

# THE CULTURAL UNIQUENESS OF PORTUGUESE-SPANISH BORDER LANDSCAPES

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present topics for describing unique features of social relations and interaction in borderlands, as reflected in tangible and intangible heritage. Considering that there are phenomena that can only take place in border contexts, we examine the Lower Guadiana basin (on the Portugal–Spain border) as a potential case study for heritage enhancement. Historically, this territory is part of Europe’s oldest stable political border, as it was delimited in 1297 (Treaty of Alcañices). This condition was a determinant for the configuration of a unique historical human landscape, with villages founded for surveillance purposes, as well as buildings (fortresses or houses for guards) along the borders. In contrast, the separations created by the states provide clues about the development of unofficial social relations and hybrid manifestations (e.g., smuggling, language confluence). This article provides insight into the importance of interconnections and mutual influences in the formation and consolidation of unique cultural realities in borderlands that contradict the image of rupture and separation created by mainstream historiography. With this overview, it is possible to identify some topics for further research on borderlands, especially in the current geopolitical context, that is, after the elimination of border checkpoints in the Schengen Area and the loss of the political importance of these peripheral territories. This situation leads to the depopulation of border territories, especially in the hinterland, which can inspire the examination of the particularities of this human landscape from a multidisciplinary point of view. It should be noted that the Guadiana River is navigable between its mouth and Mértola, which has determined human occupation, interregional contact and its defence since the eighth century BC.

**Keywords:** borderlands, Guadiana River basin, Luso-Spanish border, heritage

## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to present topics for describing unique features of social relations and interactions in borderlands reflected on tangible and intangible heritage. Considering that some phenomena can occur only in border contexts, we examine the Lower Guadiana basin (on the Portugal–Spain border) as a potential case study. This navigable river separated two Roman provinces (Baetica and Lusitania); from the end of the thirteenth century onward, it separates Portugal and Spain between Vila Real de Santo António and Ayamonte and between Pomarão and Cañaveral (see Fig. 1). This condition is crucial for understanding the long tradition of contact between the main ports (Castro Marim, Ayamonte and Mértola) and the Mediterranean during the Iron Age. It also explains the protection and settlement of the riverbanks after the Treaty of Alcañices in 1297 to counter the permeability of border areas.

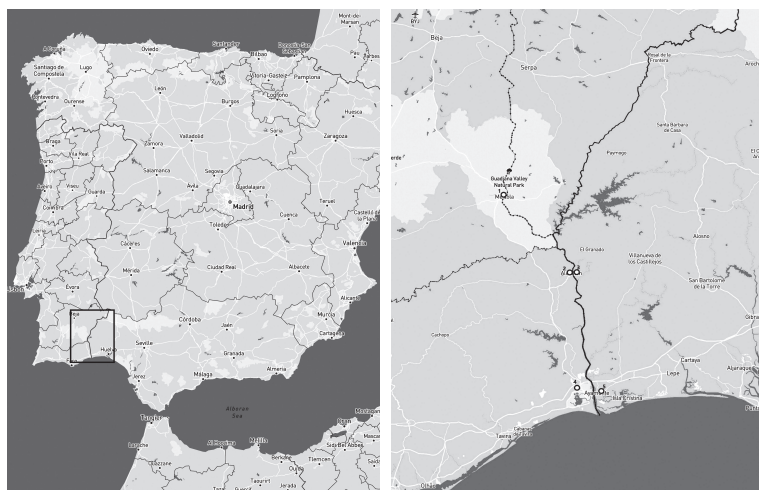


Fig. 1: The Luso-Spanish border in the Lower Guadiana Basin.

1. Mértola; 2. Alcoutim; 3. Sanlúcar de Guadiana; 4. Castro Marim; 5. Ayamonte; A. End of the international border on the Guadiana River (Source: Mapbox).

A recent research project conducted in this area focused on the archaeological examination of this territory, especially on the navigable section of the Guadiana River (between the river mouth

and Pulo do Lobo), to identify human settlements along the riverbanks between the eighth century BC and the first century AD (see Albuquerque et al. 2020).

Some of the main topics examined there include, firstly, the national narratives developed within the natural and artificial limits of a nation state. This means that the borders are perceived and described as remote peripheries that shape national territories and identities, and the other side is perceived as a culturally different and separated territory. In other words, the main historiography often ignores the particularities of the border territories and, especially, the social relationships that take place in them.

These statements explain the relevance of this no exhaustive and unambitious note on the cultural uniqueness of border landscapes. They intend to be a steppingstone for heritage enhancement or heritagization in the Iberian Peninsula, and particularly in the Lower Guadiana Basin, but also in other peripheral territories.

## CONCEPTUAL REMARKS

“Border”, “boundary”, “frontier” and “territorial limits” are concepts that describe diverse types of reality, as they can be tangible, intangible, territorial, political, economic, natural, personal and so on. This paper deals with the political borders of national territories in the Iberian Peninsula that have been in place since 1297, human settlement along more than 1,200 km of shared territories and identity constructs between these two countries.

Ideas that are associated with those words include “rupture” and “differentiation” between two entities, as well as “defence” and “periphery”. In fact, states often define the limits of their sovereignty and stimulate the occupation of those territories. However, a historical examination of these realities must consider that there are communication strategies on both sides and unofficial interactions between them. At first glance, this seems to contradict the depiction of these peripheral or marginal territories as places that mark the limits of the cultural perception of “us” and “them”. The analysis of these phenomena can be related to what van der Vleuten and Feys (2016) recently called the border paradox, that is, flows and social or cultural realities that are determined by the separation created by states. These realities, as seen later, explain the uniqueness of borderlands phenomena.

Several aspects are relevant for contextualizing this subject. Some decades ago, C. Cavaco stated:

The border is not only the symbolic limit of a community's territory, linked by shared and internalized elements opposed to the Other. It is a space for encounters, influences, relationships, changes, complicities, cooperation, and solidarities because of their position in the extremes, on the outskirts of territories and national sovereignties.<sup>1</sup> (Cavaco 1997, 159)

Borders or frontiers are depictions, and their place, function or dimension can be changed. They are closely dependent on the historical circumstances and the social and cultural perceptions of territories and landscapes. They can mark a rupture and discontinuity as well as a transition and a locale where encounters take place. However, the (anachronic) perception of national histories often promotes the idea that people's space is delimited by natural frontiers (Castro and González 1989, 8; Sahlins 1990, 142). This perception, from the point of view of historical geography, examines borders as 'no man's lands' and as defensive barriers that structure political discourses and projects with no place for transitions or contact beyond border conflicts (e.g., Raffestin 1992; Cavaco 1997).

However, these peripheries share spaces and even identities. In the case of the Lower Guadiana Basin, it is evident that the river not only marks a separation but provides conditions for interactions. The Iron Age occupation of its riverbanks is a telling example of this (Albuquerque et al. 2020). Thus, borderlands can be regions or landscapes with unique humanization strategies, even when they are politically and administratively separated by a body of water such as the Guadiana.<sup>2</sup>

Borders are critical to understanding the history of the relationships between two countries. In some political contexts, they are used as barriers that prevent access to a territory and reinforce the control of territorial limits.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the construction of sym-

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by the author. "A fronteira não é apenas o limite simbólico do território duma comunidade, unida por elementos comuns e interiorizados, em oposição ao Outro, mas é espaço de encontros, de influências, de relações, de trocas, de complicitades, de cooperações e solidariedades, pela situação nas extremas, nos confins dos territórios e soberanias nacionais."

<sup>2</sup> For a careful examination of various phases of the Luso-Spanish Border, see Cosme (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Situations in which a frontier is constructed for apartheid purposes here (e.g., the Kraków Ghetto wall or the wall between Israel and Palestine) are

bolic and tangible elements (a tower, a fortress, etc.) can reflect conflictive relations and tensions for short or long periods (Cavaco 1997). By contrast, their obsolescence and abandonment are a consequence of more peaceful political relations. For example, Duarte de Armas' manuscript, "Livro das Fortalezas" [Book of Fortresses], presented to Portuguese king D. Manuel in 1510, depicts and describes the defensive structures of the borderlands.<sup>4</sup> This book is an important source for the evaluation of these structures and for the examination of the history of military architecture, for example, the evolution of construction techniques and weaponry. Furthermore, it must be remembered that in the sixteenth century, these territories were not clearly depicted on maps and were poorly known by rulers and outsiders.

However, the examination of borders is not restricted to political issues. As cultural inventions, human landscapes can be examined from an archaeological perspective on various scales (see Albuquerque and García Fernández 2019). The first (macroscale) has to do with the distribution of settlements along a territory. The second (mesoscale) deals with the possible relationship models between sites (for example, mutual surveillance) and the third (micro or nanoscale) focuses on the construction of social or intangible boundaries in food consumption, behaviour and practices (Rizo and Romeo 2006; García Fernández 2012, 721–722). These levels of interaction are critical for understanding why it is postulated that border contexts paved the way for local particularities that can be enhanced as a cultural (in)tangible heritage shared by both countries. In the next chapter, some general assumptions are presented in order to carry out further multidisciplinary investigations about these particularities.

## THE UNIQUENESS OF BORDERLANDS

As stated above, borderlands are more than separation lines; they can be places where encounters, interactions and mutual influences take place, leading to the formation of hybrid realities or, in other words, of what can be called 'border identities'. These territories began to interest European scholars in 1958 (see the works of C. Raffestin in the 1970s), some years before Iberian researchers. It

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not considered because they are extreme cases that are not suitable for the discourse of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> <https://digitarq.arquivos.pt/details?id=3909707> (accessed 15<sup>th</sup> December 2021).

is telling that the first “Coloquio Ibérico de Geografía” (Iberian Conference on Geography, Salamanca, 1979) did not include communications about borderlands, but in the presentation, Antonio Cabo proposed the inclusion of this topic in the agenda of geographers (Cabo 1981). In fact, this event inaugurated a research avenue on the geography of borderlands and reflections on the effects of delimitation processes in local communities. Gradually, the idea of “border separation” gave way to the idea of “border cooperation”, which was consolidated when Portugal and Spain joined the EEC in 1986 (Albuquerque and García Fernández 2019).

After 1990, initiatives of local development such as INTERREG or FEDER programs tried to promote cross-border cooperation. This topic will not be examined in detail (see Medeiros 2009; García Fernández et al. 2017; Albuquerque and García Fernández 2019, 134 ff). However, the development of these programs was crucial for the study of borderland contexts, with new perspectives focused on the uniqueness of these communities and their identities.

In this context, studies have been conducted to outline these unique phenomena, such as the linguistic confluence that resulted in hybrid manifestations. This is the case with *Português Oliventino* (Oliventine Portuguese) and other hybrid dialects that are formed from Portuguese and Spanish words (Vasconcelos 1890–1892; Carrasco 2007). The formation of a unique linguistic landscape (Pons 2014; López de Aberasturi 2020) facilitates further research that can help to preserve this endangered heritage.<sup>5</sup> New economic and political circumstances are leading to the progressive abandonment of these regions and the irremediable loss of older members of the population who have this knowledge and unwritten (i.e., oral) histories.

Recent works of anthropologists raise questions about the effect of new discourses and goals on community building and their role in the touristification of borderlands (see Hernández 2017). The historical description provided above is critical for understanding the discourse about these territories, whether it is focused on confrontation (that is, the construction of defensive structures) and whether it is centred in the common features developed in a shared territory. In other words, there is always a boundary between contrasts and convergences in the discourse about this landscape. Moreover, there is also a crucial difference between the touristic product and the way local communities perceive life in these spaces. Therefore, despite

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth mentioning the works of the project FRONTESPO (<https://www.frontespo.org/en>), which focus on the linguistic landscapes of borderlands.

the attractiveness of fortresses as visible monuments in the landscape, often providing spectacular views of the surrounding territory (see Fig. 2 as an example), other features, such as language or even archaeological records, are equally interesting to researchers. In this context, cross-border tourism is based on the perception of hybridity and cultural diversity, and border tourism is focused on differences, markers of separation and cultural homogeneity (Hernández 2017).



Fig. 2: Alcoutim viewed from the San Marcos Fortress (Sanlúcar de Guadiana). Photo by the author.

Archaeology can be a tool for understanding what is often lacking in written sources. This is especially true of periods when the Guadiana River played a key role in the circulation of products from other parts of the Old World, as the first millennium BC occupation of three ports demonstrates (Ayamonte until the seventh century BC, Castro Marim from that century onwards and finally, Mértola from c. the sixth century BC onwards). The archaeological records of these sites reveal that the navigability of this river determined the formation of apparently multicultural communities. This is especially evident in Mértola, a city located near the end of the navigable section (García Fernández et al. 2019; Albuquerque et al. 2020). Its navigability was crucial for promoting interaction, which led to the construction of ports in strategic places. This feature determined the construction of fortresses along the riverbanks when surveillance was needed in medieval and modern times. However, it must be noted that the construction of walled sites can be related to the protection of a trade route (see, e.g., Mértola) and is not always to surveillance of the borders.



This duality between border conflicts and the protection of trade and military routes determined the uniqueness of the border landscapes and also of cultural features and heritage assets. Some of these features, such as daily life or even language, can only exist in these regions, which is a strong argument for the developing studies to preserve and enhance knowledge about these phenomena. Moreover, it must be noted that this case also deals with rural territories, which is a strong stimulus for creating strategies to improve lifeways and sustainable development in peripheral areas.

## TOWARD THE ENHANCEMENT OF BORDERLANDS' HERITAGE

It can be postulated that borders are historical constructs that configure unique landscapes and reflect political relationships between countries and interconnections between communities. There is a difference between the image promoted by states about their inner and neighbouring territories and the way local communities perceive themselves and the people from the other side. The peripheral condition within countries explains the lack of interest in the study of these territories, especially where political boundaries have lost their relevance, as in the internal borders of the Schengen Area.

As the oldest border in the world, the Luso-Spanish border has a rich heritage that can and must be enhanced. Through its long history, a unique human landscape has been constructed, which reflects the evolution of the relationships between the two Iberian nations and kingdoms, as well as centuries of contact, interactions and mutual influences. The study and interpretation of these interconnections and entanglements can promote heritagization, community building and sustainable development.

*Mértola Vila Museu* (Portugal) is a good example of community building and heritagization. It is an open-air museum project focused on the local development of a border territory with a substantial social impact. In this project, archaeological and ethnographic research is conducted with the participation of local communities, as described in several published works (Gómez et al. 2016, among others). The success of this long-term project shows that heritage can be a source of social, economic and cultural sustainability in peripheral territories. One consequence of the enhancement of archaeological and ethnographic heritage and collective memory is the prevention of the depopulation of rural areas (Del Espino 2020).

The examination and enhancement of intangible and tangible heritage must be holistic and multidisciplinary. The roles of historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and philologists are equally important for a broader view on the cultural uniqueness of borderlands not only in the territories discussed here but also in other countries around the world. As shown, surveillance and permeability are the obverse and reverse of the same coin, which determines what is (and what is not) border or cross-border investigation. By focusing on interaction instead of opposition, it is possible to enhance the cultural diversity of border contexts and composite or hybrid identities formed by the fact that human groups share and sometimes explore the same territory. In other words, it is possible to state that these communities can have more affinity with their neighbours than with the capitals of their respective countries.

Additionally, the dialogue or comparison between old and young borders in European countries can be fruitful not for constructing or reinforcing epistemological walls but for creating bridges and communication between communities, lifeways and cultures (Albuquerque et al. forthcoming). The border is, as we have tried to show, the place where these features meet, like a fence where two neighbours meet to talk.

## CONCLUSION: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF BORDERLANDS IN A BORDERLESS EUROPE

The European dream of a borderless Europe focuses primarily on free circulation within a common market despite the conventions that recommend the implementation of territorial policies such as the “European Spatial Development Perspective” (see, e.g., Mora, Pimienta 1996-2003). The sense of strong protection of European external borders creates a sense of belonging to a system more than to a community. In the era of globalization, borders have lost their importance, leading to new ways of conceiving history as a complex web of communication between territories without considering territorial limits. However, the act of delimiting national territories paved the way, as shown above, for interactions and entanglements that go far beyond the official discourse. It also determined the construction of fortress and surveillance buildings along the border.

The loss of political relevance relegated these territories to a more evident peripheral condition, especially the rural areas that

became even more isolated and forgotten. However, cultural tourism can be a strategy to promote the resilience of local communities by enhancing their cultural uniqueness. The construction of border identities as a result of the confluence of lifeways can illustrate how these territories, as seen by local communities, are traditionally borderless and how they can be multicultural, even before the abovementioned European dream became relevant.

Therefore, by examining and enhancing the rich past of the Luso-Spanish borderlands, investigators from various scientific areas can contribute, along with local communities, to the sustainable development of rural peripheries. By intervening in the present, it is still possible to pave the way for the sustainable development of these forgotten (yet culturally, historically and archaeologically rich) territories.

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