

CARRIERS AND DISTRIBUTION NETWORKS IN THE FRONTIER TOWNS OF ALTA EXTREMADURA (15TH-16TH CENTURIES)

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a characterization of the professionals engaged in the transportation of goods by land, and who lived in the towns along the border of Portugal and Extremadura while they circulated through Upper Extremadura. It also describes the distribution circuits that linked these towns with both regional and interregional districts. Drawing upon data gleaned from legal proceedings and local ordinances, the findings ascertain the emergence, between the late 15th and early 16th centuries, of a specialized professional work force –the *recueros*– devoted to transportation. The aforementioned data also underscores the pivotal role played by the distribution professionals in facilitating economic cohesion between coastal Portugal and the hinterlands of Castile.

KEYWORDS: Middle Ages, Castile, Portugal, trade, transport, globalization.

TRANSPORTISTAS Y REDES DE DISTRIBUCIÓN EN LAS VILLAS FRONTERIZAS DE LA ALTA EXTREMADURA (SIGLOS XV-XVI)

RESUMEN

En este artículo se presenta una caracterización de los profesionales del transporte terrestre de mercancías que habitaron las villas de la frontera luso-extremeña en su discurrir por la Alta Extremadura. Igualmente, se presenta un esbozo de las redes de distribución de mercancías que conectan a estas villas con el ámbito comarcal y el interregional. A partir de los datos extraídos de fuentes procesales y ordenanzas locales, los resultados obtenidos permiten afirmar que en nuestra área de estudio se configuró, entre finales del siglo xv y comienzos del siglo xvi, un grupo profesional –el de los *recueros*– especializado en el transporte y que las redes de distribución en las que se insertaron y que contribuyeron a crear fueron fundamentales para la articulación económica entre la costa portuguesa y el interior castellano.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Edad Media, Castilla, Portugal, comercio, transporte, globalización.

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0. INTRODUCTION¹

The formation of increasingly integrated economies across Western Europe during the Late Middle Ages –marked by growing regional complementarities and interdependence– laid the essential groundwork for the processes of early globalization that would unfold from the Atlantic axis in the sixteenth century. This integration was not merely the result of expanding maritime capabilities, but also of profound transformations in consumption, production, and distribution networks that reshaped the economic landscape of late medieval Europe. A more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this modern phenomenon is achieved when the analysis of its medieval roots incorporates not only final consumers but also the networks through which goods circulated, the resistances to cultural and material exchanges, the diversity of goods exchanged, and a multipolar perspective that moves beyond Eurocentric or Atlantic-centric narratives (Bonialian, 2019; Yun-Casalilla & Aram, 2014). In this context, it becomes essential to consider the evolution of commercial infrastructures from 13th century, such as fairs, regional markets, and maritime routes. One of the most significant developments in this regard was the consolidation of trade networks, which fostered increased cross-border exchanges and linked distant regions into a more cohesive commercial system.

Recent historiography has emphasized the strategic importance of the so-called “Atlantic route” –a corridor that interconnected the Atlantic and Mediterranean spheres– as a formative precedent to the commercial expansion that characterized the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Rozas Español, 2017). This maritime corridor did not simply serve as a conduit for goods; it also spurred innovation in shipbuilding, encouraged the rise of new port cities, and consolidated the commercial leadership of both Portugal and Castile through their growing involvement in international trade circuits. However, focusing exclusively on maritime expansion risks obscuring the critical role of terrestrial infrastructures and overland networks in sustaining and facilitating long-distance trade. While household consumption undoubtedly played a central role in stimulating demand –and seafaring routes connected distant shores– it was the land-based transport systems and local commercial structures that formed the indispensable intermediaries between consumers, producers, and ports. These overland routes enabled the movement of bulk commodities and everyday goods,

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such as textiles, leather, foodstuffs, and tools, from inland production zones to coastal harbors or fairgrounds. Scholars have noted that the connection between local producers and consumers through terrestrial trade – particularly in the circulation of common-use goods – must be seen as a key driver in the early phases of what has been termed the “Western Commercial Revolution” (Wickham, 2023).

To investigate this dynamic more fully, it is necessary to delve into the socio-professional world of muleteers and rural carriers, who played an indispensable yet often underappreciated role in the circulation of *godos* (Diago Hernando, 2020). These actors, typically organized in informal networks and guided by a deep knowledge of geography and market cycles, were instrumental in bridging the gap between local production and inter-regional commerce. By studying their practices, the routes they traveled, the logistical infrastructures they relied upon (such as inns, storage facilities, and rest stations), and the institutional frameworks that regulated their activities (including municipal ordinances and royal provisions), we gain valuable insight into the material and social conditions that underpinned late medieval economic expansion. Ultimately, this approach not only enhances our understanding of the mechanisms that linked supply with demand, but also challenges conventional narratives of premodern economies as isolated or static. Instead, it reveals a landscape of dynamic interaction, where terrestrial and maritime spheres converged, and where local economies were embedded within broader regional and international trade systems.

Iberian historiography has identified a general increase in consumption capacity across all social strata in the late medieval world. This shift is marked by a declining proportion of household expenditure on food and a rising demand for semi-durable and durable goods. Various factors underpin this transformation in consumption patterns, including the expansion of trade, the increase in real wages, and the emergence of new commercial practices (Villanueva Morte, 2016, p. 69). In the Crown of Castile, this period of prosperity can be traced from the mid-fifteenth century to the central decades of the sixteenth century. Regional studies consistently link this growth to demographic expansion, a positive regulatory environment, and the development of rural manufacturing sectors. Another critical driver of increased purchasing power was the improvement in living standards, facilitated by the negotiating capacity of municipal councils with jurisdictional authorities – a well-documented phenomenon in late medieval Castile (Clemente Quijada, 2014; Clemente Ramos, 2007; Luchía, 2015). This economic growth was paralleled by rising consumption levels, with aggregated demand in both urban and rural settings favoring higher-quality goods and, in some cases, luxury items. Fiscal records from late fifteenth-century Seville, particularly those concerning *alcabala* and *almojarifazgo* taxes, reflect an uptick in the aggregate demand for fruits and vegetables. While this does not necessarily indicate a rise in per capita consumption, it does point to a stimulative effect on surrounding rural producers – corroborated by evidence of increased cultivation in the Sevillian hinterland during this period. More broadly, evolving patterns of bread consumption underscore a qualitative shift: composite breads made with wheat and lower-cost cereals such as rye or barley were increasingly replaced by higher-quality bread made exclusively from wheat. Thus, demography,



production, and consumption are tightly interwoven in this context. However, to fully grasp the complexity of this transformation, it is crucial to investigate the intermediary links in the chain, it means, those actors and infrastructures that connected producers and consumers, ultimately enabling access to goods.

This economic development is correlated with an increase in consumption, a variable addressed by recent bibliography, revealing that demand rose in proportion to the urban and rural growth, which resulted in an increase in the commercialization of products of better quality, or even luxury items. Data regarding taxation in Seville at the end of the 16th century, mainly based on the amounts paid in *alcabala* and *almojarifazgo* taxes, show an increase in demand for fruit and vegetables. Although this does not necessarily correspond to *per capita* demand, it does indicate that there was a new stimulus for local farmers, resulting in an increase in cultivated land in Seville's outskirts during this period (González Arce, 2023). On a general scale, changes in bread consumption show that bread which had been made with a mixture of wheat and other cheaper cereals such as rye and barley, was being substituted by a better-quality bread made with wheat only (Clemente Ramos, 2011). Therefore, demography, production and consumption are inextricably associated in this period, but we need to analyze in more depth the links in this chain, those factors that motivate the producer, connecting him to the consumer, and finally, facilitate trade.

This period and its issues have been analyzed, with special focus on commercial companies and merchants, and the role of marketplaces (Bustos Rodríguez, 2014; Casado Alonso, 2010, 2015; Igual Luis, 2006, 2014). Both the sectors of specialized transportation and retail were fundamental for the economy; they were the link between the producer and the end consumer since the distribution network is fundamental to understand both the increase in consumption and new trades that emerged with the growth. Merchant and companies organized the big commercial operations in terms of volume and value, but underlying those operations there was a whole network of transport and distribution professionals that made these transactions possible, and to which recent historiography gives importance as key factors in the economic process. However, less known for bibliography is the role of transportation professionals and infrastructures (Córdoba de la Llave & Hernández Iñigo, 2003; Diago Hernando, 2020; Igual Luis, 2016).

We consider that it is important to examine in depth the people whose work it was to transfer goods because efficient and accessible transportation is crucial for the commercialization of production. Transportation serves as a stimulus to the economy, increasing efficiency in the use of resources and competitiveness among producers in one, or among several regions. We are talking about a whole profusion of retail distributors who often, though in smaller volumes, find the goods and buy them wholesale, then sell them in the towns and villages of the Castilian interior; or deliver grain and other agricultural products, such as wine, at the ports, providing another form of distribution for goods produced in the interior. We also consider that these networks created at the end of the Middle Ages were fundamental for the articulation of the worldwide circuits that propitiated early globalization.

Therefore, in order to understand how the transportation networks operated and their early global connections were established, in this work we will focus on the



way transportation by land between Portugal and Castile functioned in the 15th and 16th centuries. We will examine the case study of the border settlements of Leonese Extremadura –a space in which we include the Tierra de Albuquerque and the *Maestrazgo* of Alcántara–, especially through the muleteers and the infrastructures that made possible the circulation of people and goods. Studying these factors in a border area allows us to find answers to some of the questions about global articulation, but also implies the incorporation of other variables, *i.e.* to clarify if the border was a factor that fomented transportation, or if it was an obstacle for the exchanges. Therefore, we work from the hypothesis that the transportation of goods to and from these border communities stimulated the inclusion of their inhabitants in wider routes of transportation and distribution that connected the Atlantic coast with the interior of Castile, and that contributed to a regional specialization in grain and wine production, as well as in transportation. We will mainly use data from the *Registro General del Sello* for the second half of the 15th century; with council ordinances for the first half of the 16th century and with legal proceedings and fiscal records from the *Contaduría Mayor de Cuentas*. From these sources we obtain information about the goods that were traded, plus their origin and destination. We realize especially how the transportation networks and infrastructures function, *i.e.* roads and hostels. The sources do not allow for a systematic analysis of those details, but we will be able to give some indications about: a) descriptions of transportation professionals, b) the nature and extension of transportation routes, c) the establishment of infrastructures that facilitated the functioning of those networks.

1. TRANSPORTERS AND DISTRIBUTION CIRCUITS: REGIONAL AND INTERREGIONAL INTEGRATION

Some traditional interpretations of economic development in medieval Extremadura have emphasized a marked tendency toward subsistence-oriented production, which, in turn, is thought to have resulted in a weak and fragmented commercial landscape. According to this view, economic exchanges were predominantly local in nature, confined to the internal circuits of each district, with minimal integration into broader commercial networks. These exchanges have often been portrayed as isolated and limited in scope, disconnected from the dynamics of long-distance or international trade (De Santos Canalejo, 1981; Rodríguez Blanco, 1985, p. 276). Furthermore, it has traditionally been argued that the principal venues for commercial activity in medieval Extremadura were local or regional livestock markets, which, although socially and economically important within the framework of pastoral economies, lacked the capacity to generate the types of surplus, specialization, and diversification commonly associated with more complex or expansive trade systems. These markets functioned primarily as spaces for the exchange of animals and their derivative products –such as wool, hides, and meat– often in association with transhumant networks and seasonal fairs. However, they remained, in this view, largely disconnected from broader circuits of interregional or international trade. As a result, Extremadura has frequently been



portrayed in historical narratives as a marginal and economically underdeveloped region, occupying a peripheral position within the broader structures of late medieval Iberian commerce. It is described as a territory whose economic profile was shaped predominantly by extensive livestock husbandry, with limited urban development, a weak monetized economy, and scarce integration into the major commercial arteries of the Atlantic seaboard. This perspective, while grounded in certain demographic and geographical realities –such as low population density, the dominance of the *dehesa* landscape, and the political-military role of the region as a frontier zone– risks overlooking other dimensions of economic life that recent scholarship has begun to recover. These include evidence of artisanal specialization, localized manufacturing, and more active participation in regional distribution networks, particularly in areas close to the Portuguese border. Consequently, a reexamination of these assumptions is necessary to better understand the true complexity and variability of economic practices in the frontier societies of late medieval Extremadura.

In fact, the border has been interpreted as the cause of weak human presence and shortage of infrastructures that could have fomented trade. However, more recently, in the last two decades there has been a positive change in interpretations of the role of the border in the daily life of the people who lived there. Some economic developments in the Extremadura region have been re-interpreted, both by moving away from the idea that trade was weak, and by focusing on production oriented towards commerce and regional specialization (García Barriga, 2020; García Oliva, 1991, p. 197; Sánchez Rubio, 1993, p. 405). Cases of complementarity between mountainous areas and the plains were identified, as well as between Castile and Portugal (Clemente Ramos, 2013, 2015; Montaña Conchiña, 2014). It is pertinent, therefore, to examine in depth how the transportation networks operated, making that interregional complementation possible, particularly since there are other works that have addressed the types of products that were in circulation.

1.1. MULETEERS AND REGIONAL CIRCUITS

At the end of the Middle Ages we find, in the area under study, individuals dedicated to the transportation by land of goods who are usually referred to in the documents as «recueros» (muleteers), or occasionally as «recoversos». These individuals are in charge of driving trains of pack mules or donkeys to transport loads. Normally the sources allude to their acémilas (mules) and their caballerías (horses), which we see in the ordinances of Trujillo: «muleteers who bring a drove of pack animals» (Sánchez Rubio, 1995, p. 158). Sometimes it is difficult to differentiate between them and the merchants, because in certain documents, especially the local ordinances, the muleteers are mentioned in different stages of the commercial process, including the acquisition of a product, its transportation and its wholesale resale at its destination. For example, the ordinances of the Torre de don Miguel mention muleteers who intervene directly in the purchase of wine to be transported, since they have a provision that regulates the conditions of transactions between the wine producer and the muleteer: «person who shows red wine to sell to some person or muleteer,

and if such muleteer likes the wine, he is obliged to sell it to him at the same price he would sell it for in the town» (Torres González, 1988, p. 405).

Although at times the muleteer acted as a commercial agent, there is evidence that these men also carried out specialized activity, that is, the transportation of goods by land, either as employees or as independent workers, but without intervening in the stages of business. This idea is revealed by a lawsuit that was brought to the Royal Council in 1480 by David Cea, a merchant of Albuquerque, against Pedro Tejelo, who is clearly cited by the investigating committee to which the magistrate of Trujillo is assigned as a «muleteer, resident of the town of Valencia de Alcántara»². In the committee proceedings it is mentioned that both parties agreed that Pedro Tejelo take some loads to Medina del Campo and return to Valencia with other products; nowhere does it mention that the muleteer was involved in the buying and selling negotiations. This document offers an insight into the social condition of the muleteer, stating that he is a «a prosperous man and officially domiciled in the place where he lives and takes part in the court trials». The muleteers can also be salaried employees of those who do long distance transactions. This is evidenced in a mandate issued in 1495 by the Royal Council to the border guard (*continuo*) Juan de Alcaraz, to return some mules that were the property of a partnership created in Herguijuela de Ciudad Rodrigo between Juan Péres de Aguijuela, Juan Velasco and Mari Sánchez; the mules had been confiscated as the muleteers were getting ready to cross the pass of Ciudad Rodrigo on their way to Portugal: «you took the said five mules from the aforementioned employees»³. Also mentioned as a salaried employee was the muleteer who collected cloth in Ceclavín to take to the fulling mill run by María Gómez in San Martín de Trevejo⁴. The documents indicate that although some farmers engaged in this occupation to complement their regular income, there are also specialized transporters, or at least it is what we deduce from the differentiation between farmers and muleteers that appears in one document: «those who do this transport the most are muleteers and farmers and other humble people»⁵.

This activity is carried out both regionally and interregionally, and gives rise to production chains. In the regional ambit, transportation by land facilitates specialized production in regions close to the Portuguese border. The Sierra de Gata area is specialized in the production of wine, which is complemented by the production of grain in the flat zones of the south of the Maestrazgo of Alcantara. This fact has been brought to light in previous works, but for the effects of this analysis, what interests us is to observe how the emergence of professionals specialized in transportation aided this integration of wine and grain producing regions. Thus, wine produced in the Sierra de Gata is transported to the markets in the interior of Castile, such as Plasencia, the fairs of Medina, and to Portugal at the end of the 15th century.

² AGS, RGS, Legajo 148009,51.

³ AGS, RGS, Legajo 149507,272.

⁴ ARCHVA, Registro de Ejecutorias, Caja 1642,72.

⁵ AGS, RGS, Legajo 149505,360.





Local ordinances illustrate how regional distribution networks operated regarding wine. These transporters connected producers and consumers during their travels from the Sierra de Gata to the city of Plasencia. An ordinance from Plasencia makes a reference to «the muleteers who bring wine to this city [...] from Gata or la Torre [de don Miguel]. And what they brought from Xaraiz [...] and what they brought from Cuacos and Aldeanueva (Lora Serrano, 2005, p. 130). This reference resembles another one in the ordinances of Gata of 1515, which regulate the terms by which transactions should be carried out between wine producers and muleteers: «a person who shows wine to any muleteer or muleteers must first tell them what the asking price is per arroba. After the price is established and the wine tasted and the muleteer agrees to take said wine, the owner is obliged to sell it» (Clemente Ramos, 2008, p. 1651). The ordinances of the town of Torre de don Miguel in the Sierra de Gata mountains also mention the participation of muleteers in the distribution of wine. Similarly to what was practiced in Gata, they establish norms to regulate the relations between producers and distributors: «Neighbors and residents of this town that sell wine to a muleteer, for coinage in arrobas» (Torres González, 1988, p. 405).

In regional terms, muleteers contributed to the creation of economic complementarity by moving goods in both directions of their itineraries. For example, those muleteers who arrive from Torre de don Miguel transport goods from, but also to the town, as evidenced by an ordinance: «a muleteer who comes to this town for wine [...] and brings any other goods to the town» (Torres González, 1988, p. 406). Also, in Valencia de Alcántara the muleteers not only transport local products to other places, but they bring merchandise from outside: «muleteers who come to this town or its surroundings or any places within its boundaries and jurisdiction, bringing fish, olive oil, salt and other goods and provisions, from either Castile or Portugal, must register said goods» (Bohorquez Jiménez, 1982, p. 216). From the south of the Maestrazgo, one of the products that is most transported is wheat, as evidenced, for example, by an order of the Royal Council in 1485 to the bachiller Juan López Navarro, to arrest certain residents of Brozas for transporting wheat to Portugal: «it has come to our attention from a report that certain residents from Broças and other border places were passing the border guards which our mayor Diego de Salzedo had installed to control the loads and things banned by the town of Albuquerque, with beasts loaded with wheat and others that were going to the kingdom of Portugal»⁶.

1.2. THE ARTICULATION OF INTERREGIONAL CONNEXIONS

In the previous section we drew a profile of the carriers and observed their work in the structuring of regional distribution networks. Next, we will examine their participation in interregional networks, both in the interior of Castile and

⁶ AGS, RGS, Legajo 148605,360.

those that articulated Portugal with Castile, and the Iberian Peninsula with overseas regions. In the interregional ambit, wine production is the most prevalent. Muleteers from the Sierra de Gata transport wine to Salamanca and the markets of Medina del Campo, as demonstrated in a complaint that was sent to the Royal Council by the town councils of Gata and Robledillo (de Gata) in 1495: «neighbours and residents of the said towns, or some of them, say that they often go to the fairs of Medina and of Salamanca [...] and for their provisions they say that they take some wine in leather wine bags and other vessels, and other times they take the wine to sell in other places»⁷.

The transporters of the border, through their work, achieved interregional integration from the end of the 15th century onwards, linking the Atlantic coast of Portugal to the interior of Castile through the border towns. This deduction is based on the goods that are mentioned in the ordinances, mostly fish, but also dyes and exotic goods such as cinnamon, ginger and cotton. The ordinances of Valencia de Alcántara are enlightening in that respect, since they mention those who arrive in town with «with loads of fish, olive oil, salt and other goods and provisions, from both Portugal and Castile» (Bohorquez Jiménez, 1982, p. 216). The types of fish that are mentioned include sardines, indicating their coastal origin. In title 40 of the ordinances of Ceclavín there is reference to pack animal drivers that sell fish: «muleteers came from other places with sardines and other fish for which this town has a need»⁸.

These carriers could be foreign to the area, but the available documents indicate that in many cases the residents of border areas were specialized in the transportation of goods between the Portuguese coast and the Castilian interior. We have an early reference for Tierra de Ciudad Rodrigo which mentions the transport of goods between Portugal and Castile in 1495 by neighbours of the village of Herguijuela de Ciudad Rodrigo. That year Juan de Alcaraz, a *contino*, is ordered to return some mules that he had confiscated from María Sánchez and her partners -residents of Aguijuela- when they were crossing into Portugal to load sardines: «*que yendo unos moços suyos e del dicho Juan Velasco e de la dicha Mari Sánchez con cinco acémilas por el puerto de Çiudad Rodrigo por sardinas al reino de Portugal diz que a la pasada que pasaron a registrar las dichas acémilas e dimos que llevaban e diz que vos salistes con çiertos onbres de pie e de caballo cerca del mojón de Portugal, e les tomastes las dichas cinco azémilas a los dichos sus moços, porque llevaban çiertos panes cozidos e çierta çevada e paja para las dichas acémilas*» (when some employees of theirs and of Juan Velasco and Mari Sánchez were crossing the pass of Ciudad Rodrigo with five mules to collect sardines from the kingdom of Portugal they say that they registered the said five mules and you came after them with some men on foot and on horseback near the boundary marker with Portugal, and you confiscated

⁷ AGS, RGS, Legajo 149505,360.

⁸ AHN, OM, AHT, Expediente 28791.



the aforementioned five mules and the *moços*, because they were carrying some bread and barley and straw for the mules)⁹.

In the interregional integration, these muleteers move goods in both directions, that is, from our area of study to the customary destinations and from those places towards our area of study. This indicates that these are specialized pack animal drivers because the diversity of goods suggests a broad knowledge of both places of supply and distribution possibilities for those products. We have a convincing reference in the complaint to the Royal Council by the town councils of Trevejo and San Martín in 1485: «the main livelihood and sustenance that the inhabitants of those places have is trading in the wine they make from their vines, and they usually export it and sell it in the kingdom of Portugal». Those who carry out this activity return afterwards to their places of origin with fish, cloth and wax: «these muleteers bring to our kingdoms fish and cloth and wax»¹⁰.

Although the documents do not specify which destinations in Portugal the carriers are heading to, the fact that they return with fish suggests that these transportation circuits extend to the Atlantic coast. The question is whether these muleteers reach Portuguese seaports on their own, or are they part of one of the commercial networks that connect an unidentified point, or the coast, with the border. On this subject we have only a few comments dating from the second half of the 16th century and these are almost anecdotal, but which we should not rule out because of what they suggest about the existence of international distribution chains. The chronicler Alonso Barrantes Maldonado claimed in the decade of the 1560s regarding wine produced in the localities of *La Raya* (the border), that he had «drunk it in Flanders in the chamber of Emperor Charles V, who had it delivered from Alcantara (Martín Nieto *et al.*, 2010, p. 198). The same author described the roads that connect Castile with Portugal passing through the border town of Albuquerque, and he explicitly mentions Portuguese muleteers from the coast who crossed the Castilian border with fish: «This road is used by the muleteers that come from Setubal, who sell fish fresh from the sea» (Martín Nieto *et al.*, 2010, p. 406).

The articulation of the trade by land between both kingdoms carried out by the transporters contributed to their integration in the multipolar system that characterized early globalization. We estimate that interregional movements were not the result of a merely passive circulation, in which people were obliged to pass through a town simply because of the geography of the area. On the contrary, we consider that the inhabitants of the border towns were not only a part of the trade networks in the interior of the Peninsula, but they made the networks possible. Some Portuguese sources are more explicit than the Castilian ones, but we will use both for the sake of comparison. For example, several houses in the town of Portalegre belonging to the merchant Turibio Lopez and his wife, Francisca Lopes, were sold in public auction because of a debt of 300,000 *reais* to Jorge de Melo who in 1543 had

⁹ AGS, RGS, Legajo 149507, 272.

¹⁰ AGS, RGS, Legajo 148503, 33.

lent them that amount to finance a trip to buy indigo, and which was to be followed by another journey to Castile¹¹. This event shows how a married couple living in a border town between Portugal and Extremadura articulated commercial exchanges with the Atlantic and Indian Oceans (indigo being a product from overseas) and with the Castilian interior. It was not an isolated case, since similar examples have been analyzed in bibliographies pertaining to the social and economic history of cross-border trade (Caso Amador, 2017; Villegas Díaz, 2003).

The articulating capacity of the inhabitants of the border towns between the Kingdom of Portugal and the Crown of Castile and overseas trade can also be defined through the data and analysis of legal proceedings. Specifically, a lawsuit filed by the arrendador lessor of the Valencia de Alcántara pass against Manuel Díaz, a resident of Castelo de Vide, provides similar evidence to the case of Portalegre regarding the articulating function of border towns and other places in the Portuguese interior, such as Abrantes, in the organization of trade in the early days of globalization¹². Thus, it is the residents of those places who are in charge of the transport of overseas goods, such as spices, cloth and manufactured consumables, for redistribution in the Castilian interior. The court records which we analyzed had an original annotated transcription of the official customs documents of Valencia de Alcántara issued to Portuguese merchants and muleteers passing through the border post during the first semester of 1572. The documents include the date of passage, the products being transported and the quantities. In some occasions they also mention the recipient of the products and their address, as we specify below.

TABLE 1. PRODUCTS THAT CROSSED THROUGH THE CUSTOMS OF VALENCIA DE ALCÁNTARA BETWEEN APRIL AND JULY OF 1572				
MERCHANT	VICINITY	PRODUCTS	DESTINATION	RECIPIENT
Manuel Díaz	Castelo de Vide	Indigo	Castile	--
Bastían Fernández	Castelo de Vide	Indigo	Toledo	Arias González
Pero Vaz	Abrantes	Indigo and wax	Castile	--
Bernardo de Acuña	Lisbon	Indigo, cinnamon and clove	Madrid	Juan Rodríguez
Baltasar Fernández	Abrantes	Cloths from India, cinnamon, clove, ginger, pepper, indigo and wax	Castile	--

Source: AHN, OM, AHT, 27991.

As Table 1 shows, between April and July of 1572 at least 5 muleteers coming from Portugal crossed the border, four of whom declared that their permanent residence was in towns in the interior of Portugal like Abrantes and Castelo de Vide. The nature of their loads reveal that they were dedicated to transporting

¹¹ ADP, MSBP, Cx. 16 maço 179,1210.

¹² AHN, OM, AHT, Expediente 27991.

overseas products such as spices, dyes and cotton cloth (cloths from India). It is not yet possible to determine if they actually reached the port of Lisbon, or if they had intermediaries. However, given the cases associated with the commercialization of salt and sea fish, and the fact that witnesses mention transporters who pass through Albuquerque on their way from Setubal, it is possible that the transporters of *La Raya* (border) travelled the whole distance between their destinations (Toledo, Madrid) and the port of Lisbon. Furthermore, these muleteers declare themselves as such at the customs, suggesting that they are not actually merchants, but rather agents specialized in the transportation of goods.

2. INFRASTRUCTURES

We have described how the transportation of goods by land stimulated a regional specialization in the production of wine in the Sierra de Gata and of grain in the southern areas of the district of Alcantara. We observed the transfer of that production to other areas of Extremadura (Plasencia and Cáceres), Castile (Ciudad Rodrigo and the markets of Medina) and Portugal, and the acquisition of products along the routes. At this point we consider it important to point out that for these logistics to function adequately there must be infrastructures that enable those exchanges to take place. These infrastructures are both physical (roads, accommodation, repairs, meals), and judicial (markets, norms for exportation and importation). As we have suggested for other forms of settlement, some of these places -such as the *ventas* or what we will refer to as “roadside towns” - emerged from the spontaneous settlement of local inhabitants along the roads. Their proliferation and growth can therefore be considered an indicator of increased in traffic and also commercialization and distribution of rural goods (Córdoba de la Llave, 1995, 109). So, in this section we will describe the new hospitality establishments (*ventas*), and settlements (La Codosera and Navas del Madroño) that emerge on various roads of the border area and change the settlement network, which we interpret as indicators of an increase in the circulation of people and goods across the border during the 16th century. In the following table we present the establishments discovered in the area, which we have grouped into three typologies (*ventas* or inns, roadside villages and *casas de postas* or staging posts). These dispersed clusters of settlements are found near roads that run East-West, that is, the roads that are used to circulate between Castile and Portugal.



TABLE 2. INFRASTRUCTURES THAT ENABLE THE LOGISTICAL PROCESS

TYPOLGY	PLACE	FIRST MENTION	REFERENCE
Venta (inn)	Azagala (El Tejarejo)	1523	AGS, CMC-1, Leg 231
	Navas del Madroño	1520	AHN, OM, AHT, Exp. 26581
	Venta de Perea	1543	AGS, EXH, Leg 213
	Venta de los Calvos	1520	ARCHGR, Caja 1914, Pieza 005
	Venta de Benavente	1517	(Franco Silva, 2000, p. 50)
Roadside settlement	Azagala (El Tejarejo)	1520	AHN, OM, AHT, Exp. 30983
	Navas del Madroño	1540	AHN, OM, Libro 505
	La Codosera	1523	(Franco Silva, 2000)
Casa de postas	Azagala (El Tejarejo)	1540	AHN, OM, AHT, Exp. 30983

2.1. VENTAS

Ventas were establishments located along roads, outside urban areas, intended to provide lodging and food for travelers, transporters, as well as their animals and cargo. And, as previously noted, they also function as exchange nodes between locally produced goods and the merchandise moving along the road networks in whose vicinity they became established (Córdoba de la Llave, 1995, 109). We encountered the existence of *ventas* for travelers during the first half of the 16th century. This may have been thanks to a proliferation of documents during this period, since much of the information derives from legal proceedings that are subsequent to the incorporation of the *Maestrazgo* of Alcántara to the Crown of Castile in 1494. However, an analysis of these cases invariably shows a more recent chronology of its construction, whereby we can affirm that most of the cases we document are from the first two decades of the 16th century (table 2). In one trial heard by the *Real Chancillería de Granada* (Royal Chancellery of Granada) there was a description of the construction in the first half of the 16th century of a *venta* called Venta de Juan Crespo next to the river Salor¹³. In 1519 Pablo de Pedraza, one of the witnesses in the trial, declared that thirty-five years before (around 1485) there had been only “a mill dam and an old mill which is in ruins». Shortly thereafter, Diego Martín, a resident of Brozas “built a mill where now the said Juan Crespo lives and built a small house for himself and his family and for other people who passed by there». A statement by the witness Miguel García, a shepherd from Villascastín who grazed his animals in the area, reveals that later the neighbor of Brozas sold only the mill and the little house to Juan Crespo «before the aforementioned Juan Crespo bought the property [...] he had not built more than the mill and a house». Juan Crespo appears to have

¹³ ARCHGR, Caja 1914, pieza 005.

acquired the installations with the intention of starting a hospitality business, since all the witnesses coincided in the idea that it was he who enlarged the buildings for lodging and for provisioning travelers and their animals, as clearly stated by the witness Juan Pardo: «for two years this witness has seen Juan Crespo build the corral and straw barn, which had not been built before, and are new».

The *ventas* in the area under study are situated in places remote from the local communities, along the roads that lead to Portugal and pass through Valencia and Albuquerque. The Venta del Tejarero in the *dehesa* (grassland) of Azagala, halfway between Valencia de Alcántara and Albuquerque, was located on the «camino real» (royal road) and some witnesses' declarations from the *Contaduría Mayor de Cuentas* insist that the surroundings were uninhabited: «that there are no neighbors within the said limits of Azagala other than the owner of the venta de Tejarejo»¹⁴. The venta of Juan Crespo was next to the river Salor: «cabe el camino real que va para Alburquerque e para Almaçanete e para Villar del Rey e para Valençia [de Alcántara]» (on the *camino real* that goes to Albuquerque and to Almacanete and to Villar del Rey and to Valencia de Alcantara)¹⁵. In the Tierra de Alburquerque, the *venta* of Benavente was on the border of Castile and Portugal, very near the road that connected both kingdoms. There, the witness Alonso Pérez claimed that he had known the place and its boundaries very well for over twenty years because he lived near La Codosera in a *venta* they called Benavente, and he thinks that if it was repopulated it would be beneficial to all the people who travel by there «because that way they will find repast and will travel more safely» (Franco Silva, 2000, p. 50). As we can see, the *ventas* had proliferated along these routes and served as support to those who traveled on them with their goods.

The case of the *ventas* presents us with a typology of settlement that initially consisted of establishments intended for lodging and food for travelers and installations for accommodating pack animals. Over time these establishments expand, evidence of the increase in traffic and commercial activity. In 1540 the *venta* of Tejarejo has a staging post with stables exclusively for the remount horses which are added to those initially belonging to the *venta*: «a reasonable house with a tiled roof where the said Juan Dávila has horse / mule remounts as well as another little house where there is a gardener and an oven». Everything indicates that Juan Dávila has combined his work of running the *venta* with tending the vegetable garden, until he decided to give up the garden, perhaps as a result of the intensification of activity in the *venta*. Juan Crespo's *venta* had a similar trajectory; after a period in which there was only a house that functioned as an inn, the owner expanded the installations to include «dos grandes caballerizas e un grand corral e cortinas que caben más de çient vacas e bueyes» (two large stables and a big corral and a fenced area where more than one hundred cows and oxen could be held)¹⁶.

¹⁴ AGS, CMC-1, Leg 231.

¹⁵ ARCHGR, Caja 1914, pieza 005.

¹⁶ ARCHGR, Caja 1914, pieza 005.

2.2 NEW SETTLEMENTS

Another element that we believe is an indicator of the increase of circulation of people and goods between Portugal and Castile on the roads that cross our area of study is the emergence of small population centers which, from the early 16th century onwards, begin to grow up around the *ventas* for travelers on foot, and which later, with the increase in traffic, become permanently inhabited. We discovered at least three new settlements that follow this pattern: La Codosera, Navas del Madroño and the now abandoned) El Tejarejo. The three cases provide evidence that allows us to reconstruct their development process. All three have a similar first phase in which there is only a *venta*, followed by a second stage in which settlers arrive and start to build their dwellings in the surroundings, and a third phase in which the population consolidates and demands the right to be acknowledged as a separate entity, a situation that is often called into question by towns in the close proximity. Next, we will analyze these processes, correlating them to the increase in circulation during the first half of the 16th century.

The first stage in the emergence of these settlements is the presence of a *venta* for foot-travelers. Navas del Madroño, La Codosera and El Tejarejo were all initially points of lodging and food for foot travelers next to a road. The inhabitants of Navas del Madroño, which was described in 1583 as a place that «is on a very principal and royal road», still remembered it as having only the buildings of the *venta*: «there were only two houses, which were a *venta* for foot-travelers»¹⁷. In the case of La Codosera, the Duke of Albuquerque asks permission of the Royal Council in 1517 to settle that place. The Council names a commissioner and initiates inquiries into this possibility, whereby he interrogates several witnesses. These all concur that an abundant traffic of goods passes through La Codosera between Portugal and Castile. Among the witnesses' statements is that of Alonso Pérez, who claims that he knows the place because he lived there for many years in a *venta* for foot travelers which is located precisely where a new settlement is going to be created, called Venta de Benavente (Franco Silva, 2000, p. 50). In the *dehesa* of Azagala there is no permanent settlement before 1520, and some witnesses insist «that there are no residents in the said townships of Azagala, except for the owner of the *venta* of Tejarejo»¹⁸. Although there are periods of intermittent settlements in its surroundings, it is not until the 1520s that a settlement is consolidated around the *ventas*, which have remained a point of reference in the area.

After the second half of the 16th century the situation of settlement around *ventas* for foot travelers changes, and people begin to populate the surrounding areas, establishing permanent residence. In many cases they are involved in activities related to supplying the *ventas* and the travelers. Around 1520 some individuals set up small farms in the vicinity of the *venta* of El Tejarejo, who according to the witnesses

¹⁷ AHN, OM, Libro 505.

¹⁸ AGS, CMC-1, Leg 231.



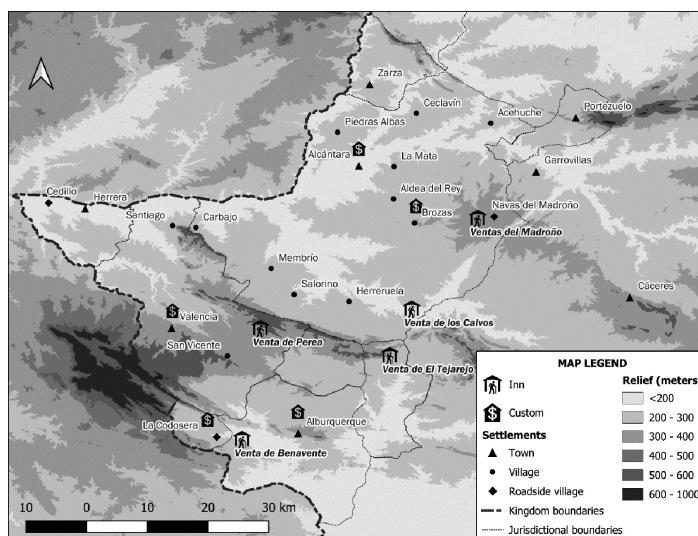
grow produce to supply travelers and transhumance herders. The declarant Bartomé Martín appreciated this connection between market gardens and the circulation of people because «with the said market garden the travelers have ample refreshment». Hernando Alonso Bejarano made a similar assessment, which also enables us to contextualize this development as the result of the distance to the closest settlement: «the herders and shepherds who bring their livestock there obtain fruit and vegetables, which cannot be found until Albuquerque, which is four leagues away»¹⁹. One of the farmers also has an oven in his plot to make bread. In Navas del Madroño the pattern is similar. In the 1580s, in a conflict with the town of Brozas, the procurator of the latter affirms that in the place where the *ventas* were «against the will of said town [...] they have made houses and occupied the empty sites with fenced enclosures».²⁰ In the vicinity of the *venta* of Benavente, which will later become the community of La Codosera, it is estimated that the permanent presence of settlers was necessary because «there were no inhabited places in those surroundings to provide facilities and provisioning for pack animals» (Franco Silva, 2000, p. 51).

This pattern of spontaneous occupation, related to the circulation (of people and goods) results in permanently populated centers in all three cases, including the two towns (Navas del Madroño y La Codosera) which endured up the modern times. Those communities, which we call *poblaciones camineras*, are distinguished by a long layout, with houses built along the road and other streets parallel to that road. There is a visible fossilization both in the current urban plans of La Codosera and Navas del Madroño, both towns arose around the *venta*, and their economy being initially based on the traffic and supply (of goods) influenced the shape of the town because the population wanted to be as close as possible to the main road. This pattern suggests that settlers were attracted to these places in a spontaneous way, as a result of the stimulus provided by the traffic of people and goods. Consequently, these towns are not the customary round-shaped urban models of Medieval settlements.

A second indication of the spontaneity of settlements is the tension that their potential consolidation as villages causes in other towns and surrounding areas. La Codosera shows a consolidated settlement in the census of 1528 with 117 residents, although one decade earlier, in 1517 the commissioner Falconi insisted that it was uninhabited. It is possible that the report had some imprecisions because in 1509 the Duke of Albuquerque implemented a policy to attract people to the area, which indicates that the settlement was in its embryonic stage, a process which the landlord was trying to promote. Records from 1512 reveal the existence of a council, from which we reckon that the commission led by Falconi in 1517 was intended to obtain approval to consolidate a new border town, and not to declare void the convenience of repopulating. In Navas del Madroño the problems between the nearby towns and its inhabitants were recorded from the 1540s onwards, although they most likely

¹⁹ AHN, OM, AHT, Expediente 30983.

²⁰ AHN, OM, Libro 505.



Map 1. Settlements and roadside inns in the study area around 1500.

started around 1530, since it is customary for the witnesses to use the expression «over the past 15 years»²¹.

3. CONCLUSIONS

As stated at the outset of this study, our primary objective was to examine in depth the role, functions, and defining characteristics of professional land-based transporters of goods, with particular attention to those residing in the frontier towns situated between the kingdoms of Portugal and Castile, specifically in the region of Extremadura. These individuals, whose livelihoods depended on the movement of goods, played a fundamental role in sustaining and enabling the flow of commerce across this transboundary space. In addition to profiling these transporters and their socio-professional identity, we sought to trace and analyze the distribution networks in which they were embedded –networks that, while rooted in the local economic structures of Alta Extremadura, extended far beyond the immediate vicinity. These circuits connected rural and urban centers, linked local producers with distant consumers, and contributed to the integration of regional economies into broader inter-regional and even trans-Iberian commercial systems.

²¹ AHN, OM, AHT, Exp. 26581.

The available evidence points to a clear and progressive professionalization of land-based transport during the late 15th and early 16th centuries. This is reflected not only in the emergence of a specialized occupational group –muleteers or *recueros*– but also in the increasing presence of infrastructural support mechanisms such as inns and roadside settlements, designed specifically to accommodate both the transporters and their animal or spontaneously emerged to take advantage of this traffic. These establishments formed a crucial part of the logistical ecosystem that sustained long-distance overland trade, and, in long terms, sometimes had modified the settlement structures. Moreover, repeated references to the activities of these pack animal drivers in municipal ordinances, council regulations, and documents issued by the Royal Council, underscore the growing importance and institutional visibility of transportation. Regulatory texts often sought to monitor, organize, or even protect the circulation of goods and those who transported them, indicating not only the volume of such movement but also its relevance to local authorities and the Crown.

The evidence gathered throughout our research supports the conclusion that, between the late 15th and early 16th centuries, a distinct professional group began to take shape: the *recueros* or muleteers. These were specialized transporters who used pack animals, primarily mules, to carry a wide variety of goods across rural and urban markets. It was a group of people who had the sufficient knowledge of road networks and transactions, which makes it difficult to assume that this was only a part-time occupation to complement their main activity. Far from being occasional or supplementary laborers, the *recueros* demonstrate a clear degree of professionalization. Their work required, at least, a detailed knowledge of the road systems, including the most efficient routes; familiarity with commercial practices, toll regulations, and local market dynamics. Also organizational skills to coordinate logistics and manage timing. Such skills and knowledge suggest that this occupation was not merely a way to supplement agricultural income, as has sometimes been assumed, but rather a full-time or primary profession with its own internal structures and socio-economic significance. Their activities were crucial to the functioning of these rural economies, as they enabled the flow of manufactured goods and agricultural products between production centers and consumer markets. Moreover, their presence in our frontier zone underscores their strategic role in integrating peripheral regions into broader commercial networks. In this sense, *recueros* not only served as carriers of goods, but also as agents of connection, facilitating the circulation of wealth, information, and cultural practices.

This increase in traffic takes place in circulation and distribution networks, which, as mentioned above, join the Atlantic coast, the border area, and the interior of Castile. These networks enabled regional and inter-regional economic articulation, generating specialization in local production in border towns, at least in the wine and grain sectors. Wine and grain were sent to Portugal, and fish, salt and overseas goods were brought back to Castile. The local muleteers of the border have been key parts of this process of articulation between the Portuguese coast and the Castilian interior, acting as logistical pivots. We consider that the development of economic exchanges in the 15th century, which had emerged from an inorganic dimension, were consolidated and systematized from the 16th century onwards.

During the transition from the 15th to the 16th centuries, circulation among the border towns became structuring elements in the Peninsular commerce. The routes that would be the supply chain were established, generating an inter-regional market which was made possible, in part, by lodging infrastructures –*ventas*, new communities– and to the initiative and continuous negotiation of residents and neighbors along the main roads.

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