



Ovejas, cerca de Itero de la Vega, otoño 2001 watercolor
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Sheep and the Camino

A guidebook in *castellano* that I used on my first walk included a picture taken in Provincia Palencia, a rolling wheat field with a single tree in the distance, "el árbol," the vast and nearly treeless *meseta* captured in a photograph. A zone many pilgrims would be happy to miss (although I rather enjoy walking across it, I must admit) we tend to think of the *meseta* as almost a desert. It is thus a little surprising to look at medieval landscape paintings (really the landscapes behind paintings of people, as landscape painting *per se* was a post-medieval genre) of Spain and seeing forest. Or to read medieval documents discussing hunting in forests but describing regions that are now devoid of trees. Many factors have led to the deforestation of large parts of the *meseta*-climatic shifts, clearing for cultivation, use of trees for raw materials, not least the timber to build the ships required for exploitation of Spain's vast colonial empire, and for firewood and charcoal. Despite all of those factors, we can make a good case that the primary cause of the deforestation of the *meseta* was a single domestic animal - the sheep.¹

Thanks to the mentoring of a professor, as an undergraduate I decided I wanted to become an economic historian.² Unfortunately his interests, and those of my other economic history teachers, were mostly limited to the United States, and mine were mostly beyond its borders. To make a boring story brief, I abandoned that goal before receiving my undergraduate degree, but in the process I read some books and articles that had strong impacts on my future interests both professional and especially avocational. The book that initiated my fascination with Spain was Julius Klein's Harvard dissertation published in 1920 as *The Mesta: A Study in Spanish Economic History, 1273-1836*. It is not a readily available title except in research libraries, and most readers would find it both dated and heavy going, but it introduced me to a series of

fascinating topics, several of them directly relevant to the Camino, on Spain and the role of sheep in its history, economy and ecology.

The grazing of domestic sheep in Iberia dates at least to Roman times and probably was well established long before the Roman conquest. By the Middle Ages, sheep, or more correctly the wool they produced, were a primary element of the Iberian economy, a role sheep were to maintain into the 19th century. At the end of the *reconquista* much of rural Spain was very lightly populated, a fact very important to the history of the Camino. The Moorish farmers had been driven off their lands and eventually out of Spain, and in many regions the remaining rural labor force was far too small to engage in labor-intensive forms of agriculture. Sheep grazing was a way to eek an income off fertile and reasonably well-watered lands, including forested land, but which demanded only a small labor force. Most of that land, expropriated from its former Moorish occupants, had been given to members of the nobility, prizes for their military service in the *reconquista*. They were frequently impecunious and needed to generate an income from the land, and the grazing of sheep was the main response, as grazing of cattle was to become in similar situations in the New World a few generations later.

Wool was to the late medieval and early modern economy of Europe what oil is to the contemporary world, and Spain was the Saudi Arabia of fleece. The wool of merino sheep was considered to be the most desirable of all fleeces, with the fine wool of merino lambs especially prized for luxurious fabrics. Spain was the sole source of merino wool. Spain produced far more fleece than its domestic market demanded, and almost all of it was exported as unprocessed fleece, taken to other places to be spun, dyed, and woven into cloth. The only significant export of cloth from Spain was to the New World, to the colonies with no other choice of suppliers and forbidden from developing local textile industries.³

The city of Medina del Campo (near the center of Castilla la Vieja but quite a distance south of the Camino in Valladolid province) was the European center of the raw wool or fleece trade. Traders came to Medina from Italy, from England, from France and especially from Flanders, the area that was to become Belgium and the Netherlands. That last area was the world's first industrial belt, manufacturing cloth for export to the world using wool from Spain.⁴ The annual fair at Medina del Campo was an event of continental importance and remained so for a number of centuries. Routes to the interior city were developed from coastal ports, mostly those on the Basque and Cantabrian coasts, so that traders could travel to the fair and more importantly so that fleece could be exported. Most of those routes were perpendicular to the Camino. Their pattern can be seen in the later location of roads and railways oriented north to south.

Those routes were used by many pilgrims who disembarked at ports like Santander or Bilbao after trips from the Netherlands or England on boats intended to bring back fleece from Spain. Also important were the sheep runs crossing Spain to move sheep from one area of pasturage to another. Those routes can still be seen today, indeed some of them are still used to drive sheep from one pasture area to another. The *Camino frances* crosses several of them between Burgos and León. Elsewhere the traces on the arid landscape of the abandoned sheep runs, like the tracks of the Oregon Trail across the Great Plains and interior deserts of the United States, can still be seen on the ground and even in photographs taken from space, more than one hundred years after they fell

out of use. While sheep had, and still have, rights-of-way on those runs, the sheep runs became *de facto* highways for the movement of goods and people. Routes to the *Camino frances* from Andalusia, from Extremadura, and from Nueva Castilla bringing Spanish pilgrims to Santiago all used those sheep runs in whole or in part, following them north to join the *Camino frances* before turning west toward Santiago. The route of the *Via de la Plata* through Extremadura as it is now being revived follows those sheep runs for considerable distances.

The ecological impact, the deforestation of the *meseta*, was far less in the commerce of trading the wool staple or in the movement of sheep between areas of pasturage than it was a consequence of sheep raising practices. Sheep are voracious eaters and omnivorous in their willingness to eat vegetable matter. Cattle, by contrast are browsers, eating some but not all of the grasses and other vegetation available to them. Pinned into a small area, a herd of sheep will eventually eat all of the vegetable matter, including roots, and render the land sterile. Passing across an area, they will eat any appealing vegetation including the seedlings and shoots of trees and bushes. In consequence, sheep are rarely kept in a confined area but are driven, sometimes over considerable distances, between pasturages and only kept in any given pasturage area for a relatively brief period. Even then they can devastate the flora. In the Western United States during the last half of the nineteenth century sheep were referred to as "hooved locusts," despised by cattle herders and later by farmers and foresters.

Crossing the *meseta* in Castilla y León, the *peregrino* encounters the remnants of a major sheep raising area (grazing of sheep was common throughout Spain, so this was but one of the areas). Vast amounts of land were used for sheep pastures, including the woods and forests. While some of the sheep were raised *estante*, in a single enclosed area, most of the sheep were seasonally driven from mountain pasturage in the summer to lowlands where they spent the winter. *Transhumance* is the name for such seasonal migrations, usually over well-defined routes, and it is still practiced in Spain, as it is elsewhere in Europe and in sheep and cattle raising areas of the western United States and Canada.⁵ Anyone who walks the Camino in spring and early summer when the sheep are being driven toward the mountains or autumn when they are returning to the lowland valleys may encounter this migration. The watercolor leading this essay was based on a photograph taken in mid-October near Itero de la Vega in the Rio Pisuerga valley. It was necessary to wait nearly half an hour as the shepherds and their dogs (ones not fond of *peregrinos*!) drove their large flock south across the route of the Camino. The shepherds were none too friendly, but I was able to gather they were driving their flock from summer pastures in the mountains that rim the northern end of the valley to winter pastures not far south of where the photograph was taken.

The herders of the flock were probably employees of a large landowner rather than individual farmers. The Swiss or Norwegian farmers who practice transhumance and drive their small herds of cattle from summer mountain pastures to winter ones along the lakes and fjords, are mostly "owner-operators," but in Spain the raising of sheep has for many centuries been dominated by a small number of very large operators. Most of those owners were members of the nobility.

The sheep raising nobility had in late medieval and early modern Spain a dominance of politics and the economy of the type Texas oil plutocrats enjoy in the United States. All

of the interests of the state were focused on their needs and demands, and they had the ability to dictate government policies. The landed nobility controlled vast expanses of land, and some of the best endowed among them had estates in several parts of Spain. Their wealth was overwhelmingly from the sale of fleece, and thus their demands were for freedom from government regulation of the wool trade, except where such regulation was beneficial to the profits they expected from that trade. They wanted, and got, rights to exploit vast areas of land beyond their estates, lands nominally held by the state or held in common by the populace, and they wanted that usage to be free from competition from other users. When there was a conflict, the sheep raisers were the *de facto* winners in almost all situations. A farmer attempting to grow a crop next to one of the sheep runs might complain that sheep wandering off the runs ate his growing crop, but that was as far as it could go, a complaint, for the sheep owners were held harmless. They were well organized, initially in locally based *mestas* to control sheep runs and eventually in the Council of the Mesta, a large state-within-a-state entity. The Mesta ran its own courts to adjudicate disputes between various owners of herds and between those owners and landowners with plots adjacent to the sheep runs. It was rare indeed for the latter to win disputes, especially as the Mesta had tremendous influence with the royal household. The export of fleece was the source of the income of the nobility and they, in turn, supported the government through loans and levies. For that support they had the ear and the backing of royalty and government.⁶ It was willing to formulate its policies to encourage the trade in wool, and on occasion it was willing to wage war to meet the demands of its wool producing members.⁷

Dominance of the European fleece trade was a function of the merino sheep, a Spanish monopoly. The land owning nobility demanded the state forbid export of live merino sheep and lambs, potential breeding stock. Even the Spanish colonies in the Americas, with nascent wool export trades of their own, were forbidden to import merino sheep, and it was especially forbidden to let the sheep out to England, France or Italy, areas that directly competed with Spain in the European fleece trade. From at least Elizabethan times, English landowners tried to smuggle merino sheep out of Spain, and the French made similar efforts. They were eventually successful. Meanwhile it was a crime, punishable with severe penalties, on occasion capital punishment, to allow live merino sheep to leave Spain.

All good things must come to an end, as the cliché would have it, and the end of the Mesta and the Spanish dominance of the fleece trade was a function of several factors including the successful smuggling of merino breeding stock to France and England in the 17th and early 18th centuries, the development of ovine grazing areas in the New World, and in the late 19th century especially in Australia and New Zealand, now the world's primary suppliers of fleece. Not least among the factors leading to Spain's decline as a fleece supplier was the environmental destruction the past grazing practices had caused. The long-term and at times far too intensive grazing of sheep left behind a devastated landscape. Today as we walk across the *meseta* we are viewing a landscape far different from the one those who traveled in the 11th or 12th centuries would have seen, and we can blame sheep for that!

1. Some of my ancestors were involved in sheep raising in a meseta-like environment in the American West, and I have long been fascinated with the subject of sheep raising and the wool trade.

2. He later was awarded a Nobel Prize in economics.
3. The closure of the Latin American market to textiles from the Low Countries and England became a major cause of illicit trade in later years, for the colonies preferred the higher quality and lower cost cloth from the northern countries to the expensive and poorly manufactured cloth from the mother country.
4. Arguably it was the second, the first being the northern part of Italy including Venice with its glass manufacturing and Tuscany famous for fabrics, many of them using Spanish wool. The wealth that created the renaissance was in no small part a function of the fabric manufacture in Tuscany. Virtually every country in Europe raised some sheep, but the quantity and quality of the Spanish fleeces put them in high demand, especially after the trade made the industry in the Netherlands a large one.
5. *Transhumance* is not the same as nomadism. It differs in a number of ways from the pastoral nomadism of the herders in desert areas like the Bedouin in Arabia or the Tjdiik in Central Asia.
6. The royal household was itself a large landowner and profited from the sale of fleece.
7. Despite the apparent similarity, the words *mesta* and *meseta* are unrelated in origin. *Mesta* derives from the Latin *mixta*, and refers to the combination of large and small sheep raisers in the organization. *Meseta*, on the other hand, comes from the same root as *mesa* and means flat.

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