Constructing territories, deconstructing the landscape: a conclusion

by Igor Santos Salazar

The aim of these conclusions is to draw out the main issues linked to the study of territoriality (and territorialities) from a critical point of view, taking into account all the complexities that the subject entails. To interpret political landscapes, to investigate the construction of a territory in the Middle Ages is, thus, to approach a set of methodological problems that have to do with the deconstruction of written sources; with the construction of the archaeological record; with the interpretation of the interaction, in all its complexity, of human societies with the space they inhabit and of the material and written traces which have survived to the present day of those interactions.

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To discuss the history of political landscapes, the construction of a territory, is to confront historical landscapes in a dynamic way, seeking the relationship between its spatial dimension (the stage) and the social construction (the screenplay) that transforms this same space by virtue of the actions and interests, the victories and defeats, of all the actors called to act in a given drama. Throughout this volume, therefore, the focus has not been on a univocal approach to the concepts and complexities that lie behind the construction of early medieval political landscapes. And, although some definitions have been proposed, these have not exhausted the methodological problems and research strategies that have been followed to tackle the study of landscapes by several authors, both archaeologists and historians.

There are many and very different variables documented throughout Europe during the period between the sixth and eleventh centuries. Interpretations can be conducted studying material records and written sources; this volume is a vivid example of this variegated world that was constructed in a thousand different ways and through processes that saw the protagonism of many different actors: the mills, churches and monasteries; the rural communities of the north of present-day Portugal, León and Cantabria; the members of the Frankish aristocracies and the free men and women of the Italic kingdom, not forgetting the participants in the liturgy of power in West Frankia, although it is true that throughout its pages, this book privileges, in a very particular way, the landscapes of the Iberian plateau and the northern fringes of modern Portugal.

The volume has emphasized the importance of contextual and relational analyses, avoiding any teleology. What meaning does a landscape have for the societies that lived in a given territory? For their elites? For their communities? For the central authorities that governed at different times the different places studied here? An interpretative approach was also designed to answer other questions linked to the problems that articulate the landscape according to the political, social and economic needs of these same elites and communities: What is a castle? What is a central place? How are they defined and identified? And, above all, in relation to what? For whom? Since when? How far?

Some examples serve to thread together more than one contribution. This is the case of the landscapes chosen for the resolution of conflicts, a topic addressed by Giuseppe Albertoni and Mariel Pérez. Their contributions show how justice also needs spaces to become public (i.e., to make the resolution of a conflict known to a given society) from Italy to León. These spaces are fundamental pillars of the stage in which politics becomes concrete and visible; becomes a "performance" and, therefore, are not chosen by chance: a city, a church, ancient baths… have been appearing as stages used in a large part of Europe (and even in India, as Iñaki Martín Viso has shown with his Asian perambulations, which have given a touch of *Global History* to his chapter). The churches studied by Mariel Pérez worked as focus of hierarchy and organization of the social landscape. Their control often led to bitter conflicts, creating, at the same time, a specific territoriality. Nevertheless, the landscape(s) does not always change according to the actors who appear in it, from serfs to kings: is the grammar of

the power which manipulated the landscape(s) to create very different realities, also for a funerary point of view, as has been underlined, for Galicia, by José Carlos Sánchez, Laura Blanco and Marcos Fernández.

The different spaces evoked in the Italian judicial proceedings (*placiti*) range from the Alpine villages to the capital, the city of Pavia, and in the succession of their sessions the people involved find themselves participating in an enormous political landscape, which is known as *regnum Italiae*. Vice versa, in Galicia and León, where the *iussio* refers to the kings too, the judicial spaces do not create an extensive political community: the judgments nevertheless show an unequal community of neighbors, of rulers and ruled, moving in a space recognized and recognizable by all, which does not usually exceed the limits of a single territory, county or diocese (on these issues, see also the contribution on Galician churches and cemeteries written by the group of archaeologists lead by José Carlos Sanchez Pardo). Similarly, if a village can be home to a king, not all landscapes are royal landscapes. It suffices to compare once again Albertoni's Italy with Andrade's Galicia: in both authorities were able to configure spaces of representation of its power that has very different characteristics depending on the ways in which, at any given moment, kings or emperors were able to represent their own political performances.

A case of this type has been analysed by Adrien Bayard through the descendants of the family – the Guilhemids, which descended from Thierry I or Theodoric I d'Autun, a cousin of Charlemagne – which was part of the highest social ranks of the Carolingian aristocracy. Concentrating on their social and political agency, Bayard proposes how their power was able to shape a Carolingian landscape into a "princely" landscape by proceeding to the deconstruction of spaces which were, previously, royal. In order to achieve such a significant transformation, the Guilhemid initiated a process of manipulation of all the political and symbolic instruments available to their kin, through the construction and domination of a network of places of power, from monasteries (and their relics) to the city of Clermont.

However, many of the essays in this book give little weight in their interpretations to central authority. Too often, it has remained as an elliptical protagonist, more assumed as a background than directly studied when it comes to altering, constructing or modifying political landscapes, in part because of the intention of many authors to show small-scale processes, as well as their ambiguities. And even when decoding these spaces that seem to be articulated from within or by the will of communities that are never described beyond very nebulous contours, the concept of weak statehood has not been used.

Among the essays centered on political power in the landscape one of the most spectacular examples is the case of Vetricella (Tuscany, Italy), studied from an archaeological point of view by Giovanna Bianchi. The sole case in which the action of a strong authority, such as that which defines the Italic sovereigns, can be touched by hand on the articulation of rural landscapes from the 9th century onwards. An example that gains in interpretative depth when compared with other central places, such as the castles of the Iberian

Plateau, where power (but what kind of power?) combines defense and authority, political organization of space and military duties, through the semiotics of fortification, as in the case of study afford by Daniel Justo Sánchez. Taking into account examples located in the kingdom of León, Justo analyses, between the 10th and 11th centuries, the different vocabulary used in Leonese parchments to define fortified spaces and in which ways these structures were used as spatial markers for the communities who lived nearby.

From a conceptual point of view, it is not surprising that the dominant note of the entire volume is that of a preference for decoding political processes in medieval landscapes by resorting to the study of the micro-politics of some spaces characterized by their low political and social complexity (at least if we compare them with Constantinople or Cordoba, to mention but a few examples of social, economic and political complexity in tenth century). The contributions of Juan Antonio Quirós, Catarina Tente, Carlos Tejerizo-García, Juan Pablo López and Diego del Pozo, as well as that of Iñaki Martín, show complex and articulated territorialities in spaces well perceived by local societies that dialogue – not always peacefully – with those who held authority over communities whose social, political and economic characteristics are very difficult to trace.

In fact, Juan Antonio Quirós has gone further. Recognizing elite residences as one of the major challenges of early medieval archaeology, has attempted to relate micro and macro-politics, explicitly claiming Microhistory as useful historiographical tool to decode those social and political relations over the early medieval landscape. Quirós claims historians such as Angelo Torre, following, in particular, his reflections on the "creation" of places, warning, at the same time, of the enormous methodological issues created by the profound asymmetry which exists in the sources: the relevance and density of the aristocracies in the written record and the elusive and problematic definition of high-status settlement in material terms, introduce much turbulence in the studies of social practices and the exercise of power on the ground.

From this point of view, the case of the mills analyzed by Julio Escalona and Álvaro Carvajal is an example of how infrastructures can "create" territorialities. Both authors present watermills as a component of local political landscapes and as a proxy to power relations and political interactions within early medieval local communities. Through their example, we are faced with realities in which concepts experimented by the most recent historiography can also be useful to delve into the economic multi-functionality / political and social multi-responsibility that lies behind the mention of a mill in a single written record: I am referring to the concept *in the middle*, taken from the title of a book edited by Steffen Patzold and Carine van Rhijn, which they have dedicate to the Carolingian *presbiteri*.[1] Taking all this into considera-

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[1] *Men in the Middle: Local Priests in Early Medieval Europe*, Steffen Patzold, and Carine van Rhijn (eds.), Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016.

tion, mills could therefore be considered as a *technology in the middle*, that is to say, a technology which created intra-community and inter-community relations, between monasteries and local societies, between rural and urban markets, between "lords and peasants", to use an old-fashioned label: agglutinators of social and political action in different levels of decision-making on which their management relied, and delving into and creators of a "territoriality of flour", that is, the local landscapes that mills contributed to shape weaving together different resources and infrastructures.

And what about the case of the priests themselves: these men were complex social figures, not only from a religious point of view, who have been the focus of reflections as mediators and creators of territoriality on behalf of ecclesiastical powers, but often manipulated by lay powers, as Pablo Poveda has shown in his chapter, devoted to the interpretation of the mechanisms used by Visigothic bishops to ensure the control of the territorial structures under their charge, in particular rural churches. The *presbiter*, therefore, at the centre of the connections that make possible the weaving of an intricate network of relationships linking rural societies with each other and with the aristocracies active in the countryside and in urban spaces. Moreover, the priests were the instrument of the central authority to make its voice heard to the furthest corners of their polities, as Pablo C. Díaz essay has taught taking into account the processes documented, again, in Visigothic Spain.

In their works, many authors have sought territorial, political, social and economic logics to decode the landscape between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. I would like to end by recalling Marc Bloch. In his *The Historian's Craft*, the French author reminds us that History does not understand logics, nor coherent strategies that end with a triumphant reason. And he warns us of the danger of looking for the chimeras of success while many historical processes often ended in resounding failures. This is advice that we should always bear in mind when studying the history of landscapes, both from a material point of view and through written records.

The landscape, a veritable historical palimpsest, cannot be reduced to the teleological history of progress. Often, in the folds of failed processes, the history of their development can be hidden. This book demonstrates all this in a rich and problematic way through many examples from late antique and early medieval Western Europe.

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