

Is it really relevant the ethnicity of our historical subjects?

¿Es relevante la etnicidad de nuestros sujetos históricos?

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SUMMARY

The debate on the implications of two conflicting ways of interpreting the early medieval funerary records is raising a great dust in this days. The archaeological analysis of a couple of recently excavated sites in the center of the Iberian Peninsula (in which the cemetery has been documented at the same time that the habitat) reveals some of the contradictions in the ethnic assumption. The distinguishing features of specific funeral deposits in both cases correspond to a material record that (in the settlement) could only be defined as the characteristic of village communities. In light of these data is not very convincing the causal link proposed by some authors between the barbarian immigration phenomenon and the emergence of the first early medieval villages.

The increasing verbal aggressiveness shown by the participants of the ongoing debate on the presence of ethnic features in the archaeological record may have gone too far, in my opinion. Overall when, and as professor Quirós has presented in the first pages of this issue, there are more things that link us than things that keep us separated. Therefore we believe it is necessary to intervene, to ask for a pause to think and tackle the topic with calm, although not without still being firm on what is really important.

Amongst witty arguments and other provocations, we risk moving from a theatrical parody of the frontier conflict presented some

RESUMEN

El debate sobre las implicaciones de dos opuestas formas de interpretación de los más antiguos registros funerarios altomedievales está levantando una gran polvareda en fechas recientes. El análisis arqueológico de un par de yacimientos de reciente excavación en el centro de la península Ibérica en los que la necrópolis ha sido documentada al mismo tiempo que el hábitat revela algunas de las contradicciones presentes en los postulados etnicistas. Los específicos rasgos diferenciales de los depósitos funerarios corresponden en ambos casos a un registro material que en los asentamientos sólo podría definirse como el característico de sendas comunidades aldeanas. A la luz de estos datos parece poco convincente la relación de causalidad propuesta por algunos autores entre el fenómeno inmigratorio bárbaro y la emergencia de las primeras aldeas altomedievales.

years ago by Sahlins (2005) to a re-edition of a minor version (caricature) of the argument held between this author and Obeyesekere (SAHLINS 1988, OBEYESEKERE 1992, SAHLINS 1995). This is no place to assess who or what was politically correct, neither who or which proposals can be socially or scientifically more or less responsible¹.

What in certain cases could have begun as a conflict originated in its specific national scholarly environment, and in others it emerged as an urgent response of social responsibility towards the social and political turn of events, should not have ever come so far as to pollute a scientific (and social) debate about the meaning

¹ These pages were written soon after the Oslo terrorist attacks. A draft was previously presented at the Leeds 2011 International Medieval Conference.

and transcendence of ethnicity in Early Medieval archaeology. And even less when the formidable recent development in this branch of knowledge is providing the possibility of bringing both many traditionally neglected questions and many new ones to a rich and suggestive critical analysis. Thus, the 'internationalisation' of the course of the debate should correct the legacy of the claims held by the alleged historiographical positions (conceptual or theoretical) of the litigants based on their origin or school. The process of factional affiliation of the contestants to either a post-processual theoretical horizon or to a positivist position would be part of such strategies for automatic disqualification, while leaving the architecture of argument offered by individuals (peers and colleagues) with their names and surnames aside.

Our relative position away from that debate (especially regarding the different approaches to the ways it has been proposed) should not be understood as lack of interest, but rather as a result of the conviction that their bases should be established on productive terms, far from any manichaeism; terms on which the small differences regain their importance, and that the way in which the analysis and criticism of the archaeological information is carried out should not be taken *a priori* as an ethic or political alternative. Therefore, we do not believe that in a socio-temporal context such as the fragmentation of the imperial political system in the fifth century AD a simple dichotomy between Roman and barbarian cultural forms (including all the diverse and antagonic elements each cultural form contains) can be established. It is still extremely significant that an imperial law enacted in 416 banned wearing long hair or clothes made of fur (both considered barbaric customs) not only inside the city but in nearby districts² (ARCE 2007: 260-1). For a late-imperial city-dweller could be difficult to discriminate between the appearance of a barbarian and a Roman *rusticus*. Being aware of such phenomena, it is at least worrisome that some authors may consider 'something brought from outside'

(BROGIOLO, CHAVARRIA 2010: 47) some of the most remarkable features and breakthrough of this period, as those referring to the new modes of agricultural use, the location of settlements, and even the development of the integrated system of villages, their specific architectural features or internal organization. Some of these will occupy our attention in this paper:

Thus, we are looking again at some material evidence from territories of inland Spain dating to the troubled fifth and sixth centuries. It is possible that these materials help us to understand a bit better what may have been the social, economic and political meaning of those objects deposited in burials.

All seems to indicate that most of the rural population, the labourers of great late Roman estates, left hardly any remains about their beliefs or their eschatological positions. The disproportion between the knowledge we have on late Roman urban burial practice and the burial practices of the rural environment in the same period leads us to wonder whether if either people from the countryside were buried in peri-urban necropoleis or if burial rites took place around their settlements without leaving any archaeologically visible remains. A third alternative would be to assume that the corpses of those socially-excluded from the community did not receive any specific funerary ritual.

This overview is significantly changed in the first fourth of the fifth century when sociopolitical instability in these territories becomes evident. This crisis was, in the first place, the result of military conflicts between the Spanish relatives of the legitimate emperor (Honorius) and the legions of the usurper Constantine III, and secondly, the result of the entry of Sueves, Vandals and Alans in the Peninsula. I do not think that the recruitment of *rustici* by the members of the most important Spanish estate-owner families and their later defeat has been taken into account by scholars, as far as it

² Arce 2007: 260-1. This author concludes that "Undoubtedly, many of the signs of distinction in dress (brooches, belt buckles) were equally used by Romans and barbarian people" (Id.: 263).

concerns the impact this had on the society of the Peninsula. The presence of barbarian military groups during a long period of time before their relationship with the local political structure was normalized (after the collapse of the imperial administrative structure and the intervention of Visigothic armies in Spain for almost a century, either commanded by Rome or by their own initiative) certainly contributed to forge a new landscape in all conceivable aspects of life.

The remains of funerary constructions built close to the most representative areas of the great late Roman *villae* are more frequent from the beginning of the fifth century onwards. In the region of Madrid, three sites with such characteristics have been found in the recent years (Arroyomolinos (VIGIL-ESCALERA 2009a), Torrejón de Velasco ³, Villaviciosa de Odón (VEGA, 2005). For some unknown reason, some important figures of the community (high-rank individuals which may have been the *possessores* of these estates) invested large amounts of money in these mausolea, and decide to bury themselves there, away from the city ⁴. While some use expensive lead sarcophagi, publicly displaying their Christian beliefs (El Pelicano), others chose to bury with all the items linked to their social and administrative or military rank (Torrejón de Velasco): weapons (long sword, dagger, spear), gold belt buckles, bronze, silver, and glass wares and ceramics.

A new type of funerary display is archaeologically visible immediately afterwards ⁵, although this time led by individuals of a much lower social rank. These are the post-Imperial necropoleis (previously known as “Duero necropoleis” (Fuentes 1989), in which several types of individuals were buried: these range from those with the right to bear weapons to those that are simply buried with their personal belongings. The use of pottery and glass wares in these funerary deposits (certainly linked to a

funerary banquet) is one of their most common characteristics. The post-Imperial regional productions of late Samian wares (TSHT) play in these necropoleis and in this period a key role, together with other artifacts of undeniable technical complexity (glass, metals ⁶).

For almost half a century (410/420 up to 460/470, this type of cemeteries became the norm in our archaeological register. Hardly any other funerary ritual is known in the Peninsula. These necropoleis are linked both to small towns (such as Simancas (RIVERA 1940), hill forts (Saldaña (ABÁSULO *et al.* 1984), Pontón de la Oliva (VIGIL-ESCALERA *e.p.2*), big and small *villae* (La Olmeda (ABÁSULO *et al.* 1997), Pelicano (VIGIL-ESCALERA 2009a), and small rural settlements (El Soto). These necropoleis range from those with hundreds of burials to those with hardly a dozen inhumations. The point up to which these necropoleis are a reflection of the composition of their communities is difficult to assess. Short-lived cemeteries (limited to the two first thirds of the fifth century) present these type of deposits in most of their burials (66-95%). These percentages significantly coincide with those sites in which their life-span are thought to go beyond the date suggested by the cemeteries.

Between the end of the fifth and the end of the sixth century the vast majority of the territory previously occupied by the post-imperial necropoleis became the territory of the so-called “Visigothic necropoleis”. However, what may seem confusing if seen from high above is greatly clearer when focusing closer to the terrain (“searching for truffles” as Hodges would say (HODGES 1989). The degree of location coincidence is minimal. Furthermore, in most cases the old post-Imperial necropoleis are abandoned, and the ‘Visigothic type’ ones appear in a new near location. The cases in which both necropoleis coincide (or rather,

³ Still unpublished. We thank Raúl Flores for allowing us to see in situ the context and characteristics of the finds.

⁴ These are the last investments made by late imperial rural aristocrats in Madrid.

⁵ This seems to indicate that it was triggered by the previous action.

⁶ Nothing can be said about those materials which have left no archaeological remains, such as clothing, which must have had in these social contexts a very important significance (Brumfiel 1996).

where the former is still in use) are very few, and it is worth considering these details.

The archaeological discontinuity visible in the last third of the fifth century does not only apply to necropoleis. A series of new hill forts (at least most of the ones which are known, like Navasangil, El Castellón or Muelas del Pan) show destruction contexts dated to this period. In some cases the site would be later reoccupied (Navasangil), but in others there is no continuity (El Castellón), while it seems to lack evidence of such an impact on the remaining (Pontón de la Oliva, possibly Bernardos (GONZALO 2006). It seems, anyway, that all these were the places where the fate of political dominion over the interior of the Peninsula would be decided; local powers and Visigothic military forces were the most probable protagonists.

TWO CASE STUDIES

The material provided from some sites recently excavated in great extension provide us with new hints which are worth following if we intend to critically compare some conventional interpretations of these necropoleis, and can generally be applied to the post-Imperial period. Gózquez and El Pelicano, 28km apart, are two early Medieval villages in the south of the province of Madrid, the histories of which run in parallel between the sixth and eighth centuries. This region is part of the old rural territory north of the city of Toledo, which was turned into the capital of the Visigothic Kingdom. Archaeological research carried out in the aforementioned sites has shown the relationship between the settlements and their respective funerary areas. This opens up the possibility to solve some of the problems created by archaeological record whose biggest problem has always been its bias and partiality. It is extremely important to identify the differences between both sites, but it is also important what they have in common, because out of these common elements derive

the weight that the ethno-cultural component will receive from our interpretations of the historical development of this territory in the Visigothic period.

The village of Gózquez was built *ex novo*, probably during the second quarter of the sixth century, without any known link to a previous settlement. Its toponym, according to some authors, could be linked to the Latin root Gothicus, -i, in which case, it would be alluding to a foreign demographic situation inside a local context. Furthermore, the necropoleis with 'Visigothic' material are rather frequent in the region (as in Tinto Juan de la Cruz, for instance (OÑATE et al. 2007), which is only 9 km from Gózquez⁷).

One of the most distinctive characteristics of the settlement is its rigid urban planning, established from the beginning and its remarkable stability until the site's abandonment. The village is formed by a group of between six and ten domestic units, distributed in two neighbourhoods, and the area in between is where the necropolis is located. Each domestic unit had a rectangular plot, roughly 2650 m² in extension, and separated from its neighbouring plots by paths, fences and ploughed fields of the same shape and size, in which permanent structures were never built (Vigil-Escalera 2010). Each plot contained at least one main building and a cluster of satellite structures which include sunken-featured huts, silos, wells and other minor spaces of doubtful function.

The cemetery, with over 350 tombs, is located in an area suggesting the existence of a rectangular enclosure. The degree of burial reuse is remarkable, although moderate (1.5 individuals per tomb on average). Some tombs have one or two lateral cavities or niches, in which the deceased is/are located. Inside the cemetery, the burials are organised in streets or rows, following the main North-South axis. The oldest recognisable materials are some bow-brooches (CONTRERAS 2006; CONTRERAS,

7 Some of the necropoleis with Gothic-type materials in this region are (amongst others) Cubas-Griñón, Acedinos (Getafe), Carabanchel (Madrid), Cabeza Gorda (Carabaña) or Cacara de las Ranas (Aranjuez).

FERNÁNDEZ UGALDE 2007). The newest are belt buckles with a bronze-casted plaque which are usually dated to the first half of the seventh century. However, some of the contexts of the settlement have produced material dated with certainty to the end of the seventh and the first half of the eighth (belt buckles with lily-form plaques and pottery dated to that period). Radiocarbon dating of samples from contexts which had been *a priori* dated to both ends of the settlement occupation confirm (or rather, do not contradict) the proposed chronology. Considering the wide chronological range in which the cemetery was in use, the global percentage of furnished burials (35%) correspond to a higher proportion during its first century (AD 525/550-650), because we know that during the following century (AD 650-750), burials lacked almost any recognisable grave-goods.

The village of El Pelicano has its origins in an older Roman settlement, without a noticeable topographic discontinuity. During the first half of the fifth century the first mutations become evident. At the beginning of this century, an individual of considerable importance (maybe the owner of the estate) decided to get buried in a lead sarcophagus inside a squared plant mausoleum, some 50m towards the East of the main structures of the villa. Soon afterwards another sarcophagus was placed inside, this time for a child, which had clear Christian imagery: a chi-rho golden pendant and two open-end crosses on the short sides of the lead box.

This Roman concrete building, with its three-column porticoed façade and polychrome wall paintings, seems to be built immediately before the abandonment of residential and productive structures by the landowning elite. Throughout the following centuries and up to the abandonment of the village, the cemetery developed around this remarkable monument. Meanwhile, after the second quarter of the fifth century, the rooms of the villa were used as dwelling areas by the families of the *rustici*, as evidenced

by the presence of hearths and the accumulation of domestic residues in them⁸. Next to the late Roman walls of buildings sunken huts were built. This modest community buried their dead next to the mausoleum, although keeping a distance from it, in tombs of variable orientation. These tombs are characterised by the presence of fine table wares (TSHT Samian wares and painted wares), common pottery, oil lamps, and glass vases together with personal belongings and ornaments (including spiked-soled boots). The main characteristics of these burials match those of the previously-called "Duero necropoleis", now more accurately described as post-Imperial." (VIGIL-ESCALERA i.p.). The deposition of grave goods becomes increasingly rare from the last third of the fifth century on, when only sporadically oval belt buckles with simple or shield-base pins are to be found, always following traditional late Roman patterns.

Furthermore, from then on the previously unorganised settlement shifted to an area immediately to the East of the cemetery, where it became a compact cluster of small houses with stone foundations built around courtyards, with sunken huts, silos and wells. From the second third of the sixth century, however, the village began to spread again, with domestic units separated by several plots of arable land. In this format, the village extended for over a kilometre and a half on the north bank of a river which acted as the village's main axis. The settlement was abandoned in the mid-eighth century. During the last occupation period the burials have not produced any recognisable grave good.

However, as we have seen previously in Gózquez, several metallic finds have been recovered from the abandonment contexts of dwelling or auxiliary structures. These include two lily-form belt buckles (one in bronze and another in iron with bronze plaques and silver decoration) and a belt end decorated with knots and engraved dots. The archaeological

8 The roman-style management system of household waste was probably already out of use.

contexts from El Pelicano have some elements or characteristics which are often referred to as foreign: rectangular sunken huts (*Grübenhäuser*) and grey polished wares (with or without stamped decoration)⁹. And yet, the funerary behavior of the community is outstandingly different from that from Gózquez. In the period whilst the tombs from Gózquez present material usually labeled as 'Visigothic', at El Pelicano all the grave goods consist of belt buckles, earrings and necklaces of Roman tradition.

As a consequence of what we know nowadays about the social structure of both communities (regarding the management of its economic production, its crops and livestock, the domestic sphere of grain storage, the degree of integration of both communities in a regional network of basic exchange, etc) nothing really indicates that a village community like Gózquez, with Visigothic material in the necropolis, could be distinguished from another like El Pelicano, which appear to be identified as exclusively Roman. Currently it is impossible to tell if the specific organisation of either village is a result of the different origin of their inhabitants or if it derives from their specific social organisations.

CONCLUSIONS

We now reach the predictable conclusion: is ethnic identity really important when it comes to analyse the first centuries of medieval history? And above all, is the impact of the supposed arrival of barbarian people relevant for the emergence of village communities in this territory? Within half a century (or maybe less) the working population of *villae* (now peasants) ended up organised in a true village system, and this is a really consistent structural change; an absolute transformation as far as the management of the agrarian production by domestic units, the storage systems of the families which form these communities, their increasing territorialisation and the organisation of their cemeteries are concerned.

The possibility of two massive processes of depopulation can be securely discarded as an explanation for the emergence of two different burial practices (post-Imperial and Visigothic). Understanding them as the result of the arrival and settlement of large numbers of incoming populations is neither an option. No matter how much we try to create a precise territorial limit for the distribution and location of the aforementioned burial practices, it is difficult to believe that the regions created in this way may indicate the settlement of specific populations. Our archaeological categories are nothing but the reflection of direct or indirect social, political, military and economic influences of an elite whose social reproduction played a key role in the processes of identity distinction.

This interpretation does not exclude the settlement of immigrant communities in given territories, taking over abandoned lands or estates, but it makes the importance of specific burial practices and the use of grave goods as indicators of ethnic adscription relative, emphasising the political environment (patronage) in which these objects vertically circulated. The substitution of a broad range of provincial, late Roman material indicators in the necropoleis by a new one in which the indicators point toward the exotic fashion should be understood as a change of the cultural and political reference of the local elites. We believe that the public expression of this link to the new ruling power by a part of the members of some communities can also be linked to the preservation of social order within these populations.

Those early medieval archaeological finds recently discovered from the inner provinces of Hispania indicate an extraordinary disruption in the social, economic, political and ideological forms of landscape inherited from the Roman Empire. In our opinion, the importance of identifying through archaeology the different identities that are formed in this period would only be relevant if out of these identifications any impact on the emergence of village communities (the hard core for future research) could be inferred.

⁹ The foreign character of certain types of wares is a hypothesis recently proposed by some Spanish authors (Ariño, Dahi 2008).

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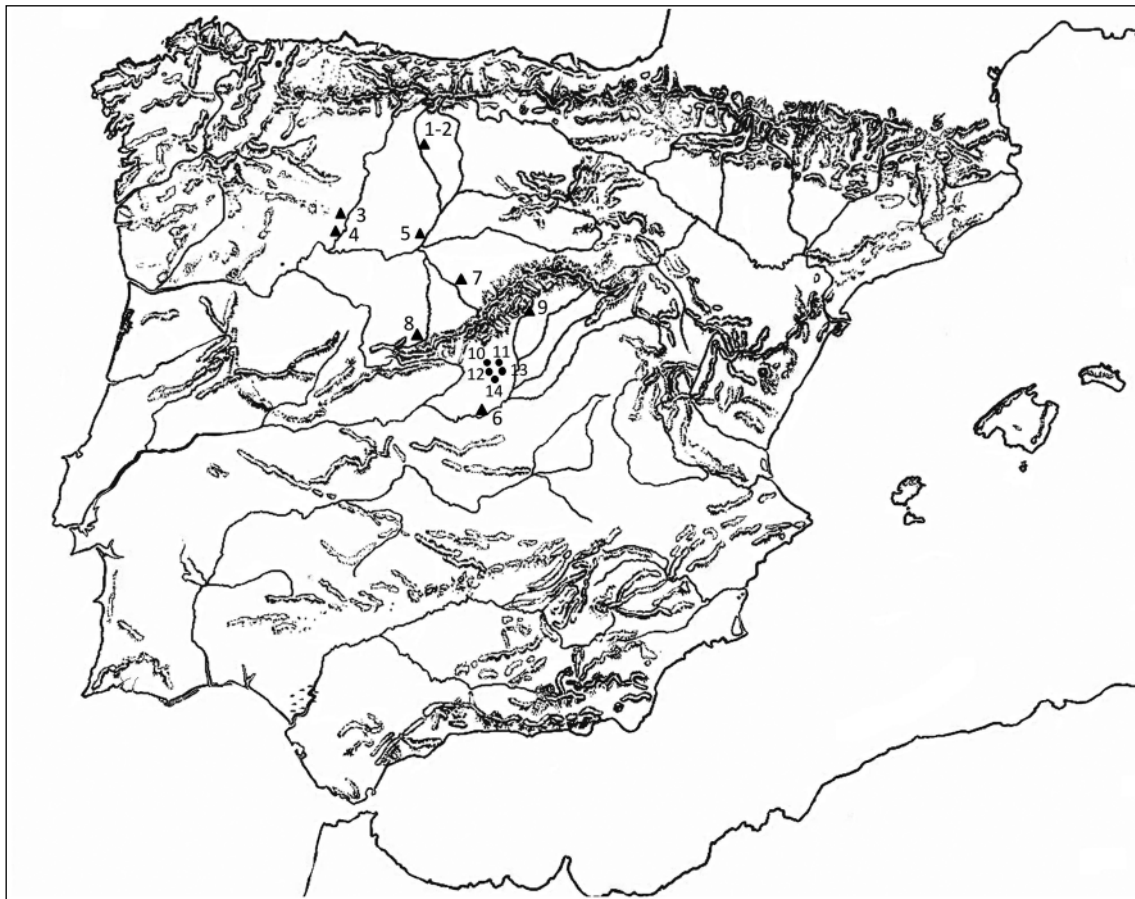


Figure 1. Map locating the sites mentioned in the text. 1-2 La Olmeda-Saldaña; 3 El Castellón (Sta Eulalia Tábara); 4 Cristo S. Esteban (Muelas del Pan); 5 Simancas; 6 Toledo; 7 Bernardos; 8 Navasangil; 9 Dehesa de la Oliva; 10 Villaviciosa de Odón; 11 El Soto; 12 El Pelicano; 13 Gózquez; 14 Torrejón de Velasco.

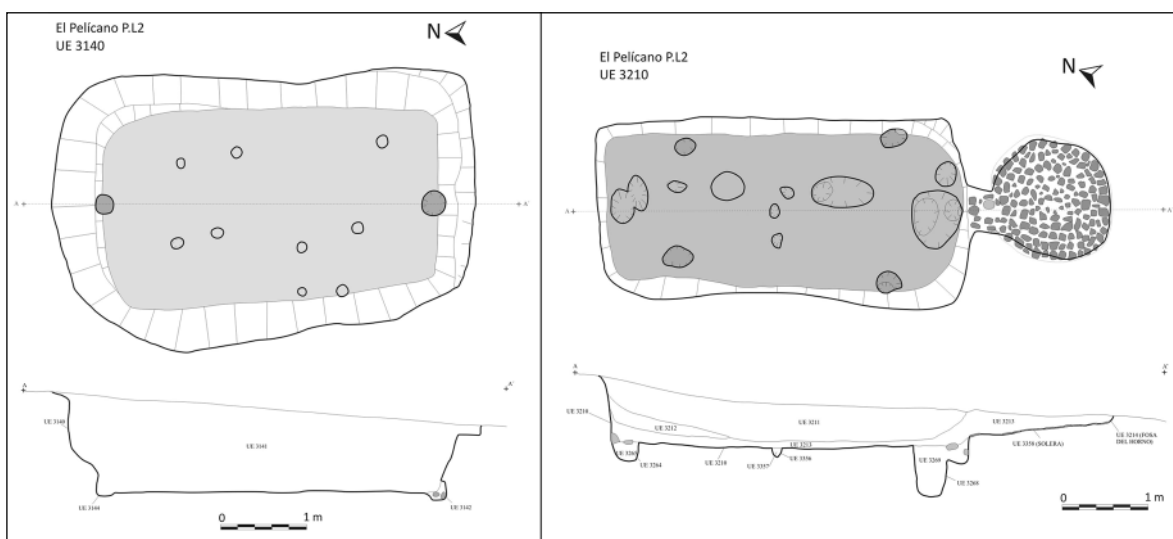


Figure 3. Sunken huts (Grübenhäuser) in El Pelicano.

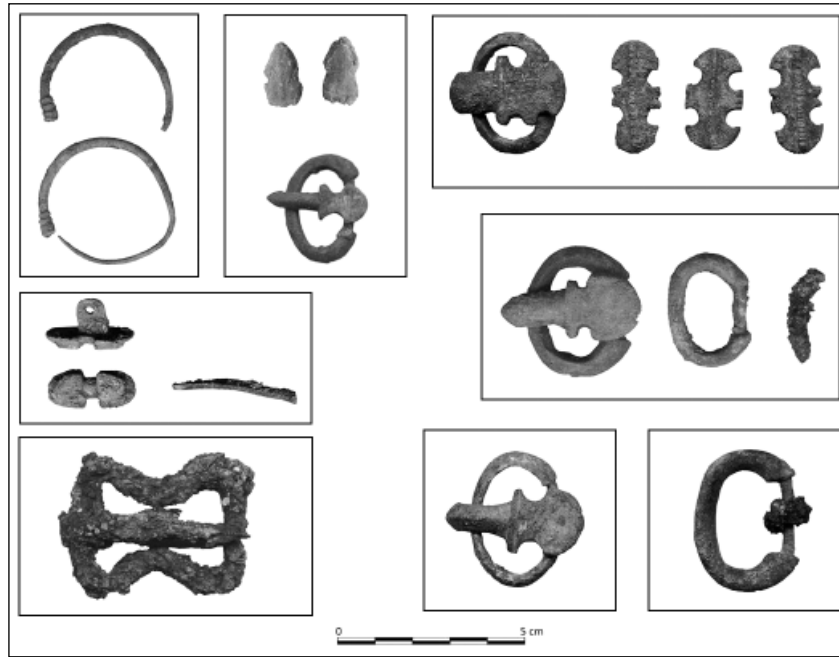


Figure 4. Metallic findings from the necropolis at Jardín-El Pelicano.



Figura 5. Personal objects from domestic contexts at El Pelicano.