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Origin, Typology and Evolution of the *Dehesas* in the South of the Iberian Peninsula during the Late Middle Ages (13th to 15th Centuries AD)

Keywords: medieval livestock, *dehesas*, meadows, Andalusia, rural history

Abstract

The occupation of Hispano-Muslim territory by the Christians brought the implantation of new systems of settlement, changes in crops, alteration of livestock and forest exploitation, in short: new rural landscapes and therefore a new spatial reality. Thus, from the very moment of the Christian conquest in Andalusia, land was delimited due to different factors and with a very varied ownership. The aim of this paper is to analyse the causes of the *dehesas* and their typology according to the use to which they were to be put, studying the regional diversity conditioned mainly by geographical and socio-economic factors.

In this way, different types of pastures are to be found. The limited lands of communal use, mainly *ejidos*, meadows and *dehesas*, in which the cattle of the inhabitants could graze. There are also the so-called *dehesas de propios*, exploited for the benefit of the council. Finally, the privately owned pastures, which were used for the livestock of an individual or an institution, but which on numerous occasions were rented in order to obtain economic benefits.

Introduction

The Christian conquest of Andalusia in the 13th cent. AD caused an important transformation of the political, economic and social structures.

The change also had a profound effect on the landscape, as it meant the introduction of new systems of population, changes in agriculture, alteration of livestock and forestry operations. In short, new rural landscapes, and therefore a new spatial reality. On the other hand, the birth of a border with the kingdom of Granada led to the emergence of a space of contact between two societies at odds, the Castilian and the Nasrid, which was created in the 13th cent. AD, and remained virtually unchanged until the late 15th cent. AD. This significantly altered the logical process of implementation of the new agricultural structures and the degree of population of that space. Something similar happened on the border to the neighbouring kingdom of Portugal, which was also defined in the 13th cent. AD, and which, with a low population density, with mainly surveillance functions, developed an economy based primarily on livestock breeding.

Another reason for the notable development of livestock farming in Andalusia (*fig. 1*) is the significant demographic decline that occurred after the Castilian conquest, due to the shortage of Christian settlers and the abandonment of the region by most of the Muslim population (González Jiménez 1995). This led to a reorganisation of the settlement, with the concentration of human resources in certain villages, as well as a reduction in crops. The most obvious consequence of this was the regeneration of the natural ecosystems with the consequent development of forests and woodlands most notably in the wide mountain areas that bordered the Andalusian Depression. The resources were used for an important development of activities such as hunting, fishing, beekeeping,

forestry and livestock. From all of them, we must emphasise the importance of the livestock breeding, which had a remarkable advance, not only due to the existence of abundant natural resources, but also for the impulse and protection provided by the authorities. Therefore, although there are territories where livestock breeding was predominant, especially in the sierras and border territories, the reality is that with a greater or lesser intensity, livestock breeding experienced a significant boost throughout Andalusia (Argente del Castillo Ocaña 1991; Carmona Ruiz 1998).

The Origin of the *Dehesa* in Medieval Andalusia

Due to the necessary balance between agriculture, stockbreeding and the exploitation of uncultivated spaces, after the conquest of al-Andalus, there was an organisation of the agricultural space around the centres of the population. At the beginning, the change was not very significant, since the form of organisation developed by the Castilians in Andalusia was very similar to that previously used by the Islamic villages. In fact, in the *alquería* the territory was divided between unsuitable land or *mubāḥa* and suitable land or *mamlūka*. The former was in turn subdivided into *ḥarīm* (communal space) and *mawāt* (dead land) subject to appropriation (Linant de Bellefonds 1959, 111 f.). This system was easily comparable to the Castilian tradition, where in addition to privately owned land, there were areas for communal use (Carmona Ruiz 1998, 121 f.).

Thus, after the Christian conquest of the 13th cent. AD, uncultivated spaces were preserved for communal use, which were mainly used for feeding livestock, although they were also susceptible to other uses, such as the collection of firewood and wood, wild fruits, charcoal, lime and plaster manufacture, beekeeping, hunting and fishing. All of these could serve as a complement to the always precarious peasant economies. Therefore, there are several types of lands and communal rights:

On the one hand, the open lands of common use, also known as *tierras realengas*. These were communal lands or wastelands. Although legally there could be a difference between communal

lands and wastelands, the first ones constitute the land extensions reserved during the repopulation process or later for the common use of the inhabitants, while the wastelands are uncultivated spaces that haven't been distributed at first but were susceptible of being so in the future. In fact, the wastelands are integrated within the goods of communal use and at the end of the Middle Age, there is no clear distinction between one or another type of lands (Vassberg 1986, 35).

Likewise, there were the enclosed lands for communal use, the *dehesas*, which arose due to the need to reserve grazing areas for livestock. In addition, the councils, in order to alleviate their economic needs, would use a number of meadows as their own property and there were some community rights over private properties, as in the case of *la derrota de mieses*. This was a practice whereby cattle were allowed to enter farmland after the harvest had been gathered, feeding on any leftovers. In this way, the cattle could be fed in summer with better grass than those in the forests, fertilising the land at the same time.

Therefore, after the Christian conquest, and following the general trend of the traditional Castilian system of agricultural organisation, the terrace was structured into several areas of use arranged in circles around the population centres that can be separated into:

- *Los ruedos*. A ring located near the population centres with intensive crop farming, among which the orchards and fodder plant crops stand out.
- A second, wider circle were the core components of the agricultural system to be found: land used for cereals, olive groves and vineyards. Also, in this space were the grasslands, the *dehesas*, and uncultivated lands where animals, especially small livestock, could graze.
- And finally mountains or wastelands, normally the areas furthest from the population centre, although they were included into land-use, dedicated mainly to grazing or foresting.

Among all these spaces, those studied are the enclosed spaces, the *dehesas*, generally located within the core component of the agricultural system. First the changes in the meaning of *dehesa* have to be discussed.

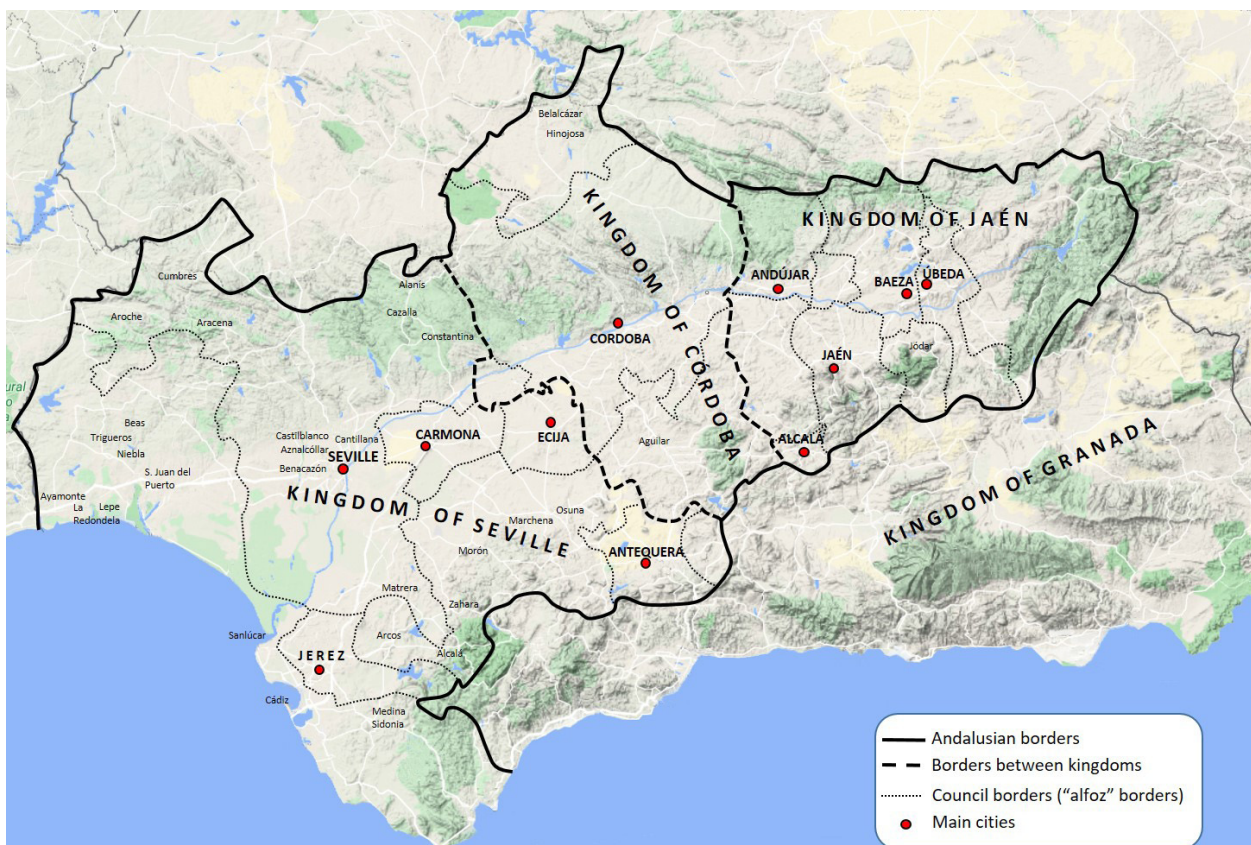


Fig. 1. Map of Andalusia with regions and sites mentioned in the text.

Nowadays *dehesa* is understood as a type of landscape or agricultural exploitation area. Generally, this designation covers a type of landscape of pastures and hollow oak forests, extensively used for grazing and on which certain silvicultural and hunting practices can be found. It is only in very recent times (second half of the 19th cent. AD at the earliest) that the word *dehesa* acquires the meaning of a sparsely wooded formation with which we identify it today.

Throughout history the term *dehesa* has been used to designate various types of enclosed pastureland, without specific direct reference to the plant formations that covered it, so that different proportions of pastureland, trees and scrubland were found there.

Etymologically, the word *dehesa*, *defessa* in medieval times, meant ‘defense’ and *defessar* meant to subtract a certain portion of land from common pasture, reserving its use for a certain type of livestock or for livestock belonging to specific owners. It is supposed that this type of distinction already existed in Roman times (Aranda García 2016, 41)

and that it was also maintained in Islamic times. In fact, it can be considered that the emergence of *dehesas* is mainly linked to the agricultural development and the need for beasts of burden, mainly oxen and equids, hence this was the most widespread type of *dehesa* in medieval municipalities.

Typology of *Dehesas* in Medieval Andalusia

At the beginning all the uncultivated spaces of the medieval councils that were of communal use could be used by all the inhabitants of a town without any kind of restrictions. However, economic needs and political circumstances gradually led to the emergence of use restrictions and different types of boundaries. Similarly, some landowners created privately owned pastures.

The need to guarantee grazing for farm animals explains the emergence of *dehesas* for oxen, a particularly problematic issue in intensively cultivated areas. This matter was attempted to be remedied in cereal farming land by allowing

animals to graze after harvest. However, this was not enough, and it was also necessary to provide enclosed pasture for farm animals in times when they could not be kept on the fields. The fact that this type of *dehesas* appeared in most Andalusian villages after the conquest may be an indication of its widespread presence in earlier times.

Consequently, from the very moment of the Christian conquest, in most Andalusian towns at least one pastureland intended to guarantee the grazing of farm oxen belonging to the local residents is to be found. These *dehesas* were usually called *dehesas concejiles* or *dehesas boyales*.

Occasionally, some communal grazing lands were also created for other types of livestock. There were also *dehesas* that were intended only to preserve the best pastures in an area for the exclusive use of the livestock belonging to the residents of a town or village and to avoid their use by livestock from localities with which they had made some kind of brotherhood agreement.

The characteristics of the *dehesas boyales* varied from one place to another, depending mainly on the geographical location and the extent of the municipal area in which it was located. Its vegetation, surface and location varied with respect to cultivated areas and population centres. Sometimes it could be very large, more than it was necessary for the local livestock, especially so from the 15th cent. AD, when as a result of demographic and economic expansion that occurred, its areas were reduced in favour of crops. In other cases, such as in the Aljarafe area, these pastures were insufficient, especially at the time of agricultural expansion, therefore they were sometimes expanded or new ones were created (Borrero Fernández 1992). Sometimes the problems of space in some *dehesas* were resolved by prohibiting their use by people who had private *dehesas*, so that the municipal *dehesas* were used for the livestock of inhabitants who did not have large enough properties to have their own *dehesas*. On the other hand, all regulations coincide in strictly prohibiting the entry of small livestock and specifically pigs, because of the damage they caused to the ground with the rooting and fouling of the water.

Municipal *dehesas* usually were situated close to the settlement, for the ease of access and guarding the animals, but not on the most fertile soils.

However, sometimes the quality of pastures or the extent of cultivated land made it necessary for them to be established in marginal areas far from the population centre. This is the case at Aljarafe (Borrero Fernández 1992). There are some *dehesas* shared by several villages, possibly due to the fact that at the time of the establishment of *dehesa*, the borders of these villages were not well defined. This is the situation of the one shared between Cumbres Mayores and Cumbres de San Bartolomé. Sometimes it could be the result of some kind of agreement between the localities. This is the case of the Dehesa del Campillo, shared by the residents of Ayamonte, Lepe and La Redondela, or the Dehesa de Alcolea, which was used by the residents of Niebla, Trigueros, Veas and San Juan del Puerto (Carmona Ruiz 1998, 124 f.), or the *dehesa* of La Encinilla, which was used jointly by Hinojosa and Belalcázar (Cabrera Muñoz 1977, 251).

In order to renew their pastures, the *dehesas* were left to rest during the period when the cattle could feed on the arable land, either by grazing on the cereal stubble or the fodder that the owners could provide. Sometimes during part of this time, the *dehesas* were used by different animals, as in the case of Benacazón, where, after the oxen left at the end of September, cows and mares occupied it until mid-January, with the pasture resting until May (Carmona Ruiz 1998, 128).

In addition to oxen and cows, the local bulls might have been given access to the *dehesas boyales*. Sometimes, due to the danger in which they put other cattle, sections called 'bullfighters' or 'bulls' were built, as in the case of the Dehesa de Almanzor, Utrera, but in other cases complete *dehesas* were reserved for bulls, as at Jerez, where there were two *dehesas*: the Berlanga and the Jardilla. Sometimes, horses could also access the *dehesas boyales*, as in the case of Carmona or Cantillana (Carmona Ruiz 1998, 129 f.). However, the usefulness of these animals made it advisable to create *dehesas* reserved exclusively for them. This type of *dehesas* was of special interest in frontier lands since, due to the needs of war, special care was taken with their breeding and feeding. Furthermore, the work of threshing with the mares and their importance for reproduction explains why they also appear in cereal-producing areas (Carmona Ruiz 1998, 130; 2006, 262 f.).

In some localities, in order to guarantee the supply of meat, *dehesas* for livestock to be slaughtered were created. These arose belatedly, from the second half of the 15th cent. AD, in response to complaints from some butchers about the lack of space to feed the cattle that went to the butchers. An example of this is the Dehesa de Tablada, which was set up by the Seville Council for the cattle that supplied the city's butchers (Carmona Ruiz 1998, 131 f.). Although usually only cattle destined for public butchers' shops entered the *dehesas*, in the case of Jerez de la Frontera it also took in the milk cows of the city's poor and it was also permitted to take grass for the horses (Carmona Ruiz 2014, 199).

In addition, because of the quality of their pastures, some *dehesas* were reserved for the exclusive use of local cattle, not allowing the cattle of other localities. Within this category would be some *dehesas*, such as the Islas y Marismas del Guadalquivir, which were for the exclusive use of the residents of the city of Seville, and numerous acorn *dehesas* located mainly in the mountainous regions. There, the best holm oaks were reserved exclusively for the inhabitants of the different localities, prohibiting the entry of cattle from other villages with which there was a brotherhood agreement or which belonged to the same *alfoz* (i.e. rural environment). Thus, there is proof of the enclosure of numerous holm oak groves both in the Sierra de Aroche and Aracena, and in the Sierra de Constantina (Carmona Ruiz 1998; 2011b). In the same way, some *dehesas* were created in which only the neighbours of a town could use the wood of their trees, as in the case of Cortegana (Pérez-Embid 1999, 99).

A particular type of pasture were the so-called *echos*. These were quite frequent in the Cadiz area, especially known in Jerez de la Frontera (Martín Gutiérrez 2015), although they also appear in other councils of the Kingdom of Seville, as is the case of Matrera, Carmona, Ecija or the county of Niebla. They were usually used for cattle, and it is likely that the origin of the word was the lottery with which these lands were distributed. In the case of Jerez, the *echos* were reserved for the use of the cattle of the residents of that city and were assigned to the different farmers by means of a draw for their use for three years. Only those owners who had at least 150 cows could participate

in the draw, which was the minimum allowed to maintain an *echo*, where no more than 300 cows could enter either. If an owner had enough cows to occupy more than one *echo*, he could enter the draw for two, but never for more. This regulation, which is known from the end of the 15th cent. AD, clearly benefited the owners of large herds, who mainly belonged to the citizen oligarchy, which controlled all the council activity and therefore regulated the system of providing pasture to the local cattle. In contrast to these privileged few, the rest of the inhabitants, owners of less than 150 heads of cattle, which should be the vast majority, had to solve the problems of maintenance of their livestock as well as they could (Carmona Ruiz 1996).

In some localities, there were also seasonal restrictions on certain communal spaces, seeking an equitable distribution of their assets. The case of the holm oak woods can be highlighted. In Carmona access to the woods was restricted by the end of September each year, preventing the entrance of people with sticks or cattle in the mountains, until the acorn was mature and fell to the ground, re-opening for communal use on November 1st. By this, it was tried to prevent people from picking the acorns before they were ripe (Carmona Ruiz 2011a).

Finally, within the limited spaces of communal use, we can talk about the *ejidos*, which were the lands that surrounded the population centres. They were areas of expansion of the villas, where new houses could be built. Meanwhile, they were destined to the development of some collective activities of the inhabitants, among which were the feeding of some types of livestock, mainly donkeys and horses (Carmona Ruiz 1998, 115–118).

Besides the communal regime, there were also other types of *dehesas*. Firstly, the so-called *dehesas de propios*. The council owned these and leased them out for the use of any type of livestock. These *dehesas* allowed the council to cover its expenses and therefore benefited the town. Because of that, this type of enclosure proliferated throughout Andalusia. They could originate in royal donations, in the case of Matrera (now Villamartín), granted to the council of Seville by Alfonso XI (1311–1350 AD), but usually they were purchased or repurposed communal grounds.

On some occasions, the purpose of the benefits obtained from renting them is specified, as is the case of the Dehesa de los Cuellos de Baeza, which was granted by Alfonso XI for the maintenance of the city walls (Argente del Castillo Ocaña 1991, 533). Amongst the *dehesas de propios* that existed in Andalusia, those created in Constantine and Aracena should be mentioned, reserving the best oak woods for the Seville shipyards (Carmona Ruiz 2011b, 105; Pérez-Embid 1999, 119).

At certain times some of the *propios* farmland was no longer rented out in order to allow the entry of livestock that was withdrawn from the border to the kingdom of Granada in times of danger (Argente del Castillo Ocaña 1988; 1998; Carmona Ruiz 2009). This is the situation of the Dehesa de la Torre don Ibáñez, in Baeza (Carmona Ruiz 2012), or that of Matrera (Carmona Ruiz 1998, 143–147), which also shows the economic value that livestock farming had in late medieval Andalusia.

The proliferation of privately owned *dehesas* must also be mentioned. These generally belonged to institutions or individuals, who enjoyed all profits. Among these *dehesas* we can highlight those that were made on crop lands destined for plough oxen, although there were numerous *dehesas* or rented out for other people's livestock of different kind. *Dehesas* for farm animals on grain lands were carried out with royal or local authorisation. These types of pastures were also known as *dehesas dehesadas*, and their size varied according to the quality of the land and the possibilities of the area. Similarly, private *dehesas* for the use of other types of livestock came from royal donations, although sometimes they were obtained through purchase, or by bartering with other lands (Carmona Ruiz 1998, 155 f.).

Some gentry were in possession of large mountain areas for their exclusive use, mainly hunting. For example in La Puebla de Cazalla the Earls of Ureña had exclusive access to the forest of Hontanar and the forest of Cote near Morón. In Marchena, the Duke of Arcos owned the Monte Palacio, renting it out for cork production (Carmona Ruiz 1998, 159). In the kingdom of Jaén, there is the case of the benefits that Alonso de Carvajal, Lord of Jódar, obtained from renting his meadows, or in the kingdom of Córdoba, those that the Lord of Aguilar or the Lord of Belalcázar

obtained from their meadows (Argente del Castillo Ocaña 1991, 554–558).

Finally, there are the lands that the Andalusian livestock farmers leased in the kingdom of Granada, linked to the movement of livestock on both sides of the border. There are documents relating to the renting of pastures to graze cattle coming mainly from Zahara, Jerez, Arcos, Alcalá de los Gazules and Medina Sidonia in Cortes and from Gibraltar in Casares. Similarly, the Grenadians leased pastures in Andalusia, as is the case of the lease of the *echo* of the Genal, made by residents of Gibraltar to the Moors of Casares around 1471 AD (Carmona Ruiz 2009).

The Evolution of the Andalusian *Dehesas* at the End of the Middle Ages

As was already indicated, the conquest of Andalusia meant a significant increase in livestock breeding. This situation continued into the 14th cent. AD due to various factors that prevented a demographic growth of Andalusia, such as the border war, the various cycles of epidemics and the poor harvests that affected the region throughout the century (Collantes de Terán 1982). The scenario began to change at the beginning of the 15th cent. AD, when a progressive population growth was detected, with the consequent increase in cultivated areas and the appearance of new populations. Thus, the 15th cent. AD brought about an important change in the economy of the area due to pushing back of the borders of Granada (the conquest of Antequera in 1410 AD and Ronda in 1485 AD are particularly noteworthy), and the definitive conquest of the Nasrid kingdom in 1492 AD. In fact, after the conquest of Granada, instability and fear were dissipated. The main consequence was a significant population growth stimulated by the agricultural potential of much of the border area, the Campiña. This region became a major attraction for new settlers, with the consequent ploughing and the creation of new settlements, such as Villamartín (in the Dehesa de Matrera), Paradas, Campillos, Puebla de Cazalla and so on (Collantes de Terán 1977).

The subsequent clearing of land caused by this growth had a significant negative impact on

Andalusian livestock farming, due to the significant reduction in the amount of land used for grazing. This produced considerable imbalances in the development of economic activities and quite a lot of damage to livestock, because many communal pastures disappeared. This agricultural development meant a greater need for working livestock, so the main consequence of this development was the proliferation of both public and private *dehesas*, mainly for working livestock, which was essential for the proper development of agricultural activities. The *dehesas boyales* that existed in previous times were not always sufficient to maintain all the working livestock, so it was necessary to expand them by purchasing adjacent land or creating new ones (Carmona Ruiz 1998, 127 f.). The *dehesas dehesadas* increased considerably in size and number, so that in many cases they came to occupy a quarter of the available land. This increase was not due to the need for more space to feed the oxen, using these *dehesas* to feed livestock not on the farm. Sometimes the owners managed to close the proprietaries completely, thus turning them into *donadíos cerrados*, where the cattle were fed as allowed by their owners, sometimes charging them a fee for their use (Carmona Ruiz 1998, 152; Ladero Quesada 1976).

The increase in the number of *dehesas* in Seville was so notable that in the mid-15th cent. AD the king Juan II. (1405–1454 AD) cancelled all the *dehesas* that the Seville Council had authorised in the twenty years before, prohibiting it from allowing new *dehesas* to be built without his authorisation. This order was not respected and, in fact, Seville continued to grant permits for *dehesas*, and, as in other areas of Andalusia, the number of private *dehesas* increased considerably between the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th cent. AD (Carmona Ruiz 1998, 153 f.).

In addition, taking advantage of the food needs of the livestock, the owners of the estates began to usurp spaces for communal use, enclosing them to obtain new income from the renting of their pastures. Among others, examples of this practise are the disputes the Counts of Ureña had with the people of Morón and Osuna (García Fernández 1995), especially the one with Morón, because of the Algaida and Dehesa de Cote. They had been in communal use until access was denied by the

Counts of Ureña, who started to rent them out at the beginning of the 16th cent. AD (Carmona Ruiz 1999). Another example is the case of Arcos de la Frontera, where Don Rodrigo Ponce de León had appropriated communal lands in the district (Carmona Ruiz 2003).

There are countless communal and private *dehesas* that were established around this time, although we do want to emphasise that a large part of them were intended for farm livestock, which was essential for the proper development of agricultural activities. This does not include the numerous private *dehesas* created especially by the lords for profit, and therefore destined for any type of livestock, among which were logically the large flocks of transhumant sheep integrated in the Mesta Real.

In fact, after the conquest of Granada in 1492 AD, transhumant livestock began to arrive regularly in Andalusia. The reasons for this are the development of local livestock, the protectionism deployed by the councils of Andalusia and the permanent danger that the border of Granada entailed. This explains why, even though the Crown always contemplated the possibility of using the pastures of the south, in fact during the medieval period the *mesta* (an institution established in medieval times) played little role in the region, limiting its presence to points located in the Sierra Morena area (Argente del Castillo Ocaña 1991, 284 f.). Despite the interests of the lords in leasing their pastures, the situation of many of the lordships on the border meant that the *mesta* livestock breeders, faced with the danger of the *razzias* from Granada that continually devastated the area, did not risk to use these territories. Only after the definitive destruction of the kingdom of Granada they moved there. On many occasions the *mesta* livestock was forced to cross the lands of the councils of the royalty until they reached the lordships. Given the impediments the lords placed, the operation could become quite complicated. All this explains that it would not be until the disappearance of the danger of the border at the end of the 15th cent. AD that transhumant livestock began to proliferate in these lands.

The inclusion of the Andalusian lands into the Hispanic transhumance networks was favoured by the power that the *mesta* acquired from the

reign of the Catholic Kings, the disappearance of the Muslim danger and the financial problems of some councils that tried to solve them by leasing their lands to the transhumant pastoralists. Also, by that time the load of debts on pastures in lands of dominion increased notably. This situation was much easier in the lordships that arose at the end of the 15th cent. AD in the lands of Granada, such as in the Villaluenga mountain range, where the Duke of Arcos had large and numerous *dehesas*. In contrast, in those places that had previously belonged to the royal jurisdiction or an important council autonomy, the lords clashed head-on with the interests of their neighbours, since the latter intended to keep all the vacant land open for the use of common people. This is the case in the lands of Niebla or the lordship of Osuna. However, despite the opposition, the lords made numerous leases (Carmona Ruiz 2007).

The benefits that some individuals tried to secure by establishing and renting of *dehesas*, meant severe damage to the economy of some municipalities, because of the loss of land for grazing.

Conclusions

Through these pages we have been able to see that since the Christian conquest a large number of *dehesas* have been created in Andalusia. The first ones to appear were the *dehesas boyales*, in order to guarantee the feeding of the working cattle belonging to the local people. These *dehesas* appeared in the communal areas and although their extension varied from one place to another, in general, they were created in places with good pasture and water and easy access for the cattle to which they were destined. From then on, and throughout the centuries, the number of *dehesas*

increased gradually, preserving some spaces for other types of livestock and for the exclusive use of the neighbours. This growth was especially important from the 15th cent. AD onwards when the number of *dehesas* increased notably, as a result of the increase in spaces for agricultural use and the consequent decrease in uncultivated spaces. This reality explains the confrontation between farmers and ranchers and the appearance of new *dehesas* which were intended to guarantee food for the local livestock. In this sense, we must highlight the notable increase in the number of *dehesas* in the mountain areas from the 15th cent. AD onwards.

All this also explains the considerable increase in the number and extension of private *dehesas*, many of which were created to feed the owners' livestock, but in many other cases were intended for renting out and obtaining economic benefits. In this respect, it is worth noting the large amount of land that the nobility reserved in their lordships as pastureland to be leased to local and transhumant livestock. Parallel to this reality, some community uses were restricted, such as the Defeat of Miseses, and in fact, at the end of the Middle Ages, the stubble fields, which in principle were for communal use, began to be sold, benefiting the owners of the farmland, who were mainly the local authorities and the nobility.

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