



Courtesy os Fototeca de Lagos

Monte Molião: A Journey into the Past

By Lena Strang

Imagine Lagos many thousands of years ago... The free flowing Bensafrim Ribeira is a hub of activities. Houses can be seen lining the river, taking advantage of their prime position close to the water's edge. Trade is brisk and ships from further afield are busily unloading their cargoes. The land beyond is cultivated and vineyards flourish. The population seems to be getting on well with their lives.

This is no longer a mere flight of fancy as archeologists in Lagos have been busily piecing together what life was like in the ancient past. The areas that are of particular interest are the hill of Monte Molião and the estuary of the river extending to where the present aerodrome lies.

It has now been established that the first human habitation was on the hill of Monte Molião in the late Iron Age (4th and 3rd centuries BC). The whole of the estuary was open water and easily accessible by

boat. In other words, an ideal location to develop a settlement. This was followed by Roman occupation of the area until it was abandoned in the middle of the 2nd century AD.

The significance of Monte Molião is enormous. Lagos is fortunate in having so much historical heritage but this must surely be the jewel in the crown. So what exactly have excavations on the site unearthed?

Elena Moran, Lagos city archeologist, explains: "Some years ago with the help of the universities of Seville, Bremen and Nantes we did a geo-archeological study of the estuary. We were able to reconstruct the coastline and identify activities that had been ongoing along the navigable river. To understand it fully, we have to cast our minds back and imagine what the region was like before the tourist industry made its impact."

Under the co-ordination of Professor Ana Arruda from Lisbon University, work was started in 2006 covering three different stages. Teams of students do field work in the summer and each time have unearthed countless artifacts and structures. To begin with the focus was the top of the hill where evidence of Iron Age occupation from the 4th and 3rd centuries BC was found. Objects collected include pottery, coins, glass and metal hooks. Traces of later Roman occupation (2nd and 1st centuries BC) on this site indicate that there were commercial activities in the form of clay production and large circular brick configurations believed to be ovens, were discovered. Greek ceramics show that inhabitants at this time were involved in Mediterranean trade routes

The second area studied at the top of the hill was dated to the Imperial Roman period in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. It was possible to trace the city with its distribution of roads and organisation of residential and commercial areas. Two tanks for the preparation of salt fish were also discovered. The excavations point to the fact that the area was densely populated at the time. Using magnetic resonance archeologists were able to prove that the whole of the hill had been occupied.



Professor Ana Arruda, Lisbon University.



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It is interesting to note that previously there had only been an assumption about life here at this time based on other excavations in Lusitania but archeologists now have conclusive evidence, including confirmation that fish and oil production was an important economic activity.

The work this year uncovered a reservoir built by the Romans in the 1st century BC.

In August, the municipality of Lagos organised one of its Open Day events to present the site to the public. In the morning visitors could see the archeological team working on the reservoir and were able to ask questions. Catarina, one of the archeological students had collected a bucketful of pieces of amphorae, glassware, needles, tools, coins and much more. She was keen to demonstrate the layers of plaster lining the reservoir and explained how it had been constructed. The water was for domestic use and for the small-scale fishing and pottery industries in the area. The immediate concern now is to do the necessary conservation and restoration work under the supervision of Pedro Gago, from the Albufeira municipality.

The artifacts that students collect are cleaned and catalogued in Lisbon and then returned to Lagos. As Professor Arruda points out there is an added corollary in the work they do. "This teaches the students to be archeologists and work in the field. They do the digging and cleaning of the objects, learn to recognise the information and catalogue it."

Next summer the students will return to the site and will focus on further areas of study.

While the archeological team was at work at Monte Molião in the summer, geo-physical prospecting took place at the Roman villa of São Pedro de Pulgão near the aerodrome



Catarina, archeological student, Lisbon University

at the same time. Some years ago, parts of a Roman villa from the late Roman period, still intact with mosaics, had been discovered. The archeological team at Lagos Câmara completed initial investigations. To safeguard the precious findings it was subsequently covered with soil for protection. As modern residences occupy part of the site in question, the German team led by Professor Félix Teichner from the University of Marburg, was nevertheless able to use modern technology this time to produce archeological imaging – all contributing to an increased understanding of the past.

Nearby in Sargaçal, is the modern vineyard of 'Monte da Casteleja' where a Roman villa once stood. It is fascinating to note that wine production is still going on here as it did all those centuries ago.

If Monte Molião and the area around the estuary were so important throughout early history, why were they abandoned? The simple answer is: the estuary silted over. Radiocarbon data tells us it remained open until 2800BC. At the mouth of the estuary a spit started to appear and a salt marsh began to develop behind the sand barrier. In the middle of the 2nd century AD people moved to the other side of the river to the present old town of Lagos - and became known as Lacobriga. In the 20th century the

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Appeal for missing son

Continued from front cover



meeting people I would otherwise have never met."

His disappearance was of all the more strange because he seemed particularly happy working as a chef in Lagos. In case he had for some reason sought a new job, searchers checked out many workaway and woofing community sites in the region, to no avail.

"Along with working abroad sites, we have contacted as many of the missing persons agencies as we can think of in the hope that someone will have seen him, but none of these have come up with anything as yet," said Mrs Edwards.

Adding to the mystery, Mrs Edwards reasons that had he planned to go away without telling anyone, he surely would have collected any wages owing to him, taken some clothes other than those he was wearing, and not left behind his passport or mobile phone.

"He obviously wasn't in the right frame of mind when he went anyway because of his head injury. What young lad leaves his phone behind? It was glued to his hands - and he had no money either."

Mrs Edwards says that on top of her worries she has been desperately frustrated by the lack of information she has received from authorities in Portugal.

If anyone does have information they should contact Jon's sister, Kenna Ballion by phone on +447724928706 or email: kenna_balion@yahoo.co.uk

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swampland was drained and the modern marina that now stands there with all its facilities, was built. What would the Romans make of it, I wonder?

As Lagos abounds in archeological treasures like this, I was curious to know why excavation work only started very recently. The first reference to past archeological work on Monte Molião is that of Estácio da Veiga who at the end of the 19th century recorded tentative excavations on the site. Fragments of ceramics and some Roman coins were unearthed. He also registered the existence of the Roman reservoir, which was later excavated in 2014. In the early 20th century archeologists discovered a possible Roman necropolis with evidence of burial rituals.

Regrettably, crucial evidence was lost due to the construction of the EN125 national road in the 1920s along the periphery of the site. More serious damage was done in the 1980s when Rua do Molião and nearby houses were built along with the development of an extensive condominium some years later. However, according to Prof Arruda a major part of the site has been saved.

The archeological work that is happening now is of utmost importance. Step by step the studies of the archeologists have helped to connect the pieces encountered with a chronological period. They now have a good picture of human existence on Monte

Molião. The parts of the giant historical jigsaw puzzle are slowly coming together.

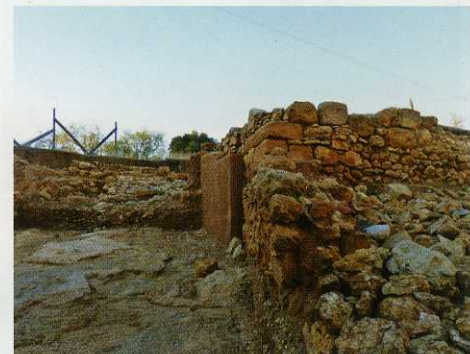
The research is partly funded by Lisbon University and Lagos Câmara, supplemented by some European funding although Prof Arruda points out that it is not always easy to access. There is now enough information to rebuild Monte Molião and the surroundings - digitally. Just imagine a 3D animation showing the whole area with the vital lifeline of the busy river enabling people to go about their everyday lives. The intention is also to have the area properly signposted and open to the public with objects displayed in a designated museum.

The archeological project has great value as a subject of study and learning about the past, but is much more besides. As Elena Moran puts it: "It's wonderful to be able to present new evidence and see the project developing so well, adding a great deal of value to the area. It will be fantastic when it opens up for the benefit of both residents and visitors to Lagos."

Here is a wonderful opportunity to preserve history and also capitalise on it as a great tourist attraction. The creation of local businesses with a vested interest in the preservation and maintenance of the site could provide on-going and long-term sources of incentive and funding for conservation. It would help ensure that the public can enjoy the experience of visiting ancient places for generations to come.



One of the Open Days at Monte Molião



Excavation at Monte Molião



Monte Molião and São Pedro de Pulgão showing the extent of the River Bensafrim



Professor Félix Teichner, University of Marburg