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# A Visigothic king in search of an identity – *Sisebutus Gothorum gloriosissimus princeps*

During the first decade of the seventh century, the Visigothic kingdom underwent a short succession crisis, during which two consecutive kings – Liuva II (d. 603) and Witteric (d. 610) – were deposed in an aristocratic coup, and a third king – Gundemar (d. 611/612) – died shortly after ascending the throne. Marked by the continuous conflict with the Byzantine forces in the Iberian Peninsula and by the brutal factional fighting among the Visigothic nobility, this period stands in stark contrast to the long and successful rule of Leovigild (d. 586) and Reccared (d. 601).[1] It was Sisebut, the Visigothic king of Spain from 611/612 till 621, who put an end to this chaotic state.

Of all the Barbarian rulers of the post-Roman world the Visigothic King Sisebut is perhaps the most intriguing. His personality and sense of duty reflect the fusion of opposites characteristic of a transitional stage, of which religious devotion and political expediency, militarism and quasi-pacifistic Christian piety, and brutal anti-Jewish policy and poetic refinement, are the more obvious polarities. There are also, of course, other more subtle ones. He was an exceptional figure in the political scene of the post Roman world, and his writings give us a rare glimpse of the ways in which he perceived himself in relation to his environment.

Although he sat on the Visigothic throne for less than a decade, Sisebut's reign is commonly perceived as a glorious chapter in Visigothic history.[2] In many respects it was indeed a remarkable period of military success, religious transformation and vibrant intellectual activity that benefited much from the king's exceptional talents and creativity. The Frankish chronicler commonly known as Fredegar, for example, described Sisebut's reign with much admiration:

> "He [i.e. Witteric] was succeeded as king of Spain by Sisebut, a wise and most pious man, much admired throughout Spain. He had fought bravely against the Roman Empire and had won Cantabria, previously held by the Franks, for the Gothic kingdom. … Sisebut captured several of the imperial cities along the seaboard and razed them to the ground. The slaughter of the Romans by his men caused the pious Sisebut to exclaim: 'Woe is me, that my reign should witness so great a shedding of human blood!' He saved all whom he could from death. Gothic rule in Spain was established from the sea to the Pyrenees."[3]

Similarly, Isidore of Seville (d. 636), Sisebut's fellow-countryman and good friend, sung the praises of the Visigothic king in his Historia Gothorum ("History of the Goths"):

> "In the era of 650 (612), in the second year of the emperor Heraclius, Sisebut was called to the royal dignity after Gundemar, and ruled for eight years and six months. At the beginning of his reign he forced the Jews into the Christian faith, indeed acting with zeal, 'but not according to knowledge' [Romans 10, 2], for he compelled by force those who

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[1] On the history of Visigothic Spain, see Edward Arthur Thompson, The Goths in Spain (Oxford 1969); José Orlandis, Historia de España: La España Visigótica (Madrid 1977); Roger Collins, Early Medieval Spain: Unity in Diversity, 400–1000 (London [2]1995); id., Visigothic Spain (Oxford 2004). Some of the issues raised in this paper were more fully discussed in Yitzhak Hen, Roman Barbarians: The Royal Court and Culture in the Early Medieval West (London/New York 2007) 124–152.

[2] On Sisebut's reign, see Thompson, The Goths in Spain 161–168; Orlandis, Historia de España 135–142; Collins, Early Medieval Spain 66–68; id., Visigothic Spain 75–76. See also José Orlandis, Semblanzas visigodas (Madrid 1992) 105–127.

[3] Fredegar, Chronicarum libri quattuor cum continuationibus IV, 33 (ed. and trans. John-Michael Wallace-Hadrill, Fredegarii chronicorum liber quartus cum continuationibus, London 1960) 21–22: … *Sisebodus Spaniae successit in regno, vir sapiens et in totam Spaniam laudabelis valde, pietate plenissimus. Nam et adversus manum publecam fortiter demicavit, provinciam Cantabriam Gothorum regno subaegit quam aliquando Franci possederat. ... plures civitates ab imperio Romano Sisebodus litore maris abstulit et usque fundamentum destruxit. Cumque Romani ab exercito Sisebodi trucidarentur, Sisebotus dicebat pietate plenus: "Eu me misero, cuius tempore tante sanguis humanae effusio fietur!" Cuiuscumque potebat occurrere de morte liberabat. Confirmatum est regnum Gothorum in Spaniam per mare litora usque Paereneos montes.* Fredegar omits from his account Gundemar, who succeeded Witteric in 610 and was succeeded by Sisebut in 611/12.

should have been called to the faith through reason. But, as it is written, 'whether through chance or truth, Christ is to be proclaimed' [Philippians 1, 18]."[4]

Despite Isidore's criticism, Sisebut seems to have been eloquent in speech, informed in his opinions, and imbued with some knowledge of letters. He was famous for his military example and victories. Dispatching an army, he brought the rebellious Asturians under his domination. Through his generals, he overcame the Ruccones, who were protected by steep mountains on all sides. In person, he had the good fortune to triumph twice over the Romans and to subject certain of their cities to himself in battle. He was so merciful in the wake of victory that he ransomed many of the enemy who had been reduced to slavery as booty by his army, and used his treasure for the redemption of captives. Some claim that he died a natural death, others, that he died as a result of an overdose of some medication. He left a small son, Reccared, who was regarded as the king only briefly after his father's passing until his own death a few days later.[5]

Sisebut, so it seems, was perceived by his contemporaries as a praiseworthy king, whose success was judged against his achievements in three different fields – war, religion and culture. In what follows I have no intention of rehearsing in detail every known aspect of Sisebut's reign. Rather, I should like to focus on Sisebut himself and the ways in which he reflected on his duties as a king and as a Christian vis-à-vis the early seventh-century Visigothic society he lived in.

## SISEBUT, *VIR SAPIENS ET NIMIUM LITTERATURA DEDITUS*

We know nothing about Sisebut before he became king of the Visigoths, but it would not be too far fetched to assume that like many of his predecessors he was a well-connected nobleman, who rose to power through a successful military career in the service of the Visigothic king.[6] His short reign, on the other hand, is slightly better documented, and it is mainly thanks to his personal writings that we get an exceptional glimpse of his personality and worries.

Sisebut was an extremely learned ruler. His contemporaries had no doubt about it, and they openly praised his intellectual talents. Fredegar called him "wise" (*sapiens*);[7] Isidore of Seville, who was less enthusiastic about the king's talents, relates that he was "eloquent in speech, informed in his opinions, and imbued with some knowledge of letters" (*eloquio nitidus, sententia doctus, scientia litterarum ex parte inbutus*);[8] and the anonymous author of the so-called Chronicle of 754 claims that he was "a wise man of profound learning" (*vir sapiens et nimium litteratura deditus*).[9] Modern historians duly followed suit in describing him as "probably the most sophisticated of any barbarian king",[10] "a friend and protector of learning" (ami et protecteur des lettres),[11] comparable only to Alfonso X "the Wise" or Alfred the Great.[12] A closer look at Sisebut's own

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[4] Isidore of Seville, Historia Gothorum, Wandalorum, Sueborum 60–61 (ed. and trans. Cristóbal Rodríguez Alonso, León 1975) 270–274: *Aera DCL, anno imperii Heraclii II, Sisebutus post Gundemarum regali fastigio evocatur, regnans annis VIII mensibus VI. Qui initio regni Iudaeos ad fidem Christianam permovens aemulationem quidem habuit, sed non secundum scientiam; potestate enim conpulit, quos provocare fidei ratione oportuit, sed sicut scriptum est, sive per occasionem sive per veritatem donec Christus adnuntietur. Fuit autem eloquio nitidus, sententia doctus, scientia litterarum ex parte inbutus. In bellicis quoque documentis ac victoriis clarus. Astures enim rebellantes misso exercitu in dicionem suam reduxit. Ruccones montibus arduis undique consaeptos per duces evicit. De Romanis quoque praesens bis feliciter triumphavit et quasdam eorum urbes pugnando sibi subiecit. Adeo post victoriam clemens, ut multos ab exercitu suo hostili praeda in servitutem redactos pretio dato absolveret eiusque thesaurus redemptio existeret captivorum. Hunc alii proprio morbo, alii inmoderato medicamenti haustu asserunt interfectum, relicto Recaredo filio parvulo, qui post patris obitum princeps paucorum dierum morte interveniente habetur.* I cite the English translation by Kenneth Baxter Wolf, Conquerors and Chronicles of Early Medieval Spain (Liverpool 1990) 106–107.

[5] Isidore of Seville, Historia Gothorum, Wandalorum, Sueborum 60–61, ed. and trans. Rodríguez Alonso 270–274..

[6] On the succession of kings in Visigothic Spain, see José Orlandis, El poder real y la sucesion al trono en la monarqia visigoda (Rome 1962).

[7] Fredegar, Chronicae IV, 33, ed. and trans. Wallace-Hadrill 21.

[8] Isidore of Seville, Historia Gothorum 60–61, ed. and trans. Rodríguez Alonso 272 [trans. Wolf, Conquerors and Chronicles 106].

[9] Crónica mozárabe de 754, 13 (ed. and trans. Eduardo López Pereira, Zaragoza 1980) 32. I cite the English translation by Wolf, Conquerors and Chronicles 115.

[10] John-Michael Wallace-Hadrill, The Barbarian West, 400–1000 (Oxford$^3$ 1967) 124.

[11] Isidore of Seville, Traité de la nature (ed. and trans. Jacques Fontaine, Collection des Études Augustiniennes, série Moyen Âges et Temps Modernes 39, Paris 1960) 151.

[12] Isidore of Seville, Traité de la nature, ed. and trans. Fontaine 152; Collins, Early Medieval Spain 66.

correspondence and compositions clearly reveals the Visigothic king's passionate intellectual curiosity, his multifaceted erudition, and his unusual literary creativity.[13]

Five letters written by Sisebut and three addressed to him are preserved in a single late eight-century manuscript that was copied in Spain, probably in the region of Toledo.[14] This small group of letters, the remains of what seems to have been a more extensive collection, is quite extraordinary, not only because of the variety of its contents, but also for its style and tone. Indeed only five letters authored by Sisebut survive in this collection, but each deals with a completely different issue, from a polite diplomatic exchange of letters with the Byzantine governor Caesarius,[15] through pastoral guidance and theological concerns,[16] to a reprimand of bishops and interfering appointments to ecclesiastical positions.[17] All these letters bristle with biblical citations, as well as with direct and nearly direct quotations from Jerome, Sedulius, Dracontius, Avitus of Vienne and Gregory the Great – a gallery of authors that was by no means generally familiar to other barbarian kings of the early medieval West. Hence, Sisebut's use of these authors and their works indicates an unusual literary taste and a very broad scholarly spectrum.

Unlike the correspondences of other early medieval rulers, the tone of Sisebut's letters is straightforward, full of emotions and marked by a unique personal touch. When writing to the *patricius* Caesarius he is respectful and formal;[18] in his letter to his son Theudila he is the joyful and extremely proud father;[19] his true religious concern in face of Arianism is revealed in his impatient letter to the Lombard King Adaloald;[20] and his letters to Bishop Eusebius and Bishop Cilicius burst with anger.[21] These are not the formally aloof letters composed by Cassiodorus on behalf of Theoderic the Great or those sent by Ennodius of Pavia to his correspondents.[22] The undeniable personal tone in Sisebut's letters makes it highly probable that he himself composed them, or at least supervised their composition very closely.

Sisebut, however, left us much more than the five letters mentioned above. The jewel in the crown of his literary output is, no doubt, the poem on lunar eclipses (commonly known as De eclipsi lunae).[23] This poem, which is a verse epistle in sixty-one hexameters, was sent by the Visigothic king as a "thank you" present to his friend Isidore of Seville, who had dedicated his treatise De natura rerum ("On the Nature of Things") to Sisebut.[24] Yet, Sisebut's most celebrated work is the Vita Desiderii,[25] which relates the life and death of Bishop

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[13] On Sisebut's education and culture, see Pierre Riché, Education and Culture in the Barbarian West from the Sixth through the Eighth Century, trans. John J. Contreni (Columbia, SC 1976) 258–264; Isidore of Seville, Traité de la nature, ed. and trans. Fontaine 152–161; Orlandis, Semblanzas visigodas 112–114. See also Walter Stach, König Sisebut ein Mäzen des isidorischen Zeitalters, in: Die Antike 19 (1943) 63–76. On the level of the education of lay people in Visigothic Spain, see Roger Collins, Literacy and the laity in early medieval Spain, in: The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge 1990) 109–133; Wolfram Drews, The Unknown Neighbour: The Jews in the Thought of Isidore of Seville (The Medieval Mediterranean 59, Leiden/Boston 2006) 114–118.

[14] El Escorial, Real Biblioteca de Monasterio de San Lorenzo I, 14. On this manuscript, see Elias Avery Lowe, Codices Latini Antiquiores: A Palaeographical Guide to Latin Manuscripts Prior to the Ninth Century 11 (Oxford 1966) 1635; Miscellanea Wisigothica, ed. Juan Gil (Sevilla 1972) X–XX. All of Sisebut's correspondence is edited by Juan Gil: Epistulae Wisigoticae (ed. Juan Gil, Miscellanea Wisigothica, Anales de la Universidad Hispalense. Filosofía y letras 15, Seville 1972) 3–29.

[15] Epistulae Wisigothicae 2–5, ed. Gil 6–14.

[16] Epistulae Wisigothicae 7–8, ed. Gil 15–29.

[17] Epistulae Wisigothicae 1 and 6, ed. Gil 3–6 and 14–15.

[18] Epistulae Wisigothicae 3, ed. Gil 8–11.

[19] Epistulae Wisigothicae 7, ed. Gil 15–19.

[20] Epistulae Wisigothicae 8, ed. Gil 19–27.

[21] Epistulae Wisigothicae 1 and 6, ed. Gil 3–6 and 14–15.

[22] Jacques Fontaine has characterised Sisebut's correspondence as fort alambiquée, similar in style to the letters of Ennodius of Pavia; see Isidore of Seville, Traité de la nature, ed. and trans. Fontaine 152. I, on the other hand, could not find this similarity. On the letters of Cassiodorus and Ennodius, see Hen, Roman Barbarians 39–53, and see there for further bibliography.

[23] For an edition of the poem, see Sisebut, Epistula de libro rotarum (ed. and trans. Jacques Fontaine, in: Isidore of Seville, Traité de la nature. Collection des Études Augustiniennes, série Moyen Âges et Temps Modernes 39, Paris 1960) 328–335, and see ibid. 151–161, for Fontaine's discussion of the poem. See also Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz, El misterio de un eclipse y otras notas más. Para una historia del Códice Ovetense, Escorial R. II. 18, in: Homenaje a Don A. Millares Carlo 1 (Las Palmas 1975) 159–169.

[24] See Isidore's dedication, in Isidore of Seville, De natua rerum, ed. and trans. Fontaine 166–169.

[25] For its edition, see Jose Carlos Martín, Une nouvelle édition critique de la "Vita Desiderii" de Sisebut, accompagnée de quelques réflexions concernant la date des "Sententiae" et du "De viris illustribus" d'Isidore de Séville, in: Hagiographica 7 (2000) 127–180,

Desiderius of Vienne (d. 606/7), who was savagely persecuted at the order of Queen Brunhild, the Visigothic princess who married the Frankish King Sigibert I in 566.[26]

Sisebut's learning, which was quite exceptional among the rulers of his time, did not emerge *ex nihilo*. It was deeply rooted in the political and cultural tradition of Visigothic Spain, and it was part of the cultural movement commonly known as the 'Isidorian Renaissance', which reached its apogee during the time of Isidore of Seville.[27] Centred on the resurrection and redefinition of late-antique and patristic ideals, this intellectual movement was understood by contemporaries "as an intellectual renaissance, a moral rearmament, a religious revival and as a construction of a new political, royal and national ideology".[28] In actuality, it meant that an outpouring of new compositions and treatises swept the Iberian peninsula from the late sixth century onwards, and Sisebut's intellectual curiosity owed much to the compelling force of this intellectual movement.

Isidore was a charismatic bishop and an inexhaustible author. He was indeed keen to salvage and restore much of the old culture that was largely unavailable in Spain before his time, but he also possessed a fair share of originality. This originality reveals itself not only in his choice of topics and sources, but also in the way he associated the intellectual revival led by him with the newly formed Visigothic political ideology. Isidore wrote in order to educate, and he dedicated his works to kings, bishops, clerics and monks who occupied pivotal positions in Visigothic politics and society. Education and cultural leadership were perceived by him as central elements of royal authority and Christian consensus, and through his writings he sought to transmit a new culture that was, first and foremost, Christian, but also intellectual, moral and historical.[29] Sisebut shared Isidore's vision of a Christian polity, and it should come as no surprise that Christian ideals dominated the Visigothic king's writing.

## THE BURDEN OF PIETY

One of the most prominent features of Sisebut's self-identity was a deep sense of Christian piety. Like many of the barbarian kings of the post-Roman world, Sisebut's Christian piety was part and parcel of his political ideology and his sense of royal duty. But, this "most clement" (*clementissimus*) king, as Fredegar called him,[30] was not merely satisfied with giving alms to the poor and building churches.[31] His piety was much more extravagant and aggressive. Both Fredegar and Isidore of Seville found it necessary to note the king's unease with the outcome of his successful military campaigns. Whereas Isidore notes how he ransomed numerous captives, hence stressing the king's "mercy" (*clementia*),[32] Fredegar relates how he lamented the slaughter of Byzantine soldiers by his forces: "Woe is me, that my reign should witness so great a shedding of human blood!" (*Eu me*

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at 147–163. For an English translation, see A.T. Fear, Lives of the Visigothic Fathers (Translated Texts for Historians 26, Liverpool 1997) 1–14.

[26] On Desiderius of Vienne and his *vitae*, see Yaniv Fox, Desiderius of Vienne, martyr and activist: the cultural and political background of the Vitae Desiderii (forthcoming).

[27] On Isidore's life and work, the starting point is Jacques Fontaine's monumental study: Jacques Fontaine, Isidore de Séville et la culture classique dans l'Espagne wisigothique, 3 vols. (Paris [2]1983). See also id., Isidore de Séville. Genèse et originalité de la culture hispanique au temps des Wisigoths (Turnhout 2000); Pierre Cazier, Isidore de Séville et la naissance de l'Espagne catholique (Paris 1994); Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz, Introducción general, in: Isidore of Seville, Etymologiae (ed. and trans. José Oroz Reta/Manuel-A. Marcos Casquero. Biblioteca de autores cristianos 433, 1, Madrid 1982) 1–257; Ursicino Domínguez del Val, Estudios sobre Litteratura Latina hispano-cristiana 3: San Isidoro da Sevilla (Madrid 1998). An interesting glimpse of Isidore's world is provided by John Henderson, The Medieval World of Isidore of Seville: Truth from Words (Cambridge 2007). For an annotated bibliographical survey, see Jocelyn Nigel Hillgarth, The position of Isidorian studies: a critical review of literature, 1936–1975, in: Studi Medievali 24 (1983) 817–905; id., Isidorian Studies, in: Studi Medievali 31 (1990) 925–973. For more recent studies, see Alberto Ferreiro, The Visigoths in Gaul and Iberia: A Supplemental Bibliography, 1983–2003 (Leiden 2006).

[28] Jacques Fontaine, King Sisebut's Vita Desiderii and the political function of Visigothic hagiography, in: Visigothic Spain: New Approaches, ed. Edward James (Oxford 1980) 93–129, at 99.

[29] On the nature and limits of the 'Isidorian Renaissance', see Fontaine, Isidore de Séville et la culture classique 863–888.

[30] Fredegar, Chronicae IV, 73, ed. and trans. Wallace-Hadrill 61.

[31] See, for example, the church in honour of Saint Leocadia, built by Sisebut in Toledo, where four Church councils were held; Isidore of Seville, Chronica 416a (ed. Theodor Mommsen, MGH AA 11, Berlin 1894) 480. This information, given by the so-called Epitome Ovetensis, was not incorporated into the new edition: Isidore of Sevilla, Chronica (ed. Jose Carlos Martín, CC SL 112, Turnhout 2003). On the Epitome Ovetensis, see Isidor, Chronica, ed. Mommsen, Introduction 370–375.

[32] Isidore of Seville, Historia Gothorum 61 (recapitulatio), ed. and trans. Rodríguez Alonso 272–274.

*misero, cuius tempore tante sanguis humanae effusio fietur!*)[33] According to Isidore and Fredegar, Sisebut was torn between his vocation as an effective ruler, and his Christian belief, and this conflict tormented his soul. In a letter to the *patricius* Caesarius, the governor of the Byzantine enclave centred on Cartagena, the Visigothic king raised the very same dilemma.[34]

Sisebut's exalted piety, however, was not merely a propagandistic move. His religious sensitivity is also attested in his other letters. For example, a letter addressed to his son Theudila, in which Sisebut congratulates him on becoming a monk, is, in fact, a short sermon on the cardinal vices and virtues.[35] In another letter Sisebut urges the young Lombard king Adaloald (d. 626) to convert from Arianism to Catholicism.[36] This tactless letter, which reads more like a blunt anti-Arian attack, presents Arianism as the source of all humanity's misfortunes, and exposes the Visigothic king's conviction that it is his duty as a Christian king to promote Catholicism among his subjects by eliminating all forms of doctrinal diversity.[37] It is also against this background that Sisebut's anti-Jewish policy is to be understood, as we shall see.

Sisebut's views on his duties as a Christian king were determined and obstinate. He did not hesitate to tell his subjects and fellow rulers what he thought, and to act accordingly. At the beginning of one of his anti-Jewish laws Sisebut wrote that: "We seek healing remedies for all the peoples living in the provinces of our kingdom as well as for us and our nation when we snatch away from the hands of the unbelievers those joined to our faith".[38] And he concluded this very same law, with what seems like an elegant manifesto of his political ideology, according to which a Christian king should take care of his subjects by promoting and strengthening the Christian belief among them:[39]

> "We decree that this law, which we have promulgated out of our love of piety and religion for the salvation of ourselves and of our people, shall retain its validity forever, with the help of God, who had inspired it. Christ's triumphant right hand shall make victorious our successors who would observe the regulation of this law, and the Divine Clemency shall strengthen in truth the throne of the king whose faith in this matter it shall observe. … When the terrible time of the future judgement shall open and the fearful coming of the Lord unfold, he [i.e. anyone who would not observe this law] shall be separated from Christ's manifest flock and burn with the Hebrews on the left in cruel flames with the Devil, and such an eternal and vengeful punishment shall consume the transgressors, while plentiful reward shall descend on the Christians who shall cherish this law in this life and to eternity."[40]

This perception of Christian kingship also gave Sisebut an excuse to intervene in Church affairs and to exercise tight control over the Visigothic clergy. In a letter to Eusebius, bishop of Tarragona, the Visigothic king expressed his disappointment with the bishop's conduct in strong, even offensive, language.[41] Apparently,

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[33] Fredegar, Chronicae IV, 33, ed. and trans. Wallace-Hadrill 21–22.

[34] See Epistulae Wisigothicae 3, ed. Gil 8–11, at 9: *Quod si bella surgant, si mucro fervidus in qualibet parte deseviat, si vitia hominum tempus bellicosum nunc exigat, quem opinaris pro tantis sceleribus, pro ingestis cladibus, pro funestis inlatis vulneribus Deo reddere rationem?*

[35] See Epistulae Wisigothicae 7, ed. Gil 15–19.

[36] See Epistulae Wisigothicae 8, ed. Gil 19–27.

[37] On this letter, see Rachel L. Stocking, Bishops, Councils, and Consensus in the Visigothic Kingdom, 589–633 (Ann Arbor 2000) 124–125.

[38] Leges Visigothorum XII, 2, 14 (ed. Karl Zeumer, MGH LL nationum Germanicarum 1, Hannover 1902) 420: *Universis populis ad regni nostri provincias pertinentibus salutifera remedia nobis gentique nostre conquirimus, cum fidei nostre coniuctos de infidorum manibus clementer eripimus*. I cite the English translation by Amnon Linder, The Jews in the Legal Sources of the Early Middle Ages (Detroit/Jerusalem 1997) 273.

[39] On the Visigothic ideology of Christian kingship, see Paul D. King, Law and Society in the Visigothic Kingdom (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought. Third series 5, Cambridge 1972) 122–158; id., The barbarian kingdoms, in: The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c. 350–c. 1450, ed. James H. Burns (Cambridge 1988) 123–153, especially 143–144; Marc Reydellet, La royauté dans la littérature latine de Sidoine Apollinaire à Isidore de Séville (Rome 1981) 505–597; Drews, The Unknown Neighbour, especially 20–26.

[40] Leges Visigothorum XII, 2, 14, ed. Zeumer 422–423: *Hanc vero legem, quam pietatis et religionis amore concepimus pro nostro populique nostri remedio, in perpetuum suffragante auctore Domino valituram esse censemus. Successores quoque nostros legis huius iustitia servitutes victrix Christi victores faciat dextera, et eius solium in veritate conroboret, cuius in hoc fidem inspexerit divina clementia. … Futuri etiam examinis terribile cum patuerit tempus, et metuendus adventus Domini fuerit reservatus, discretus a Christi grege prespicuo, ad levam cum Hebreis exuratur flammis atrocibus, comitante sibi diabulo, ut ultrix in transgressoribus eterna pena deseviat, et locuplex remuneratio christianis faventibus hic et in eternum copiosa proveniat.* [trans. Linder, The Jews 275].

[41] See Epistulae Wisigothicae 6, ed. Gil 14–15.

Eusebius was rather fond of theatrical shows and clowns, which the Visigothic king thought was unsuitable behaviour for a bishop. Sisebut also commanded Eusebius without any qualms or reservations to appoint the bearer of his letter to the see of Barcelona. In another letter, Sisebut scolded Bishop Cilicius of Mentesa for expressing his wish to retire into a monastery after being released from captivity at the hands of the Byzantines.[42] The poor bishop was immediately summoned to appear before the king and some other bishops in order to discuss the matter.

Sisebut was, no doubt, a passionate man of letters, but it was his deep religious feelings and his sense of duty as a Christian king that motivated his actions. He clearly realised the heavy burden that lay on his shoulders, and he did his best to fulfil his double vocation as an effective ruler and a devoted Christian. These, however, were not always compatible, and whenever they clashed they dragged Sisebut into an abyss of self-reflection, remorse, and ostentatious piety.

## A CLASH OF EGOS

Sisebut, as we have already seen, embraced the 'Isidorian Renaissance' wholeheartedly, and played an active role in it. His political ideology was based on and nurtured by Isidore's intellectual vision, and by taking a keen interest in scholarship, he paid tribute to the traditional authority of the Church and its most illustrious contemporary representative. But, the close relationship between the Visigothic king, who presented himself as an intellectual, an author and a preacher – the embodiment of the Platonic ideal of the Philosopher King – and the bishop of Seville, who regarded himself as the unrivalled intellectual and the unsurpassed ecclesiastical leader in the whole of Visigothic Spain, had its own difficulties. A clash between these two ambitious men was inevitable, and it is this clash that gives us a rare glimpse into how both Sisebut and Isidore constructed their identity in relation to one another.

Unlike most conflicts between ecclesiastics and monarchs in the early Middle Ages, the clash between the bishop of Seville and the Visigothic King was not solved with bloodshed, nor did it bring about the exile of the former or the excommunication of the latter. Although it had some ideological basis, it was, more than anything else, a clash between two inflated egos. Hence, the battle between the ever determined and obstinate king and the prolific metropolitan of Baetica, who, after all, were good friends and co-operated closely throughout Sisebut's short reign, was not fought with swords, but with quills and parchment.

The first signs of this competitive burst of egos were already evident in the literary exchange between the two intellectuals early in Sisebut's reign. Sometime around 613, the bishop of Seville dedicated his treatise De natura rerum to the newly enthroned Visigothic king. At the very beginning of his work, Isidore himself tells us that he wrote this treatise at the behest of the Visigothic king, whose oratory skill and literary talents he praises.[43] Sisebut, in turn, thanked Isidore for this gesture by composing a verse-epistle on eclipses, as we have already seen.

Sisebut's poem, which contains sixty-one hexameters, opens with a short preface (lines 1–14), which Jacques Fontaine describes as "a lyrical potpourri" (un pot-pourri lyrique).[44] Indeed, this preface contains a variety of apparently unrelated poetic themes, among them the burdens of his royal duties and the military campaigns he had conducted in Cantabria and against the Basques. After this banter-like opening, Sisebut dedicates a few lines to popular perceptions of eclipses (lines 15–22), before embarking on his task – to give a full scientific explanation of lunar eclipses (lines 23–56). He concludes this poetic tour de force with some short remarks on solar eclipses (lines 57–61). As far as its content is concerned, this poem displays the breadth of Sisebut's learning, from Lucretius, whose work De rerum natura set the tone for the entire poem, to the Alexandrian tradition of astronomic poetry, on which some of his scientific explanations are based.[45] Similarly, the stylistic qualities of the poem reveal Sisebut as a very competent poet indeed.[46]

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[42] See Epistulae Wisigothicae 1, ed. Gil 3–6.

[43] Isidore of Seville, Traité de la nature, praefatio 1, ed. and trans. Fontaine 167: *Dum te praestantem ingenio facundiaque ac vario flore litterarum non nesciam*.

[44] Isidore of Seville, Traité de la nature, ed. and trans. Fontaine 154–155.

[45] See Isidore of Seville, Traité de la nature, ed. and trans. Fontaine 155–157.

[46] See Isidore of Seville, Traité de la nature, ed. and trans. Fontaine 157–158.

How are we to understand such a literary enterprise? Is it merely a scholarly exercise for the entertainment of his good friend? Or did Sisebut have a hidden agenda in composing this versified treatise on lunar eclipses? According to Vincenzo Recchia, Sisebut's poem should be understood as a longing for the contemplative monastic life, which the Visigothic king had to reject for his royal vocation.[47] This interpretation, however, puts too much emphasis on Sisebut's references to his military burdens, and it stretches the king's Christian piety ad absurdum. L.J. van der Lof, on the other hand, understood Sisebut's poem as part of the Isidorian ideology concerning the creation of "a national Spanish culture".[48] Yet again, there is nothing in the poem that suggests such an interpretation. Jacques Fontaine has opted for the functional-pedagogical explanation, arguing that "its rational explanation of eclipses helps to explode mythological superstitions resulting from nature worship, while its vocabulary and meter provide a royal example for the return to the refinements of ancient culture";[49] whereas Stephen McCluskey understands the poem as "the interaction and mutual support of three concepts of a single lawful order: the philosophical order of ancient astronomy, the Christian order of Divine law, and the political order of Visigothic political theology, which sought to portray the Visigothic king as God's Vicar on Earth."[50] But none of these explanations is entirely convincing on its own, and one is left with a strong feeling that Sisebut's short poem is, in fact, part of a hidden "literary duel" in which the two learned intellectuals were engaged.

Isidore's De natura rerum was not the only case in which the bishop of Seville dedicated works to his royal friend and patron. He also dedicated to King Sisebut an earlier version of the Etymologiae (probably only books I–X).[51] A short dedicatory notice, appended to the work in some manuscripts, reads: "See, as I promised, I have sent you the work on the Origin of Certain Things, compiled from my recollection of readings from antiquity and annotated in certain places as written by the pen of our ancestors."[52] Unfortunately, Sisebut's reply (if there was any) to Isidore's dedication of the *Etymologiae* did not survive.

Yet, the literary ping-pong between Isidore and Sisebut was not confined to poetic and scholarly exercises, in which each of them displayed his talents. Soon enough they started sending each other messages of political and religious criticism in a literary disguise. It all started with Isidore's criticism of Sisebut's Jewish policy.

Sometime at the beginning of his reign (and certainly before 616), King Sisebut made an attempt to convert the Jews of Visigothic Spain by force. It is, however, impossible to discern clearly the nature and scope of Sisebut's anti-Jewish policy. None of the laws that promulgated this policy has survived; nor do we have any report on how these laws were implemented.[53] The two surviving pieces of anti-Jewish legislation issued by Sisebut deal with the minor issue of Christian slaves owned by Jews,[54] and therefore cannot be taken as evidence for the reality of forced conversion, or for the persecution of Jews in Sisebut's kingdom. Nevertheless, these laws, as we have seen, unveil the king's deep piety and the rationale behind his extravagant and sometimes fierce actions.

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[47] Vincenzo Recchia, Sisebut di Toledo, Il "Carmen de luna" (Bari 1971); id., Sul Carmen de luna di Sisebuto di Toledo, in: Invigilata Lucernis 20 (1998) 201–219 [reprinted in id., Lettera e profezia nell'esegesi di Gregorio Magno (Quaderni di "Invigilata Lucernis" 20, Bari 2003) 137–155].

[48] Laurens Johan van der Lof, Der Mäzen König Sisebutus und sein "De eclipsi lunae", in: Revue des Études Augustiniennes 18 (1972) 145–51.

[49] Fontaine, King Sisebut's Vita Desiderii 98.

[50] Stephen C. McCluskey, Astronomies and Cultures in Early Medieval Europe (Cambridge 1998) 124.

[51] Apparently, the revised (and enlarged) version of the *Etymologiae* took rather longer to complete, and by the time it was finished, Sisebut was already dead. Hence, the final version of the work was dedicated to Braulio of Zaragoza, who, according to his own testimony, divided it into twenty books. On the various versions of the Etymologiae, see Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz, Los Capitolos sobre los metales de las Etimologías de Isidoro de Sevilla (León 1970); The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville (trans. Stephen A. Barney et al., Cambridge 2006) 17–24.

[52] Isidore of Seville, Etymologiae (ed. Wallace M. Lindsay, Oxford 1911), Epistula VI, trans. Barney et al. 413: *Et tibi, sicut pollicitus sum, misi opus de origine quarundum rerum ex veteris lectionis recordatione collectum atque ita in quibusdam locis adnotatum, sicut extat conscriptum stilo maiorum*.

[53] For some varying views, see Solomon Katz, The Jews in the Visigothic and Frankish Kingdoms of Spain and Gaul (Cambridge 1927) 11–12; Thompson, The Goths in Spain 166f.; King, Law and Society in the Visigothic Kingdom 130–145; Bernard Bachrach, A reassessment of Visigothic Jewish policy, 589–711, in: American Historical Review 78 (1973) 11–34; Alfredo M. Rabello, Sisebuto re di Spagna (612–621) ed il battesimo forzato, in: Rassegna Mensile di Israel 51 (1985) 33–41; Collins, Early Medieval Spain 130–137; Stocking, Bishops, Councils, and Consensus 125–126; Drews, The Unknown Neighbour 16–32.

[54] See Leges Visigothorum XII, 2, 13–14, ed. Zeumer 418–423. Both these laws elaborate on laws issued by Reccared.

Isidore, on the other hand, was not pleased with Sisebut's interpretation of his regal duties, and he was not the kind of man to sit quietly and ignore such colossal misconduct, especially when it had important theological implications. Although in his Chronica, written in 615, Isidore mentioned Sisibut's Jewish policy without any comment, at about the same time he obliquely expressed his reservations regarding the Visigothic king's conduct in two independent treatises. In his Sententiae, composed between 613 and 615,[55] Isidore rehearsed the Christian political ideology that stressed the ruler's responsibility for his subjects, underlining the patience and the *scientia fidei* that a ruler should demonstrate while preaching faith through his laws, not through force.[56] Similarly, in his De fide catholica contra Iudaeos ("On the Catholic Faith against the Jews"), written around 614/615,[57] Isidore repeatedly stressed the central role of faith in the conversion process, arguing that no attempt to convert the Jews at present is expected to be successful.[58] Juxtaposed, these two treatises together read like an extremely severe indictment against the Visigothic king.

Sisebut did not remain silent for long, and shortly after the publication of the Sententiae he published his own version of the Vita Desiderii,[59] which, in this context, seems like a sharp and witty response to Isidore's accusations. At the beginning of his Vita Desiderii, Sisebut briefly explains the motivation behind his decision to write this treatise:

> "For the imitation by the present generation, for the edification of men to come, and that holy deeds may be done in future time, I have decided to write the life of the holy martyr Desiderius. Whatever has been brought to our notice by reliable testimony, I have recorded in a bare style rather than in one loaded down with glistening words, begging that the Lord who gave, and not without reason, power to that man to perform miracles, might come and be present with us and, rousing my mind and tongue from sloth, grant me, unworthy though I am, the ability to tell of the passing of these deeds."[60]

These opening remarks sound familiar, but they should not be dismissed as a mere topos. The justification Sisebut gives for writing the Vita Desiderii accords extremely well with his extravagant piety, but it does not explain why he decided to demonstrate his piety by choosing a Frankish saint as his protagonist. Piety surely played a central role in his decision to write hagiography, but other reasons must have been involved as well.

It has been suggested in the past that Sisebut wrote the Vita Desiderii as a political manifesto against the Franks.[61] By telling the dramatic story of the good bishop, who was persecuted by the Frankish kings, Sisebut casts Theuderic II and Brunhild as villains, and thus reminded his audience of the danger posed by a strong Frankish monarchy, now reunited under a sole king – Chlothar II. The choice of the dramatic personae, according to this explanation, was not arbitrary. After all, Theuderic II and his grandmother Brunhild took advantage of the volatile situation in Spain to extort territories in Septimania, and the horrors of this violent infringement were still a living memory among the inhabitants of the region.[62]

This explanation is, however, not entirely convincing. Not only was Brunhild a Visigothic princess, her grandson ruled only one-third of the Frankish kingdom, and by the time Sisebut wrote his Vita Desiderii, both

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[55] On the date of the Sententiae, see Martín, Un nouvelle édition 134–145. Martín argue very persuasively for an earlier date of the Sententiae (rather than c. 633 as suggested by Cazier), which accords extremely well with the chronology of the clash between Isidore and Sisebut.

[56] See Isidore of Seville, Sententiae, especially III, 50, 1; III, 51, 3 and III, 62, 1 (ed. Pierre Cazier, CC SL 111, Turnhout 1998) 301, 304, and 328 respectively.

[57] On the date of this treatise, see Drews, The Unknown Neighbour 37–38. For its edition, see PL 83, 449–538.

[58] See the superb analysis of De fide catholica in Drews, The Unknown Neighbour 33–136.

[59] On the date of the Vita Desiderii, see Martín, Un nouvelle édition 134–145.

[60] Vita Desiderii 1, ed. Martín 147: *Pro imitatione praesentium, pro aedificatione hominum futurorum, pro sanctis exercendis studiis succedentium temporum vitam sancti martyris scribere Desiderii disposui, quaeque nostrae cognitioni fidelis fama innotuit sicco magis stilo quam verbis onusto faleratis innotui, quae adesse nobis flagitans Dominum adfuturum: qui faciendis virtutibus ei nec immerito contulit potestatem, temporem mentis ac linguae nostrae discutiens ad enarrandum gestorum ordinem indignis nobis conferat facultatem*. [trans. Fear, Life of the Visigothic Fathers 1]

[61] See, for example, Thompson, The Goths in Spain 163; Jocelyn Nigel Hillgarth, Historiography in Visigothic Spain, in: La storiographia altomedievale (Settimane **di studio** del Centro italiano **di** studi sull'alto medioevo 17, Spoleto 1970) 261–311, at 286–287 [reprinted in id., Visigothic Spain, Byzantium and the Irish (London 1985) III].

[62] See the correspondence of Count Bulgar, who served on the frontiers with Francia under king Gundemar, in: Epistulae Wisigothicae 10–12 (ed. Juan Gil, Miscellanea Wisigothica, Anales de la Universidad Hispalense. Filosofía y letras 15, Seville 1972) 30–37.

bêtes noires had already died.[63] Hence, suggested Jacques Fontaine, the Vita Desiderii is not to be understood as an anti-Frankish manifesto, but as Sisebut's signal of good will to the new ruler of Francia. After decades of sour relations with the Frankish kingdom, Sisebut was eager to cease the old enmity between the two kingdoms, and a golden opportunity fell to his hands with the death of Theuderic II and Brunhild in 613. By blackening Brunhild and her grandson, Sisebut openly sided with their enemies, and stretched out a peaceful hand to Chlothar II, the new ruler of all of Francia.[64] But even this explanation is somewhat wanting. As it was so nicely put by Fontaine, "a literary Passion is not a diplomatic memorandum, nor the text of a secret treaty made between two chanceries".[65] Given the fact that other versions of Desiderius' story were circulated around Gaul,[66] how can we be sure that Sisebut's *vita* reached the Frankish king at all? And even if we suppose it did reach him, how can we be sure that Chlothar II and his courtiers understood the hidden agenda in the *vita* as Sisebut meant them to understand it?

Although none of the explanations given thus far is enough on its own to untangle the enigma of Sisebut's Vita Desiderii, they cannot be dismissed off-hand. There is no way, and indeed no reason, to favour one explanation over the other. The Vita Desiderii, as pointed out by Jacques Fontaine, is a multi-layered composition, "addressed simultaneously, in different languages, to different publics".[67] It is much more sophisticated than it seems at first glance, and it provides eloquent testimony to the author's ingenuity. Sisebut himself replies towards the end of his composition to those who may criticise his crude language and grandiloquent style:

> "In this unskilled way I have given, to the best of my ability, an account both of the life and of the death of Christ's soldier, which, although it may displease the learned through its excessive crudeness, shall nonetheless, having cast aside verbal pomposity, ennoble the humble and the believer."[68]

A mere topos? I do not think so, especially if we take into account the rest of the passage:

> "And now we have told of his life, miracles and his most glorious end, it remains to describe the perdition and death of the sinners. When Theuderic, abandoning God or rather having been abandoned by God, rejoiced at the news that the servant of God had died, he was seized by a disease of the bowels, ended his vile life and a friend of death came to possess it for eternity."[69]

If we had any doubts regarding the king's aims in writing the Vita Desiderii, this short passage must dismiss them all. In the context of the clash between Isidore of Seville and King Sisebut over the king's conversion policy, the Vita Desiderii seems like an attempt to provide a "mirror of princes". It was, in a sense, a commentary on the nature of royal office, particularly in relation to the Church and its representatives.[70] Hence, Brunhild and Theuderic II played the role of the unjust ruler in this drama, whereas Chlothar II, and more so Sisebut himself, were moulded in the shape of the just Christian king. Every element in this multi-layered work was carefully chosen in order to reach as wide an audience as possible. Pro-Frankish elements, anti-Frankish sentiments, Christian piety, political ideology – each and every reader of the Vita Desiderii could find something relevant in it. Any attempt to opt for a single explanation would seem like a drastic simplification of a complicated and multifarious treatise, whose author was a devout Christian, a creative intellectual with a politically oriented mind, and a self-promoting author. But when Isidore of Seville read Sisebut's Vita Desiderii, he must have understood it as a blunt dismissal of his criticism.

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[63] Fontaine, King Sisebut's Vita Desiderii 96.

[64] Fontaine, King Sisebut's Vita Desiderii 122–125.

[65] Fontaine, King Sisebut's Vita Desiderii 125.

[66] See Vitae Desiderii episcopi Viennensis (ed. Brno Krusch, MGH SS rer. Merov. 3, Hannover 1896) 626–629 and 638–648.

[67] Fontaine, King Sisebut's Vita Desiderii 125.

[68] Vita Desiderii 19, ed. Martín 160–161: *Vita obitumque simul impolitus ut potuit sermo Christi militis enarravit, qui, quamlibet squalore nimio peritis imperite displiceat, omissa pompa verborum humiliter sentientes credentesque nobilitat*. [trans. Fear, Life of the Visigothic Fathers 12]

[69] Vita Desiderii 19, ed. Martín 161: *Ergo sicut vitam, virtutis et eius granditer gloriosum finem descripimus, restat ut exitia perditorum obitumque narremus. Cum Theudericus deserens Deum, immo derelictus a Deo, percepto nuntio Christi de famulo exultaret, desinterico morbo correptus vita foedissimam perdidit et amicam sibi mortem pepetuam acquisivit*. [trans. Fear, Life of the Visigothic Fathers 12]. Note that the "disease of the bowels" traditionally points to Arius and Arianism, as well as to the gruesome death of the persecutors of Christians (see, for example, the description by Eusebius of Emperor Galerius' death). On the Arian context, see my forthcoming book, Western Arianism: Politics and Religious Culture in the Early Medieval West.

[70] See, for example, Collins, Early Medieval Spain 67.

Isidore, as one could expect, did not give up. In 621, shortly after Sisebut's death, he published the first version of his Historia Gothorum, where he remarks that:

> "At the beginning of his reign he [i.e. Sisebut] forced the Jews into the Christian faith, indeed acting with zeal, 'but not according to knowledge' [Romans 10, 2], for he compelled by force those who should have been called to the faith through reason."[71]

If in his Sententiae and De fide catholica Isidore's criticism was disguised as a theological lecture, in his Historia Gothorum it was open and straightforward. Sisebut, according to him, acted "not according to knowledge" (*non secundum scientiam*), but that should not surprise us, since he was "imbued with [only] some knowledge of letters" (*scientia litterarum studiis ex parte inbutus*). Isidore's wording (especially the use of the word *scientia*) was carefully chosen,[72] and the bottom line of this passage suggests that Sisebut's limited literary skill was matched by his deficient theological knowledge – a rather harsh accusation, especially when it comes from a close friend.

This, of course, was not the end of the story. In 625 Isidore's revised his Historia Gothorum by adding Suinthila's triumph at Cartagena in 624 and, more importantly, by transferring the praise originally bestowed on Sisebut to King Suinthila.[73] According to Kenneth Wolf, these alterations and the words of encouragement to Riccimir, Suinthila's son and designated successor, suggest that the composition and revision of the Historia Gothorum was closely linked with, if not directly sponsored by, the Visigothic monarchy.[74] This may have been the case, but by inserting these changes and stripping Sisebut of his glory, Isidore clearly dissociated himself from the person and from his politics.

Similarly, in 626, Isidore published a revised version of his Chronica, in which *Sisebutus Gothorum gloriosissimus princeps* became simply *Sisibutus rex*, and King Suinthila received Reccared's title of *religiosissimus princeps*.[75] Jose Carlos Martín had no doubt that these changes reflect Isidore's wish to please the newly enthroned king, or more probably, the king's desire to receive a more prestigious royal title.[76] Yet, against the background of Isidore's disapproval of Sisebut's conversion policy, these changes seem like just one more attempt to say the last word.

Isidore, one should constantly bear in mind, did not dare to criticise Sisebut openly while he was still alive. Was he afraid to criticise the Visigothic king? Was he reluctant to embarrass his good friend? Both explanations sound logical, but it seems more plausible that Isidore conscientiously chose not to do so, simply because he was well aware of the fact that Sisebut's interpretation of his regal duties was a legitimate one. After all, the views of the Church Fathers on the matter were far from being clear, and Augustine, for example, swung from relative tolerance to legal coercion in an attempt to eradicate the Donatists in North Africa.[77] Sisebut knew his Augustine very well. He cited him extensively in his Vita Desiderii,[78] and against Augustine there was very little that the bishop of Seville could do. With his sharp mind and broad knowledge Sisebut was not to be taken lightly. He posed a real challenge to the bishop of Seville, and after his death, no one in the Visigothic kingdom was brave enough and wise enough to contest Isidore's authority. At last, Isidore was free to re-write the history of Sisebut's reign, and to impose his views on the duties of kings.

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[71] Isidore of Seville, Historia Gothorum 60, ed. and trans. Rodríguez Alonso 270–272: *Qui in initio regni sui Iudaeos ad fidem Christianam permovens aemulationem quidem (dei) habuit, sed non secundum scientiam; potestate enim conpulit, quos provocare fidei ratione oportuit*. [trans. Wolf, Conquerors and Chronicles 106].

[72] See Drews, The Unknown Neighbour 211–214.

[73] On the various versions of the Historia Gothorum, see Hillgarth, Historiography in Visigothic Spain 287–302; Isidore of Seville, Historia Gothorum, ed. Rodríguez Alonso 26–49.

[74] Wolf, Conquerors and Chronicles 14.

[75] Isidore of Seville, Chronica 415–416 (ed. Jose Carlos Martín, CC SL 112, Turnhout 2003) 204–205. For Reccared's title, see Isidore of Seville, Chronica 408, ed. Martín 201. On the date of the Chronica, see Martín's introduction 13*–35*.

[76] See Isidore of Seville, Chronica, ed. Martín 35*.

[77] See Emilien Lamirande, Church, State, and Toleration: An Intriguing Change of Mind in Augustine (Villanova 1975), especially 29–32; Peter Brown, St. Augustine's attitude to religious coercion, in: Journal of Roman Studies 54 (1964) 107–116 [reprinted in id., Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine (London 1972) 260–278]; W.H.C. Frend, The Donatist Church (Oxford 1952) 239–241. Note that Isidore was quite reluctant to mention Augustine in his De fide catholica.

[78] Martín, Une nouvelle édition 166–168.

The "Isidorian Renaissance", as Jacques Fontaine puts it, "was the result of an exceptional historical conjecture: the unification of the kingdom, the conversion of the Visigoths, and the birth of a Hispano-Gothic ideology".[79] It was the fruit of the efforts made by two exceptional men, King Sisebut and Bishop Isidore of Seville. Together they strove to create centralised Christian governance based on religious and political consensus, and together they supported the conscious movement of cultural renewal that swept the Iberian Peninsula from the late sixth century onwards. There were bound to be some differences of opinion between the two on various matters, and these differences were an extremely important reference point, around which they constructed their own political, religious and social identity. It is true that the real craftsman of the intellectual revival in Visigothic Spain was Isidore, bishop of Seville, and the most prolific author of his age. But he could not have brought his intellectual abilities and reforming skills to their full fruition without the support of King Sisebut, whose cultural interests and generous patronage set an example for many a generation to come.

[79] Jacques Fontaine, Education and learning, in: The New Cambridge Medieval History 1, ed. Paul Fouracre (Cambridge 2005) 735–59, at 750.