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Marta FERNÁNDEZ CORRAL
University of the Basque Country (EHU)
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0615-9955

ROMAN EPIGRAPHIC HABIT IN THE SIERRA DE LA DEMANDA: THE STELAE FROM THE CHURCH OF LA ASUNCIÓN IN SAN VICENTE DEL VALLE (BURGOS, SPAIN)

This article presents a study of Roman-period inscriptions reused as building materials in the church of La Asunción (Burgos, Spain), with the aim of gaining insight into the local society of the area. First, we review the general historical and archaeological context of the region during the Roman period. We then examine the funerary stelae, focussing on personal names, ages at death, and family relationships, and relate these data to the broader epigraphic habits and social patterns known from the surrounding region and Hispania.

HÁBITO EPIGRÁFICO ROMANO EN LA SIERRA DE LA DEMANDA: LAS ESTELAS DE LA IGLESIA DE LA ASUNCIÓN EN SAN VICENTE DEL VALLE (BURGOS, ESPAÑA)

Este trabajo presenta un estudio de las inscripciones de época romana reutilizadas como material de construcción en la Iglesia de la Asunción (Burgos, España) con el objetivo de profundizar en el conocimiento de la sociedad local de la zona. En primer lugar, se revisa el contexto histórico y arqueológico de la región durante el período romano. A continuación, se analizan en detalle las estelas funerarias – prestando especial atención a los nombres personales, las edades de fallecimiento y las relaciones familiares – y se ponen en relación estos datos con los hábitos epigráficos y los patrones sociales del resto de la región e Hispania.

Keywords: Roman epigraphy, epigraphic habit, San Vicente del Valle, Hispania
Palabras clave: epigrafía romana, hábito epigráfico, San Vicente del Valle, Hispania
Słowa klucze: epigrafika rzymska, zwyczaje epigraficzne, San Vicente del Valle, Hiszpania

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Introduction[1]

San Vicente del Valle is a small village located in the upper valley of the Río Tirón, on the northern slopes of the Sierra de la Demanda, in the province of Burgos. Despite its modest size, the village occupies a landscape of notable historical depth, where archaeological and architectural evidence demonstrate a continuous human presence from antiquity to the present day. The church of La Asunción, located in the immediate surroundings of San Vicente del Valle, represents this long and complex history of occupation. Its architectural fabric preserves traces of different chronological periods, from the reuse of Roman funerary stelae to the early medieval and later phases of construction.

Until recently, scholarly attention has focused primarily on the medieval architecture and decoration of the church of La Asunción. In fact, in the meticulous description of the church made by L. Huidobro in the early 1930s (Huidobro 1932a, 1932b, 1932c), no reference was made to the Roman elements of the building and even the external cornice – later identified as belonging to the Roman period – was given a Visigothic chronology, although Huidobro acknowledged that 'it recalls classical entablatures'. The discovery of the Roman-period architectural elements and stelae began in 1985, after a fire ruined the wooden roof and the northern wall of the church. In response to this event, the authorities funded an archaeological excavation and restoration project of the church (Aparicio Bastardo 1995; Aparicio Bastardo, de la Fuente 1996).[2] As a result, archaeologists were able to shed light on the historical processes involved in the construction and use of the church, identifying numerous reused stone blocks and Roman date.[3] Following their discovery, some of the best preserved Roman epitaphs became part of a small permanent exhibition at the church (Figure 1) – together with some other archaeological findings – while others are still part of the fabric of the building.[4]

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[1] I would like to express my gratitude to the editors of the journal and the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions, which helped improve the paper.

[2] The archaeological excavation and the restoration of the church happened between December 1990 and October–December 1993 and were fund by the Junta de Castilla y León. I would like to thank archaeologist J.A. Aparicio Bastardo for kindly answering all my questions regarding the archaeological intervention at the church and providing valuable information.

[3] It is worth mentioning that the same process of reuse of Roman stone blocks was also identified in other near churches of the area, for example, in San Pedro el Viejo de Arlanza and Quintanilla de las Viñas (Latorre González-Moro *et al.* 1991: 151–152; Caballero Zoreda 1995; Utrero Agudo, Caballero Zoreda, Arce Sáinz 2003: 82; Arce Sáinz 2010: 77).

[4] Some other stelae uncovered during the archaeological excavation were not displayed at the church because of their poor preservation conditions and were deposited in the storage facilities of the Provincial Museum of Burgos. Direct access to this last group of inscriptions only happened at the final stage of preparing this paper. Because of the poor preservation conditions of the ensemble, their study has been extremely difficult, and the interpretation of the texts are still very preliminary. Therefore, none of those inscriptions will be mentioned in this study. A complete edition of these

The elements were only scarcely mentioned as secondary findings in several publications devoted to the medieval architecture and history of the church. In 1985 J.A. Abásolo published one of the inscriptions (1985: 164), but it was not until 2018 – within the framework of a research project on the epigraphy of the area – that the Roman period inscriptions displayed at the church were finally edited and published (Fernández Corral 2018). However, a broader perspective on the epigraphic ensemble, incorporating the available historical, archaeological, and epigraphic data for the Roman period in the area, was still lacking. Thus, the aim of this article is to improve understanding of San Vicente del Valle and its epigraphic production by further contextualising it within the Roman historical framework of the Sierra de la Demanda and the spread of the epigraphic habit in the region.



Figure 1. Some stelae from Roman period displayed at the church.

The historical and archaeological context of the area

The exact place of origin of the stelae in the Roman period remains unknown. There is no information regarding the cemetery in which the epitaphs were originally set up, nor about the existence of a Roman-period settlement in San Vicente del Valle itself. However, it is possible to approach the general context of the area thanks to the information provided by other historical sources. The work of

stelae will be published after the intervention of the restoration service of the Provincial Museum of Burgos.

the authors Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis historia* III, 3, 26-27) and Ptolemy (*Geographia*, II, 6, 52-54) constitute our principal sources of information about the organisation of this territory during the early Empire. The first one, in his description of the province of Hispania Citerior offers the administrative division of the area and mentions some cities, and the second, provides a more detailed catalogue of the *civitates* of the region. According to their information, the Sierra de la Demanda was the limit between the *civitates* of group of the Autrigones and, Berones and therefore, between the *Conventus Cluniensis* and *Caesaraugustanus*. The *civitates* of the former included *Virovesca, Tritium,* and *Segisamonculum*, in the north-east of the Sierra de la Demanda, currently identified as Briviesca, Monasterio de Rodilla and Cerezo de Río Tirón (TIR K-30, 247, 226 and 207). To the West, in the *Conventus Caesaraugustanus*, the group of Berones had the *civitates* of *Libia* and *Tritium Magallum* as the closest ones to San Vicente del Valle, in the current cities of Herramelluri and Tricio (TIR K-30, 141 and 226-227) (Figure 2).

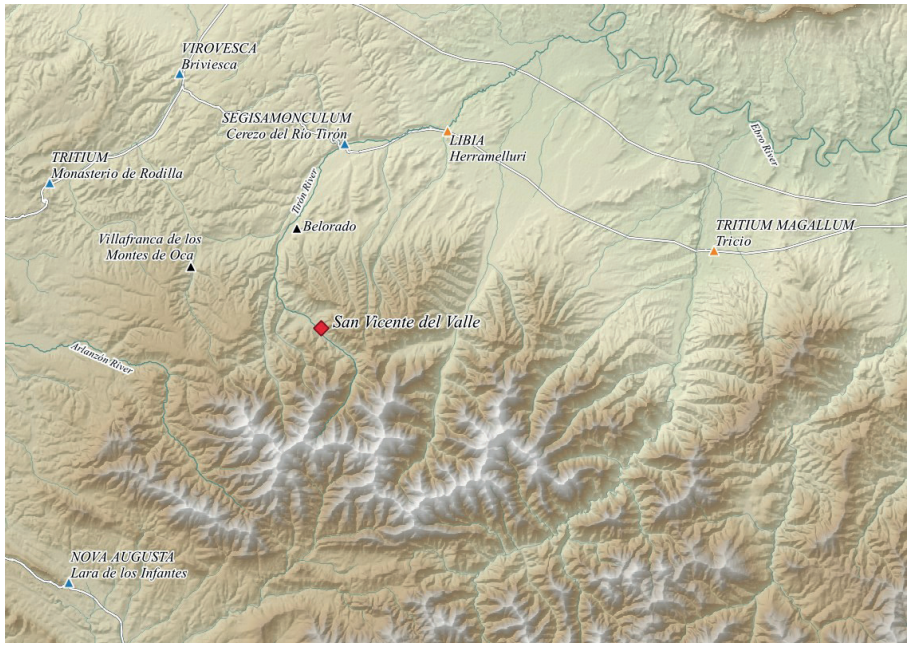

Figure 2. The Sierra de la Demanda in the Roman period.[5]

[5] The map was created with QGIS.org, 2025. QGIS Geographic Information System. QGIS Association. http://www.qgis.org. The elevation and hill shade shapefiles were obtained from the Ancient World Mapping Center (http://awmc.unc.edu/wordpress/map-files); the rivers shapefile from the Instituto Geográfico Nacional (IGR-HI 2019 CC-BY 4.0 http://scne.es) and the Roman roads KMZ files were created by I. Moreno Gallo and shared in https://viasromanas.net. The shapefile with the civitates and other Roman period settlements was created by the author of this paper.

In addition to these urban centres, the closest archaeological sites with levels of occupation of the Roman-period are the oppidum of La Mesa in Belorado (Oller Guzmán *et al.* 2016; Oller Guzmán, De León Subías, Eguiluz Maestro 2017) and several disperse archaeological sites around the present-day town of Villafranca de los Montes de Oca (Abásolo Álvarez 1974a: 18–20). Unfortunately, most of the archaeological work of the area has consisted in small-scale excavations and surveys that merely confirm the existence of Roman-period settlements and their integration into the regional road network.

Indeed, all these cities were well connected by the main Roman routes of *Via De Italia in Hispanias / Item Ab Asturica Tarracone (Iter XXXII)* and *Ab Asturica Burdigalam (Iter XXXIV)* as well as by several secondary roads. Recent archaeological surveys in the area have identified several paths linking Belorado with *Segisamunculum* – Cerezo de Río Tirón (Moreno Gallo 2011) and possibly with Villafranca de los Montes de Oca (Moreno Gallo 2001: 85). Although no major Roman road passed directly through San Vicente del Valle, the site was situated within a well-connected landscape and access to the *Via de Italia in Hispanias*, located barely 20 km away, would have been relatively easy to access through these secondary routes.

The population of this territory not only adopted the Roman epigraphic culture but also adapted it to its own local traditions, producing distinctive ensembles and epigraphic supports such as the river stone stelae from nearby Belorado-Fresno de Río Tirón (Reyes Hernando 2000; Fernández Corral 2015; Fernández Corral, Carcedo de Andrés 2015; Gorrochategui, Fernández Corral 2016; Hernando Sobrino 2016; García-Dils de la Vega, Oller Guzmán 2025), the house-shaped monuments from Poza de la Sal to the northwest (Abásolo Álvarez, Albertos Firmat, Elorza Guinea 1975), and the remarkable concentration of nearly two hundred inscriptions at *Nova Augusta* (Lara de los Infantes) to the southwest (Abásolo Álvarez 1974b). Apart from the concentration of epigraphy in these specific places, a smaller yet continuous distribution of inscriptions across the present-day territories of La Rioja and northeastern province of Burgos illustrates the diffusion of the epigraphic habit throughout the region.

The stelae from San Vicente del Valle

In this context, it is not surprising that the epitaphs from San Vicente del Valle follow the standard textual structure of the Roman epigraphy. The name of the deceased is the central element, often accompanied by the age, epigraphic formulae, and occasionally the name of the dedicator. Regarding their chronology, in the absence of stratigraphic or primary archaeological data, it is necessary to rely on the internal information of the inscriptions, especially the epigraphic formulae. The formula *Dis Manibus* appears frequently in the inscriptions of the San Vicente del Valle

epitaphs, abbreviated as DM, as in thousands of examples across the Roman Empire. This funerary invocation became widespread in the provinces from the second century CE onwards (Knapp 1992: 359; Stylow 1995: 223; Raepsaet-Charlier 2002) and can therefore serve as a *terminus post quem* for the inscriptions that include it (Table 1). Another inscription (*AE* 2018, 984) can be dated more precisely due to the use of the laudatory adjective *pientissimus*, which became common in provincial epigraphy between the second century CE and the second half of the second century onwards CE (Curchin 1982). The remaining inscriptions do not provide chronological indicators, but the predominance of *duo* and *tria nomina* name structures among them could be a sign of the same chronology.

Table 1. Inscriptions found in the church of La Asunción in San Vicente del Valle.[6]

Interpretation of the inscription	Dimensions (cm)	Reference
D(is) M(anibus) / Iuliae Fla{v}/vi`n<a>e´ Flavi f(iliae) / an(norum) L	97 × 50 × 19	*AE* 2018, 982
D(is) M(anibus) / `An´toniae / Flaviṇ<a>e / `an´ (norum) XII · `Ant´oni/us · Flavinus f(iliae) · f(aciendum) · c(uravit) / s(it) t(ibi) t(erra) l(evis)	(55) × (47) × 30	*AE* 2018, 983
- - - - - - [Sempronio] / Q(uirina tribus) · Paṭeṛnọ [- - -] / L(ucius) · Semp(ronius) · Fla[vinus pa]/ter · f(ilio) · pientiss[imo] / f(aciendum) · c(uravit) · Ạẹṃịḷḷi<a>e [Flavi]/n<a>e `an´(norum) [- - -] / ṃ[- - -] / - - - - - -	(24) × (49) × 33	*AE* 2018, 984
L(ucio) · Antonio / [P]ạṭẹrno / - - - - - -	(19) × (46) × 26	*AE* 2018, 985
- - - - - -? / Ạ`nt´oni[a / ae] [- - -] / Anqueṃ[a / ae] [- - -] / p(...) f(...)[7] */ [an]no(rum) · XXẊ[- - -]*	(30) × (20) × 9	*AE* 2018, 986
D(is) Ma(nibus) / O[c]ulati<a>e / ++ḶLEM[- - -] / XXXV	(34) × (24) × 15	*AE* 2018, 987
D[- - -] / L·M·F[- - -] / EG[- - -] / S[- - -] / A[- - -] / +E[- - -]	(78) × ? × 17	Fernández 2018, 2
[- - -]V[- - -] / [- - -]V[- - -] / [- - -]N[- - -] / [- - -] AN[- - -] / LXX	(55) × (17) × 18,5	Fernández 2018, 6
[- - -]O / [- - -]N / [- - -]+NI / [- - -]RA	(25) × (22) × 17	Fernández 2018, 8
D[- - -] / A[- - -] / OA[- - -] / AN[- - -]	(42) × (12,5) × 29	Fernández 2018, 9

The assemblage includes the names of individuals who followed Roman onomastic patterns, precisely *duo* or *tria nomina* structures. Among males, the *tria nomina* can be confirmed in *L. Antonius [P]ạṭẹrnus, L. Semp(ronius) Flavinus*, and probably in the fragmentary *[Sempronius] Q(uirina tribus) Paternus*. The latter is particularly significant, since, if the interpretation of the letter Q as *Quirina tribus* is correct, as indeed seems the most plausible option, it would constitute unequivocal evidence

[6] The complete edition of the inscriptions is available in Fernández Corral 2018.

[7] Options are multiple: *p(osuit) f(ilio, -ae*), *p(ater) f(ecit) or p(iisimae) f(iliae)*.

of Roman citizenship (Fernández Corral 2019) (Figure 3). The remaining individuals have *duo nomina* (*Iulia Flavina, Antonia Flavina, Aemillia Flavina* and *Antonia Anquema*), possibly including the incomplete name *O[c]ulatia* […], assuming that, as was customary, the *nomen* was followed by a *cognomen*.

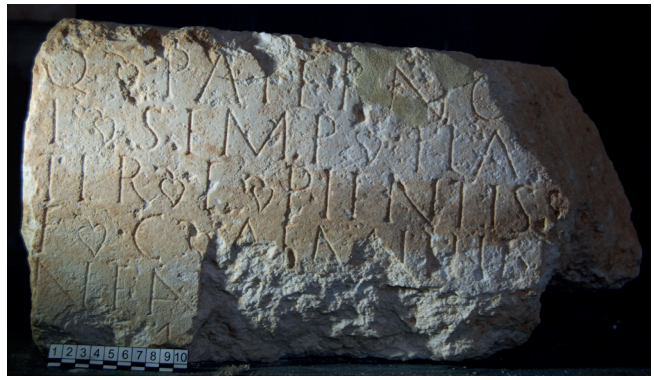

Figure 3. Funerary inscription with the indication of the Quirina voting tribe (*AE* 2018, 984).

All the recorded names are Latin, with the sole exception of *Anquema*, a local name that also appears, for example, in the nearby town of Lara de los Infantes on two occasions (Abásolo Álvarez 1974b: no. 85 and 100). However, it is also important to notice some regional patterns in the use of the so-called kinship names, such as *Paternus, -a* and *Maternus, -a, which* may represent translated names that could have appealed to the local population because they echoed earlier indigenous personal names (Abascal Palazón 1984) (Figure 4). The presence in this epigraphic ensemble of these names is probably connected with their popularity in the surrounding area of the city of Clunia and broader in the present-day province of Burgos (Fernández Corral 2020: nos. 1, 24, 60, 63, 67, 69, 74, 77, 86, 96, 105).



Figure 4. Funerary inscription dedicated to Lucius Antonius Maternus (*AE* 2018, 985).

Regarding the Latin names, all of them were widely attested in the province of Hispania Citerior. Unsurprisingly, the *praenomen Lucius*, used on two occasions, is the most common *praenomen* in Hispania (Abascal Palazón 1994: 28), while the nomina *Iulius, Antonius, Sempronius, Aemilia,* and *Oculatia* were likewise very frequent. The recurrence of some of these names may suggest familial connections, particularly in the case of the nomen *Antonius, a,* which appears four times, and the *cognomen Flavinus, -a*, which occurs in five instances.[8] Indeed, the transmission of these names from one generation to the next is evident in several inscriptions: *Iulia Flavina* is identified as the daughter of *Flavius* (*AE* 2018, 982), *Antonia Flavina* shares the same name as her father (*AE* 2018, 983) (Figure 5), and *Aemilia Flavina* may have been related to *L. Sempronius Flavinus* (*AE* 2018, 984). Similar practices are attested throughout Hispania and other Roman provinces, where sons and daughters occasionally inherited not only the nomen of their father but also the *cognomen* of one of their parents, apparently a matter of personal choice rather than a formal obligation (Armani 2002: 162–164).

In addition to personal names, the age at death is recorded in most of the inscriptions. The stelae are generally better preserved in their lower sections, where the age of the deceased was inscribed; consequently, this is the only information that can still be read in some of the epitaphs. The recorded ages range from twelve to seventy years, but as is common in funerary epigraphy, there is a clear tendency toward numerical rounding, since all but one of the figures are multiples of five or ten. Unsurprisingly, the person whose age seems to be more exact is the youngest one, *Antonia Flavina*, who died at the early age of 12 years old. Exaggeration of the age at death often accompanies this rounding and suggests a general lack of precise knowledge regarding the exact age of the deceased. Although it is not possible to confirm it in San Vicente del Valle, this phenomenon is particularly evident, for example, in the near ensemble of inscriptions from Belorado–Fresno de Río Tirón, where more than ten individuals are said to have lived beyond 70 years (Fernández Corral 2020: 58).

Family relationships were especially relevant in the funerary commemorations, where most dedicants were members of the nuclear family in most part of the Roman Empire (Saller, Shaw 1984). This general trend has also been confirmed in the surrounding area of San Vicente del Valle (Fernández Corral 2020: 62) and in this group of inscriptions where parents are, as expected, the ones dedicating the epitaphs to their children. This was the case for *Antonius Flavinus* dedicating the funerary monument to his homonymous daughter (*AE* 2018, 983); *L. Sempronius Flavinus* dedicating to his soon (*AE* 2018, 984) and, possibly, *Antonia Anquema* being commemorated by one of her parents (*AE* 2018, 985).

[8] *Antonius* and *Flavinus* are also present in the epigraphy of Belorado (Gorrochategui, Fernández Corral 2016: no. 1), Monasterio de Rodilla (Fernández Corral 2020: nos. 123 and 125) and Poza de la Sal (Fernández Corral 2020: no. 76).



Figure 5. Funerary inscription dedicated to Antonia Flavina by his father, Antonius Flavinus (*AE* 2018, 983).

Regarding the external features of the epitaphs, it is possible to identify most of the epitaphs as stelae, except for inscriptions *AE* 2018, 983, 984 and 985. These three inscriptions could be considered blocks because of their thickness and shape, and thus they could have been part of a larger funerary monument such as a mausoleum. Indeed, the presence of decorated Roman-period stone blocks reused as well as building material in the church of La Asunción in San Vicente del Valle has led some scholars before to suggest the existence of a funerary structure to which these pieces may have belonged (Abásolo Álvarez 2002, 156–157). Interestingly, the paleographic analysis of the inscriptions also shows a certain connection among this group of epitaphs. All three have letters executed by incision and a certain resemblance in how A, N, M and O were executed – wide and with small serifs. Additionally, they all repeatedly use hedera as interpunction symbols.[9] Regrettably, their fragmentation prevents us from being able to analyse in

[9] I would like to thank Marina Bastero Acha (University of Warsaw–University of the Basque Country) for her help in analysing the palaeography of these inscriptions.

depth the repetition of formulae and decorative motifs or general composition, although it is possible to identify the same concentric circular motifs in *AE* 2018, 983 and 985.

Conclusions

The inscriptions of San Vicente del Valle form part of the material footprint of the local population during the Roman period. The almost complete predominance of Roman naming structures and Latin names – apart from the single local name *Anquema – may* be surprising in a region where the epigraphic record otherwise exhibits a wide variety of nomenclature systems. Although Roman onomastic forms and names were generally predominant, they often coexisted with indigenous naming traditions, as well as with hybrid forms combining elements of both (Gorrochategui, Navarro Caballero, Vallejo Ruiz 2007; Navarro Caballero, Gorrochategui, Vallejo Ruiz 2011). This is particularly evident in the previously mentioned epigraphic corpora from Belorado-Fresno de Río Tirón and Lara de los Infantes, where nomenclatures composed of two indigenous names are especially frequent, alongside mixed Roman-indigenous combinations within a single nomenclature. The homogeneity of the inscriptions from San Vicente del Valle may therefore indicate that the epitaphs were produced within a relatively limited chronological horizon, at a time when *duo* and *tria nomina* had already replaced local onomastic systems but before their simplification led to single-name usage.

As mentioned above, the probable adscription of one individual to the *tribus Quirina* confirms the Roman citizenship of at least one person attested in the San Vicente del Valle inscriptions. The Quirina *tribus* is particularly common in Hispania, as it was assigned to new Roman citizens in the municipia created after Vespasian's grant of the *ius Latii* to all Hispanic provinces. It is also the most frequently attested tribe in the region (Fasolini 2012: 73), with the notable exception of the city of Clunia, which was probably elevated during the reign of Tiberius and consequently assigned to the *Galeria tribus.* It is not possible to determine whether *[Sempronius] Paternus* obtained Roman citizenship through his own merit or inherited it from his father, *L. Semp(ronius) Fla[vinus]*; in either case, such a status would have conferred considerable prestige and social distinction.

Unfortunately, the absence of a primary archaeological context for the stelae precludes any further understanding of the associated funerary ritual. As explained before, three of the inscriptions could be connected and even be part of the same funerary structure, but while the hypothesis is plausible, the evidence does not permit a firm conclusion in this regard. Until new data become available, it can only be asserted that these epitaphs once belonged to a funerary area of undetermined location in the area around San Vicente del Valle. The poor state of preservation of most of the pieces hinders further conclusions, yet it is precisely

their reuse as building material in the church of La Asunción that has ensured their survival to the present day. Thus, this epigraphic ensemble presents a population that embraced the Roman epigraphic culture as part of the funerary commemoration of their beloved ones and once again illustrates the diffusion of Roman cultural practices as well as the presence of Roman citizens in regions that might initially appear peripheral to the main networks of exchange.

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Asst. Prof. Marta Fernández Corral is a researcher in ancient history and professor at the University of the Basque Country (EHU). Her research focuses on Roman society and epigraphy, with particular emphasis on the funerary commemoration patterns of local societies from Hispania and their adaptation to the Roman Empire's power structures and culture. She is the author of the monograph *La epigrafía funeraria de época romana del área autrigona. Conmemoración, relaciones familiares y sociedad* (CSIC, 2020).

e-mail: marta.fernandezc@ehu.eus