

# The Cueva de Hércules in Toledo

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As I was planning a day trip for my family from Madrid to the mediaeval city of Toledo, I was intrigued to read a note on the map that I was looking at telling me that I could visit the *Cueva de Hércules* – the Cave of Hercules. Although I knew that the present World Heritage listed walled city had been built on what had been, in much earlier times, the site of a fortified Roman garrison town, I could not find any specific local connection (*Hercules* being an inhabitant of the Roman mythological world but borrowed from that of the Greeks [there as *Heracles*]).

Further research revealed, although the “Cave of Hercules” may well have started out as a small cave in the bedrock of the hill upon which the various successive fortified towns were located, that which made it of contemporary interest was the fact that it was one of two archaeological sites, dating from approximately the first century CE, of the Roman town that had been excavated under existing buildings in the mediaeval city.

Despite these inconsistencies, my family agreed to indulge me and incorporate, in our exploration of the mediaeval city, a search for this unusually named “cave”.

When we arrived at the square outside the cathedral in the centre of the walled city, there was a sign pointing uphill and away from the other main tourist features directing us the location I was seeking. As we walked through the labyrinth of streets (following an occasional sign), we passed the entrance to a Museum of Mediaeval Torture Instruments. Unsurprisingly, my sons demanded that we abandon our search for the “cave” and enter what turned out to be a morbidly fascinating exposition (including a garrotting chair which, we were informed, was in use until the middle of the 20th century).

After prising my children away, we continued through the maze of tiny streets until we found the first of the Roman sites, one which had been discovered when the basement of the mediaeval building above was being excavated for some reason. It was a small but fascinating excavation showing various walls of what would have been the villa of a well-to-do Roman family (see below). But it was not our elusive “cave”.



We continued a few hundred metres further up toward the ridge of the mediaeval city and eventually found a poorly signed entrance providing access to our “cave”.

Inside, we descended a circular metal staircase leading us some 5 or 6 m below street level. We were standing at the bottom of the “Cave of Hercules” – what turned out to be a Roman cistern nearly 2000 years old. This had provided storage for water to serve a number of dwellings in the vicinity with the water drawn from the cistern and gravity distributed through a piping system. The water arrived to the cistern by aqueduct from a considerable distance away.

There were several masonry walls and arches to support a vaulted roof with, presumably, an aperture for drawing the water out of the cistern and into the pipes. The cistern was, perhaps, some 2.5 m wide and 5 or 6 m long.



It was, for the Roman settlement within which it had been located, a modestly impressive engineering feat.

However, despite its name, there was no cave and a “Labour of Hercules” it certainly was not.

Haven't forgotten Naracoorte, have you?