

# IDENTIFICATIONS OF SMALL PERIPHERAL TOWNS AT THE TURN OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: CULTURAL HERITAGE, USE OF HISTORICAL EXAMPLES, AND REVITALIZATION STRATEGIES IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The question of the cities' role in the nation-branding and identification processes is very challenging, since in historian's eyes obviously the use of history is involved in the process. The article is based on a research, where the strategies of revival used by small-sized towns and population were assessed. Those towns were chosen for studying, which were placed in regions distant from Capitals, in deep countryside. In the wider context they were peripheral towns in peripheral regions; peripheral in socio-economic sense, and in geographic as well. The content of their strategies has been analysed, the outcomes and their impact, their motivation and the context. The sources were statistics, periodical press, publicity leaflets, and presentations of all kinds, regional historiography, and observations, which were carried for nearly twenty years. These strategies have been explored on the basis of three case studies: Gers in Gascony in the South-West France, Třebíčsko in Vysočina in the Czech Republic, and Dukla in Šariš in Slovakia, bringing Western and East-Central Europe into comparative perspective. These towns, which are mostly located in a significant distance from capital cities, large urban centres, motorways and railway corridors, have focused on marketing their natural environment and historical heritage. As a part of the revival strategy, the small towns have attempted to construct an identity supported by historical examples that locate them within larger – regional, national and supranational – identities. They have discovered the power of history to brand them. In all three regions also the attempt to reach the registration in the List of World Cultural Heritage (UNESCO) was successful. They have decided to display their historical and cultural heritage as a marketable value. In this context differences, similarities, analogic situations, and interconnections have been identified between local (urban), regional and national, and supranational identities. In this article it is shown that the cases of Gascony, Gers respectively, were similar, while the Czech and Slovak cases are used to compare and contrast.

**Keywords:** national identity, regional identity, local identity, identification, town branding, Gascony, Gers.

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<sup>1</sup> The article was supported by the CUNI research framework PROGRES Q09. The author has visited the compared regions many times in various ways, but her observations were not carried out using ethnological methods. This article is a continuation in part of more extensive research published as 'Between Urban and Rural Culture: Public Use of History and Cultural Heritage in Building Collective Identities (1990–2007)', in KLUSÁKOVÁ, Luďa – TEULIÈRES, Laure (eds.): *Frontiers and Identities. Cities in Regions and Nations*, Edizioni Plus, Pisa University Press, Pisa 2008, s. 299–322, accessible on [www.CLIOHRES.net](http://www.CLIOHRES.net).

# ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ МАЛЫХ ПРОВИНЦИАЛЬНЫХ ГОРОДОВ В НАЧАЛЕ XXI ВЕКА: КУЛЬТУРНОЕ НАСЛЕДИЕ, ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ ИСТОРИЧЕСКИХ ПРИМЕРОВ И СТРАТЕГИЯ ВОЗРОЖДЕНИЯ В СРАВНИТЕЛЬНОЙ ПЕРСПЕКТИВЕ

Люда Клусакова

**Аннотация.** Вопрос о роли городов в национальном брендинге и идентификации является весьма сложным, поскольку в глазах историков очевидно, что история используется в данном процессе. Статья основана на исследованиях, где оценивались стратегии возрождения, используемые малыми городами и населением. Для исследования были выбраны города, размещенные в регионах, далеких от столицы, в глубинке. В более широком контексте они являются периферийными городами в периферийных регионах; периферийные в социально-экономическом смысле, и в географическом. Содержание их стратегий было проанализировано, также как результаты и их влияние, их мотивация и контекст. Источниками явились статистические данные, периодическая печать, рекламные буклеты и презентации всех видов, региональная историография и наблюдения, которые велись в течение почти двадцати лет. Эти стратегии были изучены на основе трех исследований: Жер в Гаскони на юго-западе Франции, Требичско в Высочине в Чехии, и Дукла в Шарише в Словакии, в Западной и Центрально-Восточной Европе в сравнительной перспективе. Эти города, которые в основном расположены в значительном удалении от столичных городов, крупных городских центров, автомагистралей и железнодорожных коридоров, сделали упор на маркетинг природной среды и исторического наследия. В рамках стратегии возрождения малых городов они пытались построить идентичность, подтверждая ее историческими примерами, чтобы влиться в более крупные региональные, национальные и наднациональные идентичности. Во всех трех регионах также была предпринята попытка войти в список Всемирного культурного наследия (ЮНЕСКО), которая завершилась успешно. Они решили показать свое историческое и культурное наследие в качестве товара. В этом контексте различия, сходства, аналогичные ситуации и взаимосвязи были выявлены между местной (городской), региональной и национальной, и наднациональной идентичностями. В статье показано, что случаи Гаскони, Жер, соответственно, были сходными, в то время как чешский и словацкий случаи используются для сравнения и контраста.

**Ключевые слова:** национальная идентичность, региональная идентичность, локальная идентичность, идентификация, брендинг города, Гасконь, Жер.

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## THE OBJECTIVE

In the past, small towns in peripheral regions were not a major theme in nation branding or tourist marketing [Kolb, 2006]. This was a role which was largely reserved for capital cities. Recently, however, this situation has been challenged by the cultural heritage sites, often located in very remote areas, registered on the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL). This has led to a transformation in the image of such places, which in some instances has even extended to their inclusion in the regional and national narrative.

As Peter Clark pointed out, there is a beneficiary group of small towns which have been transformed into cultural tourism destinations. More often, however, "small towns in more peripheral areas have regularly undergone depopulation as a result of out-migration, ageing populations, and the steady attrition of their urban functions, including the loss of industries, shops, and other businesses. Frequently, only their basic administrative functions serve as a safety net keeping up their urban identity" [Clark, 2009, p. 244–245].

This is the case with (Gascony) and its towns. They represent both situations; having suffered all the losses possible, they became cultural and agro-tourism destinations only in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of them made it to the UNESCO WHL. Gers is crossed by the Route Jacquaire – the pilgrim trail to the Spanish Santiago de Compostela. The 78 official registration sites along the French part of the itinerary were registered on the WHL in 1998. Although only three of those places are actually located in Gers, the entire department benefits by identification with the tradition of hosting the pilgrims. Two questions inevitably arise. How do the towns and their inhabitants use this identification? Is there a discrepancy between the auto-stereotype and the hetero-stereotype? My research was constructed around the hypothesis that this experience is not unique, that comparable processes can be seen and analyzed in other peripheral regions (such as Třebíčsko in Vysočina in the Czech Republic and Dukla in Šariš in Slovakia). The argument is theoretically embedded in a constructivist concept of identity understood as a process, the term identification, therefore, is best suited to describe the case studied [Krocová, Řezník, 2010, p. 5–31].

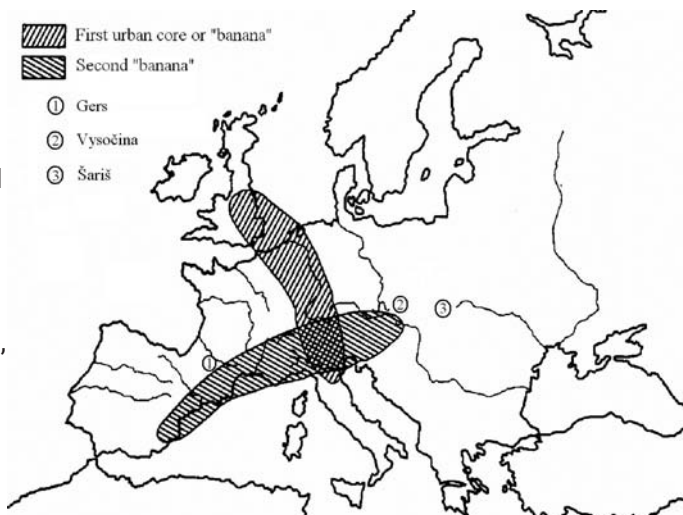


Fig. 1. Gers, Vysočina and Šariš on the map of Europe (the map is based on [Hohenbergh – Hollen Lees, 1995, p. 371])

## THE EMPIRICAL EXAMPLE: GERS/GASCONY

Today, Gascony is a culturally defined region in the south-west of France. It has no officially or administratively demarcated borders. The image of Gascony relies on the memory of its past as one of the historical provinces of France [Sourbadère, 2001]. In several departments north of the Pyrenees, roughly between Bordeaux and Toulouse, we can find various indications of a sense of belonging to this entity. However, one of these departments, Gers, identifies itself as the very heart of Gascony, as its true modern descendant. Being Gascon is perceived as a very positive attribute and a significant emphasis is placed on the Gascon character of the region. It is further defined by the local styles of rural and urban settlement, dominated by the remnants of medieval fortified villages and small towns. The origins of these towns are often preserved in their names, which contain such words as *sauveté*, *castelnaud*, *bastide*, and *villefranche*.

The current positive nature of Gascon identity is especially interesting because, since early modernity, the region was not perceived as wealthy, and being Gascon, behaving like a Gascon, or producing *Gasconnade*, had a slightly negative, or at least not a favourable, connotation. It was an “image of the other”, a northern hetero-stereotype. Indeed when in 1978 Robert Escarpit, professor of the sociology of literature and president of the University of Bordeaux III, suggested changing the University's name to *Université de Gascogne*, his proposal was rejected by the academic council on the grounds that such a name would not sound serious enough [Escarpit, 1987]. In 1990 the university was eventually named after Michel de Montaigne who was born in Perigord and identified himself as Gascon.



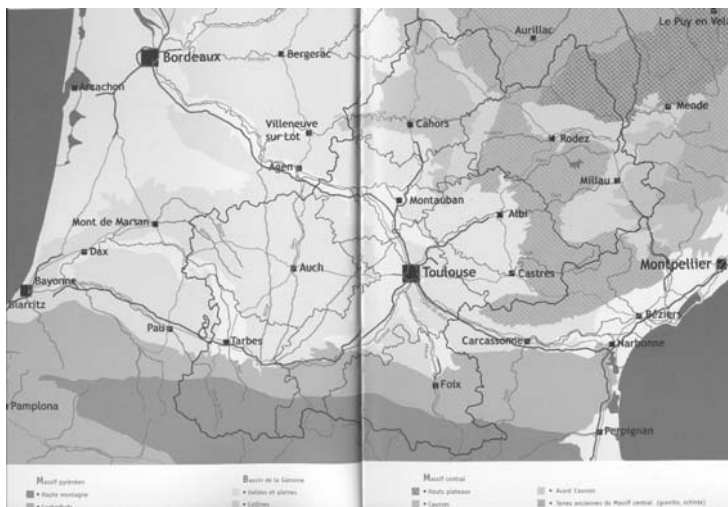
Fig. 2. France's Historical Provinces (citation from [Dickinson, 1967, p. 210, fig. 39])

Gascony is not an administrative unit; it does not function or exist in the same sense as an official region with established borders and a regional government. Nor does it play its part as one of the various euro- or micro-regions, created and sustained by governmental projects. Instead, Gascony is defined by the historical influence of its language. Although largely relegated to the periphery and today noticeable mainly in toponymy, the historical

antecedence of the language, as with all Occitan languages or dialects, has not been forgotten. Furthermore, despite the dominance of the *langue d'oïl* over the whole territory of *langue d'oc*, there are still discernible regional accents and spoken dialects, as well as deep cultural differences [Le Roy Ladurie, 2001].

Historically, Gascony existed as an entity only for a brief period in the Middle Ages. Since that time it has been part of the *grand-gouvernement de Guyenne-et-Gascogne*, which borders Languedoc and Foix in the east, Spain in the south, and Guyenne in the north. *Novempopulanie* or *Aquitaine III<sup>e</sup>* of the Gallo-Roman period, it took its name from the *Vascons*, the people who crossed the Pyrenees from the south, seeking refuge from the Visigoths. The territory became the duchy of Gascony in 768, and in 1036 came under the control of the family of Poitiers-et-Aquitaine. In 1137 it was united with the French crown through the marriage of Aliénor d'Aquitaine to Louis VII, but as a result of her second marriage, this time to Henry II Plantagenet (1152), Gascony passed over to English rule, which lasted until 1453 when it was re-united with France under Charles VII. It has always been part of several administrative units, and the idea of creating a Greater Gascony as a distinct administrative entity, with its centre in Auch, proved to be a failure. Auch itself was the seat of a *generalité* and *intendant* from 1716–1789. The notion of creating a province which would integrate all the regions of Gascony was a project promoted by the *intendant* Megret d'Etigny. After the revolutionary reorganization, which disbanded the borders of the old provinces and created new departments, Auch became the centre of the department of Gers, which took its name from the local river. The departments of Hautes-Pyrenees, Landes, Pyrenees-Atlantiques, Haute-Garonne, Lot-et-Garonne, and Tarn-et-Garonne were also created in the region. These departments, with geographically

descriptive names, hid, and began to dissolve, the old *Gascogne*. Two hundred years later, however, as a result of the 1982 law on decentralisation, it appears that we can observe the revival of regionalism, and the rebirth of Gascony and Gascon identity [Féral, 1988–1991; Debofle, Féral, 1990].



**Fig. 3.** The triangle pointed out by Bayonne, Bordeaux and Toulouse, or lines of Pyrenées, river Garonne and the seashore, defines Gascony in today's region Occitanie, composed of former Midi Pyrenées and Aquitaine. The heart of Gascony is Auch and the department Gers (the map is cited from [Aramendy et al., 2000, p. 6–7])

## IDENTIFICATION AS PART OF PLACE MAKING

After my personal encounter with the region I very soon became immersed in questions about the identity of Gascons, Toulousains and Gersans. The labels of Midi-Pyrenees, Gascony and Gers were omnipresent and associated with promotion of the region for various occasions and purposes. I wondered even more about the region's image after I had visited *bastides* and *castelnaus* all looking like tiny towns with paved streets and squares. Their names linked the streets and squares with national history: dates of important events, politicians and generals prominent during the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, the Great War, and World War II, among others, as well as with famous visitors. In *Barran*, for instance, a *bastide* with 724 inhabitants, there are streets recalling the French Revolution, *Rue du Rhin et Danube* and *Rue de l'égalité*; not far from there we see a square next to the war memorial entitled *Le Souvenir français* after the patriotic association created in 1887 in *Alsace Lorraine* during the German occupation, whose members are devoted to the care of war graves and memorials. Thus identification with the national historical narrative becomes immediately clear. Nor is this an exception. In the *bastide* of *Miélan*, a town with around 1,200 residents, the main square is called *La place 8 mai*, one of the larger streets *Avenue du onze novembre*, next to that a street named after *Jean Sénac*, one of the town's former mayors, and most of the other streets likewise call to mind famous countrymen. At *L'Isle de Noé*, which has 536 inhabitants, the three main roads surrounding the historical core of the contemporary village are named after General de Gaule, Georges Clémenceau and President Wilson, while a tiny square takes its name from the 19<sup>th</sup> century caricaturist, *Cham*, a descendant of the *de Noé* family who owned the domain from the Middle Ages. Space identification in *Lombez*, with around 2000 inhabitants, is based on an inclusive representation of its history. The street names map its religious associations (*monastery, bishop, cathedral*), the history of the republic and resistance in WWII (*Jean Moulin*), and the war in Algeria (19<sup>th</sup> March 1962, the day hostilities ended). All these *bastides* and *castelnaus* also have toponymic or value free names – their *Rue de l'église* or *Avénue des Tilleuls*. This kind of nomenclature is common in all European towns, although not quite to the same extent in such relatively small places. In the Czech and Slovak Republics, for instance, and also in Poland, minor settlement areas only recently saw the appearance of paved streets and roundabouts, financed by European project funds. Plaques with street names are a sign of township. Generally such streets take the name of the local saint, or very often, mark location and direction. Only in towns or urban suburbs do streets have ideologically loaded names side by side with value free designations. In Gers the referents have strong national and republican overtones complementing Gascon identity.

## IDENTIFICATION COMPONENTS

A contents analysis of the principal journal of the French South, *La Dépêche du Midi*, as well as that of an assortment of leaflets and web presentations, points to four essential components of identification: history, the mountainous landscape, the well-preserved

countryside, agricultural production, the local people – Gascons – and innovation, stressing a welcome for new technologies. These overlap, with each component part of a patchwork put together from many pieces. During the summer months, *Dépêche du Midi*, publishes a special issue highlighting all the places of interest and all forthcoming events in the region. This has been the principal tool for the manufacture of self-image and auto-stereotype. The authors are local and the target audience tourists from the “North”. Offprints are distributed free of charge. With the expansion of digitized media, an electronic version of the journal has also appeared. The region and townships have each their individual web page, all repeating and reinforcing the identification components.

**History** is very strongly represented in the image; it is cumulative and all-inclusive, with even difficult and bloody conflicts not glossed over. The presentation is factual and consensual. In *Auch*, the departmental capital, several episodes from the past are highlighted along with some very positively depicted heroes: *le bon roi Henry*, *le brave d’Artagnan* and the cohorts of *cadets de Gascogne* in his shadow, as well as the *intendant Antoine Mégrét d’Étigny*. Both *d’Artagnan* and *d’Étigny* have statues in the town. The three sites of architectural heritage on the WHL – the cathedral in *Auch*, the collegiate church in *La Romieu*, and the Roman bridge *d’Artigues* are objects of pride and care. The many stops on the *route jacquaire* – the pilgrim path to Santiago de Compostela – are publicised, touching on the fame of the UNESCO heritage listing and with an effort made to present the pilgrimage as a lived historical experience, as well as an opportunity for healthy hiking in well-preserved landscapes [Huchet, Boelle, 1999]. The role of history as an integral part of regional identity is accompanied by an image of **nature unspoiled by industry** and the defects of modern civilisation, and also by an affirmation of **openness to new technologies (cyberspace)**. In addition, the region is portrayed as a desirable place not just to visit but to live in and settle down [Aramendy et al., 2000].

This last focus, **“the region, where it is a pleasure to live”**, is heavily publicised in the journal and on the regional websites and is accentuated by a programme of events. The events themselves are the main public endeavour to display the benefits of living in the region and sharing in the experience of regional identity. Bernard Kayser, quoting Alain Lefebvre, called this trend a *‘festivalomanie’*, which is the symbiosis of culture and economic interests by means of tourism. The cultural events are meant to attract the visiting public as well as local elites who wish to present their locality and region as sufficiently interesting to justify a decision to settle there. The festivals come in various shapes and sizes, and experience varying degrees of success. Those in Gers are thought to be especially popular; four in particular are very effective in attracting paying visitors. The events have a contemporary content and, since they have already been running for several years, the organizers believe that they have established a new tradition. The most noteworthy festivals in Gers include the festival of Jazz in Marciac, that of Country Music in Mirande, and the truck and motorcar races in Nogaro. However, only Pentecotavic – a fiesta to mark Pentecost – and corridas held in Vic-Fezensac and in several other communities actually stem from regional culture. The same town also launched a new celebration, the annual Tempo Latino, a festival of music of Latin and Afro-American

origin, like salsa. In Gers, and Gascony as a whole, the role of local initiative in villages and small towns in the regeneration of the region through tourism has been of interest to researchers for about twenty years. [Kayser, 1990, p. 255–256; Alirol, 1997, p. 11–14; Theulle, 2004].

These small, charming *bastides*, with their interesting architecture and rich historical associations, attract far more people during a festival, which, although commercial, and thematically not derived from local traditions, offer visitors the opportunity to learn more about the history and culture of the region [Cursente, Loubes, 1991; Dubourg, 1997]. In Gers it is believed that these festivals prove the potential of *tourisme evenementiel*. By holding them in a little known setting, the sponsors ensure that the events become effective tools

in the growth of the local economy, and, moreover, put the whole region on the map.

The success of the Jazz festival in Marciac, for instance, prompted the creation of a corresponding Country festival in Mirande in 1993. In consequence, the neighbouring communities decided to create a consortium, *Coeur d'Astarac en Gascogne*, situated in the *departement* of Gers, with the aim of encouraging cooperation and increasing the regional benefit of festival tourism. *Communaute de communes 'Coeur d'Astarac en Gascogne'* consists of 16 communities, with 7,110 inhabitants. The consortium was created in 1999 by five districts: Mirande, Mielan, Laas, Monclar sur l'Osse, and Saint-Maur. This would later increase: by 1 January 2004 a further six had been accepted, and by 2004 there were sixteen members in all: Armous, Cau, Bars, Bassoues, Castelnaud d'Angles, Laas, Lamazère; Marseillan; Mascaras; Mielan, Mirande; Monclar sur l'Osse, Montesquiou, Mouches, Pouylebon,

St Christaud and St Maur Soules [Communauté de Communes...]. Only two communities in the consortium, Mirande and Mielan, have more than a thousand inhabitants and can thereby be classified as small towns. The Mayor of Mirande is the head of the consortium and the two towns have the strongest say in the organization. Together they collect a special regional tax and both have profited from the effects of festival tourism, which is clear from the growing numbers of paying visitors. Mirande is essential to these activities and has benefited greatly from events related to the festivals.



Fig. 4. Mirande, bastide famous through its country music festival. Photo L. Klusakova, 2004



Festival tourism is only one aspect of the complex regional tourist policies of Gers. The other enterprises in this economic sector include: spas, family and agro-tourism, arts and historical monuments, sports and gastronomy. Although Gers has no direct access to the seashore, it does offer a variety of landscapes and tourist activities. Part of the representation of the *bastides de Gers* is a positive self-image: shortcomings and drawbacks, such as the lack of industry, highways, railway corridors, large-scale tourist capacity, and a low population density ratio (29 per sq. km.) are all portrayed as advantages with a matching emphasis on the rural milieu, clean air, quietness, authenticity, and healthy living. Even the ageing population is cited as a positive sign of the wholesome environment.

Historical allusion is not confined to public places and printed materials. The landscape also reveals the historical story. Gers is a mountainous region, not far from the Pyrenees and located, it can be said, in the French-Spanish borderland. Its general setting has led to meetings and exchanges with many 'Others'. The interaction stems mainly from the effect of Iberian or Spanish influences and inspiration from across the Pyrenees and the acceptance of sizeable economic and political migration from Spain. In addition, there was a considerable influx of Italians after the First World War, as well as the *Pieds noirs* – *les rapatriés* – from Algeria and other former French-African colonies, who settled mainly in the south. Traces of the Huguenot, and Sephardic heritage can also be found, pointing to the legacy of a difficult past. Delving deeper shows that the area was also shaped by northern French efforts to integrate the south into mainstream French culture and by the Roman tradition of written law. [Braudel, 1986, p. 85].



**Fig. 5.** War memorial "To the children of Lombez who died for France" in Great War, World War II, and also in Algier. Photo L. Klusakova, 2007

## REVITALIZATION STRATEGIES FOR SMALL TOWNS

The peripheral towns live in close symbiosis with the rural hinterland. This explains why the study undertaken by Bernard Kayser is a very useful analysis of the situation in rural regions, including towns, of Western Europe, especially in France. Kayser was fascinated by the variety of solutions or paths taken by those regions, which he identifies as *renaissance rurale*, and in particular by the so-called "happy endings". He addressed

the question of who was behind the strategies for *renaissance rurale*, defined its preconditions and the framework in which it functioned. Firstly, he concluded that the process of reinvigorating rural regions varies from place to place and takes the form of a social movement. It is motivated by those who live in the area and the willingness of decision makers at various social levels to take the ground swell of opinion into account. Kayser argues that *renaissance* is not the usual process in every rural region. In reality, all phases can be found from rebirth to decline: from *renaissance* through *decadence* to *desertification*. The social movement of regional rebirth appears only in places with favourable conditions and has been encouraged by a reversal of the values of urban society. Rural culture, which was formerly scoffed at by modern urban society, came to be admired. An idealised image of the rural landscape emerged, comprising scenic villages embellished with flowers and free of the noise and smells of everyday urban life. This picture of the rural world also integrated the small provincial settlements and towns and their communities. The flight from the urban environment and the rejuvenation of rural landscapes are two sides of the same coin. Indeed, some authors use a newly-created term, *urbanisation*, to describe the process. This concept, however, is more associated with urban-rural peripheries, while the study of the renaissance of the rural landscape focuses more on regions that are



**Fig. 6.** Landscape of Gers is promoted as Tuscany in France. Lavardens. In my explorations of Gers I was often accompanied by a colleague from Toulouse University, Jean-Francois Berdah, for whom photography is a passion. I am grateful for the permission to use his pictures. This one was taken in summer 2002

distant from urban centres, in the *campagne profonde* – remote countryside [Kayser, 1990, p. 28–30]. The regeneration of agricultural regions, according to Kayser, is the outcome of various initiatives and results in the release of the hidden potential of the rural world, which is based on social structure, commemorative constructions, buildings of historical importance and institutional networks at a regional and local level. He highlights the inventive capacity of rural societies and their positive approach to the implementation of change, whether economic, social, technological or cultural. Kayser, who was himself based in Toulouse in provincial France, believed this innovative rural movement had an important influence on society, since it deconstructed the border between the dominant, urban world and the dependent rural periphery.

It may seem to some, as Yves Lacoste claims in his geographic dictionary [Lacoste, 2003], to be an overuse of the term periphery, an important concept used to describe the organisational trends of both modern and post-modern society. Given the context, however, it seems unlikely that a more pertinent term could be found [Lacoste, 2003, p. 293–294]. The innovative spirit evident in rural and small urban societies has been facilitated by a process of reframing and restructuring. Kayser points to a synergy of the indigenous inhabitants and the new social groups who have settled or resettled in the rural environment. These latter include individuals from a variety of professions and occupations ranging from artisans, manual workers and office employees to managers, entrepreneurs, intellectuals and artists. Kayser noted that the symbiosis between culture and the economy is facilitated by tourism. Quoting A. Lefèbvre, he concluded that the innovations that are successful are those that animate the location and its community, encourage residents and visitors to engage with the experience, and focus not on promoting specific districts but the entire region. [Lefèbvre, 1987; Kayser, 1990, p. 255–256].

With respect to the Gascon culture and mode of life, the most intensive declarative identification is found in Auch, the departmental town of Gers, which has proclaimed itself the capital and heart of Gascony. The *Maison de Gascogne* hosts exhibitions and promotes the sale of regional gastronomic products, which are all labelled to confirm that they are entirely authentic *gascon* and representative of the whole region.



**Fig. 7.** Mauvezin was a bastide, and a covered market on the square is a typical setting for this type of township. It was and is still a space devoted to community's social life.

Photo J.-Fr. Berdah, 2002

The project to revive rural regions in France was supported by the cultural politics of the French Republic and of regional governments in answer to the critical conditions prevailing in markedly rural

regions. It has to be borne in mind that these strategies and policies emerged after the law of decentralisation introduced by the Mitterand government in 1982. However, the trend by urban citizens to move to the countryside had already appeared by the end of the 1960s, although the neo-rustics were not always welcomed by the neighbours among whom they now found themselves [Léger, 1979; Chevalier, 1993].

In Slovakia and in the Czech Republic efforts to revitalize rural regions came as a reaction to economic changes after 1990. The projects were stimulated by unemployment and economic migration from such regions on the one hand, and by various incentives offered by the EU and in consequence by the state governments on the other [Hughes et al., 2001; Illner, 2001; M. Czerny, A. Czerny, 2002]. In both Western and East-Central Europe, rural regions have risen in the esteem of urban societies. There has been a renaissance in their cultural life and diverse activities have been developed. In Gers, in Gascony, and in the Czech-Moravian highlands one can detect a tendency to move to the countryside and forsake the town for the *périurbain*, or rurban, small towns and villages. In the case of North-East Slovakia, it should be noted, the population continues to leave. All these areas have seen extensive cooperation between interested parties, including the original inhabitants, those returning and resettling, those without prior affiliation who have rejected the urban lifestyle in favour of a country setting, and the public authorities in the region. Together they have encouraged an impulse for creativity and an appreciation of innovation. They have set out to rejuvenate regional cultural life, a process concentrated in small towns and boroughs. In France, this course of action has been more the result of redistribution and diffusion of surplus rather than response to a crisis. Social geographers evaluate the situation as part of the continual growth of state revenue, a process that is slow and sometimes problematic notwithstanding, which permits attempts to reach spatial balance in support of regional culture. Gers is a successful example if we accept demographic growth as the criteria. This was certainly the main goal for the Regional Council of Gers, where the demographic trend was reversed and the population has grown by 15 percent since 1998 [Le site officiel du département Gers en Gascogne]. This priority in ensuring constant demographic growth is reflected in Council plans for investment in a high quality internet signal to cover 100 percent of the territory, the establishment of a 22<sup>nd</sup> college, the fight against medical desertification, and completion of the scheme to upgrade the road between Auch and Toulouse. Internet access is essential for cultural life in rural and mountainous areas. The regional council has achieved a high level of digitization since 2005 when it announced its support for the Occitanian language and associated cultural values, fully aware of the rich potential this would have for the region, and even more since 2011, when a project for the digitalization of the Departmental archives was launched.

Regional identity is very important for the self-esteem of small local societies. It has been demonstrated here that reinforcement of this identity is the result of systematic efforts by local elites and by volunteers from outside together with professional historians and art historians from the region itself. Narratives about places and people are generally a combination of local, regional, national and supranational elements. In Lombez, for instance, the small museum in the town hall devotes space to the friendship between

Petrarch and Colonna, bishop of Lombez, and, in telling this tale, also reveals the beauty of the countryside and Petrarch's relationship with Charles IV. Through its association with Petrarch and the Luxembourg family, Lombez has become an integral component part of wider European history. Local identity loses much of its salience without this regional perspective and the importance attached to a region is justified through its role within a national or supranational context.

It would appear that a crisis in the perception of novelty and in the presentation of innovation has also arisen. A common belief is that the repeated, the old and the traditional have a better chance of gaining acceptance. All the newly-constituted festivals have almost from the outset been portrayed as traditional. Urban society increasingly values historicity

and many are questioning, contesting and even rejecting much of the aesthetic and technical value of the modern world. In the information age, when increased travel opportunities and internet communication have transformed access to information, it is no longer easy to trace how the ideas that inspired the renewal of rural space emerged. On the other hand, it is very interesting to analyse how these changes were effected, who was behind their implementation and how the structures of the civic community were involved.

Although sociologists and historians have recognised the contribution smaller towns have made towards various innovations, in public discourse these towns were, until a short time ago, perceived as bastions of conservatism, bound to tradition and resistant to change. Bernard Kayser has pointed to a new paradigm of *renaissance rurale*, which he characterises as a revolution in values. Kayser, drawing mainly on sociological research,



**Fig. 8.** Lombez – Cathedral in the core is carrier of supranational identification through the memory on F. Petrarca's visit. Photo J.-Fr. Berdah, 2007

recognized the new inventive capacity of the *monde rural*, which is not only the village and hamlet, but also the small town. He emphasized the novelty of its ability to *valoriser les innovations*, whether economic, social, technological or cultural [Kayser, 1990].

Remembrance and historical heritage help to intensify the feeling of collective memory central to the strategies of regional revival and these are drawn on by planners and investors as well as by civic bodies. This exploration of the strategies of small towns and provincial regions suggests that, in small towns, history has a marketable value and can be employed for business purposes. Artistic monuments and historical heritage are used as instruments for enhancing identification and for labelling urban space to facilitate understanding and utilization [Lynch, 1960]. The small town's strategies point also to the importance of emotional relationship between the inhabitants and the place on one hand, and the tourist gaze on the other [Urry, 1995]. This trend towards the instrumentalisation of heritage is most visible in those places, including

small towns, which have made it to the UNESCO list of world cultural heritage sites, and indeed UNESCO policy has contributed significantly to this development [Vahtikari, 2017]. The strategies adopted by small towns and provincial regions also demonstrate a need to identify with larger units, imagined national or even supranational communities. This phenomenon is testified to by street names and by museums and monuments commemorating not only local but also national, European, and indeed global history.



**Fig. 9.** Auch – St Marie Cathedral is a UNESCO site enlisted within a nomination of French segment of pilgrim trail to Compostella. Photo J.-Fr. Berdah, 2002



**Fig. 10.** Available at: Compostella. Photo J.-Fr. Berdah, 2002



**Fig. 11.** La Romieu – yet one of the UNESCO WHL sites in Gers. Photo J.-Fr. Berdah, 2002

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