

# 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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## Modern Galicia and the Middle Ages

### *Castros, Castles, and the Camino de Santiago*

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The last two sections centered on Compostela and the cult of St. James, and Galician language and literature. Both can also be seen as reminders of the weight of the medieval heritage in the construction of the modern nation. For Galician nationalists, the Middle Ages had obvious appeal as a 'golden age'. The splendor of Compostela and the flowering of Galician literature were two key components of this, first in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalist movements, and later in the autonomous community constituted under the Spanish constitutional monarchy after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco. Today, medieval figures thrive in the Galician cultural imagination, while medievalism holds its own in literary circles and inspires popular festivals. Given the current prominence of medievalism as a subject of study in its own right, it is fitting to close with reflections on Galician medievalism by Ramón Villares, professor of contemporary history at the University of Santiago de Compostela and, since 2006, president of the Consello da Cultura Galega.

Before the Spanish Civil War and Franco's rule, Galician literature had been revitalized in the *Rexurdimento* of the late nineteenth century and the *Xeración Nós* of the 1920s, nationalist movements with cultural, intellectual, and political dimensions. The nationalist organization As Irmandades da Fala (The Brotherhoods of the Language), founded in 1916, made the defense and use of the Galician language a cornerstone of its program. In 1919, it adopted St. James's feast, July 25, as the Día da Patria Galega, the national day of Galicia. As Villares explains here, this celebration gained ground among Galician nationalists over the next two decades, and it persisted in Compostela under Franco's government as "an almost clandestine observance" through the permissible homage to the famed Galician poet Rosalía de Castro. While Franco's regime discouraged the use of Galician, the poetic movement known as *neotrovadorismo* cultivated the language with an aestheticism that escaped suspicion. Best represented by Álvaro Cunqueiro and Fermín Bouza Brey, it arose after publication (1926–1932) of the medieval *cantigas* by the Portuguese philologist José Joaquim Nunes. The foundation of the publishing house Galaxia in 1950 and its program to promote Galician language and culture opened a new space for a cultural politics that had been confined to the exile communities of the Americas since the Spanish Civil War. From the 1960s

onwards, as Villares observes, language became central to the “nationalist discourse” of “the ‘new’ nationalism.”

The position of the Galician language and of Compostela was consolidated with the ratification of the Galician Statute of Autonomy by referendum in 1980. Galician was recognized as an official language and the Linguistic Normalization Law of 1983 advanced its use with far-reaching measures. The commemoration of the Día de Patria Galega had endured, and Santiago de Compostela was proclaimed capital of the autonomous region of Galicia in 1982. Honored as a European Capital of Culture in the millennial year 2000, the city has flourished as a cosmopolitan cultural center with the embrace of the resurgent pilgrimage as a symbol of European unity.

Compostela and the Galician language, of course, have a place in today’s Galicia that transcends, and sometimes obscures, their medieval origins. Villares, however, unearths the more specific strands of medievalism that have shaped the Galician nation since the Romantic era when the medieval past was of supreme importance culturally and politically for nationalist movements. The Middle Ages did have rivals in the search for national origins and the definition of national cultures. Celticism was, as Villares writes, “one of the most powerful intellectual currents in the modern Galician cultural system.” Attached to the prehistoric world of the *castros* and championed by the historian Manuel Murguía, Celticism had an unmistakably racist character. As an “ethnic argument for the nationality,” Villares concludes that it now “retains only a residual significance in the theoretical apparatus of contemporary Galician nationalism,” despite continuing appeal in popular culture and the arts. Medievalism offered a powerful alternative to Celticism in Galician nationalist thought, and, to explain this, Villares highlights three key exponents who have not achieved quite the renown of other Galician intellectuals, writers, and artists in the history of the modern nation: the historian and historical novelist Benito Vicetto, the poet Ramón Cabanillas, and the multifaceted artist Luis Seoane whose career unfolded in exile in Buenos Aires.

Medieval characters, led by the heretic Priscillian, dominate the solemn procession of “immortal Galicians” conjured up by the Galician nationalist writer, artist, and political exile, Alfonso Rodríguez Castelao, in his famous speech, *Alba de gloria* (*The Glorious Dawn*), delivered in Buenos Aires on July 25, 1948. Villares compares these with the portraits which Luis Seoane designed for ceramic mugs in 1967 or his more ambitious ensemble of seventy-two woodcuts—“a grand mural of the totality of Galician history,” as Villares describes it—published as a book, *Imágenes de Galicia*, in 1978. These august assemblies illustrate both the diversity and pervasiveness of the medieval past

for an emergent nation whose more recent history was decried by nationalists as a dark era of political subjection and cultural and linguistic repression.

Some figures in Castelao's reverie—like Archbishop Diego Gelmírez or Emperor Alfonso VII—were problematic symbols for the modern Galician nation, despite their impact. More striking is the role of figures enlarged and transformed by myth, like the marshal Pardo de Cela, whose remarkable fortunes in the modern Galician political and cultural imagination Villares traces here. Secular characters of popular lore and literary invention loom even larger in Seoane's collection, and Villares's analysis of the artist's lifelong engagement with the Middle Ages points to fundamental reasons for the period's attraction and its eventual triumph—to a degree—over the Celtic past.

For Seoane, Galicia's history was "a collective saga in which the protagonists are popular figures, like peasants, minstrels, or sailors, accompanied by legendary characters," and "twentieth-century Galicia...(was) the product of struggles and social conflicts underway since the Middle Ages." In contrast with the "ethnic foundations of Celticism" and the "unchanging national character" it presented, Villares argues that medievalism emphasized agency, "social attitudes and actions," and "struggles and conflicts among classes" that encouraged a "dynamic or dialectic conception of national identity." In short, the Middle Ages inspired modern Galicians, not only as a 'golden age', but as one that urged action and promised a better future of their own making.

We may hope, too, that the vision of medieval Galicia presented here challenges simple notions of ethnic or geographic determinism, or the conservatism of rural cultures; that it reminds us of how past generations overturned geographies, interacted dynamically with other cultures, and revitalized their own histories and traditions; and that it encourages us to approach and interpret the past actively and creatively as a reservoir of experience through which we too can make our own futures.