

Agrarian Landscapes and the Toponymy of Mediterranean Europe. Catalonia as a Case Study^{*}

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Abstract

In the countries of the European Mediterranean region (and, specifically, in the territories in which the Romance languages are spoken today), a significant part of the historical toponymy has close links with the rural world and its agrarian activities. This is no chance happening as the first extensive agrarian colonization of these countries was carried out under the Roman Empire. It was also under the rule of this Empire that the *pagus* was created and became widespread: a legal (and not just a linguistic) concept that referred to the land which was to be farmed and cultivated. And the vestiges of this concept remain visible today in features such as the landscape and the toponymy.

In this paper, we wish to present the results of our examination of the links between the agrarian landscape and its toponymy at various points of the Iberian Peninsula. In so doing, we focus our study on a series of present-day place names in Catalonia, Aragon and Valencia. We analyse the features that these names have in common and the differences that they present. And, finally, we explain the general correlations that can be observed between these toponyms and certain landscape types or patterns.

1. Introduction

In the countries of Mediterranean Europe (and, specifically, in the areas in which Romance languages are spoken today), a significant part of the historical toponymy has close links with the rural world and its agrarian activities. This is no chance happening as the first, extensive, agrarian colonization of these countries was carried out under the Roman Empire. It was also under the rule of this Empire that the *pagus* was created and became widespread: a legal (and not just a linguistic) concept that referred to the land which was to be farmed and cultivated, and the vestiges of this concept remain visible today in features such as the landscape and the toponymy (Menéndez Pidal, 1952; Coromines, 1965).

In this paper we wish to present the results of our examination of the links between the agrarian landscape and its toponymy in various areas of the Iberian Peninsula. In so doing we focus our study on a series of present-day place names in Catalonia (given the fact that Catalonia is a specific example of a Mediterranean country in Europe). We analyse the features that these names have in common and the differences that they present. And, finally, we explain the general correlations that can be observed between these toponyms and certain landscape types or patterns.

2. Agrarian landscapes in Europe

In Europe, the process of territorial colonization is deeply rooted in its ancient history (Soria Puig, 1989: 31). In the fields of palaeontology and anthropology it is generally agreed that this process, which proceeded from the south to the north (from the shores of the Mediterranean towards the centre and the north of the continent), occurred in parallel with the spread of agriculture and the establishment of the first stable settlements. And that, in the zones of greatest

altitude and in those of highest latitude, the process occurred in close unison with the thawing of the ice fields and the retreat of the glaciers at the end of the last ice age (some ten thousand years ago).

In short: the spread of “agrarian culture” in Europe had the Mediterranean Sea as its point of reference and main axis (Braudel, 1976). The shores of this sea, despite their steep mountainous character, were the preferred environment for human settlement and they soon came to register very high densities in population. Archaeology shows us that agricultural activity was, in general, fundamental to these primitive human communities along the Mediterranean seaboard – and this, in spite the obstacles typically presented by the local geographic environment (the absence of large areas of flat cultivatable terrain; the steepness of the hill slopes; the aridity and general lack of surface water; the predominance of stony soils, and the existence of extensive areas of wet marshlands, unsuitable for farming).

3. The agrarian colonization reflected in the toponymy: some examples

Thanks to its marked physical character (geologists when referring to this part of Europe categorise it as a “subcontinent”), the Iberian Peninsula constitutes an ideal geographical environment for studying the correlation between a geographical landscape and its toponymy (Tort, 2006: 75–76). Its individuality is the result, to a large extent, of the location of the Peninsula at the *crossroads* of different geographical domains: between the European continent and the African continent, on the one hand, and between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, on the other. In addition, the fringe of mountains that runs across the northern, eastern and southern sides of the Peninsula (and which tectonically link up, to the north, with the Alps, and to the south, with the north African system of the Rif and Atlas mountain chains) helps to isolate the interior from the coastal lands, and to fragment the territory, turning it into a veritable *mosaic* of different, often self-sufficient, units (a unique characteristic, according to the region’s historians, of the Mediterranean world throughout its history).

Within this setting, the various protohistoric and historic colonizations (undertaken by the peoples of three different origins: central and northern Europe; the north of Africa, and the central and eastern Mediterranean) have been of great importance in the peninsula. These colonizations have left a considerable mark in terms of the linguistic heritage and, above all, on the toponymy. The origin of some of the peninsula’s toponyms of greatest geographical importance can be traced back to these ancient languages. And, often, they provide us with the yardstick by which the earliest settlers evaluated these lands. For example, the name of the river Ebro (the main river on the Mediterranean seaboard of the Peninsula) refers, in its original meaning (according to the accepted etymological interpretation), to the idea of *water*, a particularly scarce commodity in the Iberian lands (*OnoCat*, IV: 36–37).



Photo 1: River Ebro, near the place of Xerta, Tarragona (02-97-11)

A further example is the name Aran, given to one of the main valleys of the central Pyrenees. In this instance, the etymology of the word can be traced to the Basque word “aran”, meaning *valley*; evidence of the presence of this language, in protohistoric times, in the geographical heart of the Pyrenees (Coromines, 1965, I: 93–151) – in other words, alongside the highest massifs and peaks of this mountain chain, and at a considerable distance from the present-day dominions of the Basque language.



Photo 2: High valley of Aran, Lleida (04-93-03)

Particular emphasis should be given to the great impact of Roman colonization on the lands of the peninsula. It was also under the rule of the Roman Empire that the *pagus* was created and became widespread: a legal (and not just a linguistic) concept that referred to the land which was to be farmed and cultivated (DCECH, IV: 338–339, Spanish *pago*); and the vestiges of this concept remain visible today in features such as the language, the landscape and the toponymy. As far as the language is concerned, the Latin root *pagus* (whose original meaning was “the land”) is to be found at the base of a number of key words in the lexicon applied to the territory. For example: *país* (country, land), *paisaje* (countryside, landscape), *payés* (peasant farmer), *pago* (estate, property) – all of which can trace their roots to the aforementioned Latin word (DECLC, VI: 165–169, Catalan *pagès*).

Another Latin word, *campus*, constituted a way of referring generically to the “rural territory”. Its various forms in the Romance languages (*campo* in Spanish, *camp* in Catalan) maintain this meaning (DCECH, I: 791–792, *campo*). And the same root is, likewise, found in toponyms referring to the extensive territorial areas. Such are the cases of *Tierra de Campos* (the name given to one of the largest districts in Castilla-León); *Campo de Calatrava* and *Campo de Criptana*, in Castilla-La Mancha; and to the large district in southern Catalonia, *Camp de Tarragona*.



Photo 3: South border of Camp de Tarragona, not far from the Mediterranean Sea (09-99-14)

4. Agrarian landscapes and toponymy of Catalonia. Case studies

Within the Iberian Peninsula, we wish to centre our analysis on the territory of Catalonia for the following reasons:

- a) Its geographical diversity (representative in this respect of the whole peninsula) and its high degree of territorial cohesion, since the Middle Ages up to the present day.

- b) The importance of agriculture, livestock farming and forestry on the geography of Catalonia since ancient times.
- c) The linguistic homogeneity of the Catalan territory, with a Romance language, *Catalan*, which has retained its vitality despite being a minority language.
- d) The richness of Catalan toponymy, in which can be seen, in addition to Latin roots, the historical vestiges of various linguistic layers: pre-Roman, Germanic and Arabic.

4.1. The Pyrenees

The Pyrenees are the geographical setting for the formation of Catalonia as a sovereign political entity, based around the medieval *counties* (Solé Sabarís, 1958–1968, II: 25–30). The names of some of these counties allude, etymologically, to the tribes that had settled in the valleys of the Pyrenees before the Roman colonization: Cerdanya is a clear reference to the *kerretani* tribe (*OnoCat*, III: 356–360) while Berguedà alludes to the *bergistani* (*OnoCat*, II: 459–463, *Berga*). Other ancient toponyms allude to the presence of water, for example Urtx and Urgell (*OnoCat*, VIII: 152).

But probably the most common reference, in this geographical domain, is to farming (crops and livestock) and forestry (which, historically, according to Pierre Vilar, 1964, I: 237–259, has been the main resource of these lands). Here, a number of toponyms are particularly representative: Boí (in Latin *vallis bovinos*, the “valley of the cows”; *OnoCat*, II: 45–46); el Port del Comte (*port* meaning “upland pastures”; *DECLC*, VI: 718–723); Taüll (according to Coromines, from the ancient Basque *a-taúri*, “the people of the upland pasture village”; *OnoCat*, VII: 248); Castanesa (an allusion to an ancient chestnut wood, felled and turned into pasture; *Onocat*, III: 304).



Photo 4: Pyrenees landscape in the neighbourhood of Tremp, Lleida (08-97-09)

4.2. *The lands of the interior*

The lands of the interior, often identified as the Central Depression, are a broad geographical area that links the Pyrenees, in the north, with the Mediterranean coastal strip, to the east and the south (Solé Sabarís, 1958–1968, I: 97). Within this area, we find the wide plains of the Lleida region: geographically this is the most arid zone in Catalonia, with a complex network of irrigation channels, and its toponymy marked by the significant presence of names with an Arabic root – reflecting the persistence of Muslim rule in this area between the eighth and twelfth centuries (Coromines, 1965, I: 265).



Photo 5: Dry lands at Mas de Vinfaro, 15 km south the city of Lleida (01-97-12)

Many place names, therefore, make explicit reference to this situation. Examples include: Alfarràs (according to Coromines, *OnoCat*, II: 125, from the Arab root *al-frs*, “the place of the great harvest”); *Garrigues*, a name that alludes to a plant species, the *garric*, indicative of extreme aridity (a name derived from the Berber root of *akarrus*; *DECLC*, IV: 390–395, *garric*); Agramunt (“sterile mount, not suitable for cultivation”; *OnoCat*, II: 21–23); Montsec (“dry mount, without water”; *OnoCat*, V: 381); Ivars (“marshy lands”; *OnoCat*, IV: 454–456); and the three names, studied in depth by Coromines (1965–1970, II: 175–193), of Seix, Sas and Sardera (which share the common Latin root of *saxum*, believed to be applied to the idea of “a rocky, arid high plateau”). A further toponym that makes a clear allusion to the dryness of the country (in particular, before the introduction of modern irrigation mechanisms) is the broad Plans de Llenguaxeixuta, lying in the northeast of the city of Lleida.

4.3. *The Ebro valley*

The long Ebro valley seals off the Lleida plain in the south. Extending out in this same direction is the area of Catalonia with the most toponyms of Arabic origin, as mentioned in the previous section.

This geographical area is characterised on the whole by its aridity and the harshness of its climate. Only the river Ebro (a name that alludes to the idea of *water*, as mentioned earlier) serves as a counterpoint to the general drought conditions (Solé Sabarís, 1958–1968, III: 172–176). The banks of the river however are made up of highly productive irrigated lands (Ascó, Vinebre, Benissanet, Benifallet, Xerta, Aldover), as is the Delta.



Photo 6: Agricultural landscape in the low lands of river Ebro, Tarragona (03-96-27)

By contrast, both valley slopes are characterised by a predominance of dry farming landscapes, typified by Mediterranean crops (vines, olive trees, almond trees and cereals). Two key place names here are la Terra Alta and el Priorat. Finally, mention should be made of the rocky massifs to the south of the Ebro and traditionally referred to by the toponym of el Port: that is, the upland pastures grazed, during the summer months, by the flocks of sheep from the Ebro valley and the surrounding lands of Aragon and Valencia.



Photo 7: Dry farming landscape at Terra Alta, Tarragona (08-95-08)

4.4. The coastal and pre-coastal strips.

The coastal and pre-coastal strips comprise what in Catalonia is known as the *Mediterranean mountain chain*: that is, the area of land running parallel to the Mediterranean coast. In practice, after the Pyrenees and the interior, it is the third largest landscape in Catalonia. Today it is characterised by a high degree of urbanisation (derived from the fact that the main modern communication links in Catalonia run along this coastal fringe). Despite this circumstance, the dense urbanisation has not eradicated all signs of its long agrarian past, visible today in its toponymy.

A name of great importance in the northern sector of the pre-coastal lands is la Selva (Latin *silva*, woods; *DECLC*, VII: 756–759); the name alludes to what was one of the main wooded areas in Catalonia, standing halfway between Barcelona and Girona. By contrast, in the northern sector of the coastal strip, around the city of Tarragona, the outstanding name is el Camp: a rural zone *par excellence*, standing in marked contrast to what was the *urbe*; that is, Tarraco, the ancient Roman capital and, in its day, one of the main cities in the Iberian Peninsula (Tort, 2002: 44–50). Other place names referring to the dominant landscapes within the pre-coastal strip are Vallès (Latin *vallensis*, “country of valleys”) and Penedès (Latin *penitensis*, “country of small mountains”), according to Coromines (*OnoCat*, VII: 422–423): names that, in both cases, refer to physical conditions that historically facilitated the cultivation of the land. Above all, in contrast with the surrounding area that was more mountainous and which presented problems of inaccessibility.



Photo 8: The Riera de Caldes stream, in the central part of Vallès, Barcelona (06-02-29)



Photo 9: The small village of Subirats, in the Penedès region, Barcelona (02-97-16)

4.5. *El Empordà*

El Empordà is a region that lies in the extreme northeast of Catalonia which, owing to its physical characteristics, lies outside the main landscape areas described so far. The region comprises a plain that extends between the eastern limits of the Pyrenees and the sea and constitutes an enclave whose conditions are ideal for linking the Mediterranean and the inland areas. Known to the ancient Greeks, the Romans (A.D. 218) used it as the base for the colonization of the Iberian Peninsula. In fact, the name Empordà is derived from *emporion* (an ancient Greek word meaning “market”; *OnoCat*, IV: 53–55), which in turn gave us Empúries (the name of the settlement from which the colonization of the peninsula was begun).

Today are to be found numerous vestiges of the ancient colonization of these lands both in the landscape and in the toponymy of el Empordà. One of the most interesting is the presence of a long series of names given to settlements that include in the toponym the root *vila*: Vilabertran, Vilamalla, Vilamaniscle, Viladamat, Vilademuls. This root probably, refers to the Roman *villae* (although one that was transformed in the medieval period): the typical farms of the age (*OnoCat*, VIII: 42–56). Today, despite the urbanisation and tourism, el Empordà has managed to maintain a significant agrarian heritage in its landscape



Photo 10: Rural landscape in the south of Empordà, Girona (07-03-30)

4.6. *The Barcelona area*

The metropolitan region of Barcelona, with 4.5 million inhabitants, is home to two thirds of the population of Catalonia. It is, in fact, one of the largest metropolitan urban areas in the south of Europe. But this has not prevented agrarian landscapes of great interest (albeit increasingly marginal in nature) and of great historical import from surviving. Here, we should point out that the Pla de Barcelona, the name given to the plain on which the city of Barcelona stands, was once a territory that was almost completely under cultivation and populated with numerous *masías* (typical Catalan farmhouse), some of which have been preserved within today's urban fabric (Casassas, 1977).



Photo 11: A typical Mediterranean *masia*, in Badalona, a few kilometres north of Barcelona (07-96-23)

Outside the city, although in closely neighbouring areas, we should mention the lowlands of the Llobregat river valley (la Vall Baixa), as well as the mouth of the river (el Delta). Its landscapes, although subject to very strong urban pressures today, still maintain clear signs of their agrarian past (historically, and until no more than fifty years ago, these lands were the *great garden* of Barcelona). The name of el Prat de Llobregat, one of the largest towns in the region, refers to the ancient pasture lands (“prat”, Latin *pratum*; *OnoCat*, VI: 274–276).

To the north of Barcelona, the narrow strip known as el Maresme (a name that alludes to the idea of “flat lands adjacent to the sea”; *OnoCat*, V: 194–196) constitutes another of the large historical redoubts of agriculture in the zone, dedicated to intensive market gardening.



Photo 12: A view of lowlands of Llobregat valley, near el Prat de Llobregat, Barcelona (08-96-06)

5. Final reflections

Below, by way of a summary, we present the essential ideas that can be drawn from this study:

- a) The vestiges of agrarian landscapes (or landscapes that reflect the use of the lands for agriculture, livestock and/or forestry) are highly significant throughout the Iberian peninsula, for reasons linked to the geography and history of the territory itself. Against this background, the toponymy can serve as a highly useful tool for delimiting and analysing these landscapes – be it from the perspective of the present day (synchronic), or from that of history (diachronic).
- b) The territory of Catalonia, for geo-linguistic and historical reasons, constitutes a European setting that is especially suited to the study of the correlation between *toponymy* and *landscape*.
- c) Within the plurality and diversity of meanings that can be detected in the Catalan toponymy applied to the landscape, we should highlight the relevance of certain aspects above others. Here, we have stressed two of these. On the one hand, the mark left by the Roman agrarian colonization (important in extent and, in some zones, also in its depth). On the other hand, the juxtaposition and contrast that is reflected in certain aspects of the physical environment, and in its exploitation: aridity and drought contrasted with the availability of water; scarcity of extensive cultivatable lands contrasted with zones (exceptionally) with conditions that are ideal for agriculture; general tendency towards the predominance of steep, mountainous areas.

Note

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Abbreviations

- DECLC*: Coromines, Joan. 1979–1991.
DCECH: Coromines, Joan and José A. Pascual. 1980–1991.
OnoCat: Coromines, Joan. 1989–1999.

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