

Representations of Galicia (*Galiza*): an approach

Symbolic representations of **Galicia** are diverse and mutable, even though there are some stable references. These representations are constructed from two main issues: the construction of a Galician imagery by Galicians themselves and the construction of an imaged Galicia by non-Galicians. These two aspects are, obviously, interconnected.

There is an internal and an external perception of Galicia, and these interpretations of the country also evolved and changed in time. Furthermore, it is evident that all of these interpretations and representations are interrelated inasmuch as they influence each other. Besides, it can be argued that in present time the external image and understanding of Galicia is slowly but gradually being “exported”, that is to say, it is primarily constructed in Galicia and afterwards interpreted abroad. However, in many occasions the very perceptions of Galicians on themselves and their country are eventually influenced by outer influences.

The use of some ancient symbols such as spirals and triskels will be a constant in Galician history and culture. Designs using such motifs as a base pattern have been developed until today. Presently Galicia is often represented with a simple triskel (for example in car stickers). For that matter car stickers will even depict a Galician flag with a cow impressed on top of it, as the cow evokes the farming and rural background of Galician culture; it is a totemic animal present everywhere, from traditional folklore to contemporary poems.

The maritime vocation of Galicians is yet another constant. The sea is perceived as a dangerous space, but at the time source of all kind of resources. Representations of the sea life and the intimate relation with the sea will develop throughout history until present day.

Roman chronicles are a key source of information: they identify Galicia with the “beyond”, the “land of the dead”, the “coast of the death”, and this is done according to the legends of the indigenous Celtic tribes. Romans themselves call Galicia the “end of the land” (*Finisterrae*), the end of the known world. Other chronicles identify Galicia with the “land of the snakes” - easy to understand for any Irish person when remembering the story of Saint Patrick. Romans name the area *Callaecia* (from there *Gallaecia* and later *Galicia/Galiza*) as they first encountered the tribe of the *Callaicos*, or the “worshippers of *Cailleach*” (a Celtic goddess and a word that, as some of you may know, means witch or supernatural woman in modern Irish language).

It is during the Roman conquest when a mythical geographical reference begins to take form: The Medúlio mountain, alas the last stance of heroic resistance of the local Celts whom, surrounded by the enemy, decided to kill themselves before falling into Roman hands. As Medúlio represents the warriors, the material but indomitable fighting spirits of 'true Galicians', two other holy mountains complete this magical geography: Pindo mountain (mountain of druids at the end of the world and gate to the Beyond) and Seixo mountain (the female force, the primordial Mother-Goddess).

In general, this idea of Galicia as a ‘mysterious place’ will prevail throughout time. Furthermore, Galicia’s physical isolation, ruralism and rampant paganism will later help to reinforce the idea of Galicia as the “land of the witches” or the “witch land”, a sort of southern European Transylvania. This vision is deeply rooted in Spain.

In medieval times Galicia was one of the main actors among Iberian Christianity. Galician monarchs used to agglutinate other crowns such as the Leonese or even Castilian. Indeed, Portugal originated from a split in the Galician Kingdom. Arab chronicles depicted Galicia as the dominant power in Iberian Christianity, and offer referred to the conglomerate of Christian kingdoms in Iberia as simply “Galicia” (*Al-Khalysia*). This, in addition to the remembrance of the Galician Swabian Kingdom (5th to 6th C) helped to construct an image of strength and confidence through centuries 9th to 13th.

St. James’ Way represented the main communication channel for Galicia, and it eventually became its more internationally recognised symbol. In many occasions all innovation in Galician culture and daily

life, all contact with the rest of Europe, would come through this pilgrimage route. In this way, the Kingdom of Galicia or “Land of St. James”, *Jakobsland* for the Scandinavians, began to be well-known in the Christian and Muslim domains. Nowadays the *Caminho de Santiago* or *Ruta Xacobe* still represents a major international attraction and the Pilgrims' Shell its main “logo”.

Even when political struggles and military action against the Muslims made Galicia less relevant in the Iberian geo-strategic scenario (mainly after 1230), Galician culture and language were still perceived as those of greater prestige. Hence the apparent paradox that the first Golden Age of Galician-Portuguese literature (12th-14th C) coincides with stages of relative political instability.

Nevertheless, the independence of Portugal, lost of successive dynastic wars by Galician nobility and the failure of popular revolts undermined Galician self-confidence and reinforced the role of Castile as a dominant force in Iberia. By mid 15th C the past “glory and splendour” vanished and, according to a number of authors, this is the background where Galicians began to develop a chronic sentiment of frustration. The execution of Pardo de Cela in 1483 transformed this nobleman into a national icon, as he was the last to resist the military invasion of Galicia (a possible paralelism could be established at this point with the Flight of the Earls - in terms of what this execution meant for the contry – and sure this rings a bell for the Irish). The effective installation of the Castilian administration in Galicia from 1486 represents the symbolic reference of the successful colonisation. The policy followed by the Castillian monarch was written in the chronicles as “the taming and castration of the Kingdom of Galicia”, a quote still used today in an humorous tone, with doses of dark humour.

A music piece called 'The Royal March of the Galician Kingdom' was conveniently forgotten and only recovered in recent years.

From then on Galicians were portrayed as ignorant, uncultivated and rude, not to mention “bad Christians” and “unable to speak properly”, and repression finally made Galicians themselves to 'assume' their own powerlessness. This was ethnic self-hate in the making, aided with prohibition to use Galician language in public or with official purposes (something that will only be corrected as late as 1978).

Galicia remained isolated from trade routes until 17th C. This factor of (physical) isolation is critical in the understanding of the Galician sentiment of subjection, dependency and, at the same time, preservation of the cultural heritage in an popular way. Galicians would still keep a very special relation with “the land one steps”. Indeed, the “land” itself is often considered in terms of affection; it is the “mother land”, “our mother of the two seas”, “the land that [for good or for bad] feeds you”, and so on (the turning from topophilia into topophobia was – fortunately – never completed). And there is another constant: “Galicia is a woman”, always; quite probably an echo of the old *Cailleach* and the Mother-Goddess.

In the majority of cases Galicia's backwardness was considered as a result of Galicians' ineffectiveness and pusillanimous character. This came to be accepted even by Galicians themselves, constantly undermined in their morale.

Economic developments, the period known as The Illustration and the successful war against the French helped to nurture a new generation of intellectuals who realised not just the potential of Galicia, but the uneven relation with Spain and prosecution of Galician culture and identity (Fr. Sarmiento and Fr. Feijoo being the precursors – 17th – 18th C). Popular self-confidence gradually grew. Galician language begins to be publicly used again, not just in the intimate family settings, in direct defiance of the existing establishment.

There is a decided move towards the public normalisation of Galician culture: literary and cultural revival (*Rexurdimento*) is directly linked to a more intense political activity and defined political expression of Galicia: from provincialism to regionalism and later to nationalism (according to the terminology of each period). In 1863 poet Rosalia de Castro publishes *Cantares Gallegos*, this issue marking a pivotal moment of the *Rexurdimento*. Rosalia herself would eventually become a Galician icon, a pop-icon even, with her face stamped on pins and t-shirts, as she would come to represent everything Galician: the love for the land, the unambiguous pride for the own culture and language, the firm combative spirit but at the same time presenting a calmed/calculated attitude, and of course the woman, the symbolic 'mother' of all Galicians, stretching it a bit.

Emigration generates a myriad of symbolic representations of the “beloved mother land” as well. Again, Galicians identify plenty with the country, often idealising it from the Americas: “Galicia of the

ever-green landscapes” and so on; not so unlike the Irish in North America – plenty of parallelisms could be established here.

The primary objective of many migrants is to “make a fortune” so they can “come back to the village as rich men”. Galicians began to be seen as “very hard workers” in the host nations (i.e. the saying: “he works as a Galician”), but this often was also related to “limited intelligence”: “they only think about work”. Jokes about Galicians appeared all around the Americas (as in the ‘paddy jokes’).

Massive migration made that in countries such as Argentina all Spaniards would be simply known as “Galicians”, regardless of his/her true origin.

When migrants disembarked in Argentina they were aligned according to their nationality following a flag code. Many Galicians could not recognise the Spanish flag and often went to the Portuguese queue because “these ones speak like us”. “Spain” was often a referential construction imposed at school, with no real transcendence in daily life. Many Galician speakers would believe that they were, in fact, speaking Spanish since they never had a direct contact with “Spain”. As a matter of fact, I have personally known of such cases in the 21st C. Go figure.

Since many ships set sailed from Corunna’s harbour, migrants began to identify this port’s flag with that of Galicia. In the host nations Galician ships also were identified as such when they displayed that flag. That is the origin of the actual contemporary Galician flag, although the coat of arms dates back to medieval times. Having said this, early medieval flags representing the country as a whole are being rediscovered and restored now in public (non official) acts as proof of symbolic continuum.

The *Xeración Nós* (‘Generation Us’) set the basis of Galician nationalism. This generation embraces a group of Galician intellectuals who were involved in projects such as the *Irmandades da Fala* (‘brotherhoods of the language’, 1916), the journal *Nós* (‘Us’, 1920), the *Seminario de Estudos Galegos* (‘Seminar of Galician studies’, 1923) and the *Partido Galeguista* (‘Galicianist Party’, 1931). Some of them, namely Alexandre Bóveda and Castelao - the two chief architects of the Statute of Autonomy of 1931 and 1936 - attained the rank of national icons. Castelao eventually became the male version of what Rosalia represented. He is seen as many as the first would-be president of the Republic of Galicia which never came to be (a Galician De Valera if history had gone in some other direction perhaps? - Sure, Bóveda would have to be Michael Collins in this imaginary mad parallel I am creating, but without the bad blood!). Still, the Statute of Autonomy itself represented the recovery of the “dignity and self-government of Galicia after centuries of oppression”, in the words of Castelao himself.

This is the period when the Galician flag and coat of arms are standardised, even though Castelao proposed a new revolutionary coat of arms that also became quite popular, clearly influenced by a left-wing political view (hence the red star and sickle), but the medieval design prevailed. Notwithstanding, some still see Castelao's proposal as a possible national coat of arms for a hypothetical independent Galicia, and it is often represented in political acts and publications.

Since there was no national anthem (and the Galician Royal March we now know was lost in time), maestro Pascual Veiga composed a score in 1906 based on a poem written by Eduardo Pondal in 1886. These flag and anthem are the current, official, ones in Galicia. The new Galician national anthem was first presented and sang in Havana (Cuba) by Galician emigrants in 1907.

The Spanish Civil War and later dictatorship opened a period of restrictions and repression. Alexandre Bóveda was executed on 17th August 1936. That day became the *Day of the Martyr Galicia* or *Day of the Galician Martyrs*. Many intellectuals and politicians were also executed. Others, like Castelao (fortunately on a trip abroad when the armed hostilities began), sought exile.

In the *Longa Noite de Pedra* (Long Night of Stone - euphemism for the dictatorship used as a title of a literary work) Galicia was portrayed by the Spanish regime as a “bucolic place of peaceful peoples”, full of “charm” and “regional idiosyncrasy”, “where one can eat good and cheap food”. The Francoist regime promoted colourist naïve folklore among the “Spanish regions”. Curiously enough, Franco was a Galician-born himself, and because of that many Spaniards came to identify the land with the person. Indeed, the hometown of the dictator, Ferrol, changed its official name during the 1939-1978 period to “El Ferrol del Caudillo” (‘The Ferrol of the leader’, in Spanish).

Galician folk symbols and representations suffered a clear cooptation. Bagpipers and “regional dancers” were incorporated into the “choruses and dances section” of the “[Spanish] National Movement”. Even the bagpipes began to be painted in red and yellow, the colours of the Spanish flag. Such a strong visual element of Galician culture was incorporated in the wider “project” of the

“Spanish Nation”, not much different to the process followed in Scotland affecting its bagpipers, incorporated into the British troops, a couple of centuries earlier.

A paternalistic vision of the State was constructed: the “bloody uncultivated and savage Galician” became the “poor rural ignorant Galician”. Pamphlets in Spanish with the text “Don't be a barbarian – Speak Spanish not Galician” (to summarise the full text) were distributed.

The most picturesque (and artificially constructed) folklore was used in order represent Spain as a whole: this marks the apparition of bastardised flamenco, standardisation of bullfights, *toreros*, *paella*, etc. Spain is represented as plainly “sun and beach”, because “Spain is different” (1960s tourist slogan). These representations of an united and one-dimensional flat Spain and its “regions”, completely alien to Galicia, was widely exported from the “tourist boom” in the 1960s. These are the typical clichés of the Spanish State that internationally known at a popular level, to present day. Thus, Galicia is often represented under such parameters outside the Hispanic world. It is only at an academic/more cultivated level where Galicia (and the Spanish State in general) are more accurately understood.

The death of Franco in 1975 and transition towards the restoration of Monarchy and parliamentary elections initiated fierce political debates, where fears about political involution mixed up with a weakened intellectual elite. A myriad of political parties representing the most varied options attempted to take part in the turbulent process of self-government recovery. In spite of everthing, a new Statute of Autonomy was voted in referendum and passed in 1981. Galicia then gains partial self-government in accordance with the general regulations of the State.

Symbolic representations of Galicia are from then on more varied than ever. There is a coexistence of the classical vision of Galicia and its representations with new ones, and all these are not always are correlated. The *Xunta* (Galician government) itself becomes a symbol, since it is the public body responsible for the official development of Galician culture in general and use of Galician language in particular. Galician radio and TV also arise as major factors of cultural dynamism, creating a notable bond of identification with popular sectors. From mid 1980s there has been a major revival of Galician culture, basically represented in literary production and traditional and folklore music. The success of a series of writers in Galician language (later translated into other languages, including English, like Manuel Rivas) and the international recognition of a number of music bands (Berrogüetto, Milladoiro, Luar na Lubre, Carlos Núñez, etc.) has been of paramount importance for the Galicians self-appreciation from mid 1990s.

Indeed, Galician self-consciousness, Galicianness, has been partially revitalised since the end of the dictatorship, especially in urban areas. In many social sectors there exists a moderate sentiment of pride and confidence in spite of the political struggles and economic setbacks. New international symbols linked to the capitalist idea of success arise, such as major companies, i.e. Zeltia (chemistry and pharmaceutical industry); Pescanova fishing holding (owner of Bird's Eye in Ireland); the Zara-Inditex textile holding (incorporating Massimo Dutti, Pull&Bear, Springfield, etc.); and a number of fashion designers and firms (Caramelo, Antonio Pernas, Adolfo Domínguez, etc.).

For many these companies constitute contemporary symbols of Galician “power”, “influence” and international projection.

Sporting events and success in the 1990s was yet another way in which the name of Galicia was publicised abroad. Many football lovers will remember clubs such as Celta de Vigo or Deportivo da Coruña.

However, the sentiment of peripherality and isolation still persists. Galicia is still portrayed with a number of clichés, such as “mysterious land”, “extremely rural”, a place “where to eat good, plenty and cheap”. Economic crisis and the current Galician government do not help in promoting Galicia abroad or recovering self-appreciation once lost either.

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* Open debate/discussion followed *