LATE ANTIQUE AND EARLY MEDIEVAL IBERIA

Edited by Eleonora Dell' Elicine and Céline Martin

Framing Power in Visigothic Society

Discourses, Devices, and Artifacts

Amsterdam University Press

Late Antique and Early Medieval Iberia

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1. Texts, Discourses, and Devices: Reading Visigothic Society Today

Eleonora Dell' Elicine and Céline Martin

Abstract

This volume examines how power was framed in Visigothic society and how a culturally diverse population was held together as a single kingdom. Through this dynamic process a new early medieval society emerged. This transformation involved the deployment of an array of political and cultural resources: the production of knowledge; the appropriation of Patristic literature; controlling and administering rural populations; reconceptualizing the sacred; capital punishment and exile; controlling the manufacture of currency; and defining Visigothic society in relation to other polities. This volume brings together researchers from a variety of disciplines to rethink frameworks of power in the Peninsula in both historical and archaeological as well as anthropological terms, offering a new understanding of Iberian society as a whole.

Keywords: Late Antiquity, Early Medieval, Visigothic Spain, Power, Society, Interdisciplinarity

Around 582, King Leovigild summoned Bishop Masona of Mérida to his court at Toledo. After trying unsuccessfully to get him to embrace Arianism, he demanded that Masona hand over the precious tunic of Saint Eulalia of Mérida to him, so that it could be kept in an Arian basilica in Toledo. But the bishop refused to hand over the relic, which he had concealed by wrapping it around his stomach, under his clothes. Suddenly, the clear sky resounded with God's thunder, causing Leovigild to fall from his throne onto the ground. Enraged, the king sentenced Masona to exile and ordered that he leave on an untamed horse, in the hope of seeing the holy bishop fall 'and give him a great spectacle.' But Masona mounted the horse with

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ease, which the Lord had made 'like a gentle lamb' for him and he rode off into exile without suffering any mishap.[1]

This confrontation between the Arian Visigothic king and the most powerful Hispanic bishop of the time can be read, in a rather traditional fashion, as a conflict between the church and the state, or between the spiritual and secular powers, or otherwise between 'centre and periphery'.[2] Yet, there are still more ways to understand the story and to frame the conflict between Masona and Leovigild without confronting 'church and state' or 'centre and periphery'. Both characters held power over the people: they were able to influence people to behave in one way or another, each within a different sphere, bearing in mind that, before the Gregorian Reform, both spheres were not watertight compartments; each of them could even exert a certain pressure on the course of action of the other. In the case discussed, they vied to control an artefact – a tunic – whose holiness was both a magnet for pilgrims and a means to enhance the authority of its possessor. Masona's careful concealment of the tunic upon his stomach was also a way for him to identify with the martyr Eulalia, who had allegedly borne it in the same way centuries before;[3] and identifying with a martyr amounted to characterizing Leovigild as a tyrant, that is, to disauthorizing him.[4] From another perspective, power is classically made visible through processes such as elevation, in this case, onto a throne or a horse. In the story, Leovigild fell from his throne but Masona did not fall from his horse; a legitimizing transcendence determined who was meant to fall and who was not. Finally, whatever one's position on the Linguistic Turn, no contemporary scholar can overlook the fact that the story itself is a discourse of power produced by the see of Mérida during the following century, years after the death of both characters: the sentence of exile issued by the king must thus be seen as a discourse of power within a discourse of power of a different nature and scope. All these ways of addressing the anecdote are valid, complementary, and by no means exhaustive. In this vein, the present volume intends to provide an overview of the potential new insights into power in Visigothic society.

The first collections of essays on Visigothic studies, offering complementary and often multidisciplinary approaches, date back to the 1970s and

1 *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium*, V, 6, pp. 65-70.

2 A milestone for this last approach was Collins, 'Mérida and Toledo'.

3 A striking illustration of the point made by Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*; see also Collins, 'Mérida and Toledo', p. 197.

4 In describing the confrontation between Leovigild and Masona, the hagiography closely followed the model of the *Passiones:* see Maya, 'De Leovigildo perseguidor'.

1980s. In 1971, a special issue of the journal *Anales toledanos*,[5] dedicated to the Visigothic realm, was published: it included thirteen contributions by leading philologists, historians, archaeologists, and numismatists of the time. Two colloquiums followed and were published soon after in 1980 and 1981, respectively: *Visigothic Spain: New Approaches*[6] and the more modest *Innovación y continuidad en la España visigótica*.[7] The collective works on Visigothic Spain then reached their apogee. In 1986, a special issue of *Antigüedad y Cristianismo*[8] included the proceedings of an International Visigothic Conference with a diverse set of approaches and 40 different contributions. In 1989, the III Council of Toledo of 589 was commemorated with an official symposium,[9] numerous contributions (out of a total of 41 in the scientific section)[10] to which are key among the Visigothic literature of the twentieth century. Several months later, another International Visigothic Conference was held in Madrid. As multidisciplinary as the previous encounters and still ambitious in its dimensions (29 contributions), it was only released in 1998.[11] Subsequently, Visigothic scientific activity shifted to northern Europe, with two collective volumes published almost simultaneously in 1999,[12] and then apparently waned. Since the turn of the century, only one more collection of Visigothic matter has been published, although the protagonism had to be shared with the Lombards: nine of the sixteen contributions to this multidisciplinary colloquium held in Rome in 1997 were Visigothic.[13] Nearly twenty years later, there has not been another Visigothic compilation published in print, in Spain or in any other country. Admittedly, we can celebrate the recent (2016) launch of an online series of *Visigothic Symposia*, which has been rallying many international specialists in the field around different general themes[14] and a special issue of *Antiquité tardive* dedicated

5 *Estudios sobre la España visigoda*.

6 James, ed., *Visigothic Spain*.

7 Gonzálvez Ruiz, *Innovación y continuidad*.

8 *Los Visigodos. Historia y civilización*.

9 *Concilio III de Toledo*.

10 In the words of Peter Linehan, the volume is 'prefaced by 200 pages of preliminary matter which will chiefly be of interest to students of the Spanish church in the late 1980s,' Linehan, 'Review', p. 333.

11 Méndez Madariaga *et al.*, eds, *Jornadas Internacionales*.

12 Ferreiro, ed., *The Visigoths;* and Heather, ed., *The Visigoths*.

13 *Visigoti e Longobardi* (2001).

14 Of the series of five scheduled 'Visigothic Symposia', directed by Michael Kelly and Dolores Castro, the following have been released so far: 'Visigothic Symposium 1 (2016-2017), "Law and Theology"'; 'Visigothic Symposium 2 (2017-2018); "Iberian Spaces, Iberian Identities"'; 'Visigothic Symposium 3 (2018-2019); "Communication and Circulation"'; and 'Visigothic Symposium 4 (2018-2019); "Manuscripts and Edition"'.

to the times of Isidore of Seville.[15] Paradoxically, scholarship on the matter has never been so vibrant: the publishing of new scientific editions, notable since the 1990s, has increased[16] and several recent monographs confirm a renewed interest in the period.[17] It is, therefore, high time for this present volume, which will be dedicated specifically to power.

In Visigothic historiography, the issue of power is examined in two main ways. The first one focuses on the *subjects* of power, studying the ways in which it was displayed by kingship, church, aristocracy, or even peasantry. This approach foregrounds the constitution of social bounds on the broad scale of the kingdom, perceiving Visigothic society as the result of a display of key forces. Moreover, this perspective clearly reveals social inequalities: it exposes a society in which power was poorly distributed. However, what still remains difficult to understand in this approach is how authority was built in the Visigothic society; that is to say, the ways in which particular forces managed to impose conditions on others. Broadly speaking, power is perceived as the force exerted by an existing subject on another subjugated one. According to this point of view, the articulation of authority is conceived as chronologically and logically preceding the real exercise of power.

The other way to examine power in Visigothic historiography – itself largely developed – focuses on *techniques, practices*, and *artefacts*. Topics such as law, taxation, monetary circulation, monuments – to name just a few examples – are considered valuable access roads for exploring concrete forms of power. This approach unveils particular mechanisms, highly codified procedures for exercising power in certain fields. Its major concerns are not large-scale or society as a whole, but the protocols deployed by a singular device in order to achieve its aims. This standpoint specifically reveals the energy invested in a particular detail, in only one tool, figure, or device that allows power to circulate, to move from one point to another, increasing in strength as it does so. Such an approach to the exercise of power helps us to observe that force is certainly not some sort of vector applied on a subject or an object. Instead, power may be seized as an amount of social energy that can only be put into action through complex devices involving several

15 *Isidore de Séville et son temps*.

16 Braulio of Saragossa, *Epistulae* (2018); *Chronica Hispana* (2018); Isidore of Seville, *Synonyma* (2010); *Iuliani Toletani episcopi Opera II* (2014); Martin of Braga, *Oeuvres morales* (2018).

17 Barroso Cabrera, *Etnicidad vs. Aculturación* (2018); Buchberger, *Shifting Ethnic Identities* (2017); Chavarría, *A la sombra* (2018); Cordero Ruiz, *El Territorio Emeritense* (2013); Díaz, *El reino suevo* (2011); Dell'Elicine, *En el principio* (2013); Fernández, *Aristocrats and Statehood* (2017); Pérez Martínez, *Tarraco* (2012); Riess, *Narbonne* (2013); Vallejo Girvés, *Hispania y Bizancio* (2012); Valverde Castro, *Los viajes* (2017); Wood, *The Politics of Identity* (2012).

agents. Moreover, these devices are ones that allow the subject controlling them to gain authority: even practices such as war – frequently associated with pure violence – are complex social codes. Consequently, the standpoint that favours the study of techniques, practices, or artefacts shows that the exercise of power cannot be fully separated from the construction of its authority. Command is exerted from a recognized authority and, conversely, command brings authority up to date. From this perspective, the subject does not lose relevance or dissolve into the object, rather it is conceived as one of the forces managing social constructions, trying to direct them and constantly holding them to its aims. We can consider, for instance, the analyses of the punishment of exile performed by **Martin**, or the study of the bishop's role examined by **Castro**, both included in this volume: the interventions of the subjects accommodate practices in force, updating them in each case according to the aims they define. Considering this concern paid to a particular technique or practice, this point of view tends to suspend the consideration of other devices that are being deployed simultaneously. This is an in-depth approach centred on the complexity and refinement of one of a number of ways of exerting power.

As its title reveals, the present volume also shines light on practices, devices, and artefacts, and its chapters certainly favour the second approach outlined above: topics as varied as pastoral texts (**Elfassi**); techniques of exegesis (**Castro**); peasant communities (**Tejerizo**); alternative cultic practices (**Dell' Elicine**); penal sanctions (**Martin**); currency (**Pliego**); and international relations (**Vallejo**) are all examined as social constructions articulating forces and exercising power in Visigothic society through specific and highly sophisticated mechanisms.

In this sense, the volume as a whole can be approached in two different and not mutually exclusive ways. The first one, more evident and familiar, is a reading direction that fosters an update on topics as manifold as philology of Visigothic texts, numismatics, diplomacy, archaeology, legal history, etc. As already noted, each of these fields demands a high degree of specialization and the review of an immense number of works, making it materially arduous for a non-specialist to monitor all these topics. Paradoxically, at the same time, the rate of discoveries and new developments in each specialty compels scholars to become acquainted with the major debates ongoing in the wider field; otherwise their personal research would become obsolete. In this challenging context, the present volume intends to expose meaningful – albeit brief and swift – discussions around certain topics, posing ideas and lining up the essential bibliography on the issue. The intended readership is certainly varied: experts on Visigothic society, but also readers interested

in the functioning of other medieval societies or, broadly speaking, in the ways pre-modern communities frame their social bonds.

A second approach to the volume intends to benefit from the rich diversity of topics that this book is made up of. Even if not providing a thorough record – an almost insurmountable endeavour for sure – this book collates significantly different ways of framing power in Visigothic society and unfolds them in a simultaneous and probably overlapping way. The clearest example of the superposition examined in this text is territory: far from being the clean and neatly boundaried surface shown in maps, the territory held by the Visigoths was defined by the king in various ways, including by: repeatedly confronting the Byzantines (**Vallejo**); by marking off centralities and distances whenever he sentenced anyone to exile (**Martin**); or by promoting various monetary circuits (**Pliego**). Concurrently, the aristocracy played its role in defining territory since it distributed population, enhancing some areas and relegating others (**Tejerizo**). The peasantry performed their part as well while settling and producing value (**Tejerizo**); not to forget cultic practices disclosing different powers frequently confronted (**Dell' Elicine**). In the territory, the various powers established refined mechanisms in order to exert force. Such a cross-reading of the contributions collected here allows us to ponder the complexity of the powers at stake, their close-knit relationship, paving the way for conceiving the objects themselves – in this case, the territory – as relationships of power in Visigothic society.

The idea of complexity maintains its ability to dismantle certain prejudices still rooted in some current discourses on medieval societies, all of them firmly established in daily speech by videos, movies, or school books, which frequently associate these experiences with darkness, primitiveness, and even with a return to nature. Yet, for medievalists, this discussion provides little novelty to the ongoing debates. By contrast, complexity understood as the exercise of powers acting simultaneously helps to conceive Visigothic society not only as a dynamic frame that experiences change over a period of time, but as the social bond resulting from the overlap of different undertakings. As already noted, such a global scale can perfectly be grasped by focusing on the subjects of power, at the expense of describing power relationships as unidirectional. Understanding pastoral texts, currency, particular techniques as exegesis, legal practices, diplomacy, cultic rites, human settlements – all issues examined in this book – as powers exercised simultaneously enables us to comprehend Visigothic society as a dysfunctional functioning; in turn, a similar formula can be employed to understand each one of these devices. We note its 'functioning' dimension because Visigothic society definitely was a social experience that worked

and bonded. At the same time, we qualify it as 'dysfunctional' since it was not the result of central powers integrating many parts into a harmonious whole, but rather the ever-precarious effect of changing forces controlling many overlapping devices. Even if functioning in a dysfunctional way is not necessarily an exclusive feature of Visigothic society, the ways in which this social experience dealt with disarrangement were distinct. Thinking of the simultaneity of powers helps us to conceive the historicity of Visigothic society.

This functional dysfunctionality, which we posit as characteristic of the Visigothic experience, unequivocally retained central powers. Most studies related to the first point of view summarized here confirm centrality and explore the scope and ranges of these powers, but they leave this issue ultimately unexplained: according to this standpoint, kingship and church displayed a wide range of powers precisely because they were central. For their part, studies that favour the second point of view tend to account for centrality examining the refinements of a single device of power. In order to grasp the historicity of Visigothic society, though, we should start by exploring the conditions these powers had to control in order to exercise pre-eminence over other forces during a given period of time.

Even though the list of devices analysed in this volume is limited, studying them one by one may help some preliminary ideas emerge that will facilitate our thinking through of this question.

We can simply start by focusing on those objects examined here that were controlled by central powers: pastoral texts (**Elfassi**); exegesis (**Castro**); currency (**Pliego**); legal practice (**Martin**); and diplomacy (**Vallejo**). All of them, in one way or another, resort to writing in order to convey a command, even if writing did not play a major role, as in the cases of currency, diplomatic rites, or the judicial apparatus as a whole. In Visigothic society, writing did more than express power: it widened social distances. And although this could be achieved in a variety of ways (for example, by raising monuments or building cities), writing was one of the most powerful techniques for doing so. A subject in Visigothic society could thus only aim to become central if it relied on writing, at least with respect to the main devices it controlled.

The second condition that allowed for centrality and that can be observed from this limited series of objects was institutionalization, ensured to a certain extent by the capability of the subject to rule itself. In fact, texts, currency, the legal apparatus, and even diplomacy were controlled by subjects provided with mechanisms of self-regulation: kingship by means of the law, the church through canon law and monastic rules. The higher the level of institutionalization, the better opportunities for controlling various devices, even with the

presence of other opposing forces.[18] In Visigothic society, centrality was not a given position, but rather was the result of the work of different forces. It was based on the accumulation of mechanisms of power, on the control of writing, and to a larger degree, on institutionalization. The list exposed here certainly does not account for all the conditions that enabled a force to become central, but it prompts readings to reach an understanding of the whole.

In sum, these powers did not open social distances in Visigothic society because they held a central position; instead, they held a central position because they exerted control over the conditions examined above. Whereas kingship and church mastered these conditions quite effectively, the different aristocratic groupings, who controlled fewer self-regulatory mechanisms, managed with varying degrees success or only temporarily.

Further, we know that Visigothic society included other forces that opened social distances and were not central. The list of devices examined in this volume allows for fewer explorations at this level, only providing some glimpses of general tendencies.

Let us begin with the analysis **Tejerizo** devotes to peasant communities. According to the author, peasantry was a full social subject in Visigothic society and therefore a force that held power, in turn liable of being ruled by other forces. Although it controlled some self-regulatory mechanisms – silos, for instance – many other relevant ones were beyond its command and made the peasantry vulnerable to, for example, laws of inheritance or war, just mention just a few. The peasant community was in fact a power relation in itself, criss-crossed by other powers. As analysed by **Tejerizo**, some of these powers relocated populations, moving them in order to colonize new areas. Their force consisted of recruiting, gathering, and bringing people together. A similar phenomenon can be detected in the exploration of so-called idolatric cults by **Dell' Elicine**. One of the ways in which powers made themselves visible was precisely by reinforcing already existing groups (groups of relatives, of neighbours, *clientes,* etc.) with new identitary bonds, or by promoting new ones. As we can see, both contributions recall the same performances: recruiting, gathering, and bringing people together. Yet, these actions were not limited to minor powers; simply put, they were the ways in which powers manifested themselves in Visigothic society. In fact, minor powers worked similarly, but were not able to control self-regulatory mechanisms thoroughly and, moreover, had erratic access to writing.[19]

18 For this topic, see Humfress, 'Institutionalisation'.

19 For the purposes of this preliminary introduction, we prefer the adjective 'minor' rather than 'local' – generally employed in most specialized works and the texts of Tejerizo and Dell'Elicine

To conclude, reading heterogeneous objects through the lens of simultaneity, as we have been doing here, allows us to highlight some perspectives conducive to the examination of Visigothic society as a whole. Firstly, it helps us not only to recognize its complexity, but also to think it through; secondly, it enables us to identify more accurately its gestures of power; and finally, it contributes to locating the study of particular devices in the broader frame of the forces at play.

Such a perspective entailed considering all the devices concerned in this volume comprehensively. Having sketched some common guidelines, we can now explore some other topics of interest rising from different ways of clustering the same texts.

In this section, we attempt to bind together some of the contributions to this volume that may transversely share particular issues relevant to the exercise of power in Visigothic society. Without losing the perspective of simultaneity, our intention is to focus on the topics or points of view shared by some of the texts, but not necessarily present in others, which can, nevertheless, provide, even in a fragmentary and biased way, interesting glimpses into the examination of forms of power. These are just a few readings from the many possible, considering that any other grouping would highlight many more issues than the ones pointed out here.

The two opening contributions, those of Jacques **Elfassi** and Dolores **Castro**, direct their attention to written texts, that set of operations that was in itself – as we have already pointed out – a device of power. With characteristic precision, **Elfassi** examines the set of texts and forms through which Isidore of Seville read Augustine of Hippo. He points out two of them: firstly, a careful review of the corpus of Saint Augustine known by Isidore; secondly, a reconsideration of his ways of approaching authority. According to **Elfassi**, Isidore employed Augustinian texts in three different registers: as proof of truth; as a reserve of technical terms; and as an aesthetic reference, a Christian model of discursive elegance. For her part, **Castro**'s perspective on Isidore's texts is sociological rather than philological: her aim is to examine the several uses this bishop conferred on biblical exegesis in many of his works. In **Castro**'s opinion, Isidore's exegetic approach strove to settle orthodoxy, to educate the clergy, and to promote Hispalis as a major centre of knowledge. As can be seen, both texts reflect on the ways an authority

collected here –to highlight a weaker intensity of power than that of the forces able to organize the broader social bond. The topic of territory would demand a longer development than the scope of this introduction permits.

(in this case, the bishop of Hispalis) made use of another (Augustine of Hippo, Patristics, the Bible). Writing was a device – typically ecclesiastic and episcopal – for promoting oneself as the fair heir to a tradition, the means by which a certain see or even an ethnic church claimed their place in the spiritual heritage of the new religion. This place conferred or aimed to confer a deep identitary mark onto the group. Orienting oneself authoritatively in the Bible, in Patristics, and particularly in Augustine was charged with special meanings according to the community of readers: some meanings worked for the clergy of Hispalis, others for the broader Visigothic clergy, for the Roman prelacy, for the Franks, or even for imperial readers. In any case, using an authoritative text was a claim of privilege, a hallmark of distinction.

In turn, **Tejerizo**'s and **Dell' Elicine**'s chapters do not focus on texts, but rather on powers acting in the territory. As mentioned above, **Tejerizo**'s contribution outlines peasantry as a subject of power established in new residential frames, the villages. Material remains indicating the presence of villages since the fifth century give us a glimpse of territorial stability, of some direct control over production, social cohesion policies, and internal inequalities. **Dell' Elicine**'s work also brings into focus rural environments, examining the development of cults penalized by the church. According to her, a wide variety of groupings convened around these cults, helping to strengthen powers of all types. **Tejerizo** and **Dell' Elicine** both advocate for a change of frame that would allow us to grasp power relations in a renewed way. The former, building on the 'archaeological turn' disclosed by Escalona, resolutely moves from an archaeology of the early medieval rural world to an archaeology of peasantry, thereby revealing the so far unseen social dimension and the power relations encapsulated in the rural territory. The latter discusses alternative cultic practices through practically the only written evidence left – legislation; yet, her main focus on normative discourse is not on its prohibitive, negative aspect, but on the efficient, positive technologies of power made visible hereto. Finally, both authors agree that ethnicity, traditionally presented by scholarship, is not an essential feature of identity in the societies under study; other criteria, such as vicinity or kinship, appear to be more relevant. Village as well as idolatric cults, insofar as they were power relationships in themselves, could give birth to social bonding, for example, in the cemetery, and simultaneously to vertical links that would reinforce the power of the lord or patron.

Finally, the contributions by **Martin**, **Vallejo**, and **Pliego** emphasize the mechanisms and strategies of power carried out by the Visigothic

monarchy, a topic often discussed by scholars. **Martin** and **Pliego** examine the production of coins and legal rules respectively, showing how royal power projects itself into the territory through monetary emission and the statement of the law. **Vallejo** considers the issue of mutual recognition in the brave new world of post-Roman Late Antiquity. In all three cases, the strategy of power deployed is also one of authority: it aims at achieving practical results as well as constructing an appropriate image for the Visigothic monarch. Adopting a numismatic approach, **Pliego**'s work unveils new insights into some specific moments in the Visigothic period, for instance, Leovigild's policy to confront his rebellious son, or the shift of the centre of power to the south under Chintila and Tulga and, once again, in the last years of the realm, under Wittiza. Although strongly denying the feasibility, within current knowledge, of a study of monetary circulation, she exposes how royal power, through monetary emission, articulated the Iberian territory, seeking to control the flow of wealth and to project the royal image. Likewise, in **Martin**'s study, legal discourse given in the king's name – not only legislation, but also judicial practice – retains a double edge: while serving to contain a restless aristocracy, it produced, depending on the circumstances, a fearsome or a merciful monarch. Finally, beyond the state level, **Vallejo** shows how the uncertain Visigothic-Byzantine diplomacy of the time also sought practical results – to arrange a peaceful, if temporary, cohabitation in the Iberian Peninsula – while appearing, in a more abstract way, as a credible interlocutor. Far from being the feeble force many traditional works describe, the Visigothic monarch retained several and very different devices in order to achieve his aims.

As mentioned above, these basic guidelines to the present volume are just some of the envisaged possibilities. Their aim is not to summarize the content of the following contributions. More than twenty years after the publishing of the last compilation on Visigothic society, there has been a significant increase in research; new topics, new sources and a large number of different historical perspectives make the exercise of simply carrying on from where the field left off unfeasible. In our opinion, undertaking a collective volume today must necessarily have new aims and meanings: not resuming but facilitating dialogues between particular fields, and most of all stimulating comprehensive approaches that can be the key to locating and to reconsidering specialized research in broader and updated perspectives.

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