

Archaeological study about the medieval Monastery of San Salvador de Cornellana (Salas, Asturias, Spain)

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The 'San Salvador de Cornellana' monastery is placed in the confluence between the river Narcea, and its tributary, the Nonaya. Nowadays, this place reproduces the traditional characteristics of the Asturian meadowland landscape, with tamed watercourses, small plots of land over a rolling country of meadows and crops and population spread in small hamlets. Taking this contemporary image as a backing, it is not to a surprise to find in Medieval historiography a plenty of backwards explanations that relate the colonisation of this meadowlands in the Dark Ages, and even in the Antiquity, with their soil's fertility and their optimal conditions for agricultural exploitation.

Nothing could be more different from reality. The idyllic garden-like image that this environment offers nowadays isn't anything but the result of a centuries long process of anthropization that starts in the Middle Ages and continues to this day, built over man – nature interaction, during which the strenuous work of draining was opposed by the unbridled force of floods, and with ploughing and farming at the mercy of the rigours of the climate and subject to the edafological characteristics. In this way, studies about the geomorphological evolution of this meadowland have allowed us to know about the importance of sideways changes in river Narcea's bed during last centuries, the own Monastery being built on a different bank from the one that in which we see it today (Niembro/Jimenez 2001). Furthermore, the palinological analysis of samples of medieval date has shown the prevalence of a riverside vegetation proper of a more cold and humid climate, with flooded areas very near the Monastery, with a chestnut wood in their

midst, towards the south (Fombella et al. 2002). About the population, we must remark that, during Antiquity, the Narcea-Nonaya basin doesn't show any sign of settlements, it being symptomatic the fact that no remains of the Roman Ages have been documented in any of the seven archaeological campaigns done in the Monastery, which gives weight, up to the moment, to the certainty of a mediaeval or late-antiquity origin of the Monastery (Adán et al. 2001). In its surroundings, the populations dating back to antiquity, the fortified as the luxurious villas, or humble cottages are sited in high ground, away from the big rivers. The paths give structure to this area, hugging the slopes an going down only to cross the rivers by the unavoidable fords, like Cornellana (Muñiz López 2001).

In the year of 1024, the Infanta Cristina, daughter of King *Bermudo* and of his first wife *Velasquita*, founds the monastery of 'San Salvador de Cornellana'. As we have said, the foundation is made in a riverside without traces of occupation during the antiquity or late-antiquity. Was this monastic foundation done in an uninhabited place or was the ecclesiastical structure superimposed on another pre-existent one, on the contrary? The answer comes by hand of a methodology that combines the information obtained from archaeological excavation and the scarce written documents from the upper Middle Ages.

Through the foundational document dating from the 1024, we know that *Domna Christina* donates the villa called *Corneliana* to the community for its sustenance (Floriano 1949, doc. 1). So it seems that the monastery isn't founded in an up to that moment *desertum* place, but that in the confluence between the rivers

Annonaia and *Narcegia* there existed a settlement prior to the monastic foundation, this villa of *Cornelius*, that, as another 9th century document states, abutted with a Pre-Romanesque church near the one at San Martín (Muñiz López 2001; Calleja 2001). To get an approximation to its morphology and internal organisation, we must come again to the 11th century foundational document, where we have a detailed description. The diploma reflects a complex settlement, composed by dwelling structures – *villam cum domibus, edificiis cassas* – and economic structures, that show us the gradual arrangement of the place, subjected still to ecological conditions. So, with specifically agricultural terms – *cum terris vineis, pomeriis arvuusta fructifera vel infructifera* – the farming areas are specially highlighted – *cum montes et fontes, cum exitibus adque introitus suis, cum pratis, pascuis, silvis, cum adiacenciis et prestiatonibus suis*. The meadows gained to the forests isn't nothing more than the support needed by the important herds that constitute the foundational endowment, composed by ten cows, fifteen mares, a mule and a hundred heads of minor cattle – *Vakas decem; equas, quinque; pecora promiscua, numero centum; mula una*. Furthermore, the rights over the rivers exploitation are expressly mentioned, not only fishing rights – *nasis* –, but rights over the exploitation of the water and its energy – *aquis cum accessu et regressu suo*. And, last of all, the document includes the processing means – *torcularibus, molinis cum suis productibus* – and crop storage facilities – *orreo, abotecis cum suis utensilibus*.

And what data about this villa, which existed before the monastic foundation, have rendered the archaeological excavations? In 1989 a first intervention around the head end of the Romanesque church was made, and remains of dwelling structures older than the Romanesque work were found. It was a rubblework masonry wall, cut by the apse, associated to a lime floor, over which pottery fragments that can be dated to the 10th and 11th centuries (Martínez Villa et al. 1988) were found. During the 2001 excavation we were able to work on a wide surface around the Romanesque church's head end, and this allowed us to document the extension of the wall previously excavated in 1989, which was built oblique to the central apse. Associated to this structure, a

first stratum, composed by occupation debris over a floor formed by the levelled river bank, with remains of a terracotta paving, was excavated. This unit of wall, floor and debris was cut by the foundations of the Romanesque apse (García Álvarez 2001). The functional interpretation of this remains is pending of further excavations in this area, but we can surmise that they are remains of dwelling structures older than the Romanesque church's apse building, dated for the moment, by artistic parallelisms, between the 12th and 13th centuries (Alonso 2001).

Are these structures a part of the *Villa Corneliانا*, or must we, rather, frame them in a later phase, belonging to the monastery foundation? The answer to these questions will be given by the absolute dates given by the C-14 method, now in progress. Nevertheless, we must take into account that between the medieval *Villa* and the monastic foundation in 1024, there mustn't have been many architectural changes in the villa's organisation, and the *domibus, edificiis* and *cassas* that belonged to it must have continued in use, for the most part, during the first period of the monastery's history, until its reorganisation in the midst of the Middle Ages, by Count *Suero Vermúdez* (Calleja 2001).

The private monastic foundation in the 11th century

On the basis of the *villa Corneliانا*, the *Infanta Domna Christina* founded the Monastery in the year of 1024. In the early mediaeval historical context, the ecclesiastical institution acquires a great preponderance, during the 10th and 11th centuries, as a way to amalgamate the aristocratic family's estates, protecting it from being broken up between several heirs. Through this institution, what had been a *villa* was transformed into a private Monastery. But, what changes implied this new regime for the old settlement? Really, very few. We have already stated that we can guess the continuity in the use of the early medieval villa's outhouses, and even the basilica that we have described was already built in the 11th century, as in the foundation document of 1024 we are told about this temple, sponsored by *Christina* and her husband, *Ordoño*, *quorum basilica in nomine tuo edificavimus sub iure monasterii*

fundata esse dinoscitur – endowed with its proper set of liturgical implements, clearly of Hispanic origin, and with Pre-Romanesque echoes (Alonso 2001).

The archaeological excavations haven't been able to document any structure that can be attributed to the early mediaeval church. The only remains that we know of are due to unconnected findings, out of context, as they are embedded in the modern walls. We can guess that the primitive basilica was razed to the ground, remaining its vestiges covered by the Romanesque work, of much bigger proportions. The own Romanesque temple's foundations must have altered in a great measure the already extant structures. However, even if not a single remain of the Pre-Romanesque church has not been documented *in situ*, we have been able to partially identify its necropolis. We are before a set of four tombs of stone slabs, excavated in the superficial sands of the geological substrata. The interments are defined by vertical slabs topped by covers sealed with strips made from clay, tiles and dirt. Over the tomb's cover is a mainly organic stratum, with plenty of coals and pottery fragments, this being cut by the trench made for the Romanesque church's foundations. Past archaeological campaigns have documented interments dated before that the Romanesque church in other places around the Monastery (Adán 1999a; 1999b).

Besides the Pre-Romanesque church, the second structuring of the Monastery proper is the old tower. Up to the moment, we knew, by the study of the walls, that it presents three building phases in height, the lower starting, a middle Romanesque body, and the modern top, and also that it is older than the abutting Romanesque church (Adán 1999a; 1999b). In the description made in 1024 of villa *Cornellana*, the tower is not expressly mentioned, and this could give us a *post quem* term for its building, although there is also the possibility of it being one of the *domibus, edificiis y cassa* mentioned by the document, so that to be sure about its dating, we have to wait for the radiocarbonic analysis results, through which we have been able to define the stratigraphical sequence of the tower's foundations, from the earth movement work done in the river bank, to the building of the foundations and the finishing of the Tower's contour with a fringe of tamped clay (García Álvarez 2001).

The Cluny monastery and the Romanesque restructuring in the midst of the middle ages

After *Domna Christina's* death, the property and rights over the monastery were divided among *Domna Christina's* heirs (García Larragueta 1962, doc. 109 y 115), until when, in the 12th century's first decades, the Count *Suero Vemúdez, Alférez* of the King Alfonso VII, and grandson of *Domna Christina*, and his wife *Enderquina* unified the old monastic domain (Calleja 2001). The Counts, linked to the reigning peerage, with international relationships and without heirs, donated the Monastery to the Cluny congregation in 1122. Nevertheless, seeing that this was a loss of direct influence over the estate, Suero tried in 1128 to donate the Monastery to the Bishop of Oviedo, but the french monks appealed to King Alfonso VII, who solved the issue favourably for them. In this begins a new phase under the Cluny Order for the 'San Salvador de Cornellana' monastery, typified by the Romanesque reforms. How this change in ownership and jurisdiction affected the morphology of the San Salvador de Cornellana monastery?

The changes were drastic, restructuring the old private monastery into a regular classic monastic establishment, so that in this new phase, the building is completely rebuilt, affecting also the original Pre-Romanesque basilica. The only element that seems to survive from the old times, is the tower, which, although a structuring element of the Romanesque ensemble, was subject also of an extensive rebuilding. The extant dwelling structures, sited near the head end of the church, will also be made redundant, at least partially. In any case, this new building phase in the monastery, this 'Romanesque restructuring' doesn't obey to a single continued action, but is more of a superposition of successive works, separated not only in time, but also in style between them. All this must have implied the survival of some of the older structures, and doing basic building campaigns to allow to carry on the religious services and the domain's daily work, with a church, a cloister and two rows of rooms around it, instead of four.

The Monastery's documentation analysis proposes the beginning the start of the rebuilding by the work in the cloister (Alonso 2001; Calleja 2001), to start with a mention by Jovel-

lanos in the now missing *Libro de los Obitos* of San Salvador de Cornellana, where it was mentioned that the funeral services for *Doña Enderquina*, who had died in 1148, were offered in gratitude for the cloisters she had built. With this first Romanesque phase, up to the Countess' death in 1148, is associated the building of the *Sala Capitular* wing (Alonso 2001). The solutions that archaeology has brought to this problem are incomplete, by the moment, being subject to a very limited operations. None the less, the results reflect an irregular building rhythm, that we suppose was more subordinated to the economic capability of the moment than to the imposition of a building program based in a theoretical 'ideal' model carried from start to end. In this way, even if the building of the cloister started generically before 1148, the western side was dated, by means of an Alfonso X coin, as being later than 1230 (Adán 1999a; 1999b). The 1989 excavation showed, and determined the inner perimeter of the Romanesque cloister, covered by the Baroque work, and with a start in the 12th century (Martínez Villa et al. 1989). For the moment, the medieval two storey eastern side, and the northern and southern walls are still to be determined. Furthermore, the finishing of the SW nave, a lofty tower with a possible portico (Adán 1999b), at the entrance of which the famous 'Puerta de la Osa' (the bear's door) could have been situated (Carballo 1613).

For a time, the Romanesque cloister coexisted with the inherited Pre-Romanesque basilica until the building of the voluminous Romanesque church started. For the moment, the date of this building is only an estimate, established on the basis of artistic parallelisms that place it in a wide chronological frame between the 12th and the 13th centuries (Alonso 2001). The building of this church must have forced to dismantle the original Pre-Romanesque basilica and the dwelling areas, same as the funereal ones, reaching even to the river bank (García Álvarez 2001).

At the same time that the 'City of the living' is built, the Monastery's necropolis, or 'City of the dead' is also coming into being, thanks to the religious administration of its own independent territory (Bango 1997). The excavation of the Monastery's main cloister brought to light a vast necropolis of graves built of slabs of stone, dated by formal parallelisms as be-

longing to the 12th or 13th Centuries. The anthropological study of the skeletons allowed us to know that they were male adult interments for the most part, which gave way to the interpretation of this necropolis as the Monastery's monks cemetery, that occupied a privileged place of burial (Martínez Villa et al. 1988). In the areas outside the walls, in the church surroundings, a vast necropolis is documented, placed southwards to the church and the old tower, and to the Southwest of the present cloister (Adán 1999a; García Álvarez 2001). Whilst the first area was used for a long time as a burial ground, the second is affected by the building of new Romanesque spaces. In the area near the had side of the church, the prolongation of this necropolis wasn't documented, as this area was deeply changed by the building of late mediaeval structures, and, at a later date, by the digging of two big ossuary pits in the 19th and 20th centuries (García Álvarez 2001).

The monastery in the middle ages

There are no big building reforms started during this phase, on the contrary of what happened in the precedent phase, as the Monastery is provided with all infrastructures needed. All the same, it continues its activity with a series of minor works and the overhaul of several of the existing structures. Near the head end of the church can be seen a renovation of the pre-existing dwelling structures, with the building of a low wall that closed an area between this structure and the central and southern church apses. An occupation space, of little entity, is so defined, perhaps as a temporary structure, taking vantage of the church's head, covering it partially, an where the covering of temporary needs overrules the esthetical concept of the view of the church as a whole (García Álvarez 2001). Indoors in the Monastery other reforms and overhauls also are documented, as is the conversion of the western wing into a smithy (Adán 1999a).

During this time new burial grounds are documented in the aforementioned southern side of the church, where an upper level of late medieval is superimposed on the graves dating from the mid of the Middle Ages, to a total of 16 stone slab tombs covered by mounds of clay and stones over which fires burned, creat-

ing a layer of cinders with plenty of organic remains, and where an Enrique III coin was found, providing us with an *ante datum* date for this interments. There was documented, also, a small ossuary associated probably with reuses. At the foot of the church, we have

been able to document a triple superposition of stone slab graves, which indicates a long standing use of this area as a place of burial during the late Middle Ages, that spreads along the whole of the north side of the Romanesque cloister (Adán 1999a; García Álvarez 2001).

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