

# MEDIEVAL DESERTED VILLAGES IN ALAVA (SPAIN):

## The Zaballa Project

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As in other regions of Europe, in Iberia ‘rescue’ archaeology has seen significant growth during the 1990s and the first years of the new millennium as a result of the boom in construction in old urban centres. Moreover, investment in numerous lineal infrastructure projects has led to the discovery and excavation of many deserted villages.

The abandonment of villages in Iberia during the medieval and early modern periods has been studied by a number of scholars from the mid-20th century onwards but, for a number of reasons, did not lead to the development of an archaeology of deserted sites as it had in the United Kingdom and in other European countries (Christie and Stamper 2012). For this reason, many of these pioneering studies were limited to the creation of inventories of deserted sites, and to the analysis of the causes and processes of abandonment based on written documentation, putting the emphasis on the effects of the late medieval demographic crisis, the Reconquest, or the expulsion of the Moriscos (Cabrillana 1965; 1971–2). Indeed, as we have maintained in previous papers (Quirós Castillo 2007), neither the archaeology of abandoned sites nor that of medieval villages in general formed part of the nascent medieval archaeology in Iberia (with a few exceptions, Bazzana 1978), which meant the virtual invisibility of the peasantry in material terms. It has only been recently, with the significant contribution of rescue archaeology providing us with new conceptual and methodological perspectives, that the identification of the production and habitational spaces of the peasantry and rural centres of power has been made possible. Although we still lack a proper synthesis bringing together the results of the interventions carried out over the last few years, the partial analyses that we have allow us to understand the profound social and political transformations that took place in the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages (for example, Vigil-Escalera 2007; Quirós Castillo 2009).

In this paper we will briefly analyse the results of the Zaballa archaeological project, presenting it as an example of both the characteristics of this type of site in northern Iberia, and of the type of historical and archaeological problems that it allows us to tackle. Zaballa is located in the province of Álava, in the Basque Country, and has been severely affected by a public works infrastructure project leading to the complete excavation of the site. The project has extended over some forty months (6 months’ evaluation, 13 months’ excavation, and 21 months’ study and reporting), concluded by the publication of the first monograph devoted to this type of site in Iberia (Quirós Castillo 2012). However, before going into detail, we will situate the Zaballa site within

the context of the phenomenon of village abandonment in Álava.

### The deserted villages of Álava

The modern Basque Country is divided geographically between the two northern provinces of Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa on the Atlantic coast, and the interior which is part of the Ebro valley and belongs to the province of Álava. It is in this latter province, of just over 3,000 km<sup>2</sup>, that medieval settlements and more specifically the phenomenon of deserted villages has been most systematically studied over the last few decades. The earliest studies on the deserted villages of Álava appeared in the late 18th century (Barandiarán 1929), and were made possible largely by the existence of 11th-century documents identifying a number of villages which had subsequently been abandoned (Fig. 1). More than fifty years ago, in an important study contrasting the written documentation with modern place-names, G. López de Guereñu published a list of over 300 deserted villages (López de Guereñu 1957), a figure which should probably be regarded as an under-estimate. Since then a number of scholars have analysed the significance of the phenomenon in historical terms, relating it to the social crisis of the 14th century or with the processes of territorial and political restructuring that accompanied the emergence of the new royal towns from the 13th century onwards (Díaz de Durana 1986; Pastor 1986).

By contrast, only in recent years has the archaeological study of these sites and through them of medieval domestic space been undertaken, generally within the context of preventive archaeology projects. The invisibility of this type of site – a result of land reform initiatives during the Franco period, the intensification of agricultural practices in recent years, and the nature and scale of the material remains – has meant that their identification and delimitation have proved singularly complex. Indeed, in the archaeological inventories drawn up by the local administrative authorities, many of these sites have only been identified generically with reference to place-names. Nonetheless, in the last fifteen years a number of research projects have confronted these problems, leading to the excavation of several such sites (Zornoztegi, Aistra, Arganzón, Urizara, Santa Coloma), and preventive intervention in others (e.g. Zaballa, Bagoeta, La Llana, Mavilla, Legardagutxi, Mostrejón), all of which has enabled us to understand for the first time the complexity of the formative processes of the archaeological deposits and the nature of their architecture, and to analyse the methods of exploitation of the environment. Moreover, within the scope of these archaeological projects, both bioarchaeological and geoarchaeological registers have been studied

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systematically, and new protocols have been developed for the analysis of the rural environment, allowing us to construct detailed narratives for the history of rural medieval communities.

In effect, the abandoned villages of Álava have become genuine archaeological laboratories in which new generations of researchers have been trained and in which the transformations experienced in rural

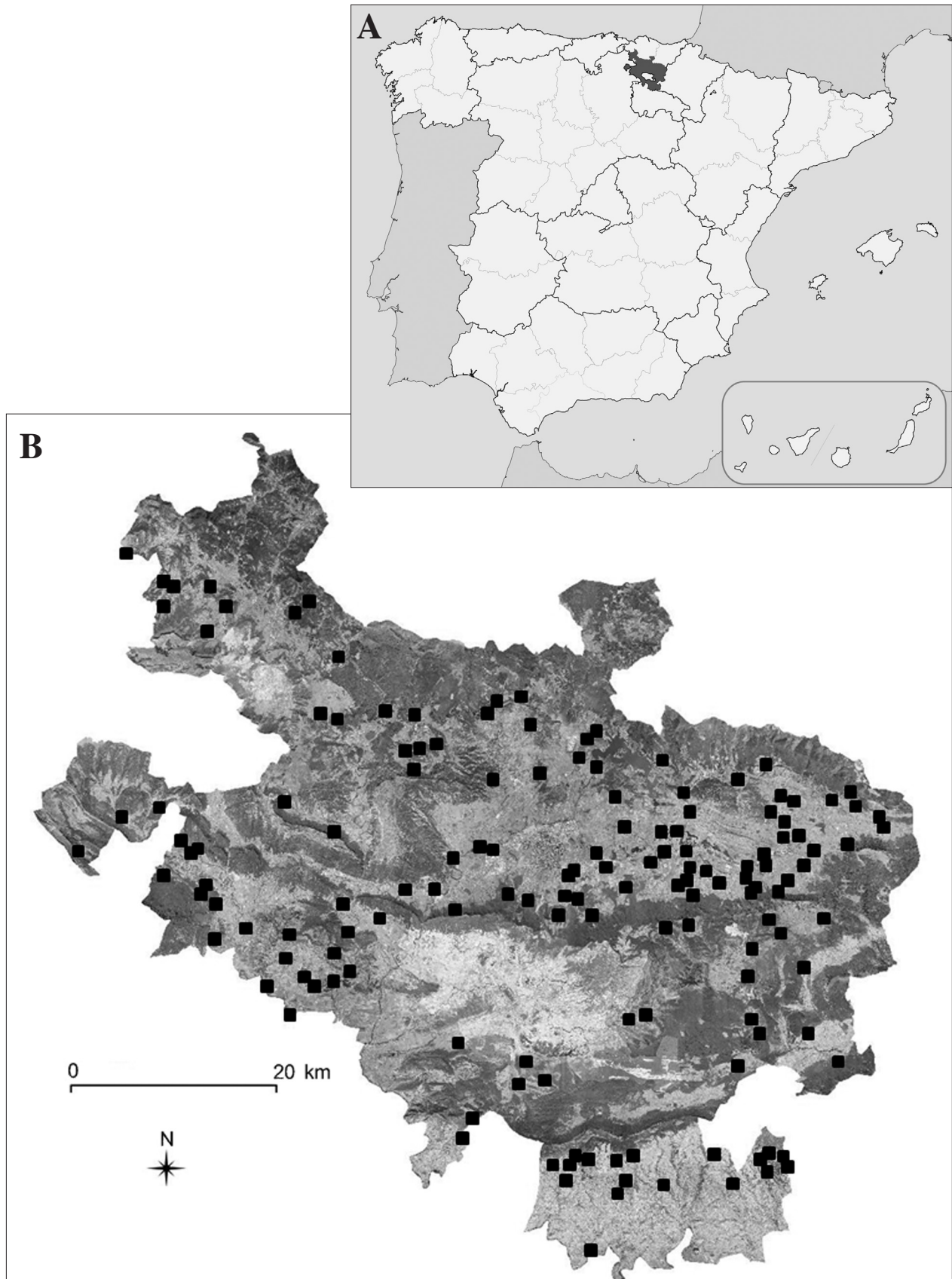


Figure 1 Map showing the sites of the deserted villages of Álava (B) within the context of Iberia (A).



Figure 2 Aerial view of Zaballa during the excavation.

communities and habitats during the Middle Ages have been analysed.

### The Zaballa site

Zaballa is one of over 300 Alavese localities which, in 1025, were supposed to pay dues to the Riojan monastery of San Millán de la Cogolla, as is duly recorded in an important document preserved in the cartulary of the monastery (*Becerro Galicano Digital*, [www.ehu.es/galicano](http://www.ehu.es/galicano), doc. 583)). Although the Basque place-name ‘Zaballa’ is itself quite common in the region, the document is structured in geographical order which has made it relatively easy to identify the hamlet in question, some 10 km south-west of the city of Vitoria-Gasteiz. The Basque term *Zabal* refers to open spaces or to places where the terrain suddenly broadens, descriptions which match the morphology of the Zaballa site perfectly (Fig. 2). The place-name currently designates an area situated on the north slope of the range of hills known as the *Montes de Vitoria* (rising to between 800 and 900 m) which form the southern boundary of the Álava plain (at an altitude of 400–500 m). Here a broad valley opens up at right-angles to the slope drained by various streams running down to the river Zadorra, a tributary of the Ebro. It is an area mainly devoted to forestry, though on flatter land at the foot of the hills some cereal crops are cultivated.

During the twentieth-century, the area was used as a munitions dump, but some years ago was chosen as the site for a new penitentiary centre, which was eventually built between 2009 and 2011. The scale of the work – which has radically altered the morphology of the terrain and has meant the complete destruction of the site – was such that it required a preventive intervention over an area of more than four hectares. According to our evaluation of the archaeological deposits, the limits of the hamlet covered the whole of the valley as well as a broad platform dominating it to the east, while the area dedicated to agriculture extended as far as the banks of

the river Zadorra, a marshy area in the Early Modern period.

Although the site was never intensively reoccupied after its late-medieval abandonment, it was significantly affected in recent decades by both the construction of the military camp and by modern agricultural practices that have reclaimed land for agricultural use using heavy machinery. These post-depositional alterations allied with nature of the archaeological deposits themselves have combined to present us with a number of challenges when it came to reconstructing the occupational sequence of the site. In particular, the stratigraphy of this type of site is characterised by the almost complete lack of primary deposits as opposed to the predominance of secondary and tertiary fills, the low density of vertical stratigraphic relations, the frequent changing of functional use of spaces, and, in general, the complexity of the formation processes of archaeological stratigraphy. Indeed, it was necessary to undertake a number of radiocarbon determinations in order to contextualise the deposits analysed (Fig. 3).

Moreover, we should point out that, knowing that the site was going to be completely destroyed, the project focussed on the excavation of the whole landscape rather than just the settlement, including the cultivated as well as the inhabited areas (Quirós Castillo 2010).

### Zaballa between the 6th and the 17th centuries

The occupational sequence at Zaballa is reasonably representative of the tendencies observed in recent years in other medieval settlements, abandoned or otherwise, in northern Iberia. What follows is a brief outline of the six most significant phases documented for the site.

Zaballa is situated some 4 km south of the ruins of Iruña-Veleia, the only Roman urban centre recognised as such in the whole of the Basque Country. Recent excavations suggest that from the 5th century onwards Iruña-Veleia was partially abandoned and that new

settlements sprang up in its surroundings. The oldest remains in Zaballa (phase 1) are single-family peasant farmsteads spread around the valley and the upper platform. These dwellings, consisting of structures

supported by wooden posts and associated with storage pits, have been dated to the 6th and 7th centuries.

Between the late 7th and early 8th centuries the site experienced profound changes (phase 2). In Zaballa,

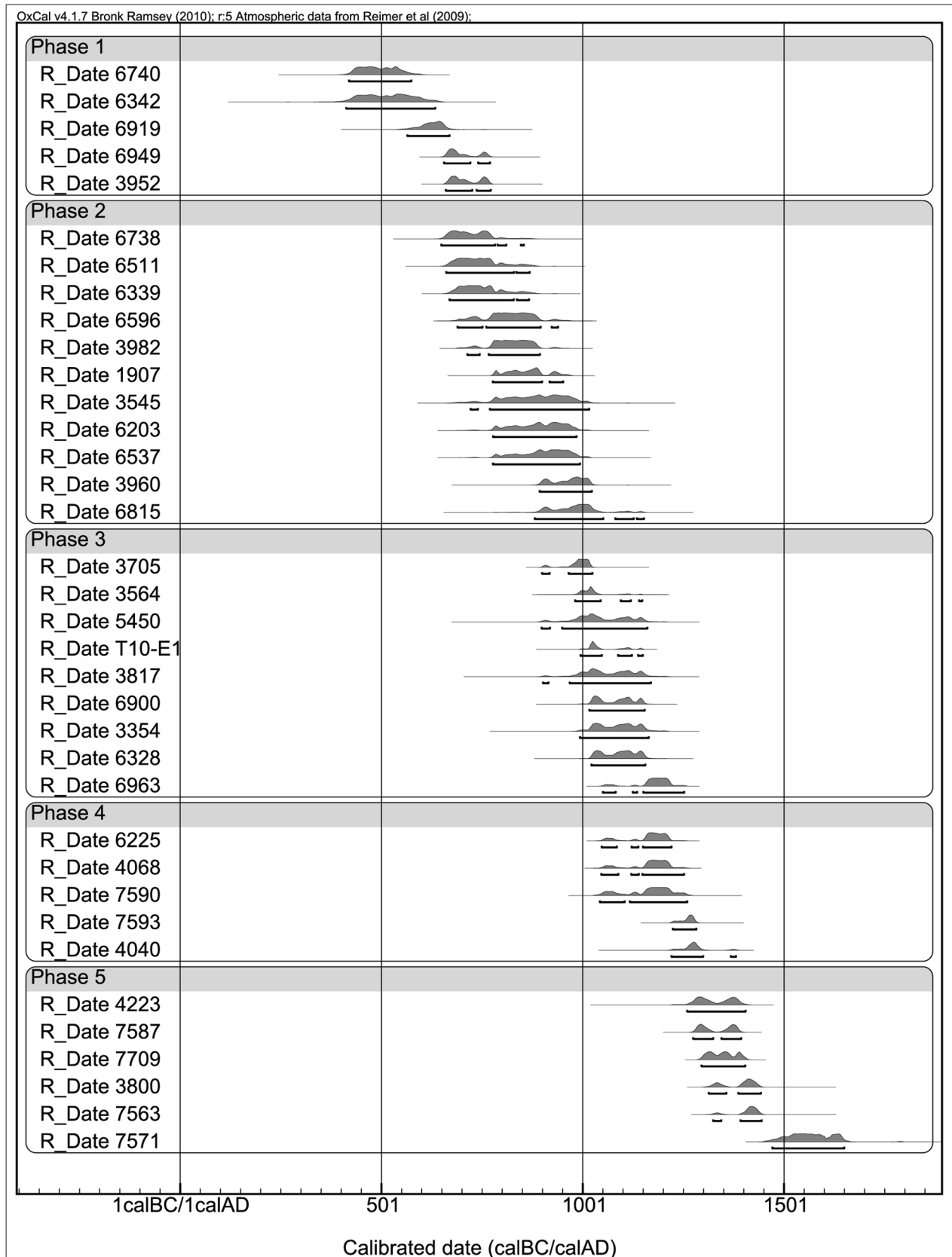


Figure 3 Radiocarbon datings used in reconstructing the occupational sequence of Zaballa.

as is the case at numerous other sites investigated in Álava (Gasteiz, Zornoztegi, San Andrés, San Martín de Lantarón), this was the moment when a stable peasant community was created of sufficient size to be regarded as a true village. Making use of the structures from the previous phase, a settlement sprang up covering almost 1 ha and consisting of approximately ten domestic units. All available archaeobotanic evidence shows intensification of occupation and an increase in the cultivation of cereals and fruit-trees. The productive strategy that characterised this rural community, as is the case with the majority of the abandoned villages studied in Álava, is one of diversification with the integration of non-transhumant animal husbandry and intensive agriculture. Legumes, cereals (both short and long-cycle), and forage were the main species cultivated, within a system of crop rotation. From the 9th century onwards, if not earlier, the vine was also cultivated. The lack of specialisation helped protect peasant communities from the dangers of bad harvests, while the existence of a number of domestic storage pits suggests that each dwelling had its own strategic reserves to survive disastrous years.

The early medieval village consisted of contiguous domestic units dedicated to both dwelling and production, which in turn consisted of a range of buildings and structures of diverse functionality. However, many of these dwellings were significantly altered in later phases of occupation, complicating the analysis of the settlement structure. The pottery and other everyday objects found indicate the integration of the village into a sub-regional trading system, as well as the existence of internal differences within the community.

In summary, from the 8th century onwards an internally diversified peasant community had been established in Zaballa, although no evidence of local hierarchies has been found. The paleo-environmental indicators suggest a degree of communal organisation would have been necessary to carry out certain activities, such as the crop-rotation system, animal-husbandry and vine-growing.

The first significant change in the structure of the village has been dated to the mid-10th century (phase 3). This was the moment when a monastery was built in the centre of the village, leading to the destruction of all the dwellings on the eastern platform and the shifting of the settlement into the valley below.

Sixteenth-century documentation referring to Zaballa mentions the existence of a church dedicated to San Tirso (Fig. 4), which has been identified with a large rectangular construction measuring some 19 x 7 m, of which only the lower levels have survived as a result of subsequent plundering for building material. The foundations of the new building literally cut across the earlier domestic structures, in such a way that we can talk in terms of the appropriation of the pre-existing village space by a new hegemonic power. Moreover, the social dominance implied by the new construction seems to be confirmed by the discovery nearby of a series of large storage-pits on a different scale (5,400–6,300 litres) to the ‘domestic’ pits found in various deserted villages of the same period (1,000–2,000 litres). A document of 1087 from the cartulary of San Millán mentions a ‘monasterio de Zaballa’ among possessions donated to San Millán by Elo Téllez, a member of an important 11th-century Castilian family (*Becerro Galicano Digital*, [www.ehu.es/galicano/](http://www.ehu.es/galicano/), doc. 476). However, the ubiquity of the toponym has led specialists to be cautious about identifying this monastery with the Zaballa site (Fig. 5).

Nonetheless, a document dating from 1373 that was recently discovered in the archive of the Casa de Alba strengthens the hypothesis that San Tirso de Zaballa can be identified with the monastery mentioned in the earlier cartulary. In this 14th-century text, Pedro López de Ayala endows a newly constituted *majorat* with a number of possessions, among them the ‘*monesterio de Çavalla*’ which indeed refers to our site. It can thus be argued that in the mid 10th century a seigniorial group not resident in Zaballa – and thus presumably exercising its authority over a broad though not necessarily continuous territory – founded a monastery in the village of Zaballa that



Figure 4 Aerial photo of the church of San Tirso and the Zaballa site.

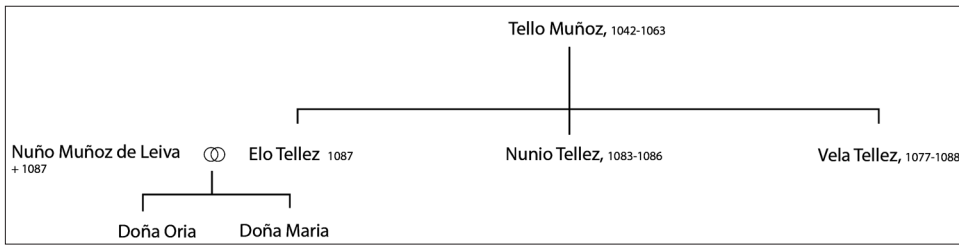


Figure 5 The family of Tello Muñoz, 'lords of Zaballa'.

subsequently became a centre of local power. In the 11th century the monastery was in the hands of the family of Tello Muñoz, though we cannot be sure that it was founded by his ancestors.

The most immediate effect of the building of the church of San Tirso was the displacement of all the dwellings to the valley floor. Indeed, this would seem to be the period during which a series of modifications were introduced in the valley, including the channelling of watercourses and the terracing of hillsides for the cultivation of vines and fruit trees. The bioarchaeological evidence continues to indicate a diversified production model, mixing agrarian and husbandry practices in such a way as to avoid the specialisation that would threaten the equilibrium of the peasant community. Nonetheless, the archaeological evidence for the 10th to 13th centuries reveals the existence of profound social inequalities much more marked than in the preceding period. This is noticeable not so much in terms of domestic architecture, pottery or storage-pits, but in the discovery of a late 11th century hoard of 29 coins and of the appearance of precious personal decorative objects in just a few of the houses. Moreover, the carbon and nitrogen isotope values of the human remains found in the cemetery next to the church of San Tirso suggest that the diet of the inhabitants of Zaballa was that of an internally stratified community (Lubritto *et al.* 2013).

In other words, the material remains and structures identifiable with this phase reveal the introduction into the heart of the community of forms of non-local power and the creation of local elites within the village, all within the context of the process of feudalisation. The role of the church of San Tirso has been key, as is the case in other parts of Álava, in the construction of significant seigniorial networks.

Towards the middle of the 13th century another profound transformation would take place in the village of Zaballa (phase 4). In demographic terms, there was a significant reduction in the size of the community, which henceforth would consist of between four and five family units. This partial abandonment could be explained by the attraction of the newly founded royal towns, which at that time were absorbing a growing number of inhabitants drawn from the rural surroundings. However, within the microhistory of Zaballa, the actions of the lords who completely dominated the community from that period onwards (and perhaps from even earlier) was particularly significant.

The archaeological evidence shows that during this period all of the dwellings on the valley floor were completely removed when a layer of earth, varying in depth between 40 and 120 cm, was introduced to create an entirely new field system suitable for intensive agriculture. The northern limit of the new field was

marked by a strong containing wall which also served as a terrace. It has been estimated that some 10,000 m<sup>3</sup> of earth would have been moved as part of this huge engineering project, a scale of work that implies coordinated and managed activity.

One of the consequences of this restructuring of the area was the need to harness and control the different streams and rivulets crossing the valley by means of a complex network of channels that have been detected in different parts of the valley. This new hydraulic system was controlled by the construction of a main elevated water-course running down the west side of the valley, which allowed for the individual irrigation of smaller parcels of land separated by walls which have been detected in the upper part of the valley.

Moreover, the destruction of the dwellings on the valley floor necessitated the construction of a new residential area, situated on the western slope overlooking the valley. In order to accomplish this, some of the terraces created in the preceding phase were dismantled.

The architecture of this new residential area is quite different from that observed in the other phases in Zaballa, being a compact square structure containing several different dwellings (Fig. 6). The whole group of buildings, covering in total some 18 x 18 m, was carefully planned and constructed, taking into account the particular problems posed by building on a slope. A complex network of drains was created, and a series of terraces were constructed on which the dwellings were built, with supporting walls shared between them. The different dwellings across the whole complex share the same characteristics in terms of structure, access and dimensions. In summary, we have a unified architectural project designed to house a peasant community of some four or five families, carried out by skilled stonemasons introducing architectural models hitherto completely unknown in the context of rural Alavese communities.

All of the above suggests that the changes seen in Zaballa during the mid 13th century were part of a coherent and planned project which completely redefined the morphology of the village in terms of both production and habitat.

Unfortunately, the bioarchaeological data we have for this occupational phase is rather limited and thus incapable of fully explaining the economic structure of the village during this period, although we do have some useful pointers. To begin with, in the other inhabited sector, around the church of San Tirso, some important changes were implemented. The old monastic church, probably by now functioning as a parish church, was enlarged and transformed by the creation of a porch, in addition to other lesser changes. However, what is most significant is that in the deposits in the storage-pits by the church, there is an almost complete dominance



*Figure 6 Area of peasant dwellings constructed during the thirteenth-century on the western slope of the Zaballa valley.*

of barley during the 13th and 14th centuries, which suggests a significant degree of specialisation. What is more, in this period we also observe a significant growth in the number of cattle, which could well point towards their increased use in agrarian tasks.

In summary, then, during the 13th and 14th centuries Zaballa can be defined as a genuine peasant factory, characterised by demographic shrinkage, simplification of the community's social complexity, and the planned transformation of both landscape and settlement. All of these indicators point towards a community that was managed and controlled from this moment onwards by a seigniorial group which is much more clearly visible than in the previous phase. The lack of any written evidence for the 13th century makes it virtually impossible to identify any of the individuals responsible for the transformation of Zaballa. Nonetheless, it is worth going back to the fact that in the document of 1373 cited above, the monastery of Zaballa was in the hands of Fernán Pérez de Ayala, one of the principle aristocrats of Álava in the late Middle Ages and an important figure in the Castilian court. It was still in the family's hands in 1411, when his daughter-in-law granted the whole of Zaballa to the recently founded monastery of Santa Catalina de Badaya, situated some 5 km to the north. In the context of such intense seigniorial control, it seems reasonable to suggest that the changes observed during the 13th century can be attributed to the desire of a seigniorial class, increasingly dominant in such rural communities, to increase its profits.

From the 15th century onwards, then, Zaballa came under the jurisdiction of the monastery of Badaya which probably obtained the lion's share of its income from the village. It was probably the growing monastery's desire to increase its income from Zaballa still further that led to the abandonment of the village by its last few residents in the mid 15th century (phase 5). It is possible that in this way the monastery was able to impose tougher conditions on new tenants and introduce new ways of exploiting the land. Indeed, several documents from

the 15th and 16th centuries show how the monastery changed rental agreements to introduce new and very precise rules controlling the exploitation of Zaballa. In material terms, this period is only reflected in the dismantling and abandonment of the few buildings that were still standing.

However, difficulties in collecting rents and generally disappointing returns led to the monastery selling Zaballa to a local family in 1610. This is probably the moment (phase 6) that the old church of San Tirso was reoccupied and converted into a house. Though this period of domestic use only lasted for a brief time, it resulted in significant changes to the architecture of the building, which was divided up into different spaces, with hearths and chimneys introduced and storage space created. When Zaballa changed hands again a few decades later, the house situated in the old church was definitively abandoned. From then onwards Zaballa remained deserted until the 20th century, and although there were some attempts to repopulate it during the 18th century, such projects never prospered. In recent centuries, the only inhabited part of Zaballa – apart from the military base noted above – was an inn situated on the Royal Highway (running from Madrid towards France along the course of the river Zadorra), thus preserving the Zaballa place-name. The last remains of the inn were destroyed less than a decade ago during the construction of the new motorway.

## Conclusions

By way of conclusion we would like to address a series of issues that have emerged during the project.

First, it is important to stress the role of 'rescue archaeology' in the reinvigoration of study of the rural world in large parts of the Iberian Peninsula, and the way it has met the challenge of intervention on a huge scale with an unprecedented level of investment. Now that the economic crisis has slowed down or even completely halted this model, this is the moment to evaluate the

progress made and the results obtained. Although many such projects will remain unpublished and in some cases even lacking adequate technical documentation, others will provide the basis for new research and publications that explore the archaeological results in their social contexts.

Secondly, it is interesting to see how some of the tendencies we have observed in the ways rural landscapes are transformed are mirrored in other parts of Europe. As has already been noted in different regions of Italy, France, Germany and England, in northern Iberia too the 7th and 8th centuries constitute a singularly significant period in the construction of the landscape and of medieval communities. Until relatively recently, this narrative was confined to the field of settlement archaeology, although some recent studies are re-evaluating its importance for the history of the economy and, more generally, the social history of the early Middle Ages (Hodges 2012).

Zaballa also shows how, during the 10th century, seigniorial pressure on rural communities became much more noticeable in northern Iberia. In this site the method used by absentee lords was the construction of a monastery able to collect a significant volume of rents. In other sites, lordships promoted other initiatives such as the construction of fortified villages (a process known as *incastellamento*), the creation of private churches, or their introduction into the control mechanisms that existed in peasant communities (Quirós Castillo and Santos Salazar 2011).

Although the Zaballa project has allowed us to analyse the dynamics and internal articulation of the rural community, it is nevertheless undeniable that the seigniorial control of the community was decisive in the history of the village. We see this first in the partial depopulation that took place during the 13th century, within the context of the growing pressure being applied on such rural communities by the royal-foundation towns and the socio-economic crisis, which led the elites to seek new ways of maximising their rents. Secondly, in the 15th century, the monastery of Badaya ordered the abandonment of the village, attempting to maximise profits by using the neighbouring communities to work the land unencumbered by a resident population. However, it should be noted that this model of abandonment diverges significantly from that seen in recent years in other Alavese archaeological projects (e.g. Zornoztegi, Aistra, Urizar), where other historical influences are detected.

In Zaballa, as in many other abandoned villages, taking a *longée durée* perspective we observe a series of profound transformations affecting a rural community. The fact that the village of Zaballa was almost completely redesigned every two hundred years or so challenges some of the clichés that have tended to define rural communities and landscapes in terms of unchanging conservatism. This is not an isolated case. A comparative analysis of the different archaeological projects undertaken in Álava show how a range of heterogeneous historical realities are hidden in the category of 'deserted villages', influenced by a number of social, political and economic factors. The only common ground is that they were abandoned at some stage during the Middle Ages

or the Early Modern period, and the fact that they were abandoned has allowed the realisation of archaeological projects on a scale unthinkable in inhabited areas. As a result, deserted villages continue to be regarded by both historians and landscape archaeologists as a privileged medium for the construction of social history.

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