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The Growth of Gothic Identity in Visigothic Spain: The Evidence of Textual Sources

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The Growth of Gothic Identity in Visigothic Spain:

The Evidence of Textual Sources

Introduction

In recent years, scholars have made significant progress in understanding the transition from a Roman world to a medieval world in Spain. New archaeological excavations have added to our knowledge of the early medieval landscape, and increasingly analytical discussions of the labels used to describe people and objects have brought new depth to both historical and archaeological studies. In place of black and white visions of Goth vs. Roman and continuity vs. discontinuity, it has become more common to see Visigothic Spain as a complex mix of elements on their own terms. What it was like to be a Roman in ancient Spain, and a Visigoth in medieval Spain, is far clearer now than it was twenty years ago. However, one area that has been underexplored is the mental landscape: how did Hispano-Romans come to think of themselves, and be thought of by others, as Goths? How did the mental transition from identifying as Roman to identifying as Gothic happen?¹

One reason that this mental shift is still poorly understood is the imprecise use of language in many scholarly works discussing early medieval ethnicity. When discussing methodology, both historians and archaeologists regularly acknowledge the complexity and flexibility of the terms «Gothic» and «Roman». Historians cite the work of anthropologists and sociologists showing that people can change their ethnic affiliation under certain circumstances. They also note that being a «Goth» meant different things at different times. Archaeologists acknowledge that a Germanic buckle in a grave could indicate a Roman adopting Gothic fashions just as easily as it could indicate migration of Goths into that territory. However, once they move on to a specific topic, many of these same historians and archaeologists fall back into discussing «Gothic» and «Roman» as homogeneous, natural, permanent characteristics. For archaeologists, this means asserting that an individual's ethnicity can be determined solely based on one material item.² For historians, this often means equating a specific characteristic with Gothicism and then assuming that anyone with

¹ Recent inroads can be found in POHL, GANTNER, AND PAYNE, 2012; POHL AND HEYDEMANN, 2013a and 2013b.

² Arguing this, see BIERBRAUER, 1994; KAZANSKI, 1991; PERIN AND KAZANSKI, 2011, pp. 299-330. Against, see BRATHER, 2004, esp. pp. 328, 615, 622; CURTA, 2002 and 2004; HALSALL, 2010, pp. 155-67; JONES, 1997, esp. pp. 106-27; VON RUMMEL, 2007, pp. 59-64.

that characteristic was identified as a Goth (and anyone *without* it must be Roman).³ The clearest example of the latter is the correlation between Arian Christianity and Gothic ethnicity; while true in many cases, there are two very high-profile exceptions: the Catholic Goths Mazona of Mérida and John of Biclaro. That these exceptions exist means we cannot assume that *everyone* called a «Goth» in our sources was an Arian, or vice versa. Another assumption historians make is that, though the meaning of «Goth» and the way the term was used may change over time, it can only have one meaning *at any given point in time*.⁴ A good example of this tendency is the debate about the requirement, dating to 636, that a king be a «Gothic» noble. Historians continue to argue about what «Goth» meant in this case; some say it must refer to Visigothic ancestry, while others argue that Hispano-Romans were sufficiently assimilated by the 630s for it to mean residents of the Visigothic kingdom as opposed to foreigners.⁵

One way around the difficulty historians face in talking about Gothic and Roman identity is to acknowledge that ethnic terms could be used with a variety of nuances simultaneously, and to distinguish carefully between these different uses. In written sources of Visigothic Spain, there are three main senses to the term «Goth»: political, religious, and descent-based. One could be a Goth in a religious sense, initially an Arian Christian, then after conversion a Catholic. Being a good Goth and being a good Catholic went hand in hand, and the writings of Isidore of Seville in the 620s and 630s encouraged residents of the kingdom toward this way of identifying themselves. One could also be a Goth as a subject of a Gothic king, a member of his army, or an official in his government. This is what I call a political sense, because it refers to membership in a political unit—in this case a kingdom. Finally, one could be a Goth because one's parents were Goths, so by descent. When historians do not distinguish between these various co-existing meanings and the contexts in which they were used, they miss perhaps the best hints there are as to how these identities changed and were adopted. Distinguishing among meanings allows us to see that individuals did not casually change ethnic identities as it suited them, but held multiple identities simultaneously, only one of which may have been salient in any given circumstance.

³ Arguing this, see COLLINS, 2004, pp. 241-4; GARCÍA MORENO, 1998; THOMPSON, 1969 and 1980; WOLFRAM, 1994 and 2006, esp. p. 52. Against, see GEARY, 2002; GOFFART, 2002, esp. p. 21; LIEBESCHUETZ, 2013.

⁴ Contra: GOETZ, 2003, p. 344.

⁵ CLAUDE, 1998, pp. 127-9; COLLINS, 1994, pp. 1-5; HEATHER, 1998, p. 289; ORLANDIS, 1992, p. 142; TEILLET, 1984, p. 553. The passages under dispute are 5 Toledo 3, in *CCH*, vol. 5, p. 282; 6 Toledo 17, in *CCH*, vol. 5, pp. 326-7.

In this paper, I propose a partially new narrative for Gothic identity in Visigothic Spain following this method. I will begin by reviewing the old, common narrative that assumes homogeneous, unilateral identities. I will then proceed chronologically through this narrative deconstructing its problems and providing alternative views that address each of the three ways of being «Gothic» separately. In the process, I will show that Hispano-Romans could make the difficult mental transition to seeing themselves as Goths—religiously, politically, and by descent—and have others accept this identity—by proceeding one nuance at a time. When Gothiness became associated with Catholicism, Hispano-Romans became Goths on a religious level, which eased their acceptance as Goths on a political level, which in turn made it easier to think of them as so thoroughly un-Roman as to pass on their Gothiness by descent.

The Common Narrative

In the traditional narrative, Spain before 589 A.D. was divided neatly into Arian Goths and Catholic Hispano-Romans. These groups co-existed fairly well, with continued Roman infrastructure, loose central control, and the maintenance of separate populations with separate identities. These identities were marked by separate religious traditions and naming patterns. In the 580s, two major changes encouraged these separate peoples to unify. The first was King Leovigild's lifting of the ban on intermarriage between Goths and Romans. Leovigild shaped many of his policies, including this one, around the aim of unifying the people of Spain under his rule. He modified Arian Christianity to make it more palatable to Catholics, he embarked on military campaigns to gain firmer control over semi-independent regions of the kingdom and to conquer the remainder of the peninsula, and he encouraged the biological merging of the populations through intermarriage. The second key change was the conversion of King Reccared, followed by the entire Gothic *gens*, to Catholicism. He and his successors encouraged Romans and Goths to see themselves as part of a common Catholic family, and Isidore of Seville's later writing served as propaganda for this vision of unity. Without these religious and legal barriers to intermixing, Goths and Romans began to marry and the two populations quickly merged. The process was so thorough that by the late seventh century, no Romans remained; everyone had become a «Goth». When the Arabs arrived, then, the population that fled north and would eventually rally behind the concept of Reconquest was a thoroughly Gothic one. These northerners would use the image of a

unified Visigothic kingdom, parts of which were oppressed by Muslim invaders, to sustain and explain their conquest of southern Iberia.⁶

Leovigild and Reccared

This narrative certainly gets much right, including the importance of the major changes Leovigild and Reccared instituted in their quest for peninsular unity. Leovigild has always been seen as a unifier, particularly on a territorial level.⁷ The Catholic writer John of Biclaro (c. 540-c. 621), despite suffering exile at Leovigild's orders, presents him in his *Chronicle* (c. 590) as a defender and preserver of Spain.⁸ Because Leovigild's conquest of huge swaths of the peninsula meant all its people were subject to conversion under Reccared's rule, John saw him as a positive, essential part of a divine plan to unify and evangelize Iberia. John is also our source for the Arian synod at Toledo in 580, at which Leovigild eliminated from Arian doctrine the requirement of rebaptism for Catholics who wished to convert, making the process easier and, in his mind, more appealing.⁹ Isidore records that Leovigild corrected laws Euric had promulgated in the early sixth century, which suggests a concern for unified legal practice also.¹⁰

The legal change that matters most for the eventual unity of the Visigothic kingdom was Leovigild's official sanction of marriage between ethnic Goths and Romans. This law has a complicated history, which can not be covered in complete detail here.¹¹ Nevertheless, it is important to provide some background in order to understand the implications of Leovigild's change.

The history of the intermarriage ban begins on 28 May 373, when the emperor Valentinian I issued a decree in the context of a difficult campaign against an African-Roman

⁶ CASTRO, 1961, pp. 1–3; COLLINS, 2004, p. 3; GONZÁLEZ FERNÁNDEZ, 1986, pp. 289–300; LINEHAN, 1982, pp. 161–99; PAYNE, 2007, pp. 47–56; SÁNCHEZ-ALBORNOZ, 1956, pp. 122–39, and 1983, pp. 75–116; TEILLET, 1984.

⁷ JOHN OF BICLARO, *Chronica*, pp. 212, 216; KING, 1972, pp. 13–14; WOLF, 1999, pp. 6, 10; I. WOOD, 1999, p. 193; J. WOOD, 2012, pp. 43–6.

⁸ *DVI* 31, pp. 151–2; *Chronica*, p. 212: «et provinciam Gothorum, quae iam pro rebellione diversorum fuerat diminuta, mirabiliter ad pristinos revocat terminos». GALÁN SÁNCHEZ, 1998, p. 57; VELÁZQUEZ, 2003, p. 180. WOLF, 1999, pp. 6–7.

⁹ *Chronica*, p. 216.

¹⁰ *HGVS* 51, p. 288: «In legibus quoque ea quae ab Eurico incondite constituta videbantur correxit, plurimas leges praetermissas adiciens, plerasque superfluas auferens». See also MEREÁ, 1948, 247; and for the idea that it never existed, GARCÍA GALLO, 1974, pp. 381–2, 395–400.

¹¹ JIMÉNEZ GARNICA, 1985; LIEBESCHUETZ, 1998; MATHISEN AND SIVAN, 1999; SIVAN, 1996, p. 139, and 1998; VELÁZQUEZ, 1999.

named Firmus and a group of African Moorish rebels. These were not outsiders or foreign enemies but rebels from within the boundaries of the Roman Empire.¹² This is a key point in understanding the intent of the law, which reads as follows: «No provincial, of whatever rank or class he may be, shall marry a barbarian wife, nor shall a provincial woman be united with any foreigner (*Nulli provincialium, cuiuscunque ordinis aut loci fuerit, cum barbara sit uxore coniugium, nec ulli gentilium provincialis femina copuletur*)».¹³ In this original version, «Romans» were not specifically mentioned; instead «provincials» was used, certainly to mean Romans residing in the provinces of the Empire. Those whom these Roman provincials were not to marry were both «barbarians» and «gentes». This law was included in the *Theodosian Code* of 437, and from there spread to the Visigothic kingdom.

In 506, the Visigothic king Alaric II assembled his *Breviary* (sometimes known as the *Lex Romana Visigothorum*), an abbreviated version of the *Theodosian Code* for use in his kingdom.¹⁴ It included the original Theodosian text followed by «interpretations» clarifying the meaning for changed circumstances. Because the editors of the former had not included most of the context surrounding the initial promulgation of the law, its original meaning would have been difficult for Alaric and his legal advisers to discover. Their «interpretation» altered slightly the meaning of the original law, whether intentionally or not, changing «provincials» to «Romans» and removing «gentiles», but leaving «barbarians» as it was (*Nullus Romanorum barbaram cuiuslibet gentis uxorem habere praesumat, necque barbarorum coniugiis mulieres Romanae in matrimonio coniungantur*).¹⁵ It is unclear whether they intended «barbarian» to refer to non-Romans (including Visigothic subjects) or non-residents.

By Leovigild's time, the wording had again shifted. Leovigild's *Codex Revisus*, presumably composed c. 580, no longer survives except through the *Antiquae* of the later *Lex Visigothorum*. Leovigild's law, as repeated there, says that the ancient law was unacceptable because it unjustly prevented the marriage of individuals of equal status (*priscus lex ... que incongrue dividere maluit personas in coniuges, quas dignitas conpares exequabit in genere*), and henceforth «a Gothic man may marry a Roman woman, and likewise a Gothic woman a Roman man (*ut tam Gothus Romanam, quam etiam Gotam Romanus si coniugem habere*

¹² SIVAN, 1998, p. 191.

¹³ *CTh* III, 14, 1.

¹⁴ COLLINS, 1998, pp. 6-7

¹⁵ *LRV* III, 14, 1, p. 92; MATTHEWS, 2000 and 2001, p. 19.

voluerit)», provided of course that they met the status requirements recorded elsewhere in the code (which mattered more to Leovigild).¹⁶ There is no mistaking the meaning of this passage: Leovigild interpreted Alaric's law as banning marriage between Goths and Romans.

In the traditional narrative of Spanish history, this law was a radical innovation that made possible the mixing of ethnic groups for the first time. However, this narrative omits the fact that there had already been some marriages between Romans and Goths before the 580s. The most prominent example is Theudis, the Ostrogothic nobleman sent by Theoderic the Great as his royal proxy during the Ostrogothic domination in the 520s, who married a local Hispano-Roman woman. His later rise to the throne of the Visigothic kingdom shows that no one was terribly concerned by this particular intermarriage.¹⁷ While intermarriage may have been the exception rather than the norm, it is important to acknowledge that the blending of Roman and Gothic peoples and cultures did not happen instantaneously upon the issuing of a law; it was a gradual process that had already begun by 580. Once Leovigild clarified that intermarriage was legal, it probably did increase. Undoubtedly the resulting unity of Romans and Goths within families would have facilitated unity along other lines too. After all, a child of a Roman and a Goth would potentially have had two religious traditions, two cultures, and two lineages within his or her own family from which to choose.

Arians and Catholics

Perhaps in anticipation of this negotiation of identities, Leovigild took action to unite his subjects along religious lines as well as family lines. To that end, he convened an Arian synod in Toledo in 580. At this meeting, Leovigild eliminated from Arian doctrine the requirement of rebaptism for Catholics who wished to convert, making the process easier. Because, from Leovigild's perspective, Arian Christianity was the truly universal, «catholic» faith, he did not call the orthodox Catholics «catholic». Instead he called their religion «the Roman religion (*Romana religio*)» in contrast with «our catholic faith (*nostra catholica fides*)». ¹⁸ The canons of the Third Council of Toledo in 589 mention a pamphlet from this council as advocating «conversion of Romans to the Arian heresy». ¹⁹ In both instances, there are religious and ancestry-based overtones to the term «Roman»: one could be Roman

¹⁶ LV III, 1, 1.

¹⁷ COLLINS, 2004, p. 44; KULIKOWSKI, 2004, p. 260; PROKOPIOS, *Wars* V.12.50-54. For more examples, see THOMPSON, 1969, p. 59.

¹⁸ JOHN OF BICLARO, *Chronica*, p. 216; GREGORY OF TOURS, *GM* 24, p. 52.

¹⁹ 3 Toledo, in *CCH*, vol. 5, p. 82: «Romanorum ad haeresem Arrianam transductio».

religiously by following the religious tradition of Rome and, because many of these individuals were also undoubtedly of Roman descent, one could also be Roman by virtue of Roman ancestors. The latter could be Hispano-Romans (probably the bulk of Spanish Catholics at this time). However, these were not the only Catholics in Spain: the Byzantines on the coast were also Catholic, as were some prominent Goths including Masona of Mérida and John of Biclario, to whom we will return momentarily.

Of course, Visigothic Spain did *not* become thoroughly Arian. Instead, after Leovigild's death, his son Reccared converted to Catholicism and ultimately banned Arianism as heresy. The conversion was made official at the Third Council of Toledo (589), opening the way for the collaboration between church and state that would be a hallmark of the seventh-century kingdom, though a few Arians who opposed the change did revolt.²⁰

The language which contemporary authors used to describe the conversion bundles all of the Goths together, claiming that they converted *en masse*. The Third Council of Toledo (589), for example, states that Reccared called the council to thank the Lord for his conversion and for that of the Gothic *gens* (*ut tam de eius conversione quam de gentis Gotorum*).²¹ Similarly, the *Lives of the Fathers of Mérida* tells that when Reccared converted from the Arian heresy, he led «the whole people of the Visigoths (*totusque Wisegotorum gens*)» to Catholicism with him.²² In order to convert, these Goths must have been Arian. In both cases, the authors were not concerned with exceptions, but with the bulk of the Goths who required conversion. Even John of Biclario, himself one of these exceptions, made this generalization.²³ The story of Reccared was intended in these sources as a grand description of a king piously converting to the «right» religion and bringing all his people with him; it is therefore as much mythology of the kingdom's greatest hour as it is historical record. Likewise, Isidore portrayed the Arian religion in his *History of the Goths* as the faith «which the people of the Goths had held» up until the late 580s (*quam hucusque Gothorum populus Arrio docente didicerat*) and praised his brother Leander for leading the Goths «from the Arian insanity to the Catholic faith (*ab arriana insania ad fidem catholicam*)».²⁴ His simplification of the matter, ignoring any Goths who were Catholic and non-Goths who were

²⁰ COLLINS, 1991; DÍAZ AND VALVERDE, 2000, p. 75; GALLEGO BLANCO, 1974, p. 738; ORLANDIS AND RAMOS-LISSÓN, 1986; STOCKING, 2000; J. WOOD, 2012, pp. 49-51, 217-29.

²¹ 3 Toledo, in *CCH*, vol. 5, p. 50. This is only one of many instances.

²² *VSPE* V.9, p. 79.

²³ *Chronica*, p. 218.

²⁴ *HGVS* 53, p. 289; *DVI* 28, p. 149. See also J. WOOD, 2005, pp. 17–18.

Arian, conflated Gothic descent with Gothic religious identity. Overall, this was probably an accurate generalization to make—the majority of children born to Goths were also Arians (and so Goths in both senses), so it seems a fairly innocent generalization that should cause few problems, and many modern historians have adopted it. Yet not taking care with the terminology can, and does, cause crucial problems in understanding the reality of Gothic identity.

I draw a distinction between the religious and the ancestral meanings of «Goth» not because converts from Arianism were not (mostly) Goths by descent but because mixing together these particular uses of the term «Goth» gives the misleading impression that there were no individuals of Gothic ancestry who adhered to the Catholic faith before the 580s. The two high-profile examples which say otherwise—Masona and John—are unlikely to be the only such individuals; their importance in society just means they appear in our sources while others do not. There is also an example of a Roman adopting Arianism—Vincent, bishop of Zaragoza—whose mention similarly suggests the existence of others.²⁵

In his 1969 book, *The Goths in Spain*, E.A. Thompson asserted that, «[t]o become a Nicæan was, so to speak, to become a Roman, and to cease to be a Goth».²⁶ While elsewhere Thompson briefly acknowledged that some individuals converted sooner, even naming John and Masona, his assertion—and the tenor of his language throughout his writings—makes it appear that they did not exist and ignores the very numerous uses of the term «Goth» in sources *after* the conversion of the kingdom to Catholicism.²⁷ Drawing from Thompson's work, Roger Collins insisted in a 1991 article that Arianism was a reflection of a Gothic desire for ethnic distinction, as if Arianism were a necessary element of being a Goth.²⁸ This definition would, of course, exclude Masona and John from the ranks of «Goths». A common tendency to simplify matters by describing the religious division in the Visigothic kingdom as also an ethnic one, even if for the most part the religious divide fell along ethnic lines, contributes to this misunderstanding.²⁹

²⁵ *HGVS*, p. 288.

²⁶ THOMPSON, 1969, p. 40.

²⁷ THOMPSON, 1980, p. 7.

²⁸ COLLINS, 1991, pp. 216, 220.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; JORGE, 1999, pp. 99-122; ORLANDIS, 1962, p. 319; STOCKING, 2000, p. 32; THOMPSON, 1969, p. 105. I. WOOD, 1998, p. 302, notes that the correlation of Arianism with Visigothic ethnic self-identification rarely stands up to scrutiny.

In briefly acknowledging the existence of these exceptions and then switching to language which implies they did not exist, historians like Thompson and Collins suggest that they are inconvenient—and unimportant—anomalies that interfere with our picture of what *really* happened in Spain, very much as Isidore and other contemporaries did to support their narrative agendas. There are, however, far more interesting things to say about Masona and John. Their exceptional nature means that the way they were described can tell historians far more than descriptions of others could about how contemporaries negotiated various forms of identity in the complicated and changing world of Visigothic Spain.

Masona, bishop of Mérida (c. 570-600 or 610), is among the protagonists of the *Lives of the Fathers of Mérida*, a hagiographical celebration of Spain's holy men written by a local churchman in the 630s. This text, as can be expected, follows the conventions of the genre, such as a religious focus, moral instruction, the inclusion of miracles, and divine intervention.³⁰ The *Lives* describe Masona as Catholic despite being a Goth: «although of the Gothic *genus*, his mind [or heart] was completely devoted to God (*genere quidem Gothus, sed mente promptissima erga Deum devotus*)».³¹ Suzanne Teillet has argued that «Goth» was meant in a religious sense here, as a synonym for «Arian»; however, this really cannot be so—one cannot, after all, be both Catholic Christian and Arian Christian simultaneously.³² Were *gens* used rather than *genus*, there might be room for argument, since by the early medieval period *gens* could also have political and religious meanings.³³ However, the use of the term *genus*, meaning birth, descent, or origin, makes the meaning perfectly clear: «Goth» here was meant to refer to ancestry. Teillet's adherence to a necessary link between Arianism and Gothiness led her to overlook these clues in the text.

The author of the *Lives* expected his audience in the 630s to be surprised that a Goth in the time before Reccared's conversion could be Catholic. This passage also implies that Gothic birth was a handicap to be overcome in the quest for salvation. A later bishop of Mérida, Renovatus (d. 633), was called «Goth by nation (*natione Gotus*)», but there is no implication in the text that this was a surprise; he was bishop in the post-conversion era, when all Goths were supposed to be Catholic.³⁴ Were Masona of Roman origin, his expected

³⁰ CASTELLANOS, 2003, pp. 392-3, and 2004, esp. p. 356.

³¹ *VSPE* V.2, p. 48. See also GARVIN, 1946, p. 1, ARCE, 1999, pp. 5, 14.

³² TEILLET, 1984, pp. 553-4.

³³ DUQUESNAY ADAMS, 1969, p. 774; GOETZ, 2003, p. 336; HEYDEMANN, 2013.

³⁴ *VSPE* V.14, p. 100.

religious profession would be Catholic; it was only his Gothic birth, and the date prior to the conversion, which made his Catholicism unusual to the author.

As an Arian king, Leovigild was not content to leave Catholic bishop Masona in a position of such power in such an important city. Before finally exiling him, Leovigild appointed a co-bishop to serve the Arian community, a man named Sunna. The author explicitly labelled him as a «Gothic bishop (*Gotus episcopus*).»³⁵ After Reccared became Catholic, Sunna was among the Arians who rebelled against the rest of the kingdom's expected conversion, and he won over a number of «nobles from the *genus* of the Goths (*Gotorum nobiles genere*)» to his cause of ridding the city of Masona and the «Roman» *dux* Claudius.³⁶ These nobles attempted (unsuccessfully) to assassinate both men. Both religious and descent-oriented nuances can be seen here. Sunna was certainly Arian, and so the equation of Goth with Arian works in his case, but given that earlier in the text the author used «Goth» to describe the clearly Catholic Masona and «Arian» to describe Sunna himself, it is doubtful that he would employ «Goth» here in a primarily religious sense. In a hagiographical work aiming to show leaders of the Catholic faith victorious over Arian heresy, it would not make sense to use «Goth» in a manner which could put the religious identity of his protagonist into question. Thus, we can safely assume that Sunna was also a Goth by descent, and that this is the primary nuance the author intended. The use of *genus* for the nobles, of course, lends their Gothicism a similar flavour, and while they may have been Arians both in the past and after allying with Masona, the text clearly states that Sunna turned them away from the Catholic Church (*persuasit eos que de catholicorum hagmine ac gremio catholice ecclesie cum innumerabile multitudine populi separavit*), so when first mentioned, they were *not* Arians.³⁷ These men were Goths who dutifully converted to Catholicism and then lapsed, and they continued to be noble Goths while either Catholic or Arian; changing their religious identity did not change their nobility or their «Gothicness».

John of Biclaro was also a «Goth by nation» (*natione Gothus*) according to Isidore.³⁸ In medieval times, *natio*, like *genus*, signified birth, making John a Goth by descent, and it is this identity combined with his refusal to deny his Catholic faith which seems to have led to

³⁵ *VSPE* V.10, p. 81.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *DVI* 31, p. 151. See also GALÁN SÁNCHEZ, 1994, pp. 81-2

his exile on Leovigild's orders in the 570s.³⁹ In *De viris illustribus*, Isidore contrasts the pious John with the heretical Leovigild who promoted «Arian insanity». Although Isidore did not *explicitly* indicate in this short account that John's Gothic identity was remarkable, the fact that he mentioned it despite not noting the ancestry of most of the other great men he described indicates that it was so. The sources provide no evidence that Leovigild instituted a mass exile of Catholics; historians only know he exiled two Goths: Masona and John. John was not even a bishop (until c. 591), so he would have been far less powerful and influential than Masona and little real threat to Leovigild's power. Thus they were probably exiled not only because they were powerful opponents, or because they were Catholics, but also because they were both ethnic Goths and Catholics.⁴⁰ They set a bad example at a time when Leovigild hoped to encourage Arianism as a unifying force within his kingdom, and proved false his *own* generalization that Gothic equalled Arian. Without differentiating between their religious and descent-centred identities, it is difficult to notice this important nuance.

The Example of Claudius

The benefits of highlighting the specific nuances of an ethnic term like «Goth» or «Roman» each time it is mentioned can be demonstrated even more clearly by examining surviving accounts of the duke Claudius. A Roman contemporary of Masona and John who was himself directly involved in the events of Masona's *Life*, Claudius appears in three separate sources, all of which were completed post-conversion and celebrate unity of Visigothic subjects. Examining the ways authors described him alongside his interactions with Goths like Masona illuminates the ways a shift from Roman to Gothic identity may have happened.

The most detailed description of Claudius comes from the story of Masona in the *Lives of the Fathers of Mérida*. He appears in Masona's story as a strong ally of the Catholic, Gothic bishop and a fellow target of the Arian bishop Sunna's assassination attempt. He was himself Catholic and of sufficient prominence in the Visigothic kingdom that Pope Gregory the Great wrote to him in 599 requesting that he escort an envoy.⁴¹

The author explicitly stated Claudius' family background: «This Claudius was born to a noble lineage, begotten to Roman parents (*Idem vero Claudius nobili genere hortus*

³⁹ LEWIS AND SHORT, 1933.

⁴⁰ GODOY AND VILLELA, 1986, p. 126; THOMPSON, 1960, p. 30.

⁴¹ GREGORY THE GREAT, *Registrum Epistolarum*, IX.230, vol. 2, pp. 226-7.

Romanis fuit parentibus progenitus)». ⁴² The author clearly perceived Claudius' «Roman» identity as bestowed on him by birth; he was descended from Romans and this made him «Roman» himself. His Roman family was also called «noble», which illustrates that membership in the aristocracy under the rule of the Visigothic kings was not exclusive to those of Gothic birth, and that individuals did not necessarily cease to be Romans by becoming participating members in the activities of the kingdom's nobility. Claudius was certainly a participant: both Isidore and John of Biclaro identified him as the general who led the Visigothic army to a stunning victory against the Franks in 589. ⁴³

The inclusion of Claudius' Roman descent proved useful for the *Lives*' central narrative, precisely because Claudius interacted closely with a prominent Catholic Goth in a time of religious tension. By showing the Arian Sunna attacking both a Goth and a Roman, the author emphasized that the conflict was based not on descent but on religious identity, bringing the focus of his tale onto the triumph of Catholicism over Arianism in Mérida. This was not a battle between Goths and Romans over which group should dominate post-Roman Spain; it was a local victory in the wider battle between Catholics and Arians for the souls of the faithful—a battle that mattered far more to the author than any difference of background. His treatment of Claudius in this way also serves as further evidence that the author did not intend to imply an Arian background when he labelled Masona a «Goth»—he had already invested too much in crafting a narrative of religious rather than ethnic conflict to throw it away with ambiguity here.

The *Chronicle* of John of Biclaro briefly narrates events between 567 and 590 in Spain and the wider world. It draws on the genre of universal chronicle, and Eusebius' example in particular. John focused on Christian history and the Visigothic kingdom's integration into the Catholic community, which for him as a devout Catholic was also the story of the kingdom's salvation. For this reason his longest entries are those for 589 and 590, at the time of the official conversion and its immediate aftermath. The latter includes an exposition on the «Arian heresy (*haeresis Arriana*)» and a declaration of the Catholic Church as victorious over it. ⁴⁴

Claudius appears briefly in this latter bit of the *Chronicle* as the leader of a Gothic army against Frankish troops in Septimania. John describes him as «the duke of Lusitania

⁴² *VSPE* V.10, p. 83.

⁴³ JOHN OF BICLARO, *Chronica*, p. 218; *HGVS* 54, pp. 289-90.

⁴⁴ *Chronica*, p. 219. See also GALÁN SÁNCHEZ, 1998; ÁLVAREZ GARCÍA, 1997.

(*Lusitaniae dux*)» and his victorious army as «the Goths».⁴⁵ There is no mention here of Claudius' Roman birth, which makes him appear to the reader as a «Goth». In a political sense, he can indeed be considered a «Goth» as a subject of the Gothic king and leader of that king's army. John's linguistic choice is both a simplification for practical purposes in the abbreviated chronicle genre and a narrative strategy for placing the story of a unified Visigothic Spain within the Roman/Byzantine world. Hispano-Romans do not appear by name, nor any other peoples once the Goths secured control over them, as they would not be independent political actors. All were subsumed under Gothic leadership and ultimately united with the Goths under the auspices of the Catholic Church.

In Isidore's version of the same tale, Claudius was sent against the Franks, and «no victory of the Goths in Spain (*nulla umquam in Spaniis Gothorum victoria*)» was greater than this one by the Goths over the Franks, under Claudius' command.⁴⁶ Again, «Goth» appears in an inclusive sense, encompassing all members of the army under the political umbrella of «Goth» after the name of the kingdom they defend.⁴⁷

It is well established that Isidore actively worked to promote a Gothic Catholic identity.⁴⁸ He worked closely with the Visigothic kings as both a bishop and a scholar, including as a tutor to King Sisebut (612-621).⁴⁹ He also presided over the Fourth Council of Toledo (633), which encouraged the education of clergy and promoted kingdom-wide unity.⁵⁰ It is therefore unsurprising that Isidore constructed his narrative of Gothic history in support of this same goal, writing of the victory of the Goths over both the land of Spain and the heretical Arian beliefs of their ancestors. We can see his portrayal of Roman-born Claudius as a Gothic army commander as one element of Isidore's subtle—and sometimes not so subtle—reshaping of Gothic identity as politically-based and open to all Catholics.

Like John, Isidore was focused on the Goths, but more so, attempting to show a unified people now under the banner of Catholicism. For both authors, Claudius' political Gothiness rather than his Roman descent was what mattered; his loyalty to the Gothic king was his most salient identity given their narrative goals. Their emphasis on his political identity does not erase the other identities Claudius held. One was not his «true» identity and

⁴⁵ *Chronica*, p. 218.

⁴⁶ *HGVS* 54, pp. 289-90.

⁴⁷ On ethnic identity and armies, see HEATHER, 1998, p. 69; KULIKOWSKI, 2002.

⁴⁸ MERRILLS, 2006, p. 38; J. WOOD, 2012, esp. pp. 1-2, 6-7, 142.

⁴⁹ Wolf, 1999, p. 12.

⁵⁰ J. WOOD, 2012, pp. 6, 142-7.

the other «false»; they are simply two different types or modes of identification based on different criteria of distinction.

A Language Shift

Isidore and John, in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, could describe contemporary Goths in a religious sense as Arians or new Catholics, in a political sense as subjects of the king, and in an ancestral sense as descendants of earlier Goths. All of these nuances enjoyed widespread currency in their time and place. This does not mean, however, that they all remained equally prevalent; they did not. The language of a range of sources shows a significant change in the use of each mode of identification over the sixth and seventh centuries.

In the case of religion, «Goth» initially referred to the Arian form of Christianity, distinguishing this confession as most common among the Goths. Once Arianism was banned in 589, religious Gothicness ceased to have meaning until the new association with Catholicism, which both Isidore and the monarchy promoted in the 620s and 630s, became stronger. What prevailed in its place was the consciously-promoted political meaning of «Goth»; with these subjects unified on religious terms, it became easier to see them as a cohesive unit in political terms as well (although it caused considerable problems for Jews who, not being Catholics, were henceforth harder for the latter to see as loyal (political) Gothic subjects). The clearest example of this phenomenon is the formulation *rex Gothorum*, «king of the Goths». This is a very common regnal style in the early medieval period for many different kingdoms.⁵¹ Although when clearly referring to the Visigothic kingdom, the sources from Spain tend more often to say simply «king», both John of Biclaro and Isidore of Seville did occasionally specify «king of the Goths». In his entry for the year 568, John called Athanagild «king of the Goths in Spain (*rex Gothorum in Hispania*)», and at the end of his work, he also named Reccared «king of the Goths».⁵² Isidore stated that Alaric became the «prince of the Goths (*princeps Gothorum*)» in 484.⁵³ Sisebut's own letter to the Lombard king and queen of Italy, written between 616 and 620, in which he referred to himself as «king of the Visigoths (*rex Wisegotorum*)», demonstrates that even he styled

⁵¹ GILLET, 2002, pp. 89-90; JAMES, 1998, pp. 59-60; and POHL, 2002, p. 232.

⁵² *Chronica*, pp. 212, 220.

⁵³ *HGVS* 36, p. 281. On Theudis: *DVI* 17, p. 143, and 20, p. 145.

himself similarly in some contexts.⁵⁴ The «army of the Goths (*exercitus Gothorum*)» is another such formulation. It appears in the Seventh Council of Toledo (646) in reference to those who defend the «people or king or country of the Goths (*gens Gothorum vel patria aut rex*)». ⁵⁵ Of course, not all references to the army specify that it was «of the Goths» ; more often authors simply used «the Goths», as both John and Isidore did with the army led by Claudius.

Yet no Visigothic king in Spain ruled over Goths alone, in the descent-based sense of the term. Hispano-Romans like Claudius, semi-subdued Basques in the north, and the Syrians, Greeks, and Jews mentioned in the Council of Narbonne were all subjects of the «king of the Goths». ⁵⁶ «Goths» in this formula seems to refer to all subjects of the king, describing the political situation of those within the kingdom's borders. Hispano-Roman generals, Syrian merchants, and nobles of Gothic descent were apparently all «Goths» in the sense that they were subjects of the Gothic king and participants in his kingdom—identified as politically Gothic regardless of their ancestry.

By the 630s, the sources regularly link this political formulation with a Catholic identity. The most explicit example appears in the Fourth Council of Toledo: «the glory of Christ strengthens his [the king's] realm and the people of the Goths in the Catholic faith (*conroboret Christi gloria regnum illius gentisque Gothorum in fide catholica*)». ⁵⁷ The kingdom and people are closely connected in this phrase, implying that the people in question was a kingdom-wide people. As descendants of both Goths and Romans would have been Catholic by 633 when this council took place, there was no reason to exclude one or the other from the spiritual benefits bestowed on the king's realm. This phrase supports the image of a people united both religiously *and* politically which Isidore regularly promoted.

The «stability of the country and people of the Goths (*patriae gentisque Gothorum statu*)» appears three times with slight variations in canon 75 of this same council in the context of what punishment was due to anyone «of us or of the peoples of all Spain (*a nobis vel totius Spaniae populis*)» who attempted to disrupt this stability. ⁵⁸ Isabel Velázquez, in an

⁵⁴ *Epistolae Wisigothicae* 9, p. 671.

⁵⁵ 7 Toledo 1, in *CCH*, pp. 340-41.

⁵⁶ Narbonne 4 and 14, in *Concilios*, pp. 147, 149.

⁵⁷ 4 Toledo 75, in *CCH*, vol. 5, p. 259.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 252-4: «Quiquumque igitur a nobis vel totius Spaniae populis qualibet coniuratione vel studio sacramentum fidei suae, quod patriae gentisque Gothorum statu vel observatione regiae salutis pollicitus est ...».

article focusing on the first of these phrases, describes it as an attempt at social harmony and unity and compares it with the classical *senatus populusque Romanus*, with *gens* meaning the people subject to the king.⁵⁹ The connection of country and people in this formulaic manner indicates that «people» was probably an inclusive term just as country would be, meaning all people within the kingdom no matter their ancestry. Even if the plural word *populi* in part slightly weakens that – that there can be more «peoples» than one is clearly still conceivable – it makes the same unitary point as well. As the army of the Goths was an ensemble of people under the leadership of the Gothic king and with an obligation to him and to his kingdom, so the Gothic «people» was an ensemble, under the king’s jurisdiction and command.⁶⁰ «Goth», again, had a kingdom-wide, political meaning, and its promotion within the religious context of a church council linked that political Gothicism with religious, Catholic Gothicism. The Goths in need of a stable kingdom and the Goths in need of religious shepherding were one and the same.

Similar phrases appear in multiple sources in the decades following the Fourth Council. The acts of the Seventh Council of Toledo (646) legislated against those who sought to harm «the people [here *gens*] of the Goths, the country, or the king».⁶¹ Both the Eighth Council of Toledo (653) and the *Lex Visigothorum* (654) demanded harsh punishment for anyone who sought to ruin the «country and people of the Goths».⁶² Clearly the ideology of a unified Gothic people, in both political and religious spheres, had taken firm root in the mindsets of seventh-century Visigothic kings and subjects.

In conjunction with the increased use of «Goth» in a unified sense, the sources also show a decrease in the use of the term «Roman» to refer to residents of Spain. Claudius, living in the late sixth century and described in the 630s as of Roman ancestry, is the last individual to be explicitly identified as Roman. Romans as a group appear in the law code of 654 in older laws dating from Euric and Leovigild’s reigns, but not in a contemporary context from at least the early seventh century onward.⁶³ The Ninth Council of Toledo in the following year prohibited the marriage of *liberti* of the church to free persons, whether Goth or Roman, privileging distinction by social status over ancestry.⁶⁴ Since the formulaic nature

⁵⁹ VELÁZQUEZ, 2003, pp. 187, 200-202.

⁶⁰ MARTIN, 2008, p. 88.

⁶¹ 7 Toledo 1, in *CCH*, vol. 5, p. 343.

⁶² 8 Toledo: «Gothorum gens ac patria», in *CCH*, vol. 5, p. 375; *LV* II, 1, 8.

⁶³ *LV* III, 1, 1; III, 1, 5; X, 1, 8-9 and 16; X, 2, 1; X, 3, 5.

⁶⁴ 9 Toledo 13 and 14, in *CCH*, vol. 5, pp. 506-8.

of legal language means it changes more slowly than most other written genres, we cannot even be certain whether the use of Roman here reflects ordinary usage or an archaic but expected turn of phrase.⁶⁵ With the exception of one even more antiquated-sounding law of Wamba's reign in the 670s, this is the last use of the term «Roman» for Hispano-Romans in Visigothic Spain.⁶⁶

In sources dating from after the Ninth Council, another shift in the use of «Goth» becomes clear. Where once the phrase *gens Gothorum* appeared to refer to all inhabitants or participants in the kingdom's affairs, in the late seventh century the qualification *Gothorum* was usually dropped; the people were simply a *gens*.⁶⁷ The Council of Mérida (666), for example, discussed the defence and security of the «king, people, and country (*rex, gens, aut patria*)» without specifying that these were Gothic, and phrases like *seniores gentis Gothorum* virtually disappear in favour of simply *seniores*.⁶⁸ The text of this council still includes language of unity, but without the earlier concern to define the unified people ethnically. Some manuscripts of the Twelfth Council of Toledo (681) simply refer to the people of «our kingdom».⁶⁹ As a substitute for «Gothic», the qualification *Hispaniae* (of Spain) appeared more frequently at this time, as in the Fourteenth Council of Toledo (684) telling of «Spanish bishops» (*Spanorum praesulum*) rather than Gothic ones, and of the «kingdom of Spain» (*regnum Hispaniae*) rather than the «kingdom of the Goths».⁷⁰ Similarly, the Fifteenth (688) and Seventeenth Councils of Toledo (694) mention «the bishops of Spain and Gaul [that is, Visigothic-ruled Septimania]».⁷¹ This does not mean, as a number of historians have suggested, that the late seventh century was the era in which modern Spain and Spanish identity was born.⁷² It is simply a sign of assimilation of Hispano-Romans and others into «Gothic» identity; «Goth» needed to be mentioned less often because in a political sense, and perhaps even in terms of descent, almost everyone in the Visigothic kingdom had come to be seen as a «Goth».

⁶⁵ KING, 1972, p. ix; KOON AND WOOD, 2009, pp. 803-4.

⁶⁶ LVIX, 2, 9.

⁶⁷ The one exception is «patriae gentisque Gothorum statu» in 16 Toledo (693), in *Concilios*, p. 511, which may be a reference to this phrase's appearance in 4 Toledo.

⁶⁸ In *Concilios*, p. 327; SÁNCHEZ ALBORNOZ, 1956, 172.

⁶⁹ In *Concilios*, p. 384: «populis gentisque nostrae regno».

⁷⁰ 14 Toledo, in *CCH*, vol. 6, pp. 277-9. «Spain» or «Spain and Gaul» appeared in some earlier councils, but not «Spanish»; these are 3 Toledo, 4 Toledo, and 10 Toledo (656).

⁷¹ 15 Toledo, in *CCH*, vol. 6, p. 291; 17 Toledo, in *Concilios*, p. 522.

⁷² FONTAINE, 1959, p. 816; TEILLET, 1984.

Conclusion

As these examples have shown, identity in early medieval Spain was often a highly complex phenomenon. While a term like «Goth» or «Roman» may have a single meaning, pointing to a single facet of identity, it may also have multiple meanings. «Goth» can refer to ancestry in one context and have a political nuance in another, and it can also employ multiple nuances simultaneously, giving a sense of both identities (or more) in a single source or passage. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that the various types of identification were mutually exclusive, that, for example, the increasing use of «Goth» in the mid-seventh century to refer to all the king's subjects must mean that these subjects had all become ethnic Goths, or, as Herwig Wolfram has suggested, that «Goth» had ceased to have any ethnic meaning (by which he means descent-based) in favour of a wider, more inclusive political one.⁷³ The reality was more complicated. Religious, political, and ethnic identities coexisted in Visigothic Spain, for both the «Gothic» and the «Roman», and the specific uses and importance of these identities could vary across time, individuals, and circumstances. It is precisely this fluid and multi-dimensional nature that allowed Hispano-Romans to make the shift from «Roman» to «Goth».

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⁷³ WOLFRAM, 2006, p. 52.

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