

The Representation of Plural Female Deities in Ancient Hispania: The Decorated Stelae of Ortigosa and Villoslada in Camero Nuevo (La Rioja, Spain)

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Abstract. *Camero Nuevo (La Rioja, Spain) preserves a group of Roman-period funerary stelae featuring anthropomorphic decoration, traditionally interpreted as funerary portraits. This study offers an iconographic and iconological analysis of their most representative elements: the triadic grouping of figures, the bust-like depiction, the emphasis on the head, and the radiate disc. Two of the tombstones, from Ortigosa and Villoslada, depict the figures with female attributions through the schematic representation of breasts. We propose a new interpretation, considering the Celtic substratum and the attested cult of the Matres and other plural female deities in the same area. This analysis offers a deeper insight into the iconography associated with sovereign deities governing both this life and the afterlife, as well as certain dance-related rituals linked to the renewal of nature.*

Rezumat. *El Camero Nuevo (La Rioja, Spania) păstrează un grup de stele funerare din perioada romană cu decor antropomorf, interpretate ca portrete funerare. Această lucrare prezintă un studiu iconografic și iconologic al elementelor sale cele mai reprezentative: gruparea figurilor în număr de trei, reprezentarea sub formă de bust, accentul pe cap și discul radiat. Două dintre pietre funerare, cele ale lui Ortigosa și Villoslada, încorporează caracterizarea feminină a figurilor prin reprezentarea schematică a sânilor. Articolul propune o nouă interpretare, ținând cont de substratul celtic și de cultul Matres atestat în aceeași zonă și alte divinități feminine de natură plurală. Această analiză oferă o perspectivă mai profundă asupra iconografiei asociate cu divinitățile suverane care guvernează atât această viață, cât și viața de apoi, precum și asupra anumitor rituri legate de dans, asociate cu reînnoirea naturii.*

Keywords: Ancient History, Ancient Religions, Epigraphy, Funerary Monuments, Iconography

Introduction

Roman Hispania offers few representations of indigenous deities, despite the attested persistence of religious expressions with a pre-Roman substratum. This contrasts with other regions of the Roman West, where such divine images persist well into the process of Christianization.

The corpus of plural female deities in ancient Hispania² led us to identify different areas of Indo-European or Celtic substratum, whose plastic expressions deserved more careful consideration than previously acknowledged. Our study focuses on two decorated stelae from the Camero Nuevo group (La Rioja, Spain). This group is dated to the Early Empire period, enabling a deeper analysis into the persistence of earlier religious conceptions and the degree of continuity and transformation of ancestral beliefs and representations in Roman-period monuments, as explored in previous research³.

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² ALEIXANDRE BLASCO 2015.

³ BLÁZQUEZ 1983; SALINAS 1984-1985; MARCO SIMON 1987; ídem 1999; SOPENA 1987; LORRIO 1997; GORROCHATEGUI, STEMPEL 2004.

1. The Stelae of the Camero Nuevo Region (La Rioja)

1.1. The Camero Nuevo Region

Camero Nuevo is located in the upper part of the Rioja Media region, bordering the province of Soria (Spain) to the south. It lies in the upper basin of the Iregua River and occupies the northern foothills of the Iberian System, adjacent to the Cebollera and Piqueras mountain ranges. The area consists of forests and grasslands with altitudes exceeding 1,000 metres, making it highly suitable for livestock farming⁴. The rivers that flow through the region — Najerilla, Iregua, Leza, and Cidacos— have irregular courses and flows and have been used throughout different periods for transportation purposes, connecting the Ebro Valley with the Plateau and the upper Duero Valley⁵.

In ancient times, the region was part of the northwesternmost area of the *conventus Caesaragustanus*, territory of the Berones according to literary sources⁶. Camero Nuevo was a relatively isolated area from the main urban centres of the surrounding regions: *Vareia* (Varea) and *Tritium Magallum* (Tricio). However, communication between Camero and the outside world relied on these two enclaves, via certain secondary routes that we can partially reconstruct (Figure 1). The location of *Vareia*, on the route through the Ebro Valley⁷, made it the central urban hub of the territory during Romanisation⁸. Its connection with Camero Nuevo has probably been preserved by the current N-111 road (Mecinaceli-Viana), which follows the Iregua River valley to Numancia⁹. Communication between Camero Nuevo and the municipality of *Tritium Magallum* may have been even more intense, as the communities of Camero could sell their livestock and acquire artisan products there¹⁰. Another route, between Camero region and Demanda Mountain Range, would have taken advantage of the western slope of the Najerilla River valley up to the vicinity of Mansilla and Canales de la Sierra¹¹. Canales forms a natural passage between the Plateau and the Middle Ebro Valley, and it is located on the likely secondary Roman road that connected *Clunia Sulpicia* to *Tritium*¹².

⁴ ESPINOSA 1989.

⁵ VILLACAMPA 1978; ARIÑO, MAGALLÓN 1991-1992.

⁶ VILLACAMPA 1978, 46-48.

⁷ *It. Ant.* 393.2.

⁸ PASCUAL, ESPINOSA 1981, 74.

⁹ CALONGE MIRANDA, 2020.

¹⁰ ESPINOSA 1989, 406.

¹¹ CALONGE MIRANDA 2019, 201.

¹² ARIÑO, MAGALLÓN 1991, 448.

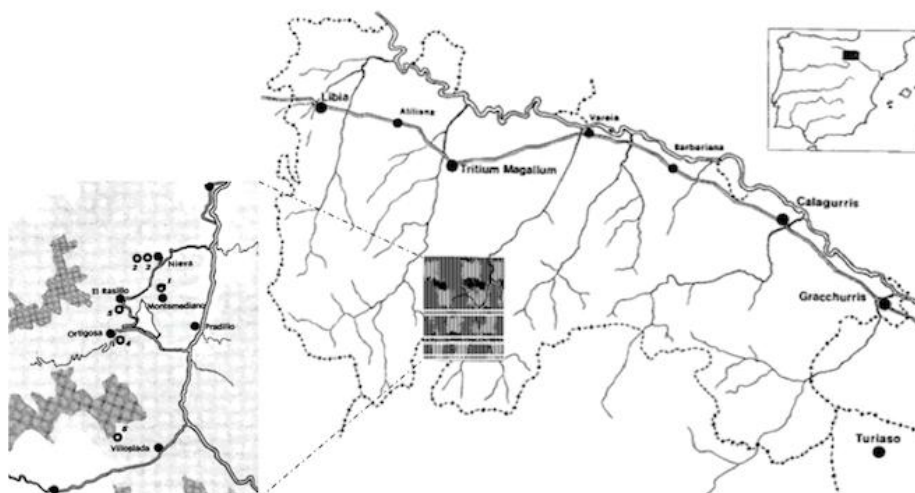


Figure 1. Map of the Rioja territories with markings along the Ebro road. The hatched area indicates the geography corresponding to the Camero Nuevo epigraphic set, extended to the left with the locations of the finds and the numbering of the stelae. Source: Espinosa 1989, Figs. 1 and 2. Layout: own creation.

1.2. The Epigraphic Set: General Features

Around the areas of Nieva, Montemediano, Pradillo, El Rasillo, Ortigosa, Villanueva and Villoslada, an epigraphic set of nearly twenty tombstones has been recovered. This set represents almost 20 % of the regional epigraphic catalogue of La Rioja (Spain)¹³ and it is the most abundant after the Tritian set. The physical conditions of the region suggest that livestock farming was probably the main economic activity. In the peaceful context of the Early Empire, this would have enabled the emergence of a relatively wealthy social class capable of commissioning stonework, such as the pieces that have been preserved¹⁴.

The Camerano epigraphic group is predominantly funerary. The inscriptions preserve anthroponyms of Indo-European substratum. In Nieva de Cameros, an individual named *Titullus Calaedico(n) Viam(i) f(i)lius*¹⁵ bears a *cognomen* documented in Indo-European Hispania, particularly in central Celtiberia¹⁶; the patronymic *Viamus* may be of pre-Roman origin¹⁷, while *Calaedico(n)* could refer to a supra-familial organisation, as seen in Hispanic anthroponyms such as *Calaetus* or *Calaitus*¹⁸. In other cases, they appear to be probable Hispanic ethnic groups, such as the *cognomen* *Paesu(ro)* in El Rasillo de Cameros¹⁹.

The votive inscriptions are limited to five copies, two of which have an illegible theonym²⁰. In El Rasillo de Cameros, the local deity named *CALDO VLEDICO*²¹ is believed to be associated with

¹³ *ERRioja*, 12.

¹⁴ ESPINOSA 1989, 414.

¹⁵ *ERRioja*, 52

¹⁶ UNTERMANN 1965, 172, map 75: *Titullus*.

¹⁷ ALBERTOS 1966, 249.

¹⁸ UNTERMANN 1965, 84, map 25: *Calaetus*; ALBERTOS 1966, 72.

¹⁹ *ERRioja*, 61; ESPINOSA 1989, no. 5. In this regard, ALBERTOS 1966, 175. Other associated testimonies are the *cognomina* of kinship detected in the area (*ERRioja*, 53 and 54), regarding this onomastic phenomenon. cf. ABASCAL 1984; ESPINOSA, CASTILLO 1995-1997, 108.

²⁰ Montemediano (ESPINOSA, CASTILLO 1995-1997, no. 7; *Hep* 7, 1997, 587) and Torrecilla de Cameros (*Hep* 6, 1996, 799).

²¹ MORESTIN 1976, 187, Figure 5; *ERRioja*, 60.

a thermal cult. The other two inscriptions, whose theonym are Roman, appear to reflect phenomena of religious syncretism: one dedicated to *Silvanus* in Nieva de Cameros²², and the other to *Jupiter Optimum Maximum* in El Rasillo de Cameros²³.

1.3. The Decorated Stelae of the Camerano Set

Within the Camero Nuevo epigraphic set, Espinosa identifies six decorated stelae as products of the same local workshop²⁴, to which other pieces could be added with some degree of uncertainty²⁵. These pieces come from the towns of Montemediano, Nieva —where two pieces have been found: Nieva I and Nieva II—, Ortigosa, El Rasillo and Villoslada (Figure 2)²⁶.



Figure 2. Group of decorated stelae from Camero Nuevo. Stela no. 1: Montemediano; no. 2: Nieva (I); no. 3: Nieva (II); no. 4: Ortigosa; no. 5: El Rasillo; no. 6: Villoslada. (ESPINOSA 1989, Figure 3).

According to Espinosa —whose reading, description, and classification we follow— the close formal resemblance among the pieces and their distinct character, compared to other monuments in the area, suggest that this set was produced by a single individual or a family of stonemasons within a limited timeframe, around the 2nd century AD, given the recurrent invocation *D(is) M(anibus)*²⁷.

²² ERRioja, 52. MORESTIN (1976, 84) suspects this phenomenon of *interpretatio* due to the dedicant's anthroponym: *Titullus Calaedico(n)* (see above).

²³ ERRioja, 59. Its indigenous character is inferred from the widespread worship of Jupiter in areas of pre-Roman and Celtic *substratum*, cf. Le ROUX, TRANOY 1973, 178; OLIVARES 2015, 195, Figure 7.

²⁴ ERRioja, 12; ESPINOSA 1989; HERNÁNDEZ *et alii* 2005.

²⁵ These are three stelae, respectively found in San Andrés de Cameros (ERRioja, 142 and ESPINOSA 1989, no. 7), Pradillo (ERRioja, 58) and La Pasada (ERRioja, 10).

²⁶ Montemediano (ERRioja, 51; HEP 1, 1989, 506; ESPINOSA 1989, Figure 3, no. 1), Nieva with two monuments: Nieva I (MORESTIN 1976, 190, Figure 8; ERRioja, 55, pl. 8; HEP 1, 1989, 511, ESPINOSA 1989, no. 2) and Nieva II (ESPINOSA 1989, no. 3), Ortigosa (ERRioja, 56, pl. 9; ESPINOSA 1989, no. 4), El Rasillo (ERRioja, 61, pl. 10; HEP 1, 1989, 513; ESPINOSA 1989, no. 5), Villoslada (ERRioja, 62, pl. 10; ESPINOSA 1989, no. 6).

²⁷ ESPINOSA 1989, 409–411.

2. General Methodology: Iconography and Iconology in the Stelae of Camero Nuevo

Our aim is to reassess the sculptural decoration accompanying the funerary stelae of Camero Nuevo. It is well known that images serve as a privileged means of understanding the mindsets of the pre-Roman Iberian peoples. However, Iberian sources reveal significant methodological paradoxes, such as the non-coinciding meaning of epigraphy and iconography within the same piece²⁸, as well as the documentation's partly Roman and partly indigenous nature. In light of these difficulties, we will rely on the distinction between the concepts of iconography and iconology²⁹, differentiating between the iconographic elements or the formal features displayed in a plastic representation, and their iconology or significance, that is, the symbolic interpretation that this set of signs could evoke in the viewer—whether in the dedicant themselves or in their contemporaries who interpreted the images according to traditions and symbols belonging to their collective imagination.

2.1. Review of the Proposed Iconology for the Stelae of Camero Nuevo

The general interpretation of the decoration on the Camerano stelae has been shaped by the funerary nature of the pieces. According to Espinosa³⁰, the sculpted field alludes to the image of the deceased, with the upper section representing a sort of aedicule or funerary shrine, modelled after certain monumental stelae with a triangular pediment found in *Tritium*³¹. Under this proposal, the schematic rendering of the figures suggests impersonal, archetypal representations rather than direct depictions of the dedicant or the deceased. Certain isolated features that individualize some figures could be explained by the stonemason's willingness to accommodate specific requests from the client³².

On this basis, it seems pertinent to question whether there is any correlation between these formal variations and the information in the epigraphs, particularly regarding the number and gender of the individuals mentioned in the epigraphs and the figures depicted on the same pieces. This, however, proves difficult to determine in most cases due to their state of conservation.

The Ortigosa stela (Figure 3) is the only one that allows for such a comparison. The epigraph indicates a woman, *Cor(nelia) Sextina*, who dedicates the monument, *ex testamento*, to three men: her husband, son, and father-in-law (Figure 7: epigraphic fiche). All three figures retain the schematic representation of breasts, a detail previously noted by Espinosa, who executed a careful tracing of the piece³³, and which we confirm after visual inspection (Figure 4). We believe that the individualization of the breasts suggests their identification as women, although it is contradictory with the content of the text³⁴.

²⁸ MARCO SIMON 2004.

²⁹ ISLER-KERÉNYI 2014.

³⁰ ESPINOSA 1989, 143.

³¹ *ERRioja*, 36, 26 and 22.

³² ESPINOSA 1989, 412.

³³ *EERioja*, 56, pl. 9.

³⁴ In this regard, Espinosa had already indicated that "the number and interrelation of the individuals mentioned is not entirely clear" (*ERRioja*, 56, 74).



Figure 3. Comparison between photograph and tracing of the Ortigosa stela. On the left, image of the stela. Source: author. On the right, drawing based on the tracing of the piece. Source: Espinosa 1989, detail Figure 3. Layout: own creation.



Figure 4. Detailed image of the anthropomorphic figures on the Ortigosa stela, detail of the schematic representation of the breasts. Source: authors. Layout: own creation.

On the other hand, the Villoslada stela, although it does not allow us to make this comparison due to the difficulty in reading and interpreting its epigraph (Figure 11), aligns with the individualization of the breasts of the three figures depicted, a feature that we were able to identify upon inspecting the piece (Figure 9). This iconographic alignment between the two has led us to reconsider their supposed nature as an archetypal representation of the deceased, which is usually considered the most likely for these funerary stelae, with the aim of reviewing, at least for these two cases, the connotations that these images may have suggested to dedicants and their relatives.

2.2. Common Iconographic Features of the Camero Nuevo Set

To advance in this iconological reassessment, we will first identify three iconographic traits shared by the Camero Nuevo stelae: (1) the predominance of anthropomorphic figures arranged in groups of three –present in three out of the six monuments: Montemediano, Ortigosa, and Villoslada; (2) their schematic representation in the form of busts, with an emphasis on the head; and (3) the association of the hexapetal motif –six petals– with the *fastigium* –replaced by a tetrapetal motif in the stela of El Rasillo.

We will examine each of these three iconographic elements separately, considering their parallels in the Iberian Peninsula and the Roman West. This analysis does not contradict a unified interpretation of the tombstones, as the selection of certain elements was governed by codes shared between the stonemason and the clients, who perceived the image as a meaningful whole.

a. Triadic Anthropomorphic Groupings in the Iberian Peninsula

The grouping of three figures is distinctive of the regions corresponding to the Cluniac and Caesaraugustan conventus³⁵. In contrast, it is rare in other regions of the peninsula, except for certain iconographic and technical parallels observed in the stelae of the Northwest and in some stelae and funerary urns from the Pyrenean valleys of Arán, Arboust, and other locations.

Within this extensive area, the highest concentration of documents featuring groups of three human figures is found along the upper course of the Ega River, in the borderlands between Álava and Navarra. In Antiquity, this region was traversed by a section of the road leading to Aquitaine³⁶, as well as forming the frontier between the ethnic groups of the *Berones*, *Varduli* and *Vascones*³⁷.

Regarding the formal analogies between the Camero Nuevo stelae and those from their surrounding area, this issue had already been noted by García and Merino³⁸, given the similarities between certain stelae from the Meseta region of Soria and those from the Navarrese-Alavese area: both areas share the decorative motif of three frontal anthropomorphic figures.

Considering this particular feature of the triadic groupings, a few isolated cases can be observed south of the Camero region, particularly in two Sorian stelae found, respectively, in

³⁵ The finds extend from Galdácano (Vizcaya) to the Pyrenean valleys, but not uniformly, cf. MARCO 1978, 43. The hypothesis was already outlined in GARCÍA MERINO 1977. MARCOS POUS–GARCÍA SERRANO (1972, 324) extend the typological analogies as far as Aquitaine, which is also agreed upon by MARCO SIMON (1979, 43) and ABÁSOLO (1993, 183).

³⁶ MARCO SIMON 1979, 207.

³⁷ MARCOS POUS, GARCÍA SERRANO 1972, 325; SIMÓN 1979, 206; EMBORUJO SALGADO 1987, 381; GARCÍA ARIZA 1991, 210.

³⁸ GARCÍA MERINO 1977.

Santervás³⁹ and in San Esteban de Gormaz —the latter being fragmented⁴⁰. To the north, in the Navarrese-Alavese area, additional examples have been documented. The locality of Aguilar de Codés (Navarra) has preserved a set of five stelae, each depicting three human figures in low relief⁴¹. In its vicinity, two other tombstones featuring triadic groupings have been identified, specifically in Marañón (Navarra)⁴² and Santa Cruz de Campezo (Álava)⁴³. All these sites appear to be interconnected due to their location along the route that, from Navarra, entered La Rioja via Asa or Laguardia⁴⁴. This type of grouping is also evident in the eastern Navarra, particularly in the area surrounding Estella-Lizarra, where two examples have been recorded: one in Estella-Lizarra itself⁴⁵ and another in Urbiola⁴⁶.

The corpus of triadic groups extends further, both to the northeast of the Camero, in the current provinces of Vizcaya and Cantabria, and to the southeast, in the province of Burgos⁴⁷. This iconographic consistency across such a vast area corresponds to the communication network linking the Ebro and Duero river valleys, suggesting that these representations may also reflect a socioeconomic background. Given the underlying cultural elements, it is not unlikely that these interconnected communities shared not only certain aesthetic preferences propagated by active workshops but also an ancestral substratum that, despite various processes of Romanisation, persisted in the heritage of mentalities, religiosity and vision of the world.

b. Triple Repetition in Celtic Hispania

Triplication is an emerging iconographic feature in countless manifestations of the Indo-European peoples, particularly within the worldview inherited by the monuments and literature attributed to the Celtic sphere⁴⁸. This category is always subject to reassessment, as ethnographic divergences and various processes of Romanisation led to the development of different expressions stemming from this common denominator⁴⁹.

The persistence of triadic conceptions in Hispania prior to Romanisation has been identified through various indicators⁵⁰, among which we have previously noted the concentration of stelae decorated with three figures in the area surrounding the Duero and Ebro river valleys (see above). The fundamental question is whether these representations should be interpreted solely in a realistic manner, as family portraits, or whether, in some cases, they allude to other aspects of the indigenous religious sphere. It is to Marco's credit⁵¹ that he observed how this concentration of representations in groups of three is accompanied by a regional artistic style characterized by highly simple and schematic forms, which show little alignment with funerary stelae from other parts of the Roman Empire —such as *Cisalpine*

³⁹ GARCÍA MERINO 1977, 314 ss., pls. II, 2 and III, 1; *ERPSO*, 109, pl. XXXV: 1.

⁴⁰ GARCÍA MERINO 1977, 314 ss., pls. II, 2; *ERPSO*, 100, pl. XXXII: 2.

⁴¹ MARCOS POUS, GARCÍA SERRANO 1972, nos. 1-5; *IRMN*, nos. 38, 37, 70, 71, 72; MARCO SIMON 1978, 191, nos. 1-5; MARCO SIMON 1979, 233, nos. 1-5.

⁴² MARCOS POUS, GARCÍA SERRANO 1972, no. 5, Figure 8; MARCO SIMON 1978, no. 31; MARCO SIMON 1979, no. 31.

⁴³ ELORZA 1967, no. 110; MARCOS POUS and GARCÍA SERRANO 1972, no. 6; MARCO SIMON 1978, no. 59.

⁴⁴ ELORZA 1967.

⁴⁵ Lost stela, cf. MARCOS POUS, GARCÍA SERRANO 1972; MARCO SIMON 1978, no. 9; MARCO SIMON 1979, no. 38.

⁴⁶ BARANDIARÁN 1968, 216 ss.; MARCOS POUS, GARCÍA SERRANO 1972; MARCO 1978, no. 38; MARCO SIMON 1979, no. 38.

⁴⁷ MARCO SIMON 1978, 43.

⁴⁸ USENER 1903; VENDRYES 1935; GREEN 1995b, etc.

⁴⁹ VITAL PEDREIRA 2018, 74.

⁵⁰ BLANCO 2011-2012.

⁵¹ MARCO SIMON 1978, 44.

Gaul, Illyria, Dacia, and Pannonia. On this basis, he suggests that some of these Hispanic funerary stelae may reflect a probable legacy from the ancient heritage of Celtic and Indo-European peoples, referring to the notion of the number three as “repetition of intensity”⁵². In this sense, the triplication of figures would express the heroic vitality of the deceased, without precluding a gradual “infantilisation” of this symbolism, which may have progressively influenced a more realistic vision of family representation, as seen in a significant number of monuments.

It should be considered, *a priori*, that the religious tradition of the Celtic peoples of the Iberian Peninsula did not encourage the representation of their deities in the central-peninsular region and its surroundings⁵³. This phenomenon may be a legacy of the possible religious aniconism prevalent among certain pre-Roman Iberian peoples and is perhaps echoed in the atheism attributed by Strabo⁵⁴ to the *Gallaeci* until the Roman conquest⁵⁵.

Conversely, the artistic production of Celtic tradition in the Western Roman world abundantly attests to the incorporation of imagery in sacred representations, particularly employing indications of plurality as a distinctive marker of divine power. It should be noted, however, that these groups, frequently triadic, were not exclusive to any specific deity but were applied to various Celtic divinities—whether to their anthropomorphic representations or to certain animals associated with them or some of their functions⁵⁶. Within this category, certain female deities stand out due to their broad territorial distribution and considerable presence. Their theonymy or iconography presents them in plural form, typically as triads: *Matres, Iunones, Parcae*, etc⁵⁷. Some of these divinities can also be traced epigraphically in Ancient Hispania; however, paradoxically, there is scarcely any identifiable imagery of them.

c. Representation in Bust Form and Emphasis on the Head

The figures of the Camerano group consistently reduce the body to a bust-like form. The disproportionately large head—on some stelae, the head and neck nearly equal the size of the torso—corresponds to an almost total absence of limbs, with the exception of the Villoslada stela (see below). Funerary stelae from the neighbouring region of Alto Cidacos, in Camero Viejo, also depict anthropomorphic busts⁵⁸. However, this group does not exhibit a significant number of triadic compositions, and its decoration frequently includes images of livestock. These differences suggest that they should not be included in this study, despite sharing certain features with other triadic representations in this area, which would merit a dedicated analysis.

On the one hand, the bust was one of the preferred modes of portraiture in Roman art, particularly in funerary sculpture, often framed within semicircular arches⁵⁹. On the other hand, across different periods and regions, there is well-documented evidence of a correlation between the hypertrophy of certain body parts and a lack of interest in realistically rendering the rest, as if the emphasized feature were endowed with a specific power. This tendency toward emphasising the head is also observed in Celtic European sculpture, explaining the characteristic schematic nature of the figures. Far from indicating technical incompetence, this stylisation appears to be a deliberate artistic choice shared by both artisan and client⁶⁰.

⁵² LAMBRECHTS 1954, 7.

⁵³ ALFAYÉ VILLA 1995; 2003; 2011; 2013b.

⁵⁴ Str. 3.4.16.

⁵⁵ BLÁZQUEZ 1990.

⁵⁶ GREEN 1989; 1995a.

⁵⁷ GREEN 1989, 171.

⁵⁸ ESPINOSA, USERÒ 1988.

⁵⁹ MARCO SIMON 1978, 41.

⁶⁰ GREEN 1989, 214.

Additionally, the iconography represented by these Hispanic tombstones from the central-peninsular area aligns with broader Celtic plastic art at the continental level. It also exhibits the archetypal characteristics of head representations in Celtic art as defined by Jacobsthal: frontal positioning, frequent absence of ears, a broad-based triangular nose, and horizontal eyes, either appearing closed or large and prominent⁶¹.

d. The Radiate Disc

The radiate disc is a recurrent decorative motif on Hispanic tombstones, appearing either with straight or curved rays —the former predominate— or in the form of discs or stars with six, four, or five rays⁶². It is difficult to determine, in general terms, whether these motifs are merely decorative or hold a deeper significance. However, their widespread placement at the *apex* of the Camerano stelae, adorning the interior of the *fastigium*, suggests a significant symbolic value.

This motif is ubiquitous within the Camerano group, with two partial exceptions. First, the Ortigosa stela is fractured and lacks its upper section. Second, as noted by Espinosa⁶³ and confirmed through our direct examination of the piece, the central motif of the *fastigium* on the Nieva (II) stela does not correspond to a radiate disc. Instead, the series of broken and parallel incisions resemble an arboreal representation. To its left, the letter 'A' can be distinguished, and further left, the letter 'M'. However, due to the loss of the epigraphic field, any further interpretation remains speculative.

Marco⁶⁴ interprets these vegetal decorations as an allusion to a living reality that regenerates periodically —a symbolism we associate with the message conveyed by what appears to be a cyclical dance representation on the Villoslada stela (see below).



Figure 5. Detail of the *fastigium* of the Nieva stela (II), where the outlines of an arboreal motif and the letters 'A' and 'M' can be discerned on the left and right, respectively. Source: authors.

The radiate disk, or “wheel”, is a common but not exclusively Celtic symbol. In particular, within Celtic Europe, this symbol appears to be associated with solar connotations and functions as an attribute of *Taranis*, as well as other deities linked to chthonic and funerary aspects, and to dominion over water, fertility and salvation —such as the *Matres*, *Epona*, and

⁶¹ JACOBSTHAL 1944, 12.

⁶² MARCO SIMON 1978, 18-19.

⁶³ ESPINOSA 1989, 407 and 410, no. 3.

⁶⁴ MARCO SIMON 1978, 55.

Sucellus, among others. In the same regions, it is also recognised as an attribute of other deities bearing Greco-Roman theonyms, though these are often interpreted as indigenous divinities, especially *Genius* and *Bonus Eventus*, as well as *Mars*, *Hercules* and *Fortuna*⁶⁵. According to Vries, the symbol evolved from a “*simple cercle à l’origine sans doute, on y voit bientôt apparaître quatre rayons, puis d’autres*”⁶⁶, thereby suggesting that the original four-spoked wheel signified the cardinal directions. Thus, the circular shape would not primarily allude to the solar disk itself but rather to its cosmic orbit over both our world and the underworld.

2.3 Comparative Study of the Significance of the Represented Figures

The iconographic analysis of the Camero Nuevo stelae, despite their sparse decorative elements, reveals the presence of three well-established features in the artistic expressions of Celtic Europe: the tendency to group figures in triads, the emphasis on the head, and the prominence of the radiate disk. While these symbols also appear in other ancient cultures, their convergence with the Celtic substratum attributed to the region’s populations (see above) suggests that they reflect a Celtic tradition.

The grouping of figures in triads is particularly characteristic of a relatively confined area in the central Iberian Peninsula, where this plastic singularity is framed within a coherent ethnic, sociocultural, and economic framework. Within this context, the Camerano group displays a degree of distinctiveness, likely influenced by the region’s isolation, which may have fostered a unique expression of certain early religious beliefs.

Two of the stelae, those of Ortigosa and Villoslada, exhibit a distinctive feature: the identification of their figures as female through the schematic representation of breasts. However, these depictions are not identical. They differ in the relative emphasis placed on the head’s size —significantly larger in the figures from Ortigosa compared to those from Villoslada. The latter, in contrast, present a more proportionate relationship between the head and body, along with the unique inclusion of arms, depicted in a horizontal position (Figure 10).

In our opinion, both iconographic programs refer to meanings that go beyond a mere representation of the deceased as a form of memory, which in other tombstones seems to be the most likely explanation or simply the least risky one. We do not question the funerary nature of both pieces, which is confirmed by the formula *D(is) M(anibus)*, a reading that we have confirmed in both cases. However, we believe we can identify some parallels that allow for a new and fairly close iconological proposal.

A priori, the depiction of a triad of female figures evokes monuments dedicated to certain deities of Celtic Europe, particularly the *Matres*, *Matrae* and *Matronae*⁶⁷. However, before assessing the validity of this interpretation, we must first consider the distribution of testimonies dedicated to these deities across the Iberian Peninsula. While no evidence of plural divinities —nor of any female deity— has been found in the Camero region, such testimonies do exist in the surrounding area of La Rioja, specifically in Badarán and Canales de la Sierra, as well as in Laguardia (Álava), where they bear the theonym *Matres*⁶⁸.

To the southwest, beyond the Demanda Mountain Range —topographically connected to the Camero region by ancient routes— one of the most significant concentrations of Iberian

⁶⁵ GREEN 1984.

⁶⁶ VRIES 1977, 44.

⁶⁷ DUGAST 2017, 240.

⁶⁸ Cf. Epigraphic Corpus (CE onwards) *apud* ALEIXANDRE BLASCO 2015. Badarán: CE 1; Canales de la Sierra: CE 13; Laguardia: CE 12.

dedications to the *Matres* has been identified around Clunia⁶⁹. South of the Camero region, beyond the Tierras Altas of Soria⁷⁰, additional testimonies have been recorded at the foot of Moncayo in Ágreda⁷¹ and along the border between the Cluniac and Caesaraugustan conventus, in Uncastillo (Zaragoza)⁷². The relative concentration of epigraphic testimonies dedicated to these deities in central Iberia partially coincides with the distribution of decorated stelae featuring triadic groupings (Figure 6).

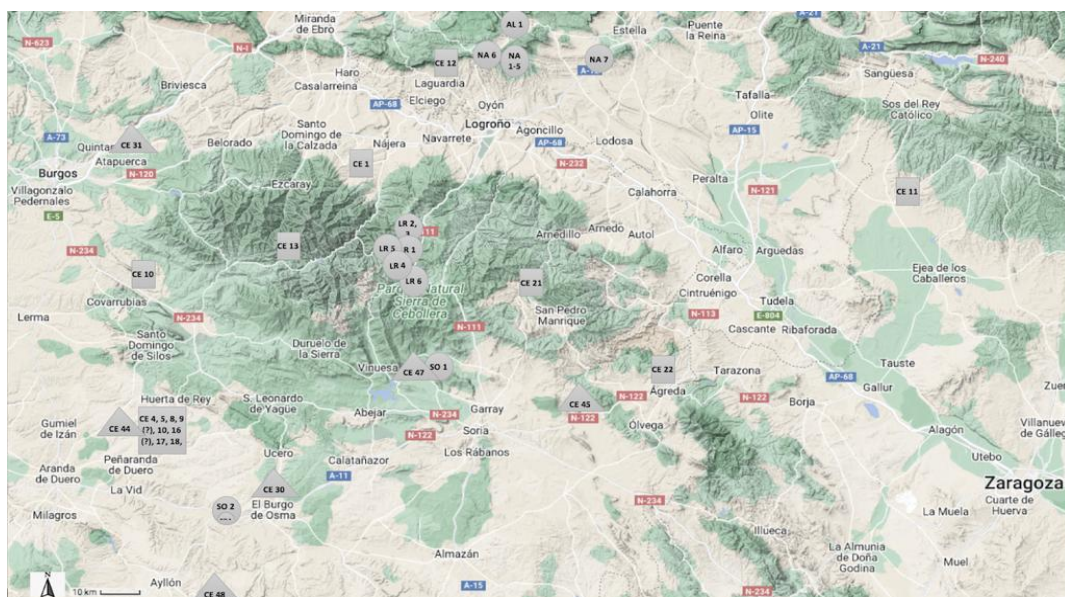


Figure 6. Distribution areas of stelae with triadic anthropomorphic decoration in the Camerano region and its surroundings, alongside the distribution of altars dedicated to the *Matres* and other plural female deities. The numbering of the votive altars follows the *Epigraphic Corpus* (CE) (Aleixandre Blasco 2015), while the stelae are identified by the provincial abbreviation and a sequential number. Layout: own creation.

Legend — Square: *Matres*

Riojan area: CE 1 *Matres Apillarae* —Badarán; CE 12 *Matres Usea / Festae* —Laguardia; CE 13 *Matres V.* —Canales de la Sierra.

Clunia (Burgos): *Matres* with epithet: CE 4 *Matres Brigeacae*; CE 5 *Matres Caillacae*; CE 8 and 9 (?) *Matres Endeiterae*. *Matres* without epithet: CE 16 (?), 17, 18.

Demanda Mountain Range: *Matres* (origin uncertain, possibly Clunia, Covarrubias, or Lara de los Infantes): CE 9 y 16. Possible origin between Covarrubias and Lara: CE 10, *Matres Monitucinae*.

Sorian area: *Matres* without epithet: CE 21 —Yanguas.

Other nearby areas: CE 22, MATRVBOS —Ágreda, Soria. CE 11, MATRIBVS TRIS (?) —Los Bañales, Uncastillo, Zaragoza.

⁶⁹ Clunia: CE 4, CE 5, CE 8 , CE 9 (?), CE 16 (?), CE 17 and CE 18

⁷⁰ Yanguas: CE21. About the Soria Highlands, cf. ALFARO 2023.

⁷¹ CE 22.

⁷² CE 11.

Legend — Triangle: Theonym of other plural deities⁷³

LVGOBIBVS (CE 30) —Burgo de Osma, Soria

LVGVNIS DEABVS (CE 31) —Atapuerca, Burgos

DIVIS (CE 44) —Clunia, Burgos

DVIRIS ORDAECIS (CE 45) —Valdegeña, Soria

LATTVERIS (CE 47) —Hinojosa de la Sierra, Soria

PARCIS (CE 48) —Termes, Montejo de Tiermes, Soria

Legend — Circle: Stelae with triadic anthropomorphic decoration

La Rioja, Camero Nuevo: Montemediano (LR 1), Nieva I (LR 2), Nieva II (LR 3), Ortigosa (LR 4), El Rasillo (LR 5), Villoslada de Cameros (LR 6).

Soria: Santervás (SO 1), San Esteban de Gormaz (SO 2).

Navarra: Aguilar de Codés (NA 1-5), Marañón (NA 6), Urbiola (NA 7).

Álava: Santa Cruz de Campezo (AL 1).

The relative concentration of some testimonies allows us to reconsider Marco's hypothesis of interpreting triadic groupings as a way of expressing the heroisation of the deceased, and to propose⁷⁴, at least for the female triads of Ortigosa and Villoslada, an allusion to a local plural deity, whether reflecting sacred images or cultic practices.

a. Category of Plural Female Deities

In the Roman West, we are aware of a significant number of indigenous female deities identified by attributes associated with the granting of fertility, which led Germanic research to coin the general term “mother goddesses”⁷⁵. This is a broad category based on epigraphic and archaeological findings, and it has required certain heuristic considerations:

a. To approach the general corpus, as Rüger⁷⁶ does, using the categories of “mother goddesses” (*Muttergottheiten*) and “plural deities” (*mehrzahlige Gottheiten*). Plurality is distinctive in deities of Germanic or Celtic substratum, but their maternal character is only made explicit in the theonyms of some: *Matres*, *Matronae*, *Matrae*, or in iconography of a nurturing nature.

b. To limit the iconographic corpus, as Schauerte⁷⁷ does, to areas of Celtic or Germanic substratum and to deities where the notion of motherhood can be inferred.

The Iberian Peninsula contributes nearly fifty epigraphs from three main areas: the central Iberian region between the Cluniac and Caesaraugustan conventus, the northwestern region between the convents of Braga, Lugo and Astur, and the southern area between the convents of *Hispalis*, *Corduba* and *Emerita*⁷⁸.

b. Iconography and Iconology of Plural Deities

In contrast to the numerous representations of *Matres* and other related deities known in other European regions, very few of these deities have been identified in Iberian stone documents, and their attribution remains debated. One example is an anepigraphic altar from Palencia, discovered in a sacred space with dedications to the *Duillae*⁷⁹, which displays features commonly seen in continental representations: a triadic grouping, an upright position, and a

⁷³ On the debated feminine or masculine nature of some of these plural deities, and the reasons that lead us to interpret them as feminine, cf. ALEIXANDRE BLASCO 2015: LVGOBIBVS (CE 30), DVIRIS ORDAECIS (CE 45), LATTVERIS (CE 47).

⁷⁴ MARCO SIMON 1978, 44.

⁷⁵ HEICHELHEIM 1933, col. 947.

⁷⁶ RÜGER 1987.

⁷⁷ SCHAUERTE 1987, 55.

⁷⁸ ALEIXANDRE BLASCO 2024, Figure 1.

⁷⁹ HEICHELHEIM 1930, col. 2241.

frontal view⁸⁰. Another example is a seated sculptural group found in Castro Mozinho, Porto⁸¹. In terracotta, certain figurines found in Los Bañales (Uncastillo, Zaragoza)⁸² and Arucci (Aroche, Huelva)⁸³ have been proposed as representations of these deities.

This situation is partly due to the reliance on a heuristic approach limited to the general iconography or “classical typology” of *Matres* and *Matronae*, developed primarily in research on the Rhineland area of Lower Germania, an Ubii territory⁸⁴. However, variations have been identified in other regions⁸⁵. Instead, it is necessary to consider the revision led by Schauerte, who identifies three distinguishing aspects in these pieces: iconographic attributes (1), material (2), and the number of deities represented (3)⁸⁶.

The attributes (1) serve as a basis for comparison and analogy between images, particularly when they appear on stelae identifying the goddesses with maternal epithets, suggesting a shared significance in the remaining examples. The number of deities (2) highlights the predominance of triads, although both individual and grouped figures share the same attributes. Differences related to material (3) indicate that stone inscriptions are more closely tied to cult images, whereas terracotta representations exhibit greater variability and independence from these.

c. Bust-shaped Representations

Bust-shaped representations are uncommon in the iconography of *Matres y Matronae*⁸⁷. Conversely, they are characteristic of the *Proxumae* or *Proxumae*, a plural deity known exclusively in *Gallia Narbonensis*, around Nîmes, Arles, Avignon, Orange and Vaison⁸⁸. Research has classified the *Proxumae* as deities related to *Matres*, *Matronae* and *Fatae*, conceptualising them as tutelary spirits of individual fortune⁸⁹. The chthonic nature implied by the bust-shaped form led Rüger to place this appellation within the category of ancestors, suggesting that they were conceived as guardian spirits of forebears who protected the family entity⁹⁰.

Champeaux⁹¹, in turn, highlighted a parallel between this bust-shaped iconography found in these Celtic deities and that of certain representations of Italic *Fortuna*, as well as other nurturing deities in Sicily and southern Italy—such as *Demeter* and *Kore*, the nymphs, and the *Meteres* of Engyon—pointing to their *theurgic* nature⁹².

In the Iberian context, a bifrontal stela attributed to the *Matres* in Nocelo da Pena (Ourense)⁹³ could serve as an iconographic parallel due to its trinitarian composition and bust-shaped form. However, its poor state of conservation warrants omitting it as a precaution⁹⁴.

⁸⁰ BELTRÁN LLORIS, DÍAZ ARIÑO 2007; discussion *apud* ALFAYÉ 2011.

⁸¹ ALMEIDA 1980; BLANCO GARCÍA 2011-2012; discussion *apud* ALFAYÉ 2011 and 2013a.

⁸² ANDREU PINTADO 2012.

⁸³ BERMEJO 2014.

⁸⁴ HORN 1987; RÜGER 1987; GARMAN 2008.

⁸⁵ HEICHELHEIM 1933, col. 950; SCHAUERTE 1987, 58.

⁸⁶ SCHAUERTE 1987.

⁸⁷ BAUCHHENS 1997, nos. 63 and 64, respectively, Mannheim and Bonn (Germany).

⁸⁸ BUISSON 1997.

⁸⁹ DUVAL 1976, 56.

⁹⁰ RÜGER 1987, 2.

⁹¹ CHAMPEAUX 1982, 180.

⁹² CHAMPEAUX 1982, 181. For the same author, the bust form of the Prenestine Fortunes would have referred to their hierophany, conceived as a mysterious emergence from the depths of the earth.

⁹³ CE 6. Cf. RODRÍGUEZ COLMENERO 1977.

⁹⁴ *HEp* 7 1997, no. 545; ALFAYÉ 2011.

d. Groups in the Form of *Nymphae*, *Nutrix* or Venus

The individualisation of breasts is a well-known feature in the iconography of Venus, including in the Iberian Peninsula⁹⁵, and is shared by various representations of *Matres*, *Nymphs*, *Charites* or *Gratiae*, highlighting the deep connection in the Celtic sphere between healing water cults and mother goddesses⁹⁶.

The *dea nutrix* type is frequently found in stone representations of mother goddesses in groups⁹⁷, typically depicted as a seated triad of matrons, partially uncovering one of their breasts, accompanied by infants or young children⁹⁸. This typology is rarer in individual stone figures⁹⁹, whereas it is more abundant in coroplastic art, where the goddess is shown seated on a basket, dressed as a nurse, and uncovering one or both breasts depending on the number of infants.

Images of *nymphae* frequently draw on classical iconography of Venus, such as Venus *Anadyomene*, Venus *Pudica*, etc., whether depicted standing, reclining, or in a combination of both¹⁰⁰. The coexistence of the cult of *Matres* and *nymphae* in the same sanctuaries facilitated an exchange of iconographic elements, with *nymphae* alternatively adopting a triadic character and attributes such as cornucopias, baskets of fruit, or infants on their laps, while *Matres* took on features associated with the former, such as shell-shaped *aediculae*¹⁰¹.

A third key reference point is the iconography of the *Gratiae*, which follows the Hellenistic model of the *Charites*¹⁰² and was dedicated in the Roman West to the decoration of *sarcophagi*¹⁰³. The *Charites* or *Gratiae* are represented as three nude maidens, alternating between front and back views —typically with the central *Charis* facing away— creating a circular connection by placing their hands on each other's shoulders. Their dance would allegorically express the cyclical nature of their beneficent role¹⁰⁴. The figures of *Charites* or *Gratiae* are closely associated with fertility deities, particularly Aphrodite, *erotes* and *nymphae*, which explains the significance of their nudity.

None of these three models —*Matres*, *nymphae*, or *Gratiae*— precisely replicates the images from Ortigosa or Villoslada, yet they exhibit certain analogies. The upright depiction of *Matres* as *nutrices* and *nymphae*, both lacking attributes, shares points of contact with the composition of the three female figures from Ortigosa, whose silhouettes reveal only the outline of their breasts. Meanwhile, the interlinked arms of the three female figures from Villoslada suggest a possible allusion to a cyclic dance akin to that of *Charites* or *Gratiae*, with which they also share a preference for funerary monuments.

⁹⁵ PRETE MAINER 2017.

⁹⁶ GREEN 1995b, 89-92; for the Hispano-Roman context relevant to this research (Figure 6), cf. the intriguing identification of cults dedicated to mineromedicinal springs in the Highlands of Soria, *apud* GÓMEZ-PANTOJA (1997). It worth noting the documentation in Camero Viejo of a local deity, CALDO VLEDICO (El Rasillo, *ERRioha*, no. 60), whose theonym seems to allude to thermal connotations (see above).

⁹⁷ We use the term in a descriptive sense. The theonym *Nutrices* is confined to the area of *Poetovio*, in the province of *Pannonia Superior*, cf. SCHAUERTE 1987, 64.

⁹⁸ SCHAUERTE 1987, nos. 210, 55, 65, respectively: Châtillon-sur-Seine, Cirencester and London.

⁹⁹ SCHAUERTE 1987, nos. 153 and 63, respectively: Reims and Dieburg.

¹⁰⁰ SCHAUERTE 1987, nos. 46 and 47, both come from the sanctuary of *Conventina* in Carrawburgh —Northumberland, UK—.

¹⁰¹ SCHAUERTE 1987, 64, 72 and 81.

¹⁰² HARRISON 1986.

¹⁰³ SICHTERMANN 1986, 203.

¹⁰⁴ HARRISON 1986, 200; SICHTERMANN 1986, 203.

3. Iconographic Proposal

3.1. Sacred Triad on the Ortigosa Stela

OBJECT	
OBJECT TYPE	Stela
DESCRIPTION	A trapezoidal-shaped stela that has lost its upper section, possibly finished with a pediment like the others. Above the epigraphic inscription, the rectangular field is adorned with three human profiles in low relief, with only the one on the left retaining part of its face. The lower part is finished with a projection intended to be fitted into a podium or similar structure.
SUPPORT TYPE	Stone - Granite
DIMENSIONS	(59) x 36 x 19.5
STATE OF PRESERVATION	Fractured, missing top
REFERENCES	<i>ERRioja</i> , n.º 56, lám. 9; <i>HEp</i> 1, 1989: n.º 512; ESPINOSA 1989: 407, 411-412, n.º 4.

INSCRIPTION	
INSCRIPTION TYPE	Sepulchral epitaph
TEXT	<i>D(is) · M(anibus) · p(ositum) · m(onumentum) · Cor(nelia) Sextina / [- - -] o et filio Flav[i]o - - -] x[- - -] OS socer[ro - - -] / PREA[-] et Lu[- - -] Iulia / d(ed)ic(avit) illis opt(imis) e(s)t t(estamento)</i>
EPIGRAPHIC FIELD (cm)	11 x 28
LETTER MODULE	1.2 - 2
PALAEOGRAPHIC FEATURES	Rustic capitals. Interpuncture

ORIGIN and DEPOSIT	
PLACE OF DISCOVERY	Found on a hill near Ortigosa
DEPOSIT	Museo de la Rioja, n.º 2.471

Figure 7. Epigraphic record of the Ortigosa stela. Source: own elaboration.

The Ortigosa stela is a funerary stela, as indicated by its epigraphic text (Figure 7), which begins with the formula *D(is) M(anibus)*. Its iconographic field (Figs. 3 and 4) suggests a certain analogy with the artistic tradition of Celtic influence seen in the decoration of certain sacred monuments, leading us to identify the image as that of a plural female deity. We put forward this proposal despite its funerary context, which makes it a *hápax*, although not without rather illustrative parallels. This hypothesis allows for two possible directions or developments:

a. The Ortigosa stela reflects an image of a cult honoured in the region. This deduction is based on the stone material, which appears to have fostered a stronger dependence on the imagery of cult centres¹⁰⁵. In this case, the Camerano stonemason would have drawn on a familiar iconography, whether from a cult image in a local sanctuary, rendered in either stone or wood¹⁰⁶.

b. The Ortigosa stela reflects images or figurines of the goddesses used in their worship.

In our view, this second possibility seems more plausible, based on various pieces of evidence. Firstly, at the regional level, there is evidence of the production and consumption of ceramic figurines featuring Venus-type iconography. The Museum of Logroño houses a ceramic mould for crafting terracotta figurines of Venus with the *Anadyomene* typology (Figure 8)¹⁰⁷. Moreover, the same Museum preserves a fragment of a ceramic statuette from *Vareia*¹⁰⁸, produced in a *Tritium* workshop using a mould similar to the previous one. Both the mould and

¹⁰⁵ SCHAUERTE 1987, 68 and 72.

¹⁰⁶ MARCO 2004.

¹⁰⁷ Ceramic mould, Venus. Logroño Museum Inv. no. 4791.

¹⁰⁸ Ceramic varnish figurine TSH, Venus. Logroño Museum Inv. no. 4821; h. 6.5 cm; w. max. 2.5 cm.

the figurine indicate their production and consumption in the region, likely in connection with *lararia* or domestic cult chapels¹⁰⁹.

As in the case of *Vareia*, a significant proportion of these terracotta figurines across Europe have been found in habitation contexts, leading to the conclusion that they were associated with domestic cults¹¹⁰. These images draw on Greco-Roman iconography —Venus, Fortuna, Diana, *Dea Nutrix*, etc.— but in many cases, they likely represented female deities of local substratum¹¹¹. Similarly, the domestic cult of the *Proxumae* is inferred from the *lararium*-shaped decoration of some of their altars¹¹², as well as that of the *Matres* in Hispania, particularly in Clunia, due to the frequent discovery of small altars (*arulae*) in habitation contexts¹¹³.

Furthermore, the association of these female figurines with funerary contexts in Celtic Europe is also documented¹¹⁴. The seamless transition of these figurines from domestic to funerary settings suggests their tutelary role as protectors of the group, extending into the mortuary sphere, safeguarding both the funerary monument itself and the afterlife¹¹⁵. Additionally, they serve as indicators not only of protection but also of lineage and identity¹¹⁶.



Figure 8. Venus-type terracotta mould and figurine. Source: Museo de La Rioja, Inv. nos. 4821 and 4791.

The general catalogue of terracotta figurines representing maternal deities¹¹⁷, which documents their production in central Gaul and the Rhineland, provides a coherent comparative framework for the *Anadyomene* type figurine from *Vareia* and the pottery mould from *Tritium*¹¹⁸ (Figure 8). Furthermore, Schauerte's association of these individual figurines

¹⁰⁹ PÉREZ RUIZ 2010 and 2012. These pieces should be added to the bronze image of the Venus of *Libia* —Herramélluri—, Logroño Museum Inv. no. 2444. Cf. PRETE MAINER 2017, 368; E. T. 48.

¹¹⁰ SCHAUERTE 1987, 90.

¹¹¹ SCHAUERTE 1985; RÜGER 1987; GREEN 1995b; MAIER 2001; GARMAN 2008.

¹¹² BUISSOT 1997. Women predominate in the dedications to the *Proxumae*.

¹¹³ GÓMEZ-PANTOJA 1999, 429.

¹¹⁴ DUGAST, 2017, 244-245.

¹¹⁵ MAIER 2001.

¹¹⁶ DUGAST 2017, 253.

¹¹⁷ SCHAUERTE 1985.

¹¹⁸ SCHAUERTE 1985, catalog, 126.

with a terracotta variant of plural deity representations¹¹⁹ is based on the ubiquity of such finds and the prevalence of the cult of *Matres*, *Matronae* and *Matrae* in the same regions. We believe that the correlation between stelae decorated with triadic groupings and monuments depicting plural female deities (Figure 6) offers a valuable interpretative perspective on the triple reiteration and the nude bust iconography that dominates the Ortigosa stela. This interpretation is further supported by the strong road connections between the Camero region and these neighbouring areas, as well as the circulation of this Venus typology in the *Tritium* pottery workshops, which may have served as a model for the Camerano stonemason¹²⁰.

Although this case is exceptional —since no other explicit representations of *Matres* or indigenous deities are known in funerary stelae— we do have an example that presents an interesting analogy. It is a funerary stela found in Úbeda (Jaén), which bears, in its first line, a dedication to *Ataecina Turibrigensis* and the *Manes*¹²¹. This piece is exceptional as it attests to the theonym of a peninsular indigenous deity in a funerary stela.

Luján Martínez makes a significant observation, noting that this is not a case of religious syncretism between *Ataecina* and *Manes*, but rather a deliberate choice by the family of *Gaius Valerio Proculinus*. They decided to associate, in this sepulchral funerary stela commemorating a deceased child, the Roman deities to whom such epigraphs were typically dedicated in the Romanised context of the find —the Roman colony of *Salaria*— alongside an indigenous deity likely worshipped within their family tradition¹²².

We suggest that the Ortigosa stela, on an iconographic level, also associates a representation of a Camerano female deity with the usual epigraphic formula dedicated to the *Manes*, without inferring syncretism between the two, but rather a tutelary role for these indigenous deities in the afterlife. In this sense, it does not seem coincidental that certain Venus figurines can be identified as a reference for the stonemason, as they may have played a role in both domestic and funerary cults of the region. However, the lack of archaeological excavations in habitation sites or cemeteries in the Camero Nuevo region prevents us from asserting whether such a cultic association existed, as we can infer in the nearby *Vareia*. In any case, the three female figures with exposed torsos represented on the Ortigosa funerary stela seem to allude to a Celtic substratum deity conceived as female and plural, whose association with the *Manes* allows us to suggest its probable tutelary, nurse-like, and identity-forming role, in line with what is known about other Celtic deities invoked in relation to the full life cycle of their followers, in this case, during the transition of death¹²³.

¹¹⁹ SCHAUERTE 1985, 115.

¹²⁰ We must regret the lack of updated studies on these coroplastic productions for the Iberian Peninsula; the specific studies on female terracottas found in Los Bañales (ANDREU PINTADO 2012) and in *Arucci* (BERMEJO 2014) are appreciated, as they suggest the use of Greco-Roman style images for Celtic-based cults in the Peninsula.

¹²¹ CILA III.1, 356; HE4, 497. We follow the re-reading proposal put forward by E. Luján Martínez (1995), who slightly corrects the development of the abbreviations in the first line: *A T D M*. While the first editors of the text interpreted the line as *AT(aecina) D(iis) Manibus*, Luján convincingly proposes: *Ataecina Turibrigensi*.

¹²² We refer to the article LUJÁN MARTÍNEZ (1995) regarding the character of the *cognomen* of the dedicant, *Proculus*, which is unusual for the Jaén region where the find was made, but common in the core territory of inscriptions dedicated to *Ataecina*: the central area of Extremadura, extending southward to the Celtic Beturia (ABASCAL 1994), whose city of *Turobriga* may have been its original centre (TOVAR 1974, 173). An inscription from *Emerita* (CIL II, 462) expresses the association of *Ataecina* with the Greek *Proserpina*, suggesting an ambivalence for *Ataecina* between agrarian and infernal attributions. This has been supported by the debated etymology of the theonym, for which cf. GONZÁLEZ ROMÁN 1991, 233. It should be noted that Celtic Beturia is also a territory where the cult of the *Matres* and other plural female deities is documented. However, there is no conclusive evidence to support the association between these and *Ataecina*; on the testimonies of plural deities in Beturia cf. ALEIXANDRE BLASCO 2024.

¹²³ SCHAUERTE 1987; OLMSTED 1994; GREEN 1995b; DUGAST 2017.

3.2. Triad of Dancers on the Villoslada Stela

The Villoslada stela (Figure 9) was carved in granite, which has preserved both its sculptural and epigraphic content in relatively good condition. The stela follows the temple-like model, with the *fastigium* decorated with a five-petaled rosette and the lateral volutes featuring a modillion. The central section is occupied by the silhouettes of three human figures of uniform size, identified as female (Figure 10) by simple hemispherical marks representing the breasts (Figure 11), a detail previously unrecognised¹²⁴.

The bodies are rendered with a highly schematic prismatic representation of the torso and upper limbs, which are extended horizontally. The heads are depicted as simple circles, with visible eye sockets and the outline of the nose¹²⁵. The funerary nature of the inscription is confirmed by the abbreviation *D(is) M(anibus)* in the first line. Identifying the remaining elements is highly complex, possibly including the anthroponym *(F)APMENVE*, the filiation *ALOIANI*, and a potential indication of the deceased's age (fifteen years).



Figure 9. Villoslada stela and detail of its sculptural field. Photograph: authors.

¹²⁴ ESPINOSA 1989, no. 6.

¹²⁵ The iconography is reminiscent of that used to identify female figures in the anthropomorphic votive busts from the Gallic-Roman sanctuary of Forêt d'Halatte (Oise, France), cf. GREEN, 1995b, 25.



Figure 10. Backlit detail of the iconographic field. Photograph: authors.



Figure 11. Detail of the epigraphic field. Artificial colour application —blue and red (Triguero, 2023), with the most visible inscription traces digitally overlaid on the Villoslada inscription. Right: restitution of the Villoslada inscription traces. Source: own elaboration and collaboration with I. Triguero and J. González (UAH).

OBJECT	
OBJECT TYPE	Stelae
DESCRIPTION	Rectangular body topped with a <i>fastigium</i> with lateral acroteria, decorated with a disc with five rays and points between them. The fields are framed with a bead molding; in the central field (16 x 32), three schematic human profiles; the epigraphic field is recessed.
SUPPORT TYPE	Stone - Granite
DIMENSIONS	78 x 44 x 25
STATE OF PRESERVATION	Fractured
REFERENCES	<i>ERRioja</i> , n.º 62, lám. 10; <i>HEp</i> 1, 1989: n.º 519; ESPINOSA 1989: 407, n.º 6.

INSCRIPTION	
INSCRIPTION TYPE	Sepulchral epitaph
TEXT	<i>D(is) M(anibus) MA(umentum) F(ecit)? / FAPMENVE / NEVOPALOLA/NI ALOESE P?² an(n)o(r)um XV</i>
EYE INSPECTION AND ARTIFICIAL COLOUR APPLICATION	<i>D · M · M · A · F F?APMENVE NE · YOP · ALOLA NI (..)O?E?SE(,)P? A?N?O?VMXV?</i>
EPIGRAPHIC SPACE (cm)	17.5 x 32
LETTER MODULE	2 – 4 cm
PALAEOGRAPHIC FEATURES	Rustic capitals. Interpunctuation with round points in line 1, possibly. Interpunctuation in the short traces in lines 2 and 3.

ORIGIN and DEPOSIT	
PLACE OF DISCOVERY	Mojón Alto area, 10 km from Villoslada.
DEPOSIT	Placed by ICONA on a podium in the original place.

Figure 12. Epigraphic record of the Villoslada stela. Source: own elaboration.

In funerary contexts, the representation of music and ritual dances is common¹²⁶, often depicted in groups of three¹²⁷. This invites us to identify a ritual dance on the Villoslada stela, considering that the depiction of the dancing women with nude torsos may have been partially inspired by the model of the *Gratae* or *Charites* (see above), particularly the crossing of the upper limbs as a reference to their circular connection.

The decoration of some altars outside the Iberian Peninsula dedicated to the *Matres* exhibits this reference to dance. In Cisalpine Gaul, where the cult is primarily directed towards the *Matronae*, several testimonies from around the first century AD¹²⁸ depict women standing and joining hands in a dance-like posture¹²⁹. Other geographically isolated documents testify to the presence of ritual dances in the cult of the *Matres*¹³⁰. Some researchers have identified these figures as the same goddesses¹³¹, while others favour the interpretation of dancing women¹³².

The iconographic ambiguity between the human and the divine in these representations may suggest the mimetic character often adopted by rituals in relation to myths, sagas, and theogonies, and specifically the sympathetic value of dance, particularly jumps and leaps,

¹²⁶ RODRÍGUEZ-LÓPEZ 2010.

¹²⁷ USENER 1903, 1-2.

¹²⁸ RÜGER 1987, 10.

¹²⁹ These female figures appear grouped in numbers of three —Pallanza (*CIL* V, 6641) and Morozzo (*CIL* V, 7703)— or five —Avigliana (*CIL* V, 7210).

¹³⁰ An altar from Kirkham, Lancashire (SCHAUERTE 1987, no. 84) combines the representation of a seated triad of *Matres* on the front face with two groups of three dancing women placed on the sides of the piece. A pillar from Escles —Vosges department, France— depicts three dancing female figures above the crowned head of a male (SCHAUERTE 1987, no. 69). A relief from Vindonissa —Windisch, Switzerland— displays three standing female figures in long garments that appear to be holding hands (BAUCHHNESS 1997, no. 57; SCHAUERTE 1987, no. 217).

¹³¹ HEICHELHEIM 1930, no. 101.

¹³² IHM 1893-1897; SCHAUERTE 1987; BAUCHHNESS 1997.

which throughout Europe are linked to rituals aimed at promoting the growth of crops¹³³. The analogy between the iconography of the *Charites* or *Gratiae* and that displayed on some altars to the *Matres* and related deities could allude to the cyclical renewal required from the goddesses.

On the Iberian Peninsula, there are two testimonies suggesting the role of dance in rituals dedicated to substratum female deities. On the one hand, there is a decoration of a stela from Tejada de Tiétar (Cáceres), dedicated to the *SELAIS DVIL(LIS)* or *Du(v)itera*, and on the other, an inscription addressed to the *Rixamae* in *Arucci* (Aroche, Huelva).

In the first case, we refer to a decorated Cáceres stela found in the natural area of the Dehesa del Boyal¹³⁴. The reading and iconographic interpretation of the piece remain subjects of debate. According to Domínguez Monedero¹³⁵, line 4 refers to the plural feminine theonym *SELAIS DVIL(LIS)*, which he links to the *DVILLIS* of Palencia. The associated anthropomorphic figure is interpreted, with numerous iconographic parallels from the Iberian Peninsula, as a dancer in a sacred ritual, possibly a *paloteo* dance, suggested by two small horizontal stripes at the top of the skirt. For Alfayé¹³⁶, the image would be more closely associated with an offering table, and the theonym could be reconstructed as referring to an individual divinity: *Du(v)itera*. We agree with the fragility of these proposals due to the poor preservation of the inscription, but we believe that the reference to an indigenous female deity and a possible allusion to dance cannot be dismissed¹³⁷.

In the forensic area of ancient *Arucci*¹³⁸, a *tabula ansata* dedicated to the *Rixamae* was found. Bermejo's study¹³⁹ links this epithet, without a theonym, to the term mentioned by Martial¹⁴⁰ in his list of the *nomina Duriora* from his native Celtiberia: *chori Rixamarum*, which has already been recognised as a probable reference to some form of Celtiberian dance or ritual¹⁴¹. The Huelva inscription, in correlation with Martial's text, seems to refer to a specific cult involving dances and rituals in honour of a plural female divinity, the *Rixamae*, whose etymology, *IE rix-* meaning 'king or royal', suggests a prominent position in the Celtiberian pantheon¹⁴².

Accepting these parallels, we identify in the Villoslada stela the depiction of a ritual dance. However, we draw attention to the absence of lower limbs, which introduces a certain ambiguity regarding the human or divine nature of the figures. In any case, the symbolism of a cyclical dance and the funerary nature of the stela seems to correspond to the role of the deities referenced in the consummation of the life cycle beyond death—symbolism that shares some parallels with the representation of a tree element on the *fastigium* of the Nieva (II) stela (Figure 5), which, in its own way, expresses the concept of regeneration.

The natural and desolate character of the location where the Villoslada piece was found raises questions about the reason for its transport to an uninhabited, high-pasture area such as Mojón Alto (1768 meters above sea level), where visual surveys conducted by Espinosa¹⁴³ and

¹³³ FRAZER 1951, 152.

¹³⁴ *HEp* 3, 1993: no. 139.

¹³⁵ DOMÍNGUEZ MONEDERO 1987-1988.

¹³⁶ ALFAYÉ 2011; ALFAYÉ *et alii* 2017.

¹³⁷ The alternative interpretation of an offering table, although viable, relies on extra-Peninsular parallels in Dacia and northern Italy, which are not fully justified by ALFAYÉ *et alii* 2017, 239.

¹³⁸ CE 51.

¹³⁹ BERMEJO MELÉNDEZ 2014.

¹⁴⁰ Mart. 4.55.16.

¹⁴¹ RAMÍIA 2017.

¹⁴² GIMENO PASCUAL, ROTHENHÖFER 2012.

¹⁴³ ERRIOJA, 62.

our own have not recorded any traces of occupation. In this case, or others like the Tejada de Tiétar stela, the sacred value and regulation of certain natural spaces or *luci* among Celts and other ancient peoples should be considered¹⁴⁴.

4. Conclusions

The testimonies recovered in the Camero Nuevo region have allowed us to identify processes of cultural survival and syncretism in a marginal sector of *Tarraconensis* that was nonetheless connected —both economically and culturally— to a vast area traversed by the valleys of the Duero and Ebro rivers. Camero Nuevo appears as a relatively independent zone, where the influences of Romanisation facilitated the transposition of indigenous beliefs into the epigraphic testimonies. This grants it value as a paradigmatic case, although we must exercise caution when extrapolating the results of this study to other areas.

We have analysed various iconographic elements, such as triadic groupings, the wheel or radiate disc, and chthonic and nurturing attributes —either depicted in bust form or indicated through the emphasis on breasts. We argue that, taken together, these elements not only express an iconological framework consistent with the Celtic sphere but also support the presence of a cult dedicated to female deities of the *Matres* type in the region. This aligns with the distribution of similar testimonies in the central areas of the Iberian Peninsula.

The identification of two triadic sets —those depicted on the stelae of Ortigosa and Villoslada— where groups of three female figures are distinguished has allowed us to propose their sacred interpretation: as sacred images in the case of Ortigosa and as dances performed by or for the goddesses in Villoslada. To this end, we have drawn upon artistic representations in funerary stelae and terracotta from Romanised Celtic Europe. The fact that these are funerary monuments does not contradict this interpretation, since, although monuments dedicated to the *Matres* and related deities are primarily votive rather than funerary, their association with domestic and funerary cults is well attested through female figurines, which can be interpreted as individual variants of the same plural divinities.

The Iberian corpus allows us to identify a case in which an indigenous female deity, *Ataecina*, was associated with the *Manes* in a funerary inscription, providing a parallel for our proposal regarding Ortigosa. We consider that the references made by the stonemason from Camero could be linked to ceramic figurines of the Venus type, which likely held special significance due to their shared role in both domestic and funerary contexts.

This aspect of sovereignty over both this life and the next would, in turn, be expressed by the Villoslada stela through a triad of women performing a dance. Beyond suggesting a possible ritual aspect in the form of dances dedicated to these goddesses —akin to Martial's *chori Rixamarum*— it would also allude to other attributes ascribed to these divinities, such as the regeneration of nature and of the deceased mentioned in the inscription.

In future studies, we aim to examine other iconographic sets from Roman Hispania, including both additional examples from the Camero region —intentionally limited in this analysis to these two specimens— and from the central Iberian area, to which this region was geographically and culturally connected in Antiquity. Our objective is to apply this methodology to progressively unravel these and other substratum religious concepts, as well

¹⁴⁴ FERNÁNDEZ-NIETO 2010. The image of three female figures dancing on a male head in the pillar of Escles (SCHAUERTE 1987, no. 69; see above) could explain this phenomenon by symbolically alluding, according to the metaphor of “hill” for “head”, to the performance of dances in honour of the goddesses on sacred promontories separated from the inhabited areas.

as to verify the deep connection between parts of Hispania and the Roman West, heir to Celtic Europe.

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Abbreviations

CILA III.1 – GONZÁLEZ ROMÁN y MANGAS MANJARRÉS 1991.

ERRioja – ESPINOSA RUIZ 1986.

ERPSO – JIMENO 1980.

Hep – *Hispania Epigraphica*.

IRMN – CASTILLO, GÓMEZ-PANTOJA y MAULEÓN 1981.

LIMC – *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*. Artemis & Winkler Verlag.

MvG – BAUCHHENSS, G. y NEUMANN, G. (Redaktion) 1987. *Matronen und verwandte Gottheiten*.

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RE: *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*.

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