

Manuscrit acceptat

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Archaeology of
Mountain Landscapes

Interdisciplinary Research Strategies of
Agro-Pastoralism in Upland Regions

Edited by
Arnau Garcia-Molsosa

Llibre

Archaeology of Mountain Landscapes. Interdisciplinary Research Strategies of Agro-Pastoralism in Upland Regions

ISBN

9781438489872

Data de publicació

Octubre 2023

Per citar aquest document:

Orengo, H. A. 2023. "On the supposed marginality of mountain areas" a Garcia-Molsosa, A. (Ed.), Archaeology of Mountain Landscapes. Interdisciplinary Research Strategies of Agro-Pastoralism in Upland Regions, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, p. 385-398.

Aquest arxiu PDF conté el manuscrit amb correccions per a la seva publicació.

Postprint:

This is the accepted version of the chapter "**On the supposed marginality of mountain areas**", included in the volume *Archaeology of Mountain Landscapes. Interdisciplinary Research Strategies of Agro-Pastoralism in Upland Regions*.

To acquire the original volume:

<https://sunypress.edu/Books/A/Archaeology-of-Mountain-Landscapes>

Citation of the original chapter:

Orengo, H. A. 2023. "On the supposed marginality of mountain areas" a Garcia-Molsosa, A. (Ed.), *Archaeology of Mountain Landscapes. Interdisciplinary Research Strategies of Agro-Pastoralism in Upland Regions*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, p. 385-398.

On the supposed marginality of mountain areas

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Introduction

I would like to start this text thanking Dr Garcia for the invitation to present a paper at the IEMA conference at Buffalo and to author one of the chapters in this book. To write a chapter for this volume is a unique opportunity to reflect on issues that do not usually fit in journal papers, more focussed on specific case-studies or periods.

The IEMA conference provided an excellent forum where interdisciplinary experts in mountain human-environment relations presented not just their research but more or less directly their research conceptions. It was fecund ground to compare different traditions, geographies and approaches and this paper stems from my thoughts during these sessions and some others with a similar focus as well as my work on European mountains. This paper is therefore an attempt to contrast my own experience with the conceptions exhibited during the talks, and in particular with the idea of isolation of mountain environments. This isolation is often indirectly related to backwardness (often termed as traditionalism or conservatism) and marginality, also reflected in mentions to the frontier character of mountain areas. This is by no means a conception particular to the IEMA conference (nor to most papers presented there) but one that has subtly permeated meetings and conference sessions dealing with the archaeology of mountain areas since I started working in this subject back in 2004.

In this paper I argue from an explicit European perspective that these conceptions are artefacts of our urban modern life-styles, our often limited understanding of mountain economy and practices and our biased approach in terms of time, space or study topic to the archaeology and history of these areas. This paper aims to analyse these conceptions and open a, hopefully, fruitful debate which may eventually result in a more balanced understanding of mountain areas.

Isolated mountains

The isolated character of mountain areas has often been related to difficulties in accessing them. By definition they do not present ports that open them to the sea with all its connection possibilities (although many ports are relatively accessible to mountain ranges). They also have fewer roads than the lowlands as they need to adapt to the topography of the terrain. These, therefore, are not straight nor follow a straight, wide nor particularly even route and their slope hinders the use of wheeled transport. We assume that as it is the case today these roads were little transited in the past. This is not a misguided assumption as mountains present today low population densities in comparison to lowlands and, except in a few cases, they do not host large urban centres. They are not just difficult to reach and move through, but they also have other characteristics that contribute to visualise mountains as inhospitable areas. A harsher climate than that of the lowlands, with high mountains being inaccessible half of the year due to snow cover, their vegetation cover that ranges from dense shrub and forests to continuous grasslands at higher altitudes has also contributed to marginalise and characterise these spaces as pastoral, in opposition to productive agricultural landscapes, that have a weighty bibliography backing their civilising nature.

However, mountains constitute folded surfaces and, if ‘unfolded’, their areas would significantly increase. Verticality allow mountains to integrate highly diverse environments in relatively small spaces, multiplying the resources reachable in shorter distances. It is also important to note that in previous periods the movement might have had a lower cost for people accustomed to such environments. What to us might look as insurmountable barriers to locals are everyday environments with no particular restriction. I clearly remember how while we were struggling to excavate cheese production structures in Perafita valley (Andorran Pyrenees) at 2200 m.a.s.l. the area’s shepherd remarked how local women from Les Escaldes used to walk up the valley to collect fresh milk during the milking season twice a day, a walk implying a height difference of 1000 m.

Despite the difficulties involving wheeled transport, mountain communities used to maintain a network of well-trodden paths and stone roads that today are invisible or difficult to find due to the expansion of forests and vegetation, and lack of maintenance. Even when only earthen paths existed these could have maintained an intense mule traffic as the volume of Andorran contraband towards France and Spain attests since the XVIII century to a degree that by the mid-XIX century was considered as forming a basis of the Andorran economy (Bertran i Soler

1847: 247). The particular intensity of Andorran contraband is the fruit of particular socioeconomic and historic factors but serves well to illustrate how, despite the supposed limited availability of roads fit for transport, many paths were used in high mountain settings to transport large quantities of produce for a long period of time. More so when taking into account that the main roads (easier to control) were not used for such traffic and the fact that the trips were made during the night and, therefore, the paths must have been accessible for loaded mules.

Backwards, conservative and marginal areas

It is nowadays difficult to find an explicit mention of the backwardness of mountain areas as this can be understood, with reason, as negative and backwards itself. However, there are a series of assumptions and tags pinned to mountain areas, such as that of conservative, marginal or traditional that in my opinion implicitly refer to this concept and are a fruit of our modern urban lifestyle.

Cretan mountain society is very interesting in this respect. Mountain communities there are formed by, as a Telegraph reporter put it (Freeman 2008), a “feisty, independent people” in “remote, clan-dominated areas, where the first loyalty is to family, not government”. Indeed one of the points usually made about these areas is their independence from authority the maintenance of old traditions based on manly honour and blood and their love for guns, clearly advertised by the bullet holes in many signposts in the area. Mediators or *mesites* are prestigious individuals that are required to intervene in cases of conflict. They very successfully manage to avoid bloodshed and prevent the intervention of police and legal system (Tsantiropoulos 2008, Chereji 2018). Indeed, the assiduous visitor to Crete willing to go beyond summer resorts would have heard about the worrying state of affairs between mountain villages and Cretan police, which prevents the later from accessing these areas. The fact that the mountainous areas of Crete are one of the largest producers of cannabis in Europe¹, a good

¹ A selection of news referring to Cretan cannabis production and are:
<http://www.balkananalysis.com/blog/2005/08/29/cretan-drug-lords-defend-fields-with-land-mines-albanian-armed-guards/>
<http://www.ekathimerini.com/33862/article/ekathimerini/news/crete-drug-lords-in-police-battle>
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/greece/2207277/Drug-dealing-shepherds-set-up-Crete-crime-empire.html>

reason to impede police access, is rarely mentioned in these romanticised accounts of Cretan rebellious mountains. Mountains are today a focus of less investment than areas where more population concentrates or more productive activities develop, this has facilitated the preservation of more traditional activities and customs despite the fact that these traditions were also part of lowland communities. The modern lack of investment or development in conjunction with the maintenance of traditional sociocultural systems has found fertile ground for the development of alternative, even illegal, activities. It is worth noting that the same socio-economic situation that preserves practices such as blood feuds in mountain areas that can be considered as backwards has also facilitated the development of a production activity that is not just fully a part of current society but integrated in international economic networks. In the mountain village of Tor (Catalan Pyrenees) another tale-telling case developed a few years back. The mountain of Tor is strategically situated in the frontier with Andorra between the sky stations of Pal and Arinsal just below a mountain pass joining the Andorran and Catalan territories. In 1896 the heads of the 13 houses of Tor signed an agreement to co-exploit the natural resources of this mountain. Members of this society needed to own property on it, to be living in the village and to be head of a family. By the 1970s the harsh living conditions in Tor (no water, electricity or phone are available there) have left the village uninhabited although Josep Montané, Pepe, head of the Sansa family makes a point of going there often to accomplish the society's conditions. In 1976 Rubén Castañer, an Andorran developer, was contacted by Pepe with plans to develop the mountain with a sky station that would join Pal and Arinsal stations in what would be the largest sky station and winter resort in the Spanish Pyrenees. This renewed a long-lived conflict between Josep and Jordi Riba, 'el Palanca' head of the Riba family and horse breeder, which opposed to the development of the mountain which resulted in the deaths of two workers of el Palanca by bodyguards of Castañer in 1980. In 1995 Pepe is declared as the only owner of the mountain but 5 months later he is found dead in his house in Tor with a wire around his neck and clear signs of violence.

The case had important media coverage with multiple news, podcasts, documentaries and two books². In these the landscape is described as a pristine, natural, stunning and its beauty is set off

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/greek-police-retreat-after-ambush-by-cretan-drug-gangsters-5329103.html>

<http://www.ekathimerini.com/221076/article/ekathimerini/news/police-destroy-cannabis-plants-in-crete>

² A selection of these include:

https://elpais.com/diario/2004/03/28/domingo/1080449559_850215.html

<http://www.ccma.cat/tv3/alacarta/30-minuts/tor-la-muntanya-maleida/video/196447331/>

<http://www.ccma.cat/catrado/tor/tots/>

against the horrifying nature of crime. Epithets such as penury, marginal and isolated repeat constantly in all these media but in reality the crimes were very much related to modern economic concerns, connectivity and development. Although Tor mountain might seem to be very isolated, it stands at the centre of many interests. Apart from the interest of Josep Montané, Rubén Castañer and several Andorran, French and British investors to create a massive sky and winter resort in the area, according to data gathered by Porta (2005), Tor has been considered as an ideal point to open a new frontier with Andorra, as the other two are usually saturated, however, Tor mountain is also an important route for contrabandists that constantly move large quantities of tobacco, but allegedly also weapons, other goods, and people from Andorra to Spain. The deaths and conflict in Tor are ironically more related to its connectivity than its isolation, the confluence of incompatible extraneous interests in the area represented by local people with their own interests in mind is ultimately the cause of the tragedy. The marginality of this area is an artefact of our preconceptions as we tend to think that a small place at high altitudes is disconnected from modern society. Crimes such as the ones described in Tor, moved by very current economic interests also happen in cities and lowland settlements on an everyday basis but they are simply not regarded as extraordinary enough to excite interest. The contrast between our idealised concept of a natural, pure mountain environment inhabited by harsh people and the horrifying crime facilitated by penury and marginality makes these actions news and contribute to picture mountain areas as isolated and backwards.

In fact, much of this backwardness of mountain areas, with their late adoption of many innovations is starting to be disproved by archaeological data. Only recently new excavation and palaeoenvironmental data (Bahn 1983; Bertranpetit and Vives 1995; Ejarque et al. 2010 and 2013; Gassiot et al. 2017; Llovera 1986; Miras et al. 2007 and 2010; Orengo et al. 2014; Palet et al. 2017; Yáñez 2005) have disproved the, as Gassiot et al. (2017) put it, ‘non-explicit consensus’ that the neolithisation process in mountain areas was later and less intensive than that of the lowlands. Equally interesting is the fact that high mountain pastures, a defining trait of the highest supraforestral zones at least in the Pyrenees are not natural but a result of human-controlled burning as early as the Middle Neolithic (Ejarque et al. 2010, Ejarque 2013). So much for this idealised idea of the pristine mountains.

Risky environments?

Much has also been written in relation to risk perception in mountain environments (e.g. Walsh 2005). It seems to me, however, that these environments are not particularly risky to those who inhabit and know them well. Activities, as in other areas, are strictly regulated by the period of the year and the exigencies of the particular socioeconomic system in place, and these regulations tend to reduce risk factors considerably. When dealing with mountain environments risk should be interpreted more in relation to particular social or economic contexts than to environmental settings. In fact, mountain areas have as often been considered a refuge in troubled times or by prosecuted groups. Again, the conception of risk is, in my opinion related to our urban lifestyles and lack of environmental knowledge. In this regard, it is curious to see how in the context of high mountain excavations how differently mountain and lowland people react to the same situations. Summer thunderstorms in high mountains are dangerous phenomena and few lowland people are aware that a lightning can kill not just whatever it hits but everything in a radius of around a hundred meters in wet grasslands. Shepherds are well aware of this, and that this can cost them a whole flock and their own lives and look for shelter as soon as it is clear a storm is in the making, while lowland people can wait until the storm is at hand and select inadequate shelter unaware of the danger. Many other examples come to mind such as our incapacity of food procurement in mountain settings or the way in which we react to grazing animals disregarding the dangers of calving cattle or male horses, which are a cause of increasing concern for weekend excursionists in the Pyrenees.

One of the characteristic situations I have found in my own scarce ethnoarchaeological work is the way in which experienced agropastoralists look at me when I make entirely legitimate (to me) questions about the use of structures or the development of their work. They seem to be assessing if I am trying to test them or joke at them. Their staring only abates when they have fully considered the possibility that a lowland academic can also be a complete ignorant. For them many of the questions I am truly interested to elucidate have obvious answers that they would have not bothered to mention if I would have not specifically asked about them. Indeed, much of the most interesting information I have come across has been delivered by pursued chance comments rather than as a consequence of my insightful questioning and I am always left with the feeling that I lack questions more than answers. Such is the extent of our

ignorance of traditional practices, such is the space that we, at least partially, fill with our preconceptions.

Frontier nature of mountain areas

Linked to these conceptions is the ‘frontier’ character of mountain areas. Applied to this context, frontier seems an ambiguous term (see Leveau and Palet 2010 for an interesting discussion of the Roman mountain frontiers and their perception). Mountains being invariably large areas, this term does not seem to be related to a well-delineated line in space nor a set of disputed lines separating areas with different administrative, legal or institutional organisations. In this context frontier seems to be more related to a far-west iconography of no-man’s lands, where productive activities and settlements are unstable and there is a factor of risk related to disputes between communities living at both sides of it.

It is true that the difficulty of movement (particularly with armies) and the ease of defence and hiding of mountain areas makes of mountains fertile ground for guerrillas or highwaymen. However, these kinds of frontiers are always temporary until a victory or agreement between the parts in conflict is achieved and it would be wrong to put forward a characterisation that is only valid during short periods of time. In fact, leaving apart the romantic adventurous view of the frontier, frontiers tend to be not just well-delimited natural traits but also areas of resources so important that they cannot be renounced by any of the communities living both sides of them. A good example of this are rivers, often used as frontiers in the Greek and Roman classical period. Barcino, the Roman colony from which modern Barcelona developed, like many other classical cities had its limits at the Llobregat and Besós rivers, which provided invaluable resources to the inhabitants at both sides of them. The Évros river (currently Maritsa) marks the frontier between Bulgaria and Greece and Turkey and Greece at different parts of its route while the eponym river Ebro in Spain acts as a frontier of several administrative divisions alongside its course. This might explain the long duration of frontiers, even those of relatively small communities. Examples in lowland areas are abundant. The limits of the towns around the Albufera lagoon in Valencia (figure 1), an important provider of resources for local communities, adapt and elongate to provide access to the lake to all of them. Although borders in mountains are more difficult to trace, the Garraf mountain range presents an interesting case study. Four large pastoral enclosures were studied and dated in the Garraf

(figure 1). From these, Marge del Moro, dated to the 3rd century AD, was located between in the border between Begues and Vallirana, Puig dels Avençons, dated to the 6th century AD, in the border between Begues and Olesa de Bonesvalls and the biggest of these enclosures which has two phases of use one during the Bronze Age and the second during the Early Iron Age (and was probably in use at later stages) is located at the exact point of confluence of the limits between the populations of Begues, Olesa de Bonesvalls, Olivella and Avinyonet del Penedès (Orengo 2018). It is worth noting how the town limit of Avinyonet del Penendès elongates, as in the case of the borders of the towns surrounding the Albufera lagoon, to give access to this particular enclosure, and by extension to the important resources that might have linked to it. In Andorra it is common to find between the medieval documentation complaints that groups from a different community have displaced the stones marking the commons limits to increase their pastures.

Borders and frontiers can be marginal and dangerous in dangerous times but they also serve to delimit precious resources to which several communities need access. With this discussion about borders I introduce a new topic, that of the economic importance of mountain areas.

Economic importance

Mountain resources into rocks or stones, minerals, pigments and wood. To these most discussants would add pastures in relation to their allegedly pastoral economic focus. It is true that those are the most evident natural resources found in mountain environmental settings but agriculture is also present in terraces and sediment accumulation areas. I would argue, therefore, that the big difference in terms of resources between lowlands and mountains is therefore reduced to sea resources. Salt, in particular, is an important resource in high mountain pastoral economies given the low mineralisation of water there, which, nonetheless, can also be produced in mountain environments through saline water sources of which we have many examples in the Pyrenees.

From these resources a rather large amount of products can be derived from which we only know about or can identify archaeologically a small part. Many of these can also be produced in lowlands, so, in my opinion, what makes a real difference is the capacity of the environment coupled with the particular socio-economic context. For example, in the Madriu-Perafita-

Claror valleys (Andorra) an intensive activity of pitch extraction from pine trees from the second to the 7th century AD was identified (Orengo et al. 2013). This research also linked the production of pitch to that of charcoal, which was probably employed for the reduction of iron mineral in kilns, such as those documented in the nearby Cadí range at a similar height during the same period (Palet et al. 2010). The interesting fact about these data is that the production of pitch was using local techniques, just as that identified in the Massif Central in France, which was using pre-Roman materials (e.g. Trintignac 2003). This was not a Roman innovation, local populations producing pitch and charcoal were using their own traditional practices to respond to the new demand of iron and pitch brought by their integration into the Roman economic sphere. These could have been produced in lowland territories but not at such a large scale given the availability of ore and forest resources. It is therefore the particular Roman context coupled with the large availability of certain resources and the experience exploiting them that creates the opportunity for these mountain products to be exported to large distances. The importance of pitch in Andorra is also mentioned in a document dated to 860 AD³ (Baraut 1988) in which King Charles II ‘the Bald’ confirms to Urgell his right to receive the tithe of the iron and pitch produced in Andorra. Since these were the only taxable industries of Andorra, they must have involved an important production. Ironically, the payment of a tithe for the produced pitch has been interpreted (Oliver 1998) as an indirect way to tax sheep as these were marked using pitch. This is a good example how the economic orientation of mountain areas tends to be interpreted following preconceived beliefs, even if, as in this case, it requires reinterpreting a straightforward document using complicated arguments to highlight the pastoral focus of this mountain area.

In a similar manner, the famous *perna cerretana*, which appears in the Latin sources, most significantly in Diocletian’s ‘Edict Concerning the Sale Price of Goods’ as an expensive pork ham exported from this same area (the Cerretania region included the area of Andorra) should be understood (Orengo et al. forthcoming) as a mountain commodity produced using traditional methods that was exported to the extremes of the Empire as a luxury product.

Discussion: mountains in their socio-economic, cultural and historical context.

³ The document in fact indicates that the tithe on pitch was previous to this date as it only intends to confirm a right already in place. The continued taxation of iron and pitch after this date should also be assumed as the tithe right was confirmed in multiple documents until, at least, the 10th century.

Products such as iron, pitch, stone, charcoal, specific types of meat, cheese, ice and snow, lime, quartzite are specific or can be produced at a larger scale in mountain ranges. This is an important distinction as it can mark the level of economic buoyancy of these areas depending on the particular socio-economic situation of the period.

In periods like the Roman when a certain economic integration of the different territories of the Empire propitiated large-scale production for extra-regional trade, those territories with large availability of certain resources specialised and intensified their production. This can be seen in the particular focus on pitch and iron in the aforementioned Andorra example, products that were abundant in the area. Mountains during these periods were not isolated but wholeheartedly integrated within large-scale socio-economic networks given their particular production types and the ease with which with they could produce them. These fairly compensated the supposed isolation of these territories or the difficult access.

During the middle ages mountain resources continued to be perfectly integrated within their larger socio-economic context. In Andorra the continuing production of iron and pitch during the IX and X centuries, probably the only taxed products of the area, are indicative of trade and not just local and regional consumption. Pastoral produce was not taxed because it was probably directed towards local and regional consumption. This was perhaps related to the fact that most other communities, also in the lowlands, had their own pastoral production and therefore they would not invest in obtaining goods that they could produce themselves. Pastoralism in Andorra starts to be integrated in extra-regional economic networks at a later stage, precisely when sheep rearing starts being a large-scale business for wool production. Between the 11th and 12th century transhumance movements start and the conflicts between the large monasteries of Santes Creus and Poblet in the lowlands for the rights of mountain pastures at this early moment (Llobet and Milà 1951) illustrate well the economic value of these areas. Sheep transhumance increases its importance with the grouping of flocks coming from not just monasteries but, landowners and towns during the 12th and 14th century and so does the value of mountain pastures. At this moment we start finding multiple conflicts in the Andorran documentation for the right to exploit mountain pastures, which become an important economic resource for the community until the 20th century, as the increasing population pressure and urbanisation, drainage of coastal wetlands, agricultural expansion and industrialisation progressively reduced available pasture space in the lowlands and increased demand for animal

produce. Iron and charcoal in Andorra continued to be important Andorran exports throughout this period (Codina 2005), particularly with the advent of the industrialisation which required enormous amounts of both. This little economic history of Andorra serves to exemplify how these high mountain valleys were never isolated from their socio-economic context but tightly integrated. Interestingly, the nature of this integration changed with the particularities of the period but specific products, such as iron and charcoal, continued being exported with more or less intensity.

The concentration of population and crop production in the lowlands, in particular coastal plains in eastern Spain, is an interesting concept that deserves further comment. As coastal wetlands were systematically drained from the XVII century onwards, coastal ranges were deforested and population concentrated, lowlands were increasingly exploited for crop production and habitation. This process was, of course, exaggerated around large habitation nuclei. Cities became less self-sufficient, with important requirements that could only be provided by mountain areas. As a natural consequence of this process involving demand and availability of produce, the value of locally produced crops decreased while that of mountain products increased. Many of those were absolutely necessary for the maintenance of urban lifestyle such as ice for the transport and preservation of produce, charcoal and iron for the making of tools, timber, stone and lime for construction and, of course wool, cheese, milk and meat (Ejarque and Orengo 2009, Garcia 2013). While city populations were dependant on mountain resources, mountain nuclei were relatively self-sufficient through the use of terraces for crop production. Farmhouses in these areas increased their size during the Modern period beyond that of any equivalent in the lowlands to become real production centres. Ironically is in part their 'isolation' and low population density in combination with the particularity of the environment what renders their products such valuable resources.

It can be argued that people conducting these mountain industries were nonetheless underprivileged and had little access to the revenues of this trade. Indeed, many of the owners of mountain exploitations could have been living in cities. In any case, most people living in cities during the Modern period were also quite low positioned in the social scale. It is only during the 20th century with the important innovations on transport that allowed inter-continental trade that mountain resources have stopped being essential for lowland populations and investment in these areas decreased, leading often to depopulation. In my opinion this is, together with our ignorance of the diversity and value of mountain products, the basis for many allusions and half-expressed opinions on the marginality of mountain landscapes. The nature

of mountain-lowlands relations during the 20th century is also a product of a socio-economic context and does not form an intrinsic part of the character of mountain areas. As archaeologists and historians, we should appreciate better the value of context. Mountains continue to adapt to their historical and economic context today and the rise of mountain tourism, mountain sports, cannabis production or contraband and, why not, mountain archaeology is a proof of this evolving relation which forms a historical continuum in an integrated society.

Concluding remarks

This brief text is necessarily subjective, based on my own experience and observations working on European mountain areas and therefore partial in time and space. This is somehow unavoidable as here I am trying to deal with sometimes fuzzy concepts arising from the general constructs formed by our societies' collective imaginary. With it I try to make manifest perceptions that most authors do not consider they hold and put them forward for open examination. Hopefully, it will contribute to highlight the enormous value of mountain areas in the past and in the future.

Figure Captions

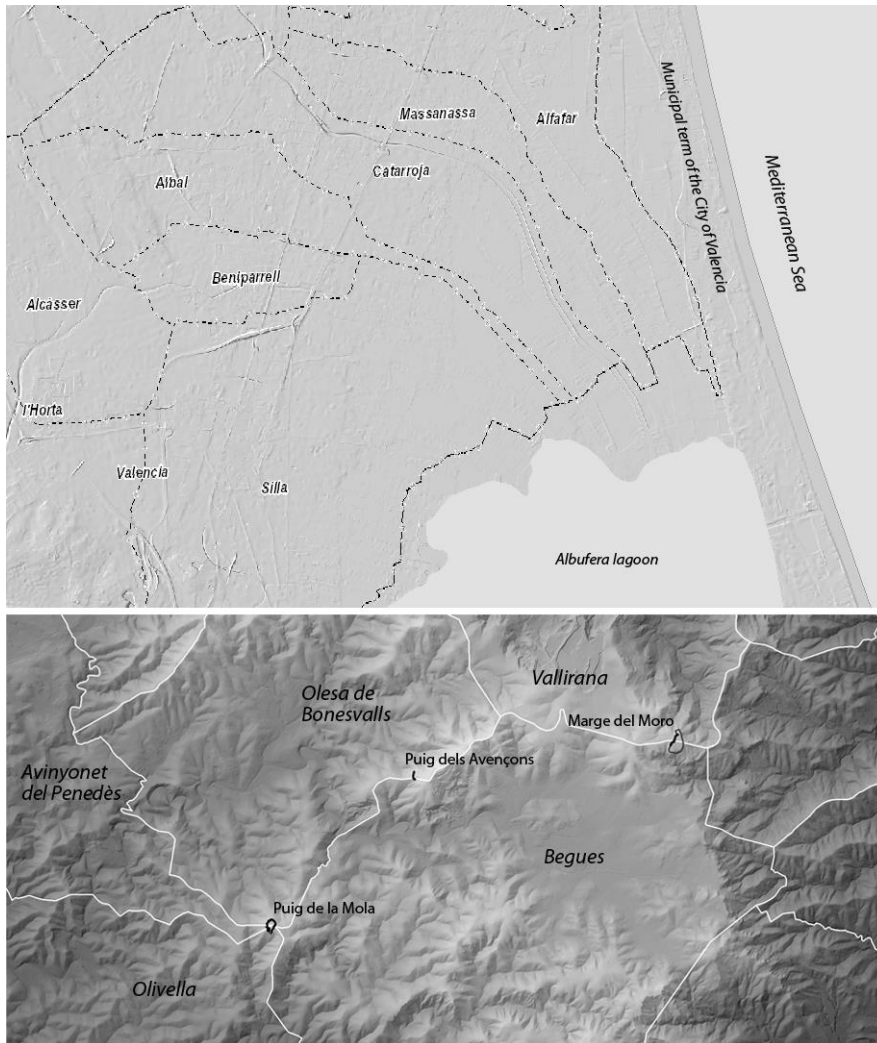


Fig. 1