



I, Abbot Opila, with my belongings and my brothers, came to this place, a wasteland, and found the two churches and there, due to the thickness of the mount, I cut all the trees in the crag where the first church was founded, from the eastern side to Peña Longa hill. . .

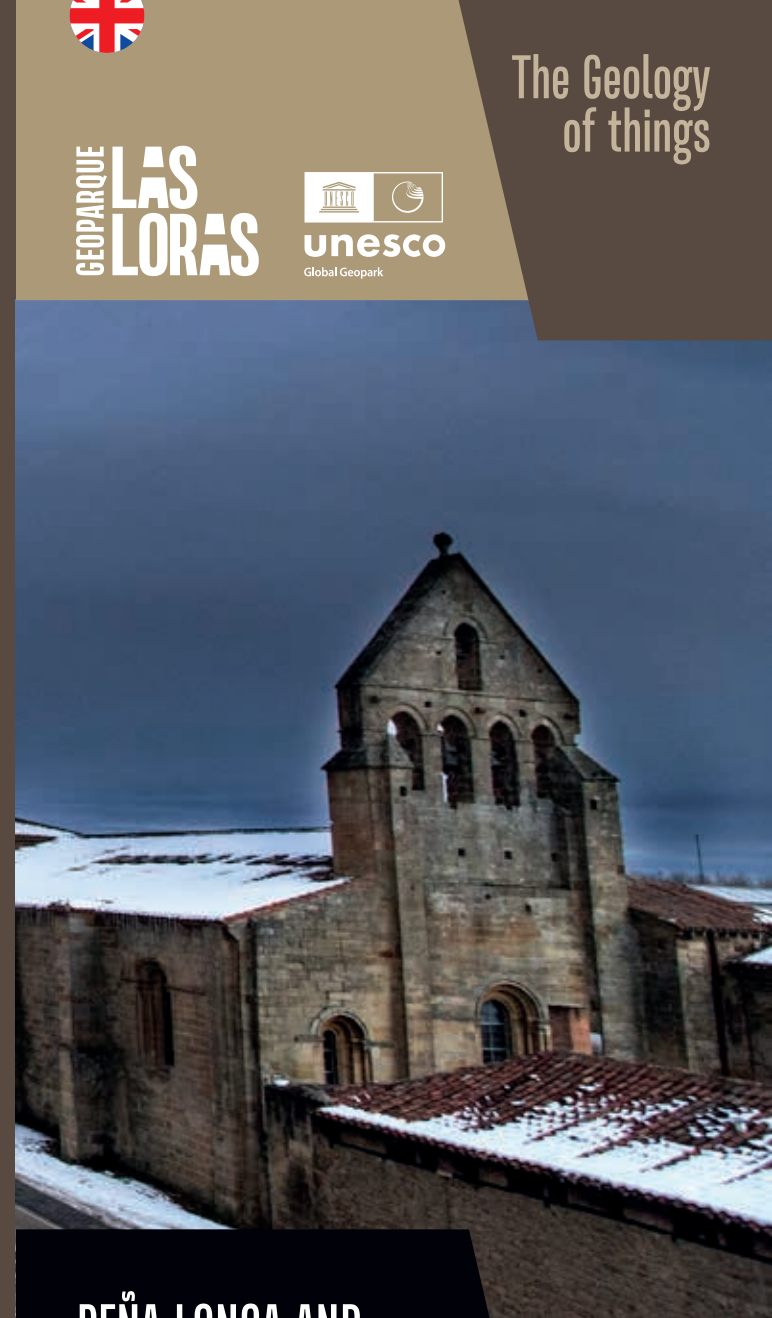
These words, dating back to the year of 822, are part of Santa Maria la Real Monastery official document and represent the first reference to Peña Longa, the extraordinary stone mass formed by limestone layers, which protect the abbey. It is undoubtedly a fake document, probably written during the 13th century, and intended as a propaganda manoeuvre to attract donations. It nevertheless underlines the link between the crag and the religious building. From its depths springs the water that keeps the monastery alive, and the stone that shapes its foundations and protects both karstic caves made into great churches originating the monastic enclosure. The higher cave was devoted to Saint Peter and the Apostle Paul, whose relics were found in there. The lower cave, which is bigger and has three altars, is devoted to Saint Mary, Saint Engracia, Saint John the Baptist, Saint Pelayo and Saint Martin the Confessor.

Despite the legendary document linking the crag and the monastery, their close medieval connection is undeniable and

goes far beyond the function of water and stone provider, safeguard against the icy northern winds, prayer centres and burial areas. None of the places has lost their mystical connection, taking part in the abbey's most important events. The finding of the tomb of Bernardo del Carpio inside the higher cave was a milestone event. He was a mythical hero born from the illicit union between the Count of Saldaña and Jimena, the sister of Alfonso II, the Chaste. Such a situation has condemned him all through his life, but it also provided him with an exciting biography which culminated at the Roncesvalles battle. It was an armed conflict against Charlemagne troops, led by his nephew Roldán, who would be defeated by our hero, who took from him the famous sword of Durendarte. A legend with little prospect of reality but extraordinarily widespread during the Medieval period which got definitely linked to the crag and the monastery in 1522 when Charles I of Spain and the V, Holy Roman Emperor, visited Santa Maria la Real for the second time. Being told about the tomb and enchanted by the aura of the character, he climbed to the top of the crag and accessed the tomb, which had been opened, showing the sword of Durendarte. The monks offered him the sword, which he proudly carried all through his life. For the second time, the powerful limestone crag was the heart of a marketing operation.

The relation between Peña Longa and Santa María la Real is a story of crossed destinies overlapped even at the hardest moments. The monastery was disintegrated in 1835 and its bleakest period began, resulting in its ruin and the plundering of the most outstanding works of art. On the other hand, at the beginning of the 20th century part of the crag was drilled as to extend the meandering road at its foot. The lower church and its three apses were swept away. After these moments of uncertainty and sadness, the joy returned and the monastery was beautifully restored and turned into a recognised centre of cultural dissemination, a high school and the headquarters of Santa María la Real Foundation, whereas Peña Longa has become an important geological site within Las Loras Geopark.

César del Valle
Santa María La Real Foundation



PEÑA LONGA AND SANTA MARIA LA REAL MONASTERY

A story of crossed destinies

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entretantos



The Geology of things

GEOPARQUE LAS LORAS



Once upon a time there were some limestones, a cave and the tomb of a medieval knight

Did you know

that Peña Longa limestones, straight opposite Santa María la Real Monastery, are one of the world's thickest limestone rock formations of continental origin?

But... What is a limestone rock of continental origin?

Semi-arid wetlands at the end of the Jurassic period in Aguilar de Campoo

There was a shallow wetland, very similar to the Tablas de Damiel as we know them today, 145 million of years ago in Aguilar de Campoo. Large quantities of carbonate mud accumulated at its bottom. They formed the present limestone rocks of Peña Longa.

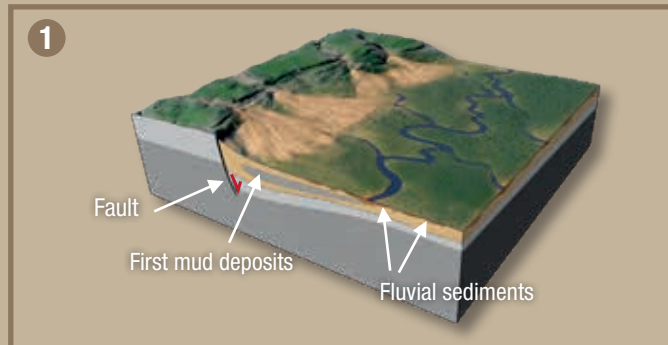


Fossils of ostracods, which are small crustaceans, fish teeth, freshwater gastropods and charophyte algae have been found here. But also, several fossils of dragonfly wings, several remains of plants and dinosaur bones have been found in nearby rocks of the same geological formation. These findings provide a general idea of what this area was like during the Upper Jurassic.

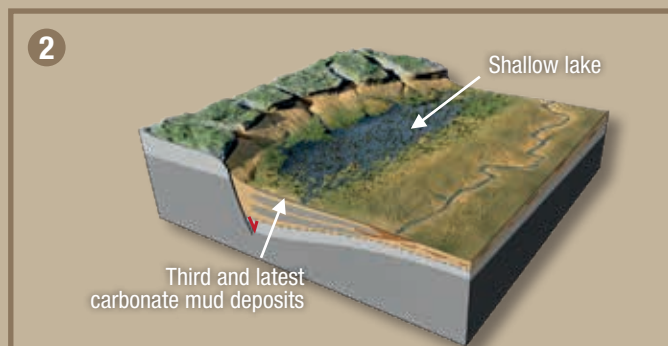
Aguilar de Campoo 145 million years ago (Jurassic-Cretaceous boundary)

One of the world's thickest continental limestone outcrops.

Peña Longa limestones great thickness is very rare according to the sedimentary record around the world. This unusual concentration of carbonate mud at this Upper Jurassic shallow wetland was caused by several faults which sank the sedimentary basin, thus enabling the continuous accumulation of sediments at the bottom of the wetland.

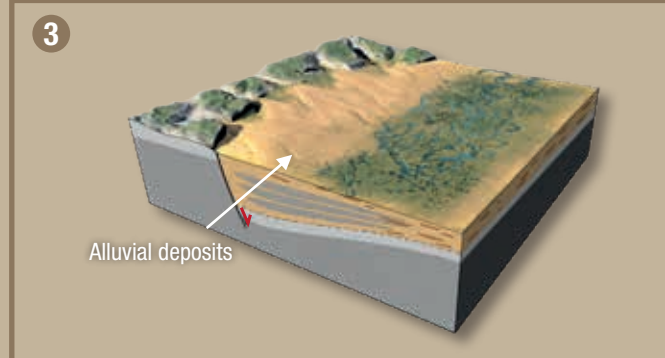


Stage of little tectonic activity: Fluvial and alluvial environments play a leading role, depositing detrital materials in the basin (boulders, sands and clays that we see today in the form of conglomerates, sandstones and shales).



Stages of major tectonic activity: a subsidence of the sedimentary basin is produced by the reactivation of the fault, forming the wetland again and depositing the carbonate muds that will be transformed into limestone over time.

Palaeogeographical map of the Upper Jurassic



Stage of little or no tectonic activity: braided fluvial and alluvial systems are again established in the sedimentary basin and detrital materials are again deposited on top of the carbonates.

NOTE: The scientific geological information has been obtained from the PhD Thesis of José María Hernández Gómez.