



JAVIER PÉREZ GIL

*Professor of the Theory and History of Architecture
(University of Valladolid)*

At the age of 17, he founded the 'Pro-Pilgrims' Hostel citizens' group in León (1994–1995), which called on the City Council to provide basic infrastructure for the Way of St James.

This group later developed into the Pulchra Leonina Association of Friends of St James' Way, which was established in 1996. He was a founding member and the association's first secretary.

The Way as a Cultural Phenomenon and Cultural Heritage as a Journey

In 1670, the Bolognese clergyman Domenico Laffi published *Viaggio in Ponente a San Giacomo di Galitia e Finisterre per Francia e Spagna*, in which he recounted his experiences as a pilgrim. On his way to El Burgo Ranero, he describes what happened to him as he crossed the Páramo del Payuelo region (Las Matas), an area sometimes mistaken for Tierra de Campos by inexperienced visitors, despite its geographical and historical differences and limited interaction. This is a region that appears austere yet possibly embodies the purest essence of the Camino. Few stretches can boast such a dense network of historic routes (almost a system in itself, in terms of the new Law 7/2024 on Cultural Heritage of Castile and León), including the Via Trajana, the Southern Route and the French Way. There are few landscapes through which

the pilgrim will pass that are so austere, unadorned and silent as to compel spiritual introspection, which is, after all, more than half the Way. While the pilgrimage may have begun as an end in itself (the relics and indulgences), it is, above all, a means to an end: a personal, inner journey.

“...we set off for El Burgo Ranero, four leagues away, but having walked some three leagues across those sandy plains, we came across a dead pilgrim, and two wolves arrived and began to devour his body; we drove them off and continued on towards El Burgo, where we arrived after dark; we went to fetch the chaplain so that he removed the body. We also sought lodging, but it was so poor that we had to sleep on the ground, for here everyone is a shepherd tending their flocks, and the village consists entirely of thatched huts...”

From this passage, we are going to focus on a couple of details that might go unnoticed amidst the gruesomeness of the event.

Firstly, the landscape, which we all have a sense of, but perhaps not with great accuracy. In historical terms, three centuries are not a long time, and we may take the description of that stretch between Sahagún and El Burgo for granted, with its unobstructed horizon. However, in those days it was markedly different, with extensive communal woodlands (so unusual in Tierra de Campos), as well as the presence of the now-vanished Monte Grande de San Benito, the historic timber reserve of Sahagún Abbey. This stretched from Calzada del Coto towards Calzadilla de los Hermanillos, Bercianos del Real Camino and Gordaliza del Pino, which remained until Mendizábal confiscated church estates, with only the Mahudes wood remaining today.



Secondly, let us turn our attention to the urban landscape and its domestic architecture. Laffi tells us that it was an impoverished village, 'entirely made up of thatched huts'. However, something does not quite add up. This does not align with our perception of El Burgo Ranero, or the traditional architecture of the region, which has been characterised by the use of clay and roof tiles since time immemorial. But that is how it was three and a half centuries ago, when thatched roofs predominated in Las Matas villages. And it still does. And that should make us reflect on the presence of change in cultural phenomena as they are expressions or products of human communities that are constantly evolving, sometimes imperceptibly and sometimes at a rapid pace, as in our own era. What Laffi experienced was the authentic mid-17th-century landscape and architecture of El Burgo Ranero, which differed from that of the early 20th century. We cannot say for certain what it would have been like a few centuries ago. Likewise, the landscape and architecture we see today are authentic cultural expressions of El Burgo Ranero. I am not only referring to the rammed earth and adobe buildings plastered with mud, but also the modern industrial ones, even the rather unsightly ones. The shepherds wrapped in sheepskin coats that the oldest among us still remember were as much a part of the countryside as the grandparents who built their rammed-earth houses seven decades ago or the grandchildren who sow their crops today, carefully controlling the amounts via their mobile app. Culture is a dynamic process and architecture is an expression or manifestation of it, both tangible and intangible.





In June last year, Spain launched its new National Cultural Landscape Plan (2026), which states that all landscapes are cultural, including 'everyday landscapes'. They are defined as the result of the interaction over time between people and the natural environment, expressed as a territory that is perceived and valued for its cultural qualities — the product of a process and the foundation of a community's identity. They are therefore understood as a dynamic reality, which becomes one of the characteristics of our current concept of Cultural Heritage.

In this sense, the Way of St James is an excellent example of cultural heritage in contemporary terms. Unlike the traditional monumental concept (material, stable and legitimised by supposedly objective historical or artistic authorities), it is a heritage asset with predominantly intangible values that is dynamic as part of a cultural process, kept alive through societal participation. The Way is cultural heritage, and cultural heritage today is also a journey: an active process that evolves alongside every human community. Perhaps it has no definitive or known destination, but it is always — and inevitably — in motion.

