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# THE ROMAN THEATRE AT CLUNIA, SPAIN

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Since a very young age I was fascinated by history, but wanted to go into a more hands-on career. Needless to say, my discovery of archaeology a few years' later gave meaning to my ambitions, and now – at nearly 20 years old – I am finally making my way to a BA Honours degree in Archaeology at one of the top universities in the country. Now my career ambitions have focussed on a more specialised sphere, Forensic Archaeology, partially influenced by my fieldwork experience this summer.

Having been a high achiever throughout my educational life, my 'high mark' ambitions have not changed through entering university, and so when the University of Nottingham informed students that we must undertake at least 20 working days of practical fieldwork before Christmas 2008 in order to complete the second year, I made it a point to sign on to an interesting field project very early on in the year; advice that my professor gave me, which I fully recommend you follow, "If you can afford to work abroad now, do so, as you may not get this chance again. Also, apply early as spaces are snapped up on these projects".



Fig 1: Map of Spain showing location of Clunia  
(Map: <http://www.archaeospain.com>)

Taking in the fact that I've always been as weak as a new born kitten (or was before this summer), the thought of spending hours on my hands and knees trowelling away at dirt, wielding a pickaxe twice my weight, not to mention coping with the any evil bugs that may be laying in wait, made me shudder in horror. Therefore, I concluded that if I had to die of exhaustion this summer, it might as well be somewhere hot and picturesque. Discovering the ArchaeoSpain organisation, which offers a range of different and exciting excavation choices, I decided to apply for the Roman Theatre project at Clunia.

Having once acted as the Roman administrative capital of Northern Iberia, Clunia is a large site close to Burgos, and contains many remains of Roman buildings, the theatre being it's most prominent. The city itself dates from around 1st century BC, but the exact date of the theatre is still to be determined. The small finds our team excavated this summer date from 1st century at least, but there were artefacts that may have dated from previous centuries. Previous years of excavation of the theatre at Clunia have showed function and structure of the building, and have also gone a short way to show the development of the rest of the area. The theatre itself is partially carved out of the bedrock, and overlooks the landscape surrounding it.

Until recently live performances were still held at the theatre. Past excavations have found that the theatre seated around 9,000 viewers, and the local government aims to restore the seating area to it's former glory in order for modern performances to continue. In 2003 the team discovered the theatre's main drainage system that continues to work to this day. The following year it was concluded that the theatre had been converted into an amphitheatre, and a large stone block was found with an inscription naming the consuls who renovated it, thus allowing the conversion to be dated at AD 169. Last summer a Visigothic necropolis was also discovered just past the theatre back wall, complete with several burials. Our team continued to excavate the previously discovered backstage area, where we excavated the back wall of the theatre, and ramps leading from the stage to the back rooms. Next year's team will continue the work we began, and also continue uncovering the drainage system.



Fig 2: View of the Roman Theatre from the top  
(Photo: Sara Champlin)

All training was on site, building up experience and learning as you went along. Our daily work at first involved cleaning, lots of weeding, and removing unwanted rocks and soil. We then excavated the wall by working in small teams, using pickaxes and shovels; one of the key things I learned on this excavation was that there is a technique to shovelling! The wheelbarrows were heavy, and the trainee pick axing was lethal, but after a week of toil and trauma (not to mention plenty of moaning and groaning) our muscles grew to meet the required workload, and soon we were ploughing away at centuries of soil to the steady flow of Disney songs. The Spanish team were fun and supportive, with lots of laughs to be had, on site and off; admittedly English language was limited for some, but that did not prevent communication (often achieved through lengthy games of Charades).



Fig 3: Working on site, showing [left to right] site director Dr Francesc Tuset, ArchaeoSpain director Mike Elkin, Amy Cholerton. (Photo: Maria Alberta Badini Confalonieri)



Fig 4: Roman figurine. (Photo: Amy Cholerton)

Our next task was to uncover the backstage floor, so many a day was spent on our hands and knees scraping away layers. Surprisingly there were plenty of finds hidden amongst such thin layers, including cow skulls, patterned pottery, bones, a ladies hairpin, and even an engraved figurine!

We also had the chance to survey and record the area, catalogued a few items, and also washed many a piece of pottery, bone and nail, plus spent a fun day washing broken column pieces and even a statue. Our aim to uncover the backstage area was achieved, and future teams will focus on uncovering the rest of the theatre.



Fig 5: A trip into the theatre drainage system, showing Manuel. (Photo: Amy Cholerton)

Offsite the social side was never lacking; lunch and dinner at the local restaurant provided opportunities to get to know people, evening games in the director's living room or the team house, and particularly memorable fiestas in nearby villages. One such trip to local archaeological site Tiermes resulted in our team taking part in a Pagan festival by dressing up as Romans, waving torches, and chanting to the moon whilst local tourists watched, mesmerized.



Every weekend and some evenings, trips were organised to local historical or archaeological sites. These included the Roman City of Tiermes, the Dolmen of Cubillejo de Lara, the Roman Villa of Baños de Valdearados, the Visigothic Necropolis of Cuyacabras and Visigothic Church of Quintanilla de las Viñas, the Romanesque Monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos, the medieval Castles of Gormaz and Caracena, the medieval town of Peñaranda de Duero, and the regional capital city of Burgos.

Fig 6: The team dressed as Romans at the Pagan Festival at Tiermes (Photo: Felix Paulinski)

My overall and general impression of the site and the people was that there was much to be learned and discovered through organised, methodological physical work, and that although the work was tiring, the team and volunteers clearly enjoyed what they did, creating a comfortable atmosphere, and making memorable friends from all over the world. The archaeological remains of the site are very impressive, and if you do not work there, I fully recommend you visit the site. The work is suitable for all ages and abilities, even the director's young son came to help on occasion, and you can choose to volunteer separately, or as part of the ArchaeoSpain team, with whom I worked and lived for four weeks. The excavation met all my university requirements, as well as my own expectations, plus some, since I never expected to have so much fun at work, or make so many new friends.



Fig 7: The team on an outing, showing [left to right] Amy Cholerton, Sara Champlin, Kaley Marie, Manuel Larson Santos, Mike Elkin, Iza Romanwska, Maria Alberta Badini Confalonieri and Felix Paulinski. (Photo: Axia)



Fig 8: ArchaeoSpain volunteers after hours showing [left to right] Amy Cholerton, Felix Paulinski, Maria Alberta Badini Confalonieri, Kaley Marie, Manuel, Sara Champlin, and Christina. (Photo: Axia)

In terms of learning about the physical and fundamental side of archaeology, the Clunia project is perfect for anyone wanting to get their hands dirty, and learn the skills required in the field. Personally, ArchaeoSpain helped me fulfil my university requirements to the full by teaching me many of the skills I'll need in a future career in archaeology; by allowing me to handle the body we found buried within the wall, this experience showed me that my ambitions lie in forensics as I wanted to know the who, why's and how's of the mysteriously-placed person. The team took good care of us all, and I would certainly go again; therefore I highly recommend Clunia as both a learning experience and a unique, fun opportunity to all aspiring archaeologists and future volunteers.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the Archaeology Abroad Fieldwork Award programme, which assisted me with funding in order for me to attend such a unique experience as ArchaeoSpain's Clunia project.

Out of a possible 5 trowel rating, I give Clunia 5!

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