

Ornamenta urbana in the finis terrae: Some Observations on Elites and Luxury Elements in the Roman Villas of Northwest Hispania

Diego Piay Augusto, *Universidad de Oviedo, ES*
piaydiego@uniovi.es



Abstract

Late Antique literary sources attest to the presence of high-ranking individuals from late Roman society (4th–5th centuries) associated with the territory of the former province of Gallaecia. However, comprehensive studies evaluating the luxury elements documented in the villas of this region, particularly those linked to elite groups, remain absent. This gap is especially pronounced in the westernmost areas of Gallaecia, corresponding to the modern regions of Galicia and Asturias.

This study begins by analysing the geographical boundaries of the ancient province of Gallaecia and the specific study area. Next, a brief prosopographical analysis will provide insight into which members of the elite may be linked to the Hispanic Northwest. The third section examines the study of villas in Galicia and Asturias. Finally, the presence of luxury elements in the villas of the study area will be analysed.

The objective of this paper is, therefore, to compile all available evidence related to the presence of luxury items (mosaics, sculptures, wall paintings) in the villas in these regions in order to corroborate the presence of the elites mentioned in literary sources through archaeological analysis. A defining characteristic of the upper classes during Late Antiquity was their preference for high-quality products, which they procured for their opulent residences, even if these were located at the edges of the known world.

Keyword

Ornamenta urbana; Gallaecia; Late Antiquity; prosopography; villae.

1. THE GREAT PROVINCE OF GALLAECIA

At the end of the third century, Diocletian had expanded Gallaecia as part of his reforms which, in the words of the Christian intellectual Lactantius, had subdivided the provinces “to infinity”¹. It was bound by the Douro River to the south, the Atlantic Ocean to the north and west, and the east extended to Iuliobriga. Further information on the new expanded province comes from interrogating the sources of the time: Both Hydatius² and Zosimus³ speak of Theodosius the Great as “originally from Gallaecia, born in the city of Cauca” (likely modern Coca, in northern Segovia). Prosper of Aquitaine tells us that Priscillian was the bishop of Abela (modern Avila) in Gallaecia⁴; and Orosius relates that “Cantabrians and Asturians were part of Gallaecia” and Numancia was located “on the border with Gallaecia”⁵.

This study does not focus on the entire ancient province of Gallaecia. The area of study is centred on the present-day regions of Galicia and Asturias, which were incorporated into the Roman Empire at a later stage and are characterized by limited urban development compared to other areas of the Iberian Peninsula (Fig.1).

The presence of three major urban centers in northwest Hispania is confirmed: the stunning walled city of *Lucus Augusti* (now Lugo); *Bracara Augusta* (modern Braga), which Ausonius (*Ordo urbium nobilium*, XI) went so far as to call “opulent” in his catalogue of major cities; and *Asturica Augusta* (present-day Astorga), which Pliny had nicknamed «*urbs magnifica*» three centuries before⁶.

In the northwest of Hispania, archaeological findings and, in some cases, written sources confirm the presence of other smaller population centres, such as *Tude* (now Tui), *Aquae Celenae* (Caldas de Reis), *Iria Flavia*, *Lucus Asturum* (Lugo de Llanera), *Gegioni* (Gijón), and *Brandomil*⁷. However, the true focal points of archaeological interest are the numerous *villae* documented in Galicia and Asturias. These were luxurious estates located just outside of the urban areas in which productive activities such as agriculture, arboriculture, livestock breeding or fishing industry took place. Horse breeding in particular had long provided a significant income to the elite of Gallaecia⁸, as we know that Galician, Asturian and Lusitanian horses were as highly coveted during the 4th and 5th centuries as they had been in the Republican period. Villas were the quintessential physical spaces for late Roman elites.

Thanks to the collation of written references, oral testimonies, casual finds and archaeological activities, it is possible to identify around eighty archaeological sites that could plausibly be classified as villas within modern Galicia. In Asturias, according to the data, it is possible to identify twenty-six archaeological sites⁹. The number of *villae* is, in any case, approximate. First, because there are undoubtedly other sites of this type that have not yet been documented. Second, because most of these settlements have not undergone archaeological interventions that would confirm their identification as *villae*. The criteria for their classification are based on their location in rural areas and the discovery of Roman-period architectural elements (*tegulae*, *imbrices*, structural remains, etc.), and, in some cases, evidence of residential architecture (column shafts, hypocausts, mosaics, sculptures, wall paintings, etc.). In these latter instances, the presence of luxurious elements confirms the existence of aristocratic elites in the area under study.

¹ Lact., *Mort. Pers.*, 7.

² Hyd., *Chron.*, II.

³ Zos., *Hist.*, IV, 24.

⁴ Pros., *Chron.*, 1171.

⁵ Or., *Hist.*, V, 7, 2; VI, 21, 2.

⁶ Plin., *Nat.*, 3, 28.

⁷ A recent monograph has been published on this interesting site, presenting the results of the excavations conducted between 2019 and 2024 (Gorgoso, Vigo 2024). The urban or semi-urban character of the ancient Gijón is still a subject of debate among researchers (García de Castro, Ríos 2013).

⁸ Symm., *Ep.*, VII, 82.

⁹ Piay, Argüelles 2021.



Fig. 1. *Diocesis Hispaniarum* during the time of Emperor Diocletian and study area with the main Roman-period population centers documented. Author.

2. PROSOPOGRAPHY OF THE NORTHWEST OF THE IBERIAN PENINSULA

Although the issue deserves a much deeper analysis, to date, 18 individuals from the upper classes have been identified who can be linked to the territory of Gallaecia between the 4th and 5th centuries (Fig. 2)¹⁰. These are mostly individuals linked to the religious world (bishops, presbyters, and monks), but also to the provincial administration (*vicarius Hispaniarum, peraequator census*), and even with imperial power (Theodosius). The belonging of the former to the upper classes is well established during this period, as the ecclesiastical hierarchy will gradually assume the functions of civil power. In Gallaecia, the invasion of the Suebi and the progressive fragmentation of Roman power will lead bishops and priests to assume roles that go beyond the limits imposed by their own episcopal function. In the case of the monks, they initially came from wealthy families¹¹. This must also have been the case for the Galician monk Baquiarius¹².

¹⁰ So far, there is no prosopographical study specifically dedicated to the territory of Gallaecia during Late Antiquity. Some information can be extracted from the second volume of the *Prosopography of the Late Roman Empire* (Jones *et alii* 1971a; Jones *et alii* 1971b) and from the initial data of the *Prosopographie chrétienne du Bas-Empire* dedicated to Hispania (Vilella 1998). Additional information can also be obtained from our prosopographical studies dedicated to the members of the Priscillianist movement and the anti-Priscillianists (Piay, 2018).

¹¹ Blázquez 1989, 105-107.

¹² Crespo 2021.

NAME	CHRONOLOGY	POSITION HELD	PLACE OF BIRTH
Lucius Aradius Valerius Proculus	IV (300-350)	<i>Peraequator census</i> of Gallaecia	Rome
Priscillianus	345-385	Ascetic, Bishop	¿Gallaecia?
Theodosius	347-395	Emperor	<i>Cauca</i> (Coca, Segovia) (ancient Gallaecia)
Marinianus	IV	<i>Vicarius Hispaniarum</i>	¿Gallaecia?
Egeria	IV-V	Ascetic, pilgrim	El Bierzo (Ponferrada, León)? (ancient Gallaecia)
Paulus Orosius	385-420	Presbyter	<i>Bracara Augusta</i> (ancient Gallaecia)
Avitus	IV-V	Presbyter	<i>Bracara Augusta</i> (ancient Gallaecia)
Baquariarius	IV-V	Monk, deacon	Gallaecia
Simposius	IV-V	Priscillianist bishop	¿ <i>Asturica Augusta</i> ? (ancient Gallaecia)
Dictinius	IV-V	Priscillianist bishop	¿ <i>Asturica Augusta</i> ? (ancient Gallaecia)
Herenas	IV-V	Priscillianist bishop	¿Gallaecia?
Exuperantius	IV-V	Catholic bishop?	¿Gallaecia?
Ortygius	IV-V	Catholic bishop	¿Gallaecia?
Pastor	433	Catholic bishop	¿ <i>Lucus Augusti</i> ? (ancient Gallaecia)
Syagrius	433	Catholic bishop	¿ <i>Lucus Augusti</i> ? (ancient Gallaecia)
Agrestius	433	Priscillianist bishop	¿ <i>Lucus Augusti</i> ? (ancient Gallaecia)
Toribius	V	Catholic bishop	¿ <i>Asturica Augusta</i> ? (ancient Gallaecia)
Hydatius	400-469	Catholic bishop, chronicler	Chaves (Portugal), (ancient Gallaecia)

Fig. 2. Prosopography of the later roman Gallaecia. Author.

In other cases, belonging to the wealthier groups is fully confirmed by the information known through written sources. Egeria is the protagonist of the most well-known *peregrinatio ad Loca Sancta*. Theories that Egeria was a woman of high social status and considerable means traveling with a large entourage have retained a subtle attraction¹³. A contemporary of Egeria was Priscillian, whom according to the information from Sulpicius Severus, was raised in a *familia nobilis y praedives opibus*¹⁴. Furthermore, Priscillian and his followers are particularly significant to this study, as the Council of Zaragoza in AD 380 states that they gathered in *villae alienae*¹⁵.

It is true that in very few cases has the origin of these figures been indisputably located in the Hispanic northwest. *Lucius Aradius Valerius Proculus*, responsible for the census in Gallaecia during the first half of the 4th century¹⁶, *vir clarissimus*, «among the first men of his age, whom the glory of his ancestors did not overburden»¹⁷, was probably originally from Rome¹⁸. In the case of Priscillian, despite the identification of Priscillianism with Gallaecia since the late 4th century and in the subsequent centuries, his birth in this region remains a source of controversy¹⁹. Nor is it unanimously accepted that Egeria was originally from the Hispanic northwest²⁰. Nevertheless, the Galician origin of these characters is not an essential aspect to the topic that will be addressed in this work. The key fact is that the existing data allow for the corroboration of the presence in the Hispanic northwest, during the 4th and 5th centuries, of a series of individuals belonging to the upper classes of the late Roman society (Fig. 2).

3. THE STUDY OF ROMAN VILLAS IN GALICIA AND ASTURIAS

The bibliography related to the study of villas in these regions is directly linked to the development of archaeological activities. It should be noted that more than one hundred sites have been identified as potential Roman villas in Galicia and Asturias. However, archaeological interventions have been conducted in only two of them in recent years: the villa of Andallón (Las Regueras, Asturias) and Proendos (Sober, Lugo)²¹.

In Andallón (Las Regueras, Asturias), through the implementation of a multi-year project, short excavation campaigns have been conducted since 2018 and continue to the present day. The villa, first identified in 1958 due to the discovery of a mosaic²², has its main phase of occupation in the 4th century. During successive campaigns, a new mosaic pavement, wall paintings, and a bath complex that includes a *natatio* have been documented.

At the villa of Proendos (Sober, Lugo, Galicia), archaeological interventions have been more modest, with data primarily derived from a geophysical survey conducted in 2019 and a series of test excavations. To date, a *horreum* from the 1st century A.D. has been identified, as well as evidence of a more monumental phase from the 3rd and 4th centuries, which includes hypocausts and apsidal rooms²³. This year, an intervention was carried out in a 60m² area around the *horreum*, though the results of this work are still unpublished.

¹³ McGowan, Bradshaw 2018, 11.

¹⁴ Sulp. Sev., *Chron.*, 2.46.3.

¹⁵ Freijeiro 1982.

¹⁶ CIL VI, 1690.

¹⁷ Symm., *Ep.*, I, 2, 4.

¹⁸ More information about this character can be drawn from PLRE 1:747-749.

¹⁹ Babut 1909, 90; Vollmann 1974, 491; Piay 2024, 24-25.

²⁰ McGowan, Bradshaw 2018, 20-22.

²¹ In July 2020, the villa of Coea (Castro de Rei, Lugo, Galicia) was also excavated, but it was an archaeology rescue intervention that, to date, has not been followed up.

²² Muñiz *et alii* 2022, 209.

²³ Garcia-Garcia *et alii* 2022, 9.

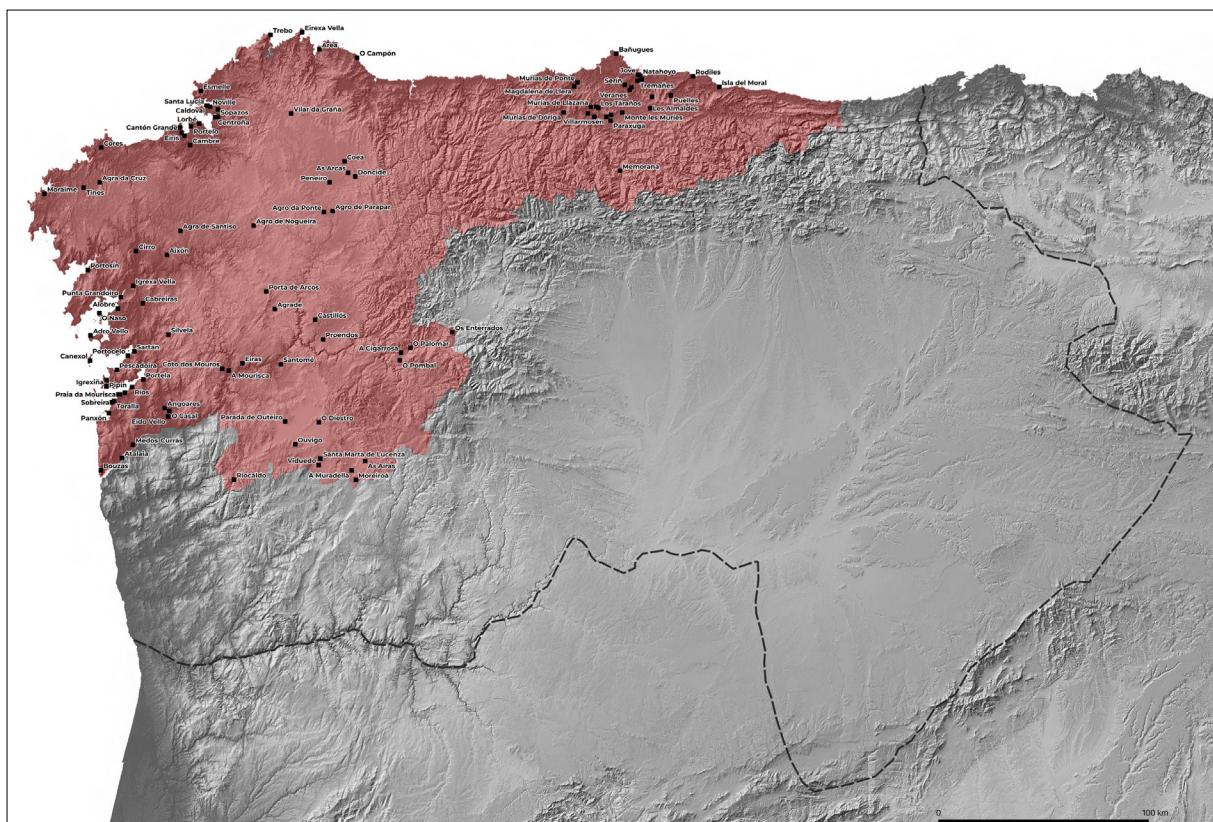


Fig. 3. Archaeological sites identified as villas in modern Galicia and Asturias. Author.

Although the directors and teams working at both sites have published general findings from the interventions²⁴, it is clear that the resulting scholarly production is insufficient compared to the total number of villas identified in Galicia and Asturias (Fig. 3). Given the lack of excavations, it is unsurprising that the study of Roman villas in the northwest remains stagnant and that ongoing research relies on works and reports published years ago.

A recent attempt to highlight these settlements has been made in a work on the territory of Asturias, where all known evidence has been compiled and updated for the 26 identified sites in the region²⁵. In Galicia, no comprehensive monographs have been published to date on Roman villas. However, a few works include a list of the most well-known sites of this type²⁶. Moreover, a doctoral thesis has recently been presented at the University of Santiago de Compostela, analysing the typology of rural settlements in Roman Galicia between the 1st and 5th centuries²⁷.

Regarding the analysis of luxury elements documented in Galician and Asturian villas, some studies have examined the mosaics found in the former²⁸, while two works analyse the mosaic pavements of the latter²⁹. Contributions focused on mural paintings are less

²⁴ Muñiz *et alii* 2024; Muñiz *et alii* 2023a; Muñiz *et alii* 2023b; García-García *et alii* 2022, 9; Muñiz *et alii* 2022; Alonso *et alii* 2021; Muñiz *et alii* 2021; Muñiz *et alii* 2020; Muñiz *et alii* 2019; Muñiz, Corrada 2018.

²⁵ Piay, Argüelles 2021.

²⁶ Pérez 2002.

²⁷ Carlsson-Brandt 2021.

²⁸ Torres 2005; Acuña, Alles 2002; Alles 2003.

²⁹ Blázquez *et alii* 1993; Regueras 2013.

common and, as expected, are not general studies but rather case-specific analyses³⁰, due to the scarcity of available data. Finally, there are no known studies on sculptures from villas in Galicia and Asturias, although there is a comprehensive publication focusing on the southern region of Gallaecia, specifically in the Duero River valley³¹ and in the Portuguese part of the former territory of *Conventus Bracaraugustanus*³². Once again, the evidence is too sparse. Nevertheless, some statues have been found in rural contexts, originating from villas that have not been identified³³ or rural estates with limited available information³⁴.

4. LUXURY ITEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PRESENCE OF ROMAN VILLAS IN THE NORTHWESTERN IBERIAN PENINSULA

In the 1st century B.C., Varro, in his *De Re Rustica*, suggests that, in his view, a perfect villa is one that combines economic solvency achieved through the productivity of its resources with the beauty provided by the presence of luxurious elements such as mosaics, stuccoes, carpentry, and a library to house one's own work³⁵. Although the discussion surrounding the concept of a villa and its constituent parts is far more complex³⁶, the presence of luxury elements in a rural estate is clear evidence to the wealth and high social status of its owner. This reality became even more evident during the 3rd and 4th centuries, when the upper classes of late Roman society defined their own image through a series of objects that clearly expressed their social identity³⁷.

4.1 The mosaics

Mosaic pavements are undoubtedly one of the most prized elements among Roman elites, who opted for this type of pavement with the aim of showcasing their wealth and social status to their guests³⁸. In Asturias, eight sites with evidence of mosaics have been identified to date: Soto del Barco (Murias de Ponte), Valduno (Las Regueras), Murias de Beloño (Gijón), La Isla (Columga), Veranes (Gijón) Andallón (Las Regueras), Bañugues (Gozón) and Memorana (Pola de Lena). However, in most cases, the presence of mosaics is known only through reports or photographs. In fact, only a few assemblages have been recovered that allow for some conclusions to be drawn, specifically in the villas of Andallón (Las Regueras), Memorana (Pola de Lena), and Veranes (Gijón). Nevertheless, only in the villas of Veranes and Andallón have mosaics been preserved *in situ* (Fig. 4).

In all cases, the mosaics are geometric (although the mosaic from Memorana also includes, floral elements, fish and birds), as no figurative mosaics have been documented anywhere in Asturias to date. The documented examples are polychrome and are dated to the second half of the 4th century AD³⁹. In all cases, the mosaics must be associated with residential spaces, but only at Veranes has their location been clearly identified: in the quadrangular *oe-cus* situated in the northeastern part of the villa and in the *triclinium* located in the southeastern part of the estate. In the case of Andallón, the mosaic was part of one of the rooms accessed from a central courtyard⁴⁰, probably a *triclinium*, whereas the one from Memorana was part of a

³⁰ Loira 2014.

³¹ Regueras 2012.

³² Abraços, Wrench 2022.

³³ Soutelo *et alii* 2020.

³⁴ García y Bellido 1969.

³⁵ Varro, *De Re Rustica*, 3.1.10.

³⁶ Piay, Argüelles 2021, 21-37.

³⁷ Grassigli 2011, 18-19.

³⁸ Neira 2019, 15.

³⁹ Regueras 2013, 15.

⁴⁰ Piay, Argüelles 2021, 197.

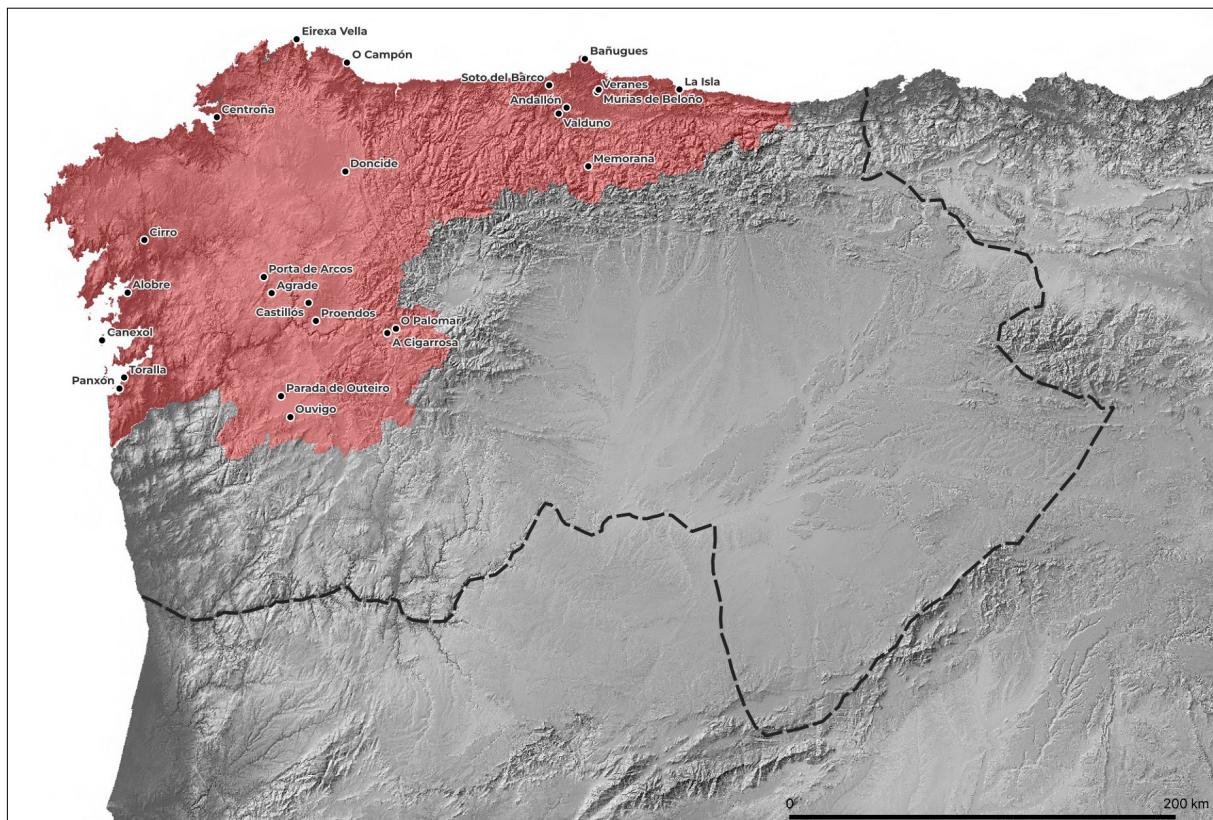


Fig. 4. Distribution of Mosaics in Villas of the Northwestern Iberian Peninsula. Author.

room open to the long corridor⁴¹.

The mosaic design of the villa of Memorana is particularly noteworthy, as it features rows of rectangles framed by a rope-like pattern. Each panel includes distinct motifs such as flowers and stylized vegetal elements, fish among molluscs, paired birds, vases, and cross pâties. No motif is repeated in two consecutive panels. Although this type of composition is already known in Hispanic mosaic art, the decorative scheme—rows of panels separated by rope-like patterns—is uncommon in Late Roman Hispano-Roman mosaics⁴². Unfortunately, no further archaeological interventions have been conducted at this villa, discovered in 1921, since the mid-20th century, while the remains of the mosaic are preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Oviedo (Fig. 5).

At the villa of Veranes, four mosaics are known to be associated with a significant renovation carried out during the second half of the 4th century, which involved the restructuring of certain spaces and the expansion of the buildings⁴³. Although all the mosaics are severely deteriorated and were damaged by the pits of medieval burials, it can be asserted that they are polychrome mosaics featuring geometric motifs for which parallels can be found within the Iberian Peninsula⁴⁴.

At the villa of Andallón, the most significant mosaic in Asturias is preserved, considering its dimensions (11.80 x 3.60 m) and state of conservation (Fig. 6). It is a polychrome mosaic organized with an outer border and a rope-like pattern framing two parallel rows of 11 panels, each containing alternating decorative elements (e.g., two-link knots, four-petaled flowers).

⁴¹ Blázquez 1987, 54; Piay, Argüelles 2021, 221.

⁴² Blázquez 1987, 54-55.

⁴³ Fernández Ochoa *et alii* 2003, 123-124.

⁴⁴ Fernández Ochoa *et alii* 2003, 124-127.

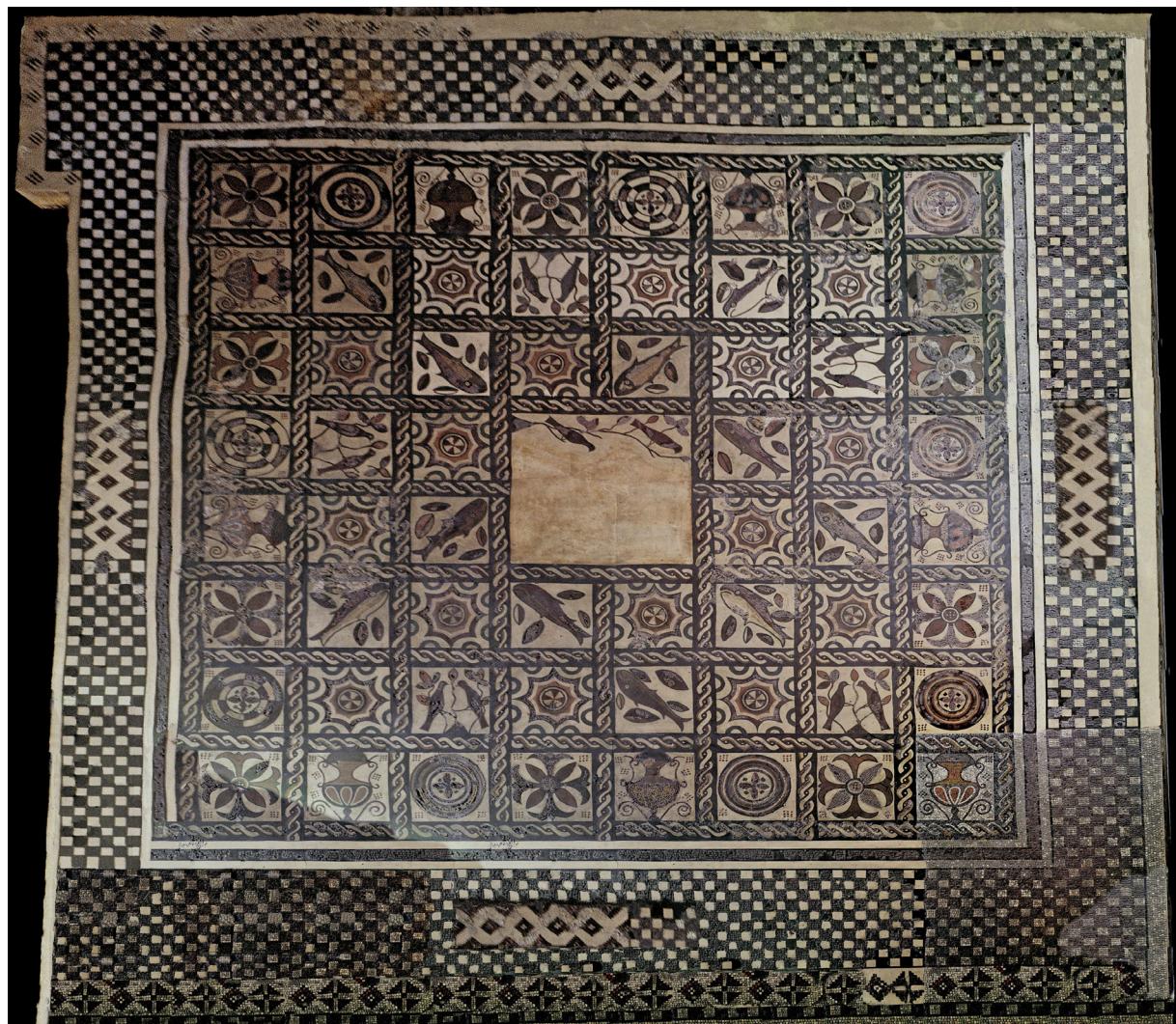


Fig. 5. Mosaic from the villa of Memorana (Vega de Ciego). Archaeological Museum of Oviedo (Album/Oronoz).

The entrance is located on the western side and is clearly marked by a decorative band featuring a diamond enclosing a white swastika cross on a red background⁴⁵. On the eastern side, a chalice in yellow colour outlined in red has been documented. From the cup, two stylized branches emerge, clearly associated with the Bacchic or viticultural meaning of the scene⁴⁶. This interpretation would strengthen the identification of the room as a triclinium and reflect, through wine, the importance of the banquet among the elites of the Roman territory of Asturias. It is no coincidence that this was the central ritual in power relations within late Roman villas⁴⁷.

In the region of Galicia, 17 sites identified as villas are known to be associated with the discovery of mosaics. However, as is the case in Asturias, the presence of mosaic pavements has not been archaeologically documented in most instances, and their existence is based on reports of past discoveries or old photographs. Unfortunately, none of the mosaic fragments found in the identified villas in Galicia have been preserved *in situ* at their original location.

⁴⁵ Muñiz *et alii*, 2022, 213-214.

⁴⁶ Muñiz *et alii* 2021, 26-27.

⁴⁷ Prevosti 2020, 477.



Fig. 6. Mosaic from the Roman villa of Andallón. Photograph provided by Juan Muñiz, director of the excavations at the site.

The most important examples were located in the villas of Eirexa Vella (Bares, A Coruña), A Cigarrosa (A Rúa, Ourense), Panxón (Nigrán, Pontevedra), Parada de Outeiro (Vilar de Santos, Ourense), Porta de Arcos (Rodeiro, Pontevedra), Toralla (Vigo, Pontevedra), and Doincide (Pol, Lugo). The known mosaics are characterized by marine motifs (A Cigarrosa, Panxón, Parada de Outeiro) or geometric designs (Eirexa Vella, Porta de Arcos, Doincide, Toralla). As in Asturias, no figurative mosaics have been identified in Galicia. However, in this latter region, bichrome mosaic pavements have been identified at Castillós, Eirexa Vella, and Doincide⁴⁸. As for the location of the documented mosaics, it is difficult to determine due to the characteristics of the findings. In the case of Eirexa Vella, the mosaic formed part of a gallery open to the sea⁴⁹, while in A Cigarrosa, some of the documented mosaics can be clearly linked to a *natatio*, as can be seen in some of the preserved photographs. In the case of Toralla, the mosaic covered a room with a hypocaust⁵⁰.

The most important mosaic ensemble documented in Galicia to date is undoubtedly that of A Cigarrosa (Fig. 7). Unfortunately, it was almost entirely destroyed after its discovery, with only a few fragments preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Ourense. In total, five polychrome mosaics were found. The first two were discovered in 1969 and covered the floor and walls of two pools. They depicted numerous marine species (fish, molluscs, etc.). The last three were located in 1973 during the construction of a road. Of these three, one was a fragment of the ones already documented in 1969, and it decorated the bottom of a pool. It depicted two dolphins facing each other, with a series of schematic marks simulating the movement of water. The other two, however, were geometric mosaics. One of them had a compositional scheme formed by squares and rhombuses. The other had a decorative scheme based on an eight-pointed star, framed by squares⁵¹. The chronology established for the ensemble of mosaics documented in A Cigarrosa spans from the late 3rd century to the 4th century, that is, the period of maximum diffusion of villas in northwest Hispania. The villa, unfortunately destroyed by the construction of a new road on the left bank of the Sil River, was located on the Via XVIII of the Antonine Itinerary.

Marine motifs are also present in other mosaics in Galicia. Their presence, along with the characteristic 'water fly motif' used to simulate the movement of water, led to the hypothe-

⁴⁸ Alles 2003.

⁴⁹ Ramil *et alii* 2003.

⁵⁰ Torres 2005, 477.

⁵¹ Acuña, Aller 2002, 368-370.



Fig. 7. "Mosaic of A Cigarrosa" (A Rúa, Ourense), after its discovery in 1969. 3rd–4th centuries A.D. Provincial Archaeological Museum of Ourense (Photographic archive).

sis, years ago, of the existence of an itinerant workshop that operated in the northwest of the peninsula⁵². In fact, the same motif is found in other documented mosaics in Galician villas, such as those of Parada de Outeiro and Panxón. The former was discovered in 1950 during renovation work on the parish church of Santa María de Parada de Outeiro. The polychrome mosaic was part of the floor of a pool belonging to a Roman villa, depicting various species of marine fauna (fish, molluscs, sea urchins, etc.), along with the 'water fly motif' (Fig. 8). The realism of the mosaic allows for the identification of the species represented: bream, sea bass, pout, and a dolphin, which occupies the centre of the mosaic. Of the original mosaic, only a fragment is preserved in the Provincial Museum of Ourense⁵³. Like the example found in A Cigarrosa, it likely belonged to a 4th-century villa located near the Via XVIII.

In Panxón (Nigrán, Pontevedra), another polychrome mosaic with representations of marine fauna was discovered in the first half of the 19th century⁵⁴. Only a fragment is preserved, in which the presence of a large fish and two clams can be seen, along with the characteristic 'water fly' previously described. Additionally, in some late 19th-century manuscripts describing the discovery of the mosaic, 'castles and figures' are mentioned, an important reference that confirms the pavement was larger and suggests the possible presence of figurative and architectural elements⁵⁵. Unfortunately, the exact location of the mosaic remains unknown, however it undoubtedly belonged to a Roman villa located on the Galician coast, which likely flourished during the 4th century AD.

In addition to marine motifs, Galicia also has examples of mosaics with geometric motifs. The most interesting among the documented examples is that of the villa of Eirexa Vella, discovered in 1997 during an archaeological excavation on the beach of Bares (Mañón, A Coruña). It is a bichrome mosaic, whose scant remains allow for the reconstruction of its decorative scheme.

⁵² Balil 1975, 261-262.

⁵³ Acuña 1974, 38-39.

⁵⁴ This mosaic has had a particular history that led it to become part of a collection in North America after being auctioned in Madrid. After its trail was completely lost, it was rediscovered in 2018 in New York. Its repatriation to Panxón was only achieved in December 2024, following the payment of 58,000 euros, a story covered by the regional media (for example, *La Voz de Galicia*, December 14, 2024: <https://www.lavozdegalicia.es/noticia/vigo/nigran/2024/12/13/br-mosaico-romano-panxon-regresa-nigran-tras-odisea-internacional/00031734115393466933464.htm>).

⁵⁵ Acuña 2013, 145-146

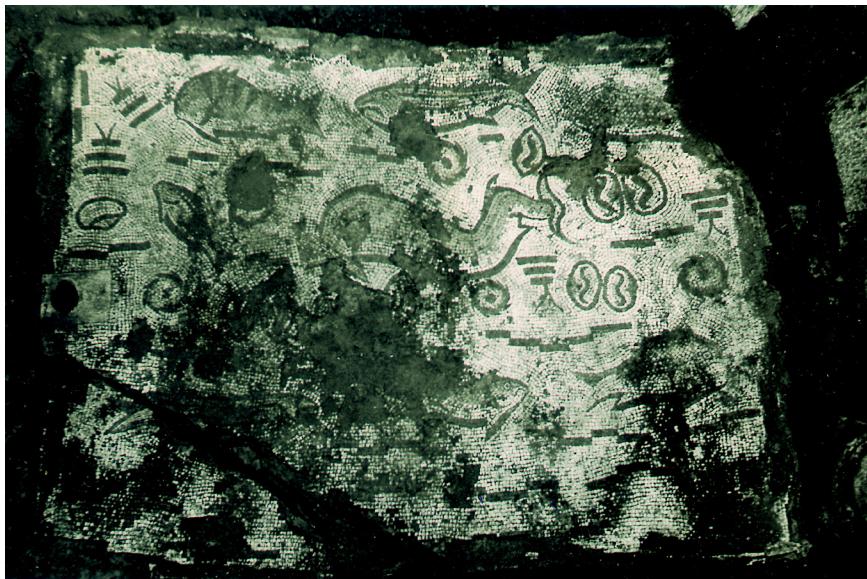


Fig. 8. Mosaic of Parada de Outeiro *in situ* (Vilar de Santos, Ourense). 4th century CE. Provincial Archaeological Museum of Ourense (Photographic archive).

The entirely geometric ensemble represents a series of circles forming four-petalled rosettes, externally outlined by acanthus leaves. To the south of this mosaic, evidence of another was documented, although, unfortunately, its design is unknown⁵⁶.

Other mosaics have also been found at Porta de Arcos (Rodeiro, Pontevedra), Toralla (Vigo, Pontevedra), and Doñide (Pol, Lugo). In the villa of Porta de Arcos, excavated during 1972 and 1973, numerous archaeological materials and structures were discovered, indicating the significance of this site⁵⁷. Two of the documented constructions were paved with bichrome geometric mosaics. Unfortunately, their state of preservation was very poor, and only a small fragment of the ensemble could be recovered, which does not allow for the reconstruction of its decorative scheme. From the scant photographic documentation, it can be perceived that the decoration consisted of a series of concentric circles that probably framed a vegetal element. The Doñide mosaic was bichrome and is known only through photographs and descriptions from the 19th and 20th centuries. It appears to have been associated with the remains of structures and a hypocaust. Its compositional scheme was based on a combination of circles and rectilinear squares, featuring floral and geometric motifs as decorative elements⁵⁸. The Toralla mosaic, discovered during the excavation of the villa in 1992, is polychrome and included geometric and vegetal motifs. It was part of a room with a hypocaust⁵⁹.

In other sites, remains of mosaics have been found, but to date, they have not allowed the identification of decorative schemes. An example is the fragments of a polychrome mosaic located in the villa of Proendos, which are associated with an apsidal structure⁶⁰. On the island of Ons, there are references to another mosaic, known only from a report and a photograph, consisting of 'some lines of white tesserae'⁶¹. In the villa of Castillós⁶², a fragment of a bichrome and geometric mosaic was found in the area where two hypocausts are located. Its compositional scheme, which cannot be fully reconstructed due to the scant documented evidence, included a grid of lines of squares on their vertices.

⁵⁶ Torres 2005, 479-481.

⁵⁷ Carlsson Brandt 2015.

⁵⁸ Alles 2003, 221; Acuña, Alles 2002, 370-372.

⁵⁹ Acuña, Alles 2002, 372-373; Torres 2005, 478-479.

⁶⁰ Toucido *et alii* 2021, 50.

⁶¹ Acuña, Alles 2002, 372.

⁶² Arias 1992, 231-232; Acuña, Alles 2002, 367-368.

4.2 The wall paintings

Thirteen of the documented villas in Galicia and Asturias have yielded remains of mural paintings (Fig. 9). In most cases, these are isolated references to the discovery of painted stucco fragments, which provide little more information than confirming the presence of a luxury element in the villas of the northwest. This is the case with the Asturian villas of La Isla (Columba), Serín (Gijón), Veranes (Gijón), Priañes (Siero), or Murias de Beloño (Gijón), although in the latter case, abundant remains of paintings with geometric motifs in red, yellow, white, and grey tones were found⁶³. In Galicia, fragmentary remains of paintings were located in the villas of Area (Viveiro, Lugo), Agrade (Chantada, Lugo), Ouvigo (Os Blancos, Ourense), Adro Vello (O Grove, Pontevedra), and Cirro (Brión, A Coruña), but they have not allowed for the reconstruction of decorative schemes.

However, the paintings preserved in some of these villas is of greater significance. Two cases are particularly noteworthy: the villa of Andallón (Las Regueras, Asturias) and the villa of Cambre (A Coruña).

The villa of Cambre provides some interesting data and has also been the subject of a specific study on the mural painting fragments (Fig. 10)⁶⁴. The remains of the villa were documented in 1998 during the construction of a block of buildings opposite the church of Santa María⁶⁵. The archaeological excavations carried out in 1998 led to the discovery of the *frigidarium* and *latrinae* of a *balneum*, which formed part of a villa built in the 4th century⁶⁶. The paintings were found in the *frigidarium* area, where a painted vaulted ceiling was documented, featuring marine fauna motifs with great naturalism on a bluish-grey background. These paintings would undoubtedly have been reflected in the pool, recreating a marine environment for the users of the *balneum*. The walls displayed marbled imitations, friezes, and an architectural motif⁶⁷. The study of the recovered evidence has allowed for the documentation of several marine species, including fish that may correspond to a tuna, an eel, and a carp. Several molluscs were also identified, including a clam and a scallop⁶⁸. The different species, depicted with a wide range of colours, are typical of Atlantic waters.

As for the architectural motif, which is reflected beneath the narrow part of the vault against a red background, it depicts a continuous arcade of ashlar blocks that could represent a port⁶⁹. The villa has been dated from the mid-4th century AD to the end of the 5th century.

The villa of Andallón offers enormous potential for the study of mural paintings. Excavations carried out from 2018 to the present have documented different sections of a villa dated to the 3rd century, which featured mosaic floors and, also, paintings. In some areas, these paintings are preserved at heights of over 1 metre. To date, no comprehensive study has been conducted on the recovered mural painting fragments, but publications about the site mention data that reveal the significance of the collection. The documented wall paintings were executed using both the *al secco* and *fresco* techniques, and include vegetal and geometric elements (Fig. 11). In addition, red elements have been identified, drawn over an ochre background. The best-preserved areas feature lines resembling gathered drapery and feline silhouettes⁷⁰. To prevent the collapse of the walls with paintings, the excavation of areas with wall decoration exceeding 1m in height has not yet been completed. However, future interventions may allow for the consolidation of the structures and the acquisition of further information.

⁶³ Jordá 1957.

⁶⁴ Loira 2014.

⁶⁵ Loira 2014, 240.

⁶⁶ Naveiro *et alii* 2008.

⁶⁷ Loira 2014, 241.

⁶⁸ Loira 242-244.

⁶⁹ Loira 242-244.

⁷⁰ Muñiz *et alii* 2022, 214-215.

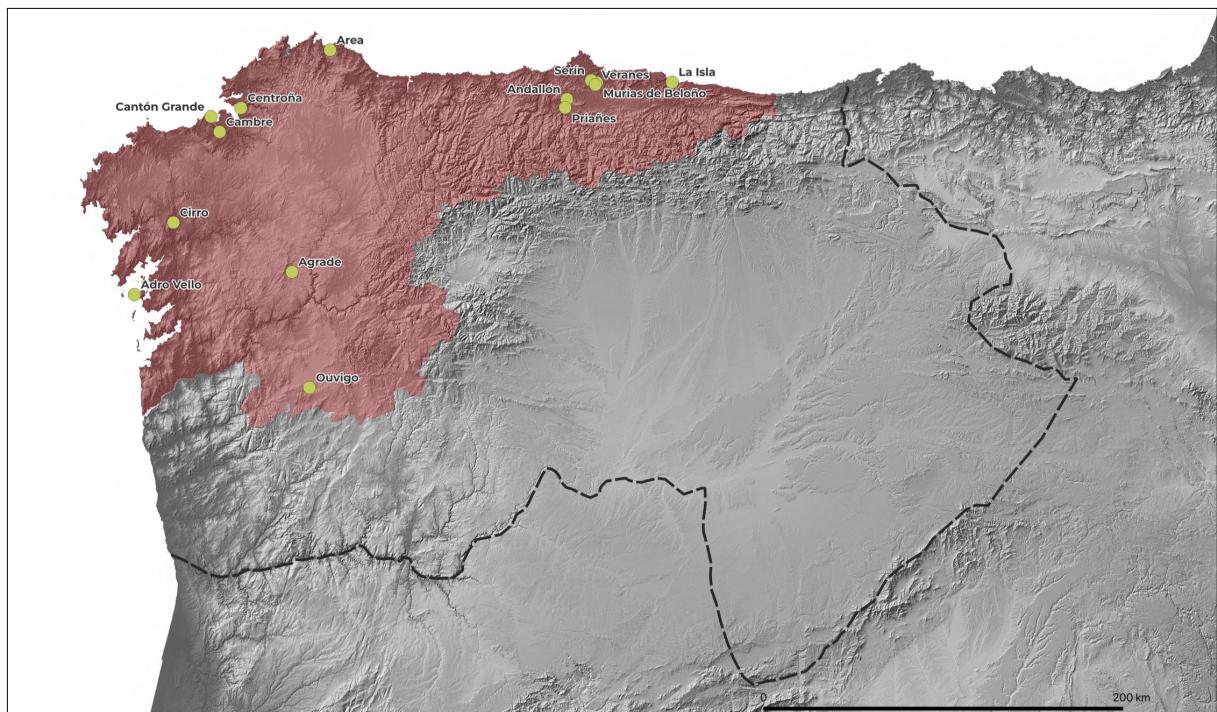


Fig. 9. Distribution of Wall paintings in Villas of the Northwestern Iberian Peninsula. Author.

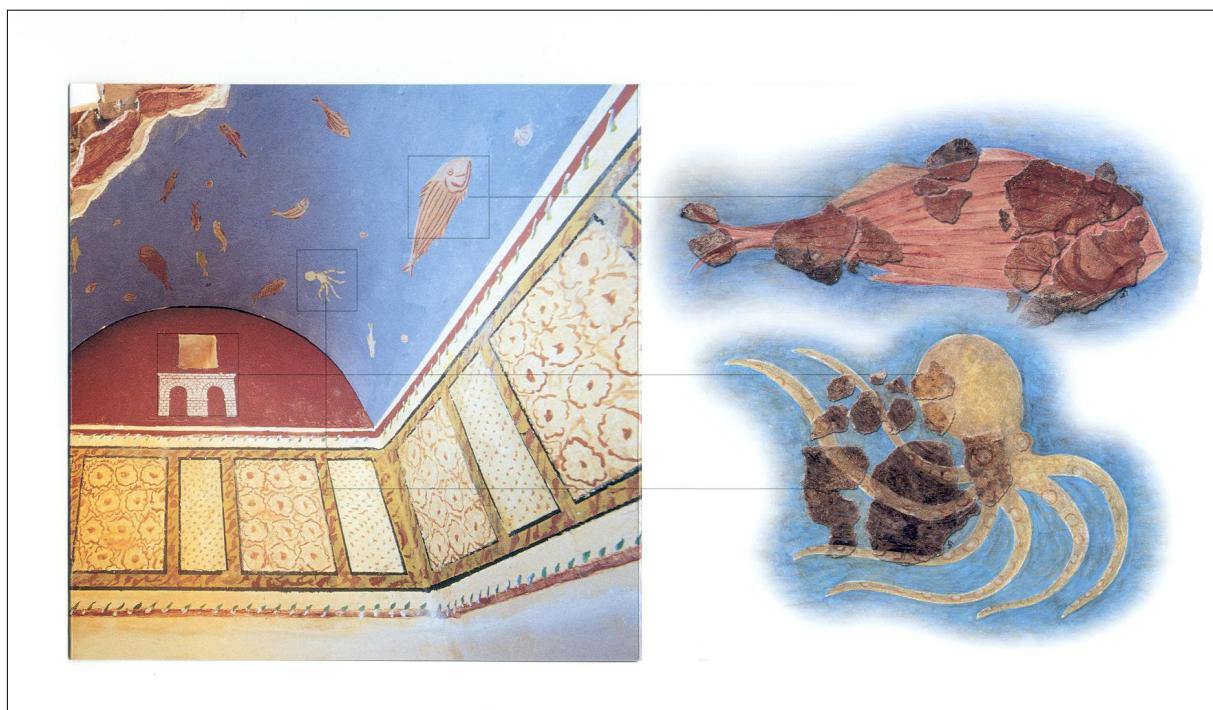


Fig. 10. "Villa of Cambre" (Cambre, A Coruña), 4th century A.D. Reconstructive hypothesis of the decorative scheme of a room (by Juan Naveiro López).



Fig. 11. Wall paintings discovered in the Roman villa of Andallon (Las Regueras, Asturias) in 2019 (Photo by Sergio Ríos González).

Among the other villas where wall paintings have been documented, the villa of Centroña (Pontedeume, A Coruña) stands out. This site has frequently been mentioned in Spanish literature on villas because it is considered practically the only structure discovered in Hispania with a colonnaded portico located on a cliff with views of the sea⁷¹. Among the various remains found at this villa, numerous fragments of paintings were documented. The elements in question consisted of uniform red plinths, friezes, and bands, combined with wavy lines in red and green, along with brown lines adorned with small red and green leaves. Other ornamental stucco elements were also found, such as a Corinthian capital with remnants of reddish paint⁷². The villa of O Cantón Grande (A Coruña) should also be mentioned, a site investigated during a rescue excavation, where painted coatings were discovered on the plinths of various rooms, as well as collapsed fragments from the upper parts. Although the remains do not allow for the restoration of the villa's decorative programme, they do enable the identification of a series of geometric motifs (circles, lines, dots, etc.) and possible marble imitations. Regarding the pigments used, the colours ranged from yellow to red, greens, greys, blues, white, and black⁷³. Of particular interest is a Christian-themed motif located on one of the plinths, preserved in a fragment measuring 120 cm x 48 cm, depicting a circle with two axes in a Greek cross pattern marking the diameter, with the centre emphasised by a kind of circle in the same red paint on a pale yellow background⁷⁴. It is likely to be a schematic Chi-Rho, which would confirm the arrival of Christianity to the villa at some indeterminate point during the final centuries of its chronology (1st-6th centuries)⁷⁵.

⁷¹ Fernández Castro 1982, 135.

⁷² Luengo 1962, 12-13.

⁷³ Loira 2024, 13.

⁷⁴ Loira 2024, 14-15.

⁷⁵ López, Vázquez 2007.

4.3 The sculptures

When analysing the sculptures documented in Galicia and Asturias, the evidence remains even more limited (Fig. 12). In fact, to date, no sculpture has been located in Asturias that can be associated with the villas detected in its territory. In Galicia, although some sculptures have been documented, none have been discovered during excavations carried out with archaeological methodology. In most cases, the connection to the residences of wealthy rural landowners is based solely on the location of these finds outside the urban context and is, therefore, probable but not certain.

One of the most striking cases concerns the location of a Lunensis marble bust in Abegondo (Os Barreiros, A Coruña), whose original context is unknown⁷⁶. The poor condition of the piece makes it difficult to establish a precise chronology, and it possibly represents a young man (Fig. 13). However, based on its stylistic analysis, it has been preliminarily dated to the 2nd century AD and associated with a private residential space, possibly a villa⁷⁷. Regardless of the assigned chronology, what is truly important for the argument presented here is that this sculpture would reinforce the idea of the arrival of luxury goods to the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula. These types of objects were associated with a specific clientele of large landowners, who displayed them in their residences as items of ostentation, self-representation, identity, and wealth (Soutelo *et alii* 2020, 281).

The largest documented sculpture in Galicia to date is the group of 'Dionysus and Ampelos,' which was discovered in 1964 in A Muradella (Fig. 14) (Mourazos, Verín, Ourense). The accidental discovery of the statue led to the excavation of several trenches in 1966, which revealed Roman construction materials, remains of walls, column shafts, and the feet and legs of two figures belonging to another sculpture made of limestone⁷⁸. All these findings suggest the presence of a villa, likely located near the Via XVIII of the Antonine Itinerary and the important urban centre of Aquae Flaviae.

The freestanding statue represents Dionysus with a satyr and reaches a height of 0.93m, although it should be noted that it is incomplete and its surface is heavily eroded. It is made of marble and may have been imported, although a local production for an educated owner cannot be ruled out⁷⁹. Its dating was initially established between the 2nd and 3rd centuries due to the proximity of an Iron Age hillfort near the site of the discovery⁸⁰, but it is more likely to be later, with its commission coinciding with the peak diffusion of *villae* in the northwestern Iberian Peninsula (late 3rd and 4th centuries). Despite the challenges posed by the Dionysus and Ampelos group, its importance for this study lies in that the presence of this sculpture symbolizes the culture of its owner, who, as a member of the aristocracy, was distinguished by access to a certain education that was not available to everyone, thus providing class coherence to the late Roman aristocracy⁸¹.

In San Salvador de Seiró (Vilar de Barrio, Ourense), about 2 km from the Via XVIII that connected Bracara Augusta with Asturica Augusta, a small bronze statue measuring 17.4 cm in height was discovered in the first quarter of the 20th century. The statue represents Mercury with his usual attributes (winged petasos and a purse in his right hand) (Fig. 15). At the same site where this statue was found, a bronze tripod depicting two dogs was also discovered, although there is no consensus on whether this tripod was part of the statue of Mercury or not⁸².

⁷⁶ Soutelo *et alii* 2020, 274.

⁷⁷ Soutelo *et alii* 2020, 282.

⁷⁸ Taboada 1969, 2024.

⁷⁹ Díez 2006, 16.

⁸⁰ García y Bellido 1969, 30.

⁸¹ Scott 2004.

⁸² García y Bellido 1969, 32-33.

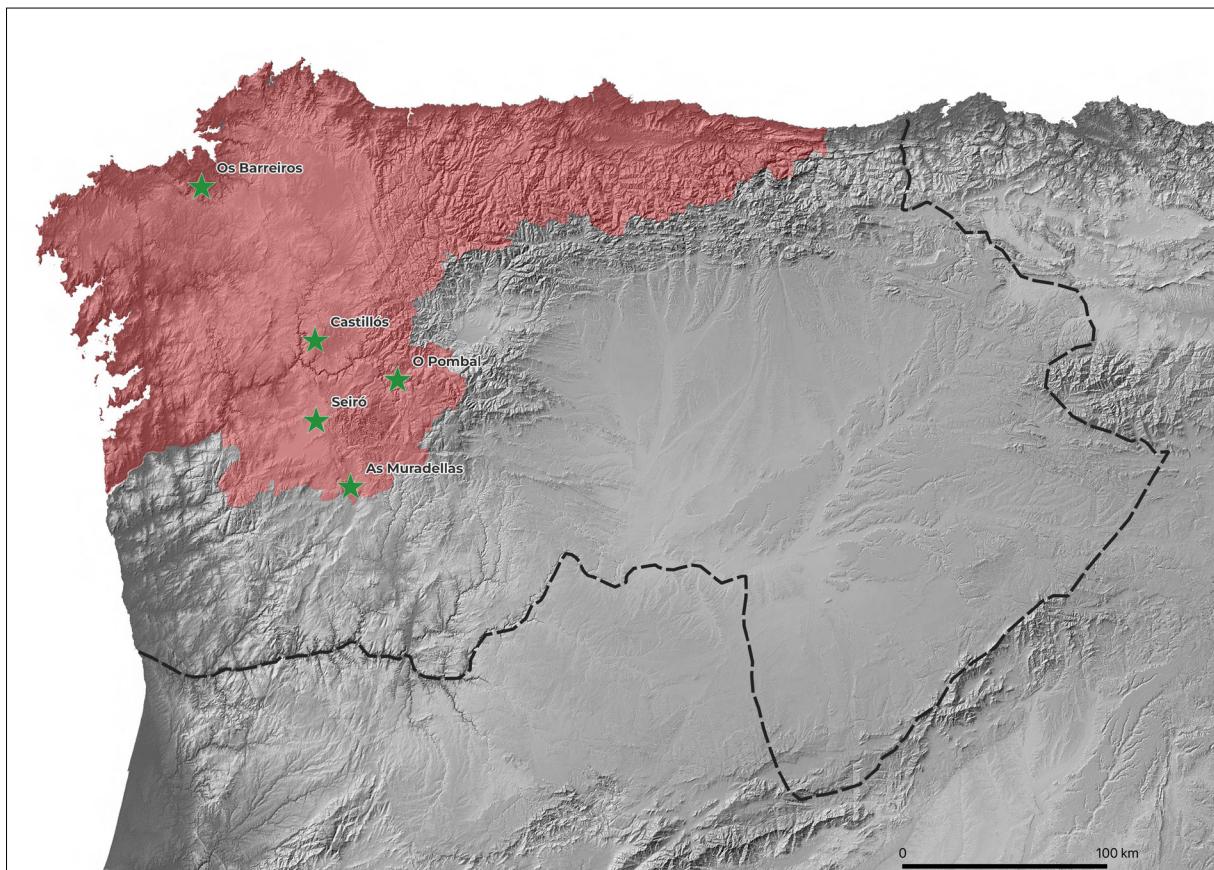


Fig. 12. Distribution of Sculptures in Villas of the Northwestern Iberian Peninsula. Author.



Fig. 13. Marble bust of Abegondo. Photo by A. Erias Martínez (González Soutelo et alii 2020, 276, fig. 2a.)

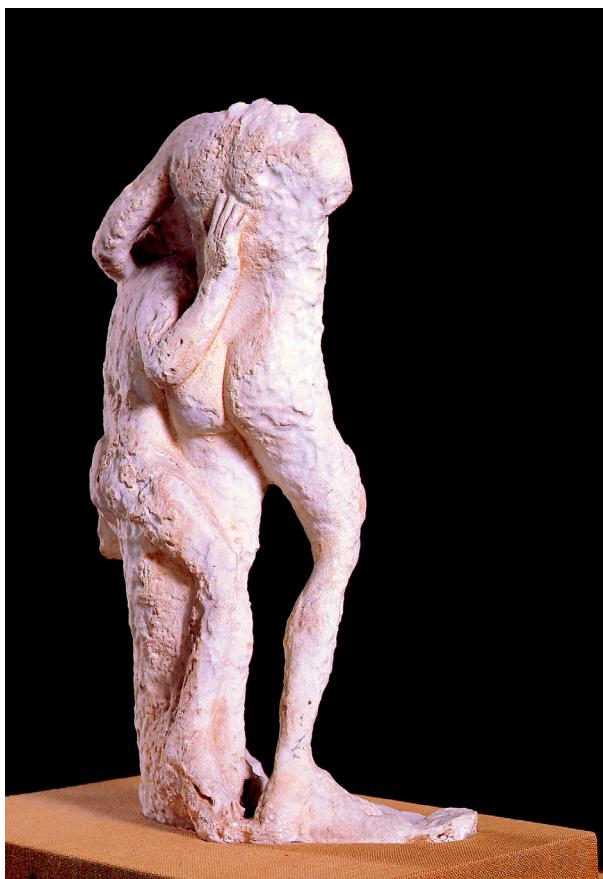


Fig. 14. Dionysus and Ampelos (Verín, Ourense). 3rd century AD. Provincial Archaeological Museum of Ourense (Photos by Fernando del Río).

The fact that the statue was found out of context and the long temporal persistence of such specimens complicates its dating⁸³, although there are no strong reasons to preliminarily date it to the period of the diffusion of *villae* in northwestern Hispania. It may have been part of the *lararium* of a private residence, possibly a villa located in this area.

The site of O Pombal (Freixedo, A Rúa, Ourense) is associated with the discovery of another bronze statue⁸⁴. It was found alongside a series of construction remains and Roman coins, which may have been part of a villa⁸⁵. It could represent an offeror wearing a toga, holding a container with flowers in his left hand⁸⁶. It is perhaps an imported piece intended to be part of the *lararium* of a private residence⁸⁷.

Lastly, a granite bust, perfectly sculpted, should be mentioned. It was discovered in 1928 at the Castillós site (Pantón, Lugo), where its location inside a tomb is suggested, albeit with reservations. However, the sculpture may have been part of a villa located in the area. In fact, this interesting site, dated between the 1st and 5th centuries, is linked to a necropolis, as well as numerous findings, including bases and shafts of columns, construction materials, remains of mosaics, two hypocausts, and some inscriptions⁸⁸. Unfortunately, the lack of systematic excavations has prevented clarification of the site's function, which has been interpreted as a villa in the late imperial period, but it may have served as a *mansio* during the early empire⁸⁹.

⁸³ Acuña Fernández 1977, 206-207.

⁸⁴ García y Bellido 1969, 30-31.

⁸⁵ Lorenzo 1956, 288.

⁸⁶ García y Bellido 1969, 31.

⁸⁷ Lorenzo 1956, 289.

⁸⁸ Arias 1992.

⁸⁹ Arias 1992, 241.



Fig. 15. Mercury of Villar de Barrio. Provincial Archaeological Museum of Ourense (Photos by Fernando del Río).

CONCLUSIONS

A preliminary prosopographical analysis based on written sources and epigraphy situates a number of individuals belonging to the upper classes of Late Roman society within the territory of Gallaecia. Their very presence is indicative of the development experienced by this province during the 4th and 5th centuries. A similar conclusion emerges from the evidence provided by archaeology, as during this period, the construction or monumentalization of the villas documented in Gallaecia is confirmed.

Although the study of this type of archaeological site has not yet seen significant development in the present-day regions of Galicia and Asturias, the quantity of evidence known through chance finds, reports by scholars, or archaeological interventions confirms their presence and distribution. Undoubtedly, one of the key elements for securely identifying a villa is the discovery of luxury items (mosaics, wall pavements, statues, etc.) in a rural context. Moreover, the very presence of such luxury items serves as evidence of the existence of members of the upper classes of Late Roman society in the northwestern corner of the Iberian Peninsula.

As in other parts of the Roman Empire, it can be deduced that the territory of the present-day regions of Galicia and Asturias was fully integrated into the dynamics that characterized the Roman Empire during the second half of the third century and the fourth century. It was during this period that the display of wealth and property, expressed through the grandeur of the villa and an elevated lifestyle, became the most effective means of demonstrating power. Ostentation itself had become the emblematic measure of the intensity of this power⁹⁰.

⁹⁰ Grassili 2011, 236.

From the evidence analysed, however, certain specific characteristics of the geographical area under study can be derived, which will evidently need to be confirmed in the future as research on the villas in the northwest progresses. Since these elements are essential for confirming the identification of a site located in a rural context as a *villa*, their presence has been instrumental in shaping the distribution map of villas in Galicia and Asturias, which has been incorporated into this study (see **Fig. 3**).

Regarding the mosaics, it can be stated that the pavements discovered to date suggest a preference among the elites for polychromy and for the depiction of geometric motifs and marine contexts featuring various species of fish and molluscs. The preference for marine elements in mosaic representations could be linked to the importance of the sea for the economy of the elites in the northwestern Iberian Peninsula, as is well confirmed by the existence of numerous villas located on beaches or in coves with good anchorages, docking areas, and slipways. The maritime nature of these settlements should, in turn, be associated with fishing and the fish salting industry⁹¹.

Mythological or everyday life scenes have not been documented, indicating that a distinctly aniconic character seems to define the mosaics of the villas identified in Galicia and Asturias. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize the fragmentary or incomplete state of the known examples.

Regarding wall paintings, the evidence documented to date is extremely scarce, and consequently, there are virtually no specific or comprehensive studies on the remains. The excavations at the villa of Andallón offer an excellent opportunity for analysis too, as in some cases, paintings over one meter in height have been preserved⁹².

At the villa of Cambre, it has been confirmed that marine motifs were also favoured by the elites when decorating the walls of their residences, while at the villa of O Cantón, a cruciform motif painted on one of the walls could represent one of the earliest pieces of evidence of Christianity in the northwestern Iberian Peninsula⁹³.

Examples of statuary are also very scarce, and their connection to the villas documented in the northwestern Hispanic region is probable but not always certain. The majority of the documented examples are concentrated in the southern part of present-day Galicia, in an area with a high density of Roman period sites clustered around the Via XVIII and in the northern section of the Via XVII of the Antonine Itinerary, which connected Bracara Augusta and Asturica Augusta. This situation contrasts with the evidence recorded in other Hispania provinces⁹⁴, as well as with what is known about the southern territory of Gallaecia, particularly in the Duero Valley area, where significant evidence has been identified⁹⁵.

The lesser presence of luxury elements documented in Galicia and Asturias aligns with the fact that the level of monumentalization in the villas identified to date is lower than that observed in villas studied in other parts of the former Roman province of Gallaecia. This is particularly evident when compared to the most well-known examples, such as the Villa of La Olmeda (Pedrosa de la Vega, Palencia) or the Villa of Almenara de Adaja (Valladolid), among many others⁹⁶. Furthermore, the layouts of the villas known so far in Galicia and Asturias do not reach the levels of complexity seen in the estates excavated in the Duero Valley. However, it is important to emphasise the limited development of research in both regions.

⁹¹ Naveiro 1991, 136. The importance of the fish salting industry in the northwestern Iberian Peninsula is gradually being confirmed by the research project *Galfish - Salt and Fish Salting in Ancient Gallaecia: Looking for the Origins of the Galician Canned Fish Industry*, which focuses on the study of factories for the processing of marine resources along the Atlantic coast of ancient Gallaecia (Fernández *et al.* 2021, 138).⁸ Ravennate IV, 45, 318-322 (Schnetz 1940: 82).

⁹² Muñiz *et alii* 2022, 214-215.

⁹³ Loira 2024.

⁹⁴ Regueras 2012, 23-29.

⁹⁵ Regueras 2012, 29-46.

⁹⁶ Regueras 2007, 58-59.

In any case, the analysis conducted on the northwestern Iberian Peninsula provides sufficient evidence for the existence of wealthy landowners who possessed the economic means to acquire the luxurious elements characteristic of Roman residential architecture during this period. Moreover, the research conducted enables the formulation of several preliminary historical conclusions, contributing to a broader reconstruction of developments in the northwestern area of the Iberian Peninsula. The evidence suggests that, initially, the territory was structured around the three principal urban centres of the Augustan period: *Lucus Augusti*, *Bracara Augusta*, and *Asturica Augusta*. Subsequently, the establishment of the road network facilitated the emergence and dissemination of the *villae*⁹⁷.

In fact, the villas documented in Galicia are mostly organised around the vias XVIII, XIX, and XX of the Antonine Itinerary⁹⁸, and most of the villas situated in Asturias are located in the central part of the region, near the Via connecting *Asturica Augusta*–*Lucus Asturum*–*Lucus Augusti* mentioned in the *Anonymous of Ravenna* (in the Asturian case)⁹⁹.

In line with developments in other parts of the empire, by the late 3rd century, following the reforms of Emperor Diocletian, the villas located in the northwesternmost part of the province of Gallaecia likely played a crucial role in structuring the territory¹⁰⁰.

Regarding the identity of the owners of the villas in the northwest, these were likely, in the first instance, Roman citizens connected to the administration of the territory and gold mining operations. Later, they may have included army veterans who returned to their place of origin after completing their years of service¹⁰¹.

Future research

The interpretative framework presented here should be regarded as a working hypothesis. While it is considered consistent with all the available evidence, it will need to be confirmed in the future. To achieve this, it will be essential to undertake new archaeological investigations that could refine or adjust these conclusions. Furthermore, this study should be expanded to incorporate additional archaeological evidence not addressed in this work (e.g. hypocausts and architectural elements like columns and capitals), which also serve as indicators of the presence of members of the upper classes of Late Roman society in northwestern Hispania. This study should also be complemented by a specific analysis of the architecture of villas in the northwestern Iberian Peninsula. The layout and architectural choices are also essential when assessing the social status of the owners during a specific period. Lastly, further investigation into the development of the northwestern Iberian Peninsula during Late Antiquity is needed.

In any case, the economic development of the northwestern Iberian Peninsula during the 4th and 5th centuries is becoming increasingly evident. Current studies conducted by various researchers trained at Galician universities point in the same direction: the northwestern Iberian Peninsula experienced unprecedented prosperity during this period. This is archaeologically evidenced by the presence of materials brought through long-distance trade networks¹⁰², the demand among elites for luxury goods such as marble¹⁰³, and the presence and dissemination of villas in the region¹⁰⁴. The perspective, therefore, for confirming the hypotheses put forward in this work is promising.

⁹⁷ Lobelle, Quiroga 2000, 75–76.

⁹⁸ *Itinerarium Provinciarum* (Cuntz 1929, 65–66).

⁹⁹ *Ravennate IV*, 45, 318–322 (Schnetz 1940, 82).

¹⁰⁰ Coarelli, Torelli 2000, 167.

¹⁰¹ Piay, Argüelles 2024, 6.

¹⁰² Fernández 2014.

¹⁰³ Soutelo 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Piay 2024.

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