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Origin Legends of Visigothic Spain in Isidore of Seville's Writings

Erica Buchberger

Introduction

As the most prolific author of Visigothic Hispania (or Spain), Isidore of Seville is unsurprisingly also the key figure behind the origin legends of the Visigoths.¹ Isidore was born in Cartagena c.560 to a family that soon fled to Seville, probably as a result of the Byzantine takeover of the region. He succeeded his brother Leander as bishop of Seville c.600. During his episcopal tenure, he tutored King Sisebut (r. 612-621) and presided over the Fourth Council of Toledo (633), which promoted kingdom-wide unity through Catholic faith and Gothic identity.²

Of his many influential writings, those most relevant to Gothic origins are his *Etymologies* and *History of the Goths, Vandals, and Sueves*. The *Etymologies* (sometimes called *Origins*) is a collection of knowledge on various subjects emphasizing ancient authority and understanding concepts through the origins of the words for them.³ Because of their antiquarian bent, we should not assume his definitions here reflect his opinion on contemporary meanings (though they may). Isidore deliberately crafted his oeuvre to influence his present, but here he was also trying to relate eternal truths from ancient times.⁴

Two versions of Isidore's *History* survive in manuscript form. The shorter redaction was written earlier and ended with the death of King Sisebut in 621. The second redaction is more detailed and narratively developed, including the rhetorical bookends known in modern times as the Prologue or *Laus Spaniae* (In Praise of Spain) and the Recapitulation or *Laus Gothorum* (In Praise of the Goths). These situate the history of the Visigothic kingdom in geographical context in Hispania and assert the Goths' manifest destiny in the province. It is also updated

¹ While 'Spain' is a reasonable English translation of 'Hispania' and commonly used to describe the region of Visigothic rule, it is important to note that the Roman Hispania they ruled is not coterminous with modern Spain. It includes what is now Portugal, Andorra, and even sometimes the Roman province of Gallia Narbonensis or Septimania in southern France. For ease, I will use Spain, Hispania, and Iberia interchangeably, but no modern national context is implied.

² Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, 2nd print ed. (Liverpool, 1999), p. 12.

³ Stephen Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof, trans. with commentary, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 3-28.

⁴ Barney et al., *Etymologies*, pp. 10-17; Jamie Wood, *The Politics of Identity in Visigothic Spain: Religion and Power in the Histories of Isidore of Seville* (Leiden, 2012), p. 76.

through Swinthila's victories over the Byzantines in 625.⁵ Unless otherwise noted, passages cited from the *History* will be from this later redaction.

Isidore actively sought to legitimize Visigothic dominance and promote a Gothic Catholic identity under which all subjects of the Visigothic kings could unite. In his role as bishop, this meant presiding over church councils and advising kings. As a historian, it meant manipulating borrowed models of history writing and ethnicity to place the Goths in an exalted position in Christendom. Thus Isidore treated the Goths as more important than other peoples in the peninsula, depicted them as supplanting the Romans both in the province and in God's favour, and arranged his narrative to make Gothic rule of Hispania seem preordained from their very origins.⁶

In doing so, Isidore faced two particular challenges. Firstly, the Visigoths were not the only possible heirs of Rome and of Catholic legitimacy in Hispania. The Byzantine Empire held coastal territory from the 550s to the 620s. The Byzantines, of course, were called 'Romans' at the time, were direct heirs of the eastern half of the empire, and were viewed in the West with religious suspicion following the Three Chapters Controversy.⁷ At the time Isidore revised his *History*, the Goths had just expelled them completely from Iberia, and as we will see Isidore celebrated this as the ultimate Gothic military and religious triumph. How could a barbarian people claim to be more truly 'Roman' than they? Part of Isidore's answer was to give the Goths earlier origins as a people and greater orthodoxy.⁸ Secondly, Isidore needed to defuse previous authors' negative depictions of the Goths. While some, like Orosius, emphasized the Goths' Christianity and relative civility when pillaging, more commonly authors saw the Goths as Arian heretics and barbarians whose sack of the city of Rome in 410 appalled all civilized Romans. Some drew parallels to biblical scourges sent by God to punish, even suggesting the Goths heralded the end of the world. Isidore would need to neutralize the potential negative connotations in order to make the Visigoths the rightly destined rulers of a Catholic kingdom. In some instances he transformed a negative into a positive, such as admitting the Goths were once heretics but placing the blame on the Roman emperor who converted them. At other

⁵ Wood, *Politics*, pp. 4-6, 68-73; Andrew H. Merrills, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 185.

⁶ Erica Buchberger, *Shifting Ethnic Identities in Spain and Gaul, 500-700: From Romans to Goths and Franks* (Amsterdam, 2017), pp. 68-70; Wood, *Politics*; Merrills, *History and Geography*, p. 38; Walter Pohl and Philipp Dörler, "Isidore and the *gens Gothorum*," *Antiquité Tardive* 23 (2015), 141; Jacques Fontaine, *Isidore de Séville et la culture classique dans l'Espagne wisigothique* (Paris, 1959).

⁷ Jamie Wood, "Defending Byzantine Spain: Frontiers and Diplomacy," *Early Medieval Europe* 18.3 (2010), 292-319; Wood, *Politics*, pp. 42-43; Rachel Stocking, *Bishops, Councils, and Consensus in the Visigothic Kingdom, 589-633* (Ann Arbor, 2000), p. 60.

⁸ Similarly, Trojan origin legends provided other peoples with a history predating Rome's foundation: e.g., Fulton in this volume, p. 323. 340

points, he looked for the positive, emphasizing their ultimate salvation through conversion to Catholic Christianity.

Isidore crafted his origin legend not uncritically but in service of these objectives.⁹ He drew on a repertoire of available strategies and models from classical ethnography (especially Herodotus and Pliny), biblical genealogy and prophecy (Genesis, Josephus, and Revelation), and the writings of other late antique authors (Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Orosius) to give the Goths the most advantageous, illustrious origins befitting their new destiny as divinely ordained masters of Spain. In fact, Isidore and his main late antique sources used the same classical and biblical texts to explain the origins of the Gothic people. They created related narratives by building on, refuting, and adapting their predecessors' ideas, with varying interpretations of what the evidence could tell them. While their aims often differed—and therefore Isidore had to adapt rather than copy his predecessors' models—the raw materials and late antique Mediterranean context in which they wrote were the same. Their common Roman and Christian cultural milieu led to shared assumptions about the nature of the world.¹⁰ Among these is “a sort of law of conservation of peoples”: the notion that all contemporary peoples must be descended from known peoples from ancient ethnography, the biblical peopling of the world after the flood, or both—or that they were in fact the same peoples renamed.¹¹ Further, many peoples were thought to derive their names from their founders and their characters from the etymology of that name and from the influence of their environment.¹² Thus Isidore looked for similarity of names and for hints of the character of a people in the meaning of its name. His writings contributed to an ongoing debate on the merits of each approach and the degree to which one could reasonably connect the Goths to either the classical Getae and Scythians or the biblical Gog and Magog. As we will see, Isidore tried to combine both to give his Visigoths every possible advantage from their heritage. He also

⁹ See also in this volume the chapters by Plassmann and Reimitz; Introduction pp. 16-18, 21 15; Conclusion p. 458; Rix, p. 270 264; Fulton, p. 322 338. Compare with Ambrose of Milan: Mark Humphries, “‘Gog is the Goth’: Biblical Barbarians in Ambrose of Milan's *De fide*,” in *Unclassical Traditions: Alternatives to the Classical Past in Late Antiquity*, ed. Richard Flower, Christopher Kelly, and Michael Williams (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 44-57.

¹⁰ See also in this volume Introduction, p. 10 16; Plassmann, p. 409 413-14.

¹¹ Patrick Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, 2002), p. 49; Peter Heather, “Disappearing and Reappearing Tribes,” in *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300-800*, ed. Walter Pohl and Helmut Reimitz (Leiden, 1998), pp. 95-111; Humphries, “Gog,” pp. 45, 56-57; Walter Goffart, “Rome, Constantinople, and the Barbarians,” in his *Rome's Fall and After* (Ronceverte, WV, 1989), p. 3; Jamie Wood, “*Religiones* and *gentes* in Isidore of Seville's *Chronica maiora*,” in *Post-Roman Transitions: Christian and Barbarian Identities in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Walter Pohl and Gerda Heydemann (Turnhout, 2013), p. 132.

¹² Barney et al., *Etymologies*, pp. 11-13, 22-24; Geary, *Myth*, p. 43.

adapted selectively from the repertoire of stories available to him, sometimes ignoring or detracting from inconvenient passages, and relying heavily on Orosius, whose positive portrayal of the Goths aligns with many of Isidore's own goals.¹³

This chapter will begin with Isidore's explicit descriptions of Gothic origins. I will then dissect first the classical then the biblical influences he selected to construct these descriptions and related passages and why he chose them. Finally, I will follow his Goths' journey to his present, highlighting the narrative choices that painted what Plassmann calls in this volume an "arc of redemption" from barbarian savages to civilized Christians.¹⁴

Isidore's Origin Story

A Gothic origin story appears twice in the *History of the Goths*: in the first two chapters, and in the Recapitulation at the end. Chapters one and two state:

The people of the Goths is a very ancient one. Some suspect that they originated from Magog, son of Japheth, on the basis of the similarity of the last syllable, or they conclude the same from the prophet Ezekiel. But in the past, learned men were in the habit of calling them 'Getae' rather than 'Gog' or 'Magog'. However, the meaning of their name in our language is *tectum*, by which is meant strength, and rightly so, for there was never a people on earth that succeeded in exhausting the Roman empire to such an extent. These were the ones that Alexander himself declared should be avoided, the ones that Pyrrhus feared, the ones that made Caesar shudder.¹⁵

Gothorum antiquissimam esse gentem, quorum originem quidam de Magog Iafeth filio suspicantur a similitudine ultimae syllabae; et magis de Ezechiele propheta id colligentes. Retro autem eruditi eos magis Getas quam Gog et Magog appellare consueverunt. Interpretatio nominis eorum in linguam nostram tectum quod significatur fortitudo, et re vera: nulla enim in orbe gens fuit quae Romanum Imperium adeo fatigaverit. Isti sunt enim quos etiam Alexander vitandos pronuntiavit, Pyrrhus pertimuit, Caesar exhorruit.

¹³ Wood, "Religiones," pp. 129, 159; Magali Coumert, *Origines des peuples: Les récits du haut moyen âge occidental (550-850)* (Paris, 2007), p. 119; Christopher Heath, "Hispania et Italia: Paul the Deacon, Isidore, and the Lombards," in *Isidore of Seville and his Reception in the Early Middle Ages: Transmitting and Transforming Knowledge*, ed. Andrew Fear and Jamie Wood (Amsterdam, 2016), pp. 165-66.

¹⁴ Plassmann, p. 413 418.

¹⁵ Isidore, *History of the Goths* (henceforth *HG*) 1-2, ed. Cristóbal Rodríguez Alonso (León, 1975), trans. Wolf, 2nd print ed. (Liverpool, 1999).

The Recapitulation begins much the same, but then follows the Goths from a distant homeland to Spain and expounds on their character:

The Goths originated from Magog, the son of Japheth, and have been proved to have a common origin with the Scythians. That is why they are not much different in name: with one letter changed and one removed, 'Getae' becomes 'Scythae'. They were inhabitants of the icy peaks of the west and they lived on the mountain slopes with other peoples. Driven from their territory by the attack of the Huns, they crossed the Danube and surrendered themselves to the Romans. But when they could no longer tolerate their unjust treatment, they took up arms in their wrath, invaded Thrace, devastated Italy, besieged and captured Rome, entered Gaul and, bursting through the Pyrenees, reached Spain, where they established their homeland and dominion.

The Goths are agile by nature and quick to understand. They have a strong sense of duty. Robust in bodily strength and lofty in stature, they are impressive in their carriage and demeanour. Skilful with their hands, they are also impervious to wounds, just as the poet says about them, 'The Getae despise death while praising the wound'. They waged such great wars and had such a reputation for glorious victory, that Rome itself, the conqueror of all peoples submitted to the yoke of captivity and yielded to the Gothic triumphs: the mistress of all nations served them like a handmaid.¹⁶

Gothi de Magog Iapheth filio orti cum Scythis una probantur origine sati, unde nec longe a vocabulo discrepant. Demutata enim ac detracta littera Getae quasi Scythae sunt nuncupati. Hi igitur occidentis glacialia iuga inhabitantes quaequae sunt ardua montium cum ceteris gentibus possidebant. Quibus sedibus inpetu gentis Hunorum pulsi Danubium transeunt, Romanis se dedunt; sed dum iniurias eorum non sustinerent, indignati arma sumunt, Thraciam inruunt, Italiam vastant, obsessam urbem capiunt, Gallias adgrediuntur patefactisque Pyrenaeis montibus Spanias usque perveniunt ibique sedem vitae atque imperium locaverunt.

Populi natura pernices, ingenio alacres, conscientiae viribus freti, robore corporis validi, staturae proceritate ardui, gestu habituque conspicui, manu prompti, duri vulneribus, iuxta quod ait poeta de ipsis: "mortem contemnunt laudato vulnere Getae". Quibus tanta extitit magnitudo bellorum et tam extollens gloriosae victoriae virtus ut Roma ipsa victrix omnium populorum subacta captivitatis iugo Gothicis triumphis adcederet et domina cunctarum gentium illis ut famula deserviret.

¹⁶ HG 66-67.

The *Etymologies* include a similar story, sometimes nearly verbatim, under the section “On the Names of Peoples (*De gentium vocabulis*)”:

The Goths are thought to have been named after Magog, the son of Japheth, because of the similarity of the last syllable. The ancients called them Getae rather than Goths.

They are a brave and most powerful people, tall and massive in body, terrifying for the kind of arms they use. Concerning them, Lucan (*Civil War* 2.54): ‘Let here a Dacian press forward, there a Getan rush at the Iberians.’¹⁷

Gothi a Magog filio Iaphet nominati putantur, de similitudine ultimae syllabae, quos veteres magis Getas quam Gothos vocaverunt; gens fortis et potentissima, corporum mole ardua, armorum genere terribilis. De quibus Lucanus (2, 54): Hinc Dacus premit inde Getes occurrat Iberis.

Classical Connections: Getae and Scythians

The first sentence of his *History of the Goths*’ main text makes it clear that antiquity was essential in defining them. Identification with in the Getae and Scythians of ancient Greek and Roman writings pushed the Goths’ known history back, thus making them comparably venerable.¹⁸

To convince the reader that the Goths and Getae were one and the same, he appealed to ancient authorities. In his *Etymologies* “the ancients” called them the *Getae*.¹⁹ Likewise in the first chapter of the *History of the Goths*, “learned men” of the past did so.²⁰ This passage copies nearly word for word from Jerome’s *On Genesis*, which might serve as an appeal to more recent authority too for the learned reader. Jerome likewise appealed to ancient classical authorities, writing: “in fact all learned men in the past had certainly been accustomed to calling the Goths Getae.”²¹ Isidore includes among them the Massagetae, so-called because they are “‘weighty,’ that is, ‘strong’ Getae” who live “in northern regions between the Scythians and Albanians” and are also of Scythian origin—in line with Pliny’s *Natural History*, but without directly citing his

¹⁷ Isidore, *Etymologies* 9.2.89, ed. W.M. Lindsay (Oxford, 2011), trans. Barney et al. (Cambridge, 2006).

¹⁸ HG 1; Geary, *Myth*, p. 60; Wood, “*Religiones*,” pp. 148-58. See also in this volume Fulton p. 322 338; Rix, p. 266 259.

¹⁹ Isidore, *Etymologies* 9.2.89.

²⁰ HG 1, with parallels to Jerome noted by Rodríguez Alonso on p. 75.

²¹ Jerome, *On Genesis* 10.2, ed. Dominic Vallarsi, PL 23: 935-1009, trans. C.T.R. Hayward (Oxford, 1995): *Et certe Gotthos omnes retro eruditi, magis Getas, quam Gog et Magog appellare consueverunt.*

work or authority.²² Being connected to the Scythians further bolstered the Goths' antiquity, because this people (*gens*) is more frequently mentioned in ancient sources and "always held to be very ancient."²³ In fact, in the earlier, shorter version of the *History*, it was the Scythians not the Getae Isidore began with: "The kingdom of the Goths is certainly very ancient, because it derived from the kingdom of the Scythians."²⁴ This more forceful and definitive assertion disappeared upon revision in favour of what can only be described as plausible deniability: some say Magog, others Getae.²⁵ Whatever readers believed, whichever patristic authority they wished to follow, could be reconciled with Isidore's explanation—at least until they read to the end. In the second recension's Recapitulation, the forceful assertion returns: "The Goths ... have been proved to have a common origin with the Scythians."²⁶ His 'proof' here is the similarity of the names *Getae* and *Scythae*, exhibiting a faith in sometimes shaky etymological connections rather than quoting a known authority like Pliny or Orosius, both of whom had in fact asserted their kinship.²⁷ Isidore also mentions in his classification of all peoples in *Etymologies* others who were considered related to the Scythians, including the imperial Parthians and Bactrians, changed from neighbours as in Pliny and Orosius to kin, and the renowned Amazon kingdom founded by Scythian women, taken from Orosius.²⁸ All these people, as relatives of Scythians, were also each other's kin.

All of these ties impart character traits too, not just antiquity. By associating the Goths with the powerful empires of the Parthians and Bactrians, he implies they naturally have what it takes to rule. From both Amazons and Scythians they acquire attributes of fierce warriors.²⁹ They even tap into contemporary Dacians' strength against Rome when Isidore quotes Lucan's (unsurprisingly) creative etymology: "people think they were called Dacians (*Dacus*) as if the word were *Dagus*, because they were begotten 'from the stock of the Goths' (*de Gothorum*

²² Isidore, *Etymologies* 9.2.63: *Et dicti Massagetae quasi graves, id est fortes Getae ... Hi sunt, qui inter Scythas atque Albanos septentrionalibus locis inhabitant*. On Isidore's familiarity with Pliny, see Trevor Murphy, *Pliny the Elder's Natural History: The Empire in the Encyclopedia* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 1-28; Barney et al., *Etymologies*, p. 11.

²³ Isidore, *Etymologies* 9.2.62: *gens antiquissima semper habita*; Coumert, *Origines*, p. 106.

²⁴ *HG* 1: *Gothorum antiquissimum esse regnum certum est, quod ex regno Scytharum est exortum*. Pohl and Dörler, "Isidore," pp. 137-38.

²⁵ *HG* 1.

²⁶ *HG* 66.

²⁷ Pliny, *Natural History* 4.25; 6.50[19], ed. and trans. H. Rackham, W.H.S. Jones, and D.E. Eichholz, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA, 1938-1962); Orosius, *History Against the Pagans* VII.34.5, ed. Marie-Pierre Arnaud-Lindet (Paris, 1990-1991), trans. A.T. Fear (Liverpool, 2010).

²⁸ Isidore, *Etymologies* 9.2.62; 9.2.43-44.

²⁹ Wood, "Religiones," p. 155.

stirpe).³⁰ He confers strength on them through their Massagetae kin whose name includes “strength.”³¹ The Goths also inherit the Massagetae and Scythians’ northern origin, commonly associated in ancient ethnography with ferocity, hardiness, and warrior skill derived from the harshness of their cold, unforgiving environment.³²

However, this strength and ferocity could also be viewed negatively, as uncivilized and barbaric, and Isidore needed to neutralize this reading. His strategy was partly setting the Goths on a journey toward civilization, much as his sixth-century predecessor Jordanes had, but he also minimized negative traits to draw attention to positives that would make the Visigoths look good.³³ So while the Massagetae were “savage,” more often the Getae and Scythians of Isidore’s tale exhibit strength, bravery, victory, antiquity, and hardiness.³⁴ Isidore ultimately bestows these characteristics on the Goths directly when he states that they “are a brave and most powerful people, tall and massive in body, terrifying for the kind of arms they use,” and “agile by nature.”³⁵

Thus we see that classical ethnography provided many useful elements for Isidore’s origin story of the Visigoths. By claiming that they were Getae and Scythians, he makes them an old, venerable people on par with or older than the Romans, and thus their Byzantine descendants. By referring to the great deeds, courage, and warrior skill of a variety of Scythian peoples, he implies the Goths inherited these traits. By highlighting kinship with the Dacians, who had strongly resisted Roman domination, he suggests the Goths, too, were Rome’s military equal.

Biblical Connections: Gog, Magog, and Noah

In addition to this classical pedigree, Isidore provided the Goths with a biblical origin through the characters of Gog and Magog. Like the Getae and Scythians, they could provide antiquity greater than Rome’s and warrior strength but also savagery and danger.³⁶ The biblical connection, though, added new elements: positively, the Goths could join the common Table of Nations schema as descendants of Noah’s son Japheth, providing antiquity, links to other

³⁰ Isidore, *Etymologies* 9.2.90: *dictos putant Dacos, quasi Dagos, quia de Gothorum stirpe creati sunt*. Pohl and Dörler, “Isidore,” p. 137; Juan Ramón Carbó García, “Godos y getas en la historiografía de la tardoantigüedad y del medievo: un problema de identidad y de legitimación sociopolítica,” *Studia historica, Historia antigua* 22 (2004), pp. 182-85, 188, 190-91.

³¹ Isidore, *Etymologies* 9.2.63.

³² As Isidore himself claims in *Etymologies* 9.2.105. For the stereotype, see Pliny, *Natural History* 2.80; Kasperski and Rix in this volume.

³³ On Jordanes, see Kasperski’s chapter in this volume.

³⁴ Isidore, *Etymologies* 9.2.66.

³⁵ Isidore, *Etymologies* 9.2.89; *HG* 67.

³⁶ Humphries, “Gog,” p. 48.

peoples, and a possible role in God's plan for salvation; negatively, they were associated with the Gog and Magog of Revelation who were tempted by the devil to begin the battle of the apocalypse.³⁷ Again, Isidore chose to skirt the problematic elements with a positive spin.³⁸

To connect the Goths to Gog and Magog, Isidore draws once more on others' authority and etymology: "[s]ome suspect" that the Goths came from Magog based on the further authority of the prophet Ezekiel and on the similarity of the last syllable.³⁹ Isidore also knits the biblical and classical threads together when stating in the *Etymologies* that people think both Scythians and Goths originated with Magog.⁴⁰ He does not explain how the Scythians and Magog are connected, but geographical coincidence is undoubtedly a factor; he asserts elsewhere that, "like the country of the Goths," Scythia was said to be named after Magog.⁴¹

The implied inheritance of Gog and Magog's character and destiny remained the biggest obstacle Isidore faced. He wanted the Goths to be inheritors of Christendom, not its destroyers from Revelation. Here, a brief exploration of the writings of Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine will situate Isidore in an ongoing late antique conversation about Gothic identity and illustrate how he was one in a succession of authors who manipulated the Gothic origin story to suit their own times and contexts.

Ambrose (374-397) was bishop of Milan when the Goths defeated the Romans at Adrianople in 378, killing the eastern emperor Valens, and his explanation of who the Goths were strongly reflected this context.⁴² Not long after the battle, the western emperor Gratian asked Ambrose to write about the Catholic faith. This became the first books of his *On Faith to the Emperor Gratian* (*De fide ad Gratianum Augustum*).⁴³ In it, Ambrose explicitly states that Gog and the Goths are the same. Quoting from Ezekiel 38-39, he opines, "For Ezekiel, in those far-off days, already prophesied the diminishing of our people, and the Gothic wars." He

³⁷ Genesis 10:2; Ezekiel 38-39; Revelation 20:7. On the Table of Nations, see in this volume Charles-Edwards, pp. 76-77 63-64. On salvation history, see in this volume Introduction, pp. 14-15 6-7; Fulton, p. 324 340; Plassmann, p. 413 417-18. On Gog, Magog, and apocalypse, see Sverre Bøe, *Gog and Magog: Ezekiel 38-39 as Pre-text for Revelation 19,17-21 and 20,7-10* (Tübingen, 2001); James Palmer, *The Apocalypse in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2014); E.J. van Donzel and Andrea Schmidt, *Gog and Magog in Early Eastern Christian and Islamic Sources: Sallam's Quest for Alexander's Wall* (Leiden, 2010).

³⁸ Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths* (Berkeley, 1988), p. 29.

³⁹ *HG* 1, reiterated as fact at 66; Isidore, *Etymologies* 9.2.89.

⁴⁰ Isidore, *Etymologies* 9.2.27; Wood, *Politics*, p. 163.

⁴¹ Isidore, *Etymologies* 14.3.31: *Scythia sicut et Gothia a Magog filio lapphet fertur cognominata*.

⁴² J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, trans. with commentary, *Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches* (Liverpool, 2005), pp. 3-26.

⁴³ Neil McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 98-106; John Moorhead, *Ambrose: Church and Society in the Late Roman World* (London, 1999), pp. 113-18.

predicts imperial victory over the Goths because he is convinced, “[t]hat Gog is the Goth, whose coming forth we have already seen, and over whom victory in days to come is promised.”⁴⁴ Gratian’s concern about the Goths and Ambrose’s theological battles with anti-Nicene heretics strongly influenced this identification. Ambrose wished for Gratian’s support and so framed the emperor’s victory as inevitable for someone of right faith, proven by the prophecy of Ezekiel.⁴⁵ His Goths were a scourge, but Nicene Catholic Romans were divinely destined for victory.⁴⁶

Jerome (c.347-419), a Bethlehem monk, wrote exegetical commentaries and produced the Vulgate Bible, a Latin translation from the Hebrew and Greek originals that became standard in the Latin West.⁴⁷ In his biblical commentaries, without naming names, Jerome directly attacked Ambrose’s assertion that Gog was the Goth.⁴⁸ It could not be true, he wrote, because no battles featuring Gog in Ezekiel matched battles fought by the Goths. As we have already seen, Jerome instead likened the Goths to Getae, appealing to classical authorities. Goths, then, could be brave fighters after their Getic ancestors, but not a biblical scourge. Jerome was prepared, however, to equate Magog and Scythian. In his commentary *On Genesis*, he aligns descendants of Noah with contemporary peoples, including that of “Magog to the Scythians.”⁴⁹ This derives from Josephus, whose *Antiquities*, written in the late first century A.D., places Japheth’s sons up the river Don. Magog, Josephus writes, founded the Magogians, “who by the Greeks are called Scythians.”⁵⁰ Geographical coincidence was thus made genealogical certainty. But Gog, despite being from Magog, is *not* Scythian. Jerome’s commentary on Ezekiel states, “the Jews and our Judaizers think that Gog refers to the Scythian nations, savage and innumerable,” living beyond the Caucasus, and fighting against the saints

⁴⁴ Ambrose, *On Faith* 2.16.137-38, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, PL 16:523-698, trans. H. De Romestin, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 2, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, 1955): *Namque et futurum nostri depopulationem, et bella Gothorum Ezechiel illo iam tempore prophetavit ... Gog iste Gothus est, quem iam videmus exisse, de quo promittitur nobis futura victoria.*

⁴⁵ Humphries, “Gog,” p. 49-51; Moorhead, *Ambrose*, p. 118; Michael Stuart Williams, *The Politics of Heresy in Ambrose of Milan: Community and Consensus in Late Antique Christianity* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 119-21.

⁴⁶ Humphries, “Gog,” p. 53; Michael Maas, “How the Steppes Became Byzantine: Rome and the Eurasian Nomads in Historical Perspective,” in *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity: Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe, ca. 250-750*, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo and Michael Maas (Cambridge, 2018), p. 20.

⁴⁷ Andrew Cain, *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 1-4.

⁴⁸ Jerome, *On Genesis* 10.2; Jerome, *On Ezekiel* 11.38, ed. Dominic Vallarsi, PL 25: 25-490D, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (New York, 2016).

⁴⁹ Jerome, *On Genesis* 10.2.

⁵⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.6.1.122-23, ed. and trans. H.St.J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA, 1930-1965): *Magog vero magogas a se nominata instituit, isti a grecis scithae sunt appellati*; Bøe, *Gog and Magog*, pp. 184-86.

per Revelation 20:8.⁵¹ It seems Jerome can accept Magog as a neutral ethnonym for Scythians without implying that prophecy refers to this contemporary people, something which would help Isidore in his similar quest to neutralize apocalyptic connotations.⁵²

Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa (395-430), completely rejected the notion that Gog and Magog corresponded to any known peoples, whether the Getae or other “foreign peoples” like Scythians or Goths.⁵³ Focusing on Revelation, Augustine concludes in *The City of God* that since John wrote therein that Gog and Magog spread over the whole earth, and no single known peoples did so, none of these peoples could fit the criteria to be Gog and Magog. It is noteworthy that Augustine referred to Revelation rather than Ezekiel, unlike Ambrose. Perhaps this is due to a new event in recent memory that read more apocalyptic to contemporaries: the Goths’ sack of Rome in 410. Just prior, in 406, a group of Goths under the leadership of the pagan Radagaisus had entered Italy intending to destroy Rome. He was killed and his army defeated by the general Stilicho. In 410, a different band of Goths under Alaric, an Arian Christian, succeeded. His troops served Rome as a federate army, and their looting of the city was repayment for Rome’s broken promises to them. However, they did not touch the churches, nor the treasures and people inside them.⁵⁴ To those who equated the Goths with Gog, Ambrose’s ‘Gog’ was no longer just on the battlefield but at the very heart of the Western empire. Augustine’s writings in the aftermath aimed to focus Christian concerns on heaven not earth and attempted to defuse such apocalyptic fervour. *The City of God*, though not itself a direct response to the sack, begins by reminding those who blamed Christianity that the “bloodthirsty” barbarians would not have shown mercy without Christ taming them into doing so: “God forbid that any prudent man should impute this merely to the ferocious barbarians! For their minds, utterly savage and cruel, were dismayed, bridled, and miraculously tempered by Him [God].”⁵⁵ He asserts that had God allowed the pagan Goth Radagaisus to attack Rome as

⁵¹ Jerome, *On Ezekiel* 11.38: *Igitur Judaei et nostri Judaizantes putant Gog gentes esse Scythicas, immanes et innumerabiles.*

⁵² C.T.R. Hayward, trans. with commentary, *Saint Jerome's Hebrew Questions on Genesis* (Oxford, 1995), p. 140; Maas, “Steppes,” pp. 31-32.

⁵³ Augustine, *City of God* 20.11, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, PL 41:13-804, trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge, 1998).

⁵⁴ Michael Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars: From the Third Century to Alaric* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 1-10.

⁵⁵ Augustine, *City of God* 1.1 and 1.7: *Absit, ut prudens quisquam hoc feritati imputet barbarorum. Truculentissimas et saevissimas mentes ille terruit, ille frenavit, ille mirabiliter temperavit.* Gillian Clark, “Augustine and the Merciful Barbarians,” in *Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World: Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity*, ed. Ralph Mathisen and Danuta Shanzer (Burlington, 2011), pp. 33-35; Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, revised ed. (Berkeley, 2000), p. 311.

chastisement, Rome would have suffered far worse. Instead, he sent the Arian Alaric, “who, out of reverence for the Christian religion ... spared those who sought refuge in the holy places.”⁵⁶

Returning to Isidore, we can see echoes of this earlier debate. Jerome and Augustine had already illustrated that the Goths could not be the actual biblical scourge, which helped Isidore, but they also rejected the connection between the Goths and Gog that he wished to make. Therefore, he would have to borrow selectively from their models. It is possible, too, that he knew Jerome’s *On Genesis* second-hand and therefore was unaware he denied the Goths’ descent from Gog. A close look at the passage where Isidore states that Scythia was said to be named after Magog reveals a remarkable resemblance to the language used by Eucherius of Lyon, who summarized Jerome’s *On Genesis* but omitted the original’s dismissal of a Goth-Gog link.⁵⁷ Thus Isidore mirrored Josephus and Jerome’s matter-of-fact geography, minus apocalyptic overtones. However, that did not preclude their being *like* Gog in character. As I will discuss in more detail below, Isidore borrowed Augustine’s reminder that the Arian Alaric showed churches mercy to emphasize their piety. Also, happily for Isidore, there were others he could easily substitute into the negative role. The Huns, who hailed from the same steppe region and attacked Rome in the mid-fifth century, appear as the “rod of God’s wrath” just as the Persians had been to the Israelites centuries earlier.⁵⁸ His Goths are metaphorically on the side of biblical Israel, defeating the Huns “with the help of” the Roman Aëtius.⁵⁹ Both Goths and Huns came from the northern steppes and were once pagan, but the Goths overcame their heritage to be not scourges but defenders—to become civilized while retaining just the good qualities of their strong lineage.

Finally, Isidore noted how similar Gog and Goth sounded, and used etymology to imply character by stating that Gog meant “*tectum*, by which is meant strength.” However, this etymology is demonstrably untrue; *tectum* in fact means “roof.” He can only have derived his definition from an incorrect reading (intentional or accidental) of Jerome’s *Book of Hebrew Names*, which lists “Gaza, strength; Gog, roof.”⁶⁰ It is clear why Isidore would prefer “strength” to “roof,” but how these suspect intellectual gymnastics convinced other Latin speakers, who must have known better, is less clear.

⁵⁶ Augustine, *City of God* 5.23: *deinde ab his barbaris Roma caperetur, qui ... ad loca sancta confugientes christianae religionis reverentia tuerentur ipsisque daemonibus atque impiorum sacrificiorum ritibus, de quibus ille praesumpserat, sic adversarentur nomine christiano, ut longe atrocius bellum cum eis quam cum hominibus gerere viderentur*. Clark, “Merciful Barbarians,” p. 36.

⁵⁷ Patrick Gautier Dalché, “Isidorus Hispalensis, *De gentium vocabulis* (Etym. IX,2) : quelques sources non repérées,” *Revue d'études augustiniennes et patristiques* 31.3-4 (1985), p. 279.

⁵⁸ *HG* 28-29: *virga furoris dei*. Wood, “*Religiones*,” p. 155.

⁵⁹ *HG* 25.

⁶⁰ Jerome, *On Ezekiel* 11.38; Jerome, *Book of Hebrew Names*, ed. Dominic Vallarsi, PL 23:771-858; Coumert, *Origines*, pp. 113-14; Wolfram, *Goths*, p. 29.

Journey from Barbarism to Civilization

The remainder of the origin story fits with the broader goal of Isidore's *History* to illustrate progression of the Goths from their origins as outsiders from a harsh land to insiders worthy of Rome's inheritance. This was partially about becoming Christian, as by Isidore's time they were Catholic Christians and he was promoting Catholicism as essential to their kingdom, but it was also about making them worthy heirs to Rome in Iberia. Telling a story of growth allowed him to make barbarian background an asset, not a hindrance. He drew heavily on the *Histories Against the Pagans* of Orosius (c.375-418), who in looking on the bright side of barbarian invasions provided the perfect arc for Gothic redemption: God's plan to spread Christianity via the universal Roman Empire and its encounters with barbarians.⁶¹

The Recapitulation describes their journey from "icy peaks" across the Danube into Roman territory, recalling classical descriptions of Scythia and biblical accounts of the land of Magog and the association of these places with harshness and hardness.⁶² Isidore grounds the Goths in a familiar, decorated past by claiming that Alexander, Pyrrhus, and Caesar feared the Goths, using much the same words Orosius did when he invented these connections.⁶³ Isidore embellishes further that they supported Pompey in Thessaly against Caesar with great valour, turning the Goths into champions of republican liberty against tyranny.⁶⁴ In the third and early fourth centuries, they conquered Roman Illyricum and Macedonia before the emperor Claudius II expelled them. They were such a "powerful" foe that Claudius was honoured in the forum for this deed.⁶⁵ In 331, they "invaded" Sarmatia, "slaughtered the people, and plundered the land." After "enormous struggle," Constantine defeated them and was publicly honoured for the task. He "shone with the glory of his valour against many peoples, but he was most renowned for his victory over the Goths."⁶⁶ Like their Scythian relatives, they were victorious, powerful people to be feared. They were also truly Rome's equal in war if Rome's celebrated army struggled to defeat them.

But the Goths also make a journey of character and faith. They soon became Christian, but the wrong kind: Arian heretics. Isidore lays the blame on the Roman emperor Valens for sending heretical priests, thus "infus[ing] a deadly poison into this excellent people."⁶⁷ But they would not remain so, and Isidore foreshadows their coming "through Christ's grace to the unity

⁶¹ A.T. Fear, *Orosius: Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* (Liverpool, 2010), pp. 1-6; Peter van Nuffelen, *Orosius and the Rhetoric of History* (Oxford, 2012).

⁶² HG 66.

⁶³ HG 2. Compare Orosius, *History* I.16.2-3.

⁶⁴ HG 3; Merrills, *History and Geography*, p. 213.

⁶⁵ HG 4.

⁶⁶ HG 5: *de diversis gentibus virtutis gloria clarus, sed de Gothorum victoria amplius gloriosus.*

⁶⁷ HG 7.

of the Catholic faith” here.⁶⁸ In 378, they fled the Huns, and Valens settled them in Thrace, but “when they found themselves oppressed by the Romans against the tradition of their own liberty, they were forced to rebel,” destroying the Roman army at Adrianople and burning Valens to death. Again, and unlike Ambrose, Isidore blames the Romans for Gothic violence and shows them to be the more natural champions of liberty, as they once were against Caesar’s tyranny. He also frames Valens’ death as poetic justice, following Orosius: “[h]e who had surrendered such beautiful souls to the eternal flames deserved to be burned alive by the Goths.”⁶⁹ Like Augustine and Orosius, Isidore contrasts Radagaisus and Alaric, though without their crucial element of divine mercy; his story centres not on the Goths’ role in the divine plan but on the Goths’ earthly destiny. Radagaisus, “king of the Goths, of Scythian stock, dedicated to the cult of idolatry and wild with fierce barbaric savagery,” vowed to sacrifice Romans to his gods.⁷⁰ He exhibits all the negative stereotypes of a barbarian. In contrast, Alaric was “a Christian in name, though a heretic by profession,” only attacked Rome to avenge Gothic deaths, and was “conspicuous for the mercy” he showed to Christians and churches.⁷¹ As an example of how “the frightfulness of their savagery was ... restrained,” Isidore recounts Orosius’ tale of Alaric ordering his soldiers not just to return anything they had taken from St. Peter’s church but to guard the nuns carrying this treasure as they processed back to the church. When giving this order, Alaric proclaims he was “waging war against the Romans, not against the Apostles,” signalling his Christian piety.⁷² Radagaisus demonstrates that Goths could still be barbaric and pagan, but his death suggests this part of Gothic character belongs in the past. The future is Alaric’s Christian mercy. By repeating Orosius’ emphasis on Radagaisus’ Scythian and pagan identity, Isidore likewise draws on his motif of Goths transcending their Scythian ancestors by becoming Christian and civilized.

Before long, the Goths became protectors of Rome. King Wallia “was directed by divine providence toward peace” and thus made a treaty with the emperor Honorius, promising military support for Rome. His first task was to destroy the “barbarians” warring in Spain, bringing peace to Isidore’s homeland.⁷³ The Goths also fought with the Romans to defeat the Huns at the Catalaunian Fields.⁷⁴ But with pagan barbarians converted or removed to the

⁶⁸ HG 8.

⁶⁹ HG 66, 9: *se opprimi a Romanis contra consuetudinem propriae libertatis ad rebellandum coacti sunt ... merito ipse ab eis vivens cremaretur incendio qui tam pulchras animas ignibus aeternis tradiderat.*

⁷⁰ HG 14: *Radagaisus genere Scythia cultui idolatriae deditus barbaricae inmanitatis feritate.*

⁷¹ HG 15: *nomine quidem Christianus, sed professione haereticus.*

⁷² HG 16-17: *feriendi tamen inmanitas refrenata est ... dicens cum Romanis gessisse bellum, non cum apostolis.* Compare Orosius, *History* VII.37.5, 37.8-9, 39.3-10.

⁷³ HG 21-22.

⁷⁴ HG 25.

distant steppes, Gothic Arianism became a clearer stain Isidore needed to address. In 549, King Agila “polluted” the tomb of the martyr Acisclus in Cordoba “in contempt of the Catholic religion.” He was thus punished by “the saints” when his son died in battle.⁷⁵ King Leovigild lived up to the Goths’ military reputation by gloriously conquering the Sueves, but “the error of his impiety tarnished his great success.”⁷⁶ “Filled with the madness of Arian perfidy,” he persecuted Catholics, exiled bishops, removed church privileges, and “forced many into the Arian disease.”⁷⁷ However, his son Reccared completed the Goths’ spiritual journey by adopting Catholicism and banning Arianism, “recalling all the peoples of the entire Gothic nation to the observance of the correct faith and removing the ingrained stain of their error.” While his father was “irreligious [and] warlike” and increased the Gothic kingdom with war, Reccared was “pious and outstanding in peace” and elevated the Goths not with war but in faith.⁷⁸ He soon, “with the help of his newly received faith,” sent an army against the Franks and won a victory greater than any other in Spain. Thus conversion even improved the Goths’ already exceptional military prowess.⁷⁹

In the 620s, Swinthila defeated the Romans (Byzantines) once and for all, conquering the last fortresses they held in Spain and uniting the whole land under the Visigoths.⁸⁰ In his Recapitulation, Isidore celebrates the Goths’ mastery of the peoples in Hispania who “feared them”: the Vandals who were “widely known for their barbarity” and “were put to flight by their renown,” the Alans who were “extinguished by the strength of the Goths,” the Sueves who “experienced the threat of extermination at the hands of the Goths,” and “Rome itself, the conqueror of all peoples” who “submitted to the yoke of captivity and yielded to the Gothic triumphs: the mistress of all nations served them like a handmaid.”⁸¹ Isidore’s final line and his beginning, the prologue In Praise of Spain, demonstrate Isidore’s rhetorical goal: showing the Goths superseding the Romans in Hispania.⁸² The Recapitulation ends: “Subjected the Roman soldier now serves the Goths, whom he sees being served by many peoples and by Spain itself.”⁸³ The prologue is written as a classical encomium personifying Spain as a cherished bride. It describes Hispania as “sacred and always fortunate mother of princes and peoples” and “the pride and ornament of the world ... in which the Getic people are gloriously prolific”

⁷⁵ HG 45.

⁷⁶ HG 49: *Sed offuscavit in eo error impietatis gloriam tantae virtutis.*

⁷⁷ HG 50: *Arriane perfidiae furore repletus.*

⁷⁸ HG 52.

⁷⁹ HG 54.

⁸⁰ HG 62: *In ipsis enim regni sui exordiis catholicam fidem adeptus totius Gothicae gentis populos inoliti erroris labe deteresa ad cultum rectae fidei revocat.*

⁸¹ HG 67-68.

⁸² Wood, *Politics*, p. 147.

⁸³ HG 70: *subactus ... servit illis Romanus miles, quibus servire tot gentes et ipsam Spaniam videt.*

with “an abundance of everything fruitful.” It is a place worthy of such an ancient (hence “Getic”) people, and also of “golden Rome, the head of nations,” that “rightly” desired Spain long ago and “betrothed” her to itself. But the Goths’ victory over Rome and surpassing it in greatness means Hispania now rightly belongs to them, and not the East Romans/Byzantines. Isidore writes, “[N]ow it is the most flourishing people of the Goths, who in their turn, after many victories all over the world, have eagerly seized and loved you.”⁸⁴

Through this narrative, Isidore presents a Gothic people favoured by God, redeeming themselves with their journey toward Catholicism and civilization, and winning rightful rule of Spain through their military prowess against Rome and their piety.⁸⁵ They mimicked the ancient Scythians and Magog as strong warriors. They inherited a love of liberty from their steppe ancestors and devoted themselves to bringing peace to Hispania. And as Catholics, they were ready to claim the mantle of rightful Roman heir for a land that deserved a victorious master.

Conclusion

It was once common to read that the modern Spanish nation originated with the Visigoths and Isidore was its first promoter.⁸⁶ Historians now recognize that neither this modern origin legend nor Isidore’s medieval one are unbiased accounts of the past but instead deliberately crafted with a purpose. Like other early medieval historians, Isidore adapted existing historical and ethnic narratives to promote a new vision of community that would help legitimate his Gothic rulers and unite their Roman, Gothic, and Suevic subjects into one Gothic, Catholic people.⁸⁷ Yet unlike many of his late antique predecessors who lived and wrote in the waning days of the western empire, for Isidore, Rome was not a collapsing empire in the west but the eastern empire that competed with the Gothic kingdom for supremacy on the Iberian coast. Nor were the Goths outsiders, heretics, and rhetorical foils; they were the rightful, Catholic rulers of his kingdom whose dominance he aimed to support. He attempted in many of his works to bolster the Gothic kingdom and its Catholic Christian identity, even at the expense of the fallen Western Empire. He therefore modified previous narratives so that the Goths replaced rather than joined Rome in Hispania—as both political and religious caretakers.

His Gothic origin legend appropriated the antiquity and strength of classical steppe peoples, interwove these elements with biblical genealogy, and carefully selected historical

⁸⁴ HG prologue: *denuo tamen Gothorum florentissima gens post multiplices in orbe victorias certatim rapit et amavit*. Merrills, *History and Geography*, pp. 185-96, 227.

⁸⁵ Giuseppe Cannone, “Storia ed esegesi biblica nell *Historia Gothorum* di Isidoro di Siviglia,” *Romanobarbarica* 8 (1984), p. 19; Wood, “*Religiones*,” pp. 133-34.

⁸⁶ J.N. Hillgarth, “Historiography in Visigothic Spain,” in *La storiografia altomedievale* (Spoleto, 1970), pp. 298-99.

⁸⁷ Wood, “*Religiones*,” p. 128; Helmut Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550-850* (Cambridge, 2015).

events that together could convince a wide variety of readers to identify with the Goths and support their destined inheritance of Hispania. Borrowing the ideas and the authority of classical historiography, the Bible, and late antique patristic authors, Isidore reshaped the Goths' past in order to give new shape to their future.

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