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***Central places and territorial organization of communities:
the occupation of hilltop sites in Northern Castile (6th-11th centuries)***

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CENTRAL PLACES AND THE TERRITORIAL
ORGANIZATION OF COMMUNITIES:
THE OCCUPATION OF HILLTOP SITES
IN EARLY MEDIEVAL NORTHERN CASTILE

Iñaki Martín Viso

The Occupation of Hilltop Sites: Ancient Roots, New Phases

In spite of the introduction of new methods and theories in Castilian historiography on the early Middle Ages,¹ the lack of contemporary sources makes analysis difficult and different explanations exist, many of them highly speculative. One possible way of transcending this problem is through the study of the social evolution of settlements as part of the transformations of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. In this context, I want to focus my analysis on the occupation of **hilltop sites***, whose occupation is revealed in our data from the fifth century onwards.² Ninth- and tenth-century written documents and chronicles frequently refer to forts, named *castra* or *castella**, in different districts and archaeology has made clear the vitality of these hilltop sites in some areas of the Iberian peninsula.³ In describing the occupation of these sites, two essential

¹ See Escalona, this volume.

² A clear example is the mention of the *castella tutiora*, in which the population took shelter from the Suevic incursions, Hydatius, *Chronicon*, ed. J. Campos (Salamanca, 1984), VI.439–45.

³ See A. Barrios García and I. Martín Viso, 'Reflexiones sobre el poblamiento rural altomedieval en el Norte de la Península Ibérica', *Studia Historica: Historia Medieval*, 18–19 (2000–01), 53–83; J. López Quiroga, 'Fluctuaciones del poblamiento y hábitat "fortificado" de Altura en el Noroeste de la Península Ibérica (ss. V–IX)', in *Mil Anos de Fortificações na Península Ibérica e no Magreb (500–1500)* (Lisbon, 2001), pp.83–91.

factors must be underlined. On the one hand, not all occupation was similar, meaning that the places under study had different histories: different functions, varied degrees of intensity of occupation, ruptures and continuities should be identified on each site. On the other hand, the Iberian landscape, specifically its northern and central regions, is very heterogeneous and so in some areas there was no general process of occupation of hilltop sites.⁴

Hilltop sites became very important in the territory that became the County of Castile from the first third of the tenth century. The name Castile, which began to be common from the second half of the ninth century, comes from Latin *castella* and refers to the abundance of fortifications. Many recent analyses have pointed out the role of these places as foci for the socio-political articulation of early medieval Castile.⁵ I want to discuss some problems and make some remarks on that issue through the study of one specific area: northern Castile, the region around the high basins of the rivers Ebro and Pisuerga, now part of the provinces of Palencia, Burgos, Cantabria and La Rioja (Fig. 8.1). This zone of approximately 5000 km² was identified, from the tenth century, with the district of *Castella Vetula* (Old Castile). It is very fragmented geographically as well as being very heterogeneous in terms of its early medieval landscape and social evolution.

The most usual explanation for the occupation of hilltop sites postulates their abandonment after the Roman conquest and their later reoccupation from the fifth century onwards, on the basis of the clear hiatus in the archaeological record.⁶ Their reactivation would result from the increase in political instability, although their occupation was less intense than in the pre-Roman period.⁷ In the

⁴ For example, the Cantabrian areas. See I. García Camino, *Arqueología y Poblamiento en Bizkaia (siglos VI-XII): La Configuración de la Sociedad Feudal* (Bilbao, 2002) and J. A. Gutiérrez González, ed., *Penaferruz (Gijón): El Castillo de Curtel y su Territorio* (Gijón, 2003).

⁵ See J. Escalona Monge, *Sociedad y territorio en la Alta Edad Media Castellana: La formación del alto de Lara*, British Archaeological Reports, International Series, 1079 (Oxford, 2002); R. Vázquez, *Castros, castillos y torres en la organización social del espacio en Castilla: el espacio del Arlanza al Duero (siglos IX a XIII)*, in *Del Cantábrico al Duero: Trece Estudios sobre Organización Social del Espacio en los siglos VIII a XIII*, ed. J. A. García de Cortázar (Sanander, 1999), pp. 351-73, and I. Martín Viso, *Poblamiento y estructuras sociales en el norte de la Península Ibérica (siglos VI-XIII)* (Salamanca, 2000).

⁶ See J. A. Gutiérrez González, *Fortificaciones y Feudalismo en el Origen y Formación del Reino Leones (siglos IX-XIII)* (Valladolid, 1995).

⁷ A. Domínguez Bolaños and J. Nuño González, *Reflexiones sobre sistemas defensivos tardorromanos en la Cuenca del Duero: a propósito de la muralla de "El Cristo de San Esteban"*, in *Muelas del Pan (Zamora)*, in *La Hispania de Teodosio*, ed. R. Teja and C. Pérez, 2 vols (Salamanca, 1997), II, 435-50.

Castilian case, the rupture between pre-Roman and medieval strata appears on many sites. Thus, Monte Cilda (Olleros del Pisuerga), doubtless to be identified as the main focus of the late antique *civitas** of Mave, was reused from the fifth to eighth centuries. Some refortification was carried out after settlement was moved in the Roman period to the plain around the present-day village of Santa Maria de Mave.⁸ However, tenth- and eleventh-century written documents reveal numerous examples of hilltop sites as functioning elements within the settlement pattern. The documents describing the endowment of the monastery of San Salvador de Oña at its foundation in 1011 mention several, such as Castello Dei (probably Medina de Pomar), Santa Gadea del Cid or Alfania.⁹ Moreover, many of the place-names of these sites seem to be pre-Roman (note the use of the suffix *-on* in the original forms of names such as Siero, Berbeia or Alfania) and others describe a defensive structure (*muratello, castello*). Although this is not a decisive argument, it is very strange that the pre-Roman names of these sites, which were completely abandoned without developing any local function, should have been preserved for more than four hundred years. Furthermore, the new and permanent occupation of some hilltop sites throughout our period must have involved profound transformations in local economic organization, and these cannot have been brought about very quickly. Consequently, the theory of rec-occupation cannot provide a general explanation for the occupation of hilltops, although it would have applied in some cases. A possible explanation is that some of these sites could have survived with certain important transformations as part of the Roman network.

The archaeology carried out to date provides poor information but there are some sites that yield interesting, though problematic, data. One is Siero, a hill fort on the confluence of the rivers Kudón and Ebro, formed by a residential area and probably an old fortification located on the summit, where a hermitage devoted to Saints Centola and Elena now stands. Surveys carried out in that area have discovered an Iron Age phase followed by a Roman one but the most usual evidence found is a kind of smooth or grooved wheel-turned painted pottery, dated to the early Middle Ages but without a clear chronology.¹⁰ The presence of

⁸ L. Hernández Guerra and L. Sagredo San Antonio, *La Romanización del territorio de la actual provincia de Palencia* (Valladolid, 1998), pp.44–54 and 108–09.

⁹ *Colección Diplomática de los Condes de Castilla*, ed. M. Zabalza Duque (Salamanca, 1998), doc. 64.

¹⁰ R. Bohigas Roldán and others, 'Carta Arqueológica de la Provincia de Burgos: Partidos Judiciales de Sedano y Villarcayo', *Kobie*, 14 (1984), 7–91 (pp.21–22 and 28); J. Campillo Cueva,

an eighth- or ninth-century inscription, still extant in a wall of the hermitage, seems to underline the use of this place during that period, although its present location is not the original one.¹¹ According to written records, this place gave its name to a territorial district or *alfoz** during the tenth and eleventh centuries, and it might have been the centre of a **supralocal unit***.¹² Another similar case is Berbeia, located on one of the promontories near Bachicabo Peak, just above Barrio de Valdegovía, with visual control of the valley of the Omecillo. Excavations carried out there revealed a cultural sequence that started in the second Iron Age and continued, although with clear contraction, through the Roman period. In the Middle Ages, however, this place was used again, with an occupation defined as 'light' compared with the pre-Roman phase, and detected on the basis of some wheel-turned pottery. The settlement was divided into two sections, a residential area, with the remains of buildings with stone foundations, and a defensive one, situated higher up.¹³ Written documents reveal its presence as a populated site in the early medieval period, and it is still mentioned in 1123.¹⁴

A pronounced hiatus during the early Roman period was apparently common. A very rigid view of the archaeological data compels us to consider a sudden breakdown in the use of hill forts during the Roman era followed by later reoccupation. However Roman phases were identified only by the presence of sherds of pottery known as *terra sigillata*. Some occupation from the Roman period could, therefore, be hidden, particularly in peripheral zones, and only revealed in the late Roman centuries thanks to late Hispanic *sigillata* (*Terra Sigillata Hispanica tardía*). I want to propose another view, based on the different degrees of intensity in the use of hilltop sites during successive periods. A territorial hierarchy was formed, focussed on hill forts with separate residential and defensive functions in two sections and with a subordinate territory round about. Roman domination undoubtedly favoured the development of new types of settlement linked to

'Los despoblados medievales de la Honor de Sedano (Burgos)', *Kobie*, 24 (1997), 125–68 (pp.152–53).

¹¹ S. Andrés Ordax, 'Arte Burgalés de la alta edad media', in *II Jornadas Burgalesas de Historia: Burgos en la Alta Edad Media* (Burgos, 1991), pp.125–40 (pp.135–36).

¹² *Becerro Gótico de Cardeña*, ed. L. Serrano (Valladolid, 1910), doc. 270; I. Martín Viso, 'Monasterios y Poder Aristocráticos en Castilla en el siglo XI', *Brocar*, 20 (1996), 91–133 (doc. 6).

¹³ J. A. Algorreta and others, 'Castro de Berbeia (Barrio-Álava): Memoria de excavaciones, Campaña de 1972', *Estudios de Arqueología Alavesa*, 8 (1975), 221–92.

¹⁴ *Colección Diplomática Condes de Castilla*, ed. Zabalza Duque, docs 30 and 73; *Los Cartularios Gótico y Galicano de Santa María de Valpuesta (1090–1140)*, ed. S. Ruiz de Loizaga (Vitoria, 1995), Gótico, doc. 136.

structures of ownership and power that did not exist before, to the profit of some local aristocratic groups, as in the *villa-estates** of Las Ermitas (Espjo) or those of the Losa Valley.¹⁵ The intensity of the use of hilltop sites probably decreased, but they continued to form part of the Roman rural landscape. The disintegration of the Roman system promoted the renewed influence of local aristocratic groups, diluting the hierarchy established by the Romans. Later, the Visigothic realm needed to negotiate with local authorities, in order to strengthen its political dominion. In this context, each community could obtain greater autonomy and so used the hilltop sites more intensively. Thus, a sequence generally dated as early medieval can be detected. The function of these places was above all political and they worked as a territorial representation of communities' autonomy, and especially as refuges. The key lies in considering the hilltop site not as an isolated element, but as part of a system: its creation cannot be understood outside a pattern of exploitation of resources founded in strong community autonomy. It was a dynamic system and changed down the centuries, with successive transformations that did not break the general pattern and always kept the hill fort, although the latter lost some of its previous functions during the Roman Period.¹⁶

Peasant and Central Power Initiatives

The location of many hilltop sites in northern Castile reflects an interest in making complementary use of lowland and upland areas. The choice of this pattern was connected with small-scale transhumance or with the desire to control the richest agrarian land, and so the site would be located outside these areas. The hilltop sites generally preferred marginal locations close to local routes, but not to Roman roads, and do not reveal any large-scale architectural works. These features imply that they were spaces created by very cohesive communities with strong internal autonomy.

A good example of this type of territorial organization is Valderredible, a valley situated in present-day Cantabria, close to the source of the Ebro. One of the Valderredible's hilltop sites is Ruanales, a place quoted in a document of 962 that

¹⁵ I. Filloy Nieva, 'Yacimiento de Las Ermitas (Espjo)', *Arkeoñuskua* (1995), 295–302; J. A. Abásolo Álvarez and F. Pérez, 'Excavaciones en Salinas de Rosio (Burgos)', *Noticario Arqueológico Hispánico*, 24 (1985), 159–264.

¹⁶ I. Martín Viso, 'Perivencia y transformación de los sistemas castrales en la formación del feudalismo en la Castilla del Ebro', in *Comunidades locales y poderes feudales en la Edad Media*, coord. I. Álvarez Borje (Logroño, 2001), pp. 255–88.

refers to the presence of lands and mills 'in Rabanales' and perhaps refers to a territory, although this is not certain.¹⁷ Its location seems to be the current village of the same name, situated on a hill 970 m high, controlling an area of pasture near Mount Ijedo as well as the basin of the river Panero.¹⁸ There are no remains of fortifications at this site but, since they could have been of timber, they would probably have been destroyed by the present residential area. Little is known about the early medieval settlement pattern; the only contemporary remains in the area — although problematic — are cemeteries of graves cut into the rock in the neighbourhood. They probably were linked to a dispersed pattern, but we need more information and research on these sites. The definition of this territory is best explained by the exploitation of summer pastures on Mount Ijedo, together with the lowland ones of the Panero basin (Fig. 8.2).¹⁹

A similar site is Castrillo de Valdelomar, the centre of the district of Valdelomar, a stretch of valley in the West Valderredible. This site is located at the top of a hill, from where there is visual control of the plain of the Mardancho stream, close to Mount Ijedo and the bleak plateau Lora. Although there is little documentary evidence for Castrillo de Valdelomar, previous occupation can be accepted on the basis of the existence of a cemetery of graves cut into the rock on the hill where the present-day **parish*** church stands.²⁰ A local route, traversing the valley horizontally, had great influence in connecting the places of the district. Therefore, the main impulse was the control of the natural resources of an area which preserved strong communal ownership and whose origin was probably linked to this territorial organization.²¹ The third hilltop site is Alfania, in the middle of Valderredible, whose location can be identified with the so-called Ermita del Monte, on the foothills of Mount Ijedo, 2 km away from the present-day village of Villanueva la Nía. This site and its district, defined as an *alfoz*, were mentioned in the first half of the eleventh century.²² Its location seems to be

¹⁷ *Colección Diplomática del Monasterio de Sahagún (siglos IX y X)*, ed. J. M. Mínguez (León, 1976), doc. 207.

¹⁸ R. Bohigas Roldán, *Yacimientos Arqueológicos Medievales del Sector Central de la Montaña Cantábrica* (Santander, 1986), pp.190–91 and 196.

¹⁹ This last area was part of the *alfoz* of Bricia after the division of Castile between García III and Fernando I in the middle of the eleventh century. *Burgos*, doc. 178.

²⁰ Bohigas Roldán, *Yacimientos*, pp.188–89.

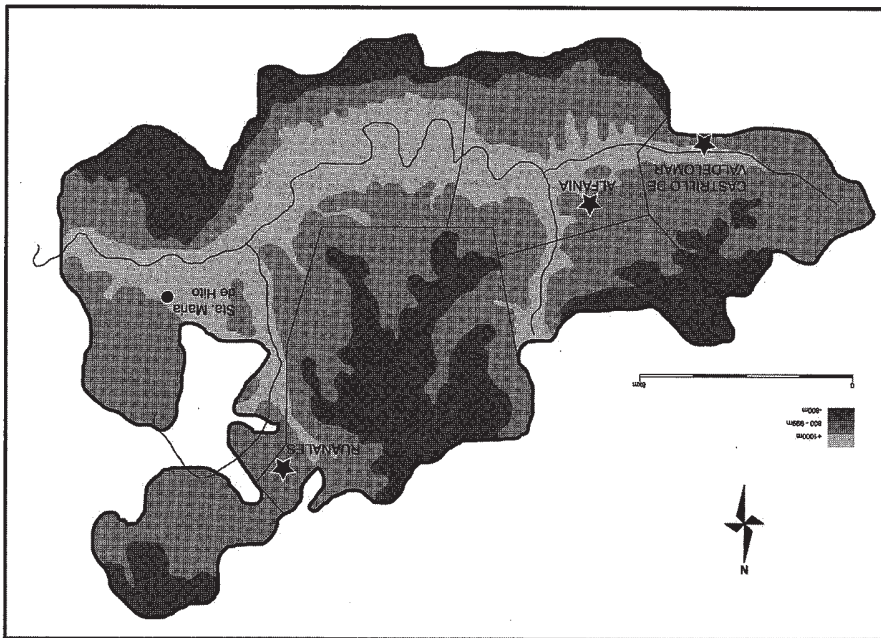
²¹ See J. Ortega Valcárcel, *La Cantabria Rural: Sobre la Montaña* (Santander, 1987), pp.15–16.

²² *Colección Diplomática Condes de Castilla*, ed. Zabalza Duque, docs 64 and 75; *Colección Diplomática San Salvador de Oña (822–1284)*, ed. J. del Álamo (Madrid, 1950), doc. 35.

²³ *Colección Diplomática Condes de Castilla*, ed. Zabalza Duque, doc. 75.
²⁴ See Escalona, this volume. I. Alvarez Borge, *Monarquía feudal y organización territorial: Alfoces y merindades en Castilla (siglos X-XIV)* (Madrid, 1993).

related to the domination of some areas close to the Ebro, perhaps with a dispersed settlement pattern. Some of the most important information about this territory comes from a document of 1014, in which the count of Castile promised to defend the use of communal lands by the inhabitants of Berzosa and Alfania, represented by some local leaders ('omes de concilio').²³ That piece of land was the economic basis of the system ruled from the hilltop site (Fig. 8.3).
 The study of Valderredible shows how these hilltop sites shaped territorial structures larger than the villages. This kind of articulation was probably developed as a dominant factor in the early medieval Castilian landscape.²⁴ They existed in the tenth and eleventh centuries but perhaps also in the previous period too, like the rock-cut graves and the pre-Roman place-names of the central sites

Figure 8.2. Territorial organization and hilltop sites in the valley of Valderredible.



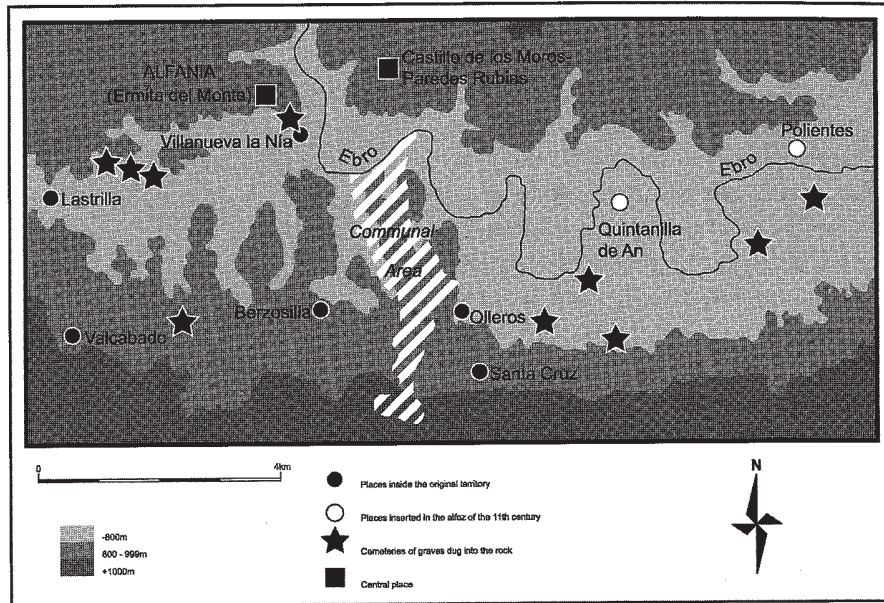


Figure 8.3. The territory of Alfania-Paredes Rubias.

mentioned above. Nevertheless, not all the valley was organized into territories around these hilltop sites and some areas were excluded, because another pattern of territorial articulation emerged during these centuries. The most evident sign is the villa-estate of Santa María de Hito, whose residential area was used as a cemetery after the Roman era.²⁵ The establishment of the nearby monastery of San Martín de Elines, which retains some remains of an early medieval '**mozarabic**' church,²⁶ would have been closely connected with the transformation of the social basis of the aristocracy in the post-Roman period. The local elite invested in this religious centre to strengthen its legitimacy and safeguard extensive, indivisible ownership.²⁷ This zone must be identified with the territory of *Val de Ripa Yble*, a space without a central hilltop site.²⁸

²⁵ R. Gimeno García-Lomas, 'El conjunto de cerámicas medievales de Santa María de Hito', in *I Congreso de Arqueología Medieval Española*, 5 vols (Zaragoza, 1985), II, 385–401.

²⁶ Bohigas Roldán, *Yacimientos*, pp.199–200.

²⁷ See Halsall, this volume.

²⁸ See *Burgos*, doc. 20.

In spite of the priority of peasant or community initiative, the central authorities sometimes promoted the occupation of hilltop sites. One of their main features was their location in certain geo-strategically important areas, like gorges or places near important routes. However, the aim was not exclusively to guarantee the use of military routes but also to make their domination of the region effective through 'islands of authority', especially over the most powerful agrarian zones. The genesis of some of those places can be traced back to the Roman period, although they undoubtedly saw more intensive use during the period between the sixth and eleventh centuries. The most eminent of this kind of site in northern Castile is Tedaja. It is located on the foothills of Sierra de la Tesla, from which one could control the wide plain between Villarcayo and Medina de Pomar — one of the main agrarian areas of the region — and the La Horadada pass, a narrow gorge of the Ebro. Tedaja was initially a Roman *turris* (tower) but it was turned into a fortified nucleus in the Visigothic period (sixth–seventh centuries). The considerable dimensions of this site and the complex works carried out, with the raising of towers and very solid stone walls, have to be emphasized because they are specific characteristics of Tedaja.²⁹ It was probably used as a focus from where Visigothic authority could have been extended in the area, and the most eloquent traces of Visigothic presence in northern Castile have been found in precisely this place. The consecration of the church of Santa María de Mijangos, at the bottom of Tedaja, by Bishop Asterio of Oca at the end of the sixth century implies that the place also served as the region's ecclesiastical focus. The residential area was not nucleated on the hilltop site, but developed on the plain, close to the river, in Vallejo de Santillán, where a cemetery and some buildings have been found (Fig. 8.4).³⁰

The pattern of Tedaja shows some features of the hilltop sites created by the central power: the priority placed on a geo-strategic position, the clear difference between a large political and military area and a residential one, the consolidation of spacious walled enclosures and the use of complex techniques of fortification. The shaping of these 'islands of authority' was subordinated to the raising of

²⁹ R. Bohigas Roldán and others, 'Evolución de las formas y funciones de la arquitectura en el Norte de Hispania: el caso de Tedaja', in *3º Congreso de Arqueología Lemuslar*, 8 vols (Oporto, 2001), VI, 555–68; J. A. Lecanda Esteban, 'Mijangos: la aportación de la epigrafía y el análisis arqueológico al conocimiento de la transición a la alta edad media en Castilla', in *Visigodos y Omeyas: Un Debate entre la Antigüedad Tardía y la Alta Edad Media*, ed. L. Caballero and P. Marcos (Madrid, 2000), pp. 181–206 (pp. 194–97).

³⁰ Lecanda Esteban, 'Mijangos', pp. 197–99.

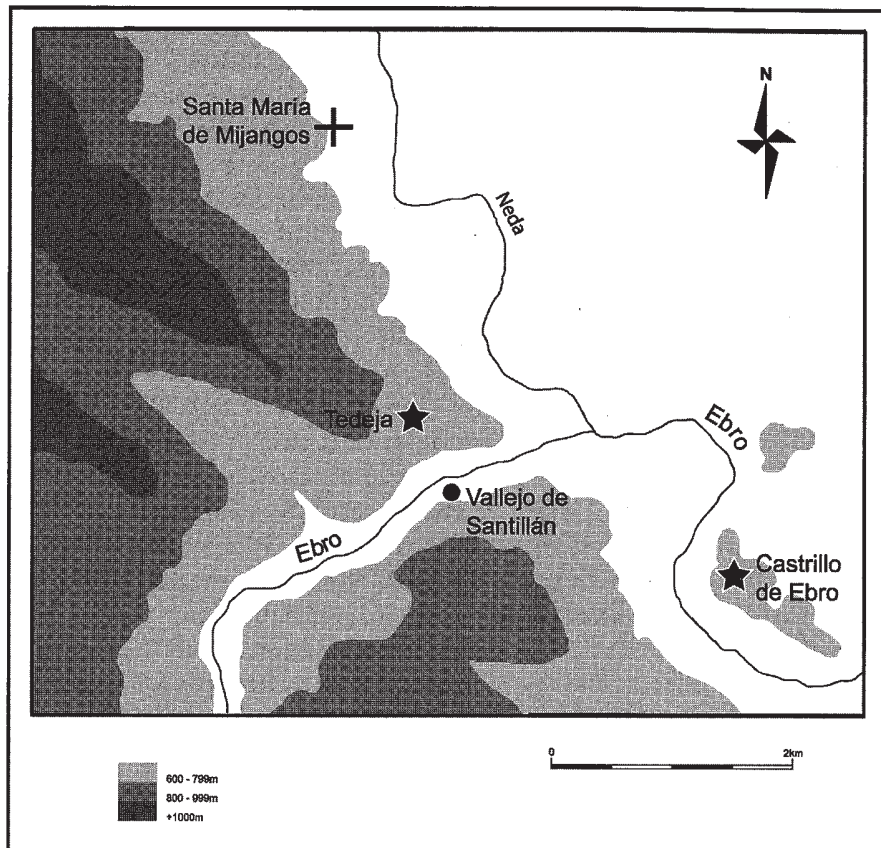


Figure 8.4. The area of Tedeja.

tribute and the establishment of political power structures into which the local leaders were undoubtedly inserted. A similar case was Buradón, a site of Roman origin formed by a fort, probably used between the fifth and tenth centuries, and by a settlement on the slope. This place controlled the gorge of 'Conchas de Haro' and it was close to the basin of Miranda, a very rich agrarian plain. Archaeological work has revealed a military structure and a church, perhaps raised in the fifth century, which underwent enlargement during the early Middle Ages.³¹ Both elements were connected with the area's political and religious frameworks. On

³¹ M. Unzueta and A. Martínez, 'Proyecto de variante y túnel entre las Conchas de Haro y el Cruce de Briñas', in *Arqueología de Urgencia en Álava, 1989-1993* (Vitoria, 1994), pp.43-60.

the other hand, the fact that the houses were built in stone would mark it out as a prestigious site. This site must be linked to Bilbio, a place mentioned in the seventh century as a fort (*castellum Bilbivum*),³² whose supposed remains have been located on the other side of the pass, where the hermitage of San Felices de Bilbio now stands. A stretch of wall made of regular stone blocks, of a type unknown in the communal structures, is preserved in this small site. One possible hypothesis would be that this last site was a fortified strong-point linked to Buradón, which was the axis of the territory called Bilbio.

Both examples allow us to assert that the Visigothic kingdom of Toledo was able to form 'islands of authority' from which its power was extended in northern Castile, though becoming weaker the further it radiated out from the centre. But they are the only cases — alongside Mave — of this kind of hilltop site in northern Castile. That pattern was later the key to the articulation of socio-political higher-rank polities during the eighth and ninth centuries, when any centralized power disappeared in the *meseta*. Tedéja seems to have been the main nucleus of one of the polities identified in 865³³ that would later give rise to the political formation based from 930 around the figure of Fernán González. On the other hand, the same Fernán González was mentioned in 964 as count in Buradón,³⁴ which would reflect that place's importance as an axis of political dominion in northern Castile. However, the absence of central authority combined with the permanence of the socio-political basis of local leadership favoured the creation of new places of power focussed on certain hilltop sites. The most significant was Lantarón, seat of one of the main Castilian counties before unification.³⁵ Its location is still unknown, but it was probably on the site where the hermitage of San Martín de Lantarón now stands. If this identification is correct, its location repeated the use of a spot overlooking a gorge of the Ebro at a strategic point, thanks to the confluence of the routes that cross the valleys of Tobalina and Valdegovia.

³² Sancti Brailonis Caesaraugustanis Episcopi, *Vita Sancti Emiliani*, ed. L. Vázquez de Parga (Madrid, 1943), section 9, lines 3–4.

³³ Ibn Idari, *Historia de Al-Andalus*, ed. F. Fernández González (Málaga, 1999), p. 135. The so-called lord (*sabib*) of *Misamka* (Mijangos, on the foot of Tedéja) was quoted in this text, referring to an Arab campaign against the Castilian region.

³⁴ *Cartulario de San Millán de la Cogolla (759–1076)*, ed. A. Ubierto Arce (Valencia, 1976), doc. 85.

³⁵ See I. Martín Viso, 'Poder político y estructura social en la Castilla alto-medieval: el condado de Lantarón (siglos VIII–XI)', in *Los Espacios de Poder en la España Medieval*, coord. J. I. de la Iglesia Duarte (Logroño, 2002), pp. 533–52.

Nevertheless, there are no remains of fortifications; if they existed, they have been demolished. The aim was the control of the rich agrarian areas of Valdegovía and Miranda, in which some minor territories focussed on hilltop sites endured.³⁶

The Transformations From the Eighth to the Eleventh Centuries

Social, political and economic organization between the sixth and eleventh centuries in the Duero basin was based on very different cells of local power, such as hill forts, cities, monasteries or villa-estates. Each one worked as an arena wherein any real influence of central power had to be negotiated. But the system experienced a great change during the eighth century, due to the collapse of central authority. The new status quo is explained by the disintegration of the Visigothic kingdom after the Arab invasion of 711, the low interest of the Umayyads in the direct control of the northern Iberian plateau and the inability of the regional aristocracies to restore a central political apparatus. The local units, well-adapted to the particular needs of their communities, consolidated their role in a fragmented world.³⁷ Many small-scale leaderships emerged throughout this region, but none achieved hegemony. The formation of some polities was a long process, culminating in this part of the *meseta* in the crystallization of the County of Castile around 930. A determinant factor was the promotion of some aristocratic groups, distinguished by a strong military ethos and able to be inserted into a new large-scale system, working as the dominant social group.³⁸ The supralocal units were transformed into the basic axis of the configuration of aristocratic power, because they were, at the lower, smaller-scale, level, the arena for economic, social, political and religious organization. Many were focussed on hilltop sites, although there are outstanding exceptions. These transformations should be connected with the progressive feudalization of Castilian society, which produced very different effects. I want to draw attention to one of them, the 'aristocratization' of the hilltop settlements and the gradual loss of their function as a main focus of the

³⁶ See Martín Viso, 'Poder político', pp.538–39.

³⁷ S. Castellanos and I. Martín Viso, 'The Local Articulation of Central Power in the North of the Iberian Peninsula (500–1000)', *Early Medieval Europe*, 13 (2005), 1–42; Escalona Monge, *Sociedad y territorio*, pp.58–72; I. Martín Viso, *Fragmentos del Leviatán: La articulación política del espacio zamorano en la alta edad media* (Zamora, 2002), pp.39–65.

³⁸ I. Álvarez Borge, 'Estructuras de poder en castilla en la alta edad media: señores, siervos, vasallos', in *Señores, Siervos, Vasallos en la Edad Media* (Pamplona, 2002), pp.269–308.

spatial hierarchy. They were an instrument through which the local leaders' military monopoly could be consolidated, and the political and economic resources of communities controlled — due to the centralization of military duties in the fortress — and, in general, through which other social groups could be dominated. The passage from 'peasant castles' to 'aristocratic fortresses' was very simple in the case of the great nuclei created by the central authorities. Tedeja is a good example, because it was one of the early counties of the ninth century and later a seat of Castilian power.³⁹ Excavations show the persistence of a strong defensive structure and the remodelling of the adjoining ancient church of Santa María (probably abandoned in the tenth century), resembling the settlement of Vallejo de Santillán.⁴⁰ This area was very important in the articulation of large-scale power before the crystallization of the County of Castile. It probably lay at the origin of the district of *Castella Vetus*, in which other lesser-rank sub-systems were inserted.⁴¹ Lanarón and Buradón had a similar evolution and they were the chief places of important districts from which the Castilian county was formed in this area. However, they experienced a clear decline from the end of the tenth century. They were replaced by new sites (like Término-Santa Gadea del Cid, to the detriment of Lanarón),⁴² or fossilized as topographical names ('Tedeja'),⁴³ and sometimes even the place-name changed, as with the transformation of Buradón into Bilibio. All are different signs of a process of abandonment, demonstrated archaeologically in Tedeja and Buradón. Their decadence would be linked to the formation of a new social system, which implied a change in the reference-points of power. Feudal lords exercised their dominion through the control over the peasant working process and not over the socio-political resources of communities, and through the participation in a new central political apparatus organized around feudal relationships.

There were other hilltop sites of smaller size that controlled minor areas. The recognition of these territories as political districts named *alfoces* by the Castilian

³⁹ It was the seat of a royal agent, with some fiscal and judicial functions, in the middle of the eleventh century. *Colección Diplomática San Salvador de Oña*, ed. Alamo, doc. 27.

⁴⁰ Lecanda Esteban, 'Mijangos'.

⁴¹ R. Bohigas Roldán and others, 'Tedeja y el Control político del territorio del Norte Burgalés en Época Tardorromana, Visigoda, Alto y Plenomedieval', in *V Congreso de Arqueología Medieval Española*, 2 vols (Valladolid, 2001), 1, 49–56 (pp. 54–55).

⁴² See Martín Viso, 'Poder político', pp. 50–51.

⁴³ The last mention linked to a royal agent in Tedeja is dated in 1127, *Los Cartularios Góticos y Galicanos*, ed. Ruiz de Loizaga, Gótico, doc. 149.

counts means that they were considered as cells of the territorial articulation of the new authority. However, Castilian central power did not possess the means to create these districts, so its aim was the control of some processes and areas in order to insert them in its network.⁴⁴ This integration did not mean that all situations were similar, or that all the districts developed an identity as *alfoz*; nor did it mean the general implementation of this pattern. In the areas where supralocal units were stronger, it was generally expedient to include them into the new political construction.⁴⁵ The hilltop sites could function as one of the main types of central place on a small scale, but in other areas monasteries could carry out this function.⁴⁶

It is necessary to analyse how the *alfoces* located in districts that initially did not constitute the axis of the formation of Castilian power worked. One of them is Siero, quoted as an *alfoz* in the tenth and eleventh centuries, including a great part of the valley of Rudrón into its territory. The latter area probably lay outside its initial area of activity, so there some small hilltop sites, like Castrillo de Butrón and probably Sedano, were inserted into it. Another very similar case is Alfania, controlling the eastern part of Valderredible — an area without hilltop sites — during the reign of García III (1035–54), when this zone was a frontier area.⁴⁷ This expansion came together with a change of the place-name in favour of Paredes Rubias,⁴⁸ a modification linked to the construction of the small fortress near the village of Báscones de Ebro.⁴⁹ Both examples show how hilltop sites and their territories were bases for the formation of new districts during the implementation of Castilian authority. This involved a new arrangement of the hilltop

⁴⁴ This hypothesis can be deduced through some recent studies, such as Álvarez Borge, 'Estructuras'; Escalona Monge, *Sociedad y territorio*; or I. Martín Viso 'Pervivencia'.

⁴⁵ See C. Estepa Díez, 'El alfoz castellano en los siglos IX al XII', in *En la España Medieval, IV: Estudios Dedicados al Profesor D. Ángel Ferrari Núñez*, 2 vols (Madrid, 1984), II, 305–41; Álvarez Borge, *Monarquía feudal*, pp.7–54; Escalona Monge, *Sociedad y territorio*, pp.85–184.

⁴⁶ A good example is the monastery of Valpuesta. The role of the ecclesiastical centres is well known; see E. Peña Bocos, 'Ecclesia y Monasterium: elementos de ordenación de la sociedad de la Castilla altomedieval', in *Señorío y Feudalismo en la Península Ibérica (siglos XII–XIX)*, ed. E. Sarasa Sánchez and E. Serrano Martín, 4 vols (Zaragoza, 1993), III, 379–98.

⁴⁷ *Colección Diplomática San Salvador de Oña*, ed. Álamo, doc. 35 (1048.04.10).

⁴⁸ Although the term had appeared in the foundation endowment of San Salvador de Oña, dated 1011, it was more common from the second half of eleventh century. *Burgos*, doc. 34.

⁴⁹ R. Bohigas Roldán, 'Fuentes arqueológicas y organización social del espacio en el reino de Castilla', in *Del Cantábrico al Duero*, ed. García de Cortázar, pp.75–121 (p.115).

sites, with fission and hierarchization promoted by central power.⁵⁰ The previous balance between residential and defensive areas was broken, and the sites were essentially transformed into fortresses. It is very difficult to detect the defensive structures, because they were probably built of timber, whose remains have not been recognized by archaeologists. The local leaders that exercised domination over communities in the eighth and ninth centuries probably did not develop complex means of extracting large surpluses, so they had to resign themselves to using these simple types of construction. The eleventh- and twelfth-century charters identify some of these old hilltop sites with castles, showing what their main function was in the eyes of the clerks,⁵¹ although stone structures were never erected in many of these sites.

At the same time, a gradual abandonment of many hilltop sites can be traced, with an intermediate phase of use as religious centres, as shown by the excavations carried out at Castros de Lastra (Caranca).⁵² Different factors can explain this trend. Once the aristocratic groups were transformed into feudal lords, they laid aside the control of hilltop sites, which had been the centres for some of the socio-political roles of communities. Social power was based on the domination of the peasant working process, the collection of feudal dues and political service to the Castilian king. The effective exercise of the royal power was focussed on some fortresses, such as Têrmino, Tedejá, Piedralada or Aguilar, where an agent of the king was located, the so-called *dominante*, normally an aristocrat, with military and judiciary functions. In addition, the decay of the hilltop settlements must be connected with the gradual process of settlement nucleation, which had, as its main effect, the generalization of the village as a settlement form throughout the region.

Although this trend was general, there are some cases of hilltop sites, such as Ruanales, Medina de Pomar, Moradillo del Castillo or Villalba de Losa, which have survived as villages to the present day. The fact that present-day nuclei lie over the previous sites makes accurate understanding of their medieval phases difficult, but their location forces us to consider them as hilltop settlements — a situation that high medieval sites normally avoid — and some were central places of *alfoces* (Ruanales and Moradillo del Castillo). Be that as it may, early defensive structures disappeared or were replaced in favour of stone walls, as at Medina and

⁵⁰ See Escalona, this volume.

⁵¹ It was the case of Berbeia: *Los Cartularios Gótico y Galicano*, ed. Ruiz de Loizaga, Gótico, doc. 136.

⁵² F. Sáenz de Urturi, 'Castros de Lastra: XX campaña de excavaciones', *Arheološka* (1993), 53–62.

Villalba, both royal boroughs from the twelfth century. Their survival as simple villages was, however, more common, although the site's survival was sometimes linked with the continuation of a supralocal unit based on the hilltop site until the thirteenth century, above all in those areas removed from the great foci of lordship.

Probably the last reason explains why the hilltop continued to be an important site in the mountain areas. The communities of the southern European highlands have been characterized as very strong and cohesive, allowing the conservation of a settlement pattern that had been abandoned in other areas.⁵³ Pernía — a mountain district located in the high valley of the river Pisuerga — may stand as a good example to illustrate this situation in northern Castile. In spite of the problems of the archaeological data and the scant early medieval written references, three territories focussed on hilltop sites seem to be revealed: Piedras Negras,⁵⁴ Resoba⁵⁵ and Tremaya.⁵⁶ There were probably another two: Castillería — whose name derives from the word for castle — and Mudá, mentioned as an *alfoz* in the delimitation of the bishopric of Palencia in 1059.⁵⁷ All of them controlled narrow stretches of valley, where complementary use of lowlands and uplands can easily be developed. The survival of pre-Roman place-names of some of the central places and villages seems to be connected with a pre-medieval origin. The absence of geo-strategic interests, because there was no important route crossing the district and Pernía was never an area whose control was contested between different

⁵³ About mountain areas of the Iberian north-west, see M. Fernández Mier, *Génesis del Territorio en la Edad Media: Arqueología del Paisaje y Evolución Histórica en la Montaña Asturiana* (Oviedo, 1999) and J. A. Gutiérrez González, 'Sobre los orígenes de la sociedad asturleonesa: aportaciones desde la arqueología del territorio', *Studia Historica: Historia Medieval*, 16 (1998), 173–97.

⁵⁴ J. Pérez de Urbel, *Historia del Condado de Castilla*, 3 vols (Madrid, 1945), III, doc. 129bis; J. L. Martín, *Orígenes de la Orden Militar de Santiago (1170–1195)* (Barcelona, 1974), doc. 113. It could be identified with the hilltop site of Peñas Negras, near the village of Arbejal.

⁵⁵ Pérez de Urbel, *Historia*, III, doc. 129bis; *Documentación de la catedral de Palencia (1035–1249)*, ed. T. Abajo Martín (Palencia, 1986), docs 82 and 91; Martín, *Orígenes*, doc. 118.

⁵⁶ *Colección Documental del Archivo de la Catedral de León, IV (1032–1109)*, ed. J. M. Ruiz Asencio (León, 1990), doc. 952, and Martín, *Orígenes*, doc. 183. The place was probably near Santibáñez de Resoba.

⁵⁷ *Documentación de la catedral de Palencia*, ed. Abajo Marín, doc. 9. See also *Colección Diplomática del Monasterio de Sahagún, II (1000–1073)*, ed. M. Herrero de la Fuente (León, 1988), doc. 530. Some historians have thought that there was a castle inside the territory, although its location remains unknown even now.

polities, supports the hypothesis of a communal origin. That idea was reinforced thanks to the presence of a homogeneous royal lordship (*valengo**) up to the end of the twelfth century, whereas the local aristocratic elite did not have feudal status. The kings claimed a general dominion over the communities⁵⁸ and controlled the activity of some local monasteries under their patronage.⁵⁹ The process of feudalization came together with a trend to develop commercial, extensive stock raising in these areas from the thirteenth century. The definitive break in territorial organization must be dated to around 1200, implying an enduring tradition compared with other areas of northern Castile (Fig. 8.5).

This territorial pattern, based on strongly cohesive communities, also appears in other highland areas of northern Castile (Soroscuera, Valdebobres, Espinosa) and in different areas of the Iberian peninsula. The weak hierarchy among the different hilltop sites, the stability of territories and the absence of a powerful indigenous class of feudal lords explain the highlands' experience. The key might be found in the communities' adaptation to a difficult environment. They chose control of some territories organized around stretches of valley and probably based on seasonal small-scale transhumance and stock raising. This pattern did not need great initial investment but did require the maintenance of strongly cohesive communities to allow the pastures' use by all members and their defence against other groups. This model was very stable because any change could only be made by the integration of other similar systems or by inclusion in a different system. The first possibility was very difficult, because of the inability of local elites to transcend the limits of the communal framework. Thus the status of the elites was connected with the exercise of prestigious social functions and not with the exploitation of large estates, which would require the acquisition of new pastures in the hands of other communities.

Finally, although the occupation of hilltop sites was a general phenomenon in northern Castile, it is necessary to emphasize their heterogeneity, which can be summarized as falling into three different patterns: the defensive point created by the communities and associated with a nearby settlement; the defensive area placed on the summit, without any settlement, articulating a valley community in the highlands; and the complex defensive structures begun by a central political

⁵⁸ The hilltop sites were identified as royal castles and some taxes would be focussed on them. *Documentación de la catedral de Palencia*, ed. Abajo Martín, docs 48 and 82.

⁵⁹ For instance, San Miguel de Infravillas, San Salvador del Monte, San Salvador de Cantamuda and Santa María de Lebanza; *Documentación de la catedral de Palencia*, ed. Abajo Martín, docs 14, 82 and 91.

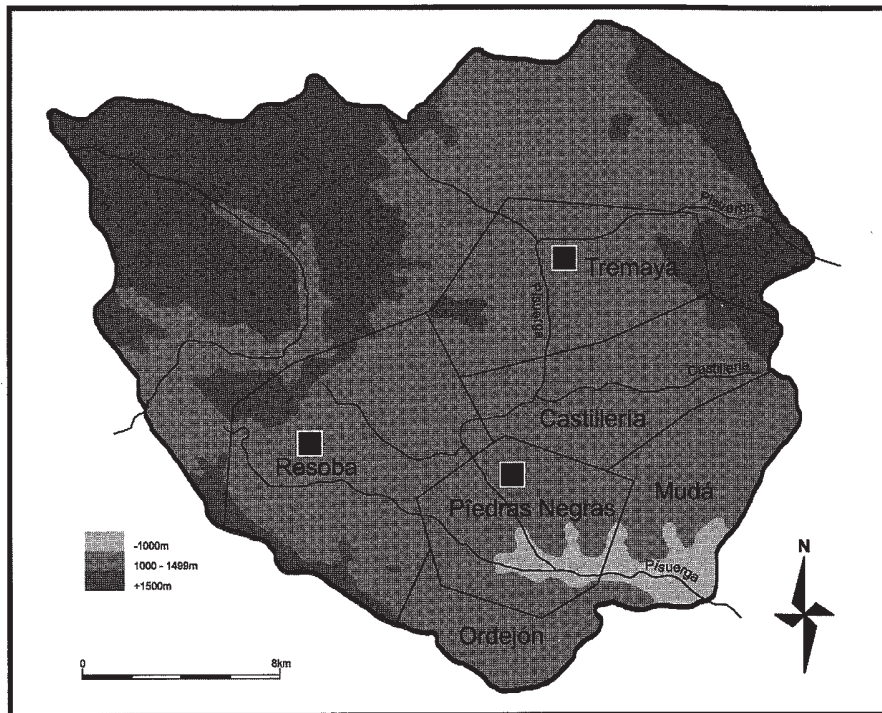


Figure 8.5. Hilltop sites and territories in the district of Pernía.

apparatus, with its residential functions located on the plain. The first two possibilities were the most usual and they implied an initiative by communities. The occupation of the hilltop sites must be connected with the transformation of the social basis of aristocratic groups after the collapse of the Roman system. These changes could take different forms, according to previous regional conditions, and the occupation of hilltop sites in varying forms was their consequence.