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Encounters in the Ditch: Ritual and the Middle Ground in an Iron Age Hillfort in Galicia (Spain)

The late 5th century BC is a period of deep transformation in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula, the area called Callaecia by the Romans. Almost everything changes during this century, from the smallest artifacts to the whole landscape. Hillforts in the mountains are abandoned and new settlements are established in the valleys, new types of fibulae appear, pottery is radically transformed—most strikingly the decorative grammar. Among these changes, one has to be singled out for its long-lasting repercussions: the arrival of Mediterranean sailors¹. The presence of southerners was not strange to this Atlantic end of the world. There is some archaeological evidence from Phoenician and even Mycenaean visits in southern Galicia and northern Portugal. A few glass beads, rock art representing Mediterranean boats, and iron implements have been discovered in the area dated to the late 2nd millennium BC and early 1st millennium BC².

Yet nothing is comparable to what would happen from the late 5th century BC onwards. It is no longer daring explorers, lost sailors or curious merchants that will roam the coasts of northwestern Iberia, but well-organized trading expeditions whose aim was to exploit the rich mineral resources of the region. Some of the traders probably spent part of the year living with the local populations inside their hillforts or beside them. Well over fifty hillforts in Callaecia have yielded Punic or Greek artifacts (pottery, glass beads, coins) for the period comprised between the 5th and 2nd century BC and in some of them Punic finds are counted by the hundred. In fact, a few coastal hillforts became important emporia, where trade between foreigners and locals was channeled.

The opening of the northwest of Iberia to the Mediterranean economies was made possible by previous travels from the Late Bronze Age onwards, which furnished important knowledge about this remote area. However, the turning point in the Atlantic-Mediterranean relations cannot be explained without the explorations conducted by the Carthaginians during the second half of the 5th century BC. At least two main expeditions left Carthage at that time³: one was led by Himilco and headed for the northern Atlantic, the other one, with Hanno as a commander, sailed south down the west coast of Africa. Himilco may have reached as far as the British Isles, although data about his travel are scant and very obscure. Anyway, if it did reach Britain it had no immediate repercussions of any kind. That was not the case with Callaecia, since after Himilco's explorations the area would be fully incorporated into the Mediterranean exchange networks. Himilco, and probably other explorers whose names and feats have not been preserved for posterity, most

¹ GONZÁLEZ-RUIBAL 2006.

² GONZÁLEZ-RUIBAL 2004, 289–290.

³ CUNLIFFE 2001, 89–90.

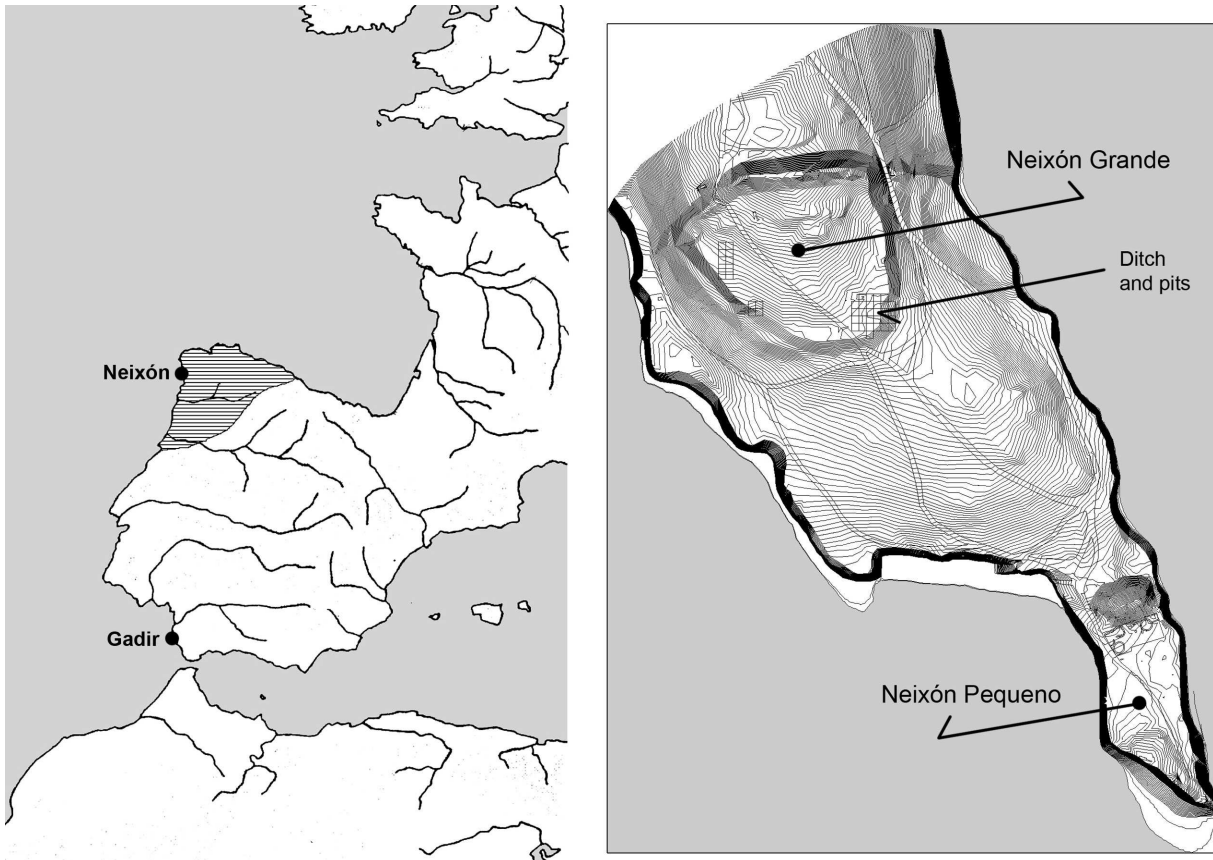


Fig. 1 - Map of Castro Grande de Neixón with its location in NW Iberia.

likely obtained strategic information on berths, settlements, mineral resources, and the local peoples that enabled the subsequent trading operations in the region.

Neixón hillforts and the punic trade

One place is key to understanding the evolution of the relationship between Punics and indigenous populations in northwestern Iberia: Os Castros de Neixón (A Coruña)⁴. This site is composed of two adjacent hillforts: Neixón Pequeno and Neixón Grande. The first one was inhabited during the early Iron Age (8th-5th centuries BC) and the second one from the middle Iron Age to the Late Roman period (4th century BC – 5th century AD). The longevity of the settlement may be explained by its strategic location: the hillforts were founded on a coastal promontory endowed with good natural harbors and they were located close to rich tin sources. Besides, the place was next to the main natural route to the interior of Galicia: the river Ulla.

Neixón Pequeno has some of the earliest evidence of Punic trade in Galicia: an aryballos of polychromatic glass was found in the 1970s, dated to the 6th or 5th century BC and another fragment from the same type of container, but of a later date (3rd-2nd c. BC), was documented in 2007, this time in Neixón Grande⁵. Furthermore, during the latest excavations two shards of Punic pottery have been discovered in Neixón Pequeno, which can be stratigraphically dated to the 5th century BC. It is not by chance that the

⁴ AYÁN VILA 2005, 2008.

⁵ AYÁN VILA ET AL. 2008.

Punics ended up in Neixón. Apart from the aforementioned strategic location of the hillfort, there is much evidence of metallurgy at the Early Iron Age site, already noticed during the previous excavations in the 1920s and 1970s⁶. Remains from the smelting and processing of bronze appear almost everywhere and in relatively large quantities. During the excavations of the summer of 2008 alone 26 fragments of crucibles and 6 molds turned up, along with numerous elaborated artifacts (fibulae, pieces of cauldrons, rods, a knife or razor, etc.). After the abandonment of Neixón Pequeno during the 5th century BC, metallurgical activities will continue to play an important role in the neighboring Neixón Grande from the 4th century BC onwards⁷. Tin was obtained in the cape itself: traces from ancient mining have been recorded in different points around the hillfort⁸. If the Punics wanted metal, Neixón was the perfect place to start a trading relationship.

The site was abandoned shortly after the arrival of the first Punic merchants but a new, larger, hillfort was built a hundred meters inland. It is tempting to see in this change an influence of the Punic presence. The tiny Neixón Pequeno (pequeno means "small" in Galician) was not really suitable to carry out frequent and large-scale exchanges. That was not the case with Neixón Grande. The hillfort occupies a larger surface and there is a wide plateau around the site that makes the circulation of people and commodities easier.

Neixón Grande has the outward appearance of the typical Atlantic hillfort: it has around one hectare, a circular shape, and it is enclosed by a ditch and an earthen wall. Resemblances with the average Iron Age settlement end there, though. Whereas most sites are packed with circular stone houses, as corresponds with a village, in Neixón there are only pits, at least until the early 1st century BC. We have only a few parallels for this in the northwest of Iberia⁹, although there are good examples in southern Britain, as we will see. For at least four centuries, it does not seem that Neixón Grande was a usual kind of settlement, but a special locale, an area of collective storage where exchanges and rituals took place involving different communities¹⁰. We know of sites during the Iron Age in Callaecia that played the role of central places for exchanges between groups¹¹, but there are not many in which those contacts involved locals and aliens. This foreign element makes Neixón especially interesting: from a cultural point of view, the activities that were carried out in the hillfort were inherently hybrid in nature. Let us take a closer look at the evidence.

As we mentioned, the hillfort was surrounded by a ditch. Originally, the site was enclosed by the ditch only: there was no wall, rampart or bank. The function was probably more symbolic than practical at this stage—that is, to mark out a specific area. Our excavations in the ditch discovered the entrance (or at least one entrance) to the hillfort, looking east, and some very interesting materials associated with it. The orientation to the east is meaningful, as it is found in many Iron Age hillforts in Atlantic Europe, and it might be related with notions of life, reproduction and fertility¹². The character of the finds reinforced the idea that this was not a regular ditch, either. It had been filled up with local and Punic pottery, a few singular objects (such as fibulae, an axe, unguentaria and a decorated antler) and food remains, including a large amount of shells (mainly mussels, but also cockles, oysters, razor shells and clams) and animal bones.

Most local vessels were thrown unbroken to the ditch, a very strange fact in Callaecia, where pottery always appears shattered to minute pieces and well worn. Besides, the characteristic indigenous drinking vessel (a sort of mug) is overrepresented—17% of the total assemblage in the main layer of deposition¹³. The analysis of the local pottery indicates that complete banquet sets were discarded, including cooking pots, large vessels for serving food, and drinking equipment. Within the local assemblage, the existence of two complete unguentaria has to be singled out. These were extremely rare in Callaecia and were imitated from Punic types. Punic pottery was much more fragmented and it was composed of askoi, kalathoi, jugs, bowls,

⁶ ACUÑA 1976.

⁷ GÓMEZ FILGUEIRAS 2008.

⁸ AYÁN VILA ET AL. 2008.

⁹ e.g. MARTINS 1988.

¹⁰ AYÁN VILA 2008, 415–418.

¹¹ GONZÁLEZ-RUIBAL 2006-2007, 317–320.

¹² PARKER PEARSON 1999.

¹³ GONZÁLEZ-RUIBAL 2005, 209.

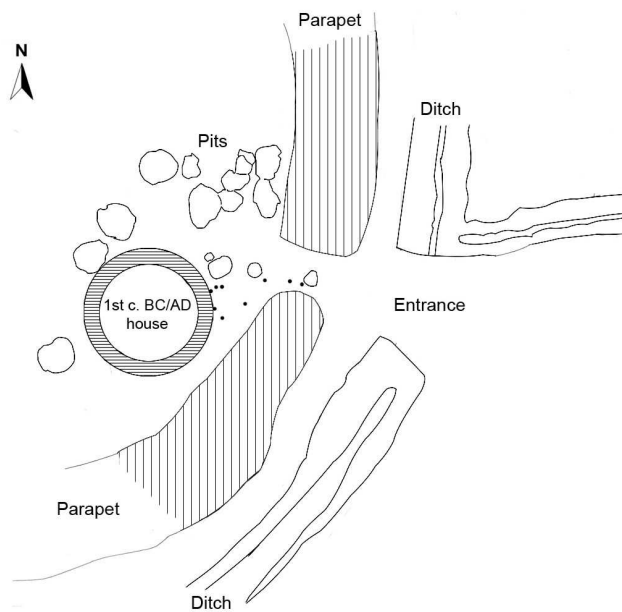


Fig. 2 - The ditch and pits of Castro Grande de Neixón, where offerings were deposited.

they have not been preserved. The excavation of pits probably followed a certain rhythm and may have coincided both with local feasts, as it has been suggested in Britain¹⁷, and perhaps with celebrations involving locals and traders.

What we have here is clearly a case of structured deposits as found in other places of the Atlantic rim. They have been well studied in southern England, where examples of ditches and pits with ritual offerings are numerous¹⁸. There are even some parallels for Neixón there: Danebury hillfort, for instance, had many pits, which were excavated and filled according to a particular ritual calendar¹⁹. In the filling, human and animal remains were often mixed together. In France, Britain and Ireland in general, many enclosures have been discovered which fulfilled ritual functions. Offerings were often made in the ditch that delimited those places. The ritual (and political) activities carried out at some enclosures is especially well known in Ireland, thanks to the information of the early sagas²⁰. The materials deposited in other Atlantic sites and in our case study are often similar: dogs, for example, were present among the offerings of Danebury and Gournay and in the latter place, young pigs were butchered and eaten²¹. Whereas in Danebury animal remains were buried in pits, in Gournay, they were buried in the ditch that surrounded the shrine.

Yet Neixón is more than an example of an Atlantic ritual enclosure. Actually, it is difficult to say where the Atlantic ends and the Mediterranean starts. This is in part because many ritual practices were similar all over Europe and the Mediterranean during the 1st millennium BC. Dogs, for example, are a typical

dishes and amphorae. Imported Mediterranean pottery makes for a remarkable percentage of the deposited materials (up to 80% of all shards on the northern side of the entrance).

Faunal remains are also very interesting: apart from the usual representation of cattle, sheep, goats, pig and deer, remains have been found of dog, piglet, and birds, which are very rare in Callaecia¹⁴. It seems that both artifacts and food refuse were discarded from the access to the hillfort, since they appear concentrated on both sides of the entrance passage¹⁵.

As layers of pots, shells and bones were being deposited in the ditch, people were digging pits inside the hillfort and filling them with a variety of artifacts including local and Punic pottery, shells, animal bones, charcoal, and metallic objects. Most likely, the pits were grain silos originally, before they were reused as ritual deposits¹⁶. The conservation in the pits is worse than in the ditch and organic materials are fewer and in poor condition. If human bones were deposited, as we know it occurred in similar contexts elsewhere,

¹⁴ FERNÁNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2008.

¹⁵ AYÁN VILA ET AL. 2007.

¹⁶ AYÁN VILA 2008, 416–417.

¹⁷ HILL 1995.

¹⁸ *IBIDEM*.

¹⁹ CUNLIFFE 1992, 1993.

²⁰ RAFTERY 1994, 65–83.

²¹ MENIEL 1992, 47–63.



Fig. 3 - Punic and local pottery and other artefacts (fibula, bone shaft and Punic glass) deposited in the ditch and pits.

ritual offering among Punics in the Iberian Peninsula²² and they were sometimes eaten²³. The same occurs with piglets. The use of pits for religious purposes is also documented among the Punics²⁴ especially in southern Iberia²⁵ and the same happens with banquets, which had relevant social and ritual meanings for both Atlantic and Mediterranean communities. Banquets and pits, in fact, are strongly linked among both

²² NIVEAU DE VILLEDARY, FERRER ALBELDA 2003.

²³ CARDOSO, GOMES 1997.

²⁴ NIVEAU DE VILLEDARY 2003.

²⁵ NIVEAU DE VILLEDARY 2006.

communities. This shared middle ground, expressed through ritual acts, obviously made the exchanges between foreigners and natives easier. On the other hand, the difficulty to distinguish between Mediterranean and Atlantic has also to do with the hybrid character of the rituals that took place in Neixón. They were neither purely Mediterranean nor purely Atlantic. Banquets, for example, most probably included local beverages and Mediterranean wine, since both local and foreign alcoholic containers have turned up in the ditch. What we see is a third space opened by the contact between traders and locals. In any case, we can identify clear Mediterranean elements, unknown before in Callaecia, such as unguentaria (although locally made!), askoi, kalathoi, and wine, carried in Punic amphorae. The askós is especially relevant, because it tends to appear in ritual contexts in the Punic world, like tombs, shrines and votive pits. Thus far, askoi have appeared only in coastal hillforts in Callaecia, where the encounters between foreigners and locals took place.

Obviously, the ditch was not filled up in one go and the pits were not dug all simultaneously. There were different episodes of deposition and pit digging, but in both cases, these activities came to a halt at some point during the late 2nd century BC. A wall was then built around the hillfort and shortly after, the digging and filling of pits stopped and stone houses were built inside the enclosure. Neixón kept on being an important commercial enclave until the end of the Roman period. Imports from the southern and eastern Mediterranean appear as late as the 5th century AD. What is lost in the transit between the 2nd and the 1st centuries BC is the ritual character of the exchanges. Structured deposits and offerings disappear, along with evidence from banquets, in spite of the continuous input of Mediterranean goods into the hillfort. This transformation was probably produced by a change in the actors involved in trade. Around the early 1st century BC the Romans, who had conquered Punic southern Iberia a century before, finally managed to take hold of the commercial routes to the northwest of Iberia—after several failed attempts. A new situation emerged, which will be less and less a shared middle ground and a relation between equals, and more and more a colonial and capitalist enterprise. The conquest of Callaecia by the Romans during the late 1st century BC effectively and definitively put an end to the old trading system, where rituality restricted, for a very long time, the use of power and violence.

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