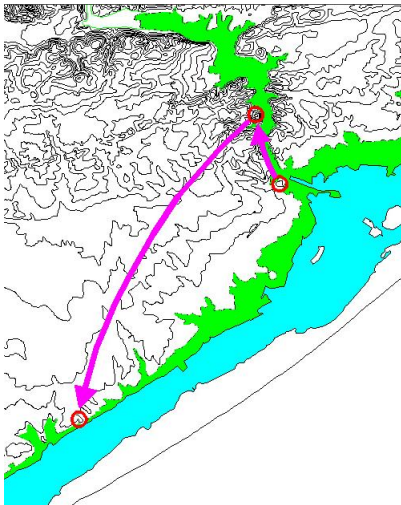
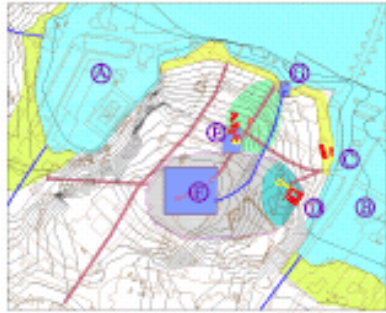
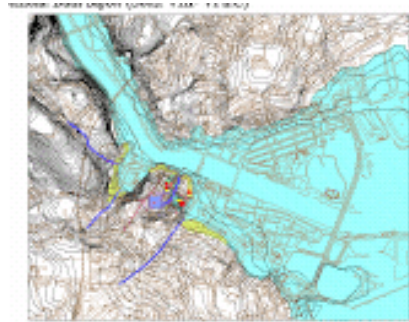


Campo Arqueológico de Tavira (Tavira, Portugal) informs about recent archaeological findings, relevant to scholars of Phoenician and Eastern religious influence in the European West, specifically in Southwest Iberia

Quick Introduction: The First Settlements of Tavira



Tavira is a town of *Portugal*, in the province of *Algarve*, located in the northern shore of the *Gulf of Cadis*. The actual town descends from a Moorish settlement started in XI AD.

The place was settled and fortified by the Phoenicians in VII BC and abandoned in mid VI BC, after a violent destruction.

It is nowadays thought that the original name was a Phoenician theonym B'L Š[...]

By late VI BC or early V BC the place was resettled, becoming a thriving urban centre, integrated in the Tartessic and Gaditan Commonwealth. The findings next described belong to this period.

This settlement suffered several reconstructions until the end of IV BC, when was definitively abandoned, after new violent destructions. The central place moved then 2 km North, to the fortified *oppidum* of *Cerro do Cavaco*, which survived until the time of Augustus, being then abandoned. The native name of the place would be already *Balsa*.

After Pompey's Pirates' War the Romans found a new harbour base, some 8 km away, which becomes Roman *Balsa*. This mints native coinage in mid I BC, with strong Phoenician symbolic influence. *Balsa* becomes a large town (45 hectares) during late 2 AD, as a Flavian Latin Municipality, having started as a *civitas peregrina stipendiaria* belonging to the *Turdetani*, according to Pliny. This town decays with the Roman Empire and disappears as such before the Arab conquest of 714 AD.

The top and central maps show a reconstitution of the area and details of the Phoenician settlement, with some later structures of the Tartessic-Turdetan phase.

The bottom map shows the sequence of settlement change, from Tavira to Cerro do Cavaco and then to Roman Balsa.

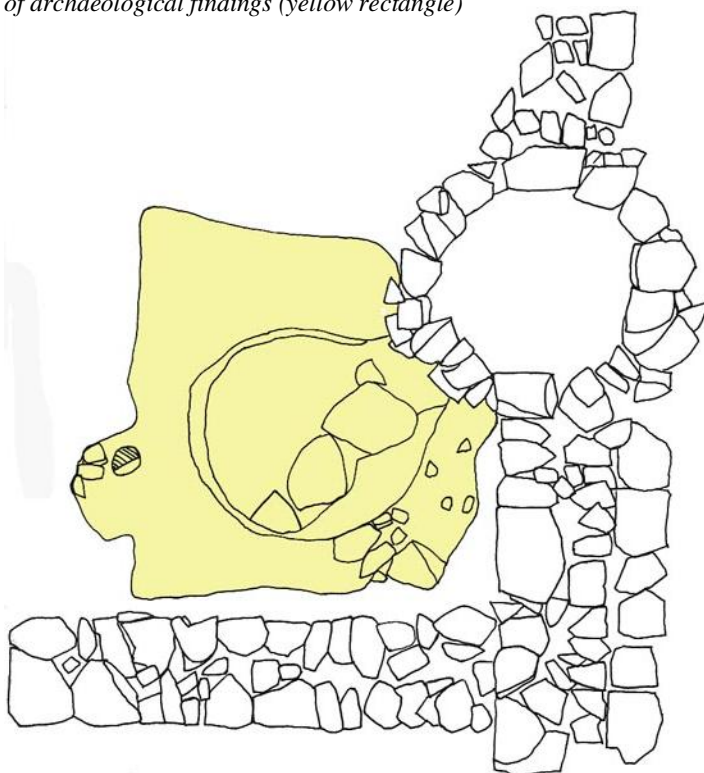
Recent discoveries

In the archaeological excavation currently taking place in *Tavira*, at the site of old *Corte-Real* palace, nearby the castle, archaeologists from **Campo Arqueológico de Tavira**, directed by Maria Maia, have been discovering a complex sequence of occupations, between VII BC and XVIII AD.

The results are archaeologically very rich and will be published in due time.



Historical centre of Tavira and location of area of archaeological findings (yellow rectangle)



Ox-hide shaped altar with inner circular tank. Surrounded by Islamic walls, 1400 years younger. A circular dark-pit, coming from an above level, destroyed a corner of the altar.

Ox-hide shaped altar and temple precinct

In this complex was found an occupation level, datable from the end of IV BC, corresponding to the final period of Turdetan *Tavira*. Above it, destroying some of its structures, lay directly the foundations of the first occupational level of Islamic *Tavira*, 1400 years posterior.

In this last Turdetan-Iron Age level was discovered an ox-hide shaped structure, with an excavated circular tank.

The structure rises over a regular floor level of considerable dimensions and rectangular shape. The tank is impermeable, with signs of liquid residues (reddish striae) and absence of fire marks.

This structure is interpreted as an altar, with a libation/sacrificial deposit.

The altar and the floor pavement are artificially made of marl, brought to the place. It is the same material that covered artificially the Phoenician pits from *Palácio da Galeria*, some centuries older.

An ox-hide shaped *larnak*, dated from the beginning of V BC had already been found by the same archaeologist in 1985, at *Neves-Corvo (Castro Verde, Beja, Portugal)*, a temple-funerary complex located some 58 km NW of *Tavira*.

Altars with the same shape have been described in several points of the *Guadalquivir Basin*, revealing its generalization and probable symbolism sharing in the Turdetan/Tartessian cultural area.

The altar and the floor are interpreted as parts of a temple precinct, whose precise dimensions and older occupations are still undetermined.



Front view

The snake-god

In a recess by the altar was found an isolated terracotta figurine, about 14 cm high, excluding the disappeared head.

It is formed by a hollow campanular elongated body, made by potter's wheel, including the head or part of it, and by solid, hand-made additions, such as the arms, from which remain only the shoulder stumps.

It represents a masculine figure, as can be seen from the strong shoulder muscles and the absence of characteristic female shapes.

The neck is surrounded by a stole ending in a well-represented rim, that covers the upper shoulders. The tunic, prolonged to the base and also finished by a rim, was originally painted, probably whitewashed.

The most original aspect of the figurine is, however, the presence of a moulded, undulating big snake or serpent, laid against the anterior part of the body, between the neck and the bottom of the figurine.

The snake presents a head, slightly broken, with a visible eye, and its skin is represented by carefully notched dots.

The overall style and size of the figurine is similar to the *ex-votes* found in *Syria-Palestine* (such as those in the *Ashmolean* collection) or *Baleares (Illa Plena-Ibiza)*.

Being an *ex-vote*, at least several other would be expected in the vicinity. However, so far, no other statuettes or fragments were found in the excavation field. As all lower levels still remain sealed, the hypotheses of being an idol instead of an *ex-vote* remains open.

In the case of Tavira it is remarkable then maintenance of a Levantine (Eastern Mediterranean) style and the absence of Greek influences, in such a late epoch and in a settlement and area where Attic ceramics abound.

We ignore formal parallels of this figurine, either with or without a compatible chronology. Many snake figurines are described, as spirally curled reptiles, humans holding snakes or semi-anthropomorphic shapes with snake heads or tails, but not, that we know, with a large serpent laid to the body front as is the example of Tavira.

The preliminary identification of the figurine corresponds to a local interpretation of *Eshmun* or similar deity: snake-god, ctonic, medic and aquatic, with eventual oracular powers. Assimilated to the pre-Hellenic *Apollo* of Delphi and other sanctuaries, one of his aspects was sincretized as *Asklepius*, an healing entity.



Right and back views.

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