Cult Spaces and Religious Practices in Pre-Roman Celtiberia

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1. Indigenous religion and Romanization

During the last decades, a number of works have appeared which attempt at deepening our knowledge of the Celtiberian religion¹. The material used for its analysis, however, have come from contexts in some respects different from those of the Hispanic indigenous world, because they are conditioned by the new social, economic and ideological schemes introduced by Rome during and after the conquest².

In general, this is a common phenomenon in most parts of the European continent, where the Empire's influence gave rise to substantial changes in the indigenous ideological sphere. Some of these changes are undetectable from an archaeological point of view, because they belonged to an intimate and personal dimension, but others are manifest and allow us to recognize new ritual formulas and religious contents. Thus, owing to their contacts with Rome and thanks to the generalization of writing, these indigenous societies begin recording the names of their deities by means of epigraphy; the same is to be observed with respect to the physical attributes of the gods, since, also in that period, an iconic dimension appears that never before existed; and, finally, again in the same period, spaces for the cult of these deities are clearly displayed for the first time, attested by the appearance of buildings specifically intended for cultic pur-

In the face of this situation, it is worthwhile to put a critical question: to what extent may the indicators available be considered real expressions of the indigenous world? In the previous Workshop at Osnabrück³ I proposed that at least part of the Celtic theonyms registered in Wales might be regarded as the consequence of Roman action, whether as the product

of a demagogic policy or as the result of the dispersion of individuals of different origin integrated into the Imperial army. Nevertheless, as I already acknowledged on that occasion, I do not believe all the linguistic elements of Celtic ascendance to be the exclusive product of Romanization, but it is reasonable to recognize the existence of a genuine Celtic religion. In this sense, and independently from the role Rome played as an ideological propagator, we cannot ignore the regional particularities existing on the European continent; an heterogeneity which is talking in favour of the existence of cults and beliefs prior to the Roman intervention, even though I have little confidence in wide-spread phenomena - I am talking about aspects such as the supposed panceltism of deities like Lug, Cernunnos and Epona, or druidism-, which might as well be the product either of the imperialistic Roman policy or of misinterpretations by later historians.

What is not easily acceptable is the continuity stricto sensu of the original protohistoric religious forms during the Roman times. When considering the studies available on this subject, I get the impression that it is generally assumed that the Celtic religious practices and concepts known in the Imperial period were essentially the same as those practiced by pre-Roman societies - whose apparently non-writing and aniconic condition should have impeded their graphic record and current perception. But if it is true that only the adoption of writing allowed to transmit the names of deities worshipped formerly, it is also true that after the Roman impact this religion acquires new forms: now the ritual is basically Roman, new religious behaviours emerging which never before existed; behaviours that arose from the logical processes of syncretism and assimilation taking place in this context4.

¹ Marco Simón 1983–84; idem 1987; Sopeña 1987; Beltrán 2002

² Beltrán 2002b, 39–41.

³ Indigenous World and Romanitas. Welsh Iron Age Societies in the Roman Period. In W. SPICKERMANN, R. WIEGELS (eds.), Keltische

Götter im Römischen Reich. Akten des 4. Internationalen F.E.R.C.AN Workshops 4.–6. 10., Osnabrück 200; Möhnesee 2005, 107–124.

⁴ Freeman 1997; Webster 1995; idem 1997.

2. The specific case of Celtiberia

Focussing on the specific case of Celtiberia, let me start by pointing out the clear differences which exist between the Celtiberian religion and other cultural circles of the Celtic -or perhaps it would be better to say Celto-Roman-Europe: we have no physic evidence of temples, i.e. built spaces specially conceived to perform religious practices, like those registered in other parts of Europe; neither do we know of any specifically liturgical equipment, and, of course, we lack any hint of the existence of an institutionalised priesthood.

Moreover, as will be discussed in this paper, the religion of the pre-Roman Celtiberians must have been, at least in its ceremonial, different from that of the Romanized Celtiberians, the latter being the receivers of new cult formulas which transformed the external physiognomy – and probably also the contents – of their ancestral religion. Once this fact is assumed, it is possible to think that our ignorance of the pre-Roman religious behaviours is not only the consequence of the lack of written records, but that it is essentially due to variations in the religious contents and their ceremonial environments. Would it have been so difficult, e.g., to draw in the 3rd century BC an anthropomorphic figure like the supposed representation of Lug⁵ which was carved at the end of the 1st century BC in the rocky walls of the shrine of *Peñalba de Villastar*?

To detect diachronic variations, therefore, is not difficult... the problems arise when we try to verify the nature of the specifically indigenous beliefs. Firstly, because the archaeological record is not explicit enough and does not provide religious indicators like those attested after the contact with Rome. And, secondly, because to the scarcity of data we would have to add our anxiety to put the Celtic world of Hispania on the same level as the continental one, which induces us to focus our efforts on looking for temples, druids and other figures that probably never existed in pre-Roman Hispania, instead of analysing the existing material indicators which, by the way, have little or nothing to do with the continental manifestations.

However, all these comments do not mean that the knowledge of the Celtiberian religion previous to the 2nd century BC is beyond our reach. What I want to state here is that, at least in some aspects, this religion manifestated itself in a different way from what we pretend to find ... in spaces which are not normally regarded as being the scenario of religious practices and under ceremonial formulas hitherto unexpected and, therefore, gone unnoticed.

Accordingly, I think that in the case of Celtiberia it is possible to follow two different lines of inquiry:

- ⁵ Alfayé 2003.
- ⁶ Arenas, Cortés 1994; Lorrio 1997, cap. IV.

2.1 Funerary practices and religion

As a starting point, it is necessary to reconsider the meaning of the Celtiberian funerary manifestations. My position in this respect can be summarized in the following statement: the Celtiberian cemeteries were not only intended for the burial of people, but also to carry out religious acts of wider significance than the strictly funerary.

In general the Celtiberian necropolis have several common traits⁶. In the first place, there is a clear dichotomy between the space intended for daily life and that consecrated to the dead: in the former, almost everything has an apparent utilitarian character whilst in the latter almost nothing; in the settlement we find a sort of architecture totally different -from a structural as well as from a functional point of view- from that of the cemetery; the material culture, and especially its associations, are also different in both environments. Even common elements, such as the use of fire or the presence of animal remains, manifest themselves in the archaeological record in different ways, evoking different functional and ideological contexts. In this framework, the setting of the cemeteries in flat and low terrains of high agricultural potential is not a casual fact. On the contrary, I think this trait must be regarded from a wide perspective that, beside the social, economic and functional nuances, takes into account the religious component inherent to any sacred place. At first glance, there seems to be no sense in wasting areas with a high economic potential and close to the settlements in order to set up a cemetery... hence, there must be other reasons to justify this specific and generalized location. One promising approach is to consider that these pieces of land had a symbolic value higher than their mere economic potential.

Another aspect to be borne in mind is the close relationship of these cemeteries with water resources like brooks, water springs and even salted water springs. In this context, the presence of water should be considered an element evoking the idea of a *limes*; a boundary between two different conceptual scopes: physical support of the *Living* and ideological support of the *Afterworld*. A piece of land has become a mediating conduit between two quite different spheres of human culture; in a place that, paraphrasing⁷ is and is not in this world at the same time.

Anyhow, it is evident that the special role adopted by these centres is also perceived in the rituals displayed on them. Rituals that, beside their funerary purpose, seem also to be conceived to establish an immediate link between the individuals and their deities.

An example of this can be seen in the cemetery of *La Cer*rada de los Santos at Aragoncillo, whose excavations I directed

⁷ Leach (1989, 71).

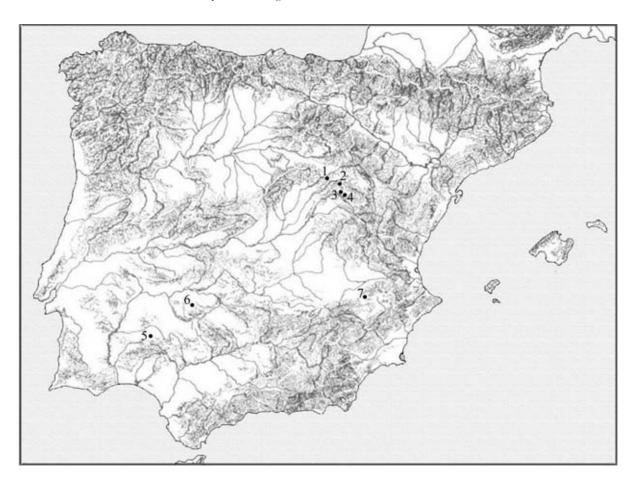


Fig. 1: Sites mentioned in the text: 1) Aguilar de Anguita; 2) El Palomar-Cerrada de los Santos; 3) El Ceremeño; 4) Cemetery of El Molino; 5) Capote; 6) Cancho Roano; 7) El Amarejo.

from 1990 to 1995. There, beside burials and other elements linked to funerary ceremonials, hints of further ritual activity were recognized, not linked to individual burials but, on the contrary, showing an evident collective character. They are areas where offerings and banquets were carried out, with varying morphology in the course of time.

In the earliest phase of the cemetery -6th-5th centuries BC- a stone platform (Fig. 2) was built and covered by large amounts of ash, a respectable set of ceramic and metallic objects and, especially, a large quantity of animal remains (Fig. 3). Among the animals identified, sheep and/or goat -8 individuals- are the most frequent species, followed by cattle -6 individuals-, horse -3 individuals- and deer -3 individuals-. A very interesting fact is that all these remains show a deliberated anatomic selection because, generally, only the mandibles and the end of the limbs are present. These remains can be interpreted as one or more collective banquets in which a high number of animals were sacrified

and partially consumed; animals that, we should not forget, were one of the most important bases of the communal economy.

Furthermore, in the latest phase of the cemetery -3rd-2nd centuries BC- a large dark stain, 63 m² wide and 0,40 m. thick, was detected. Included in an ash matrix, it provided a large set of ceramic vessels: cups, jars, several types of dish and, finally, lots of small pots (Fig. 4). But in this case, the absence of animal remains and metallic objects, together with the already mentioned specific pottery vessels, are indicating a kind of ritual in which liquids, combined with fire, played an essential role. We can see, thus, how a collective banquet based on the consumption of meat and the deposition of metallic weapons and ornaments is substituted by another one in which libations -probably of exotic drinks- played a central role⁸.

Another example is that provided by the cemetery of *El Molino* at Herrería, currently in excavation, where a long

Burkert 1977, 71 f. and 118 f. for the Greek world, or Hondius-Crone 1995, 107 f. and Bauchhenss 2001, 265 for the Roman).

The substitution of meat-consumption rituals by meatless ones is a common process in different cultures of Antiquity (cf. e.g.

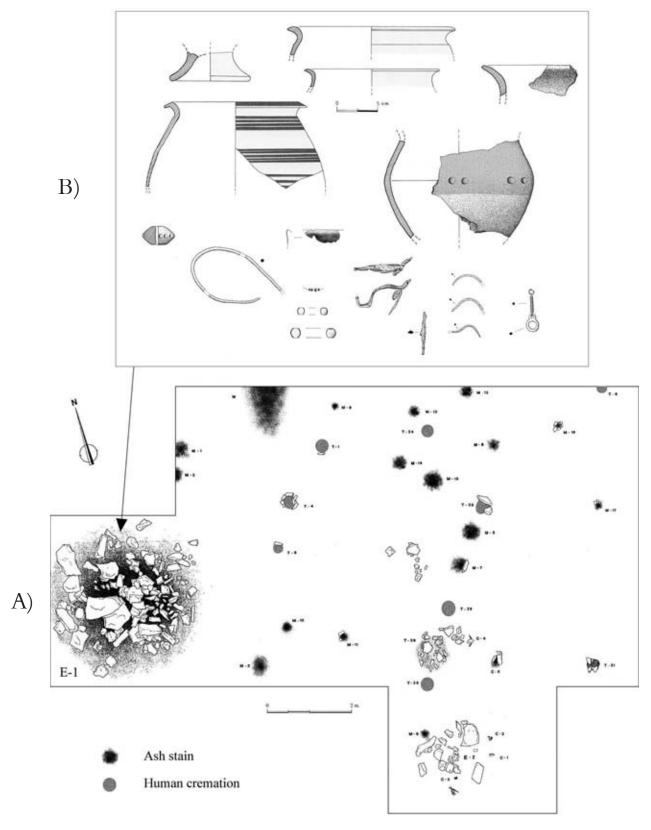


Fig. 2: The cemetery of La Cerrada de los Santos: A) Offering platform (E-1) and other related features from the first phase (6^{th} –5th c. BC); B) Archaeological material found at the Structure E-1.

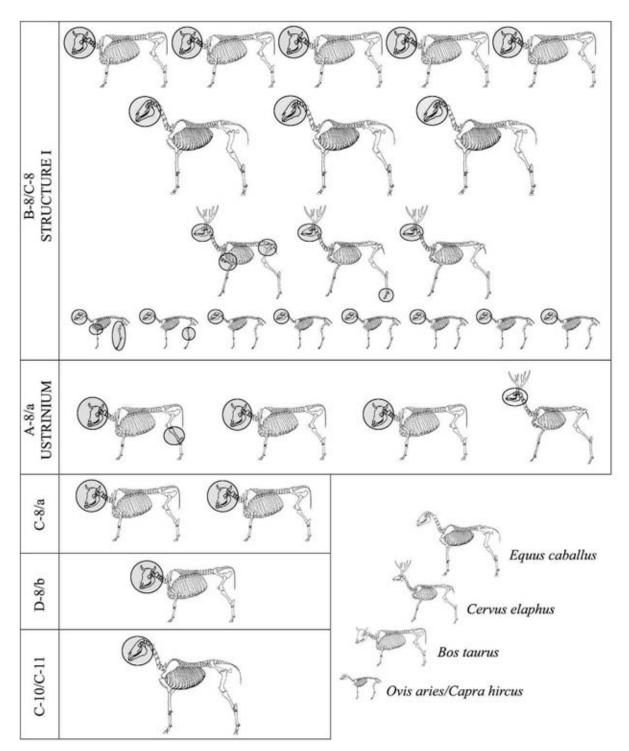


Fig. 3: Animal offerings from the first phase (6th–5th c. BC) of the cemetery of La Cerrada de los Santos. The circles mark the anatomic part represented.

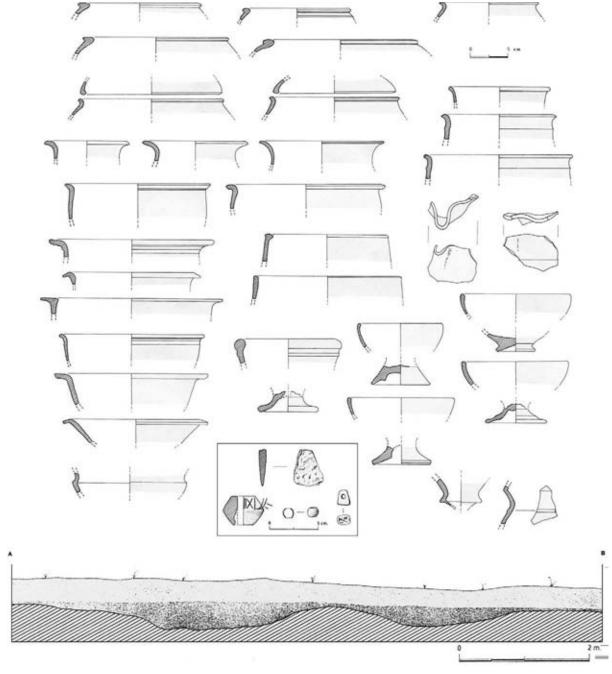


Fig. 4: Probable silicernium recorded in the second phase (3rd–2nd c. BC) of the cemetery of La Cerrada de los Santos: section of the ash deposit and material found in it.

burial sequence of more than one millennium has been recognized9. In this cemetery some behaviours have been detected that, as in the case of Aragoncillo, go beyond the strictly funerary framework. First of all, the preliminary analysis shows that the graves not only observed an astronomic arrangement, but were also oriented in terms of an axis connected with the settlement of El Ceremeño¹⁰, thus establishing a symbolic linkage between the living world and that of the ancestors. Moreover, the generalized use of stone markers (Marcos et al. 2004) was not only conceived to signpost individual graves, but some of them were a focus of attention around which offering rituals were carried out, consisting in the consumption and further deposition of large quantities of animal remains together with ceramic and metallic objects, all of them contained in a large stain of ash and organic material¹¹.

We can see, thus, how these funerary spaces fulfilled several functions which put them in the proximity of that kind of "open air shrine" characteristic of the Celtic world; to the loca sacra libera where the contact with the deities takes place. The Celtic sanctuary is, following Benoit, a place where the living communicate with the dead; a world where gods were the ancestors and the ancestors were the gods¹². Diodorus Siculus and Caesar describe it, above all, as the place where offerings were made¹³. In the Celtiberian cemeteries not only repeated offerings are attested but it seems also possible to recognize, at the same time, the devices used for the creation of ancestors and for the communication between the living and their Afterworld¹⁴ ... Do not all these traits relate these Celtiberian cemeteries with cult spaces such as those described for the Celtic shrines?

This statement can even be reinforced if we bear in mind the fact that probably not all the Celtiberian settlements had a cemetery. This is an hypothesis which should be corroborated by large-scale field works, because the erosive processes may have concealed these cemeteries several metres deep¹⁵. There is, however, an unquestionable fact: while in many pre-Roman settlements of Celtiberia no cemetery has yet been found, it is certain that several of the large cemeteries known to us were not linked to any settlement. Suffice it to quote one example: the cemetery of *Aguilar de Anguita* with more than six thousand graves¹⁶ and without any substantial settlement in its surroundings is located on the edge of an important communication route between the Southern Spanish Plateau and the Ebro valley; at a point where a salt

mine, a copper mine, a Neolithic megalithic burial, several Bronze Age open sites with lithic industry, a Roman villa and, on its top, a Christian shrine are located... If my proposal is confirmed, we may see once more in the Celtiberian cemeteries something else than simple burial places; we may regard them as gathering centres of persons and groups with a common feeling: that of belonging to the same community which would find there the necessary references for preserving their idiosyncrasy.

2.2 Domestic environments and cult activities

Beside that from funerary contexts, we have more evidence coming from domestic areas where, with the adequate methodology and care, it is possible to recognize ritual behaviours of collective character in some cases, and apparently private or familiarly restricted ones in others.

In the first place, we have to mention the recently published settlement of *El Ceremeño* at Herrería¹⁷, where several occupation levels have been recorded between the 6th and 2nd centuries BC. After establishing the first occupation phase -6th c. BC-, the authors studied a large set of material found in the different buildings excavated which, invariably, have been identified as "houses". However, among these structures, the one named "House H" (Fig. 5) stands out on account of its singularity, because the soil analysis carried out there¹⁸ shows that it was an area with a specialized use with the following characteristics:

- Higher presence of organic material with respect to other analysed spaces.
- In the central part of the structure a hearth is detected where organic remains not totally calcinated were accumulated.
- In a point closer to the entrance, there is an area composed by non-burned organic material whose provenance is not an accumulation of manure.

The authors do not find an explanation for this chemical profile and prefer to leave it as a pending issue. Nevertheless, what is certain is that "House H" was a place where fire was lighted and organic material was deposited in large quantities in front of a space –at the bottom of the room– where the chemical analysis does not detect human activity and large burned wooden pieces were found. If beside this we attend to the furnishings recorded there (Fig. 5), some very clarifying elements emerge. They are not the typical equipment of a domestic environment and, of course, they are not

⁹ Cerdeño et al. 2002.

¹⁰ Cerdeño et al. 2001–2002.

¹¹ Oral information provided by Fátima Marcos, co-director of the

¹² Benoit 1970, 7.

¹³ Brunaux 1986, 36.

¹⁴ Arenas, Cortés 1994.

¹⁵ Burillo 1992, 567–568.

¹⁶ Aguilera y Gamboa 1916.

 $^{^{\}rm 17}$ Cerdeño, Juez 2002.

¹⁸ Valdés 2002.

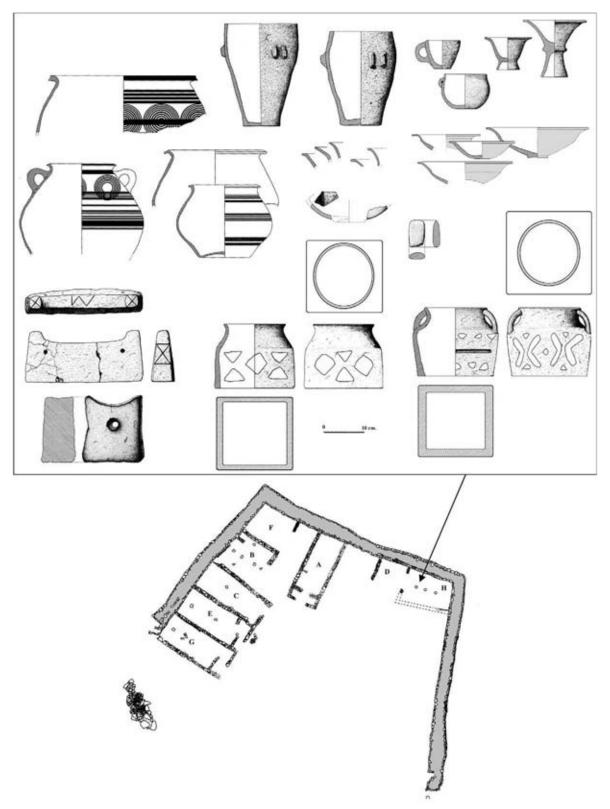


Fig. 5: Plan of the first phase (6th c. BC) of the settlement of El Ceremeño and equipment found at the so-called "House H".

comparable to those found in the other structures integrated in the same occupation level.

The ceramic vessels -most of them found on a compacted mud bench- show intriguing numerical associations: four cups, four dishes and four urns of medium size. In the same way, it is symptomatic that all these objects are commonly used in the consumption of liquids. Also conspicuous is the presence of six containers full of acorns, whose medium size indicates that they were not intended for long term storage. Lastly, the presence of some elements related to fire must be highlighted, such as two small openworked braziers of Italic type and five terra-cotta firedogs.

These facts, even summarily exposed, clearly indicate that we are not facing a domestic environment but a ritual one; a space where vegetal -and probably animal- offerings were deposited and some kind of libation was performed. Moreover, a specific use of fire was made there because, besides being used with destructive -in the case of immolation offerings – or culinary -if connected with a banquet-purposes, it was used, as the braziers and firedogs demonstrate, for burning some substances in small quantities which may have been fragrant or have had some curative properties. The specific details of the ceremonies carried out in El Ceremeño, and above all, to whom or to what they were addressed, are at the moment quite difficult to determine. However, the fact that "House H" does not show clear signs of domestic activities and that it is located in a slightly marginal area of the settlement, may indicate that it was used for a collective ritual activity.

Another example is that provided by the settlement of *El Palomar* at Aragoncillo¹⁹, linked with the above-mentioned cemetery of *La Cerrada de los Santos*. In its occupation phase belonging to the 3rd-2nd century BC some structures of domestic and craft type have been identified, two of them containing table services (Fig. 6) whose components suggest that they were not intended for an ordinary consumption of liquids, but probably for libations of exceptional character.

Although this case must be regarded with caution, because that kind of drinking sets could be also used in acts of basically social character lacking any religious connotation, the similar numerical grouping of some of their components is curious: one or two jars, two cups, two bowls and two small pots. Moreover, these groupings respond to a different behavioural pattern from that perceived in the rest of the furnishings – logically variable – found in the buildings, and suggest that they were not table services of daily use but special sets employed in acts that required fixed patterns and components – are we talking about liturgy?. In any case, the use of these drinking sets was restricted to a domestic or

familiar framework because the same equipment is found in two different living units.

2.3 Domestic ceremonials in extra-celtiberian environments

Outside the Celtiberian environment we find other examples of ritual activity performed in living areas. Perhaps one of the most interesting cases, and of course better recorded, is the altar found at the settlement of *Capote*, located in south-western Spain, with a chronology fixed between the early 4th and the first half of the 2nd century BC²⁰. As can be observed in Figure 7A, this altar is a small rectangular structure placed at a crossroad in the centre of the site, and consists of a stone board surrounded by a continuous stone bench intended for the setting of both persons and objects.

The most interesting characteristics of this deposit are the abundance of pottery -5034 pieces- and the presence of semi-cremated bones belonging to twenty-three mammals of large size. An interesting detail -for the parallels it shows with *La Cerrada de los Santos*- is the deliberate selection of the anatomic parts to be used in the ritual: skulls and especially mandibles together with the ends of limbs. Among the ceramic objects, a large number of openworked vessels – in some way quite similar to the braziers found in *El Ceremeño* – with evident signs of having been used for burning fragrant materials. All these devices were intended to perform a collective ceremonial in which, following Berrocal, could intervene more than two hundred persons.

In order to establish the cultural profile of this find, the author assumes that "historically" the site "was located in the central area of a district whose name, transmitted by the Romans, was Beturia, inhabited by Celtic peoples and in which Pliny locates the neighbouring Nertobriga"21 (Nat. Hist., III, 13-14). This and other classic references are used to establish the Celtic character of the ritual carried out at Capote, but I think that this is an aprioristic recourse, because he has not taken into account the data provided by other sites in the vicinity, much more explicit in terms of ceremonial practices. One example of this is the site of Cancho Roano at Zalamea de la Serena²², a palace-sanctuary of oriental type founded at the end of the 6th century BC and which nowadays is not only the best example of religious architecture of the whole Hispanic protohistory (Fig. 7B), but has also provided one of the best ceremonial equipments of the Orientalizing period of the whole Iberian Peninsula. Many of the ritual behaviours described and commented in this paper were also performed in Cancho Roano that, by the way, is only 110 kilometres away from Capote. But as I have already stated, both the

¹⁹ Arenas 1999.

²⁰ Berrocal 1994.

²¹ Berrocal 1994, 26.

²² Almagro Gorbea 1993.

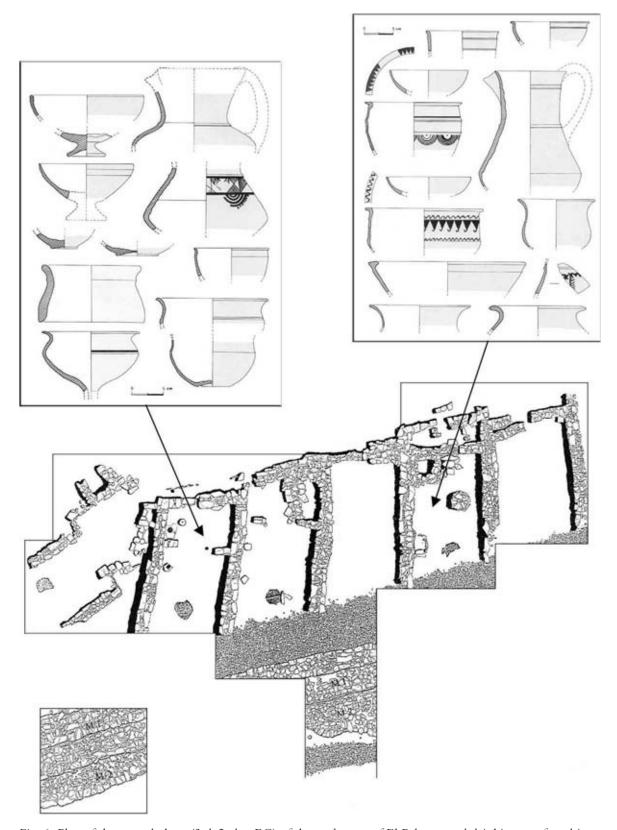


Fig. 6: Plan of the second phase (3rd–2nd c. BC) of the settlement of El Palomar and drinking sets found in two of its rooms.

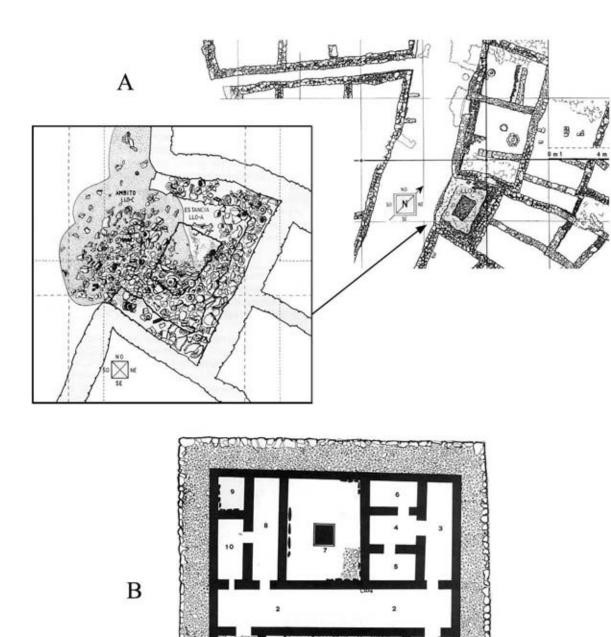


Fig. 7: Plans of the altar of Capote (A) and the palace-sanctuary of Cancho Roano (B).

architectonic design of the palace-sanctuary and the material culture contained in *Cancho Roano* are unequivocally Orientalising and their origin and cultural filiations have absolutely nothing to do with the Celtic world²³.

3. Towards a conclusion

I do not know if it is possible "to be a Celt" and to practice an Oriental religion; but what I know is that, certainly, sometimes an Oriental religion was professed "speaking a Celtic language"24. The example of Cancho Roano illustrates the error implicit in looking for the roots of ceremonial acts like those recorded at Capote exclusively in the continental Celtic world and in trying to define, from there, the rituals and religious beliefs of the peninsular Celtic groups. To ignore that similar rituals of clearly non-Celtic origin were being carried out nearby is not operative, in particular when they appear to be the cultural background of the pre-Roman groups of a wide area of the South of the Peninsula. This attitude shows that some scholars use merely ergologic criteria in order to establish "their" Celticity degree, whereas the objects which are "Celtic" are so because they were Celtic at their time and not because we or other external observers wish them to have been: throughout all his work Berrocal tries to transmit that the materials found at the altar and the ritual they represent are a sound proof of the

presence of Celts in the South West of the Iberian Peninsula²⁵. This perspective presents us with "Continental or Celtic materials" since they have been obtained in an aprioristical manner on account of their resemblances with materials from the Continent, but ignoring with more or less discretion closer elements only because they are unequivocally related with non-Celtic groups.

Now I would like to conclude acknowledging that the data related with the religious profile of the pre-Roman Celtiberians are still quite scarce, but - on account of what we have seen - not unexistent. In this sense I think it is necessary to revise the old excavation reports and even the recent publications - see the case of El Ceremeño -, which have not been able to recognize the evidence of religious significance in an objective way. Therefore, although the indicators and hence the sound arguments are few, if we begin to pay attention to details like those exposed in this paper, perhaps some day we will be able to talk about something else than indigenous materials and names carved in Greek and Roman inscriptions. Perhaps we will be able to achieve a deeper knowledge of the religious concepts of those groups that used a Celtic language ... perhaps we even will be able to talk about indigenous communities worshipping deities with names similar or alike to those which have gathered us here.

- There are other examples in pre-Roman Hispania that, like in the case of *Capote*, have been identified as Celtic rituals only after the references provided by Greek and Roman writers. The most outstanding case, and by the way geographically quite close to *Capote*, is the votive deposit of *Garbao* (Beirão et al. 1987). This latter example is used as a constant point of reference in the interpretation of *Capote* although, paradoxically, it is quite similar to others recorded in the Levantine Iberian world. That is the case of the settlement of *El Amarejo* (province of Albacete), where not only a ritual pit identical to that of *Garbao* (Broncano 1989) has been found, but one of its buildings, the so-called Department 1, contains a ceramic equipment (Broncano, Blánquez 1985) very similar to that recorded in *El Ceremeño* at Herrería.
- From the Imperial period some examples of dedications to Oriental or Mediterranean deities made by Celtic speakers are

- known. This is the case of the dedications to *Jupiter Dolichenus* (Ba'al) and *Caelestis* (Dea Syria) *Brigantia* in Britain (Aldhouse Green, raybould 1999, 125), to *Mitra* in Belgic Gaul (r.i.g..-*L-109 from Baudecet) or to *Maia* and *Letinno* in Narbonensis (Häussler in this volume).
- ²⁵ Berrocal establishes the Celticity of a material ensemble exclusively on the reports provided by Strabo (*Geog.* III, 1, 6; 2, 15; 3,5) and Pliny (Nat. Hist. III, 13–14), who speak about the presence of "Celts" in the lower Guadiana valley, but he ignores the internal data that could be deduced from the proper material ensemble and, above all, the relationship which this maintains with other rituals of non-Celtic origin. In this respect, it is very significant that the metal equipment of *Capote* is directly related to cultural circles of central and northern pre-Roman Italy (groups of Golasecca and Este), Etruria, Liguria and the Southern Gallic world (Berrocal 1994, 260).

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