

CRAFTSMEN, MANUFACTURES AND MARKETS IN THE FRONTIER TOWNS OF ALTA EXTREMADURA (15TH–16TH CENTURIES)*

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ABSTRACT

This article presents evidence indicating that certain towns along the Luso-Extremaduran border in Alta Extremadura have, since the late 15th century, become centres of manufacturing activity in the textile and leather sectors. These activities demonstrate a level of specialization that extends beyond local consumption, positioning them within broader interregional trade networks. The central hypothesis posits that this concentration of manufacturing is attributable to the formation of a critical mass of consumers, which initially generates demand and facilitates productive linkages with related industries and services. This process is further bolstered by trade agreements between neighboring jurisdictions. Through a comparative analysis with other towns in Alta Extremadura, and drawing on local ordinances, royal records, and judicial sources, this study provides a comprehensive survey of the most documented trades, an assessment of their relative significance, and an evaluation of the evidence concerning the distribution of their products beyond local boundaries.

KEYWORDS: Castile, Middle Ages, Craftsmen, Manufacturing, Trade, Textiles, Leather.

ARTESANOS, MANUFACTURAS Y MERCADOS EN LAS VILLAS FRONTERIZAS
DE LA ALTA EXTREMADURA (SIGLOS XV Y XVI)

RESUMEN

En este artículo se presentan evidencias de que algunas villas de la frontera de la Alta Extremadura han concentrado, desde finales del siglo xv, actividades manufactureras propias del sector textil y del cuero, con un grado de especialización que trasciende al abastecimiento local y las inserta en los circuitos comerciales interregionales. Nuestra hipótesis es que la concentración de esas actividades se debe a la formación de una masa crítica que genera una demanda inicial y posibilita los encadenamientos productivos con la industria y servicios asociados, realidad en la que también influyen positivamente los acuerdos comerciales entre jurisdicciones vecinas. Mediante una comparativa con otros concejos de la Alta Extremadura, y a partir de fuentes como ordenanzas concejiles, documentación regia y expedientes procesales, ofrecemos un levantamiento de los oficios de más frecuente aparición, una estimación sobre su relevancia y un repaso a las evidencias sobre la comercialización de sus productos más allá de los límites de los concejos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Castilla, Edad Media, artesanado, manufacturas, comercio, textil, cuero.

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0. INTRODUCTION¹

Manufacturing, craftsmen, supply chains, and marketing circuits are well documented in the Crown of Castile when examining the major late-medieval production enclaves such as the textile towns of the northern sub-plateau, those located in La Mancha and Andalusia (Asenjo González, 1991; Diago Hernando, 2009; Fazzini, 2023; García Sanz, 1987; González Arce, 2010; Iradiel Murugarren, 1974; Rozas Español, 2024), or the clusters where the tanning sector is particularly well attested (González Arce, 2020; Martínez Martínez, 2002; Mendo Carmona, 1990; Salicrú Lluch, 2003; Villanueva Zubizarreta *et al.*, 2011; Viña González, 2024). More recently, attention has also been directed to the existence of rural manufacturing oriented toward everyday consumption, produced and marketed locally, and likewise present in many Castilian towns and cities (Córdoba de la Llave, 2017; Da Graca, 2016; Gómez Vozmediano, 2004; González Arce, 2020; Oliva Herrer, 2000; Puñal Fernández, 2018). This line of inquiry has gradually displaced a widespread topos in general accounts of the industrial history of late-medieval and early modern Castile, which portrayed the region as economically specialized in the production of raw materials for export, with the asymmetrical corollary of importing manufactured goods from other European areas (Diago Hernando, 2008, p. 639). While acknowledging that regional integration remained incomplete and interregional integration relatively weak (Asenjo González & Furió Diego, 2024, p. 74), current research has focused on workers engaged in rural manufacturing (Da Graca, 2016; Luchía, 2022), the development of commercial linkages, and the incorporation of local rural production into interregional exchange circuits. This analytical framework seeks to assess the capacity of these settlements to project themselves outward and generate spheres of economic influence that transcended the strictly local level (Clemente Ramos, 2007, p. 85; Igual Luis, 2023; Melo da Silva, 2021; Sequeira, 2014 p. 40).

Outside these better-known areas, however, the mosaic of manufacturing production and commercialization remains incomplete, as we lack a general overview of extensive rural areas in the western Crown of Castile. This is particularly true of present-day Extremadura, where the persistence of the topos of asymmetric exchange has long shaped interpretations of the region's late-medieval and early modern economy (García Barriga, 2020, p. 266). Extremadura has often appeared almost disconnected from the productive and commercial realities of the later

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Middle Ages, especially as one moves away from the peninsular heartland toward the Portuguese frontier. Indeed, the border itself has frequently been interpreted as one of the key factors conditioning this supposed disconnection, owing both to its distance from the main districts of production or consumption, and to the conflicts that punctuated relations between Portugal and Castile during the Middle Ages (Bernal Estévez, 1998, p. 50; Martín Martín, 1998). Such a perspective, however, sits uneasily with the patterns of regional specialization and interregional connection that characterized economic activity across western Europe during the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century. It is possible, in fact, that more recent realities have been reprojected into the late-medieval context, since research on Extremadura's industrial development has long suggested that the emergence of a true "manufacturing desert" did not occur until the late eighteenth century (Llopis Agelán, 1993, p. 52), and that the frontier itself acted as a positive stimulus until the mid-seventeenth century, when political estrangement between the two kingdoms produced a cooling of economic and social relations (García Barriga, 2002). In this light, recent decades have witnessed a reassessment of Extremadura's economic dynamics. Scholarship now demonstrates the existence of a primary sector capable of generating surpluses, exporting its production, and establishing connections with the peninsular centre (Toledo, Ciudad Real), the Duero valley (Medina, Valladolid), neighbouring Portugal, and even the Americas (Caso Amador, 2017; Clemente Ramos, 2007, p. 85, 2009, 2013, 2015; García Barriga, 2020; Martín Martín, 2001, p. 237; Montaña Conchiña, 2005). Building on these perspectives, we argue that it is necessary to revisit the phenomenon of manufacturing production and commercialization in this extensive Castilian frontier region during the late Middle Ages. As an initial, exploratory approach, we focus on the frontier towns of Alta Extremadura, which are the least studied to date, but which we consider holding significant potential for research due to their functions as comarca-level centres and their possible connections with cross-border circuits.

In line with developments observed in other regions, we hypothesize that manufacturing activities tended to concentrate in the larger settlements of the frontier zone, regardless of their legal status as towns or villages, since these provided the productive linkages necessary to sustain the textile and tanning industries and to market their products beyond town hinterland boundaries. By contrast, in smaller settlements where manufacturing did not develop, the need to acquire manufactured goods through trade would have created demand that stimulated comarca-level commerce, which in turn fostered artisanal production in the centres where it was concentrated. Accordingly, this article pursues a dual objective: first, to identify the frontier towns of Alta Extremadura where artisanal activity was concentrated, and second, to systematize the trades established within them. We then examine the nature of commercial relations between these artisanal towns and those settlements where such trades did not consolidate, in order to determine whether manufacturing production was oriented exclusively toward local consumption or, conversely, generated surpluses destined for comarca-level and interregional markets. Methodologically, we base our analysis on a systematic review of local ordinances from the frontier towns of Alta Extremadura, seeking references to secondary-sector trades (Section 3) and



mentions of comarca-level and interregional commerce (Section 4). These sources are complemented with diplomatic and procedural records to assess whether production was restricted to local consumption or also produced many surpluses for regional markets. To advance this objective, we also draw comparisons with the larger Alta Extremaduran towns of Cáceres, Trujillo, Plasencia, and Galisteo, all of which have been the subject of systematic monographs in recent decades, providing a substantial knowledge base on late-medieval production in the region (Clemente Ramos, 2001; De Santos Canalejo, 1981; García Oliva, 1991; Sánchez Rubio, 1993).

1. MANUFACTURING AND MARKETS IN EXTREMADURA: A BRIEF RESEARCH SYNOPSIS

Studies of manufacturing and trade in the towns of Alta Extremadura during the late Middle Ages have emphasized an almost exclusive orientation toward local markets, that is, commerce confined within jurisdictional boundaries. Although it has been assumed that some capacity for export existed, the sources do not always permit a systematic analysis of the destinations of manufactured goods. As has been suggested for the Portuguese context, research on the organization of different economic sectors in small and medium-sized communities remains scarce. Likewise, the role of these activities within local economies and the actual extent of their spheres of influence has yet to be fully explored (Melo da Silva, 2021). This issue merits further investigation, as the towns of Extremadura examined in recent decades reveal a well-developed manufacturing sector by the end of the fifteenth century. Labor within each sector was highly specialized, particularly in textiles and leatherwork, as evidenced by the alcabalas (sales taxes) levied in the town of Cáceres (García Oliva, 1991a: 197). In Trujillo, textiles and leatherwork constituted the most prominent industries, as reflected in their specialization and frequent appearances in documentary records. Leather, however, appears to have been the more dynamic of the two, as indicated by the sale of leather goods at the fairs of Guadalupe and Deleitosa, and by council licenses permitting the export of leather products to Zafra and Córdoba (Sánchez Rubio, 1993: 413). Documentary evidence also confirms a significant development of the leather sector in Alcántara, as attested by shoemakers' ordinances preserved in the Archivo Histórico Nacional and analyzed in a graduate thesis at the Universidad de Chile (Lagos Villagrán, 2023).

Subsequent scholarship, however, has begun to demonstrate a different perspective, situating the towns of Extremadura within a broader commercialization paradigm and analyzing them with particular attention to patterns of economic complementarity. Thus, although the study of the Cáceres case echoed this interpretive change that we have been presenting, despite the discreet presence of the secondary sector in the town territory, it began to highlight its incorporation into the exchanges and the role of the town in its organization (García Oliva, 1991, p. 187). Similarly, the functioning of the economy of the Tierra de Trujillo has been interpreted along these lines, as the last decades of the fifteenth century and the early sixteenth century reveal a clear pattern of productive specialization, which



may have even formed the basis of an incipient industrial sector (Sánchez Rubio, 1993, p. 405). More recently, for the Tierra de Medellín, evidence from the first half of the fifteenth century shows an extensive network of economic complementarity between this town and Guadalupe, but also between Medellín and several towns in La Mancha, particularly Ciudad Real, with these relationships grounded in the artisanal and commercial importance of the latter settlements (Clemente Ramos, 2007, p. 85). In the case of frontier towns, recent research has increasingly highlighted the positive linkages generated by relations with the Kingdom of Portugal, including the mobility of people and ideas as well as patterns of economic complementarity between neighboring cross-border populations (Caso Amador, 2017; García Barriga, 2002; Montaña Conchiña, 2014).

More recent works, however, have begun to show a new direction in these conceptions, as they include the communities of Extremadura in the paradigm of trade, and they pay special attention to relations of economic complementarity. Although the case of Cáceres emphasized the scarcity of information about manufacturing activities, this study began to consider the importance of some leather goods for exportation trade, and the role of the town in its organization (García Oliva, 1991, p. 187). Apart from that, a constellation of textile-specialized activities and workers was identified for the city and its hinterland, such as fullers, dyers, weavers, wool dressers and carders (García Oliva, 1991, p. 187). In this same line, the performance of the economy of Tierra de Trujillo was analyzed, ascertaining that there was a change in the interpretive model; the last decades of the 15th century and early 16th century revealed a clear specialization in production, which may even have constituted the early stage of industrialization (Sánchez Rubio, 1993, p. 405). More recently, for the case of Tierra de Medellín, from the first half of the 15th century onwards the existence of an extensive network of relations of economic complementarity between Tierra de Medellín and Guadalupe have been observed. The same was observed between the former town and other towns of La Mancha, particularly Ciudad Real - relations that were based on the crafts and trade of the latter. (Clemente Ramos, 2007, p. 85). Consequently, our knowledge of the development of artisanal activities in present day Extremadura during the Late Middle Ages, and the commercial connections of the towns in that region is still scarce. Despite important studies in the 1980s and 1990s, the idea persisted that manufacturing was mainly for local consumption. The sources on which pioneering works were based did not always allow for a closer look at the destinations of manufactured goods, and given the emphasis of town council on regulating the local market and safeguarding the sources of supply, it would be hard to assume that that production went beyond local boundaries. However, we consider that this vision is due to factors that may have influenced the conclusions, such as: 1) the studies focused on large towns and its hinterlands (Trujillo, Cáceres, Plasencia, Ciudad Rodrigo) and lordship towns (Zafra, Burguillos), which generated a view that could at times be biased toward the self-sufficiency of the system, and 2) when smaller towns were analyzed (Galisteo, Medellín, all those of the *maestrazgo* of Alcantara), the objectives of this research was not focused on the artisanal sector. Therefore, we first consider it is necessary to deepen our understanding of manufacturing production and its distribution, starting with a systematization of



the trades in our area that illuminates their diversity, distribution, and integration into exchange circuits beyond the strictly local sphere.

2. CRAFTSMEN, CRAFTS AND THEIR LOCATIONS

In this section we will present a categorization of the professions associated with the manufacturing sector in the border towns between Portugal and Extremadura. For our study we mainly used local ordinances from the 15th century and first third of the 16th century, and other sources (literature, visits, legal processes) which offered information on this matter. This particular segment of time was chosen because in the early 1400s ordinances began to be compiled in books to categorize the local norms that were used in the Late Middle Ages to address new social and economic realities. During the 1530s some Medieval ordinances were enacted, many of which were from earlier dates, and others were added, to obtain royal confirmation, which is why most of the books of ordinances (for the area under study) are ascribed to this time segment. This was the case of the ordinances of Valencia de Alcántara, which were compiled in 1489 and confirmed in 1533. They include norms created at different times during the 15th century. Therefore, the data that we present comes from published ordinances (Valencia de Alcántara, Gata), and from other unpublished ordinances that are in complete books (Ceclavín), and in loose titles (Alcántara). Here we make a brief comment regarding Ceclavín: its ordinances are from a later date (around 1540) because it had previously been a village dependent on the town of Alcántara, without its own ordinances, until it was elevated to a township in 1536. Finally, we have increased the sample with data from literary news and visits from the Order of Alcántara, i.e. the case of Brozas, where there is mention of tax revenues from shoemaking in 1499 (López de Zuazo y Algar, 2007) and texts from the late 16th century that mention the presence of dyers from around 1520.

TABLE 1. REFERENCES TO PROFESSIONS IN SOME FRONTIER TOWNS OF ALTA EXTREMADURA DURING THE TRANSITION FROM THE 15 TH TO THE 16 TH CENTURY*		
PLACE	DATE	PROFESSIONS
Valencia de Alcántara	1489	Carders, dyers, weavers, fullers, tanners, shoemakers, ironsmiths, potters.
Brozas	c. 1500	Dyers, shoemakers.
Alcántara	c. 1520	Carders, dyers, weavers (of cloth, linen, sackcloth and woolen fabric), fullers, tanners, shoemakers, ironsmiths, potters, weavers, metalworkers, blacksmiths.
Gata	1515	Shoemakers, coopers.
Ceclavín	1540	Carders, weavers (cloth, high quality woolen cloth and linen), fullers, shoemakers.

* The dates are indicated in a precise way when the main source are the ordinances. When the dates are listed with *circa* it means that the series has been elaborated with documentation from different places, as explained further on.





The data obtained, while not allowing us to quantify the number of craftsmen and the relative weight of each trade in the villages, allow us to offer some interpretations regarding both the type of trades, their location and the degree of internal division of labor. Based on the frequency of references, and sectorial divisions, the results show a higher percentage of professionals of the shoe and textile sectors in frontier towns. In all those communities we find shoemakers, and only in some is there a clear specialization in the textile sector, with division of labor. In the first place, noteworthy in the sources is the presence of leather workers, always shoemakers, who are often associated with other tasks related to the sector, such as tanners (in Valencia and in Alcántara). The second sector that has a notable presence in manufacturing is textiles; in three towns (Valencia, Alcántara y Ceclavín) out of the six towns analyzed we detected the presence of these specialists, which, as in leatherworks, included different professions: carders (Valencia y Ceclavín), cloth shearers (Ceclavín), fullers (Brozas, Ceclavín y Valencia), and dyers (Brozas, Alcántara y Valencia). In the cases of Alcántara and Valencia we did not find references to fullers, but we did encounter records of fulling mills and their owners. The ordinances of Valencia include a reference, in title 32, to water tainted by the fulling mills: «because of the said fulling mill runoff, harm is done to livestock and people who drink from the river» (Bohorquez Jiménez, 1982, p. 253). The presence of dyers in Brozas is documented by the testimony of Francisco Sánchez de las Brozas (el Brocense), who states that he was born into a family of these specialists (Martínez Cuadrado, 2003, p. 22). To document the activity of tanners in Alcántara we used a letter of donation from 1480 in which María Dacosta and her husband, Martín de Prado, gave their servant, Fernando Morán, their share of the dehesa of La Melada. In the deed Alonso Tintorero figures among the witnesses². The presence of a certain Juan de Crs, *tintorero*, in a census from 1496, confirms the existence of dyers in Alcántara (Martín Nieto *et al.*, 2010, p. 224). Apart from this information, for Alcántara we have a reference offered by Leandro de Santibáñez, an essayist from the 18th century, who in his *Retrato político de Alcántara* claims to have seen ordinances of the town: «the businesses, transactions, industries, arts, practices and mills of Alcántara are quite clear and distinct in its ordinances» (De Santibáñez, 1779, p. 28). Among the professions mentioned in these ordinances, he cites «tanners, shoemakers, potters, weavers, dyers, carders, ironworkers, farriers and weavers of cloth, linen, sackcloth and woolen cloth» (De Santibáñez, 1779, p. 29). He later mentions fulling mills, based on a local ordinance to transfer that activity to the river Alagón, but with no reference to a date, (De Santibáñez, 1779, p. 32)³.

The data presented here remain provisional, pending the completion of full series, yet they are consistent with the findings of recent scholarship on Iberian

² AHN, Clero_Secular-Regular, Legajo722,19.

³ Literally, «They were beaten in the waters of the Tagus, and there was so much water, and such a strong current that they were tainted. Thus, the council ordered the fulling mills to move to other locations, whereby they were established in the river Alagón».

manufacturing. This research has highlighted how, within an economy largely based on self-consumption, manufacturing poles nevertheless emerged with the capacity to supply regional and even supra-regional markets (Oliva Herrero *et al.*, 2024, p. 197; Sequeira, 2014, p. 40). The same can be said of the establishment of facilities devoted to secondary-sector activities, whose presence is well documented in Castilian rural areas (Córdoba de la Llave, 2017, p. 49; González Arce, 2020). In towns of Extremadura, several of which had already received historiographical attention regarding their manufacturing sectors, notably Cáceres, Trujillo, and Plasencia, the presence of leather and textile specialists is consistently attested. Samples drawn from these three jurisdictions, which together covered a large portion of the territory comprising late-medieval Alta Extremadura, reveal both a diversification of trades within local boundaries and a marked specialization in leatherworking and textiles. This is evidenced by references to the division of labour and the creation of local taxes specifically targeting these sectors. In Trujillo, for instance, alongside construction-related crafts, leatherworking and textiles were the most diversified sectors and the most frequently subjected to commercial exactions (Sánchez Rubio, 1993, pp. 407-413). In Cáceres, artisanal activities were likewise dominated by leather and textiles, a conclusion supported by evidence such as a town tax on leather exports and the diversification of occupations in the textile sector (García Oliva, 1991). In Plasencia, the period under study saw the prominence of shoemakers, weavers, tanners, and furriers (De Santos Canalejo, 1981).

The systematized references for the frontier area allow for an initial, albeit tentative, approach. The sample is based on a methodology designed solely to register the presence or absence of crafts and to reconstruct, through the logical sequence from raw material to finished product, the degree of specialization within certain sectors. On this basis, we can confirm both the consolidation of specific trades and the internal division of processes in those sectors that required greater specialization, such as footwear and textiles. The data also provide occasional information on products and prices, but they do not allow us to assess the relative weight of these sectors in comparison with other artisanal activities. For this reason, in what follows we offer an indicative approximation of the relative importance of these sectors within the wider craft economy, as reflected in Table 1. Although it is not possible to reconstruct reliable quantitative values for the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century, certain indicators do point to the relative weight of artisanal activity. For instance, in Alcántara a testimony from the tax-farmers of the *alcabalas* in 1509 provides figures that, although not corroborated by other sources, clearly suggest the significance of the footwear sector in the town. That year, the *regidor* Diego Chamizo, lamenting the severe economic conjuncture, stated that “of the one hundred and forty shoemakers and potters, and of the other trades of the *cristianos nuevos*, who used to pay sixty thousand maravedís in tax assessment, only fourteen married men remain, and now they cannot pay more than sixteen or seventeen



thousand *maravedís*, for they can no longer continue their business dealings”⁴. This testimony is consistent with the limited quantitative evidence available, such as the reconstruction of socio-professional categories in the town of Fregenal de la Sierra, based on inquisitorial lists from 1491 to 1511. These registers record 104 artisans and 24 professionals in the service sector (Caso Amador, 2014, p. 249). In Trujillo, town records show forty-nine shoemakers in 1498-1499, and this figure including only those who applied to the council for licenses to export their products (Sánchez Rubio, 1993, p. 411).

Another indicator of the weight of the leather sector in towns close to the Portuguese border was the increase in sumac cultivation, which we documented from the end of the 15th century. Around the 1530s sumac began to be regulated by local ordinances because of the disputes that arose with the expansion of this crop. We believe that the leather tanners’ demand for sumac fueled the growth of this crop, to the point that it figured in the district ordinances, along with vineyards, as one of the crops that were grouped into *pagos* (protected cultivation areas). The use of sumac appears in the ordinances of Valencia de Alcantara in 1489: «water from the bark and sumac, and other things extracted from the vats and pelts where the hides are tanned» (Bohorquez Jiménez, 1982, p. 228). In these ordinances there is no specific information about the cultivation of this crop, but from the early 16th century onwards, sumac begins to figure in council matters, as suggested by its inclusion in the ordinances of Alcántara, Ceclavín, Garrovillas and Brozas. The ordinances of Alcantara include, under title 130, provisions about «the sale of sumac plants» (López de Zuazo y Algar, 2007, p. 822). Another ordinance from 1540 mentions sumac as one of the crops for which private property can be given to residents of that town: «each neighbour to whom such a favor is granted should be given, if it is for a vineyard, what is requested, up to twelve days of work and no more [...] and for sumac, up to eight plots»⁵. Sumac becomes as important a crop for the council as wine, as shown by the provision of the council of Ceclavín that added a title to its ordinances which declared «of the vineyard plots and sumac fields»⁶. A similar measure was adopted in the neighbouring town of Garrovillas to create ordinances for vineyards and sumac groves, as evidenced in a memorandum from 1536: «Your Lordship will have knowledge of the ordinances we sent to Your Lordship for the protection of the vineyards and sumac trees» (Rol Benito, 2004). Apart from the ordinances, we have other empirical evidence that corroborates these findings: an investigation in Brozas in 1542 gives the same importance to sumac and vineyards in one of the *pagos*: «it seems to him that the sumac trees, figs and vineyards are planted as much or more than they should be, and that the best land is the one that is planted»⁷. There are even records of land being occupied in the 1540s to grow

⁴ AGS, CCA, Legajo 1,195.

⁵ AHN, OM, AHT, Expediente 26581.

⁶ Ordinances of Ceclavín, in AHN, OM, AHT, Exp. 28791.

⁷ AHN, OM, Libro 505, 68r.





this crop. For example, in a court case in 1540 heard by the Consejo de Ordenes, following a complaint by the council of Alcantara, the judge accused several residents (mostly from Brozas) of occupying small extensions of uncultivated land without complying with the ordinances of the town. All of them were planted with crops that intensified the production and profitability of the land, i.e. vineyards and sumac⁸.

What factors influenced the locations of the professions? At first glance, it is tempting to adopt a classical interpretation of the rural-city dichotomy, whereby Medieval towns concentrated secondary and tertiary activities –craftsmanship, markets– while the villages saw those developments limited. In the frontier zone, trades are not located exclusively in the towns, and we can confirm that they can also be found in the villages. The first evidence of rural manufacturing is shoemaking and textile professionals in the villages of Brozas and Ceclavin. Both villages were dependencies of the town of Alcantara until the mid-1530s, when they acquired their charter of township during the process of alienation of jurisdictions of the military orders during the reign of Carlos I. As the ordinances of Ceclavin were drafted in the 1540s, and this settlement had been elevated to the status of town five years earlier, it seems evident that the development of that craftsmanship had been taking shape long before, when Ceclavin was still a village dependent on Alcantara. The same occurs with references to the leather sector in Brozas, as both the revenue from shoemaking and the references to dyers (that we document in the table) are prior to the charter of township. Moreover, other references pointing in the same direction can be detected in other areas of the Tierra de Alcántara in the 1560s, when a case presented before the Council of Orders places some cloth manufacturers in the Alcántara village of Membrío⁹. This situation is repeated in Tierra de Plasencia, where the ordinances reveal the presence of rural industry in its villages: «female weavers who lived in the places of the land» (Lora Serrano, 2005, p. 195). In short, despite the establishment of weekly markets, or the development of asymmetric taxation, which may have favoured the rise of secondary activities in the towns, it does not appear that the mere fact of being a town was sufficient to concentrate the manufacturing activity.

Demographic concentration appears to be the most relevant factor for the development of manufacturing in the frontier zone. This fact, which is noticeable in the villages of Alcantara, i.e. Brozas and Ceclavin, is a determinant not only in the increase in demand, but also in the emergence of chains of production, such as the connection with producers of raw materials, with transportation specialists and with craftsmen responsible for other stages of the productive process in sectors that leant towards division of labour. In the following table we collect the demographic data of the localities that were analysed, as well as the manufacturing sectors identified in those places.

⁸ AHN, OM, AHT, Exp. 26581.

⁹ AHN, OM, AHT, Exp. 27424.

TABLE 2. SETTLEMENTS (BY NUMBERS OF RESIDENTS) AND MANUFACTURING SUBSECTORS FOUND IN SOME FRONTIER TOWNS OF ALTA EXTREMADURA*

SETTLEMENTS	RESIDENTS	SECTORS
Moraleja	246	No mention in its ordinances
Ceclavín	500	Textiles and leather
Alcántara	800	Textiles and leather
Brozas	722	Textiles and leather
Gata	360	Textiles, leather, timber.
Valencia de Alcántara	800	Textiles and leather

* The demographic data is from the series elaborated by Pablo Blanco based on the inquiry of 1528 (Blanco Carrasco, 1999).

It is not the fact of being a town, but rather the concentration of a critical mass. For example, the ordinances of Moraleja only mention agricultural professions, and although we don't have information about other frontier towns (i.e. Cilleros, Zarza la Mayor and Valverde), this pattern is followed in neighbouring settlements like Galisteo, where there is no sign of textile manufacturing, only reference to leatherwork: «çapateros o pelliteros» (shoe makers and leather workers) (Clemente Ramos, 2001, p. 107). A solid textile and leather manufacturing sector in Ceclavín, (formerly a village under the jurisdiction of Alcántara), indicates that towns may not have put restrictions on secondary activities in the villages within their districts. Therefore, the concentration of artisanal activities was more about the critical mass and professional specialization than limitations imposed by guilds, corporations and councils. We find at least two cloth manufacturers in the village of Membrío, and a rural textile industry dispersed throughout the hinterland of Plasencia. Once the location of the professions in the border towns is established, and compared with other communities of Alta Extremadura, we need to decide whether we are looking at a region of isolated towns that sell their production in local markets, or if they produce a surplus that can be sold outside the hinterland.

3. THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF MANUFACTURED PRODUCTION

The studies devoted to the economies of the town of Alta Extremadura, together with the documentation gathered for this research, reveal a panorama that differs substantially from the prevalent image in late twentieth-century scholarship of a manufacturing sector oriented exclusively toward local supply. The central question, therefore, is whether this production was indeed of low quality and confined to local consumption, or whether, by contrast, the artisanal sector generated some surpluses to supply interregional markets at the close of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century. To offer a provisional response to this issue, we may draw on several types of evidence: (1) applications for licenses authorizing the commercialization of artisanal products beyond the jurisdiction of the town council; (2) agreements and



conflicts among neighbouring towns over the import and export of raw materials and manufactured goods, particularly footwear; and (3) scattered indications of a degree of economic complementarity, at least among adjacent towns, in the sphere of artisanal production.

First, the evidence assembled, though still fragmentary, suggests that some locally manufactured goods were indeed sold in external markets. References of this kind frequently concern attempts to regulate the export of manufactured products, likely with the dual aim of ensuring council revenues from commercial taxation and safeguarding internal supply, especially when these goods formed part of wider value chains, such as tanned leather or materials for the wine industry. One of the clearest examples comes from the town of Gata, whose ordinances contain provisions restricting the external sale of leather: “that no person may take tanned hides out of this town, under penalty of two hundred *maravedís* for each offense, unless duly announced before the council” (Clemente Ramos, 2008, p. 1653). A similar case is documented in Valencia de Alcántara, where the 1489 ordinances devote extensive chapters to regulating the trade of tanned hides outside the jurisdiction. Some of these provisions imply the presence of foreign buyers in the area: “if the said exporters are foreigners, even if they are not seized, the townsmen who sold them the hides shall incur the penalty of six hundred *maravedís*” (Bohórquez Jiménez, 1982, p. 197). Finally, mention should also be made of a tax on the “export of hides” (*saca de la corambre*), recorded among the town revenues of Alcántara in the early sixteenth century (López de Zuazo y Algar, 2007, p. 847). Comparable regulations are also found in the case of wooden hoops for wine casks, whose sale outside the locality was restricted to specific periods of the year, most likely to ensure the availability of casks for the wine sector: “no person who makes hoops from the said forest may sell them to anyone from outside until All Saints’ Day” (Clemente Ramos, 2008, p. 1656).

The cases cited regarding the commercialization of manufactured goods beyond local supply, though not abundant, are consistent with findings from studies on individual towns. These have highlighted the existence of local taxes and licenses authorizing the export of locally produced goods (such as tanned hides, footwear, and textiles) beyond the jurisdiction of the town. For instance, the ordinances of Trujillo contain no restrictions on the sale of local textiles, since such provisions generally affected raw materials and goods of daily consumption. However, the existence of certain prohibitions has been linked to potential losses in *alcabala* revenues, and it is precisely this restriction that allows us to discern a production oriented toward external markets rather than exclusively local consumption. Indeed, in the 1490s cloth merchants applied for several licenses to sell their products at the fairs of Medellín and Deleitosa (Sánchez Rubio, 1993, p. 409). Likewise, requests for export and import licenses enable us to trace the distribution networks of leatherworkers and shoemakers. In 1498, applications were recorded to sell footwear at the fairs of Guadalupe and Deleitosa, together with two petitions to export tanned cordovan to Córdoba and others to import hides from Zafrá and Córdoba (Sánchez Rubio, 1993, p. 413). In Plasencia, although the scale and destinations of production remain unknown, the existence of exports of hides and footwear can be confirmed through local ordinances, which explicitly prohibit external sales without license: “that no



shoemaker or any other person shall dare to take footwear, either finished or cut, out of this city for sale elsewhere [...] and if they take it out with license, they shall pay the *maltrota* at the rate set for each pair of shoes, according to the ordinance” (Lora Serrano, 2005, p. 241). The same ordinances include tariff provisions suggesting that textiles were likewise exported, given that they levy duties on all “outsiders, not residents of this city and its lands, who purchase or export any of the aforesaid goods,” which included “cloths, fustians, tow linen, coarse woollens” (Lora Serrano, 2005, p. 264). Another relevant piece of evidence is the creation by the Cáceres town council of a tax on the export of footwear and tanned goods, explicitly linked to their surplus character and ease of commercialization (García Oliva, 1991, p. 194). Of similar purpose was the *maltrota*, documented in Plasencia’s ordinances, which applied to hides exported outside the hinterland: “whoever takes out of this city or its district tanned or raw cordovan and other hides” (Lora Serrano, 2005, p. 236). The *maltrota* is likewise recorded in Coria, where in 1531 it was defined as “a certain sum paid for the hides which the inhabitants of the city and its lands take out to sell elsewhere”¹⁰. That this tax was not marginal is confirmed by references to a specific revenue stream in Plasencia, denominated the “renta de los cueros que se sacan fuera desta ciudad”¹¹ (Lora Serrano, 2005, p. 239). Similarly, the same document for Coria remarks that “in recent times this tax has risen far higher than before.” Galisteo’s ordinances of 1536 also attest to the external sale of leather products: “shoemakers, furriers, or others of similar crafts may export the goods of their trade sold in this town to outsiders” (Clemente Ramos, 2001, p. 107).

A second indicator of a manufacturing sector oriented toward interregional commerce emerges from references to the transit of goods, documented in both conflicts and agreements concerning circulation. Such evidence is found, for example, in royal letters issued by the Crown to mediate disputes between neighboring towns over free circulation, which was often contested and became subject to transit duties. One such case involved a commission assigned to the licentiate Juan de Herrera in early 1498, to investigate and resolve a conflict between the councils of Cáceres and Alcántara. The dispute concerned merchandise moving from a Portuguese frontier town to other areas of Castile’s interior, which the Cáceres council sought to tax through a new levy called the “roda.” This is clearly expressed in the *petitio* of the royal letter appointing the commission: Alcántara protested that “in recent times, when some residents of the said town pass through the town of Cáceres with their beasts and merchandise, they are charged and required to pay certain rights called *roda* [which] had never before been levied nor customarily collected”¹². Similar fiscal burdens on transit are attested in the town of Torre de Don Miguel, where inspectors recorded among the town privileges a judgment by the warden of Galisteo, clarifying “that the inhabitants of Torre shall not be obliged to pay tolls in Galisteo or its district”

¹⁰ AHPC, Archivo Municipal de Coria, Caja 7,16.

¹¹ The revenue from the leathers exported out of this city.

¹² AGS, RGS, LEG,149801,153.





(Torres González, 1988, p. 335). While these cases do not specify the merchandise involved, the clearest evidence for the large-scale circulation of manufactures comes from *acuerdos de vecindad*¹³ between councils. These reciprocal agreements allowed residents to circulate with market goods between jurisdictions without paying taxes or requesting licenses, and occasionally they provide explicit information about the products in question. For example, an agreement signed in 1482 between the councils of Cáceres and Trujillo exempted from tolls not only foodstuffs but also manufactured goods such as shoes, tanned hides, iron, and textiles: “two pairs of shoes, and two pairs of soles, and one measure of salt, and two cheeses, and two small flasks of oil, and one pair of kids, and two pairs of goslings, and two pairs of hens, and two pairs of chickens, and two measures of figs, and six fleeces of wool, and fruit to the value of ten maravedís, and two tanned or raw goat or sheep hides, and up to half an arroba of iron, and all linen, cloths, and tablecloths” (García Oliva, 1987, p. 39). A similar agreement was signed in 1493 between the councils of Cáceres and Mérida, essentially reproducing the earlier terms (García Oliva, 1987, p. 196). The Cáceres council also reached an agreement with the herdsmen’s guild of the Mesta, permitting its members to bring in and take out goods such as wine and footwear during their seasonal stays: “those who pasture in the jurisdiction of this town may take in hides and footwear for use while they remain there, but not beyond nor for other persons” (García Oliva, 1987, p. 85). A similar provision is implied in the ordinances of Valencia de Alcántara: “the shoemakers of the said town may sell soles and pieces to the herdsmen grazing in its jurisdiction” (Bohórquez Jiménez, 1982, p. 197). Although such clauses typically limited purchases to personal use and exempted them from taxation, they nonetheless point to the existence of a broader traffic in manufactured goods, one that was indeed subject to taxation.

This evidence also allows us to suggest the existence of a certain degree of regional complementarity, in which some localities developed specialized artisanal production in the textile and tanning sectors that went beyond supplying their own hinterlands. The argument rests on relatively scattered references in space and chronology, but they nonetheless point to the horizontal mobility of artisans, manufactured goods, and associated services, a phenomenon that seem to have expanded during the sixteenth century, as most surviving references cluster in its final quarter. Although more speculative in nature, indirect evidence can also be drawn from the absence of certain crafts in the ordinances of smaller towns, which suggests reliance on regional markets or on itinerant artisans. In 1498, for instance, a neighbourhood agreement between the councils of Cáceres and Montánchez reveals a degree of specialization in textile processes in Cáceres, where artisans carried out tasks for the surrounding region. The document allowed the free circulation of textiles “taken to weave, dye, and shear” (García Oliva, 1987, p. 199). While the direction of the movement (from Cáceres to Montánchez or vice versa) is not specified, Cáceres’ ordinances confirm this specialization, mentioning “outsiders” who brought products

¹³ Neighbourly agreements.

to the town for processing. Dyers, for example, are said to work cloths “belonging to the residents of this town as well as to those from elsewhere” (García Oliva, 1987, p. 180); a similar pattern appears in references to individuals washing wool “brought from outside this town and its district”.

If habitual, such practices would place the towns of northern Extremadura in line with patterns observed elsewhere in Castile, where towns like Burgos or Madrid, despite specializing in everyday cloths, also became centres of cloth reworking (Puñal Fernández, 2018, p. 276). Comparable complementarities are also visible in the leather sector: the town of Fregenal de la Sierra, in Lower Extremadura, seems to have specialized in the production of soles that circulated as far as Alta Extremadura. Thus, the ordinances of Ceclavín refer to soles from Fregenal as commonly used by local shoemakers, even fixing the rate at which they were to be applied: “if the soles are from Fregenal, they shall be priced at forty *maravedís*”¹⁴. A lawsuit of Alcántara’s shoemakers in 1562 likewise records this trade, when they complained of earning only “a modest profit from the cost of soles and leathers obtained in Fregenal and elsewhere”¹⁵. Plasencia’s ordinances, for their part, refer to hides brought into the city for tanning, requiring those “who bring from outside hides, sheepskins, or cordovan to be tanned” to pay the *maltrota* tax (Lora Serrano, 2005, p. 239). This practice appears to have intensified throughout the sixteenth and into the mid-seventeenth century, as suggested by evidence of commercial companies formed for this purpose (García Barriga, 2020, p. 280). In Trujillo, too, tanning services are attested in 1499, when hides, shoes, and soles from Montánchez were taken there to be finished and worked (Sánchez Rubio, 1993, p. 411).

Complementarity and specialization in manufacturing processes did not disappear in the sixteenth century. On the contrary, by its mid-point the region’s artisanal sector still seems to have had the capacity to import products for further transformation. In the textile industry, for example, we find evidence of the circuits involved in cloth production in the borderlands: in 1589, a lawsuit between Pedro Sánchez of Cilleros and María Gómez of San Martín de Trevejo reveals the latter operated a fulling mill with assistants who collected cloth from Cilleros (15 kilometers away) “and other places” fulled it, and returned it. The case also offers a glimpse of organizational structures in which at least a weaver and the fuller worked under the coordination of Pedro Sánchez, who appears in the proceedings as complainant and owner of the cloth, even though the weaving had been carried out “in the house of Lorenzo Muñoz, resident of the said town, who had woven it”¹⁶. In Plasencia, commercial companies for tanning and selling imported hides from the Americas remained common in the early seventeenth century (García Barriga, 2020, p. 281). The available evidence also allows us to glimpse cross-border trade with Portugal: in

¹⁴ Ordenanzas de Ceclavín. in AHN, OM, AHT, Exp. 28791.

¹⁵ AHN, OM, AHT, 32949.

¹⁶ ARCHVA, Registro de ejecutorias, CAJA 1642,72.





1571, for instance, a register of fines in Valencia de Alcántara records the confiscation of “84 dozen hides” from Gaspar Vaz, a muleteer from the town¹⁷.

Within this context, itinerant artisans also circulated, as suggested by several local tariffs. It is likely that we are observing a specialized sector adopting hybrid strategies comparable to those analysed for peasantry (Luchía, 2022, p. 109). Thus, the tariff of Gata, updated by royal inspectors in 1538, stipulated dues for “any craftsmen who bring their trade with them” (Cotano Olivera, 2004, p. 563). In Alcántara, the toll register explicitly mentions such itinerant artisans in both the textile and metal trades: “carders who weave wool, and blacksmiths, one *maravedí* shall be paid for the trades they practice”¹⁸. These itinerants also crossed the Portuguese border, as Alcántara’s customs tariff likewise lists “weavers, carders, and other such craftsmen”.¹⁹ The practice continued through the sixteenth century. In 1576, for example, a lawsuit between the tax collector of the shoemaking *alcabala* in Valencia de Alcántara and Juan Álvarez, a shoemaker of the town, preserves a ledger as evidence; it records, under the month of August: “In August I was absent, in the Kingdom of Portugal.” Other lawsuits confirm that Portugal was a recognized outlet for both artisans and their products: in 1562, Alcántara’s shoemakers, protesting against town restrictions, claimed that if conditions did not improve, “the said footwear would be sold secretly or taken into the Kingdom of Portugal, which is nearby”²⁰.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have gathered and systematized data on the presence of crafts associated with the manufacturing sector in the towns of the Portuguese borderlands of Alta Extremadura during the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century, comparing these findings with results already available for other localities in the region. The evidence points to a predominance of the leather and textile trades among the crafts identified in the frontier towns, in line with patterns documented elsewhere in Extremadura. We can therefore affirm that specialization in leatherworking and in the processing of wool and linen textiles was the defining feature of the *rayano* towns at the threshold between the medieval and the early modern period. This is confirmed by the concentration of artisanal activity reflected in the ordinances of Ceclavín, which list a wide range of textile products, as well as by references to dyers and fullers in Brozas and Alcántara, suggesting a cloth production of some quality rather than merely low-competitive goods. Leatherworking and shoemaking appear across all of the towns studied, and in most cases, we find evidence for the commercialization of leather products, at the very least, exported to other

¹⁷ AHN, OM, AHT, Exp. 31561.

¹⁸ AHN, OO. MM. LIBRO 505, folio 131r.

¹⁹ AHN, OO. MM. LIBRO 505, folio 132v.

²⁰ AHN, OM, AHT, 32949.

districts, whether through regional fairs or by transport to more distant destinations such as Córdoba and Portugal. From this, we may conclude that the frontier did not constrain artisanal development in the later Middle Ages. The concentration of manufacturing activity seems to have been more closely tied to demographic growth, opportunities for local specialization, and access to markets than to the legal condition of the populations where workshops were located. Nor do we observe any negative impact from intermittent cross-border conflicts.

We are also able to affirm that commercial relations between the towns and districts of Alta Extremadura reveal the emergence of an incipient form of regional economic complementarity. The proliferation of regulations on crafts, along with disputes and agreements concerning the trade of their products at the close of the fifteenth century, suggests that it was at this moment that a *rayano* commercial take-off occurred or, put differently, that local production began to generate marketable surpluses. It is precisely in this period that ordinances introduce new taxes on the transit and sale of goods in general, and on leather and textiles in particular. The *maltrota* in Coria, designed to tax tanned hides, and the *roda* in Cáceres, applied to goods from Alcántara, are two clear indicators of the dynamism reached by the export of manufactures in Alta Extremadura from the late fifteenth century onward. This trend persisted throughout the sixteenth century, when the expansion of industrial crops such as flax and sumac, together with references to cross-border trade in hides and the mobility of specialized workers, point to a measure of vitality in the secondary sector rather than its stagnation. These findings invite us to reconsider the traditional interpretation that saw artisanal production as exclusively oriented to local supply, and instead to recognize the presence of social groups capable of generating surpluses for commercialization, consistent with what existing scholarship has already shown for the primary sector. If this pattern of specialization and complementarity was eventually curtailed, it seems more likely attributable to the increasing fiscal burdens imposed on inter-district trade by local authorities and on international exchange by the Crown.

In sum, the evidence suggests that the artisanal economies of the *rayano* towns were not confined to local supply but were increasingly capable of producing marketable surpluses. The specialization in leather and textiles by the end of 15th century, coupled with emerging patterns of regional complementarity and new fiscal regimes, indicates a commercial dynamism at the Extremenian frontier towns. Far from representing a marginal periphery, the Alta Extremadura borderlands participated actively in the broader processes of economic integration that marked the transition from the medieval to the early modern period in western Europe.

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