CHAPTER 1

Strabo and the Invention of Turdetania

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The work of recent years has been fundamental in expanding our understanding of how ancient geographers and historians perceived the Iberian Peninsula*.1 Strabo’s Book 3 has been central to this effort, as it is a complete source that synthesizes this ancient perception, from Iberia’s first emergence onto the historical and cultural horizon of the Greeks, up to the first century CE. It constitutes a unicum: there is no other ancient text on Iberia that equals it in information or potential for analysis.

This chapter will not only focus on the particularities of Strabo’s description of Turdetania. It will also question whether this literary construct may also be explained as a redefinition of Roman imperial ideology and, consequently, of romanization in Hispania.

The image of Tartessus as a lost and legendary civilization with which the Greeks developed a special relationship of amicitia at around the seventh century BCE, was an idea created by the geographer from Amaseia, one which has been enthusiastically adopted by scholars in Spain and abroad from the nineteenth century onwards.2 Hence, Turdetania, as a corollary of Tartessus, is also a part of Strabo’s carefully crafted narrative.3

From the beginning of Book 3, Strabo clearly attempts to establish a comparison between Turdetania-Baetica and the remainder of the Iberian territories (although these varied in degrees of transition between barbarianism and civilization). The first is the ideal example of a harmonious coexistence

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2 Cruz Andreotti 2010, 17–53.
3 Cruz Andreotti 2007, 251–270.
between nature and culture (a central principle of Greek geography), allowing for the expansion of a hitherto unparalleled politeia or political culture, understood in a broad sense, throughout the recently conquered western Mediterranean. From ancient times, the region recorded its laws and history in verse (in contrast to other Iberians, who used writing but were illiterate, Strab. 3.1.6), implying a level of ‘political organization’ and ‘historical consciousness’, which increased gradually over time, leading to the successful development of urbanism, the economy and culture, later to be encountered and reinforced by the Romans, with Gades as the region’s paradigmatic city (Strab. 3.5.3). According to Strabo, Turdetania was the most prosperous territory of the oecumene (Strab. 3.1.6; 3.2.15), due to the combination of: optimal natural conditions (the balanced mix of farming resources in the valley, sea wealth and mining activity in the mountains, Strab. 3.2.6 to 9); communications (a spacious river structuring the entire territory, Strab. 3.2.3 to 5, and a close knit network of cities and river and sea ports, later expanded by Roman roads, Strab. 3.2.1–2); and the character of the Turdetanians. All the other lands in Iberia (from the coast of the Spanish Levant to those recently conquered by Augustus in the Cantabrian mountains, including the Celtiberian or Vaccean plateaus, Lusitania and Gallaecia), required, to a greater or lesser extent, some kind of Roman intervention to overcome the obstacles posed by barbarianism and the contradictions caused by varying degrees of civilizing development (cf. Strab. 3.4.20). Faced with the isolation caused by dispersed populations and a mountainous geography, the Romans grouped the natives into new cities along well communicated valleys (Strab. 3.3.5; 3.4.9). In order to dominate the wild character of some communities, these had to be defeated and pacified (Strab. 3.4.5; 3.4.17). All were forced to adopt cultivated lifestyles (Strab. 3.3.5; 3.3.7–8). So as to overcome the poverty inherent to ways of life based on plunder and warfare, communities were organized around large urban centres, which distributed and consumed the products of agriculture, herding and commerce. The history of these territories began with the Roman conquest; that of Turdetania, on the other hand, was traced to the times of Heracles, when the Greeks and Phoenicians navigated its coastline, constituting the seed of its civilization.

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4 Castro Páez in this same volume.
5 Cf. Strab. 3.4.13 regarding the discussion between Polybius and Posidonius on the extension of inland cities in the Iberian world before the arrival of Rome. Contrary to them, Strabo believed the existence of urban centres in the Celtiberian world before the arrival of Rome was not possible.
6 Ciprés Torres 2012.