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CEREMONIAL SPACES FROM LATE BRONZE AGE TO ROMAN IN WESTERN CANTABRIAN HILLFORTS

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Abstract: *The first fortified settlements in Asturias date back to the Late Bronze Age, in the transition between the 9th and 8th Centuries B.D. From their foundation to their definitive abandonment (which took place when the region was already under Roman rule), the archaeological record shows the presence of preeminent spaces with singular architectonic structures. The importance of these spaces within the primitive urban landscape of hillforts is expressed in both their monumental architectural characteristics and their placement in prominent locations. None of them has rendered any archaeological evidence pointing toward domestic or artisan activities but, on the contrary, the amount of evidence supporting their ceremonial nature is almost overwhelming. The present paper reviews those social and architectural traits that characterize the socio-ritual scenography in these fortified settlements from the Late Bronze Age temenos, the monumental constructions imbricated in the urban fabric of Iron Age settlements, and their peculiar adaptation to Roman administrative liturgy during Roman occupation.*

Keywords: Hillfort, Acropolis, sauna, assembly houses, indigenous fora, necropolis, C¹⁴ dates, Asturias

THE MONUMENTALIZATION OF RITUAL SPACES DURING BRONZE AGE: THE CHAO SAMARTÍN ACROPOLIS

The presence of fortified settlements from the Bronze Age in Asturias has only recently been documented. However, whenever a long-term excavation has been completed in moderately extensive site areas in the western area of the region, thus allowing for systematic dating of archaeological structures, the results provide evidence of the presence of settlements delimited by monumental defensive belts whose foundation dates back to the 8th Century B.C. or earlier (Villa 2002: 177-179).

These precincts are characteristically located on top of strategic topographic landmarks overseeing extensive, or

key geographic areas, and evolve toward unequivocally Castreñan morphologies in the following centuries. Relative territorial cohesion is also indicated by the dispersion of these settlements, which share a common overall morphology across all regional biotopes, from the coastal plains to the interior highlands (Fig. 16.1). These elements delineate two characteristics, continuity and frequency of these settlements, which emerge as particularly relevant due to their contrast with the evolution of settlement patterns in other contiguous Castreñan areas.

Late Bronze Age sites are scarce in Asturias. Most of the settlements in the central and eastern areas of the region have been attributed to the Early Iron Age (Camino, 1999: 158; Maya and Cuesta, 2001: 83), even when Late Bronze

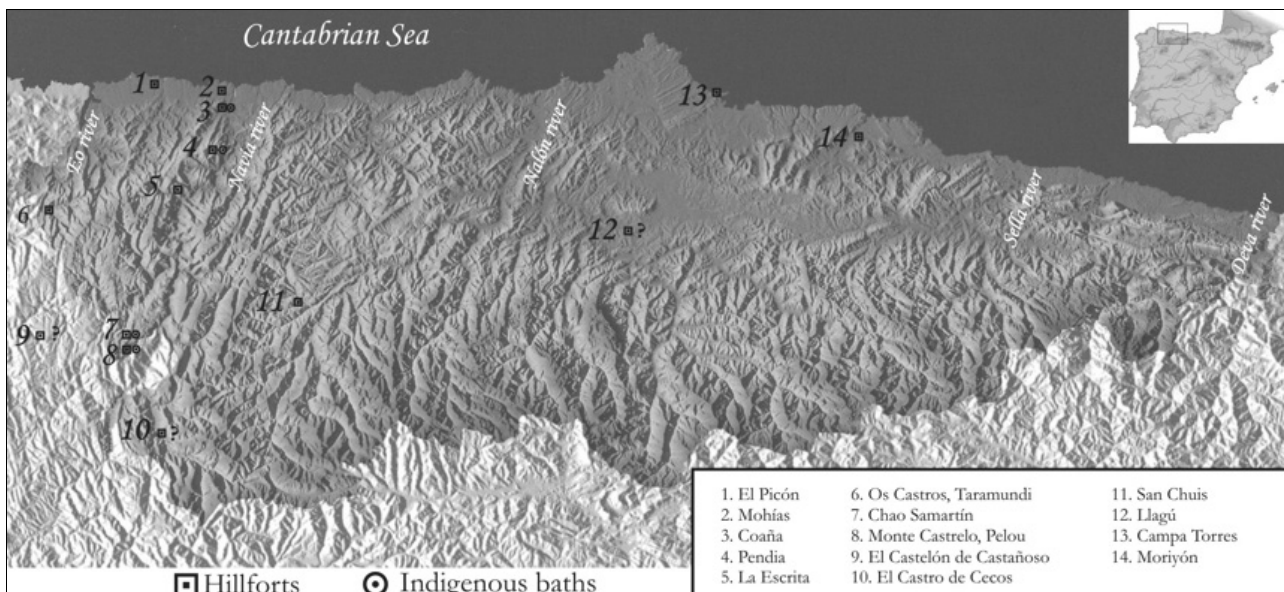


Fig. 16.1. Map of Asturias showing referenced sites



Fig. 16.2. Chao Samartín. Left: Acrópolis gateway. Right: village, Roman and pre-Roman walls and ditches

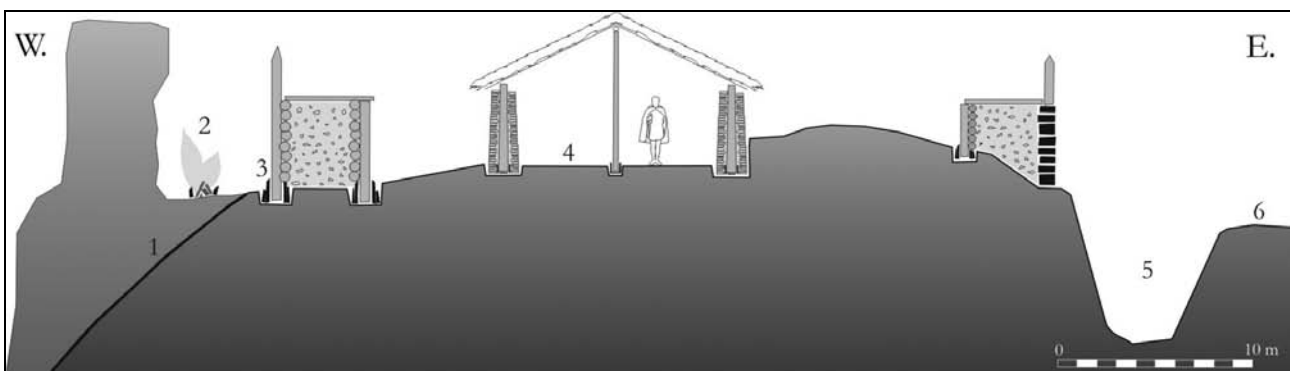


Fig. 16.3. Chao Samartín. Ideal section of the Acropolis (8th Century B.C.) showing dated places with ¹⁴C

Age dates, or cultural traits inherited from this period (when not in direct continuity with Bronze Age traditions) have been identified in these sites. In the western area of the region, on the contrary, a small but significant group of Bronze Age sites are currently being excavated or have been comprehensively surveyed.

Chao Samartín hillfort, in Grandas de Salime, is the most representative example of these western Asturian Bronze Age sites (Fig. 16.2). In this site, a monumental precinct enclosing a large wooden building was built atop the small plain, crowning the site, ca. 800 B.C. The building sat facing a large boulder that presides over the site, on whose feet blazed a pyre (Fig. 16.3). The complex was delimited by the combination of two contiguous defensive structures. A heavy palisade covered the western flank, while a stone wall demarcated its southern and eastern limits. A moat bordered at least the eastern margin of the wall.

The palisade rose above a steep cliff dominating the valley, resting on a double line of supports. It continued until the northern end of the precinct, with a small corridor between the large building and the boulder as its only interruption.

A 3.5 m wide door opened in the south to a trail leading to the large building, located in the centre of the Acropolis.

The structure of this building was sustained by wide beams, which rested directly on the bedrock and were entrenched in wooden wall panels. Two central beams supported the roof, which covered an area of 12.50 x 4.40 m. This structure yielded several metallurgic artefacts, mostly with a cupriferous base, including *situla* handles, caldron fragments, and the remains of a large disc manufactured from riveted and nailed down metal plates. These findings suggest a ceremonial use of the

structure, rather than a domestic or industrial one. The spatial segregation and isolation of the structure also seem to support the hypothesis of a ritual nature, which can likely be extended to the rest of the complex in view, for example, of the funerary deposit placed in its gate.

A human skull was placed in this location, at the base of the defences of the Acropolis, and by the trail conducing to the building. This deposit was contained in a small stone urn, and represents a singular finding within the context of North-Western *Castreña* culture, due both to the previous lack of any documental information regarding the funerary rites of these communities, and to the originality of the burial feature itself. The urn was constructed by excavating a niche of an approximately rectangular base in a compacted dirt soil, and covering the walls with slate flagstones, resulting in an internal space of approximately 250 x 200 x 330 mm. A horizontal flagstone sealed the urn's mouth, whose only contents at excavation consisted of a human calotte (Fig. 16.4). Preliminary analysis indicates that the remains represent a sub-adult individual, likely a teen woman, and that the original deposit consisted of the skull alone (Villa and Cabo 2003: 145).

In view of the unusual characteristics of this deposit, it seems reasonable to attribute a complex intention to the burial liturgy, transcending the condition of mere inhumation. Rather, the aim seems to have been, the safekeeping of a relic that was highly valued by the community, either because of the special range of the individual, or due to the meaning of the ceremony that most likely accompanied its deposit, which was probably related to the foundation of the precinct.

The Acropolis was not an isolated structure, but constitutes a ceremonial complex that was consubstantial to the settlement, although segregated from it physically and monumentally. The habitation settlement surrounded the Acropolis and was also circled by defensive structures, as evidenced by a few preserved features, pits and defensive ditches contemporary to the ceremonial complex.

From the combined analysis of the radiocarbon dates obtained from the different areas surveyed in the Acropolis, it can be concluded that the foundation of the fortified precinct took place between 801 and 778 B.C., and it was completely destroyed at some point between 761 and 679 B.C. (Villa and Cabo 2003).

CEREMONIAL SPACES IN BRONZE AGE SETTLEMENTS

During the early 4th Century A.D., those traits that will characterize the urban landscape of these fortified settlements until Roman domination (completed on 19 B.C.) attain their full maturity. At this moment the

defensive belts undergo a period of rapid renovation. New moats are built and modular walls become the general rule. Modular walls represent an original technique of construction, at present only observed in Asturian hillforts, in which the defensive walls are built through the addition of discrete and largely independent sections, resulting in fully compartmentalized structures. In those sites where large enough wall sections have been excavated, it has been revealed that, apart from the immediate objective of consolidating a solid defensive line, these structures are also linked to an extension of the perimeter of the precinct, and are likely related to a demographic expansion. These communities, with mainly an agricultural base, formed closed groups without marked social inequalities, and solved their conflicts through segmentation and foundation of new settlements (Fernández-Posse 2002:86). Within this framework, the monumental fortifications would be an expressive sign of reaffirmation in front of neighboring communities, the material expression of the capabilities, power and cohesion of the group.

These defenses shelter a net of buildings and constructions, meticulously fit into the layout of walls and moats, whose patterning also reveals clear regional differences. While the settlements in the Central and Eastern areas of the region are characterized by circular-base constructions built from perishable materials (interwoven twigs cemented with clay) laid atop circular stone foundations (Campa Torres, Moriyón, Llagú), in the Western hillforts the walls are entirely built from local slate stone, and rectilinear walls (still finished in rounded corners) join the circular structures (Monte Castrolo, San Chuis, Chao Samartín, Os Castros).



Fig. 16.4. Chao Samartín. Burial feature (8th Century B.C.)

It is precisely some of these constructions with rectilinear walls and rounded corners that come to break the monotonous domestic architecture of the hillforts, among other reasons because of their architectural originality and

prominent emplacements. They are the large buildings known as “assembly houses” and the “Castreñan saunas,” two typologies that share the aim of monumentalization already present in the Late Bronze Age Acropolis, but now intertwined in the urban fabric of the settlements, on which they are projected with indisputable scenographical protagonism.¹ In this way, new communal spaces are born, conceived as a framework for social representation, and around which probably orbited all those political or religious rites that served to reaffirm the group’s identity.

The large buildings or assembly houses

This type of building is present in all settlements that were comprehensively excavated, were they are especially noticeable due their hypertrophied dimensions, which sometimes double or triple the usual area of the remaining domestic constructions.² Inside these wide and apparently clear spaces, the archaeological record reveals an unequivocal departure from domestic or residential patterns, while artifacts suggesting social and ideological values are abundant.³ Their strategic placement and monumental projection also support the evidence for their social and symbolic nature (Fig. 16.5). In fact, there are have not been offered any convincing arguments to question their interpretation as social spaces linked to the organization of the indigenous communities, as classically proposed for equivalent structures within Portuguese hillforts (Coelho 1986: 53).



Fig. 16.5. El Castro de Pencia. Large building or “assembly house”

¹ At the same time it has been detected a maybe occasional reutilization of the old precinct of the Acropolis. Gold and silver jewelry has been recovered in this area, in contexts dated between the 4th and 2nd Centuries b.C. (Villa 2004: 261).

² Compared to the 12-20 m² typical area of regular cottages, these large buildings always cover areas above 45 m² -Os Castros or Mohías- and frequently above 60, 70 or 80 m², as is the case in Coaña, Pencia, Monte Castreo or Chao Samartín.

³ A set of a metallic and several polished stone axes recovered at Pencia hillfort must be interpreted in this sense (García and Bellido 1942: 305).

Castreñan saunas or monumental structures with ovens

Asturias possesses the higher concentration of this type of features, which are characteristic of the north-eastern Iberian Peninsula, and probably constitute the most singular architectonic expression within the urban landscape of hillforts.

The older of these constructions date back to the early 4th Century B.C. (maybe late 5th B.C.), following a regular pattern with surprising similarities in their dimensions and emplacements. The primitive model is characterized by a rectangular axis continued in an apse-like chevet. An oven, a steam chamber and a small hall or a foyer align inside the structure (Fig. 16.6).

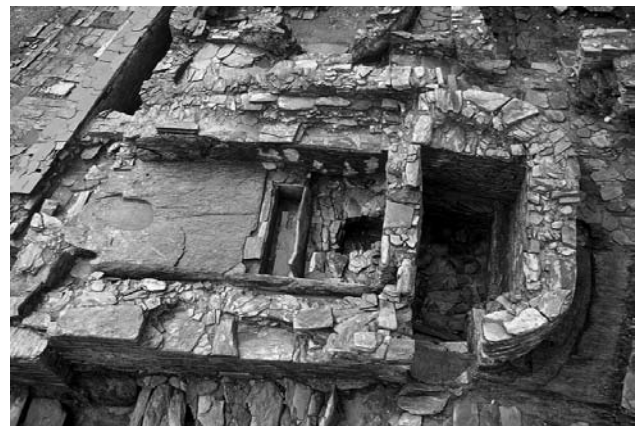


Fig. 16.6. Chao Samartín. Indigenous baths (5th Century B.C.)

All the rustic saunas documented in Asturias are located along the Navia River Basin, in the westernmost area of the region.⁴ Their location, proportions and morphology define a homogeneous building typology that appears as a differentiated regional array, functionally different from the Portuguese structures that are traditionally considered their counterparts. With no exception, they are enclosed within the fortified perimeters of hillforts, always in a position overlooking the access area. These prominent emplacements, together with their monumental architecture, reveal the leading role reserved for these saunas within the conceptual framework of the community, being a focal element showcased before the main gate of the settlement (Fig. 16.7).

In consequence, Castreñan assembly houses and saunas represent the inside-wall expressions of the same

⁴ Six rustic saunas have been or are currently being excavated in Asturias (two at Coaña, two at Pencia, one at Chao Samartín and, finally, one at Monte Castrelo de Pelou, in Grandas de Salime county). Similar buildings, and therefore potential saunas, are mentioned in the literature at El Castro de Cecos, in Ibias county, Asturias (Ron, J.A., In Fernández and Graña 1994: 182), and El Castelón de Castañoso, at the Eo River Basin, in the county of A Fozagrada, in Galicia (López *et al.* 1986: 51).



Fig. 16.7. Monte Castrelo, Pelou. Indigenous baths destroyed by later construction of new walls (5th – 4th Centuries B.C.)

mechanisms for social self-affirmation and group cohesion that inspired the construction of colossal defensive walls and moats. They served as the arenas to stage the main communal rituals, apparently reflecting a liturgical duality between the civic or political plane (assembly houses) and a spiritual one characterized by a preeminence of aquatic and thermal ceremonies (saunas).

HILLFORT SPACES FOR SOCIAL REPRESENTATION DURING ROMAN AGES

The consolidation of Roman occupation triggers a deep but heterogeneous transformation of the ancient Iron Age settlements. The degree of transformation reflects a hierarchy in settlement importance, which could be based in their already established preeminence or, more likely, in the importance assigned and acquired within the Imperial administrative network. This came to engender significant social contrasts, evidenced in the material culture of the settlements. Generally speaking, the more genuine Roman contributions – *terra sigillata*, glass, *lucernae* or Roman currency – coexist with the traditional local elements, at least to some extent. But in some hillforts the traditional equipment and utensils are systematically substituted by sumptuous exogenous elements. Sites like Chao Samartín reveal a transformation of the urban landscape marked by the appearance of privileged family groups. This is evidenced by new habitation spaces formed by aggregation of existing individual constructions, including the areas amid the joint buildings, formerly public spaces and streets. This capacity even to appropriate public spaces is more revealing when weighted against the extraordinary sets of rich artifacts recovered behind the doors of these new structures, the first ones to be protected by key locks in the region (Villa 2005: 94).

The new social groups reach their climax of wealth and ostentation during the last decades of the first century A.D. Their promotion is obviously linked to their proximity to the Roman power, and probable involvement in the implementation of the Roman tax system. At Chao Samartín – and maybe in other cases, such as Coaña, San Chuis or La Escrita – it was not necessary to further endorse the nature of the site as a key landmark. The settlement already enjoyed this consideration, at least from the foundation of the first fortified precinct in the early 8th Century B.C. (de Blas and Villa 2007). Through the election of these settlements as local capitals, Rome repossesses an already existing supra-communal relational network, making use of it to implement its tax policies. This network kept its functionality until the second half of the 2nd Century A.D.

Chao Samartín is once again the best example of one of these administrative centers, being in this case not merely close to Roman political and administrative influence, but physically housing Roman administration. There is not an alternative explanation for the presence of military troops in the settlement, at least from the administration of emperor Tiberius, and until that of Trajanus (Villa *et al.* 2006). The presence of high rank officials is also evidenced by the construction inside the precinct of a *domus*, structured around a main body with columned back atrium, thermal and heating system, and rich wall decorations (Fig. 16.8).



Fig. 16.8. Chao Samartín. Public square built during the first Century A.D. above a pre-Roman large building (4th – 1st Centuries B.C.)

An urban centre and space was required for the celebration of those ceremonials and public routines that are consubstantial to its administrative function. At Chao Samartín this space was placed in a public square facing the main gate, and overlooking the entryway of the settlement. It was a broad rectangular and completely paved area, with benches built against, and running along the whole extension of, the north and west walls (Fig. 16.9). This is a space conceived as rural representation of



Fig. 16.9. El Castelón, Coaña. Square platform built by the bath's area, overseeing the settlement's entryway

the traditional Roman *fora*, that was significantly built over the remains of the large assembly building from the Iron Age, and attached to the monumental stairs that led to the gate of the Castreñan sauna, which at that moment had already been deeply modified. It is therefore, a location that preserves a significant part of its former highly symbolic value,⁵ only reinterpreted in Roman fashion. Indeed, the same ceremonial complex and patterning also appears in the Coaña hillfort (Fig. 16.10), combining the same elements and reproducing the dimensions of the main building. An entryway, flanked by two guard posts, leads to a rectangular platform, which raises slightly above the level of the paved trail conducting to the primitive Castreñan sauna⁶ (Fig. 16.11).



Fig. 16.10. El Castelón, Coaña. Left: gateway, indigenous baths and square platform

⁵ Some of the elements that were probably used in the official ceremonials were recovered in a small reliquary located in front of the building: a set of 15 bronze scale weights, and a magnificent example of *hasta*, manufactured in iron, with tubular handle and a ca. 0.75 m blade (Villa 2005: 50).

⁶ At Coaña this platform was originally interpreted as a tower. In fact, it is simply an architectonic solution that allowed to configure the adequate scenery for the ritual exercise of power, following a well established pattern.

In conclusion, after a period of military proctoring, the Roman *civitas* established a social system based on the inter-dependence and general subordination of the indigenous population allocated in the hillforts. In this way, the hillforts came to constitute the basic unit of the Roman administrative structure, and some of them, the most prominent, were established as *caput civitates*. This is the case of Chao Samartín,⁷ Coaña, San Chuis and the Campa Torres, where a monument (likely a lighthouse) was erected to honour emperor Augustus (Fernández Ochoa *et al.* 2005).

By the end of the second Century A.D., the hillforts are completely abandoned, definitively losing all conditions of predominate habitation. In some cases the abandonment can be linked to natural causes, such as in Chao Samartín, where an earthquake destroyed the settlement, causing the total collapse of all buildings. Anyway, this catastrophe took place, when a strong diminution of commercial activity was already evident, culminating a progressive decadence in the inflow of currency and sumptuous goods that can be clearly perceived from the beginning of the second Century A.D.

In spite of their abandonment, the symbolic relevance of these settlements survived in the collective conscience of local rural communities. From the Early Middle Ages, the construction of Christian chapels and burial grounds atop their former locations came to fossilize their condition of key landmarks in the sacred geography of Asturias.

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⁷ This settlement has been identified as the *OCELA* mentioned by Ptolomeus among the interior Gallecian settlements (de Francisco & Villa 2005).

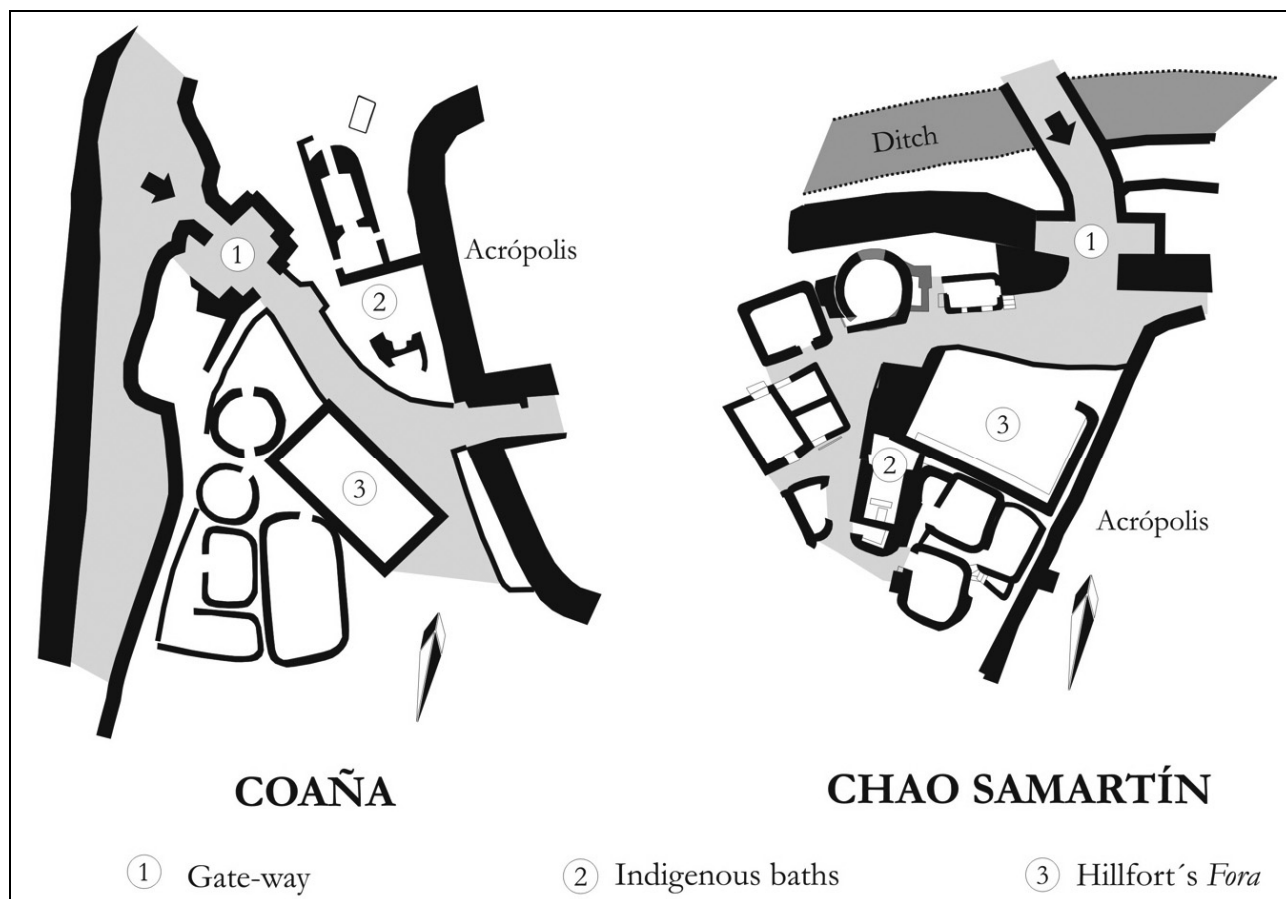


Fig. 16.11. Ceremonial spaces built during Roman Ages at Asturian hillforts

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