# The etymologies of Isidore of Seville and the Greco-Roman culture transmission in Visigothic Spain

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**ABSTRACT.** This article presents a reading of the Etymologies of Isidore of Seville, a seventeenth-century Spanish bishop, as a manual of instruction for clerics and laity, which main guidelines were the transmission (and emulation) of Greco-Roman culture in Visigothic Spain. Considering Isidore as an educator, we place his work in the Visigothic context to understand how his manual presents contents of Greco-Roman culture as an ideal worthy of emulation, with special emphasis on government, history, the liberal arts, nature, human beings, and society. The establishment and legitimacy of the Visigothic Kingdom were related to the method of reproducing Roman manuscripts, an activity that was highly intensified under the guidance of Bishop Isidore of Seville: Royal counselor, administrator of monasteries and 'bishop schools', where men were trained to be agents both for the royal and ecclesiastic powers. As a major Church authority in the peninsula, he helped to consolidate the legitimacy of the Visigothic Kingdom in the territory. The analysis of the best-known work by the bishop of Seville reveals both the appraisal and the use of the classical roman culture in the rising 'barbarian' kingdom, as well as exposes the mindset and conceptions about the world and the society within that context.

**Keywords:** medieval education; Isidore of Seville; Christian paideia; 7th century.

## As etimologias de Isidoro de Sevilha e a transmissão da cultura greco-romana na Espanha Visigoda

**RESUMO**. Este artigo realiza uma leitura das Etimologias de Isidoro de Sevilha, bispo espanhol do século VII, como um manual de formação de clérigos e leigos, tomando com eixo principal de análise a transmissão (e a emulação) da cultura greco-romana na Espanha Visigoda. Tomando Isidoro como um educador, inserimos sua obra no contexto visigodo para compreender de que maneira seu manual apresenta conteúdos da cultura greco-romana como ideais e dignos de serem emulados, com especial ênfase para o governo, a história, as artes liberais, a natureza, o homem e a sociedade. O estabelecimento e a legitimação do reino visigodo estariam conectados com o método da reprodução de manuscritos da cultura romana, ações que atingiram um ápice sob o comando do bispo Isidoro de Sevilha: conselheiro real, administrador dos monastérios e 'escolas de bispo', que criariam homens aptos para serem agentes do poder régio e eclesiástico. Ele foi a maior autoridade da igreja na península, ajudando a consolidar a legitimidade do reino visigodo no território. A análise da mais conhecida obra do bispo de Sevilha revela tanto a valoração quanto o uso da cultura clássica romana no nascente reino 'bárbaro', como expõe a mentalidade e as concepções de mundo e sociedade daquele contexto.

**Palavras-chave**: educação medieval; Isidoro de Sevilha; paideia cristã; século VII.

## Las etimologías de Isidoro de Sevilla y la transmisión de la cultura grecorromana en España Visigoda

**RESUMEN.** Este artículo realiza una lectura de las Etimologías de Isidoro de Sevilla, obispo español del siglo VII, como un manual de formación de clérigos y laicos, tomando con eje principal de análisis la transmisión (y la emulación) de la cultura grecorromana en España Visigoda. Tomando Isidoro como un educador, insertamos su obra en el contexto visigodo para comprender de qué manera su manual presenta contenidos de la cultura grecorromana como ideales y dignos de ser emulados, con especial énfasis para el gobierno, la historia, las artes liberales, la naturaleza, el hombre y la sociedad. El establecimiento y legitimación del reino visigodo estarían conectados con el método de la reproducción de manuscritos de la cultura romana, acciones que alcanzaron un ápice bajo el mando del Obispo Isidoro de Sevilla: consejero

real, administrador de los monasterios y 'escuelas de obispo', que crearían hombres aptos para ser agentes del poder regio y eclesiástico. Él fue la mayor autoridad de la Iglesia en la península, ayudando a consolidar la legitimidad del reino visigodo en el territorio. El análisis de la obra más conocida del obispo de Sevilla revela tanto la valoración como el uso de la cultura clásica romana en el naciente reino 'bárbaro', como expone la mentalidad y las concepciones de mundo y sociedad de aquel contexto.

**Palabras-claves**: educación medieval; Isidoro de Sevilla; paideia cristiana; siglo VII.

## Introduction

Isidore of Seville (560-636), Seventh century Spanish bishop, was an author of several theological treatises (Gilson, 2007), some of which intended to set an identity for the religious leaders before the secular leaders, and were used, amongst other things, in the education of training clerics (Silva & Rainha, 2010). His book of sentences (*sententiae*), one of these treaties, seeks to correct theological errors and prevent the diffusion of evil, centering his discussion about human life on the notion of sin: "Human life is the stage of the struggle between virtues and vices [...]" (Feldman, 2010, p. 176). Moving towards God or away from Him would depend on its spirituality or its worldliness. The human body should be rigidly controlled, repressed and contained. (Feldman, 2010).

He produced his materials for use in episcopal and monastic schools. Both of them were mostly spaces for the education and training of new members of the clergy. The first was connected to the central church and, the latter was found in the monasteries. The opening of such schools to the laity is a phenomenon from the later centuries in the History of Education (see Hilsdorf, 2012, p. 12 and following).

His most famous work is undoubtedly the *Etymologies* or the *Origins*. They

> [...] formed a type of encyclopedic memento organized in twenty books, two of which were equally suited by these titles. Isidore believed, and so he persuaded his mass of readers, that primitive nature and the very essence of things are recognized in the etymology of the names by which they are designated. When the natural etymology of something is not known, one can always create one *ad propositum* for the necessities of the cause. True or false, not rarely witty, and sometimes ridiculous, Isidore's Etymologies were transmitted throughout the generations until the end of the Middle Ages. (Gilson, 2007, p. 177, our translation).

While considering the wittiness of his etymologies, we cannot ignore the fact that they were part of a medieval context of understanding knowledge and language:

> Medieval etymologies most certainly did not excel in scientific accuracy. If the interpretation given to the origins of the words was not always true (and was at times even ridiculous), frequently it was *bene trovata*. Anyhow, for them, the functioning of language was different, and they thought of language as something savory, bearer of news about a reality. (Lauand, 2004, p. 2, our translation).

Words have a special flavor and should be slowly tasted so that its essence can be apprehended. But it is not only a matter of relationship with language but also of education of those surrounding the individual. To educate, in this case, means to transmit (to emulate) the ancient culture to the barbarian peoples. But the gap between the way of thinking of Greeks, Romans and that of Germanics was far too great, and, therefore, transmitting ancient culture meant summarizing it, simplifying it:

> An educator with vision and with a sharp pastoral sensibility, the Sevillian identifies the problem of his time: as to severe cultural necessities, the more precarious is the base of knowledge (acquired and available...), the more urgent. And he finds the pedagogical solution in this formula: opuscules that condensate what is essential, in a way that is easily accessible to memory (Lauand, 2002, p. 4-5, our translation).

If in the medieval universities Isidore and Boecio were not read any longer as basic textbooks (Hilsdorf, 2012), Isidore's Etymologies were still quoted by Thomas Aquino (Lauand, 2004; 2005). And as important as being quoted by a medieval author is the fact that he continues to be present in the History of Education manuals, considering that his name is potentially present in the instruction of future educators. But in which way?

Despite being read and reread along the Middle Ages, few words are written about him in the History of Education manuals, perhaps as everything that has been produced in that period. We selected some examples for illustration. In the book of Franco Cambi, for example, Isidore is someone who dedicates himself:

[...] to the construction of an encyclopedic knowledge organized through the study of etymologies, which allows us to know the true essence of things (man = *homo* = *humus* = earth) and estimates knowledge as analysis. Besides, Isidore delineates a 'philosophy of temporality' (Aléssio) based on the principle of progressive degradation, thus, giving us a pessimistic view that is typical of almost all the Middle Ages (Cambi, 1999, p. 164, emphasis in the original, our translation).

For Lorenzo Luzuriaga, Isidore is a notable example of such authors who wrote pedagogical encyclopedias in the Middle Ages, being, "[...] for some, the perfect representation of medieval culture. He created numerous schools and is the author of the famous Etymologies which served as texts in the schools of the Middle Ages" (Luzuriaga, 1985, p. 90, our translation).

Francisco Larroyo mentions Isidore as the author of the Etymologies, a book used in monastic schools. For him, this work "[...] was a true encyclopedia of all that was known of his time" (Larroyo, 1970, p. 273, our translation). René Hubert (1976) only mentions him among the encyclopedists of the time, whereas we do not find any direct references in Manacorda (1989).

Authors citing Isidore, in general, along with Boecio (470-525) and Cassiodore (468 -562?), emphasize his position as a medieval educator, who, through a culture of an encyclopedic character, was accountable for the transmission of classical culture in an organized way in his Etymologies. This brief outline from manuals in the area shows how this unanimity hides our ignorance of his work, especially if our approach comes from the History of Education.

In the Context of this dossier, which seeks to show medieval sources concerning the educational issue, we decided for a reading of Isidore´s Etymologies from the perspective of a text inserted in the space-time of Visigothic (and Roman, and Christian) Spain, which, in his exercise of synthesis of the Greco-Roman knowledge, seeks to preserve this knowledge to perform an educative process. In these terms, we seek to map out the work to present shreds of evidence of the Roman ideals that Isidore proposed to emulate in Visigothic Spain. For this paper, we worked with the English translation of the text (Barney, Lewis, Beach, & Berghof, 2006).

## The etymologies inserted in a Visigothic context

The path of the Visigoths, from their entrance in the Roman territory to their settlement and independence, was marked by several conflicts and alliances. Rome´s sacking by Alaric is one of the most famous events in this course. But, among these disputes, Visigoths became increasingly Romanized, abandoning their traditional customs, their religion (deeply connected with their former lifestyle, as with their ancient lands) and even their language in favor of something new. By the time Visigoths finally settled in their new kingdom in the Iberian Peninsula, their religion was Christian, their language Romanized, and their political and social customs were deeply altered due to their relationship with the Romans. (Thompson, 1963).

The Iberian Peninsula, despite being under Visigothic rule, still maintained a sizeable Roman population, who thought of themselves as Romans even with the dissolution of the Western Roman State, and initially regarded Visigoths more as a foreign conqueror than a legitimate government. The Arian Christianity worshiped by Visigoths at the time were considered heretical by the Nicenic majority (Thompson, 1962). When they finally settled in the territory as official rulers, such was the situation of Visigoths, for being now the 'official ruler', and not any more mere invaders, settled immigrants, or federated to the empire, they would have to learn to adapt and organize themselves in their new kingdom, and seek ways to legitimize themselves among the native populations.

Visigoths entered the roman territories more as a large mass of immigrants than invaders, and for this reason, there were moments that cultural exchange, marriages, and alliances between Roman and Visigothic families were more common than armed conflicts. The *Adoptio,* for example, a practice in which noble Roman families adopted members of other families, guaranteeing their status as a way of sealing alliances, was used with Visigothic noblemen, who incorporated this practice as their own (Frighetto, 2005). As time passed, a lot of the Visigothic nobility would behave as Roman patricians in their proprieties much more than their ancestors would have done. Conflicts between Romans and Visigoths were much more provoked by Visigoths's desire to have their own permanent lands to settle and have a place inside the Empire, whereas they faced the Empire's resistance to granting them such lands, than by a war during which the loser would be destroyed, enslaved or sacked in behalf of the winner (Thompson, 1963).

When federated, Visigoths fought side-by-side with Romans to defend the Empire against other foreign invaders, the most notorious of whom were the Huns. They maintained their loyalty to the Empire until the moment when the Roman state found itself in such a condition of bankruptcy that Visigoths considered more advantageous to have their kingdom in the lands they occupied than serving an Empire that no longer had any real power. But even with this new independence, Visigoths still had the classical Roman civilization as a great model to be followed.

One of the connections that Visigoths had with Romans was the Christian religion. Visigoths converted gradually to Christianity since they first entered the imperial territory; although we currently do not know exactly why they converted to Aryanism and massively remained as such for so long, we can assume that the fact that Aryanism saw their prophet as a mortal man could have been decisive. Later on, identifying themselves as Aryanists could have been a differentiation between their identity and that of the Nicenic Romans, since the difference of religious option between Arianism and the Nicenic Church was one of the forms of cultural differentiation between a Visigoth and a Roman, mainly in the time of the independence of the rise of the kingdom.

Christianity is a scholarly religion, as reading is required by those who seek to understand the divine word, and, not coincidently, it is called 'religion of the book'. After Constantine, it gained a considerable amount of influence in Roman schools and academies. Particularly in the west, Christian scholars dedicated themselves to the study of language and were well prepared for the teaching of the liberal arts in the Roman academies. The staff produced by the church and Christianity was, therefore, capacitated to teach and alphabetize the young nobles and patricians, and to serve in administrative offices since the Roman State as its successors (Marrou, 1973).

That would also be true in the independent Visigothic kingdom, the Church would be present and would help in the administration of the kingdom, and were also Royal councilors of the Visigothic kings, as they would have not only indispensable staff for the kingdom to be appropriately administrated, but they could also be teachers of the Visigothic nobility and their future kings. This close relationship would finally allow Bishop Leander of Seville to convert King Reccared to the Nicenic Catholicism after various ideological conflicts, some of which with bloodshed, what would finally officially transform the Visigothic kingdom in a Catholic kingdom.[1]

This conversion allowed the Church to be much closer to the royal Visigothic power, eventually allowing Leander´s brother, Isidore, to have a much more meaningful, lasting and impactful presence as a royal councilor and authority of the Church in the peninsula. Isidore used his influence and the dependency that the kingdom created with the Church to organize a network of monasteries and bishop schools that would use the teaching methods of the Roman academies for the alphabetization and teaching of the liberal arts, as well as the study of Christianity, to educate agents that would fulfill the missionary work of the Church, as well as help sustain the royal power, favoring its legitimation and organization. (Silva, 2014).

The Iberian Peninsula possessed a great diversity of peoples and cultures living together, and the 'addition' of the Visigoths to this melting pot was not something new (Feldman, 2007). But, along with the kingdom becoming officially, Nicenic comes an unprecedented unity and 'homogeneity', a sense of common identity that had not been felt since the golden times of the Roman Empire. This feeling of identity would be one of the cornerstones in which Isidore would work as a bishop (and as a counselor of kings), seeking to legitimize this unity not only religiously, but culturally and historically as well (Crouch, 1994).

Thus, with conversion and the help of the church, the Visigothic kingdom gained not only legitimacy among the Roman Catholic populations, but a staff network that allowed the royal power to count on a much more efficient administration and resolution in internal conflicts, seeking proximity to what once was the Roman state. In exchange, the kingdom would give the church the necessary resources to maintain its network of monasteries, churches and bishop schools. That would create a relationship of codependence between the two powers, which would eventually cause one not to exist without the other.

## Laws and Times

The Etymologies contain an ample array of subjects, and those who read them could say that they had a vast content knowledge about both spiritual and worldly matters, written in an attempt to summarize all knowledge that would be available to Isidore at the time (Barney et al, 2006).

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[1] On Reccared's conversion see Feldman (2007, p. 16).

When we read the text, we realize the author establishes a direct connection between the word and the essence of the represented object as an implicit starting point. It is, thus, possible to explain the origin, meaning and importance, and the sense expressed by the word. For example, 'sun' comes from '*Solis*', because the sun is alone in the sky, 'human', comes from '*humus*', (earth, clay) because human beings would have come from the soil.

The use of Latin attests to the importance that was given to it and, more generally, to the classical Roman culture, as it would be the 'purest' language in existence, endowed with the innate capacity of containing the essence of objects. The Roman Empire was understood as the Empire of God on Earth. The fact that the principality was formed at the same time Jesus would have been born would not be mere chance, but a carefully planned providence of the divine. As we will discuss further ahead, the conception of divine providence would also be attributed to the existence of the Visigothic kingdom and its attempt to emulate the Roman Empire. With this understanding of the world, Isidore's Etymologies were written and were intended to serve as a tool for a greater purpose: to contribute to the rise of a Christian kingdom that would be heir to classical culture. Therefore, even though the work was written under 'barbaric' rule, the classical laws, customs, tools, ways of organization, and even thinkers would be its greatest references. As Gilson recollects:

> Many works were consecrated as the sources of Isidore of Seville, but they are not the sources of thought, but a dictionary. Still, such studies are very useful, as they allow us to see how the residue of general classical knowledge accumulated by classical Latin culture was formed, and this must have been the first groundwork on which high Middle Ages Europe would live on. (Gilson, 2007, p. 177, our translation).

Book V: Laws and Times (Barney et al, 2006, p. 117 and following) is a good start point to observe the role of classical culture in Visigothic Spain, and the value of Rome for the kingdom. This book begins with the definitions of laws, their types, and their importance to that society. It describes the general types of laws and rules. Military laws, for example, were, according to Isidore, common to all the peoples, despite the differences in their forms and applications. He would later proceed to the types of laws that were more specifically roman products, being more elaborated and serving more appropriately to a more complex society. In the first moment, Isidore recognizes the existence of social organizations and administrations in other peoples, not assuming 'barbarians' lack capacity in this sense, but still placing Rome as a great reference for having it achieved higher levels in social organization.

As regards 'times', there is an extensive timeline in which all human history is told until Isidore´s 'contemporary' times, i.e. when he wrote his book. It begins with the biblical narrative, pointing to when he believes were the dates of the most important events, sometimes also referencing important dates in Greco-Roman history, especially those after Christ´s martyrdom, a time when Augustus effectively became the 'first emperor'. He thus creates a continuity, where the history of the Roman Empire is a direct sequence from the biblical narrative, repeating this strategy with the Visigoths, introducing the most important dates related to their entry in the Roman territories until their settlement in the Iberian Peninsula, amongst other important dates as an independent kingdom, specially the time of Reccared´s conversion, which is a turning point in the transformation of the kingdom into a catholic kingdom, and which would completely seal the existence of the royal power with the existence of the Church[2].

This continuous timeline from the biblical narrative to the times of the Visigothic kingdom makes it appears as if one were a direct result of the other, a divine providence now uniting the supposedly brave and innate valor and virtue of Visigoths to the 'superior and pure' culture of Romans, to the revelation of the divine truth. There would be an effort of 'identity creation' for the new kingdom, emphasizing that the Visigothic presence and leadership, the Roman culture, and the Christian presence of the church were inseparable for the creation of a kingdom that would be the true heir to the Roman and Christian traditions.

This timeline would not be the only elaboration in favor of creating an identity for the Visigothic kingdom created by Isidore. His exaltations of the Iberian Peninsula and Spain are a very clear example of this, again considering the settlement of Visigoths in this beautiful and fertile land, with adequate climate, God's providence. In this sense, the ideal people to lead an ideal kingdom in an ideal land, together with the true religion, and the most polished culture, would result in a perfect fusion to create a 'kingdom of God'.

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[2] This link between the kingdom and the Church power is developed by Silva and Rainha (2010) in *A educação dos leigos no reino visigodo: reflexões sobre a Vita sancti Aemiliani*. Also Aherne (1966) *Late Visigothic bishops, their schools and the transmission of culture*.

Parallel to this 'identity', created with an appeal to a connection with three distinct pasts, the Visigoth, the Roman and the biblical, there would be a project, that would seek to make use of this identity and effectively create a Christian kingdom that would be the successor of Rome, and for that, the roman laws would be taken into great regard.

## Liberal Arts

Being almost a 'manual to the world', made to educate the agents of the State and of the Church, and that would allow any reader to be learned even if they had no access to a great deposit of books, the Etymologies are a manifestation of the values that were intended to be preserved in the context in which they were written, as well as in the following centuries. The first three books of the Etymologies, on the liberal arts, constitute the appropriate set of tools of education in this period, used to educate the ones that would be the ideal agents of the royal power and that of the church.

Isidore cites his authors in several ways, depending on the subject he intends to talk about. Many times, for example, he mentions Cicero (also citing names as Aristotle, Quintilian) to refer to more serious and conceptual questions of rhetoric, philosophy, and the way that these should be applied and taught; and passages of Virgil and Lucan were included to demonstrate the use of daily and mundane or descriptive words that he had just used, for example, when talking about the name of the carriages that matrons used or for natural descriptions about the positioning of stars and constellations.

The fact that Isidore had access to these works and used them to make his Etymologies is an evidence of the value and vision placed upon these works as extremely necessary, which value is reinforced by the institution of the bishop schools and the copyist monasteries, which would use this material, reproduce it, and use it as a means to create their ideal agents for the church and kingdom.

As proposes Marrou (1973), Christianity developed itself in the West as a 'scholar religion' by excellence, and knowing how to read is essential for understanding and being educated in the Christian culture, and appreciating the divine Word. And the way alphabetization was held in this context made the works of the classical pagan authors and philosophers necessary, especially for the young. The existence of manuscripts of these works was indispensable for teaching the youth how to read and write, as well as to make those who study in the bishop schools and monasteries more capable agents. It is noteworthy that Isidore himself recognized that these works should be analyzed and studied even if only for the need to know them to be able to reject them.

The first three books are about the liberal arts, their use, and importance, and how the world would be organized and defined according to them. For example, mathematics is utilized to decipher and understand the natural world, and Grammar is important for speaking and correctly conveying information.

Through these books, we can start to analyze Isidore's writings in the way knowledge was organized, valued and how it was used both for the interpretation of the world and to validate a project of a stable and prosper kingdom, mirroring that of Rome.

For such, education played an essential role, not only for the status of the Christian religion as 'scholarly', requiring its followers to be able to read to interpret the divine word, but also for the training of individuals capable of acting as ecclesiastical and royal agents. The methods of alphabetization were emulated from the roman academies and schools, and for manuscripts of the classical poets, philosophers, and writers, whether pagan or not, would be necessary (Marrou, 1973).

The use of a Greco-Roman heritage is evident from the first definitions in the first concepts in Isidore's work, through the adoption of terms and words from the liberal disciplines as the basis for all the organization of knowledge that would be conducted in the continuity of the work. Isidore considers classical culture as the key to having an organized knowledge about human beings, society and the world, and also as the tools that would enable them to educate human beings to receive this knowledge.

> Discipline and art (*De disciplina et arte*) A discipline (*disciplina*) takes its name from 'learning' (*discere*), whence it can also be called 'knowledge' (*scientia*). Now 'know' (*scire*) is named from 'learn' (*discere*) because none of us knows unless we have learned. A discipline is so named in another way, because 'the full thing is learned' (*discitur plena*). And an art (*ars*, gen. *artis*) is so called because it consists of strict (*artus*) precepts and rules. Others say this word is derived by the Greeks from the word αρετε, that is, 'virtue', as they termed knowledge. Plato and Aristotle would speak of this distinction between art and discipline: an art consists of matters that can turn out in different ways, while discipline is concerned with things that have only one possible outcome. Thus, when something is

expounded with true arguments, it will be a discipline; when something merely resembling the truth and based on opinion is treated, it will have the name of an art. (Barney et al., 2006, p. 39, author's emphasis)

Liberal disciplines are so called by Isidore for being based on 'true arguments' and only having 'one possible result'. That is, by applying a technique from a liberal discipline to some situation, there can be only one possible solution for that situation. Mathematics is in this sense a liberal discipline, for its techniques results in specific outcomes whenever it is applied. It is a language of 'truth' in the interpretation of the world.

Grammar, i.e., the way of correctly expressing and transmitting ideas as the first discipline to be analyzed is not only an arbitrariness but the first step to effectively establishing a 'knowledge manual'. It starts with the definition of the transmission of knowledge tools and moves on to the concepts that these tools could be used to define, construct and organize. Just as Christianity is a way where there is only one possible result, salvation and truth, the disciplines, also based on 'true arguments', would lead to only one possible result. We can then assume the preservation and existence of these disciplines to build a Christian kingdom as providential.

 Rhetoric as a liberal art (book II) was also greatly esteemed:

founders of the art of rhetoric (*De inventoribus rhetoricae artis*) This discipline was invented by the Greeks, by Gorgias, Aristotle, and Hermagoras, and was carried over into Latin culture by Cicero and Quintilian [and Titianus], but so copiously and variously that it is easy for a reader to wonder at it, but impossible to grasp it fully. For while one has a treatise on rhetoric in hand, the sequence of its content as it were clings to the memory, but when it is set aside all recollection of it soon slips away. Accomplished knowledge of this discipline makes one an orator (Barney et al., 2006, p. 69, author's emphasis)

The fact that Isidore participated in ecclesiastical councils and was a royal counselor in a highly competitive and complex court makes his approach to rhetoric and its importance for coherent argumentation interesting. Contrarily to what is observed in often reproduced stereotypes of the medieval period, based on anachronic concepts that the church would have an almost 'totalitarian' authority, responding with torture to any divergence in the field of ideas, which completely ignores the complexity and changes that occurred over the medieval and ecclesiastical history, an attempt to create an environment where argumentation and resolution of conflicts were as close as possible to the Roman senate (or of an idealization of it), so as to distance themselves from the warrior tradition of the Visigoths, is found. Armed conflicts and assassination of Visigothic kings and leaders were seen as an obstacle for the consolidation of a strong and prosper kingdom.

As to mathematics (book III), this was a liberal discipline and also used to interpret the world in which human beings are inserted. In this book, not only elementary issues of 'odds and evens' are addressed, but it also contains an understanding of the cosmological operation of the universe as it was known. The four arts of the Quadrivium (Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy) had their space in this part of the work. As to the latter, the 'superstition' called 'astrology' was already opposed to by the pagans, who condemned it:

Not only those learned in the Christian religion, but also Plato, Aristotle, and others among the pagans, were moved by the truth of things to agree in condemning this in their judgment, saying that confusion of matters was generated by such a belief. For if humans are forced towards various acts by the compulsion of their nativity, then why should the good deserve praise, and why should the wicked reap the punishment of law? And although these pagan sages were not devoted to heavenly wisdom, nevertheless they rightly struck down these errors by their witness to the truth. But clearly, that order of the seven secular disciplines was taken by the philosophers as far as the stars, so that they might draw minds tangled in secular wisdom away from earthly matters and set them in contemplation of what is above (Barney et al, 2006, p. 107).

In this book, there is an established and perfect order in everything, and it is left for humans to simply learn and decipher this perfect order established by God. And the tools of these disciplines were the most certain pathways to achieve this result. From numbers, separated and organized into different types, to the geocentric cosmological order, everything should be perfectly aligned, organized, and stable, demonstrating the desire to reach this Order and Stability, and considering organized knowledge as a means to it.

## Nature, Human Beings, and Society

As to Nature, a theme addressed in books XII, XIII, XIV and XVI ('Animals', 'The Cosmos and its parts', 'Earth and its parts', and 'Stones and Metals', respectively), geocentrism and the perception that every detail in the world is perfectly placed and related by divine providence are combined with Isidore's

etymological definitions where an essential relationship between word and object would be established. There would be a providential connection of the words that defined creation. If the cosmos is a perfect and exact creation by a perfect God, the definitions of its essences and concepts should seek to be equally exact and perfect. To a contemporary reader, Isidore's conceptions may appear somewhat 'poetic' when we observe the way the universe is constituted. For example, the sun, when it sets, would plunge itself into the Ocean, traveling under the Earth, 'nourishing' itself by waters. This would be the reason why we would often see sun moist and dewy. We have to remember, however, that the understanding that this would be the 'path of the sun' is simply a coherent way that empirical observation would have produced in that context, and that this 'way' would simply be a piece of a perfect architecture put together by the divine.

Thus, the very descriptor 'Sun' (*solis*, as it is alone) as the name of the path it runs through (the milky way – as it is a white path) mirrors the conception that such objects occupy a specific and architected place, reflected in their very names and words that refer to their respective objects. The natural world, animals, the parts of the world and how it is formed are analyzed and named by words that contain the essence of the object, reflecting their providential place in the divine architecture.

The book of animals is mainly about the relationship between animals and humans and how the former is used by the latter. Not coincidently, 'cattle and beasts of burden' is the first item in this chapter. Animals that are not used by humans are described and when possible analyzed as regards how much damage they can cause to human beings. The blend of Greek-Latin definitions of the terms are explained through Christianity, which means that the Latin and Greek names offer no contradiction with the belief that Adam named all animals of creation. The existence of mythological beasts seems to be, according to Isidore's descriptions, as real as the non-mythological ones. Therefore, dragons and leviathans occupy the same space in these individuals' imagination of reality as a dog or an ox.

While addressing the various stones and metals, Isidore includes them both in the Christian cosmos and as a utility for human society, describing each metal in terms of how it is refined and what they are used for.

Considering that the names of the items mentioned in this chapter somehow indicate their use, relating their existence to their purpose, one may run the risk of assuming an anachronic view and associating an apparent 'utilitarianism' in the naming of these items, since, for example, iron and gold do not exist as 'independent' elements, but as items to be used by the human being, and their naming is given as a direct relation to their 'utility. But, this book is not entirely different than the previous ones as regards the explanation of the existence of things in the world and the origin of the words, and follows the same principle that, if something exists, it is because God put this something there for some higher purpose, such as being used in the manufacturing of tools.

Hence, contrarily to a simply 'utilitarian' view, the conception therein presented is that a certain mineral exists precisely to fulfill a purpose, just as all the rest of Creation. Therefore, knowing about it and how to use and name it is the duty of human beings as an equally divine creation and an instrument to carry out His will.

The description of Nature adopted by Isidore has to do precisely with its relation to human beings, what their place within divine creation is, and how they can interpret it in the best possible way. In this sense, we see that the purposes of Isidore´s definitions are still the same, naming and analyzing the existence and essence of these parts of nature, estimating the direct relationship between the object and the word, and understanding how these fit into the providential divine architecture.

Iron exists for human beings to make tools from it, and this is the reason why God created it and made it available to them. This applies in different ways to other minerals, and this is how the same logic is finally used while referring to animals:

> Iron (*De ferro*) Iron (*ferrum*) is so named because it buries the grain (*far*) of the earth, that is, the seeds of crops. It is also called chalybs ('sword,' lit. 'steel') from the river Chalybs where iron is tempered to have the best edge. Whence the material itself is also loosely called *chalybs* as in (Vergil, Aen. 8.446): And the wound-inflicting steel (*chalybs*). The use of iron was discovered after that of the other metals. Later this kind of metal was turned into a symbol of opprobrium, for long ago by iron the earth was plowed, but now by iron blood is shed. (Barney et al, 2006, p. 331, author's emphasis).

Therefore, to a great extent, whilst considering nature, Isidore analyzed tools that God made available to human beings (which use can be bad, corrupting their more correct applications). In this regard, glass and coinage are included in the same list as iron and gold, which are items sometimes refined, or created and forged by human beings from the elements of earth at their service.

Another group of books of the Etymologies can shed more light on the theme of 'human beings' and how they were conceived in this period. In this sense, whether when Isidore refers to the human being or their occupations in several sectors of the society, he demonstrates once again that there is a 'providential order' in the way society must organize itself, using the essence that is supposedly contained in the words that define parts of the human body, crafts and the manufacturing of artifacts, tools, household items, and even ships precisely to explain the way humans organize themselves, and the supposed motivation for it.

The divine architecture, where everything fits in the cosmos, the natural world, and the earth, is emulated and reproduced in the parts of the human body, in the relationship between the sexes, and the position between the crafts and offices in society.

The essence of these terms is contained in the words since 'nature' would be so called, because it causes the birth of something (*natura, nasci*), and would be the means through which things are engendered and created. 'Nature', therefore, is something that causes something to be born and creates life. So, life is named precisely for meaning 'vigor' and having the power of generating something and making it grow. Everything that is born and grows is, therefore, alive and, hence, belongs to nature. This affirmation leads to the supposition that, if something 'natural' and 'living' is what makes something be born and created, the association of homosexuality as something 'unnatural' for not involving 'reproduction' and, therefore, not being embraced by the 'force (*vis*) of life', originates from the 'biblical narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah. When referring to the human body, Isidore brings up Cicero and Paul the Apostle together to explain the etymology of the word hand:

> The hand (*manus*) is so called because it is in the service (*munus*) of the whole body, for it serves food to the mouth and it operates everything and manages it; with its help we receive and we give. With strained usage, *manus* also means either a craft or a craftsman – whence we also derive the word for wages (*manupretium*, lit. "hand-price"). The 'right hand' (*dextra*) is so called from 'giving' (*dare*), for it is given as a pledge of peace. It is comprehended as a sign of good faith and greeting, and this is the sense in Cicero Against Catiline 3.8: "At the command of the Senate I gave a pledge of protection," that is, his right hand. Whence also the Apostle [says (Galatians 2:9): "They gave their right hands to me"]. The 'left hand' (*sinixtra*, i.e. sinistra) is so called as if the word were derived from 'without the right hand' (*sine dextra*), or as if it 'permitted' something to happen, because sinixtra is derived from 'permitting' (*sinere*) (Barney et al., 2006, p. 235, author's emphasis).

While describing the human being, he starts by assuming that they come from the soil (*humus*). Therefore, being human is being 'brought up from the soil of the earth'. This and other terms as the 'soul' derive directly from Greek and Latin terms in pagan concepts, but, unlike astrology, Isidore does not oppose to these concepts, but adapt them to a Christian interpretation of the human being, the soul, etc. Therefore, by not completely defying and being adaptable to the Christian understanding, even Greco-Roman pagan concepts could be preserved to explain and define human beings and the world around them. In this sense, this adaptability would also be seen as 'providence'.

Finally, some books discuss the way society organizes itself, how the layout of the cities and the kingdom should be to have it work appropriately, and the various elements that constitute the movements within this society. Society was understood consonantly with the conceptions of a perfectly structured architecture, again alluding to a supposed divine providence. In these terms, Roman society is again the major example of cultural and social operation. The Roman Empire having been consolidated concurrently with the birth of Jesus was interpreted as a divine signal. Rome would thus be the materialization of the divine Empire and it was up for Visigoths to emulate it.

According to this interpretation, there would be a 'correct', or even 'natural', way for society to be formed and consolidated. Society would also be the result of various pieces and parts being put together. As close to perfection as it should be, the social body should merely emulate certain laws and concepts understood as 'correct' to be able to prosper.

The books that refer to the fields and their constructions, as well as the city and its parts, are very revealing of the way society organizes itself. Whether in the field or the city, human beings live in a place that was built and remodeled by themselves. A strong and organized society would be the one in which the habitations of humans should be properly organized and related to one another. And ancient knowledge would help to guarantee the prosperity of the fields:

> The cultivation of fields (*De cultura agrorum*) Cultivation (*cultura*) is how crops or wines are procured with great labor, so called from 'inhabiting' (*incolere*; cf. *colere*, ppl. *cultus*, 'cultivate'). The wealth of the ancients inhered in

two things: good pasturing and good tilling. The cultivation of fields involves ashes, plowing, lying fallow, burning of stubble, dunging, hoeing, and weeding. (Barney et al., 2006, p. 337, author's emphasis).

The city is present both in Greco-Roman history and in the biblical narrative, and Isidore explicitly mentions cities that are important to both traditions. For someone immersed in the context where these traditions are major references, the city may have been understood as a natural result of human organization, where rigid discipline and organization would be necessary for its appropriate functioning. The following logic stands out, according to this view: humans inevitably build cities, and even the fields connected to them; every city needs organization, even more so if it expands into a kingdom or an Empire:

> Public buildings (*De aedificiis publicis*) A city (*civitas*) is a multitude of people united by a bond of community, named for its 'citizens' (civis), that is, from the residents of the city (*urbs*) [because it has jurisdiction over and 'contains the lives' (*contineat vitas*) of many]. Now *urbs* (also 'city') is the name for the actual buildings, while *civitas* is not the stones, but the inhabitants. There are three kinds of communities (*societas*): households, cities (urbs), and nations (*gens*). 'City' (*urbs*) is from 'circle' (*orbis*), because ancient cities were made circular, or from 'plow-handle'(*urbus*), a part of the plow by which the site of the walls would be marked out. Whence this (Vergil, Aen. 3.109 combined with 1.425): And he chose a seat for his kingdom, and marked out the limits with a furrow. (Barney et al., 2006, p. 305, author's emphasis)

Kingdoms and Empires, as they were seen as a group of cities and fields, need discipline and order. Nothing better in that regards as being ruled by disciplined humans, and the best way to achieve that is by training them in the disciplines and arts that would enable them to create and maintain a lasting order.

In this regard, the liberal disciplines, the classical and Christian traditions, and the conjunction of them all as organizational tools would be understood as an inevitable result of the human condition. The divine providence would have led humanity to produce these pure forms of organization, expression, knowledge, and discipline so they would be able to create an organized and ordered society comparable to the natural world (after all, the latter was divine creation). Human beings would be an instrument of the divine word, and the natural environment around them would be an example of this recreation.

When discussing society, Isidore does not simply mention how it would work in its 'ideal' or 'harmonic' condition, but he also mentions issues that he considers obstacles to its functioning, but which nevertheless exist, such as the theater and violent sporting games, which he condemned for being associated, in his view, with prostitution or with a pagan origin. He even considers wars and military issues as an integral part of society, after all, if we look into the context of late antiquity in which Isidore lived, that was particularly true. Rival societies compete with each other, and even within themselves disputes and conflicts exist. In that regard, the fact that Rome had learned to regulate its internal conflicts through its laws would be one of the reasons why it was seen as an important model to be followed.

Precisely, as regards internal conflicts, Isidore includes them in the same book in which he examines war. Addressing specifically conflicts that were regulated by Roman law, he brings elements that constitute negotiations and judicial conflicts per se. The mechanisms that could allow society to be internally governed without bloodshed were seen as extremely favorable by Isidore, considering that the internal politics of Visigoths were particularly violent. Isidore himself was the councilor of several different kings since so many of them were assassinated.

## Final considerations

Isidore starts his work discussing the liberal arts. They were the perfect tools created by the wise of the past for the transmission of knowledge and culture to allow society to function more elaborately. Not in vain, he discusses the supposed 'creators' and 'founders' of each art and discipline, the majority of whom were Greek or Roman. The 'myth of foundation' of each liberal art merges with the 'myth of foundation' of the very Kingdom. They would all be heirs of a culture regarded as superior and 'providentially chosen', and that these men would understand as also accessible to themselves through the divine grace.

As this Grace would have made this grand cultural arsenal accessible to them, the use of pagan authors in the teaching of young Christians that would become ecclesiastical and royal agents became more tolerable, for they would be learning the 'master' language through which God´s kingdom on earth would be implemented. The preservation and continuation of what was produced by the Roman civilization would be extremely important not only for the continuity of the church and its missionary work but also for the consolidation of the 'barbarian' kingdom. It even integrated the very notion of identity of the kingdom

which Isidore was helping to create. Despite the Visigothic kingdom as such did not survive very long, the educational legacy and the work of Isidore lived on. The social, political and religious development in the process of consolidation of other Christian kingdoms would certainly not have been the same without his contributions.

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