Response to Visigothic Symposium 3, Panel 1: Communication

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The papers collected in this panel sought to address the key issue of communication in the Visigothic kingdom (and beyond), understanding "communication" in all cases as the transmission and exchange of information. With such a broadly-defined discussion topic, it was no surprise to see all five papers covering various aspects that relate to communication from very different perspectives: Chernin's paper dealt with the three-way interaction between the Jewish and convert communities of the kingdom and the episcopal and royal legislators.[1] Ferreiro's article, similarly, discussed the direct lines of communication between Pope Innocent I in Rome and the bishops of Hispania in the early fifth century.[2] Osborne in his text focused on the role of the military as an element of cohesion for the Visigothic monarchy (sending internal and external messages of unity).[3] Ruchesi's focus was on the perception and dissemination of military events (looking at three particularly well-recorded examples).[4] Lastly, in my paper I tried to present the collapse of civil engineering in the Visigothic period as a rupture in teaching

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[1] Liubov Chernin, "Visigothic Jewish Converts: A Life in Between," *Visigothic Symposia* 3 (2018): 1-18.

[2] Alberto Ferreiro, "The Bishops of Hispania and Pope Innocent I," *Visigothic Symposia* 3 (2018): 19-35.

[3] Jason Osborne, "A Call to Arms: Cross-Regional Communication and the Visigothic Military," *Visigothic Symposia* 3 (2018): 55-71.

[4] Fernando Ruchesi, "Military Matters in the Visigothic Kingdom: Initial Considerations," *Visigothic Symposia* 3 (2018): 72-87.

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and the transmission of knowledge.[5] At first sight, this would appear to be an eclectic collection of papers, ranging from the early fifth into the late seventh century and varying from politics to religion, from group-definition and ethnogenesis to construction. And, while it is true that the articles do not appear to be addressing each other, it is perhaps in these response essays where any shared underlying issues can be put together.

In my own paper, I tried to justify talking about construction and engineering by presenting the processes of teaching and educating in the subject through Communication Theory. In this summary essay I think it is perhaps even more justifiable to use such a general paradigm to address the remaining papers from this shared point of view. Considering the main components of the theory (sender, receiver, message, reference, channel, and code), it seems that the papers in this panel addressed, above all, the agents (sender and receiver – *who* was involved in communication) and the reference (the circumstances surrounding the subject being discussed by the involved parts). After discussing this, I will also highlight how much of the presented arguments were about misinterpretations and miscommunication between the communicating agents. It is unfortunate that the medium (oral reports, letters, etc.) and the code (language and script) have been left mostly unaddressed in these papers.

The agencies involved in communications show a degree of overlap across the various papers, which has to do mostly with the type of evidence analyzed (i.e., written sources). Needless to say, the nature of the sources is biased towards the ecclesiastical

[5] Javier Martínez Jiménez, "Engineering, aqueducts, and the rupture of knowledge transmission in the Visigothic period," *Visigothic Symposia* 3 (2018): 36-54.

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elites, as they produced the vast majority of our existing written record for this period, and their presence and importance may be overrepresented.

For instance, in Chernin's and Ferreiro's papers we see not the Church as a whole necessarily, but bishops as individuals acting as the main interlocutors in the exchanges of information. Bishops also appear as compilers of facts in Ruchesi's piece. In Ferreiro's case-study, bishops are involved in an epistolary relationship with the Pope. This shows the fact that Spanish bishops belonged to a western-Mediterranean ecclesiastical network of patronage with Rome at its apex, and that they were conscious about it. The bishops initiate the correspondence with regards to the imminent (apparent) schism within the Hispanic church, seeking guidance and papal backing to the position established at the First Council of Toledo. But this, of course, is taking place in the early fifth century: way before the establishment of a direct Visigothic rule over the Iberian Peninsula, while the bishops of Hispania are still (*de iure* and *de facto*) part of the Empire. After the consolidation of the Visigoths as the ruling power in the Peninsula during the sixth and seventh centuries, it is clear that the bishops' point of reference in ecclesiastical matters is still Rome but, in practical and legal terms, Toledo is the focus of power. The anti-Jewish legislation of the seventh century is the consequence of a dialogue between the bishops and the monarchy, resulting in the eventual revocation of civic protection for Jews and a very blurry and ill-defined status for converts. The relation between Christians and Jews had been a matter of civil, not ecclesiastical, ruling (even in Roman times) – which may be the reason behind this dialogue with the monarch. In the fifth century this might have been done through the emperor, but by the seventh that was no longer an option. In fact, this collaboration between bishops in favor of the interests of the monarchy and the way the relevant

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information is conveyed is seen in Ruchesi's paper, where we find bishops engaged in the reconstruction and writing down of battle narratives presenting the enemy of the Visigothic king as the "other." In Osborne's paper we see more royal communication at both ends, between the monarchy and the military aristocrats but, as with the laws described by Chernin, their dialogues have a direct impact on a third party which is not necessarily involved in the exchange of information. In one case we find the Jews being at the rough end of the royal legislation and, in another, we find the provincials of Septimania being rescued and saved by the armies from beyond the Pyrenees, further conveying a policy of unity carried out by Reccared.

Besides the overlaps in the interlocutors, there are also overlaps on the frame of reference, the external elements and circumstances that allowed the messages to be properly understood by the receiver. As most of the agents discussed are members of the ecclesiastical and royal elites, it is not surprising to see the processes of state formation and ethnogenesis as the frame that dictates the communication.[6] From the sixth and into the seventh centuries, the military leaders either of old "Gothic" stock or extracted from the "Roman" landed nobility (as in the case of dux Claudius), together with the ecclesiastical elites appear to have come together into a royal service aristocracy.[7] This may explain how and why the ecclesiastical elites take up this discourse and promote it though their writings. The political and social redefinition of

[6] For ethnogenesis, the unifying idea that the kingdom of the Goths included the subjects and the ruler elites into a whole, see Walter Pohl, "Christian and Barbarian Identities in the Early Medieval West: An Introduction," in *Post-Roman Transitions: Christian and Barbarian Identities in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Walter Pohl and Gerda Heydemann (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 1-46; cf. Erica Buchberger, *Shifting Ethnic Identities in Spain and Gaul, 500-700: from Romans to Goths and Franks.* Late Antique and Early Medieval Iberia 4 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

[7] Aitor Fernández Delgado, Javier Martínez Jiménez and Carlos Tejerizo García, "Old and New Elites in the Visigothic Kingdom (550-650 AD)," in *Tough Times: The Archaeology of Crisis and Recovery. Proceedings of the GAO Annual Conferences 2010 and 2011*. BAR IS 2478, ed. Elsbeth van der Wilt and Javier Martínez Jiménez (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2013), 161-70.

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the Visigothic period prompted a response noticeable in the surviving written communication, a combination of royal propaganda and a way of redefining the elites and their role outside the old Roman order. The alienation and "otherness" of Franks, converts and rebels (such as Paul), clear in these texts served to further underline the definition of the "us," the subjects of Visigothic law and its king, and the audience of these sources.

These topics appear (although perhaps not phrased in this same way) explicitly addressed in Osborne, Ruchesi and, to a certain extent, in Chernin's paper. In this last case the topic of the discussions involved how to define and how to exclude an individual in Visigothic law. As already mentioned, this political context is a frame of reference completely different to Alberto Ferreiro's bishops – who still see themselves within the Roman imperial system (or at least within the Roman ecclesiastical sphere of influence). This is to say, the Visigothic Church of the sixth and seventh centuries still acknowledged the primacy of the Pope, but the impression we get from Chernin's paper is that they did not need feedback or papal sanction for their anti-Jewish legislation. We should note that, even if at first these would appear to be very different topics (how to deal with repented heretics and how to deal with "repented" Jews), in terms of legislation they were very similar concepts. Heretics (such as Priscillianists) were listed amongst the *infames* in Roman legislation in a way that the Jews were not,[8] and the willingness to forgive or accept them [back] in the congregation or not had different political connotations in late Roman and Visigothic contexts. Innocent I might have been seeking to strengthen his position by backing the bishops who signed the

[8] Cristina Lo Nero, "Christiana Dignitas: the New Christian Criteria for Citizenship in the Late Roman Empire," *Mediterranean Encounters* 7.2 (2001): 146-64. In the sixth century, Jews appeared more included and considered if not protected, cf. Cassiodorus, *Variae* 4.33, 5.37 and the anonymous *Lives of the Fathers of Mérida* 5.3.5.

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acts of Toledo I, but he would not have been in a position where he could enact or enforce legislation that alienated Roman citizens without imperial consent – which is precisely the collaborative solution of the seventh-century bishops.

A last element I would like to mention briefly (which is visible across the various papers) is, paradoxically, the importance of miscommunication. Furthermore, this is even more interesting because the cases of miscommunication noticeable in the texts discussed are mostly social ones: a lack of direct interaction between the elites and the lower orders in the compilation and exchange of information. And I underline this as a consequence of social differentiation because of the topics which are being considered, and not necessarily as a consequence of the literacy gap: this must have been relevant but, as Graham Barrett has shown, literacy was not just confined to the educated aristocracy.[9] I may be biased in this sense, as my paper tries to show the lack of interaction between the educated elites (who may discuss architecture as part of their inherited Classical education)[10] and non-elites interested in this field of science (builders), resulting in a loss of practical knowledge. But Chernin's essay also shows this to an extent: in the case of Erwig's legislation against converts, the miscommunication is visible in the vague definition of the "Jewish books" (in contrast with the earlier well-researched laws by Chintila) and the lack of specificity regarding actual Jews and converts. It shows that legislators and bishops appear to be reiterating previous elements about which they did not fully understand and had no intent in finding out. This can be traced back to the late Roman period, as it seems that the concerns of the bishops writing to the Pope in Ferreiro's paper are about repentant

[9] Graham Barrett, *The Written and the World in Early Medieval Iberia* (PhD Dissertation: Oxford University, 2015).
[10] Thinking of Isidore as a possibility, but certainly the case of Gregory the Great and (at a later date) Alcuin and Einhard.

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bishops, not minor priests or members of the congregation: it was about confirmation of status amongst episcopal elites. Other than highlighting the elite bias of the source material, these examples show that there appears to have been a social barrier in post-Roman society which extended to the exchange of ideas, rooted directly in the limited actual interaction between the two groups.

Overall, the aspects of communication explored in these five papers focused mostly on the exchange of information amongst the educated religious elites, who collaborated actively in the crown's efforts of consolidating the monarchy's process of state formation. The nature of most written records from this period is biased towards this perspective, but this does not mean that a different set of papers on communication in the Visigothic kingdom could not have been presented. The texts preserved in the Visigothic slates, on the one hand, and the funerary epigraphic *habitus* on the other would have given a very different view on communication, as well as opening up discussions on literacy and continuity of Roman munificence traditions (among the non-elite and across the social divide). The use and variations of Latin, Greek, Hebrew or Gothic, orally or in written form, is another area of research which would give new and exciting information about communication between different groups within the kingdom and different ways of highlighting alterity and belonging.[11] Communication is a very broad topic and it is understandable that five short articles cannot cover all of it, even for such a narrow scope like the Visigothic period. We can but wait for a forthcoming monograph or edited volume to address all the ideas which did not have a chance in this symposium.

[11] Cf. Edgar Fernandes and Miguel Valerio, "Comunidades helenógrafas en la Lusitania visigoda (s. VI)," *Pyrenae* 44.2 (2013): 69-108.

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