CHAPTER 10

Roman Exploitation and New Road Infrastructures in *Asturias Transmontana* (Asturias, Spain)

*Patricia A. Argüelles Álvarez*

**Introduction**

The northwest of Hispania was the last part of the Iberian Peninsula conquered by the Romans, when the independence of the Asturian-Cantabrian territory ended with the victory of Rome in the wars of 29–19 BC. The victory of Rome changed the landscape and the administration of the Asturian area, and had an important impact on the pre-Roman ‘castros culture’, named after the typical Asturian dwelling.¹

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The *conventus Asturum*, which included *Asturia transmontana* and *Asturia cismontana*, contained a large number of Roman roads. Their primary use was for military purposes, as is confirmed by the presence of the newly discovered Roman camps at the sites of Moyapán and Vallado. As Roman dominance continued, Asturias became an exit to the sea for the Empire, as well as providing good communication routes between coastal and inland Hispania, especially the area around León. The Roman impact on the landscape of Western Asturia is clear; at the same time the area shows a more complex cultural and economic configuration than was assumed until recently. This article will investigate how the roads built by the Romans opened up the region and facilitated the exploitation of its natural resources. This, in time, would have important consequences for the political structure, economy, and culture of the local population.

Several Greek and Latin authors, e.g. Strabo and Pliny the Elder, speak highly of the mining works carried out by Romans in the West of the Iberian Peninsula, specifically in Asturia and Gallaecia. The main areas of mineral concentration in the *conventus Asturum* were the Suevan mountain range, the Narcea Valley, the Pigüeña Valley, the Naranco area, Teverga, and some areas on the central coast. Since pre-Roman times these mines had been worked by natives for the day to day needs of the local communities. They met their needs with small mining operations for tin or by looking for gold nuggets from the river. Because of the mineral wealth of the territory, Rome made great effort to increase the mining output in Western Asturias. The modification of the pre-Roman landscape involved, for example, the drilling of tunnels and canals, the creation of horizontal and vertical mine shafts, and the building of roads adapted to this type of exploitation.

Melting furnaces, slags, and cupels have been attested, as well as evidence of moulds, remains of alloys, traces of canals, and drilling through the mountains. This makes it possible to investigate how the Asturian landscape was adapted to the Roman industrial pattern. Although gold mining has received most of the scholarly attention, there is also much evidence for the mining of copper, lead, silver, zinc, and, in smaller amounts, iron and tin. Archaeological excavations in the late-twentieth century have shed more light on the mining activity in the region and its relation to the Asturian hill forts.

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3 Gutiérrez et al. (1999).  
5 Maya & Cuesta (2001).