



Response to Visigothic Symposium 2, Panel 1: Space Scales and Spaces of Power in Visigothic Iberia

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The articles in section 1 of the second Visigothic Symposium interpreted the theme of “space” in rather different – but related and highly stimulating – ways. Many scholars, including myself, have approached Visigothic Iberia by focusing on the relationship between the royal and ecclesiastical centre and regional peripheries.¹ For example, Santiago Castellanos explored the role of taxation in harnessing regional elites to the royal government in Toledo.² By legitimating local leadership groups through the dispensation of offices and the right to collect taxes, the kings were able to connect them more effectively into the kingdom. Several of the sources examined in our articles inform us about the relationship between the royal centre and regional peripheries (e.g. Amorós Ruiz et al.; Frighetto), as well as between more regional or local centres and their subordinates (e.g. Martin; Arias). Céline Martin, in particular, points out the “nested” nature of Valerius of Bierzo’s vision of the spaces that he inhabited in the second half of the seventh century – from the episcopal city of Astorga to “the smaller *patria* of his religious life, the Bierzo” (Martin, 74).

¹ Jamie Wood, “Borders, Centres and Peripheries in late Roman and Visigothic Iberia,” *International Journal of Regional and Local History* 10 (2015): 1-17.

² Santiago Castellanos, “The political nature of taxation in Visigothic Spain,” *Early Medieval Europe* 12 (2003): 201-28.



However, given the diversity of papers in this section and their general focus on the “small worlds”³ of local and regional communities in Visigothic Iberia, a better model for connecting the different papers in this section is through the concept of “scale,” a theoretical framework derived from the social and natural sciences that has been applied with some success to studies of late antiquity and the early medieval period.⁴ Indeed, it is in understanding the above-mentioned focus of several of the articles on the relationship between communities operating at different levels within complex social, political, religious networks and hierarchies that scale may prove to be a useful conceptual tool, nuancing our understanding of the reciprocal interactions that went on between centre (or centres) and periphery (or peripheries) in Visigothic Iberia.

Perhaps most closely aligned with my article on how writers of Visigothic Iberia discussed education within monastic spaces, especially in relation to their boundaries, is Martin’s paper on Valerius, a holy man from the region of the Bierzo in the late seventh century. It is clear that Valerius had received a good training and Martin notes that young boys stayed with him to get an education. Valerius looked towards Fructuosus of Braga (d. 665) as a model for emulation, further demonstrating that lone ascetics were as embedded in the formative economy of Visigothic monasticism as were their coenobitic peers (on monasticism in late antique Iberia more generally, see Martínez Tejera’s contribution). In

³ Wendy Davies, *Small Worlds: The Village Community in Early Medieval Brittany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

⁴ Julio Escalona, “The Early Middle Ages: A Scale- Based Approach,” in *Scale and Scale Change in the Early Middle Ages: Exploring Landscape, Local Society, and the World Beyond*, ed. Julio Escalona and Andrew Reynolds (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 9-30.

terms of boundaries, it is clear that Valerius's life as a hermit took place not in an utter wilderness but at sites that were relatively accessible to others, for example via the road network. The boundaries of the ascetic spaces inhabited by Valerius during his lifetime were thus rather porous and not closed from outsiders, despite the frequent hostility of his writings towards the world and some of the people who inhabited it. The theoretical spaces envisaged by my monastic rule-makers, who espoused a rhetoric of strict separation from the world while they laid down regulations that allowed and even encouraged contact, thus bear some resemblance to Valerius's accounts of his own monastic formation and practices.

Valerius's passing references to a *castrum* and a *castellum*, as well as the frequency with which he mentions roads and travel in general, can be profitably related to the article by Arias. Arias makes clear that the late antique *castros* of north-western Iberia were established with local populations in mind (either by such groups or due to a desire to exploit them) and were often designed to control the communication network. That such settlements (and/or defensive sites, depending on one's point of view) seem to have sometimes been organized in hierarchies, suggests that the small world of Valerius and those like him was thus enmeshed in a series of relationships not simply with the inhabitants of local settlements or the owners of estates, but also with local and regional power brokers and their agents.

Operating at a more lofty scale level and clearly the result of at least some degree of central planning was the city of Eiotana / Elotana (modern El Tolmo de Minateda), examined by Amorós Ruiz et al., which was established by the Visigoths in the late sixth and early

seventh century and which seems to have formed an important bulwark against *Spania*, the Byzantine province in the south east of the Iberian Peninsula. As with the *castros* and the evidence of Valerius, control of the road network and an easily defensible position seem to have been important considerations in the establishment of the city and bishopric of Eiotana / Elotana, although in this case the settlement was intended to operate in the context of international power relations rather than at a more regional or local scale level. Nonetheless, we must not forget that the city (and bishopric) would also have been in close relationship with its surrounding area, as is made clear in Arias's analysis of the *castros* of the north. The discovery of imported ceramics here, as at some coastal or coastal-related sites in the northwest (see Arias's contribution), points to the international trading connections of some more important sites, the status of which must have been reinforced by the ability of the elites that ruled them to control the distribution of imported goods to their subordinates.

In addition to controlling the collection and redistribution of resources, elites developed other methods for encouraging and enforcing loyalty amongst their subordinates.⁵ This was necessary due to the potential strength of local articulations of power and identity, as is hinted at by Martin. Renan Frighetto discusses how Visigothic rulers, drawing on Roman practices, stressed loyalty, formalized and sacralized through the swearing of oaths, as a means of tying the population more closely to them in the context of potential threats from without and instability within the kingdom. It is interesting that, when we shift our focus from the level of the kingdom as a whole (see Frighetto's contribution) to that of the

⁵ cf. Castellanos, "The political nature of taxation in Visigothic Spain."

relatively small world of the monastery and the bishopric, similar anxieties about social stability and loyalty to particular confessional formulations plagued ecclesiastics. Just as kings were concerned about the loyalty of the population of the Iberian Peninsula in the face of strong regional aristocracies and enemies from abroad such as the Franks or the Byzantines, so monastic writers worried about the integrity of their communities in the face of interference from monks' families in their affairs, while bishops fretted over relations between Nicene and Arian Christians in the sixth century and between Christians and Jews in the seventh. Texts produced by ecclesiastics like Isidore of Seville (d. 636) and Fructuosus of Braga proposed very similar means of resolving such anxieties – that is, through entering into sacral and legal agreements such as monastic contracts and baptismal vows in front of God. That kings and bishops came up with similar solutions to these problems is hardly surprising because they collaborated extensively in the production and implementation of royal and church laws.

From the small (ostensibly religious) world of the hermit Valerius to the kingdom as a whole, then, the control and manipulation of spaces were vital to the articulation of power relations in Visigothic Iberia. Sometimes this was through the very practical organization of territory and possession of particular sites, as in the case of the *castros* of the north and Eiotana / Elotana in the southeast. On other occasions, our sources suggest a concern on the part of elites to harness conceptual space to their aims, whether at the level of the monastery (e.g. the bounded nature of the monastery) or of the kingdom (e.g. loyalty to the king). Very practical means were put in place to make such ideal delineations of space a reality (e.g. monastic rules and the practices that they establish for the formation of

monastic subjects; taking oaths of loyalty to the king). However, the fact that such practices were deemed necessary points towards the instability of ecclesiastical and royal power across the scale levels that kings and bishops sought to influence and, ultimately, control.

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