

New university experiences: intergenerational archaeological excavations as a participatory learning method

Valero Tévar, Miguel Ángel^a and Huete Alcocer, Nuria^b

^aDepartment of History, Faculty of Letters of Ciudad Real, University of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain. ^bDepartament Spanish and International Economics, Econometrics and History and Financial Institutions. Faculty of Economics and Business, Albacete, University of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain.

Abstract

The present paper outlines a new training process carried out during the summer of 2017 by the research team at the site of the Roman villa of Nohedá. The project is based on the practical implementation of an archaeological excavation experience and the study of related materials by an intergenerational team. The activity was carried out by students of various Spanish and foreign universities together with senior citizens who had previously been thoroughly trained in archaeological methodology. Not all of the senior citizens had university degrees, but they did have extensive life experience allowing them to bring a high degree of commitment to the project. All the students were able to implement the archaeological knowledge acquired in the preceding months through theoretical lessons covering a wide range of subjects. They worked through participative procedures in intergenerational teams, thereby fostering the exchange of knowledge and new learning methods. The results were very positive, from both an academic and a scientific perspective, as well as in terms of the participants' personal gratification.

Keywords: Roman villa, archaeological excavation, participation, teamwork, intergenerational cooperation.

1. Introduction

Society has undergone an astonishing change in recent years. Today, people not only enjoy visiting museums and archaeological sites, but also taking part in many other heritage-related cultural activities (Monsalve et al., 2014, 74). The days of archaeology as a hobby for a relatively wealthy minority are long gone. Nowadays, the general public, regardless of sex, age, education or income, has taken an interest in the subject. And this interest is not limited to mere observation. On the contrary, people wish to play an active role in the field's advancement.

In this regard, the scientific team of the Roman *villa* of Noheda, made up of teachers from a number of universities, has launched an innovative programme to promote the integration of students and postgraduates completing practical and theoretical training with senior citizens who have previously been thoroughly trained in archaeological methodology.

In this context, the archaeological excavation at the Roman *villa* of Noheda was useful both to further the site's investigation and to create an environment for interaction both amongst senior citizens and between them and the other age groups. This gave rise to an educational setting that fostered both social and intergenerational interaction and cooperative deliberation.

2. The Roman *villa* of Noheda

The Roman *villa* of Noheda, and the existence of its mosaics, has long been known (Larrañaga 1966, 438; Abascal 1982, 68; Palomero, 1985, 169). The site is located in the central area of the Iberian Peninsula, close to the towns of Segobriga, Ercavica and Valeria, 17 kilometres north of the city of Cuenca. The *villa* is a mere 500 metres northeast of the place it is named for and is part of the municipality of Villar de Domingo García.

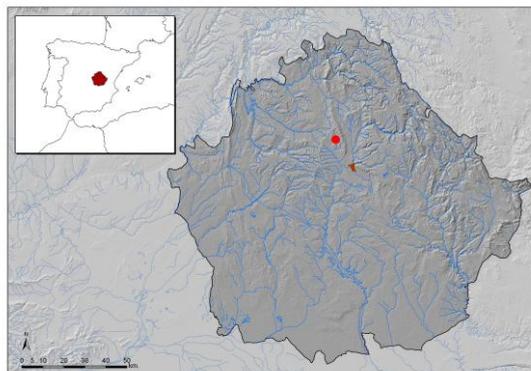


Figure 1. Location of the Noheda site in the peninsular context.

The archaeological complex was listed as a Site of Cultural Interest in 2012, mainly due to the mosaics discovered there, which are the site's most outstanding and best known feature (Valero, 2009, 54; 2010, 6; 2011, 91-105; 2013a, 312-327; 2014a, 523; 2014b, 54-60; 2014c, 81 ss.; 2015a; 2015b, 1347 ss.; 2015c, 439-444; 2016a, 131-152; 2016b, 10-12; 2017a, 79-80; Valero and Gómez 2013, 87 ss.). Although the Late Antique period is the best documented period to date, evidence of anthropic activity has been found from other periods as well. Furthermore, territorial analyses conducted in the immediate vicinity (Valero, 2013b, 232) have revealed signs of intense human activity in the area, offering proof of the uninterrupted existence of inhabitants from protohistoric times up to the Middle Ages.

So far, three areas of the rural complex have been excavated. The first contained various structures belonging to the *pars rustica*, which, in and of themselves, indicate that the complex had all the necessary buildings to confirm its agricultural nature, inherent to the concept of a rustic *villa* (Balmelle, 2001, 16; Mulvin, 2002, 3, Arce, 2006, 14; *idem* 2012, 27, Sfameni, 2006, 110).

The second excavated area, which was the focus of the efforts discussed here, consisted of a section of the chambers of the *pars urbana*. Amongst these, the *triclinium* clearly stands out, due to its astonishing size (290.64 m²) and extraordinary flooring, as well as the intricate architectural layout and exquisite parietal decorations. This is the chamber where the aforementioned exceptional figurative mosaic is located. Made mostly of *opus vermiculatum*, the preserved portion spans an area of 231.62 m².



Figure 2. Mosaic of the Noheda triclinium indicating the locations of the figurative panels (image by M. Á. Valero over a photograph by José Latova).

Currently, in the same sector, the *balneum* is under excavation. According to the data available so far, it would have spanned nearly 900 m² and had an axial-symmetric floorplan (García-Entero, 2005, 751). It is made up of a number of utility rooms arranged around a central axis and is marked by a *narthex*-type entrance, an *apodyterium* and a large *frigidarium*. On the left edge are two chambers, which are interconnected with the cold room by way of two bays. The first of these chambers has a quadrangular shape, rounded off by an exedra-shaped appendix, and straight walls arranged in a half octagon that could be interpreted as a possible *uctorium*. Annexed to the latter is a quadrangular chamber with heated walls corresponding to the pool. On the opposite side, by the *natatio*, are the warm *tepydarium* and *caldarium* chambers, the latter containing two *alvei* that face each other, as well as three *praefurnia* to service the warm areas (Valero, 2015a, 123-126).

Based on the scant area excavated, it is impossible to confirm whether the *balneum* was an isolated structure or was connected to the dwellings by a corridor or even a *xystus*. This latter option is thought to be more likely, since such layouts were fairly common from the 3rd century on, although some examples have been dated to the 2nd century.

3. Excavations as a pretext for intergenerational relations and learning methods

As with most excavations carried out in summer, in addition to the workers employed for the purpose, the scientific team encouraged the integration of students and postgraduates on certain dates to engage in theoretical and practical training that would prove useful in their curriculum.

However, this rather standard practice in research projects of enlisting postgraduates as workers in exchange for training was taken one step further at Noheda by integrating, in a single working environment, both young people and senior citizens who had something in common: they were all university students. To this end, work was planned with young people from various European universities together with senior citizens from a number of towns who had previously received archaeological training.

Thus, an intergenerational group was formed. The contribution of those members aged 55 and over, who constituted a diverse and heterogeneous group, proved to be a strong human, social and cultural resource that endowed the project with a strong sense of commitment, knowledge and extremely valuable life experience.

One of the main objectives was teamwork. Thus, the few weaknesses shown by some of the group's members were compensated for by others. This also increased the group's potential: if a given member proved to be particularly effective at a certain task, he or she would not only carry it out but also explain his or her method to the other members.



Figure 3. Intergenerational excavation team

Both young people and seniors became equally involved, fostering dynamic communities that stimulated communication and intergenerational work.

The prior knowledge brought by the senior citizens proved to be an important asset in executing the project. The tasks they undertook, together with the various ways in which they had accessed the university environment, provided a wide range of possibilities that proved beneficial for the project as a whole.

These possibilities were leveraged to achieve what most programmes oriented towards senior citizens set out to do (Pinazo et al., 2009, 30 ss.). First, they facilitated a reciprocal and mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and values between the two generational groups. Second, the excavation itself was enriched by the anthropological knowledge of the seniors, who, for example, taught the youths, *in situ*, wall-building techniques or the methodology of extracting and preparing lime used for traditional constructions, which, incidentally, was closely related to the chrono-cultural period under study at Noheda.

The result was the gestation of an inclusive, socially committed project as a means of bringing together people of different generations whilst fostering interactive alliance mechanisms between archaeology and society. Such was the success and repercussion of the training activities that they were picked up by a number of provincial, regional and even national media outlets, which described them as a model to follow.

4. Conclusion

The spirit of the project pivoted around the concept of intergenerational education understood as a tool for learning, cooperation, interaction and exchange amongst different age groups with the aim of allowing people of all ages both to achieve and contribute their

best, determining their role according to their needs and capabilities (Alonso & Mackay, 2011, 10).

The undertaking proved very rewarding and was very well-received by the entire team, as a novel experience in which all participants were able both to learn and to teach. The positive outcomes have encouraged the team to continue fomenting this type of experience, both at the Roman *villa* of Noheda and at other nearby sites in the province of Cuenca in the coming years.

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