

# **A blurred frontier: the territories between the kingdom of Asturias and al-Andalus (eighth and ninth centuries)\***

by Iñaki Martín Viso

The Islamic conquest of the kingdom of Toledo brought about the disappearance of central authority in certain regions of the Iberian Peninsula. This is what happened on the Duero Plateau, which, between the eighth century and the mid-ninth century, was an area bereft of any type of complex political structure. The paper provides an analysis of certain elements of political organization during that period, defined by fragmentation and the existence of numerous small-sized territories that were associated with the management of common lands. It was in an area on the fringes of Asturians and Andalusians that a blurred frontier was drawn, where some influences of al-Andalus can be identified. After the second half of the ninth century, the kingdom of the Asturias spread across these territories at the same time as the county of Castile became consolidated. This increase in complexity created formerly non-existent struggles against the Muslims, and gave rise to a new frontier, although the areas south of the Duero generally remained outside the scope of Asturian, Castilian and Andalusian authority.

Middle Ages; 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries; Iberian Peninsula; Duero Plateau; al-Andalus; Asturias; frontier.

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### 1. *The Islamic conquest and its consequences*

The *Mozarabic Chronicle of 754* laconically mentions the demise of the kingdom of Toledo as a result of the Muslim conquest<sup>1</sup>. The account is especially interesting, since – except for the very brief *Byzantine-Arabic Chronicle* – it is chronologically the closest one to the events, and was drafted from the point of view of an author who was unrelated to the conquerors, probably a priest from Toledo<sup>2</sup>. Surprisingly, the chronicler never mentions northern areas, where new Christian political leadership emerged, such as the Asturias. From the perspective of Toledo, they were faraway lands about which there was no accurate information. Besides, the chronicler does not present the subsequent political evolution as struggle between Christians and Muslims. In spite of this, in the ninth century, the Asturian monarchy fostered an image that depicted them as guardians of the Christian faith and heirs of the Gothic kingdom, an ideology that legitimated a new power<sup>3</sup>.

News about Northern Iberia in the eighth century can be mainly found in Andalusian accounts from the tenth and eleventh centuries onwards, which locate this place, identified as *Yiliqiya*, outside the *Dar-al-islam*. Nevertheless, there was a marked internal diversity. The Asturian centre, initially a military chiefdom that gradually spread across the northernmost territories, became consolidated as a monarchy that steadily incorporated new areas, especially in the ninth century. The Asturian chronicles, drafted around 880-885, reveal this royal ideology<sup>4</sup>. Hence, there is mention of a series of campaigns carried out by King Alfonso I and his brother Fruela in the mid-eighth century against a large number of places to the north of the Central System<sup>5</sup>. As a consequence, the inhabitants of the area would have moved to Asturias leaving vast depopulated areas. Later, in the second half of the ninth century and the first half of the tenth, these territories would have become part of the kingdom, being “repopulated”, since they were deemed “deserted”.

A large part of the historiography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries endorses this account, especially because of the work of Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz<sup>6</sup>. However, research in the last 50 years has dismantled these ideas<sup>7</sup>. One of the keys lies in the fact that there are large areas for which there is no written documentation about these centuries, so historians turn to texts produced after Asturian rule became established. Nonetheless, such texts – especially chronicles – should be regarded as instruments of ideological legitimization. The example of the campaigns engaged in by Alfonso I is

<sup>1</sup> *Crónica Mozárabe de 754*, 8. 51.

<sup>2</sup> López Pereira, *La Crónica Mozárabe de 754*.

<sup>3</sup> Barbero – Vigil, *La formación*; Deswarte, *De la destruction*; Isla Frez, *Monarchy*.

<sup>4</sup> Isla Frez, *La Crónica*.

<sup>5</sup> *Crónica de Alfonso III, Rotensis*, § 13 (*Crónicas asturianas*).

<sup>6</sup> Sánchez-Albornoz, *Despoblación y repoblación*.

<sup>7</sup> Barbero – Vigil, *La formación*, pp. 220-225; Estepa Díez, *Estructura*, pp. 66-68; Pastor Díaz de Garayo, *Castilla*; Mínguez, *La despoblación*; Escalona, *Sociedad y territorio*.

especially significant, since they were not mentioned in any other sources. It could be understood as a narrative to demonstrate that native settlers of these supposed deserted regions were the Asturians, given the fact that they were descendants of those who had headed for Asturias<sup>8</sup>. The gradual disengagement from the “depopulation” perspective gave way to a series of approaches that may be defined as “colonizing”, according to which the peasants from the North who began to settle there in the ninth century reactivated the economy and generated more complex socio-political structures<sup>9</sup>. But in recent years, several researchers have begun to advocate a different idea, which is, basically, that there was never a depopulation, and that these areas were inhabited although outside the scope of control of any type of central authority<sup>10</sup>.

However, the challenge is to understand how these spaces were structured. This study is focused on a broad area, the Duero Plateau (Figure 1), although other areas such as Southern Galicia, the north of Portugal or areas south of the counties of Northeastern Iberia, the Carolingian *Marca Hispanica*, experienced similar situations. The political dynamics generated by the Islamic conquest did not entail the creation of two opposing political blocs (Christian and Muslim), but rather a variegation of very diverse situations, one of which resulted in a complete absence of political control. It happened in some areas located on the fringes of different polities.

## *2. The dynamics of a stateless region*

The main problem is the lack of a solid corpus of information. Firstly, written texts, previously scarce, vanished. This effect could have been the result of a lack of institutions to preserve them. A widespread literacy reappeared in the late ninth century, just when some monasteries and episcopal sees that have preserved their archives emerged. This fact might be used as an argument to support the idea that it was not the writing which vanished, but the institutions where those texts could have been preserved. It is necessary to turn to information found in later documents (from the late ninth and early tenth centuries) and try to carry out cautiously a retrospective reading. Secondly, the archaeology of the period is still “work in progress”, with important gaps, although the picture that is beginning to emerge highlights two aspects: the continuity of some rural landscapes, though with changes, and the absence of monumentality, a characteristic that once again stresses the weakness of the elites<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Escalona, *Family memories*.

<sup>9</sup> García de Cortázar, *Del Cantábrico* and *Las formas*; Mínguez Fernández, *Innovación*; Martínez Sopena, *La Tierra de Campos*.

<sup>10</sup> Escalona – Martín Viso, *The life*.

<sup>11</sup> Martín Viso, *Colapso*.

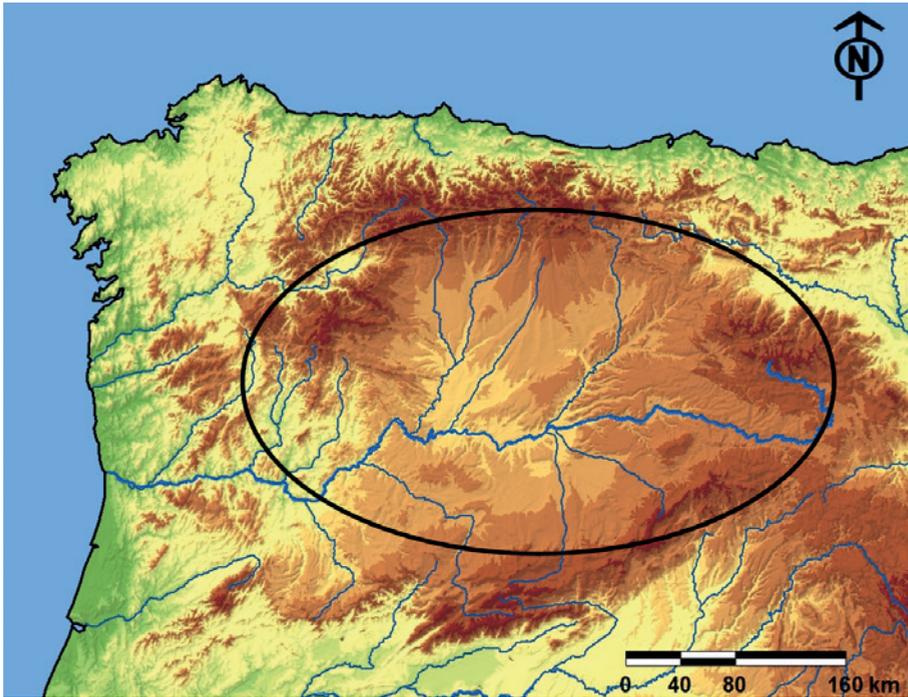


Figure 1. The Duero Plateau.

The negligible role of cities is significant; their influence was already very weak in the post-Roman centuries, when it was almost always associated with bishops. From an archaeological view, the only place that can be trusted to be more or less accurately described is León. Here the sequence is defined by the continuity of settlement without any investment in monumentality. The existence of common pottery, most likely produced by locals, would be proof of the presence of inhabitants, although their standard of living would have differed little from that of rural communities<sup>12</sup>. The situation in other cities must have been similar<sup>13</sup>. Interestingly, Muslim chronicles mention campaigns against cities, like Astorga in 795 and León in 845<sup>14</sup>. However, for over a century, they are only referred to on those two occasions, which suggests that they were not frequent targets. Perhaps the attacks were related to the symbolic value of both places, thanks to their Roman and Visigothic past; or maybe such mentions were simply a way of labelling the most recognizable

<sup>12</sup> Gutiérrez González – Miguel Hernández, *Cerámica altomedieval*; Miguel Hernández, *La estructura urbana*.

<sup>13</sup> Gutiérrez González, *Procesos de formación*, pp. 38-40.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn Hayyan, *Al-Muqtabis II-1*, pp. 119 and 322.

sites (a way to define a whole region) for Andalusian chroniclers who were not familiar with the area.

The political geography of the Duero Plateau was already so complex because of the proliferation of settlements that were halfway between a well-defined “central place” and a village since the sixth and seventh centuries. Some of these sites are mentioned in the Asturian chronicles, as is the case with Amaya. But here there is no archaeological data that proves the site would have been densely populated in the eighth-ninth centuries, so its mention might have been the result of a political geography that drew on the past<sup>15</sup>. A different case is that of Zamora, which played a certain role in the hierarchical organization in the sixth and seventh centuries without yet being a city. The interventions carried out in recent years have revealed the existence of small settlements located in the area that is immediately outside the medieval walls, especially in the quarter of Olivares, which could be identified as signs of occupation in the eighth and ninth centuries. Material remains include sunken-featured buildings, and pottery, especially kitchenware, of local production<sup>16</sup>.

None of these places was an eighth-ninth century bishopric. The only accurate data about a bishop is the reference to Etherius of Osma, who took part in the Adoptionist dispute in late-eighth century. He supported the position of Beatus of Liébana, a representative of the Asturian Church, against the Elipandus, archbishop of Toledo. This option seems to place him in the political environment of the kings of Asturias. He could not be a bishop located in Osma, but one with an honorific title in the entourage of the Asturian kings<sup>17</sup>. Since bishops had been a crucial instrument in the consolidation of Visigothic royal authority in local settings, creating a node that connected localities to the political center, the demise of the kingdom of Toledo involved the vanishing of a pattern that strongly depended on the royal authority.

The lack of social and spatial hierarchization brought about a deep fragmentation that should be the adaptation to a framework where there were no effective central authorities over the region, rather than as a malady of the system. The recent decades analyses have revealed the presence of small territories that structured regional or even micro-regional areas, and which had not been created by a centralized authority. The best example are the Castilian *alfoces*, districts that encompassed a handful of rural sites, and became the axis around which the authority of the tenth century Count of Castile revolved<sup>18</sup>. In this region, the formation and consolidation of power arose from the competition among different political leaders without the direct intervention of the Asturian kings. So, counts were in practice the central authority in the North-Eastern Duero Plateau. Nevertheless, higher authority over the

<sup>15</sup> Quintana López, *El castro*.

<sup>16</sup> Martín Carbajo *et al.*, *El Campo de la Verdad*.

<sup>17</sup> Martínez Díez, *Los obispados*, pp. 456-457; Pastor Díaz de Garayo, *Castilla*, pp. 132-136.

<sup>18</sup> Estepa Díez, *El alfoz*; Álvarez Borge, *Monarquía feudal*; Escalona, *Sociedad y territorio*.

*alfoces*, which were a lower level of political action, was fundamentally in the hands of counts<sup>19</sup>. However, it is also possible to find traces of such territories in other areas.

A first example is Sublancio (Figure 2), near the city of León, where there is documentary confirmation of the existence of a small fortress, although, according to the evidence found, it cannot have been built before the late ninth century<sup>20</sup>. Sublancio appears as a territory in several ninth- and tenth-century charters and, thanks to the identification of several of the places mentioned as part of it, it is possible to reconstruct an area located on both sides of the Esla River. Late-ninth and early-tenth century documents reveal the existence of a set of *sernas* that are directly associated with such territory, and which were donated by the kings to some powerful aristocrats and ecclesiastical institutions<sup>21</sup>. *Sernas* can be defined as lands arranged into two levels: a lower level, where the members of a group – most likely the inhabitants of a place – had the right to use some parts of the *serna*, perhaps by drawing lots; and a higher level related to the presence of a power that ensured the protection and correct management of *sernas*<sup>22</sup>. Given the prominent role played by the kings of Asturias-León in the control of *sernas* between 850-950, it might be assumed that authority over such *sernas* was one of the most common resources of the elites of the Duero Plateau, which was transferred to the monarchs as a means of legitimizing their new rule<sup>23</sup>. The *sernas* would have been one of the main factors of local rule in Sublancio before its integration into the kingdom of Asturias, and also a key element of its identity. That said, the *sernas* documented in such period were not the only common lands, since in 1014 there is mention of a land «de omnes de Solancio», meaning an area over which a specific group identified with the inhabitants of a certain territory exercised their rights<sup>24</sup>.

Dueñas is the second example<sup>25</sup>. In the early-tenth century, it is described as a territory with a *castellum*, which must have been located on a nearby hill to the north of the current village. Unfortunately, the information available for the tenth century does not provide clues for the identification of the places included in the district, although later data allow the identification of the territory with the valley of Carrión and Pisuerga Rivers, enclosed by the contiguous high moorland. Once again, the evidence of the charter proves the presence of several *sernas* within this territory, all of them owned by kings who transferred them to the monastery of San Isidro de Dueñas. There is once again a noticeable association between territory and common lands, which is

<sup>19</sup> Álvarez Borge, *Monarquía feudal*; Estepa Díez, *La Castilla primitiva*; Escalona, *In the name*.

<sup>20</sup> Gutiérrez González, *Poblamiento*, p. 109.

<sup>21</sup> Martín Viso, *Pervivencias*, pp. 83-87.

<sup>22</sup> This hypothesis is more thoroughly developed in Gómez Gómez – Martín Viso, *Rationes*.

<sup>23</sup> Martín Viso, *Las propiedades*.

<sup>24</sup> *Colección*, doc. 734.

<sup>25</sup> Justo Sánchez – Martín Viso, *Territories*.

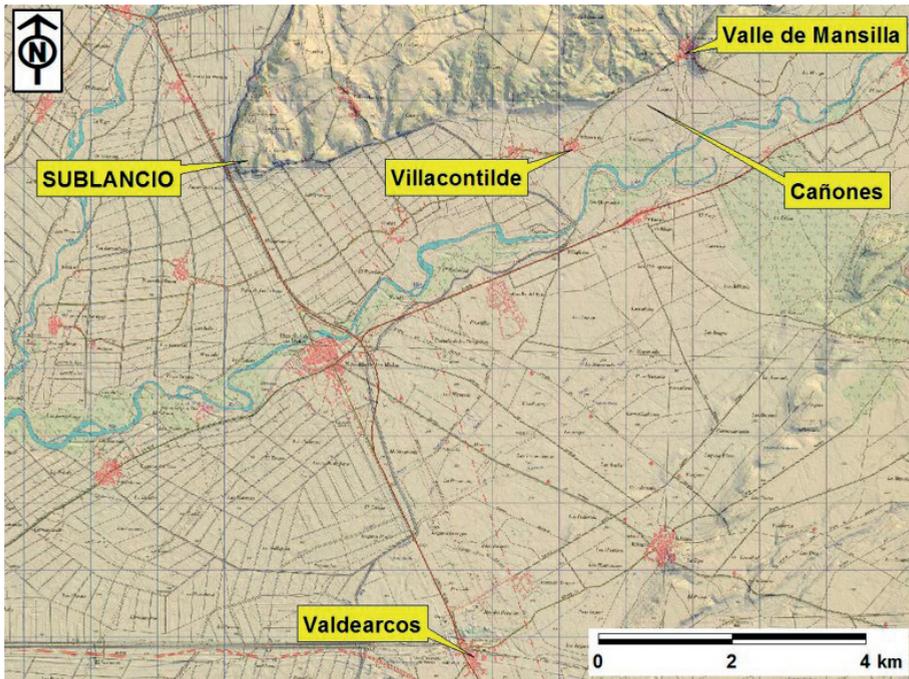


Figure 2

not constrained to the role of *sernas*: in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, there are references to the *monte* of Dueñas, a wasteland used by people of the whole territory.

The third example is a Castilian *alfoz*: Ausín or Los Ausines, to the south-east of the current city of Burgos. It was a small district closely linked to a river network structured as several small valleys whose main axis was the river Lara or Los Ausines<sup>26</sup>. There is an interesting document from the cartulary of the monastery of San Pedro de Cardeña dated in 972. The inhabitants of the *concilio* of Los Ausines (*Agosyn*) delivered the pasturelands of La Lomba to the Count of Castile, García Fernández, in exchange for being exempt from working in the castles. The text is validated by forty individuals, a number that suggests that they were people related to various settlements<sup>27</sup>. In this case, *Agosyn* referred to a territory linked to common land.

These three examples are proof of the existence of territories associated with the presence of areas for collective use. The management of such lands could play an essential role in the eighth and ninth centuries political organization of the Duero Plateau. However, this does not mean that it was always

<sup>26</sup> Escalona, *Sociedad y territorio*, pp. 94-96.

<sup>27</sup> *El Becerro Gótico*, doc. 3.

so. A good counterexample is Coyanza, where there is evidence of fifth and sixth centuries occupation. The reconstruction of the territory that surrounded this fortified site (*castrum*) in the tenth century outlines a wider area that spread beyond the Esla river valley. This situation could be proof of a greater capacity for hierarchical organization. Whether there were common lands directly related to this territory is unknown. Everything suggests that its pattern was different, based on a relevant post-Roman core, and from which political authority of a different nature was exercised<sup>28</sup>.

Some of these territories are identified with the presence of fortifications (*castros*). There is practically no archaeological data about them, but, according to the information available, there was a gradual monumentalization. In spite of clear chronologies, the most ancient archaeological evidence nowadays visible could be dated to the tenth century, when the region was incorporated into encompassing polities<sup>29</sup>. However, a possible explanation could be that those *castros* were simple structures, perhaps small towers made of materials such as wood or sun-dried brick prior to the intervention of Asturian kings. It is very likely that some of these places would have been an object of interest for the authorities that became established as of the second half of the ninth century. For example, the location of the *castrum* of Sublancio has been identified with a site where there used to be a tower with a square floorplan, built with large stone blocks. This architectural pattern has been related to the Umayyads, but it is probably a kind of fortification promoted by Asturian kings<sup>30</sup>. Although there is no evidence of a previous edification, before this monumentalization, the *castro* appears early in the written record, a clue of a prior origin<sup>31</sup>.

The geographical spread of these *castros* might be regarded as a sign that there was the result of the construction of a militarized frontier. The location of those fortifications reinforced the idea of a control of some districts, much of them small pieces of valleys. They were socio-political control instruments that included a variety of combinations: buildings linked to local elites previous to the Asturian rule, places created by central authorities, sites re-used by kings and counts, and fortifications built by local elites during the Asturian rule, but without any mediation of a central authority. In every case, these *castros* were tools of power, related to control over small-scale political arenas, and they are likely to have been widespread in the eighth and ninth centuries across the Duero Plateau. Nevertheless, there were also territories with no hierarchical sites, as is the case with Los Ausines.

The strong fragmentation deprived the elites of the Duero Plateau of the means to increase their scale of action. This assertion admits a significant

<sup>28</sup> Martín Viso, *Pervivencias*, pp. 87-90.

<sup>29</sup> Palomino Lázaro – Negro García, *La investigación*, pp. 59-60; Palomino Lázaro, *El territorio*, p. 215.

<sup>30</sup> Gutiérrez González, *Poblamiento*, p. 109; Martín Viso, *Pervivencias*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>31</sup> *Albeldensis*, XV, 12-33 (*Crónicas asturianas*).

exception: Castile. This north-eastern region of the Duero Plateau was characterized by the emergence of a series of governances headed by individuals identified as counts, a term that was merely the acknowledgement of a higher authority. These authorities competed against each other in the late-ninth and early-tenth centuries, resulting in the shaping of a single count of Castile as of approximately 930. Indeed, the county of Castile was where such authority was recognized, holding the effective powers of central authority, even though it was part of the Asturian-Leonese kingdom<sup>32</sup>. Nevertheless, such authorities could have emerged earlier, as suggested by some pieces of evidence. The so-called *fuero* of Brañosera, dated 824, refers to Count Muño Núñez, who granted the inhabitants of that settlement, which was really a small local territory, a series of rights. The county action is outside the scope of any royal authority, working as an autonomous power acting on a territory. He was an individual invested with a higher capacity for leadership<sup>33</sup>.

Despite the absence of any form of central authority, there must have been political and cultural influences. It is not easy to perceive potential Asturian influences prior to the second half of the ninth century. That assertion seems paradoxical considering that a large part of the Duero Plateau became later integrated into the Asturian-Leonese kingdom. The unquestionably Christian character of the native populations would lead to think, from the perspective of the traditional confrontation between Christians and Muslims, of the existence of connections. Nevertheless, such religious rivalry was actually a political legitimation tool for the Asturian kingdom. Therefore, the political dynamics of the period cannot be explained as part of an often non-existent opposition in which the people of the Plateau took no part. In fact, the Asturian polity was a regional leadership whose scope of action did not reach the Duero Plateau.

By contrast, al-Andalus was at the time the most powerful society in political terms, and the most prestigious as regarded culture. Tenth-century charters include a wealth of Arab anthroponyms, as well as certain place names of the same origin<sup>34</sup>. However, archaeological evidence is quite feeble. Most of the scarce pottery remains that have been found must be dated to the Caliphate (tenth century) and the Emirate (eighth-ninth centuries) archaeological contexts are very scarce and questionable<sup>35</sup>. There are also references to fortifications made in an Umayyad fashion, but they would belong to a later date (Caliphate) and perhaps be the work of specialists employed by Asturian kings and Castilian counts<sup>36</sup>. Although some researchers have suggested

<sup>32</sup> Escalona, *In the name*; Santos Salazar, *Competition*.

<sup>33</sup> *El fuero*. Although the documentary transmission of the text is complex, the most recent edition considers it to a large extent truthful.

<sup>34</sup> Fernández Conde, *Los mozárabes*; Reglero de la Fuente, *Onomástica*.

<sup>35</sup> Zozaya Stabel-Hansen *et al.*, *Asentamientos andalusíes*; Gutiérrez González, *Oviedo*, p. 403.

<sup>36</sup> Aymerich – Dovao – Zamora Canellada, *Las murallas*, pp. 132-133; Zamora Canellada, *El castillo*, pp. 103-119 and 196-197; Muñoz García, *Las murallas*, pp. 73-74. For a critical view, see Martín Viso, *Integración*, p. 217.

the presence of Berber settlers on the Duero Plateau, as well as the existence of an initial distribution of lands, there is hardly any solid evidence for that assertion<sup>37</sup>. The arguments that sustain such assumptions are based on place names that often belong to a much later date. The hypothesis is difficult to accept if it is compared to the situation of some areas with a strong Arab presence, such as the valley of the Guadalquivir River, where there is no evidence of such a distribution. The Duero Plateau was a marginal region, outside Islamic lands, according to the Arab chroniclers. In addition to this, people with Arab or Berber names, or those who lived in places with names of such origin, seem no different from the rest of people of the Duero Plateau in tenth-century texts. If there ever was a Berber population, their identity had already vanished and had no significance as a socio-cultural marker.

It would be more accurate to assess these pieces of evidence as proof of cultural and perhaps political connections with al-Andalus. People in these areas took names that connected them to the more prestigious culture, perhaps as a result of an informal political relationship between some of them with emiral power. After all, there is documentary evidence of Umayyad campaigns against Asturias that must have inevitably crossed the Duero Plateau and would have required logistical support. In such a fragmented framework, this connection could have raised an interest in the imitation of some superficial elements of the Arab culture, which was a much more powerful actor. Indeed, the individuals who boasted Arab or Berber names did not follow the Arab onomastic pattern<sup>38</sup>. Neither did these relationships involve particularly relevant trade exchanges, given the scarcity of pottery from al-Andalus and the absence of silver *dirhams* coined by Umayyads.

The image conveyed is that of a peripheral area, outside the scope of any centralized political authority, a sort of buffer area controlled by local elites<sup>39</sup>. It seems that Umayyads had no interest in a direct subjugation of this region, that the Arab Chronicles always located out of the Islamic lands (*Dar-al-islam*)<sup>40</sup>. So, the frontier of the Muslim political sphere was placed on the southern foothills of the Central System. The Christian polities were in fact a set of chiefdoms without any ability to carry out decisive interventions in the region.

### 3. *The process of affirmation of Asturian power*

The gradual consolidation of Asturias as a kingdom, and the construction of a far more complex and strong polity in the ninth century, altered the previous balance. A decisive fact was the territorial spread of the kingdom, which

<sup>37</sup> Peterson, *Quintana*, gathers all the arguments of several authors.

<sup>38</sup> Aguilar Sebastián – Rodríguez Mediano, *Antroponimia*.

<sup>39</sup> Mínguez Fernández, *Poderes locales*; Martín Viso, *Colapso*.

<sup>40</sup> Maíllo Salgado, *Acerca de la conquista*.

moved towards the Duero Plateau. The process was accomplished in different ways; the most noticeable was the *populatio* of some places, especially cities with a long tradition, such as Astorga (854) and León (856). But other places were also the target of this process. A reference to Zamora, dated in 893, provided by the chronicler Ibn Hayyan, which, in turn, refers to al-Razi, describes what the *populatio* entailed. King Alfonso III integrated Zamora into his kingdom, constructed buildings, fortified the site, and promoted the arrival of settlers, some of them seemingly from Toledo, meaning Christians of the Central March of al-Andalus<sup>41</sup>. Archaeological data suggest that Zamora was an already inhabited site, so that *populare* would really mean to organize, in this case in political terms<sup>42</sup>. The new settlers must have been a small group that, nevertheless, ensured the links between Zamora and royal power. These *populationes* created anchoring points for centralized political authority, thus drawing a political geography composed of a series of “islands of authority” that emerged in a very diverse political landscape, where there was room for areas where the presence of central power was less effective or even non-existent (Figure 3).

As part of the same process, there is a clear policy of property redistribution, seeking to reward those who had participated in the territorial expansion. A dispute dated 915 allows us to identify the appropriation of water for the mills of one Vimara in the context of the *populatio* of León – including the mention to an edict issued by Alfonso III. The action involved the creation of new landmarks before witnesses<sup>43</sup>. But the most revealing case comes from Astorga, where in 878 the sons of one Catelino and Bishop Indiselo of Astorga had a dispute because of the control of the village of Brimeda. The representative of Catelino’s sons claimed that the latter had obtained Brimeda during the *populatio* of Astorga, and that such ownership had been acknowledged by the bishop, who was perhaps in charge of the redistribution of properties. The bishop, on the contrary, said that he and his men had received Brimedo as *presura* or *scaldido* when those of El Bierzo left for Astorga with Count Gatón, which could perhaps suggest that he was a native authority<sup>44</sup>. The text proves the existence of a process of appropriation and delimitation of properties, not without conflict. These and other cases show that *populationes* involved the appropriation of lands, including its demarcation and redistribution among collaborators. The beneficiaries seem to have been members of a local or foreign elite, but the native population was not stripped of its properties, since the appropriation and distribution was limited to only part of the local space.

A frequent legal tool to legitimize the new properties was the *presura*. Contrary to the central role given to it by the historiography as a legal means

<sup>41</sup> Ibn Hayyan, *Al-Muqtabis III*, pp. 204-205.

<sup>42</sup> Menéndez Pidal, *Re población*.

<sup>43</sup> *Colección*, doc. 34.

<sup>44</sup> *Colección*, doc. 5. For two different interpretations of the text see Reglero de la Fuente, *La ocupación*, p. 140, and Martín Viso, *Authority*, pp. 127-128.

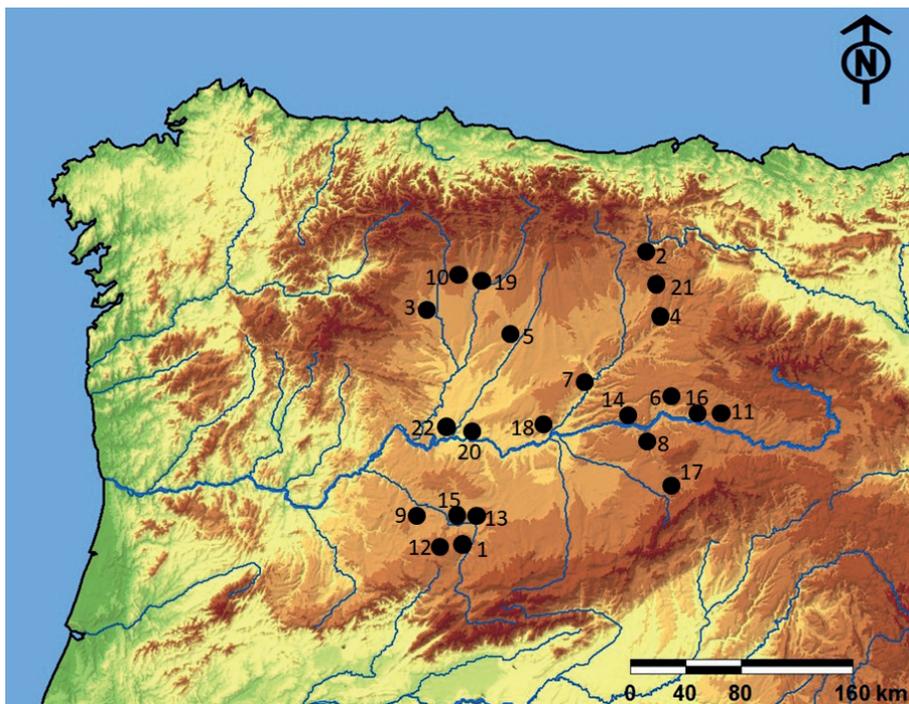


Figure 3

for people to settle in uncultivated areas, a review of the documentation reveals that, before 950, the total number of references amounts to a meagre 4.65% of the preserved texts<sup>45</sup>. These *presuras* were undertaken by individuals of high social standing on already occupied areas. The purpose was to create a new domain that was, above all, associated with control over uncultivated lands or certain spots of particular relevance, such as churches, which would also allow the *presor* to become part of a group that had access to commons<sup>46</sup>. Land redistribution as a result of *populationes* was sometimes channelled through *presura*, as can be observed in León<sup>47</sup>. Nevertheless, its use was more widespread and not only limited to these contexts. Its beneficiaries

<sup>45</sup> This is the author's quantification. Quantitative data differ from those of other authors who have used different chronological and regional samples as a basis. Nevertheless, there is a coincidence in terms of the paucity of references; Reglero de la Fuente, *La ocupación*, p. 139, and Mínguez, *Innovación*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>46</sup> The concept of *presura* has been addressed in many studies since the 1980s (E. Peña Bocos, J.Á. García de Cortázar, J.M<sup>a</sup>. Mínguez, P. Martínez Sopena), but the study by Larrea, *Construir Iglesias*, is central to our argument.

<sup>47</sup> Here there are nine references to *presuras* until 950, although, in several occasions, the documents of the fourth decade of the tenth century really refer to situations of the last third of the ninth century. *Colección*, docs. 24, 28, 34, 53, 58, 89, 100, 146 and 167.

were not necessarily individuals who came from other areas, but also native elites whose social status was thus endorsed.

These policies were supplemented by the appropriation of property by kings, which allowed its redistribution, a basic mechanism in the weaving of political networks. The analysis of royal grants reveals how kings mostly owned *villas* – which should be understood as rights on the group of inhabitants and lands related to a village –, *sernas*, which were crop and livestock farming areas for collective use, and local churches, over which they exerted patronage, which could perhaps be related to control over the communities that were attached to such churches<sup>48</sup>. These are all elements that are associated with a higher power, not merely with property, and which, by being delivered to individuals or ecclesiastical institutions, also allowed the shaping of a superior authority linked to the king.

In this context, previous territories did not disappear, but they acquired a new meaning. Sometimes, small defensive enclosures that became markers of royal authority must have been created or renovated. There is also evidence of how kings took over the control of collective-use spaces, such as *sernas* and others, that became part of the circuit of property that could be redistributed, a process that was the result of political dynamics, as is revealed in Los Ausines. Some of these territories – as all the previously mentioned – became part of the royal political network, although it was never a consistent territorial organization with homogeneous units distributed across the whole region.

In general, it seems that native groups collaborated in this process of political integration, and that elites could adapt themselves to a framework where their authority could be legitimized<sup>49</sup>. But there was also resistance, such as that mentioned in a charter dated 909, where Alfonso III notes that he had to send his warriors to stand against *gente barbarica* near Tordesillas<sup>50</sup>. Although it is hardly more than a conjecture, these displays of resistance must have been the target of a *damnatio memoriae*, as were the oral stories and accounts associated with leadership in the eighth and ninth centuries.

The integration brought with it two new elements: on the one hand, the consolidation of a new authority defined as Christian and as the heir to the Goths; on the other hand, the kings used the implementation of military duties to some local elites as a way to assert and reinforce their political network<sup>51</sup>. Likewise, the increasing assertion of the political authority of monarchs and counts was regarded as a threat by the Umayyads. They, as caliphs, sought to maintain their hegemony in the Iberian Peninsula, which under no circumstance involved conquering these territories, but only that their leaders be subjected to paying tax. It is at such times, and not before, that the number of al-Andalus and Christian campaigns increased, with purposes fo-

<sup>48</sup> Carvajal Castro, *Bajo la máscara, passim*; Martín Viso, *Las propiedades regias*.

<sup>49</sup> Carvajal Castro, *The monarchy*.

<sup>50</sup> *Colección*, doc. 9.

<sup>51</sup> A situation that is well attested in Castile; Escalona, *Comunidades*.

cused on spoils in the Christian case, and on maintaining the *statu quo* in the case of the Umayyads.

Nonetheless, the process of political integration was very uneven. A central region, such as Tierra de Campos, was characterized in the first half of the tenth century by a strong fragmentation and an under-representation of royal authority<sup>52</sup>. Wide areas in the southern part of the Plateau – a zone which started to be known as *Stremadura* – continued outside the control of any central authority; other were integrated into Christian polities but it was a weak and ephemeral situation<sup>53</sup>. In any case, the consequence of such integration was the definition of a boundary in the fullest sense of the term. The Duero River became the marker of the limits of the Asturian-Leonese kingdom. However, it was not al-Andalus that was on the other side, but a politically undefined area: *Stremadura*.

#### 4. *By way of conclusion*

From the mid-eighth century onwards, the Duero Plateau became an undefined area. The complete absence of centralized political authority, added to fragmentation, local horizons and the role of commons, were essential features that materialized in the territories. The Duero Plateau served as a blurred frontier, barely defined, and connected, although not very clearly, to al-Andalus. However, from Cordoba it was perceived as foreign to Islamic territory. To understand the period adequately, more attention should be paid to small-scale dynamics. It was a wide frontier, controlled by its own leaders, between complex polities, such as the Islamic state and the Christian chiefdoms, and with a less complex but far more heterogeneous socio-political pattern.

The situation changed after the mid-ninth century with the consolidation of Christian polities. The influence of such authorities grew, and a new social pattern emerged. The Duero worked as a political frontier, although it was never fully defined as such: it was neither a defensive line nor an impassable limit. On the other side of the river, informal ties with the authorities of northern areas were gradually established, and there continued to be a wide buffer area. Nonetheless, the changes led to an increase in military activity in this sector, which became much more evident in the communities that were to the south of the Duero and in Castile. The struggle did not revolve around religious differences, but around the prize to be obtained: control over the territory and political hegemony. It was a society that lived on the border, but not a frontier society.

<sup>52</sup> Martínez Sopena, *La Tierra de Campos*, p. 83; Carvajal Castro, *Bajo la máscara*, p. 96.

<sup>53</sup> Martín Viso, *Integración*.

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