

**THE OBJECT OF THE SEASON  
SUMMER 2023**

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*Meloncillo (Herpestes ichneumon) Photo: Antonio Vázquez*

## **UNUSUAL ANIMALS IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT**

It is well known that the primary diet of the Romans was based on cereals and legumes, usually accompanied by vegetables, cheese, or meat covered in sauces made from fermented fish, vinegar, honey, and various herbs and spices.

Archaeological excavations reveal that the Roman diet included a variety of animals as part of their cuisine, and that animal meat was more prevalent than historical sources tell us. Here are some animals that have been confirmed through archaeological research to have been commonly consumed by the ancient Romans: pork, chicken, beef, goat, fish, seafood, snails, deer, boar, hare, and wild birds. This list is not exhaustive, and it is likely that the Romans consumed other animals as well. Occasionally, archaeological sites reveal the presence of animals that are not native to the area, indicating long-distance trade or cultural exchange.

# SREMSKA MITROVICA

## CAMEL AT THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF SIRMIUM

**Sometimes domesticated animals are found in regions where they are not typically associated. The discovery of camel bones in the very center of ancient Sirmium suggests the presence of long-distance trade. What could be the reason for bringing a camel this far from its natural habitat?**

It is a little-known fact that in the very center of Sremska Mitrovica, there are the remains of an ancient hippodrome or circus, one of the most monumental buildings in the ancient world. It was identified on the basis of archaeological research in the 1960s and 1970s, and was an integral part of the imperial palace complex. The late Roman palatial complex of Sirmium, like the complexes in Milan, Trier, and Nicomedia, were adapted to the needs of the emperor.

The hippodrome was used for the ceremonial presentation of the ruler to the people, who organized horse and chariot

racas and other types of spectacles (acrobatic skills, wrestling, animal fights, gladiator fights).

This popular meeting place was elongated in shape, measuring about 530 meters long and about 100 meters wide. It consisted of the entrance part (carceres) from which the chariots departed, the race track (arena), the spine in the longitudinal axis of the hippodrome, the auditorium tracts, and the semicircular structure (sphendon) with the triumphal gate opposite the entrance.



© G. Lemajić / Hippodrome of Sirmium

## CAMEL AT THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF SIRMIUM

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The games that took place on it were supposed to reflect the traditional cult of the sun and the four elements subordinated to it (earth, fire, water, air). The twelve front doors represent the 12 months of the year, the seven circles that make up each race symbolize the 7 days of the week, and the 24 races that take place – 24 hours a day. In this way, certain elements of the hippodrome's architecture (arena, spina, obelisk) and the circus games that were performed there served the imperial ideology as symbols of cosmic elements and cyclical changes in nature.

The emperor himself, as a symbol of cosmic order and wisdom, approved the beginning of the games and a new cycle of these changes.

**Doubtless, the hippodrome of Sirmium can be the reason why a camel was brought this far from its natural habitat.**



The discovery of camel bones in Sirmium suggests that camels were brought to the city from their natural habitat in North Africa or the Middle East. This could have been done for a number of reasons, such as for use in circus games, as pack animals, or as status symbols.

The hippodrome of Sirmium was a large and impressive structure, and it is likely that camels were used in the games that were held there.

Camels are also strong and hardy animals, and they would have been well-suited for use as pack animals in the region. Additionally, camels were seen as status symbols in the Roman Empire, and it is possible that some wealthy individuals in Sirmium owned camels as a way to display their wealth and status.

The discovery of camel bones in Sirmium provides us with a glimpse into the long-distance trade networks that existed in the Roman Empire. It also suggests that the hippodrome of Sirmium was an important center of cultural and sporting activity in the region.

## ALESIA

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**Most of the houses in the Gallo-Roman town of Alesia had cellars. These rooms were first and foremost food reserves, as the excavation of one of them in 1989 showed. This cave contained numerous animal bones, shells and seeds, enabling the archaeologists to reconstruct the diet of its inhabitants, who are thought to have deserted the house in the middle of the 3rd century AD.**

Cereals were the most popular food staple, often in the form of mush, bread or cooked in water. Here, wheat, oats, barley, millet and spillet were stored alongside legumes such as lentils and lupins, as well as vegetables such as squash or melons, and fruits such as apples, pears, quinces and grapes. Meat included pork and duck, and fish included river perch.

In addition to this very familiar menu, there are some rather more surprising foods...

Snail shells show that the taste for these gastropods is not new to Burgundy! In Rome, it was a classic appetizer, particularly at the turn of our era, and would later remain very popular in Gaul.

At last, oysters, cooked or uncooked, could grace the best tables! In Gaul, oysters were farmed around the Mediterranean and the Aquitaine basin.

Carefully transported in seawater, perhaps at night to avoid heating them up, oysters could survive and therefore be eaten up to two months after being fished. But such a long journey meant that the shellfish were particularly expensive, and could not possibly have been accessible to all the gourmets of Alesia, who lived more than 400 km away from the nearest sea!



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Roman Bessales brick with Legio VII mark. (León, Ruta Vía de la Plata)

The Ruta Vía de la Plata is dotted with numerous archaeological sites, such as Hispalis (Seville), Itálica, Castra Caecilia (Cáceres el Viejo), Emerita Augusta (Mérida), Legio Septima (León) and Noega (Gijón). They all formed part of this ancient route that connected the Atlantic side of Hispania from north to south and vice versa.

The excavations carried out at some of those archaeological sites have recovered a large amount of faunal remains; in some cases the waste from dinners and in others evidence of curious animals.

Here we will describe the results of studies that archaeological researchers have carried out about the diet of the Legio Septima (León) or their identification of an exotic species in the north of Spain, such as the Egyptian mongoose found in the excavations of the civitas of Gijón. A cowry shell discovered in a tomb at Emerita Augusta (Mérida) had been deposited as a votive object.



A burial at Emerita Augusta (Mérida, Ruta Vía de la Plata)

### ***Meat in the diet of Legio Septima (León, Ruta Vía de la Plata, Spain)***

The meat consumed by the Legio was mainly pork, beef, and mutton and goat. Rabbit and poultry were also eaten but less often. Remains of wild animals have also been found at the site, particularly wild boar, as well as red deer and roe deer, and even a bear; although they must have been hunted more for sport than for subsistence.

**Marine mollusc shell accompanying a burial at Emerita Augusta (Mérida, Ruta Vía de la Plata, Spain)**

A marine mollusc shell belonging to the species *Cypraea pantherina* (panther cowry) was found during the excavation of a burial at Emerita Augusta (Mérida, Spain) in 2013. This is an exotic shell from the Indo-Pacific area that was occasionally included in funerary deposits in the Roman world from the first century BC. It is usually associated with female burials because of its connotations linked to fertility, procreation and safe childbirth. This one from Emerita Augusta is the only one currently known in the Iberian Peninsula, and therefore widens our knowledge about the human distribution of shells from distant seas.



*Cypraea pantherina* - Excavation of a burial at Emerita Augusta

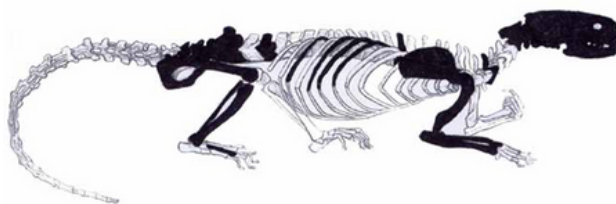
**Mongoose from the Tobacco Factory at Gijón (Ruta Vía de la Plata, Spain)**

Excavations in the well-deposit at Gijón Tobacco Factory (Spain), which was located in the administrative centre of the civitas in that territory, unearthed the remains of an Egyptian mongoose (*Herpestes ichneumon* Linnaeus, 1758) dated in the sixth-seventh centuries AD. Known to the Greeks by the name of ichneumon, this species is thought to have been introduced into Spain in the Islamic period as a way of controlling plagues of rodents, reptiles and insects.

However, the presence of this Egyptian mongoose dated before the Islamic age invites a reflection on where this animal came from and how it reached the north of Hispania, in this case Gijón.

A total of 28 skeletal remains of the mongoose were found and were attributed to at least one adult specimen that, judging by the wear of its teeth, must have been an old animal.

Its genetic study is still in progress, but the results that are being carried out indicate that this specimen is not related to the native mongooses in the Iberian Peninsula and therefore would have been brought to Noega from overseas.



Skeletal remains of mongoose found at Gijón Tobacco Factory