



Ancestral memories and early medieval landscapes: the case of Sierra de Ávila (Spain)

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This paper focuses on early medieval funerary practices from a landscape perspective in central Iberia. Rock-dug graves constitute the most conspicuous remains in this region, but their informative potential has not yet been realized. The preliminary outcomes of an ongoing research project are presented here. This aims to contextualize such funerary cases by examining a mid-altitude mountain study-area. Through the use of intensive archaeological surveying and geographic information systems, the paper characterizes two basic funerary types: isolated graves and rural disordered cemeteries, which responded to two social strategies led by local households. By recalling ancestorship, they constituted effective mnemonic resources, contributing to claiming rights and forging identities among these dispersed and predominantly small-scale herding communities.

1. Introduction

The early medieval history of the centre of the Iberian Peninsula is difficult to reconstruct. After the disintegration of the Roman system, this region was left on the margins of all centralized political power. Visigothic rule (409–711) was only manifested through the bishoprics and the actions of regional elites as intermediaries with the local communities.¹ The Muslim conquest in 711 and the later Berber revolt (742–3)

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¹ For a general view of this process, see S. Castellanos and I. Martín Viso, 'The Local Articulation of Central Power in the North of Iberian Peninsula, 500–1000', *EME* 13 (2005), pp. 1–42. See also I. Martín Viso, 'La ordenación del territorio rural y la tributación en el suroeste de la meseta del Duero (siglos VI–VII)', in S. Castellanos and I. Martín Viso (eds), *De Roma a los bárbaros. Poder central y horizontes locales en la cuenca del Duero* (León, 2008), pp. 227–61.

destroyed all central authority in this large region, which became an 'area without a state', except in the tenth century under the Asturian-Leonese kingdom. The campaigns of Almanzor's armies in the last third of the tenth century meant that the area was again without a state, until its definitive integration into the Christian kingdoms in the late eleventh century.² The political mechanism through which this integration was achieved was the concession of charters (*fueros*) by the kings to certain important local communities, which obtained political and legal privileges organized as urban councils or *concejos*.³

The history of central Iberia for this period is characterized by its lack of information. Written texts are very rare and are limited to a few tenth-century charters and the so-called Visigothic slates. The archaeological record is elusive and barely studied; before the definitive sedentarization of permanent settlements in the high medieval centuries, short-lived dwellings were made of perishable materials leaving a weak archaeological imprint. Therefore long-lasting funerary expressions – mainly rock-carved tombs – constitute the prevailing source of information. However, mainstream research on these graves is based on misleading and increasingly contested ethno-typological premises and has benefited little from alternative strands of enquiry.

This paper will focus on a variety of historical lines of evidence in order to emphasize the need to contextualize these rock graves in their social landscape. Thus, the paper will draw on a fresh intellectual framework inspired by current social theory, and will adopt a multi-scalar approach to shed new light on the spatial dimension of such burial expressions. First the state of play will be presented, highlighting some problems and research possibilities and stating the categories of historical analysis adopted here. A micro-regional analysis of a mid-altitude mountain study-area – the Sierra de Ávila (Spain) – supported by Geographic Information Systems (GIS) will be presented. The paper then reviews La Coba, a paradigmatic large cemetery that seems to have played a remarkable role in the articulation of burial practices in the area. The high medieval transformations and the profound feudal reorganization of these rural landscapes and mortuary practices are finally addressed in the last section.

² J. M^a Mínguez, 'La frontera del Sistema Central: una realidad difusa', in G. del Ser Quijano and I. Martín Viso (eds), *Espacios de poder y formas sociales en la Edad Media. Estudios dedicados a Ángel Barrios* (Salamanca, 2007), pp. 203–18; I. Martín Viso, 'Espacios sin estado: los territorios occidentales entre el Duero y en Sistema Central (siglos VIII–IX)', in Martín Viso (ed.), *Tiempos oscuros? Territorios y sociedad en el centro de la península ibérica (siglos VII–X)* (Madrid, 2009), pp. 107–135.

³ Literature on the medieval councils is abundant; for a general overview see J. M^a Monsalvo Antón, 'Frontera pionera, monarquía en expansión y formación de los concejos de villa y tierra. Relaciones de poder en el realengo concejil entre el Duero y el Tajo (c. 1072–c. 1222)', *Arqueología y Territorio Medieval* 10.2 (2003), pp. 45–126.

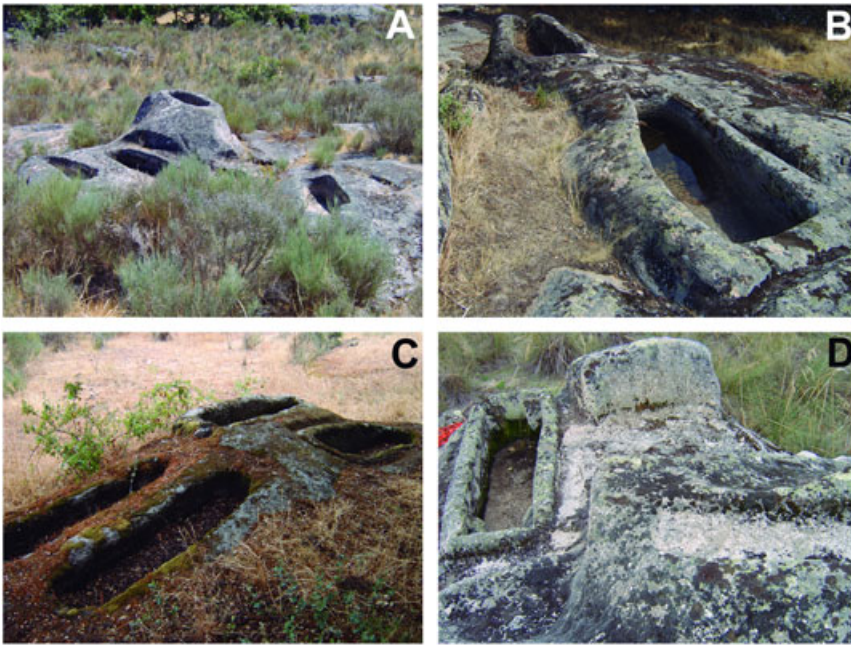


Fig. 1 Rock-cut graves from (A) Negrelhos (Manigoto, Pinhel, Portugal); (B) Rodillo de la Laja (Hinojosa del Duero, Salamanca, Spain); (C) Álamo Blanco (Villar de Ciervo, Salamanca, Spain) and (D) Tapada da Raposeira (Vermiosa, Figueira de Castelo Rodrigo, Portugal). Photographs by I. Martín-Viso

2. The research on early medieval funerary practices

Tombs carved in granite boulders (Fig. 1) represent by far the predominant burial type in central-western Iberia, a region characterized by a Palaeozoic lithology. Besides this kind of grave, slab tombs were also used at this time, but they are more unusual and associated with fortified settlements (*castella*) during the post-Roman period, such as Las Merchanas (Salamanca) or Cabeza de Navasangil (Ávila),⁴ as well

⁴ J. Maluquer de Motes, 'Excavaciones arqueológicas en el castro de Las Merchanas (Lumbrerales, Salamanca)', *Pyrenae* 4 (1968), pp. 101–28; J. Caballero Arribas and D. Peñas Pedrero, 'Un castrum de época visigoda en el valle Amblés: La Cabeza de Navasangil (Solosancho, Ávila)', in J.A. Quirós Castillo and J. M^a Tejado Sebastián (eds), *Los castillos altomedievales en el Noroeste de la península ibérica* (Bilbao, 2012), pp. 213–38. About the *castella*, J.A. Quirós Castillo, 'Defensive Sites of the Early Middle Ages in North-West Spain', in J. Baker, S. Brookes and A. Reynolds (eds), *Landscapes of Defence in Early Medieval Europe* (Turnhout, 2013), pp. 301–39. An overview on the archaeological problems concerning the *castella*, in E. Ariño, 'El hábitat rural en la península ibérica entre finales del siglo IV y principios del VIII: un ensayo interpretativo', *Antiquité Tardive* 21 (2013), pp. 93–123, at pp. 110–16.

as being closely linked to parish church cemeteries from the twelfth century onwards.⁵

The analysis of this funerary evidence is challenging. Human bones decompose in these acidic granite soils, and the funerary ritual did not involve the deposition of burial goods. The location of most graves in agro-pastoral settings has also entailed their reuse (e.g. as oil presses or drinking troughs), removal or destruction. Further biases stem from the customary research approaches. Research has traditionally centred on enlightening the obscure chronology of the inhumations. The pioneering work by Alberto del Castillo has become the mainstream paradigm. He postulated a twofold chrono-typological seriation: a) non-anthropomorphic (oval or bathtub) tombs (Fig. 1 A and C) allegedly dating to the seventh-ninth centuries, and b) anthropomorphic or 'Olerdolan graves' (named after the Catalan Olèrdola site) that he dated to the ninth and tenth centuries (Fig. 1 B and D). This later phase, comprising a much larger number of tombs, would supposedly correspond to the repopulation carried out by southern Christians from al-Andalus (*Mozarabs*), settling in empty areas from the eleventh century onwards.⁶ Research in the last forty years has disproved both the occurrence of true demographic voids in northern Iberia and the massive influx of immigrants from the south.⁷ Nonetheless, the morphological funerary taxonomy established by Alberto del Castillo remains largely uncontested and accepted.⁸ This paper does not aim to make an in-depth review of this long-held established chrono-typological framework. Such a model is based on flimsy contextual data and a formal evolutionary sequence – from simpler to more complex burial receptacles. Above all, such a narrative disregards the socio-political, economic and ideological processes framing the elaboration and use of burial devices, which continue to be seen in isolation, detached from their social landscape. Moreover, some radiocarbon dates point towards the prolonged use of non-anthropomorphic tombs in the tenth century, as demonstrated in Alto da Quintinha (Mangualde,

⁵ A case in point are the cemeteries in the province of Ávila. M.Á. Carbajo *et al.*, 'La antigua iglesia de San Martín, en Bercial de Zapardiel (Ávila). Excavaciones arqueológicas', *Numantia* 6 (1996), pp. 187–204, with some examples.

⁶ A. del Castillo, 'Cronología de las tumbas llamadas olerdolanas', in *XI Congreso Nacional de Arqueología* (Zaragoza, 1970), pp. 835–45.

⁷ A general introduction to the depopulation in A. Isla Frez, *La Alta Edad Media. Siglos VIII–XI* (Madrid, 2002). For an excellent state-of-play of the research on medieval Arabized Christians, C. Ayllet, *Christianisme, islamisation et arabisation en péninsule ibérique (IXe–XIIe siècle)* (Madrid, 2010).

⁸ A recently postulated model, with some nuances, by J.I. Padilla Lapuente and K. Álvaro Rueda, 'Alberto del Castillo y la cronología de las tumbas llamadas olerdolanas', in N. Molist and G. Ripoll (eds), *Arqueología funeraria al nord-est peninsular (segles VI–XII)*, 2 vols (Barcelona, 2012), I, pp. 33–40.

Portugal).⁹ Other indirect data, such as the presence of anthropomorphic tombs associated with the habitation site of La Genestosa (Salamanca), dated to the fifth and seventh centuries, reveal a variety of situations and overlapping chronologies.¹⁰

These tombs have been more recently regarded as diagnostics to identify the elusive early medieval rural settlement. In several Iberian regions, a hierarchical settlement model has been posited based on the frequency of preserved graves.¹¹ Thus, a dispersed settlement has been envisioned by Portuguese researchers, such as Mário Barroca, who proposed that some outstanding isolated graves were elite or prestigious burial devices.¹² However, a straightforward identification between dispersed settlement and burial places is not as easy to prove as uncritical standpoints would have it. At the habitat of La Genestosa, at least a dozen domestic structures and only one grave have been documented.¹³ The presence of isolated mortuary spaces – documented throughout early medieval Europe – would respond to other factors than the kind and size of a settlement, such as emphasizing status in a competitive socio-political context or highlighting an individualized treatment contrasting with communal cemeteries.¹⁴ Importantly, rock-cut tombs are to be considered high-quality funerary devices; many of them were skilfully carved in granite bedrock (Fig. 1 D), an arduous and highly demanding material. Finally, many graves are located on top of prominent granite outcrops, rocks or spurs, that is, in conspicuous places within the local landscape, chosen to enhance their perceptibility (Fig. 1 A). These cases may be interpreted as monuments with evolving and ever-changing meanings. As locations endowed with cultural esteem, such spots often coincide with boundaries,

⁹ P. Nóbrega, F. Neto and C. Tente, 'A sepultura medieval de Alto da Quintinha (Mangualde)', *Arqueologia Medieval* 12 (2012), pp. 203–10.

¹⁰ I. Martín Viso and R. Rubio Díez, 'Primera campaña de excavación arqueológica en el yacimiento de La Genestosa (Casillas de Flores, Salamanca)', unpublished archaeological report (Salamanca, 2013).

¹¹ J.I. Padilla Lapuente and K. Álvaro Rueda, 'Necrópolis rupestres y el poblamiento altomedieval en el alto Arlanza', *En la España Medieval* 33 (2010), pp. 259–94.

¹² Research work by Mário Barroca in 1987 remains unpublished, but the section concerning the rock-dug tombs has lately been published in M. Barroca, 'Sepulturas escavadas na rocha e Entre Douro e Minho', *Portugalia. Nova Série* 31–2 (2010–11), pp. 115–82, at pp. 126–7, 142. See also J. A. Marques, *Sepulturas escavadas na rocha na região de Viseu* (Viseu, 2000), p. 216; M. Vieira, *Alto Paiva. Povoamento nas épocas romana e alto-medieval* (Lisbon, 2004), p. 146; C. Tente, *A ocupação alto-medieval da encosta noroeste da Serra da Estrela* (Lisbon, 2007); and S. Lourenço, *O povoamento alto-medieval entre os rios Dão e Alva* (Lisbon, 2007), pp. 30, 84–5.

¹³ Martín Viso and Rubio Díez, 'Primera campaña de excavación'.

¹⁴ On these dispersed funerary sites, see L. Pecqueur, 'Des morts chez les vivants. Les inhumations dans les habitats ruraux du Haut Moyen Âge en Île-de-France', *Archéologie Médiévale* 33 (2003), pp. 1–31; F. Blaizot, 'Ensembles funéraires isolés dans la moyenne vallée du Rhône', in O. Maufrais (ed.), *Habitats, necropolis et paysages dans la moyenne et la basse vallée du Rhône (VIIe–XVe s.)* (Paris, 2006), pp. 281–362; H. Hamerow, *Rural Settlements and Society in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 123–38.

acting as landmarks symbolizing the socio-political control over particular territories.¹⁵

The above statements frame the starting point from which to address rock-carved tombs in western-central Iberia from a landscape perspective.¹⁶ This large region features a significant number of rock graves unevenly distributed in the foothills of the Central System ranges, in a large area from the western Portuguese region of Beira up to the Spanish province of Soria in the east (Fig. 2). Thus, solely in this west-central Iberian sector (from Viseu to Ávila), some 640 such burial sites have been identified, exhibiting remarkable concentrations such as in the region of Ciudad Rodrigo (in the south-western part of the province of Salamanca) with 63 sites in 1,300 square kilometres.¹⁷ This abundance of funerary sites involves certain heterogeneity. In order to understand the different social meanings of these sites and their role in the landscape it has been necessary to establish a basic classification. Determining the number and on-site arrangement of the tombs has proved a useful way of classifying them. Thus, according to the scheme presented elsewhere,¹⁸ a significant threshold to distinguish isolated tombs from true necropoleis can be set at ten tombs; over this number graves tend to feature in much larger clusters, whereas isolated tombs occur in small aggregates. Following these criteria we can differentiate three types of burial places: a) *isolated graves*, i.e. groups of up to ten burials, which clearly predominate in western-central Iberia; b) *rural disordered* or *segmented cemeteries*,¹⁹ groupings of juxtaposed tombs forming loosely distributed plots in an unbounded area dedicated to mortuary practices, lacking a preplanned design; and c) *row-organized cemeteries* of aligned graves organized by urban powers, associated with the administrative integration of this region within the Asturian-Leonese kingdom from the tenth century onwards.

Finally, in order to better understand the carving and use of early medieval tombs, these should be integrated within their landscapes. A holistic concept of landscape will be deployed here, encompassing both

¹⁵ M. Lauwers, *Naissance du cimetière. Lieux sacrés et terres des morts dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris, 2005), pp. 236–7; A. Maldonado, 'Burial in Early Medieval Scotland: New Questions', *Medieval Archaeology* 57 (2013), pp. 1–34, at p. 24.

¹⁶ In this vein, a pioneering study on landscape archaeology is C. Laliena and J. Ortega, *Arqueología y poblamiento. La cuenca del río Martín en los siglos V–VIII* (Zaragoza, 2005), pp. 180–3.

¹⁷ On this region, see I. Martín Viso, 'Enterramientos, memoria social y paisaje en la Alta Edad Media: propuestas para un análisis de las tumbas excavadas en roca en el centro-oeste de la península ibérica', *Zephyrus* 68 (2012), pp. 165–87. Since the publication of this paper, three new sites with rock-dug graves have been documented.

¹⁸ Martín Viso, 'Enterramientos, memoria social y paisaje en la Alta Edad Media'.

¹⁹ This sort of funerary site might be classified within the model of *segmented cemeteries* described by M. Parker Pearson, *The Archaeology of Death and Burial* (Stroud, 1999), p. 12.

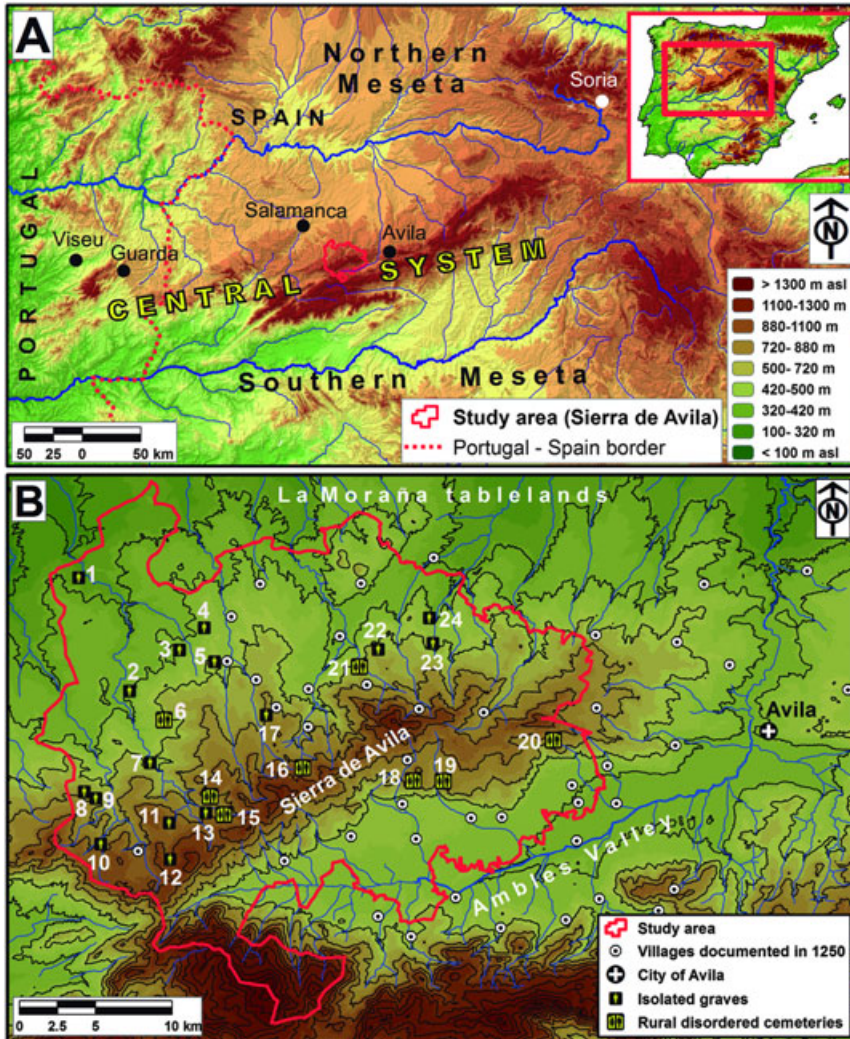


Fig. 2 (A) Location of the study area within the Iberian Central System. (B) The Sierra de Avila and sites mentioned in the text: 1. Fuente de la Zorra; 2. Cornejuelos; 3. Cercado de Morales; 4. San Benito; 5. La Cañadilla; 6. Serranos de Avianos; 7. Navaestrellar; 8. Navagamellas; 9. El Canto de la Sepultura; 10. Fuente de la Madera; 11. Prado Roble; 12. Cocina de los Moros; 13. Carrilejos; 14. Lancha del Trigo; 15. Lancha de la Lana; 16. La Coba; 17. El Rebollar; 18. Canto de los Pilonos; 19. San Simones; 20. Dehesa de Montefrío; 21. Dehesa de Brieua; 22. Las Henrenes/San Cristóbal; 23. Los Tejadillos; 24. Casares. Design by A. Blanco-González

the strategies of exploitation and the cosmological mechanisms imbuing meanings to this reality. In this understanding, the landscape is a multi-layered historical product linked to social memory not as a mere neutral and inert stage, but rather as a dynamic and influential element shaping these mnemonic resources.²⁰

3. A burial landscape: the Sierra de Ávila

The Sierra de Ávila is a highland milieu extending over 700 square kilometres in the Central System, the mountain range dividing up the Northern and Southern Mesetas (Fig. 2 A). It is located to the south of the tablelands of La Moraña and to the north of the Amblés Valley. Although some of its peaks exceed 1,600 metres above sea level (masl), it is not a high mountainous area, and there are nearby sedimentary platforms above 1,000 masl (Fig. 2 B). Like the remainder of west-central Iberia, data on the early medieval period are very scarce. There is no written documentation up to the mid-thirteenth century for this area.²¹ Settlement archaeology contemporary to the rock-carved tombs also points towards dispersed and relatively short-lived habitats, leaving weak archaeological traces. The Las Henrenes site (Fig. 2, No. 22), recently excavated, is a case in point. It consists of a small settlement dated between the seventh and tenth centuries, whose burial space has not been identified yet, apart from a freestanding child's sarcophagus.²² Further possible early medieval settlements in San Simones (Fig. 2, No. 19) and Dehesa de Brieva (Fig. 2, No. 21) are associated with rock-dug tombs, but their chronology remains unclear.²³ There are no early medieval fortified sites that would have acted as 'central places', and most early medieval villages are located in the northern foothills of the range (Fig. 2 B). In short, the funerary evidence represents the prevailing source of information for this study area and time period. Intensive archaeological surveys²⁴ have identified twenty-four

²⁰ On the concept of social memory and its applicability to medieval societies, see J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford, 1994).

²¹ I. Velázquez Soriano, *Las pizarras visigodas (Entre el latín y su disgregación. La lengua hablada en Hispania, siglos VI–VIII)* (Burgos, 2004).

²² J. Díaz de la Torre *et al.*, 'El despoblado de San Cristóbal o Las Henrenes (Cillán, Ávila): una aproximación al paso de la Edad Antigua a la Edad Media en tierras abulenses', in Martín Viso (ed.), *Tiempos oscuros?*, pp. 159–80.

²³ H. Larén Izquierdo, 'Aportación al estudio de los despoblados en la provincia de Ávila', *Cuadernos Abulenses* 4 (1985), pp. 111–23, at p. 116 and documentation regarding the Archaeological Inventory of the Province of Ávila.

²⁴ J. Díaz de la Torre, J. Caballero Arribas, B. Cabrera González and I. Martín Viso, 'Inventario y documentación de las tumbas y necrópolis excavadas en roca en la provincia de Ávila', unpublished report (Ávila, 2005).

burial sites, representing a dense *mortuary geography*²⁵ (Table 1). Concerning their typology, sixteen sites are *isolated graves* whereas the remaining eight cases may be classified as *rural disordered cemeteries*. The relative abundance of the latter is uncommon, as their number is generally quite low in central Iberia,²⁶ and this suggests they played a key role in the early medieval funerary landscape in this region. No *row-organized cemeteries* are known, an observation that coincides with the absence of any 'central place' up to the definitive political integration of the region by the early twelfth century. These burial locales cannot be related to any ecclesiastical centres either. As for San Simones (Fig. 2, No. 19), an extant upright masonry wall has been interpreted as the ruins of a cult building, but it is of late medieval date, documented in textual sources in 1317.²⁷

A preliminary visual approach suggests some differences between the *isolated graves* and the *rural disordered cemeteries*. The former are concentrated only in the northern and western foothills, near water courses in transitional areas between the sedimentary plains of La Moraña and the range peaks (Fig. 2 B). Such settings are at relatively lower altitudes and feature less-steep slopes within a context predominantly of livestock-rearing. These tombs appear scattered, carved in granite outcrops and on top of large boulders, as in Cercado de Morales and La Cañadilla. In other cases, a granite tor allows the concentration of a few graves around it, as occurs at El Canto de la Sepultura. This site is not far from Navagamellas, suggesting the occurrence of similar burial locales within the same micro-landscapes (Fig. 3).

By contrast, *rural disordered cemeteries* are often located at higher altitude, usually on the southern hillside, although some cases – e.g., La Coba and Serranos de Avianos – are on the northern side (Fig. 2, Nos. 16 and 6). Those foothills lead to higher uplands with large pastures and, as in Serranos de Avianos, Canto de los Pílonos, San Simones, and Dehesa de Montefrío (Fig. 2, Nos. 6, 18, 19 and 20), they might be related to areas of critical pastoral resources within a seasonal livestock mobility strategy (locally known as *transterminancia*). These cemeteries are relatively separate from each other, a pattern that suggests the identification of several communities that might have accessed these areas with their livestock. On the other hand, Carrilejos (five graves), Lancha del Trigo and La Lancha de

²⁵ H. Williams, *Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 191 uses that term for a funerary reality in which different types of burial spaces coexist in areas that are not clearly separated from other aspects of the landscape.

²⁶ It may be compared with the region of Ciudad Rodrigo (Salamanca); Martín Viso, 'Enterramientos, memoria social y paisaje en la Alta Edad Media', p. 175.

²⁷ Á. Barrios García, *Estructuras agrarias y de poder en Castilla: el ejemplo de Ávila (1085–1310)*, 2 vols (Salamanca, 1984), II, p. 46; Larrén Izquierdo, 'Aportación', p. 116.

Table 1 Funerary sites within the Sierra de Ávila

No. (Fig. 2B)	Site	Municipality	Number of graves	Type
6	Serranos de Avianos	Cabezas del Villar	35	Rural disordered cemetery
14	Lancha del Trigo	Vadillo de la Sierra	11	Rural disordered cemetery
15	Lancha de la Lana	Vadillo de la Sierra	11	Rural disordered cemetery
16	La Coba	San Juan del Olmo	81	Rural disordered cemetery
18	Canto de los Pilonos	La Torre	14	Rural disordered cemetery
19	San Simones	La Torre	18	Rural disordered cemetery
20	Dehesa de Montefrío	Padiernos	24	Rural disordered cemetery
21	Dehesa de Brieva	Cillán	17	Rural disordered cemetery
1	Fuente de la Zorra	Cabezas del Villar	4	Isolated graves
2	Cornejuelos	Cabezas del Villar	1	Isolated graves
3	Cercado de Morales	Gallegos de Sobrinos	1	Isolated graves
4	San Benito	Gallegos de Sobrinos	2	Isolated graves
5	La Cañadilla	Hurtumpascual	2	Isolated graves
7	Navaestrellar	Cabezas del Villar	4	Isolated graves
8	Navalagamellas	Villanueva del Campillo	7	Isolated graves
9	El Canto de la Sepultura	Villanueva del Campillo	4	Isolated graves
10	Fuente de la Madera	Villanueva del Campillo	2	Isolated graves
11	Prado Roble	Vadillo de la Sierra	1	Isolated graves
12	Cocina de los Moros	Villanueva del Campillo	1	Isolated graves
13	Carrilejos	Vadillo de la Sierra	5	Isolated graves
17	El Rebollar	Manjabálago	1	Isolated graves
22	Las Henrenes/ San Cristóbal	Cillán	3	Isolated graves
23	Los Tejadillos	Chamartín	4	Isolated graves
24	Casares	Charmartín de la Sierra	1	Isolated graves



Fig. 3 Location of the focus of isolated tombs at Navagamellas (Villanueva del Campillo). Photograph by Castellum Ltd

la Lana (eleven graves each) (Table 1) are in the vicinity of the village of Vadillo de la Sierra, within a summit area with abundant grassland. Such foci might have been part of a large common burial area, and the foundation of the early medieval village might have altered our perception, leading us to identify three very close discrete sites, two of them *rural disordered cemeteries*, where only one was actually in use. This is not a common feature, because the *isolated graves* appear clearly isolated from other burial sites.

The above remarks deserve a more careful examination. GIS offers a suite of possibilities to attain a more in-depth analysis insofar as these observations can be expressed in quantitative terms. This analytical toolkit has already been applied to European early medieval burial evidence, opening up new avenues of enquiry.²⁸ In the present study,

²⁸ An early example is H. Williams, 'Placing the Dead: Investigating the Location of Wealthy Barrow Burials in Seventh Century England', in M. Rundkvist (ed.), *Grave Matters. Eight Studies of First Millennium AD Burials in Crimea, England and Southern Scandinavia*, BAR International ser. 781 (Oxford, 1999), pp. 57–86. Recent contributions in S. Brookes, 'Walking with Anglo-Saxons: Landscapes of the Dead in Early Anglo-Saxon Kent', in S. Semple and H. Williams (eds), *Early Medieval Mortuary Practices. Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 14 (Oxford, 2007), pp. 143–53; and D. Sayer and M. Wienhold, 'A GIS-Investigation of Four Early Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries: Ripley's K-function Analysis of Spatial Groupings Amongst Graves', *Social Science Computer Review* 31.1 (2013), pp. 71–89.

systematic comparisons were made between *rural disordered cemeteries* and *isolated graves* to gain insights into their spatial roles. Using the software ArcGIS 10, a series of spatial variables were tested: a) the potential land-use within the surroundings of the sites; b) the patterns of visibility from funerary sites, and c) the frequency of graves per site and their spatial relationship with early medieval habitat boundaries. Least-cost analysis (LCA)²⁹ was also conducted to test movement across the study area in relation to historical drove-ways and natural corridors. However the method³⁰ depends on many uncontrolled input parameters and the results were not expressive enough to be considered at this stage.

The analysis of landscapes in early medieval Europe often relies on palaeo-environmental proxies, especially palynological cores.³¹ Indeed, there are several pollen diagrams relating to the study area for the time-span studied here.³² However, in order to collate funerary locales, site-catchment analysis³³ (SCA) may provide indirect but more suitable estimates on the availability of soils around these localities. Catchment territories based on Euclidean distances in one- and two-kilometre radii were obtained for every burial site (Fig. 4). These one- and two-kilometre polygons were used to measure the area of soils within them, classified in qualitative types³⁴ (Fig. 4). These agrological classes were grouped into three categories to facilitate their interpretation: Group A (Classes 2 and 3) are deep fertile soils such as alluvial bottomlands of streams, suitable for irrigated, permanent or short-fallow agriculture and intensive cattle-breeding; Group B (Classes 4 and 5) are soils allowing limited dry-farmed long-fallow crops combined with grazing; and Group C (Classes 6 and 7) are thin, steep and rocky soils appropriate for forestry and extensive livestock-raising in rough pasture. The results of the SCA of burial sites (Table 2) are statistically different from the average values

²⁹ See I. Herzog, 'The Potential and Limits of Optimal Path Analysis', in A. Bevan and M. Lake (eds), *Computational Approaches to Archaeological Spaces* (Walnut Creek, 2013), pp. 179–211.

³⁰ An ArcGIS Path Distance toolkit was deployed instead of network analysis. Multiple source and destination locations outside the study area were computed over an anisotropic raster featuring eighty-metre pixels to cope with bidirectional movement of people and flocks.

³¹ N. Edwards, A. Lane and M. Redknap, *Early Medieval Wales: An Updated Framework for Archaeological Research* (Cardiff, 2011) <<http://www.archaeolog.org.uk/pdf/earlymed2011.pdf>> [accessed 22 June 2016].

³² A. Blanco-González, J.A. López-Sáez, A. Alba, A. Abeland and S. Pérez, 'Medieval Landscapes in the Spanish Central System (450–1350): A Paleoenvironmental and Historical Perspective', *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 6.2 (2014), pp. 3–19.

³³ On the technique and its applicability using GIS, see E.D. Hunt, 'Upgrading Site-Catchment Analyses with the Use of GIS: Investigating the Settlement Patterns of Horticulturalists', *World Archaeology* 24 (1992), pp. 283–309.

³⁴ For further details of the cartographic sources, see A. Blanco-González, 'Tendencias del uso del suelo en el Valle Amblés (Ávila, España). De la Edad del Hierro al Medioevo', *Zephyrus* 63 (2009), pp. 155–83.

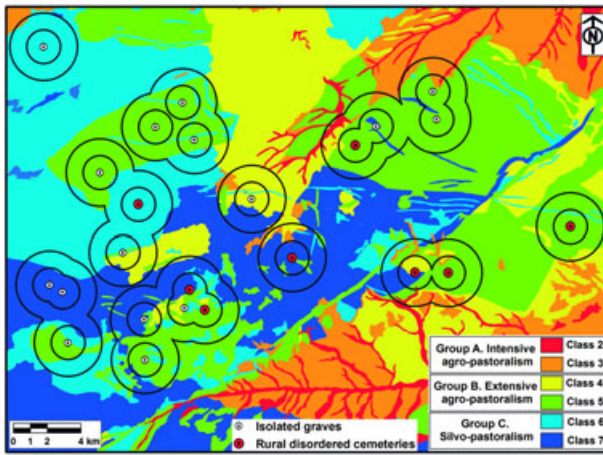


Fig. 4 Site-catchment areas of one- and two-kilometre radii from the burial sites and agrological classes in the study area divided into three categories (Groups A, B and C) to facilitate their interpretation. Design by A. Blanco-González

in the study area, as illustrated by their comparison with a series of random points.³⁵ Such measurements are also clearly dependent on the above-mentioned distinctive location of both types of burial sites; with the isolated tombs in the northern and western hill-slopes and the cemeteries on higher peaks. A purely visual and intuitive examination also enables the assertion that Group A soils are clearly under-represented in the surroundings of funerary sites (Fig. 4) – in fact, they are missing within the one-kilometre-radius buffer of the archaeological sites – and thus they can be rejected as a contributory locational factor. On the one hand, accessibility to Group B and C soils, representing the silvo-forestal resources more in demand for the extensive and diversified strategies of those herding communities, is remarkable. In particular, the importance of Group B soils in the surroundings of most funerary sites, with frequent high-percentage values within their one-kilometre buffers (Table 2), is worth noting. Thus, the prospects for small rotational crop fields in the vicinity of those places should not be disregarded. On the other hand, it is not possible to differentiate the isolated tombs and the disordered necropoleis using their SCA results. They exhibit some tendencies (Table 2), but such differences are not statistically

³⁵ Randomly distributed points ($n = 24$) were generated with the Geoprocessing toolbox in ArcGIS 10. The SCA measurements (in hectares) of the archaeological sites and of these stochastic points were subjected to chi square tests, offering low enough p values ($p < 0.05$) to reject the null hypotheses.

Table 2 Quantitative results of the SCA using one- and two-kilometre polygons to compare isolated graves and disordered necropolises

No. (Fig. 2B)	Site	Type	% Group B in 1 km	% Group C in 1 km	% Group B in 2 km	% Group C in 2 km
13	Carrilejos	Isol. graves	88	12	73	27
24	Casares	Isol. graves	93	7	64	14
3	Cercado de Morales	Isol. graves	100	0	94	6
12	Cocina de los Moros	Isol. graves	81	19	72	28
2	Cornejuelos	Isol. graves	98	2	82	18
9	El Canto de la Sepultura	Isol. graves	0	100	0	100
17	El Rebollar	Isol. graves	78	22	65	23
10	Fuente de la Madera	Isol. graves	52	48	32	68
1	Fuente de la Zorra	Isol. graves	0	100	0	98
5	La Cañadilla	Isol. graves	86	14	58	40
22	Las Henrenes/San Cristóbal	Isol. graves	88	12	77	15
23	Los Tejadillos	Isol. graves	92	8	89	11
7	Navaestrellar	Isol. graves	48	52	35	61
8	Navalagamellas	Isol. graves	0	100	0	100
11	Prado Roble	Isol. graves	52	48	42	58
4	San Benito	Isol. graves	100	0	67	26
18	Canto de los Pilonos	Dis. cem.	65	35	55	23
21	Dehesa de Brieva	Dis. cem.	100	0	77	11
20	Dehesa de Montefrío	Dis. cem.	93	7	89	9

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

No. (Fig. 2B)	Site	Type	% Group B in 1 km	% Group C in 1 km	% Group B in 2 km	% Group C in 2 km
16	La Coba	Dis. cem.	15	85	16	71
15	Lancha de la Lana	Dis. cem.	80	20	82	18
14	Lancha del Trigo	Dis. cem.	22	78	30	70
19	San Simones	Dis. cem.	92	0	72	3
6	Serranos de Avianos	Dis. cem.	0	100	8	92

significant. Thus the two types of funerary sites cannot be discriminated based on the soils available in their surroundings.³⁶

Line-of-sight tendencies from the burial sites have also been explored. Despite recent criticism underlining technical and theoretical flaws in this kind of analysis, it remains useful in landscape archaeology for it is a systematic, easily conducted and reliable procedure for collating numerous sites, especially when deploying high-quality digital cartography,³⁷ as in the case here. A digital elevation model (DEM) whose cell resolution is eighty metres was deployed to conduct the analysis. The simulation generates surface models whose cell values depend on this variable. First, multiple viewshed maps were generated for each set of sites: the *isolated graves* and the *rural disordered cemeteries*. The resulting image (Fig. 5 A) represents the total potential areas³⁸ in the landscape seen from both datasets, and it evinces a dual pattern, with negligible overlap. The *isolated graves* feature short-distance visibility over small north–south intra-mountainous valleys on the northern side of the Sierra de Ávila, and their viewsheds do not coincide with soils of higher agrological potential (compare Figs. 4 and 5 A). Some *disordered cemeteries* such as Navaestrellar and Dehesa de Brieva exhibit this visibility pattern, but sites within this category mostly feature broader, potential long-distance viewsheds over the Amblés Valley. A more nuanced insight is gained from cumulative viewshed analysis (CVA),³⁹ used here to ascertain which surfaces are seen from a higher number of sites. The results (Fig. 5 B) show the limited visibility from these sites. The north–south corridors on the northern hillside are mainly seen from only one spot and occasionally from up to three sites. The surfaces viewed from a higher number of localities (up to nine) are prominent landforms, such as the peaks within the Sierra de Ávila or the ranges bordering the Ambles Valley, lacking agrarian interest. In short, this simulation allows us to conclude that local contrasts are not perceptible enough because of the micro-regional scale of this analysis; major differences might be apparent at a much wider (macro-scale) scope.

³⁶ The results (in hectares) for Group B soils within the 1 km (chi square = 13.125, *p* value = 0.517) and the 2 km (chi square = 15.000, *p* value = 0.595) Euclidian buffers are not significant. Neither are the tests for Group C soils within the 1 km (chi square = 13.875, *p* value = 0.459) and the 2 km (chi square = 17.250, *p* value = 0.573) buffers.

³⁷ Williams, 'Placing the Dead', pp. 62–73. M. Llobera, 'Reconstructing Visual Landscapes', *World Archaeology* 39.11 (2007), pp. 51–69.

³⁸ Even though a clear perception of objects or animals by an observer starts decreasing from a lineal distance of 2.5 km.

³⁹ D. Wheatley, 'Cumulative Viewshed Analysis: A GIS-Based Method for Investigating Intervisibility and its Archaeological Application', in G. Lock and Z. Stancic (eds), *Archaeology and Geographical Information Systems* (London, 1995), pp. 171–87. Viewshed maps were obtained for every single site, and then summed using map algebra available within the ArcGIS package.

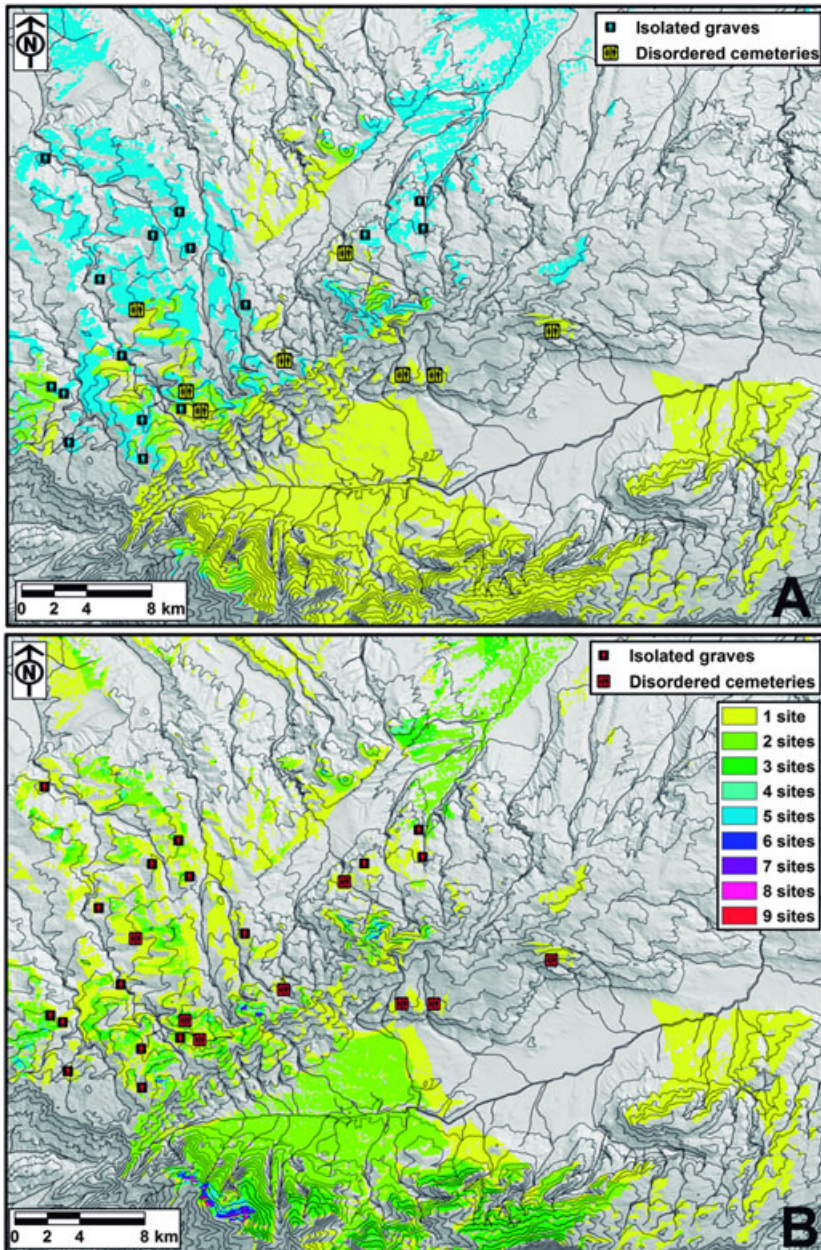


Fig. 5 Line-of-sight simulation from the burial sites. (A) Multiple potential viewsheds from two datasets (the isolated tombs and the cemeteries) exhibiting a dual pattern with negligible overlapping. (B) Cumulative viewshed map showing which surfaces are theoretically seen from a higher number of sites. Design by A. Blanco-González

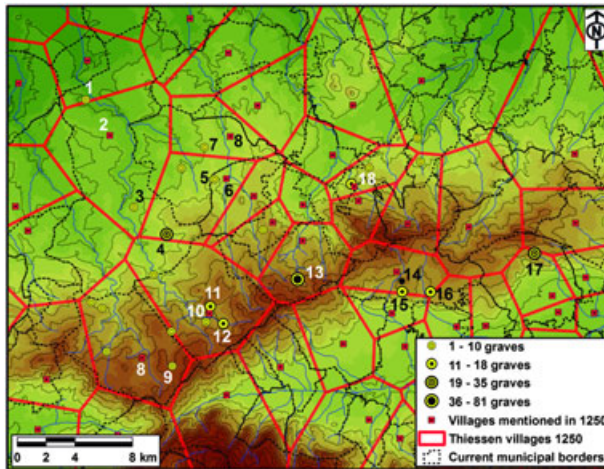


Fig. 6 Comparison between the early medieval funerary sites (represented according to their density of graves) and the high medieval network of permanent villages and parishes (mentioned in 1250) and their hypothetical territories (Thiessen polygons). Sites mentioned in the text: 1. Fuente de la Zorra; 2. Cabezas del Villar; 3. Cornejuelos; 4. Serranos de Avianos; 5. La Cañadilla; 6. Hurtumpascual; 7. San Benito; 8. Gallegos de Sobrinos; 9. Cocina de los Moros; 10. Vadillo de la Sierra; 11. Lancha del Trigo; 12. Lancha de la Lana; 13. La Cobra; 14. Oco; 15. Canto de los Pilones; 16. San Simones; 17. Dehesa de Montefrío; 18. Brieua

Finally, the frequency of rock-dug tombs within the study area has been mapped (Fig. 6). Even though the total number of graves is subject to future fieldwork aimed at identifying new cases, some trends arise from this tentative visualization. In fact, if we classify cemeteries – i.e. funerary sites with over ten tombs – within the study area according to their density of graves, there seems to be a certain spatial pattern in their distribution. Thus, when in small clusters of tombs (<18), these *rural disordered cemeteries* are located close together, whereas larger sets (>18 graves) are located at certain distances from each other, within a radius of eight linear kilometres from other necropoleis (Fig. 6). La Cobra, with eighty-one tombs, occupies a central position in the Sierra de Ávila and in its outer periphery there are two large cemeteries and mostly scattered foci of isolated graves.

4. A rural disordered cemetery: La Cobra

In order to obtain a more accurate insight into the functioning of the *rural disordered cemeteries* in their local settings, a specific case needed to be more closely characterized. The La Cobra site is located on the

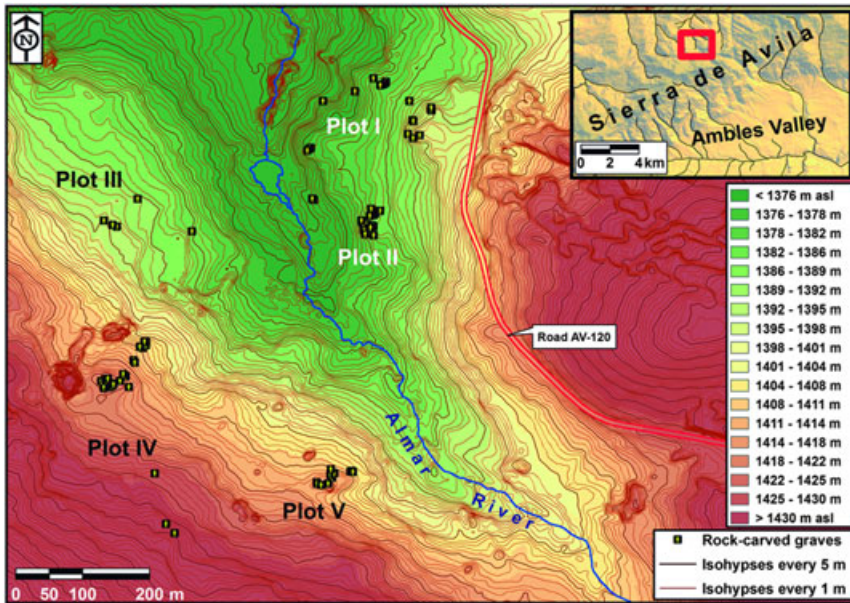


Fig. 7 General map of La Coba (San Juan del Olmo). Topography by M. Sánchez. Design by A. Blanco-González

northern side of the Sierra de Ávila, at about 1,400 masl and near the Almar River, on a natural route across the range (Fig. 7). Intensive surveying, archaeological excavations and exhaustive topographic fieldwork have been carried out in the framework of our research project. A total of eighty-one tombs have been identified; nine are slab graves and the remaining are rock-dug graves, each type located in segregated areas.⁴⁰ Despite the existence of further examples,⁴¹ it is not usual to find both funerary formulae in one place and their chronology is unclear. Graves are distributed in five foci over twenty hectares, separated by gaps in between. Plots I and II with nineteen and twenty-two tombs respectively are on the right bank of the Almar River, located on the average slope. Plots III and IV are on the left bank of the water course, also along the average slope, and consist of five and twenty-four tombs respectively. Finally, Plot V, located on the left bank of the river, is made up of eleven graves around a granite outcrop (Fig. 7). All the tombs are located on small landforms featuring locally in prominent positions over the bottom of the basin.

⁴⁰ I. Martín Viso, J. Caballero Arribas and B. Cabrera, 'Informe de excavación arqueológica. Yacimiento de San Juan de La Coba', unpublished archaeological report (Ávila, 2012).

⁴¹ G.I. Yañez *et al.*, 'Excavaciones en el conjunto funerario de época hispano-visigodo de La Cabeza (La Cabrera, Madrid)', *Pyrenae* 25 (1994), pp. 259–87.

We have some details on the chronology of La Coba. Tomb T23, located within Plot II, yielded a small burial set consisting of a ring, a bead and a ceramic mug-bottle, which could be dated to the seventh century.⁴² So this place functioned as an early burial locale and its use may have lasted for centuries. Five possible domestic structures have been recognized, which could indicate the settlement of a small population associated with any of the funerary foci. However, the absence of archaeological excavations means that their chronology and function cannot be determined.

The relative isolation of La Coba from other early medieval burial places within quite a large radius is striking (Fig. 6, No. 13). The site may be interpreted as a burial ground shared by the local villages, perhaps in an area of pastures used by transhumant flocks. In addition, it is the location of the source of one of the main streams in the range. Therefore, this may be a place of special interest to which families from different settlements in the surrounding area would go. It is likely that not all the members of those communities would be buried there, but only those who, because of their prestige, would be remembered as ancestors. In this way, such inhumations would demonstrate that the deceased belonged to a segmental community that claimed control over those lands. This heterogeneity of social and kinship links might explain the dispersed topography of the cemetery (Fig. 7), which would function as a focus for supra-local identity. In this case, it would be necessary for these groups to go there regularly to re-enact these genealogical links, in a clear example of a legitimizing strategy.⁴³ The visible structures might have been the places where the people in these dispersed communities temporarily gathered, a nexus that has been documented in north-west Europe.⁴⁴ This hypothesis is attractive, but we currently lack data to be able to take it any further.

At the same time, La Coba does not appear to be an unusual case in the Sierra de Ávila. The relative isolation, the location in areas of pastures, and even the dispersion in foci are repeated in such places as Canto de los Pilones, San Simones and Dehesa de Montefrío (Fig. 6, Nos. 15–17). The last two sites are relatively near to each other, but it is possible that they

⁴² H. Larrén Izquierdo, 'Materiales cerámicos de La Cabeza (Navasangil, Ávila)', *Boletín de Arqueología Medieval* 3 (1989), pp. 53–74, at p. 65.

⁴³ L.G. Goldstein, 'One-Dimensional Archaeology and Multidimensional People: Spatial Organization and Mortuary Analysis', in R. Chapman, I. Kinnes and K. Randsborg (eds), *The Archaeology of Death* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 53–69.

⁴⁴ H. Williams, 'Assembling the Dead', in A. Pantos and S. Semple, *Assembly Places and Practices in Medieval Europe* (Dublin, 2004), pp. 109–34. For a general view, S. Semple and A. Sanmark, 'Assembly in North-West Europe? Collective Concerns for Early Societies?', *European Journal of Archaeology* 16.3 (2013), pp. 518–42, and especially about the link between cemeteries and assembly places at pp. 532–4.

correspond to different communities, as to the west of Canto de los Pilonos and the east of San Simones there are areas with no burials. One possibility is that each one of them represents the funerary nucleus of a series of different settlements. However, the location of their burial grounds in a certain place should be understood as a sign of interest in that particular site. Indeed, the domestic structures documented at San Simones can be interpreted like those at La Coba⁴⁵ and the location pattern is similar in the two *rural disordered cemeteries* at Vadillo de la Sierra (Fig. 6, Nos. 10–12). This pattern may also occur at Serranos de Avianos, where the thirty-five burials identified are distributed over about six hectares. No other burial places have been found in its surroundings (Fig. 6, No. 4).

5. Early medieval burial sites and high medieval parishes

In this section the subsequent evolution of the studied landscapes in the high medieval period is addressed. In particular, the relationship of early medieval burial sites and later land boundaries will be tackled, as a way of assessing the influence of such enduring physical landmarks and their recontextualization within a new spatial order led by the church (parish system) and the nucleated settlement (village communities). The integration of the Christian kingdoms led to the introduction of the parish system and a dense network of rural villages during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The new settlements were founded as permanent rural habitats as a result of the nucleation of the peasant population in the zone and most of them have become present-day villages. As part of this process, parish cemeteries were located in the immediate surroundings of the parish buildings within the villages.⁴⁶ This entailed the gradual abandonment of the previously dispersed funerary practices, which were now controlled and managed by the church. The new village cemeteries are the clearest expression of the feudal reorganization.

In 1250, Cardinal Gil Torres gave orders for the drawing up of a full list of the parishes in the dioceses of Ávila in order to determine the distribution of *prestimonios* (a third of the annual tithes of a parish) between the chapter and bishop.⁴⁷ This extraordinarily valuable list included the

⁴⁵ Larrén Izquierdo, 'Aportación', p. 115.

⁴⁶ E. Zadora-Rio, 'The Making of Churchyards and Parish Territories in the Early Medieval Landscape of France and England in the Seventh–Twelfth Centuries: A Reconsideration', *Medieval Archaeology* 47 (2003), pp. 1–19, at pp. 12–13; Lauwers, *Naissance du cimetière*, pp. 246–8.

⁴⁷ Á. Barrios García, *Documentos de la Catedral de Ávila (siglos XII–XIII)* (Ávila 2004), doc. 83. A thorough analysis of data recorded in this charter in Á. Barrios García, 'Conquista y repoblación: el proceso de reconstrucción del poblamiento y el aumento demográfico', in Á. Barrios García (coord.), *Historia de Ávila II. Edad Media (siglos VIII–XIII)* (Ávila, 2000), pp. 227–70, at pp. 254–64.

whole of the Sierra de Ávila, with a total of twenty-seven parishes (Fig. 6). The correct calculation of the *prestimonios* implied the definition of the lands belonging to each parish, so as to determine which men and lands were obliged to pay. However, this definition was the result of permanent negotiation between the ecclesiastical powers and peasant communities. The land belonging to a parish was defined by identifying the land that corresponded to a church, but its precise definition was determined by the perception of those lands by the local communities inhabiting them. Thus, the parish became the articulating centre anchoring a series of overlapping spatial layers.⁴⁸

The territory of a medieval parish cannot be reconstructed precisely, except when parishes were defined on the occasion of their consecration or in order to decide a legal dispute affecting their boundaries.⁴⁹ The delimitations were made by recognizing a series of landmarks in the landscape that were deemed important in dividing the land. However, in the case of Sierra de Ávila, no information is available about the delimitations of parish boundaries. The use of modern municipal boundaries is risky, as it offers an image of timelessness in the rural landscape (Fig. 6). For this reason Thiessen polygons, a simple geometrical strategy,⁵⁰ may provide a systematic simulation of how these hypothetical territories might have been organized and especially to test if ancient and enduring landmarks such as the early medieval burial sites (still visible and usable) might have been of some importance to descendant communities. Therefore, Thiessen polygons were drawn around all high medieval villages mentioned in the Cardinal Gil Torres document in 1250 (Fig. 6).

From the comparison between early medieval funerary sites and the high medieval social landscape (Fig. 6), it seems remarkable that some large *rural disordered cemeteries* are located at points equidistant between villages, near the hypothetical boundaries suggested by the Thiessen polygons, such as San Simones, Canto de los Pílones, Dehesa de Montefrío and the burial foci located near Vadillo de la Sierra. These places might have functioned as landmarks on the boundaries of parishes. The actual use of such places as boundary markers has been documented in a relatively nearby area, in the valley of Valdeiglesias (Madrid) in 1205.⁵¹

⁴⁸ E. Zadora-Rio, 'Territoires paroissiaux et construction de l'espace vernaculaire', *Médiévales* 49 (2005), pp. 105–20, at pp. 117–19.

⁴⁹ Zadora-Rio, 'Territoires paroissiaux', pp. 109–10. The early medieval charters from the bishopric of Urgell (Northern Catalonia) show the implementation of parish boundaries from the ninth century, as part of its consecration. C. Baraut, *Les actes de consagracions d'esglésies de l'antic bisbat d'Urgell (segles IX–XII)* (La Seu d'Urgell, 1986).

⁵⁰ This technique, also known as Voronoi tessellation, is based on Euclidian geometry; each polygon represents the area of influence of a point, so that any location inside this cell is closer to this point than any other point.

⁵¹ J. González, *El reino de Castilla en época de Alfonso VIII* (Madrid, 1960), doc. 772.

However, the main lesson learnt from such a comparison between the old mortuary areas and the feudal village and parish network is the disconnection between both phenomena (Fig. 6). In the case of the places with isolated graves documented as parishes, tombs and village churches are located at different places. The tombs are found near the settlements but outside them, as at Cornejuelos in relation to Cabezas del Villar (Fig. 6, Nos. 2 and 3) and La Cañadilla in relation to Hurtumpascual (Fig. 6, Nos. 5 and 6). This model is repeated in other cases with longer distances between parishes and tombs, such as the village of Gallegos de Sobrinos in relation to San Benito, or Fuente la Zorra and Cocina de los Moros (Fig. 6, Nos. 1 and 9). The previous *rural disordered cemeteries* do not tend to be identified with parishes. In some cases, as at La Coba, San Simones and Dehesa de Montefrío, the presence of medieval settlements is not even certain. The hamlet of Oco (Fig. 6, No. 14) located about two hundred metres from Canto de los Pílonos is not cited as a parish in 1250 and there are no references to it until the late Middle Ages, when it must have appeared as a small settlement. In actual fact, Vadillo de la Sierra was still not documented as a parish in the mid-thirteenth century (Fig. 6). The first documentary testimony to this village is the donation of a place named San Adrián made by the council of Ávila in 1283 to Rodríguez Velasco.⁵² The definition of boundaries allows this place to be identified as Vadillo de la Sierra. It is possible that the origin of this new settlement, which bears a significant hagiotopeponym (it is called San Andrés), may be related to the existence of a large burial area composed of different nuclei, some of them already identified around the village. The use of a hagiotopeponym, which are unusual in this area, supports this possibility, as it would be a place founded after the establishment of a church. In short, Oco and Vadillo de la Sierra would be examples of a late establishment of settlements. The rural cemeteries did not give rise to parishes because they were not directly linked to settlements. However, two parishes coincide with *rural disordered cemeteries*. One of these is Brieva, associated with a cemetery arranged in several nuclei. Some of the tombs are inside the residential area, and therefore the hamlet, abandoned in the late Middle Ages, would have been founded after the phases of the use of the tombs.⁵³ The other is Serranos de Avianos, mentioned as a parish in 1250. Thirteenth- to fifteenth-century documents indicate that a network of smaller settlements (*collaciones*) was linked to this place.⁵⁴ However, the village, now uninhabited, was to the south of the cemetery, in a different place. These two exceptions may be evidence of a settlement-

⁵² Barrios García, *Documentos*, doc. 120.

⁵³ Díaz de la Torre *et al.*, *Inventario*, p. 65.

⁵⁴ Barrios García, *Documentos*, doc. 129.



Fig. 8 Dehesa de Brieva (Cillán, prov. Ávila). Photograph by Castellum Ltd

formation process in an intermediate phase between the abandonment of the cemeteries and the foundation of the parishes. Brieva and Serranos de Avianos were villages by 1250, and this explains their presence in the list of parishes. Both places are in relatively low-lying areas in the region, where a phenomenon of the foundation of settlements may have taken place in an immediately earlier period (twelfth century) (Fig. 8).

6. Discussion

Our analysis of early medieval cemeteries in the Sierra de Ávila is based on the idea that their design and location were influenced by political, social, subsistence and symbolic factors, and therefore it is necessary to investigate the historical combinations that conditioned the observed variability, a rather complex task.⁵⁵ In the study area, two main funerary expressions occurred in a time-span between the seventh and eleventh centuries: the *isolated graves*, which seem to be the result of spontaneous family initiatives apparently of short-term currency; and the *disordered*

⁵⁵ H. Geake, 'The Control of Burial Practice in Anglo-Saxon England', in M. Carver (ed.), *The Cross Goes North. Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe* (Woodbridge, 2003), pp. 261–2.

cemeteries, which could be understood as the cumulative outcome of several social units with a more prolonged use. Both burial types were initially defined by their morphology and spatial distribution.⁵⁶ The present paper aims to integrate them even more closely within their social landscapes. Hence the exhaustive study of a series of spatial variables, such as visibility, proximity to agro-forestal land, and the concentration or dispersion of sites and their relationship with theoretical limits, reinforces this classification as well as adding some nuances.

Isolated graves represent the overwhelming majority of burial expressions in the centre-west of the Iberian Peninsula, but not in the Sierra de Ávila. This type of burial occurs above all in locations with less-steep slopes, at medium altitudes and closely associated with water courses, along the main routes across the northern side of the mountain range (Fig. 2). Inter-visibility between burial sites does not seem to have been an important contributory factor, and neither does visual command over the more fertile lands in the study area. Other locational factors, such as short-distance visibility directed precisely at the natural north–south corridors (Fig. 5 A), appear to have held greater importance. These tombs are located in areas used for extensive livestock-raising, although some crops may have been grown in the more sheltered and sunnier areas featuring Group B soils (Table 2). The carving of these tombs may be related to the need of certain households to claim property rights over these resources. If this was the case, the graves would have acted as landmarks in the landscape that, through the social memory of ancestors, would have legitimized the exploitation of terraced fields and pasture lands (Fig. 3), as equally suggested by recent research at La Genestosa, near Ciudad Rodrigo (province of Salamanca).⁵⁷

On the other hand, the abundance of *rural disordered cemeteries* is a characteristic feature in the Sierra de Ávila. These burial sites are located in relatively high areas, but not on the summits in the mountain range (Fig. 2 B). Inter-visibility between cemeteries does not seem to have been a conditioning factor in their location – they feature broader viewsheds than the isolated tombs, but these are also directed only to certain niches. Regarding the availability of agro-pastoral soils in their vicinity, the SCA results (Table 2) suggest that for all funerary sites Group A soils were not represented at all within the one-kilometre buffer, whereas there is scope for accepting the likely presence of long-fallow crops in terraced fields in

⁵⁶ Martín Viso, 'Enterramientos, memoria social y paisaje'.

⁵⁷ The southern Low Countries between the mid-seventh and mid-eighth centuries seems to be a very similar case. F. Theuvs, 'Changing Settlements, Burial Grounds and the Symbolic Construction of Ancestors and Communities in the Late Merovingian Southern Netherlands', in C. Fabech and J. Ringvold (eds), *Settlement and Landscape* (Aarhus, 1999), pp. 337–49, at pp. 342–5.

the well-represented Group B soils surrounding such funerary sites. La Coba also shows that these cemeteries might have been designed to claim rights over these areas of pastures by supra-local communities. This is suggested by the presence of several foci and their position in conspicuous landforms at a local level (Fig. 7). As well as burial places, these landmarks may have been used as meeting places. The agreed management and benefit of common subsistence resources and the sharing of communal places for the dead would have been two basic elements defining the identity of the dispersed households inhabiting these mountainous settings. In brief, *isolated graves* and *rural disordered cemeteries* might have corresponded to discernible strategies and social processes in the shaping of the landscape. They could have been funerary practices applied at different times, but their weak differences also suggest their likely coexistence, as complementary patterns in which the role of livestock-rearing is to be highlighted.

Pollen studies carried out from natural peat bogs in the Central System⁵⁸ indicate an increase in the indicators of pastoralism and of the pressure of livestock on vegetation, such as percentage increase of coprophilous fungi (species living on manure), heathlands, and grasslands (indicative of open landscapes), from the later Roman period onwards. In selective mid-altitude landscapes like the Sierra de Ávila, this trend continued after the eighth century and only changed substantially with an intensified deforestation after the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁵⁹ It is not surprising that the location of early medieval sites is very different from that of Roman sites, owing to the clear preference for areas used for animal husbandry, as equally seen in the neighbouring Amblés valley.⁶⁰

Intensification in stock-rearing is associated with increasing interest in the control and use of these medium-altitude mountain areas. The absence of 'central places' in Sierra de Ávila may indicate that local communities were the instigators of this process. Although this phenomenon may be due to the reorientation of production made by elites after the disarticulation of Roman exchange networks, it seems more logical that it was the consequence of the initiative of the rural peasant

⁵⁸ Details on the techniques and procedures of the sampling strategies, the treatment of samples, the resolution of the age-depth models and the criteria used in the identification of palynomorphs can be found in J.A. López Sáez *et al.*, 'Vegetation History, Climate and Human Impact in the Spanish Central System over the Last 9,000 Years', *Quaternary International* 353 (2014), pp. 98–122.

⁵⁹ A. Blanco-González, J.A. López Sáez and L. López Merino, 'Ocupación y uso del territorio en el sector centromeridional de la cuenca del Duero entre la Antigüedad y la Alta Edad Media', *Archivo Español de Arqueología* 82 (2009), pp. 275–300; Blanco-González *et al.*, 'Medieval Landscapes in the Spanish Central System'.

⁶⁰ Blanco-González, 'Tendencias del uso del suelo'.

communities.⁶¹ They would have occupied areas considered marginal in Roman times. It was necessary to resort to strategies legitimizing control over the territories in a context of competition between different local communities. In this way, a landscape was shaped in which the role of the ancestors was used as a guarantee of appropriation rights. The eighth-century crisis affected the organization of the elites, but not the rural communities that were able to maintain control over these areas of pasture. Political integration in the tenth century did not affect the region and the nearest political centre, the city of Ávila (Fig. 2 B), does not seem to have formed part of the Asturian-Leonese political geography.⁶² This lack of interference from central agents may have allowed continuity in social practices and symbolic reference points in these mountain areas until perhaps the eleventh century. This hypothesis would explain the existence of isolated tombs as part of an area subjected to new models of use and occupation, which equally required new legitimization strategies. This situation can be extended to the *rural disordered cemeteries*, which seem to be associated with communitarian ownership of pastures. The location of some of these cemeteries (e.g. La Coba or San Simones) near natural corridors to mountain areas seems to reinforce the hypothesis of the ancestral tombs having acted as landmarks closely located by livestock drove-ways leading to high pasture lands. Thus, these graves were visible to passers-by with their flocks, re-enacting the social memory of the ancestors.

It is possible that this model can be applied to other regional cases, especially in mountain areas, but it is not the only pattern. The design and management of the burial grounds was in the hands of family segments, and local historical conditions explain choices made by these households. These funerary spaces also played a key role in the framing of a shared social memory, as venues where the commemoration of ancestors was collectively enacted by the living population. In this vein, they may be envisaged as *lieux de mémoire* or as 'technologies of memory'; material resources for memory that forged social networks by enmeshing people and land. In this way, recalling certain deceased members of these communities made them become ancestors.⁶³ Some of these links might

⁶¹ In the same fashion, for the Anglo-Saxon case, R. Faith, 'Forces and Relations of Production in Early Medieval England', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 9.1 (2009), pp. 23–41, applying the 'intensification and abatement' model enunciated by N. Horden and R. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea. A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2009).

⁶² Á Barrios García, 'Una tierra de nadie: los territorios abulenses en la Alta Edad Media', in Barrios García (ed.), *Historia de Ávila, II*, pp. 193–225.

⁶³ H. Williams, 'Introduction. The Archaeology of Death, Memory and Material Culture', in H. Williams (ed.), *Archaeologies of Remembrance. Death and Memory in Past Societies* (New York, 2003), pp. 1–23; Z. Devlin, *Remembering the Dead in Anglo-Saxon England. Memory Theory in Archaeology and History* (Oxford, 2007), p. 49.

have served to legitimize social status or to claim rights over the territory through the strategic deployment of this oral memory, particularly important in illiterate rural milieus.⁶⁴

Finally, one trait in common with the whole centre-west of the Iberian Peninsula is the church's lack of direct control over such early medieval rural cemeteries.⁶⁵ This situation changed drastically with the introduction of the parish network. In Sierra de Ávila, this system became established in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and was fully operative by 1250. One of the major outcomes of this early medieval political-administrative reordering was a novel social landscape, in which local identity was based around the parish, where the cemetery was located. This process was instigated by feudal powers to guarantee an efficient collection of rents and involved a reorganization of farmland to the benefit of the urban elites that composed the Council of Ávila, which created a complex system of uses.⁶⁶ One immediate consequence was the loss of function of the ancient funerary landscape and its landmarks. This process may have begun in the twelfth century or late eleventh, and included the foundation of new permanent settlements on top of old burial grounds, as at Brieva and Serranos de Avianos. However, the *rural disordered cemeteries* may have played a part in the definition of the new parish territories, even though they lost their importance in the landscape.

7. Conclusions

After the disintegration of the Roman system, a new landscape appeared in the Sierra de Ávila in the early Middle Ages. This mid-altitude highland setting, which until then had been regarded as marginal and not occupied effectively and only exploited occasionally, became an attractive area for post-Roman peasantry. After the eighth century, this region became more dynamic because of the new role placed by self-dependent

⁶⁴ N. Roymans and F. Theuvs, 'Long Term Perspectives on Land and People in the Meuse-Demer-Schedtregión (1100 BC–1500 AD). An Introduction', in F. Theuvs and N. Roymans (eds), *Land and Ancestors. Cultural Dynamics in the Urnfield Period and the Middle Ages in Southern Netherlands* (Amsterdam, 1999), pp. 1–32, at pp. 12–14.

⁶⁵ Y. Duval, *Auprès des saints, corps et âme. L'inhumation ad sancto dans la chrétienté d'Orient et d'Occident du III^e au VII^e siècle* (Paris, 1988), pp. 3–23. B. Effros, *Caring for Body and Soul. Burial and Afterlife in the Merovingian World* (University Park, 2002), pp. 139–40.

⁶⁶ In this area there were community pastures (*alixares*), whose control was disputed in the fifteenth century by the livestock farmers in the city of Ávila (the *Asocio*), the rural councils, and some aristocratic families. Thus there were the *exidos de la Puebla* and Las Becedas, a settlement in Grajos, now San Juan del Olmo. J. Ma Monsalvo Antón, 'Usurpaciones de comunales: conflicto social y disputa legal (Culturas políticas, luchas del común y sistema concejil en Ávila y su tierra durante la Baja Edad Media)', in J. Ma Monsalvo Antón, *Comunalismo concejil abulense. Paisajes agrarios, conflictos y percepciones del espacio rural en la Tierra de Ávila y otros concejos medievales* (Ávila, 2010), pp. 113–90.

and scarcely integrated subsistence strategies, among which livestock-farming was the main occupation. As a consequence of this process, elusive habitats (including temporary hamlets), which we are only beginning to know, were created in the mountain range *ex novo*, as well as burial sites, of which only the most imperishable – those carved in rock – have been identified. As they were used for the burial of certain relevant individuals, these devices played a crucial role in the forging of social identities. Thus, communities inhabiting the Sierra de Ávila and exploiting its resources resorted to recalling ancestorship as a key symbolic mechanism to claim their rights over the landscape. The location of these funerary locales, defined by the use of rock-dug tombs, seems to support this idea. The *isolated graves* would be related to family or individual properties but also perhaps served to translate the identity of a community or social segment into the landscape, especially in those cases in which a relationship of proximity to the settlement may be surmised. The case of the *rural disordered cemeteries*, located in places of particular pastoral interests, appears to be even clearer.

The prevalence of isolated mortuary sites and communal disordered burial spaces suggests a series of autonomous, detached social forces. This archaeological phenomenon seems the result of spontaneous decisions on the part of families and rural communities instead of being the product of external ecclesiastical or political authorities. These heterogeneous and relatively self-dependent groups might have claimed property and usufruct rights over their territories by deploying a series of symbolic mechanisms.⁶⁷ In contrast, there is no evidence supporting the existence of ecclesiastical control over such practices. Community or family management of the cemeteries may also indicate that the main direct agents of the new subsistence practices were precisely these same communities and families, who were also responsible for this increase in pastoralist practices in Sierra de Ávila. However, these communities would possess internal differences. Thus, only a small fraction of the population was inhumed in such monumental graves, and over the subsequent decades they would come to be considered as ancestors. This reasoning would explain the virtual absence of children's graves in rural areas. The difficulty thus lies in identifying the places where most of the population was buried. Perhaps the use of less elaborate burial formulae has resulted in the disappearance of many of the remains of these graves in an area with very acidic soils.

The local landscapes underwent a profound transformation when the region was integrated into the Christian kingdoms. The creation of new

⁶⁷ Martín Viso, 'Enterramientos, memoria social y paisaje en la Alta Edad Media'.

mechanisms of political and ecclesiastical power, added to increasing pressure on pastures, determined the formation of a new structure of rural landscape. In the funerary realm, the progressive affirmation of the parish and the parish cemetery led to the abandonment of the old burial grounds. Nonetheless, some of them may have functioned as boundary markers for parish lands. In any case, the presence of some hermitages, as at La Coba with the chapel of Nuestra Señora de las Fuentes, may reflect the maintenance of the importance of this area into the late Middle Ages and the modern period, albeit with profoundly different values and meanings.

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