



## Response to Visigothic Symposium 3

JASON OSBORNE  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

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### INTRODUCTION

While reading each author's contribution to the third *Visigothic Symposia*, I became interested in how each paper shed different light on the concept of identity during the Visigothic era. Even though only a few papers took identity as a major subject, it was striking that each of the articles had something substantive to contribute to the wider discussion of this topic. While it is true that the general topic of identity has often been discussed in print, the variance of views present throughout this particular set of papers suggested to me that there is still much to say, especially in terms of the nuance of how identity was experienced by individuals living in this period. Rather than offer an analysis of each article, what I propose to do in this paper is to use the various submissions as a platform for exploring the multi-faceted manner in which the people of the Visigothic Kingdom saw themselves.

### RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Possibly the most important facet of identity during this era was religion, and it is here that the panelists made their most direct comments regarding this topic. The first thing to note is that the works of Luís Fontes and Liubov Chernin reach the same conclusion from differing directions, in that both articles reflect an underlying assumption that, among Visigothic leadership, citizens of the kingdom either were or were expected to



be officially Catholic; there would be no room for non-Catholics.<sup>1</sup> To begin with Fontes, his article discusses shrine edification and the extent to which architecture served as a missionary tool to “Christianize” the countryside. His point that the Visigothic period was one of expanded construction efforts seems, on the surface, at some odds with the contribution of another author, Javier Martínez Jiménez, whose article argues for the relative paucity of major construction works during this period.<sup>2</sup> It is the distinctions between these two articles, however, which help elucidate an important point about identity. Although Martínez Jiménez shows that the artisans of the kingdom had lost many of the skills essential for complex construction, such as that required for maintaining and building aqueducts, Fontes suggests that there were still significant efforts at new construction, but that these were mainly local religious projects, rather than royal civic projects. Taking both articles together it seems that the leadership class throughout the kingdom maintained an interest in religious construction more so than civic, specifically as an aesthetic attempt to reinforce the official Christian ethos.

The discussion of shrine edification might naturally raise questions about who was served by these shrines and the thoroughness of Christianization of the inhabitants of the Kingdom. On this topic Chernin’s article reminds the reader that however much societal leaders may have wanted to create the image of universal Christendom, there was still a large group of non-Christians extant on the Iberian Peninsula – for example, Jews. Chernin’s article shows not only that non-Christian status caused a variety of

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<sup>1</sup> Luís Fontes, “The Circulation of Models in the Construction of Christian Identity in the Northwest Iberian Peninsula: Architecture and Hagiotoponymia in the Braga Region,” *Visigothic Symposia* 3 (2018): 130-50; Liubov Chernin, “Visigothic Jewish Converts: A Life in Between,” *Visigothic Symposia* 3 (2018): 1-18.

<sup>2</sup> Javier Martínez Jiménez, “Engineering, Aqueducts, and the Rupture of Knowledge Transmission in the Visigothic Period,” *Visigothic Symposia* 3 (2018): 36-54.

social challenges, from property ownership to marriage and raising children, but also that it was not necessarily easy for members of the Jewish community to be accepted as Christians even after they had converted. Lingering suspicions remained for an indeterminate amount of time for some converts – sometimes generations – although some Jewish converts gained acceptance much more quickly and easily.<sup>3</sup>

Chernin's discussion of the Jewish experience in the Visigothic kingdom may be usefully related to Alberto Ferreiro's article about Pope Innocent I's dealings with the Priscillianists in that both pieces show how religious and political leaders attempted to solve the problem of creating theological unity. The striking thing for this discussion of identity is that Christianity by its very nature created a clear distinction between those who were Christian and those who were not, i.e. the "other." Yet, Alberto Ferreiro's discussion of the Priscillianist controversy and the ability of Pope Innocent's reinforcement of papal authority in the west to bring pagans and heretics back into the Christian fold, suggests that Christianity had no inherent need for an "other" as a tool of self-identification. The basic nature of Christianity, as presented in these two papers, was universalist rather than exclusionary. Instead of requiring an "other" to exclude, Christians sought out conversion of the non-believers, so that eventually there would be no "other." This is a point made clear by Innocent's rebuking of Spanish bishops who would not allow repentant Priscillianists back into communion with the church. Officially, none who wanted to join should be excluded from the fold.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Chernin, "Visigothic Jewish Converts," 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 21.

## THE “OTHER”

If “the other” was not necessarily important in terms of Christian identity, it certainly was central to a sense of national or cultural identity. In his article, Fernando Ruchesi shows that the way that military campaigns were recorded reflected a strong sense of cultural identity which required drawing clear distinctions between the opposing sides in a campaign.<sup>5</sup> Whether it was Gregory of Tours, who lost no opportunity to impugn the courage of the Goths, or Hispano-Roman/Visigothic authors portraying the Franks as an invading horde, or Julian of Toledo in his *Historia Wambae Regis* using those opposed to the Visigothic royal house as the “others” who stood in contrast to loyal and good members of society, the use of “others” was important in the literary portrayals of military conflicts and for the creation of a sense of peoplehood.<sup>6</sup>

Continuing on this topic, Luciano Gallinari observes that in Sardinia there exists the prevalence of “a concept of ‘pure’ ethnic identity, characterized by the non-fusion, non-assimilation with the Other, and by the maintenance of some absolutely original and special characteristics.”<sup>7</sup> Although he goes on to suggest that Romanization was probably far more prevalent than Sardinian tradition would allow, it is still particularly interesting that by its rejection of Roman culture, which had been the dominant culture in the Mediterranean basin for many centuries, in a sense the Sardinian’s actually identified themselves as “the other.”<sup>8</sup> Instead of being the majority who were beset by the oddities of a recalcitrant minority, or a small group of invaders, they were the minority holding out against a Roman encroachment that carried the weight of the

<sup>5</sup> Fernando Ruchesi, “Military Matters in the Visigothic Kingdom: Initial Considerations,” *Visigothic Symposia* 3 (2018): 72-87.

<sup>6</sup> Ruchesi, “Military Matters,” 75, 77, 81-82.

<sup>7</sup> Luciano Gallinari, “Indigenous peoples in Sardinia and the Iberian Peninsula in the Early Middle Ages: A Comparative Historiography,” *Visigothic Symposia* 3 (2018): 155 [151-64].

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

Mediterranean with it. According to this view, the Sardinians clung to an identity as those who were *always* the distinct minority and who would *never* be part of the larger group.

#### NATIONAL / CULTURAL IDENTITY

The consideration of such a distinctive local identity leads naturally to the topic of the development of what could be called a national identity. Javier Martínez Jiménez has much to offer on this account with his discussion of aqueduct construction in the Visigothic Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> One of the main points regarding identity which one might derive from this article is that for modern researchers, Romanness itself is identifiable with architectural sophistication, especially the construction of arches, domes and aqueducts.<sup>10</sup> The author points out that some of the elements of construction present in Reccopolis are so unique on the peninsula in that era that the skilled workers who completed the projects may have come from outside the kingdom.<sup>11</sup> The idea of building a Roman city in the midst of the Visigothic Kingdom itself raises questions as to the purpose of such an effort. Others have drawn a connection between the Romanness of Reccopolis and a number of other things occurring during the reigns of Liuvigild and Reccared to suggest that they were making overt efforts to identify themselves as natural heirs to the Roman Empire.<sup>12</sup> This article certainly offers support to that point of view.

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<sup>9</sup> Martínez Jiménez, "Engineering, Aqueducts...", 36-54.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Javier Arce, "Leovigildus rex y el ceremonial de la corte visigótica," in *Visigoti e Longobardi: atti del seminario, Roma, 28-29 aprile 1997*, ed. Javier Arce and Paolo Delogu (Florence: All'insegna del giglio, 2001), 79-92.

Yet, Tomás Cordero Ruiz's article reminds researchers that even if the Visigothic monarchy sought to identify itself with some of the glories and sophistication of the Roman world, it also seemed to develop a sense of identity relating to the Iberian Peninsula, which included the reunification of the territory of the Iberian Peninsula under the leadership of a single monarchy.<sup>13</sup> Of particular importance here is the way that the Visigothic monarchy incorporated the territory of the Suevic kingdom into a united Iberian Peninsula. The author shows that it was at this point that the Visigothic monarchy recreated the old Roman province of Lusitania,<sup>14</sup> which suggests a dual identity, both Spanish and Roman, which brings to mind Isidore of Seville's encomium to Spain at the beginning of his *Historia Gothorum*.<sup>15</sup>

#### ARISTOCRACY / MONARCHY

The topic of dual identity serves to unite all of the disparate parts discussed heretofore, because it is certainly the case that each of the inhabitants of the Visigothic Kingdom experienced multiple identities simultaneously. Pablo C. Diaz makes this point abundantly clear with his discussion of the career of Valerius of Bierzo, who lived amidst the tension of his competing identities.<sup>16</sup> As a Christian and a cleric, there was a certain code and a certain approach to life which he was required to follow, but as an aristocrat he had civic responsibilities as well as rights and privileges which were never

<sup>13</sup> Tomás Cordero Ruiz, "At the Center and the Periphery of Lusitania: The Evolution of the City of Egítania and its Territory (4th-8th centuries)," *Visigothic Symposia* 3 (2018): 88-111.

<sup>14</sup> Cordero Ruiz, "At the Center..." 91.

<sup>15</sup> For an edition and translation of Isidore see, respectively, Isidore of Seville, *De Origine Gothorum. Las Historias de los godos, los vándalos y los suevos de Isidoro de Sevilla*, ed. Cristóbal Rodríguez Alonso (León, 1975). Translated in Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 79-110.

<sup>16</sup> Pablo C. Diaz, "Sociability and Sense of Belonging: Community Interaction in the Work of Valerius of Bierzo," *Visigothic Symposia* 3 (2018): 112-29.

abrogated by his status within the church. Indeed, his place in the church was bolstered by his social status.<sup>17</sup>

It is also interesting to note that as opposed to many other notions of identity discussed above, aristocracy had no natural need of an “other” to provide it with context. In Diaz’s article, Valerius of Bierzo does not act as an aristocrat in order to avoid the stigma of appearing to be beneath his class, but rather the manners and morals of the aristocracy were an innate part of his being, and he acted the part of the aristocrat without any apparent consideration of not doing so. As portrayed in the article, Valerius seemed almost indifferent to members of the lower classes unless they attempted to assert their own rights and privileges, as happened with the character Justus, with whom “Valerius illustrates the ignorant, rural clergymen.”<sup>18</sup>

What is true of the average aristocrat is certainly even truer of the monarch, and it is Andrew Kurt’s discussion of currency that brings the monarchy into this topic.<sup>19</sup> His argument that the central reason for the development of currency in the Visigothic Kingdom was to “facilitate the monarchy’s expenditure needs and procurement of revenue” coincides with his other point that the minting of currency provided “a tool both within the realm and to some extent in foreign territories for expressing and reinforcing their rightful position of power.”<sup>20</sup> The monarch, then, established an identity that was possibly the most multifaceted of all the inhabitants of the kingdom. At the same time he had a royal identity by which he attempted to create an equal

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Kurt, “Visigothic Currency in its Making and Movement: a Varying State of Circumstances,” *Visigothic Symposia* 3 (2018): 165-97.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 184, 175.

standing with the other monarchs of the age, but he also served as an example to the Hispano-Romans in attempting to recreate some of the trappings of Roman culture, especially in architecture. Like aristocrats, the king had no need for an “other” in society against which to compare himself, because he stood supreme and acted according to royal prerogatives, yet the kings themselves were the ones, who, over successive generations, most defined this sense of the “other” for the rest of the citizen body when they engaged in the destruction of Jewish society, and when they fought wars against rival kingdoms, the Empire or native insurgents. There is much more to say on the topic of royal identity, but because I want to limit my comments to topics directly relatable to this particular set of papers I will just say that in its person, the monarchy represents the epitome of the identity struggle that must have been prevalent at every level of society during this era when the old Roman world was passing away and the new world of medieval monarchies, ending in the formation of European states, was only just beginning.

## CONCLUSION

A brief look over the range of articles presented here shows that any question of identity is complex and leads in a variety of different directions. Although scholars have asked such questions about Visigothic identity for many years at this point, there is no indication that the topic has been exhausted and no indication that researchers will stop seeking answers – nor should they. There is much more to be said.



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