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VOLUME II



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**Proceedings of the 24th International
Congress of Roman Frontier Studies**
2nd – 9th September 2018
Viminacium – Belgrade, Serbia

*These proceedings are dedicated to the memory of
C. Sebastian Sommer,
dear friend and colleague,
man who dedicated his entire life to the Roman limes.*

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LIMES XXIII

Session 16

Stand Your Ground!

Building and Rebuilding of Limes



José Manuel Costa-García

Universidad de Salamanca, Salamanca
Spain
jm.costagarcia@usal.es

The rationale behind the Roman military deployment in NW Iberia during its initial phase (2nd to 1st c. BCE)¹

ABSTRACT

The discovery of new Roman military sites in northwestern Iberia in recent years has contributed significantly to diversifying our field of study. Driven by the availability of new open geospatial datasets, the discoveries have been made quickly, so there has not yet been time for a comprehensive analysis and reflection.

The study of morpho-typological and local aspects helps to understand better the logic that motivated the construction of these field fortifications, as well as to detect the factors that may have had a determining influence on the adoption of different practical solutions. GIS analysis (visibility, mobility, etc.) can help us identify the dynamics that guided the deployment of the Roman army in the same territory in a diachronic manner.

These approaches provide us with useful information to understand the role played by the Roman army in NW Iberia and clarify how the interaction between this imperial agent and the different indigenous populations was articulated during the first phases of the occupation. Given the diversity manifested by the Late Iron Age societies in this vast region (from Cantabria to Galicia), a certain degree of heterogeneity in the actions of the Roman army is to be expected. However, does the static picture of this process reflect ancient realities, or is it the result of historiographical bias?

KEY WORDS: ROMAN ARMY, CAMPS, NW IBERIA, SETTLEMENT PATTERNS, REMOTE SENSING, GIS ANALYSES

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1.- The times they are a-changin'

A few decades ago, any external observer could reasonably believe that Roman military studies in NW Iberia were a research topic condemned to stagnation. The prevailing narratives about the conquest and occupation of these territories had been provided by historians trained in an already outdated classicist tradition, while archaeologists kept flying in circles around the few permanent fortifications discovered to date². The development of urban archaeology and the systematic survey of the eastern Cantabrian Mountains significantly contributed to breaking this dynamic in the 1990s. The former set the foundations for a better knowledge of the permanent fortifications in the *longue durée*, helping to reconstruct the evolution of the military deployment between the late 1st c. BCE and late 3rd c. CE.³ The latter made it possible to archaeologically trace one of the episodes most debated by historians: the Augustan campaigns against the *Cantabri* and *Astures* (29-19 BCE)⁴. By the mid-2000s, several new camps and temporary installations had been discovered following this impetus⁵.

More recently, the increasing incorporation of remote sensing techniques and new geospatial datasets (aerial and satellite imagery, airborne LiDAR, etc.) has had a significant impact on this field of study (Fig. 1)⁶. Far from causing a mere accumulation of homogeneous information, this “digital revolution” has contributed to the exponential diversification of our research topic, allowing us to catch a glimpse of realities simply unknown to us some years ago. However, the “discovery frenzy” has left very little room for the analysis and reflection on the data gathered all together, let alone the development of innovative narratives based on them.

In this sense, it is worth emphasizing an obvious statement: the Roman army did not move through empty

spaces. In fact, it actively interacted with indigenous societies, which showed different social, cultural and political traits within the region; a portrait of diversity constantly depicted by Late Iron Age researchers⁷. This aspect surely had a direct impact on how they interacted with Rome, from resistance to resilience⁸. Somehow, Roman military Archaeology in Iberia has tried to build its own narratives without seriously considering this reality.

2.- Methodology and goals

This paper aims to briefly assess the archaeological evidence related to the Roman military presence in the territories the classical sources assign to *Cantabri*, *Astures* and *Callaeci* in order to identify patterns of serializable behaviour that could be translated into useful historical information. The methodology, already described in previous works⁹, tries to obtain new data through the extensive use of GIS analyses. The study of aspects such as the morphology, defensive system or locational pattern of the Roman military sites allows us to understand better the rationale behind their construction as well as to detect some of the agents which could have caused the adoption of locally adapted solutions. The implementation of visibility and mobility analyses can help us identify the dynamics of the Roman military deployment in a given territory through time. These approaches could not only provide useful data about the actual role played by the Roman army deployed in NW Iberia, but also contribute to clarifying the nature of the interaction between these imperial agents and the local population during the early stages of the Roman presence in the area.

3.- Fossilised Violence

Since the initial discoveries took place in the mid-1990s¹⁰, the archaeological study of the Roman milita-

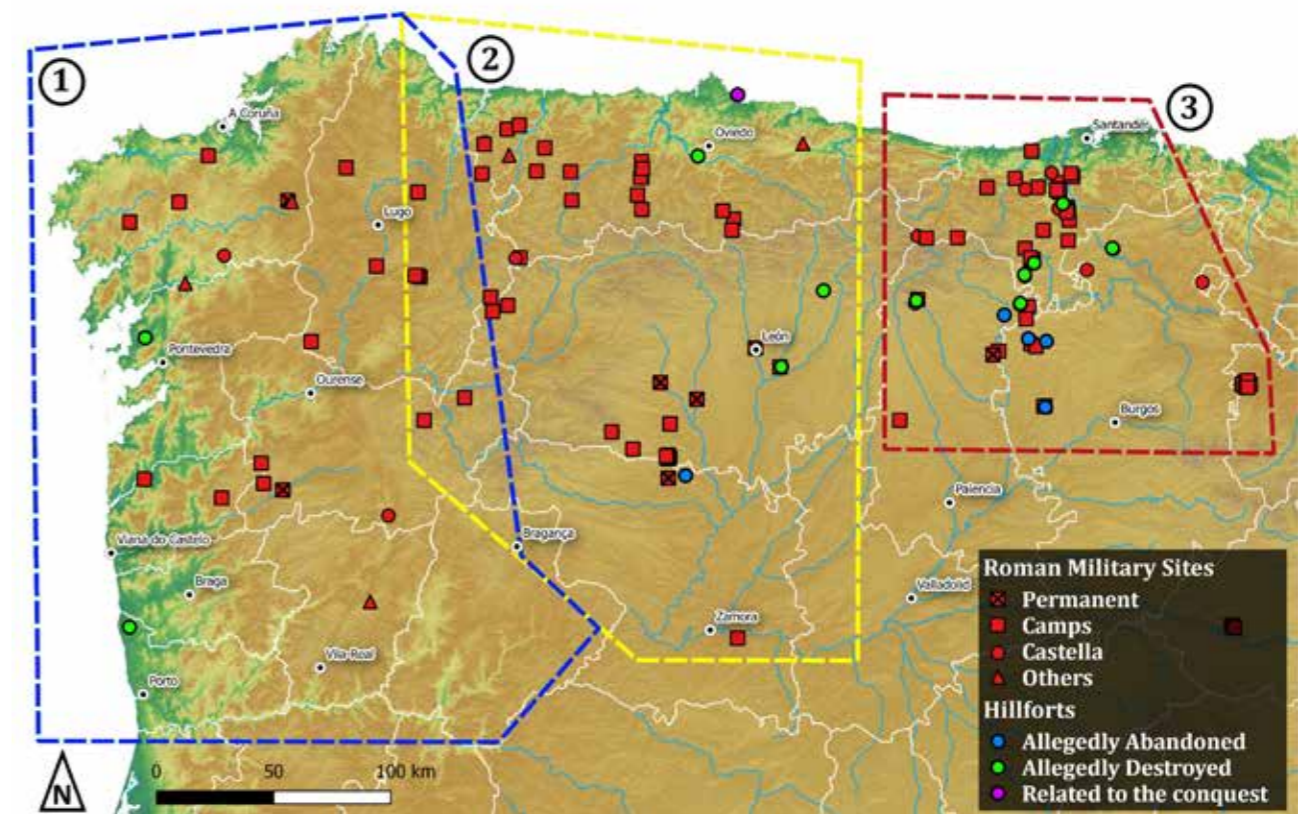


Fig. 1 - Roman military presence in Northern and North-western Iberia (May 2019). Galician-Northern Portuguese (1), Asturian-Leonese (2) and Cantabrian-Northern Castilian (3) sectors.

ry presence in the territories of modern-day Cantabria and northern Castile has come a long way (Fig. 1.1)¹¹. After two decades of research, Archaeology offers a vivid account of the conquest of these mountainous territories in Augustan times (26-19 BCE) which is consistent with the story transmitted by classical authors¹². Undoubtedly, the Romans not only dismantled the indigenous population's traditional forms of organisation but practically exterminated them¹³. This episode had a relevant impact on the geopolitical scenario that emerged after the conquest¹⁴.

After establishing its operational base on the Iberian northern plateau¹⁵, the Roman offensive aimed to quickly reach the shores of the Cantabrian Sea by crossing the mountain ranges. In order to do so, the army had first to control the large *oppida* located on the southern slope of the Cantabrian Mountains. The siege and assault on the *castro* (hillfort) of La Loma (Palencia) reveal the thoroughness and brutal effectiveness with which the Roman commanders implemented this strategy¹⁶. In Monte Bernorio (Palencia), the outstanding preservation degree of the archaeological remains even allows to serialize the different phases of the assault on the *oppidum* from the camp

²Morillo, Martín 2005

³Morillo 2009

⁴Camino *et al.* 2007; Peralta 2002

⁵Camino *et al.* 2015

⁶Costa 2018a

⁷González Ruibal 2012

⁸Marín, González 2011

⁹Costa 2017; 2018b

¹⁰Peralta 1999

¹¹Camino *et al.* 2015, 87–211

¹²Cass. Dio 53.25–29, 54.5, 54.11; Flor. 2.33; Vell. Pat. 2.90; Oros. 6.21

¹³Fernández-Götz *et al.* 2018

¹⁴Very few auxiliary units carried the ethnonym *Cantabrum* (Perea 2010), as opposed to those recruited among *Astures*, *Callaeci* or *Celtiberi* (Spaul 1994; 2000).

¹⁵Augustus' headquarters have been traditionally located in Sasamón (Burgos), where the remains of some temporary installations were documented in recent times (Didierjean 2015; García, Costa 2019) (*). The massive presence of structures in the vicinity of Herramélluri (La Rioja), on the upper course of the river Ebro, has also been linked with these campaigns (Didierjean *et al.* 2014).

¹⁶Peralta 2006

of El Castillejo¹⁷. In their violent advance northwards, the Roman columns crushed all opposition, and other important war scenarios have been documented at the indigenous sites of La Espina del Gallego (Fig. 2) and Santa Marina-Monte Ornedo (Cantabria)¹⁸. The *castrum* of Las Rabas (Cantabria)¹⁹ was also destroyed at this time, although the link between this episode and the neighbouring camps in La Poza is unclear (Fig. 3)²⁰.

To consolidate their advance, the Romans placed small outposts (*praesidia*, *castella*) within the already dislodged *castros* or in locations from which it was possible to have a wide visual control of the surrounding landscape²¹. The classical sources convey that the local population focused its loathing and anger on these enclaves as soon as Rome began to reorganize the land and demand tribute²². It was not until 19 BCE that the *Cantabri*, still fighting tooth and nail, were mercilessly subdued by *M. Vipsanius Agrippa*.

4.- Mastering the landscape

The Romans devised a similar strategy to subdue the *Astures* (25-22 BCE) (Fig. 1.2), but the natives anticipated this move and tried to surprise the invaders in their winter garrisons. This strategy would have been effective if not for the betrayal of the *Brigaecini*: an episode that reveals the *Astures* were not a homogeneous block but several tribes with a high degree of political autonomy²³. After this initial crisis, it looks like the Romans neutralized the main *oppida* of the southern *Astures*. Unfortunately, we lack reliable archaeological evidence related to this initial phase of the conflict (*)²⁴.

To the north, in the mountains, the detection of Roman military settlements linked with traditional transit routes has been a constant trickle for the past two decades, being the sites of the *Vía Carisa* (Asturias/León) perhaps the best known of them all²⁵. The camps of Picu L.lagüezos and Monte Curriel.los show very complex layouts, different from one another, probably resulting from a diachronic occupation of both sites. They also show a similar settlement pattern of sticking to summits from where they could control and even block the transit through the mountain route. More surprising is the pattern of Cuaña Carraceo, a small *castellum* which also controls the Carisa route, but at the cost of compromising its defensive position and close-range visibility against any recommendation in *castra metatio*²⁶.

Up to six enclosures have been discovered in the last decade following the *Camín Real de La Mesa* (Asturias) (Fig. 4)²⁷. Some interesting behaviour patterns can be observed among this heterogeneous set. The large camps of El Xuegu la Bola and El Mouru (ca. 10 ha) place their rear at the highest point of the mountain range, drawing a square or trapezoidal layout downhill. This way, they clearly face and control the route, particularly to the north (Fig. 5). Slightly smaller in size, Cueuris is a more complex site. It shows a double enclosure facing south, so it may respond to regrouping and/or withdrawing of troops from the mountains. Rather than with a massive deployment of troops, Las Cruces and El Llauriez appear to be related to rearguard actions or the seasonal control of the route. Quite interestingly, the visibility from these sites is complementary. Finally, Valbona is the most discordant -and doubtful-

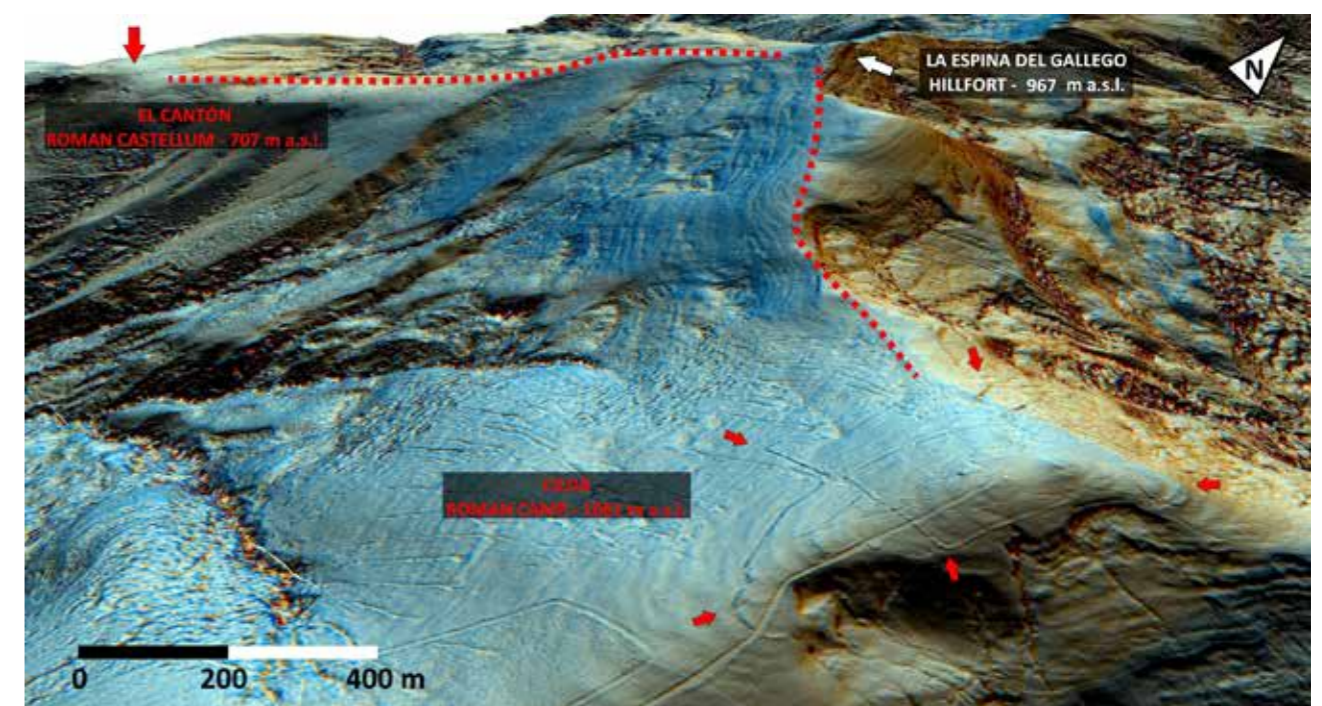


Fig. 2 - The assault on la Espina del Gallego. 2.5D LiDAR-derived visualization (2012). Note how the Romans effectively blocked the routes giving access to the hillfort from the South. © Author (based on data provided by Peralta 2011)

element of the set, showing an anomalous settlement pattern and a minimal range of visual control.

Further west, five sites have been detected following an analogous pattern in the mountains of Peneda-Ouroso (Lugo/Asturias)²⁸. Three of them (A Penaparda, El Pico el Outeiro Zarrado, A Pedra Dereta) show a similar extension (ca. 10 ha) and a tendency to build up a rectangular defensive perimeter. El Chao Carrubeiro, half their size, follows a previously documented settlement pattern (Fig. 6): the rear is placed at the highest point and the vanguard faces a point of interest. In this case, the transit across the neighbouring range. Finally, a small *castellum* on the top of El Pico el Outeiro Zarrado could reveal a diachronic occupation of the route and its seasonal, more static control.

One last area around the Serra dos Ancares (Lugo/León/Asturias) could be linked with the Augustan campaigns against the *Astures*. Some fortifications different in size (4-12 ha) and morpho-typology have

been documented here (A Serra da Casiña, A Cortiña dos Mouros, As Penas de Perturexe), all of them in the vicinity of mountain passes²⁹. To the west, three camps showing a similar size range (4-13 ha) were detected on A Chá de Santa Marta plateau³⁰, in what could have been a logistical centre of first importance at the foot of the mountain massif. To the northeast, the camp of A Granda das Xarras (León/Asturias) and the *castellum* of A Recacha (Lugo), very close from one another, have been dated before the change of era³¹. In the eastern sector of the mountain massif, there have also been important discoveries in recent years³².

In short, some recurrent behaviours were detected in this area: mobility following the mountain ranges, concern about controlling the transit across mountain routes, and quite consistent settlement patterns for camps and *castella* -despite some notable exceptions. It is also remarkable the virtual absence of the native population in this archaeological account. It has been impossible yet to find a single archaeological scenario

¹⁷Brown *et al.* 2017

¹⁸Fernández, Bolado 2011

¹⁹Fernández *et al.* 2012

²⁰Those supporting this hypothesis (Cepeda, Jiménez 2015) probably ignore that La Poza I and II are oriented toward the NW, while the hillfort is located to the NE of their position. Perhaps the archaeological features recently detected by LiDAR in the area could be linked with this episode (Hesse, Costa 2016).

²¹Costa, Fonte 2017

²²Cass. Dio 54.5.3, 54.11.2.

²³Costa 2015. The Bierzo Edict (15 BCE), written after the conquest, also shows that some social groups took sides in favor of the Romans during the conflict Sánchez-Palencia, Mangas 2000.

²⁴The written sources explicitly mention the assault on *Lancia* (Flor. 2.33.57-58; Cass. Dio 53.25.8; Oros. 6.21.10), Around Villasabariego (León) some traces of military presence were documented via aerial photography (Didierjean 2015). More recently, LiDAR data has revealed structures that could be linked with a Roman assault on the oppidum of Las Labradas (Zamora) (Hierro *et al.* 2020).

²⁵Camino 2015; Camino, Martín 2015; Martín, Camino 2018

²⁶Costa 2018b

²⁷González Álvarez *et al.* 2011-12; Martín 2015; Menéndez *et al.* 2018

²⁸Menéndez *et al.* 2013; 2015

²⁹Vidal *et al.* 2018

³⁰Costa *et al.* 2018; Orejas *et al.* 2015

³¹Orejas *et al.* 2015; 2018

³²Menéndez *et al.* 2020

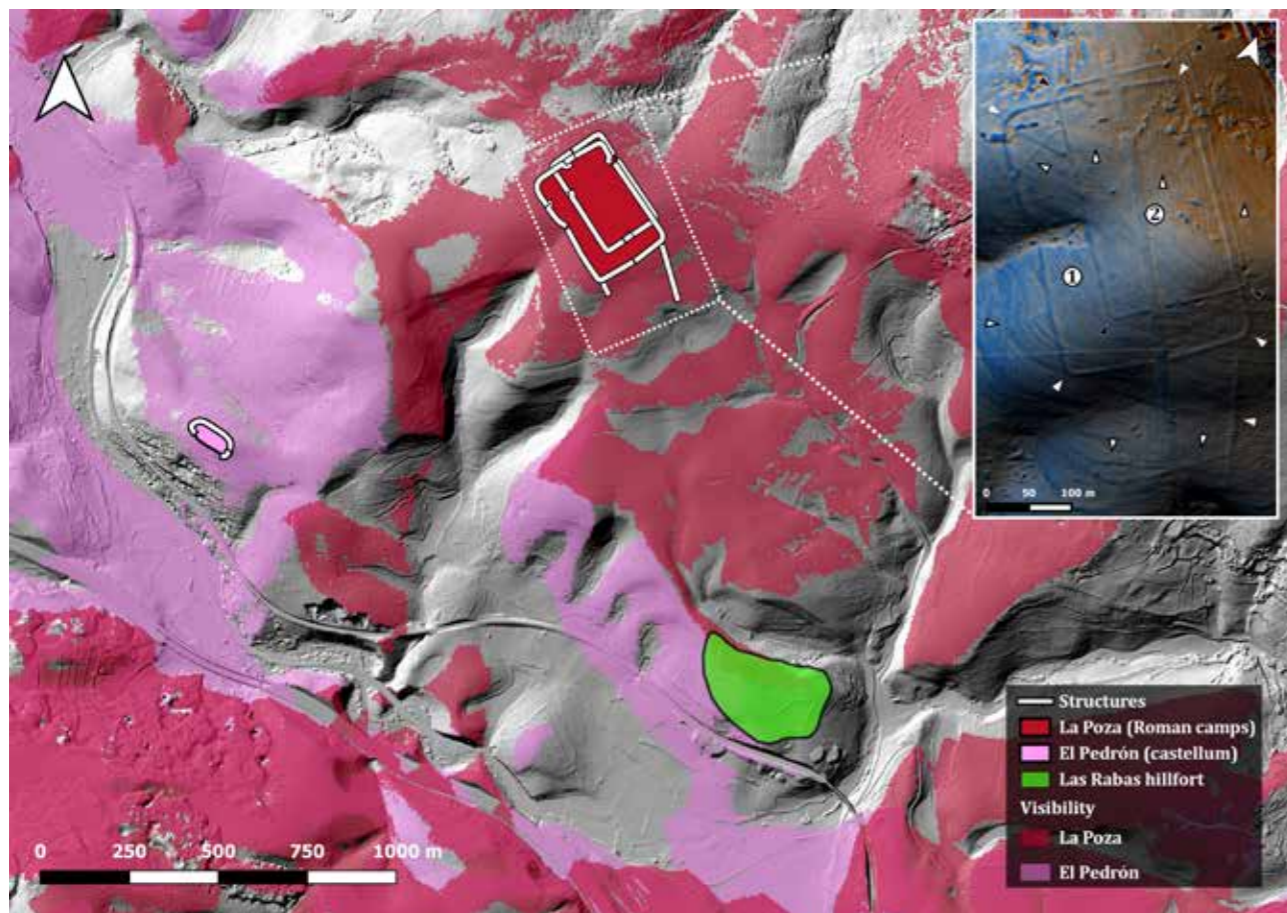


Fig. 3 - A controversial connection. LiDAR-derived DTM (2012). Even if the visibility analyses might indicate a joint action from the Roman military sites against the indigenous settlement, the fortifications turn their backs to the indigenous settlement. © Author (based on data provided by Cepeda - Jimenez 2015).

where the connection between Roman military presence and Late Iron Age sites is explicit³³. The different settlement patterns shown by camps and hillforts, and the weight of scholarly traditions focused on studying strict historical periods instead of formulating diachronic, Landscape-based research questions have undoubtedly influenced this matter.

5.- The void to be filled

Apart from offering some approximate dates (roughly ca. 138-29 BCE), historical research has not yet proposed a solid periodisation of the conquest of Galicia

and Northern Portugal (Fig. 1.3). The paucity of mentions of this process in the written sources³⁴ and the lack of archaeological evidence that could be related to it³⁵ have been a major obstacle to overcome. Although Archaeology must lead the construction of innovative narratives, we are still handling unconnected and poorly contextualized data to a great extent.

Some sites located in eastern Galicia have already been mentioned in connection with the Augustan campaigns against the *Astures*. Considering their proximity to this war scenario, the large camps (8-13 ha) of O Monte de Ventín and O Monte dos Trollos (Lugo) could perhaps

³³The abandonment and even destruction of some Iron Age *castros* before the end of the 1st c. BCE has been linked with Roman military operations -i. e. Llagú (Berrocal *et al.* 2002)-, but the evidence is still fragmentary if not merely circumstantial. The battle scenario in the surroundings of Monte Curriel.los was discarded by their own theorists a long time ago (Camino 2015 *contra* Camino *et al.* 2005).

³⁴The campaigns of D. Iunius Brutus (138-137 BCE) (App. *Hisp.* 71-74; Strab. 3.3.1, 4; Flor. 1.33.12; Liv. *Per.* 55-56; Oros. 5.5.12; Val. Max. 6.4), P. Crassus (97-96) (Strab. 3.5.11) and C. Iulius Caesar (61-60 BCE) (Cass. Dio. 37.52-53; Suet. *Caes.* 18.1; App. *Hisp.* 102; Plut. *Vit. Caes.* 11-12) are briefly addressed. Except for a problematic passage of Orosius (*Hist.* 6.21), no ancient source links the *Callaeci* with the Augustan campaigns, so it has been commonly assumed that the area was already conquered by then (Morillo 2016).

³⁵Costa 2018a, Costa *et al.* 2019

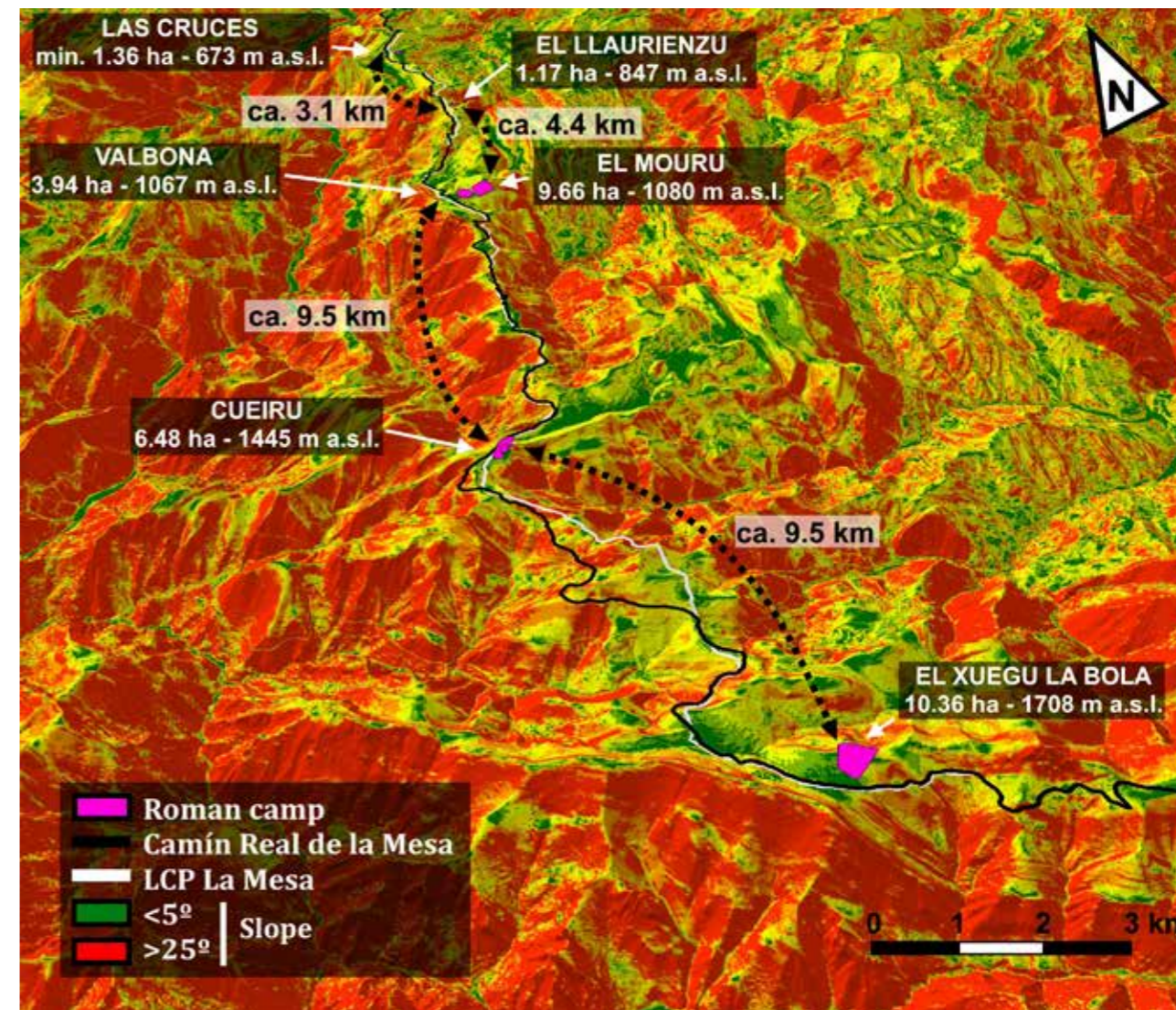


Fig. 4 - Roman military presence along the Camín Real de la Mesa (official route as recorded by Heritage Management Bodies -black- and GIS Least Cost Path -LCP, white-). 2.5D LiDAR-derived slope shade visualization (2010). Quite interestingly, no indigenous hillforts have been located at this altitude. © Author

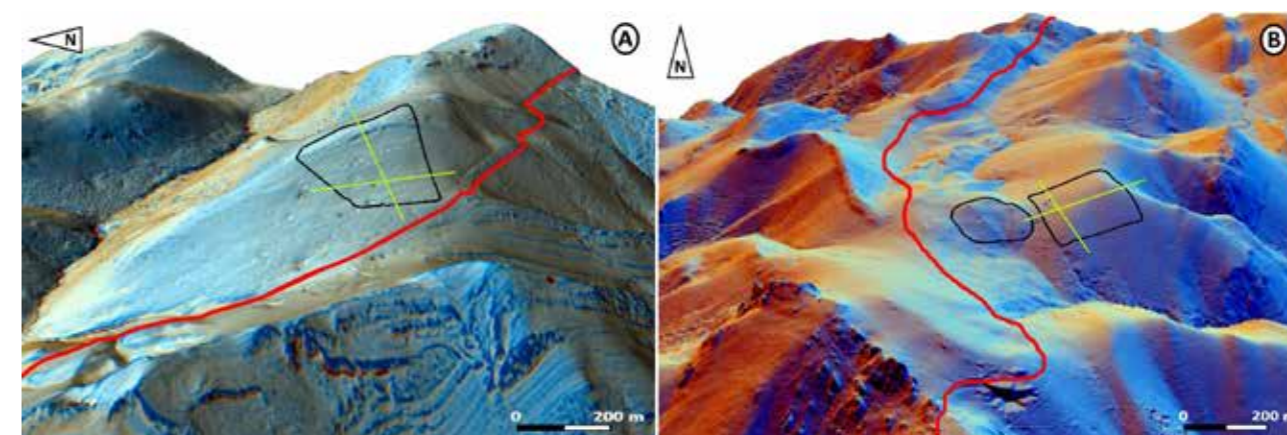


Fig. 5 - Facing a point of interest. 2.5D LiDAR-derived visualization (2010). El Xuegu la Bola (A) and El Mouru (B) show an identical settlement pattern: the porta praetoria is oriented towards the Camín Real de la Mesa. © Author

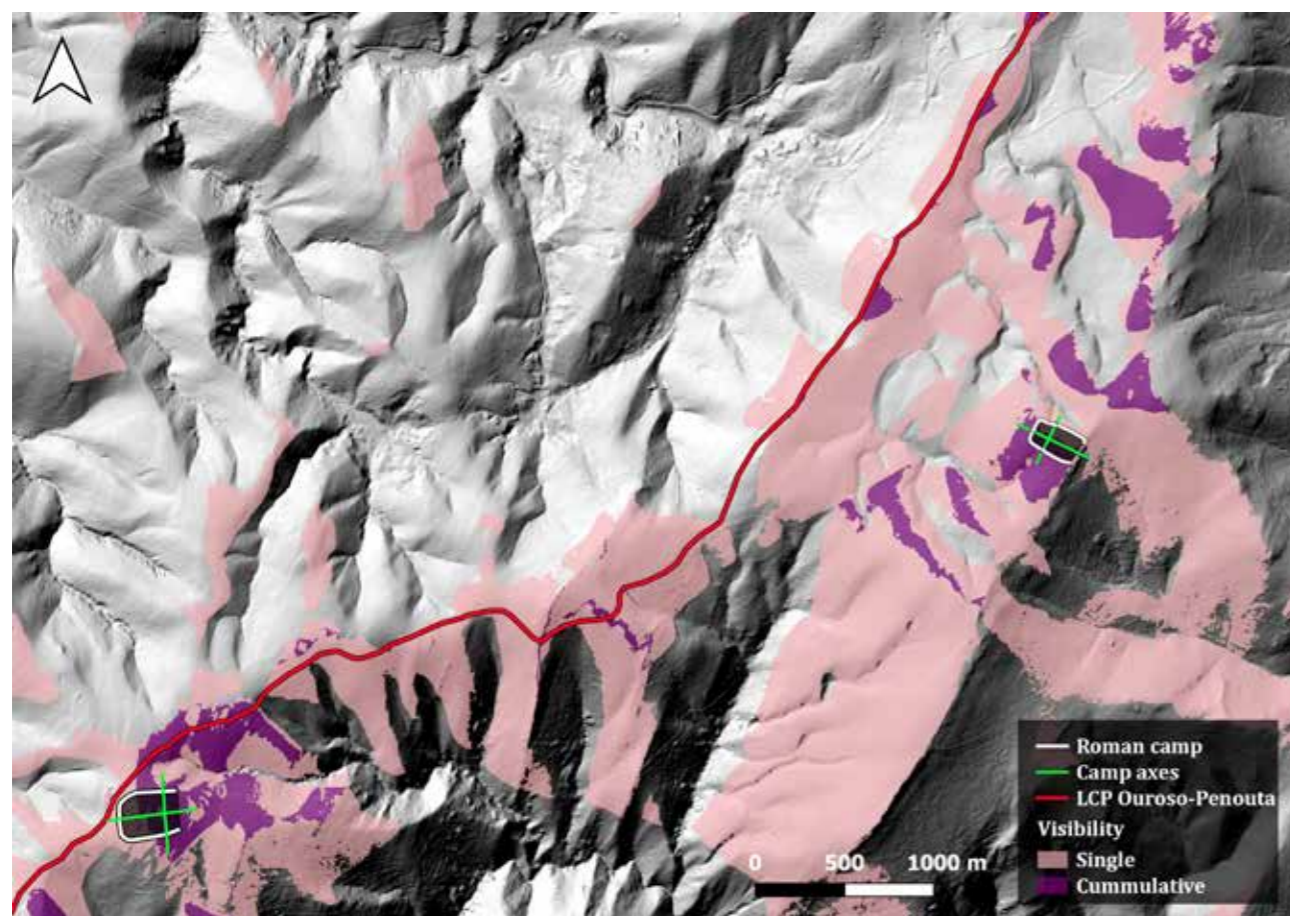


Fig. 6 - Controlling the mountain routes. LiDAR-derived DTM (2012). Two different settlement patterns, from almost blocking the transit across the mountain route -LCP- (A Pedra Dereta, to the left) to the visual control from a safe distance (El Chao de Carrubeiro, to the right). © Author.

be added to the list³⁶. They also are two excellent examples of how Romans strategically used the land to control river fords (Fig. 7).

Up to four small-sized sites (1,5-2,5 ha) reveal a particular concern about controlling some natural corridors in mountainous or hilly landscapes across the territory (Fig. 8). A Cova do Mexadoiro (A Coruña), Coto do Rañadoiro (Lugo), Alto da Pedrada (Viana do Castelo) and Penedo dos Lobos (Ourense) also draw a regular playing card layout. Thanks to coinage, the latter has been recently dated ca. 25-22 BCE³⁷.

It is more difficult to contextualize the military presence in other areas of this wide territory. Close to the

Atlantic coast, the camps of O Cornado, Santa Baia (A Coruña) and Campos (Viana do Castelo) are related to significant deployments of troops (5-13 ha) in an area where the latest mentions of Roman military actions date back to the 60's BCE³⁸. In the mountainous border area between Galicia and Portugal, two huge enclosures (ca. 20 ha) were detected in Lomba do Mouro and Chaira da Maza (Fig. 9)³⁹. Once again, we do not know the motivations behind the deployment of such numerous contingents, being the scarce mentions to Late Republican campaigns our only guide⁴⁰.

Thus, the Galician-Portuguese territories offer an excellent setting for future research. The morpho-typological and locational diversity of the archaeological

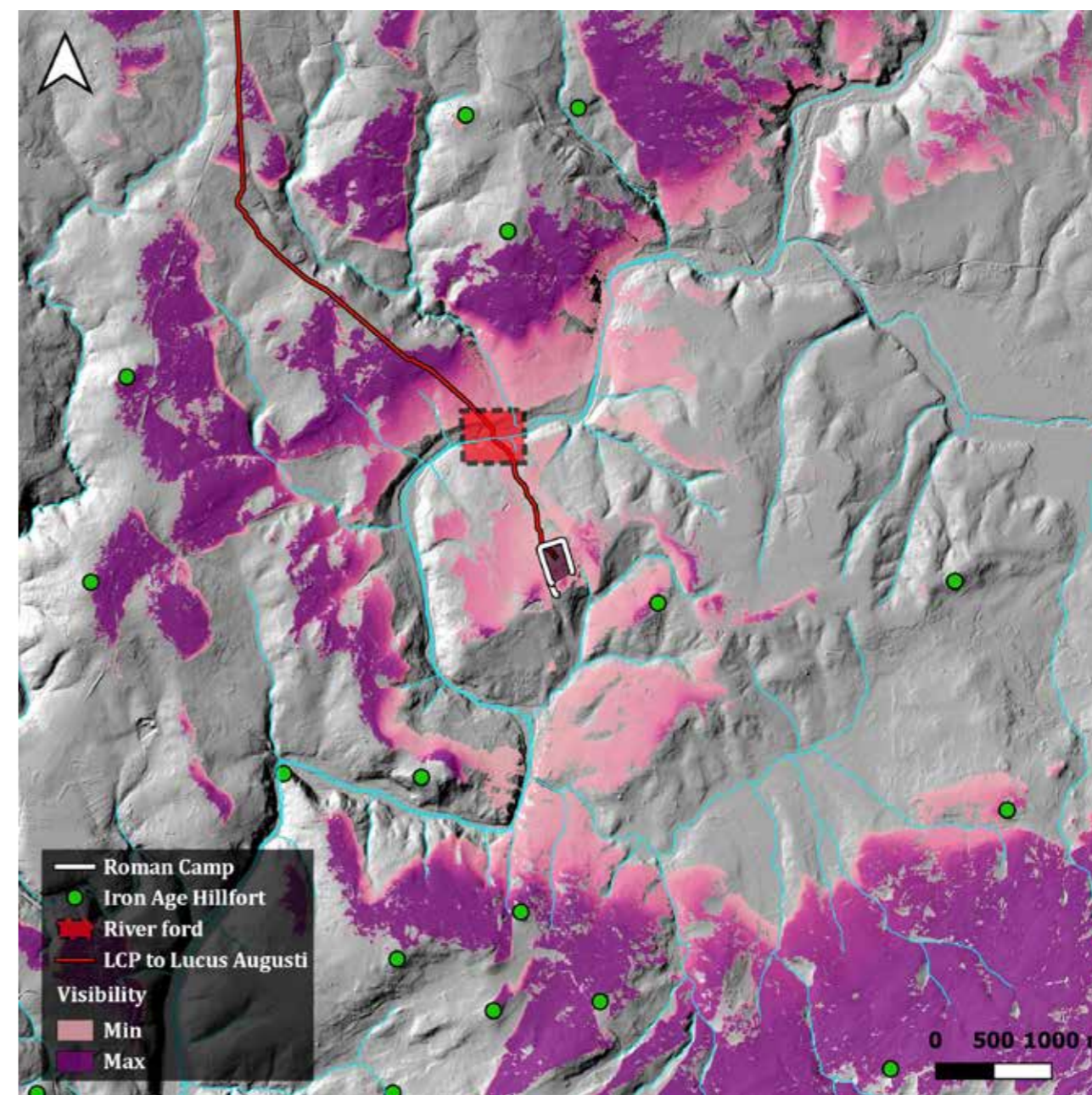


Fig. 7 - River fording. LiDAR-derived DTM (2009). The Roman camp of Monte dos Trollos is placed next to the only place where the River Miño is fordable several kilometres around. It is also possible to control several Iron Age hillforts from here, but the Romans do not seem worried about their proximity. © Author.

evidence is extremely attractive, and the very question of its presence in the different areas has to be answered yet. Similarly, the nature of Roman-native interaction remains unclear here. In several cases, the disposition of the camps reveals a lesser concern for the close presence of indigenous hillforts and a greater interest in controlling the surrounding physical space.

6.- Still a long way to go

Our knowledge about the numerous sites in NW Iberia is very uneven. Most of them have been archaeologically surveyed only for their characterisation and cataloguing. In this research phase, the identification of morpho-typological variables susceptible to serialize and the documentation of locational patterns allow us to approach this dataset more holistically and recognize realities that could have gone unnoticed in the past.

³⁶Costa *et al.* 2017

³⁷Costa *et al.* 2017

³⁸See above n. 32

³⁹To date, only the camps of Cildá, El Castillejo (Peralta 2006; 2011) and Villalazán (Del Olmo 1995) have a comparable size.

⁴⁰See above n. 32

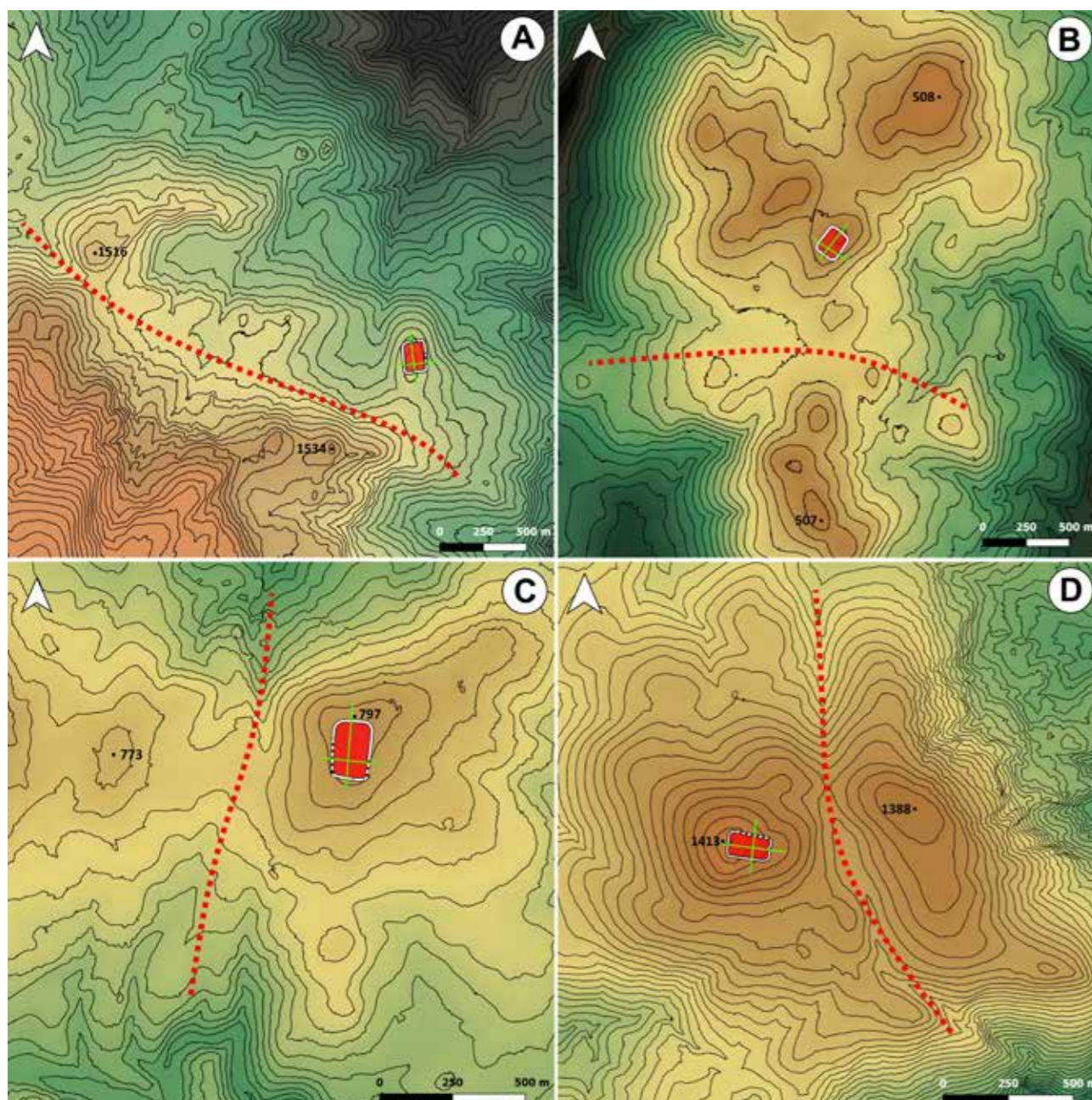


Fig. 8 - Small but fierce. LiDAR-derived DTMs (2009-2017). With slight variations, all of these camps seem to be related to the control of natural passages: Penedo dos Lobos (A), Cova do Mexadoiro (B), Coto do Rañadoiro (C) and Alto da Pedrada (D). © Author.

The precise dating of these sites is the greatest challenge in the coming years and a major barrier to creating historical narratives. Only a handful of sites in NW Iberia have been dated thanks to the presence of material culture -mainly coinage-, while many others were ascribed to certain periods just by context⁴¹. The situation worsens as we move away from the Cantabri-

an Mountains. The Iberian northern plateau is a vital area for understanding both the first phase and the aftermath of the conflict against *Cantabri* and *Astures*, but the anthropogenic pressure related to agricultural activities has already wiped out many sites detected by remote sensing (*)⁴². The diverse soil composition and the greater acidity levels in NW Iberia are a true

⁴¹Camino *et al.* 2015

⁴²Didierjean *et al.* 2014; , Menéndez *et al.* 2020

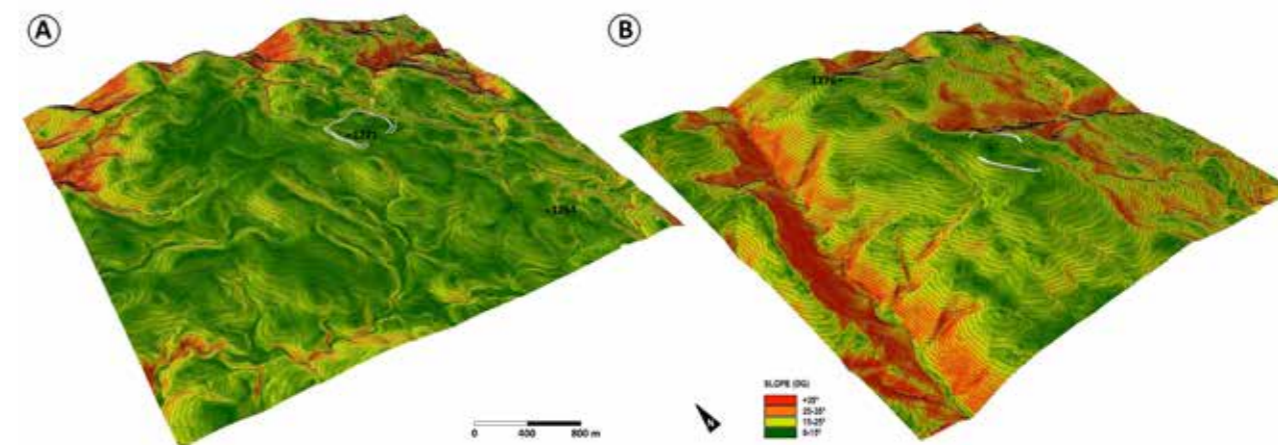


Fig. 9 - Adapt to overcome. 2.5D LiDAR-derived visualizations (2009-2015). The layouts of the neighbouring camps of Lomba do Mouro (A) and Chaira da Maza (B) may look different, but follow the usual patterns of the Roman army in Iberia when moving across the mountains. © Author.

challenge for material culture preservation. To these deterioration agents, we must add large-scale reforestation activities and the negative impact of treasure hunting. Since we are practically facing “mute” sites, the excavation and dating of the surviving structures are needed to reverse this situation, something that we have only begun to see in recent years⁴³.

It is also essential to make an effort to better contextualise Roman camps from an archaeological and palaeoenvironmental point of view. The need for building bridges with Iron Age Archaeology has already been stressed out in this work. Likewise, the number of Roman military sites where environmental studies of any kind have been carried out is alarmingly low⁴⁴, making it impossible to assess the real impact of Rome’s arrival on these territories.

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⁴³Menéndez, Sánchez 2018; Orejas *et al.* 2015; 2018.

⁴⁴Camino 2015; García 2015; Orejas *et al.* 2015; 2018; Peralta 2011

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Resumen

El hallazgo de nuevos asentamientos militares romanos en el noroeste de Iberia en los últimos años ha contribuido de forma señalada a la diversificación de nuestro campo de estudio. Impulsados por la disponibilidad de nuevos datos geospaciales en abierto, los descubrimientos se han producido a gran velocidad, lo que significa que no ha habido tiempo aún para un análisis y reflexión de conjunto.

El estudio de aspectos morfotipológicos y localicionales ayuda a comprender mejor la lógica que motivó la construcción de estas fortificaciones, así como a detectar los factores que pueden haber influido de forma determinante en la adopción de unas u otras soluciones prácticas. El uso de análisis SIG (visibilidad, movilidad, etc.) nos puede ayudar a identificar las dinámicas que guiaron el despliegue del ejército romano en un mismo territorio de manera diacrónica.

Estas aproximaciones no solo nos proveen de información útil para comprender el rol jugado por el ejército romano en el Noroeste, sino también contribuir a clarificar cómo se articuló la interacción entre este agente imperial y las distintas poblaciones indígenas durante las primeras fases de la ocupación. Habida cuenta de la diversidad manifestada por las sociedades del final de la Edad del Hierro en esta amplia región (desde Cantabria hasta Galicia), es de esperar cierto grado de heterogeneidad en las acciones del ejército romano. Sin embargo, ¿la imagen que de este proceso tenemos en la actualidad refleja las realidades antiguas o es fruto de una deriva historiográfica?