

## Article

# Agrarian Archaeology: A Research and Social Transformation Tool

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to approach the concept of agrarian archaeology, an epistemological framework that allows the investigation of agrarian landscapes favouring new historical narratives far from traditional paradigms and, at the same time, the proposal of innovative forms of cultural heritage management in rural areas. The working methodology and some examples of both empirical work (archaeology) and research-action approaches to cultural heritage are presented. As a result, agrarian archaeology opens up a perspective of experimental research, which permits the problematization of conceptual languages, questions historical narratives and causes the rethinking of personal practices, in addition to promoting an open science close to citizens. Cultural heritage here is to be understood as a social process of meaningful construction, a space of debate and transformation for social innovation.

**Keywords:** agrarian landscapes; local communities; agro-ecosystem; local knowledge



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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to approach the concept of agrarian archaeology, an epistemological framework that allows the investigation of agrarian landscapes favouring new historical narratives far from traditional paradigms and, at the same time, the proposal of innovative forms of heritage management in rural areas. This theoretical tool was defined over the last decade in parallel with the development of several research projects in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula. This allows a deeper delve into the productive practices developed by the peasantry, which were the starting point for various strategies of knowledge transfer and social involvement of historical science [1,2].

The development of the concept has to be understood within a double problematic: on the one hand, the historiographical tradition of rural history that the research team first focused on, oriented towards understanding early mediaeval social processes in the northwest of the peninsula; and on the other hand, the dramatic situation of depopulation and disarticulation currently suffered by the rural areas that our research team studied. These circumstances encouraged new intellectual challenges that went beyond questions about the early Middle Ages and led to reflection on the connections that this research should have with current social problems.

The early mediaeval period in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula, as in Europe as a whole, was a time of important changes that would favour the emergence of new political entities and a different network of settlements [3–8]. In the area studied, these processes were manifested in the consolidation of the Kingdom of Asturias from the 8th century AD, a political framework that bequeathed an impressive architecture and invaluable chronicles, sources with which the whole period has been historicised for decades. Research has focused on the political history of its kings, relying on a handful of written texts to generate grand narratives about the exercise of political power, yet it has gone without addressing

its economic and social structures. This study's objective is chronologically framed within this period, but the research is oriented towards exploring the foundations of this political entity: the local communities and their territoriality, which were the setting for the daily life of the majority of the population, and about which there is hardly any information at the local level. The uneven development of archaeological research and the tyranny imposed by chronicles written in the 10th century A.D. favoured a certain discourse, which has only very recently been subjected to a complex process of deconstruction and re-reading [9–11]. For decades, this prevented the formulation of questions about the complex social and economic realities of early mediaeval society and how these were articulated with the political structures.

On the other hand, the study of the peasantry and local communities in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula has been conditioned by the paradigms that were imposed on Hispanic historiography during the 20th century, oscillating between a juridical interpretation that emphasised free men who defined “*homo hispanicus*”, as defended by Sánchez Albornoz [12], and a dichotomous view between peasants and lords linked to the concept of feudalism, in which the former are presented as a uniform mass, dependent on the decisions of the lords and without capacity for agency, ignoring the complex social differences that were manifested in the diplomas of the 9th and 10th centuries A.D. [13]. This historiographical peculiarity derives from the political situation in Spain during the 20th century: Franco's totalitarian regime, which generated its own myths about the origin of the nation which were supported by Albornocian interpretations; this must be countered by the rapid reception of historical materialism in the 1970s, coinciding with the demise of Francoism, which meant a strong reaction against the dominant Albornocian paradigm, proposing new models of interpretation based on written sources and on the rapid process of feudalisation of local communities [2,14,15].

However, in the last two decades, the approach to local communities has been given a new impetus by a research agenda that prioritises archaeological interventions, redefining the theoretical frameworks for the study of the peasantry. The development of commercial archaeology in the 2000s in the northwest made it possible to document rural settlements attributable to the 6th–8th centuries AD that were virtually unknown until then. Through various avenues related to archaeological practice, be it commercial archaeology [8,16], the archaeology of depopulated areas [7,17], the archaeology of inhabited villages [18], the archaeology of the peasantry [7,19] or agrarian archaeology [1,2,17,20], a complex agenda was developed that, in a holistic way, has dealt with all the processes related to the peasantry, beyond its legal status and the theoretical frameworks generated from the analysis of written documentation: from the agricultural-livestock production strategies of local communities, to their ability to access resources, to the relationships of family units within the framework of communities and their relationships with other entities operating at a supralocal level (lay aristocracy, ecclesiastical, monarchy), to the characterisation of social inequalities and hierarchies, conflicts and resistance [19,21–25]. A complex agenda implemented by different groups has allowed a deeper delve into the early mediaeval landscape, as the analysis of all these aspects favoured the characterisation of the social complexity of the period, as well as determining the geographical variability of the processes. All this took place through the study of the landscape, giving special prominence to archaeobiological and geo-archaeological analyses, which have been a true revolution in studies on the peasantry in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula [26].

Even so, the information is very uneven: some areas are extensively documented, while others lack significant information. It is very relevant that the geographical spaces with the spectacular pre-Romanesque architecture of the 9th and 10th centuries A.D. (Asturias and Galicia) are the worst known areas from the point of view of the landscape of the local communities. This is due to the fact that they are areas with a mountainous orography, which has favoured the maintenance of settlement in the same areas since the Early Middle Ages, as opposed to the greater mobility found in the plateau areas, which makes it difficult to characterise the early stages of the settlements.

## 2. Methodology and Problem Posing

This problem requires the definition of a working methodology that allows a deeper delve into these aspects, approaching the landscape with new questions and new tools that provide information on the complexity of social processes. The archaeology that was developed in the Iberian northwest until the end of the last century had a markedly monumental character, which is why it was necessary to implement action protocols that questioned this dynamic, making its practice and recording more complex. Above all, it gave the same relevance to the study of places of habitat, centres of power or necropolises, as well as to the scenarios in which they took place: crop fields, pasture and woodland areas, secondary buildings, irrigation and terracing systems, and data that allows us to understand how the peasantry conceptualised the territory. Thus, intensive archaeological interventions were programmed from holistic approaches that questioned the landscape through a dismantled archaeology that favoured the understanding of the genesis of landscapes, the characterisation of the productive practices of the peasantry and the mechanisms of different social groups to access, manage or accumulate resources, studying where and how they were produced, where they circulated and how they accumulated and distributed what was produced.

From the point of view of archaeological practice, this implied adapting the protocols of action to the different problems presented by the territories of the northwest of the peninsula, with geographical characteristics that had not favoured the locating of information on the Early Middle Ages for decades. It was undoubtedly a matter of reflecting on and adapting the protocols developed by prehistoric archaeology [27] and Andalusian archaeology [28], as well as incorporating the extensive experience that this type of work had had in the Anglo-Saxon sphere into areas of our research study [29–34].

1. In the plateau areas, dedicated for centuries to cereal farming, the sites of this period are practically destroyed: agricultural work with heavy machinery has removed the sites, and they present a record that is limited to hut bottoms excavated in the rock, post holes and silos to which an exhaustive archaeobiological and geoarchaeological investigation has been applied. This has provided qualitative and quantitative information that has allowed the characterisation of this type of settlement. They are generally uninhabited settlements with horizontal stratigraphy [8,16,17,35].
2. In mountain areas and areas located on the Atlantic coast, the intervention methodology required excavating in villages still occupied today, as well as in landscape units (terraces, irrigation systems, livestock establishments, crop fields) that are in use [36]. There are landscapes that have been previously defined as resilient [37,38], in which post-depositional activities of great complexity have been documented, with steep spaces that have suffered deep erosion processes that dismantled the contexts and deposited them in secondary positions in the flatter areas, and other places where the accumulation of sediments preserves and masks a complex stratigraphy that provides information of special relevance to understanding the gestation of the landscape and, therefore, the practices related to the activity of the peasantry.

Reflection is focused on the latter landscapes and sites because they are the ones approached in this research, applying the methodology of agrarian archaeology. In addition, the progress of the work opens up three lines of research of particular relevance to the objectives pursued with the articles that make up this special issue of the journal.

1. Firstly, micro-territorial studies have been carried out with a holistic perspective, taking as the unit of analysis the territorialities of the villages as they are defined in the mediaeval documents. This research has provided qualitative information on the early mediaeval period that favours the understanding of productive and social processes. However, the data are presented in a fragmented way, which requires a large number of archaeological interventions that allow advancement in the characterisation of the period under investigation [39].

2. On the other hand, this archaeological practice provides quantitative information of a diachronic nature that helps to define the processes related to the gestation of the landscape over the long term. It has been possible to document activities from the 4th millennium onwards that offer a complex and dynamic panorama of the use of the territory, with special relevance given to the moments of amortisation of prehistoric habitat sites masked under cultivation areas built at a later date. This means obtaining a wealth of information on the occupation and management practices of the territory over the long term, which opens windows that not only shed light on the processes of settlement of the territory, but also on how the peasantry conceptualises the landscape, uses it and manages it.
3. Finally, it must be taken into account that this work is taking place in villages that are still occupied and on agricultural units that are in use. These are elements that have a function in the current agro-ecosystem, such as terraces or fields, but whose function has changed over the millennia. This is a rural world that is currently undergoing a severe process of disarticulation due to the inviability of traditional agricultural and livestock farming practices, which cannot compete with capitalist agriculture. The excavated elements still play a role in today's landscapes, although strategies have been redefined, and are a reflection of the local ethnoecological knowledge accumulated over millennia by the communities. Soil characteristics, climate, erosion, management of crops, etc., are just a sample of local knowledge to which historical depth should be given with archaeological and historical research, and which should be turned into an active tool that allows for the generation of new narratives about the role that these communities have played in shaping the landscape throughout history. This information must fulfil three objectives: to overcome old interpretive paradigms that insist on an outdated political history; to provide these communities with new narratives that make them the true protagonists of landscape management; and to promote actions for the management of the territory and the landscape according to new forms of social innovation.

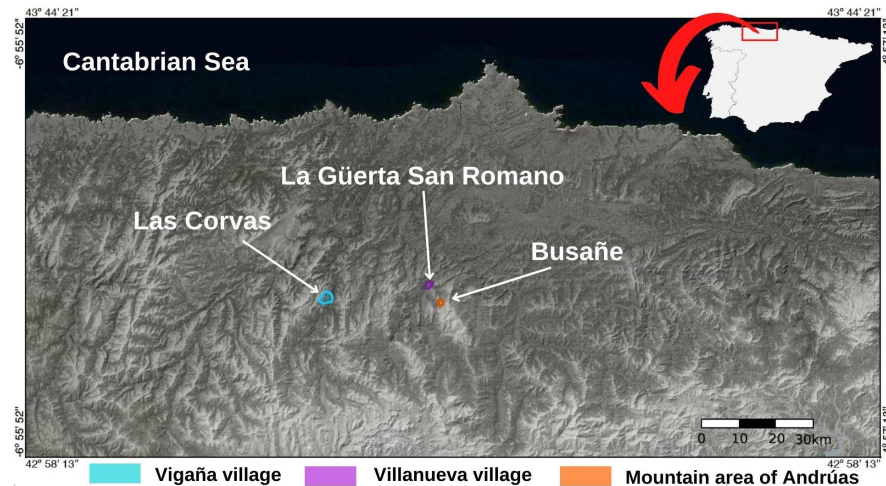
### 3. Case Studies

This study analyses three examples which demonstrate both the advances in historical research and the strategies which have been put in place to turn it into an active tool for today's society.

#### 3.1. Documentation of the Mediaeval Peasantry

Since 2009, a series of archaeological interventions have been carried out in the village of Villanueva de Santu Adrianu with an interdisciplinary and diachronic perspective, combining archaeological excavation with a dense protocol of archaeobiological and sedimentological analysis. One of the areas investigated was an agricultural space, a farm called "La Güerta San Romano" (Figure 1), traditionally dedicated to extensive cultivation, similar in its morphology to other European agricultural spaces, such as the English openfields or the German *zelgensystem* [40], although smaller in size. In other nearby countries, these phenomena have been studied for decades and related to the formation of concentrated villages and their agrarian spaces [41,42]. Historical and archaeological research attributed different formation chronologies to openfields: from the early Middle Ages in Germany (6th–10th centuries) to the 11th–13th centuries in England [43]. In Asturias, these agricultural areas have been considered to be of medieval origin on the basis of documentary and geographical studies [44–46]. However, there was no research that had addressed this problem from an archaeological point of view. So, the excavation of this agrarian space began with the aim of documenting the formative sequence of these agrarian units and defining their uses and chronology. Logically, this process does not exclude the use of other types of sources that contribute to an understanding of the complexity of these kinds of supposedly mediaeval agrarian structures. This work demonstrates that these areas have mediaeval origin, but late mediaeval, because they did not begin to be used exclusively

as agricultural spaces before the 14th century. Before, they were multifunctional spaces and were not defined, combining both domestic and agricultural functions depending on the period. In the 14th century, all this seemed to stabilise, at least in the context studied here [40].



**Figure 1.** Map of the Iberian Peninsula. Area and case studies.

On the other hand, this work documented a series of domestic structures that were in use between the 12th and 13th centuries (Figure 2). One of these structures was completely excavated: it is a domestic space with a small identifiable internal division, entirely built in perishable materials, without stone plinths or wall structures, with a single interior hearth and a total area of about 32 m<sup>2</sup>, in addition to several adjacent areas of use with hearths and complementary structures. Overall, for the dates of its last occupation (13th century), this kind of construction corresponds to the earliest types of European habitat structures. In France or England, for example, peasant houses were already built in stone or with stone plinths in the 13th century [47,48]. It is worth asking why this chronological gap exists. It can be attributed to the later establishment of an urban network in Asturias (during the 13th century), which definitively enabled the circulation of goods among peasant societies, which then began to have certain surpluses to invest, among other things, in building their houses in stone, as is seen in other peninsular areas [49].



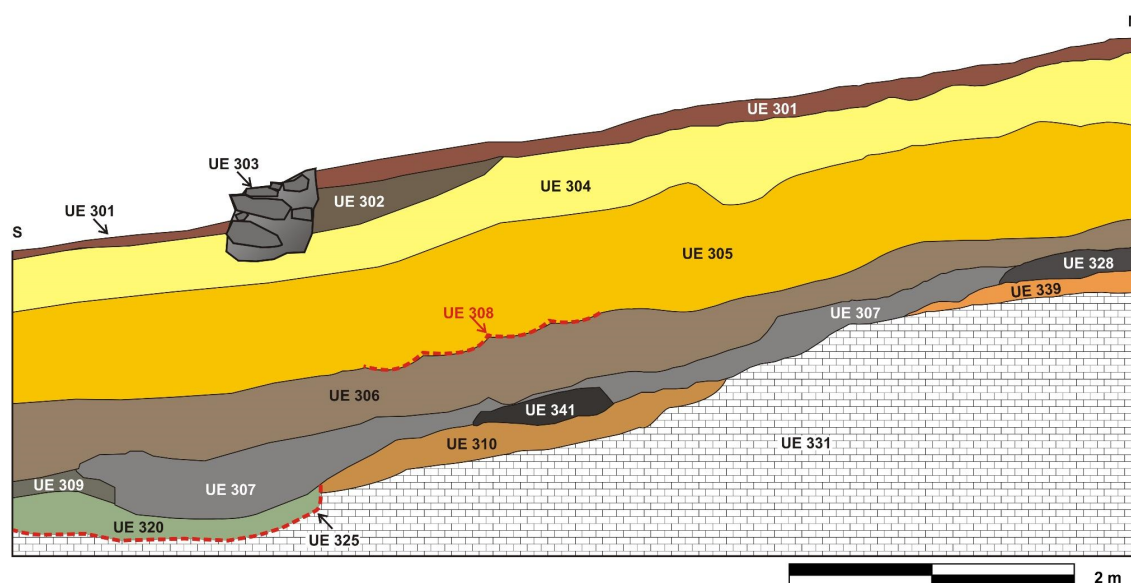
**Figure 2.** Peasant timber building from XIII ct. Excavation in 2017.

### *3.2. The Genealogy of the Landscape in the Long Term: Spaces of Agricultural Use in the Long Term, the Corvas (Vigaña)*

Another micro-territorial research carried out by our team is the study of the mid-mountain village of Vigaña, in the Pigüena valley, in Asturias. Over the course of twelve years, a complex research protocol was implemented that intervened in different sites of the territory, making it possible to trace the genealogy of this mountain landscape from the 4th millennium BC to the present day [2,18,50–52]. This section focuses on one of the stratigraphic sections carried out in the site of Las Corvas (Figure 1), which is very illustrative of the type of diachronic information that can be obtained with archaeological interventions in terraces and fields. The site of Las Corvas is located at the bottom of a small watercourse, the Val.le'l Pandu, where the fields of the village of Vigaña were traditionally located; the habitat area is about 800 m from this site. This area stands out for being sheltered from the north winds, making it a warm area suitable for growing cereals, mainly maize and potatoes, which were the crops grown there until the 1970s, when they were abandoned in favour of pasture and grass, which are still grown today. Small terracing systems are distributed throughout the valley, both to facilitate cultivation and to separate the plots of land belonging to different owners. Although terraces are more common in the lower part of the small valley, in the higher areas they alternate with a system of separation based on boundary stones. Also associated with this agricultural practice is the presence of a water channel that runs from the upper part of the valley to the bottom, which allows the different plots of land used for growing maize to be irrigated.

In order to understand the construction processes of these terracing systems and to attribute an absolute chronology to them, an archaeological excavation was carried out on one of these terraces, where the existence of an important stratigraphic power was foreseeable and which, in addition, had the attraction of being located close to a fortified settlement from the Iron Age, which opened up the possibility of locating fields associated with this site. The stratigraphy provided by the cut revealed that the cultivation terrace consisted of no more than two courses of stones set on a bone, against which loose soil accumulated, creating a flatter surface favourable for cultivation. The terrace was built on a deep package of sediments with a clayey matrix which, in some areas, were up to two metres deep. This is presumed to be related to depositional processes favoured by the action of the water from the irrigation canal, which, throughout the 17th to 19th centuries, favoured the superimposition of these clayey materials from the upper part of the valley and deposited them on the plots located at the bottom. The archaeological materials associated with this UE 305 indicate this chronology of use, while those associated with the cultivation terrace are limited to very modern materials with a chronological ascription of the 20th century. The geoarchaeological studies carried out on this sediment package insist on the abundance of water, and it has been possible to document furrows similar to irrigation channels in the western profile of the area of intervention (UE 308).

At lower levels, the sedimentological dynamics change: UE 306 was also a clayey matrix soil, but with abundant organic matter, of little thickness and with the presence of ceramic remains that were not very diagnostic, although clearly ancient. Geoarchaeological studies indicate that this may have been an area of extensive agriculture associated with the nearby fortified site, as attested by radiocarbon dating on some charcoal that points to a chronology of the Early Iron Age. This agricultural stratum is superimposed on a collapse of medium and large stones (UE 307), which occupied the whole of the excavated sector and was associated with a large number of charcoals and some handmade ceramic materials with a rough appearance which were very fragmented and eroded (Figure 3).

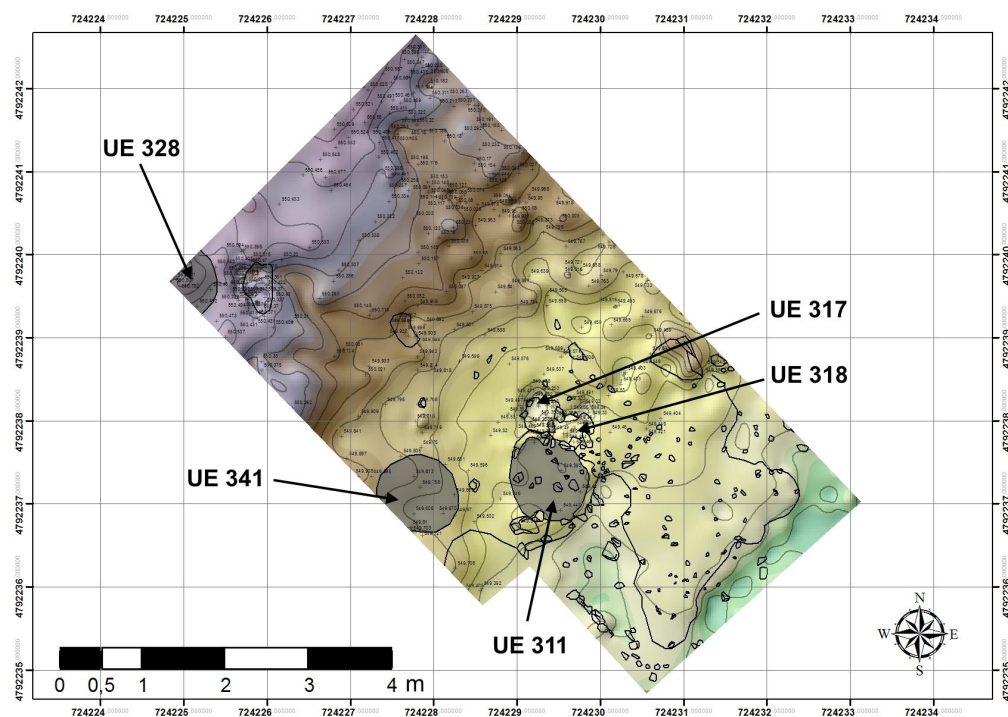


**Figure 3.** West profile of Las Corvas, Vigaña 2012.

This collapse level sealed a hearth in the northwest area of the archaeological test pit, associated with a floor level. The hearth, in an excellent state of preservation, had a sub-circular shape with a diameter of 90 cm and was delimited by small stones and clay that reinforced its walls. A large quantity of burnt wood was preserved inside, corresponding to species of hazel and oak (UE 311). Two pits of different sizes were documented that were associated with the hearth, filled with stones, one of which was a fragment of a hand mill. These pits (UEs 317 and 318) would have some function associated with the hearth, although they have different chronologies, as they cut into each other. The hearth was built on a level of trodden clay floor with small stones (UE 316), which extended over the entire excavated area. To the west and south, this horizon was cut by negative units corresponding to possible ditches that delimited an occupation space (Figure 4). The type of constructive structure associated with these levels is not clear, although it could well be a hut erected with wooden posts, as indicated by the semicircular imprints in the ditch that delimits the structure to the south.

The extension of the excavation to the north allowed for the observation of the general extension of the collapse (UE 307), and it was found that it had a significant slope. Two other hearths of different construction typology were documented under the collapse. One of them, located in the northwest corner of the excavated area (EU 328), was a charcoal patch laid on a trodden clay floor, with no stones at its base or other delimiting elements. Its thin thickness indicates a very limited use over time. The third hearth (UE 341) was recognised in the western profile, very close to the first documented hearth. With a diameter of 1 m and a depth of 13 cm, it was a small basin made in the ground without any kind of external reinforcement, inside which small limestone stones were found.

The three hearths rested on a staggered floor, which was the result of some work to prepare the hillside. The substrate was worked to create two small platforms formed by the same geological material removed. This level was only 10 cm thick in some areas, while in other parts, where hearth UE 328 was located, it was up to 30 cm thick. Three post holes have been documented in this floor, which could be related to some construction associated with the floor and hearths. Unfortunately, the dimensions of the excavation sector did not offer the necessary amplitude to recognise its formal parameters.



**Figure 4.** Plan of the intervention carried out in Las Corvas, Vigaña 2012.

With regard to the documented movable materials, they are scarce and inexpensive. Only a mill hand and a ceramic fragment under the collapse and above ground level were recovered. The pottery is coarsely handmade. The dating of these three hearths dates back to the 4th millennium BC, making it one of the few open sites located in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula from this period.

In addition to the exceptional location of the Neolithic site in the lower levels of the stratigraphic section, the most relevant aspect of the intervention is that it allows for the recording of different moments of domestic, agricultural and livestock use in this area, making it possible to identify the major transformations of the landscape due to the effect of anthropic action: there are moments of great intensity on the territory from the Neolithic to the Iron Age; however, the area was abandoned during the Roman period and the Middle Ages, and a new agricultural activity was recorded from the 17th century until the 20th century, when it was used as a space for livestock farming. Undoubtedly, this qualitative and quantitative information allows for the understanding of the genealogy of the landscape and the stratigraphic complexity, to identify the work processes that shaped the territory and to give a voice to the peasantry that played a leading role in these processes.

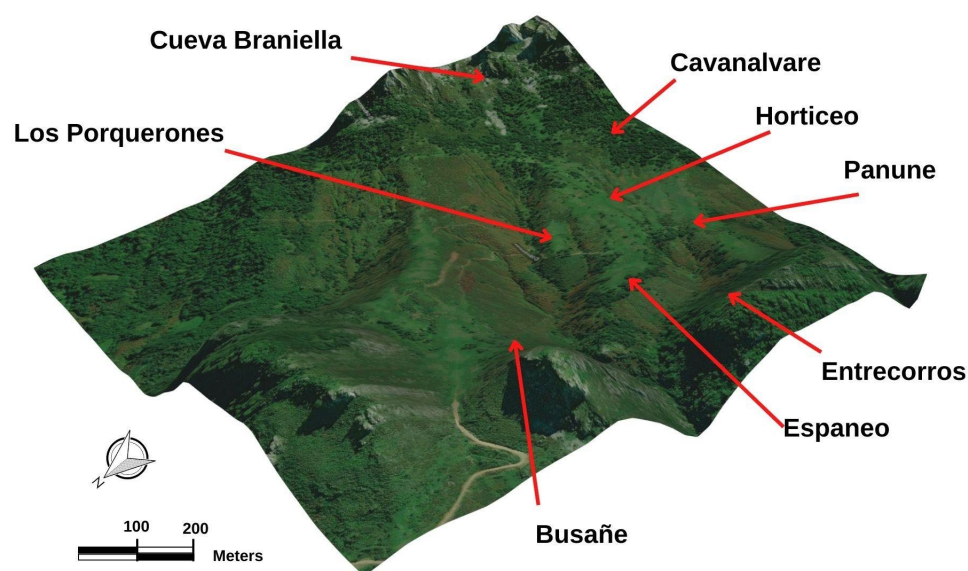
### *3.3. The Genealogy of the Landscape in the Long Term: Spaces of Livestock Use in the Long Term, Andrúas*

In the last three years, the research group has focused its efforts on archaeologically documenting different areas of collective use and communal property. Particularly relevant for this purpose have been the micro-territorial studies of large areas of high mountain pasture. These places are characterised by the presence of numerous seasonal livestock settlements, associated with different transhumant practices in which collective management forms have prevailed.

Andrúas is one of the two micro territories in which the research group has implemented agrarian archaeology (Figure 1). It is a mountain area, at an altitude of over 1000 m in the Cantabrian Range, which is used communally by ten local communities that share rights of use and practise a transhumance of the valley: Pedroveya, La Rebollá, Bermiego, Tene, Pirueño, Agüeras, Villamexín, San Martín, Serandi and Villanueva de Santu Adriano.



During the fieldwork, much of the local knowledge of these communities—including the toponymy, with the different local variants, the traditional forms of management or the cosmovision that the communities have of this space—was compiled. Various written sources have been accessed, including the first references to this area in a document dating from the 12th century AD [53], which mentions a series of livestock farming areas, four of which are located in this study area (Ortizeto, Coua, Iohanni and Panonin). From the 16th century to the present day, a series of ordinances have been preserved that show the rights of collective use that, with minor variations, have survived to the present day. Thus, the communities of Bermiego, Tene, Pirueño and Agüeras maintain their rights to seasonal livestock settlements during the summer months in Horticeo, Panune, Espaneo and Los Porquerones; Villamexín, San Martín, and Villamueva de Santu Adrianu do the same in the places of Entrecorros, Espaneo and Busañe; and those of Pedroveya, La Rebollá and Serandí share rights of use throughout the year, which are regulated collectively by means of the “vecera”—a livestock management model where collective herds are formed and cared for by the whole community in a system of shifts (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** 3D model of Andrúas and toponymy collected.

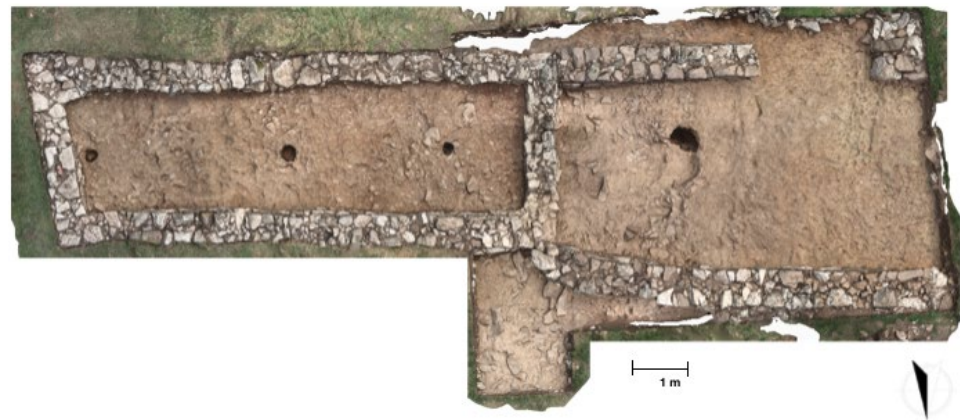
The surface survey documented more than forty livestock structures in the seasonal settlements of Horticeo, Panune, Entrecorros, Espaneo, Los Porquerones and Busañe. Of these, only two constructions are still standing, one belonging to the inhabitants of La Rebollá and the other to Villanueva de Santu Adrianu. The latter is one of the best preserved examples of vernacular mountain architecture.

The site of the hut of Busañe (the ancient bust of Iohanni in mediaeval documentation) [54] was the area selected for archaeological intervention. Specifically, we selected one of the ruined structures that had been documented during the surface survey.

The first levels of the excavation correspond to the reuse of the collapse of a dwelling as the exterior patio of a more modern construction. The material remains associated with this structure (small bowls, jugs and pots in the local tradition) indicate a chronotypological stage of the 18th–19th–20th centuries. Most of the building remains scattered around the area and mentioned in written sources correspond to this period.

The second phase of use is a large building with at least two rooms. Despite the existence of two large looters’ pits, part of a hearth was preserved. Both the material remains and the radiocarbon dating indicate a synchronous use of the two rooms between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period (15th–16th centuries AD). Among the already processed organic matter, the presence of abundant remains of hawthorn, especially the remains of charred seeds, indicates a use of branches as fuel and as construction material

for the roof. There were also the remains of hazelnut shells and a charred chestnut, which are noteworthy (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Plan of the intervention carried out in Busañe, Andruás 2020.

The dimensions of the structure (about  $14 \times 4$  m) with two distinct rooms, together with the material remains, especially the presence of coins and hazelnut and chestnut shells, allow the interpretation of this phase of occupation with a stable use, something that differs from the traditional livestock uses associated with the transhumance of the valley in the modern/present-day period. The layout of the collapse and its subsequent fitting out to create a grazing area seem to indicate an intentional ruin of the house. In the written documentation, there are references to an attempt at stable settlement, which was finally demolished after a conflict with the local communities, restoring the communal livestock farming uses of the area. This is a common practice in the lawsuits in this area, seen again in both the 18th and 20th centuries, although in these cases, it was associated with conflicts over livestock use between the local communities.

The third phase of the occupation of this space must be associated with prehistoric times, specifically with three different moments of use of the space: one in the early Bronze Age, another in the Chalcolithic and another during the first Neolithic occupation of the area.

Immediately below the mediaeval levels, an important phase was documented which contained numerous materials chronologically associated with prehistoric times: handmade ceramics with reductive firing, a circular bronze earring and abundant remains of lithic tools. This level is associated with a hollow-bottomed construction with a prepared cobble floor and four post holes. The dimensions were not determined, as they exceeded the limits of the archaeological intervention, but they did exceed  $30 \text{ m}^2$ . This reveals a longhouse type construction, the western part of which was excavated at the geological level. The dating of the stone pebble floor preparation places this construction in the Chalcolithic period.

Below these levels, taking advantage of a small hollow in a natural limestone outcrop, the remains of a hearth that has been dated to the 4th millennium BC have been documented. This occupation must be seen in relation to the first presence of the Neolithic groups that began to transform the Cantabrian landscapes.

As with other productive areas of agrarian societies under investigation, mountain pastures are revealing themselves to be places with a complex superposition of phases of occupation, with changes and resilience in the models of use, but always with an important centrality in the economies of the socio-ecosystems of the local communities. Moreover, the possibility of combining archaeological documentation with written documentation from mediaeval times and anthropological work allows a deeper delve into the forms of management and governance models, as well as the great complexity of the forms of ownership and the use of these spaces. Traditional uses have been maintained up to the present day and have generated important conflicts, especially with the imposition of paradigms linked to liberalism since the 18th century; this meant a continuous friction

between traditional uses and the legislation generated by the liberal states, which is still very active not only in these mountain areas, but also in a large part of the rural areas of the Iberian Peninsula, which must be the unavoidable starting point when considering new models of territorial management.

#### 4. New Narratives and New Forms of Heritage Management

The examples given above have allowed for a deepened knowledge of the formation of landscapes, and although bio- and geoarchaeological studies play an important role in this type of research, collaboration with local communities has been no less important. The previous anthropological and ethnoarchaeological work allows for an understanding of the traditional forms of land management: from agricultural and livestock farming practices to the forms of governance related to them. All this local ethno-ecological knowledge has been incorporated into the research and, as with toponymic studies, allows for the understanding of how local societies understand the territory and the tools they use for their daily management [38,50].

Thus, the holistic approach to landscapes and local communities provides a dense knowledge of territorial management that has made it possible to generate narratives in which, far from continuing to consider the peasantry as a social group without decision-making capacity or agency, give them a leading role in the management of space that makes it possible to generate new historical narratives about the memory of the territories. In this way, the present is linked to the past in a line of continuity that binds the peasantry to its territory and its history; the new narratives that are proposed cannot be made on the margins of these communities, who are the ones who really understand the territory. This dialogue between the past and the present has made it possible to generate alternative discourses that question the idea of “natural” landscapes; the research allows the strengthening of the idea that landscape is a social construct, the result of the dynamic and long-term relationship between a human group and an area, and focuses on the complexity of access to resources and their collective management. This implies giving prominence to local communities as “makers” of the landscape, which is why it is essential to work with them from different points of view and through different activities, involving them in this knowledge and, as much as possible, in its management.

Moreover, the territories that are the subject of this research suffer the rigours of rural depopulation, so problems related to local development and environmental management have filtered into political agendas in the last decade, which has stimulated the emergence of alternative proposals in the form of territorial planning, with a greater role for self-management and the direct involvement of local communities.

The necessary reorientation of rural policies has revived reflections on what measures should be applied in these poorly exploited areas and what their economic future should be like; some initiatives propose an economic reorientation based on new industries, forms of exploitation of an ecological-productivist nature, or emerging energy sectors which, however, may have a high environmental cost. In the face of these dynamics, a wide range of reactions and initiatives are increasingly common, emerging from the heart of rural communities and denouncing these policies for their aggression towards the landscape or the erosion of traditional forms of use. The emerging proposals turn their attention to their own ways of managing the local space, claiming more sustainable productive activities and cultural and ecological values associated with the territory, which this research helps to enhance by giving them complexity and historical depth.

As a way of contributing to this revaluation of local knowledge and the construction of new alternatives in the rural environment, and in parallel with the research projects, various actions have been developed that not only contribute to transmitting the results of this research, but also aspire to advance a true co-construction of knowledge, involving local communities in research activity and balancing scientific and local knowledge by establishing links and connections between them through participatory projects.

#### 4.1. *La Ponte-Ecomuséu: An Experimental Process to Connect Academic and Local Interests*

La Ponte means “bridge” in the Asturian language. It is not an arbitrary choice. It refers to a well known infrastructure that links two sides: separate shores that need, for some reason, to be connected. As researchers working in rural territories and close to local communities, there was this need for connection. It was hoped that the knowledge acquired through the research processes would have an impact on those rural areas. A “bridge” was needed, but how to build it?

Different solutions were imagined, but the one that seemed most interesting on a theoretical, conceptual and practical level, and in terms of coherence with the lines of research implemented, was the ecomuseum. Ecomuseums are dynamic institutions that conserve and interpret the tangible and intangible heritage of a defined territory (Supplementary Materials [www.youtube.com/watch?v=7s\\_b65S-f8E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7s_b65S-f8E), accessed on 10 October 2022). According to Davis [55], an ecomuseum is “A museum that demands action by the community to conserve its own material culture and natural heritage within the boundaries of its geographical area or territory”. They are museums of time and space that serve to conserve and interpret all elements of the environment (social, cultural and natural) to establish the thread of continuity with the past and provide a sense of belonging [55,56]. Although each ecomuseum is unique depending on its location and community, there are some general defining characteristics originally described by Davis [55] and modified by Corsane et al. [57], among which are highlighted their implantation in a defined territory, their work with heritage, memory and local communities or their open and cooperative structure.

The ecomuseum was ultimately that infrastructure—that bridge needed to deploy a type of situated research, connected with the territory itself and the people who live there. But it is not only that, it is a self-conscious initiative that seeks to build environments of practices in which to apply knowledge and establish a dialogue of knowledge from research, but also act as an “experimental process”.

La Ponte began to work along these lines between 2011 and 2013, setting up an initial legal infrastructure (adopting the charity formula) and economic infrastructure (self-managed), which allowed the generation of the first work contracts and the initiation of new lines of work in three main areas: the management of local heritage, its conservation and research. This orientation of the ecomuseum towards the social, while being built from scientific experience, led to its description as a social enterprise based on knowledge [58,59], thus calling for transfer processes from the University not strictly based on technology or company profit, but on the humanities and cooperation with the territories, as tools of social innovation [60].

Since those early years, the ecomuseum has consolidated a basic structure of its own management, administration and research. After almost ten years of work, the ecomuseum has a permanent working group (some locals, some academics) on different projects and networks: from the most local to the most international, through European programmes such as Creative Europe or Erasmus+ (Figure 7). The ecomuseum develops important research work covering different fields: from archaeology to oral history, paying special attention to collective memory and work with the local community. In terms of heritage management, the group with which it works is diverse and includes publicly and privately owned assets, around which different types of interpretative activities are organised, such as guided tours, meetings, conferences and talks [61]. In order to gain access to these sites, different agreements have been reached with each agent (Catholic Church, regional and local administration, neighbours). A legal precedent has thus been created in which university-local community cooperation leads to the creation of a “heritage community”, as defined in the Faro Convention. In this sense, the work carried out with La Ponte-Ecomuséu has received various awards, including the international LCD Award in 2016 and the Hispania Nostra award for good practices in cultural heritage in 2019, perhaps the most important in this field in Spain. In conclusion, La Ponte-Ecomuséu is an experimental process that allows for a connection between academic and local interests. These

hybridisation processes allow for learning and reflection on the work of our team regarding scientific practices in a permanent dialogue with the local sphere. They allow us to practise, in epistemological terms, what Donna Haraway called “situated knowledge” [62].



**Figure 7.** Example of working methodology with La Ponte-Ecomuseum. Collecting oral memory from the community.

#### 4.2. “ConCiencia Histórica”: Co-Construction of Knowledge through Archaeology and Local Knowledge

One of the main vectors of the project was to focus attention on children and young people, promoting knowledge of the rural world in which they are integrated, discovering the heritage values of their environment and encouraging the creation of identity elements that help to counteract powerful urban references against rural ones. This is how the ConCiencia Histórica project was launched in 2018, initially promoted by La Ponte and the Balmonte de Miranda educational centre, which has been joined by various agents from the local social fabric of the territories researched (associations, administrations, companies . . . ) and new educational centres (such as the one in Proaza). It was awarded two grants for the promotion of Scientific, Technological and Innovation Culture from the Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT) (Supplementary Materials).

The Balmonte Public School has around thirty pupils in a municipality with 1600 inhabitants, a mountainous area suffering the rigours of depopulation and ageing. The school has implemented project-based education. It participates in various service-learning activities for the community and in STEAM projects (interdisciplinary projects based on the teaching of science, technology, arts and mathematics, working on curricular content as well as skills, attitudes and behaviours). This opened up the possibility of actively collaborating with the educational community through the design of a proposal in which archaeology, the scientific method and the ethno-historical and ethno-ecological knowledge of the municipality would become the cornerstone of the pedagogical process [63].

In each school year, a historical or ethnographic theme is developed around which the school’s educational project revolves. The proposal is defined in collaboration with the teaching staff and is related to La Ponte’s research topics. The first year was the study

of the Monastery of Balmonte, a centre of mediaeval and modern power very close to the town where the school is located. The second year was devoted to oral tradition, and the third year was oriented towards water as a resource.

Once the theme has been decided, joint work is carried out on the design of the contents to be dealt with and adapted to the different educational levels. The experience involves everything from the compilation of bibliographical and ethnohistorical information on the chosen theme to the proposal for the enhancement of some elements, including the archaeological excavation of a site (Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** “ConCiencia Histórica”. Students in an archeological excavation.

At the beginning of the project in each academic year, a motivational activity is carried out with the participation of the entire educational community: teachers, families and pupils. The activity consists of a visit to one of the sites where La Ponte works archaeologically. This experience allows a first approach to archaeological activity, both to the research methodology and to the conditions in which the interventions are carried out. The location of the sites gives rise to the treatment of some topics related to different subjects of the curriculum: geographical and environmental aspects, territorial limits, traditional architecture, primary economic activities, etc. This first contact with the archaeological practice gives way to the second phase of the project: the realisation of didactic workshops designed in relation to the subjects of the curriculum that allow the teaching of different types of scientific studies, as well as ethnographic and cultural knowledge. The first block of workshops has a specifically scientific and technological orientation, trying to introduce students to this type of study through the analysis of the remains located in the archaeological interventions. Physical anthropology, zooarchaeology, 3D modelling of archaeological pieces, and anthracological and carpological analyses are carried out. The second block is designed with the revaluation of local ethnographic and cultural knowledge in mind: pottery modelling and firing, making bread in a traditional oven and a workshop on oral tradition and music [63]. The aim of these workshops is to achieve a balance between both types of knowledge, scientific and traditional, when constructing the theoretical tools on which the construction of knowledge is based.

Finally, the main activity of the project, complemented by all the activities described above, revolves around carrying out an archaeological excavation either in a heritage site or in the village itself. This gives all the students the opportunity to participate in all the phases of an intervention: administrative procedures, planning of the surveys, the design of the grid, the method of excavation and recording of information, the sieving of the soil and the management and study of the materials. This allows for the addressing of various subjects of the curriculum, from mathematics to language, in a practical and cross-cutting way.

The general objective is to turn the archaeological excavation into the main activity of the project, taking the step from “playing at excavating”, an activity previously carried out in various workshops recreating some archaeological remains (a medieval tomb, a megalithic burial mound), to “excavating while having fun” [64], actively participating in all the processes of archaeological research, with the pupils being the protagonists in the construction of historical knowledge—a clear commitment to the gamification of learning through a real archaeological experience.

## 5. Discussion

One of the challenges facing society today is the sustainability of resource management and the profound environmental, climatic and global change being experienced. Associated with this is concern for the progressive imbalance between the occupation of urban and rural areas, as well as the depopulation of the latter in some territories and local development. All this has favoured a multifaceted reflection on the use of resources, generating new proposals that give value to traditional forms of management that, less than a decade ago, were considered a reflection of a backward society. Today, however, they are being re-evaluated as a possible response to environmental problems. Included in this re-evaluation is the ethnobiological and ethno-historical knowledge that local communities have of the territory, which is considered the unavoidable starting point for the redefinition of new forms of resource management.

La Ponte believes that research based on the concept of agrarian archaeology can contribute to providing answers to these social challenges. As explained in the preceding pages, the application of multidisciplinary analyses to the study of landscapes, using all the information offered by sources (from geographical to bioarchaeological, including documentary and toponymic sources), favours the generation of scientific-historical knowledge of a diachronic nature that allows the tracing of the genealogy of landscapes. In this way, historical depth is given to the processes that have contributed to the generation of the landscape over millennia, which favours the accumulation of a dense knowledge by local communities that is associated with its management, and which is cultural capital at risk of disappearing in parallel with the abandonment of the rural environment.

Landscapes are associated with productive practices, constructive elements and forms of governance and ownership that are dynamic, but also resilient, since they have had the capacity to adapt to new circumstances and problems, changing their functionality. Through their study, visibility is given to local communities and the capacity they have had to intervene in the territory and transform it, analysing the heterogeneity of the peasantry as a social group while highlighting their capacity for agency when it comes to the management of the territory and the complexity that these processes entail.

Both the scientific information generated by historical-archaeological research and the dense local knowledge of local communities is a cultural heritage that needs to be valorised through innovative management models that put local communities at the centre and give special relevance to heritages that are generally forgotten in favour of monumental heritage.

Models of heritage management based on active participation give priority to proposals coming from the rural environment itself so as to encourage intergenerational relations, favouring the transmission of local knowledge while introducing the importance of the

scientific method and giving special relevance to working with new generations in the education system.

## 6. Conclusions

From the scientific point of view, the experience of the ecomuseum and the ConCiencia Histórica project allows for the opening up of a perspective of experimental and problematising research to build what can be called an “epistemic community”. These are initiatives that are committed to hybridising the research process with the social process itself; they are laboratories where different cultural dynamics are observed, but which become environments for learning and reflection on scientific practice in a recursive process. This experimental collaboration [65] or experimental dialogue [66] dilutes the separation between observation and experimentation with the aim of building ethnographic infrastructures which allow the discovery of new conceptual languages and the rethinking of personal practices, in addition to promoting an open science close to citizens, collaborating with different “epistemic partners” through participation, modelling of the objects of study, debate around the research topics with local communities, etc., which also alters self-perception and invites reflexivity from La Ponte’s counterpart [67]. In short, it is about generating environments and infrastructures where researchers ask new questions that previously were not even imagined [68]. It is in these environments, both micro and experimental, that gaps open up in the academic disciplines themselves, as well as their languages and practices. As an example, heritage here is to be understood as a social process of meaningful construction [69–72]: not an object or a commodity, but a space of debate, conflict, transformation, learning and struggle, with no place for idealised and substantialist definitions. It is also—and this is what La Ponte-ecomuseum demands—a space for social innovation [60].

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=644kEGsc\\_TE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=644kEGsc_TE), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUMDYep-XFk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUMDYep-XFk), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=7s\\_b65S-f8E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7s_b65S-f8E) (accessed on 10 October 2022).

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