CERRO DEL VILLAR EXCAVATIONS

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From August 24 to September 21, 2024, we conducted our third season of excavations at the Iron Age Phoenician site of Cerro del Villar, located in a nature preserve on the outskirts of the modern city of Málaga on the southern coast of Spain (figs. 1–3). The University of Chicago excavation team consisted of forty-two people, including seventeen undergraduates and ten master's students, who did most of the digging; seven experienced PhD students, who trained and supervised the more junior students; and eight senior staff members and specialists.

The excavation is structured as a field school in which students learn archaeological methods, including the latest computerized recording and mapping methods, and have the option of earning academic course credit. The students dig on the site from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. every weekday, Monday through Friday, and attend evening lectures given by the senior staff and specialists a few days each week. On the weekends, we take the students on field trips to sites and museums of interest in the region. There are many interesting places from a wide range of historical periods located only an hour or two from Málaga.

We previously conducted two excavations at Cerro del Villar, one in 2022 and one in 2023, each lasting four weeks. Now, after three seasons of excavation, we have exposed an area of 250 m^2 to a depth of 1–2 m, revealing several buildings and streets in a densely built town dating to the eighth and seventh centuries BCE (figs. 4–5). This town, which was about 8 ha (20 acres) in size, was founded by Phoenicians from the Levant on a small, uninhabited island in the mouth of the Guadalhorce River, which empties into the Mediterranean Sea a few miles west of Málaga.

The University of Chicago excavations at Cerro del Villar are part of a larger project conducted in collaboration with the University of Málaga and headed by Dr. José Suárez Padilla, a professor of archaeology

Figure 1. Map of the Mediterranean showing the location of Cerro del Villar in Spain in relation to the Phoenician homeland far to the east in the coastal Levant (the kingdom of Tyre).

Figure 2. Map of southern Spain showing the location of Cerro del Villar on an island near the mouth of the Guadalhorce River.

Figure 3. Aerial view of the site of Cerro del Villar near the airport on the outskirts of the modern city of Málaga.

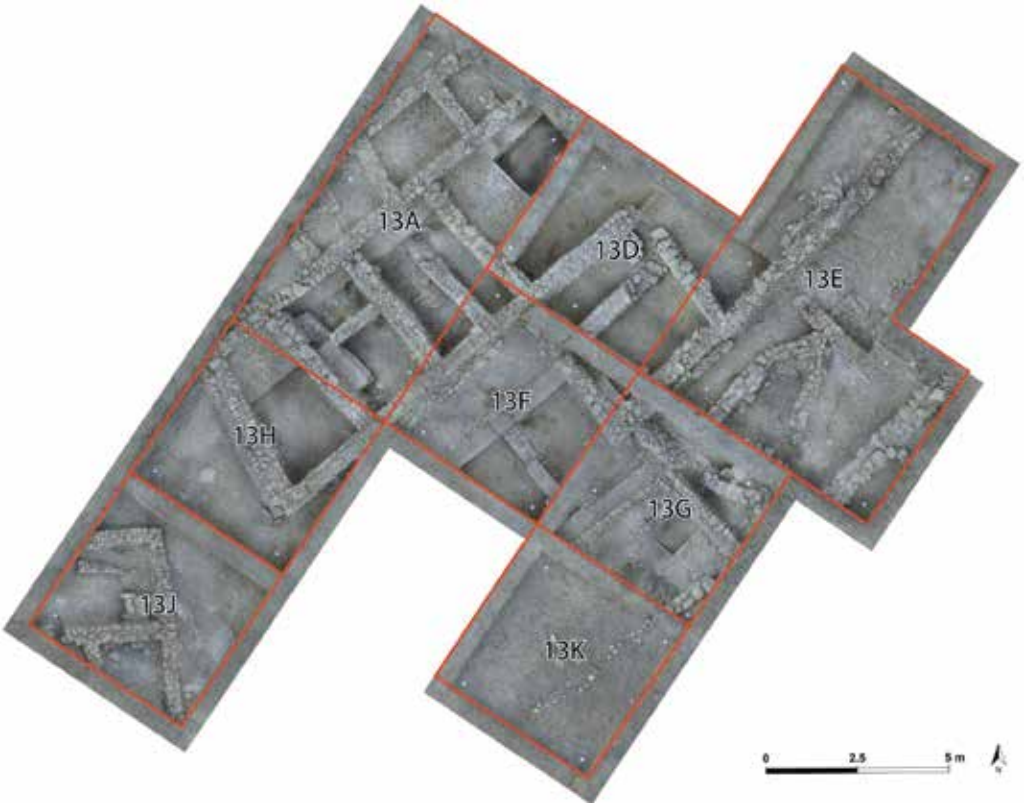

Figure 4. The University of Chicago's excavation area (sector 13) at Cerro del Villar.

Figure 5. Warehouse room excavated in sector 13 at Cerro del Villar, with smashed pottery storage jars found in situ on the floor.

at that university, with the assistance of Dr. Manuel Álvarez Martí-Aguilar, a professor of history. The Chicago team has its own sector of the site and works independently, but we excavate at the same time each year as the Spanish team and cooperate with them on many aspects of the project. We are grateful to our Spanish colleagues for inviting us to work with them at this important site and for the warm and productive nature of the collaboration.

In June and July 2025, we conducted an eight-week "study season" with a small team to analyze and document our finds in a laboratory at the University of Málaga, including state-of-the-art 3D scanning of all the diagnostic pottery sherds, restored pottery vessels, and other artifacts. We plan to resume excavating in 2026, with a four-week excavation season occurring in each of the years 2026, 2027, and 2028, during which we will train large groups of students. Our goal is to expand our sector of the ancient town to 300 m^2 to encompass a coherent block of houses bounded by streets and alleys and to excavate all the way down to virgin soil so we can reconstruct the town's architectural, economic, and social development over two centuries, from its initial settlement shortly after 800 BCE until its inhabitants moved to higher ground on the mainland around 600 BCE, abandoning what had become an inhospitable, swampy location on a low-lying island that was prone to flooding.

No later town was built on this swampy site in subsequent eras to disturb the remains of the short-lived Iron Age town, which are accessible just under the surface. This circumstance makes the site an ideal location for exploring a Phoenician colony in Spain during its formative period, when thousands of settlers from the kingdom of Tyre in the Levant sailed 2,500 miles from the other end of the Mediterranean Sea to the Iberian peninsula, bringing with them their culture, language, and technology. Our research agenda includes addressing the larger historical question of why the Phoenicians migrated when they did—that is, what were the conditions back home in the Levant that led to this major and risky endeavor so far from home? We are also interested in knowing what political and cultural impact the Phoenician settlers had on the indigenous Iberian population. It has become increasingly clear from recent research that the Phoenician (and specifically Tyrian) colonization of Iberia began already in the ninth century BCE—much earlier than was previously thought—and was conducted on a larger scale than scholars had surmised. The impetus for colonization was not just a matter of establishing mercantile trading posts to obtain silver and other metals but also involved agricultural settlement—especially in the region of Málaga—and entailed the rather sudden transplantation of the eastern Mediterranean's entire cultural and technological "package" to the far west of the Mediterranean and to the Atlantic shores of Spain and Portugal.

Based on our preliminary results and the results of previous excavations nearby in the 1980s and 1990s, we believe we are excavating what was primarily a commercial and industrial district of the town not far from a sheltered harbor or anchorage on the leeward edge of the island. The area we are digging seems to have been occupied by warehouses for storing commodities—presumably brought up from ships moored nearby—and also featured an open-air workshop for metalworking (figs. 5–7). So far, we have found mainly ceramic shipping containers and storage vessels, with relatively little in the way of domestic pottery for cooking and serving food, and few botanical and faunal remains. However, firm conclusions must await full analysis of the excavated materials, and we are mindful that the function of this part of the town could have changed over time as a result of economic changes in the transition from the

Figure 6. Artist's reconstruction of Phoenician buildings along a street dating to the seventh century BCE that were excavated at Cerro del Villar.

Figure 7. Copper-alloy bracelet found in sector 13 at Cerro del Villar in 2024.

eighth to the seventh century—developments that may be revealed as we dig more deeply in future seasons and expose earlier architectural phases.

We will combine the results obtained in our University of Chicago excavations with those realized concurrently by our collaborators from the University of Málaga and with the data from earlier excavations in various locations of the site. Doing so will give us a good picture of the overall organization of the town and the social and economic (and perhaps religious) practices of its inhabitants. Extensive urban excavations of this kind have only rarely been possible at Iron Age Phoenician sites in Spain and, indeed, in any part of the Mediterranean, including the Phoenicians' homeland in the Levant.