LIFE baccata, Conserving and restoring yew forests (9580*) in the Cantabrian Mountains | LIFE15 NAT/ES/000790 | 2016-2020

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The yew tree, a tree of great cultural and ethnographic value

The culture of the yew is very broad and practically all the peoples who have lived with it have considered it a sacred tree, with a multitude of traditions and myths, and an extraordinarily deep-rooted yew culture, a contribution of astonishing richness and diversity to the intangible heritage.

Due to its perennial anetr, its astonishing longevity and its toxicity, the yew has been a symbol of death and eternal life, forming part of rituals, beliefs and legends that are deeply rooted in different territories.

The presence of the yew in ancient literatura

The use of plants by humans (food, clothing, medicinal, etc.) is one of the activities that has left the oldest historical records. One of the oldest comes from Mesopotamia, where the King of Babylon, Marduk-Apal-Iddina II (Potts 1997), in the 8th century BC, lists on an Assyrian anet a list of more an 60 names (in Akkadian) of plants cultivated in the Royal gardens. Centuries later, the philosopher Aristotle [384-322 BC] produced during the 4th BC century a compendium of writings in which he formulated a specific classification of plants based on their form, life span and habitat.

Yew in Classical Greece

The presence of the yew in literature is almost as old as first botanical writings. And it was precisely in classical Greece when a disciple of Aristotle himself, Theophrastus of Eresus [372-287 BC], made the first mention of the yew in historical writing, in his work The History of Plants (De historia plantarum in Latin).

Some authors have interpreted that the yew was even mentioned much earlier by the Greek poet Euripides [484-406 BC] in his play "The Bacchantes"; however, this opinion is not shared by other philologists and this hypothesis has now been discarded. The confusion comes from the interpretation of the Greek terms used to designate the yew (táxos, smîlos, mílos). Theophrastus calls the yew mílos, a term that has a certain affinity with the mílaki of which Euripides speaks, so Tovar (1955) interprets Euripides as referring to the yew, and therefore the written reference to the species would have occurred more than a century earlier than previously thought. This opinion is not shared by other authors (García Gual & de Cuenca 1979, Fernández Galiano

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1991), who understand that Euripides' mílaki (Attic form of smílaki) refers to the sarsaparilla (in modern botany, included in the genus Smilax). In this sense, Theophrastus himself refers to sarsaparilla as Smilax (Hort 1916, Díaz-Regañón 1988), differentiating it unequivocally from the yew (mílos).

In any case, Theophrastus makes repeated references to the yew, indicating that it is a wild tree species (it is not included in the cultivated species), evergreen, which are typical of mountainous areas but grow in valley areas, indicating the times of flowering and fruiting, rapid growth. In one section he gives a specific description of the species, indicating its growth habit, leaves, wood, bark, roots, fruit, geographical variants, shade-loving temperament and uses of its wood. It also refers to the toxic potential of the yew, indicating that horses die from eating its leaves, while ruminants are tolerant.

THEOPHRASTUS OF ERESUS – DE HISTORIA PLANTARUM

Book I 9,3
Deciduous and evergreen trees

[...]"The trees are either evergreen or deciduous. [...] of the wild ones, the white fir, the spruce, the Phoenician cedar, the yew [...]".

Book III 3,1
Mountain and lowland trees

[...].""Here are the trees of the mountains that grow in the plain. [...]The boxwood, the strawberry tree, the yew, the Phoenician cedar [...]".

Book III 3,3
Evergreen and deciduous wild trees

[...].""Now, of the wild trees, the evergreen trees mentioned above are evergreen: [...] boxwood, arbutus, yew, Phoenician cedar [...]".

Book III 4,4-6
Fruit ripening of some wild and cultivated trees

"The terebinth bears fruit around the time the wheat is harvested [...] the fir and the yew blossom a little before the solstice. Both bear their fruit after the sunset of the Pleiad [...] Ivy, juniper, spruce and strawberry are also late-fruiting. But as the inhabitants of Arcadia say, even later-

fruiting than these, and almost more than all of them, are the sweetbriar, the sweet-smelling cedar and the yew".

Book III 6,1
Fast-growing and slow-growing trees

[...]."There are fast-growing trees; others are slow-growing trees. Fast-growing are those that are rooted by the water [...]. The fastest growing are the yew, the cherry tree [...]".

Book III 10,2
Description of the yew tree

"The yew also has only one species. It grows straight, easily, and is similar to the fir tree, only it is not as tall and is much more branched. Its leaf is also similar to that of the fir, but smoother and softer. The wood of the Arcadia variety is black or red, but the wood of Mount Ida is bright yellow and resembles the juniper oxycedron, which is why it is said that traders cheat by selling it as if it were the wood of this shrub, because it is all heart when the bark is removed. Its bark also resembles that of the oxycedar juniper in its roughness and colour. But its roots are small, thin and shallow. This tree is scarce on Mount Ida, but is abundant in Macedonia and Arcadia. It produces an oblong fruit, little bigger than a bean, which is red and smooth: it is said that if horses eat its leaves they die, while ruminants suffer no harm. There are men who eat its fruit, which is sweet and harmless.

Book IV 1,3
Each tree has an appropriate place for its development

"The yew, the yew tree, the cerecin and the ephedra are very fond of shady places".

Book V 7,6
Various examples of other woods
"Yew is used for ornamental work attached to chests of drawers, footstools and the like'' [...]

Some authors have adopted a neutral stance, such as Filhol (1999), who considers the translation of such works to be complicated, so that he maintains the Greek term without opting for a particular botanical species. What is clear is the phonetic similarity between the two terms, which in Latin will still be used when citing authors writing in Greek (Prioreschi 1996).

Yew in the Roman Empire

One of the first references to the yew during the Roman Empire was to highlight the toxic

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properties of the species, and the uses made of it by the population. This contribution was made by Gaius Julius Caesar [100 B.C. – 44 B.C.], known as Julius Caesar, who was an important Roman military and political leader. During the later phase of the Roman Republic, he was appointed dictator for life. Before this appointment, Julius Caesar held the post of proconsul of the province of Gaul, where he pursued a bellicose policy against the peoples who opposed Roman occupation, which he himself recorded in his book The Gallic War (De Bello Gallico in Latin), written in the third person and describing the battles and episodes that took place during the period 58 BC. – 50 BC.

In this war scenario, Julius Caesar dedicates a passage in which he indicates that the Eburones, a tribe that lived in northern Gaul (in the area currently occupied by eastern Belgium, southern Holland and western Germany, mainly between the Meuse and Rhine rivers), used yew juice to commit suicide when they were forced to succumb to the invading army. To this end, he recounts how one of the kings of the Eburones, Cativolco, committed suicide with the toxic brew because it was no longer possible to stand up to the enemy or to escape with guarantees, spurred on by the flight of the other king of the Eburones, Ambiorix. Interestingly, Julius Caesar points out how easy it was for these people to obtain the poison made from yew, since in Gaul and Germania there was an abundance of this species.

JULIUS CAESAR – THE GALLIC WAR (DE BELLO GALLICO)

Book I 9,3
VI, XXXI

"Cativolco, se of half the country of the Eburones, an accomplice of Ambiorix, overwhelmed by old age, unable to bear the fatigues of war and flight, abhorring Ambiorix, the se d of the conspiracy, gorged himself on yew juice, of which there is a great abundance in Gaul and Germania".

The reference to eburones has a se do importance in the case of the yew. According to many authors (Albertos Firmat 1972, 1975), the root "eburo-" comes from pre-Roman languages, and its meaning is "yew". Thus, the name "eburones" refers to a place where there is an abundance of yew se , at least enough to be a characteristic element of the landscape to cause those who live in that territory to call themselves that way. Perhaps even this etymological derivation is closely related to the episode narrated by Julius Caesar, in such a way that

the name of this tribe would be imposed by the traditional use of the poison made from yew. Similarly, toponymy with the root "eburo-" has been found throughout the history of Europe, being se don to cite it (Toorians 2000) in Great Britain (Eburakon, now York), France (Ebriaco, now Ivry-la-Bataille; Evriacum, now Ivry-le-Temple; Eburobriga, now Avrolles), Portugal (Ebora, now Évora; Eburobrittium, now Óbidos, Eburobriga, now Évora de Alcobaça) or Spain (Ebureinius, now Berzocana), and these places are attributed as meaning 'place of yew trees'.

Strabo [63 BC – 19 AD] was a Greek geographer and historian, as well as a great traveller who, taking advantage of the Roman Peace, travelled much of the known world during the Roman Empire. Strabo is best known for his work Geography (in Greek [Geōgraphiká], in Latin Geographica), written in Greek. In this work, the se d describes the resistance of the Cantabrian peoples to the conquest of the Roman Empire, indicating that they used to carry a deadly poison that they se don themselves in case of defeat. Although recently some authors have interpreted this poison as being made from yew (Peralta 2000, Álvarez-Lario & Álvarez-Roy 2017) according to the toxic properties described, this hypothesis has not been classically used, since the botanical description of the plant does not resemble a yew at all, so that most authors (Cortés 1835, Jones 1949) believed that the plant referred to by Strabo must be an apiaceae, probably hemlock.

STRABO – GEOGRAPHY

Book III, 4.18

About the Cantabrians

"It is also an Iberian custom to have habitually at hand a poison, which is made by them from an herb that is almost like parsley and painless, in order to have it ready for any sudden eventuality; and it is also an Iberian custom to devote their lives to whomever they are attached to, even to the point of dying for them."

Gaius Plinius Secundus [23-79], known as "Pliny the Elder", was a Latin writer, scientist, naturalist and military man, who carried out studies on natural, ethnographic and geographical phenomena, compiled in his work Naturalis historia (Natural History), which was used until the late Middle Ages as a model encyclopaedia (Langlow 2000, Rackham 1960). Pliny in this work, written in Latin, already refers to the yew as taxus, although he also indicates the Greek name (milax) of the species, when he quotes Quintus Sextius [70 – 50 BC], a Roman philosopher who founded a philosophical school that combined aspects of the Pythagorean and Stoic schools

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(Di Paola 2014). However, Pliny uses the same name (milax) when referring to sarsaparilla, although when referring to the latter, he extends its name to aspera milax (Blánquez Fraile 1960), so that the confusion between the two Greek terms that occurred between Theophrastus and Euripides disappears.

PLINY – NATURAL HISTORY (NATURALIS HISTORIA)

Book XVI, XX, 50

The Nature of Wild Trees: About Conifers

"Moreover, not to leave out any variety, resembling these trees in appearance is the yew, soft green all over and slender in form, with a gloomy and frightening appearance; it has no sap, and is the only tree of the whole class that bears berries. The fruit of the male yew is harmful; in fact, its berries, particularly in Spain, contain a deadly poison; even wine bottles for travellers made in France from its wood have been known to cause death. Quintus Sextius says that the Greek name for this tree is milax, and that in Arcadia its poison is so active that people who go to sleep or picnic under a yew tree die. Some people also say that this is why the poisons were called 'taxicos', which we now pronounce 'toxic', meaning 'used to poison arrows'. It has also been established that a yew tree is rendered harmless if a copper nail is driven into the tree itself."

Pliny includes the description of the yew in the section on wild trees, within the section on conifers, placing great emphasis on the toxic potential of the species. And he adds a novelty with respect to this characteristic of the yew, and that is a reference to the etymology of the word "toxic", indicating that it comes from "táxico", that is, from the yew, and that it means "used for poisoning arrows". In fact, numerous authors (André 1985) have confirmed this hypothesis, associating the Greek term toxon (bow) with the relationship between the bow and the arrow impregnated with yew.

Tiberius Catius Catius Asconius Silius Italicus [25 – 101], more commonly known as 'Silius Italicus', was a Latin politician and epic poet. His best-known work, Punica, recounts in the form of a long poem the Second Punic War, fought two centuries earlier between Rome and Carthage. When describing the peoples of the Iberian Peninsula, Silius Italicus depicts the Cantabrians as a hardened and fighting people, who defend their territory at all costs, and when their citizens reach an age when old age prevents them from carrying out warlike tasks, they put an end to their lives by poisoning themselves with yew.

SILIUM ITALICUM – PUNICA

Book III, 326–331

"The Cantabrian, invincible in the face of cold, heat and hunger, takes the lead in all kinds of work. Admirable love for his people! When the useless senile age begins to turn him grey, he puts an end to his years, no longer fit for war, by poisoning himself with yew. It is impossible for him to live without war, for he puts all the reason for his life in his weapons, considering it a punishment to live for peace.

A similar situation is described by Lucius Annaeus Florus [74–130], a Roman historian during the rule of Emperor Hadrian [117–138], commonly known as Florus, was one of the main sources of the Cantabrian wars during the Roman occupation of the Iberian Peninsula. In his work Compendio de las hazañas romanas (Latin Epitome rerum Romanarum), he describes that the Cantabrian warriors preferred suicide to slavery, so that when they perceived that the battle could be lost, among the methods chosen to take their own lives, poisoning with concoctions made with yew seeds was one of the most commonly used (González Echegaray 1999, Peralta 2000). Floro describes this in the context of the explanation of the tactical methods and military operations during the Roman period in Hispania, locating it in a place called Monte Medulio, in a paragraph that will be a real enigma for the authors who from the Modern Age will try to locate this mountain in the North Iberian geography, without there being a consensus or even a moderately contrasted hypothesis (Tuñón y Quirós 1858, 1890; Díaz Jiménez 1885, Menéndez Pidal 1897, Risco 1952, Labrada 1804, González Echegaray 1986, Fernández Vázquez & Fernández Vázquez 1997), so that this location has become a kind of icon that has attained pseudomythological overtones.

FLORUS – COMPENDIUM OF ROMAN EXPLOITS (EPITOME RERUM ROMANARUM)

Book IV, Cap. XII

On military operations in Hispania

"Encircled on Mount Medulius by the Romans, who had opened around them a deep ditch fifteen thousand paces in radius, and attacked in every direction, the barbarians, reduced to the last extremity, anticipated their death at a feast with fire, sword, and a poison which they commonly squeezed from the tree called yew, thus freeing the greater part of this people from the slavery which threatened them."

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"De Materia Médica" would be translated into Spanish in the 16th century thanks to the work of Laguna (1570), from which comes the following passage. In it, in a similar way to Pliny, he describes the areas where the yew tree is present in Europe, the morphology of the species, and assesses its toxic potential, both in Book IV ("about the medicinal matter") and Book VI ("of the deadly poisons"). Dioscorides' postulates would be a constant in various medicinal treatises of later centuries (López de Araújo 1725).

DIOSCÓRIDES – DE MATERIA MÉDICA

From the tree called Smylace

"The Smylace, called Taxo by the Latins, is a tree similar to the fir tree, both in size and leaves. It grows in Italy and in Narbonne, next to Iberia. The little birds that eat the fruit of this tree in Italy choke to death and the men who eat it suffer from diarrhoea. The Narbonne yew is so vehement that it seriously offends those who sleep or sit in its shade, and often even kills them. I wanted to recite its history here, so that everyone may beware of it".

Book VI, Cap. XII

From Smilax

"The tree commonly called Smilax, and of some Thymo, as well as of the Latin Taxo, if drunk induces throughout the body a great coldness, chokes, and gives very accelerated death. These inconveniences require the same remedies as hemlock."

Galen of Pergamon [129–216] was a Greek physician, surgeon and philosopher in the Roman Empire (Brain 1986). His works, like those of Dioscorides, were written in Greek, and reached medieval Europe thanks to translations from the Arab world (Barquero 2007), most notably in the ninth century by Hunayn ibn Ishaq al-Ibadi [809–873], writer, physician to the caliph Al-Mutawakkil [821–861], and obviously translator. It is worth noting that during this period, Arabic medical treatises were largely based on Galen's postulates, as in the case of Ibn Sina [980–1037] and Ibn Wafid [998–1075], among others. However, it would not be until several centuries later that Galen's work would be translated into Latin with different versions by different translators, including the one by Kühn (1826), which includes the volume on yew.

However, Galen devotes much less attention to the yew than Dioscorides or Theophrastus, indicating only that it possesses poisonous properties, but without describing the species morphologically or ecologically, or its possible therapeutic uses, which, on the contrary, is

confirmed in several references (Segura & Torres 2009, Blanco 2014).

GALEN OF PERGAMUM – ON THE POWERS AND NATURE OF SIMPLE MEDICINES
Book XII, 127
From Smilace
"The Smilax or yew tree possesses poisonous powers".

Symbolism around the yew tree

As we have seen in previous sections, during classical Greece and Rome, the yew is included in the various written works as a wild species, and never as a cultivated species.

The yew tree as a sacred and totemic tree has had great significance for many peoples of the north of the Iberian Peninsula and the entire Atlantic coast of Celtic origin, particularly in a large part of the Cantabrian Mountains, with ancient references to it being found in Cantabrian, Asturian and Basque writings, and a surprising heritage link to it being preserved.

Interesting recent research has been recorded regarding a hillfort with an altar in the Soria mountains of Cabrejas, where, as written on the dolmen, the inhabitants vowed vows to Eburos, related to a Celtic divinity (Sanz-Aragonés et al, 2015). Marco (2013) relates this finding to the forest and the sacred trees that were essential in the Celtic world, linked to the eburóvices or eburones, the Gallic peoples of the yew. He also includes in his research certain relations with other compound derivatives of Celtic toponymy such as eburoceton (yew woods) or eburoialum (clearing between yew trees). The hypotheses proposed by Almazán de Gracia (2017), where he shows decorative motifs and campaniform ceramics with engravings of branches that resemble the yew tree and contain possible sacred connotations, even come from a much earlier origin. This type of engravings are currently being studied and appear in other areas of the Castilian-Leonese territory, such as the Sierra de Francia in Salamanca (Fernández et al., 2014).

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It was not until the Middle Ages that the yew began to be used in gardening. The bad reputation of the yew in the classical world justifies its absence from ornamental use, both in Greek and Roman gardens, and that this is due to the lack of a tradition of previous use, as the yew had not been used in the first gardens of the Fertile Crescent in Mesopotamia. Its absence extended to the Greek, Roman (and even early medieval European) gardens, in whose first examples cedars, pines, cypresses, myrtles, etc. were planted, appears on Assyrian reliefs, in literature (including the Bible), etc. This absence is paradoxical when, from the late Middle Ages onwards, its presence in gardens and its use as an ornamental began to become widespread, until it became one of the most widely used species in continental Europe, mainly due to its requirements, climatic reasons, aesthetic values and topiary capacity.

The yew was a funerary species, which was associated with the goddess Hecate, the goddess who separated the gates of the world of the living from the underworld of shadows. The yew is linked with immortality, death being considered a mere transition (Bolen 2003). Very ancient references are found in Cantabrian, Asturian and Basque writings to the practice of euthanasia and suicide during their confrontations with the Roman people. López de Guereñu, 1984 in Cortés et al, 2000, states: "the Basques, on seeing themselves lost before being crucified, ingested a quantity of narcotics, dying painlessly amidst chants and insults to their enemies who contemplated the spectacle full of fear and amazement", the same happened with the Asturians and Cantabrians relegated in these same wars to the mountains of León (Teleno, Mampodre, Las Médulas) where, subdued by hunger, women, children and old people preferred to drink a concoction of yew root rather than give themselves up.

Figure 1. Representation of a yew-shaped branch on Numantine pottery. Modified from Almazán-Gracia (2017).

In many of these villages it was believed that "those who slept under a yew tree would meet death or illness, as its shadow was supposed to be harmful". On the contrary, as can be seen today – especially in some areas of the western Cantabrian Mountains – there is a belief that the yew tree repels lightning and storms, a belief that extends to bad omens and spirits in general. In the Aquilianos of León, shepherds used to build their huts under yew trees. This deep-rooted custom extends to both sides of the mountain range and transcends to the curious planting of yew trees at the entrance of the houses, right at the door so as not to lose this protective property with a very archaic mystical connotation.

A particular yew plantation can be found on the outskirts of Ponferrada (León). Martínez in Manso et al. (2012) carried out an original exploration of the wild origin of more than 70 specimens of yew trees planted and differentiated from those of ornamental origin from gardening. In his research, he concludes that the former were planted in the Ponferrada suburbs by the native inhabitants of the surrounding mountain villages. They brought them down in their diaspora to the industrialised areas in the middle of the 20th century. That is to say, that in their move, that rural exodus so recurrent in the mountain range, many of them brought with them as well as "family, belongings, carriages and a piece of vegetable garden", what the author calls the "emigrant yew trees". It is in a way a renewal of the ancestral connection. The oldest tree is about 80 years old according to dating.

The uses that the local populations have made of the areas occupied by the yew groves, or the use they have made of the species that characterise them (mainly yew, Taxus baccata), show the ancestral character of these formations, and how they have been witnesses to man's adaptation to the adversities of the territory. The traditional uses that have been carried out in the areas where the 9580* Mediterranean Taxus baccata woodland habitat is conserved do not seem to have a particular impact on the yew woods. This is probably due to the fact that the yew formations are located in remote areas, relatively far from rural centres and with difficult access.

One of the most widespread traditional uses of the yew in the eastern mountains of Galicia (Terras de Burón, Os Ancares, Pena Trevinca) is the use of its leafy twigs in the harshest winters as feed for cattle: during those years when the eastern Galician mountains were buried under thick layers of snow for weeks at a time, and when it was impossible to go out to graze, the

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collection of a few yew branches by the villagers was the only food their cows received after having exhausted all the available fodder reserves. This traditional use has also been recorded in the mountains of León, even though it is known that high doses consumed by this type of livestock are poisonous or at least abortive. It was never accompanied by water (Domingo 'Pumarego', pers. comm.).

Another more specific use known in Galicia is the use of the yew as a windbreak to protect houses and the airas (threshing floors) where the palleiros (haystacks) were made. In addition to these uses, the yew (Taxus baccata) is a tree species respected by the people of eastern Galicia, mainly because of its longevity and its toxicity to humans. The relationship between the yew and people has been long and complex, which has meant that the presence of the yew has left an important mark on many aspects of the daily life of these populations.

Figure 1: One of the most widespread traditional uses of the yew tree (on the left of the photo) in the eastern mountain area of Galicia (in the photograph Piornedo, Cervantes, Lugo), was the use of its foliage twigs in the harshest winters as the only available feed for cattle.

In Palacios del Sil (León), cows were smoked with yew branches when they had colic. In a cauldron they put embers with yew branches and gave them "escobazos en el lomo" (brooms on their backs). They also made incense or "fumazos" with yew, laurel and the straw from the garlic "riestra". The aforementioned scents were also used against cows' colds. (Conecte, 2018).

Another custom, still preserved today in several villages, is the use of the yew branch in religious rituals, both of funerary origin, especially on the day and eve of 1 November, and on other festivals, generally associated with key lunar periods. The Day of the Dead is essential for understanding the importance of this tree in Celtic mythology. Thus, the first of November corresponds to Samaín, associated with the winter solstice and, according to the Celtic calendar, with the yew tree (Abella 1996, 2009).

The use of the yew branch as a blessed bouquet on Palm Sunday, or to decorate hermitages, saints' shrines or religious processional arches, is still present in some villages in the north of the Iberian Peninsula. So deeply rooted was this use that even in villages such as Chanos, in Sanabria (Zamora) the name given to the yew is precisely 'ramo'.

Figure 2: Detail of a bouquet placed on the door of a Bierzo house to ward off storms and bad omens. Photo: "A Morteira".

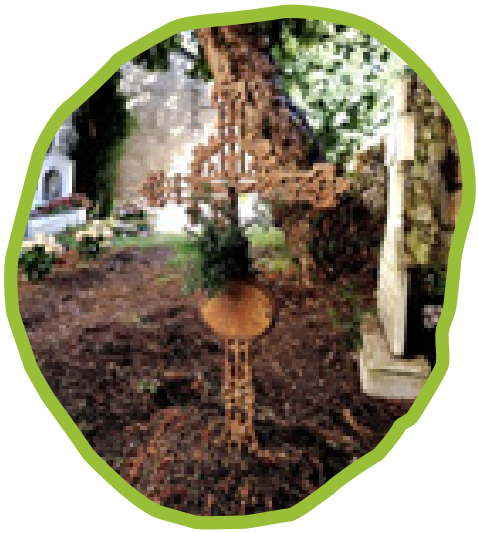

Figure 3: Bouquet of yew placed on the cross of a cemetery in Compludo, León. This small detail shows the deep-rooted funerary tradition of ancestral origin that is still preserved today by some inhabitants in the rural world of the territory. Photo: Isidro Canóniga.

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With regard to the mythology associated with the territory, some of the most relevant examples are mentioned below:

In the Burgos County of Treviño, embedded in the Basque territory, and very close to the city of Gasteiz, a singular cave can be found from the centre of which, literally hangs an old yew tree. This highly symbolic place known as the "Cueva del Agin" (Agin Cave) is related to other nearby examples of the extensive Basque mythology. Very close to this place there is also a singular Tejeda with ancient specimens embedded in a sub-Mediterranean beech forest, the "Aginal de Arralde", in a ravine that is indebted to the river Ayuda.

One of the most important legends about the yew comes from the lands of Bierzo, and concerns the serpent of Rupiana, killed by San Fructuoso. "Very close to the monastery of Montes is the hermitage of Santa Cruz, whose altarpiece depicts the famous serpent. From the hermitage can be seen the abyss, and down below you can be seen the mouth of a legendary cave. This is the cave where the famous serpent lived, represented at the top of the altarpiece of the hermitage, and where the eye of the terrible serpent can be observed. It lived in a cave on the banks of the Oza, below the castro of Rupiana, and it was so large that its tail was still in the cave when its big head came up to the vicinity of the hermitage, eating men and animals. Saint Fructuosus freed his monks and vassals forever from this demon of Rupiana. He managed to do this by making the serpent drunk with a large loaf of chestnut flour kneaded with yew and celery juice until it fell asleep. Then, as can be seen in the altarpiece of the hermitage, he put a large chestnut wood through its eye, sharpened and burnt in fire until it scorched its brain "(Alonso, 1994).

Furthermore, in 1916, Mariano Roso de Luna wrote a book that recounts the life of the ascetic Saint Genadio, making some references to Saint Fructuoso as a follower of the latter, "a sublime life, later imitated by Saint Fructuoso, the one with the yew wood dice, which are kept in the Chapel of Nuestra Señora del Dado".

One of the most interesting stories relating Basque mythology to the yew comes from José Miguel de Barandiarán, under the compiling mediation of Abella in his various publications on the yew and its associated culture, and reads as follows:

"Several sailors from Mutriku bet against a fellow sailor that he did not bring a yew tree branch by night, which rises at the edge of a chasm of Mount Arno. He maintained that he did, went up

to the mouth of the chasm, and there a lion appeared to him and asked him what he was doing. The sailor explained the case, but the lion replied that he would not let him cut the yew branch or return to the village unless he told him three truths. The sailor told them to him in this way:

1º. The sun is hot, but the fire is hotter
2nd The moon (= illargia) is clear (=argia) but the sun is more so.
3º I have seen big dogs but none as big as you.

The lion let him cut the yew branch, and then the sailor returned to Mutriku".

In a conversation at the foot of the beech forest in the Lizarrasuti pass, a resident of Olaberria told the authors of the document "Characterisation and preliminary diagnosis of the Priority Habitat "Mediterranean forests of Taxus baccata (9580*)" in Pagoeta and Aralar", carried out in action A1 of the Life Baccata project, another interesting story, this time related to the wars of succession in the 19th century:

"A Carlist soldier, pursued on horseback by Elizabethan troops, stopped in desperation in front of a small pond in Aralar, on the edge of which some yew trees were growing. Without stopping in the slightest, he cut off numerous yew branches and threw them into the water, setting off again in flight. When the pursuing troops arrived at the place, the horses stopped to drink water in the pond itself, falling down some time later dead from poisoning and allowing the soldier to escape definitively".

Cult yew trees

The traditional planting of yew trees in hermitages, cemeteries and other places of spiritual relevance has provided an enormous cultural legacy spread over a large part of the Cantabrian mountain range. The locations usually coincide with sacred places for the pre-Christian settlers, as is the case throughout the Atlantic arc where the same ancestral connection exists around the yew tree as a symbolic entity of the first order for the Celtic peoples.

As has been usual in many religions, but especially in the expansion of Christianity, this condition was taken advantage of by the neo-colonisers to adapt many customs to their beliefs by way of syncretism. This can be seen in certain ornamental motifs carved in stone representing a yew branch in pre-Romanesque temples such as San Miguel de Lillo, as well as in other Asturian localities.

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Certain areas of central and southern England together with Wales, Normandy and French Brittany undoubtedly make up the most spectacular and monumental collection of church yews (see for example, https://www.ancient-yew.org). Unfortunately, the Irish monumental ensemble (and some counties in England itself such as Kent) seems to have been lost in the bloody wars between these territories, as the felling of these trees by invading enemies meant the removal of an important symbolic significance for the peoples and regions concerned (Hagueneder, 2007; McGeeney, 2013).

Similarly to these European areas, as well as other Iberian areas (Ramil Rego et al. 2008a,b), a significant number of yew trees have been used in the North of the Iberian Peninsula as ornamentation of important places in the daily life of rural communities, such as religious areas (churches, cemeteries) and also in places of public use (squares, fountains, etc.). This means that today it is possible to find monumental specimens in these locations, which are probably several centuries old, with spectacular shapes and forms, as well as large trunks with large hollows and buttresses that give them greater heritage value.

Figure 4: General view of habitat 9580 in Teixadal de Casaio, Pena Trevinca SAC (ES1130007).*

The exceptional characteristics of these monumental yews have led to their protection and cataloguing in different regional regulations. In Galicia, the yews of greatest interest have been included in the Galician Catalogue of Singular Trees (CGAS), approved by Decree 67/2007, of 22 March (DOG nº 74, 17/04/2007), in order to provide them with specific measures to protect their integrity. Among the most outstanding examples of yew trees included in the CGAS are those of Baldomir (Bergondo) and Viladonelle (Neda) in the province of A Coruña; Balmonte (Castro de Rei), Carballido (A Fonsagrada), Pasada (Baleira), Córneas (Baleira) and Cereixido (Quiroga) in the province of Lugo; and the yew trees of Teixadal de Casaio (Carballeda de Valdeorras) in the province of Ourense. Although not included in this catalogue, church yews such as those of Vilameá (A Pontenova), Noceda (Folgoso do Courel), or Fonfría (Pedrafita do Cebreiro) are also worthy of mention, as well as ornamental individuals in pazos and rural villages such as Pazo dos Tenreiro (Pontedeume, A Coruña), Pazo de Mariñán (Bergondo, A Coruña), Piornedo (Cervantes, Lugo), Vilalba (Vilalba, Lugo), Altide (Begonte, Lugo), Luxís (Castro de Rei, Lugo) or La Unión (Sarria, Lugo). In all these cases they are spectacular specimens, some of which are

Figure 5: Baldomir yew (Bergondo, A Coruña), included in the Galician Catalogue of Singular Trees.

Figure 6: Carballido Yew (A Fonsagrada, Lugo), included in the Galician Catalogue of Singular Trees.

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among the most studied, historicised and popular trees in Galicia (Codorníu and Stárico 1912; Areses 1952, 1953; Castro et al. 1989; Rodríguez Dacal 2001; Rodríguez Dacal & Izco 2003; Casal Pita 2008; Olano 2004) whose age is estimated at several centuries, and which have a long and interesting history with respect to the property on which they are located.

In Asturias, those yew trees with the greatest heritage, aesthetic, botanical or symbolic value have been declared Natural Monuments, such as the yew trees of Bermiegu (Quirós), Pastur (Illano) or Lago (Allande). In those cases where the yew trees are located in an environment of great historical value next to a church or cemetery, this group has been declared a Historic Site, as is the case of the churches of Martul (Villanueva de Oscos), Rozadas (Boal), Cenero (Gijón), San Martín del Mar (Villaviciosa). However, there are notable examples of yew trees that have been declared both, such as the yew trees of Salas (Salas) or Santibanes de la Fuente (Aller).

In the Basque Country, monumental yew trees have been declared Singular Trees, such as those in Pagoeta (Aia), Aginalde (Zeanuri), Aginarte (Zeanuri), Antoñana (Campezo) and Izarra. In Navarre, the largest yew trees have also been declared Natural Monuments, such as the yews of Otsaportillo (Ameskoabarrena), Auztegia (Otsagabia) and Etxalar.

Figure 7: Yew tree in San Cristóbal de Valdueza, León. Photo: Life Baccata partners.

Figure 8: Village of Teixeira, Folgoso do Courel, Lugo, with several yew trees next to the houses. Photo: Life Baccata Partners.

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Recent uses

The yew is a tree species respected by the population mainly due to its long life span and its toxicity to humans. For this reason, a significant number of them have been used as ornamentation in important places in the daily life of rural communities, such as religious areas (churches, cemeteries) and also in places of public use (squares, fountains, etc.).

The uses that the local populations have made of the areas occupied by yew forests show the ancestral character of these formations, and how they have been witnesses to man's adaptation to the adversities of the territory.

Within the historical and socio-cultural context, the yew has shown an ancestral connection with the human being, and as has already been pointed out, there are multiple uses throughout Spain for the resources offered by the yew tree according to the needs of each moment.

Guilds such as shepherds and stockbreeders are very knowledgeable about the uses and properties of the yew tree, the result of the knowledge acquired during the long periods they spent with their livestock in the mountains. The most common uses include its abortive properties for livestock, and the use of its wood to make the typical sticks or wattles, as well as to make collars, clappers and cowbells for sheep.

In this sense, one of the most common uses since time immemorial has been the use of yew wood itself, thanks to its well-known qualities of durability and resistance, for the production of tools, objects and working tools.

For example, the use of wood as a structural element, such as load-bearing beams and dividing walls (Dehesa de Montejo, in Palencia, Gorbea Massif between Vizcaya and Álava, where the structural trestle is called "agine", etc.), as well as for the manufacture of lathes and necessarily durable parts for carriages, cart axles, farming tools and even hooks and bases for cutting meat, is widespread in the peninsular area.

Another widespread example, not only for the European species of yew, as it has also been reported for the Mexican species (Taxus globosa), is its use as stakes for fences and boundaries.

A popular use until recently was the use of yew wood for kitchen utensils such as forks and spoons.

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In Castilla y León and the Basque Country, yew wood is used for religious carvings and the construction of skittles, spinning wheels for spinning wool, carpenter's brushes, garlopas and even castanets and other musical instruments such as bagpipes and rebec. Although less widespread, wood has also been found to be used in carpentry, for the construction of furniture and beds.

It should be noted that one of the most specific traditional uses known in Galicia is the use of the yew tree as a windbreak in the NW of the province of Lugo, used as a windbreak to protect the houses and the airas (threshing floors) where the palleiros (haystacks) were made.

Figure 9: Yew wood dish for making butter, called "Plato macho", from an Omani village. Photo: I sabel González.

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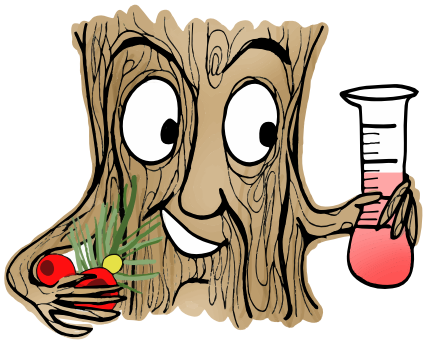

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