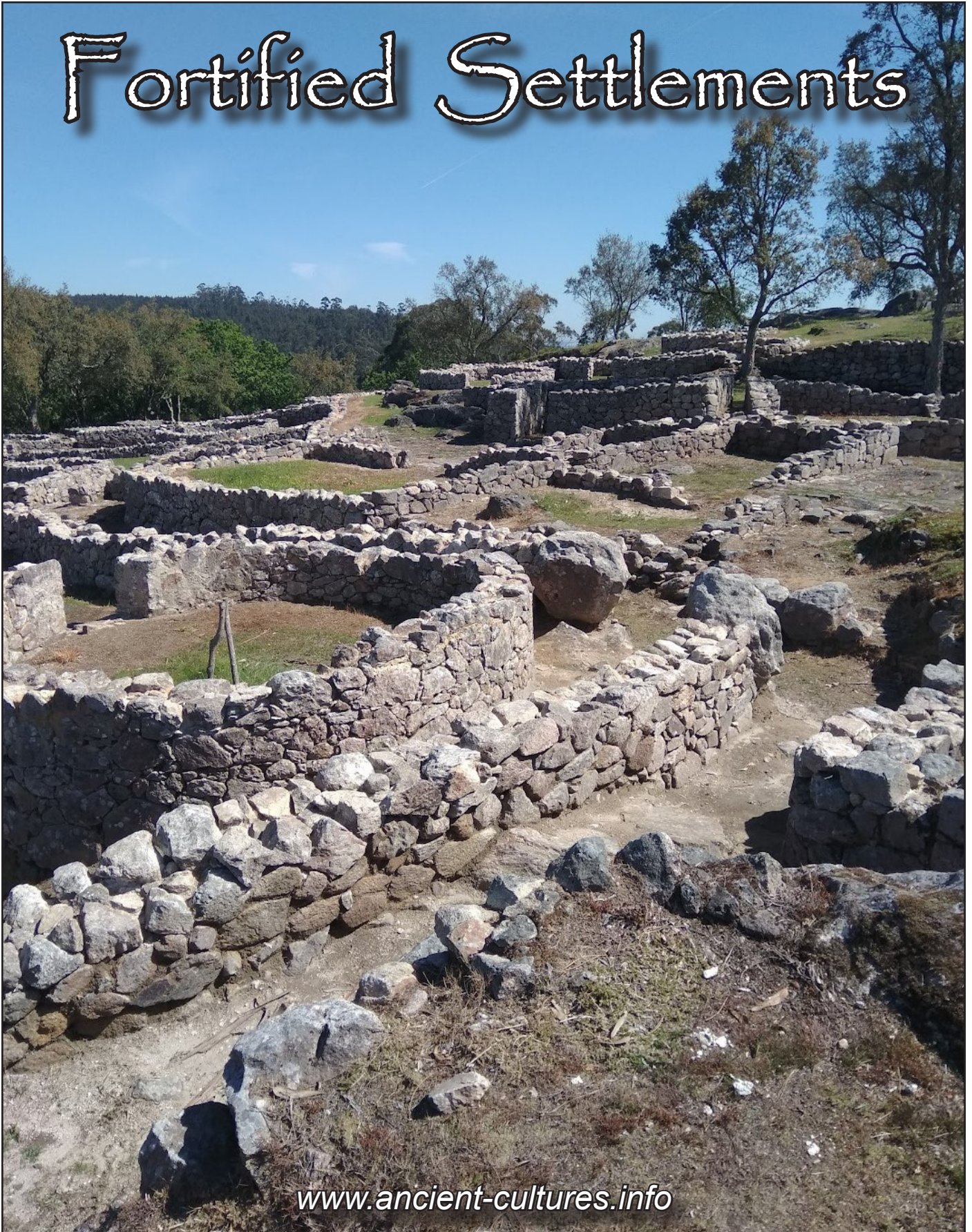


Castro Culture

Fortified Settlements





The so-called Castro Culture belonged to the Celtic cultural area. The Castro Culture central area extended over northern Portugal and the Spanish province of Galicia. Its name was given to it by archeologists using the Latin *castellum*, because the typical Castro villages were fortified by several walls and moats and looked like castles.

Castro Culture

It was a typical Iron Age culture with the full set of artisans active at that period and it started 3,000 years ago at the end of the Bronze Age. The Castro Culture began south of Rio Douro in Portugal and extended further north and started at the coast and moved further inland. Its center was the area around Ave in northern Portugal. In its 1,400 years of existence the last 400 years were strongly affected by Roman influence until it was totally Romanized and finally disappeared as an independent culture.

Economic Basis

The Castro people lived from agriculture, hunting and fishing. In addition, they were very active in mining of copper, tin, lead, iron and gold. This was the basis of strong trading ties with Romans to whom they sold swords and daggers. Possibly this was the reason

why Romans left the Castro people so long alone despite the wars they fought on the Iberian Peninsula with other tribes.

Part of Celtic Culture

The Celts were not a homogenous ethnic group, but consisted of many tribes, which just shared the same culture with regards to their skillfully crafted artefacts. Their tribal name was given to them later by archeologists. The wide expansion of the Celtic Culture resulted in their flourishing long distance trade.

At that time wandering artisans were common and spread important know how. Especially metal smelting and working artisans were sought after experts. Therefore, the Celtic Culture spread over Europe from England to Italy and from Germany via France to the Iberian Peninsula. So, the Castro Culture like the Celts were known for their live sized warrior stone statues and sitting or standing figures of gods and goddesses.

Selection of Castro Settlements

We assume there are over 100 Castro settlements in northern Portugal starting from Rio Douro including the Spanish provinces of Galicia, Asturias and Leon. To better under-

stand this rather unique culture, we have selected nine of these fortified villages. We will describe them more in detail, so that you get a first impression of this little known culture and their astonishing fortified villages. The chosen sites still exist today and some have been partly restored and can be visited.

Some have even a visitors center and in few towns nearby small museums show interesting artefacts, which were excavated. This Celtic sub group were excellent artisans and produced beautiful gold jewelry and bronze artefacts like drinking jugs and cup, which the Celts were famous for. For more information, please read the article about the Glauberg Celts on this website.

Barona

This Castro settlement is one of the best survived and is situated on a small rock formation surrounded by the sea. This rock is connected by a small land bridge and therefore in an ideal defense position. It is not the oldest fortified Castro village and archeologists established it was founded about 2,200 years ago. So, it falls into the period of the first growing Roman influence on the Iberian Peninsula. So far ruined walls of 20 round and oval stone houses have been found and partly restored. The inner walls had surrounding stone benches, which also might have served as sleeping benches.

No Doors & Windows?

The initially found ruined walls were too low to confirm the existence of doors or windows. But possibly the houses had entrances via their roofs. This was a common feature in ancient settlements and might have been used here also for reed covered roofs. Unfortunately, none of this material survived to help answer this assumption. There are only few Castro settlements erected directly on the shore line. Barona lies at a rough part of the Atlantic coast, so possibly these houses had no windows and doors to prevent the negative effects of strong winds and winter storms.

Two Village Areas

Due to the nature of this marine rock formation, there are a lower and higher housing area. The total settlement area reaches 25,000 m² and is protected by a triple stone





wall with moats. It seems that in the Castro Culture a triple wall system with moats was the protection standard. Barona was well secured by its rock position surrounded by the sea. It could have well survived any siege, because of its well and the possibility to fish. Under normal circumstances the Barona fishermen used the small beach next to it to launch and land their boats. The fishing grounds here were and still are today very rich in fish.

Santa Tegra

Most of the Castro settlements were hill top villages with best views and easy to defend. As best defensive choice the Castro people selected round hill tops or ridges. This peak raise 300 meters above the close coast line and offers a fantastic view over the valley and shore line below. Often Castro settlements are near the coast or rivers, because fishing seems to have been an important economic factor for own use and trade.

Huge Population

Santa Tegra was home to a population of 3,000 to 5,000 about 2,600 years ago. The main site measured 700 by 300 meters and consisted of round stone huts with a diameter of five meters and rectangular houses measuring fifteen by five meters. They certainly housed extended families. Rectangular houses were also found at other Castro sites. The settlement consists of various areas, which were erected at different times. Unfortunately, they are divided by a modern road.

The thickness of hut walls was only 40 centimeters and they were erected without foun-

dations directly onto the bedrock. The floors were all paved with stones and the Castro typical wall benches were part of the housing structures here as well. Most of the round huts had semicircular vestibule. Surprisingly, here the walls were plastered and painted in a single color. The settlement like all Castro sites was surrounded by a protective wall with two gates. But the wall was only 1,6 meters high. Were this limited height chosen to give inhabitants an open view outside and allow to better defend themselves?

Romariz

This fortified settlement lies in northern Portugal south of Rio Douro. It is the most southern site of the Castro Culture. Again, it was erected in a strategic position on a ridge 400 meter high. Steep cliffs on three sides protect it and, on the flatter slope a wall plus moat was erected. It is one of the oldest Castro settlements set up about 3,000 years ago. Romariz was inhabited right into Roman times. The first huts were erected using timber only and 800 years later inhabitants changed to stone built houses. The plateau has an extension of 150 by 100 meters giving enough space to erect 50 huts and houses. Some have again the Castro typical semicircular vestibule.

Romariz is a smaller site, because other Castro settlements are with 20 hectares four times larger. Between the houses run stone paved passages. Here we see also small extended family complexes with up to 400 m² surrounded by separate walls. Were they really for larger families or did they include barns for livestock? The round huts had the Castro



typical diameter of five meters and the rectangular houses fifteen by five meters.

Bagunte

This hilltop settlement is special as it is surrounded by various smaller villages. Was it therefore an important trading center? Bagunte was inhabited from 400 BC until 400 AD. So, it was occupied mostly during the Roman period, which indicates that it lived from trading with Romans. With 50 hectares it was a rather large settlement with 800 round and rectangular houses.

This small town had four quarters, which were connected by stone paved roads. Each quarter had about five complexes with several houses for larger families. Have various clans for economic reasons worked and lived here, each with its specific artisanal business? Bagunte was again surrounded by a triple wall structure with moats.



Sanfins

With 15 hectares it is smaller than Bagunte. Situated northeast of Porto it is a late Castro settlement, which has been founded during Roman times and surprisingly was inhabited until the Middle Ages. Archeologists could not establish with certainty if it was occupied uninterrupted. This long occupation must have had a valid reason and this could only have been a flourishing trade with Romans. Might its reason of existence have been the wine growing, because wine was a sought after product for Romans?

Pedra Formosa

A special discovery in Sanfins was a so-called pedra formosa. These are skillfully crafted and engraved stone plates placed as a façade in front small rooms. Experts assume that the small openings led to grave chambers behind. Despite found traces of fire archeologists could not establish with certainty what





these structures served for. Such stones were also found at Briteiros, Freixo, Eiras, Borneiro and Castanoso. These Castro settlements are all situated in Portugal and it seems that the southern part of the Castro Culture practiced a special ritual in connection with these stones.

Briteiros

This is one of the oldest Castro villages in Portugal near the city of Braga and its beginnings are estimated to have started 2,800 years ago. Only a small part has been excavated so far. Archeologists found three walls with moats to protect approximately 160 houses. Along the stone paved passages,

they found water channels and gullies. Interestingly, a *pedra formosa* was found here in its architectural context. The structure consisted of a vestibule with the ornamented *pedra* stone plate in front of a round chamber not erected with stones like all the walls, but with stone plates.

Is this an old custom they carried on from the end of the stone age? This also reminds us of the giant graves in Sardinia as well as the fortified Nurghen settlements there. Still a long distance away, but long distance trade was also a means of cultural and know how transfer. For more information, please read the article on Sardinia on this website.



More on Pedra Formosa

It is interesting that these grave structures were built against the inside of the village protection walls. Some of them were even erected outside of the village. Some experts believe the fire traces could indicate, that they were used as ovens. The position away from houses might support this theory. But the west east orientation of all these structures with rising and setting sun indicates for us clear funeral purpose. Other experts proposed these structures were used as places for fertility cult rituals.

Ulaca

This Castro settlement is the highest of all established in an altitude of 1,100 meters. It was founded early about 2,700 years ago and given up with the arrival of the Romans on the Iberian Peninsula about 100 BC. With an extent of 60 hectare, it was rather large and housed 1,500 inhabitants. So, it was not really densely populated. Two walls with a length of three kilometers and a height of two meters surrounded it. Unique is the enormous monolith possibly used as a sacrifice stone. A staircase leading to its top was hewn into the natural rock. This monolith lies on a ritual place surrounded by various standing monolithic plates forming a wall.

Rare Stone Sculptures

Another unique feature has been moved to the nearby village. So far only two such monoliths are known, which have been sculptured into a simple but impressive animal form with four legs. The bull figure is two meters long and weighs several tons. The other figure represents a wild boar. Not common for the Castro Culture are the houses in Ulaca, which have up to three rooms. Possibly this has to do with the work of its inhabitants, because it was a center for blacksmith and potters.

Curalha

This old Castro site is situated in northern Portugal close to the Spanish border. The settlement was erected on a ridge at an altitude of 400 meters about 2,100 years ago. It is a smaller village covering a space of 60 by 40 meters. The site is protected by two walls with a distance of ten meters between them. The inner wall had three gates and a massive wall thickness of five meters. Possibly it was the first and for some time the only wall. Later



as the settlement population grew a second wall was added, but had only one gate. Archeologists also found a stretch of a third wall. Was it not completed because the village was attacked and left? Or were its stones used as building material for modern day villages around?

High Density Housing

The passages were typically paved with stones. But unusual is the closeness of buildings between the two walls. The houses were attached to the inner wall and shared the backwall as well as the side walls with neighbors. Did this happen due to time constraint or limited building materials?

Monte Mozinho

This settlement is also called Morta de Penafiel and is situated north of Rio Douro on a hill top in 400 meters altitude. It was erected at the same time as Curalha and occupied until Roman times. The site extends over 20 hectares and various smaller satellite villages surround it. The three walls have a thickness of three meters. Unique for the Castro Culture is the open ritual place on the hill top measuring 40 by 20 meters, which is protected by its own oval shaped wall. All passages are paved by granite stones. A wider road descends from the ritual place to the northeastern gate.

The houses are both round and rectangular and housing complexes have been found here as well. Archeologists recognized two development periods. First round stone huts with semicircular vestibule were erected. Then followed rectangular buildings for the Romanized population. Later even a small Roman temple for Jupiter was built. Outside excavators found a cemetery with fire funerals.

Summary

Fortified Castro settlements are special to northern Portugal and northwestern Spain. Its form and layout seem to be unique in Europe. If they were erected due to regular and ongoing warlike activities at the time is not certain, but can be assumed. Otherwise, its inhabitants would not have taken the enormous construction efforts. All sites we described here are accessible and can be visited freely.

Picture Credits

We thank all museums, institutions and photographers for making available some of their pictures and graphs.



