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AN UNRELIABLE WITNESS? *VITAS SANCTORUM PATRUM EMERETENSIUM* AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN VISIGOTHIC SPAIN.

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ABSTRACT

Amongst the many achievements of Peter Brown may be included the ways in which he has taught us to understand and value the testimony of the Saints Lives and other hagiographic texts of Late Antiquity that often seemed baffling to scholars of earlier generations. On the other hand, sa small number of these hagiographic texts can appear so transparently historical in the nature and details of their content, as not to seem in need of such careful interpretation. In the western Mediterranean the Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium is an outstanding example of such a work, that has been used to throw light on a range of topics, from medicine to architecture, beyond the confines of the events in later sixth century Mérida that it describes, and largely without raising any questions as to the reliability of its narrative. However, when this can be compared with that provided by other, more clearly contemporary historiographical sources, its account usually proves to be erroneous or misleading. This article reopens questions long thought closed, or which have been ignored, as to the origins, nature and purpose of the work, so as to enable the strengths and weaknesses of its evidence be better understood.

KEY WORDS: HAGIOGRAPHY, SOURCE CRITICISM, VISIGOTHIC SPAIN, MÉRIDA.

RESUMO

Entre as muitas realizações de Peter Brown podem ser incluídas as maneiras pelas quais ele nos ensinou a compreender e valorizar o testemunho das Vidas dos Santos e outros textos hagiográficos da Antiguidade Tardia que muitas vezes pareciam desconcertantes para estudiosos das gerações anteriores. Por outro lado, um pequeno número desses textos hagiográficos pode parecer tão transparentemente histórico na natureza e nos detalhes de seu conteúdo, que não parece necessitar de uma interpretação tão cuidadosa. No Mediterrâneo Ocidental, o Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium é um exemplo notável de tal trabalho, que tem sido usado para lançar luz sobre uma variedade de tópicos, da medicina à arquitetura, além dos limites dos eventos de Mérida no final do século VI que descreve em grande parte sem levantar quaisquer questões quanto à confiabilidade de sua narrativa. No entanto, quando isso pode ser comparado com o fornecido por outras fontes historiográficas mais claramente contemporâneas, seu relato geralmente se mostra errôneo ou enganoso. Este artigo reabre questões há muito pensadas encerradas, ou que foram ignoradas, quanto à origem, natureza e finalidade da obra, de forma a permitir uma melhor compreensão dos pontos fortes e fracos das suas evidências.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: HAGIOGRAFIA, CRÍTICA DE FONTE, ESPANHA VISIGODA, MÉRIDA.

Amongst the many things that the study of Late Antiquity owes to the scholarship of Peter Brown is the better understanding of the ways in which the supernatural was perceived and how it was encompassed in literary description in both Christian and pre-Christian societies in those centuries.[1] In particular, the significance of hagiographic texts, often overlooked or misunderstood by earlier generations of classicists and historians, have been re-evaluated in his published work, from the "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man" onwards.[2] His pioneering approach has led to a proper understanding of writings previously ignored, because of their apparent lack of nuggets of "hard" or useable information on historical events, named individuals or social practices.

By contrast, some hagiographic works of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (wherever the divide between them may be thought to fall) might not have seemed in need of such rescue, as they have long enjoyed scholarly enthusiasm, for their apparently containing just such helpful details. The mid-seventh century *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* (died 613) is a good case in point, with its vivid accounts of encounters between the Saint and a succession of emperors, and it has recently been recruited to help illuminate part of 'the Last Great War of Antiquity' of 603-628, fought between the East Roman Empire and Sasanian Iran.[3] In a western context of similar date, the anonymous work known as the *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium* or 'Lives of the Holy Fathers of Mérida' (henceforth VPE) has enjoyed acclaim for its evidential value to both historians and archaeologists, not least for what it seems to say about a wide range of subjects relating to the history of the Spanish city of Mérida in the late sixth and early seventh centuries.[4]

First published in 1633, by a local historian of Mérida, the trustworthiness of its evidence on both the city and the so-called Visigothic kingdom more widely has long been taken almost for granted.[5]This includes its role in the identification of archaeological sites in the city, as for example

[1] Starting not least with his phenomenally well-attended lectures in Oxford in the early 1970s on "Society and the Supernatural from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad". See Peter Brown, *A Life of Learning* (American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper 55, 2003) and Roger Collins, 'Oxford, 1968-1975: Crucible of Late Antiquity' (forthcoming).

[2] Peter Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 61 (1971), pp. 80-101.

[3] André-Jean Festugière (ed.), *Vie de Saint Théodore de Sykéon* (2 vols. Brussells, 1970); James Howard-Johnston, *The Last Great War of Antiquity* (Oxford, 2021), pp. 73-86 and 137-140.

[4] "A source of remarkable value" according to one over-enthusiastic assessment: Roger Collins, 'Mérida and Toledo, 550-585', in Edward James (ed.), *Visigothic Spain: New Approaches* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 189-219, at p. 192. See also Javier Arce, 'The City of Mérida (*Emerita*) in the Vitas Patrum Emeretensium', in Evangelos Chrysos and Ian Wood (ed.), *East and West: Modes of Communication* (Leiden, 1999), pp. 11-14; Diego Pérez Sánchez, 'Algunas consideracionessobre el ceremonial y el poder politico en la Mérida visigoda', *Studia Historica. Historia Antigua*, vol. 20 (2-002), pp. 245-266 etc.

[5] Bernabé Moreno de Vargas, *Pauli Diaconi Emeretensis Liber de vita et miraculis patrum Emeretensium* (Madrid, 1633); the main source for idem, *Historia de la Ciudad de Mérida* (Madrid, 1633). The work was used from manuscripts before then: Ambrosio de Morales, *Los Otros Dos Libros Undecimo y Duodecimo de la Coronica General de España* (Alcala de Henares, 1577), pp. 84-85.

Bishop Masona's *Xenodochium*, or pilgrim hostal cum hospital.[6]Providing in itself the material for an entire book on the history of medicine in Visigothic Mérida, as well as for numerous articles on a wide range of other topics, its status as one of the few texts able to offer a reader a window onto life in a western Mediterranean city at that time seems almost beyond question.[7] The only significant attempt to undermine the consensus that it was the work of a first-hand observer writing in the 630s, thus close in time to the events it describes, has proved largely unpersuasive, thanks to its author's wider and very controversial project of liberating Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) from responsibility for writing his well-known *Books of Dialogues*.[8]

Freed from such doubts, VPE's standing remains high, not least for the way some of its narratives can fill out the all too spare and sometimes ambiguous reports of the only near contemporary historical writings produced in the Visigothic kingdom around this time, the chronicle of John of Biclarum (c.602) and the two versions of Bishop Isidore of Seville's *Historia Gothorum* (c.615) or *De Origine Gothorum* (c.625).[9] In particular, VPE places the wider issues, at which they sometimes do little more than hint, in a more intimate, well-rounded and localised context.[10]For example, it has recently been used very effectively to suggest the existence not just of conflicts between the growth of the centralising authority of the Gothic monarchy and the traditions of local independence and cultural self-sufficiency of a great Roman city such as Mérida, but also as evidence of detectable feuds and factional alliances within the city itself.[11]

In no one area is its testimony more frequently deployed than in the matter of religious conflict between Catholics and Arians; an issue that came to a head in the second half of the reign of Leovigild (569-586), before being resolved in the opening years of that of his son Reccared I (586-601). The sources for this suffer from being either contemporary but ill-informed and prejudiced, as in the case

[6] Pedro Mateos Cruz, 'Identificación del *Xenodochium* fundado por Masona', *IV Reunió d'Arqueologia Cristiana Hispánica* (Barcelona, 1995), pp. 309-316; well-illustrated in Isaac Sastre de Diego, *Guía Arqueológica. Mérida Cristiana* (Mérida, 2017), pp. 61-69. Though this identification has more recently been called into question. See Pilar Diarte-Blasco, *Late Antique and Early Medieval Hispania: Landscapes without Strategy?* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 87-88.

[7] Blas Cuado, *La Medicina en Mérida según la Vida de los Padres Emeritenses* (*Cuadernos Emeritenses*, 25: Mérida, 2004). See also Manuel Sanabria Escudero, 'La medicina emeritense en las épocas romana y visigoda', *Revista de EstudiosExtremeños*, vol. 20 (1964), pp. 75-80 and G. Tsoucalas, K. Laios, M. Karamanou and M. Sgantzos, 'Bishop Paul of Mérida and the First Known Caesarean Section on a Living Woman', *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, vol. 32 (2015), p. 203.

[8] Francis Clark, *The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues* 2 vols. (Leiden, 1987), vol. I, pp. 131-162; also idem, *The 'Gregorian' Dialogues and the Origins of Benedictine Monasticism* (Leiden, 2003), pp. 336-360.

[9] Cristóbal Rodríguez Alonso (ed.), *Las Historias de los Godos, Vándalos y Suevos de Isidoro de Sevilla* (León, 1975), pp. 172-281.

[10] *Johannis Biclarensis Chronicon*, ed. Carmen Cardelle de Hartmann, *Corpus Christianorum series latina*, vol. CLXXIIIA (Turnhout, 2001), pp. 124*-143*.

[11] Graham Barrett, 'Empire and the Politics of Faction: Mérida and Toledo Revisited" (forthcoming), an important revisionist study.

of the notices of it given by Gregory the Great in his *Dialogues* and in the *Books of Histories* of Gregory of Tours, or being geographically closer but later in time, as with John of Biclarum and Isidore, both of whose accounts may have been influenced by other considerations.[12] So, here VPE seems, if not strictly contemporary, to be a beacon of clarity. The intimacy of observing this kingdom-wide confrontation being played out in the context of a single city and between a group of named individuals is unmatched in any other source, and thus seems to provide a new dimension to our understanding of both what actually occurred and what was at stake.

The high evidential value accorded to the testimony of VPE in this and other areas has diverted attention from some of the problems raised by the state of the text in its present form. One of the most obvious of these, if little discussed, is the peculiar nature of its structure. In the way in which it is found in the few extant manuscripts, the VPE is divided into five books, the first three of which are considerably shorter than the remaining two.[13] They recount three miraculous events that occurred in the vicinity of Mérida, which are explicitly intended to parallel the far more numerous stories of a similar character collected by Gregory the Great in his *Dialogues* of 593.[14] The fourth and fifth books of the VPE, on the other hand, describe events from the pontificates of five of the city's bishops, from Paul and his supposed nephew Fidelis to Masona, Innocent, and Renovatus.[15] The fourth book is devoted to the first two of them, while the fifth, the longest of all, is almost entirely given over to the bishopric of Masona, with only very brief mention made of his two immediate successors at the very end of the book.

While no explicit chronology is ever given in the VPE, approximate dates for some of the five episcopal tenures have been deduced, in part from the attestation by two of them of conciliar acts from 589 onwards. VPE itself is the only evidence for the existence of both Paul and Fidelis, and even the names of their predecessors as bishops of Mérida since the mid-fifth century are entirely

[12] Gregory the Great only includes Hermenegild, in a sensationalist account that does not tally with the prosaic details of John of Biclarum's chronicle: *Libri* Dialogorum III. xxxi, Adalbert de Vogüé (ed.), *Grégoire le Grand, Dialogues* (3 vols. Paris, 1978-1980), vol. II (1979), pp. 384-390. Gregory of Tours, who met Arian envoys from Spain on their way to and from Frankish courts, also in practice confines himself to the revolt of Hermenegild. See Roger Collins, 'Gregory of Tours and Spain', in Alexander Callendar Murray (ed.), *A Companion to Gregory of Tours* (Leiden, 2015), pp. 498-515. For Isidoran historiography see Jamie Wood, *The Politics of Identity in Visigothic Spain. Religion and Power in the Histories of Isidore of Seville* (Leiden, 2012).

[13] For the MSS see Antonio Maya Sánchez (ed.), *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium, Corpus Christianorum series Latina*, vol. CXVI (Turnhout, 1992), pp. X-XXXI.

[14] VPE, *praefatio*, ed. Garvin, p. 136; ed. Maya Sánchez, pp. 3-5.

[15] Barrett, 'Empire and Politics of Faction' (forthcoming) raises very pertinent doubts about the relationship.

unknown, other than for a Bishop Zeno, who received a letter from Pope Felix III (483-592).[16]In his Chronicle, John of Biclarum mentions Masona in his entry equivalent to the year 573. While several of his annal entries have been shown to have become internally misplaced, possibly in the course of the work's transmission, the variations are not extreme and a commencement of Masona's episcopate in the early 570s seems reasonable.[17]

The extent of those of Paul and Fidelis, who preceded him, estimated at about thirty years for both, cannot be other than guesswork. At the other end chronologically, Renovatus's successor Stephen was clearly in post by 633, when he signed the acts of the Fourth Council of Toledo. Based on these clues of uneven worth, the historical coverage of Books Four and Five of VPE is of a period from roughly 540 to c.630. Within that, attention is particularly focussed on the conflict over Arianism under Leovigild and Reccared I.Additionally, one of the three miracle tales in the first part of the work is explicitly set in the reign of Leovigild.

The general view on VPE's date of composition also derives from these same indicators, and in particular the lack of mention of Bishop Renovatus's successor, Stephen. First attested in 633, he himself had been replaced by (H)orontius by either 635 or 638.[18] From the time of the second editor of VPE, Tamayo de Vargas (c.1589-1641) onwards, it has been thought that the work was written during the period of office of bishop Stephen, and thus in the early 630s.[19] The logic behind this is that it would not have been appropriate to include him if he were still living, and equally so to exclude him if he had died prior to the completion of the text.[20] This and similar arguments depend not least upon the extant version of the text still having the form and the dimensions its author originally intended. This is by no means assured.

The disparity in the scale and in the nature of the content of the first three books of VPE when compared with the final two has aroused comment, but not been allowed until recently to cast doubt on the integrity of the work as a whole. An intriguing suggestion, newly made, would see the VPE

[16] He also features in an inscription recording the repair of the city's bridge over the Guadiana, along with a Count Salla; see José Vives, *Inscripciones cristianas de la España romana y visigótica* (2ndedn., Barcelona, 1969), no. 363, pp. 126-127. See also Henrique Flórez, *España Sagrada*, vol. XIII (Madrid, 1756), pp. 165-176, who did not know of Zeno.

[17] Johannis Biclarensis Chronicon, 30, ed. Cardelle de Hartman, p. 65. For the chronological problems see Roger Collins, 'An historical commentary on Johannis Biclarensis *Chronicon*, ibid., pp. 110-148 gives several examples.

[18] The foundation inscription of the church at Ibahernando, near Mérida, may refer to a Bishop Orontius and to the year 635. Horontius, bishop of Mérida, certainly signed the Acts of VI Toledo of 638. See García Moreno, *Prosopografía*, no 440, pp. 171-172.

[19] Tomás Tamayo de Vargas, P*auli Diaconi Emeretensis Liber de vita et miraculis partum Emeretensium* (Antwerp, 1638).

[20] Maya Sánchez (ed), VPE, pp. LV-LVI; Garvin (ed.), VPE, pp. 1-6. See also Aquilino Camacho Macías, *El Libro de las Vidas de los Santos Padres de Mérida* (Mérida, 1988), pp. 29-30.

in its present form as the later amalgamation of two quite separate works from two different authors.[21] This could explain the contrasts in size and purpose between the two components, which would thus represent fragments of once larger and more coherent works, not very artfully combined to create a hybrid. While this does not necessarily challenge the argument for putting composition of the text of the present books Four and Five in the 630s, it does imply that the form in which we now have the work is the product of some later and much less easily determined date.

Such an argument may go further than some, including the most recent editor of the text and similarly the creator of its latest translation into Spanish, are prepared to accept, even if it does address an anomalous feature of the VPE that is largely overlooked.[22] However, while there are good structural grounds for suspecting that the work in its present form may not have originated as a single composition, stylistic evidence, including some distinctive and idiosyncratic features, seems to point to all or most parts of it as having been written by the same author. So, it may represent all that survive of two separate works of identical authorship, fused together at a later point in time, and with a non-authorial five book structure then imposed upon the composite text. The possibility of some textual interpolation at this time must also be allowed.

There has been a tendency among those scholars who have used the testimony of the VPE for historical and archaeological purposes to ignore the generic disjunction between what are here called the two parts, or Books One to Three on the one hand and Books Four and Five on the other. This may have been further encouraged by the presence of references to the reign of Leovigild in both. However, the authorial intent behind the first three books is made explicit in a short preface, which announces his (or her?) intention of recording Spanish examples of the numerous miraculous interventions reported by Pope Gregory in his *Dialogues*.[23] On the other hand, such miracle stories are almost entirely lacking in Books Four and Five, beyond a supernatural chastisement of King Leovigild by Eulalia, the patron saint of Mérida, which is largely incidental to the narrative.[24]

At the simplest level, it is hard to imagine an author openly setting himself the kind of task described in the preface, while knowing he only possessed three suitable stories to include in his book. Even assuming this were to be the case, why would he switch genre to a virtually miracle-free episcopal history while having explicitly compared his work to that of Gregory?So, it is hard to resist

[21] Graham Barrett, 'Empire and Politics of Faction' (forthcoming).

[22] VPE, ed. Maya Sánchez, p. LV; Isabel Velázquez Soriano, *Vidas de los Santos Padres de Mérida. Introducción, traducción y notas* (Madrid, 2008), pp. 11-13.

[23] VPE *praef*., ed. Garvin, p. 136; ed. Maya Sánchez, pp. 3-5.

[24] VPE V. viii. 3, ed. Garvin, pp. 222-224; ed. Maya Sánchez, p. 74.

the view that we are faced with two different kinds of book: one a collection of miraculous tales and the other an episcopal history, focusing on the role of Saint Eulalia as the patron of the city and of its bishops. It is hard to imagine that the author of the VPE, whose literary skills are quite apparent in the individual parts of the text, was also so poor a writer as to have concocted the very unsatisfactory and generically hybrid structure of his work as it stands. While the influence of Gregory's Dialogues on Books One to Three is explicit, no attempt has been made to seek a source for or parallel to the local episcopal history of Books Four and Five.

Almost all other early examples of the genre of *Gesta Episcoporum*are of Carolingian origin, dating from 784 and after. The only exception, which was also the model for virtually all of them, is the papal *Liber Pontificalis*, the first version of which dates to c. 540.[25] Its entries on successive popes tend to be briefer and more factual than the second part of VPE, recording papal places and dates of burial, synods held, decisions made, building projects undertaken, numbers of ordinations conducted, and other kinds of statistical information, with only short references to contemporary events. However, some of the last of the pontifical *vitae* in the mid-sixth century version are longer and include more detailed descriptions, including in the case of Pope Agapitus (535-536) an account with dialogue of a confrontation between him and the emperor Justinian in Constantinople in a theological debate. In it Agapitus is made to compare Justinian with the persecuting emperor Diocletian, openly refusing to yield to his threats and defying him to his face.[26] So, it is quite conceivable that the author of VPE, like his Carolingian successors, was influenced by the *Liber Pontificalis*, both in terms of the overall conception of his work and, from specific parts of it, the way he constructed some of his narrative.[27]

An examination of the manuscript tradition is a precondition for the further pursuit of this hypothesis, and for a clearer chronology for the history of the formation of the work in its present form. Only found in a small number of codices, in either complete or partial form, the VPE was first edited in the seventeenth century, not very expertly and based on all too few of them.[28]In 1946the first modern critical edition appeared, in a doctoral thesis for the Catholic University of America. Its editor, Joseph N. Garvin C.S.C., the first Assistant Director of the Medieval Institute of the University

[25] Michel Sot, *Gesta Episcoporum, gesta abbatum* (*Typologie des Sources du Moyen Age Occidental*, vol. 37, Turnhout, 1981, pp. 7-8, 32-41.

[26] *Liber Pontificalis* LVIIII, ed. Louis Duchesne, *Le Liber Pontificalis. Texte, introduction et commentaire* (2 vols., Paris, 1955), vol. I, pp. 287-289.

[27] It must bead mitted that no other evidence exists for knowledge of the *Liber Pontifalis* in Spain in the early medieval centuries.

[28] For the *editio princeps* by Bernabé Moreno de Vargas (1576/7-1648) see note 5 above; for an assessment: VPE, ed. Maya Sánchez, pp. LIX-LXI.

of Notre Dame, was constrained by the difficulties of the time, in the access he was able to gain to the manuscripts, mostly but not exclusively to be found in Spain.[29] Importantly, however, his edition, which is accompanied by a substantial linguistic and literary commentary, was the first to recognise the existence of two distinct versions of the text.

Represented by only three manuscripts, this second form of the text was clearly not of the original author's making, but it may represent a reaction to the problem of the contents mentioned above. Whoever was responsible took several of the miracle stories from the *Vita Fructuosi*, the life of the monastic founder Fructuosus, bishop of Braga (653/6 to pre-675), and inserted them in blocks into the VPE after the three original tales and before the two books devoted to the bishops of Mérida.[30] The details of the insertions and the composition of the manuscripts containing this secondary version are fully described in the authoritative edition of the VPE made for the *Corpus Christianorum* series by Antonio Maya Sánchez in 1992.[31]It should be noted that problems with the dating and manuscript tradition of the *Vita Fructuosi* in general limits use as a chronological indicator for this revised form of the VPE.[32]

In addition to the sections taken from the *Vita Fructuosi* and inserted into the original text, a prefatory list of contents shows that this second version also once included some additional items that were placed at the very end of the work, following the conclusion of Book Five.[33] These included a *Confessi*o written by a Deacon Paul and addressed to a Bishop Festus, who may have been the bishop of Mérida of that name sometime between 666 and 681.[34]Its existence is established by the list, but the *Confessio* itself has not survived, as of the three manuscripts containing the expanded version, none is now complete.[35]

The earliest of the manuscripts containing the original or un-interpolated version has been dated to the tenth century, which is also the period of the first possible mention of the text in an independent context. This is in a somewhat problematic letter sent by king Alfonso III of the Asturias (866-910) to the canons of St. Martin's church in Tours, which is dated to 906.[36] In it the king seeks

[29] Joseph N. Garvin (ed.), *The Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium. Text and Translation, with Introduction and Commentary* (Washington D.C. 1946), pp. 12-23. Garvin's subsequent academic career was mainly devoted to the study of medieval philosophical texts of later centuries.

[30] VPE, ed. Maya Sánchez, pp. LXXIX-XCV; on Fructuosus see García Moreno, *Prosopografía*, no. 383, pp. 151-153.

[31] See note 13 above.

[32] Manuel C. Díaz y *Díaz, La Vida de San Fructuoso de Braga. Estudio y edición crítica* (Braga, 1974, pp. 13-23.

[33] VPE, ed. Maya Sánchez, pp. XXXI-XLIII and LV-LVII.

[34] García Moreno, Prosopografía, no. 442, p. 172.

[35] VPE, ed. Maya Sánchez, pp. XXXIII-XLI and L-LIV.

[36] A.C. Floriano (ed.), *Diplomática española del period Astur* (2 vols., Oviedo, 1949-1951), vol. II, no. 185, pp. 339-342.

to acquire an imperial crown that that had been presented to the church by one of the Carolingian rulers in the preceding century. He offers to send in return: *multorum virorum illustrium vitam virtutes et mirabilia ut pote Emeretensium evidenter ac sapienter conscriptas habemus quae, utre moror in archivis vestris non habentur*.[37]

Doubt has been cast on the authenticity of this letter, both because of its unusual contents and the nature of the communication involved, between the Asturias and the Loire valley.[38] However, the manuscript tradition of the text, the lack of any obvious reason for its being forged, the good evidence for long term links between the two regions, and the correctness of the contemporary references in the text all combine to promote trust in its overall reliability, even if it were subject to some later changes. [39] This would therefore seem to establish that a version of the VPE was known in the Asturian kingdom by at least the beginning of the tenth century. At some later date it may have been the presence of VPE in other, less easily determined locations, that inspired the writing of the Pseudo-Isidoran letters supposedly addressed to Bishop Masona, Duke Claudius and Archdeacon Redemptus, all of whom feature in its text and the last of them exclusively so.[40]

It is also possible that the version of VPE referred to by Alfonso III in 906 was the second form of the text, with the interpolations taken from the *Vita Fructuosi*. The earliest manuscript containing this is dated to the 11thcentury and is held in the *Bibliothèque municipale* of Evreux in Normandy.[41] Up to the French Revolution it had been owned by the Norman abbey of Notre-Dame de Lyre.[42] It is the only codex containing either version of the VPE that was written outside of the Iberian Peninsula. The promise of a copy of the text for St Martin, Tours, is the only known context in which it might have found its way to north-western France. Admittedly, Notre-Dame de Lyre was not founded until 1042.[43]Therefore, some prior circulation in the Loire/Normandy region would have to be imagined; one that has left no other trace of itself. So, this can only remain as an intriguing speculation.

[37] Ibid., p. 341. It is even conceivable that he is referring to a complete version of our 'Part One', and not VPE in its present state.

[38] See the discussion in ibid., pp. 342-345.

[39] Roger Collins, 'El Reino de Asturias en el Europa del siglos VIII al X', in Javier Rodríguez Muñoz (ed.), *Nuevas Visiones del Reino de Asturias* (Oviedo, 2020), pp. 11-25, at pp. 15-16.

[40] These three Pseudo-Isidoran letters, unlike some of the others, have not been extensively studied: Faustino Arévalo (ed.), *Sancti Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Opera Omnia*, vol. VI (Rome, 1802), pp. 563-573; also, Gordon B. Ford Jr. (tr.), *The Letters of St. Isidore of Seville* (2ndedn., Amsterdam, 1970), nos. IV, VI, and VII, pp. 22-27 and 30-43.

[41] Evreux Bibliothèque Municipale, MS latin 30, ff. 83r-118v; see VPE, ed. Maya Sánchez, pp. XVI-XVII and notes 21 and 22.

[42] Geneviève Nortier, *Les bibliothèques médiévales des abbayes bénédictines de Normandie* (Paris 1971), pp. 124-142.

[43] Charles Guéry, *Histoire de l'Abbaye de Lyre* (Evreux, 1917), pp. 3-39, and pp. 323-402 for the monastic library.

The relationship between the dozen surviving manuscripts of both text forms of the VPE have been carefully deduced and clearly expounded in the *Corpus Christianorum* edition.[44] The codices themselves are dated on palaeographic and other grounds to being no earlier than the tenth century, and this, as just mentioned, also encompasses the letter of Alfonso III to Tours of 906. The manuscript tradition reveals itself as possessed of considerable complexity. This includes the consequences of a further deduction from the editor, derived from the presence of common errors in manuscripts of the interpolated version and in some of those containing the original or un-interpolated form of the text. This indicates the existence of at least another stage in the transmission, following authorial composition but prior to the point at which the divide between the two versions took place.[45]

What, however, the codicological and textual evidence cannot provide is any evidence as to when the VPE was originally written, either as a single work, close to its present form, or as two separate ones, parts of which were subsequently joined together. Maya Sánchez, understandably, relies on the *a priori* deductions previously used to suggest a point of origin in the mid-630s, and suggests that the evidence that the *Confessio* of Paul to Bishop Festus once formed an integral part of the interpolated version implies that the latter was created in the 670s.[46]

If these deductions be accepted, *nemo contradicente*, then the authority of the information contained in the VPE, removed by roughly two generations from the period on which it mainly focuses may be considered strong, though not overwhelmingly so. Yet there are other problems with it that have been largely ignored that might lead us to question its fidelity.

Firstly, the text needs to be interrogated for any clues it may provide about its author. That there is a single author, whether the work in its present form derives from fragments of two previously separate components, seems established by generally strong stylistic consistency and the presence of idiosyncratic features common to both Books One to Three and Four to Five. Amongst the latter, for example, are the peculiar distinction between and juxtaposition of 'the Orthodox' and 'the Catholics'.[47]

[44] VPE, ed. Maya Sánchez, pp. XLIII-LVIII.

[45] Ibid., p. LI

[46] VPE, ed Maya Sánchez, pp. LV-LVI

[47] *Virorum ortodoxorum maximeque catholicorum prorsus*: VPE, *praefatio*, line 1, ed. Garvin, p. 136; ed Maya Sánchez, p. 3, and *vir denique orthodoxus et per omnia catholicus*: VPE V. ix, ed. Garvin, p. 230; ed. Maya Sánchez, p. 79. See Garvin p. 260 for useful commentary.

Authorial self-presentation in the narrative only occurs at one point, which is in Book One, the story of a boy called Augustus and his celestial vision, prior to his death.[48]The anonymous author hears the vision directly from the sick boy. He describes himself as a deacon and states that he recounted what he had heard from Augustus 'to my lord abbot'.[49] The physical context is the *Domus Sanctae Eulaliae*, the church erected on the site of the martyr's burial, which was also the residence of a monastic community, to which it may be assumed the author belonged.[50]No chronological indicators are given at any point in this narrative, though it is worth noting that archaeological evidence suggests the basilica of St. Eulalia was destroyed at some point in the ninth century.[51]

Book Two on the other hand starts with the statement that what it describes occurred 'very many years before our time'.[52] The story itself is about a gluttonous monk of the monastery of Cauliana, located in the countryside near Mérida and possibly to be identified with site of a ruined chapel of fifteenth century date known as the Ermita de Cubillana.[53] The anonymous monk is eventually led to see the error of his ways, prior to an exemplary death in which he foresaw himself admitted to Heaven by saints Peter, Paul and Laurence. A central role in the narrative is played by the then abbot, 'the venerable Renovatus of pious memory, later a famous bishop of Mérida'.[54] The episcopate of Renovatus, the second successor to Masona, is not capable of precise dating, as he is not attested as signatory to any council. His successor Stephen was certainly in office by 633, and his predecessor Innocent was still occupying the see in 610.[55]

This raises a problem for the normally accepted date for the first composition of the VPE. As this is generally assigned to the pontificate of Stephen in the 630s, it is hard to see how a story relating to his predecessor Renovatus, even prior to his episcopate, can be said to have occurred 'very many

[48] This is an unusual personal name for Visigothic Spain, but two officials bearing it appear in the letters of Gregory the Great: J.R. Martindale (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. IIIA (Cambridge, 1992), p. 155.

[49] *Ego indignus et omnium peccatorum primus, levitaChrsti.…sanctissimo viro domno et abbati meo*: VPE I, ed. Garvin, p. 144; ed. Maya Sánchez, p. 12. See Ana Suárez Fernández, 'Un relato de fantasmas hispano visigodo: el caso de pequeño Augusto en las *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium'*, *Estudios Medievales Hispánicos*, vol. 5 (2016), pp. 263-290.

[50] Pedro Mateos Cruz, *La Basilica de Santa Eulalia de Mérida. Arqueología y urbanismo. (Anejos de Archivo Español de Arqueología, vol.* XIX, Madrid, 1999) and *Extremadura arqueológica III: Jornadas sobre Santa Eulalia de Mérida* (Badajoz, 1992).

[51] Pedro Mateos Cruz, *La Basílica de Santa Eulalia de Mérida. Arqueología y urbanismo* (*Anejos de ArchivoEspañol de Arqueología*, vol. XIX, Madrid, 1999), p. 201.

[52] VPE II, line 1: ed. Garvin, p. 146; ed. Maya Sánchez, p. 14: *ante nossatisplurimosannos…*

[53] Vicente Navarro del Castillo, 'El Monastério visigótico de Cauliana, hoy ermita de Santa María de Cubillana', *Revista de studios extremeños*, vol. 20 (1964), pp. 513-531.

[54] VPE II. The translation is that of Garvin, p. 146. The identification of the bishop as the former abbot is also stated in VPE V. xiv, ed. Garvin, p. 254; ed. Maya Sánchez, p. 100. See Luís A. García Moreno, *Prosopografía del reino visigodo de Toledo* (Salamanca, 1974), no. 438. p. 171.

[55] Ibid. no 439, p. 171 and no 437, p. 170.

years ago'. In addition, if the author was writing no more than five years after the death of Renovatus, it is difficult to understand why he is referred to in the text of Book Two as if its readers would never have heard of him. Furthermore, as Renovatus is described as *mirificus* in Book Two, it is surprising that he is not given a much more substantial treatment when his episcopate is mentioned in just five sentences at the end of Book Five.[56]

Even allowing from some difference in perspective on the passage of time, the story of the gluttonous monk of Cauliana does not easily fit with a date of composition of the VPE in the 630s. This is not the only point at which chronological doubts can be raised. Even in the Preface, Gregory the Great (d. 604) is depicted as living at what feels like a greater distance in time from our author's 'now' than a date in the 630s might warrant. The reference to the pope as being *inflammatus paracliti carismate Spiritus* also evokes the image of him being inspired by the Holy Spirit, usually depicted iconographic ally as a dove sitting on his shoulder and whispering into his ear.[57] This widely attested imagery derives from various later *Vitae* of the pope, rather than from anything in his own writings or in contemporary accounts of him. It is first found in the *Liber Beati et Laudabilis Viri Gregorii Papae Urbis Romae,* written by an anonymous monk of the Northumbrian abbey of Whitby around 714.[58]This story, along with others taken from this Whitby Life, was interpolated into the text of a life of Gregory that has been attributed to the Lombard historian Paul the Deacon (d. c. 798), while an alternative version of it was included in another life of the pope, that was written by John the Deacon in Rome during the pontificate of John VIII (872-882). This is not to suggest that the author of the VPE was directly inspired by the Whitby *Life of Gregory*, but the emergence and spread of this tale and the view of the pope it implies suggest a date later than the 630s when Gregory's reputation was only starting to establish itself in Rome.[59]

The third book of the VPE raises similar questions about its chronology and its implications for the question of the work's compositional history. The author begins his brief account of the fate of the African hermit Nanctus, who was established in an estate near Mérida by king Leovigild (569-586), with the surprising statements that "While trying to tell of recent events, we have omitted the deeds of earlier times. Many speak of how, many cycles of years ago, in the times of Leovigild, king

[56] VPE V. xiv. 4, ed. Garvin, pp. 254-256; ed. Maya Sánchez, pp. 100-101.

[57] VPE praef., ed. Garvin, p. 136; ed. Maya Sánchez, p. 4 (his text quoted here).

[58] *Vita Gregorii*, ch. 26, ed. Bertram Colgrave ,*The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great* (Kansas, 1968, reprinted Cambridge, 1985), pp. 120, 122; see also pp. 45-49 for the dating, and pp. 51 and 58 on the story of the dove.

[59] Peter A. B. Llewellyn, 'The Roman Church in the Seventh Century: The Legacy of Gregory I', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 25 (1974), pp. 363-380.

of the Visigoths…"[60] Firstly, in the text in its present form he had only so far included only one unquestionably recent event in his narrative, the vision and ensuing death of the boy Augustus. His only other story, that of the gluttonous monk of Cauliana, had, like the one he was starting to recount about abbot Nanctus, been located "many years ago".[61] Again, it is worth remembering that the authorial intention stated in the preface was to show that "in Mérida in our own times such things had taken place" as had been described by pope Gregory in his *Books of Dialogues*.[62] So, unless the author was entirely unaware of what he was writing, two of his three miracle stories, supposedly drawn from "Mérida in our own times" were taken from what in his perspective was a distant past.

This is not the only surprising feature of the opening lines of Book Three. The entitling of Leovigild as "king of the Visigoths" is another and perhaps greater one. This is but one anachronistic feature in his account of the events of the later sixth century that he describes in much greater detail in Books Four and Five. Although used by Gregory the Great and others writing outside of the Iberian Peninsula, the term 'Visigoths' does not appear in contemporary Hispanic sources.[63] From the later sixth century a new Gothic identity was forged for both the kingdom and its social elite, irrespective of their family origins, as represented in such phrases as *gens et patria Gothorum.*[64] Only after the Arab conquest of 711, when not just a political but also an ideological gulf had been created between the now defunct Kingdom of the Goths and its Christian successor states in the north of the peninsula did the name of Visigoth become common in Hispanic texts, as in the entitling of the law code as *Lex* or *Leges Visigothorum.*[65] The standard modern practice of calling the kingdom that came to an end in 711 that of the Visigoths is convenient, in distinguishing it from the (Ostro) Gothic kingdom in Italy, but it distorts the realities of the period, and has led to a misleading over-emphasis on supposed ethnic and cultural distinctions between a 'Visigothic' ruling class and a Hispano-Roman subject population nearly two hundred years after the former's arrival in the Iberian Peninsula.

The author of VPE only uses the word in reference to king Leovigild. Thus, when he mentions the future monarch Witteric (603-610) he gives him the title of *Rex Gotorum*. Three of the bishops

[60] VPE. III, ed. Garvin, pp. 154 and 156; ed. Maya Sánchez, p. 21. See Alexandra Chavarría Arnau, 'Monasterios, campesinos y v*illae* en la Hispania visigoda: la tragic historia del abad Nancto', in Catherine Balmelie, Pierre Chevalier and Gisela Ripoll (ed.), *Mélanges d'Antiquité tardive. Studia in honorem Noel Duval* (Turnhout, 2004), pp. 114-125.

[61] VPE III: *ante multa iam plurima curricula annorum*, ed. Maya Sánchez, p. 21.

[62] Ibid. *praef*, quoting Garvin's translation, p. 137.

[63] Suzanne Teillet, *Des Wisigoths au nation Gothique* (Paris, 1984), pp. 9-10 and n. 44.

[64] See most recently Santiago *Castellanos, The Visigothic Kingdom in Iberia: Construction and Invention* (Philadelphia, 2020), pp. 83-114.

[65] Collins, 'Reino de Asturias' on the break between the Gothic kingdom and its ideological reconstruction in the late ninth century.

of Mérida he includes in Book Five are also said to be Goths: two are Catholic and are described as being Gothic 'by birth' or 'by nation'.[66]The third is Masona's Arian rival, bishop Sunna. Quite what is meant by these statements about ethnic origin cannot be known, as no other details of the family backgrounds are preserved. Were they born into families with nothing but a 'Gothic' heritage, mixed as that was from its origins in the late fourth century Balkans onwards?[67] This question is especially relevant in the case of Masona (or its variant Mausona), as his name was neither Gothic nor Roman but Berber, in other words indigenous North African.[68] In the light of the evidence for substantial migrations from North Africa into the Iberian Peninsula from the second half of the sixth century onwards, this is by no means surprising. But it does raise the questions of exactly what the author of the VPE meant by describing Masona as a Goth and how reliable his evidence for so doing might have been.

In calling Leovigild *Rex Visegothorum* or the king of the Visigoths in both Books Three and Five, our author might have been borrowing the usage of Gregory the Great, from whose *Dialogues* he takes numerous unacknowledged quotations.[69]On the other hand, the unanimous presentation of the *regnum Gothorum* as the sole legitimate political authority in the peninsula in the historical writings of John of Biclarum and Isidore of Seville, and in both conciliar acts and secular laws, makes the author of the VPE's way of referring to Leovigild surprising in the context in the 630s.

However, the author's image of Leovigild in Book Five is at best fanciful, and it is also at variance with the positive way in which he is depicted as both patron and potential avenger of the Catholic hermit Nanctus in Book Three; here too he is described as *rex Visegothorum*. Before addressing this issue further, it is also worth noting that several of the other statements he makes about the events of the episcopate of Masona (570s – c.600) can be shown to be erroneous or misleading in strictly factual terms.

For example, a certain Claudius is described as *Dux Emeretensis civitatis.* The title of dux was, however, that of a military official at the provincial not the urban level, and we know from the chronicle of John of Biclarum that Claudius was the Dux ('Duke') of Lusitania.[70]He features in the

[66] VPE V ii and xiv, ed. Garvin, pp. 190 and 254; ed. Maya Sánchez, pp. 48 and 100.

[67] Suzanne Teillet, *Des Goths à la nation gothique* (Paris, 1984), pp. 503-536; also, Manuel Koch, *Ethnische Identitätim Entstehungsprozess des spanischen Westgotenreiches* (Berlin, 2012), pp. 217-404.

[68] Collins, 'Masona, Bishop of Merida' (*Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, forthcoming); Interestingly, the name of his replacement as bishop, Nepopis, would seem to be Egyptian.

[69] For example, in describing the conversion 'of the Visigoths' to Catholicism under the rule of Reccared: VPE V. ix, ed. Garvin, p. 230; ed. Maya Sánchez, p. 79; ibid. pp. 108-109 lists all the borrowings from the *Dialogues*.

[70] Iohannis Biclarensis Chronicon, 90, ed. Carmen Cardelle de Hartmann, CCSL vol. CLXXIII A, p. 80

narrative of the VPE as the bishop's ally, and like him is the subject of a planned assassination attempt, on the part of a group of Gothic Counts in league with the Arian bishop of Mérida, Sunna. In John's chronicle, however, Sunna is presented, together with Segga, probably a Gothic official, as the ringleaders in a conspiracy against king Reccared in 587.[71]It is not impossible that this intended revolt may have included the elimination of Masona, but the scale and focus of the events described in the two narratives are entirely different.

Such obvious inaccuracies as the descriptions of Claudius as *Dux Civitatis Emeretensis* and of Leovigild as *Rex Visegothorum* might be thought to undermine our witness's credibility or could not unfairly be used to suggest that the author was writing in a period later than that of the Gothic kingdom, in other words after 711, and thus be unfamiliar with some of its institutional terminology. On the other hand, there are no grounds for requiring the writer of a work of hagiography to share the same literary principles as might be expressed by an historian. Nor was consistency a necessary virtue. It may be the literary influence of Gregory the Great mattered more to the author than the contemporary political ideology of the new forged Gothic kingdom. Similarly, the association of the Dux Claudius with the city of Mérida rather than with the province of which it was the administrative centre may have seemed more important to him than using the duke's correct title.

The deliberate focus on the city and its patron saint could explain the very narrow perspective of our author when it comes to describing political events beyond his own immediate concern. Also, if the idea that the text as we have it consists of fragments of two once separate works is correct, then we have the explanatory preface to the first of them but lack any equivalent for the second. So, no comparable statement of intent exists for the second part.

Whatever the truth of that, the author's presentation of the events following the death of Leovigild in 586, VPE is almost entirely centred on Mérida, and he gives no indication of the wider dimensions of Sunna and Segga's conspiracy, thereby also suggesting lack of knowledge of John's chronicle. No hint of any influence of it or of the historical works of Isidore of Seville can be found in VPE.[72]However, our author's perspective was not always localised: a little later in Book Five he includes a brief account of another rising, in the province of Narbonensis, which was led by two Gothic counts and an Arian bishop of unidentified see called Athalocus, and involved an invasion by Frankish forces.[73]No mention of these names are to be found in John's chronicle, though the Frankish

[71] Ibid, 87, p. 79.

[72] Also, John mentions a *Johannes presbyter ecclesie Emeritensis* in an annal for 577, who does not feature in VPE: *Johannis Biclarensis Chronicon*, 51, ed. Cardelle de Hartmann, p. 70.

[73] VPE V. xii, ed. Garvin, p. 246; ed. Maya Sánchez, p. 92-93.

incursion is probably to be identified with the one he dates to 588 and which he describes as being decisively defeated by Duke Claudius of Lusitania at Carcassonne.[74] For John this is purely a Frankish invasion, instigated by King Guntramn and led by his Duke Boso, with no suggestion of collaborators existing amongst the Gothic elite.

It is with the account of Leovigild's face to face encounters with Masona in Toledo, which form the centrepiece of the narrative in Book Five that especial difficulty lies. Its most extraordinary feature is that some of this episode is taken verbatim but without acknowledgement from the *Vita Desiderii*, whose authorship is attributed to the Gothic king Sisebut (611/12-619/21).[75] Surviving only in four sixteenth and seventeenth century copies of a lost medieval exemplar (10th/11th centuries?), this life of Bishop Desiderius of Vienne (595-601/2), who was murdered, supposedly on the orders of the Frankish king Theuderic II (595-613) and his grandmother Brunechildis, is a an unexpected literary product for the monarch of another kingdom, and even if it were intended as some kind of propaganda against his Frankish opponents, there is no evidence of its ever circulating in Francia.[76] Its attribution to Sisebut, known also as the author of astronomical verses, depends on trusting the manuscript heading, but the surprising nature of this gives it greater rather than less probability, though it can never be more than that.

Use of this *Vita* by the author of the VPE is the only other testimony to its existence. The passages borrowed are almost entirely descriptive of the appearance and behaviour of those being negatively depicted, mainly king Leovigild but also the Sunna, the Arian bishop of Mérida. They all contain invective of an extreme kind mixed with physical stereotyping, as in the depiction of the bishop as "a supporter of wicked doctrine, a baleful and harsh featured man: his brow was wild, his eyes savage, his aspect hateful, his movements horrifying; he was sinister in mind, depraved in character, of lying tongue and obscene speech, turgid on the outside, empty on the inside….devoid of all virtue internally, deformed both within and without, lacking in goodness, abounding in evil, notorious for his crimes, volunteering himself for perpetual death".[77] In his 1946 edition Garvin suggested that in general such passages were inspired by martyr narratives, found in numerous early

[74] VPE V. xii, ed. Garvin, p. 246.

[75] *Vita vel Passio Sancti Desideriia Sisebuto Rege Composita*, ed. Juan Gil, *Miscellanea Wisigothica* (Seville, 1972), pp. 53-68; see also José Carlos Martín Iglesias and Salvador Iranzu Abellán, 'Dos nuevos fragmentos manuscritos del S. XI de la *Vita vel Passio S. Desiderii* de Sisebuto de Toledo (612-621): transcripción y estudio, *Analecta Bollandiana*, vol. 138 (2020), pp. 338-367. The uncertainty over dates reflects different traditions about the length of reign of his son Reccared II, which range from two months to nearly two years; see Roger Collins, *Visigothic Spain, 409-711* (Maldon MA, 2004), pp. 76-77.

[76] Jacques Fontaine, 'King Sisebut's Vita Desiderii and the Political Function of Visigothic Hagiography', in Edward James (ed.), *Visigothic Spain: New Approaches* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 93-129.

[77] VPE V. v, ed. and trans. (here modified) by Garvin, pp. 200-203.

Spanish liturgical Passions, describing the verbal exchanges between captive Christians and the Roman judges or other officials before whom they were being tried. In a more recent study this has been confirmed and more fully documented by Antonio Maya Sánchez.[78]Our author's use of the text of the *Vita Desiderii* as a literary model and source, instead of borrowing directly from one of many *Passiones,* which would include that of St. Eulalia herself, may be inspired by its being the literary depiction of such an encounter between a Christian king and a bishop.

The theme of martyrdom and the prominent place it held in the historical memory of the Spanish church, like its North African counterpart, needs to be understood as a central ideological component of the Arian Catholic conflict in the Iberian Peninsula in the later sixth century. In practice, the Diocletianic persecution in the western provinces of the Roman Empire was extremely short-lived (303 to 306 at the latest) and the historical reality of the numerous stories of defiance, torture, and execution, not least by and of women and children, that are connected to it is open to question. The memory of resistance and suffering, endowing the martyrs with both celestial reward and great posthumous spiritual authority was a powerful and long-lasting feature of the Christian identity in Spain, from the Later Roman Empire through to the time of the Mozarabic communities of al-Andalus. That it also played a central role in the depiction of theological disagreements in the late sixth century is not surprising, but the danger exists of taking the rhetoric too literally. Similarly in Africa under the rule of the Vandals, it is only recently that the literary depictions of Catholic clerics, martyred and suffering at the hands of savage Arian rulers, have begun to be questioned.[79]

As with 'Visigoths', it is easier for us, trying to delineate two seemingly contrasted and irreconcilable communities, to use 'Arians' as a term for one of them, even though it belongs to the vocabulary of prejudice wielded by their opponents. The existence of handbooks, with brief descriptions of heretical teachings named after their supposed founders, made such prejudicial labelling easy.[80] The theological continuity between the beliefs of those described as Arians by Isidore and John and the Trinitarian doctrines condemned at the Council of Nicaea in 325 are both tenuous and complicated. The early supporters of the latter are now seen as 'Homoians', to emphasise

[78] Antonio Maya Sánchez, 'De Leovigildo perseguidor y Masona mártir', *Emerita*, vol. 62 (1994), pp. 167-186. See also Santiago Castellanos, 'Política y registro hagiográfico en la Hispania visigoda: Leovigildo en las *Vitae*', in María Josefa Castillo Pascual and Pilar Iguácel de la Cruz (ed.), *Studia historica in honorem Prof. Urbano Espinosa Ruiz* (Logroño, 2018), pp. 485-499.

[79] Danuta Shanzer, 'Intentions and Audiences: History, Hagiography, Martyrdom, and Confession in Victor of Vita's *Historia Persecutionis'* in A.H. Merrills (ed.) *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa* (Aldershot, 2004), pp. 271–290

[80] Judith McClure, 'Handbooks against Heresy in the West, from the late fourth to the late sixth century', *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 30 (1979), pp. 186-197.

the particular doctrinal differences at issue.[81] Like their predecessors at Nicaea, both sides in the conflict in sixth century Spain would have described themselves as Orthodox and Catholic Christians and have regarded their opponents as steeped in error.

A full revaluation of this controversy cannot be attempted here, but it is necessary to stress that, firstly, there are no suggestions of theological or physical confrontations, let alone what might have been called martyrdoms and persecution in the whole of the earlier part of the sixth century. Conflict is only recorded in the second part of the reign of Leovigild, following his unification of most parts of the Iberian Peninsula under his rule. Secondly, there is no evidence that the revolt of Hermenegild against his father, starting in 578, was caused by prior religious disagreement. This element only emerges with his conversion to the faith of the ultimately victorious Catholic party and is itself linked to his attempt to secure imperial military assistance. Thirdly, Leovigild's calling of an ecclesiastical council to meet in Toledo in 579 may be the actual catalyst for what follows. This reduced the theological difference between the opposing positions and, even more importantly, removed the requirement for rebaptism for those moving from what we call the Catholic to the Arian side.[82] Repetition of baptism, an unrepeatable sacrament, was both a major issue theologically, not least in Africa, and probably the main stumbling block to a gradual resolution of the divide between the two sides.[83] Its removal was thus the greatest threat to what we see as the Catholic party, leading as it did to some immediate conversions among the episcopate.[84] The deep rooted response of the Catholic party, perhaps particularly in the southern provinces, was to see this in terms of persecution, causing them to make claims about the unleashing of 'Arian fury' and sending appeals to sympathetic contemporaries outside of Spain, such as Gregory the Great and Gregory of Tours, but without providing substantive detail.

Returning to the testimony of VPE, the depiction of the confrontation between Leovigild and Masona in Book Five must be understood clearly in the light of this tradition, which shaped its author's imaginative reconstruction of events that either never occurred or had a character entirely different to that described. The narrative of the encounter is entirely two dimensional and gives no

[81] Uta Heil, 'The Homoians', and eadem, 'The Homoians in Gaul', both in Guido Berndt and Roland Steinacher (ed.), *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed* (Farnham and Burlington VT, 2014), pp. 85-115 and 271-286.

[82] *Johannis Biclarensis Chronicon*, 57, ed. Cardelle de Hartmann, pp. 71-72, and Collins, 'Commentary', ibid., pp. 130-131.

[83] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (2nd edn. London, 2000), p. 278.

[84] Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum* VI. 18, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison, MGH SRM vol. I, p. 287, reports that Leovigild was visiting the tombs of Catholic martyrs and praying in Catholic churches, and now accepted the equality and co-eternity of Father and Son, though not of the Holy Spirit, in the Trinity. While Gregory and his informant dismiss this as a deception, it could indicate a more rapid and closer rapprochement between the two sides than is usually believed.

sense of context beyond the bald claim that it occurred in the palace in Toledo. It also contains elements that are clearly fictional, though intended to reinforce the depiction of the king as demented and deluded. These include Leovigild falling off his throne in terror at a rumble of thunder and his being painfully flogged in his bedroom by St. Eulalia.

It is also at variance with other features of the story our author is trying to tell. For example, the claim by the Arian bishop in Mérida that he should be put in possession of the basilica of St. Eulalia, thus the focal point of religious devotion in both the city and its territory, leads to the despatch of judges to hear arguments from both sides. While these speeches are not given in the text, those of Masona are said to be so overwhelming as to the force these judges to decide in his favour. The next conflict, over the possession of a relic of the saint, in the form of her tunic, is instead handled by means of the bishop being taken to Toledo for the personal confrontation with the king.[85]

Although in VPE Masona's exile to a monastery in an unspecified location is said to only last for three years and is reversed after St Eulalia flogs the king in his bedroom, both its imposition and its ending are presented as arbitrary royal decisions, without any suggestion of the judicial process seen in the case of the basilica. The same is true of the king appointing a replacement bishop for the Catholic community in Mérida, in the person of Nepopis, translated from another unnamed see. No explanation is given for Masona's deposition from office other than his refusal to surrender a relic, when he had successfully resisted handing over an entire basilica containing the saint's body. Perhaps surprisingly, no mention is made of any element in this episode by John of Biclarum or by Isidore of Seville, who mentions two other instances of exile in these years: those of his own brother Leander and of John of Biclarum himself.[86] So, it is possible that the story of Masona's exile was just an authorial fiction, or if there is some truth in it, it may have been the product of quite different causes and processes to the ones described in VPE.

VPE makes no mention of the one occasion in which the king and the bishop really could have come face to face, which was in Mérida rather than in Toledo. In 582, according to Gregory of Tours, two envoys, from the court of king Chilperic, were sent to see Leovigild to discuss arrangements for his second son Reccared's marriage to Rigunth, the Frankish ruler's daughter. As they told Gregory when returning home via Tours, they had been unable to meet Leovigild himself as he had been absent

[85] VPE V. vi. 11-14, ed. Garvin, p. 212; ed. Maya Sánchez, pp. 65-66. See Ramón Teja, 'El simbolismo mágico de la tunica de Santa Eulalia de Mérida en el enfrentamiento entre el obispo Masona y Leovigildo', in Pablo de Paz Amérigo and Ignacio Sanz Extremeño (ed.), *Eulogía. Estudios sobre cristianismo primitivo. Homenaje a Mercedes López Salvá* (Madrid, 2018), pp. 265-274.

[86] Isidore, *de Viris Illustribus*, xxviii and xxxi, ed. Carmen Codoñer Merino, *El 'de Viris Illustribus' de Isidoro de Sevilla* (Salamanca, 1964), pp. 149-152.

from Toledo, campaigning against Mérida, which he had just captured.[87] If we allow any credence at all to VPE's account of Masona being exiled for three years, before being reinstated in his see at the very end of Leovigild's reign, then a banishment starting in 582 and concluding in 585 would make a perfect fit. So too would the context of the capture of the city by the Gothic king, as part of the opening phase of his war against his son Hermenegild, which itself can be dated to 582. Thus, exile imposed on Masona was the result of his being a partisan of Hermenegild and not the consequence of a conflict over St Eulalia's tunic, a relic never otherwise heard of.

If this be true, the most specific example of Leovigild 'persecuting' members of the Catholic clergy ceases to be credible.[88]It also undermines the long-held belief that his action was particularly directed against Goths who had abandoned their 'ancestral' Arianism by converting to Catholicism. Similar doubts also exist about the other two instances of Catholics being exiled for their faith in these years. The first is that of John of Biclarum, the chronicler, future monastic founder and later bishop of Gerona, though he was not a member of the clergy at the time of his exile. The second is Isidore's own elder brother Leander (died c. 599/600), but who was not of Gothic origin.

In the case of John, Isidore describes him as going to Constantinople while still *adolescens*, defined as being anywhere between the ages of fourteen and twenty-eight. John studied both Greek and Latin there for seven years prior to his return to Spain, where, soon after, he was exiled by Leovigild to Barcelona for a decade.[89] While this banishment is attributed by Isidore to the king's 'Arian insanity', the transition in John's chronicle from a focus predominantly on events in the Empire to one that becomes almost exclusively Hispanic occurs around 577/8, and this may mark the point of his return to Spain. 578also saw the outbreak of Hermenegild's revolt against his father, though not his conversion to Catholicism, which probably occurred around 581/2. We have no idea why John left Constantinople or indeed who or what had taken him there in the first place. Nor do we have any clues as to what role he may have played in the diplomatic exchanges and tumultuous events of the late 570s. Isidore's suggestion of a purely religious motivation for his exile carries little weight.

[87] Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum* VI. 18, ed. Levison, MGH SRM, See Collins, 'Gregory of Tours and Spain', p.508.

[88] Céline Martin, 'L'évêque dans un petit navire. Bannissement et relégation dans les *Vies des Saints Pères de Mérida*', in Alban Gautier and Céline Martin (ed.), *Echanges, communications et résaux dans le haut Moyen Age* (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 45-56.

[89] *De Viris Illustribus*, XXXI, ed. Carmen Codoñer Merino, *El 'De Viris Illustribus' de Isidoro de Sevilla. Estudio y edición crítica*. (Salamanca, 1964), pp. 151-152. Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XI. ii, ed. W.M. Lindsay (2 vols., Oxford, 1911), vol. II, unpaginated.

In his account of his brother in his *De Viris Illustribus*, Isidore's statement that Leander wrote 'two books against the teaching of the heretics' while *in exilii sui peregrinatione* ('in the pilgrimage of his exile') is laconic and ambiguous. The exile here referred to has often been identified with Leander's time in Constantinople, where he met the future Pope Gregory, then serving as papal envoy (*Apocrisarius*) in the imperial capital. However, this is at best a guess and for both Masona and John their exile was internal. In any case, it is clear from Gregory's own account that he met Leander in the very early 580s, possibly about 582, and certainly before the end of Hermenegild's revolt. As bishop of the latter's capital, it is likely, if unprovable, that Leander was in Constantinople to seek imperial assistance for the rebel king, now facing imminent attack by his father. In any case, there is no need to assume the exile and the period in Constantinople were one and the same. With the fall of Seville and the suppression of Hermenegild's revolt in 583, the rebel was himself sent into internal exile, and it is likely such prominent supporters as Leander would then have shared this fate.[90]

In all three cases of political exile, in so far as they are credible, the common denominators are either support for the revolt of Heremenegild, or Byzantine connections (or both in the case of Leander). As the threat of imperial involvement played a vital part, not least in prompting Leovigild to act against his son when he did, the two elements are in any case interconnected. In other words, there are no good grounds for assuming that religious differences were in themselves the prime cause for conflict, or that Leovigild exiled both John and Masona because they were Goths who had converted to Catholicism. Ethnic identity and religious affiliation were far more fluid than has long been assumed, though both could be influenced by political considerations in periods of tension, such as a royal succession.[91]

This may seem to ignore the statements of such external witnesses as Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great. In the case of the pope, however, no explicit examples are given, other than for the case of Hermenegild, but his presentation as a Catholic martyr who suffered for his faith is entirely misleading. Religious disagreement was not the cause of his revolt against his father, and Gregory's own testimony indicates that his conversion to Catholicism only came at a late stage in that revolt, and certainly was not the cause of it.[92]

[90] Surprisingly, John of Biclarum refers to Leander as *Ispalensis ecclesiae episcopus clarus habetur* in an annal for 584. So, it is conceivable that he was not bishop of the city when he went to Constantinople: Chronicon, 77, ed. Cardelle de Hartmann, p. 76.

[91] José Angel Castillo Lozano, 'Luchas de poder en Mérida visigoda', *Intus-Legere Historia*, vol. 14 (2020), pp. 104-123 is probably right to categorise the conflicts in the city as being primarily factional and aristocratic rather than being driven principally by religious differences.

[92] Collins, 'Mérida and Toledo'; see also Céline Martin, 'Leovigild à Narbonne', *Le Moyen Age*, vol. CXXV (2019), pp. 529-541.

Gregory of Tours's only specific instance of someone being ill-treated for religious reasons is that of the Frankish princess Ingundis, who was apparently subjected to pressure by her Goth grandmother, now Leovigild's wife. Again, the reasons behind this do not have to include *inania arriana*, as religious uniformity was clearly a necessary precondition to her marriage to Hermenegild, at the time still theologically Arian.

Overall, as in Vandal-ruled Africa, it is only the rhetorical claims of some of the Catholic episcopate against their opponents that has led to a widespread scholarly belief in a prolonged religious controversy in the reign of Leovigild, involving repressive measures on the part of the ruler.[93]The evidence for this has generally not been challenged, any more than has the argument that these theological differences were a means of expressing ethnic distinctiveness.[94] In both cases the testimony of VPE has had a part to play.

Where does this leave our understanding of the work? It hardly needs saying that hagiographic texts should be judged by different criteria from explicitly historical ones, even if both depend upon their authors' own individual understanding of their aims and of the information they wish to convey. The danger of ignoring the generic distinctions comes, with a text like VPE that seems to provide better history than the Histories, when anything in it that cannot be clearly disproved ends up being treated as true, for fear of losing the 'high grade intelligence' it contains. As suggested in the above brief enquiry, total distrust of anything that cannot be independently confirmed might seem the wiser, and certainly the safer approach.

The problems presented by VPE in its present state are not easily solved. Reliance on generally accepted ideas on its textual integrity, stated purpose and period of composition may now seem unsound. There are reasons to question its date, though not place, of writing, and alternatives could lead to the period after the Arab conquest almost as much as before it.[95] The assumption that Christian literary production in the Umayyad period was confined to Córdoba may not be justified.

[93] Eric Fournier, 'Persecuting Heretics in Late Antique North Africa: Tolerant Vandals and Intolerant Bishops?', in Yaniv Fox and Erica Buchberger (ed.), *Inclusion and Exclusion in Mediterranean Christianities* (Leiden, 2019), pp. 147-166.

[94] See Robin Whelan, 'Ethnicity, Christianity and Groups: Homoian Christians in Ostrogothic Italy and Visigothic Spain', *ibid.*, pp. 167-198. Manuel Koch, 'Arianism and Ethnic Identity in Sixth-Century Visigothic Spain', in Berndt and Steinacher (ed.), *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed*, pp. 257-270, suggests the ethnic divide had already broken down by the time of Leovigild.

[95] There are parallels here with the arguments over the dating of what were long seen as the archetypal Visigothic churches, but which have been reassigned in recent years to the eighth or ninth centuries by several archaeologists. See, amongst much else, Luís Caballero Zoreda, 'La arquitectura denominada de época visigoda: ¿es realmente tardorromana o prerrománica?', in Luís Caballero Zoreda and Pedro Mateus Cruz (ed.), *Visigodas y Omeyas. Un debate entre la Antigüedad tardía y la alta Edad Media* (*Anejos de ArchivoEspañol de Arqueología*, vol. XXIII, Madrid, 2000), pp. 207-248.

In general, while new answers may not have been found, and may indeed never be so to general satisfaction, the questions that are seeking them must be raised and pursued. And the understanding of VPE itself will be all the better for its testimony being treated with greater caution.