

Zorita Castle

A GLIMPSE OF MEDIEVAL LIFE IN A SPANISH STRONGHOLD

Amidst the olive tree-lined plains of central Spain is a remote Medieval castle overlooked by archaeologists until the arrival of husband-and-wife team **Dionisio Urbina** and **Catalina Urquijo**. What secrets are emerging from this bastion of history?

Zorita Castle perches on a plateau overlooking the village of Zorita de los Canes, a community of just 85 inhabitants in the heart of Spain. But between the 9th and 13th centuries this site was a thriving hub of commerce, and hotly contested during

the wars that raged between Muslim and Christian forces battling for control of Spain. Eventually, the castle became the property of the Spanish crown and subsequently passed into the hands of various noblemen (see box on p.42). But by the end of the Medieval period, its glory days were over, and it slowly fell





OPPOSITE PAGE Zorita Castle, a Medieval jewel in central Spain, as seen from the south.

LEFT The floor area of the castle courtyard, where the team were hopeful they would find the tombs of the castle's knights.

open courtyard is where the men and horses were housed, and where the basic necessities for castle life were stored.

Opposite, on the right, is the Romanesque Christian church built by the Calatrava knights in the 12th century, with its subterranean crypt and watchtower accessed by a narrow spiral staircase. Past the church is the castle keep, the lord's chambers, and – after passing through a tunnel – a triangular lookout post that from the ground looks like the bow of a large ship.

In 2008, Zorita Town Hall spent about €750,000 on an emergency restoration project to reinforce falling walls and to restore the gateway arches and the church. The first archaeological study inside the castle, however, began last summer, when we began excavation of the small, open courtyard just to the south of the church – an area thought to be where the castle's knights were buried.

Medieval documents mention a cemetery, but the only clue to this area's function was a long stone slab – possibly a burial cover – just visible above the ground. When we began clearing the ground of vegetation and loose soil, and brushed the slab, we found a carving of Medieval Tic-Tac-Toe, a game we owe to the Arabs.

The slab game was just the beginning. We uncovered three *in situ* burials, >

into ruin. By the 20th century it was badly neglected and, though declared a site of national cultural importance in 1931, Zorita Castle remained largely forgotten or ignored. Until now.

The castle is a mere 90-minute-drive east of Madrid in the Guadalajara province. It lies on the banks of the Tagus, the country's longest waterway – a prime position, as the site controlled one of the three bridges that crossed the river. The original fortress, which covered an area slightly smaller than an international football pitch, was built in the 9th century AD by armies from North Africa following the Moorish and Berber invasion of what is now known as Spain. The foundations are made of stonework looted by the builders from the nearby ruins of Reccopolis (see CWA 65), built by the Visigoths who controlled Spain following the collapse of the Roman Empire. Persian physician and scholar Muhammad Ibn Zakariya Razi wrote in the 10th century

AD: 'Zorita is strong because it is made from the stones of Reccopolis.'

The castle walls remain tall and intact, with two monumental gates on the eastern and western sides, accessed by steep switchbacks. The southern side is too steep and narrow to approach the walls; but the northern end, with a wider and more gentle slope, was vulnerable to attack. The walls are taller here, but unfortunately the gate no longer survives. For added security during the castle's later period, builders dug out a huge moat to protect the northern side. According to Medieval documents, the town's Jewish quarter sat on this slope, just outside the castle wall.

A stone pathway leads to the western gate, whose walls comprise a combination of bedrock and dressed stone. Once through the horseshoe arch, to the left sits the expansive bailey, with several underground cisterns, wells, and chambers. This



ABOVE A single burial placed in a carved stone tomb. Behind this grave is a double burial (see also inset) with the individuals placed directly into the ground.

ALL IMAGES: Dionisio Urbina

A PESETA FOR ZORITA

Its elevated position made Zorita Castle almost impregnable, and thanks to the taxes it could collect from merchants crossing the bridge over the Tagus River, it became an attractive asset for competing powers in Medieval Iberia. A document from 926 says the castle was a strategic site during an internal revolt against the Caliph Abderraman III, who reigned from Cordoba in southern Spain. In 1085, the castle passed to Alfonso VI – king of Castilla, Leon, and Galicia – as part of a treaty with Al-Qadir, ruler of the Muslim *taifa*, or kingdom, of Toledo. Legend says that the castle went to Alfonso as part of a wedding dowry when he married Al-Qadir's 12-year-old daughter, Zaida.

Subsequent war and peace between Christian and Muslim factions resulted in the castle changing hands several times.

RIGHT The Medieval Zorita Castle dominates the surrounding landscape.

But in the mid-12th century, King Alfonso VII of Castilla, Leon, and Galicia took Zorita Castle during his military campaigns against the Moors. The castle never again fell in battle to Muslim forces.

Christian nobles squabbled over control of Zorita for a few decades, until 1174, when the crown gave the castle to the Order of Calatrava, Spain's first military order, linked to the Cistercian order of monks. Led by Martin Pérez de Siones, the Calatrava knights converted Zorita Castle into a full-time war machine (in addition to building the church, which is now the best-preserved structure). Soon, however, fighting over the castle continued among factions within the



Calatrava order. And as the order's territory grew in different directions, Zorita became a backwater populated by renegade knights not welcome in elite circles.

By the 15th century, with the battles against the Muslims all but finished, Spain's military orders disappeared or were absorbed into the aristocracy. Zorita Castle passed to the Spanish crown, and then to numerous noble families, before the ruins were sold to the Zorita de los Canes Town Hall for a symbolic one peseta in 1994.

confirming the presence of the cemetery. The dead had been placed on their backs and facing eastwards, with legs straight and arms crossed over their chests. Two were buried directly in the ground, the third was encased in an anthropomorphic stone tomb. All three are adult males, and preliminary examination revealed that at least one, who had out-lived all his teeth, had reached old age. It seems probable that these individuals were either members of clergy or knights of the Calatrava order, as only they would have typically been accorded the right to be buried so close to the church within the castle's walls.

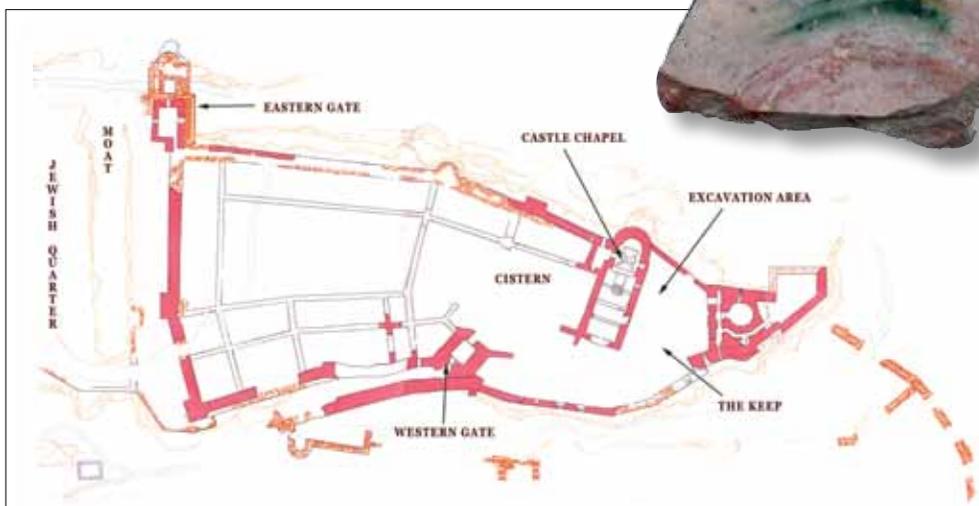
RIGHT Glazed ceramic sherds bearing Spanish-Islamic designs typical of the period 1350-1450.
BELOW Site plan showing the area of excavation.

Dating the tombs has so far proved difficult because we did not find any grave goods. However, we do know that this area was turned into a cemetery when the church was renovated, suggesting these burials occurred between the end of the 13th century and the middle of the 14th century. Modifications to the church included converting a door into a window, and installing two arched-niches into the outside wall to accommodate sarcophagi, one of which is still there. During this work, builders tossed some of the unwanted materials – mouldings, columns, and arch stones, for example – into a trench

along the base of the church wall.

Where the church and the castle's eastern wall meet, we discovered a previously undocumented structure with rectangular walls measuring 3m x 5m. The walls were constructed using stone and earth, the latter employing a technique popular among the Berber Almohad Caliphate that controlled all of Iberia from 1172 to 1212. This method is similar to making concrete, except that the Caliphate used soil instead of clay. The walls were finished with a layer of plaster, as was a bench and a type of altar on one end of the structure that was accessed via a few steps. On one side of the altar we found carefully piled river stones and some human bones. Though work continues in this section, it seems probable that this structure was some sort of chapel.

We also uncovered the remains of the fallen walls and ceiling, in addition to glass and pottery sherds. Some of the artefacts included glazed ceramic plates with geometric and floral designs in green and black over a white base. This is a well-known Spanish-Islamic design dating to around 1350 to 1450. We were able to further hone our chronology with the discovery of three coins from the reigns of Enrique III, Juan II, and Enrique IV, who ruled from 1390 to 1474.





LEFT Exploration of an area at the junction of the church and the castle's eastern wall, whose purpose is as yet unexplained. BELOW Piles of human bone fragments were found here, possibly cleared from ground that was once a cemetery.



But our most curious find from this structure was a small stone cannonball. Artillery using gunpowder developed in Spain in around 1425. Over the following decades, architects began changing the openings in castle walls, previously used by archers, to accommodate long-range and short-range cannons. In Zorita Castle there are very few archer-openings remaining, but many spots for cannons. The Calatrava order laid out their armament in a text from 1491: four large cannons, 31 long-barrelled rifles, hundreds of iron rifle balls, stone cannonballs, and moulds for manufacturing projectiles.

Because we found the cannonball by itself, and so close to one of the more ruined parts of the castle walls, it is possible that it is evidence of an enemy attack, and may even have been part of the volley responsible for destroying the structure we were excavating. The period around the reign of Enrique IV in the second half of the 15th century saw much military action. His time on the throne and the battle for succession following his death in 1474 was rife with internal conflict, as various factions jostled to tip the balance of power in their favour. Eventually, his half-sister Isabel assumed power and married Fernando, the prince of Aragon. The pair united their kingdoms, expelled the Jews and Muslims, and financed Christopher Columbus's voyage to the Americas.

Another interesting find was a small, polished axe that dated to the Bronze Age. Despite the age gap, discovering one of these

axes in a Medieval site, whether Christian or Muslim populations, is not uncommon. They were thought to bring good luck, and were often buried in the home beneath the floor. In Spain they are popularly called 'lightening stones' because it was said they fell to the earth with lightning bolts. But it was in the corner of the cemetery where the church meets the castle wall that we uncovered a find linking the cemetery to the mysterious structure. We found what appears to be a rubbish pile, full of pottery sherds and iron fragments, but also containing a mass of human bones belonging to about 20 individuals. It is possible that the remains were dug up from the cemetery during the building of this structure, and simply tossed into the corner.

BELOW Is this stone cannonball evidence of an enemy attack?

LEFT A polished Bronze Age axe was probably an heirloom. They were called 'lightening stones' because it was believed they fell from lightning bolts in the sky, and were thought to bring good fortune.



Tip of the iceberg

Towards the end of the season, we began to investigate the area facing the church entrance, where 16th-century documents suggest the lord's chambers would be. This would be the most lavish section of the castle, but though we uncovered wall foundations and some high-quality mouldings, we found few artefacts other than fragments of glass and a brass button.

So far, we have just scratched the surface at Zorita Castle. In our forthcoming excavation seasons, we will seek to establish the boundaries and the chronology of the cemetery. And, as some of the bases of the castle walls reveal a construction technique common during the Caliphate period in the 10th century, and the upper levels date to the middle of the 15th century, we have about 500 years of occupation to uncover. Clearly, Zorita Castle has much to teach us about Christian and Muslim armies during the Middle Ages. ■

SOURCE Catalina Urquijo and Dr Dionisio Urbina, site directors, Zorita Castle Project, Spain.

JOIN IN

Two groups of high school students from the United States, Spain, Canada, and Britain joined the field school organised by the regional Castilla-La Mancha government, US firm ArchaeoSpain, and the non-profit American Foreign Academic Research (AFAR). For more information on the Zorita Castle field school, please visit www.archaeospain.com/zorita or email programs@archaeospain.com.