Response to Visigothic Symposium 2, Panel 2: Identity

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When Michael J. Kelly and Dolores Castro invited me to write a response to papers on identity, I approached the task as an opportunity to reflect on identity as a category of analysis. I have often regarded identity as a usefully expansive framework through which to examine late antique and early medieval society, but I would also argue that it can be deceptively comforting or stultifying. Too often, historians invoke identity as a shorthand to represent a process, the dynamism and contingency of which are lost when grouped under a single term. For myself, the possibilities and complexity of identity are best encapsulated in Alice's exchanges with the Caterpillar during her adventures in Wonderland. In response to the query "who are you?" Alice shyly replied: "I — I hardly know, sir, just at present — at least I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."[1] The exchange captures multiple valences of the concept of "identity." It juxtaposes identity of self and identification by others, it underscores identity as changing over time, and most importantly, Alice's vocal examination of her confusion is representative of identity as a process.

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[1] Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1869), 60.

Over the past thirty years, identity has become a staple in late antique and early medieval scholarship. Modern historians have a much better grasp on identity as constructed, as situational (to use Patrick Geary's terminology),[2] and as relational. Religious identity has been a critical vehicle for understanding religious group formation, heresiology, and interaction between Christians, Jews, pagans, and Muslims. The recently revived debate over the degree of Roman continuity in the post-Roman world has, in part, lent more urgency to questions of Roman, regional, and ethnic identity. Since the 1980s, increasingly nuanced studies of gendered identities have highlighted the varied interpretations and experiences of the early medieval world. Recently, however, studies of late antique and early medieval identities have ventured beyond proving that identity is constructed, taking this as a given fact rather than a theory needing to be proven. The work of Éric Rebillard on Christians in North Africa, David M. Grossberg on Jewish rabbinical communities, and Helmut Reimitz on the contested formation of Frankish identity offer new models of how identity functioned, uncover the precise impact of social context, and reveal the literal, material construction of identity narratives.[3] All advance our understanding of identity as a process by demonstrating precisely how that process could work.

In adopting "Identity" as their focus, five of the contributors to Visigothic Symposium 2 sought to "approach the core issue of the meanings of self and other in early medieval Iberia." Drawing on varied types of evidence, the essays introduce new aspects of personal

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[2] Patrick Geary, "Ethnic Identity as a Situational Construct in the Early Middle Ages," *Mitteilungen der anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 113 (1983): 15-26.
[3] Éric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); David M. Grossberg, *Heresy and the Formation of the Rabbinic Community* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017); Helmut Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550–850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

and group identity for examination. Some revisit older questions, such as the continuity/change argument and the diversity of Iberian monasticism; others explore underappreciated, yet central, means of developing religious and professional identity.

The first two essays use material as well as textual evidence to examine post-Roman Iberians' relationship to the Roman and Byzantine empires. In "The Artisans behind Visigothic Buildings: the Materiality of Identity," María de los Ángeles Utrero Agudo explores the potential identities of early medieval builders. By evaluating evidence of builders' technical knowledge and skills, Utrero Agudo draws out how their construction activities might have translated into self-conceptions. Despite the proven limitations of interpreting material culture as evidence of identity, the general absence of masonry skills and low levels of local building leads Utrero Agudo to conclude that it is difficult to speak of an artisanal community in Visigothic Iberia. In contrast to Utrero Agudo's local professional communities, in "Being Roman under Visigothic Rule: Space and Identity in the Northeastern Territories of the Iberian Peninsula (*Hispania Tarraconensis*)," Meritxell Pérez Martínez explores identity on a larger scale and evaluates the self-conception of the people of Tarraco as the northeastern peninsula painfully passed from Roman to Visigothic rule. Pérez Martínez emphasizes the importance of Tarraco's status as a Roman provincial capital and a metropolitan see. Such aspects of Tarraco's status are concrete examples of "local Romaness" in the post-Roman world, and Pérez Martzínez uses written and material evidence to propose that continuity of urban life and prosperity suggests little Visigothic impact.

The remaining three essays turn to textual evidence to explore individual, communal, and "national" layers of Iberian religious identity. My own essay, "Mapping Liturgical Identity in Early Medieval Iberia and Beyond," addresses Isidore of Seville's conception of Iberian liturgical tradition and its relationship with other liturgical traditions of the Mediterranean. In particular, I explore how Isidore used geography to map his liturgical vision over the contemporary world and to offer commentary on the Iberian liturgy's orthodoxy. Mark Tizzoni shifts the reader's focus from Isidore of Seville to Eugenius of Toledo. Scholars frequently assume that Eugenius was a staunchly Catholic Visigothic poet in the center of Toledan and royal politics. In "(De-)Constructing the Visigothic Poet: Regional, Cultural, & Religious Identity in Eugenius II of Toledo," Tizzoni dismantles this casual assumption. Through Eugenius's poetry, he uncovers the bishop's self-perception as a pastor and an ascetic, his regional identification with Zaragoza, and his engagement with a broader Latin tradition that spanned space and time. Overall, Tizzoni presents Eugenius as "intentionally very much part of a larger non-regional, pan-Latin intellectual structure," but grounded in Iberia.[4] Finally, in "Monasticism in Late Antique Iberia: Its Origins and Influences," Artemio Martínez Tejera offers a broad survey of the varied indigenous, eastern, north African, and Gallic roots of Iberian monasticism. Martínez Tejera usefully emphasizes the diversity of the Iberian monastic experience and raises questions regarding how Iberian monks saw themselves in the larger monastic world.

As I read the contributions, three themes emerged from the essays that suggest fresh and exciting directions in the study of identity. The first theme is the absolute necessity of

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[4] Mark Tizzoni, "(De-)Constructing the Visigothic Poet: Regional, Cultural, & Religious Identity in Eugenius II of Toledo," *Visigothic Symposium 2* (2017-2018): 170.

detailed attention to the process of constructing (or reconstructing) individual and group identities. As I stated above, it is all too easy to claim (correctly) that identity is constructed and to allow that phrase to obscure the complexity and the specificity of the process it represents. The essays in Visigothic Symposium 2 demonstrate methods through which scholars can examine the mechanics of how identity was intentionally or conditionally shaped. In doing so, the essays destabilize longstanding assumptions about identity in scholarship on early medieval Iberia. Tizzoni's work exposes the dangers of internalizing our sources' emphasis on the centrality of Nicene Christianity and Visigothic identity; my own essay contributes to the growing recognition that historical actors' interests in developing certain Iberian communities did not automatically lead to denigration or lack of attention to the broader world; Utrero Agudo's essay is a brilliant caution against prioritizing the intent of our actors while neglecting their context. Although it is ultimately impossible to recapture exactly how early medieval builders thought of themselves, Utrero Agudo's caution against assuming that architectural style or reuse of materials was a direct correspondent to identity reminds us to be careful of reading every decision as a deliberate expression of self-identity.

Second, all five essays underscore the need to view Iberians and Visigoths as participants in and products of the western Mediterranean world. This reflects a recent and welcome trend in Visigothic scholarship more broadly, as more and more historians are looking to intellectual and material exchange between Iberia and Byzantium, north Africa, Francia, and even Britain. Whether a broader intellectual community (Tizzoni), an architectural dialogue (Utrero Agudo), a vanishing empire (Pérez Martínez), the universal Christian

church (Lester), or extra-Iberian monastic traditions (Martínez Tejera), Iberians and Visigoths saw themselves as members of communities that stretched beyond the shores of the peninsula. Yet all five essays also effectively juxtapose Iberian interest in broader communities with the undeniable localization of the early medieval world, and the regionality of Iberia in particular. The two are not mutually exclusive, and the above-mentioned work of Éric Rebillard on vertical and horizontal identities effectively captures the coexistence of multiple identities in one individual or community. Rather than seeing a single identity as predominant over all others, we should see multiple identities shifting according to context, not inherently in conflict, but rather insistently in contestation.

Finally, one of the most exciting contributions of the essays is the importance of (for lack of a better term) "professional" identity or social position. Many Iberian texts already display this approach to personal identity. Isidore of Seville's *Sententiae*, for example, addressed Christians as priests, kings, and judges, while decades later, Valerius of Bierzo tailored his poetic advice to correspond to his audience's roles as monks, nobles, and wives (among others). Attention to Iberians' daily activities and professions as a critical part of their identity weaves throughout many of these essays. My own essay gestures towards viewing Isidore as a pastor as well as a politician, while Pérez Martínez touches on the importance of imperial office for shaping Roman identity of local notables. Two essays that explore this idea with particular efficacy are those of Tizzoni and Utrero Agudo. Seeing Eugenius as a pastor and ascetic, and ordinary Iberians as masons, might hit the closest to how these people thought of themselves on a daily basis – through their daily activity. Although professional identity might be harder to explore than religious, ethnic,

or even gendered identities, it deserves to have a place alongside them in studies of late antique and early medieval identity.

Taken together, these contributions offer new and exciting perspectives on identity in early medieval Iberia. And yet more work remains to be done. I opened this response by probing the possibility of approaching identity as not only an object, but also a category of analysis. Moving forward from the contributions of the "Identity" substrand, future scholars might productively approach identity as a lens through which to examine Visigothic society as a whole. What would be the broader regional impact of Tarraco's "Roman" affiliation? How might Eugenius of Toledo's multiple loyalties have shaped his conduct as bishop of Toledo? And how did professional identities intersect with local or regional economies and politics? Like Lewis Carroll's Alice, we must consider how far we can venture into the world beyond the looking glass; we need to examine the history of identity in relation to the wider world in which identities were constructed and reconstructed. In doing so, we need to consider whether and how to use historically constructed identities as a broader category of analysis with which to view the history of early medieval Iberia.