

RURAL BUILDINGS OF MOUNTAIN REGIONS IN GALICIA: A RESOURCE TO INCREASE IN VALUE

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Abstract

Nowadays, the mountain in Galicia seems to have an exclusively forest porpouse, but traditionally, this did not happen. The use of mountain is a model of sustainable situations, according to Balboa. Theses uses in Galicia could be summarized in the following points:

- “Estivadas”, use of the mountain based on utilization of fire for renewing gorse and broom bushes, getting collateraly a harvest of rye.
- Rotation of rye-fallow during periods of 6-10 years and then let bushes to take up the land.
- “Esquilme”, which is a practice consisting on the use of bushes for cattle bedding. Once this material turned into manure, it could serve to fertilize crop lands.
- Mountain pastures which were a huge pastures land for cattle herds: cows, sheep, goats and, to a lesser extent, horses. These animals grazed in freedom, semifreedom or colective grazing (system of “veceiras”).

Apart from these main uses, there were others as: firewood, timber, fruits (chestnuts) or honey.

These traditional uses could be found in mountain regions in Galicia, where there are different kinds of buildings depending on the area, which are dissapearing. All these constructions, today into disuse in most of cases, are a resource which should be held up, and not only because they have an ethnographic interest.

Keyword: Mountain, buildings.

1. Exposition and objectives of the study.

The maintenance and restoration of these buildings is necessary because of their historic, ethnographic, cultural and even economic value. With this work we intend to do an introduction to the analysis of these constructions, starting from a field study that we done in eastern mountains of Galicia and from the bibliographic review.

For doing this analysis, we work on the principle that this maintenance and restoration only will be done if the buildings are still functional, that is, if they still have some utilization.

The first step to achieve this is doing an inventory of the buildings and classing them. This labour is only done in a localized and partial way.

In second place, the possibility of a future utilization of these buildings has to be studied from two points of view: the possibility of maintenance of their current and traditional uses (agricultural and for cattle) and the possibility of new uses related to agroforestry and cattle sector or not.

For analysing these two possibilities is necessary to study:

- The kind of building and its constructive features. This knowledge will allow us to define if they are still useful in the new productive systems of the current extensive agriculture.

- Technical and economic determinants that could have influence when the possibilities of use of the buildings were put into effect.
- Role of actors, social agents and involved institutions.

This work shows an initial approach to the results of this study.

2. Methodology

The employed methodology could be summarized as follows:

- First evaluation of the existence of rural buildings in mountain regions in Galicia. The objective of this first step was the identification of the regions where mountain buildings related to the extensive system existed. Two sources of information were used: the bibliographic review and local information from the people and institutions of the most important village settlements of the mountain regions in Galicia.
- In the second stage, a field study was done. It consisted on the visit to different rural buildings in a whole of six mountain regions. For locating these buildings in each region, we used the local information picked up in its village settlements, because there is not enough data about them. Once they were located, they were selected according to the information about their entity and their conservation condition. The objective in this stage was doing an inventory of the buildings and determining the features of each type.
- The third step was the research of the traditional use of the studied buildings. Because of the shortage of bibliographic references, it was necessary using in each region the information given by elderly persons who still remember that use. From this information we intended to set up their specific utilization.
- Finally, according to the kind and the traditional uses, the possibilities of current use were analysed studying the advantages and the problems of the proposals, which in future works should be more studied and checked.

This work picks up the summary of the three first stages and an advance of the last one.

3. Results of the study about the features and types of buildings.

3.1. Classification of the studied buildings.

The studied buildings could be classified, according to their traditional use, in the following way:

- Buildings related to extensive grazing with animals in freedom regime or “veceiras”. In this group are included the next ones: “Alzada” huts, “curros”, “chozos” and huts of the “Rías”.
- Buildings related to grazing and forage conservation. Including: Isolated huts and grouped huts.
- Buildings destined to the storage of non-forage products and complementary productions. Including: “Sequeiros” and “albarizas”.

3.2. Buildings related to extensive grazing with animals in freedom régime or “veceiras”

A high number of huts could be included in this group; of those, we point as more relevant the next kinds:

3.2.1. “Alzada” huts.

We found them in eastern mountains of Galicia, exactly in the region of Ancares. They form groups of a number of dozens of huts, which are real small summer villages where herdsmen and herds shelter in spring and summer time, when the herds are moved to grazing high mountain lands of Galicia.

There are different kinds, but over all, two of them:

- Usual “alzada” huts, with rectangular layout, loading walls of ordinary masonry, wood beams and slate cover (picture 1).
- “Pallozas” with round or square layout, loading walls of ordinary masonry, wood structure, including central poles and cover of straw (picture 2).

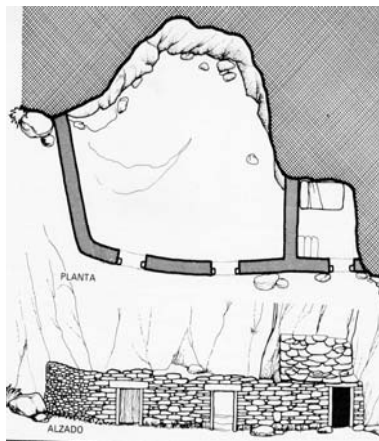
Picture 1: “Alzada” huts with rectangular layout in San Robredin (Ancares).



Picture 2: “Pallozas” on hill of Campo de Auga and Pan de Zarco (Source: Xurxo de Vivero and authors’ documentation).

3.2.2. “Curros”

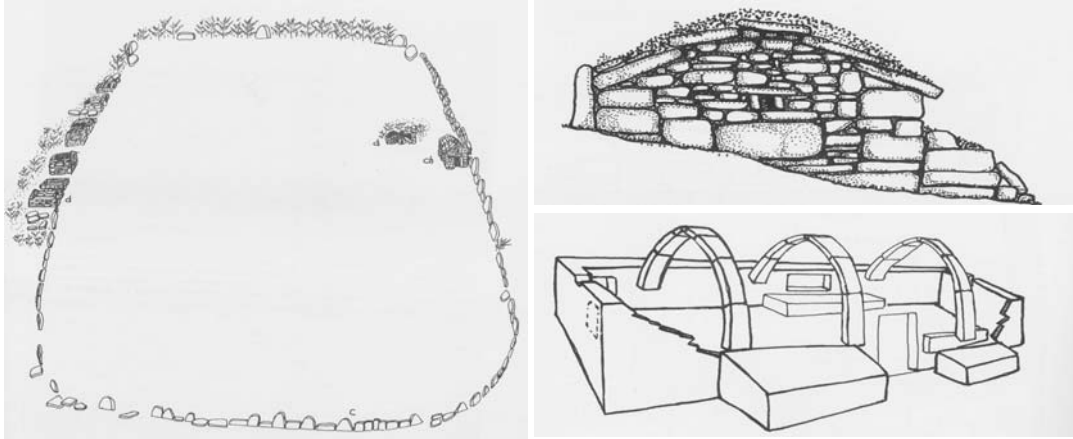
They are characteristic of central mountains in Ourense and used for concentration and night rest of sheep herds. They are formed by a stone wall, normally against the stone of a mountain (or between two of them). It could have or not a hut for the herdsman (picture 3).



Picture 3: “Curro” for sheep herds (Source: Pedro de Llano e Augusto P. Alberti).

3.2.3. “Chozos”

They are identified and placed on Suído Mountain Range, in the central part of Galicia. They have intermediate characteristics between “alzada” huts and “curros” (picture 4).



Picture 4: “Chozos” in Suído

In a similar way to them, they have a wall, but in this case, it is formed by flagstones of slate and they constitute a kind of huts which is appropriate for the collective handling of the herd, in some way, like “alzada” huts. These ones have a characteristic structure with arches of stone.

3.2.4. Huts of the “Rías”

In the mountains which form the estuary of Muros-Noia (Barbanza, Pindo, ...), important herds of sheep grazing in other times and, today, they have disappeared.



Picture 5: Huts of Monte Louro (Muros).

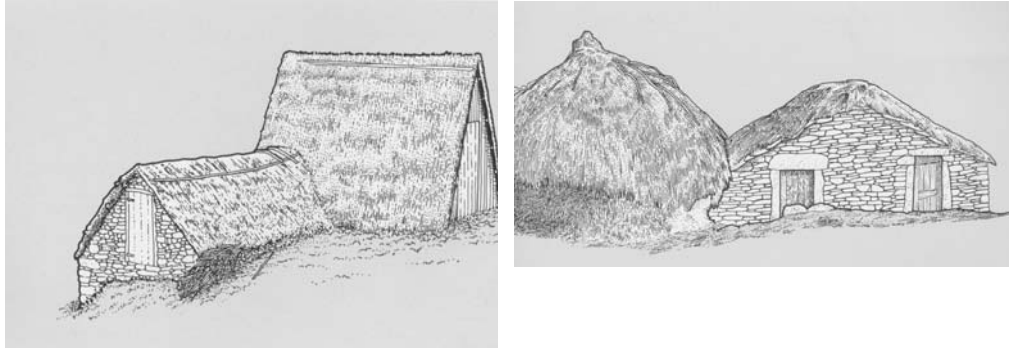
However, constructions related to them already exist, as the ones we have identified and placed on the hillsides of Louro Mountain, near from the protected area of the pool of Xarfas. They are small huts, some of them digged out the stones, with a rectangular layout, loading walls made of stones, wood beams and an one slope tile roof.

3.3. Buildings related to grazing and forage conservation

In this group, a number of huts with different typologies could be included:

3.3.1. Isolated huts

We found them in eastern mountains of Galicia, exactly in the region of O Courel or in Muras, on narrow valleys and with slope, which are formed by the rivers and pools of these mountain areas (pictures 6 and 7).



Picture 6: Huts in Muras Region. Source: Augusto Pérez

They are situated on the high part of fields. Normally they are made using the slope of the ground and have two floors. The one with the entrance through the upper side served as straw loft. The bottom floor, with independent entrance by the low part of the construction, was usually used as a shelter for cattle.

They are huts with a size related to the surface of the field where they were placed, that is, with the quantity of hay which was stored. They have a rectangular layout, loading walls of masonry, wood beams and cover of slate, usually having an one slope roof.



Picture 7: Isolated huts between Seoane and Padern (O. Courel).

3.3.2. Grouped huts

In the same Mountain Range of O Courel, we have placed the same huts described in the previous case, grouped next to paths and chestnut groves, forming small settlements near of pasture areas, at middle distance between valleys and towns (picture 8). Their features are similar to the ones described before, although we have confirmed the presence of bigger huts with one only floor and a two slope roof.



Picture 8: Grouped huts in Seoane and Visuña (O. Courel)

3.4. Buildings destined to the storage of non-forage products and complementary productions

Some mountain constructions could be included in this type. We take as an example the next ones.

3.4.1. “Sequeiros”: Drying places for chestnuts

In the “soutos” (forests of chestnut trees) and joined to the picking up and conservation of chestnuts, it is easy to find all around Galicia’s regions “ouriceiras” or closed places where these fruits are stored. It is more difficult to find the drying places that we have identified in the forests of chestnuts of the oriental mountain ranges of Galicia, particularly in the region of O Courel (picture 9).

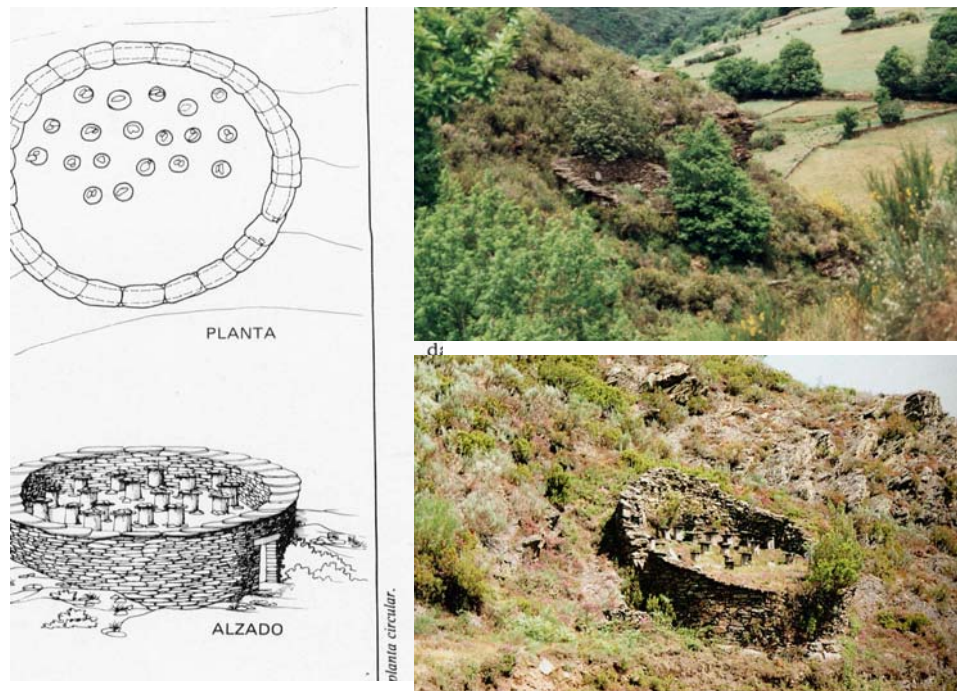


Picture 9.- Drying places for chestnuts in Mostade (O Courel).

They are constructions with a rectangular ground plan, loading walls of masonry and cover of slate with a characteristic triangular “peak” on their front part which served as a porch, showed in picture 9. They are buildings which have been done making use of the drop of the ground. By the upper side, chestnuts are introduced and by the low part, fire could be done for drying the fruits. The floor is made of wood.

3.4.2. “Albarizas”

“Albarizas” or “cortins” are constructions made for protecting “trobos” or traditional beehives from the attack of wild animals, fundamentally from bears. They exist in a lot of regions in Galicia. They do not have any cover and have a circular or ovoid layout, and to a lesser extent, square or irregular. Walls are made of quarring with a variable height from 1,5m to 2,5m (picture 10).



Picture 10: “Albarizas” in Ancares e Paderne - O Courel (Source: authors’ documentation. Xurxo de Vivero and Pedro de LLano).

4. Discussion and analysis of utilization possibilities of mountain buildings

4.1. Possibilities of maintenance their agroforestry and cattle usefulness

Possibilities of a farming use are related to the extensive process of cattle production and the reassessment of handicraft productions, tied to the land and exactly, to the practise of grazing for dairy cattle and sheep fundamentally.

4.1.1. Possibilities offered by each type of building and their features

The “alzada” huts have such a dimension which could permit its use as a shelter for the cattle, perhaps not for dairy cattle, but appropriate for sheep.

Providing these buildings with services (water, energy) appears as a perfectly viable fact. The supply of drinkable water is guaranteed by wells, which usually exist in these constructions. The use of solar and wind power offers good possibilities.

Talking about drying places for chestnuts or “albarizas”, their use for the same objectives is still valid.

Isolated or grouped huts, which were thought up as shelters for cattle, at the same time, they could serve as a storage for hay, their possibilities of utilization depend on the study of the use of actual small holdings for rotational grazing.

4.1.2. Determinants and detected problems

We think that the maintenance of the current use will be conditioned by grazing practices: with complete herds or in parts.

Traditional grazing practise was similar to modern rotational grazing, although in very small sized groups. It doesn’t seem dispensable that, with transports, this system allows an appropriate management of big herds without increasing work.

The presence of small groups in small pieces of ground would make usefull the huts, in their original task as shelter or store, perhaps, not so as hay store as another food supplements.

4.1.3. Role of involved persons and institutions

The possible conservation of the current use of huts is related, in some way, to the conservation of the trade of herdsman, suitable to actual times. This trade had some disadvantages, as an example: the isolation and the conditions of living in the huts are two of the most important ones. On the contrary, the seasonal work and the contact with nature would be two advantages.

Respect to the disadvantages, current technology could permit its overcoming. Isolation is fought, in some way, by actual communications (mobile telephones, four-wheel drive vehicle,...). Considering the conditions of living in huts, the technique permits to provide them properly. Possibilities of the use of huts as housing are showed in restorations, as the ones started in Campo de Auga or in Monte Louro.

It also seems to be decisive the push that could be done from different institutions. The creation of “herdsman schools”, similar to the one started in the council of Allariz could be a good idea.

The use of “sequeiros” and “albarizas” is very conditioned by the fact that the handicraft production of honey and hazelnuts has to achieve an appropriate profitability. About this point there are two key aspects: the role of institutions in the support of the commercialization and the connection with the tourism in rural areas.

4.2. Possibilities of new uses

4.2.1. Possibilities of new agroforestry and cattle usefulness

In the same agroforestry and cattle use, recovery possibilities of these constructions towards small handicraft industries seem possible. “Alzada” huts and drying places for chestnuts offer a higher number of possibilities, due to their size and situation. It doesn't seem dispensable its use as drying place for sausages and meat products, cheese factories, bottling of chestnut jam. Respect to cattle production, the use as shelters for pig cattle, in the same way as extensive systems (camping system) could be an option to study for grouped huts and even for the isolated ones.

In any of these situations, the maintenance of an agroforestry or cattle use would suppose a kind of utilization that, in a high number of cases, would lose functional nature respect to new installations. This problem should be compensated, in some way, by the Administration, because the use of these constructions supposes the conservation of an ethnographic and cultural heritage, interesting for the whole society.

4.2.2. Possibilities of new uses outside the agroforestry and cattle sector

The possibilities of new uses are very related to the tourism in rural areas. We mentioned before that options of restoration are important, simply as the interest of preserving the heritage and that this was visited, or as possible housing, mountain shelters, etc.

Restoration and use as housing seem to be the best option, not only for rural tourism, but an educational use or for conservation of environment.

4.2.3. Role of involved persons and institutions.

In this way, some action has been done by different institutions, town councils and European plans.

New options are opened for their use as work fields, centers for interpretation of nature, housing and support places for environment investigators, etc.

Anyway, these new uses must be undertaken in a complementary or symbiotic line with agroforestry and cattle uses, because one favours the others. There isn't rural tourism without people and active life and the possibilities of an educational use are small if there isn't population or economic activities related to the medium.

Conclusions

Mountain buildings are an important resource to increase in value, not only from the ethnographic point of view, but also agroforestry and for new uses in the rural medium. Anyway, this increase supposes their maintenance and that depends on their utility for the future.

These buildings offer the possibility of the maintenance of their use in the agroforestry and cattle sector, because of their features, and they also offer the possibility of new uses derived from the tourism in rural areas or the industrialization of the handicraft production of some products.

For this purpose, possibly, it will be necessary a diversification of their uses, about substructure for extensive cattle production and handicraft transformation of products and about substructures in relation with rural tourism or educational or investigative uses. This diversification, below the criterion symbiosis of them that will make that they favour reciprocally, would give value to a resource which nowadays is being lost and destroyed. Finally the participation of involved actors and social agents and institutions, basically the local ones, seems to be a key element for putting new energy and holding the conservation and maintenance process.

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