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The Visigoths in Spain: old and new historical problems

The bibliography on the Visigoths and their *regnum* in the Iberian Peninsula is enormous and abundant.¹ However, there are still many obscure and debatable points not satisfactorily explained that offer possibilities of new interpretations. One of the main aims of the present contribution is simply to point out some of them and put forward alternative proposals of interpretation. These new proposals are possible only through/by way of a new reading of the historical and archaeological sources, the latter not always taken into consideration by historians of the period. The problem of the study of the history of the Visigothic kingdom in Spain is not only to answer the question, fundamental as it is, if it can be defined as a kingdom, a nation or a state. Many other questions remain still unsolved or not satisfactorily interpreted. The lines that follow are only one set of possible examples that demonstrate that there are still many key topics in the historical interpretation of the period under discussion, and that it is possible to propose alternatives to the traditional historiography. I do not pretend to solve these questions, but only to put them forward for eventual discussion or reflexion. “The task of the historian”, and I quote Norman Baynes, “has been defined as a ‘continual putting of questions’ – a ‘fortgesetzte Fragenstellung’; the successful student of history is not so much he who solves questions, but rather he who asks the right – the suggestive – questions.”²

One of the most discussed topics regarding the Visigothic kingdom in Spain is its unexpected and quick dissolution in 711/712. Many disparate causes have been put forward by historians.³ Perhaps we can investigate the problem in a new light.

A STRONG *REGNUM*, ABANDONED BY THE CHURCH

In the middle of the Jordan desert lay the Ummayyad residence and the baths of Quṣayr Amra. In one of the paintings that decorate the rooms, there are the images of six kings. Above their heads, painted in Greek and Arabic letters, are the names of each of them. So it is possible to identify the Roman emperor (of Constantinople), Chosroes, the Sassanian king, the Negus of Ethiopia, and a very familiar personage in the history of Hispania: Roderic, the last king of the Visigoths. Two others are missing: the great Khan of the Turkish peoples and the emperor of China. The figures are standing and they have their hands extended/turned upwards in a gesture that traditionally denoted supplication or rendering honour. The recent study of Garth Fowden on Quṣayr Amra demonstrates that the residence was constructed and used by the Ummayyad Emir Yazid-ben-Abdal-Malik between 720 and 724.⁴

The presence of a (even symbolic) portrait of the Visigothic king Rodericus at Quṣayr Amra, thousands of kilometers away from the Iberian Peninsula, has a multiple significance, and the question is why he is found there.

¹ See now recently Gerd Kampers, *Geschichte der Westgoten* (Paderborn 2008), and the book now in preparation by Manuel Koch; and to refer only to one recent title in Spanish see Santiago Castellanos, *Los godos y la cruz* (Madrid 2007).

² Norman H. Baynes, *The thought-world of East Rome*, in: Norman H. Baynes, *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (Westport-CT 1974) 24–46, at 24.

³ Luis A. García Moreno, *El fin del reino visigodo de Toledo* (Madrid 1975).

⁴ Description and recent study of Quṣayr 'Amra in Garth Fowden, *Quṣayr 'Amra. Art and the Ummayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria* (Berkeley 2004) 197–226. The presence of the three personages in the residence of the emir evokes the three empty thrones in the Sassanian palace of Chosroes I Anushirvan in Ctesiphon. The thrones were prepared for the emperor of China, the Grand Khan of the nomads of Central Asia and the Roman emperor in case they once arrived at Ctesiphon as vassals of the King of Kings. Cf. Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London 1971) 160.

The story is well-known. Musa ben Nusayr, governor of Ifriquiya, who entered Toledo in 712, and his lieutenant Tariq ben Ziyad, were called to Damascus in 714. According to all the chronicles they arrived with many Visigothic nobles as prisoners and plenty of booty: gold, silver, jewellery and, according to the legend, with the famous ‘table of Solomon’; booty that was a part of (or perhaps all) the Visigothic *thesaurus* captured at Toledo and also the *thesauri* belonging to the sacked churches.⁵ Even though the caliph was disappointed by the actions of his generals in Spain, the impact of the defeat of the Visigothic king and the captured booty was an occasion for propaganda and triumphal celebration in the residence of Quṣayr Amra, not only during his reign but also those of his successors. The Muslim conquerors of Spain in 711/712 were mainly Berbers, but immediately “the people of Damascus sought to manipulate the victory and ignore the Berber role in the conquest”⁶, and the presence of Rodericus in Quṣayr Amra is the best proof of this.

It seems remarkable that in Quṣayr Amra the last king of the Visigoths is considered as equal to the most powerful kings of the world at that time. The victory over the Visigoths was proclaimed as the conquest of the West, since it also involved the capture of an immense amount of booty. The Umayyads considered the victory over the Visigoths a great and successful enterprise that destroyed not a weak and decayed *regnum* (or king), but one of the most powerful of the known empires. The conquest of this powerful empire, in the Muslim imagination at least, was exhibited to the visitors and guests of the luxurious residence in the Jordanian desert. The display of the captured gold, hostages, clerks and administrative officers, women and children increased the satisfaction of the caliph. Apparently, at the end of the Visigothic kingdom resources were not exhausted and the treasury was not empty. And for the Visigoths, *thesaurus* represented the *regnum*, power, and dominion.⁷

Perhaps my interpretation of the paintings of Quṣayr Amra is not correct, but if it can be accepted, it goes in the opposite direction of many interpretations about the causes of the end of the kingdom of Toledo, which explain it in terms of crisis, decline, weakness, catastrophe and an inability to exert fiscal control. It points, instead, in the same direction as the conclusions of those (few) historians and archaeologists who do not find the breakdown “in law and order and in the power of kings over the aristocracy, leading to the incapacity of the Visigoths to resist the Arabs in 711”⁸ as a cause of the end of the Visigothic *regnum*. It coincides with what Chris Wickham has recently observed: “The Visigoths in Spain are unique in the post-Roman West: the state did not get weaker over time, but stronger.”⁹ In a recent book, in my opinion perhaps one of the most original about the Visigoths in Spain, Céline Martin arrives at the same conclusion. In the West, in the seventh century, the Iberian Peninsula was one of the most powerful and stable countries: Italy was ravaged by the Gothic wars; Africa agitated by the pressure of the Berbers; and Gaul was in a demographic and economic crisis. Spain was, in contrast, relatively free from civil wars and untouched by the plague of the Justinianic era. The imperial army present on the southeast coast was not an aggressive power but rather a stable defensive settlement.¹⁰

The defeat of Roderic in 711, which has been magnified by the historiography (ancient and modern), needs a reconsideration in its own terms. We must analyse, first, the assumption that it was a military failure, and secondly, the consequences of the defeat, i.e. the dissolution of the kingdom.

⁵ References collected in Pedro Chalmeta, *Invasión e Islamización* (Madrid 1994). Because they were conveniently hidden, the conquerors were unable to obtain the so-called crowns of Guarrazar, a gift of Recceswinth, Suintila and other persons to the Church; crowns that we now know, after a recent technical analysis, to contain emeralds from the Austrian mines of Habachtal and sapphires from Sri Lanka. For the treasure of Guarrazar see now *El tesoro visigodo de Guarrazar*, ed. Alicia Perea (Madrid 2001) 286.

⁶ See Chalmeta, *Invasión* 164.

⁷ A fact very well attested by ancient sources for the period. In general see now Matthias Hardt, *Gold und Herrschaft. Die Schätze europäischer Könige und Fürsten im ersten Jahrtausend* (Europa im Mittelalter 6, Berlin 2004). Matthias Hardt, *Royal treasures and representation in the early Middle Ages*, in: *Strategies of Distinction. The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800*, ed. Walter Pohl/Helmut Reimitz (*The Transformation of the Roman World 2*, Boston/Leiden/Köln 1998) 255–280.

⁸ Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford 2005) 93; cf. also *ibid.*, 39.

⁹ Wickham, *Early Middle Ages* 93.

¹⁰ Céline Martin, *La géographie du pouvoir dans l’Espagne visigothique* (Lille 2003) 305–306.

A military defeat can provoke the end of a kingdom, especially if the king dies (as was the case of Roderic), but that does not necessarily indicate weakness or corruption or internal chaos (or a kingdom without resources). However, historiography has interpreted his defeat in terms of moral considerations.

We find this theme recurring in many chronicles of the period: military failure is equivalent to the end of the *regnum*. A few examples illustrate this conclusion: In a single battle, in 418, the Alans, established in the Cartaginensis and in Lusitania, “suffered such heavy losses at the hands of the Goths that after the death of their king, Addax, the few survivors, *oblito regni nomine*, ... placed themselves under the protection of Gunderic, king of the Vandals”.¹¹ Years later the *magister militum* Castinus, commanding a huge Romano-Gothic army (*cum magna manu et auxiliis Gothorum*) was defeated after being betrayed by his auxiliaries (*auxiliorum fraude deceptus*).¹² In 507, after Vouillé and the death of Alaric II, *regnum tolosanum destructum est*, as we read in the *Consularia Caesaraugustana*.¹³ Therefore, we can consider that the description of Rodericus’ defeat in the sources reflects a current topic in the historiography of the time. Rodericus’ failure was due to other reasons and it needs an explanation in military terms. The most plausible one is perhaps found in a notice in the *Akhbar Majmu’a* – a book of the 10th century, which is a compilation of oral traditions, in which we read that the Visigoths were not well aware of the consequences of the Muslim *razzia* in 711 because “these people do not pretend to establish themselves in our country, they only seek booty; once obtained, they will leave our country”.¹⁴ Perhaps this source is not completely trustworthy, but at least it sounds plausible. North African expeditions into the Iberian Peninsula were not unusual, but they were brief incursions, not grand scale invasions. In fact, there had been other similar occasions before 711. The *Chronicle of Alfonso III*, for example, mentions that “in the reign of Wamba, 270 Saracen ships attacked the coast of Spain and there all of them were destroyed and burned”; and I need not mention here the precedents from the Roman period, in the second and third centuries A.D.¹⁵ Therefore, it is likely that nobody in the Visigothic kingdom expected a major conquest.¹⁶ In fact, the first Berber army that arrived in Spain had no more than 2000 soldiers. If the Visigothic army was annihilated so easily, perhaps it was due to their being unfamiliar with the military tactics of the newcomers. The death of the king and the disappearance of his *comitatus* created an unexpected situation. Rodericus had no heir, and it was not so easy to find a quick and satisfactory appointment or election.

The problem is that Rodericus’ defeat meant the practical and almost immediate dissolution of his kingdom. To explain it we need to look at the relationship between the king and the church in Visigothic society, so inextricably mingled from at least the second half of the seventh century, that we can safely say that without the church there was no kingdom. We know that the Church abandoned the kingdom when Bishop Sinderedus of Toledo fled to Rome in 712; from that moment cohesion and governance were no longer possible.¹⁷ The Church and the King were the two pillars of the Visigothic kingdom: the king could not maintain his power without the church, so neither could survive independently. In the Visigothic kingdom, from Reccared onwards, nothing could be done without or outside the church.

¹¹ Hydatius of Lemica, *Chronica Subdita CCLXLVIII OLYMPI, XXIII* (ed./trans. Robert W. Burgess, *The Chronicle of Hydatius and the Consularia Constantinopolitana. Two Contemporary Accounts of the Final Years of the Roman Empire*, Oxford 1993) 86–87.

¹² Hydatius of Lemica, *Chronica Subdita CCC OLYMPI, XXVIII*, ed. Burgess 86–89.

¹³ *Consularia Caesaraugustana a. 507*, in: Victor Tunnunensis, *Chronicon cum reliquiis ex Consularibus Caesaraugustanis et Iohannis Biclarenis*, *Chronicon* (ed. Carmen Cardelle de Hartmann, CC SL 173A, Turnhout 2001), and perhaps it would have been destroyed without the intervention of Theoderic of Italy.

¹⁴ Martin, *Géographie* 306.

¹⁵ *Crónica de Alfonso III* (ed. Juan Gil/Juan Ruiz de la Peña Moralejo, *Crónicas asturianas*, Oviedo 1985) 116.

¹⁶ Roger Collins, *España en la Alta Edad Media* (Barcelona 1986) 192: “Rodrigo no debió de reclutar gran número de guerreros de otras partes de la Península tanto porque había tenido que regresar desde el norte como porque consideró que se trataba de una amenaza limitada”.

¹⁷ Sinderedus in Rome, see *Crónica mozárabe de 754*, 53 (ed. Eduardo López Pereira, *Textos Medievales* 58, Zaragoza 1980) 68–71; Edward A. Thompson, *Los godos en España* (Madrid 1971) 285. This is the conclusion of Martin, *Géographie* 376.

But there are other explanations. Many historians find the content of the military laws of Wamba and Ervig (672–687) to be proof of the internal weakness of the Visigothic kingdom. These laws obliged the people, including the clergy, to enroll in the army in case of danger. It was necessary to be ready to defend the territory. This has been interpreted as a symptom that the king had lost his social network. The social basis (including the aristocracy) preferred to work in the fields instead of assisting in the sacred duty of war. Many historians see this as a key point to explain the weakness of the Visigothic kingdom in the second half of the seventh 7th century, and the very reason for Rodericus' defeat: "Where can we observe better that the last Visigothic kings were conscious that their social basis was progressively dissociating itself from the central power is in a series of laws given to regulate the participation of the people in the army, a problem that was causing alarm in the seventh century. There were few ready to go and take up weapons ... The monarch's entourage was isolated and consisted of only a few people ... As a consequence, the Muslim army (approximately 8000 soldiers) in 711 disembarked in Spain and Roderic was defeated, a clear proof that the anxieties of the king were totally justified."¹⁸

The law of Wamba, dated 673, came out a little after the rebellion of Paulus in Gaul and specifies that "all those living in a district in danger of a *scandalum* [that is, an unexpected attack] should immediately be at the disposal of our *gens* and *patria* to defend the territory with all capable men, including the clerics, if not, they will be punished with harsh exile"¹⁹. This was a preventive law that had nothing to do with the army (*exercitus* is not mentioned nor *expeditio*) and was a normal proviso specified for the different types of militia. According to Isidore, *evocatio* was a form of participation in the army that obliged all people: *non solum miles sed et ceteri evocantur*.²⁰ It is difficult to see here either weakness in the king or the "erosion of the social basis".

To sum up: The Visigothic kingdom in the first years of the 8th century was a powerful and strong monarchy with a considerable *thesaurus* (and this means economic resources) to support military expeditions, payments, donations, diplomatic gifts, prestige and so on, and its richness strongly impressed the Arabs who arrived in Spain in 711 and captured the capital, Toledo. Therefore the Visigothic king was represented and considered equal to the other powers or empires of the world at that time, in the desert residence of the caliph in Qusayr Amra. The defeat of King Rodericus was the result of a miscalculation and perhaps he was also the victim of new tactics in warfare and equipment in his battle against the Berber army. The King's death and his military failure were presented in the sources – the most contemporary being the Chronicle of 754 – as the end of the kingdom, as was traditional in the topical historiography of the period from Hydatius onwards.²¹ The laws of Wamba and Ervig on the need to participate in the army have been interpreted as a proof of a 'loss of social cohesion', nevertheless, strictly speaking, they reflect only a usual custom in Visigothic society in the case of external danger. The dissolution and disintegration of the kingdom that followed the king's death is better understood against the background of the traditional election of the king by the Church and the bishop of Toledo. Since the capital was captured very quickly by the Arabs, the bishop fled to Rome, abandoning the very essence of the Visigothic monarchy and its legitimation. Another factor was, surely, that there was no successor available, due to the fact that Rodericus did not leave any sons.

THE EARLIER YEARS: A PROBLEMATIC SETTLEMENT

If the end of the Visigothic kingdom is a major historical problem whose causes and explanation need to be re-examined from another perspective, no less crucial is the problem of the period of the first settlement in the Peninsula at the beginning of the sixth century.

¹⁸ Eduardo Manzano, *Conquistadores, emires y califas. Los Omeyas y la formación de Al-Andalus*, Crítica (Barcelona 2006) 32–33.

¹⁹ *Laws of Wamba: Lex Visigothorum IX, 2, 8* (ed. Karl Zeumer, MGH LL nat. Germ. 1, Hannover/Leipzig 1902) 370–373, at 372–373. See also the excellent commentary on these laws in Martin, *Géographie* 301ff.

²⁰ Isidorus, *Ethymologiae IX, 3, 52–55* (ed. Jose Oroz/Manuel A. Marcos Casquero, Isidoro de Sevilla, *Etimologias 1*, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, Gredos, Madrid ²1993).

²¹ *Crónica mozárabe de 754, 52*, ed. Pereira 68: *regnum simulque cum patriam ... amisit*.

I am going first to talk briefly about the eventual settlement and control of Spain in the reign of Euric, in the second half of the fifth century. E. Thompson, taking as evidence the inscription of the bridge of Emerita (I will deal with it later in detail) states that “it is beyond question that this inscription demonstrates that, because the *dux* Salla is mentioned in it during Euric’s reign, the Goths occupied *Emerita* from the year 473”.²² Others go further: König speaks openly of a *ducatu* *emeritense*, using as evidence the same inscription,²³ and Orlandis, quoting a text of Jordanes, thinks that Euric owned “all the Spains and the Gauls” and, moreover, he says that “Euric is the first Visigothic monarch that has the right to be called king of Spain”.²⁴ Spanish historiography has an unavoidable tendency to claim a Germanic origin for the Spanish kings from the Middle Ages, and to claim the Visigothic period as the real origin of the Spanish nation. But documentary evidence and the close analysis of the period, does not allow one to arrive at these anachronistic ideological constructions. There are also other historians who agree and who defend the same idea, that King Euric controlled the whole Iberian Peninsula. Let us consider the evidence.

Jordanes’ text about the the ownership of all Hispania, can be understood as a generalization that we cannot take *ad pedem litterae* if we consider two facts: First, that our sources mention only that the military campaigns of Euric’s generals were in Tarraconensis (and so in only a small part of the Peninsula) and second, that despite the frequent conquests of Euric, his successor, Alaric II, was obliged to intervene for the reconquest of the province, and that means that Euric’s actions were ineffective, an opinion recently developed by Kulikowski.²⁵ The same type of geographical generalization is found in the *Chronica Gallica*, which says that the *comes* Gauteric *Hispanias per Pompilonam, CaesarAugustam et vicinas urbes obtinuit* (a. 473). The conquest of these cities cannot be considered as the conquest and control of Hispania. Later we see that another army, lead by Heldefredus and Vincentius, crossed the Pyrenées at Le Perthus, besieged *Tarraco* (*obsessa* does not means that it was taken), and took possession of some cities on the Mediterranean shore.²⁶

SALLA AND THE INSCRIPTION FROM THE BRIDGE OF EMERITA

However, there is still the document, dated from Euric’s reign, that has been considered as definitive proof of his dominion in Spain, in 483. I refer to the inscription on the bridge of Emerita, preserved only in a manuscript, that, leaving aside problems of transcription, is considered today to belong to the last year of his reign. Many historians regard the inscription as indisputable proof of Euric’s kingship over Spain (Garcia Moreno, Orlandis, Collins, Koch, Thompson, Stroheker, König etc.), and some even speak of a Gothic military presence there and of an established collaboration between Goths and Hispano-Romans.²⁷ Nevertheless, I think that the text does not allow this conclusion because in fact the problem of the inscription is a problem of translation. The text is as follows:

*Solberat antiquas moles ruinosa vetustas,
Lapsum et senio ruptum pendebat opus.
Perdiderat usum suspensa via p(er) amnem.*

²² Edward A. Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians* (Wisconsin 1982) 190.

²³ Gerd G. König, *Archäologische Zeugnisse westgotischer Präsenz im 5. Jahrhundert*, in: *Madrid Mitteilungen* 21 (1980) 220–247, at 223. As correctly observed by Michael Kulikowski, *Late Roman Spain and its Cities* (Baltimore 2004) 381 at n. 43, “the assertion of König has no foundation in the sources”.

²⁴ Jordanes, *Getica* 47 (ed. Theodor Mommsen, MGH AA 5, 1, Berlin 1882/repr. 1982) 121: *Quod Eurichus grato suscipiens animo, totas Spanias Galliasque sibi iam iure proprio tenens ...*; see also José Orlandis, *La España visigótica*, (Madrid 1977) 60 and 217; in the same sense Luis Garcia y Moreno, *Historia de España visigoda* (Madrid 1989) 72.

²⁵ Kulikowski, *Late Roman Spain* 203–209.

²⁶ *Chronica Gallica* 651 and 652 (ed. Theodor Mommsen, MGH AA 9, *Chronica minora* 1, Berlin 1892/repr. München 1981) 615–666, at 664–665.

²⁷ The inscription appears in José Vives, *Inscripciones cristianas de la España romana y visigoda* 363 (*Monumenta Hispania Sacra* 2, Barcelona 1969) 126–127; cf. José Vives, *La inscripción del puente de Mérida de la época visigótica*, in: *Revista de Estudios Extremeños* 13/1 (1939) 1–7. For a full discussion of these aspects see Javier Arce, *La inscripción del puente de Emerita (483 d.C.) y el dominio de la Península Iberica en época del rey visigodo Eurico*, in: *Pyrenae* 30/2 (2009) 121–126.

*Et liberum pontis casus negabat iter.
 Nunc tempore potentis Getarum Eurici regis,
 Quo deditas sibi precepit excoli terras,
 Studuit magnanimus factis extendere n(o)m(e)n,
 Veterum et titulis addit Salla suum.
 Nam postquam eximiis nobabit moenib(us) urbem,
 Hoc magis miraculum patrare non destitit.
 Construxit arcos, penitus fundabit in undis
 Et mirum auctoris imitans vicit opus.
 Nec non et patrie tantum cr<e>are munimen
 Summi sacerdotis Zenonis suasit amor.
 Urbs Augusta felix mansura p(er) scl(a) longa
 Nobate studio ducis et pontificis. era DXXI.*

We are going to focus on lines 5 and following. In the text there is nothing that suggests that Salla was acting in the name of the king. Euric's reference is only chronological, that is, the king is mentioned only in order to date the text during his reign: *nunc tempore potentis Getarum Eurici regis* etc. Salla acts for his own personal desire for glory, which was associated with the bishop Zeno: it was Salla who wanted (*studuit*) to add his name to the others that were mentioned in the previous inscriptions (*veterum et titulis addit Salla suum nomen*), *suum* refers to his name, not the name of the king. Salla is the subject of *studuit*, not Euric, and Salla is also the one called *magnanimus*, not Euric (in genitive in the inscription). The wall and the bridge of *Emerita* had been repaired in the past many times, and there were inscriptions (*tituli*) to commemorate these works (by Roman emperors, governors, etc). Salla wanted to add his name in a new inscription, to perpetuate his own name. But it was the bishop, here with the curious epithet of *summus sacerdos*, who was the person who encouraged the reconstruction work for one explicit reason: *amor patriae*. This formula, very common in late antique urban epigraphy in North Africa and Italy, contradicts the exaggerated conclusions of Garcia Moreno, which frame the reconstruction of the wall and the bridge in the context of a military strategy of fortifications and as proof of "Gothic aristocratic settlement" in *Emerita*.²⁸ Neither of these conclusions can be deduced from the inscription. *Amor patriae* is a traditional euergetic epigraphical formula alluding to the necessity for preservation of the urban *dignitas*. The inscription was written in verse and most probably was composed by the bishop Zeno and not by Salla, the *dux*. His presence in *Emerita* may have been accidental or fortuitous, as is the case in many other instances during the fifth century, and probably the works were payed for by the bishop himself, the public benefactor on that occasion. We have many other examples of this kind of ecclesiastical euergetism, especially in *Emerita*.²⁹ Thus, the inscription cannot be taken as proof of Euric's power over Spain or *Emerita*.

From 507 onwards, and after the end of the *regnum Tolosanum*, we can begin to speak of increasing Visigothic immigration to Spain. The proof is that in 513 *Theodericus Italiae rex Gothos regit in Hispania*³⁰, that is, Theoderic was the king of the Goths in Spain. But until Theudis' reign, beginning in 531, the Gothic people were established mainly in the *Tarraconensis*.

How can this reading of the literary and epigraphic sources modify the theories of archaeologists about the so-called 'Visigothic necropolis' in the Castilian Meseta, which they date to the second half of the fifth century? I think that it is necessary to review their interpretations and chronology.³¹

The settlement of the Visigoths in the Iberian Peninsula poses many problems not yet satisfactorily explained, if we take into consideration the archaeological and the literary evidence. Two fundamental questions should be answered: where were they established and how can we identify them? And what were the "techniques of accommodation"?

²⁸ Garcia Moreno, *Historia de España visigoda* 72.

²⁹ Cf. the *Vitas Patrum Emeritensium*, or the activity of Synesius of Cyrene.

³⁰ *Consularia CaesarAugustana* a. 513, ed. Cardelle de Hartmann.

³¹ See also Kulikowski, *Late Roman Spain* 266–271.

In a recent article, W. Liebeschuetz has written that “the Visigoths in Spain were settled on individual lots. The rules of settlement—*hospitalitas* were the same as those that had been applied for the settlement of the Visigoths in Gaul. The Goths received two-thirds of an estate, while the Romans kept one-third.”³² This statement is based on two texts from the *Lex Visigothorum* of Recceswinth that, under the rubric *Antiqua*, reproduces extracts of the *Codex Revisus* of Leovigild (568), which goes back to Euric. The problem is whether we can consider these references as an illustration of early sixth century facts, or of the situation in Gaul in the fifth century (418). In any case, the *Antiqua* implies that not all the land was divided according to this rule, because it was necessary to give evidence or proof for it: *si tamen probatur celebrata divisio*.³³ Not all settlement was made in the same way. I am rather sceptical about accepting that the settlement of the Visigoths in Spain after Vouillé was made in the same way as the settlement in Gaul on the basis of only such a late and ambiguous piece of evidence. If this was the case, who was the authority supervising this division in the earlier years of the sixth century? Was there a personal negotiation between Hispano-Roman owners and the Visigoths? The period between 507 and the reign of Leovigild (569) is characterised by an enormous instability, and we see the kings residing successively in *Barcino*, *Emerita*, *Hispalis*, *Corduba* and *Toledo*. We know nothing about the settlement of the Visigoths in the different territories during this period. What is clear from the sources is that they first occupied the *Tarraconensis*, and probably some regions in the Central Meseta and the north of Spain, but there remained many lands in the south, on the Mediterranean coast, and in *Lusitania* and *Gallaecia* not controlled by the Visigoths until the second half of the sixth century. However, this does not mean that there were no settlements in any of these cities and territories. Here the problem is an archaeological one. For many years, archaeologists have identified a series of *necropoleis* in the center and north of the Castilian Meseta as a Visigothic necropolis, which they considered as proof of Visigothic settlement. These *necropoleis* are used as evidence of the limits of the territorial division of land among the Visigoths. It is current opinion that the Visigothic agricultural lands lay between Herrera de Pisuerga (Palencia), Carpio (Toledo), Duraton, and Castiltierra.

It is necessary to bear in mind that none of these *necropoleis* has been studied systematically, or has been subjected to stratigraphic excavation (with the exception of some recent work in the province of Madrid), and therefore we have no guarantee of a reliable chronological sequence. Some objects, such as fibulae and belt brooches, have artistic or stylistic evidence of Visigothic manufacture. Likewise with certain weapons, spears, and military equipment. Perhaps the best studied is the necropolis of El Carpio de Tajo, by G. Ripoll. Here she established a theory of hierarchisation of the tombs and a chronology that goes back to the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the sixth (a date that fits well with the information provided by literary sources³⁴ about the first presence of Goths in Spain), with a continuity up to the seventh. But the meaning of the two entries in the *Consularia* are far from clear, and surely only one of them can be taken as a proof of settlement,³⁵ particularly when they refer only to the *Tarraconensis* and the Mediterranean coast, not to the lands of the interior. We cannot identify the population of these *necropoleis* as Gothic.³⁶ Furthermore, none of the *necropoleis* is associated with a habitat. For now, they are isolated archaeological remains that we cannot associate with any city, town, *villa*, or even *vicus*. G. Ripoll herself has recently acknowledged that “we must contemplate the possibility that the so-called ‘necrópolis visigodas’ in the Meseta cannot be considered as such”.³⁷

³² Wolf Liebeschütz, Latest Barbarians and Taxes, in: *Archeologia e società tra tardoantico e alto Medioevo*, ed. Gian Pietro Brogiolo/Alexandra Chavarria (Documenti di Archeologia 44, SAP Società Archeologica, Mantova 2007) 71–84, esp. 72–74.

³³ *Lex Visigothorum* X, 1, 8, ed. Zeumer 385–386, at 386.

³⁴ *Consularia CaesarAugustana* a. 494 and 497, ed. Cardelle de Hartmann.

³⁵ *Consularia CaesarAugustana* a. 497, ed. Cardelle de Hartmann: *sedes acceperunt*; but Manuel Koch has recently challenged this interpretation: see Manuel Koch, Gotti intra Hispanias sedes acceperunt. Consideraciones sobre la supuesta inmigración visigoda en la Península Ibérica, in: *Pyrenae* 37/2 (2006) 83–104.

³⁶ See, among others, Kulikowski, *Late Roman Spain* 269 and 403.

³⁷ See the very useful article by Gisela Ripoll, Las necrópolis visigodas. Reflexiones en torno al problema de la identificación del asentamiento visigodo en Occidente según los materiales arqueológicos, in: *Hispania Gothorum*. San Ildefonso y el reino Visigodo de Toledo (Toledo 2006) 59–74, at 65, and see also Roger Collins, *La España visigoda*, 400–711

We can now add another problem to the archaeological interpretations: not only is it very difficult to individuate or visualise the material culture of the Visigothic period – *necropoleis*, artifacts, ceramics – but there is also the problem that the Visigothic churches have ‘disappeared’, according to new and recent studies by Spanish historians and archaeologists about early medieval churches such as San Juan de Baños, Melque and others. After the article by Sally Garen on Melque, in which she dates the church to the eighth century on stylistic grounds because of its parallels with buildings in the Palestine region such as Khirbet al Mafjar, not only Melque but almost all churches previously considered to be from the seventh century are now classified as Mozarabic, that is, churches built by Christians living in Muslim territories with a strong influence from eastern building techniques and decoration.³⁸

What interests me here is not the stylistic considerations, nor even the archaeological discussions about these churches, but the historical reasons that archaeologists used to establish their thesis. The main reason given is that in the political environment of the seventh century, characterized by a profound crisis of the state (aristocratic rebellions, and so on), there was no impetus to build churches because the social or cultural context did not support the construction of such buildings.

I think that there is no reason to maintain such an extreme position. Building churches was not an euergetic act, it was a demonstration of *pietas*; and, at the same time, a source of revenue for the builder. For example, the Council of Braga (572) refers to the *fideles* that *motu proprio* built churches not for faith or devotion, but to make money with the offerings of the people: *si quis basilicam non pro devotione fidei sed pro quaestu cupiditatis aedificat*. On the other hand, what to do with the abundant references in different literary texts and canons about the construction of churches by kings, aristocrats, and monks during this period? Sisebut dedicated the church of Saint Leocadia in Toledo (612–621); an inscription from *Iliberis* mentions a man named Gudiliva who erected three churches *cum operarios vernolos et sumptu proprio* (577); Wamba restored Toledo with a variety of elegant constructions (678); Suintila founded the city of *Ologicum (civitas Gothorum)* (621–631); and the church of the so-called Recopolis is surely from the seventh century, as is the church of Tolmo de la Minateda. The *Vita* of Valerius of Bierzo informs us about the construction of a basilica in the *fundus* of Ebro-nato in 678. The splendid *villa* of Pla de Nadal, near Valencia, dates from the second half of the seventh century, according to the archaeological reports, and perhaps its owner was Theodomir, the same *comes* that negotiated with the Muslims after 711.³⁹ The historical reasons given by archaeologists for the chronology of the Visigothic churches do not seem adequate to support their hypothesis for changing the date of the churches.⁴⁰ There is still much to debate on this topic.

But the picture is not entirely negative. Possibly settlement in the first decades of the sixth century was in the abandoned *villae* or in the *agri deserti* and indeed in the abandoned cities. Very little is known about the material culture of this new population, but what is possible to detect is the re-use of the different spaces of the *villae* and their conversion into productive zones. The new owners did not need to negotiate anything, but only wanted to use and exploit the *villae*. In the sources we have many references to the different forms of the habitat, *loci*, *castella*, *villula*, *civitates*, *villa*, and so we can establish the hierarchy of the Visigothic settlements.⁴¹

There are a series of documents in which, better than in the archaeological record, we can visualise the population in the Visigothic period spread across the territory. In the inscriptions on Visigothic

(Barcelona 2005) 181–194 (Spanish translation of the English edition 2004), who arrives at the conclusion that the *necropoleis* do not correspond to Gothic settlements.

³⁸ Sally Garen, Santa Maria de Melque and church construction under Muslim rule, in: *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 51 (1992) 288–305, followed by Luis Caballero, La arquitectura denominada de época visigoda ¿es realmente tardorromana o preromana?, in: *Visigodos y Omeyas. Un debate entre la Antigüedad Tardía y la alta Edad Media*, ed. id./Pedro Mateos (Anejos de Archivo Español de Arqueología 23, CSIC, Madrid, 2000) 207–249, to quote one of the numerous articles he has written on this topic. Excellent summary of all the problems and a critical revision in Alexandra Chavarría, *Chiese rurali in Spagna prima e dopo il 711: ipotesi su un'altra transizione* (forthcoming).

³⁹ On these examples, see Javier Arce, Reyes visigodos y arquitectura, in: *Hortus Artium Medievalium* 13/2 (2007) 255–260, and Alexandra Chavarría, *Chiese rurali*.

⁴⁰ Achim Arbeiter, Alegato por la riqueza del inventario monumental hispanovisigodo, in: *Visigodos y Omeyas. Un debate entre la Antigüedad Tardía y la Alta Edad Media*, ed. Luis Caballero/Pedro Mateos (Anejos de Archivo Español de Arqueología 23, CSIC, Madrid 2000) 249–263, and Chavarría, *Chiese rurali*.

⁴¹ See the study of Martin, *Géographie* 32ff.

slates we find their actions, daily life, names, activities, beliefs and preoccupations. These documents allow us to know where they were; published in the excellent edition of I. Velázquez,⁴² they have been underused by historians. Here we find the population of Visigothic Spain, more visible than in the chronicles and councils. Tax and rent accounts, registered on the slates, show a continuity of the late imperial system, best exemplified in the monthly accounts of the *tabula* of Trinitapoli,⁴³ and the inspection visits by the *dux* or the town authority. Another example is provided by scholastic exercises for writing and memorizing psalms, which constitute a radical change in the transmission of culture in contrast with the classical system exemplified in the *Hermeneumata PseudoDositheana*.⁴⁴ The slates also show a mixed population and a closed and almost autarchic agricultural and pastoral economy. However, the question is whether the population reflected in the slates is Gothic or Hispano-Roman or both.

THE MYTH OF RECOPOLIS

According to John of Biclar, King Leovigild founded a city in 579, named Recopolis after his son Reccared:

*Leovigildus rex, extinctis undique tyrannis et pervasoribus Hispaniae superatis, sortitus requiem propiam cum plebe resedit. Civitatem in Celtiberia ex nomine filii condidit, quae Recopolis nuncupatur: quam miro opere et moenibus et suburbanis adornans privilegia populo novae urbis instituit.*⁴⁵

On the evidence of this text, many historians and archaeologists think that Recopolis was a *sedes regia*, a second capital for the heir of the throne, Reccared.⁴⁶ Archaeologists, on the other hand, assume that the ruins of the so called “El Cerro de la Oliva”, near the town Zorita de los Canes, in the province of Guadalajara, should be identified as the city of Recopolis.⁴⁷ Following the proposal of D. Claude⁴⁸ they consider that Recopolis was a royal city planned in the manner of Iustiniana Prima (present-day Caričin Grad in Serbia, ancient Illyricum, founded by Emperor Justinian in 530). They see a palace in the architectural remains that still exist, associated with a church, and they speak of a “palatine complex”. Claude was convinced of the “byzantinization” of the Visigothic kingdom in the middle of the sixth century, an idea that is far from certain. It is no more than a attractive hypothesis, without clear support in the ancient sources.⁴⁹

Two points should be considered about Recopolis: First, that to give the name of an heir to a city does not mean that he will reside there, or that the newly-named site will be a *sedes regia*. We have many examples in the Roman tradition of cities that were named after the emperor or members of his family. Therefore Recopolis could be only the new name for an ancient site, or, simply, the name of a

⁴² Isabel Velázquez, *Las pizarras visigodas*. Edición crítica y estudio (Antigüedad y Cristianismo 6, Murcia 1989), and ead., *Documentos de época visigoda escritos en pizarra*, ss. VI–VIII (Monumenta Paleographica Medii Aevi, Series Hispanica, Turnhout 2000).

⁴³ Inscription of Trinitapoli: see Andrea Giardina/Francesco Grelle, *La Tavola di Trinitapoli: una nuova costituzione di Valentiniano I*, in: *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome, Antiquité* 95/1 (1983) 249–303.

⁴⁴ Cf. Anna Carlotta Dionisotti, *From Ausonius’ schooldays? A schoolbook and its relatives*, in: *Journal of Roman Studies* 72 (1982) 83–125.

⁴⁵ John of Biclar, *Chronica* 578, 4 in: Victor Tunnunensis, *Chronicon cum reliquiis ex Consularibus Caesaraugustanis et Iohannis Biclarenensis, Chronicon, Commentaria historica ad Consularia Caesaraugustana et ad Iohannis Biclarenensis Chronicon* edidit Roger Collins (ed. Carmen Cardelle de Hartmann, CC SL 173A, Turnhout 2001 recte 2002).

⁴⁶ See, for example, Gisela Ripoll/Isabel Velázquez, *Toletum vs Recopolis: Dos sedes para dos reyes?*, in: *Recópolis y la ciudad hispánica en época visigoda*, ed. Laura Olmo Enciso (Alcalá de Henares 2008) 205–219. I thank Gisela Ripoll for sending me her original before publication; Lauro Olmo, *Arquitectura religiosa y organización litúrgica en época visigoda*. *La basílica de Recópolis*, in: *Archivo Español de Arqueología* 61 (1988) 157–178.

⁴⁷ Lauro Olmo, *Los conjuntos palatinos en el contexto de la topografía urbana altomedieval de la Península Ibérica*, in: *Actas del II Congreso de Arqueología Medieval Española* 2 (Madrid 1987) 345–352; ead., *Ciudad y procesos de transformación social entre los siglos VI y IX: de Recópolis a Racupel*, in: *Visigodos y Omeyas*, ed. Luis Caballero/Pedro Mateos (Anejos de Archivo Español de Arqueología 23, Madrid 2000) 385–399; Gisela Ripoll, *Recopolis*, in: *RGA* 24 (Berlin/New York 2004) 204–208.

⁴⁸ Dietrich Claude, *Studien zu Recopolis* 2, in: *Madridrer Mitteilungen* 6 (1965) 167–194.

⁴⁹ Javier Arce, *Recópolis, la ciudad fantasma*, in: *Homenaje al Prof. Luis G. Iglesias* (forthcoming 2009).

new city destined to commemorate a victory as well as, of course, to honour the heir.⁵⁰ Second: the identification of the actual site of El Cerro de la Oliva with Recópolis is unsure because nothing in the present excavations has been found to confirm it. Moreover, what the archaeologists have identified as a palace and a “palatine complex” do not correspond to this kind of building, if we consider other buildings elsewhere which are more clearly “palatine”. Instead it corresponds, more probably, to an *horreum*, or building for stockage purposes.⁵¹ So the ruins of El Cerro de la Oliva perhaps can be identified as a “fiscal city”, a center in the region to store the fiscal revenues.⁵²

In the historiography of the Visigothic period in Spain, there are many other subjects like those considered above that must be reviewed, and one of them is, of course, to define or identify the type of political institution it was.

Was the Visigothic regnum a state, or a nation? Obviously it depends on the definition of nation or state, and on the minimum essential elements included in such a definition. There are a number of elements that dissuade one from the use of these terms: the concept (state, nation) itself is anachronistic for the period. Romans never had the consciousness of a nation or of nationalism, and their successors had even less. The city was the element of cohesion and distinction. We have no evidence of a sense of nationhood in the Visigothic period. The territorial unity ascribed to Leovigild or Reccared by many historians is a propagandistic fiction. There was no sense of unity at least until the reign of Suintila (621). He was the first to obtain for the monarchy the entire kingdom of Spain, which had not been achieved by any previous ruler.⁵³ Even the Basques were subjugated by him. That means, and there are texts reflecting this sensibility, that there was a conscious perception of a frontier, at least in territorial terms. However, in the Visigothic period all literature, chronicles, and *vitae* are intrinsically mingled with the biblical and Catholic idea of a universal history. Céline Martin is very convincing when she says “[in the Visigothic period] the frontiers define a sanctified space, the territory of the *regnum*, linked to the Christian idea of the king as spiritual guide of the *fideles*, that is, the people”.⁵⁴ For this reason, even considering the centralisation, the capital Toledo, the tax system, the control of the bureaucracy, and the unity of language, none of these are the essential element in the *regnum Gothorum*. The most essential components were the Church and the bishops. The *regnum* was a Christian State in which the king himself had to submit his decisions to the sanction of the clergy gathered in the Council.

Without the church there is no *regnum*. And that was what proved to be decisive in 712.

⁵⁰ Javier Arce, Recópolis.

⁵¹ Javier Arce, Recópolis.

⁵² Javier Arce, Recópolis.

⁵³ Isidorus, *Historia Gothorum* 62 (ed. Theodor Mommsen, MGH AA 11, *Chronica minora* 2, Berlin 1894/München 1981) 266–295.

⁵⁴ I paraphrase Martin, *Géographie* 367.