Chapter 4

The Suevic Kingdom

Why Gallaecia?

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The Sueves... (came to) hold the supremacy which the Vandals abandoned.¹

Introduction: Towards a Re-evaluation of the Suevic Kingdom of Hispania

During the reign of Rechiar (448–456) in the middle of the fifth century, the Sueves’ hegemony in Hispania seemed unassailable. Rechiar had inherited from his father, Rechila (438–448), a Suevic kingdom strong in Gallaecia and assertive across the Iberian Peninsula.² By marrying a daughter of Theoderic I in 449, the new Suevic king won the support of the Visigothic rulers in Toulouse.³ As a Catholic, Rechiar managed to draw closer to the population of Hispania and also to Valentinian III, making himself, in a sense, a ‘modern’ monarch.⁴ In 453, he secured imperial backing through a pact with the imperial house of Ravenna.⁵ Confident in his power and prospects, Rechiar plundered Carthaginensis and, finally, Tarraconensis, the last Spanish province under imperial control, following the deaths of Aëtius (454) and Valentinian III (455).⁶

¹ Ubric (2004), 64.
³ Hyd. 132, pp. 98–99; Valverde (1999), 304.
⁴ Rechiar’s father, Rechila, died a pagan (gentilis), but Hydatius 129, pp. 98–99, describes Rechiar as catholicus at the time of his succession; see also Isidore of Seville, Historia Sueuorum 86–87, p. 301. Presumably, Rechila, his predecessor, Hermeric, and most of the Suevic aristocracy followed traditional German religious practices: Schäferdiek (1967), 108; García Moreno (1997), 200–201. Citing Dumézil, Veyne (2007), 121, writes that “after what one calls the Great Invasions, the German rulers unfurled their Christianity as a sign of their high level of culture...their princes converted because of the religion’s prestige, and to be modern. To be modern could be a matter of display for a potentate.” For a German king of the 450s, being a Christian ruler—and being Catholic rather than Arian—was undoubtedly a sign of ‘modernity’, and it facilitated relations with the Theodosian imperial house.
⁵ Hyd. 147, 163, pp. 102–107.
⁶ Hyd. 161, 163, 165, pp. 104–107; Rechiar brought many captives back to Gallaecia. On his return from Theoderic’s court in 449, the Sueves—joining the Bacaudic leader Basilius—had pillaged Tarraconensis, but that action remained isolated: Hyd. 134, pp. 98–99.
Despite the evident successes of the Sueves in Hispania, their meteoric ascent continues to be dismissed as a passing and circumstantial event in much contemporary historiography. According to this view, the Suevic kingdom was weak from its very creation in 419, when we first hear of a rex suevorum, Hermeric, from Hydatius. Since the power of the Suevic kings—Hermeric, Rechila, and Rechiar (419–456)—lay in Gallaecia, such a remote region, the monarchs neither possessed the commercial resources of the Vandal kingdom nor the political capacity of the Visigoths to influence the empire. The crushing of Rechiar’s outsized ambitions in 456 seems, then, a logical and fitting outcome that merely confirmed the Sueves’ original destiny.

By such reasoning, the Sueves’ consolidation of their rule in Gallaecia and their occupation of the provinces of Lusitania, Baetica, and Carthaginien is largely resulted from the departure of the Vandals from Hispania in 429, and, more crucially, from the events of 439–442 across the Western Empire. After Valentinian III came of age, the imperial authorities made an important treaty in 439 with the Visigoths, firm allies of his mother, Galla Placidia, since 414. The Vandals extorted a treaty of their own from the empire in 442, after the failure of the expedition against Gaiseric in Italian waters in 441. Satisfied by the recognition their kingdoms wrested from a weakened empire, the two Germanic neighbors of the Sueves allowed their kings, Rechila and Rechiar, a certain freedom of action. Rechila occupied Mérida in 439 and Seville (Hispalis) in 441, and the Sueves profited in the 440s and 450s from events beyond their control. According to this view, their role in Hispania was limited to “simply controlling what was left of Roman administration.”

There is an alternative to this minimalist vision of the fifth-century Suevic kingdom. In this article, we will demonstrate that the kingdom of these first three Suevic kings of Hispania was neither as weak nor as peripheral as is often assumed. Nor were the Sueves isolated internationally. The Sueves were linked to the imperial court in Ravenna through their chief ally, the Visigoths of Toulouse, and their power was respected in the West after 418. A fresh look at

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7 The best-known statement of this view remains the categorical judgment of Musset (1975), 62, “In historical terms nothing very important would have been changed had the Sueves of Spain never existed.”
8 Sánchez León (1996), 65, writes that “Suevic expansionism developed at a moment, beginning in 442–445, favorable to the Sueves and Goths, in opposition to the rapprochement of the Roman state with the Vandal king, Gaiseric.”
10 Ubric (2003), 112.