

Urban Landscapes in Iron Age Iberia:  
New Approaches for a Comparative Anatomy





# Urban Landscapes in Iron Age Iberia

New Approaches for  
a Comparative Anatomy

Editors

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Front cover: Ideal reconstruction of the Iron Age hillfort of Villasviejas del Tamuja (Cáceres, Spain) at its peak of development in the 1st century BC. Elaboration by 3DStoa based on the research project developed by the Merida Institute of Archaeology. Back cover: Ideal reconstruction of the Iron Age Iberian oppidum of Illiturgi (Mengibar, Jaén, Spain). Elaboration by Francisco Arias based on the research of the University of Jaen.

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## Foreword

Iberia has always been a place ‘in-between’. In between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, Europe and Africa, East and West. This makes it an exciting place for understanding a wide range of phenomena, but it has also often meant being left out of many mainstream archaeological narratives. When it comes to the origins of urbanism, two main traditions can be identified in regards to the analysis of Europe in the 1st millennium BCE: approaches that focus on early cities in the Mediterranean, most prominently in Greece and Italy (e.g. Osborne and Cunliffe 2005); and studies focused on so-called ‘Celtic’ archaeology, particularly the temperate European *oppida* (e.g. Fichtl 2005). In both cases Iberia has frequently played a marginal, sometimes even non-existent, role. This, however, does not acknowledge the richness of its archaeology, which provides plenty of evidence for complex phenomena of urbanisation during the Iron Age (Ruiz Zapatero *et al.* 2020). However, things are starting to change, and recent international overviews on 1st millennium BCE urbanism are increasingly incorporating information from the Iberian Peninsula (e.g. Fernández-Götz 2018; Gleba *et al.* 2021).

The present volume, *Urban Landscapes in Iron Age Iberia: New Approaches for a Comparative Anatomy*, represents a commendable addition to the growing research on the topic published in English. Based on a conference organised in Extremadura in 2023 by the three editors, it brings together contributions ranging from southeast to northwest Iberia. Thus, it overcomes a prevalent division that, since the 19th century, has characterised most studies on the 1st millennium BCE on the Iberian Peninsula: the linguistically-based distinction between an Indo-European (mainly Celtic) speaking area in the centre and north, and a non-Indo-European area along the south and east. By integrating regions from all across Iberia into a single, thematically-oriented volume we obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the development and characteristics of urban processes in the ‘Far West’ of the ancient world.

Two terms used in the volume’s title deserve special consideration: landscapes and anatomy. While some papers focus on individual sites, providing exciting new insights at the micro-level, others adopt a wider scope looking at networks of settlements within well-defined geographical regions. Among the examples of a landscape-scale approach are the chapters on northeast Iberia, the Duero Valley and the Amblés Valley in the northern Meseta, the Lower Guadalquivir in western Andalusia, the Guadalbullón River Valley in eastern Andalusia, the upper basin of the Segura River, or the

southern Valencian region. This research links with the wider theme of ‘urban landscapes’ (cf. Smith, M. 2014), which acknowledges that urban sites cannot be explained in isolation, but rather need to be understood as part of wider networks of connectivity and often also interdependence, both with other sites of an urban nature and with their surrounding countryside.

The other key term included in the title is ‘anatomy’, which reflects the interest in the internal organisation of the sites and the buildings within them (rather than just a focus on their fortification works, as has long been the case at many hillforts and *oppida*, cf. Collis 2010). The term ‘anatomy’ has already been used in other landmark publications on Iron Age fortified sites, most notably Cunliffe’s (1983) classic monograph *Danebury: Anatomy of an Iron Age Hillfort*. In the context of the present volume, anatomy refers primarily to the use of non-invasive methodologies such as geophysical surveys and remote sensing to the study of the interior of urban sites in Iberia. The editor’s themselves have pioneered some of the most interesting applications of these methods over the last decade, for example in relation to the Late Iron Age hillfort of Villasviejas del Tamuja in Extremadura (Mayoral Herrera 2021). The increasing application and enhanced resolution of these techniques forms part of the ‘methodological revolution’ that is profoundly transforming our knowledge of early urbanism around the globe (Fernández-Götz and Smith 2024). The papers in the volume provide numerous examples of how these approaches are substantially contributing to our understanding of Iron Age urban sites on the Iberian Peninsula, including at already well-known settlements such as Ullastret, Ulaca, Puente Tablas, and Tejada la Vieja. The use of cutting-edge methodologies clearly demonstrates that current archaeological research in Spain is of a comparable standard to the work carried out in other parts of Europe such as Germany and Britain.

A final point that should be highlighted is the engagement with social structures. Most chapters in the volume do not simply analyse the urban sites as such, but also discuss (implicitly or explicitly) how the built environment reflects, and simultaneously shapes, social relations within and between communities. Several papers note how the Late Iron Age was a period of increased social hierarchisation, and many *oppida* communities were dominated by local aristocracies. However, there was considerable variation in modes of social organisation, as reflected for example in both northwest and northeast Iberia, so we also need

to take into account those societies in which more inclusive corporate strategies played a prominent role. Urbanism was also incredibly diverse across the landscapes of Iron Age Iberia, with examples including both high- and low-density urban centres that reflected the differing landscapes in which they were built and the heterogeneity of the societies that inhabited them.

In sum, this book represents an excellent addition to studies on Iron Age urbanism. While many of the primary data have already been published in Spanish, bringing them together in a succinct way in English will hopefully facilitate that they become widely known among an international scholarly audience, contributing to wider European narratives on the topic. The high-standard of the fieldwork approaches presented in the various chapters shows how much research has advanced in the last few decades. I want to congratulate all the authors, and the editors in particular, for putting together such a fine volume.

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