

Bibliographic repertory and a brief analysis of cities and towns in Asturias

Research into the cities and towns of Asturias has been carried out in many different fields, although probably most studied in a detailed manner from the perspectives of History of Art, Geography and town-planning (and to a slightly lesser degree by Economic History specialists). However, legal research looks at the cities of Asturias from a more general perspective: legislation with respect to land tenancy and property rights are dealt with at a regional and national level, leaving the detailed specifics with respect to analyses, proposals and general diagnoses to be reflected in the town planning that, albeit in theory, is supposed to lay down future directions.

The project to establish an updated repertory of books and documents on the cities and towns of Asturias is framed within a larger plan for a specific bibliographic database for the whole of Spain as ordered by Autonomous Communities with this present article a kind of research in progress document and the relevant repertory for Castile and León already in press. The first requirement for putting together a database is to select the cities for which the data is to be collected. In the case of Asturias as specifically occurs in most of Atlantic Spain questions of layout of the land and territorial organisation of population, both back in the Middle Ages and in the present mean that habitation is so diverse and diffuse that to limit the study to cities over a threshold figure of 2,000 inhabitants would leave out of the picture a large number of significant working urban hubs. Most are directly inherited from the “*pola*” policies (towns or poles of population) of the XIII century within the former Kingdom of

Asturias to move concentrations of people further inland in order to exert greater control over them by the Crown, the nobility and the Church, as corresponded. These poles soon were to become towns in every possible sense (there were 73 royal councils in 1749) functioning as if they were capital cities. However, even through to the XIX century the number of urban hubs of population in Asturias was highly limited. The Atlas by Coello offers a magnificent source for a clear understanding of the urban structure of some 23 urban hubs of population. However, it is a fact that the layout or map of the municipality was to remain largely unaltered from the mid-XIX century onward, with scarce urban development of the capital cities, since the limits to growth were geographical or historical-political rather than responding to the need to put in place powerful urban mechanisms and dynamics, with considerations such as diverse sizes of the municipalities, the scarce population and historic rivalry of nearby towns with greater tradition or potential (among others) weighing more in the balance. Besides, the communication and transport network required for industrialisation of the region produced further demographic imbalances, favouring the consolidation not only of the former capitals but also of mining and factory towns while concentrating activity and population in a large functionally metropolitan area in the centre of the region. All these considerations taken together mean that the concept of “city” or “town” and the definition of urban characteristics and structures has always been more complicated in Atlantic Spain, with a large number of important hubs of population left out of the equation.

All being said, any analysis of the growth and shape of the “cities” in Asturias must take into account these historical hubs produced in the Middle Ages and consolidated in our modern times thanks to planned and spontaneous expansion due to the railway system and by a burgeoning industrial bourgeoisie, or by reclaiming land from the sea along the coastline to set up port facilities while draining marshlands, positioning new capitals in the XIX century and by establishing industrial developments that were to take the region from a subsistence to a market economy. Together with these historical hubs there co-existed in stark contrast the process caused by industrialisation of converting small nuclei of population into cities of much less interest from a distinctive morphological perspective as they tended to function as mere outskirts or dormitory- towns. They may have housed large numbers of people but have been left out of the short list of “cities” to be studied as theoretical and practical references. But some of the medieval poles developed in such a way later as merited being included in the short list. So whereas Castropol underwent minimum development, Gijón that had been a hub of population since Roman times and that received the official recognition as a town in the Lower Middle Ages developed significantly as of the consolidation of its standing as an industrial port city in the XIX century. As the capital city of a sprawling municipal area, Gijón thus reunites all the morphological elements to be investigated, that is, a historic city centre, a road system influenced by the defence network in place in the Lower Middle Ages, planned expansion, a “garden city”, workers’ quarters and a sparsely populated outlying residential area on the outskirts. The case of Castropol is not exceptional since the uneven effects of industrialisation together with rigid social stratification of the city areas resulted in most of the municipal capitals and vintage poles accommodating less than 2,000 of a stable population, although there has been a growing movement of expansion of building due to increased mobility and the importance of the service sector that have not produced, however, equivalent demographic growth.

So in order to pre-select the “cities” on which to build the bibliographic repertory, references have been collected for a basic stock of 19 cities and towns, many of which have populations of under 10,000 but whose characteristics merit morphological interest. Using this initial short list, work progressed on bringing together all the existing monographic studies without total exclusion of general studies, however, for that matter those that dealt with the central metropolitan area of Asturias, or even those that

focused on various towns on our shortlist. It is for that reason that there are abandoned old poles and hubs of conurbations in the functional metropolitan area that also figure in the repertory.

From the perspective of methodology, the database was structured over the following items (apart from the complete bibliographic reference): the city to which they make reference, the type of work, the year of production, the subjects covered, the main theme and the keywords relating to urban development and morphology. The resulting spreadsheet allowed for graphic and statistical analysis and representation of the collection and references by cities and towns, general works, metropolitan area, towns in general and even other towns not included in the pre-selection.

To date, there is a list of 235 detailed monographs on cities in particular or various cities and towns in Asturias. Most of these are academic although there are articles from geographers working in the field of town planning, territorial planning and local development. It should be noted that geographers have had significant political implication in Asturias, holding posts at all the governmental levels.

The time span considered is between 1975 and 2020 inclusive, with only a few previous references. Given that most of the works considered fall within the field of geography, the results of setting up the Department of geography in the University of Oviedo in 1970 are more than clear, producing as a result in the 80s a broad-spanning series of theses and academic publications relating to the region. The first of these was the geography of Asturias (four volumes) originally published in the form of 64 separate booklets in 1982-3 and that was circulated locally to a tune of between 70,000-100,000 copies. Some of the towns selected barely have specific analyses different from the profiles collected in this collective work for the whole of the region, so that the maximum number of bibliographic references is reached around 1992. Likewise, the successive University reforms gave rise to an increase in final year dissertations in both the degree and Master programmes that span off into theses and academic articles that were at a high in the 90s continuing through to 2007 when again they grew in number.

Books are the most favoured type of publication, representing almost a third of the total references registered. It is also noteworthy that a large number of these focus specifically on urban geography as represented in one or various cities in Asturias or are devoted to the analysis of related phenomena that have a bearing on the growth, structure and morphology of the same. Chapters

of books and academic journal articles follow closely at around 28% of the items registered. These are perhaps the result of the contributions made toward analysis of the cities and towns as made in the aforementioned collective works plus the highly significant role that was played by the Geography Department journal, *Ería. Revista cuatrimestral de Geografía*, a University of Oviedo publication.

As previously indicated, then, this means that almost 80% of the references fall under the heading of geography with some interdisciplinary studies among these where co-authorship falls into the areas of architecture and town planning. There are also references relating to history of art, history, architecture and economy, besides significant photographic collections, together with maps, atlases and scale drawing plans of these cities and towns, and a scarce number of monographic studies. Some 140 authors are included within the remit of the project, where some 25% of the works range over various subjects (especially relating to general geography or regional studies by people from outside the field of geography) with almost half of the registers relating to urban geography, followed by those relating to history. The greatest number of references correspond to the following authors: Ramón María Alvargonzález, Francisco Quirós Linares, Guillermo Morales Matos, Sergio Tomé Fernández, Gaspar Fernández Cuesta, Felipe Fernández García, and Emilio Murcia Navarro.

The keywords of the works in the light of the overall theme of the bibliographic repertory relate to spaces, structures and shapes of cities. In other words, most analyse cities from a synchronic perspective. A slightly smaller number relate to town-planning processes and city growth, more in line with town-planning practice plus others that talk about housing and urban systems, more properly related to territorial organisation policies and processes.

Some three-quarters of the reference correspond to the preselected cities. However, due to the fact that general works have been included, where aspects that pertain to the cities are referenced, these have also been included together with those relating to the central metropolitan area of Asturias, the hub of most of the larger cities and historic towns. Likewise, for obvious reasons, there are works relating to the regional urban systems and sub-systems of townships plus regional studies with differentiated analysis of varying degrees of the cities and towns. Gijón alone merits 50 references, Oviedo 48, Avilés 17, Mieres 10, Langreo, Navia and Ribadesella 7 while Llanes, Lluarca and Candás are referenced five times each.

As perhaps was to be expected, the cities most researched are the more densely populated, relating directly to student and teaching communities and easier to access when doing fieldwork or archive research. There is also a significant block of recent research, in the form of unpublished or semi-published theses, and degree or master dissertations. However, some of the coastal towns outside the metropolitan area have attracted considerable interest from art historians, geographers and other tourism and leisure specialists, dealing with the heritage produced mainly as the result of the noteworthy urban development as of the end of the XIX century linked to industrialisation and transport systems.

Non-specific works make up a large part of the database since to exclude them would be to elude basic knowledge relating to how urban growth occurred and evolved in Spain. So overall triggers (transport systems and inter-urban networks), crosscutting issues (similar characteristics of evolution over more than one town or city) and synthetic conclusions are included. Said foci are pertinent, above all from the theoretical and academic perspective but require the complementary vision of specific studies of the cities and their characteristics in order for them to be relevant. From an operational or practical perspective, specific articles on how a city evolved are vital to town and territorial planning. Moreover, unequal interest in researching some of the cities and towns pre-selected has led not only to some being given merely token research but also to others that have been more deeply analysed seriously lacking updated study.

Due to the structure of the present research, the selection transferred to text leaves entities with urban characteristics worthy of note without a specific heading (although they can be searched in the database). This is the case of coastal towns such as Castropol, Tapia and A Caridá, of other municipal capitals (Boal, Pola de Allande, Tineo, Muros de Nalón, Grado, Soto del Barco, Piedras Blancas, Noreña, Nava, Infiesto, Arriondas, Pola de Lena, El Entrego and Pola de Laviana). Of the seaports of certain historical relevance (Figueiras, Ortigueira, Puerto Vega, Tazonés) and even certain garden-city type hubs of population (Salinas), cabotage ports (San Esteban de Pravia), entities that shaped conurbations such as those of El Entrego, Sotroñido and Blimea in the Valle del Nalón that were brought together administratively to form one, San Martín del Rey Aurelio in the early 21st century or even the outlying districts produced in the early industrial period that gave rise to significant hubs of population (such as Lugones or Colloto).

In practice, sustainable urban development requires carefully researched documents such as were produced in the “golden age” of urban geography that can still be pursued toward explaining how the city is as it is in the present, tracing its dynamics and the roots of the problems, while looking at the contextual pointers of economic resources, cultural practices and sense of place. The bibliographic repertory should also serve to detect existing gaps in research (towns that have barely been studied or where the studies have not been updated in years in order for researchers to direct their attention in a coordinated manner and interdisciplinary basis where possible to further analyse towns and townships that are research

“orphans”. It is clear that most of the works registered also contain historical references that may be highly useful to researchers. There is also a list of works that may be of value toward studying cities and towns that have not been sufficiently pursued with aspects such as articles containing photos and illustrations that may help when studying them from a geographic perspective. In short, the repertory may prove to be useful both to academics and to other professionals interested in understanding the mechanisms and hubs that make a city work, above all in the smaller and medium-sized towns included, to reinforce them in order to re-balance the region and stave the processes of exodus in order to re-activate Asturias.