

**THE LEIRO HOARD (GALICIA,  
SPAIN): THE LONELY FIND?**

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# THE LEIRO HOARD (GALICIA, SPAIN): THE LONELY FIND?

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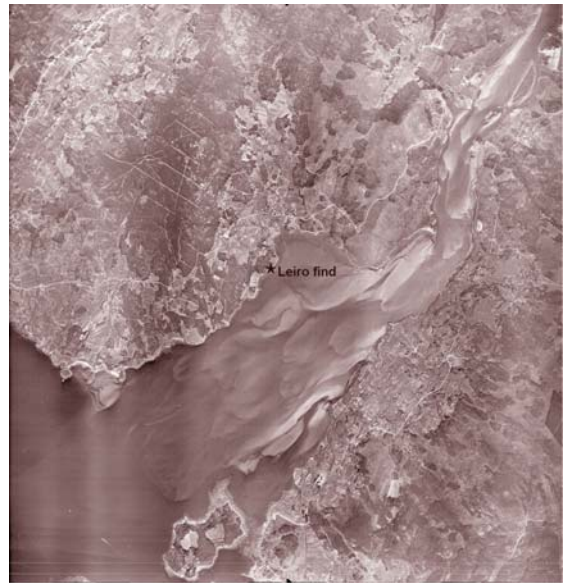
## 1. The geographic location of the Leiro find (Rianxo, Galicia, Spain).

Leiro beach (Rianxo, A Coruña) is located on the Atlantic coast in the region of Galicia (Spain), in the northwest of the Iberian peninsula, on the northern shore of the *Ría de Arousa*. The Galician coast branches into a myriad of *rías* –estuaries-, of which the *Arousa* is the largest, with an area of some 555 square Km and roughly 27 Km in length. At its widest point it measures 14 Km, which is why it is often called the *Mar de Arousa* (*Sea of Arousa*). The shores of this estuary are low and rugged, and there are a number of islands and keys, some of which are small isthmuses formed by recent alluvial deposits. This estuary is also an extraordinary marine valley because of both its size and the wealth of shellfish it produces.

The angle formed by the estuary starts diminishing in size from the Island of Sálvora towards the NE, and is at its narrowest point - just 5,5 km wide- at the mouth of the Ulla river. It is the second most important river, after the



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Miño, in the hydrographic system of the northwest, offering optimum conditions for navigation along a 12-14 Km stretch, upstream to Pontecesures/Padrón, where the effects of the tides are still strongly felt. It is more difficult to go beyond this point owing to the narrowing of the river bed. However, the basin offers an alternative route by land with no major obstacles, which connects with the numerous valleys formed by its tributaries on both banks. For all these reasons, the course of the Ulla has been used as a waterway to reach the interior of Galicia from very early times (Naveiro & Caamaño, 1992). As Ruiz-Gálvez (1995: 29) has pointed out, it is no coincidence that this is the route, as legend has it, that St. James the Apostle followed when he came to Spain, and it is the very same route that the Normans used when they stormed Santiago de Compostela in the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

We may point out that Leiro beach, in the cove of Rial, enjoys a strategic location, as this is the point at which the estuary narrows for good as it flows upstream to join the course of the Ulla river, between *Palleiro Point* (N) and *Grandoiro Point* (S). In other words, it is the *gateway* of what historically was the major route travelled to reach the interior of Galicia.

## 2. The Circumstances surrounding the find and the description of the artefact.

This find<sup>2</sup> took place on April 7<sup>th</sup> 1976 at a spot known as *Corruncho dos Porcos* a small, rocky projection by the sea near Leiro beach (Rianxo, A Coruña, España). That day, J.M.<sup>a</sup> Vicente Somoza, a local seaman, was busy clearing a piece of land among the rocks to build a shed where he would keep his boat and fishing gear. As he was shovelling out the earth he found vessel made of clay.

The object is hemispherical in shape, with an appendix in the form of a truncated cone on the upper part. It is 15 cm high (including the appendix which measures 2.3 cm), with a diameter of 19.5 cm, weighing 270 g. The entire surface of the object is decorated with motifs arranged in horizontal bands framed by series of parallel bead mouldings, except for the ones on the top, which are finished off with the above-mentioned appendix. There are vertically arranged rows of umbones or knobs and the rows of concentric rings bear a small umbone in the centre with four similar ones framing each of the outer rings. All together there are six bands. The object is partly embossed and chiselled (mouldings and rings) and partly decorated with pierce marks made by an awl.

Armbruster (1999: 243-244) concludes that it is one individual object, fashioned out of a semi-finished cast product. She points out that the goldsmith left the tip as is when he hammered the vessel and on the inside, where the appendix is found, the surface is concave, denoting the effect of the casting. She also mentions that the rim is not reinforced, unlike the objects from Axtroki, around whose rims gold thread has been wound for reinforcement.

The gold surface used to have a shiny appearance, toned down by reddish-coloured adherences, although due to excessive cleaning, they have since disappeared<sup>3</sup>. There were no



<sup>2</sup> The information on the find was taken from the files kept at the M.A.C., from the news item published in the *Ideal Gallego* (14-IV-76) and the article by Cardozo (1976), which was corroborated by the person who discovered the object.

<sup>3</sup> It was cleaned while on display at the

temporary exhibition *Galicja no Tempo*, organised by the Xunta de Galicia (Monastery of San Martiño Pinario, Santiago de Compostela, 1991).

analyses carried out to determine their composition.

The M.A.C. also conserves 22 ceramic fragments from the find, however none of the pieces fit together to reconstruct the vessel and very few match. In general, this pottery is hand made out of loose clay with large additions of quartz/mica and impressions of other organic matter. The simple finish is achieved by smoothing the surface. The clay has a reddish tinge on the outer wall, while the interior is brown, which would suggest that the interior underwent a less oxidising kilning process. Most of the fragments have a maximum thickness of between 1.3 and 1 cm., although this is somewhat irregular, since the fractures indicate that the outer wall has a tendency to chip off. Despite the lack of information, we would suggest that this is a good-sized hemispherical vessel with a coarse finish.



### 3. Historiographic Review .

The object commonly known as the Leiro *helmet* is one of the most popular attractions at the M.A.C. Yet, 25 years after it was discovered, it is still largely unknown. It has never been the subject of a monographic study, rather, it has only inspired brief commentaries, scattered throughout a variety of essays. These opinions have been overshadowed by comments regarding its formal counterparts, which have been the object of greater attention, such as the *bowls of Axtroki* (Guipúzcoa) or the *Treasure of Villena* (Alicante) on the Iberian peninsula (Barandarian, 1973; Almagro, 1974), or by

other finds all over Europe, such as the gold cones of *Avanton* (Vienne), *Schifferstadt* (Renania) or *Ezelsdorf* (Baviera) (Eluère, 1987).

The object was considered, from the very start, to be a *gold helmet dating from the culture of the hillfort settlements*. The news of the find was immediately published by a Portuguese investigator, M. Cardozo (1976: 174), based on the information provided by M. Chamoso. They both agree that it is a *casque* dating from the Hispano Roman period, from between the years 350-250 b.C. (Celtic Iron Age II), which they link to the sculptures of Lusitanian or Galician warriors. Owing to the fragility of the metal sheet, it is assumed to be an ornamental piece to be used directly or placed over a support made of leather or another similar type of material and worn over the skull. The object is believed to have belonged to the grave goods of the tomb of a chief or a high status warrior.

Most of the authors subsequently decided on an earlier dating, with the majority of opinions placing Leiro as straddling the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age. Thus, Calo (1991) has assigned it to the Iron Age (Hallstatt B and C), between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries b.C., because of its striking similarity to Axtroki, which he relates to the Hallstatt objects of central Europe, especially those found in Germany. Monteagudo (1996: 41-42, Fig. 19) dates it to around the 8<sup>th</sup> century b.C., based on decorative parallels. Vázquez Varela (1992, 1994) includes it in the Late Bronze Age, giving special attention to the fact that it is a hoard. Blas (2000: 42,43) believes that both Axtroki and Leiro have gold vessels like those found in northern central Europe and in the mid-continental area, where Bello and Peña (1995: 154) consider that it originates from. While bearing in mind that it is, formally speaking, a hoard, Almeida et. alii (1994: 30-31), consider that it may be related to other objects from the Middle Bronze Age of the Atlantic, owing to its similar decorative elements.

Over the last decade, the study of prehistoric goldwork has undergone a new approach that pays special attention to the technological aspects. From this standpoint, Armbruster (1999: 243) has linked Leiro to the hoards of Axtroki and Villena, with the latter being included in the Late Bronze Age, around 1000 B.C., owing both to the bracelets cast using the lost-wax process and shaped in combination with rotary instruments, as well as to the first vestiges of iron found in southwestern Europe. In this respect, the author separates it from Hallstatt goldwork, and includes it in the technological domain of the *Villena/Estremoz* type goldwork, thus taking several out-of-context objects and situating them in a relative chronological framework (1993: 402). This same framework also encompasses other artefacts from the Northwest Iberian peninsula, which derived or evolved from the *Villena/Estremoz* type, like the bracelets from Toén and Ourense, for instance, (Ourense, Galicia) and the bracelets from Urdiñeira (A Gudiña, Ourense) in Spain or the bracelet from Chaves (Vila Real, Portugal) and Monte da Saia (Braga) in Portugal (Armbruster Perea, 1994: 74).

In the last few years, a number of authors have opted for its interpretation as a bowl. According to Reboredo (1999: 214-215) the appendix might have been used to attach it to some kind of support, and may have had a magical or ritual significance. Ruiz-Gálvez considers it to be related to gold crockery. And lastly, in the opinion of Vázquez Varela (1994) its lack of functionality would confirm that it had a possible symbolic or ritual purpose.

In general, the opinions have been rooted in a formal point of view (which would include the technological aspects), and to a lesser extent, in the interpretation of its archaeological context as a hoard. Several aspects are commonly assumed:

- That it is an exceptional object owing to its uniqueness as far as the archaeological records are concerned, and therefore must

be unique in the society that created and adopted it.

- That it is a foreign object, because it imitates foreign objects or that it actually is one.

That its chronology and function depend on the interpretation of its foreign counterparts.

#### **4. Leiro in its archaeological environment.**

From the above analysis, we are struck by two questions. First of all, the Leiro find has been dated to a time interval of around 1000 years, without this having had any impact on its interpretation within the archaeological context of the Northwest Iberian peninsula. Secondly, it has largely been studied from an exterior viewpoint rather than considering the archaeological context of the area or region in which it was found.

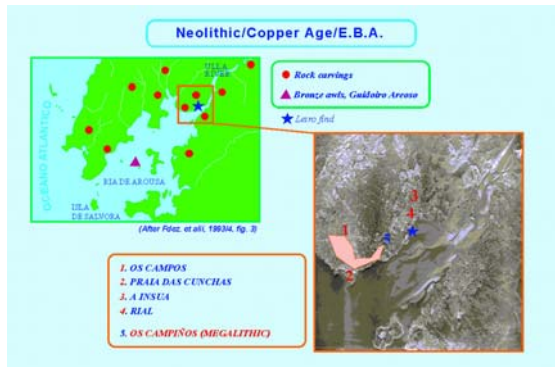
One of the aspects that usually draws a consensus among authors based on the information about the Leiro find is that it might be a hoard. Ruiz-Gálvez (1989) has warned that caution must be exercised in the interpretation of these types of finds owing to the interplay of a great many variables, including chance. Clearly it may be an unreliable find as far as its location is concerned. Even so, in this paper we will analyse the Leiro find in the context of the archaeological record of the mouth of the Ulla, river, relating it in turn, to the global context of the Northwest Iberian peninsula. We will thus attempt to seek out new elements that will be able to shed light on whether or not it should be interpreted as an *isolated* object, a “*lonely find*” from a formal point of view, or as a *hoard*.

##### **4.1. The Precedent (The Neolithic/Copper Age/Early Bronze Age).**

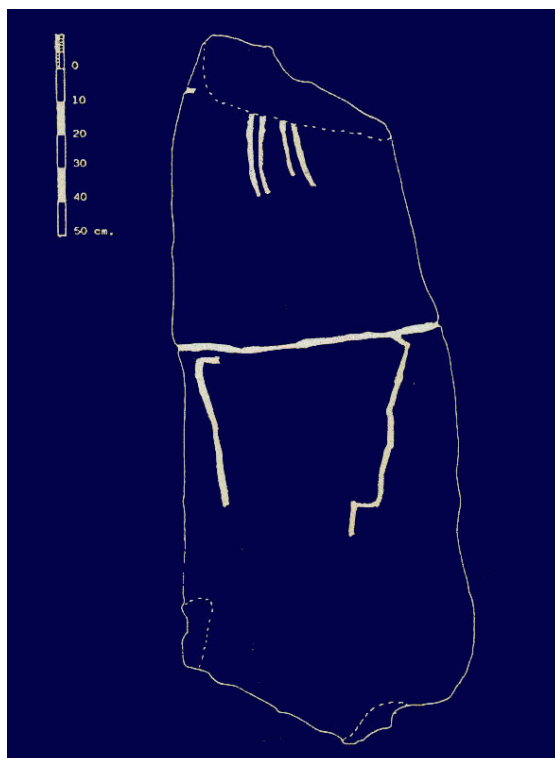
We wondered if there were any signs in the area that this territory had been appropriated by the groups of humans settled there prior to the supposed *arrival* of the helmet/bowl of Leiro. We also speculated as to whether we could interpret from the record, any indication

of social hierarchisation or even the extent to which there was deliberate interaction.

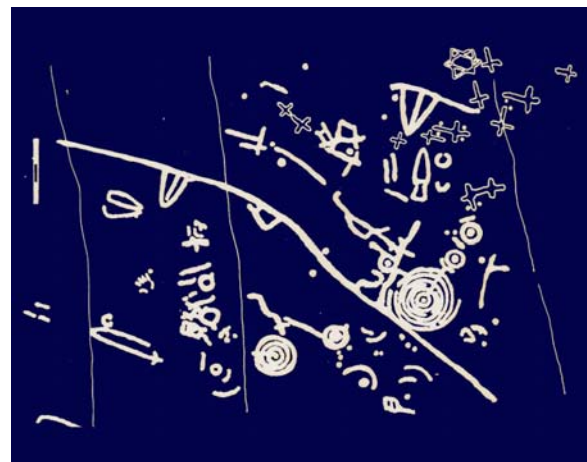
The intensive occupation of the territory has been demonstrated by the wealth of manifestations of two of the most characteristic phenomena of the archaeological record in Galicia, *the megalithic phenomenon* and the *Galician Rock Art Carvings*, which have some unique aspects as we will comment on below.



On a small, level stretch on the south-facing slope of Monte Lióra, is the *tumular necropolis of Os Campiños* (Sta. M<sup>a</sup>. de Leiro, Rianxo). A slab decorated with anthropomorphic carvings was recovered from this necropolis, which the authors date to the late Megalithic, possibly already into the Copper/Early Bronze Age (Fábregas y Fuente, 1994: 309).



On the other hand, the petroglyphs found on the banks of the ría de Arousa have a distinct style, particularly those in the area around Rianxo, located near the coastal zone. Moreover, Leiro is one of the few Galician carvings that portray weapons. The *Foxa Vella* station (Monte da Pena, Rianxo) located on a hilltop with a sweeping view over the lowlands, includes the representation of two halberds, as well as daggers and ring motifs (Calo & González, 1980). As an exception, Leiro is the only place in Galicia where the weapons depicted in the carvings and their metal counterparts appeared in close proximity. On the same mountain slope a possible hoard was located consisting of five tanged daggers and one halberd, and, moreover, it is the only one in the Galician archaeological record (Comendador, 1999).



Lastly, human figures are a much less common motif in the carved images, and even scarcer are the representations that might be interpreted as *praying figures*, with their upper extremities stretched out and upwards. Two of these figures appear in Rianxo, one in group III of Praia das Cunchas (Vázquez



Rozas, 1997: 105, Costas & Novoa, 1993: 138) and the other, which bears a striking resemblance to the former, is found on the *petroglyph da Insua*, situated in the valley of O Rial, right next to the location of the Leiro find (Bonilla et. alii, 1995/96: 90).

For many authors, the Galician Rock Art Carvings are the expression of a hierarchised society, with the male figure being predominant. Other authors (Vázquez Varela, 1995) have put forth the theory of the development of a type of warfare, which would have been reduced to battles between groups that were few in number, representing the small social units, and perhaps engaged in for ritual purposes or for ostentation. The social hierarchy would have been manifested and legitimised by the possession of the metal weapons found in the grave goods. Not only is there evidence that would point to a social hierarchisation towards the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, but some of the most tangible and exceptional proof from the northwest also comes precisely from the area where the Leiro helmet/bowl was discovered.

The southern coast of the Rías Baixas also presents a probably old evidence of the introduction of the bronze alloy on the Iberian peninsula. The site on the islet of *Guidoiro Areoso*, in the middle of the ría de Arousa, consists of two bronze awls, which from the dating and the associated materials could be

assigned to the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C. and may be taken as proof of the relations across the Atlantic at the time (Comendador, 1999).

#### 4.2. The “Hiatus” of the Middle Bronze Age.

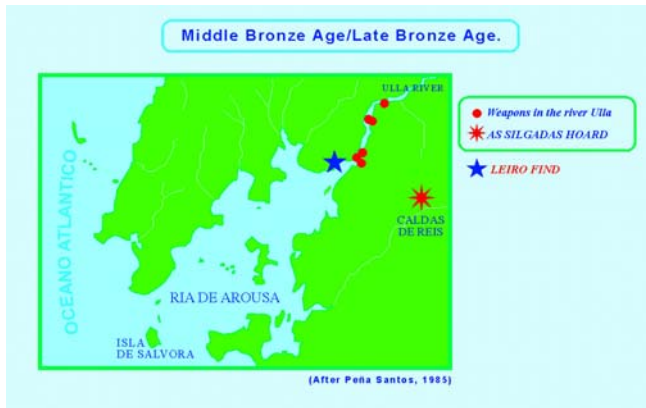
If we examine the archaeological record of the Bronze Age on the Northwest Iberian peninsula, it is quite surprising to see the Leiro find included in the Middle Bronze Age. Starting around the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, there is very little evidence recorded, with a dearth of information on both inhabited places and burial grounds. And up until relatively recently, only a few isolated finds of metal artefacts were attributed to this period.

While some investigators have interpreted this hiatus as a crisis or recession period, others believe that it may reflect an increased instability in the habitat in terms of a socio-economic restructuring process. It has been suggested that smaller sized social units were formed in which the possession of certain prestige goods played a less important role than during the previous period. Some of the investigators also consider that certain evidence in the record, generally interpreted as dating from earlier periods, might belong to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium. They argue that many phenomena, such as *megalithic art*, *the beaker phenomenon*, and *Galician Rock Art Carvings* took place during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium. There are even authors who believe that the view of a social change and a recession would not necessarily be contradictory. In any event, the evidence on record does become scarcer.

The finds traditionally attributed to the Middle Bronze Age in the area under study are also scanty, although we cannot rule out the possibility that new surveys may be able to contribute additional knowledge on the continuity of settlement during this period.

In view of the extraordinary record of the previous and subsequent periods in this area, the archaeological record dating from the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium is so scarce and/or

unknown, up to the present, that the Leiro helmet/bowl would be a veritable “exception”, owing to its unique presence as well as to its character as a luxury object.

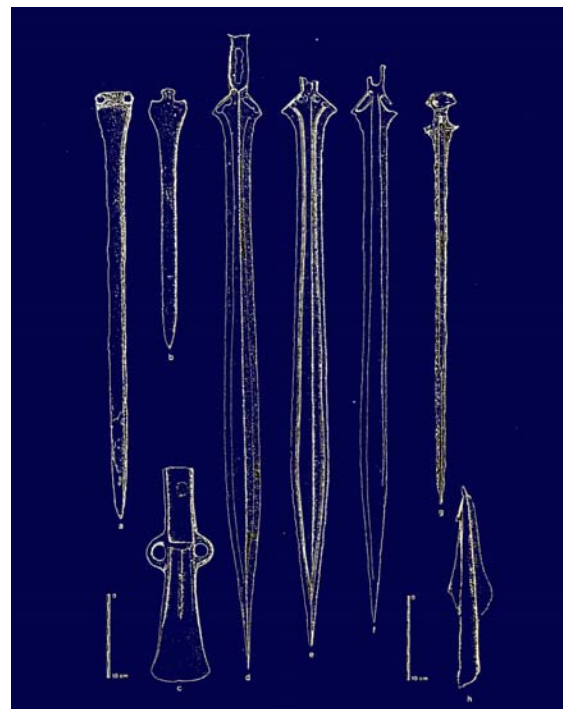


### 4.3. The Late Bronze Age.

In terms of metalwork, the Late Bronze Age on the Northwest Iberian peninsula is characterised by a major change in the scale of production, with an increase in the appearance of household objects. Most of these are produced locally, imitating foreign styles, especially in the Atlantic area. We may highlight the appearance of new types such as the *flange-hilted swords*, hollow-bladed spearheads and axes, ranging from the palstave type without rings to the two-ringed type.

The most characteristic phenomenon at this time would be the hoards, which, again, in the area under examination, make a special appearance. The Ulla is the river of the Northwest Iberian peninsula which has produced the largest number of aquatic metal finds in its downstream section as well as at the mouth. The main artefacts that have been recovered are swords and spearheads dating from the Middle/Late Bronze Age to the transition period of the Late Bronze Age/ Iron Age; two rapiers from the transition period Middle Bronze Age/Late Bronze Age; three swords from the Late Bronze Age in addition to another one that was washed away; a spearhead and a sword of the *Monte Sa Idda* type from the transition period of the Late Bronze Age/ Iron Age that may be dated to around the year 800

b.C. (Peña Santos, 1985; Ruiz-Gálvez, 1995: 29, Meijide, 1988). More recently another tanged and riveted dagger was reported, also extracted from a stretch of the river in the proximity of the *Torres do Oeste* (Grela, 1995/96: 9-12). All of these finds were happened upon by chance, during the dredging operations carried out for the extraction of sand. These finds add to the evidence corroborating the close relations that existed between the Atlantic area and this zone towards the end of the Bronze Age. Ruiz-Gálvez (1995: 29) has suggested that there may have been river ports functioning in the downstream section of the Ulla river since the Bronze Age.



Although it is not possible to establish a direct connection between the river hoards of the Ulla river and the hoard of the Leiro helmet/bowl, we should make mention of another find in Galicia that links the two phenomena. We are referring to the *Hío hoard* (Cangas do Morrazo, Pontevedra, Spain), which was discovered in the crevice of a granite cliff overlooking the estuary of Vigo. Not only was it found in a similar location, but the hoard also consisted of an assorted panoply of objects datable to the Late Bronze Age. Among the artefacts are a sword resembling the flange-



hilted swords of the Ulla and several fragments of riveted bronze vessels (Obermaier, 1923: 30-32).



We can also mention two other interesting hoards of goldwork. The first was found at *Sequeade* (Barcelos, Portugal), which produced a chain of skeins made of gold wire inside a ceramic vessel with a cover (Comendador, 1999: 91).



It is related to the find of *Alto da Pedisqueira* (Chaves, Portugal) where a similar chain was unearthed, in this case, along with a bracelet imitating those found in the above-mentioned hoard of Villena (Alicante) (Comendador, 1999: 50).



Lastly, we must not overlook the hoard of *As Silgadas* (Caldas de Reis, Pontevedra), near Leiro, which consists of objects from different periods, however in recent years has been considered to belong to the Late Bronze Age (Comendador, 1999).



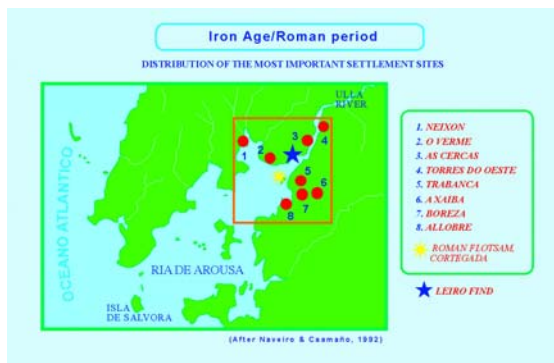
In our opinion, the Leiro find, interpreted as a hoard, has a coherent context within the archaeological record pertaining to the final centuries of the Late Bronze Age.

#### 4.4. From the Iron Age to Roman Times.

Standing out among the most important large fortified settlements in this area are the *Casa de Xil o As Cercas* (Isorna), which gets its name from the defence structures that are still standing and the castro de Neixón, both strategically located overlooking the mouth of the estuary and the outlet of the Ulla river. However, we must also point out that up to now there is no evidence of burial grounds belonging to the *castrexa* (*hillfort*) culture which may be assigned to the Iron Age in Galicia, which means that the hypothesis that Leiro was a burial ground cannot be authenticated in the archaeological record.

It would be impossible here to expand upon the archaeological context of the later

periods of the area in question, a subject that has been widely discussed by Naveiro and Caamaño (1992). These authors have highlighted the importance of the Ulla waterway during Roman times, particularly during the early decades of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. They assume that there were several embarkation points and river ports; this idea was also corroborated by the find of a sunken Roman ship at *Punta Fradiño*, on the Island of Cortegada.



## 5. Final Considerations

Studies have characterised Leiro as an isolated phenomenon in the archaeological record of the Northwest, with an outward-looking perspective. An attempt has been made to adjust its chronology and function in relation to other comparable finds from other cultures, either Atlantic, central European or Mediterranean. The result of this approach to date has been a vague chronological assignation ranging from the Iron Age to the Middle Bronze Age passing through the transition to the Late Bronze Age. As regards to whether its function was that of a helmet or a bowl, there are advocates of both hypotheses, or of neither, yet the opinions are dictated, in any case, by what was decided on as the purpose of its European counterparts.

In our opinion, after an analysis of the archaeological context which this find belongs to, the following observations can be made:

- The outlet of the Ulla river and the mouth of the estuary, the ría de Arousa present a continuous archaeological record, at least from the Megalithic Neolithic Age with

evidence that is abundant as well as exceptional.

- There are convincing reasons to believe that, among other factors, the strategic value gave the local populations a special interest in exerting their right to control the area. At the mouth of the Ulla river, the archaeological record indicates that a complex social structure arose starting from the Copper Age, which is expressed in its art.

- This record verifies a special dynamic action in terms of evidence of foreign contact. Thus, Leiro is an exceptional find, but included within a region where the archaeological record is also exceptional, so it is not an “lonely” find in terms of this exceptional character.

With regard to its use, we must first distinguish between the *use* of the object and the *significance of the hoard*. We believe that neither its use nor its significance are necessarily dictated by its foreign counterparts. First of all because the object represents the end of its life cycle, and at that time may have already lost its original use. Secondly, because the fact that it was discovered inside a coarse vessel indicates that its use had been intentionally prevented.

We believe that the most coherent archaeological context for the dating of Leiro would correspond to the final centuries of the Late Bronze Age. Leiro would be significant within a social context of control by certain populations over the access to the territories and resources as well as to circulation. This aspect has been attributed to the Villena hoard, whose interpretation has given rise to controversy. Ruiz-Galvez (1998) believes that it is the personal property of a local ruler, while Armbruster and Perea (1994: 84) consider it to be a piece of material that was rejected for exportation in connection with the international circuit of raw materials that developed during the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. between the Atlantic rim and the central Mediterranean.

Whether it was an introductory gift, an occultation or any of the many other possible explanations, Leiro is engraved upon the discourse of power echoed by the mouth of the Ulla river since prehistoric times.

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