

History, Archaeology and Cultural Heritage of Interconnections and Complicities in Intra-European Borders

The Case of the Navigable Section of the Guadiana River (Portugal – Spain)

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Abstract

This paper examines the current state of the navigable section of the Guadiana River (that marks a part of the interstate border) from the perspective of cultural heritage and tourism. Focusing mainly on the archaeological and historical record, it aims at providing some directions for the enhancement of local memories and identities around the role of the river in the past interactions, interconnections, and entanglements. Following a Global history-centred approach, this paper values the importance of the archaeology of ports such as Mértola (located ca. 70km from the coast) for the construction of a narrative centred on entanglements that explains, from a historical long-term perspective, the construction of this unique cultural landscape. This narrative is crucial for the enhancement of border heritage beyond the idea of interstate separation.

Keywords: Border Heritage, Border landscape, Guadiana River, Portuguese-Spanish Borderlands

Introduction

“Mi pueblo se llama Villanueva, pero debería llamarse Villamuerta porque es una villa muerta. He oído que en tiempos pasados tuvo épocas de auge, pero hoy está en franca decadencia. La gente joven se ha ido marchando y el pueblo se ha quedado casi vacío.”

J.M. Vaz de Soto, Quoted in Pintado & Barrenechea, 1972¹

1 “My village is called Villanueva [New Village], but it should be called Villamuerta [Dead Village] because it is a dead village. I have heard that in the past there was a golden age, but now it is openly declining. Young people have been leaving, and the village has been left almost abandoned” (translated by the author).

This passage from José María Vaz de Soto's *El infierno y la brisa* (The hell and the breeze, 1970), quoted by A. Pintado and E. Barrenechea (1972), describes eloquently the reality of several communities that are located near or on the border between Portugal and Spain: abandonment, demographic decline, peripheralisation and ageing. Pintado and Barrenechea's book had the particularity of calling the attention of Iberian scholars to these territories by the end of that decade and in the first half of the 1980's, after several years of oblivion (Cabo, 1981; Garcia, 1997; López Trigal, 1984; see Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2019, p. 135ff.). This situation is a turning point in the examination of the Iberian borderlands and its integration in a set of studies previously developed in other European borders (see, e.g., Guichonnet & Raffestin, 1974), where there were also cooperation programmes, especially after the founding of the Association of European Border Regions in 1971 (<https://www.aebr.eu/history/>).

It should be noted that the Iberian countries were about to join the EEC in the 1980's, which finally happened in 1986. Few years before, in the first year following the fall of dictatorships in Portugal (1974) and Spain (1975), the Iberian Scholars, especially the geographers, started taking a closer look to the situation of borderlands, which was notorious both in the 3rd Conference of Iberian Geography in Barcelona (1983) and in the Meeting of Ajuda in Olivenza (1985), in which there were several important contributions to the examination of borders from the perspective of political and regional geography (among many others, Lois & Carballo, 2015; López Trigal, 1984;) and focusing on the impact of political delimitations on landscapes, on economy, and on the lives of local communities. In sum, the examination of the function of these "lines" progressively gave way to a perception focused on borders as "social, cultural and political constructions", as well as on historical processes that take place in these territories and leaves marks in the landscape (Liberato et al. 2018, p. 1349; see also Newman & Paasi, 1998), which can also be examined from an archaeological and historical perspectives (Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2025).

The integration of the Iberian countries in the EEC in 1986 paved the way to the implementation of several programmes of regional development focused on the fixation of population in border areas, as well as on transport connections/ spatial development and exploitation of resources (e.g., Cavaco, 1995; Gaspar, 1987)². The Council Regulation 2052/88 of 24th June 1988, about the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) is a conspicuous example of these concerns and priorities for "ensuring the development and structural adjustment of regions whose development is lagging behind", such as border regions, in the process of integration (Council Regulation 2052/88, 24th June 1988). Some months later, the 5th Luso-Spanish Summit of 1988 laid the foundations of the first cross-border initiatives between the two countries, and it was followed by the first INTERREG programme (1990-1993), which was created to empower regional entities affected by the new geopolitical and economic circumstances with structural fundings (among others,

2 The investment in transportation is unequal if one compares the construction of road webs that connect big cities with the connections between urban nuclei of the interior.

García Fernández, Del Espino & Albuquerque, 2017; Prokkola, 2023; Lois & Cairo, 2015, p. 322). As F. Durand points out, the first two programmes called the attention to the enhancement of border heritage “through economic activities”, as well as to the improvement of cross-border cultural identity in the subsequent initiatives. In the last decades, the EU has directly or indirectly supported projects of local practitioners and research (Durand, 2022, p. 309-310; see *infra*).

Moreover, in 1991, Portugal and Spain also signed the Schengen Agreement, which was a turning point in the relationship between these countries and in the life of borderlanders. Notwithstanding, the abolition of border controls between the Iberian countries paradoxically aggravated the issues of these liminal territories long affected by isolation and peripheralisation. These borders lost their relevance and, consequently, both smuggling and surveillance became obsolete activities (see Prokkola, 2023), but on the other hand it put an end to the long-lasting queues to cross the border by ferry between Ayamonte and Vila Real de Santo António (cf. Albuquerque & Monteiro, 2025, fig. 1; Pintado & Barrenechea, 1972, p. 33). Intra-European dyads became laboratories of integration, especially after the creation of the so-called Euroregions (Lois & Cairo, 2015, p. 322). Furthermore, integration is strengthened by the work of institutions and initiatives such as TEIN (Transfrontier Euro-Institute Network) and B-Solutions, which collaborate with universities in practitioners to overcome several issues related to dyads, especially in terms of governance.

The aim of this paper is to examine the navigable section of the Lower Guadiana River as a dynamic borderscape shaped by long-term interactions and cultural entanglements, using an interdisciplinary approach. This perspective enables the reconstruction of everyday practices, cross-border interactions, and local responses to regional or national processes. It contrasts container-based narratives (often portraying borders as rigid barriers) with the lived experiences of borderland communities from a bottom-up perspective. A diachronic analysis allows the study of this landscape before and after the political delimitation of the 13th century, which means that it is mandatory to integrate several sources of information. A broad and interdisciplinary analysis is then crucial for the creation of an open-air museum, where different kinds of heritage are integrated (see Albuquerque, 2023). The approach presented in this paper is focused first and foremost on the history and archaeology of the navigable section of the Lower Guadiana Basin, considering that a long-term examination could positively contribute to the heritagisation of these “in-between” cultural landscapes.

Figure 1: The Lower Guadiana border area (adapted from mapsforfree.com)



Heritagisation, or patrimonialisation, is here understood as “the process of commoditizing the past as a resource for consumption today” (Timothy & Więckowski, 2023, p. 221). It is a process where several assets related with these territories (memories, daily-life artifacts, monuments, sites, social practices, and places) and local communities can acquire a status of heritage that must be enhanced and protected for touristic purposes (see Gillot, Maffi & Trémon, 2013). As an inheritance from the past, heritage can be seen as a narrative determined by the relationship between memory, identity, values, and collective history. This means that meaning, significations and narratives need to be negotiated, especially because they are associated with different actors of the past (*e.g.*, state

= border guards, commoners = smugglers). Fortresses are in this context a conspicuous example, for they are buildings remind conflictive or mistrusting interstate relationships and are a significant part of the touristic assets in the border section examined here. This is particularly relevant in contexts where barriers to mobility become free-crossing areas and memory sites (cf. Elbel, 2022), and where there is a need to value more than the heritage assets associated with power groups (Timothy & Wiecehowski 2023, p. 222-223). Global history is, in this context, a good way to provide perspectives focused on interactions and entanglements in these areas before and after the processes of political delimitation (see, e.g., Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2022; 2025).

The formation of large-scale networks and entanglement facilitated by the navigability of the river, whether it was used as a border or not, is one of the aspects that can be highlighted in a process of a cross-border heritage enhancement. From an archaeological perspective, the navigability of the Guadiana River was crucial for the integration of this area in the ancient “global” networks and for the formation of culturally diverse societies since, at least, the 1st millennium BC, a period when the Mediterranean trade with the Iberian Peninsula became more frequent and intense (Albuquerque, 2022b). Later, the river was used as a marker of the separation between the Roman provinces of *Baetica* and *Lusitania* from 27 BC onwards. During the Islamic period, the river was also used as a water road. This situation changed drastically in 1293, when Christian kingdoms of Castille and Portugal signed the Alcañices Treaty, which defined the Guadiana River as a border between Pomarão and Castro Marim/ Ayamonte. This process paved the way to the promotion of settlement in border areas in order to defend them (see, for instance, Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2022).

One of the most relevant examples in the Guadiana is Mértola. This village was an ancient port of trade located in the interior of the Guadiana River, ca. de 70km from the river mouth. The archaeological record of several occupation phases (Iron Age, Roman, Christian and Muslim periods) reveal that these communities have people, products and ideas from different areas of the Mediterranean, as seen, for example, in epigraphy. In this case, archaeological works conducted in the village found inscriptions written, e.g., in Latin and Greek, as well as Jewish symbology. Indeed, one of the most highlighted features of this area is the fact that Mértola integrated quickly the several ideological and religious waves from the Mediterranean, which indicates that these communities were traditionally accustomed to coexisting with cultural diversity (see Torres, 2014).

The richness of this past, which is accessed through archaeology and History, can be used as an economic resource in order to help to overcome the current situation of one of the poorest and depopulated areas in Europe and promote economic growth and resilience (Jurado, 2023; Prokkola, 2023). The recognition of these issues is a determinant for the development of initiatives and research centred in cultural heritage and tourism (see *infra*). Consequently, it is important to provide an overview of the theoretical and methodological framework.

Methodology

The sources used in this manifold approach are varied and are part of different scientific approaches to border areas that are interconnected in order to provide a broad picture of the cultural landscape examined. The approaches include global history applied to border studies, history, archaeology, human geography, tourism, ethnography, linguistics, and cultural heritage. These sources allow one to identify regional issues that need to be addressed and to reconstruct long-term patterns of occupation and connectivity, as well as to examine a navigable river as a scenario of entanglements, more than separations. One of the most critical aspects of this approach is the riverbanks-centred analysis which contrast with historical and container-based narratives that interpret this river as a periphery of both Portugal and Spain (Andalusia in particular). On the other hand, an interdisciplinary knowledge (or collaborative work) about borderlands is crucial for a better understanding of the communities' needs and, consequently, for the delineation of research strategies.

This examination of border areas, especially when it deals with a wide diversity of scientific areas, is mainly based on bibliographical research and on the selection of cases that illustrate border complicities. For example, linguists are currently examining and enhancing language interpenetrations (among others, López de Aberasturi, 2023), which illustrate border complicities. In turn, these phenomena are closely related with smuggling that took place in border areas and put people from both sides of the border in contact (Castaño & Hernández, 2023). The fieldworks conducted in the last decades by anthropologists and philologists provided an interesting, though intangible, picture of the so-called “border paradox”, which was developed by Baud and van Schendel (1997). As van der Vleuten and Feys put it, “according to the so-called ‘border paradox’, borders trigger legal and illegal cross-border flows by virtue of the separations they create” (van der Vleuten & Feys, 2016).

This is the key for the interpretation of the long-term history of settlement and interaction in the Lower Guadiana navigable section before and after its use as a political border. The sources exposed here (history and archaeology) highlight the importance of micro-history in understanding border dynamics. While states often project an image of borders as rigid barriers or “no man’s lands,” micro-historical analysis reveals the specificities of everyday life and local interactions that contrast with these official narratives in temporal or spatial scales. By focusing on the micro-scale, researchers can characterise local reactions to regional or national processes, identifying how communities developed shared identities and complicities that still functioned independently of state intervention after the 13th century. Micro-history can also identify different relationships between specific border communities.

There are several examples of it. In the area examined in this paper, the author compared (with his collaborators) two different textual sources from the 18th century. Both were the result of surveys that were organised separately by Portuguese and Spanish kingdoms and counted with answers from local ecclesiastics. The former was undertaken in the middle of the 18th century, while the latter was written by Tomás López by the end

of that century. These sources provide an interesting picture of the past and present of the border relationships as seen by members of a specific group. In Sanlúcar de Gadiana/ Alcoutim, along with intermarriage, there were several conflicts between borderlanders, while in Ayamonte/ Castro Marim the main conflicts were related with fishing rights (Albuquerque, Herrera-Delgado & Malheiro-Cordeiro, 2025; see, for instance, the cross-border interactions of the 16th century in Ayamonte/ Castro Marim examined by Freitas, 2021). These studies allowed us to conclude, firstly, that the perception of these interactions and border crossings differ from one social group to another (see, *e.g.*, Hernández & Brito, 2022; Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2022, with previous bibliography). Secondly, that the picture provided by these local studies does not need to be the same in other areas of the dyads, which is a steppingstone for further research.

The case-studies can be analysed from the perspective of global history. On the one hand, the Iberian borders can be studied in the way they were replicated overseas. This perspective will not be developed here (see, *e.g.*, Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2022; 2025). On the other hand, these territories can be examined in the way local contexts can be affected by global processes, which determine, *e.g.*, the obsolescence of a settlement system or a site. A conspicuous example is, again, Mértola. The site grew from the 7th century onwards thanks to the development of commercial interactions with the Mediterranean through the Gadiana River. The river was an important water road until the 1960's, when the depletion of mining resources in São Domingos provoked the progressive abandonment of this area, in a process that affected also the mines from the Spanish side (Puerto de la Laja). Moreover, considering the whole the navigable section of the Gadiana River, the loss of relevance of borders also accelerated the obsolescence of these territories, especially after the Schengen Agreement.

Global history is also focused on entanglements from a cross-border perspective (see Conrad, 2016). However, borders were usually far from the interests of global historians, which inspired new bottom-up insights focused on border as spaces of complicities (Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2022; 2025). Archaeology emerges in this context as a means to approaching this reality, by examining firstly settlement from a landscape or territorial perspective, and secondly by interpreting the record of archaeological sites such as Mértola, considering the latest advances of the knowledge of the Iron Age occupation (see Albuquerque, García Fernández & Fonte, 2025, with previous bibliography). This perspective is critical for the interpretation of the cultural heritage of the Lower Gadiana Basin for tourism purposes, as seen in the next chapter.

Cultural Heritage and Tourism in the navigable section of the Lower Gadiana River

[...] Border heritage is worthy of protection and commemoration to sustain memory, build solidarity, and to achieve the past so that it is not forgotten in a rapidly debordering world.

Timothy and Więckowski, 2023, p. 237

The academic interest in the relationship between borders and tourism has resulted in several publications in the last decades (among many others, Liberato et al. 2018; Pardo, Almeida & Campos, 2024; Prokkola, 2023; Timothy & Gelbman, 2013), while tourism is one of the most relevant focus of investment of the INTERREG programs in terms of cultural projects (for a detailed insight on this issue, see Durand, 2022), as it was recognised as an economic resource for local communities in these territories (Lois & Cairo, 2015).

The mobility scenario provided by the Schengen Agreement's free cross-border circulation, let alone the current tendency of "rebordering" intra-EU dyads along Europe (e.g., the Franco-German border in Strasbourg – Kiel) and Euroscepticism, have broaden people's horizons in terms of places to visit and made several regions more accessible, without needing to wait several hours to cross the border as before. The remoteness of some border areas, especially in the interior, as well as the possibility of easily crossing a border, are features that can make these destinations of "dividing lines" particularly attractive from the point of view of the visitors' experience (Pardo et al. 2018). In this context, two types can be highlighted: "tourism in the border" (focused on contrasts and ruptures) and "cross-border" (centred on convergence and shared features: Hernández-Ramírez, 2017, p. 386ff.) or "borderless" tourism (Jurado, 2023, p. 217–218). Consequently, there are two different, though complementary, ways of travel and interpret the border and both contribute to the "authenticity" of the experience.

A noticeable example of the idea of rupture is the slide that allows the visitor to cross the border between Sanlúcar de Guadiana (Spain) and Alcoutim (Portugal) (see fig. 3): "LIMITEZERO offers a unique and unforgettable experience, crossing the Guadiana River from Spain to Portugal via the world's first cross-border zipline. Spanning 720 meters that connect the two countries, participants fly over the river at speeds between 70 and 80 km/h, literally 'flying through time' as they gain an hour due to the time zone difference between the countries" (<https://www.limitezero.com/en/home/>). On the other hand, local memories constructed around smuggling and surveillance as a significant part of living in this border, paved the way for the implementation of a route (rota do contrabandista), the erection of statues that remind both the fiscal guards and the smugglers, and a festival between those villages, which constitutes a conspicuous example of shared heritage and memories around daily collaborations and complicities that became obsolete after the abolition of border controls. Both examples reveal that there are experiences that can only take place in border areas.

Beyond these experiences, cultural heritage (and consequently tourism) can also be seen as an opportunity for local development and cross-border cooperation, as well as for mitigating the effects of population decline (ageing, emigration, etc.) in those (mainly rural) areas affected by peripheralisation by creating job opportunities related to cultural heritage management (Albuquerque, 2023; Del Espino, 2020; García-Delgado, Martínez-Puche & Lois-González, 2020; Hernández-Ramírez, 2017, p. 393–397; Jurado, 2023; Pardo, Almeida & Campos, 2024) and empowering local authorities (European Movement International, 2026). In fact, in small villages such as Mértola, the enhancement of natural,

archaeological and ethnographic heritage through the Vila-Museu project by the Campo Arqueológico de Mértola (founded in 1978) was critical for a community that suffered the impacts of obsolescence (e.g., the depletion of mining resources in the late 1960's and the loss of relevance of fluvial commerce) in an interior area of the present-day Alentejo (Portugal) (Del Espino, 2020; Palma et al. 2025; see *infra*) (fig. 1).

Customs buildings, which represent the physical manifestation of borders, are also examples of resignification and frequently became museums or interpretation centres (cf. Prokkola, 2023, p. 353–354; Timothy & Więckowski, 2023, p. 229). In several borders, these buildings became “memory sites” and objects of “heritage-making”, which occurs, as M. Lois and H. Cairo accurately state, “when spaces, individuals, objects and so on are re-constructed, re-interpreted or, in general terms, affected [...] in order to fabricate heritage values” (2015, p. 323) and new narratives or negotiations for identity/ memory-making around both state delimitation, transgression (*ibid.*, p. 325) and cultural features that result from encounters (Albuquerque, 2022a). In the Lower Guadiana basin, the customs building of Vila Real de Santo António is still in use but now is a ticket office for the ferry (which was the only way to cross the border in this area). On the other side, in the Aduana of Ayamonte are currently the headquarters of the Chamber of commerce.

Other assets, such as the Casas da Guarda Fiscal (Fiscal Guard's houses) in this area represent the materialisation of the abandonment provoked by the abolishment of border controls or, in other words, they are an example of how global processes affect local histories. Approximately twelve of these buildings can be found between Vila Real de Santo António and Pomarão if one observes the 1/25000 Portuguese maps. They are positioned strategically close to the riverbanks in places where crossings can be efficiently controlled. Now most of them lie in ruins (fig. 2).

Figure 2: Abandoned Fiscal Guard's house near Alcoutim, Portugal (photo by the author)



Surveillance and Smuggling are the obverse and reverse of bordering, i.e., they can be seen as opposites, but they are inextricably linked to the processes triggered by artificial separations imposed by states. For D.J. Timothy and M. Więckowski, “stories of smuggling or transborder raids are endemic to borderland throughout the world and have become a salient part of local identities and folklore, even to the extent of heroifying famous local outlaws and valorising a general sense of lawlessness” (Timothy & Więckowski, 2023, p. 227). Indeed, there are several museums focused on smuggling along the Portuguese-Spanish border, such as the Museu do Contrabando in Santana de Cambas (Municipality of Mértola, Portugal) in the region examined in this paper, as well as the aforementioned Festival do Contrabando in Sanlúcar de Guadiana/ Alcoutim. On the other hand, it there is a noteworthy example of the image of smuggling as part of the local memories: in Soutelinho da Raia (Northeastern Portugal), an 18th century fresco depicts a miracle of Saint Anthony helping the smuggler to run from the policemen, which reveals the relationship between the state and border populations. That is, the “other”, from the perspective of a borderlander, is the state, not the individual of the neighbouring country (see Kavanagh, 2000).

The defence buildings disseminated along the border are by far the most eloquent examples of the border scenography and consequently they are perhaps the most famous touristic destinations. This fact explains the investment made on these assets in the last years, such as restorations (e.g., in Sanlúcar de Guadiana and Alcoutim: Hernández-Ramírez, 2017, pp. 399–401; a broader overview in Duclos, 2002; fig. 3) that remind hostile relationships in the past that contrast with a peaceful and collaborative present. Nonetheless, in the two villages that share the Guadiana River (Fig. 3), several decades of strict surveillance and prohibition of crossing left a scar in the lives of local communities (cf. Hernández & Brito, 2022), which means that these villages configure what can be called a “phantom border”.

Figure 3: Sanlúcar de Guadiana (Spain/ Andalusia, left) and Alcoutim (Portugal, right) seen from the Castelo Velho of Alcoutim (Photo by F.J. García Fernández and P. Albuquerque)



Another interesting aspect of this discussion is the linguistic evidence, which is interpreted as a “sociological osmosis” constructed by centuries of the socioeconomic ties and entanglements that took place in the Iberian dyad (López, 2023, p. 187). The hybridisation of languages in border areas is a phenomenon that is on the brink of disappearing because of the population ageing and the lack of interactions provoked by the abolition of border controls (most of this interpenetration was due to smuggling).

Finally, archaeological evidence, which will be discussed in the next chapter, provides interesting details about the evolution of settlement along the riverbanks of the navigable sections, which is a steppingstone for the enhancement of these territories as a shared cultural heritage related with ancient “globalisations”.

The archaeology of the navigable section of the Guadiana River

“Les frontières sont du temps inscrit dans l’espace” (Foucher, 2007, p. 28). Archaeological and historical viewpoints are crucial for the documentation and interpretation of long-term human occupation in the territories that currently share a border, by allowing one to examine the evolution of settlement and landscape before and after territorial delimitations (e.g., Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2025). Archaeology is a tool for approaching ancient lifeways and interactions beyond the (also partial) information provided by texts. Consequently, the integration of this perspective in the study and enhancement of border heritage provides new and complementary research avenues.

In the last decade, several publications were dedicated to the archaeology and border heritage of the Lower Guadiana Basin in the context of research projects focused on the settlement along the riverbanks between the beginning of the 1st millennium BC and the 1st century AD. Projects such as *Ana-lise/ Ana-lisis* (2015-2022) have sought to overcome a container-based perspective of the archaeological reality of the navigable section by studying the river as a single unit of analysis, considering mainly the occupation of the immediate surroundings of the riverbanks (*ca.* 5km for each side: Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2019; Albuquerque, 2022b).

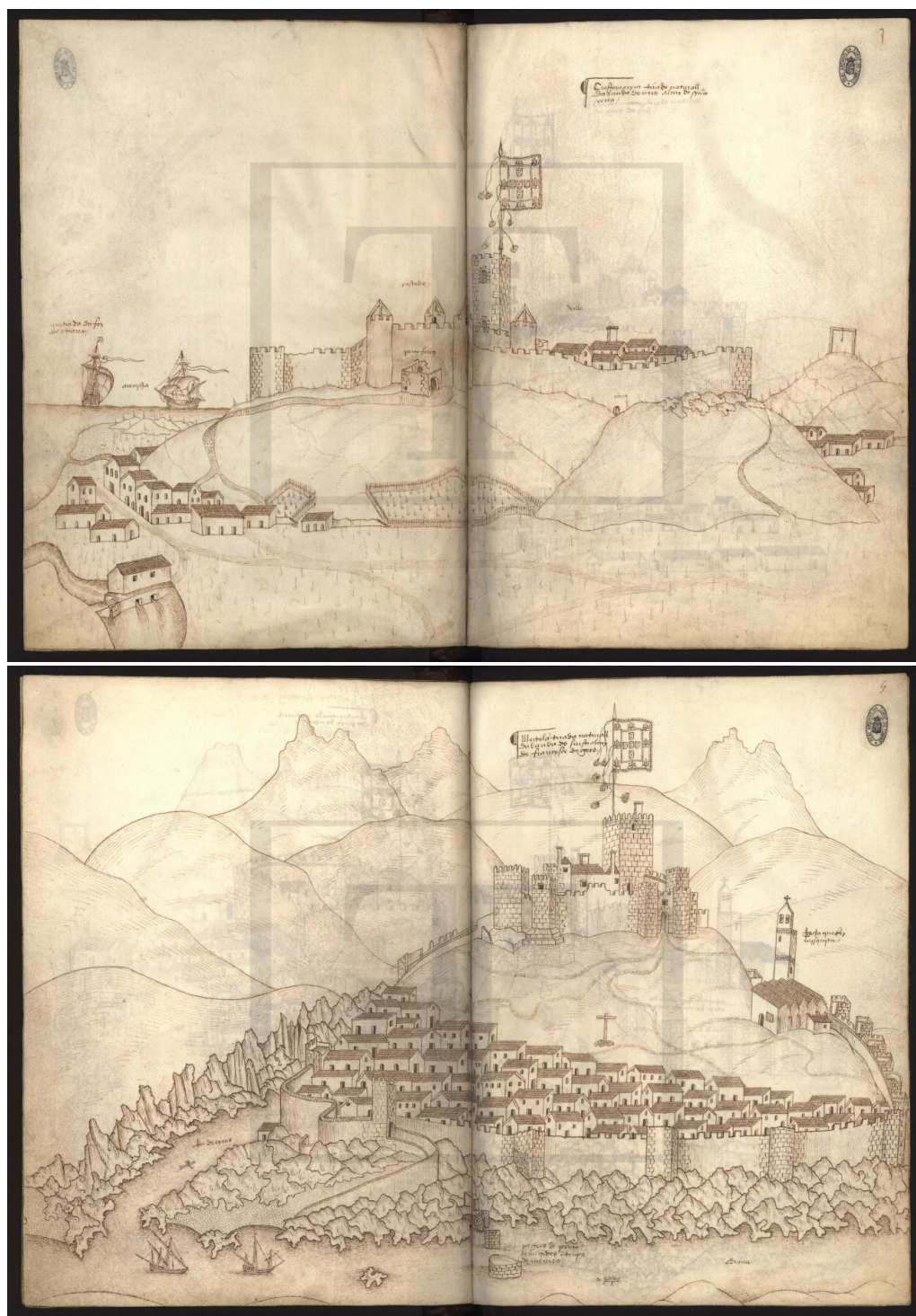
A central aspect of the studies conducted is the significant disparity in archaeological knowledge between the Portuguese (right) and Spanish (left) banks of the Guadiana (e.g., Albuquerque, 2022b). This “decompensation” is particularly evident in the interior territories between Pomarão and the estuary (the section shared by the two countries: see fig. 1). The right (Portuguese) bank is better known thanks to the work of research and heritage management in border municipalities (Castro Marim, Alcoutim, and Mértola), as well as to the activities of preventive archaeology in several infrastructure projects, which led to the identification of several archaeological sites. Comparatively, the knowledge of the left (Spanish) bank is scarce, especially in the interior, where there are few infrastructures and investment. In fact, most research has been concentrated in coastal and pre-coastal areas like Ayamonte.

The identification of these issues is a stimulus for the development of alternative strategies of collaborating works in dyads. In the recent years, research has been complemented by non-invasive survey methods that allow researchers to identify new potential archaeological sites. Consequently, it is important to dedicate few words to the use of LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) in the surveying of the Lower Guadiana Basin. For example, this technology allowed us to review the Mértola's Iron Age defensive wall (Albuquerque, García & Fonte 2025, fig. 5). The data collected in this area (remains of buildings like fortifications, enclosures or road systems that can have topographic visibility). The chronology of these structures can only be defined in a complementary pedestrian survey, and the buried structures can be examined by invasive (excavations) or non-invasive methods (e.g., geophysics). It is noteworthy that the fact that both Portugal and Spain have (despite some differences) have published LiDAR topographic datasets with high resolution both in Portugal and Spain. Until a few years ago, only Spain had this coverage, which means that now it is possible to start new research after a careful analysis of data. The use of LiDAR technology is crucial for the development of cross-border archaeological research programmes, as well as for territorial planning. The goal of this activity is to identify visible structures in the Lower Guadiana's navigable section and validate the data with pedestrian surveys, which will be especially helpful in the identification of potential archaeological sites in the Spanish riverbank. In the next years, it is hoped that this ongoing investigation can allow one to prepare future pedestrian surveys and, consequently, shed some light on the knowledge of human settlement of the left bank of the river.

In addition, the results of archaeological works conducted by the Ana-lise/ Ana-lisis project in the navigable section of the Guadiana River have broaden our understanding of the occupation of the riverbanks, as well as of multicultural settlements such as Mértola (ancient Myrtilis). Firstly, the pedestrian survey campaigns conducted in Portugal identified several archaeological sites (cf. Albuquerque, 2022b, with previous bibliography), while the excavation of the Iron Age necropolises of Hoya de los Rastros (Ayamonte), from 8th century BC, by the German Archaeological Institute (Marzoli & García Teyssandier, 2019) and, upriver, Largo do Terreiro da Feira (Mértola), from the 6th – 5th century BC provided crucial information about the integration of this region in the Mediterranean koine during the 1st millennium BC. The excavations undertaken in this necropolis have provided crucial evidence of this ancient cultural diversity, as well as in other areas of this village, such as the municipal Library (Albuquerque, García & Fonte 2025, with previous bibliography).

For example, funerary architecture reveals a myriad of influences of the local background, of the Southeastern Iberia and of other areas of the interior of the Iberian Peninsula, which is revealing of the above-mentioned cultural integration of diverse cultural elements. Conversely, archaeological materials can be related with the Guadalquivir Basin (Andalusia, Spain) and the Bay of Cadiz (see some preliminary remarks in Miguel et al. 2019).

Figure 4: Castro Marim and Mértola in 1509 (after Duarte d'Armas).



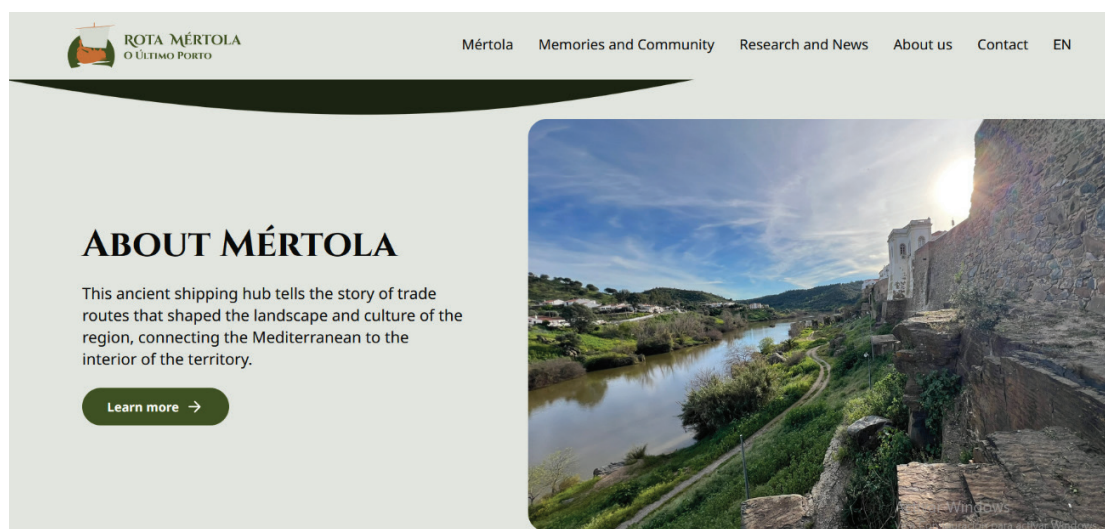
Source: <https://digitalr.q.arquivos.pt/en/documentDetails/72c4eeea2882461282ff1c6849e417e6>

These archaeological works conducted in the Lower Guadiana River are fundamental for reconstructing the evolution of border landscape before and after the political delimitation of the 13th century AD. One of the most relevant aspects of this examination is the fact that the Guadiana River functioned as a vital communication “water road” that articulated human occupation through a network of ports and commercial nodes defined by permeability and intercultural interaction, especially between the 1st millennium and the end of Islamic domination. In fact, the river lost a great part of its commercial relevance after this period, and the most relevant sites were fortified as strategic points for border surveillance, such as Castro Marim and Mértola, as mentioned. These villages, as well as others that were disseminated along the boundaries of Portugal, were depicted by Duarte d’Armas in 1509 – 1510 in a document that was intended to be a thorough description of the Portuguese borders. As seen in a vast bibliography, textual evidence prove that local communities seem to maintain networks and contacts beyond the intervention of states (see, e.g., Albuquerque & García 2022).

From a heritage perspective, the systematic archaeological recovery of Mértola was fundamentally catalysed by the founding of the Campo Arqueológico de Mértola (CAM) in 1978. For decades, this institution has centred its research mainly on the Islamic, using it as a leitmotif for the city’s identity and its biannual Islamic Festival. However, recent scholarship emphasises the necessity of expanding the analytical scope to earlier periods in this village, such as the Iron Age, which was historically undervalued or scarcely explored by the institution (Albuquerque, García & Fonte, 2025). This shift aims to define the complete urban structure of the city throughout the first millennium BC, recognising that Mértola’s significance as a “global port” predates the Roman and Medieval period.

In this context, programmes such as *Promove – O futuro do interior* (“Promote – the future of the interior”) by La Caixa Foundation, funded dissemination projects that could contribute to the sustainable development of these areas and the empowerment of local communities. One of the projects that was funded is ROTA Mértola, O último porto/ROUTE Mértola, The Last Port (fig. 5; <https://rotamertola.pt/en/>), which is based on the long history of the navigability between Pomarão and Mértola (fig. 1) to promote the implementation of touristic routes by river, focusing on archaeological information about this landscape. Even though the project is being conducted in the Portuguese section of the Guadiana River, it can be replicated in other border municipalities between Pomarão and the Eurocity of Guadiana, especially because the abolition of border controls is an opportunity for the creation of cross-border fluvial routes and for the enhancement of cultural heritage associated with it (cf. Jurado, 2023).

Figure 5: Printscreen of ROTA-Mértola website



As noted above, tourism is one of the most important elements of cross-border territorial cooperation, as seen in the number of projects funded by INTERREG programmes within this scope (e.g., Durand, 2022; Jurado, 2023, p. 223ff). Archaeotourism, or archaeology-based tourism, can be a key element in the development of rural areas, as well as in the process of community-building (Del Espino, 2020; De Man, 2016; Fernández Ortea, 2017)³. The study of Blanca del Espino (2020) highlights the impact of projects such as Mértola Vila-Museu in this Portuguese municipality focusing, for example, in demographic data. One of the conclusions is that it is possible that the job opportunities related to heritage increased and, consequently, curbed (though partially) the impact of demographic decline in the areas where there are more heritage assets.

Archaeological sites can be used as tools for interpreting border landscapes as testimonies of the relationships between communities and the natural (with repercussions, e.g., in the analysis of climate changes) and social environments. Consequently, it seems necessary to expand in the next years the research to the Andalusian side of the border in order to obtain a broader understanding of settlement dynamics in the region from a diachronic perspective.

In the case examined here, archaeotourism based on the river and its navigability can be an excellent attraction, especially because the perception of the territory from the river is key to understanding settlement patterns and the function of archaeological sites within a larger territory. In fact, this idea motivates the development of archaeological surveys along a section of the Guadiana River north from Mértola (fig. 6). Moreover, its study and interpretation can consider the way bordering changes landscapes and trigger new

3 See, e.g., the works of CSIC in the archaeological site of Casas de Turuñuelo de Guareña (<https://www.tartesoencomunidad.org/p/tarteso-en-comunidad.html>), which is an example of a site that is being used as a base for strengthening identities in local communities.

social phenomena or, in other words, activate what can be called the “border paradox” (cf. Albuquerque & García Fernández, 2025; Baud & Van Schendel 1997) without changing the nature of interconnections that took place for several centuries in this territory.

Figure 6: Archaeological surveys conducted in the river (ANA-lise/ ANA-lisis project), which inspired the archaeological route proposed in ROTA (Photo by F.J. García Fernández)



Global history emerges in this context as a key for the interpretation of this heritage, by focusing on the river as a water road that connected communities before and after the 13th century and paved the way for cultural entanglements. A diachronic and bottom-up overview allows us to identify the impact of bordering in local communities and in the settlement along the river, and also to overcome the image of separations created by states by providing a real cross-border interpretation and heritagisation of these territories by highlighting their unique cultural features and identify the several phases of settlement.

Concluding remarks

Border dwelling characteristics, unique to either side of the line, become dominant moulders of the cultural landscape within the shadow thrown by the boundary, and yet these characteristics disappear as one moves away from the borderland in either direction into the territorial domain of the states divided.

Minghi, 1991, p. 15

The “bottom-up” approach proposed here is essential for interpreting borders not just as political limits, but as permeable spaces of transition and cultural flows. In few words, borders are interesting cases for examining intercultural encounters and the effects of cultural diversity in culturally and socially unique landscapes. Global history provides

some theoretical directions to the examination of this cultural landscape, especially in terms of the examination of interactions, as seen in recent publications. The historical and archaeological study of local contexts is helpful to understand how broader historical processes affect directly the lives of the communities that inhabit(ed) these territories along the centuries and shaped the cultural landscapes. It is also crucial for the heritagisation and interpretation of border areas.

The intertwined histories and identities of border regions and communities is one of the most relevant topics in the examination of their past. The search for a common identity of borderlanders obscures the identification of contexts where diversity is the main feature. The discourses for the enhancement and interpretation of cultural heritage in the Iberian dyad, particularly in the area examined here, could value concomitantly differences as part of the uniqueness and diversity of border landscapes. Consequently, the search for common elements may lead to overlook other situations that shaped different manifestations: e.g., in terms of gastronomy, the importance of fish in Alcoutim and of meat in Sanlúcar de Guadiana, or the linguistic encounters in border areas due to informal or unofficial interactions. In sum, divergences do not need to be excluded from the heritagisation of border areas, for they are also a part of the history of these landscapes. In other words, the richness of border areas lies precisely in the diversity of cultural traits and of interactions between local communities (Albuquerque, 2022a).

Regarding pre-existing routes, although the Cross-border Cultural Route already includes points of high archaeological value, such as Mértola (“Museum-Village”), the archaeological site of Montinho das Laranjeiras, and the Castles of Castro Marim and Alcoutim, these resources are often underutilised or viewed as incipient and isolated offerings. The absence of an integrated management strategy and a common tourist brand (such as “Guadiana-Border”) means that this archaeological heritage has not yet been fully converted into a consolidated tourist product in regional planning. Consequently, it is hoped that archaeological and historical research could contribute to study the past of these territories and provide further directions for the enhancement of cultural heritage in cultural landscapes shaped by centuries of interaction.

Notwithstanding, governance is still an important subject of discussion in the context of cross-border cooperation, e.g., in terms of cultural tourism (Liberato et al. 2018) and common identities or senses of belonging, especially because borders can be perceived both as “an object of integration and as a scar on people and space” (Durand, 2022, p. 307). Moreover, there are considerable differences between Portugal and Spain in terms of local policies. Different legislations and bureaucratic processes can be a barrier for the implementation of cross-border projects, e.g., centred in archaeology (García, Del Espino & Albuquerque, 2017, p. 136–137). These obstacles need to be identified in order to promote cultural touristic routes focused on the archaeological record of current border areas and to promote an actual cooperation between countries without the invisible barriers imposed by territorial boundaries.

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