

Peoples of the Roman World:  
The Iberians

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Politically, the Iberians disappeared during the Second Punic War when the Romans under their general Scipio took Spain. As a people, however, they continued to exist and were changed by the Romans as they had been changed by the Phoenicians, Greeks and Celts with whom they had contact over many centuries.

The Iberians were a loosely joined group with tribes of many different names. The Iberian peoples spread over the South and East coasts of Spain and up a bit into the area of modern France. Next door to them on the Spanish peninsula were the Celts, cousins of the many other Celtic groups in France, the British Isles and eastward in Europe. In parts of Spain the Celts and Iberians formed a unified Celt-Iberian culture.

The origins of the Iberians themselves are mysterious. They have been linked to the Basques of Northwest Spain, the Hamites of Egypt, the Berbers of North Africa, and have also been thought to have been indigenous. Nothing is known for certain, and may well never be.

As a mainly coastal people, the Iberians were very open to foreign influence. The heaviest influx of foreigners and therefore foreign influence (before the Romans) came during the Archaic period, c. 800-500 B.C., when the sleepy Mediterranean woke up and peoples began travelling again, trading, colonising and fighting. The first group of traders to arrive on the Iberian coast were the Phoenicians, who established trading posts in North Africa (Carthage, for example) at the same time, traditionally before 800 B.C. The Phoenicians established a trading post in Gadir (modern Cadiz) as early as 1100 B.C. according to tradition.

The Phoenicians brought the very important alphabet to the Iberians, first appearing in Phoenician words on seals, jars and assorted public pillars and plaques, the equivalent of the billboard in the ancient world. The script was used for Iberian gravestone inscriptions and other things, such as graffiti on

walls, which has been around as long as people could scratch and find a wall to scratch upon. The Iberian language was ultimately written in four main letter-styles and was in use until roughly the first century A.D. The script was borrowed during the centuries B.C. by the Celts who lived near the Iberians. Most of the signs have been transliterated, thanks to several bilingual documents, Iberian and Latin or Greek; we know how the words or groups of letters were probably pronounced but we still don't know what they all mean. For example, the inscription on the animal-shaped ceremonial drinking vessel reads, in our alphabet letters: neitin iunstir eigi kulnika...r belbitinko enegiar arbigir artingi ausrikar. It would be very interesting if we knew what it meant! Strabo said that the Iberians had written down in their alphabet their history and laws; this is all presently lost to us.

The other group to trade with and colonise the Iberian region before the Romans were the Greeks. They found a ready market for oil and wine, and luxury goods such as perfume. Many Greek pots are found throughout the Iberian coastal region.

What was so attractive about the Iberian region that made the Phoenicians and the Greeks sail all that way to trade? Metals, such as tin, silver and gold, were the attraction. Silver especially was prized, and the famous mines at Rio Tinto, on the southwest coast of the Spanish peninsula, were worked from at least the early Bronze Age (2000 B.C.). Rio Tinto runs for some 100 km and produces copper, gold, arsenic, lead, tin and also silver to this very day. The name of the region comes from the red colour of the river and soil of the mining region, caused by the red iron ore salts which are leached out of the various deposits and spread by rain and the river throughout the region.

Smelting was done on site as the immense slag heaps indicate. Particularly awful must have been the more or less continual presence of the various poisonous gases released by the smelting process. Miners' quarters have even been excavated. It appears that most of the miners must have been local Iberians, since they continued to use Iberian pottery and showed no signs of Greek or Phoenician styles of living, except for one thing: massive quantities of imported Greek and Phoenician wine amphorae (large shipping jars) were found in and around the miners' quarters.