TRAVELS THROUGH PREHISTORIC SPAIN: A GUIDE

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A GUIDE

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Introduction

This book has been a labour of love. It combines four things which we have enjoyed doing for many years – travelling in our camper van, visiting different areas of Spain, looking at prehistoric monuments and walking within beautiful landscapes. Spain is obviously a big country and it contains thousands of prehistoric monuments – what we present here is just a small sample of those sites, ones that we have visited and enjoyed. In total we present here over two hundred sites, including some museums with collections of prehistoric material, covering many but not all of the autonomous regions of Spain.

Our two criteria for including a site are that firstly it has to be relatively easy to find and that secondly there has to be something interesting to see once you get there. Of course, these are both fairly subjective and some of the sites involve longish walks or even longer drives along dusty unmade tracks and not everyone may be impressed once the end is reached.

[A personal note from Jude – although I totally agree with this being a labour of love, for me it initially began as an opportunity to have relaxing, interesting holidays in Northern Spain. Being married to an obsessive archaeologist with a specialism in prehistory means that this always colours our times abroad and relaxation hardly comes into it! However the beauty of the Spanish landscapes we travelled through and the chance to seek out different prehistoric sites, from wonderful overhangs with paintings and sculptures which were breathtaking to obviously ancient dwellings with intact walls and even a prehistoric sauna, became addictive. The journey to different provinces to find what traces the ancient past had left behind was fun, exciting and rewarding. Days looking for a dot on the map which was never quite where it should be, dusty walks which always seemed to be in the midday sun and then finding what we were looking for, measuring and photographing it and delighting that it was there and we had found it. I urge others to enjoy this kind of journey as much as I can honestly say I have over at least 13 years of exploration. Remember to take your sun screen, your insect repellent, lots of water, a large hat and some good walking shoes, plenty of patience and good humour too. We both needed that at times!]

Road numbers in Spain can be very confusing. Sometimes roads have more than one number and sometimes the numbers change. This is especially true as we started this endeavour in 2010 so some of the information included here may be out of date. Even so, the sites should still be there. We used the Michelin regional maps at 1/250,000 together with our satnav and web searches. Information on the internet is vastly improved since we started this survey and it may be that you don't need the paper maps at all although we still find them useful as a backup. We have attempted to give directions to each monument although sometimes signposting is non-existent or at best minimal so apologies in advance if you don't find what you are looking for. All is not lost however as these monuments usually involve nice walking across some spectacular and

lovely landscapes. Over the years we have undergone many wild goose chases convinced that a good site was within reach only to fail to find it.

Generally speaking Spain is very proud of its cultural heritage and provides good access and information. Many towns both large and small have good museums with prehistoric collections although this does vary across the different autonomous regions. Many individual sites, or towns/villages close to them, have interpretation centres run by the local authority which are always worth visiting first to gain information and, sometimes, maps and leaflets describing sites and archaeological trails. We have indicated these in the text where appropriate. For the most detailed presentation of Spanish prehistory the National Archaeological Museum in Madrid is a must see (page 1).

We have not included information about site and museum opening times as these can, and do, change. Current information can be found at local tourist information offices and/or on the internet. As a rough guide we indicate whether a site/museum is restricted access (there are opening hours) or unrestricted access (the site is permanently open).

Chronology and sites

It is useful here to explain prehistoric chronology generally and how that applies to Spain as well as mentioning the main types of sites described for each period. Here we offer a simple outline with pointers to where in the book more detail is presented.

At its simplest level prehistory is 'before writing' although this is more complicated in some places and especially towards the end of the period in Europe due to contact with the Romans and earlier in Spain with the Phoenicians (more on this below). Prehistory is divided into the so-called Three Age System of the Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages reflecting technological changes. This was first suggested in 1836 by the Dane C. J. Thomsen based on his work with the collections in the National Museum in Copenhagen. Since that time the vast amount of new archaeological evidence together with new interpretations have developed detailed sub-divisions of these three periods. The development of scientific dating methods, especially radiocarbon dating since the 1960s, has enabled absolute dates to be established for prehistoric periods.

The Stone Age is subdivided into the Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age), the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) and the Neolithic (New Stone Age). The Palaeolithic is an immensely long span of time starting at least 3 million years ago and covers the development of humans and our predecessors from the earliest forms in Africa to modern humans, Homo sapiens sapiens, appearing between 120,000 and 90,000 years ago in Africa and spreading across the globe. Some of the pre-modern forms of the genus Homo were in Spain and by far the best place to experience them is the very impressive Centre for Human Evolution in Burgos and the nearby site of Atapuerca where evidence for them living and dying has been found (page 130).

This long period is subdivided into shorter periods based mainly on the development of stone tools which generally speaking start crude and become more and more finely worked with an ever-increasing range of tool types. Through detailed excavation of sites where Palaeolithic people lived, many in the mouths of caves but not always, there is also increasing evidence of other aspects of ancient life such as the development of diet and food preparation and burial practices, for example

as shown in the Serinyà Prehistoric Caves Park, Catalunya (page 188). An intriguing area of research over many decades has concerned the religious beliefs and aesthetic considerations of these people including what we would call art.

Modern humans spread out from Africa and reached Spain at around 38,000 years ago overlapping with Homo sapiens neanderthalensis (Neanderthals) who had been in that part of Europe since about 90,000 years ago. Genetic evidence shows that there was a certain amount of interbreeding between the two subspecies until neanderthals became extinct at about 40,000 years ago. Evidence for the Palaeolithic is offered in many of the museums mentioned below but in terms of visiting sites we are mainly limited to caves and cave art. The north-western coast of Spain, mainly the autonomous regions of País Vasco, Cantabria and Asturias, is one of the main centres for cave art in Europe with many spectacular sites to visit, not least Altamira with its fabulous frieze of coloured bison (page 12).

Palaeolithic cave art reached its zenith in the Magdalenian sub-period, *c.* 17,000 to 13,000 years ago, although there is similar art from the earlier Solutrean period, from 20,000 years ago. In all its forms Palaeolithic art spans a period of just before 30,000 to 10,000 years ago. There are a few examples of other forms of Palaeolithic art and Siega Verde, Castilla y León (page 114) is a good example. Here panels of inscribed animals are on slabs of bedrock along a river valley. Inscribed art also occurs on bones and stones, generally called mobile art, much of which can be seen in museums.

During the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods people were hunter gatherers moving around their environment knowing where the herds of animals would be and also the natural fruits and berries to pick. They lived in temporary camps and caves. Following the end of the last glacial period, around 10,000 BC, the climate began to warm and it is around 5,000 BC that we see a major change in lifestyle and archaeological monuments. This is the beginning of the Neolithic period which is characterised by a more sedentary lifestyle, the introduction of pottery making and domesticated animals and cereals, a way of life that spread across Europe from the eastern Mediterranean region. Agriculture and animal husbandry appeared earliest in eastern and southern Spain and spread slowly and irregularly across the rest of Iberia. Here we concentrate on the two forms of Neolithic evidence that are easiest to visit as sites, rock art (arte rupestre and petroglyphs) and megalithic tombs (dolmen), as opposed to the other aspects of Neolithic life which are explained and illustrated in many of the museums mentioned in this book.

Levantine art is known mainly from the south and east of Spain with many examples in Aragón (page 89), it is probably dated to the late Neolithic/early Bronze Age. It differs from Palaeolithic cave art not just in date but in being found within rock overhangs known as rock shelters (abrigos) rather than deep caves and, therefore, originally probably being much more visible. It also differs in its content, whereas cave art is focussed on animals much of the later art depicts humans, both men and women, engaged in a variety of activities providing tantalising glimpses of their lives and society. These include hunting deer and wild goats, collecting honey from hives, dancing and fighting with bows and arrows with details providing information on clothing such as baggy trousers, hairstyles and personal ornaments.

The other major legacy of the Neolithic in terms of what can be seen in today's landscape is megalithic tombs, literally 'large stone' constructions which were various forms of collective burial places starting around 4,000 BC. These are known as 'dolmen' and can be found across Spain, many

have been extensively excavated and studied and all museums with a prehistoric collection will display and explain examples of dolmen. Some dolmen are massive and provoke amazement at how the huge stones were moved and placed in position, for example the three near to Antequerra in Andalucía, Dolmen de Viera, Menga and El Romeral (page 166). Others are much smaller but occur in large groups, or cemeteries, such as those in the dramatic landscape around Gorafe, northeast of Granada (page 170). On the island of Menorca a different and unique megalithic tradition can be seen displaying some remarkable structures (page 195).

The first metal-using communities utilised copper before adding it to tin to form bronze, in Spain starting at around 3,200 BC. This period is called the Chalcolithic (Copper Age) and is transitional between the Neolithic and the Bronze Age. During this time we get the arrival from other parts of Europe of the Beaker people named after their distinctive pottery and bringing with them a range of new artefact types and burial practices. Levantine art continued for a while although it changed from showing human figures to being mainly geometric patterns. The big change in the Chalcolithic is evidence for large well organised settlements the prime example of which is Los Millares near Almería (page 175). Here triple walls with entrances and bastions defend a settlement over 2ha in size containing many houses and workshops occupied from about 3,200 BC to 2,300 BC. The tombs in the cemetery contain a range of grave goods suggesting the beginnings of a stratified society with some people being of higher social status than others. These sorts of settlements are not found all over Spain and in many parts the Chalcolithic period is not well represented.

Bronze Age Spain saw different sorts of settlements in different areas and from about 2,000 BC the Chalcolithic settlements were abandoned. We see increasing sophistication in bronze working techniques compared to the relatively simple methods of the earlier period. The much expanded range of tools, weapons and personal decoration as well as pottery types and other domestic items are well represented in many of the museums listed below. There seems to be a growing focus on weapons perhaps suggesting increasing tension and conflict between the emerging tribal groups. In and around Extremadura, for example, there are many Bronze Age stelae, gravestones consisting of a large stone with carvings on it. Many good examples in Badajoz Museum (page 149) show well-armed warriors with helmets, shields, swords and some chariots.

From 800 BC the Mediterranean coast of Spain took a very different developmental trajectory to the areas inland and to the northwest. The arrival of the Phoenicians probably to exploit the mineral wealth of southern Spain established a series of colonies along the coast which became part of extensive trading links to the Greek world further east. From about the 4th century BC Carthaginian traders established colonies and continued the trading until their defeat by the Romans in the Second Punic War in about 200 BC. The Greeks also arrived on the northeast coast of Spain as offshoots of their main city at Marseille although they did establish earlier trading settlements further west. The indigenous Bronze Age people adopted and adapted these new cultural values and opportunities to create a vibrant and exciting culture of their own becoming known as the Iberians. From about 550 BC large Iberian cities were thriving especially along the coast of Andalucía and many of their very rich possessions and ways of life and death can be seen in the important display at the Archaeological Museum in Madrid. Different forms of early writing were in use during these times so these cultures were not prehistoric and, therefore, are not covered in this book.

Of more interest here are the developments to the north and west, the area of the so-called Celtiberians who were influenced by late Bronze Age and Iron Age cultures in central non-

Mediterranean Europe and who remained prehistoric until the arrival of the Romans. These people were organised into many different tribal groups and territories, some living in small farms and villages while others built large, centralised settlements usually called castros. These impressive sites are surrounded by massive stone-built ramparts enclosing stone roundhouses and other buildings. Around Navia in western Asturias, the land of the *Astures*, there are some good examples to visit (page 32), many of which have been excavated such as Coaña and particularly Chao Samartín with its excellent onsite museum. Some of these sites were first constructed in the late Bronze Age but their main period of use is the Iron Age from about 700 BC. In this area many were taken over by the Romans who were exploiting the local gold deposits so that changes in house design can be seen within the castros. One interesting feature within many of these castros are the so-called saunas possibly used for ritual cleansing. The material culture of these Iron Age people was rich and varied as can be seen in many museums, a very good one being the archaeological museum in Oviedo (page 25).

Another area of Iron Age occupation that we cover in some detail is around Ávila in Castilla y León where a series of large castros can be visited (page 120). Here we are in the land of the *Vettones* and sites such as Las Cogotas and Ulaca, some with interpretation centres, give a detailed picture of how these people lived. One interesting aspect of the *Vettones* is their use of the enigmatic verracos, large carved stone bulls and boars, see the particularly impressive group at Guisando (page 126).

It took the Roman legions nearly 200 years to completely subjugate Spain with the northern and western mountainous regions causing them particular problems. A key battle was the siege and eventual defeat of the Celtiberian town of Numancia, Castilla y León (page 133), in 133 BC. The culmination of the Cantabrian wars and the final taking of Asturias in 19 BC saw the end of prehistoric Spain although some aspects of life such as houses, farming and material culture must have continued for a while for many people especially those in more rural areas.

Acknowledgements

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Map Locations

City

Book Section