

# Engagement strategies for Late Iron Age *oppida* in North-Central Spain

## *Estrategias de compromiso en los oppida de la Edad del Hierro de la Meseta Norte española*

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### ABSTRACT

*Late Iron Age oppida represent an excellent example of heritage sites which, by their very nature, have to be integrated into working landscapes to ensure their sustainability. This paper focuses on a purposely-selected experience in Amblés valley (Ávila) and the oppidum of Pintia (Valladolid). With ongoing archaeological research, represent both the variety of the Late Prehistory phenomenon at Central Spain and the varied ways in which these sites and landscapes are researched, understood and managed today.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Oppida, Vettones, Vacceos, Verracos, Iron Age, Stakeholders, Heritage Management.*

### RESUMEN

*Los oppida de finales de la Edad del Hierro constituyen un ejemplo excelente de sitios patrimoniales que, por su propia naturaleza, deben considerarse paisajes activos para poder asegurar su sostenibilidad. Este trabajo se centra en dos áreas de la Meseta Norte, el valle Amblés (Ávila) y el oppidum de Pintia (Valladolid). Con investigaciones arqueológicas en curso, ambos representan la variedad de un fenómeno típico de la Prehistoria Final y los distintos modos en los que estos sitios y paisajes son investigados, comprendidos y gestionados hoy en día.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Oppida, Vettones, Vacceos, Verracos, Edad del Hierro, Partes Interesadas, Gestión del Patrimonio.*

**SUMMARY:** 1. The oppidum of Pintia. 2. Ávila and the Amblés Valley.



**Figure 1.** Inside the *oppidum* of Ulaca (Solosancho, Ávila). Late Iron Age domestic building remains.

Like many other parts of Europe, the last twenty years in Central Spain have seen attempts at describing the state of our knowledge of the *Oppida*, and trying to provide an interpretation of these data (Almagro-Gorbea 1995; Almagro-Gorbea and Dávila 1995; Ruiz Zapatero and Álvarez-Sanchís 1995 and 2015; Álvarez-Sanchís *et al.* 2011; Álvarez-Sanchís and Ruiz Zapatero 2014)<sup>1</sup>. The emergence of these large fortified settlements is a process which begins to be known, and there were probably substantial differences between them, in terms of geographical setting, size, form, function and chronology. At the same time, there have been exhibitions, for instance *Celtas y Vettones* (Ávila 2001) or, more recently, *Vettones: Pastores y Guerreros en la Edad del Hierro* (Alcalá de Henares 2008), which allow us a much more dynamic and up-to-date view than those presented in the major museums whose exhibitions are more static. As in other countries it tends to be the local and regional museums which present the more modern views (Collis 2008: 63).

*Oppida* represent an excellent example of heritage sites which, by their very nature, have

to be integrated into working landscapes to ensure their sustainability ([www.refitproject.com](http://www.refitproject.com)). The concept of “cultural landscape” was formally introduced by UNESCO in 1992 and is a fundamental element of the *European Landscape Convention* (2000). It emphasises the need to consider landscapes as “resulting from the combined action of Man and Nature”, recognising the important links between nature and culture in creating sustainable landscapes, inseparable from the people who maintain them. As a form of archaeological monument, *oppida* are unusual in representing both specific ‘sites’ but also, because of their scale and roles in the past, representing cultural landscapes in themselves. In terms of engagement strategies for these Iron Age settlements, there are two major factors which affect the archaeological record.

Firstly, the activities of the ancient people themselves and what has happened with them in the last two thousand years. This is most obvious in Central Spain, in the way in which archaeological sites were constructed and exhibited (Collis 2008: 64): *oppida* with ramparts are much more visible than open



**Figure 2.** Iron Age sculpture of Villanueva del Campillo (Ávila), IV-III BC.

sites. There is also the material used for construction: mainly stone, though it is not always clear why one technique should be preferred over another on different sites, for instance, in Ávila, why the houses on Ulaca (Solosancho) are so visible in comparison with those of Las Cogotas (Cardeñosa) or La Mesa de Miranda (Chamartín), despite all three sites were constructed on a substratum of granite. There is also the visibility of ritual sites, such as the tumulus or the stelae used between the vaccean, vettons and celtiberian peoples to mark the positions of burials; and there are the *verracos*, the famous prehistoric stone sculptures depicting bulls and pigs, that marked and protected pastures and Iron Age settlements in Western Iberia and which have no counterpart elsewhere in Temperate Europe (Álvarez-Sanchís 1994; Ruiz Zapatero and Álvarez-Sanchís 2008). This ‘visibility’ of ancient *verracos* also extends to recent history, once they lost their original sense, starting from the fifteenth century to present time (Mariné 2008: 442). Five hundred years of biographies depending on if they have been “in situ” and visible from antiquity, if they have been moved as ornamental sculptures, if they have been discovered at an

excavation –in original or secondary context–, if they have been used for building or, finally, if they have been an aim with top priority in the cultural management.

The second factor, and possibly the most important, is the activities of the archaeologists themselves, and the attitudes of stakeholders, heritage protection organisations and regional governments, indeed the people as a whole. There may be archaeological remains scattered around the landscape or buried in the earth, but it requires an interest in them to be exploited and recorded systematically and interpreted in a way which is meaningful for present day people (Hodder 2011; Myers *et al.* 2010 and 2016). These landscapes are constructed from people’s lives, their perceptions and are often fundamental to people’s sense of identity and well-being. The concept of cultural landscapes recognises that human actions, of all kinds, cannot be divorced from other aspects of these landscapes, including their ecology, heritage, economics, along with other aspects such as communities’ belief systems (Fairclough and Rippon 2002; VV.AA. 2009). They, therefore, pose a particular challenge and opportunity for us to explore how people perceive such

landscapes and how we might manage them in more integrated ways (Ruiz del Árbol and Orejas 2005). By working across disciplines with non-academic stakeholders (wildlife organisations; farmers; SMEs; National Parks; Heritage Protection Organisations; politicians), we can explore the experiences of such groups through exchange opportunities, allowing the transfer of expertise and experience between these, often dislocated, stakeholders.

### 1. The *oppidum* of Pintia

Between recent experiences, particular attention could be paid at the *oppidum* of Pintia (Padilla de Duero, Valladolid). For more than 30 years, researchers from the University of Valladolid have worked together at the site to help create a window into the lives of the ancient Vaccean culture, an Iron Age people that settled in North-Central Spain (Sanz 1998; Sanz and Velasco 2003). Pintia is a vast and rich site. In addition to its large necropolis –located about 300 meters from the main settlement– it has a cremation area or *ustrinum*, a village, an

artisan quarter, and a possible sanctuary, so far only identified by aerial photographs. Such is Pintia's glut of archaeology that the 125 hectare site was declared a National Cultural Asset in 1993.

Archaeological research has been very intensive, especially in the cemetery area, used between the 4th century BC and the 1st century. The team lead by Professor Carlos Sanz Mínguez has implemented a range of engagement strategies through education activities, reconstructions and re-enactment events, building relationships with the local SME's and taking into account the wildlife in the area and possible sports activities (Sanz *et al.* 2005; Sanz 2013). Artisans and local professionals have actively collaborated through competitive tendering of crafts inspired in the material culture from the site. The Pintia Project finances itself through several programs, such as the guided tours, the online store, archaeology for kids, and most importantly, the excavation initiatives. Each summer the archaeologists prepare seminars and workshops concerning the fieldwork and the history of the site. Topics include Funerary Archaeology, Archaeological Draw-



**Figure 3.** Excavations at medieval cemetery of San Nicolás in Ávila, and discovery of a Late Iron Age verraco next to the graves (photo: J.C. González Blázquez).



**Figure 4.** Two verracos discovered near the Old Hospital at Mirueña de los Infanzones (Ávila). Both were reused in the construction of the new building (photo: M. Mariné).



**Figure 5.** People shows great interest about Iron Age *oppida* when archaeology engages (informative talks, panels, exhibitions...). Here, students attend an explanation at the cemetery of La Mesa de Miranda (Chamartín, Ávila).

ing, and a day-long theoretical and practical course in human and animal bone studies by professors from the Valladolid University Medical School. Since 2007 they have an educative program for kids between 10 and 14 years old (Sanz and Romero 2008). In the workshop they learn about excavation techniques, funerary rites (taking part in a cremation ceremony) and how to make a pot. It is a very welcome activity in schools here and beyond.

The grave goods recovered have been essential to the study of the social organization of these pre-Roman peoples. This ‘visibility’ of ancient cultures also extends to the material hidden under the ground, in contrast with the almost complete invisibility of the settlement; around 100 giant limestone slabs (some weighing nearly a metric ton) covered the tombs, which protected them from subsequent farming and left the funerary jars and grave goods in excellent conditions. So, the first step in reconstruction works has been to fill the trenches, erecting the stelae in its original position. Finally, it has been planted some cypresses and putting a plate with the characteristics of the burial and a poem written by local poets (Sanz *et al.* 2003: 276). Visitors can sponsor a grave paying the cost of the plate. As part of the museographic program developed at the cemetery, research team has constructed a *tumulus* with

a sculpture representing the exposure of the deceased to the vultures and a *columbarium* where they will put the human remains from the cremations after finish the anthropological analysis.

Pintia is in the middle of a rich area of wine production, with a lot of wineries producing different “Ribera de Duero” wines. In this context research team working in Pintia outlined a research project around the “archaeology of wine” (Sanz 2007; Romero *et al.* 2009; Sanz *et al.* 2010). They did analysis of residues in some containers from the cemetery and the results were positive: they were used for drinking wine. These results immediately interested producers of wine and they funded the project. One result of this collaboration has been the publication of two monographs on “wine and feast” (Sanz and Romero 2009; Sanz *et al.* 2009). In addition, the public agency responsible for the conservation of the banks of the Duero river has cleaned an elm grove close to the site, making a bike route in the area to visit all the important places around Pintia. Finally, about dissemination and volunteering, it is necessary to highlight its annual publication: *Vacceia*. It is other result of the collaboration between wine producers and research team. They edit about 20.000 copies of this publication containing the excavation results, some



**Figure 6.** Cultural landscapes include many different natural and human influences. This photograph of the cultural landscape of Ulaca shows cattle grazing inside the *oppidum*.



**Figure 7.** Pintia (Padilla de Duero, Valladolid). Stone stelae used to mark the position of Iron Age burials, after reconstruction works.

research papers, news of the project and sponsor advertisements. Pintia team also organise volunteering days every month to keep the site clean of weeds or to plant some trees.

## 2. Ávila and the Amblés Valley

With ongoing archaeological research, these settlements provide good examples of where archaeologists are already attempting to engage, to a greater or lesser degree, with other stakeholders. We can extend our perception of cultural landscapes and popular archaeological involvement through case studies in similar contexts with different approaches. In Ávila, where we have been working for the last thirty years, we can see the evolution of attitudes. There are records and references to the *oppida* from the end of the nineteenth century, but it was between 1920s and 1930s that excavations were undertaken by Juan Cabré (1930 and 1932; Molinero and Cabré 1932) in the central part of the province. Cabré's works demonstrated the importance of the *oppida* as Las Cogotas and La Mesa de Miranda, with its impressive military architecture of strong walls and a stone “chevaux-de-frise” in front of the entrances, their cemeteries, the famous zoomorphic stone sculptures –so-called “verracos”- of the Vettonian area, certain types of ceramics and certain weapons and metallic adornments. This archaeological group has been named as “Cogotas Culture” and also

“Culture of the Verracos” (Ruiz Zapatero 2004; Álvarez-Sanchís 2008). Those excavations uncovered archaeological findings of great monumental value. Settlements such as Las Cogotas, La Mesa of Miranda, Ulaca or El Raso (Candeleda), in Ávila, and Las Merchanas (Lumbrales), El Lugar Viejo (Yecla) and El Castillo (Saldeana), in Salamanca, belong to the first stage of these exploratory projects.

In the 90s, different reconstruction programs were created, thanks to a high demand for “cultural tourism”, and soon the initial recovery steps led to an increasing notoriety of these archaeological sites (Fabián 2004 and 2008). Nowadays the Amblés valley (Ávila) has witnessed some of the most important Iron Age excavations in North-Central Spain, with an increasing awareness and interest in the past among the local population; a lecture by one of my colleagues about the local excavations in a small village as Solosancho (Ávila), next to the *oppidum* of Ulaca, saw an audience of over 200 people; it is an experience which is being repeated across Europe, as was only too clear when Ávila put on the exhibition *Celtas y Vettones* recently (Almagro-Gorbea *et al.* 2001). So, the public has shown a strong desire to learn about the past through archaeology. According to recent polls the public feels that *archaeology is important because we improve the future by learning about the past* (Smith and Harris 2001). People demonstrate their interest in the past with their travels: visitors to cultural attractions tend to stay longer, thus



**Figure 8.** *Tumulus* representing the exposure of the deceased to the vultures at the cemetery of Pintia.

paying for more food, lodging, and other purchases. This spending helps diversify the local economy and contributes to the preservation of the community's heritage.

Why this phenomenon appears in recent years? There are three factors that help us to explain the emergence of this cultural tourism and also popular around the *oppida* in North-Central Spain.

First, the development of the archeology of the vettones and their dissemination, especially

in the last two decades: archaeological excavations in El Raso and Las Cogotas (Fernández Gómez 1986, 1997 and 2011; Ruiz Zapatero and Álvarez-Sanchís 1995), the revision of the Iron Age cemetery of La Osera (Baquedano 2016), archaeological surveys in the Amblés valley and Ulaca, the subsequent discovery of the cemetery at Ulaca (Ruiz Zapatero 2005; Álvarez-Sanchís *et al.* 2008), the first public presentation of La Mesa de Miranda (Fabián 2005; López García 2012), and other fieldworks around Salamanca (Benet and López 2008), have given a significant boost to the study of the *oppida* in central Spain. This dynamism of archaeological research explains the major exhibition about Celts and Vettons (*Celtas y Vettones*, Ávila, 2001), which had an extraordinary success between the public and a great impact on society. The exhibition had over 120.000 visitors in just three months, sold more than 5.000 catalogs and promoted the offer of “Celtic foods” in restaurants and hotels in the city. Or the most recent ones, also in Ávila, dedicated to the discovery of the vettones (VV.AA. 2005) and their relations with the Iberian and Mediterranean regions (Barril and Galán 2007).

Shortly afterwards, the European project (*Interreg III-A*) between Salamanca, Ávila and



**Figure 9.** *Columbarium* (right) used to preserve the human remains from the cremations of the Iron Age cemetery at Pintia.



**Figure 10.** First excavations, between 1932-1933, at La Mesa de Miranda (Chamartín, Ávila). Detail of an Iron Age burial. IPHE, Archivo Cabré.

northern Portugal, led by the Council of Ávila, was another decisive impetus for the recognition and dissemination of archaeological heritage of the Iron Age *oppida* (Ruiz Zapatero 2011), in different formats: new excavations in major sites, an important task of restoration and presentation to the public of the most iconic settlements (Fabián 2006; Ser Quijano 2006), a collection of publications aimed at the general public, such as *Cuadernos de Patrimonio Abulense*, including a child guide about hillforts and verracos (González-Tablas and Mateos 2004), an international meeting on the same subject (*Castros y Verracos, Gentes de la Edad del Hierro en el Occidente de Iberia*, Ávila, 2004) (Ruiz Zapatero and Álvarez-Sanchís 2011) and the creation of a permanent exhibition center of vettonian culture (*Vettonia*). The Regional Government of Ávila (Diputación Provincial) has been developing an outstanding project focused on managing, conserving and presenting the archaeological heritage of the area to the public. The most important works have focused on the study and dissemination of knowledge regarding Late Iron Age *oppida* (Ulaca, Las Cogotas, Chamartín, El Raso). As part of this process, it has built a

tourist route around the sites and the verracos (Martín Vázquez 2010). The aim of the work is threefold: to disseminate information to today's society; to ensure responsible and qualified tourism; and to promote the development and participation of rural communities linked to these major archaeological sites.

Second, it is the process of building local identities to reaffirm the specificity of current societies in the context of cultural globalization (Fewster 2007). Some customs of the traditional agrarian world have been lost and today, the feeling of lack of identity is a growing phenomenon. The impact of archeology is very real in this context (Ruiz Zapatero and Jimeno 2005). The support of institutions to report the history, the receptivity of people to know a past traditionally ignored, but very close due to the proximity of the verracos and vettonian hillforts (Mariné 2005) and the strategy of cultural tourism which places the *oppida* as the historical roots of the region, all this has created a kind of popular *vettonism* (Ruiz Zapatero and Salas 2008). In the case of Ávila these sites imply an exceptionally high concentration of population (Álvarez-Sanchís 2000). By the II-I century BC the Vettones had a highly devel-





**Figure 11.** *Oppidum* of El Raso (Candeleda, Ávila). Late Iron Age domestic building remains and reconstruction of one of the houses.

oped society which can be labelled as a ‘tribal state’ comparable with those in other parts of central Iberia and in Temperate Europe. Like these other states it possessed urban settlements and a hierarchical society, apparently dominated by a military aristocracy. However, it had many characteristics which distinguish it from its contemporary societies (Collis 2008), but we still need extensive field work and excavation of settlements to understand better how

it functioned. Anyway, the special status of the area is also implied by the exceptional concentration of verracos (more than 130) in and around the Amblés valley. The contemporary expressions of this are important and diverse (Ruiz Zapatero and Salas 2008: 411-421): first, the creation of “references of prestige” using archaeological items specially zoomorphic stone sculptures; second, the use of the vetton past in street markets, festivals and celebra-



**Figure 12.** Las Cogotas (Cardeñosa, Ávila). View from the north of the site.



**Figure 13.** Iron Age cemetery of Ulaca. Archaeological excavations (summer 2004) at the foot of the *oppidum*.



**Figure 14.** Exploring the landscape. Walkers visit Ulaca (autum 2016).



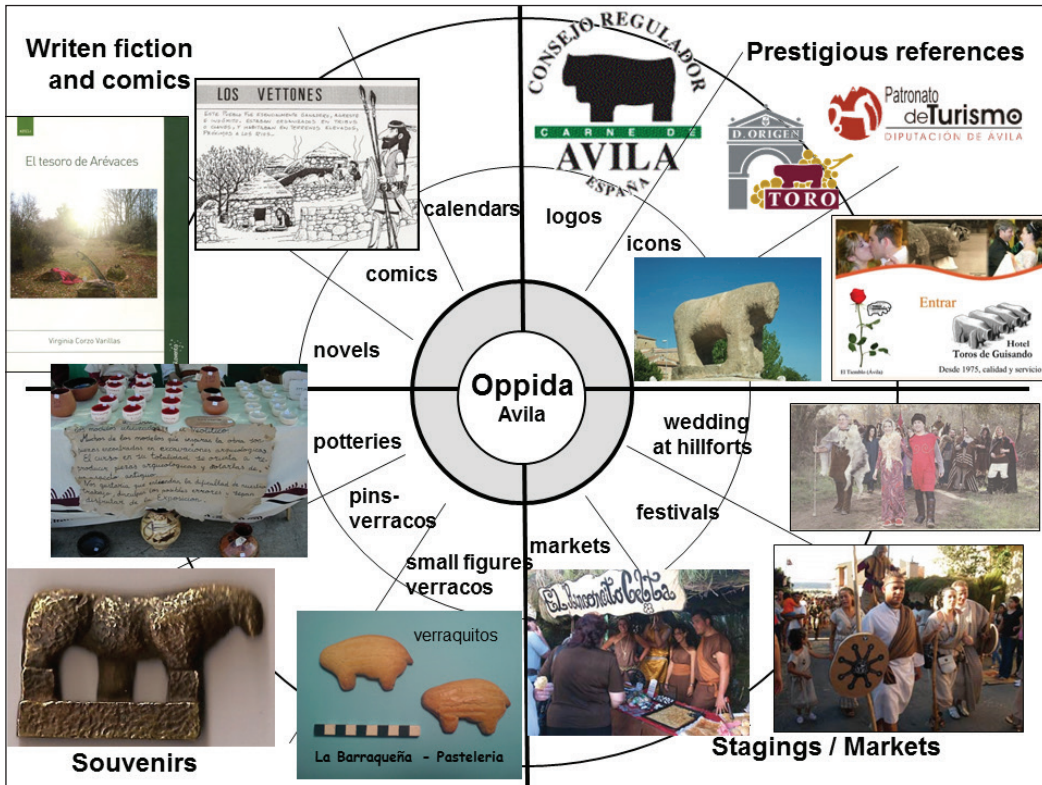
**Figure 15.** “*La Luna Celta*”, summer (2016) festival and staging of Iron Age people in Solosancho (Ávila).

tions (as *La Luna Celta* at Solosancho, [www.solosancho.com](http://www.solosancho.com)); third, the increasing number of souvenirs in the form of pins, small figurines and sweets, and finally, the production of fictional Iron Age pasts in novels and comics. All these elements are very important in the construction of modern identities. As archaeologists, we must be very careful in defending the true values of history and archaeology (Díaz-Andreu *et al.* 2005). In this way the past helps for the creation of senses of attachment to place, the landscape. Because the landscape lived and constructed by the peoples of the past and the present is a huge collective archive of all the generations who made sense of it and worked with it.

Third and last, the Archaeology offers a special attraction to a very specific sector of the current population. We mean the elderly. As life expectancy increases, many societies move towards a future in which a higher percentage of the population than ever before is more than 65 years old, people who have more free time and demand a cultural education more accessible to their needs. How can the elderly be engaged as users of the past and heritage? (Chilton *et al.* 2013). An aging population coupled with better health means that more people will want to engage with archaeological sites and museums. What are and should be the goals of heritage

providers regarding elderly audiences? For example, just twenty-five years ago, the average age of students at the University was significantly younger than today. This large group of people demands a specific training in History, Art and Archaeology, and this implies an improvement in the democratic access to training and culture (Álvarez-Sanchís 2009: 244). This trend is absolutely unstoppable. Education and enjoyment of the public in archeology are crucial to the survival of this discipline (Bender and Smith 2000; Burke and Smith 2007), and an important part of the future of public universities and specialties like ours should move in that direction (Stone and Mackenzie 1990; Ruiz Zapatero 2009).

In the XXI century teaching and learning of archeology will involve the mobilization of important social and economic resources and cannot be reduced to basic research (Layton *et al.* 2006; Okamura and Matsuda 2011). The interpretation and presentation of the past are inseparable from its social base and archeology is no different from other disciplines in the sense that it has responsibilities. Heritage, memory, community archaeology, stakeholders and the politics of the past form the main strands for understanding engagement strategies for Iron Age *oppida* in Central Spain. And this is an inevitable process which will grow in the future.



**Figure 16.** Popular expressions in relation to the *oppida* and the archaeology of the vettones in Ávila (Ruiz Zapatero 2008).

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