

# THE ROMAN TOWN OF BALSA

## An encyclopedic entry

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This text intends to be a scholarly resume about the Roman town of Balsa, for general reference. It corresponds to the original English Wikipedia article *Balsa\_(Roman\_town)*.

Balsa was a Roman coastal town, situated in *Hispania*, province of *Lusitania*, *conventus Pacensis*.

The modern location is in the rural estates of Torre d'Aires, Antas and Arroio, parish of Luz de Tavira, county of Tavira, district of Faro, in Algarve, Southern Portugal.

## Name origin

Balsa is a pre-Roman place-name with a most probable Phoenician etymology: *B'LS...*, a possible theonym originated with the older Phoenician occupation of neighboring Tavira.

## References in Classic Authors and Archaeology

Balsa is mentioned by Pomponius Mela (DC III 1, 7), Pliny (HN IV 35, 116), Ptolemy (GH: II 5, 2) and Marcianus of Heracleia (PME: II, 13).

Mints bronze *asses* and its lead divisors (*semis*, *quadrans*, *triens*, *sextans*) about mid 1st century BCE, in Latin alphabet with marine motives (tunas, dolphins, several kinds of boats). The name Balsa, recorded in these coins is the oldest attestation of the toponym.

According to Mela (DC III 1, 7) Balsa was situated in the *Cuneus Ager*, a Roman geographical region corresponding to modern Central and Eastern Algarve.

It was one of the *stipendiary oppida* of *Lusitania*, siege of the *balsenses* (Pliny: IV 35, 118), people

belonging to the ethnical group of the *Turdetani* (Ptolemy: II 5, 2).

Stage of *via XXI* of *Antonine Itineraries*, between *[B]Esuri* and *Ossonoba* (IAA: 426,1) . Referred as *civitas* in the *Ravennate* between *Besurin* and *Stacio Sacra* (RAC: IV 43, 30).

It was considered by Marcianus of Heracleia the *polis* at the Southmost limit of *Lusitania* (PME: II, 14).

Place Identification is attested by epigraphy found in the local, where *Balsensium* appears three times, qualifying persons CIL II 5161.5164 and the political/civic community IRCP 75.

## Pre-Roman past

The Late Bronze and Early Iron Age *oppidum* of Tavira (7 km from Roman Balsa) stands as the genetic regional urban place, first as a Phoenician maritime colonial settlement with a strong religious character (mid 8th to end of 6th centuries BCE) and later as a *Turdetani* town (5th and 4 th centuries BCE).

It was abandoned and replaced by the near *oppidum* of Cerro do Cavaco (1 km North of Tavira,

occupied from the late 4th to late 1st centuries BCE), a better defensible site that was the central place of the *balsenses* during the Carthaginian and Roman Republican periods.

Cerro do Cavaco, the pre-Roman Balsa, did not survive the epoch of August, being then replaced by Roman Balsa.



## Status, society and economy

Epigraphic inscriptions reveals Balsa as a Latin Right Municipality (*ius Latii Municipium*) during the 2nd century CE, most probably promoted by Domitian (81-96 CE).

All main aspects of provincial Romanisation are documented locally: A *res publica* with a *ordo decurionica* IRCP 75, local prominence of the *gens Manlia* CIL II 5161.5162, magistrates (*duunvir* belonging to the QUIRINA tribe CIL II 5162), *sexvir* CIL II 13, public slaves (*balsensium dispensator*, CIL II 5164), evergetism (spectacle of *naumachia* and pugilate CIL II 13, collective construction of a *circus* CIL II 5165.5166 and other unidentified monuments CIL II 5167), imperial cult IRCP 90 and a large proportion of Greek and North African names. A Roman citizen of *Neapolis* (Nabeul, Tunisia) with a daughter in *Pax Iulia* (Beja, Portugal) countryside, declares himself an *incola* of Balsa! CIL II 105

The level of Romanisation in Balsa can also be inferred from the known personal names (39 men and 16 women): 58% have *tria nomina* or are

women with Latin *dua nomina*. 71% have a Roman *nomen* and the remaining 27% a single *cognomen*, these being mostly Greek names. Native name words in all forms (Celtic or Turdetanian) are a small minority (9%).

From the 3th century comes a rare funerary monument in Greek, considered by some to be Christian CIL II 5171, and a hoard of coins of *Claudius Gothicus* (268-270 CE) discovered in a bath sewer.

Imported *terra sigillata* and glassware form a continuous series between late Augustan wares (*early Hispanic*) and *late African D*, *late Gallic* and *Focean*, with the latest pieces dated from the 7th century. The overwhelming volume peak corresponds to *South Gallic* wares of the 1st century CE but the studied material is much limited topographically.

Fish preserve factories are well *documented* in the town and neighborhood, as well as amphorae factories. Six *garum* producers are known in Balsa by their industrial brands: AEMHEL, OLYNT, LEVGEN, IVNIORVM, IMETVS F and DASIMVSTELI

## Urbanism and territory

Several testimonies describe the existence of very extensive and dense Roman building remains before 1977. The archaeological terrain has been being heavily destroyed since then to the present days (2008) by agricultural works and the building of suburban *villas*.

Archaeological exploration has been very limited to two necropolises, two bath buildings, three fish factories and a few structures. The larger part has been done in the 19th century, with pre-scientific standards. On the other hand, a total of sixty places with Roman findings are known in the archaeological perimeter of Balsa.

Archaeotopography revealed important and extensive urban structures: a theatre, a pier and internal harbour, a hippodrome, large hippodamic quarters and several others.

The urban centre had an extraordinary size for a municipal town without a capital status: the urban limits spawned no less than 116 acres and the peri-urban area occupied at least 266 acres. Its plan reveals a double town, or a massive development juxtaposed in two urban moments.

The *civitas* territory corresponded to modern Eastern Algarve, bordering the province of *Baetica* and with an approximate area of 585 square miles, mostly occupied by hills then rich in forests and minerals.

Significant remains of Roman agrarian centuriations can still be traced in modern surveys, limited to the littoral plains where olive groves, vineyards and dry orchards are historically best adapted. The coast was formed by lagoons and estuaries, whose agro-maritime capacities were extensively exploited in Roman times.

The major fluvial road of river *Anas* (modern Guadiana) was controlled from Balsa territory along its better navigable part, draining several mining districts south of *Myrtilis* (Mértola, Portugal). Several better known *villae* or *vici* like "Pedras d'el-Rei", "Paul da Asseca", "Cacela", "Manta Rota", "Vale do Boto", "Álamo", "Montinho das Laranjeiras" and many others belonged to the territory of Balsa.

## Archaeology and heritage

Archaeological collections of Balsa are scattered by several museums and private collections. The best preserved objects are from funerary spoils (good collections of *sigillata*, glassware, lucernes and personal objects such a complete surgeon kit), an Antonine female bust, 17 civic and funerary epigraphic stones, statuettes, coins, architectural elements, etc.

In the present day there is practically nothing to be seen of Balsa. Almost all land became fenced private property, cutting most accesses to the

public lagoon-shore, and the few known and visible archaeological remains are kept more or less hidden. With the present total lack of protection and real menace of total destruction it is better they remain like that for the time being.

However, notwithstanding the brutal destructions of the last 30 years, Balsa still has a major archaeological potential: the foundations of about 1/5 of the town extension, including maritime suburbs, ought to be still basically preserved, either buried, silted or submerged.

### Public museums with collections of Balsa

*Museu Nacional de Arqueologia*, Lisbon

*Museu Municipal de Faro*, Faro

*Museu Paroquial de Moncarapacho*, Moncarapacho (Olhão)

## Images

A large collection of pictures, graphics and maps of Balsa, its territory and the most important archaeological findings can be browsed at the on-line bibliographical references below, marked with (PIC).

## Bibliography (in development)

Practically all bibliography is in Portuguese.

A growing number of studies below are being published on-line at [www.arkeotavira.com](http://www.arkeotavira.com) (site of *Associação Campo Arqueológico de Tavira*).

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Jeannette U. Smit Nolen: 1994, *Cerâmicas e vidros da Torre de Ares (Balsa)*, Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, Lisboa

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## BALSA in the internet

[www.arkeotavira.com](http://www.arkeotavira.com) / [www.arqueotavira.com](http://www.arqueotavira.com)

[www.balsa-romana.com](http://www.balsa-romana.com)

