


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Away but connected: from the mountains of Babia to the plains of Cáceres. A study of Spanish transhumance at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries

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Abstract

One of the most important systems of sheep transhumance since the Middle Ages in Spain occurred between the mountains of northern Leon and the Extremadura Meadow lands – a 500-kilometre journey on foot. We analyse here an interesting collection of thirty letters, written at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and sent by the shepherds responsible for the flock from the wintering land to the owner of the animals. The only connection with the owner for seven long months but also with their villages and families, were these letters.

The epistles provide important information of ethnographic and historical character about migration, amid such significant transformations, as the beginning of the decline of the wool industry and the start of railway transportation, which started to substitute the long displacements on foot for up to one month. The letters make it possible to reconstruct, thanks to this privileged documentation, the daily itinerary followed by the shepherds and their sheep, the day-to-day living. The details of the letters allow us to reconstruct the livestock work carried out by the shepherds who, away from home for eight months, looked after their flock. One of the keys is the owners' firm commitment to continue with a farm focused on quality wool production, when the market, in this transition period, was already changing towards meat. The key to this process is to verify the maintenance of the doubling technique (sacrifice one lamb, so that two mothers may suckle one lamb), as well as to verify that the tail docking is the key moment of the winter works since it allows confirmation of the number of lambs that will be added that year to the flock.

With this research, we intend to expand the ethnographic information available and delve deeper into the transhumance practice in the transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Introduction

Transhumance can be defined simply as the seasonal movement of livestock. The existence of these livestock movements of transhumant herds is well studied, not only in the Mediterranean environment, but also in other places, such as in the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Scandinavian countries or Great Britain, since prehistoric times (Collis et al., 2016; Costello and Svensson, 2018), with the finding of summer farms of seasonal character.

In the Mediterranean arc, we find abundant evidence of transhumance in the mountains of the Spanish Pyrenees, from the end of the Neolithic period (Gassiot Balbé et al., 2020), as well as

Roman farms in the Provence region, where transhumant herds arriving from the Alps spent the winter (Badan et al., 1995). Braudel (1949) masterfully described transhumance in the Mediterranean context, pointing out the importance of the movement of flocks of sheep, sometimes hundreds of kilometres, from the winter pastures in the plains to the mountain where they spend the summer months.

Transhumance was the principal mode of management of the extensive livestock husbandry in Spain, as in many other Mediterranean countries, where it is a way to combat the thermal variations between mountainous areas and valleys, taking advantage of the favourable conditions of both ecosystems. The transhumance from the Picos de Europa to Extremadura and Andalucía is the longest, but there are also shorter journeys from the Pyrenees to the Ebro valley (Pallaruelo, 1988) or from the mountains of Teruel to the Valencian coasts (Vidal-González and Antón Burgos, 2007), that have been carried out uninterruptedly since the Christian conquest in medieval times (twelfth and thirteenth centuries).

The ecosystems of the mountains of León and the meadows of Cáceres offer extraordinary complementarity for the practice of transhumance. The cold of the León mountains makes livestock farming unfeasible in winter, complemented very well with the pastures of Extremadura, with poor soils and very hot summers, but with mild winters. It is a perfect binomial to get the most out of two ecosystems that allow a very low agricultural yield, but that with this centennial practice achieve optimal yields for extensive livestock. Thus, each fall, the flocks that had spent the hot summer months in the cool green mountains began a long journey to reach areas of milder climate where they spent the winter months. This practice, as Collantes points out, 'was a solution for areas that . . . had few possibilities for winter feeding of livestock' (Collantes, 2003: 157).

One of the territories with the richest traditions of long transhumant movements was the Cantabrian range and especially the north of the province of León. This transhumance was attested since the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth century, at the same time as the conquest of the southern lands from the Muslims. Its flocks made long trips on foot all the way to the distant regions of Extremadura and Andalucía, in journeys that could last a month. This phenomenon has been repeated since the reconquest of the Extremadura dehesas in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Klien, 1920).

It's in this context that we find ourselves in the house of José Pérez Quirós, a rich farmer and doctor, owner of a significant flock of migratory sheep. From a farming family, he created one of the most important flocks of the west of the mountains of León in the small village of Cabrillanes. This village, of 159 habitants and located at an altitude of 1,249 metres in the region of Babia, is part of the most mountainous province of León and in the heart of the Picos de Europa National Park. His family has conserved the rich personal archive, a unique chronicle of migratory activity. Among their documents, we found a set of thirty handwritten letters, chronologically written between 1898 and 1911. The employees in charge of the flocks wrote them during the winter migratory period in the lands of the province of Cáceres, almost 500 kilometres to the south. They reported to the owner of the sheep on the details of his livestock and in those letters, one can observe the principal concerns in relation to sheep exploitation amid the important historic period at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. These letters, through their personal and direct character, offer a unique testimony of a period of great interest in the history of Spanish transhumance.

Historical context

Spanish sheep migration can be traced from Roman and Visigoth times, but it would not be until the thirteenth century, in the process of reconquering the lands of the south, when the 'Mesta' was formally constituted as a livestock organisation under royal protection that managed pastures and

livestock tracts on the land of the Castilian Crown. This institution, founded by King Alfonso X the Wise in 1273, achieved a prominent role in the country's economy, thanks to its thriving business of fine Merino sheep wool (Klein, 1920). The Crown of Aragon also played an important role in transhumance after the Christian conquest. This was especially evident in the livestock interests of the inhabitants of Teruel after the conquest of the new Kingdom of Valencia (Castán Esteban, 1994).

However, a new period started with the arrival of liberal and reform ideas that led to the development of modern agriculture in contrast with livestock that was considered backward and unproductive (Harrison, 1989). With the export of Merino sheep outside the borders of the kingdom, a significant decline of migratory livestock began. Another of the direct causes of the demise was the War of Independence, during which troops decimated the great flocks. Del Río, a privileged witness of the time, says: 'It has been seen with pain that this scourge of mankind (war) has reduced some powerful cattle ranchers to the greatest misery while raising others who barely knew the opulence of sheep' (Del Río, 1828: 123).

At the same time, the greater specialisation of Saxon wool, which broke into the British market, caused the collapse of the prices of Spanish Merino wool beginning in 1830 (García Sanz, 1978). Consequently, the owners of the big flocks were ruined. With these ominous precedents, in 1836 La Mesta and all of its privileges were abolished, in the context of the abolition of stately rights as part of an effort to rationalise the productive economy. Subsequently, it was replaced by the rather modest General Association of Cattlemen of the Kingdom. It was at that very moment when ecclesiastical wealth and the great lordships were dismantled and so the large owners of flocks were decimated and replaced by small- and medium-sized cattle ranchers. As Collantes indicates, 'sheep raising retained some presence in the mountain economy, but its scale and character had greatly changed' (2009: 132). In Klein's words (1920: 294), 'the Mesta had lost its power and its usefulness; it was now but a Quixotic mockery of its ancient splendour. Its abolition was a step that simply swept away the useless wreckage of medievalism and cleared the ground for the foundation of a pastoral industry along modern lines.'

The aforementioned sharp fall in the price of wool also caused the gradual transformation of livestock to adapt to new demands, namely greater use of meat in emerging urban centres. In the expression of Collantes (2009: 132), 'the times of the Merino breed and its high-quality wool were gone' and therefore a process of adaptation of the breed began, as people sought new qualities in the Merino breed as a meat producer. Already in 1891 the agronomist responsible for the province of Cáceres pointed out how 'to find some compensation for the decline of wool in the higher value of meat' (Grupo de Estudios de Historia Rural, 1979: 151), pointing out how the move to a greater interest in meat was the solution to the fall in wool prices.

Travelling on foot to wintering places was a long journey, as we have already noted. The transhumants of the Babia region used the Cañada de la Vizana, which started in those mountains and after passing through Astorga reached Cáceres. After the appearance of the railroad in Spain in 1848, stockbreeders began to transport the flocks in this new means of locomotion, using the services of the Madrid-Cáceres-Portugal Company. According to Friberg (1920: 231), the first transport of flocks by rail took place in 1899, although Abellán García and Olivera Poll (1979: 389–90) point out that 'the use of the railroad was minimal, exceptional and only for leading farmers.' See, for example, the first of the letters analysed here, which already mentions the displacement by train in 1898, suggesting that the owner of this flock was ahead of his time and would have been one of the first Leonese farmers to use this service.

Friberg (1920: 239) tells us, perhaps in an overly enthusiastic tone, that 'the old Leonese Glen and the branches that had joined it were abandoned in favour of the Astorga-Cáceres railroad.' On the other hand, Abellán García and Olivera Poll (1979: 99) concluded that 'everything seems to indicate that at the height of 1913, the transhumant cattle did not yet use the railroad as a substitute for traditional movements.'

Methodology

The collection of letters that is the object of this work are in the family archive of Álvarez Pérez, in Cabrillanes, located in the province of Leon, Spain. We visited the archive, as well as the nearby mountain passes in the vicinity, where the sheep spent their summers. Firstly, the thirty documents were scanned. Subsequently, they were transcribed, as they were handwritten, with a calligraphy that doesn't make reading easy for a fast reader. After the transcription, all the topics of interest mentioned in the letters were sorted by category for further thematic analysis. We favoured the anthropological and historical dimensions of the texts. Our aim is to reconstruct the daily life of transhumant shepherds, the tasks they had to carry out during their stay in Extremadura, as well as to reconstruct the meaning of livestock farming from the epistolary relationship between shepherds and the owner. At the same time, other documents have been consulted from the same archive, such as account books and invoices, and they have allowed us to confirm the information that the letters offered.

Precisely because they are private documents for strictly personal use, very few historical letters from pastors are preserved. It is therefore an exceptional document, which allows the researcher to know, from a primary source, more daily data about the life and work of the shepherd. Among the few cases we can cite are those presented by Ramírez Benito (2007), the one cited by Castán Esteban (1998, note 40) or the livestock archives of Casa Liró in Aragiúes del Puerto, Huesca, which Pallaruelo was able to study (1988), which also included letters written by the shepherds of the house.

The collection of letters analysed here were all written by those responsible for the flocks, *rabadanes* (head shepherds) or *companions* almost always, during the winter period, in order to inform the owner of the progress of the sheep. The head shepherd 'directs and manages the flock' (Le Men, 2003–04), so he had an obligation to render periodic accounts to his employer and owner.

These are professional letters, but also include personal asides or comments related to health, which indicate the closeness of the correspondents. Nineteen of the thirty (63 per cent) were written in the month of March, to account for the result of the docking of lambs' tails, while we found only three letters in November, January and February, and only one in April, another in May and none in December. Cutting the lambs' tails had a sanitary function, as it prevented dirt and diseases, but it also meant the incorporation of the new lambs to the flock.

Only the correspondence sent to the owner is present today, and not the letters sent by the owner to his employees in Extremadura, although reference is continually also made to these. We found a range of the number of letters, including one letter in the years 1899 and 1907 and as many as seven letters in the year 1909. The letters, all of them dated, pointed out the name of the pasture from where they were written, all of them in the vicinity of the city of Cáceres.

Their structure is quite repetitive, always with a cordial formula of greetings and personal health wishes, followed by a description of the weather and rainfall in the area, which was understandable given the implications such details presented in relation to the quality of the pastures and the welfare of the flock. This is followed by a detailed report on the sheep's vicissitudes, that is, the health of the investment made by the owner. Finally, a farewell paragraph typically concluded with wishes of good health, accompanied by messages for the families of all who were leading the process of transhumance.

Writing a letter was quite unusual for matters other than livestock, but nevertheless letters also arrived directly to shepherds from their families. Thus in 1898 Casimiro Pérez said he had received a letter from his son in which he says that 'he will stop studying. Write to him and give him a good reference.' Communication was not easy or rapid, as evidenced by another letter dated 6th March (from 1911) in which the *rabadan* shows concern for the health of his son. Segundo Pérez received a letter from 28th January and claimed he had fresh news about his health, a month and a half later!

Finally, the pastures in Cáceres were visited in the winter, right at the time of the shepherds' stay. Those were the places where the shepherds wrote their letters. Experiencing the landscape



Figure 1. The transhumance from the Babia mountains to the plains in Extremadura. Author's own map, using Google Earth.

has helped us to understand even better the content of the letters and the descriptions reflected in the epistles.

The displacement

Transhumance, as the account books as well as the letters analysed here point out, began at the end of October from Babia, to arrive, as we will see, at the beginning of November in the meadows near the city of Cáceres (Figure 1). The livestock we study here were moved by train at least since 1898, as confirmed in the first of the letters resulting from our analysis. This confirms that José Pérez Quirós was one of the first farmers to make use of this new development in transportation. Later letters, from 1899, 1908, and 1911, confirm that this practice continued.

The flock, as indicated in the account books consulted, moved along the sheep routes from Babia to Astorga, to board there on special trains, with several floors, where the sheep were crowded together. Thanks to the scrupulous accounts provided by the shepherds and preserved in the archives, we have been able to document that the path on foot passed through Villabandín, El Castillo, Pandorado, La Garandilla, San Martín de Falamosa and Ferreras, until reaching San Justo de la Vega, where Astorga station was located. This first section on foot, following one of the branches of the Cañada Real Vizana, was carried out over three to six days, depending on the crowdedness of the path and the day set for boarding the train.



Figure 2. Pasture areas near the city of Cáceres. Author's own map, using Google Earth.

The train journey, from the city of Astorga and to the village of La Perala, in Casar de Cáceres, was 430 kilometres and was carried out in two days, with successive stops in Zamora, Salamanca, as well as in Segura del Toro, Cañaveral from Cáceres until reaching the La Perala station. From there, it was one or two more days on foot until they reached the successive pastures (Figure 2). We know from the accounts that these stops were prolonged for hours, allowing the shepherds to stock up on bread and wine, while also perhaps letting trains with more priority like passenger trains pass.

This kind of transportation, however, also caused serious problems for livestock. In one of the letters, precisely from 1898, we are told that 'the sheep from the train arrived totally damaged, so much so that they left 4 dead from the floors and three from Enrique and from there to Escobero another 7 or 8.' The transport by train offered many advantages, but it was also clearly dangerous, given both overcrowding, and the fact that the sheep had to remain those two days locked in the wagons. The flock, accompanied by the shepherds, disembarked at the Casar de Cáceres station and were divided there into smaller groups, each of which was assigned a different pasture where, accompanied by a group of shepherds, they would spend the winter. The flock that made the journey had a variable number of heads, from the 2,500 recorded in 1898 to the 4,300 of

1910. Their number changed in relation to sales in previous years. Next to the sheep, the main reason for the migration was that there was a good group of mares, since, for the shepherds of Babia, these animals represented a portion of their salary in kind.

Each shepherd could take two mares and an appraised number of sheep, from twenty for the humblest shepherd, all the way to thirty for the head shepherd. These privileges in kind were called 'the excuse' and were a complement to the salary, which at this time at the turn of the century was 280 royal fleeces. Both De Gaminde (1827) and Del Río (1828) point out that the mountain shepherds took a mare and *rabadanes* two, although in the accounts we have been able to consult, it seems that the privilege of taking two mares is widely used. The goal was to fatten those animals well with the winter grass and to be able to raise foals and sell them later. With the beginning of the migration by train, the transport of the mares was complicated, since they did not fit in the wagons equipped for the sheep. This forced the appointment of at least one shepherd exclusively to carry out the migration on foot of these animals. This is stated in the letter of 4th January 1909, 'on November 29th the mares came well transported', which speaks of an important stud formed by eighty-nine mares.

De Gaminde bitterly lamented the abuse that this meant for the owners, because 'the mares eat the best of the pastures' (1827: 23) and 'each mare eats what 8 to 10 sheep eat' (1827: 24). Del Río, by the same dates, indicated how the mares received the best attention and they were destined for the best pastures, to the detriment of the sheep, 'because these (the mares), mostly owned by the shepherds, get the attention, and care is taken that they pasture in the best places' (1928: 116). Only a few years later, around 1930, the mares belonging to the shepherds were eliminated (Gómez Sal and Rodríguez Pascual, 1992), being replaced by cash.

Thanks to the content of the letters, we know that other animals accompanied the flock. In the migration of 1898, 120 goats were part of the entourage. Their function was to guide the flock along the way and provide milk for those lambs that, due to various circumstances, were separated from their mothers. In the letters we do not find any reference to the existence of pigs, but in the accounts we do. At least in the accounting of the return migration in June 1911 there is talk of expenses 'for pigs', with the hiring of a temporary worker for the return trip, as well as for the purchase of barley for them.

When the flock arrived at the station of Casar de Cáceres, the distribution of the animals in the different allotted pastures was carried out, since none could bear the burden of all the sheep alone. Thus, we know that in 1898, the distribution was made among four meadows, all located in the vicinity of the city of Cáceres. These are those of Escobero, Vuelta de Ayuela, Gómez Nuño and Hocino. Each of them could bear, depending on its size, a load of between eight hundred and nine hundred heads, at the rate of one sheep per hanegada. Along with the sheep, as we have pointed out, the mares were divided proportionately, as well as the shepherds who would be in charge of each group. The target pastures were very accessible from the station, thanks to the well-worn network of roads for livestock. It was probably a strategy sought by the owner to take advantage of the recent advantages offered by rail transport. The shepherds had only to follow the Cordel de El Casar and later the Cañada Real de Cáceres or the Cañada Real del Puerto del Pico and Miravete to reach the winter spots in one or two days on foot.

The tasks and responsibilities of the head shepherd

The distribution of tasks among the different workers of the flock followed an almost military structure. The organisation of the large flocks of the Old Regime was headed by the figure of the *mayoral*, who applied the instructions of the owner and coordinated the rest of the people who were distributed among the different flocks that made up the livestock.

In the years in which these letters were written, since the flocks were smaller, the structure had been simplified and the *rabadán* (head shepherd) was the person responsible for the care of the

sheep. It was he who assumed the functions of the mayoral, and promptly informed the owner of any news. This was precisely the purpose of the letters we are analysing. The content of the letters allows us to recognise what specific tasks he performed and they indicate the high responsibility entrusted to him.

When arriving in Extremadura, he divided the flock between the different meadows and, in the same way, distributed the workers, and frequently visited the rest of the meadows to check the state of the animals and the pastures, as Rodríguez Pascual refers (2001: 132). In one of the letters, the head shepherd would write, for example, 'on the 22nd of the past (month) I went up to the meadows to see the sheep from above'.¹ If he could not visit them personally, he would send written instructions. He was also responsible for correctly uniting newborn lambs with their mothers during the period of births, always a task that involved the most work. At that moment, he would decide how many lambs would be raised and how many would be sold to butchers. In this regard, he remarked, 'I gave him the order so that they would not kill any lamb that came out alive.'²

He would also buy barley or wheat to supplement animal feed when pastures were scarce. When the month of March arrived, he would decide on the number of lambs and rams to be sold, as well as their price. He would also handle matters in the city, such as official payments or connecting with the bakers who provided food to the shepherds. He would hire temporary workers in the case of accumulation of tasks or leave due to illness of any of the shepherds. Finally, he would close the lease of the pastures for use in the future by setting the price or he would advise the owner about the pastures to lease in the future.

It is clear that we are facing a person of maximum confidence, who made his decisions on behalf of the owner, given the distance and the difficulties in communication. These letters are a good example of this. These responsibilities were the same among the *rabadanes* of the great Castilian transhumance herds (Rodríguez Pascual, 2001). This organisation is already reflected in the medieval books of La Mesta and will last until well into the twentieth century, with the significant decrease in transhumance. The difference in herd size and the distance to be travelled made this particular transhumance exceptional, compared to the ones in Spanish East to the Mediterranean or in other geographies such as France or Italy.

The pastures

The destination of the migratory flocks was the pastures of Extremadura; spaces of low agricultural value, due to the poverty of their soils 'that make arable farming unprofitable' (Moreno and Pulido, 2009: 128) but of great interest for the use of pastures in winter, 'permitting winter grazing by huge numbers of livestock in one of the most complex Mediterranean ecosystems' (Ruiz and Ruiz, 1988: 82). When we visited the pastures in December, on the same dates as the flocks that were described in the letters, we came across scarce pastures, due to an extremely dry autumn and late rains that have hardly served to improve grass conditions, when coinciding with the cold (Figure 3). The Book of Herbs described the pastures as 'pure grass', that is, trees were scarce, and the few that were there were holms oaks, which makes the pastures more appropriate for livestock, among other things because it allows animals to take advantage of nutritious acorns. At present, these lands are still used in the same way as an area of pasture for extensive livestock, since the lands lack value for agricultural production due to the low quality of their soil. These pastures, with hardly any trees, differed from those dedicated to pigs, which used to have a higher density of oak trees, highly appreciated for their fruit. Similarly, there was no difference in the use of grass for wool or meat sheep.

Large landowners controlled the bounded and private land of the pastures, and they mainly lived in Madrid, and rented land for grasses in winter (Sánchez Marroyo, 1993). These spaces were absolutely essential for mountain farmers, to the point that they knew each of these pastures as well as their characteristics, acting as if they were an appendix to their own farms. In the archive



Figure 3. Extremaduran pastureland in winter. Photo courtesy of Carlos Crespo.

of the Álvarez Pérez family we find a first-hand manuscript ‘Herb Book of the province of Cáceres’, from the mid-nineteenth century, as well as a second copy, already printed, dated in 1909 (Villegas), as tangible proof of the perfect knowledge of each space usable from afar. In the aforementioned archive we find numerous receipts for payments made annually to the owner or owners of those pastures. As an example, the 3,234.13 pesetas paid in 1909 for the lease of the pasture of Gómez Nuño de Abajo to one of the owners, the testamentary of the Marquis de Ovando, compared to the 60 pesetas of a shepherd’s annual salary.

Winter work in the pasture

The repairing of huts and pens

The shepherds and their flocks would spend about eight months in the pastures, so the places where they stayed had to be well prepared. Thus, after the arrival of the flocks in their respective pastures, work began on repairing or constructing the huts or shacks that would be used by the shepherds to stay during the winter months (Figure 4). In a way, it’s a homecoming, a return to their new home during the long winter months, to a place where they can experience greater freedom (Costello, 2018).

They would also work on the pens or spaces for the sheep. The *chozos* or huts were circular constructions of stone or adobe, generally with vegetation cover in the top part, formed by a conical structure of sticks that would be completed with branches at a diameter of 5 metres.

As we can see by consulting the descriptions of the pastures in the New Cáceres Herbs Book (Villegas, 1909), these constructions were common, and were popularly called *chozos de horma*.



Figure 4. A traditional hut (*chozo*) from the Garrovillas village in Cáceres, Spain. Photo courtesy of Santiago Bayón.

The earliest letters mention the tasks of arranging and fine-tuning the accommodation for the next six months. One of the letters mentions how the owner is repairing the structure of one of the pens with some bricklayers at the beginning of the winter period. Another letter describes how the accumulation of tasks left them no time to ‘prepare the hut’. The grassland used to have a house that was used by the owners, so that the shepherds could only be housed in the hut, as it appeared in the contracts consulted in the archive.

Births

The sheep arrived pregnant to the lands of Cáceres, having eaten abundant grass in the mountain pastures and arriving strong and fat to the lands where they would spend the winter. Thus begins the period of births, the lambing season, at the end of November, and it extended until the beginning of January. These early births were the result of a programmed strategy. In Castile, lambing was encouraged for this period, so that the lambs were more developed in the months of greater rigours due to the cold and the absence of pasture (Castán Esteban, 1998: 33). This was the time of greatest work for the shepherds, with hardly any time to rest since, in the words of one letter, they were ‘being quite attacked in the birth work’, because it was necessary not only to be aware of the births, but above all to ensure that the mothers recognised their lambs and that they started the breastfeeding process. This work was key and occupied the days and nights of the entire work team, led by the head shepherd.

Doubling

The letters tell us about a breeding practice which, from our point of view, seems on the one hand very rudimentary and on the other very focused on providing only the highest quality specimens

to preserve the purity and quality of the wool of the Merino sheep. It is about doubling (*doblar* in Spanish), a practice whose details are given to us by Gaminde, who in the first half of the nineteenth century clarifies that ‘the breeding animal will double, which means, one of two newborn will be slaughtered so a lamb will be raised between two mothers’ (1827: 39). Del Río, as we have seen at the time of the previous author, also gives us details about this practice: ‘the sheep were raised extraordinarily, but the wool was adulterated so as not to bend; an operation, it is said necessary to achieve good offspring, and therefore have good fruit’ (1828: 123). In any case, these testimonies from the nineteenth century are exceptional, showing an outdated technique, typical of periods of scarcity and survival.

There are numerous references by these authors to this truly unproductive system of breeding, which tells us about the scarcity and hardship of new lambs and the lack of resources to provide complementary feed for pastures. In the letters there are numerous references to the sheep not advancing or about the lack of pasture that caused insufficient feeding of the mothers, so this practice would be the least harmful to ensure at least the rearing of some lambs. Thus, there is talk of doubling ‘because there was no ground for anything else’ or ‘I will double the most’ or a third reference ‘in spite of having doubled very well, they are worthless.’

The meaning of this practice, associated with the lack of resources to complement the feed provided by the pasture, is quite another. We are faced with the testimony of an ancestral practice, which stopped long ago. At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the main product of migrant livestock was still wool, which was sheared annually. Currently the main product is another one – meat – which required the largest possible number of lambs. This, together with the lack of abundant food, is what explains why exploiting sheep is avoided, seeking only a minimal replenishment of flock, since it is all about shearing the sheep themselves. If the animals faced many hardships, such as being cold or hungry or having to raise two lambs, the quality of wool would decrease considerably. The second half of January and the entire month of February were reasonably calm months, mainly focused on the growth of the lambs and on preventing them from getting very cold. As Del Río (1828: 126) points out, ‘in February the shepherd is revived, because he has completed the most painful of his tasks.’

These letters confirm the continuity of this practice, repeatedly pointed out in the letters, around the turn of the century, in spite of Pérez Romero (2007: 1057) pointing out that it is a practice typical of the eighteenth and previous centuries. This continuity, at least in the exploitation studied here, would be a sign of the concern of the owner of this flock to give priority to the production of a high-quality wool, rather than an increase in its quantity.

Tail docking

Tail docking is a universal practice in sheep as well as in pigs or cows for milk, still used today, but not free of discussions about its convenience (Sutherland and Tucker, 2011).

Our letters described how at the beginning of March the shepherds proceeded to separate those lambs – referred to as little lambs (*corderillos*) in the letters – which would be sold, with remarks in letters such as ‘tell me the amount of lambs that are to be sold’, as well as those mainly females that were reserved to rejuvenate the flock. This operation of cutting the tail of the lambs that weren’t slaughtered for meat and to be incorporated into the flock, was called tail docking, work that was accompanied by the task of marking the new animals incorporated into the livestock with the sign of the house. Del Río (1828: 129) pointed out that this operation ‘must begin on the first Friday of the month, based on the fact that if it falls into a waning moon, it may very well be the best day for this operation’ before the belief then generalised that ‘the lamb at this time expels the coldness of winter, grows more intensely and the bleeding that results from the tail-end can be a preservative against some ailments’ (Del Río, 1828: 130). Along with this, the tailbone avoided infections in the surroundings of the tail, helps hand milking and facilitates the subsequent covering of the females.

The letters indicate, in an interesting ethnographic note, that this operation should be carried out on the waning of the moon of March at the beginning of the month, but that is typically delayed if it is very cold. It was the main winter operation, as it meant the annual renewal of the flock, as well as those that were available for sale. To achieve this goal, the females ‘selected for their rough, poor calibre wool’ and almost all the males ‘with the exception of 49 that were chosen for seed’ were set aside and their sale for meat was arranged. We find here a new sample of genetic selection, of a continuous process of improvement of the breed that the shepherds had been doing for generations, to ensure an increasing quality of the sheared wool. Proof of the importance of this operation is the high proportion of these letters, 63 per cent, written to the owner, pointing out carefully the news of this operation. This list of the tails docked could be considered as a part of the annual harvest, or part of the profits for the owner, to which we would have to add the sale of the wool after shearing. A good example of this practice is found in the letter from 9th March 1911, which counts twenty-four males tailed off compared with 208 with tail (and therefore for sale), as well as 208 females tailed off compared with 122 with tail.

We know that the previous year the flocks were made up of 4,300 heads, so we are faced with strikingly low rates of reproduction amounting to 562 new lambs. The phenomenon is explained by the practice of doubling that we have referred to previously, which confirms that the main objective was to ensure the good quality of sheep wool.

The days of the docking of the tails also had a festive component for the shepherds, because they cooked the tails, after peeling them carefully to remove the wool. It was an exquisite meal, a ‘delicious snack’ in Castán Esteban’s words (1998: 34), inflected with the peculiar fact that it was meat from a live animal.

Castration and sale

At the end of the task of docking the tail, the brand of the farm was to be stamped on the animals, to identify them well. In the following days, the shepherds would carry out the task of castration of the males that would not be used to breed, as well as rams older than one year, the *capones viejos*³ and *ciclones*,⁴ which had been maintained for their wool production. With this practice, the rams grew fatter more easily and the animal became more docile and manageable.

The lambs that were not reserved, to renew the flock, if possible were sold in the month of March, too. This practice saved mothers from working to care for their lambs as a way of improving their wool for shearing. Additionally, they were prevented from consuming more pasture or feed, thereby saving money. In 1910, for example, we know that six hundred lambs were sold, along with four hundred old sheep and two hundred old rams.

The different epistles tell us that the sheep were sold to a butcher’s shop in the nearby city of Cáceres. As one letter explained in 1899, ‘I sold yesterday to an acquaintance of yours who is in the nearby city of Cáceres in the Madrileña butcher’s shop.’ In a mark of the durability of these practices, some twelve years later the connection persisted, as one letter explained – in relation to the sheep – that ‘Vicente the Madrilenian has ordered them from me.’ The letters also observe the presence of dealers who visited the farms. One letter wrote that ‘the traffickers are already on the field’, while another explained the great distance that the merchants came from: ‘a few days ago, a merchant from the province of Toledo was here to see them and it seems that they didn’t disgust him.’

Birth of the mares

Beginning in mid-March the births of the mares started, which was reason for great happiness, because the new foals were important income for the shepherds, as well as for the owner of the flock. As an example, in 1909 the flock had eighty-nine mares, so this birthing time also meant more attention to the mares.

Shearing

One of the last tasks to be carried out during the time spent in the meadows of Extremadura, before starting the march towards the mountains of the north of León, was the shearing. The task was carried out at the end of April or the beginning of May, in full accordance with what had been suggested by Del Río (1828: 151), which allows us to conclude that the wool would be sold in Extremadura.

At the time the letters were written, wool remained the main product of Merino sheep, although its price had nothing to do with that of the early nineteenth century and the transformation into sheep with a greater meat vocation had not yet occurred. This task, considered a feast for the shepherds (Vidal-González, 2016) meant to reap the fruit of the work of the whole year.

In one of the letters from the end of April, mention is made of this task. As the letter goes, 'I must shear the old ones after the capon rams.' However, it is in the only letter that we have from the month of May, where we can find more detailed information: 'yesterday we finished the task of shearing', resulting in 32,037.5 pounds of wool, that is to say, the by no means negligible amount of 14,739.813 kilograms.

The return to the mountains

The return was completed again by train from the Casar de Cáceres station in early June, with arrival on the 15th in the lands of Babia. A single letter mentions this return, for which it was necessary to schedule a time for the animals to board and get the necessary wagons from the railway company.

Wolves

The meadows of Extremadura are spaces of strong livestock presence, fenced so that the animals do not leave the confined places, but vulnerable to the attack of predators. We only found one reference to the existence of wolves among the thirty analysed letters. As the letter described, 'some of them, of course, die and between those and some that the wolves take, the flock is depleted by 22 or 23.' Although these animals were quite frequent in the province they were mainly in the mountains and mountain areas. In the years 1855–9, 1,217 wolves were hunted in the province, compared with 375 in the years 1954–61 (Rico and Torrent, 2000).

Conclusions

With the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, we are facing a process of accelerated change, with the fragmentation of the large manorial herds or the use of the railroad to carry out the displacements. Likewise, the value of wool ceased to be strategic, and the interest in meat became more important, as a consequence of greater urban demand. This collection of letters depicts that specific historical moment, in which a well-to-do small landowner strives to maintain a sheep farm that offers a quality product, wool, in a period of change.

The letters are written in the midst of the wool production crisis, in the face of strong competition from foreign markets but before the transition to the use of sheep for almost solely meat production. The flocks were still mainly used for their Merino wool. The main benefit, in the case studied, was the wool collected after the spring shearing, and this process occurred in Extremadura. Along with wool, the second benefit was the sale of lambs, as well as old sheep and rams for meat use, which were also sold both directly to butchers in Cáceres and street traders, who travelled to the different livestock farms.

The letters, which were sent in times of difficult communications, must be understood as necessary to update the owner of the flock on the state of their investments and their personal fortune. They involve the necessary communication between the person responsible for maintaining the

sheep during the long eight months in which they were outside, and the owner, who would be eager to know about development of his flocks, and also know if the pastures would favour a good harvest in spring, in the form of meat and wool.

The letters allow us to know in more detail the diverse practices of the shepherds during the long months of their migrant stay. Although the time of the greatest amount of work is lambing season, the one that the letters portray mainly is the time of tail docking. It is at that time when they could assess the number of new lambs that would be added to the flock and how many would be available for sale. It is here when the details of the letters are greater, because the owner had a great interest in these issues, seeing as they constituted the summary of the work of the entire year in animal husbandry.

Another one of the elements that appear in a recurring manner in the writings is that of the *escusa*, which is to say the sheep and mares that were part of the flock, but which were the property of the shepherds. It was a salary in kind, many times more important than the salary itself. This practice of shared responsibility and timeshare greatly increased the responsibility and good work of shepherds. It also allowed many salaried shepherds to start with small flocks that later allowed them to become independent as owners of their own livestock.

One of the practices that we have been able to reconstruct in greater detail, thanks to what is stated in the texts, is that of doubling. It is an already extinct practice, typical of flocks with scarce resources to complement the natural diet offered by pastures with feed and cereals. It was generally related to the exploitation of wool, since it was about forcing the mother sheep as little as possible, so that they produced wool of the highest possible quality. The maintenance of this practice at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century can only be explained by the strong commitment of the owner of this flock to continue producing top quality Merino wool. This is a personal commitment by the owner, at a time when the transition to a meat orientation is already a reality. In the first half of the twentieth century, merino wool maintained a certain importance, with acceptable prices, until the serious fall in prices in the 1960s. The number of head of sheep fell from 22 million to 13 million between 1865 and 1891 (Grupo de Estudios de Historia Rural, 1979.cuadro 1). Although researchers agree on this period of change, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact date during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century because the quality of livestock censuses and counts during this period makes it impossible to be more precise (Collantes, 2003: 143–4). Similarly, this would confirm how the loss of quantity, associated with doubling, would continue to be associated with a high selling price of that wool on the markets.

This process entailed the sacrifice of a significant number of lambs, since the practice was that every two sheep would raise a single lamb, with all the excess lambs sold for meat. As Pérez Romero (2007: 1061) points out, ‘bending was perhaps the key practice in controlling the reproduction of transhumant flocks, both from a zootechnical and an economic perspective.’ Naturally, this practice draws attention to modern techniques that seek the greatest possible number of offspring for the subsequent sale of lambs. The model has changed radically from wool to meat.

The letters also allow us to track the beginnings of migrant train journeys at least to 1898. This early use confirms that the owner of the cattle was one of the pioneers in the use of this means of locomotion for the transport of migrant sheep.

The figure of the *rabadán*, the true general of the shepherds and the flocks during that time is powerfully highlighted, as he was the highest authority. The *rabadán* was often delegated by the owner, but given the distance from the owner, he had to be trusted to be able to make most of the decisions on his own with the full confidence of the farmer. The letters clearly state the importance of their tasks and how the owner delegated most of the decisions, even those involving significant financial obligations. His responsibilities and his ability to make and undo show the key role he occupied in the migrant activity. These letters are exceptional documents, not only because of their number and age, but also because they are a collection that provides a unique context. The vision, concerning and daily life of the transhumant shepherds of 120 years ago is also a privilege, as it

allows us to witness a time of important changes in transhumant livestock farming, such as the move towards a more modern market, encouraged by the consumption of meat in the cities and which is abandoning the priority in the production of wool.

The merino wool crisis, associated with the internationalisation of production and the fall of the Ancien Régime, is represented here by the important transition between the large corporations of the past and a practice more closely linked to local medium-sized landowners, who maintain transhumant stockbreeding as an investment of their personal capital. This transition is accompanied by a more meat-based vocation on the livestock, in turn linked to the increase in meat consumption, in view of the growth of the cities and the greater demand associated with industrialisation. Another factor of change that we observe is the beginning of rail transport. It is striking that the owner of our herd is probably one of the firsts to introduce this mode of transport.

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Notes

- 1 Letter dated 9th February 1909.
- 2 Letter dated 4th January 1909.
- 3 Male gelded when young.
- 4 Ram with testicles hidden inside the body.

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