

The Agricultural Territory of La Solana de las Pilillas (6th–5th centuries BC)

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The Requena-Utiel Plain is located in the West of the Valencia province (Spain). Oriented northwest to southeast, this plain covers a 2,100 km² area between 600 to 900 metres above sea level. This area marks the contact between the southern foothills of the Iberian System and the northeastern slopes of the southern sub-plateau. A river called Cabriel, tributary of the Júcar River, delimits its southern border having deeply carved the terrain.

The plain forms a geographical entity, which has been, since antiquity, a cultural and administrative unit. Its characteristics derive from its border location on the route leading from the Mediterranean coast to the interior of the Iberian Peninsula. Its climate is broadly Mediterranean but with some transitions to continental marked by cold winters and short hot summers that restrict farming possibilities but offer better chance of success for vine cultivation.

The Cabriel river created abrupt cliffs in a mountainous morphology furrowed by numerous dry rivers and deep valleys. Along two of these furrows, Los Morenos and Alcantarilla, several settlements dedicated to the production of wine were established from 6th century BC onwards (fig. 1). They are characterized by the adaptation of the natural rocky environment for carving treading floors, presses and vats used for crushing and pressing the grape and make wine.

The Origin of Wine Production at La Solana de Las Pilillas

Wine consumption in the Requena-Utiel Plain has been documented as far back as the 7th century BC, and the beginning of local production dates from the 6th century BC.

La Solana de las Pilillas (Requena, Valencia) is an Iberian tower-farm that started the production of wine in the early 6th century BC.¹ The site is located at 65 km from the Mediterranean coast in the ravines of Los Morenos, next to the Cabriel river. This area is covered by limestone soils; the local microclimate is ideal for vine cultivation, sunny and not too dry thanks to the water of the ravine. The site is exclusively dedicated to wine production and commercialization, where wine was fermented in amphorae produced in the area.² This seasonal settlement consists of four rock-cut wine presses, a cellar and a tower, displayed on terraces maintained by walls. The platforms are linked by passages that facilitated access to the different areas (fig. 2).

On the slope of the hills, intense erosion detached large blocks of limestone that rolled down and are now situated far from their original location. The presses are carved in these blocks; they usually present an upper platform, rectangular in shape, surrounded by a rim with postholes and grooves used for covering the structure. This

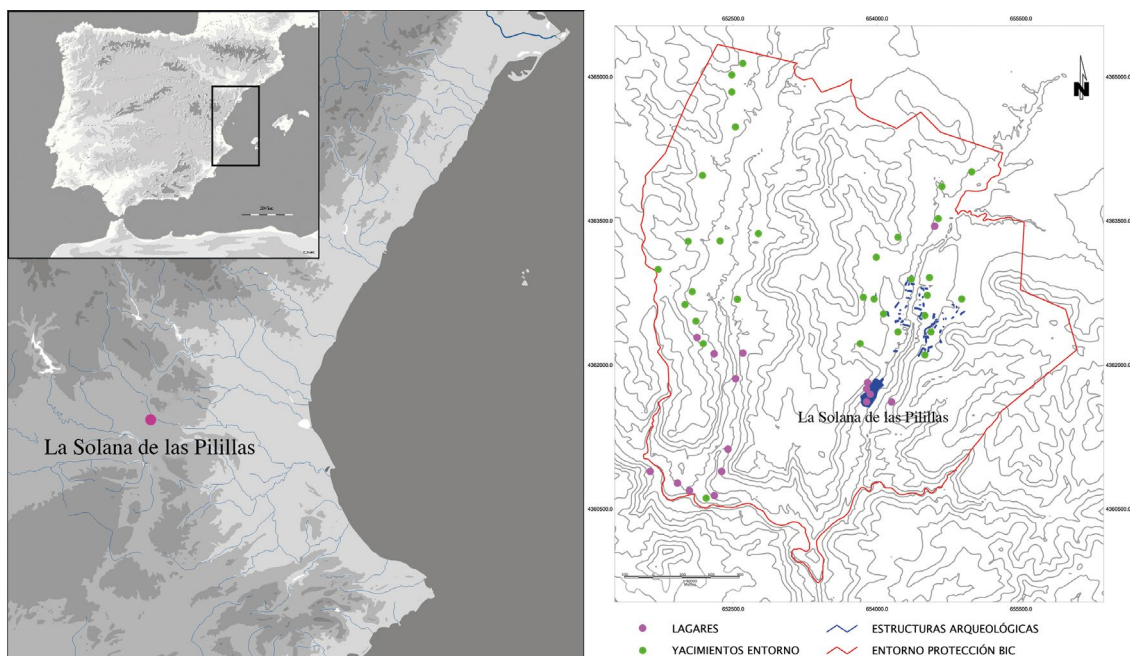


Fig. 1: Location of La Solana de las Pilillas and its territory.

platform is connected through holes to a vat carved at a lower level. The must flew from the trodden grapes into the lower basin. It was then poured into amphorae and taken away in order to proceed with the subsequent production process.

Detailed analysis of these wine presses allows to propose a hypothetical reconstruction. Holes and marks carved in the rock reveal the pressing systems. The capacity of the lower basins gives us an idea of the quantity of must gathered in one load. In the four presses excavated at Solana de las Pilillas, one load could produce approximately 2,000 liters of must.³

Next to the wine presses, a building containing amphorae and stone stoppers can be interpreted as a wine cellar with a storage capacity higher than other contemporary wineries in the Iberian territory. Such a capacity suggests that a part of the wine was intended for trade.

The excavations of the site were coupled with survey of the surrounding area in order to discover other wine presses and other settlements connected to this place dedicated to wine production. Twelve rock-cut wine presses in use during the 5th century were found along the ravines of La Alcantarilla. La Solana de las Pilillas site was part of an agricultural territory covered partially by vineyard and exploited from several settlements. This territory was thus organized around settlements mainly dedicated to the production of wine.

These settlements were connected by tracks, which were certainly used by the wine trade. The remains of these narrow tracks and paths are enough numerous for partly reconstructing the road network (fig. 3).



Fig. 2: Aerial photo of La Solana de las Pilillas.

Las Pilillas winery is linked to two pottery workshops, where amphorae and tableware were manufactured. Both, pottery and wine production show a significant Phoenician influence.

The Potters Kiln El Nacimiento

The potter's kiln El Nacimiento (Requena) can be detected by the abundant Iberian ceramics scattered in surface and by over fired sherds; it can be dated from the 7th–6th centuries BC. The ceramic production included pithoi, amphorae, plates and gray ceramic. The production of typical tripods and mortars is linked to the Phoenician influence. From the beginning of the excavations of Phoenician sites in the Iberian Peninsula, tripods were identified as a specific type introduced by them. The tripod does not derive from any local production of the Late Bronze Age and it is considered as a Phoenician import into the western Mediterranean from the second half of the 7th century BC. Besides the local wares, fragments of amphorae R1 made in the southern part of the peninsula prove the import of Phoenician wine; some fragments of pithoi are also imported.

The ceramic production of El Nacimiento is related to the consumption of wine. The Iberians adopted the Phoenicians drinking behavior. The locally made tripods and mortars (in gray ceramic and class A) were used for crushing substances added to the preparation of the beverages.⁴

This production of tripods in a kiln near the Early Iron Age site of Requena suggest narrow contacts between the local population and the Phoenicians who transmitted the know-how of the ceramic and wine making.



Fig. 3: Ancient track probably related with wine trade.

Casillas del Cura Archaeological Site

Towards the beginnings of the 6th century BC, the pottery workshop of Casillas del Cura began to produce ceramics at commercial scale near the Cabriel River. The excavations carried out on this site showed a large pottery workshop equipped with four kilns and surrounded by over fired scattered vases. Fourteen discarded amphorae were found in one of the kilns. All of them were broken and 3500 fragments⁵ had to be assembled in order to obtain complete profiles and to measure their capacity; the typology of these amphorae shows that they derive from Phoenician prototypes.⁶ The Casillas del Cura workshop consolidated the technology of ceramic production. According to the dimensions of the kilns and the volume of pottery, this workshop was more important than the El Nacimiento one. The forms made in this workshop are often more evolved even if some of them are similar in both deposits. Containers of Phoenician influence, such as jars and small jars, dominate at Casillas del Cura. They constitute more than 50 % of the output, the plates and the amphorae around 15 % each. The potteries made at Casillas del Cura are largely present in the warehouse of La Solana de las Pilillas.⁷

Rock Cut Wine Presses of the Ravine of La Alcantarilla

In the 5th century BC, the production of wine increased and the occupation of the ravine of La Alcantarilla began to condense. Wine making is associated to scattered farming settlements, located next to rock cut wineries. The growing production implicates a greater control of the territory with new settlements up the hills, next to the main communication and trade routes.⁸ Concentrations of these wine presses have been discovered on the edges of the ravine of La Alcantarilla. For example, la Solana de Cantos includes four wine presses and a cellar, which was used during two phases between 5th and 3rd century BC. This occupation was not permanent and we interpret the remains as shelters used for housing the work force during the harvest and for storing the amphorae during the process of fermentation.⁹

Another archaeological zone at the Rincon de Herreros was occupied from the 5th century BC: three wine presses and two displaced fragments of another one were found. Remains of wine presses are also visible at El Saltadero and at Solana de las Carbonerillas.

The permanent settlement village is located at Casa de la Alcantarilla. Here lived the population who exploited the agricultural territory between the 5th and the 4th centuries BC.

Conclusions

The wine production began in the Requena area under the influence of eastern Mediterranean populations towards the beginnings of the 6th century BC starting vine cultivation, which was maintained in the Requena-Utiel plain for centuries.¹⁰

Through contacts with Phoenicians not only the vine cultivation and the production techniques were transmitted, but also cultural elements that the Iberian people assimilated and adapted to its own idiosyncrasy. The dynamics of occupation of the territory created a new agricultural landscape.

Direct connection with the Mediterranean wine cultures has been proven by the excavation of the rock cut presses and the fermentation processes in clay vessels often made in local kilns since the 6th century BC.

The wineries of La Solana de Las Pilillas and other ones along the ravine of La Alcantarilla are examples of the capacity of the Iberian societies to organize themselves collectively and to build infrastructures technically adapted albeit in remote areas. The construction of the presses, of the terraces, of the cellars required a great investment of time and effort; their maintenance was also difficult given the seasonality of their use.

These settlements are integrated into the territory and are related to other Iberian sites through a wide network of roads, some of them paved in order to facilitate the circulation of carts and, thus, the transport of wine.

Las Pilillas archaeological site is part of a cultural heritage shared with others Mediterranean countries. There have been many documented discoveries regarding wine culture influenced by Mediterranean cultures, such as an Iberian goblet locally

made that bears a picture of a Dionysian myth often represented on Greek vases dated from the 5th to the 4th centuries BC (fig. 4).¹¹



Fig. 4: Iberian goblet with representation of a Dionysian myth.

Notes

¹ Excavation of the site started in 2009 with the purpose of creating a museum. The following institutions are cooperating in this project: Valencian Institute of Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage and Requena's Town Council.

² Martínez Valle et al. 2013a.

³ Pérez Jordá 2000.

⁴ Martínez Valle 2017.

⁵ UPV (Universidad Politécnica de Valencia) students doing their specialization on conservation and restoration of cultural heritage have managed to complete some of the amphoras in summer working campaigns.

⁶ Martínez Valle et al. 2001.

⁷ Martínez Valle et al. 2013b.

⁸ Martínez Valle 2017.

⁹ Mata et al. 1997.

¹⁰ Brun 2013.

¹¹ Martínez Valle 2014.

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