

THE DOURO VALLEY (IN PORTUGAL): HERITAGE CORRIDOR OF HUMANITY – FROM THE PAST TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Abstract

The conceptual convergence of the notions of landscape and heritage, conveyed by the international normative documents, assumes them as an historical construction resulting from the interaction between society and Nature. In the Douro Valley, the presence of a significant number of landscapes (urban, rural and natural) of interest and of international value turns it into an authentic heritage corridor. The sustainability and resilience of this cultural landscape imply its acceptance as an inheritance received and to be passed on to future generations, through the perpetuation of its cultural identity.

Key words Landscape, Heritage Corridor, Humanity, Douro Valley

The concepts of heritage and landscape in international documents

In the last decades, the UN, ICOMOS and the European Council have been consolidating a process of reflection about the rational use and the profitability of the natural, cultural and economic pre-existing resources. This process, materialized through the issue of various international normative documents (Charters, Recommendations and Conventions) is marked by the evolution of the notions of heritage and landscape. Landscape and heritage are understood, nowadays, through a wide and holistic concept, as a social and historical product, as a legacy that should be preserved, valued and incorporated active and dynamically, in the processes of social-economic development, under sustainability criteria, so that the received inheritance can be transmitted in the long term.

In this sense, and after successive conceptual expansions, there are two fundamental questions, given the intricate inter-relations between the ideas of heritage and of landscape conveyed by that set of documents. The first question relates to the current meaning of heritage that claims a broad consideration which incorporates the landscape as an historical construction. And the second question relates to the operational delimitation of landscape which, in the broadest sense, covers the set of manifestations that result from the relationships between Society and Nature. In fact, the text from the European Landscape Convention¹, among others texts issued by those International Organizations, recognizes landscape as an expression of the diversity of the European Cultural and Natural Heritage, and the basis of their identity. This document emphasizes precisely the idea of landscape as a cultural and historical construction, meaning, as a space of complex organization, a product of the sum and interaction of multiple processes, both natural and anthropogenic. The intricate tissue of the relationships that are established between the populations and their territory, underlying the process of spatial occupation and organization, is translated in simultaneous or successive overlapping of different cultures, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, in its articulation and juxtaposition. A fact that contributes to the acceptance of the ideas of landscape and heritage as a palimpsest, considering a vertical reading of the space, and as a corridor that connects and relates points or areas, from their horizontal reading. This idea is implied in the spirit of those international documents and has in the Douro territory a clear example of the spatial and temporal continuity of the secular human actions and

¹ (European Council, 2000) <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/treaties/Html/176.htm> The European Landscape Convention was signed in Florence in 2000 and transcribed to the Portuguese regulation in 2005 (Decree-Law No. 4/2005, of February 14)

marks imprinted in the territory within the historical process of construction and transformation of its landscape, recognized worldwide for its natural and/or cultural interest and value.

Brief natural and cultural history of the Douro Valley landscape

Douro River as a linear element of Iberian expression unifies the territories of the interior and coast through a route that, in Portuguese territory extends for about 300 Km (including its international course), being characterized for its high geographical and cultural complexity and diversity, although it is, in its whole, an «landscape unit»², of undeniable beauty and landscape and heritage richness, both on national and worldwide level. The natural and cultural history of this landscape (of landscapes) translates, precisely, the adaptation of the human communities to the environmental variables (relieve, soil, climate, water), which determined a greater concentration of the population in the inferior part of the river where the climate is milder (Atlantic influence) and the topography less pronounced, or the construction of terraces for the cultivation of vines on the slopes of schist, where the climate has Mediterranean influences (Alto-Douro), differentiating itself from the most upstream section where the poly-culture (almond and olive groves, vineyards and vegetable gardens) alternated with the granitic cliffs and the thickets that grant it a greater biodiversity. With effect, the landscape of the Douro Valley is the result of the use that people make of the ecological niches present through arduous and permanent work that allowed their own survival, from the beginning of the humanization of this territory (from about 20 000 years ago) until the development of a traditional agriculture responsible for the construction of landscapes, considered to this day, biologically balanced, socially useful and aesthetically beautiful.

The very embedded valley constitutes a morphological unit that is characterized by climatic oscillations (from the Atlantic influences to the continental ones) and significant altimetric ones (on the margins of the river there are many altitudes ranging from sea level, near the mouth, and 120 meters, near the border, up to the greatest altitudes, associated with the ridges that reach 600 and 800 meters), being included in the Old Massif, corresponding a geological substrate constituted mainly by schist, occurring sporadically, granite, and in which predominate the lithosols³.

Historically, the uses of the soil are determined by these natural factors and by a process of human intervention, slow and progressive, of which resulted an extremely original agricultural landscape, which variable pattern along the river, expresses a specific understanding of the territory.

The presence of the river that runs perpendicular to the ocean, fitted between steep slopes, and the grandeur of the valley highlighted by the clipping of the valleys by its main effluents, determines distinct ecological situations that are on the basis of different cultural expressions. These are responsible for a diversity of landscapes that, associated to the valley and the river, hold a common denominator: a high identity and strong character, a result of the wise and enterprising work of generations that, for centuries have been able to take full advantage of the pre-existing hard natural conditions, building on the ecological history of the place, a cultural landscape that does not exist elsewhere. This landscape integrates an unmatched set of areas, urban, rural and natural, meanwhile classified as “areas of protected landscape” of international value that validates, with justice, the idea of landscape as a dynamic cultural construction in permanent evolution and transformation. In fact, in the Portuguese Douro territory there are four areas of worldwide recognized interest and value (from downstream to upstream): the Historical Centre of Oporto (classified as World Heritage by UNESCO in 1996), the Vineyard Landscape of Alto-Douro (classified by UNESCO as Cultural Landscape, in 2001), the Archaeological Park of Côa Valley (inscribed in 1998 in the List of UNESCO’s World

² Within this article, the Douro valley is considered a landscape unit, even though there may be a distinction of the character of the different parts of the river (Lower-Douro, *Riba-Douro*, Douro Wine Region and Upper-Douro), as referred to in the work “*Contributos para a Identificação e Caracterização da Paisagem em Portugal Continental*”, volume 2 (2004) from the authors Alexandre Cancela d’Abreu, Teresa Pinto Correia and Rosário Oliveira, edited by the General Directorate for Landscape Planning and Urban Development.

³ (Abreu, Correia, Oliveira, 2004)

Heritage, under the designation “Prehistoric Rock Art Sites”), and the National Park of the International Douro (Natura 2000 network) (fig.1).

These areas correspond to distinct and successive cycles or stages of the colonization of the territory, marked by the rational and sustainable use of the natural and cultural resources by the human communities. The historical process of spatial organization and occupation that underlies it, puts into evidence the construction of a landscape (of landscapes) that served, through time, as *habitat* of several people, civilizations and generations, and it is recognized today as a unique cultural heritage in worldwide context.

This unique heritage corridor constitutes a living and evolving example of a landscape demonstrative of diverse periods and layers of the natural and human history. Of millennial occupation, since prehistory, the Douro Valley constitutes a cultural and ecological corridor that testifies the adaptation of the human communities to the circumstances of the environment. The history of its humanization reveals a secular process of landscape construction (urban, rural) based on an extraordinary ability to take advantage, in the best possible way, of the difficult natural conditions and its adaption to civilizational evolution. The urban evolution of Oporto or the cultivation of vines in terraces, on the steep slopes, testify the effort of multiple generations that were able to construct, over centuries, landscapes that correspond, today, to cultural assets classified by UNESCO as World Heritage.

Douro River as a landscape and heritage corridor of universal value

The idea of *continuum naturale* and *culturale* as a principle of spatial organization of the historical and traditional landscapes (and resumed, today, as a fundamental assumption under the current plans of landscape intervention both in urban and rural environments), has, in the Douro Valley, an unmistakable example of a model of occupation of territory that has always sought the long term development both of Nature and Society.

In the Douro territory, the relationship between economy – culture – ecology created a multi-faceted and complex landscape reality that, based on the use of methods and environmental optimized methods and solutions, is anticipatory in the time of the emerging concepts of sustainability, which lead to the internalization of landscape as a second nature by the resident populations, and which is identifiable in the adaptation of villages, of farms and of the diversified agricultural mosaic to its surroundings and to the productive process, not only just the cultivation of the vine, but of also Mediterranean cultivations, as almond and olive trees, in slopes or in the vegetable gardens and orchards in the more fertile lands in the areas adjacent to the water lines, and of thickets in areas of greater altitude (img.1) ⁴. In this sense, this landscape understood as heritage resulting from successive civilizational and gerational interventions and, as such, deeply rooted in time, it acquired a social, economic and heritage value, by being composed of elements of which the national identity, as well as European, depends. Indeed, of very ancient occupation, the Douro Valley constituted a ...*corridor of people and culture*⁵ that here left their marks, turning it into an historical reservoir, a container of traces and memories, and in reading area of the world.

As an historical compendium that reveals signs of an old and continuous human presence and occupation, the Douro cultural landscape, having the river and its tributaries as a structuring and crucial element, it takes form as a collective work of art that integrates the following set of rare natural and cultural assets, considered true treasures of Humanity to be preserved and perpetuated:

(i) The Historic Centre of Oporto, situated on the right margin of the river, corresponds to the urban space delimited by the Fernandina Wall which was consolidated over the last eight centuries through a thorough process of adaptation of multicolor houses to the rugged topography, which grants it a strong character, to which contribute, with equal measure, the monastery of Serra do Pilar and the D. Luís I Bridge, to which UNESCO attributed the status of Cultural Heritage of the World (imgg.3, 4);

⁴ (Aguiar, 2002)

⁵ (Aguiar, 2002; Pereira, 2011)

(ii) Equal distinction has deserved the vineyard landscape of Alto-Douro that corresponds to the central area of the region of Port Wine which translates into a monumental cultural landscape considered a masterpiece of the human ingenuity to adapt to the scarcity of soil and water and to the accentuated slope, of which resulted the artistic construction of immense continuous terraces supported by walls of schist where the vines are cultivated for the production of the famous wine, between farms of the XVIII century and villages that contribute to the perpetuation of a traditional social-economic activity responsible for the construction of a landscape that is unique in all of the world⁶ (imgg.5, 6);

(iii) The Archeological Park of Côa is considered the biggest and most significant set of Paleolithic rock art on the outdoors worldwide. The cultural continuity of this place, which extends for over twenty kilometers, is considered an authentic sanctuary associated to a possible veneration of the river waters, which would be sacred, shows us hundreds of pictures of great mammals (horses, deer, etc.) with more than 20 millennia, but also more recent pictures, dated of the Iron Age, representing stylized human figures and geometrical motifs⁷ (img. 7);

(iv) The Natural Park of International Douro is considered an area of protected landscape for its great biological richness associated both to the diversity of the agricultural systems and to the natural habitats and species of the wild fauna and flora present in its territory, and it integrates the Natura 2000 network which constitutes an European ecological network of preservation of biodiversity, considered the main instrument of conservation of Nature in the European common space (img.8).

This set of landscapes with extremely rich, intelligible historical, cultural and natural content, holds a high identity associated to river Douro, to the morphology of the valley and the use of its slopes for both the settling of the historic city of Oporto and for the development of the cultivation of vines, almond and olive trees. The construction of these landscapes corresponds to the possible adaptation and transformation of the hard biophysical conditions present, of which resulted a coherence of uses that, covering the multi-functionality both in urban and in rural spaces, reveal their resilience and sustainability.

However, the landscape and heritage corridor of the Douro valley as a linear structure of ecological and culturally fragile landscapes demands a careful and thorough management that conciliates the objectives of environmental and heritage protection, and of agricultural and wine production with the objectives of enjoyment connected to cultural tourism and ecotourism. In this heritage corridor of Humanity, the organized landscapes that integrate it hold a high aesthetic quality and a singular sensorial dimension that comes from the strong feeling of grandeur resulting from the natural morphology and from the secular and balanced human interventions. The safeguard and perpetuation of its cultural identity will pass by maintaining and valuing the traditional social-economic activities associated to its own productive sustainability which, complemented with actions of dissemination and dynamism of this set of protected areas for the sake of a cultural and leisure tourism, will contribute to the active protection of the landscapes and world heritage of the Douro valley.

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⁶ (Aguiar, 2002)

⁷ (www.uc.pt/fozcoa; Pereira, 2011)

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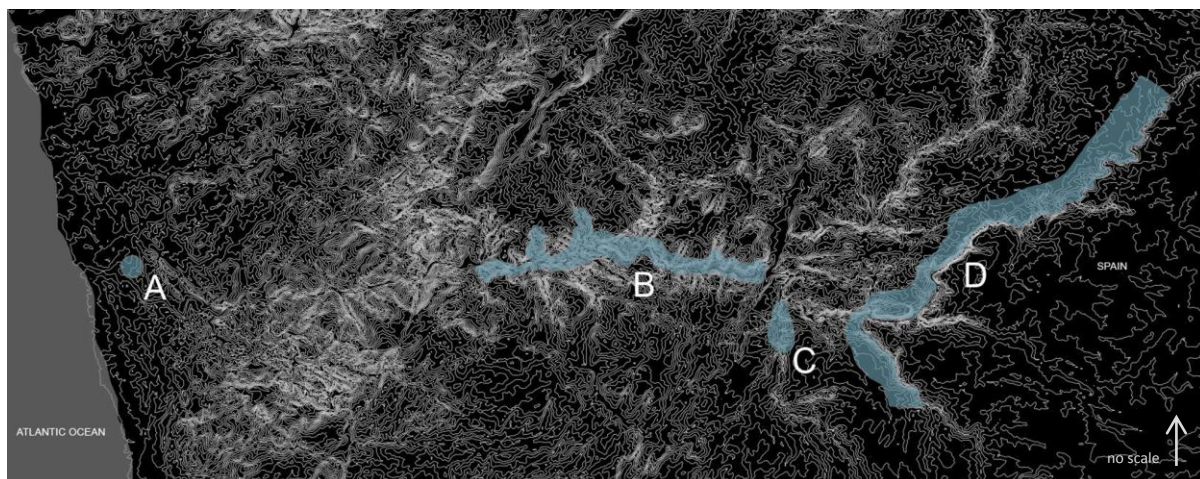


Figure 1 – the Douro Valley: landscape and world heritage corridor - (A) Historic Centre of Oporto; (B) Wine Cultural Landscape; (C) Côa Prehistoric Rock Art Site; (D) Natural Park of Internacional Douro.



Image 1 – the Douro landscape



Image 2 – Historic Centre of Oporto



Image 3 – Historic Centre of Oporto



Image 4 – the cultural landscape of Alto-Douro: wine-producing farm complexes with winemaking-terraces



Image 5 – Alto-Douro vineyard landscape: winemaking-terraces



Image 6 – Prehistoric Rock Art Site of the Côa Valley Archeological Park



Image 7 – Internacional Douro Natural Park