

Transhumant herding systems in Iberia

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of medieval transhumance in the Iberian Peninsula inevitably brings to mind *La Mesta* (beginning in the thirteenth century, *La Mesta* referred to a complex system of transhumant long-distance paths which allowed shepherds to move large flocks of sheep either southwards to the rich winter commons in Southern Iberia or northwards to the summer pastures in the Cantabrian Mountains; Gerbet, 1991). In addition to the fact that it survived well into the nineteenth century, the importance of *La Mesta* has made it a centrepiece of medieval stockbreeding studies in Iberia (see Klein, 1920; Bishko, 1963).

Indeed, this very emphasis on the *Mesta* has upstaged research on alternative forms of transhumance and common land management. Furthermore, the study of the role of big, oligarchic owners has overshadowed those of small owners and town councils in the management of grazing areas and the heterogeneous nature of the conflicts generated by grazing rights.

From the 1970s onwards, Spanish and Portuguese historians shifted their approach by targeting pre-*Mestán* livestock-management strategies, stressing the agencies of large northern Benedictine monasteries and the knights of the town councils, both of which were the main actors in large-scale sheep breeding (Pastor, 1970). Medium-distance transhumant arrangements can be documented from the tenth century as they alternated between summer and winter pastures. In some cases (and after the profound reforms in the sixteenth century), these systems were preserved and maintained well into the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries (García Martínez, 1988, 2003). In recent years, the focus has shifted to common land management by local communities, including the examination of the guidelines used for a variety of ecological niches, governance of the grazing areas, identity-related issues and the processes involved in confrontation and social unrest (Aguadé Nieto, 1993; Escalona Monge, 2001; Fernández Conde, 2001; Fernández Mier et al., 2013).

Anthropological studies, still a novelty in this field, have emphasized transhumant circuits and the shepherd's way of life and material culture. These interests

are linked to local hopes for tourist interest, visitor promotion and the rekindling of regionalism as all of those phenomena are based on the importance of herding and its associated communal practices (García Martín, 1994; Elías Pastor & Novoa Portela, 2003).

Even more recent still is the arrival of archaeological studies on the scene of transhumance investigation. A monograph issue of *Debates de Arqueología Medieval* (2013) was recently devoted to stockbreeding and outlined the main lines of investigation. It also included the novel perspectives presented by landscape archaeology and zooarchaeology.

Of special interest is the study of common lands (especially those in mountainous areas), particularly those commons which were used as pastures. Such an approach considers the importance of livestock in rural economies, thus overcoming the old paradigms which equated herding with primitivism while stressing peasants' and shepherds' agency as masters of their territory who were also capable of rationalizing the use of their lands (Fernández Mier & Quirós Castillo, 2015).

All the aforementioned approaches have furnished us with a more complex and nuanced view of transhumant herding. Among the varied new perspectives which have only recently been taken now into account are the role of peasant societies in the management of pastures in the medieval period (ninth to twelfth centuries) and the long clash between nobility, ecclesiastic elites, villagers and larger landowners over the control of the pastures.

In the light of this historiographic context, how can archaeology contribute to our understanding of medieval stockbreeding and the types of transhumant herding associated with it? Can archaeological research shed light on other aspects of Iberian transhumant cycles? As was explained above, archaeology has turned to cattle production only very recently; undoubtedly, this delay must have been partly caused by the ephemeral nature of most of the practice's by-products and the consequent lack of reliable archaeological material. However, the central role recently assumed by bioarchaeological perspectives as well as landscape archaeology has brought with it new and promising approaches to the complex issue of transhumant herding and its cyclic nature.

ECOSYSTEMS AND METHODOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE STUDY OF TRANSHUMANCE

Two Iberian case studies provide good examples of the intricacies of studying transhumance systems: Cantabrian Mountains in northwest Spain and Estrela Mountain in central Portugal (see Figure 15.1).

The Cantabrian Mountains are abrupt and rugged, their orography being at the root of a compartmentalized geographic arrangement. Narrow fluvial valleys run along an oblique axis to the 80-mile-long mountain range, while some small secondary valleys run parallel to it. The differences in elevation are quite dramatic, they range from 300/400 m a.s.l. in the northern lowland riverbeds to peaks which clock in at well over 2000 m a.s.l.; the summer pastures usually lie within a range of 1200 to 2000 m a.s.l.

These Cantabrian fluvial valleys typically present steep limestone slopes and summits (which are largely unsuitable for agriculture) although some terraces near the headwaters provide good grazing fields at the headwaters. From the Neolithic Revolution on, several types of transhumance have been practiced there: valley transhumance, short-distance transhumance, medium-distance transhumance (coast-to-mountains) and long-distance transhumance (from Southern Iberia to the Cantabrian Mountains).

Estrela Mountain, the highest elevation in mainland Portugal at 1992 m a.s.l., is a granitic mountain range at the headwaters of the Mondego River, which describes a curve from its northern to its western flank. The highly diversified climate conditions that characterize the region can be explained by the relative proximity of the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Spanish *Meseta* to the east as well as its altitude. Altitudinal layering of the vegetation cover in Estrela Mountain can be split into three main zones: a basal section (up to 800/900 m a.s.l. and heavily Mediterraneanized and deeply altered by human intervention); a middle section (from 800/900 to 1300/1600 m a.s.l., corresponding to declining oak forests due to fires and the grazing) and an upper section (above 1300/1600 m a.s.l., where juniper came to dominance after the human-led destruction of its post-Würmian cover of pine and birch). Geologically, the region is characterized by granites and schists, often found under a thin cover of acidic soil. This is an important limitation regarding the preservation of organic material, such as human or faunal remains. Due to anthropogenic deforestation and subsequent soil erosion – a fact attested since Neolithic times in the region – fertile land is found mostly in lower areas, at the foot of mountains and in river valleys. In higher altitudes, outcroppings dominate the landscape. Estrela Mountain is one of the few Portuguese mountain

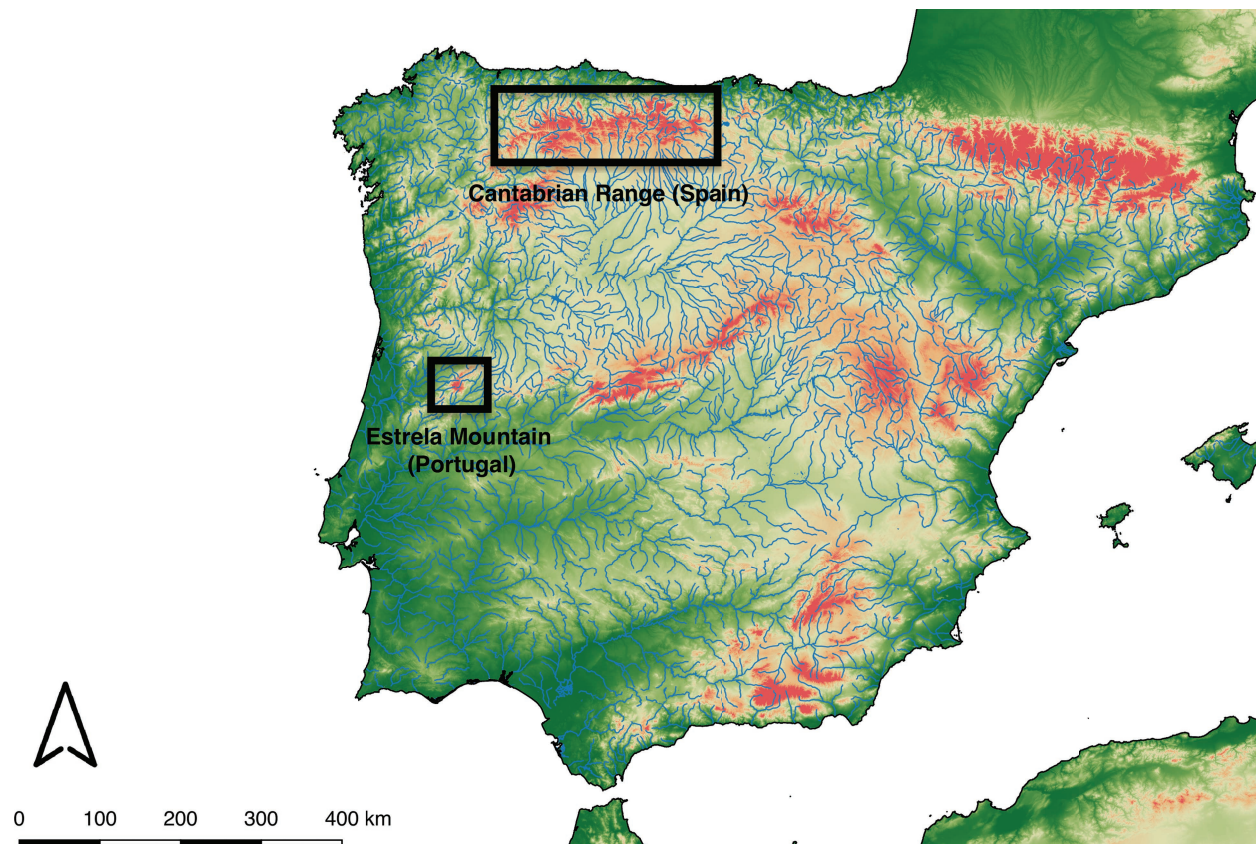


Figure 15.1. Iberian case-study area: Cantabrian Mountains (northwest Spain) and Estrela Mountain (northern-central Portugal)

ranges for which transhumance can be documented. The reference work for transhumance in the region was written in the 1930s by Orlando Ribeiro (1940–1941), who documented the seasonal movements of sheep, and sometimes goat, flocks from lowland villages.

From a methodological point of view, cross-disciplinary studies are an essential part of transhumance research and should also lead to a combined analysis of the data provided by written, toponymic, archaeological, ethnographic and palaeoenvironmental sources (López Gómez et al., 2016).

Documentary evidence is very succinct prior to the thirteenth century, and fourteenth and fifteenth century parchments are somewhat more explicit. It is only after the sixteenth century that there is an abundance of relevant written sources, although they have not yet been commonly utilized in connection with transhumance. There was a great increase in the number of references to pastures, both in the collections of ecclesiastical and common lordships and in the archives of the councils and local *juntas* (local administrative entities which managed several villages), and including also notarial certificates. A critical reading of these can certainly help us to understand how and to what extent herding put pressure on pasture lands and their management as well as how that pressure affected its main players and how alternative uses of the land could be implemented.

Our research teams have also used toponymy as a valuable source of information. Place names abound in our area of study and are remarkably resilient, a fact which facilitates the identification of the places mentioned in the documentary sources (especially after the twelfth century; Fernández Mier, 2006). A thorough comparison of present-day place names with the toponyms found in the documents¹ was combined with archaeological field surveys and excavations to help ascertain economic practices and their chronologies.

Livestock breeding systems in both Estrela Mountain and the Cantabrian Mountains can also be better understood through ethnographic and anthropological analyses. In both areas, transhumance has persisted into the twentieth century. Even though the liberal governments of the nineteenth century placed some pressure on communal land management, many mountain areas were able to keep or recover their traditional ownership systems, facilities and the material culture associated therewith by means of collective exploitation. Only in the 1960s did these traditions start to disappear *en masse* due to the dismantling and disintegration of rural environments in Spain and Portugal which resulted in an exodus towards industrial centres (Daugstad et al., 2014).

Nowadays, transhumance is just a residual practice. However, thorough field surveys and examination of the remaining buildings and tools, together with the documentary and archaeological sources, go a long way to clarify these practices.

Generally speaking, the written sources provide information on four main issues: pasture boundaries, social clashes caused by competition for grazing rights, ownership and management systems or pasture leasing (e.g. involving big landowners). In addition, descriptive and interpretive ethnographic accounts help us document building patterns (sheds, cabins, houses or livestock enclosures) and their traditional uses as they were recorded in oral testimonies. It is not uncommon for one pasture area to have undergone different types of transhumant exploitation at the same time. Naturally, this complicates the identification of their associated remains. In those cases, oral sources are especially relevant if we are to understand all the complexities inherent to transhumant systems.

Due to the resilience of some of their socio-economic traits and their belated conservation of these ancient practices, our two areas of study are particularly well suited to this cross-disciplinary and ethnographically informed approach (González Álvarez et al., 2016).

SHORT-DISTANCE TRANSHUMANCE AND PEASANT COMMUNITIES

Short-distance mountain transhumance involves the movement of flocks from villages to high-altitude pastures. This vertical movement can be undertaken just by a few shepherds, but in certain regions a two-settlement arrangement existed, in which a sizeable part of a village's population moved to communal dwellings in the mountains. In Portugal two types of housing units exist: *brandas* or estival mountain settlements situated over 1000 m a.s.l. and *inverneiras* (winter villages situated in the valleys). In the Cantabrian Mountains, the estival settlements are called *brañas* or *mayaos* and range between 600 and 1400 m a.s.l.

Still today, anthropological research on Estrela Mountain and the Cantabrian Mountains can document this system of valley transhumance, nowadays mainly oriented to cattle, with its movement of herds from lowland pastures in the vicinity of the villages (at the bottom of the valley or mid-slope) to the summer commons in the highlands. Although these communities currently specialize in cattle rearing, their use of agricultural land as a complement can be documented well into the twentieth century. The balance between livestock breeding and agriculture required wide compromises in the midst of these peasant communities, as well as the existence of some very precise statutes which held until the twentieth century. Many villages in the Cantabrian Mountains have kept the documents in which these statutes were encoded, sometimes as early as the fourteenth century; in other cases, we know about them only through oral accounts. There is an

abundant bibliography on livestock breeding in the valleys, especially concerning the seventeenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries (García Fernández, 1988; Rodríguez Gutiérrez, 1989; González Álvarez, 2013).

Short-distance or valley transhumance (2–5 km) in the Cantabrian Mountains (NW Spain)

Geographic, ethnographic and historical research has informed our understanding of cattle management. Our description of these practices relies on ethnographic accounts collected in two valleys located in the Cantabrian Mountains along the Piguëña and Trubia rivers. Our main sources are oral surveys conducted in the 1990s, which we compare with a corpus of medieval records from the several landholders present in the area from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. Among these landowners were ecclesiastical powers (Balmonte Monastery and Oviedo Cathedral), secular lordships (the lords of Entragu from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries) and the documents generated by the villages from the fifteenth century on which codified the rules for managing the commons (Álvarez Menéndez et al., 1990; Fernández Mier, 2006).

During the winter, livestock (mainly cattle and sheep) were kept in barns and were grazed on the meadows near the village. After the harvest, fields were also collectively used as pastures, which meant different months depending on the crop: August to March for spelt fields and only a fortnight in March in the case of corn.

Crops were cultivated in semi-collective enclosures. These were located in wide areas close to the village; each small division or enclosure (called *ería* or *sierra*) was exploited by a family. After the harvest, the remaining plant stubble was gathered collectively by all owners. The size of the herds allowed in the *erías* depended on the area they enclosed (García Fernández, 1988; Fernández Mier, 2010).

Halfway between the habitational areas and the high-altitude pastures lay the *morteras*, which were also semi-collective units used for the feeding of livestock. They were managed following the same principles as applied to the cultivated land. In this case, the aim was to gather hay for storage. This task was undertaken between April and July. In March/April and then in November/December, the herds were collectively allowed into the *morteras* as an intermediate stage before and after their stay in the high pastures. Most villages had more than one of these grass-producing *morteras* and they rotated their use in order to enhance their complementarity. When the herds were in these pastures, one individual was trusted by the community to take care of them, preventing them from going out of

bounds while also keeping alien livestock from entering the area (Bueida, 1991; Fernández Mier, 2013).

Orography dictates a wide variety of practices related to the uses and exploitation of these grazing fields in the different territories. Nevertheless, their main features remain constant throughout the Cantabrian Range. From the sixteenth century onwards, regulations of their use were amply dealt with by each village's ordinances. These established very precisely when the livestock were to be removed from upland areas (in order to allow for adequate resting periods for the pastures), on which days the herds were supposed to enter and leave them as well as the manner in which the repair of fencing systems should be managed (Álvarez Menéndez et al., 1990).

These semi-collective lands can still be located. While they are still a part of the local lore in some cases, in others, researchers can compare the place names as they appear in the written sources with those used today, or take into account the morphology of a particular place. They subsequently underwent a process of privatization; this can usually be traced through tell-tale signs such as partition of the plots into individual smallholdings and the building of cabins for shelter and for storing early-summer hay (García Martínez, 1988; Rodríguez Gutiérrez, 1989; Álvarez Menéndez et al., 1990).

During the summer months, livestock were transferred to the upland commons which belonged to each village or to a whole parish. Grazing rights were inherent to both native and non-native residents. Specific statutes regulated the size of the livestock that could be supported by the pastures and when they could enter and leave as well as different timelines for cattle, horses, sheep and goats (although the latter usually graze on lower-value pastures). There were also rules for the maintenance of paths, fencing, dangerous areas and the use of collective cabins, fountains and drinking troughs.

Brañas or *mayaos* are the names given to groups of huts or shelters situated in the upland pastures. Some of these are even protected, especially when located within the bounds of a national park. Their architectural diversity throughout the Cantabrian Mountains is remarkable. These buildings were used to protect newly born livestock and as shelter for the herdsmen who walked to and from the village at dawn and at dusk in order to milk the cows. A large number of *brañas* are still in use, although most of them have been almost completely abandoned. Archaeological excavations, through a wide variety of methodologies, have furnished us with ample information on the many activities developed in the *brañas* as well as the chronology. In the *braña* belonging to the village of Vigaña in the Piguëña Valley, random survey pits compensated for the absence of archaeological information on the surface. These methods allowed for the gathering of data about prehistoric land use in

the area, as well as tile making in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Fernández Mier et al., 2013).

We find a variety of constructive typologies in the *brañas*, from circular buildings with a false dome, used as a shelter for the livestock, to larger rectangular buildings with several rooms (Figure 15.2). The latter could be used for hay stocking and for sheltering both livestock and herdsman. In addition to this, a variety of corrals, chapels, lodgings (near the main roads) and cold storages for milk. The archaeological cataloguing of this rich material heritage has only just begun. Although ethnographers have devoted a great deal of attention to it, they have generally limited themselves to the analysis of those buildings which are still standing and/or which were still in use until fairly recently (Graña García & López Álvarez, 2007).

Brañas enabled villagers to move a part of their daily activities to the uplands. Each family sent at least one of its members (especially in the early summer for the reaping); sometimes, they even farmed if it became necessary. The importance of this double life, up and down, is clearly seen in the fact that some *brañas* held

their own festivals in the summer months, which gathered people from neighbouring villages and from those which shared grazing rights in the area.

From the sixteenth century onwards, there is abundant evidence for the regulations and codes which ensured a rational and multi-faceted use of all herding-related spaces. These prescriptions emanated from village councils which represented all the individuals in a village (Rodríguez Gutiérrez, 1989; Alvarez Menéndez et al., 1990). Unfortunately, these are not available for earlier centuries; therefore, understanding how these economic systems emerged and evolved in medieval times proves more difficult.

In addition to archaeological investigation in the Cantabrian Mountains, recent bioarchaeological research has unveiled evidence of major deforestation which appears to have started in Roman times. This process intensified in the fifth century and continued until the tenth century, leaving a largely treeless landscape with large grazing areas. In some cases, this was paired with intensive livestock breeding near the villages. In others, it appears to have been coupled with



Figure 15.2. Braña La Mesa (Asturias, Spain). A braña used in short-distance transhumance situated in the highest pastures of the Cantabrian Mountains.

Source: © Margarita Fernández Mier

signs of cultivation. The data suggest a mixed economic system in which livestock breeding and cultivation were complementary, including pasture areas and meadows for hay production along with fields destined for crops and vegetables (Fernández Fernández, 2011). A coherent exploitation of a village's ecological niches could, thus, be achieved. In consequence, a village's location strongly predicted its economic specialization, with livestock becoming more relevant for higher villages (Fernández Mier & Quirós Castillo, 2015).

Similar economic arrangements can be found in some geographic areas adjacent to the northwest Iberia in which comparable transhumance-related buildings have been documented. A good example of this comes from the Aralar Range in the Basque Country, where such constructions have been documented from the sixth–seventh centuries. These Aralar *brañas* were gradually constructed by several generations of herdsmen. Their construction was contemporary with the consolidation of village networks in river valleys which points to a scenario in which fertile lowland areas and seasonal upland pastures combined in order to form a coherent economic system (Agirre et al., 2003a, b).

Another example comes from Galicia; the presence of cattle was documented in the sixth century. Some animals fell down a crevice while grazing and could not escape from it, thus hinting at extensive livestock breeding at that stage (Pérez-Rama et al., 2015).

An archaeological approach to pasture use in Estrela Mountain (Portugal)

Short-distance movements in Estrela Mountain are characterized by vertical displacements carried out by shepherds alone (rather than entire communities). This transhumant system does not imply the building of habitational structures or even well-defined settlements. Orlando Ribeiro's study of the region's pastoralism mentions the fact that around the month of April (and after the melting of the snow on the peaks), flocks would be moved to the highland pastures. Their owners would take turns sowing and taking care of the animals. When the weather was harsh, shepherds slept in mountain sheepfolds. However, moving the livestock to the mountains was less profitable than keeping them in the valleys. In this regard, Ribeiro (1940–1941: 251; translated from the Portuguese) writes:

Here, the owners I interviewed during the separation of the different herds told me that sending flocks to the mountains was a custom that they always had done so, but also that if the flocks (sheep) stayed in the *Terra Chã* (literally, “the plain land”) they would profit more

because they lost weight in the mountains; that flocks were also sent to the upland because the peasants could not take care of them during the intensive working period on the crops.

However, in some Portuguese regions, this kind of short-distance transhumance concerned entire communities rather than just the shepherds and their animals. A good example of this can be found at Castro do Laboreiro, where a larger segment of the community, composed by several families, moved along with the animals and settled in communal housing units near the mountain pastures. This implied, therefore, a twofold housing seasonal system in which the so-called *brandas* were the more permanent places located above 1000 m a.s.l. (at which families stayed from Easter to Christmas) and the *inverneiras* were the villages situated in the valleys (occupied during the winter months between December and March/April, when the snow covered the uplands; Lima, 1996: 12).

This twofold settlement system comprising *brandas* and *inverneiras* is documented only in the Peneda and Gerês mountains (Ribeiro, 1991a; Lima, 1996), which are located in the northernmost mountain ranges of the country, immediately south of the Galician border. Written or ethnographic records of such settlements are unknown in Estrela Mountain, a fact suggesting in a first moment of analysis that the herding system inherent to them was never practiced in the area. However, the discovery and study of an early medieval site – an enclosure named Soida, in the municipality of Celorico da Beira – led us to think otherwise or, at least, that some other ethnographically unrecorded system was there at play.

Indeed, this particular site is located on the top of an elongated promontory (around 1000 m a.s.l.) whose steep and irregular topography allowed for the building of only a few huts. Fieldwork carried out in 2006 and 2007 focussed on the enclosure and the domestic structures inside it. Initially interpreted as a fortification, the enclosure took the form of a thick stone wall (ca. 3 m wide) which was complemented by a palisade of indeterminate height. In the so-called Sectors II and III, the remains of two huts were identified and excavated. Whereas their superstructures should have been built with light, perishable materials, their infrastructures were solely composed by stone-structured hearths (see Figure 15.3). This site was abandoned by the end of the tenth century after a fire which completely destroyed it (Tente, 2010; Tente & Carvalho, 2011). In sum, Soida differs from the remaining coeval sites in the region which are either located in or near valley bottoms. Furthermore, activities witnessing a permanent occupation (such as storage, metalworking or grinding tools) are absent from the archaeological record, a fact which strongly intimates the possibility that Soida was a temporary habitation site.



Figure 15.3. Soida (Celorico da Beira). Archaeological site from the tenth century, Estrela Mountain.

Source: © Catarina Tente

Unfortunately, on the basis of the available archaeological data alone, it is not possible to confirm if the entire Soida community moved to the mountains during the spring/summer season (as was documented in Peneda and Gerês) or if (perhaps, more likely) stock raising was a task which was carried out only by some families. Further research may bring the finding of similar sites in the highlands which would help us to test the interpretation of Soida as a *branda* settlement and, therefore, its relation to a specific (now extinct) strategy of pastoral exploitation of the mountain in medieval times. Considering the scarcity of the evidence obtained from the site, it is reasonable to think that only a segment of a major demographic unit moved to the uplands along with the herds, therefore differing in this particular aspect from the Peneda and Gerês ethnographically documented case studies.

It should also be noted that in the Peneda and Gerês examples, such seasonal movements were not motivated solely by pastoralism. They were part of a broader and more complex agrarian system involving arable crops and in which the herding of sheep, goats and cattle were also benefiting from it (Ribeiro, 1991b: 255). Under the hypothesis put forward above to explain the Soida case, in Estrela Mountain and its adjacent drainage basins, we might be dealing with an

earlier economic system, an instance of medium-sized demographic scale between individual and communal types of mobility (i.e. a segment of a larger community). Interestingly, the ethnographic parallels to the huts identified in Soida are the transhumant shepherd huts (*choupanas*) dated in the Estrela Mountain from the first half of twentieth century (Oliveira et al., 1969). However, similar structures have also been identified in the archaeological record of some valley villages, such as São Gens and Penedo dos Mouros (Tente, 2012).

MIDDLE-DISTANCE TRANSHUMANCE

Middle-distance (60–90 km) transhumance in the Cantabrian Mountains

From the tenth century onwards, monasteries in northwest Iberia began to acquire pastures, *brañas* and grazing lands, and this trend intensified in the two following centuries (Escalona Monge, 2001). Two such examples can be found with the monasteries of Courias and Sahagún which dominate wide pasture areas which are both north and south of the Cantabrian Mountains respectively and which adamantly defended the borders

of their estates. The written records emphasize the importance of the herding activities of the local elites as well as the monasteries, a fact which was confirmed by pollen analyses, pointing to an expansion of grazing land and a reduction in woodland area (Fernández Mier & Quirós Castillo, 2015).

The Monastery of Courias in Asturias offers an excellent example of this. Although the monastery already owned several *brañas* in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it concomitantly began to effectuate a set of policies aimed at annexing more high-altitude lands in an obvious attempt to strengthen its power as a livestock owner. This emphasis on *brañas* and pastures shows clearly in the written record as a recurrent theme (García, 1980). The monastery's struggle to gain access to the upland pastures in the Cantabrian Mountains is thus quite apparent. The monks' focus was on cattle; their success brought about the consolidation of a supra-local ecclesiastical power nucleus between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries which controlled ample and well-defined domains and which furthermore were not subjected to partitions as was the case with hereditary lordships. Probably as early as the twelfth century, Courias configured a set of transhumant networks connecting the coast (or mid-mountain areas) with the highest parts of the Cantabrian Mountains. However, this hypothesis has yet to be verified; more archaeological research would be needed in order to ascertain the chronology of those transhumant systems.

Aside from the lands owned by the Church, a sizable part of the territory belonged to the Crown. Through the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, royal lands were re-organized in accordance with the founding of new towns (*burgos*, *villas* and *pueblas*). These new urban centres administered their surrounding areas (the *alfoz*) and established regular markets which channelled the economy of the whole region (Ruiz de la Peña, 1981). A new oligarchy emerged. Their attempts to seize land had a profound effect on the management of pastures; the process of the appropriation of grazing lands by town councils accelerated to the detriment of the commoners. These town councils (*concejos*) had great interest in pastoralism and pastures, as indicated by the privileges gained by some of their number in the fourteenth century and which allowed their herds to travel from the mountains to littoral regions. An easy example of these developments can be found in the case of the councils of Ponga and Amieva in Asturias. In 1395, they were granted free-grazing rights by King Henry III of Castile. The council of Casu acquired the same rights from King John II in 1447 (Ruiz de la Peña, 1977: 169–72). It is clear that a number of town councils had strong interests in herding and livestock rearing, which speaks of local oligarchies setting up complex economic networks which aimed at exploiting both lowland pastures (near the coast) in the winter

and high pastures (located in the mountain passes) in the summer. This arrangement mirrored that developed by monasteries during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

After the thirteenth century, monastic orders gradually lost some of their power and their domains were transferred to a secular aristocratic class with a focus on livestock. This new group put great pressure on the ecclesiastical entities, town councils and villages in order to secure their access to estival grazing lands in the Cantabrian Mountains. The ensuing clash was in essence a fight for hegemony, with these secular noblemen trying to establish a speculative brand of stockbreeding which was in direct conflict with that practiced by peasant communities, relying on a combination of herding and agriculture (García Martínez, 1988; Fernández Mier et al., 2013; García Cañón, 2006).

In this context of social unrest and territorial disputes between monasteries, town councils and prominent aristocrats, new social groups emerged, namely the *vaqueiros de alzada* and the *pasiegos*, two communities which specialized in short-distance transhumance. Their identities became cemented between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The *vaqueiros de alzada* live in central western Asturias and an adjacent area in the Leonese Mountains. *Vaqueiro* families have two dwellings for the winter and summer seasons, and move twice a year taking their animals and belongings with them, in a journey known as *alzada*. *Vaqueiros* spend winters in coastal or mid-mountain locations and summers in higher-altitude villages. The activities they perform in the latter are similar to those carried out by the local peasants who live in those upland areas year-round and which correspond to the valley transhumance described above. *Vaqueiro* settlements modify the landscape in distinct ways; their summer and winter villages (*brañas*) consist of true houses rather than simple cabins. Even more conspicuous is the parcelling out of lands that previously must have been commons (and have, thus, undergone a process of privatization; see Figure 15.4).

The *pasiegos* live in the Pas Mountains, in the provinces of Cantabria and Burgos. In the spring, *pasiego* families move to the summer pastures and stay there until autumn (De Terán, 1947). In this case there are several stages to their transhumant cycle, as the whole family moves from one hut to the next. Some families own as many as four huts, and they stay in all of them as they complete their yearly cycle. This movement is called *muda* (Corbera Millán, 2003; 2006; 2008).

Both systems (*alzada* and *muda*) originated within a context of intensified stockbreeding activity which began in the fourteenth century, a period marked by population growth and a rise in the demand for animal products. This brought about an important transformation of the landscape: including a generalization of hay



Figure 15.4. Moudreiros (Asturias, Spain). A winter vaqueiro village or braña de invierno.

Source: © Margarita Fernández Mier

meadows and the intensification of pressure upon areas of extensive stockbreeding (which, nevertheless, did not disappear). This process has been styled as *la revolución de las cercas* (the fencing revolution) (García Martínez, 1988). There are abundant post-sixteenth-century sources recording these developments, which were complete by the eighteenth century, but some archaeological research is still needed if we are to understand all of their complexity. Some additional research on the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries could also help to explain the origins of these changes. The fact is that, while places of habitation date from the seventh and eighth centuries and (for the most part) still remain inhabited still today, their landscapes were considerably transformed after the fourteenth century. This phenomenon is especially evident in stockbreeding areas.

These forms of transhumance come with a rich legacy of material culture which has, in many cases, remained until today. Our team has already begun its investigation of this body of data from an archaeological standpoint (López Gómez, 2013; López Gómez et al., 2016).

Complementary transhumance systems in Estrela Mountain (Portugal)

There are two scales of ethnographically documented transhumance on Estrela Mountain. One short-distance system (described in the previous section) occurred in the summer when flocks went up to graze on mountain pastures. Another medium-distance system began with the first snowfall in November/December. Whereas some few animals returned from the uplands to graze on the pastures located around the valley villages, most were grouped in large herds and were grazed by herdsmen from the villages that were hired by the owners of the herds (Ribeiro, 1940–1941). These herds initiated a long way to faraway lands, encompassing journeys of more than 100 km each at the rate of 20 km per day. Different villages established different destinations for their flocks (Ribeiro, 1940–1941): the ones situated on the northeast slopes went to the Douro Valley, those that were located on the western slope went south to the lowlands of the Tagus Basin and, finally, the villages situated in the central area of Estrela Mountain chose

the low Mondego Basin, more specifically, the fertile lands of the Coimbra (see Figure 15.5).

It is not yet possible to establish the historical origin of these transhumant movements. The oldest written references to mountain pastures go back to the first territorial charters endowed to the mountain villages of Folgoso, Gouveia, Linhares, Seia and Manteigas. These documents allow us to conclude that these pastures were of considerable importance for local economies. Inaccurate border divisions in mountain areas were often a cause for conflict between these municipalities, occasionally even of a warlike nature, and entailing the dispute over communal pastures (Ribeiro, 1940–1941). It is likely that the systematic exploitation of these pasture lands and their integration into a transhumant system – either vertical or horizontal – goes back to sometime before the twelfth century, a time period when these practices seem to have already been well established. A clue may be found in the pollen studies carried out on Estrela Mountain. Indeed, palynological research in highland lagoons – at Charco da Candeeira and Lagoa Comprida, located at 1400 and 1600 m a.s.l., respectively – allowed the reconstruction of a bioclimatic model from

the end of the Pleistocene to the present day. According to the results thereby obtained, there is evidence for an increase in deforestation during early medieval times, a fact that testifies to the systematic economic exploitation of the middle and upper sections of the mountain during this time period. The factors underlying this large-scale deforestation around AD 1000 are clearly identified: forest fires associated to the opening of plots for pasture and cereal agriculture. In consequence, spontaneous vegetal cover of oak, birch and willow forest was irrevocably replaced by heath. Thus, AD 1000 may have been the moment when the pastoral exploitation of the highlands became an intensive economic practice (Janssen & Woldringh, 1981; Van Der Brink & Janssen, 1985; Van der Knaap & Van Leeuwen, 1997).

These transhumant strategies in Estrela Mountain comprised until very recently two different geographical scales, as presented in this paper. Due to the fact that each complements the other, it is possible that they began at the same time. The preservation of such social and economic costumes is deeply rooted, and originated, in an ideology of communitarianism that characterized these farming communities until as recently as the 1970s.

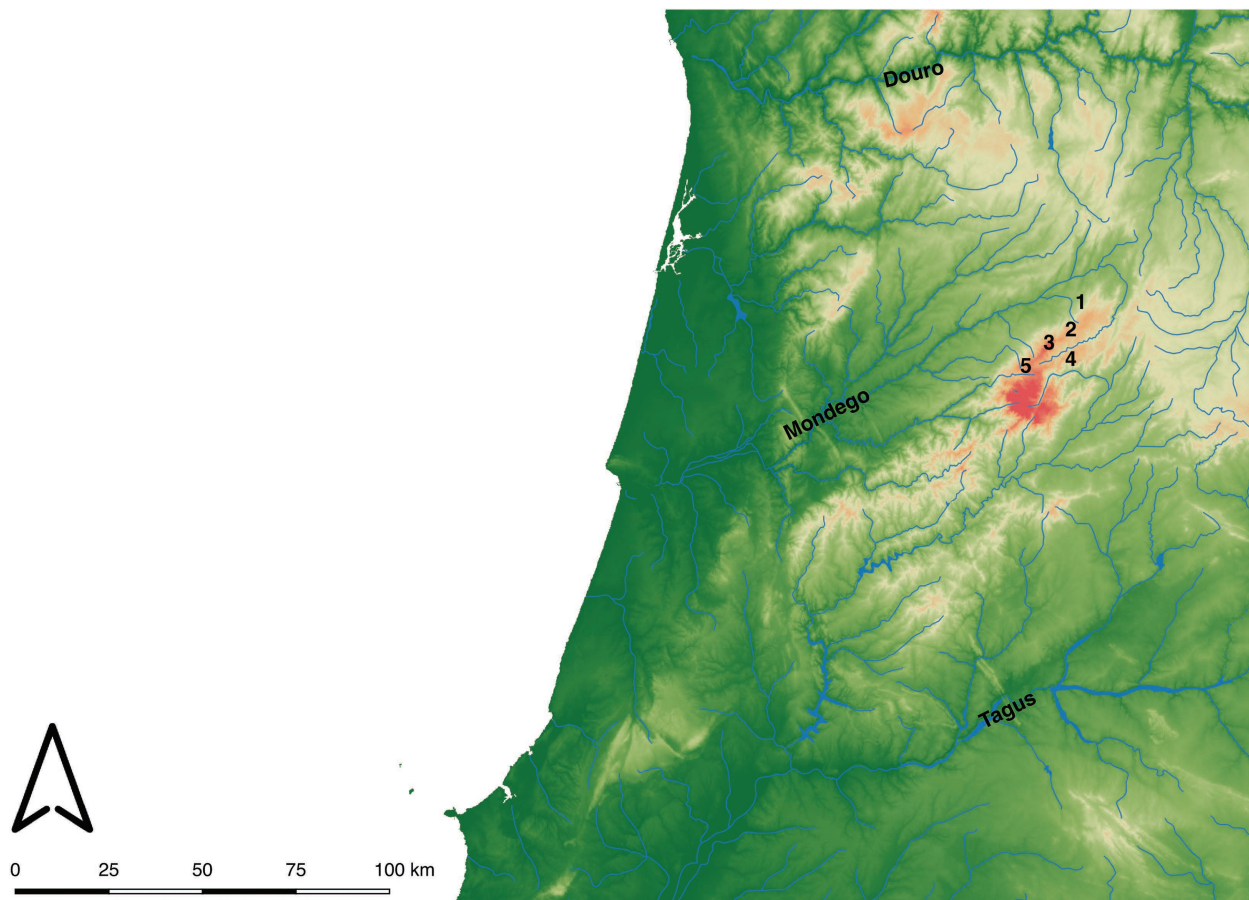


Figure 15.5. Medium-scale transhumance from Estrela Mountain (Portugal) showing villages of origin and transhumance destinations (middle of twentieth century). Villages of Linhares 1), Folgoso 2), Gouveia 3), Manteigas 4) and Seia 5) on Estrela Mountain, all of which received formal Charters in the twelfth century.

LONG-DISTANCE TRANSHUMANCE

From the thirteenth century on a new form of transhumance appears in Iberia, adding yet more diversity to its medieval herding practices. Long-distance transhumance is also connected to the rise of *La Mesta*. The influence of *La Mesta* was uneven across Iberia; it barely affected areas within the present-day Portuguese borders; in the Cantabrian Mountains, it concerned most of the highest pastures.

The *Honrado Concejo de la Mesta* was established in the first half of the thirteenth century. Even from its inception it assembled a network of routes and regulated rights of passage and grazing for the *Mesta's* Merino sheep flocks. An effect of this was an intensification of ovine production (especially after the fifteenth century). Although the role of large landowners in the *Mesta* has often been highlighted, in medieval times, the *Mesta* grouped together a diverse body of livestock owners whose interests were not necessarily aligned. The *Concejo* (council) was strengthened during the Catholic Monarch's reign (fifteenth century) when it started to be presided by the chairman of the *Consejo Real*. Also under Isabella I and Ferdinand II it acquired greatly extended rights of way for its flocks, now no longer bound to Castile but extended to Aragon. From then on, the most important families from both kingdoms began to gain influence in the inner workings of the *Mesta*, a fact which brought about a process of the concentration of wealth in the seventeenth century as the oligarchy hoarded the rights to the use of grazing areas while they also profited from wool export to other European countries (Pascua Echeagaray, 2007).

To date, research on *La Mesta* has focussed on its internal dynamics and its organization as an institution, the sociological aspects concerning its participants and, especially, its transhumance routes, from the most important *Cañadas Reales* to the secondary branches that led to specific places in Castile (Aitken, 1947; García Martín, 1991). Some attention has been also devoted to the *Casa de Ganaderos de Zaragoza*, in Aragon, which regulated grazing rights on the Crown's commons and even administered justice in both civil and criminal law within its area of influence (Fernández Otal, 1993).

The presence of Southern Iberia herds in our area of study can be traced back to the thirteenth century (Ruiz de la Peña, 1977), but it was during the fourteenth century when it became fully established, following the interests of the new landholding aristocrats who had gained control of the commons. The Earldom of Luna in León is an example of this: innumerable confrontations with the locals ensued the earl's lease of ample extensions of land to big *Mesta* livestock owners. Some contemporary written sources give detailed account of these events, which severely harmed the local stocks

(García Cañón, 2006). The arrival of *Mesta* herds introduced a new stockbreeding model which was characterized by its speculative and market-oriented nature and was radically different from the small-scale subsistence level production practices of local peasants.

La Mesta's main material remains are the important livestock paths or *cañadas* which facilitated the movement of big herds. The *brañas* or huts used by *Mesta* shepherds are small and consist of only one room, as herds were kept in enclosures situated nearby (Figure 15.6). These huts (*chozos*) and their enclosures can often be documented in the same *brañas* used by local stockbreeders. Therefore, two different construction types occupied the same physical space at the same time while concomitantly retaining different functionalities (i.e. they were used by different social groups who practiced two different types of transhumance on disparate scales).

CONCLUSION

Thus, from the late thirteenth century and along into the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Cantabrian Mountains became a place of confluence where several different systems were at work at the same time exploiting pasture lands: 1) transhumant stockbreeding as a complement to agriculture and non-transhumant stockbreeding in the villages, 2) short-distance transhumance involving a movement from the coast (or mid-mountain areas) to the uplands, undertaken by whole families specialized in livestock breeding; 3) market-oriented pastoralism or long-distance transhumance, involving the movement of big herds from Central and Southern Iberia.

These three models reflect the interests of the various social actors at play: local peasants and shepherds, *concejo* oligarchs, high-rank aristocrats and ecclesiastical entities. Their approaches to the exploitation of pastures were connected to different sets of economic orientations which were themselves manifested in the animal species they chose. Non-transhumant and short-distance transhumant livestock were in most cases cattle (although complemented with smaller species), while the big long-distance transhumant herds owned by important lordships were sheep flocks.

Consequently, pastures in the Cantabrian Mountains were in great demand, a fact which generated unrest when the interests of the different social groups clashed. The ensuing conflicts involved a process of appropriation, privatization and the parcelling out of grazing lands which had already begun in the thirteenth century. Over the course of the following centuries, this process caused rapid transformations in the landscape. As mentioned in our introduction to this complex



Figure 15.6. *A chozo for Mesta herds from the Cantabrian Mountains*

Source: © Margarita Fernández Mier

issue, exploitation of these pasture areas continued well into the twentieth century, when a slow but unstoppable decline began which would eventually lead to the demise of most stockbreeding traditions (Fernández Mier et al., 2013).

Iberia is one of the most mountainous areas in Europe. From prehistoric times, this fact has facilitated the deforestation of large highland areas for the purposes of pastoralism. During the medieval period, a variety of transhumant systems developed which involved not only different types of movement (short to long distance), but also different trade targets. These systems originated in the competing economic interests of the social groups aiming at controlling the pastures.

From small-scale valley transhumance to long-distance south/north transhumance not to mention intermediate arrangements, various modes of pasture exploitation have coexisted in Iberia which have generated a rich legacy of material culture whose archaeological analysis has only barely begun.

More multidisciplinary research is needed to further clarify the transhumance and the management of grazing lands. The existence of sufficient written sources as

well as the survival of these practices into the twentieth century will undoubtedly make Iberia a suitable testing ground for such studies.

NOTE

- 1 This is especially the case with regards to minor toponymy. Also, this kind of research has to take into account the fact that while some toponyms may have endured, they might now refer to different places.

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