

BASIS FOR A GEO-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TRADITIONAL RURAL SETTLEMENT IN GALICIA

José Carlos Sánchez Pardo

Institute of Archaeology, University College of London
jsp1980@hotmail.com

I. INTRODUCTION

The pattern of the traditional rural settlement in Galicia (Northwest Spain) is very complex, and it has always been hard for the geographers to explain it. The traditional rural settlement structure in this region has survived to the changes of the industrialization in better conditions than other European regions, given its fragmentation in a frame of smallholdings and polyculture. Settlement structure in Galicia is very dense and it spreads all along the landscape. But it does not simply correspond to a typical scattered pattern like other Atlantic areas of Europe, since small villages are prevalent. It fits better in some kind of transitional model between nucleated and scattered patterns. Moreover, beyond the physical features of the habitat, a whole level of very strong identity bonds between rural communities exists in Galicia (the importance of the parishes, the cooperative work, traditional festivities...), influencing the shaping and definition of the units of settlement. Because of this complexity, no agreement exists between scholars when it comes to explore the origin, evolution and features of the traditional rural settlement in this region.

This paper aims to carry out a critical review of the main discussed issues relating the Geography of the traditional rural settlement in Galicia, and to contribute to the debate with some proposals from the perspective of the combination of History and Geography. Given the aforementioned preservation of the Galician traditional landscapes, it is believed that only the collaboration between both disciplines can help to improve our knowledge about the roots and the structure of the rural settlements in this peripheral region of Europe.

II. THE THREE MAJOR ISSUES OF DISCUSSION REGARDING GALICIAN RURAL SETTLEMENTS

A first key question relates to the basic cell or unit of organization in the Galician settlement structure. Scholars like A. Precedo Ledo consider the village (or hamlet) as the basic unit. Following this idea, several classifications of villages have been proposed by J.

Fariña Tojo or A. Bouhier. However, other authors as X. Souto González indicate that the village can be divided in farmhouses, which would be the real basic units of consumption and production, while other geographers consider the «place» as the better category for explaining the organization in rural Galicia. Finally, scholars like Pazo Labrador propose that the parish is the true unit of articulation. Following this author the parish is a step above the village that brings socio-economic life to the various singular entities under their moral jurisdiction. In addition, this geographer highlights that the parishes work as a system or network of different elements interconnected.

The second key issue is the definition and classification of the structure and character of Galician rural settlement. Alveolar, scattered, spread, concentrated, compact... the terms used by different authors to discuss the Galician rural settlement are manifold, but no agreement exists on what criteria should be established in order to analyze it. Most geographers agree with the idea of dispersion as the main characteristic of rural settlement in Galicia, but some of them also detect a tendency toward nuclearization within that general pattern of dispersion. For example X. M. Souto distinguishes between settlements tending to concentration or dispersion, attending not only to morphological criteria but also to aspects such as the degree of accessibility or functionality of the infrastructure.

Finally, a third major topic of discussion is the explanation of this peculiar organization of the Galician rural habitat. Most of the explanations give a central role to the physical environment and the agricultural systems as the major influences on the Galician rural settlement. But other also emphasize the high demographical pressure that Galicia has suffered throughout its history, which has led to a very intensive use of space and a large land fragmentation. It is important to note here that most authors consider that the structure of Galician rural settlement can not be understood simply from the present but it is important to explore historical evolution of the settlement in order to adequately understand its configuration. In this sense, A. Bouhier has done the most extensive work on the historical evolution of rural Galicia. His important and monumental book remains, undoubtedly, a fundamental reference, but it lacks from historical social-political frameworks.

III. THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF A HISTORY OF THE RURAL SETTLEMENT OF GALICIA

As said, one of the most promising approaches to this complex issue is the geo-historical analysis, given, overall the potential of the well-preserved galician traditional rural landscape as a historical source. Most geographers and historians share the idea that the general structure of the settlement in traditional rural Galicia has remained relatively stable since at least the Later Middle Ages until the 60's of the last century. This means that we can learn about the origins and evolution of rural settlement from its present by means of the regressive analysis.

The results of this geohistorical analysis indicate that from the late twelfth century an important dispersion and expansion of the settlement took place all along Galicia, and it was started by a typical kind of farmstead, called «casal». The «casal» was the unit of colonization of uplands and other low-populated areas. This process was so strong that by mid of fourteenth century the dispersion indexes were similar to the current ones. But the crisis of the late fourteenth century changed this picture and brought an important recession.

The recovery of the population growth between fifteenth and nineteenth centuries adopted and preserved the basic structure established between the 12th-13th centuries. However, contrary to the previous stage, geographical differences can be detected in this period. While in inland Galicia this growth was softer and more conservative regarding settlement structure, it was more intense in the Western part of the region. In this area, a typical cycle of settlement growing can be detected during Modern Age: Internal growth and concentration – Saturation – Expansion and dispersion in small villages – Again internal growth and concentration

IV. GUIDELINES TO EXPLORE THE GEOHISTORICAL STRUCTURE OF THE GALICIAN TRADITIONAL RURAL SETTLEMENT

Thus, the traditional Galician rural settlement is the result of a long historical evolution, with multiple factors that have influenced each stage. But its correct study requires the use of adequate parameters. In this sense, a number of conceptual and methodological proposals will be discussed in the next lines.

4.1. The different scales of study: it is crucial to clarify and define the scales of work, something which seems obvious but it is usually forgotten in the studies on the rural settlement structure. This is especially evident in the case of concepts such as dispersion or compaction, often used in a rather loose way, depending of the author. We propose to distinguish at least two scales: the level of the place of the housing, and the level of the distribution of the settlement in an area.

4.2. Spaces versus points in the traditional rural landscape: the experience shows that in the Galician countryside it makes more sense to speak about «spaces» that «points». Rather than «capitals» (which do not exist in many parishes, municipalities...), the concept of space is crucial to the galician landscape semantics. This is reflected in the galician toponymy.

4.3. The possible levels of analysis. Not just one but three levels or realities of settlement must be distinguished when analyzing galician rural settlement: the physical, the community and the territory. They are independent but can be combined at different scales: for example, several physical units of settlement can actually compose a unique rural community, and in turn, many rural communities can share the same territory. The combinations are numerous and in practice can achieve a high degree of complexity.

4.4. A proposal of basic units of analysis of the Galician rural settlement. First, the concept of «settlement entity» must be used to refer the smaller rural settlement cell. It is a flexible concept that tries to cover the different minimum physical level of each zone, regardless of the size and structure.

When dealing with the basic unit of organization we are referring to the «village», regardless of the different definitions that have been given to it. It is here believed that the village has to be defined, rather than by their physical characteristics, by the feeling of the inhabitants of an area of belonging to the same community. In fact, the village can be composed of several entities of settlement (polynuclear or dispersed village).

Finally, it seems clear that the first and most basic unit of territorial organization in Galicia is the parish. The parish is primarily a territory, with well-known and defined boundaries and it acts as the smallest level of common territorial organization in Galicia (not the village).

4.5. Dispersion and concentration measures criteria. As said, the definition of the settlement structure is, overall, a matter of scale and it is important to define it before starting a work on this topic. Regarding the scale of habitat the organization and distribution of houses and dwellings must be studied, in relation to the agrarian spaces. As for the settlement, the objective is to analyze the distribution of the different villages along an area of study. In this sense, it is often wrong the association between small size and dispersed settlements. They are independent phenomena, belonging to two different scales.

4.6. The basic explanatory factors of the settlement conformation along the time. Two groups of factors interact and explain the settlement and rural habitat: physical (or natural) factors and others that can be called human. Their combination along the time in each area have shaped the current image. Regarding physical factors, the topography and morphology of the land, the existence and amount of resources needed for human life and the productive capacity of soils are the most important ones. As for the human factors, a variety of influences must be taken in consideration: the population, the system of agricultural organization in each area (types and forms of cultivation, use of forests and uncultivated land, importance of livestock and pastures, agricultural uses and collective habits...), communications and their relationship with the structure of the settlement, the different expressions of power that have conditioned the organization of settlement and habitat, the religious and symbolic factors, the heritage regimes....

These are only a few proposals to encourage new studies on this interesting topic. These works can't be delayed too much since the traditional rural landscape in Galicia is rapidly disappearing.