

More questions than answers: the singular animal deposits from Camino de Las Yeseras (Chalcolithic, Madrid, Spain)

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ABSTRACT

Among its many features of strictly domestic nature, the ditched enclosure site of Camino de las Yeseras incorporates a series of singular faunal deposits that do not seem to represent consumption refuse. These deposits that appear in strategic places of the site often feature very biased representations of the animals' skeletons. In addition, considerable time and effort appears to have been put into the correct placement of these remains. In one instance this meant covering with red ochre the bones themselves. Combined, these lines of evidence reveal a treatment of the carcasses that goes well beyond what one would attribute to utilitarian slaughtering and consumption, pointing instead to some kind of ritual. Some features of this presumably ritual processing exhibit parallels with other regions of Spain, but the sheer faunal diversity recorded in this case renders Camino de las Yeseras an exceptional case in the Prehistory of the Iberian Peninsula.

KEY WORDS

Fauna,
Chalcolithic,
ditched enclosure,
ritual deposits,
Iberian peninsula.

RÉSUMÉ

Plus de questions que de réponses: Les dépôts singuliers d'animaux du gisement de Camino de Las Yeseras (Chalcolithique, Madrid, Espagne).

Parmi ses nombreuses structures à caractère domestique, le site à enclos fossoyé de Camino de las Yeseras présente une série particulière de dépôts fauniques qui ne semblent pas être des rejets de consommation *stricto sensu*. Ces dépôts, qui sont situés dans des endroits stratégiques du site, offrent des représentations très biaisées des squelettes d'animaux. En outre, beaucoup de temps et d'effort ont été investis pour disposer correctement ces restes. Dans un cas, les ossements avaient été couverts avec de l'ocre rouge. Ensemble, ces éléments révèlent un traitement des carcasses qui va bien au-delà de ce que l'on peut observer pour des animaux abattus et consommés, soulignant la possible pratique d'un rituel. Certaines caractéristiques de la pratique peuvent être mises en parallèle avec d'autres régions de l'Espagne, mais la diversité faunique qui a été constatée à Camino de Las Yeseras fait de ce gisement un cas exceptionnel pour la Préhistoire de la Péninsule Ibérique.

MOTS CLÉS

Faune,
Chalcolithique,
enclos fossoyé,
dépôt rituel,
péninsule ibérique.

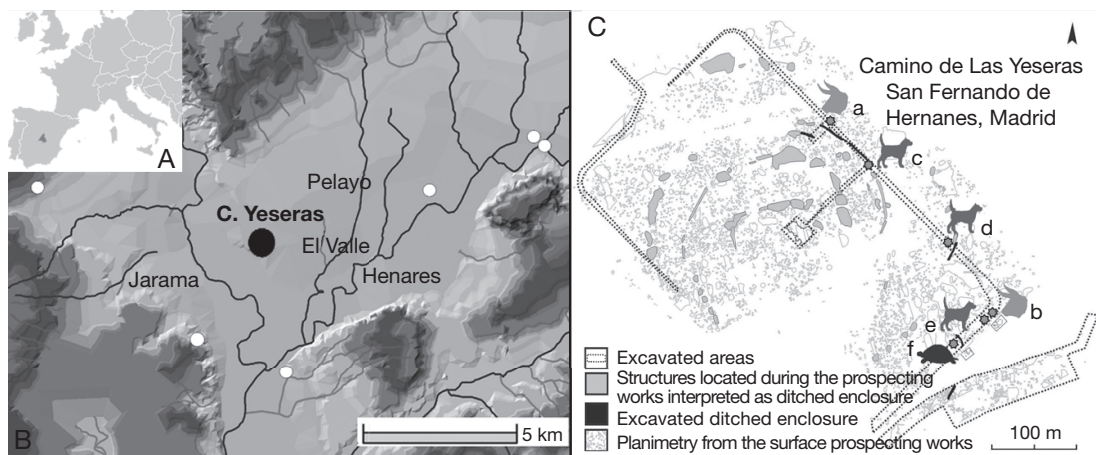


FIG. 1. — **A**, Location of the Community of Madrid in the Iberian Peninsula; **B**, Location of the Camino de las Yeseras site between the confluence of the Henares and Jarama rivers (after Ríos 2011: 41). **C**— General planimetry with an indication of the prospected and excavated areas highlighting the ditched enclosures and animal deposits described in this paper (Argea, S.L.).

INTRODUCTION

Camino de las Yeseras is a 22Ha ditched enclosure site strategically located in an upper terrace on the confluence of two rivers, the Henares and the Jarama featuring extensive fluvial plains with deep agricultural soils (Fig. 1A,B). In addition to the existence of a wealth of biotic resources, in particular those associated with forest and grasslands, a number of abiotic resources are presently found around the site as well as a number of

natural communication routes (Liesau *et al.* 2008; Ríos 2011). Different lines of evidence indicate that the site was a relevant production center (eg. flints, limestones, clays, and possibly salt) exhibiting contacts throughout the Iberian Peninsula and beyond (Blasco *et al.* 2011).

Though the site features a series of short-lived episodes from a later age, the bulk of the occupation, spanning over *ca.* 1,000 years, dates from the third millennium B. C. and incorporates both Pre-Bell Beaker and Bell Beaker occupations that turn

TABLE 1. — Radiocarbon datings of the faunal remains from the singular deposits.

Context	Bp date	Calibrated bc date	Reference
Aurochs Skull Deposit			
Área 60, elemento 01, UE 03.	3931 ± 33	2500 - 2290	Ua-39322
Aurochs Skull Deposit			
Área 22, elemento 02, UE 02.	3756 ± 31	2290 - 2110	Ua-39323
Dog Burial On A Ditch			
Área 54, elemento A-121-E01A UE 02.	3987 ± 30	2580 - 2460	Ua- 39315
Dog Skulls' Semicircle Dog no. 1	4007 ± 30	2580 - 2460	Ua-39316
Área 40, elemento 01, UE 07. Dog no. 4	3976 ± 30	2580 - 2450	Ua-39317
Dog burial connected with bell beaker grave			
Área 21, elemento 04, UE 01.	3530 ± 40	1970 - 1740	Ua-35019
Terrapin deposit			
Área 16, elemento 04, UE 02.	4215 ± 38	2820 - 2670	Ua-39314

Camino de las Yeseras into one of the most relevant sites from the inner Iberian Peninsula at that time.

A series of sondages and superficial “scrapping” carried out by two archaeological companies (ie. “Gestión del Patrimonio S. L.” and “Argea Consultores S. L.”) provided the superficial planimetry of the site’s structures. The excavations proper followed the streets that had been laid out by the urban development of the area. As of this writing 3 Ha have been excavated in the North, center and South of the settlement (Fig. 1C)(Vega & Menduina 2011). The excavations confirm the existence of thousands of features, mainly pits, hut pits and ditches, in addition to a series of inhumations scattered among the habitation structures. Animal remains at Camino de las Yeseras represent consumption refuse for the most part and only the animal deposits described in this paper qualify as items of a non-subsistence connotation (Liesau *et al.* 2008, Daza 2011).

Radiocarbon datings revealed the diachronic use of the concentric ditches, the oldest ones being located in the center, as well as the chronological sequence for the structures where the animal deposits were found (Table 1)(Ríos 2011: 76). In addition, radiocarbon datings evidenced that at the beginning of the Chalcolithic inhumations were collective, with individuals placed in pits, whereas during the Bell Beaker horizon inhumations featured a higher frequency of individual graves and were associated with more complex structures. Among them one finds funerary areas whose basement re-



FIG. 2. — The aurochs skull from Feature Área 60 (elemento 01, UE 03) (Photo: Argea, S.L.).

vealed the excavation of small artificial caves and hypogea according to social rank (Blasco *et al.* 2005, 2009, 2011).

THE FAUNAL REMAINS

The fauna from Camino de las Yeseras, numbering well over 100,000 remains, is presently under study, with only a restricted number of finds having been published thus far (Blasco *et al.* 2007; 2008; Liesau 2011b). The remains that represented consumption refuse concentrated in the central area of the site, whereas the singular

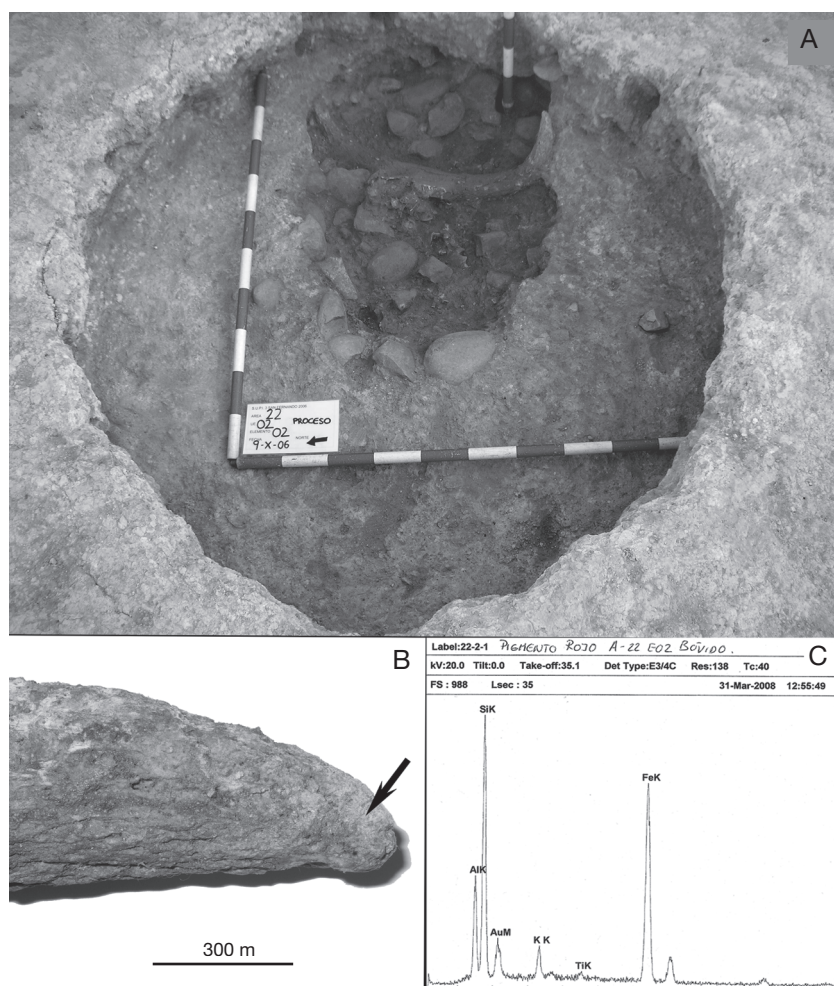


FIG. 3. — **A**, The aurochs skull from Feature Área 22 (elemento 02, UE 02) (Photo: Argea, S.L.); **B**, Remains of red ochre on the surface of the aurochs horn core; **C**, SEM spectroscopic graph of the red ochre (ie., ferric oxide) pigment.

animal deposits described here were retrieved in the fourth and fifth enclosures of the settlement (Fig. 1C).

From the standpoint of subsistence? the data thus far gathered indicate that the domestic stock, in particular *Bos taurus* constituted the basis of the animal economy followed by Caprinae and *Sus domesticus* (Blasco *et al.* 2007; Liesau 2011b). Slaughtering ages indicate that both primary products (ie. tender meat from non-adult individuals) and secondary products were aimed at by the inhabitants throughout the oc-

cupation. Game animals constituted a marginal item (9% according to the NISP yet barely 5% in terms of “biomass”). Horse, red deer, hare and rabbit, though infrequent, are regular items throughout. Aurochs, dogs, brown bear and lynx, as well as some birds and fishes, on the other hand, constitute marginal items (Liesau 2011a; Llorente 2011; Pérez-García *et al.* 2011; Roselló 2011). Except for the tombs, that were floated, the manual retrieval that took place at Camino de las Yeseras renders any statements concerning the small faunas highly contentious.

THE BOVINE DEPOSITS

With close to one hundred remains identified thus far, Camino de las Yeseras features the largest documented collection of aurochs (*Bos primigenius* Bojanus, 1827) in the province of Madrid (Liesau 2011a). This species has been found in the dump yard contexts of the central area, in domestic contexts and in the ditches, where it apparently represented consumption refuse. In addition, two complete skulls revealed a completely different treatment and significance of the species:

- Feature Área 60 (elemento 01, UE 03), with a diameter of 1.5m and a depth of approximately 0.6 m, documented the almost complete skull from a huge male aurochs (Figs. 1C: a, 2). This deposit was found near the entrance to the fourth enclosure, the skull being placed over a small wedged clay platform that elevated it so that it could be seen in full from above. The filling surrounding this cranium was an ashy sediment with flint artefacts and fragments of pottery. The absence of teeth and mandibles, as well as the poor state of preservation suggest a prolonged exposure followed by a burial along with discarded artefacts.

- Feature Área 22 (elemento 02, UE 02), located among habitation structures of the SE sector of the settlement, documented the skull from a presumably adult female aurochs (Fig. 1C: b, 3). Although doubts persists on whether this skull could represent a domestic bull due to the extremely poor state of preservation, it was intentionally placed above a small assemblage of disconnected horse, dog and cattle bones inside a small dug out cavity on the basement of a half-filled pit. As in the previous case, the sediment was ashy and compact. During the excavation a red pigment was detected lining the horn cores whose analysis evidenced that red ochre was applied to the bone (Fig. 3B,C) (Ríos & Liesau 2011).

Although the two skulls were subjected to paleogenetic analysis, only the skull of the male aurochs provided collagen. MtDNA from this specimen and other aurochs bones from Camino de las Yeseras revealed the existence of two yet-undocumented mitochondrial haplotypes of great relevance for the evolution of the species (Geigl *et al.* 2011).

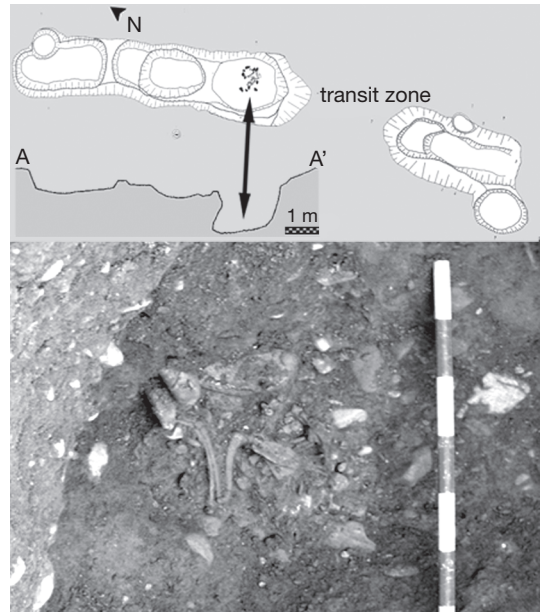


FIG. 4. — A, Overview and profile of the dog burial from Feature Area 54 (elemento A-121-E01A, UE 02); B, Detail of the skeleton.

THE DOG DEPOSITS

With 14 remains thus far identified on the consumption refuse deposits (1% NISP), dogs (*Canis familiaris* Linnaeus, 1758) represent a marginal item of the faunas at Camino de las Yeseras (Liesau 2011b). This contrasts with the frequency of the species in the three singular deposits herein reported, namely:

- Feature Área 54 (elemento A-121-E01A, UE 02), dug out on the basement of the fourth ditch lying next to the entrance of the third enclosure, documented a complete skeleton from a sub-adult (6-10 months) male intentionally placed in a small pit along with the hind limbs of a piglet (*Sus* sp.). Above this assemblage a small cup was placed on the superficial level that sealed the deposit (Fig. 1C: c, 4).

- At a depth of ca. 1.2m, Feature Área 40 (elemento 01, UE 07), a pit 1.85m deep with a diameter of 2.85m, incorporated six dog skulls arranged in a semicircle dotting its perimeter along with a mandible and a partial skeleton including a seventh skull (Fig. 1C: d). A plate located slightly above the skull semicircle was the only archaeological item found. The arrange-



FIG. 5. — The Semicircle of dog skulls from Feature Área 40 (elemento 01, UE 07) and the plate above them.

ment of the deposit and the essentially synchronous dates of the two radiocarbon dated skulls revealed a single episode of deposition (Table 1). It should be stressed that the sediments lying below this deposit represented a natural infilling and also that the pit was not originally dug out with the intention of providing space for an animal burial. Likewise, we do not have any clear indications as of this writing that the skulls represented beheaded dogs though the retrieval of the first 3-4 cervical vertebrae in three of the isolated skulls suggest that this might have been indeed the case (Fig. 5).

— Feature Área 21 (elemento 04, UE 01), a pit that intersected another one with a Bell Beaker inhumation, documented two complete dogs lying above each other (Fig. 1C: e, 6A). The inhumation, featuring the remains of four humans along with numerous Bell Beaker vases, had been looted previous to the deposition of the dogs. These were respectively laid on an S-N (upper dog) and a W-E (lower dog) direction, over a heap of boulders and large fragments of pottery. The dogs were encased in a stone bed, probably to prevent displacement of their bodies, and their deposition conveys the impression of having been carefully conceived and executed (Fig. 6B). On

the margins of the dog's pit a small assemblage of caprine ribs and scapulae seem to have been packed tightly (ie. deposited inside a cloth?).

THE TERRAPIN DEPOSIT

Feature Área 16, (elemento 04, UE 02), a 1.2m diameter pit with a depth of 0.5m next to a ditch located in the southern part of the site, featured a collection of several thousand dermal plates from terrapins (Fig. 1C: f, 7). These plates were spread out in a semicircle on the pit's southern margin. A preliminary and partial study from this huge assemblage revealed the presence of specimens of different ages from the two Iberian terrapin species, the European pond (*Emys orbicularis* Linnaeus, 1758) and the stripe-necked (*Mauremys leprosa* Schweigger, 1812) (Pérez-García *et al.* 2011).

The scarce bones found among the thousands of plates indicate that mostly carapaces accumulated on Área 16. This suggests that the terrapin bones were removed elsewhere so that this accumulation could hardly qualify as consumption refuse. Such huge concentration of remains on such a restricted space within the pit again conveys the impression that the

carapaces were introduced in some kind of perishable container (ie. a bag?).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Although the spatial and taphonomic analyses of the aforementioned finds are pending as of this writing, several lines of evidence suggest that none of these deposits represent regular food debris in its strictly functional sense. Such line of argumentation rests upon three criteria:

SKELETAL REPRESENTATION

All of the reported finds constitute either complete skeletons or else highly biased spectra of the skeletons from the species. Such is seldom the case when one deals with consumption refuse. Isolated skulls, either with mandibles (dogs) or without them (bovines), and the almost lack of bones in the terrapin sample points to an intentional selection of parts but the same argument applies in the case of complete specimens given that such “selection” reveals that consumption was not the sought after purpose. For these reasons, it seems evident that choice played a key role in the formation of the deposits.

MANIPULATION

Except for the fractures on the skulls of the two dogs that reflect the blows with which they were dispatched, no traces of butchering, defleshing or skinning have been found in these specimens (Daza, 2011). Still, manipulation is hinted at in the way remains were deposited. This includes the placement of remains over platforms (bovines) in semicircle (dogs), and, above all, the careful encasing of the two dogs in the heap of boulders with their legs flexed into position (Fig. 6). All this indicates the amount of labor that went into the placement of the animal remains. The possible use of containers (terrapins) and wrapping (caprines) complement this but manipulations do not seem stop at this point. In this way, the covering of one of the bovine skulls with red ochre has, to our knowledge, never been described in the european archaeozoological literature. Indeed, although covering human bodies with ochre was a common practice throughout the Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic in

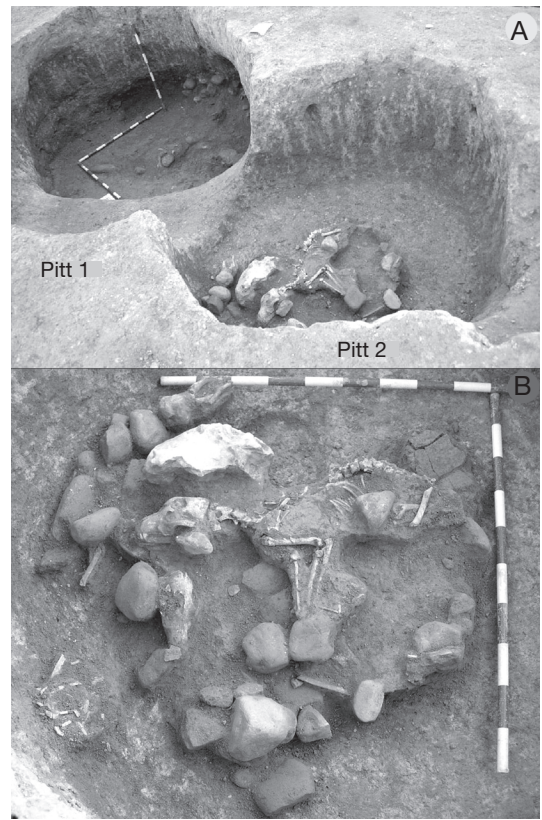


FIG. 6. — **A**, Overview of Feature Área 21 (elemento 04, UE 01) with a collective Bell Beaker grave (pit 1) contacting the (pit 2) where two dogs were buried; **B**, Detail of the two dogs placed over a heap of boulders and pottery fragments.

Europe, and at the graveyard of Skattholm (Swedish Mesolithic) both human and dogs' bodies were covered with ochre (Larsson, 1989), Camino de las Yeseras represents a totally different cultural tradition, devoid of any connotations with hunters and gatherers, and the animal bones here must have been defleshed and horncores removed previous to their impregnation with ochre, something that doesn't seem to be the case in any other instance. In connection with coloring, and despite the fact that no evidence reveals ochre on the dog remains, one should remark that the people at Camino de las Yeseras were deeply acquainted with the use of red colorants. This we know because the rich graves from the Bell Beaker horizon evidenced the use of cinnabar, also documented to decorate

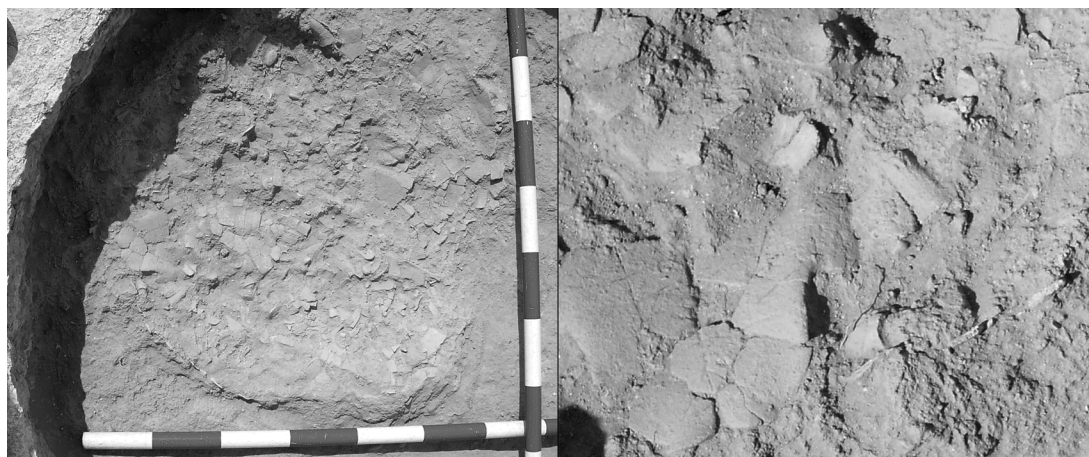


FIG. 7. — The terrapin dermal plate deposit from Área 16 (elemento 04, UE 02): **A**, Overview; **B**, Detail of the carapaces.

symbolic pottery, to either taint/dust human bodies or their shrouds (Ríos & Liesau, 2011).

LOCATION OF THE REMAINS

All of the aforementioned deposits appear disconnected with the bulk of the faunal remains that appear in the center of the settlement and are taken to represent consumption refuse. In addition, some of our singular finds were placed in pits that were purposely dug for them. This would be the case of the complete dog found in the basement of the fourth ditch but was perhaps also the case with the two bovine skulls. The placement of a dog at the entrance of the third enclosure conveys the idea of a foundation ritual but could also be interpreted as the intentional placing of a guardian at the entrance of the inner quarters of the settlement. In connection with the former hypothesis, the retrieval of the piglet bones in the same deposit might reinforce the idea of a foundation pit since piglets are a recurrent theme in foundation rites throughout Iberia from the middle to the end of the second millennium B. C. (Valiente 1992, 1993). Given the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record at Camino de las Yeras, it appears unlikely that one would be ever able to find the reason why one finds what one finds and why it was found precisely there. The placement of offers such as pottery, human and animal remains since Neolithic times has been reported in other

European sites (Davis & Payne 1993; Mount 1994; Baquedano *et al.* 2000; Bradley 2004; Szmyt 2006; Cardoso 2009; Márquez & Jiménez 2010; Perusin & Mazza 2010; Valera *et al.* 2010; Müller 2011).

Although there are a wealth of alternative hypotheses that come mind to explain the peculiar assortment of finds reported in this paper (eg. funerary offers, cenotaphs, etc.), one should not forget that interpretation at this level of analysis is fragile due to a lack of the adequate frames of reference in light of the very partial excavation that has taken place in this site. For such reason, the animal deposits reported here will contribute to enlarge the body of data on faunal remains of non-subsistence nature in the Iberian Peninsula, and hopefully help pave the way for a more systematic search for patterns within the archaeozoological record that will contribute to our understanding of the extremely slippery social and symbolic realms that our discipline occasionally addresses.

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