

Food Heritage in the Mediterranean Area: In Search of New Perspectives of Promotion and Interpretation

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Since 1999 (with the international distinction of the UNESCO Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Immaterial Heritage of Humanity, established on the initiative of Morocco) and, later, in 2001, with the declaration by UNESCO, for the first time, of 19 spaces of Immaterial Heritage of Humanity, we can consider that the “official” concept of heritage has in some way started to *dematerialise* and has recognised fields that are beyond the merely monumental and environmental, thereby widening its field towards more ethnoanthropological and less *tangible* aspects.¹

An important aspect that we wish to emphasise here is that gastronomic heritage and, by extension, human food in general, is included within this emergent immaterial heritage. If UNESCO’s 2005 declaration of assets has had an outstanding characteristic (of course, from the point of view that we want to emphasise here) it is that, for the first time, a country like Mexico has presented its culinary art with the aim of being declared Heritage of Humanity.

However, as Moncusí and Santamarina (to be published) note, the reasons for its non-inclusion by UNESCO respond to an important series of problems related to its candidature, that is: “Mexican cuisine does not fit the characteristics of what is recognised as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Immaterial Heritage of Humanity, as its risk of disappearance is not clear; its frame of reference is too wide (nation), and it does not place the asset in question within a specific space-time framework (festival, ceremony, ritual, theatre performance context or similar...).”

But it is true that, both before and after, different initiatives and candidatures *related* with the food sector have been submitted (or are in process of submission) to UNESCO. These include the jurisdiction and landscape of the Saint-Émilion vineyards in France (1999); the wine region of Alto Douro (2001) and the grape and wine-growing landscape of Pico Island in Portugal (2004); the Agavero landscape and the old tequila industry in Mexico (2006), or

1. However, it should be noted that the Material Heritage declarations are well above 700, while those of Immaterial Heritage of Humanity are, at the moment of writing this article, just 71. For further information on this issue, consult: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/intangible-heritage/>.



Olives, a mainstay of Mediterranean diet.

– especially relevant in terms of the Mediterranean area – the Cultural Route of the Vine and Wine in the Towns of the Mediterranean,² which is currently in the indicative list of Spanish candidatures³ (submitted from La Rioja) awaiting its future consideration.

This latter example places us in the Mediterranean area seen (in heritage terms) from different perspectives: especially as an “area of culture” (even as the “cradle of culture”), with all the ideological significance that this involves; moreover, as a transnational area, be-

yond political borders; and, therefore, as an area of creation and promotion of “product”.

In this same context, there is another initiative that has tried to launch some agreement for the processing of its application to UNESCO. It is the possibility of the proposal for the declaration of the Mediterranean diet as Immaterial Heritage of Humanity. Between 29th September and 1st October 2005, Rome hosted the 3rd Euro-Mediterranean Forum “Dialogues between Civilizations and Peoples of the Mediterranean. The Food Cultures”. One

2. In a previous article (Medina, 2000: 283 and ff) I devoted a brief analysis to this candidature in its Mediterranean context.

3. See on this: http://www.mcu.es/jsp/plantillaAncho_wai.jsp?id=79&area=patrimonio&contenido=/patrimonio/pei/ph/phe/listCandidaturasEsp.html.

of the proposals of organisation included was a specific roundtable with UNESCO members on the possible recognition of the Mediterranean diet as heritage, which finally came about (without the presence of UNESCO) in an academic session on the strategic need for a position of consensus on the Mediterranean diet, understood, in this case, as an innovative form in relation to this concept: beyond a medical diet, as a cultural system.⁴

The problem in relation to this sought consensus came, in fact, from defining the Mediterranean diet itself, with a strong division of views on this issue: while some of the participant speakers advocated defining it as “*traditional* Mediterranean diet”, others refused to include the term “*traditional*” in its definition; without ever arguing the importance of the health actions and policies in this sense, but clarifying its recent history as a constructed concept and with a particular history in relation to cardiovascular illnesses and with the health of the population in general. Moreover, the notable difficulties of articulation of this diet and its absolute positive recommendations became clear, along with the history and the *tradition* of the food practices in a broad sense in the Mediterranean area, which makes a possible *heritagisation* of the subject in question difficult and impedes a necessary consensus on it.

In September 2006, however, the Health Department and the Ministry of Health and Consumption of the Catalan and Spanish governments, respectively, together with the Fundación para el Desarrollo de la Dieta Mediterránea, started the preliminary steps for the submission of this candidature to the status of Heritage of Humanity, which is still underway.

In the last four months of 2006 came the submission of the preliminary candidature dossier of French gastronomy as Heritage of Humanity, promoted by the Institut Européen d’Histoire de l’Alimentation and the Université François Rabelais in Tours. France (through its Ministry of Culture) plans to submit this candidature in 2008, with the aim of “Not ‘fixing’ French cuisine or maintaining it in the mists of a glorious past but rather promoting its creativity and diversity, real signs of French cultural identity.”

If anything is certain, it is that the new candidatures should learn as much as possible from the failure of Mexican cuisine’s attempted accession to world immaterial heritage. Any candidature mainly needs internal coherence and consensus on it, and both elements are not as easy to achieve as we might believe at first sight.

What is clear is that intangible heritage and, within its field, gastronomic and food heritage, is in a moment of expansion, of recognition and awareness of its protection. In this context, the Mediterranean area will undoubtedly have a lot to say.

References

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4. Another of the sessions was devoted to the erosion of the Mediterranean food inheritance, with which we introduced another of the factors that come into play when defining a world heritage declaration: the danger of disappearing.



Water physically constructs the landscape of an oasis.