

The *hórreos* in Riaño Mountain, León, Spain. Vernacular architecture between conservation and musealisation

María Pilar García Cuetos¹

¹University of Oviedo, Asturias, Spain, gcuetos@uniovi.es

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Abstract

Hórreos, aerial or raised barns, constitute a very singular typology of vernacular architecture. The guardianship of Spanish hórreos began with their recognition as personal properties in 1926. In 1973, all the hórreos and paneras in Asturias and Galicia were placed under state protection. Later, the autonomous laws included its preservation. In 1984 an order that protected the Leonese hórreos was approved. However, this legislative protection was useless when the Remolina reservoir, which flooded several towns in the region of Riaño Mountain – León, Spain – was built in 1985. The value of traditional architecture and the hórreos in the villages of the Riaño Mountain was claimed by architects such as Leopoldo Torres Balbás or Manuel Cárdenas. The disappearance of many of them has meant an irreparable loss of a unique type of vernacular architecture. When it came to deciding which elements should be saved from the destruction caused by the reservoir, vernacular architecture was neglected. One of the hórreos was dismantled and remounted in Nuevo Riaño, the new settlement built to replace the disappeared village. Isolated from its context, it became a museum element, perceived as a cultural relic. At the beginning of the 20th century, the council of Riaño became aware of how valuable these elements are and proposed the recovery of the constructive techniques and traditions related to Leonese hórreos. In 2014 a new one was built and placed in Nuevo Riaño square. Surrounded by buildings that have nothing to do with the vernacular architecture in the territory and decontextualised, it is perceived as something beyond to the present days. Today, 142 hórreos are preserved in Riaño Mountain and they must be kept as something more than cultural relics and, additionally, the constructive traditions linked to them must be preserved.

Keywords: *Hórreos; vernacular architecture; conservation; wooden architecture.*

1. Introduction. *Hórreos*, a unique vernacular architecture and a specific preservation problem

Hórreos constitute a very unique typology of vernacular architecture. These raised barns are preserved in different parts of the world and in the Iberian Peninsula they are located in Galicia, Asturias, Cantabria, the Basque Country, northern Castile-Leon and Portugal. They have remained in Spain mainly (Carlé, 1948) and are characterised by their local features, so they might be defined as local and localist buildings (Cantero,

2019, p. 2). Since their origin, they have maintained a function related to the storage of alimentary products, although they have also been used as housing or workshop. Such versatility could be the key to its functional recovery, as it will be explained below. The Leonese *hórreos* appear in the mountainous areas, especially the eastern ones, connecting with the Asturian ones, although their conservation has been minor.

The process of patrimonialization and guardianship guidelines are different between autonomous communities, but in Galicia, Asturias and

León there are some common points: the prohibition of their removal and the ban of interventions that are not subject to the control of the institutions responsible for property protection. It also regulates the construction of new specimens, which must follow the guidelines and techniques of traditional building. Currently, there is a debate between the search for a functional recovery or its maintenance as fossilized objects, lacking any other functionality than that of constituting a kind of cultural relic of high landscape value, following partially the thesis arguing that *hórreos* can be considered as relics that would have perpetuated stilt architectures (Frankowski, 1918, p. 143). The image of the *hórreo* as testimony of the past and as an identity element has determined the way in which its conservation has been proposed and, paradoxically, has contributed to its disappearance.

2. Riaño Mountain and Remolina reservoir

The region of Riaño Mountain is a historical district located in the northwest of the province of León, Spain. The valley of Riaño is located in this area and its capital, Old Riaño, was its administrative and social centre. The region included the municipalities of Acebedo, Boca de Huérgano, Burón, Crémenes, Oseja de Sajambre, Posada de Valdeón, Priorio, Maraña and Riaño. The value of its traditional architecture was claimed by Leopoldo Torres Balbás, who emphasized the value of their *hórreos*, which still kept their thatched roof (Torres Balbás, 1930). His study was accompanied by drawings by the architect Manuel Cárdenas, which together with the photographs preserved in the Institute of Cultural Heritage of Spain, constitute documents of great value to bring us closer to that legacy. Their disappearance has prevented this analysis from being completed (Rubio y Valderas, 1990, p. 75) and has meant an irreparable loss of examples of a unique type of vernacular architecture, since before this area was flooded, eighty *hórreos* were preserved (López García, 2007, pp. 51-52).



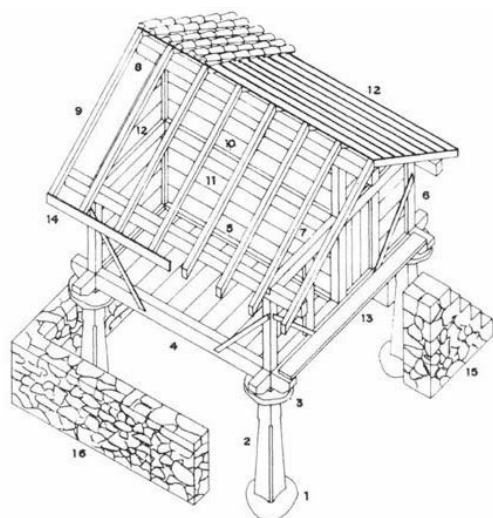
Fig.1. *Hórreos* in Riaño between 1922 and 1936. Photographic library of the Institute of Cultural Heritage of Spain. Ministry of Culture and Sports. Archive Wunderlich number of inventory WUN-07347.

The project for Riaño reservoir, or Remolina reservoir, was proposed at the beginning of the 20th century, but it was delayed and finally completed in the 1980s. This was the last high mountain dam to be built in Europe and began to operate on 31 December 1987, the day before the European Community legislation on environmental impact came into force, fact that would have made it illegal.

3. Hórreos in the valley of Riaño

3.1 Features

The *hórreos* in the valley of Riaño are integrated in the group of those spreaded across the northwest of the province of León. Some authors consider them a variant of the Asturian *hórreos*, while others are drawn to the Cantabrian-Basque ones. They are smaller than Asturian raised barns, with a square floor plan – although some cases reveal a slightly rectangular base – and can present gabled or hip roofs. Normally, these architectures rest on four supports, although some of them are based on six, and their height varies between 1.50 and two meters (Casado, 1980, p. 139). They were mainly built with oak wood and the *pegollos*, or supports, could be built with the same material or stone.



1.- Solera. 2.- Pegollo. 3.- Toma-ratas. 4.- Trave. 5.- Viga media. 6.- Cantonera. 7.- Sobre-trave. 8.- Viga cumbre. 9.- Cabio. 10.- Viga divisoria. 11.- Tabique divisorio. 12.- Tablero. 13.- Tanobia. 14.- Mandril. 15.- Escalera acceso. 16.- Muro delimitador.

Fig. 2. Axonometric diagram of an *hórreo* with a gabled roof in the Valdeón Valley and its main elements (Source: Luermo Varela, 1995).

A very peculiar feature of this group of *hórreos* is the worked shape in the heads of the support beams, with quarter moulding planes, decoration that is especially common in those that present hip roofs. The body of the structure in the oldest aerial barns is composed by roughly squared trunks or planks placed horizontally and dovetails in the corners, also articulated by square section wooden supports. Exceptionally, the plank has a vertical layout. Access to these structures is made by stone stairs. If they have more than one owner, they have two different entrances. Two-sided roofed *hórreos* originally had a vegetation roof, which has now been replaced by Arabic roof tiles (García Grinda, 1991, pp. 38-39). Since they are linked to domestic tasks, meetings and complementary works – such as tool arrangement, slaughter tasks, etc –, *hórreos* are located in the surroundings of the dwelling, constituting an architectural group.

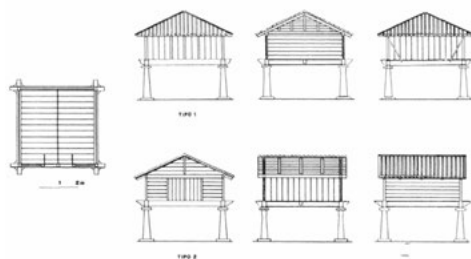


Fig. 3. *Hórreos* in Valdeón. Valley. Elevation, floor plan and section. Drawing (Source: Luermo Varela, 1995).

3.2 Functional changes and degradation

Since the middle of the 20th century, an economic change that imposed livestock farms on those of cereal cultivation began, and *hórreos* started to lose their granary function. In addition, building materials became more expensive (González Arpide, 1987:341) and finally traditional trades were lost. For all these reasons, *hórreos* suffered a progressive abandonment, which became critical in the final decades of the century. The few ones that remained were transformed into a warehouse and storage room or tool store. In the specific case of the town of Riaño, the threat of the closure of the reservoir caused the degradation of the vernacular constructions and, finally, the demolition of its precious and unique specimens.

The villages in Riaño Valley were destroyed prior to the closure of the reservoir in July 1987 and, despite the fact that the Spanish Heritage Law of 1985 indicated the value of the ethnographic and traditional heritage, it was only decided to save five buildings, all of them related to religious, palatial and school architecture (García Cuetos, 2020). Two *hórreos* were rescued from Pedrosa del Rey, but only one was officially recovered, dismantled in the town of Salio and recovered in Riaño, next to the monument *Silencio de las Campanas* (Silence of the Bells), which aims to pay tribute to the disappeared villages and their inhabitants. This structure houses the bells of the destroyed churches and includes the following inscription: *These bells, in remembrance of all the churches in the valley, as well*

as the hermitage of Ntra. Sra. de la Puerta and the *Hórreo* in Salio, moved and rebuilt here, are the symbol of the collective memory of a people materialized in its vernacular architecture and represent the permanent tribute and recognition to the generous sacrifice of its children for the benefit of many in memoriam 1989-1996



Fig.4. Leonese *hórreo* from Salio dismantled and remounted in Nuevo Riaño (Source: Pablo Herrero Lombardía).

As explained, reference is made to the lost heritage and it is specifically mentioned the vernacular architecture that was devastated and of which only one sample was preserved, placed next to the monumental landmark as a sculpture or a heritage relic. The *hórreo* from Salio cannot be perceived in any other way due to its decontextualisation, the isolation in its disposition and the memorial environment in which it is inserted. It may be concluded that there was not a real interest in preserving the legacy of the singular buildings that *hórreos* meant in Riaño Valley.

In the 1980s, due to the development of the autonomous governments and the vindication of their own identities, an interest in traditional culture was generated and *hórreos* began to be integrated into publications on the subject (Álvarez Rubio, 1982). In fact, between 1981 and 1982, a census of the *hórreos* in Castile and Leon was carried out (González Arpide, 1987). The conclusions in this census, therefore, refer to 1982, prior to the destruction of the samples in Riaño valley. In that document, it was already mentioned that the conflicting interests of the owners and the Administration, and the bureaucratization supposed serious obstacles for the conservation of Leonese *hórreos*.

The density of *hórreos* is currently located in the areas of Valdeón and Sajambre, after the loss of those located in Riaño valley under the waters of the reservoir. Priorio is one of the centres where a peculiar group of *hórreos* displayed in row, similar to the disappeared one of Riaño, is preserved (Saiz Guerra, 2012).



Fig.5. Tour of *hórreos* in Riaño Mountain. Riaño Council.

4. Difficulties for preserving *hórreos* in Riaño Mountain. Experiences and proposals.

In 1973, the Order that established the protection for *hórreos* and *cabazos* located in Asturias y Galicia was approved. The criteria justify that guardianship were based on the following idea: these buildings constitute characteristic samples of the localness and the popular architecture in both territories as well as on the will to reverse the process of disappearance and degradation of these elements. It was established that all *hórreos* and *cabazos* over a century old, and regardless of their state of conservation, should be protected to prevent their demolition and any possible intervention that could alter their configuration. Likewise, the owners could not transfer them or initiate any intervention on them without the required permission from the Ministry of Education and Science. These guidelines determined the current debate on the future of *hórreos*, which focuses on the issue of their use as well as on limiting the use of non-traditional materials, adding

functional elements - such as gutters-, and the need for approval from the competent authorities to carry out any work on these elements. Its survival is evident in subsequent legislation. In 1984, the Junta de Castilla y León approved a decree that protected all the *hórreos* in the Community under the figure of Properties of Cultural Interest. The following year, the Spanish Historical Heritage Law (1985) was approved, recognizing the testimonies of vernacular architecture as an integral part of our cultural heritage. The Decree 69/1984 meant the implementation of the criteria established a decade earlier and points out that *hórreos* and *pallozas* are elements linked to typism fundamentally: *they give to the rural environments of certain provinces of our Autonomous Community a peculiar physiognomy, constituting characteristic samples of the localness and the popular architecture of the territories in which they are located.*

Likewise, it is possible that the massive destruction of the *hórreos* preserved in the villages flooded by Riaño reservoir in 1987, had the effect of implementing measures for the protection of those still standing in other areas of Castile and Leon. A pilot programme for the restoration of Leonese *hórreos* was initiated and implemented in the territory of Valdeón. Five intervention campaigns were carried out between 1988 and 1992 (Luelmo Varela, 1995), under the supervision of an architect. These campaigns were conceived as work camps. It was opted for the criterion of minimal intervention and damage repair, avoiding the replacement of parts. In the event that one was partially damaged, the damaged fragment was replaced. Protective products were also applied to the wood. In addition, efforts were made to maintain the tradition of the trades that had survived and the way of acting that had been documented since the 1950s in the valley. The architects considered that the conservation of a living architecture was being addressed, so it was a matter of carrying out a maintenance as the artisans had always done, using at all times the available technologies (Luelmo Varela, 1995, p. 19).



Fig.6. Restoration of one of the *hórreos* in Valdeón (Luelmo Varela, 1995).

It was also suggested that, in case of making use of other means, which were defined as more purist, the precedent of excessively costly processes could be set, preventing owners from maintaining the initiated dynamic. To carry out rehabilitation operations, the chosen samples were the oldest ones together with those that presented building systems considered 'unique' (Luelmo Varela, 1995, p. 19). In the reproduction of pieces, formal analogy was used and contemporary materials were introduced, such as steel points for piece joints and factory ceramic tile for the roofs. In conclusion, specific criteria for architectural restoration were introduced, such as the rejection of the mimetic restitution of damaged or missing elements and, although local artisans were incorporated, the truth is that unaffiliated elements with that tradition were introduced. The applied criteria may be described as questionable, since they alter the fundamental authenticity of vernacular architecture, based on the transmission of trades and the use of traditional materials.

However, account has to be taken of the fact that architects noted the disappearance of traditional trades and the lack of knowledge among carpenters about vernacular assembly techniques. They also concluded that hórreos had been degraded both by the loss of their original function and by the integration of new uses. They had been reused as warehouses and their lower space was used as a garage or clothes dryer, although these functions were inherent to the evolution of hórreos over the last centuries. As an alternative, the use of restored hórreos as an element of occasional support to the local innkeeper offer was proposed as an accommodation designed for visitors with limited budgets, so that the low profitability achieved would enable the owners to meet the maintenance costs. This initiative did not end up crystallizing and only two of the restored hórreos were occupied. The local population perceived the established guardianship in a negative way, while project leaders noted the need to encourage a change in the mindset of property owners. The culture of conserving structures that constituted a distinguishing heritage - that were liable to be appreciated by quality tourism - should be imposed and reflected in the model of the Alps or the Pyrenees (Luelmo Varela, 1995, p. 7). The open debate in the 1980s is still alive and closely related to the use that can be made of hórreos.

In 2021, the Castile-Leon regional government published the last terms of the call for grants for the restoration of traditional architecture in León. Having abandoned the criteria of the end of the 20th century, the call establishes the need to carry out interventions using traditional techniques and materials. It also specifies that the structures must maintain the uses and functions for which they were built. Thereby, the loss of functionality of hórreos as granaries in the context of a marked transformation of the economy in rural areas generates a problem parallel to that observed in Asturias and the danger of the musealization of hórreos persists at the base of this conservation policy. Another important aspect is that the prior approval of the technical document by the

Territorial Commission for Cultural Heritage remains mandatory. Thus, the recovery of traditional techniques and trades and of the uses of the systematic repair and maintenance of these vernacular constructions are subjected to the same discretion as those of the monuments. The complexity of the technical documents to be drawn up also acts as a deterrent to owners, as was also evident in the Asturian case.



Fig.7. Newly-designed hórreo in Cimadevilla de Riaño square. Photograph by Pablo Herrero Lombardia.

In the 21st century, the desire to recover vernacular culture has crystallized new initiatives. The Riaño Ethnographic Museum was inaugurated in 2004 (Díez, 2019, p. 57). One of its objectives has been to recreate lost traditional lifestyles and crafts. Subsequently, a newly-designed hórreo was built in Cimadevilla Square, next to the museum. The structure was built by a local company, in oak wood from the mountains in the valley and the installation was completed with the placement of an explanatory panel on the characteristics of the Leonese hórreo and with a map proposing a tour of the preserved samples. Curiously, this information was not installed next to the original hórreo coming from Salio and installed next to the monument of the Bells.

5. Conclusions. State of the debate on the conservation of hórreos

Hórreos have become an ethnic-identity symbol in the territories where they have been preserved and the criterion that they should be preserved in their materiality, regardless of the loss of their

real function, is maintained. It tends to be accepted that *hórreos* should be preserved as cultural relics, as testimonies detached from the social, material and community context in which they were born. However, alternatives may be considered: the functional recovery as well as the recovery and restitution of their values to the society and the community in which they are integrated, laying the foundations for a correct process of patrimonialisation, based on the recovery of the community will to preserve them. But it is not just about materiality. *Hórreos*' building and maintenance are linked to the heritage of traditional trades and, given their progressive disappearance, it is necessary to promote their revitalisation and also to establish a unification of criteria when intervening in this heritage. Another very interesting aspect is the context in which these structures are situated. After the *hórreos* have basically maintained their traditional configuration, the rural housing that accompanied them has evolved in recent decades. It is usual to see them inserted in an environment of buildings remodeled or replaced by others of contemporary conception. The need to maintain a suitable environment for *hórreos* clashes with the aspirations of housing modernisation and even expansion. In fact, in the first interventions in the 1980s in order to allow a renovation of the houses, it was proposed that the transfer of *hórreos*, which could be grouped in lands of communal or municipal property, could be allowed (Luelmo Varela, 1995). Obviously, this is a solution that breaks the relationship that gave rise to the housing-barn binomial and that also alters the composition of rural centres. The displacement and regrouping of *hórreos* would contribute to their conversion into relics and musealised testimonies of a denatured vernacular culture and at the service of a tourism of false approach to rural and traditional environment.

If *hórreos* constitute an architecture that, in its very origin, could accommodate different uses, from barn, to warehouse and even housing, recovering that versatility is presented as the only alternative to maintain not only the structure, but

their community and identity values. I agree with Ana Sofia Ribeiro on the fact that it will be precisely the simplicity and functionality that characterise this architecture, which makes it possible to adapt to new functions and make it permeable to a new integration in the set of contexts to which they belong (Ribeiro, 2016, p. 35). This new vision is being progressively imposed and, therefore, a framework document of recommendations on the management of heritage assets of ethnographic nature, expressly referring to *hórreos* and *paneras* has been drawn up in Asturias. This reflection addresses the two fundamental questions: the use of non-traditional materials and techniques and new uses. The conclusion, debated, is that both practices contradict the idea of living heritage and clash with the reality of *hórreos*: *Trying to prevent this dynamism in the current situation is to go against the traditional practices of the hórreo and not to recognize that versatility has been one of its main characteristics* (Cantero, 2019, p. 16). It is proposed to break with the archaeological criterion that would have prevailed in the conservation imposed on the *hórreos*.

This reorientation of the debate takes into account the new needs of rural society, the possibility of equipping *hórreos* with housing use, the addition of elements such as gutters, etc. It is intended to break with criteria that prevent *hórreos* from being considered as heritage in use and that, therefore, may experience a process of reuse. We can see that, despite the strict conservation criteria, the truth is that *hórreos* are a well-known and appreciated element in a superficial way. The vocabulary related to its elements is unknown, local and regional variants are not identified and the loss of traditions and trades linked to them has occurred. The alternative for the future of *hórreos* must be based on uniting the initiatives of diffusion and heritage restitution with the interventions that would allow them to maintain a function that, like the case of any built heritage, facilitates its conservation. The revival of traditional trades, which can be an opportunity to generate employment linked to them, must also be included.

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