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EARLY MEDIEVAL CHURCHES CONTESTING PLACE IN ASTURIAS, SPAIN

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Abstract

This paper explores how different conservation criteria applied to early medieval churches in Asturias (Spain) have affected the historical landscapes to which these buildings belong. Places never cease to transform; monuments, on the other hand, are often perceived as landmarks and alterations carry consequences, not only for the place, but also for the wider landscape.

Three main periods of conservation may be identified for early medieval churches in Asturias: mid-twentieth century, late twentieth century, and the twenty-first century. During the first phase, political ideology was attached to the reconstruction of ruins. Links to a mythical early medieval past were created by stripping the churches of modern additions in order to replicate an idealised ninth century appearance. During the later phases, those working on reconstruction concentrated on highlighting early medieval remains, while still preserving their rural character as acquired through centuries of functioning as parish churches. Results in most cases were aesthetically pleasing yet strongly contested.

The fate of early medieval churches within this region has been very different: some were declared UNESCO World Heritage monuments in 1985, while others, mainly in rural areas, have often been the subject of heated debate between conservationists and local population. These debates have been fuelled by increasing archaeological knowledge of the period. Whilst heritage studies have fully embraced the concept of place and landscape, archaeology prefers to focus on space and territory. A dialog between those advocating both approaches is necessary to arrive at new research questions. Monuments no longer 'fill' isolated pockets of space and time. We are now able to place these churches into their wider historical and geographical contexts, relate them to remains from other times, and create a more comprehensive picture of the multilayered meanings constituting ancient landscapes.

Key Words: Spain, Asturias, Early Middle Ages, UNESCO, church, landscape, conservation, archaeology, architecture, heritage.

Introduction

In the phrase 'Landscapes, churches, churches, landscapes...' ¹, Cees Nooteboom captures the feeling many people experience when they first encounter rural Spain. These buildings, which often retain large parts of medieval architecture, may initially come across as an element of continuity, as a perpetuation of the past, but this is only a superficial impression. Spanish churches are characterised by their reflection of change and evolution through time, incorporating innumerable styles and different histories. It is precisely this permeability, which has allowed them to survive and contribute so greatly to the conceptualisation of the Iberian landscape. They are not only landmarks: 'churches are places'. ²

Places, like landscapes, are multi-layered: they accumulate meaning. Much like the experiences in a human life, their different layers and aspects are better understood in relation to each other, rather than separately. The main challenge faced by conservationists when approaching an ancient monument is deciding what is relevant to keep, what may be changed, and how much can be rebuilt as new.

Medieval Asturian architecture has gone through intense reconstruction and conservation from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Issues of authenticity, the presentation of

architectural changes in post-medieval centuries, and the negotiation of functional roles in the present are some of the most pressing topics of debate concerning these churches. Moreover, as part of living landscapes, it is important to realise that they will always remain precursors of change, rather than monoliths of the past. It is not only the buildings that change in time, but everything that surrounds them, and everyone who experiences them. As Julian Thomas has pointed out, these transformations lead places to be read in different ways and be re-evaluated through time.³

Historical background and myth

The early medieval churches of Asturias date from the sixth – tenth centuries and are of a style known as Pre-Romanesque. Basilical plans predominate and key elements include verticality, luminosity, and spatial unity.⁴ Churches of similar style are found in the areas once belonging to the Frankish Empire and Lombardy, Italy.⁵ Chronological changes in the architecture of these churches and political events are closely connected. As of the eighth century, the majority of Iberia fell under Islamic rule, except for a few northern territories, the first political entity of which was the kingdom of Asturias. The building of the last churches in the distinctive Asturian style during the tenth century coincides with the beginning of the *Reconquista*, the Christian expansion south over Muslim territory.

The geography of Asturias comprises a network of valleys, which rise swiftly from the Bay of Biscay to the mountain passes in the south, separating the region from the *Meseta*; the Iberian central plateau. Due to the topography of this area, with its numerous valleys, travel and communication was structured around very specific routes. Political power was heavily dependent on control of these routes.⁶ In the aftermath of the Muslim conquest, the largest Asturian urban centre, the Roman port of *Gigia* (Gijón) (Fig. 1), was controlled by the Muslim forces, and accessed overland by the northern branch of the *Iter ab Emerita Asturicam* or the Roman ‘Silver Way’ (Table 1). *Circa* 718-722, local lords allowed Pelayo, a Visigothic warrior, to gain strength in the east. Pelayo was the mythical ‘first’ Spanish monarch and his capital, Cangas de Onís (Fig. 1), was established in eastern Asturias.

It is important to stress the mythical status awarded to this territory and its kings, in order to understand later political uses and interpretations of their architecture. According to legend, ‘Spanish essence’ survived in Asturias, protected by the mountains that kept the Muslims out after Pelayo’s revolt. From a central nationalistic point of view, Asturias is considered the embryo of modern Spain. Medieval texts of the beginning of the *Reconquista*, such as the Chronicle of Alfonso III, fuelled such a view:

Pelayo said, ‘Christ is our hope that through this little mountain, which you see, the well-being of Spain and the army of the Gothic people will be restored.’⁷

The socio-political origins and the political character of the medieval kingdom of Asturias during its existence of approximately one hundred and fifty years are unclear. Traditional historiography explains the rise of this small kingdom as the result of a Gothic regrouping in the north after the loss of the Visigothic capital in the south, Toledo.⁸ Other, more recent interpretations portray Pelayo as a Hispano-Roman noble and his kingdom as the inheritance of a *romanised* Asturian past.⁹ Influences in religious architecture are cited as evidence for both interpretations.¹⁰ Basilical plans, decorative styles and the use of *spolia* are common to both, yet spatial unity, luminosity and height are innovative Asturian characteristics that remind of classical inheritances. The search for a Visigothic origin to the *Reconquista* can also be understood as part of a general European trend to view medieval Germanic kingdoms as founding political entities for modern states.¹¹ During the Franco Regime (1939-1975) religion and politics were closely tied, and so it became useful to search for a specific,

mythical origin between Catholicism and a united Iberia. The Visigothic kingdom became the focus of this narrative, and through it the later Christian state of Asturias.

Today it has become clear that medieval kingdoms did not rise from a single cultural entity (indigenous, Roman or Gothic). The Visigothic kingdom prior to the Muslim-Asturian-Frankish Iberia of the eighth century was just as diverse and complex as its political successors. The heterogeneity of early medieval Spain has been exposed by varied kinds of historical and archaeological studies. Coin evidence has shown that Byzantium was present in south-eastern Spain until the Muslim invasion and that the Kingdom of the Suebi in the north-west was incorporated –not eliminated- into the Visigothic crown.¹² Likewise, new studies in settlement archaeology have revitalised debate concerning early medieval village communities, which structured life between themselves or in wider networks, sometimes with very loose attachments to any political super-structure.¹³ Medieval realities were forged by a mixture of backgrounds, religions, languages, and communication across permeable geographical borders. Rather than constituting a fortress for Christianity, Asturias was an experimental realm in the middle of a continent in transition. This situation was reflected in the material culture, not least by its churches.

Conservation of Heritage in the mid 20th C: political abuse

When a monument is altered by a conservation project it may affect not only its appearance, but also its role in society, even leading to the loss of relationships previously held with the landscape. Ideally, such roles are either continued in altered forms or substituted for new ones; hence the monument contributes to the life-cycle of the landscape. Nevertheless, if the monument fails to be reassigned with new roles or loses them, it becomes frozen in history and loses the links with its current environment. Heritage runs the risk of becoming ‘decontextualised’ and offering an immobile vision of the past.¹⁴

Some of these churches (Table 1, A-B) experienced such a process after the fall of the Franco Regime. Heavily reconstructed in the middle of the twentieth century, they were subject to political interests, eventually leading to radically different fates: they were either redefined as regional emblems or left to renegotiate new and uncertain roles in their rural contexts.

Like most of Europe, Spain suffered tremendous violent destruction in the first half of the twentieth century. A good number of early medieval monuments were destroyed in Asturias as a result of the workers’ revolt of 1934 and of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Reconstruction, financed by the new fascist regime, was imbued with political ideology. The Early Middle Ages became a favourite and targeted period of study with the aim of tracing the geographical and religious unity of Spain as far back as possible. The Catholic conversion of the Visigoths in 587 has been used by different groups to promote the idea of a unified Spain since the sixteenth century.¹⁵ Therefore, the success of the Asturian kingdom and the international fame of its churches *had* to be a testimony to the survival of Gothic and, ironically, Hispanic glory in equal measure.

Luis Menéndez Pidal, the main architect of the 1950s undertaking the research, conservation, and sometimes excavation of the early medieval sites has been widely repudiated by archaeologists, not only for his political ideas, but also for what are considered to be his interpretative errors.¹⁶ Although Asturian architecture is one of the better preserved early medieval styles in Europe, lack of previous knowledge and excavation in the 1950s led to many ‘idealised’ reconstructions and misinterpretations of the original architecture.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Menéndez Pidal was simply following the trends of his time, and the aesthetic results brought fame to the churches. Conservation criteria of the early and mid-twentieth century were strongly influenced by nineteenth century thinkers who favoured ‘ideal compositions’ when no archaeological data was available. Restorers attempted to apply

inductive processes through archaeological and architectural studies of the buildings they handled, but were faced too often with insufficient data. They then resorted to constructing theoretical models, valuing style, composition, and architectural unity and orthodoxy.¹⁸ The result may be appreciated in Figs. 2-3, which are strikingly different from Fig. 4. Divested from the elements that identified them as parish churches (bell towers, wooden porticos, wall-painting), Menéndez Pidal attempted to replicate what he assumed was a ninth century appearance (A1-2, A4-5, B1-3, B5). The actual medieval buildings would have probably been very different. A clear example of this is found in Santa María de Bendones (B2) (Fig. 2). An independent rectangular structure to the back of the church was reconstructed as a tower, even when no solid proof for it existed.¹⁹ Other differences include decisions on space, distribution and the addition of decoration (A1-2, B1, B5). In practice, new monuments were created from medieval ruins. Academics of the time considered them stylistically 'unique',²⁰ presumably testifying to an isolated moment in history.

Their imagined 'uniqueness' goes hand in hand with other assumptions on Asturian identity. These new architectures were attempting to take a leap in time, leading the viewer not only to identify the present with the past (neglecting time-depth), but also to make similar assumptions regarding the places or landscapes to which these churches belonged. The fact that these monuments were unique to the Asturian region, further accentuated the perception that Asturian landscape was fossilised in the Middle Ages and existed through the years in essentially the same form. However, as Barbara Bender has pointed out, landscapes are always temporal, 'they are not a record, but a recording'.²¹

The political vision attached to early medieval churches in the 1950s became outdated in the late twentieth century and new uses arose for some of the monuments: they were reinterpreted as regional emblems. In two specific instances they act as cultural gateways. The urban church of Santullano (A4) is so strategically placed at the entrance of the city that it stands adjacent to the motorway going north. It is widely known for its mural paintings, parallels for which may be found in the Frankish Empire.²² A similar role is played by Santa Cristina de Lena (B1) (see cover image)²³, which sits on the hillside overlooking the last train stop in Asturias before the train line crosses the mountains south. Its silhouette features in tourist posters and textbooks and serves as a gateway reminder of all that may be considered 'authentically' Asturian. Immediately south of Santa Cristina de Lena lie the mountains and with them disappears the distinctive Asturian architecture. It is context which has allowed these monuments to develop new meanings and roles after the fall of the Franco Regime. It may be argued that the authenticity of Asturian heritage is a social construct, but the way it has interacted with its landscape has created a collective image of place that Asturians identify with themselves and their region. These buildings have evolved together with their surroundings, becoming part of a complex history. They are not only isolated examples of a specific moment in time.

A different kind of success was experienced by the urban churches of the region's capital city, Oviedo, and their varied situation and contexts are well fitted for the eclectic atmosphere. Four out of the five urban Pre-Romanesque churches were awarded the status of UNESCO World Heritage monuments in 1985 (A 1-4). A mythical kingdom needs a mythical court and such is the role of Oviedo. San Tirso (A5) and the Cámara Santa (A3) are embedded (even camouflaged one might say) within the current cathedral complex. They are the remnants of the monumental foundation of King Alfonso II (759-842), which also included palaces, baths, defence structures and public spaces. The Gothic cathedral, which now dominates the scene, sits over the previous Pre-Romanesque building and the Cámara Santa (A3) has been incorporated into one of its towers. Romanesque, Baroque, and Neoclassical styles are also present throughout the cathedral complex. An important part of this place is the missing Santa María del Rey Casto (F1), primitive pantheon of kings, which is now converted

into a garden. Together they set the scene for a magical past, yet without ignoring the historical reality of time-depth and the diverse nature of culture which is reflected in the heterogeneity of the urban centre.

The situation in rural areas is different. San Salvador de Valdediós (B5) (Fig. 3), nicknamed 'El Conventín' or 'small convent', still celebrates regular mass, thanks to the upkeep and management of the site by the Cistercian order to which it belongs. In fact, the Cistercian monastic church and the Pre-Romanesque monument are separated by a very short distance. Its popularity is such that people travel from the town centre of Villaviciosa into the countryside in order to attend mass. The monastic complex has also been the object of several archaeological campaigns, the results of which testify to its continued use through time from at least the Roman period onwards.²⁴

Other rural churches have not enjoyed the same fortune. The onset of Spanish democracy in the late 1970s was accompanied by a strong reaction against the values of the Franco Regime and consequently against the academic sector that represented these ideals, most particularly, medievalism.²⁵ Most new research focused on reconstructing Islamic pasts, and less attention was paid to redefining Christian medieval realities.²⁶ Very recently, this problem has come to the attention of landscape archaeologists, who have reclaimed these buildings for research on the grounds that they lack social context.²⁷ However, before that can be achieved, they must be reintroduced into their present social landscapes.

Those churches that were not able to redefine themselves as regional emblems of tourist interest or retain their original roles as local places of worship may be considered to be 'decontextualised' from the landscape. This is particularly true of Santa María de Bendones (B2) (Fig. 2) and San Pedro de Nora (B3). These monuments are located in the outskirts of Oviedo, where residential areas mix with small farms and village houses. Both stand alone, accompanied only by a single, rusted sign giving a brief explanation of the architecture and antiquity of the building. Santa María de Bendones only celebrates one mass a week, and tourists may only visit the monument half an hour before. San Pedro de Nora is slightly more accessible, offering the possibility of visiting the place by prior appointment. Similar fates would have befallen other examples of rural churches if they had not been the objects of more ambitious tourist projects in the late twentieth century.

Conservation of Heritage in the late 20th C: in search of redefining place

The shift from fascism to democracy was only one of the many changes that affected Spain in the late twentieth century. There was also economic growth, largely due to tourism which brought a new, important agent, the recreational traveller. In the preceding section some examples were given of churches that acted as regional emblems that contributed to a collective image of place. These regional emblems also served to attract tourists. In fact, from this period onwards, much of the economic investment for heritage restoration necessarily addressed tourism as one of the main targets. Local populations and tourists intermingled in many historical landscapes. Conservation criteria of the time were forced to negotiate these two different agents.

Freeman Tilden popularised the concept of heritage interpretation. In 1957 his seminal book, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, considered natural and cultural heritage sites in similar terms and introduced the idea of promoting conservation through informal educational channels, i.e. by having fun.²⁸ The idea of creating a place where local population and tourists could both benefit was introduced during the late twentieth century. San Miguel de Lillo (A1) and Santa María del Naranco (A2) were originally part of a medieval palace complex built on a hill overlooking the capital city of Oviedo. Today, they also form a monumental complex, which includes not only the churches, but also restaurant, parks and a Centre for Reception and Interpretation of Asturian Pre-Romanesque. The centre was created in 1985, the same

year the buildings were declared UNESCO World Heritage Monuments. In this case the churches are the focal point of the entire complex, but in other examples early medieval churches have blended into wider areas, which combine both cultural and natural landmarks into the protected landscape.

The church of Santo Adriano de Tuñón (B4) is nestled in the Trubia valley. It was first restored by Luis Menéndez Pidal and underwent subsequent phases of conservation between 1946 and 1968. Then, due to humidity problems in the roofing and deterioration of some of the foundations adjacent to the cemetery, regular works were necessary in the 1980s and in more recent years. Taking advantage of this situation, the architects in charge designed a more ambitious project, which aimed at protecting the entirety of the surrounding valley. Although it had been designed as early as 1985, this project was not ratified by the regional government until 2003.²⁹

The choice of protecting the Trubia valley was not made at random. It follows an ancient Roman road known as 'La Mesa' (Table 1), which also connects the southern mountain passes with the coastline. Towards the east, it branches off, connecting with another important communication route of the nineteenth century, now in disuse. During the 1980s and 1990s there was a certain degree of debate on how to best reuse the nineteenth century abandoned train track cutting across the valley. Eventually, it was protected and reoriented for sport and leisure. Nowadays, the famous 'Senda del Oso' or 'Bear Path' is connected to the Mesa Roman road and Santo Adriano through the Trubia Valley, and may be travelled by foot, car or bicycle. In fact, one may park the car and rent a bike right in front of the church.

After leaving Tuñón, the road descends north to Pravia (Fig. 1). There are differences and similarities between the conservation works effected on Tuñón (B4) and Santianes de Pravia (C1). Neither was destroyed by the Civil War, and therefore restoration was not completed until later years. More subtle changes were enforced in Tuñón,³⁰ including the reconstruction and preservation of the bell-tower, which was eliminated from many churches in the first group of restorations. A protruding narthex, added in the nineteenth century, was also preserved. Santianes de Pravia (C1) underwent many more changes, having first been put under the charge of José Menéndez-Pidal, who was more partial to the preceding legacy of his brother Luis.³¹ Essentially, Santianes de Pravia was reconstructed in much the same manner as the previous phase, but as testimony to its rural character, it retained an expansion of the transept (sacristy). The bell-tower was moved from the entrance and placed over the transept. The result is somehow disconcerting, since one would expect the bell tower to overlook the entrance of the building. It was obviously an attempt at renegotiating both aspects of the building, the Pre-Romanesque monument and the rural church.

The negotiation of the functional roles of heritage buildings is still a topic of current debate. Roughly half of these churches no longer celebrate mass (Table 1). By becoming only places to visit, monuments run the risk of being encased as mere tourist attractions. This is where the importance of context once more comes into play. These churches also function as historical landmarks, which remind the beholder of the existence of past landscapes. When put in relation to other historical landmarks belonging to other time periods, as seen for the Trubia valley, the viewer is also reminded that time and places are in constant transformation. Daily experiences are enriched by the awareness of time-depth and ancient landscapes. Therefore, when possible, it is important for monuments to play a role in work, prayer, or any other social aspect, not only as recreation.

A further step was taken in negotiating these roles during the restoration of Santiago de Gobiendes (C2). Excavation and conservation work were undertaken between 1983 and 1987, although never published. Gobiendes (C2), Tuñón (B4) and Priesca (B6) make up a group of later Pre-Romanesque rural churches that traditionally have been interpreted as less sophisticated and monumental in art history.³² This might be part of the reason why they were

allowed to retain a larger part of their rural character. Santiago de Gobiendes (C2) continued to celebrate mass and serve a small adjacent cemetery. It not only retained its bell-tower, but also its tiled portico and lime plaster wall covering. The reason for its survival also responds to an important change in attitude towards conservation. As part of an active rural community, it was not only important to preserve the monument and its function, but also the surroundings.

In 2007, the Centre of Interpretation ‘Sierra del Suevo’ or ‘Suevo Mountain Range’ was built adjacent to Santiago de Gobiendes. The desire to integrate the monument into a protected area in order to enhance its value is evident. The importance of landscape context and social interaction lies at the heart of conservation issues in the twenty first century.

Conservation of Heritage in the 21st C: monumental landmarks in the landscape

The search for redefining place became much easier as archaeological research started adding new landmarks to the monumental landscape. Knowledge and material evidence for early medieval religion is scarce and until recently largely depended on limited burial evidence and the churches included in Table 1 (A-D). In the last thirty years, new sites have been discovered, a large number of them under later Romanesque constructions and locations that still retain spiritual meaning today (Table 1, E-F). These new sites have added visibility to medieval religion and to the importance of ancient landscapes, despite the connotations of their political past. Many of them had already been chosen as places of worship in Prehistory and in the Roman period.

Excavations in Santa María de Tina (F3) uncovered the first traces of an early medieval plan in the environs of an abandoned Gothic monastery. The construction was so different to its monumental counterparts that the archaeologist decided to interpret the site as a *cella orationis*, or a small sanctuary, intended to Christianise a formerly pagan site.³³ As more and more sites of this kind were discovered (E 1-8, F4), it became clear that early medieval religion was a rather diverse phenomenon which was strongly linked to social value invested in the landscape. In fact, the association with prehistoric burials was not an exception.

The best example of this is Santa Cruz de Cangas de Onís (E7), the first known royal foundation of the Asturian monarchy, dating to 737. It sits over a megalithic tomb, just like Santa María de Mián (E5) in the eastern highlands. Not far from Santa Cruz is another important site associated to a prehistoric cemetery, later used by the Asturian monarchy as a royal burial palace: Santa Eulalia de Abamia (D1). This church led a peaceful, rural existence, until recent conservation works were contested by the local population. Despite belonging to a tourist hotspot (Picos de Europa National Park and Cangas de Onís historical centre), it had remained unnoticed by visitors. The Romanesque church bore no visible signal of having a prehistoric, Roman and Pre-Romanesque past, although its historical richness was well-known to archaeologists and locals.³⁴

The surrounding area of Santa Eulalia de Abamia (D1) has served as a burial ground since the Neolithic period. Its present community is currently involved in protecting the place from the intervention of outsiders. The importance the community places on keeping its spiritual significance is a clear example of the importance for daily life held by ancient, ritual landscapes. Additionally, it also stands as a clear reminder that tourism and local life cannot always be combined in a harmonious way. Cangas de Onís (Figure 1) has suffered acutely from the consequences of mass tourism. The local population has virtually been displaced from the urban centre, choosing other places to interact socially. It comes as no surprise that residents should attempt to safeguard those places that they can still keep to themselves. The Cultural Association of Abamia is a non-profit organization that acts a social gathering point, but also as an institutional voice for local residents in protecting their heritage.

Conservation criteria applied in the twenty first century have completely changed from the ‘ideal models’ of the nineteenth century. The object now is to reinforce the architectural structure as much as possible, while trying not to alter anything that is not scientifically backed by archaeological or architectural data. The focus is on authenticity and avoiding any form of “ideal” reinterpretation. It is important for the public to be able to distinguish the material parts that have been reconstructed from those that are preserved. A very clear example may be found in San Andrés de Berdiñana (D2) (Fig. 4) where every single ‘non-authentic’ addition, such as the windows and wooden bars supporting the portico, are carefully marked. Another innovation of twenty first century conservation is the application of lime plaster against humidity. The discovery that this was already a common measure in medieval times has prompted many restorers to apply the material freely, even when we have now become used to looking at our medieval churches as sombre, bare, stone structures.³⁵

This use of lime plaster was one of the major points of contention between the restorers and the local population of Santa Eulalia de Abamia (D1). The local residents argued that they liked their church as it was and that white-washed walls would break the visual relationship they held with the building as well as with their memories. One of the most fascinating aspects of ‘place’ is that people’s reactions to the elements in the landscape depend a lot on human factors and how the relationship plays out at different times. Hence, similar actions in Berdiñana (D2) and Abamia (D1) resulted in radically different consequences. What seems clear is that the stronger the relationship of the population with the landscape, the more contested the smallest alteration to a landmark or monument.

Contention is not necessarily negative or to be avoided. Rather, it is a means by which people negotiate inevitable change and the spaces around them. Monuments as historical landmarks offer a stable sense of belonging. Conversely, they also set the scene for important redefinitions of place at different points in time. The significance of historical monuments in contemporary contexts is not only the preserve of modernity; it is a phenomenon that has been recognised in other periods. Richard Bradley has studied the reuse of ancient landscapes in prehistory, highlighting precisely how people and monuments are constantly redefining the way they relate to each other, sometimes leading to the complete loss of original functions and roles.³⁶ In the Early Middle Ages, references to diverse political and cultural inheritances are especially perceptible in architecture.³⁷ Legitimation, spirituality, inheritance, politics, and *habitus*, are all sufficient reasons for the use and transformation of ancient landscapes.

Archaeology vs. Heritage

Heritage and archaeology often approach material culture from very different perspectives. In Asturias, in particular, archaeological research focuses on spatial and territorial aspects and conservation/heritage work deals with issues more closely related to landscape and human experience. The latter stems directly from the problems of dealing with socially contested places: of which Early Medieval churches are one of the clearest examples.

In terms of research, there also exists a clear divide between funding allocation towards those churches that have become heritage monuments and those that have only recently been discovered as a result of archaeological research (Table 1: sections A-C vs. sections D-E). Most financial investment has favoured actions guided towards tourism, i.e., gardening, beautification and architectural restoration, rather than research and excavation.³⁸ This situation has not only antagonised research professionals, but also hampered communication between the two disciplines. In other regions, for example, heritage studies have found their way to the forefront of research. Graham Fairclough and English Heritage are examples of this approach.³⁹ Others include European funded projects, such as LANDMARKS A27, a pioneering COST (Cooperation in Science and Technology Framework) initiative involving twenty-one European leading projects studying mining effects on landscape and society.⁴⁰

The Roman mining landscape of Las Médulas, in the neighbouring region of León (directly south from Asturias) was part of this initiative. Here, research, conservation and tourism have been successfully combined, constituting one of Spain's main international points of reference for archaeological research.⁴¹ In fact, in other regions of Spain, heritage activities may be considered to a large extent the precursors of the landscape focus.⁴²

Heritage and landscape have been closely linked from very early on. When 'New Archaeology' was only starting to gain its feet,⁴³ heritage professionals were already discussing the indivisibility between culture and nature, leading to the 1972 World Heritage Convention, which adopted the *Recommendation Concerning the Protection at National Level, of the Cultural and Natural Heritage*, entering into force three years later.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, a definition for landscape in these terms did not become official until 2000:

'Landscape' means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors; (...) it covers natural, rural, urban and peri-urban areas. It includes land, inland water and marine areas. It concerns landscapes that might be considered outstanding as well as everyday or degraded landscapes.⁴⁵

Currently, the approach has gained so much influence that the European Science Foundation (ESF) and the European Cooperation in Science and Technology Framework (COST) herald the study of cultural landscapes as a driving force in future research, aiming at 'integrating landscape research, policy, and practice'.⁴⁶ Heritage lies at the intersection of the three.

In Asturian archaeology the methodology used to approach these monuments is largely absorbed by a territorial focus on landscape. In fact, territory and landscape are practically interchangeable terms in Spanish archaeology. Much of the medieval research carried out in the country which focuses on landscape is published in subject-specific journals created during the 1990s, such as *Arqueología y Territorio Medieval* and *Territorio, Sociedad y Poder*. Territorial archaeology, as studied in Asturias, views landscape as a stage on which space is configured and negotiated through relationships of power.⁴⁷ The archaeology of architecture, which studies buildings through stratigraphy, is complementary to this approach. It also focuses on power relations and organisation of space, although introducing the novelty of considering technological change and production.⁴⁸

Archaeology of architecture has been fundamental in re-introducing early medieval Asturian churches into modern research concerns, such as identifying the actual builders of the churches (not the patrons) and the sources of production.⁴⁹ This approach has also played an important role in overthrowing outdated historical theories, concerning chronologies and architectural influences of the churches.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the most revolutionary contribution of archaeology to the study of early medieval churches has been the discovery of more sites, mostly underlying later constructions. A quick look at Table 1 will demonstrate that these new sites are as numerous as the preserved heritage monuments. Territorial archaeology has embraced the discovery of these 'hidden' churches, much humbler in material and origin than their monumental contemporaries, and combines the study of documentary sources and archaeology in an attempt to recreate the village network and social configuration of the Early Middle Ages in Asturias.⁵¹

Early medieval churches comprise yet another field of contention in research. While heritage studies are used to dealing with place and landscape, archaeology has veered towards the concepts of space and territory. Any shift in research from space to place, will necessarily have to address the problems experienced by heritage studies and use them as an initial

impulse. Communication between both disciplines would not only enrich research, but also contribute towards redefining the social roles of some of these monuments.

With the incorporation of new sites to the archaeological record, it is now possible to arrive at interesting conclusions on the role played by ancient landscapes and their development through time. Nevertheless, the churches examined here did not only rise as part of ancient landscapes. They were also constructed *ex-novo* with the intention of creating new places or realities. This is clearly the case with some of the most monumental examples of early medieval Asturian architecture. It may be argued that creating new places was also the implicit (if not explicit) intention behind some of the restorations of the twentieth century. Therefore, ironically, they were not necessarily straying that much from their original role. First, they served the means of medieval lords, and after destruction, their ruins served the means of a modern political power.

The mistake historiography made in the twentieth century was to envision these monuments as a homogenous group. Not all of them were royal foundations, or monumental. Their material characteristics were as varied as the landscape contexts they belonged to, varying both in roles and fates through time.

Conclusion

The changes adopted by heritage restoration throughout the last seventy years are a clear reflection of how monuments may transform and evolve in time. They are not only remnants of the past, but places that live in the landscape. In fact, people and places continuously redefine their relationship and renegotiate the meanings of historical landmarks.

Meanings invested in monuments are directly related to their use in the present. This is clearly perceptible in the changes in conservation criteria applied to early medieval churches in Asturias. During the mid-twentieth century, ruins were restored attempting to replicate ninth century physical appearances, which divorced the buildings from their previous roles as parish churches, turning them into monuments that represented the political ideology of the time. Once these meanings became outdated, they were forced to renegotiate new ones.

Conservation criteria of the late twentieth century attempted to combine the interests of local population with the booming tourist sector. The monuments were included in protected landscapes along with other historic and natural sites. As regional emblems, they contributed to creating collective images of place, and as historical landmarks they increased awareness of ancient landscapes and time-depth. There are also examples of churches that have failed to renegotiate their roles in the present and have subsequently been neglected by society. They have been decontextualised from their landscapes.

Meanings are also invested in monuments according to the vision that is held of the past at different moments. This is also seen through the changes in archaeological research from the mid-twentieth century to the present. Recent archaeological research has helped expand the corpus of known early medieval churches in Asturias and to link them with other remains, creating richer and more meaningful relationships with the landscape. The recent conservation criteria of the twenty-first century has applied increased knowledge of the architecture of these churches to address issues on authenticity and highlight changes through time. The experience accumulated by heritage conservation in dealing with present society serves to introduce new research questions and approaches in archaeological research. Contention in the landscape, whether from a social or from an academic point of view, testifies to the multiple meanings attributed to monuments and places.

TABLE 1 : EARLY MEDIEVAL CHURCHES IN ASTURIAS

CHURCHES		LOCATION	CHARACT.	SPECIFICATIONS
MID TWENTIETH CENTURY CONSERVATION				
<i>Urban Monuments</i>				
A1	San Miguel de Lillo	Part of palace complex overlooking city (Oviedo)	○	UNESCO World Heritage
A2	Santa María del Naranco	Part of palace complex overlooking city (Oviedo)	○	UNESCO World Heritage, originally a palace
A3	Cámara Santa	Part of cathedral complex (Oviedo)	○ □	UNESCO World Heritage
A4	Santullano	On main motorway north (Oviedo)	○ + □	UNESCO World Heritage
A5	San Tirso el Real	Adjacent to cathedral complex (Oviedo)	○ +	Original plan unknown, only reconstructed on outside
<i>Rural Monuments</i>				
B1	Santa Cristina de Lena	Over main motorway/train track south (Pola de Lena)	○ □ ◻	UNESCO World Heritage, La Carisa Roman road (Silver Way)
B2	Santa María de Bendones	Rural-residential area (Oviedo)	○ □	
B3	San Pedro de Nora	Rural-residential area (Oviedo)	○ □	
B4	Santo Adriano de Tuñón	Natural preservation area (Santo Adriano)	△ ◻	La Mesa Roman road
B5	San Salvador de Valdediós	Part of monastic complex (Villaviciosa)	○ + ◻	UNESCO World Heritage, near Puelles villa / <i>tegulae</i> tiles found on site
B6	San Salvador de Priesca	Rural farming area (Villaviciosa)	△ ◻ +	
LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY CONSERVATION				
C1	Santianes de Pravia	Rural farming area (Pravia)	○ ◻	La Mesa Roman road
C2	Santiago de Gobiendes	Natural preservation area (Colunga)	△ +	
TWENTY FIRST CENTURY CONSERVATION				
D1	Santa Eulalia de Abamia	Rural-tourist area, border of National Park (Cangas de Onís)	△ ◻ ◻	Barrow burial site, indications of Roman phase for medieval cemetery
D2	San Andrés de Berdiñana	Rural farming area (Villaviciosa)	△ +	

CHURCHES		LOCATION	CHARACT.	SPECIFICATIONS
NO PRESERVED EARLY MEDIEVAL REMAINS				
<i>Part of later church</i>				
E1	Santa María de Arbazal	Rural farming area (Villaviciosa)	⊕ ◡	Barrow burial site
E2	Santa María de Sebrayo	On rural, pilgrimage route (Villaviciosa)	⊕ ◻ ◡	Mythically linked to Iron Age hillfort
E3	San Juan de Riomera	Mountainous- mining area, border south (Aller)	⊕	
E4	San Vicente de Serrapio	Mountainous-mining are, border south (Aller)	⊕ ◻ ◡	Roman Silver Way, over Roman temple to Jupiter
E5	Santa María de Mián	Near ancient mountain pass connecting eastern Asturias with south (Amieva)	⊕ ◡ ◻	Over megalithic tomb, 19 th C Church, Arcediano Roman road
E6	San Salvador de Oviedo	Santa María de la Corte church (Oviedo)	⊕	Part of later monastery of San Vicente, under current museum and university
E7	Santa Cruz de Cangas de Onís	Town centre (Cangas de Onís)	△ ◻ ◡	Over megalithic tomb, rebuilt in 17 th C and 1950
E8	San Salvador de Deva	Urban outskirts (Gijón)	△ ◻ ⊕	Complete rebuilding of romanesque and early modern remains
<i>Disappeared or in ruins</i>				
F1	Santa María del Rey Casto	Part of cathedral complex, now garden (Oviedo)		
F2	Santa María y San Pedro de Veranes	Part of an excavated Roman villa, urban outskirts (Gijón)	◻ ◡	Over Roman Silver Way
F3	Santa María de Tina	Eucalyptus plantation, previous communication route (Ribadedeva)		Remains under romanesque church in ruins
F4	San Salvador de Plecín	Mountainous landscape, border south (Peñamellera Alta)	◻ ◡	Barrow burial site, Romanesque church in ruins

KEY	
○	ATTEMPTS TO REPLICATE ORIGINAL EARLY MEDIEVAL FORM
△	PRESERVES LATER TRANSFORMATIONS
◻	AFFECTED BY VIOLENT DESTRUCTION IN 1930'S
⊕	STILL CELEBRATES REGULAR MASS
◡	ASSOCIATED TO PREHISTORIC BURIAL SITE / SETTLEMENT
◻	ASSOCIATED TO MAIN ROMAN ROAD
◡	ASSOCIATED TO ROMAN VILLA OR SANCTUARY



MUNICIPALITIES	EARLY MEDIEVAL CHURCHES IN ASTURIAS
<i>Coastal areas</i>	
Gijón	E 8, F 2
Villaviciosa	B 5-6, D 2, E 1-2
Colunga	C2
Ribadedeva	F3
<i>Midlands</i>	
Pravia	C 1
Oviedo	A 1-5, B 2-3, F 1
Santo Adriano	B 4
Cangas de Onís	D 1, E 7
<i>Highlands</i>	
Pola de Lena	B 1
Aller	E 3-4
Amieva	E 5
Peñamellera Alta	F 4

Fig. 1. Distribution of early medieval churches in Asturias in reference to Table 1.



Fig. 2. Santa María de Bendones (B3)



Fig. 3. San Salvador de Valdediós, 'El Conventín' (B5). Image by Lucas León Sánchez.



Fig. 4. San Andrés de Berdiñana (D2)

Notes

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