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A tale of two gorges: Late Quaternary site formation and surface dynamics in the Mula basin (Murcia, Spain)

Diego E. Angelucci ^{a, *}, Daniela Anesin ^a, Davide Susini ^a, Valentín Villaverde ^b,
Josefina Zapata ^c, João Zilhão ^{d, e}

^a Dipartimento di Lettere e Filosofia, Università di Trento, Trento, Italy

^b Departament de Prehistòria i Arqueologia, Universitat de València, Spain

^c Departamento de Zoología y Antropología Física, Facultad de Biología, Universidad de Murcia, Spain

^d Seminari d'Estudis i Recerques Prehistòriques, Departament d'Història i Arqueologia, Facultat de Geografia i Història, Universitat de Barcelona, Spain

^e Institució Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avançats (ICREA), Passeig Lluís Companys 23, 08010 Barcelona, Spain

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ABSTRACT

We present a case-study in Palaeolithic archaeology focusing on formation processes at cave- and rock-shelter-sites in a Mediterranean context and on the correlation between site deposits, Quaternary surface sediments and the morphology of the surrounding land. We study three sites located in the basin of River Mula (Murcia, Spain): the cave-site of Cueva Antón and the rock-shelters of Finca Doña Martina and Abrigo de la Boja, in the Rambla Perea valley. They are examined through an integrated geoarchaeological approach that takes into account geomorphological, stratigraphic and soil micromorphological data. The three sites are found within a short distance and cover similar time spans within the Upper Pleistocene but have different formations and show distinct degrees of preservation of the archaeological record. Cueva Antón features a densely-stratified, mostly alluvial succession, with excellent preservation of stratigraphic layout and sedimentary facies. The succession represents a well-preserved record of past activity of the River Mula and can be correlated to its open-air alluvial system. The Rambla Perea sites, despite their immediate vicinity, underwent distinct formation dynamics, with a complex interaction among the site deposits and the hillslope along which they are found, and exhibit different degrees of preservation of archaeological layers and features. We summarise the evidence from these sites and then discuss its implications for site formation, for the preservation of the archaeological record and for the correlation between the 'inside' (the archaeological successions preserved within caves and in rock-shelters) and the 'outside' (the geomorphological setting of the land and the evolution of Quaternary surface dynamics through time).

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we present a Palaeolithic Archaeology case-study matching the theme proposed by the Cologne meeting ("Inside – Outside. Integrating Cave and Open-Air Archives"). Our study reports on three sites located within a short distance that cover similar time spans within the Upper Pleistocene but have different formation processes and show different degrees of preservation of the archaeological record. These sites are located in the hydrographic basin of River Mula, in the Autonomous Region of Murcia, Spain (Fig. 1).

* Corresponding author. Dipartimento di Lettere e Filosofia, Università degli Studi di Trento, via T. Gar 14, 38122 Trento, Italy.

E-mail address: diego.angelucci@unitn.it (D.E. Angelucci).

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The case-study originates in an archaeological project undertaken in the basin of the Mula with the aim of locating and studying sites documenting the Middle-to-Upper Palaeolithic transition (Zilhão and Villaverde, 2008; Zilhão et al., 2010). The project started in 2006 and eventually explored three main localities: Cueva Antón, Finca Doña Martina and Abrigo de la Boja. Cueva Antón is a cave site located along the River Mula; it preserves a ca. 4-m-thick stratigraphic succession containing Middle Palaeolithic assemblages. Finca Doña Martina and Abrigo de la Boja (respectively FDM and ADB from now onwards) are two rock-shelter sites in the Rambla Perea valley, approx. 1.5 km from Cueva Antón; in both cases, systematic excavation revealed Upper Pleistocene successions featuring Middle and Upper Palaeolithic assemblages and features.

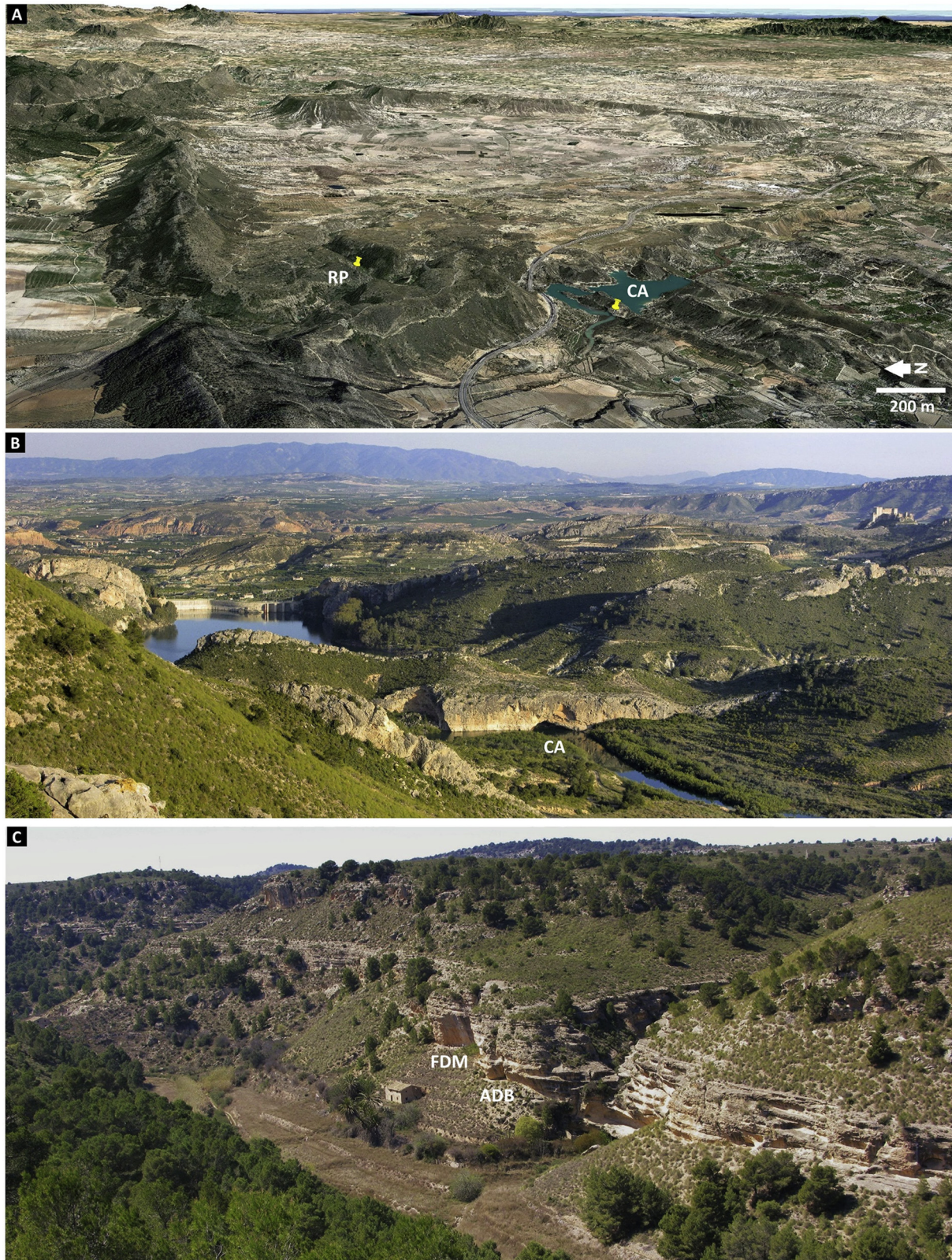


Fig. 1. Geographical setting (modified after Zilhão et al., forthcoming). A. GoogleEarth view of the Mula basin (March 29, 2015 image; elevation $\times 1.5$) with location of the Cueva Antón cave (CA), in the reservoir-inundated El Corcovado gorge, and of the Rambla Perea valley (RP). B. Panoramic photomosaic of the Mula valley upstream from the La Cierva dam (April 23, 2009). C. Position of the rock-shelters sites of Finca Doña Martina (FDM) and Abrigo de la Boja (ADB) in the middle reach of the Rambla Perea (March 20, 2008). See Fig. 6 for location. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

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