

The movable and immovable heritage of the Aran Valley and its management

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Abstract

Aran Valley, on the north-west side of Catalonia, is located on the septentrional gradient of the central Pyrenees, constituting the source of the Garona River. It borders with France in the north and Aragon in the west. This particular locality, and its singular history, have made this valley a strategic area since medieval times. A consequence of this is the conservation of rich, mainly ecclesiastic, movable and immovable heritage, managed by the “Comission d'Auviatge (heritage) dera Val d'Aran”, an assessing organism of the Conselh Generau d'Aran. This organism has an integral composition and functionality that differs from the Heritage Commissions that we can find in other places.

This paper lays out the rich and unknown heritage of Aran Valley that comprehends the immaterial, natural, movable and immovable heritage, concentrating the attention on the latter two and in their management through the control of the state administrations. The particularities and challenges that assume the conservation of such a rich and large heritage are exposed.

Keywords: Aran Valley, Aran Valley, Val d'Aran, immovable heritage, movable heritage, heritage management, Romanesque architecture, wooden Romanesque sculpture, wooden Gothic sculpture, mural painting.

1 Geographical, historical and cultural framework

Aran Valley – Valle de Arán in Spanish or Val d'Aran in Aranese, the native language – is located on the northern gradient of the Pyrenees (Province of Lleida, Spain). It borders in the north with France (Department of Haute-Garonne), in the southwest with the region of the Ribagorza (Province of Huesca) and in the south and east with the Catalan regions of Alta Ribagorza and



the Pallars Sobirà (Province of Lleida). With an extension of 634Km² and 30% of its surface being over 200m of altitude, it is in major part an Atlantic basin.

From ancient times, human relations, commercially and culturally with the north (following the natural course of the River Garona), have been very intense, especially with the French regions of Comminges (Department of Haute-Garonne) and Couserans (Department of Ariège). Proof of it is the archeological remains of prehistory and Roman times. It was not until the Middle Ages when its political link began with the states located on the southern gradient of the Pyrenees. Between the 11th and the 15th centuries, a large historical process took place in which, in a progressive way, it became part of Aragon's kingdom and in it, later on part of the principality of Catalonia, and after the vanishing of the Aragonese Crown, of Spain.

This process had the opposition of the French monarchy who, on numerous occasions, occupied the Aran Valley. The longest and most transcendent of these occupations was after the invasion of November 1283. Without going into detail, Aran belonged to the French for more than fifteen years, claiming that the King of France had rights over the territory. For this reason, a long dispute persisted and while it remained unresolved, Aran was left in the hands of the King of Majorca. The Poissy Treaty, of 26th April 1313, ended the conflict and Philip IV of France restored Aran to the Crown of Aragon. During these struggles, the Aranese knew how to negotiate and enforce their rights and privileges. So, not long after their return to the Aragonese Crown, on 22nd August 1313, they achieved from the King James II of Aragon the privilege of "Era Querimònia", a written recompilation of their usages, rights and customs.

However, the church level continued to be integrated into the French Bishopric of Comminges until its disappearance and in 1804 was definitely annexed to the Diocese of Urgell (Catalonia), to whom it now belongs.

The consequence of all of this has been the preservation of a rich and varied natural and cultural heritage, extremely concentrated in the no more than 40km of length that the valley has. It is in this natural environment with a high landscape value the small 30 villages are located, arranged in 9 municipalities. It has an interesting ethnological heritage – the traditional stock economy concentrated in the house as the economic, social and political unit; hydraulic flour mills, washing places – and industrial heritage – lime ovens, wool factories, iron and zinc mines and, most recently, big hydroelectric plants.

Not least important is its immaterial heritage, highlighted by Aranese, a variant of the Occitan language, spoken in the Aran Valley, and numerous festivities and traditions. However, I will center my paper on the architectonic and artistic heritage that acquired major volume and singularity.

2 Architectonic and artistic heritage

2.1 Medieval artistic heritage

The Aran Valley has retained a large and concentrated group of parochial churches and chapels of Romanesque and Gothic style. Also, there are ruins of



various castles – some of them emerged to protect the parochial churches – and lookout and defensive towers.

Unfortunately, we have a lack of historical documentation to date these buildings. Up to now, the chronologies we are talking about are based in the study of the materials and constructive techniques and in the style characteristics, comparing them with other monuments. I also point that a revision of these chronologies must be taken on as these are based on old or superficial papers. The oldest ones, from the beginning of the 20th century were a result of two expeditions with a scientific character: the first one, in the year 1904, from the architecture school of Barcelona led by Lluís Domènech i Muntaner, whose materials were published by Granell and Ramón [1], and the second one, in 1907, the “Missió arqueològica”, of Josep Puig i Cadafalch, Gudiol and company, whose materials were published by Alcolea Blanch [2]. The result from this trip is the synthesis and interpretation of Puig i Cadafalch *et al.* [3] on the characteristics of Romanesque Aranese architecture. After that, differing from Boí, the Aran Valley, having much worse accessibility, fell into oblivion. It would not be until the works of Sarrate Forga [4] and the encyclopedic publication “*Catalunya Romànica*” [5] that a more complete and comprehensive addressing and contents would be achieved.

Despite these shortcomings, it must be recognized that in the last two decades, knowledge has been significantly increased with specific studies, largely as a result of interventions carried out both in some movable and immovable goods, which have contributed new information on many topics.

2.1.1 Romanesque and Gothic architecture

During the 11th and 13th centuries, an original and attractive Romanesque art flourished in this valley, which far from its origins, conveyed the archaic elements with other proper examples from the full Romanesque or even from the late. We can see signs that the origin of this flourishing is somehow related to the renewal that the Diocese of Comminges experienced during the episcopate of Bertrand de l’Isle (1083–1123) who, canonized in 1308, would give its name to the episcopal see of Comminges.

Thirty-five churches which are standing or have significant enough remains are preserved whose construction can be attributed to this period. The most antique group is inscribed in the first Romanesque style, although in many cases they are retarded constructions, fully built in the 12th century, which also can be seen in the neighboring valley of Boí. They are characterized by the use of small ashlar roughed down by hammer; a total absence of sculpt decoration with the exception of toothed frieze, blind arches and pilaster strips, cut tufa stone that articulate and give life to the exterior surfaces of the walls, especially in the apses; the absence in some of these constructions of vaults; the use of calcarea tufa in arches and vaults, and the simplicity and narrowness of the overtures, both doors and windows.

From a first prototype church, Santa Maria de Cap d’Aran, which must have started its construction in the 11th century, all the great Romanesque churches in the valley during the 12th and 13th centuries, adopted the basilica floor plan with

three naves extending in four sections. The Church of Cap d'Aran is also the only one with a small crypt. In these basilica buildings, the nave is usually covered with a barrel vault and both sides with individual quarter circle vaults. In a late building, in transition to Gothic, St. Andr  u of Salard  , the coverage of the nave is effected by cross vaults.

In these buildings of basilica floor plan, the pilasters that sustain the vaults and divide the naves, are usually circular, which is a common characteristic when comparing with the Romanesque architecture of the neighboring valley of Boi.

From the time the small chapels and basilica floor plan were built, we found that many churches also have a basilica floor plan and we have come across small chapels which have a nave and a bell tower.

During the 12th century, even during the first third of the 13th, Romanesque buildings were still being built but with a better finish on exterior surfaces, through a greater and more regular rig, set out in horizontal courses, cut regularly and with a smoother surface.

Externally, a single slate roof with a double slope covering the three naves. The simultaneous presence of two types of bell is characteristic: a belfry wall in the eastern gable and a robust bell tower, usually attached. However, few cases exist where the tower is Romanesque. Many of the bell towers were completed at a later time, in Gothic style, or even later. The slender pyramidal slate spire that covers them gives great uniqueness to these towers.

They possess one or two entrances that almost always open to the lateral facades and, from the 12th century they received a generous sculpt decoration on the tympanums, archivolt and capitals, usually the work of a local artist.

Despite the power of the Romanesque tradition, at the end of the 13th century and even more in the 14th century, new ideas of Gothic artistic and architectural trends arrived at the valley. We cannot forget that the beginnings of the new style coincided with the French occupation period (1283–1295) and Majorca's (1295–1313). The French style is obvious in the bell tower windows of Vilac or in the decoration of the exterior archivolt of the main entrance of the Church of St. Miqu  u de Vielha, as has come to be appreciated by Espa  ol [6]. Besides in this one, a new type of monumental doorway is experienced, in which the longitudinal direction of the pointed arches are superimposed; a timid tendency to the disappearance of the tympanum, and the use of not only the space of the tympanum but also of the archivolt as a support for an abundant sculpture. Subsequently, a more simple and devoid of sculptural decoration typology is adopted. With architectonic solutions from the so called meridional Gothic, some of the Romanesque buildings are finished or restored. In Salard   the central nave of the church is covered with crossed vaults and the western wall is finished with a magnificent ogival window. In other many Romanesque churches, the importance of light in this period forced wider windows to open, especially in the western fa  ade. In other cases, larger restorations and extensions were taken on or new buildings constructed. These new constructions acquired the formula of a unique nave although, in the first moment, maintaining a tripartite sanctuary, a consequence of the deep roots of the basilica floor in native builders.



Figure 1: Church of Cap d'Aran.



Figure 2: Mijaran Christ.

The Aran churches, according to the sharp conflicts of the period, became in this time true fortified enclosures defended by a wall flanked with towers. Besides the church, this enclosure protected inside some annexed buildings and the cemetery. The bell towers were provided with loopholes and battlements. Between the 15th and early 16th centuries this evolution of the Aranese bell towers towards a fully military appearance culminated in the Gothic towers of octagonal section of Salardú and Vielha.

2.1.2 Romanesque and Gothic painting

The mural painting of Romanesque style is found in the sets of the churches of Cap d'Aran in Tredòs and of Santa Eulària in Unha, both in the municipality of Naut Aran. From the set of Cap d'Aran, a magnificent scene of the Epiphany occupying the apse basin, chaired by a Virgin and Child in Majesty, inscribed in a mandorla. Today it is exposed in The Cloisters section of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Also in the New York Museum fragments of geometric borders of the same set are preserved. The rest of representations that integrate the group, whose composition and organization we know from Garland [7], apostolate, saints, mystical dove and Pantocrator, were dispersed after being pulled out in the Spanish postwar period. Recent investigations have been able to locate some fragments in museums and private collections. Others however, we do not know of their location. The high quality of these paintings is evident, with a clear byzantine influence, attributed to the circle of Pedret master and dated from the 11th to the 12th century. In 2004, under layers of plaster, a Romanesque painting of a Madonna standing with the Child was discovered in a pillar of the church, which Pagès i Paretas [8] attributed to the same set.

In the apse of the Church of Unha fragments of Romanesque painting were located in 1995. In the apse basin the image of Christ in Majesty surrounded by

the Tetramorph can be observed. In an intermediate register, two busts of the apostolate are preserved, and the lower register is occupied with a decoration with curtains. The paintings present as observed by Pagès [9] close parallels with those attributed to the master of the Last Judgment that after the year 1123 he painted in the churches of Taüll.

But the Church of Unha has provided also two mural sets of Gothic style. It is a series dedicated to the cycle of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ that occupies the major space of the northern wall of the church. An inscription on the painting informs of its realization in the year 1493. In 2007, on the first part of the same wall another Gothic pictorial was discovered, although painted by other hands, identified by Sierra Reguera [10], as the Life and Miracles of Saint German of Auxerre. Like the others, an inscription provides us with the date of realization: the year 1484. The relations and parallelisms of these paintings are found in the north, on French territory and, especially, within the limits of the old Diocese of Comminges.

On the contrary, the Gothic paintings on wood, represented by the altarpieces of Artes, Vielha and Vilac, all three of the 15th century, are products of various Catalan or Aragonese artists to whom recent studies of Velasco González [11] and Favà Monllau [12] have managed to name, thanks to the documentary research.

2.1.3 Romanesque and Gothic sculpture

The hardness and ingenuity that, with few exceptions, stone sculpture shows undoubtedly the work of local workshops, contrasts with the exceptional quality of a good crowd of Romanesque and Gothic statues in wood, which has largely preserved the original color.

Diverse Romanesque wooden carvings of Christ crucified are emphasized. We highlight the Mijaran Christ, a striking bust of great proportions, the only surviving piece of what would have been a monumental representation of Dead Christ at the time of being removed from the cross. The typology of the Descending appears in Hispanic imagery between the 12th and 14th centuries, interpreted by Bracons Clapés [13] as a reaction against the ideas of the heresy Cathar, much extended all over Occitania, who denied the human nature of Christ and, thus his death. In the second place, the Christ on the Cross is preserved and venerated in the Church of Salardú. It is a *Christus patiens*, with open eyes and nailed with four nails in a contemporary cross, which, like the carving, retains the original Romanesque polychrome. Both are two masterpieces of Romanesque statues, being attributed to the named Erill's workshop, an anonymous workshop of sculptors who would have worked during the second half of the 12th century in Aran and Boí.

Chronologically more advanced are two Majesties as they are coroneted representations; nowadays exposed in the Museu dera Val d'Aran. The first of them, the Casarilh Christ (MdVA 515), dated around the year 1200, shows as indicated by Lorés *et al.* [14], a unique typology, halfway between a *Christus patiens* and a Majesty, with eyes closed, dead, but crowned, and stylistically still within the area of influence of Erill's workshop. The Escunhau Christ (MdVA 508/509), from the 13th century, is a work of transition, although it is still loyal

to the typology of the Romanesque Majesties representing an alive and triumphal Christ, applied schemes announcing Gothic in the clothing and especially in the position of the feet, nailed to the cross on only one nail.

Fully Gothic is an important group of images carved in wood, dated from the late 13th century and the first half of the 14th century, denoting an obvious French influence [15]. This statuary group debuts in the Aran Valley and also in the neighboring French Comminges, the new Gothic art came from the north and more specifically, from the Paris region. Within the group and with a very distinctive language seated and crowned Virgin and Child seated on her lap are represented, and a repertoire of saints iconographically specific. This group although poorly known, was identified by Batlle [16] as the “workshop of Comminges” thanks to an inscription on the base of one of the five images that the Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya (MNAC) owns that makes reference to the Bishopric of Comminges. Recently, in a joint project between specialists from MNAC, France and the Conselh Generau, we have initiated a thorough study that will hopefully provide greater information on the artistic group.

2.2 Renaissance and Baroque artistic heritage

The last third of the 15th and the 16th centuries were very turbulent in the Aran Valley. Within this conflict and anarchy flourished banditry that at times took effective control of the valley. Later in the 16th century, during the wars with France and religion between Lutherans and Catholics, the Aran Valley suffered numerous raids. For this reason it continued fortifying, creating a defensive network throughout the territory, capable of facing the enemy and giving shelter to the population. In addition to some castles, this network was also based on the use of the bell towers as defensive towers. The most powerful families also built fortified residences. Despite this warlike atmosphere from France came new ideas and aesthetic conceptions of the Renaissance.

By contrast, from the second third of the 18th century Aran would start living a period of peace and prosperity that resulted in a strong increase of the population in 1860 that would reach its record high figure of 11,272 registered inhabitants.

2.2.1 Architecture

The Gothic tradition is still heavy on the architecture of the 16th century. In churches, constructive activity was limited to some expansion reforms or consolidation works and more frequently, opening wider windows to illuminate the originally dark Romanesque churches. The effort focused on building solid and sober bell towers, of military appearance, with few concessions to decoration. The best examples of this phenomenon are the towers of rectangular section of Gessa (1592), Casau (1613) and Garòs (1619), this latter raised in a place of high strategic value, protecting the passage to the upper part of the valley, externally measuring 8.75m side and a height of 19.5m for the wall construction, to which must be added the 12 meters of spectacular spire built with huge wooden beams and slate coating, as testified by Vilarrubias i Cuadras [17].

However, it is in the civil constructions where the Renaissance is most clearly manifested. These buildings, besides being fitted with defense elements such as towers, watchtowers, loopholes and battlements, have embellished facades with Renaissance windows and portals.

The new aesthetic trends of Baroque arrived especially in the 18th century. Architecturally, to accommodate an increasing population, new churches were built like in Montgarri, Arròs or Les and others were enlarged, adding chapels or modifying the header, as in Vielha, Vilac or Vilamòs. Also a number of bell towers were raised with a remarkable typological change in the mid 18th century. These were octagonal, high, devoid of defensive elements and more graceful towers than the previous, topped with a pointy slate roof that increased its slenderness. The bell tower of Unha, built in 1775, is crowned with a unique rococo spire of bulbous base.

2.2.2 Painting

If architectonically the Renaissance had a discreet presence in Aran, however pictorially it reached a strong development, leaving an extraordinary set of wall paintings, sometimes of great quality. Numerous art commissions would enrich and try to transform some churches, basically of Romanesque architecture, into Renaissance style spaces.

Its painters were itinerant artists that worked in the area of the central Pyrenees, some of southern origin, but more frequently from the north. It is these latter who introduced the new Renaissance models that had been imposed in the diocese of Comminges and, in general, by the cities of southern France.

In less than a century these paintings evolved from the clear roots of the Gothic tradition to a naturalist and inspired by classical antiquity, to eventually, through a more organized and dogmatic representation, faithful to the Tridentine doctrine, serve as a tool to the Church to impose the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The paintings on the walls of the churches of Arties, Unha and Salardú exemplify this evolution very well.



Figure 3: Renaissance mural painting of Arties.

Also in the 17th and 18th centuries, the walls of the Aran churches were still being decorated with paintings, although of a minor quality.

2.2.3 Sculpture

Virtually no imagery and Renaissance altarpieces have reached us. However, from the 17th and especially during the 18th century great development of woodcarving altarpieces and polychrome or golden images were acquired, that with great profusion, decorate the interior of the churches. Although most of these altarpieces were destroyed in 1936, the Baroque legacy remains remarkable.

These altarpieces, placed behind the respective altars, tried to create an appearance of monumentality and grandeur, despite their material poverty. They sought to increase the fervor of the faithful by means of harrowing images or celestial apparitions, sometimes naively represented, that emerged from niches between twisted columns, foliage and flowers. The creators are local artists, of highly variable quality, roaming which often can be followed on the valleys from one side and the other of the border.

3 Managing the movable and immovable Aranese heritage

The special characteristics of the Aran Valley, geographical, historical, linguistic and cultural as well as the insistent demands of the Aranese people throughout the 20th century, led on July 13, 1990 for the approval of Law 16/1990, of Special Regime of the Aran Valley by the Parliament of Catalonia and the restoration of their own administrative organization, the Conselh Generau d'Aran which was re-established in June 17, 1991 and from that date exercises in the valley a series of competencies.

Referring to the management of cultural heritage expressed under the Law 16/1990, the Generalitat of Catalonia transferred to Conselh the restoration and maintenance of buildings of historical interest and the "Musèu dera Val d'Aran".

Subsequently, the Law 9/1993, of 30 September, the Catalan Cultural Heritage, in its second additional provision, item 1, paragraphs a) to e), specifies the extent of the competencies, attributing to Conselh Generau d'Aran, in its territory, the competencies listed below:

- The initiation and instruction of files for the declaration of cultural property of national interest and to rescind a declaration.
- The adoption of conservation action programs in immovable goods of national interest
- The authorization of interventions in immovable monuments of national interest and in which they have initiated a file to declare, and corresponding compensation, if needed.
- The binding report on urban planning instruments that are required by the local government where historic buildings, archaeological spaces, paleontological or ethnological interest, and protected areas and environments of any cultural interest.
- The authorization of changes of use of a monument.

- The competence in archeology was limited to the valuation report possible involvement in archaeological remains of those construction projects, facilities or activities that require evaluation of environmental and landscape impact.

Based on these transfers from the Department of Culture and Heritage of Conselh Generau d'Aran depend on them the Musèu dera Val d'Aran and Airau de Patrimòni (Heritage Area).

Currently, the museum in addition to the permanent exhibition of its headquarters in Vielha, manages other equipment, owned or leased: an eco-museum in Vilamòs, a mill in Salardú, a wool factory in Vielha, a temporary exhibitions hall, set up in an old Gothic church located in Arties and an old zinc mine. In addition, an agreement with the Bishopric of Urgell, makes it possible to organize guided tours in the most artistically relevant churches, integrated at a tourist level as the "Romanesque Route of Aran" visits. This route started in 2002 and is now fully consolidated.

The heritage area is responsible for ensuring the preservation, conservation and maintenance of movable heritage (except the museum collection). This heritage is mainly ecclesiastical. Usually, it is the Conselh Generau d'Aran who promotes most of the interventions although on some occasions, in those most technically complex and/or high cost interventions, it has received financial and technical support from the Generalitat of Catalonia. On other occasions, it has opted for grants, sponsorships, or collaboration agreements.

One of the most interesting and rewarding works carried out in recent years has been the recovery, study and appreciation of different and varied pictorial sets murals that were hidden under layers of plaster.

This enormous task of preservation, conservation, study, enhancement and dissemination of Aranese ecclesiastical heritage, would not have been possible without having reached close synergy with the Bishopric of Urgell.

Finally, we would like to announce that recently, the new Law 1/2015, of February 5, of the Special Regime of the Aran Valley, has come to extend the competencies applied until now. In terms of heritage, article 51.2 goes one step further by adding competencies in archeology and archives and documentary collections. Item 3 of the same article states that the Conselh Generau d'Aran, among others should ensure conservation and promote the enrichment of the historical, cultural, archaeological, documentary, legal, natural, artistic, scientific, ethnological, geological and industrial heritage of the Aran and goods within it, whatever the legal status is and its ownership.

3.1 Composition and operation of the "Comission d'Auviatge (heritage) dera Val d'Aran"

In order to acquire a competent advisory body in decision making in the field of expressed competencies, Conselh Generau d'Aran created in June 1996 (BOP of June 27, 1996) the "Comission d'Auviatge dera Val d'Aran", with similar functions to those in Catalonia that have the territorial commissions of cultural

heritage. Since then, this committee has been working at first with some ups and downs and in recent years, more regularly.

However, there are some differences in its composition and performance from the Catalan commissions. These differences are due to different factors. First, the small size of the territory on which it acts and therefore, a more limited number of interventions. Also the desire to ensure the representativeness of institutions with strong territorial identity and more especially, a more comprehensive conception of cultural heritage, in which there is also a very important movable heritage, as well as landscape and overall nature that surrounds our monuments.

For these reasons the composition of the Aran commission is broader. Thus, besides the regular members in the Catalan regional commissions, presidency, speakers – architect, archaeologist and historian of art – secretary and many advisors – technical representatives of department responsible for territorial policy and public works, of the county council (usually an archaeologist), of the two municipal associations of Catalonia and of the Catalonia College of Architects, it integrates a competent technician on natural environment; a representative of the Bishopric of Urgell, as owner of most of the monuments; the director of the museum; the director of the historical archive of Aran; a representative of the longest established cultural institution, the “Fondacion deth Musèu Etnologic dera Val” and a couple of chairs of free choice appointed by the president from among people of recognized merit in the scope of cultural heritage – architect, archaeologist or historian.

The committee chair is held by the president of the Conselh Generau with two vice-presidencies. One rests with the principal of Culture and Heritage Department of Conselh Generau and the other, on the managing director of the corresponding department of the Government of Catalonia.

Another difference is that the “Comission d’Auviatge dera Val d’Aran” normally informs or advises not only on those cases where it is mandatory by law (interventions of maintenance and conservation in cataloged monuments or in protection environments of these; approvals of urban planning in historic centers or activities or in those actions that require environmental impact report), but also on many others, such as proceedings under movables properties, immovables cataloged as local interest and even, in uncatalogued immovables though not devoid of cultural interest.

They are mainly projects promoted by the Conselh own Generau d’Aran that, when subject to the approval of the commission, ensures greater consensus.

Between 4 and 6 sessions per year are usually held, depending on the volume of records. However, it must be said, that the fact that competition has so far been shared with the Generalitat has caused confusion and even some duplications, through ignorance of its existence and competence in matters of heritage Conselh Generau d’Aran, not only by private developers, but also by many public administrations. The new Law 1/2015, of the Special Regime of the Aran Valley, recently approved, will not only expand the competencies but will correct these issues.



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