

Mediterranean Landscapes in Post Antiquity

New frontiers and new perspectives

edited by

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in collaboration with

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A Mediterranean mountain landscape: the transformation of the Frailes–Velillos Valley

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Abstract

Recent works, especially the archaeological excavation in the castle of Moclín (García 2011: 167-84) and the Mozarab necropolis of Tózar (Mattei 2014: 181-96), have set the historical focus on the, hitherto neglected, Frailes-Velillos Valley during the Middle Ages. In addition to these excavations, several survey campaigns have contributed not so much to increase the number of known sites but to gain a better understanding of the settlement dynamics and its transformation over time, from the consolidation of the Andalusí model to the changes introduced by the Castilian conquest in the early modern period. The present work will focus on the evolution undergone by the settlement pattern between the 6th and the 15th centuries.

Keywords: Landscape archaeology. Settlement. Middle Ages. Nasrid fortresses

Introduction¹

This work is the result of multi-layered archaeological research carried out in recent years in Frailes-Velillos, a narrow valley that links the Subbaetic mountain system in the province of Jaen with the Vega of Granada (Spain) (Figure 1). Research has essentially focused on two sites. Firstly, the Castle and village of Moclín, which are located on the 14th century frontier between the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada and Castile; excavations there were initiated in the early 1990s and, after a long hiatus, works were resumed in 2010 (García *et al.* 2011; 2012). Secondly, the necropolis of Tózar, a cemetery that was used by the Mozarab community during a relatively late stage in the history of al-Andalus (9th-12th centuries) (Mattei 2014; Mattei *et al.* 2014), which has yielded significant information in terms of social organisation. In parallel with these excavations, and within the framework of the doctoral thesis then being prepared by one of us (Mattei 2013), several extensive archaeological surveys were also undertaken; this fieldwork was funded by the Campus de Excelencia Internacional PatrimoniUn 10.

Following this research, a large volume of data was collected for the different periods, but the information still needs to be coherently integrated in order for us to offer a comprehensive perspective on the history of the valley in the Middle Ages. This is the aim of the present work. We are persuaded that the historical

trajectory of the valley will be similar to that in other areas of southern-eastern al-Andalus, especially those areas which were located on the frontier between the Kingdom of Granada and Castile in the late Middle Ages. In this regard, the research carried out in the valley of Frailes-Velillos can provide a valuable reference for the study of the wider issue of southern-eastern al-Andalus in the late medieval period.

Due to its natural conditions, the valley is an ideal environment for small- and medium-sized settlements dedicated to dry land agriculture, stockbreeding and intensive irrigation agriculture in valley-bottom areas, a pattern which is also reproduced in nearby valleys (Mattei 2013: 607-656; Jiménez 2002: 67-237). Also, the valley is traversed by an important medieval thoroughfare (Mattei 2013: 472-483), such as the road that linked Córdoba, capital of the emirate and caliphate, and its main harbour, Almería. At a later period, this same road connected Granada, which was already the capital of the Zirid, and later Nasrid, and the Crown of Castile, especially Córdoba and Jaén.

Despite these conditions, until recently, specialists have shown little interest in the area, which as a consequence remains virtually unexplored in historiographical and archaeological terms. The little work that has been done is chiefly focused on the Late Medieval period and the frontier region of the hill range to the west. Most of this attention, moreover, has concentrated on the analysis of castles, originally as military fortresses and more recently as key elements in the articulation of settlement (García 2014: 54-9). At any rate, the analysis of the territory in itself, of the associated settlement, and of the human-driven transformations of the

¹ This research was undertaken as part of the Projects 'Transformaciones paisajísticas en la frontera medieval entre Granada y Castilla. Aplicación de análisis paleoambientales y arqueológicos al patrimonio natural y arquitectónico del pasillo Guadajoz-Belillos', (CEI PatrimoniUN 10) and 'Los agentes locales del poder en el Reino Nazarí: impacto en la red social y capacidad de liderazgo' (MINECO ref. HAR2011-24125).

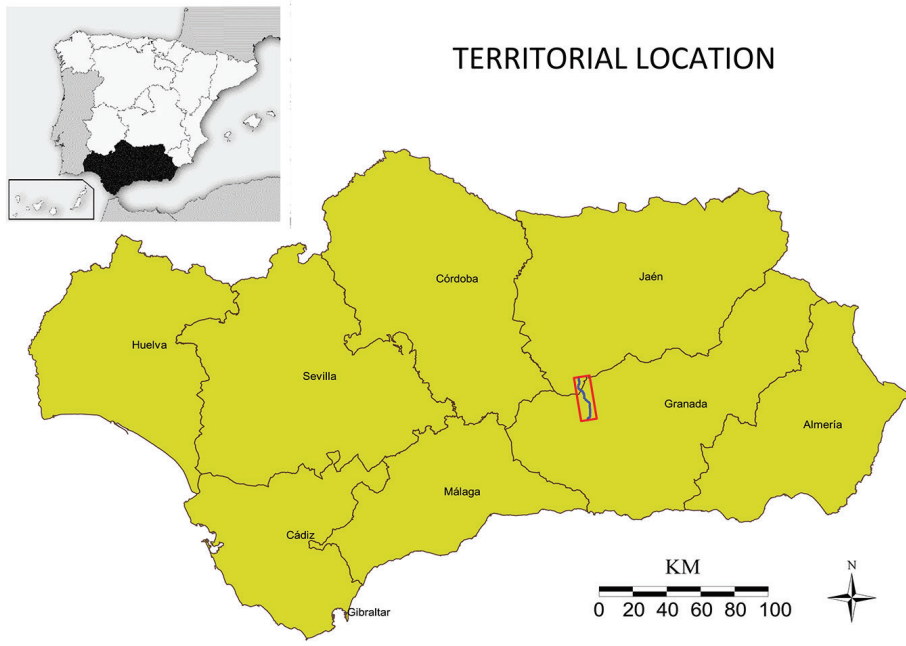


Figure 1. Location of the study area.

landscape remains largely understudied. Our target is promote a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics affecting settlement and the landscape, something which is not possible if the analysis is restricted to a limited set of significant landmarks.

The Frailes-Velillos Valley

The valley of Fraile-Velillos is part of the rugged region known as the Western Hills of Granada, which is located in the central sector of the Baetic System. The physical conformation of the system is characterised by the alternation of lofty crested limestone hills and lower formations, the substrata of which are made up

of softer types of rock. The higher formations are rich in underground aquifers; as a result, many springs are present in the lower areas (Rubio 2006: 228-232), where the limestone formations come into contact with the sedimentary rock substrata. Water supply is, therefore, plentiful.

The specific area which our research focused on is characterised by NW-to-SE abrupt crests, which repeatedly cut across the valley. At the narrowest point of the valley the river has had to carve a narrow gorge, known as Gollizno, a place of outstanding natural beauty. The areas to the north and the south of this gorge open up in a series of gentle, rolling

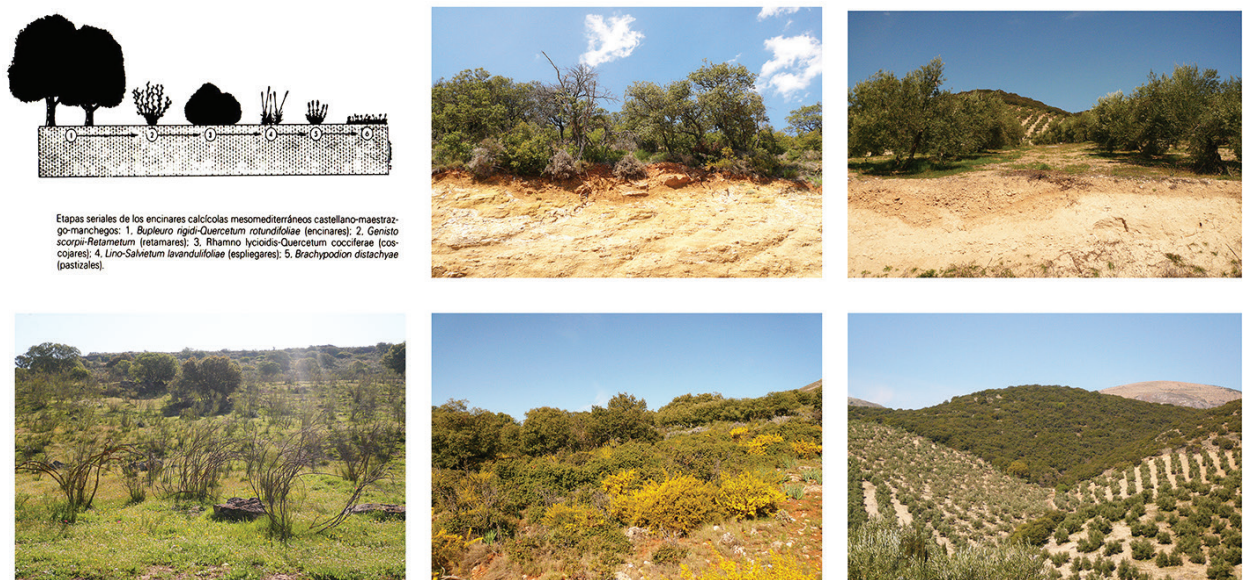


Figure 2. Soil and vegetation present in the Frailes-Velillos.

hills, which have been traditionally exploited for dry land agriculture. This agricultural regime is favoured by both the climate conditions and the geological substratum: there are moderately evolved, medium-depth soils, which are fairly well endowed with organic matter and are capable of sustaining a prolonged exploitation if adequate agricultural strategies are followed. At any rate, the implementation of a dry agricultural regime would have involved clearing the indigenous vegetation, essentially comprising holm oaks and Mediterranean scrub (*cornicabra*, *espino*, *retama*, rosemary), remnants of which can still be found in the less accessible areas (Valle *et al.* 2001:19-48) (Figure 2). The area under analysis includes the basin of the Frailes-Vellillos River and the main road that follows it from S to N; this encompasses an area which is approximately 200 km² in size, distributed among three municipalities (Pinos Puente and Moclín, in the province of Granada, and Alcalá la Real, in the province of Jaén), whose territories extend beyond the limits of the valley. The basin can be divided into three areas: the southern area, which goes from the town of Pinos Puente to Moclín on River Gollizno; the area to the N and NW of Moclín; and, the area near Alcalá la Real.

The transformation of the valley in the medieval period

The archaeological work carried out in the valley of Frailes-Vellillos has combined a variety of methodologies (excavation, the analysis of standing buildings, landscape survey, etc.), and several chronological horizons have been identified. Some of the settlements have been documented only by survey and are pending a more detailed examination, but

have been taken into consideration for the purposes of settlement analysis.

Prehistory

The natural conditions are well-suited to human inhabitation, and traces of the human presence can be traced back to prehistoric times, at least to the 3rd millennium BC. Prehistoric human groups seem to have made intensive use of caves and rock shelters and to have exploited the abundant natural resources on a hunter-gatherer basis. The territory around Moclín is rich in these caves and rock shelters, many of which are decorated with cave art (García-Pellicer 1959; Carrasco-Pastor 1980; Cantalejo 1983). Stone tools have also been found in abundance at a number of sites (Cueva de Malalamuerzo, Cueva de las Vereas, the caves of Bermejas and Araña, Tajo de la Cañada de Corchera, the rock-shelters of Corcueta, La Solana and Las Canteras) (Contreras-Carrión 1979). A dolmen has also been found in Pileta de la Zorra de Tózar (Pellicer 1964; Ferrer 1981) (Figure 3).

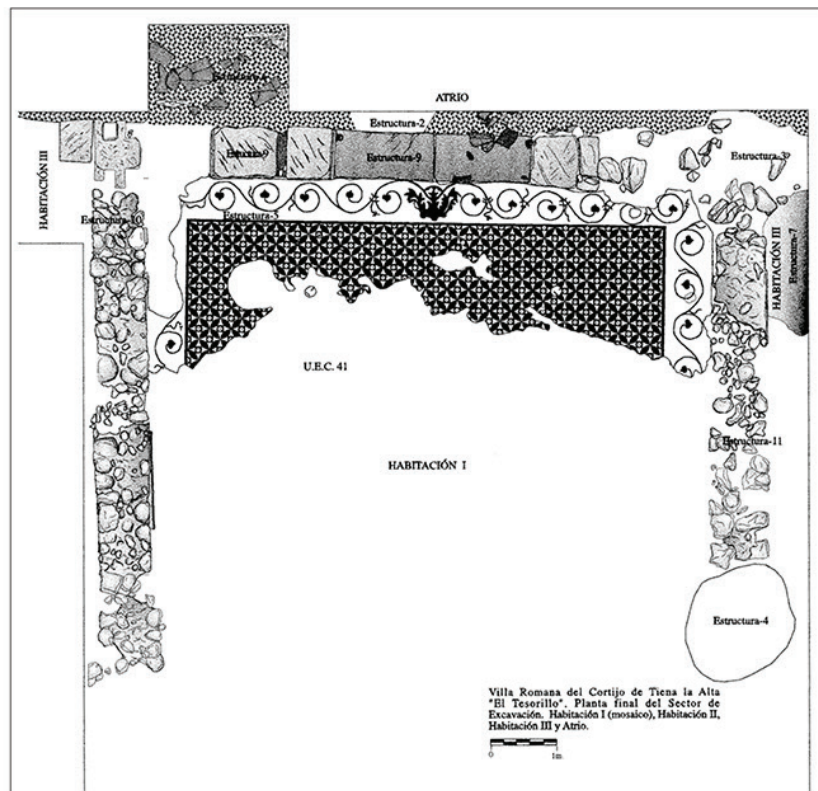
The Roman period

A solid Roman presence has been documented around the city of Ilurco, the largest settlement in the area, which is located in the Cerro de los Infantes (Pinos Puente), towards the bottom end of the valley. It is important to examine briefly the most significant characteristics of this chronological horizon, since it immediately precedes the medieval period, which is the focus of our research.

A territorial analysis of the area under the administrative control of Ilurco (Morales-Castillo 2009: 269-308) has



Figure 3. Dolmen and cave paintings in the valley of the river Frailes-Vellillos.



MOSAIC TIENA VILLAE

Figure 4. Mosaic found during the excavation of the Tiena villae.

revealed that the landscape was densely occupied. There are a large number of *villae* and other types of small settlements, especially during the Late Empire. The occupation density seems to slacken from the late 4th century onwards (Wickham 2007; Chavarría 2007).

It is, however, possible to characterise different occupation patterns in the valley during the Roman period. Thus, settlements are more numerous in the southern half, probably because of the proximity of Ilurco, located at the head of the valley. The settlements

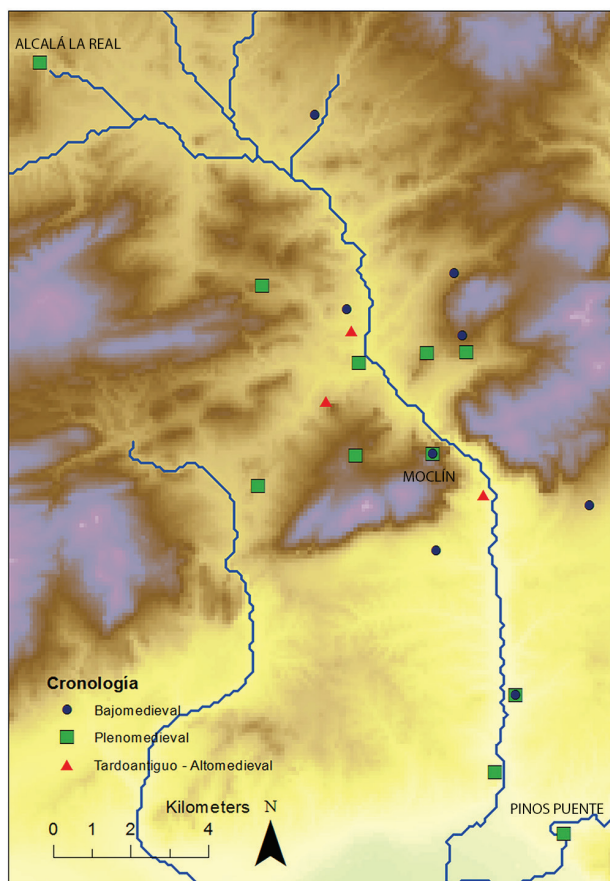


Figure 5. Location of the medieval sites in the valley of the river Frailes-Velillos.

found in the northern half (Mingoandrés, Esquiladero) are not only fewer but also smaller.

Most small farming settlements have been identified in the proximity of Ilurco. They occupy the nearby hill slopes and are often associated with water sources, which were seemingly only used for human supply, extensive agricultural fields and grazing areas.

Villae tend to be located somewhat further away from the main settlement. They always occupy a position that is midway upslope, and they are less intimately connected with the valley bottom (Tiena la Alta, Limones) (Carretero 1998) (Figure 4). These *villae* made use of the gently sloping hillsides during the implementation of extensive dry land agricultural practices, especially the cultivation of olive trees and cereal. Also, olive crushing activities are indicated by the large number of circular and conical millstones found in the vicinity of the settlements. They are, in all probability, associated with the *villae's pars rusticate*, for example in Limones and Olivares (Morales-Castillo 2009: 269-308).

In addition to these domestic and agricultural settlements, which have been dated to the Roman period on the basis of the associated pottery finds, a

quadrangular defensive structure was also identified. It was located on a hilltop near the Fraile-Velillos River, close to Olivares, and it controlled the southern access to the gorge of Gollizno.

The early middle ages (5th-8th centuries)

Few settlements dating to the 5th-8th centuries have been identified to date, and no settlement pattern can, therefore, be proposed as of yet. A number of hilltop settlements have been attested in the nearby regions (Carvajal 2008), which may suggest that a period of instability and insecurity prompted the population to seek refuge at easily defensible points from which the territory and the communication routes could be controlled more effectively. To date, none of these settlements have been identified in the valley, although a few isolated and hard-to-access sites, for example Gollizno, could tentatively be ascribed to this category. Gollizno is located on a mid-sized rock spur, and some associated unglazed pottery finds may suggest a date within this period. Similarly, there is a potential settlement under the modern village of Olivares, as



Figure 6. A grave of the village and the necropolis mozarabs of Tózar site.

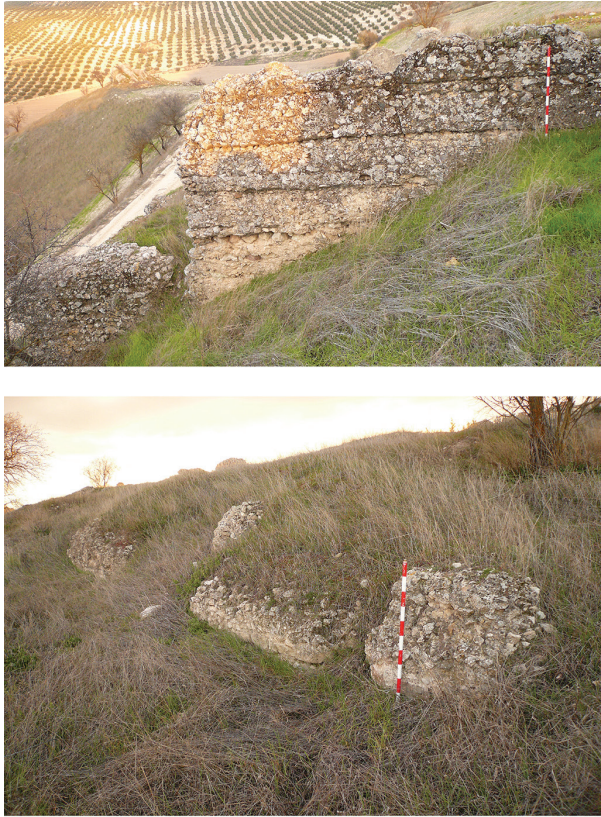


Figure 7. Old walls in the places of the Los Angeles farmhouse.

suggested by the presence of unglazed and crude pottery in the vicinity.

The relative scarcity of well-dated localities from this period can be due to a variety of reasons. On the one hand, it is possible that the chronological span of some minor settlements goes further than has been recognised heretofore; it is difficult to be certain of this only on the basis of surface pottery finds. On the other hand, it is plausible that, in this period, the population focus moved away to the other face of Sierra Elvira, where some important early medieval settlements exist (Iliberis?). These were later superseded by the foundation of Madinat Ilbira, in a pattern which has been identified elsewhere on the outskirts of the Vega de Granada, for example in Cerro de los Infantes (where an early medieval phase may exist, although this is has not yet been confirmed) and Castillejo (Pinos Puente).

9th-11th centuries

The central centuries of the Middle Ages witnessed a substantial transformation of the settlement patterns in the valley. A large number of new settlements emerged throughout the valley, from the hills of the Subbaetic system, in the province of Jaen, to the outskirts of the Vega of Granada and the central area of the valley (Mattei 2012). The pottery found in association with these sites seems to suggest a date in the 9th century

for the first occupation, and at some of the sites there is continuity of habitation until the 12th century. Some examples are the sites of Tózar, Fuente Pilarejo, Torre de la Porqueriza, Castillejo de Pinos Puente, Cortijo de los Ángeles and Búcor (Figure 5-6). Most of the pottery sherds identified are well made, they have been treated with a glazed slip, and they can be dated to the 10th-11th centuries (Mattei 2013: 629-639).

These settlements tended to occupy mid-slope positions (with the exception of Búcor and Cantares, which are located by the river), near water sources, which were used for human supply and for the irrigation of small vegetable gardens that were created around the new settlements. The irrigation areas identified to date are of very modest proportions. For this reason, we believe that the economic focus of this phase cannot have been so different from that of the preceding period: dry land agriculture and animal husbandry, which were especially suitable for the prevailing natural conditions and which were, perhaps, also encouraged by the conditions of political and territorial instability that characterised this period, with the *fitna* first and, eventually, with the emergence of the Zirid *taifa*. These considerations must, however, be taken with extreme caution, because it is likely that some irrigated areas, which were to become very significant in the following period, were already beginning to emerge in the 11th century. These were small settlements located on the valley-bottoms, near the river and within the limits marked by the so-called 'rigidity line', set up by the secondary irrigation channels. In this regard, the settlements of Búcor and Cantares, clearly stand out among its contemporaries. They have been characterised through the identification of unglazed pottery assemblages, including large pots with profile in S and upturned lips (in the case of Cantares). It is plausible that a new type of settlement, which was to take final shape at a later date, was beginning to emerge throughout the 11th century.

Most of these settlements exhibit no evidence of having had an earlier stage, either in Roman or in early medieval times (with the exception of Cortijo de los Ángeles, where some construction materials taken from the city of Ilurco were used), although in some cases earlier remains are not too far off, for example the sites of Búcor and Tres Hermanas. There is, therefore, a clear rupture in the Roman settlement pattern. The population relapse suffered by the region in the early medieval period must have facilitated this parting from the previous settlement pattern. In this period, two types of settlement can be distinguished: those situated in the interior of the valley (Búcor, Tózar, Fuente Pilarejo, Torre Porqueriza), which do not appear to be equipped with defensive structures, and those located on the outskirts of the Vega of Granada (Cortijo de los Ángeles and Castillejo de Pinos Puente), which were surrounded

by a solid wall. The wall around the site of Cortijo de los Ángeles was built on top of a Roman structure, and some authors have suggested that a fortress existed (Molina *et al.* 1983: 699; Martín-Martín 1999: 47-48) (Figure 7). Castillejo de Pinos Puente is also encircled by a series of defensive structures. Both sites are situated on high eminences, considerably above the Vega of Granada, at a point from which the intersection between the Vega and the valleys of Velillos and of Cubillas can effectively be controlled (in the case of Velillos, from Cortijo de los Ángeles, and in the case of Cubillas, from Castillejo de Pinos Puente, which, in addition, directly controls the Califal bridge that crosses the river at this point). Although these settlements are not fortresses in a strict sense, they were considerably fortified, and it is worth enquiring whether their construction had to do with the protection of the nearby peasant communities or the control of the territory. Both sites are related to other coeval settlements in nearby valleys to the SE and the Vega of Granada. In addition to these settlements, two potentially interesting locations were identified during survey: Lomo de la Era and Pozo del Milagro. These sites were identified through the discovery of a doorjamb and an assemblage of ceramic coarse wares, some of which present a typically 10th-11th centuries green glazing. These were small settlements located on top of medium-sized hills, with good visibility around, not far from the main road that linked Granada with Alcalá la Real, in areas where the road becomes narrower. These characteristics suggest that the settlements could well be military in nature, or at least that their purpose was to control the road. We have not been able, in any case, to identify defensive structures or watchtowers, so it is also a possibility that these settlements were no different from the agricultural and farming communities found elsewhere in the valley. Whatever

the case may be, their privileged position cannot be ignored, especially the fact that they are located where the road becomes narrower. It is, therefore, tempting to speculate with a settlement created on the initiative of the political rulers (either central, regional or local) or in order to respond to the defensive needs of the local communities, complementing the role played by the castles located at the head of the valley. At any rate, this hypothesis cannot be confirmed with the current state of our evidence, and the interpretation of these sites will necessarily have to be framed within a broader historical narrative.

Several factors need to be taken into account to explain this change in the settlement pattern. The region is traversed by a natural communication route that links two key cities for the geography of al-Andalus. Almeria was, the most important Andalusí harbour. The pottery wares found in association with these settlements were not local manufactures, which suggests that relatively well-developed trade networks, which have not yet been identified, were in operation. It is likely that agricultural surplus was also commercialised via these mid-range commercial networks. In addition, the imposition of a new political system in the early 11th century may have sparked a change in the settlement pattern. It is plausible that some settlements were consciously developed, for example Castillejo de Pinos Puente and Cortijo de los Ángeles, or created anew, for example the Castle of Moclín, in order to play a role in the control and organisation of the territory around them.

The excavations carried out in recent years have revealed that the earliest structures found in association with the fortress were built in the 11th century. The

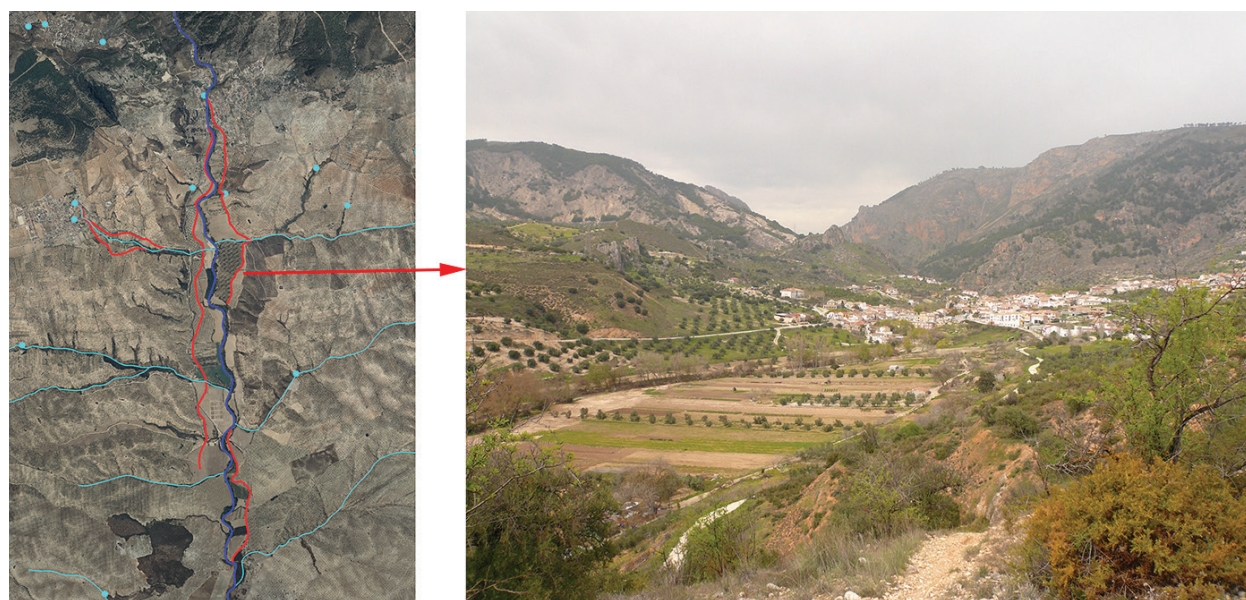


Figure 8. Irrigated areas of the southern part of the river Frailes-Velillos and detail of the vega Baeza.



Figure 9. Panoramic view of the castle of Moclín.



Figure 10. Tower-Gateway of the castle of Moclín.

upper enclosure (the so-called Alcazaba) is the earliest phase: it is composed of two towers of cemented rammed earth and the entrance to the original fortress (García 2012: 66). This is a rather primitive plan by Andalusí architectural standards. These towers are by far the most solid structures in the region and they dominate the course of the Velillos River; they may, therefore, be plausibly identified as the mythic fortress of Belillos, mentioned by the King of the Sevillian *taifa* al-Mutammid and the Castilian King Alfonso VI ('Abd Allammid and the 2010: 178-9). The fortress was built by the *taifa* King of Zirid Granada in order to control the surrounding territory.

12th-13th centuries

In the 12th-13th centuries, the settlement pattern initiated in the preceding phase was consolidated and expanded to reach the bottom of the valley, as shown by the results of the archaeological survey. New domestic and economic structures were built. In contrast with those of the previous period, these structures seem to have been integrated with one another in order to form more complex nuclei. At the same time, most of the settlements occupied in the previous phase seem to have been abandoned. It would appear (future research will help to confirm or reject this preliminary interpretation) that the occupation and exploitation regime of the territory responded now to more complex principles; new, larger and more elaborate exploitation areas were created, for example the vegas of Búcor, Baeza, Olivares (Figure 8) and, probably, also the area around the acequia (irrigation channel) of Esquiladero. The irrigated terraces of Tiena may also be included in this category (Mattei 2012a). Some of these vegas, for example those at Búcor and Esquiladero, may dig their roots in the preceding period, but they reached their apogee during the 12th and 13th centuries. The vegas of Búcor, Baeza and Olivares seem to be part of a project to implement an intensive exploitation regime at the bottom of the valley and thus increase production. This follows a general trend that has been identified elsewhere in al-Andalus. This was a gradual process, the early stages of which may be traced back to the preceding stage; the key period for this process of agricultural intensification is, at any rate, the Almohad period.

The presence of higher political powers in the valley is increasingly visible. The fortress of Moclín, for example, was enlarged and reinforced in this phase. The hilltop was fully fortified in this period. Recent excavations have revealed a surrounding wall of notable proportions and perimeter. The entrance to the precinct, which was originally built of cemented rammed earth, was rebuilt using the same material, which was now reinforced with lime. The plan of the gateway was left unaltered. New towers, which were also built of rammed earth and lime, were constructed in the Almohad period (for example, towers A and B, in the southern face of the wall precinct). The structures erected in association with these towers were built with masonry. The homogeneity of the technique suggests that the new constructions were part of a coherent programme that had been ordered by the higher political authorities, a general trend that can also be found elsewhere in al-Andalus (García in press a).

The Nasrid period (14th-15th centuries)

The habitation of the valley was clearly affected by the establishment of the frontier between Granada and Castile. After the conquest of Qalat Yahsub by Alfonso XI,

in 1341, this city became a crucial military springboard for the Crown of Castile; a large number of campaigns and expeditions set out from here. In response, the Nasrid kingdom reinforced its defences, especially the castle of Moclín, the closest fortress to the newly-named Alcalá la Real.

The castle was reinforced in its upper part with a double wall, to the north and south of the preceding one, as well as with a new precinct, which encircled the southern slope of the hill, facing the Vega of Granada. The occupation of the southern slope followed the concentration of the population around the castle, which was caused by the new threats. This process, which can also be attested at other similar fortresses (Malpica 2001), may have involved the depopulation of part of the valley. In fact, the territorial analysis shows that, in this period, clearly differentiated patterns existed in the northern (Frailes River) and southern (Velillos River) sectors of the valley. In the southern area, on the one hand, the settlement and economic patterns seem to have remained pretty much the same as they were in the preceding period (sites of Búcor, Baeza, Olivares and the agricultural area of Tiena). In the northern sector, on the other hand, no evidence for intense occupation has been found, with the exception of Cantares; the establishment of the frontier, moreover, seems to have a considerable effect on population patterns, for example by the disappearance of most valley-bottom settlements (one exception is Esquiladero), and the growth of mid-slope settlements such as Tózar and Limones). More research is, however, necessary to confirm these ideas. This probably means that this sector of the valley was partially abandoned, and that only some economic activities were continued in the face of the danger posed by frequent enemy raids. Moclín grew and turned into the main population nucleus in the valley (Figure 9), despite not being close to the river; it soon acquired the characteristics of a nearly urban centre (Malpica 2008).

One such characteristic of this new Moclin was the greater presence of the Nasrid power. This is mentioned in the written record, but it is reflected even more clearly in the archaeological record; the construction model adopted closely mirrors that used in other Nasrid fortresses, which means that the new works were carried out on the initiative of the Nasrid crown; also, a number of buildings, which were associated with the activity of these agents, were built inside the precinct, for example the monumental Tower-Gateway (Figure 10) and the keep over the summit of the hill (García in press).

The modern period (16th-17th centuries)

The Castilian conquest of the Nasrid kingdom brought new changes to the settlement pattern. Now, the population was distributed according to the needs of a society that

was half way between feudalism and a new modernity that had little in common with the Andalusí precedents. The process of concentration around large settlements (Tózar, Limones, Mures...) continued, although in the specific case of Moclín the castle was abandoned and the population expelled outside the walls.

Similarly, the agricultural exploitation of the vegas on the riverbanks became more intense, facilitated by the end of the endemic situation of war. With the arrival of the Christians, some hamlets disappeared, while others were replaced by *cortijos* and *cortijadas*, a new settlement/exploitation model which has survived to today. The most significant examples are La Matanza, el Rodeo, El Esquiladero, Baldío Bajo, Baldío Alto, Enmedio and Baeza, around which we have found ceramic coarse wares dated to the 16th and 17th centuries.

Conclusion

The present work aims to fill a research gap. Until now, the Frailes-Velillos Valley, part of the central sector of the late medieval frontier between Granada and Castile, had not been subject to systematic territorial analysis. The only research to have been carried out to date was focused on the Castle of Moclín, a crucial territorial landmark, and the necropolis of Tózar, a settlement with very specific characteristics. The analysis here presented facilitates a better understanding of the changes undergone by this territory in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, the new settlement and exploitation pattern developed from the 10th and 11th centuries, the intensification of economic practices in the 12th and 13th centuries, and the important transformations brought about by the establishment of the frontier in the 14th century and, finally, the Castilian conquest in 1486.

The next step will be to go beyond reconstructing change, with a more in-depth analysis of the processes undergone by settlement patterns. Palaeoenvironmental studies, some of which are already in progress (pollen analysis, isotopic analysis and zooarchaeological analysis) will, no doubt, play a central role in the future study of this important historical landscape.

Acknowledgements

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