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Mountain occupation sites in the Cantabrian Range (Spain)

ABSTRACT

BERNALDO DE QUIROS F. & NEIRA CAMPOS A., 1993 - Mountain occupation sites in the Cantabrian Range (Spain). [Occupazione delle zone di montagna nella catena dei Cantabrigi (Spagna)]. *Preistoria Alpina*, 28: 49-58.

In this article the results of digs carried out in the Northeast of the province of León (Spain) are presented. In this region various late Upper Palaeolithic sites have been discovered. These give us valuable insights into the occupation of high mountain areas in the Cantabrian range, and suggest the existence of communication routes between the two sides of the mountain chain. In view of the differences in results from dig to dig, this work allows proposals for a number of new approaches in future research to be made.

Parole chiave: tardo Paleolitico superiore, alta montagna, monti Cantabrigi, Spagna.

Keywords: Late Upper Palaeolithic, high mountain, Cantabrian mountains, Spain.

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The Cantabrian range constitutes the principal geomorphological feature of the North of the Iberian Peninsula. From the point of view of methodology, experts on the Palaeolithic have considered that there was a Cantabrian region centred on the most northerly part of the northern slopes of this range, also called the Cantabrian fringe. This was because it was in this territory that were to be found all the classical deposits from this period. Human settlement during the classical Upper Palaeolithic is located in a narrow strip of land between the Bay of Biscay and the central portion of the range. This strip reaches a width of not more than 50 kilometres at its widest points.

The relief of the range, which is geologically recent (mostly dating from the Alpine mountain formation period) is characterized by the presence of numerous steep-sided valleys, strongly separated from one another, and by a dense karst network. Its main axis runs East to West, and according to some authors it constitutes a prolongation of the Pyrenees. On its North-South axis there is considerable asymmetry. On the northern side it always ends at sea level. The southern side, on the other hand, varies greatly between its western part, descending to the Meseta or to the basin of the River Douro (at altitudes rarely lower than 800 metres), and its eastern part, opening onto the valley of the Ebro, with notably lower altitudes.

All this mountainous region is split into two large blocks. The western portion, which has the highest peaks in the range (over 2,600 metres in the Picos de Europa), is formed by chains of mountains running West to East. Their height gradually decreases to the North as one approaches the coast, and to the South towards the Douro valley. There are relatively flat open valleys, more frequent in the coastal area, because of the difference in height between the Meseta and the Bay of Biscay, and these are often linked by river gorges running mostly in a direction that cuts across the axis of the range. The eastern portion has a harsher relief, although at a lower height, and its valleys often run right down to the coast on its northern slope, while on the southern side is to be found the River Ebro, which directs the whole river system into a West to East orientation, with its valley which opens out progressively from the canyons in the northern part of Burgos province to the wide valleys of the Rioja region.

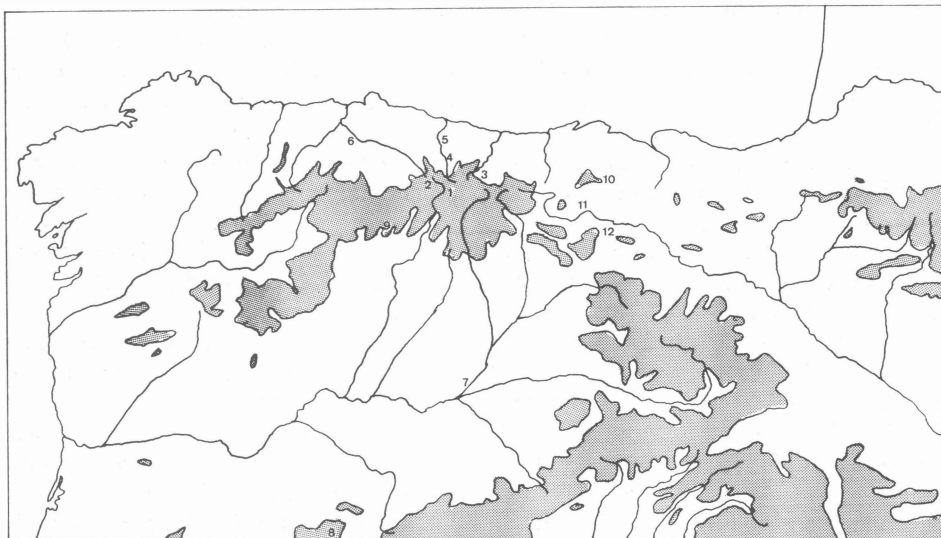


Fig. 1 - Distribution of main sites mentioned in text. Shadow, lands over 1000 m, showing differences between East and West parts of Cantabrian Mountains. 1.- El Espertin and other sites in the Orza Valley (León); 2.- La Uña (León); 3.- La Mina (Cantabria); 4.- Collubil (Asturias); 5.- Sites around Cangas de Onís (Los Azules, Buxu, La Güelga) (Asturias); 6.- Sites in the Middle Nalon Valley (La Viña, Las Caldas, La Lluera) (Asturias); 7.- El Palomar (Valadolid); 8.- La Dehesa (Salamanca); 9.- La Cantera (León); 10.- Los Santos (Cantabria); 11.- Ojo Guareña (Burgos); 12.- Sites on Oña (Caballon, Penches) (Burgos).

The Cantabrian fringe belongs naturally to the Southwest of Europe, an extensive region which includes Aquitaine and the Pyrenees, and could be seen as forming a great southern Atlantic zone within Europe as a whole. This macroregion includes the majority of sites with rock paintings, and from a cultural point of view seems to us to have a very similar overall evolution, although there are obvious differences caused by the terrain or the natural environment.

The Cantabrian fringe connects with the Southwest of France through the western Pyrenees, more specifically via the Bayonne to San Sebastián coastal corridor. This affects the evolution of the Cantabrian Upper Palaeolithic, since this corridor has a size varying with climatic conditions and the fluctuations in sea level. These two factors at times limit communications and may perhaps, when they can be studied in greater depth, explain some of the differences in the details of evolution of the Upper Palaeolithic cultures in the Southwest of France and the Cantabrian fringe.

Alongside the differences that may be due to the intensity of communication between these regions, there are others that can be related to their physical differences. Variation in the terrain, in particular the rugged and mountainous nature of the Cantabrian fringe, is one of these.

If we compare the Cantabrian area with other parts of the southern Atlantic region, such as the Dordogne or the Pyrenees, we notice at once one fundamental feature. Geographically, as previously mentioned, the Cantabrian area is a passageway with its principal orientation of movement being East to West. The Dordogne or the Pyrenees are in zones permitting expansion in other directions as well. In the case of the Pyrenees, besides the East-West direction, there is also a North-South line (BAHN, 1982, 1984). That is to say, we find Mediterranean to Atlantic links as well as Pyrenees to the Dordogne links. In the case of the Cantabrian area, the main axis during the Upper Palaeolithic is from the Basque country to Asturias. Communications with the South, whether with the Ebro valley or with the Douro valley, which would involve crossing the central portion of the mountain range, have not, till now, been the object of great interest.

Some Authors, such as K.W. BUTZER (1986: figure 4.6) state baldly that this central zone is unproductive, restricting resources patterning to the coastal plain, the open foothills, the foothills-mountain ecotone, and the lower mountains, which would exclude communication between the northern and southern slopes of the range. Nonetheless, since the beginning of research into the Palaeolithic in Spain, there have been references to finds attributable to the Upper Palaeolithic on the southern slopes of the range. Most of these are situated in the Ebro valley, such as the sites at Oña (Burgos province), especially El Caballón cave (OBERMAIER, 1925: 192) or the cave with rock paintings at Penches (OBERMAIER, 1925: 263), but these references have been played down in later research. These finds in the province of Burgos were reviewed by Clark with negative results (1979: 251). However, in our view, his work lacked sufficient rigour. In any case, we believe that it lies at the root of the minimising presuppositions of Butzer.

To these references should be added, in any case, further evidence, such as the cave with rock paintings at Ojo Guareña (Burgos province) (LEROI-GOURHAN, 1971). It is true that it could be argued that this evidence is due to penetration up the Ebro valley from the Mediterranean. However, in the South of Cantabria, three kilometres north from the natural pass of Portillo de la Sia, which leads to the Ebro valley, a site with rock paintings has recently been discovered: this is Los Santos cave, at an altitude of 720 metres (BERNALDO DE QUIROS, BOHIGAS and CABRERA, 1988/1989), which in some sense covers the gap between the two regions.

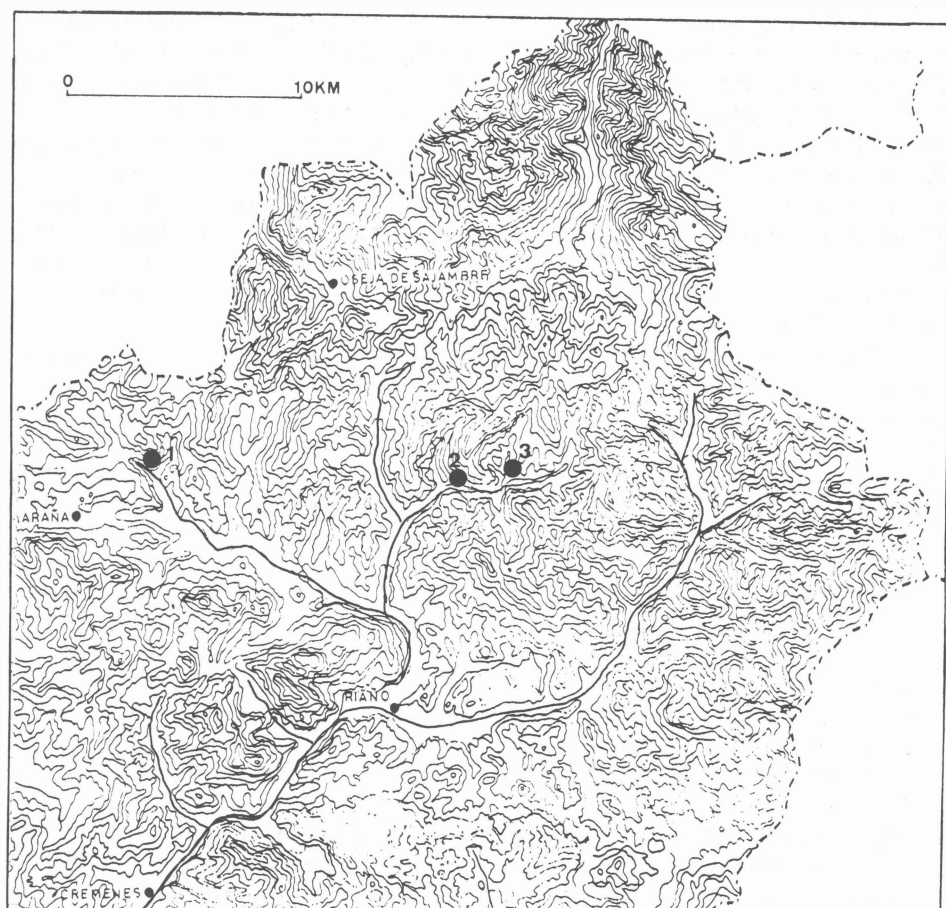


Fig. 2 - Sites of Northeast León;
1.- La Uña, 2.- El Espertin, 3.-
Shelter and Cave of Casasuertes.

In the Douro basin a number of sites ascribed to the Upper Palaeolithic or to the Epipalaeolithic have been known for many years. In the southern foothills of the Cantabrian range, there are La Cantera cave at Alcedo de Alba, León province (LUENGO, 1947), the rock shelter at La Aceña, Burgos province (BREUIL & OBERMAIER, 1913 and BOSCH GIMPERA, 1932) or Los Cachorros cave at Quintanar de la Sierra, Burgos province (GONZÁLEZ SALAS, 1955). To these should be added several finds studied more recently: at La Dehesa near Tejado de Béjar, Salamanca province, attributed to the late Upper Magdalenian (FABIAN, 1986) or El Palomar at Mucientes in Valladolid province (MARTÍN, ROJO & MORENO, 1986). The latter, although it has been considered Chatelperronian, seems to us, in view of the relative abundance of bladelets, to fit better into the Upper Magdalenian.

Although the finds at La Cantera cave were clearly in the contact zone between the Cantabrian range and the Meseta, at an altitude of 1,020 metres, it would still be possible, though doing some violence to the model, to argue that all these finds correspond to an occupation originating from the Mediterranean. Only the presence of Upper Palaeolithic sites in the heart of the Cantabrian range would allow us to demonstrate the existence of communications between its northern and southern slopes.

In 1990 we began a research project, financed by the Junta de Castilla y León, aimed at determining the characteristics of several deposits situated in the upper valley of the River Esla in the province of León. This area has a number of features that should be noted: its surroundings are clearly high mountains from a geomorphological viewpoint, being close to the Picos de Europa, which are formed principally from Carboniferous limestones, with notable evidence of glacial action (OBERMAIER, 1914). It is on the southern slopes of the range, in a zone with easy communication with the northern slope via several traditional mountain passes.

The first site located (NEIRA, 1985, 1987) is El Espertín cave at Burón, province of León. This is a small cavity, with a vestibule of about 24 square metres, in front of which there is a small terrace of some 18 square metres which served to extend the inhabited zone. It faces the Southeast, overlooking a part of the small valley of the River Orza, a tributary of the Esla. It is sited at 1,260 metres above sea level, and 20 metres above the river level, on its right bank.

In the excavations so far carried out, a single occupation layer has been found, with a maximum depth of 10 centimetres. The cave has suffered erosion on an East-West line and towards the interior, so that part of this layer is on the surface, and has even disappeared at points. Further, it is affected by crioturbation here and there, and there are traces of cementation, forming breccia.

Stoneworking was done mostly in flint, with black flints, both shiny and matt, standing out, together with radiolarite. Quartzites and some quartzes also occur. Ninety percent of this stoneworking is represented by unretouched pieces, with the whole production sequence appearing, from cores and flakes to blades and bladelets, in the case of matt flint, but only the final stages of the chain for the other raw materials. Retouched pieces are very rare. So far there is a slight preponderance of burins over scrapers, with unguiform types being prominent among the latter. The presence of several pointed backed bladelets should also be noted. These elements allow provisional ascription of the finds to a late Upper Palaeolithic of an Upper Magdalenian type, rather than to the Azilian. The absence of boneworking and of absolute dating, which is still in progress, does not permit greater precision, especially owing to the problems of distinguishing the two periods as regards stoneworking.



Fig. 3 - View of site of La Uña.

Animal remains are scarce, but this cannot be laid at the door of problems of preservation, since the bones collected, though very fragmentary, are otherwise in perfect condition. Among the remains identifiable were ibex (*Capra ibex*), chamois (*Rupricapra rupricapra*), red deer (*Cervus elephas*), and possibly wild boar (*Sus scropha*).

The general characteristics of this site allow us to make some general comments on the way it was occupied. In view of the small size of the cave and the low density of materials discovered in it to date, the finds seem to relate to seasonal occupation by a small group of humans, perhaps temporarily split off from a larger group. Although the lie of the land, with good visibility, control of movement through the valley and other features, make it an ideal place for a hunting stand, the animal evidence - quantity of remains and range of species - do not point to numerous kills nor to specialized use.

However, the most appropriate model seems to be of a site mostly given over to the tasks of preparation and maintenance of equipment and other logistical work during pauses in hunting, of the Mask Site type (BINFORD, 1978), while traces of the kill site and butchery site might be at some nearby spot, outside the perimeter of this settlement.

Some two kilometres upstream, and still on the right bank of the River Orza (near the village of Casasuartes), we have recently discovered two further deposits with traces of stoneworking similar to El Espertín cave. The first of these is a large shelter, facing in a southwesterly direction and at an altitude of 1,300 metres, 80 metres above the level of the river. It has yielded numerous surface traces of stoneworking, but we have also noted the presence of materials affected by cementation into breccia. Below this large shelter, some 20 metres above the river level, there was a small cavity, unfortunately now destroyed by the construction of a reservoir, which contained stone and animal remains that did not permit of a clear attribution.

Following the Esla valley, 22 kilometres away from El Espertín, is the recently discovered La Uña cave, at La Uña, province of León. It faces southwards, and is at an altitude of 1,200 metres above sea level and 10 metres above the level of a small brook. In the trial dig carried out in the summer of 1992, evidence was found of a four-layer stratigraphy. The materials from these layers are very similar to one another. Among raw materials, as at El Espertín, flint and radiolarite are abundant, though here quartz is present in greater proportion. Quartzite and other varieties of flint found in that cave are much scarcer. Typologically and technologically, stoneworking here is very similar to that at El Espertín, while animal traces are even less abundant, with the presence of ibex standing out. Comments made above about the El Espertín cave are also valid here, though it is noteworthy that here there are several occupation layers, with an average depth of 10 centimetres each, unlike the single layer there. Likewise, there are no clear traces of frost movement here.

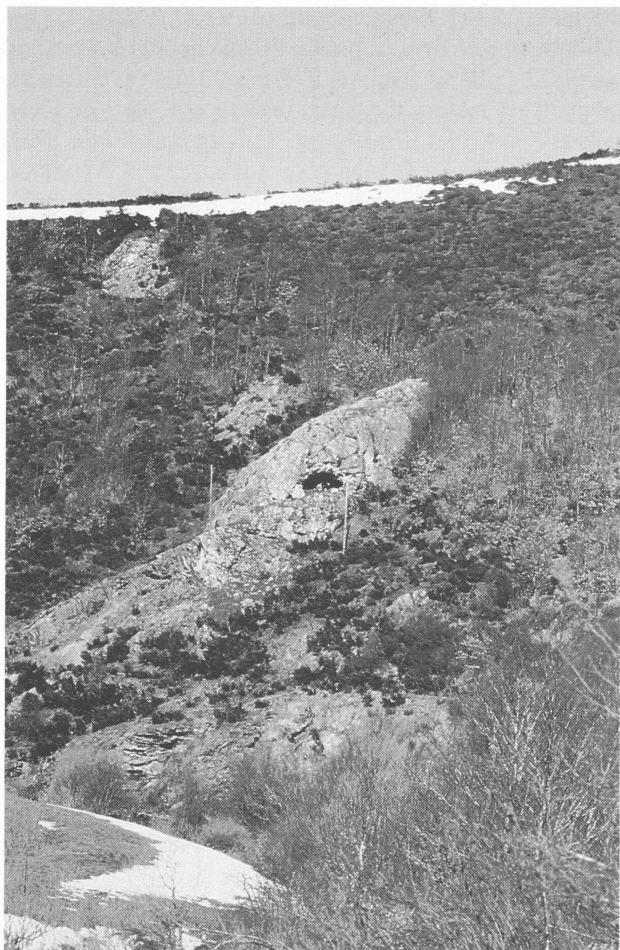


Fig. 4 - View of site of El Espertín.

All these deposits have certain features in common, as can be appreciated. Sources of raw material all seem to be local. Specifically, the radiolarite must come from the Vissean griotte limestone strata that are widespread in this area. The quartzites come from alluvial terraces formed by rivers or glaciers and/or from one of the numerous strata of conglomerates to be found in these valleys, in the case of La Uña cave at less than 10 metres from the cavemouth.

In all cases, the sites are in positions overlooking small valleys, which gives them a topographically advantageous location. Moreover, the area in which they are all situated is a natural route towards high mountain summer pastures, which could be the explanation for these settlements.

As previously mentioned, they are in an area with easy communication with the northern slope. Eastwards they are connected with the Liébana valley in Cantabria via the pass of San Glorio. In the Liébana area an Azilian find was recently discovered in La Mina cave (VEGA GÓMEZ & HERRERO ORTUÑA, 1992), which indicates penetration of the high mountain area from the North.

Of greater interest are these sites links with Asturias. El Espertín cave is situated less than 10 kilometres from El Pontón pass (1,290 metres altitude), which stands on the watershed of the River Sella. Following this river, some 20 kilometres northwards we come to the Upper Magdalenian site at Collubil, Amieva, Asturias (GONZÁLEZ MORALES, 1974), and, at a distance of around 30 kilometres, the group of finds at Cangas de Onís: Azilian and Magdalenian deposits at Los Azules (FERNÁNDEZ- TRESGUERRES *et alii*, 1990, 1992), El Buxu (MENÉNDEZ, 1990, 1992) and La Güelga caves (MENÉNDEZ & MARTÍNEZ, 1992). It should be noted that between El Pontón pass and Amieva runs the so-called «Vía del Arcediano» [Archdeacon's Way], a natural route used in historical times, with records of repair work having been undertaken on several occasions, both in medieval and modern times, demonstrating its importance as a line of communication since ancient times. The data we possess, and have set out in this report, allow us to hypothesize that the existence of this route explains the presence of some of the finds we have been studying, in particular those along the River Orza.

La Uña cave is at the foot of the Tarna pass (1,490 metres above sea level). This pass is at the watershed of the River Nalón. In the mid course of this river's valley, some 50 kilometres from the pass, there is a major grouping of Upper Palaeolithic finds at La Viña (FORTEA 1990b, 1992), Las Caldas (CORCHÓN, 1981, 1990, 1992), La Lluera (RODRIGUEZ ASENSIO, 1990, 1992) and elsewhere (FORTEA, 1990a, FORTEA *et alii*, 1990).

Although the data collected so far are still being analysed, it seems of interest to make a number of comments about them. The finds noted in this article strongly suggest crossings of the mountain range by groups of humans at the end of the Upper Palaeolithic. It cannot, however, be ruled out that such crossings took place at other, earlier, periods in the Upper Palaeolithic. Furthermore, although so far the clearest evidence for these crossings is located in the Northeast of the province of León, we must not exclude the possibility of crossing points at other places in the range. As so often, an apparent vacuum or lack of finds is due more to there having been no digs than to any real absence of material.

RIASSUNTO

In questo articolo vengono presentati i risultati degli scavi effettuati nella zona nord orientale della provincia di León (Spagna). In tale regione sono stati scoperti vari siti del tardo Paleolitico Superiore e ciò fornisce delle preziose conoscenze sull'occupazione delle zone d'alta montagna nella catena dei monti Cantabrici e suggerisce l'esistenza di vie di comunicazione tra i due versanti della catena montuosa. Prevedendo delle differenze di risultato tra uno scavo e l'altro, questo lavoro avanza delle proposte di definizione di un certo numero di approcci utili a future ricerche.

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