Fields of Rome. Lusitania, the Mediterranean connectivity, the Roman Empire and the loss of knowledge.

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ABSTRACT: *Complex societies can fade away, bringing to oblivion much of the knowledge produced. Starting from a case study - the diachronical process identified in the ongoing archaeological excavations in the Roman* villa *in Horta da Torre (Fronteira municipality, Alentejo, Portugal), and the research project developed since 2012, we try to identify some of the patterns happened in the past. Also, we can perceive how complex and stratified was the Roman rural landscape, as so fragile and unstable were the settlements that followed.*

1. FIELDS OF LUSITANIA: THE ROMAN LANDSCAPE

1.1 The Roman villa in Horta da Torre (Fronteira): a space for convivium in Lusitania

Somewhere in the middle of the 5th Century A.D., a grand aulic room in the extreme East of a significant residential complex was utterly abandoned. The place underwent a peaceful and systematised process: no evidence of destruction or violence was found during the archaeological excavations ongoing since 2012.

The room has a little more than 90m^2, with a unique planimetry, carefully designed and decorated. It has a robust double apse, perfectly aligned with the main entrance; this strong structure inside was utterly void, with a gateway allowing the entry of water, to be contained inside the structure. From there, the water flowed into the interior of the main room thanks to another gateway, but also in small cascades through the existence of small holes in the wall. All these solutions were carefully planned, creating a complex and sophisticated scenario. Nothing new in the Roman horizon: in the literary sources, as the *villa Leontina* portraited by Sidonius Apollinaris (*Carm.* XXII 206-210) shows, we can see parallels in the 5th century Gaul.

The room had a *stibadium*, furniture where the guests sat during the banquets offered by the *dominus* (the owner of the *villa*). Watching the water flows, he could talk with his *socci*, the allies with whom negotiations could be arranged, as part of the Mediterranean *convivium*, because banquets took part of this ceremonial (Dunbabin, 2010). Diners sat in front of the whole room, carefully decorated with marble slabs around the wall's footers, and mosaic panels decorated with colourful *tesselae* that filled the

upper area of the walls. Slowly covering the entire floor, the water created a vibrant brightness's that undoubtedly generated a multi-sensorial experience (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Virtual 3D model from the *stibadium* room in Horta da Torre by A. Carneiro, C. Carpetudo & G. Lopes.

The coherence of the decorative programme, where symbols related to water filled the different elements, indeed reinforced the role of the *dominus* as a refined and cosmopolitan citizen, because the decorative plan formed part of the cultural *oikouméné* of the classical background.

The *villa* in Horta da Torre is a *unicum*, having close parallels in other provinces (El Ruedo, Cordoba), and also in other territories in the Western Roman Empire (Faragola, Ascoli). However, the entire surrounding region in nowadays Alto Alentejo is filled with several of these monumental units that managed the territory and centralised the economic exploitation of the countryside. Each has a unique architectural plan, with different decorative programmes, but all had the same role, managing the economic exploitation in the territory and creating

synergies with the local population. In the Fronteira municipality, six of these *villae* are known in only 150km², sharing the landscape and gathering the daily life and activity of the local populations.

We also have to consider that the tissue of rural settlement implied several other units. This territory has almost 50 sites of smaller dimensions, spotted in the archaeological field surveys (Carneiro, 2004; see also 2014, vol. II), with some more added in recent fieldwork.

In January 2018, a collaboration between the University of Évora and Leiden University, with funding provided by the *Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds*, allowed new insight into this territory. An intensive field survey was made in selected zones, namely some around Horta da Torre, in its immediate *fundus* (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Survey results around the villa of Horta da Torre: Fronteira Landscape Project, T. D. Stek, J. García Sanchez, A. Carneiro & R. Kalkers.

The methodology was exhaustive: coverage within 50mx50m units, all of each with detailed geo-reference, with surveyors distanced within 10m each. Every archaeological item was collected, bagged, tagged with metadata indications (day, time, team, surveyor, type of sampling procedure) and processed in the laboratory so that we can have exact references of each element collected (García Sánchez, Stek, Carneiro, Kalkers, *in press*).

As for the results of only one month of intensive fieldwork were very intricate and multivariate, it is not the aim of this paper to present and debate them, but we could spot intense rhythms of change, from a Roman Republican landscape dominated by extensive fortified sites to an open-based network of sites dedicated to farming activities.

However, and especially concerning the core of this paper, a complex system of small, medium and huge-sized sites, that filled the landscape with a critical density of populated settlements was spotted in the field survey. Of course, we do not have a detailed chronology because the timetable is very open – we are dealing with the *Roman landscape*, which is the

result of surface findings, and we do not have stratigraphies, so the result is a composite image – but it is evident that this is an intensively occupied landscape. Around Horta da Torre two more small sites have been identified, adding to more others and the burial space previously known, possibly satellites of the vast Roman *villa*, all of which depended from the vicinity of the Roman road connecting the capital of the imperial province of *Lusitania – Augusta Emerita –* to the Atlantic harbour, *Olisipo* (nowadays Merida and Lisbon, respectively).

This was a dense and specialised landscape, with productive sites surrounding a monumental and refined *villa*, benefiting from the economic surplus provided by the farming exploitation of the territory, and with the connectivity brought by the Roman road, linking the two main cities of the province. No wonder that these banquets had oysters served in delicate ceramic and glassware, as other aulic Roman *villae* in this territory (namely Torre de Palma, near 10km from Horta da Torre, in nowadays Monforte municipality). Luxury and refinement brought by the Mediterranean connectivity in nowadays Alto Alentejo, more than 100kms from the seaside.

However, in the gap of one generation, things would change radically.

1.2 The post-roman presence in Horta da Torre (Fronteira): a space for plundering

At the end of the 5th century (or in the first years of the following), nearly 30/50 years of the end of the last banquet, the Roman *villa* of Horta da Torre was going to be reoccupied. In the main room, the walls are still perfectly standing, with all the decorative program still preserved: marble slabs, the mosaics decorating the walls, and possibly the roof, which covered all the space.

We cannot entirely understand all the processes that happened in the site, but a carefully made excavation of the occupation levels above the pavements could spot some evidence.

A group of people occupied the room, and the pavement of *opus signinum*, a Roman mortar that has the capability of being waterproof (so resisting to the water that entered the room in the moment of the banquets), was perforated to place wooden posts to build a *longhouse*, a precarious shelter (Fig. 3). In this room, men and animals would be placed together: in the excavations of the ground level above the pavement, horse bones were found, not linkable with the Roman moment of occupation, but with this post-Imperial sequence.

These men plundered carefully and systematically all the compartments. For instance, excavating all levels in the stratigraphic sequence above pavements, we barely found a single coin; the scarce findings are spotted in revolved soils, due to modern agriculture.

Almost all the Roman pottery was cleaned, also the most relevant ceramics and artefacts. The marble slabs that covered the wall footers were spoiled, sometimes with violence, leaving some broken pieces as testimony. In the adjacent compartment, the small *perystilium* next to the double room, thrash was dumped: a darkish soil, filled with jawbones and truncated bones, filled the area, leaving a dark colour in the pavements, so intense that does not enable us to see the coloured frescoes in the walls. The most impressive element comes from the ceramics: the oven technology was so poor that the fragments dissolved in the water, with such rude clays that remind the local pre-Roman technology of the Iron Age. In 30/50 years, the technology has retrogressed almost one millennium.

Figure 3. 3D model of the cenatio of Horta da Torre, with postholes from the squatters' longhouse: Fronteira Landscape Project, T. D. Stek, J. García Sanchez, A. Carneiro & R. Kalkers; figure by A. Jansen & A. Carneiro).

We do not know the identity of these people. We cannot call them *barbarians* in the traditional way, because not a single exogenous element was found among the evidence of their poor material culture. We do not know if they were pagans or Christians; again, not an only clue about their faith or beliefs was found.

Probably, they were a part of the pre-existent population, the peasantry that became unemployed with the crisis of the Roman global economic system (see Wickham, 2005, for an overview). What we can perceive is that, in no more than 50 years, the perception of the space and the forms of the human presence in this site radically changed. From a sophisticated and refined presence, where the *voluptas* created the *convivium*, we rapidly jump to a mere subsistence level, plundering all the materials that can be used or recycled.

What happened in Horta da Torre is not a unique example. With more carefully excavations, parallels in other sites are emerging. This phenomenon is nowadays called *the squatter occupation*. However, this concept has recently been redefined, because it was not a single and particular moment: it happened systematically in a vast majority of the western rural landscape, in a broad diversity of sites and regions (Lewit, 2009).

In the turning of the 5th to the 6th century, living in the rural landscape had changed a lot. And the connections with the Mediterranean are no longer visible. The world became far-reaching larger.

2. THE END OF A COMPLEX SOCIETY AND THE LOSS OF KNOWLEDGE

Again we must emphasise that this is not the place to debate such a complicated process like the transition of the Roman Empire to the Early Medieval Age; or to discuss the concept of *Late Antiquity* as it was proposed by Peter Brown and, soon after, Averil Cameron; or to examine the Gibbonian perspective of the *Fall of the Roman Empire*, then smoothed by the *transition* perspective in the historical debate in the end of the past millennium, subsequently criticized and rejected by the radical proposal made by Bryan Ward Perkins.

In this paper, the most relevant element is to perceive *change*. Of course, we can always invoke some examples of continuity, even with comfort and the maintenance of connectivity circuits with the Mediterranean, which were spotted in this region. But, in a general overview, we can perceive that the 5th century and the subsequent periods will mark the end of a complex society, evolving since at least one millennium.

The result would be the process of change, shifting to a completely different society.

The Roman conquest was the end of an enduring process connecting the Southwest of the Iberian Peninsula to the Mediterranean circuits, ongoing since the beginning of the first-millennium b. C. Phoenicians, with their trade, ships and written culture, brought influences that created a mosaic of cultural influences with different impacts in the indigenous communities.

Throughout the Iberian Peninsula, territories react differently, depending on their vicinity to the channels of external influence: along the navigable rivers or in the coast, traders and diplomats brought external influences, causing different *stimuli* locally visible in the archaeological evidence. In some areas, these contacts would lead to the creation of proto-urban settlements, throughout negotiation and trade dynamics, although other extended areas either remained uninvolved or only residually benefited from different and unequal contacts with these external agents.

The Roman conquest will be the next step in the process: for the first time, all the Iberian Peninsula will be under the same political power, but the Roman process would not standardise all the local communities (During, Stek, 2018, for several examples). Nowadays, the concept "*Romanization*" is being

more and more questioned (Scheidel, 2014), seems evident that the Roman power intended more to cooperate with some local elites, leaving large contingents outside of the process –the 'people without history' presently discussed in many post-colonial perspectives (Gardner, 2013).

However, the "*Roman landscape*" formed by the *villae* as the main units will dominate most of the rural landscape, especially growing along the 3rd and 4th centuries, when the climax of the system arises. In this phase we can see the *emulatio* process, with the creation of local copies, trying to graft the symbols of the *oikouméné*, adopting the common values of the classical culture. From the Eastern Mediterranean to the Atlantic façade, we can see the same patterns, sometimes locally mixed with some identity values, creating the "*glocalisation*" process, with hybridisation mixing different paradigms. It is the highlight of the process, with rich mixtures merging in different directions.

As we can see *Lusitania* nowadays, the local elites perceived the opportunities. Integration brought new ventures, and throughout urban and rural landscapes, local elites-built residences that materialise their power and influence, sometimes reaching broader circles. However, as we can also see by the archaeological and epigraphical record, a vast mass of people remains outside, in peripherical circles that maintain their archaic prototypes.

The balance between these elites, searching for these higher paradigms, and the rest of the population would enlarge throughout the Late Roman period, due to the process of land concentration (*latifundia*). New paradigms arrived, as we can see in the Lusitanian mosaics: *strong men* and new leadership, more authoritarian, would arise, as we perceived the emergence of a more muscular culture.

The end of the process can be seen in places like Horta da Torre. These sophisticated sites, filled with cultural and iconographical references, sometimes imported from the other half of the Mediterranean basin. As the example of the sculptures from the Roman *villa* of Quinta das Longas, in Elvas, made from the nowadays Turkish marble from Aphrodisias. These places, where the local elites received their partners, exhibiting their opulence and culture, were reoccupied, but at this time in an entirely different manner. Among ruins, people searched for the materials of the ancient *otium* culture, or bury their deceased, like in another Roman *villa* in Fronteira, named Monte de São Francisco, where a grave was excavated in 2015, very close to the Roman buildings (Fig. 4).

Again, a hybrid culture is in the creation process, using a common visual culture, because the old symbols are going to be reused. And another step in the process will come (again) from the Eastern Mediterranean basin: the Christian religion will have a moment of coexistence with the pagan iconography,

but in the next phase, we can see open conflicts and the suppression of the ancient culture.

Figure 4. Grave in Monte de São Francisco, excavation in 2015 by A. Carneiro.

In this way, a sophisticated universe would change, and people would live among ruins and memories, adapting to *change* and transforming their places with their natural resilience - as they always did. The loss of knowledge happened in the past, bringing radical changes into complex societies, involving the *loss of comfort* that was one of the main characteristics in the Roman Empire. Walls and fences were useless, and authoritarian leaders, with their reaction against the future, were incapable of reacting to change.

The end of the Roman Empire and their archaeological evidence in *Lusitania* shows us how the process of loss of knowledge can appear in moments of crisis, bringing profound and definitive changes into society.

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