



Response to Visigothic Symposium I, Panel 1: Theology

ELEONORA DELL'ELICINE

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF GENERAL SARMIENTO / UNIVERSITY OF BUENOS AIRES

In the Visigothic Kingdom, the act of writing works was, under no circumstances, a starting point for the making of authority. In contrast to our society – so much concerned about authorship, originality and individual innovation – in that community, texts gained persuasion because they sprung from an established authority. Definitely, the act of writing was an act of distinction aimed at entrenching existing power, but not for inventing it. Under these circumstances, how did authority manage to persuade its readers effectively? How could these texts transmit authority properly? It is on the bias of this interrogation that I organize my commentary of the first Visigothic Symposium's collected papers. My purpose is not to sketch what the authors assert on their own in their papers, but rather to demonstrate one of the many lines of reading that these papers can provide.

As Elfassi's and Castro's respective contributions show, a crucial device in the making of an authoritative text in Visigothic society is the masterful **display of revealed Truth**. Direct quotations from the Bible or the Church Fathers, borrowings, textual parallels, associations, summaries are some of the most used ways of making clear, at one time, the certainty of what is stamped in the text and its author's qualifications to write it.

Rightly considered as a self-contained scholarly problem, moreover, Elfassi shows that the recognition of the Sevillan's precise sources is immensely helpful for understanding the exact address of Isidore's discourse, the actual shifts intended by the bishop, and the complexity of his labor in writing and rewriting texts. Elfassi explores new ways of dating some of Isidore's more controversial works by identifying some sources employed by the bishop in different texts and the way he does it. However technical and arduous it really is, the philological method proves to be, once again, the only scientific way to ground future conclusions about Isidore's thinking and guidelines.

Castro's paper posits, in turn, the quest of method. In order to reveal the Truth appropriately, an authoritative text must disclose its issues in an orderly and precise way. Exploring the relation between God, Creation and man in Isidore's texts, Castro highlights how the bishop recurrently appeals to strongly specialized categories belonging to the *Trivium* sciences, particularly Grammar ("figura," "symbolum," "index," "imago," "imitatio," "differentia," "synonymum"). In the first place, as Castro points out, assuming a close link between ontology and epistemology – that is to say, Being containing a way to be known, Divinity wanting to be recognized – the bishop keeps hope alive for salvation on scientific grounds at the same time that he posits the Church as the only possible mediator.

In the second place, as Castro suggests, the use of these largely settled intellectual tools not only permits Isidore to communicate accurately the connection between God and His Creation. It provides him a means to found the order of Creation – or at least, the way he

understands it – on a rational basis as well. For instance, the association between Divinity and Creation may be seized as an *index*, God allowing man to recognize His sovereignty through his actions. This is not a matter of human wish or human will: definitely, it is a matter of *gratia*. On the other hand, as Castro remarks, the link between saints and the rest of mankind is dealt as an “imitatio,” that is to say, a free-will disposition to emulate a human reference. As it can be observed, *Trivium* categories are used to legitimate hierarchies and differences between domains, and hence they certainly are reliable building codes in Isidore’s discourse. An appropriate method plays a crucial role in adding persuasion to texts.

From the perspective that I have chosen here, Gusmão’s paper highlights another crucial aspect of the making of authority through texts: the authorial position. As it is well known, the authorial position during the Middle Ages can be largely assumed by different agencies affecting different roles (the one who creates the discourse, the one who writes it down – it might not always be the same individual – the one who copies it, the one who reads it, etc.).

As its title points out, Gusmão’s work focuses on bishops, a major creative source for authoritative texts during this period. As her’s and Velázquez’s papers suggest, authority can be understood by no means as an isolated vertex distant from the rest of society. On the contrary, it has to be figured out as an *activity*, an unceasing work on society linking once and again different points of the social spectrum (and excluding others, needless to say).

Certainly, the authority of the Visigothic bishops is foremost grounded on a sacramental bound, reinforced – as Gusmão accurately remarks – by civil law. In fact, associating bishopric to chief Christian virtues (charity, justice, love, etc.), the *LI* furnishes bishops with a powerful role as judges and supervisors, enlarging in this way their position as *episcopus* over the society as a whole. In my opinion, the *LI* is not remitting to bishops a *paterfamiliae* association, as Gusmão suggests (p. 83), but mainly to a magistracy in this case. Gusmão also points out a kinship basis for episcopal authority founded on Roman senatorial ancestry (p. 81). While that is true, a kinship basis can be considered an incremental aspect in making authority; there is scant evidence – as far as I know – to infer Roman senatorial ancestry working in this context. Even Isidore's prestige is not fundamentally based on blood ancestry, but rather on the ecclesiastical roles so successfully undertaken by his brothers and sister, not his father's senatorial status. Kinship is only one among many other possibilities for gaining episcopal authority: monastic education (e.g. Ildefonsus), favoritism (e.g. Paulus), may be some others. In any case, for the aim chosen here, the different functions properly examined by Gusmão provide the bishop a wide platform on which to forge authoritative writing. In turn, writing increases his personal authority particularly in the face of the clergy, laity or rival sees.

The last contribution I review here is Velázquez's "*Leges in Confirmationem Concilii: The Relationship between the Monarchy and the Church in Visigothic Hispania.*" The idea that the philologist posits in her paper – Monarchy and Church being in fact inseparable poles of power during the Visigothic period – widens our comprehension of the ways authority was actually carved out in this society.

In order to explore the problem, Velázquez examined the whole *corpus* of conciliar *Leges* endorsed by the king or, vice versa, the king's proposals to be supported by the ecclesiastical hierarchies. As a matter of fact, she verifies that the *formulae* used to transmit this sort of decisions are not always the same, varying according to contexts and situations. At any event, as human rules are considered major means to achieve salvation, Monarchy and Church commit to cooperating with the same assignment. This is the place where authority is particularly raised in the Visigothic period. In fact, what chiefly upheaves authority in this society is not only sacrament but also legitimacy to meddle in as many ruling matters as possible. The written text finally derives its authority to reveal Truth from this effort to institutionalize power in different domains and records.

As I tried to show in this commentary, the reading of these contributions provides many clues to tackling different quests concerning Visigothic society. In this case, they have furnished me with some tools to understand the complex making of authoritative texts during this period. For sure, this kind of source is not the only on which we can rely, but certainly it is the most relevant: Elfassi's, Castro's, Gusmão's and Velázquez's research can be enormously helpful for understanding the texts in their own terms. We must always draw attention to the way our sources are produced, so as not to handle them naturally.