

## HEADING REPORT(H)A: Environmental Stories

### Trees, humans and the history and methodology of the 'tortoise don't climb trees'

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Figura 1: *La reina* e *El rey* – Palácio Real de La Granja de San Idelfonso. Fotos: Gilmar Arruda (2022)

I recently visited the Royal Palace of Granja de Santo Idelfonso, in the Sierra de Guadarrama, near Madrid, built by Fernando V and Isabel de Farneso in the early 18th century. Known as locals say the 'petit Versailles'. Gardens, fountains, beautiful plantations, and an even more stunning view of the mountains. A nature organized for the delight of the monarchs and, currently, for tourists who go there, however, this knowledge is already known and public. When I arrived at the entrance of the Palace which is located on the square which gives access to the Church, I came across some gigantic and splendid trees. A cedar from Lebanon 29 meters tall known scientifically as *Cedrus libanus* with approximately 120 years old, a European beech, *Fagus sylvatica*, 26 meters tall and about 160 years old, and two giant sequoias, *Sequoiadendron*

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giganteum, one 46 and another 41 meters high respectively, both which are approximately 150 years old. The largest among them is called "La reina", and the smallest "El rey", according to existing information, another tree fell, breaking a part of El rey. As March Bloch said, a historian is like an ogre, 'where he smells human flesh, he knows his game is there'. Humans, as we know, leave their traces and their scent wherever they go, on the roads, walls, bridges, and houses they build, in the churches they build, in the papers and paintings, in the fences and plowed lands, in short, in everything that a human touches and consequently transforms there is in its record and there's when a historian sniffs it out. The environmental story has given the ogre's hunting skills a few more clues. He also learned with colleagues from other areas, such as botany, to sniff out the human where apparently only nature could be seen. Thus, we know that sequoias and cedars are not native to the Sierra de Guadarrama. They are majestic trees that can live a few thousand years. Cedars, as their name implies, are from the mountains of Lebanon, occurring in other mountainous parts of the southern Mediterranean the few cedars that remain in Lebanon have trunks 14 meters in diameter and are over 2000 years old. Sequoias are native to North America, from California, one of them, General Sherman, is about 100 meters high and 2700 years old. Once an ogre, always an ogre, and here comes the 'tortoise don't climb trees' methodology, completing, in a way, Bloch's thought. Because if the tortoise is in the tree someone put it. These trees were planted in a garden of a royal palace, and it is known that nothing happens in a palace without the knowledge or order of kings. If those trees are there, someone decided they would be there. Why these tree species and not others? They are majestic, he said, but were royals' trees? Associating those trees, El rey and La reyna, the kings of the time, imagined perpetuating their names for the millennia they lived. Symbolic relationships of humans with the natural world. One of the themes of environmental history. But these trees deserve more from historians. It will be a challenge to know their origins, their caregivers, the ways and techniques of their planting, their diseases, the disasters that hit them, and the other seedlings that did not survive. Even more, despite being of the same species as the original ones on the other side of the Atlantic or in the Mediterranean, perhaps they are different: rhizomes, climates, soils, and micronutrients could have modified them? For all, these trees deserve a 'bio-graphy'. Will anyone venture out?

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