Chariot Racing in Hispania Tarraconensis: Urban Romanization and Provincial Identity

Raymond L. Capra

The Roman experience in the Iberian Peninsula began in the vicinity of Tarraco during the Second Punic Wars with the arrival of Gnaeus Cornelius Scipio Calvus in the Greek polis of Emporion, and the subsequent defeat of Hanno and capture of a Carthaginian camp north of the mouth of the Ebro River in the autumn of 218 BC. The nearby Iberian town Kese was also taken by Cornelius Scipio.1 Excavations of the past thirty years have identified a pre-Roman town within the area of the lower city of modern Tarragona, though the exact identification of this Iberian town with the Kese of Scipio's campaign is uncertain.2 A Roman praesidium was built upon the rocky hilltop of Tarraco during the time of Scipio Africanus' Iberian campaign in 217 and substantially enlarged at the beginning of the second century BC (fig. 11.1).3 Thereafter the Scipios were seen as the founders of the Roman city, as even in the first century AD Pliny the Elder referred to the city as Colonia Tarracon Opus Scipionum.4 The original Iberian settlement quickly developed into a Roman town with a forum built at the foot of the hill at least by 71 BC, as implied by an honorary inscription for Pompeius Magnus after the conclusion of his campaigns against Sertorius the previous year in Iberia.5 Tarraco itself was most likely given Roman colonial status as early as 44 BC by Julius Caesar following his victory at the battle of Munda.6

4 NH 3.21.
5 RIT 1 (CIL 112.14/2 991).
6 Alföldy 2000 20 and the revision of RIT 362 (CIL 11, 4134) with the reference to Tarraco as a Roman colonia:

The city continued to develop as an urban center to such a degree that it was able to accommodate Augustus, and effectively serve as the capital of the Roman state during the early phase of the Cantabrian campaigns in 27 BC when Augustus retired to Tarraco due to illness and remained there for the following two years. Tarraco thereafter was designated by the *Princeps* as the capital of the Roman Province *Hispania Tarraconensis*. As the city’s importance as a center of Roman authority in the peninsula increased, so did the need for a greater architectural expression of that authority. The provincial elite, themselves an increasingly cosmopolitan group, in the beginning of the first century AD courted the favor of Rome to increase their own prestige and that of their city. Tacitus remarked that the permission granted by Tiberius in AD 15 for the construction of a temple dedicated to Augustus in Tarraco was in response to a petition of the ‘Spaniards,’ *Hispani*, a term Tacitus had used for the Roman sol-

---

7 Dio 53.25.
8 Strabo 3.4.20; Pliny *NH* 3.6; Mela 2.87.