

GREGORIO CASTEJÓN PORCEL

Universidad de Alicante

From Traditional Market to Cultural Heritage: Comparative Regional Study about the Old Water auctions of Fuente Álamo de Murcia (Murcia, Spain)

I. INTRODUCTION

In Spain, there were real water markets where this became a commodity sold at auctions. From the beginning of the 20th century, these commercial acts aroused the interest of researchers from different disciplines, especially the interest of those dedicated to rural historical geography. Auctions in which the highest bidder obtained the right to use the water to supply their farms, and in which those who owned the water obtained significant profits with its sale. A separation of water from the land and sale of this good whose start in the Region of Murcia dates to the 13th century and for which numerous specialists point to the permanent shortage of water as the main cause, as well as the abundance of available and attractive arable land. This trade and way of proceeding contrasts with the historical use of the most important watercourse in the region and in the Vega Baja del Segura, already in the province of Alicante, the Segura River.

In the Region of Murcia, there are not many hydraulic systems whose waters are known to have been auctioned at some moment in their history, just known twelve, enough to be significant. Among them, all are some of the qanat-type hydraulic complexes built in the municipality of Fuente Álamo de Murcia in the 18th-20th centuries, whose earliest documented date of an act of sale of this type linked to them occurred in the first decade of the 19th century. Systems that lacked a specific analysis in this socio-economic sense beyond the valuable contributions of Sánchez (2007), Rabal (2008) and Luna (2008), although other studies, including the work of Castejón

(2014, 2019), have mentioned their existence and this characteristic feature.

Thus, as indicated by Melgarejo and López (2015), in the case of the Autonomous Community of Murcia, it can be affirmed that the strong disproportion between the meagre and irregular flows of the Mediterranean rivers and streams and their extensive and fertile alluvial plains contributed to “making water ownership independent, turning [...] the transfer of irrigation rights through leasing, private sale or auctions into a lucrative business, thus giving rise to real water lords”. This circumstance can, undoubtedly, be extrapolated to Fuente Álamo de Murcia and its immediate surroundings, where the lack of watercourses was made up for by the resources captured from the subsoil, which allowed the irrigation of an important part of the fertile lands that today make up the natural region of Campo de Cartagena, in the southeast of the Region of Murcia, one of the main agricultural areas in Spain, both in terms of surface area and volume of production and economic data.

II. METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

This research can be framed within the framework of rural historical geography and classified as fundamental, diachronic and documentary, as well as being a field and case study that incorporates a participatory and historical character with an eminent descriptive objective. For its development, a main methodology of comparative analysis has been followed, carrying out this task from

the documented information about the different hydraulic systems that existed in Fuente Álamo de Murcia and in the Region of Murcia in which their waters were sold at public auctions at some point in their useful life. In this sense, the information has been obtained through: 1. Bibliographic analysis; 2. Documentary analysis, both archival and to review newspapers and newsletters; and 3. Interviews with ten people linked to the hydraulic systems and the management-sale of their water flows.

III. WATER AUCTIONS IN THE REGION OF MURCIA

The existing literature shows that, despite the long and extensive agricultural tradition, there are not many documented sales of water through auction in the Region of Murcia. From their comparative analysis, it can be concluded that the hydraulic systems of this territory which at some point in their history auctioned their waters, have a diverse chronological origin, some of them going back to the Muslim period and the most recent ones to the 20th century. Likewise, the variety of the origin of the resources is equally noteworthy, distinguishing between those captured from sub-surface water streams and those extracted from the groundwater aquifers. This circumstance also influenced the different types of water harvesting techniques applied, in many cases with hundreds of years of existence since their creation. On the other hand, as far as ownership is concerned, the most significant difference is between public and private water and, in turn, whether there is a single owner or, on the contrary, several members, who may be grouped in societies, which are common in the region, as well as in irrigation communities, which have been applied more recently. Similarly, there is no doubt that each of these systems offers a different organisational and control structure, even with substantial variations throughout their history as a result of their adaptation and evolution, which is influenced by the existence or not of regulations governing the management of the system itself and the rights and obligations of owners and users, especially significant for this study with regard to the way of proceeding in auctions.

Nor is the name applied to these acts of public sale the same in all of them, most of them without other designation than auction, but four of them with a specific term, that of Alporchón (Lorca and Totana) and that of Concierto (Mula and Moratalla). Likewise, it has been verified that the place of celebration also differs from

one complex to another, being able to be grouped into those were held in public premises, such as town halls or rooms annexed to hermitages, and those that took place in private buildings; as well as, in the same way, can be differentiating those held in exclusive locations for the execution of this activity or, on the contrary, reused for its celebration. Likewise, the periodicity in the occurrence of the auctions is equally different, although there are notable coincidences, being able to differentiate the complexes in which their waters were sold weekly, as occurred with those that originated in Fuente Álamo de Murcia, and others in which this act took place daily, as in the case of the Alporchón de Lorca or Mula. However, this regularity is broken in other cases in which the auction was a one-off event depending on the availability and interests of the owners to carry it out at a given time. Finally, there is a differentiating feature between almost all these study systems, related to the division of the resources for their subsequent sale and distribution, with a multitude of divisions in their volumes and whose common denominator were to make the most of the available flows by dividing them into more or less homogeneous portions according to the total available.

IV. WATER AUCTIONS FROM FUENTE ÁLAMO DE MURCIA

The written and oral sources consulted certify the sale at public auction of the waters of four hydraulic systems whose catchment area was located in the municipal district of Fuente Álamo de Murcia, in particular, from in the sub-alve waters of the dry riverbeds that surround the head town of the municipality, Fuente Álamo, namely: Rambla de Fuente Álamo and Rambla de la Azohía. Private systems, built in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, in which both the water resources and the infrastructure that guaranteed their collection and channelling belonged to an owner or owners, in some cases pooled in trading companies or, more recently, even in irrigation communities, but in which their waters were auctioned at some point in their history.

These hydraulic systems were known as: 1. Aguas de la Casa de Girón - Condes de Heredia-Spínola (1753); Aguas de la Casa de Girón - Adolfo Ceño Martínez (1837); Aguas de la Sociedad Amistad y Lucro (1893); and Aguas de la Sociedad Anónima San Juan (1917). Systems dug underground and built on the surface by means of masonry work, which provided irrigation for land in the municipalities of Fuente Álamo de Murcia,

Murcia, Cartagena and Torre Pacheco. They therefore supplied an important area of the current region of Campo de Cartagena, constituting one of the precedents of the agricultural revolution suffered in this territory since 1979 with the arrival of the waters of the Tagus-Segura Transfer, delayed to Fuente Álamo de Murcia until 1992.

The public auctions of these waters were held in different public and private locations throughout the municipality and, despite the lack of any regulations or ordinances, a scrupulous procedure was followed. Thus, they took place on a specific day of the week, usually on a Sunday, and were directed by a water board or tribunal made up of the corresponding local mayor and representatives and workers from each of the water collection and distribution systems. After the auction was over, the *muñidores* were responsible of distributing the irrigation shift in the field to those who had won at the auction the right to use it.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In the Southeast of Spain, the limited availability of water gave rise, in specific enclaves and from medieval times onwards to a process of privatisation of the ownership of this resource and of independence concerning the lands it irrigated. A circumstance that has been documented in different parts of the Region of Murcia, where, as in other specific places of the Spanish Levante, water became a commodity sold at public auctions. A commercial activity whose number increased especially in the Modern Age and which favoured a local oligarchy that took advantage, economically and socially, of the opportunity offered by the control of such a necessary resource. A useful asset both to increase their wealth and to strengthen their political and social position.

In any case, both saw how, from the middle of the 20th century, the celebrations of the *almonedas* became obsolete and condemned to disappear, the main consequence of the application of modern techniques for the collection and channelling of resources which hurt the

availability of water flows and ended up making a significant part of the traditional systems described dysfunctional; and, specifically, those whose origin was in Fuente Álamo de Murcia. Thus, whether by force or due to the negative dynamics of their celebrations, these public sales were disappearing at the same time as the flow of water through the irrigation channels, practically all of them in the 1960s-1970s, some of them even a few years later.

A peculiar water management activity, both in the Region of Murcia and in the rest of Spain, which is associated with a cultural and heritage consideration of great value, not only because of its rarity and long history, but for being a sign of an ethnographic identity and a water culture linked to a semi-arid territory, with a significant shortage of water resources, but which, on the contrary, is characterised, since ancient times, by an intelligent hydraulic and an important agricultural dedication, both in space and labour. This singularity also gives the activity a significant academic interest, as demonstrated by the numerous works carried out by specialists in different branches of science, thus enjoying a long tradition of research on the subject, especially in the field of rural historical geography.

In this way, the water auctions of the Region of Murcia, and therefore also those of Fuente Álamo de Murcia, are an indisputable cultural landmark to be preserved and valued as a heritage attraction, as well as an example of water resource management in regions lacking this precious resource. A fundamental resource for the development and growth of present and future societies; both with the vital challenge of guaranteeing its accessibility and supply in a sustainable, equitable and generalised manner. These are objectives for which this paper reveals that water auctions were useful in their day to promote the allocation of access to water under competitive conditions, making them an example to be considered. However, their adaptation to the current reality makes strict and official regulation essential to avoid the creation of monopolies and unequal and unsustainable distribution.