

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE KINGDOM OF TARTESSUS BY THE ANCIENT GREEKS REVISITED: NEW EVIDENCE FOR A FORGOTTEN CAUSE¹

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ABSTRACT

Results in the recent studies of the geomorphological evolution of the coastlines of Iberia in the Gulf of Cadiz in the Middle and Late Holocene add up to archaeological evidence accumulated since the 1980s in support of a renewed case for the representation of the pre-Roman kingdom of Tartessus in the writings of a number of Greek and Roman authors of Antiquity. Herodotus, for instance, made reference to this Iberian kingdom in connection with Ionian navigation, trade, and settlement in the western Mediterranean Sea in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE. The accumulated evidence ought to make researchers revise the paradigm for studying Tartessus that has prevailed in the literature since the 1960s. Launched in the wake of a number of sustained archaeological excavations and spectacular finds in the Spanish regions of Andalusia and Extremadura in the late 1950s and early 1960s, this paradigm has two defining characteristics: (1) the resort to archaeology as the practically exclusive source for Tartessus, to the detriment of the narratives from Antiquity, and (2) the concept of this ancient kingdom as a derivative culture in the long history of relations that natives of southern Iberia maintained with Phoenician traders and colonists.

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In our previous presentation⁴ we mentioned evidence of at least three high-energy events or EWEs in the Gulf of Cadiz in the 2nd millennium BCE that significantly altered the geomorphological evolution—gradual and uniformitarian otherwise—of the coasts of the Gulf.

The coasts of the Gulf that are most relevant for our presentation now are those of the Guadalquivir and Guadalete estuaries. Around 1150 BCE, the third event (Event “C”) was cataclysmic enough to bring to an abrupt end the Middle Bronze Age in at least both estuaries. In the Guadalquivir estuary, the rapid changes in the landscape included a new rupture of the Doñana spit and a rupture as well in the Algaida spit that transformed this second barrier into an island. In the Guadalete estuary, the event must have eroded the Valdelagrana spit and altered much of the sub-aerial extension of the three islands of Cadiz, moving eastward the sandy formations (beaches and dunes) that are associated with rocky ledges.

Following such a violent marine transgression in both estuaries, the low-energy geomorphological forces at work in the Gulf since the end of the last Ice Age resumed their action. In the Guadalquivir estuary, the Doñana spitbar started to grow again. In the process, the erstwhile wide estuary became ever more confined vis-à-vis the Atlantic Ocean, which in a few centuries would result in the formation of a coastal lagoon. The island of Algaida, by contrast, would take longer to become a spit anew: as much as 1,500 years, up to the Roman imperial period, when the mouth of the Guadalquivir River would approximate its present form and the coastal lagoon would turn into the present-day marshes of Doñana National Park. Because of the large range of the Doñana spit, future EWEs hitting the area would affect the sea front far more than would the inner sectors of the estuary.

⁴See “Paleo-geography of the Gulf of Cadiz in SW Iberia during the Second Millennium BCE, by Antonio Rodríguez-Ramírez & Juan J. R. Villariás-Robles.” In S. A. Paipetis (ed.), 2017, *Ancient Greece and Contemporary World: The Influence of Greek Thought on Philosophy, Science and Technology. An International Conference (Ancient Olympia, 28-31 August 2016)* (ISBN: 978-960-530-171-2), pp. 123-132. Athens: University of Patras & International Center for Sciences and Hellenic Values.
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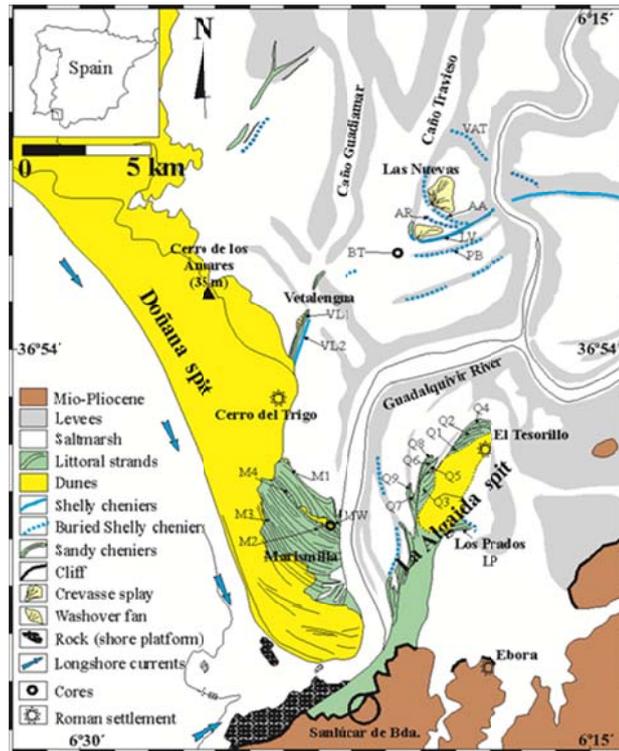


Fig. 1: Chenier systems in the Guadalquivir paleo-estuary

The development of chenier systems in the larger Guadalquivir paleo-estuary is consistent with this evolution. Cheniers are relict beach ridges of sandy and shelly deposits with a littoral strand morphology that overlie the clayey infilling of the marshland. They signal the location of ancient shorelines and are evidence of changes in paleo-environmental conditions, specifically changes in the sediment supply, the river discharge, the sea level, and the frequency of storms.

South of the Guadalquivir paleo-estuary, near the present-day mouth of the river, there are sandy chenier systems that are 50 to 100 m wide and 2.00 to 2.25 m high above sea level. They consist of overlapped strands associated with two ancient paleo-mouths and inlet channels which the estuary had up to the Roman Imperial Period. The western paleo-mouth, defined by the littoral strands of Vetalegua, was flanked on the right side of the estuary by the Doñana spit and on the left side by the Algaida spit. The eastern paleo-mouth, defined by the littoral strands of Los Prados, was flanked on the right side by the Algaida spit and on the left side by the hills of Sanlúcar de Barrameda.

The existence of these two paleo-mouths is confirmed by the testimony of Greek and Roman authors who described the area. One of them was Strabo of Amasia, in the

first years of the Christian era. He wrote that the Guadalquivir River, known as “Baetis” then, emptied itself into the Atlantic Ocean by means of two outlets. Some fifty years later, Pomponius Mela of Tingentera, a native to southern Iberia, wrote that the River reached the Ocean in the form of two large streams which flowed from a large lake that stood not far from the Ocean. The erstwhile spit of Algaida, therefore, would have been an isle in at least Roman times, lying between the two mouths. By way of both, the fluvial current as well as the tidal flows would put the Ocean in connection with the coastal lagoon that Mela mentioned.

In the Guadalete estuary, also following the marine transgression of Event C, the Valdelagrana spit resumed progradation toward the south, which would make the Bay of Cadiz as well as the Guadalete estuary itself ever smaller (Alonso *et al.* 2015). The sandy formations in the southern half of the island of Erýtheia, because of the marine dynamics and the EWEs themselves, would tend to move eastward, approaching the island of Leon. This erosive process has been recognized elsewhere on the outer front of the Bay of Cadiz, especially from the Roman period onwards (Gracia *et al.* 1999). Such post-cataclysmic paleo-geography would be the setting, we submit, for the founding of a Phoenician colony on the islands of Cadiz sometime after the end of the Trojan War, if Strabo is to be believed. Explorers from the city-state of Tyre in search of the trade routes opened in the Bronze Age by the hero Melkarth (the Greek Heracles), Strabo wrote, established a settlement at one end of the island of Erýtheia while erecting a temple for the cult of Melkart at the other end. Strabo also mentions, in the Bay of Cadiz or in the Guadalete paleo-estuary, one “Port of Menestheus,” after the Athenian leader in the Trojan War mentioned by Homer. We think it was an erstwhile port of the city that might correspond with the archaeological site of Doña Blanca, where remains of a Phoenician settlement in the 8th century BCE have been found (Ruiz-Mata and Pérez 1995). Elsewhere on the littoral of the Bay, Strabo places one “Oracle of Menestheus.” Judging by the structure of his narrative, we believe this oracle was at or near the present-day town of Rota, where apparently Roman and pre-Roman remains of a temple or a shrine turned up in the 17th and again in the 19th century (De San Cecilio 1669: 497-504, Sociedad Geográfica de Madrid 1878).

1. The issue of Avienus's *Ora maritima*

With respect to the coasts of south-west Spain as well as the islands of Cadiz, we submit that our reconstructed paleo-geography for the same period following the geomorphic effects of Event C fits the scenario described in another well-known source for the study of southern Iberia in Antiquity, particularly as regards the pre-Roman kingdom of Tartessus. This additional source is the poem *Ora maritima*, by Roman author R. F. Avienus. The credibility of this source, however, has been seriously doubted by many a specialist for some fifty years now. The poem dates from the 4th century AD, but contains references to the sea coasts of the Iberian Peninsula that are much older. Avienus himself mentions many or most of the authors whose works he had read and inspired him to write the poem. At least some of these authors—such as Himilco, the Carthaginian explorer; Euctemon, the Athenian geographer; and Herodotus, the Ionian historian and ethnologist—lived no less than seven hundred years before he did. Furthermore, the poem belongs in an intellectual context of revivalism of pre-Christian advancements in philosophy, science, and the arts (Mangas and Plácido 1994: 17-18, 26).

One of his unnamed sources for the poem appears to be an old description of a coastal course, like in a portolan chart or rutter (*periplous*), or a number thereof, to help mariners navigate from the islands *Sacra* and *Albionum*, in the North Atlantic, down to the “Pillars of Heracles,” which flanked the Straits of Gibraltar, and from there on to the Greek colony of Marseilles along the coasts of southern and eastern Iberia. Avienus cited this ancient rutter at large; in many of his verses, even *verbatim*—to such an extent that *Ora maritima* became famous right after it was argued for the first time, in the 18th century, that the poem had an old portolan chart embedded in it. The chart contains a clear reference to the realm of Tartessus, indicates the western and eastern boundaries of this realm, and provides directions as to where exactly the city capital was located. This city—the unnamed author wrote—sat on an isle, “the isle of Cartare,” which was within a large river, also called “Tartessus.” The isle was near the mouth of the River and could be seen from the sea. The River surrounded the isle after flowing through a lake called *Lake Ligustinus*. The eastern branch projected three channels into the hinterland further east and then joined the western branch south of the isle through a “two two-fold” outlet—apparently a sequential bifurcation within a small delta. The joined course of the River then emptied into the Ocean.

Despite this detailed information, the remains of the city of Tartessus were never found; not even in the Roman period. One reason is that the geographical scenario described in the anonymous source matches no landscape known in southern Iberia today. Another reason is that its author makes reference to additional places and features that are mentioned in no other narrative for ancient Iberia, which makes identification an apparently unsolvable problem.

There is, for instance, the city of *Herbi*, located somewhere between the mouth of the Guadiana River and the mouth of the Tartessus River. Avienus commented that this city no longer existed in his time, as it had been destroyed in “past times of wars”—in probable reference to the conflicts and disturbances of the 2nd century AD in southern Iberia.

Beyond the mouth of the Tartessus River, Avienus cited the rutter to remark that the prospective mariner, in his way to the Straits of Gibraltar, could make out in the horizon a feature known as *Gerontis Arx* (“King Geryon’s citadel”), which received the waters of “a wide river” (*flumen amplum*) that flowed into the sea nearby. Across from *Gerontis Arx* was *Fani Prominens* (“The Cape of the Shrine or of the Temple”). *Gerontis Arx* and *Fani Prominens* flanked the entrance to *Sinus tartessius* (“The Gulf of Tartessus”). In addition, *Gerontis Arx* stood by or was located in the walled city (*oppidum*) of “Gadir,” arguably the core settlement of the Phoenician colony of Cadiz.

A channel (*interfluum*) five stadia wide (some 900 m) separated the walled settlement and *Gerontis Arx* from the island of “Erythia,” which must be the same as the 100-stadium island of “Erytheia” mentioned by Strabo in connection with the story of King Geryon. To the west of this long island stood another island, “consecrated to Venus Marina,” which included a subterranean temple and an oracle.

Let these examples suffice to argue that the very rareness of the contents of *Ora maritima*—an unfamiliar geography and a sequence of singular names for places and features—support the authenticity of the chart as much as they evince its lack of credibility. Indeed, the rare names might well be pointed to in contending that they reflect the description of at least two commercial sea routes in a remote past. One was from the city of Tartessus to the islands *Sacra* and *Albionum*, in the North Atlantic, and back, so as to procure lead and tin. The other sea route would connect the city of Tartessus to the Ionian colony of Marseilles and beyond in the Mediterranean Sea.

So interpreted, the rare information contained in *Ora maritima* can then be dated, as in effect it has been (Cf. Mangas and Plácido 1994: 23), to the time of the close relations (political as well as commercial) that Ionians—particularly Ionians of the city of Phocaea, through the colony of Marseilles—kept with the kingdom of Tartessus in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE. More specifically, the information appears to date to the early years of the 6th century BCE, as it mentions the colony of Marseilles, founded c. 600 BCE, but fails to mention the colony of Ampuries, which was founded by people from Marseilles not long thereafter (Sanmarti-Grego 1992a, 1992b).

The relations between the kingdom of Tartessus and the Ionians of Phocaea became close to the point—wrote Herodotus—that the Tartessian king, Arganthonios, offered the city of Phocaea assistance with which to resist the expansion of the Persian Empire. Fierce commercial competition, however, might have existed between the Ionians, on the one side, and the Phoenicians and Carthaginians on the other for the Iberian and the northern Atlantic trade.

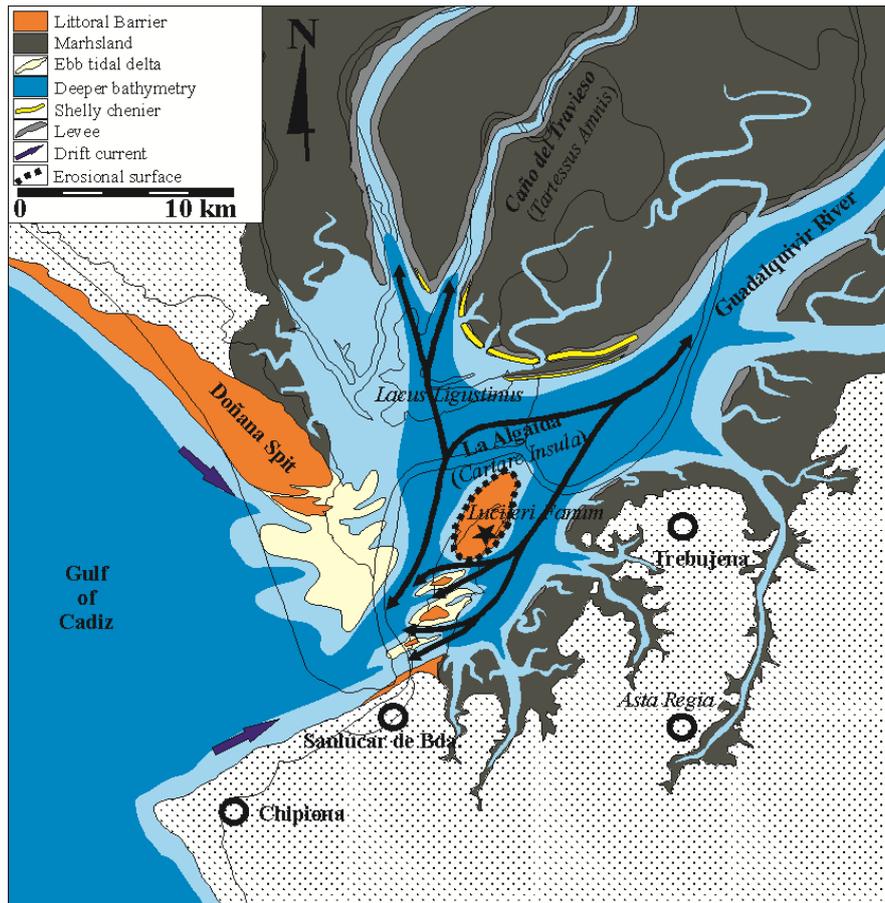


Fig. 2: Paleogeography of the mouth of the Guadalquivir River in the Tartessian period as inferred from geomorphological evidence from the Guadalquivir paleo-estuary.

2. Interpretation in the light of the geomorphological evidence from the Guadalquivir and Guadalete paleo-estuaries

Our reconstruction of the geomorphological evolution in the Guadalquivir and Guadalete paleo-estuaries in the course of the Middle and Late Holocene invites us to suggest that the isle that the spit of Algaia was from c. 1150 BCE to Roman imperial times was “The isle of Cartare” mentioned in *Ora maritima* as the isle where the city of Tartessus stood. If so, then the Tartessus River was the present-day Guadiamar River, which flowed across the Guadalquivir paleo-estuary through today’s relict “Travieso” channel. *Lacus ligustinus* was, therefore, the coastal lagoon that progradation of the Doñana spitbar had formed.

Archaeological remains from the Tartessian period have been found at the present-day spit of Algaia. These remains, however, have been interpreted as those of a Carthaginian shrine (Blanco-Freijeiro and Corzo-Sánchez 1983). The spit of Algaia does

have been pointed to as the location for the city of Tartessus by other researchers (Barbadillo-Delgado 1951, Menanteau in Palacios 1981); yet they lacked the geomorphological evidence presented here.

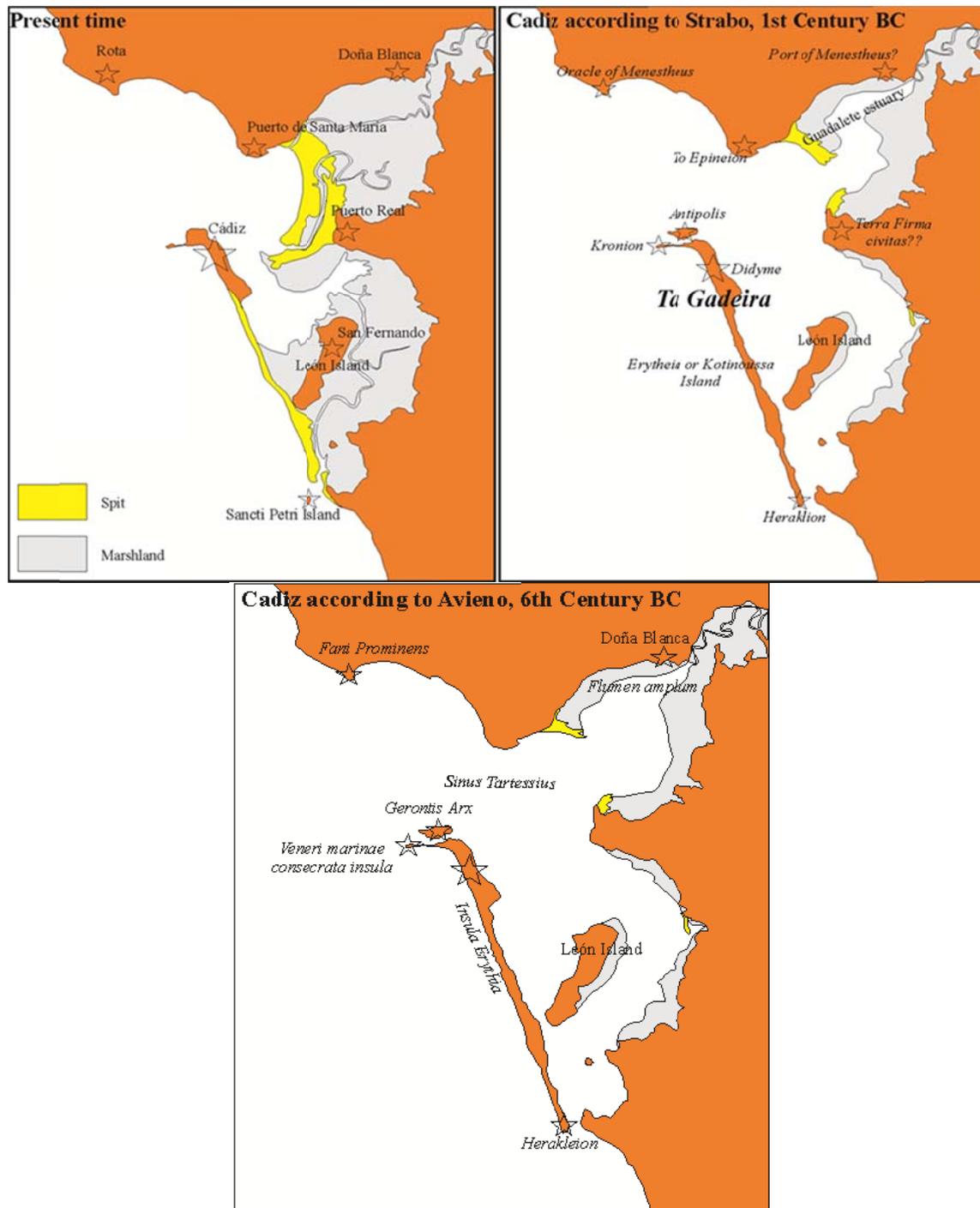


Fig. 3: The islands and bay of Cadiz and their vicinity as described in Strabo's *Geographiká* and Avienus's *Ora maritima*. Geomorphological data partially referred to Alonso *et al.* (2015) and Dabrio *et al.* (2000)

To continue with the direction of the rutter: *Arx Gerontis*, “King Geryon’s citadel,” we believe stood on the isle which geophysical tests run in downtown Cadiz have revealed that lay north of an outlet of the Bay though the present-day beach of La Caleta. This isle would later hold the core of the first Phoenician settlement, referred to as *Gadir* in *Ora maritima*. It is the same isle that still later in the 1st millennium BCE, wrote Strabo, would hold the “the anti-polis” of the multi-sited city community of *Ta Gádeira*. The “polis” counterpart sat across the 5-stadia wide outlet of the Bay through the beach of La Caleta, on the long island of Erýtheia, where according to Greek mythology King Geryon had confronted Heracles and died.

Opposite *Arx Gerontis*, on the other side of the entrance to the Bay, stood *Fani Prominens*, “The Cape of the Shrine or Temple.” Opposite the northernmost end of the Cadiz peninsula today, on the other side of the entrance to the Bay, stands the town of Rota, where, as remarked earlier, Roman and pre-Roman remains of a temple were found in the 17th and 19th centuries and where, to judge from Strabo’s directions, “Oracle of Menestheus” may have stood. It is then tempting to surmise that the shrine or temple on a cape across *Arx Gerontis* was the “Oracle of Menestheus” mentioned by Strabo for the coast line of the province of Cadiz where Rota now stands. *Sinus tartessius*, “The Gulf of Tartessus,” therefore, would be the Bay of Cadiz and the Guadalete paleo-estuary. *Flumen amplum* would be the Guadalete River.

Finally, the island consecrated to Venus Marina may have been the present-day island—and peninsula, depending on the tidal cycle—of San Sebastián, where, according to Strabo, a temple for the worship of Cronus once stood. Cronus (Roman Saturn) and Aphrodite (Roman Venus) were connected in Greek mythology.

3. The fall of the Schulten Paradigm

For more than a century, up to the 1960s, the rutter embedded in *Ora maritima* was considered geographical information of the utmost importance for doing research on Tartessus. It was the fundamental evidence, for instance, to which Schulten and Bonsor pointed in the 1920s to announce their hypothesis that the remains of the city of Tartessus lay buried at the site of Cerro del Trigo, on the spitbar of Doñana. This hypothesis was the archetypal product of a paradigm for the study of Tartessus that can be called here, for the

sake of argument, “The Schulten paradigm.” The defining characteristic of this paradigm was methodological: practitioners placed trust upon the comparative analysis and interpretation of all references to Tartessus contained in the writings preserved from Antiquity. Avienus’s *Ora maritima*, Strabo’s *Geographiká* and Herodotus’s *History* were such writings; yet so were the references in the Old Testament to “the land of Tarshish” (out to which the merchant ships of ancient Israel as well as Tyre would sail) and the references to this same land in the cuneiform texts of Assyria. Information from archaeological projects, or from projects from other scientific disciplines, such as geology, was viewed as supplementary to the information provided by these writings.

In the 1960s, however, this time-honored paradigm was abandoned—and with it the credibility of all those sources from Antiquity, including Avienus’ *Ora maritima*. Instead, a different paradigm was adopted, which can be called here “The Xeres Paradigm,” after an important meeting of experts on the subject of Tartessus that took place in the city of Xeres, southern Spain, in September, 1968. Although the reasons for the paradigm change were many, few of them, if any, could really justify it. The new paradigm had two defining characteristics: (1) the resort to archaeology as the practically exclusive source for Tartessus, to the detriment of the narratives from Antiquity, and (2) the concept of this ancient kingdom as a derivative culture in the long history of relations that natives of southern Iberia maintained with Phoenician traders and colonists.

Since the 1990s, however, new data and new scholarly conditions are increasingly bringing about a renovated interest in the narratives of Antiquity. The new data that are most significant are the ever larger amounts of Greek pottery shards and other types of evidence that add up to remains known for decades which date to periods covered by the written sources, the Middle and Late Bronze Age included. The most spectacular developments have taken place in the city of Huelva and in the city of Cadiz. The references in the Old Testament to “the land of Tarshish” understood as the realm of Tartessus have been re-vindicated as well from the field of Biblical Studies (Cf. Koch 2003).

The new scholarly conditions are those of an increasing impatience with the limitations of the Xeres paradigm, which in the face of the fresh archaeological evidence presses its supporters to answer questions about the less material aspects of culture related to this evidence that the paradigm was ill set to pose in the first place; e. g., regarding social

and political organization and economic interaction patterns, precisely the topics that the written sources best inform about.

This new context favoring a renewed interest in the written sources of Antiquity should extend, sooner or later, to a renovated regard for Avienus's *Ora maritima*.

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