

7-12-2005

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Luis Berrocal-Rangel

Departamento de Prehistoria y Arqueología, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

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Recommended Citation

Berrocal-Rangel, Luis (2005) "The Celts of the Southwestern Iberian Peninsula," *e-Keltoi: Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies*: Vol. 6, Article 9.

Available at: <https://dc.uwm.edu/ekeltoi/vol6/iss1/9>

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The Celts of the Southwestern Iberian Peninsula

Luis Berrocal-Rangel

Departamento de Prehistoria y Arqueología
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

Abstract

Archaeological investigations carried out in the southwestern Iberian Peninsula during recent years have contributed to the identification of the cultural characteristics of its ancient populations, called *Keltikoi* or *Celtici* by Ephorus, Herodotus, Strabo and Pliny. From a detailed analysis of the types and distribution of the material culture, references in the Classical sources, epigraphic evidence, contemporary observations, and the presence of an individual decorative style of hand-made pottery, it is now possible to record the specific cultural traits of those native populations that occupied, at least from the end of the fifth century BC, the basins of the Sado and Guadiana Rivers in both Spain and Portugal. This context represents a new combination of cultural and ethnic traits that could be due to the incorporation of foreign elements, the closest parallels of which, based on style, philology and beliefs, are located in the central Douro River basin, the land of the Vaccei and Ulteriores Celtiberi peoples. In this way, it is possible to comprehend the historical migrations described by Strabo and Pliny as the origin of these Celtic peoples of the southwestern Iberian Peninsula.

Keywords

Keltikoi, Celtici, Baeturia, Capote, Garvão, Nertobriga, Eburobrittium

Introduction

Archaeological investigations conducted in the southwestern Iberian Peninsula during the last fifteen years have confirmed the cultural personality of the ancient populations of this region, referred to as Celtic peoples in pre-Roman and Roman times according to Ephorus, Herodotus, Strabo and Pliny the Elder.

From a detailed analysis of the types and distribution of the material culture, the Classical references, epigraphic evidence and contemporary observations, as well as the presence of an individual decorative style of hand-made pottery, it is now possible to affirm the specific cultural

personality, clearly of an occidental nature, of the native populations that occupied the basins of the Sado and Guadiana Rivers at least from the end of the fifth century BC on.

This context represents a new combination of cultural and ethnic traits that could be due not only to the greater value placed on indigenous cultural components after the fall of the Tartessos kingdom and the end of the oriental influence on the Atlantic side of the Iberian Peninsula, but also to the incorporation of foreign elements. The closest parallels to these elements, based on stylistic evidence, philology and beliefs, can be found in the central Douro River basin territories of the Vaccei and Ulteriores Celtiberi peoples, although they share a common ancestry with the rest of the Indo-European inhabited Iberian Peninsula and beyond, including France and northern Italy. Thus, the southwestern Iberian Peninsula provides a good example of the contradictions inherent in prehistoric settlement history that, in our opinion, is more common in prehistoric Europe than might at first appear.

As a result of increased archaeological research during the last decade, we believe that it is now possible to develop working hypotheses using spatial, temporal and ethnocultural data to help define the cultural and ethnic personality of the pre-Roman populations of the southwestern Iberian Peninsula (Almagro-Gorbea and Martín 1994; Berrocal-Rangel 1992, 2001a; Correia 1997; Fabião 1998, 2001; Gamito 1988; Pérez 1996; Rodríguez 1998; Rodríguez and Enríquez 2001; Vélazquez and Enríquez 1995). This definition is based on geographical, philological, archaeological and cultural evidence (Berrocal-Rangel 1992).

Geographic concepts have been utilized to define the existence of a region located in the territories of both Spain and Portugal, which anthropologically refers to a specific ethnic area. Its defining characteristics are a volcanic base geology and a typical Cambrian period siliceous European geological configuration of light, rocky soils that are not very suitable for agriculture, characteristics that favoured certain types of settlement (Barrientos 1990).

The abundance of granite and slate, together with a sub-Atlantic rainfall regime, had a significant effect on the construction systems and techniques employed as well as on the types and patterns of colonization of the land. That same siliceous geological panorama favoured oak forests better suited to livestock husbandry than agriculture, which in turn has ensured the survival of important hunting resources until the present day (Fig. 1).

Another feature of the geological dynamics of this region is the existence of a

mountainous ecosystem characterized by an abundance of iron, copper, gold and tin in the Paleozoic plate of the Hesperian Massif. This last characteristic affects the nature of the hydrographic network, favoring shallow channels and sharp turns typical of such hard bedrock (Zamora 1987). Because of this, the waters of the Guadiana, Sado and Mira Rivers favored



Figure 1. Iron Age hillfort of Monte Novo, Alentejo, Portugal. (Photo L. Berrocal-Rangel.)

human movement and communication without acting as barriers. Philological concepts, fundamentally based on epigraphic evidence, are as rare as may be expected from an historical area where an autonomous writing system did not develop. Nevertheless, early Roman accounts and information from Greek and Latin texts have helped in generating solid hypotheses. Thus, the result of a compilation and analysis of these late testimonies indicates with almost complete unanimity the presence of Indo-European speaking peoples in the southwestern Iberian Peninsula (Berrocal-Rangel 1992: 29-72). Among the languages recognized in the Peninsula as belonging to this group, the best candidate is Lusitanian, a pre- or proto-Celtic language that seems to be conditioned by two foreign elements: a strong Celtiberian component along with some Trans-Pyrenean influences and a very ancient substratum related to Goidelic Celtic, Oscan, Latin and Illyrian.

On the other hand, the wide range of sources, along with the judgements expressed in the Greek and Latin texts which refer to toponymy, hydronymy, customs and beliefs, allow us to confirm that in the eyes of Classical writers, these populations shared a common ethnic entity that they called Celtic (Fig. 2).

Archaeological concepts have been analysed on the basis of spatial and temporal evidence (Berrocal-Rangel 1992: 167). The spatial evidence is treated inductively at different levels of reliability in order to establish the principal economic and cultural patterns that justify the interpretation of the occupational history

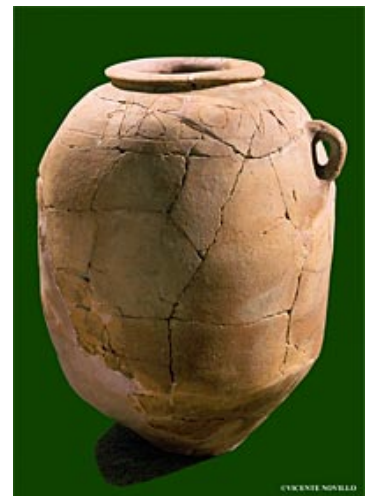


Figure 2. Pottery container with the Celtic name ABLONIOS from the hillfort of Capote. Second century BC. (Photo V. Novillo.)

of the territory. Micro-spatially we call attention to the presence of socially and productively significant elements, such as smelting ovens, forge and quarry tools, storage pits, mills and ritual structures, that have served to define the dominant functions of various structures and clarify the internal morphology of the site habitats. Different levels of defenses, from elemental inaccessibility of location to authentic fortresses with towers, bastions, ditches and lines of stone *chevaux-de-frise* are well documented (Berrocal-Rangel 2003) (Figs. 3, 4, and 5). Unique rooms,



Figure 3. Iron Age hillfort of Capote, Badajoz, Spain. (Photo L. Manglano.)



Figure 4. Walls and tower of the hillfort of Capote, Badajoz, Spain. Fourth century BC. (Photo by L. Berrocal-Rangel.)

such as that containing the altar at the hillfort of Capote, and buildings that seem to have served prestige functions, as at the site of Castro de Segovia, are also known (Berrocal-Rangel 1994) (Fig. 6), and have been the subject of special treatment due to that uniqueness (Gamito 1988).



Figure 5. Band of stone *chevaux-de-frise* in the hillfort of Passo Alto, Alentejo, Portugal. (Photo A. M. Soares.)



Figure 6. Sanctuary of the hillfort of Capote, Spain. Late fourth century BC. (Photograph V. Novillo.)

These elements acquire particular importance at the next interpretative level, when it is necessary to inter-relate the remains of defensive constructions with the degree of adaptation to landforms, the estimation of surface area occupied and the internal organization of the habitat in

order to present a coherent treatment of the settlement's configuration.

In conjunction with evidence of the different geographical environments of pre-Roman villages, it is possible to define through their proximity to resources the characteristics of locations and the incidence of significant archaeological materials, patterns of settlement and, through these, models of a centripetal or centrifugal nature according to relations of subordination or coordination.

Studies focused on territory synthesize all of these analyses, permitting us, on the one hand, to generate hypotheses of concentration and dispersion of the population while on the other hand revealing probable geopolitical systems that only future archaeological research can confirm. Different patterns can be identified based on settlement type: some sites are well-located for distribution, as in the case of Alcácer do Sal, some for mining exploitation as in the case of the Portuguese site of Castro d'Adiça, others for territorial control, as at the site of Peña de San Sixto on the northwestern border of the Spanish province of Huelva (Berrocal-Rangel 1992: 261-267; Fabião 1998; Pérez 1996).

Temporally, the archaeological record has been organized based on the few but important stratigraphic sequences recognized as pre-Roman, such as those at Garvão, Miróbriga and Mesas dos Castelinho in today's Portugal, or Capote, Nertobriga and Belén in Spanish territory. All of these, together with artifacts collected from a few necropoli, from surveys and from isolated finds, allow us to establish this temporal sequence (Berrocal-Rangel 1992: 275-281; 2001b).

Initial or Transitional phase (425 - 375 BC)

We know that, as in the rest of Europe, the fifth century BC was a time of profound transformation marked by the exhaustion of previous dynamics, a decline that in the southwest of *Hispania* is marked by the end of the Kingdom of Tartessos and the orientalizing phenomenon. Nevertheless, although the contrast is much more evident in the fourth century, the persistence of orientalizing ceramic traditions during this Initial or Transitional phase can be seen in the strata of Badajoz A, Corvo I, Galeado and La Martela de Segura de León.

Also, other artifacts, such as the important gold plates from the last of the sites mentioned above, clearly reflect this world in transition, combining purely oriental techniques with designs from Celtic iconography (masks or human heads with leaf crowns, wolfs, or ducks) (Fig. 7). New elements make their appearance even in the most common

artifacts, as in the case of Phase A at the castle of Badajoz and most likely also at the hillfort of Segovia (Elvas), with the earliest examples of vessels decorated with stamped impressions.



Figure 7. Gold plaques of a necklace with representations of human masks between leaves, wolves, and an acorn. Hillfort of La Martela, Spain. Early fifth century BC. (Drawing L. Berrocal-Rangel.)

As a result, it is not possible to speak of a complete rupture with previous traditions but of new guidelines that were imposed without apparent violence, marking the direction of what would be profound transformations that manifested themselves, seen from a historical perspective, in the appearance of a new phase.

Central phase (375-350 and 175 BC)

Attic pottery represents one of the index fossils of the changes that characterized this phase, due to its broad distribution, chronological sensitivity and initial persistence. Thus, these Greek imports are useful in delimiting the initial subphase whose principal characteristic is that it marks the definitive beginning of the new patterns of cultural behaviour.

This moment has its climax in the middle of the fourth century BC based on the available evidence, and traces of what appears to be a veritable colonization of the land. Numerous newly founded small sized hillforts, strongly associated with fluvial currents, cattle and mining

resources, and the appearance of a hand-made pottery ware with a strong personality in decoration are the principal novelties, along with the diffusion of stamp impressed pottery decoration, black wheel-thrown ceramics and metal pins and weapons of Continental influence (Fig. 8).

A whole archaeological complex, whose geographical distribution and symbolic elements clearly correspond to peoples that can be described as Celtic, appears as a homogenous cultural horizon in the Sado and Guadiana River basins, including cosmopolitan and Mediterranean nuclei such as Alcácer and the region of the Baeturians in the Guadiana River region.

Late phase (175-150 and 150-90 BC)

Once again, the presence of imported artifacts indicates new transformative dynamics, although within the same cultural trajectory as before. Campanian ware, Dressel amphorae, and the first Mediterranean coins reflect the violent social convulsions of the second century BC.

In the initial subphase, between 175 and 150 BC, the appearance of Italic and Mediterranean elements is quite sporadic (coins, Campanian A pottery). It is possible to argue that the later warfare and social chaos of the Lusitanian wars were the cause and effect of this process of change, with rebellious responses (raids, revolts, banditry) that, to a certain degree, testify to a change in the direction of indigenous transformations.

However, the final cultural repercussion was a strengthening of integrating changes, which is reflected at the end of the century by the appearance of Italic products on a massive scale and by an evident transformation of indigenous ceramics with the total replacement of local pottery by a black wheel-thrown pottery tradition that adopts Roman decorative techniques.

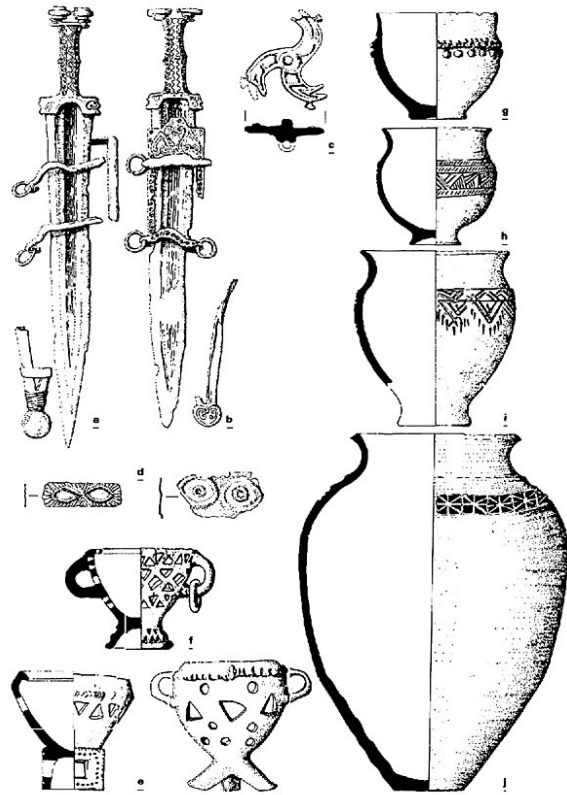


Figure 8. Swords (Álcacer do Sal: Schüle 1969), pottery (Capote: Berrocal-Rangel 1992), bronze triskel (Jerez de los Caballeros: Berrocal-Rangel 1995) and gold plaques (Garvão: Beirão et al. 1987) from Celtic sites in the southwestern Iberian Peninsula.

Also, some significant associations between isolated finds (weapons, coins, fibulae, *simpula*) (Fig. 9), and early epigraphic and toponymic evidence, allow us to identify an authentic Celtiberian military presence at this moment in time (Berrocal-Rangel 1995; Ramírez 2001). This social category, thought to have taken the form of a powerful and restricted élite, was probably the inspiration for the later tradition collected by Pliny the Elder about the Celtiberian origin of the Baeturian Celts (*Celticos a Celtiberis ex Lusitania advenisse manifestum est sacris, lingua, oppidorum vocabulis, quae cognominibus in Baetica distinguntur* (*N.H.*, III, 13-14).



Figure 9. Celtic bronze brooches from the hillfort of Capote, Spain. Second century BC. (Photo L. Berrocal-Rangel.)

Final phase (90-50 BC)

The process of conquest of the occidental territories to the south of the Tagus River seems to have come to an end with the victory of Licinius Crassus in the year 93 BC. Around that time, the syncretic character of cultural change begins to give way to a gradual imposition of new social and political guidelines. This phenomenon seems to have been especially marked during the Sertorian wars, and came to an end following the civil war between Caesar and Pompey. For that reason, we propose the arbitrary date of 50 BC as the methodological end of the pre-Roman Period in the southwestern Iberian Peninsula.

Archaeologically, these dynamics had an effect on the indigenous ceramic tradition, which reflects the wholesale acceptance of Roman tastes in pottery production also represented by Roman imports or imitations of imports.

The abandonment of some indigenous sites (Capote, Chibanes, Pedra d'Atalaia, La Martela), the strengthening of other centers (Nertobriga, Mirobriga, Ebor) and the establishment of new positions of military and economic control, such as those indicated, reflect the disappearance of the previous settlement patterns and mark the transition to a new historic period. Thus, a revitalization of some *oppida* can be observed, not as population centers but as administrative, political, economic and religious places bearing distinctly Celtic names that are

mentioned by the later Classical writers (Nertobriga, Mirobriga, Turobriga, Segida, Eborā, Eburobrittium, etc.).

All these data reveal a greatly altered population and settlement panorama in the first half of the first century BC that affected both both large and small centers.

Answers to ethnocultural concepts are the most interesting, since they represent the final objective of the preceding interpretations and, therefore, are those most difficult to identify and reconstruct in archaeological studies.

It is evident that the Classical sources do not provide valid explanations for the appropriateness of the designation "Celtic" in the southwestern Iberian Peninsula, a term that they frequently employ. Thus, we need to search for reliable correlations with material evidence that allow us to approach the cultural traits and the identification of ethnic identity that would justify such an appellation.

We are well aware of how thorny it is to deal with any subject related to the protohistory of the Iberian Peninsula that delves into the characteristics and roots of those peoples traditionally considered to be Hispano-Celtic. Fortunately, the work of a few Spanish Celticists in more recent times is beginning to bear fruit and the viability of studies of peoples called Celts has passed from an initially generalized rejection to a more hopeful reality (Almagro-Gorbea 1992; Almagro-Gorbea and Ruiz Zapatero 1993; Almagro-Gorbea et al. 2001; De Hoz 1992).

All of the Classical authors that deal in depth with pre-Roman *Hispania* concur regarding the presence of Celtic peoples in the Sado-Guadiana River basins. That only allows us to affirm that pre-Roman peoples were considered Celtic according to the ethnic concepts of their Greek or Latin contemporaries. In this sense, it seems justified to use the tribal name *Celtici* to identify these peoples, based on the same reasoning as applies in the case of the Bituriges, Brigantes, Belgae or Celtiberi.

However, these Classical references, charged with ethnocentric considerations as they are, cannot serve as a justification for an important Central-European presence in the Peninsula, a presence that Portuguese and Spanish archaeologists have not been able to confirm in spite of suggestive linguistic evidence. For this reason, the rejection of the efforts of eminent figures in Spanish historiography, such as Bosch Gimpera or Almagro Basch, has led to the denial of any Celtic presence in the Peninsula, without taking into consideration, in our opinion, that such a position is subject to the same interpretative errors as the traditional theories based on invasions

as the principal diffusive agents of change.

The rejection of a Celtic presence has ignored the outstanding contributions of fields such as linguistics (e.g., the texts found at Botorrita as well as other toponymic and anthroponymic evidence [Almagro-Gorbea and Lorrio 1987]) or belief systems (such as the cults of *Lugus*, *Epona*, and *Bormanicus* [Marco 1993]). Even when considering the archaeological record some of these scholars come close to denying the importance of the profusion of well-coordinated studies that provide us with an in-depth knowledge of peoples from the Central Peninsula, such as the Celtiberians (Burillo 1998; Lorrio 1998), whose material culture is not less Celtic than the classic complexes known from the Hallstatt and La Tène culture areas.

These studies offer explanations without having to invoke massive invasions, but rather emphasize more common and continual diffusive processes, such as those favoured by the constant secular relations between peoples on either side of the Pyrenees, or along the Atlantic coast, from at least the late Bronze Age on. The source of the error perpetuated by such negative considerations can be found in the excessive weight given to the absence in the Peninsula of archaeological evidence comparable to that from Central Europe. We should also consider the problem that such evidence leads to the traditional and erroneous equation of archaeological culture and ethnic identity.

Numerous anthropological discussions (cf. Shennan 1989) have argued that this dead-weight of research poses a dilemma. As this author and others have indicated, the archaeological record on its own is a product of cultural practices but it should never be confused with cultural identity as a whole. Once we accept this postulate, we may also ask ourselves to what extent the Hallstatt/La Tène assemblage as a paradigm of the protohistoric Celts in Europe might imply the same level of subjectivity and an even greater degree of distortion (Collis 1986). In this sense, we believe that the recognition of the Hispano-Celtic world, with the provision of its special characteristics based on more recent scientific discoveries, marks a new era in the interpretative studies of late European prehistory. The Hispano-Celts must be regarded as an example of the heterogeneous nature of the Protohistoric Celts as peoples sharing common languages and beliefs and specific stylistic perceptions, but not as a unique ethnic group, nation or state defined in terms of Mediterranean and other contemporary social concepts.

Therefore, setting aside the dated concept of an archaeological culture, we have decided to

approach the presumed cultural identity of these peoples of the southwestern Iberian Peninsula by following the paths blazed by Shennan, Wiessner and other scholars, especially those referring to the spatial and temporal variability of the record and to the analysis of the nature of style as a form of cultural and ethnic expression (Shennan 1989; Wiessner 1989).

Regarding spatial and temporal variability, material culture reflects a complex conjunction of the social, economic and ideological factors that can aid in the process of cultural understanding. The villages (whose distribution and internal organization cannot be considered completely urban), the necropoli (which do not contain rich burials equivalent to princely Iberian or Celtic graves), and the organization of production (there is no evidence for the existence of proto-state geopolitical systems, not even to the degree seen in Celtiberia or in the small Iberian kingdoms), reflect an egalitarian and unitary character that is confirmed by the relatively unstructured approaches to the world of beliefs and customs.

In this sense, the small amount of evidence available demonstrates a unity of cults, fundamentally associated with the Celtic gods Endovelico and Ataecina, the presence of large scale rituals, judging by the standardization of votive offerings found deposited at Garvão (small hammered gold and silver plaques shaped like eyes and possible organic offerings in small bowls)



Figure 10. The sanctuary and altar of Capote. Late fourth century BC. (Photo R. Caso Amador.)

and our interpretation of the Altar and deposit at Capote. The remains of both collective customs were coordinated by no more than 20 individuals (Beirão et al. 1987; Berrocal-Rangel 1994) (Figs. 10, 11 and 12).

To sum up, the material and ideological evidence reveals a population with a low level of sociopolitical development ruled by a certain concept of egalitarianism that nevertheless requires the presence of chieftains, based upon privileges of age or military need rather than on hereditary rights and wealth. It may be worth remembering that the relatively limited information collected by the Classical authors confirms this characteristic of the occidental peninsular peoples, referring repeatedly to the presence of Celtic military leaders in the Iberian and Punic armies.



Figure 11. Virtual reconstruction of the Sanctuary of Capote. (R. Maqueda García-Morales.)



Figure 12. Several pottery vessels found in the Sanctuary of Capote. (Photo L. Berrocal-Rangel.)

In terms of stylistic analysis, we employ those methodological procedures that have proved to be the most efficient in attempting to approach cultural identity. We understand that the recognition of an individual cultural style, together with social customs, represents the best proof of conscious or unconscious notions of community membership, that is, the recognition of an ethnic sentiment.

In this sense, if the data about customs strengthen a collectivist and egalitarian interpretation of the nature of southwestern Iberian society, the presence of a particular style is particularly evident precisely in the most common form of material culture: the local, hand-made pottery. In fact, the pottery is the most characteristic product of the southwestern Iberian Celts. This distinctive style possesses the two factors involved in the construction of symbolic value, according to Wiessner (1989: 257-258).

1. Emblematic style, which represents the conscious expression of a community, the reflection of which can be seen in decorative motifs such as the profuse wolf's-teeth pattern, stamped haloed or semi-haloed polygons, cut-out geometric motifs, and/or the appearance of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic stamps.
2. Assertive style, which implicitly includes a wide range of stylistic variability, focused from a stochastic view on artifacts such as the votive deposits at Capote, Garvão or Vaiamonte, the results of which are comparable to those known from other large ceramic assemblages in the southwestern Peninsula (Badajoz, Belén, Segovia or Miróbriga) during the Central phase.

In conclusion, we defend the Celtic nature of the pre-Roman peoples of the southwestern Iberian Peninsula, which must be regarded as the result of a long process of transformation and consolidation in the social complexity of these peoples who, although indigenous in character,

share historic dynamics with the rest of Atlantic Europe.

A slow process of Indo-Europeanization, amplified by the social developments of the late Bronze Age, including a system of military chiefdoms (well-known for the *stelae* that are characteristic of this period, which represent horned-helmeted warriors with chariots), began to reach a clear culmination by the end of the fifth century, when northern archaeological materials appeared in orientaling sites to an extent unknown previously (i.e. at Cancho Roano and Villanueva de la Vera).

Then, in the next century, the archaeological record presents a massive input of new pottery types and techniques as well as an increase in the exploitation of the land, including cattle husbandry, mining and control of trade and travel routes. The increase in the number of small hillforts and the adoption of a Celtic language at this time allow us to speculate about the occurrence of an important migration event which, judging by the evidence of ritual artefacts, came from the Central Douro River basin in northern Spain, the land of the Classical Vaccei.

The strong cultural character of these peoples in the southwestern Iberian Peninsula (particularly in the Lower Guadiana and Sado River basins) from the fourth century BC on is surprisingly homogeneous up to the end of the second century, when it absorbs various Roman and Mediterranean influences, demonstrating social and political transformations in the form of wars of resistance. At this point, some specific complexes of weapons, coins, adornments and epigraphy (as well as later toponymic and anthroponymic evidence) suggest the presence of Celtiberian military élites. These scanty and ephemeral traces are all that remain of the later tradition, collected by Roman Classical authors such as Pliny, regarding the origins of Celtiberia and the beliefs of the Celts of the *Baeturia regio* (Guadiana River basin), their use of a Celtic language, and the Celtic place-names of their villages: *Nertobriga*, *Segida*, *Turobriga*, *Corticata*, *Ugultunia*, *Ebora*, and *Caettobriga*.

Thus, the Celts of the southwestern Iberian Peninsula were on the one hand the result of a cumulative process of social and cultural transformations of indigenous populations that had extensive foreign relations during the last millennium BC and, on the other hand, the product of demographic shifts involving the movement of peoples from the Douro River Basin that originated in Vaccei and Celtiberian contexts, on a massive scale in the fifth century BC and more selective later on, during the second century BC.

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