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before the
Romans
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Pintia

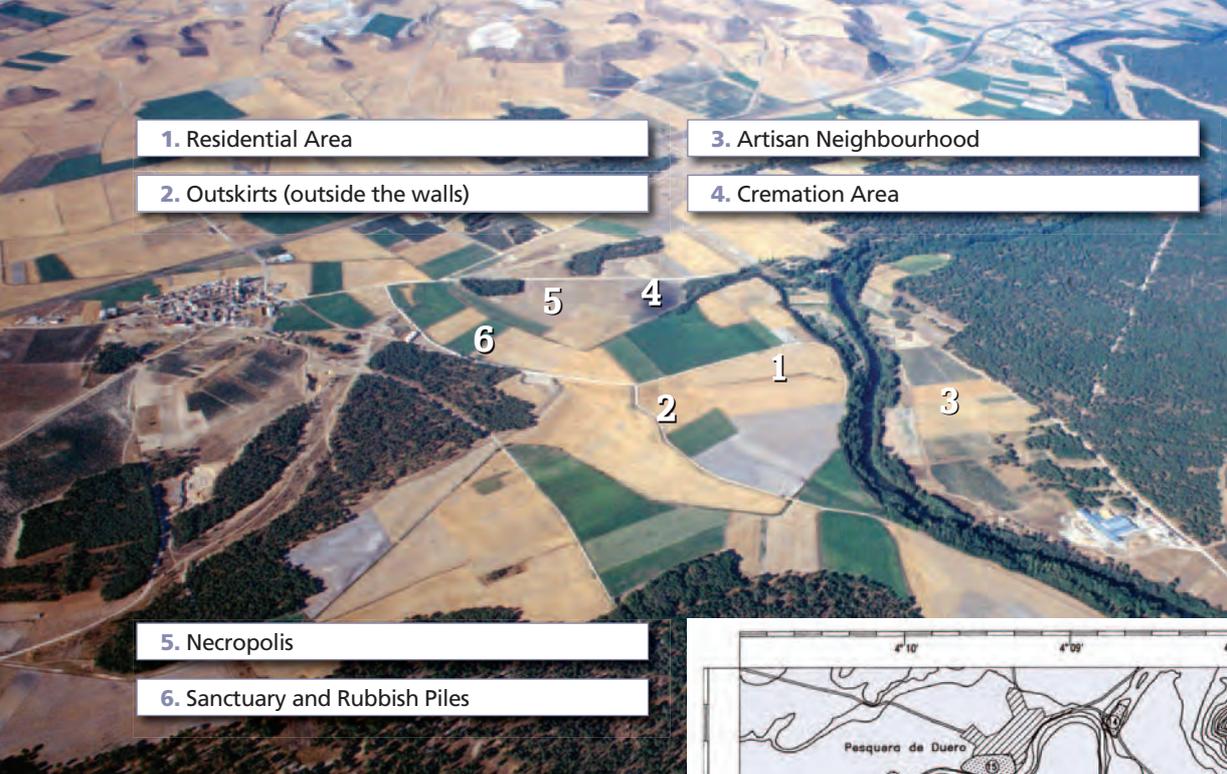


Fortunes of a pre-Roman city in Hispania

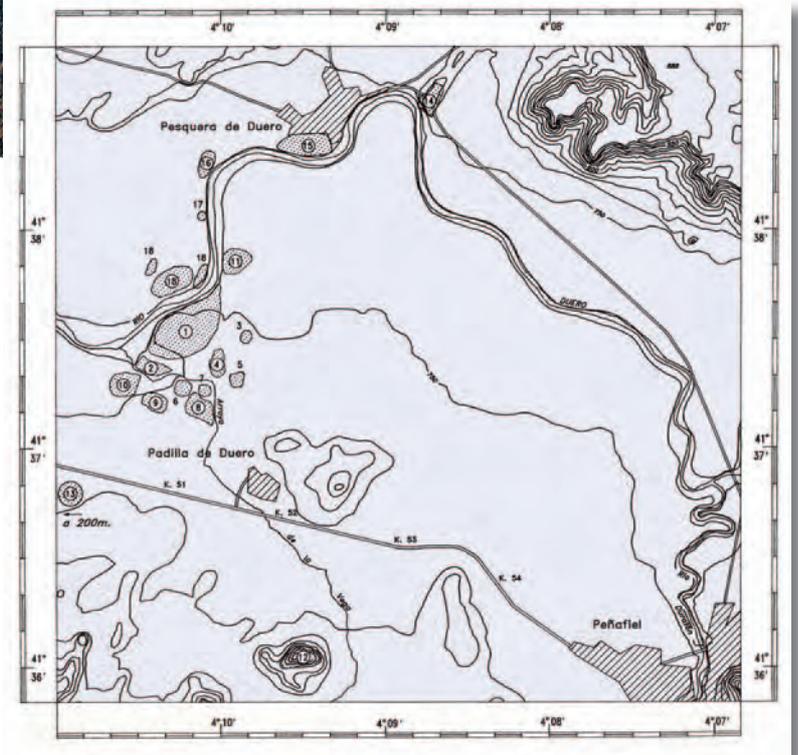
Pintia was a thriving Iron Age city in North Central Spain. At its dawn, around the 5th century BC, it was part of the Vaccean culture, an Iron Age people with Celtic links whom scholars believe crossed into Spain from Central Europe. In the 3rd century BC, the area came under attack from Hannibal, and within 200 years it had been absorbed into Roman Iberia. Pintia's vast necropolis is proving a rich source of information about this relatively little known Vaccean culture. Here, excavation directors **Carlos Sanz Minguez** and **Fernando Romero Carnicero**, reveal the site's latest finds.

Below Necropolis of Las Ruedas at Pintia. The field of tombstones is made up of unworked limestone blocks hewn from the nearby quarry. The stones are of various sizes, and up to a maximum height of 1m.





Left & below A photographic aerial view and geological survey map of the area showing the positions of the main sites.



Pintia is a vast and rich site. In addition to its large necropolis, it has a cremation area or *ustrinum*, a village, an artisan quarter, and a possible sanctuary, so far only identified by aerial photographs. Such is Pintia's glut of archaeology that the 125 hectare site was declared a National Cultural Asset in 1993.

Who lived in this massive site? The answer is the Vaccaei, a people whose existence is hardly remembered in history. Though they lacked a written language, they organised their walled cities in grids and had complex beliefs in the afterlife. Moreover, judging by the affluence of the funerary objects we have found in the necropolis at Pintia, the Vaccaei were no 'primitive tribe'. Indeed, the Classical author Diodorus Siculus described the Vaccaei as the most cultured people among all their neighbours. But how cultured? What do Pintia's numerous burials tell us about its erstwhile dwellers?

Digging the dead at Pintia

Modern research at Pintia began in 1979 under the auspices of the University of Valladolid. But it was six years ago, after a pause of two decades, that we resumed our excavations on the Vaccean necropolis at Pintia. In our first season, we uncovered 70 cremation tombs. Since then, the excavation has continued uninterrupted, and by the end of the 2007 campaign we had completed the excavation of grave N° 147.

The Vaccaei cremated their dead, but the cremation was carried out in a different area to the deposition of the ashes. The actual cremation was performed in an area known by the

modern name of Los Cenizales – a version of the Spanish word for 'ashes'. From there, the cremated remains of the deceased were taken in an urn to a grave in Las Ruedas necropolis, which was founded around the end of the 5th century BC and remained in use for the next 500 years. The name Las Ruedas ('The Wheels') is thought to derive from the large circular stones which marked some of the graves in Roman times. We reckon between 20 and 30 generations of Vacceans and Romans were buried here, so with an estimated population of between 5,000 and 7,000 inhabitants at the city's peak, we calculate there should be a total of between 60,000 and 100,000 burials awaiting us.

The Vaccaei's belief in the afterlife often meant they took status symbols with them, ➡



Above Grave N° 135, a 1st century BC cremation at Las Ruedas, with eight crude containers, a bottle and three bowls in situ.

Below Recreation of an elite warrior at Pintia, based on elements recovered from 2nd century BC graves.



indicative of sex, age and social position, in addition to provisions for their journey to the great beyond. Although highly symbolic in nature, the artefacts offer enormous potential for social reconstruction. The wide array of grave goods and offerings reflect the complexity of a hierarchical society ruled by a small military elite – whose necropolis is the subject of our current work.

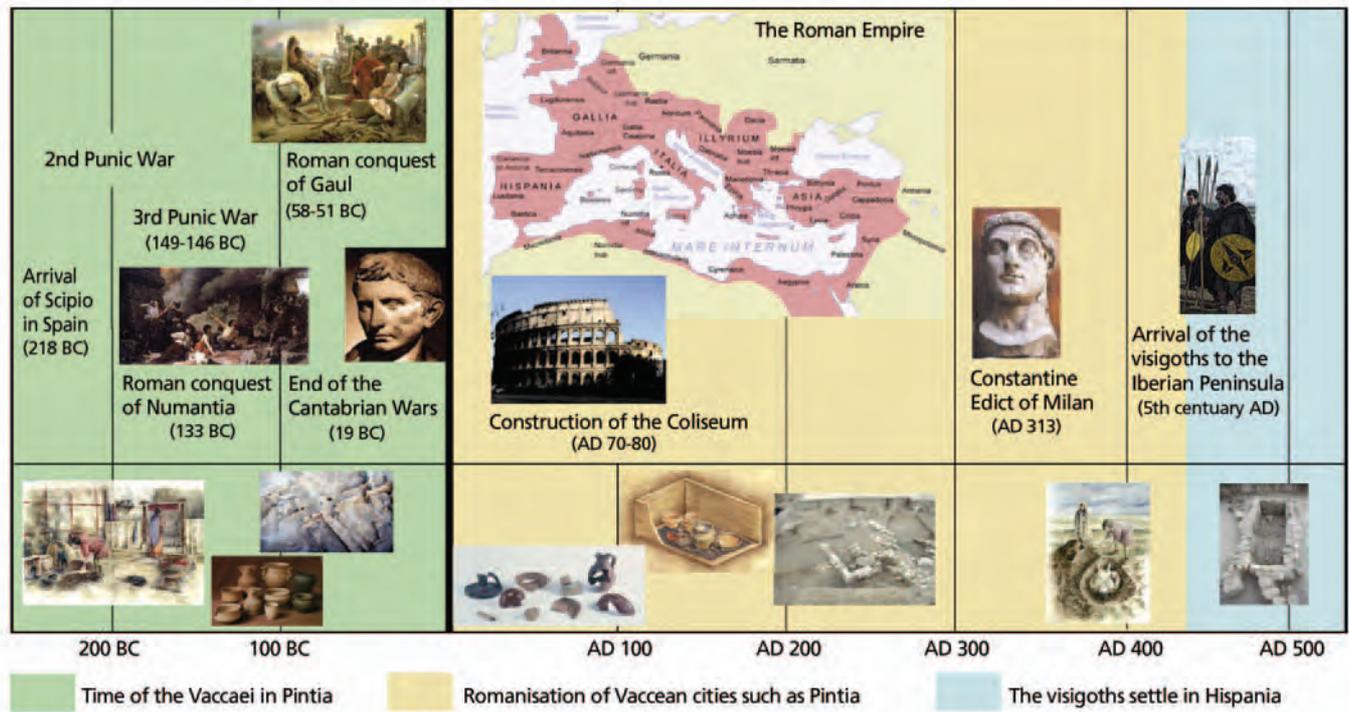
In the summer of 2007, we hosted three 30-day fieldschool sessions, covering theory and practice, thanks to an agreement between US non-profit outfit ArchaeoSpain and the Federico Wattenberg Centre for Vaccean Studies at the University of Valladolid. Our crew of Spanish archaeologists and students hailing from across the world, including the UK, Brussels, Canada and the US, uncovered 25 cremation graves that yielded more than 300 pottery, metal, glass and bone artefacts *in situ*.

Though we are still analysing last summer's remains and artefacts, we already know that the 2007 season was special. In previous

years, the majority of graves belonged to male warriors. But last year we found only three bearing weaponry that suggest military status – such as grave N° 133 (dating to the 4th century BC), which contained iron weaponry, including a dagger and sheath, the clasp for fastening the weapon onto the waist, and fragments of a *caetra* - a round, concave shield. Instead, the remaining tombs belonged to women and children linked to the warrior elite. The discovery tells us that this area of the necropolis not only contained soldiers but their families as well.



A TIMELINE FOR PINTIA'S HISTORY



One of the most interesting finds was a twin grave belonging to an adult woman and a young girl. A study of the girl's teeth indicates that she died no later than her eighth birthday. Bone analysis confirmed our suspicion that they were female – an idea already suggested by the ceramic counterweight of a spindle and a bronze sewing needle found buried with them. Traditionally, archaeologists have found links between pre-Roman women of all ages and sewing needles.



Far left Excavation work on Grave N° 128. This is a tomb of a woman with a large cache of pottery bearing Iberian artistic influences.

Left Excavation of Grave N° 143b during the 2007 campaign. This one held a varied collection of pottery vases, including several bottles which could have contained oils. Artefacts in situ.

The adult woman was buried with 21 artefacts, including a complete pottery drinking cup collection, probably for wine, comprising two jugs, a carafe and a goblet. We also found other pieces of pottery painted with characteristic Vaccean geometric motifs. Other items of interest included small, roundish pottery vessels used to store oil, rectangular boxes with four legs and a handle that were probably salt containers, and a small, unrefined and poorly-fired darkish vessel filled with cremated bone that had served as a funerary urn. Some artefacts, such as a miniature grill and tongs made of iron, had no practical use but might have symbolised the funeral feast. Perhaps this explains the abundant remains of rabbit and spring lamb, which were found in both graves.

The child's tomb yielded even more, and we extracted 67 artefacts. A third of the finds were different kinds of containers: some for drinking and others for pouring oils, and holding dairy products and syrups. All were made of fine, orange-coloured painted pottery. As in the other tomb, we found unrefined, dark pieces of pottery including a funerary urn as well as striking hand-made, oval-shaped, comb-decorated dishes. We also found a range of items that were probably children's toys, including 23 clay and stone balls that may have been used for a game of marbles, and two baby rattles. We



also found two small ceramic horns, miniature musical instruments of the type that are well-documented from the digs at the Celtiberian site of Numantia in Soria to the east. These artefacts were local imitations of the Euro-Celtic Iron Age bronze trumpets known as *carnix*.

We surmised the child's family was wealthy due to the number of precious metal artefacts. Her jewellery included a small bronze bracelet, a bronze necklace with six pendants, three faience beads, one amber bead, and six clasps. Of the latter, five were bronze, one iron and one of these had a wolf's head with faience inserted into the eyes. This child was also buried with a tiny iron grill and tongs, symbolic of the funeral feast. In this aspect, we also found the remains of meat offerings, and the goose egg painted in wine-coloured tones might be considered a food offering although it may relate to the idea of rebirth. Both sets of grave goods, and in particular the young girl's, indicate inherited riches. Their chronology appears to take us to the end of the 2nd or 1st century BC.

What surprised us, in comparison to other contemporary finds from neighbouring cultures, is how much wealthier our graves appear to be. In other graveyards, most tombs reveal only the bones of the deceased. Yet these so-called 'poor graves' appear to be rare in Pintia.

Fleshing out the bones of the Vaccae

Pintia was one of approximately 30 Vaccean settlements mentioned by the Classical authors. The earliest historical reference to the tribe comes from Polybius, who recounts Hannibal's mighty campaigns in 220 BC against two Vaccean cities nearby. He writes: 'Next summer he [Hannibal]

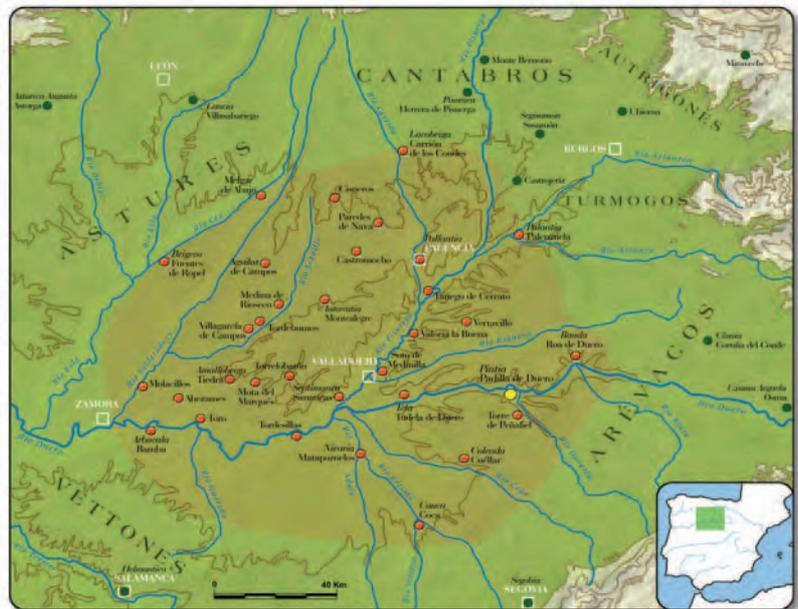
Left Artefacts from Grave N° 127: the twin tomb from 2nd century BC containing the bodies of an adult woman and a young girl.

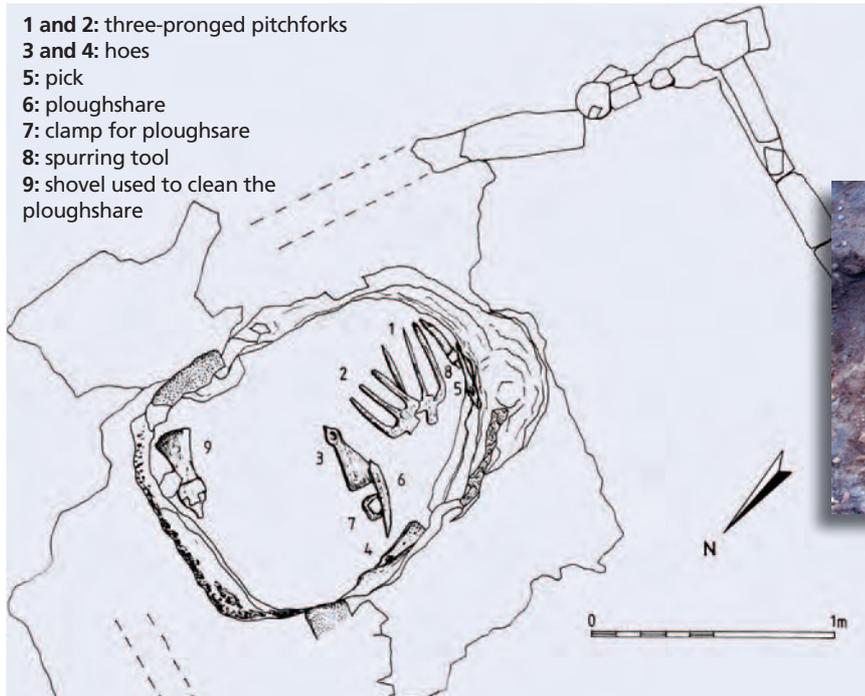
Top Artefacts taken from Grave N° 127a, belonging to the adult female.

Above Artefacts taken from Grave N° 127b, belonging to the young girl.

made a fresh attack on the Vaccae, assaulted and took Hermandica [Salamanca] at the first onset, but Arbacala being a very large city with a numerous and brave population, he had to lay siege to it and only took it by assault after much pains.'

Below Map of the Vaccean Region.





- 1 and 2: three-pronged pitchforks
 3 and 4: hoes
 5: pick
 6: ploughshare
 7: clamp for ploughshare
 8: spurring tool
 9: shovel used to clean the ploughshare



Above & left Cache of farming tools in a Vaccean home, dated to 1st century - the archaeological drawing shows placement and name of each find.

Archaeology is demonstrating that Pintia and its Vaccean presence may stretch as far back as the end of the 5th or early 4th centuries BC - and recent research even suggests they were direct descendants of a first Iron Age people who date to the 9th century BC. They occupied an area of some 50,000km² in the middle Duero valley, also known as the Vaccean Region.

It seems that the large towns, such as Pintia, were veritable city-states, occupying the prime fertile valleys of the Duero River and its tributaries, covering an area of up to 15 and 20 hectares and providing homes for several thousand people. The Vaccean economy relied mainly on wheat agriculture as well as raising cattle and goats. Hunting deer, rabbit and hare was another activity - as confirmed in our excavations at Pintia. (Rather interestingly, the author Appian, writing in 151 BC, even refers to the illnesses the Romans suffered, from eating local game meat during their siege of the Vaccean city of Intercatia.) The Vaccae were also artisans, practising a skill which thrived with the arrival of the potter's wheel and the widespread use of iron, giving rise to pottery production as well as weapons and silverwork.

The urban settlement The urban settlement of Las Quintanas

To learn more about these people, our second area of focus has been on Pintia's urban centre, which is today known as Las Quintanas. This part occupies about one third of the total site. It has an almost semicircular layout covering around 25 hectares and was once enclosed by a double-fenced adobe wall separated by a moat.

In his *Geography*, Ptolemy describes Pintia's settlement as a *mansio* or an official stop on the route linking Caesar Augusta (modern Zaragoza) and Augusta Asturica (Astorga in León) on the *Antonine Itinerary*.

Our excavations at Las Quintanas show the town enjoyed a long life, although the land was put to various uses over the centuries. For example, during its final period - from the ➔

DEATH IN ROMAN TIMES AND AFTER

We do not know much about the funerary rituals following the Roman conquest of Pintia. In the necropolis of Las Ruedas we have uncovered around six burials from the early Empire that maintained the cremation ritual and included funerary objects such as *terra sigillata* and glass cups. In one case, the ash urn, the burial objects and the offerings were placed into a wooden box shut with nails.

Yet we do not have any information related to death at Pintia as of the 2nd century AD. It is possible that the Romans continued the custom of burials in Las Ruedas, although to date we have not found any dated later than the 1st century AD. It is also possible that the Romans built other cemeteries: we found part of a 4th century AD cemetery in part of the Las Quintanas settlement. The new funerary ritual was burial. The bodies, heads pointing west and feet pointing east, were placed in a trench in the ground and surrounded by stones to form a type of coffin. These stones were taken from the wall foundations of houses that were torn down during the Roman era to make room for the cemetery. Funerary objects were scarce, amounting to a few belt buckles or bronze rings which could indicate a certain level of poverty. The buckles, however, were beautifully decorated.





Far left Monte Bernorio type dagger, decorated with silver and copper damascene.
Left Hoard of jewels and denarii unearthed at Pintia.

4th to 7th centuries AD - part of the area was turned into a cemetery by the late-Romans and Visigoths. There, we unearthed around 100 graves, occasionally marked by stones.

Digging beneath these levels, we found an early Imperial Roman layer with quadrangular houses with stone foundations, adobe walls and internal divisions. The houses were grouped into blocks and, as aerial photography has revealed, were ordered following a typical Roman primary and secondary road grid. This layout is fairly consistent with the earlier Vaccean urban grid because the Roman invasion did not disturb indigenous life to a great degree. The only significant difference we have noticed was that the Romans used rock foundations for structures.

Under this level, we uncovered two earlier periods - the first dating from the second half of the 1st century BC and the second from the Sertorian period around 75 BC, a time of intense warfare between the armies of Roman military upstart Sertorius and dictator Sulla, which ended after the former was assassinated in 72 BC. Here we have found quadrangular houses ranging between 30m² and 100m², with between three and seven rooms apiece.

These pre-Roman levels from the 1st century BC abound in archaeological information. It appears there were several violent episodes, as invaders or disaster forced inhabitants to abandon their belongings in homes that soon collapsed. Recent excavations have even uncovered some homes with their contents intact. Almost frozen in time, these discoveries have provided archaeologists with a true snapshot into the daily lives of these people.

Research in the larger houses has helped us to identify the various functions of the rooms

and we have identified kitchens, food stores, living rooms, areas for weaving, dining rooms, and so on. Below the floors, we also uncovered the remains of rooms used to store farm tools, seeds and wool. In these areas we also found child burials with animal offerings. Infants younger than two years of age appear to have been excluded from Pintia's necropolis.

In addition, aerial photography has revealed what could be a sanctuary between the village and the necropolis: a 360m² area plus another small quadrangular enclosure with an apse on one side. The layout, and the fact that the perimeter seems to be marked by a ditch and not by any structure, resembles sanctuaries in other European Iron Age settlements.

On the opposite side of the Duero River lies the artisan area now called Carralaceña. This district was linked to the rest of the site by a natural ford in the river. Our excavations of the

Below Detail of the Sertorian dwellings, 1st century BC, at the village of Las Quintanas.
Right Furnace N° 2 in the artisan area of Carralaceña.



pottery workshops have revealed areas where refuse from baking was deposited, and three furnaces, prominent among which is Furnace N° 2 (see photo below). This is a circular twin-chamber vertical draft furnace, measuring 4.5m in diameter, and a striking *praefurnium* or furnace room, which is where vessels and other pottery were baked between the 2nd century BC and the beginning of the 1st century AD.

The riches of Pintia

Almost three decades have passed since we began our work at Pintia, and each year the digs reward us with yet more new information to plug into the Vaccaei's life story. Based on the latest results, it is clear that Pintia was a rich society, where even young girls could achieve a high status thanks to their parents' wealth. This wealth makes it unsurprising that the locals erected a double city wall to protect their goodies. Yet, enemy raids forced families to abandon their homes, which explains why we find entire households frozen in time.

Following Romanisation, it appears that not much really changed for the Vaccaei - although our information from this time period pales in comparison to the pre-Roman database. We know almost nothing of the city as of the 3rd century AD, and the only signs of its existence are Christian tombs in the necropolis from the 4th century AD. Yet, these burials yielded no evidence as to where and how these early Christians lived. It seems the city was all but abandoned sometime between the 4th and 7th centuries AD.



Right Visigoth tomb of two children, dated to the 7th century AD; artist's recreation shown above



The future discovery of Roman and Visigoth burials will no doubt fill this gap. In any event, we hope that our excavations afford Pintia the place in history it deserves. As archaeologists, we must not forget that we are the caretakers of one of Spain's most cultured people. 🌐

Source:

Carlos Sanz, a professor of Archaeology at the University of Valladolid, has excavated at Pintia for more than 25 years and is the founder of the Federico Wattenberg Center for Vaccean Studies. **Fernando Romero** is a professor of Prehistory at the University of Valladolid, who focuses on Iron Age cultures in Spain.

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