

ALBERTO ANSOLA FERNÁNDEZ

Departamento de Geografía. Universidad de Cantabria

The genesis of a village: Lebeña (Liébana, Cantabria)

Within certain currents of the medieval historiography it is maintained that the villages and the village communities of the Spanish peninsular north were born as a result of the process of repopulation that experienced this territorial strip from at least the 8th century. According to some leading authors, the predominant model of socio-spatial organization in this Cantabrian zone emanated from valley communities, communities formed by kinship groups very dependent on an extensive cattle economy and, therefore, forced to a space mobility of more or less distance covered that had to take shape in a very dispersed and semi-nomadic settlement. However, since the 5th century there are some indications that this type of organization was entering into a process of restructuring capable of affecting the socio-family links, with the internal hierarchy of groups of place names, to economic activities, with a stronger presence of the agricultural works, and to the own territorial structure, with a greater fixation of the settlements and the planted fields associated to them. A process that in the 8th century, with the entry of the Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula and the consequent emigration of Hispano-Goth nobles and ecclesiastics towards the Cantabrian mountains, underwent a powerful impulse and, at least in some places, a rapid acculturation of the valley communities that ended to end around the 9th and 10th centuries in the village communities; that is, in social bonds of feudal dependence, agricultural activities and grazing with more fixed fields, and an even more stable settlement based on the villages.

This process of changes had to be staged very intensely in the region of Liébana. Liébana, because of its

proximity to the Asturian political power and its physical framework, with high mountains conducive to isolation and with a climate of Mediterranean influences, was erected in the High Middle Ages in one of the territories that sooner and in greater quantity received Hispanic population from the south, which ended up also materializing in an earlier and intense aculturization with respect to other Cantabrian counties. According to some historians, if in the 8th century there are indications of this migration in the founding of the *ecclesiae* and monastic communities, and in 9th there is an acceleration of the process through greater diversity and fixation of settlements, in the 10th the densification of settlement and the consolidation of the fields are verified, all within a social framework characterized by feudal relationships that are hierarchically political and ecclesiastically. Therefore, throughout these centuries a spatial organization was directed, especially through the *ecclesiae*, because regardless of whether or not there existed monastic communities, or that they were located in more central places in search of greater control or in more marginal areas in search of seclusion and abandonment, it was this institution that led the process of repopulation, colonization and culturization, which ultimately ordered the spatial distribution of settlements and fields. As the historians did not fail to point out, in the 8th century documentation there is a certain quantitative balance between the terms *locum*, *villa*, and *ecclesia*; a century later is the mention to *ecclesia* that acquires dominance; and already in the 10th century some of these *ecclesiae* are reconverted into *villae*, in the sense now of villages or village communi-

ties. But the case of Liébana is not only an example of the repopulation movement and of a territorial organization commanded by monastic communities; it is also of continuity between late Antiquity and the High Middle Ages. The fact that the Hispano-Goth elites directed the eye with special interest towards the region of Liébana could be equally influenced by the existence of intense relations and close ties between Visigoths and Astures. Had this been so, it would not be unreasonable to argue that in Liébana a more consolidated space organization had pre-existed than it was believed, which was later enriched and energized by repopulation until it reached the village communities, in the design of which inheritance might very well have a prominent influence.

From there, it took as unit of study a council and valley of Liébana, the one of Lebeña. It was a question of investigating the different forms of settlement and their evolution throughout the Middle Ages, using both documentary sources, collections of the monastery of Santo Toribio de Liébana usually late medieval, as field work, surface surveys of vestiges related to this settlement. From the beginning it became clear that in the Late Middle Ages was a consolidated village, Quintanilla (today the population of Lebeña), as well as the transient monastic occupation linked to the church of Santa María, but also appeared signs of other types of settlement less fixed. The toponymy of the documentation suggested the possibility that other areas might have held a certain seasonal or permanent settlement, secular or ecclesiastical, of gentilist groups or nuclear families, late medieval or medieval genesis. One of these spaces would run through the valley of the Fuentecillas stream from its headland, on the wide landing of Maredes, to its mouth on the river Deva in front of the site of the San Julián hermitage, passing through El Valle, a place of considerable importance in Low-medieval centuries and a neighborhood in the modern centuries. And another could also be the enigmatic site of Perdueles, in the middle section of the stream of the same name, often referred to as a spatial reference point, although surprisingly alien to the domains of the monastery of Santo Toribio, and which was flanked, downstream, by the land of Los Casares and, upstream, by the hermitages of Santa Cecilia and San Pedro.

The questions to be answered that were then raised were how the process of formation of the village of Quintanilla and its subsequent internal structuring took place in a diverse group of ancestral homes; but also how the spatial and population organization had been carried out in the surroundings of the church of Santa María, in the

San Julián-El Valle-Maredes axis, and in the upper section of the Perdueles stream. Questions, for example, about the possible occupational structure based on three different models, and whether one could have been faced with a very dispersed population of pre-medieval roots and livestock-itinerant inheritance or, on the contrary, the fruit of an early medieval repopulation that already appears reordered from the village of Quintanilla in the Late Middle Ages, or even in the face of an overlap of late antiquity and medieval settlements. The answers to these or other questions were, of course, far from the aspirations of this work. However, it was not ruled out the possibility of arriving at somewhat more elaborate hypotheses and larger scales, of finally trying to formulate other questions through the crossing of documentary information and field surveys both in the main field of village of Quintanilla as in the other designated places.

After studying these three models (the village of Quintanilla, the monastic settlement of the church of Santa María and the dispersed settlement of the lines of El Valle and Perdueles) some interesting clues could be highlighted. For example, in the late antiquity the settlement may have been characterized by small semi-displacement groups and by highly dispersed settlements, but without excluding that in some places, such as in the Quintanilla area, a tendency was already emerging towards larger, more stable and more concentrated settlements. Also that in the High Middle Ages the Christian repopulation process, with the exception of the monastic attempt of Santa María, could overlap over much of the preexisting structure, taking advantage of the dispersion in the cases of El Valle and Perdueles and enhancing the role nuclear and villager of Quintanilla. And also that in the Late Middle Ages, already reordered the territory, the village of Quintanilla and the neighboring church of Santa María arrived fully consolidated, so as to have weakened other possible settlements and other possible churches, some converted into small neighborhoods (El Valle and Perdueles) and others in simple hermitages (San Julián, Santa Cecilia, San Pedro).

In short, the conclusions reached were that it could be three models of settlement and culturization with different genealogies and different destinies. A dispersed, even disseminated, probably associated with a certain short-distance mobility, or at least a consumption of large spaces, and presumably pre-medieval roots, which over time was able to generate population and stable fields, but not documentaries villages. Another concentrate that knew very early to take advantage of the lands more propitious for the agriculture, and that translated

in the village of Quintanilla, a consolidated settlement under the protection of the church of San Roman and by the progressive dismemberment of ancestral homes. And, in the meantime, another one of punctual repopulation through the monastic community and the church of Santa María, which in the end did not end up generating a village settlement, but did eventually become the religious epicenter of the entire council of Lebeña .

Three models that cohabited in medieval times, which in the Late Middle Ages and even in modern times the dispersed and concentrated settlement continued to do so unevenly and have now been translated into an exempt church, that of Santa Maria, two groups of cabins, those of Maredes and Perdueles, a district, El Valle, and a main population nucleus, that of Lebeña, heir of the old village of Quintanilla.