

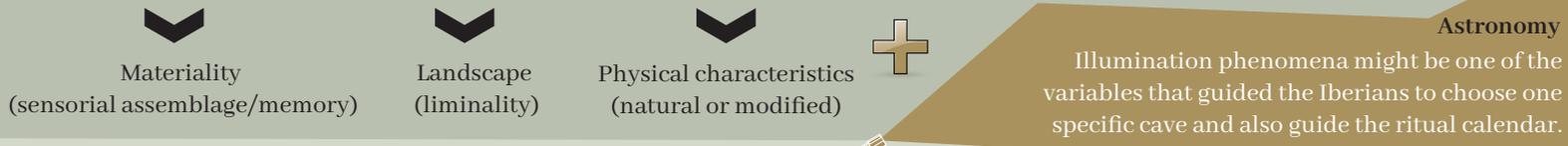
CAVES
DARKNESS
RITUAL

Natural caves are symbolic landscapes of darkness. They were visited and used for ritual purposes due to its symbolic power in different periods, cultures, and locations.

In the Iberian Iron Age (6th to 1st centuries BC), caves located on the boundaries of some territories were scenarios to develop diverse rites of passage, starting by the pilgrimage to these sacred destinations.

The ritual assemblages, generally located in the darkest areas of these natural spaces, inform us about the sacred performances undertaken inside caves, such as offerings, libations, rites of commensality, sacrifices..., as well as other performances undertaken around these liminal locations.

Why only some caves far away from the main settlements were chosen between the 5th and 3rd century BC and became ritual spaces?



Illumination phenomena occur inside a substantial number of Iberian Iron Age ritual caves at certain unique moments on the solar calendar.

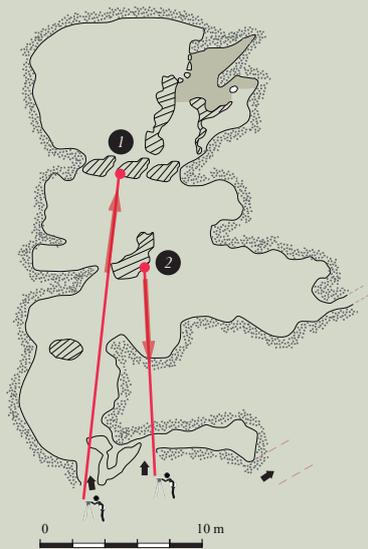
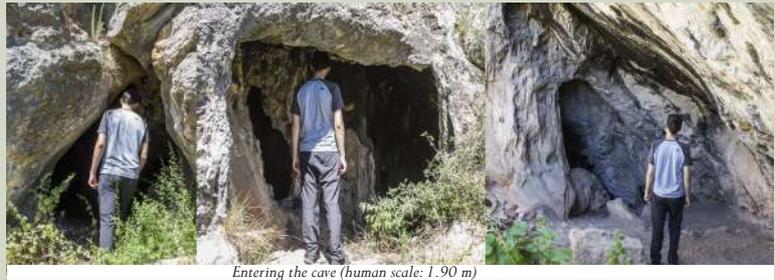
- Commonly at sunset
- It can involve structural elements of the cave that have been artificially modified
- Sometimes is associated with water springs

The cave Cueva Merinel First results

Along with the shrine of El Sapo cave, Merinel cave seems to be delimiting the south boundary of the area controlled by the Iberian city of Edeta.

- The access to the cave, located 290 m a.s.l. on the left edge of Hoces/Merinel ravine, can be done through three entrances. Nevertheless, only two of them give access to the ritual deposit area.
- The interior is all interconnected, with predominantly a horizontal surface, full of speleothems, some of them still active.
- The ritual assemblage, found in the 1980s excavations, show a repeated offering of animals (cranial parts of young pigs, goats and sheep, less than one and two years old respectively), most of which were deposited inside pottery vessels.

- We found**
 - Sunlight could illuminate, through the central entrance, the interior of the cave.
 - Part of the eastern horizon could be seen through the central entrance from the back-west wall of the cave.
- We estimated**
 - Around summer solstice, sunrise might illuminate a small portion of the back-west wall, but only during a short moment. This was possible only from a very limited area just at the centre of an opening framed between two karstic columns.
 - Besides, the rectangular shape of the upper part of the central entrance may be the result of artificial modification, as it happens in other caves frequented by Iberians such as La Lobera.
- To be checked**
 - Sunlight through the rest of the entrances may produce short illumination phenomena in a few and particular small areas of the cave, but this is still under investigation.



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*Due to COVID-19, our ongoing research was interrupted. However, it will be retaken next year, offering new results related to the astronomical symbolism of the cave.

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