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Ethnicity and *Imitatio* in Isidore of Seville[1]

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Analyses of *imitatio imperii* commonly focus on the ceremonial and symbolic aspects of the Roman Empire—victory celebrations, creation of a capital, ceremonial dress and language, imagery on coins, and legal pronouncements—not ethnicity. Perhaps one reason is that in modern English, 'imitation' carries derogatory connotations of uninspired copying that remove the agency and creativity of the imitator. Imitated items and practices are seen as poor copies of originals, the latter of which are much more worthy of attention.[2] Under this definition, one would expect an imitator of Rome to claim to be Roman, resembling Athaulf's claim that Goths were unable to submit to law and so should join and revive Rome, not replace *Romania* with *Gothia*.[3] Following this logic, the Visigoths may be considered imperfect imitators of Roman ethnic concepts since the identity they claimed was not 'Roman' but 'Gothic', a poor copy of the original.

However, this is not how the classical rhetorical tradition understood *imitatio*. Students learned Latin grammar and rhetoric by replicating styles and forms, but this required careful selection of appropriate material to emulate as they wrote on new topics in new ways to rival

[1] Thanks to Fred Astren, Riccardo Pizzinato, the anonymous reviewers, and the attendees of the workshop that preceded this volume for comments and suggestions.

[2] Ziolkowski 2001, 295–96.

[3] Oros. Hist. 7.43.

rather than parrot the original. *Aemulatio* was such a central part of *imitatio* that texts regularly paired the terms.[4] Using this definition, Visigothic authors did not *just* imitate; they borrowed Roman ethnic concepts, adapted their stories of Gothic origins, and asserted their legitimacy within Hispania in order to supersede the empire, not to become it. They were active participants in negotiating their identities in dialogue with Roman norms from a common cultural landscape.[5] This *imitatio* is not only far from uninspired 'imitation', but it also more accurately reflects how early medieval ethnicity is now commonly understood. Ethnic identity is no longer seen as a fixed or innate trait, but as a dynamic process involving actors making strategic choices within specific historical contexts using the repertoires of identification available to them.[6] Similarly, historians are increasingly understanding *imitatio imperii* as not merely copying a static model, but as emulating useful models from a repertoire and adapting them for particular purposes wholly one's own.[7]

In what follows, I examine such adaptations of Roman ethnic terms and concepts in Visigothic Hispania. Given space constraints, I focus on Isidore of Seville since his writings had a profound influence within the Visigothic kingdom and beyond and his *Etymologies* provide

[4] Ziolkowski 2001; Mayernik 2016, 3–6.

[5] On cultural commonalities across the Mediterranean and former Roman provinces, see especially the recent volumes Esders, Fox et al. 2019; Esders, Hen et al. 2019; and Cvetković and Gemeinhardt 2019. That such commonalities could trigger parallel developments, see McCormick 1986, 395–96; Ziolkowski 2001, 303.

[6] Reimitz 2015; Pohl et al. 2012; Pohl and Heydemann 2013.

[7] Chrysos 2003; Majnarić 2017; Frighetto 2016.

definitions to which historians regularly refer. To prevent confusion, I will avoid the term 'imitation', instead selecting language that will highlight the distinction between the different ways of understanding *imitatio imperii* discussed above: rote copying on the one hand and emulation, appropriation, and rhetorical *imitatio* on the other.

Isidore was bishop of Seville from the early seventh century until his death in 636. Of his highly influential, prolific writings on a wide variety of topics, the most relevant on ethnicity are his *Etymologies* and *History of the Goths*. The *Etymologies* (or *Origins*) is a wide-ranging collection of knowledge emphasizing ancient authority and understanding concepts through word origins.[8] Because of their antiquarian bent, we should not assume his definitions here reflect contemporary meanings (though they may). Isidore crafted his oeuvre deliberately to influence his present, but here he also aimed to summarize eternal truths from ancient times.[9] Two versions of Isidore's *History* survive: an initial, shorter redaction ending with the death of King Sisebut in 621, and a second, more developed redaction updated through Swinthila's victories over the Byzantine or east Roman Empire in 625. This includes the rhetorical bookends known in modern times as the *Prologue* or *Laus Spaniae* and the *Recapitulation* or *Laus Gothorum* which situate Gothic history in geographical context in Hispania and assert the Goths' manifest destiny in the province.[10]

[8] Barney et al. 2006, 3–28.

[9] Barney et al. 2006, 10–17.

[10] Wood 2012, 4–6, 68–73; Merrills 2005, 185.

It is now well known that Isidore sought as a cultural broker to encourage unity in the kingdom under Gothic rule and Catholic faith.[11] Among his strategies, as I have argued elsewhere, he emphasized a common religious identity as Catholics and a common political identity as subjects of a Gothic king. Over the course of the seventh century, these commonalities came to override distinctions between Goths and Romans by descent until ethnically all Christian subjects could claim to be Goths. This process was aided by the inherently multi-layered nature of ethnicity, with multiple modes of identification (religious, political, descent, cultural) operating simultaneously and the most salient ones potentially influencing the others.[12] Isidore crafted his historical writings to promote and legitimize Gothic dominance by reformulating models of ethnicity and of history writing, depicting God's favour shifting from the Romans to the Goths in Hispania, and presenting a narrative of Gothic manifest destiny.[13]

The obvious place to begin is with the terms for peoples, *populus* and *gens*. The only explicit ancient definition of *populus* is Cicero's: 'an assembly of a multitude united in

[11] Castellanos 2020, 29; Reimitz 2014, 48–49; Wood 2013, 126; Fontaine 1959; Fontaine 2000; Merrills 2006, 38.

[12] Buchberger 2017, esp. 22–24, 33–100; Abrams 2012, 21; Pohl 2018, 4–9; Halsall 2018, 41–42.

[13] Buchberger 2017, 68. Compare John of Biclarum: Ioh. Bicl. 85–92; Humphries 2019, 101, 109.

agreement on law and in partnership for the common good.'[14] It included all citizens, divided into elite patricians and common *plebs*.[15] According to Livy, the Latins and the Romans were each a *populus* born from multiple peoples, called *gentes* before union and *populi* after agreeing to common law.[16] The only ancient definitions of *gens* pertain to its technical meaning in republican law (particularly the Twelve Tables), obsolete by the early empire.[17] However, in both technical and broader senses, authors regularly used *gens* to indicate purported shared origins, applying to groups ranging from ancient families to large nations.[18] In Late Antiquity, Christian authors adapted these terms to describe the Christian people. Augustine's *populus Dei* was similar to the Roman *populus*, being constituted by adherence to a covenant with God. It could be comprised of many ethnic *gentes*, but unlike those who became part of the ancient Roman *populus*, they often retained a separate ethnic identity, in part because this sometimes

[14] *Populus autem non omnis hominum coetus quoquo modo congregatus, sed coetus multitudinis, juris consensu et utilitatis communione sociatus* (Cicero, *De re publica* 1.39 [25]; trans. adapted from Keyes 1928, 64–65).

[15] Gai Inst. 1.3.

[16] Livy, Ab urbe cond. 1.2, 8–9 (ed. Foster 1919); Geary 2002, 49–50.

[17] Smith 2006, 13–17.

[18] See the listings in Lewis and Short 1933, s.v. *populus* and *gens*.

coincided with a political identity associated with a post-Roman kingdom. *Gentes* could also be a religious other contrasted with either Old Testament Israel or the Christian *populus*.[19]

At first glance, it seems that Isidore adopted the ancient meaning of *populus* and *gens* nearly wholesale. His definition of *populus* in *Etymologies* copies Cicero's almost verbatim: 'a human multitude united in agreement on justice and in partnership for community harmony.'[20] Isidore continues, borrowing from Gaius's *Institutes*, that it is 'distinct from the *plebs*, because a populace consists of all the citizens, including the elders of the city'.[21] In fact, because he does not include its application to the Christian people, his definition of *populus* looks not just classicizing but antiquated from a seventh-century perspective.[22] With *gens*, Isidore was more flexible, defining it as 'a number of people sharing a single origin, or distinguished from another

[19] De civ. Dei 19.24; Adams 1991, 113–14; Heydemann 2016, 29–31, 38; Pohl 2018, 11–12, 21, 23–24; Geary 2002, 54–55. On ethnicity as part of Christian models of peoplehood, see Buell 2005, esp. 138–66.

[20] *Populus est humanae multitudinis, iuris consensu et concordi communione sociatus* (Isid. Etym. 9.4.5; trans. adapted from Barney et al. 2006, 203 (Isidore) and Dyson 1998, 78, 950 (Augustine)). Isidore accessed Cicero's definition via Augustine (De civ. Dei 2.21, 19.21). See also Furtado 2008, 410 n. 5; Adams 1991, 109–11, 120.

[21] Isid. Etym. 9.4.5 (trans. from Barney et al. 2006, 203). Cf. Gai Inst. 1.3. See Elfassi 2011, 29.

[22] Furtado 2008, 410 n. 5.

nation (*natio*) in accordance with its own grouping'.[23] This modifies the common ancient association with descent to acknowledge the possibility of other self-selected criteria.[24]

In many cases, Isidore uses *populus* and *gens* in line with his definitions and with ancient and Christian practice. The legal aspect of *populus* appears in his definitions of law as 'the ordinance of the *populus*' and of civil law as 'law which each *populus* or city' establishes for itself, in numerous examples of ancient Roman legal practice (such as the *populus* creating *decemviri* to write laws), and in describing leaders as selected by or serving their people (such as the Greek *basileus* being the pedestal supporting the *populus*).[25] Most of these references concern biblical Israel, Greeks, and Romans. Isidore also uses *populus* for a multitude or crowd, often in the context of public speeches necessary for functional rule of law, but also for audiences at spectacles and plays.[26] Despite omitting religious meanings from his definitions, Isidore does refer to both biblical Israel and Christians as a *populus* or *populus Dei*. Like the Romans, they participated in their rule by selecting leaders and heard speeches and sermons about God's law as a *populus*.[27]

Similarly, Isidore adopts the late antique Christian distinction between a Christian *populus* and pagan *gentes* or *gentiles*. The Apostles spread the Christian faith among the *gentes*,

[23] Isid. Etym. 9.2.1 (trans. Barney et al. 2006, 192).

[24] Pohl and Dörler 2015, 137.

[25] Isid. Etym. 2.10.1, 5.10, 5.5; 5.1.3; 9.3.18. Translation adapted from Barney et al. 2006, 73, 118.

[26] For example, Isid. Etym. 6.8.2, 18.16.1, 18.45.

[27] Isid. Etym. 7.6.63, 8.5.67; 7.12.24, 7.6.65, 15.4.15.

and *gentiles* wrote hymns to Apollo.[28] Even the Romans, who were a *populus* or three connected *populi* when Romulus divided them into three legal assemblies, become a *gens* when listed among other pagans who named the months.[29] Law continues to play a role, as *gentiles* are those 'without the law' who 'have not yet believed'; like Livy's Romans, they should cease to be called *gentes* or *gentiles* once they convert and therefore agree to follow the (Christian) law.[30] *Gentes* also appear, as in classical texts, as nations born of a common ancestor or as multiple peoples in the world. Abraham was the father of many *gentes*, Jesus came to save all *gentes*, and there were once as many languages as *gentes* in the world.[31]

When referring to named peoples in *Etymologies*, however, Isidore diverges strikingly from this tidy pattern adopted from older Roman usage. One would expect him to label a people *gens* if referring to shared origins and *populus* when referring to legal constitution, yet there are some peoples he calls both *gens* and *populus* without differentiation. The Albani are both among the Scythian *gentes* and inhabitants of a region 'named for the colour of its *populus*'.[32] The Bessians are a *populus* sharing Thrace with other *nationes* and *gentes*, and the Garamantes a *populus* of Africa near Ethiopian *gentes*.[33] Yet Ethiopia's name derives from the colour of its

[28] Isid. Etym. 6.2.48, 1.39.17.

[29] Isid. Etym. 9.3.7, 5.33.5.

[30] Isid. Etym. 8.10.2–4 (trans. Barney et al. 2006, 183).

[31] Isid. Etym. 7.7.2; 7.2.7, 7.8.7; 9.1.1.

[32] Isid. Etym. 9.2.65, 14.3.34 (trans. adapted from Barney et al. 2006, 288).

[33] Isid. Etym. 14.4.6, 9.2.125.

populi, not *gentes*.[34] The Galicians are a *gens* named by Teucer and whiter than other *populi* of Hispania.[35] Italus gave his name to the province of Italy, which then did likewise for the *gens*, yet elsewhere Isidore calls the Italians a *populus*.[36] Romulus named both *gens* (Romans) and *civitas* (Rome), yet more often Isidore writes of the Roman *populus*.[37] There are no clear contextual distinctions to explain Isidore's varied terminology in these cases. Sometimes *populus* suggests a region's population and appears in Book 14 on world regions, and *gens* refers to peoplehood itself and features in Book 9 on languages and peoples, but not always.[38] Nor is there an identifiable ancient precedent Isidore might be following.

His terminological usage in the *History of the Goths* is even more ambiguous, with the Goths alternately labelled as *populus*, *populi*, and *gens*. His clearest innovation is in the realm of law and leadership, which should take *populus* according to both his definitions and ancient precedent. Yet Isidore relates that Athanaric accepted governance of the Gothic *gens* and that Leovigild and Reccared each improved the *gens*, one territorially and the other in faith.[39] Following his own advice that once adhering to Catholic Christian law a people should no longer be a *gens*, Isidore changes to *populus* when describing the Catholic King Reccared's merciful

[34] Isid. Etym. 14.5.14, 14.5.9.

[35] Isid. Etym. 9.2.110–11.

[36] Isid. Etym. 14.5.18, 9.2.85.

[37] Isid. Etym. 9.2.84.

[38] Examples of exceptions: Isid. Etym. 9.2.55, 9.2.94, 14.3.40, 14.6.5.

[39] Isid. Hist. Goth. 6, 52; Adams 1969, 772–73; Adams 1997, 4.

reduction of tribute his *populus* owed and Swinthila as virtuous ruler of the *populi*.[40] This also serves to legitimize the Goths as rightful heirs to Rome on the peninsula, replacing one *populus* governed by law with another. Yet even here there are exceptions. For example, he relates the great strength of the Gothic *gens* to its right to rule in the *Recapitulation*, after their conversion.[41] He refers to the Arian heresy the *Gothorum populus* held previously, as if they were still a *populus* as Arians, despite describing them before this point as a *gens* poisoned with heresy by Valens and persecuting those Catholic Christians among their number.[42] The Goths also appear as a *gens* ruling multiple other *gentes*, or sometimes multiple *populi*. Reccared's conversion recalled the *populi* of the Gothic *gens* to the faith, mountain *populi* were terrified by Swinthila's army, and Rome sees the Goths served by many *gentes* and even Hispania itself.[43] It is not clear who these various peoples are, but there is precedent in classical texts and his *Etymologies* that suggests the population of individual cities or the general multitude.[44] Most of the time when referring to other peoples, Isidore adheres to ancient norms by using *gens*, but in one passage Rome appears as both 'mistress of all *gentes*' and 'victor over all *populi*', seemingly meaning the same thing.[45]

[40] Isid. Hist. Goth. 55, 64.

[41] Isid. Hist. Goth. 69.

[42] Isid. Hist. Goth. 7, 6.

[43] Isid. Hist. Goth. 52, 63, 70.

[44] Isid. Etym. 9.4.3, 9.2.85, 9.2.98; Livy, Ab urbe cond. 22.7.6 (ed. Foster 1919).

[45] Isid. Hist. Goth. 67. Translation adapted from Wolf 1999, 108.

These divergences in the *History* from the classical norms he followed in other writings suggest that a transformation of ethnic terminology was taking place—whether by Isidore's design, more generally across the post-Roman West, or probably both. Gerda Heydemann has shown *gens* becoming more 'elastic' in Cassiodorus's writings in sixth-century Italy as he worked to balance old definitions with the new reality of ruling Christian *gentes*.[46] Helmut Reimitz has demonstrated also that the seventh-century Fredegar Chronicler reworked older texts for a world of *gentes*.[47] Similarly, Benjamin Cornford has highlighted Paul the Deacon's broadening of the term *populus* in eighth-century Italy.[48] Even within Visigothic Iberia, the Third (589) and Fourth (633) Councils of Toledo employ language similar to Isidore's, mixing classical usages with contemporary adaptations. As records of bishops' decisions in assembly, the councils describe the Christians as a *populus* (or *populus Dei*) far more than Isidore in his *History* and *Etymologies*.[49] Otherwise, though, they align closely with Isidore's usages, presenting Visigothic kings as rulers of *gentes* or *populi* fairly interchangeably and the *gens* as an assembly of political actors consenting to be ruled and protected by the king alongside the stability of the country.[50] Some of Toledo IV's similarities to Isidore's writings may relate to his

[46] Heydemann 2016, 44–46, 51–52.

[47] Reimitz 2015, 222–31.

[48] Cornford 2006, 57–58.

[49] For example, III Toledo, prologue (Coll. Hisp. V, 100); IV Toledo 6, 18 (Coll. Hisp. V, 193, 209).

[50] For example, III Toledo prologue (Coll. Hisp. V, 54); IV Toledo 75 (Coll. Hisp. V, 251, 256). For further discussion of the conciliar language, see also Velázquez 2003; Martin 2008.

presiding over that council, but this was not the case for Toledo III.[51] Together, all of these examples reveal that Isidore and his contemporaries engaged in creative adaptation of ancient Roman terms for peoples. *Gens* was being normalized as a descriptor for a people united politically or religiously, not just by purported kinship. The rhetorical *imitatio* Isidore and others engaged in borrowed a classical framework for ethnicity but modified it to describe a changed political and social reality where barbarian *gentes*, not Rome, ruled in the West.

Another way Isidore drew on and reworked Roman ethnic models is his creation of an origin story for the Goths. Here again, he did not adopt ancient and late Roman tales from biblical genealogy (Gog and Magog) and classical ethnography (Scythians and Getae) wholesale and uncritically. Instead, Isidore refashioned them in order to give the Goths greater antiquity—and thus legitimacy and status—while neutralizing any negative connotations previous authors had envisioned.[52] He particularly aimed to portray them as older than the Romans, to endow them with strong and victorious characteristics, and to establish their development from barbarians to worthy successors of Rome in Hispania. They were to supersede the Romans, not simply copy them.

As a churchman living in a society that valued both classical heritage and biblical authority, Isidore drew from both of these sources for the Goths' past. From ancient Greek and Roman ethnography, he linked them to the Getae described by Herodotus and Pliny. From biblical genealogy, he traced them to Noah via Magog and the related Gog that Ezekiel prophesied would lay waste to Israel in punishment for its sins. In doing so, he followed in the

[51] Stocking 2000; Castellanos 2020, 36–37.

[52] I explore Isidore's Gothic origin legend in more detail in Buchberger 2022.

footsteps and adapted the interpretations of Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, Augustine of Hippo, and Orosius.[53] These late antique Christian authors had all speculated about the Goths and other barbarians' connection to Gog or the Getae, but for them the Goths were outsiders, heretics, or rhetorical foils in the story of Christianity's triumph; for Isidore, they were the rightful, Catholic rulers of his kingdom whose dominance he strove to support. His selective reuse and refashioning of his predecessors' accounts reflects this different perspective.[54]

The Goths' origin story appears twice in Isidore's *History of the Goths*. Chapters one and two state:

> The people (*gens*) 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 (*gens*) 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.[55]

The *Recapitulation* begins in much the same manner: 'The Goths originated from Magog, the son of Japheth, and have been proved to have a common origin with the Scythians. That is why

[53] Coumert 2007, 103–214.

[54] Humphries 2010; Clark 2011; Merrills 2005, 62–64; Wood, 2013, 153–55.

[55] Isid. Hist. Goth. 1–2 (trans. Wolf 1999, 80–81).

they are not much different in name: with one letter changed and one removed, "Getae" becomes "Scythae".'[56] The *Etymologies* similarly tell, 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 (*gens*), 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'.[57]

To depict the Goths and Getae as one and the same, Isidore appealed to ancient authorities, asserting that 'learned men' or the 'ancients' called the Goths 'Getae'. This statement at the beginning of his *History* copies nearly word for word Jerome's *On Genesis*, a subtle appeal to more recent authority.[58] He also uses etymological links, such as the similarity of 'Scythae' to 'Getae' and of 'Gog' to 'Goth', and demonstrates a belief that a people's character is reflected in the meaning of its name, borrowing Jerome's assertion that 'Gog' means 'roof (*tectum*)'.[59] Yet he also innovated by claiming that *tectum* meant 'strength', co-opting the definition for 'Gaza' preceding Gog in Jerome's *Book of Hebrew Names* in order to suggest that the Goths were strong

[56] Isid. Hist. Goth. 66 (trans. Wolf 1999, 107).

[57] Isid. Etym. 9.2.89 (trans. Barney et al. 2006, 197).

[58] Jerome, *On Genesis* 10.2 (PL 23:935–1009, at col. 951).

[59] Jerome, *On Ezekiel* 11.38 (PL 25:25–490D, at col. 356); Jerome, *Hebrew Names* (PL 23:771–858, at cols. 831 and 837).

by their very nature.[60] This is an important adaptation, because many contemporaries, including Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome, emphasized Gog and Magog's apocalyptic role as enemies of Christendom.[61] Isidore needed to claim their antiquity without these connotations. He does so by focusing on more neutral geographical and genealogical overlaps than on character: people think both Scythians and Goths descended from Magog, and their countries were named after him.[62] No apocalypse is needed.[63]

Furthermore, Isidore implied Gothic kinship with other peoples so that the Goths could appropriate their strengths and victories. Orosius's *Histories* asserted that the Goths were savage Getae whom Alexander, Pyrrhus, and Caesar feared, bolstering the claim by including them among Scythian tribes.[64] Isidore borrowed this, mostly in Orosius's words, and invented an episode where the Goths supported Pompey against Caesar with great valour.[65] He thus makes the Goths champions of republican liberty against tyranny. Changing Pliny's and Orosius's descriptions of Parthians and Bactrians from neighbours to fellow Scythian peoples, Isidore associates the Goths with their powerful empires, implying the Goths are naturally capable of

[60] Coumert 2007, 113–14; Wolfram 1988, 29.

[61] Ambrose, De fide 2.16.137–38 (PL 16:523–698); Aug. De civ. Dei. 20.11; Jerome, *On Genesis* 10.2 (PL 23:935–1009, at cols. 950–51); Jerome, *On Ezekiel* 11.38 (PL 25:25–490D, at cols. 356–57).

[62] Isid. Etym. 9.2.27, 14.3.31; Wood 2012, 163.

[63] Palmer 2014, 39; Gautier Dalché 1985, 279–80; Bøe 2001, 184–86.

[64] Oros. Hist. 1.16.2–3, 7.24.5; Merrills 2005, 62; van Nuffelen 2012, 109–11.

[65] Isid. Hist. Goth. 3; Merrills 2005, 213.

ruling. From both Amazons and Scythians they attain the ferocity of warriors.[66] They also harness the Dacians' strength against Rome through Isidore's 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 stirpe*).'[67] Occasionally Isidore mentions a negative trait, like savageness, but he mostly highlights positive characteristics: strength, bravery, victory, antiquity, and northern hardiness. In a society where classical and biblical heritage each had value, he took advantage of the rhetorical promise of both to depict the Goths as a superior people.

Isidore's Gothic origin story supports his broader tale of the Goths' progression from barbaric outsiders to worthy insiders destined for Hispania. He borrowed heavily from his fellow Iberian Orosius, whose interpretation of contemporary conflicts as advancing God's plan to spread Christianity via the Roman Empire had made the Goths key players in the Christian story.[68] Isidore's *Recapitulation* describes the Goths' journey from 'icy peaks' across the Danube into Roman territory, recalling classical descriptions of Scythia and biblical accounts of the land of Magog.[69] But the Goths also make a journey of character, highlighted through the characteristics presented in his origin story which ultimately bolstered the Goths in Isidore's present. Once enemies of Rome who were defeated only with 'enormous struggle', they are now

[66] Isid. Etym. 9.2.62, 9.2.43–44; Wood 2013, 154–58.

[67] Isid. Etym. 9.2.90, trans. Barney et al. 2006, 197. See also Pohl and Dörler 2015, 137; Carbó García 2004, 182–85, 188, 190–91.

[68] Merrills 2005, 39–43; van Nuffelen 2012, 164; Wood 2012, 154.

[69] Isid. Hist. Goth. 66, trans. Wolf 1999, 107–08.

victorious people to be feared.[70] They soon became Christian, but of the heretical Arian sort. Isidore blames the Arian Roman emperor Valens for their heresy as well as for their rebellion, as the Goths were only 'forced to rebel' at Adrianople in 378 when Rome oppressed them 'against the tradition of their own liberty'.[71] Because Isidore had earlier claimed that the Goths supported liberty against Caesar's tyranny, the reader is primed to accept such a tradition.

Like Augustine and Orosius, Isidore contrasts the threat that Gothic kings Radagaisus and Alaric posed to Christian society, though without his predecessors' emphasis on God's plan for humanity.[72] While the former authors express relief that God chose Alaric instead of the more vicious Radagaisus to punish Rome, Isidore leaves these two threats disconnected. He describes Radagaisus as 'of Scythian stock (*genus*), dedicated to the cult of idolatry, and wild with fierce barbaric savagery', much as Orosius does, but Alaric as 'a Christian in name' and fighting with restraint.[73] He borrows Orosius's account of the Gothic soldiers during Alaric's 410 sack of Rome who escorted a nun and the relics she guarded to safety, to show their piety and respect.[74] For Isidore, the difference between the two men shows the development of the Goths toward an earthly destiny: unlike Radagaisus, Alaric's Goths transcended their Scythian ancestors by becoming Christian and civilized, and their future is not violent destruction but Christian mercy.

[70] Isid. Hist. Goth. 5, trans. Wolf 1999, 82.

[71] Isid. Hist. Goth. 7–9 (trans. Wolf 1999, 85).

[72] De civ. Dei 1.1, 1.7. 5.23; Oros. Hist. 7.37.5–9; Clark 2011, 33–36; Brown 2000, 311.

[73] Isid. Hist. Goth. 14–15 (trans. Wolf 1999, 86).

[74] Isid. Hist. Goth. 16–17.

In 589, Reccared completed the Goths' spiritual journey by converting to Catholicism and banning Arianism, 'recalling all the *populi* of the entire Gothic *gens* to the observance of the correct faith and removing the ingrained stain of their error'.[75] He soon defeated the Franks 'with the help of his newly received faith', showing conversion improving the Goths' already impressive military prowess.[76] Swinthila then defeated the Romans (Byzantines) for good in the early 620s, conquering their remaining fortresses and uniting the peninsula under Gothic, Catholic rule. Isidore's *Recapitulation* celebrates this among other examples of the Goths' mastery of peoples in Hispania: the Vandals put to flight, the Alans extinguished, the Sueves threatened with extermination, and 'Rome itself, victor over all peoples' submitting to 'the Getic triumphs'. These peoples, and even Hispania itself, now rightly served the Goths.[77]

These final lines recall the *Prologue* with which the *History* began: a panegyric praising Hispania and foreshadowing its eventual perfect union with the Goths. Following the classical genre of *encomium*, with clear parallels to Pliny's *Natural History* and Pacatus Drepanius's panegyric for Theodosius, Isidore stresses the region's exceptional fertility bestowed by its creator and personifies Hispania as both a supportive mother and the Goths' cherished bride.[78] The province is the 'sacred and always fortunate mother of princes and *gentes*' where 'the Getic *gens* is gloriously prolific'. It is thus a place worthy of such an ancient people (hence 'Getic',

[75] Isid. Hist. Goth. 52 (trans. Wolf 1999, 102).

[76] Isid. Hist. Goth. 54 (trans. Wolf 1999, 103).

[77] Isid. Hist. Goth. 67 (trans. mine).

[78] Pliny, *Natural History* 37.77 (201) (ed. Eichholz 1962); Pacatus, *Panegyric* 4.2–5 (ed. Nixon and Rodgers 1994); Rodríguez Alonso 1965, 113–19; Merrills 2005, 185–96, 227.

referring to the ancient Getae) and also of 'golden Rome, the head of all peoples' that 'rightly' desired Hispania long ago and 'betrothed' her to itself. However, Isidore writes, 'now it is the most flourishing *gens* of the Goths, who in their turn, after many victories all over the world, have eagerly seized and loved you'.[79] Isidore's rhetoric and the *topoi* he employs are borrowed directly from his ancient and late antique predecessors, but his goal is different from theirs. He did not aim to support or revive Rome, or to make the Goths into Romans; he wanted the Goths to replace the Romans in Hispania. In alluding to Rome's fading glory, Isidore transfers its superiority to the Goths as its destined Iberian heirs.[80] It is now the Gothic *gens* in charge, superseding the Roman *populus*, and Rome's own cultural and literary motifs emulated and refashioned helped it happen.[81]

As I hope this chapter has demonstrated, Isidore of Seville appropriated Roman ethnic terms, origin stories, and models of triumphant victory and strategically altered them to better reflect the Hispania he experienced and wanted to build: one ruled by Catholic Goths destined to unite the peoples under their rule in faith. He was not alone in seeking to capitalize on Roman prestige through *imitatio*, nor was ethnicity the only avenue through which to do so, as the other chapters of this volume make clear. From literature and language to law, from religious practice to art and architecture, residents of the Visigothic kingdom reinterpreted the Roman legacy to create something new. Too often such adaptations have been described as merely derivative,

[79] Isid. Hist. Goth. Prologue (trans. Wolf 1999, 79–80).

[80] Merrills 2005, 193, 198–99, 227.

[81] Wood 2012, 147–55; Wood 2013, 126–33, focusing on Isidore's *Chronicle*; McCormick 1986, 326–27.

seeking and failing to become truly Roman.[82] But this ignores the conscious choices authors made in dynamic dialogue with their neighbours, past and present, removing the authors' agency in the process. It also ignores the fact that Isidore was not trying to make the Goths 'Roman' but to manipulate the borders of Gothic identity such that all under Gothic rule, including those of Roman descent, could find a home among the Gothic *gens* divinely destined to rule Hispania. That he explicitly promotes 'Goths' rather than 'Romans' illuminates the true nature of his *imitatio*, and hopefully this look through an ethnic lens can help us see beyond assumptions of 'mere imitation' in other areas, too.

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[82] E.g., Goffart 2008, 863–64.

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