

# TERRITORIAL AND LANDSCAPE HERITAGE OF LEITARIEGOS (ASTURIAS AND LEÓN, NW OF SPAIN): FROM INTELLECTUAL REGARD TO FIRST OFFICIAL CONTEMPORARY ACTION

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The term “heritage” has evolved for the last century to cover every material and non-material realities associated with collective practices. The heritage issue is connected today with curiosities which have to do with the willingness of a given community to protect, preserve and transmit every valuable and collective memory or custom. (Béghain, 1998; Poulot, 1998). Thus, the heritage, understood as built within any society, brings outstanding meaning and principles for the community (Bouisset y Degrémont, 2010). In addition, it must be taken into account a new approach as regards nature (Berdoulay, 2004), as well as the consciousness of how important it is to look after the environment (Béghain, 1998). These factors have been crucial in the evolution of the term “heritage”, by adding a territorial and landscape meaning (Berdoulay, 1992; Degrémont, 1998).

Some specific locations are considered as heritage as a result of spreading recognition, study or joy practised by social actors, scientists and institutions. Those identify ecological, aesthetic, educational and symbolic values and promote their knowledge in order to be recognised or, according to the social actors, be used as a source of economic income. (Bouisset et al., 2010).

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In this article, our goal is to analyse the origins of the heritage process which the western mountains Asturias and León have. These surroundings possess a prominent ecological, ethnographic, aesthetic and historical value; places such as Leitariegos mountain pass and Cueto Arbás mountain range. We find examples of natural landscapes together with rural usage and cultural contents appreciated by travellers and distinguished scientists from several different areas of knowledge (botanists, ethnography experts, geologists...). They have been travelling to these spots since the end of the 18th century, narrating their observations. And their texts can be taken as a kind of legacy in the sense to consider their heritage value. It can't be left out the importance of this place in the communications of Western Asturias, since both the commercial sector between Luarca, Navia and Catropol harbours and fairs and markets from Southern areas such as León, El Bierzo or some Castilian fairs and markets were already being recorded in medieval times. This is a reason why it is specially meaningful the role the neighbours have been playing for ages, awarded with a royal privilege.

Leitariegos and Cueto Arbás have been under protection due to its priceless environmental and ecological values in the last decades, being landscape an argument in the protection statements (although it cannot be considered a main reason).

The Southern part, in the province of León, is part of Laciana valley, which is included within the Special Area for Conservation known as "Alto Sil" as well as the Special Protection Area for Birds "Alto Sil" and the natural area called «Sierra de Ancares». Furthermore, Laciana Valley is Biosphere Reserve. As the Northern area, which belongs to Asturias, is regarded, it is also protected: "Cueto de Arbas" Natural Reserve; "Fuentes del Narcea, Degaña e Ibias" Special Area of Conservation; "Fuentes del Narcea, Degaña e Ibias" Special Protection Area for Birds and the same park Biosphere Reserve. In addition to all this, the glacier of Puerto de Leitariegos has been recognized as Geological Interest Site (LIG 0-95), included in The Geological Heritage Catalogue (edited by the Spanish Geological and Mining Institute). And "Camín Real de Leitariegos" is contained in the Natural Paths Programme promoted by the Spanish Ministry of Environment, also in the Asturias Cultural Heritage Inventory.

Nevertheless, this governmental policies towards protection have been unable to solve the incompatibility between the usage of spots for livestock, often crowded due to different kinds of tourism such as trekking and winter sports, or affected because of outdoor mining activities.

The goal of the project, in this case, is to feature the actions promoted by individuals and groups, who have spread out the knowledge of these mountains, favouring and taking part in giving importance to the heritage value from the early stages.

The study goes back to find the very first governmental recognition of this place, a royal privilege awarded by Alfonso XI in 1326 to the inhabitants of the mountain pass to acknowledge their role in helping and assisting this flyover.

Next, we are going to look into the scientific, educational, literary and graphic work made by thinkers, travellers and mountaineers, who went deep into this territory with the willingness to discover it from the end of the 17th century until the times when the first contemporary official acts took place, back in the 1970s. These have to do with the ski resort built there and the tourist promotion of the mountain, which was before any protection rules.

By verifying how this argument is still valid, we try to appreciate that legacy as the birth of the heritage making process of the mountains we are dealing with.

## II. THE ROYAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT TO ANCIENT NEIGHBOURHOOD INITIATIVES

The historical Leitariegos mountain pass relevance has quite likely its origins in ancient times. Different studies point out that back in Roman times, it was used to transport goods from Western Asturias golden mines and Laciana and el Bierzo shires (León) (Ruiz de la Peña, 1979; Rabanal, 1984; Santos, 1988; González, 2011).

During the Middle Ages, this natural way becomes well-known while increasing the people and goods which pass by. This fact can be shown by the hostels or hospitals settled around, since mid 12th century, facilities with their own resources to carry out charitable services. (Ruiz de la Peña, 1979; Ocampo, 2013).

The importance and recognition to the help which Leitariegos had, is reinforced due to the increasing astur-leonés trade. This fact reached such an importance that the inhabitants of Leitariegos, Brañas, Trascastro and all places nearby were given the royal privilege, awarded by Alfonso XI the 14th, April, 1326. From then on, the neighbours benefited from an exceptional, legal status which meant they were allowed not to pay any kind of taxes. Thus, the aim was to encourage their staying in the mountain pass for years, despite the hard living conditions, to guarantee their devotion to reconditioning the paths and the help and guidance the travellers needed.

The privilege was ratified by the Crown for over five centuries, until it was abolished in 1879, year when the road which connects the two shires is opened, being already considered Royal Way from Madrid to Asturias. (Ruiz de la Peña, 1979; Grupo Ecologista Cangués Azor, 2012).

All along this long process, the inhabitants develop a territorial sense of identity, determined by the way they live and work, closely attached to the environmental conditions under which they live (Béghain, 1998). This identity can be considered the foundation of Leitariegos heritage image.

## III. THE INTELLECTUAL SCOPE AND LEITARIEGOS CONSIDERED AS AN EXCEPTIONAL MOUNTAINOUS AREA

At the end of the 17th century, Cueto Arbás is significantly mentioned in the work *Antique pieces and memorable things in Principado de Asturias*, written by the Asturian historian and religious Luis Alfonso de Carvallo, born in Narcea's shire. He describes the location of the mountain range. Moreover, Carballo already appreciates the beauty of Cueto, which stands out over the surrounding mountains and it draws the attention due to the remarkable break between the slope and summit.

During the next century, the most relevant piece of work is "Description of the Royal Leitariegos or Lazariegos Jurisdiction", written by Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos. As an intellectual and politician concerned with development, he put all his effort in recognising and analysing Asturian resources in order to identify opportunities for progress (González, 2011). In this context, a trip to Narcea shire takes place and it is narrated in his *Diary* (1795 and 1796). Jovellanos includes a remark on the mountain pass and its surroundings, which could have been taken from Manuel Folgueras' observations. The description is idealistic in

a way: it not only praises the elevation of the mountain range, which is always present when describing Cueto, but he also considers it as one of the most important mountain ranges in Europe (Jovellanos, 1999).

The most important incentives to visit the place in modern times are related to scientific progress. A big number of campaigns try to dig deeper in the knowledge of the Cantabrian Mountain. An example is the one carried out by Michel Charles Durieu de Maisonneuve, French infantry official and botanist, in 1835, encouraged by his compatriot Jean-Baptiste Bory de Saint-Vincent (Castañón y Quirós, 2004); naturalist Jacques Gay is also asked to study many of the samples gathered in Asturias. Gay's work emphasise the geometrical shape of Cueto, with the flat summit and abrupt (and difficult to reach) slopes. Durieu would also pay attention to stones which are stored in several sides and some snowfield which can still be seen in mid summer (Gay, 1958).

Afterwards, other prominent scientists explorations are known. Among them, we can mention the geologist and paleontologist Eduardo Hernández-Pacheco, Medicine Nobel Prize Santiago Ramón y Cajal, botanist Blas Lázaro Ibiza and physicist Ignacio González Martí, bonded to University of Madrid and Free Teaching Institution (*El Distrito Cangués*, 1914). Eduardo Hernández Pacheco remarks the natural environment, as it is reflected in the Royal Natural History Society Bulletin “ [...]traces of glaciers have been recognised in the Leitariegos mountain pass and lagoon [...]” (Hernández-Pacheco, 1914).

Later, in 1929, his son, Francisco Hernández-Pacheco, is the one who travels the mountainside, writing for the Natural History Society publication an article titled “Asturian Geology Data (Leitariegos y Somiedo)” in which he refers to the geological structure (Hernández-Pacheco, 1929).

In the same edition, R.Stickel, assistant teacher at Bonn University, publishes “Glacier Morphology in North- Western Spain Observations”, which are the conclusions drawn from the trip which takes place in August and September, 1928. One of the chapters is wholly devoted to “ Cueto de Arbas Peak: - Leitariegos mountain pass and valley”. It is headed by a description of the shape of Cueto, in which the perception of contrast between the abrupt slope gradient and the flat summit shows up again. It also relates the extension of the Quaternary glacier which rocks the lagoon (Stickel, 1929).

The creation of mountaineering clubs and excursionist associations beginning in the second half of the 19th century were encouraged by the already mentioned scientific progress and the recognition of almost unknown places. Outstanding descriptions, full of orographical, geological, toponymical ethnographical and an assortment of graphic representations were published in magazines and journals. (Castañón y Frochoso, 2007; Saule-Sorbé, 2007).

The Royal Spanish Mountaineering Peñalara Society, created in 1913, is one of the main and earlier examples of this in Spain. Its members are influenced by the Free Teaching Institution as regards the educational goal which mountaineering mean. (Mollá, 2010). Encouraged by the information provided by other mountaineers, they visit this Northwestern region. One main example is Arno Teichman, who explores “ Along the Cantabrian- Asturian mountains: from Oviedo to Leitariegos mountain pass” in the summer of 1926 (Teichman, 1926).

The Illustrated Peñalara Mountaineering Magazine, which publishes Arno Teichman's narrative, disclose naturalist Francisco Hernández-Pacheco's experience four years later.

His observations and Teichman's describe common features, since the magnificent shape of Cueto is noticed at first glance. Hernández-Pacheco climbs and reaches the lagoon and Cueto and enjoys the views, pointing out the main mountains and valleys in the four cardinal points. Subsequently, he explicitly uses the metaphor which former intellectuals have been spreading. El Cueto is the sentinel of the mountain pass, it guards the historical pass from the highest spot around. Furthermore, the atmospheric conditions and the effects of light, which underline the trace which glacier left, keep on interesting travellers and scientists. (Hernández-Pacheco, 1930).

Finally, it must be pointed out the fact that Leitariegos mountain pass has deserved being object of remarkable interest for those disciplines devoted to social sciences. Moreover, private societies concerned with social and humanistic knowledge, as well as some editorial initiatives to spread culture and regional heritage, contribute by providing new data about this western mountain. Among them, the one written by Luis Bello (jurist, essayist and politician who belongs to the well-known 98 generation) deserves to be mentioned. The route leads him to get to know Spanish Northwestern schools (Rojo, 1979-80). Bello's narrative appears in the chapter "Travelling Asturias", as a part of an article called "Leitariegos-Brañas de Arriba" (Bello, 1926).

The floor, the materials and how the buildings are set, together with, in general, the settlements and the traditional ways of life, catch Bellos' eyes. The same can be said of German linguist and ethnograph Fritz Krüger, just a bit later, in the autumn, 1927. Krüger is stunned by this fascinating environment, which differ from some of his previous explorations. (Krüger, 1948). Similarly to Jacques Gay, Francisco Hernández-Pacheco or Luis Bello, the relationship between the local population and the natural environment is what is crucial to determine the aesthetic worthiness of the place. This is also noticed by Universidad de Oviedo historian Juan Ignacio Ruiz de la Peña, in a geographical approach in which, according to his notes, is partially the result of a trip in company of Arturo Rodríguez Álvarez-Buylla and another historian, Eloy Benito Ruano, in the summer of 1972 (Ruiz de la Peña, 1979).

#### **IV. HEADING THE FIRST OFFICIAL CONTEMPORARY ACTION**

The portrayals described by such varied intellectuals shape a noticeable inherited image which contribute to the present value of Leitariegos and Cueto Arbás mountain range. Nevertheless, not all the descriptions influence the first official actions. Snow is perceived as something attached to the conditions and way of life, especially in the mid 20th century, when it reaches a new dimension. Its abundance, which buries paths, fields and mountains for most part of the year, begins to be seen as something related to leisure and so, to a source of wealth, since it is considered ideal for leisure activities and winter sports in particular.

A year before Teichman cited the chances which the mountain pass surroundings offer for sport events in *Peñalara Magazine*, Ramón García Redruello, local judge in Cangas de Narcea in 1924 and 1925, in a chronicle published in the diary *La Voz*, recommended to the own Peñalara Society and some others to visit Leitariegos, as it fulfilled all the features of the places often visited by these associations in their trips. In addition, he pointed out the same correspondence with Madrid mountain chain which Rivas Goday y Rivas Martínez (1959)

had recalled when they mentioned “the interesting lagoon, which remembers the big one in Peñalara, in Guadarrama”. He also mentioned one of his articles published in the magazine *Vida Leonesa*, in which he encouraged to take advantage of Pajares and Leitariegos as Alpine resorts. (García, 1925; López, s.f. b).

Skiing practice can be recorded with some detail in the 1950s. According to testimonies taken by Evencio Asenjo, skiing instructor in Leitariegos, some military groups and amateur mountaineers, but with experience in other mountain chains, help spread both the technique and the new materials which replace those local rudimentary ones (Asenjo, s.f.). Media in León describe in those years different expeditions which travel to Leitariegos in order to practise winter sports, among which The Hispanic Sporting Association (*Diario de León*, 1958 y 1959). Different Spanish Youth Organisation sections and Peña Rubia Society, with a large number of members from Bierzo and Laciana, are found among the organisations which help develop skiing in Leitariegos, thanks to courses and championships, in which Cangas de Narcea Asturian Section also takes part (*Diario de León*, 1963; *Proa*, 1968a y b). In fact, skiing development in the Asturian area is due to Manuel Pérez Frade, founder of the section OJE in Cangas de Narcea and Local Youth Representative (Pérez, 1998; *El Tous p@ Tous*, 2014).

In this context, the house formerly devoted to the old regional taxes receipts, property of Oviedo Council, is given and set up. That house was not being used, so it became an OJE youth hostel, after it was required by the Local Youth Office and Cangas de Narcea town hall. In spite of all this, there were no dragging methods, so carrying the skies over one’s shoulders was necessary to climb the mountain range. (Pérez, 1998). For this reason, Peña Rubia Society was concerned about collecting funds to afford a dragging machine at the beginning of the following decade (*Diario de León*, 1970; Pérez, 1998).

Due to the growing number of fans, a ski resort started being considered (López, 1979; Pérez, 1998). The first Assembly for Initiatives and Tourism in León, gathered in the spring of 1970, claims for money investments for this place (*Proa*, 1970b). The landscape, likewise many other tourist spots, plays an important role because its quality, among other reasons, catches the visitor’s eyes. (Espejo, 2011). It is then when Villablino town hall, led by his mayor- and regional deputy-, Manuel Barrio Valcárcel, a key character for all this development, puts forward the project for a mountain shelter. (Pérez, 1998; *Proa*, 1970c).

The dragging project and its work finally start in 1972, once an Accounting Department led from el Bierzo and encouraged by Peña Rubia, gets the credit which they need. The hostel promoted by Villablino town hall, together with some other councils such as Palacios de Sil, León and the National Physical Education and Sports Office, are opened in October, 1973, being previously given up to León Council (*Diario de León*, 1972b; *Proa*, 1973). This is the seed of the ski resort.

## V. STRENGTHENING THE HERITAGE MAKING PROCESS: BETWEEN EXPLOITATION AND PROTECTION OF THE NATURAL RESOURCES

Among the features and values which prove the exceptional personality of this place, it is the likelihood of snow the reason which draws the attention of local institutions, although non-seasonal trekking is also noticed. The practical meaning of mountaineering goes beyond

the traditional farming perspective. And the landscape, truly appreciated by the uniqueness of natural and rural elements, which have already been spread from ancient times, and by the feelings attached when staring at it, is now seen at that moment as a perfect setting for a sport and tourist activity which relates body, physical effort and surroundings (Damery, 2004). Both the political and economic context of the country, in which tourism emerged as an alternative and growing business, need to be understood to know the reasons why the authorities found exploitation more beneficial than preservation. This was only possible since the first preservation organizations in Spain had not paid attention to this area.

Landscape is taken into account, but as a place worthy of admiration and suitable for sports. This imply the implementation of technical resources, so its attractive is both stood out and modified. (Espejo, 2011). The establishment of a new use of leisure places in nature, carried out by urban inhabitants, entails elements which do not fit in the landscape. Even though the ski resort grows progressively in the following decades, without reaching a large area, the trace is noticeable between the mountain pass and the 2,000 metres height (Sevilla y Rodríguez, 2015). This is a fact to be taken into account when some associations and administrations are in favour of enlarging the skiing area. Doing so means to speed up the damage in a weak mountain, which has been also altered by the exploitation to obtain coal without the suitable restoration in the second half of the 80s and, consequently, before preserving measures (Castaño, 1984; Redondo, 1988).

Later, Leitariegos and Cueto Arbás mountain range have been under official protection. Despite this, landscape is neither the main value nor the argument which gives way to its protection. When it is decided that these places need to be protected, it is implicit the importance of the complex cultural background, which have been present for ages (this is mentioned in chapters II and III in this article). The Administration focus on environmental and ecological issues (natural habitats, the presence of unique species, outstanding biological and geographical features...)

As regards Leitariegos heritage making process, the traditional El Tous pa Tous Association have been crucial to spread knowledge through documentation and the publication of texts and historical, geographical, ethnographic, literary news. The Ecologist Group Cangués Azor (GECA), founded in Cangas de Narcea, in May, 1985, has published educational guides about the Narcea River and Camín Real.

The opportunity caused by the institutional recognition and its inclusion in international networks (Natura-2000, Biosphere Reserves,...), together with all the work done by associations, should be taken into consideration to solve relevant conflicts which this land is dealing with, which they have to do with the recent transformation of the place and the incompatibility of the uses fostered by the different administrations involved (protected natural areas, traditional cattle activities, ski resort).

