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SEVILLA, SPAIN

The chalcolithic mega-site of Valencina de la Concepción (Sevilla), Spain



Results of the fieldwork from 2018 to 2020

Department Madrid of the German Archaeological Institute

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Martín, Nils Ostermeier, Charles Bashore and

Natalie El Dana



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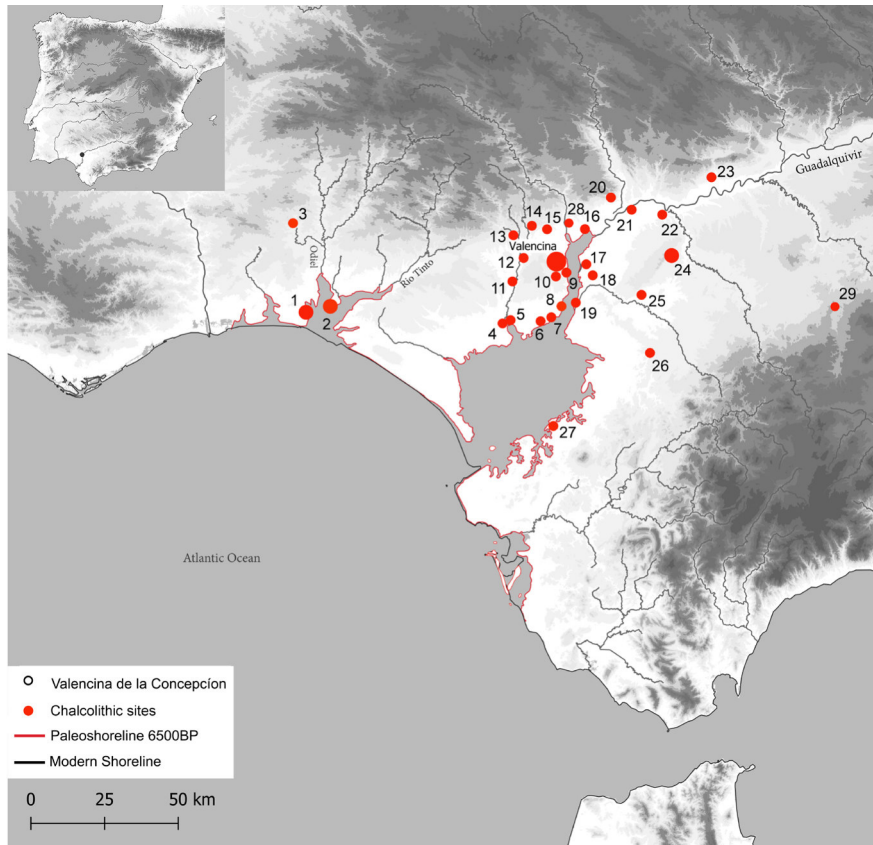
Cooperation partner: Universität Würzburg, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Casa de Cultura – Museo de Valencina de la Concepción (J. M. Vargas Jiménez).

Financial Support: Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

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Die chalkolitische Fundstätte von Valencina de la Concepción befindet sich in Südwestspanien, am westlichen Rand des Unteren Guadalquivirtals. Das Siedlungsareal und die zugehörige Nekropole erstrecken sich auf über 460 Hektar, womit sie die größte der im Südwesten der Iberischen Halbinsel lokalisierten chalkolithischen mega-sites bildet. Die Forschungen beinhalten archäologische Ausgrabungen und Surveys auf den landwirtschaftlichen Flächen im Norden der archäologischen Fundstätte. Mithilfe von geomagnetischen Prospektionen konnten zehn verschiedene Linien von Gräben dokumentiert werden, die sich zu fünf unterschiedlichen Grabenwerken und einem sechsten, kleineren, zusammenführen lassen. Abgesehen von Gräben und Gruben, werden sechs in den geologischen Untergrund eingetiefte Hütten und Werkstätten untersucht. Die vorhandene Information sowie die ¹⁴C-Daten zeigen eine kontinuierliche Besiedlung von Valencina für die Zeit von 3300/3200 bis 2200 cal. BC an und erlauben eine hypothetische Rekonstruktion der unterschiedlichen Grabenwerke. Zwischen 2300 und 2200 cal. BC kam die Siedlungsaktivität in Valencina nahezu zu einem Ende.

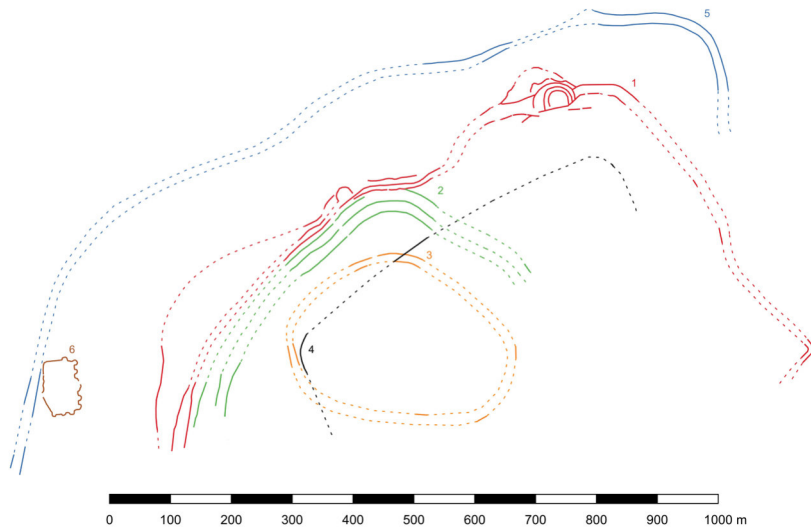


- 1 Valencina de la Concepción and other chalcolithic sites in the Lower Guadalquivir area. 1 Papa Uvas (Aljaraque, Huelva); 2 La Orden – Seminario de Huelva (Huelva); 3 Cabezo Juré (Alosno, Huelva); 4 Chillas (Villamanrique de la Condesa, Sevilla); 5 Aznalcázar (Sevilla); 6 La Marismilla (La Puebla del Río, Sevilla); 7 Estacada de Álfaro und Cañada Fría (La Puebla del Río, Sevilla); 8 Cerro de San Juan und Cantalobos (Coria del Río, Sevilla); 9 El Carambolo (Camas, Sevilla); 10 El Zaudín (Tomares, Sevilla); 11 Chichina (Sanlúcar la Mayor, Sevilla); 12 Olivares (Sevilla); 13 Los Páramos (Aznalcóllar, Sevilla); 14 Cerro del Castillo/Mesa Redonda (Gerena, Sevilla); 15 SE-B/SE-K (Salteras, Sevilla); 16 La Angorilla (Alcalá del Río, Sevilla); 17 Parque de Miraflores (Sevilla); 18 Universidad Laboral (Sevilla); 19 Torre de los Herberos (Dos Hermanas, Sevilla); 20 Mesa Redonda (Villaverde del Río, Sevilla); 21 La Loma del Real Tesoro (Carmona, Sevilla); 22 La Morita (Cantillana, Sevilla); 23 Mesa de Setefilla (Lora del Río, Sevilla); 24 Carmona und El Acebuchal (Sevilla); 25 El Gandul (Alcalá de Guadaira, Sevilla); 26 El Amarguillo (Los Molares, Sevilla); 27 Huerto Pimentel (Lebrija, Sevilla); 28 El Hediondal (Guillena, Sevilla); 29 El Negrón (Gilena, Sevilla). (Design: Natalie El Dana, Thomas X. Schuhmacher)

The chalcolithic site of Valencina de la Concepción is located in southwestern Spain, on the western edge of the Lower Guadalquivir river basin. The settlement area and a contemporaneous necropolis extend over more than 460 hectares, constituting the largest site among a series of chalcolithic mega-sites located throughout the southwest of the Iberian Peninsula. The investigations include excavations and field surveys on the agricultural land in the northern area of the archaeological site. Through geomagnetic surveys 10 different lines of ditches, forming a total of five different enclosures and a sixth, smaller one could be detected. Besides ditches and pits, six dwelling structures and workshops, partially dug into the geological base, are being excavated. The available information and radiocarbon dates indicate a continuous occupation of the settlement of Valencina from 3300/3200 to 2200 cal. BC and allow a hypothetical reconstruction of the different enclosures. Between 2300 and 2200 cal. BC settlement activity in Valencina came almost to an end.

Introduction

- 1 The ›mega-site‹ of [Valencina de la Concepción](#) [↗] extends throughout the northeastern limit of the Aljarafe Plateau, 6 km to the west of modern-day Seville in the South of Spain (Fig. 1). During prehistoric times, it was located next to an inlet of the Atlantic Ocean, which covered most of the current estuary of the Guadalquivir. The wide prehistoric estuary reached modern-day [Alcalá del Río](#) [↗], some 15 km Northeast of Valencina, facilitating navigation and giving Valencina a quick and easy connection to the Atlantic sea.
- 2 The site of Valencina was first known through the accidental discovery of the tholos tomb of La Pastora in 1860, followed by the detection and excavation of several other burial monuments, mainly hypogea and tholos tombs. In contrast, the settlement of Valencina was not discovered until 1971, when the first excavation was carried out in the area known as the ›La Perrera‹, not far from the area of Cerro de la Cabeza, where our project is focused on. Additionally, in 1975 the first ditches in the same area were identified.



2 Theoretical model of the lines of enclosures 1–6 in the northern area of Valencina de la Concepción following the results of the geomagnetic surveys (dashed lines: reconstructed). (Design: Nils Ostermeier, Natalie El Dana, University of Würzburg)

The interdisciplinary project of Valencina-Nord

- 3 In the year 2014 we carried out a first geophysical and archaeological survey and in 2016 we began a research project sponsored by the German Archaeological Institute of Madrid in collaboration with other institutions. The project focuses on the history of the chalcolithic settlement of Valencina de la Concepción. The investigations include excavations and field surveys on nowadays agricultural land in the northern area of the archaeological site, including but not limited to Cerro de la Cabeza. Furthermore, selected rescue excavations in the adjacent northern part of the modern town are also being re-evaluated and their materials studied. The expansion and structure of the prehistoric settlement areas is explored through field and geomagnetic surveying, followed up by archaeological excavations in order to investigate and date the multiphase chalcolithic earthworks and settlement areas with the objective of reconstructing the settlement's history.
- 4 Two more geomagnetic surveys followed in 2017 and 2018. Until now, we have surveyed more than 17 ha of the northern part of the settlement. In 2014 and during the following field campaigns, archaeological surface material was collected and in 2014, a first transect of manual drillings was executed in the municipal plot of the Cerro de la Cabeza to clarify the nature and depth of the documented structures as well as to obtain a general stratigraphy. In the last years, we extended the manual drillings to all the detected ditches to obtain data on the width, depth, profile and stratigraphy of the ditches. At the same time, the entire infill sediments from the drilling cores were floated in order to recover organic material that could be used for dating. Additionally, in 2019 a geoelectric transect was carried out with the objective of obtaining a profile throughout all the ditches located on the municipal plot on the Cerro de la Cabeza. In the years 2017, 2018 and 2019 we executed excavation campaigns in four trenches on the same parcel of land.
- 5 Recent archaeological and geophysical surveys in selected zones have provided evidence regarding several earthworks and domestic areas with numerous clusters. By means of intensive scientific analysis using radio-carbon dating, archaeobotany, zooarchaeology, archaeometric material analysis and pedology, the spatial, chronological, functional and economic



3 Valencina de la Concepción, Cerro de la Cabeza, sector 3. Highlighted are the dwelling structures. (Photo: D-DAI-MAD-JMV-DG-058-2018-004, Juan Manuel Vargas)

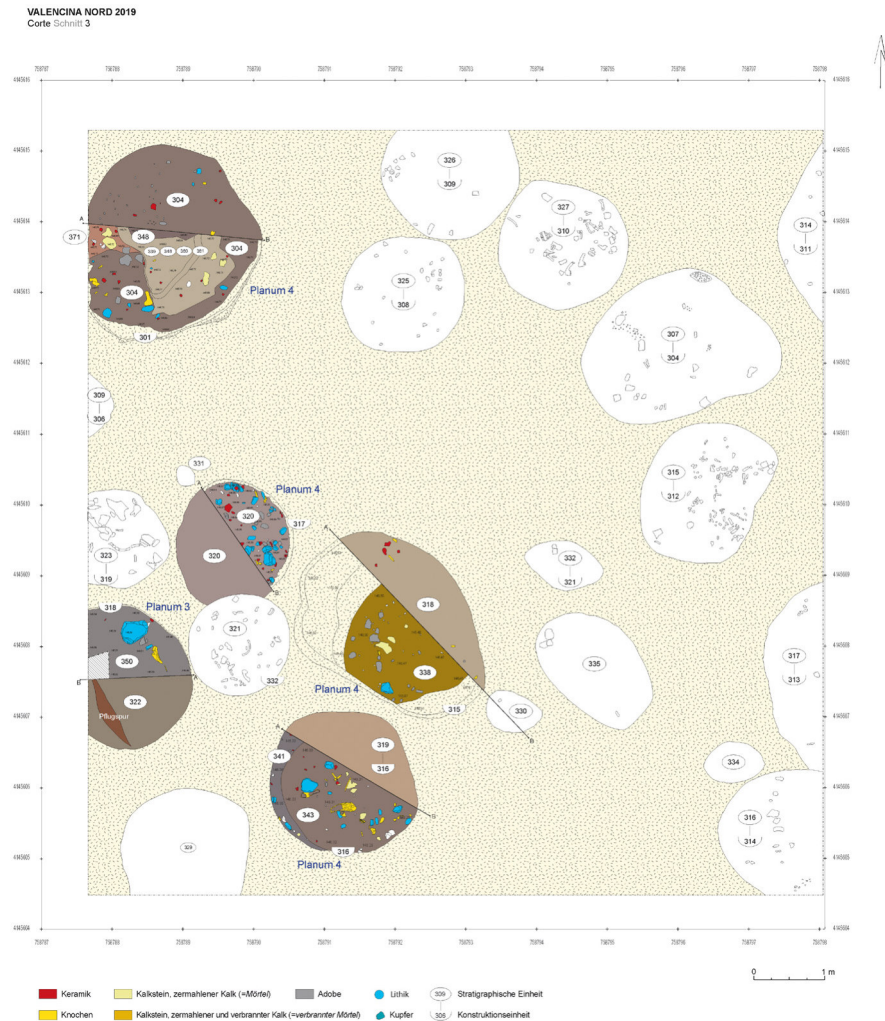
aspects of the chalcolithic settlement of Valencina de la Concepción are being investigated. Thus, the project aims are to clarify the cultural sequence, dynamics, density and structure of the settlement's activities, the supply of raw materials, craft production, long-distance contacts, and ultimately, to better understand the social organisation of the mega-site.

The geophysical and archaeological survey

- 6 The geomagnetic survey detected, aside from hundreds of smaller, circular anomalies, pits and dwelling structures, a total of ten different ditch lines, forming five different enclosures and a sixth, smaller one located to the west, with a diameter ranging between 95 m and 60 m (Fig. 2). By means of manual drillings carried out in all of the ditches and the partial excavation of four of the ditches, we can differentiate between narrow and wide, deep and shallow, as well as V- and U-shaped ones. The ditches normally have a width of 3 m to 6 m and a depth that ranges from 1.2 m to 3 m. An exception is ditch 10, located to the South of ›Cerro de la Cabeza‹ with a width of 10 m and a depth of approximately 8.5 m, certified by manual and mechanical drillings as well as by geoelectric survey.

The excavation campaigns

- 7 During the excavation campaigns at the municipal plot on the southern slope of the Cerro de la Cabeza two of the sectors, 3 and 4, each 10 × 11 m in size, were placed over two circular pit clusters. An extension of trench 4 additionally cross-sections ditch 10, previously identified during the geomagnetic surveys. We also began to excavate the first 27 m of trench 5 to the north, which in the end will deliver a 40 m long profile through six of the observed ditches. Until now, a first profile through the ditches 1, 2 and 5 has been obtained and, the latter including a small entrance accompanied by a big post hole.
- 8 Among the documented pits are some which were used as simple waste pits, containing large quantities of animal bones and ceramic sherds. Others might represent ritual deposits, such as UC 319 in sector 3, with an almost complete aurochs skull placed upon a bed of ceramic vessel fragments



4 Valencia de la Concepción, Cerro de la Cabeza, sector 3. Plan with indications of structures. Highlighted are some of the excavated structures. (DAI Madrid; Design: Rui de Almeida)

together with animal bones in anatomic connections, a stone adze, flint objects and an antler punch.

9 The most interesting contexts documented to date are six dwelling structures that were partially excavated into the geological base layer at a depth of about 1 m (UC 301, UC 309, UC 314, UC 315, UC 447/448 and UC 444) (Figs. 3. 4. 5). These structures present an oval plan and a diameter of approximately 3 m. Only one of them, UC 447/448, located in trench 4, has larger dimensions and is 3 m wide and 6 m long. In contrast to other pits, the filling sediment of this structure includes quite a large amount of ceramic material and crescent-shaped clay artefacts (usually interpreted as loom weights). Besides that, faunal remains, including worked bone objects, and lithic artefacts were identified. We must also highlight the discovery of large amounts of clay fragments and disintegrated clay, which appear mainly in the centre of these structures. Particularly the more well-preserved fragments are located alongside the internal edges of the structures. Some of the larger fragments do present a cuboid form, and therefore are almost for certain air-dried clay bricks, which form the upgoing walls together with clay balls, and were probably partially reinforced by wooden elements. All these structures present a floor composed of a mix of marl, clay and chalk. The wall and the sunken-floor were most likely plastered with clay.

10 Structure UC 447/448 was overlapped by a L-shaped ditch with a width of 0.85 m and a depth of 0.3 m. The longest preserved side is 4.9 m long, the other 2.8 m. The southern part of this structure was probably eroded by the slope and cut by the big ditch 10 in the south. Inside the filling of this small ditch and its immediate surroundings some sun-dried adobe bricks and lump balls were found. Therefore, the ditch probably corresponds with the foundation trench of a rectangular building built in adobe.

11 Other structures are smaller, with a diameter of 2 m but constructed in the same way (UC 316; UC 317) (Fig. 6). Their filling sediments include a large amount of different macro-lithic tools and animal bones as well as horns belonging to cattle or aurochs. A seemingly sound interpretation of these structures is that they could have been used as workshops or storage areas located near the dwelling structures.



5



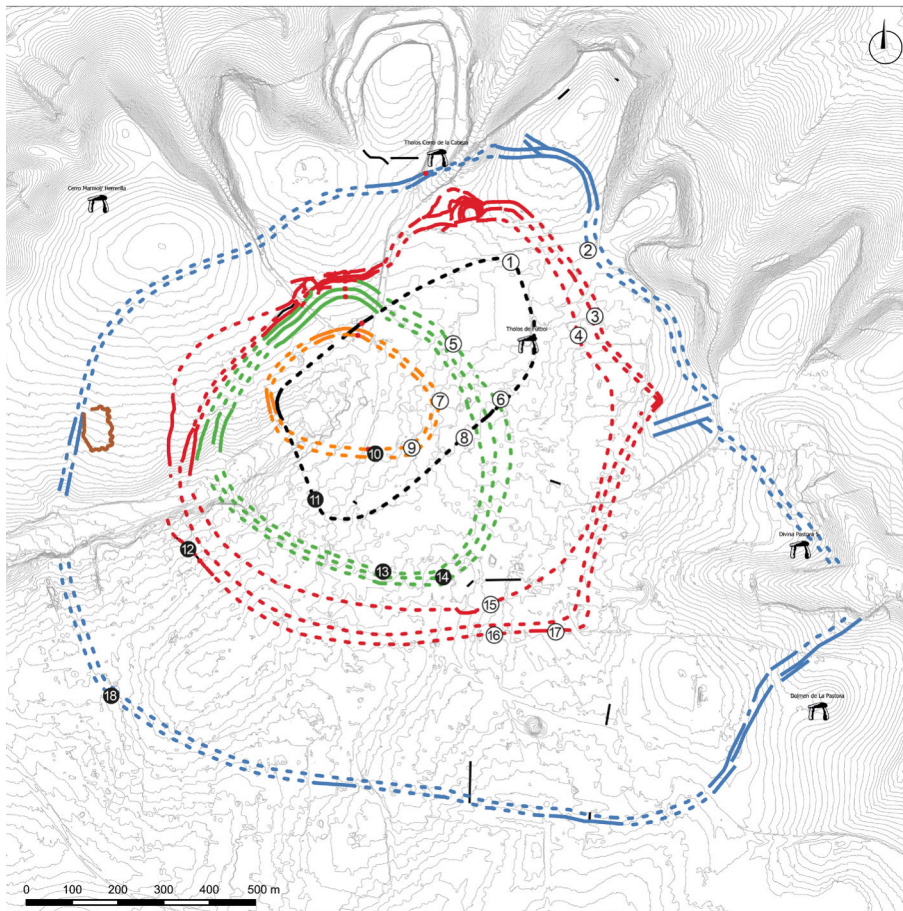
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5 Valencina de la Concepción. Sector 3, dwelling structure UC 301 during the excavation campaign in 2019. (Photo: D-DAI-MAD-CBAS-DG-46-2019-0021, Charles Bashore)

6 Valencina de la Concepción. Sector 3, Workshop UC 316. (Photo: D-DAI-MAD-CBAS-DG-46-2019-0157, Charles Bashore)

The hypothetical reconstruction and chronology of the enclosures

- 12 The combination of data derived from our surveys and excavations, as well as rescue excavations and geophysics carried out by external researchers, allows for a first hypothetical reconstruction of the different enclosures delimiting the settlement area of Valencina de la Concepción (Fig. 7). Naturally, such a reconstruction has to be re-evaluated every time new data is available. Due to different factors including modern construction, the ditches could only be detected in sections. We based our reconstruction on the assumption that circular and concentric enclosures existed in Valencina. This is not only suggested by the numerous parallels for ditched enclosures discovered throughout the Iberian Peninsula, but also by the outline of the ditches in the northern sector of Valencina, of which we have a more complete image.
- 13 Our manual drillings and excavation campaigns delivered stratified organic material. Mainly seeds and animal bones were dated by AMS-¹⁴C. So far, we have collected 105 new radiocarbon dates. This allows us to formulate a hypothesis regarding the beginning, evolution and end of the settlement and enclosures of Valencina de la Concepción.
- 14 Therefore, we have been able to identify three main phases. Settlement activity clearly began in Valencina at around 3300/3200 cal. BC, as the dates from pits UC 312 and UC 503 located in excavation sectors 3 and 5 highlight. These coincide with the oldest dated hypogea of La Huera and Calle Dinamarca, which mark the beginning of burial activity. Following the ¹⁴C-dates, shortly after that, the first and smallest, inner enclosure 3, corresponding to ditches 11 and 12, was built (Figs. 7, in orange. 8). Ditches 11 and 12 present a V-shaped profile and are respectively 3 m and 4.5 m wide, and 1.6 m and 2.8 m deep. The ditches documented and excavated in the rescue excavations of Nueva Biblioteca (Fig. 7, 10) (2018 and 2020/21) and La Perrera trench D (Fig. 7, 7) (1975) probably also form part of this enclosure.
- 15 At the end of this first phase, during the later Early Chalcolithic, ditches 7, 6 and 5 were constructed, forming enclosure 2 (Figs. 7, in green. 8), extending the enclosed area of the settlement. Ditch 5 has a more or less U-shaped profile, a width of 5 m and a depth of little more than 1.8 m. During the excavation campaign of 2019 we were able to detect a small entrance

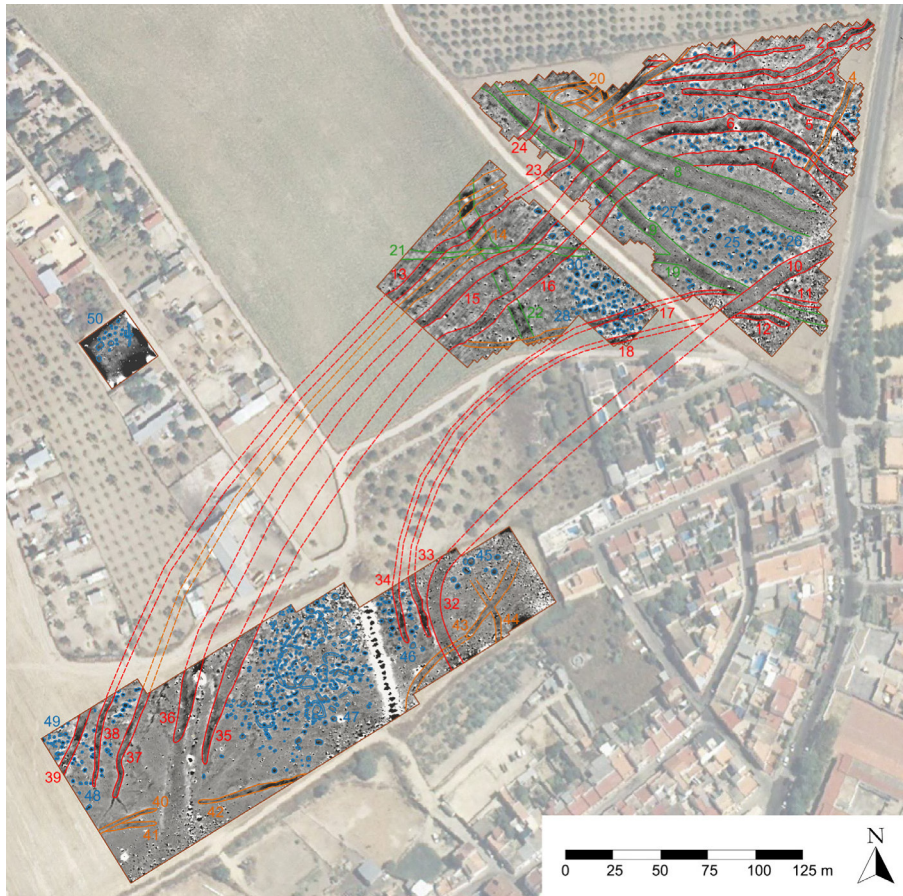


7 Valencina de la Concepción. Hypothetical reconstruction of the various enclosures. (DAI Madrid, Design: Natalie El Dana, Rui de Almeida)

through ditch 5, accompanied by a large posthole. Ditch 6 also presents a U-shaped profile, with a width of 10 m and a depth of 2.6 m. Ditch 7, with a width of 7 m and a depth of 2.9 m seems to present two phases. It is likely that an original V-shaped ditch was subsequently widened and remodelled into a U-shaped one.

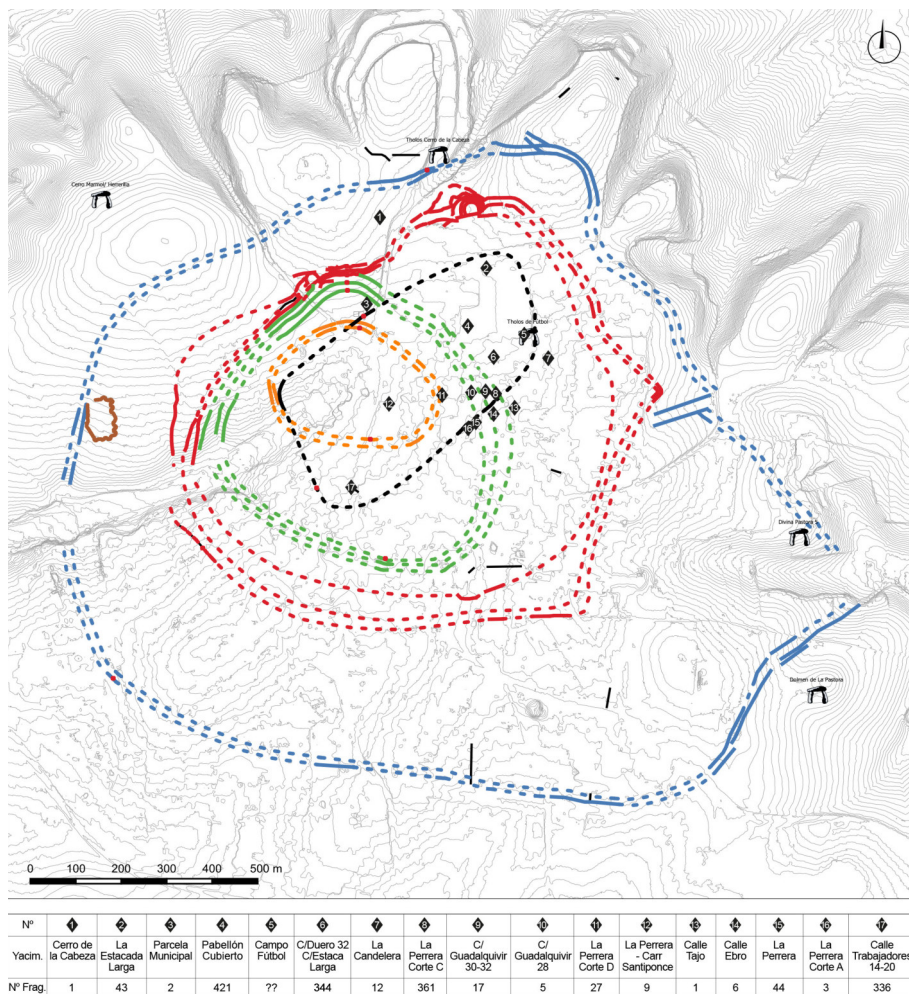
16 The double ditched enclosure 5 was further identified in our geomagnetic survey to the Northeast of Cerro de la Cruz and in the outermost Western sector (Fig. 2). Enclosure 5 (Fig. 7, in blue) marks the maximum settlement area, some 200 ha. This enclosure is also formed by the ditches documented in 1976 during the excavations by the Museum of Seville and a ditch recently excavated in Calle Bulería, where manual drillings were carried out. Radio-carbon dates suggest that these ditches were abandoned and gradually filled during the Middle Chalcolithic, this concludes that enclosure 5 was probably built at the beginning of the Middle Chalcolithic. The six dwelling structures and the workshop detected in sectors 3 and 4, as well as a pit containing probable seasonal deposit of snail shells, date to this phase, and are located within the area delimited by enclosure 5.

17 At around 2600/2550 cal. BC, with the beginning of the third phase, the Late Chalcolithic, a reduction of the enclosed area began. This is signified by the construction of enclosure 1, consisting of three ditches, 1, 2 and 3 (Figs. 7, in red. 8), forming bastions or complex entrances. In [Perdigões](#) [↗] (Portugal) the outermost ditch 1, which, among other examples, also presents complex entrances, is also dated to the Late Chalcolithic (2450–2150 cal. BC). Ditch 3 from Valencina has a U-shaped profile and is 5 m wide and 1.9 m deep. In its early phase, ditch 1 had a width of 2.7 m and a V-shaped profile. After the ditch was already partially filled, it got widened to a width of more than 5 m, but was now shallower, reaching only 1.2 m in depth. The chronology of the original ditch, narrower but deeper is not clear, being possible that the original ditch 1 was already in use during the Middle Chalcolithic. Ditch 2 has a maximum width of 6 m and a depth of 2.3 m. Enclosure 1 can be completed by several lines of ditches detected in different rescue excavations, enabling us to partially reconstruct the northern, western, eastern and southern limits of this enclosure, although there are still many gaps left in its outline.



8 Valencina de la Concepción. Interpretation of the results of the geomagnetic survey 2014 and 2017. (Design: Nils Ostermeier, University of Würzburg)

- 18 A ritual deposit of an aurochs skull, together with other archaeological remains and two trash pits containing, among other elements, a large quantity of animal bones can be ascribed to this phase (UC 310; UC 462). It is probable that the rectangular house floor from sector 4 (UC 446), lying just north of ditch 10 and probably cut by it, was part of the settlement protected by enclosure 1. Rectangular house floors are traditionally thought to not have existed until the beginning of the Early Bronze Age, but several dates for this structure point to a time-span of 2600 to 2300 cal. BC. An example of a rectangular building dated to the Chalcolithic and used for metallurgical activities was identified in Los Millares (Almería), and another one dated to the Late Chalcolithic was identified in Outeiro Redondo (Lisbon).
- 19 Enclosure 4 is formed by ditch 10 (Figs. 2. 7, in black. 8) and other lines of ditches already documented in 1975 in La Perrera and in recent excavations in Calle Trajano 6 and the Campo de Fútbol. Through manual and mechanical drillings and a geoelectric survey a width of 10 m, a depth of approximately 8.5 m and a V-shaped profile could be certified. This monumental ditch 10 seems to mark an end of the construction of enclosures in Valencina. A correlation between the distribution area of Bell Beaker ceramics and the surface delimited by ditch 10 also seems to exist (Fig. 9). Furthermore, this ditch was filled with sediment between 2500 and 2200 cal. BC, although it was not completely filled until Roman imperial times.
- 20 Finally, the enclosure 6 (Figs. 2. 7, in brown) located to the west, near the inner side of enclosure 5, has a north-south span of 95 m and a west-east extension of 60 m. Enclosure 6 shows semi-circular bastions at regular intervals on its northern, eastern and southern sides. On the western side of the ditch there is an interruption of its linear development, probably corresponding to an entrance. One striking parallel is the enclosure of Venta de Rapa (Mancha Real, Jaén), dated to the Late Chalcolithic (second half of the 3rd mill. BC). Another similar enclosure was documented in Puech Haut (Paulhan, Hérault, France), in use throughout the entire 3rd millennium BC. Nevertheless, the chronology and relationship of enclosure 6 with regards to the other enclosures of Valencina de la Concepción has still to be thoroughly studied.



9 Valencina de la Concepción. Hypothetical reconstruction of the various enclosures and distribution of Bell Beaker ceramics by number of fragments. (DAI Madrid, Design: Natalie El Dana, Rui de Almeida)

21 In any case, the high number of structures, the presence of domestic features and workshops, archaeological materials in general, the identification of raw materials, the continuous use and reshaping of lithic tools, among them grinding stones, clearly indicates a continuous occupation of the settlement in Valencina from 3300/3200 to 2200 cal. BC. Between 2300 and 2200 cal. BC settlement activity came almost to an end. There are only a few remains indicating occupation of Valencina during a final stage of the Early Bronze Age, between 1900 and 1700 cal. BC. We are trying to find an explanation for this sudden and abrupt end of the enclosures and occupation on the site, evaluating among other aspects a loss of fertile agricultural soil due to erosion, overexploitation, or climatic change. During the transitional period from the Bronze to the Iron Age, a re-occupation took place. This is represented by the presence of possible funerary contexts, documented by an ›à char-don vessel‹, fragments of a Phoenician red slipware plate and a bronze fibula.

Conclusion

22 The site of Valencina de la Concepción is part of the phenomenon of Chalcolithic ditched enclosures, which became a relevant part of prehistoric investigation and research in the Iberian Peninsula since the 1970s. The size of most of the ditched enclosures lies between 15 and 30 ha. Among them we find some ›mega-sites‹ such as Porto Torrão in the Alentejo (Portugal) with a surface of 75 to 100 ha, La Pijotilla (Extremadura, Spain) with 80 ha, Marroquíes Bajos (Jaén, Spain) with 113 ha, or Valencina de la Concepción with more than 200 ha.

23 Nevertheless, we can observe an important variability regarding the size, form and architecture of ditched enclosures, and therefore cannot expect all of them to have the same chronology, function or social role. In the case of Valencina de la Concepción we are sure that we are talking about a settlement which was continuously occupied from the end of the 4th millennium until the end of the 3rd millennium BC. It might, like other ›mega-sites‹, in fact have aggregated a large number of people.

24 Especially in the largest and more complex tombs of Valencina we can find very sophisticated objects made in exotic raw materials such as gold,

ivory, ostrich egg-shells, rock crystal, variscite and amber aside from ceramics and flint objects. On the other hand, copper objects are quite scarce. Undoubtedly, these complex funerary monuments and the grave goods found in some of them suggest regional and inter-regional exchange. A certain degree of social complexity can be assumed, although its characterization is still debated.

- 25 Although Valencina was subject to many changes concerning its extension and occupation pattern, it might have fulfilled a major role as settlement for a large amount of people, acting as a central place, production center and gateway for the exchange of products and exotic goods, while also operating as a funeral and ritual space.

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