



The present text is the interpretation of an Archaeological landscape – the natural region of the Upper Paiva – and was developed within the project “Upper Paiva: societies and strategies of settlement from prehistoric times to the middle ages”, coordinated by Domingos J. Cruz. It means to contribute, through a regional scale study, to develop the scientific knowledge of continuity/rupture that occurred in the area between Douro and Vouga rivers, throughout the Romanization period and early Middle Ages. By sketching the evolution of settlement a few questions arose and some hypothetical explanations were set forth.

By means of extensive methods an inventory of over one hundred sites was made, this was the base for the interpretative analysis.

The Upper Paiva region, an upland complex, is not rich in resources and probably for that reason has been looked at as a marginal area during historical times. The ancient landscape was certainly ruled by ancestral rural and pastoral rhythms, due to the favourable conditions that the region offers. In more troubled periods — like Late Antiquity and during boundary conflicts between Christians and Muslims — it was a place population fled to in search for security.

Its peripheral character must not, however, deceive us. This area was crossed by communication axis of Roman and medieval periods through natural corridors that are outlined from the north to the south and from the west to the east. These routes allowed a regional and trans-regional circulation, in part proved by archaeological data.

The Romanization introduced a level of complexity not known to the indigenous communities, integrating them into a quite different society (universe): the Roman Empire. The proximity of water and roads has influenced the localization of dispersed settlement, whose territory includes some fertile lands and other less fertile and at a higher altitude, suggesting herding, agriculture and some foraging were used in complement.

The Early Middle Ages are still quite unknown, but the gathered data allow us to think there was a certain tendency to cluster settlement and to reoccupy old fortified settlements due to the troubled times. Herding was certainly the major economical activity, and agriculture was less important due to the soils’ inferior quality.

From the eighth century on, Christians marked the landscape with their rock carved graves, placed close to settlement areas, in places that stand out and are frequently close to paths. These graves are found isolated or in groups forming small cemeteries, sometimes close to a temple, showing a dispersed settlement pattern, close to water and fertile lands.

This marginal area is not going to be appealing to the Islamic conquerors, though the importance of this territory apparently grows when the frontier between the Christian and Islamic worlds builds up next to the Douro margins. During that period Alto Paiva is probably an interesting place for those who seek refuge. Rudimentary defences are built by the population for moments of distress, some of these fortifications emerge close to the villages in high and easily tenable places.

This study revealed a more humanized area than it was expected for such a barren territory — the one the writer Aquilino Ribeiro named “Terras do Demo” (“devil’s land”, because of the hard living conditions that people had to deal with) — and poses a series of questions about the peopling of this region along the centuries, namely the more obscure periods of Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages.