

# **From Hispalis to Ishbiliyya**

The ancient port of Seville, from the  
Roman Empire to the end of the  
Islamic period  
(45 BC – AD 1248)

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Front cover: Approximate reconstruction of the Guadalquivir River and the city of Seville in the 13th century. Note the new impressive city wall, the different historical districts on the east side of the river and the absence of constructions on the west side. See section 5.4.2 and Figure 162 (scale bar 1 km, Author).

Photograph of the remains of the wooden boat found *in situ* at Plaza Nueva, Seville, in 1981 (Archaeological Museum of Seville).

Back cover: Picture illustrating Seville and its port in the 16th century. Work attributed to Alonso Sánchez Coello depicting the Guadalquivir River and Seville's natural harbour known as 'El Arenal' (Museo de America, Madrid, source Wikipedia under Creative Commons license).

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*To my parents and daughter*



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The author with Dr David Blackman and Professor Simon Keay (Nicosia, October 2017)

## Foreword

The subject of ancient ports is one of growing academic interest, and recent years have seen the publication of important studies into sites of all periods, drawing upon archaeological, geoarchaeological and historical evidence. The ports of southern Spain have a particular fascination, having played key roles in the development of maritime commerce in the Mediterranean and Atlantic during the protohistoric, Roman, Byzantine, Medieval and post-Medieval periods. Recent years have seen major discoveries at the ports of Cádiz (Gades/Gadir), Bolonia (Baelo), Huelva (Onoba) and Málaga (Malaca), amongst others. The same is also true of Seville. This great port worked in tandem with Cádiz to become one of the key maritime centres of antiquity. The installations of its river port processed the movement of key agricultural products and metals between southern Iberia, the rest of the Mediterranean and the Atlantic seaboard from the 7th c BC through into the 7th c AD.

This book, by Dr Carlos Cabrera Tejedor, builds upon the results of many years of rescue archaeology in Seville which have done much to transform our understanding of this ancient port city, and which has been undertaken under the auspices of the Delegación de Cultura de la Provincia de Sevilla and the Universidad de Sevilla from the late 1980s down to the present. The account of the river port of Seville, which is structured around three time periods, allows us to understand its development as it followed the westward displacement of the river. The research has involved the meticulous study of not only the archaeological remains, but also the evidence for the climate and environment over more than a millennium, and the morphology of river meanders. Cabrera Tejedor's perspective here, of a view of the port from the river, is a valuable contribution to maritime studies.

His research also tells us about the structures of the river port, but also the development of exchange network focused upon the port during the Roman, Late Antique and Islamic periods, with particular attention being paid to the transition between periods. Historical maps, published excavation reports and earlier studies, as well as the evidence of air photos and satellite images are fully exploited. A merit of this study is its careful and detailed analysis of the archaeological remains of the waterfront, with a valuable study of the contested date of an anchor and boat (on the Plaza Nueva site). An unexpected feature of this study – and one which will need further attention – is the evidence indicating the existence of a dockyard already in the Islamic period, close to the site of the historic dockyard built after AD 1248. This fits well with the evidence for Ishbiliyya as a naval base, and with many references in Muslim chronicles to 'arsenals' at various sites.

With the publication of this book, a major port in use between the Iberian and Islamic periods on one of the great river systems of antiquity, is introduced to academic audiences. It raises important issues about the nature of ports between the Roman and Islamic periods, the relationship between Seville and the river upstream, the role of Seville within the maritime façade of the Atlantic coast, and the nature of maritime links between southern Iberia and the wider Mediterranean world. This multi-period study thus makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of one of the most important ports of ancient Iberia.

David Blackman and Simon Keay  
26 September 2019



## Foreword

The study of the economic dynamics of ancient societies based on the analysis of the circulation of goods, inferred from the provenance of the ceramic materials found in excavations, has been one of the most improved areas within Mediterranean Archaeology in recent decades. This growing attention to exchange systems and forms of inter-territorial connectivity has progressively made researchers aware of the importance of incorporating other proxies, such as studies on the naval architecture of ships and/or studies on the infrastructures (i.e. ports) within which these exchange systems took place. This is one of the reasons that explain the important development that the archaeological study of ports has been experiencing from the beginning of the new millennium in practically the entire Mediterranean. And although historians already made important contributions to economic history and navigation from written texts throughout the twentieth century, the enormous critical mass of data generated recently by rescue archaeology, paleo-environmental studies and geomorphological studies, force us to rethink these topics completely. And yet, the archaeological studies conducted on ports in the Western Mediterranean, and those in the Iberian Peninsula in particular, are still limited both in number and in scope, so there are many questions that still remain unanswered.

On the other hand, most of the interventions that clarify the materiality of port infrastructures have been carried out within the framework of the so-called Urban Archaeology. The approaches, that since the 1970s have produced 'archaeology within cities' rather than 'archaeology of the city' in much of the Mediterranean, have come face to face with the impossibility of properly processing and managing a huge volume of heterogeneous and complex reports generated over several decades. As a consequence, it has not been possible to elaborate natural narratives about the history of cities, their morphology and their characteristics. Museums are full of materials, technical reports and documentation from urban interventions awaiting for someone that would (re)construct the archaeological information. In a recent conference dedicated to Urban Archaeology in Spain, it was concluded that after years of work no significant progress had been made in the knowledge of the history of cities. And, as Riccardo Francovich pointed out, an urban archaeology lacking defined objectives and a significant project in terms of historical reconstruction generates nothing but descriptivism that detrimentally affects the economic and social aspects. Therefore, to achieve assessing the results of rescue interventions carried out in cities, based on a deeply cognitive project, and aligned with the most innovative approaches it is a real challenge. The excellent book by Dr Carlos Cabrera Tejedor focused on the port of Seville from the Roman Empire to the Islamic period is good proof of that.

Seville was during the 1st to the 13th centuries, and in fact it still is, one of the main urban centres of the Iberian Peninsula. In addition, it has been one of the cities in which more rescue archaeological interventions have been carried out in recent decades. The syntheses and archaeological studies conducted by González Acuña, García Vargas, Amores Carredano, Tabales Rodríguez and others have shown what could be learned from an urban environment when archaeological records are properly analysed. In addition, geoarchaeological, paleo-environmental and paleo-geomorphological studies conducted in recent years provide another fundamental pillar to build upon the history of the city of Seville. Many archaeological strata lay more than a dozen meters underneath the current ground level of Seville due to the complex hydro morphological transformations of the River Guadalquivir over the centuries. Therefore, the understanding of the ancient city continues to pose so many difficulties for researchers.

The study of the port systems of the city of Seville is critical to understand the history of the city. And although there are several authors who have dealt with the subject before, it lacked an exhaustive monograph such as this book destined to become a reference for the archaeology of ports in all the Iberian Peninsula. Moreover, the author's ambitions go beyond locating and characterizing the port of Seville, since it is an advantaged viewpoint to understand different aspects such as: the topography of the city and its transformations in diachronic terms; the urban functions of Seville with respect to the rural environment in terms of redistribution of agricultural products such as olive oil; the exchange network and connections in which city residents participated; the profound geomorphological transformation of landscapes in historical times; naval architecture, etc. In my opinion, the main contributions of this study can be recapitulated around three main areas.

### **1. Theoretical and methodological innovations**

First, this book proposes a very interesting theoretical-methodological approach that could be applied to other case studies. It uses the concept of maritime archaeology that surpasses the mere identification of underwater archaeology, following the integrative approaches that authors such as K. Muckleroy proposed since the 1970s.

In this line of a maritime archaeology approach, studies on intertidal spaces or on maritime infrastructures in a broader sense are experiencing a significant development because they are leaving behind artefact approaches in favour of more ambitious heritage approaches. The study of the port systems of Seville constitutes, from this point of view, a virtuous example of how to explore, in all its facets, the analysis of these spaces and mechanisms of interaction between land and water.

A second aspect that is worth noting is the diachronic treatment of the subject. Even at the risk of not exploring in depth with the same detail each historical period, the long-term assessment provides a very enriching perspective. I have always believed that one of the main virtues of archaeology is its ability to adopt these perspectives, although academic and disciplinary constraints often end up building insurmountable walls.

The third aspect to be stressed is the holistic approach adopted. In fact, this study scrutinises sets of evidence usually undertaken by a research group rather than the individual work of a single doctoral student. For this, Dr Cabrera has built a dense network of multidisciplinary collaborations that has allowed him to critically explore a large number of records and themes. Among others, this study uses written, epigraphic and iconographic sources, ethnographic parallels, excavation results, study of materials, anthracology, paleo-environmental, paleo-climatic and geoarchaeological records, etc. Through the analysis of the intrinsic aspects of each of these registers, a very suggestive picture of Seville's port system emerges. In short, this book proposes a model for the study of port systems that integrates heterogeneous proxies and critically analyses them.

## **2. Results obtained**

It is not possible to summarise in just a few lines the main contributions achieved by this study. But there are some points that should be emphasised. First, the way in which records provided by geoarchaeological, paleo-environmental and paleo-climatological studies are reworked from a historical perspective to illustrate, in combination with the results of archaeological excavations, the complex transformations of the Guadalquivir hydrographical network as it passes through Seville. There is no doubt that in recent years there has been a real outburst of paleo-climatological studies, providing definition and levels of detail that were previously absent. And although, in general, humanities scholars tend to be prudent, critical, when not reluctant, to incorporate the impact of paleo-environmental changes on the human agency due to the permanent risk of falling into mechanistic explanations, some researchers such as M. McCormick, K. Harper or A. Izdebski - among others - have embarked on the difficult journey of constructing dense and complex narratives that overcome the risk of environmental determinism. In my opinion, the analysis proposed by Dr Cabrera is another relevant contribution in this line and it will be a study to bear in mind when considering these records.

A second aspect that I would like to emphasise is the relevance of the critical review of archaeological interventions and rescue works carried out in the city of Seville, starting with the findings made in Plaza Nueva in 1981. It is not only a fundamental finding to locate and characterise the port system, but it also constitutes a good example of the complexity of Seville's archaeological urban deposits and the usefulness of reviewing old interventions. In Spain, Portugal or in Italy, administrative atomization, lack of will and the complexity of heritage management procedures makes very complex to be able to review and reinterpret old archaeological records from new standpoints. However, in other European countries the revision of large critical masses of archaeological records is allowing the creation of new empirical bases from which new syntheses are being developed and European research projects are obtained.

Third, although the title and emphasis of the book focuses on 'the ancient port of Seville', the study actually defines a true port system in both Seville and its landscape. A very dynamic system that changed over time as a result of the hydro-morphological transformations of the Guadalquivir, but also because the changes of the local societies. This case study, therefore, invites us to rethink this type of infrastructure from a broad and landscape perspective, in contrast to the architectural and isolated-structure analysis with which the study of ports in Iberia is usually approached.

But in addition, the book makes other relevant contributions in key aspects such as: the characterization of urban morphology during the three defined periods, the study of olive oil production transferred through the city in Roman times as well as the estimation of the number and types of vessels used in the process, the tension between continuity and transformation of the port system during Late Antiquity, the transformation of the river's channel network in the 9th-10th centuries, the naval architecture of the boat found in Plaza Nueva, etc.

### **3. Future consequences**

But perhaps the main contribution of this book is that, beyond the specific case study, it provides a guide for future studies on port systems. Although the Iberian Peninsula does not lack studies on other examples, Dr Cabrera's study will be a stimulus to review the archaeology of ports from new perspectives in terms of long duration, as well as carrying out new multidisciplinary projects.

In conclusion, it is a brave, complex and suggestive study destined to become an essential reference for those who aspire to overcome the contrast between land and sea, between city and landscape, between artefacts and archaeological site, between sciences and humanities.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

(...) yet I assume that a large portion of the work still remains to be done; and if I shall be able to make even small additions to what it has been said, that must be regarded as a sufficient excuse for my undertaking.(...)  
Strabo, *Geographica*, (1.2.1)

The ancient port of Seville was one of the most preeminent commercial hubs during the Roman Empire and the Early Middle Ages. Despite its importance in antiquity, little is known about the port's exact position, layout and/or facilities. Equally, the developments and/or transformations that the port probably underwent through different historical periods are also undetermined. What we know is that the ancient port of Hispalis ceased to exist at some point before the 13th century, yet we are uncertain exactly when, how, and why this happened. It is clear however, that any remains of the ancient port that might be preserved currently lie seven metres beneath the tell of Seville's city centre. This is the result of a significant displacement in the position of the Guadalquivir River, which occurred no later than the 13th century, and ultimately led to the assimilation of the ancient port area by the emergent Islamic medina of Ishbiliyya.

It is the purpose of this book to study the topography, layout, and facilities of the ancient port of Seville, their history and development from approximately the 1st century BC to about the 13th century AD. This diachronic or *longue durée* study of the ancient port has been conducted adopting a holistic and interdisciplinary approach by examining a diverse range of information such as: direct evidence from the scant knowledge of archaeological remains of the ancient port; direct and indirect information contained in multiple archaeological reports of interventions in Seville that have unearthed remains nearby the location of the ancient port; historical and literary sources that provide information about the port especially, but not exclusively, from the Early Middle Ages onwards; geomorphological data on the palaeo-evolution of the Guadalquivir River in antiquity; and palaeo-climatological data on the Late Holocene. For each particular historical period, the present study has also conducted some comparative analysis, examining analogous information from other ancient ports with related characteristics.

I believe the study of the ancient port of Seville not only could increase our knowledge of the port itself, but could also shed significant light on the development and layout of the city. Additionally, a diachronic study

of the port could help us to understand some of the political, economic, cultural and religious changes that Seville endured through different historical periods.

Research questions that the study intends to address include:

1. What is the current knowledge regarding the topography, layout, number of harbours, and facilities of the ancient port of Seville?
2. What were the size, capacity, and the volume of commercial traffic that the ancient port of Hispalis sustained at the peak of its trade during the Roman era? Did the size and capacity of the port remain similar or change within different historical periods?
3. Where exactly was the ancient port of Seville and its harbour/s located? Was the same location used throughout the life of the port? Or did the location/s change over time?
4. What layout and type of facilities did the port have? Were its layout or facilities transformed with time?
5. Precisely when, how, and why did the ancient channel of the Guadalquivir River cease to be navigable or change its position, an event that irremediably led to the disappearance of the ancient port?

During the course of this research, many archaeological excavations within Seville's historical centre have been thoroughly studied and will be briefly presented. Among them, the Plaza Nueva Square salvage excavation represents a fundamental source of information for deciphering some aspects of the ancient port of Seville. At the present time, the Plaza Nueva excavation is the only archaeological intervention that has been conducted in the area (i.e. anchorage) of the ancient port of Seville. This salvage work not only unearthed abundant ceramic remains and other terrestrial artefacts, but also discovered the only nautical archaeological remains from antiquity (i.e. an iron anchor and the remains of a wooden boat) known to date from Seville. In the present book, for the first time all the artefacts from Plaza Nueva are studied, presented and discussed in detail because of the substantial amount of information that

these remains have to offer. This heterogeneous and seemingly chaotic assemblage, largely ignored until now by archaeologists, is helping us to better understand the geomorphological transformations that the Guadalquivir River underwent and consequently the transformations of the port. Particularly, they shed light on when the ancient channel of the Guadalquivir, and therefore the ancient port of Seville, ceased to be navigable and how, soon afterwards, it disappeared after being assimilated by the expansion of the Islamic city.

This study represents a *longue durée* or diachronic study with the goal of explaining the founding, development, and disappearance of the ancient port of Seville. With that goal in mind, and considering both the large time span covered (i.e. about thirteen centuries) and the scarce direct evidence available, the work has been divided into three main historical periods presented in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. Each of them is conceived as a 'historical snapshot' of the reality of the port during that period.

The first third of the work is focused on the founding of the port as a commercial hub for the Mediterranean maritime trade network, which occurred in the Roman period of Seville (i.e. Hispalis) during the Late Republic and the Imperial Roman periods (i.e. 1st c. BC to 4th c. AD). Chapter 3 considers the historical role and importance of the ancient port of Seville within the Mediterranean trade networks during the Roman Empire. The Chapter also covers the palaeo-reconstructions of the ancient channel of the Guadalquivir River (carried out by geologists that study its palaeo-geomorphology) and other archaeological data, with the aim of understanding and reconstructing the position, layout and characteristics of the Roman port, and its port facilities (e.g. quays, *horrea*, etc.).

The second part (Chapter 4) focuses on the development of the port. Moving into the 6th c. AD, an extremely important yet scarcely known century of the late antique city of Seville (i.e. *Ispali*), this Chapter aims

to explain two aspects: first, some of the profound historical changes that the city, and the entire region endured; second, the palaeo-geomorphological transformations of the river, the port, and its port-facilities that occurred during Late Antiquity.

Finally, the third part of the book (Chapter 5) focuses on the disappearance of the ancient port. Advancing into the Early Middle Ages (i.e. 9th-13th c. AD), it attempts to explain exactly when, how, and why some dramatic changes occurred to the ancient channel of the then Islamic Guadalquivir River (i.e. *al-wādi al-kabīr*). This will tentatively be achieved by examining and combining three sets of information: current palaeo-geomorphological hypotheses; archaeological data from the Plaza Nueva excavation and other archaeological sites from the Islamic medina of Seville (i.e. Ishbiliyya); as well as palaeo-climatological Late Holocene data. The dramatic changes that the ancient channel of the Guadalquivir sustained during an undetermined time during the Islamic period produced the irreversible disappearance of the ancient port of the city.

The change in the course of the river profoundly transformed the Islamic medina of Ishbiliyya, significantly increasing the size of the city and developing, as a result, new vast districts later occupied by its flourishing population. This also represented the foundation of a new port, the current port of Seville. This new port might have been, at first, a mere shadow of its predecessor; yet, in the coming centuries, this newly founded port would become no less than the most prominent and important port of Europe. It connected, for the first time in history, the Old World of Europe with the New World of the Americas and the Far East in the thriving 16th century of the Age of Discovery. This was the home base used by the Kingdom of Spain to enable Spain to become the world's first and one of the greatest transoceanic imperial powers. Alas, the fascinating story of this prominent port of the Renaissance is not covered in the present study, although some specific comparative analysis will be offered in the different chapters.