



Wielyd, cheap and pale: Lead tablets in the Palaeohispanic world

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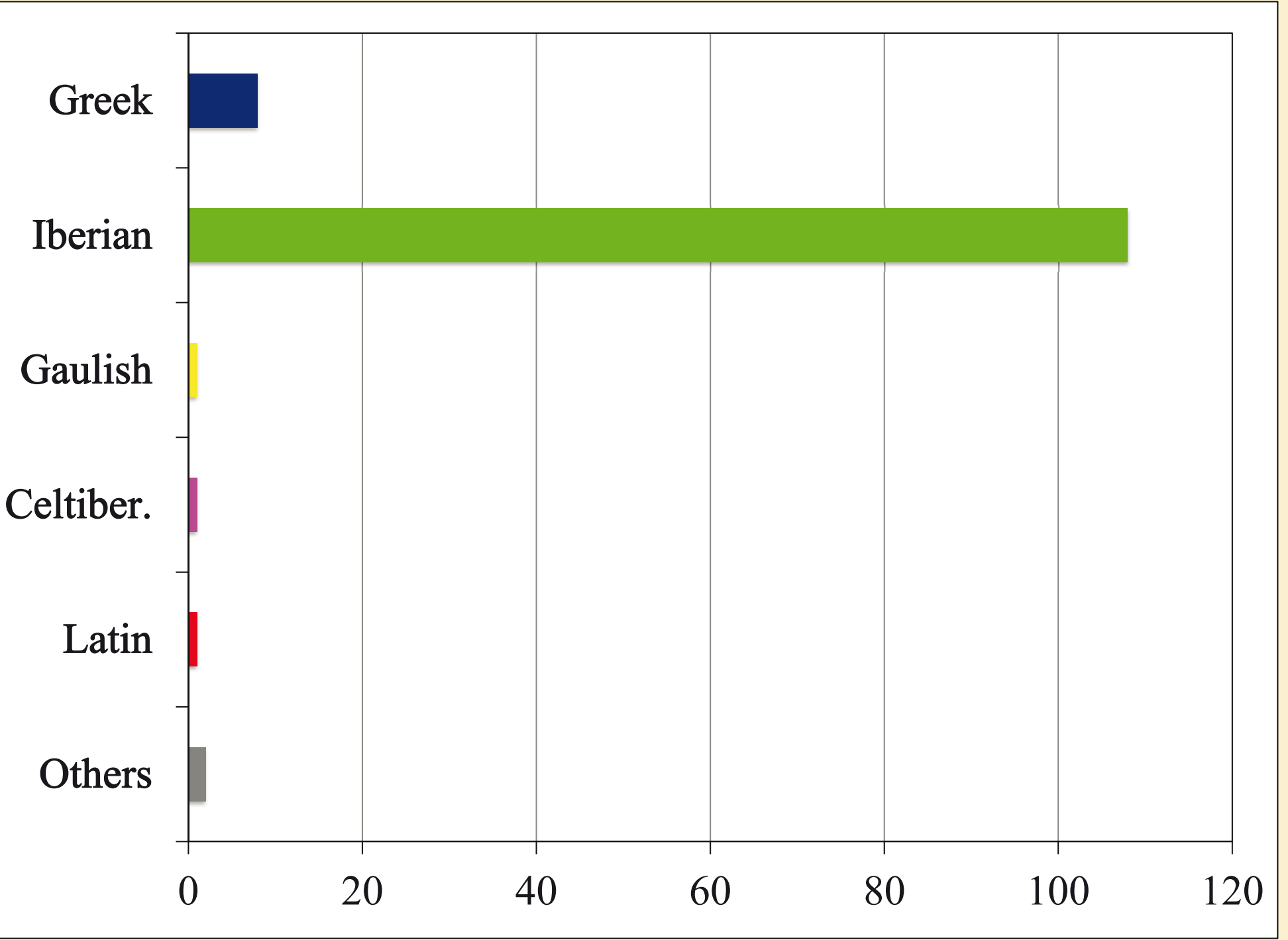
What languages are attested?

There have been found around 120 inscriptions on lead tablets in the territories inhabited by the pre-Roman peoples of the Iberian Peninsula, most of them in the area dominated by the Iberian tribes. This fact helps us understand the large amount of Iberian lead tablets, which account for the 90% of the whole corpus and have been found all along the coast between the river Hérault in Southern France and the Sierra de Gádor in Almería, with very few exceptions from the interior.

However, the corpus also includes documents in other languages. Nine are in Greek, the oldest of which conserve traces of the Ionian dialect of Phocaea. All but one come not from indigenous sites, but from colonial settlements located within the area of Iberian influence: *Agathe* (Agde), *Rhode* (Roses) and *Emporion* (Empúries). The sole exception is the Etruscan and Greek inscription found at the Iberian *oppidum* of Pech Maho (Sigeon), which bears witness to the reuse of a sheet that would have otherwise been recast.

As far as local languages are concerned, there is also a Gaulish lead from *Illiberis* (Elne) and a Celtiberian one which comes probably from Castillejo de Iniesta. Finally, the only Latin lead from the Palaeohispanic environment

is a *defixio* found at *Emporiae*. A supposedly Iberian–Latin tablet from *Baetulo* is still unpublished and may only consist of Latin characters after all, so it is not certain whether it should be dated to the Iberian period.



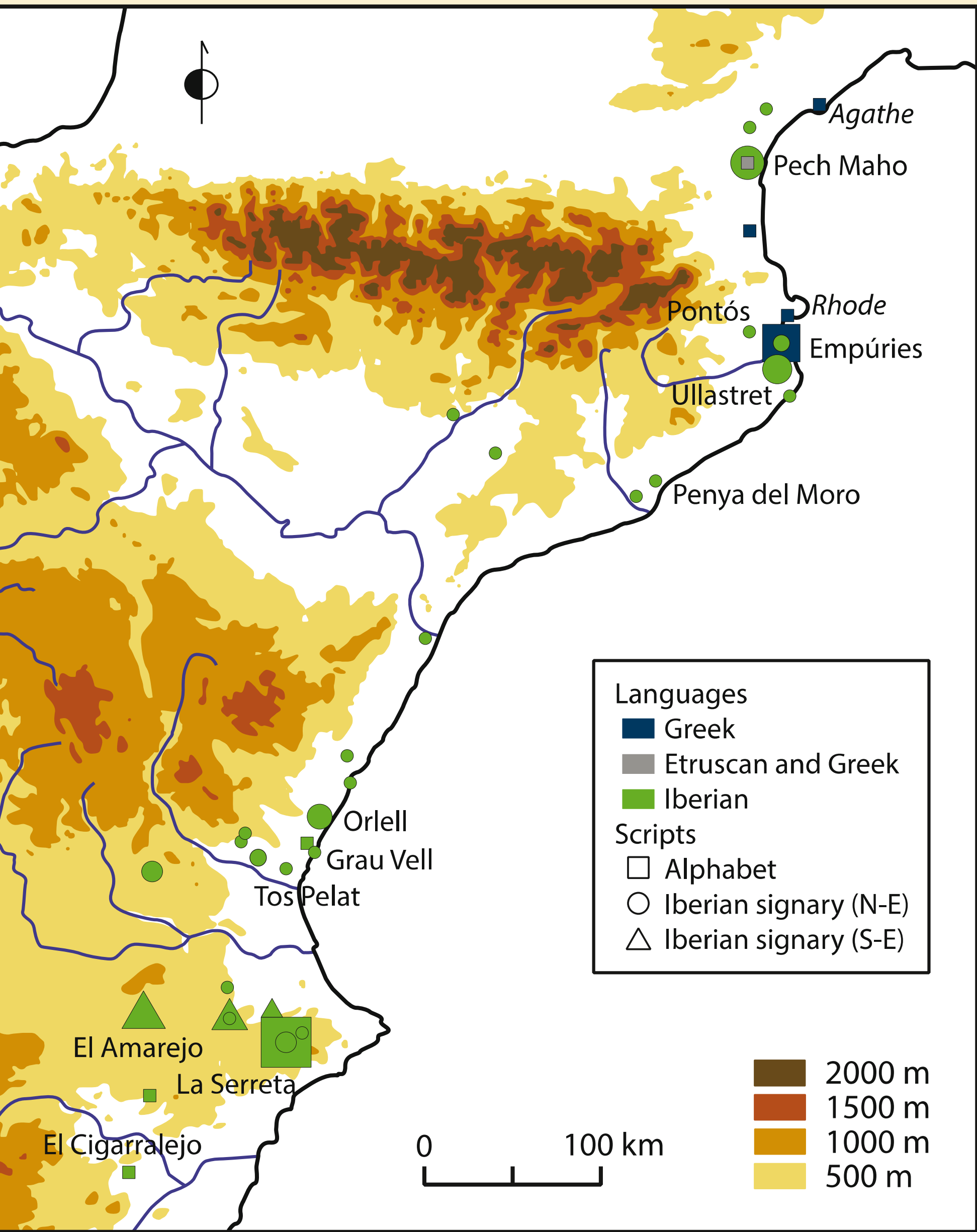
Lead tablets from the Palaeohispanic world according to the language of their texts

When did the oldest documents appear?

The earliest lead tablets were written in non-autochthonous languages and, despite the lack of clear archaeological contexts, the medium seems to be in use in our region by the middle of the fifth century BCE. Two inscriptions point in this direction:

1. The first one is the aforementioned lead from Pech Maho (*ETNa* 0.1 = *IGF* 135). The archaeological context of this find is barely known, but its palaeography dates the Etruscan inscription to 500–450 BCE, and the Greek one to the second third of the same century.
2. The second one was recovered at the *Neapolis* of *Emporion* (*IGEP* 129). It appeared among earthenware from the fifth century BCE, and the palaeography points to the second half of this century (Slings) rather than the last third of the sixth (Santiago).

As regards the Iberian tablets, they first appear a few decades later in three specific regions: Northern Catalonia, with the lead sheets from Pontós and *Penya del Moro* (350–325); the area of Valencia, with those from *Grau Vell* (425–375) and *Tos Pelat* (400–350); and Contestania (Alicante and part of Murcia), with the inscription from *El Cigarralejo* (400–350).



Lead inscriptions datable to between the fifth and the third centuries BCE

Mapping the earlier inscriptions (5th to 3rd centuries BCE)

The epigraphic habit of writing on lead mainly developed around these three areas, where the most important sets of tablets are found (Pech Maho, Empúries and Ullastret in the north; Orlell and Los Villares in Valencia; La Serreta, La Bastida and El Amarejo in Contestania), and reached its summit during the third century BCE.

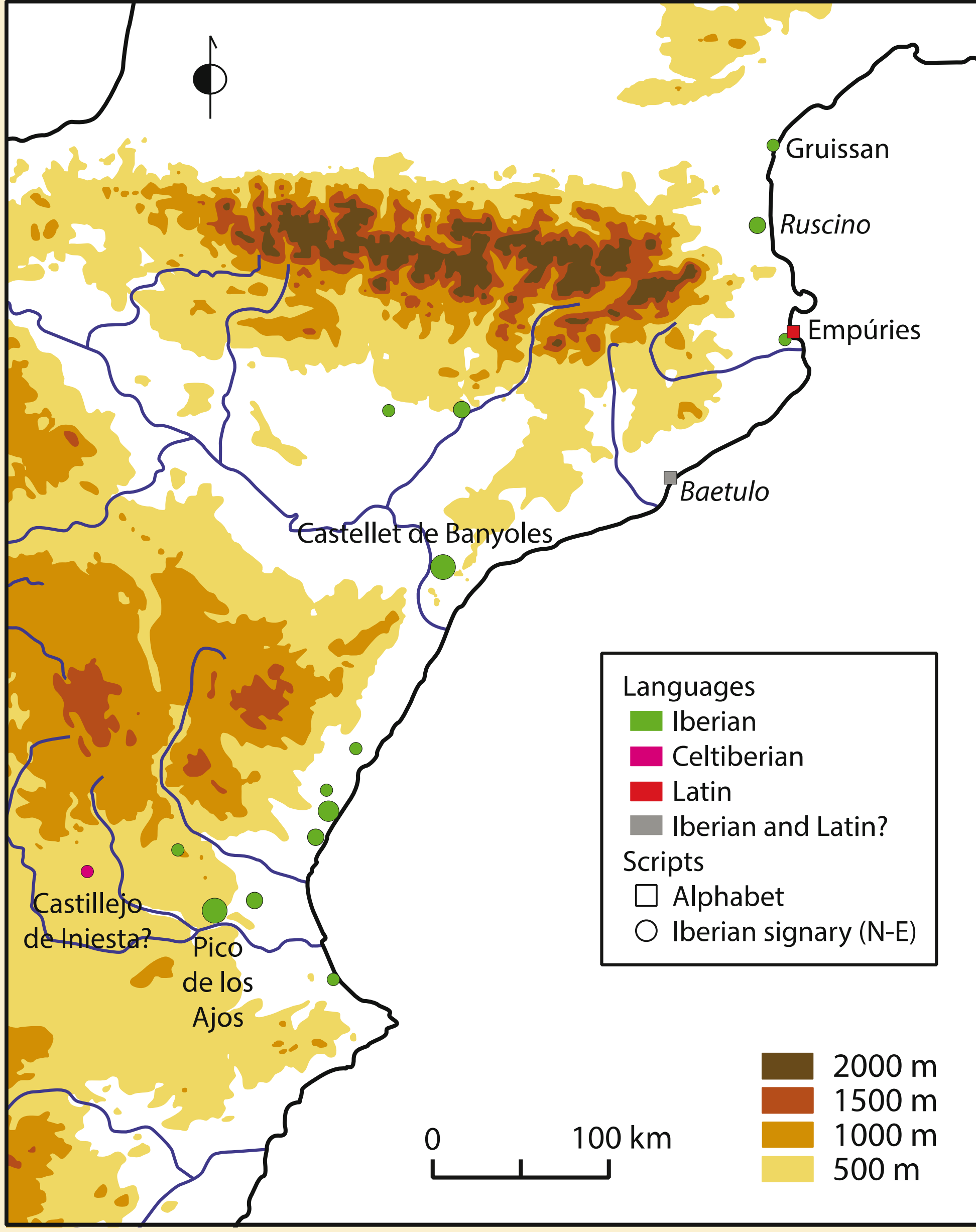
As far as the writing systems are concerned, the most interesting region is Contestania. What makes it quite unique is the coexistence of the three scripts in which the Iberian language was written: the North-Eastern Iberian signary, the South-Eastern one and the Graeco-Iberian alphabet.

There are still some problems with the chronology of those inscriptions that lack archaeological context, such as the Gaulish lead from Elne or almost all tablets in the South-Eastern Iberian signary. Besides, many sheets are to

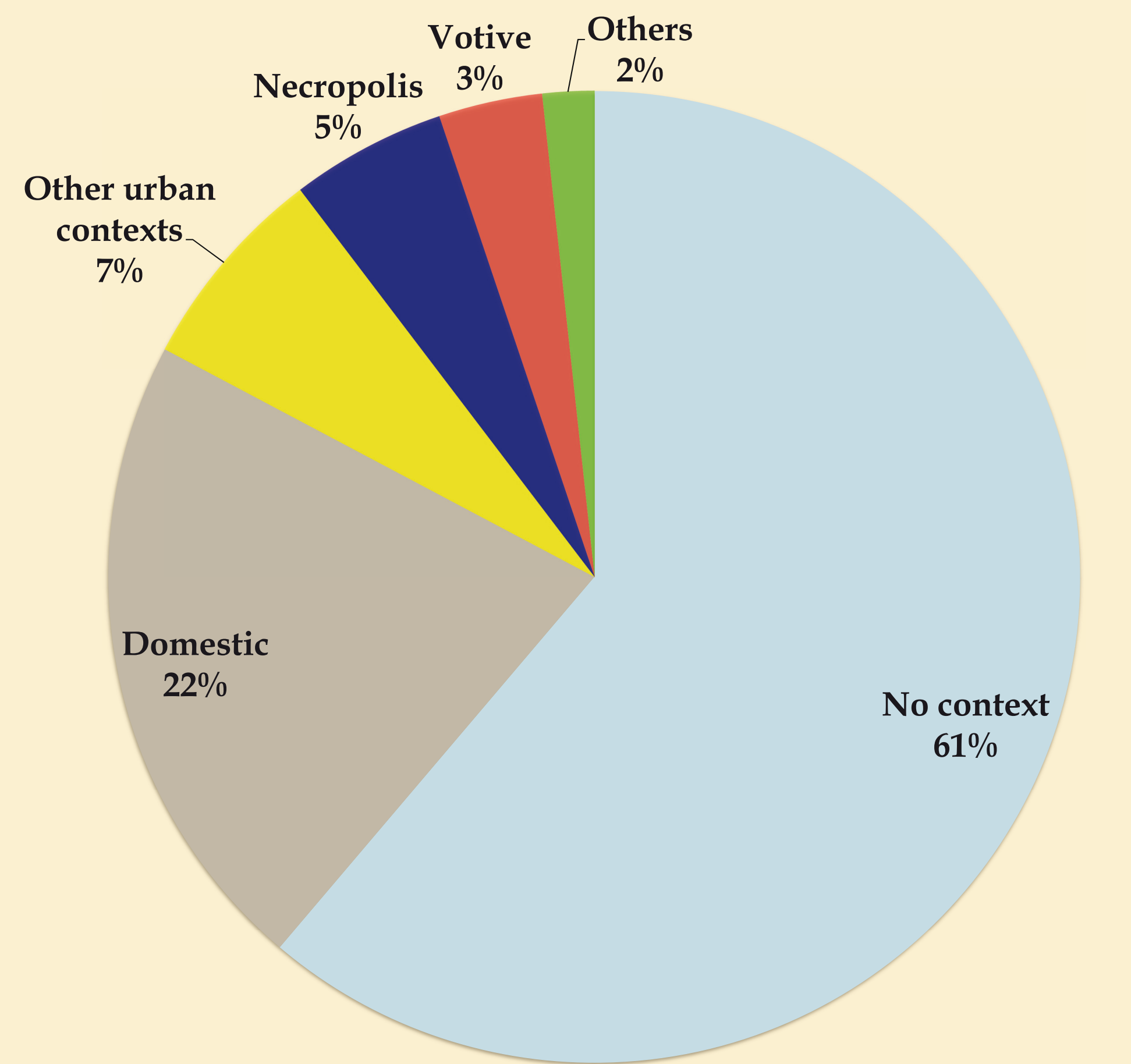
be dated to the late third or early second century, when great changes occurred as far as the North-Eastern signary is concerned: namely, the abandonment of the so-called ‘dual system’, which distinguishes voiced and voiceless stops by means of an extra stroke. In case of doubt, I have included those lead tablets that use the dual system in this first map.

Mapping the later inscriptions (2nd to 1st centuries BCE)

The distribution of the lead inscriptions dating to Ibero-Roman times can create a misleading picture of the phenomenon. Many of them seem to belong to the aforementioned period of transition *ca.* 200 BCE, such as the sets from *Ruscino* or *Castellet de Banyoles*, so after about 150 the habit is in clear decline. Yet it is true that the old centres continue to write on lead sheets (especially Empúries, where the first Latin tablets are found, and the area of Valencia, most of all the *Pico de los Ajos*) and that the only known Celtiberian lead must be a result of a still strong Iberian influence.



Lead inscriptions datable to between the second and the first centuries BCE



Archaeological context of the lead tablets under consideration

What did they write on those tablets?

The Greek lead tablets that have been found in our region contain three kinds of texts: commercial documents, private letters and *defixiones*. As regards their Palaeohispanic counterparts, at least four Iberian lead tablets and the Celtiberian one are also private letters, while others may be business documents or accounts, as is suggested by the presence of numbers and words like *śalir* (‘silver’ or ‘silver coin’).

Apart from these linguistic clues, when establishing the content of an inscription it is important to know the physical conditions of its finding. In this respect, however, the situation of Iberian lead tablets is tragic: more than half have no archaeological context at all, and less than 10% come from a place that can somehow indicate the type of text, such as a necropolis, a votive deposit or a sanctuary.

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