

I

AT THE EDGE OF EMPIRE

The political and cultural entity that constitutes modern Spain did not exist in antiquity and came into being during the medieval period only gradually. The Iberian peninsula was populated far back into the Paleolithic period but those shadowy, indigenous peoples of Iberia had been overlaid in part and in turn by Phoenecian, by Carthaginian, by Greek, and by Celt. But of these intruders none had brought unity until Rome gradually had extended her control over all of its peoples, beginning with the Second Punic War (218–201 BC). During the next six hundred years Roman rule there became an imperial order and the fundamental structure of the Roman Empire was always the province. Still at the beginning of the Middle Ages Iberia was simply a collection of Roman provinces politically, the westernmost peninsula of the Roman world geographically, and a participant in a common culture which we style classical.

The geography had imposed its conditions upon the Romans as it had and would upon everyone who attempted to govern Iberia. By European standards, the Iberian peninsula is large, more than 581,000 square kilometers. That is more than four times the size of England and a little bigger than France. Iberia is also very dry, on the average, with an annual precipitation of less than 1,000 millimeters. The westerlies off the Atlantic see that the northern and western coasts are mostly well watered, but the mountains of Cantabria in the north and of Galicia and Portugal in the west drain the Atlantic winds of most of their moisture before they reach the interior. There a central *meseta* averages 600 meters above sea level and constitutes almost half of the peninsula. The coastlands of the south and

the east belong to the drier world of the Mediterranean. The agricultural civilization of Iberia, then, has always depended upon its river valleys to collect the precious water that is otherwise so scarce. Iberia has lived by its five great river basins.

The first and greatest of these is that of the Guadalquivir River whose 842 kilometers drain a watershed of 58,000 square kilometers. Since Phoenecian, Greek, Carthaginian, and Roman approached the peninsula from the east, which coast offers only one good entree to that land mass, it was usually simpler to sail through the “pillars of Hercules” and land at Cádiz. This originally Phoenecian port controlled the entrance to the Guadalquivir which was navigable all the way to modern Seville and, intermittently, to Cordova. But the river provided life-sustaining water from the eastern foothills of the Sierra de Cazorla with their towns of Ubeda and Baeza down through what would much later become the seat of the caliphate at Cordova. This basin and the narrow strip of coast along the Mediterranean to the south became the Late Roman Imperial province of Baetica. Its center was at Hispalis (Seville) and its northern limits were formed by the mountains of the Sierra Morena and the lower reaches of the Guadiana River.

Just north of these two lies the watershed of the Guadiana River, 839 kilometers long and draining a basin of 69,000 square kilometers. However, its flow is the weakest of all of the major rivers, much weaker than that of the Guadalquivir despite its considerable extent to the east. The river partially formed the border between the provinces of Baetica and Lusitania as it largely does that of modern Spain and Portugal. Its center was at Emerita (Mérida), the highest point to which it was navigable, and its northern border was constituted, in good measure, by the mountains of Toledo. Joined to the Guadiana basin in the Late Roman province of Lusitania was the Portuguese coastline as far north as Portucale (Oporto) and the lower portion of the watershed of the Tajo River.

This latter basin comprised some 81,000 square kilometers and the river itself stretches for more than 1,100 kilometers. It was useful for agriculture and stockraising but it drops down from the central plateau to the coastal plain of Portugal and to Santarém and Lisbon so steeply that it is hardly useful for transportation much beyond the former. To the north the Tajo basin was bounded by the great central chain of the Guadarrama Mountains and to the east by the Sierra de Albarricín. Like Baetica, Roman Lusitania too was easiest of approach from the Atlantic.

On the eastern side of the peninsula, of the two provinces oriented toward the Mediterranean, only Tarraconensis offered easy access to the interior. Tarraco (Tarragona), its capital, sat in the basin of the Ebro River.

This watershed of 85,000 square kilometers and its 928 kilometers long heart stretched, between the Pyrenees to the north and the Sierra de Albarracín to the south, from the mountains of Cantabria to the Mediterranean below Dertosa (Tortosa). It was a world in its own right as well as a province. The volume of water that the Ebro carries is the second greatest of the five rivers of Iberia and its flow is the most regularly distributed over the year.

Carthaginensis, on the other hand, took its name from its port at Carthago (Cartagena) which had little hinterland itself. The province included the major portion of the eastern Mediterranean coast and from there stretched northwest up onto the central *meseta* of Murcia, La Mancha, and Castilla La Nueva. At its northwestern end it even included most of the Duero River basin. That latter watershed of 98,000 square kilometers is essentially broken into two parts by the violence of its drop from the plateau down to the Atlantic at Oporto. Its 700 kilometer length in Spain and its 200 kilometer length in Portugal are, socially, two separate rivers. Both supply the essential water but only the latter is navigable for a short distance from the Atlantic. But if the province of Carthaginensis was a unit in some sort it had to be held together by administrative means. It had no such natural artery or center as had Baetica, Lusitania, and Tarraconensis.

The same may be said of the fifth province, Gallaecia, in the far northwest. Bounded by the Duero to the south, the Atlantic to the west, and the Bay of Biscay to the north, it stretched inland through the mountains to the edge of the *meseta* of Castilla la Vieja at Asturica Augusta (Astorga). It had a capital at Braccara Augusta (Braga) but geography oriented the province, essentially a group of mountain valleys and a narrow coastal plain, towards the Atlantic and the ports of Portucale (Oporto) and the more northerly Iria Flavia (Padrón). Were it not for the stubborn inventiveness of Rome, Gallaecia would have been merely what was left over from the remainder of the peninsula.

Indeed, Iberia's geography predisposed it to remain a series of separate human communities. The coasts, except as one of the great riverine systems reached them, everywhere were separated from its interior by substantial mountain ranges. The coasts themselves differed. Those of the Bay of Biscay, Galicia, and northern Portugal were well watered, even lush, while those of southern Portugal and the Mediterranean were dry, semi-desert. The first group lacked a navigable river for access to the interior. On the other hand, the rivers of the second group led only into their own watersheds. If mountains divided the coastlands from the interior, the Guadarrama divided the northern *meseta* in the Duero basin from its southern counterpart in the basin of the Tajo. The mountains of

Toledo divided the Guadiana basin from that of the Tajo. Finally, the Sierra Morena divide the Guadiana basin from that of the Guadalquivir. Even in our own times, the motor car, the railroad, and the airplane, only partially suffice to draw these well-defined regions together into one human community. The Romans had to attempt to unite it by means of roads alone.

Surely, the most significant material improvement made by Rome in Iberia was the construction of a comprehensive network of roads which covered and connected most of its physical surface. The prime purpose of this road system was military, i.e., to speed the movement of troops, their supplies and replacements, and the communications essential to their coordination. Although the Roman dominance in Iberia was not challenged during the first four centuries of the Christian Era, nevertheless that road system was constructed as a precaution and maintained as a convenience. In all the centuries after the disappearance of Rome from the peninsula, it was to remain the basic communication, commercial, and military grid of every Iberian society down to the coming of the railroad.

In part, it was a coastal network. From the port of Padrón in Galicia it ran south through Braga, Coimbra, Santarém, and Lisbon in Portugal, and thence south and east to Seville. From that point it continued on to Algeciras, Malaga, and to Almeria, where it turned north through Cartagena, Denia, Valencia, Tortosa, Tarragona and Barcelona, and from there around the eastern end of the Pyrenees into what was then Roman Gaul. Since no attack was ordinarily to be envisaged from the sea, this linking of the major seaports of the perimeter must largely have served to facilitate the shuttling of troops between them when it could not be done more expeditiously by boat, that is, in winter. It is significant that the one coast not included in this network was that of Cantabria. Romanization among the tribes of the north there was so slight that it could not produce even this basic index of empire.

Seville was the southern center of this network. Not only did the coastal road from Galicia and Portugal touch there before continuing on around the peninsula to Barcelona and Narbonne but one great interior artery ran diagonally and northeast from it to Toledo, Saragossa, and then on to Barcelona. This most strategic route linked the valley of the Guadalquivir, the Tajo basin, and the Ebro valley. To hold it was to dominate the richest and most cultivated half of Iberia.

Second only to it was the system that emanated from Mérida, after coming east from Santarém and Lisbon. From this second hub of the south, one branch ran up the valley of the Guadiana to unite with the road from Seville. Yet another crossed the mountains of Toledo by Trujillo

and then passed through Talavera de la Reina to join the Seville road at Toledo. Between the two the valley of the Guadiana was joined firmly to that of the Guadalquivir and that of the Tajo.

Of course a road ran south from Mérida to Seville but yet another ran north to fork off to the northwest to Braga and to the northeast through Salamanca and Zamora to Astorga. At Zamora it was joined by a spur of the Toledo–Saragossa road that crossed the Guadarrama by way of the pass of Navacerrada and Segovia. At Astorga (*Asturicas Augustae*) both of these north–south routes joined the east–west road that led from Padrón (*Iria Flavia*) in Galicia through Lugo, then Astorga and León, and on to Pamplona and to Gaul by way of the pass at Roncesvalles. This road was to become the *Camino de Santiago* when that pilgrimage came to be established after the ninth century. For the Romans, however, it tied the northern plateau and the valley of the Duero to the Atlantic coast and to the Guadiana and Guadalquivir basins. Since a spur of it also led east to Saragossa and Tarragona, the Duero basin was connected with that of the Ebro as well.

This brief sketch of the road network of imperial Rome in Iberia illustrates well the pervasive character of its civilization in the peninsula. But even the most casual contemporary traveler will be struck by the extent and the monumental character of Roman building there as it endures down to the present. However, perhaps the most impressive testimony to the attraction of things Roman are the Iberian idioms, Catalan, Gallego, Portuguese and Spanish. As early as the first century AD the Greek geographer Strabo asserted that the inhabitants of Baetica had forgotten their own language. While that appears to have contained some literary exaggeration, four centuries later they, along with the other inhabitants of the peninsula, would indeed have done so. The one certain exception is the Basques. There was no system of Roman roads in Guipúzcoa, Vizcaya, and Alava. Nor do they appear in High Aragon or the Pyrenaen valleys of Catalonia. Likely, the indigenous idiom lingered on there as well as in northern Galicia and Asturias. One might say that the Romans subdued the tribes of the Cantabrians and the Pyrenees but hardly that they conquered them.

Rome found Iberia a world of villages and made it a world of cities. Again that is true except in the mountains of the north. Everywhere else four centuries of Roman administration seems fairly to have dissolved the old tribal structures and to have replaced them with civil and economic ones. When, in turn, that Roman order should have collapsed, the old tribalism proved to have no power to regenerate itself. The new order of the Suevi and the Visigoths, fragile as it was, would instead triumph.

Now it is true that the Roman cities in Iberia were largely political

and administrative devices. As generally elsewhere in the world of the western Mediterranean, those cities seldom had any important industry and often not even a commerce beyond that of victualing the government and its garrisons. The major ports are an obvious exception. The ordinary city was populated by officials, civil servants, soldiers, small merchants, artisans, and slaves, and their families. In addition they boasted a number of elite families, possessed of a city dwelling as well as of a rural *villa*, but whose agricultural estates furnished their essential source of wealth. Such cities could, then, support a polite society which could in turn patronize literary and artistic expression and see to the education of its own members. This social world was nurtured by Roman government and law and Iberian products of it, such as Seneca and Marcial, Trajan and Hadrian, moved easily in the higher circles of the imperial Mediterranean.

Nevertheless the massive reality which supported it was the world of agriculture and the countryside. The population of Roman Iberia at its height is ordinarily estimated at 6,000,000. Cádiz, its largest city boasted but 65,000 and Tarragona, the next largest, only 27,000. The total population of its ten largest cities would aggregate but 175,000. That is, roughly ninety-six percent of its inhabitants were rural.

Now both the Roman conquest and the Roman market had reoriented significant portions of that agriculture from a subsistence to a cash-crop basis. The *villa* had become the most important form of agricultural organization and a few material remains of those rural institutions have even been discovered in central Asturias beyond the Cantabrians. As never before, Iberian wheat, olive oil, and wine, in addition to its wool, fish oil, and livestock, moved in the Mediterranean market. Mining was similarly affected as Iberian gold, silver, iron, copper, and lead, were worked for shipment over long distances. To both the former and the latter, new Roman techniques had been applied and worked major expansion and improvement. These innovations were especially notable in the realm of irrigation in agriculture and mechanics in mining. Generally speaking, Iberia benefited materially and socially from the imposition of the Roman order. However, it would also suffer from Rome's decline.

Yet, before that decline became critical, Rome provided the highway for the dissemination of the Christian religion to Iberia. Probably arriving in the peninsula before the end of the first century, Christianity there had become widely enough diffused to produce authentic martyrs by the times of Decius, Valerian, and finally Diocletian (AD 285–305). When the first visible council of the Spanish church was celebrated at Elvira before AD 313, no less than nineteen bishops attended to represent their diocese. If most of these units were clustered in Baetica, nevertheless diocese

already existed at Braga, León, Saragossa, and Barcelona. But like the cities, their invariable habitat, none were found in the mountains of the Cantabrian chain or in the high valleys of the Pyrenees.

THE TIME OF TROUBLES

The larger aspects of the decline of the Late Roman Empire are well known and the developments in Iberia were not particularly distinctive. From AD 250 plague was endemic for about fifteen years. Beginning roughly about AD 260 the collapse of the imperial frontier on the Rhine resulted in the penetration of Germanic tribesmen even into Iberia. The major invasion route was around the eastern end of the Pyrenees and the valley of the Ebro was the region which suffered most. Tarragona, Lérida, Saragossa, and Pamplona were attacked. Other groups of invaders may have entered by way of Roncesvalles and pillaged their way down the valley of the Duero, visiting their wrath in turn upon Palencia, Valladolid, León, and Astorga. Lusitania and Baetica suffered less severely but Coimbra and Mérida were also attacked. Curiously in all this, there is no record of organized resistance. In all probability the invaders were able to recruit in the peninsula among the margins of the rural population, from decaying tribal groups, and even disaffected regular troops.

When this storm had worn itself out and order had been restored, here as throughout the empire after AD 286 under Emperor Diocletian, the population of the peninsula had clearly begun to shrink to an estimated size of about 4,000,000 on the eve of the fifth-century invasions. A concomitant decline of commerce can be best measured in the physical shrinkage evident in the acreage of port cities. In general, the political and economic preeminence of cities over the country districts so typical of the classical world was failing as well. Both cause and effect of this phenomenon was the growth of the *villa* into great *latifundia* in the more favored agricultural regions of the river valleys and the reduction of small proprietors to economic and legal, even military, dependence on the Late Roman magnate class which owned the former.

As with the invasions of the third century, those of the fifth century were prepared by the decrepitude of the imperial government itself. But this time they were visited upon an Iberia with less power of absorption and assimilation. The story of the failure of imperial government upon the death of Emperor Theodosius the Great (379–395), the rivalry of eastern and western portions, the revolt of the Visigoths in the Danube provinces, the ineffectuality of Honorius in the west, and finally the ultimate collapse of the Rhine frontier in 407 is too familiar to need much telling here. By the summer of 409 the first contingents of Vandals, Suevi, and Alans, had

threaded their way through the pass at Roncesvalles and a German future was in the making for Iberia.

Notwithstanding, the peninsula would long continue to be involved with the death throes of the Roman Empire in the west. In fact, at the time of this invasion that empire was hopelessly divided. The Emperor Honorius in Ravenna was confronted by a former general of Roman Britain, Constantine, who had been proclaimed emperor and had subsequently made himself master of Gaul and Iberia. The latter's own general, Gerontius, had broken the power of the Roman troops loyal to Honorius in the peninsula but had then, in turn, revolted against Constantine and set up his own puppet emperor in Iberia. Gerontius concentrated his forces in the valley of the Ebro to defend against an attack by his previous master whose capital was at Arles in Provence. He also invited the Vandals, Alans, and Suevi, then concentrated in Aquitaine, into western Iberia as his allies. They entered unopposed by the pass at Roncesvalles. Avoiding the valley of the Ebro, the Germans took possession first of the valley of the Duero, then of Galicia, and finally of Lusitania and Baetica. There was only scattered opposition and within two years they were settling as garrisons in and about the larger cities. There, under a long familiar political and legal device, they kept their own identity intact under their kings but as *foederati*, i.e., allied peoples settled on Roman territory, were able to draw upon the resources of the Roman administration for maintenance and support.

Meanwhile the Emperor Honorius had watched helplessly from Ravenna while the Visigoths, having broken through the defenses of the Upper Adriatic from the Balkans, swept the length of Italy itself, sacking Rome in 410. These circumstances encouraged Gerontius to march against Constantine at Arles but his ambitions came to an abrupt end in 411. Following the death of Alaric in southern Italy the Emperor Honorius had come to terms with the Visigoths and despatched them as allies, together with troops of his own, to the south of Gaul. Faced by these forces, Gerontius' army revolted and he was killed. Honorius' forces then forced the surrender of Constantine at Arles. In Iberia the troops of Maximus, the puppet emperor set up by Gerontius, mutinied at the news, returning to their loyalty to Ravenna. Maximus fled to find refuge and obscurity among the Germans of the peninsula. For the moment, the integrity of the Western Empire had been restored.

For Rome, the question now became how to reassert its control in more than nominal fashion. To this end the Visigoths, now quarrelling among themselves and desperate for supplies, could be utilized. Under their king, Valia, they had already ventured into Iberia once in 414 without great result. Now as *foederati* of the empire they were despatched

into the peninsula in 416 in order to reclaim it for Rome. Wallia's campaign succeeded brilliantly and, in a climactic battle not far north of Algeciras, he destroyed the armies of both the Alans and the Siling Vandals. Bereft of their kings and most of their military effectives, those two federations disintegrated and their surviving members were absorbed by the still potent Hasding Vandals under King Gunderic and the Suevi.

Fearing too complete a success of Wallia, Rome now recalled him and, by virtue of a new pact or *foedus*, settled their allies permanently in the south of Gaul in the valleys of the Garonne and the region about Toulouse. There was a redistribution of lands in these areas in favor of the Visigothic king and his nobles and their followers. Gallo-Roman *latifundists* were compelled to part with a portion of their holdings in return for the protection afforded by their new Visigothic neighbors. For a century yet, the Visigothic kingdom centered on the south of France.

In Iberia, Rome had recovered the basin of the Ebro and the coast of the Levant as far south as Cartagena as a result of their efforts. A new Roman force of about 4,500 was now despatched under the command of a "Count of Spain" who took up residence at Tarragona. Imperial authority had been restored to the Tarraconensis and the coastal area of the old Cartaginensis but Baetica, Lusitania, Galicia, and the inland reaches of the Cartaginensis, remained in the hands of the Suevi and the Hasding Vandals. These tribes ruled with the more or less reluctant cooperation of the great Hispano-Roman *latifundists* who were the other real power in the occupied areas. So Rome seemed disposed to leave matters until Gunderic of the Vandals undertook a war against the Suevi in 420 which might have ended in the conquest of the latter. This was not desirable from the Roman point of view and the troops from Tarragona marched west and forced the Vandals to conclude the struggle.

In the following year a potentially more serious event occurred. With the acquiescence of Gunderic the old pretender to the purple, Maximus, emerged from obscurity and reasserted his imperial dignity. Once again the army of the Ebro, this time heavily reinforced with Visigothic auxiliaries, marched into Baetica and scored initial victories over Maximus who was captured and sent to Ravenna to be executed by Honorius in 422.

Subsequently, however, the Vandal Gunderic scored a crushing victory and immediately went over to the offensive against the empire. While the Tarraconensis was to be held, the losses of men in 422 could not be made good and the death of Honorius in 423 further complicated defensive efforts. Cartagena fell in 424 and, having seized the makings of a fleet there, Gunderic even raided the Balearics in 425. In 428 it appears that he had wrested both Seville and Cordova from those elements of the

population still loyal to Rome there. When Gunderic died in 428 he had become master of all Iberia but for Galicia held by the Suevi and the Tarraconensis. However, his brother Genseric, who succeeded, was to organize the successful invasion of the province of Africa in 429 and the Vandals crossed the straits of Gibraltar and disappeared from Iberian history.

The resulting vacuum in the peninsula could not be filled by Rome. The province of Africa, the granary of Rome, at all costs must be protected from Genseric. Simultaneously servile revolts erupted in Gaul and the Visigoths threatened to move south into the Narbonensis and Provence. All these problems left free rein to the Suevi in Iberia even though the total numbers of the tribe did not exceed 25,000 souls. Reinforced by recruits from among the depressed lower orders of Hispano-Roman society, they carried on a war of attrition against the Hispano-Roman nobility and bureaucracy. Under their king, Rechila, the Suevi gradually expanded from their strongholds in Astorga, Lugo, Oporto, and Braga, from Galicia south into Lusitania and even Baetica. In 439 Rechila took Mérida and by 441 Seville as well. At precisely this juncture new and most serious slave revolts broke out in Gaul but this time also in the Tarraconensis. It was another five years before a *magister militum*, one Vitus, could be spared for Iberia. At the head of an army composed largely of Visigoth allies, he marched south into the valley of the Guadalquivir only to meet defeat there at the hands of Rechila in 446.

That victorious king of the Suevi died in 448 having achieved control of the entire peninsula except for the valley of the Ebro. Rome and Rome's Iberian allies and sympathizers must have now despaired of any full restoration of imperial power there. The former sought ways to hold the Ebro basin, the latter the best accommodation possible with the new masters. The new king of the Suevi, Recharius, almost immediately sought an alliance with the Visigoths. In 449 he journeyed by the pass at Roncesvalles to the court of Theodoric I, whose daughter he married. The trip to Gaul was marked by Suevic pillaging of much of the northern Tarraconensis and the return around the eastern end of the Pyrenees was accompanied by the sack of Lérida and the environs of Saragossa. The resulting confusion encouraged a new servile revolt in the valley whose highpoint was the capture of Tarazona and the execution of its bishop by the rebels. At this juncture, the defeat of the Huns at Chalons in 451, the death in that battle of the Visigothic Theodoric I, and the death of Attila himself in 453, all combined to momentarily restore the imperial position in Gaul. In Iberia, however, the best terms that a formal Roman embassy of the latter year could extract from the Suevi was an agreement to respect continued imperial rule in the Tarraconensis.