

ETERNITY THROUGH FIRE: DEATH IN THE PHOENICIAN PERIOD 625-525 BC

In the seventh century BC, the Phoenicians came to Puig de Vila and the surrounding area and founded a settlement in the bay of Ibiza that would later grow into a city. It was at this time that the lower part of the hill known as Puig des Molins began to be used as a necropolis, eventually occupying a surface area of nearly 10,000 square metres.

FUNERARY RITES

The first step in the funerary ritual was washing the body to purify it. People of higher social standing were given special treatment: makeup was applied to highlight their facial features, their hair was combed, and finally the body was anointed with scented oil.

The corpse was then taken to the cemetery and cremated. Cremations were done individually on a spot near the tomb or, in some cases, inside the burial pit. Afterwards, the bones were gathered and sometimes carefully cleaned, and these remains were buried in a small hole in the ground, in an urn or in a proper grave. Before sealing the tomb, the mourners performed a series of prescribed rites such as libations (pouring out liquids in honour of the deceased), funeral banquets or placing lighted oil lamps beside the remains to illuminate the way to the afterlife.

The tumulus-like structures that may once have marked the grave sites have disappeared at Puig des Molins. The only surviving elements, which may be related to the worship of the dead, are the baetyli or memorial stones carved out of local sandstone. However, the fact that bits of broken baetyli or grave markers have been found in the earth filling in burial sites suggests that they may be symbols of the union between the deceased and the deities they represented and of the religious consecration of the grave itself.

BURIALS

Burial offerings were not placed in the majority of Phoenician tombs at Puig des Molins; such pieces have only been found in just over 40% of interments. In contrast to other Phoenician cemeteries, where groups of objects are repeated in a significant number of cases, here there seems to be no common criteria for grave goods. Only a few graves have yielded the odd piece of jewellery and personal adornments (perhaps to protect the deceased) and, in some cases, pottery items—primarily globular ampullae which probably held oil used in the anointing ritual.

POSSIBLE CENOTAPHS

At the necropolis of Puig des Molins, as at other ancient cemeteries on the Iberian Peninsula, archaeologists have uncovered sites similar to those used to inter cremated remains, where they found a few pieces of pottery or personal adornments but no bones. These sites, sometimes referred to as “fires”, are believed to be cenotaphs—in other words, graves or offerings for a dead person whose body is located elsewhere.



Please put me back where you found me!