

# Ritual practices at the edge of the Celtic world: The sanctuary of Castrejón de Capote (SW Spain)

by

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## Summary

The hillfort of Castrejón de Capote is one of the southernmost settlements of Celtic populations in Europe. Located in southwest Spain, it was one of the main centres of the communities named in Classical sources as the *Celtici* of the *Baeturia* region, which would have migrated to the area around the late 5th and early 4th centuries BCE. The site of Capote was subject to extensive excavations in the late 1980s and the 1990s, leading to important discoveries including a central sanctuary. The latter has provided exceptional information about communal feasting in the 2nd century BCE, as evidenced by large amounts of pottery and the remains of animal sacrifice. The present paper will provide an overview of the results of previous fieldwork, as well as some parallels and wider reflections on the importance of the sanctuary of Capote.

Keywords: Capote hillfort, Celtic sanctuary, communal feasting, sacrifices; ethnogeography, landscape

## Zusammenfassung

Die Höhensiedlung von Castrejón de Capote ist eine der südlichsten Siedlungen keltischer Bevölkerungen in Europa. Sie liegt im Südwesten Spaniens und war eines der Hauptzentren der Gemeinschaften, die in klassischen Quellen als die *Celtici* der Region *Baeturia* bezeichnet werden und die im späten 5. und frühen 4. Jahrhundert v. Chr. in das Gebiet einwanderten. Die Stätte von Capote wurde in den späten 1980er und 1990er Jahren umfangreichen Ausgrabungen unterzogen, die zu wichtigen Entdeckungen führten, darunter einem zentralen Heiligtum. Letzteres hat außergewöhnliche Informationen über gemeinschaftliche Festmahle im 2. Jahrhundert v. Chr. geliefert, wie große Mengen an Keramik und Überreste von Tieropfern belegen. Der vorliegende Aufsatz wird einen Überblick über die Ergebnisse früherer Feldarbeiten geben sowie einige Parallelen und breitere Reflexionen zur Wichtigkeit des Heiligtums von Capote aufzeigen.

Stichworte: Capote Höhensiedlung, keltisches Heiligtum, gemeinschaftliches Festmahl, Opfer, Ethnogeographie, Landschaft

### **The *Celtici* of *Baeturia***

The sanctuary of the hillfort of Castrejón de Capote is located within the territory of the pre-Roman peoples known as *Celtici* (or *Keltikoi*, in the Greek version). These populations inhabited the southwest of the Iberian Peninsula from, at least, the end of the 5th century BCE to the 2nd century CE, covering part of the current Spanish provinces of Badajoz and Huelva, and areas of southern Portugal (regions of Alto and Baixo Alentejo) (BERROCAL-RANGEL 1992) (Fig. 1).

While they do not share the La Tène material culture, they are repeatedly denominated as *Celtici* by classical authors, making them the southernmost Celtic communities in Europe. During the Roman conquest, in the 2nd century BCE, part of them were incorporated into a territory known as *Baeturia*. It is important to differentiate between the geographical term *Baeturia* and the ethnic term *Celtici*. There were no people called ‘Baeturians’ (*Beturici*), but rather *Celtici*. This distinction becomes apparent when comparing ancient Greek references from the 5th and 4th centuries BCE mentioning Celts and Gauls in the southwest of Iberia, with later Roman sources referring to the *Celtici* of Southwestern Iberia, inside and outside the region known as *Baeturia* (BERROCAL-RANGEL 2012, 322–323; FERNÁNDEZ-GÖTZ 2007).

The most significant of these references is attributed to Pliny the Elder, who identified these *Celtici* as descendants of the Celtiberians, and stated that this was recognised by their language, beliefs, and the names of their *oppida*, for which he provided the main names (Plin., *Nat.* 3.3). This migration is also attested archaeologically, with the appearance of a new type of settlement in hillforts with a distinctive material culture in the south of Badajoz and north of Huelva starting in the late 5th and early 4th centuries BCE. Likewise, in the neighbouring lands of the Alentejo region, the Roman colony of *Pax Iulia* (Beja, Portugal) is mentioned ‘among the *Celtici*’ and, further west, the *municipium* of *Mirobriga Celticorum* (Santiago do Cacém, Portugal) is located, showing the extent of the territories inhabited by these Celtic communities (BERROCAL-RANGEL 1992, 2012).

The location of the *oppida* of the *Celtici* has helped to confirm Pliny’s information, and therefore, we know about their settlement around the Ardila River, a tributary of the Guadiana River (Fig. 2). Their sites are distributed along the Ardila Basin in

combination with the Múrtigas River, indicating a radial layout around the most powerful *oppidum*, *Nertobriga Concordia Iulia* (Fregenal de la Sierra, Spain).

In Figure 2 we can observe the central relationship of this *oppidum* of *Nertobriga* with the loop of the Ardila River, and its proximity to the hillfort of Capote, the main focus of our paper. We present this map to highlight a second point of interest in the landscape, the striking resemblance of this ethnogeography to another Celtic region much further north and much larger, that of the Loire Valley and the territory of the *Bituriges*. In that region, the *oppidum* of *Avaricum* plays the same central role as *Nertobriga* (Fig. 3). Further south lies the significant hillfort of *Mediolanum*, ‘the centre of the plain’, in Chateameillant (KRAUSZ 2009). The *Mediolanum* of the *Bituriges* could be a good parallel with Capote of the *Celtici* (BERROCAL-RANGEL 2017, 146–147).

In any case, if we take a closer look at the geography surrounding *Nertobriga* and Capote, we can see that the centrality of the former is relative to the river and the late *oppida*, while Capote does indeed occupy the geographical centre of the region. It is positioned centrally within a circle formed by the Tentudía mountain range and the Múrtigas River, along with its tributaries Sillo and Álamo (Fig. 4).

### **The sanctuary of Capote**

The hillfort of Castrejón de Capote (Higuera la Real, province of Badajoz, Spain) had an enclosed settlement area of 3.5 ha, surrounded by a fortification wall. It was occupied between the late 5th and the 1st centuries BCE. The extensive fieldwork undertaken at the hillfort in the late 1980s and the 1990s uncovered numerous domestic structures as well as the fortification system. But the most striking feature was a unique structure located at the centre of the site, identified as a sanctuary that could have served as the focal point for the entire region (BERROCAL-RANGEL 1994) (Fig. 5).

A detailed excavation of this structure was undertaken in 1988. It revealed a trapezoidal space, with Iron Age phases from the 4th to 2nd centuries BCE, which are marked in red, and Roman Republican phases from the 2nd to 1st centuries BCE, which are marked in blue (Fig. 6.1–2).

The upper excavated layers belonged to the period of Roman rule over the region. During these phases, the space appeared empty, covered with a layer of clean, hard soil, and was integrated among the houses of a wide street. Its presence, right in the centre of a densely populated settlement, was surprising. After removing the upper layer, the Iron

Age phases were reached, uncovering a closed room that was elevated one metre above the street level. The room, just over twenty square metres in size, was arranged with a masonry altar-table in the centre and three benches around it. It was easy to distinguish a later structure, in the form of a wall, which closed the room on its southwest side. This structure was built over the Iron Age layers that covered the central room and served to close it off (Fig. 6.4).

It was evident that the room had a very specific function. Its identification as a sanctuary was logical, however it did require a significant degree of understanding of Iron Age religion because no similar case was known in the Iberian Peninsula (MARCO SIMÓN 2005, 321–322). Thanks to the abundant ceramic, bone, and metal finds collected, as well as the layers of charcoal and ash, it seemed reasonable to conclude that the sanctuary space had been used in its last phase to host a great banquet, during which twenty-four ungulates (cows, horses, sheep, wild boars), perhaps in pairs, were sacrificed and dismembered on the altar-table and cooked, including some of their entrails such as the heart and liver (MORALES – LIESAU 1994, 291). The rest of the meat was roasted on nine open fires scattered throughout the street, with the excavation revealing that the latter formed a larger open space, such as a square. As a result, only remains of limbs and skulls were found in the sanctuary itself (Fig. 7). On the altar-table, three knives, two skewers, a paddle, and iron tongs were found next to a grill. Outside, in the square, a large fragment of a bronze cauldron was discovered. Butchery and cooking utensils suggest the roasting of the viscera of the sacrificed animals, while the meat was probably cooked in bronze cauldrons.

During the banquet, three hundred sets of pottery cups and bowls were used, and dozens of cut-out vessels were employed as censers, known by the Latin term *foculi* (Fig. 8). Six hundred medium-sized containers were also found. These vessels appeared in the upper layer of the Iron Age stratigraphy, heavily crushed but maintaining a semblance of their original shapes. Additionally, some complete vessels were found in the corners of the room. Below, a layer of animal bones mixed with pottery and charcoal was documented, and beneath that, a layer of almost exclusively ash and charcoal (BERROCAL-RANGEL 1994, 52–64). The wall that was built after the sanctuary was abandoned and which closed off the side facing the square helped to perfectly preserve the stratigraphy. Bones, ceramics, charcoal, and ashes were also scattered around the square, having been dumped from the sanctuary itself.

The final interpretation is that this was a central sanctuary of a communal nature, where a grand feast was held probably over several days. The figures of gods were absent either because they did not exist or because they were made of perishable materials, or, maybe, simply votive offerings were made. The sanctuary had a clear southwest orientation (Fig. 9), matching an alignment close to the winter solstice, which could be related to the reference provided by *Polybius* in his book *Storiae* (35.2) concerning the conquest of the *oppidum* of *Nertobriga* by the legions of *Marcus Atilius*, when he returned from fighting against the Lusitanians and intended to winter in *Corduba* in 152 BCE.

The presence of a large, pierced vessel on the table led us to interpret the 46 incense burners as carriers of the embers from family hearths that could have been transported there to collectively build the community fire of the collective feast (ALMAGRO-GORBEA – BERROCAL-RANGEL 1997, 581). Thus, the site held a strong symbolic significance not only as the geographic and natural centre of its region, but also because it was the focal point for the construction of the communal identity of the populations who inhabited it.

Were the Romans the desecrators of a recently celebrated festival and aware of the symbolic importance of the sanctuary, and did they force its closure by prohibiting its use? The stratigraphy of Capote in its second phase suggests this is likely to have been the case. The hillfort was destroyed by the Roman army around the middle of the 2nd century BCE, probably within the framework of the Lusitanian Wars and the conquest of *Nertobriga* in 152 BCE. This led to the dismantling of the sanctuary, which was not in use anymore when the hillfort was resettled.

Finally, we want to briefly mention the presence of a quartzite rock outcrop not far from the sanctuary. It is interesting that this rock formation was spared, despite the interior of the hillfort being densely inhabited. Almagro-Gorbea and colleagues have suggested that the rock outcrop might have held an omphalic symbolism for the inhabitants of the hillfort, perhaps representing the *Numen loci* or the *Genius* of the site (ALMAGRO-GORBEA et al. 2021, 24–25, 228). The potential symbolism associated with the rock formation, together with the discovery inside the hillfort of a stela with engravings and an inscription that clearly predates the Late Iron Age occupation, could perhaps point to the site of Capote having some symbolic meaning already before the foundation of the fortified settlement – a phenomenon also observed at many other Iron Age sites in ‘Celtic’ Europe (FERNÁNDEZ-GÖTZ 2014).

**A (partial) parallel to Capote: The sanctuary of Garvão**

Although we do not currently know any other sanctuary identical to Capote in Iron Age Iberia, some of its remains have parallels in other communal sanctuaries among the *Celtici* of the Southwest. This is the case with the hillfort of Garvão (Baixo Alentejo, Portugal), the southernmost known for the *Celtici*. In 1985, three years before the discovery of Capote, Portuguese archaeologists found an immense pit, ten metres in length, filled with the same containers, cups, and plates as those found at Capote. It was dated to the end of the 3rd century BC. The same cut-out vessels were present, but there was also something different. At Garvão, a dozen votive offerings made of silver and gold were found, in the form of rectangular sheets representing pairs of eyes (BEIRÃO et al. 1985; HORN 2005). Similar votive offerings have been found in Gallic sanctuaries in Côte-d’Or (Alésia) or Oise (Forêt de Compiègne, Mont Berny) (FAUDET – RABEISEN 1993, 145; GOLOSETTI et al. 2019). This type of votive offering is very rare in the Iberian Peninsula but has parallels with Gallic sanctuaries. In addition, a plaque with an embossed image of the Phoenician goddess Astarte and a 3rd century BCE hemidrachma from the Phoenician colony of *Gadir* (Cádiz, Spain) also appeared at Garvão (BEIRÃO et al. 1985, 111), which is logical given its relative proximity.

The pit at Garvão was not fully excavated, given its size, but it provided, in its foundation, a revealing discovery: a stone cist, inside of which the skull of a woman was located, showing clear signs of blunt force trauma (FERNANDES 1986, 84). The cause of the injury was a black fibrolite axe found in the same pit. According to Caetano de Mello Beirão, who led the excavation, we are faced with the *favissa* of a sanctuary similar to Capote, a place of grand periodic feasts, after which the utensils used were carefully buried (BEIRÃO et al. 1985, 60-61). A similar interpretation about its destruction as a result of the Roman conquest has also been suggested for the closure of the Garvão deposit (GOMES 2012, 120).

It is also worth noting that close to the sanctuary of Garvão (with its offerings representing pairs of eyes) there is a Christian hermitage dedicated to Santa Luzia (Saint Lucy/Lucia, from the Latin *lux*), protector of the blind and, symbolically, the bearer of light in the dark of winter. This Medieval hermitage is an important pilgrimage site in this region of Portugal, with the Christian feast being celebrated on December 13, very close to the winter solstice. In southwest Spain and Portugal, the veneration of Saint Lucy replaced the pagan devotion to *Proserpina* in Roman times, who had in turn taken the place of the Celtic divinity *Ataegina*, as can be seen at the Roman-Visigothic sanctuary of Santa Lucia del Trampal (Cáceres, Spain) (MARCO SIMÓN 2005, 306–307; SOPEÑA 2005, 353).

The connections between these sanctuaries and rituals, such as collective banquets celebrated at the beginning of winter and the cult of the head as a founding symbol, are themes that we will continue to explore in the future. In 2023, we began developing a new collaborative project funded by the Spanish government, which we hope will offer novel perspectives on Capote and other neighbouring settlements of the *Celtici*.

## **Conclusion**

Thirty years after its excavation, the sanctuary of the hillfort of Capote remains a unique site in the archaeology of Iron Age Iberia. Despite its material analogies with the sacred deposit of Garvão, it is evident that the latter corresponds to a sacred place with a chthonic connotation of protection and probably also healing. Contrastingly, Capote reflects the importance of central places in the immediate and regional geography of the *Celtici*, being a space dedicated to large, possibly periodic, banquets. During these celebrations, several ungulates were sacrificed (perhaps in pairs) and their meat was eaten by the community of the hillfort, with abundant drink. The orientation of the sanctuary and the written account about the destruction of the nearby *oppidum* of *Nertobriga* support the possibility that this community festival was celebrated close to the winter solstice. The absence of weapons and sacred images is significant, as is the fact that the site is situated on a central square in the middle of the hillfort. In sum, the evidence clearly indicates the importance of the sanctuary for the construction of collective identity among the inhabitants of Capote, and probably also for the populations of the wider environs.

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### Figure Captions

1. Map of the Iberian Peninsula with the main Late Iron Age ethnic groups and the sites referred to in the text: 1. Capote and *Nertobriga*; 2. *Pax Iulia*; 3. *Mirobriga Celticorum*; 4. Garvão (image: P. Sánchez de Oro).
2. The Ardila River loop and the distribution of the *oppida* in the *Baeturia Celticorum*, with the central position of *Nertobriga* (image: authors).
3. The Loire River loop and the distribution of the *oppida* and hillforts of the *Bituriges* in Central France, with the central position of *Avaricum* (image: authors).
4. Location of Castrejón de Capote in a central position with respect to its landscape (image: authors).
5. Map of the Capote hillfort, with the excavated structures on the LiDAR of the site: 1. Central sanctuary; 2. Omphalic rock (image: authors).
6. 1 – 2. Plans of the sanctuary in the different phases of occupation; 3. LiDAR image; 4. Front elevation with the closing wall structure of phase 2a (in blue), raised over the remains of the ritual feast (image: authors).
7. Main objects found in the sanctuary: a. Bronze cauldron fragment; b. Grill; c. Knife; d. Spit; e. Shovel; f. Sacrificed fauna (with MNI); g. Spindle whorl; h: Miniature ceramic vessels; j: Bowls; k: Cups; l: Containers; m: *Foculi*. The number of ceramic objects by type is quantified (image: authors).
8. Cup found on the altar-table, with profuse cut-out decoration (photo: D. Sanabria, Museo Arqueológico Provincial de Badajoz, Junta de Extremadura. D.02203).
9. View of the sanctuary of Capote from its northern corner (photo: L. Berrocal-Rangel).