chapter 3

Gallaecia in Late Antiquity
The Suevic Kingdom and the Rise of Local Powers

P.C. Díaz and Luis R. Menéndez-Bueyes

Gallaecia and Galicia are terms that are often used interchangeably in the historiography. Of course, the phonetic evolution of the modern name from the Roman one is perfectly understandable both in Galician and in Castilian. Nonetheless, the shaping of the region of Galicia was neither an automatic nor inevitable consequence of the Gallaecia which the Romans had built upon the indigenous societies and endowed with a measure of homogeneity. A Christian Galicia took shape in the Middle Ages and its boundaries approximated those of the modern region, with minor differences and the occasional extension to encompass the neighboring Bierzo. This was the outcome of a long process within which the Suevic monarchy played a key role in the configuration of the region, particularly during what has been called the ‘second’ kingdom of the sixth century, following the kings’ conversion to Catholicism. In close collaboration with the church, the monarchs gave the territory a unity that would endure under the Visigoths, when the region was joined as a dependent province to the Visigothic kingdom of Toledo. This process, often hidden by the opacity of the sources, helps us to make sense of the history of the Suevic kingdom itself and to understand the long journey from Diocletian’s creation of a Roman province stretching across the northern Meseta to the shaping of the medieval kingdoms.¹

Gallaecia: A Roman Administrative Unit at the Edge of the Empire

The territory of ancient Gallaecia (or Callaecia) was constituted by the Roman authorities by binding together and imposing a certain uniformity upon populations which shared recognizably similar, but not identical, cultures and social structures.² These are the communities which, from an archaeological perspective, specialists describe as the cultura castreña of the Northwest.³

---

¹ For a general view of the Suevic kingdom: Díaz (2011b).
³ Calo (1993), (1997); Parcero (2002); Peña (2003), 109–183; Fanjul and Menéndez-Bueyes (2004), 17–70; González Rubal (2007); Parcero et al. (2007); Rodríguez Corral (2009); Serna et al. (2010); Torres Martínez (2011); Fanjul (2011a), 303–318.
Based on the archaeological analysis of objects recovered from their settlements, this culture extended across all of modern Galicia, the Bierzo, the Leonese mountains, the plains and rolling hills of Sanabria-Carballada and Aliste in Zamora, the Portuguese region of Tras-os-Montes, and the Navia valley in the western Asturias which once belonged to the *conuentus Lucensis*.

At the same time, the archaeological evidence reveals internal variations, some of considerable significance, that indicate the existence of different peoples. Thus, the Gallaeci inhabited the northwestern lands of the Iberian Peninsula, north of the Duero. They were in contact with the Lusitanians through a border district where differences in language and material culture are well documented. This would later belong to Gallaecia Bracarensis, which included the lower Miño basin, while Gallaecia Lucensis lay to the north. In effect, the Romans grouped a large number of different peoples under the name of Gallaeci. The generic label barely provides clues to their complex origins, because it refers exclusively to a minority of Celtic origin who arrived at a relatively late date. It ignores most of the cultural and ethnic elements of these populations, as is evident from their inclusion in Lusitania during the first administrative arrangements after the conquest.

This culture clearly took shape as a result of the internal development and growing complexity of Atlantic societies of the late Bronze Age. Of course, the region was open, throughout this process, to external contacts and influences of diverse origin, but we lack solid data on the arrival of peoples from outside the region, a postulate dear to the advocates of a ‘Celtic’ historiography.

---

4 Patrick Le Roux has argued that the Romans applied the term ‘Gallaeci’ across the whole territory north of the Duero, because this was the first group with whom they came in contact during the campaign of D. Brutus in 138–137 BC. This labeling was, to some extent, justified by the similarities among these peoples, and it facilitated a convenient—and necessary—assimilation. This historical process is comparable to what occurred in Germania, where Tacitus (*Ger.* 2.5) notes that the name ‘germanus’ had been that of a specific people who were the first to cross the Rhine and overcome the Gauls. In this way, Rome’s goal would be “to incorporate existing ethnonyms within the framework of the systems of nomenclature that the Romans traditionally used so that these would also reflect the diversity and internal divisions of indigenous populations” (Le Roux [2006], 68–69). Some archaeological evidence appears to support the hypothesis that the coastal regions between the Duero and Miño passed under Roman control as a result of the campaign of D. Brutus. One can, for example, document the rising presence of products of Roman commerce in indigenous contexts after this date: Peña (2003), 150–151.


6 For critical views of the Celtic slant in the traditional historiography: Díaz Santana (2002); Peña (2003), 119–126; Marín (2005); Calo (2010). This ethnic characterization not