



Dossier 02

The egg of eternal life

Seasonal exhibit
Winter 2017

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Credits

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Presentation

Both objects are grave goods, offerings placed in two of the 150 graves that were excavated in 2015 under the direction of Diego Ruiz in the Jovada area of Les Casetes cemetery. Burials were found here dating from the end of the 7th century BC until the late Roman period (4th/5th century AD). The graves were located near to the entrance road of the ancient Punic–Phoenician town*, which later became an Iberian and Roman town, and on top of which, from 1301, the modern town of Villajoyosa was built.

The graves GU 445 and GU 503 are the most spectacular and unusual in the cemetery. They are rectangular chambers; GU 445 measures 1.87 x 1.08m and GU 503 2.43 x 1.63m. Both are 1.4m deep and the chamber walls are covered with fire hardened clay. They are evidence of an important Punic-Phoenician* presence in Villajoyosa during the 6th century BC and the exchange of exotic goods between North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula.

(*) Punic-Phoenician: the main period of Phoenician presence in the local area dates from the 7th century BC. After, the fall of the capital Tyre (nowadays in Lebanon) in 573 BC at the hands of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, the colony of Carthage ruled the Phoenician Mediterranean territories: which gives its name to the Punic Empire.

Grave GU 503



Two extraordinary Punic-phoenician objects

Eastern origins and traditions

In antiquity ostriches were frequently found on the steppes and desert margins of river valleys in Syria-Mesopotamia, Egypt and North Africa.

The nobility had the hunting rights to the fast running ostriches, which are illustrated in a number of representations of Egyptian pharaohs and kings of other Eastern dynasties. Ostrich eggs were not just used as a source of food but were also a symbol of fertility.

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Cup being excavated

Smooth and granulated eggshells

Various species of ostriches live in such a widespread geographical area. Ostrich eggs from the Near and Middle East and the Sahara have smooth surfaces, whilst those from subtropical Africa are more granulated, similar to orange peel. Both types are protected by a shiny and impermeable layer. However, in reality it is actually difficult to distinguish between the smooth and granulated shells as they have generally been polished.

Shape and form

The cup found in grave GU 445 has a smooth bevelled rim with short incisions cut into it, which extend down only affecting the surface of the shell. The top part of the egg was cut off to enable the contents to be eaten, and then the shell was converted into a vessel that was easy to transport, for example in a rope bag.

The top part of an Ostrich egg found in grave GU 503 has been more roughly separated from the rest of the egg. There is one 2 cm diameter hole positioned just off centre, which was most likely made to empty the contents of the egg. In 2001 a similar ostrich egg object was found in a grave in Les Casetes cemetery (García, 2009).

> Continued on page 11

Aerial view of the Jovada area of Les Casetes cemetery





Exhibit catalogue record

The egg of eternal life

Inv. No.

22238 (photo page 8)

Material

Ostrich eggshell

Location

Grave GU 503 from the Jovada area of Les Casetes cemetery (Villajoyosa, Alicante).

Date

6th - 5th century BC

Description

Top of an ostrich egg with carved and painted decoration

Inv. No.

22293 (photos pages 12 and 16)

Material

Ostrich eggshell

Location

Grave GU 445 from the Jovada area of Les Casetes cemetery (Villajoyosa, Alicante).

Date

6th - 5th century BC

Description

Painted ostrich egg cup

> Continued from page 7

Decoration

Regardless of whether the ostrich eggs are smooth or granulated, the shells are always covered in a cuticle or impermeable layer that is tenths of millimetres thick. This cuticle prevents the contents of the egg from evaporating but also helps any pigments used to decorate it stick better.

Although the decoration is difficult to see today, the cup from grave GU 445 appears to have been painted with red designs on top of the natural colour of the eggshell. Under ultraviolet light we can see that the surface layer of the shell was removed by sanding it to make it more porous so that the pigments would stick better. The dark colour that can be seen on some parts of the shell is probably due to it being buried for such a long time.



Floral design

The top of an Ostrich egg has been decorated in different ways. The convex part has two parallel brush painted bands, whilst the concave part is decorated in hollow relief. This type of carving is obtained by submerging the object in an acid bath with the areas to be left in relief covered beforehand using wax or resin. This type of decoration has been recorded in the Punic site of Gunugu (today Guraya in Algeria). A microscopic examination of the surface has revealed the remains of this wax or resin.

Both decorative techniques have been recorded in the Iberian Peninsula and in the Mediterranean Basin. Although painted decoration is much more common, examples of relief decoration have also been found, with the standout examples being from Ibiza.



Ostrich egg being excavated



Cup from grave GU 445.

The eastern origins of the iconography: symbols and interpretations

Cup

The decoration has parallels to other ostrich eggs found in Spain – such as from Villaricos (in Almeria) and Ibiza. The decoration is framed by bands: one dark upper band and, in the lower part, there is a white disk, a dark band and a red, brush painted, ochre line, which extend from the bottom to a quarter of the way up the egg.

The body of the cup, in between the two bands, is divided into four metopes (rectangular spaces) separated by a thinner vertical band divided into three or four boxes. Two of these metopes are decorated with bicolour ovoid shapes that could possibly be plant motifs, or perhaps a schematic guilloché pattern - which appears on various eggs found in the Puig des Molins cemetery in Ibiza. The other two metopes are decorated with stylized plant motifs, derived from the palmette design. On both sides of the central motif there is a flower bud, which is a popular Eastern decorative motif. These flower designs are similar to the IIb series from the Villaricos site, which is characterised by compositions of palmettes..

(*) Guilloché: is a repetitive decorative pattern which is usually complex and radiates from a central point.



Convex side of the egg

Top part of the Ostrich egg

The concave side of the eggshell is decorated with a radial design that appears to originate from the off-centre hole cut through the eggshell. Four rectangular spokes radiate out from the edge of the hole which contain small rectangles, placed at 90° to each other. Triangular designs are interspersed between the spokes. The general design gives the impression of a star or an astral body. This design, and the fact that it has been executed on the inside of the eggshell, makes it unique amongst the decorated ostrich eggs found in the Iberian Peninsula.

This decoration is similar to the symbol of Shamash, the oriental Sun god. This is a well-known symbol in Mesopotamia and in Phoenician and Punic territories, but it has not yet been recorded in the Iberian Peninsula. However, we cannot either ignore the fact that this decoration may have just come from the imagination of an artist who only wanted to adapt a design to the constraints of the eggshell itself with its off-centre opening.

Ostrich eggs deposited in graves have a funerary value as symbols of rebirth and the eternal soul.

Decorative design on the concave side of the egg (drawn by Miguel Sánchez Signes)





Cup from grave GU 445

Exotic and luxurious

Eggshells, as they have a white or light yellow and shiny surface, resemble marble and sea shells, both of which are associated with luxurious craftsmanship.

A large number of decorated Ostrich eggs have been found in the Iberian Peninsula; in Eastern – Phoenician and Punic contexts – as well as native contexts – Tartessos and Orientalizing Period.

The Phoenicians and Punic peoples distributed Ostrich eggs made into cups, vessels or masks throughout the Western Mediterranean. They used different routes, from Carthage and Guraya, with goods arriving in Spain between Ibiza and Villaricos. Various other finds came from grave GU 445, including a Phoenician wide rimmed plate, a handmade ceramic bowl and fragments of a second ostrich egg cup, which has the same type of cuts to the rim. The typology and decoration of this egg are similar to those from Villaricos.

The grave goods from GU 503 also included a pottery stand and an alabaster unguentarium or flask, which had also been imported.

The decoration on the top part of the Ostrich egg found in grave 6 from the area of the cemetery excavated earlier in 2001 is different to the one found in grave GU 503. It only has a white band in the convex part. It is not known whether these egg tops could have been used as a type of lid or shallow bowl. Although this type of egg top is not known in the Peninsula nor in the Mediterranean, similar examples have been found in Ibiza and in Guraya. A whole undecorated ostrich egg, which had been emptied through a small hole, was also found in the Jovada area of the cemetery, in grave GU 466.

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