

SHORT REPORT

Landscapes of the Medieval Commons in Villanueva, Asturias, Spain

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This brief report provides an overview of the aims and preliminary findings of the first two seasons of excavation of fields and structural remains in Asturias, Spain, buried by a medieval flash flood. It also describes a workshop developed in collaboration between the La Ponte Ecomuseum in Villanueva, Asturias, and the UCL Institute of Archaeology based on the heritage and archaeology of the region. The project uncovered ceramics, faunal remains and evidence of changes in land use during the period before the site was inundated.

Keywords: Common land; community heritage; landscape archaeology

Introduction

In two summer seasons of excavation in 2015 and 2016 a team from UCL Institute of Archaeology worked with La Ponte Ecomuseum in Villanueva, Asturias, northern Spain to uncover the remains of medieval fields, which were buried in a flash flood at some point between the fourteenth and fifteenth century. With a population of approximately 50 people, the village of Villanueva is located in central Asturias, twenty kilometres south of Oviedo, which has been regional capital since the medieval period. Like many villages in the area, Villanueva has experienced a steep decline in population over recent decades, and this has affected traditional agricultural practices and patterns of land use.

One of the distinctive features of Villanueva is the presence of the La Ponte Ecomuseum, a community-based heritage organisation founded in 2011 and dedicated to researching, preserving and communicating the history and archaeology of the area. La Ponte maintains an active programme of archaeological fieldwork in collaboration with the universities of León and Oviedo, as well as working with museum and heritage studies scholars (Alonso González and Fernández Fernández 2013; Fernández Fernández et al. 2015). The collaboration with UCL began in 2014 with the award of a Marie Curie Cofund grant to Jesús Fernández Fernández, Director and research lead for the Ecomuseum, held at Oxford University and UCL.

Project Aims and Background

This project consisted of two two-week long workshops involving students and staff from UCL as well as several Spanish universities; staff from the Ecomuseum and local residents. The workshops included visits to

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archaeological sites, historic buildings, museums and historic landscapes alongside the primary work of excavation and post-excavation in Villanueva. The aims of the project were twofold, focused on the heritage aspects of the workshops and the excavation itself.

The aims of the workshops were to introduce the students to the regional and local archaeology on a landscape scale, ranging from the Palaeolithic to the industrial period. The area around Villanueva is rich in archaeological heritage including Palaeolithic cave art, Iron Age hillforts, medieval churches, vernacular architecture and historic pathways. Other parts of the workshop focused on material culture including lithics, animal remains and medieval ceramics. To introduce the students to the local archaeological ceramics, the workshop included a visit to the workplace of Selito, the last surviving artisan working in the tradition of the pottery industry of Faro which dates back to the medieval period (**Figure 1**).

A secondary aim of the workshop was to familiarise the students with the work of the Ecomuseum and the field of community archaeology and heritage. This included highlighting the connections between local material and intangible heritage, and the roles of oral history and ethnography in its collection and preservation. La Ponte is not a museum in the traditional sense, and we felt that it was important for students to understand the function of Ecomuseums as hubs for communities, allowing them to take control of their own heritage.

The workshop also formed part of a longer-term project to investigate currently inhabited villages of medieval origin in Asturias. This project has run since 2009 under the direction of Margarita Fernández Mier of the University of Oviedo (formerly of the University of Leon) and Jesus Fernández Fernández (Fernández Mier et al. 2014). The project focuses on two villages, Villanueva and Vigaña, and has in the past included a



Figure 1: Selito demonstrating traditional ceramic techniques to students from UCL.

field team from UCL led by Andrew Reynolds. The work in Villanueva focuses on the changing patterns of agricultural land use and management as common fields. In 2015 and 2016 this project focused on an area in Villanueva where flood debris had buried medieval agricultural land, preserving a unique sealed deposit. The aim of the excavations in this period has been to uncover this land, and take samples from the soil to study the environmental evidence, soil taphonomy and other aspects of medieval agricultural fields.

Results to Date

The focus of the excavations in 2015 and 2016 was a 3m by 10m trench excavated in an area of open field, to the south of the present-day village, close to the medieval church (**Figure 2**). The location of the trench was chosen in part based on a series of test pits excavated around the village over several years. Approximately 30cm of modern soil overlaid layers of stony debris from the flash flood. The thickness of this layer

varied across the village, and in the trench it reached a depth of approximately 80cm. Towards the bottom of the flash flood debris we recovered building stones and roof tiles from buildings destroyed in the flood. Below the debris layer we found a layer of medieval agricultural soil containing datable ceramics and fragments of animal bone.

The majority of the ceramic remains are domestic cooking and storage vessels of various sizes with rounded bodies and flanged rims, made with a slow-wheel technology, alongside a small quantity of handmade vessels. The forms, fabrics and incised decorations of the vessels are typical of the late medieval period in the area. The sizes of the pottery fragments and their degree of roundedness is consistent with samples taken from contemporary open fields in the area that have been under plough. Comparing these contemporary examples with larger, less rounded samples taken from land worked with hand-tools indicates that the medieval agricultural layers were probably under cultivation that included the use of ploughs.



Figure 2: The excavation site showing the remains of buildings destroyed in the flash flood.

During excavations into the buried agricultural soils we uncovered postholes and traces of an interior floor surface that predate the layers buried in the flash flood event. Charcoal from one of the postholes was radiocarbon dated to between 1275 and 1385. The presence of agricultural soils above the structural layer demonstrates a change in land use in the period prior to the flash flood.

Zooarchaeological remains excavated from the trench amounted to 179 bones and fragments of bone, of which 69 could be identified to a specific species. These were divided into four categories: cattle (Minimum Number of Individuals [MNI] = 3), equids (MNI = 3), pigs (MNI = 6), and sheep and goats (MNI = 4), which represent a typical assemblage for settlements of this type (compare Sirignano et al. 2014). Most of the animal bones found in the trench were teeth or small fragments of bone (less than 10cm in length) with taphonomy consistent with a ploughing scatter based on domestic refuse.

Based on the distribution of the ceramic and zooarchaeological remains in the layers beneath the flood debris we observed a clear distinction between two layers. The upper, darker earth contained considerably larger quantities of ceramic, animal bone, charcoal and organic material compared to the lower, although pottery types and taphonomy remained consistent between the two. A more detailed analysis of the seeds and other organic materials is forthcoming, and will hopefully shed light on the changing agricultural practices between these two layers.

Future Plans

In the next stage of the project we intend to further explore the structural remains found in the final stages of the 2016 excavations to trace the extent and form of the structure. The presence of these remains was a surprise and offers insights into the stages of development of the settlement, prior to its

destruction. The change between domestic and agricultural use suggests a more complex organisation of land use than is generally assumed in this period, warranting further research. In addition to the excavation we will continue the analysis of archaeobotanical remains and soil taphonomy. The work of the La Ponte Ecomuseum will continue to form the basis for communicating our research to the local community and we intend to involve UCL students in the public archaeology dimensions of the project.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.


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