

WORLD HERITAGE LIST

Oviedo (Spain)

No 312bis

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The historic centre of Oviedo (extension of World Heritage site 312 - Churches of the Kingdom of the Asturias)
<i>Location</i>	Principality of Asturias
<i>State Party</i>	Spain
<i>Date</i>	1 July 1997

Justification by State Party

The City of Oviedo has in its immediate vicinity two monuments inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1985: Santa Maria del Naranco and San Miguel de Lillo. These two buildings, constructed between 842 and 850, are the greatest examples of early medieval Asturian architecture, and are among the masterpieces of European architecture of all time.

In the heart of Oviedo three other monuments are preserved from the period when the city was the capital of the Kingdom of Asturias (791-910): the Holy Chamber of San Salvador of Oviedo, the Basilica of San Julián de los Prados, and La Foncalada. Together with the two buildings of Naranco, the remains of San Tirso and the unequalled treasure of early medieval gold and silver articles preserved in the Holy Chamber make up an artistic and architectural ensemble with no equal in the rest of Europe. No other European city can present, as a group, five buildings of the 9th century, integrated in the urban centre, in such an enviable state of preservation.

The exceptional concentration of these buildings in Oviedo is undoubtedly due to the role that the city played as capital of the Kingdom of Asturias. Founded by royal decision in the middle of the 8th century and marked from its beginning by the stamp of the ecclesiastical buildings around which it developed, Oviedo has an urban layout in which the urban planning of an early medieval capital can be seen at first glance. The bishop's quarter, made up of the Cathedral of San Salvador, the Basilica of Santa María, the Holy Chamber, San Pelayo, and San Vicente, the hydraulic system of La Foncalada (a monument in itself), the suburban Basilica of San Julián de los

Prados, and the residential buildings of the Naranco mountain form an urban complex which is truly exceptional because of its authenticity and uniqueness.

For these reasons alone the historic centre of Oviedo deserves to be inscribed on the World Heritage List, as it constitutes an adequate urban framework and the historical reason for which the two monuments of the Naranco have already been inscribed. This nomination is therefore an extension of the inscription to the central part of the city to which the two monuments already inscribed belong, so that a more complete and logical historical and artistic understanding of the monuments of the Naranco is achieved. In this way the city of Oviedo is the privileged framework allowing pre-Romanesque itineraries, which bring together the elements of this unique group of buildings, from the ecclesiastical centre to La Foncalada, from here to San Julián de los Prados, and from this suburban basilica to the Naranco. This is possible thanks to the fact that the urban layout has faithfully preserved the road network that originally linked them together. It is therefore possible to walk the same routes that allowed communication between the first citizens of Oviedo in the 9th century.

Furthermore, the fact that the three pre-Romanesque buildings that are included are monuments in themselves fully justifies the extension of the existing inscription. The Holy Chamber, an internationally venerated sanctuary from the 11th to the 18th century and parallel in its development and power of attraction to the great apostolic sanctuary of Santiago de Compostela, is unique in its structure, and bears witness to the effect of Palaeochristian architecture in the 9th century. In the 12th century it was furnished with one of the most outstanding examples of European Romanesque sculpture, the Apostles of the Chapel of San Miguel, and it is now home to the most important treasury of gold and silver objects in Europe. The Foncalada is a unique example in Europe of the hydraulic architecture of the 9th century, majestic in its megalithic construction and totally faithful to the corresponding classical Roman typology, in the form of nymphaea and fountains. Finally, San Julián de los Prados, majestic testimony to Palaeochristian basilican forms, parallel to the Carolingian revival of the same architectural forms, has in its interior the widest and best preserved ensemble of European pre-Romanesque wall painting, incomparable in terms of its date (beginning of the 9th century) and subject matter. It is a unique example in the European artistic heritage, deserving maximum world-wide recognition.

From its very beginning the capital of the Kingdom of Asturias has been a bastion of the survival of the classical European style. Asturias shared with contemporary Carolingian Europe an interest in recovering Roman features as a foundation upon which to build the new European reality. However, Oviedo differed from the Carolingian Empire in the way it assumed this common classical inheritance. In continental Europe there was a conscious effort to revive the past, reintegrating it into a society that to a great extent had lost its memory. In the Kingdom of Asturias, and especially in Oviedo, this classical inheritance was the sub-stratum of all new creation.

There was no rupture, only continuity, with complete awareness assumed in a political programme. It was precisely from the Oviedo of Alfonso I, the Oviedo of San Julián del los Prados, that the “order of the Goths,” the *gothorum ordo*, of the Asturian chronicles became a material and a spiritual reality at the same time.

For decades historical investigation has shown the diplomatic relations and cultural exchanges between Oviedo and the Carolingian capital, Aix-la-Chapelle; the exchange of ambassadors between Alfonso II and Charlemagne is well known. The European repercussion of the theological “adoptionist” debate is known. The last great debate about the figure of Christ in Catholic theology was resolved in the Councils of Ratisbon (792) and Frankfurt (794).

Origins and parallels for the gold and silver objects of Asturias have been traced to Lombard and Rhenish styles. The decisive work of Hispanic intellectuals of those of Hispanic origin in the Carolingian Renaissance and the preceding Hiberno-Saxon flowering of the 8th century, nourished by the wisdom of St Isidoro, is increasingly receiving the credit it deserves. The current significance of these questions has called for the organization of international scientific meetings, in which the inexhaustible wealth of opinion and interest in the origins of the building of Europe are evident, attributing the deserved merit to the Carolingian political initiative.

The architecture of the Kingdom of Asturias is evidence of the greatest quality, homogeneity, and wealth, which has survive from this transcendental moment in history. The city of Oviedo is the historical reason for the preservation and appearance of this type of architecture, which is only understandable in the context of the city, the principles and efforts of which made it possible. In this sense, such cities as Aix-la-Chapelle, Lorsch, Reichenau, or others that are presented as parallel to Oviedo cannot withstand comparison with the Asturian capital, where the architectural heritage and urban layout faithfully reflect and permit enjoyment of the urban plan of its foundation.

Furthermore, the fact that it was the seat of the throne of Asturias for over a century and that it contains the oldest pantheon in Spain, in the Basilica of Santa María, next to the Cathedral, gives Oviedo a special relevance, which puts it alongside the great Imperial cities, such as Speyr, Mainz, or Worms. The difference, which is in Oviedo’s favour, is the degree of preservation of its legacy of monuments, which in other cities have all been destroyed with the exception of their Cathedrals.

[**Note** The State Party does not make any proposals in the nomination dossier concerning the criteria under which it considers the property should be inscribed on the World Heritage List. However, the earlier inscription was under **criteria i, ii, and iv.**]

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *group of buildings*.

History and Description

History

Fruela I, King of Asturias from 757 to 768, founded a basilica dedicated to the Saviour at a place then known as *Ovetao*, with a royal residence alongside, where his son Alfonso II was born. At about the same time a monastic community established itself in the same place and built a monastery dedicated to San Vicente.

The new settlement was destroyed during the campaign of the Cordoban Emirate in 794-95; however, it was rebuilt by Alfonso II and served as his capital. During his long reign (791-842) Oviedo was provided with many new ecclesiastical and secular buildings; these included the rebuilt basilica and monastery, a second basilica dedicated to San Tirso, a church dedicated to the Virgin, palaces, and baths inside the walls and a third basilica, dedicated to San Julián and Santa Basilisa *extra muros*.

The two religious establishments on the southern side of the Naranco, Santa María del Naranco and San Miguel, were built during the harsh reign of Ramiro I (842-50). It is not known why he chose to locate these some miles outside the capital of his predecessor. The contribution of Alfonso III, last and greatest of the Asturian kings (866-910), was the construction of a fortress to the north-east, outside the walls. Below the castle, in a quarter known from its location as Socastiello, was the Jewish quarter in late medieval times.

It was around this time that the remains of the Cordoban martyrs Eulogius and Leocricia were brought to Oviedo. A treasury was built at the Cathedral to house them, the Cámara Santa (Holy Chamber), which was to become a place of pilgrimage in the later Middle Ages.

On the death of Alfonso, the Royal court moved to León and Oviedo had a setback, since it lost its important royal connections. However, it continued to hold a high place in religious and ecclesiastical affairs, rivalling Santiago de Compostela as a place of pilgrimage. It also attracted a number of Frankish immigrants, to such an extent that two separate jurisdictions were set up, one for the Castilian and the other for the Frankish part of the population. This connection with south-western France continued throughout the Middle Ages.

Oviedo was given its first legal regulations, the Fuero Charter, during the reign of Alfonso VI of León and Castille (1065-1105). These clearly excluded those citizens who paid allegiance to the Bishop of Oviedo and not to the Crown. The city was given the right to build new fortifications around its extended urban area by Alfonso IX (1188-1230). It quickly expanded beyond these limits, and communities of mendicant friars were established outside. During this time the influence of the religious foundations - the Cathedral and the monasteries of San Pelayo and Santa María in particular - grew considerably, and much of the urban land was in their possession.

This medieval order came to an end with the disastrous fire on Christmas Day 1521. In the subsequent

reconstruction the townsfolk freed themselves to a considerable extent from ecclesiastical overlordship. Secular public buildings were erected, such as the Town Hall, the Magistrates' Court (*Audiencia*), and the University, and the 17th and 18th centuries saw many fine bourgeois palaces and houses built.

Description

The area proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List is that bounded by the 13th century city wall, plus two monuments lying outside, but still within the limits of the modern city - the Basilica of San Julián de los Prados and La Foncalada.

The eastern part of the medieval wall itself is preserved. Inside there are the three quarters into which the medieval city was divided - the episcopal quarter to the north-east, with the Cathedral and its associated buildings, the Socastiello in the north-west, and the civil settlement in the south.

The original street plan consists of three main axes running north-south and crossed by a main east-west axis and another slightly to the north, interrupted by the Cathedral complex. These are linked by smaller streets, forming blocks that preserve the long medieval building plots with their narrow frontages to a considerable extent.

Most of the buildings in this area go back to the 17th-19th centuries; the only exceptions are the religious structures and two older residential buildings. They are of two or three storeys with commercial premises on the ground floors and reasonably homogenous facades, the more luxurious having balconies.

The *Cathedral of San Salvador* is in late Gothic style, dating mostly from the 15th century but not completed by its west facade until 1587. It is a basilica with a nave and two side aisles, a polygonal chancel, and a spacious transept. The roof of the nave, 20m high, is divided into five cross-vaulted sections. The interior elevation consists of arcades on clustered pillars, triforium, and clerestory. There are rose windows at each gable end of the transept.

On the north side of the Cathedral is the Basilica of Santa María del Rey Casto, the pantheon of the Asturian dynasty. The present structure dates from the early 18th century and replaced the ruinous Romanesque structure. Three other chapels, all of 17th century date, dedicated to San Sebastián, Santa Barbara, and Santa Eulalia, are also in the Cathedral complex.

The original Romanesque *Monastery of San Vicente*, which adjoins the Cathedral, was demolished in the 16th century and replaced by the present structure. The elegant church is the parish church of Santa María de la Corte. The monastic buildings, with a spacious cloister, now house the Asturias Archaeological Museum.

The most ancient part of the Cathedral complex is the *Holy Chamber*, which consists of two distinct elements. The Crypt of Santa Leocadia is rectangular in plan, divided into a nave and a presbytery. In the nave there are three tombs cut into the rock. The crypt is covered by brick vaulting.

The Chapel of San Miguel is similar in plan to the Crypt, which it overlies, and was constructed at the same time. The nave was originally roofed in wood and the presbytery barrel-vaulted. Some time in the latter part of the 12th century the upper part of the nave was substantially remodelled. The walls were lowered and the entire structure was covered by a barrel vault, with three transverse arches decorated with vegetable motifs on elaborate impostes resting on pedestal columns with statues of the Apostles carved into the shafts. The precise function of the Cámara Santa has been discussed at considerable length. It is now generally thought that the Crypt was an episcopal pantheon, grouped around the martyrs' tombs, and the Chapel reserved for the private use of the bishop.

The *Basilica of San Julián de los Prados* (also known as *Santullano*) was built, as its name implies, on land that lay outside the early walled town. In plan it has a nave and two side-aisles, tripartite chancel, transept, and porticoes on either side of the transept. With the exception of the three chapels of the chancel, which are barrel-vaulted, the whole structure is roofed in wood. The transept is separated from the nave by a wide triumphal arch, with a large central window and two small side openings. The sculptural decoration is minimal, being no more than a series of arches with eight capitals, probably re-used from a Visigothic structure. The interior walls are covered with paintings. Most of those on the north and south walls have disappeared over time, but sufficient remains to permit the iconography, much of it of classical architectural origin, to be deciphered (though not entirely interpreted). The timbers of the roof are also carved and painted with circles and other motifs.

Also outside the walls is *La Foncalada*, a unique survival of early medieval hydraulic technology, only properly interpreted following excavations in 1991-95. It consists of three distinct elements: a pond, a small temple or chapel, and a channel. The pond consists of a platform of enormous limestone blocks with side walls of masonry faced externally with slabs. It is 4m wide, and so far 40m of its length have been uncovered. The chapel is trapezoidal in plan, built in dressed stone and approximately 4m by 3m in external size; the walls are 90cm thick, so the interior is very small. Its stone roof has a triangular pediment. Only part of the supply channel has been brought to light; it is made up of very large limestone blocks. The whole structure is very reminiscent of water-supply systems known from classical sites such as Pompeii.

In its present-day form the *Monastery of San Pelayo* is entirely in 17th and 18th century style. Covering nearly 1ha, it is organized around five courtyards, one of which is a large cloister. There is a dignified main facade on the east, the workmanship of which is exceptionally fine. The tower, which imitates that of the Cathedral, is from the 17th century.

Other important historic buildings in the centre of Oviedo are the *La Ruá House*, from the end of the 15th century with a fine sandstone main facade; the *Palace of Malleza* from the late 17th century; and three imposing 18th century aristocratic houses: the *Palace of Bernaldo de Quirós* (now the Tribunal Superior de Justicia), the *Palace of Miranda-Heredia* (now the seat

of the Audiencia Territorial de Asturias), and the *Palace of Velarde* (now the Fine Art Museum).

Management and Protection

Legal status

In 1955 the area proposed for inscription was covered by a Decree of the Ministry of National Education which declared it a monumental area, and this was confirmed by a Resolution of the General Directorate of Fine Arts in 1974. Subsequent orders in 1983 and 1984 defined levels of protection and control of works. With the promulgation of Law No 16/1985 on the Spanish Historic Heritage 23 buildings and monuments within Oviedo were declared to be of national importance.

The Autonomous Community of Asturias has issued a number of decrees relating to the protection and conservation of Oviedo and its historic monuments. There are also municipal regulations in force, related to the urban planning regulations (see below).

Management

Ownership of properties in the nominated area is distributed between public authorities, the Catholic Church, and private individuals and institutions.

A Special Plan for the Artistic Complex of the City of Oviedo (*Plan Especial del Conjunto Artístico de la Ciudad de Oviedo*) and a General Plan for the Urban Regulation of Oviedo (*Plan General de Ordenación de Oviedo*) approved by the City Council of Oviedo provide the framework for control over all activities within the historic centre. This is implemented by a series of detailed regulations, bye-laws, and plans.

An agreement was signed by the Ministry of Culture and the Principality of Asturias in 1990 on the restoration of the historical heritage, which allocated responsibilities and the provision of funds between the two levels of government.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The historic fabric of Oviedo suffered grievously during the workers' uprising of October 1934. Work had hardly begun on restoration and rehabilitation in July 1936 when the Civil War began, during which the city suffered fifteen months of siege, when 75% of the buildings were damaged. Its restoration was therefore one of the main projects of the National Institute for Reconstruction (*Instituto Nacional de Reconstrucción*) and the National Directorate for Devastated Regions and Repairs (*Dirección Nacional de Regiones Devastadas y Reparaciones*), and work was carried out for two decades under the direction of Luis Menéndez Pidal y Alvarez and his collaborators.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the street plan of the historic centre of Oviedo is high, preserving the medieval pattern almost intact. Most of the historic buildings have an

acceptable level of authenticity, despite the need for restoration after the 1934 uprising and the Civil War.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Oviedo in January 1998. The views of the ICOMOS International Committee on Historic Towns and Villages were also obtained.

ICOMOS comments

ICOMOS considers this to be a somewhat misguided and confused nomination, and one that should be reconsidered by the State Party.

The proposal is made as an extension to the existing inscription of the Churches of the Kingdom of Asturias, made in 1985. That inscription covers the Churches of Santa María del Naranco and San Miguel de Lillo, both close to Oviedo, and Santa Cristina de Lena, some 37km to the south. The proposed extension includes the whole area within the 13th century enceinte of the city walls of Oviedo, along with two monuments outside (but within the present-day urban area of Oviedo) - the Basilica of San Julián de los Prados and La Foncalada.

The addition of the entire historic centre, with its buildings largely dating from the 15th century and later, to the existing group of Romanesque churches would change its character completely. Of the structures in the area at present proposed, only the Cámara Santa and the Basilica of San Julián would be appropriate as extensions to the existing group of churches, along with La Foncalada, which is a relatively minor monument, but of considerable archaeological interest.

ICOMOS does not consider the historic centre of Oviedo *per se* to be of World Heritage quality. It does, however, believe that the Cámara Santa, the Basilica of San Julián de los Prados, and the Foncalada to be worthy of adding to the existing inscription. This proposal was approved by the Bureau at its meeting in June 1998, and the State Party was requested to reformulate its nomination. At the time this evaluation was sent to the printer, no response had been received from the State Party.

Recommendation

That this nomination be *deferred* to await the agreement of the State Party to the proposal to reformulate the proposal for extension to cover only the Cámara Santa, the Basilica of San Julián de los Prados, and La Foncalada.

ICOMOS, October 1998



**Le centre historique de la cité d'Oviedo / Historical part of the City of Oviedo :
Vue aérienne du sud-ouest / Aerial view from south west**



**Le centre historique de la cité d'Oviedo / Historical part of the City of Oviedo :
Cathédrale du Sauveur, façade ouest / Cathedral of the Saviour, western facade**