The Visigoths in History and Legend

J. N. HILLGARTH

This book explores one of the central myths of Spain: the idea that Spanish culture arose from that of the Visigoths. It begins with a sketch of Visigothic history, then proceeds to explore attitudes towards the Goths and legends and myths that developed around them from late antiquity to the twentieth century; such ideas proved influential among those who saw the Goths as their spiritual, if not literal, ancestors. The focus is on the myth of the Goths as expressed in literature of a broadly historical nature; many authors have played a significant role in forming and shaping this myth, and thus in shaping the mentality of their contemporaries and descendants.

The Gothic myth was of great use to the different monarchies that succeeded the Goths after the Arabic invasion of 711. Visigothic kings were adopted as models by one age after another, from the rudimentary kingdom of Asturias in the ninth century to the world-monarchy of Spain under the Catholic Kings and the Habsburgs. Over the centuries, adroit “improvements” on history and even outright fabrications influenced the creation of an idealized, epic past to which Spaniards look even today. This study of the evolution and persistence of the myth of Spain’s Gothic roots is essential reading for scholars of Spanish history.
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MANUFACTURED IN CANADA
For

ROBERT BRIAN TATE,

to whose studies on medieval Spain

all historians of that country

are greatly indebted
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Abbreviations

Series

BAE Biblioteca de Autores Españoles desde la formación del lenguaje hasta nuestros días (Madrid: Rivadeneyra, 1846–88; Atlas, 1954–)

CCCM Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis (Turnhout: Brepols, 1966–)


MGH Monumenta Germaniae historic

MGH AA MGH Auctores Antiquissimi. See especially MGH AA 11 (Chronica minora saec. IV.V.VI.VII. 2, ed. Theodor Mommsen [Berlin: Weidmann, 1894])

MGH LS MGH Legum Sectio. See especially MGH LS 1.1 (Leges Visigothorum, ed. K. Zeumer [Hanover: Hahn, 1902])

MGH SRM MGH Scriptorum rerum Merovingicarum


Other Works

CCH La Colección Canónica Hispánica, ed. Gonzalo Martínez Diez and Felix Rodríguez (Madrid: Instituto Enrique Flórez, 1966–)


Preface

This book explores one of the central myths of Spain: the idea that Spanish culture arose from that of the Visigoths. It begins with a sketch of the history of the Visigoths, then proceeds to explore the attitudes, legends, and myths about the Goths which influenced those who saw them as their spiritual, if not literal ancestors. The focus is on literature; many authors have played a significant role in forming and shaping these myths, and thus in shaping the mentality of their own contemporaries and descendants.

Since the myth of the Goths developed over many centuries, this book is bound to cover a very extensive period, from late antiquity to the twentieth century. Inevitably it is indebted to many earlier explorations of Spanish history and historiography. Many names appear in the bibliography; that of Peter Linehan stands out. All students of medieval Spain are aware of Linehan’s vital contributions to Spanish historiography and especially of his monumental *History and the Historians of Medieval Spain*. I wish to say something of two older scholars to whom I am greatly indebted. I have benefited enormously, over more than forty years, from the scholarship and the personal friendship of both Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz and Jacques Fontaine. Díaz y Díaz’s patristic, linguistic and paleographical studies have illuminated many figures of the Visigothic age, most particularly Isidore of Seville, but they have ranged well beyond the period of Isidore to embrace the manuscripts, liturgical and canonical, contained in Spanish libraries. His study of the inscriptions on slate found in excavations in northern Spain stands out. While, because of their hideously difficult script, these inscriptions present great problems to decipherers, they are extremely valuable because they enable us to document for the first time the rural population of sixth and seventh century Spain. Of equal importance is Díaz y Díaz’s exploration of books and libraries. The results illustrate the transmission of classical and Christian learning – from Virgil to Augustine – in Spain down to the twelfth century. A recent book, *Asturias en el siglo VIII*, is yet another example of how Díaz y Díaz has been able to shed unexpected light on a further important, but hitherto obscure, epoch.

Díaz y Díaz’s death in 2008 has left an irreplaceable gap in Spanish studies. Jacques Fontaine is still, happily, alive. His epoch-making study of
Isidore and classical culture (1959, with an additional volume published in 1983) is known to all students of the subject. Fontaine’s work was no doubt inspired in part by Henri Irénée Marrou’s famous study, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* (1938), but it could be argued that Isidore was a more difficult subject to tackle. The seventh century in Spain is far less well known and far less well documented than the fourth century in North Africa and Italy. While the *Confessions* is far from being simply an autobiography it does offer a first approach to Augustine. There is nothing comparable, no work even in part autobiographical, in Isidore. His Letters are few and poor in comparison to Augustine’s. There is also nothing in Isidore as rich in interest to any student of the transition between antiquity and the Middle Ages as *The City of God*. Given these handicaps what Fontaine has achieved is all the more remarkable.

*Isidore de Séville et la Culture Classique dans l’Espagne Wisigothique*, which draws on Fontaine’s extraordinarily detailed knowledge of the whole of ancient learning, explores Isidore’s place in the encyclopaedic tradition. His successive studies of style in Isidore and of the diffusion of Isidore’s works have added greatly to our knowledge of his time and of succeeding centuries. At the same time, through a study and critical editions of Sulpicius Severus, Fontaine has also explored late ancient hagiography. Like Díaz y Díaz he has continued to combine archaeology with literature. His volumes on Spanish art of the fourth and later centuries are arguably as significant as his studies of late antique poetry and literature. His contributions range in subject from Tertullian to the Mozarabic writers of the ninth century.

Many more pages would be needed to describe the different ways in which Díaz y Díaz and Fontaine have enriched and indeed transformed our understanding of late ancient and early medieval Spain.

Debate continues on many of the subjects discussed in this book. I have not attempted to disguise the difficulty of writing about the early Middle Ages in Spain. Although I may comment on a manuscript which makes clear the connection (for a tenth-century artist) between Visigothic times and his own age, I am not an art historian. My ability to explore a number of other subjects is similarly limited. It is also clearly very difficult to tell to what extent a particular author reflects the general beliefs of his time.

Debate extends even to themes central to our conception of the Visigoths. Here I shall only comment on two of the modern authors whose theses have been accepted by many scholars but with whom I have to express my disagreement. Suzanne Teillet and Thomas Deswarte have written on the Visigothic monarchy and its successors. No one could deny the erudition displayed by both authors. It is only unfortunate that their works were written to demonstrate theses which are, in my view, undemonstrable, in the first case the predestined progress to greatness of the Visi-
goths, in the second the recovery of Spain after the Arabic invasion, “from
the destruction to the restoration” of the old Visigothic order. As I have
suggested in Chapter Three, what Deswarte forgets is that what was
“restored” was very different from what had been “destroyed.”

It is indisputable that “none of the successor states [to the Roman
Empire] survived unchanged into the late Middle Ages and none of the
modern peoples of Europe can claim to be the direct heir of an early
medieval gens.” But reality is often less powerful than myth and legend
and “reinvented nations need reinvented heroes.” While this is true of
many periods of history, it is certainly true of the Visigothic kings who were
enthusiastically adopted as models by one age after another, from the rudiments
of the Asturias in the ninth century to the world-monarchy of Spain under the Catholic Kings and the Habsburgs. As José Antonio
Maravall saw, “the tradition of inheritance from the Goths, which eventually
came to be accepted by the whole of Spain, while far from being an
authentic version of history,” was a central “belief” which helped to inspire
the actions of men who themselves lacked any real connection with the
Goths of the past. This belief was expressed – in an exaggerated form – in
an article published in 1983 where we are told that the birth of the Spanish
country took place in the Visigothic period and was due to the insertion of
Gothic society and institutions into the life of Roman Spain.

The dilemma faced by modern historians was clearly stated by J.M.
Wallace-Hadrill. “We can never be certain what was happening. But we
can often guess what contemporaries thought was happening.” The role
played by historians in forming the political mentality of their contemporaries and successors is one of the themes explored in this book. Here
legends play as much and often more of a role than reality.

There is much in this book that may amuse or surprise the reader
today. But, as Colin Smith pointed out, “modern critics imbued with the
rational outlook and historians of the scientific kind must not treat the
credulity of medieval thinkers with scorn nor condemn pseudo-history as

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1 See my review of Teillet, cited below, Chapter Two, n 135.
2 Walter Pohl, “The Barbarian Successor States,” in The Transformation of the
3 Hugh Kennedy, “The Mongol’s Return,” review of Genghis Khan, by John Man,
5 J.M. Alegre Peyrón, “El Nacimiento de España,” RIDS 111 (Copenhagen, 1983); I
7 Bernard Guenée, Histoire et culture historique dans l’Occident médiéval (Paris,
1980), 16.
an aberration. It is a question of the usefulness of the myth, of its purpose.”
The Gothic myth was of great use to the Visigoths as they laboured to
justify their conquest of Spain and it was to be of service to the different
monarchies that succeeded the Goths after the disaster of 711. “The myth
was a unifying force in a politically fragmented Spain.” 8 And in the twenty-
fifth century – despite the centralising efforts of General Franco and his
predecessors – Spain, under its present system of autonomías, under which
each of its seventeen provinces possesses considerable local powers, is now
even less centralised and more fragmented than it has ever been in the past.
Whether one laments this state of affairs (as Franco – and no doubt as the
Visigoths – would have done) or sees in it an (overdue) recognition of
reality, one cannot deny that it is the case.

In his book Zur Geschichte des Goticismus, Josef Svennung acknowl-
edged that Gothicism was “a history of errors,” but one with important
consequences. In England the myth of the Goths influenced the promoters
of Parliamentary views, in France the opponents of the absolute Bourbon
monarchy. 9

It would be a mistake to believe that this myth is buried in the past. A
few years ago I was assured by the then Spanish ambassador to the United
Kingdom – who appeared to be speaking entirely seriously – that all the
Spanish nobility were descended from the Goths. The myth of the Goths is
certainly still alive.

The dedication and my prefatory remarks above indicate some of my debts
to scholarly friends. The bibliography lists many other authors on whom I
have drawn.

I should express my thanks to the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval
Studies for publishing the book and in particular to Professor James Carley
and Professor James Farge, csb as well as the other members of the
Manuscript Review Committee, and to my editor, Fred Unwalla, and his
assistant, Megan Jones, for their kindness and patience. My years at the
Institute were among the happiest in my life. It is a great pleasure to see this
book so well published in Toronto.

8 Colin Smith, “History as Myth in Medieval France and Spain,” in A Medieval Mis-
cellany ... in Honour of Professor John Le Patourel, ed. R.L. Thomson (Leeds,
l'Espagne des XVIe et XVIIe siècles,” in L'Europe héritière de l'Espagne wisigoth-