

Introduction

by Iñaki Martín Viso

The title of this book requires some preliminary clarification, because words can be much more attractive than precise. I must start with some definitions. Landscape is a concept that is increasingly present in our societies and its meanings have multiplied. However –and simplifying many nuances – the term refers to two meanings: one objective, related to physical features, as an environment modified by humans, and another that emphasises the perception of those who live in or contemplate the physical world.¹ Both meanings imply a human action, an anthropisation, but they also entail an experience. Therefore, landscape would be a social construction, in which both economic and cultural aspects merge, as it is largely the result of a view of space, both individual and collective, that was always linked to the values and needs of each historical context. In short, landscape is a social and cultural construction that changes over time.²

Political action is thus an essential element in the construction of the landscape. It is not a homogeneous object, but different actors (individuals or groups) create and change their landscapes through political choices. The perception of space as an essential stage on which political relations are embodied involves an intervention on that space, both in physical terms and in terms of the meanings that some landmarks can acquire. It is at this inter-

¹ Corbera Millán, “El paisaje;” Tosco, *El paisaje*; Jakob, *Il paesaggio*.

² Nogué, “El paisaje.”

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Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup_referee_list)

FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)

Iñaki Martín Viso, *Introduction*, © Author(s), CC BY 4.0, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0530-6.02, in Iñaki Martín Viso (edited by), *Political landscapes in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages: the Iberian Northwest in the Context of Southern Europe*, pp. 1-6, 2024, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0530-6, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0530-6

section that we can speak of political landscapes, understood as those ones constructed around political relations. Put more simply, political action alters the physical forms of the environment and shapes views of that environment.

The best way to understand how these political landscapes work is through two key concepts. The first is place, which is a concrete landmark, natural or human-made, that defines and gives meaning to space by acting as a vector of experience. Place is a localised experience, related to rootedness and linked to everyday life, a mechanism that creates individual and group identity. However, place is also an axis of interaction, exchanges, relationships and routines that take place there, that are localised.³ The concept of “central place” becomes a key to study political landscapes. The term was coined by the German geographer Walter Christaller, although, leaving aside the rigidity of the original model, it can be applied to all places that serve as axes of power on very different scales (regional, local...). It is not, however, exclusively a matter of institutional hierarchisation, but a place could be “central” thanks to its meaning that takes shape in a specific way, in certain events.

The second concept is that of territory. As Robert D. Sack has pointed out, it is a strategy of domination through the control of space that allows for the reification of power. Territoriality, understood as the action of an individual or group to influence or dominate people, phenomena and relations through the delimitation and assertion of control over a geographical area, is a political technology.⁴ The creation of territories involves delimitation as a strategy that enables control by an authority. However such delimitation is not necessary linear or strictly drawn across a space, nor should it be confused with the territorial concept of contemporary states.⁵ Territory in the Middle Ages was defined through a series of places, whereas linearity is a situation specific to contemporary states. Moreover, this dominance established “from above” is not the only one. It is also necessary to take into account the territorial definition “from below”, based on local communities that have been able to create collective strategies of domination.

Place and territory are fundamental to the understanding of how political landscapes are constructed. Nevertheless, politics operates on very different scales. One easily visible, almost confusing, is that of the state or central authority. It can take the form of the creation of “central places” with strong hierarchical capacity, polyfunctional and well-articulated ideological meanings. A trend to homogeneity is a feature of this kind of territoriality. Another level, which can be clearly observed in medieval Europe, concerns the action of aristocratic groups. The construction of “central places” linked to these families and their memory would form a complex web in which territories were created without being topographical units; the key was the link

³ Tilley, *A Phenomenology*, 14-5 and 27; Gyerin, “A Space;” Córdova Aguilar, “Los lugares.”

⁴ Sack, *Human Territoriality*, 19; Elden, *The Birth*, 321.

⁵ Ruggie, “Territoriality;” Martín Viso, “Introduction.”

between these families and other groups and individuals. Finally, the local communities, whose political action is often invisible in written texts – but not in archaeology. They were internally stratified, with some rural elites whose political frames did not go beyond the locality. They were related to landscapes in which micropolitics, understood as normative uses of local political management, although fluid and not formalised as laws, took on a particular relevance. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that there was a more complex interplay, with different overlapped scales of action, like matrioshkas.

The fifth to tenth centuries was a period with some particular features. During the Roman Empire, the state was able to create an apparently homogeneous political landscape with the *ciuitas* as its main axis. However, the disappearance of the Empire gave rise to a process of diversification of political landscapes, mainly due to the plurality of actors. The late antique and early medieval centuries were thus characterised by the coexistence of inputs “from above” in the formation of political landscapes, albeit weaker than in earlier times, and others “from below”, that was very noticeable, thanks to the relative weakness of kingdoms and complex polities. This diversity makes it possible to observe very different situations. For example, in the context of the affirmation of encompassing polities, some kings built great linear defences, which must be understood as the physical manifestation of their power over the local communities, such as the Anglo-Saxon Offa’s Dyke or the Bulgarian *Erkesiya*.⁶ On other occasions, we are dealing with places associated with small-scale political practices, such as meeting places, whose management and control may have been in the hands of communities and local elites.⁷ In fact, the evidence seems to be consistent with a reduction in the scale of action, so that local collectiveness enjoyed a greater prominence. This increasing role of the “locality” allows for a better understanding of the processes of assertion of overarching powers and even lordship later on. Likewise, the construction of those complex polities necessarily involved the control of these local scenarios and their transformation.⁸

This book is the result of a conference held on 17-19 October 2022 as part of the activities of the project *Los escenarios de las micropolíticas: acción colectiva, sociedades locales, poderes englobantes (siglos VI-XII)-ESMICRO* (Ref. PID2020-112506GB-C42), which is part of a series of four coordinated projects *Las sociedades locales altomedievales de la Península Ibérica en su contexto europeo: Escenarios, prácticas y territorialidades (siglos V-XII)-LocSoc*. That conference reflects on those topics from a dual view: on the one hand, the perception and participation of local societies in these political landscapes; on the other hand, the intervention of overarching powers.

⁶ Squatriti, “Patrons.”

⁷ Semple, Sanmark, Iversen, and Mehler, *Negotiating the North*.

⁸ Escalona, Vésteinnsson, and Brookes, “Polities.”

It is essential to know what these landscapes were like in material terms, what places they consisted of, or how they were articulated in territories. Materiality enjoyed a special role in early Middle Ages, because, as John Moreland has pointed out, objects and monuments worked as basic elements of social memory and allowed communities to remember their histories.⁹ Places and territories become the main axes of a research that seeks to offer a pluralistic approach, not a common pattern. However, it is necessary to pay considerable attention to micropolitics, which were much closer to the majority of the population than high royal politics. These micropolitics were not divorced from the higher, all-encompassing power.

This book is the result of these working days. Some of the contributions finally could not be included in the publication. But I would like to thank Sarah Semple, Alexandra Sanmark, José Miguel Andrade, Margarita Fernández Mier and Jesús Fernández for their participation in the conference on which this book is based. It was also not possible to publish the eight freely submitted papers, as this would have required a much larger volume than this.

The content of the papers is mainly focused on Iberian Northwest. The project was based on that wide region with some shared historical features, like the weakness of Post-Roman (Suevic and Visigothic) kingdoms in those areas and the eighth century political collapse. However, some contributions could be read in a more general sense, like the papers of Pablo C. Díaz and Pablo Poveda. Finally, three case studies are focused on non-Iberian regions, all of them in Southern Europe (Adrien Bayard, Giovanna Bianchi and Giuseppe Albertoni). The book is organised in two clear parts: the Iberian one and the three Southern European cases. The order is similar to the title of the book.

However, it is possible to read the book around some main axes. Firstly, some contributions are focused on the residences of the elites, like the papers of Pablo C. Díaz and Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo, which are interested in the residences of elites and peasants, that is the places of power closest to them. Another key of lecture is the role of some places to construct hierarchical landscapes that involved the action of local actors, like the places of justice examined by Giuseppe Albertoni or the constellation of “central places” analysed by Adrien Bayard and Giovanna Bianchi in Aquitaine and Tuscany. Three articles examine the role of territories linked to local communities in the centre of the Iberian Peninsula: those by Iñaki Martín Viso, Carlos Tejerizo (in collaboration with Juan Pablo López García and Diego del Pozo) and Catarina Tente together with Diego Melo. Two of the most important places in the medieval landscape and territory were the church and the cemetery; Pablo Poveda, Mariel Pérez and José Carlos Sánchez Pardo, with Laura Blanco Torrejón and Marcos Fernández Ferreiro study them as part of formation of political landscapes from different angles and periods. Finally, two chapters

⁹ Moreland, *Archaeology*, 39-41.

are particularly relevant from the point of view of micropolitics, as they focus on very specific places, such as fortifications and their perception (Daniel Justo) and mills conceived as artefacts for the formation of political landscapes (Álvaro Carvajal and Julio Escalona).

A final word of thanks. Firstly, to all the participants in the conference and in the book. But we must also acknowledge that it would not have been possible without the support of Irene González Martín, Alicia Martín Rodríguez and Leonor Baeza Gomariz, who were indispensable for their efficiency in all aspects of logistics. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their readings and comments, which have allowed us to improve and refine the analysis; although the book is the product of a conference, all the articles have undergone peer review to ensure quality. And finally, thanks to the colleagues and friends of *Reti Medievali* who welcomed the opportunity to publish this book in their prestigious collection, especially Paola Guglielmotti and Gian Maria Varanini for their careful editing and patience.

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