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Centralisation and Urbanisation in Iron Age Europe

edited by

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The Emergence of Urbanism in Early Iron Age Central Iberia

Jesús R. Álvarez-Sanchís and Gonzalo Ruiz-Zapatero

In the 1st millennium BC two processes developed in ‘Celtic’ Iberia: a process of growing demography and a trend towards nucleated settlement. Both processes ended in the appearance of large fortified settlements, well known through archaeology and, at least some of them, by written sources. We know when some small settlements were founded, but the evolution of these communities into others somewhat larger and more complex is not clear. The process was not linear and homogeneous, but rather more likely in mosaic with rhythms and settlement manners differing in each region of the Meseta. In the end, the insight offered by the process leading to the first urbanisation at the end of Iron Age is presented as a changing and multiple entity in space and time, with similarities and their own characteristics. The exploration of the relationships between settlement, demography, centralisation and urbanisation is considered in this paper.

During the Early Iron Age (800–400 BC) for first time in the central region of Iberia, some communities grew at a fast rate and were very active in the economic sphere. In previous periods, Bronze Age communities were small, living in hamlets or very small villages with fewer than one hundred people. Even throughout the Iron Age until the Roman conquest most people lived in tiny settlements and their economy reflected a dispersed settlement pattern (Almagro-Gorbea 1995).

Recently we have discovered that in Central Europe there were Early Iron Age settlements with perhaps slightly more than 1000 people (Guichard et al. 2000; Krausse 2010; Sievers & Schönfelder 2012) and even settlements covering areas over 100 ha, apparently similar to the Late Iron Age big oppida (Collis 1984; Fichtl 2012; Woolf 1993), as ambitious research projects have demonstrated at Heuneburg and Bourges (Krausse & Fernández-Götz 2012; Peyre & Buschenschutz 2008). In this sense the first urban settlements in West and Central Europe began in the 6th century BC. In Central Spain recent research has found Late Bronze/Early Iron Age with long houses and a population estimated in the several hundreds, like Las Camas (Madrid) the best known site (Urbina et al. 2007; Morín & Urbina 2012) which presents us with an unexpected type of settlement for the period just before the beginning of the Iron Age. But certainly all the above examples usually refer to just surface and/or population size and no additional elements that constitute the complex concept of ‘urban settlement’ (Attema 2004; Hansen 2000; Osborne & Cunliffe 2005; Smith M. L. 2003; Smith, M. E. 2010).

Landscape was probably an important factor. Nearly all the Meseta (Central Spanish Plateau), except the most hilly regions, can produce enough food and resources to maintain populations like those of the Iron Age communities. They were small communities with a basic diet based on cereals and dry fruits, milk and derivatives, hunting and some fish which was accessible and easy to get. In these rich landscapes, why did bigger more permanent communities with clear indicators of social hierarchy emerge? The reasons of the initial transformation are still unknown. Many scholars consider the Early Iron Age as the result of a continuous agriculture expansion, but the process details are poorly understood (Romero et al. 2008). One of the critical factors in the process of change was probably an increase in metal production and the number of elaborated objects (Ruiz Zapatero et al. 2012). Iron was widely available and...
used for making new agricultural tools and related with other productive tasks.

At the beginning of the 1st millennium BC there was an important change in the natural environment, the climate became wet and rainy in the northern half of Iberia (López-Sáez & Blanco-González 2003; López-Sáez et al. 2009). The coincidence between this climate change and the emergence of agricultural villages along the fertile lowlands of rivers must be considered in more detail. Any landscape change, even those apparently insignificant, could have produced movements of supra-family groups through entire territories. It is possible that these unbalances could produce demographic crisis in the herding communities with traditionally imposed summer movements and an even greater impact on subsistence resources. What can be seen in the archaeological record is that a significant part of the traditional Bronze Age settlements – a few huts with wooden posts and vegetal roof – were definitely abandoned (Blanco-González 2010) and just a few sites continued to be occupied on permanent basis.

Cemeteries and habitation sites: a new model of settlement

A good number of settlements in the Duero Valley, of between 1 and 5 ha, systematically exploited the fertile lowlands (Delibes & Romero 2011). Several studies have demonstrated the existence of a forest landscape, but with clearance around settlement sites probably due to ploughing necessities for cereal agriculture specialised in wheat, barley and oat (Delibes et al. 1995; Romero et al. 2008). Charred grains have been found on the floor of houses and inside large pottery containers, a new storage way different to the previous silos excavated in the soil. These groups are well known for their round sun-dried brick houses, plain pottery and Atlantic technology metallurgy, but the funerary rituals remain unknown. Nonetheless, their origin must be found in the local Bronze Age substratum (Fig. 18.1).

Around the 7th and 6th centuries BC permanent settlements appeared in the highlands of Soria and Guadalajara (Arenas 2011; 2012; Romero & Lorrio 2011) along with hilly areas of Ávila, Zamora, Salamanca and León (Esparza 2011). Most of them were defended with stone ramparts, although there are others without artificial defences but with a natural strategic position. In some areas, such as Molina de Aragón there was a significant concentration of settlements and the small Celtiberian settlements were positioned in those valleys controlling the gateways and the most fertile lands (Arenas 1999). This type of settlement endured for some time in the region developing over a long period and, in some cases, virtually until the arrival of Roman legions (Lorrio & Ruiz Zapatero 2007; Ruiz Zapatero & Lorrio 2005).

The lack of sites makes difficult to envisage the role of Bronze Age communities in the emergence of these first Iron Age settlements (Ruiz Zapatero 2007). Open lowland settlements organised with a few unstable huts, such as Fuente Estaca (Embí, Guadalajara) have led, through a detailed study of archaeological materials, to an interpretation of scattered people movements from the Ebro Valley (Northeast Spain) throughout the 8th century BC (Arenas 1999). In other sites, the type of pottery utensils found in areas such as Los Quintanares de Escobosa (Calatañazor, Soria) or Reillo (Cuenca) reflected in those
discovered in Urnfields of Ebro Valley (Ruiz Zapatero 1995); however, designs and decorative techniques in the Meseta (Cogotas I culture) are clearly related with the dominating styles of the end of the Bronze Age.

Little is known of the internal structure for both kinds of sites of these settlements: residential sites and sites with a possible military or commercial function. Although sites with permanent round huts excavated into the rock have been documented (Romero & Misiego 1995), the traditional settlement constructed with rectangular houses (30–50 m² in surface) and shared walls closed to the exterior was the more typical Celtiberian pattern from the early stages (Arenas 2010). In this model of ‘closed settlement’ doors open up on a central street, revealing in this way a collective construction. This urbanism offers some characteristic features of the Urnfield Ebro Valley settlements which slowly permeated the interior territories until almost reaching the Atlantic shores. The model was consolidated quickly as is demonstrated by the houses of the ancient occupation in El Ceremeño (Guadalajara) (Cerdeño & Juez 2002). The visualisation of small groups moving along the right bank of Ebro River is consistent with the spread of the cremation funerary ritual (Ruiz Zapatero 2007: 44–46) as the older tombs in the Herreria cemetery prove (Cerdeño et al. 2002). Therefore, the best hypothesis is to visualise a certain cultural dualism, innovative groups moving along the main communication lines as opposed to other, more conservative, groups (Fig. 18.2).

During the 7th and 6th centuries BC a new and significant economic factor emerged in the lands of the Iberia interior: the demand of raw materials from the Mediterranean Phoenician and Greek colonies for getting supplies to a growing population and for industries in expansion. The objectives and chronology of the first colonial factories in the south (Andalucía) and Levant (Valencia) are more or less debated (Celestino et al. 2008; Delgado 2008), but the foundation of anchorages and ports in strategic points of access to the barbarous hinterland speaks clearly of the central role of commerce. The import of manufactured products and luxury objects led to changes in production and social relations. The Mediterranean colonial agents imposed over indigenous elites the demand of significant products from both political and social viewpoints (bronze vessels and jars, jewellery, pottery and textiles) which created relationships based on dependence and the transformation of traditional social and economic structures.

With the intensification of these developments, the character of settlements began to change. Before 600 BC the landscape was spotted with small agricultural and herder communities quite similar in their economic activity. The development of trade and iron production facilitated the emergence of a few dominant centres (Ruiz Zapatero et al. 2012). The defensive aspect of some settlements can be best understood through the necessity of protecting the new richness which was generated and transported from one place to another. This influence on the landscape is
especially noted in the growing distances between most relevant settlements.

All the above appears to indicate that in the first half of 1st millennium BC settlement structure was linked to that of the agricultural cycles and, as a consequence, a regular association between fortified *castros* (hillforts) and permanent sites (Álvarez-Sanchis 2000; Ruiz Zapatero 2007). The significance of these sites was marked consistently in a visual form through the creation of physical limits and ramparts. Even if we assume the domestic context of some known burials in settlements of the Duero Valley as Roa (Burgos), Cuéllar (Segovia), or Soto de Medinilla (Valladolid) (Delibes et al. 1995; Delibes & Romero 2011), they have an ultimate justification in the symbolic appropriation of land. It is expressed through the excavation of tombs of very young children under the floor of houses. They could symbolise a sentiment for property and land fertility (Fig. 18.3).

Beyond the economic impact, which implies cultivated cereals and stockbreeding, the notions of progeny, memory and continuity constitute one of the great transformations of the period (Blanco-González 2011; González-Ruibal 2006). The general impression is that Early Iron Age settlements developed independently including phases of settlement and abandonment or with more or fewer signs of activity. It is not easy to explain why some sites were more successful than others and had a longer life. The necessity of defining new territories in the Iron Age suggests a greater significance in the productive capacity of land (Ruiz-Gálvez 1992; 1998), perhaps exacerbated by a population increase (Blanco-González 2010). If we admit that, then the development of the first Celtiberian *castros* could be associated with the *domestication* of landscape through important field subdivisions.

The first Celtiberian cemeteries epitomise clear power relationships. The most ancient cremation cemeteries are found in the Northeast Meseta (Upper Duero, Tajo and Jalón rivers), a nuclear area of Celtiberian people. In this region we find older evidence of the Celtiberian culture and the thorough archaeological study of cemeteries has permitted the formation of a long sequence beginning in the late 7th and 6th centuries BC (Lorrio 2005). These ancient Celtiberian cemeteries reflect certain homogeneity in tombs, but together with a great majority of individuals with poor grave goods there are some tombs with arms, basically spears and iron knives, which show the existence of groups with an incipient social differentiation. The process which may have occurred over the following centuries is just partially understood, but it is clear that since the 4th century BC social structure became more and more complex (Almagro-Gorbea & Lorrio 2004; Álvarez-Sanchis 2005; Lorrio & Ruiz Zapatero 2005).
It is difficult to build up a general outlook of the first settlements in this period. We have good regional studies on the Early Iron Age, but we usually tend to imagine a complex mosaic of territories with different and changing characteristics as seen in other areas of temperate Europe (Cunliffe 2009; Haselgrove & Pope 2007; Sharples 2010). The number of excavated sites is high and that makes control of the archaeological record difficult, we face the temptation of maintaining ’updated’ descriptions, but in fact they are becoming ‘old’ (Ruiz Zapatero 2011a: 95). However, through studying the number of known cemeteries it is most likely that the majority of the population lived in dispersed and self-sufficient villages. The reading of the residential record fits well with the sociological background of cemeteries: small settlements with low hierarchy. Ideally, the perception should be one of hamlets with five or six houses and villages with a maximum of 20–25 families. This was surely the more abundant type of site and was found across a good part of the rural population scene. Nevertheless, the demographic estimation of buried community sizes and its relationship with the known surface area of some villages offers relevant contrasts (Álvarez-Sanchís & Ruiz Zapatero 2001; Arenas 2010; Cerdeño & Sagardoy 2007). In large cemeteries such as Aguilar de Anguita or Luzaga (Guadalajara), the resident population reached several hundreds of inhabitants (Fig. 18.4).

Production and exchange: new technologies
The new socioeconomic organisation of the period should stimulate the demographic growth and should lead to a progressive concentration of richness in groups controlling basic resources such as pasture land and saline outcrops, with broad expansion across the region and extremely important for cattle and human diet. Salt extraction and manipulation was in its early stages at the end of the Copper Age (Delibes & del Val 2007–2008; Guerra et al. 2011) but Iron Age production very much exceeded previous levels (Morere Molinero 2008). The growth of salt use for meat and fish preservation had a great impact in trading networks. At the same time the agriculture system evolved towards improved certainty because the possibility of seasonal famines was reduced to an extent.

Iron metallurgy production, favoured in some cases by the proximity to important iron mineral ores in the Iberian Mountains, allowed for the development of useful tools. Once people learned techniques for melting and forging
iron many communities had an advantage due to metal exploitation in their territories (Ruiz Zapatero et al. 2012). Iron was especially relevant for armour, present in the ancient Celtiberian cemeteries such as Sigüenza, Molina de Aragón and La Mercadera. While it is true that such discoveries are rare and there is no available data on iron ore extraction, patterns of use and deposition it is also true that mineral iron ores are relatively widely extended through many areas of Central Iberia. Iron use seems to have been established in Western Meseta (El Berrueco, Sanchorreja) and the middle Duero Valley (Soto de Medinila, Cuellar) around the 8th and 7th centuries BC. Finds include knives, shaving razors, awls, chisels, axes and adzes all of which imply a certain knowledge about its function and technology, perhaps related to the figure of travelling metallurgists.

In summary, the emergence of aristocratic groups in the Meseta as inferred from the study of tombs could be, to some extent, a consequence of the evolution of dominant groups in Late Bronze Age herder societies. On the other hand, the influence could be from external demographic contributions, although we need further studies on that possibility (Almagro-Gorbea 2011). There were clear movements of people differing in nature perhaps and without relevant demographic effect, but with strong socioeconomic impact (Ruiz Zapatero & Lorrio 2007). It seems plausible that the arrival of new peoples and new products marked the beginning of a slow and gradual trend to abandon relatively stagnant ways of life. This process could be associated with the growing importance of armament and certain personal ornaments (fibulae, belt brooches, bracelets, necklaces) as new methods of ethnic identity.

It seems clear that in a patched, cultural landscape like the Meseta no political or military authority emerged to control large territories. The economic and social organisation everywhere was always on a small scale. People could interact at a local level between different communities without interferences from more organised and developed systems. The absence of a strong regional political power means that competition and conflict should have been unavoidable. In Central Iberia the development of fortified areas alongside others with open settlements could show a significant difference between the paths of territories as a result of wars and plundering in the Early Iron Age; but the possible reasons remain unknown. The existence of open settlements in the Meseta hilly sites with similar functions to that of the lowland settlements cannot be ruled out. Nevertheless, the possibility that the processes leading to regionally centralised societies occurred at different rates should be seriously considered.

Whether these sites reflect local confrontation at the level of small agricultural communities (Armit 2007) or if they are central places with the aim of building the basic structure in affective relationships with the surrounding people (Lock 2011) is an unexplained issue; in fact sometimes hypothesis move between extremes (Sastre 2008). There is scarce evidence of direct attacks in these sites; however excavation of known sites proceeded with just chronological and constructive aims in mind (Wells 2011: 417). It seems reasonable that Early Iron Age people were involved in war episodes but the profound sense of war would be different in diverse and heterogeneous communities (Ruiz Zapatero 2003: 16). On other hand, with the available data it seems risky to place great emphasis on fortified sites found alongside open sites, inevitably more important and numerous than we ever have imagined (Haselgrove & Pope 2007).

Conclusions: urbanism, demography and the concept of town

The Iron Age of the Spanish Meseta is the story of numerous and diverse local societies that evolved from the Bronze Age with multiple identities. The best way to describe the central lands of Iberia is the picture of a mosaic of different agrarian societies living in small worlds. Some of them began to live in larger settlements from the middle of 1st millennium BC onwards. This trend accelerated in the last few centuries until the Roman conquest with the emergence of the oppida (Álvarez-Sanchis et al. 2011). Pre-roman urbanism, aside from the internal analysis of settlements, shows on the one hand the use of landscapes and on the other encapsulates the social, political and ideological structures of Iron Age people. To some extent, urbanism is another phenomenon of social history (Andreev 1989).

A multitude of definitions on urbanism have been put suggested from an archaeological perspective: 1) some have favoured checklists of urban traits (Childe 1950; Talbert 2000; Smith M. L. 2003; Smith M. E. 2009a); 2) additional studies have followed ancient classic urban features (Kolb 1984) as a reference for prehistoric contexts; 3) some have emphasised the roles of towns within landscapes and people’s lives (Yoffee 2005); 4) further studies have contrasted rural and urban identities (Cowgill 2004; Rich & Wallace-Hadrill 1991) or have even introduced ecological backgrounds in that approach (Mattingly & Sterry 2013) just a few have introduced the ideological component for identifying cities in ‘Celtic’ Iron Age (Almagro Gorbea & Lorrio 2011); 6) others have proposed a pragmatic context-dependent definition (Fernández-Götz & Krausse 2013), and finally some have dismissed the idea of defining features existing (Smith A. T. 2003).

It is clear that, although urban is a comfortable and useful term to classify societies and in particular for making comparative analysis, our objective is not to produce labels but to really understand how Iron Age societies worked and changed (Collis 1996: 223). It seems quite reasonable to accept that urban societies cannot be reduced to a single model and there are — and there have existed — different
types of cities, also in the European Iron Age. Perhaps the most relevant question is to explore the common elements present in the wide catalogue of past cities and to understand each case in its own terms, specifically discovering changes that they represent compared to previous settlements (Ruiz Zapatero 2011b: 298).

The key factor for understanding the meaning of the new Early Iron Age settlements is to consider what components of every day life changed. In that sense we need to look carefully at all changes which involved living in a city (Yoffee 2005: 61–62). There are at least five main dimensions to be considered (Fig. 18.5):

(1) Demography. The number of people living together permanently is a good reference for discussing the urban concept and many studies have enhanced the critical distance between small rural settlements and urban centres (Fletcher 1995), even if we accept Fletcher’s concept of ‘low-density and agrarian-based urbanism’ (Fletcher 2009, 2012). Evidently there is not a clear rubicon limit acceptable for all cases in every region and any time, but it seems reasonable to use some flexible figure to separate rural and urban settlements from the basic point of view: the increase in problems in prehistoric face to face relationships relate to the rise in number of inhabitants as reflected in studies in modern contexts (O’Brien 2009). We suggest that big castros (hillforts) and open settlements in the Early Iron Age of the Spanish Meseta with probably 400 or 500 inhabitants (Almagro-Gorbea 1995) represent the upper limit for a purely agricultural settlement. In many cases the nearby large cemeteries support the settlements as centres of significant population (Álvarez-Sanchis & Ruiz Zapatero 2001). What is clear is that the Meseta communities in previous periods had never lived in such large agglomerations, this was the first time and it created new perceptions of living together in community (Cerdeño & Sagardoy 2010).

(2) Subsistence and economy. The key question is in which way urban settlements are different of rural sites in economic terms. Basically it is assumed that primary production (agriculture and livestock) is common to both kinds of sites although we can identify differences of scale and forms of subsistence. The true differences, however, must be found in the number and scale of craftsmanship accomplished in urban centres. Metallurgy and pottery were probably the most important crafts and just at the end of Iron Age with oppida we find potter’s workshops and iron production at a supra-family level (Ruiz Zapatero & Alvarez-Sanchis 1995). That means that urban centres were involved in a redistributive function of goods and services to minor rural sites. This aspect leads us to another outstanding function: trade and exchange activities focused at urban sites and not in small sites. So in our view the true urban character must include self-sufficient feeding, diversified craftsmanship to supply the necessities of rural settlements and the role of a trading centre. We need much more information on those issues to establish a clear vision of the first urban centres in the Meseta Iron Age.

(3) Territory. Cities usually control a more or less extensive territory (chora) including other distinct settlement categories. This implies the consideration of cities re-routing and utterly changing patterns of everyday life, generating new forms of social life and interactions with a hinterland. The lack of information on small rural settlements in the Meseta region deserves much more future investigation on this point, although the exploration in the neighbourhood of urban areas is providing interesting data as in other peninsular areas (Belarte & Plana 2012). The evolution of castros takes shape in the emergence of oppida with the necessity for controlling more and more extensive territories which set up a clear hierarchy (Burillo 2007: 251).

(4) Constructive features. Perhaps the most well known feature is the orthogonal layout of Mediterranean and Near East ancient cities (Castagnoli 1971), but it seems evident that this is just one possibility in the internal space organisation of a city, albeit the most popular. The internal zoning of a site following functional criteria is quite well known in Late Iron Age temperate Europe (Fichtl 2012) and it should be reflected in a form of spatial organising which expresses the urban condition of the settlement. We claim this case for big castros and oppida in the Meseta with internal zoning separating crafts areas and communal services from residential space. Political and ideological/religious buildings (sanctuaries) are not very common and it seems more likely a Late Iron Age feature. However, a new interpretation, taking into account the ancient sanctuary of Termes, may introduce an important aspect in the discussion.
of ideological dimensions of Celtiberian cities as seen below (Almagro Gorbea & Lorrio 2011). Finally, the existence of public or common services like rubbish dumps or areas for temporary craft fairs and walled perimeters or enceintes are relatively well documented.

(5) Ideology. Scholars have virtually excluded ideological dimensions for explaining oppida in the Celtic world; nonetheless the concept of a city in Celtic Europe would essentially be ideological as it was in Greece (Morris 2006), Rome and nearly every culture in Antiquity (Gates 2003). Almagro-Gorbea has argued for this interpretation, analysing the ancient Termes sanctuary in Celtiberia, arguing that this sanctuary was proof of the existence of a ‘Founder-Hero’ of the city, represented here and in other Celtic cities as the mythic figure of Teutates divinity (Almagro Gorbea & Lorrio 2011: 155–166). It is a complex explanation with some problematic elements, but attractive for its powerful capacity to discover the profound social and political structure of Celtic communities with rex or rix holding the paramount position of a social pyramid. Rex or rix were probably politically reinforced, elite members transformed into heroes. It has been suggested that urban concept in great Celtic agglomerations should be clearly associated with legal rituals of foundation (Ryckwert 1976).

If this proposition is correct, then we have to assume that the proper notion of living in a city is, before anything else, an ideological matter. The key, encompassing aspect which covers and pervades all four previous issues: demography, economy, settlement structure and hinterland. From this point of view we cannot perhaps establish exact dates in the process of the Iron Age Meseta becoming urbanised. The process through which Meseta communities shaped a way of life in agglomerated settlements was continual and led to what would become proper cities.

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