

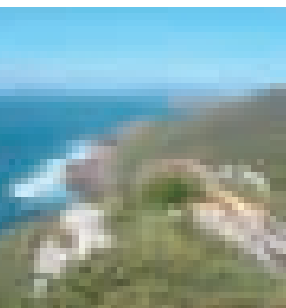
Ons

"The Blessed Company must be kept under surveillance at night. It is known by a light as red as fire and other white lights both ahead of it and in its wake. It travels from Noalla to Centulo and from there it walks above everything else, over the gorse, as far as the cemetery, where it disappears underground. When it appears, everything can be seen more clearly than now, as if it were daytime. They can talk to the dead and, if two people encounter it and one does not see it, all the one has to do is tread on the other's left foot for them to see it. Where it leaves the box, either today or tomorrow someone must die". Eugenia Otero, islander.

HISTORY

The very few remains from the **earliest period of history** on the Ons Islands are so dispersed that no guesses can be made regarding the existence of settlements or temporary settlers. However, there are remains and settlements dating from the castro culture of the **Bronze Age**. The slope above the Canexol neighbourhood is the site of one of them, known as "**Castelo dos Mouros**". Although as yet unexcavated, visitors can make out the circular arrangement. The defensive structures associated with this castro, or fort, are interpreted as a triple moat, which could mean that it is one of the most well-structured castros on the Galician coast if evidence proving the moats existed is discovered. The other *castro*, known as "**Cova da Loba**", is in the north of the island, but all that remains from it are pottery shards, tiles and large numbers of shells.

Recent archaeological survey work has brought to light the existence of several drawings or petroglyphs that are thought to date from between the fourth century B.C. and the second century A.D., artefacts that are practically unprecedented in the region.





Despite being underground, traces of the structure of "Castelo dos Mouros" are visible on the surface

The lack of exploration of the fort located in Canexol leaves us without information about its possible use by the Romans, who usually occupied pre-existing Celtic settlements. However, the Roman presence on the island is supported by the recent discovery of a reservoir in the vicinity of Canexol which, given its location and the structures and materials used, is associated with the exploitation of marine resources in Roman times (possible salting factory?). Geographers from this period named the islands *Aunios*.

Although the subsequent **Sueve and Visigothic occupation** in Galicia left no traces on Ons, the inhabitants most probably left in response to the attacks.

The Ons Islands first appear in a document in 899 (the **Middle Ages**), when King Alfonso III donated the "Aones Island" to the **Cabildo de Compostela**. That donation was ratified by later kingdoms until 1109 under Alfonso VI. Contemporary documentation points to the existence of the Church of San Martín, but there is neither indication nor trace of a congregation or any population.

Despite Viking attacks in the Early Middle Ages, there is known to have been a monastery on the island in the fifteenth century. No evidence about it has survived and although it is not known whether it housed monks on a regular basis, monks from the coastal hinterland went there for retreats and meditation. It is associated with a grave on Area dos Cans Beach, known as "Laxe do Crego", which dates from that time. Although now lacking the top stone, it is visible at low tide. The entire historical ensemble gave rise to popular legends among the islanders.



View of Area dos Cans Beach, site of the "Laxe do Crego", said to be the grave of a monk who lived in the monastery

In the **16th century**, the Church awarded the island as a domain to the Montenegro family. Written references to that domain indicate that it was inhabited and had a parish church. But from the end of the century it came under siege from English corsairs (the best known and most feared being Francis Drake) and from Turkish and Berber pirates. The sacking and burning of buildings which the settlers suffered until well into the eighteenth century made them flee to the coast.

In 1810, the **19th century**, the Junta Provincial de Arma-mento y Defensa decided to **fortify the island**. As the Montenegro family's property became safer as a result, it could be resettled. Two fortresses date from that period: one in the Pereiró neighbourhood, of which only a few stones are left (many were used for the houses), and another in Curro, a few metres away from the quay in the direction of Melide. Known as "Castelo de Rueda", it is the subject of unusual legends that tell of nearby caves.

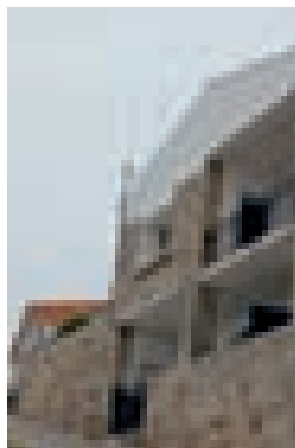
After the Army established a base there, the land was divided up into plots which the State awarded to islanders to be cultivated in exchange for a fee. Income from that source was allocated to meet the cost of the fortifications until, when the defensive projects were neglected, it was handed over to the lords of the island.

Ruins of the fortification known as "Castelo da Rueda".

In the period 1835-40 the first **salting factory** was installed near the quay, ushering in changes to island life. The

islanders took to fishing to supply the factory, and more people arrived from Barbanza, the island's economy improved and the population increased. Fluctuations in sardine fishing led to the decline of the company and eventually its closure, while the settlers' sold their catches on the coast.

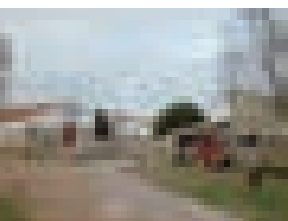
In 1929 - **20th century** - Manuel Riobó bought the Island, set up a **trading company** under the name of "**Isla de Ons**" which engaged in drying and marketing octopus and conger eel, and occupied the former salting factory. The islanders specialised in new species and all fisheries were managed via the company. The heir to the company, Didio Riobó, committed suicide at the beginning of the Civil War, leaving the island without any direct management.



Building on the site of the former salting factory

In 1940 the State expropriated the island for national defence, and the Army Ministry took charge of it in 1943 with the intention of setting up a submarine base, a project that was never realised. In 1960, it came into State hands once again and a local mayor was assigned to manage the island. From then on, the island of Ons came under various **State authorities**.

- In 1965, under the National Colonization Institute, a report was made that reflected the urgent need, amongst other things, to build a port suitable to take modern ships. The "Civic Centre" was built, with a church, school, warehouses and accommodation for teachers and doctors, but no improvements were made to the port.
- In 1975 IRYDA took over the island, but did not solve the anchorage problems.
- In 1979 ICONA (Nature Conservation Agency) set up offices in the Civic Centre. Its actions did not respond to the population's needs. Tired of the administration's lack of interest, they established their main residences on the coast, keeping their island houses as second homes for the summer.



The new church in the Curro neighbourhood, with the civic centre opposite. Proximity to the quay makes it the busiest part of the island

During the 40s-50s the island knew better times, and there were almost 500 inhabitants. The boys left school to go fishing with the adults until they could buy their own boat. The girls, on the other hand, got married, looked after their houses and children and tended the fields. They grew rye, potatoes, vegetables and raised cattle, oxen, sheep and goats. It was common to keep chickens and at least one pig. The abundant shell fish and fish initially meant a better diet, later becoming a profitable activity in which many islanders specialized. In such a harsh setting, everything was shared, and Sunday was the day that everyone congregated at the Civic Centre.

The progressive depopulation of the island went hand-in-hand with the rise in tourism, which reached a peak in the seventies. By that time, hostelry and leisure facilities were consolidated, and given the influx of visitors, they needed to be managed to protect and safeguard the natural resources.

State transfers of power to the Autonomous Region of Galicia in 1983-84 established that the territory came within the remit of the Regional Department of Agriculture, and, later, the current Regional Department of the Environment.



Curro neighbourhood on the island of Ons

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE

There is a gneiss scraper and a trapezoidal carved granite piece from the Paleolithic era.

From the **Bronze Age**:

- Two Bronze Age axes.
- Castro "Castelo dos Mouros": on the hillside at El Alto de Altura. Although it has not yet been excavated, some written documents identify a single very inclined enclosure and a separate antecastro separated by a ditch. Access is via a cut between 2-metre-high walls with a narrow passage in several sections which slope down to the settlement. Adjoining the settlement is a cave - "Cova dos Mouros", which could be an entrance to the fort, as described in several legends known among the islanders.
- Outdoor drawing from Chan da Pólvora.

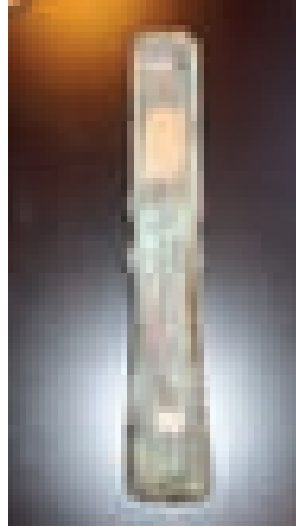
Two outdoor drawings found on the island—one is known as "Petroglifo de A Laxe"—are not attributed to a specific culture but are included within a period covering the fourth century B.C. to the second century A.D.

Roman Times:

Recent archaeological studies establish a possible Roman salting factory on Canexol beach, although further study is needed to date the site.

Middle Ages:

"Laxe do Crego" sarcophagus: a stone shaped like a human grave about 2 metre long, visible at low tide among the rocky reefs on Area dos Cans Beach. Popular tradition has it that it belonged to an old abbot when there was a monastery on the island.

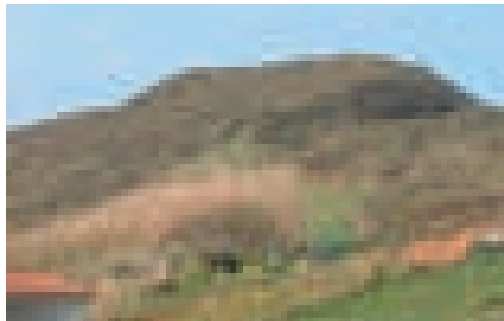


Axe



Outdoor drawings in Ons (petroglyph)

Buried fort settlement at Canexol

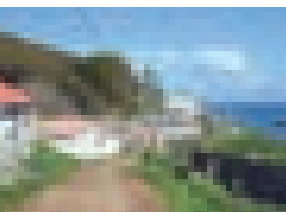


ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE



Fortifications

The fortifications are not very important in spite of the fact that the island was fortified in two different periods – 1810 Junta de Defensa and 1943 the Army Ministry. The 24-m castle-style platform at Punta do Castelo known as “Castelo de Rueda”.



Neighbourhood of Pereiró, in the south of the island

Housing and ancillary buildings:

Houses of the thirties were divided into two kinds. There were two storey - *casales*- for the rich and single-storey -*casetas*- for the rest. They had an oven and hearth and their windows looked out onto the estuary. Animals were kept in adjacent ancillary buildings or on the ground floor.

It is a well-known fact that every house has a number of raised grain stores. They are mostly made of stone and



Typical celeiro-type grain store at the rector's house

of the “celeiro” type, with a closed base and two-sided sloping roof decorated with crosses and pinnacles. There are two large ones behind the rector’s house around a central patio where celebrations used to be held.

Fountains and wash troughs

Rich in water, Ons made the most of some of its natural springs to construct wash troughs in the 1950s in all the neighbourhoods or districts. Others – in Curro, Gai-teiro, Dornas, etc.- were fitted out to be used as drinking fountains.

Religious constructions

The Chapel of San Joaquín, at Canexol, is small and simple. It is surrounded by the island’s cemetery and a recently built wall, which protects the ensemble. The bell disappeared years ago and religious ceremonies ceased to be held there in 1969. It contains a built-in stone font and a free-standing one in marble. There are no pictures or statues due to a fire in the 70s.

The church in the Curro neighbourhood was built for the Civic Centre but is not Galician in terms of aesthetics. It is decorated with mosaics and the bell tower is Mudejar style.

The nearby cross was erected after the Civic Centre and is thought to have been built as a symbol of the Atlantic route to Santiago.

Chapel



Church





Ons lighthouse, one of the last manned by lighthousemen

Lighthouse

This historic lighthouse, erected on the top of Mount Cucorno, is manned by the last lighthouse men in Spain. Initially constructed in 1865 with a light shed by an octagonal lantern that could be seen for 17 miles, in 1926 it was rebuilt on the original base. Nowadays the lenses turn round on the light and the beam can be seen 35 miles away. The building adjoining the

tower includes housing for lighthouse men, a warehouse and workshop. The energy is supplied by recently installed solar panels.

Dornas

Their origins lie in the early Norman vessels that invaded the coast around the tenth-eleventh centuries. They were locally adapted into a wooden inshore vessel. Very stable, they can be propelled with oars or a sail, which traditionally is of the Latin type.

When every family had acquired a *dorna*, family fishing changed to cooperative methods involving three men and a boy. The larger *dornas*, with a longitudinal deck beam of 5 or 6m, known as *xeiteiras*, are used for catching sardines. The smaller ones – 3 to 4m.- are known as *polbeiras* and are used for octopus. Nowadays many are fitted with motors and lights for safety and better handling.

All the architecture, which originally had maritime associations, particularly in the case of Ons, is nowadays being restored and conserved.



The dorna, a vessel typical of Ons.

SOCIOLOGICAL HERITAGE

Isolation and lack of spiritual and medical services gave rise to a unique popular culture.

Legends, the Blessed Company, homemade remedies, traditions, etc. represent very valuable know-how, threatened with disappearance.

Popular medicine

The difficulties in getting medical care gave rise to popular cures and medical know-how. Plants with special properties were used- sorrel, poison hemlock, mallows, elderberry, etc., elements and substances from animals and others used in the kitchen- cereals, ointments, feathers, excrement, etc., and rites were carried out to ensure that the remedies applied had the correct effect. They were used to treat respiratory and digestive ailments, women's complaints, rheumatism and ailments in animals.

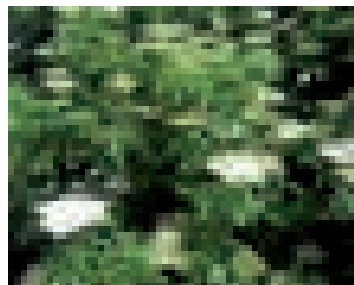
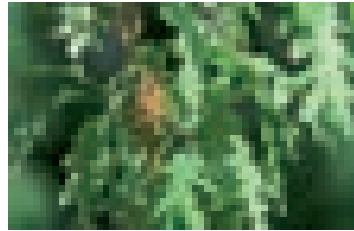
Superstitions

Many sayings became popular and even conditioned life on the island:

- If a pregnant woman ate goose barnacles, she had to avoid water from the barnacle splashing on her face for if it did, the child would be born with a mark similar to part of the goose barnacle's body.
- If a person mistrusted someone, he or she had to go to Beluso and bring a toad to whose mouth they had attached a piece of clothing belonging to the person in question. As long as the toad keeps the cloth in its mouth, the loathed neighbour will always be "ailing".
- When one member of a group of fishermen fails to catch anything, he concludes that his boat has been bewitched and so goes out at night and propels it with a piece of broom until he is tired.



Ons quay, the link with land



Many island plants have special properties that were used in popular medicine



*Saint Joachim,
patron saint of Ons*

Celebraions and Gastronomy

The most celebrated festivities were Christmas, Carnival, Easter, St. John (San Juan), the patron saint St. Joachim (Joaquín) – in August– and San Martín (pig slaughter). These celebrations involved the preparation of delicious dishes and desserts typical of Ons such as *bandullo*, *lingotes*, *filloas*, *compota* and *buñuelos*.

On Ons there used to be a rich repertoire of popular local songs with coplas and desafíos that local women made up or adapted from pre-existing ones.

Octopus fishing around Ons:

- *A la Seca*: at low tide with a boat hook.
- With a mirror: with a dorna and boat hook with a mirror.
- With a line: with a pole with hooks and crabs as bait.
- With a fish pot: an octopus trap.

Ons can boast a well known octopus-based dish called *caldeirada*.

Ons is a unique island. Its cultural heritage, alive today, has an incalculable value that must be preserved.

Fishing boat loaded with pots

