Ethnography and Archaeology in Upland Mediterranean Spain

Manolo's world: Peopling the recent past in the Serra de l’Altmirant

Neil Christie, Paul Beavitt, Josep A. Gisbert Santonja, Joan Seguí and Maria Victoria Gil Senís

with contributions by Josep Castelló, Oliver Creighton and Ferran-Lluís Naya i Alemany

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ETHNOGRAPHY AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN 
THE SERRA DE L'ALTMIIRANT 
MANOLO'S WORLD: 
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Manolo (see cover photo) is the last resident working shepherd and farmer in the upland district of La Llacuna in eastern Spain, in a space now progressively being eaten away by modern holiday colonisation. His is a rough and ready looking farm, old limestone and new (but weathered) breeze block combined, with a flock of 40 sheep sheltered inside the pen forming the central unit of his farmstead or corral (see Section 2.4; pls.2, 21-26). This building blends well into the landscape, in contrast with the white-washed, metallic, corrugated or breeze/concrete block houses now dotted around the basin and slopes of the mountain-girded basin. Manolo’s farm seems distant from these new houses, but it also seems a million miles away from the towering tourist apartments and heady nightlife of Benidorm a mere 40km away direct (pl.14). Manolo’s farm is not in truth an alien relic untouched by the present: his radio blares away, he has his cigarettes, and he even has a small solar panel on his roof for electricity – but there is enough of the past in his farm and farm to stand out.

The Serra de l’Altmirant Survey Project has aimed to contribute to extending knowledge of a little studied area and period in an upland district of central eastern Spain (figs.1, 8). Though in sight of the coast and the lush orange, olive and almond groves of the coastal plain between Alicante and Valencia (and with the fine flesh of the oranges more than adequate testimony to the fertility of the plain!), the inland zones of La Safor are rapidly mountainous and with settlement and cultivation strongly linked to the valleys and their immediate slopes. Yet the uppermost slopes, the plateaus and the watersheds between these upland areas are equally part of the human landscape of eastern Spain: they feature old villages, far less transformed than the coastal settlements through tourism, occasional Islamic and later castles, smaller working farms, plus ruinous farms, enclosures and terraces, and the occasional shepherd. The image to be reconstructed is one of a fairly busy and working landscape, with various small plots worked by villagers and farmers, and with a greater frequency of shepherding and local, vertical transhumance (see Part IV).

But this working past has been much eroded and obscured, and indeed, many old farms and storage structures are now in zones reverting to nature, walls and terraces re-colonised by scrub. Yet this fragmented past is now coming under threat also by human colonisation and exploitation: in our study area, the lower zone, the Plà de la Llacuna (or La Llacuna), easily reached by a tarmac road from the township of Villalonga, has witnessed in the last decade or so a spawning of numerous houses, chalets, villas, stores, mainly for holiday/weekend use by local families, but with some also geared for land use, indicated by terraced fields chiefly containing almond trees but with some olive groves and varied vegetable patches (see pls.1b, 12). These farm units are clearly being slowly ousted by holiday houses, few of constructional and architectural quality (pls.15, 86). As a result various of the oldest structures lie wholly abandoned, ready for demolition. Elsewhere in the zone there is quarrying for limestone, there is clay extraction, and also removal of the rich terrarossa soil; in places this is of up to 10m depth, and as detailed below (see Section 1.4) it contains evidence of palaeolithic activity – unchecked exploitation will remove more of this important archaeology. Meanwhile, electricity and telephone lines, and the all-essential satellite dishes, have begun to make a mark on the skylines. By AD 2000, two restaurants had appeared at the eastern end of La Llacuna.

The tarmac road currently reaches as far as the small lake/water hole; the rough track with exposed stones and boulders for the present limits much further modern expansion, although this will undoubtedly progress soon (see Section 3.1). The track in fact eases and then follows up the northern flanks of the Tossalet de Llamp and Serra de l’Altmirant to emerge on the high watershed (c. 606m) and turns south-westwards to run through the exposed plateau running down...
Pl. 1a (above): The spectacular natural and human landscape in the Vall de Gallinera – ridge farm and slope terraces amidst limestone bedrock and tumble and Mediterranean scrub

Pl. 1b (right): The more manufactured landscape of the Plu de la Llucuna

Pl. 2 (below): Manolo being interviewed by Joan Segui in his corral's main byre
to the Vall de Gallinera (pls.1a. 17). Here settlement is extremely limited and the landscape seemingly dominated by scrub; there are occasional pockets of terraced cultivation, but working farms are few and far between before the contours fall to the 500m and then 400m level and the tarmac road resumes, running down to the valley villages and townships of Benisili, Patró, Beniali and La Carrocha and then twisting between olives and almond groves bordered by well tended terraces (see map, figs.1, 8).

The structures and terraces that lie ruinous or only in part maintained on the Gallinera side do not present any great antiquity. Indeed, they are in many instances units belonging at most to the earlier part of the last century and denote colonising efforts by farmers and shepherds deriving from the Gallinera villages. Some structures belong to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although very few have any related documentation. Their locations relate to a pre-mechanised era and to one when tracks for people, donkeys, sheep and goat followed north-south flowing torrent beds; the modern roadway, for ease of vehicular use, ignores many of the older structures. For the La Llacuna zone much of this pre-modern past has already been obscured; for the Gallinera zone there is still time and scope to investigate and study these remnants. As noted, this is not a distant past, and yet even to locals, much has been forgotten. The Gallinera zone has itself been threatened for various reasons. Josep Gisbert, as head of the Museu Arqueologic of the city of Denia, has long promoted greater interest in local history and ethnography; his extensive local knowledge of the region and its landscape and his own initial mapping of the Safor zone alerted him to the need to record the information presented by the buildings there. Dr. Joan Segui was undertaking at Leicester MA and then doctoral research into shepherds and ethnoarchaeology in the Famorca and Fageca districts, and he was thus able to extend his expertise into this related district (Segui 1995, 1999). Similarly Victoria Gil Senis’ study offered an extension to work already undertaken by her for an MA thesis on the geomorphology of the territory (Gil Senis 1987a, 1987b, 1989).

The British collaborators drew upon their expertise and experiences from project work on the Rascino plateau in central Italy, integrating survey, excavation and ethnoarchaeology in interpreting medieval settlement and exploitation in relation to transhumance. As in La Llacuna, Rascino had, in the 1990s, been opened up to tourism, marked by a new tarmac road, the building of a bar-cum-restaurant, the scattering of barbeque points, and the transportation of sheep and shepherds by lorry. Shepherds and extant farmhouses all provided invaluable guides to assessing archaeological survivals (Barker & Grant 1991; Christie ed. 1992; Beavitt, Christie & Leggio 1994). The lure of more sunshine, sheep and (the occasional trip to the) sea was enough to tempt Paul Beavitt, with nearby summer residence, to organise with Dr. Gisbert, the Serra de l’Altmiran Survey (pl.4).

This is one of few studies which have investigated post-medieval and pre-modern landscapes as their central brief; in most other cases, the period is one tackled onto wider survey projects, even if with good academic ethnographic/ethnoarchaeological input (e.g. Barker & Grant 1991); or too often the medieval and modern periods are ignored through
being less interesting or being too visible to map and interpret. Documents do exist and structures may stand, but frequently the two do not come together and oral history may remain untapped until the final vestiges of the pre-modern past disappear (cf. Whitelaw 1991: Stedman 1996).

We hope that this project goes some way to bringing into focus a marginal but fascinating area of Spain: beautiful and seemingly wild, but one in which humans and nature once combined resourcefully, even if only for a relatively short while. The contrast is now between the wilderness of the Gallinera and the chaotic human scatterings in the Llacuna: the former where man seemingly lost out and nature reclaimed its space, and the latter where nature is being eroded. Something of the old continues, however: a few shepherds — but perhaps three at most for the Gallinera valley — still take flocks up the slopes and over the ridges for summer pasturage. Manolo, who graces the cover and title of this monograph, is one of these last few: his woven back pack, his rugged face and his very clothes capture the essence of the last remnants of the old ways in these mountains.

This monograph covers the results of the Survey undertaken in four short seasons (April 1994, April 1995, May 1997, May/June 1998 — most seasons of nine days’ duration). Although restricted external funding prevented realisation of all of the Survey aims, nonetheless, significant results were achieved, thanks to the commitment and efforts of all concerned. The monograph thus provides a synthesis of the structural analyses and ethnographic and geomorphological studies, combined with archive and ceramic analyses. Full site catalogues are provided in the gazetteers (Part VI). The archive for the Survey is housed in the Museu Arqueologic of Denia; a copy is kept at the School of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Leicester.

Pl.3: Abandoned corral VG19 with spectacular Gallinera valley landscape setting
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in addition valuably supported for the EDM survey work by Pete Boyer (Essex County Council), (Dr.) Oliver Creighton, now lecturer at Exeter University, and Dott.ssa Luisa Dallai, currently at the Dept of Archaeology of the University of Siena, Italy – their shouting out of recordings and desired relocations of the EDM still echo across our study zone (pl.11). Luisa and Oliver produced the detailed survey of VG4 and its environs and a first GIS analysis of the Gallinera farms (fig.6). For 1997 and 1998 we welcomed Dr. Sarah Scott (Leicester) who very ably assisted in our final phases of mapping and was used as a frequent scale. We also fondly recall the unending help of Sarah Pantling (née Beauchamp) who attended the Project in 1994-95 and supported the work through to 1997 with her reliable typing and organisational work in Leicester.

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Penultimately, it is vital to note that it was the long-standing friendship of Neville and Doreen Surve which first drew co-director Paul Beavitt to Spain and to the delights of Playa de Piles – in sight of the Serra de l’Altmirant. But the very final vote of thanks is extended to the Beavitt, Christie and Gisbert Santonja families for their patience throughout those disrupted Easter vacation periods!

*Pls. 5 & 6:*
*The 1994 Leicester and Spanish team in La Llacuna, and the 1995 crew find shelter!*