

# *Is Galicia the Original Celtic Homeland?*

*Celtic Life International correspondent  
Steve Melia pedals through the past*







Graffiti in Lugo

**W**here did the Celts of Ireland and the west of Britain originally come from? Irish mythology has a specific answer - from Galicia in Spain.

In the *Leabhar Gabhála Éireann*, the Irish Book of Invasions, the sixth and final group of invaders, the Gaelic-speaking Milesians, came from Brigantia (A Coruña today) on the northwestern tip of Spain. Several regions in northwest Spain have claimed Celtic identity in recent times, often fuelled by nationalist politics. Those claims have been controversial. In the 1980s, Galicia and Asturias were admitted to the Celtic League, then expelled for linguistic reasons, as the last traces of their Celtic languages disappeared in the early Middle Ages.

So, are there any grounds to consider Galicia a Celtic region? Intrigued by this story, I recently set out on a 1500-kilometer bicycle trek to find out.

It was three days' ride from my home in Bristol to the port of Plymouth and 24 hours by ferry to Santander, Spain. Clouds were

drifting over the mountains as I arrived, but the port and beaches were bathed in sunshine.

The cool and temperate climate of Northern Spain is totally unlike the rest of the country. In the Spring, the rainfall is similar to Cape Breton - more than double that

of Dublin or Edinburgh - and the weather forecast was showing rain for most of the next fortnight, making the countryside lush and green. As I left Santander on the coastal cycle route, I noticed how the landscape looked more like northwest Europe than the Mediterranean. The cloud-topped mountains



Lugo Roman Walls



could be in Wales or Scotland, and the rocky gorse-strewn coastline could be in Cornwall or Bretagne.

Connections between those regions predate recorded history. In 2012, archaeologist Barry Cunliffe and linguist John Koch published *Celtic from the West*, challenging the traditional view that the Celts originated in Central Europe. Instead, they argued that Celtic languages evolved as a *Lingua Franca* between the peoples of the Atlantic coast, from Spain and Portugal to Ireland and the west of Britain. There was prehistoric trade between these peoples, and some studies have found genetic similarities, although the evidence is not straightforward.

The sun returned for a day as I turned inland towards the Picos de Europa mountain range and national park. There are no roads through most of the park. The N-621 skirts its eastern fringe, following the river Deva upstream, between wooded slopes topped by limestone peaks. I recognized the name: Deva was a Celtic goddess of water, who also gave the Romans their name for Chester - ironically where I once lived - on the border between England and Wales.

The next section proved to be a challenge: a 1300-metre climb to the San Glorio pass. Fortunately, the road is quiet and well-graded, climbing gradually over 21 kilometres towards the peak still smattered with snow. Near the top, I stopped at a viewpoint with a group of motorcyclists. One of them looked at me sweating and shivering, shook his head and said, "fool!"

A freezing headwind blew hail into my face as I started to descend. The trees disappeared as the road snaked downwards through bare rocks and a short tunnel. I was struck by the fragility of the mountain roads; some of them had succumbed to landslips and contractors were rebuilding several stretches. Before the invention of dynamite in the 19th Century, these mountains isolated the northwest regions from the rest of Spain.

**“In prehistoric times, travel, trade, and migration was easier by sea than by land.**

The northwest of Spain was the last part to resist the Roman invaders. Following their



Bretoña Church Tower

conquest they named it Gallaecia, after one of the many peoples who lived there. The modern region of Galicia is only part of that ancient province. It took me five more days to reach its border, riding through mountain passes, gentler pastures, and the ancient cities of León and Astorga. Two days later I arrived at the first of the sites I wanted to visit: the castro of Lansbrica at San Cibrao de Las.

Castros are fortified Iron Age settlements, usually on hilltops. There are dozens of them all over northwest Spain and northern Portugal. They form an important part of Galician identity and are even mentioned in the Galician national anthem. Lansbrica was one of the later ones, from the 2nd Century BC, when the Romans were threatening to conquer the area, although there is no evidence of fighting there.

I climbed for several kilometres in driving rain to reach the grey angular museum at the entrance to the site. I was drying off under its canopy when I was greeted by a tall young man, Diego Fernández, who is an expert in castro culture and works for the museum, offering free guided tours in English.

I start with the thorniest question: who decided that the castro builders were Celts, and why? It goes back to the 19th Century, he explained, to the early days of Galician archaeology, when nationalist movements were trying to differentiate Galicia from the

rest of Spain.

So, were they just making it up? No, there was evidence linking Galicia to the Celtic regions, but it would be wrong to think of them as a people with a shared identity. The settlements were independent, often at war with each other. Fernández showed me two granite carvings with symbols reminiscent of Celtic art. Art and religion were two hallmarks for identifying these people as Celts. For example, the city of Lugo is named



Maeloc in Bretoña



Diego Fernández  
@ San Cibrao de Las  
Museum

after Lugh, the Celtic god of storm. However, as they left no writing, our written evidence, including names, has come to us through the Romans, who had their own agenda. The Roman writer Strabo called three of the coastal peoples Celtic, a word he associated with barbarians.

The display boards were all in Spanish and Galician. Modern Galician is a Latin language, close to Portuguese, with a few words of Celtic origin. So, what do we know about the original Gallaecian language? Not much, it seems, beyond those names of gods, places and peoples, which suggest at least a Celtic influence.

Diego showed me a model of the site; the excavated parts, just 15 percent so far, were coloured grey. The rest, in white, is yet to be uncovered. The rain paused as I left the museum and walked towards the castro. Walls, three to five feet high, trace three defensive rings surrounding rectangular homes, with circular kitchens and grain stores.

**“As I walked around its outer walls, I was struck by the huge scale of the site - home to 3000 people at its height - and also by the power of nature, which has reclaimed everything around it.**

The following day I arrived at Santiago de Compostella, which is best known as a destination for the pilgrims who converge on its magnificent cathedral. I joined the line filing past the remains of St James, noting the warning not to kiss the statue - divine protection didn't extend to COVID-19, apparently. Some come here to pray for miracles, and while I was there a miracle did occur - the sun came out and the rain stopped for several days.

A Coruña, the largest city in Galicia, was off my route, so I took a train there. It feels very different from Santiago - more of a normal city but surrounded by the sea, with several peninsulas. On top of one stands the structure I had come to see: the oldest working lighthouse in the world - the Torre de

Hercules was built by the Romans, though what you see today is mainly from the 18th Century. According to the Irish Book of Invasions, the Celtic god Breogan founded the city, originally called Brigantia, and built the tower, from where his descendants set sail to conquer Ireland. A statue of Breogan stands at the foot of the hill, where a musician was playing bagpipes, an instrument as familiar here as in Scotland or Ireland.

The capital of Roman Gallaecia was Lugo, which took me a day and a half to cycle from Santiago. The original Roman walls still surround the core of the city, making it a UNESCO world heritage site. Roman remains and themes are everywhere, but tourism is less intrusive here than in Santiago.

In the 15th Century convent - which houses the Provincial Museum - I met with archaeologist Enrique Alcorta. The first object he showed me was a game-changer for my inquiry; the Stele of Crecente was commissioned by a high-status man for his wife, who died at the age of 25. The family, depicted in happier times, are described, in Latin,



as ‘Supertamaric Celts’ - one of the peoples mentioned by Strabo. Alas, here were indigenous people, after the Roman conquest, calling themselves Celts.

The Romanization of Gallaecia varied from place to place, Enrique explained. Lugo was the centre of their power and influence. There were a few outposts, such as Castro de Viladonga where I was heading next, but elsewhere life carried on as before. He showed me some Celtic-style objects from after the Roman conquest, including bronze fibulae, like many I have seen across Iron Age Europe. But the highlight of the visit predated their arrival. The Torque of Burela is 1.8kg of pure gold, a masterpiece of its type. “Not very comfortable” said Enrique, adding that Celtic chiefs and warriors commonly wore torques but that this one was likely ceremonial.

After sampling the bars that night, I saw the Roman walls illuminated and decided to walk back along their ramparts. The god of storms responded, lighting up the sky and the buildings, ancient and modern, in my own private sound and light show.

The storm passed and the temperature soared as I rode towards Castro de Viladonga. It is smaller than Lansbrica, but more widely excavated. People have occupied the site since the Bronze Age, but what we see today was built after the Roman conquest, which is intriguing. I have seen Roman remains all over Europe and this is nothing like them, with one exception; rectangular buildings appear like a well-defended Iron Age hillfort from one of the Celtic regions.

Climbing onto its inner wall you can see the land for miles around. It is more intensively farmed here than around Lansbrica, but nature still makes its presence felt. A pine marten crossed my path on the way, and I could hear the gentle hooting of a hoopoe in the distance.

Inside the small museum, the main exhibit features a fusion of Gallaico-Roman culture; the word ‘Celt’ is never mentioned. Some of the objects display a Roman influence but most of them look indigenous, including a Roman-era gold and silver torque.

I had one more place to visit before riding back to Santander; the small unremarkable village of Bretoña, which adds a curious footnote to the story of Celtic Galicia. As



the Romans withdrew from Britain, and the Saxon kingdoms pushed the Celtic Romano-Britons westward, many took to the seas. Some of them sailed to Galicia where they established an outpost of the Celtic church. Their leader, Bishop Maeloc, is recorded at a council of bishops in 567 AD. In addition, a few brief references confirm the presence of Bretones in this area, until medieval times.

A statue of Maeloc stands on a dry fountain in Bretoña’s main square. On one side he is a bishop, on the other side a warrior. A pair of storks were nesting on the tower of the village church, which was rebuilt in the 16th Century. Excavations have revealed the

foundations of an early medieval church beneath it, but all that remains above ground is a small plaque on the wall inside.

All the experts I spoke to were wary of the word ‘Celtic’, associating it with nationalist politics or pseudo-history. The modern definition of a Celtic nation is one where a Celtic language is spoken. On that basis, there is no case for including Galicia, but many Galicians clearly do feel a connection to the Celtic world, and I had read and seen enough to conclude that those connections are genuine.

