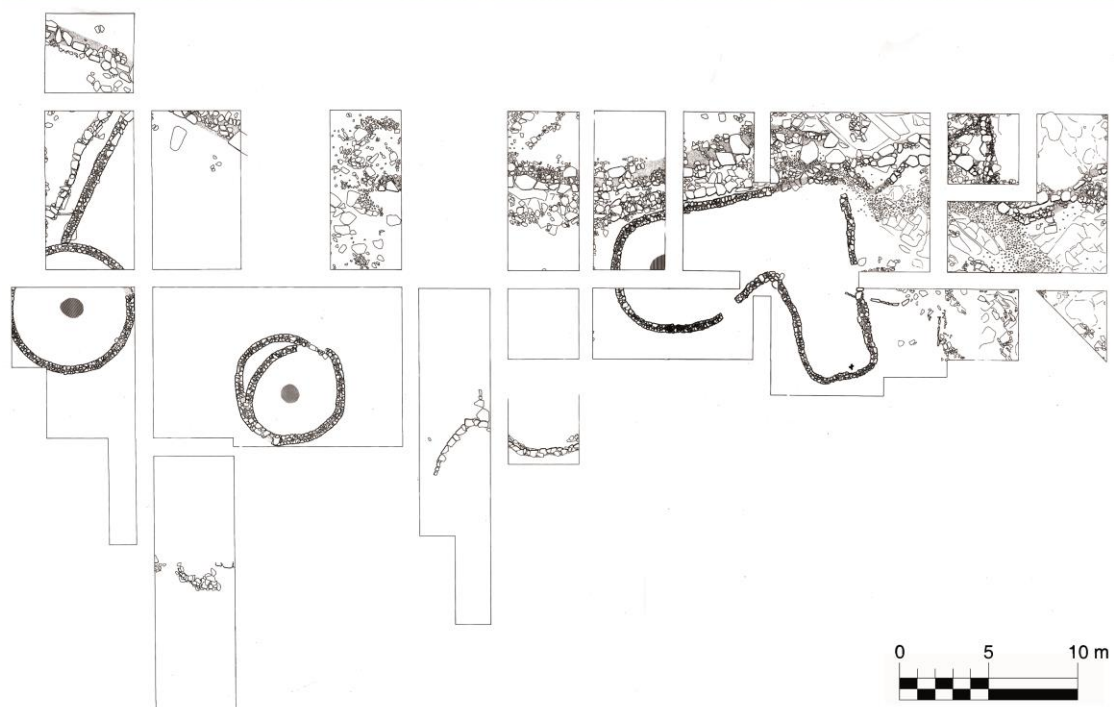
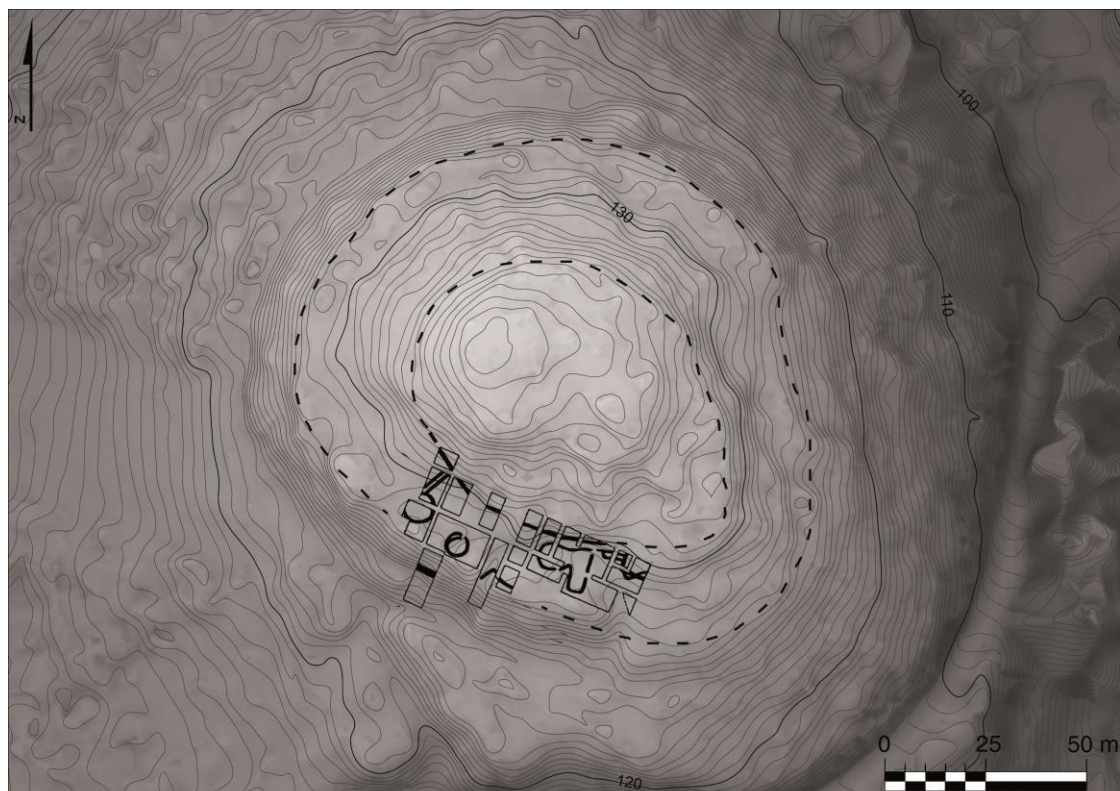


Fig. 2 Torroso *castro*, VIII-V c. BC (modified after Peña Santos, 1992)



Fig. 3 San Cibrán de Las large *castro*, I c. BC – I c. AD (after Terra Arqueos S.L. planimetry).

Why was a social structure, such as that characteristic of the earlier segmentary Iron Age *castros*, that had always tended towards disaggregation, and had succeeded in maintaining the balance between households and communities, suddenly re-oriented towards coalescence and the concentration of population? A fundamental explanatory factor for this is the presence of a dominant imperialist State (i.e. Rome). That stated, it is not our intention to resuscitate long-forgotten diffusionist theories of civilization. On the contrary, it is the failure of the careful checks and balances reflected in the archaeological record for the earlier Iron Age societies which requires an explanation. In this regard “the complementary nature of push and pull explanations” (Adler et al., 1996:406) is certainly a good starting point.

Comparative studies (Birch, 2013; Smith, 2014) have organized the drivers for aggregation into three factors: defense, political administration (with coercion to facilitate taxation and population control) and economies of scale (which could be related to communalism and collaborative labor, or to central-place functions). In our case, defense seems clearly implicated (see below) but the other two drivers fit better with the Augustan era from the end of 1st century BC onwards. Regarding defense, many researchers have emphasized warfare as an essential element in Iron Age social formations, but they generally do so in order to explain atomized settlement patterns (Parceró and Criado, 2013). The most obvious threat at the time large *castros* emerged was Roman expansion (which had succeeded Carthaginian imperialism). This has been used to explain coalescence at some places such as Las Labradas de Arrabalde (Zamora), a 25 hectare fortified settlement dating to the 1st century BC (Esparza, 1987:242; Romero, 2015:115-117, 138).

With regard to issues of domination and coercion, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the archaeological records relating to the phases just before and just after the Augustan conquest of the late first century BC. However, there is an essential distinction to be made because the forms of Roman imperialism during the Late Republic differed from the dominion imposed by Augustus based on an hegemonic imperialistic ideology. Processes of synoecism to encourage larger settlements directly induced by the Roman administration are documented after the reign of Augustus, and thus in the first century AD (both by ancient texts and archaeological research). These are clearly related to the new forms of imperial dominion introduced by Augustus in order to establish a general imperial taxation system that would characterize the Empire. But we contend that the area occupied by the large *castros* was surely under Roman control before the Cantabrian Wars (29-19 BC) (probably by the end of the 2nd c. BC and clearly in the middle of the 1st c. BC). This control does not imply systematic military occupation impacting both populations and territory. Instead there seem to have been bilateral forms of domination that were characteristic during Republican expansion. While these did not entail particular expectations of cultural assimilation on the part of Roman generals, they were clearly enough to promote social change (Ñaco, 2003; Currás, Sastre and Orejas 2013). It was inside this militaristic environment that the earlier growth of the large *castros* took place. Change is clear in the more southerly and coastal areas, specially between the Miño and Duero rivers, as well as in the León flatlands of the interior. This development must be interpreted as a local response to the increasingly powerful presence of the Roman army in this territory after the first military campaigns by the end of the 2nd c. BC, but the precise mechanisms by which, and the precise moment at which, these processes took place, are unknown. Moreover, the indisputable evidence for social hierarchization in these areas that occurred under Augustus was not necessarily present at all in earlier times.

A heterarchical model can assist in understanding this period of change, because the notion of “heterarchy” highlights the fact that both communal and hierarchical features can co-exist within the same society. While Crumley’s model for the Iron Age emphasizes the “democratic” features that restricted the power of Celtic hierarchies, we highlight the communal forms of organization that attempted to prevent the emergence of such hierarchies, and which finally failed because of increasing Roman imperial pressure. These communal forms of organization included control of settlement growth and control of surplus production inside a segmentary spatial organization. These Iron Age social foundations were turned on its head when settlements began to grow, but it seems clear that generalized access to the means of production, and a segmentary spatial logic still persists. Our interpretation considers the archaeological record recovered from the larger *castros* as a convoluted result of the co-existence of hierarchical and heterarchical power flows taking place in contexts which were formerly egalitarian. There appear to have been “nascent leaders” who attempted “to build power across settlements organized around cooperative units that stubbornly insisted on autonomy and relative egalitarianism” (Jennings and Earle, 2016:477). For many authors, large settlements were clearly central places which organized and dominated smaller *castros* (González-Ruibal, 2006:152), but we maintain that this hierarchy emerged after the Augustan conquest. During the preceding Late Republican period, communal forces remained active and can even be seen as predominant. In the following paragraphs we illustrate this point.

Settlement size is a conspicuous difference between the large and the small *castros*, but functionally, the different sized settlements had similarities. Although large *castros* lack comprehensive in-depth analysis beyond traditional archaeological excavations, there is no evidence of large settlements holding political sway over territories beyond their immediate catchments. That is to say there are no indications of domination and subordination amongst settlements in the pre-Augustan period. Smaller and larger *castros* were located close together. In other cases, large *castros* were positioned very close to each other. Defining the territorial unit belonging to a single large *castro* can therefore be difficult. Social hierarchy is particularly hard to detect from the organization of space within the settlement walls of large *castros*. No specialized sectors or buildings stand out. Evidence for trade and exchange is no more strongly present in the large settlements than in smaller ones. All artisanal and productive activities occur in *castros* of all sizes. The material record from these sites is also hardly different, regardless of the size of their enclosing perimeter. In addition, elements potentially associated with social hierarchy at this period -such as Mediterranean imports, saunas, warrior statues, and figurative art- appear both in large *castros* and traditional smaller ones.

Large *castros* represent an aggregation of households and have a distinct absence of any larger or ceremonial buildings. Households are similar to those represented in the pre-Roman model found in the smaller *castros*, but are arranged differently in spatial terms: the compounds and “neighbourhoods” (González-Ruibal, 2006; Silva 1983-84:128). Their most relevant feature is that every household had its own subsistence stores. This implies that decentralized control of resources was an ongoing reality in these settlements. In the absence of communal resources, an egalitarian ethos could have survived from earlier times: small-scale cooperative units with face-to-face interactions could compete with centralizing tendencies, but, at the same time, facilitate support for overarching political power structures (Jennings and Earle 2016:477; Smith and Novic, 2012). The absence of communal resources is thus highly relevant, paradoxically, in explaining the viability of communal relationships. As Colin Grier and Jangsuk Kim have noted “communal resources to which no one has

individual control leave the effective control of these resources in the hands of managers” (2012: 20). So, the centrifugal trends of households are counterbalanced by communal spheres of interaction. We therefore deem inaccurate the “house society” model in which each family’s space within a village became more relevant and self-contained by the Late Iron Age in comparison with the more open layout observed in previous *castros* (González-Ruibal 2006: 154). Even if familial spaces became more self-contained in larger castros, the social relevance of communal features continued so that domestic arrangements cannot be seen to typify these settlements (Gillespie, 2007:26). A model focused solely on the domestic institutions in the change from small to large *castros* also ignores the significant factor of Roman pressure on local populations.

Hierarchical Trends inside a “Third Space”

In large *castros*, as outlined above, there is a communal dimension that overcomes the supposed independence of “households.” In fact, *castros* are aggregations of households, each controlling its own subsistence production. But the new reality imposed by a large community in which daily face-to-face interaction is no longer possible, activated scalar stress. It is in these new social circumstances that the first evidences for social inequalities are documented. These new inequalities related to the emergence artwork (“warrior sculptures” and a proliferation of goldwork) that corresponded to new social divisions of labor that overcame previous self-sufficiency (Armada and García-Vuelta, 2015). Such new materiality comes with a new social reality imposed by the Roman presence. The beginning of Roman domination does not mean the simple assimilation of Roman cultural patterns by local communities; so-called “Romanization” presupposes a linear transfer of the values, ideas and objects of Rome, and their uncritical and passive assimilation by the conquered groups. However, postcolonial studies and their significance for understanding the expansion of Rome have shown that Romanization was a much more complex process. The dominated had agency in the creation of a new reality (Woolf, 1998; Mattingly, 2011). The resulting society was neither Roman nor indigenous; it was a hybrid product (Jiménez Díez, 2008) that emerges in a “third space” (Bhabha, 1994). Following Bhabha, we understand this third space as an area situated out of binary logic. An area resulting from the interaction of two cultures, that produces a space of social negotiation from which arises a new social reality in which searching for the previous identities -in an essentialist approach- does not make sense. Here, in this space of ambivalence, taking the words of Bhabha, “the process of cultural hybridization gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Rutherford 1990: 211). “The importance of hybridity is no to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom” (Rutherford 1990: 211).

Warrior statues are especially eloquent in this sense. [Fig. 4] Both the chronology and the interpretation of these sculptures have been controversial. It is unclear when they first appear, but there is a minimal level of consensus in which they are placed between the end of the 2nd and 1st centuries BC, and endure into the 1st century AD. Interpretations of warrior statues vary with some scholars envisaging them as a form of Roman provincial art (Calo, 1994) and others viewing them as a symbolic manifestation of Iron Age communities (Rodríguez Corral, 2012). Dichotomizing the figures as either Roman or indigenous fails to address the

complexity of cultural change in the centuries of their production. The statues show symbols that are relatable both to local groups and to Roman power, but which is relevant is their new social meaning. For example, the *caetra*, the round shield, is described by Diodorus (V, 34, 4-7) and Strabo (III, 3, 6), and is depicted in use by Roman troops in the coinage of the Cantabrian Wars. Some statues, like the one from Sanfins, Portugal, wear a helmet, seemingly of Montefortino and thus Roman type. These helmets are an integral part of the Roman provincial world, and they can also be found within *castros*, albeit with certain, probably local, stylistic particularities (García-Mauriño, 1993:136). Another recurring feature on these sculptures is the so-called biglobular dagger (Quesada 2003), a weapon of Celtiberian origin that arrived in the Northwest with Roman soldiers. Clothes depicted on these statues display the same symbolic elements that we find in domestic architecture and on locally-made jewelry after the 2nd century BC.

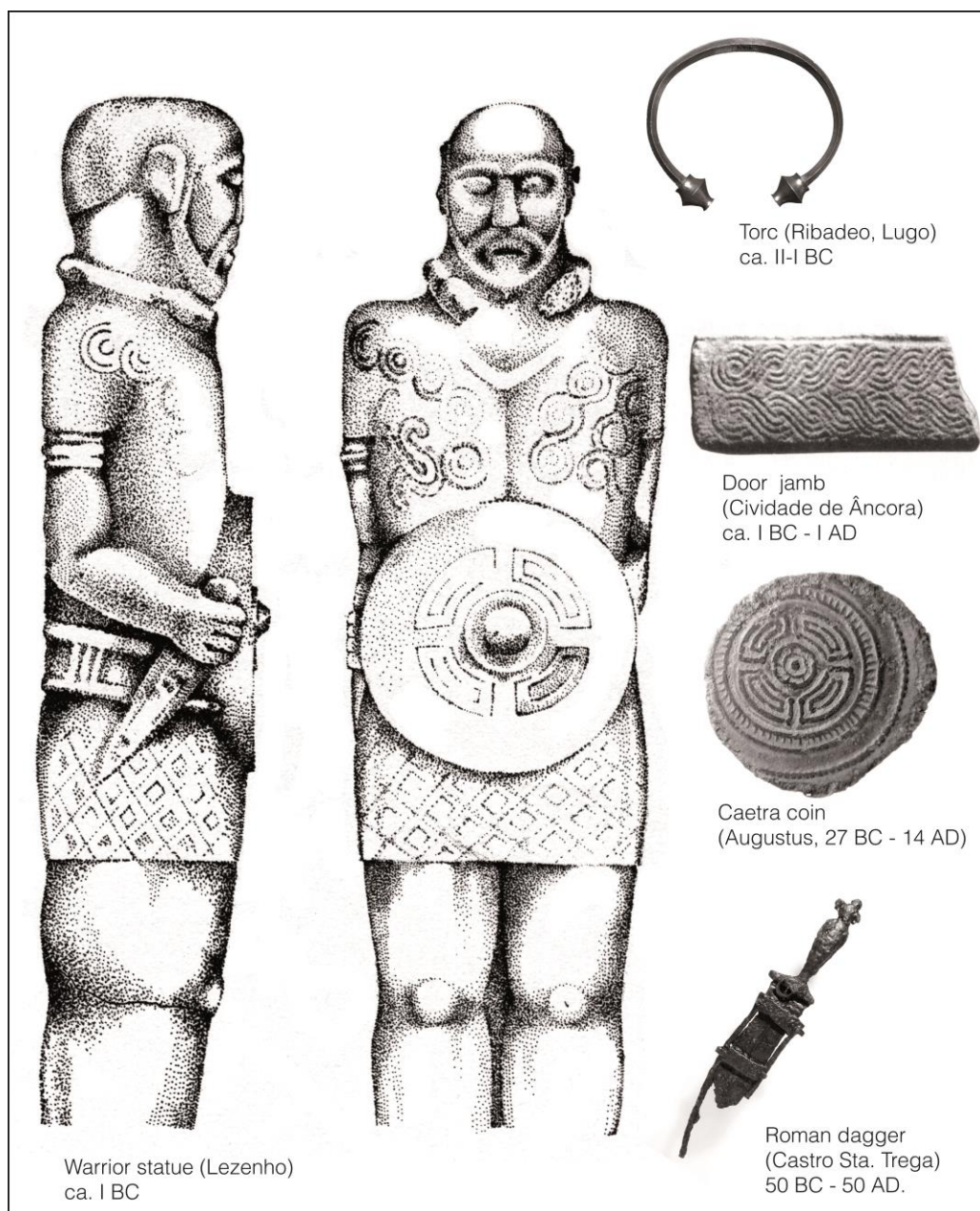


Fig. 4 Warrior statue from Lezenho *castro* (modified after Silva 1986, Peña Santos, 1987, Calo 1994; torc photography by O. García Vuelta)

Many warrior sculptures are depicted wearing a torc around their necks. The overwhelming majority of gold torcs found in the Northwest date to the 2nd-1st centuries BC. They are clearly locally-produced and display indigenous stylistic and technical characteristics (García-Vuelta, 2007). Notwithstanding Northwestern Iberian production, the torc is also a Roman symbol; a military award loaded connoting not only martial success, but also the exercise of power (Marco 2002). Additionally, the torc appears within the complex figurative narrative of sacrificial bronzes (Armada and García-Vuelta 2003). Torcs form part of a complex iconographic language (which probably includes zoomorphic art, cauldrons and axes) that emerges in this moment of change and is fostered under Roman influence.

Taken as a whole, these sculptures are an artistic synthesis of the new social order and the new elite which emerged from the 2nd century BC onwards as a result of contact with Rome (Currás, Sastre, and Orejas, 2016). The representations of the warrior are an unambiguous indigenous type of local production, but one which was capable of adopting symbols that were intelligible in the semiotics of power both for the conquerors and those they dominated. The statues can be considered to mediate between the Empire and the local leaders, and between the local elite and the rest of the subjugated population.

New local leaders thus represented themselves, both to their communities and to Rome in military roles. Some authors stress the paradox of Rome allowing the erection of statues of heroic indigenous warriors (Calo, 2003: 39). However, the language of the statues does not necessarily reflect a warmongering local society nor local tradition. Their emergence fits within a strategy of the creation of new referents of power. This strategy was activated during the first contacts with the Roman world, then intensified during the conquest phase, and was finally conditioned by new provincial realities. Considering the wars which marked the arrival of the Romans, the militaristic representation of local elites is self-explanatory. The Empire was present in the Northwest because of its victorious army, from which all power emanated. That army, in turn, was also the main means of access to the sources of power which now ruled the land. It is not unreasonable to imagine that the warrior sculptures resembled the *auxilia* (foreign troops) that served in the Roman army, possibly even before the time of Augustus. For example, in 49 BC during the preparations for the clash with the armies of Caesar, Pompeian forces carried out several maneuvers in the Northwest. At that time, Petreius was in charge of recruiting infantry and cavalry in Lusitania, whereas Afranius did the same in the territories of the “Celtiberians and Cantabrians and all the barbarians that inhabit in the coasts of the Ocean” (Caes. *B.Civ.* I 38, 3).

By the first decades of the 1st century AD, under the rules of the Principate, a completely new society had become established, based on a new aristocracy and a centralized territorial system grounded in the Roman *civitas*. This implied the disappearance of the society based around large *castros*, which are abandoned by the end of 1st century AD. A new sociopolitical structure was imposed by the Roman state after the 1st century BC Cantabrian Wars. The new urban foundations –*Asturica* (Astorga), *Bracara* (Braga) and *Lucus* (Lugo)-, united by a road network, became the axis for territorial control and the imposition of a tributary system. Inside this framework, new hierarchical settlement patterns developed. If communalism did not disappear completely, it adapted to the new imperial exigencies of a provincial, stratified society.

Final remarks

We have proposed an interpretation of Northwestern Iberian large settlements as a typical product of a “third sphere” (Bhabha 1994) marked by indigenous responses (and resistance) to Roman pressure. Following the Peter Burke statement, we assume that “hybridity is often, if not always, a process rather than a state” (Burke 2009: 46). In our case, hybridity implied a radical social change, that is, the seeds of social exploitation. We defend that Roman imperialism was the main factor for understanding change during the Late Iron Age, and we emphasize the diversity of Roman interventions implemented over time. The examination of imperial dominion as a dynamic product of history allows us to change perspectives on these societies. The traditional opposition between indigenous and Roman must therefore be set aside; we face the challenge instead of tracing the types of changes produced through unequal interactions during Roman expansion. We find a dialectical relationship between a communal sphere of egalitarian interrelations which smother hierarchical trends (as in small castros), and the imperialist pressures inside a “third space” (large castros) that foster the emergence of those hierarchies.

The *castro* societies maintained an unranked political order and a non-hierarchical social system during most of the first millennium BC. Half-way between imperial hierarchies and the egalitarian societies of the Iron Age small *castros*, we find a different society in the making. It was a society not readily accommodated within traditional models of political theory, but which fits well inside a heterarchical approach: evidence points to both communal organization and emerging hierarchical relationships. Crumley’s heterarchical analysis and her reflections on dynamic human-environment relationships allow us to identify complexities in the interactions between local communities and Late Republican Romans.

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