

# Culture and Society in Medieval Galicia

*A Cultural Crossroads at the Edge of Europe*

*Edited and Translated by*

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BRILL

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## Early Medieval Galicia

### *Tradition and Change*

*James D'Emilio*

After the Visigothic king Leovigild annexed the Suevic kingdom in 585, texts from Galicia thin and material evidence awaits exploration. Ecclesiastical works include the *Life of Fructuosus* (d. 665) and related monastic rules, the autobiographical and other tracts of the monk Valerius of Bierzo, the canons of the Third Council of Braga (675), and those of Toledo in which Galician bishops participated. We can follow the output of local mints for some decades, and glimpse administrative arrangements under the Visigoths. With this scant trail, the peripheral region hardly detained earlier twentieth-century Spanish historians drawn to the Visigothic realm as a herald of peninsular unification under a Catholic monarchy. The region's subjection to the kings of Toledo had even less appeal for Galician historians who had privileged Celtic *castros* and Suevic kings as exemplars of Galician independence and distinctiveness.

In the three centuries following the Muslim invasion of Iberia in 711 and the collapse of Visigothic rule, Galicia flourished as a weighty and dynamic sector of the Astur-Leonese kingdom. The political history of the realm is tersely outlined by the court chroniclers of Alfonso III (866–910) and their continuators— notably, the eleventh-century Leonese cleric Sampiro. Charters multiply in the tenth century, and their form, language, and content reveal dense settlement, economic diversity, well-articulated social structures, vigorous religious life, and a remarkably literate culture grounded in scripture, patristic learning, and the religious writings, monastic rules, church canons, and civil law of Visigothic times. Documents, toponyms, and modest remains of churches are promising guides for future archaeological surveys.

International scholarship, however, has largely ignored the Astur-Leonese kingdom, and Galicia even more so. The realm gets meager coverage in general works or collections in English like *The New Cambridge Medieval History*. Rare monographs, like Roger Collins's survey (*Caliphs and Kings*) of 2012, gravitate to military and dynastic history. The treatment of sources mirrors this decidedly political bent: the spare Asturian chronicles were edited or translated in four languages between 1980 and 1990, but a fascinating corpus of oft-times florid charters lay too long tainted by the scathing critiques of the early twentieth-century French historian Louis Barrau-Dihigo and the ideological agenda of their foremost champion, Claudio Sánchez Albornoz.

In fact, Sánchez Albornoz framed the issues that Spanish historians of the Astur-Leonese kingdom debated passionately in the mid-twentieth century: the Gothic, neo-Gothic, or indigenous origins and character of its rulers, institutions, and laws; ruptures or continuities of settlement in its growing territories; and the ideology of the Reconquest. Galicia certainly won attention from Sánchez Albornoz and his disciples, and historians like Manuel Rubén García Álvarez and Emilio Sáez probed Galician charters to piece together aristocratic lineages and political and ecclesiastical narratives. Their work, however, had faint echo outside the Spanish-speaking world.

In his 1984 study of Diego Gelmírez, the twelfth-century archbishop of Compostela, Richard Fletcher opened with a sketch of early medieval Galicia and later outlined the origins of St. James's cult. Like the bibliographic essay concluding Roger Collins's *Early Medieval Spain* (1983), those pages are a measure of the limited material on early medieval Galicia then available to English-language historians and their readers. Over the next generation, the landscape was utterly transformed. After the recovery of the cartulary of Samos and its publication in 1986, editions of those of Lourenzá, Santiago Cathedral, Celanova, and smaller communities soon followed. With the resurgence of regional identities after Franco's death, a new generation turned eagerly to Galicia's early medieval history. María del Carmen Pallares Méndez's monograph on the monastery of Sobrado, Fernando López Alsina's studies of Compostela, and those of Carlos Baliñas and Amancio Isla on territorial and social organization contributed to a judicious rehabilitation of charter evidence to address a range of new topics. Moreover, these advances were matched by an avalanche of published sources and local studies across Atlantic Iberia and the heartland of the Astur-Leonese kingdom.

Despite this, Galicia is often set aside in Spanish discussions of an Astur-Leonese realm once widely known as the kingdom of Galicia, but later fashioned into the cradle of Spanish national unity. Moreover, the political separation of Galicia and Portugal has discouraged an integrated approach to lands north and south of the Miño River. As a result, the emerging vision of early medieval Galicia is relegated to the circumscribed domain of 'local' history and filtered out of narratives or models of historical development that reach and engage an international public. St. James's cult, of course, has long commanded an audience beyond Iberia, and penetrating analyses of early texts by Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz and Fernando López Alsina, together with ongoing archaeological investigation, have fueled debates addressed in part 5 of this volume. More broadly, Thomas Deswarte has dedicated a series of works to the Astur-Leonese church. In the 1990s, the European Science Foundation's program on The Transformation of the Roman World launched international

partnerships which would extend to the Astur-Leonese kingdom as well. For the last decade, British and Spanish early medievalists have collaborated closely to investigate space, settlement, state formation, conflict resolution, and local communities and elites. Early medieval Iberia now receives its due in the journal *Early Medieval Europe*, and Wendy Davies, in particular, has mined the charters of northern Iberia to illuminate social relations, legal practices, and written culture.

Even so, early medieval Galicia may still appear a far-off corner of a distant kingdom, neither close to its court, nor in the dynamic zones of resettlement that would be the heartland of León-Castile. Here, we highlight the significance of Galicia within the Astur-Leonese kingdom, and of this period within Galician history. We introduce its charters as multifaceted historical sources, and we invite readers to accommodate the region in more ample and comparative visions of early medieval Europe. The three articles treat the aristocracy and their relations with the monarchy; monasteries and the literary culture of their charters; and legal practices and conflict resolution.

Although we, too, skip over Visigothic rule, each author demonstrates its enduring legacy, barely touched by the fleeting passage of Muslim invaders. When Galicia enters the Asturian chronicles of eighth- and ninth-century conquests, we find, as Amancio Isla argues, a cohesive society and powerful elites who forged their own legitimizing narratives from the Visigothic past, thereby reinforcing the neo-Gothic ideology of the new realm. My discussion of monastic charters and communities uncovers a vibrant religious life, nourished by the cultural and religious heritage of late antiquity and of the Suevic and Visigothic churches, and cultivating the monastic traditions of Martin of Braga and Fructuosus. In assessing legal practices, Jeffrey Bowman describes the role of the Visigothic code, as “an imaginative touchstone and repository of rules,” invoked within a broader neo-Gothic program and applied selectively “to prepare testaments, to emphasize the alienability of land, to insist on the value of written records, to determine the admissibility of proofs, and to bolster the authority of judges.”

Each author looks ahead as well. Amancio Isla shows how aristocratic families built their power, wealth, and local hegemony through collaboration with the monarchy and mutually advantageous marriages. This was a regional aristocracy whose interests lay in the Northwest and newly conquered lands to the south. There, aristocrats pursued their own initiatives, from religious foundations and family alliances to military campaigns, conspiracies against the crown, and the monopolization of titles and their prerogatives as family patrimony. Aristocratic violence was “not a sign of the so-called feudal revolution,” but “endemic in early medieval society...within the framework of the struggle



for power.” Conflict intensified in the late tenth century as resources were squeezed by military setbacks, economic contraction, and demographic growth, while the number of competing elite families prevented any one of them from dominating the region. Ultimately, aristocratic encroachments on religious houses, mercenary service under the Muslims, and clashes with the kings drove the crown and church into an alliance, centered on the see of Compostela, that would anchor the policies of twelfth-century monarchs.

In my own article, I use a singular charter to revise the early history of the monastery of Samos. I argue that the charter of Theodenandus (902) inspired a later tenth-century forgery of a diploma of King Ordoño II purporting to restore Samos in 922. Moreover, my analysis of this authentic piece as a literary composition of the court of Alfonso III shows how the allusive clauses of splendid charters illuminate an ecclesiastical and court culture that has left us few other texts. In content and context, the charter of Theodenandus reflects the crises that spurred the reforms associated with Rosendo of Celanova and Genadio of Astorga. More than the rescue of one remarkable charter from oblivion, the intertwined histories of Samos and Theodenandus’s monastery at Calvor recover a diverse monastic landscape obscured by the later tenth-century aristocratic foundations and a historiography that hailed the triumph of the Benedictine rule. Samos would become a mighty and renowned Benedictine community in medieval and early modern times, but its success was not inevitable and it should not overshadow the intriguing stories of earlier Galician monastic traditions.

Lastly, Jeffrey Bowman takes up Pierre Bonnassie’s call for a broadly comparative history of the regions “from the Rhône to Galicia” around the year 1000. His purpose is not to revive or apply Bonnassie’s model of the ‘feudal revolution’ which, as he explains, has undergone thorough criticism. Instead, his focused case study of legal practices in tenth- and early eleventh-century Galicia and Catalonia demonstrates how comparisons across regions can unravel “linkages among different social, political, economic, and cultural phenomena.” From his remarks on how “surviving evidence...both facilitates and complicates comparisons” to his identification of specific features that distinguish otherwise similar legal practices, Bowman furnishes a template for such comparisons. These will not only isolate distinctive features of a region’s culture and society against a background of shared practices, but they can disclose “unpredictable combinations” among diverse phenomena that “were neatly interwoven” in Bonnassie’s model of feudal revolution and, we might add, in other overarching historical explanations.

Together, these three articles offer a tantalizing glimpse of the richness of early medieval charters from Galicia and the society and culture they reveal.

We encourage readers to consider early medieval Galicia not simply as a domain of local history, but as a vital part of the Astur-Leonese kingdom and a bridge to the central Middle Ages. Even beyond the territories “from the Rhône to Galicia,” Galicia invites comparison with other lands on the periphery of Carolingian Europe from the British Isles to southern Italy. Parting from the premises established in part 2, namely that late antique Galicia was well integrated in the Roman Empire and early Christendom, we argue that the region’s early medieval history provides insights into the transmission and transformation of the cultural heritage of late antiquity and early Christianity, the different trajectories of ecclesiastical institutions and social structures, and the ways cultures may thrive and societies cohere in regions lacking strong central powers. Finally, early medieval Galicia stands as a fresh vantage point from which to assess critically paradigms based on the Carolingian achievement and its role in shaping medieval culture, religion, society and politics. As a new generation of scholars—exemplified by Ainoa Castro Correa’s studies of the Visigothic script in Galicia, Robert Portass’s work on royal power and social structure, or that of José Carlos Sánchez Pardo on parishes and settlements—turns to early medieval Galicia, we may hope that it will have a more deservedly central place in the study of early medieval Europe.