

Recent research on the Cantabrian Wars: the archaeological reconstruction of a mountain war

Eduardo José Peralta Labrador, Jorge Camino Mayor
and Jesús Francisco Torres-Martínez

Over the centuries, Spanish historiography has attached great importance to the wars that Octavian launched at the start of the last third of the 1st c. B.C. against the population in the north of the Iberian peninsula. In this way he intended to bring an end to the long conquest of Iberia that had begun two centuries earlier in the hegemonic struggle with Carthage. Although the wars previously attracted the attention of European scholars, today they play little part in the historiography of the Early Roman Empire and even less in the biographies of Augustus, who suffered some of his worst military fortunes in this war, putting his very life in danger (Suet., *Aug.* 29.3 and 81.1; Hor., *Carm.* 3.14; Dio 53.25.5-7; Oros. 6.21.4). Even Departments of Ancient History in Spanish universities have failed to progress beyond well-worn exegesis of the written sources. This is because until just two decades ago all the information came from two historical sources: Florus and Orosius, on the one hand, and Dio Cassius, on the other (the relevant books of Livy being lost). Although they stress the importance of the conflict, these sources are excessively laconic; they have also been subjected to erudite speculations about place-names that have turned the military campaigns into a series of historiographic fictions.¹

Both the lack of any material vestiges related to the war and the inability to situate the events described at any reliable locations were spectacularly transformed, however, by the discovery of a series of remains that reveal one of the most significant Roman military campaigns, now indeed one of the best understood in Europe. Apart from the early discovery of some peripheral camps, like Valdemeda (León)² and Castrocalbón (Zamora),³ which at that time were not expressly associated with the wars, the long chain of discoveries began unexpectedly in the mid-1990s with a new exploration of the fortifications of Cildá (Cantabria). This large and complex site lies on a ridge between the Pas and Besaya river valleys in the Cantabrian mountains at an altitude of over 1000 m. It had originally been identified as a “Cantabro-Roman” settlement. Other camps, El Cantón and Campo de las Cercas, were identified nearby.⁴ In spite of various characteristics that were quite unusual for a Roman camp, the earthworks suited the pattern of a military camp: walls with double

1 The various traditional interpretations are covered by R. Bolado del Castillo, E. Gutiérrez Cuenca and J. A. Hierro Gárate, “Las guerras cántabras,” in *Cántabros. Origen de un pueblo* (Santander 2012) 98-103. For a criticism of the reconstruction of place-names in traditional historiography, see J. L. Ramírez Sádaba, “La toponimia de la guerra. Utilización y utilidad,” in *Las guerras cántabras* (Santander 1999) 173-99, and “Los textos clásicos de las guerras a la luz de la arqueología: mitos y realidades,” in J. Camino, E. Peralta and J. F. Torres (edd.), *Las guerras astur-cántabras* (Gijón 2015) 69-85.

2 F. Sánchez-Palencia, “El campamento romano de Valdemeda, Manzaneda (León): ocupación militar y explotación aurífera en el NW peninsular,” *Numantia* 2 (1986) 227-43; id. and B. Currás Refojos, “Campamentos romanos en zonas mineras del cuadrante noroeste de la península ibérica,” in Camino, Peralta and Torres (supra n.1) 273 and 275-78.

3 E. Loewinshon, “Una calzada y dos campamentos romanos del *conventus Asturum*,” *AEspArq* 38 (1985) 26-43.

4 E. Peralta Labrador, “La penetración del ejército romano por el interfluvio Pas-Besaya,” in Camino, Peralta and Torres (supra n.1) 131-47.