

MONTE ROMERO (HUELVA), A SILVER PRODUCING WORKSHOP OF THE TARTESSIAN PERIOD (ABSTRACT)

by

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The subject of this poster is Monte Romero, a silver producing workshop situated in the Sierra Aracena (Huelva) in South-west Spain. Excavation of the site took place in 1986 and produced a number of archaeometallurgical finds connected with the extractive metallurgy of silver from polymetallic complex ores (Rothenberg, Andrews and Keesman, 1986). Based on the typological study of the pottery, the smelting activities were dated from the last half of the 7th century BC to the beginning of the 6th century BC (Pérez Macias, 1991: 106-107).

The period in question is known as the Tartessian period during which trading links between South-western Iberia and the Eastern Mediterranean were established. Silver was the commodity central to this trade. As a result of the booming metal trade, a general growth and prosperity is witnessed not only in the larger sites such as Huelva (Fernández Jurado, 1988-89a: 227) but also in the mining areas of the Huelva Province where at this time there is a marked increase in the mining activities and the smelting of ores (Ruiz Mata, 1990: 408).

Metallurgical workshops have been found in a number of the excavated sites such as San Bartolomé de Almonte (Ruiz Mata and Fernández Jurado, 1986) and Huelva-San Pedro and La Esperanza (Fernández Jurado, 1988-89b), but more often than not these are dedicated to the refining of silver rather than primary smelting. On the other hand, evidence of extractive metallurgy dating to this period discovered in sites such as Rio Tinto are often found under metres of metallurgical debris accumulated over centuries of exploitation.

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The site of Monte Romero, is different in that respect: it is a primary smelting site whose location next to the mining sites enables the identification of the type of ore used. Furthermore, the archaeometallurgical finds represent all the different steps of the production of silver from the smelting of a polymetallic ore to the cupellation of the silver rich lead. Finally, it was occupied for a short period only which avoids any problems of dating and/or mixed deposits which may arise from sites such as Rio Tinto. The archaeometallurgical finds from the site, therefore, offered a unique opportunity to study the technology of this particular period and understand how silver was produced.

Free-silica slags or as they are also known slag balls is a type of slag typical of this area which is found in almost all the sites of this period connected with silver smelting and has often been interpreted as product of a failed smelt. The discovery during the excavation of Monte Romero of slag balls together with tapped slag enabled their study and a new suggestion is offered as to their origin and function.

Through a thorough scientific investigation of the archaeometallurgical finds from Monte Romero a process model is proposed which may seem rather complex for such a relatively early period (Kassianidou, 1992; Kassianidou, 1993). Nevertheless, it does agree best with the archaeometallurgical finds from the site.

This fairly sophisticated process, shows that the people working in the 7th century BC workshop of Monte Romero were competent metallurgists who were able to process even this type of complex ore to produce silver.

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