

The forgotten battle of the Spanish Civil War: recovering the archaeology of the fight at Turó del Balís

A new study, led by the Landscape Archaeology Research Group (GIAP) of the Catalan Institute of Classical Archaeology (ICAC-CERCA), unveils new details about the battlefield of Turó del Balís, one of the last Republican resistance episodes in Maresme (Catalonia) at the end of the Spanish Civil War, and proposes the preservation of the archaeological site.

The Francoist offensive in Catalonia began in late December 1938 and extended until early February 1939. The Republican Army was nearly defeated after the Ebro battle and the prolonged war effort of the front in the Pallars region. However, it attempted to reorganize the Catalan front in successive defense lines and fought the invasion on several battlefields across the country. Some of these clashes have left material remains that have only recently been excavated, such as the **battle of Ordal** or the **trenches** of Abrera on the Llobregat River.

Although the intense fighting impacted the oral memory of many villagers, the battlefield has almost gone unnoticed until today.

Between January 28 and 29, 1939, Republican troops established a new front between Sant Vicenç de Montalt and Caldes d'Estrac. They fought against Italian and Spanish troops of the *Corpo Truppe Volontarie* advancing along the Maresme coast (Barcelona). The **Balís battle** took place during the coastal campaign that began just after the Francoist military occupation of Barcelona on January 26. The Italian divisional forces of the Blue Arrows encountered the Republicans entrenched on the top of Balís' hill. Although the intense fighting impacted the oral memory of many villagers, the battlefield has almost gone unnoticed until today.

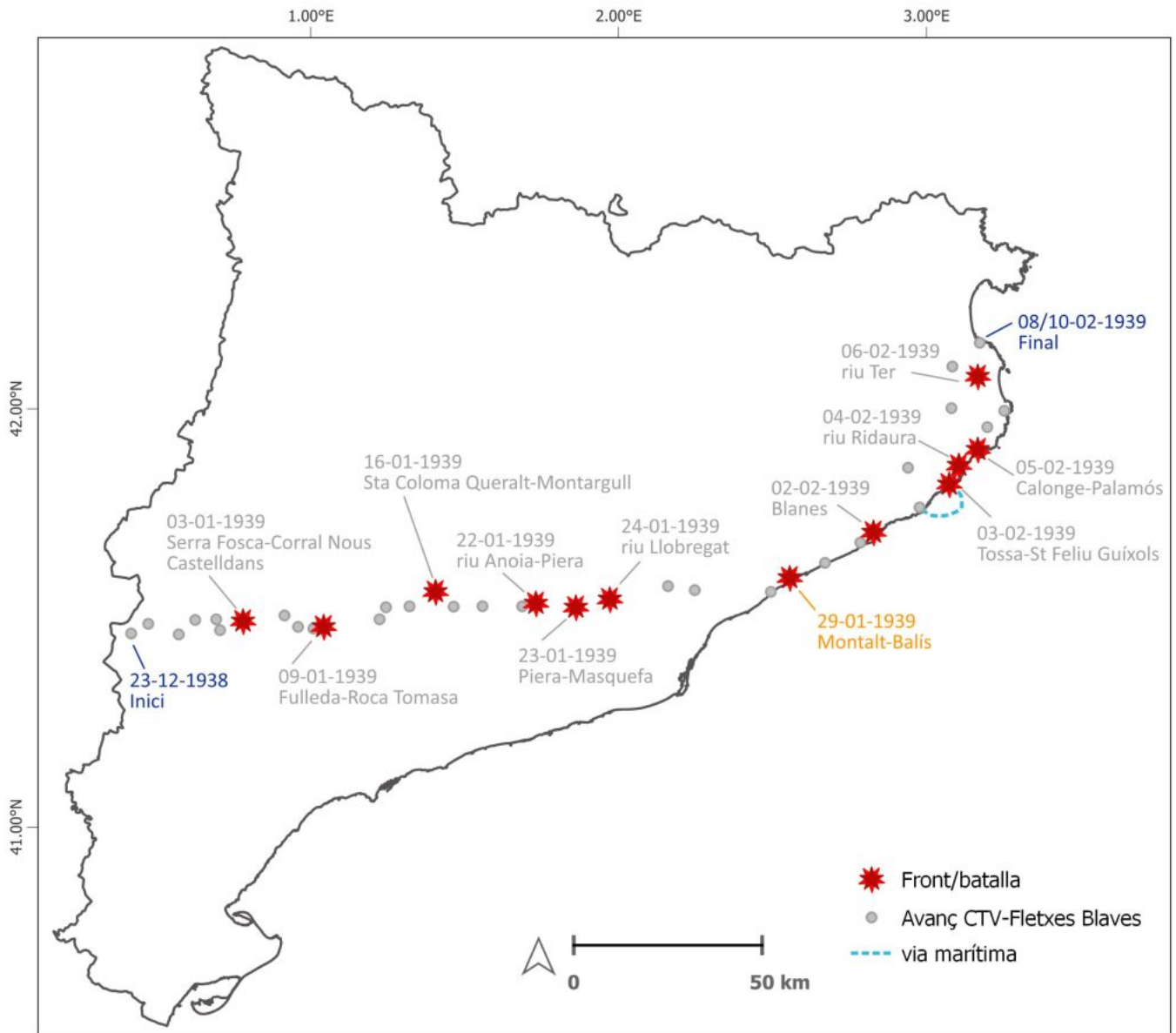


Figure 01. Route of the CTV-Blue Arrows during the Catalonia campaign, indicating areas where the most notable fighting occurred. Source: F. C. Conesa (ICAC-CERCA).

The Italian data provides quantitative information about the Catalan offensive and offers almost daily campaign records that can be analysed and compared with the fighting at Balís and in other notable episodes of Republican resistance, such as the defense of Castellans or Santa Coloma de Queralt and the defensive lines established in natural defenses such as the rivers Llobregat, Ter or Ridaura, among others. These operations never could reverse the offensive. However, **as happened at Balís, they managed to slow down the Francoist advance**. They provided essential time to reorganize the Republican rearguard and ensure the bulk of the civilian withdrawal towards exile.

The preservation of the
archaeological site is threatened
by urban growth

The battle's area has been delimited through the combined analysis of archive funds, historical cartography, and the recent recovery of a collection of archaeological materials illicitly taken from the Balís battlefield. Currently, however, the preservation of the archaeological site is threatened by urban growth, which is rapidly transforming the traditional agricultural landscape of the Maresme coast. This pressure makes the **need to protect the battlefield area even more evident, together with a new survey and excavations program**. After all, 2024 will mark 85 years since the battle and the end of the Catalonia war campaign.

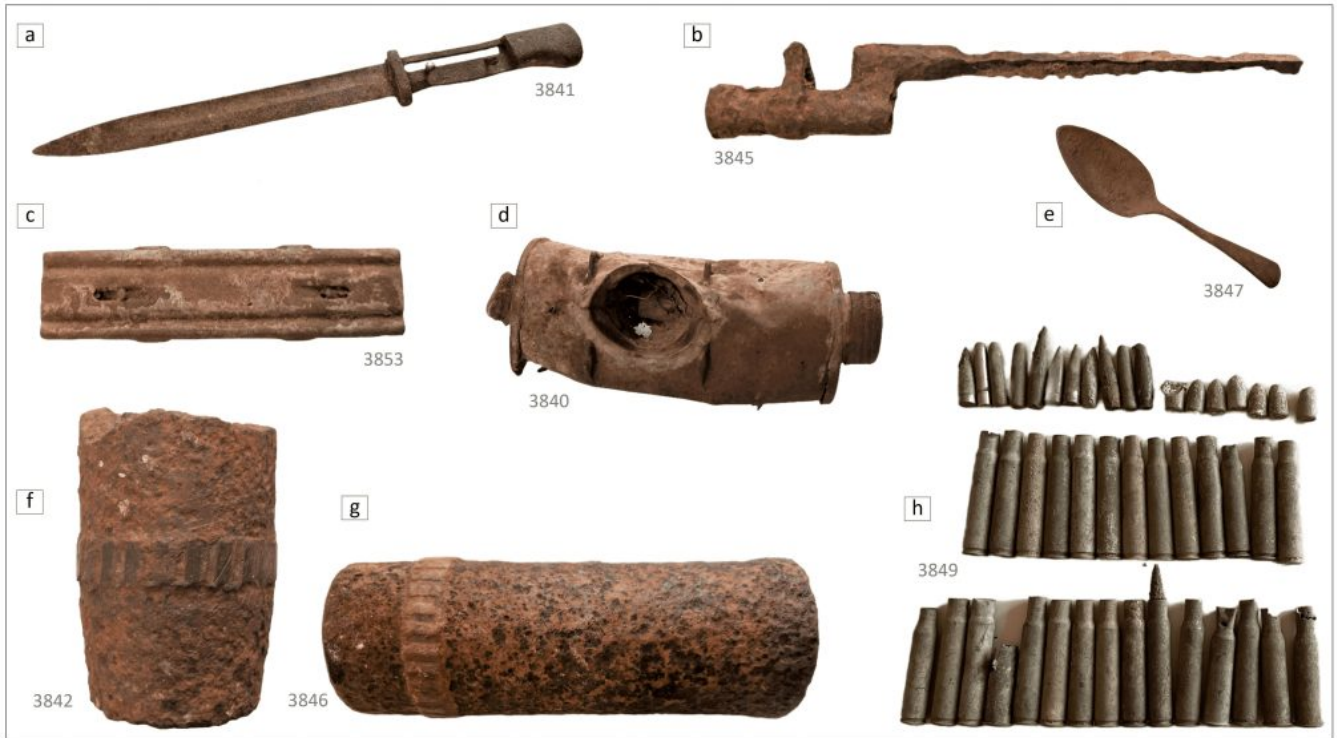


Figure 04. Collection deposited at the Museum Archives of Sant Andreu de Llavaneres, originating from an illicit extraction at Balís carried out in the early 2000s. Source: F. C. Conesa (ICAC-CERCA).

The research has been published in the International Journal of the Civil War, *Ebre 38*, from the University of Barcelona. It promotes historical, archaeological, and didactic dissemination studies on the heritage of the Spanish Civil War.

The article is available openly and includes a data repository and R software code to visualize Italian data so that the results can be reproduced and used in the study of other battlefields and episodes of Republican resistance. Check these links:

- Paper: <https://revistes.ub.edu/index.php/ebre38/article/view/44847>

- GitHub: <https://github.com/fconesa/TuroBalis2023>
- CORA: <https://doi.org/10.34810/data888>

Conesa, F. C. (2023). «L'últim front al Maresme: la batalla del Turó del Balís a finals de gener de 1939». *Ebre 38: Revista Internacional De La Guerra Civil 1936-1939*, 13(13), 7-35. <https://doi.org/10.1344/ebre38.2023.13.44847>

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