

# Culture and Society in Medieval Galicia

*A Cultural Crossroads at the Edge of Europe*

*Edited and Translated by*

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# Contents

|                                   |         |
|-----------------------------------|---------|
| Preface                           | IX      |
| Acknowledgments                   | XXIV    |
| List of Figures, Maps, and Tables | XXVI    |
| Abbreviations                     | XXXII   |
| List of Contributors              | XXXVIII |

## PART 1: THE PARADOX OF GALICIA

### *A Cultural Crossroads at the Edge of Europe*

- 1 The Paradox of Galicia  
*A Cultural Crossroads at the Edge of Europe* 3  
*James D'Emilio*

## PART 2: THE SUEVIC KINGDOM

### *Between Roman Gallaecia and Modern Myth*

- Introduction to Part 2 126
- 2 The Suevi in Gallaecia  
*An Introduction* 131  
*Michael Kulikowski*
  - 3 Gallaecia in Late Antiquity  
*The Suevic Kingdom and the Rise of Local Powers* 146  
*P. C. Díaz and Luis R. Menéndez-Bueyes*
  - 4 The Suevic Kingdom  
*Why Gallaecia?* 176  
*Fernando López Sánchez*
  - 5 The Church in the Suevic Kingdom (411–585 AD) 210  
*Purificación Ubric*

**PART 3: EARLY MEDIEVAL GALICIA***Tradition and Change*

Introduction to Part 3 246

- 6 The Aristocracy and the Monarchy in Northwest Iberia between the Eighth and the Eleventh Century 251

*Amancio Isla*

- 7 The Charter of Theodenandus

*Writing, Ecclesiastical Culture, and Monastic Reform in Tenth-Century Galicia* 281

*James D'Emilio*

- 8 From Galicia to the Rhône

*Legal Practice in Northern Spain around the Year 1000* 343

*Jeffrey A. Bowman*

**PART 4: GALICIA IN THE IBERIAN KINGDOMS***From Center to Periphery?*

Introduction to Part 4 362

- 9 The Making of Galicia in Feudal Spain (1065–1157) 367

*Ermelindo Portela*

- 10 Galicia and the Galicians in the Latin Chronicles of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries 400

*Emma Falque*

- 11 The Kingdom of Galicia and the Monarchy of Castile-León in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries 429

*Francisco Javier Pérez Rodríguez*

**PART 5: COMPOSTELA, GALICIA, AND EUROPE**  
*Galician Culture in the Age of the Pilgrimage*

- Introduction to Part 5 464
- 12 **St. James in Galicia (c. 500–1300)**  
*Rivalries in Heaven and on Earth* 477  
 Thomas Deswarte
- 13 **Compostela**  
*A Cultural Center from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century* 512  
 Adeline Rucquoi
- 14 **The Tomb of St. James**  
*Coming to Terms with History and Tradition* 543  
 John Williams †
- 15 **The European Architecture of Church Reform in Galicia**  
*The Romanesque Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela* 573  
 Henrik Karge
- 16 **The Topography of Images in Santiago Cathedral**  
*Monks, Pilgrims, Bishops, and the Road to Paradise* 631  
 Manuel Castiñeiras
- 17 **Dreams of Kings and Buildings**  
*Visual and Literary Culture in Galicia (1157–1230)* 695  
 Rocío Sánchez Ameijeiras
- 18 **Cistercian Scriptoria in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries**  
*A Starting Point* 765  
 Ana Suárez González
- 19 **A Convent for *La Sabia***  
*Violante of Aragón and the Clarisas of Allariz* 812  
 Melissa R. Katz

**PART 6: LANGUAGE AND LITERARY CULTURE*****From Latin to Galician-Portuguese***

Introduction to Part 6 838

20 Galician Before 1250 843  
*Roger Wright*21 On the Music of Galician-Portuguese Secular Lyric  
*Sources, Genres, Performance* 862  
*William D. Paden*22 Making Poetry, Making Waves  
*The Galician-Portuguese Sea Lyric* 894  
*Amélia P. Hutchinson***PART 7: MODERN GALICIA AND THE MIDDLE AGES*****Castros, Castles, and the Camino de Santiago***

Introduction to Part 7 914

23 Castles vs. Castros  
*The Middle Ages in the Construction of Galician National  
Identity* 917  
*Ramón Villares***PART 8: EPILOGUE*****Future Directions***Epilogue: Future Directions in the Study of Medieval Galicia 949  
*James D'Emilio*

Index 963

## Galicia in the Iberian Kingdoms

### *From Center to Periphery?*

*James D'Emilio*

In my opening article, I suggested that “the strength and cohesiveness of local Galician society turned the Asturian *caudillos* into kings and, to contemporaries, made their kingdom the kingdom of Galicia.” When Galicia was incorporated into the Astur-Leonese kingdom in the eighth and ninth centuries, it was a densely populated region with powerful local elites, religious traditions that attracted Christian emigrants from Muslim Iberia and North Africa, and an infrastructure of communities and communications that sustained a diversified economy. That was the legacy of pre-Roman settlement and Roman administration, the consolidation of the Suevic kingdom, and successful Christianization. The early medieval charters that tell the interwoven tales of aristocratic families, monasteries, and legal practices depict a cohesive society and a thriving religious culture where writing and literacy played key roles. Aristocratic violence was widespread, to be sure; religious houses might have a precarious life; and persistent conflicts over properties and rights demanded well-established procedures of different kinds for their resolution.

For three centuries, Galicia held its own culturally, economically, and militarily in the Astur-Leonese kingdom, and its aristocrats could be valuable collaborators or troublesome adversaries of the monarchs. Those kings ruled from Oviedo or León, but Galicia gained a spiritual center with the ninth-century discovery of St. James’s tomb at Compostela, soon a beneficiary of royal largesse. Compostela’s rise fed unease among court chroniclers and clergy, and modern historians have followed their reluctance to concede Galicia’s weight in that kingdom. Partly this is due to a teleological vision of the ‘Reconquest’ and the forging of Spanish national unity, and it reflects—retrospectively—the reconfiguration of Galicia within the kingdom of Castile-León in the central and later Middle Ages, the subject of this section.

From the eleventh century to the thirteenth, Galicia shrank to its modern boundaries, and it became peripheral—geographically, at least—in the vastly enlarged kingdom of Castile-León. Royal power and activity turned eastwards, beginning with the dynastic unification of the northern Iberian realms under King Sancho III *el Mayor* of Navarre and the joining of Castile and León under his son Fernando I in 1037, and culminating in the final union of the two kingdoms in 1230 under Fernando III. In addition, the territory of modern Galicia

was split, step by step, from ancient Gallaecia and cut off from the advancing frontier of Christian rule. Fernando I conquered Coimbra in 1064, Alfonso VI separated the administration of the county of Portugal from Galicia in the 1090s, and Afonso Henriques proclaimed himself king of Portugal after the battle of Ourique in 1139, a title recognized by Alfonso VII in 1143, and the papacy in 1179. Across the peninsula, the Christian conquest of cities of political, economic, and religious importance—Toledo (1085), Córdoba (1236), Valencia (1238), and Seville (1248)—pushed the centers of gravity of the Christian realms southwards and favored north-south axes of communication and commerce over the Camino de Santiago, the east-west pilgrimage road across northern Iberia.

Galicia's changing place in these medieval realms has shaped its position in modern historiographies colored by nationalist agendas. In Spanish national histories, the central Middle Ages marked a decisive stage in Christian Reconquest and peninsular unification. That narrative originated in the medieval chronicles surveyed here by Emma Falque, and it sidestepped periods of disunity, like that of García's short-lived kingdom of Galicia (1065–1071) or the independent Leonese kingdom (1157–1230) within which Galicia flourished under Fernando II and Alfonso IX. As Ermelindo Portela observes, the negative portrait of the “defeated and dethroned” King García of Galicia was already sketched in the thirteenth century for modern historians to endorse. For Galician nationalists, however, the same king was the last to govern the entirety of ancient Gallaecia as an independent kingdom. By contrast, the region's diminished size and incorporation in larger realms anticipated its subjection, later on, to distant Madrid, and its concomitant subordination within a modern economy and political structures.

Here, three articles examine Galicia's place in the kingdom of Castile-León. The opening and closing articles chart two critical phases in this political reconfiguration. Portela treats the century between the partition of Fernando I's kingdom at his death (1065) and that following the death of Alfonso VII (1157). Against the backdrop of the conflicts and accords that had defined Galicia's place in the Astur-Leonese kingdom, he analyzes the ill-fated reign of García who concentrated his activity between the Duero and Miño, capped by his restoration of the metropolitan see of Braga. Beyond the Duero, Count Sisnando Dávídiz retained considerable autonomy over the Portuguese frontier districts assigned to him by Fernando I. In the decade following Alfonso VI's conquest of Toledo in 1085, the king who had reunited Galicia, León, and Castile met challenges in the Northwest. A revolt of nobles in Lugo was put down, Bishop Diego Peláez of Iria-Compostela was deposed, and the king named his prospective son-in-law and heir, Raymond of Burgundy, count of

Galicia, still the territory of ancient Gallaecia and García's former kingdom. Faced, as Portela suggests, with Raymond's bold assertions of sovereignty, the king entrusted the county of Portugal and the southern frontier to Henry of Burgundy after 1096. Possibly meant to thwart Galician autonomy, the move ironically led to Portugal's independence. As a result, the Galicia of 1157 was, for Portela, "already the Galicia of the future...defined both by the fixing of its physical boundaries and by its placement in a peripheral position in relation to centers of power."

In the closing article, Francisco Javier Pérez Rodríguez turns to the thirteenth century when, it would seem, the reunification of Castile-León in 1230 and the conquests in Andalusia only sealed this peripheral status. By conventional narratives, Galicia's marginalization within the larger kingdom of Fernando III (1230–1252), Alfonso X (1252–1284), and their successors triggered a precipitous decline for a region ignored by the monarchs and under the grip of ecclesiastical lordships which overshadowed the lay aristocracy and stifled urban life. Focusing on royal actions and administration, Pérez Rodríguez thoroughly revises this view. First, he demonstrates strong continuities between the policies of Fernando III towards Galicia and those of his Leonese predecessors for whom Galicia and Compostela had undeniable importance. Under Alfonso IX (1188–1230), the issuance of royal charters for towns accelerated, new concessions to the Galician church slowed, and the office of *merindad mayor* of Galicia was instituted. Looking ahead, Pérez Rodríguez argues that it is not "correct to speak of the decadence of Galicia, of its loss of importance, or its neglect by the monarchs." He reminds us that the unification and enlargement of Castile-León profoundly affected regions across the peninsula, and the monarchy developed new ways of exercising power over territories where the kings were seldom present. In Galicia, royal authority was felt through support for municipalities in conflicts with ecclesiastical lords, seizures of episcopal domains, collection of customs duties and other taxes, and the award of numerous charters to Galician monasteries under Sancho IV (1284–1295) and Fernando IV (1295–1311). Moreover, Galicians attended the court and participated in the conquest of Andalusia and the resettlement of the Leonese Extremadura, while Galicia's maritime economy prospered from trade and military activity in the south.

Pérez Rodríguez's attention to the struggles between crown and church is the centerpiece of a broadly revisionist portrait of later medieval Galician society. Specifically, he argues that ecclesiastical seigneuries were not as extensive, unchallenged, or singular as often imagined, while towns and commerce flourished with encouragement from monarchs who profited from trade, industry, shipbuilding, and fishing. In this respect, both Pérez Rodríguez and Portela

look well beyond Galicia's 'place' by exploring how Galician society was shaped by the monarchy's changing relationships with different groups. In part 3, Amancio Isla's study of the Galician aristocracy in the Astur-Leonese kingdom concluded with the eleventh-century alliance between the crown and church—particularly the see of Compostela—that came to anchor royal policy. Here, Portela contends that Galicia's eventual place within the twelfth-century kingdom was contingent on “a kaleidoscope of shifting alliances” that tied bishops and clergy, lay aristocrats, and townspeople to the different “roads to legitimation” that opened in the conflictive reign of Queen Urraca (1109–1126). Ultimately, the rule of Alfonso VII was accepted as “the framework for political action” and the “source of political legitimacy.”

Bookended by these discussions of Galicia's changing place within the Iberian kingdoms, Emma Falque considers how Galicia fared in Latin historical sources. She reviews the twelfth-century chronicles (the *Historia Roderici*, the *Chronica Adefonsi imperatoris*, the *Historia Silense*, and the *Chronica Naierensis* [or *Najerense*]), culminating in the massive *Historia Compostellana* and shorter Compostelan works, and she concludes with the contrasting thirteenth-century histories of the Leonese and Castilian bishops, Lucas of Tuy and Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada. These works vary widely in their treatment of Galicia. The *Historia Roderici*, for example, ignores even St. James's cult, and the Leonese *Chronica Adefonsi imperatoris* is “surprisingly silent” about events in Galicia. By contrast, the *Historia Silense* devotes much attention to Galicia, incorporating material from earlier chronicles, a practice followed later in the *Chronica Naierensis* and thirteenth-century histories. The *Silense* also militarized St. James as a knight interceding for Christians besieging Coimbra, an image that would be elaborated by Lucas of Tuy in his account of the battle of Clavijo, but downplayed by the archbishop of Toledo, Rodrigo Jiménez.

Naturally, Galicia takes center stage in the *Historia Compostellana* and Falque singles out “the terminology used in the work, the characterization of the Galicians, and the references to the Galician language.” Her observations, however, on the sponsorship, authors, and aims of this “partisan work” serve as a valuable orientation to a narrative which, she reminds us, is our main source for much of what we know about western Iberia in the early twelfth century. Briefer and less familiar, the *Chronicon Iriense* and *Chronicon Compostellanum* cast light on the intellectual milieu among the Compostelan clergy and its different perspectives on Compostelan traditions.

While most articles in sections 3 and 4 rely heavily on charters, Falque—herself the editor of the *Historia Compostellana*, *Chronicon Compostellanum*, and the *Chronicon mundi* of Lucas of Tuy—underlines the value of these medieval histories, nearly all of which have now been published in fine critical

editions in the *Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis*, and, in some cases, in Spanish translations. Moreover, the studies of the editors are complemented by a recent and growing literature—including monographic issues of *E-Spania: Revue Interdisciplinaire d'Études Hispaniques Médiévales et Modernes*, articles in *Cahiers de Linguistique et de Civilisation Hispaniques Médiévales*, and the work of, among others, Peter Linehan and Georges Martin—on the sources, authors, and agendas behind the Latin historiography of medieval León and Castile. If the historical information in these medieval histories is selective, their value for the study of medieval Galicia may lie more in their purposeful manipulation of earlier chronicles, the growth of legends on topics from Galicia's origins and name to St. James's powers, and the contrasting viewpoints of their clerical authors—expressed explicitly and through silence—on Galicia's place within Iberia. For its part, the *Historia Compostellana* could be read as part of the effort to shape a history and identity for the new Galicia whose birth in the early twelfth century Portela describes. In time, however, it was drowned out by thirteenth-century histories and their successors, the Castilian vernacular histories of the later Middle Ages. These would lay a foundation for the modern notions of Galicia's medieval 'marginalization' which Pérez Rodríguez calls upon us to re-examine.