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VOLUME I



# LIMES XXIII

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*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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**VOLUME I**

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## **New archaeological data for the study of the conquest and occupation of NW Iberia in Early Imperial times<sup>1</sup>**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper synthesizes the research developed by the Romanarmy.eu collective from the previous International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies in 2015 to 2019. During this three-year period, the methodology for identifying and documenting Roman military sites using remote sensing has been consolidated. Significant progress was made in studying some of these sites on the ground: Cueiru and El Xuegu la Bola (Asturias) and A Penaparda and Penedo dos Lobos (Galicia). This step forward allowed us to propose new narratives about the extension of the Roman state in NW Iberia and the role played by the Roman army in this process.

**KEY WORDS: ROMAN ARMY, CAMPS, NW IBERIA, REMOTE SENSING, CANTABRIAN-ASTURIAN WARS, ROMANARMY.EU**

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## 1. Introduction

In the last two decades, the increasing availability of geospatial datasets has boosted Roman Military Archaeology outputs in NW Iberia. As a result, not only several new sites have been discovered, but also their distribution is now more homogeneous across the region, including areas such as Galicia and Northern Portugal, formerly misrepresented<sup>2</sup>. This situation reveals the existence of Roman military activity outside the areas where the traditional narratives, mainly based on the classical sources, believed it to be concentrated. Also, the study of the location and the morphological characterization of these sites have depicted a more complex overview of the ways deployed by the Roman army across these territories, making it urgent to consider new chronological and functional explanations for the presence of the Roman army in NW Iberia further than the conquest of these lands during the Cantabrian-Asturian Wars (29-19 BCE).

However, identifying the actual geographical scope of the military operations carried out by the Roman army here in Early Imperial times is still a difficult goal. The surviving classical sources focus on very specific war episodes, and even those best-described events -such as Augustus' campaigns against the Cantabrians and Asturians- are characterised by the lack of reliable geographical references and details about the military actions<sup>3</sup>.

Luckily, the potential of Roman Military Archaeology for answering many questions related to the conquest and occupation of these territories between late 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE and early 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE is far from exhausted. On the one hand, archaeological methods have exhaustively explored only a limited number of the already discovered sites<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, an important amount of useful data about its function and chronology can still be recovered by using appropriate strategies -as long as il-

legal detectorists or agrarian and forestry activities do not erase them before!-. On the other hand, studying every site from a Landscape Archaeology perspective can show the rationale behind their construction and the mobility of the Roman army across NW Iberia<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, these approaches could help us build predictive models for discovering new sites. Moreover, the integration of the interpretative narratives produced by Roman Military Archaeology with the considerations about the indigenous communities' agencies regarding the extension of the Roman state is still a pending task both for Late Iron Age and Roman archaeologists.

Since the previous Limes Conference, our research collective RomanArmy.eu<sup>6</sup> has been investigating in relation to several case studies comprising different geographical areas within NW Iberia. New Roman military sites were primarily discovered in modern-day Galician and Northern Portuguese regions. At the same time, our team and collaborators have conducted surveys and excavations in the Roman camps of Cueiru, El Xuegu la Bola, A Penaparda and Penedo dos Lobos. Altogether, these collective efforts constitute a qualitative advance in our understanding of the Roman military presence in NW Iberia, in addition to a better understanding of the expansion of the Roman state in this region.

## 2. A modular methodology

Our research collective has developed a bespoke research methodology specifically adapted towards identifying and analysing Roman military sites in NW Iberia<sup>7</sup>, combining several digital tools and resources with more conventional archaeological survey methods. Similar methodological approaches have become increasingly frequent in both the Iberian Peninsula<sup>8</sup> and the rest of Europe<sup>9</sup> when investigating the Roman military presence. However, this method with a modular design allows for the constant revision of

the procedures used and the incorporation of new techniques and resources. The constant improvement and optimisation of resources and techniques leads to maximising the potential results.

The integration of airborne laser scanning data with aerial and satellite imagery has been vital for the identification of new Roman military sites and for the reassessment of other previously known sites. After their detection through the systematic use of these remote sensing techniques, all the possible features have been duly validated through ground observations, allowing us to confirm their archaeological relevance. In this sense, we may stress that this remote sensing approach is part of a research process that is integrated into a broader methodology. These techniques make it possible to identify and analyse archaeological sites that would otherwise be very difficult to detect, given the temporary and practically invisible nature of the structures that compose them<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, we will be able to achieve a more holistic and balanced historical perspective only through the integration of different research methods.

GIS-derived spatial analyses, focusing on mobility and visibility modelling, were also implemented to better understand site location and wider connectivity trends between the sites and the surrounding landscape, allowing us to predict, in some cases, the location of other new Roman military sites<sup>11</sup>. In addition, we have also paid attention to oral tradition and place names in order to detect potential archaeological elements that are not quite perceptible or even that disappeared by recent landscape transformations<sup>12</sup>.

These initial studies allowed us to set general patterns regarding the identified sites -morpho-typological, locational, etc.-. These actions were complemented by a more intensive field survey of selected sites as detailed below, namely to obtain archaeological evidence for their historical contextualization. Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) derived structure-from-motion photogrammetry was used to perform a detailed morpholo-

gical study of site defences. In some cases, exploratory trenches were excavated to explore its construction, use and abandonment sequence. Lastly, intra-site, metal-detecting surveys for the recovery of relevant material remains were also carried out.

In general, this phased research methodology has allowed us to move forward in the study of the Roman military presence in NW Iberia: new sites, new morphologies and locations, but, above all, new research questions to tackle the established interpretations. Nevertheless, this research methodology has its own limitations, considering, for instance, the heterogeneous landscape of NW Iberia, its current administrative fragmentation and the unequal availability of digital and geographical datasets for the whole region, which hinders the potential identification of new Roman military sites in some areas.

## 3. Mapping uncharted territory

In the previous Limes Congress proceedings we announced the discovery of 22 new Roman military sites in NW Iberia during the period 2014-2016 thanks to the use of the above-mentioned methodology<sup>13</sup>. At the time this paper is written, 10 more could be securely added to the list, while 4 are also promising<sup>14</sup> (Fig. 1). Quite significantly, this evidence is mainly located in an area where the Roman military presence had been marginal to date: Galicia and Northern Portugal, where some of us have been focusing our research in the last three-year period. Interestingly, these areas still lack solid narratives regarding their conquest and occupation by the Roman state.

A complete account summarizing the morphological properties of these enclosures can be found in figures 2 and 3, so we will skip a detailed description here. However, certain observations regarding their distribution throughout the territory are worth noting.

The morphological and locational consistency of four small camps (1.5-2.3 ha) documented across the Gali-

<sup>2</sup>Camino Mayor *et al.* 2015; Costa-García *et al.* 2018

<sup>3</sup>Costa García 2015; Ramírez Sádaba 1999

<sup>4</sup>The most recent and comprehensive summary can be found in Camino Mayor *et al.* 2015, although important discoveries have taken place since 2015 (Costa-García 2018a).

<sup>5</sup>Costa-García 2017

<sup>6</sup>Blanco-Rotea *et al.* 2016b

<sup>7</sup>Costa-García, Fonte 2017; Costa-García *et al.* 2016; Menéndez-Blanco *et al.* 2013; Menéndez-Blanco *et al.* 2017

<sup>8</sup>Bellón Ruiz *et al.* 2017; Berrocal-Rangel *et al.* 2017; Cordero Ruiz *et al.* 2017

<sup>9</sup>Bernardini *et al.* 2015; Groh, Seldmayer 2015; Jones 2012; Oltean, Hanson 2017

<sup>10</sup>Peralta Labrador 2002

<sup>11</sup>Costa-García 2018b; Costa-García *et al.* 2017

<sup>12</sup>Menéndez-Blanco *et al.* 2015a

<sup>13</sup>Costa-García *et al.* 2018

<sup>14</sup>Some of them had been already made public (Costa-García 2018a; Costa-García *et al.* 2017), but others remained unpublished.



cian-Portuguese territory (Coto do Rañadoiro, Cova do Mexadoiro<sup>15</sup>, Penedo dos Lobos and Alto da Pedrada) is very striking: all of them focus on controlling natural passages through elevated terrain. The enclosure of Santa Baia (Fig. 4) shows a similar pattern, but it raises the question of why it was necessary to dislocate a large number of troops in the Galician pre-coastal valleys<sup>16</sup>. The fact that the site was constructed encircling an Early Iron Age hillfort whose defences were probably reused by the Romans is also interesting.

The recent discovery of two huge enclosures (19-23 ha) in the mountainous borderlands dividing Galicia and Portugal was also surprising. To date, sites as large as Lomba do Mouro (Fig. 5) and Chaira da Maza had only been identified in the Iberian Northern Plateau or the eastern Cantabrian Mountains<sup>17</sup>. Future research should ask what could have motivated such a deployment of troops in a remote area that, on the other hand, was supposed to have been integrated under Roman control before the Augustan era<sup>18</sup>.

To the east, O Monte de Ventín can be perhaps connected with other camps documented in the westernmost areas of the Cantabrian Mountains due to its morphological similitudes<sup>19</sup>. As for La Chanica d'Arriba (Fig. 6), it is located in an area where Roman military presence was not a stranger<sup>20</sup>. Likewise, the site seems to have suffered the effects of the early development of gold-mining activities in the area<sup>21</sup>. Although there is no direct connection with the above-mentioned sites yet, Cabeza do Pau is exactly placed on the other side of the mountainous massif dominated by the Sierra de Cabrera, an area assigned to the "Astures" by classical authors.

The detection of small *castellum* or *praesidium*-type enclaves remains a major challenge for Archaeology outside mountainous areas. The morphological similarities with some Iron Age or Early Medieval fortifications have made it difficult to identify them. For now, we can suggest the oval, double enclosure of O Castrillón (Galicia). Its settlement pattern fits the Roman behaviour and it forms an interesting archaeological landscape with O Couto de San Sebastián hillfort. The possibility of a Roman detachment garrisoning the pentagonal fortification of Outeiro de Arnás (Galicia) is also suggestive but has not been undeniably proven.

In this work, we have already pointed out the close locational connection between some camps and indigenous hillforts, but we face a completely different paradigm in O Castelo. A defensive, V-shaped structure has been detected here. This defensive solution is not typical of Iron Age hillforts and reminds of a *brac(c)hium* as it has been documented in some Iberian sites<sup>22</sup>. An identical solution recorded in El Picu Viyao (Asturias) has been taken as proof of the military reoccupation of this hillfort<sup>23</sup>. As regards Alto da Cerca (Portugal), it has traditionally been considered a pre-Roman site, but we have discussed elsewhere the idea of a permanent or stational military presence here, perhaps linked with gold mining activities in the area<sup>24</sup>.

#### 4. Going deeper

As mentioned above, a more intensive field survey approach was carried out in some selected sites to advance into its chrono-functional characterization.

The camps of El Xuegu la Bola and Cueiru are related to an important transit route through the mountains of León and Asturias: the Camín Real de la Mesa<sup>25</sup>. The

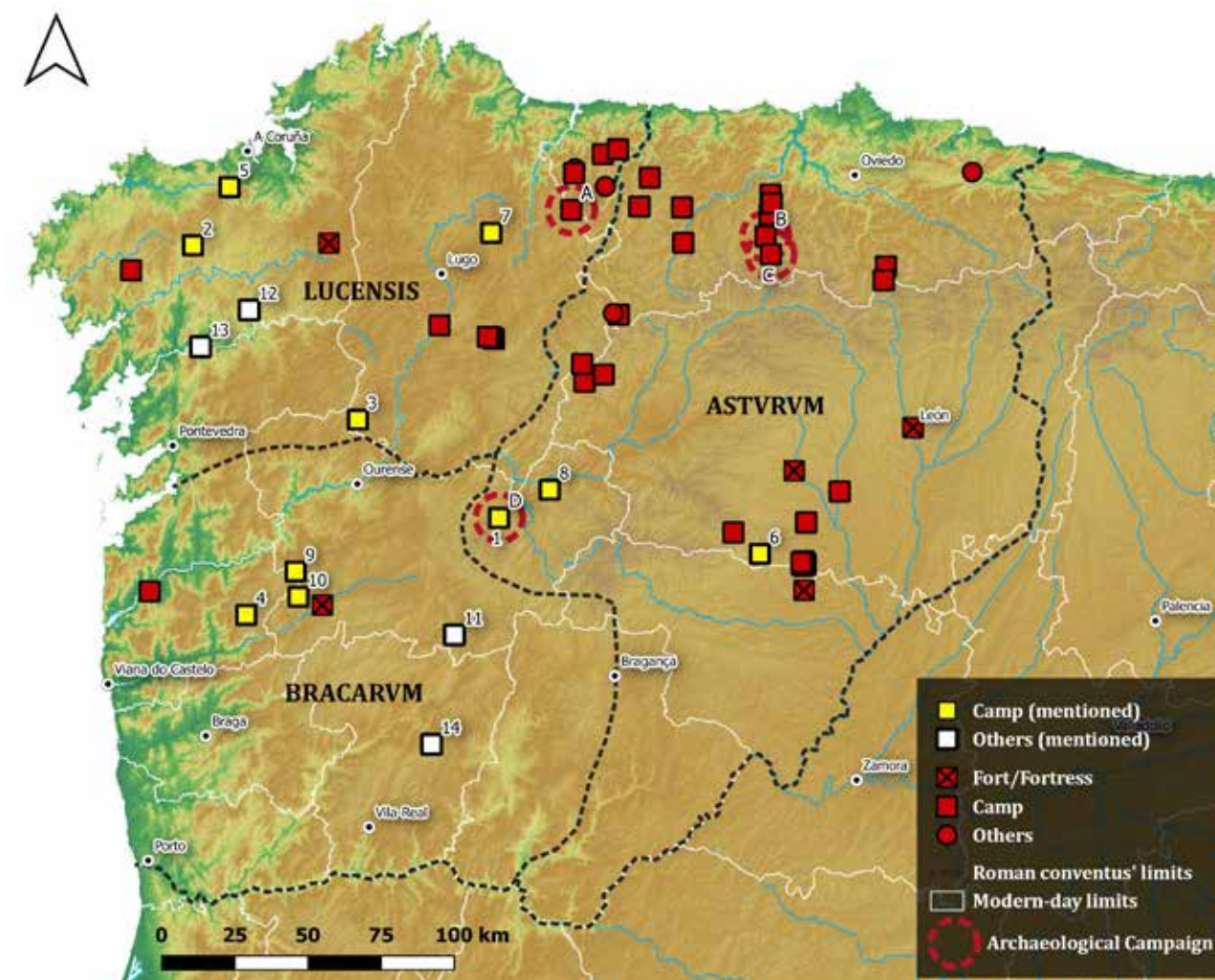


Fig. 1 - Roman military sites in NW Iberia: Penedo dos Lobos (1), Cova do Mexadoiro (2), Coto do Rañadoiro (3), Alto da Pedrada (4), Santa Baia (5), La Chanica d'Arriba (6), Monte de Ventín (7), Cabeza do Pau (8), Lomba do Mouro (9), Chaira da Maza (10), Outeiro de Arnás (11), O Castrillón (12), O Castelo (13), Alto da Cerca (14). © Authors

first phase of their archaeological study was planned as a non-invasive approach and carried out in 2016<sup>26</sup>. The defensive perimeters of the sites were precisely documented through conventional archaeological surveys and oblique aerial photography<sup>27</sup>. The intensive survey of some sectors with the support of metal detectors allowed us to map material culture densities and recover a representative sample for its study. Quantitatively speaking, only a small percentage of those objects can be linked with the Roman military presence (among them, tent pegs, a spearhead and other possible pro-

jectiles) (Fig. 7), but none of them serves as a dating indicator.

Encouraged by these results, we planned the study of A Penaparda (Galicia/Asturias) (Fig. 8) -a site presumably related to another mountainous route used by the Roman army- in 2017<sup>28</sup>. In this case, it was possible to obtain high-resolution photogrammetric models that confirmed the archaeological nature of the structures previously identified by LiDAR<sup>29</sup>. However, the field survey showed that they had been dramatically eroded in several sectors. The excavation of an exploratory

<sup>15</sup>We thank its discoverer, J. Canosa Betés, for allowing us to include it in this paper.

<sup>16</sup>Where other large sites were detected in the past (Blanco-Rotea *et al.* 2016a; Gago Mariño, Fernández Malde 2015).

<sup>17</sup>Del Olmo Martín 1995; Peralta Labrador 2011

<sup>18</sup>Morillo Cerdán 2016

<sup>19</sup>Costa García *et al.* 2017; Menéndez-Blanco *et al.* 2015b

<sup>20</sup>Sánchez-Palencia 1986

<sup>21</sup>Fernández-Lozano *et al.* 2019; Sánchez-Palencia, Currás 2015

<sup>22</sup>Camino Mayor, Martín Hernández 2015

<sup>23</sup>González-Álvarez *et al.* 2011

<sup>24</sup>Fonte, Costa-García 2016

<sup>25</sup>Up to six enclosures have been detected following this route, the largest concentration of Roman military sites in present-day Asturias González-Álvarez *et al.* 2011-2012; Martín Hernández 2015.

<sup>26</sup>Menéndez-Blanco *et al.* 2018

<sup>27</sup>The adverse atmospheric conditions did not allow a complete mapping of the archaeological structures for photogrammetric purposes.

<sup>28</sup>Menéndez-Blanco *et al.* 2015b

<sup>29</sup>Costa-García *et al.* 2017



	SITE	LAYOUT	NET AREA (ha)	DEFENCES			EST. GARRISON
				Rampart	Ditches	Entrances	
Camps	Alto da Pedrada	Rectangular	1,54	Stone / Earth	N/D	3 (Clav.)	750-1000
	Cabeza do Pau	Triangular / Irregular	Min. 7,2	Stone	N/D	N/D	Min. 3500-4600
	Chaira da Maza	Trapezoidal	19,64	Stone / Earth	N/D	N/D	9600-12500
	La Chanica d'Arriba	Rectangular?	Min. 7	Earth	N/D	N/D	Min. 3400-4400
	Coto do Rañadoiro	Rectangular	2,5	Earth	N/D	1 (Clav.?)	1200-1600
	Cova do Mexadoiro	Rectangular	2,15	Earth	N/D	1 (Clav.?)	1050-1350
	Lomba do Mouro	Square / Irregular	Max. 24,35	Stone / Earth	N/D	N/D	10350-13500
	O Monte de Ventín	Rectangular / Irregular	13,35	Earth	N/D	2?	6500-8500
Other sites	O Penedo dos Lobos	Rectangular	2,3	Yes	N/D	3 (Clav.) + 1 (Chicane)	1100-1450
	Santa Baia	Rectangular / Irregular	Min. 5,11	Earth	N/D	N/D	Min. 2500-3250
	Alto da Cerca	Poligonal	2,15	Earth	U-shaped	1	Min. 650
	O Castelo	Triangular / Irregular	Max. 2,39	Stone / Earth	V-shaped	N/D	N/A
	O Castrillón	Ovoid	Máx. 0,83	Earth	N/D	N/D	410-530
	Outeiro de Arnás	Pentagonal	0,44	Earth	V-Shaped	1	215-280

Fig. 2 - Sites described in this paper. Morphological aspects. © Authors

trench in the southern walls revealed a stone and earth rampart, as well as a shallow ditch excavated in the bedrock. Unfortunately, radiocarbon dating only allowed us to determine that the structures were built in Roman times without further precision<sup>30</sup>. It was not possible to recover material remains related to the Roman military presence, since the acidity of the soils rapidly corrodes metal objects. Undoubtedly, this is one of the greatest challenges archaeological research faces in several regions of our area of study.

Luckily, this is not the case with Penedo dos Lobos (Galicia) (Fig. 9), where a survey campaign in 2018 provided us with a crucial piece of evidence regarding its precise dating: two well-preserved asses of *Publius Carisius* minted in *Augusta Emerita* between 25-22 BCE<sup>31</sup> to pay the military who were involved in the Cantabrian-Asturian Wars (Fig. 10). This means that, at least for the moment, this is the oldest Roman military presence archaeologically documented so far in modern day Galician region. This open up new re-

<sup>30</sup>However, the nearby camp of El Pico el Outeiro has been dated between the mid-1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE and mid-1<sup>st</sup> c. CE (Menéndez Granda, Sánchez Hidalgo 2018).

<sup>31</sup>RIC 20 and RIC 15b, 16 or 17

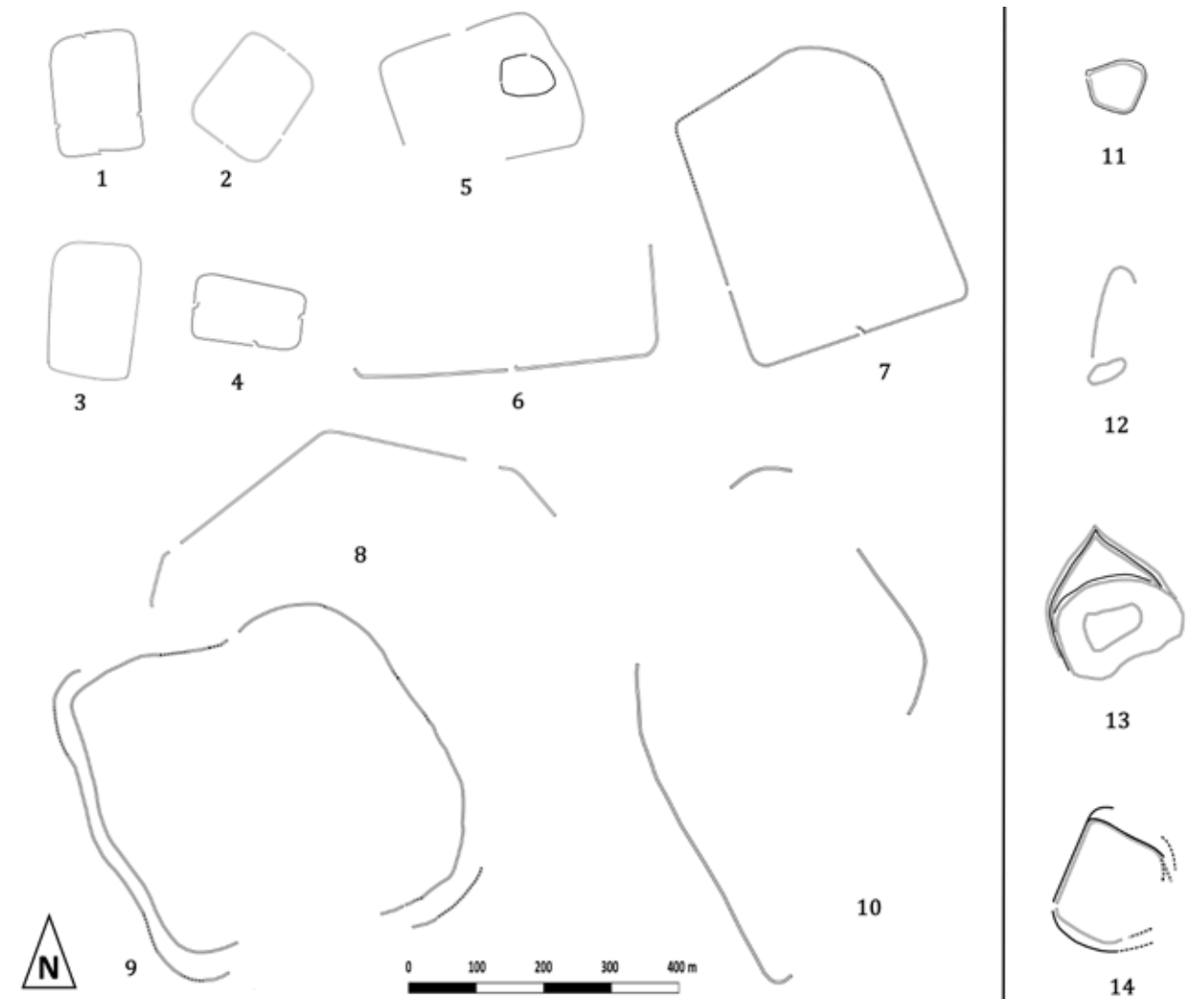


Fig. 3 - Sites described in this paper. Layouts. Same numbering as in fig. 1. © Authors

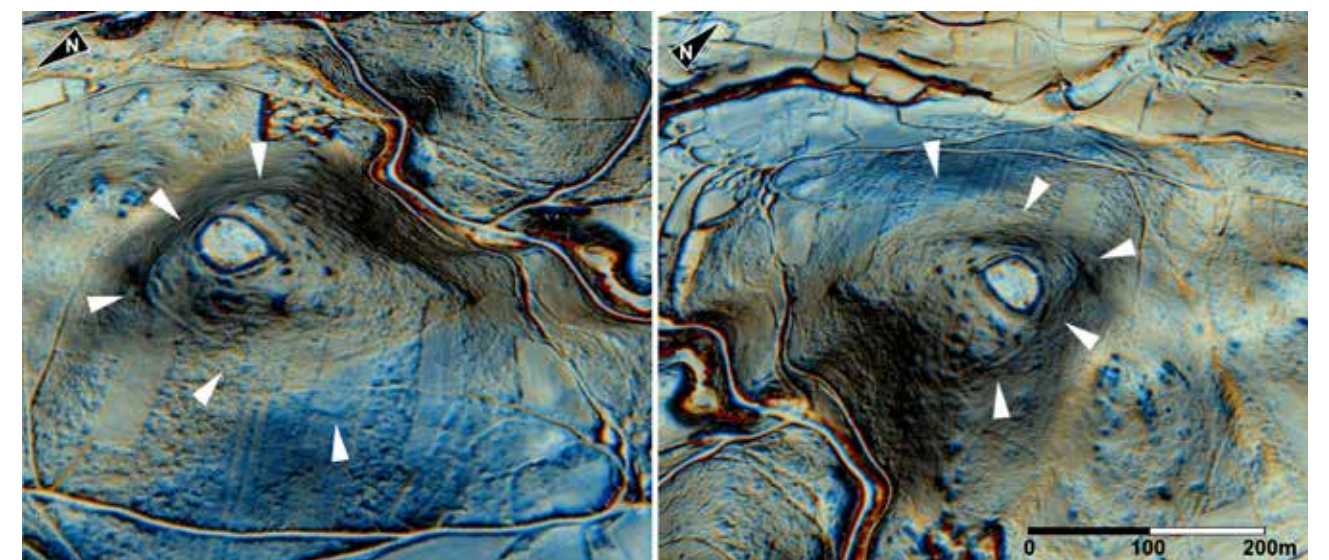


Fig. 4 - Roman camp of Santa Baia. 2.5D LiDAR-derived visualization (2009). Note the presence of an Iron Age hillfort on the top of the elevation. © Authors



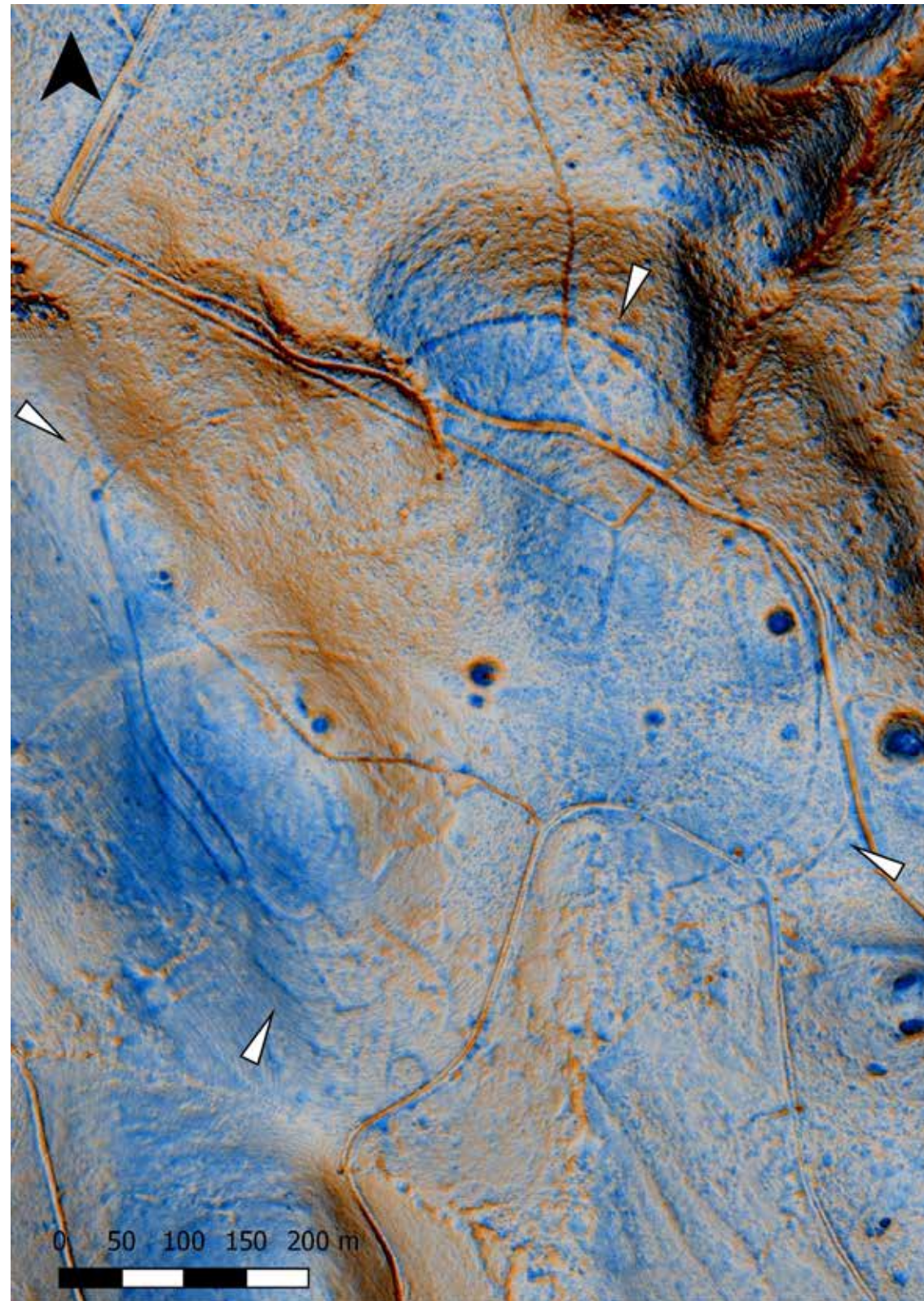


Fig. 5 - Lomba do Mouro. The precise dating of these recently discovered enclaves and their better morphotypological and locational characterisation could help us to define the strategies adopted by the Roman army in NW Iberia. The rounded features belong to a Prehistoric necropolis. © Authors

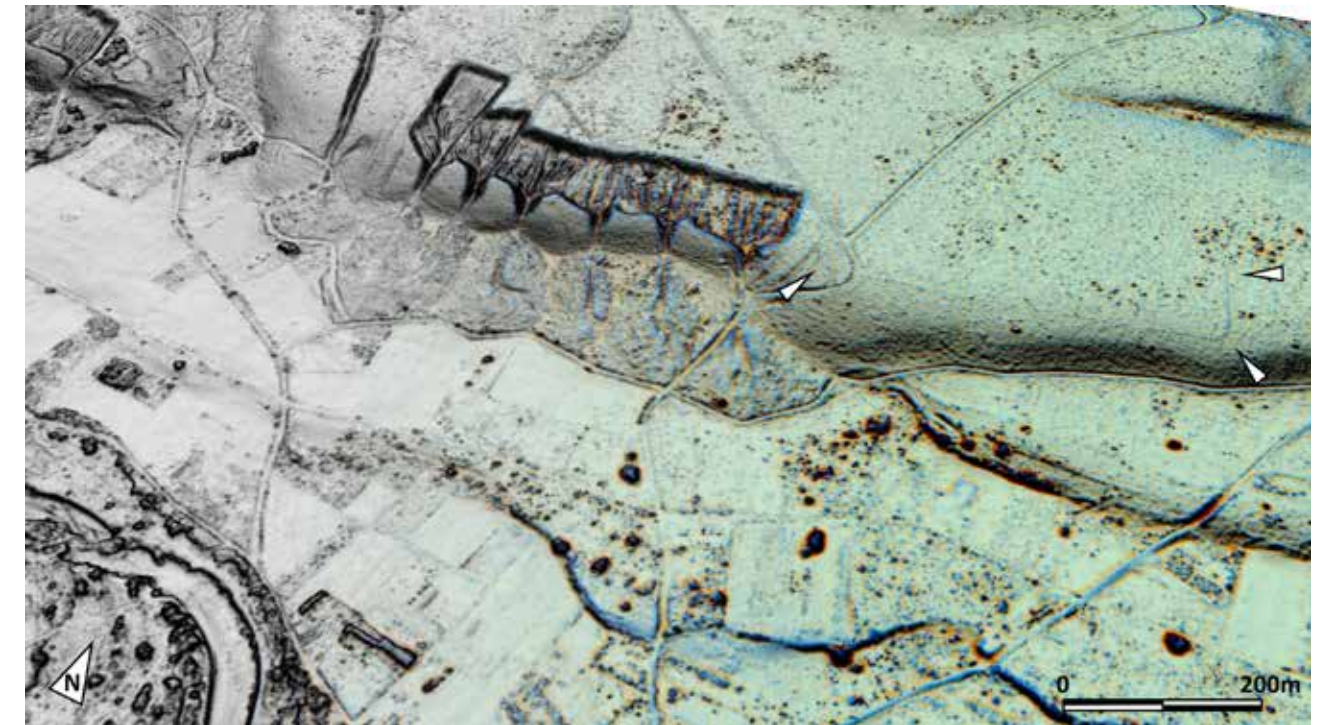


Fig. 6 - Roman camp of La Chanica d'Arriba. 2.5D LiDAR-derived visualization (2010). Note the nearby presence of gold-mining exploitations. © Authors

search perspectives into the study of the early Roman military presence in the Galicia and northern Portugal regions. Other pieces of Roman military equipment were also recovered, namely several *clavi caligarii*. Penedo dos Lobos was occupied during the late 1st century BC, possibly coetaneous with the Cantabrian-Asturian Wars, the last military conflict that ended the Roman conquest of Hispania. Although we know this was a seasonal site occupied for a certain period by a small military contingent, it is not yet possible to determine its specific mission.

### 5. Final remarks

The study of most Roman military sites recently discovered in NW Iberia is in its initial phase. In fact, very few sites have been properly dated, hence limiting the articulation of diachronic perspectives. Quite remarkably, aspects such as the different soil composition or diverse anthropogenic alterations affecting these sites reveal that the traditional dating strategy based on the systematic recovery of the material culture may not be viable in several cases. Implementing strategies that encourage using physical-chemical dating techniques

and establishing protocols for developing paleoenvironmental analyses is genuinely needed to contextualize these fortifications better. A more detailed account of the chronological contextualisation of different sites –and the diversity among them in morphotypological and location sense– will inform us about the strategies and historical happening related to the recently discovered Roman military sites in NW Iberia.

Although we have a better archaeological knowledge of the Roman military presence in the study area, we still need to go further in the shaping of interpretative narratives that would depict historical accounts about the expansion of the Roman state in NW Iberia. In this regard, we cannot forget the integration of Roman military Archaeology with the archaeological research related to the local indigenous communities. Otherwise, we would deny the agency of local populations in shaping the new colonial context launched by the Roman conquest of NW Iberia territories<sup>32</sup>. Naturally, the articulation of in-depth discussions around this historical process relies on gathering new, trustful archaeological data.

<sup>32</sup>Marín Suárez, González-Álvarez 2011; Sastre Prats 2001





Fig. 7 - Some metallic objects recovered in the Roman camp of El Xuegu la Bola. A spearhead (upper) and a tent peg (lower). © Authors

Results from our three-year research invite us to be moderately optimistic about the future. However, we cannot forget that we are truly working against the clock concerning discovering and studying the fragile traces of Roman military sites. Several anthropogenic and natural agents are yearly compromising the preservation of these sites. Remote sensing techniques show the dramatic effects of mechanised agrarian activities in the last decades, such as intensive agriculture or forestry. Therefore, we need to establish informed policies in land management that may allow the compilation and study of archaeological information in these fragile sites.

Undoubtedly, accumulating new data has allowed us to glimpse archaeological realities previously unknown to us. This information helps us enunciate novel research questions aimed to be answered by future investigations and also serve as stimuli in elaborating more detailed hypotheses and interpretations. Mapping previously marginal regions allows us to acquire a more comprehensive view of the Roman military presence

in NW Iberia. It is also a reminder of the potential of Archaeology to assess the reasons behind the current voids in our knowledge about the military activities of the Roman state. We presume archaeological debates around the role played by the Roman army in NW Iberia during Late Republican and Early Imperial times will be a recurrent topic at the Limes conferences to come.

#### Post-scriptum

The authors originally submitted this manuscript on June 2019. In only four years, archaeological research on the Roman expansion in NW Iberia has changed substantially, with relevant discoveries, new methods being applied, and a more complex debate on the subject. For this reason, we would like to invite the readership to complement the understanding of our research shown in this chapter with the consideration of some other manuscripts (Costa-García *et al.* 2019, 2021; Menéndez-Blanco *et al.* 2020) published after our attendance to the Limes XXIII held in Serbia.



Fig. 8 - Roman camp of A Penaparda. 2.5D visualization using the orthophoto and the DSM obtained thanks to the photogrammetric processing of aerial photographs (2017). Note how eroded the ramparts are at the present time due to agricultural activities. © Authors

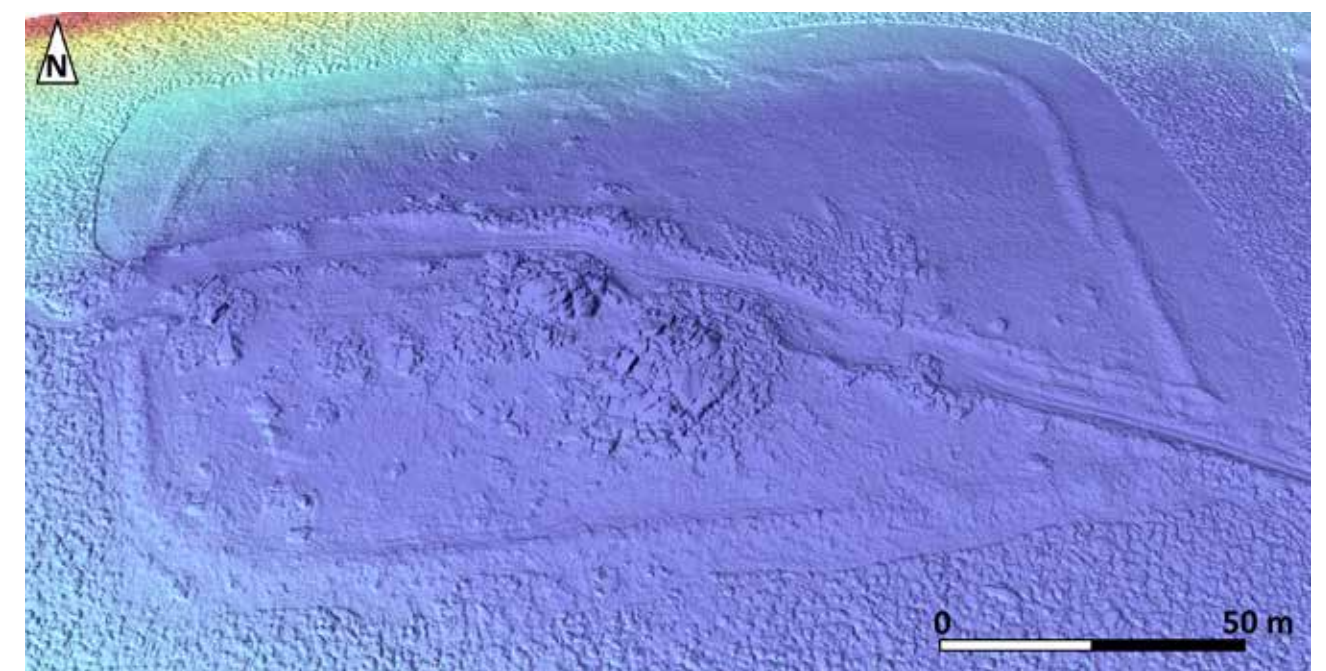


Fig. 9 - Roman camp of Penedo dos Lobos. 2.5D visualization using the photogrammetric DSM obtained in the 2018 campaign. Despite some important alterations, the defensive perimeter preserves its structural integrity. © Authors

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Fig. 10 - Minted ca. 25-22 BCE by Publius Carisius, this coinage (RIC 20, upper; RIC 15b, 16 or 17, lower) allow us to link the Roman camp of Penedo dos Lobos with the Augustan campaigns against the Astures. © Authors

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#### Resumen

Este trabajo sintetiza la investigación desarrollada por el colectivo Romanarmy.eu desde la celebración del anterior Congreso Internacional de Estudios sobre la Frontera Romana en 2015. Durante este periodo de tres años, se ha consolidado la metodología para la documentación y estudio de asentamientos militares romanos con recurso a la teledetección, pero hemos avanzado de manera significativa en el estudio de alguno de estos yacimientos sobre el terreno: Cueiru y El Xuegu la Bola en Asturias, y A Penaparda y Penedo dos Lobos en Galicia. Este paso hacia adelante nos ha permitido plantear narrativas novedosas acerca de la extensión del estado romano en el noroeste peninsular y el papel desempeñado por el ejército romano en este proceso.