

# Archaeologists unearth 4,200-year-old fortification, unique in continental Europe

September 27 2012

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The archaeological excavations carried out this year at the site of La Bastida (Totana, Murcia, in Spain) have shed light on an imposing fortification system, unique for its time. The discovery, together with all other discoveries made in recent years, reaffirm that the city was the most advanced settlement in Europe in political and military terms during the Bronze Age (ca. 4,200 years ago), and is comparable only to the Minoan civilisation of Crete.

Similar characteristics have not been observed in other constructions of the Bronze Age, with three-metre thick walls, square towers originally measuring up to seven metres, a monumental entrance and an ogival arched postern gate; a fully conserved architectural element unique in Europe in that period.

The wall protected a city measuring 4 hectares located on top of a hill. With architectural elements reminiscent of people with Eastern styled military skills, its model is typical of ancient civilisations of the Mediterranean, such as the second city of Troy.

The alignment and characteristics reveal a shrewd defence strategy which represented a new way of fighting, and the implementation of a violent and class-based power structure which conditioned the development of other communities in the Iberian Peninsula during the following seven centuries.

The discovery poses new questions about what is known of the origin of

economic and political inequalities in Europe, the formation of the military and the role violence played in the formation of identities.

The discoveries made in the past few years at La Bastida point to the importance of this site in Prehistoric Europe, comparable only to the Minoan civilisation of Crete, and represent a strong addition to the projection of heritage in the region of Murcia, Spain and Europe in general.

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The discovery was presented today by Pedro Alberto Cruz Sánchez, Secretary of Culture of the Region of Murcia and Vicente Lull, professor of Prehistory of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) and director of the excavation. The event also included the presence of Iván Martínez Flores, executive administrator of the research and head of the UAB Area for Strategic Projects.

The fortification consisted of a wall measuring two to three metres thick, built with large stones and lime mortar and supported by thick pyramid-based towers located at short distances of some four metres. The original height of the defensive wall was approximately 6 or 7 metres. Until now six towers have been discovered along a length of 70 metres, although the full perimeter of the fortification measured up to 300 metres. The entrance to the enclosure was a passageway constructed with strong walls and large doors at the end, held shut with thick wooden beams.

One of the most relevant architectural elements discovered is the ogival arched postern gate, or secondary door, located near the main entrance. The arch is in very good conditions and is the first one to be found in Prehistoric Europe. Precedents can be found in the second city of Troy (Turkey) and in the urban world of the Middle East (Palestine, Israel and Jordan), influenced by the civilisations of Mesopotamia and Egypt. This indicates that people from the East participated in the construction of the fortification. These people would have reached La Bastida after the crisis which devastated their region 4,300 years ago. It was not until some 400 to 800 years later that civilisations like the Hittites and Mycenaeans, or city-states such as Ugarit, incorporated these innovative methods into their military architecture.

## **A Construction Designed for Combat**

The fortification of La Bastida is an impressive construction due to its monumentality, the expertise demonstrated in architecture and engineering, its antiquity and because it helps us today to learn about such a distant past which is also easily recognisable in the present. It also represents an innovation in the art of attacking and defending fortifications, especially on the military front. The construction was designed solely for military purposes, by people experienced in fighting methods unknown in those times to the West.

The towers and exterior walls denote advanced knowledge of architecture and engineering, with slopes of over 40 per cent. The lime mortar used offered exceptional solidity to the construction, strongly holding the stones and making the wall impermeable, as well as eliminating any elements attackers could hold on to.

The postern gate, as a hidden and covered entrance, demanded great planning of the defensive structure as a whole and of the correct engineering technique to fit it perfectly into the wall.

## Continental Europe's First Bronze Age City

The latest excavations and the result of Carbon 14 dating indicate that La Bastida was probably the most powerful city of Europe during the [Bronze Age](#) and a fortified site since it was first built, in circa 2,200 BCE, with a defence system never before seen in Europe.

The fortification was not the only discovery made. From 2008 to 2011, excavations unearthed large residences measuring over 70 square metres distributed throughout the city's four hectares. These large houses and public buildings were alternated with other smaller constructions, all separated by entries, passageways and squares. A large pool held by a 20-metre dyke with a capacity for almost 400,000 litres of water also clearly denotes that the city's population was of a complexity and that it used advanced techniques incomparable to other cities of its time.

The discoveries made at La Bastida reveal a military, political and social rupture: the establishment of a violent and classist ruling society, which lasted seven centuries and conditioned the development of other communities living in the [Iberian Peninsula](#). Overall, [archaeologists](#) are redefining what is known of the origin of economic and political inequalities in Europe, as well as military institution and the role played by violence in the formation of identities.

## A Unique Archaeological Park in Spain

The excavations at La Bastida are directed by the Research Group in Mediterranean Social Archaeoecology (ASOME) of Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), formed by lecturers Vicente Lull, Rafael Micó, Cristina Rihuete and Roberto Risch. The research group receives the support and funding of the Department of Culture Regional Cultural Ministry of Murcia, the UAB, and the Totana City Council. The

Spanish Ministries of Industry, Trade and Tourism, and of Economics and Competitiveness also give financial support to the project.

La Bastida will be systematically excavated with the aim of becoming a unique archaeological park open to the public and consisting in a monographic museum, a research and documentation centre, and part of the site open to visitors. Advancing and maintaining this project will depend on the commitment shown by the different public institutions and social agents taking part in the excavation of La Bastida.

**More information:** [www.la-bastida.com/LaBastida/](http://www.la-bastida.com/LaBastida/)

Provided by Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Citation: Archaeologists unearth 4,200-year-old fortification, unique in continental Europe (2012, September 27) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-09-archaeologists-unearth-year-old-fortification-unique.html>

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