

Numantia

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The Site

Numantia is located on a flat-topped hill, at the confluence of the Duero, Tera and Merdancho rivers in North-Central Iberia (fig. 1). Founded in the mid 4th Century BC, it is one of the earliest examples of what would come to be known as 'Celtiberian' culture. The city is built around 2 main parallel streets with a North-West orientation, intersected by 11 other parallel streets, showing a regular town layout from the outset. Possibly an example of influence from Greco-Roman town planning. (Jimeno-Martinez, 1991, p. 406)

The site perhaps most known for the Numantine War, in which the city's defense led to the surrender of 20,000 Romans in 137 BC, with Tiberius Gracchus negotiating a peace treaty. (Plit. TG 5) The city was eventually successfully defeated by Scipio Aemilianus in 133 BC, following a 13 month siege., at the end of which the civilians burned down their city. (Flor. Epit. 2.17-18)

'Celtiberians'?

The term 'Celtiberian' was used by many ancient authors to describe the people of the Iberian peninsula, such as Diodorus (5.33-4) and Strabo (Geog. 3.4.5, 3.4.12), the latter incorporating Iberians into his classification of *Celti*.

Traditionally, the formation of this culture was attributed to invasions, but more recent scholarship attributes it to the spread of agricultural as pastoral innovations leading to social hierarchies, with those controlling summer pastures holding the power. (Almagro-Gorbea, 1991, p. 392)

The material culture of the Iberian peninsula has some similarities to La Tene culture, such as the presence of the carnyx, (fig. 2) with the funerary practice of excarnation also present. (fig. 3) The widespread use of images of horses on artefacts is also common among areas north of the Pyrenees. However, there are also many fundamental differences between the cultures of the Iberians and that of the La Tene culture. For example, the weaponry used in Iberia consists mainly of short swords and round shields, rather than the long swords and tall shields used in the La Tene areas. (Almagro-Gorbea, 1991, p. 393) There is also a lack of inhumation burials and typical La Tene grave goods, (Lenerz-de-Wilde, 1995, p. 538) Therefore, due to the large differences in certain aspects of Iberian culture, it is somewhat problematic to consider the inhabitants of Iberia as part of the same people as those further north despite their similarities. Thus, it is more useful to look at the 'Celtiberians' as a separate people.



Fig. 2: Bell of terracotta trumpet in the shape of a wolf's head from Numantia, 2nd to 1st century BC, Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, from Jimeno-Martinez, 1991, p. 406.



Fig. 3: Pottery sherd showing a corpse being excarnated by birds. Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, from Jimeno-Martinez & Galán, 2017, p. 159.

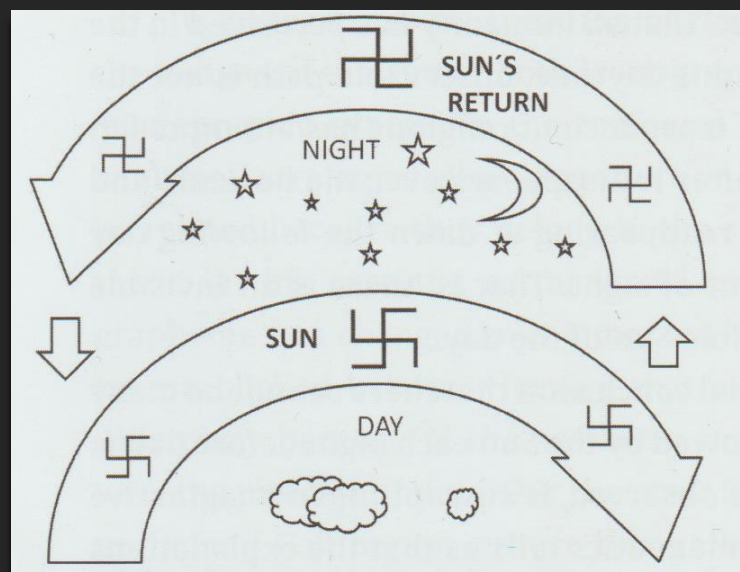


Fig. 5: Diagram of the movement of the sun based on Numantine iconography, from Burillo & Burillo, 2017, p. 262.



Fig. 1: Location of Numantia, From Google Maps

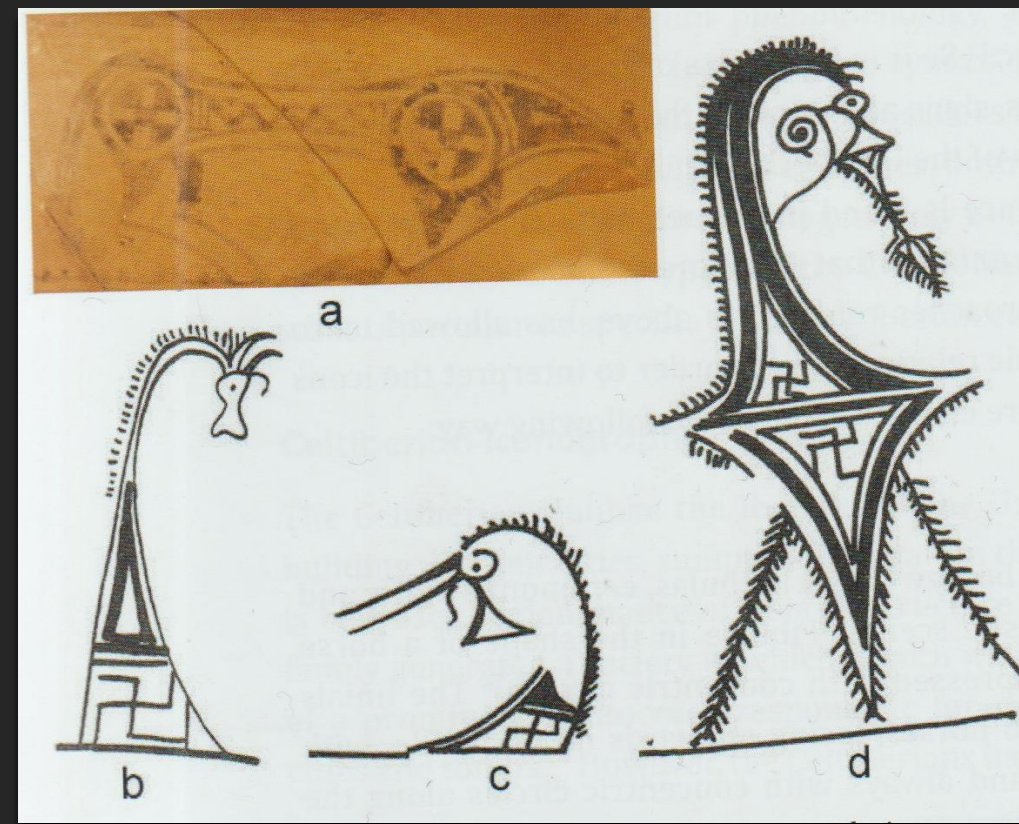


Fig. 4: Numantine pottery, from Burillo & Burillo, 2017, p. 258.

Iconography, Mythology and Religion

One of the main iconographic elements used in Numantine pottery is symbolic representations of the sun. Two examples of this are the use of concentric circles and 'swastikas'. The 'swastika', according to Burillo & Burillo, (2017, p.p. 260-2) represents the direction of the sun's travel depending on direction, in turn representing the cycle of day and night. (fig. 5) Interestingly, this solar iconography often coincides with the image of horses. (fig. 4) This could be an indication that the horse represents some form of solar deity common among the 'Celtiberian' culture, with the horse being the only zoomorphic representation found in other Iberian sites. (Burillo & Burillo, 2017, p.p. 263-4)

This iconography of the horse as a solar deity can be utilised to attempt a reconstruction of mythology. For example, the image of a fish chasing a horse (fig. 6) could represent an idea of an 'ocean beyond the heavens' as the source of water, similar to a biblical description, (Genesis 1:6-8) and could also be a representation of a solar eclipse similar to that of the Norse gods Sol and Mani being caught by wolves causing eclipses (Edda, Grim 39; Burillo & Burillo, 2017, p. 269) However, reconstructing ancient Iberian myths from Icelandic myths from over a millennium later may be rather far fetched.

The representation of Cernunnos on a pottery sherd (fig. 7) may show a religious connection to cultures further north, similar to the Gundestrup Cauldron. (fig. 8) This is interpreted by Lenerz-de-Wilde as showing the Numantians only worshipping 'patrons of craftsmanship'. (1995, p. 544) However, the discussion of the horse as a representation of a solar deity shows this to be incorrect.



Fig. 6: Ceramic no. 2308, horse being chased by a fish, tracing and original artefact, Numantine Museum, from Burillo & Burillo, 2017, p. 265.



Fig 7: Ceramic sherd, generally accepted as depicting Cernunnos, Numantine Museum, from Sopeña, 2005, p. 355.



Fig 8: Cernunnos, Gundestrup Cauldron, from Wikimedia Commons.

Pottery

Numantia is particularly useful for its many examples of ceramics, the largest selection on the Iberian peninsula. (Burillo & Burillo, 2017, p. 258) The ceramics generally conform to 2 styles, the first being monochromatic, consisting of simple, angular shapes with figures of people or animals, designed to be seen without having to hold or move the object. The second, less common style found only in Numantia consists of a polychromatic style, with more realistic figures. (Jimeno-Martinez, 1991, p.407; Burillo & Burillo, 2017, p. 258; fig. 4)

The manufacturing of the ceramics were usually done by pottery wheels, which Almagro-Gorbea attributes to Mediterranean influence. (1991, p. 396) However, the only imported Roman pottery found at the site are Campanian ceramics, showing rather low levels of trade or exchange with Mediterranean peoples. Most pottery is also made from locally extracted materials, showing that there was, in fact, very limited influence from imports. (Garcia-Heras, 2000)

Overall, the style and manufacturing of the pottery show that artistic development in Numantia, as well as the remainder of Iberia likely developed independently from that of the Mediterranean world. This firstly shows the independent nature of the Iberian peoples, while also calling the 'core and periphery model' of Mediterranean influence on the surrounding areas into question.

Conclusion

Overall, Numantia is a very important site for understanding the identity, customs, mythology and religion of the Iron-Age Iberian people. Using the evidence from the site, we can determine that the Iron-Age Iberian culture, although having some similarities to the La Tene culture north of the Pyrenees, had many of its own properties, which justify treating it as a separate cultural entity. We can also see that many of the artistic and technological advancements were likely made independently of the Mediterranean world, which discredits the traditional view of the development of such phenomena as deriving from external sources. The iconography found on the many examples of ceramics can also be used to attempt a reconstruction of the religion and mythology of the city, hinting at the existence of a solar deity represented as a horse, while also linking these myths and religions to examples from elsewhere, although this must be taken with caution. All in all, Numantia is a vital site in understanding the culture and identity of Iron-Age Iberia.

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