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THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN A WORLD IN TRANSITION: IBERIA BETWEEN THE ROMANS AND THE ARABS

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Abstract: This paper analyses the role that culture played in the legitimization and consolidation process of the Visigothic state and its lay and religious elites, alike, with special emphasis being place on the use of knowledge by the episcopal authorities. In this process, the religious element was an important tool for cohering and building an identity on which to construct the main socio-political structures. And all this was achieved through the creation of a new cultural programme that included and reformulated only part of the knowledge coming from the ancient world. In short, this work analyses the process through which the culture of late Hispania was progressively identified with that of the Catholic Church.

Keywords:

General - Cultural and Historical, Historiography, Iberia, 4th-8th centuries

Visigoths, Bishops, Identity

The ninth poem of the Gallo-Roman Sidonius Apollinaris refers to the city of Cordova and underscores its importance by mentioning two famous 1st-century

Cordovan writers, Seneca and Lucan.¹ The bishop of Clermont (*Auvernia*) apparently did know of any other author from the city of *Hispania Baetica*, or at least did not mention any other, when he wrote his poems more than 300 years later, in the second half of the 5th-century. This testimony is perhaps insufficient to deny the importance and cultural development of *Corduba* during the last centuries of the Roman world. However, it seems revealing that no further news of the city has come down to us, not even before the appearance of such an important figure as Bishop Hosius of *Corduba*, known not only for his protracted religious, but also political, career². Indeed, this leading churchman serves to justify the chronology of this chapter on the role of culture in the Visigothic period. The 4th

¹ Sidonius Apollinaris, *Poems*, IX, 230-258. The dearth of information on the city of Cordova, despite being mentioned in Ausonius' *Ordo urbium nobilium* (*Urb.*, 11-14) is as significant as this reference to its well-known, but remote, literary past. In this work, it appears below Merida, and next to Tarragona and Braga, although it is impossible to know whether or not the Bordeaux poet is referring to an established pecking order of cities (Riestra, "Décimo Magno Ausonio", pp. 129-137).

² Fernández Ubiña, "Osio de Córdoba, el Imperio y la Iglesia", pp. 468-471. Regarding the literary work of Hosius, Menéndez Pelayo claimed, "Los escritos de Osio que a nosotros han llegado son brevísimos y en corto número, pero verdaderas joyas. Redúcense a la profesión de fe de Nicea, a la carta a Constancio, y a quince Cánones del Concilio de Sárdica. San Isidoro le atribuye además una carta a su hermana, *De laude virginitatis* [...], y un tratado sobre la interpretación de las vestiduras de los sacerdotes en la Ley Antigua. San Atanasio parece aludir a escritos polémicos de Osio contra los Arrianos [The writings of Hosius that have come down to us, albeit very brief and few in number, are real gems. They boil down to the Nicene Creed, the letter to Constantius, and the 15 canons of the Council of Sardica. St. Isidore also credits him with a letter to his sister, *laude virginitatis* [...], and a treatise on the interpretation of priests' vestments in the Old Covenant. St. Athanasius seems to allude to Hosius' polemical writings on the Arians]." (*Historia de los heterodoxos españoles* [History of Spanish heterodoxies], I, I, V).

century, with the rise of Christianity and its hierarchies' consolidation of power, of which Hosius is a magnificent example, ushered in a cultural reality that will be examined in the following pages. Likewise, the arrival of the Arab-Berbers in Iberia would bring the period analysed here to a close, for the profound cultural transformations occurring after the conquest of the peninsula's cities and regions brought the curtain down on the cultural legacy of the Roman world which the Visigoths had known how to manipulate so adroitly to their own ends.

The importance of Christianity during this entire period is undeniable. Following its slow and gradual penetration,³ it would shape Visigothic socio-political structures to such an extent that, at the beginning of the 8th century, marking the final years of Gothic control in Iberia, these would form part of the same, hardly distinguishable reality. Neither do we have much data on this process of Christianization, nor is there an abundance of general information on this first stage of late antiquity. Broadly speaking, there is a considerable lacuna in the historiography of the age, at least until the mid-6th century, which makes it enormously difficult to gain insights into the period.

As far as Cordova is concerned, the city appeared on the scene around the mid-6th century, after a "dark age" during which it must be concluded that *Hispalis*

³ The presence of unequivocally Christian cultural elements is apparent in the sarcophagi discovered in several *Baetican* cities, including Cordova. These sarcophagi must have reached Hispania in the 4th century (García, "Sarcófagos romanos decorados", pp. 183-193, in addition to previous studies performed by Beltrán / García / Rodríguez, *Los sarcófagos romanos de Andalucía*, and by Sotomayor, "Testimonios arqueológicos cristianos", pp. 157-160). In relation to euergetic practices, see Fuentes, "Patrocinio eclesiástico, rituales de poder", pp. 315-344; and especially Castillo, "*Pro amore Dei*", pp. 335-350.

(Seville) had displaced it as the provincial capital.⁴ The city's reappearance in the literary sources is related to its clash with the Visigothic King Agila who, in 549, attempted unsuccessfully to seize it. This episode, perhaps one of the greatest military assaults to be launched against a *Baetican* city during the 6th century, encapsulates, however, a brief but interesting event that deserves our attention, for it is closely related to the cultural aspects analysed here.

The profanation of the tomb of St. Acisclus the martyr, the city's patron saint, mentioned by Isidore of Seville in his *History of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi*, seems to be more than just a mere anecdote:

He [King Agila] waged war against the city of Cordova, and since in contempt of the Catholic religion he did harm to the most blessed martyr Acisclus and profaned and defiled the sacred place of his sepulcher with the blood of the enemy and of their pack-animals, after fighting a battle against the citizens of Cordova, he earned a fitting punishment through the agency of the saints. For he was smitten by vengeance for the present war and lost there his son, who was killed together with a large part of the army, and also lost the whole treasure with its renowned riches.⁵

The episodes following the profanation involving Agila are full of unfortunate events, viewed by Isidore as the inevitable consequence of the king's bad deeds. Doubtless the profanation of the tomb should be considered as an attack against one of the most distinguishing traits of the Hispano-Roman community of Cordova,

⁴ See Arce, *El último siglo de la España romana*, p. 51. In reference to the capital of the diocese, see Arce, "¿Hispalis o Emerita?", pp. 501-506.

⁵ Isidore of Seville, *History of the Goths*, 45 (Donini / Ford, *Isidore of Seville's History of the Kings of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi*, p. 22). See also Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 6.43.

in this case, of a religious nature. This is even more evident when bearing in mind the political-religious tensions underlying the relations among the Visigothic elites at the end of the 6th century, particularly the rebellion of Hermenegild, son of King Leovigild, with whom he was at loggerheads.⁶ This rebellion was behind Leovigild's dual conquest of Cordova in 570 and 582.

Reluctance to fall under the Visigoth influence during the 6th century most certainly had its religious motivations, exacerbated by both the Visigoths' profession of the Arian creed and the Oriental Churches close to monophysitism, and was intimately related to the fact that the leadership of the urban community was in the hands of the Catholic episcopate.⁷ It should be recalled that the election of bishops by co-option helped important members of the elites to rise to the top of

⁶ In spite of having apparently been motivated by religious concerns, Hermenegild is portrayed as a traitor and not as a martyr. This is especially telling when taking into account that the sources referring to the story were written after the conversion of the Visigoth king to Catholicism, which makes it incomprehensible that such a magnificent opportunity to create a relevant figure for the Catholic cause was missed. The political *fides*, conspicuous by its absence in this account, was unquestionably more important than the religious element. To this should be added the participation of Reccared in the death of his own brother, a dark chapter in the king's career (Thompson, *Los godos en España*, p. 81; García Moreno, "Andalucía durante la Antigüedad tardía", p. 305). Furthermore, it is odd that Hermenegild, *dux Baeticae*, was considered an usurper when his uprising was limited to the area with whose government his father had entrusted him, as can be seen in John of Biclar's *Crónica* (a. 573, 5 and a. 579, 2; Calson, *Regionalism in Visigothic Spain*, p. 166).

⁷ See Castillo, "El cristianismo y las iglesias del sur peninsular", p. 292.

the social ladder, thus allowing them to consolidate their group interests, while dictating the fate of the rest of the community.⁸

Admittedly, irrespective of the importance of the religious factor in the dispute between Cordova and King Agila, the transformation of urban and peri-urban areas had already become a tangible reality that presaged new spheres of power and also conflict, as would be the case with the basilica of St. Acisclus the martyr.⁹ This strongly fortified building, located to the west of the city--outside its walls--in use at least until the Arab-Berber conquest,¹⁰ must have formed part of this new

⁸ Some of the most significant examples of the power consolidation process of these elites include, in addition to the well-known family of Leander and Isidore of Seville, Bishops Nibridius of Terrasa, Elpidius of Huesca, Justinian of Valencia, and Justus of Urgell, all brothers and regarded by Isidore of Seville as *nobilissimi*--Isidore of Seville, *On Illustrious Men*, 21. On this aspect, noteworthy is Orlandis' study, "Una familia episcopal", 61-68. From Justus we have an epistle (see primary sources). On the other hand, the epitaph of Justinian, included in the *Anthologia Hispana*, provides us with a piece of information that, undoubtedly, has a bearing on this chapter dedicated to the role of culture in the Visigoth period, for it states that, "he writes about many useful things for later times" (*scripsit plura posteris profutura [seclis]*; *CIL* II 14, 89, lin. 6), the literary facet of these bishops being instrumental at the time, as will be seen further on.

⁹ In relation to the resistance offered by the city of Cordova and its elites, see García Moreno, "Transformaciones de la Bética", 434-441. In all likelihood, this fact contributed to pave the way to the conflicts arising after Leovigild's time, in which the role played by the elites of the *Baetica* province would be more than noteworthy (Castillo, "Católicos bajo dominio arriano", pp. 139-169).

¹⁰ See Sánchez Velasco, "La Antigüedad tardía y la época visigoda", p. 327. Concerning the basilica's capture by the Moors, see Ocaña, "La basílica de San Vicente", pp. 361-363.

topography of power more than any other in Cordova during the 6th, 7th, and 8th centuries.¹¹

The arrival of new Germanic *gentes* at the beginning of the 5th century would only accelerate the progressive decline of Roman power, meaning, in turn, greater independence for territories such as those of the *Baetica* province where, except for *Hispalis*, the majority of the cities evaded the recently established and precarious Gothic supremacy during the 5th century, until the reign of Leovigild.¹² At that moment it is possible to observe actions clearly aimed at controlling the interior of Western *Baetica*, an area in which Cordova must have played a prominent role, but about which there is practically no information.

KNOWLEDGE, PAST AND TRANSFORMATION

The urban make-up of late Western cities was, to a great extent, new, not only due to the location of their most distinctive buildings, but also because of their relationship with space. In the cultural realm, in contrast, late antiquity gladly adopted the immense legacy of its predecessors.¹³ Although it is true that the ancient knowledge produced in the Graeco-Roman world was highly mediated in order to meet the demands of the political-religious authorities, i.e. the monarchy and, to a larger extent, the bishops who were at the forefront of the new cultural

¹¹ It was also the sanctuary of the rebel Hermenegild after his flight from Seville and, later on, a stronghold against the Arab-Berber conquest of the cities of *Hispania Baetica*.

¹² For the evolution during this period, see Salvador, "Los siglos VI y VII en el Sur de Hispania", pp. 185-203. Noteworthy is Theudis' incursion in an attempt to retake Ceuta from the Byzantines (Vallejo, *Hispania y Bizancio*, 99-116).

¹³ An obligatory reference work is Riché's *Éducation et culture*.

programme that shaped late antiquity and which, above all, favoured the consolidation of their power in the nascent Christian society.

To this end, it was essential to create a solid network of knowledge and of--mutually dependent--individuals who shared an intellectual background that allowed them to undertake their doctrinal, pastoral, and, more importantly, proselytizing labours--including the defence of orthodoxy--with a view to encouraging conversions. It was thus vital to develop cathedral schools and monastic *scriptoria*,¹⁴ which were used to disseminate the knowledge necessary not only for understanding the Scriptures, but also a variety of issues, many of a civil character, addressed in councils, as well as for administering ecclesiastical goods.¹⁵

The accounts dealing with the process through which mainly the clergy, although some laypersons as well, acquired their knowledge are few and far between. However, it seems as though it was clearly aimed at giving them a good command of grammar.¹⁶ During the Roman Empire, the acquisition of a solid education had always been associated with the needs of the civil administration and its

¹⁴ See Fontaine, "Fins et moyens de l'enseignement", pp. 145-202.

¹⁵ In Canon XIX of the IV Council of Toledo, it is expressly indicated that "those who do not know how to read or write" cannot be ordained bishops. A minimum of culture for the delivery of sermons and the reading of the Scriptures, and to have risen through the different ecclesiastical offices and ranks, were all essential (Arce, *Esperando a los árabes*, 266-267). For its part, Canon II of the XI Council of Toledo referred to the fact that many bishops had neglected their studies and, therefore, the council was obliged to berate them: "o voluntariamente se dedicaban a estudiar y leer, o serían obligados a ello contra su voluntad [or they decided voluntarily to study and to read, or they would be forced to do so against their will]" (Arce, *Ibid.*, 277).

¹⁶ Kaster, *The Guardians of Language*.

officialdom. This process intensified in Visigothic Iberia, particularly at the end of 6th and at the beginning of 7th century, a moment at which a new state with different needs was taking shape. It was also at around the end of the 6th century when it is possible to talk about a significant increase in Hispanic literary production, maybe with some connection to the process of reorganizing the state and creating a new administration.

The cultural education of the elites was the responsibility of the Church, which acted as a filter that, only on occasion, allowed ancient knowledge to reach the late antique world. This filtering pursued, in addition to a good command of grammar, the teaching of all that practical learning necessary for life: medicine, geography, agronomy, astronomy, etc., as well as, but to a lesser degree, history. The historical literature, so important during the last centuries of antiquity, should be understood as a natural consequence of the upheavals experienced which had made it necessary to rewrite the history of the exhausted and, later on, defunct Rome, and venture into apocalyptic literature that ultimately announced the end of the world.¹⁷ Perhaps they were not that mistaken, for the known world had disappeared forever.

NEW POLITICAL CONTEXTS, NEW CULTURE

After an initial period--from the 5th to the mid-6th century--during which it is impossible to claim that there was a clear interlocking between Visigothic

¹⁷ This apocalyptic threat would provoke an euergetic reaction from the elites who, as from the end of the 6th century, would often devote part of their fortunes to the construction of religious buildings. On millenarianism in the Visigothic period, see García Moreno, "Expectativas milenaristas y escatológicas", pp. 247-258.

elements and Hispano-Roman culture, there was indeed a progressive and deep-seated assimilation that doubtless must have been affected by the historical context as of 560.¹⁸ At that time, the Byzantines in Iberia stepped up the pressure on a Visigothic world immersed in perpetual internecine feuding. A clear example of this is the conflict between Agila and Athanagild in the *Baetica* province, thanks to which the Byzantines surely found a way of meddling in the peninsula's domestic politics. The Suevic kingdom, completely abandoned by historiography until only recently,¹⁹ but which played a key role in its Visigothic counterpart's struggle for territorial consolidation, as well as in its self-definition, came to an end around the same time. The confrontation between the Suevi and the Visigoths, and later between these and the Byzantines, would be one of the driving forces behind the creation of a centralized and religiously unified Visigothic state. It was then that we can appreciate the development of a cultural system that allowed the political and religious elites,²⁰ who had much in common,²¹ to secure their position. Reference has been made very recently to the conflict with Arianism,²² an aspect that, to our mind, is essential to that reaffirmation and creation of new cultural elements. This led to the need for a doctrinal education indispensable for the dialectic battle and, in turn, became the intellectual powerhouse to which the elites were often forced to resort to protect themselves from both the internal

¹⁸ In this respect, see Vallejo, *Hispania y Bizancio*, especially Chapters V and VI.

¹⁹ We currently have Díaz Martínez's *El reino suevo (411-585)*.

²⁰ Sánchez Medina, "A Created Enemy: 'Barbarians' in spite of Religious Conversion", pp. 123-136.

²¹ For an interesting methodological reflection on this matter, see Sánchez Velasco, "La Antigüedad tardía y la época visigoda", p. 321.

²² Mülke, "Isidorische Renaissance", pp. 95-107.

clashes between the different Gothic factions and religious groups and the external onslaughts of other peoples such as the Suevi, Byzantines, Franks, etc.

This process took place principally during the reigns of Leovigild, Reccared, and Sisebut, more or less contemporaries of the exceptional polymath Isidore of Seville, to whom we will return below.²³ The combination between the political endeavours of the aforementioned kings and Isidore's intellectual labours certainly yielded interesting results from a cultural standpoint. The Christianization of power, in its Catholic version, forced the sacred and the profane to move forward together: the monarchy and the nobility would intervene in matters pertaining to the Church, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy would do much the same in key developments affecting the state. The instrumentalization of culture by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities not only meant renouncing a great deal of ancient knowledge, but also reformulating content in pursuit of its better use in the context of late antiquity. The church councils were probably the best examples of this cultural instrumentalization.²⁴ Although their aim was to bring some order to religious life in Iberia, they also served to place the political organization of the Visigothic kingdom on a firmer footing.²⁵ The participation of the lay elites and the

²³ The introductory study conducted by Díaz y Díaz on the Seville bishop, which is included in *Etymologies* (ed. and trans. Madrid 1982), is an essential read. See also Quiles, *San Isidoro de Sevilla*.

²⁴ Included in Martínez Díaz (ed.), *La colección canónica hispana*; Vives, *Concilios visigóticos e hispanoromanos*, and afterwards in Martínez Díez / Rodríguez, *Concilios Visigodos, La colección canónica hispana*.

²⁵ Arce (*Esperando a los árabes*, 237) argues that the council meetings became a form of government, above all as from the second half of the 6th century, not only with respect to Church

king in these council meetings, in addition to the fact that these synods ended up becoming the only meetings held in general in the Visigothic kingdom, points to a territorial administration nearly exclusively based on them. Culture was thus reduced to its most pragmatic expression, i.e. that which enabled the exercise of power.

In reality, this new formula, introduced as from the late Roman Empire, gradually abandoned the recently created concept of *Romania*²⁶ and all of its cultural connotations, to perpetuate only a part of it: *Christianitas*. At the same time, a process of religious convergence got underway, which ultimately signified the consolidation of Catholic orthodoxy.

The new order, stemming from the growing power vacuum in Roman administration, also allowed for the creation of a robust framework in which the bishops, thanks to their classical education and culture, guaranteed their political presence. Only those trained in the ancient arts of rhetoric and oratory were capable of constructing the discourses required by the successors of Rome. The episcopal authorities therefore received a solid classical education with which they

matters, but also concerning aspects of daily life, touching on economic, political, and military matters, among others. This is particularly well-illustrated in the participation of the *iudices et actores fisci*, which is documented as from the III Council of Toledo, a key moment of change in Visigothic Church-state relations.

²⁶ Paul Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, III, 20, 11, who reformulates this term from a religious perspective.

could construct models that would enhance their social visibility.²⁷ Civic munificence was all but replaced by episcopal patronage, which did not only involve works of a religious nature, but also catered to some of the daily needs of the community through traditional euergetic formulas.²⁸

With regard to the interaction between the political and religious spheres, there are many aspects that can be taken into consideration and which link both worlds. A good example of this would be the use of religious sanctions, like excommunication, to penalize political actions contrary to the powers that be.²⁹

The frequent faction fighting in the Visigothic world forced monarchs and bishops, alike, to resort to control mechanisms of a religious nature but with an unambiguous political purpose.

²⁷ On the important role of bishops in late antiquity, see Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity*; Lizzi, "The Late Antique Bishop", pp. 525-538; Gwynn, *Episcopal Leadership*; Fear / Fernández Ubiña / Marcos, *The Role of the Bishop*.

²⁸ Lizzi, *Le trasformazione delle élites*. On the construction of civic and religious buildings, alike, and the different repairs carried out on them, see Ubric's essential *La Iglesia y los Estados bárbaros*, especially pp. 328-393.

²⁹ Curiously enough, those of the faithful who had committed political crimes were liable for the most extreme sanction, i.e. excommunication *ad aeternum*, as can be observed in different conciliar canons (the 29th of the IV of Toledo; the 2nd of the V; the 3rd and 18th of the VI; the 1st of the VII; and the 10th of the XVI). See Sanz, "La excomuni3n como sanción política", pp. 275-288. Exile, another popular form of punishment, meted out on many occasions to bishops themselves, is studied by Frighetto, "El exilio, el destierro y sus concepciones políticas", pp. 111-134.

The holding of councils (Tarragona, Gerona, Toledo II, Barcelona, Lerida, Valencia, Braga I, Lugo,³⁰ Braga II, Toledo III, and Saragossa),³¹ the prime movers behind the political-religious synthesis and the creation of a shared cultural imaginary that served as a language between the different groups, intensified during the 6th-century. Numbering among the architects of this combined imaginary were men like the aforementioned Isidore of Seville and his older brother Leander, who played such a crucial role at the III Council of Toledo.

CULTURE, FUSION, IDENTITY

The III Council of Toledo was an outstanding development in the history of the Iberian Peninsula, mainly for its cultural evolution. The period between 589, the year in which the Toledo council was held, and 654--that of the promulgation of the *Liber Iudiciorum*--may be regarded as the high point of a culture combining different elements, but not only Hispano-Roman and Visigothic, but also pagan and Christian, Arian and Catholic, and particularly lay and religious through their respective political elites.

³⁰ This council of the Suevic kingdom is yet another example of the importance of the Church-state symbiosis, for it established the need to create new episcopal sees that expedited territorial administration, as well as the different primacies between the main sees, in this case, Braga and the city of Lugo itself.

³¹ Vilella, "Los concilios eclesiásticos hispanos", pp. 1-47.

Already very clearly perceptible since the reign of Theudis (531-548),³² and just before the city of Cordova took centre stage owing to its clash with Agila, a new political identity, not entirely free of strife,³³ began to take shape. To this end, it was necessary to construct an imaginary combining all the realities of the turbulent Iberian Peninsula. The creation of a new identity that encompassed aspects capable of accommodating the effective multiple realities, needed an excellent “contact glue” only in the hands of the most educated elites, chiefly the episcopal authorities. The education of the clergy defended by Isidore in *Sententiae*, in a context in which new teaching materials were possibly being created for their use in the newly-created episcopal seminaries and schools as of 633, was unquestionably of vital importance: “A clergy that was well educated and morally upright would help ensure the liturgical, moral, and political stability so desired by both kings and bishops. Clerical education and discipline would support the political legislation and ecclesial synodal activity [...].”³⁴ But this education would be insufficient on its own when bearing in mind the ultimate objective of any cultural project, i.e. the perfect assembly of the different elements making up Iberian reality, to which end there was a need to construct new discourses. The *summum* of this fusion is crystal clear in one of Isidore of Seville’s most celebrated

³² Theudis’ marriage with a noble Hispano-Roman was a step forward in that fusion between both population groups (Procopius, *History of the Wars: The Gothic War*, I, 12, 50). See Fuentes, “La obra política de Teudis”, pp. 9-36.

³³ Frighetto, “Cuando la confrontación genera la colaboración”, pp. 157-172.

³⁴ Isidore of Seville, *On Ecclesiastical Offices*, Knoebel (trans. and introduction), p. 9.

works, the *History of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi*,³⁵ which offers us an interesting example of the new intellectual discourses of integration that were being constructed at the time. Even though the Visigoths were its leading lights, Isidore does not hesitate to include other *gentes* who, at the beginning of the 5th century, had crossed the Pyrenees. The decision of the Vandals to abandon Iberia as of 429,³⁶ in addition to the disappearance of the Suevic kingdom in 585, did not prevent the Seville polymath from highlighting the importance of these peoples when writing his work during the first half of the 7th century. In point of fact, in the case of the Vandals, their establishment in *Hispania Baetica* and the taking of Seville as their capital are interesting aspects in the evolution of the southern region of the peninsula which have not been sufficiently studied.

Isidore masterfully describes, in the prologue to this work--the so-called "*Laus Spaniae*"--what had been the great intellectual concern hitherto: the difficult temporary arrangement between the Hispano-Roman population and the Goths, the *natio gothorum*. For him, this new combination was not only feasible, but also allowed the Hispanic territories to be converted into ideal places "in which the glorious fecundity of the Getic people rejoices much and abundantly flourishes"³⁷.

³⁵ On this work, see Velázquez, "Revisiones de autor y de copistas", pp. 67-79. A brief introduction to Isidore can be found in Velázquez / Ripoll, "Isidoro de Sevilla y su época", pp. 43-45. In reality, there are more references in this work that must be taken into consideration to understand the figure of Isidore and his world, with particular attention to the works of Kampers and Pohl / Dörler.

³⁶ The best available study of the Vandals in the "longuée durée" is Modéran's *Les Vandales et l'Empire romain*.

³⁷ Isidore of Seville, *History of the Goths*, intro.; Donini / Ford, *Isidore of Seville's History of the Kings of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi*, p. 1.

The *Praise of Spain* has been interpreted, more frequently than it should, along national lines through an exacerbated sense of belonging to an essentialist entity, unshakeable in the face of different historical eventualities.³⁸ However, the new way of conceiving the history of Iberia which this cultural construct involved, integrative as regards its different peoples, albeit focusing on the Visigoths and their antiquity, needed not only a literary, but also political, prologue compelled by the new context of union between the Hispano-Romans and the Visigoths.³⁹ In the first edition of the work (c. 621), this new Isidorian conception enabled the legitimization of the power of the Visigoths by comparing them to the age-old and legendary Scythian people, and in the second (625-626), to the descendants of Magog, in clear reference to the biblical story and to the peoples foreordained to carry out God's will--*populus Dei*.⁴⁰ From the ancient conceptualization of Hispania as a mere geographical and administrative division in Roman times, Isidore would then consider it as a place for which the Goths had always been predestined, who wedded her as if she were a bride.⁴¹ The figure of Isidore of Seville is thus worthy of special attention. On the one hand, he was the greatest intellectual exponent of

³⁸ For an essential study of the *Laus*, see Fontaine, "Un manifeste politique et culturel", pp. 61-68; on the repercussions of this praise during the Middle Ages and its importance in the process of the Reconquista, see Rei, "A *Laude Spaniae*", pp. 315-346.

³⁹ Fontaine, *Isidoro de Sevilla: Génesis y originalidad*, p. 171; his reflections on the forms of dating this work in relation to the *Chronica* are also very thought-provoking.

⁴⁰ Regarding when the work was written, and the reasons behind the existence of two versions, see García Moreno, "¿Por qué Isidoro de Sevilla...?", pp. 387-408.

⁴¹ Merrills, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity*, pp. 205-207.

his time and, on the other, one of the prime movers behind the articulation of relations between the different political stakeholders.

The very little information that we have on his life is mostly provided by Isidore himself in his works. The importance of his family was doubtless due to the duties that it performed for the Gothic powers that be. The whole family's exile from Cartagena to Seville, after the arrival of Byzantine troops in the coastal city, would initiate a period of very fruitful collaboration between its members and the Visigothic monarchy: Severianus, his father, as a high official, and Leander and, later on, Isidore himself, as Bishop of Seville, as well as Fulgentius, another of his brothers, as Bishop of Écija. The lineage of his mother, whose Gothic descent and links to the Germanic monarchy itself are sometimes hinted at, is much more confusing.⁴²

Indications of Isidore's status can already be glimpsed when he accompanied Leander to the royal capital to attend the III Council of Toledo. His election to the episcopal see of Seville, following the death of his brother, inevitably brought him into the orbit of the new Gothic King Sisebut as of 612, with whom he had

⁴² *Patrologia Latina* 81, 96. In this respect, the reference to a possible relationship between one of his sisters, Theodora or Theodosia, and the usurper Hermenegild, whose mother she would be, is also significant. It might be an error, particularly in light of the ban in force on mixed marriages (*Liber Iudicum*, III, 1, 1). However, we have examples of marriages of this type between the peninsula elites (e.g. Theudis). It is obvious that the ban had not been strictly observed many years before the enactment of the law normalizing this state of affairs. On this issue, see Valverde, "El reino visigodo de Toledo y los matrimonios mixtos", pp. 511-527.

studied.⁴³ From that moment on, Isidore would be a frequent visitor to the royal city to advise the king on the difficult decisions that he would be called on to make. Although all his literary oeuvre has a bearing on the analysis at hand, some of Isidore's works are truly exceptional for understanding the 6th and 7th centuries. Certainly, *Etymologies* was his most well-known and reproduced work in the Middle Ages. This voluminous compilation marking his maturity contains a compendium of knowledge of his time and, more specifically, of that wisdom that he judged as being essential as a basis for the new Christian culture of late antiquity, aimed at underpinning the new society. It was so widely used in medieval teaching that, in many cases, the original sources cited in its pages were gradually pushed aside until many of them disappeared. It gives grammar a central role, whose importance has already been noted and whose study occupies the first of the 20 books comprising the compilation. To this was added afterwards rhetoric and dialectics and, finally, mathematics. Very different subjects are addressed in the rest of the work, for together with medicine and law, it also deals with ecclesiastical literature and Church offices. There is no doubt whatsoever that the importance that Isidore gave it was determined by its real objective: to place the knowledge inherited from the ancient world at the service of the elites of late antiquity.

⁴³ Noteworthy among the works mentioning Sisebut is the life of St Desiderius of Vienne, a magnificent example of the political function that hagiographic literature served in the late antique world (Fontaine, "King Sisebut's *Vita Desiderii*", pp. 93-129).

Another outstanding work is *On Illustrious Men*,⁴⁴ a short compendium of biographies that links up the works of Jerome and Gennadius of Massilia with those of Ildefonsus of Toledo-- which already included the life of Isidore--in addition to subsequent early medieval chronicles. A century after Gennadius had written his work, Isidore intended to underline the relevance of a new category. Together with mainly 5th-century poets and Christian historians/hagiographers, there appeared a new group composed of Hispanic authors and bishops.⁴⁵ There was still, of course, concern with heresy, so typical of Gennadius, in this case particularly in relation to the nature of Christ--an important aspect considering the evolution of the conflict between Arians and Catholics during the last decades of the previous century.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, it was the bishops who took pride of place in the treatise. Hosius, Hidatius of Chaves--a 5th-century chronicler--and Martin of Dumio--the evangelizer of the Suevic kingdom--are just some of those mentioned, along with other outstanding 6th-century figures: Justinian of Valencia, Justus of Urgell, Isidore's own brother Leander, Licinian of Cartagena, Severus of Malaga, John of Gerona--of Biclár--Eutropius of Valencia and, the most recent, Maximus of Saragossa. Idacius of Cordova, the first to decry Priscillianism,⁴⁷ noteworthy for a treatise against heresy, also gets a look in. The bishop of Cordova's quest for

⁴⁴ It must have been written between 615 and 618, during the reign of and perhaps commissioned by Sisenand, with whom Isidore shared cultural interests. See Codoñer, *De Viris Illustribus [On Illustrious Men]*, p. 17.

⁴⁵ Sánchez Salor, "El género de los *de viris illustribus*", pp. 29-54.

⁴⁶ In turn, there are constant references to authors opposing monophysitism and to the quarrel of the Three Chapters (Markus, *Gregory the Great*, chap. 9).

⁴⁷ Isidore of Seville, *On Illustrious Men*, 9.

orthodoxy would have contributed to strengthen the fledgling Visigothic state. As would the learning and works of the rest of the bishops listed above, the authentic intellectual powerhouse of the Visigothic kingdom.

It could be argued that the Iberia of Isidore was identified in an increasingly less ambiguous way with the culture of the Catholic Church.⁴⁸ This evolution would culminate in Ildefonsus of Toledo's *On Illustrious Men*,⁴⁹ which almost exclusively lists Hispanic bishops who had never written anything, a clear indication of the progressive cultural impoverishment at the end of the Visigothic period. While Isidore insisted on the problem of heresy and on the education and literary production of bishops, Ildefonsus focused his attention, once consolidated the Visigothic monarchy, exclusively on episcopal figures, principally those of the see of Toledo, inextricably linked to the king.⁵⁰

One of the most significant cultural achievements of that newly combined world was, undoubtedly, law, which both the monarchy and the Church knew how to use to protect their own interests by defending common purposes.

⁴⁸ Sánchez Salor, "El género de los *de viris illustribus...*", p. 50.

⁴⁹ It starts with the Roman Gregory the Great. The Pope, at the forefront of the intellectual revival of the West, had close ties with the Visigothic kingdom. It also includes the monk Donatus--in *On Illustrious Men*, 3--who, after arriving in Iberia from Byzantine Africa, accompanied by his community and a well-furnished library, was to become one of the architects of the Visigothic kingdom's cultural development (Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, pp. 275-276). On the reasons behind his emigration to the Visigothic part of the peninsula, rather than to the part controlled by the Byzantines, see *Hispania y Bizancio*, pp. 222-224.

⁵⁰ Sánchez Salor, *Ibid.*, p. 53.

The Code of Leovigild--now lost--laid the foundations for subsequent changes in Visigothic law. The lifting of the prohibition against mixed marriages was just one of the aspects envisaged in the *Codex Revisus*, which must have favoured the combination of Gothic and Hispano-Roman elements. Similarly, the code must have improved the position of the monarchy with respect to the community and have established hereditary succession, which would ultimately mean a further step towards the new political reality that would be consolidated in the 7th century. That consolidation had its highest expression in the *Liber Iudicorum* decreed by Recceswinth in 654, nearly two decades after the death of Isidore. Even though we are unfamiliar with the full details of some aspects, we do know that the code could be modified at the wish of the king and with the acquiescence of the bishops and court principals.⁵¹ The aim of this new code was yet again to consolidate the position of the monarchy and the stability of the Visigothic state. To this end, its dissemination was encouraged to the extent of controlling its price on the market.⁵² This interest in disclosing the content of the new laws--the legal culture--together with the monarchy's price cap on the final product--the code--brings us back to the cultural sphere and the dissemination of a political programme championed by the elites. However, this situation would not last forever.

The second half of the 7th century and the first few years of the following one, during which Iberia remained under Visigothic control, evince a certain

⁵¹ An analysis of Book I of the *Liber* is sufficient to appreciate the importance given to the bishops and the *officium palatii* as the king's advisors.

⁵² A maximum price of six wages.

deterioration in the glittering cultural achievements of the previous decades. The clergy, who had gone to such great lengths to secure the Visigothic monarchy's position through their cultural programme, now seemed to abandon common objectives in pursuit of individual salvation or, at best, on a small scale, that of their respective urban communities. The establishment of the political-religious frontier between Al-Andalus and the Christian kingdoms and the progressive Arabization of culture fostered at the highest levels of Umayyad officialdom, did not however hinder cultural activities among the Hispano-Visigoths--intellectuals, libraries, parish schools, new monasteries, manuscript restoration, the commissioning of new copies, the transfer of works, etc. It is reasonable to believe that the relentless advance of Islamic culture in Southern Iberia must have provoked a cultural reaction expressed not only in the appearance of voluntary martyrs, but also in the recovery of a large part of the culture in which martyrdom had been possible. This was none other than that of the last centuries of the Roman Empire. The importance of Cordova, where this cultural renaissance involved such remarkable figures as Eulogius and Alvarus, must have increased gradually or, alternatively, possessed a dissident kernel, maybe thanks to the Jewish community, at a moment when the Arab-Berbers consolidated their hold over Iberia, for they established their capital precisely at the *Baetican* city, thus reviving once again the splendour of the ancient Roman *urbs* of *Corduba*.