

The Forgotten Battle. Archaeology of the Spanish Civil War in the Trenches of Oviedo.

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Abstract

In July of 1936 the city of Oviedo rose up in arms against the Republic with a defense of 4,200 soldiers, who were immediately surrounded by 10,000 soldiers of the Popular Army – a number that continually increased throughout the battle. By the end of the siege in October of the same year, Oviedo was completely obliterated. Furthermore, the city received the most damage throughout the Spanish Civil War. Through a touristic project based on maintaining the trenches visible in Pico Paisano we intend to develop an authentic archaeological environment surrounding Oviedo during the Spanish Civil War, providing valuable information and materials – all from a scientific perspective – isolated from the politically charged archaeology applied to this field in Spanish universities.

1. Archaeology or Politics? The “Official Archaeology” of the Spanish Civil War.

Very few European nations can proudly boast of their intensive military history as Spain has over the past millennium and more and still we cannot find a strong war archaeology (Alonso 2008, 291). There are several principle factors that explain Spain’s unique historical position.

First and foremost, the academic specialization in non-historical archaeologies has led many museums within the country to reject artifacts post-16th century as they are deemed not part of Spain’s archaeological heritage.

Second, Spain has held its democracy by ignoring its own Civil War (1936-1939) that severely divided the country. The conflict has become somewhat of a taboo with local politicians, even more so when an archaeologist aims to develop and promote a touristic site – isolated from any political agenda.

Furthermore, the increased archaeological interest in the Spanish Civil War has led to an increased participation in the excavation of mass graves of political opponents, military leaders, and soldiers executed before, during, and after the war. The removal of

these corpses, although far from a recovery mission for family members, has been politicized by the media, historical associations, politicians, and archaeologist alike. (González Ruibal 2010 & guerraenlauniversidad.blogspot.com). Currently, this political concept of scientific research in relation with Spanish Civil War archaeology has been soundly rejected by local institutions who refuse to partake in any possible controversy. Therefore, certain archaeologists and institutions from the "official" Spanish academy who promoted the politicization of the past have obstructed the development of archaeology as a "real war" science in relation to the Civil War.

Last, but not least, the lack of specific legislation rules and regulations on preserving areas of the Spanish Civil War has caused the destruction of many important materials and artifacts related to the war to be deemed legal in most regions of the country. However, in certain cases archaeological work has been permitted prior to urban construction to document potential military artifacts and materials (Sánchez Barroso *et alii* 2004, 172).

With few projects developed so far, Spanish Civil War archaeology is classified into three categories: (1) studies of war materials and artifacts (2) exhumation of mass graves and (3) study of fortifications and/or battlefields. Outside of several minor projects, it can be assured that an authentic archaeology of the Spanish Civil War within the country barely, if at all, exists.

2. The Siege of Oviedo

Oviedo, the capital of the province of Asturias, came under Republican rule by July 1936, which marked the commencement of the Spanish Civil War. The head commander of the troops stationed in Oviedo, Colonel Antonio Aranda, promised loyalty to the local Republican government and politicians, due to this commitment many Asturian miners traveled to Madrid to fight against the Nationalist forces. Aranda, taking advantage of the vacancy left behind by the miners switched allegiances to the Nationalists, thus leaving Oviedo completely surrounded by Republican forces (Cabezas 1984).

Nationalist forces in the city were very few compared to their counterparts, the Republicans, however much more professional. They consisted of branches in the military, police, the civil guard and the Falangists, a Fascist wing composed of youth trained in

weaponry, which were joined by hundreds of local volunteers. The Republican Army, also coined the Red Army, despite relying on tens of thousands of men, were primarily composed of miners and local workers without any form of military training. However, over the course of the campaign, Republicans were partnered with professional Soviet troops and armed with Soviet weapons sent from Joseph Stalin, leader of the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) (Vázquez Prada 1984).



Fig. 1: Communist troops attempting to assault Oviedo in 1937. Photo credit: Constantino Suárez.

Aranda's tactic consisted on maintaining several strategic positions away from the city of Oviedo, in order to buy time for relief forces from Galicia (Martínez 1947). Over several months of massive aerial bombings and an increased number of Republican soldiers,

Nationalist troops were forced to retreat into the center of Oviedo. There, both armies fought hand-to-hand combat and from house-to-house.

On October 16th, National relief forces broke through the siege and created a 12 mile (20km) supply line and for the evacuation of Oviedo's citizens. From that moment forth, Republican forces attempted to destroy the supply line by overtaking the highest hills that protected it. However, despite heavy casualties, the front did not switch over until the end of the war in Asturias in 1937 (Garate 1973).



Fig. 2: Nationalist defense soldiers displaying unexploded Communist bombs among the ruins once the battle is over.

The Battle of Oviedo, developed not only within the city and its suburbs but also within the 12 mile supply line, protected on both sides by trenches and bunkers, formed spectacular battlefield dimensions and abandoned war materials. Human remains of soldiers and unexploded bombshells continue to appear frequently on the surface of the vast battlefield on the hills surrounding the city, reminding Oviedians that the battle is one of the least studied military confrontations of the entire Civil War.

The months of conflict in the city allowed Republican forces to practice new military tactics, such as long distance underground mining, as well as using new weapons that had not been marketed, taking full advantage of the nearby arms factory in Trubia. Once the battle was over and 80% of the city completely destroyed, the possibility of creating a new capital several miles away was thought of as a cheaper alternative than reconstructing the entire city.

One strange and interesting fact of the battle was as soon as it ended, international tours were created for foreign journalists and visitors. The main attraction amongst the international community was the hundreds of weapons used between both the Nationalist and Republicans and captured Republican tanks. The level of destruction and the international fame of the siege came at the cost of local citizens and all while in the midst of the Spanish Civil War.

3. Paisano's Peak.

A small mountain, Mount Naranco, rises north of the city and from its peak overlooks the entire city of Oviedo. Paisano's Peak is geographically the highest point of Mount Naranco and has the best views of the entire city. Converted today as a touristic site, during the battle it was the most important position to defend and attack the city.

In the midst of the Republican advancement in Oviedo and its suburbs, Paisano's Peak laid too far behind the front line. During the night, a Nationalist relief force flanked and surprised the Republican forces on the peak, pushing them back down into the city. This retreat allowed for the relief unit to advance into the city to aid other Nationalist forces still defending within the city.

Several Nationalist reinforcements were left behind to fortify the hill, conscious of possibly overtaking the city completely, thus guaranteeing full victory. However, Republican forces were keen on retaking Naranco and in February 1937 planned an offensive to regain the ground. They understood if the offensive succeeded, than the Nationalist supply line would be cut off and reinforcements into the city would be nearly impossible.



Fig. 3: Map of Paisano's Peak, the highest point of Mount Naranco, overlooking the entire city of Oviedo.



Fig. 4. General view of Paisano's Peak.

The Nationalists, aware of the strategic value of Paisano's Peak, defended the high ground with an elite group of Moroccan regulars. These highly trained soldiers believed their fight – and death – against Communism would guarantee them a rich reward in paradise. The African troops created a network of trenches in the form of spider-webs through successive circles around the top of the hill, connected by communication trenches that zigged-zagged together with a central command center at the top of the hill.



Fig. 5. African troops on top of Paisano's Peak in 1937.

On February 20th, 1937 at approximately 8 pm, Republican forces initiated a full-scale attack on the African Nationalist troops defending the Peak. According to a correspondent for the agency, Logos, who reported from the front lines in Asturias and watched the battle develop described in the following: *"However, at eight in the evening the heaviest fighting was recorded. The Reds (Republicans) pretended to overtake the position known as the Pico Paisano, at the summit of Naranco. From Oviedo, the fighting was contemplated by the defensive forces in this position. The Reds from the location known as 'Pinewood' advanced to our location, where there was regular forces. In the beginning the Marxists were not bothered, and because of that were able to throw a large number of grenades,*

which did not reach our trenches because they were thrown from a large distance away. When the Reds were close to our soldiers, the regulars came out, and within half an hour slaughtered the Marxist unit with knives. Soon after, a great silence came over Mount Naranco. The Moors devoted themselves in picking up the bodies of their enemy, which amounted to three hundred, and to remove the injured. Within the clothes of a captain's corpse was found a written order with these terms: "without any excuse you must occupy Pico Paisano; once you have gained it, make a signal to send more people. By sunrise I should be at the doors of Oviedo descending towards Naranco". It was found that the forces who wanted to seize Pico Paisano corresponded to the Basque battalion Larrañaga". (Pérez Solís 1938: 323-324).

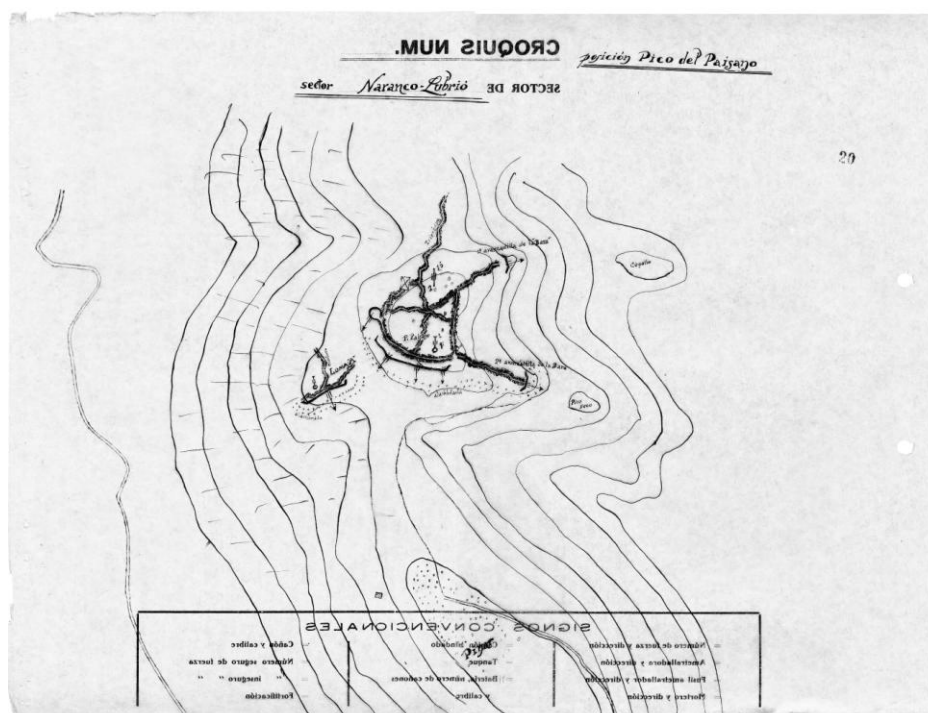


Fig. 6: Nationalist military map displaying defense locations to protect Pico Paisano.

In this respect, we should note the information recently transmitted to our team by researcher Guillermo Tabernilla, specialist in the history of the Basques regiments during the Spanish Civil War, states these troops could not have matched the Larrañaga battalion, but rather belonged to an Asturian Communist battalion.

4. Archaeological excavations and their contributions to the battle of Paisano's Peak

Despite the hundreds of miles of trenches and bunkers that currently exist inside Asturias, this is only the third time that archaeological techniques have been applied to a Civil War battlefield, as the previous two occurred due to emergency. (Álvarez 2008).

During our 2013 excavation campaign, we focused our work on the eastern side of the hill in the trenches, which laid directly in front of the Republican forces and the front line of combat. The trenches' excellent state of preservation and its immediate proximity to the touristic site provides a unique location for our military archaeological project.

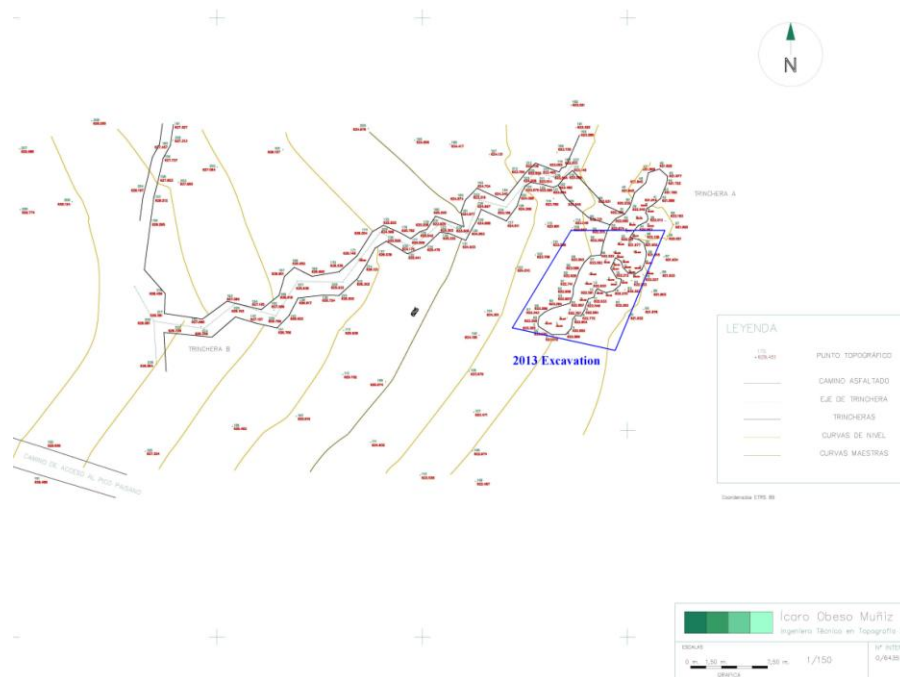


Fig. 7: Topography of the studied trench and excavation in 2013

The excavation process began with the removal of the vegetation that covered the defensive structures and subsequent topography. The excavated portion of the trench was extremely simple: a superficial level covered the geological stone floor on which the fortified line was built.

The excavation project exposed a thirty-two yard long stretch trench with several positions dug into the rock for unknown reasons. One of the project's first objectives was to determine - through a series of markings on the map - which position was used for domestic purposes or exclusively militarily.

It resulted that location was that of a shelter, where remains of a fire was discovered in front of a shelf carved into the rock, which served as a natural bed for the soldiers, as well as several machinegun positions.



Fig. 8. Firing position excavated with stone parapets overturned on one of their sectors. The findings demonstrate the combined use of stone blocks and sandbags along the entire trench.

The second objective was to confirm the authenticity of the reporter who witnessed the battle in 1937. Through an analysis of the ammunition and items discovered in the trenches, it proves the Republicans did indeed take this positions, just shy fifty-four yards from the Peak's summit and left behind a large quantity of hand grenades. Furthermore, empty shell casings belonging to the Republicans are marked with the name of the imported country such as Mexico, Poland, and the Czech Republic

Last occupation witnessed in the trenches, German ammunition left behind – evidence that Nationalist forces overtook the ground. Together, with these recent military remains, numerous scattered Communist military boots have been discovered, whose owners were possibly killed and left buried within the hill.

The remaining material was divided into two groups, one domestic and another military, as it was the only method to determine areas of use – if in doubt. Domestically, constructive remains exist with iron beams that supported the shelter, and fabric from the sacks of earth, along with remnants of everyday use, such as food and liquid containers.



Fig. 9. Refuge excavated in the rock at the southernmost end of the trench. This position depicts the first domestic use of the structure by the defenders, and was later used by the assailants who occupied the area in February 1937 as a firing position.

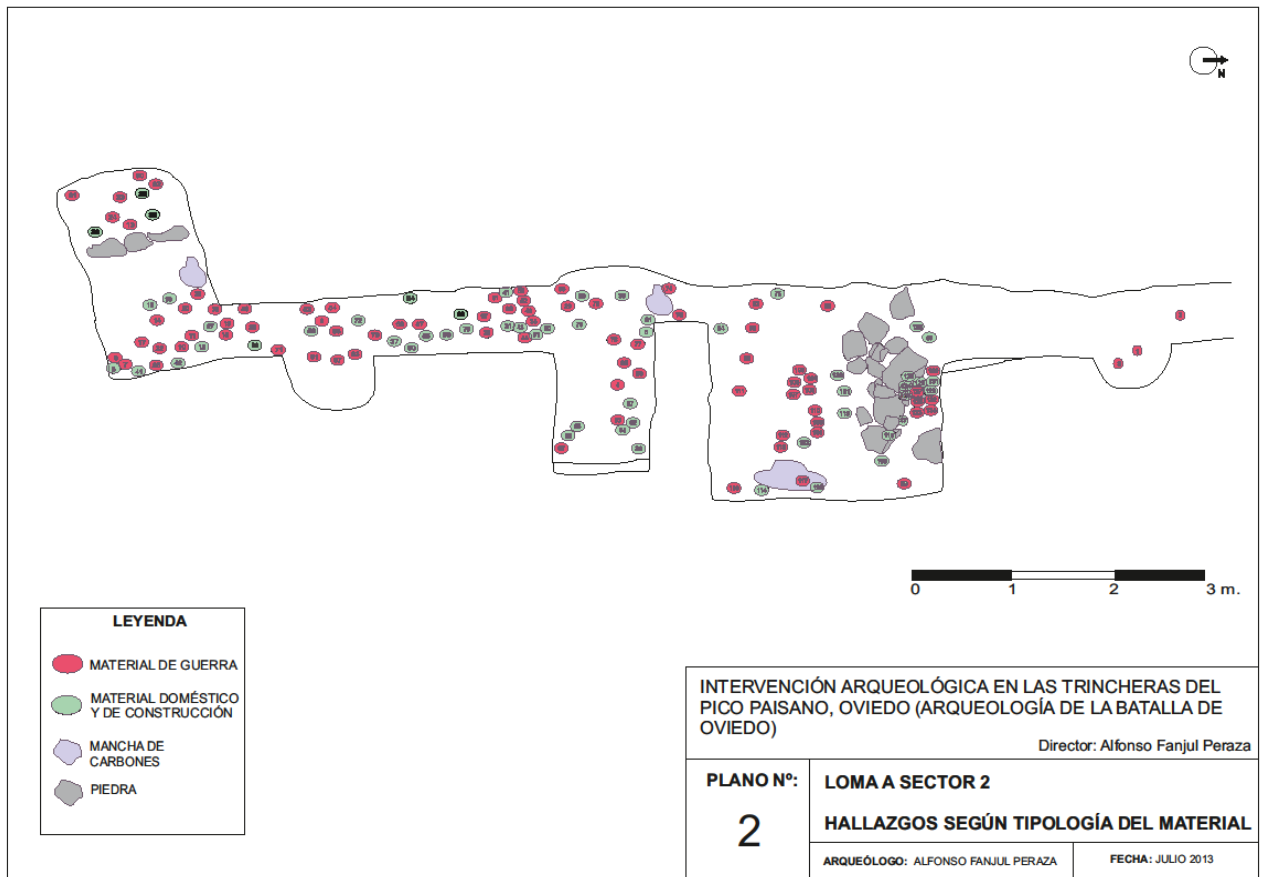


Fig. 10. Map with the distribution of objects found and its division between military parts and elements of domestic-type construction.

Among the military items discovered included an abundant amount of shell casings, the remains of several hand grenades launched from within the trenches, boxes of ammunition, as well as several symbolic materials such as a bronze tip flag, carved with the Spanish monarchical infantry shield.

According to the analysis of the material uncovered in the trenches, the Republican forces were fifty-four yards shy from the Peak's summit. If they had gained those remaining yards, than most likely the outcome in the battle for Oviedo might have been differently.

In conclusion, we theorize that the political spectrum of Civil War archaeology developed so far, means we cannot consider most of the projects that have been developed as scientific.



Fig.11. The boots of a soldier found in the trenches and its excellent preservation due to the immediate collapse of the clay that covered the trench during the offensive in February 1937.



Fig.12. A bronze tent cap with the military shield of the infantry pre-Civil War.

The objective of the Civil War archaeology – aside from the political spectrum – does not need to be a secondary science that fills in the intellectual gaps, but as explained in Paisano's Peak, where there is extensive documented information, the material always provides data to the historical discourse.

Despite the difficulties of public funding and academic promotion for developers of non-political research projects of the Civil War, we believe that it is possible to build an archaeology of the Spanish Civil War, which provides supplementary information to military events, in the same way the European War Archaeology (Sanders 2002, 103 & 2007) is proving to be a reliable contribution to the history of our recent past.

5. References.

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