

# ROCK & RITUAL

*Caves, Rocky Places and Religious Practices  
in the Ancient Mediterranean*

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Edited by

Sonia MACHAUSE, Carmen RUEDA, Ignasi GRAU and Réjane ROURE

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# Ritual Practices and Social Change. The Umbría de Salchite Caves, Memory and Landscape in South-Eastern Iberia (4th to 1st Centuries BC)

Susana GONZÁLEZ REYERO<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction: Ritual From the Iberian Iron Age to Republican Hispania

In this case study of south-eastern Iberia, I analyse social practices in western Mediterranean caves in the second half of the 1st millennium BC. I view the caves as part of a connotated landscape rife with meaning for its inhabitants as a result of their social relations. Cave frequentation consequently varied with changes in social relations. With their characteristic shadows, temperature, humidity, flowing water, echo or distorted sound, caves formed part of ancient communities' cognitive geography.

In Umbría de Salchite (Moratalla, Murcia) (hereafter, Umbría), rather than basing analysis solely on the most prominent elements, I believe it is essential to formulate hypotheses from a comprehensive and multi-scaled perspective, integrating all the archaeological, paleo-environmental, geomorphological and archaeo-metallurgical information required to identify specific practices as well as the features shared with other regions (Fig. 1). The aim is to advance toward large-scale comparison, assessing ritual uniformities and non-uniformities in relation to each region's social structure and historic dynamics.

In my opinion, cultural anthropological and archaeological scholarship, which has established performance as a critical constituent of ritual (e.g. Bell 1992, 1997), is especially pertinent to ritual practice and archaeological contexts. Equally pertinent is the notion that ritual—or ritualization (Bell 1992)—encompasses a range of activities from mundane acts of daily life to episodic or unique spectacles (Inomata and Coben 2006). I agree that binary classifications (as in sacred *versus* profane) lack the capacity to afford explanations and that what we know as ritual forms an integral part of the rest of social activity. For that reason, I deem ritualization—*i.e.*, the contention that ritual activities are related to individuals' everyday practice—to be a key notion and one of the contributions of this approach. Such everyday practice, in

turn, constitutes a fundamental element of social dynamics as defended by the theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977), which among others infers that in such everyday and fundamental practice anyone, not just the ruling class, may bear the potential for agency.

Viewed as a social practice, ritual can be assessed from the perspective of its impact on negotiating, manipulating and building political and cosmological order. My approach hinges on the idea that ritual practice, as a social mechanism, served as a vehicle for communication, negotiation and at times the institution of political relations. I shall consequently attempt to outline the relationship between ritual practice and political processes. That will entail analysing ritual practice as inseparable from other social spheres and recognising the possibly essential role of the everyday or unique actions that constitute ritual practice in building social cohesion and collective identity (Whitehouse, McQuinn 2013).

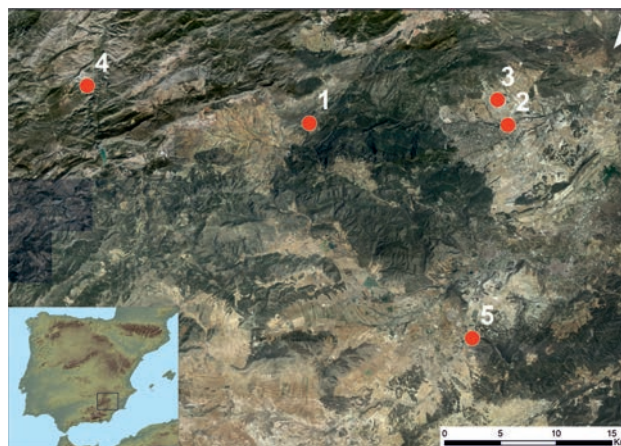


Fig. 1—Main sites mentioned in the text: 1. Umbría de Salchite; 2. Molinicos; 3. Moratalla la Vieja; 4. Morra de los Castillejos; 5. Los Villaricos-La Encarnación.

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## 2 Umbría de Salchite. Physical Setting and Archaeological Record

### 2.1 Physical Setting

Umbría is located on the Campo de San Juan high, inter-range plateau in Moratalla, Murcia, on the southern slope of the Calares de la Cueva de la Capilla massif. The area forms part of the Baetic Range that we have been studying under a series of research projects (González Reyero *et al.* 2015, 2016, 2019; Gener *et al.* 2016; Fort *et al.* 2019; Chapa *et al.* 2019, among others). More specifically, Umbría takes its name from the surrounding eponymous farm, spring and brook, although it is colloquially known as “La Nariz” (the nose in Spanish), perhaps in honour of its peculiar morphology (Fig. 2).

Such a distinct contour explains why, despite its proximity to one of the highest summits on the southern slope of the massif, the sanctuary lies in shade most of the day. It also houses several caves, two of which are particularly deep. This shaded area looks like a giant face (Sánchez Moral 2016: 29), a circumstance that could readily have afforded it supernatural connotations.

The various specific features that converge at Umbría may have made it a particularly significant component of the landscape. Characterised by generous visibility, it has a command over the surrounds. Moreover, accessing the caves is difficult or at least necessitates familiarity with the route.

I should stress the contrasts that converge here: between the outer light and the inner shade and darkness, and between the outer heat or cold and the inner humidity in the caves, and between clear outer sound and the inner silence altered



Fig. 2—Location of Umbría de Salchite in the Campo de San Juan, Moratalla, Murcia highlands.

by the distorted echo of flowing water. In my opinion that convergence gave Umbría what has been called a multi-sensorial natural architecture with specific temperature, humidity, streams or sound that both attracted and challenged human exploration and potential appropriation.

Those features help assess the site’s many dimensions. I believe water is especially significant in that regard and has been so identified in several historic contexts in general and Iberian societies in particular. Water cycles have been recurrently used by different cosmologies to establish a relationship between human and supernatural domains (Oestigaard 2011: 47; Scarre 2011: 10).

In the pages that follow I shall focus on the essentials I deem to be of greatest relevance to this edited volume and refer readers to earlier literature for more exhaustive information on this case study. By essentials I mean the definition, as far as possible, of social practice and its chronology and an assessment of the sanctuary in the landscape and its role in the social processes prevailing in the late 1st millennium BC.

### 2.2 Archaeological Context

This discussion of the most representative groups of organic and inorganic remains collected at Umbría is intended as background for possibly ritualised social practice. Further details can be found in earlier studies (Lillo 1981, 1983; González-Alcalde, Chapa 1993; Olmos 1996, 1999; No. 702; González-Alcalde 2005, 2006; Ocharán 2013, 2016, 2017; González Reyero *et al.* 2014; Sánchez Moral 2016). It does not address material culture in the Bronze Age, which would be associated with initially non-cultural frequentation of the area that lies beyond the scope of this study, although the remains might be subsequently re-interpreted and attributed to certain forebears to afford a cultural content to the natural site. The following description is intentionally brief to be able to expand on the analysis of the sanctuary’s role in the landscape and certain chronological coordinates. The archaeological record for Umbría is divided in two areas: one inside the two caves, a narrow space difficult to access and directly associated with flowing water; and the other immediately outside them.

The archaeological remains found at Umbría include small, greyware goblets (Roos 1982: 60), pitchers (Aranegui 1985: 105) and pots, either unadorned or grooved (type 7B, Lorrio 1988-89; form 4, Roos 1982; type B.1 Mata, Bonet 1992). Such items comprise most of the remains found inside the caves (Lillo 1983; Ocharán 2017). The archaeological record is more diversified in the outer area, where most of the tableware was found<sup>2</sup>: dishes (A.III.8.2 and 8.3), bowls (A.III.8.3.1 and 8.3.2), pitchers (37, 38 and 40, Vegas 1973), *oinochoai* (A.III.2.3) and small jars (A.II.2). Imported Campanian tableware was also found sporadically, in particular shallow bowls (Lamb. 1 form, series F 2320 2361, Morel), deemed to be multi-purpose objects associated with the individual consumption of semi-solid or liquid food (Principal 2005: 54). *Terra sigillata* is absent from the known assemblage and the remains referred to here, based essentially on studies published by Lillo (1983) and Ocharán

2. Following Mata, Bonet (1992) typology for most of the Iberian pottery (classes A and B).



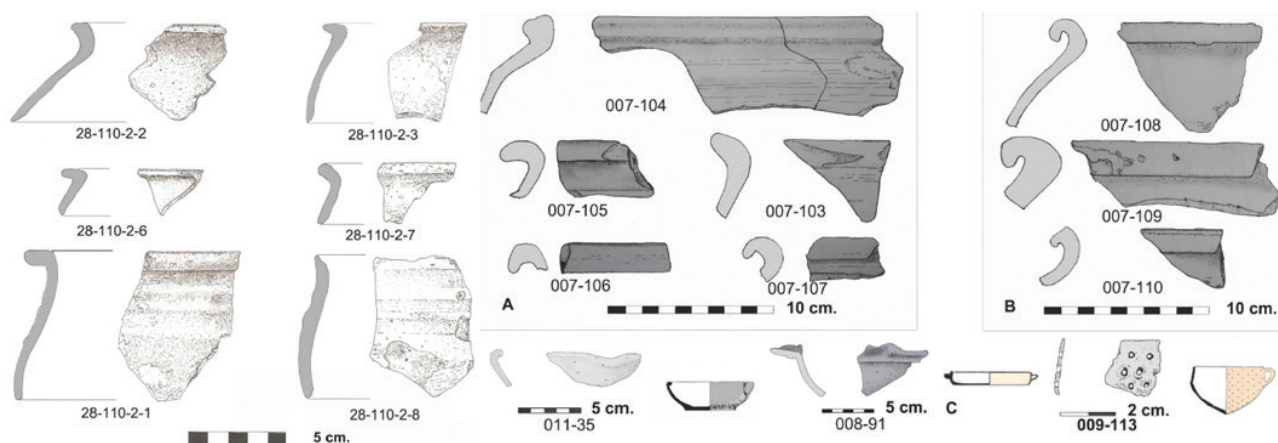


Fig. 3—Significant Umbria pottery (Ocharán 2017: 512, Fig. 408, 515, Fig. 411).

(2017). Most of the pottery used for storage, such as *dolia*, amphorae (A.I.1.2; Dressel 1A) and large jars (A.I.2.1.3), was also found in this outer area, with only a minority presence inside the caves (Ocharán 2017: 526). Kitchenware has also been observed, with various sizes of pots (B.1) and pans (B.2.10). Other types of pottery found, albeit more sporadically, include oil lamps (A.V.6.7), caliciform ware (A.III.4.1.1. and 4.2), perfume bottles, *kalathoi*, a strainer (form 18, Vegas 1973: 54–55), a jar (A.II.1.10.3) and several potsherd disks. An Attic black-glazed sherd (form 21, Lamboglia; Ocharán 2017: 510) and part of an Iberian krater foot, likewise identified, constitute the oldest 1st millennium materials found (Fig. 3).

A group of comparatively scarce decorative or personal adornments have also been documented in the outer area, including earrings, bracelets, rings, nails, La Tène or annular fibulae, along with weapons (arrowheads, darts), the remains of what might be knives, one with the form of an Iberian sword (*falcata*) donated by Lillo, and perhaps an Iberian *falcata* (Ocharán 2017: 546). One of the former, an iron annulus interpreted to be a ring, might also be deemed an ornament such as those worn by youths in their braids and offered to the deities, as hypothesised in other regions (Rueda 2011). Four coins were also found, the most outstanding of which is a late 3rd century BC as from Cástulo. A few loom weights, three spindle-whorls (one disk-shaped, type A.V.8.1.5; and two truncated cones with a head, type A.V.8.2.2) and an awl may attest to spinning and weaving. On the whole, this group has been associated with objects set into cracks in the natural rock (Ocharán 2017: 480, 540), a practice reminiscent of other Iberian sanctuaries. Remains of fauna, especially ovicaprines and to a lesser extent *Suidae*, *Leporidae* and *Cervidae* (Ocharán 2017: 576), also merit mention here, although no evidence exists of seeds or pollen that would complete the organic record of ancient frequentation.

Lastly, two groups of items are related to what I define as transformation activities, either in connection with food processing or artefact refitting. The former consists in a saddle quern that, along with certain other pieces, I associate with food processing. The latter comprises a series of lead clamps, ingots, dribbles, and sheets, some in deposits containing evidence of fire (Lillo 1983; Ocharán 2017), which I infer to have been used for repair (Fig. 4.1).



Fig. 4—Lead metallurgy at Umbria (Ocharán 2017: 1103 1168) (1); Lead metallurgy and clamped items from Morra de los Castillejos (Nerpio, Albacete) (2).

No information is available on the formation of the archaeological contexts or possible post-deposition processes. Other factors, such as the slope, would have been significant in the exterior. I merely wish to stress for the present intents and purposes, of the fact that most of the *dolia*, small jars, amphorae, pots, lids, and dish sherds were found outside the sanctuary. Small greyware pots, goblets and pitchers prevailed inside the caves (Ocharán 2017: 511, 521).

To date that has been interpreted to mean that the in-cave pottery was associated with ritual and the outside assemblage with offerings (Ocharán 2017: 526). Certain caliciform ware would not have particularly votive connotations, whilst the highly fragmented nature of the material culture has been interpreted to be intentional, the result of successive sanctuary cleaning. The premise defended is that the area was frequented from at least the Bronze Age and used ritually in the Iberian Iron Age from the 4th and more intensely between the late 3rd and the 1st centuries BC (Ocharán 2017: 527).

### 3 Ritual Practice and Landscape

Building on the foregoing brief description of the archaeological record I shall proceed to identify and analyse practices at Umbría from a perspective close to ritualisation and the theory of practice.

Firstly, I should stress that the Umbría assemblage consists essentially in everyday objects which, once ritualised, acquired a different meaning. In other words, their significance lies in the practices for which they were used. At Umbría the archaeological record contains no devotional items or offerings *per se*, but rather everyday objects used in religious rites at given times. That is consistent with the idea that rituals were merely ritualisation strategies in which everyday activities were specifically and differentially performed (López-Bertrán 2007: 2). Neither landscapes nor materials were in themselves sacred or profane; rather their distinction stemmed from practice and usage (Bell 1992).

Travelling across the landscape to the sanctuary, which would have been at a fair distance for many, given the sparsity of the Campo de San Juan population in the 1st millennium BC, is the first practice I shall address here. That pilgrimage was characterised by eminently bodily behaviour. While routine for other types of activity such as pasturing or forestry, such conduct was ritualised in certain situations through demeanour, travelling companions, dress, objects, or even specific atmospheric conditions. Any and all might have imbued the journey with a different meaning at certain times of the year<sup>3</sup>.

A second practice that merits analysis is related to the abundance of pots, goblets and small jugs inside the caves. On the one hand, as pointed out in other contexts, they may be related to rituals in which ingesting or offering food and beverage played a pivotal role, although practices involving fire must not be ruled out. As they were deposited inside the caves near springs, it is tempting to associate them with the possible libationary rituals.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of analysis of the contents of this pottery to support arguments for one or the other use, the relative abundance of these items might be believed to denote widely attended or, given the narrow spaces involved, frequently held rites.

In connection with the recurring presence of these small goblets I should draw attention to the role of the frequent repetition of a series of actions intended to activate semantic memory and improve message reception (Whitehouse 2004: 66). Repetition guarantees the dissemination of standardised communications in networks, such as those formed by participants from different settlements or valleys, too extensive for habitual face-to-face contact (Feinman 2016). In that context synchronous chanting, music and coordinated dance might inspire cooperation or reinforce affiliations (Feinman 2016; Collins 2004: 48). The discovery of a small bell at Umbría (Lillo 1983) would infer the potential presence of percussion sounds that are consistent with such repetition and what I shall call doctrinal practices as defined in Whitehouse's (2004, among others) cross-cultural model (see Rueda *et al.* in this volume:

chapter 5). Whitehouse distinguishes between “imagistic” and “doctrinal” forms of religiosity. The former would comprise practices associated with revelation, stimulated by altered consciousness, whilst the latter would be comparatively more routine and patterned, conducted in relative calm and dependent upon semantic schemes and repetitive and consistent rhetoric. Although we know that Whitehouse's model is not intended to be merely classificatory and that any given society may engage in both imagistic and doctrinal practice, in my opinion the recurrence of these small pots and goblets suggests the repetitive and routine practice associated with doctrinal behaviour, memory activation and more broadly based policies that generate trust, cooperation and collective action (Blanton 2016).

A third practice, *i.e.* periodic meals, with the preparation and cooking of stored food carried to the site for ingestion there, is compatible with the material context outside the caves. The use of fire is attested to by the anthracological remains, burnt materials and the evidence of the presence of water, access to which may have entailed rearranging the original rocks. Fire and water would be the main agents for transformation in these practices. I consequently premise that food was processed and perhaps carried, ground, cooked, consumed and possibly offered by pilgrims repairing to Umbría, who at the same time may have collected the water springing in the caves in the small urns and pots found there for subsequent libation. This premise on the ingestion of food and drink is consistent with the aforementioned faunistic remains. Rites might have also included allusion to the narratives partly depicted on large painted vessels.

A fourth practice, related to the third although in the outer area, is the offering of adornments or personal items such as earrings, bracelets, rings, fibulae or weapons. Although short in number, such objects would be associated with ceremony and the desire to leave a record of the presence of certain participants.

Libation and ceremony might be supplemented with another, more elusive practice around hypothetical artefact refitting, referred to earlier. Like other ritual sites Umbría is characterised by the fragmentation of its materials and the evidence of metallurgical activity. Although this subject forms part of a study still underway, this feature of the Umbría archaeological record merits explanation. Firstly, some of the sanctuary materials were found to be so highly fragmented that the objects could not be reassembled. As in other contexts, such fragmentation has been deemed intentional (Ocharán 2017: 517). Although the temptation is to relate it to ritual destruction, confirmation would depend on more detailed data on the formation of the archaeological deposits or post-depositional processes. Likewise lacking is evidence of whether intentional fracture followed an established sequence (Hull *et al.* 2013).

Umbrían metallurgy, in turn, appears to have been confined to lead and almost exclusively to making lead clamps (Lillo 1983; Ocharán 2017: 480) (Fig. 4.1). One wonders whether that activity was ritualised at Umbría. The connection between ritual contexts and metallurgical activity is not unusual in ancient Mediterranean societies, although it must obviously be assessed in each historic context. In broaching this issue,

3. See also comments on pilgrimage in this volume: chapter 4 (M. LÓPEZ-BERTRÁN) and 5 (RUEDA *et al.*).

4. Other examples of this relation can be seen in COTS *et al.* in this volume (chapter 8).

I shall analyse a number of factors. The clamped pieces, including the sanctuary's best known figurative sherd, appear to have mostly included large vessels with painted decoration (Sánchez Moral 2016: 31; Ocharán 2017). The inference is that such vessels were highly esteemed, perhaps made-to-order objects intended to endure (Olmos 1987). They may also have had a long life cycle, all of which is consistent with the repairs known to have been made to imported or fine tableware (Reitermann 2016; Rodríguez Pérez 2019). The large jars or figuratively decorated kalathos may certainly be thought to have been memory vessels.

These large vessels could have been repaired if, as contended in other areas, the craftsmen travelled to the sanctuary on the occasion of ritual visits. Lead metallurgy was not, however, a sophisticated technology in that period, and clamping was technically quick and simple enough to be performed domestically (Morell 2009: 378). Moreover, the presence of lead grew in the 2nd and 1st centuries BC. In Catalonia, for instance, beginning in the 2nd century BC, with changes in the autochthonous models, lead clamps appear more and more intensely in the archaeological record (Morell 2009: 380).

A comparison to other contemporary, neighbouring contexts is relevant here. Our studies in the nearby Taibilla Basin documented a settlement, Morra de Castillejos (Nerpio, Albacete), where we identified large painted, occasionally clamped vessels and lead works (Fig. 4.2). That attests to the long duration of certain vessels, surely bearing iconographies significant for the Umbría rituals. The presence of contemporary settlements at Morra de los Castillejos and Umbría also supports the existence of relations between the sanctuary and the Taibilla Basin to the west as well as to the Alhárabe Basin to the east. That evidence is relevant in connection with another variable of ritual that must be studied: rather than sporadic rituals, a series of coetaneous contexts must be addressed so as not to lose sight of broader social connotations (Feinman 2016: 13).

The relationship between clamping and large painted vessels might have been the result of adverse socio-economic circumstances or remoteness, which would hinder the production or accessibility of certain products, as noted in Olbia (Reitermann 2016: 156). Nonetheless, the presence of metallurgical activity and clamping in sanctuaries such as La Luz can be less convincingly explained by adverse socio-economics or a remote location. The slag and the bronze and lead beads and staples found at La Luz induced Lillo to deem trench B-96 to have been the site of a metallurgical industry. The presence at La Luz of clamping might also corroborate the association between pottery repair and ritualisation or ritual refitting.

At least part of the pottery that appears not to have been repaired is highly fragmented and deposited inside the caves (Ocharán 2017: 786), in contact with this liminal space, the cave and the spring. Possibly used to collect and libate water, a substance perhaps believed to have sacred connotations, this pottery might have required special treatment, including ritual breakage. More than the result of successive cleaning, I believe that such potential breakage was meant not only to render the items useless, but to emphasise their characteristics and reinforce the behaviour (libation, ingestion) in which they played a leading part. They were buried to ensure direct

contact with the soil, itself a symbol of fertility and regeneration. Deposition was not intended to destroy materials: rather, their burial added to and heightened their significance (López-Bertran 2007; Pollard 2001). Burial would reinforce the memory of the rituals performed; contact with the soil would sustain the plea for renewal and fertility over time.

Although this hypothesis must certainly be more firmly substantiated, I find it helpful to premise that clamping might have been an everyday activity highlighted in the sanctuary, *i.e.*, ritualised. I shall return to this idea in the discussion of the general interpretation of the sanctuary. In any event, the repairs conducted in the sanctuary clearly appear to have involved primarily large painted vessels, hypothetically mended because of their pivotal role in these social practices. The clamped vessels seem to be the ones bearing complex painted iconographies, potentially mnemotechnical resources for narratives that may have played a key role in ritual practice.

To approach those narratives as nearly as possible, we must turn to the best known image of the sanctuary, found on a staple mark-bearing oval urn or kalathos sherd measuring 256 mm at its longest and 125 mm at its widest. Its decoration includes a female figure dressed in a long cloak, with raised arms and attributes deemed sacred, along with fire, certain animals such as birds and carnivores and plants (Fig. 5.1). This is the image on which many earlier studies of the sanctuary have focused and whilst I do not intend to analyse it exhaustively here, its reconsideration admittedly inspired our change in perspective from a specific site to the landscape and surrounding settlements and the formulation of a territorial reading (González Reyero *et al.* 2014).

That territorial hypothesis established a relationship between the Umbría sanctuary and the neighbouring Llano de Moratalla-Calasparra settlements. Our proposal was based on identifying an iconographic and territorial relationship between the two geographies, the Campo de San Juan highlands and the Llano de Moratalla-Calasparra plains. We based the iconographic relationship on the presence in both areas of this anthropomorphic, possibly female image dressed in a long cloak and with arms raised or stretched outward. At Umbría it was found on the aforementioned painted sherd, along with elements such as birds, carnivores and a few plants, all present in other Iberian Iron Age ritual images. At Moratalla-Calasparra and more specifically at the Molinicos settlement, the image is found on two firedogs discovered in room K, a space differentially shaped and purposed, home to Bronze Age burials where the hearth and the firedogs evoke a cuisine and meal related material culture (Fig. 5.2). As at Umbría, the significance of the presence of cuisine and consumption lies in the ready ritualisation of their various stages, such as preparing, quartering, carving and selecting specific parts of meat, in keeping with social norms (González Reyero *et al.* 2014).

In addition to that iconographic relationship, we have also contended the existence of a territorial relationship between the Campo de San Juan highlands, home to the Umbría sanctuary, and Molinicos. The two shared the River Alhárabe basin and were connected physically by a path, today fossilised in GR 7.1, as well as visually, for Mount Umbría was the most

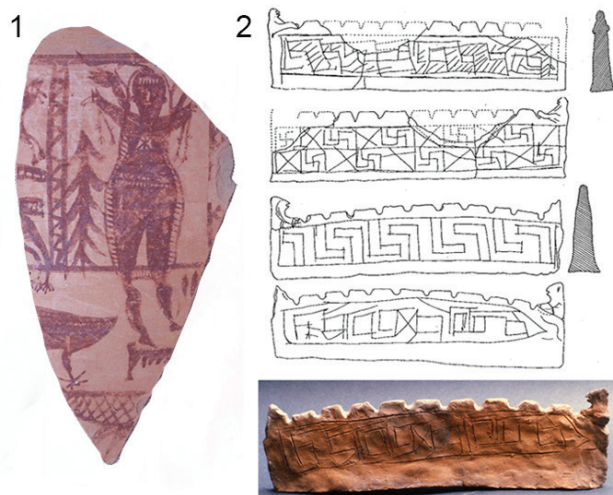


Fig. 5—Female figure on the Umbría pottery (1) and Los Molinicos firedogs (2).

prominent feature in the Molinicos communities' horizon (Fig. 6). Although Molinicos seems to have been abandoned in the 4th century BC, the Llano de Moratalla communities that continued to live in nearby Moratalla la Vieja would have maintained a constant visual connection with Mount Umbría.

Albeit at different times during the 1st millennium BC, in these two areas of the River Alhárabe ideology was embodied in a female figure associated with fire as a transformative element and with the kitchen represented by firedogs. Even though the most likely chronology for Molinicos is the 4th century BC and for Umbría the 2nd century BC, the visual, geographic and iconographic relationship between them seems to indicate that this north-eastern area of the province of Murcia featured a shared, long-term narrative in which the lead role was played by a female figure associated with fire and a number of natural elements (González Reyero *et al.* 2014).

That brings us back to the landscape. Umbría is located near a hub where several traditional routes converge. One is a traditional trail between the Granada highlands and the Hellín region that crosses the Taibilla Basin and Campo de San Juan, conventionally deemed a cattle route or path. It courses through certain known 1st millennium BC settlements such as the Molata de Casa Vieja *oppidum*, Macalón and the Hellín region settlements, although not all were contemporaneous with Umbría. Mention should also be made of the route that follows the course of River Alhárabe and partially fossilises today's long GR-7.1 path. The Cehegín route that runs through Campo de San Juan and near El Letrado, a Roman rural settlement (Ocharán 2017: 677), is of similar significance. The connection between the Umbría area and the source of the River Argos and La Encarnación Narrows, with its well known ancient settlement around Villares-Villaricos-La Encarnación, was ensured by the Archivel cattle route. Another route ran from Umbría across Yeste Ravine to Morra de los Castillejos and Vizcable, both alongside the River Taibilla.

That convergence of routes may explain the attraction or frequentation inspired by Umbría and surrounds at certain times. Several of the routes were traditionally associated with herding cattle from the mountains to the lowlands. Thanks to their existence, the Campo de San Juan resources could

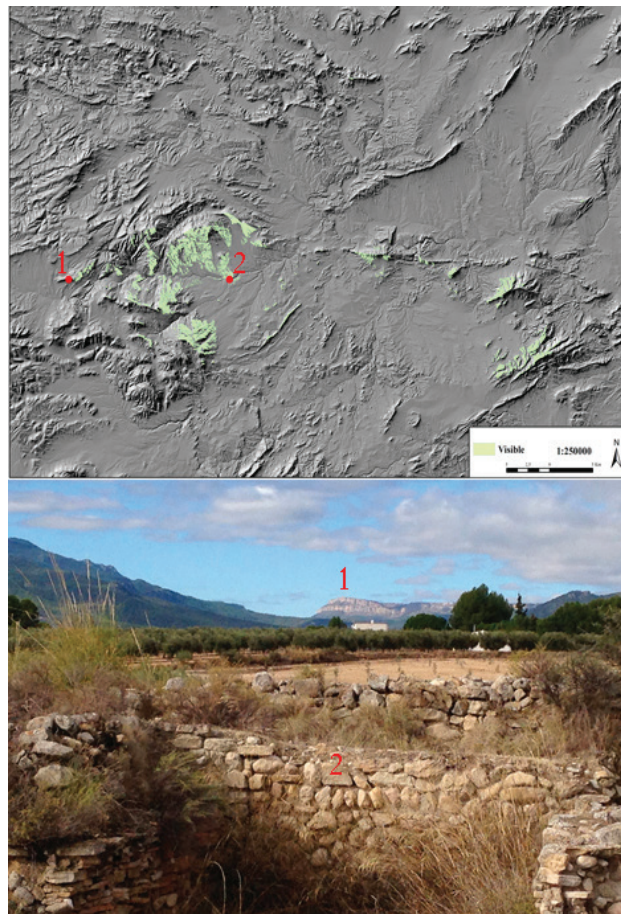


Fig. 6—View of landscape from Molinicos (2) to Mount Umbría (1).

reach the surrounding areas such as north-eastern Murcia, the Taibilla Basin mountains and, somewhat further afield, the Granada highlands and Upper Andalusia.

While not extrapolating later economic significance directly to ancient times, Campo de San Juan is a traditional pasture with a wealth of spring water. Ancient practice might be assumed to have been geared essentially to a mix of farming and livestock raising, as reflected in place names related to both agriculture (such as “Half-bushel Farm”, “Capel Mill” or “Puerto Mill”) and livestock-raising (such as “Meadow Stream”, “Corral Farm”, “Meadow Farm”, “Cattle/Spring/Pond/Corral Path”). The nearby Villar de Archivel necropolis has also been related to livestock raising, based on the presence of spindle-whorls and loom weights (Brotóns 2008; López-Mondéjar 2009a: 395; Inchaurreandieta 2015: 222).

Yet another factor not mentioned up to now is the presence of salt at Campo de San Juan, imperative for cattle, among others. The Zacatín saltworks, located very near Umbría and alongside the Cordel de Hellín cattle route, documented as active since at least the Middle Ages, traditionally supplied the Moratalla municipal district and towns in neighbouring provinces such as Huéscar, La Puebla de Don Fadrique, Santiago de la Espada, Nerpio and Yeste, as well as cattle ranchers in Campo de San Juan, Archivel, El Sabinar and Barranda. The area surrounding Umbría was consequently home to an important resource that may have also induced ancient frequentation and exploitation.

## 4 Chronology and Practices

In light of the foregoing and given the near total absence of evidence of Iberian settlement at Campo de San Juan from the 5th to the 4th centuries BC, I would like to preliminarily suggest that the area was possibly frequented seasonally or sporadically in Iberian times. That would not rule out the presence there of small scattered groups, farms or similar, although I believe we have insufficient grounds for proposing the presence of larger settlements. The highlands where Umbría is located might have been frequented from other surrounding valleys with known Iberian settlements, such as Moratalla, home to Molinicos and Moratalla la Vieja, the Archivel-La Encarnación area or the Taibilla Basin to the west.

The altitude and prevalent soil types characterising the Campo de San Juan highlands might have induced economic use that differed from the surrounds, a possibility consistent with the absence of a distinct settlement from the 5th to the 4th centuries BC. Those two factors suggest that Campo de San Juan, highlands with pastures, water and salt where frequentation was regulated, may have been sparsely populated until at least the 2nd century BC. The relationship discussed earlier between Umbría and Llano de Moratalla might seem to infer that, in Iberian times at least, part of that regulation may have rested on an ideological narrative based on a female figure and Mount Umbría.

One intriguing idea around that possible relationship between the highlands and the surrounding landscape at lower altitudes is that pasturing areas large enough for the herds of more than one community would entail rights, claims and disputes. If such pastures were at a distance from the communities at issue, some manner of social sanction must have existed to authorise their use and the presence of animals (Faith 2009: 28). I feel such a possibility should at least be considered in the case of Umbría, particularly in light of the absence of any substantial community nearby, the size of Campo de San Juan and its location too distant from the surrounding Iberian settlements to be exploited on an everyday basis. The manner in which farming or husbandry is conducted obviously entails many forms of inter-group relations. Therefore, the economic use of Campo de San Juan by more or less remote communities must have led to covenants and political relations that may have been sanctioned in the context of a sanctuary. Such travel to Campo de San Juan to use its resources might have been ritualised at certain times, possibly seasonally or on key dates in the agricultural calendar. Although this hypothesis must be verified in future, I believe it affords a plausible social context for the possible significance of Umbría.

The social relations mirrored in the landscape would vary over time and the Second Punic War and Roman conquest must have pressured the communities to change. The relationship I premise between Campo de San Juan and its environs during Iberian times would obviously not have had to continue after the Roman conquest. The takeover of Carthago Nova must certainly have had essential implications on the area, altering the communities' territorial organisation and social structure, although the Roman administration is known to

have often organised land use around the existing productive system and structures.

The question that must necessarily be posed is why, although Mount Umbría had been frequented in earlier ages, most of its archaeological record dates from the late 3rd through the 1st centuries BC. Although its best known iconography invokes earlier images, as attested to by the Molinicos fire-dogs (González Reyero *et al.* 2014), black-glazed ware dated in the 4th century BC is only sporadically present and may, like the Piquía kraters (Ruiz *et al.* 2015), have been objects with a long social life. We have very little information on practices in that regard in Umbría through the end of the 3rd century BC. Inferring that the information at hand on the late 3rd through the 1st centuries BC is applicable to earlier centuries seems risky at best, inasmuch as all social practice changes over time and tradition read as a timeless, unchanging continuity is a construct (Oestigaard 2015: 369). Consequently, whilst we cannot deny an earlier stage, the fact is that most practice at Umbría materialised against the backdrop of contact between the Roman administration and the local communities. The historical explanation for that practice and for territorial integration is still outstanding and certainly imperative to any historical interpretation of the sanctuary and the region analysed here.

Despite the still incipient state of knowledge, the Campo de San Juan settlements appear to have grown during Roman times, although the chronology is still imprecise. The possibly greater occupancy of the highlands would necessitate understanding and controlling the agricultural calendar as precisely as possible and seeking and propitiating fertility of the soil and renewal of the harvest and pastures through ritual. That in turn would entail laying claim to the right to exploit these lands on identity-related grounds in which the divinities deeply rooted in the region would play a key role.

In that context both topographic reference and a possible astronomical orientation toward the winter solstice proposed for the Umbría caves (Esteban, Ocharán 2016; Esteban 2019; see also C. Esteban in this volume: chapter 7) are reasonable, insofar as the winter solstice marks the end of certain farming chores and signals the time to plead for abundance in the new agricultural cycle. The winter solstice has driven ritual in many societies throughout history, given its association with the farming-husbandry calendar. Attendant upon the celebration of the end and beginning of the farming cycle are pleas for field renewal and fertility and in the Campo de San Juan highlands for fertile pastures and fertile soil.

In a nutshell, my hypothesis is that the suite of practices undertaken at Umbría between the late 3rd and 1st centuries BC might have been related to commemorative or calendar-based rituals, possibly to plead for fertility to favour renewed pastures and plentiful harvests year after year. That hypothesis is consistent with the perspective whereby certain primarily economically-induced travel may have become ritualised on occasion. Ritual practice would thus afford an explanation for movement toward a place over which the communities had some manner of ritual-sanctioned entitlement. Economic movements migration could therefore have been converted to ritual movements, pilgrimage.

I believe that the practices documented at Umbría might have constituted cyclical communal rites, including food preparation and cooking, ingestion and perhaps item refitting and the deposition of material culture. The notion of beginning and end and their propitiation is directly related to the worship of Saturn, one of Rome's oldest cults (Ovid. *Fast* I 235–240; *Macr. Sat.* I, 7 14 18–26 and 9 1–18). Its most prominent celebration was the *Saturnalia*, held precisely during the winter solstice (*Macr. Sat.* I 10 1–23), initially on 24 December or the fourteenth day before the January calends (*Macr. Sat.* I 10 2 and 18). Those archaic festivities celebrated both Saturn, who introduced the benefits of farming to Rome and whose name, as Macrobius claims, was associated with sowing (*satus*), and his consort Ops or Ope, whose name links the wealth of the soil (*ops*) to human work (*opus*), rewarded by harvests and fruit (*Macr. Sat.* I 10 19–21). I believe it would not have been difficult to liken Ops, who represented abundance and regeneration, to local divinities. Although this is a coincidental detail and should be taken as such, her image included plant elements such as spikes wheat flowers, copiously represented both in the nearby Encarnación sanctuary (Brotóns, Ramallo 2010: 138–139) and in the well known Umbría sherd. The point here in connection with Saturn and Ops is that the cyclical and propitiatory nature of the most ancient farming and chthonic divinities would be further ratified by their ties to the founding of Rome itself and all its ritual (Coarelli 1983: 209–226).

The presence of metallurgy may also be related to propitiation and chthonic worship of the goddess Demeter or Ceres, Saturn's daughter in the final analysis, who has been associated with the local divinity at La Encarnación (Brotóns, Ramallo 2010: 138) as well with the discovery of metallurgical works in sanctuaries devoted to Demeter, such as at Bitalemi, Gela, or S. Anna, Agrigento (Fiorini 2002).

Briefly, the idea preliminarily put forward here is an attempt to explain the cyclical fragmentation and repair of sanctuary materials, representative of the beginning and end of the farming cycle. Bell (1992: 104) contends that the “appropriation of calendrical festivals is a very common and highly effective strategy in places where one set of religious practices encounters and tries to dominate another set”. In that vein my hypothesis is that in the context of conquest and early Roman presence, renewed frequentation of the old familiar mountain may have been a way to revisit an earlier tradition and its narrative, dating perhaps from the 4th century BC and embodied in a female figure associated with fire and, at Molinicos, the processing of food (Fig. 5). That reinvention of tradition would be captured in large painted vessels which, with their narratives, would recover an old myth for the sanctuary, involving a goddess perhaps believed to control the renewal and fertility of the soil. These vessels, esteemed, used, and repaired with lead clamps, would have surely been pivotal to ritual. The depiction of tradition, here the female figure described above, may have been a highly effective way to institute social change (Skeates *et al.* 2013: 122). Not only such depiction, but the respective rituals may have played a significant part in an age of change. As noted, the conservational dimension of ritual often imbues it with special power, both to contest and to establish new socio-

political conditions (Feinman 2016). Ancient rituals or the places where they were practised might be altered to convey the messages that had changed. Objects or icons may retain some specific meanings while at the same time forming part of broader celebrations, possibly conveying new messages and negotiating relations on a wholly different scale.

Through association with places frequented from earlier times such as Umbría, and with the divinities described above, certain 2nd and 1st centuries BC social groups, may have proclaimed their affiliation with a possibly female divinity and with it their legitimacy in a context of new socio-political conditions under the Roman administration. On the occasion of visits to the sanctuary, inter-group competition and tension would have consequently converged with furtherance of cohesion in the exercise of common practice. That is consistent with population growth at Campo de San Juan, especially in the Roman Imperial period, a pattern seen in other small settlements near roads and farm and pasture lands and similar to the one defined more broadly for the region as a whole (Brotóns 1995).

Despite the still partial understanding of the area, I feel I must set these rituals at Umbría in a broader geography and well-studied processes. As a sanctuary located in a cave and hence with no outer architecture to speak of, Umbría contrasts with other nearby sacred sites such as Encarnación de Caravaca or Cerro de los Santos (neither located in caves), which were remodelled to monumental architectural programmes and materials imported from Italy (Ramallo 1991, 1993; Ramallo, Brotóns 1997; Ramallo *et al.* 1998). The absence of prominent settlements at Campo de San Juan and Llano de Moratalla should induce us to turn our gaze to neighbouring regions, such as Cehegín-Caravaca, home to Begastri and the La Encarnación Narrows.

Here I would draw attention to the possible relationship between the Los Villaricos settlement, associated with La Encarnación sanctuary, and Campo de San Juan's Umbría. Those two nearby areas were connected by well known trails (López-Mondéjar 2009a 2009b). We know that Villaricos had consolidated its prominence in the region during Roman times, as attested to by the transformed building at La Encarnación. That construction programme has been aptly viewed as an obvious expression of the alliance between Rome and the local elites (Ramallo 1991). The settlement has even been suggested to have played a strategic role in local conflicts between Caesar's and Pompey's followers (Brotóns, Murcia 2008: 50–64; López-Mondéjar 2009b: 13). Against the backdrop of its administrative role in Roman times, Los Villaricos could have had an interest in consolidating its presence, seasonal or otherwise, in other nearby areas such as the Umbría highlands. One of the mechanisms possibly deployed would have been to prevail in the symbolic domain. And that may have entailed processes such as the one proposed here, which at certain times of year would have ritualised movements across trails long since known and used.

I premise, then, that the intensified frequentation of Umbría in the 2nd and 1st centuries BC might have been related to the reorganisation of land occupancy or use driven from Los Villaricos that would lay the grounds for organising farming calendar and regulation of the Umbría

highlands, among others. This hypothesis clearly needs to be developed more fully and backed with sound arguments leading to its reinforcement or rejection. For the time being, my intention is to put forward a plausible explanation for the record of more intense frequentation of Umbría between the late 3rd and the 1st centuries BC. This suggestion is of course compatible with the fact that the Umbría mountains continued to be the visual horizon or venue for seasonal celebrations for other surrounding communities such as Llano de Moratalla or Morra de los Castillejos in Taibilla Basin. In fact, the potential encounter between these various, normally distant, communities at certain times of year would afford the occasion for social practices that might drive common memory and cohesion among neighbouring communities at times of change when they may have been subject to new forms of taxation or authority.

## Conclusions

In this study I attempted to emphasise how frequentation of the Umbría caves might have acquired different meanings over time. Ritualised or otherwise, visits to this mountain would possibly have continued up to the 1st century BC, forming part of festivities that, perhaps permitted or encouraged by the earliest Roman administration, generated most of the area's material record.

The 2nd and 1st centuries BC regional organisation, possibly governed from Los Villaricos, may have encompassed Campo de San Juan, where settlement and land use, including ritualisation on key dates in the agricultural calendar, would have been regulated. The caves' astronomical orientation toward the winter solstice afforded them elements that converged on the *Saturnalia*, a festival held on those dates and clearly associated with resource use and the agricultural calendar.

Frequenting Umbría and the repetition of practice and ritual celebrations or banquets would have contributed at least partially to naturalising and negotiating new power relations. The backdrop of incipient Roman policy would soon be immersed in and transformed by the civil wars that in this south-eastern Iberian region would bring new settlements such as the Archipel *castellum* and the Barranda *turris* (Brotóns, Murcia 2008, 2014; López-Mondéjar 2009b, 2010), both very near Campo de San Juan. The civil wars ultimately led to new territorial policy and permanent integration in the Roman sphere and, for the present purposes, the end of ritual frequentation of Umbría, perhaps in the wake of the concentration of such practices in cities.

Here we have seen the sacralisation of a landscape where everyday activities and worship converged. This liminal and astronomically oriented place chosen propitiated contact with divinities and ancestors who could intercede in favour of field renewal and fertility on which the communities continued to depend, irrespective of political change. That cyclical celebration, based on ritualised everyday activities such as travelling to the highlands, transporting, preparing, cooking and consuming food, highlighted and accorded

new meaning to the objects involved. Here I premise that fragmented and clamped objects may have been ritualised, embodying the plea for cyclical renewal of the soil through their breakage and repair. The materials deposited and the metals used would reinforce the idea of life cycles (Fowler 2004: 63), whereas their burial would be intended to conserve the ritual and consequently the pleas raised to the divinities. The everyday act of eating, itself a type of renewal, may have been ritualised and its celebration may have contributed to the more extensive processes of naturalisation and negotiation of new Roman political realities.

Such practices in itself hold might potentially further social cohesion, in an attempt to keep the groups united in this context of questioned or changing power-dependence relationships. I therefore believe that ritual and policy converged at Umbría, a relationship that I deem vital and which seems to have been particularly powerful in this region, as attested to by the Roman administration's eager construction at La Encarnación-Los Villaricos. My premise is that Campo de San Juan and Umbría may have been administered under the aegis of that settlement.

I suggest that in this area sanctuaries must have been key elements in territorial construction by building memory and identity. In the Republican period that may have materialised in a characteristically Hellenistic formula consisting in linking illustrious and ancient Roman worship, such as Saturn-Ops, to the tradition of this specific region, embodied in a local divinity associated with regeneration, nature and fire. Both cults could have been viewed as having illustrious and ancient origins, drawn from to legitimise new power relations through tradition. So viewed, the Republican period, far from being the mere continuity of what preceded it or the antechamber to what was to come, constituted the development of new strategies of power and region-specific forms of control and domination.

If the proposal set out here is correct, the Umbría caves, far from being marginal or remote, would have been scenarios for political action with a well defined role in a context of change. Perhaps precisely because its rituals integrated tradition, the sanctuary might have played an active part in the new policy and change. As in other contexts, tradition, an ideological interpretation, uses the past in the present for the future (Oestigaard 2015: 373).

Through reiteration, ritual in Umbría would have been ultimately building memory. Repetition at certain times of the year would activate semantic memory and enhance the reception of messages that might contribute to reinforcing affiliation and social cohesion, which was particularly necessary in this especially sensitive socio-political context. That would also explain why the archaeological record at Umbría pertains to none other than that historic period. The possible appropriation of a calendrical festivity would have impacted the communities' symbolic domain, building memory and perhaps mitigating tension. The well-known place chosen for the purpose had been frequented from times long past and epitomised tradition in the region. Ritual may have thereby reinvented tradition and naturalised change.

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