

museums

of Castilla-La Mancha

The Libisosa Museum Collection



LEZUZA (ALBACETE)



View of the Cerro del Castillo, the enclave where the Libisosa site is located.



The Agripina Social and Cultural Centre, which houses the Libisosa Museum Collection.



The Agripina Social and Cultural Centre run by the Local Council of Lezuza (Albacete) and promoted and financed by the Regional Government of Castile-La Mancha, houses the Libisosa Museum Collection, which is made up of the artefacts and materials found at this archaeological site. These artefacts belong to the Region as a whole and the venue where they are exhibited is associated with the Museum of Albacete.

Since 1996, successive archaeological campaigns financed by the Regional Government of Castile-La Mancha, under the scientific direction of Mr. José Uroz, have uncovered the Iberian and Roman settlement of Libisosa. These campaigns led to an endless series of discoveries: a part of the urban layout, a series of architectural structures and a considerable number of artefacts dating from between the end of the Bronze Age and the Early Medieval Period, not to mention the Iberian and Roman Eras, which are the two most important periods at this site.

Archaeological finds:
large earthenware
jars, amphorae
and other ceramic
artefacts.



Libisosa. A Settlement in the Roman Region of Oretania and an Important Medieval Enclave

The settlement of *Libisosa*, which is located near the town of *Lezuza*, enjoyed an *enviable strategic setting* overlooking a key crossroads on the Iberian Peninsula. It was located in a region that based its wealth on agriculture and control over *transhumance routes* and the *metal trade*, which made this an area of exceptional importance in the Ancient World. In this respect, this site today constitutes a key point of reference with regard to the historical and archaeological heritage that exists throughout the region.

The region's territory has been crisscrossed by the most important transhumance routes since Pre-Historic times: the *Via Heraclea*, which links Upper Andalusia with Valencia, and the transhumance route of Los Serranos, which borders the Mediterranean through the lands of Murcia and Alicante. This control over trading routes endowed *Libisosa*

with a high *geo-strategic value*, which is why it is mentioned in the main itineraries of the Ancient world: the Vicarello Vases, the Itinerary of Antoninus and the Anonymous Ravenna Cosmography.

Various artefacts that have been found at the site known as *Cerro del Castillo* over time, as well as other materials such as the inscription that the settlers in Libisosa dedicated to Marcus Aurelius (which accompanied the lost statue), help to create a picture of an important settlement, which we know today occupied an area of around *30 hectares*.

The *archaeological excavations* that have been carried out since 1996 by a team from the University of Alicante, including workers from the local area and students from various Spanish and foreign universities, have so far revealed a series of different structures and a considerable number of artefacts dating back to the end of the *Bronze Age and reaching as far back as the Orientalizing Period* (ninth to sixth centuries BC) and the *Early Medieval Period* and including the *Iberian and Roman Periods*, the two most important ages for this particular site.

Between the Iberian and Roman Periods, *Libisosa* would enjoy a pre-colonial status, that of a *forum*, which clearly reflects the settlement's importance in terms of trade. The Roman colony (first to third centuries AD) may have been planned by Augustus, but its monumental structure was created by the Emperor Tiberius. We might highlight the legal importance of Roman *Libisosa* within the Hispanic-Roman context, given that it was one of the few settlements run under *Roman law*, which meant that the inhabitants enjoyed the same rights as the inhabitants of Rome itself.

Following the Late Roman Imperial Period, the site witnessed a gradual decline, which continued up until the Early Medieval Period. From this stage in its history, in addition to the well-known *watchtower*, which lends its name to the hill itself, to the northeast of the forum archaeological excavations have uncovered a building that served a political and religious purpose, one linked to the *Military Orders* and the conquest and resettlement process for the surrounding region.



LIBISOSA. The Museum Collection

The *Libisosa* Museum Collection encompasses a selection of artefacts dating from the Iberian Period of the site, namely *Regius Oretana*, which is the name cited in Ancient literary sources in reference to the Iberian territories in the South-East which stretched from Upper Andalusia (with *Kastilo* serving as the main population centre), to the Province of Ciudad Real, featuring sites such as Cerro de las Cabezas, Alarcos and *Oretum*. The structures and artefacts discovered at the *Libisosa* site, which are quite unparalleled throughout the rest of Oretania, reflect the importance of this enclave as a key crossroads for both regions and a nerve centre during the Ancient Period in what has become the Province of Albacete today.

The sheer quantity, quality and variety of the Iberian artefacts found in Lezuza, the result of a series of very special preservation circumstances and conditions, provide us with an inexhaustible resource when it comes to approaching this remote historical period throughout the region. A tour of the First Floor of the Agripina Social and Cultural Centre offers a series of live historical flashbacks regarding the handicrafts, farming and fishing pursuits and trade activities of the Ancient inhabitants of Libisosa, as well as the resources of self-exaltation employed by the governing classes in order to maintain their grip on power, not to mention various traces of their dramatic end.

Inhabitants of Oretania from Its Heyday (Eighth Century BC): The Consolidation of a New Culture

Iberian culture, which followed a process of ongoing development through contact with the Phoenician-Punic and Greek worlds, first of all, and the Roman world later on, brought with it the general appearance of various fundamental aspects regarding the history of Mankind, aspects partly introduced by these cultures, such as *wheel-turned pottery, civic town squares*, writing, the coinage of money and also the *practical use of iron* for tools and weapons.

The consolidation of this culture in *Libisosa* originated from an early settlement organised around an urban layout, from which an *oppidum* arose, inhabited by Iberians affiliated to Oretania. From this period we can identify various early architectural structures dating from at least the *fourth century BC*. Above all we might highlight the structures discovered in *Sector 19*, located on one of the lowest northern slopes of the hill, a site where a considerable number of artefacts have been recovered, including Greek pottery and even gold jewellery.

An Unaltered Picture of the Final Iberian Period (Second to First Centuries BC)

The best-known stage in the history of Oretania corresponds to the Final Iberian Period (*second to first centuries BC*). To date, archaeologists have been able to excavate a

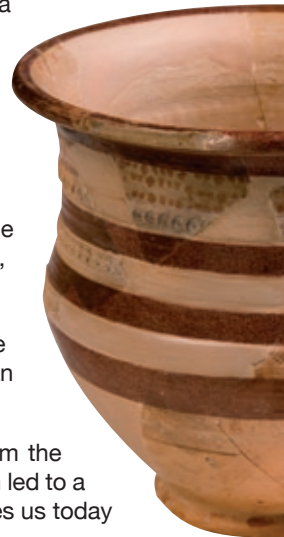
district in the northern part (Sector 3), whose complete boundaries have yet to be defined. Various dwellings have been discovered that appear to have served a domestic and commercial purpose. Furthermore, traces of two parallel streets running north-south have been discovered, making up a minimum of three blocks.

The building techniques employed for the walls consisted of foundations made of rubblework accompanied by adobe walls, although mud walls and paved areas made of clay and cobbles have also been found. The use of certain supporting elements has also been documented, such as posts and pillars, whilst indications have been found that the roofs were made of plant material, probably being one-sided and aligned with the slope of the hill.

To the north-west of this sector we come across Sector 18, which is dominated by a large building of trapezoidal foundations that must have belonged to a local oligarch who controlled all of the production processes. The construction that has been recreated *in situ* in the museum for the tour, features six rooms. We can highlight the good state of preservation of its inner walls made of adobe and mud (2 m in height in some cases), as well as its access stairwell, not to mention a large lead barrel, replete with its almost 500 complete pieces.

In this part of the Museum Collection we can view a small selection of the artefacts found in Sectors 3 and 18, both imported (especially Italic items, including wine amphorae, slender black-varnished pottery and bronze plates), and locally-made items, such as large vases (amphorae-earthenware jars) and tableware and cooking implements. Equally abundant are farming tools, cart wheels, loom wheels and weights, as well as Iberian coins and necklace beads made of glass-like paste.

The excellent state of preservation of these structures and artefacts from the Final Iberian Period is due to their rapid and systematic destruction, which led to a “sepulture effect” caused by the collapse of the adobe walls. This provides us today



with a picture of these items before the decline of this civilisation, constituting a frozen image of the inhabitants' daily life.

Artisans in Oretania

Iberian pottery was made by hand using a *potter's wheel*. We could say it was almost produced on an industrialised scale, but it did not achieve the levels of standardisation witnessed in the Greek and Roman worlds. The pottery is generally the result of *oxidation firing*, producing vases of orangey and beige hues. *Reduction firing* was also used, which produced pottery of grey and very high quality finish.

We do not know very much about the purposes of Iberian vases or their different names, although considerable research efforts have been made in this respect. The main problem encountered in historical-archaeological research consists of the fact that the vases that are in the best state of preservation are always found within special contexts (funerary and ritual purposes), not those relating to daily life. In this sense, the great contribution made by *Libisosa* is the fact that various *complete artefacts have been found within their original context*.

The most common pottery artefacts in Iberian *Lezuza*, which were used as vases for holding, serving and consuming solid and liquid foods, consist of small spherical earthenware jars, traditional "red-varnished" plates, small bowls and cups, *lebes*, *kalathos*, crater-shaped vases, bottles, pitchers featuring tri-lobed lips or *oinochoe* and calyciform vases. The large amphorae-earthenware jars presented later on appear to have been used exclusively for storage purposes.

The simplest form of *decoration* that can be found on these pottery items consists of the objects being dipped in a liquid clay bath known as *engobe*. The most characteristic feature of Iberian culture, however, consists of *painted details* produced with



colours based on iron oxide, which produced a series of reddish hues. The painted decorative details typically found at *Libisosa* are the result of a sum of different influences from the direct surroundings, together with local elements: it is in the plant-like compositions that the influence of the *South-Eastern style* is most evident, based on the important impact of La Alcudia in Elche. In *Lezuza* we also come across an unusually large number of pottery items featuring *incised decoration* and stamped motifs.

The coarse *pottery vases* adopt the most standard forms used for Iberian plates and dishes. Dark hues tend to prevail (grey and black), although the examples from *Lezuza* also feature a predominant use of orange and beige shades. In spite of being turned on a potter's wheel, this kind of pottery is less carefully made than the previously presented varieties: the clay reveals the use of a large amount of opening materials, both within the pottery itself and in the surface finish, giving these items a rather porous appearance. An explanation for the majority of these pieces, especially the pots, can be found in their functional purpose: these vases were made to be placed directly *over a flame*, in which respect they would rest on special ring-like or coil-lie supports.

Merchants, Farmers and Stockbreeders in Oretania

The *cart wheels* found at *Libisosa* have extra-reinforced radiuses, which attest to their use for transporting heavy loads over long distances. These wheels provide a faithful reflection of the considerable amount of trade activity that took place at the site.

The *emergence of money provided a guarantee* for transactions, although the domestic economy would continue to operate through barter. The governing classes used this phenomenon as a new means of narrating and consolidating their history and identity.

The more-than-healthy trade activity in *Lezuza* and the wealth generation that resulted from it can also be deduced from the arrival of an exceptional number of *imported artefacts*, mainly from the **Italic Peninsula**. In this respect, we might highlight various bronze dishes, as well as slender



black-varnished vases, which are the most characteristic pottery items of the Roman Republic. At a scientific level, the high degree of standardisation of Italic items endows them with an important role when it comes to establishing dates in excavation work. However, trade encouraged the *circulation of ideas* as well as goods. The general use of these prestigious items attests to the growing degree of *Romanisation* of the elite classes in Libisosa, who were the first to be integrated into the new Roman order. Furthermore, the presence of a *lagynos* of possible Hellenistic manufacture and decorated with erotic scenes is also highly significant.

The *amphora* was the *storage and transport container* par excellence in the Ancient World, being used for wine, oil, salted fish and cereals by different cultures throughout the Mediterranean. These vases achieved quite a high degree of standardisation in the *Libisosa* of the Final Iberian Period. The most characteristic features of these items, aspects that distinguish them from the common Iberian vases, include the absence of handles and the testimonial presence of a foot, which endows them with a static quality, one exclusively designed for them to serve as storage containers in homes, at vineyards and at other businesses by placing them in holes dug in the ground or on wooden shelves.

The amphorae-earthenware jars of Libisosa were made to hold around *100 litres of wine*, an indispensable beverage in the Ancient World. The finding of these vases was accompanied by the discovery of a proportionally smaller but still significant number of *Italic amphorae dating from the time of the Roman Republic* (Dressel 1, Lamboglia 2), which provides testimony to the fact that *Lezuza* at this time was clearly within the orbit of the Roman imperialist trading system.



The degree of preservation of the items recovered from *Lezuza* dating from the time of Oretania reaches a highpoint in the case of the artefacts made of metal. The use of *iron* for all kinds of tools constituted one of the great advances witnessed by Iberian culture and this leap forward can be observed from the very beginning in the *agricultural instruments* employed during the period. At *Libisosa*, archaeologists have recovered

sickles, picks, hoes and other instruments that testify to the degree to which these tools were perfected during the Final Iberian Period. Such is the degree of *specialisation* (each task has its own tool), that it is quite striking just how little this technology has changed over the two millennia that followed, not only in relation to agricultural instruments, but also with regard to other appliances such as shearing scissors and cowbells, the latter made of bronze. The emergence of metal tools and instruments represented a transcendental advance in the history of Mankind, given that it led to an *increase in production and productivity*.

The Languages of Power: The Niche of the Iberian Oligarch

The *main beneficiary* of the economic and social situation that derived from agricultural, cattle-breeding and artisan activities, and the trade in raw materials and manufactured goods, was the Iberian *governing class in Oretania*. A faithful and eloquent reflection of this fact is provided by the resources for *self-exaltation* that this power group presented as of the Full Iberian Period, but which now acquired a new expression in line with the social and political development of the élite classes and the establishment of new alliances, not to mention contact with the hegemonic power of the age throughout the Mediterranean, the Roman Republic.

Out of the grand sculptural and religious projects that emerged from the Ancient and Full Iberian Periods, which were clearly influenced by Greek and Phoenician-Punic culture, we might highlight *vase painting* as an important means of *expression for the élite classes*, constituting a qualitative shift regarding image and power. Pottery is a field whose scope is rather more diversified than that of sculpture, based on a code that was not spontaneous in any sense, to the extent that such pieces had to be commissioned, either based on individual or collective demand.



It was during this period and in this format that the aristocracy endowed itself with its own universe and language, whose ultimate expression consisted of the painted motifs of the South-East, structured around the theme of fecundity, as represented by the bird (a symbol of female divinity), and the *profusion of plant life*, in its capacity as a metaphor for aristocracy and its relationship with nature. A special role was assigned to the figure of the *carnassier*, a term promoted by French and German scholars at the beginning of last century that makes reference to a mythical being derived in good part from the *wolf*, whilst encapsulating the essence of this animal at the same time. A sense of fear and disdain for this predator, which damaged the local economy, was combined with a sense of admiration and respect for such an efficient animal. The wolf, as an astute, ferocious and well-organised creature, constituted a model for *these warlike societies* and appears in these paintings through the filter of an heroic evocation of a myth.

The greatest reminiscences in the figurative painted ceramics of the sculptural language of the preceding age can be found in the *individual warrior contests or monomachiae*, which were frequent in Edetania, although they also took place in the South-East, serving as a commemoration of a remote and heroic past. At Libisosa we also come across parades featuring *knights*, together with more complex confrontations in which legendary ancestors played a leading role.

This *mythical exaltation of the aristocratic ideal* forms part of the language of *self-affirmation of the Iberian oligarchy* and its new client-based system, accompanied by new ties

and new alliances. The fact is that Iberian society, at least in an idealised sense, was an *eminently warlike affair*. In order to discover the *complete range of arms used*, we have two main sources of information in archaeology: the weapons recovered from graves at burial sites, and the iconography present in sculptures and painted images on ceramics. Another of the most exceptional aspects of the site in *Lezuza* consists of the fact that the *Iberian and Roman weapons* that have been recovered to date





do not come from a burial site, but were uncovered from a *context in which they were actually being used*, testament to a battle that was being waged at the time.

Destruction of the Settlement

The *sudden destruction* of the *oppidum* of *Libisosa* appears to have been the result of a *war*. In this respect, we should bear in mind the fact that the *Roman Civil Wars* took place at around this time on a large scale throughout the Iberian Peninsula, specifically between the years *82 and 72 BC*, with the main players being Sertorius, Metellus and Pompey. It is illustrative that, within the context of this devastation, archaeologists have discovered *weapons, hoards of coins* and the remains of human bones on the *same streets*.

During this precise moment in the history of the settlement of *Libisosa*, on the upper terrace of the *oppidum*, where the forum would later be erected, a religious ceremony was carried out, of which the votive deposit has been fossilised. This consists of a *pit* that was carefully excavated out of the natural earth of the hill and in which was deposited material belonging to more than *400 individuals*. The items are mainly of Iberian manufacture, consisting, above all, of pottery (dishes, calyciform vases and miniatures), but also metallic objects.

A part of the settlement was effectively buried under the earth, like a kind of Iberian-Roman Pompeii, and this part would never been reoccupied in the Roman age, simply waiting there to be discovered by archaeologists some 2100 years later. The fact is that the *wall* that the Roman Army was to build hurriedly during the Civil Wars, would only surround the *highest part of the hill*, thus reducing the original size of the town to just 8 hectares. The Roman constructions were built directly over the ruins of the former settlement wherever possible (as in Sector 3). This fortification would remain in use up to the beginning of the following century, which is when the Roman colony was founded. But that is another story.

The Libisosa Museum Collection



OPENING TIMES

From Wednesday to Friday, 9:00 am - 3:00 pm

Guided and pre-arranged tours

Saturdays and Sundays,

10:00 am - 2:00 pm and 4:00 pm - 6:30 pm.

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