

## Re-evaluating the Iberian Northwest in Late Antiquity

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### **Abstract:**

*In late antiquity, Iberia offers us a patchwork of sub-regional variations, some areas hinting towards strong continuities, with others seemingly succumbing to relatively quick and thorough urban breakdown. The northwestern province of Gallaecia, isolated and distant from the Mediterranean heartlands of empire, seems at first sight to present us with a case-study which immediately raises “catastrophist” suspicions, especially in the light of Hydatius’ agonizing account of the end of direct Roman rule in the province. Nonetheless, we would do well to nuance this interpretation in the light of a growing corpus of archaeological work which has now conclusively proven that the Roman cultural and socio-economic imprint in this region was deeper and more complex than was once imagined.*

*Three cities formed the heart of Roman Gallaecia, each the capital of their respective administrative unit (conventus): Braga (Bracara Augusta), Lugo (Lucus Augusti) and Astorga (Asturica Augusta). Were these islands of Romanitas in a largely indigenous sea? Or were they merely the focal points of a more widespread and deeply felt affinity with Roman authority in the Northwest? This paper will argue that the cities of late Roman Gallaecia do not easily fit within either paradigm; similarly, they resist both of the grand narratives associated with the study of this period: continuity, and decline. Braga seems to have flourished in the late Imperial period; Lugo retained some measure of prosperity and importance; and the fate of Astorga seems to have been intertwined with that of the mining industry for which the northwest was famed.*

*The construction of grand sets of city walls around the cities of Bracara Augusta, Lucus Augusti and Asturica Augusta was the most spectacular physical manifestation of a programme of State-directed change in our period. This paper contends that the changes which these cities underwent were the result of a concerted effort to reassert and underline Roman authority and prestige in the region; and that a more nuanced understanding of the process of Romanization is crucial for our efforts to comprehend historical developments in the provinces of Empire.*

PROOF

## ***Introduction***

The vast area between the Duero valley and the northern coast of Spain suffered for many years from a series of historiographical preconceptions which hindered our attempts to understand the historical development of this large sub-region of the Iberian Peninsula in late antiquity. To this day, the state of archaeological research, in conjunction with the paucity of written sources, means that an exhaustive account remains out of the question. Nonetheless, it would paint too bleak a picture of current investigative findings to say that nothing useful can be offered and the objective of this paper is to present a sketch of our current knowledge as regards the fate of the administrative role and the physical face of the late antique cities of *Gallaecia*. What emerges from the soil and the sources suggests that what was once written off as a rainy backwater was a much more vibrant and varied world than many were long prepared to countenance.

This article will focus on the cities of the Roman province of *Gallaecia* in the northwestern quadrant of the Iberian Peninsula. Restrictions of space mean that it is impossible here to formulate a detailed historiographical framework, the like of which the topic deserves. However, it is useful to remember that study of the post-Roman period in Spain was for a long time shaped by explicitly politicized exchange between rival historiographical factions. For our purposes it is sufficient to say that the debate has been infused with a particularly charged nationalist argument; and that a Marxist versus Catholic historiographical disputation for many years characterized Spanish historical writing about this period (Barbero & Vigil 1984; Sánchez Albornoz 1956). Wickham's discussion of this problem remains pertinent and he usefully calls to our attention the need to broach Spanish historiography with great care (Wickham 2005: 41; 2006).

These concerns aside, it needs to be noted at the outset that *Gallaecia* does not easily fit with the paradigmatic notion of the Roman province. The relative scarcity of urban centres is indicative of this. This is in part due to the fact that the city was a form of settlement which was not found in the northwest of Iberia prior to the arrival of the Romans. Indeed, it was the foundations of Braga – *Bracara Augusta*, Lugo – *Lucus Augusti*, and Astorga – *Asturica Augusta* in the Augustan period that introduced the urban model to this part of Iberia. But were these “true” cities in the Roman sense of the term? Were they characterized by a set of public buildings, symbolic of Roman might and culture, where the business of government was to be carried out? Were they equipped with the bath-houses and mosaics which are so deeply pressed into our collective imagination? And did people actually live in them and carry on productive activities in them? The answer to these questions is that the principal cities of Roman *Gallaecia* conformed in every way with the archetype of the Roman city. Braga, Lugo, and Astorga have yielded to the archaeologist a clear *forma urbis*, walls, sewer systems, residential accommodation, and bath complexes (Martins & Delgado 1989-90; Martins 1991-92; Martins, Delgado *et al.* 1999; González Fernández & Carreño Gascón 1999; García Marcos & Vidal Encinas 1996; 1999).

That the Roman state would have been interested in subjugating and absorbing this area should be no surprise, and not solely for reasons of internal coherence in Iberia. This is because the northwest was a region with abundant natural resources, which, when harnessed to Roman technological capability, offered very significant economic rewards. The gold mines of *Gallaecia* were an enormous incentive to the implantation of Roman centres of government in the northwest of Iberia (Bird & Jones 1972; Domergue 1990). Trading ports along the Atlantic coast, although less well studied, may too have offered an incentive (Naveiro López 1996).

Other forms of settlement offer a glimpse of life beyond the urban milieu. Of these other settlements, by far the most studied has been the distinctive castro culture of the Iberian northwest, a better understanding of which may help to explain the perceived atypicality of the region as a whole (Calo Lourido 1993; Sastre 2002). Castro settlements were small iron-age communities based on circular hill-forts enclosed by walls. They are thought to have formed the axes around which indigenous communities were socially and economically organized in the pre-Roman period. The impact of the Roman order on castro society has therefore come to be seen as a fundamental question in the scholarly literature, but one should resist the temptation to accept the continuist or catastrophist clichés associated with castro culture. *La cultura castreña* neither withered away in the face of Roman power, nor continued in more or less unchanged form. As in other parts of the empire, a self-generating fusion of Roman and native came to the fore in *Gallaecia*, especially in areas of heightened contact, such as the mining zones and the cities.

Recent work on the mining zones has allowed us to appreciate the very real ways in which castro settlements were modified in accordance with the needs of the Roman state (Orejas 2005; Sastre 2002). An example of this process would be those castro settlements, dated to the Roman period, which are located in very close proximity to areas of mining activity. Such settlements are thought to represent the first attempts to populate the difficult and mountainous terrain of these remote parts of *Gallaecia*. The *castros mineros* of Filiel, Boisán, and Luyego, probably all owe their existence to the state directed gold mining of the northwest (Orejas 2005). The Roman period therefore oversaw the re-organization of space in parts of *Gallaecia* and in this way directly affected settlement patterns and population. Excavation suggests that some Roman period castros were unlike their pre-Roman counterparts in certain crucial aspects; the castro of Chao Samartín, for example, appears to

have lacked defensive features, a sure sign that the *castro* in the Roman world underwent functional adaptation (Orejas 2005). Inés Sastre has even suggested that the social structures of *castro* communities were completely non-hierarchical and non-class-based in the pre-Roman period (Sastre 2002). Within Sastre's framework, the Roman legacy *par excellence* with regard to social structures in *Gallaecia*, might be described as the development of the sorts of power relationships which came about as a result of the unequal access to resources. Even if one does not accept this egalitarian model, it is very likely that *castro* society became more hierarchical in the Roman period.

With further study, we will better understand the role of the *castro* settlement in Roman *Gallaecia*; but it is beyond doubt that the triumvirate of important cities was the focus of Romanitas in the region. Some would go further, suggesting that the cities represented the only significant Roman imprint on *Gallaecia* outside of the mining areas of the modern day provinces of Oviedo and León. An alternative view takes a much more Romanist line, emphasising that recent archaeological excavation appears to show that a number of smaller scale Roman settlements were dotted throughout *Gallaecia*, and perhaps more densely along the western coastal fringe now known as the Rías Baixas. Archaeology suggests considerable Roman activity in O Areal (Vigo), Brigantium (La Coruña) and Iria Flavia (Padrón) (Rodríguez Resino 2005). A series of *villae*, many in coastal regions, have come to light in recent years, of which those at Adro Vello, Moraime, and Bares, have been discussed in some detail (Rodríguez Resino 2005); it is therefore misleading to characterise the area simply as one of three sizable cities, mining zones, and rural hinterlands beyond which largely fell outside of the sphere of Roman influence. *Gallaecia* probably contained areas which remained largely impervious to Roman influence, but this was by no means true of other parts of this large region. It seems to me that the best way to make sense of these considerations is

to think more flexibly about the notoriously slippery concept of Romanization and to imagine varying gradations of this latter in different contexts (Merryweather & Prag 2002).

This small synopsis of some of the questions which currently interest Romanists and Medievalists outlines the major interpretative dispute between those who wish to minimise Roman influence in *Gallaecia*, and those who see grounds for proposing a more intense, albeit nuanced, Romanization in the Iberian north-west. In my view it must surely be conceded that recent archaeological work throughout the north and northwest of Spain now makes it difficult for us to play down Roman presence in this region in a way which was once commonplace (Fuentes Domínguez 1996).

The arrival of the Vandal-led barbarian confederacy in Spain in 409 had profound consequences for the Iberian north-west; the Sueves soon took control of this area, probably as the result of a treaty, although much remains unclear as to the strength and cohesion of their polity (Arce 2005: 128 – 130; Díaz Martínez 1986; Hydatius [41]. *It should be noted that henceforth all references to Hydatius refer to the edition of Burgess*). The Suevic fifth century is portrayed by Hydatius as a period of barbarity and interminable chaos (Hydatius [40]). But the archaeology of the cities suggests otherwise. Hydatius clearly lamented the Germanic threat posed to the Roman order in his native *Gallaecia*, but the details of his text provide ample evidence of the rootedness of Roman institutions in the early and mid fifth century (Hydatius [40/66/194]). This rootedness had persisted thanks to the impetus provided by Diocletianic reform in the late third century. These measures reorganized administrative structures, elevating Braga to provincial capital, and coincided with a period of urban regeneration in *Gallaecia* which remains something of a mystery to us. It is the contention of this paper that these reforms, and the contemporaneous archaeologically visible urban renovation, make it quite impossible to speak of widespread urban decline in fourth

century *Gallaecia*, which was the traditional view. We must try to turn the debate on its head and view functional adaptation as a sign of change without any negative connotations whatsoever. Braga and Lugo remained centres of population (in relative terms), and in all probability also remained the focal points of their hinterlands. Braga indeed, would retain its importance throughout the early middle ages (López Quiroga 2004: 73 – 78).

Since the fourth century *Gallaecia* was made up of three *conventus*: the *Lucensis*, *Bracarenensis* and *Asturum*. All three of these *conventus* are cited directly by Hydatius which suggests the possibility that these divisions still existed in the mid-fifth century (Hydatius [93/172/243]). Clearly, the barbarians did not set about the wholesale dismantling of Roman administrative structures shortly after their arrival. Such a suggestion anyway makes no sense (even Hydatius does not complain that the barbarians did away with Roman models of governance and administration in the cities – and he complains about everything else), and it is certainly not supported by our admittedly fragmentary evidence. It would also seem to be counter-productive given that the wealth of the cities, largely drawn from their tax-collecting mechanisms, was presumably a source of wealth for the incoming barbarians. Rather, the picture which emerges is one of continued governance and administration, gradual localization characterizing its evolution throughout the fifth century. Amongst Spanish scholars, Javier Arce (2005) has been a vocal supporter of this line, and he has shown how the revolt of Maximus in Spain in 420, which relied on the help of Jovinus, almost certainly a senior governmental figure, suggests that Roman governmental infrastructures had not been abandoned (Arce 2005: 193 – 194). Hydatius recounts the murder of Roman inhabitants in Lugo in 460 and suggests that important figures, at the very least of local eminence, were killed; “*romani aliquanti cum rectore suo, honesto natu*” (Hydatius [194]). This may not have included members of a curial class if we are imagining that term to mean what it did in



the second century, but it undoubtedly referred to local people of influence. Lugo had not been abandoned to ruin.

It is easy to imagine that the status of the three major cities as capitals of their respective *conventus* reflected their organizational and administrative importance. For it was in Braga, Lugo, and Astorga that the process of tax-collection would have been overseen. Below these three cities, it seems sensible to imagine that the *civitates* would have played a role in the organization of tax-collection proportionate to their importance and size, as they did elsewhere in the empire, for as long as tax lasted. Kulikowski (2005) has argued persuasively in favour of the prolongation of urban magisterial functions into the late fourth century, and indeed beyond, deliberately beginning his discussion of cities and government in the early Imperial period in order to stress continuities. The territory of *Gallaecia* was clearly organized along the lines of Roman models, and they do not seem to have waned in the fourth century, nor been brought crashing down by barbarian invasion in 409. To portray the period after 300 in *Gallaecia* as one of a rapid descent into darkness is to fail to do justice to the changes which characterized the transformation of this area in the late antique age.

### ***The Cities of Late Antique Gallaecia***

#### **Braga – *Bracara Augusta***

The city of *Bracara Augusta*, modern day Braga in Portugal, was the most important city of late antique *Gallaecia*. It was founded around the first decade of the first century AD, and it seems reasonable to suggest that its foundation was part and parcel of a strategy to equip the wider region with socio-political structures which would support Roman government (Martins 1991 – 1992). Its geographical location could hardly have been better within the

context of *Gallaecia*; equidistant from the Miño and the Duero, close to the Atlantic coast, and surrounded by fertile land, it was the natural site *par excellence* for the Romans to choose as their base in the region. The last quarter of the first century AD saw rapid growth, as the city gained municipal status. At around the same time, the city gained a monumental centre, public baths and residential quarters, although archaeological indicators of these buildings are very scant (Gaspar 1985). Ceramic finds dated to the period 75 –150 point to the presence of a highly Romanized city elite; Braga was clearly prosperous enough by the mid second century, as necropolis excavation also testifies (Martins 1991 – 1992: 179 – 180). It was, in short, a burgeoning Roman city of a moderately large size, equipped with all of the public buildings and infrastructure one would expect, and home to the curial class which took care of its administrative needs. Evidence of manufacturing factories and appreciable volumes of imported ceramics suggest that it was part of a wider commercial network too (Martins 1991 – 1992; Morais 2005).

The third century is less well known to archaeologists and historians of *Bracara Augusta*. It can be said with a high degree of probability however, that urban life and commercial exchange continued in the city. Certainly, the archaeology yields no sign of rupture, and indeed allows for us to talk, in broad terms, of continuity. This continuity is clearly visible in the archaeological register for the fourth and fifth centuries. Martins and Delgado (1989 – 1990) have spoken of “*a presença de grande quantidade de cerâmica importada, designadamente de hispânica tardia e sigillata clara C e D*” (the presence of large quantities of imported ceramics, particularly of TSHT and ARS types C and D), which seems to imply that the city and its hinterland did not enter into any sort of commercial slump, a factor once thought to have exacerbated urban decline. What is more, Braga actually underwent a programme of urban renovation in the latter stages of the third century and the beginnings of the fourth century, with baths and residential houses undergoing

extension or rebuilding work (Gaspar 1986; Martins 1991 – 1992; Martins, Delgado *et al.* 1999). We have no reason to believe that any extensive damage had been done to the city; what we are witnessing is a deliberate programme of extension and renovation of both public and private buildings (López Quiroga 2004: 73 – 78). The real significance of these changes though, can only be seen when placed together with the plethora of important privileges awarded to Braga during the Diocletianic period. For Braga went at this time from being a successful, moderately sized Roman city and *conventus* capital (45 – 50 hectares), to the capital of the province of *Gallaecia*, endowed with a resplendent set of city walls (discussed below), and a senior administrative role within the hierarchy which operated across the whole of the diocese of *Hispania*.

This era of newfound prosperity was reflected in both public and private buildings. An example of the former comes from the bath complex of Alto da Cividade, which it seems was remodelled, its interior showing signs that a hypocaust system was removed from one room which accordingly adapted its function from the end of the fourth century (Martins, Delgado *et al.* 1999: 745). Excavations have also uncovered evidence of extensions and remodelling to private houses which date to around the year 300. In the so called *domus* of Santiago, mosaics and baths seemed to have been constructed in this period (López Quiroga 2004: 75; Martins & Delgado 1989 – 1990: 30 – 31). More late third or early fourth century mosaics have been found in the Casa da Roda and the part of the city formerly known as Infantaria de Braga (Martins & Delgado 1989 – 1990: 30 – 31). Further building work was done in the residential quarter of Carvalheiras in late third century (Martins, Delgado *et al.* 1999: 745 – 746). Archaeology does not allow us to say much about the hinterlands of the city in this period, but it is interesting that so far relatively few luxurious *villae* have been found, which leads one to speculate as to whether we actually can talk of ruralization, or

perhaps, suburbanization with regard to the private dwelling quarters of the elites in the Braga district at this time. The Sueves chose Braga as their capital, and it is logical to assume that the buildings which housed the royal court were located there. The indications are that elites still chose to live in the city of Braga throughout the fifth century.

According to Hydatius, Braga was sacked by the Visigoths in 456 but no record of serious destruction is obvious from excavation carried out thus far (Hydatius [167]). We cannot say much about the type or quality of buildings one would have seen in Braga after the year 400, but the clues are that Braga remained an important place. By all accounts, commercial networks continued to include Braga, which apparently supported “*um bom ritmo de importações ao longo dos sécs. V e VI*” (a good rhythm of imports throughout the fifth and sixth centuries) (Martins & Delgado 1989 – 1990: 32; Morais 2005). Some evidence for later functional adaptation can also be cited; the bath-complex of the hill of Maximinos was seemingly turned into a private residence at some stage in the fifth century (López Quiroga 2004: 75). It has been acknowledged that the re-use of building materials from older constructions can be detected in this period, as everywhere in the empire including Rome, and that the quality of constructions is, for the most part, not as high as it once had been (Rodríguez Resino 2005: 152). Buildings were still being used however, and indeed, some were still undergoing extensive remodelling work. Buildings in the Largo de Paço and the Rúa Gualdim Pais show successive stages of building and occupation until the sixth century (Rodríguez Resino 2005: 152). Martins and Delgado (1989 – 1990: 32) talk confidently about the “*persistência de uma vida urbana activa ao longo dos séculos V e VI*” (persistence of an active urban life throughout the fifth and sixth centuries); these two scholars draw our attention to the possible urban renovation of an area once home to buildings of the high imperial period, later to the Cathedral (Martins 1991 – 1992: 181; Martins & Delgado 1989 –

1990: 32 – 33). At some stage, probably in the sixth century, this area around the cathedral became a new focal point in Braga, and it brought with it the abandonment of certain areas of the city. Small communities outside the city walls may have formed around *martyriae*, and necropolises litter the city and its extra-mural area (Rodríguez Resino 2005: 153). The city was undergoing functional adaptation, of this there can be no doubt. But it was still a population centre, and it had not, for the most part, been abandoned to rack and ruin. Braga can thus without difficulty be added to the long and lengthening list of western Roman cities which adapted to the post-Roman period without “catastrophe”, cities such as Mérida, Arles or Paris.

Martins and Delgado (1989 – 1990) have tentatively suggested that a move towards the Christianization of the urban landscape might have defined Braga post c. 550. Certainly, the little evidence we have suggests that this may have been a possibility. One thinks of the funerary inscription from the Church of São Vicente, dated to 618 (Martins 1991 – 1992: 181). Should churches and places of Christian worship have become the new poles around which urban communities were organized, other parts of Braga may then in turn have been neglected. At the moment, it is hard to be precise. Nonetheless, we have reasons to suspect that Braga remained a place of some importance; one such indicator is the selection of Braga as the site for two mid sixth century church councils under the auspices of Martin of Dumio, in 561 and 572 respectively. Again, we might stress the possibility of the increasing importance not only of religious buildings, but also of the primacy of the areas in which these buildings were built in the late antique period. López Quiroga (2004) affirms that the street known as Rúa Nossa Senhora do Leite, to the side of the Cathedral, provides evidence of continued occupation from the Roman period until the tenth century at the very least. If not full blown Christianization, then we can at least say that buildings related to Christian

worship became the focal points of their urban landscapes. Here too, Braga fits with other “successful” cities in the West.

### Lugo – *Lucus Augusti*

Our knowledge of late Roman Lugo is not as extensive as that of late Roman Braga. Nonetheless, archaeological work indicates that Lugo was a prosperous city. The size of the city at its height has been estimated to be somewhere in the region of 35 hectares, and this figure is very similar to the size of the walled area of the city after the late third century. Clearly, this remained a city of some importance in the north-western quadrant of Iberia.

Recent archaeological excavation in Lugo has prompted experts to talk of urban vitality in the late antique period (González Fernández & Carreño Gascón 1999: 1179). This took a similar form to that which transformed Braga after c. 275 as we have already seen. González Fernández and Carreño Gascón (1999) have described significant urban renovation and restoration in Lugo from the end of the third century until approximately the middle of the fourth century. The same authors tentatively suggest that this was related to the administrative reforms of the Diocletianic period. The fact that similar processes of renovation also affected the single other large city of the region, Braga, make this almost certain.

There also exists evidence of major public works taking place within Lugo in the middle of the fourth century. For example, the city was equipped with a new sewer system under the *decumanus* now located under the street known as Armanyá; this has been dated thanks to a stray coin find in the excavated area which bears the name of the emperor Constans (337 – 350) (González Fernández & Carreño Gascón 1999: 1181). Such a major public work, necessarily involving the goodwill and largesse of wealthy urban elites, is not a

sign of a city in decline. Evidence of private building can also be traced to the fourth century in Lugo, and mosaics, wall paintings, and baths have all been found in private residences from the late antique period (González Fernández & Carreño Gascón 1999). It needs to be stressed that our knowledge of specifically late antique modifications to private dwellings is not as developed as that which we enjoy for Braga, but we can still say that a number of private houses seem to have undergone some renovation in the fourth century, new paving areas of considerable quality seemingly constructed in Batitales and Santo Domingo (González Fernández & Carreño Gascón 1999: 1198).

The old orthodoxy held that the fourth century, save perhaps the Constantinian achievement, was a time of slow but visible urban decline. Cities, we were told, once the emblem of local civic pride, became shells stripped of their former glory. Yet Lugo seems to present us with a very different story, which is that of prosperity in the fourth century. This is because the Diocletianic reforms which saw the Roman Empire undergo territorial and administrative restructure at the end of the third century probably benefitted the city of Lugo in the same way that they seem to have benefitted Braga. Admittedly, we currently have fewer signs from the archaeological register to support the notion that Lugo remained in the same healthy state of repair after c. 450 as Braga seems to have done. In fact, we can say little about the city of Lugo after 400 save perhaps for the fact that the quality of the construction from this time was in no way a match for that of the high Imperial period currently known to archaeologists. González Fernández and Carreño Gascón (1999: 1182) have argued that the presence of human burials within the urban areas (excavated in the modern streets of Armanyá, Progreso, and Reina) points towards the abandonment of certain areas of the city in the fifth century, or at least, towards functional adaptation.

Nonetheless, we should be wary about pressing the claims of a drastic picture of decline in Lugo after 400 for a number of reasons. Excavations in the area behind the street of Ramón y Cajal in the north west of the walled area of the city, whilst not definitive, suggest no real break in ceramics throughout the late Roman period (Arias Vilas 1977). Arias Vilas (1977) has testified that the archaeology supports the conclusion that this north-western zone “*conoció habitación por lo menos desde época bajoimperial, con cierta continuidad en el periodo medieval*” (was inhabited from at least the late imperial period, with a certain continuity into the medieval period). More recent work on ceramics has noted that TSHT was clearly still in demand in fifth century Lugo, and that local imitations were used too (Alcorta Irastorza 2005). In San Roque, a set of ceramics has been found which consists of mixed pieces of TSHT and cheaper local imitations (Alcorta Irastorza 2005: 202). This may tell us something about availability, or spending power, but it also tells us that people were still able to purchase goods in the fifth century. Parts of the city may have fallen into disrepair or have known less dense occupation, but the city was by no means abandoned. López Quiroga and Lovelle (1999b: 1396) have investigated necropolises in Lugo and it seems that their findings from the necropolis located by the Church of San Roque seem to support a chronology of continued usage from the third to the sixth century. They even point us towards a relief from an *edificio de culto*, which dates from the seventh century.

Let us remind ourselves that Hydatius relates Suevic violence in the city in 460, and moreover insinuates that this was perpetrated against men of high birth (Hydatius [194]). From a measured reading of Hydatius’ rhetoric, it makes sense to imagine Sueves and Hispano Romans living in awkward co-existence in this area. In our period, Lugo was also an episcopal see. This would simply not have been the case had it been devoid of some measure of importance, probably reflected by Christian buildings, and almost certainly by an



urban population, even if reduced. With this in mind, we should begin to consider whether political and religious aspects are more useful criteria than purely economic ones for the cities of *Gallaecia* after 400.

#### Astorga - Asturica Augusta

Astorga has traditionally been seen as the third city in *Gallaecia* in terms of importance and the city is well attested in myriad classical and late antique written sources, as García Marcos and Vidal Encinas (1999) remind us. The city's development followed the same pattern of growth as Braga and Lugo, which is to say that by the end of the first century AD the city was home to an urban layout of Roman design. Epigraphic sources refer to *Praeses Provinciae* and *Legati Iuridici* amongst other titles which highlight that the city was quickly endowed with Roman administrative networks (Diego Santos 1986; Mañanes 1982). Particularly well documented in archaeological terms from this period is the city's extensive drainage network (García Marcos & Vidal Encinas 1999). The discovery of a private house in the Plaza de Santocildes in 1962 uncovered painted wall decoration of a wonderful standard (García Marcos & Vidal Encinas 1999: 928). Clearly, Astorga was home to the Galaico-Roman elites which inhabited Braga and Lugo too.

Several recent studies by García Marcos and Vidal Encinas (1996; 1999) have illustrated the early development of the city throughout the first two centuries AD via a clear exposition of the archaeological information. Unfortunately, our knowledge of the period after approximately 250 is sketchy to say the least, but the city seems to have suffered from a reduction in size. Indeed, the earlier urban vitality of Astorga seems to come to an end in the mid-third century and this in itself could be very significant for our attempts to understand the later urban prosperity of Braga and Lugo. This has to do with the geographical location of Astorga within easy reach of the gold-mining district of *Gallaecia*. The economic *raison*

*d'être* of the city was very probably that of administering the needs of this massive state undertaking. It is not unreasonable to suspect that the city may have felt the effects of a decline in mining activity, possibly datable to the mid third century, which in turn could have meant that Braga and Lugo became more central to the state's extraction of resources. Whatever the case may be in that regard, the Roman state had always looked to bolster the mining industry (Bird & Jones 1972; Orejas 2005). Here we might point to the presence of military units in the eastern half of *Gallaecia*, and the apparent concern on behalf of the authorities to maintain the extensive road network which joined Astorga not only to the main body of the peninsula to its south and east, but also to its fellow Gallaecian cities of Braga and Lugo (Fuentes Domínguez 1996; Díaz Martínez & Menéndez Bueyes 2005). The only very significant construction in Astorga thought to date to the period after 250 seems to be the wall circuit. However, we would do well to remember that walling an unpopulated city would never occur, so we need to be cautious with the decline motif in this context. The city was clearly an important religious centre too; it is one of the oldest dioceses of Spain and boasted notable bishops throughout the late antique period, including Toribio in the mid fifth century.

There are indications that Astorga may have remained more important than has often been said after the middle of the third century, even if mining did fall away in this period. The city was walled, and was clearly not thought of as peripheral or unimportant enough by the last quarter of the third century to have made walls dispensable. In short, it retained a place within imperial strategy relative to its status as *conventus* capital (which it retained in this period). This in itself is suggestive. The archaeology shows that pottery, albeit in lesser quantities than in earlier periods, has been found in late third century and early fourth century contexts (Morillo Cerdán *et al.* 2005). Commercial routes had certainly not cut Astorga off

from other areas of the peninsula in this period either, ceramics from Baetica and the Rioja area having been amongst those located (Morillo Cerdán *et al.* 2005: 149). Indeed, a surprisingly wide range of ceramic ware has been found in fourth century contexts, including terra sigillata Africana (ARS) and terra sigillata Gallica tardía (the ware the French call DSP). Morillo Cerdán *et al.* (2005) have concluded that Astorga was the nodal centre of a northern commercial network until well into the fifth century. They have sensibly tied this in with the continued usage and good state of repair of road networks which formed a part of the maritime trading route along the Cantabrian coast (and involved the once thought to be moribund, but now fully accepted as late Roman, port town of Gijón) until the sixth century (Morillo Cerdán *et al.* 2005: 150; Fernández Ochoa *et al.* 1996).

Indeed, there is no reason to suspect that the city should have been immediately abandoned. In fact, given that Astorga was located at the head of the Via de Plata, a key north-south road which ran all the way to Mérida, we can see why it continued to live on as a city, albeit one of reduced importance. Tellingly, Hydatius reminded us that the city was indeed a focal point of urban life as late as the mid fifth century, when he tells that two bishops were living in Astorga when a Gothic army arrived in 457 (Hydatius [179]). Recently, García Marcos and Vidal Encinas (1995) have helped us to envisage a situation by which Astorga's continued significance can be explained in a context which accepts that mineral extraction was by 300 not its primary life line. The theory they posit links Astorga in to the great villa network of the Duero valley and asks that we consider that the city may have played a part in the industry of large scale cereal production. It is hard for us to ascertain with any degree of confidence the likelihood of this suggestion but the proximity of great villas such as those of Quintana del Marco and Milla del Río makes this a possibility worth

considering. At any rate, Astorga is by no means a city on its last legs by the end of the third century and this is a telling factor when we come to consider the construction of the walls.

### *City Walls*

In recent times, efforts to make the late antique city walls of Braga, Lugo, Astorga and many other Iberian cities in the late Roman period “fit” into the grander jigsaw of administrative reform in the age of Diocletian, have proved a significant source of difficulty for historian and archaeologist alike. However, consensus has been reached, thanks to archaeological work, with regard to the period in which the wall circuits were constructed. This date is almost universally accepted as around about the last third of the third century (Fernández Ochoa & Morillo 2005); it is difficult to be more precise. In Braga, the walls enclosed the whole of the second century extension of the city, and also perhaps included artisanal quarters just to the southern edge of the city (Martins, Delgado *et al.* 1999: 742).

Lugo’s walls are the best example of a surviving set of late Roman walls in the Iberian peninsula and a grander affair altogether. Their gates are still used to enter and exit the city, and the wall still boasts over 40 towers which are thought to have remained almost perfectly intact since their construction (Arias Vilas 1972: 50). Locally quarried granite and slate are the key components of the wall, which displays a thickness of between 4 and 7 metres. Lugo’s walls still stand at between 8 and 12 metres in height (Arias Vilas 1972: 50). The construction of the wall has, as stated, been cautiously dated to the last third of the third century. In other words, the walls which surround Lugo were built at the same time as those of Braga, and are also roughly contemporaneous to wall circuits in Astorga, as also in Chaves (*Aquae Flaviae*), León (*Legio VII*) and Gijón, not discussed here (Fernández Ochoa &

Morillo 2005). All of these wall circuits once surrounded towns or proto-urban settlements of some importance in Roman Gallaecia. What might this concentration of walled towns in the northwest tell us?

On first sight, these walls seem to be part of a significant defensive system. In fact, their aspect leads one to conclude that the walls of Lugo ought to have been built to ensure the city's defence. However, we have no firm evidence that they were ever breached in our period, nor that there was significant disruption or danger in the region prior to their construction. Fernández Ochoa and Morillo (2005: 299) have stated that "it remains difficult to establish a causal relationship between invasions and wall-building".

The city walls of Braga, and indeed of Lugo and Astorga, remain something of a mystery then. In the absence of any firm evidence which can help us to decide the matter once and for all, we can only offer possible interpretations. The most obvious, and to my mind, in light of the evidence currently at our disposal, the most likely explanation for the construction of city walls in this period, is simply that of status and show. Diocletian's wide ranging reforms were more than a practical measure, for they were imbued with propagandistic symbolism too. Enclosing an important city in this period with walls may have served to reaffirm that city's status; that is to say, the wall circuit in this period may have become part of a city's monumental kit in north-west Hispania. This speculation makes sense in statistical terms. Indeed, Fernández Ochoa and Morillo (2005) have noted that out of the 25 sets of city walls in Hispania, "the majority...are concentrated in the north of the peninsula, in the Roman provinces of *Tarroconensis* and *Gallaecia*, and at the northern edges of *Lusitania* and *Carthaginiensis*". They go on to stress that "the most significant group is found in the north-west" (Fernández Ochoa & Morillo 2005: 304). Perhaps local aristocrats and city elites vied for the construction of grand sets of walls in *Gallaecia* as a means of

securing the status of their city in the wake of Diocletian's administrative shake-up. Large building projects, costly and conspicuous, had always been a way of garnering attention and fostering local prestige. It is not unreasonable that this might have been the case in Braga.

However, whilst it may well have been the case that grand walls served more than a functional purpose in the late antique Iberian north-west, the sheer scale of the project makes it hard to imagine that they could have been constructed without direct state intervention. We might also consider at this juncture that the greater the element of state involvement, the less room there may have been for local competition. Accepting that this was the case, we are faced with a programme of wall building which was roughly contemporaneous with the administrative reorganization put in place by Diocletian which showered privileges on Braga and coincided with significant urban renovation in Lugo too. Within this hypothesis, the Roman state "selectively decreed the fortification of some urban centres rather than others" (Fernández Ochoa & Morillo 2005: 333).

Astorga, as we have noted, was significantly reduced in terms of total surface area by the middle of the third century and archaeologists talk of a period of demonumentalization (García Marcos & Vidal Encinas 1999). Might this be because the mines upon which the city relied had been exhausted as many scholars now believe? Almost all scholars propose that gold mining in *Gallaecia* had ended by the last half of the third century (for comment, Díaz Martínez & Menéndez Bueyes 2005). Above I have sketched out how we might try to fit this in with the evidence for the change which saw Astorga shrink significantly in this period. Yet if we imagine that Banaji (2001) is right in arguing that mineral extraction continued and that the shortage of gold during this time has been exaggerated by modern scholars, then the issue takes on a different aspect altogether. We have already seen how it is possible to paint

a slightly less catastrophist picture for Astorga, and this may well indicate continued mining, even if on a smaller scale, as well a role in coordinating agricultural production.

Of course, this argument has two sides to it. If mining continued, then we can easily explain why Astorga retained a regional significance and tie this in with the construction of walls as a constituent element of reforming measures at the state level which elevated *Gallaecia* in relative importance. But what if mining did not continue beyond c. 250? It seems odd that the city would not have enjoyed the same scale of urban regeneration experienced by Braga and Lugo unless its role in Imperial strategy was for some reason drastically reduced. Stretching this hypothesis further, the walls of Astorga may have been erected as a last gesture towards the city's former grandeur. That they were not of the same scale as the walls in Lugo seems logical given the city's declining importance in relative terms. And yet as a *conventus* capital, Astorga may well have been walled in keeping with the state programme of affording the region as a whole greater significance.

Conversely, it is possible that the walled cities served a different purpose. Díaz Martínez and Menéndez-Bueyes (2005) have suggested that *Gallaecia* may have fulfilled the function of supplying troops for the German or British *limes*. This being the case, the fortification of cities even in light of the decline in mining activity seems to make sense since the army would have been involved in the construction of walls. It would also explain the upkeep of the road system in *Gallaecia* which is well attested (Fuentes Domínguez 1996; Caamaño Gesto 1997). Related to this interpretation is the so-called *annona militaris* hypothesis. This theory proposes that the walling of the cities, their subsequent significant remodelling, and the upkeep of the road network were all measures designed to facilitate the collection of the *annona militaris*. This would have involved the collection of grain or other taxes in kind in the form of animals such as horses, and almost certainly would have

necessitated the shoring up of the defensive systems of such valuable nodal points in the fiscal network. If such a source of wealth to the Roman state was regularly to pass through *Gallaecia*, the area would have assumed greater significance in imperial strategy. But it does not follow as a matter of course that this was the reason for the walling of cities, since this phenomenon is not found across the empire.

We have to recognise that the construction of walls in this part of *Hispania* was motivated by reasons which are still opaque to us. Protection the walls certainly did provide, but it seems hard to argue that this was their primary purpose, since we have no evidence in support of its necessity in the late third century in *Gallaecia*. Mining may well have played a part; had it continued beyond 250 then it may have provided another good reason for the imperial authorities to wall the cities of this area. But mining alone, it seems to me, was not enough. If mining was the crucial factor, why were the cities not walled earlier when production was at its peak? The *annona militaris* theory, whilst certainly plausible, is not yet built upon firm enough evidence to be entirely convincing. In the light of this, it seems that these walls were simply part and parcel of a process of regeneration and renovation. These walls were a statement of triumphalism and the power of the Roman state, and may have been constructed so as to highlight the continuing prosperity and wealth of the region in a localized context when other parts of the empire certainly were undergoing difficulties. They exuded the newfound confidence of the late Roman state after the trials of the mid third century, and can possibly be related to a selective programme of reaffirming Roman control in the area. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that towns could have become more important in the state's wealth raising strategy in the absence of mining revenue. Whether you believe in subsidiary economic motivations in the shape of mineral wealth or taxation, that the walls were propagandistic statements is beyond doubt; it may also be significant that



the city walls of *Gallaecia* were situated in the midst of a native culture which appears to have held in high regard the symbolic potency and practical benefits of the perimeter wall. It should not be forgotten that a large number of pre-Roman castro sites, some of which were still occupied in the late Roman period, were characterized by a wall which encircled the community; herein may lie a clue in our attempt to resolve the mystery of the late city walls of *Gallaecia*. Significantly, if this was the case, then it would show a level of cultural sensitivity and political acumen on the behalf of the Roman authorities which one may at first sight overlook.

### ***Conclusion***

Urban continuity in *Gallaecia* has a complicated historiography. For so long, Romanization of this large part of the Iberian Peninsula was thought to be sparse and superficial; these days much of the debate is moving in a profoundly “Romanist” direction. Archaeology has revealed more extensive Roman remains in *Gallaecia* than was imagined possible thirty years ago. La Coruña, Gijón, Vigo, Tuy, León and Santander, are just some of the sites which display urban characteristics (albeit small-scale, but in the case of Gijón going on into the seventh century) which I have not been able to investigate in this paper. The cities of Braga and Lugo, both with regard to their monumental appearance, and the variety of socio-economic and cultural phenomena they supported, indubitably remained for a long time Roman cities in keeping with the classical paradigm. They were key elements in a small network of urban centres in *Gallaecia* designed to support the administrative needs of the army, based at León, and the exploitation of significant mineral resources. Moreover, these two cities both enjoyed periods of splendour in the fourth century, reflected in the archaeological record, at a time when the mining industry in *Gallaecia* was perhaps grinding

to a halt. In the case of Lugo, we can say that the city supported urban life until the year 500 at a conservative estimate. Braga provides evidence for the continuation of urban vitality throughout the whole of the later antique period and well beyond, into the post-Visigothic period. When other parts of the empire may indeed have been undergoing urban decline, these two cities, and particularly Braga, enjoyed something of a revival, reflected in numerous new building projects and significant renovation. The upshot of this impressive fourth century might lead us to think that *Gallaecia* was afforded a more significant role in Imperial strategy. The construction of impressive sets of city walls in this period supports this hypothesis. *Gallaecia* was never characterized by a very dense urbanism, but its urban centres were healthy, medium sized cities with the full monumental kit, which remained central to the articulation of the territory until well into the late antique period. There exists the tantalising possibility too, that they were central in the late empire's attempts to gather the tax in kind which helped to prop up the state itself.

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