

## *Galician small towns: concept and reality*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Villas, small towns or county capitals are some of the terms used in Galicia to refer to the lowest step of the urban hierarchy. This is a complex, diffuse and polyhedral concept whose meaning varies considerably depending on the criteria, the variables or the spatiotemporal frame of reference used. This is not a new or exclusive problem of Galicia, as many authors over the last century and from different disciplines (geography, sociology, architecture, economy, etc.) have tried to define “the urban”.

All the questions referring to small towns must today be reformulated due to changes in urbanization. The modifications suffered in Galicia because of this strong process lived since the mid-twentieth century together with the singularities of the mode of occupation of the territory within the Spanish set make necessary a revision of the concepts and criteria used to define the small towns. The transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society has modified not only the concept of city but also the traditional idea of town (CAPEL, 2009). These changes also give rise to a more complex and heterogeneous territorial framework, where the boundary between urban and rural becomes increasingly blurred, but the difference between dynamic urban spaces and declining rural areas is accentuated. The characteristics of these county capitals as articulating nuclei of their area of influence and as links between the rural and urban world will depend to a great extent on the properties of the space they organize and will give rise to dif-

ferent types of towns, which increases the difficulty of establishing a single, synthetic definition for the case of Galicia.

This text aims to expose the problems encountered to identify the lower step of the urban system in Galicia. For this it is necessary to know which are the limitations of the criteria most used to define the small towns in order to identify the one or those that better adapt to the Galician case. Understanding the urban-rural link is fundamental for the definition of small towns, because in it the territorial context plays a key role for its explanation. The methodology used is based on a bibliographical review that allows us to know the diversity of existing meanings behind the term town. Once this part of the work has been elaborated, a statistical analysis is carried out that allows empirically contrasting through demographic, socioeconomic, construction, etc. data.

For this study, a total of 90 urban nuclei were selected according to various criteria. On the one hand, all those with more than 2,000 inhabitants, as this is the minimum threshold set in a general way in Galician academic literature. On the other hand, it was decided to complete the study with the inclusion of all those nuclei that, without surpassing this threshold, appeared in the Guidelines for Territorial Planning of Galicia (2011) as “Nodes for territorial equilibrium” as these have many common characteristics with villas of a larger demographic size. In the case of the towns in metropolitan areas, and in view of the high number of towns with more than 2,000 inhabitants, those identified as towns in the bibliography used for the preparation of this study were taken.

## II. THE PROBLEMATIC DEFINITION OF SMALL TOWN

The basic function of small towns is to serve as a link between the urban world and the rural space. They are dynamic poles in rural areas, “places of production of exchanges, services, discovery and interconnection” (MARACHE, 2006) and become an archipelago network of large poles where economic flows are increasingly concentrated (VELTZ, 1999). As the lowest step of the urban hierarchy, they act as diffusing points of economic and social dynamism from large cities to rural areas (CARAVACA and GONZALEZ, 2009). The criteria for the designation of small cities are such that a wide variety of cities is collected here. There is a certain ambiguity of terminology as different words are used to refer to them. Difficulties in distinguishing between small and medium sized cities causes both to be considered under the same term as intermediate cities (CAPEL, 2009). There are also problems in differentiating between small towns and villages or county capitals despite being able to refer to very different realities.

This leads to the need to establish typologies and hierarchies within this group of population nuclei that make up the lowest level of the urban system that can meet criteria such as its economic structure, demographic evolution or morphology. Another important criterion to explain the characteristics of small cities in relation to the territorial changes suffered in recent years is their location. While those that are isolated and far from the area of influence of a higher-ranking city act as real subregional capitals (PLAZA, 2000). This fact shows that the role and importance of small cities increases in areas that are far from large urban centres, and they become essential for the structuring of the territory, with dynamizing effects on their regions by helping to maintain the rural population by providing services and employment (PUMAIN, 1997).

Under the term small city there may appear nuclei of a very variable demographic volume. The majority of the authors have chosen to use a minimum population threshold as a defining criterion of what a town is, despite the lack of consensus when establishing this figure (GOERLICHT GISBERT and CANTARINO MARTÍ, 2013). In Spain, a lower limit of between 2,000 and 10,000 inhabitants has been generally established, while the upper threshold was between 20,000 and 50,000 (LÓPEZ TRIGAL, 2006). The introduction of other demographic variables such as density improves the complex definition of urban spaces. In addition, the use of quantitative criteria, especially demographic ones, is highly conditioned by the availability

of statistics and their characteristics (CAMARERO, 1993), as well as by the use of the population entity or municipality as a unit of measurement.

The functional criterion also presents problems in relation to the appearance of new spatial realities that modify the classic functions of a town. While those located in isolated places, far from other urban nuclei of entity, continue to maintain the traditional characteristics of the villas and small cities as governing nuclei of a rural region, in those located in metropolitan spaces, periurban or polynuclear systems their function varies. In those urban nuclei located in metropolitan or suburban spaces, the traditional function that characterises small towns has no effect as the leading role of these dynamic areas falls on the city with the highest urban rank. The expansion of the urban peripheries has also led to a very important modification of the spaces previously considered as rural and which have now lost their only primary character to incorporate a wide variety of activities such as residential, industrial or tertiary benefiting from their proximity to urban areas. In polynuclear spaces there is no single urban nucleus that centralises and organises the area of influence and, therefore, its relationship with the surrounding space also has different characteristics from those of a centralised space. We can say that the urban character and the role of centrality is given by a gradient in relation to the level of regional development because, the lower it is, the less the urban nucleus will need to appear as an important city (CAPEL, 1968). This makes see the need to create new definitions that gather this diversity of territorial contexts and that update the concept to the new realities that have appeared in recent years.

The recent evolution of Galicia and its singularities within the Spanish context make it necessary to review the characteristics of the urban fact in general and the definition of small towns in particular in this region. Several authors have made more or less clear definitions of the concept of villa in Galicia. Already in the 1920s, Otero Pedrayo (1980) referred to them as “small towns of different sizes that, without reaching cities, preside over a more or less extreme radius of a region, being difficult to distinguish them exactly from the village or the city”.

It was Rodríguez González (1997) who carried out the most exhaustive study of the Galician towns. In it they are defined as nuclei that, distributed by all the rural space, count on a modest and very oscillating demographic size (between 2.000 and 15.000 inhabitants) and that concentrate tertiary activities for the attention of the demands generated in the region that they organize besides being centres for the social relation and the daily

life of the inhabitants of their area of influence. From a morphological point of view, they present compact urban plots and landscapes, with a high constructive growth in the past years and of strong contrast with their immediate surroundings (building in height, linear growth around communication axes, etc.). (RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2015). This definition from the 90's refers to a group of villas in rural Galicia, since they respond in a clearer way than the coastlines to their character of regional headwaters, as these spaces of supra-municipal scale are easier to individualize within a rural context. In coastal areas the areas of influence are diffuse as there are functional links between the settlements and even a specialization and complementarity because of a spatial organization of metropolitan or urban characteristics (RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 1999). The proximity between the villas and the urban nuclei of greater rank in the urban hierarchy makes it even more difficult to delimit clear areas of influence and weakens the articulating capacity of the space of these small nuclei.

Demographic criterion:

- Population nuclei below the demographic threshold of 2,000 inhabitants.
- Existence of population nuclei that exceed the demographic threshold but that only have a residential function.
- Rigid administrative divisions that do not adjust to the demographic reality.
- Decreasing trend in the smaller internal settlements studied.

Socio-economic criterion:

- The percentage of population employed in non-agricultural activities is no longer valid to define a city.
- Stocks of small cities (such as fisheries) where the primary sector employs a high percentage of the population.

Functional criterion:

- The functional importance of small Galician cities is not determined by the level of their commercial or service functions but by their uniqueness.
- The scope of influence of health and educational services tend to be supra-municipal in interior spaces while in dynamic spaces they have a smaller radius.

- Tendency towards the concentration of public facilities in small cities more important and reduction in smaller nuclei.
- The logics of location of public services and commercial activities are modified in metropolitan spaces by the proximity of the central city.

Morphological criterion:

- Great differences between the urban fabric between small historic cities and those of recent growth.
- Difficult identification at morphological level in densely urbanized spaces.

Small cities in spatial planning:

- The Galician Territorial Planning Guidelines (2011) establish two categories according to their importance: Intermediate Urban System and Nodes for Territorial Balance.
- Small cities do not appear in urban regions.
- Not only analytical but also prospective.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

After the statistical analysis and the bibliographical review, it seems obvious that when speaking of Galician towns, reference is made to a problematic concept, whose basic definition requires a profound reflection and comparison of both the variables that determine their differential character and the population nuclei themselves that can be considered as towns. These are nuclei with many common aspects and dynamics, although these are manifested in a quantitative and qualitative way in very diverse forms. For this reason, it would be erroneous not to consider the whole set of towns seen as part, albeit with nuances, of the same reality: that of serving as a link between the rural and urban world.

Although statistical definitions may be irrelevant and unnecessary, there must be a minimum consensus when it comes to identifying small towns in order to achieve optimum planning and governance. The complexity of the phenomenon does not correspond to the simplicity with which it is delimited in statistical terms. As we have seen, the characteristics of the urban fact and of the towns in particular are not given by the existence of a certain threshold of population, by the percentage of population employed in a specific economic sector or by the volume

of housing built but go beyond. All of these criteria must be combined to result in a statistical definition that is as close as possible to the theoretical concepts that have been analysed. For this reason, a multivariate analysis must be carried out in which the variables studied are put into relation, as the combination of them can give rise to very diverse realities.

The spatial component has a special importance in the analysis of the Galician urban system. The peculiarities of Galicia in the Spanish context make it necessary to define small towns that adapt the usual definitions to the reference territory and its historical evolution. These should also include the internal differences within the region.

The absence of intermediate sized urban nuclei within the urban regions partly explains the difficulty of studying these spaces. These are polynuclear spaces, very dynamic, intensely occupied and with a tendency towards specialisation that have undergone significant changes in recent decades. For this reason, the existing urban nuclei in these spaces have their own characteristics that differentiate them from the rest of Galician towns. The expansion of the urban phenomenon has caused, on the one hand, the emergence of new centralities and, on the other, the modification of existing ones. The fit of these metropolitan urban nuclei within the Galician urban system requires a revision according to their importance as central points of the most dynamic areas of the region.

The differences between the urban centres studied are so great in some cases that it may lead us to think whether

we are talking about the same urban reality or whether, on the contrary, a division should be made that adapts better to this diversity. Although the study can be posed independently, it should not be forgotten that the processes that generally explain the current characteristics of small cities have been the same, although obviously the result has been very different. Nor should it be forgotten that despite the spatial differences there is a common pattern that can be seen simply by observing the data provided in this study.

The loss of dynamism in the future makes the consideration of villas as such debatable. Their urban character comes from their endowment function and from their deep urban-rural relationship. The growth experienced by villas in very depressed rural areas is partly explained by the trend towards the concentration of population, economic activities, equipment and services in their areas of influence. For these reasons, it is logical to consider whether, if they were to lose their differential endowment with respect to the territory surrounding them, they would also lose their status as small cities.

Subjectivity is also an aspect to bear in mind when dealing with the definition of the urban fact of a population nucleus, which is why methodologies and criteria must be used in which the subjective weight is the least possible. At the same time, the methods used must allow a classification that reflects the heterogeneity of the case studies. It is not so much a question of hierarchising as of linking the different variables in such a way that the logics underlying each type of towns are visible.