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# CLUNIA

## Roman Failure, Archaeological Marvel

The Spanish city of Clunia was one of Rome's greatest un-success stories. Here, site directors **Francesc Tuset** and **Miguel Angel de la Iglesia**, and ArchaeoSpain director **Mike Elkin**, explain why.

As a Roman city, Colonia Clunia Sulpicia failed. Perched high on a vast plateau, Clunia was the only administrative capital in northern Spain that died with the Roman Empire, never to evolve into a modern city. The region became more of a backwater as Rome's power waned and was largely ignored by subsequent Visigoths, Moors and Medieval Christians. Its grandiose monuments, disproportionate to the size of the population, became relics and quarry for looters. The desertion of Clunia, however, proved to be an act of conservation, since archaeologists are now uncovering and studying the city's monuments – the forum, the baths, the theatre – unhindered by 2,000 years of human progress.

But what spurred its collapse? Clunia boasted a strategic military position, the largest theatre in Iberia, and an infrastructure for providing and removing water to rival those in use today. It was also granted the status of a *conventus* capital – a provincial capital with its own important legal and administrative functions. Nevertheless, of the seven *conventus* capitals in Hispania's northern Tarraconensis region, Clunia was the only one not to become a diocese and expand into a larger city in later times.

Looking at the geographic distribution of Roman Spain (see maps below), we can see how Clunia changed from an important

“ Its grandiose monuments, disproportionate to the size of the population, became relics and quarry for looters. ”

**BELOW LEFT** In the 1st century AD, Clunia figured as one of seven *conventus* capitals in the northern Tarraconensis province.

**BELOW RIGHT** 200 years later, the city was relegated to a backwater status.

administrative centre in the 1st century AD to a secondary city under the domain of the distant Carthago Nova, modern Cartagena. What is not clear is whether the cartographic shake-up sparked the decline or was a reaction to it.

### A tale of two cities

Our excavation work in the theatre over the past ten years, plus a study of the excavations of the forum, baths and adjacent buildings which took place throughout the 20th century, has been

charting the rise and fall of Roman Clunia. It appears the city went through two phases: the original settlement following Rome's conquest of the area in 55 BC, and then a more monumental city built over it, possibly after Clunia was named a *conventus* capital in the 1st century AD. The aim of this second phase was to convey prestige. Clunia's new grandiose structures were to be used by its citizens and people from outside the city when they flocked to the administrative capital for events such as festivals, or when important business was taking place. We do not know exactly when Clunia was awarded this status, but Pliny the Elder lists Clunia as a *conventus* capital in his *Natural History*, published in AD 77.

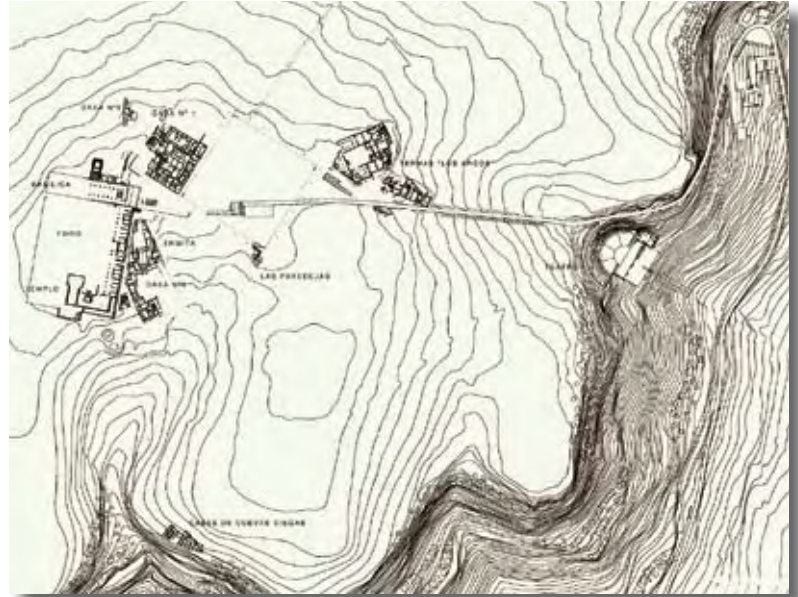
Some archaeological remains from the original settlement lie deep below the surface. One of the reasons why we think the Romans built their city on this plateau instead of on top of the Celtiberian city (see box, p23) is because of



its large aquifers, which the Romans tapped for drinking water and for the baths. Archaeologists have discovered a dozen wells throughout the city - it takes around three seconds for a pebble to hit water.

Our scuba-sporting spelunkers spent days exploring the underground networks. They entered a cave on the northern slope of the plateau - intriguingly known as the Roman Cave to the locals - and found that the Romans had carved tunnels between the aquifers in order to even the water level. At one spot, our crew discovered inscriptions on the walls and phallic clay figures, suggesting a shrine. City magistrate Bergius Seranus left behind three inscriptions, which not only indicate that the tunnels formed part of the city public works, but also, because Seranus appears on Tiberius-age coins, that the city and its water-works were functioning during his reign (AD 14-37).

With this information, we can firmly place the aquifer project at the beginning of the development of the city, and logically so. Another area that likely dates from the original settlement is a few blocks of excavated houses



**ABOVE** The Clunia plateau: the theatre is on the right and the baths sit just north of the road. At the end of the road we have the House of Taracena, the mansion named after the archaeologist who excavated the house, the forum, basilica and several other houses.

next to the forum where past archaeologists found some brilliant mosaics. The forum - built sometime in the mid 1st century AD and one of the most important features of the second, monumental phase - slices through this neighbourhood, creating some awkward angles and dead-end streets.

Former excavation director Pedro de Palol, who oversaw the dig from 1958 to 1987, dug one half of the forum, although the edges of the other half are visible, especially from the air. Overlooking the plaza was a tetrastyle temple,



**MAIN** Looking down onto the theatre: the Romans carved the theatre's upper seats out of the bedrock, while stone, brick and mortar filled the rest of the theatre.



**LEFT AND BELOW** The heart of any Roman city, the forum, acted as Clunia's administrative, financial and religious hub.

possibly dedicated to Jupiter or to the Capitoline Triad. The temple was separated from the public space by a podium and was accessed only from the religious area to the sides and behind the temple. The remains indicate that a wall and statues marked the public-religious divide, and ritual cisterns were located behind these features – similar to those found on both sides of the temples of Mérida in Cáceres and Évora in Portugal. On the northern side of the forum sits the basilica, which was built over a previous structure at some point during the 1st century AD.

Close to the basilica is the House of Taracena, a mansion excavated in the 1930s and home to many colourful mosaics. Its interpretation, however, teems with complications due to the scant information about the previous excavations and the imaginative reconstruction of the walls by past archaeologists. Nevertheless, from the coins recovered, we believe that the structure began as a block of separate houses when the city was founded. Then, around the late 3rd century AD, the houses were amalgamated into one giant dwelling – complete with subterranean rooms running the length of one side of the building.

On the road from the mansion towards the theatre, sit the baths, built side-by-side at the same time. The larger bath house, known as Arcos I, boasted a colonnaded entrance and a central garden area that likely held a swimming pool. Along both the left and right sides of the central space were a changing room, a gymnasium, the cold pool



**BELOW** Backstage, the archaeological team unearths the theatre's back walls and excavates the subterranean levels.

and the warm pool. The only room not duplicated was the *caldarium*, located directly behind the garden area. The smaller bath house, Arcos II, lacked the symmetry of its sibling. Why build two bath houses in the same place, with one far larger than necessary to accommodate the local population? Taking into account the over-

sized theatre and forum, we think that the larger bath house was built during the second-phase and used only during special events when more people were likely to travel to Clunia. Maintaining these structures all year-round for only periodic use must have weighed heavily on the city's finances.

For a while, the archaeological evidence fitted quite snugly into our two-phase model – until we learned, in the theatre, that the city's evolution proved to be much more complicated.

## No business like show business

Since 1996, backed by the provincial Burgos government, we have focussed on the excavation, interpretation and restoration of the





theatre. Built into the eastern side of the plateau and once holding approximately 9,000 people, it is the largest Roman theatre in Iberia. The architects took advantage of a semicircular bend in the terrain and carved the upper seating from the bedrock, still visible. Dressed stones served for the remainder of the theatre, although the majority have been looted over the centuries and recycled into the nearby towns. Archaeologists, architects, students and construction workers from Burgos, Barcelona, and Valladolid, plus the international volunteers led by US non-profit outfit ArchaeoSpain, have worked side-by-side to understand the theatre's design and functions, and to rebuild and protect areas for public use, such as hosting summer concerts and plays.

During the excavations of the stage area, which began in 2002, we unearthed hundreds of pieces of column and Corinthian capitals. Analysing the architectural artefacts, we found that they corresponded to four different column sizes: one for the first tier of the *scaenae frons* wall, another for the second, a third for the semi-circular colonnade behind the upper seats, and the fourth and largest column type flanked the main entrance for the actors, the *valva regia*. With this work behind us, we reckoned we had a solid grasp on the construction of the Clunia theatre. We were wrong.

Subsequent excavation failed to uncover the orchestra, and then we found a semicircular base of dressed stones that ran through the lower *cavea* to connect the side-entrances. After further excavation, we surmised that at some point in the 2nd century AD, city leaders decided to renovate the



**ABOVE** There was a major Roman underwater reservoir at Clunia. It was explored by scuba-clad experts who discovered inscriptions and clay figures (see inset) at what could have been a shrine.

theatre to accommodate less-cultured entertainment, such as gladiators and wild animals. They removed the lower *cavea* and stage to build a large arena – imagine an amphitheatre cut in half. To mark the completion of the renovation,

local magistrate G Tautius Semanus installed a large stone in the theatre floor with his name and the names of the two consuls, Q Sosius Priscus Senecio and P Caelius Apollinaris. Because the chronological list of Roman consuls is well-known, we were able to date the arena's inauguration to AD 169.

One curiosity about the commemoration stone is the circular groove carved into the rock, with a bronze loop at 12 o'clock. So far, our interpretation is just conjecture, but the groove appears to be the housing for a metal ring – perhaps to control wild animals (indeed, it is reminiscent of those used to control the tigers in the film *Gladiator*).

Not far from the stone we found another key element to the theatre – a maintenance entrance to a vaulted tunnel, used to drain excess ground-water from the theatre's foundation. As we dug close to the entrance, we could hear water clinking along the stone floor. The drain works today as it did 2,000 years ago – although we did have to remove countless buckets of sludge, over several seasons, to restore the drain to its optimum level.

The theatre, aside from being a place of spectacle, is also a gigantic funnel for all the water absorbed into the plateau. Without strategically

placed drains, the theatre would have, now and then, turned into a lake. We discovered what the Romans already knew when we punctured water deposits while restoring the *caveas*. To redirect the water out of the theatre we have installed a system of plastic drainage tubes beneath the *caveas* in addition to using the Roman tunnel.

### Backstage cemetery

Over the course of the past two seasons, our team has focussed on the rooms behind the *scaenae frons* wall, thought



And then we stumbled upon a complete surprise... after clearing the area by hand, we found nearly 20 burials.





**LEFT AND BELOW** Aerial shot of the major baths at Clunia. The larger bath house was built symmetrically, possibly to separate men and women. However, it had only one hot water pool.

to have been the backstage area. There would have been two levels, although all that is left are the foundations of the subterranean level. After locating several layers near the original floor, we began excavating the back wall, around 48m long and 1.5m thick, featuring nine skylights just above the surface to allow light into the cellar.

And then we stumbled upon a complete surprise. While digging machines were removing a few decades' worth of excavated dirt from behind the backstage area, they struck some flat stones. After clearing the area by hand, we found nearly 20 burials – simple trenches lined by rectangular stones and some were partially covered by larger flat stones. Although the majority of the burials yielded complete skeletons, they lacked grave goods and, from the positions of the bones, the burials seemed rushed or with little care. It is unlikely that the Romans would place a cemetery so close to a theatre but, lacking a complete analysis of the bones, we had little evidence to identify our new friends – until we discovered the metal shaft of an arrow tip lodged into the torso of one of the skeletons. One expert told us the shaft is Visigothic, one of only a known handful in Spain.

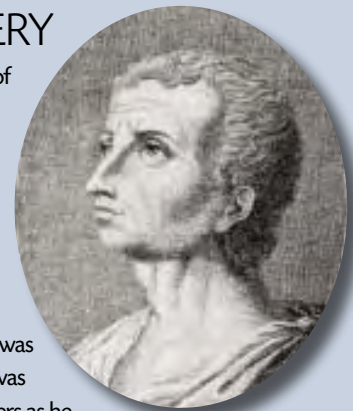
## Rise and fall of Clunia

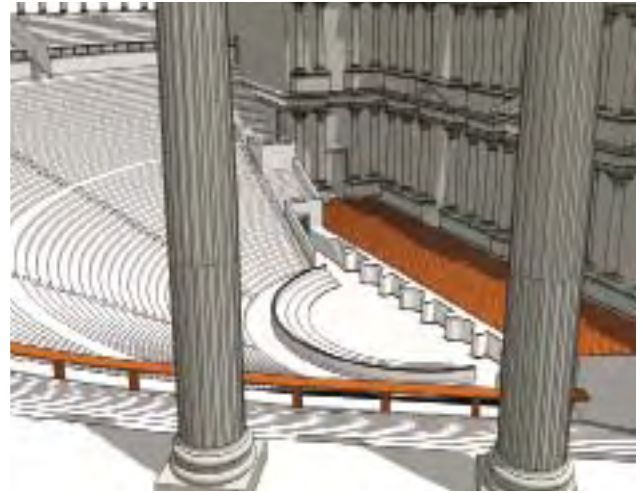
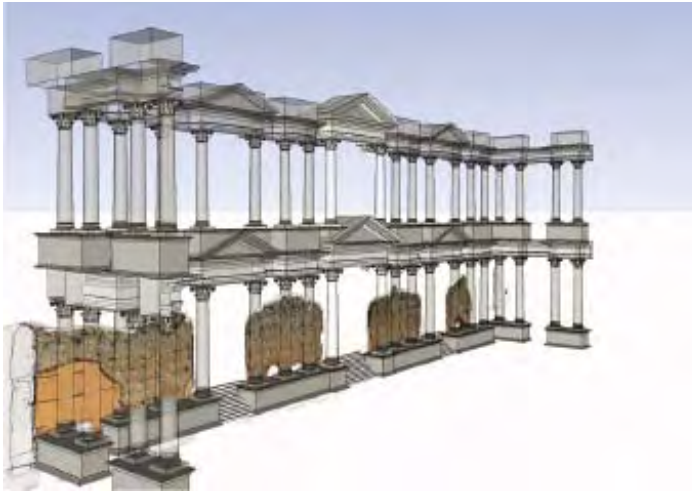
Dating the theatre is still a work in progress, although from top to bottom we have found early empire *terra sigillata*. At present, we consider it one of the major elements of the post-*conventus* second phase, which then went through a transformation - possibly as the city began to wither. Towards the end of the 2nd century AD it appears that Clunia failed 🚫



## A CELTIBERIAN MYSTERY

**Where was the** pre-Roman Celtiberian site of Clunia that gave the city its name? We know only that it does not sit below the Roman ruins. Archaeologists have speculated on a few nearby sites, but there is nothing conclusive to date and our information is limited to what the Roman historians tell us. Livy (right) states in his *Periochae* that the rebellious Roman general Quintus Sertorius 'was besieged at Clunia, but by repeated raids he was able to inflict as much damage on the besiegers as he received'. According to Cassius Dio, 'Some tribes had revolted and put themselves under the leadership of the Vaccaei. While still unprepared, they were conquered by Metellus Nepos, but as he was besieging Clunia they assailed him, proved themselves his superiors, and won back the city.'






to maintain its lure. Part of the problem may have been that people travelled to Clunia only on administrative matters, and went instead to Caesaraugusta (modern Zaragoza) for commerce because of the easier journey. Or, that although Clunia's indigenous citizens accepted the city's administrative role, they may not have identified with the grandiose architecture and its uses. In the forum taverns, for example, archaeologists did not find pottery or coins dating from after the end of the 3rd century AD. And Professor Palol found that after the 3rd century AD the bath houses were not used for bathing and were possibly transformed into a workshop for making *terra sigillata* pottery.

With this in mind, we will return to the theatre this summer to finish the excavation

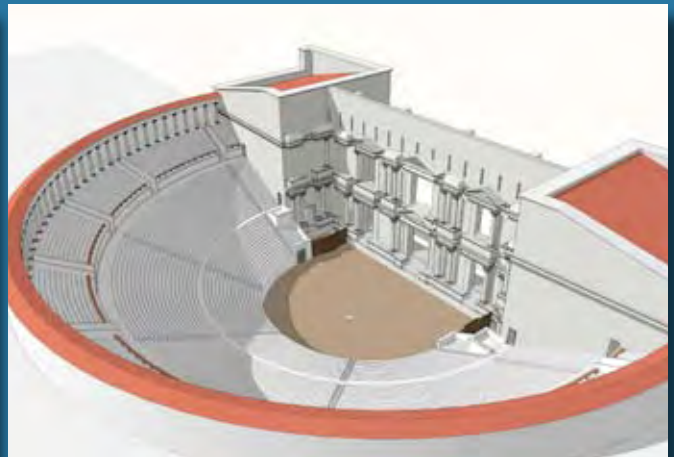
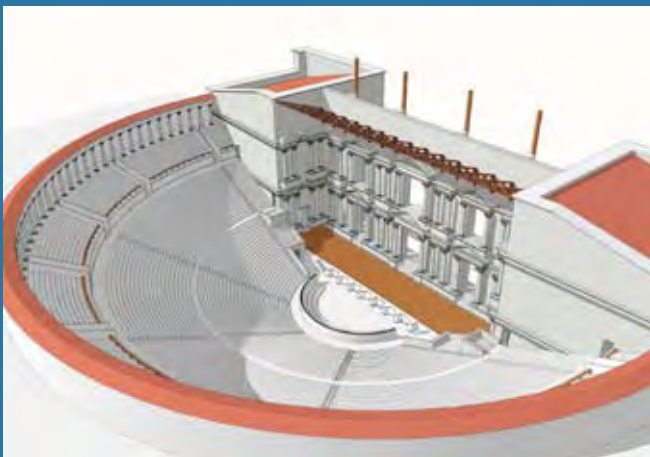
**ABOVE LEFT** From the analysis of the column pieces discovered, the archaeologists calculate that this is how the *scaenae frons* walls looked. The image has been superimposed over the existing ruins.

**RIGHT** Computer rendition of a view from the upper seats of the theatre.

of the backstage area and hopefully collect more clues about Clunia's development and decline. The results from the necropolis may be key to understanding when the theatre closed. Clunia was a complex city, replete with grandiose monuments, but one that was just too ostentatious and too bombastic to be of any real use to the locals. Perhaps the Romans realised that this gilt-edged city was not paying its way. The *conventus* status converted the city into an architectural paradise, but the population could not bear the weight of its monuments.

Clunia's demise, however, has been a gift to archaeologists because the city offers us a rare opportunity to get under the skin of a once-great Roman provincial capital that was abandoned and never inhabited again. 

**BELOW** Diagram of the two phases of the theatre. The first shows what the archaeologists think the theatre looked like when it was built. However, in AD 169 the lower seats and stage were removed to install an arena for blood games.





**ABOVE** This stone (drawn top) was placed in the arena floor to mark the completion of the theatre's renovation. It names the local magistrate and the two Roman consuls, giving us an exact date for the arena's inauguration.

**SOURCE**

Prof. **Francesc Tuset** teaches archaeology at the University of Barcelona and Prof. **Miguel Ángel de la Iglesia** teaches classical architecture at the University of Valladolid. In 1994 the provincial Burgos government enlisted the two to oversee the site of Clunia. Since 1996 they have been the co-directors of excavations at Clunia. **Mike Elkin** runs the US-based, non-profit group ArchaeoSpain, which brings international volunteer teams to several excavations in Spain and Italy. For more information, see [www.archaeospain.com](http://www.archaeospain.com)



**TOP** The surprise discovery of around 20 burials behind the theatre this summer may shed light onto when the theatre stopped being used as one. The lab results are still pending. **ABOVE** The team excavating the backstage layers of the theatre; there they found pieces of a large statue of a woman wearing a toga.

## CLUNIA REVOLTS!

**Despite its eventual decline**, for one year Clunia was the epicentre of the revolution against Emperor Nero (right). When the conspiracy to dethrone Nero began, the former consul and general Servius Sulpicius Galba was governor of the Tarraconensis. At first, Galba hesitated to join the rebellion, but soon changed his mind. According to Suetonius, Galba 'was encouraged...by the prediction of a virgin of noble birth. Great merit was attached to this prophecy because the priest of Jupiter at Clunia, inspired by a dream, had found in the inner shrine of his temple the same prediction from another girl two hundred years before. The verses read that from Spain would emerge the ruler and master of the world.' Plutarch says that when the revolt turned sour, Galba retired to Clunia and was living there when, in June AD 68, word arrived that Nero was dead and that the Senate had proclaimed him emperor. Because of this connection, and perhaps coinciding with its new status as a colony, some sources added the epithet Sulpicia to the city's name: Colonia Clunia Sulpicia.

