

# SANTIAGO AND THE ROADS TO SANTIAGO: A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE, A CULTURE OF LANDSCAPE

**Francisco Alonso Otero**

Departamento de Geografía. Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

On a not very exact date, but that is supposed to be around 820, at the end of the reign of Alphonse II, the sepulcher of the apostle Saint James the Greater was discovered in the so-called Campo de la Estrella, in a place close to where the Roman city of Iria Flavia was situated, an entranceway to Galicia from the Arosa inlet from remote times. In order to protect the sepulcher, the king ordered the construction of a simple church of masonry and clay, which at the same time would permit the cult of the apostle; but the rise in the number of visits of the most immediate neighbors and believers from lands more and more removed soon caused the church and its sepulcher to be too small; during the reign of Alphonse III these buildings were destroyed and replaced by a more monumental edifice, constructed with ashlar and marble. From that moment on one may consider that the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela begins, in the sense that it is given traditionally as «a trip undertaken individually or collectively, to visit a holy place, where in a particular manner the presence of a supernatural power is manifested.»

Santiago de Compostela is the nucleus in which a combination of large pilgrimage routes converge, a net or network of roads one could almost say, with side roads and sub-side roads that braid, intertwine, and separate. Currently seven pilgrimage routes are fundamentally promoted: the road from Ferrol and A Coruña to Santiago, the coastal road from Irún to Oviedo and from Oviedo to Santiago, the road from Oviedo to Santiago through Lugo, the «French Road,» the road from Sanabria and Verín, the Portuguese road and the road from Fisterra. Over the centuries not all of these routes have had the same intensity of traffic not the same meaning, standing out among all of them the so-called «French road» due to the profound cultural, political and religious legacy that it has left throughout the Middle Ages. Others are a more modern creation, supported by local interests and tourist promotion, more associated with tourism and hiking than with the pilgrimage, and that disappear as rapidly as they appear given that they have almost no type of appeal in the heart of the activity of hiking.

The network of Roman roads is quite developed. Moving past Galicia, the roads to Santiago base themselves on large Roman roads that cross the plateau from east to west, or on different segments of these roads. The routes that stand out most among them are the road from Bourdeaux to Astorga, the road from Zaragoza to Astorga, the silver route (from Mérida to Astorga) or the road from Bearn to Zaragoza.

In Galicia the Roman network is sustained by the following roads: the maritime route, between Valença de Miño and A Coruña; the route from Astorga to Braga through el Bierzo, the ravines of the Sil river and the valley of the Limia river; the New Route from Astorga to Braga, through the Portuguese towns of Bragança and Chaves; the route from Astorga to Lugo and A Coruña; the route from Oviedo to Lugo through the Espina pass and Valledor; and the route from Lugo to Caldeas de Reis, crossing the Ulla river in Ponte Ledesma.

In what follow we will describe some of the principle landscape characteristics of the six principal pilgrim roads to Santiago, leaving the «French Road» for another occasion.

The road from Ferrol to A Coruña and Santiago, parallel to the maritime road of A Coruña to Tuy, was utilized by the pilgrims that arrived by sea from Scandinavia and the British Isles, starting in the twelfth century, reached its apogee during the Hundred Years War (XIV-XV), and entered into decadence in the sixteenth century. The pass from A Coruña was much more traveled than Ferrol's. The two routes—that of Ferrol and that of A Coruña—combined near Mesón do Vento and forged the Tambre river in Sigüero, on whose banks Roman remains have been found, although the current bridge is of medieval origin.

The coast road from Irún to Oviedo was little frequented, since in many sections it was no more than a poorly developed path, with a very rugged and abrupt trajectory. In order to save the inlets or the beds of the many transversal rivers, there were no bridges, and the ferry services were scarce, which caused that in many cases one had to travel through the valleys upstream. The Bidasoa river could be forged in Irún, where the Santiago quarter is situated, or one might go on to Fuenterrabía; the Oria river was forged in Orio; following the difficult pass through the Iciar mountains, the route across the Deva river was found in Mendaro; people passed through Mendaro; people passed through Marquina, the monastery of Cenarruza, Guernica and its inlet, Larrabezúa, the Archanda mountain, the sanctuary of Begoña; the crossing over the Nervión river was made either over the Santiago bridge or forging it next to the monastery of the Decalced Carmelites of the El Desierto, facing Portugalete; afterwards, the crossing by boat from Oriñón, the crossing by boat of the Asón river, between Laredo and Santoña, and the crossing of the Santander bay, between the Somo point and the city; the crossing of the Pas river in Arce, another of the Saja and Besaya rivers, in Barreda; another, over the two branches of the San Vicente de la Barquera inlet, also by boat; farther on the boat crossing of the Sella river in Ribadesella; finally one went through the preacoastal furrow until Oviedo, or along the coast, crossing the Villaviciosa inlet by boat.

The road from Oviedo to Santiago became a motivation for pilgrimages from the time that the relics of the Holy Ark were transferred from Toledo to the Church of San Salvador of Oviedo, especially between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.

Few pilgrims traveled to Oviedo by the coastal route from Irún; the majority of them left the French Road in the city of León and followed an old path along the Bernesga river until the Pajares mountain pass (in the Leonese part it was called the Arbás pass, in the Asturian

part, Pajares) and would descend along steep inclines until the valley of the Lena river, to then reach the village of Mieres and, after climbing over the Padrún peak, arrive at Oviedo.

From Oviedo the route moved along the slopes of the Naranco mountain and descended to the Nalón valley, there to cross the river by the Peñaflor bridge, of remote origin (it already existed in the twelfth century). From here, the route subdivided into two branches; the most frequented passed through Pravia and Muros de Nalón, circled the village of Cudillero, and stayed on the level coast until Luarca; it passed the Navia inlet by boat, as it did with Ribadeo's; from that point the route headed inland toward the interior of the lands of Lugo in order to find the «French Road» in Arzúa.

The route from Oviedo to Santiago through Lugo has been and is scarcely traveled. A good part of its trajectory coincides with or is parallel to a roman road, and it is probably that the Asturian kingdom expanded through it toward Galician territory, and also that King Alfonso II used it to reach the recently discovered sepulcher of James the Greater.

It crosses the high plain of La Espina until the town of Tineo, and then heads toward the Palo pass in order to then descend toward Valledor, in the valley of the Oro river, and then to the profound furrow of the valley of the Navia river; from there it rises to the high lands of Grandas de Salime and the hilly and sinuous ridges of the divide between the Navia and Eo rivers, the border between Asturias and Galicia, through the towns of A Fonsagrada and Castroverde, with beautiful toponyms along a mountain road: Piedras Apañadas, Piedrafitela, Montouto, Degolada.

After crossing Lugo's urban nucleus, the route crosses the Miño river over the old Roman bridge and follows toward the west near the old paleochristian temple of Santalla (Santa Eulalia) de Bóveda in order to reach the «French Road» in Melide.

The road from Sanabria and Verín is a variant of the old Roman road known as the «silver road,» from which one branches off in Zamora and Benavente. After crossing the complex orographic juncture of the western sector of the province of Zamora and the oriental one of the province of Ourense, through a region barely populated today it reaches the banks of the Miño river in the city of Ourense; then heading northwest, it passes over the Ulla river in a very ancient forge, near the Pico Sacro, at the gates of Compostela.

During the Visigothic period it was a route with a certain amount of traffic, and during the Muslim invasion it was employed by Arabic troops in the process of occupation of the lands of the north and northwest of the peninsula; it was also used by Jewish and Muslim merchants attracted by the movement and the commerce created by Santiago as a new center of pilgrimage; it was also traveled by Christian troops from the kingdoms of León and Portugal during the Reconquest.

It was used by pilgrims only during the thirteenth century, when they headed toward Santiago from Extremadura and Andalusia, especially after the conquest of Cordoba and Seville, thus stabilizing the lands of the Guadalquivir valley. It is also the moment in which the Andalusian Mozarabs encounter a greater ease for moving through the reconquered territories, to thus be able to make the pilgrimage to Santiago. This route entered into decadence in the sixteenth century.

The Portuguese route, with a southern direction, has superimposed itself upon or runs parallel, along a good part of its trajectory, to the road known as the Maritime Route; on top of it has been superimposed the medieval road, the modern highway, the new autoroute, the

tracks of the railway and, of course, the pilgrim route to Compostela, by which Portuguese pilgrims have not ceased to flow from Braga, Oporto, Coimbra, Obidos, Santarem, Lisbon or Evora.

From Compostela also the Jacobean route was prolonged until Cape Fisterra, situated on the Costa da Morte, at the most western extreme of the Galician coast, where since Roman times, at least since the second century B.C., it was a place in which diverse types of pagan ceremonies and rituals were celebrated, with reference to the sunsets and the Milky Way. Once those locales were Christianized, starting in the eleventh century, two sanctuaries were erected, Santa María das Arenas, in Fisterra, where the Holy Christ is venerated, and A Nosa Señora da Barca, in Muxia, where the Virgin Mary is revered.