

Interview with Dr. Arnau Garcia, 2016-2017 IEMA Postdoctoral Fellow

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Dr. Arnau Garcia is currently the Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute for European and Mediterranean Archaeology at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. He grew up in a village near Barcelona and received his undergraduate degree in History at the University of Barcelona in 2005. After graduation, his professional archaeological career began digging rescue excavations. In 2008 Dr. Garcia received a Master's degree and in 2013 he completed his Doctorate degree at the Catalan Institute for Classical Archaeology (ICAC), a research center of the Rovira i Virgili University in Tarragona. After his PhD and before starting his work at IEMA, Dr. Garcia worked as a postdoctoral researcher on ICAC projects.

What are the current research interests? What are the current projects in which you are involved?

My field of research is landscape archaeology or the study of our present landscapes in their dimensions as cultural products and the result of long-term human-environment interactions. As an archaeologist I am interested in the identification and interpretation of past human actions in different geographic areas and, for me the most interesting part, the integration of the archaeological record in studies based on interdisciplinary and diachronic approaches. My research has been focused on the landscapes of the Mediterranean region. In my studies, I use GIS-based analysis, photogrammetric reconstruction, aerial imagery analysis, archaeomorphological and Historic geographical analysis, and field survey methodologies.

Since I completed my PhD, I have participated in projects with the Catalan Institute for Classical Archaeology (ICAC) Landscape Archaeology Research Group in Northeastern Spain. Our current research takes place in the basin of a river called Ter, in a couple of its upper valleys in the Pyrenees Mountains, and in the littoral plains around the mouth of the Ter. Both areas are highly anthropized landscapes where human activities, since prehistory, can be traced through archaeological and paleoenvironmental data.

This year I started to work on a new project on the Island of Menorca, the lesser known of the Balearic Islands (except, maybe, for the archaeologists interested in Bronze and Iron Age cultures). I am involved in a project with the University of the Balearic Islands focused on an area next to a small natural harbor where both archaeological and palaeoenvironmental data could contain some clues about the first colonization of the Island by humans.

I am also collaborating on two survey projects in Greece. The first one is in Thrace, where I am working with a Greek team who conducted an intensive survey in the ancient city of Abdera and its territory. The second is in the plains of Western Thessaly. In this territory, massive land reclamation works in the 1970's has had an strong impact on archaeological sites, so we are working on the analysis of ancient aerial images, cartography, and local memories to "rescue" a disappeared archaeological record.

Finally, I am the head researcher of two projects, small in terms of both budget and geographic extension, in villages near Barcelona. I have a very particular interest in those projects because they have been designed by and are being carried out together with local institutions. They are directed to put in practice more direct applications of landscape archaeology studies in the improvement of cultural heritage management by local communities. In fact, one of the areas of research in which I would like to invest more time in the future is in the uses of landscape archaeology concepts and methodologies in the context of territorial (urban and non-urban) planning.

Your work as the IEMA post-doc centers on the study of mountainous landscapes, what led you to this interesting field of study? How did you get interested in the subject in Spain?

The most direct reason is that the ICAC Landscape Archaeology Group has a very strong research program on archaeology of high mountain areas. During my Master's studies, we came into contact with the different projects carried out by the ICAC, and, for me, the one about archaeology of mountains was the most interesting. I started to collaborate with them. I did my Master's dissertation about the subject and then I had the opportunity to continue the work for my PhD.

From an archaeological perspective, mountain areas contain very valuable archaeological information about specific types of settlement and economic activities (mainly about herding, forestry and metallurgy) that are complementary and not usually documented in Urban-Agricola lowlands archaeological record. In the Mediterranean, high mountains environments contain also Palaeoecological records that do not exist in other areas, allowing the possibility of a detailed analysis of local interrelationship between human and environmental dynamics. On the other hand, traditionally, mountain landscapes have not been considered interesting areas from the archaeological point of view. In this sense, the research conducted in the last decades has had the opportunity of introduce a new archaeological record for the analysis of prehistoric and historical societies.

But, in the first place, I should have said that before even imagining that one day I would do a PhD about mountain landscapes, hiking in the mountains was one of my favorite activities. So, it is not surprise that during the last years, going to the Montseny (the mountains I studied in my PhD) and the Pyrenees for fieldwork has been one of the happy moments during the year.

What aspects of your research do you believe has, or will, contribute the most to archaeological understandings of the past?

Well, that is not easy to answer. On one side, I hope that all the research in which I participate is contributing somehow to expand the knowledge about different aspects of the past and that it could help other researchers in the future.

But here in particular, I would like to underline the studies of mountain landscapes: the research done over

the last 15 years by different groups, including the ICAC group, has changed the perspective of mountain landscapes as an archaeological document. A sampling of these studies will be presented in this year's IEMA Conference.

Whose work, both archaeological and other, has proven to be the most inspiring to your own work? Is there a particular archaeologist or mentor that has been influential in your career?

On a larger scale, one of the most stimulating characteristics of working in an area such as landscape studies is that you are on the border of various disciplines. Lectures in geography, history, and earth sciences have been, together with those about archaeology, important in the development of my research projects.

My most immediate influences come, logically, from the "environment" where I did my PhD and working with the human team of the ICAC Landscape Archaeological Research Group directed by Dr. Josep M. Palet. It has also been very important for me to have contact with the usual partners in my projects: the paleoenvironment group of the University of Barcelona, directed by Dr. Santiago Riera, and the sedimentologists of the University of Barcelona, Dr. Santiago Giralt and Dr. Ramón Julià. My ideas about how to develop research on landscape archaeology are mostly a result of the work on the interdisciplinary projects conducted by this team of archaeologists, palaeoenvironmentalists and geologists.

What have been the most rewarding, and most challenging aspects of your time as the IEMA post-doc?

This job has been my first contact with the American academy, and the first time

I lived in the U.S., so part of the challenge was the adaptation to a new place. Teaching the seminar and figuring out how to make it useful for the Master's and Doctorate students is probably the biggest challenge. It's also the first time that I am "in charge" of an event the size of the IEMA Conference. Those experiences have been challenging and rewarding at the same time, giving me the opportunity to learn from the work I have done.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that one of the most positive aspects of the IEMA experience is the reception. I think that previous IEMA fellows agree with that, so that's a really good characteristic of both the UB Anthropology and Classics Department's communities. Faculty, students, and staff have been really nice from the first day and willing to help in my adaptation, the conference organization, and the seminar class.

You have recently received a Postdoctoral position in Spain and a prestigious fellowship in Great Britain. Would you tell us a bit about the application process and the opportunities?

The first is a Research Grant from the University of the Balearic Islands and the second a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellowship, a European Union competitive grant for researchers in all fields. I obtained a grant to work for two years in the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research in Cambridge, England. Both are highly competitive and came after many rejected applications so I am very happy about both opportunities. I tell you that because I guess it is an incentive to be persistent.

They are research grants, that is, they are intended for researchers to contribute to projects carried out by research groups of the host institution and, at the same time, acquire new abilities from the work developed by the host group. Both

applications have been originated from previous collaborations with members of the destination groups and I think that on both applications processes the role of the host group has been a key factor. First, they are excellent groups, with an outstanding trajectory in archaeological research. And, second, they have been active in all the preparation and giving much important feedback to improve the application in order to make it successful.

What are your future ambitions? What is the future of your work? Is there a site, an area, a method, a theory, a person or university you have wanted to work with? Where do you see yourself doing in the future?

If you ask a postdoctoral researcher about the future, you risk receiving tears, anger and complaints as answer (plus you must multiply that by two if it is a South-European researcher and by five if he or she works in the humanities)... and after the drama you will hear that the future in this field is certainly uncertain. Fortunately, my perspective for the next couple years is to work on the projects related of the postdoctoral grants in the Balearic Islands and Cambridge. In the latter I will work in the Indus Valley, which is my first experience outside of Mediterranean Archeology.

In a longer-term perspective, the consolidation of a lectureship or a permanent contract in a research institution looks difficult, although, my intention is to be open to the opportunities that will come. In comparison to other countries, research in Spain has been traditionally low-funded by both public and private bodies. Work in other European or North American countries is a common destination for South European "young" researchers and it might be the case for me too.

In any situation, my main interest is to

carry out researches where I feel that my work is a positive contribution. And, finally, there is my permanently unachieved aim of spending more time publishing my previous and current research.

What advice would you give current graduate students that have just started to pick a topic, are working on their dissertation, or are searching for jobs?

First, read the advices from IEMA postdocs in previous Chronika issues, all of them provide excellent advice.

I suppose you are used to hearing that hard work and the communication of your ideas (with peer review publications at the core, but not only) is critical.

Finally, I do not know if this is good advice, but I would tell future and recent graduates that they should be open-minded, work in different directions and not be shy of knocking on doors. For example, the most common employment opportunities will be in the Academy or Heritage Management, having a foot in both areas could open different job opportunities, some of them perhaps unexpected. Another important concept for me is good projects: design your own projects and collaborate with good projects. Not necessarily the largest, or most prestigious, or most famous sites. Particularly for recent graduates, a good project is the one where you can learn, get involved in the research process, and where your contribution is valued and recognized.

Thank you Dr. Garcia.

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