



Research Article

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Pioneer Archaeologists and the Influence of Their Scientific Relationships on Mesolithic Studies in North Iberia

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Abstract: Count Vega del Sella's research marked the beginning of the long tradition of Mesolithic studies in Asturias (North Spain). Another pioneer, L. Sierra, explored a number of caves in Cantabria with Mesolithic shell-middens, but no specific research line was developed on this kind of deposit in the province. The early excavation at Santimamiñe Cave recorded the Basque Country's first shell-midden, which was thought to belong to a different *facies* from the deposits in Asturias (*Asturian shell-middens*). Nevertheless, no line of research into the Mesolithic was developed in that area either. The first research on the Mesolithic in North Iberia did not take place in isolation from European Prehistoric studies at the time. In fact, the historiographical context was characterized by the existence of cordial relationships between the pioneers in this region and several foreign archaeologists. This feedback between Spanish and foreign archaeologists sometimes had a significant impact. In contrast, the relationships between Spanish authors were less intense. This situation and the recurring lack of information on the Mesolithic in Cantabria and the Basque Country did not encourage debate on the existence of different Mesolithic facies in northern Iberia. So for decades the *Asturian* and the eastern Mesolithic recorded in Cantabria and the Basque Country were regarded as independent objects of study. This indicates the relevance of the scientific relationships and other factors in the perception of the Mesolithic that took shape in the first decades of the twentieth century and which has been perpetuated until the present time.

Keywords: Mesolithic, North Iberia, historiography, international relationships

1 Introduction

Circumstances of different kinds, as well as the prevailing theoretical approaches, can determine the historiographic development of research themes in Prehistory. For this reason, historiographic analysis

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is always required to understand the reason for the state of the art of particular studies, or why a certain view of a topic exists today, sometimes after over a century of research, as in the case of the Mesolithic in northern Spain. Even the names of the periods of study have changed over the years as the term “Mesolithic” was not always used in northern Iberian to refer to the time of the last hunter-gatherer societies.

In the early twentieth century, Obermaier (1916) used the term “Epipalaeolithic,” which had been coined by Sterjna (1910), to refer to the last hunters in North Africa, France and Spain in an essentially technological sense. Obermaier did not regard “Mesolithic” as appropriate since the populations being referred to did not suppose a progressive transformation in the transition from the Palaeolithic to the Neolithic. As Richter and Maher (2013) point out, it is likely that Obermaier’s powerful influence in Spanish prehistory caused the prevalence of the term “Epipalaeolithic.” However, he did use the term “Mesolithic” after the last edition of *El Hombre Fósil* (1925), like some British and German authors (cf. Clark, 1980; Hoika, 1993), to name the intermediate period between the Palaeolithic and Neolithic (e.g. Obermaier, 1932).

Even so, the term “Epipalaeolithic” was very popular in southern Europe until quite recently. It suitably reflects the industrial continuity often noted in the Pleistocene–Holocene transition; for instance, in the Azilian in northern Iberia and the microlaminar Epipalaeolithic in Mediterranean Spain (Aura *et al.*, 1998). In fact, in the north, the term remained in use until the 1990s, even to refer to post-Azilian deposits (Arias, 1991; Berganza, 1990). Today, however, the Azilian is interpreted as an epilogue of the Upper-Final Palaeolithic, and the later period, before the Neolithic, is known as the Mesolithic in a chronological sense but also as a period that marks a definitive break from the Magdalenian world.

This historiographic study of research on that period will pay special attention to the first decades of the twentieth century and the scientific contacts between the pioneers of Prehistory in northern Spain, both among themselves and with foreign archaeologists. Several authors have considered the transcendence of early research (1914–1930) in the subsequent historiographic development (e.g. Arias & Fano, 2009; González Morales, 1992; Márquez Uría, 1991, among others), but a detailed analysis of the importance of scientific relationships in the perception of the Mesolithic that continued to persist after the 1930s was still lacking. Some studies have been made, particularly on the collaborations between H. Obermaier and Count Vega del Sella (e.g. Fano, 2006; González Morales, 1996; Márquez Uría, 1996). However, the reflections made in those studies will not be reproduced here, except when the information is being expanded or the data are interpreted differently.

The geographic framework of this study is defined by the Cantabrian Mountains, a coastal range over 400 km long, from the Galician Mountains to the Pyrenees, in the north of the Iberian Peninsula, and includes the administrative regions of Asturias and Cantabria, and the Atlantic part of the Basque Country (Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa). The large areas of limestone in the geology of the region (Farias & Marquínez, 1995;



Figure 1: Map of northern Iberia with the location of the archaeological sites and municipalities mentioned in the text.

Hoyos & Herrero, 1989) have favoured the formation of caves and rock-shelters that contain the archaeological deposits studied by the scholars who began the research into the Mesolithic period in the region (Figure 1).

This article is divided into several sections. First, the general historiographic background and the archaeologists who initiated Mesolithic studies in the region will be introduced. Then the sources drawn on to achieve the objective of the present study will be presented. After that, the data about the scientific relationships among those Spanish pioneers and with foreign archaeologists will be described and finally the influence of the scientific contacts on the initial Mesolithic studies and later research will be discussed.

2 The Historiographic Background and Local Archaeologists

The circumstances arising after the well-known rejection of Altamira slowed down the access of Prehistoric Archaeology to an appropriate institutional position in Spain. However, from the early twentieth century, and particularly between 1910 and 1912, a number of events took place that speeded up research into the Spanish Palaeolithic. One was the enactment in 1911 of the Parliamentary Act establishing the regulations governing scientific excavations and the conservation of ruins and antiquities. This helped to standardise archaeological research through the *Junta Superior de Excavaciones y Antigüedades*. The other was the creation of the *Comisión de Investigaciones Paleontológicas y Prehistóricas* (CIPP) in 1912, which assumed the role of research centre (Rasilla, 1997; Rasilla & Santamaría, 2006).

Systematic research on the Mesolithic in northern Spain began over a century ago, at a time when the main aim of pioneers was to establish the cultural-stratigraphic sequence in the region, in the framework of the historical-cultural archaeology that prevailed at that time. Count Vega del Sella (1870–1941), who received French education and was a member of the CIPP, played a decisive role in establishing the chrono-stratigraphic sequence for the Palaeolithic in the area. He defined the stratigraphy and chronology of the Mesolithic facies, which, from that time onwards, was known as the *Asturian* (Fano, 2019). His excavation at El Penical Cave (Vega del Sella, 1914) marked the beginning of the long tradition of Mesolithic studies in the province of Asturias. In this excavation, the Count found some remains that were surprising both for their archaic morpho-technical characteristics and their position in the upper part of the stratigraphic series. However, his outstanding research capacity caused him to consider that the explanation given in the excavation report, that those remains belonged to the ancient Palaeolithic period, was insufficient and he continued to study the phenomenon.

During 1914 and 1915, the results of the excavations at several sites (Cueto de la Mina, Arnero, Fonfría, Mazaculos and Balmori) (González Morales, 1982; Márquez Uría, 1974a; Vega del Sella, 1916, pp. 61–67; 1923, pp. 42–49) gradually settled the hypothesis explaining the phenomenon, although it still took two more key findings: the discovery of Asturian picks within shell-middens and the confirmation of their position in the stratigraphy. The former was achieved in Mazaculos on 15 December 1915, and the latter was finally reported between 1916 and 1917, respectively, in Balmori (Vega del Sella, 1916, pp. 66–67), and with a full sedimentological explanation in La Riera (Vega del Sella, 1923, 1930) (Figure 2).

L. Sierra (1872–1947) was a pioneer of prehistoric research in Cantabria (Fernández Palacios & Renedo Arribas, 2002; Pérez Avellaneda, Garrido Pimentel, & Muñoz Fernández, 2022). During his years as a teacher in Limpías (Cantabria), and especially between 1903 and 1909, Sierra led the intense and fruitful research that, in what was then the province of Santander (today called Cantabria), fostered the official recognition of the antiquity and authenticity of Altamira. His work included the discovery of caves containing shell-middens, such as El Truchiro and Cueva del Mar (Sierra, 1909, pp. 107–108), but unlike what was to happen in Asturias, no specific research line was developed on this kind of deposit in Cantabria.

Nor did J. Carballo (1874–1961), the main promoter of the creation of the Museo Provincial de Prehistoria de Santander (today called Museo de Prehistoria y Arqueología de Cantabria, MUPAC), which was opened on 29 August 1926, take on a systematic study of shell-middens in the area, despite his interest in the topic. In fact, this author claimed to be the first discoverer of an Asturian pick, which he found in 1908

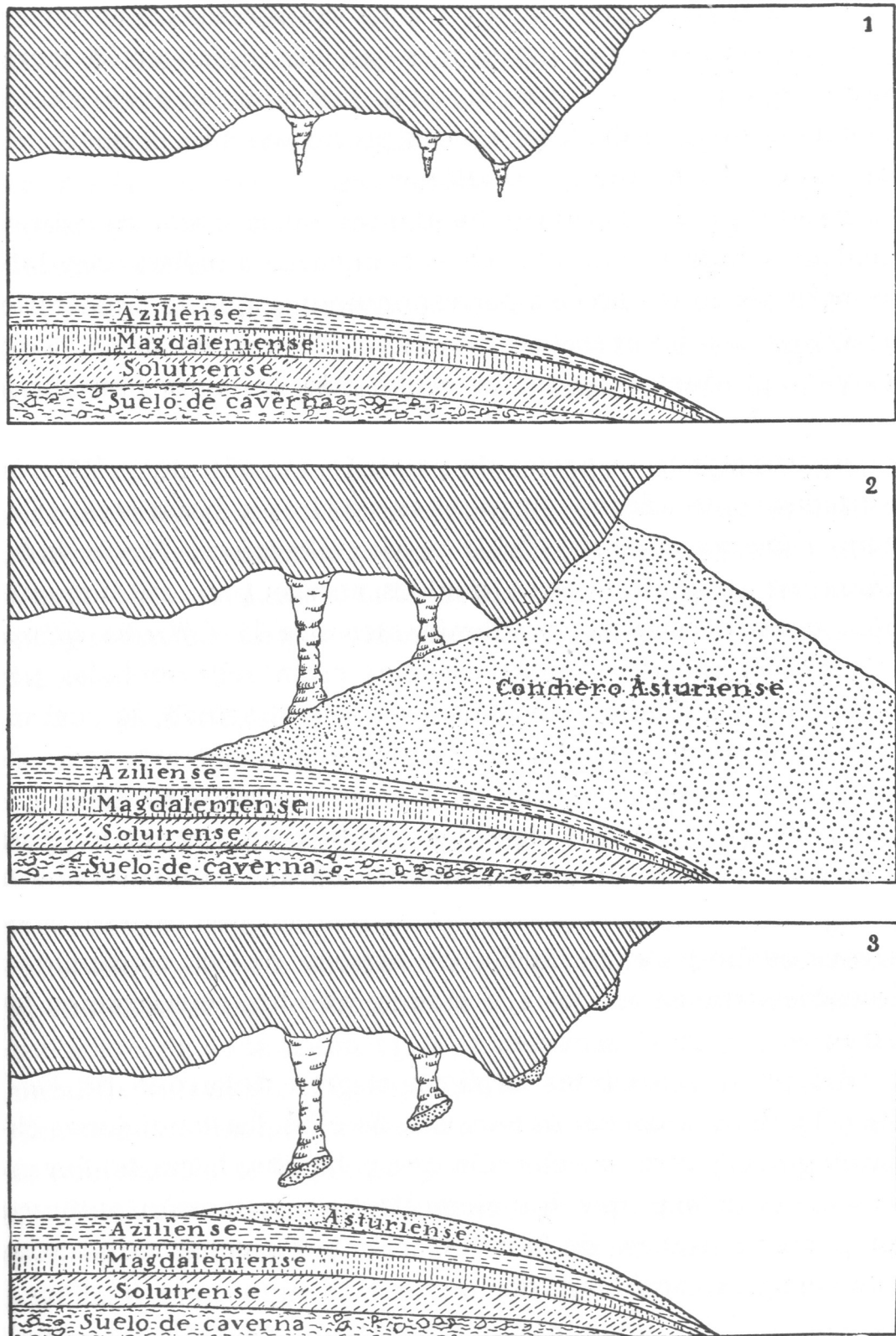


Figure 2: Formation and erosion of Asturian shell-middens in caves, according to Vega del Sella (1923, p. 11): 1. at the end of the Palaeolithic, 2. during the Asturian, and 3. currently.

on a cliff near Santander (Carballo, 1924, p. 138, cf. González Morales, 1982, p. 16). His 1926 work at El Molino de Gasparín (Asturias), where a burial was found in a shell-midden, also provided the first data on the funerary behaviour of Mesolithic societies in northern Iberia. This prehistorian also reflected on the nomenclature of the different phases of the Mesolithic. In fact, at first Carballo did not conceive the *Asturian* as a period, but as a “lithic form” that would have been a local variant of his *Cuerquense*, i.e. the stage in which the coasts of Western Europe were populated by groups whose diet was heavily based on marine resources. This led to the formation of shell-middens, which he called *paraderos* (Carballo, 1924); a term that had been used earlier by Vilanova y Piera (1875).

In the Basque Country, T. Aranzadi (1860–1945), J. M. de Barandiarán y Ayerbe¹ (1889–1991) and E. Eguren (1888–1944) formed a research team from 1916 onwards. Until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, the team carried out intensive archaeological surveying and excavation, mainly in caves and at megalithic sites. They were a highly competent team with a sound knowledge of Natural Sciences, Anthropology and Prehistory. It was Barandiarán who was most interested in this discipline, and continued to develop it after the deaths of Aranzadi and Eguren, first during his exile in France (from 1936), and then on the north coast of Spain after his return in 1953. He further developed studies on Basque Prehistory after an initial stage of poorly-defined contents (Barandiarán Maestu, 1994).

With regard to the period under discussion, special mention should be made of the excavation carried out by Aranzadi, Barandiarán and Eguren at Santimamiñe Cave (from 1918), where evidence of the Basque Country’s first shell-midden was recorded (Aranzadi, Barandiarán, & Eguren, 1931). However, in spite of years of intensive archaeological fieldwork, no line of research into the Mesolithic was developed in this area either, possibly because of the scarcity of shell-middens known on this part of the Bay of Biscay coast. Unlike what happened in Asturias, in subsequent excavations, such as Ermitia (1924–1927) and Lumentxa (1926–1929), evidence of this type of deposit was not reported.

3 Methods

To achieve the objective set in Section 1 of this article, we have examined the literature susceptible of containing information about the scientific relationships maintained at local and international level by the pioneers of Prehistory in northern Spain. All the scientific production at that time has been considered, especially the publications of the scholars who took part in the first studies of Mesolithic sites in the region. Additionally, detailed historiographic studies of some of those scholars, such as Vega del Sella, L. Sierra and J. Carballo, have been taken into account (Castanedo-Tapia & Fernández-Acebo, 2019; Márquez Uría, 1996; Pérez Avellaneda et al., 2022, among others). The letters written by the pioneers has been consulted, when available. They are sometimes revealing, as in the case of the correspondence between E. Hernández-Pacheco and Vega del Sella (Márquez Uría, 1991); the letters sent by Breuil, Obermaier and Aranzadi to J. M. de Barandiarán (Barandiarán Irizar, 1989); or the correspondence of L. Sierra recently published (Pérez Avellaneda et al., 2022). It was useful to consult Barandiarán’s personal diaries, which were gathered in a critical edition after his death, and some of his academic lectures (Barandiarán, 1917, 2005, 2009). Finally, some unpublished documents deposited in the MUPAC, like the history of that museum written by J. Carballo and recently edited with notes (Castanedo-Tapia & Fernández-Acebo, 2019), have also proved to be of interest.

¹ Henceforward J. M. de Barandiarán or simply Barandiarán, because that is how the author called himself in his studies and how he is known in academia.

4 Results

As in the case of Palaeolithic studies, the first research on the Mesolithic in the region did not take place in isolation from European Prehistoric studies at the time. The official acknowledgement of the age and authenticity of Altamira led, in the case of Cantabria, to intense and fruitful prospecting. The process ended with the work carried out, under the patronage of the *Institut de Paléontologie Humaine (IPH)*, by renowned foreign archaeologists (H. Breuil and H. Obermaier, among others) at relevant regional sites (such as Altamira and El Castillo). The presence of Spanish researchers abroad in those years was of a different nature; for example E. Hernández-Pacheco's stay in France in 1911 thanks to a scholarship from the *Junta de Ampliación de Estudios (JAE)*, but it also influenced the evolution of archaeological research on the north coast of Spain. These circumstances helped to create a favourable environment, although not always a friendly one, between Spaniards and foreigners. This was clearly evident in the correspondence of the time (Márquez Uría, 1988, p. 487).

J. M. de Barandiarán is a good example of this presence abroad, and the scientific relationships between foreign archaeologists and the pioneers of prehistoric research in North Iberia (Barandiarán, 2005, pp. 513, 535; Barandiarán Irizar, 1976, p. 183; Barandiarán Maestu, 1994, pp. 19–22). The Basque prehistorian went abroad (Leipzig, Cologne, Vienna, etc.) to take part in several courses. In particular, he attended those delivered by Breuil in Paris (IPH), where he met Teilhard de Chardin. These trips, which included attendance at courses in the Sorbonne and his participation in some congresses (Copenhagen, Tilburg), helped Barandiarán, sometimes accompanied by T. Aranzadi, to gain first-hand knowledge of the archaeological and ethnographic collections in museums at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Zürich, Vienna, Lausanne, etc. (Barandiarán, 2005).

He kept in touch with both Breuil and Obermaier, as his correspondence reveals (Barandiarán Irizar, 1989), and he was a great expert on their work (Barandiarán, 1917). In fact, in November 1924, Barandiarán attended some practical sessions led by Obermaier in Altamira, and 1 year later he was invited by Obermaier to attend his lectures at the Central University of Madrid. The available evidence also reveals that in 1926, Obermaier urged him to join the scientific committee he chaired for the study of the Cave of Altamira (Barandiarán, 2005, pp. 559, 568). His relationship with other foreign experts such as C. Gaillard (Natural Science Museum in Lyon), who carried out the study of the fauna in Ermitia and Santimamiñe, also evidences Barandiarán's international perspective, which he would keep up during his years in exile (e.g. Barandiarán, 2009, pp. 630–631, 634, 841, 879).

In the case of the pioneers based in Cantabria, L. Sierra, at the suggestion of Breuil, actively collaborated in the research work in the region, financed by Prince Albert I of Monaco (Madariaga de la Campa, 1972, p. 41). His participation, together with Breuil and H. Alcalde del Río, is evident in the work *Cavernes de la Région Cantabrique (Espagne)*, published in 1911. Sierra corresponded with foreign researchers, such as Breuil, and enjoyed the collaboration of specialists like E. Harlé in his own studies (Castanedo-Tapia & Fernández-Acebo, 2019; Pérez Avellaneda *et al.*, 2022). At that time, the “Prehistoric and Anthropological Museum” created in the school at Limpías where Sierra worked, attracted the interest of many researchers who visited it, including Obermaier, Breuil, F. Birkner, F. Harlé and even Alberto I of Monaco, among others. Additionally, L. Siret was interested in the metal objects in the collection, as seen in Sierra's letters that have survived (Pérez Avellaneda *et al.*, 2022).

J. Carballo's accounts indicate that he was not very keen on the prominence of foreigners in regional archaeology, and decided not to take part in the research work carried out by the IPH, as he says in his own words, despite his friendship with Obermaier in those years (cf. Carballo, 1956, pp. 50–51). In fact, they jointly explored several sites and the German prehistorian spent a month at Carballo's home in Santander after the outbreak of World War I. However, the relationship started to deteriorate in 1926, when Obermaier did not support Carballo's request to the *Junta Superior de Excavaciones* with regard to the excavation at El Pendo (Carballo, 1956). At the same time, some of Carballo's works did not escape Breuil's (1920) criticism.

Carballo's wariness of foreigners was not an isolated case. Indeed, as suggested by A. Moure in the 1990s, the CIPP was created partly as a response to the prominence of outsiders (especially the IPH) in research, both into the Palaeolithic in northern Spain and on the art in rock-shelters in the Spanish Levant and the interior of the Iberian Peninsula (Moure, 1996, p. 25; also see the reflections of Jordá, 1956, p. 18;

Márquez Uría, 1991, pp. 12–13). Letters at that time are explicit in this regard, especially those sent by E. Hernández-Pacheco to Vega del Sella and A. Rutot, the director of the Royal Museum of Natural History in Brussels (Márquez Uría, 1991, p. 13). Decades later, Hernández-Pacheco himself (1959, p. 726) played down the rivalry between the CIPP and the IPH and attributed the differences and discrepancies between members of the two institutions to personal questions.

In a similar way, Vega del Sella was in touch with a number of foreign prehistorians. In particular, he visited Toulouse, where he stayed with E. Cartailhac. He was therefore able to study the collections of the French archaeologist and in that way completed his training in prehistory (Hernández Pacheco, 1942, p. 177; 1959, p. 722). In addition, Vega del Sella was on cordial terms with the IPH researchers. In 1914, he went to Paris, where the Count and Breuil discussed the lithic assemblage at El Penicil (Vega del Sella, 1914, p. 13). We also know that Obermaier provided the Count with information about E. Daguin's collection from Biarritz (Márquez Uría, 1996, p. 90; Vega del Sella, 1923, pp. 32–35), which the Count saw in 1920. M. C. Burkitt's visit to Asturias was also undoubtedly significant, as he pointed out that, thanks to the Count's kindness, he had the opportunity to know the *Asturian in situ* (Burkitt, 1923).

However, more significant were Hugo Obermaier's stays in Asturias from August 1914, when the outbreak of World War I forced him to remain in Spain. He spent some time at the Count's home in Nueva de Llanes, after his stay at Carballo's home in Santander. The various circumstances referred to in the available

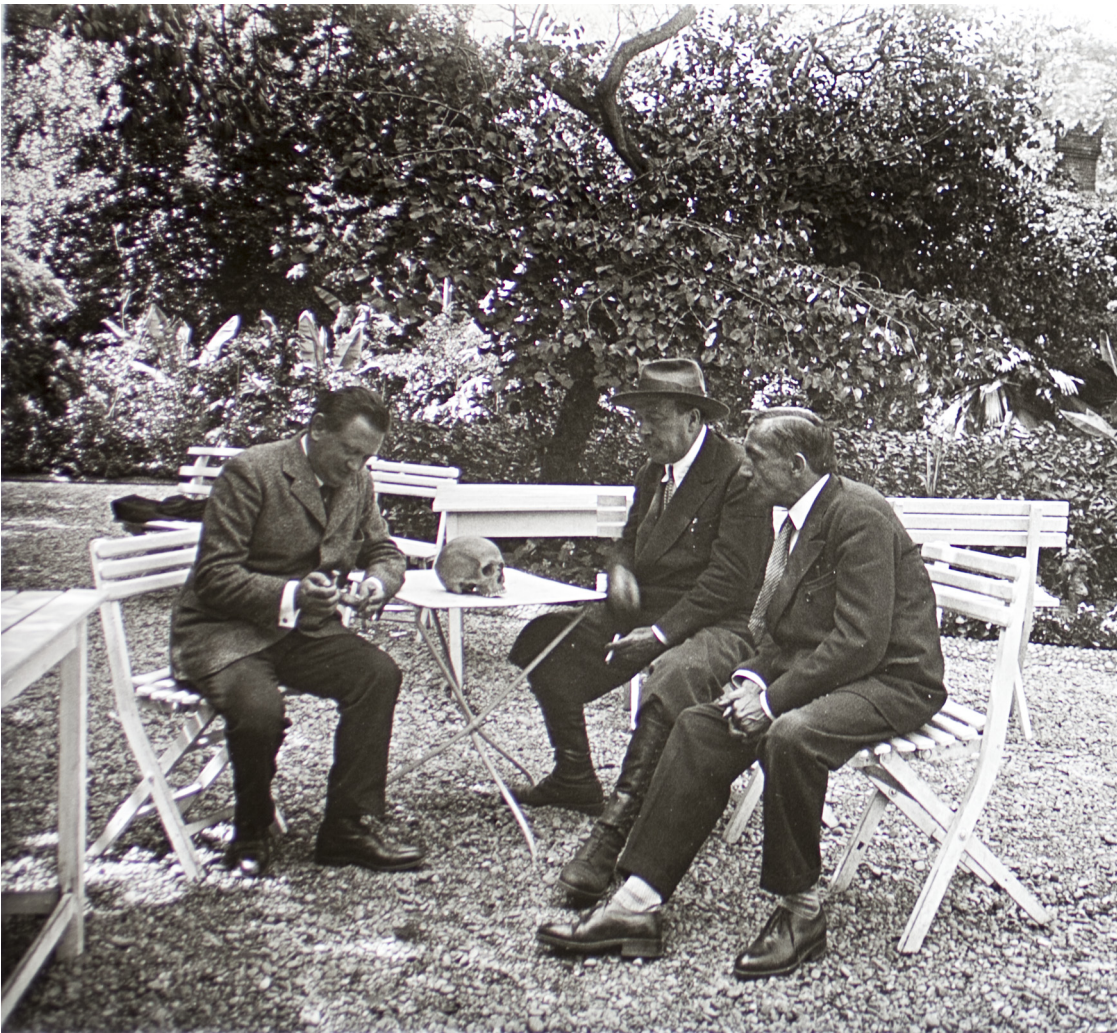


Figure 3: Garden at Count Vega del Sella's palace in Nueva de Llanes (Asturias) in about 1925–1930. Left: Hugo Obermaier; above right: Vega del Sella; below right: unknown person. Photo: Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural de España. Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte.

literature confirm the close relationship between these two pioneers of prehistoric research (Fano, 2006, p. 171). We could mention, for example, the fact that Obermaier dedicated the second edition of *El Hombre Fósil* (1925) to Vega del Sella. It is also significant that Carballo (1956, p. 54) referred to Vega del Sella as Obermaier's "great friend" (see also Castanedo-Tapia & Fernández-Acebo, 2019, note 139; Jordá, 1956; Márquez Uría, 1988, 1996; Moure, 1996) (Figure 3).

As regards local archaeologists, Barandiarán's diaries and his passive correspondence provide scant information about the prehistorians who worked in Asturias and in the Basque Country. We have proof of Vega del Sella's visit to the excavation of Santimamiñe on 16 August 1920, as recorded in the excavation report on the site (Aranzadi *et al.*, 1931, p. 18) and the Count's archival references (Márquez Uría, 1974b, p. 122, cited in Barandiarán Maestu, 1994). See also the reference to Vega del Sella in a letter sent by Aranzadi to Barandiarán in January 1919, which reveals that there was some contact between the latter and the Count (Barandiarán Irizar, 1989, p. 28).

The report on Santimamiñe shows that Vega del Sella discussed the findings in the cave with the excavators, and his observations on that day were crucial in his subsequent reflections on the nature of the shell-midden found there. Vega del Sella noted that the shell-midden at Santimamiñe was "*a completely different facies from the Asturian, both in terms of the mollusc species forming it and the lithic assemblage it contains.*" He thought it was "*like a Capsian influence from the South*" (Vega del Sella, 1923, p. 38), perhaps because of the presence of geometric microliths that were regarded as characteristic of that "culture" at the time (Arias & Fano, 2009, p. 71).

There is also very scarce information about the relationships between the archaeologists who were working in Asturias and Cantabria. However, there is evidence of some contact between Carballo and Vega del Sella with regard to the fieldwork in Cueva Morín (cf. Carballo, 1923, p. 4; Vega del Sella, 1921, p. 16), as well as Vega del Sella's visit to the Museo Provincial de Prehistoria de Santander in 1928 (Carballo, 1929, p. 5). In addition, Carballo's writings reveal his positive opinion about Vega del Sella's work (Carballo & Lavín, 1933, p. 54). In fact, after his above-mentioned initial criticism, he accepted Vega del Sella's ideas regarding the *Asturian* period (Carballo, 1926, pp. 11–12). However, Carballo's relationships with other scholars that were working in Cantabria in those years were not so cordial. See, for example, the case of L. Sierra (Carballo, 1956, pp. 63–65), among others.

Therefore, all the evidence seems to indicate that the archaeologists involved in the study of the Mesolithic period, or the sites containing archaeological layers of that period, maintained more or less cordial relationships with foreign researchers. However, the available data reveal that the relationships of Spanish archaeologists with each other were rather lukewarm, in general.

5 Discussion

The cordial relationships between the pioneers of prehistoric research in northern Iberia and a number of foreign archaeologists were a relevant factor in the historiography of the early research on the Mesolithic in the region. These relationships fostered, for example, Obermaier's collaboration in some of the Count's excavations (cf. Obermaier, 1924, pp. 170–175). In fact, if we are to believe the literature, it seems that it was the German archaeologist who coined the term *Asturian*, although he probably had Vega del Sella's approval. Obermaier received first-hand information about the Count's research, which he included in different editions of his major work (Obermaier 1916, 1924, 1925). In this way, Obermaier published all the available information about the *Asturian* in 1916, ahead of the discoverer and designer of the research strategy and the final explanation of the phenomenon (Fano, 2006).

Nevertheless, Vega del Sella explicitly stated his leading role in the *Asturian* research in some of his works. Thus, in the monograph on Cueto de la Mina (Vega del Sella, 1916, pp. 61–67), which is the first text in which he expresses his opinion, he explains it before referring to Obermaier's text in 1916 at the end of that section; and he only reproduces textually the paragraph in which the name *Asturian* is proposed for that archaeological record (Vega del Sella, 1916, p. 67). Similarly, in the book on the *Asturian* he includes a

specific chapter entitled “*The History of the Asturian*,” where he points out that he had played a leading role in that episode (Vega del Sella, 1923, pp. 42–49); the most curious thing being that he needed to highlight it.

In addition, in another chapter entitled “*General Remarks*” (Vega del Sella, 1930, pp. 91–99), where apart from summarising the points related to the research and description of the period, the Count, far from mentioning the changes in opinion that had occurred about 15 years earlier, wrote the following: “*Since 1916, when I discovered the Asturian...*” (Vega del Sella, 1930, p. 95). Similarly, Obermaier (1916, p. 334; 1925, p. 383) acknowledged the Count’s leading role in the discovery of the *Asturian*, and dated it in 1914 (with the excavation at El Penical). In a footnote, he explained the reason behind Vega del Sella’s first “mistake” and the prompt rectification he had made (as stated above, Vega del Sella initially attributed the *Asturian* culture to the Ancient Palaeolithic). It is interesting that they differ in the date of when the *Asturian* period was discovered. Vega del Sella prefers to use the year when the real nature of the *Asturian* had been completely proven; whereas, Obermaier gives priority to the date of the El Penical excavation, but *a posteriori*, and once all the data had been collected.

In any case, the close scientific relationship between Vega del Sella and Obermaier helped to frame the *Asturian* within its European context, together with other post-Palaeolithic cultures. In his publications Obermaier did not always keep to the same opinion about which period in European Prehistory the *Asturian* belonged to, which clearly demonstrates the influence of Vega del Sella’s ideas on the German archaeologist’s theories (Fano, 2006, p. 176). In the English edition of *El Hombre Fósil (Fossil Man in Spain, 1924)*, he no longer regarded the *Asturian* as an Epipalaeolithic culture, probably because he had access to first-hand archaeological data on the relationship between the Azilian and the *Asturian*, thanks to the record at La Riera. In the last Spanish edition (1925), the *Asturian* period is described as a “pre-Neolithic” culture, using the same term, in accordance with Mortillet’s so-called “hiatus theory,” as Vega del Sella does in his fundamental 1923 study of the *Asturian*. Some years later, Obermaier began to use the term “Mesolithic,” thus conceiving the *Asturian* as a culture of that stage (Obermaier, 1932, p. 167).

These cordial relationships between the different authors sometimes had a lesser impact. However, it should be mentioned that Obermaier (1925, p. 171) also disclosed some information about the excavation in progress at Santimamiñe in *El Hombre Fósil*. The data available are scarce, but mention should be made of the fact that Obermaier relates some pieces from Santimamiñe to materials found by Vega del Sella in Asturias. However, when he refers to the *Asturian* in detail, he does not mention Santimamiñe, although the German author also echoed that the concept of *Asturian* had been broadened and simplified after Vega del Sella had defined it (see in this regard, González Morales, 1982, pp. 25, ff.).

In connection with this, we do not know whether the team at Santimamiñe visited any of the sites excavated by the Count in Asturias. Anyhow, according to what has been outlined in a previous section with regard to J. M. de Barandiarán’s role, it is clear that he had, without any doubt, an excellent knowledge of the *Asturian* material. Thus, it should be noted that in the excavation report of Santimamiñe Cave, the attribution of the lower part of the shell-midden (Level IV) to the *Asturian* was not ruled out: “*The absence of ceramics, the nature of that stretch mainly made up of shell-middens, and the shape of some of the lithic instruments, lead us to regard this industry as Preneolithic (maybe Asturian), slightly Tardenoisian and with numerous archaic forms, or from more ancient times*” (Aranzadi et al., 1931, pp. 92–98). However, in later publications we do not find a single posture regarding the relation between Level IV at Santimamiñe and the *Asturian* record. The 1931 report cited above notes the existence of coincidences, such as the find in the Basque deposit of a forked osseous object “of the *Asturian* type,” but some differences are also pointed to, like the lesser frequency of “large prey” at the sites in Asturias. The report published 4 years later again finds coincidences in some objects but refers to a “*pre-Neolithic stage that cannot be identified as the Asturian*” (Aranzadi & Barandiarán, 1935, pp. 53–54; see also Barandiarán, 1934, p. 57).

Later, from 1940 to 1950, fieldwork in the region came to an end and the information gained about the Mesolithic in the first decades of the century was presented in general publications, like those of Almagro Basch (1944), E. Ripoll (Almagro-Basch, Beltrán, & Ripoll, 1956), Bosch-Gimpera (1945), Pericot (1942, 1950) and Jordá (1956), among others. Some explicit references were made to the post-Azilian deposit at Santimamiñe, as by Pericot (1942, p. 60), who was not in favour of attributing it to the *Asturian*, but without any kind of discussion of the matter.

Some years later, in his classic work *El hombre prehistórico en el País Vasco*, Barandiarán (1953) went back to the issue of the cultural attribution of that part of the Santimamiñe sequence. It is not easy to grasp the Basque prehistorian's thinking in this regard, since his text becomes rather ambiguous (Barandiarán, 1953, pp. 119–120). However, we believe Barandiarán Maestu (1967, p. 185) is right when he highlights that mixture of characteristics J. M. de Barandiarán refers to in his works on Santimamiñe. Indeed, everything seems to indicate that J. M. de Barandiarán understood that part of the sequence at Santimamiñe Cave as a context that had resulted from various cultural influences and not so much as a site that could be compared to those excavated by Vega del Sella on the other side of North Iberia (see also Barandiarán, 1962, p. 21).

In any case, the different standpoints with regard to shell-middens in Santimamiñe, including the ambiguity in the case of the excavators of the site, are worth mentioning. The pioneers who were working on both sides of northern Iberia do not seem to have maintained intense scientific relationships, which hindered the discussion of the topic in those years. The existence of two different archaeological realities on the north coast of Spain began to take shape when Vega del Sella visited Santimamiñe in August 1920. Five decades later, the systematic study of the lithic assemblage from Santimamiñe ratified the absence of *Asturian* elements (Cava, 1975), which surely supported the differentiation into two cultural realities: the *Asturian* and what was called the “Geometric Epipalaeolithic” because of the presence of geometric microliths in the assemblage (Barandiarán Maestu, 1983).

The existence of two independent objects of study was already tangible in the 1950s, when Jordá began to study the Mesolithic again and concentrated exclusively on the *Asturian* (Jordá, 1954, 1959). Later research and publications about the period reflect a similar approach (Barandiarán Maestu, 1983; Berganza, 1990; Clark, 1976; Fano, 1998; among others) and when the region is considered as a whole, the differentiation between the two archaeological realities is made explicitly (Arias, 1991; González Morales, 1982).

The persistence of the imbalance in the intensity of research between the two parts of northern Spain, also inherited from the time of the pioneers, did not favour an integrated view of the Mesolithic in North Spain in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, research was very unequal in the different political regions: in Asturias it was very intense, with several doctoral theses and other studies following on from Jordá's research; whereas, in Cantabria there was no specific investigation into the period until the 1980s. In the Atlantic side of the Basque Country it was not until the next decade that new projects went beyond the investigation of a single site and included the study of the Mesolithic in a particular area within their objectives (Fano, 2004). Recent contributions reproduce a situation similar to the historiographic panorama that has been described: in Asturias, several specific projects on the period (Arias *et al.*, 2016; Gutiérrez-Zugasti *et al.*, 2018, among others); and in the rest of the region, new fieldwork, studies of recent excavations and reappraisals of old collections that help to balance up the situation (Álvarez-Fernández & Altuna, 2013; Iriarte, Arrizabalaga, Etxeberria, Herrasti, & Álvarez, 2010; Mujika, 2008; Muñoz *et al.*, 2013; Pérez-Bartolomé, 2019; Straus & González Morales, 2012; Tapia *et al.*, 2008, among others).

Nonetheless, there have been scholars, even in the 1990s, who supported a greater degree of homogeneity in the archaeological record across the region (González Morales, 1995), but it is now that the matter is being discussed more explicitly. Is it pertinent to continue differentiating the archaeological realities corresponding to the Mesolithic in northern Spain (Arias *et al.*, 2021)? The main change that has taken place in our perception of the *Asturian* in recent years has probably been the find of lithic artefacts that questions its exceptionality. Compared with the usual scantiness of the assemblages, with an absence of bladelets, high frequency of tools made on pebbles and almost total absence of geometric microliths, the recent finds in the shell-midden at El Mazo have revealed a very different picture (Fuertes-Prieto, Risetto, Gutiérrez, Cuenca, & González, 2021). The presence of small-sized lithics is significant and the production of blade/bladelet blanks has been identified, with a high proportion of knapping waste. Points and geometric microliths, such as circle segments, triangles and trapeziums have also been documented. In sum, El Mazo has determined an image that is not very different from that seen at non-*Asturian* Mesolithic sites in north Spain or bordering regions, like the Mountains of León (Arias & Ontañón, 2012; Neira, Fuertes, & Herrero, 2016, for instance). Similarly, the latest studies of the lithic raw materials have questioned the paradigm of an “isolated” *Asturian*, as raw materials of regional (30–120 km away) and even

extra-regional (>120 km away) origin have been identified at El Mazo (Herrero-Alonso, Fuertes, Gutiérrez, & Cuenca, 2020).

In turn, symbolic behaviour and particularly mortuary practices, also lend certain homogeneity to the regional Mesolithic record. Indeed, the inhumation of bodies in shell-middens or shell-rich deposits seems to have been relatively common across the region. It will be interesting to see the results of the current research into the question discussed by Vega del Sella in his visit to Santimamiñe a little over a century ago, but without forgetting that the phenomenon of shell-middens clearly becomes less apparent in the east of the region, especially on the Basque coast (Fano, 2019).

6 Main Conclusions

The sources that have been consulted show that the Mesolithic study in northern Spain began within a historiographical context marked by the existence of cordial relationships between the pioneers of prehistoric research in northern Iberia and a number of foreign archaeologists. This feedback sometimes had a significant impact. See Obermaier's early location of the *Asturian* in the European context, and, at the same time, Vega del Sella's evident influence in the Bavarian author's ideas in this regard. However, the available data reveal that the relationships amongst Spanish scholars were less intense. This situation, and the varying intensity of research on the period in different parts of the region, did not encourage debate on issues that still remain open, such as the existence (or not) of "different Mesolithic facies." Later, the recurring lack of information on the Mesolithic in Cantabria and the Basque Country did not prompt a review of this question. Consequently the *Asturian* and the eastern Cantabrian Mesolithic (usually called "Geometric Epipalaeolithic") were regarded as independent objects of study, a view which became commonplace in subsequent research and summaries of the period. This paradigm only began to be discussed in the 1990s but rather timidly. Indeed, only now is it being openly questioned, thanks to the development of systematic research on the period in Cantabria and the Basque Country, and the find of new *Asturian* records that improve our perception of that cultural reality and contribute towards minimising the contrasts with other Mesolithic records in north Spain and surrounding regions. This is indicative of the weight of the scientific relationships and other factors in the perception of the Mesolithic that took form in the first decades of the twentieth century and have persisted unchanged since then.

Abbreviations

CIPP	Comisión de Investigaciones Paleontológicas y Prehistóricas
IPH	Institut de Paléontologie Humaine
JAE	Junta de Ampliación de Estudios

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