

# The Uniqueness of Iberian landscapes within Mediterranean Europe

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The recent Portuguese and Spanish national landscape mappings and earlier studies of Italy, France and Slovenia enable systematic comparisons of the landscapes of Mediterranean Europe.

Preliminary questions are, whether there is something like a common Mediterranean landscape identity, and which factors determine this. Subsequent questions are which cultures left footprints in the present landscapes, and how they modified them. Final questions are which Iberian landscapes are unique within Mediterranean Europe and for what reasons.

## On nature

Some natural state factors are often mentioned as unifying Mediterranean determinants, but in practice they only apply regionally. For instance, the Mediterranean Sea is a main factor in many regions, but she is very absent in Atlantic, continental and mountainous regions. Also a concentration of precipitation in the winter half-year and summer-drought are often mentioned as Mediterranean factors, but in practice the climates are very diverse. Similar reasoning applies to easy-weatherable Mesozoic/Tertiary rocks and Mediterranean sequences of landforms and soils. Bioclimatically, the 'Mediterranean'-concept is confined to a limited region, but the landscapes of southern Europe comprise also Submediterranean and mountain climates, and thus numerous non-Mediterranean plants, animals and life communities. Especially at gradients from true Mediterranean to Alpine climates and with a prominent physiographic heterogeneity, high species diversities occur. Natural and anthropogenic island-conditions cause high numbers of endemics

In its nature, the Mediterranean zone displays altogether rather its environmental heterogeneity than its common conditions. If nature is not the over-all unifying factor of the landscapes of Mediterranean Europe, a joint landscape culture might be.

## On culture

A generally accepted definition of culture is: *the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning*. Both material and intangible thus. Land use practices express culture through attributes like: produce (removable matter and benefits), artefacts, technology and management (e.g. planting systems; felling and harvesting systems), shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours (e.g. rituals, skills, values and icons).

The co-evolution with nature and the use of simple instruments in hunting, gathering food and wood for more than half a million years from early hominids to antiquity had cultural landscape impacts too. The distribution of plants and animals changed; speciation and ecotypic variation were modified while selecting and combating crops and livestock and by managing them with long-lasting burning and grazing; large mammals were exterminated. The distinction between *culture* and *nature*, *domesticated* and *wild* is blurred by these lasting impacts.

After the final Glacial, and with the Neolithic Agricultural Revolution the landscapes became ever more culturally defined. In fact, many outlines of landscapes have probably a Neolithic origin: locations of roads, settlements, clearance of woods, field patterns, cultivated plants, domesticated livestock. Moreover myths, legends, rites, traditions and habits and the fundamentals of languages, as related to landscape.

Cultures display local specialisation as well as dispersal and exchanges, which explains that landscapes have respectively both unique and common cultural attributes.

### **On exchange of culture**

Main cultural exchange-mechanisms with landscape impacts were: demic diffusion, cultural transmission by learning, and imperialism, robbery, piracy and brigandism. Exchanged were people as carriers of culture, material culture and immaterial culture.

Mediterranean populations have from prehistoric times on thoroughly been mixed by occupations and migrations over varying distances, including those by slave trade, seasonal and conjunctural labour migration, and finally mass-tourism. People that moved brought their cultures, but exchanges of the latter also occurred by means of communication, of which tv and internet recently intriguingly show their impacts on beliefs, values, customs and behaviours in land use, planning and management.

Examples of intangible culture are language, religion, legislation, customary law, organisation modes, knowledge, skills and styles. By exchanges landscape languages developed with numerous common elements. Religion spread with its organisation, institutions (e.g. monasteries), symbols (e.g. holy forests, *sacri monti*, pilgrim centres and routes, churches, chapels and crosses as signposts), morality, knowledge, skills and management structures. Mediterranean landscapes also display inherited and transferred legislation and customary law related to property, tenancy, use of water, roads. And finally also unifying and differentiating styles in arts, architecture, fashion.

Examples of material culture that spread in different stages over the Mediterranean world are those related to farming (organisation, facilities, crops, livestock), exotic wild plant species, building and construction materials, mining and industrial products, and means of transport and travelling. Most of the present crops and domesticated animals have once been introduced from abroad. Some of these exotics determine to a large extent the present landscapes, like maize, potatoes, tomatoes and sun-flowers. Yucca, agave, prickly pear and palms became present-day icons of Mediterranean conditions. Nearly all these have an American origin.

### **Unique Mediterranean landscape culture**

Unless all these exchanges and external imprints, many unique landscapes developed by: a specific cultural heritage, local constraints and extremes (water annoyance, flooding, long annual snow, cold, summer-drought, steep slopes), and local resources.

Examples of cultural heritage are persistent prehistoric artefacts like stone-age megaliths, Bronze/Iron Age constructions and buildings, Greek-Roman remains and Medieval structures and objects (e.g. impacts of monasteries, *incastellamento* and *campanilismo*, like hill-towns and coastal forts; new technology like water management works, windmills, watermills, etc.). Some Mediterranean regions display prominent expressions of Renaissance and Romanticism, such as Italian villa-landscapes, *mezzadria* landscapes, *bocage* landscapes, *polder*-landscapes and landscapes with inundated fields (*lameiros*, *marcites*, rice-fields).

Unique single constructions and views strongly determine the character of local landscapes. Many of them have a prominent physiography and specific local resources.

### **Cultural footprints and local identity**

Altogether, many different powers and cultures spread subsequently over Mediterranean Europe. Their extension, duration and intensity varied widely. Some societies with *large cultural footprints* reached far beyond their original boundaries as with ancient Greek and Roman cultures, and the American influences during the past five centuries. Opposite to these are cultures with only local cultural footprints, like the *Nuraghen* and *Talayot* cultures. Some cultures with *long-lasting footprints* held for more than a millennium, such as the Roman and Catholic cultures. But for instance the wide-spread southern fascism held only shortly. Altogether, both cultural exchanges and local conditions make landscapes unique natural and cultural mixes, with their own *dramatis personae*, symbols, attributes and specific landscape

biographies. Extremely culturally layered landscapes are those at crossing-points, such as large islands like Crete, Sicily, Sardinia, Mallorca. Their landscape identity resulted from their resistance and resilience with respect to another new external impact, as long as these remained within certain limits. Some landscapes omitted this capacity or became overruled by influences that were too dominant to integrate or buffer, as may be seen along many Mediterranean coasts. Landscapes may become here the shopping malls of a short-sighted society.

### **Unity & uniqueness of Iberian landscapes**

Every landscape is unique. But classificatory seen, some landscapes are more unique than others. Which is scale-dependent and therefore depends on a hierarchy of state factors: macroclimate – lithology – geomorphology and soil, which are at lower levels differentiated by land use and vegetation.

*Exclusive Iberian natural conditions* at landscape level are, compared with other Mediterranean landscapes, mainly: the wet Atlantic and dry Continental climates; the weathered granites of Galicia/N-Portugal and the Central Cordillera; the Atlantic coasts, the deeply incised river valleys with large dynamic streams, and the high inland plains with table-lands. Exceptional within Europe are the America-like dimensions of much of Spain's physiography, which it owes to the distance to the coast of its continental centre. At local/regional level numerous specific natural conditions occur that create equally numerous unique landscapes.

*Large cultural footprint from abroad*, which caused similarities with other Mediterranean regions, are especially Roman land reclamations and agricultural innovations, monasteries and churches, American crops, new technologies with storage lakes, drainage and irrigation, highways, high tension cables, plastic greenhouses, and coastal recreation facilities, etc.

*Some cultural footprints on other Mediterranean landscapes* had Spain by the long-lasting Aragonese-Spanish influence on southern Italy and Sicily, the influence of Spanish orthodox Catholicism on the Stato della Chiesa in central Italy, which limited Renaissance expressions; and the mutual influence of Catalonia and Roussillon.

*Culturally unique* are Iberian landscapes within the Mediterranean for instance by long-lasting Celtic footprints, to be recognized in castros, Moorish influences in architecture, land use and water management, Medieval Reconquest monasteries and land reforms, French Romanesque cathedrals, and for instance the indirect English influences on the Douro port wine area.

*Long-lasting regional landscape differentiation* resulted for instance from physical isolation, merely under poor conditions and a rare physiography (e.g. Galicia, Minho, Trás-os-Montes, Alentejo, Extremadura, Alpujarra landscapes), political isolation (e.g. landscapes with Portuguese military architecture of the Reconquest and defence against Spain), and local adaptation (e.g. Douro terraces, coastal settlements and cultures, *montados/dehesas*, troglodytic dwellings, *lameiros*, *masseiras*, stone bocages like in Trás-os-Montes).