

Archaeological Heritage as a main sustainable resource for the development of rural areas: the experience of the Archaeological Zone of Las Médulas (ZAM)

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Summary

In this paper we will present some of the questions and problems we encountered in the development of the project of the Archaeological Zone of Las Médulas. The research work carried out in the area since 1988 articulates all heritage proposals and interventions. This is particularly important in an area in which the archaeological heritage is becoming one of its most important resources. As a result, the heritage must be taken into account in any decision related to its management of the area. We want to expound how the efforts of our research group, regional government and local communities are co-ordinated in order to make more effective social, economic and cultural strategies, while protecting this cultural landscape.

The integration of research, valorisation and management has articulated all the proposals and interventions related to the cultural heritage of the ZAM

In this paper, we want to expound the experience of the Archaeological Zone of Las Médulas, a cultural heritage research and valorisation project. As we all know, Las Médulas are in the North-West of Spain, in the Bierzo region. The landscape of this rural area is marked by the impressive vestiges of the biggest gold mine of the Roman Empire.

Our intervention in Las Médulas has been integrated into several research projects which have affected various areas of the north-western Iberian Peninsula since 1988. Our work in the area is closely linked to very well programmed research with precise archaeological and historical objectives: we are interested in the study of the historical processes that took place in the region during its integration with the Roman world (SÁNCHEZ-PALENCIA, 2000). Three researchers from the Institute of History of CSIC, the Department of Prehistory and History of the University of Valladolid and the Institute of Historical Heritage of the Department of Culture have directed the research team. This team integrated specialists from seven departments and laboratories of different universities and research centres. Many students from different universities have collaborated with us.

Through the study of the landscape, conceived as a cultural creation, the archaeological project devel-

oped at Las Médulas has allowed us to investigate and to valorise all the technological elements related to gold exploitation and all those related to pre-Roman and Roman settlements and palaeoenvironmental and palaeoeconomic conditions.

We want to point out that, from the very beginning, we have considered that research, valorisation and dissemination are to be viewed from a global perspective. From this point of view, Las Médulas has been considered, on one hand, a global study of a Roman mining area, from a landscape archaeology perspective; and on the other, an archaeological zone, which can be managed as an archaeological park. Thus, our work has two complementary parts: research and archaeological heritage. The objective of the research is the same as that of the park: the comprehension of the historical evolution that has produced the mining landscape that we can see in the present day.

In short, we think that it would be nonsense to carry out research without this necessary valorisation and

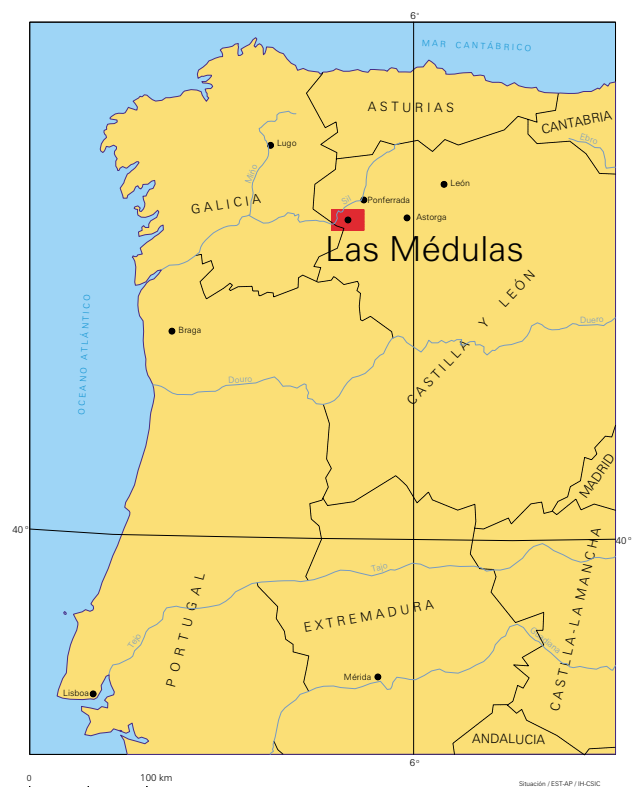


Figure 1. The location of the Archaeological Zone of Las Médulas (North-West of Spain).



Figure 2. View of the main sector of Las Médulas gold mine (Photograph: F.-J. Sánchez-Palencia).



Figure 3. The chestnut trees, an important environmental value of this Cultural Landscape, were first introduced as a crop in Roman times (Photograph: F.-J. Sánchez-Palencia).

social projection (OREJAS, 2001; SÁNCHEZ-PALENCIA, 2001). And it is precisely this historical process which allows us to understand, explain and manage this cultural heritage.

All cultural and environmental components of the landscape are integrated and articulated in Las Médulas

From this point of view – the conviction that heritage proposals and research strategies must be consistent, we did a first study aimed at the valorisation of the area as a Cultural Park in 1992 (SÁNCHEZ-PALENCIA, 1992). This study was financed by the Department of Culture of the Spanish government and co-ordinated by our department. The Regional Government executed the study. To mention but some of its main results:

- Creation and management of four complementary itineraries marked with information panels.
- Improvement of access to the archaeological sites.

- Publication of brochures and a guide to the area (SÁNCHEZ-PALENCIA, 1999).
- Creation of an information centre.

As a result, other initiatives were also developed, such as information courses for people of the region to become guides for the visitors to the area. These courses were financed by the European Social Fund.

In 1997, after its inscription as ‘Bien de Interés Cultural’ (the main protection figure of the Spanish Cultural Heritage legislation), Las Médulas was included on the World Heritage List. At the same time, scientific projects have been going forward, and this project has promoted an important part of the valorisation and tourism exploitation proposals.

Las Médulas as a Cultural Park: the design of an integral management plan of the area

It is important to stress that the whole area is protected not only by the Spanish legislation on Cultural Heritage, but also by the Environmental legislation. All natural and cultural components of this landscape are protected under the same territorial limits. More precisely, these cultural and environmental elements are the main axis on which all our proposals related to the area are articulated.

During the last semester of 2001, the Regional Administration headed the realisation of a framework programme for the global organisation and management of the Archaeological Zone of Las Médulas. Our team co-ordinated it. Archaeological heritage holds an important place in it, but we made an effort to integrate the historical heritage in a wider sense, as well as the natural heritage, the traditional activities and the social and economic realities of the area. To sum up, a priority for us has been the design of a global organisational plan that considered the whole area a Cultural Park.

The plan has two main parts (FERNÁNDEZ MANZANO, 2001). The first part is composed of a wide set of documentation, which underpins the plan. Documentation is composed of several studies (for instance, studies on heritage, tourism or the environment), five catalogues (archaeological, environmental, socio-economical, etc.) and a set of graphics (fundamentally maps of localisation, accesses, boundaries of the archaeological zone and services).

As said above, the plan is designed to achieve a rational and sustainable development through balanced proposals, to protect and to promote the various resources of the area. A series of proposals have been made, which form the core of the plan. They are all related to cultural and natural heritage. This plan must co-ordinate all the initiatives of the area and guarantee a sustainable development of this region.

General proposals want to enhance land use management. In order to achieve this, this Plan proposes several measures related to the preservation of Cultural Heritage. This also means considering the improvement of service and information infrastructures and the protection of the environment.

It is not possible to explain the whole plan in detail here. Briefly, because of its interest for the main theme of the Cracow Conference, we want to comment on those proposals related to Heritage and Tourism, both archaeological and historical.

This Heritage has become the main resource for the local communities through tourism. Tourism has greatly changed during the last few years, both quantitatively and qualitatively and the valorisation of Cultural Heritage is now the motor of other changes in the social and economic structures of the area. Tourism proposals follow two main lines:

- The proposals concerning information for visitors. A good example of this is the design of a ring or circular itinerary which facilitates the peripheral circulation of traffic and people relieving tourist pressure at certain points (such as the centre of the gold mine) and making some villages less crowded, and so directing and disseminating people throughout the whole area.
- The proposals related to tourist exploitation, like the diversification and improvement of infrastructures and the organisation of tourism (tourism is more and more important in the area).

Final considerations

Our efforts are aimed at the harmonisation of interventions and decisions (both public and private), which will allow the protection of this exceptional cultural heritage as well as the improvement of the quality of life in this rural area. In order to achieve this, we are also interested in creating the necessary tools for the local management of this heritage.

Our cultural heritage constitutes an essential element in the development both of the rural areas and of an intelligent tourism in Europe. In order to achieve this, it is indispensable, in the case of Las Médulas, that many people who do not belong to the research team take over more responsibilities, initiatives and benefits; that is, the local and regional administrators, and the local inhabitants.

We want to underline the usefulness, from the beginning of a project, of theoretical and methodological approaches being coherent with the possibilities of the planning of cultural parks. It is inadvisable to wait till the end of the research to make the design for the intervention in cultural heritage, its management and exploitation. Actually, the best guarantee for the preservation of cultural heritage is a global programme like this.

We do not believe in the direct exportation of models. Each local or regional reality is different, and it is necessary to protect the diversity of the regional identities within Europe. But it is also true that the confrontation of experiences is necessary and a great stimulant for building up and developing true and fruitful co-operation.

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