

## The landscape of Ribagorça (Catalonia-Aragon, Spain): an analysis based on an examination of the region's place names\*

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### Abstract

The region of Ribagorça, lying on the southern slopes of the Pyrenees and straddling the historical domains of Catalonia and Aragon, has long been recognised as an area of great linguistic and toponymic interest. The physically abrupt nature of its terrain, isolating it from its neighbouring territories until the building of the first roads (as late as the second half of the 20th century), and its being historically, a "frontier territory", account for the fact that, from a linguistic perspective, it constitutes a quite exceptional redoubt owing to its archaisms and the fact that its toponymy presents a great diversity of influences and local peculiarities.

In this paper we propose drawing on some of the body of linguistic and, more specifically, toponymic research undertaken in this region, in order to examine the general traits of the landscape and geography of Ribagorça. In practice, we base this study on an analysis of a series of toponyms, selected according to their expressiveness in geographical and landscape terms. The study allows us to underscore the degree of semantic correctness, precision and concordance shown, by and large, by the historical toponymy of Ribagorça. Thus, the region of Ribagorça reveals itself as a true "palimpsest": a geographically complex and diverse space, influenced by many cultures, and whose place names provide us with a highly valuable key for interpreting its landscapes through history.

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### 1. Introduction

Our main purpose in this study is to provide a general interpretation of the physical and cultural landscape of the Ribagorça region (Central Pyrenees mountain range, lying between Catalonia and Aragon) by taking some of its most relevant place names as our point of reference.

The study is based on the belief that the relationship between place names and landscape is especially strong in certain geographical contexts, and that an examination of these links can serve as an interesting tool for the onomastician.

### Methodology

The following constitute the main themes examined in the study: Place names and space-related identity; motives for place-naming. The toponyms in which we ground the study are drawn from cartographic sources (both current and historical) at different scales (1:50,000, 1:25,000, 1:10,000), gazetteers and geographical dictionaries.

Our arguments are based on the combination of geographical observation and the linguistic consideration of place names and their supposed etymology.<sup>1</sup>

The study comprises an analysis of a series of toponyms, selected according to the degree of their expressiveness in geographical and landscape terms. The study serves to underscore, by and large, the degree of semantic correctness, precision and concordance shown by the historical toponymy of Ribagorça. Thus, the region of Ribagorça reveals itself as a true "palimpsest": a complex, diverse geographical space, influenced by many cultures, and

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<sup>1</sup> We have to point out that the etymological interpretations to the toponyms included in the paper are mostly taken from the Coromines' onomastic dictionary *OnoCat* (see final references).

whose place names provide us with a highly valuable key for interpreting its landscapes through history.

## 2. The geographical context. The region of Ribagorça

The region of Ribagorça, lying on the southern slopes of the Pyrenees and straddling the historical domains of Catalonia and Aragon, has long been recognised as an area of great linguistic and toponymic interest. The physically abrupt nature of its terrain, isolating it from its neighbouring territories until the building of the first roads (as late as the second half of the 20th century), and its being historically, a "frontier territory", account for the fact that, from a linguistic perspective, it constitutes a quite exceptional redoubt owing to its archaisms and the fact that its toponymy presents a great diversity of influences and local peculiarities.

### *The territory: general traits*

La Ribagorça (or Ribagorza) is one of the largest historical regions occupying the southern slopes of the Pyrenees. Taken as a whole, it occupies an area of some 2,900 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population, according to figures published for 2009, of around 16,500 inhabitants.

In general terms, the territory of Ribagorça is bounded by the central sector of the axis of the Pyrenees mountains to the north (the Maladeta massif, 3,404 m), by the plains of Lleida and La Llitera to the south, by the river Noguera Ribagorçana to the east and by the river Éssera to the west. It has a highly fragmented physical geography due in the main to the region's mountain systems (that is, the axis of the Pyrenees chain in the northern sector, and the Pre-Pyrenees in the centre and to the south of the region) and the three rivers that cut across these systems (from east to west: Noguera Ribagorçana, Isàvena and Éssera, together with their respective tributaries) in a perpendicular direction. The fragmented nature of the physical environment (highly typical of the overall character of the high mountain areas of the Pyrenees) has impeded the development of large river valleys in the region. By contrast, what does dominate in this region are small-scale environmental units or "microregions", which in general coincide with small river banks/shores, or *riberas*, located along the main river channels that have at their head a market centre or a larger ranking settlement. This basic organization of the physical space is captured by the usual etymological interpretation of the toponym *Ribagorça* (lat. *Ripacurtia*), that is, "territory of small *riberas* or river banks" (see section 4.1).

Divided for administrative purposes between Catalonia and Aragon, at least since the 13th century, the present-day territory of Ribagorça corresponds fairly closely to the limits of the former Medieval county, which in its day was one of the strongest in the so-called *Marca Hispánica* or Spanish March (that is, the buffer territories, linked to the Frankish Kingdom, that extended to the south of the Pyrenees and which formed a border with the political domains of Al-Andalus). Today, the region of Ribagorça can be considered a "hinge" territory (or one of contact) between distinctive geographical environments, to the north and south as well as to the east and west. This situation, linked to the economic and demographic decline suffered by the region throughout the 20th century (and, especially, between 1960 and 1980), has led to its being considered a *marginal* territory; a condition reflected in its present population density of approximately 5.7 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>.

### *The main geographical environments of Ribagorça*

The study and understanding of a territory as broad as that of this region, and with such a degree of physical fragmentation, require that it be broken down into smaller distinct units. In general, the toponymy has played a key role in the identification of these "differentiated units": at times, thanks to the adoption of names of popular origin and of ancestral use; and at

others, thanks to the more scholarly creation of toponyms which, in general, have taken root among the population because of their use by the government or their diffusion via maps, geographical works and school textbooks.

Thus, the first toponymic level that we can identify is that formed by *Alta Ribagorça* and *Baixa Ribagorça*. The former occupies approximately the northern half of the region: it is the sector that corresponds structurally to the central axis of the Pyrenees chain, that is, the high mountain area of alpine landscapes. The *Baixa Ribagorça*, on the other hand, corresponds to the southern half of the Ribagorça; here, the physical predominance of the mountains is not so great and the influence of the Mediterranean climate is, in general, clearly visible in the landscape (unlike *Alta Ribagorça*, which lie in the Euro-Siberian biogeographical region and, at its highest altitudes, in the Boreo-Alpine region). The limit between both areas runs from west to east following the direction of the main massifs in the regions (lying, at the scale of the Pyrenean mountain chain, within what is known as the inner ranges of the Pre-Pyrenees), that is, the *Turbó*, the *Serra del Cis* and the *Serra de Sant Gervàs* (see Photo 1).

At a secondary toponymic level, we can distinguish a total of nine environments or “small basins” throughout the region. They are, in each instance, physically well-defined sectors, of uneven area, with a certain degree of homogeneity in their landscape. In human terms, they are characterized by their being held together (historically and in the present-day) by a centre of population that has served the functions of a capital. Four of these units lie in the northern sector of the region, that is, *Alta Ribagorça*: *Barravés* valley (historically centred on the municipality of Vilaller), the *Boí* valley (bordering the historical region of Pallars), the *Castanesa* valley (lying between the river valleys of Éssera and Noguera Ribagorçana) and the *Benasque* valley (at the headwaters of the river Éssera). The remaining five units lie within the region of *Baixa Ribagorça*: the districts of *Campo* and *Graus* (centred on villages of the same name), the *ribera d’Isàvena* (with Roda d’Isàvena, former capital of the region, at its head), the *Terreta*, in which the village of Areny lies, and, finally, in the southernmost sector, the so-called *rodalia de Benavarri* (with the village of the same name as its point of reference).



**Photo 1.** The middle valley of *Ribagorça*.  
The *Serra de Sant Gervàs*, and the flat lands of *La Terreta*. (Photo: J.T.)

### *Notes on the landscape of Ribagorça*

In general, the landscape of Ribagorça reflects the diversity of its physical structures and the region's internal fragmentation. The dominance of upland areas (and, the natural corollary of this, the absence of extensive flat spaces) and the discontinuous character of its river valleys (broken by narrow ravines that separate one sector from another) are, in practice, its two main elements. These two characteristics are completed by a series of features of secondary importance (and of a highly uneven distribution in the area), but which, overall, create the region's typical image as a "landscape mosaic" within the Pyrenees, reflecting its complexity and originality.

First and foremost, it is important to stress differences in the region's geological substrate. To the north, structures corresponding to the central axis of the Pyrenees dominate. That is, relief features formed essentially by slate and crystalline rocks that make up the oldest core of the chain, and which have undergone massive alterations caused by major tectonic folds and which have been lifted to the point that they constitute the highest peaks in the Pyrenees. Furthermore, these mountains were heavily modified by glacial action throughout the quaternary era, so much so that its imprint is today clearly visible in its relief forms (U-shaped valleys, jagged mountain crests, lacustrine features corresponding to ancient glacial cirques, etc.). By contrast, in the centre and to the south of Ribagorça the structures typical of the Pre-Pyrenees become dominant; that is, mountains of lower altitude formed, fundamentally, by more recent rocks of sedimentary origin (primarily, calcareous), affected also by Alpine folding but, in contrast, and because of their lower altitude and the fact that they lie further to the south, unaffected by quaternary glaciations. In terms of the physical landscape, the contrasts between these two "types" of mountain constitute one of the main factors of spatial differentiation in the whole region.

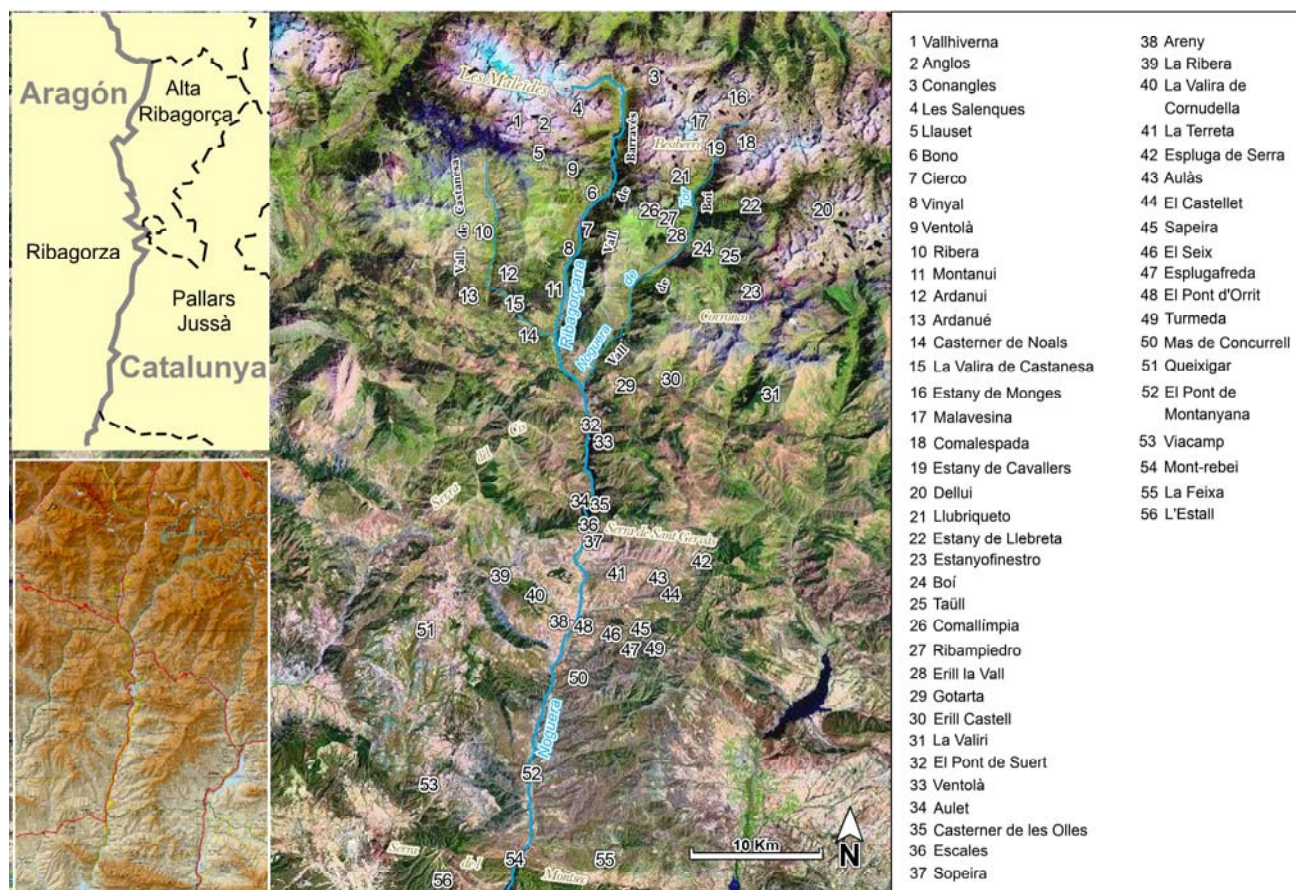
## **3. Landscape and place names. A case study in the region of Ribagorça**

### **3.1. *The toponyms selected***

For this study our basic material for analysis comprises a set of around seventy toponyms taken from the region. These place names present a variable spatial significance (that is, they are employed to name a range of phenomena from specific, linear geographical elements to spaces of considerable area) and have been selected based on our knowledge of the geography and toponymy of the zone and with the intention that, as a set, they might constitute a representative sample of the diversity of the territory and the landscape of Ribagorça.

In practice, and in order that our analysis might be as specific and effective as possible, we have limited the names selected to the eastern half of the region: that is, the territory which, broadly speaking, lies within the upper and middle stretches of the Noguera Ribagorçana river basin (see attached map). This space, which in terms of its surface area represents less than half (around 40 %) the region of Ribagorça, has the advantage of being fully representative of its overall geography (given the specific orographic and hydrographic traits of the region, noted in the section above). Furthermore, the fact that the frontier between Catalonia and Aragon cuts through the centre of this basin gives eastern Ribagorça an added importance in terms of both its historical and political geography.





Map. The region of Ribagorça.

### 3.2. Systematic analysis of the names and etymological references

Regarding the methodology adopted herein, we should add two further comments about the toponyms selected.

First, as regards the treatment afforded the place names on which we focus our attention, we should stress that in our analysis we are concerned with examining toponyms in the sense of their *spatial significance* (that is, their qualitative importance in space, regardless of whether their spatial extent is large or small).<sup>2</sup> It is not our intention, therefore, to undertake any kind of typological categorization or study related to the stages in their linguistic evolution. To the extent that our study does not simply seek to list or classify toponyms, we believe it necessary to select the names freely, in accordance with their geographical relevance, rather than by employing rigid parameters based on a simple quantification or administratively governed systematisation.

Second, reference should also be made to the problems that can be encountered in the etymological study of these toponyms. Here, given the complexity of the linguistic history of this territory (indeed, Joan Coromines in referring to this region in the Pyrenees, which comprises the Ribagorça, the Pallars, Andorra and the Cerdanya, claimed that it was “the fortress of all archaisms”),<sup>3</sup> our use of etymological references should be seen as being of a supportive nature and subject to the provisional character inherent to such interpretations. Thus, rather than the language, our prime concern here is the territory, which is attributed with more importance than arguments of a strictly linguistic order (and, in particular, their application in synchronic or diachronic Onomastics). Yet, bearing in mind that place names

<sup>2</sup> Specifically, what in other studies we refer to as the “territorial meaning” of toponyms (Tort 2003 and Tort 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Coromines, *OnoCat*, VII: 397.

(a genuinely linguistic raw material), considered as intangible patrimony, form a part of this territory, our attention remains equally focused on them. That is, however, respecting the basic premise that the essential perspective of our study is geographical and not linguistic, and that as regards linguistics, and any related appraisals, we can do no more than give careful consideration to the arguments (often contradictory and as a rule changing with the passage of time) of specialists in the etymological study of the place names of our region.

### 3.3. *The landscape as a toponymic construction*

To what extent can a landscape be *constructed* (that is: “drawn”, “delimited”, “suggested”, “implied” and/or “denoted”) by the toponyms found within it?

It is our belief that this question succinctly captures the range of problems we face in conducting a study such as the one we propose undertaking here in the territory of Ribagorça. Our response, needless to say, is inevitably full of qualifications. Not the least of these is the basically experimental nature of our proposal – i.e. in terms of the experimental exercise we conduct. That is, our starting point is the wish to see what exactly a study involving an analysis of onomastics and toponymy can contribute to the understanding of a *landscape*. And given that we are seeking to explain a notion (that of the landscape) that in itself is complex, and which epistemologically can be approached from a multiplicity of perspectives (and which does not hide a dichotomy that is difficult to reconcile: an approach from a “physical-objective-material” perspective, as opposed to one with a “cultural-historical-spiritual” bias), we understand that answering the question posed above is by no means straightforward. What we cannot hope to do is to resolve through the simple use of place names the great doubts raised among scholars in their *scientific* analysis of something as elusive as “landscape”.

On this understanding, we should stress that we believe that adopting a coherent and rigorous approach to the study of landscape is perfectly legitimate, useful and necessary. And that such an approach should be founded, as far as possible, on a scientific basis. However, a study of this nature requires adequate conditions of “conceptual flexibility” in its examination of the specific *object of study* (physical and, in turn, human) that interests us here. This same condition of flexibility is, however, required also of the toponyms that we intend to use as the *tools* of our study. In practice, only by working from this premise, is it defensible to aspire to the goal which we set ourselves here: that is, a discursive construction (and, therefore, one that is globally argued) of the landscape of a region (Ribagorça) taking, as our raw material for this discourse, a selection of its geographical names (or toponyms) at different scales.

## 4. Ribagorça: the study of a toponymic landscape

### 4.1. *Ribagorça or Ripacurtia, “the land of river banks”*

Our region of study is defined, both historically and in its present-day reality, by a toponym whose roots can be traced far back in time: Ribagorza/Ribagorça, documented as *Ripacurtia* in the 11th century. This toponym, written in Vulgar Latin, is a compound noun comprising two words whose meaning is fairly transparent: RIPA (*riba* in present-day Catalan, which here has the meaning of “steep slope formed by the falling away of earth made up of limes and clays”), and CURTIA (derived from CURTUS, *cut*). Thus, the hypothesis accepted by linguists is that the etymological meaning of the toponym is, approximately, “the land of river banks (or of cut river banks)”.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See *OnoCat*, VI, 385-386.

We should stress, in relation to the first toponym defined here, that we see a close correspondence between the name in question and its “landscape meaning”. If we wished to capture in a simple phrase, or even in one word, the morphological diversity of this geographical territory, with its almost 3,000 km<sup>2</sup> of area, we should recognise unhesitatingly that the name of Ribagorça (understood in this etymological sense of reference) is the most appropriate. Because to say “the land of river banks”, applying the name to the whole of the region, is probably the way to say the most about the overall nature of this region (and its landscape) in the fewest words<sup>5</sup> (see Photo 2).



**Photo 2.** A view on Noguera Ribagorçana river, south of *Montsec*. (Photo: J.T.)

#### 4.2. *The principal oronyms*

Given that the Ribagorça is essentially a mountainous region, the names of its large massifs and mountain chains acquire a fundamental role in the construction of what comprises the great physical structure of its particular “toponymic landscape”.

In this region, four principal groups of oronyms are the focus of our attention: to the north of the region, a group that lies within the main axis of the Pyrenees, comprising the massifs of *La Maleïda* (or *La Maladeta*), *Vallhiverna* and *Besiberri*; to the west, the isolated massif of *Turbó*; to the south, the great chain formed by the *Montsec* system; and, finally, in the interior, serving as a divide between the high peaks of Ribagorça and those of medium altitude, the *Serra del Cis* and the *Serra de Sant Gervàs*.

*La Maleïda*, and its variants of *Maleïdes*, *Maleïtes*, *Maladeta*, etc., is the name used to identify the highest massif in the Pyrenees (culminating in the peak of Aneto, at 3,404 m). Derived from the Latin MALEDICTA, participle of MALE DICERE, “to curse or damn”, the

<sup>5</sup> Similarly, it is worth noting the considerable diffusion of the name *ribera* as a toponym throughout much of the Noguera Ribagorçana basin: *Ribera*, a village in the Castanesa valley, *Ribera de Vall* and *La Ribera*, in the former municipality of Cornudella de Valira, *La Ribereta*, a place in Sapeira, etc. By contrast, a more obviously geomorphologic meaning can be attached to the toponym *Ribampiedro*, in the Boí valley, formed from the names RIPA and PETRA and which identifies a large landslide (clearly visible in landscape terms) above the village of Erill la Vall (*OnoCat*, VI, 386-387).



name alludes to the popularly held belief that the mountain was “out-of-bounds” (or damned) because of its altitude and isolation (an impression strengthened by the glaciers lying on some of its slopes –see Photo 3), until well into the 18th century.<sup>6</sup> Today, with the massif a popular destination for tourist and mountain activities, La Maleïda-Maladeta remains the main point of reference in the landscape of northern Ribagorça (and other territories) thanks to its magnitude and highly individual character.



**Photo 3.** The south face of *Maladeta* mountain range. (Photo: J.T.)

A secondary role in the landscape, but one that is nevertheless relevant, is played by two neighbouring landforms. *Vallhiverna*, from the Latin VALLIS HIBERNA (“winter valley”),<sup>7</sup> was the name initially given to the valley and, later, extended to one of the large mountain chains to the south of La Maleïda. At the same latitude, but further to the east, on the other side of the river Noguera Ribagorçana, lies the *Besiberri* massif, of similar altitude (above 3,000 m) and presenting a similar landscape. The etymology of this name (from the Basque root *baso-be erri*, “a place at the foot of the crags”) suggests, as in the case of *Vallhiverna*, that it was initially used to refer to the area surrounding the massif, rather than to the mountain itself (which, after all, would be perfectly normal toponymic behaviour).<sup>8</sup> In terms of comparative toponymy, this name has interesting links with that of a neighbouring mountain, *Comalespada*, the meaning of which is identical, albeit here based on two present-day terms from the Catalan lexis (“coma” and “espadat”).<sup>9</sup>

To the west, a major landmark among the relief features and landscape of Ribagorça stands the *Turbó* massif. The name, of uncertain etymology, has led some linguists to relate it to the formation of stormy weather systems (or “torbonades” –squalls– to use the typical local expression), highly plausible if we bear in mind the prominence of the massif and its isolation with respect to the other large mountains of the region. Of similar importance in the landscape, and extending over a greater area, is the *Montsec* system, a steep anticline that

<sup>6</sup> See *OnoCat*, V, 150-151.

<sup>7</sup> *OnoCat*, VII, 431.

<sup>8</sup> *OnoCat*, II, 488.

<sup>9</sup> *OnoCat*, III, 415.



marks the southern boundary of Ribagorça. Its name (documented as *Montesico* in 1044), which alludes to the arid, dry environment that typifies the system,<sup>10</sup> is a clear toponymic example of the transparency principle (see Photo 4).



**Photo 4.** The north slopes of *Montsec*, from *La Feixa* high lands. (Photo: A.S.)

Finally, the *oronymic landscape* of Ribagorça is completed, in these broad terms, with the names of two major relief features (which, like the *Montsec*, present an anticline sloping west to east). Geologically speaking, they both lie in the Pre-Pyrenees whose foothills shape the interior of this region. On the one hand, we find the *Serra de Sant Gervàs*, a mountain range named after an ancient hermitage, dedicated to Sant Gervàs and built on its southern slope beside one of the most important *cabaneres* in Ribagorça – an ancient way for droving livestock (see section 4.7). On the other, the *Serra del Cis* lies between the courses of the rivers Isàvena and Noguera Ribagorçana; this toponym, derived from the Latin *MONTM SCISSUM*, “cut mountain”,<sup>11</sup> is highly expressive of the general morphology of its anticline – which, by and large, defines the physical landscape of this part of the region.

### 4.3. *Distinctive features of the interior*

The presence of a number of orographic axes that dominate the region of Ribagorça and which, to some extent, divide it up physically favours the formation within the territory of a large number of highly distinctive interior features. In general, the individuality of these environments – an isolated valley, a valley side, a small basin, a watershed – is based on the fact of their having their own specific toponym, often deeply rooted in time and space. Their role is fundamental in defining the toponymy of Ribagorça, since they allow each piece in the regional landscape *mosaic* to be individually identified.

The great valleys of the north form highly significant features in the landscape of great historical importance and are endowed, in general, with a well-defined (or *differentiated*)

<sup>10</sup> *OnoCat*, V, 381.

<sup>11</sup> *OnoCat*, III, 376.

geographical personality. In the extreme northeast, the *Boí* valley is one of the most eminent. Its name (references to the *Valle Boinam* can be traced to 945, and can be interpreted as the “valley of the cows”)<sup>12</sup> alludes to what might be considered the traditional wealth of the place: extensive livestock farming. Nearby, coinciding with the headwaters of the river Noguera Ribagorçana, the *Barravés* valley, with a similar morphology to that of Boí, does not allow us to draw any toponymic comparisons given the etymological opaqueness of the name.<sup>13</sup> The same can be said of another great northern valley, in this case that of *Castanesa*: the reference to hypothetical chestnut forests cannot be founded on any clear etymological grounds<sup>14</sup> nor on any documented evidence of this species having been present in the area.

In the centre and to the south of our region of study (that is, in the area corresponding to *mid* and *lower* Ribagorça), the physical relief becomes less severe and so the large internal features are less clearly drawn. Mention should be made, however, of certain features that have a deep-rooted identity and which correspond, in each instance, to specific landscapes: here, of particular note, occupying one of the two banks of the middle course of the river Noguera Ribagorçana, are *La Ribera* (or *Ribera de Cornudella*), synonym of *riba*, a recurring name throughout Ribagorça,<sup>15</sup> *La Terreta* derived from “land/soil”,<sup>16</sup> and *La Feixa*, a highly expressive toponym of the landscape, in the sense that it alludes to a specific quality of the territory – what Coromines defines as “great rocky belt or land in the skirt of a mountain”.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4.4. A fragmented relief with a great diversity of features

At the beginning of this article we stressed the fact that the fragmentation of the physical environment constitutes a major trait of the Ribagorça region. Toponymically, this trait has a constant manifestation at all scales, and it adopts a great variety of (linguistic) forms according to the variation in the geomorphology. In this section, we seek to reflect, more systematically, this basic feature of the toponymic landscape of Ribagorça.

In some sectors to the west of Ribagorça, in the contact zone between the axis of the Pyrenees and the inner mountain ranges of the Pre-Pyrenees, lie several prominent and distinctive relief units, which stand out owing to the size of their rounded features. A good example is provided by *Corronco*, above the village of Durro, which reaches a height of 2,543 m. The toponym, of pre-Roman origin according to Coromines, is derived from the Basque *kunkur(r)* and is equivalent to the idea of “hunchback”.<sup>18</sup> It can be interpreted, therefore, as a metonymy with clear landscape value. This meaning is repeated in two further toponyms of similar structure that lie relatively close to the above feature: *Corroncui*, a small village on the northern slope of the Serra de Sant Gervàs (with very rounded forms),<sup>19</sup> and *Concurrèll*, ancient *mas* (stone farmhouse) on the eastern slope of the mountain of Sant Cosme (with a similar profile to the above).<sup>20</sup>

In contrast with these more rounded relief forms, bolder and more prominent features can be identified in two toponyms of considerable importance in the local landscape: on the one hand, *Turmeda* (a name derived from *torm* or *tormo*, which in archaic Catalan is a synonym

<sup>12</sup> *OnoCat*, III, 45-46.

<sup>13</sup> Coromines notes the highly plausible explanation that *Barravés* has an anthroponymic origin (*OnoCat*, II, 355-358).

<sup>14</sup> See *OnoCat*, III, 304.

<sup>15</sup> See section 4.1.

<sup>16</sup> *OnoCat*, VII, 266.

<sup>17</sup> *OnoCat*, IV, 204.

<sup>18</sup> *OnoCat*, III, 441-442.

<sup>19</sup> The name *Corroncui* is, according to Coromines, derived from *Corronco* with the Basque Iberian suffix –OI, which evolved to –ui. (Ibid. previous note).

<sup>20</sup> *Concurrèll*, also derived from the root word *kunkur* but without having undergone metathesis, and with a Catalan ending. (Ibid. previous note).

of “rock”),<sup>21</sup> and, on the other, *El Codó* (related with the Latin root COS, COTIS, also meaning “rock”, and which is found in numerous Catalan mountain toponyms).<sup>22</sup> Both places lie in one of the most rugged parts of the middle basin of the Noguera Ribagorçana, at the head of one of the side valleys of the basin (environments in which, generally speaking, the intensity of erosion processes is high).

*Karst* processes have also left a major imprint on the landscape of some sectors of Ribagorça, for example in the eastern part of Terreta, in the valley of the river Noguera Ribagorçana. Expressive testimony of these processes are the toponyms of *Esplugafreda*<sup>23</sup> and *Espluga de Serra*.<sup>24</sup> the names of two settlements, formed from the common root *espluga* (from the Latin SPELUCA, “cavern”), and which are to be found in a landscape to some extent shaped by *karst* processes. This is, in fact, the same environment as that which surrounds the small hamlet of *El Castellet*: a name which we interpret as a metaphorical reference to the surrounding rocky landscape, of fanciful shapes sculpted by erosive forces.

At a more detailed scale, but at an equivalent level of meaning, we find two further toponyms (also referring to settlements) whose origin appears to be linked to the shapes of the landforms: *Casterner de les Olles*, in the Noguera Ribagorçana valley, and *Casterner de Noals*, in that of Valira de Castanesa, a tributary of the former. In both instances, the etymology of *Casterner* points to a “black castle”,<sup>25</sup> in allusion to the dark colour of the crag above which their respective houses rise up (and, in its time, to a primitive castle). A similar correspondence, at this level of the “local landscape”, but with greater spatial importance, is found in two toponyms of obvious oronymic meaning that identify two notable settlements in the mid-sector of eastern Ribagorça: *Sopeira* (documented as *Supetra* in 851), and *Sapeira* (*illa Petra*, in documents from 979). In the first case, the etymology (from the Latin SUB PETRA, “under the rock”),<sup>26</sup> clearly supports the geographic reality of the landscape: literally, at the foot of the northern face of the Serra de Sant Gervàs. The second means, albeit from a different perspective, simply “the rock”,<sup>27</sup> in reference to the fact that Sapeira is sited on the crest of a small anticline perpendicular to the axis of the river Noguera Ribagorçana.

Likewise, we should stress that in the northern sector of Ribagorça (that is, the zone comprising the axis of the Pyrenees), glacial and periglacial processes have had a significant geomorphologic impact on the landscape, and these processes are reflected in the origin of certain toponyms. For example, the compound toponyms formed from the root word *coma* – derived from the Latin CUMBA, which points to the idea of a dip or depression in a mountain environment. The Boí valley, in particular, contains many examples of toponyms of this type.<sup>28</sup> Good examples include *Comallímpia* (or *Comallémpia*), from the Latin CUMBA LIMPIDA, “dip without vegetation”,<sup>29</sup> *Comalesbienes*, which Coromines associates with the root BENNA, of supposed Celtic origin, and whose meaning is equivalent to “dip filled with seas”,<sup>30</sup> and, finally, *Comaloforno*, a name that would appear to have gone from designating a

<sup>21</sup> *OnoCat*, VII, 305. The ending *-eda* gives the term a collective meaning.

<sup>22</sup> *OnoCat*, III, 455.

<sup>23</sup> *Esplugafreda*, documented as *Spluga Freta* in 988. Etymologically, the root *-freda* can be interpreted as either being derived from FRETA (“cold”) or from FRACTA (“broken”). *OnoCat*, IV, 132-134.

<sup>24</sup> In ancient times, ESPLUGA TRESSERRA (where *tresserra* meant “behind the mountain range”). *OnoCat*, VII, 348.

<sup>25</sup> *OnoCat*, III, 327-328.

<sup>26</sup> *OnoCat*, VII, 159.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* *OnoCat*, V, 45.

<sup>28</sup> See, on this point, Coromines *TVB* and *OnoCat*, III, 414-417.

<sup>29</sup> *OnoCat*, III, 415. See also footnote 8 as regards the toponym *Comalespada*.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*



place lying in the lower part of a mountain slope to identifying one of the most important peaks in the region.<sup>31</sup>

A further example, and one of considerable spatial extent, is that of *Llauset*, used to name one of the most important valleys of glacial origin in the basin of the Noguera Ribagorçana. The name is linked by linguists with the local term *llau*, derived from the Latin LABES, “falling away of land”.<sup>32</sup> In practice, a detailed observation of the two slopes, especially of their middle and upper sections, allows us to detect how the imprint of these processes remains quite visible in the general profile of the valley. Without leaving this central zone of Ribagorça, within its toponymy we occasionally find a clearly negative perception of this rugged, severe physical environment (or *landscape*): names such as *Malavesina* (see Photo 5) and *Riu Malo*, moor land and brook, respectively, in the upper Boí valley, make explicit allusions to the idea of “maldad” (evil) and are clear examples of this perception.<sup>33</sup>



**Photo 5.** *Malavesina*, in upper Boí valley. (Photo: J.T.)

We conclude this section by mentioning a further six toponyms which, although somewhat disperse, add significant elements to our analysis – to the extent that they contribute relevant data regarding the general nature of the physical environment via their onomastics. On the one hand, in the northern sector we find the small village of *Bono* (documented as *Bonnobe* in 978). Lying at the foot of the eastern spurs of the *Serra de Ventolà*, which rise up over the settlement to a height of more than 1,000 m, it is a further example of the correspondence between landscape and place name; at least, if we turn to its etymology which identifies it as a toponym whose origin can be traced to the Basque root *bono-be*, meaning “under the crag”.<sup>34</sup> To the west, the aforementioned name of *Ventolà* is another interesting example of a ‘landscape indicator’ in that it alludes to a major relief

<sup>31</sup> *OnoCat*, III, 415-416. Coromines prefers to associate *forno* with the idea of an “opening”, “niche” or “breach” in the crest of the mountain, but it appears more logical to link the name to the deeply enclosed nature (in Catalan, *encofurnat*) of this landscape. On this question, see also the entry for *Forn* in *OnoCat*, IV, 260-262.

<sup>32</sup> *OnoCat*, V, 45.

<sup>33</sup> *OnoCat*, II, 415 [*Malavesina*] and V, 158 [*Riu Malo*]. Significantly, in the first entry Coromines defines the landscape as a “an extremely craggy valley, between rocks and large precipices.”

<sup>34</sup> *OnoCat*, III, 73.

feature, literally, “exposed to the winds”.<sup>35</sup> Occupying a similar location, another *Ventolà* in Ribagorça can be found some 20 km to the south, above the town of El Pont de Suert.

Likewise, within the present-day municipality of this village, and on the easternmost spurs of the Serra de Sant Gervàs, we find *Pinyana*, documented as *Pinnana* in 1094, a name derived from the Latin PINNA (indicating “crag” or “large rock”) and which serves to underline the genuinely mountain-like environment of the physical landscape in which this settlement sits.<sup>36</sup> A further toponym that recurs frequently and which has significant semantic content is that of *Seix*, which in Ribagorça often appears in the form *Sas* (with or without the article, as in *Seix*). It is a name applied, in general, to the inter-fluvial sectors between the main valleys, usually comprising terraces of sediment transported by the rivers and lying at some distance above the valley floor. Largely arid and unsuitable for farming, they form a type of landscape that is locally quite widespread, and which is quite frequent in the lateral valleys of the mid and low courses of the Ribagorça valley.<sup>37</sup> Finally, we turn to the names of *Espills*<sup>38</sup> and *Miralles*,<sup>39</sup> which in both cases allude etymologically to the idea of a “look-out point”, and which is applied to two places (today abandoned) lying in panoramic points in the mid-sector of the Noguera Ribagorçana valley. They are interesting examples of references to the conditions of visibility (in the sense of their affording wide visual perspectives) of certain sites, strategically adapted to the region’s relief structures.

#### 4.5. A landscape with a strong fluvial imprint

Ribagorça, as noted above, is a territory that has been largely *constructed* by its rivers and the geomorphic action of their waters.<sup>40</sup> This is particularly patent in the eastern sector, shaped by the course of the river *Noguera Ribagorçana* which has been essential, from a geohistoric perspective, in the moulding of this territory. As a hydronym, this name is of double interest. *Noguera*, on the one hand (documented as *Nocaria* in 848), can be interpreted as an archaic form originating from the Latin AMNIS NAUCARIA – a derivative of NAVIS, “almadía”, that is, a raft constructed from tree trunks – and which was only used on the rivers of the Pyrenees that employed this mode of river transport.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, the determiner *Ribagorçana* (*valle Ripacurcana*, 905) makes quite visible the relation of identity that exists between the historic name of the region and the name of its main river.

The main tributary of this river is also identified with the root word *noguera*. This is the river *Noguera de Tor*, also known as *Riu de Caldes*, which runs through the Boí valley and joins the main river channel near the town of El Pont de Suert.

<sup>35</sup> *OnoCat*, VII, 458.

<sup>36</sup> *OnoCat*, VI, 229-231. In the case of the Noguera Ribagorçana river, and especially in that of the Noguera Pallaresa, this mode of transport has been documented historically.

<sup>37</sup> Highly informative on this subject is the article by Joan Coromines entitled “Sas, Sarda i Seix”, published in *Estudis de toponímia catalana* in 1970. An extract of this is reproduced in *OnoCat*, VII, 56-59. Note that we are dealing with toponyms of great antiquity (*El Seix* in the district of Orrit is documented in 978) and of little transparency in their etymology (although they have been related with the Latin SAXUM, equivalent in meaning to “crag”).

<sup>38</sup> *OnoCat*, IV, 124.

<sup>39</sup> *OnoCat*, V, 283-284. Coromines claims, as regards *Miralles* (a frequent name in the historic toponymy of Catalonia), that it is “always a toponym of orographic origin”.

<sup>40</sup> See, in relation to this idea, section 4.1.

<sup>41</sup> *OnoCat*, V, 469.

Within the Noguera Ribagorçana river basin, and alluding to its tributaries or secondary branches, we find a further hydronym of great interest: *La Valira*.<sup>42</sup> Joan Coromines interprets this name as a hagiotopeponym; that is, as an application of the construction AMNIS VALERIA (AMNIS, equivalent to “river”; and VALERIA, to a religious invocation formed from the female form of VALERIUS) to certain river courses, which would have been distinguished from the others by the fact that they have a permanent water flow.<sup>43</sup>

A meaning that is more closely related to fluvial features than the rivers themselves is presented by a set of toponyms that we note below (each, we argue, with considerable importance in terms of the landscape). Thus, at the head of the basin, the name *Conangles* (from ‘con-angulum’, a sharp bend in the river’s course)<sup>44</sup> is closely related to a nearby place, *Anglos* (from ‘angles’, applied with both an orographic and hydrographic sense).<sup>45</sup> Lower down, in one of the main ravines of the middle course of the Noguera Ribagorçana, we find a name that constitutes a true “landscape indicator”: *Escales* (see Photo 6)<sup>46</sup>. Derived from the Latin SCALA, which Coromines reports as having a meaning equivalent to that of “a step or orographic barrier”, its toponymic use (via different derivatives) has, according to this linguist, enjoyed international diffusion.<sup>47</sup> Downstream, another important toponym of considerable importance for the landscape is that of *Areny* (documented as *Arinio* in 823). The name, according to Coromines, derives from the Latin adjective ARENEUS (in classical Latin, ARENARIUS or ARENOSUS),<sup>48</sup> which is related to the presence in the area surrounding this village of sand banks (or deposits of sand) formed by the action of the Noguera Ribagorçana river and its tributaries. Finally, in the southernmost point of the region, occurs another notable example of a toponym (more specifically, a hydronym) with the value of a “landscape indicator”: *Mont-rebei*, applied to another large river gorge (and, by extension, to the area surrounding the gorge). In this case, the etymology of the name (of MONTE RAPIDIU, *rapidiu* being equivalent to “rapid”, or in Catalán “rabeig”)<sup>49</sup> presents certain undeniable associations with the river’s characteristics – with numerous rapids in a long stretch, which disappeared following the construction of the Mont-rebei reservoir.

<sup>42</sup> On the district map (scale of 1:50.000) it occurs three times: *La Valira de Castanesa* (in the district of Montanui), *La Valira de Cornudella* (district of Cornudella de Valira), and in the curious form of *La Valiri* (district of Malpàs).

<sup>43</sup> *OnoCat*, VII, 395-397.

<sup>44</sup> *OnoCat*, III, 420.

<sup>45</sup> *OnoCat*, II, 195.

<sup>46</sup> Although lying outside the Noguera Ribagorçana basin, it is worth mentioning another important toponym in Ribagorça with a comparable genealogy to that of *Escales*. This is the case of *Graus*, a settlement sitting next to the river Éssera and at the foot of a large spur in the Pyrenees. The name, in this case, derives from the Latin GRADO, which, among other words, has given us the Catalan word “graó” (*OnoCat*, IV, 380).

<sup>47</sup> See *OnoCat*, IV, 90-91. Coromines cites, in this article, interesting toponymic examples derived from SCALA, with a meaning comparable to *Escales*, in the Alps.

<sup>48</sup> *OnoCat*, II, 230.

<sup>49</sup> *OnoCat*, V, 375-376.





**Photo 6.** *Escales*, a large river gorge between *Serra del Cis* (left) and *Serra de Sant Gervàs* (right). (Photo: A.S.)

#### 4.6. *The imprint of the region's vegetation*

The toponymy related with the phytonomy, that is the vegetation, also has a great significance in the overall definition of the region's landscape that we are undertaking here. Its particular interest lies in the marked differences found within the territory, to the extent that the names of the plants and plant species from which toponyms have originated are, in general, an important indicator of the phytogeographic affinities of the spatial areas alluded to by each name.

At a broad scale, once more, a marked contrast can be seen between the upper and lower zones of the region – in other words, the dominance of the Pre-Pyrenees. In the central axis of the Pyrenees, the following plants are relevant to the landscape. *Les Salenques*, for example, is a name that refers to a shrub-like plant grown on saline soils (*Salix purpurea* or *oleagnos*) and which appears as toponym at various points of Alta Ribagorça; among other places, it identifies a large valley on the eastern slope of the massif of Maladeta. Further east, in the upper part of the Boí valley, we find the toponym *Dellui*, an archaic name and one of uncertain etymology which Coromines and other linguists interpret as indicating the presence of broom (*Genista scorpius*, in Catalan *argelaga*).<sup>50</sup> Also in this zone, a frequently occurring plant is that of the *Llubriqueto* valley; etymologically, it comes from LUCUBRETUM, a derivative of LUCUBRUM, the name of a plant (*Colchium autumnale*) known in the valley as *herba berenera*.<sup>51</sup> Near this spot lies the *Estany de Llebreta*, where *Llebreta*, according to Coromines, has the same origin as *Llubriqueto* (passing from the form LUCUBRETA).<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> According to this hypothesis, the toponym comes from the Basque OTE-ILI-ONE, “the place of broom”. Coromines *TVB*, 12:14 and *OnoCat*, IV, 15.

<sup>51</sup> Coromines, *TVB*, 14:4.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* We should stress here that through popular etymology, the name *Estany de Llebreta* has typically been associated with the existence of hares (“llebres” in catalan), an animal species quite unknown in the high mountain zone.

Without leaving the northern sector of the region, in the Barravés valley we find *Cierco*: the name of a small hamlet lying close to the river Noguera Ribagorçana and, similarly, a toponym that can be related with the root word QUERCUS, from classic Latin, and which occurs frequently in the toponymy of Catalonia.<sup>53</sup> More doubtful is the case of *Barruera*, a frequent toponym in the lower part of the Boí valley, and which etymologically has been linked with a supposed VALLIS ROBEREA (“vall de roures” in Catalan, meaning ‘oak trees valley’), which Coromines flatly denies.<sup>54</sup> In Baixa Ribagorça, however, the toponym *Queixigar* can be clearly associated with the presence of a specific type of oak, the *Quercus faginea*, in Aragonese *caxigo*<sup>55</sup> and in Castilian *cajigal*.

A further two toponyms of importance within the phytonomic landscape of Ribagorça are *L’Escobet* (in the former municipality of Betesa) and *Escobedieso* (former municipality of Senet, in the central axis). Both can be related with the Latin root word SCOPA, which has given rise to *escoba* in Catalan and Castilian and which is interestingly reflected in the two place names cited. The plant is known scientifically as *Genista balansae*, and is usually known as *bàlec*, in Catalan, and as *piorno*, in Castilian.

A final mention, in this section, should be made of two important toponyms in the central zone of Ribagorça: *Aulet* and *Aulàs*, which allude to two settlements (the first, abandoned since the mid-20th century). In both instances the root word AUL- appears to be a direct allusion to the holm oak (*Quercus ilex*).<sup>56</sup> What is more, the landscape of the zone appears to support this hypothesis. By contrast, Coromines prefers to interpret both names as being derived from EBULUS, which has originated the name of *èvol* (a plant known scientifically as *Sambucus ebulus*, and which also appears with relative frequency in the mid mountain areas of the Pyrenees).<sup>57</sup>

#### 4.7. *Toponyms related to accessibility and the network of paths and roads*

Ribagorça, a physically fragmented territory and one characterised, in almost its entirety, by its rugged relief (independent of altitude), has a network of traditional paths directly conditioned by its topographic conditions. Until the early exploitation of hydroelectricity in the Noguera Ribagorçana valley, in the middle of the twentieth century, and the consequent construction of the network of highways and secondary roads, much of the transit and internal communications were channelled along the traditional paths, which in general tended to run east-west (or west-east), seeking a route through the mountain crests, or inter-fluvial divides, as the best way to avoid the obstacles presented by the fact that the principal rivers ran through deep ravines – many of which were impassable (Vilar, 1964).

Thus an interpretation of some of the region’s place names is possible based on matters of accessibility and systems of communication, very much linked to the specific geographical and historical conditions of the local environment. One of the most significant examples, in our opinion, is the triad of settlement names in central Ribagorça, which take the lexical element *pont* (bridge) as their key referent for the construction of the corresponding toponym: from north to south, *el Pont de Suert* (see Photo 7), *el Pont d’Orrit* and *el Pont de Montanyana*. All have in common the fact that the traditional place-name corresponds to

<sup>53</sup> According to Coromines, the root word QUERCUS is to be found forming the names of *Cerc*, *Cercs*, *Cerqueda*, *Cercenedes*, *Cercós*, *Cercet* and *Cercèdol*, in addition to *Cierco*. (*OnoCat*, III, 351-354). Although he considers that these toponyms should be specifically associated with the holm oak tree (*Quercus ilex*), in fact the presence of the oak can also be characterized, toponymically, via names related to QUERCUS.

<sup>54</sup> *OnoCat*, II, 360.

<sup>55</sup> *OnoCat*, III, 178.

<sup>56</sup> Specifically, *aulet*, as Coromines points out, was the ancient name in Catalan for holm oak forests (*OnoCat*, II, 277).

<sup>57</sup> *OnoCat*, II, 276-277.

what we might call the “specific” part of the toponym (respectively: *Suert*,<sup>58</sup> *Orrit*<sup>59</sup> and *Montanyana*<sup>60</sup>), while the modern name, which integrates the “generic” *pont*, identifies the fact that the modern settlement has unmistakably arisen around a bridge – of inescapable importance for the network of communications, both locally and in the surrounding areas.



**Photo 7.** *El Pont de Suert*, capital of East Ribagorça. (Photo: J.T.)

Without abandoning these ancient toponyms (and, therefore, place-names whose etymology is inevitably quite opaque), another name that we cannot fail to include in this section is that of *Taiüll* (see Photo 8), one of the most historically important settlements in the Boí valley. The etymology of this toponym – once more of Basque origin, according to Coromines – points, in this case, to the “village of the pass”.<sup>61</sup> This hypothesis, once again, is fully supported by the geographical and historical facts: the origin of the village of *Taiüll* (a settlement with a marked central character with respect to the valley as a whole), should not be separated, it would seem, from the links that this valley has maintained throughout its

<sup>58</sup> In the case of *Suert*, a toponym (documented in 955 as *Suberte*) that Coromines considers to be of Basque origin, the etymological interpretation suggested by this author points to a compound of “zubi” and “iri”, meaning, literally, “the village of the bridge” (*OnoCat*, VII, 185-187). Therefore, were this hypothesis to be correct, *el Pont de Suert* would be, etymologically, a toponymic tautology: “the bridge of the village of the bridge”.

<sup>59</sup> The place of *Orrit*, some 20 km to the south of *El Pont de Suert*, also on the river *Noguera Ribagorçana*, holds some very interesting toponymic and landscape analogies with the former village. The name (*castro Orritense* in a document dating to 826), can be traced also, according to Coromines, to a Basque etymon, *urruti*, which might well be interpreted as “the place beyond the bridge” (*OnoCat*, IV, 31-33). Observation of the geographical setting of the place reveals a narrowing of the valley, controlled from a nearby prominence, some 150 m higher up, by the medieval castle of *Orrit* (next to the ancient village, which today stands abandoned). This narrowing was used as a passing point with a bridge built over the river, also medieval in origin (and surviving in part to this day). On the same bank as the castle, but beside the river and at the side of the bridge, a small modern settlement has been built (of barely half a dozen buildings), which significantly is called *El Pont d’Orrit*.

<sup>60</sup> Although the etymology of *Montanyana* points to a person’s name (“*Montanius*” or “*Montanus*”, *OnoCat*, V, 330), we should stress that the mechanism by which the toponym *El Pont de Montanyana* (and that of the settlement next to the village, identified with this name) is formed is identical to that of the two previous toponyms.

<sup>61</sup> *Taiüll* is derived, according to Coromines, from ancient Basque (*a*)*ta-uri*, with the meaning stated. *OnoCat*, VII, 248.



history with the neighbouring valley of Cabdella, with which it shares the same tradition of mountain pasture farming (which was of great economic importance in past eras). What is more, the site of the village beside the ancient path through the pass (that is, the *port de Rus*, the traditional pass from Ribagorça to the neighbour county of Pallars) seems to confirm quite strongly Coromines' hypothesis.



**Photo 8.** The village of *Taüll*, in the central sector of *Boí* valley. (Photo: J.T.)

Without moving away from the traditional toponymy, specific mention should be made of one of the most important geographical names (related to the network of paths) in the Serra de Sant Gervàs: *El Portús*. It alludes, as in the previous example, to the idea of pass (“port”, in Catalan) and, more specifically, to the “pass between mountains”.<sup>62</sup> And its strategic character (it is a unique pass between the two sides of the sierra, via which passed one of the ancient transhumant routes – in the local lexis, *cabaneres* – in this part of Ribagorça) is strengthened by the fact that, next to it, is found the chapel dedicated to *Sant Gervàs*, a place of great devotion at this local level which, owing to its characteristics and because of the vestiges of the location, must have played an important role in the colonisation of this territory (see section 4.2).

We complete this section by referring to a toponym, *Viacamp*, which, within the region's network of roads, serves, we believe, as a “landscape indicator”. This is the name used to identify one of the best known defensive towers of medieval origin in the southern sector of Ribagorça, owing to its prominent location and the panoramic views it affords. The tower is the point of reference of this ancient site, which today is kept alive thanks to the small settlement that is the capital of the municipality of Viacamp i Lliterà. But, besides these general characteristics, the site lies next to one of the most important passes in this part of the region, the *Viacamp* pass, along which the present-day N-230 highway runs (as, before it the ancient road or path must have passed), and which, in terms of the whole network, is the first important pass to the west of Montsec and the course of the river Noguera Ribagorçana. *Viacamp*, documented as *Via Campo* in 1077, is a name that clearly alludes to the ancient

<sup>62</sup> Concerning the various meanings attributed to the generic term *port* in Catalan toponymy, see the entry (*port*) in the *DECLC*, of Coromines.

path<sup>63</sup> and which confirms, by its toponymy, the function this place served, given its “strategic position”, in linking the territories over the ages.

#### 4.8. Toponymy in relation to the historical colonisation of the territory

A highly significant number of toponyms in Ribagorça that do not refer directly to elements in its physical environment allude to aspects, in origin or by derivation, of the territory’s historical process of colonisation. Up to this point we have indirectly cited numerous examples of these as we have presented the different thematic areas of our study. To go no further, the toponym *Boí*, examined in section 4.4 (as one of the main areas within Ribagorça), is also a unique example of the heavy stamp left by pastoral and livestock farming in the region’s highland areas. Here, in this section, we present new examples of toponyms that, in a quite specific way or more broadly, bear testimony to the two main senses in which the process of colonisation can be understood: that is, in terms of “appropriation” and in terms of the “use” of the territory.

As for the first idea (toponyms as a reflection of the means of appropriation of the territory), it is worth highlighting the frequent occurrence of names given to settlements incorporating the generic *castell* (castle) and *torre* (tower) in the toponym.<sup>64</sup> The fact that, historically (and, specifically, during the mediaeval period), Ribagorça clearly constituted a *frontier territory* (Vilar, 1964) accounts for this aspect of its toponymy, which is readily observable to all. A paradigmatic example of these place-names is provided by the double toponym *Erill Castell-Erill la Vall*. Founded on the anthroponym of *Erill*, of Basque-Iberian origin,<sup>65</sup> a name given to one of the most important families of medieval noblemen in the Pyrenean territories of Ribagorça-Pallars, they allude, respectively to two key points in their domains (some ten kilometres apart): the first, to the castle or fortified residence of the Lord of Erill; the second, to the place or enclave (today an important settlement) in the centre of the Boí valley and the nerve centre, without doubt, of their ancient possessions, considering the potential value of grazing in the valley.

A further case of a double toponym of similar meaning also occurs in the Boí valley - *Estany de Monges-Estany de Cavallers*. These are two glacial lakes at the head of the valley, whose name, according to Coromines, also reflects a link – on this occasion, conflicting – of ownership: ecclesiastic, in the first case (and related to some of the region’s monasteries);<sup>66</sup> civil nobility, in the second.<sup>67</sup>

As for the second idea (toponyms as a reflection of a given land use in the territory), there are many examples that might serve to illustrate this – frequently based on place names whose meaning is transparent; but also on those whose etymology is somewhat more opaque. In general, these names indicate a particular form of farming practice, which can be considered to have been prevalent in a large time-span of the region’s history – with the exception of the present-day period.

A set of toponyms that constitutes a significant historical testimony to the vineyards in the north of the region is formed by *Vinyal-Ardanui-Ardanué*:<sup>68</sup> three settlements separated by barely 8 km one from another and situated at almost the same latitude (albeit in different

<sup>63</sup> *OnoCat*, VIII, 8.

<sup>64</sup> In addition to the toponyms included in this article, we could include those of *la Torre de Tamúrcia*, *la Torre de Amargós*, *la Torre del Senyor*, *Torrelaribera*, *Castellnou de Montsec* and *Sobrecastell*, among others.

<sup>65</sup> According to Coromines, *OnoCat*, IV, 82-83.

<sup>66</sup> *OnoCat*, V, 320.

<sup>67</sup> *OnoCat*, III, 344-345.

<sup>68</sup> *Vinyal* is a toponym of transparent etymology, unlike *Ardanui* and *Ardanué*, which according to Coromines are names of pre-Roman origin that can be traced to the Basque root *ardan*, referring to the planting of vines (*OnoCat*, II, 224-225).

valleys and at different altitudes), in the area of what, in the context of Ribagorça, can be considered as the high Pyrenees.<sup>69</sup> Their presence constitutes an interesting fact in our knowledge of the historical boundaries of the cultivation of woody plants (such as the vine and olive tree) on the southern slopes of the Pyrenees, on the subject of which a number of authors have made important contributions over the last half century.<sup>70</sup> In fact, as far as the colonization of the region's territory is concerned (or, in other words, its historical geography) we believe that this triad of names has considerable value as “landscape indicators.”

Not far from these places, and alongside the river Noguera Ribagorçana, we find another point of great significance as regards the historical use of the territory, *Montanui*. Coromines associates this name, of somewhat obscure etymology, with a root word of Basque origin, *mendinobe*, which came to mean “place of rest for livestock”.<sup>71</sup> What is true is that the landscape surrounding Montanui, in a widening of the valley floor and with abundant pasture just outside the village, appears to support this interpretation (see Photo 9). Further south, but on the opposite slope of the valley, another name (of different morphology, but with a similar etymology), *Gotarta*, points to a settlement of similar characteristics to that of Montanui but located not on the valley floor but rather on the mountain side.<sup>72</sup>



**Photo 9.** The small village of *Montanui*, in *Barravés* valley. (Photo: J.T.)

A similar type of linguistic reference, expressed via a name which, according to Coromines, was still in use as a common noun in the Pyrenees until a few decades ago, is that corresponding to the toponym *L'Estall* (used to identify a place lying on the southern slope of Montsec, on the southern border of Ribagorça). For Coromines, *estall* was a word typically

<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, *Vinyal*, the most northerly of the three, lies on a straight line with the peak of Aneto, the highest mountain in the Pyrenees, at a distance of less than 15 km. Likewise, *Vinyal* is a few kilometers upstream of Vilaller, which is the point in the Noguera Ribagorçana valley that geologists have identified as being the southernmost limit of glacial action in this valley towards the end of the Quaternary period.

<sup>70</sup> In particular, Salvador Llobet (Llobet, 1950). Lluís Solé Sabarís also tackles the question in *Los Pirineos. El medio y el hombre* (Solé Sabarís, 1951).

<sup>71</sup> *OnoCat*, V, 329.

<sup>72</sup> *OnoCat*, IV, 372-373. Coromines interprets the name as meaning “place of corrals”, related with the Basque word *gorta*.



used to refer to a “livestock corral in a mountain zone”;<sup>73</sup> and its widespread diffusion throughout the Pyrenees accounts for the fact that it has given rise to such unusual toponyms as *Estanyofinestro*, applied to a mountain slope above the village of Taüll and which, despite appearances, does not allude to a mountain lake but rather to a compound word formed from STALLON FENESTRON, approximately equivalent to “corral among the hay meadows”.<sup>74</sup>

Allusions to livestock farming in the territory have been a recurring feature in the toponymy of Ribagorça during its history as demonstrated by the large number of present-day toponyms of transparent or virtually transparent meaning that can be detected throughout this geographical area by a careful examination of its maps and its existing nomenclatures. By way of illustration, we shall present just one case: *Pleta Verda*, a name applied to one of the mountains of the Serra de Lleràs, in the watershed separating the Noguera Ribagorçana and Noguera Pallaresa basins. It would seem to be significant that, despite being an oronym, the semantic origin of the name is linked to livestock farming (presumably related to the ancestral movement of transhumant herds through the region’s chain of mountains: an explicit example of the predominant use made of much of the region of Ribagorça in this intensive and persistent farming practice.

## 5. Final notes

By way of summary, we reiterate below what we consider to be the main findings from the geographic-toponymic analysis conducted above:

- a) Thanks to its unique geographical (a natural region occupying the southern slopes of the Pyrenees, between the main axis zone and the outer sierras of the Pre-Pyrenees), historical (the region coincides to a great extent with the mediaeval county) and linguistic characteristics (synchronically, with the coming together in this one territory of the Catalan, Aragonese and Castilian languages; diachronically, with the importance in the region’s toponymy of the pre-Latin substrata), Ribagorça provides us with a natural-scale “laboratory” that is ideal for the analysis proposed here. The fact that we have access to various tools of study in relation to the region (including, at a general level, Joan Coromines’ *Onomasticon Cataloniae*, and, in recent years, local studies from the *Toponimia de Ribagorça* collection,<sup>75</sup> under the direction of Xavier Terrado) has also greatly facilitated our research work.
- b) The wide diversity of thematic areas and the plurality of scales (both of time and space) that can be explored in studying the region’s toponymy allows us in broad terms to speak of a *toponymic system* that is, by and large, complete, coherent and well integrated. Its presence, which to a great extent responds to the way of living that prevailed prior to the *rural transformation* recorded in European upland areas from the middle of the twentieth century onwards, owes much to the peripheral character of the territory (with respect to both Catalonia as well as Aragón) and to the few physical changes to which it has been exposed.
- c) At the heart of this system, and based on the analysis reported here, we can highlight the qualitative relevance of certain *toponymic vectors*, which can be summarised in the following way: 1) We detect a certain number of toponyms that *structure* the territory (which might be termed “macrotoponyms”), and which have considerable importance for Ribagorça given the region’s marked internal compartmentalisation. 2) The toponymy related to the physical environment (principally, the oronymy; and at a secondary level, its hydronymy) are in a clear preponderance here, and of fundamental importance in the construction of the region’s toponymic system in terms of its landscapes. 3) The toponymy

<sup>73</sup> *OnoCat*, IV, 145.

<sup>74</sup> *OnoCat*, IV, 150. STALLON > *estall* would have given, by assimilation and popular etymology, “estany” (small lake), while FENESTRON gives, by a normal process of evolution, *fenàs* (hay).

<sup>75</sup> See, specifically, the references included in Terrado 2010.

- related to the historical colonisation of the territory also has an important qualitative significance; most notable is the way it is reflected in the communication systems and in traditional land uses and farming practices –areas in which it provides essential keys, in some cases, to the etymological interpretation of the more opaque or poorly transparent toponyms.
- 4) We have also noted the possibilities afforded by the study of the toponymy at the micro scale, or the regions “microtoponymy” (perhaps the region’s toponymy that has been exposed to least research to date); the cases of this type analysed in our study, in relation, for example, with the vegetation, have enabled us to detect meaningful correspondences and interrelations with the toponyms at other scales and levels.
- d) It is our understanding, on the basis of the study undertaken in Ribagorça, that it is perfectly feasible to propose an interpretation of a region’s landscape based on its toponyms, and to present it, in a reasoned way, as a *toponymic landscape* (something that, in practice, is perhaps little more than a “different” way of constructing an image of a given territory in landscape terms). Without denying that this approach means that the observer-analyst must assume what to a certain degree is an inevitable subjective bias, the exercise itself presupposes paying attention to a set of premises, the adherence to which is, at heart, a guarantee of its coherence and its essential internal logic. The availability of sound and tested sources of toponymic information; an adequate selection of toponyms; a minimum degree of first-hand knowledge of the study area (and of its language or languages, as well as of its toponymic patrimony); and, finally, a certain capacity for observation and for establishing relations between these observations and prior knowledge (what Carl Sauer characterised as the “morphologic eye”),<sup>76</sup> can, in practice, be the main methodological bases for ensuring that the study of a *toponymic landscape* is a viable research programme, in any country or region of the world.

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<sup>76</sup> Sauer 1956.

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