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## ANCIENT HISTORY

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### THE OWNERS OF VILLAS IN THE TERRITORY OF ROMAN ASTURIAS (SPAIN): ISSUES OF IDENTITY

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**Abstract:** In this paper we introduce an advance on some preliminary reflections that configure the identity of the Roman Asturian population, that occupied the *villae* of the transmontane Asturian territory during the Late Roman Empire. Through the study of the classical sources, that allude to this people in the Northwest of the Iberian Peninsula, we combine the results together with the spatial analysis of the territory and the mapping of the rural *villae* (that were distributed throughout this territory). With all of that, we interpret some guidelines that identified the character and personality of the first Asturian Romans. The territory of Asturias was conquered by Rome after the Cantabrian Wars during 29–19 B.C.

**Keywords:** *Roma, villae, rural landscape, identity, classical sources, Asturias (Spain).*

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#### INTRODUCTION

History is a tool that shapes the identity of a people, society, or nation. In past societies, identities are built through complex changes and dynamics that affect territories and produce mutations that become evident over time. In this sense, the Asturian villas are evidence of the crystallization of a process of acculturation between the Roman and Asturian elements, of which they are one of the physical manifestations.

It should not be forgotten that archaeological remains are the material reminder of our collective memory.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to them, we can rethink the historical evolution and the gradual configuration of the present. In this sense, archaeological interventions not only generate knowledge, but also create concrete, tangible and quantifiable social impacts.

The phenomenon of a society's search for its own identity is a worldwide need, which logically has multiple characteristic features that shape that identity based on the economy, physical, ideological and emotional context. The link to a territory and the feeling of belonging, together with the idea of common interests, generate the group bond that makes it possible to trace the lines of identity. The rise of nationalism will make use of these factors to defend a common trajectory over time.<sup>2</sup> The same composition can be made in past societies, linking the data that history and archaeology offer with the groups that inhabited a specific territory. Material culture, recovered through the development of the archaeological discipline, cannot be separated from

<sup>1</sup> RUÍZ 2002; NAVARRO 2002, 7–29; TABOADA 2013, 347–361.

<sup>2</sup> BALLART 1997, 193.

the society that produced it. Its importance lies in the fact that it allows the creation of bonds of identity and belonging.

It follows that historical and archaeological science cannot live outside the social and political context in which they arise. The study of ancient civilizations and cultures, the development of collecting, and current historical science have made it possible to reflect, over time, to the link between past and present societies.

The same link exists between the populations that inhabited the territory of present-day Asturias, in pre-Roman times and after the period of conquest, and the current inhabitants of the region. The aim of the present work is to analyze a specific period of a long history, in which the acculturation between Asturian and Roman society took place at the moment of maximum expansion of the *villae*.<sup>3</sup>

### THE SPATIAL AND SOCIAL CONFIGURATION OF PRE-ROMAN TRANSMONTANE ASTURIA IN CLASSICAL SOURCES

The geographical and social configuration of the Astur peoples has been studied for the ancient period.<sup>4</sup> All thanks to the numerous allusions present in the literary sources that allude to the peoples that inhabited the Iberian Peninsula in that period. Regarding the Asturians and their particularities, the keys to study their identity have been reflected in detail in both written and epigraphic sources.<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly, geography has been a determining factor, which had a decisive influence on the annexation of the Cantabrian area to the Roman Empire over time. The isolation derived from the mountainous relief would be, to a certain extent, attenuated after the Cantabrian Wars, thanks to the construction of a road network that, through various roads and branches, made it possible to communicate this geographical space with the plateau. Fundamental would be the transmontane Plata road, which opened the Cantabrian area to the plateau.<sup>6</sup>

Ancient sources mention various aspects of the region, but the geographic issue is undoubtedly fundamental in underlining the isolation from the empire, thus shaping the identity of this people.<sup>7</sup> The division of the *Iuga Asturum*, the remoteness of the centers of government, the harsh climate, the gradual integration into the Roman culture of the hillfort populations of the Iron Age, and the agricultural-livestock activities and network of mines of various kinds, will mark

the model of common personal affinity in the region until the present day.

Ancient sources coincide in marking the course of the Navia river as the Asturian-Galician border: “*The region of the Asturians, the fortified place of Noega; in the peninsula, the Pesicos and, then, the convent of Lugo from the river Navialbién....*”,<sup>8</sup> while to the east: “*The river Melso flows through Asturias; the city of Noega is not far from it, and very close by is the estuary of the ocean that divides Asturias and Cantabria*”.<sup>9</sup>

It is striking that among the numerous allusions to the Asturian territory, none of them mentions the Cantabrian Mountains as a barrier between Cismontanos and Transmontanos. This led Schulten<sup>10</sup> to propose that the Pyrenean-Cantabrian-Asturian Mountain range formed a single entity during antiquity. The vegetation and the mountains will be key in Asturias both in the past and today; already after the fall of the Roman Empire, Isidoro of Seville alluded to the lushness and relief of the region: “*The Asturians, a people of Hispania, so called because they live around the Astura river surrounded by mountains and intricate forests*.”<sup>11</sup>

The Asturian territory was rich in minerals, which made it a focus of particular interest since pre-Roman times. In Augustan times, mining was a key factor in the administration of the territory, making necessary the creation of transport routes for the evacuation of gold resources.<sup>12</sup> Thus, we find two interesting references in relation, on the one hand, to the skill of the Asturians in mining: “*All metals are found here: there are veins of electro, whose yellow hue shows its double origin, and the rough earth produces its black harvest of iron. But the gods conceal what causes the crimes. And yet the avid astur throws himself into the depths of the bowels of the mutilated earth and returns from it wretched and yellow, like the gold he plucks*”.<sup>13</sup> Thus, we find two interesting references in relation, alternatively, to the skill of the Asturians in mining: “*All metals are found here: there are veins of electro, whose yellow hue shows its double origin, and the rough earth produces its black harvest of iron. But the gods conceal the cause of the crimes. And yet the avid Asturian plunges deep into the bowels of the mutilated earth and returns from it wretched and yellow, like the gold he tears out*”.<sup>14</sup> Pliny confirms the great productivity of these lands, highlighting it among other Hispanic lands: “*There are those who believe that in this way Asturia, Gallaecia and Lusitania provide every year twenty thousand pounds (of gold), although most of it comes from Asturia. And there is no*

<sup>8</sup> PLIN. 4, 111.

<sup>9</sup> ESTR. III, 4, 20.

<sup>10</sup> SCHULTEN 1959, 251–272; ROLDÁN 1970, 205: example in ESTR. 3. 4, 10, “*The interior of the country extending above, I mean that situated within the Pyrenees mountains and from the northern part as far as the Astures, is bounded mainly by two mountain ranges*”, or FLORO 2, XXXIII, 45, 54–60: “*To the west, all of Hispania was already almost pacified, outside of the region near the last crags of the Pyrenees that bathe the ocean on the eastern side. Here there were two very powerful peoples, the Cantabrians and the Asturians*”, as well as in later medieval sources, Hist, Pelago (Mon. Germ. Hist Chron, min, II, 305): “*The king built a city in Asturias to which he gave the name of Lugo, that is, Brillo... Asturias in its entirety across the Pyrenees Mountains...*”.

<sup>11</sup> ISID. 9, 2.112.

<sup>12</sup> Regarding the old road network in Asturias see ARGÜELLES 2011; ARGÜELLES 2016. Regarding gold mining exploitation see SCHULTEN 1959, 232–235; SÁNCHEZ-PALENCIA/OREJAS 2012, 261–272.

<sup>13</sup> SIL. 1, 231.

<sup>14</sup> MARC.10, 16, 1–4.

<sup>3</sup> It is not appropriate here, in accordance with the limits set for this work, to analyze the concept of Romanization, which has generated profound debates for some time now, and on which there is a profuse bibliography BANCALARI 2005, 135–146; 2015; FREEMAN 1997; WULFF 2011; MOMMSEN 1945; HAVERFIELD 2015; CABALLOS/LEFEBVRE 2011. It should be clarified, however, that we share the concept of “Romanization” as a process of mutual acculturation between Rome and the conquered populations, explained and developed by COARELLI: SISANI 2007, 9–11. The Italian researcher is opposed to defining Romanization as a “strumento cosciente della conquista”, or a “politica esplicitamente perseguita”, should be spoken more about “autoromanizzazione”.

<sup>4</sup> Quoting OREJAS/SASTRE/SÁNCHEZ-PALENCIA 2020, 202: “*Astures’ is a Roman denomination for a wide group of communities that were subdued after the wars in Augustan times on both sides of the Cantabrian mountain range*”.

<sup>5</sup> ROLDÁN 1970, 171–238.

<sup>6</sup> ARGÜELLES 2016, 718–723.

<sup>7</sup> SÁNCHEZ-ALBORNOZ 1929, 315–395.

other part of the earth with such an abundance for so many centuries".<sup>15</sup>

But the sources do not limit themselves to describing the physical landscape of the region, or to highlighting the richness of its resources, but also offer data on its people. In this way, the picture of identity can be completed, because in addition to the well-known geographical isolation, there are other aspects that characterize the Asturian people. Some of these features will be maintained after the integration of the territory in the Roman world, even reaching our days. Perhaps one of the most complete quotations about the pre-Roman Asturians is that of Strabo:

*"They carried out gymnastic, military and horse racing competitions with pugilates, races and combats both guerrilla and in formation by manipulus. The highlanders feed on acorns two parts of the year, letting them dry and crushing them; then they grind them and make bread with them to preserve it for a long time. They also drink beer. Wine, however, is scarce and, when they get it, they consume it on the spot at feasts with their families. Instead of oil they use butter. They eat seated on stools built around the walls, and they keep their places according to honor and social position. The food is served in a circle and while drinking they dance to the sound of the flute and trumpet in a circle and also jumping and squatting. In Bastetania women dance mixed with men holding hands. All are generally dressed in black with tunics in which they also lie on straw beds. They use wooden vessels like the Celts. The women wear petticoats and dresses embroidered with flowers. Instead of currency, those who live in the most remote corners make use of the barter of goods or give cut silver sheets. They throw the condemned to the capital punishment and the parricides are stoned outside the frontiers or the cities. They marry like the Greeks. The sick, as did the Egyptians in antiquity, they take them out on the roads to seek advice about their illness from those who have already experienced it. They used leather boats until the time of Brutus because of the rains and mud and even those made of a single tree trunk are still rare. Their salt stones are reddish, although crushed they turn white. Such is the life of the highlanders, as I have said; I refer to those who are located on the northern side of Iberia, the Galicians, Asturians and Cantabrians to the Vascones and the Pyrenees, as it is similar the kind of life of all of them".*<sup>16</sup>

In addition to all this, the bravery of its people, already pointed out as an element of identity of this people, the last along with the Cantabrians to be dominated by Rome, will be added: *"Here the vigorous Cantabrian mixed with the African rebels: there the Asturian, even more dangerous than the fast Mauritanian".*<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the breeding of the Asturcon horse caught Pliny's attention with this passage: *"In Hispania itself are the Galician and Astur people; they breed a race of horses (those they call 'tielldones', and the smaller 'asturcones') whose gait when walking is not current, but elastic because they extend the legs on each side at the same time; hence these horses have been trained to walk at a trot".*<sup>18</sup>

## VILLAE AND IDENTITY

The absence of written evidence from the Asturian populations somewhat limits the present study and makes any analysis of the impact of the Roman presence and its consequences partial. But what is certain is that, within the process that has been analyzed in this work, the emergence and dispersion of the *villae* throughout the Asturian territory marks a fundamental moment. The evidence of mutual acculturation is perceived from the epigraphy and the manifestations that are observed in the religious sphere; and also, from certain administrative changes that begin to crystallize in moments after the conquest. The military presence was, without a doubt, a fundamental factor in the process of integration into the Roman world, as was the control and intensive exploitation of mining resources. But the *villas* represent the adaptation of a production model that is characteristically Roman, and which denotes a full adoption of the lifestyles of the Italic elites. However, it is necessary to analyze the identity of the owners of these *villae*, with a handicap that is difficult to overcome in the study area. For the Asturian territory, the excavation of Roman *villas* has not enjoyed a great development to date, so the analysis of such an intricate question must be based on almost only historical arguments, supported, in few cases, by archaeological data. To date, twenty-six sites have been catalogued, which more or less reliably fit the definition of the term "*villa*"<sup>19</sup>. (Fig. 1). Of all of them, only twenty have undergone some type of archaeological intervention, and of this second group, less than ten can be considered to be of a scientific nature. Therefore, the known data are scarce in most cases, and need to be confirmed through new excavations developed with the stratigraphic method.

Despite the scarce development of archaeology in the Asturian territory, and the fact that to date there is no data on the owners of the *villas*, it is possible to reflect on the identity of the possessors who lived in the rural estates documented in Asturias. To do so, it is necessary to analyze the historical process that led to the emergence of the *villas* in the region. First of all, it is necessary to establish a chronological framework for the development of the process of birth and dispersion of the *villas*, as a preliminary step to the study of their owners. The oldest dates of the sites surveyed date back to the 1st century AD, that is, to the moments after the conquest. However, the process must have started globally in the 2nd century AD, with the greatest development between the 3rd and 4th centuries AD.<sup>20</sup> In other areas of the Iberian Peninsula and the empire, the 5th century marked the decline of these settlements, which began to be abandoned or reused, but in any case, they lost their original residential function.

The owners of these *villas* are heirs to the process of gradual integration of the Cantabrian area into the Roman Empire. From the analysis of the documented transformations in the territory in the administrative, social and cultural spheres,

<sup>19</sup> PIAY/ARGÜELLES 2021.

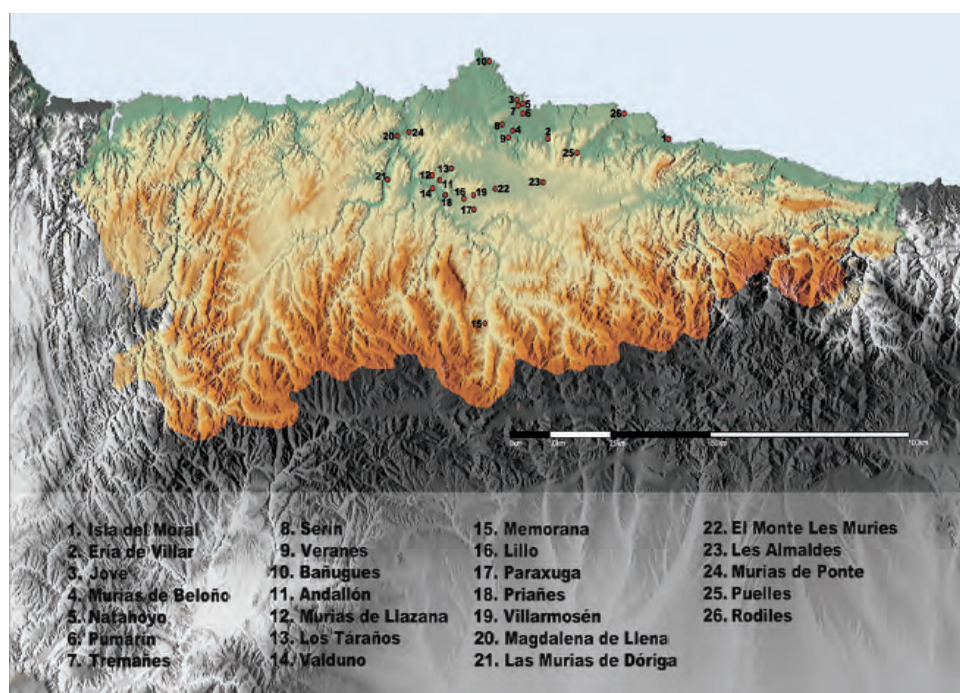
<sup>20</sup> Numismatic remains have been documented in 14 of the villages documented in Asturias. The dates are, in many cases, relative. Nevertheless, analyzed together, they allow us to establish a chronological framework for the study of the development of the process of birth and dispersion of the *villae* in the territory of present-day Asturias SAN VICENTE 2021, 77–118.

<sup>15</sup> PLIN. 33, 78.

<sup>16</sup> STRA. 3, 7

<sup>17</sup> SIL. 15,411–412.

<sup>18</sup> PLIN. 8,166.



**Fig. 1.** Sites included in the catalogue of Roman villas in Asturias (North Coast of Spain). (Map: D. Piay – Augusto).



**Fig. 2.** Works in the mosaic of the villa of Andallón in the 2020 campaign (Photo: J. R. Muñiz).

at least three plausible – and not exclusive – hypotheses can be drawn about the identity of the owners. In the first place, and in the absence of a stable and profuse network of cities present in other peninsular areas, it is very possible that certain Roman officials who moved to the Cantabrian area after the conquest, and who were responsible for the exploitation of the mining resources, established themselves in *villae*, and developed typically Roman production models.

A second group of these landowners could be constituted, without a doubt, by members of the local aristocracies that had maintained their status after the conquest, and that adopted, spontaneously, but also for the benefits that it could bring them from the point of view of their ascent in the framework of the Roman administration, the ways of life of the foreign culture. These local aristocracies would live in their own estates and imitate the comforts and luxuries of the Roman society of the time. The mosaics found in the villas of Veranes<sup>21</sup> (Fig.1),

<sup>21</sup> FERNANDEZ *et al.* 1997, 253–278; FERNÁNDEZ *et al.* 2003, 123–130.

Memorana<sup>22</sup> or, more recently, Andallón<sup>23</sup> (Fig. 2), reveal the taste for decoration and luxury typical of the Roman elites, and that their implantation in the Asturian territory was a result of the Roman culture of the time.

A last group of owners would be constituted by the army veterans, who, after developing their military career, would return to their homeland imbued with the characteristics of the Roman culture, after having completed their service for twenty-five years.<sup>24</sup> The fact of living on their own farms would mean, in a certain way, standing out in relation to the rest of the population. Some inscriptions of veterans documented in rural areas (*vg. Ujo*)<sup>25</sup> could indicate, precisely, the presence of these “new owners” who would have contributed to the implantation of typical Roman modes of

production in rural areas through the construction and diffusion of the *villae*. The choice of “disseminated plan” plants in certain villas (Murias de Beloño), could also point in this direction, given the success of this typology in the Northern areas of the empire, where the presence of military contingents was uninterrupted.

The analysis described above could err in appearing to focus only on the elites, discriminating against the mass of the Asturian population that was equally involved in the whole process of acculturation that began after the conquest. However, it should be borne in mind that during antiquity this type of process was generally expressed through the ruling classes, which are those that we generally know through written texts.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the information extracted from classical sources, it is possible to reconstruct, to a certain extent, some of the identity traits that characterized the populations that inhabited the Cantabrian area in the Northwest area of Hispania. Evidently, the considerations of the classical authors are influenced by their own prejudices and cultural tradition, but they are at least useful for the present-day researcher to be able to approach the character of these populations. Inhabitants of a region isolated by its particular orography, the Asturians were skilled in warfare, developed agriculture

<sup>22</sup> BLAZQUEZ 1987, 53–62

<sup>23</sup> Andallón is the only Asturian villa currently being excavated in Asturias, see MUÑIZ/CORRADA 2014; MUÑIZ/CORRADA 2018; MUÑIZ/CARRO-CERA 2021.

<sup>24</sup> On the role of the army in the process of Romanization of Asturias we refer to the work of Santos, who has published several works on the subject. The most recent of them SANTOS 2016.

<sup>25</sup> SANTOS 2009.

and livestock, and worked with some skill the metals, which they themselves extracted from the bowels of the mountains. They were skilled in the domestication of horses and lived in tribal societies.

The long and complex process developed between the end of the conquest of the Hispanic northwest and the establishment of the *villae* produced important transformations in the societies that inhabited the Asturian territory. The progressive implantation of the characteristic elements of Roman culture is perceptible in many areas, but the dispersion of the *villae* is possibly one of the most tangible. These rich rural occupations are physical spaces that represent the change produced in the Asturian populations that progressively changed their way of life and their settlement patterns. The process, of great complexity, was based on the coexistence of the autochthonous populations, with their own customs, beliefs, and ways of life, with the foreign element, which gradually established itself in the territory, bringing novelties in all areas of the public and private spheres. This process created a unique identity, which is the representation of the fusion between the Roman civilization and the pre-Roman Asturian populations. In this sense, the *villae* represent physical spaces in which these new identities are made manifest, evidencing a process of gradual acculturation between two peoples.

Despite the obvious shortcomings in the research of this type of settlements, it has been possible to trace the identity of the owners, opening a field of study that may be enriched in the future as archaeological excavations allow us to complete or modify the hypotheses outlined here.

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