

# Elite women may have ruled El Argar 4,000 years ago

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Part of the funerary goods found at Grave 38 in La Almoloya. Credit: Grup ASOME-UAB

Women of the ruling class may have played an important role in the governance of El Argar, a society which flourished in the southeast of

the Iberian Peninsula between 2200 and 1550 BCE, and which in the last two centuries of its existence, developed into the first state organization of the western Mediterranean.

These are the conclusions reached by researchers from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) who led a study analyzing the contents of a princely tomb (Grave 38), containing two individuals and a large amount of valuable items. The tomb was discovered in 2014 at the archaeological site of La Almoloya in Pliego, Murcia, beneath what was later identified to be the governing hall of a palatial building.

"La Almoloya and the princely grave 38 belong to these exceptional archaeological finds, which from time to time provide a glimpse into the ruling subjects and the emblematic objects of the first state societies emerging in Europe during the Bronze Age," states Vicente Lull, one of the study's coordinators. Published in *Antiquity*, this research has given archaeologists an insight into the political and economic power of the ruling class in El Argar.

The burial, located in a large ceramic jar, featured two individuals: a man aged 35 to 40, and a woman aged 25 to 30. Next to them was a range of some 30 valuable and prestigious objects, many of which were made or embellished with silver and almost all belonging to the female. There was a very complete repertoire of jewels and personal objects: bracelets, earlobe plugs, necklaces, spirals and containers with animal offerings. The most outstanding item was a silver diadem found on the head of the female.

A detailed study of the diadem found in La Almoloya and its comparison to four others found in the 19th century in the tombs of rich women at the site of El Argar, which gives name to the Argaric society and culture, points to the fact that all of them, despite being remarkably uniform, were highly exclusive pieces. They were created in a silversmith

workshop such as the one recently discovered in Tira del Lienzo, another Argaric site excavated by the same UAB team a few years ago.

"The singularity of these diadems is extraordinary. They were symbolic objects made for these women, thus transforming them into emblematic subjects of the dominant ruling class," explains Cristina Rihuete, who also took part in the study. "Each piece is unique, comparable to funerary objects pertaining to the ruling class of other regions, such as Brittany, Wessex and Unetice, or in the eastern Mediterranean of the 17th century BCE, contemporary to our Grave 38."

According to researchers, the opulence of the funerary goods found in the tombs of the elite women of El Argar, in which the diadems are of particular importance, is an indication of the distinguished role played by these women in the governance of some of these settlements. This is the case in La Almoloya, birthplace of the Argar society and center of the most relevant political and economic power within the region.

Were the women rulers, or were the emblems of power worn by them merely of symbolic value? This is the question the research team is interested in. And their answer is that most probably they were the rulers: "In the Argaric society, women of the dominant classes were buried with diadems, while the men were buried with a sword and dagger. The funerary goods buried with these men were of lesser quantity and quality. As swords represent the most effective instrument for reinforcing [political decisions](#), El Argar dominant men might have played an executive role, even though the ideological legitimation as well as, perhaps, the government, had lain in some women's hands," they argue.



Aerial view of the settlement. Credit: Grup ASOME-UAB

### **Biologically unrelated, but with shared offspring**

According to the genetic analyses conducted at the Max Planck Institute, the individuals buried in Grave 38 were contemporaneous, and died simultaneously or close together in the mid-17th century BCE. They were unrelated, but did have a daughter, who was found buried near them. The woman had several congenital abnormalities, along with markings on the ribs that could indicate she had a pulmonary infection at the time of death. Meanwhile, the male also had wear and tear on his bones indicative of extensive physical activity, possibly horse riding.



## A value of 900 daily wages

The metal objects of Grave 38 also stand out in quantitative terms. The total weight of the silver is approximately 230 g, which is equivalent to 27.5 shekels, a currency used during the time of Hammurabi, the ruler of Babylon, in the first half of the 18th century BCE (contemporaneous with El Argar), and adapted by other Near Eastern and Aegean economies. Hence, the silver found in La Almoloya would be enough to pay around 938 daily wages or buy 3350 kg of barley.

Notably, the mean weight of the three medium-sized silver spirals worn by both individuals is 8.44 g, which matches the weight of the Mesopotamian shekel (8.33 g). Furthermore, the weights of other silver spirals found in Grave 38 are practically fractions or multiplications of that figure. "This may be a random distribution or it may indicate a standardized system of weights and measures mirroring contemporaneous Eastern examples. Further research is required to determine this, but the possibility of detecting a metric system behind the silver spirals is a further indication of the extent of the economic control exercised by the dominant class in El Argar," Roberto Risch, co-author of the study, points out.

## Political unity among Argaric regions

Contrary to the tombs found in El Argar, where there is no knowledge of the space in which they were placed, the funerary goods in Grave 38 and the diadem did offer the possibility of interpreting their location within an architectural setting. "The presence of emblematic objects buried in such an important place as is the 'parliament' of La Almoloya could represent political unity among the Argaric regions during the last period of this society, in the 17th century BCE. The building was destroyed in a fire shortly after the burials took place," explains Rafael Micó, also co-

director of the project.

## **The El Argar society and the importance of La Almoloya**

The El Argar society flourished from 2200 to 1550 BCE in the southeast of the Iberian Peninsula (Murcia and Almería), and represents an early Bronze Age society with urban centers and monumental constructions, a developed division of labor, intramural burials with marked asymmetries in funerary expenditure between individuals, political boundaries and institutionalized violence in the context of a class-based state society. The most important settlements are El Argar, La Bastida and La Almoloya.

The discovery of Grave 38 in La Almoloya, excavated in 2014 by researchers from the ASOME (Arqueoecologia Social Mediterrània) research group, affiliated to the UAB Department of Prehistory, pointed out the unique archaeological wealth of the site. A privileged, strategic location which helped this society thrive for over six centuries. The discoveries made, including a building with political functions and Grave 38, confirmed its importance as a center of political and economic relevance within the political territory of El Argar. The diadem found in La Almoloya is the only one to be preserved in Spain.

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