

ALBERTO ANSOLA FERNÁNDEZ

Universidad de Cantabria

*The Calzada of Caoro: history and geography
of an emblematic mountain road in Puerto de Era
(Asturias)*

The Calzada of Caoro is an old mountain road that has been considered of Roman origin, either for military incursions or for the extraction of minerals, and that today is patrimonialised, sharing a decayed livestock use with a growing hiking use. The study of the bibliography, the documentation and the archaeological remains of the same distance it, however, from the Roman era and rather brings it closer to a medieval origin, coinciding with the consolidation of the settlement in the council of Cabrales (Arenas, Tielve, Sotres) and the acculturation of the forest in the surroundings of Puerto de Era. The Modern Age documentation would suggest this, by giving it an occasional mining functionality, to a greater extent carrier and councillor as a royal road, and above all cattle, as a sheepherding way of access to the numerous meadows and sheepfolds scattered around the port and its environment. Something that would also corroborate the study of the conserved road vestiges, which tend to relate it to a traditional bridle path that only deserved significant work (armed, pavement, water gutters) and periodic repairs in those more complex sections due to their greater slopes or to cross very rocky substrates.

Between the years 1778 and 1782, a bitter civil lawsuit was settled between Arenas and Tielve, both population centres and parishes of the Cabrales council, in the eastern Asturian mountains, specifically in the northernmost foothills of the Picos de Europa. The dispute, which already had precedents since at least the final years of the 17th century, was motivated on this occasion by a cattle kidnapping carried out by residents of Tielve in the Valf-río meadow, at the southeast foot of Puerto de Era (better

known in Asturias like Portudera), where the residents of Arenas argued that they could bring their cattle in during the opening time of the meadow. The matter escalated with more kidnappings and conflicts, in such a way that the court of the Real Chancillería of Valladolid ended up intervening, which, as usual, ordered an eye view and a painting of the terms in dispute. The master painter Francisco Leopoldo Reitter took charge of the painting, who, of course, produced a watercolour of great interest and quality, both for the information it contained, with abundant toponymy and great detail of the terms of the lawsuit, and for the technical resources used, which led him to use a curious cavalier perspective in which the representation of the steep slopes to the north of the port was achieved by painting the trees upside down. But what is most interesting here are not these technical and artistic displays, but the delineation of a “Camino Real” (royal road) that from Arenas ascended Mount Caoro and crossed Puerto de Era, first crossing its meadows and then its pastures and numerous sheepfolds (grasslands with buildings for cattle and shepherds), to finally descend towards Tielve, leaving different continuations outlined, the main one connecting with Sotres and the Cantabrian region of Liébana through the Puerto de Áliva.

Well, that road, called then and now the road or path of Caoro, is really the objective of this study. Given its antiquity, which many authors date back to Roman times, its physical remains, with several sections of well-armed and paved road, and its functional importance, where cattle traffic was added to carriage and muleteer, it is not surprising that this road has become a landscape element

of great importance not only from the hereditary point of view, but also from the point of view of the studies of historical roads. Within this field, and in general that of the historical geography of the landscape, the work focuses first on a kind of mixture between the state of the art and a bibliographical synthesis around its consideration as a Roman road, something very controversial and difficult currently maintains based on the little or no scientific evidence in this regard. Later, the documentation of the Modern and Contemporary Ages is analysed, a period in which its layout and functionality can be verified with complete certainty. And finally, in the heat of the field surveys, the technical characteristics of the road are described as it is today, as well as its extensions to the south and east.

The opening of the current road made the Caoro road old, and stripped it of much of its meaning, but by no means completely obliterated it. The Calzada de Caoro and its extension as the Camino Real can be said to be almost completely preserved, both in its ascent from Arenas to the meadows of Portudera by Mount Caoro, as in its transit through Puerto de Era and its sheepfolds, and as in its descent towards Tielve and its continuation towards Sotres.

After this concise review of the bibliography, documentation and material remains of the Calzada de Caoro, if one thing has become clear, it is that it is very difficult to maintain its supposed Roman origin. The absence of vestiges of that time in the surroundings of the Puerto de Era and its marginality with respect to the Cantabrian Wars do not indicate it at all. Even the most acceptable hypothesis of a road for mineral extraction is not supported either in the absence of a road network with similar characteristics to the main road between it and the mining sites. On the contrary, the hypothesis that gains weight is the one that points to a traditional bridle path that emerged in the Middle Ages when the settlement and cultivation of the forest for more intensive grazing was consolidated. That is to say, its origin would be linked to a neighbourhood and livestock use, functions to which

the carriage and, later, the mining were also added. And among all of them, livestock seems to be the fundamental one since the same ordinances of the parish of Arenas prioritised traffic and pastoral times over muleteer and mining traffic. Without forgetting that according to the local and regional bibliography, entire families accessed the Puerto of Era in summer, becoming what was called a summer town.

The question that remains in the air is why the path appears pavement and with a lot of work in some sections and with hardly any conditioning in others. Of course, between Arenas and the Castiello pass, it seems that it was also paved, but erosion and not considering it worthy of repairs, as on the contrary it seems to have happened further up, turned it into the path it is today. However, in its transit through the Puerto of Era and in its descent from it, it is evident that it was only armed and paved in the most difficult sections, either because of its steepest slopes or because it crossed rocky areas. Sections that, as demonstrated in the descent branch towards Cruz de Entrejano and in Espeyas and Campo de Cimbraña, did receive greater care and at least occasional repairs, including the opening of alternative passes.

In short, the Calzada de Caoro and the royal road of Portudera would have been traditional roads for carriage, council and, above all, livestock. Something that should be considered when patrimonialising it. Especially when from political and even academic spheres itineraries and routes are being valued without a minimum scientific basis and immersed, therefore, in what would be an operation of invention of tradition. Not everything, obviously, should be valid when it comes to, worth the redundancy, and value certain elements or spaces. It is obvious that a rigorous investigation is needed behind it and, as is the case in the patrimonialisation of the path under study here, a broader vision that encompasses the inseparable livestock areas of Puerto de Era, the meadows and sheepfolds today abandoned and threatened with ruin, or already ruined, and in the past true companions and protagonists of the path.