

# THE TARTESSIAN TUMULI OF THE GUADIANA

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*Abstract:* This article presents a new approach towards the territorial model in the central Guadiana valley during the Early Iron Age. The main focus is an analysis of the so-called *Tartessian buildings hidden under tumuli*. These buildings are large constructions which bear a certain resemblance to the Phoenician architecture of the southwestern Iberian Peninsula. A settlement pattern can be discussed which is unique to the period, and which gives personality to the geographical sphere in which it is found.

*Keywords:* Protohistory; Central Guadiana Valley; Tartessos; Territorial Model; Buildings Under Tumuli.

## 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The phenomenon of the so-called Tartessian tumuli of the Guadiana river is nothing new in the archaeological literature; however, as we will see later on, the variety of interpretations to which these tumuli have been subjected and the number of terms that have been used to define them have complicated their historical understanding and their integration into the analysis of how the central Guadiana valley was settled during the Early Iron Age. This is true despite the fact that the tumuli represent an element that gives more personality to the area's land occupation model, making it stand out from other territorial systems documented in the vicinity, such as the Guadalquivir and Tagus River Valleys.

The origin of the tumuli must be traced through the Phoenician architecture located in the southwestern part of the Peninsula, which is the reason why the territorial models considered up to now had their basis in the Guadalquivir valley, both in the “core” of Tartessos and in the Andalusian Highlands.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, archeology is beginning to show how a more eastern influence – resulting in the Tartessian phase in the interior – was not only a consequence of the stimulus that came out of the core of Tartessos, but that on the contrary, the influence of the Phoenician colonies of the Atlantic coast of Portugal also played an important role.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to update the information that is currently available on this type of settlement. To accomplish this, we analyze previous research work dealing with these sites, as well as the terminology used to refer to it, its unique characteristics, and finally, the role of these sites within the territorial model of the central Guadiana valley during Tartessian times, when the Tartessians lived alongside other types of settlements such as elevated settlements (which some researchers have defined as *oppida*), small village- and farm-like settlements, and the necropolis.

However, before starting, reference must be made to the geographic context of this study, as this is essential in order to understand the relationships that existed between the different archaeological sites mentioned in the article. The central Guadiana valley (FIG. 1) is an area characterized by the absence of major landforms that could hinder communications between its different component regions or districts. Similarly,

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1 This work is part of the R&D&I Research Project entitled “Building Tartessos: Constructive, Spatial, and Territorial Analysis of an Architectural Model in the Central Guadiana Valley” (HAR2015-63788-P).

2 Almagro-Gorbea 2010a; 2014; Jiménez Ávila 2001; Rodríguez Díaz – Enríquez 2001; Rodríguez Díaz – Pavón – Duque 2016.



FIG. 1. Location of the central Guadiana valley (by the author).

communications between regions were probably further simplified by the presence of a wide, calm river – the Guadiana – which would have definitely favored connections between the different parts of its middle section. It should be noted this waterway is not navigable to its mouth, due to the presence of a waterfall located at the Portuguese town of Mértola, and so connections with the Port of Huelva, which have been defended by some, would seem unfeasible, at via this river.

The phenomenon of the Tumuli of the Guadiana appears to be restricted to a very clearly-defined geographical context: the river's middle section, which extends roughly between the towns of Badajoz and the border that separates the current Autonomous Communities of Extremadura and Castile–La Mancha. Occupation of this extensive geographic strip has been related to the crisis that affected the core of Tartessos at the end of the sixth century BCE,<sup>3</sup> which forced a part of the population that occupied the modern provinces of Seville, Cadiz, and Huelva (the core of Tartessos) to move to the lands of the interior. For this reason, the term Tartessian has been extended to the region which includes the central Guadiana valley;<sup>4</sup> however, as previously mentioned, this region's cultural formation is not exclusively due to influences from the Guadalquivir Valley and so term is not an accurate reflection of the model documented in the current Andalusian territory. Instead, both the local climate of the central Guadiana valley in the Late Bronze Age as

3 Celestino 2014; Celestino – López-Ruiz 2016; Rodríguez González – Celestino 2017a.

4 Celestino 2005; Rodríguez González 2018a, pp. 13-15.

well as the Phoenician settlements on the Atlantic coast of Portugal played an important role in this region's configuration<sup>5</sup> – a clear example of which are the materials and the architecture documented in the Tumuli of the Guadiana River, and which will be analyzed below.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The work undertaken to study the Tumuli of the Guadiana River dates back to the 1970s, when excavations at the Cancho Roano Archaeological Site (Zalamea de la Serena).<sup>6</sup> It is true that when archaeological work began in this area, these “Tumuli” were still far from being considered an exclusive phenomenon that extends throughout the central Guadiana valley; however, J. Maluquer de Motes, director of the initial excavation projects undertaken at Cancho Roano, believed it was possible that there could be examples similar to those of the aforementioned site located within the vicinity, as the architecture found at the site, and its remoteness from the Mediterranean, could only mean that a strong tradition existed.<sup>7</sup>

A decade after the discovery of Cancho Roano, work began at the nearby tumulus of the La Mata Archaeological Site (Campanario), the second example of this type of construction, which was also carefully excavated.<sup>8</sup> The excavations at La Mata included the completion of a systematic surveying project, whose goal was to describe the territorial model of the central Guadiana valley during the Early Iron Age, based on the discovery of new examples of these so-called *buildings hidden under tumuli*. However, shortly before the first results from the macrospatial analysis at La Mata came to light, many of the materials from the Turuñuelo tumulus in Mérida were published.<sup>9</sup> This tumulus was a small elevation that was both structurally and materially similar to the previously cited examples. The appearance of these materials resulted in the publication of works on a small sample of these types of sites (under the term “monumental complex”), which were analyzed for the first time as a model for occupation that was exclusive to the central Guadiana valley.<sup>10</sup> Their particular features included their isolated location and their prominent rural role.<sup>11</sup>

Just one year later, the first results from excavation work at the La Mata building and the macrospatial study that had been carried out were published.<sup>12</sup> This work incorporated new case studies, while simultaneously opening the way to a second interpretation of the model, as the architectural and material differences that existed between Cancho Roano and La Mata were interpreted as if they were two different realities: while the studies that had followed the discovery of Cancho Roano had focused on the religious nature of this building,<sup>13</sup> which had been identified by some authors as a palace-sanctuary,<sup>14</sup> the absence of religious elements in the excavation carried out at La Mata led to this site being interpreted as Prestige Architecture,<sup>15</sup> referring to the aristocratic nature of the individuals who inhabited these areas. This double interpretation caused a breach in the way this type of archeological site was studied, as instead of considering the examples

5 Arruda 2002; Sousa 2014.

6 Celestino 2001, including bibliography.

7 Maluquer *et al.* 1986, p. 6.

8 Rodríguez Díaz – Ortiz 1998; Rodríguez Díaz 2004.

9 Jiménez Ávila – Domínguez de la Concha 1995.

10 Jiménez Ávila 1997.

11 Jiménez Ávila 1997, p. 148.

12 Rodríguez Díaz – Ortiz 1998.

13 Maluquer de Motes 1981; 1983; Maluquer de Motes *et al.* 1986.

14 Almagro-Gorbea – Domínguez de la Concha 1989; Almagro-Gorbea 1991, p. 106.

15 Rodríguez Díaz – Ortiz 1998; Duque 2001, p. 53; Rodríguez Díaz *et al.* 2007.

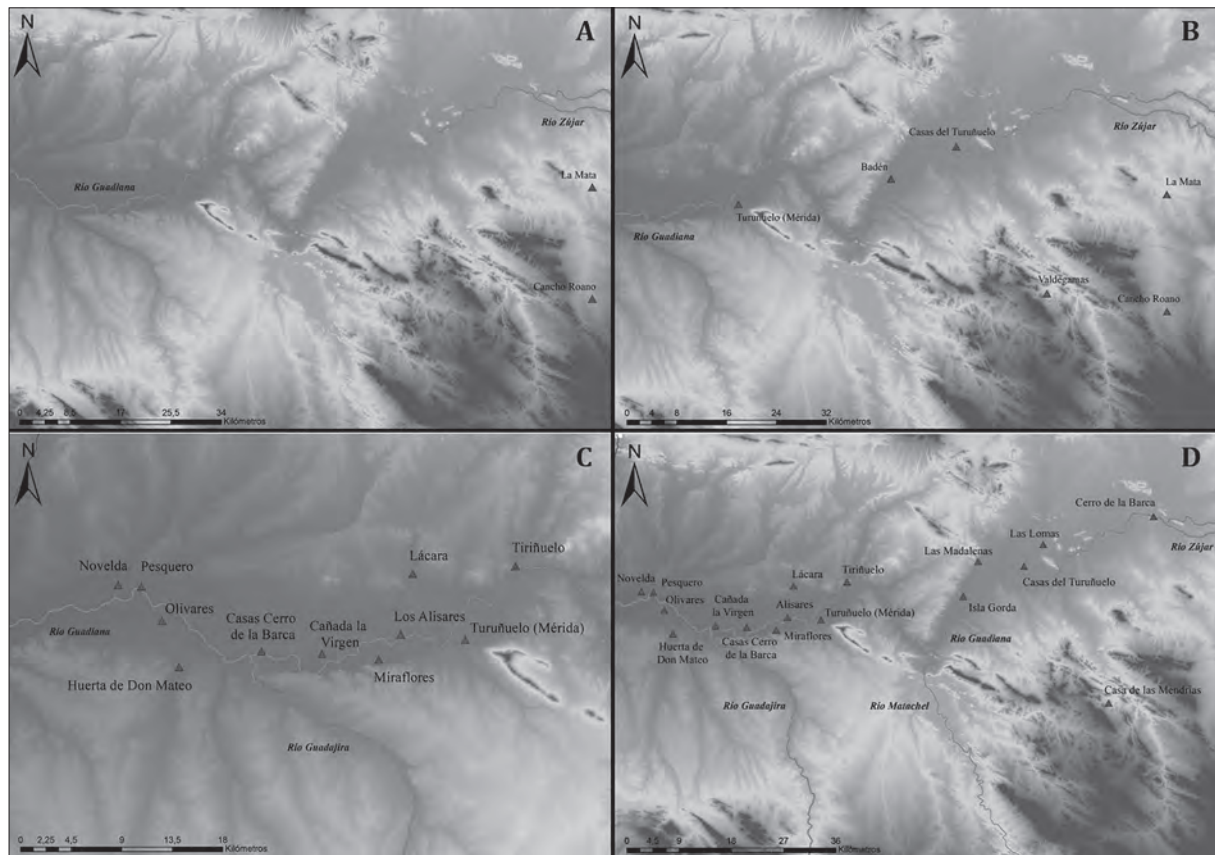


FIG. 2. Map-based evolution of the study of the Tumuli of the Guadiana River. A. Location of Cancho Roano and La Mata (by the author); B. Tumuli located according to Jiménez Ávila 1997; C. Tumuli located according to Duque 2001; D. Tumuli located according to Rodríguez Díaz – Pavón – Duque 2004.

as complementary buildings (actors in the same territorial reality but with different functionalities), a dual interpretation had been devised which hindered their understanding.

The first macrospatial study was soon complemented with an analysis of *El poblamiento protohistórico de las Vegas Bajas del Guadiana*,<sup>16</sup> a work that marked a turning point in terms of our knowledge of these structures, as well as adding ten new case studies to the list of tumuli known until that time, and bringing about several methodological innovations, such as the application of a visibility analysis and the presentation of a comprehensive study of the materials recovered during the surveying and the documentation work for each tumulus, which made it possible for a cultural description of several of these sites to be devised for the first time.<sup>17</sup>

The latest work related with the structural and spatial analysis of this settlement type was published alongside the final report on the excavations carried out at La Mata.<sup>18</sup> While at the structural level hardly any variations were observed with respect to the previous work, it is true that this was the first territorial analysis in which these sites were considered as a type of independent settlement.<sup>19</sup> In total, this work included in-

16 Duque 2001.

17 Duque 2001, pp. 40-46.

18 Rodríguez Díaz 2004.

19 Rodríguez Díaz – Pavón – Duque 2004, pp. 577-580.

formation on 16 tumuli that included their name, location, access system, an assessment in cultural terms, the results obtained in the surveys, and a final bibliography. This information was accompanied by a full set of photographs – including orthophotos – and maps (FIG. 2).

Despite the very complete information we have on many of these tumuli, their incorporation into the territorial models designed for the central Guadiana valley during the Early Iron Age has not been homogeneous; in fact, they are not even considered in all of the territorial models<sup>20</sup> and when they are included, those that are of interest in terms of the settlement's design are selected,<sup>21</sup> the reason why the majority of them continue to be unknown. As a result, more recent works have focused on the architectural analysis of these buildings,<sup>22</sup> leaving territorial considerations aside. Despite the fact that there have been various survey studies undertaken in different parts of the central Guadiana valley,<sup>23</sup> little progress has been made in terms of increasing our knowledge on of these sites for at least a decade.

Given the heterogeneous nature of the pieces responsible for summarizing the available information on the Tumuli of the Guadiana River, and the lack of consensus in terms of defining this type of construction, a project was carried out in 2013 in order to review the sites known to date.<sup>24</sup> The project focused on precisely locating the different tumuli that had been written about to date in the central Guadiana valley, in order to collect materials that would make it possible for these sites to be described chronologically and culturally, as well as to analyze the local environment in order to study them from within the context of the territorial model of this vast space during the Early Iron Age.<sup>25</sup>

When the references in the literature started to be evaluated, there were a total of 23 tumuli (FIG. 3a). Following the review and analysis, this figure was reduced to 13 archaeological sites, including those of Cancho Roano and La Mata<sup>26</sup> (FIG. 3b). This chosen group of tumuli made it possible to carry out a comprehensive territorial study which has been enhanced by the inclusion of the rest of the settlement categories, but which still has placed considerable emphasis on the tumuli – a unique aspect of the central Guadiana valley.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. A FORMULA FOR IDENTIFICATION

The heterogeneous nature that characterizes the different projects that have addressed the study and analysis of the tumuli-type settlement category in the Guadiana River region similarly includes a wide diversity of terms to refer to this type of structure. This heterogeneity has brought about distortions in terms of the study of this type of construction, as it is quite difficult to identify these buildings within the existing literature as they are referred to with a different name by each author.

The first name that this type of building received was that of *Palacio-Santuario* (*palace-sanctuary*), a term used by J. Maluquer de Motes to define Cancho Roano, as he considered that this nomenclature

20 Rodríguez Díaz – Enríquez 2001.

21 Almagro-Gorbea *et al.* 2008a.

22 Jiménez Ávila 2009a; 2009b.

23 Mayoral – Celestino – Walid 2011; Sevillano *et al.* 2013; Rodríguez Díaz – Duque – Pavón 2009.

24 Rodríguez González – Celestino 2017a.

25 These projects were included within the context of the Research Project entitled “Comparative Archaeological Study of the Outlying Territories of Tartessos: The Valleys of the Guadiana and the Tagus” (HAR 2012-33985), 2012-2015 State R&D&I Plan, Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.

26 Rodríguez González 2018a, p. 160.

27 This paper does not include an explanation of the methodology used to analyze the 23 tumuli, as this has already been described and published in recent works (Rodríguez González 2018a; 2018b); instead, this article will focus on describing the results obtained.

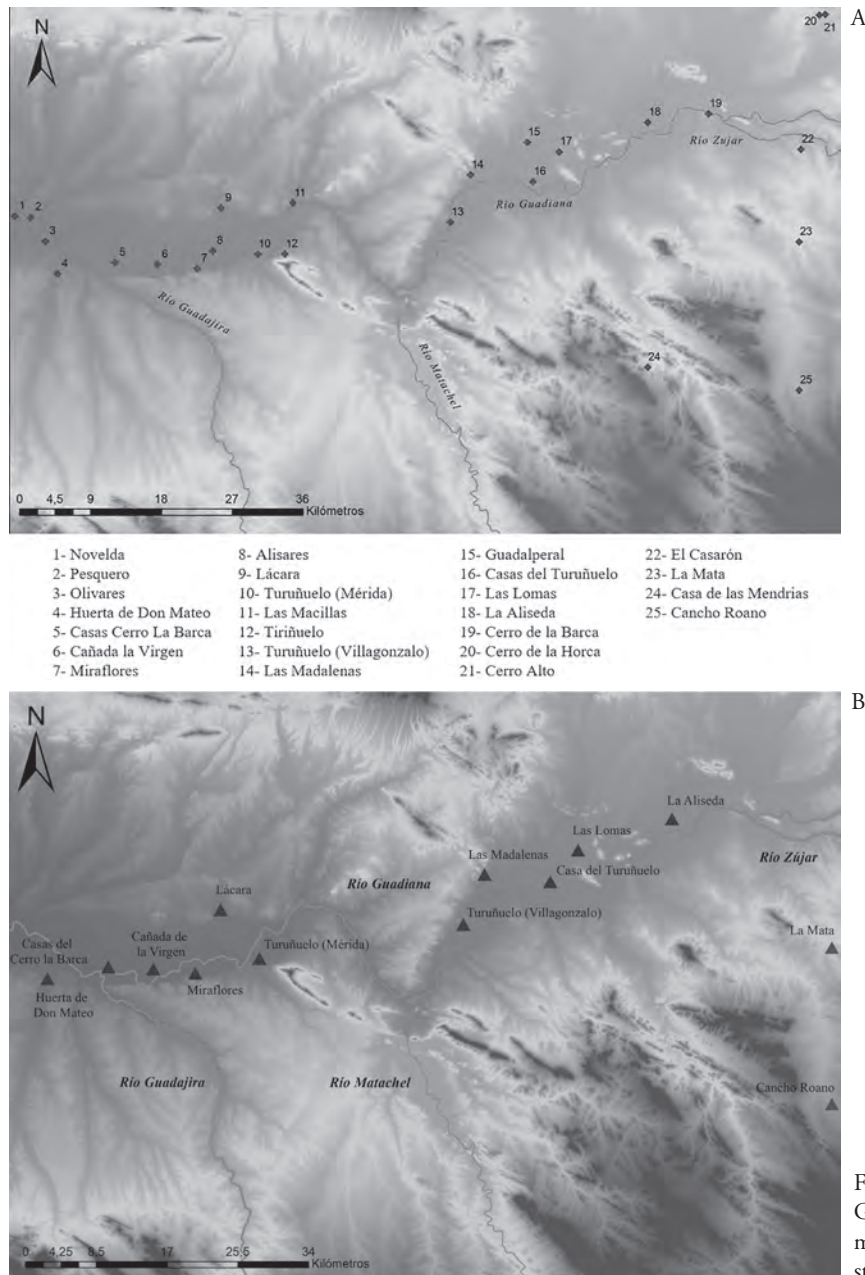


FIG. 3. Territorial study of the central Guadiana valley (by the author). A. Tumuli included at the beginning of the study; B. Results from the review.

embodied both the functionality and the monumentality of the construction. However, this term became redundant following the excavation of the La Mata building, as despite the fact that the two buildings share morphological features, their functionality is very different.

Almost in parallel to the appearance of this first term was the adoption of the concept of an *Edificio Singular (singular building)*,<sup>28</sup> a term that is not used so frequently in the literature. This was a suitable description while the only known example of this type of architecture was Cancho Roano (a single model);

28 López Pardo 1990.

however, the emergence of new examples affected the term's usefulness: something "singular" refers to something that is unique, but the tumuli of the Guadiana River are a widespread phenomenon throughout the central Guadiana valley.

Other authors have used the term *Palacio-Fortaleza* (*palace-fortress*), a concept that stems from the functionality that is attributed to this type of construction in the territorial model.<sup>29</sup> This is because the term *palace* defines the monumentality of the buildings, while the concept of *fortress* refers to their functionality. Nevertheless, it does not seem to be the most correct term, as it does not represent all of the known examples, and only applies to some of the sites. This is the case for the role that the Turuñuelo tumulus of Mérida would have played, controlling the border that separated the territories under the control of the city of Medellín, on the one hand, and the control of the city of Dipo, on the other. As a result, this concept is only applicable within the model of settlement that considers Medellín to have been the political and economic capital of the region.<sup>30</sup> In addition, it does not seem that the main and exclusive functionality of this type of settlement was defensive, as this functionality is not especially prominent in the architecture of its fortress-like appearance.

At the same time as the publication of papers on the first set of these tumuli, analyzed as a type of independent settlement category, the first attempt was made to standardize how they should be defined.<sup>31</sup> To accomplish this, the term *Complejo Monumental* (*monumental complex*) was coined, a formula that could be used to include a set of buildings unrelated with domestic architecture and whose purpose was clearly propagandistic in nature. The problem that stems from this term is the use of the word *complex*; if *monumental* refers to the relevance of these constructions, then *complex* refers to the existence of a set of buildings. However, in reality, what was being analyzed were isolated buildings which at the time did not seem to have a clear relationship with the smaller sites around them.

The last attempt to include these constructions under a common denominator proposed the application of the terms *Arquitectura de prestigio y poder* (*prestige/power architecture*)<sup>32</sup> or *Edificios de Prestigio* (*buildings of prestige*).<sup>33</sup> This terminology stems from the aristocratic functionality attributed to the La Mata building in the absence of religious elements or palace-like elements that would allow it to be included as a palace-sanctuary. Nevertheless, to apply concepts such as prestige or power to this type of building is to assume social aspects that are, to date, completely unknown. Was the functionality of these constructions to demonstrate power and prestige? What is certain is that, far from being able to answer this question, this terminology does not cover the thirteen examples that are known to date, despite the fact that the architecture that characterizes them can be considered to be a result of the power of the group that occupied them.

In the light of these circumstances, and with the aim of having a term that can be applied to all these constructions, the author of this paper proposes the use of the terminology *Edificios tartésicos ocultos bajo túmulo* (*Tartessian buildings hidden under tumuli*) as, despite being quite extensive, it fully reflects the settlement category and does not refer to their function. Instead, it only reflects the aspects that these constructions have in common: buildings from the Tartessian period (sixth and fifth centuries BCE) which after being abandoned were hidden under the earth of a tumulus, making them jut out of the landscape as if they were a small hill. In this way, regardless of the functionality of the building, all of them are included within the same category, allowing them to be clearly identified within territorial studies. Having said this, and as the title of this paper indicates, it is important to note that it is quite difficult to decouple these constructions from their common denominator: the Tartessian tumuli of the Guadiana River.

29 Almagro-Gorbea *et al.* 2008b, p. 1028

30 Almagro-Gorbea – Mederos – Torres 2008.

31 Jiménez Ávila 1997, p. 142.

32 Rodríguez Díaz – Ortiz 1998; Duque 2001.

33 Rodríguez Díaz – Ortiz 1998.

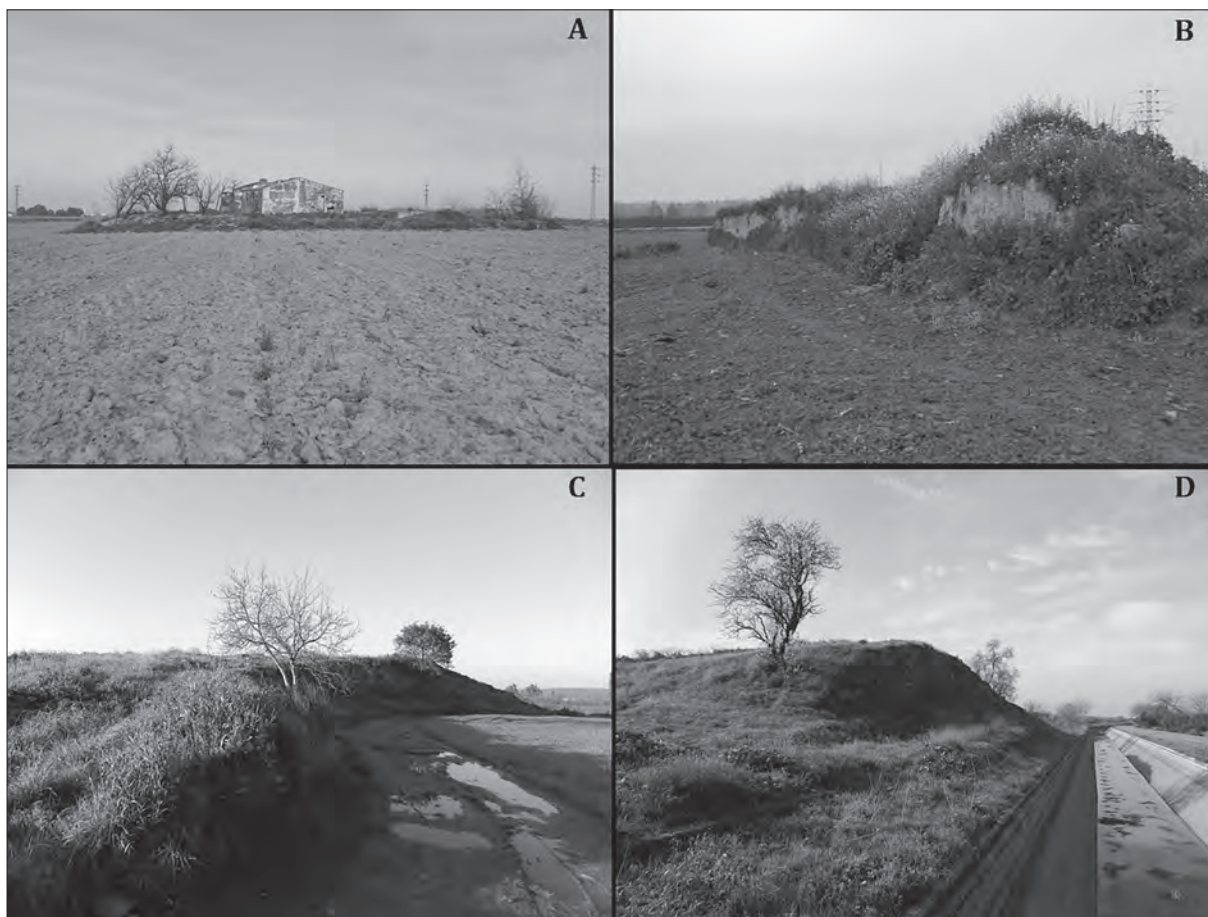


FIG. 4. Detail photos of some of the tumuli studied showing the alterations that arose as a result of agricultural activities (by the author). A. Huerta de Don Mateo (Talavera la Real, Badajoz); B. Cañada la Virgen (Puebla de la Calzada, Badajoz); C. Turuñuelo (Villagonzalo, Badajoz); D. Turuñuelo (Mérida, Badajoz).

#### 4. TARTESSIAN BUILDINGS HIDDEN UNDER TUMULI

These buildings correspond to a settlement category that is unique to the southwest of the Iberian Peninsula. Although they should fall within the group of plains settlements if we consider their geographical position, their architecture, richness, and monumentality lead us to analyze them independently; this is the only way to assess the important role that they must have played during the Tartessian stage of the lands of the interior. We could even go so far as to say that they represent the best elements for the study and understanding of the Tartessian culture in its final stage.

As already mentioned in the introduction of this paper, their appearance is related with the so-called “Crisis” of the sixth century BCE, a phenomenon that led to the abandonment of the Tartessian core and the displacement of part of the population towards the interior lands. Coinciding with that time, the lands of the central Guadiana valley underwent a territorial transformation that resulted in the abandonment of the existing sites, as occurred with El Palomar<sup>34</sup> and Cerro Manzanillo,<sup>35</sup> and the creation of new settlements

34 Jiménez Ávila – Ortega 2001.

35 Rodríguez Díaz – Duque – Pavón 2009.



in new geographical areas. This change has been interpreted in terms of socio-economic transformation,<sup>36</sup> a change in the environmental exploitation interests which led to the establishment of a unique territorial model in which, as we will see, agricultural control of the fertile plains on either side of the Guadiana River was the dominating theme.

The geographical location of these sites has made their state of conservation very unpredictable: while some preserve their architectural and material structure almost intact, others have been completely destroyed (FIG. 4). Work to make these irrigated farmlands suitable for cultivation led to the subdivision, in 1950s, of a good part of the *vegas* (river plains) of the Guadiana, which devastated some of the ancient settlements of the region. Interestingly, the very work that subdivided or destroyed portions of these tumuli simultaneously served to alert archaeologists to their existence. In order to mitigate the degree of destruction that affected many of these structures, scientists have resorted to the analysis of historic orthophotos from 1956 (prior to the land subdivision) in order to know the precise nature, extension, and location of these structures.

Of the thirteen tumuli found to date, it has only been possible to carry out morphological analysis on three of them, and two of those examples have been rigorously excavated: Cancho Roano and La Mata. The third, Casas del Turuñuelo, has been in the process of excavation since 2015. Nevertheless, due to the fact that all of them are covered by an artificial tumulus made of earth, as well as the study of the materials associated with all the surveyed tumuli, it can be concluded that they all belong to the same chrono-cultural horizon. Only their partial or full excavation will make it possible to determine whether they belong to this or another settlement category in architectural terms.

The first trait that all Tartessian buildings hidden under tumuli have in common is that they are large structures which, after being abandoned, were first burned and then covered by a huge artificial tumulus made of earth, an element that helped preserve them until the present day. This artificial tumulus has a size that ranges between 2 and 5 meters in height and between 40 and 90 meters in diameter, although there are obviously exceptions that do not fall within these ranges. It should be noted that these measurements are derived from current fieldwork, where the tumuli tend to have a circular structure as a result of the agricultural activities undertaken in their environment. Therefore, a review of aerial orthophotos has allowed scientists to detect that many of these tumuli were originally rectangular in shape (FIG. 5).

In terms of their architectural structure, these are large, monumental buildings with a strongly Mediterranean influence. Those that are known to date have a quadrangular shape and face east,<sup>37</sup> two characteristic features of Phoenician architecture<sup>38</sup>. As a result, these buildings were first compared with the constructions of the Middle East, specifically with the *bit-hilani* of northern Syria<sup>39</sup> and the *Al-Mina* complex;<sup>40</sup> however, given the cultural development from which this type of construction stems, its parallels must be sought in the Phoenician buildings and the Tartessian architecture of the southwest of the Peninsula,<sup>41</sup> as is the case of El Carambolo (Camas, Seville),<sup>42</sup> Coria del Río (Seville),<sup>43</sup> and Abul (Portugal) (FIG. 6).<sup>44</sup> Additionally, these buildings share the same construction technique: a stone foundation over which levels of adobe or brick are raised, whitewashed, and decorated, reaching up to 3 meters in height and in some points

36 Celestino 2008a, p. 323.

37 Esteban – Escacena 2013.

38 Díez Cusí 1994; 2001; Arruda – Celestino 2009.

39 Maluquer de Motes 1981, p. 53.

40 Maluquer de Motes 1983.

41 Celestino – Rodríguez González 2016.

42 Fernández Flores – Rodríguez Azogue 2007.

43 Escacena – Izquierdo 2001.

44 Mayet – Tavares da Silva 2000.

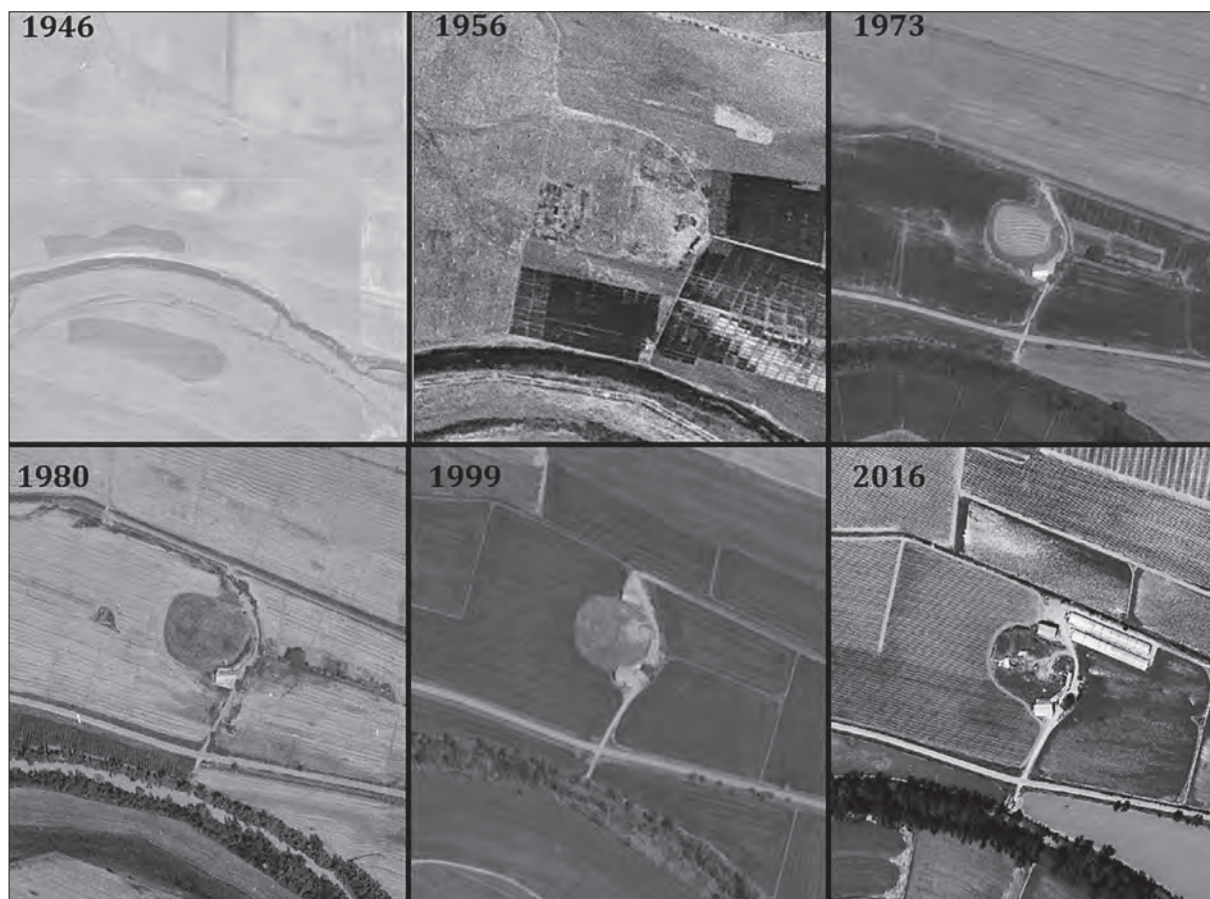


FIG. 5. Photographic evolution of the Casas del Turuñuelo tumulus (by the author). Through historic photo analysis, the transformation undergone by the landscape and the elevation as a result of human impact can be seen.

on two levels. Their floors are usually made of rammed red clay, another element strongly reminiscent of the Phoenicians, although there are examples in which the floors are covered in slate slabs, as is the case of Cancho Roano, or even with grass mats, as in room 100 of Casas del Turuñuelo. Additionally, the roofs seem to have been flat, constructed using wooden beams and branches which were subsequently lined with earth to give them consistency; however, once again considering the case of Casas del Turuñuelo, this affirmation does not hold true, as its main room (covering 60 m<sup>2</sup>) seems to have been covered by a Nubian-style brick vault.<sup>45</sup>

The group of buildings excavated to date has allowed us to document the presence of secondary architectural elements which served to organize the interior of the rooms. This is the case of the continuous benches, made of adobe or bricks, hearths, and altars, commonly in the shape of a stretched bull hide, a significant symbol of the Tartessian culture<sup>46</sup> as revealed by their appearance in the shrines of both the Guadalquivir valley, as is the case of Coria del Río and El Carambolo, and of the central Guadiana valley, where we can find examples such as Cancho Roano and Casas del Turuñuelo.

<sup>45</sup> Rodríguez González – Celestino 2017b.

<sup>46</sup> Celestino 2008b; Arruda – Celestino 2009; Gómez Peña 2017.

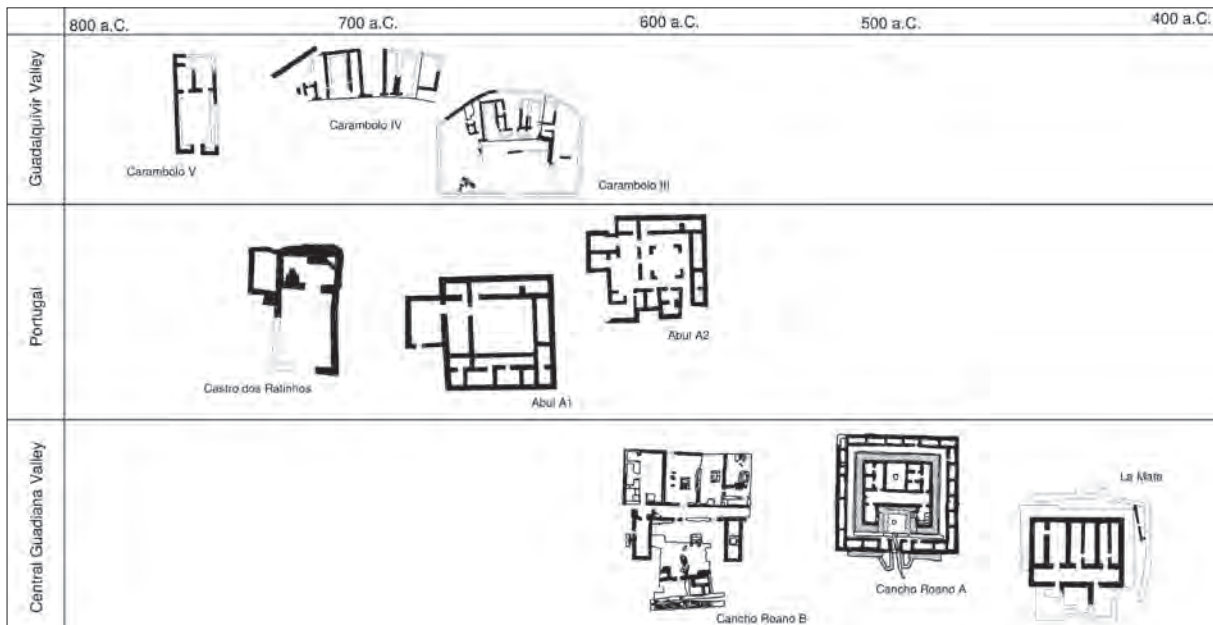


FIG. 6. Diagram of different floors corresponding to Phoenician and Tartessian buildings of the southwest of the Peninsula (by the author).

The fact that these buildings were intentionally concealed is evident from the presence of a wide range of materials, including a large number of imported items such as Attic pottery, ivory sets, and objects made of glass paste. The appearance of a rich repertoire of prestige objects points towards the social and political capacity of the individuals who lived in these monumental constructions. Also, as previously mentioned, the fact that they were concealed beneath a large, artificial tumulus means that many of them are in an excellent state of preservation: the tumulus of Casas del Turuñuelo is the best example of this, as its two levels are still conserved. In some cases, the degree of concealment of these buildings is absolutely perfect, to the point that the seal prevents the documentation of materials on the surface that would facilitate the chrono-cultural identification of the site. This is something that complicates the inclusion of some of the case studies that are presented in this paper into the territorial model for the central Guadiana valley.

In terms of the functionality of these buildings, the three examples excavated to date show the existence of a wide variety of functions. Cancho Roano has been identified as a shrine due to its geographic location, the religious elements that it contains, the presence of a *Sancta Sanctorum* with a succession of three altars, and the importance of water in its construction, among other reasons.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the large number of amphorae and mills in the La Mata building, together with a wine press, would indicate that it was used for the storage and redistribution of agricultural surplus.<sup>48</sup> It is more difficult to functionally define the Casas del Turuñuelo tumulus, as only a small percentage of the building has been excavated to date; however, the presence of a large number of elements related with the existence of a major ritual, as well as a main space presided over by a large altar in the form of a bull's hide would seem to point towards a clearly religious function.

But despite this functional diversity, all of the different sites have one aspect in common: their location within an area of high agricultural potential, making it possible to define a relationship between the

47 Celestino 2001, pp. 47-53.

48 Rodríguez Díaz 2004.

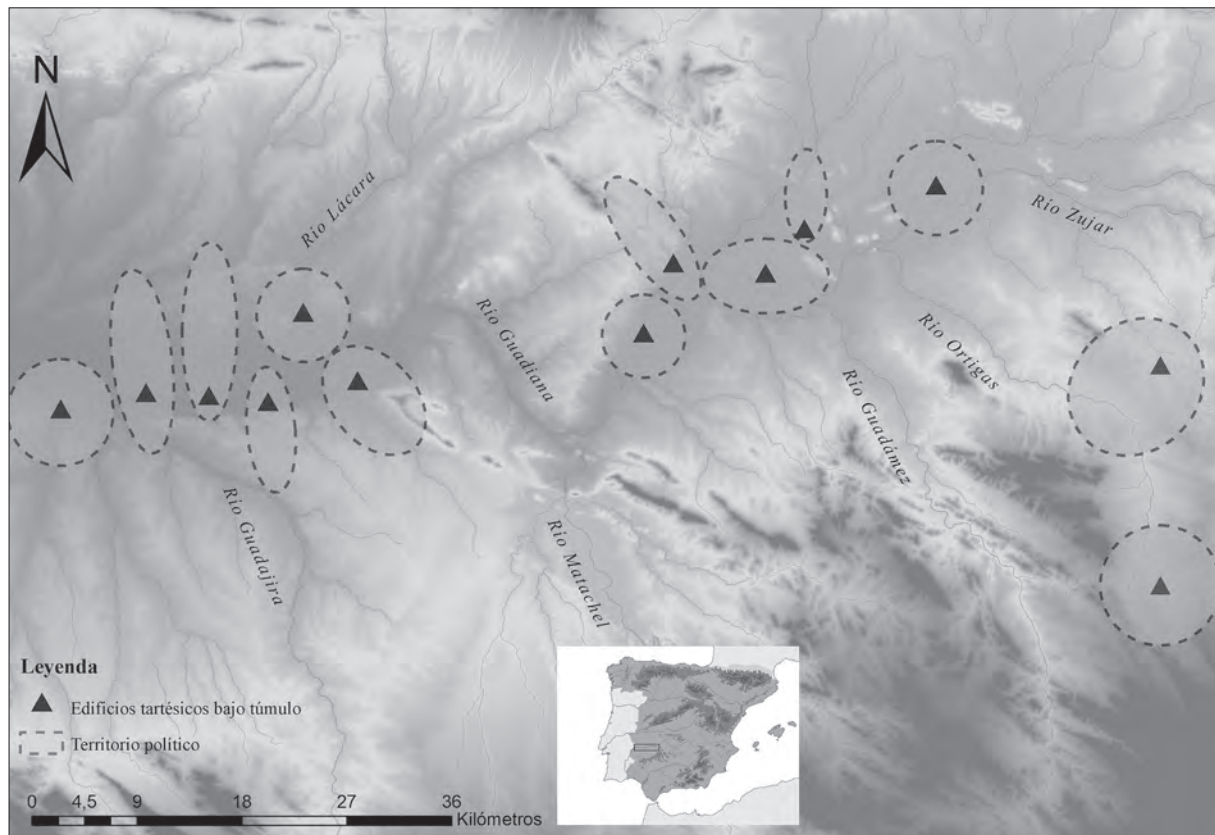


FIG. 7. Location map of the Tumuli of the Guadiana and hypothetical reconstruction of the territory that is under the control of each one of the tumular elevations (by the author).

different constructions. Each building had a specific function but, at the same time, it was responsible for the agricultural control and exploitation of its surrounding area (FIG. 7), something that would make these constructions complementary. This idea is further supported by the existence of an architectural pattern that is common to all the buildings, and by the fact that they share the same chronology. In fact, the examples excavated (mainly the chronological series extracted from the excavation undertaken at Cancho Roano), make it possible to date these structures to between the middle of the sixth century and the end of the fifth century BCE. And finally, the simultaneous disappearance of these tumuli means they all share the same historical reality.

But perhaps one of the most defining traits of these buildings is their geographic location, which is crucial in understanding their political and economic role. If we look at a physical map of the central Guadiana valley, it can be seen that all of these constructions are located precisely at the point where the Guadiana River converges with one of its main tributaries (FIG. 8). This location gives a strategic role to both the river, making it a practical and efficient communication line, and to the buildings themselves, since their positions can control both the passage of travelers down the waterway as well as a large region with great agricultural potential. The central Guadiana valley is one of the calmest and widest extensions of river of the entire Iberian Peninsula, allowing for easy communications between the different areas. Perhaps the only exception is the location of the Cancho Roano archaeological site, the farthest away from the Guadiana Basin; however, it is located next to the Ortiga River, a tributary of the Guadiana which discharges near to the necropolis of Medellín.

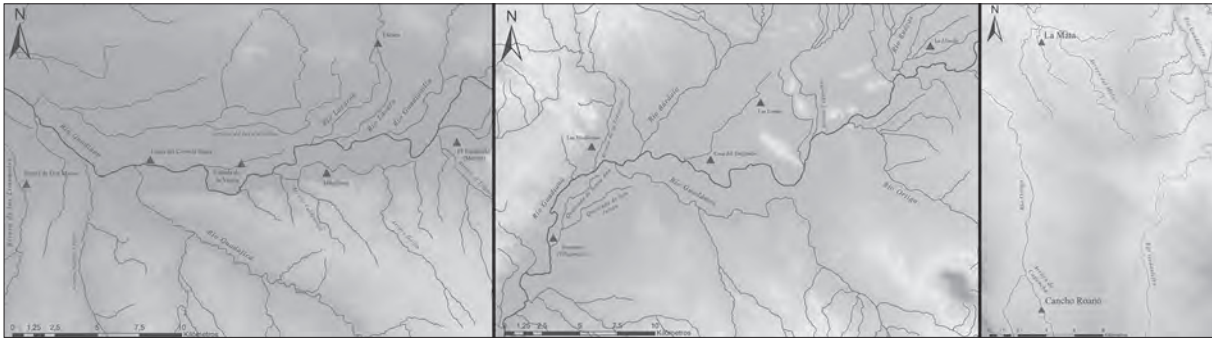


FIG. 8. Location of the tumuli in relationship with the main waterways nearby (by the author).

If we combine the functional diversity, chronology, and geographical location of these buildings into the same formula, the result is a territory that is perfectly articulated and organized; a space whose smooth workings allowed it to remain operational with only minor modifications for nearly two centuries. The reason behind the disappearance of the Tartessian people from the interior lands is still a riddle to be solved. The hypothesis that defended, up to now, the existence of external socioeconomic and cultural factors<sup>49</sup> is beginning to lose strength, as the concealment of these massive constructions implies prior planning, given that this must have involved a great deal of time and effort. We can therefore begin to consider the existence of a possible change in climate that would justify the total abandonment of this territory, which did not recover its activity practically until the time of the Roman conquest.

##### 5. THE CENTRAL GUADIANA VALLEY DURING THE EARLY IRON AGE

The Tartessian buildings hidden under tumuli are part of a settlement model that is complemented by the presence of one elevated settlement, the Cerro del Tamborrio (Villanueva de la Serena, Badajoz), and a number of flatland village or farm settlements with an extension of less than one hectare.

Despite the large number of archaeological excavations carried out in the hills along the central Guadiana valley, as is the case of the Cerro de la Alcazaba de Badajoz<sup>50</sup> or the Cerro del Castillo de Medellín,<sup>51</sup> the only archaeological evidence of the existence of an elevated settlement can be found on the Cerro del Tamborrio,<sup>52</sup> as in the two previously-mentioned examples there is no architectural evidence that would point towards their occupation during the First Iron Age.<sup>53</sup> In turn, Tamborrio is a smooth elevation located in a strategic point of the territory, at the confluence of the Guadiana and the Zújar, its largest tributary. The excavations carried out at this site have made it possible to document a moment of occupation which began in the seventh century BCE and continued until the end of the fifth century BCE, the time when the settlement caught fire and was abandoned. It was subsequently reoccupied at the end of the fourth century BCE, until it was completely abandoned in the third century BCE.<sup>54</sup>

49 Rodríguez Díaz 1994, p. 18; Rodríguez Díaz – Pavón – Duque 2004.

50 Berrocal 1994, including bibliography; Enríquez *et al.* 1998.

51 Almagro-Gorbea 1977; Almagro-Gorbea – Martín Bravo 1994; Guerra – Collado – Pérez Romero 2014.

52 Walid – Pulido 2013.

53 Rodríguez González 2018a.

54 Walid – Pulido 2013, p. 1183.



FIG. 9. Map of the location for the Cerro de la Barca and El Tamborrio Archaeological Sites (by the author).

This is an elevated settlement with a double row of walls that was built in two stages, one during the seventh century BCE (in which the wall was constructed in adobe) and a second one in the sixth century BCE (in which the wall was built entirely of stone). According to the research carried out on the north slope of the hill, the settlement was laid out on artificial terraces in which several storage spaces were dug out, while, its acropolis was located on the highest point of the hill, identified by the discovery of a single building constructed with wide walls and in which an adobe floor has been found with slabs raised over it. The archaeologists responsible for the excavation of this area identified this space as a possible pool that was used for purification rituals.<sup>55</sup>

The distance which separates this elevated site from the so-called Tartessian buildings hidden under tumuli complicates the definition of the relationship that may have existed between them; however, the geographical position of the Tamborrio settlement, its chronology, and the presence of a high percentage of amphorae remains, would suggest that the main role of this location within the central Guadiana valley would have been to control the exploitation and redistribution of resources within the area, as well as the operation and management of the so-called Tartessian buildings hidden under tumuli. Therefore, the Tamborrio settlement must have been responsible for promoting the construction of these large buildings and their administration: only in this way could the stability of these constructions within the territorial model be ensured, something that becomes evident when the durability of the system is considered.

<sup>55</sup> Walid – Pulido 2013, pp. 1210-1219.

Lastly, the small village or farm sites would have been under the control of each one of the Tartessian buildings: settlements connected to the agricultural exploitation of the surrounding environment, with an extension of less than one hectare. According to the proposed model, each of these small farms would have been under the control of a building, depending upon the territory in which they were located. It is very difficult to detect them in the surveying work, due to the extent to which this geographical area has been altered as a result of the land subdivision to which it was subjected in the 1950s. This subdivision has led to the destruction of a large number of these small villages, with an equally small archaeological footprint.

To date, a total of five plains settlements sites have been found, despite the fact that this is one of the most extensively surveyed and analyzed regions in the southwest of the Iberian Peninsula. Perhaps the largest example is the Cerro de la Barca settlement,<sup>56</sup> the only one that seems to cover more than one hectare and which could therefore be defined as a small town, and the only one that does not seem to have been under the control of one of these Tartessian buildings, given its proximity to the Tamborrio archaeological site (FIG. 9). The rest can be defined as small farms under the control of a family in charge of operating an agricultural area, as evidenced by the presence of amphorae and even small baking ovens, such as those documented at the El Chaparral archaeological site,<sup>57</sup> the only site of those known which has been partially excavated.

The last elements that are decisive in defining the settlement model of the central Guadiana valley during the Early Iron Age are the necropolises. The necropolis of Medellín is, perhaps, one of the best examples of the funerary archeology of Tartessos. Its discovery in the 1970s<sup>58</sup> represented, along with Cancho Roano, one of the most relevant findings for the Peninsula's protohistory. Its appearance led to the search for the town with which it must be related, a site that logic dictated would have most likely stood on the next hill, the Cerro del Castillo de Medellín.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, despite years of archaeological excavations, and the fact that there is material evidence of the Early Iron Age on the hill, constructive remains of this chronology have not been documented.<sup>60</sup> This means that the necropolis cannot be exclusively related with the Medellín settlement, as the large number of graves estimated for the necropolis of Medellín (some 1500, spread over 10 generations) implies the existence of a village with a population of between 1500-2000 inhabitants.<sup>61</sup>

The necropolis of Medellín is not an isolated example in this territory. Within its vicinity are the necropolises of Mengabril<sup>62</sup> and Valdelagrulla (Mengabril, Badajoz).<sup>63</sup> The closeness between the three and the absence of a large-scale site which could justify their location has led archaeologists to propose the hypothesis that these necropolises are actually communal in nature, meaning they were intended for the burial of the groups inhabiting the area. This idea is based both on the geographic location of the necropolis, right in the center of the central Guadiana valley, as well as on the uniformity of the tombs, whose richness serves as evidence of a society with a high purchasing power, like the society that must have inhabited the Tartessian buildings. Therefore, the space between the Guadiana and Ortiga rivers must have served as a funerary zone for the Tartessian communities that inhabited the area between the seventh and fifth centuries BCE (FIG. 10).

Ultimately, we find ourselves facing an occupation model that is structured around two settlement categories: elevated sites, which, to date can only include the Tamborrio archaeological site; and sites located

56 Rodríguez González 2013, pp. 75-76.

57 Sanabria 2008, p. 67.

58 Almagro-Gorbea 1977.

59 Almagro-Gorbea 1977, p. 415.

60 Rodríguez González – Celestino 2017a; Rodríguez González 2018a.

61 Almagro-Gorbea 2010b.

62 Almagro-Gorbea 1977, pp. 280-284.

63 Menéndez *et al.* 2013.

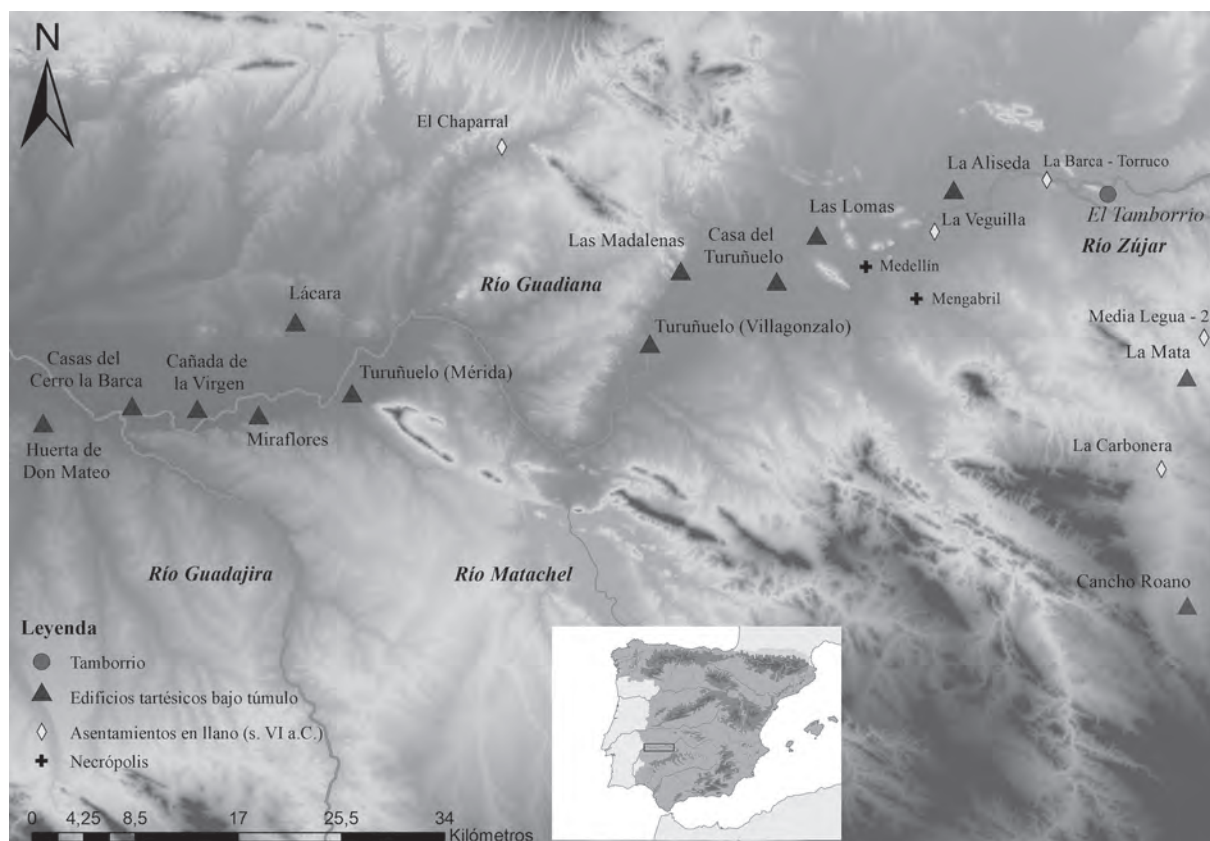


FIG. 10. Map showing the population of the central Guadiana valley during the Early Iron Age (by the author).

on plains, a group that includes both small villages and farms as well as the Tartessian buildings hidden under tumuli. The latter are the hallmark of the territory, being a settlement model that is unique to this geographical space that has a strong eastern influence. The long period of time over which the model remained in use, as well as the remodeling that these monumental buildings underwent and the richness of the materials that they contained, serve as further proof of the workings and dynamism of the territorial system that prevailed in the central Guadiana valley during the Early Iron Age.

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