

## **On the Navia-Eo Archaeological Plan, Navia Historical Park and the creation of the Museum Castro de Chao Samartín**

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The hillforts of the Navia valley are the most popular group of archaeological sites in the open air in Asturias. Their investigation developed at the same time as Archaeology became a science and the news about excavations follow from the 19th century on. The first report about the archaeological interventions at *El Castelón* in Coaña is published in 1878, written by José María Flórez, in which the results of the exploration are described with surprisingly modern criteria for that time. Nevertheless, it will be from the middle of the 20th century, after the Spanish Civil War, when some of these settlements became scientifically famous so that they were known all through Europe.

This happened thanks to the investigations of Antonio García y Bellido, who together with the Asturian scholar Juan Uría Ríu, began in 1939 the excavations at Coaña hillfort spreading them in successive years to Pencia Hillfort, Boal. The international recognition of García y Bellido and his immense scientific work gave to these sites a great diffusion amongst European archaeologists; the extraordinary drawings of the Spanish researcher contributed to this result. His recreations, called by him *anaparátasis*, reflected the image of Coaña Hillfort as a paradigm of the Iron Age fortified village.

During the second half of the century there were many interventions at these and other hillforts of the area in which, together with recognized archaeologists such as Francisco Jordá there were amateur investigators who faced their excavations with different intensity and fortune. Unfortunately, the information obtained during these campaigns did not increase significantly the knowledge of hillforts although they helped to maintain the ruins exhumed and therefore exposed to an unavoidable degradation.

In the middle of the eighties investigations were taken again, under guidance and sponsorship of the Government of the Principality of Asturias. There was the possibility of incorporating Coaña into the National Plan of Archaeological Parks which was beginning at that time promoted by the Ministry of Culture of Spain. Nevertheless, this was not possible, since the state authorities rejected Coaña, accepting Campa de Torres, Gijón, instead. This decision motivated the Principality of Asturias to assume the creation of a second archaeological park, centred in Coaña, where investigation, conservation and diffusion of the principal sites of that area were to take place.

Since then and for a decade the Principality of Asturias assigned important amounts to the development of the project; this led to the inauguration of the Didactic Room at Coaña hillfort in 1993, provided with exhibition room, projection room, stores, cafeteria and parking. Nevertheless, and in spite of the budgetary effort, the results were not very satisfactory, as there was no real project to define the legal identity of the park, the area of implementation, the objectives and its management type; this derived into a disorganized development of the actions, mainly in the archaeological excavations, which did not lead neither to the improvement of the conservation state of the ruins nor to an adequate setting for visitors. The lack of interest of most of the municipalities worsened this process which ended in many cases with the desertion of the archaeological remains.

Faced with this situation, the Council of Culture of the Principality of Asturias requested in 1997 a director plan to be drawn up which should establish the priorities of archaeological intervention in western Asturias in the following aspects: conservation, research and diffusion.

The document was named Navia Basin Archaeological Director Plan although, the area of action spread eastwards including also the riverside councils of the rivers Porcía and Eo. As a whole, an area of almost 1,600 Km<sup>2</sup>, which included seventeen municipalities, in a territory which spreads from coastal levels up to 1,300 m of altitude. A diverse landscape, sometimes abrupt, on which hundreds of archaeological remains are distributed. A varied collection constituted by Palaeolithic sites, some with cave art, a wide range of megaliths, mining sites of Roman times and, mainly, fortified proto-historical villages.

In the selection of targets, initially seventeen archaeological sites, preference was given to conservation and conditioning of the most exposed ruins, proposing to adapt other places which met the requirements included in the Letter of Cultural Tourism adopted by the ICOMOS in 1976 and managed by the Ministry of Culture for the definition of archaeological parks. In synthesis, the aspects considered were juridical questions related to the property and range of protection, the state of conservation, the monumentality of the archaeological remains as essential support for the understanding of the remains and its main components, the degree of scientific, educational or historical interest, the quality of the environment of the sites and the negative effects which tourist promotion could originate on the sites and their surroundings.

Other aspects to be considered in our case, due to the short amount of the budget, were the depopulation, the isolation of the sites and the local incomprehension. It is necessary to make clear that the counties of the west of Asturias have suffered a secular neglect with regard to the central area of the region, a discrimination that is still suffered today in essential questions. Although it is true that this backwardness helped to the conservation of traditional forms which had disappeared in a good part of Asturias and moderated the catastrophic effects which intensive mechanization of the rural environment causes on the archaeological patrimony in more dynamic regions, the administrative attention to these goods and the investment of resources in its study and conservation also provoked confusion, and sometimes opposition within the local population which relegated in their access to numerous basic services, thought that in their environment there were needs which required more urgent attention.

At the same time, the historical heritage and particularly, the archaeological sites which had been until then a complementary aspect to the tourist offer in Asturias, oriented basically to the exploitation of environment and landscape, saw that suddenly the thin balance between its marginal character and the tourist pressure had been broken. The enthusiasm with which Asturias was submitting to the adventure of tourism, especially of rural tourism, caused a dangerous unbalance of the situation. The flow of visitors which approached the region was increasing although orientated towards scattered destinations: Coaña Hillfort received more than 50,000 visitors a year, the Ethnographic Museum at Grandas de Salime 23,000, and Taramundi, with no official recount, received several tens of thousands of tourists.

Therefore, another objective was to establish (taking archaeological resources as milestones) itineraries which were attractive and easy to reach for the visitors so that this could give boost to those attractive sites which had no connection although they were only at one hour's driving distance one from the others.

Taking into account these factors, an action programme was designed in which, independently from the archaeological remains, their abundance, or scientific importance (in some cases extraordinary), practical and urgency criteria were given priority (e.g., European funds, collaboration agreements with the councils or actions from other public administrations) following international recommendations for conservation and promotion of archaeological sites. In this sense, the Director Plan expressed its refusal to generalised archaeological excavations, except for those where the basic means for a study, consolidation and publication of the work were guaranteed. Isolated interventions were applied to the rest of the cases, usually very modest, which improved the preservation condition as well as the understanding of their most significant points. The essential condition was a maintenance agreement shared with the local entities, either private or public. The characteristics of the local archaeological heritage with easy recognizable monuments and beautiful landscapes allowed foreseeing visible results in the short term.

This was a project supported by joint responsibility and subsidiariness of interventions, which pretended to favour the indefinite incorporation of new resources to the existing cultural offer of the council, without asking for a substantial increase of investments, and involving gradually the highest number of people and institutions in the protection, conservation and promotion of the archaeological heritage.

The social response was very positive and the majority of town councils agreed with the objectives proposed within the Director Plan. One year later, in 1998, once the Navia-Porcía Development Centre (which was to manage the funds from the PRODER Programme assigned to the area) had been constituted, nine of the councils came to an agreement on an investment plan which assumed all the objectives and strategies of the Director Plan; all this would be developed within the frame of a new promotional form: River Navia Historical Park.

River Navia Historical Park, which is at present managed by a foundation, includes the councils of Boal, Coaña, El Franco, Grandas de Salime, Illano, Navia, Pesoz, Tapia de Casariego and Villayón and was created with the aim to make the region a highlighted tourist destination. The central axes of the park are the preservation and valuation of natural and cultural resources. With this purpose arrangements were made for the different archaeological sites, such as conditioning works and sign posting, as well as the construction of a visitors centre in the surroundings of Chao Samartín.

The project for the building was commissioned by the Council of Culture of the Principality of Asturias to the architects Joaquín Menéndez and Pablo Gamonal who, in collaboration with the archaeological team, elaborated a document which described how the building should be endowed with enough premises to include an exhibition hall and services for the visitors, a warehouse, a laboratory and offices to hold the archaeological activity developed within the Navia Basin Archaeological Plan. The work was done with the funds of a second PRODER Programme and inaugurated in April 2007.

Thanks to the advance of the archaeological investigations sponsored by the Council of Culture of the Principality of Asturias there was an increase of new facilities. The perseverance of the institutional support made possible to verify the extraordinary abundance and historical importance of sites such as Chao Samartín and recover for the Asturian hillforts the renown they had had long ago within the proto-historical Spanish archaeology. Ten research works developed within the last decade and about one hundred titles published in scientific and divulging works prove the vitality of the project.