

## Caldas de Reis: The Birth of a Thermal Town

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this short communication is to highlight how the improvement of health and quality of life through thermal water treatments is not only a highly sought-after practice today, but also one with a long-standing tradition in several European countries, including Spain, dating back to Roman times. The names of certain towns, such as Caldas de Reis and Caldas de Cuntis, bear witness to the natural wealth and the importance of mineral-medicinal waters as a strategic sector, both for tourism and healthcare purposes. However, this paper will not address the epidemiological, clinical, or therapeutic aspects of thermalism; instead, it will focus exclusively on its diachronic perspective.

**Keywords:** Health; Thermalism; Caldas; Medical reports; Spa resort

### INTRODUCTION

Until the end of the eighteenth century, the Galician town of Caldas de Reis had not yet clearly displayed the distinctive features by which it would later become known: its character as a thermal spa town. Its inhabitants, numbering approximately 923 excluding the ecclesiastical population, were mainly engaged in artisanal activities, although they also owned land and paid rents within the framework of the late feudal guild-based system of production.

From that period onwards, interest in the therapeutic potential of its waters began to emerge more strongly, although these waters had been known since Roman times, as suggested by the town's name, Caldas, derived from the Latin *caldarium*, the characteristic space of Roman baths. In this context, scientists such as Pedro Gómez de Bedoya (1699–1776) — physician to the royal household, professor of anatomy and surgery, among other positions — according to some sources studied 217 mineral waters and maintained correspondence with numerous physicians and pharmacists in order to compile his work *Historia Universal de las Fuentes Minerales de España*.<sup>[1]</sup>

Likewise, Antonio Casares (1812–1888), a chemist by profession as well as a physician and pharmacist, first Professor of Chemistry at the University of Santiago de Compostela and pioneer in the chemical analysis and characterization of mineral-medicinal waters, studied not only the waters of Caldas de Reis in his work *Análisis de las Aguas Minerales de Caldas de Reyes y Caldas de Cuntis*,<sup>[2]</sup> but also the sulphurous waters of the spa in the Andalusian town of Carratraca (Málaga), renowned during the nineteenth century as a tourist destination for the Málaga bourgeoisie and visited by distinguished figures such as Lord Byron and Empress Eugénie de Montijo.

Equally significant was the work of the town physician Jacobo Fernández Mariño (1784–1861), medical director of the spas of Caldas de Reyes and Cuntis from 1816 to 1846, two of the four spas officially recognized at the time alongside those of Caldelas de Tui and Cortegada in Ourense. His contributions, reflected in his well-known *Memorias Médicas and the Canones generales*,<sup>[2]</sup> provided a remarkable impetus to the development of medical hydrology in Galicia.

## RESULTS

This work aims to constitute a small contribution to the history of medicine, specifically in the field of medical hydrology, which remained highly significant until recent times, when advances in pharmacology led to its relative decline in importance. Nevertheless, Spain, and particularly Galicia, has a long-standing tradition in this domain.

Caldas de Reis, with two spa establishments founded in the early nineteenth century by patrons Joaquín Acuña and Pedro Dávila, attracted visitors from as far as Madrid, from which a stagecoach service operated specifically for this purpose. In this regard, it was no less important than other renowned thermal centres such as Baden-Baden or the Carolus Thermen of Aix-la-Chapelle in Aachen.

Today, it is known that the mineral-medicinal waters of Caldas are sodium chloride sulphurous waters, that is, waters with a significant presence of sulphur and salt. This was already noted by Gómez de Bedoya in his work, despite the considerable backwardness of chemistry as a scientific discipline in Galicia at that time.<sup>1</sup>

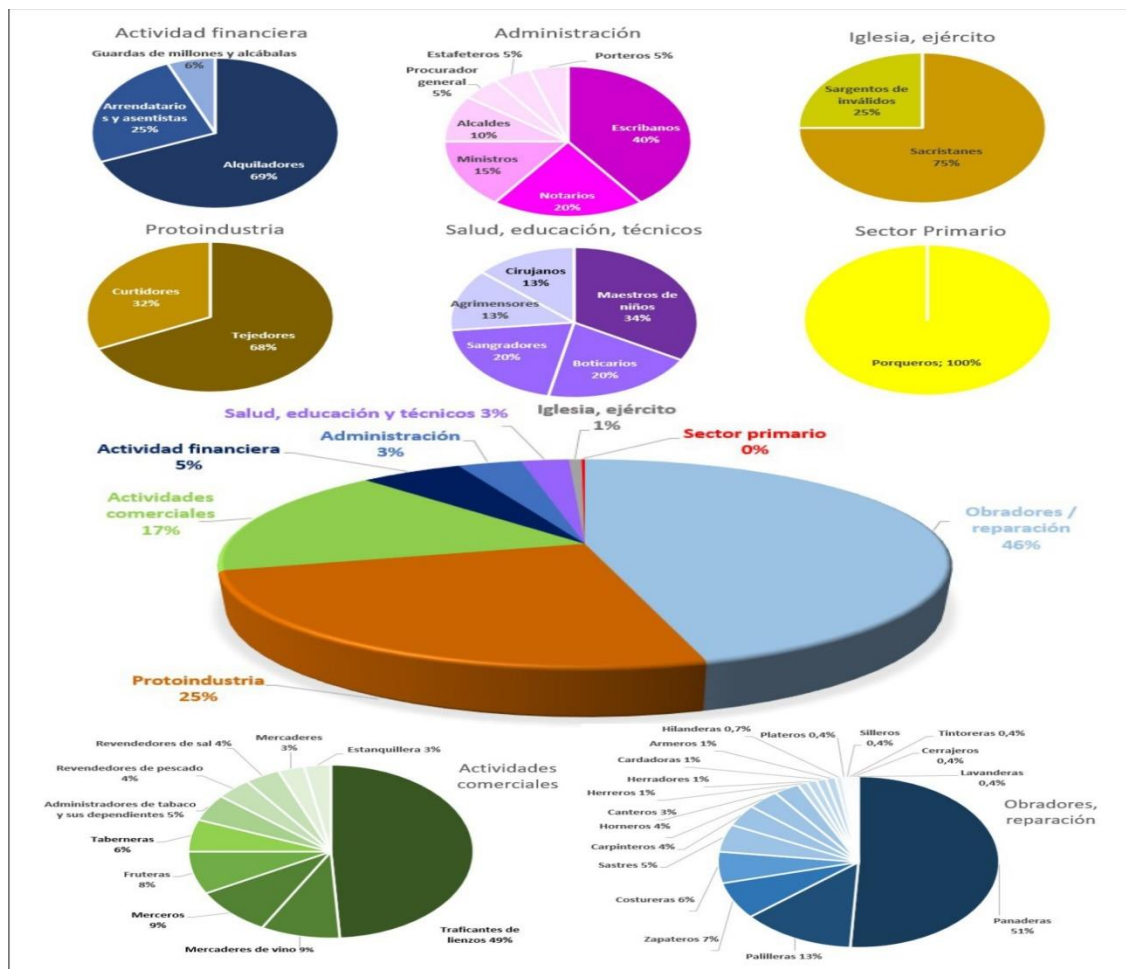
## MATERIALS AND METHODS

With regard to the materials used for this research, we have drawn upon the responses to the questionnaire carried out for the preparation of the Catastro de Ensenada, including both the personales de legos y eclesiásticos and the reales de legos y eclesiásticos, all dating from the 1760s. In addition to the publications of Gómez de Bedoya and Antonio Casares, the *Memorias Médicas* by Jacobo Fernández Mariño—first director of the spas of Caldas de Reis and Caldas de Cuntis—are of particular importance.

The methodological approach consists of adopting a diachronic perspective, which allows for an analysis of the progressive significance of thermalism, both as an activity within the tertiary sector, particularly tourism, and within the secondary sector, insofar as it relates to mining and subsurface industrial activity.

**DISCUSION**

The town of Caldas de Reis exhibited, up until the end of the eighteenth century, an economic profile based on significant proto-industrial activity, as evidenced by the notable presence of weavers, tanners, and bakers. From that period onwards, the discovery of water as a simple yet effective remedy for numerous ailments, together with the progressive contributions of Enlightenment figures such as Juan Manuel Munárriz—scientist and military officer, translator of Antoine Lavoisier’s work, and considered a disciple of Joseph Proust, founder of modern chemistry—marked a gradual shift in the perception and use of mineral waters (Figure).



**Figure:** Socio profesional estructura of Caldas de Reis according the Respuestas Generales of the Catastro de Ensenada (c 1760).

As an illustrative example, the observations of Pedro Gómez de Bedoya may be summarised. He describes two springs located next to the parish church, one cold and one hot, both mineral in nature. The cold spring, poorly maintained, supplied the town’s water and remained in this condition until 1763, when, under the tenure of the town’s procurator general, Don Felipe Diz, the fountain was rebuilt and fitted with two bronze spouts, leaving it neat and well kept. Mr Quiñones and Benito de Castro, the town apothecary, analysed the water from this spring, concluding that it passed through iron-bearing minerals

and contained a significant amount of aperient salt, giving it aperient, deobstruent, and tempering properties. As a result, local inhabitants reportedly did not suffer, nor recall their ancestors suffering, from urinary disorders, bladder stones, obstruction, or similar ailments. At that time, this water had not yet been used medicinally, but it was suggested that, if properly managed, it could be beneficial in kidney and bladder conditions, and, when mixed with milk, could be useful in treating slow fevers arising from obstructions in hot temperaments. It was further noted that only the two physicians of the town remained to apply such treatments.<sup>[2]</sup>

The second spring, known as El Baño, is closely associated with the tradition reflected in the very name Caldas de Reis, due to the ancient practice of monarchs visiting the site to experience the healing virtues of its waters. However, at the time described, it was poorly maintained and unclean, as locals used it for washing clothes and household utensils, including leather goods used in tanning.<sup>[3]</sup>

This bathing site lacked any form of covering, so patients who visited it were required to bring tents. In the mornings, it emitted a dense vapour, and a greasy, brownish layer formed on its surface. The water itself was clear but had an unpleasant odour and a taste reminiscent of rotten eggs. Nevertheless, it induced copious urination and sweating when consumed, although few patients attended due to its deplorable condition.

Once analysed, the water of El Baño in Caldas de Reis was found to contain a penetrating spirit of martial sulphur, fixed alkaline salt, some common salt, and a powerful absorbent substance, without admixture of vitriol or other metallic minerals beyond iron. This water could be used both for drinking and bathing and was considered beneficial for diseases associated with cold, thick, and sluggish humours, such as stupor, paralysis, dropsy, asthma, oedematous and flatulent tumours, flank and stomach pain, nephritic pain due to gravel, thick humours, sand or stones, obstructions of the reproductive region, menstrual suppression, leucorrhoea, and other impurities. However, it was deemed ineffective for conditions arising from hot, dry, and arid temperaments.

Furthermore, the greasy layer was considered effective for weaknesses of the nerves, muscular contractures or motor impotence, dislocations, and chronic ulcers, when applied to affected areas after bathing and keeping them properly covered.

## CONCLUSION

The emergence of a semi-urban centre in the Early Modern period, such as Caldas, contrasts with the general model of minimal urban structure, typically characterised by a walled enclosure, a main square, a network of streets, a convent, and the presence of a distinctive function such as a fair, a municipal council structure, and the fixed or temporary residence of social elites. In this context, it can be observed that Caldas possessed four basic institutional elements: a hospital for pilgrims, a prison, a school, and a fair.

By the end of the so-called Ancien Régime, a form of tourism based on balneotherapy began to emerge throughout Europe. At that point, Caldas de Reis would find a new axis of economic and social development.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None

#### **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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