

## Beyond mass graves: exhuming Francoist concentration camps

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### Abstract

As several historical investigations have revealed, between 130,000 and 150,000 Republicans were executed during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and Franco’s dictatorship (1939–1977). The Francoist repressive strategy – unleashed after the coup d’état of 17 July 1936 – developed complex mechanisms of physical and psychological punishment. The continuing subjugation of those still living was enacted through concentration camps, prisons and forced labour. During the War and Franco’s dictatorship, there were nearly three hundred concentration camps, and between 367,000 and 500,000 prisoners went through those camps. During the transition to democracy, neither the State nor the judiciary investigated mass crimes connected to the repression and execution of left-wing Republicans. After Franco’s death, some family groups recovered some of these bodies buried in unmarked mass graves without scientific involvement. In the year 2000, the first scientific exhumations took place, and since then, more than 400 mass graves have been opened, and up to 9,000 bodies have been recovered.

The memory of the victims of Franco’s violence has been mainly centralised on mass graves. The opening of mass graves has positioned the Spanish Civil War case within the international sphere of human rights violations and has also opened a new window of opportunity for the analysis of Francoist concentration camps. In this article, I provide a holistic study of mass graves that combines archaeology and forensic anthropology with historical and ethnographic research in order to examine, in detail, both the burials and the broader landscape of the repression. In this contribution, I focus on the Concentration Camp of Castuera, in southwestern Spain, a forgotten campsite, and show how mass graves, which have become widely known as sites of research and commemoration in Spain, were closely related to the camps’ complex repressive system. My results have allowed me to conduct an integrated analysis of this context of political violence. I conclude that archaeology and forensic anthropology have played a crucial role in elucidating the functioning and social reality of Spanish camps, whilst enabling new narratives about past Francoist repression.

### Key Words

contemporary conflict archaeology, forensic anthropology, material culture, Spanish Civil War, Franco’s dictatorship

### Introduction

In contrast to Nazi-occupied Europe, where the commemoration of the victims of fascism and the Holocaust has for a long time been focused on the repressive role of the camps, the memory of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and Franco’s dictatorship (1939–1977) has been mainly centralised on mass graves. Yet in Spain during the late 1930s and early 1940s there were nearly three hundred concentration camps (Hernández 2019).

Between 367,000 and 500,000 prisoners went through those camps, from the coup d’état in July 1936 until January 1947, when the last camp, the camp of Miranda de Ebro, ceased to operate (Rodrigo 2005).

The ‘rhetorical’ end of the civil war in April 1939 resulted in tens of thousands of prisoners being (re)integrated into the social fabric of ‘New Spain’ (Rodrigo 2005). From then on, thousands of inmates embarked on a journey which, in the best-case scenario, would take them to concentration camps, prisons, or forced labour camps.

The defeat of Barcelona in January 1939 acted as an incentive for almost a million Spaniards to flee to France as a Republican exodus to escape from Franco's repression in what became known as *La Retirada*. Around 220,000 fled into exile, most of them never to return to Spain (Alted 2005). Yet many of the 'red' exiles were as 'undesirable refugees' also confined in barbed wired concentration camps in the South of France. Under the regime of French guards around 14,000 of those escapees died due to the extreme conditions, whereas more than 9,000 prisoners were sent to the Nazi concentration camps across Europe, from which 5,500 Spaniards never returned (Bermejo and Checa 2006).

The lack of public awareness of Franco's complex repressive system in modern Spain has been analysed by academics as a result of the 'transitional process' towards democracy in Spain, the Amnesty Law approved in 1977, and the Pact of Forgetting, forged during the early 1980s (Aguilar 2000). Besides the camps, the recognition of the victims of Franco's repression and the exhumation of the mass graves have been the main unresolved issues of contemporary Spain's traumatic past (Ferrándiz 2014). As several historical investigations have revealed, between 130,000 (Preston 2012) and 150,000 (Espinosa 2010) Republicans were executed during the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship. Additionally, between 49,000 (Ledesma 2010) and 55,000 (Rodrigo 2008) people were killed as a result of the violence perpetrated by Republicans during the war. After the conflict, victims were mainly exhumed from the mass graves caused by Republican repression as a result of a specific procedure, the so-called *Causa General* (General Cause), in order to identify and dignify them personally and collectively – a part of them transferred to the Valley of the Fallen (Ferrándiz 2014). The victims of Francoist repression – whether dead or alive – received very different treatment, as the dictatorship imposed absolute silence upon their suffering (Preston 2012).

After the death of the dictator in 1975, the first exhumations of unmarked Republican graves were initiated by the relatives of the victims, and were carried out without scientific control (Fig. 1). It would not be until 2000 that scientific investigations began in Spain. Seven years later, the first law concerning the recognition of victims of Francoist repression was approved. In 2011, the Spanish protocol specific to the exhumation of mass graves was published by the government.<sup>1</sup> This law delegates the responsibility for searching and exhuming the graves of the Spanish Civil War and postwar oppression of Franco's regime to victims' associations, which are expected to promote excavation projects and hire scientific teams. In Spain, exhumations have become rich and varied processes, in which archaeological and forensic investigations, taking place outside



**Figure 1.** Exhumations of the mass graves located next to the temporary camp of Las Boticarias (Casas de Don Pedro, Spain). After Franco's death, during the transition to democracy, some family groups recovered some of the bodies buried in unmarked mass graves without scientific involvement. That is the case with the mass graves of the victims executed in the temporary camp of Las Boticarias (Casas de Don Pedro, Spain), exhumed in 1978.

of juridical frameworks, help people to make sense of past crimes. Searches for the missing, identification of the corpses and their return to relatives have been essential for the reparation for the victims in Spain. Nonetheless, many activists have widely critiqued the role of post-Francoist democratic governments as a bystander, as the State has never directly assumed responsibility for the search, identification and dignification of the victims (Aragüete-Toribio 2017). Between 2000 and 2019, 740 mass graves have been unearthed, and the bodies of around 9,000 victims have been recovered (Etxeberria and Solé 2019). The opening of mass graves has positioned the Spanish Civil War case within the international sphere of human rights violations, and has also opened a new window of opportunity for the analysis of the Francoist concentration camps.

Over the past decade, conflict archaeology has played a new role in the investigation of the Francoist punitive system. Concentration camps, prisons and labour camps have been archaeologically investigated, producing new narratives surrounding contemporary Spanish history (González-Ruibal 2020). A step further in the research has been taken through the analysis of the mass graves within the landscape of the conflict in Spain (Muñoz-Encinar 2016). I have developed this approach with my PhD research, and it has witnessed a profound progression for my postdoctoral research project (FOCUS) implemented in a comparative framework inside the iC-ACCESS<sup>2</sup> project. My research has successfully combined archaeology and

<sup>1</sup> In the Presidential Order number *PRE/2568/2011*, passed on September 26, 2011, the Agreement of the Council of Ministers from September 23, 2011 was published. This agreement demanded that the *Boletín Oficial del Estado* publish a protocol regarding the carrying out of exhumations of mass graves containing victims of the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship. BOE 232 of September 27, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Accessing Campscapes: Inclusive Strategies for Using European Conflicted Heritage" (iC-ACCESS) is a three year Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) funded project (2016–2019). iC-ACCESS considers the genealogies, representations and interpretations of campscapes, as topical for Europe's political and cultural histories of the last century. iC-ACCESS investigates the cultural, political, and material dynamics

forensic anthropology with historical and ethnographic research in order to examine, in detail, both the burials and the wider landscape of the repression. This approach has allowed me to conduct integrated analyses of the contexts of political violence under study. One of the main cases I have been investigating is that of the Castuera Concentration Camp, established in Extremadura, in southwestern Spain, already at the end of the Spanish Civil war. In this contribution, I will focus on this ‘forgotten’ campscape and show how the more widely known mass graves – these being Spain’s main sites of research and commemoration – were closely related to the camps’ complex repressive system.

## The Francoist concentration camps

The camps were conceptualised as a technology of punishment – in fascist narrative – ‘to create authentic Spaniards’ for the “New Spain”. Their main function was the classification of enemies of the “New State”. Those considered ‘irrecoverable’ were directly subjected to execution, and all traces of them were lost once they entered the concentration camp system. These included, amongst others, political leaders, left-wing trade union leaders, public officials of the Republican councils, as well as army officers or members of guerrilla groups. Those who were allowed to survive the camps were court-martialed and imprisoned – most for terms of between 20 and 30 years – or executed in accordance with the death penalty decreed. In the early 1940s, around 370,000 political prisoners were in Franco’s jails. In 1942, this encouraged the regime to create a system of ‘remission of penalties through work’ – based on the Catholic concept of ‘expiration of duties through work’ (Gómez 2006). From a theoretical point of view, the crime was considered as sin and guilt was substituted by expiration as a form of prisoner’s conversion (Rodríguez 2016). Its main purpose was to expedite the movement of inmates by sending them to labour camps, and to generate a cheap labour force to be used by the “New State”. Also, private businesses benefited from it (González-Ruibal 2020).

## The Castuera concentration camp

The concentration camp of Castuera in the region of Badajoz was in operation for one year – between March 1939 and 1940. According to recent studies, the number of inmates ranged from around 4,000 at its lowest to 8,000 and 9,000 at its peak (López 2009). It has been estimated that between 15,000 to 20,000 prisoners went

through the camp, including civilians and military from different regions in the country. The camp’s main functions were the detention, classification and elimination of people considered as enemies by the supporters of the rebellion against the Republic (Muñoz-Encinar et al. 2013).

One of the main obstacles for researchers studying the camp is the lack of official documentation created by the perpetrators. Until now, no documentation relating to the camp’s internal activity – such as lists of detainees and prisoners that could shed light on their whereabouts – has been found. In relation to this, as in the case of other camps, oral history constitutes a main source of knowledge, thus the task of recovering life stories of prisoners and the accounts of the repression and endured suffering was of central importance.<sup>3</sup> An increasing role in reconstructing the mechanism of violence and punishment through which the camp was operated is also played by archaeology. Several archaeological interventions were carried out inside the former camp. They have shed new light on elements of its physical structure, the daily life at the detention site, and the repressive measures to which prisoners were subjected (González-Ruibal 2020).

Since 2011, the archaeological research developed at the camp has been extended into the adjacent areas. Under my leadership, a project was carried out at the municipal cemetery of Castuera, with the objective of locating and investigating graves originating from various phases of Franco’s repression during the operational period of the camp.<sup>4</sup> We succeeded in locating nine deposits from different stages of Francoist oppression. Two of them were exhumed. The first mass grave contained a group of concentration camp prisoners. The second, pertinent to the fight against armed guerrillas during the dictatorship, contained the bodies of three victims. In 2012, a third mass grave linked to the camp was exhumed at the cemetery, where the camp’s victims had been buried.<sup>5</sup> The two mass graves for concentration camp prisoners contained skeletal remains of twenty-two and eleven men, respectively. These included young and adult members of the military, and civilians, who were selected to be extrajudicially executed outside the camp (Muñoz-Encinar et al. 2013).

## Material traces of repression and resistance

Inside the camp, a number of violent methods were used for the humiliation and disarticulation of *the enemy*. Survivors of the camp have reported extreme physical violence

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of former camps in Europe, drawing from interdisciplinary research perspectives in historical, heritage and memory studies, forensics, archaeology and material culture studies, and digital humanities.

3 Part of the original testimonies can be consulted in The Documentary Centre of La Serena. (<https://centrodedocumentacion.laserena.org/>).

4 This project was promoted by the Association for the Memory of Castuera Concentration Camp (AMECADEC) funded by the Ministry of the Presidency (PRE/786/2010; Project Number: 189.1), with the collaboration of the Project for the Recovery of Historical Memory (PREMHEX) and the Council of Castuera.

5 This project was led by Alfredo González-Ruibal and his team from CSIC-Incipient.

and psychological mistreatment. A further form of violence was the permanent lack of food and water for prisoners as a daily punishment. Widespread famine was one of the main characteristics of the Francoist camps. Along with the problem of food, or lack of thereof, poor hygiene was another significant issue within the concentration camp, as well as the proliferation of lice, parasites and rats that contributed to the increase of numerous infectious diseases.

The harsh living conditions in concentration camps have been considered an additional form of punishment as prisoners were deprived of their liberty. These repressive centres utilised a *technology of pain* to achieve their aims of humiliation and punishment (Rodrigo 2008). In Castuera, archaeological research has shown various procedures established for the psychological degradation of prisoners, most clearly represented in the humiliating design of the latrines. The latrines were designed to make inmates defecate publicly, in an open space, in groups, and with a disregard for gastrointestinal problems – this was another way to degrade and humiliate prisoners (González-Ruibal 2020). The Francoist punitive system aimed to re-educate prisoners in the Catholic faith and eradicate ‘Marxist ideals’. It was for this purpose that a large cross was placed in a prominent position in the square of the camp dedicated to public events and re-education activities, such as prayers, mass or the singing of the Francoist Hymn.

The strategies for elimination inside the concentration camp represented the first step in the Francoist repressive proceedings, in which victims with a clear political, military or trade union affiliation were selected to be executed without any judicial process. Those sentenced to disappearance were transported in trucks by soldiers and were executed in various places outside the confines of the camp during the night. Burials of bodies from extrajudicial executions occurred in mass graves near the camp or in the rear part of the municipal cemetery; sometimes their bodies were simply thrown into the surrounding mines (López 2009). Paramilitary groups (Falange), responsible for numerous executions, played a very important

role in the extrajudicial repression conducted at the site, entering the camp with specific lists of prisoners to be executed. Evidence for this procedure was found in Mass Grave 1 at Castuera. This grave contained the bodies of twenty-two men that were immobilised, tied up in pairs at the wrist and elbow, two of them tied together at the neck. At least six short weapons were used for the executions. A wine bottle was also found thrown on top of the bodies in the mass grave. This extraordinary piece of evidence indicates that perpetrators, in this case, paramilitaries, may have been drunk during the executions – a common feature confirmed by multiple testimonies (Muñoz-Encinar et al. 2013).

A second mass grave was found close to the previous one and contained the bodies of eleven prisoners, both military and civilian. In this case, the inmates were not tied up, and the bodies were thrown into the grave in no particular order. Rifles and shotguns were used for these executions. The available evidence indicates that the executions documented in this mass grave had probably been carried out by the military authorities of the camp, most likely during the later stage of the camp’s operations when court martials constituted the main agents of repression (Muñoz-Encinar et al. 2013). Apart from that, we must also note the arbitrary executions carried out inside the camp and the poor living conditions that caused numerous deaths from starvation and disease.

Detainees elected to be executed were usually misled into thinking that they were to be transferred to another location. This was to avoid any possible resistance from prisoners at the moment of their execution. In Castuera, prisoners documented in the mass graves carried all their personal belongings with them, so it is possible they thought that they were going to be moved to another prison. Knowing that they would almost certainly be killed might have motivated detainees to leave the more useful of items (spoons, can openers, sanitary items, canteens, coins, etc.) to other prisoners who remained in the camp (Fig. 2). Personal belongings registered in the mass graves also in-



**Figure 2.** Objects related to the food documented associated with the bodies exhumed in Castuera. In mass grave 1 of Castuera we documented several objects related to the daily life of prisoners inside the camp. In Figure 2 there are two different typologies of can openers and two spoons.



**Figure 3.** Objects related to hygiene and personal care associated with the bodies exhumed in Castuera. Personal belongings registered in the mass graves also included items related to hygiene and personal care. In Figure 3 we can see different types of combs documented in the mass grave 1 of Castuera. These items could be considered symbols of preserving physical and psychological integrity, used to eliminate lice. Such objects could be also considered as a means of manifesting resistance to the process of neutralisation and dehumanisation of prisoners.

cluded items related to hygiene and personal care, manual or leisure activities, games, material evidence of reading and writing, and items related to the professional identity of the victims, among others (Fig. 3). These items could be considered symbols, preserving the psychological integrity, and reaffirming the identity of the prisoners, helping them to maintain links with their lives before captivity (Bergqvist 2018). While objects such as these were very scarce

in the excavations carried out in the concentration camp of Castuera, they were widely documented in connection with the individuals found in the graves (Muñoz-Encinar 2021). The practice of keeping such objects could be considered as a means of manifesting resistance to the process of neutralisation and dehumanisation of prisoners (Bergqvist 2018; González-Ruibal 2020), and understood as a method of confronting the totalitarian nature of the system.



**Figure 4.** Virtual reconstruction of Castuera Concentration Camp. As part of the research project – in 2019 – we did field work in the Castuera Concentration Camp. We scanned the area and started to create a virtual model of Castuera Concentration Camp. We interrelated historical and ethnographic research with archaeological and forensic data using 3D reconstructions together with virtual and augmented reality to reconstruct the Castuera Concentration Camp.

## Beyond mass graves: unearthing the role of camps

The bodies exhumed in the mass graves of Castuera remain unidentified to this day. The identification process is made more difficult by the complex context to which they belong, together with other factors such as the high number of missing persons, the poor preservation of the bones, and the lack of sources related to the executions. Following the Spanish exhumation protocol, after being exhumed and analysed, the human remains were buried individually and assigned a case-study number in accordance with the scientific reports produced, with the prospect of a possible identification in the future. The remains were inhumed in a memorial constructed at the Castuera municipal cemetery and inaugurated in a commemorative service in 2017. This memorial comprises five large slabs listing the names of 250 victims of Franco's repression. The list includes the names of the victims executed after the occupation of the town, inmates of the concentration camp and of the local prison. Even so, this number is far lower than the total number of victims who lost their lives in Castuera. The research process on 2011 is still ongoing. The memorial was constructed, not only to bury the corpses of the unknown victims, but to also to have the names of the missing persons carved upon, to create a common space for commemoration, and to symbolically mourn all the victims of Franco's repression in the area.

In 2009 the Castuera Concentration Camp received the most important heritage protection classification in Spain as a Site of Cultural Interest (*Bien de Interés Cultural*).<sup>6</sup> Yet the area still remains as private property, and – in contrast to the mass grave at the cemetery – there is as yet no memorial to be found at the former campscape. Hence, the place remains invisible, unfathomed in the collective memory of local, regional and national society. The camp of Castuera, as is true for all of Franco's concentration camps, still awaits the creation of a Memorial Centre, an institution where the history and memory of the repression exerted inside and outside its fences can be interpreted and disseminated.

In that regard, new methodologies and advanced technologies have been developed to examine the 20<sup>th</sup> century's traumatic past, and implement inclusive strategies in order to use European Conflicted Heritage. In this context, archaeology and forensic anthropology have played a crucial role in opening new narratives about the past conflict, and in allowing us to visualise the camps, as in the Spanish case in question. In the framework of my current research project (FOCUS) – developed within the iC-ACCESS project and SPECS-Lab Group – in 2019, we started to create a virtual model of Castuera Concentration Camp. As has been previously done with other concentration camps, we interrelated historical and ethnographic research with archaeological and forensic data using 3D reconstructions together with virtual and augmented reality to reconstruct the Castuera Concentration Camp (Fig. 4). Our results will

<sup>6</sup> Decree 97/2009, from April 30<sup>th</sup>, by which the Castuera concentration camp was declared as *Bien de Interés Cultural*, with the category of Historic Site. Published in the *Boletín Oficial de Extremadura* on May 13<sup>th</sup> of 2009.

allow us to create a virtual model of the camp in order to access the site itself, to develop an educational tool to counter atrocity denialism and to promote a critical rejection of this kind of violence in modern society.

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