

LOCAL ESTRATEGIES FOR THE COMMONS MANAGEMENT IN THE CANTABRIAN MOUNTAINS

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1. Introduction

Our approach to the study of commons follows the research project we have developed for 10 years on the shaping of medieval agrarian systems. The study on the landscape and the high medieval settlements of the Northwest of the Iberian Peninsula led us in time to develop a line of work on villages still inhabited, addressing the study of agrarian systems in the long term. Taking into account the features of land occupation in the Northwest of the Peninsula and the resilience of villages rooted in late antiquity, it is necessary to expand archaeological practice from abandoned villages to the inhabited ones in order to understand the dynamics of the early medieval settlement, what necessarily takes us to a long-term perspective.

Over the last few years we have focused on the different elements of the units of medieval agrarian systems that have survived well into the 20th century. Orchards close to habitat sites, cereal fields used in a semi-communal way (opendfields), fields destined to hay production also managed semi-collectively (morteras) and mountain pastures where particular, semi-collective and communal properties overlap. Many of these practices are still present today. The impact of liberal reforms in the 19th century was different for each privatization of spaces of joint use; even villages could move to recover the limits used since time immemorial and that had been dismantled.

Therefore, after starting an archaeological survey of the inhabited villages that allowed us to understand the origins of the settlement network and the agricultural practices related to settlements, we've taken a new step in recent campaigns to analyse the practices linked to the use of the commons, while keeping in mind the idea of "property" present in the studied period, particularly concerning the management of the commons.

We must start from a combination of the three ownership ways used within communities: private, semi-collective and collective, mostly in terms of balance, but also in continuous conflict and tension. The ownership rights at the hands of individuals, families and communities are crossed by individual, semi-collective and collective practices tied to social relations that require the definition of a standard that regulates the neighborhood; it includes who has access rights to resources and who is excluded, agreements subject to continuous renegotiations, changing and meaningful within the micropolitics of these communities. These practices tell us about dynamic commons and territorialities that we need to explain in their own operational and identity frameworks, that is, within the framework of the local communities that manage them, be they villages, parishes or councils, all of them the operational boundaries we are studying.

Our aim is then to study the commons not only to document the times when the habitat sites, the brañas (the shealing) located in the communal pasture areas, were used—a necessary starting point—, but also to advance in the understanding of the agrarian system complexity through the archaeological record, written sources and place names. And we must highlight those moments in which tensions and conflicts are detected, since they indicate important transformations and the conflicting interests of social groups that operate at different scales. Ecclesiastical institutions, secular manors, villages, parishes and councils have different perceptions of the territory and the commons management, and all these dialectical interests are depicted in the written sources and the archaeological record. Here we will pay special attention to processes that take place between the 13th and 15th centuries that represent an important change in the commons management.

Furthermore, this perspective poses an interesting experimentation field on the study of local communities through the archaeological record, particularly in the case of villages, but also of parishes and councils.

So, the objective of the investigation is:

- Delve into the knowledge of local communities and how we can approach their study from an archaeological perspective.
- Define their agency in defense of shared purposes related to the commons management.
- Understand the complexity of the agricultural system and its transformation in the long term.
- All this goals will be achieved through a complementary reading of the archaeological record and the documentation.

2. The territorial delimitation of local communities.

Complete delimitations of territories can be found in written sources as early as the 12th century, using a very detailed toponymy, which serves to fix in the memory of the community a territoriality that will perpetuate over the centuries and that will be breached on many occasions by the pressure of external agents, though the community will be able to use defense mechanisms that allow them to keep these territorialities.

These territorial definitions present in the 12th century documentation seem frequently a response to the fragmentation of spaces previously used jointly by several villages, or even to the split of the limits of an abandoned place that since then becomes an important reference in the territory. This is the case of Vigaña, which have clear limits in the 12th century. One of those limits is the place of Fontevigaña, where a medieval necropolis associated with an abandoned area appears superimposed over a site of the Bronze Age.

This same village quarreled in the 14th century with the Balmonte monastery over their shared boundaries, the limits of the village and those of the monastic lands. The dispute over spaces used in a communal way leads to collective action of the community that sue the monastery together. 22 neighbors, all of them men, appear in the lawsuit on behalf of

the village community, very likely the representatives of all the houses in the village, and agree to appoint representatives and arbitrators to enforce the agreement reached by the moderators. It can be concluded that these spaces are used jointly by the village of Vigaña and another village belonging to the monastery lands; we ignore the terms of the agreement, since they aren't in the document, but these areas will be time and again problematic, and today they are jointly used by the villages of Vigaña and Faidiel.lu. We then see the shaping of the territory linked to the village, including the communal pasture areas, the setting of boundaries using old abandoned places and the community acting collectively in defense of these limits.

The villages aren't the only ones to define their territories, but so do the parishes, as can be seen in a 15th century dispute between two of them, Santa Olaya de Torce and Santa María de la Foceicha, who litigated for the collection of tithes from the braña de Sierra la Piedra (the brañas are pasturelands with built cabins). Representatives of the two parishes meet in a place in the braña to set a landmark, placing three fragments of tile under it; the landmark defines the separation between the two parishes and the lands that have to pay tithe to both. These acts and places acquire an important symbolic value for all the communities involved in their delimitation and they often lead to annual meetings and festivals where both the identity of the different communities, and the bonds they have with neighboring communities, are manifested.

We see the same practices in the councils between the 13th and 15th centuries; at the same time they consolidate, they set the territories belonging to each council, abandoning previous joint uses. The preserved documentation of the council of Posada de Valdeón, in the Picos de Europa, during these centuries, shows the continuous disputes of this council with its neighbors for the use of pastures and the actions of delimitation where they set landmarks and mark the limits with detailed place names.

It is a clear process of territorial delimitation by different entities that have their own ways to dominate and control over commons: villages, parishes and councils delimit territories, abandon previous structures of joint use and create more exclusive forms of governance that define the limits ascribed to those communities. In the archaeological surveys that we have carried out, these landmarks can still be documented; we have not carried out excavations in any of those landmarks that separate councils or village limits, since at the moment they are untouchable elements.

3. Spaces for semi-collective use aimed to cereal farming

The *sienrras*, *cortinales*, *morteras*, *llourías*, are the main agrarian lands linked with habitation places (openfields), and were governed by rules that fix both the farming cycle and the *derrota de mieses*, the moment when the cattle can collectively graze in them. The information from the 14th century to the 20th century indicates an individual and exclusive use of the plots during the cultivation of cereal, and a collective use when they are used for livestock grazing. Access rights were very different between areas. We've already noted that mentions to these agrarian units in the documentation are recurrent throughout the Middle Ages, but we can't determine the nature of management and the

precise moment this semi-collective practice is established, although since the High Middle Ages it seems to be some type of collective use in relation to these places, as shown by Martín Viso, and as it is detected in the documentation of the Northwest of the Iberian Peninsula. Some archaeological excavations carried out in these farmlands have provided interesting information on agricultural practices, especially related to the type of cultivation and the construction of terraces since the High Middle Ages. However, we will focus on a specific example that can provide us with chronological information about the moment in which this semi-collective management subject to rules is set.

The archaeological excavations carried out in the village of Villanueva, led by Jesús Fernández, focused on one of these agricultural units near the current village that overlaps the medieval one. The stratigraphy allows to document different levels of agricultural use, and also shows the construction process of these large farmlands. These levels of agricultural use linked to areas of built terraces are superimposed over levels of domestic use characterized by post holes, and abundant ceramic remains that dates back to the 13th century well into the High Middle Ages. That way, we can document domestic spaces used for a long time, from the Early Middle Ages to the 13th century, under the spaces for agricultural use known to have been used semi-collectively since the 15th century and linked to the building of terraced spaces.

Should we interpret in the same terms the medieval palisade documented in Vigaña, in the Sienrra excavation, the main farmlands of the village? In this case, the data seems to indicate the presence in the high medieval period of livestock in areas later used as the main farmlands of the village.

With these indications, we can begin working with the hypothesis of the set up, somewhere after the thirteenth century, of these semicolectic formulas and document an important change in the agrarian system in these high medieval time.

4. Enclosures in communal pasturelands. The evolution of the brañas.

Regarding the management ways of the communally used pastures, both the documentary and archaeological information show an important moment of change during the late medieval centuries, that seems to follow initiatives of the local communities, whether they are villages or councils, as well as manorial entities that pressure to gain control over pasturelands.

The town of Saliencia in the 15th century is a good example. The donation of a part of a braña by a neighbor of the town to the collegiate church of Teberga leads to an investigation in which several residents of Saliencia claim that, at the beginning of the century, the “good men” of the council of Saliencia divided the braña of Buslas and distributed it among the neighbors. We ignore if the distribution benefited all the members of the village or only part of them, but the information ascertained by the enquiry indicates that it was an initiative of the community itself, to split pasturelands in plots to promote the construction of brañas and cabins. We know of this because one of the parts is donated to the Teberga collegiate church, to which the members of the village seem to rebel, trying to avoid this interference of the religious institution in the pasturelands. Of course, these

subdivisions do not imply the privatization of all the commons, which in the case of Saliencia are very large: certain parts are closed, promoting a combined use between the private and the communal. The ownership of a part of the braña would imply the possibility of utilizing the spaces under a communal regime.

Regarding Vigaña, in the 16th century the monastery of Balmonte rents the Fontevigaña braña, located on the very edge of the village's territory, to some vaqueros from outside the community with the obligation to build a house and farm fields, and close several meadows in the pasture areas, always on the edge of the villages. All these initiatives affect the processes of enclosure of part of the communal spaces by different parties, local communities, religious institutions and even the councils that rent part of their pasture to other councils or individuals, as it happened in Valdeón in the 15th century, to finance their institutions.

We read the same process in the information provided by the material culture from some of those pasturelands.

The pass of Andrúas is the pasture area of the village of Villanueva, located in the Aramo range between 1,000 and 1,500 m of altitude and shared with other neighboring towns. Currently, several towns from different municipalities have grazing rights in this large area, some of them located in the middle mountainside and others at the bottom of the valley, as is the case of Villanueva. The territory is utilized under the joint system of *faceria* and several settlements have access right to the same pastures. Prospecting this wide area led us to document two areas with constructions: the Braña de Buxana and the Braña de Andrúas. In Buxana we found the remains of six structures and a large farmyard made of natural rocks. A standing building belonging to the town of Villanueva also remains. Oral tradition says that it was used by neighbors under the *vecera* system, that is, each day one house. Its most likely dates from the 18th century.

The archaeological excavation of two structures (C-2 and C-3) located in this braña, led us to document 5 occupation phases. The last phase is associated with the reuse of the collapse of a previous construction as a porch of a nearby livestock building. The material culture points to an occupation between the 18th and early 20th centuries.

The 4th phase corresponds to the last moment of occupation of the C-3, which must be dated between the end of the Middle Ages and the first Modern Age, since a coin of 2 maravedís from the Catholic Monarchs (1474-1504) was found there along with low medieval ceramics. The occupation also has a livestock utilization.

In the previous occupation a new room was built, C3, used in conjunction with the previous structure C2, apparently for domestic activities. Note that both structures have a significant size together and stand out in comparison with the typical remains found in communal pastures of this area. These uses still date from the 14th and 15th centuries.

The C-2 is clearly older and related to a ground level with beaten earth and small remains of paving, although of poorer craftsmanship than those found in C-3. Lacking C14 dates, the material culture seems to indicate a range between the 13th and 14th centuries. All the indicators point to a domestic use of this space, which together with the information

provided by the toponymy, oral tradition and written sources, reveal the presence of a domestic settlement, either stable or used seasonally during the summer in relation to a short-distance transhumance concurrent with the processes of increasing pressure over the pasture areas we read in the written sources.

The remains of a large low-level floor cabin and post holes can be found beneath these structures. It appears to be a long house, excavated at the geological level, and 4 post holes that seem to be the central part of the cabin. The sheer size of material culture, ceramic fragments and lithic tools recovered, led us to hypothesize a chronology between the Chalcolithic and the Cantabrian Bronze Age. The lithic remains are particularly overwhelming and include 3 thin sheets of flint. There are also many remains of microlites, slivers and cores of both flint (from various sources) and quartzite, in addition to 5 hammerstones. The size of the deposit and the presence in the area of materials and raw resources from remote places indicate an ongoing use during recent prehistory, something that we must relate to the presence of numerous sites and specific finds in the surroundings of the Aramo (copper mines, tumular burials, palstaves deposits...).

The excavation of the site indicates a lack of use since recent prehistory to the High Middle Ages, but we must note that it only has a single cabin. Without a doubt, more intensive excavations will lead us to document the occupation in the long term.

Los Fuexos

The braña de los Fuexos is one of the main cabin areas in this village. The structures are more numerous in the vicinity of two sources, looking for a flat area; each neighbor of the village has a cabin designed to shelter the cattle and the person who travels daily to tend it during the summer. This type of brañas are very common in the Cantabrian Mountains and they were in use until well into the 20th century. There are circular and rectangular cabins, some in use and others almost imperceptible, and are most frequent on land owned and used communally.

We have information on two different cabins from this braña. One of them has produced a large quantity of ceramic and metallic materials to recover and the remains of consumed animals. Although they are in a secondary position, they come from the upper levels of the settlement and were carried and deposited once the cabin was in the process of ruin. Most of the materials can be dated in a chronological period between the 18th and early 20th centuries, but we have some fragments that could be dated in the final centuries of the Middle Ages. In the levels of use of the cabin we found the remains of a hearth, dated by radiocarbon in a last moment of use in the 17th century.

Another excavation carried out in a hut barely protruding from the ground in Los Fuexos has provided, as happened in Andrúas, a complex stratigraphic sequence with overlays of different phases of the occupation of this small structure.

The most modern phase of occupation is the reuse for livestock of a previous structure. The remains indicate it was under use during the 19th and 20th centuries. The previous phase corresponds to the construction of this cabin with an oval shape, walls built of dry stone and large rocks detached from the high areas of the mountain that abound in the

braña. Despite the poor quality of its constructive standards, a paved floor with large limestone slabs that exceeds 70 cm stands out. The material culture recovered (black and white enameled kitchen ceramics) and the presence of a coin make us believe the cabin was in use between the 18th and 19th centuries.

The structure is superimposed over a level used as a burial place for a sheer number of dead animals. Under the paving we have found buried the complete skeletons of 4 calves between 1 and 4 months of age, 2 piglets, an infantile individual of ovi-caprid and remains of bones of domestic birds. Mortality among infant animals was and is common, with deaths usually related to diseases, so the meat of these animals would not be suitable for consumption and the most logical solution to prevent the potential spread of diseases or attract vermin would be to bury these animals, a common practice in the Cantabrian brañas. However, the species that appears are striking, with the presence of cow, pig, ovi-caprid and gallinaceous, typical animals of agrarian societies, but not usually present in seasonal livestock settlements, while common in settlements of livestock owners or in transhumant livestock practices. We consider that this level is related to the documentary information references that once again allude to the presence in the 17th century of vaqueros in this braña, who also have the duty of attending a nearby inn located in one of the main communication routes of Asturias with the plateau.

This level of fauna burials is preceded by another structure only partially documented that preserves a black clay floor, burned and with numerous coals and gray micaceous ceramics present, including the remains of a bowl with a faired rim and a globular pot. We still lack dates and the ceramic is not revealing enough to establish a chronology, but we believe it corresponds to a time just before the Middle Ages.

The final structure breaks a floor previously used with 3 related post holes. It has not been possible to recover any material remains from these levels, so we can only give them a relative chronology.

While we are waiting to receive the results of radiocarbon dating, anthracological, carpological, pollen and chemical studies of soils, it is clear that the superposition of different phases of occupation indicates the long term use of this space.

In conclusion: the archaeological and documentary information find proof of the use of pasture areas, at least since recent prehistory. While the interventions we've carried out so far in three structures have not yielded information on all the historical periods, they are revealing the use of these places since recent prehistory, and in all cases we found material culture in a secondary position that indicates they were in use during the High Middle Ages. We are waiting for the dates of the excavations carried out last year.

However, both types of sources are very telling about the changes underwent by the management ways of these places since the 14th century. Villages, councils and manors, whether lay or ecclesiastical, promote an important transformation in the utilization and management. Villages favor the division of pasturelands to create mowing meadows where to build cabins, and ecclesiastical institutions sneak into the boundaries of the

territory, closing spaces to build hay meadows or even favoring farmlands by breaking areas of communal use. Some references in the written sources allow to timidly sense the presence in this context of the management of spaces for semi-collective use in pasturelands, the so-called *morteras*, where hay is collected individually, that then can be jointly used by everyone who owns a plot there, in a similar way as documented in the cereal areas near the villages dated in the 13th century by some archaeological information. All these processes rooted in the Late Middle Ages will lead to the creation of a multiterritoriality on the pasture areas, with different perspectives and different identities that will be depicted very clearly since the 16th century.

All of the above doesn't exclude the use of these areas in the previous period, nor the presence of collective utilization practices, since both, as we have seen, are documented both in material culture and written sources. The delimitation processes of the village, parish and council limits are dismantling previous joint uses —though with long chronologies in time—, creating more exclusive spaces and institutions, which define more restrictive communities in terms of access rights to communal pastures.