The Asturia of Valerius: Bierzo at the End of the Seventh Century

***

CÉLINE MARTIN
UNIVERSITY OF BORDEAUX-MONTAIGNE

ABSTRACT

This essay firstly presents the Bierzo region as a geographical unit: a large basin surrounded by mountains on almost all its sides. It consequently can be described as a dual region, consisting both of fertile and relatively low areas endowed with a favorable microclimate, and highlands and slopes subject to harsh climatic conditions. Such a duality is starkly apparent in the writings of Valerius of Bierzo (c. AD 630-695) and must be understood as much in a concrete, practical sense – for these were the physical conditions in which he was living – as well as religiously and spiritually. Valerius’s eremitical spirituality was by no means original in the seventh century, although the region in which he led most of his life certainly was suitable to forming his binary worldview.

Seventh-century Bierzo had inherited most of the Roman framework of public roads and settlements. These are the concern of the second section of this essay: across Bierzo at least one Roman road joined Asturica, to the East, with Bracara in Gallaetia; there may have been another itinerary between Asturica and Bergidum, capital of the region, but scholars today tend to doubt the existence of two different roads. The other
places named by Valerius are a castrum (*Castrum Petrense*) and several monasteries, the locations of which are in some cases quite certain and in others still unclear.

The last section of this essay deals with Asturia as an administrative entity. Although included in the Diocletianic province of Gallaetia, it has been claimed, since the 1970s, that Asturia was promoted to a new independent province some time in the seventh century; the main argument for this theory has been taken precisely from Valerius’s works. However, such an idea is insufficiently supported, whether by Valerius’s writings or by the few other pieces of available evidence: the lack of a stronger foundation for the theory should prevent scholars from considering Asturia, Valerius’s patria, as anything other than an ecclesiastical diocese.

**ESSAY**

“I was once a most unworthy sinner. Born in the province of Asturia, I spent my youth devoted to the enticements of the world.”¹ Thus opens the hermit Valerius of Bierzo’s first autobiographical work, written probably in the final few years of the seventh century.² Having stated his place of birth, which is, in late antiquity, a mandatory step in presenting oneself, Valerius then dedicates a few words to his mundane *adulescentia,*

---

¹ Valerius of Bierzo, *Ordo Querimoniae,* 1=I.1: “Dum olim ego, indignissimus peccator, Asturiensis prouincie indigena, intra adulescentie tempora mundialibus inlecebris occupatus [...].” Despite following the latest edition by Díaz y Díaz, I will provide here two references, the first from Díaz and the second from the edition by Aherne since Díaz y Díaz changed the usual division of Valerius’s works in chapters and paragraphs. For the two editions see: Valerius of Bierzo, *Ordo Querimoniae; Replicatio Sermonum; Residuum,* in *Valerio del Bierzo. Su persona. Su obra,* ed. Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz (León, 2006), 246-322 and *Valerio of Bierzo, an Ascetic of the Late Visigothic Period,* ed. Consuelo Maria Aherne (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1949).

and the rest of his three autobiographical pieces to his religious life.\textsuperscript{3} All of the latter, approximately fifty years,\textsuperscript{4} took place in the region nowadays known as Bierzo, from the name \textit{Bergidum} (Cacabelos, León), which was its main settlement in Roman and post-Roman times. In reading his autobiography, one gets the impression that Valerius was always on the move, except for the last period of his life when he ceased to drift on stormy waters, his poor craft shaken from one inauspicious place to another (the sea-metaphor is a constant one throughout his writing), and finally found a peaceful port to rest. Paradoxically, and by contrast with his personal model, Fructuosus of Braga,\textsuperscript{5} Valerius’s constant movement seems to have been circumscribed to a small area which stood at the root of his identity as a hermit.\textsuperscript{6} I will try to describe here the peculiar environment that shaped his religious experience not only as a geographical unit, but also as an administrative entity, although, as a hermit, Valerius seems to have cared little about the administrative side of life.

Located in northwest Spain, Bierzo marks the geographical transition between the Leonese meseta and the Galician Massif. It consists of a large sink and a mountainous area, usually identified, respectively, as Low Bierzo and High Bierzo. Low Bierzo corresponds to the large basin of the Sil River, surrounded on almost all sides by

\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Ordo Querimoniae (OQ), Replicatio Sermonum (RS), Residuum (Res.), ed. Díaz y Díaz, 246-322.} The autobiographical intention of the work is debatable, see: Roger Collins, “The ‘autobiographical’ works of Valerius of Bierzo: their structure and purpose,” in \textit{Antigüedad y Cristianismo III, Los Visigodos, Historia y Civilización} (Murcia, 1986): 425-42.

\textsuperscript{4} From 648/651 to some point near 700. See Martín, “Valerio del Bierzo,” 202.

\textsuperscript{5} On Fructuosus’s emulation by Valerius see José Carlos Martín, “La biografía dentro de la autobiografía: el caso de Valerio del Bierzo (siglo VII),” in \textit{Las biografías griega y latina como género literario. De la antigüedad al Renacimiento. Algunas calas}, ed. V. Valcárcel Martínez (Vitoria, Anejos de Veleia 26, 2009), 341.

\textsuperscript{6} Most of the places mentioned by Valerius seem to have lain within one day’s walk (on this see: Pablo C. Díaz, “Valerio del Bierzo: la equívoca marginalidad de un asceta tardocristiano,” in \textit{Marginales sociales y religiosos en la Hispania tardorromana y visigoda}, ed. Raúl González Salmero [Salamancan-Madrid: Signifier Libros, 2012], 293-315). That said, it is quite probable that, while still a member of the lay aristocracy, he spent time in the capital of the realm, Toledo, and may have traveled to other places around the Iberian Peninsula.
mountain ranges peaking at some 2,000 meters: to the west, the Sierras of Ancares and Caurel, to the north, the Cantabrian Range, and to the east and south, the Mountains of León. Turning to climatic features, Bierzo divides into two dissimilar areas. The highlands undergo a kind of oceanic climate that entails cool summers and cold, windy winters with abundant snowfall. Low Bierzo enjoys a slightly continentalized Mediterranean climate: minimal temperatures are moderate and precipitation, although more abundant than in the inland regions of Spain, provides a suitable environment for flourishing communities. Accordingly, vegetation varies significantly between High Bierzo, on the one hand, and, on the other, the fertile Sil basin and some sheltered areas in the east: the bottom of the steep valleys and parts of the more exposed slopes, sometimes laid out in bench-terraces. In high areas, woods of oaks, alders, ashes and yews, followed, up the slope, by broom, holly, heather and gorse, and finally the bare rock. Valerius claims he founded his first hermitage near Castro Pedroso at the vegetation-less level or close to it, on a desolate mountaintop. In Low Bierzo and in clusters of micro-climates scattered throughout the highlands, humans could cultivate vegetables, beans, vineyards and all kind of fruit trees; they could raise stock, horses, oxen and goats, as Valerius admits to doing on several occasions.

8 The development of terraces could have begun in the seventh century, which may be the process that Valerius is describing in RS, 16=IX.2 (Pablo C. Díaz, “Percepción del espacio y la naturaleza en Valerio del Bierzo,” in Estudios de Historia Antigua en Homenaje al Prof. Manuel Abilio Rabanal Alonso, ed. Juan Manuel Abascal Palazón and Antonio Caballos Rufino (León: Editorial Universidad de Sevilla, 2012), 395.
9 Mañanes (El Bierzo prerromano y romano, 69-71) uses toponymy for a tentative description of the vegetal landscape of Bierzo in Roman times. See also Díaz, “Percepción del espacio y la naturaleza en Valerio del Bierzo,” 392-93.
10 OQ, 2=I.2: “[...] repperi saxeum locum, Deo sacratum, eminente celsitudine in montis cacumine situm, ab humana habitacione desertum, austeritate immense sterilitas aretensem, cuncte argis densitate detersum, nulla nemoris amenitate uerantem neque herbarum fecunditate conspicuum [...]”.
11 RS 19=XL.2 and 24=IV.X.
Bierzo is, therefore, a dual, starkly contrasted land, a duality that Valerius emphasizes each time he refers to his surroundings, and to which he bestows a spiritual meaning. His whole narrative navigates between descriptions of the wuthering hell of the rocky Bierzo mountains, where non-prepared ascetics may not outlive one harsh winter, thus providing Valerius with a frozen corpse to meditate upon oncoming death, and heavenly gardens full of scents and colors, anticipating in this life the rewards of the next. Valerius’s eremitical spirituality may have been of little originality within the late antique Mediterranean world, yet the region where he lived certainly fit his deeply binary world view.

Seventh-century Bierzo must have inherited most of the Roman framework of public ways and settlements. The nearest city, Asturica Augusta (Astorga), was related by road through the High Bierzo area to the other main settlement, about seventy kilometers to the west, Bergidum, in the Sil valley, and further west to Bracara Augusta (Braga). Attending to the Antonine Itinerary, on this section three different routes (XVIII, XIX and XX) joined Asturica to Bergidum. However, three itineraries do not necessarily mean there would be more than one material roadway through Bierzo, especially since all three indicate the same partial distances between the mansiones Asturica,

---

13 RS, 9=IV.2.
14 Delaplace has shown how, in eremitic literature, such a system of oppositions between hostile mountains and bucolic gardens goes back to the Roman cultural universe; however, the eremitical project consists in growing a paradisiacal garden at the very heart of hellish mountains, which to an educated Roman were dreadful, unvisited places (Christine Delaplace, “Aux origines du ‘désert’ en Occident. Éremitisme et premières fondations monastiques en Gaule et en Italie aux V°-VI° siècles ap. J.-C.,” in Religion et montagne en Europe de l’Antiquité à nos jours [Paris, 2005], 217-26).
15 Strictly speaking, one should draw a difference between the high imperial foundation of Bergidum Flavium (Cacabelos) and the pre-Roman Bergidum (Castro Ventosa), a hilltop settlement on the opposite bank of the Cúa River (Mañanes, El Bierzo prerromano y romano, 96-103; José A. Balboa de Paz, “Castro Ventosa en la Edad Media,” in Actas de las Jornadas sobre Castroventosa, Cacabelos (León), 4-6 oct. 2002 [Cacabelos, 2003], 131-61).
16 José María Roldán Hervás, Itineraria Hispana. Fuentes antiguas para el estudio de las vías romanas en la península ibérica (Valladolid, 1975), 71-77.
Interamnium and Bergidum. Scholars have often believed in the existence of two different Roman roads from Astorga to Cacabelos, a southern one, roughly following Santiago’s Road through Mount Irago and Foncebadón, and a northern one, labeled Vía Nova by milestones, through the pass of Manzanal and the valleys of Tremor and Boeza, following the old “Nacional 6” route. Still, if many material remains of the road corroborate the latter, the former, technically a worse route, is attested mainly from the finds of milestones, which are questionable evidence, being easy to move from their original location. For that reason, a recent work has cast doubts on the very existence of a duplicity of routes through Bierzo, preferring to take into account only the Vía Nova. This is an important point, since Valerius alludes to a very busy “public road” beneath his Castro Pedroso hermitage.

Castrum Petrense, the place near which Valerius chose to begin his religious life, and where a pagan cult was previously rendered to demons, has not been definitely identified so far, although there have been several proposals of location for it. One is Castropetre (Oencia, León), on the border of present-day Ourense province, in the

---


19 RS, 6=III.

20 OQ, 2=1.2. Although it is generally assumed that Valerius began his eremetic career at Complutum, Fructuosus of Braga’s first foundation in Bierzo, J. C. Martín convincingly argued that Valerius probably did not succeed in entering the monastery nor even try to (José Carlos Martín, “¿Valerio en Compluto? Examen crítico de los Opúsculos autobiográficos (CPL 1282-1284) y las Visiones del más allá (CPL 1277-1279) de Valerio del Bierzo,” Veleia 23 [2006]: 327-38). Valerius may also have stayed “at the door” of the monastery as a novice, and never have achieved there the status of monk: Díaz, “Valerio del Bierzo,” 296-97.

21 RS, 2=1.2. In Valerius’s days, the pagan (seemingly aerial) cult had been replaced by a basilica dedicated to saint Felix.
Sierra de la Encina de la Lastra,\textsuperscript{22} and very close to the Bergidum-Bracara section of the road.\textsuperscript{23} Other locations, mainly based on toponymy, are Pedredo near Astorga and a castrum called “El Pedroso” near Manzanedo de Valdueza,\textsuperscript{24} but the former does not match the description by Valerius, and the latter is too remote from any public way. Besides the Castropetre location, which may be right, and with no regard for toponymy, perhaps one could look for Castro Pedroso among the highlands south of the Boeza-Tremor corridor, part of the main communication channel of the region. There, especially between Bembibre and Torre del Bierzo, several castra have given-up abundant Roman remains.\textsuperscript{25} A few kilometers to the south of the Via Nova, the ridge line peaks to about 1,500 meters, which fits the harsh climatic conditions Valerius depicts; but the closeness to the Roman way also allows for good accessibility, making plausible the countless visits he complains about,\textsuperscript{26} and the fact that some young boys used to stay with him in the summer to get an education.\textsuperscript{27}

Northwest castra are strictly indigenous elements, present since the Bronze Age, and they kept on playing a decisive role, along with the cities, in organizing late antique territory.\textsuperscript{28} In contrast is the polarization of rural settlements by Roman villas, which


\textsuperscript{23} Mañanes, “La via nova.”


\textsuperscript{25} Tomás Mañanes, Arqueología de la cuenca leonesa del río Sil (Laceana, Bierzo, Cabrera) (Valladolid: Ediciones Universidad de Valladolid, 1988). Torre del Bierzo was always a strategic point; to the east of the locality, the castrum of Tuécar rose over the different waterways nearby; an altar to Jupiter was found on the spot (ibid., 102).

\textsuperscript{26} OQ, 5-6=II.

\textsuperscript{27} RS, 9=IV.1.

\textsuperscript{28} See Abel Bouhier, La Galice. Essai géographique d’analyse et d’interprétation d’un vieux complexe agraire (La Roche-sur-Yon: Bouhier, 1979), 1269 ff., for a detailed study of types of castros in Bierzo. Bibliographical references on northwest castros are innumerable. See, for example, José Miguel Novo Gúisán, De Hidacio a Sapío. Los castros durante la época visigoda y la primera reconquista (Lugo, 2000); and, Felipe Arias Vilas, “Poblamiento rural: la fase tardía de la Cultura Castreña,” in Los Finisterres Atlánticos en la Antigüedad. Época Prerromana y Romana ( Coloquio Internacional), ed. Carmen Fernández Ochoa (Madrid, 1996), 181-88. About their role in organizing defense against the
appears much later. Two of the places referred to by Valerius, Ebronanto and Rufiana, may fit in this category, although Rufiana is a more complex case.

Ebronanto, owned by Ricimir’s aristocratic family, is a praedium that, along with Castro Pedroso, has not been identified so far; owing to the sentence whereby Valerius relates his departure from his first hermitage, it is generally connected to Castro Pedroso. Some devoted Christians, Valerius claims, withdrew him from the distress he was suffering and led him to an estate called Ebronanto: “[...] quum pene extremo degerem spiritu, conperientes hec fidelissimi christiani mox adcurrentes, licet inuitum, finem mortis desiderantem, ab huius cladis me eripientes periculo et [in] supramemorato Petrense Castro, predio que nuncupatur Ebronanto, ad aulam sanctorum usque perduxerunt.”

The sentence presents an ablative governed by ab (a periculo huius cladis), a dative indicating direction (predio Ebronanto), and, in between, [in] supramemorato Petrense Castro. The prevailing interpretation so far, based on the editions reflecting most manuscript lessons: in supramemorato, is to associate it with Ebronanto. Yet a new translation by José Carlos Martin, acknowledging that the “in” was an addition, and maybe more respectful of the sentence balance, includes it in the complement governed by ab. The consequence of this is


Unlike for other places, in the Iberian Peninsula there is still little evidence about the transition from an aristocratic residential function of the villa to a rural settlement, which can be dated to about the 6th-7th centuries (see Alexandra Chavarría, El final de las villas en Hispania (s. IV-VII d.C.) [Turnhout: Brepols, 2007], 132).


Díaz y Díaz’s edition contains an “in” (here bracketed) that could be an addition, since it does not figure into the oldest extant manuscript T. Here I follow an edition prepared years ago by J. C. Martin which, unfortunately, has not been published so far, being linked to a collective project, in which I took part, but which was never finalized.

Thus, Castrum Petrense would be opposed to Ebronanto, and periculum to aula sanctorum.
that Ebronanto is not included in Castro Pedroso territory and should be located at a certain distance (although distances in Bierzo are fairly relative). The name of Ebronanto, of Celtic origin, means “yew valley.”  

One may point to a valley very close to a location put forward by Francisco José Udaondo for Ebronanto, the “valle de las Tejedas,” not far either from the monastery of Complutum. Yews longevity (one tree may live up to a thousand years) can have caused a long-term colonization of the valley so as to justify the persistence of toponymy until today, regardless of linguistic evolution.

In the case of Rufiana, the ultimate station of Valerius, the -ana termination indicates a derivation from the Latin name Rufus, probably a former proprietary of the estate, which Valerius characterizes as the “antique founder” of the place. Since Flórez’s times, Rufiana has been located, with some credibility, in San Pedro de Montes (Montes de Valdueza), in a mountainous landscape no less rough than nearby Complutum; Valerius describes it as surrounded by “most high peaks.” Though this is no place for a ‘classical’ villa, we know that in Northwest Spain, Roman estates could adopt variable forms depending on the environment and previous settlement organization. Actually, Valerius speaks about a castellum of Rufiana, which may be equated to a castrum.
this could be the original center from which, in Roman times, was arranged a large estate of one Rufus, whose name remained tied to the village.

These are the only places in Bierzo where we know for sure that Valerius had ever stayed. Of course he probably knew Bergidum Flavium, the city to which the woman Theodora prepared to go ad uindemia celebranda when she fell ill, but he says nothing about it. Even his place of birth in the prouincia Asturiensis is unknown, and it is surely not Astorga, for no doubt he would have used other words to state his origin.

Although its name is derived from Bergidum, Bierzo is a modern district, and there is no certainty about its alignment with the Bergidense territorium that Valerius mentions in his works. But the main administrative problem stems from the Asturiensis prouincia that the hermit claims as his patria. On that basis, Luis García Moreno has argued that, at some point in the seventh century, Asturia had been promoted into a new province of the realm, which would thereupon comprise not yet six, but eight provinces. His theory, still overwhelmingly accepted by scholars, has enjoyed a wide diffusion at a popular level, even though, as we will see, its grounds are deficient.

In Roman times, Bierzo was included in the conventus Asturum that stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Duero, with the capital Asturica Augusta. This was the Astures homeland, often called Asturia; to be more specific, Astures themselves divided into

---

40 RS, 6=III.
42 E.g. OQ, 19=VI.3.
44 Today, anyone interested in the origins of the “Reino de Asturias” can find on their phone the ‘6-to-8-provinces’ theory repeated by dozens of mirror sites.
45 E.g. on the map of Agrippa (see Francisco Diego Santos, El Conventus Asturum y anotaciones al noroeste hispano [Oviedo, 2009], 146).
Transmontani, roughly located in modern Asturias, and Augustani, whose seat was the very Astorga.\textsuperscript{46} The conventus boundaries to the north and south are quite clear to us, but not so the eastern and western ones, and either are the cultural limits of the Astur people.\textsuperscript{47} Since the Augustan period, Asturia-Callaetia had been a subdivision of Hispania Citerior Tarraconensis; with the reorganization by Diocletian, it became a province of its own, called simply Callaetia, which included the conventus Asturum without naming it any more.\textsuperscript{48} Diocletian’s provincial re-organization passed unaltered to the Visigoths.

In such a context, what could have prompted Valerius, at the end of the seventh century, to mention “the province of Asturia”? In García Moreno’s opinion, the Visigothic provincial structure had already undergone some modifications.\textsuperscript{49} The main reason would have been the vital necessity for Toledo to provide the limes erected against the ‘pueblos del norte’ with adequate military forces. This required the presence of duces prouinciae as close as possible to the endangered areas, since duces prouinciae were in charge of the Visigothic army. Hence, the solution was to create two new provincial entities in the north: Asturia and Cantabria. These changes are made apparent by the itinerary Musa followed on his conquest of Spain: for the sake of efficiency, the Muslim conqueror would choose primarily to take the main strongholds, which meant the provincial capitals; so not only Lugo, but also Astorga and Amaya in Cantabria must have been ones. Also, claims García Moreno, the subscriptions by duces prouinciae of

\textsuperscript{46} Diego Santos, \textit{El Conventus Asturum y anotaciones al noroeste hispano}, 7-9.
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Ibid.}, 121-38. The current limit between astur-leonese and galician languages is not an accurate indicator. On administrative borders of the conventus, Sánchez-Albornoz is still essential (see Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, “Divisiones tribales y administrativas del solar del reino de Asturias en la época romana,” \textit{Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia} 95 [1929]: 315-95).
\textsuperscript{48} Tranoy, \textit{La Galice romaine}, 402-03.
\textsuperscript{49} García Moreno, “Estudios sobre la organización administrativa del reino visigodo de Toledo,” 144-47.
the acts of the eighth and thirteenth councils of Toledo make clear that there were six of them in 653, but already eight in 683. Finally, the existence of a new province of Asturía is supported by the *Ravenna Cosmography*, which lists eight provinces in *Spanorum patria*, among them Asturía (not Cantabria):\(^{50}\) such an intriguing number allegedly allows no other explanation than the “effective knowledge” of the anonymous Cosmograph.\(^{51}\)

Today, each of these arguments can be refuted. First of all, the *limes hispanus* is a historiographical fiction originating from a simple commentary by Grosse in his compendium of Hispanic sources, and later overdeveloped by Barbero and Vigil.\(^{52}\) The subject of intense controversy over several decades, it is now generally admitted that *limes* never existed.\(^{53}\) Second, without even addressing the delicate issue of the reliability of Arabic sources on the conquest of Iberia,\(^{54}\) one can also doubt that Muslim conquerors, even if they logically took advantage of Roman ways, besieging cities and strongholds as they found them along their route, would have devoted themselves to stalking *duces* through the Peninsula. Third, there is no evidence that any *dux provinciae* has ever subscribed a Visigothic council: the subscriptions are by *duces* only, or, more accurately, the subscribing magnates are always either *comes*, *comes et

---

50 Anonymous Ravennatis, IV, 42: “[...] quae Spanorum patria habet infra se prouincias famosissimas octo, id est: Galletie, Asturia, Austrigonia, Iberia, Lysitania, Betic, Hispalis, Aurariola, uel si modica existet, tamen omnino fertilis et speciosissima esse dinoiscitur.”

51 García Moreno, “Estudios sobre la organización administrativa del reino visigodo de Toledo,” 146, n. 571.


54 García Moreno exclusively relies on Sánchez Albornoz (“Itinerario de la conquista de España por los Musulmanes,” *Cuadernos de Historia de España*, 10 [1948], 21-74).
procer, or comes et dux. That is why, several years ago, I proposed the term dux to be, at least in such cases, a dignity, not a function. Accordingly, no conclusion should be drawn from the number of subscribing dukes, all the more so as the attendance of bishops is notoriously irregular at Visigothic councils, so should be the magnates'. And lastly, the *Ravenna Cosmography* is a highly problematic source that should be addressed with special caution. Today, scholars believe it to have been written in the eighth or the ninth century (not seventh), on very disparate material; the three known manuscripts are full of alterations and interpolations, affecting particularly the names of the provinces. A recent key survey of the text points to the importance of Jordanes among the author’s sources; namely, *Austrigonia, Asturia, Iberia* are seemingly borrowed from his *Getica* 44, lacking any institutional basis.

Once the creation of a new Asturian province by the Visigothic monarchy is ruled out, what other explanations can we suggest for Valerius’s opening sentence? In the first place, it can be a mere scholarly phrase, referring to the obsolete *conventus Asturum*, traditionally called Asturia; in a similar old-fashioned way, Valerius goes on calling Astorga “city of Asturia” instead of directly naming it. Such formulations can be memories from Pliny, possibly mediated by Isidore of Seville or antiquarian authors.

---

60 *Asturiensis urbis* (*OQ*, 2=I.2).
62 Isidore of Seville, *Etym.*, XIV.5.21: “Item regiones partes sunt prouinciarum, quas uulgus conuentus uocat, sicut in Phrygia Troia, sicut in Gallicia Cantabria, Asturia.”
In reading his acrostic and telestic poems, no one can doubt that Valerius received an excellent worldly education, and that he sometimes liked to display it for his readers. Still, Isidore correctly placed Asturia among *regiones*, “parts of the provinces,” not among provinces; could Valerius have committed a mistake on such a basic category?

Here we should be very cautious with late antique terminology and not get fooled by our modern, rigid approach to institutional notions. As many other late antique legal terms, *prouincia* is a polysemous word, and one should not forget that it is sometimes used in a non-legal sense. One of these meanings is the quite vague one of “territory” of a people, a meaning which subsequently circulated widely in the Middle Ages, but can already be found in John of Biclar’s *Chronicon* and even before that in the *Historia Tripartita*. In his *Chronicon*, Biclar sometimes uses the same term in another non-technical sense, as when he refers to Orospeda, which by no means can be considered either a territory or an administrative entity: in such a case, *prouincia* apparently means… *regio*. Finally, in the ninth century, *prouincia* seems to have been used with the new sense of diocese, that is, the territory of a city, as would later be the case in Spanish: in his *Liber Memorialis Sanctorum*, Eulogius of Córdoba mentions the *prouinciae* of Italica and Egaben (Cabra), meaning the episcopal districts of both. It is quite plausible that at the edge of the eighth century such a linguistic evolution had already taken place and Valerius’s sentence is a reflection of it.

65 John of Biclar, *Chronicon*, ch. 569.4.
67 John of Biclar, *Chronicon*, ch. 577.2. Orospeda is a mountain range described (quite confusedly) by Strabo (*Geography*, III.4.10).
To conclude, when presenting himself in the opening lines of his first autobiographical opus, Valerius may have recalled scholarly readings instead of alluding to an administrative reality of his time; but it also could have been a way for him to place all of his subsequent narrative into a particular ecclesiastical frame, namely, the territory attached to the episcopal city of Astorga, in which laid the smaller patria of his religious life, the Bierzo.

Note:

69 This was already Udaondo’s opinion (Udaondo Puerto, “Las entidades geográficas en las obras de Valerio del Bierzo,” 210-12).
Primary


Secondary


Roldán Hervás, José María. *Itineraria Hispana. Fuentes antiguas para el estudio de las vías romanas en la península ibérica.* Valladolid, 1975.


