Shaping Landscape in Rural Northwestern Hispania

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Abstract: In vast regions of Northwestern Spain, the effects of human exploitation and land use in the Roman and late antique periods are clearly visible even today. They range from the creation of water supply systems, artificial lakes, quarrying and mining at various scales, to huge sterile deposits, and deforestation caused by intensive farming. Because of the importance that gold mining in this area had for Rome, and within the framework of Roman strictest direct administration and control, there was no room for the empowerment of local individual agents that might have functioned as intermediaries between Rome and the local communities.

This article considers archaeological and other sources in order to discuss the factors shaping Roman rural landscapes in the Bierzo region of Northwest Spain from Roman times to Late Antiquity. Specific focus has been placed on the participants in these shaping processes, as they were involved in day to day negotiation of their environment. In this sense, agency is discussed as an important dimension in the enactment of territoriality, together with the specific strategies for the control and exploitation of the landscape that had consequences in the development of the area.

Key words: agency, local agents, territoriality, gold mines, landscape

Introduction

This essay explores social, cultural and economic changes in Bierzo, a region in the North West of Spain, after it fell under Roman control, and the direct effects these had in driving change in the landscapes of the area during the Roman and late antique periods. Scholarly research in Roman Spain tends to focus on Romanisation and urbanisation, usually over a long time-span. While these issues are pertinent, the specific impact of Roman control on the Spanish provinces has not been explored in depth, and there is a general lack of studies focused not only on the influence that Rome had on specific, smaller, rural areas, but also on the situation after the control of Rome disappeared.

In trying to explore these issues, this essay will consider the specific strategies for the control and exploitation of the landscape that had consequences in the development of the area after its obvious interest had disappeared. Also, it attempts to address previous biases of interpretation through evaluation of disparate data as a whole.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

A major methodological problem with the study of this area and this period is the scarcity of material available, and the lack of systematic archaeological research. After the declaration of the Roman mining district of Las Medulas a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1997, however, a number of excavations and interdisciplinary research projects have been carried out in the Bierzo area. This essay will try to take account of a diversity of sources, literary, epigraphical and archaeological, many of which are the result of these latest projects.

Although the chronological focus is geared to the whole period of Roman occupation, the aim is to contemplate the consequences evident in the landscapes of Late Antiquity. Significant issues that appear when considering the available data include Roman and local identities, the exertion of control over land and resources, the material expression of territoriality and ties.
to the land and, throughout, the complex interaction of landscape, social agents and political power. In trying to discuss these issues, I will use concepts of territoriosity and agency as theoretical tools. Within the framework provided by these concepts, this essay will seek to explore the material dimension of past landscape, and interrogate the complex data arising both from the constant activities of people and the permanence of communities in specific territories. In doing so, it will try to expand the traditional focus of archaeology away from the rigidity of isolated sites and settlements towards wider considerations of interacting landscapes, boundaries, communities and social agents.

Case studies

Bierzo is a well-defined region inside the autonomous community of Castilla-León; located to the south of Asturias and to the east of Galicia; it is separated from these areas by mountain ranges that reach altitudes above 1,500 metres. (fig.1). Because it is surrounded by mountains, this area has a distinct ‘basin’ or bowl shape that makes it easily distinguishable in the maps. This essay examines data from two geographically distinct sites that have yielded highly localised sets of material culture. The village of Cacabelos is located roughly in the centre of the ‘basin’ of Bierzo (fig. 2). Inhabited since Palaeolithic times, this spot has numerous pre-Roman and Roman remains, among which only the sites of Castro Ventosa and La Edrada have been partially excavated (Díaz Álvarez 2006, 1-3). It is widely believed, among scholars, that this was the location of the Roman civitas Bergidum Flavium.

30 kilometers from the site of Bergidum, Las Medulas comprises the massive remains of a Roman gold mine, as well as different settlements dated both to Roman and pre-Roman periods (figs.3 and 4) (López-Merino 2010, 911). Within these areas, documentary and geographical information, and surviving monuments and structures, combine to help pose questions that involve the whole landscape of Bierzo and the way it fits inside the new social, political and economic frame imposed by Rome.
Figures 3 (above) and 4 (below): Location of Las Medulas in Hispania, and area of gold mine with pre-Roman and Roman castros (after López-Merino 2010).
Pre-Roman and Roman Times

When studying the pre-Roman world of the Spanish North West, researchers encounter a number of difficulties. Among them is the ‘celtism’ that pervades in some academic circles, as well as —and usually related to— a lack of rigour in the definition of important issues (Álvarez González 1993, 266). This problem is clearly found when attempting to study data concerning pre-Roman settlements. Consequently, we find much vagueness and little agreement in defining phenomena. Archaeology has made things even more complicated, when the most traditional kind of ancient settlement (the so-called ‘castro’), thought to be a product of pre-Roman Celtic cultures, have been shown to belong to Roman times in many cases (Arias Vilas 2003).

Pre-roman society and the Cantabrian wars

For the purposes of this essay, I will define pre-Roman societies of north-western Iberia as those organized around the control of small territorial units whose economic activity revolved principally around agriculture and husbandry; these were small but highly cohesive communities which tended towards economic self-sufficiency, and whose settlements are traditionally known as ‘castro’ (hill-fort). Most scholars would agree that these communities appeared around the eighth century BCE, that they reached a limited technological development –e.g. absence of wheel-thrown pottery- and based their subsistence in the use of local resources (Fernández Mier 2011, 91-92; Arias Vilas 2003, 278; López-Merino 2010, 916). Usually this kind of settlement consisted of a group of round houses surrounded by a ditch and a wall.

In the North West of Iberia, an area of great strategic importance due to its rich gold reserves, Romans needed a great number of military campaigns to gain control, in what came to be known as Cantabrian Wars, which lasted from 29 BCE to 19 BCE. After these wars finished, Rome decided to leave a military structure formed by three legions in permanent forts -III Macedonica, VI Victrix and X Gemina (Morillo Cerdán 2005, 183, 185).

Romans favoured -or forced- the signing of so-called ‘hospitality’ pacts, in order to secure the disappearance of hostilities between different communities with ties to the land, since their collaboration was essential to keep the flow of communications, transport and general connectivity (Arias Vilas 2003, 279). One of these documents, the Edict of Bierzo – found in the area in 1999- shows the Roman policy towards the local populations according to their role in the war (Rodríguez Colmenero 2000, 24). Engraved on a bronze plaque (fig. 5), probably displayed in a public place, this document is usually interpreted as an obvious reminder of the territorial reorganization imposed by the winners. However, it also implies the acceptance of a whole community as a valid agent, as well as acknowledging its ties to a specific territory (Rodríguez Colmenero 2000).

Figure 5: Edict of Bierzo (after Sánchez-Palencia Ramos 2006)
Bierzo inside the Roman administrative framework

Even before the end of the Cantabrian wars the North West was divided into three *conventus* by the Romans (fig.6), with conventual capitals in *Lucus Augusti*, *Bracara Augusta* and *Asturica Augusta*. This also –after a brief existence as the province of *Transduriana* (Rodríguez Colmenero 2000)- included in the larger superstructure of the *Tarraco*nensis province (Arias Vilas 2003, 278). However, and although new kinds of settlements appeared in the area of Bierzo, the Roman conquest of this region did not lead to the abandonment of its hill forts (Fernández Mier 2011, 95). Romans were aware that for centuries the native inhabitants of the area had been obtaining the gold of their jewels through panning in rivers. Soon after military campaigns finished, prospection of wide areas known to gold started, and with it a mining enterprise so huge that the Roman state needed to directly control wide expanses of land (Sánchez-Palencia Ramos 2006, 268-273). For this purpose, most infrastructure needed for the mines was incorporated wholesale into the *ager publicus*, and its maintenance depended directly on the Roman State and not on the region’s *ciuitates* (*Bergidum Flavium*). This structure must have left little space for the empowerment of local elites, because Roman administrators supervised and organized matters directly. In contrast, other conventual areas were being integrated in the different scales of Roman administration of Hispania (Sánchez-Palencia Ramos 2006, 268), in which local

Figure 6: Provinces of Hispania during the early Imperial period; in the North West, the three convventual capitals mentioned (after Ozcáriz Gil 2009)
elites functioned as important intermediaries and social agents.

Archaeological and documentary sources show that Roman direct control of resources in Bierzo was thorough, including well-planned, masterful use of water, supplied through an impressive system of channels. Water was extremely important in the mining process, and the channels also had the status of ager publicus which could cut across other administrative divisions such as local civitates (Sánchez-Palencia Ramos 2006, 279).

This system’s constant use and maintenance must have been labour-costly, especially since channels cut across mountains and areas of difficult access. Related to this issue, researchers believe that a series of small ‘castro’-like settlements located in the proximity of - and following the distribution of- the channels might have been inhabited by communities in charge of their maintenance and supervision. Several settlements of this kind have been found in the southern channel system of Las Medulas; inscriptions associated with them appear to mark the limits of the channel whose supervision corresponds to a specific community (Sánchez-Palencia Ramos 2006, 280).

There is abundant evidence of the Roman army’s role in this infrastructure. For instance, numerous epigraphic documents found in mining areas indicate permanent military presence in connection with mining tasks (Sánchez-Palencia Ramos 2006, 277). On the other hand, running this huge enterprise (see below for more details) would have been impossible without a large degree of involvement on the part of local population. Since no traces of slave labour have been found in the area, the most widely accepted hypothesis is that nearby communities sent temporary workers to the mines as a kind of tribute (Sánchez-Palencia Ramos 2006, 281).

New settlements

At the end of the first century CE, gold mining reached its highest intensity, and asturica augusta became an important conventual capital, the centre of a web of communications and population networks from both mountains and lowlands, and seat of the local administrative government (Orejas Saco del Valle 2014, 233; Fernández Mier 2011, 92). Other civitates of this conventus - Bergidum Flavium, Lancia, Bedunia, Legio, Gijón, Lucus Asturum, and Flavionavia- had, as we have seen in the case of Bergidum, a much less significant role in administrative, and therefore social, matters.

Meanwhile, hill forts or ‘castros’ not only continued to play an important role in the mining areas, but their number seems to increase (Fernández Mier 2011, 94; Olivares Pedreño 2007, 145; Reher 2012, 134). Thus, new sites were founded to fulfill specialized functions in the vicinity of Las Medulas. For example, Castro Orellan (fig. 7) appears to have been dedicated to metallurgic activities (López-Merino 2010, 920). In contrast, old hill forts such as Castro Ventosa –right next to Bergidum Flavium- was still inhabited by locals (López Merino 2008, 27-9).

This mixture of conservatism and acceptance of new ways is also evidenced in votive inscriptions dated to the Roman period. The consolidation of Roman rule introduced to the Bierzo area the epigraphic habit during the first and second centuries (Sánchez-Palencia Ramos 2006, 252), which was rapidly embraced as a new way to express religiosity (Le Roux 2009, 268). Paradoxically, Bierzo is the area with the greatest number of votive offerings consecrated to indigenous gods (Sánchez-Palencia Ramos 2006, 257; Klein 2008, 29) and at the same time the greatest number of offerings to Jupiter (Le Roux 2009, 276), often with both appearing in the same inscription.

Changes in the Landscape

Las Medulas is located to the South West of Bierzo, approximately 30 kilometers from the Roman civitas of Bergidum Flavium. By far the largest gold mine of the region, it was exploited for a relatively long time during the first and second centuries CE (López-Merino 2010, 920), a period when Rome needed great amounts of gold in order to mint the aurei (Reher 2012, 128). The mining techniques used in Las Medulas required extensive control over a large territory and its inhabitants, in order to supply workforce, tools, food and maintenance of the hydraulic network. For this purpose, bureaucracy and army were constantly deployed (Reher 2012, 128).
Figure 7: Panoramic view of Las Medulas (after López-Merino 2010)

Figure 8: Graph shows compared altitude and length of channels supplying Las Medulas; lower channel is the earliest (c-o) (after Matías Rodríguez 2006).
Because gold production was linked to an effective use of water, this method required an extensive network of channels to transport large amounts of water into the mines. The topographically high position of the gold deposits in Las Medulas in relation to the closest sources meant that Roman engineers had to plan an extensive hydraulic infrastructure that supplied water from higher locations (Matías Rodríguez 2006, 58). Pristine conservation in many parts of this site has allowed detailed studies of this network and the method, ruina montium, through which the site was exploited by beginning with the topographically lowest deposits, using the lower channels, and then advancing uphill (fig. 8) (Fernández-Lozano 2014, 359).

Gold production in this site altered the morphology of 1100 ha through the extraction of ore in 500 ha and the deposition of tailings in another 600 ha, with such an immense volume of displaced earth that the Carucedo Lake was artificially created (Reher 2012, 130) (figs 9 and 10).

Late Antiquity Developments

After the mine in Las Medulas was closed down during the third century CE, and although smaller operations remained active for a short time (Matías Rodríguez 2006, 77; Fernández Mier 2011, 104), Rome appeared to have lost interest in the whole region of Bierzo. Research has paid little attention to the large population that made their living from the mines in one way or another, or the effect that closure may have had on the population, whether gradual or sudden. Almost no research in domestic archaeology has been carried out in the site in order to learn about the conditions of life of these communities while they were working the mines and after these closed down.

Living in a transformed landscape

In the last few decades, interest in landscape archaeology and interdisciplinary collaboration has driven several projects that have shifted archaeological focus from single sites to whole landscapes and regions. Very little research of this kind has been carried out in Bierzo, but projects such as recent pollen analysis in both Las Medulas and Castro Ventosa show interesting data related to use of natural resources in Roman times and Late Antiquity.

In both areas, differences between pre-Roman and Roman sites are reflected not so much in crop diversity as in the intensity of cultivation shown by an increase in the area of farmland and, in the case of Orellán in Las Medulas, strategies for communal storage (López-Merino 2010, 920). During the Roman period, the autochthonous oak forests suffered greatly from the extension of crop and tree cultivation. The former was typically cereal; while among the latter, chestnuts appear to have been a favoured crop. (López Merino 2008, 29)

After the mining activities stopped, deforestation increased (Fernández Mier 2011, 96-7; Reher 2012, 130). This shows not only that most settlements were not abandoned, but that there was growing farming and demographic pressure in mountain areas, perhaps because people who had left mining activities had to turn to agriculture (Reher 2012, 134). In contrast, Castro Ventosa, or Bergidum Flavium, shows less cultivation of cereal and chestnut and more pastoral activity from Late Antiquity (López Merino 2008, 29).

The disappearance of Roman administration

Many researchers assume that after this region lost its specialized economic function during the Late Antique period, a great part of its population abandoned the mining districts and moved to other areas, altering the settlement patterns of the region. In support of this hypothesis, not only do the villas of the fourth and fifth century have evidence of aggrandizement and intense activity (Fernández Mier 2011, 96), civitates such as Bergidum increased their importance as hubs of activity and communication (Fernández Mier 2011, 107).
Figure 9: Geomorphical alterations caused by mining in Las Medulas (after Reher 2012).

Figure 10: channels are still visible in many parts of the mountains (after Matías Rodríguez 2006).
Paradoxically, also in this period territorial control in Bierzo seems to shift from lowland locations to elevated areas, closer to the model of the native ‘castros’. Small-scale local powers, whose domination of a castro afforded them a novel territorial influence, consolidated their control over well-defined, if limited, territories (Fernández Mier 2011, 100). Nevertheless, these settlements suffered changes, such as the amortization of their defensive ditches, which makes scholars question the accuracy of labelling them ‘castro’, even if they occupy the same location (Arias Vilas 2003, 285).

On the other hand, during the fourth to fifth centuries the territorial centrality in Bergidum shifted from the lowland site of La Edrada to nearby Castro Ventosa, located on a mesa next to the River Cua, 638 meters above sea level (López Merino 2008, 27). The Roman site of La Edrada – founded ex novo in the first century CE in the lowlands next to the river and the road – was definitely abandoned in the fifth century (Rodríguez González 2003, 77). On the other hand, Castro Ventosa, which shows a conspicuous lack of early imperial Roman material culture, built a new wall during the third century, and has yielded material culture which suggests its importance in the new political framework of the Suevic and Visigoth kingdoms (Díaz Álvarez 2003, 47). Suevic coins with the legend ‘Oppidum Berisiense’ minted in the site indicate the existence of local elites in control, and in contact with the Suevic kingdom (Fernández Mier 201, 106).

Therefore, after the disappearance of Roman administration, this region developed new forms of territorial occupation and control. In the case of more rural and pastoral areas, as we will see, settlements became increasingly disassociated from each other and from any kind of administration, developing more self-sufficient ways of life based on very local resources. Some settlements held a more privileged location, connected to the general political frame through the Roman road system. Here, control by a supra-regional political power was lax enough that local elites could empower themselves and act as agents in trying to agglomerate nearby sites and lands, and function as intermediaries in social, political and economic interaction at a supra-regional scale.

**Survival and use of Roman structures**

As the territorial structures which had developed diverse functions in the mining industry were redefined around new social agents and constructs, the vestiges of the strategies devised by Rome to exploit the landscape began to disappear, especially in areas where hill forts represented the main unit of settlement (Fernández Mier 2011, 101). Actually, the economic structures associated with the few known villae began to disappear during the fifth century, while hill forts seem to have endured with a clear effect in the territorial organization of the region (Fernández Mier 2011, 103).

Clearly, Late Antique social agents lacked the means to maintain many of the structures devised by Rome to control vast expanses of land. However, it is also obvious that they saw the advantages of preserving what they could within their means. For instance, there is evidence of milestones from the 4th century in the via nova and its main branches, and it is probably no coincidence that this same Roman road would evolve not much later into the Saint Jacques Way (Rodríguez González 2003). In the most inaccessible areas of the highlands, the remains of the hydraulic system that had been used for the gold mines provided convenient pathways and safe tracks used even today to trek across difficult mountainous terrain and reach fields and settlements (Matías Rodríguez 2006, 61) (figs 11 and 12).

Again, it is probably no coincidence that famous hermits of Late Antiquity, such as St. Fructuosus of Bracara chose for their communities and hermitages spots accessible through these paths, such as Peñalba de Santiago, or Montes de Valdueza. Even the cave traditionally thought to have been the dwelling place of the hermit St. Genadio, in Peñalba de Santiago, is but some hundred metres from one of these old Roman channels (Matías Rodríguez 2006, 60).
Figure 11: Old Roman channel width (after Matías Rodríguez 2006).

Figure 12: Old Roman channels still in use as mountain paths (after Matías Rodríguez 2006).
Discussion and Conclusion

To date, the vast majority of research on Roman Hispania, and specifically its North-western corner, has been undertaken by historians who focus on complicated chronological and military issues. Problems of theory and methodology, which should occupy centre-stage and drive debate, are mostly nowhere to be found. Recent archaeological research remains limited to the exploration of a few isolated case studies—in the case of rural areas, usually villas. Although more attention has been given to rural sites in the last decades, this has been usually driven by agendas of ‘celtism’ and nationalism, with their simplistic theories of victims and oppressors.

This essay has attempted to discuss some effects of human exploitation/use of land in the Roman and late antique period, clearly visible even today. They range from the creation of water supply systems, artificial lakes, quarrying at various scales, to huge sterile deposits, and deforestation caused by intensive farming. The participants in these processes, although by no means a homogenous group of people, were engaged in activities and motions that were more than a simple process of carrying out actions, but rather were involved in a day to day negotiation with the ‘object aggregates’ (Zedeño 2008?) contained in the land that was integral to creating the landscape.

In the two cases discussed here, the space in which social agents interacted with these object aggregates could be defined as a ‘territory’ in that they were attached to it before, during, and after Roman control, therefore on a relatively exclusive and permanent basis (Zedeño 2008, 210).

The interaction of land, inhabitants and resources clearly changed with Roman domination. The omnipresence of Rome meant its representatives had total access, opportunity and freedom of disposal (Zedeño 2008, 213), and yet their attachment to the territory, or territoriality, was either absent or totally different from that of the native inhabitants. The latter tried to enact their own sense of territoriality through different strategies: first through the use of violence (Cantabrian Wars), then through negotiation and provision of information and labour.

Although ultimately these strategies might have succeeded in granting the continuity of many communities on the land, they certainly did not entail ‘access, opportunity or freedom of disposal’. Within the framework of Roman strictest direct administration and control, there was no room for the empowerment of local individual agents that might have functioned as intermediaries between Rome and the local polities, between change and local tradition.

Therefore I would argue that agency is another important dimension in the enactment of territoriality. In this context, agency could be defined as the will to act, when sufficiently empowered, in a way that grants or strengthens the perceived exclusive attachment of a community to the land. Once the control of Rome disappeared, social agents became noticeable and the interaction with the landscape changes again, although now with a totally different set of ‘object aggregates’ that prevents Bierzo from going back to pre-Roman times.

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