



Response to Visigothic Symposium 2, Panel 1: Space

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A virtual symposium certainly lacks some common spaces to share a coffee and get to personally know other scholars of the field; yet, ironically, the formula designed by Michael J. Kelly and Dolores Castro guarantees far better than an actual meeting that all participants *really* get acquainted with the other's contributions. Besides, if laying out a virtual coffee-space for contributors was technically feasible, maybe it would be an interesting experiment... I speak without knowledge, and can't quite assess well the interest of the proposal! So, don't bother too much about it.

This second Visigothic Symposium deals with spaces and identities, and although it is organized into two different panels, really most papers seek to embrace both notions at once. The intertwining of the two is now a classical issue which may not be properly addressed without a combined contribution by archaeologists, historians and philologists; so this multidisciplinary meeting is to be welcomed as well for it. From the point of view of a simple historian, the huge progress of both Visigothic archaeology and scientific editions of Visigothic texts in the last decades are a wonderful opportunity to improve our vision of the period, which for a long time was affected by dogmatic and compartmentalized approaches.

Reconsidering dogmatic stances about ‘castros’ is what Jorge Carlos Arias attempts here. Through GIS techniques, he seeks to overcome the traditional conception of northwestern castros as hallmarks of a “landscape shaped by violence,” which would have led to their desertion in the Roman era, followed by a reoccupation in the troubled times of Late Antiquity. Beyond some local particularities and short-term changes, he brings out a global stability of all kinds of settlement sites, especially of those connected to the communication routes. In the long term, the occupation of castros seems to present no significant difference to other settlement types. It is interesting to note that two of the three known stations of Valerius of Bierzo I refer to in my own paper, *Castrum Petrense* and *Rufiana*, also are castros, and I think they can be put forward to support Arias’s case. The first one stands very close to a public road and was a center for a local cult in pagan times: it fits in the picture of long-term stability for castros connected to the network of Roman ways and river valleys. As for Rufiana, a *castellum* identified in present-day San Pedro de Montes, Valerius claims that the place had a “founder” named Rufus. Whatever its existence as a settlement previous to Roman times, Rufiana was then made into a large estate owned by a seemingly Roman landowner. On the eve of the eighth century, the village still stood. In accordance with its harsh surroundings, it was then labelled a *castellum* (no difference with *castrum*), and its name recalled that past Rufus. Such an example may sustain the idea that, in the Iberian Northwest, the stability of settlement sometimes proved stronger than the ownership structure and the political contexts.

The paper by Sonia Gutierrez Lloret, Julia Sarabia Bautista, Carolina Domenech and Victoria Amorós also leads to a reconsideration of some previously uncritically accepted

assumptions. The elements now available are conclusive evidence that El Tolmo de Minateda is the Elotanan bishopric erected *ex novo* by the Visigothic regime at the turn of the seventh century. It is striking that African imported ceramics point to the existence of commercial links with the Byzantine zone into the first half of that century, despite the diplomatically tensed relations of both polities. This strengthens the criticisms addressed years ago¹ about the mechanistic paradigm of *limes* (itself very questionable, long after Benjamin Isaac's definitive clarification²) applied to that region. Equally striking is the evidence for some persistent luxury trade from the East in the second half of the seventh century, a time generally presented, for the Visigothic kingdom, as one of closing off to the rest of the world. Both facts sustain the view that elite identity kept being fueled by long-distance connections throughout the kingdom of Toledo. This should not mislead us into thinking that continuity between the Roman and the Visigothic worlds was absolute. Through applying the stratigraphic method to Visigothic buildings (which was impossible during most of the twentieth century), María Ángeles Utrero challenges the hitherto widespread idea of an imitation of Byzantium by the Visigothic architects and sculptors. Actually, she even denies any evidence of a socio-professional class of artisans with technical knowledge and available materials to that end before 711: Visigothic constructions were made of reused materials, through simple and economical techniques, and only some sculptures appear to have been the result of skilled labor. That the Visigothic ceremonial was inspired in Byzantium has been refuted already:³ perhaps it's time for a

¹ Gisela Ripoll, "Acerca de la supuesta frontera entre el *Regnum Visigothorum* y la *Hispania* bizantina," *Pyrenae* 27 (1996): 251-67.

² Benjamin Isaac, "The Meaning of the Terms *Limes* and *Limitanei*," *Journal of Roman Studies* 78 (1988): 125-47.

³ Javier Arce, "Ceremonial visigodo/ceremonial bizantino: un tópico historiográfico. Balance de una década de investigaciones," in *Bizancio y la Península Ibérica. De la Antigüedad Tardía a la Edad Moderna*, ed. Inmaculada Pérez Martín and Pedro Bádenas de la Peña (Madrid, 2004), 101-06.

global *aggiornamento* of such a historiographical avenue, which may have been very much correlated with the political specificities of Spain in the past century, and with the subsequent temptation to depict its medieval history as unique in the West, only comparable to an outstanding medieval polity like Byzantium.

Other essays in the symposium address new issues in identity and the strong link between identity and power. Here I would like to emphasize the contrast between the scope of the identity arrayed respectively by Eugenius of Toledo (Mark Tizzoni) and Isidore of Seville (Molly Lester) on the one hand, and Valerius of Bierzo (my contribution) on the other.

The liturgical writings by Isidore of Seville show that he strived to enshrine Iberian practices into the general liturgy of the universal Christian church so as to certify their orthodoxy, be they common to all or specific to the Iberian Peninsula. When allegedly shared with the rest of Mediterranean churches, Isidore thought that Iberian liturgical practices demonstrated that Visigothic Christianity was firmly anchored to Christian orthodoxy; on the contrary, when highlighting hispanic specificities, he took them as marks of a *superior* orthodoxy against the rest of Christendom. Thus, Isidore proves to have wielded two identities at once: the Catholic one, guaranteed by universality (according to the *Sentences*, a distinctive feature of heresies is that they only exist *in aliquem angulum mundi, aut in unam gentem*⁴); and the Iberian one, through presenting the Visigothic church as the best student in the class of Christendom, and, somehow conflictingly, transmutating difference into excellence.

⁴ Isidore of Seville, *Sententiae*, 1.16.6.

The same contradiction, or complexity, appears in the sense of belonging discernible in Eugenius of Toledo, especially through his *Carmina*. Originally from Toledo but emotionally more linked to Saragossa, celebrating the Visigothic in his verse, Eugenius also self-identified, through the kind of language and the sources he used, with the pan-Latin world, albeit from an Iberian standpoint. Accordingly, both Isidore and his later admirer Eugenius can be credited with a multi-layer cultural identity, which they displayed voluntarily, depending on circumstances.⁵

Nothing of the sort in the case of Valerius of Bierzo, who deliberately focused on his most immediate surroundings and, despite his likely high-ranking origin, which would match those of Isidore and Eugenius, didn't seem to care about the unity of the state or Visigothic identity. In presenting himself, the reference he made to *Asturia* was at once old-fashioned and, very probably, based on ecclesiastical geography only. He thus exclusively placed his experience as a hermit within the framework of the church. The rejection he expressed towards Toledo makes it clear that the church he really took into account was not the Visigothic one, but Christendom as a whole. There were not various levels in Valerius's identity: his reluctant embedding into the earthly world only admitted a general reference to the ecclesiastical structure. His real belonging was in Heaven.

⁵ On multi-layer barbarian identity see Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376-568* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 59ff.