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The role of cult places in shaping landscapes during the Roman expansion: an Iberian perspective on a Mediterranean process

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Abstract

In this paper I analyse the role of sanctuaries as centres for the development and organisation of collective identity during the period of Roman expansion in Iberia. Firstly, I will review some central Mediterranean contexts that can shed light on the processes that took place in the Iberian Peninsula. Secondly, I will analyse the most important strategies and rituals practiced at cult locations in order to attach meaning to them and connect people to places. I will focus my attention on the building and rebuilding of monumental structures and the specific votive offerings that are exclusive to each sanctuary, with data from eastern Iberia to illustrate these ritual practices. The final section of this paper will be devoted to the example of the sanctuary of La Cueva del Valle (Badajoz, western Iberia), which clearly presents some of the characteristics of Iberian sanctuaries discussed here. In conclusion, during the 2nd and 1st centuries BC we observe intense activity at cult places, which ended when their symbolic attributes were transferred to the Roman towns, except in some rural districts where the sanctuaries played a key role in integrating and building local identity.

Keywords: Iberian Iron Age, sanctuaries, votives, Roman expansion, place-making

Roman expansion beyond the urban centres: the role of sanctuaries

Traditionally, studies of Roman expansion have assigned a predominant role to towns and urban networks as the main axes of territorial articulation. According to this view, political control and the Roman socio-ideological system spread out mainly from the Roman colonies and municipalities. This historiographical schema has created a

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AN: 3289708 ; Tesse D. Stek, Andr Carneiro.; The Archaeology of Roman Portugal in Its Western Mediterranean Context
Account: s3723167.main.ehost

marked binomial distribution between focal areas (articulated by communications networks and towns) and peripheral areas (rural regions). In order to develop alternative explanatory models, research in different areas of the Mediterranean is now undertaking a critical review of models that present urban–rural dichotomies. Today, urban and non-urban sites tend to be understood as the extreme ends of a spectrum, with intermediate organisational forms that adopt aspects of both (Scopacasa 2015, 162–163).

In the Greek world, the conventional view of mutually exclusive urban *versus* non-urban categories has been questioned, for example in the study of diversity in political communities beyond the conventional sphere of the polis (Vlassopoulos 2007, 3–8). Within this framework, sanctuaries are treated as focal points for the integration and territorial organisation of communities in some rural regions of Asia Minor (Williamson 2012).

In the case of the Italian Peninsula, studies of mountainous areas such as Umbria or the Tyrrhenian region (considered marginal in traditional research) show a considerable similarity to the territorial organisation of more urbanised areas in Etruria or Latium. Researchers recognise that towns were not the only centres of social, political, and economic activities, and indicate the importance of sanctuaries as territorial aggregators (Stek 2009; 2015a; 2015b).

In the Iberian Peninsula, Roman expansion was concentrated in the towns, although sanctuaries also played a crucial role in shaping the landscape, especially in the eastern region. Ideological strategies and ritual practices linked to sanctuaries promoted a sense of community and sustained the Iberian political geography that existed prior to the Roman conquest (Grau 2016). Later, the sanctuaries played an important role in Roman expansion in the 2nd and 1st centuries BC, as attested to by monumentalisation and the intensification of ritual activities (Tortosa and Ramallo 2017).

In order to recognise how sanctuaries played a key role in spatial organisation and as symbolic centres of collective identity, on the following pages I will review some examples from the Italian Peninsula that may shed some light on what occurred in the Iberian Peninsula.

The role of sanctuaries in contested landscapes of the Roman expansion: a look at ancient Italy

I now turn my attention to the Italic contexts that have frequently been linked to Iberian sanctuaries in terms of their cultural influence on buildings and monuments (Ramallo 1993). In this comparative perspective, I found interesting concomitants that are probably related to similar social dynamics, as well as to the strategies and processes employed by Rome to expand their domains in the Mediterranean Basin.

The ancient region of Lucania was effectively brought under Roman dominion during the Hannibalic Wars of the late 3rd century BC, despite strong local support

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for the Carthaginians. These circumstances determined the Roman political approach of exercising strict control over the region. Fortified settlements, such as Serra di Vaglio, Roscigno, Garaguso, and Roccagloriosa, were progressively abandoned, with the notable exception of Civita di Tricarico, which instead concentrated its population on the highest part of the hill (Battiloro and Osanna 2015, 171). The harshest political effects were the expropriation of large areas of Lucan territory, which was turned into *ager publicus populi romani* (Cappelletti 2002, 128–168; Battiloro and Osanna 2015, 170). Most of the rural areas were transformed into public lands and a *praefectura* administered the regions from the colony of Potentia (Battiloro and Osanna 2015, 172). With these changes, Rome's policy in the region sought to favour pro-Roman oligarchies that could exercise control over the region and eradicate hostile factions (Torelli 1993, xviii).

The disappearance of local centres correlated with a decline in the number of sanctuaries, but not their complete eradication as proposed by traditional research (Battiloro and Osanna 2015, 172). In fact, subsequent activity at the sanctuaries presents a very heterogeneous picture, although clearly marked by transformations in the previous period. Some cult places disappeared, while others suffered a contraction, such as Chiaromonte and Torre di Satriano. In the case of the latter, a revitalisation is documented in the 1st century BC, marked by the reorganisation of the building complex and changes in the types of offerings, for example the appearance of lamps, which were non-existent in the previous phases (Battiloro and Osanna 2015, 176). These changes are interpreted as the introduction of Roman ritual practices into a place of indigenous worship, a phenomenon perhaps connected with the development of a new pattern of rural settlement during Romanisation (Battiloro and Osanna 2015, 177).

In Civita di Tricarico, an Etruscan-Italic temple was built in the late 3rd century or early 2nd century BC on the ruins of an earlier sanctuary (Battiloro and Osanna 2015, 177). The building expresses the acquisition of new Roman cultural models by Lucan communities (de Cazanove 2011, 35). Also noteworthy is the monumentalisation of Rossano di Vaglio, which became a focus for ritual activity in the region. Two construction phases are recognised here, one in the late 3rd century BC and another in the 1st century BC that coincides with the rebuilding of Torre di Satriano (Battiloro and Osanna 2015, 185). A series of inscriptions in the Oscan language and the Greek alphabet mentions citizens of Roman origin, some with the *senatus sententia* formula, which proves the existence of an administration inspired by Roman models in the 2nd century BC. The decline and final abandonment of the sanctuary occurred when the ritual focus was transferred to Roman Potentia, which would become one of the *municipalia sacra* of the region (Battiloro and Osanna 2015, 187).

In Samnium, the Iron Age landscape was organised under a constellation of local political units. They enjoyed political independence but were united by a shared identity, to make up what the historical record describes as 'the Samnites' (Letta 1994). This ethnic identity would be reinforced in situations of tension and conflict in

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the late 4th and 3rd centuries BC, for example during the Samnite Wars when there was fierce opposition to the Roman conquest. In this historical dynamic there was friction between the pro-Roman groups favoured by the Roman conquest and those who were discriminated against (Santangelo 2007; Isayev 2013, 11–34).

In this fragmented political landscape and in a context of increasing tension between local communities, sanctuaries became centres of economic and political focus for dispersed communities. Cult places appear to have brought together different groups, as they were not usually associated with a single settlement and created bonds of identity between communities (Tagliamonte 1996, 156–202; Stek 2009, 65–67).

One of the most important sanctuaries in the region was Pietrabbondante, considered by some scholars to be the ethnic sanctuary *par excellence* (Tagliamonte 1996). In the 2nd century BC, major monumentalisation was financed by some of the most powerful families in the region, as evidenced by the epigraphic documentation (Tagliamonte 2007, 68). The same Hellenistic model of architectural monumentalisation is found at other sanctuaries in the region, for example at Campochiaro and Schiavi d'Abruzzo, and shortly after the Samnite Wars at Vastogirardi, Atessa, and Quadri (Stek 2009; 2015a). With this building programme, local groups demonstrated their economic capacity and cultural credentials, reinforcing their position in a contested landscape.

The Italic sanctuaries cited as examples show the identity creation process on a regional level, with the aggregation of different local communities at certain historical moments and especially at the time of the Roman conquest. Although their origins lie in the pre-Roman era, the different rural sanctuaries were undoubtedly linked to the transformations brought about by the Roman conquest. The development of settlements in their surroundings shows that an increase in ritual activity and the monumentalisation of the sanctuaries may be linked to the development of those local communities that constituted the base units of society after the Roman conquest (Stek 2015a, 404).

The processes described are similar to those documented in eastern Iberia. This area was brought under Roman dominion in a context of conflict and local power struggles during the Second Punic War. Some local polities were destroyed, while others were promoted by the Romans according to local attitudes and their fidelity to the new Roman power. In this contested landscape, cult places could acquire a certain importance in the cohesion of communities and the formation of focal spaces for shaping landscapes.

It is possible that the newly established Roman power would not have welcomed the emergence of powerful political entities centralised in urban centres. Roman rulers used local *oppida* and their territorial structures but limited the concentration of power by promoting political fragmentation and equilibrium between local factions. Sanctuaries contributed to the creation of collective identities without encouraging political centralisation and urbanisation, later developed and formalised by the Romans from the time of Augustus onwards (Abad *et al*. 2006). During the first stage

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of Roman expansion, the type of aggregation needed to structure the landscape was better accommodated in the sanctuaries than in the towns.

Here, I propose the role of sanctuaries as a focal point for the local communities, centres of settlement systems, and symbolic kernels in the period prior to the development of the Roman towns in the late 1st century BC. As we have seen, the roles of sanctuaries as spaces of aggregation and social interaction in this context are similar to the roles of other cult places in the Mediterranean. The power of local elites was also expressed through the development of sanctuaries, rather than through public buildings in the towns (Patterson 1992, 149–157).

Place-making in the sanctuaries of Iberia

Different strategies and ritual practices were employed at cult places in order to attach meanings and connect people to places. Two of the most prominent strategies recognised in Iberian sanctuaries are the actions of building and rebuilding monumental structures, and specific votive offerings that are unique to each sanctuary.

Building and monumentalisation of the sanctuaries

Prior to the Roman conquest, most cult places in Iberia were natural sites or ephemeral constructions that have left hardly any trace. However, during the Roman expansion we see the monumentalisation of sanctuaries in the south-east of the Iberian Peninsula. This process was first described by S. Ramallo and his colleagues (Ramallo 1993; Ramallo *et al*. 1998). They analysed the formal and decorative attributes of the buildings, proposing parallels on the Italian peninsula and dating the process to the 2nd to 1st century BC. In recent years, however, the geographical and temporal framework of this Iberian sanctuary monumentalisation process has been expanded to reveal a series of different dynamics in the Republican and Early Roman periods (Ramallo and Brotons 2014, 38; Grau *et al*. 2017). Today, we can identify the monumentalisation of sanctuaries over a wide area of the Iberian Peninsula (Fig. 12.1). Sanctuaries such as Torreparedones and Atalayuelas in Andalusia (Rueda *et al.* 2005; Rueda 2011) and La Carraposa (Pérez Ballester and Borredá 2004), La Serreta (Grau *et al.* 2017), and La Malladeta (Rouillard *et al.* 2014) in eastern Iberia have been added to the traditional examples of La Luz, La Encarnación, and El Cerro de los Santos (Ramallo 1993; Ramallo *et al.* 1998) to make up a more complex picture. Differences in the forms and chronologies of these building processes are related to the peculiarities of local initiatives within a wider trend. The initial monumentalisation of these sanctuaries during the 2nd century BC (Ramallo 1993) is followed by repeated and episodic rebuilding until as late as the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, indicating the importance of these building activities (for a summary of these processes see Grau *et al.* 2017).

In my opinion, the building and transformation of sanctuaries became a powerful mechanism of reaffirmation for the local community, requiring an organisational effort and the mobilisation of considerable material resources (Fig. 12.2). They are

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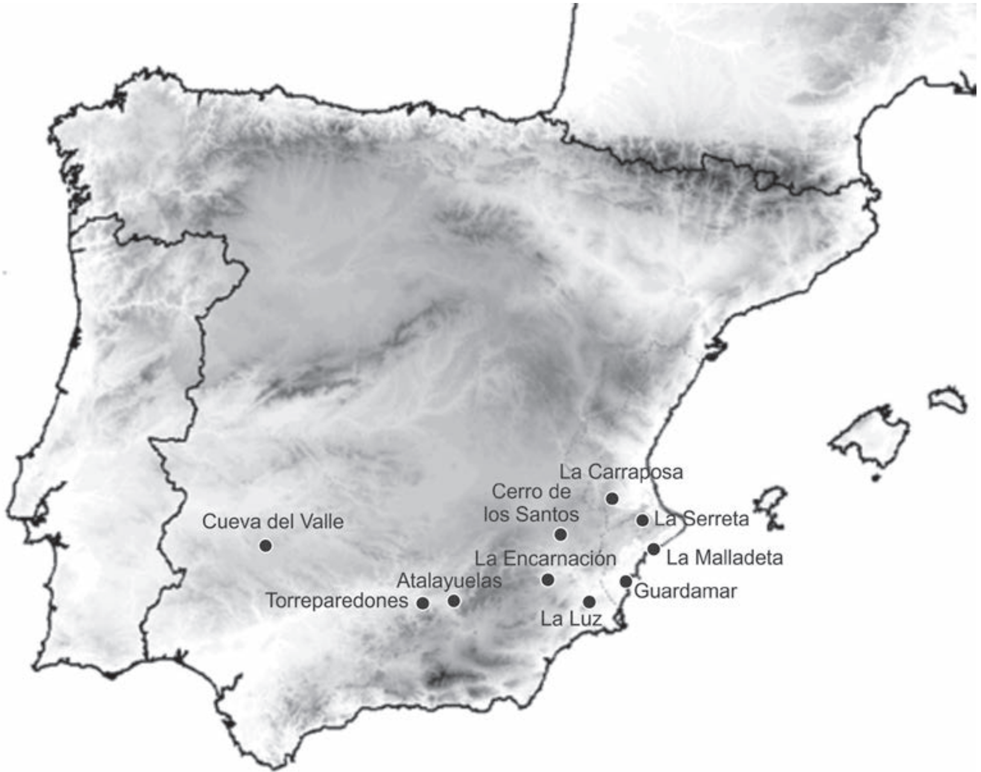

Fig. 12.1. Map of the Iberian Peninsula showing the main sanctuaries cited in the text (Map: author).

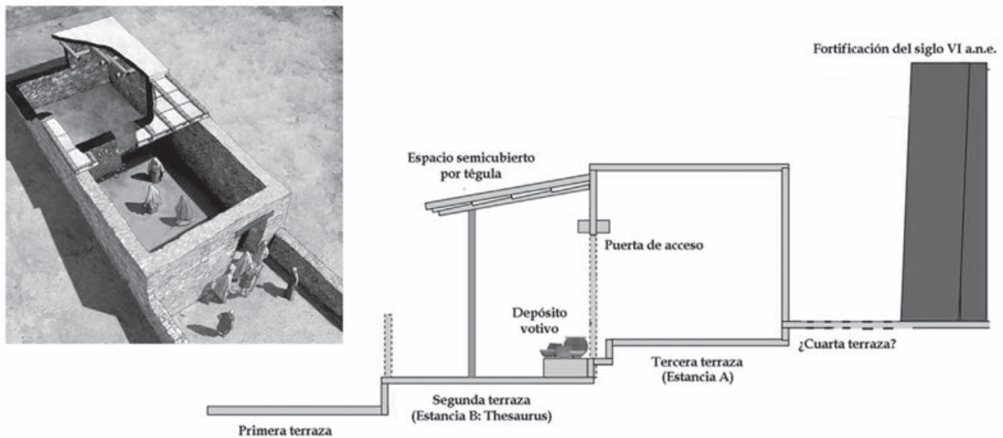

Fig. 12.2. Reconstruction of the sanctuary of Las Atalayuelas, Jaén (After Rueda 2011).

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an example of the materialisation of ideology that required a huge investment in resources and workforce management, the high cost of which implies an important source of power (Demarrais *et al*. 1996). These building practices left an imprint on the communities that participated in their creation, as collective construction is an important form of social exchange (Barrett 1994).

Common offerings to build local identities

The most important archaeological evidence for ritual activity at Iberian sanctuaries is the hundreds or sometimes thousands of votive offerings that make up the sacred deposits of each cult place. A detailed analysis and interpretation of votive offerings is beyond the scope of this paper, so here I focus on a single aspect that appears to be particularly important as a strategy for strengthening community identity. A specific group of objects were chosen to be deposited as offerings at each sanctuary. The objects were not usually of a single, exclusive type, but there is clear evidence for the selection of different objects to those of neighbouring cult places. A sense of belonging was expressed through the deposit of a specific offering in each place (Grau 2016).

For example, La Serreta d'Alcoi had a sacred deposit of nearly 500 terracotta figurines. Different types of figurine were recovered: incense burners in the shape of female heads, group compositions, male heads and, the most abundant, female figurines (Fig. 12.3). The latter have been linked to fertility worship at the sanctuary (Grau *et al*. 2017).

The sanctuary of La Carrasposa near the Iberian town of Saitabi contained a collection of nearly 100 small terracotta figurines representing animals, mainly oxen, horses, and rams. Other votive offerings, such as pottery vessels linked to ritual meals, accompanied the clay figures. Figurines representing animals have been interpreted as offerings to favour the fecundity and protection of cattle (Pérez Ballester and Borreda 2004).

The sacred deposit of Coimbra del Barranco Ancho, near the Iberian town of the same name, contained nearly 60 incense burners in the shape of female heads. These have been associated with an agricultural goddess. Small silver masks were also found (García Cano *et al.* 1997).

At the sanctuary of La Encarnación, near the Iberian town of Los Villaricos, offerings of small metal sheets were common, as well as other gold and silver items. The discovery of almost 100 pieces of precious metal characterises this place of worship. Other votive offerings included fibulas and sculptures (Brotons and Ramallo 2010).

The sanctuary of El Cigarralejo, located on a summit adjacent to a large complex consisting of a settlement and extensive *necropolis*, is characterised by a votive deposit of almost 200 small sandstone carvings. They are mainly sculptures and bas-reliefs of horses and a few human figures. The deposit is accompanied by other offerings, including rings and fibulas. The horse figurines have been interpreted as offerings to a protector divinity of horses (Lillo *et al.* 2004).

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Fig. 12.3. Terracotta figurines of La Serreta d'Alcoi (After Grau et al. 2017).

At the sanctuary of La Luz in Verdolay (Murcia) the predominant offering was of bronze human figurines, accompanied by other pieces, such as small votive falcate-style swords, rings, and a large assemblage of pottery, possibly linked to ritual meals (Tortosa and Comino 2013). Nearly 70 bronze figurines were also found wrapped in cloth (possibly linen).

The small bronze figurines representing worshippers at the sanctuaries are typical offerings at the cult places of Upper Andalusia. Thousands of bronze votive offerings have been found at Collado de los Jardines (Santa Elena) and Los Altos del Sotillo (Castellar), both in Jaén province. These figurines vary according to the territory, the community, and the specific religious practice (Rueda 2011).

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The existence of these characteristic types of offering at each sanctuary can be explained by the existence of different ways of worshipping, with symbols appropriate for the divinity in question. Specialist workshops associated with each sanctuary would have encouraged the commoditisation of the offerings. However, there can be no doubt that they contributed to the development of shared practice among those making the offerings and the sense of belonging to a community.

An example of a cult place in western Iberia: La Cueva del Valle (Zalamea de la Serena)

The final section of this paper will be devoted to the sanctuary of La Cueva del Valle in Badajoz, western Iberia, which clearly presents some of the characteristics of Iberian sanctuaries mentioned above. A comprehensive analysis is outside the scope of this paper, but I will describe some of the main features and relate them to the process of place-making through sanctuaries.

La Cueva del Valle is a rock sanctuary that occupies a natural cavity on the Cerro del Puerto, a small hill that separates the municipal areas of Zalamea and Higuera de la Serena and visually dominates the surroundings. La Cueva is in fact a deep, north-facing rock shelter with a slight slope towards the south, where there are traces of human intervention. The interior was carved and outside, next to the mouth, three steps were also cut into the rock to facilitate access to the cavity. In front of the shelter, at a lower level, there is a natural esplanade that probably played an important role in worship activities (Cazorla and Celestino 2010).

The small size of the shelter and the presence of terracotta figurines as votive offerings, as well as its late Iberian chronology, differentiate this cavity from the group of sanctuary-caves that are common in eastern Iberia. The latter are deep cavities dating mainly from the 5th and 4th centuries BC with Iberian cups as the main offerings, but also jewellery and *fibulae* (Grau and Amorós 2013).

The objects found inside are solid, handmade, clay ex-votos depicting naked anthropomorphic figures with marked sexual attributes. More than 300 figurines were found during explorations in the 20th century, plus around 60 examples during the most recent fieldwork. Other deposits included numerous pieces of pottery dated between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD, such as lamps, pateras or plates, and cups. These include around 500 handmade miniature vessels (Fig. 12.4) which have been interpreted not only as votive objects in their own right, but also as containers for offerings (Cazorla and Celestino 2010).

This cult place has a prominent location and a visual connection with its surroundings, particularly with the settlement in the valley. The sites in the area are small fortified settlements located on what few topographic prominences there are in the valley (Fig. 12.5). These singular fortifications represent a new form of settlement during the Late Republican and Imperial periods and are not related to native forms of occupation in the area. Three of them can be found within a radius of

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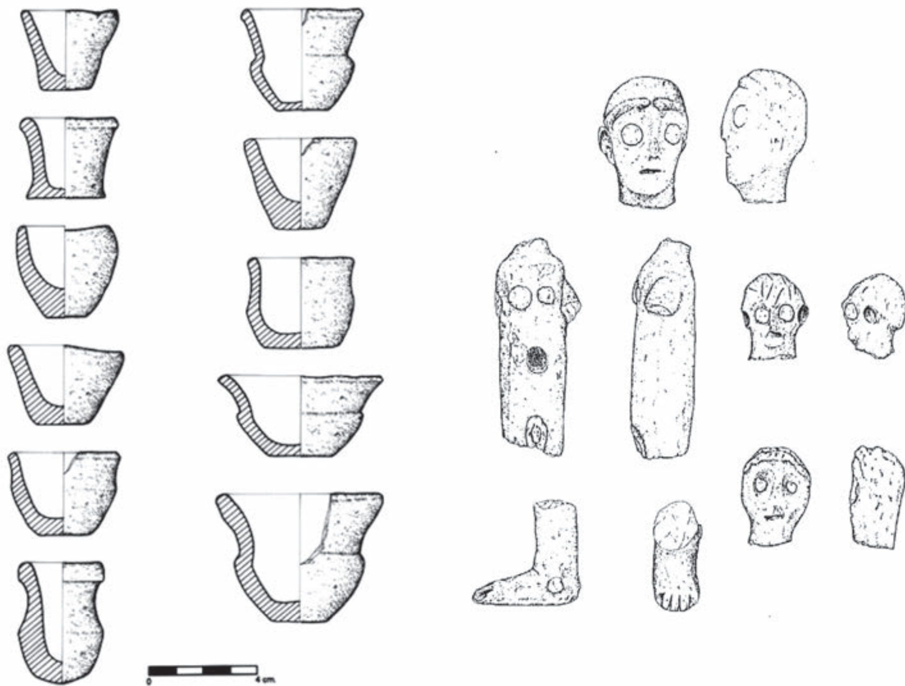

Fig. 12.4. Votives from La Cueva del Valle (After Cazorla and Celestino 2010).

3 km of La Cueva: Cerro Borreguero, El Tesoro, and the enclosure of Cancho Roano, as well as other sites in the nearby valley with which the cave had a looser relationship (Cazorla 2010, 202–203).

La Cueva del Valle was a sanctuary for a new settlement system established during the Roman expansion of the 1st century BC. This new community, possibly made up of local people and new settlers, established a collective focal point in this rock shelter. One of the most important aspects is, in my opinion, the creation of a sense of community based on the shared practice of depositing a specific type of object chosen for this territorial sanctuary. The large number of miniature vessels and terracotta figurines express the idea of a community of worshippers who carry out the same practices and make the same offerings.

The terracotta figurines are not linked to the traditional uses and ritual practices of this region, despite the finds of a few figurines at regional sites, although they are well attested to in other regions, such as Mediterranean Iberia. I am not suggesting the origins of the believers who frequented La Cueva (an issue that is beyond the scope of this paper). However, I would like to emphasise this common aspect of identity-building through shared practices undertaken at the territorial sanctuary.

It should be noted that one of the frequently mentioned cultural aspects of Romanisation is the transfer of cultural patterns from the central areas of the Empire

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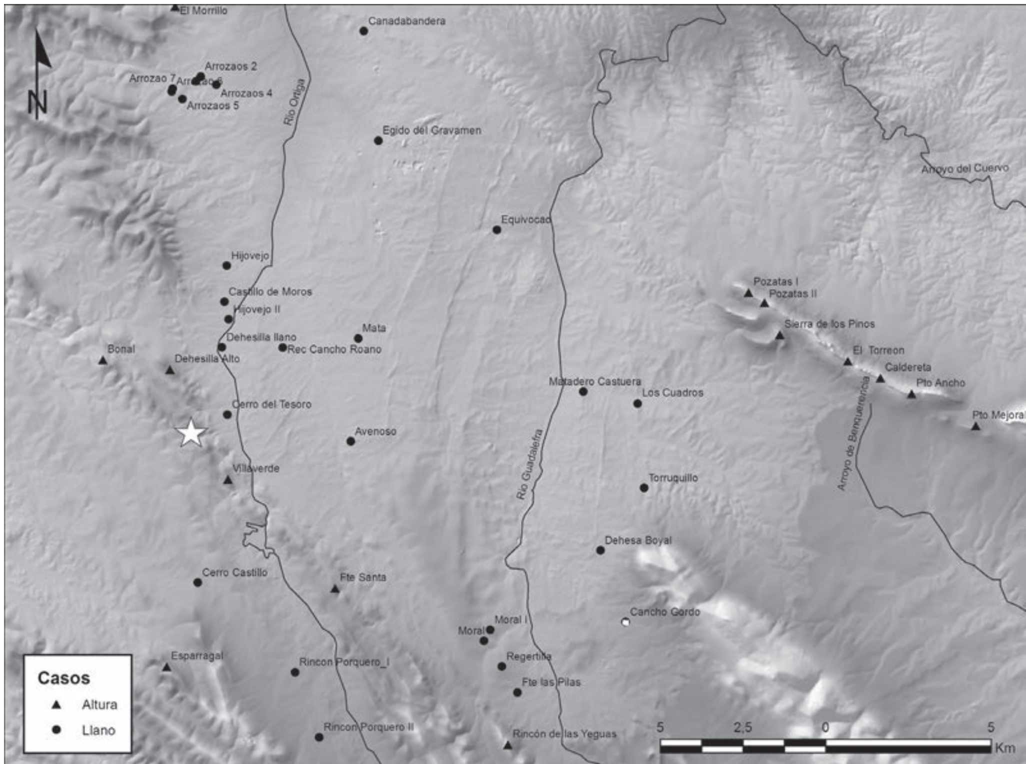

Fig. 12.5. Map of the territory and settlement around La Cueva del Valle (Courtesy of V. Mayoral).

to the peripheries that were being formed as territorial expansion progressed. For example, in the eastern part of the Iberian Peninsula, those elements specifically related to Rome or to the Etruscan-Latian-Campanian areas have been recognised as particularly important influences on the monumentalised sanctuaries of the region (Ramallo 1993). However, in a flexible and emerging view of the Romanisation processes, the plural, mixed, polycentric influences that contributed to shaping Roman culture are also valued. We can recognise traditional revivals of Punic (Van Dommelen 2001) or Iberian elements (Grau and Rueda 2014) among the varied components of this hybrid composition. The process of Roman expansion allowed cultural attributes from areas that were incorporated into the empire early on to be transferred to other areas that were annexed later. Thus, in this new context of hybridisation, we observe the influence of eastern Iberian culture at this western sanctuary of La Cueva del Valle.

Discussion

As occurred in other areas of the Mediterranean, the territories of the Iberian Peninsula that came into contact with Rome had to reinforce their regional identities

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through the aggregation of different local communities. Although their origins lay in the pre-Roman era, rural sanctuaries would undoubtedly have been linked to the landscape transformation processes resulting from these contacts. The development of villages and farms in their vicinities attests to an increase in activity and the expansion of new agricultural strategies. The intensity of activity at these cult places, including frequent (re)building and monumentalisation, must be linked to the development of new rural communities, as has been observed in some Italic regions (Stek 2015a, 404). Similar processes can be seen in the Iberian Peninsula, where collective identities were also anchored in cult spaces in this context of redefinition and change.

The parallels of the Mediterranean sites with those we observe in the Iberian Peninsula are more than evident and should be the subject of a comparative analysis in the future. Such an examination must go beyond architectural similarities observed in the monumentalisation of Iberian sanctuaries (Ramallo 1993) to ascertain the organisation mechanisms of these similar social and territorial contexts. In this interpretative framework we can propose that such similarities could be due to the political mechanisms of indirect Roman intervention. These strategies of domination used local rulers as instruments of control during the first period of expansion. Thus, territorial aggregations and local identities allowed a reordering of the political space that favoured integration into the Roman Empire.

The traditional view of the expansion of Roman power attributed this process to its cultural superiority, features of which included political and legal organisation, the establishment of a market economy based on commercial agriculture, an invincible military, and skills in the arts and engineering (Hingley 2005). From this perspective, material culture was the touchstone for assessing the degree of integration between different communities and regions. This paper, however, is based on a different theoretical background and distances itself from an idealist view based on cultural history. Here, the Roman expansion is understood as an historical process in which different cultural and material realities, including those of the ideological sphere related to cult places, are flexibly integrated. It takes a perspective that understands the role of material culture as an active means of social transformation, and not only as a gradual vector that allows the evaluation of change. In this respect, I agree that 'material culture was actively used to construct, define, redefine and maintain social identities and relationships' (Metzler *et al.* 1995, 2) in the uncertain times of the annexation of local territories into the Roman world.

In the case of the study in question, the adoption of ritual patterns and practices typical of the Roman-Italic culture was selective and combined with other elements of local tradition. However, this did not mean that they represented a 'failed' process of Romanisation, an explanation that is based on comparison with a supposed 'ideal' model of Romanisation that is rarely observed in archaeological reality. Rather, Roman influence operated through the intermixing of Iberian cultural features with Roman-Italic patterns. Consequently, local initiatives actively contributed to the historical process.

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Faced with a dualist view that resists using the terms 'native' and 'Roman' as opposing entities, our approach puts forward a much more intricate reality. In it, aspects of Iberian and Roman culture interact to produce a historical process of their own that is different to those of neighbouring regions. The intention of this interpretive exercise is to understand a historical trajectory beyond that of neutral native survival, which does not explain historical dynamics. The integration of local traditions occurs within the framework of a new Roman socio-political context, which brought about their reinterpretation. The aim is to evaluate the variability of different local responses to the implementation of Roman power. It is also important to investigate how different groups reacted to this expansion, beyond a supposed immobility for reasons of cultural rejection or geographical determinism.

Within this framework, the groups of the different rural regions shared a focal point and series of symbolic practices reinforced through traditional cultural values and religious beliefs nested in their group identity. Roman rural sanctuaries were places where different groups built a religious environment in which they could recognise their place in the world. Thus, although hegemonic cultural currents laid out the basic lines of the Roman religious map, peasant groups also had the opportunity to build a religious landscape suited to their needs and their perceptions of space and place.

Final remarks

During the Roman expansion, local communities sought to redefine themselves in a climate of change and competition brought about by the new historical circumstances. Sanctuaries became the focus of affirmation for new communities presenting themselves through ritual practices. This was a plural and complex process of place-making for Iberian groups, in which different local aspects would give rise to diverse responses. We should therefore understand cult places as spaces for negotiation and exchange between different agents, be they Iberian local communities or Roman-Italic populations, as has been proposed for other colonial contexts (Malkin 2002)

Cult places became spaces of aggregation that played a key role in the new context of Roman expansion, possibly favoured by new rulers in order to shape landscapes without the risks involved in encouraging political centres that could have acted against the interests of Rome. Traditional sanctuaries were redefined through the incorporation or reinforcement of certain elements. Important in Iberia was the adoption of new elements in votive practices, and especially the constant rebuilding work, which reaffirmed links between different generations of worshippers.

Proof of these socio-political and territorial functions can be seen in the abandonment of many traditional sanctuaries when the Roman towns were founded and religious functions were transferred to new urban temples (Tortosa and Ramallo 2017). Sanctuaries only remained active in landscapes where we do not find Roman towns, such as Cerro de Los Santos, which is closely related to the *via Augusta*, or La Serreta in the Alcoi valley, located in a rural district.

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