

A PROPÓSITO DEL CONVENTUS EMERITENSIS: CONSIDERACIONES GEOGRÁFICAS, ARQUEOLÓGICAS Y CULTURALES

UPON THE CONVENTUS EMERITENSIS: GEOGRAPHIC, ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

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RESUMEN: En el siguiente trabajo intentamos arrojar luz sobre el significado del *conventus Emeritensis* como entidad propia dentro del contexto de la Lusitania y aún, de la totalidad de la Hispania romana. Creada durante las reformas administrativas augústeas, sorprende la configuración de un vasto espacio sin aparente personalidad propia, que aglutina múltiples espacios geográficamente diferentes del Centro-Occidente peninsular. El hecho de que en el Bajo Imperio su capital, *Augusta Emerita*, fuese designada como centro de la *Diocesis Hispaniarum* en detrimento de otras urbes importantes como *Tarraco* o *Cartago Nova*, no hace sino aumentar el aparente enigma.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Conventus Emeritensis*, *Lusitania*, *Augusta Emerita*, *Vettonia*, periodo orientalizante, Romanización

ABSTRACT: In this paper we try to bring some light upon the *conventus Emeritensis* as entity in the Lusitanian and, widely, also the own Roman Spain contexts. Created by the Augustan reformation, this astonishing huge extension unifies several geographically different territories without any apparent pattern. In fact, at the Dominate the capital city of this territory, *Augusta Emerita*, was designed as the core of the *Diocesis Hispaniarum* above main centers as *Tarraco* or *Cartago Nova*; thus this enigma is encouraged.

KEYWORDS: *Conventus Emeritensis*, *Lusitania*, *Augusta Emerita*, *Vettonia*, Orientalizing period, Romanization

The *Hispania Ulterior Lusitania*, the most Western province in the Roman Empire, was the main innovation within the administrative reforms ordered by Octavius Augustus, possibly at the 13 B.C. ², by his second coming to Iberia. This new province allowed ultimately to break the Republican duality in the administration of the *Hispaniae*, divided since then in *Citerior* (or *Tarraconensis*) and *Ulterior* (or *Baetica*). Both entities were really a backdrop of the two main corridors for any Mediterranean invader in order to reach the Iberian heartland: the valleys of Ebro and Guadalquivir rivers, and their influence zones. In fact, the originally united *Hispania Ulterior* tried to include all the Western Iberia, through land ways and flock routes, to the Cantabrian Sea shores. However, by the new Augustan organization the new Lusitanian Northern limit is set at the Duero river³. The capital of the

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² Vid. Le Roux 2010: 70ff; Ozcáriz Gil 2009: 324; Salinas de Frías 2001: 81ff.

³ This is related with the aim of the *Princeps* in order to integrate the main mining districts (Las Médulas at the Northwest and the surrounding area of Cartago Nova at the Southeast), both with a

new province was set on the *Colonia Iulia Augusta Emerita*, an *ex novo* foundation recently created (by the 25 A.D.) as settlement for the veterans of two legions⁴ involved at the Cantabrian Wars⁵. However, some punishing action also existed, by the sending to the capital of the Far West to the veteran soldiers of two legions who supported the Antonius' faction at the last (until then) Roman civil war (Saquete Chamizo 1996: 40ff).

I. The *conventus Emeritensis* territory.

The Emeritan foundation was developed very probably *ab initio* in order to control vast territories, as we shall see. Anyway, by the Augustan reformation *Lusitania* was divided into three *conventus* (*Emeritensis*, *Scallabitanus* and *Pacensis*), being the first the main one by having the provincial capital and receiving a territory who double in size the union of the other two.

If exist any pattern to define the *conventus Emeritensis* territory, this is undoubtedly its absolute heterogeneity. It is a territory composed by the medium segments of three of the main Iberian river basins (Duero, Tajo and Guadiana), which act as the core elements in addition to the main land routes⁶; a long mountain range extended from Northeast to Southwest (the *Sistema Central*, from the *Sierra de Guadarrama* near Madrid to the *Serra da Estrela*, in Central Portugal) acting as spine; a fertile red-land plains to the South (the shires of the *Tierra de Barros*, *Vegas Altas* and *Vegas Bajas* in Badajoz, Southwestern Spain); a fragment of the Spanish Central Plateau (related *grosso modo* with the current Spanish provinces of Ávila and Salamanca), and, at the end, some hilly and mountain lands to the West (the Portuguese regions of the *Beira Baja*, *Ribatejo*, and partially, *Tras-Os-Montes*).

In this panorama, we must ask about the pattern in order to establish an administrative unity from these so different elements. It seems clear that we must discard any geographical factor as the *leitmotif* for that. Then, maybe we have to look for an answer in another different field: the anthropic factors.

If we look to the pre-Roman panorama, we find the human reality known as *Vettonia* was extended over about a 75% of the Augustan *conventus Emeritensis*. On its limits, really so difficult and partially-known for us as almost all the Second Iron Age peoples' ones, rivers of ink have run. Taking the best hypothesis (those which combine written sources⁷ with Archaeology⁸), we are able to establish an acceptable agreement *grosso modo* for the limits of both realities with the exception of the West and specially the South, points where the Emeritan *conventus* appear clearly bigger, by certain reasons we shall see on next pages. However, we behold the possibility of a Roman *Lusitania* composed, after the conquest, by the combined territory of the Lusitanians and the Vettonians. Thus, firstly we find the repeated common kin between both groups told by Roman authors through all the process of conquest⁹, a fact that maybe can inform us about the proximity of both peoples, at least for the Roman *interpretatio*. But also we find an urban network, for all the Eastern

strong military presence, within the *Tarraconensis* province. This was the main Hispanic province at the moment, and the basis for Augustus to rule Iberia, against a senatorial province as the *Baetica*.

⁴ The *V Alaudae* and the *X Gemina*

⁵ Dio Cass., 53, 26,1

⁶ At the Roman age they shall be, acting as the North-South axis, the *Iter ab Emerita Asturicam* (abd its natural extension to the Southern ports, the *Iter ab Hispali Emeritam*), and, as Northeast-Southwest (really in parallel to the *Sistema Central* mountains by its Southern face) the *Alio itinere ab Emerita Caesaraugustam*. For the Roman way system in *Lusitania*, vid. Sillières 1995

⁷ Mainly Plin. *H.N.* 3,19; IV,112; IV,113; Str. 3, 3 y III, 4; Ptol. 2,5,7

⁸ Salinas de Frías 2001: 41ff.; Álvarez Sanchís 1999: 101ff.;

⁹ Thus, Liv. 35, 7,8; App. *Iber.* 10,56; 10, 58 y 12, 70; Caes., *B.C.* 1, 38, 1-4; Luc. 4, 4-10

Lusitania based mainly in refoundings made over previous Vettonian habitats¹⁰. The cause of this high concordance between ancient *Vettonia* and a high percent of the *conventus Emeritensis* perhaps can be set upon the simplicity to manage. Thus, as is well known, in those weakly-Romanized territories (or better, weakly-“civilized”¹¹) Rome tends to respect the previous cultural divisions¹². On next pages we shall try to find a certain agreement between the limits traditionally set for the pre-Roman *Vettonia*¹³ and those set for the *conventus* of Mérida¹⁴. It is certainly hard to exam, due to the lack of knowledge, these limits, but in our opinion it is also useful. The geographical limits are a basic pattern in order to understand the entity and the operation of a certain human community.

II. *Vettonia* / *conventus Emeritensis*: compared limits.

We shall start our view by the Northern boundaries. Perhaps there we shall find the clearest frontier, common to both entities, for in the two cases the Middle Duero Valley is apparently followed. In this sense the written sources also point¹⁵, in approximate agreement to Archaeology¹⁶. Such a situation would be inherited, as it seems, by the Emeritan *conventus*, and so, by the Lusitanian province¹⁷.

On the contrary, at the Western boundaries huge differences it clearly exist. Thus, the pre-Roman *Vettonia* seem to reach the *Coda*¹⁸ river Valley, being *Lancia Oppidana* the last Vettonian center in this area, as can be inferred from certain epigraphic and archaeological findings¹⁹ which point to the *transcudani* and the *Igaeditani*²⁰ as the easternmost Iron Age Lusitanians. In this point Romanization actually introduce significant changes: thus, the *conventus* limit experienced a real breakthrough, of around 75 km., to the West, being established already at the Viseu-*Amaia*-Estremoz axis. Although we face the lack of closer fieldworks at this respect, the almost sure reason for this is no other than the entry into the *Emeritensis* territory of the Serra da Estrela, a range with an ancient mining tradition, mainly of gold and iron²¹, that continues to a lesser extent to the Spanish Sistema Central²². From

¹⁰ This is valid for the main cities of Eastern Lusitania (with the exception of *Augusta Emerita*): thus *Capara*, *Turgalium*, *Mirobriga*, *Augustobriga*, *Caesarobriga*, *Metellinum*, *Lacimurga*, etc...

¹¹ We understand here the concept of “Civilization” after its most literal meaning, on a etymological sense, linked to urbanization; so it is, those human groups who live in *civitates* or urban settlements. So, we do not manage here the concept as a moral judgement upon human societies and/or the rate of social development in which they are.

¹² Ozcáriz Gil 2009: 333.

¹³ To establish the geographical limits of any Iberian pre-Roman people result always uncertain. For the Vettonian case, many works have been published but we can't offer more than a mere general approach. We shall base here on the limits managed by Salinas de Frías (2001: 41ff) and, specially, by Álvarez Sanchís (1999: 101ff).

¹⁴ For the administrative limits of the Roman *Hispania* we find, in general, the same unknowledge and lack of precision as for the Iberian pre-Roman peoples.

¹⁵ Thus, Strabo points the separation of the Vettonians in front of *Vaccei* and *Arevaci* Celtiberians, settled to the East from the first ones, into the same Central Plateau (Strab. 3, 3,2; 3, 4,12), while Pliny the Elder tells how the Asturians remained to the North: “(...) *dein per Arevacos et Vaccaeosque determinatis ab Asturia Vettonibus*” *N.H.*, 4, 112)

¹⁶ Álvarez Sanchís 1999: 323ff

¹⁷ Ozcáriz Gil 2009:329

¹⁸ The current *Côa* river, a Portuguese tributary of the Duero/Douro.

¹⁹ *Vid.* Salinas de Frías 2001:47

²⁰ The inhabitants of *Egitania*, the current *Idanha-a-Velha*

²¹ At this respect, *vid.* Da Silva 2001; Perestrelo 2000; Duarte 1995

²² Sánchez-Palencia & Ruiz del Árbol 1999; Álvarez Sanchís 1999: 27ff; on this particular, we shall occupy on next works

this mining wealth, the *igaeditani* could defray, among others, the inscriptions on the Roman bridge of Alcántara²³, maybe defraying also partially its building.

For the Eastern boundaries, we can see a general agreement, with a Protohistoric *Vettonia* which roughly descend from the Duero Valley through the Esla river to reach the Guadarrama range. From here it continues Southwards through the Alberche river Valley and the Hills of Toledo-Altamira range line²⁴. Thus, the native settlement that Romans shall rename as *Caesarobriga* was still *Vettonian*²⁵, while the *oppidum* of the later *Toletum*, sited 90 km to the East, can be ascribed to the Carpetanians. The Roman administrative *limites* (between the *Uterior* and the *Citerior* firstly, between the *Lusitania* and the *Tarraconensis* afterwards) far to heavily modify this pattern, basically seem to developed it²⁶, by the creation of new settlements in the plains, drawing the borderline by the Cofio river Valley²⁷, the “Toros de Guisando” and the city of *Lebura*²⁸. For the Guadarrama range zone, we have also three interesting provincial landmarks traditionally neglected by research.

The first two landmarks are only known by the references of Spanish authors from the Modern and Contemporary Ages²⁹. These two elements were a “fifth Toro (bull) of Guisando” alleged, which chronicles refers for 1,607³⁰ (referencing a previous information from 1,566), 1,645-50³¹ and 1,872³², and we should add a milestone (known, again, only through references) supposedly located on the Puerto de la Palomera, which appears in four references from 1,572 to 1,866³³. Anyway it was, both elements supposedly would show a double epigraph, in obverse and reverse and as a milestone landmark, with the formula (for the obverse) “*HIC EST TARRACO, NON LUSITANIA*”, and (for the reverse) “*HIC EST LUSITANIA, NON TARRACO*”. It is possible, at such texts, an certain confusion from both elements with the “Toros de Guisando”, of both elements among themselves or even a confusion of any of them (or even both) with the third landmark of this list: the so-called “Piedra Escrita”³⁴ of Cenicientos, the only piece from this three whose existence is confirmed and undoubted. This stone has generated some scholar works, where it is presented as milestone through the *Lusitania* and the *Tarraconensis*³⁵. Is interesting how this “Piedra Escrita”, as well as the “Toros de Guisando”, works nowadays still as landmarks through the current Spanish provinces³⁶.

In fact, the possibility of this landmarks (maybe currently lost, with the exception of the “Piedra Escrita” and the “Toros de Guisando”) is strengthened if we realize that dividing

²³ Salinas de Frías, 2001: 47

²⁴ Salinas de Frías, 2001: 50

²⁵ Álvarez Sanchís (1999:127) sees *Augustobriga* and *Caesarobriga* as settlements in the plain, born after the new territorial structure that Romanization brought. Thus, they would receive, by this author, the population who beforehand had been living in several *Vettonian oppida* which the Romans had supposedly disrupted.

²⁶ Canto Perea 1994 : 282

²⁷ A toponym probably derived from the Latin term “*confinium*”; *vid.* Hernando Sobrino (2002: 342)

²⁸ Canto Perea 1994 : 281

²⁹ Specifically, from the XVIth to the XIXth Centuries

³⁰ Fray Luis Ariz Benito (1607, IV part) quoting the “*Libro de las grandezas de España y sedeño de varones ilustres*” (1566) from Pedro de Medina

³¹ González Dávila 1645-50

³² Martín Carramolino 1872

³³ Ponç d’Icard, L. 1572, cap. III; Anonymous from 1785 – *Historia de Badajoz desde los tiempos más remotos* (quoted by Barrantes 1875: 173-176); Masdeu 1789:154 and Mariátegui 1866:44-48

³⁴ In Spanish, the “Written Stone”

³⁵ Canto Perea 1994

³⁶ The current Spanish provinces were established at 1,833, so an eventual ancient times survival for this both elements as direct landmarks, is obviously discarded. Anyway, it is interesting how the sense of land-marking for some elements in the landscape, in terms of collective memory, perhaps lives on and eventually is being adapted to the new realities.

terminal milestones are a tradition in the Classical World in order to the spatial delimitation³⁷. Upon that same tradition, coming specifically from the Hellenic sphere, we find this passage from Strabo³⁸:

“(...) for it was a custom in early times to set up landmarks like that. For instance, the people of Rhegium set up the column — a sort of small tower — which stands at the strait; and opposite this column there stands what is called the Tower of Pelorus. And in the land about midway between the Syrtes there stand what are called the Altars of the Philaeni. And mention is made of a pillar placed in former times on the Isthmus of Corinth, which was set up in common by those Ionians who, after their expulsion from the Peloponnesus, got possession of Attica together with Megaris, and by the peoples who got possession of the Peloponnesus; they inscribed on the side of the pillar which faced Megaris, “This is not the Peloponnesus, but Ionia,” on the other, “This is the Peloponnesus, not Ionia”. Again, Alexander set up altars, as limits of his Indian Expedition, in the farthest regions reached by him in Eastern India, thus imitating Heracles and Dionysus. So then, this custom was indeed in existence.”

In another hand, the Southern sector of the *conventus Emeritensis* is where we find the biggest difference between the most accepted boundaries of both realities commented here. Those of the Later Iron Age *Vettonia* come to the South from the current province of Cáceres. Actually, from this region extends to the South a certain “wedge”, passing through the *castrum* of *Tamusia* (Villasviejas del Tamuja, Botija, Cáceres³⁹) and reaching the Guadiana river at *Lacimurgi*⁴⁰ (the current Cerro de Cogolludo, Navalvillar de Pela, Badajoz). The *hinterland* of this settlement would limit with that of *Conisturgis*⁴¹ at the hillfort of Entrerríos⁴². Meanwhile, after a long and intense discussion about the Southern *limes* of the Roman *Lusitania*, and already exceeded the dogma of the Guadiana as provincial frontier⁴³, subsequent works of Spatial Archaeology⁴⁴ has established the border of the *ager emeritensis* (the same to the Lusitanian one for this area) near of Los Santos de Maimona⁴⁵, and even further with the documented existence of a *praefectura* which would take the *Emeritensis* territory to Valencia del Ventoso, about 80 km Southwards⁴⁶. The reason for this gap through the Protohistoric *Vettonia* and the Roman *conventus* is undoubtedly an stimulant challenge, whose answer perhaps may be linked with the pre-Roman cultural substrate and the prism through Romanization view the previous Hispanic realities.

The archaeological works developed at Southwestern Iberia through last decades have evidenced an almost unsuspected panorama, whose main pattern is the close contact with cultures and populations with an Eastern Mediterranean origin. These are historical processes that exceed by far this document, and shall be addressed much better in Future works⁴⁷. Anyway, the point is that the middle segment of the Guadiana river Valley at the

³⁷ Salinas de Frías 2001: 44

³⁸ Str. 3, 5,5

³⁹ Hernández Hernández, F., Galán, E. & Martín, A.M. 2009: 161-180

⁴⁰ Cordero Ruiz 2010; Aguliar Sáenz – Guicard - Lefevbre 1994 :109-130

⁴¹ Named *Metellinum* by Romans (the current Medellín)

⁴² Almagro Gorbea & Lorrio 1986: 617ff.

⁴³ Canto Perea 1989, with huge bibliography

⁴⁴ Mainly Gorges - Rodríguez Martín 2005; Ariño Gil - Gurt 1994

⁴⁵ In the current province of Badajoz, about 50 km South from Mérida

⁴⁶ Gorges - Rodríguez Martín 2005: 112

⁴⁷ These contacts, in which Iron Age were brought to this geographical area, can be traced back at least to the VII century B.C. As many other zones of the Iberian Southwest, the Emeritan shire lives an intense acculturation by the Early Iron Age, as it show many archaeological sites (the countryside settlement of El Palomar, the necropolis of El Chaparral, the Early Iron Age phases of Medellín and Alange, etc...) and also a number of isolated findings traditionally assigned to the Emeritan area. As we advice *supra*, bibliography on this respect, even the most basic one, exceed largely this paper, deserving this theme some future works *ad hoc*.

Later Iron Age is, as we see, a border space⁴⁸, a territory that, although it follows the Orientalizing patterns, actually it acts as a link for the land routes from the Mediterranean South and the Central Plateau⁴⁹. This area of the Guadiana Valley is also controlled by two cities: *Conisturgis* (Medellín) and Dipo⁵⁰. When Rome reaches this space, it finds a “civilized”⁵¹ and Mediterranean-style cultural substrate, in addition dismantled after the destruction of Dipo by the Sertorian Wars (83-72 B.C.)⁵². All this matters turned unavoidable the foundation of a great Roman colony in this point.

We know that the criteria for to set a *conventus* were basically related with geographic patterns for highly Romanized spaces, meanwhile in those weakly-Romanized territories Rome tended to respect the previous cultural divisions⁵³. However, here a mixed model was developed, giving to the more Romanized lands the command over vast extrinsic, outsider and native extensions. Thus, the *Colonia Iulia Augusta Emerita* comes founded expressly and carefully in order to rule vast territories of the Extreme West, to the maximum physical limit, and to heading all the previous settlements as *Conisturgis-Metellinum*, *Tamusia*, *Turgalium*, etc.... Far from random, astrological, etc... criteria, the Guadianan *Urbs* pursues certain geographic and orographic patterns, so it is, a eminently practical purpose⁵⁴. It allows also to explain traditionally discussed factors as being the only one Roman colony in the Northern shore of the Middle Guadiana Valley, the continuity between the urban and countryside networks, its titanic *territorium* (in addition, with even four huge *praefecturae*), etc... In fact, *Emerita* was the perfect Roman colony, for the double target of them was to ensure the Roman rule and to provide good farmlands for the citizens⁵⁵.

III. Additional elements.

In addition to all this, another interesting element still remains, which, from the Roman epigraphy, relates *Vettonia* and *Lusitania*. We refer to the famous four epigraphs, issued between 129 and 215 A.D., that allude to some certain *procuratores Lusitaniae et Vettoniae*⁵⁶. The mention of these characters has puzzled scholars, who in general have proposed “for consensus” solutions. Thus, the possible existence of certain districts or administrations is been pointed. They would work in parallel to the *conventus* in order to collect taxes (particularly, the *annona militaris*⁵⁷). It allows another interesting discussion beyond this paper, but beforehand we must point to the strangeness that the “parallel administrations” suggest as mere concept. The famous Roman pragmatism is manifested mainly in this field (as well as the military) and these pretended parallel institutions were no other than an obstacle for it and for the whole effectiveness of the tax system. Furthermore, we have no more evidence than this in order to speculate on the existence of such “evanescent” institutions. Perhaps may be better to interpret these allusions on Epigraphy as a “simple” (extremely stimulating by itself) remembrance of an ancient territorial identity,

⁴⁸ The South-western Spain, and specially the current region of Extremadura, has been interpreted by scholars as an eternal border space, where the wet (Atlantic) and dry (Mediterranean) Iberia reach each other. This would be a constant pattern also for human groups by the whole diachronic sequence. *Vid.* Barrientos Alfageme 1985

⁴⁹ Almagro Gorbea - Ripollés - Rodríguez Martín 2009

⁵⁰ *Vid.* Rodríguez Martín 2010

⁵¹ *Vid. supra* quote #11

⁵² Rodríguez Martín 2010

⁵³ Ozcáriz Gil 2009: 333

⁵⁴ Rodríguez Martín 2010: 132

⁵⁵ As the etymology shows: from the Latin verb *colere*.

⁵⁶ González Herrero 2010: 136-137

⁵⁷ González Herrero 2010: 136 y ss.

maybe with certain cultural survivals at the popular level and the everyday life. Perhaps this “nostalgic” mentality could mean a little literary *topos* at the time, showing some particular elements from each territory within the whole of the Empire. Thus, maybe this is the meaning of the famous verses written by the hand of Prudentius⁵⁸ to the Later Roman *Emerita*

“Nunc locus Emeritae est tumulo
 clara colonia Vettoniae
 quam memorabilis amnis Ana
 praeterit et vidriante rapax
 gurgite moenia pulchra lavit”

IV. Final remarks.

There are clearly few the certainties we can offer, at the moment, on the particular of these pages, but at least we shall establish some final remarks. Firstly, to point that the *conventus emeritensis* (as the same *Lusitania* and, at the end, all the administrative division for the Roman Spain) results from an spatial vision which conceives Iberia from the South to the North, as it is logical for any Mediterranean invader. Properly on the *conventus emeritensis*, in addition, a “Southern platform” is established at the Middle Guadiana Valley. It comes developed over a territory with owns a deep Orientalizing (Mediterranean and urban) substrate, which have been dismantled by the Sertorian Wars (83-72 B.C.). On this privileged point, *Augusta Emerita* was founded as the capital city of the entire Extreme West, ruling over vast extensions on the Western and Central Iberia. The basic pattern in order to limit the sphere of influence of the new Western *Urbs* shall be the ancient Vettonian territory, one of the main inner-Iberian peoples, whose control means the dominion over the Atlantic Western façade and the Iberian heartland. In addition, the rich mining district of Serra da Estrela, held formerly by the Later Iron Age Lusitanians, is also incorporated. Anyway, a typical relationship between the urban center with its *hinterland* is established: thus, *Emerita* rules vast extensions to the North, while an economical space on its service is created. Its good working and effectiveness is revealed by the fact of, while the History of the Roman Spain passes by, *Emerita*, its *conventus* and *Lusitania* are growing in importance, until finally become, at Later Roman period, in the capital city and heartland of the *Diocesis Hispaniarum*⁵⁹.

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⁵⁸ *Peristéphanon* 3, 5, 186-190

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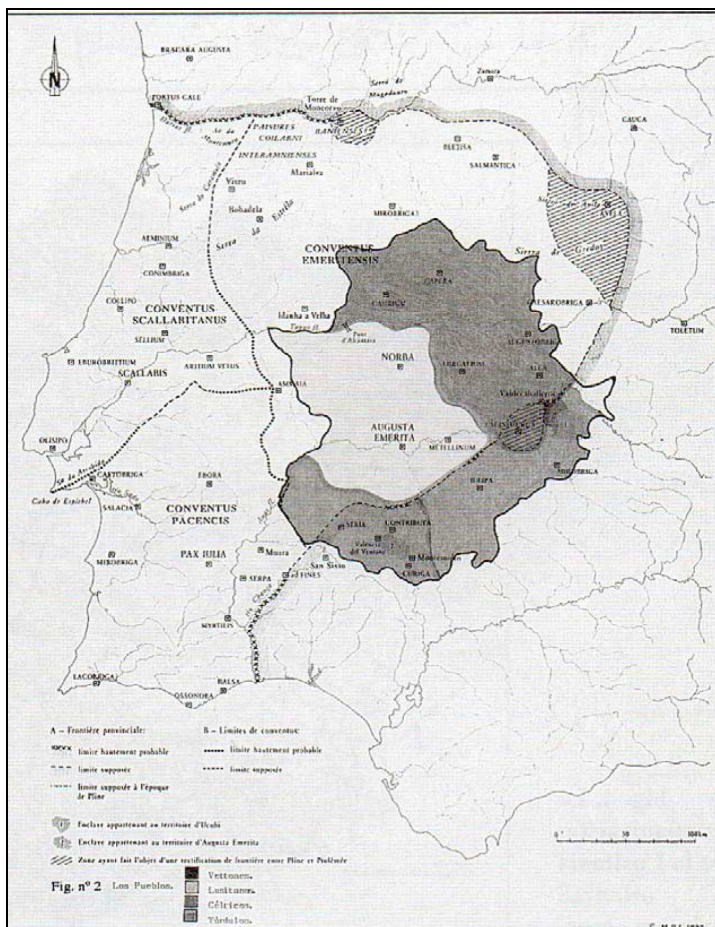


Figure I: The three Lusitanian conventus, over the current Extremadura and the Protohistorical peoples within its territory (Alonso Sánchez & Fernández Corrales 2000: 97)

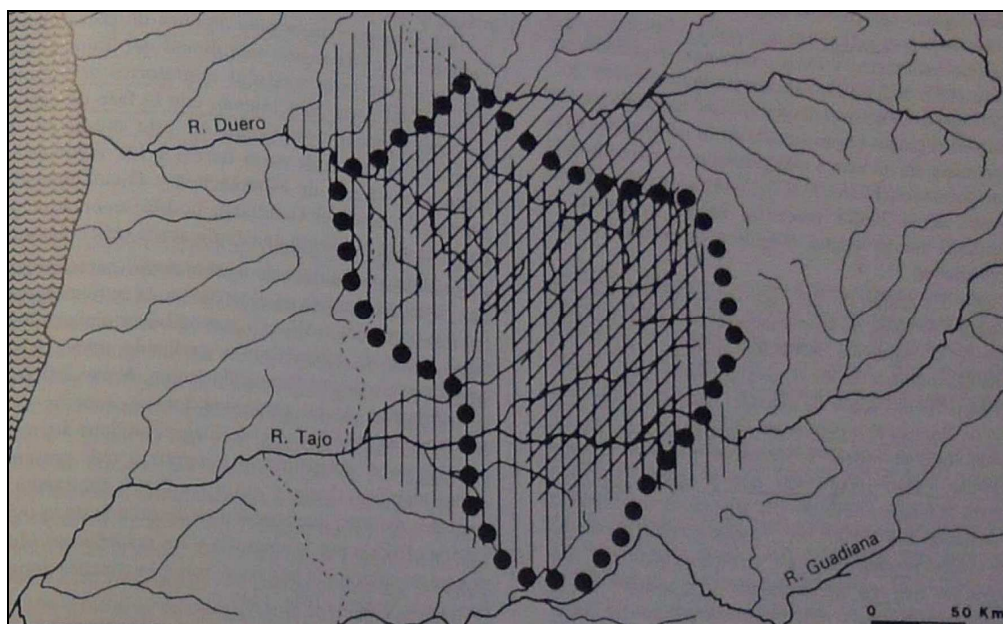


Figure II: The Later Iron Age Vettonian territory, defined by written sources (black spots), the verracos zoomorphic sculptures (vertical lines) and incised comb pottery (diagonal lines) (Álvarez Sanchís 1999: 327)



Figure III: The Eastern limits of Roman Lusitania (by ourselves)



Figure IV: The "Toros de Guisando", four typical Vettonian verracos near Madrid (by ourselves)

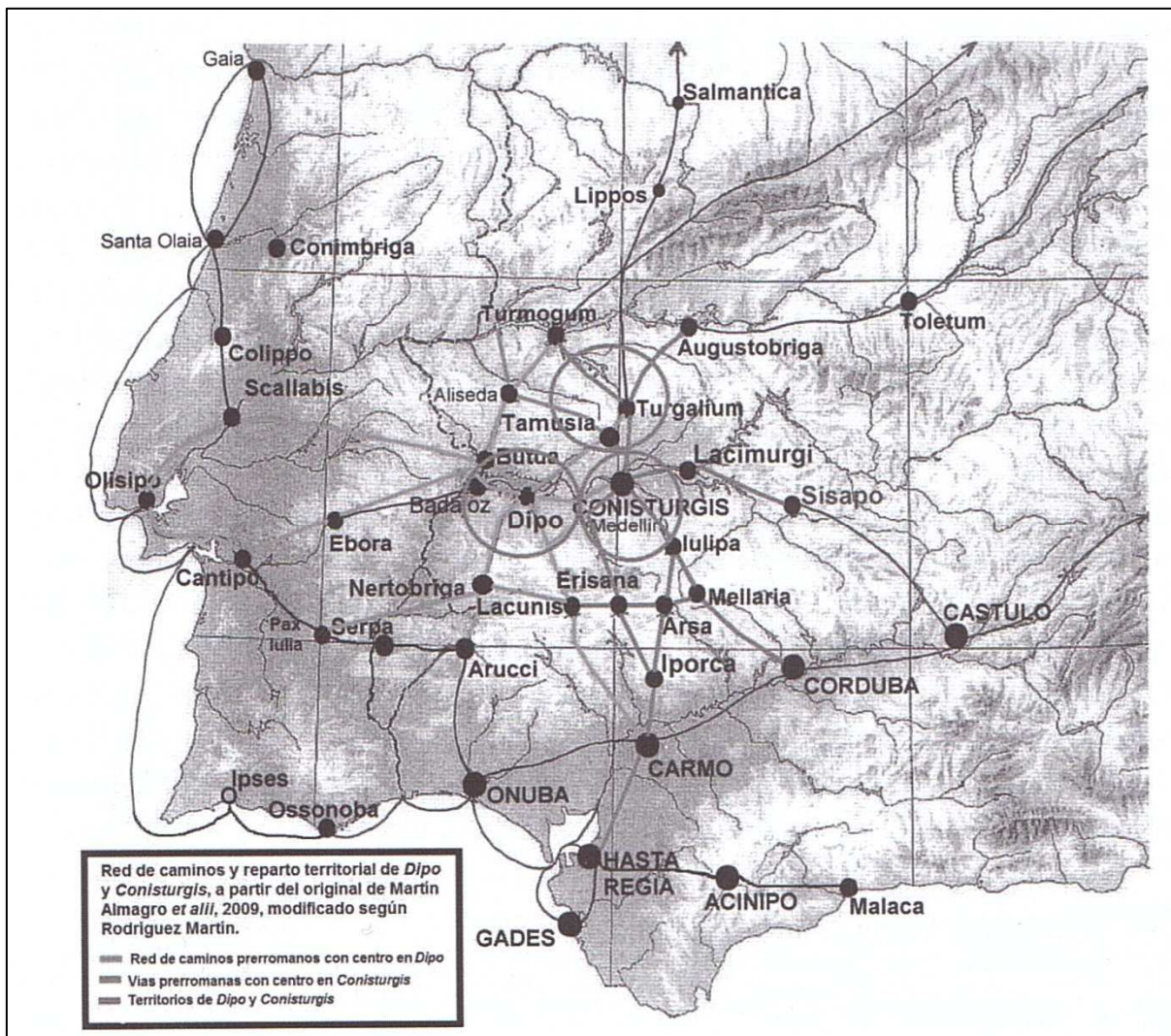


Figure V: Inner land routes in South-western Iberia at the Orientalizing period (Rodríguez Martín 2010: 119)