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The search for the Roman hinterland of Évora: thirty years on

Steven Willis

I have very positive recollections of participation in the Évora project. My contribution was through the 1987 season, which proved to be a highly instructive and memorable four weeks. My designated task was to gather together the evidence for the Roman era across the survey area. This followed the realization through the initial (previous) season that activity of that date was likely to have been extensive (Burgess *et al.* 1986, 11, fig. 25). It was July into August: the days were bright, every project day was eventful, the activities varied and there was a tremendous sense through the team of 'discovery' and that we were contributing to collective aims. Just about everyone who participated appeared to be enriched by the project. Outcomes included pioneering mapping and documentation; perhaps to some extent this enhanced existing records but clearly too, new discoveries and important records were made, of enduring value, as the interim reports enshrine (Burgess *et al.*, 1986; Burgess, 1990).

The key aspect of the project was the people comprising the team. Certainly that year there was a remarkable combination, constituting a strong and diverse group. Looking back the kindness and good will, the generosity and camaraderie, were striking. The greatest asset of the project was this collective, numbering over thirty with a great variety of backgrounds, ages, specialisms and experiences. Personalities meshed and worked well in combination, far more than is often the case on such intense fieldwork excursions. There were certainly challenges and surprises, of the type that often present themselves to large scale projects, magnified of course since most of us were 'abroad'.

A project like this, with multiple goals, needed several directors, and shaping research priorities and questions was a management-team undertaking (Burgess, 1990, Note 1). The day to day running of the project and its overall direction, however, was overseen by Colin Burgess (hereafter CB). Whilst I came to the project with no depth of prehistoric background, CB's renown was something I was well aware of. The project was ambitious in scale (with a planned survey area of 250 sq km), in its conception, vision, and research directions. Organizing and managing the daily development of the programme and the team was no simple task, especially with so many specialists, students to train and objectives to meet. CB retained composure and considerable humour, a genial gravitas in fact, through the characterful days, ensuring inclusivity and a firm sense of purpose as he led and overcame the logistical challenges. I recall few 'days off' but they were put to good educational use as we visited regional sites, which again he led. It is striking to think he had already, by this time, achieved so much and was in the glow of an accomplished career and still not yet 50. As a party developed on one of the evenings of the final weekend, a plan was afoot amongst senior members of the project, to deliver a fully clothed CB to the swimming pool (!); doubtless he would have taken it with a smile but CB was surely too distinguished a figure for such a fate and I am pleased to report it never happened, while some others did end up in the pool.

Dave Coombs was a co-director equally kind and generous and from whom I learned. Gently spoken and of modest demeanour (unusual qualities perhaps for an academic) he

was held in deep regard by his Manchester students. I wrote in my diary on the final day of the 1987 project that he had done most to ensure everyone was considered and happy through those weeks based at the Casa Monte das Flores. For me companionable highlights included conversations with Frances Lynch, Becky Payne's perspectives (and an olive eating competition one dinner when she ate 60 to beat my 56), Alex and Jane Gibson's friendship and Gordon Moir's sheer verve. Margaret Maddison and Paul Sellers were admirable in commitment; Clay Mather was full of ideas; Isabel Lisboa was a guide to what being a PhD student would be like, often quoting Prof. Colin Renfrew (her supervisor) to me. Jorge Oliveira and especially Virgílio Correia (VC) were wonderfully helpful and founts of knowledge.

Maybe the days were not quite so coherent or the agenda so honed as I seem to recall but even if that was the case we were always busy. There was a plan, purpose and pursuit of data: it was a deep learning experience. There needed to be considered organization with so many contingents abroad in the countryside each day (at a time years before mobile phones, 'maps via apps' and GPS), with basic maps, relatively remote circumstances, with, as Frances Lynch mentions in her contribution, tracks rather than roads, and where seeing a hoopoe was more likely than encountering another human being. The need for transport scheduling that never failed was vital: there were only a finite number of project vehicles. I shudder to think what a risk assessment of such an undertaking would look like these days.

The landscape was in its parched dazzling state of high summer, very open, with few constructed boundaries and, where boundaries, few gates. The grain harvest was already in before the survey began, while grazing was limited to wandering herds of grey pigs, while donkey carts were far from unusual on the proper roads. Cork oak and olive trees punctuated views in this countryside and stages of cork harvest were plain to see. Lizards, hornets, snakes and scorpions were encountered in that order of frequency.

Existing records of the archaeology of the region were, seemingly, rudimentary but with some of the more prominent monuments fairly well-known, though with many others yet to be documented or recognized for what they were. Jorge and VC always seemed to know something about the more prominent enclosures, etc. Probably archives and listings with at least minimal details were held but if so no one mentioned them and perhaps I am making an assumption in suggesting this, for there had been very little investigative work. Accordingly Jorge and VC had limits to the depth of knowledge they could call upon. It would be years before detail and focus was in any way available; the 1980s were still a time of initial documenting, as the project directors stated in justifying the whole endeavour in the first place. The Évora region might then have seemed critically in need of more systematic survey and recording but a comparison with the state of the art in Britain at the time is salutary: the explosion of archaeological data and site discovery that was heralded after 1990 in the UK was some years off and records were still mainly on index cards and in hanging files and hardly systematic (as I was to shortly find when undertaking my PhD), and not all local authorities had yet appointed County Archaeologists and Sites and Monuments Officers. Hence site records in Britain were themselves quite basic by present standards.

My involvement followed from an enquiry from CB who had approached Martin Millett (then a near neighbour at Durham University) earlier that year. CB wondered if there was a person with knowledge of the Roman era who might contribute specialist

knowledge and record the Roman material and sites that had been shown to be present in the 1986 season. Martin asked me if I would be interested in this opportunity as I was due in the autumn to embark on a research degree in matters Roman, having completed a taught MA in Roman Archaeology at Durham in 1986. I had, by that time, experience of ten fieldwork projects, mainly Roman in emphasis, from Sussex to Scotland but had undertaken no project work abroad so my knowledge of fieldwork in southern Europe was classroom based. Nonetheless, following a brief discussion with Colin I was recruited. I knew something of the nature and 'archaeological culture' of fieldwork projects in Iberia through learning of Martin's work on the concurrent Ager Tarraconensis survey (cf. Carrete *et al.*, 1995) and was familiar with the work of his friend and colleague Simon Keay on Roman Spain and Iberian amphorae. Yet nothing quite prepared me for the Alentejo that summer. Martin advised me to take lots of camera film, to "snap everything", and anticipate large ceramic assemblages, perhaps of a scale he and Simon were encountering in the Tarragona area where the pottery was so prolific that the only feasible means of washing it was to use a hose. In the event I should have taken even more film such was the richness of the evidence, the museum collections and the upstanding architectural heritage. Yet while the ceramic finds kept me busy enough the quantities of recovered material were nowhere near as large as potentially anticipated (Willis, 1990), in part for the reasons I mention below.

The survey covered a variety of tasks. Possible Roman roads and bridges were to be assessed, together with worked stone, some examples of which sat around modern farmhouses, including items of considerable significance, though nonetheless typically uncontexted 'singletons' (cf. Burgess *et al.*, 1986, 11). The principal focus, however, was the surface-collected pottery groups which needed identification. In addition, partially surviving enclosures, either in elevated topography or placed within the rolling landscape environs, called for dating. The work we undertook was systematic and, I believe, as thorough as it could be in the circumstances. I was pleased to write a report on the findings of that season through the subsequent winter. This in turn was included in the Preliminary Report on the work of 1986-8 compiled by CB and published in *NA* (Willis, 1990), being one of my first reports in print.

Rightly, two principal thrusts of the survey were (i) to identify and record chambered tombs and other megaliths, and (ii) locate and document other upstanding monuments (including enclosures). I have to admit to being slightly envious of the more obvious chambered tombs the project was recording for their identity was unequivocal, whilst some built structures and roads we were looking at were not exactly diagnostic of particular dates, let alone a firm Roman attribution (on the data to hand in 1987; and the putative Roman roads proved more than doubtful following dedicated survey by Welfare and Kear in 1988 (Burgess 1990, 43)). Perhaps Frances Lynch and others will point to some cases of possible collapsed tombs, or doubtful part survivals as equally challenging and uncertain, or the sample-excavated/surveyed enclosures enigmatically prehistoric or otherwise (cf. *ibid*, 38); even the press-stone site at Almendres excavated under the direction of Dave Coombs yielded Roman alongside medieval pottery and revealed an absence of stratification (cf. *ibid*, 44). Of course, these are not uncommonly encountered aspects of archaeology in southern Europe. Other sites such as Carapeteiro (783 764) had emphatic Roman remains (figure 1) and their status was not in doubt in 1987 (and underscored with subsequent discoveries (Willis, 1990, 54; Burgess, 1990, 44)). No site in 1987 other than Carapeteiro produced large quantities of roof tile, which might have otherwise been helpfully diagnostic. Tile might seem ostensibly

unpretentious material, common enough in parts of Iberia from the Roman period, yet it actually represents a considerable investment and expression of wealth when thatch and wooden shingles may have been a cheaper ready alternative. (The possibility of removal of Roman roof tile for reuse needs always to be borne in mind though in Roman and subsequent eras, given its utility as a building material).



Figure 1. A block of Roman flooring surfaced with crushed tile at Carapeteiro (783 764) photographed 29th July 1987. This, together with other structural material, had been removed by machine from the Roman site, for agricultural purposes, prior to the survey. This is site XXXVIII in Willis' site catalogue (Appendix). This large fragment was one of two of such size, together with smaller fragments. The mortar was off-white and the tile fragments over this visible surface were surprisingly smooth, evidently through wear. Along the edge of the fragment (right side of this photo) is a vestige of a wall skirting. The surface is scarred by recent mechanical bucket scraping. The fate of this site echoes a sub-theme noted elsewhere in reporting the survey, specifically the vulnerability of ancient remains in the district, during recent decades, in the face of modern priorities.

Establishing a reliable reference collection, particularly a pottery fabric series, was a first order priority (cf. Burgess, 1990, 44). In 1987 I was able to record 38 sites/locations attributable to the Roman era or which had produced associated material of Roman date, together with further possible sites with some Roman/potential Roman ceramics (Willis, 1990, see Appendix below), though it was not possible to visit all such sites myself.

The organization of the survey, as CB often repeated, was via 'walk-over', following the strategy adopted by Roger Mercer, (of Edinburgh University, a specialist in the same chronological eras as CB and first to be mentioned in acknowledgements after co-directors by CB in the 1990 report) for analogous pioneering survey in the uplands of Scotland where, equally, there was little existing record but the prospect of upstanding remains of some sort. This was entirely apt given the scale of the area to be surveyed

and the 'rapid assessment' approach, engendered in part by circumstances (cf. Burgess, 1990, 37). Hence walkers explored the landscape to map likely or possible monuments or, frankly, "something of possible interest". (Two different approaches were also trialled in 1987; cf. *ibid*, 37). When such sites were found surface material was collected and brought in for recording. This was mainly processed and recorded by me. These collections of finds were not though normally gathered in a systematic (e.g. gridded) manner; that could come with follow-up work. Nonetheless, the 'pick-ups' of surface items aimed to be representative of what was present. That said they were simply surface finds, and not from weathered ploughed fields, so were normally either 'stray' finds on ground surfaces that may not have been ploughed or even disturbed in many years, or were from clearance cairns, though some were from enclosure and other walling. On the whole, therefore, they tended to be selected ceramic items and not, in total, very weighty, as the searchers usually still had more surveying by foot to undertake during long hot days and the next site might equally have ceramics to gather. Where distinct surface scatters occurred there was attention to 'intensive pick-up'. Thus the emphasis of the survey was on basic locating of sites, with collection of some finds potentially useful for dating, and where subsequent work could be undertaken (though that was not feasible in most cases). Perhaps this favoured the recovery of the more conspicuous larger pieces: fragments of tile with features such as flanges and edges, *dolia* rims and body sherds with cord impressions, and amphora sherds, were the mainstay of what was gathered. Parts of the Alentejo in the Roman era will have been exploited for the regions' agricultural potential to feed mouths and palates of the urban and military consumers of the resource hungry empire, so sherds from the storage and transport vessels of workaday farms and perhaps some villas across the area might have been expected. The prominence of *dolia*, typologically similar to excavated and published examples from Roman Conimbriga, was a signal aspect in 1987, pointing to the agricultural development of this landscape during the Roman period. This was confirmed by later studies (cf. VC's contribution). The opportunity is taken here to publish some of the original illustrations of *dolia* and other types collected in the 1987 season, not previously published, figure 2.

Pottery samples gathered in this way were never large and so were recognized at the time as, at best, 'pointers of likely date and site character' rather than being the 'robust indicators' larger and/or more systematic samples might have constituted. Collection and processing of large ceramic samples was, however, not an aim of the survey and in fact my site visits suggested that few sites had such material, at least on the present soil surface. The impression was that in Roman times this countryside had mainly scattered farms populated by small extended family groups with perhaps some employed and slave workers, but essentially small households wherein use and turnover of domestic ceramics will have been modest. *Dolia* will probably have been set in the ground (were they there still but now buried?) and amphorae are otherwise known to be comparatively rare in the region, perhaps as barrels and skins were more normally used for transportation of commodities (Roman *stelae* in the shape of barrels being a feature of this district, as attested in regional museum collections).

During the 1989 season work by the late John Dore aimed to establish the general frequency of Roman ceramics in the survey area via systematic gridded sampling in and around landscapes in use in the Roman era. The results, together with his assessment of ceramics from scatters from likely Roman sites, underscored the pattern of relative

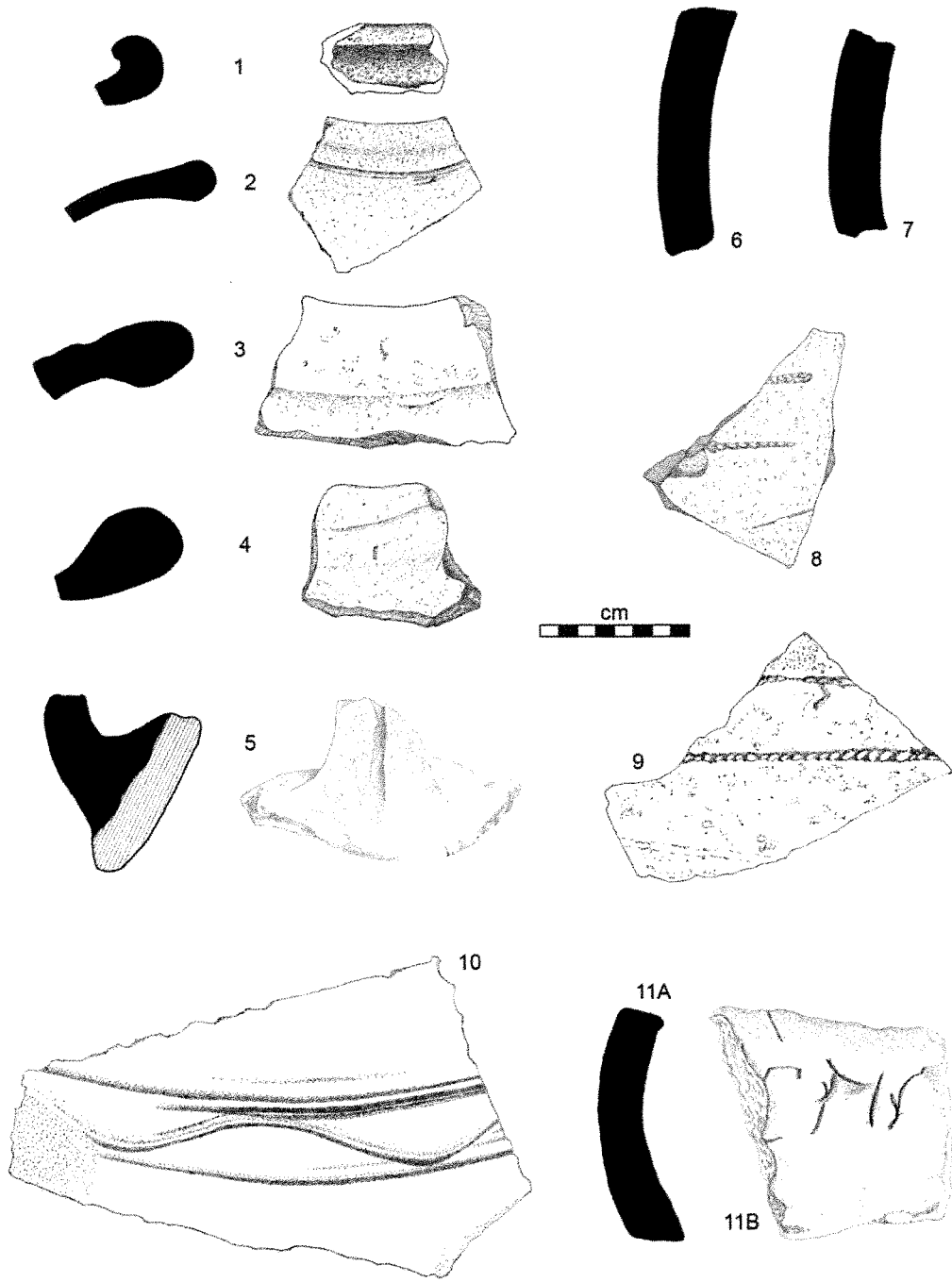


Figure 2. Roman period ceramics from the survey. 1-9. Roman *dolia*; 10. Large jar; 11. *Imbrex*. (1. rim, Willis Site I; 2. rim, Willis Site XXXIV; 3. rim, Site X; 4. rim, Site VIII; 5. handle spring point, Site XXVII; 6. wall fragment profile, Site XXXI; 7. wall fragment profile, Site I; 8. wall fragment showing cord impressions, Site XXXI; 9. wall fragment showing cord impressions, Site I; 10. wall fragment showing decoration, Site XXXVIII; 11. Fragment of *imbrex* with graffito, Site XXXII: A. profile, B. surface, reads]CRIS. Illustrations by project team members: 1-4 and 6-9 Becky Payne, then English Heritage; 5, 10 and 11 Amanda Wallace, then, undergraduate student University of Manchester).

infrequency of pottery and tile of this period highlighted in the 1987 season (Dore, 1990). John, a colleague whom many in the North-East of England will warmly remember, only published a short note on these findings, probably as the detailed data were not thought particularly significant compared to this conclusion regarding markedly low figures. However, by contrast Clay Mather's intensive fieldwalking in 1987 had revealed that sites with high densities of ceramics did exist (Willis, 1990, 54).

Roman towns such as that at Évora often had a halo of villas in their hinterlands. Whether that was so in this case was less clear thirty years ago than we expected it to be. One could not help wondering whether the trend of recent decades seeing a move of farmers to modern Évora due to the 'pull' of its amenities (Burgess, 1990, 48) echoed something similar in the Roman past: with the landed elite living mainly in the city. It will be gratifying to the team to learn, from reading VC's contribution to this volume, that the collections of *dolia* and other Roman ceramics that they made, and the assessment and reporting of these finds and sites (Willis, 1990) proved in the long run to be formative and significant. As VC states, they were the first insight and building blocks for the eventual establishment of an overview of the regional economy in the Roman era, now, recently, more firmly characterized.

Several related developments help put the survey and CB's vision in perspective. Knowing I was going on to study for a PhD on the transition from Iron Age to Roman in Britain CB sagely suggested to me that a topic on the development of Lusitania in the Roman era might be more rewarding, more innovative, and more necessary, as it was so under-examined by comparison with Britain. Whilst I did not change course I have often pondered on that prospect, for I have no doubt CB's advice was wise. I was invited by CB to participate in the 1988 and 1989 seasons but fieldwork commitments related to my PhD regrettably kept me from a return to the Évora project and John Dore undertook to record the Roman evidence in 1988 and 1989.

CB organized various events around the survey. In part this related to the courses he ran, but was motivated too by a drive to publicize the research and supplement project funds; clearly too, there was an appetite amongst his students and NAG members for the study days he convened. I recall one held on Sunday 22 November 1987 entitled 'Portugal and Southern Spain: Recent Archaeology and Current Wine' with two papers each by CB and VC, though doubtless most attendees will more vividly recall the blind wine tasting; the event was packed-out. On Saturday 22 June 1991 a further day school in aid of the project took place at Newcastle University. CB was generous in his introductory words before my talk and afterwards in passing me a vintage bottle as thanks. Consistent with his appreciation of fine wine it tasted truly remarkable. I was back in Portugal in 1996 to participate in the Ave Valley Survey north of Oporto (Millett *et al.*, 2000): my prior Évora experience helped enormously with that project.

The Évora survey had faced various challenges but generated firm results in a number of areas and highlighted the potential for discovery and deeper understanding. As so often time and scale, plus the lack of reliable reference material and other certainties were limitations. VC states in his contribution that it would be years before a clearer, more definitive, picture for the Roman era began to emerge, though the survey, thirty years ago, was a significant foundation.



Figure 3. Margaret Maddison and Paul Sellers at the dry-stone walled enclosure at (831 743) near Montinho, 20th July 1987. This is site VIII in Willis' site catalogue, producing fragments from dolia, including a rim (Fig. 2 no.4), together with a fragment from a tegula and other tile from surface collection.

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APPENDIX.

Gazetteer of Sites with Roman finds etc. recorded by Willis in 1987. The order of the sites follows the order in which information was forthcoming; √ means the site was visited by Willis. SCS: surface collected scatter. Grid references refer to figure 6 in Maddison, this volume.

Willis Site Code	Grid Reference	Area = Code of Survey	Type of Site	Finds documented/collected
I	824 696/7 NW of Almendres	82/6 82/7	Dry-walled enclosure(s) √	Brick; imbrices; tegulae?; <i>Dolia</i> ; Jugs/amphorae cf. Keay XXIII; slag
II	824 698 NW of Almendres	82/6	Dry-walled enclosure √	Dressed stones; brick
III	824 699 NW of Almendres	82/6	Dry-walled enclosure √	Slag
IV	827 698 NW of Almendres	82/7	Dry-walled enclosure √	Press stone; dressed stones; <i>Dolia</i>
V	843 691 SW of Guadalupe	84/8 & 83/11	SCS Structure? Burials? √	Imbrices; tegulae?; <i>Dolia</i> ; other pottery inc. fine ware
VI	869 772 S of Valeira	X5/5	SCS √	Tile; "pottery"
VII	867 768 S of Valeria	X5/3	Platform above field level √	Tegulae; "pottery"
VIII	831 743 N of Montinho	W3/2	Dry-walled enclosure √	Tile, including a fragment from a tegula; <i>Dolia</i>
IX	859 773 Vale de El-Rei de Cima	X4/1	Masonry structure; on rise; defended? military site? √	Masonry walls; Dressel 20 fabric; other coarse pottery
X	843 726 SE of Abaneja	84/1	SCS √	Massive Late Iron Age vessel; tile; <i>Dolia</i> ; other coarse pottery
XI	866 637/8 SE of Almo	S of Survey Area	Pottery finds	<i>Dolia</i>
XII	782 778 N of Ribeiro do Zambujal	Y1/2	SCS Enclosures and terraces √	Column tile; tegulae; <i>Dolia</i> ; Dressel 20; <i>Operculum</i> ; other coarse pottery
XIII	793 777 E of Amorerinha		SCS By farm √	Imbrices; <i>Dolia</i> ; other Roman pottery; Med. and Post-Med. pottery
XIV	805 802 S of Malhadas	Z2/7	"Large walled enclosure"	Imbrices; tegulae; <i>Dolia</i> ; other coarse pottery
XV	799 729 NNW of Pinheiro do Campo		"Artificial mound"	Imbrices; tegulae; other coarse pottery
XVI	794 729 NE of Corlicadas		Large enclosure	Imbrices; tegulae; other coarse pottery
XVII	793 731 NE of Cortiçadas		SCS	Imbrices; tegulae; other ceramics
XVIII	789 728 NE of Cortiçadas		SCS	Tile; Dressel 20
XIX	789 775 SW of Amorerinha		SCS	Imbrices; tegulae; <i>Dolia</i> ?
XX	796 735 E of Sousa		Enclosure	Imbrices; tegulae; other coarse pottery
XXI	803 732 SW of Valadas de Baixo		Enclosure See Site XXXIX	Brick; imbrices; other coarse pottery

XXII	801/2 737 W of Parreira		SCS From "platform"	Brick; imbrex; tegulae; <i>Dolia?</i> ; Dressel 20
XXIII	818 743 NW of Almo		SCS By anta √	Tile
XXIV	7983 8065 SW of Malhadas	Z2/10	Enclosure	Imbrex; coarse ware
XXV	8085 8088 E of Malhadas	Z2/11	SCS	Rim of large coarse ware vessel
XXVI	8108 7568 NE of Santa Sofia	W2/3	SCS	Tegulae; Dressel 20; other coarse wares; pounder stone
XXVII	8115 7580 Malhada	W2/1	SCS Area of anta	Brick poss. Roman; tegulae; <i>Dolium</i>
XXVIII	8006 7957 Cerro do Godelo	Z2/9	SCS	"Brick and tile"; Roman coarse pottery
XXIX	7783 7797 N of Zambujal	Y1/3	SCS By anta	Brick; imbrex
XXX	8003 7912 SE of Cerro do Godelo	Z2/3	Hilltop "enclosure/terrace" SCS	Iron Age and Roman pottery; multi-period activity?
XXXI	815 753 Courela do Patalim		SCS	Brick; imbrices; tegulae; <i>Dolia</i>
XXXII	832 747 S of Moita do Gato		SCS "c. 352 spot height" √	Imbrices; tegulae; <i>Dolia</i> ; flagon handle; other coarse pottery
XXXIII	825 744 NE of Almo		SCS near top of hill; "c. 347m spot height"	Brick; tile; <i>Dolia</i>
XXXI V	777-783/ 759-763 SW of Carapeteiro		SCS over wide area √	Roman brick; imbrices; tegulae; <i>Dolia</i> ; amphora probably Dressel 2-4
XXXV	807 7425 S of Patalim		Stone with phallic carving at the platform 'Rosa'	No Roman ceramics
XXXV I	758 762 W of Pegoras de Baixo		SCS	Imbrices; tegulae?; <i>Dolia</i> ?; amphora cf. Keay XXIII
XXXV II	7815 7640 W of Carapeteiro		SCS in ploughsoil √	Tile (abundant); <i>Dolia</i> ; coarse pottery
XXXV III	783 7635 Carapeteiro		SCS Enclosure/settlement √	Dressed stones; brick; floor tile; roof tile; <i>Dolia</i> ; amphora; Pompeian Red ware; S Spanish Colour Coated ware; coarse pottery
XXXI X	805 734 SW of Valadas de Baixo		SCS Part of Site XXI?	Coarse pottery