

Necropolis of Argiñeta



Town:

Elorrio.

Location:

Barrio Zenita.

Access:

Located next to the hermitage of St. Adrian; starting from the main square in Elorrio, towards Mendraka.

Opening hours:

The necropolis is not closed off, so it can be visited at any time.

Other places of interest nearby:

Necropolis and hermitage of St. Thomas. Mendraka. Elorrio.

Inscription of consecration of Memaia church (10th century). Hermitage of San Roque. Barrio Urkizuaran. Elorrio.

Sepulchre and hermitage of Our Lady of the Assumption. Gazeta. Elorrio.

Necropolis and hermitage of St. Bartholomew. Miota. Elorrio.

Funeral stele (10th century) and hermitage of St. Euphemia. Arauna. Elorrio

Housing a group of twenty tombs and five stelae, the necropolis of Argiñeta lies just outside Elorrio opposite the hermitage of San Adrián, St. Adrian. Although these pieces were made in the high Middle Ages to be used in the cemeteries of neighbouring districts like Mendraka, Miota and Berrio, they were regrouped in the 19th century to create the romantically evocative spot we have today. The number and quality of the pieces, together with the age of some of them (7th-9th centuries) make this the most important site of its kind in the Basque Country.

Executed in sandstone from the quarries on Mt. Oiz, the sepulchres are divided in two parts: an anthropomorphically shaped box, all of a piece, and a triangular cover forming a kind of roof. The sepulchres differ in size and in some cases box and cover clearly do not match.

The second and third rows on the left are the most interesting as the covers retain their funeral inscriptions, which are in fact the oldest recorded written evidence of the presence of Christian groups in Vizcaya.

The inscription in the second reads: *Obiit F(a)m(u)l(u)s d(e)i Paterna XVII k(l)ds Augustas* (God's servant Paterna died on the 17th day of the Calends of August). The inscription on the third runs: *In De(i) Nomine Momus in corpore bibentem /in era DCCCCXXI mi fecit/ ic dormit* (In God's name, Momus in corporal life / in the era 921 (year 83) made me/ Here he lies).

Four of the stelae - also worked in Oiz sandstone - are discoid, the other being triangular. The most interesting features of the discoid stelae are their large oval heads, resting on thin necks that accentuate their clearly anthropomorphic nature. Iconography is basically astral (concentric circles, radial or cruciform extensions and saw-toothed borders) repeating traditional motifs, although the treatment reveals a northern Pyrenean mentality unknown in the area before the late 6th century.

Argiñeta today is very different from what it was like in the high Middle Ages. Then it was just a cemetery, similar to many in the area around Durango, next to a small church and with tombs and graves of all types and conditions, depending on the dead person's social prestige and place in the local hierarchy. People of humbler condition were in fact buried in graves dug in open earth; the remnants of some of these have been located, and are currently awaiting investigation.



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