



## 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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