A Rome Away From Rome: Isidorus Hispalensis and Roman Astronomical Traditions in
Medieval Spain

By

Alicia Jessie Cameron Finan

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Abstract

In the past the works of Isidorus Hispalensis have been regarded as nothing more than a rehashing of the works of earlier ecclesiastical authors, with no direct reference to Roman sources. He has been called at best a compiler and at worst a plagiarist. However, a greater understanding of the historical context shows that it is likely that Isidorus Hispalensis was working directly from Roman sources. In addition, by studying the historical context within which Isidorus is writing, evidence of his originality is seen in his ability to cater specific works to his specific context. By outlining Rome’s presence in Spain from the very beginning, as well as the changing understanding of the barbarian invasions, I show through a study of the astronomical chapters of Isidorus Hispalensis’ *De Natura Rerum* that Roman traditions in Spain persisted well into the Visigothic period, and that Isidorus Hispalensis is a perfect symbol of the survival of Roman culture after the fall of the western Empire.
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Chapter 1
Roman Spain: Romans on the Iberian Peninsula

Knowledge of Classical texts in Spain is most commonly associated with the period following the Muslim conquest in AD 711. When they invaded the Peninsula they brought with them Classical texts that many said had been long lost to Spanish scholars after the fall of the Roman Empire and the establishment of the Visigothic kingdom on the Peninsula. The evidence of Isidorus Hispalensis’ texts, and particularly the astronomical chapters of his *De Natura Rerum*, dating to the seventh century AD, suggest otherwise. Modern scholars are inclined to criticize Isidorus as a plagiarist of earlier ecclesiastical texts, but when one takes into account the historical situation between the end of the Roman Empire and the rise of Visigothic Spain in which Isidorus lived it supports the idea that Isidorus was able to refer directly to Classical sources. Of particular importance are the changing conceptions of the barbarian invasions of formerly Roman territories.

Spain was one of Rome’s first provinces, coming under Roman control in the 3rd century BC and remaining so until the fall of the western Empire. Thus there were hundreds of years in which Roman culture, language and knowledge were able to develop and spread throughout the whole of the Iberian Peninsula. In addition, after the fall of the western Empire, there was no violent break in culture on the Peninsula as the Visigothic rulers who replaced Rome in Spain were themselves highly Romanized. Roman texts, therefore, were almost certainly widely available on the Peninsula. In addition, the Catholic Church helped Roman culture to continue unbroken in Spain, including the scientific beliefs of antiquity.

One of the members of the Spanish church who was particularly dedicated to the study of ancient scientific thought was Isidorus Hispalensis (d. AD 636). Amongst his extensive publications is a work entitled *De natura rerum* in which he discusses all aspects of
the natural world, referring frequently to the authors of antiquity. The title in and of itself shows its ancient Greco-Roman connections, echoing that of Lucretius’ 1st century BC work. Included among the various topics, it contains an extensive discussion of astronomy in which, while almost always associating pagan science with the beliefs of the medieval Spanish church, he communicates elements of ancient astronomy that would persist through the centuries to inspire later scholars. Isidorus, a scholar living and writing before the Muslim invasion of Spain, may be counted amongst those in Spain who were responsible for the preservation and transmission of ancient knowledge to the modern world. A fundamental reason why this was possible was the high degree of Romanization that existed in Spain from a very early period. The fact that under Roman rule and even after Rome’s fall Spain was not afflicted by any great violent upheaval that would have diminished Roman influence meant that there was an almost unbroken tradition of Greco-Roman knowledge preserved on the Peninsula.

Spain was by no means barren of civilization prior to the arrival of the Romans. The presence of other groups from around the Mediterranean on the Peninsula would serve to pave the way for the extensive adoption of Roman culture that happened very quickly, particularly in the southern and eastern parts of Spain. In addition to the peoples who colonized the area, there were also indigenous tribes on the Iberian Peninsula. Based on the archaeological evidence, it would seem that by the 6th and fifth centuries BC, there were a number of culturally sophisticated communities that had developed in the south and southeastern parts of the Iberian Peninsula1 and with these peoples the Phoenicians, Greeks

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and possibly even the Etruscans traded.² People in the northern Meseta and the northwest of Spain were less influenced by the other Mediterranean cultures, which allowed them to hold onto their Bronze Age culture for a longer period of time than those in the south.³ This fact has bearing on the later discussion of the degree of Romanization in Spain and on the study of Isidorus’ sources, for he was working in the southern part of the Peninsula.

The Phoenicians and Greeks were drawn to Spain by the wealth of its natural resources, which were praised extensively in antiquity, including in Strabo’s Geography. The majority of these resources were located in the southern part of the Peninsula which no doubt contributed to the rise of the great Tartessos kingdom there.⁴ As well, because of the resources in the south of Spain the greatest presence of ancient cultures who came to the Peninsula from elsewhere were centred there, again an important point of consideration, for this is where Isidorus would later write his works that were so influenced by Greco-Roman literature.

The Phoenicians came to Spain for the first time between 750 and 720 BC, arriving on the southern coast of Spain having passed the Strait of Gibraltar.⁵ Appian documents their arrival, writing “I think also from an early time the Phoenicians frequented Spain for purposes of trade, and occupied certain places there” (App. Hisp. 1.2, trans. Horace White). Strabo also discusses the influence of the Phoenicians writing that the people of the areas of Spain where the Phoenicians came “…fell so under the dominion of the Phoenicians, that at

⁴ The Tartessos kingdom was a great civilization that developed in the south of Spain and was described by Strabo as “the most intelligent of the Iberians” and were described by him as having their own alphabet, literature and laws (3.1.6).
the present day almost the whole of the cities of Turdetanian and the neighbouring places are inhabited by them” (Strab. 3.2.13, trans. H.C. Hamilton). According to Strabo the Phoenicians were the first to discover the Peninsula, having taken control of a large portion of it before the time of Homer, and being dominant there until the Roman conquest (Strab. 3.2.14). The Phoenicians were attracted to the area by the availability of precious metals and other natural resources.\(^6\)

The Greeks also had a powerful presence on the Iberian Peninsula. Appian comments on this saying that like the Phoenicians, the Greeks “visited Tartessos and its King Arganthonius, and some of them settled in Spain…” (App. Hisp. 1.2, trans. Horace White). The first Greeks to come to Spain were Phocaeans who arrived around 630 BC. As a result of their friendship with the Tartessian king, the Phocaeans were able to seek refuge in Spain when Phocaea fell to the Persians in 540 BC. There they founded, amongst other colonies on the east coast, Hemeroskopeion, meaning the “Watchtower of the Morning”, at Denia or Ilfach. In addition the Phocaean colony at Marseilles was responsible for the foundation of what would become one of the most important sites on the Peninsula, Emporium, the modern site of Ampurias in northern Catalonia, between 535 and 520 BC. To this place the native peoples of Spain went to trade.\(^7\)

Thus the culture of the Peninsula before the arrival of the Romans was a combination of the native peoples, Iberians, Celts and in the south the great Tartessos kingdom mixed with the cultures of the Phoenicians and the Greeks who dominated the south and the eastern coast. While the Phoenicians and Greeks were limited in their

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\(^6\) Ibid., 62.  
\(^7\) Ibid. 9.
dominance to those areas, the Romans would come to extend their influence throughout the whole of the Peninsula.

**The Romans in Spain**

In the history of the creation of the Roman Empire Spain was one of the earliest of their provinces in the west, preceded only by Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica. Despite the fact that Spain would later come to be so closely related to Rome as to be almost culturally indistinguishable from it, a fact that is apparent in the works of Isidorus as will be demonstrated later, up until the 3rd century BC the majority of Romans were likely not even aware of the existence of the Peninsula. Initially it was not the richness of the Peninsula that drew the Romans, as it had the Phoenicians and the Greeks, but rather the uncomfortably close presence of their Carthaginian enemies that led them to make their first foray into Spain.

The Carthaginians, as a result of their defeat in the First Punic War, chose not only to remain on the Peninsula but also increased their presence there. Concerning their arrival there, Polybius writes:

> The Carthaginians, as soon as they had set the affairs of Libya in order, dispatched Hamilcar to Spain entrusting him with an adequate force. Taking with him his army and his son Hannibal now about nine years of age, he crossed the straits of Gibraltar and applied himself to subjugating Spain to the Carthaginians. In this country he spent about nine years during which he reduced many Iberian tribes to obedience either by force of arms or by diplomacy…” (Polybius, *Histories*, ii.1.5, trans. W.R. Paton).

The campaigns of the Barcas in Spain were an attempt to reclaim the honour they had lost as a result of their defeat in the First Punic War. The Peninsula was an ideal staging ground,

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10 José Luis Corral, *Una historia de España*, (Barcelona: Edhasa, 2008), 99.
11 Ibid., 99.
as there they were able to get many of the resources they needed, such as mercenary troops
and metals\textsuperscript{13} as well as being strategically the perfect place from which Hannibal could later
launch his attack against Italy. From 237 to 219 BC the Carthaginians conquered various
parts of southern Spain and founded two new cities on the Peninsula: Carthago Nova, the
site of modern Cartagena and Bello Acantilado, which may be the site of modern Alicante.\textsuperscript{14}

Unsettled by the increased presence and strength of the Carthaginians so close to
their centre, the Romans sent envoys to the Carthaginians in Spain. In the talks, a treaty was
signed that identified the Ebro River as the dividing line between Carthaginian and Roman
territory in the west.\textsuperscript{15} It was the signing of this treaty in 226 BC that led to the name Iberia
becoming one of importance to Romans in general.\textsuperscript{16} The sense of stability created by the
signing of this treaty came to an end in 219 BC when Hannibal chose to attack Saguntum.
While this site was in Carthaginian territory, it was an ally of Rome.\textsuperscript{17} Thus it was Rome that
broke the terms of the treaty by coming to the aid of Saguntum and crossing over the Ebro
into Carthaginian territory.\textsuperscript{18} It was this event that led to the outbreak of the Second Punic
War.

Hannibal chose not only to overrun Spain, but also to use it as a base from which to
launch an attack into Italy. While Hannibal was departing Spain for Italy, the Romans were
making the opposite journey. Having heard of Hannibal’s plans to invade Italy, the Romans
made the decision to send troops to Spain either to prevent Hannibal from getting to Italy

\textsuperscript{12} Fox, 382.
\textsuperscript{13} Antonio Domínguez Ortíz, \textit{España, Tres Milenios de Historia}, (Madrid: Marcial
\textsuperscript{14} Fox, 382.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Corral, 99.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{18} Fox, 383.
or, if that failed, to prevent reinforcements from being sent to him there.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, in August of 218 BC, Gaius Scipio arrived in Spain,\textsuperscript{20} and so began the creation of a Roman culture in Spain.

As Hannibal was in Italy defeating Roman armies, Scipio and his army were in Spain conquering towns along the Mediterranean coast.\textsuperscript{21} The Roman presence in Spain was increased with the arrival in 216 BC of Gaius Scipio’s brother Publius, and together they both passed the Ebro and advanced to Saguntum, the site that had begun the war, which they rebuilt in 215 BC.\textsuperscript{22} In 214 BC the Roman armies were reinforced with Celtiberian mercenaries, as the Carthaginian armies had been, and with them they continued to advance through Alicante towards the Guadalquivir Valley.\textsuperscript{23}

Upon reaching Cástulo, a fort at the top of the Guadalquivir, the Romans were stopped and defeated by a Carthaginian army led by Hasdrubal, a battle in which Publius was killed. Gaius Scipio was later also killed while defending Ilocri against Hasdrubal. Having lost confidence as a result of these events in 212 BC Titus Fonteius withdrew the rest of the Roman army to Tarraco (modern Tarragona) and waited there for reinforcements, which came from Italy led by Publius Cornelius Scipio, the son of Publius Scipio who then spent his first year there reorganizing the army and appealing to the indigenous commanders. The indigenous groups were now more willing to side with the Romans at this time, having

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 358. \\
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{21} Corral, 100-101. \\
\textsuperscript{22} Manuel Marin Correa, \textit{Historia Universal Marin Vol. 1: Los tiempos antiguos}, (Barcelona: Editorial Marín, S.A. 1973), 358. \\
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
become frustrated by the incessant demands made upon them by Hasdrubal who was marshaling troops to march to Italy to aid his brother.24

While Hasdrubal was making his way to Italy, Publius Cornelius Scipio was moving south in Spain and in 209 BC he conquered Carthago Nova, the Carthaginian capital on the Peninsula. This was followed by further Roman victories at Bécula (possibly modern Bailén) and Iliπa (Alcalá del Río) on the right shore of the Guadalquivir, after which he returned to Tarraco in the north. At the same time, another Roman victory was won by Scipio’s deputy Silanus at Astapa.25

The Carthaginian general Mago tried to save Carthage’s possessions in Spain by attempting to retake Carthago Nova, but he was unsuccessful and in 206 BC the defeat of the Carthaginians in Spain was completed when the Romans took Gadir.26 This victory was particularly important, as it gave the Romans control of the Strait of Gibraltar as well as of the silver and copper mines in the south of Spain.27 By this time Rome had also taken control of the north coast of Cataluña from the end of the Creus to the coasts of Garraf, as well as having reached the beaches of Huelva.28 With the defeat of Hannibal at the Battle of Zama in 202 BC Carthage was forced to renounce any claim to Spain as part of the peace agreement with Rome.29

This Peninsula to which the Romans had come initially only for the purpose of protecting their home in Italy from the Carthaginians would become one of the greatest treasures of their empire, and for many would be just as much their home as Rome had

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 359.
26 Ibid.
27 Corral, 101.
28 Ibid.
been. They renamed it Hispania and initially divided it into two provinces, Nearer and Farther Spain. A succession of generals and consuls were sent in a series of campaigns to the Peninsula to subdue the more resistant peoples there, working from the coast to the more bellicose interior, which had had little to no exposure to the earlier Greek and Phoenician settlers. The final conquest of these last outposts of resistance fell to Augustus, and in 9 BC Rome finally achieved full domination of the Peninsula after its forces were finally able to conquer the rebellious Asturians and Cantabrians in the north. Augustus also reorganized the Peninsula into three provinces: Bética corresponds essentially to modern day Andalucía, and had its capital at Córdoba; Lusitania extended from the Portuguese Algarve to the river Duero and from the Atlantic coast to near Toledo, and had its capital at Mérida; the Tarraconese took up the rest of the Peninsula, including Galicia and the north of Portugal and had its capital at Tarragona (Tarraco). Although the war with the Carthaginians, which had been the initial reason for Roman entry into Spain, was completed, the Romans did not leave. Upon becoming familiar with the possibilities of this new land, they established a permanent presence there.

Spain’s resources made it a territory of great importance to the Roman people, and raised it high in their opinion. Cato the Elder, Sempronius Gracchus, Quintus Sertorius, Pompey, Julius Caesar and Octavius Augustus all considered Spain to be one of the greatest possessions of the Roman Empire. Pliny the Elder wrote of Bética that it, “excels all other provinces in the richness of its cultivation and the peculiar fertility and beauty of its

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30 Corral, 101-102.
32 Ibid., 120.
34 Cebrián, 14.
vegetation” (Pliny, Nat. 3.3, trans. John Bostock and H.T. Riley). In addition to the natural resources, the conflicts in Spain also provided opportunities for Romans to distinguish themselves and in the first half of the 1st century BC participation in them became an important way for moving up through the ranks of the Roman administration. Thus it is clear that while the Romans did not initially come to Iberia for the sake of the land itself, upon their arrival they realized the value of it, and at the same time as they were exporting natural resources from the land and transporting them to Italy, the significant numbers of Romans who stayed were importing their culture to the peoples of the Peninsula, which would later lead to Isidorus’ familiarity with Roman literature and traditions which came to be so prominent, particularly in the south of Spain.

Correa writes that this period of history in Spain may be described entirely with the word “Romanization”, which he defines as the process by which the indigenous populations were assimilated into Roman culture in every aspect of their lives, including linguistic, religious, administrative, economic and artistic. Strabo also discusses this element of the Roman presence in Spain:

The Turdetani…especially those who dwell about the Guadalquivir (Baetis), have so entirely adopted the Roman mode of life, as even to forget their own language. They have for the most part become Latins, and received Roman colonists; so that a short time only is wanted before they will all be Romans. The very names of the towns at present, such as Pax Augusta amongst the Keltici, Augusta Emerita amongst the Turduli, Caesar Augustus amongst the Kelitiberians and certain other colonies, are proof of the change of manners I have spoken of. Those of the Iberians who adopt these new modes of life are styled togati. Amongst their number are Keltiberians, who formerly were regarded as the most uncivilized of them all (Strab. 3.3.1, trans. H.C. Hamilton and W. Falconer).

35 Corral, 107.
36 Ibid., 478.
The peoples of the Peninsula experienced extreme changes as the result of the Roman conquest and these changes were by no means restricted to any one element of life. Romanization in Spain involved the construction of social classes, the development of Roman-style administration and economic organization of the Spanish provinces, the development of Roman-style cities in Spain, as well as affecting the cultural and artistic lives of the peoples of the Peninsula.\textsuperscript{38}

Many Spaniards were active in the process of their own Romanization,\textsuperscript{39} an inclination which manifested itself in a number of ways, including the adoption of Roman names by those who had not yet even been granted Roman citizenship, the use of Italian and Roman architecture in towns and sanctuaries, and also with those elite members of Spanish communities who actively sought permission to introduce the imperial cult to their area.\textsuperscript{40}

One element that contributed greatly to the spread of Roman culture was the development of Romanized cities, as they provided an easy means of communication that allowed Roman values to spread. This was aided in addition by the creation of roads, which were built throughout Spain to the supply the Roman army.\textsuperscript{41} As Cortázar writes:

\begin{quote}
Rome built roads and ports which, overcoming the barriers of geography, allowed an army of soldiers, officials and businessmen to expand the advances of Latin civilization from the most cultured places – Bética, the east, the Catalonian coast, the valley of the Ebro – towards the interior…\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{37} Corral, 122.\\
\textsuperscript{38} Correa, 479.\\
\textsuperscript{39} Cebrián, 14.\\
\textsuperscript{40} J.S. Richardson, \textit{The Romans in Spain}, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1996), 212-213.\\
\textsuperscript{41} Corral, 112.\\
\end{flushright}
In this quotation we also see reference to Bética, where Isidorus lived and worked, as one of the most Roman, supporting the argument that he was directly influenced by Roman literature and culture.

The high levels of Romanization are shown by the architecture throughout Spain, which includes amphitheatres, horse-racing tracks, baths, triumphal arches, mausolea, temples and aqueducts constructed in various cities on the Peninsula. All of these served to make the peoples of Spain increasingly Roman in their way of life and show that they were living their lives after the fashion of Rome.

As seen already, one of the most easily Romanized areas was the southern area of the Peninsula, Bética, the place where Isidorus did much of his work as archbishop of Sevilla. As Díaz-Plaja writes, “Bética was a small Italy in Spain.” The cities there, which had originally been Phoenician or Greek colonies, very quickly allied themselves with Rome, as Rome provided them with the security to continue the development of their already successful economies.

In contrast to the ease of the adoption of Roman culture in the south, it was not until the Flavian emperors that the Romans were even able to found municipia in the interior and northwest of the Peninsula where the resistance was much stronger. As Corral describes the situation, “Half of Spain fell in scarcely four decades; almost two centuries would be needed to overcome the other half.” However, with the conquest of the last

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43 Corral, 114.
45 Corral, 102.
47 Corral, 102.
48 Ibid., my translation.
Cantabrian and Asturian tribes the whole of the Peninsula came under Roman control and would come to adopt Roman customs.  Keay neatly summarizes how the Peninsula over time became more and more Roman:

…with the passage of time, the binary ethnic opposition of Romans or Italians and native would become increasingly blurred with intermarriage. Insofar as there were “Roman” cultural symbols prior to the later first century BC, there is no evidence that they were ethnically exclusive and that their presence in the archaeological record signals the presence of Italians or Romans. Imported artefacts, like Black Gloss pottery and wine amphorae, and architectural style could have been chosen by Roman or native alike for a number of reasons, not least fashions, outward expressions of status, loyalty, ethnic identification or emulation.

The Spaniards had become so Romanized in some parts that it is impossible to tell from the archaeological record whether the people who lived in an area were in fact Roman or Romanized Spaniards. Tsirkin also reinforces the idea of the high levels of Romanization in Spain that led to an inability to distinguish between the two groups in certain areas:

When the natives had been granted the citizenship, especially after the act of Vespasian, juridical differences between the two population groups utterly dissolved. The aborigines entered in the social and political systems of the Roman state, which is well attested by the disappearance of the native structures, both social, political and cultural. The system of populi inherited from the pre-Roman period was abolished and superseded by a system of towns, the latter becoming the basic cells of economic, social administrative and cultural life. Even the Phoenician and Greek colonies – Gades and Emporium – discarded their ancient character and turned into average provincial Roman towns. The Iberian tongue vanished, ancient gods were no longer worshipped, the manufacture of Iberian pottery declined, indigenous sculpture came to an end. In all fields of life and economy – in agriculture, in urban crafts and in commerce – obtained currency the same forms of ownership as in Rome and in their wake go the upper hand collegiae of artisans in towns and pagi in the country. All this resulted in the emergence in south and east Spain of a society which was essentially not unlike that of Italy.”

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49 Ibid., 136-137.
50 Keay, “Romanization”, 121.
This process was so total that the period under the Flavian and Antonine emperors created in Hispania “a country of clearly Roman character.”

Spain came to be so Romanized that various Spaniards were able to attain fame within Rome itself. Richardson writes:

At least from the late Republic, and to an extent even before that, the process whereby the upper classes in the towns and cities of the peninsula felt themselves to be increasingly part of Rome and not merely her subjects, was reinforced by the involvement of people from the provinces in the political, literary and social life of the capital.

Examples of Spaniards who would come to have great power in Rome include Trajan, the first Spanish emperor, who was succeed by Hadrian, both of whom came from Itálica, the first Roman colony in Spain. In addition, another emperor, Marcus Aurelius, is believed to have had ancestors from Ucubi (Espejo) in Bética. These were by no means the only Spaniards to attain great levels of fame in Rome, as will be shown later.

While many of the native Spaniards eagerly took up all facets of Roman life, this was not the only source of Roman culture in Spain. Many Romans themselves took up residence in Spain for a variety of reasons, and through them a pure form of Roman culture was disseminated throughout the Peninsula. Romans came to the Peninsula as veterans and businessmen who were attracted by the economic possibilities there. In the south and the east in particular Roman immigrants lived side-by-side with the native Spaniards, and as

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52 Alfödy, 458.
53 Corral, 116.
54 Richardson, 316.
55 Corral, 118-119.
56 Alfödy, 444.
57 Ortiz, 19.
Tsirkin writes, “The coexistence of immigrants and native inhabitants within a single organization, no doubt, prompted a speedy Romanization.”

The most extensive colonization of the Peninsula took place under Caesar and Augustus. In addition, citizenship was given to whole communities in Spain by Caesar, which raised their prestige and granted them great privileges in comparison with other communities in the province. As a result these other communities strove to prove themselves to be as Roman as possible so that they, too, might receive the same honours and thus Romanization continued. Caesar also gave Roman rights to already existing indigenous cities, such as Hasta Regia in Cádiz and Tarraco, the site of modern Tarragona. Augustus continued the tradition, granting the title of colony to 15 Spanish cities. In total, around 34 cities received the title of colony.

Augustus also founded cities that did not immediately receive citizenship, but were nonetheless important to the process of Romanization because of their military character. Amongst these were Bracara Augusta (Braga, in Portugal), Léon, which was founded by veterans of the VII Gemina, Asturica Augusta (Astorga) and Iuliobriga (Retortillo in Cantabria). All of this led to Imperial Spain being effectively Roman.

**Latin Language and Literature in Spain**

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58 Tsirkin, 480.
59 Ibid., 16.
60 Díaz-Plaja, 16.
61 Corrall, 111.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Cebrían, 15.
Language was one of the key elements that contributed to the spread of Romanization as well as contributing to the creation of internal cohesion in Spain\(^65\) and thus one cannot doubt that Latin literature was popular in Spain, another point in support of Isidorus later referring directly to Classical texts. The native Spaniards had to adapt to the culture of their conquerors, which included learning Latin, which was the language of the Roman administration, religion and business.\(^66\) It was adopted by those who were closely associated with the Romans, and also by those in rural areas as well. The aforementioned veteran immigrants to the Peninsula were one of the main conduits by which Latin was disseminated amongst the native Spaniards.\(^67\) Indeed, Mommsen illustrates the extent to which Latin took over, writing, “…under the influence of Rome the national language and the national writing disappear even from public use within their own communities.”\(^68\)

Throughout the 1\(^{st}\) century BC the pre-Roman languages were replaced by Latin\(^69\) and in a very short time all of Spain was using Latin.\(^70\) Its dominance was not just restricted to commerce and administration, but it was also being adopted by Spanish youths in place of the indigenous names that were still held by their parents,\(^71\) and inscriptions throughout the Peninsula suggest that there was a high level of knowledge of Latin language and literature, again lending credence to the argument that Isidorus was directly familiar with Classical works.\(^72\) Mommsen also points out that the extent of the dominance of Latin in Spain can be

\(^{65}\) Ortiz, 21.

\(^{66}\) Tsirkin, 479.

\(^{67}\) Ibid.


\(^{69}\) Corral, 115.

\(^{70}\) Díaz-Plaja, 92.

\(^{71}\) Corral, 115.

\(^{72}\) Carl A. Hanson, “Were there Libraries in Roman Spain?” *Libraries and Culture* 24,
seen in comparison with what occurred in the Roman-dominated parts of North Africa. Only one of the indigenous Spanish languages still exists in Spain, namely Basque, and then only in one particular region of the north of the Peninsula. In contrast the Berber language, the pre-Roman language of North Africa, is still commonly found in large parts of that area. In addition, the dominance of Latin in Spain can also be seen in the fact that a Latin word, *vale*, is still used very extensively in modern Spain in everyday speech.

For the most part the pre-Roman, indigenous languages disappeared, the exception being “vascuence”, found in the Basque region. Latin was an important part of the Roman conquest of the Spanish people, and its adoption by the native Spaniards was a tangible example of their “mental incorporation” into the empire. As Trend writes, “Finally Spain was bound together by a common Roman law, and by the Latin language, which was spoken by the richer Spaniards everywhere and by the whole people in some parts, until the influence of the Church made it universal.” Importantly, the Church of which Isidorus was so prominent a member is credited with the spread of Roman culture in Spain.

While in general the Latin on the Peninsula was considered to be old fashioned, upper class children were nonetheless properly educated in the language. During the Republic the Romans established their own system of education in the conquered areas of the Peninsula. Children of well-off families completed their initial education in the cities of

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73 Ibid., 73.
74 Corral, 136.
75 Díaz-Plaja, 93. My translation.
77 Correa, 484.
their birth, then were sent to Rome for further education. The education of the upper class Hispano-Roman population was the same as that of those who began their education in Rome, both studying Greek and Latin as well as the art of rhetoric. In Spain, as in Rome, they followed the Trivium, comprised of the study of grammar, rhetoric and dialectic, as well as the Quadrivium made up of arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. In the case of Isidorus, this serves as more support for his familiarity with Classical literature and intellectual traditions especially given that, as we shall see later, he was educated in a way very similar to that of an upper-class Roman youth. For instruction in these areas, in Spain as in Rome, Greek tragedies, comedies, lyrics and Homeric works were used, as were the works of Aesop. The Latin works employed for instruction were those of Titus Livius, and later those of Vergil, Cicero, Seneca, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan, amongst others.

As a result of the high levels of Romanization, and in particular the adoption of the Roman education system in Spain, it is not at all surprising that Roman literature was well-established on the Peninsula, to the point that many of the most famous authors in the Roman canon were originally from Spain. Freijeiro writes that, “The phenomenon of hispanolatin literature is a characteristic feature of Latin culture in Hispania. It shows above all the high level of Romanization achieved, especially in Bética and the Tarraconense…” The implications of this for the understanding of Isidorus’ sources is clear.

The Roman literary tradition in Spain would also have been encouraged by the fact that, having taken inspiration from the library at Alexandria, Caesar founded a great library.

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79 Correa, 484.
80 Díaz-Plaja, 95.
81 Ibid., 96.
in Rome, which other provinces, including Spain, took to emulating. It is also likely that many wealthy Spaniards had their own private collections of texts. As they were determined to live as much like Romans as possible, and as the architect Vitruvius and Seneca the Elder both identify the library as a key element of a Roman house, it would be surprising if Spaniards did not have their own literary collections. 83 It would also be surprising if all of these texts had completely vanished by Isidorus’ time, particularly given the enthusiasm for Roman culture that the Visigoths had, which will be discussed later, and thus leaving him no other recourse but to refer to ecclesiastical authors to further his understanding of ancient science.

As shown above, the desire for a Roman education was strong in Spain, and had existed from an early period. 84 In particular the wealth and increased levels of urbanization in Bética, Isidorus’ hometown, allowed the people there to occupy themselves with literary pursuits. 85 As a result, by the end of the Republican period a school existed in Córdoba, 86 a place that would ultimately become the home of some of foremost writers of the Roman Silver Age. 87 A whole generation of great Roman authors came out of Spain, 88 and as a result of the excellent educations they had received there they came to be very well respected in Rome. 89 Amongst those Spanish intellectuals who came to fame in Rome were Seneca, Lucan, Martial and Quintilian. 90

83 Ibid., 200.
85 Carl A. Hanson, “Were There Libraries in Roman Spain?” Libraries and Culture 24, No. 2 (Spring 1989), 200.
86 Fear, 58.
87 Hanson, 200.
88 Correa, 484.
89 Díaz-Plaja, 98.
90 Cebrián, 15.
The dominance of Spanish writers in Roman society is quite effectively summed up by quotation from Donald R. Dudley’s work *The Romans*, which runs, “Latin literature was dominated by men of Spanish origins…a tribute to the Latin authors of Spain and the excellence of its schools.”\(^{91}\) Mommsen echoes this, writing that after the Augustan age in Latin literature, “…the Spaniards undertook in it almost the part, if not of leader, at any rate of school master.”\(^{92}\)

All of this is important to a study of the works of Isidorus. It shows just how Roman his background was. Rather than transcribing the works of authors from a culture he was not a part of, or receiving his information second-hand from authors who were also separate from it, he was in fact part of the culture whose ideas he was discussing, and this fact makes his works that much more reliable and important. Unlike the Muslims who later came to the Peninsula and brought with them documents from whose origins they were separated by great distances of time, space and culture, Isidorus was living within the Roman culture about whose ideas he was writing.

Many scholars have accepted that Spain was thoroughly Romanized. Richardson writes that by the reigns of the Theodosius and his sons, and even two centuries before, “all the free inhabitants of the peninsula were Roman.”\(^{93}\) Mommsen agrees, saying that the Iberians ultimately disappeared completely under the advance of Roman culture.\(^{94}\) Tsirkin writes of the Spaniards who moved to the cities or to work in the mines that, “Under the new conditions, in the multitribal and multilingual, but primarily Latin, milieu these people

\(^{91}\) Hanson, 201-202.  
\(^{92}\) Mommsen, *The Provinces*, 78.  
\(^{94}\) Mommsen, *The Provinces*, 72.
surprisingly fast shed their old culture and acquired new customs and habits.” Richardson also writes that ultimately the distinction between Roman and non-Roman in Spain disappeared, and the Romans were no longer viewed as an occupying power. He says that Spain was increasingly seen as being part of the Roman world, and not merely one of its external possessions. All of the evidence suggests this: Spain was not so much a province in the sense that other areas were to become possessions of the Roman empire, but was in reality an extension of Rome itself. This is demonstrated not only by the fact that the culture on the Peninsula appears to have been so Roman, but also by the fact that those who were born, raised and educated in Spain were so readily accepted in Rome.

Modern Spanish scholars heartily support the Peninsula’s Classical heritage. As Cebrián comments, “Rome forged the source of our idiosyncrasies” and Ortiz writes that it was Rome that created national unity in Spain. This process of Romanization which spread throughout the peoples of the Iberian Peninsula with such thoroughness can be said to have begun with the conquest by Roman, but by no means ended when the western Empire fell. Indeed, it continued, being taken up by the Church and the Visigothic kings who took control of the Peninsula after Rome, who were themselves highly Romanized. After the wars in the north ended with the submission of the Cantabrians and Asturians to Roman rule, Spain would begin what would be five centuries of uninterrupted Roman rule. Roman culture was able to thrive and spread because, save for an invasion by Mauritanian tribes and one by German tribes, both of which were easily pushed back, this period in Spain was

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95 Tsirkin, 479.
96 Richardson, 130.
97 Cebrián, 15. My translation.
98 Ortiz, 19.
99 Ibid.
almost entirely peaceful.\textsuperscript{100} The extended peace that existed under the Roman rule certainly contributed to the preservation and production of Roman texts which Isidorus would later use in the 6\textsuperscript{th} and 7\textsuperscript{th} centuries AD. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the most authoritative examples of Roman knowledge were available to him in Spain.

Roman dominance did not last in Spain, and it was ultimately replaced by the Visigothic kings, under whose rule, and indeed at whose request, Isidorus wrote the De \textit{natura rerum}. The arrival of barbarian tribes is often cited as the reason for the loss of Classical culture in Europe, but a new understanding of this period suggests that this was not the case, including on the Iberian Peninsula. Understanding the impact of the arrival of the Visigoths there is key to the study of Isidorus’ Classical sources.

\textsuperscript{100} Correa, 478.
As contentious as the Romanization debate may be, it cannot be denied there was a strong tradition of Latin literature in Roman Spain. Isidorus Hispalensis, however, was writing after the fall of the western Empire under the Visigothic kings of Spain, so the issue is what survived of the Latin literary tradition when the Romans no longer controlled the Peninsula?

Traditionally the period of the barbarian invasions has been viewed as one of great destruction leading not only to the collapse of the western Roman Empire as a political entity, but also to the collapse of Rome as a cultural body. As a result, the arrival of the barbarians in western Europe is said to have heralded the Dark Ages, a period classified thus because of the belief that it was an intellectually and culturally depressed time. However, more recent scholarship on this period in the west in general, and on Visigothic Spain in particular, has led to an increasingly less pessimistic view of intellectual life under the new barbarian rulers of Europe.

**The Barbarian Invasions**

Beginning at the end of the 4th century AD various Germanic groups had begun to move into Roman territory, pushed by the increased pressure put on them by the movements of the Huns. One of these migrations was of particular importance to the history of Spain. Two Germanic groups, the Sueves and the Vandals, and the Asian Alans, pressured by the Huns and suffering from a food shortage caused by an unusually harsh winter arrived in Spain in AD 409.  

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101 José Luis Corral, *Una historia de España* (Barcelona: Edhasa, 2008), 133.
Rome still existed as a political body in the west at this time but it was by no means so strong as it had been at the height of the Empire. Internal divisions and external pressures felt on a number of fronts meant that it was no longer in a position to defend its assets effectively. As a result, though there were still Roman garrisons in Spain that tried to stop the advance of the Alans, Sueves and Vandals, they were unable to do so.\textsuperscript{102}

The increased weakness of the Roman state manifested itself in Spain with the disappearance of centralized Roman control in many areas.\textsuperscript{103} It is said that Roman power in Spain came to an end in AD 409,\textsuperscript{104} with the lack of resistance shown by Rome against the invasion of the barbarians being the main indication of the collapse of Roman power on the Peninsula. Thereafter, between AD 409 and AD 476 there was little direct Roman authority in Spain, and in reality the emperor had no power there. Control of Spain was now divided between the big rural landholders and the bishops in the cities.

Once this confederation of tribes entered the Peninsula the three different groups separated. Roman control was so weakened by this time that the Sueves were able to establish a fully independent kingdom in the area of Galicia and northern Portugal. The Roman military presence in Spain had been weakened as a result of the extended peace there and so the Romans called upon their sometime allies, the Visigoths, to help them fend off the other barbarian tribes.\textsuperscript{105} Though Rome’s use of a barbarian tribe to fight on their behalf may seem odd, it was already at this time a long-established practice.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid. 141.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid. 133.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid. 134.
Rome’s Relationship with the Visigoths

From the time of Constantine the Great the Roman army had been increasingly using barbarian troops to fill their ranks. One of the groups who had a long history with the Romans was the Visigoths, whom the Romans encountered in the area of the Danube.

Though eventually Rome would call on the Visigoths to drive other barbarians out of Roman territory, their relationship was not one of alliance in the beginning. The Visigoths defeated the Emperor Trajan Decius in AD 251, and then went through the Empire looting for the next twenty years, finally being driven out in the early AD 270s by Claudius II Gothicus and Aurelian. They then settled between the Danube and the kingdom of the Ostrogoths.

A sudden attack by the Huns in AD 370 destroyed the Ostrogothic kingdom, and caused the Visigoths to move again. Ostrogothic refugees moved into Visigothic territory, and the Visigoths themselves sought refuge within Roman boundaries. They were granted sanctuary in Roman territory by Emperor Valens, but because of exploitation at the hands of Roman officials, the Visigoths, and those Ostrogoths who had accompanied them, rebelled. As a result the Battle of Adrianopolis was fought in AD 378, and there the Visigoths defeated the Romans and the Emperor Valens was killed. This defeat led to an agreement in which the Visigoths were given land within Roman territory, in exchange for

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107 Collins, Visigothic Spain, 17.
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid. 18.
110 Ibid.
which they were to help the Romans defend their territory against other barbarians, as outlined in the treaties they signed with Emperor Theodosius.\footnote{Ibid.}

This agreement held until the death of Theodosius, after which the Visigoths, under their king Alaric, sought to find a more secure source of money and provisions. To this end he led the Visigoths into Italy where in AD 410 they famously destroyed Rome. They did not remain, however, and Alaric’s successor Ataulph then led the Visigoths out of Italy and into Gaul.\footnote{Ibid.} This was not to be their final destination, for from there they would make a journey into the Iberian Peninsula.

**The Visigoths’ Movement into Spain**

Isidorus Hispalensis himself writes of the arrival of the Visigoths in Spain in his *Chronica Maiora*, saying that they came in the sixth year of the reign of the emperor Marcian and that, “Theoderic, king of the Goths, along with a huge army, entered Spain” (382, trans. Sam Koon and Jamie Wood). The reference to the huge army the king brought with him is indicative that his reason for coming into Spain was not entirely one of peace. However, the Visigoths did not come into Spain on their own mission of conquest either. Rather, once again they were fighting on behalf of Rome.

After their destruction of Rome the Visigoths were given the province of Septimania in southwestern France by Rome in order to pacify them. In exchange for this territory the Visigoths once again agreed to fight for Rome, this time in Spain.\footnote{Corral, 147.} To this end, in AD 427 a Visigothic army under the command of King Theoderic I advanced into the Peninsula.\footnote{Ibid. 143.}
The Visigoths were successful in ways the Romans had failed. They were able to push the Vandals and Alans out of Spain and into North Africa. While they could not do the same with Sueves, they were able to restrict them to a territory in the north. Although the Visigoths had technically been fighting on behalf of Rome, they did not return the territory they reclaimed to Roman control. Though they had a kingdom in the south of France the Visigoths chose to return to Spain in AD 454.

The Visigoths came to dominate a large part of the Iberian Peninsula and in AD 463 the Visigothic king Theodoric II proclaimed the *Lex Romana Wisigothorum* which created a true Visgothic state inside the western Empire. By AD 480 the Visgothic kingdom spread from the valleys of the Loire and the Rhone to the Pyrenees and included the entirety of the Iberian Peninsula, save for Galicia, which remained under the control of the Sueves. So while the Romans had hoped to expel barbarian presence from the Peninsula with the aid of the Visigoths, whom they hoped would be content with the territory granted to them in the south of France, the result was that a Visgothic state replaced the Roman one that had existed previously in Spain. The Visigoths chose to take advantage of the vacuum left by the decline of Roman power to establish their own kingdom in the west. While initially it would be centred in France ultimately it would be Spain that would come to be the seat of Visigothic power. In AD 507 the Visigoths were finally entirely pushed out of Gaul by the Francs, and it was then that Spain became the seat of Visigothic power. The Visigoths were now the dominant power in Spain, though this was not the end of Imperial presence.

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115 Ibid. 134.
116 Ibid. 148.
117 Corral, 148.
118 Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, 32.
120 Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, 37.
there. It is important to be mindful of this fact for the later discussion of Isidorus Hispalensis.

The Creation of Visigothic Spain

The Visigoths did not immediately occupy the whole of Spain, nor was their Spanish kingdom initially a unified one, as it would be in the time of Isidorus Hispalensis. Not until the rule of King Theudis from AD 531-548, did the Goths make their presence felt in the south of Spain. Until then it had been essentially autonomous and governed by the local aristocracy, namely the Hispano-Roman aristocracy. Their continued dominance well into the century in which Isidorus was born certainly supports the argument for the survival of Roman literary culture in the area, making it very likely that Isidorus had easy access to Roman texts.

The man credited with the creation of Visigothic Spain as it existed in Isidorus’ time was King Leovigild, of whom Isidorus himself writes favourably that he was “…considered outstanding in Spain for his knowledge and faith” (Chronica Maiora, 408a, trans. Sam Koon and Jamie Wood). Initially a joint ruler with his brother in AD 568, he became sole ruler in the year AD 572. At the time he took the throne, Visigothic rule in Spain was unsettled by civil war and, as was previously mentioned, there were areas of the Peninsula that continued to be outside of Visigothic power. Amongst these, the kingdom of the Sueves still existed in the north and was the largest of the yet independent areas. Cantabria and parts of La Rioja were also independent and Sabaria, which is thought to be modern Zamora, was rebelling. There was a small independent state in the northwest and Córdoba had taken advantage of the civil war to proclaim its independence. A similar event

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121 J.N. Hillgarth, The Visigoths in History and Legend (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2009), 9.
122 Fear, introduction, ix.
occurred in the Orospeda Mountains, which form part of the Andalusian Cordillera. Clearly there was much left to be done before the Visigoths truly ruled Spain, and it became Leovigild’s priority to unite it under Visigothic rule.\textsuperscript{123}

To this end he began a series of campaigns that in the space of less than ten years would bring almost all of the independent areas under Visigothic control. He first moved against Byzantine presence in the south in AD 570 and 571 and took Medina Sidonia from them. Next in AD 572 he brought Córdoba and its surrounding territories into his kingdom. He was also able to reclaim Sabaria and in AD 574 he retook most of Cantabria, then in AD 575 the small state in the north was brought into the fold of Visigothic power. Next, in AD 577 he moved back to the south and regained control of the Orospeda Mountains. His success inspired John of Biclarum to write that Leovigild was able to defeat any who posed a threat to his authority, whether they arose within or without Spain.\textsuperscript{124}

Being the first to unite Spain, Leovigild was also the first of the Visigothic monarchs to display the full trappings of kingship.\textsuperscript{125} His reign is not characterized solely by a series of successes, though, and ultimately his greatest challenge arose close to home. His son, Hermenegild, who had been given control of the area of Bética, rebelled against him, and with the help of a Byzantine presence still left in Spain, this rebellion spread across Andalusia, Extremadura and Merida. Leovigild raised an army and with relative ease retook Merida. In order to retake Sevilla, he had to lay siege to it, and to this end he refortified the Roman town of Itálica. Ultimately Sevilla was retaken in AD 584, bringing an end to Hermenegild’s rebellion.\textsuperscript{126} This rebellion also led to the end of the long-independent Suevic

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., ix-x.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., x.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., x.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., xi-xii.
kingdom in the north at the end of the 6th century AD for they had supported Hermenegild in his rebellion, and after his defeat Leovigild took their kingdom as punishment. Thus upon his death Leovigild left to his son Reccared an almost entirely unified state. An imperial presence still existed in the south, but it was no longer of any great significance and never again posed any sort of threat. Thus Spain had become a Visigothic kingdom, though this by no means signified the end of Roman cultural influence on the Peninsula.

Where one might expect that the unification of the Peninsula under Visigothic control by Leovigild would have led to the dominance of Visigothic culture, this was not the case. It is important to note for the study of Isidorus Hispalensis’ works that although the Visigoths were now politically in control of the Peninsula, they were still by far in the minority in terms of the population, while the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Peninsula were Hispano-Roman, a fact that contributed to the continued dominance of Roman culture. Goffart goes so far as to write that the unification led to the implementation of a “Roman rather than a Visigothic priority” and that “imitatio imperii was an explicit aim of Leovigild’s reign.” This brings us to a discussion of what the barbarian invasions really meant for Roman culture in general and for the sources of the works of Isidorus Hispalensis.

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127 Roberts, 157.
128 Fear, introduction, xii.
129 Collins, Visigothic Spain, 61.
130 Stephan A. Barney et al., Introduction to The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4.
Changing View of the Barbarian Invasions

As mentioned above, the arrival of the barbarians within the Roman Empire has traditionally been seen as being accompanied not only by the political dissolution of the Empire but as well by the complete cultural destruction of the Roman people. This is seen in turn to have been followed by an intellectually and culturally barren Dark Age, the result of which was that the world would not see the like of Classical culture again until the Renaissance. Since the 16th century people have characterized the end of the Empire with “…depravity and a field of ruins, with savages camping in the ashes…a calamity that would take centuries to repair….”

It is believed by many that in the fifth century violent hordes of barbarians, spurred on by their hatred of Rome, swept through “the remains of an effete civilization” and replaced it “in a sudden and cataclysmal change, by a spirit and by institutions of a perfectly different order.”

This belief arises in part from the notion that the Germanic tribes shared a culture and were acting together, and thus were able to overwhelm and to introduce a “distinction Germanic culture” into previously Roman territories. However, to the contrary, in the case of Spain we see that the three tribes who came there, though they arrived together, quickly separated into their original three groups, not being bound by any common culture that was then spread throughout the Peninsula to replace the previous Hispano-Roman way of life. This view, that Germanic culture swiftly replaced Roman culture, has been long held, in particular by the Italian and German humanists of the 16th century. One author went so

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132 Goffart, 855.
133 Samuel Dill, Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western Empire (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1958), 286.
134 Goffart, 856.
far as to write that Roman culture had in fact been murdered by the Germanic peoples.\footnote{Goffart, 857.}

The evidence of the behaviour of the Romans at the time does not support this interpretation\footnote{Dill, 286.} and indeed, for some time many scholars have not supported it. We have already seen above how Leovigild sought to imitate the Romans, and many more instances of the Romans serving as an inspiration to the Visigoths will be discussed later. The fact that Roman culture was not targeted by the invading groups would suggest that Isidorus Hispalensis’ resources were not so barren as many have argued.

The initial arrival of the Vandals, Sueves and Alans into Spain was not particularly disruptive.\footnote{Corral, 142.} There appears to have been little widespread destruction, and the great villas in the Ebro and Duero continued to be occupied after the fifth century invasions, and it is doubtful that the lives of those living there were greatly altered.\footnote{Hillgarth, \textit{Visigoths in History}, 13.} The cultivated land, the organization of the Church established in the Roman period and aristocratic \textit{latifundia} in general continued on in their original form.\footnote{Corral, 142.} Archaeological evidence discovered in the 1950s and later is much more supportive of continuity rather than of a sharp break from the past in the sixth and seventh centuries.\footnote{Hillgarth, \textit{Visigoths in History}, 23.} In fact, it appears that the earlier invasions in the 3rd century were actually much harder on Spain\footnote{Corral, 171.} and no argument for a break from the Roman tradition is proposed for that period. In general, the Hispano-Roman culture seems to have continued essentially unaltered in any significant way after the arrival of the
barbarians, with Hillgarth writing that Spain was free of “the devastation of Italy and the confusions of Gaul.”

Upon their arrival in Spain the Visigoths were heavily influenced by Roman culture, including the language. Under the Visigoths Latin continued to be the intellectual language of Spain. Proof of this is in the fact that there is no surviving literature from Spain that was written in Gothic. The fact that Latin remained the intellectual language under the Visigoths suggests in turn that the works of Latin authors retained a high level of importance, which would have contributed to their preservation up to Isidorus’ time. Isidorus himself writes that not only the intellectual classes, but the common people spoke Latin, and that it was in fact the only language of the Peninsula, even before the Goths had converted to Catholicism. The dominance of Latin under the Visigoths is also shown by an anecdote given by Gregory of Tours which tells of two Visigothic ambassadors who in the 580s were able to carry out a theological discussion in Latin, certainly an indication of the Visigothic mastery of the language of those they had conquered.

A further indication of the lack of influence of Visigothic culture in Spain is that the Latin spoken in Spain was essentially unaffected by the Visigothic language. Latin continued its development toward the modern Romance languages it would become on the Peninsula with almost no impact from the Germanic language, to the extent that Reilly writes that, “at the fundamental level of language one can almost say that the Germanic invasion of Iberia might well never have occurred.” In the languages of the Peninsula, namely Castilian,

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142 Hillgarth, *Visigoths in History*, 19.
143 Ibid., 28.
144 Hillgarth, *Visigoths in History*, 43.
145 Ibid., 43-44.
Catalan, Gallegan and Portuguese there are barely three hundred words that appear to be of a Germanic origin.\textsuperscript{146}

Elements of the Roman political system also continued more or less unchanged in Spain under the Visigoths. The wealthy Hispano-Roman landowners called themselves “senators” and continued to make use of the old Roman titles. The Visigothic kings also made efforts to preserve the Roman administrative system, maintaining Roman law and Roman taxes in Spain. Of the taxes that were collected in Roman Spain, only one seems to have disappeared under Visigothic rulers while the others continued to be collected by them. They also kept the Roman organization of the five provinces.\textsuperscript{147} As Goffart writes, “The Middle Ages, no longer mocked as ‘dark’, bear witness to the prolonged survival” of Roman culture,\textsuperscript{148} and a further study of the relationship between the Visigoths and the Hispano-Roman culture will show that nowhere is this more true than in Spain.

**Visigoths and Roman Culture**

Amongst the bands of barbarians that came into Roman territory, the Francs and the Visigoths had a culture that had developed differently thanks to previous contact with the Romans. The Visigoths who came to Spain have been termed an “elite” group of barbarians, who were not only capable of speaking Latin, as we have seen, but were already also Christians, albeit of a different sect than the Hispano-Roman population.\textsuperscript{149} The degree to which they had adopted Roman customs, language and religion was so pronounced that Hodgkin writes, “…if you are to understand anything of the manner of life of the Visigoths in Spain during the sixth and seventh centuries, you must study the Roman state far more

\textsuperscript{146} Reilly, 27.
\textsuperscript{148} Goffart, 867.
than the Gothic people.”\textsuperscript{150} This was an idea held not only by modern scholars, but also by contemporary authors, for Theodoric the Ostrogoth wrote, “Romanus miser imitatur Gothum et Gothus vilis imitatur Romanum.”\textsuperscript{151}

The military weakness of Rome that allowed the barbarian tribes to move into Roman territory existed at the same time alongside the immense wealth held by Rome. So while the barbarians, Visigoths included, were able to move into Roman lands, at the same time they do not seem to have been able to do away with the Roman lifestyle,\textsuperscript{152} and likely had no desire to do so. Roman culture had long been seen as the height of cultural development, and the barbarian tribes, like many others, sought to emulate it. In the case of the Visigoths in Spain this is demonstrated by Leovigild’s policy of imitating imperial culture in his own court.

The Visigothic desire to adopt Roman culture is emphasized by Dill’s claim that, “To military skill they often added the charm of Roman culture and a social tact which gave them admission to the inner circle of the Roman aristocracy.”\textsuperscript{153} This was not a new phenomenon confined to the Visigoths, as some of the barbarian tribes who were part of the invasion of the fifth century were already “more than half converted into Romans.”\textsuperscript{154} The Visigoths who came to Spain were certainly in that group.

The barbarians had plenty of opportunity to become familiar with Roman culture. Before the great movements of the fifth century some of the barbarians who had moved within Roman borders were able to rise to positions of prominence within the Roman

\begin{itemize}
\item Thomas Hodgkin, “Visigothic Spain,” \textit{The English Historical Review} vol. 2 no. 6 (Apr. 1887), 219.
\item Ibid., 220.
\item Hillgarth, \textit{Visigoths in History}, 4.
\item Dill, 297.
\item Ibid., 300-301.
\end{itemize}
military, and there were even emperors of Gothic origin and a number held the consulship.\textsuperscript{155} Of this fact Dill writes:

> When an office, which the emperor himself was proud to hold [the consulship], was given so freely to men of barbarian origin, it is plain that the old exclusiveness had disappeared, and that the Germans had stolen their way into the very citadel of the Empire long before its distant outworks were stormed.\textsuperscript{156}

Indeed, Alaric, the leader of the sack of Rome, wished to hold a high Roman command.\textsuperscript{157}

Recruitment, promotion to important offices, marriage into the Imperial family and the granting of provinces to barbarian rulers all served to draw the barbarian peoples into Rome, and thus make them party to Roman culture.\textsuperscript{158} In this way, though the traditional view has the barbarians coming against Rome from the outside, one might argue that they came from within, having been part of Rome for a couple of centuries already. Rather than the dominance of a new culture over an older one, really it was just a new group who shared in the same culture taking power. Of the persistence of the Roman cultural tradition Hingley writes:

> An inheritance from imperial Rome has, however, been drawn upon in Europe from the early medieval period. Roman civilization forms part of an inherited tradition that has been handed down from antiquity, through the Middle Ages, on to modern times.\textsuperscript{159}

In the Medieval period western Catholic Europe did not lose all contact with the Roman past, and of particular importance for the work of Isidorus Hispalensis, both Christians and Pagans continued to be familiar with Roman authors. In Spain, for example, the works of Ovid were copied by Benedictine monks and medieval chroniclers followed the

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 295.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 297.
\textsuperscript{157} Hillgarth, Visigoths in History, 5.
\textsuperscript{158} Goffart, 861.
\textsuperscript{159} Richard Hingley, Globalizing Roman Culture: Unity, diversity and empire (London: Routledge, 2005), 20.
models of Sallust and Tacitus. Such pursuits were not strictly confined to the clergy, for the works of Virgil continued as part of the education of well-born scholars.\textsuperscript{160} Saint Martin of Braga was also able to study the works and ideas of Virgil, Seneca and Socrates, as well as works of eastern hermits at the monastery of Duro.\textsuperscript{161} For the most part, scholars in the early medieval period had relatively easy access to works from the Classical age, and Classical myths and legends continued to form a fundamental part of the intellectual life of educated people.\textsuperscript{162} In Spain in particular there was an effort by the Hispano-Roman population to preserve Latin culture.\textsuperscript{163} Isidorus in his role as the principal encyclopedist of the medieval period certainly played a large role in this process.

Collins, though ultimately coming to a different conclusion than the one being drawn here, at one point comments that, “Roman influence had been so pervasive that there was little to distinguish imperial troops from those recruited from outside the empire, either in terms of their weapons or their dress and appearance.”\textsuperscript{164} Religion also does not seem to have initially been an area of contention between Visigoths and the Hispano-Roman population, for from the late fourth century the barbarians living within the empire were Christian, and they are in fact praised by Orosius for not looting church property nor harming those who had sought refuge within churches during the sack of Rome.\textsuperscript{165} Religion would go on to become an issue in Visigothic Spain, but ultimately the matter would be settled in a way that led the Visigoths to adopt even more elements of Roman culture, as will be discussed later.

\textsuperscript{161} Pérez de Urbe, 26.
\textsuperscript{162} Bartlett, 34.
\textsuperscript{163} Hillgarth, \textit{Visigoths in History}, 14.
\textsuperscript{164} Collins, \textit{Visigothic Spain}, 20.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 21.
The Visigothic law code called the *Flavins Theudis Rex* dating from around AD 545, which shows strong connections to the Roman legal and administrative practices that were in place before the arrival of the Visigoths to the Peninsula, shows that much of the power in Spain still remained in the hands of the Hispano-Roman elites. To these were added the Visigothic nobles.\(^{166}\) Initially there was little mingling between the two groups, or at least that was the theory, as there was a ban on intermarriage that had existed from imperial times and which would be in place until the later sixth century.\(^{167}\) In practice, however, this does not seem to have been strictly upheld, for the Visigothic king Theudis married an unidentified Roman woman, and Collins argues that such marriages were likely more common than originally believed.\(^{168}\) These marriages were likely prompted by the great wealth that still lay in the hands of the Hispano-Roman population who were in turn quite happy to become allied to the new ruling class that was sweeping through their country. Such unions without doubt contributed to the further adoption of Roman culture by the Visigoths.

Between the creation of their kingdom in France and the establishment of their kingdom in Spain the Visigoths experienced three centuries of change, mainly focused on their institutions and ways of thinking.\(^{169}\) The Gothic population was not only dominated by the Hispano-Romans in numbers, but also culturally, to such a degree that Hillgarth identifies Visigothic Spain as a continuation of Roman Spain.\(^{170}\) This was something that the

\(^{166}\) Ibid., 44.
\(^{167}\) Barney, Stephen A., 4.
\(^{168}\) Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, 44.
\(^{169}\) Roberts, 156.
\(^{170}\) Hillgarth, *Visigoths in History*, 10.
Visigothic nobles seemed to have been quite content with, being happy to be seen as the heirs to Rome.\textsuperscript{171} Again the case of Leovigild may be cited as evidence for this.

In almost all areas, including language and religion, the Goths took on the way of life of the Hispano-Roman population that they had conquered.\textsuperscript{172} I have already touched on the subject of language above, but this is particularly true in the case of the conversion of the Visigoths to Catholicism. Accompanying this change, however, are a number of other examples of the prevalence of Roman culture amongst the Visigoths in Spain. In the late fifth century a kind of buckle that appears to be influenced by Byzantine aesthetics appears in Visigothic Spain, and continued to be worn into the seventh century. In addition, at the end of the sixth century Germanic styles disappear entirely and we see Spanish versions of Byzantine style. The change happened to such a degree that Thompson writes, “It has been said that if we had to rely on archaeology alone we should never guess that Spain was ruled by Germans in the seventh century.”\textsuperscript{173}

Richardson illustrates the almost total adoption of Roman culture by the Visigoths in Spain, writing:

The arrival then of the Romans can be described, but not their leaving, for they never left. The Visigoths who in a sense succeeded to the Roman power, took over their titles, much of their law and, in the end, their religion. Moreover, their subjects were descendants of the Romans who had been there when the barbarians invaded in 409.\textsuperscript{174}

Collins also makes an interesting point about the Visigothic culture in Spain saying that, “…while Roman Gaul turned into *Francia*, the territory ruled by the Francs, *Hispania* never

\textsuperscript{171} Roberts, 159.


became Gothia."\textsuperscript{175} This statement is a good summary of the situation in Spain under the Visigoths as largely dominated by Roman culture, however Collins takes it another way. He writes that:

There are no good reasons to deny the possibility of the development of a common Gothic ethnic identity in the later seventh-century Spain. To some extent there was hardly an alternative. There was no need for a separate Roman identity to be preserved once the major religious differences between the indigenous population and the Gothic minority had been resolved by the late sixth century.\textsuperscript{176}

Like Collins, I argue that a common culture existed in Visigothic Spain, but I disagree as to what culture was dominant. Collins argues for a common identity based on Gothic culture, whereas here I argue that the same evidence supports a culture based on the Roman tradition. In fact, his assessment of a common Gothic culture seems to contradict his analysis that Hispania never became Gothia as Gallia became Francia. If, as he suggests, the Gothic culture were dominant then Hispania would certainly have become Gothia. Instead it retained the name that it had had under the Romans, and in addition the Visigothic ruling minority took on the religion of their Hispano-Roman subjects, even after having struggled in vain to make them convert. This is surely another indication that it was not the Visigothic culture that was dominant in Spain at the time of Isidorus Hispalensis. Indeed, Collins himself supports this when discussing the Gothic language, writing that there is no evidence for its use in Spain in the fifth and sixth centuries,\textsuperscript{177} as it had been replaced by Latin, as has already been shown here.

Hillgarth agrees with this assessment of Collins’ hypothesis, writing:

If one compares this relatively small number [of Visigoths] to the much larger Hispano-Roman population, Roger Collins’s observation, ‘It is impossible to

\textsuperscript{175} Collins, \textit{Visigothic Spain}, 240.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 241-242.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 242.
detect ethnically distinct Romans in Spain by the end of the seventh century,’ suggests to me less ‘Gothicisation’ than Romanisation, the slow absorption of the Gothic minority by the vastly larger original population. This process is also suggested by the relatively greater success in Spain – as compared to Gaul – of the Latinisation document in Spain by the inscriptions on slate, even in the rural areas.\textsuperscript{178}

Despite the strong evidence for the extensive Romanization of the Visigoths, there is no doubt that the Romans were in some ways influenced by the culture of the barbarians who were coming into their territories. We can see this in the popularity of trousers and light coloured wigs amongst some Romans. The wearing of wigs made from barbarians’ hair is even discussed by Ovid (\textit{Amores} 1.14). However, the barbarians did not fundamentally alter Roman culture, whereas Roman culture did fundamentally alter that of the barbarians, and in this case, specifically those Visigoths who moved into Spain. The last great change that occurred amongst the Visigoths in Spain was their conversion to Catholicism.

**Visigothic Conversion to Catholicism**

Religion was the only area that led to any real disagreement between the Hispano-Roman and the Visigothic populations in Spain. It was also one of the last issues to be settled, and like most other areas of life it was the Hispano-Roman culture that came to dominate. In other matters the Visigoths had happily adopted Roman customs, but concerning religion a consensus was not so easily reached.

When the barbarians came to the Iberian Peninsula the population living there was already firmly Catholic.\textsuperscript{179} The Visigoths on the other hand, while Christian, followed the Arian sect.\textsuperscript{180} Arianism differed from Catholicism in that it did not hold that the parts of the Trinity were all equal, nor that they were all eternal. The Son was not believed to be God

\textsuperscript{178} Hillgarth, \textit{Visigoths in History}, 47.
\textsuperscript{180} Corral, 158.
“by nature but created, and not eternal like the Father.” Not surprisingly because of the significant differences Arianism was condemned as heretical by the Catholic Church.

It was religion that had prompted the rebellion of Leovigild’s son Hermenegild in AD 579. Hermenegild’s wife had been abused by his stepmother for having converted to Catholicism. Hermenegild’s rebellion was centred at Sevilla, as we saw earlier, and it is interesting that the rebellion of a Visigothic noble who had converted to the Roman religion of Catholicism would be based in the south, which as was shown in the previous chapter was one of the most Romanized. This is another indication of the continued strength of Roman culture there.

As discussed, Leovigild’s reign was seen as the one that truly created Visigothic Spain through his unification of the Peninsula. He was not entirely successful, however as he failed to unite the Peninsula religiously. Instead of trying to convert the Arians to Catholicism or the Catholics to Arianism he attempted to find a middle ground by introducing the belief of Macedonianism, which included the equality of the Father and Son and the subordination of the Holy Ghost, in the hope that this would be acceptable to both groups. He even sought to make the process easier by not requiring a second baptism. He was not entirely accommodating, however, and according to Gregory of Tours those who opposed his religious policies were forcibly punished. Despite his efforts he failed to establish a religious doctrine that both Visigoths and Hispano-Romans could agree on, and his death in AD 586 left the Peninsula still divided on religious lines.

182 Corral, 158.
183 Ibid., 61.
184 Fear, introduction, xii-xiv.
Visigothic nobles realized that the only way to gain fully the support of their Hispano-Roman subjects, who were by far the majority, was to convert to the Hispano-Roman religion and as a result they began to follow the Catholic Church. It was under Leovigild’s son Reccared that this process was finalized when he himself converted. In AD 589, three years after Leovigild’s death, Reccared called the Third Council of Toledo at which he proposed that the Visigoth population convert to Catholicism, after which the vast majority of the Visigothic nobles including Reccared were baptized into the Roman Church.

As a result the Roman Catholic Church became an influential institution in the Visigothic kingdom. National church councils came to proclaim legislation, not only on matters concerned with the church itself, but also on matters that technically fell outside their purview. The king was not entirely under the sway of the Church, but there was a certain degree of control believed to exist, as suggested by the idea that he was king by the grace of God. This idea is well summarized by Isidorus himself in his Etymologies, 9.3.4 when he writes “rex eris, si recte facis; si non facias, non eris”, which interestingly enough for the argument made here concerning his sources, echoes Horace’s Epistles 1.1.59: at pueri ludentes, ‘rex eris,’ aiunt, ‘si recte facies.’

Education now also fell under the control of the Church. Given that the Church preserved many elements of the Roman intellectual tradition this must have influenced the nature of the education noble youths received in Visigothic Spain. The traditional view of

185 Corral, 158.
186 Fear, xiv.
187 Corral, 160.
188 Ibid., 161.
189 Fear, introduction, xiv.
190 Fear, introduction, xiv-xv.
191 Reilly, 29.
the barbarians has classified them as un-intellectual and crude, but as with many popular beliefs about barbarian peoples, in the case of Visigothic Spain this is also incorrect.

**Intellectual Life in Visigothic Spain**

The Visigoths, like other barbarians, have long been thought to be more interested in war and pillaging than in more intellectual pursuits, and with their arrival in previously Roman dominated territories it was thought that they ended any serious intellectual endeavours that might have been pursued there. In the case of Spain, it has been argued that the unsettled conditions caused by the introduction of Visigothic rule led to a break in the literary culture of Spain throughout the fifth century\(^{192}\) and Pérez de Urbe says that Roman culture suffered during the chaos of the fifth century because any intellectual pursuits were not deemed a priority.\(^{193}\)

Collins also argues against any positive assessment of intellectual life in Visigothic Spain, saying that the evaluation of the amount of Classical learning there is “far too optimistic.” According to him the campaigns of Leovigild and the rebellion of his son resulted in 30 years of continuous warfare in Spain that caused a break from the Roman past.\(^{194}\) That the period was tumultuous for some is by no means in doubt. There were thirty different Visigothic kings in two and a half centuries, most of whom were removed from their throne violently. This frequent turnover of Visigothic kings led to Gregory of Tours calling the inclination to kill unpopular monarchs the “Gothic Disease.”\(^{195}\)

However, different opinions abound, as we have seen. Gaibrois writes that the end of the Roman Empire and the arrival of the barbarians was by no means the catastrophe that

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\(^{193}\) Pérez de Urbe, 16.

\(^{194}\) Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, 62.

\(^{195}\) Fear, xvi.
many deem it to be, nor did it result in cultural regression.\textsuperscript{196} Díaz y Díaz also disagrees with the likes of Collins and Irvine saying that Visigothic Spain was in fact the only source for science and knowledge in western Europe after the fall of the western Roman Empire,\textsuperscript{197} a point of considerable importance for the later study of the sources of scientific knowledge in Isidorus Hispalensis’ De natura rerum. Inscriptions discovered by Díaz y Díaz written in a number of different hands suggest that literacy remained widespread, and was not only limited to the clergy. Indeed, some living in rural areas seem to have been literate as well, which suggests the existence of elementary schools or at least schoolmasters in Spain.\textsuperscript{198} Despite the upheavals it appears that some elements of the extensive Roman education system, which were discussed in the first chapter, continued into the Visigothic period.

As Fear points out, “…turmoil at the top of society need not cause extensive disturbance to its essential structures and stability.”\textsuperscript{199} In this way, though life was indeed quite uncertain for the Visigothic kings, this does not mean that life was just as unsettled for others living in Visigothic Spain. That, combined with the fact that the Visigoths had no real campaign to wipe out Roman culture, and in fact were quite keen to adopt it for themselves supports the survival of Classical texts in Spain at this time. Perhaps the reason literary pursuits for a time seem to disappear is that the Roman elites involved in them to a certain degree retreat to the background to make way for the new Visigothic ruling class. They do not genuinely disappear, but are merely not so visible for a time.

\textsuperscript{196} Gaibrois, 13.
\textsuperscript{198} Hillgarth, Visigoths in History, 43.
\textsuperscript{199} Fear, introduction, xvi.
Although it was not destroyed by the barbarians, literary production slacked off for a time but seems to revived after AD 589, the date at which King Reccared and the rest of the Visigoths converted to Catholicism. Now without enemies, the fields of knowledge and culture, which had come to reside principally within the Church, were able to flourish and the Visigothic Church produced a number of notable intellectuals, to such a degree that Collins writes that, “In the seventh century the Spanish church appears intellectually outstanding. It produced a succession of authors of theological, literary, and liturgical texts that were unparalleled, at least in the west, at this time.” Many of these works were produced by Julian of Toledo and, of course, Isidorus Hispalensis, and went on to spread beyond the Peninsula into the rest of Europe.

Under royal protection Episcopal schools, such as those in Zaragoza, Toledo and Sevilla now flourished. Despite the apparent general literacy, this may not have been a period that saw widespread pursuit of academic study as most of the intellectual property was now in the hands of the Church and the kings. Indeed, the desire to preserve ancient texts in what had become a somewhat more narrow intellectual culture may have provided some of the motivation for Isidorus’ encyclopedic works, though at the same time it is important to remember that he was working within an encyclopedic tradition that dates back to antiquity. When viewed in that light, it may be seen as another example of the strength of the Roman literary tradition in Visigothic Spain.

The encyclopedic compilations created by members of the Visigothic church in Spain would have required access to large collections of books. Some have argued that such

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200 Irvine, 209.
201 Corral, 162.
202 Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, 147.
203 Corral, 165.
texts were not easily available in Visigothic Spain, and the lack of intellectual activity in Spain from the end of Roman rule to what is termed the “Isidoran Renaissance” has been cited as evidence for this. It has been argued that this renaissance was only possible because of texts that came into the Peninsula from Byzantium and Africa.\textsuperscript{204}

In the sixth century the African monk Donatus came to the Peninsula and founded the monastery of Servitanum, and he brought with him seventy monks and a large collection of books. Collins, in line with other scholars, writes:

While it is possible to identify some of the Spanish travelers to the imperial capital in the 570s and early 580s, and some of the texts they may have acquired there, this route was secondary in terms of how African influences were making themselves felt in Spain in the later sixth century. Far more substantial and prolonged was the effect of the direct connections between the two. This flow of cultural influence seems to have been entirely one way, and was principally mediated through individuals and groups who migrated from Africa to the Iberian Peninsula.\textsuperscript{205}

Collins cites the issues of political instability, banditry, war and destruction in the Peninsula as the reason for the inaccessibility of Roman texts in Spain prior to the arrival of those coming from Africa and the east.\textsuperscript{206}

It would seem somewhat strange that a region that was significantly less accepting of Roman rule and culture, as we saw Africa to be in the previous chapter, would be responsible for introducing Classical texts back to Spain which was famous in antiquity for its Latin literary production. While texts from Africa no doubt were brought into Spain, in light of Spain’s strong place in the history of Latin literature to suggest that all of the Latin texts in Spain in the Visigothic period came from Africa is unreasonable.

\textsuperscript{204} Collins, \textit{Visigothic Spain}, 148.
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 151.
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid.
Collins cites political instability as the reason for the inaccessibility of Latin texts in Spain. At the same time he cites political instability that was so severe it caused people to flee the area, as the reason that those who brought Latin texts to Spain from Africa and the east went there in the first place. If such events made Latin texts scarce in Spain, to the point that literary production ended, in a place like Africa which had a far weaker Latin tradition, one would assume that the impact of political instability would have been even more damaging to their scholarship. In addition, as we saw earlier, it seems unlikely that such political instability had a serious impact on the literary community in Spain, being restricted to the very upper levels of Visigothic society.

Hillgarth says of Spain that one of the main features of its society was the union between Christianity and Classical culture. In the late sixth and the seventh centuries, the period in which Isidorus was working, the Spanish Church was still using Latin as its “normal language” and they were also “surrounded by the ‘monuments of the ancients’, both in art and literature.” In addition, Reilly writes that:

In a tradition which went back…to the sixth century Cassiodorus, the monks pursued that Christian wisdom which was enshrined in Scripture and the commentaries and treatises of the Latin Fathers but only after they had mastered the seven liberal arts which defined the basic education of the Late Roman world. In pursuit of the latter, they pursued not simply Donatus and Priscian but Virgil, Caesar, Cicero and most of the Roman authors who are still known to us.

Not only did Latin texts survive but the Roman system of education seems to have persisted in the Visigothic church. Thus it is clear that the arrival of the barbarians into the Roman world in general, and to Spain in particular, did not signify an immediate break with

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207 Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, 152.
209 Ibid., 9.
210 Reilly, 32.
Roman culture. On the contrary, the Visigoths who came to Spain had already adopted elements of Roman culture, and upon being confronted with the highly Romanized Hispano-Roman community had little other option but to adapt further to it if they wished to maintain control of the Peninsula. Based on the fact that they were so outnumbered by the Hispano-Romans any attempt to conquer them by force would likely have been unsuccessful. The final blow to Visigothic culture in Spain was when they all converted to Catholicism, and with that Roman culture continued uninhibited. It is into this world that Isidorus Hispalensis was born and came to produce some of the most influential scientific texts of the medieval period.
Chapter 3

Isidorus Hispalensis: A Roman Visigoth or a Visigothic Roman

There can be no doubt that Isidorus’ works were shaped by the time in which he was born. The important question is how that time influenced him. Under the traditional conception of the barbarian invasions, the negative views of Isidorus’ works find support. However we have seen that this view of the invasions is no longer deemed accurate, and therefore the way we look at Isidorus’ works must also change. Though he is, correctly, closely associated with the Visigothic world of seventh century Spain nonetheless a study of his background shows that he was still tied to his Roman heritage, an inheritance that is no doubt reflected in his work.

Isidorus’ Life

Despite the fact that Isidorus, as well as his brother Leander, were the two most important writers of Visigothic Spain, little is known about their lives. Because of the lack of historical information one author attempts a psychobiological analysis of him based on the work of C.G. Jung and E. Bleuler to fill in missing information on his personality. The work by Saint Braulio, a contemporary of Isidorus, and later amended by Saint Ildefonsus, focuses solely on his literary productions. Thus little may be gleaned about Isidorus’ life before he took the Episcopal seat of Sevilla and began the creation of the works for which


\[213\] Jose Madoz, San Isidoro de Sevilla: Semblanza de su personalidad literaria (Leon: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Centro de Estudios e Investigaciones S. Isidoro, 1960), 3-4.
he would become famous. Nevertheless, looking at what information there is about his background serves to illustrate how closely Isidorus was connected to the intellectual heritage of the Roman past.

The year of Isidorus’ birth is uncertain, though it has been narrowed down to within a decade. It is estimated that he was born between AD 560 and 570 based on his ascension to the Episcopal seat of Sevilla in AD 600 or 601. Church law indicated that a candidate for the episcopate had to be at least thirty years old. Araujo-Costa argues for the earlier date, for contemporary biographers write that Isidorus was quite elderly at the time of his death. He also argues that it makes more sense for Isidorus to have been entering his 40th year rather than his 30th when he took up Episcopal duties.

The general belief is that Isidorus’ family was indeed of Roman origin, based principally on the evidence of the family names. His father’s name is given in more than one source as Severien. The names of his siblings, Leander, Fulgentius and Florentina, are also indicative of a Roman background. Though there is no hard evidence for it, it is thought that the family was also of a noble background. Some have suggested that Severien was the duke or governor of Cartagena, while other historians have denied that he held such an exalted position. Whether or not Severien held such a position, Fontaine argues that the high levels of education indicated by the writings of Isidorus’ elder brother Leander are evidence enough of the family’s nobility.

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215 Madoz, 4.
217 Fontaine, *San Isidore et la culture classique*, 5.
218 Araujo-Costa, 46.
All the children of Severien joined the Spanish Church, a move that was not uncommon for prominent Romans at the time, and thus it may be taken as further evidence for the family’s elite status. During the reign of Augustine the Church became a dominant political force through its efforts to maintain power and influence in an unstable political situation. Many Roman nobles joined the Church in order to keep some of their political power now that a new group was in control. The very fact that Isidorus’ family was so closely tied to the church can also be taken as another indication of their strong Roman background. The eldest of their children, Leander, is also famous in the Spanish church for having been responsible for the conversion of the Visigothic community from Arianism to Catholicism.

Little is known about Isidorus’ mother, though she is widely believed to have been a Visigoth. She converted to Catholicism and, as a result of her awareness of the political importance of the Church, may have played a role in the assumption of religious occupations by her children. Fontaine goes so far as to suggest that she herself entered the church after the death of her husband, and based on evidence from Leander’s work dedicated to his sister Florentina, she may in fact have been the abbess of her daughter’s convent. Given that she was a Visigoth, she almost certainly began life as a member of the Arian faith. The

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221 Later in the thirteenth century the Spanish historian Lucas de Tuy wrote that there was another sister, Theodosia, who married king Leovigild and was the mother of Saint Hermenegild, though others have denied her existence and seen it as a way to associate more closely Isidorus with Visigothic nobility (Araujo-Costa 46-47).
222 Correa, “Reino Visigodo,” 44.
223 Ibid., 43.
225 Ibid., 90.
inclination to the Roman Catholic Church would have come from Severien, and was likely a way for his children to have status in the new political situation comparable to that which he had held.

Despite his association with Sevilla, Isidorus’ family was not originally from there, but rather is thought to have originally come from Cartagena. The reason for their move to Sevilla is put down to some sort of upheaval that took place in Cartagena around the time of Isidorus’ birth, though what exactly it was that prompted their flight is not certain. The most common reason given is the arrival of the Byzantines in the sixth century which led to the region falling under their control. Hillgarth, however, suggests that the reason was that the Arian king Agila, being intolerant and not well liked by the local aristocracy, caused them to leave.

Other, less plausible theories have been put forward for the origins of the family. In his 1995 work on medieval Spain, Collins suggests that they were in fact Byzantine, for both Isidorus and Leander are Greek names, which he says is strange given the context in which they were born. In a later work he suggests that they were from Africa, again citing the evidence of names, this time relying on their brother Fulgentius, whose name was often associated with Africa. Neither argument is persuasive, and ultimately has no impact on the question of Isidorus’ relationship to Classical sources, as his work was carried out in Sevilla and not Byzantium or Africa.

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227 Hillgarth, 31.
Isidorus succeeded his brother Leander as abbot, then as bishop of Sevilla, and came
to have extensive political authority, in both secular and ecclesiastical matters. He presided
over the Fourth Council of Toledo, the result of which was that the authority of the church
was established over the king and state government. After serving as bishop of Sevilla for
40 years, thus making him the longest serving of the metropolitan bishops, Isidorus died
on April 4, AD 636. Overcome by a fever, he asked to be taken to the church of San
Vincente where he made a public confession of his sins and received the Eucharist. The day
of his death, April 4, was made his feast day. For his great works he was canonized in
1598 and made a Doctor of the Church in 1722. The works that led him to receive these
accolades would not have been possible without the education that he received, an education
that was certainly unique, and led to his appreciation and use of pagan authors that were
otherwise ignored by other scholars at the time.

Isidorus’ Education

Isidorus’ education was the result of his own unique circumstances, and made
possible by the easy access to Roman texts that were available to members of the Church in
Sevilla. As a result of the early deaths of his parents, the care of Isidorus and his siblings fell
to their eldest brother Leander and it was under Leander’s guidance that Isidorus’ literary
education began. Leander’s own education had also been of a special kind, and the style

\[\text{230 Irvine, 211.}\]
\[\text{231 Juan de Mariana. \textit{Obras del Padre Juan de Mariana} Volume 30. Ed. Francisco Pi y
Margall. (Madrid: Ediciones Atlas. 1950), 159.}\]
\[\text{232 Collins, \textit{Visigothic Spain}, 79.}\]
\[\text{233 Ibid., 162.}\]
\[\text{234 Juan de Mariana, 159.}\]
\[\text{235 Stephen A. Barney et al., introduction to \textit{The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville} (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 2006), 10}\]
\[\text{236 Fontaine, \textit{Isidore of Seville et la culture classique}, 6.}\]
\[\text{237 Madoz, 5.}\]
of prose in his two surviving works suggests that he received an education beyond that
which was normally offered in ecclesiastical schools, and was likely the result of the influence
of his Roman father.238

As the result of their father’s death, Fulgentius and Isidorus were not able to benefit
from his instruction. Thus they must have been educated principally in monastic schools
where they would have received a standard ecclesiastical education.239 As a result Isidorus’
education may have been of a more clerical nature than Leander’s.240 However, Barney
suggests that his teacher at the ecclesiastical school may in fact have been his brother
Leander,241 and from Leander he almost certainly was exposed to authors beyond what was
normally covered in a monastic institution.242 His education was as a result superior to that
of the other students. It included more pagan authors than normally were covered in a
Church-run school in a special curriculum Leander devised based on the instruction he had
received from their father. The style of teaching that Isidorus received seems not to have
been greatly changed from that of antiquity, as shown in the conservative nature of Isidorus’
sources and grammar in Book 1 of his Etymologies.243 Fontaine identifies Isidorus’ education
as having been somewhere between that of antiquity and that of the medieval period and as
a result of Leander’s role Isidorus was able to experience some of the “familial
preceptorship” of antiquity that Leander had had with his father. Through Leander the

238 Katherine Nell McFarlane, Isidore of Seville on the Pagan Gods, Transactions of the
American Philosophical Society, volume 70, Part 3, (Philadelphia: American
239 Ibid.
240 Fontaine, Isidore of Seville et la culture classique, 6-7.
241 Barney, 7.
242 McFarlane, 3.
243 Fontaine, Isidore de Séville: Génèse et originalité, 93.
knowledge and methods of ancient schools were passed onto Isidorus.\(^{244}\) Of his education Fontaine writes, “Thanks to him [Leander] the Sevillan’s education had not been reduced to the elementary level of the monastic litteratio.”\(^{245}\)

Fontaine puts forward a number of reasons for not doubting the quality of the education Isidorus was able to receive in Visigothic Spain. He first refers to the long intellectual tradition in Bética as well as the high levels of Romanization there, which I covered in the first chapter. He says that the qualities of Leander’s Latin, learned in Cartagena and Sevilla, are indicative of the high levels of education there even after the fall of the western Empire. Examples of this abound in Spain. Prudentius, nicknamed the “Christian Lucretius”, had a deep knowledge of pagan poetry on which he based his writings. In addition Juvenecus sang the Gospel in Virgilian hexameter. Indeed, Isidorus’ own poetry resembles that of Martial. The final reason Fontaine cites is the resurgence in the intellectual life of the Visigothic Church that is attested in works from southern Spain almost a generation before Isidorus.\(^{246}\) Thus it is quite clear that Isidorus’ works were based on a strong Classical foundation.

One of the main areas of contention surrounding Isidorus is to what degree he had knowledge of the Greek language. Both he and his brother Leander spent time in Constantinople,\(^{247}\) which would have encouraged some knowledge of Greek. In addition, as Greek culture was present on the Peninsula by way of Roman culture, it is possible that he was exposed to it in that way as well. At the same time, Greek had stopped being taught in the west around the end of the 4th century AD, but with the connections in the south and

\(^{244}\) Fontaine, *Isidore de Séville et la culture classique*, 7.
\(^{245}\) Ibid. My translation.
\(^{246}\) Fontaine, *Isidore de Séville*, 7-9.
\(^{247}\) Reilly, 33.
east of Spain with the eastern empire it is entirely probable that someone like Isidorus could have learned Greek.\textsuperscript{248} Greek clergy also visited Spain\textsuperscript{249} and a large number of the educators in Spain were also Greek.\textsuperscript{250}

In Isidorus’ works there is evidence for his knowledge of Greek, and Madoz writes that in the \textit{De ecclesiasticis officiis} and in \textit{De ortu et obitu partum} it would seem that he had direct access to Greek texts. At the same time he argues that the praise of Isidorus’ skill in Greek in the \textit{Vita Isidori} does not necessarily fit with his use of the language in his works.\textsuperscript{251} He writes:

\begin{quote}
Perhaps his level of Greek did not pass beyond his being able to have an educated wit to know how to reason out the origin of a technical etymology, to verify the meaning of certain passages of Greek literature, to use sporadically some of its authors.\textsuperscript{252}
\end{quote}

García Villada on the other hand argues that Isidorus had probably read the Greek authors in Latin translation.\textsuperscript{253} Based on the evidence, I think it is likely that Isidorus at least had a working knowledge of Greek, though he was probably not fluent. One of the arguments frequently put forward for his ignorance of the language is the fact that he frequently only puts the occasional Greek word in his writings, and never actually writes extended passages in Greek. This seems to me a rather unreasonable expectation, as many modern scholars frequently have a good knowledge of Greek without writing lengthy works in the language because there is no professional or intellectual need to do so. Classicists in the nineteenth

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{248} Madoz, 8. \\
\textsuperscript{250} Carl A. Hanson, “Were There Libraries in Roman Spain?” \textit{Libraries and Culture} 24, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 201. \\
\textsuperscript{251} Madoz, 8. \\
\textsuperscript{252} Madoz, 9. My translation. \\
\end{flushright}
and early twentieth centuries would write their works in Latin and not in Greek, but this did not draw the accusation that they had an insufficient knowledge of Greek. Thus it is reasonable to assume Isidorus was competent to a significant degree in Greek.

Isidorus put his education to good use in the production of his many works that were influential not only in his own time, but would go on to shape the intellectual world in Europe for hundreds of years. His works are commonly placed historically between those of Cassiodorus, considered the last of the Classical authors, and the works of the many authors who wrote later in Europe.\(^\text{254}\) He has proven difficult to place in chronology and thus finds himself in a time all his own, placed between the two major traditions, the Classical and the medieval. Barney illustrates this particularly well, writing:

> Isidore’s absorbing and replicating of these traditions, pagan and Christian, Plinian and Augustinian, show him facing both ways. He may be included among the last humanist polymaths of late antiquity, and also among the early and most influential medieval Christian scholars.\(^\text{255}\)

In the *Renotatio Librorum Domini Isidori* written by Isidorus’ close friend Braulio we find a list of his major works. Braulio lists 16 major works by the bishop, and adds that Isidorus wrote many smaller works that Braulio does not mention by name.\(^\text{256}\) Isidorus’ great scholarly output began after he had become bishop of Sevilla, the resulting body of work being “…unmatched in its range and quantity by any of his predecessors or successors in Late Antiquity and early medieval Spain.”\(^\text{257}\) One can easily suggest that this great production of scholarly works only began after he succeeded to the Episcopal seat of Sevilla because it was


\(^{255}\) Barney, 16.

\(^{256}\) Laborda, 31.

\(^{257}\) Collins, *Visgothic Spain*, 163.
at that point he was able to access easily the Classical works present in the city for the reasons cited above.

Though chronologically Isidorus is somewhat difficult to place, coming between two historical literary periods, the Classical and medieval, he is not entirely outside any literary tradition. He is most easily associated with the encyclopedic tradition of antiquity. The definition of this tradition has proven difficult, but recent work, including that of Carmen Codoñer and Robert Fowler, has simplified it to a certain degree, dividing the works that fall into this group into two categories: those about the natural world and those which are about the liberal arts, inspired by an earlier tradition, the *enkuklios paideia*.²⁵⁸

Part of the difficulty with the definition of the encyclopedic tradition exists because of challenges in the translation of the phrase *enkuklios paideia*, and uncertainty about the degree to which the later encyclopedic tradition was related to it. *Enkuklios* means “in the circle of” and *paideia* means “education” and “culture”²⁵⁹ so the phrase is usually taken to refer to “ordinary education” or “all-round cultural knowledge.”²⁶⁰ Hadot’s definition is particularly good: “a program of study, unified in method and structure, that must be followed in order to achieve a complete education.”²⁶¹ She suggests that purpose of the study of the *enkuklios paideia* is that, “it proposes that man be educated in a certain number of sciences, even if the point is to recognize the profound unity of these sciences.”²⁶² This may


²⁶⁰ Doody, “Pliny’s Natural History,” 4.


²⁶² Ibid., 39.
be related to another purpose suggested for *enkuklios paideia*, namely the study of a series of basic subjects for the purpose of later specialization. As a result some have come to associate *enkuklios paideia* with the seven liberal arts, encompassing the study of grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, mathematics, astronomy, music and geometry.\(^{263}\)

The authors identified as part of this tradition, such as Cato, Varro, Celsus and, most commonly, Pliny, are united in their recognition as polymaths, “the man in complete possession of the knowledge of his culture.”\(^{264}\) Their works fit into a tradition that existed by the Augustan period, and perhaps extended back to the Hellenistic.\(^{265}\)

For the Romans, such works began as a source of the knowledge that they had received from the Hellenistic world.\(^{266}\) These works were intended as a mirror on the world, which allowed the reader to understand the world and his place in it. They also served to provide information on a vast number of subjects in one place.\(^{267}\) As I mentioned previously, what authors are classified as part of this genre is disputed, but the one author who is almost always considered as an encyclopedist is Pliny the Elder, author of the *Natural History*. For Fowler, Pliny’s is the only work from the Greco-Roman world that can really be given the title “encyclopedia”\(^{268}\) and for both those who study the history of the encyclopedia specifically and for Classicists, Pliny is the first of the encyclopedists. At the same time, others suggest that Cato, Varro and Celsus may have been Pliny’s predecessors in

\(^{263}\) Doody, “Pliny’s Natural History,” 6.

\(^{264}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^{265}\) Fowler, 14.

\(^{266}\) McFarlane, 4.


\(^{268}\) Fowler, 8.
this area.\textsuperscript{269} Pliny’s \textit{Natural History} was very influential in later periods. In this work he attempted to be as comprehensive as possible, mainly in the discussion of natural history, but he also included numerous comments on other areas.\textsuperscript{270}

The last of the ancient encyclopedias is usually identified as Cassiodorus’ \textit{Institutiones}.\textsuperscript{271} By this time the encyclopedia had taken on a distinctly Christian tone\textsuperscript{272} as the Church sought to bring secular knowledge in line with Christian doctrine.\textsuperscript{273} The medieval encyclopedia is said to have begun between the collapse of the Roman Empire and the rise of the barbarian kingdoms\textsuperscript{274} and some identify its beginnings with the works of Isidorus himself.\textsuperscript{275} These works were likely created as the result of fears of the loss of knowledge.\textsuperscript{276} This is seen with its beginnings in the Roman period, with the attempts to preserve Hellenistic knowledge for Rome. The same happens again in the medieval period, with Isidorus’ attempting to preserve Roman knowledge in the new Visigothic-dominated time.

The medieval encyclopedia also served a purpose similar to that in antiquity. We saw above that the \textit{enkuklios paideia} served as a foundation that set students up for further specialization, normally in some more complex philosophical subject. The medieval encyclopedia did the same, though there was little opportunity for choice in specialization, as the only subject allowed was Christianity. The subjects covered in medieval encyclopedias were intended to aid in the study of Scripture and the understanding of God.\textsuperscript{277} For

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{269} Doody, “Pliny’s Natural History,” 2.
\bibitem{270} Fowler, 8.
\bibitem{272} Ibid., 16.
\bibitem{273} McFarlane, 4.
\bibitem{274} Ribémont, 15.
\bibitem{275} Meier, 152.
\bibitem{276} Ibid., 153.
\bibitem{277} Fowler, 15.
\end{thebibliography}
example, much of the encyclopedic works concerned with the natural world listed and described elements as “an inventory of the Lord’s creation, a more or less systematic supplement to the record of the divine work in the opening verse of Genesis.”278 Most such works were compiled by the scholarly community, namely those associated with monasteries, and they were the ones who had easy access to libraries,279 for the reasons illustrated above.

Isidorus fits easily into this group. First, Isidorus can certainly be described as a polymath, a fact made clear by the variety of subjects he elaborated particularly in his *Etymologies*, but also in his other works as well. He covers everything from mathematics, music and astronomy to warfare, the pagan gods and many other disparate subjects. At the same time, he also emphasizes the unity of all subjects, though based on his time and place in history, this unity is found in God. Finally, like the ancient encyclopedists, his works are intended to prepare students for later specialized study, in his case, specifically of Christian scripture. Thus he clearly continues the encyclopedic tradition begun centuries earlier, and because of the popularity of his works ensured that the genre continued on for centuries more.

**Modern Opinions of Isidorus**

Isidorus’ works led to him receiving high praise from his contemporaries, and indeed for years afterwards. At the VIII Council of Toledo he was declared “Doctor egregius, Ecclesiae Catholicae novissimum decus…in saeclorum fine doctissimus.”280 San Ildefonsus calls him the wisest of men281 and describes him as:

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279 Meier, 153.

280 Madoz, 119.

A man distinguished both by his looks and intellect. His ability in speaking reached such a pitch of fluency and delight that his wondrous richness of expression left his audience enraptured to such a degree that a man who had heard him would not remember what he said unless it was repeated many times. He wrote famous works and no small amount of them.\textsuperscript{282}

Indeed, so great was the admiration for his skills as an orator that a miracle was attributed to him, that was also accredited to other great authors of antiquity such as Plato, Virgil and Lucan, as well as to Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine. The miracle describes that when Isidorus was a child a swarm of bees came to his mouth and flying in his breath alighted on his lips, foretelling the sweetness of his words.\textsuperscript{283} The author of “The Life of St. Fructuosus of Braga” gives a particularly stunning assessment of the saint, calling him a “glorious lamp of outstanding brightness” saying that he was “famous for his oratory, outstanding in his labours, and, steeped in the arts of learning” and that “through the industry of an active life educated all Spain in worldly affairs...shining out through his outstanding eloquence, obtained fame through his learned books...”\textsuperscript{284} This praise continued into later times, including a work by Bourret in the 19th century that borders on worship.

This positive view of Isidorus and his work began to change. A restrained position was taken by German scholars while others openly ridiculed his talents, as is illustrated by the title of a lecture given in an American university called, “How and Why Isidore was an Imbecile.”\textsuperscript{285} The main criticism of his work is its supposed unoriginality. A biography of

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\textsuperscript{282} Ibid., 116-117.
\textsuperscript{283} Araujo-Costa, 49.
\textsuperscript{285} Fontaine, \textit{Isidore de Séville et la culture classique}, 3.
him in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* captures this attitude with the claim that, “Although lacking in original thinking he produced a tremendous literary output.”

Isidorus is in good company in being the victim of such criticism, as Pliny has been the recipient of the same accusation of unoriginality, his work being described as “an unoriginal repository of popular science” by some. Doody writes:

The apparent consensus on Pliny’s unoriginal encyclopedism is a particularly pernicious case, where modern generic models have set the terms of the text’s significance. The opposition between insightful science and amateurish encyclopedism has produced an unnecessarily negative image of Pliny’s scholarship as derivative and uncritical.

Diaz identifies the current identification of Isidorus as a “mere” compiler writing:

To the current errors about the human quality of the Saint it is necessary to add another, perhaps the most widespread of all, the most repeated, the one preferred by…lazy minds. Saint Isidore is a compiler.

His works have been described as “a derivative, unoriginal compilation” but Diaz argues that his works do actually demonstrate flexibility as a writer, given that he changes his style based on a given situation: the *Etymologiae* is didactic, the *Sententiae* is concise, the *Synonima* is poetic. Diaz also argues that the plan for his compilations, his clarity and his method are all original, even if the content itself is not original.

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287 Doody, “Pliny’s Natural History” 1.


290 Irvine, 241.

291 Diaz, 13.

292 Ibid., 15.
Menéndez y y Pelayo agrees that Isidorus’ method was original, writing that, “He takes from others the stones and raises the building.”\textsuperscript{293} He took elements that were scattered throughout the works of other authors and joined them together to create something new so that “having systematized in one book theological science, albeit imperfectly and briefly, is the glory of Saint Isidore.”\textsuperscript{294} Examples of true originality do exist in Isidorus’ work, with his philosophy of rights, and definition of law, as well as in his division of animals which is entirely his own.\textsuperscript{295}

In the discussion of the merits of Isidorus’ work based on its originality it is important to remember that originality in written works was not so exalted at his time as it is now. In addition, Isidorus’ lack of originality may not have been the result of a lack of skill but a lack of desire. Isidorus did not wish to write original works, but rather sought to preserve what he had known, coming from an upper-class Roman family, for future generations. We saw in the previous chapter that the barbarity of the Visigoths was greatly exaggerated and that there was by no means a concerted effort to stamp out Roman culture. This does not mean that Roman knowledge and culture were not susceptible to the natural changes that come with a change of regime or loss of common memory with the passage of time. Knowing this, Isidorus felt the need to make an effort to preserve that wisdom with which he had grown and learned as a child in his Roman family. Again in this case we see unreasonable criteria imposed on an ancient scholar. We rarely see authors of modern encyclopedias being criticized for their lack of originality. In addition to the examples of his

\textsuperscript{294} Ibid., 19. My translation.
\textsuperscript{295} Díaz, 15.
originality given above, I argue that his linking of ancient astronomy with the Christianity of his time is another example of his ingenuity, and will discuss this further in the next chapter.

Leaving aside the discussion of his originality or lack thereof, the breadth of his works and the information collected in them is certainly praiseworthy. His influence, as we shall see, was extensive, so it is difficult to imagine how barren the intellectual community of medieval Europe would have been without his contribution in the transmission of ancient science to the medieval period.

Isidorus’ Influence

The Classical Humanist tradition identified Isidorus as “the last philologist of antiquity,” but Fontaine considers this designation insufficient, suggesting rather that he should be called “the teacher of west,” for this was truly his role. Madoz agrees, writing:

The second half of the seventh century, the twilight of the patristic age and the threshold of the Middle Ages, saw the rising on the horizon of Bética a star from the west inbar ecclesiae, - sidus Hesperiae doctor Hispaniae, - who was to illuminate without rival all of the Middle Ages and beyond….  

Thompson writes that the contributions of Isidorus and the other seventh century Spanish bishops to Latin literature “far surpassed anything that was produced in the contemporary west,” the result no doubt of the high levels of Romanization in Spain, and the Roman nobles who found new positions of importance in the Spanish church.

Science was the principal area in where Isidorus' influence was felt. Madoz writes of this saying, “His spirit is so involved in the scientific production of Europe, that there is scarcely a scientific work of any worth that does not have a relationship with the Isidorian

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298 Thompson, 316.
The works of Isidorus were extraordinary in this period not only for the extent to which they spread across Europe, but also for the speed with which it happened.\textsuperscript{299} Through the evidence of their titles and contents the majority of the encyclopedias from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries had made use of Isidorus’ profane works,\textsuperscript{301} the contents of which were no doubt drawn from Classical resources to which he was exposed as a youth. Not only were his works inspirational to European scientists, but they were also taken up by Muslim scientists.\textsuperscript{302} Later scholars whose names have come to be more famous than that of Isidorus also relied on his works, such as the Venerable Bede, whose own \textit{De natura rerum} was heavily influenced by that of Isidorus, as well as Rhabanus Marus\textsuperscript{303} and the most famous scholar of the Spanish medieval period, King Alfonso X, called El Sabio for his scholarly works, was certainly deeply influenced by Isidorus.

Through him these men were able to receive the knowledge of antiquity for, as Menéndez y Pidal writes, “…into the mind of Saint Isidore ancient Spain put all of its glories.”\textsuperscript{304} Madoz writes that his role in the history of literature was the transmission and preservation of ancient monuments so that he came to be the educator of the Middle Ages\textsuperscript{305}, and that his value as a witness of ancient wisdom is incomparable. Without him many ancient treasures would have been lost.\textsuperscript{306}

Many argue that Isidorus received his information through intermediary authors, not directly from the sources themselves. However, I argue that he grew up in the culture that

\textsuperscript{299} Madoz, 152. My translation.
\textsuperscript{300} Ibid., 151.
\textsuperscript{301} Fontaine, \textit{Isidore de Séville et la culture classique}, 4.
\textsuperscript{302} Laborda, 33.
\textsuperscript{303} Ibid., 34-36.
\textsuperscript{304} Menéndez y Pelayo, 24. My translation.
\textsuperscript{305} Madoz, 120.
\textsuperscript{306} Ibid., 153.
developed this wisdom, and therefore is more properly seen as one of the most reliable
European sources for Classical scientific thought. To illustrate this point, we shall now look
at an example of one of his lesser-studied works, the *De natura rerum*. 
Chapter 4
The Astronomy of the *De natura rerum*: Roman Traditions in Visigothic Spain

In the investigation of Isidorus’ sources scholars have been inclined to look strictly at the texts themselves, and, given his role in the Church, are quick to identify other ecclesiastical authors as his principal sources. In the previous chapters I have sought to take a different approach by looking at the history of the Roman presence in Spain and how Roman traditions not only survived but thrived after the Visigoths took control as evidence that Isidorus was well versed in Roman scholastic traditions, particularly given that his upbringing and education were those of an upper-class Roman youth. I shall now give some examples of how these Roman influences are expressed in his works, drawing examples from the astronomical chapters of his *De natura rerum*. This is by no means an exhaustive list, given the limitations of space, but certainly provides evidence for the persistence of Roman traditions in Isidorus’ work.

Astronomy appears to have been of particular interest to Isidorus if one can judge from the amount of space devoted to the subject in some of his earlier works. Fontaine writes that Isidorus’ treatment of astronomy is different from that of the other subjects of the *Quadrivium* that he discusses in that he covers it more extensively. This may be because, for Isidorus, “astronomy held…an essential place in his system of the world.”[^307] This very attitude demonstrates his adherence to a classical mindset. Plato identified astronomy as required study for philosophers, and believed that a basic understanding of the heavens was

necessary for citizens as well.\textsuperscript{308} That Plato’s \textit{Timaeus} served as a model for cosmology from Antiquity into the Middle Ages\textsuperscript{309} indicates that this attitude persisted into the Middle Ages, and influenced Isidorus in that he also saw astronomical knowledge as being beneficial for all levels of society.\textsuperscript{310} This unrestricted view of the study of astronomy is particularly apparent in Isidorus’ \textit{De natura rerum}.

\textbf{The \textit{De natura rerum} of Isidorus Hispalensis}

Isidorus’ \textit{De natura rerum} is a study of natural phenomena, including the division of time, meteorological phenomena and an extensive discussion of celestial phenomena. It was commissioned by the Visigothic king Sisebut, and likely completed around AD 613.\textsuperscript{311}

The purpose of Isidorus’ \textit{De natura rerum} may not necessarily be clear from the text itself. However, Sisebut’s response to it perhaps, as Fontaine suggests, gives some clues. In his own work Sisebut discusses eclipses and begins with a rejection of the commonly held superstitions concerning their causes. Amongst these superstitions was the idea that witches were responsible for eclipses of the Sun, and that when people made loud noises it helped to end an eclipse. Both of these beliefs were common in antiquity, and appear to have persisted into the Middle Ages in Spain.\textsuperscript{312} Flint cites this work as evidence for the continued presence of “folk magic” and she refers to the work of Maximus of Turin who said that even “good Christians” believed that it was necessary to make noise during an

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[309]{Ibid.}
\footnotetext[310]{Jacque Fontaine. \textit{Isidore de Séville: Genèse et originalité de la culture hispanique au temps des Wisigothiques}, (Turnhout: Brepols. 2000), 308.}
\footnotetext[311]{Ibid.}
\footnotetext[312]{Fontaine, \textit{Isidore de Seville et la culture classique}, 455-456.}
\end{footnotes}
eclipse of the Moon, otherwise the danger existed that God could lose it.\footnote{Valerie I.J. Flint. \textit{The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe}. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1991.} Clearly pagan traditions were still contending with Christian beliefs at Isidorus’ time.

Isidorus’ reaction when confronted with these superstitions was different from other clergy at the time. Most simply attributed such celestial events to the power of God. Isidorus, on the contrary, made use of “a scientific explanation inherited from the ancient tradition.”\footnote{Fontaine, \textit{Isidore de Seville et la culture classique}, 456, my translation.} In this approach Isidorus demonstrates a characteristic normally not seen as present in scientific discussions until the Early Modern period. Isidorus relies on reason (indeed “reason” and associated words appear frequently in the astronomical discussions of his \textit{De natura rerum}) and empirical evidence. Given his strong Roman-style upbringing this proclivity can be identified as a scholastic inheritance from antiquity.

Besides the personal interest of Isidorus and Sisebut in the subject matter, the writing of the \textit{De natura rerum} was certainly also inspired by a number of unsettling natural events in the form of lunar and solar eclipses that took place in Spain around the time of the composition of the \textit{De natura rerum} in the early seventh century. In this context Isidorus used the \textit{De natura rerum} to prevent a complete return to pagan superstitions inspired by the fear caused by these events by providing simple explanations for natural phenomena.\footnote{Ibid., 456-457.} It appears counterintuitive that Isidorus would turn to pagan science to explain away peoples’ fears, especially when trying to turn them away from pagan superstitions. The natural assumption would be that he would have sought religious explanations in ecclesiastical sources, as other religious scholars at his time had done. However, as Flint writes, “…there were in existence forms of non-Christian magical thought more destructive both mentally
and socially than astrology, and against which astrology might prove to be an active compromise and counter.”

This no doubt influenced Isidorus’ creation of different categories of astrology: 1) the natural and 2) the superstitious.

Natural astrology, according to Isidorus, is concerned with the courses of the Sun, Moon, and stars, while superstitious astrology is the use of the heavens to predict the future, as well as the assignation of parts of the soul and body to the signs of the Zodiac and the use of the stars to predict births and habits of men. Other ecclesiastical officials were inclined to condemn all forms of astronomy based on the fear that it would lead to pagan practices associated with astrology. Isidorus took a different approach, identifying elements of astronomy and astrology that were not offensive to Christian beliefs and that could be beneficial by aiding in the understanding of Christian theology.

This approach was not entirely without precedent and appears to a degree in some of the works of those ecclesiastical authors most often cited as Isidorus’ main sources. Cassiodorus in his *Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning* wrote, “It seems to me not foolish to learn from these latitudes, perhaps, the length of hours, the course of the moon (to establish Easter), and how eclipses happen lest the simple should be disturbed by some confusion” (II.vi.3, trans. James W. Halporn). The science employed in Isidorus’ *De natura rerum* was meant to be used the same way. It was not meant to replace Christian explanations, but was seen as a stage in understanding Christian doctrine. It is for this reason that Isidorus without fail finishes off the scientific explanations with “a traditional

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316 Flint, 129.
This close association of pagan science and Christian theology is one of the unique features of Isidorus’ *De natura rerum*.

**The Study of Astronomy**

Roman authors wrote many works on astronomy, including commentaries which helped to preserve earlier work. Given this, and given the evidence of the strength of Roman culture in Spain as outlined in the previous chapters, it is clear that Isidorus not only had access to Roman scientific texts, but was himself part of the pagan scientific tradition.

The study of Christian-inspired cosmography existed before the works of Isidorus, as in the case of Cassiodorus, Ambrose and Augustine. Although Isidorus was inspired by these ecclesiastical authors, at the same time Isidorus in his acceptance of scientific explanations for celestial phenomenon in the *De natura rerum* does not necessarily agree entirely with them concerning the uses of astronomy. Many such ecclesiastical authors, and this included those identified as Isidorus’ greatest inspirations and sources, were apprehensive about astronomy, fearing that it could lead to heretical practices.

Astrology was seen as a threat to the dominance of the Church, and from the time of Christianity’s acceptance as the primary religion of Rome a number of restrictions were placed on the use of astrology over the years, some with very severe penalties, including torture and execution. However, as Barton writes, “The severity of these laws should not suggest that they were harshly enforced” and she cites cases in which the use of astrology for private purposes, such as attempting to find out the sex of a coming child, could escape the full punishment normally applied to those found to have been consulting astrological information.\(^{320}\)

\(^{319}\) Ibid., my translation.
The Church’s fight against astrology was frequently not aided by the Church’s own Scriptures, where one could find support of astrology in the New Testament. For example, the Magi who came to visit the newborn Christ were thought to be astrologers, and there were also stories of heavenly signs of Christ’s death, and in Genesis one finds that God created the stars as signs.\footnote{321 Ibid., 71.}

These passages made it difficult for Christian scholars to disregard completely the signs found in the heavens, and thus we see a tentative approach to the discussion of astrology and astronomy in the works of ecclesiastical authors. In Cassiodorus, we find cautious support for the study of astronomy, and even perhaps inspiration for the purpose of the De natura rerum, as cited above. He goes on to identify the utility of some astronomical investigations for sailors and farmers, but at this point his begins to become cautionary writing, “But other things that are connected with the knowledge of the stars, i.e., knowledge of the future, certainly run contrary to our belief and should be ignored as if they had never been written” (Institutions Book II, VII Astronomy, 4, trans. James W. Halporn). He goes on to limit the study of astronomy to what appears in the Bible: “However [But] it will be sufficient for us to know as much of this part [art] as Holy Scripture contains, because it is foolish to follow human reason in this matter on which we know and have as much divine teaching as is useful to us” (Institutions Book II, VII Astronomy, 4, trans. James W. Halporn). Isidorus also runs contrary to Cassiodorus in his support for the use of the pagan names for the stars (which I will discuss later). Cassiodorus condemns such usage in his Explanation of the Psalms when in his discussion of Psalm 146 he calls the traditional pagan names “alien” (Psalm 146, 4).
Saint Ambrose is even more forceful in his condemnation of the study of the heavens, writing, “Could anything be more abstruse than to spend time discussing questions relating to astronomy and geometry…or measuring the dimensions of outer space, or reducing the very heavens above us, and the sea as well, to mere figures – and in all of it to leave out the vital issues of salvation, and go off chasing errors?” (*De officiis* I.XXVI.122, trans. Ivor J. Davidson).

While a number of ecclesiastical authors could justify some degree of astronomical study as a way for men to understand better the Scriptures and come closer to God, Saint Augustine, contrary to Isidorus’ view, sees no such value in astronomy. This may be related to his personal experience of the subject from his time as a Manichean. In his work *On Christian Teaching* he wrote:

> The orbit of the moon, which is regularly used to fix the annual celebration of our Lord’s passion, is familiar to very many people, but very few have infallible knowledge about the rising or setting or any other movements of the other heavenly bodies. In itself, this knowledge, although not implicating one in superstition, does not give much help in interpreting the divine scripture – almost none, in fact – and is really more of a hindrance, since it demands the fruitless expenditure of effort. Because it is akin to the deadly error of those who prophesy fatuously about fate, it is more convenient and honourable to despise it….we should not try to extract something of relevance to our own action and experiences, like the maniacs who cast horoscopes, but confine our interest to the stars themselves” (*Book II, XXXIX 46-XXX 47, trans. R.P.H. Green*).

He also discusses the subject in his work *City of God*, where Barton describes his argument as “torturous.” Augustine writes that Christian prophecy is acceptable, but any sort of pagan divination, including astrology, was condemned as evil.

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322 Ibid., 77.
323 Ibid., 78.
324 Ibid.
In comparison, the astronomical chapters of the *De natura rerum* show that Isidorus viewed astronomy as a useful tool for bringing people to an understanding of God, and in this way joins the pagan and the Christian traditions. In addition, unlike Augustine who considered the study of astronomy as dangerous for those who were not religious scholars, based on the purpose of the *De natura rerum* Isidorus viewed it as beneficial for the layman as well, perhaps following the inspiration of Cassiodorus. Unlike Cassiodorus, however, Isidorus was prepared to look beyond the Scriptures into pagan writings as well. Given the familiarity of the Hispano-Romans and the Visigoths with Roman literature and traditions, he probably saw the use of the familiar pagan sources as a convenient starting place. By equating them with Christian teaching he sought to give the Christian teachings greater credibility. In this way he hoped to bring people to the Church instead of having them turn to more familiar pagan traditions.

Isidorus’ willingness to make use of pagan authors is one of the most striking features of his writing, and his references to them are rarely tinged with any negativity as seen in the works of the other ecclesiastical authors, who while not necessarily condemning any pagan authors by name (and at times even citing those who agree with their criticisms of astrology) by no means are so free in their references to pagan sources as Isidorus. More often than not he praises them for their wisdom. The *De natura rerum* in particular shows his reliance on ancient sources. Fontaine argues that in his organization of the *De natura rerum* Isidorus was influenced by an earlier doxographer, Actius and his *Placita.* 325 Isidorus then clearly fits into the Classical tradition drawn from Rome in terms of his process, following in the organizational footsteps of his predecessors in the arrangement of his work. While Fontaine traces this back to a specific text, I argue that part of the reason for the similarities

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is that Isidorus was first introduced to the Classical scholarly tradition during his upbringing and education in his Roman-Visigothic family and that this tradition still existed and was seen as valuable and credible in Visigothic Spain as evidenced by the historical outline given earlier.

Interestingly, Barton writes that in the West, “astrological works simply drop out of library lists, only reappearing in any number in the twelfth century. In the West, the Church’s stranglehold on learning probably proved more effective.” 326 In the East, she says that evidence of lives of saints and studies of Christianity indicate that “astrology continued at the local level.” 327 In addition, she gives the evidence of a series of earthquakes in AD 551-557 that led to the people of Antioch arranging a public debate between an astrologer and Symeon, a saint who lived on a pillar. 328

Barton cites Isidorus as evidence that “astrology had little contemporary meaning in the West.” 329 However, the content of the *De natura rerum* demonstrates that the pagan scientific tradition was alive and well in Visigothic Spain, and indeed one can draw a parallel between the earthquakes in Antioch which caused an astrologer to challenge the Church and the eclipses that took place over Spain that must have certainly caused a similar crisis of authority. García even argues for a resurgence in ancient traditions, writing, “After a strong rejection of all that was associated with Roman religion, we see from the fourth century a certain return to the ancient tradition” 330 and Maltby identifies Isidorus as “a leading figure in the revival of Latin culture in Spain which had fallen into abeyance in the early fifth and mid-

326 Barton, 79.
327 Ibid., 80.
328 Ibid.
329 Ibid., 81.
sixth centuries,"\textsuperscript{331} an important point, though as outlined above I argue that Roman
traditions persisted in Spain through to the time of Isidorus.

Many argue that Isidorus relied solely on the works of Christian authors for this
information, but as we have seen in the earlier chapters Roman traditions persisted in Spain
into the Visigothic period and were indeed fostered by the Visigothic population as well as
being retained by the Hispano-Romans living under the new regime. Even if, as Barton
points out, astrological texts had disappeared from library lists, it is unrealistic to suggest that
that such traditions had disappeared entirely from the collective consciousness of the
Romans and those who were culturally Roman living in Visigothic Spain.

Reydellet identifies Isidorus’ \textit{De natura rerum} as the most remarkable of Isidorus’
works because it illustrates, “the ambiguities of his culture."\textsuperscript{332} Isidorus cites many pagan
authors by name in the \textit{De natura rerum}. Some details he gives are not attributed to a
particular source, but a perusal of ancient astronomical texts shows that many of the theories
he presents had been held throughout antiquity. Given that his background was quite
similar to that of upper-class Romans, it is very likely that he was directly acquainted with
such works through the education given him by his father and brother, rather than learning
of them only through secondary resources in the shape of ecclesiastical works. I shall next
outline examples of pagan astronomical and astrological influences as they appear in his \textit{De
Natura Rerum}.

\textsuperscript{331} Robert Maltby, “Hispanisms in the Language of Isidore of Seville,” in \textit{Hispania
terrae omnibus felicior: Permesse ed estiti di un processo de integrazione}, ed.
\textsuperscript{332} M. Reydellet, “Sacré et profane dans l’encyclopédisme d’Isidore de Séville,” in \textit{Le
translation.
On the Heavens

In his chapter on the heavens Isidorus outlines the basic structure of the celestial realm. At the outset, he presents an opinion that agrees with those of Augustine and Cassiodorus, that the heavens are witness to the glory of God.

He moves on to discuss the origin of the name given to the heavens which is apposite given his enduring interest in etymologies, to which he would later devote an entire work. He cites Ambrose who says that the name for the heaven, *caelum*, is related to the word for an engraving, *caelatum*, because the stars appear to be impressed on it like images on an engraving. Pliny writes of this as well: “The name *caelum*, no doubt, refers to its being engraved, as it were, with the stars, as Varro suggests” (Plin. *Nat.* 2.4.5, trans. John Bostock and H.T. Riley). Pliny’s own reference to Varro shows that this notion was not just his own personal theory, but was part of a common understanding of the universe amongst Roman scholars.

Many would say that despite the similarities between Pliny and Isidorus, Isidorus received this information from Ambrose, and indeed his own citation of Ambrose supports this. At the same time, however, there is strong historical support for the idea that Isidorus was directly familiar with the works of Pliny, in part because of Pliny’s strong relationship with the Iberian Peninsula. Pliny held the procuratorship of Hispania Tarraconensis and while in Spain was offered a large sum of money for his notes.333

There are a number of other strong similarities between Pliny and Isidorus, not restricted to literary references that can be taken as evidence for the similarities in their

upbringing and also as a sign for the continuance of Roman traditions in Visigothic Spain. Both Pliny and Isidorus were from wealthy, upper-class families. Like Pliny, Isidorus did not specialize in one area but discussed a number of subjects. Though separated by six centuries, both follow the career path of a well-off Roman scholar. As with Isidorus, astronomy played an important role in Pliny’s work. Interestingly, the reception of both of their astronomical discussions by modern scholars has frequently proven to be quite similar. Pedersen’s criticism of Pliny, namely that “he was no astronomer, but an incompetent compilator of astronomical lore culled from a variety of sources, some of which were not of the purest water” \(^{334}\) sounds remarkably like many modern critiques of Isidorus’ astronomical works. While Pliny’s reputation has experienced a positive re-evaluation in more recent scholarship (as in the works of Mary Beagon and Aude Doody), Isidorus’ reputation has yet to share in this phenomenon. Beagon writes of Pliny that, “…even now, his work is often regarded, first and foremost, as an unwieldy mass of raw material, with varying estimates of its reliability, for historians” \(^{335}\) and, outside of Spanish scholarship, this is even more true for the works of Isidorus Hispalensis.

If it is very-likely that Isidorus was working from Pliny whose work was certainly common knowledge in Spain in Isidorus’ time, then why does he credit Ambrose in this instance? Again we must bear in the mind the purpose of the *De natura rerum*. It was likely intended to aid in turning people from pagan superstitions to Christian explanations. By associating elements of pagan science which were familiar to his readers and at the same time which were not offensive to Christian theology with a Christian author rather than with a pagan one, Isidorus hoped to make Christianity more appealing by associating it with trusted

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\(^{334}\) Pedersen, 189.
\(^{335}\) Beagon, 24.
sources. This technique has been used throughout history to make conversion to Christianity easier.

Isidorus then outlines the structure of the universe. He says that there is an axis running through the sphere of the universe with directional hinges at either end of it. The boundary of heaven is an arch, and at the farthest edges of the circle of heaven are two poles which support the sphere of heaven. He identifies the pole to the north as Boreus and the one to the south as Austronotus. Later, he says, the one to the north came to be known also as Aquilo and the southern one as Austral. He then cites Cicero who says that the southern pole is covered by the Earth, and is thus invisible to us.

Though he refers to Cicero by name, these ideas agree with other ancient authors whom he does not mention, showing that it was also a commonly held belief, and thus more likely to have persisted throughout the years. Martianus Capella wrote, “The fifth and last parallel is called the Australis, or the Antarctic circle. This is plunged beneath the surface…” (Martianus Capellus VIII. 822, trans. William Harris Stahl and Richard Johnson with E.L. Burge). Earlier Vitruvius had written of this as well:

The sky revolves ceaseless round the earth and sea on pivots at the extremities of its axis. For at these points the power of nature has located and structured the pivots as though they were the centres of circles: one at the highest point of the universe in relation to the earth and sea extending past the northern stars themselves; the other exactly opposite it under the earth in the southern regions…(Vitr. IX.1.2, trans. Richard Schofield).

This also appears in Aratus’ work, the Phaenomena, where he writes,

“The axis…does not move even slightly from its place, but just stays for ever fixed, holds the earth in the centre evenly balanced, and rotates the sky itself. Two poles terminate it at the two ends; but one is not visible, while the opposite one in the north is high above the horizon” (Aratus 21-26, trans. Douglas Kidd).

His discussion continues with the idea that the universe has neither beginning nor end. Isidorus mentions Plato in relation to this, but this concept also agrees with many other
ancient authors, such as Cleomedes (II.5.107, I.6.1), Pliny (Nat. 2.13.15), Manilius (1.201-205), and Lucretius (5.535). The placement of the Earth in the centre was a well-established tradition in antiquity and, given the evidence of Isidorus, in Visigothic Spain as well.

**The Sun**

Isidorus next discusses the nature of the Sun. He said that it is found in the fourth circle of heaven, in the middle of the other planets, for there it can give its light equally to the planets above and those below. Here again Isidorus agrees with Cleomedes (I.2.20) and Pliny (Nat. 2.4.6).

He continues by bringing to the fore again his interest in etymology in discussing the origins of the name for the Sun. He says that because the stars disappear with the arrival of the Sun it always shines alone and is thus called sol. Though he makes no reference to Varro by name, this etymology also appears in his work as well (On the Latin Language V.68). It is highly probable that Isidorus was well acquainted with Varro given his interest in etymology.

Isidorus next brings forward a belief that was quite common in antiquity, that the Sun when it sets actually sinks into the Ocean. If one believes Strabo (3.1.5), this view was at one time popular in Iberia. It would appear not to have been restricted solely to the Iberians however, as Homer mentions it as well: “Then into Oceanus fell the bright light of the sun drawing black night over the face of the earth…” (Hom. Il. 8.485, trans. A.T. Murray).

In Isidorus’ discussion of the movement of the Sun he cites by name Aratus and Hyginus, both of whom said that the Sun moves itself and does not remain still as the universe is turned around it. Isidorus points out that if the Sun did remain still, it would then have to rise and set from the same place every day, and the days and nights would have to be equal in length. He writes that this was arranged by God so that the Sun would not scorch parts of the Earth by remaining in the same place. As is usual with Isidorus, he is
prepared to mix the Classical and the Christian sources as needed. In this he again uses Ambrose who wrote, “...God has set different times and places for the sun’s courses, lest, it should linger always in the same places, it might burn them up with its daily heat” (Saint Ambrose Hexameron, 2.13.14, trans. John J. Savage). He also refers to Saint Clement with reference to the course of the Sun helping to regulate the temperature and the seasons. In this case Isidorus appears to rely more heavily on ecclesiastical resources, but in his discussion of the Moon he relies almost entirely on pagan authors.

**The Moon**

Isidorus says that the Moon is in the lowest sphere, and is thus closest to Earth. This again was a popular opinion in antiquity, appearing in the works of Cleomedes (I.2.20), Pliny (Nat. 2.6.9), Vitruvius (IX.ii.3), and Martianus Capella (VIII.858). One of the great debates in antiquity concerned from whence came the Moon’s light. Isidorus quotes Saint Augustine in pointing out that there were two opinions on the matter and then goes on to outline them. Some said that the Moon has its own light, and one half is lit while the other half is dark and while it turns each side faces the earth in succession. This opinion was held by Anaximander, Anaximenes and Xenophon. 

Isidorus then discusses the other theory concerning the source of the light of the Moon, which is that it receives its light from the Sun, which he says is clearly the correct theory because it is “obvious and to anyone paying attention it is easily known” (DNR XVIII.4, my translation) as it only grows larger as it moves away from the Sun and only grows smaller as it moves towards the Sun. Save for those authors mentioned above who believed that the Moon created its own light, this second theory that the Moon received its light from the Sun was a far more widely accepted notion. This idea was found not only in

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336 Ibid., 93-99.
scientific works, but also was referred to in passing in poetic works as well, suggesting that it was a common opinion. Lucretius offered this idea as one possibility given for the origin of the Moon’s light:

The moon shines by reflecting the rays of the sun, and turns this light towards our sight more from day to day, the further it moves from the sun’s globe; until, coming right opposite, it shines out quite fully illuminated and, as it rises, sees the sunset; then it must gradually hide its light again, so to speak in the same way, the nearer it glides to the sun’s fire from the opposite side, through the belt of constellations (Lucr. 5.705-712, trans. Moncia R. Gale).

This passage indeed sounds rather like Isidorus’ own justification for the phenomenon.

Another who thought the Moon received its light from the Sun was Anaxagoras of Clazomenae who wrote, “The sun puts brightness into the moon” (Anaxagoras 59 B 18 Diels-Kranz). Cleomedes, too, supported this theory, writing, “The Sun…has such a great superfluity of power that the Moon receives its light from it, and so has this as the exclusive cause of all its power…” (II.1.387, trans. Alan C. Bowan) and “Now just as the Sun also naturally illuminates every other body that is not totally composed of fire, so too it casts its rays on, and illuminates, the Moon…” (II.5.1, trans. Alan C. Bowan).

This belief persisted in the Roman tradition, and could have reached Isidorus from a variety of sources. Pliny wrote of the Moon that “…her brightness…is regulated by that of the sun…” (Nat. 2.6.9, trans. John Bostock and H.T. Riley) and Virgil wrote in the Georgics, “…the moon / As borrowing of her brother’s beams…” (1.396, trans. J.B. Greenough).

The phenomenon also appears in Vitruvius’ work:

I shall now discuss the different explanations of these phenomena which Aristarchus of Samos, a mathematician of great intellectual powers, left for us in his teaching; his theory is that it is obvious that the moon is not itself a light source but is like a mirror, of which the luminosity derives from the face of the sun (IX.ii.3, trans. Richard Schofield).

Also, in Martianus Capella: “The brightness of the sun encircles the lunar orb and bathes with light the entire part which faces it. These brilliant rays also reach the earth, like an
image reflected in a mirror” (VIII.863, trans. William Harris Stahl). This is perhaps one of the best examples of how a tradition from antiquity persisted into Isidorus’ time.

Isidorus describes how this causes the phases of the Moon. He says that when the Moon is under the Sun the top reflects the light while the lower part, which is toward the Earth, is dark. As it withdraws from the Sun it is gradually lit on the part which faces the Earth and this is what causes its phases. This is described by Cleomedes as well:

Now if the Moon always maintained the same relation to the Sun, then a single part of it would always be illuminated, but since, in accordance with its motion based on choice, it approaches the Sun at one time and withdraws from it at another, as it goes from conjunction to full Moon and from full Moon to conjunction, the light from the Sun therefore goes around the whole Moon in its circuit of it (II.5.8, trans. Alan C. Bowen and Robert B. Todd).

Cleomedes also wrote:

Thus at conjunction it is the hemisphere of the Moon facing the heavens that is illuminated, since that is the part of it facing the Sun at that time. But as it passes beyond the Sun, and in proportion to its withdrawal turns its hemisphere that is facing the Earth toward the Sun, it first causes a crescent shape on being illuminated from the side, then a half shape as it increasingly revolves toward the Sun, then a gibbous shape, and after that full shape when it is in opposition to the Sun (II.5.24, trans. Alan C. Bowen and Robert B. Todd).

In this case, the similarities between the descriptions of Isidorus and Cleomedes are particularly striking.

The phenomenon, not surprisingly, also appears in ecclesiastical works as well. Saint Ambrose wrote:

In fact, the moon undergoes a diminution of its light, not however, of its mass, at the time when it seems to give up its light in the course of the month, so that it may borrow from the sun. The orb of the moon remains intact, although the whole of it does not shine as does part of it. Its size is the same as it usually appears when it is filled with light. A certain shadow makes it appear that the moon is bereft of light. Hence, it is only the horns that shine (Hexameron 4.2.7, trans. John J. Savage).

Based on how prevalent this concept seems to have been in antiquity it is not surprising that Saint Ambrose made reference to it in his work. At the same time, its wide acceptance in
antiquity and through later periods makes it more than likely that Isidorus did not get it from
the work of Saint Ambrose, but either found it in ancient texts available to him in Spain, or
was just aware of it as common knowledge. Indeed, a comparison of the texts shows greater
similarities between Cleomedes and Isidorus than between Isidorus and Ambrose.

Isidorus also discusses how the growth and decrease of the Moon has an effect on
Earth. Isidorus specifically says that sea urchins and oysters in particular are found to be
fuller during the Moon’s growth. He writes, “For also with its disappearance the elements
are in sympathy and with its progress those which were emptied are increased, as in the case
of marine animals, since the sea-urchin and oysters are thought to be found fuller during the
growth of the Moon” (*DNR* XVIII.2, my translation).

This relationship between the growth of the Moon and sea was found throughout antiquity.
Cleomedes wrote, “…the Moon not only fashions enormous changes in the air by
controlling it and thereby fashioning innumerable purposeful results, but is also the cause of
Pliny specifically refers to the influence of the Ocean on oysters and shellfish, saying that “It
is certain that the bodies of oysters and whelks and of shell-fish generally, are increased in
size and again diminished by the influence of the moon” (*Nat.* 2.41, trans. John Bostock and
H.T. Riley). Manilius carried on this tradition, writing, “submerged beneath the waves and in
prison-shell confined, animals adapt their forms to the motions of the Moon and copy your
waning, Delia, and your growth” (*2.93-2.95*, trans. G.P. Goold), and Ptolemy also discusses
it in *Tetrabiblos* (1.2).

Saint Ambrose, too, makes reference to the influence of the Moon specifically on
oysters and shellfish, which certainly is in line with the notion that Isidorus was inspired by
Ambrose. However, in the next line Ambrose also refers to its influence upon the internal
structure of trees, of which Isidorus makes no mention. In light of such omissions it makes it difficult to attribute the entirety of Isidorus’ inspiration to Saint Ambrose, particularly when combined with the strength of Roman intellectual culture in Spain during Isidorus’ lifetime.

The Size of the Sun and Moon

Isidorus says that the Sun is far greater in size than the Earth, and that the ancients say that the Moon is smaller than the Sun. It seems bigger, he writes, because it is closer to us while what is smaller seems farther away, writing that, “the ancients say that the Moon is smaller than the Sun; indeed all things which are close to us seem bigger, but with distance sight becomes weak” (DNR XVI.3, my translation). Cleomedes also discussed how distance affects the apparent size of the Moon: “The Moon does appear large, in fact equal in size to the Earth, and larger than the other heavenly bodies, when in reality it is smaller than they, since it is closest to Earth of all the heavenly bodies…” (II.3.81, trans. Alan C. Bowen and Robert B. Todd). Aristotle commented on this characteristic of human sight in his De Caelo: “…our sight, when used at long range, becomes weak and unsteady” (On the Heavens II.viii, trans. W.K.C. Guthrie). This is another instance in which the relationship between Isidorus and the pagan authors would appear to be stronger than his reliance on ecclesiastical authors.

Eclipse of the Sun

Isidorus then turns to discuss the phenomena that had caused so much consternation in Spain a short time before: eclipses. He begins by explaining that some have said that the darkening of the Sun is caused when holes in the air through which the light of the Sun normally reaches Earth are closed. Isidorus, however, goes on to say that “wise men” had said that the sun was high in the sky while the Moon is closer to Earth, and as a result when the Moon comes into the line of the Sun it causes the Sun to go dark, an event
that is only possible at the time of the new Moon, because this is when the Moon is in the
same part of the sky as the Sun. Pliny shared this view (Nat. 2.7). Again, Cleomedes shares
the opinions of Isidorus, writing, “The Sun, then, is eclipsed through being obstructed by
the Moon; certainly this happens only at their conjunction. Also, a solar eclipse is a
condition affecting not the deity itself, but our line of sight, since it is obstructed by the
Aratus writes of the weakening of the rays of the Sun as well: “…the moon shades them,
when it stands directly between earth and sun” (864-865, trans. Douglas Kidd). Plutarch in
the De facie quae in orbe lunae apparet, 19.932 B.C cites Posidonius who comments on the
phenomenon saying that during a solar eclipse there is “a conjunction of the moon’s shadow
<with whatever parts of the earth fall under that shadow>; for only those experience eclipse
whose visual rays towards the sun are caught and blocked by the moon’s shadow” (Fr. 25,
trans. I.G. Kidd). Martianus Capella also discusses this subject:

> When the moon, in its ascents or descents, touches the ecliptic, if it happens on
the thirtieth day – that is, when it lies directly beneath the sun with its entire
body – it causes and eclipse of the sun on earth; for by interposing its body, it
darkens regions lying beneath it, while other parts of the earth, which are not
covered up are illuminated by the sun (VIII.869, trans. William Harris Stahl).

Finally, Ambrose himself makes brief mention of solar eclipses, saying that “…the sun
which from the interposition of the moon often undergoes eclipses…” (Hexameron 4.1.2).
Isidorus’ explanation, however, is more detailed than that of Ambrose and echoes the
ancient sources more than the ecclesiastical.

**Eclipse of the Moon**

Just as the Sun can be eclipsed, Isidorus writes, so too can the Moon when the Earth
moves between the Sun and Moon, and makes it impossible for the rays of the Sun to
illuminate the Moon. At this point in the text he refers directly to Stoic philosophy, which
said that it was the shadows of mountains that prevent the Moon from appearing, showing at least a passing acquaintance with that branch of philosophy. He then quotes Lucan in support of his theory, saying that he talks of the Moon turning pale after being covered with the shadow of the Earth. He may be referring to the Lucan’s *Pharsalia* in which is found, “the moon/Whose orb complete gave back her brother’s rays,/Hid by the shade of earth, grew pale and wan” (1.539-541, trans. Sir Edwar Ridley).

Other ancient authors also gave this reason for lunar eclipses, including Aristotle and Cleomedes. Posidonius, based on the fragments, seems to have thought that the cause of a lunar eclipse, writing, “The moon is eclipsed when it falls into the earth’s shadow” (Fr. 126, trans. I.G. Kidd). This is also seen in Manilius: “…when the Earth comes between to cut off Phoebus’ rays and Delia draws not the light wherewith she is wont to shine…” (4.841-844, trans. G.P. Goold). Finally, Martianus Capella also gives the same explanation:

Similarly, an eclipse of the moon occurs when it is located along the line of the ecliptic in a position of opposition; that is, on the fifteenth day. It is darkened by the conical shadow of the earth…since it will not be able to receive the light of the sun with the earth standing in the way, it will become darkened…” (VIII.870, trans. William Harris Stahl).

The heavy emphasis on ancient sources in these two chapters may have been related to the fact that eclipses were a pressing concern given the recent events visible in the Spanish skies. Recourse to the ancient sources that give scientific accounts for eclipses must have been an attempt to turn people away from the ancient superstitious explanations. An element of familiarity and comfort no doubt existed for readers with the mention of the names of ancient authors, and perhaps other elements that were part of general knowledge and were confirmed in the work of an eminent scholar and prominent member of the Catholic Church well known throughout Spain.
The Planets

The next topic Isidorus discusses is the seven planets then known. He writes that they move contrary to the course of the stars, a belief well attested in antiquity. It is found in Pliny: “The course of all the planets, and among others of the Sun, and the Moon, is in the contrary direction to that of the heavens, that is towards the left while the heavens are carried about to the right…” (Nat. 2.6.8, trans. John Bostock and H.T. Riley). Martianus Cappella also wrote, “There is one motion that is common to all seven planets – an easterly one” (VIII.854, trans. William Harris Stahl). Also Vitruvius: “These constellations…revolve ceaselessly from east to west: but the moon, the planets Mercury and Venus, the sun itself, as well as Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, move from west to east…” (IX.1.5, trans. Richard Schofield).

Isidorus discusses the differences in the planets’ courses as well as in the times of their risings and settings, which is something that Martianus Capella also identified: “Another point to be noted is that they all differ in the times and circumstances of their periods” (VIII.854, trans. William Harris Stahl). Isidorus comments that they are made to appear irregular, retrograde or stationary in their course by the influence of the Sun, again as does Martianus Capella:

The powerful effect of the sun’s rays is responsible for the anomalies in the orbits of the aforementioned planets and for their stations, retrogradations, and progressions. The rays strike the planets, causing them to rise aloft or to be depressed, or to deviate in latitude or to retrograde (VIII.887, trans. William Harris Stahl).

While Isidorus acknowledges that the planets are affected in their courses, he says that the Sun and Moon never err in their progress. Here again he echoes Martianus Capella, who had written, “…five of the planets undergo stations and retrogradations, but the sun and the moon are propelled in a steady course” (VIII.854, trans. William Harris Stahl).
These wanderings, Isidorus says, are not the reason for the identification of the planets as “wandering,” but rather this designation comes from their inclination to cause people to wander. This would sound strikingly akin to the astrology that Isidorus seems eager to have put aside, and would perhaps suggest some contradiction on his part, which many modern scholars are quick to accuse him of, citing it as a sign of his scholarly incompetence. I suggest, rather, that it is not instance of contradiction, but rather a misunderstanding of what he meant when referring to astrology.

In condemning astrology Isidorus is not putting aside the notion that the heavenly bodies influence things on Earth, including people, but rather he condemns the study of how to predict the influences of these planets on human lives. In his discussion of the characteristics of each planet Isidorus reveals that he is familiar with a number ancient traditions associated with them. Isidorus comments that Mercury is known for having its own particular light, one that is markedly hostile, and that its speed is equal to that of the Sun. Plato also wrote of these qualities of the planet, saying “…the Star called sacred to Hermes He placed in those circles which move in an orbit equal to the Sun in velocity, but endowed with a power contrary thereto…” (Timaeus 38d, trans. W.R.M. Lamb).

Of Venus Isidorus says that it is the brightest of the five planets. Again, this was a commonly held belief in antiquity, an example being Martianus Capellus who wrote that it “is the only one of the five planets…to cast a shadow…” (VIII.883, trans. William Harris Stahl).

Few particular details are given about Mars or Jupiter save for Isidorus giving Jupiter’s alternate name as Phaethon, an identification of which also appears in Pliny (Nat. I.2.20). His discussion of Saturn, however, shows the greatest link to antiquity. He places it in the highest circle of heaven, and as a result this location it is thought to be very cold. He
cites Virgil by name in relation to this, likely referring to the *Georgics* where Virgil writes of “Saturn’s frozen star” (1.331), but at the same time it is clear he is following a well-established tradition. Ptolemy wrote, “It is Saturn’s quality chiefly to cool and, moderately, to dry, probably because he is furthest removed from the sun’s heat and the moist exhalations about the earth” (*Tetrabiblos* 1.4, trans. F.E. Robbins) and again “Saturn…because of his excessive cold” (*Tetrabiblos* 1.5, trans. F.E. Robbins) and also later “Saturn, when he gains sole dominance, is in general the course of destruction by cold…” (*Tetrabiblos* 11.8, trans. F.E. Robbins). Lucan in his *Pharsalia* also refers to its cold nature, calling it “baleful Saturn, frigid in the height” (*Pharsalia* 1.654, trans. Sir Edward Ridley) and later writes “‘Neath Saturn’s sway the zone of ice and snow / Has passed…” (*Pharsalia* 10.209-210, trans. Sir Edward Ridley). Vitruvius also acknowledges Saturn’s frost, writing “…the planet Saturn is intensely cold because it is nearest to the limit of the universe and touches the frozen regions of the sky” (IX.i.16, trans. Richard Schofield) and Manilius refers to Saturn’s “native ice” (4.501, trans. G.P. Goold). The idea that Saturn was cold was obviously a commonly held belief in antiquity, and Isidorus as part of that tradition was familiar with it.

**The Stars**

In Isidorus discussion of the fixed stars, he says that they are moved with the universe, rather than that the stars are moving while the universe stays still, and that they and the universe move from East to West, opposite to the movement of the planets. Aristotle also wrote that the motion of the stars was not self-caused but that they were fixed onto the heaven and moved with it (*On the Heavens* II.viii) and Martianus Capella wrote:

A distinction must be noted between these seven bodies [the planets] and the fixed stars; the latter move only with the rotation of the celestial sphere, being set in their own fixed positions, whereas the planets are born along in their own
proper motions, in addition to their being swept along with the celestial rotation (VIII.851, trans. William Harris Stahl).

Isidorus goes on to point out that while the stars are not visible in the daytime, they are still there, but are hidden by the light of the Sun, and that this is proven during an eclipse of the Sun, when with its disappearance the stars once again reappear, though it is still day. Pliny also gives this piece of evidence for the continued presence of the stars, writing, “...as we observe that, during the day, the brightness of the sun prevents those bodies from being seen which are fixed in the firmament, although they shine then as well as in the night: that this is the case is proved by eclipses...” (Nat. 2.11, trans. John Bostock and H.T. Riley).

Isidorus attributes the power to overwhelm the stars to the Moon as well, particularly when it is full, a phenomenon that Manilius also observed, writing of it that, “When in mid-course the Moon is full, then most of all do the princely luminaries shine conspicuous in the heavens; the whole stellar populace fades from sight, and they flee, an innominate throng” (1.469-471, trans. G.P. Goold).

In discussing specific stars and constellations Isidorus makes use of the pagan names for them, for the reason that they would be the most easily recognizable for his readers. He refers to this reasoning himself, writing, “making from visible things the shapes of invisible things it [the sacred scripture] put in those names for the recognition of men, which were known far and wide, so that whatever unknown thing it shows, may be more easily known through that which is known to human senses” (DNR XXVI.2, my translation) which lends support to the idea that other pagan elements are included as a means of familiarizing his readers with Christian scholarship, as well as perhaps even hiding from them the very fact that it was happening, by subtly equating the two belief systems, and then subverting the pagan elements to the Christian.
He begins his discussion of specific stars and constellations with the Septemtriones. He describes the group saying that there are seven stars in it, and that it rolls around itself. Another characteristic of this constellation that Isidorus identifies is that it never sets, a feature that was well observed in antiquity, including in the works of Homer. In *Il.*18.489-490 Homer referred to both these features when he wrote “…the Bear, that men call also the Wain, that circleth ever in her place…and alone hath no part in the baths of Ocean (trans. A.T. Murray).” Martianus Capella also makes reference to the phenomenon, writing “The first of the parallels is the one which is always visible and looms above, never plunging below the horizon….This is called the arctic circle, from the fact that it encompasses, along with the other constellations which will be mentioned later, the constellations of the twin Septentriones” (VIII.818, trans. William Harris Stahl).

In his discussion of the Wagon, Isidorus seems to have become confused in his understanding of his ancient sources. He gives as an alternate name for Septemtrio “Arcturus.” A reading of other ancient authors, including Manilius, reveals that Arcturus is actually the name of a star in the constellation Boötes. Others also refer to Arcturus in this way. In Hyginus we find: “On the belt [of Boötes] is one star brighter than the others, which is called Arcturus…” (3.3, trans. Theony Condos), and Martianus Capella, “Herdsman Boötes, brilliant in the northern light, is wont to watch Septentriones…” (VIII.808, trans. William Harris Stahl) and again later “…Arcturus also known as Boötes…” (VIII.838, trans. William Harris Stahl). This could be a mistake on Isidorus’ part, but Fontaine suggests that it was the influence of Gregory the Great that led to his identification of Arcturus with the Septemtriones, and that it is not likely that he would contradict Gregory the Great, as his
brother Leander had been so close a friend with him.\textsuperscript{337} One can reasonably assume, based on his thoroughness in other areas, that Isidorus knew that Arcturus was associated with Boötes and not the Septemtriones, but did not want so obviously to contradict so prominent a figure in the Christian Church. In addition, when his goal was to bring pagans to the Church it would not support his cause to blatantly contradict a prominent Church official in favour of pagan authors.

Isidorus also discusses Boötes next, saying that because of its proximity to Ursa Minor it was also known as Arctophylax in antiquity. This is confirmed by Hyginus who wrote that “…the constellation appears to be following the Bear, and because it watches the Bear, is called Arctophylax (2.4, trans. Theony Condos). Aratus also writes of this name for Boötes: “Behind Helice there comes, like a man driving, Arctophylax, whom men call Boötes, because he is seen to be just touching the Wagon-Bear…” (91-95, trans. Douglas Kidd).

The next constellation Isidorus discusses is the Pleiades, writing first that it is said that it has seven stars, but that only six are visible. He says that the Latins call them the Virgiliae because they appear after the beginning of spring, thus heralding summer, and with their setting they indicate the beginning of winter, a role performed by no other group of stars. Aratus wrote of them in this way as well: “Seven in number they are in the lore of men, although there are only six apparent to the eye. No star at all has been lost from our ken in Zeus since our oral tradition began, but this is just what is said…and Zeus is the cause, in that he authorized them to mark the beginning of summer and winter and the onset of ploughing time” (257-267, trans. Douglas Kidd). Hyginus also confirms all of what Isidorus wrote about the Pleiades:

\textsuperscript{337} Fontaine, \textit{Isidore de Seville et la culture classique}, 520.
The Pleiades are seven in number, but only six are discernable…our writers called these stars Virgiliae because they rise after the vernal equinox; indeed, they enjoy greater honor than other stars, because the rising of their sign signals summer, while its setting signals winter. No other signs are accorded this role (2.21, trans. Theony Condos).

Of Orion he says that it has very bright stars so it is easy even for the untrained to identify, as Aratus also says: “Anyone whose glance misses him when he is positioned high up on a clear night may be sure he can never sight anything better to identify when he gazes up at the sky” (322-325, trans. Douglas Kidd). Like the Pleiades, Isidorus says that Orion rises at a particular time of year, namely at the height of winter, and brings with it storms and troubled seas, again an opinion not without precedent. Virgil in the *Aeneid* writes, “Wintery Orion…rose with a sudden upsurge of high seas…” (1.535, trans. Frederick Ahl) and later also “Play lavish hostess, and reef in his hawsers with reason for saying: Winter and rainy Orion, of course, whip seas to a fury…” (4.51-52, trans. Frederick Ahl). Pliny agrees, calling Orion the stormy constellation (*Nat.* 18.59, trans. John Bostock and H.T. Riley).

A heavily discussed star in antiquity was Sirius, or the Dog Star, a name that Isidorus says is frequently used by the common people for it. Its name comes, he writes, from its white light and that it seems to shine before other stars. When it rises, according to Isidorus, it makes the Earth very hot, spoiling crops and making people ill, and so the days when it is in the sky are called the Dog Days of Summer. Homer wrote of it in this way:

Him the old man Priam was first to behold with his eyes, as he sped all-gleaming over the plain, like to the star that cometh forth at harvest-time, and brightly do his rays shine amid the host of stars in the darkness of night, the star that men call by name the Dog of Orion. Brightest of all is he, yet withal is he a sign of evil, and bringeth much fever upon wretched mortals (*Il.* 22.25-31, trans. A.T. Murray).

Later, amongst Roman authors the tradition continued, and based on this passage in Pliny it was a commonly held belief: “Who is there that does not know that the vapour of the sun is kindled by the rising of the Dog-Star? The most powerful effects are felt on earth
from this star. When it rises, the seas are troubled, the wines in our cellars ferment, and stagnant waters are set in motion” (Plin. *Nat.* 2.40, trans. John Bostock and H.T. Riley).

Also in the *Aeneid* Virgil writes, “Sirius’ heat withered growth on our farms in the summer” (3.141, trans. Frederick Ahl) and also “…so Sirius’ new-born star, as he rises blazes his heat, his diseases, and drought upon sickly and death-doomed human” (10.273-275, trans. Frederick Ahl). Lucan mentioned it as well, saying that, “…Sirius’ star flames in its fury…” (*Pharsalia* 10.217, trans. Sir Edward Ridley). The tradition persisted, appearing in Manilius’ work: “At his [Orion’s] heels follows the Dog outstretched in full career: no star comes on mankind more violently or causes more trouble when it departs” (1.340-342, trans. G.P. Goold). Aratus also discussed it: “Such is also his [Orion’s] guardian Dog…its jaw is inset with a formidable star, that blazes most intensely: and so men call it the Scorcher. When Sirius rises with the sun, trees can no longer outwit it by feebly putting forth leaves” (326-333, trans. Douglas Kidd). Again, Isidorus’ discussion of Sirius echoes many elements of the ancient tradition concerning this star.

**Comets**

From the fixed stars Isidorus moves on to the most transitory of heavenly bodies: comets. Isidorus describes a comet as a star which is followed by something that appears as hair made of light. Their appearance, he says, heralds a changing of power or the coming of war. Again, this sounds like astrology, but as we have seen Isidorus did not reject the idea that celestial events had an impact on earthly ones, but rather identified the attempt to predict them as heretical. He quotes Prudentius and Lucan by name in his discussion of comets, but again there are other authors whom Isidorus does not mention by name but whose theories he echoes. Ptolemy also wrote that they brought about disturbed conditions
on Earth (*Tetrabiblos* 11.9) and Pliny comments that they appear surrounded by hair and acknowledges their association with unstable political conditions:

> It is generally regarded as a terrific star, and one not easily expiated; as was the case with the civil commotions in the consulship of Octavius, and also in the war of Pompey and Caesar. And in our own age about the time when Claudius Caesar was poisoned and left the Empire to Domitius Nero, and afterwards, while the latter was Emperor, there was one which was almost constantly seen and was very frightful (*Nat.* 2.23, trans. John Bostock and H.T. Riley).

Virgil also associated comets with upheaval (*Georg.* 1.466), as did Lucan in the *Pharsalia* when he wrote, “…with horrid hair a blazing comet stretched from east to west and threatened change to kingdoms” (1.530-531, trans. Sir Edward Ridley). This persisted in the work of Manilius who comments on their hair saying that “the flame flies in guise of hair, and the slender fire lets loose its streaming locks in brilliant rays” (1.836-837, trans. G.P. Goold) and he also associates it with terrestrial tumult. Interestingly, in this case we can see the continued presence of this belief in the malevolent impact of comets in the thirteenth century AD in the works of King Alfonso X of Spain, known as El Sabio, (*The Wise*), for his scholarly pursuits.

This discussion of the similarities between Isidorus’ astronomy in the *De natura rerum* and pagan astronomical traditions is by no means an exhaustive discussion of all instances in which Isidorus follows the Classical traditions, but these examples certainly accentuate the fact that Isidorus was in many respects faithful to the Classical traditions associated with particular heavenly bodies. In only one instance, that of his confusion of Arcturus and the Septemtriones, does he contradict the ancient sources, and this may have been intentional on his part in order not to appear to undermine a prominent Church authority.

**The Divine Craftsman**

Naturally, Isidorus credits God with the creation of the universe, calling him the Craftsman. However, interestingly enough he chooses to refer to a pagan author to support
what he certainly intends to be a fundamentally Christian argument. In his discussion of the
Creator of the universe he refers to Plato directly, which would seem an odd choice of
reference on this topic for a Christian scholar arguing for the role of God as the fashioner of
the universe. Again this is fitting given the intended purpose and audience of his De natura
rerum. Plato offers great support in this area, writing that “…we must declare that this
Cosmos has verily come into existence as a Living Creature endowed with soul and reason
owing to the providence of God” (Timaeus 30b, trans. W.R.M. Lamb). Following Plato,
Isidorus gives evidence for the existence of the Creator: the heavens are built on a straight
line, it has neither beginning nor end, it is made around one point, it is moved by itself, it
contains all other shapes within itself, it moves in only one way though there are numerous
other ways it could move, and that it exists out of necessity. These reasons appear in a
number of other ancient texts as well. Manilius wrote of the spherical shape of the heaven
that, “This is the shape that continues forever and most resembles that of the gods: nowhere
in it is there beginning or end, but it is like unto itself over all its surface, identical at every
point” (1.212-214, trans. G.P. Goold). This echoes Cleomedes, who wrote:

> And that the cosmos has Nature as that which administers it is evident from the
> following: the ordering of the parts within it; the orderly succession of what
> comes into existence; the sympathy of the parts in it for one another; the fact
> that all individual entities are created in relation to something else; and, finally,
> the fact that everything in the cosmos renders very beneficial services (1.1.11,

Beyond ascribing all of creation to a divine Craftsman, Isidorus goes on to draw a
variety of associations between pagan astronomy and Christian theology in the De natura
rerum. The Sun, he said, is to be understood as related to Christ, and quotes Malachi in this
regard. The important distinction to be made is that Isidorus did not see the Sun as a
manifestation of Christ himself, in the way that the Sun was viewed as a deity in and of itself
in antiquity, but rather the Sun and other heavenly bodies were intended to be allegories to
aid in a better understanding of the Scriptures. In the case of the Sun he writes that as it sets and rises again, so too did Christ die and return. In addition, the Sun burns the ill and comforts the healthy, as Christ is a joy for the faithful and a torment for the unfaithful.

Isidorus also identifies the Sun as a faithful servant of God which will burn the Earth and bring disease to men if God so asks.

The Moon, Isidorus says, in its growth and its fading shows man that from birth he is destined to die and that from death he is destined to live again. It is also to be understood as the Church. As the Church is made glorious from the influence of Christ, the Moon is made to shine by the light of the Sun. The Church also grows and fades as the Moon does. The link between the Moon and water mirrors the governing of baptisms by the Church. As the Moon makes crops grow, so the Church helps its followers grow. Like the Moon, the Church has many forms, and the number of gifts given to the Church by God is the same as the number of the phases of the Moon.

Many of these elements are not without precedent in earlier ecclesiastical works.

Cassiodorus also compared the Church to the Moon:

The Church is rightly compared to the moon, for it has no brightness of its own but receives its light in an unchanging manner from the sun, as astronomers carefully expound together with other teachings….So this was the way that the Church obtained light in a measured way from the true Creator; at one point it seemed to be on the wane through persecutions, but now that it has obtained peace it is again at the full, enjoying the clearest light (Explanation of the Psalms Vol. 2, 71.5, trans. P.G. Walsh).

And again later, “The Church says that she will witness her waxing and wanings which the moon undergoes, so that at one time she swells with the faith of many, at another she seems to some to diminish with the deaths of martyrs” (Explanation of the Psalms Vol. 1 8.5, trans. P.G. Walsh).

Saint Ambrose also makes this comparison:
The Church, like the moon, seems to lose light, but she does not. She can be cast into shadow, but she cannot lose her light. For example, the Church is weakened by the desertion of some in persecution, but is replenished by the witness of her martyrs. Wherefore, glorified by the victories of bloodshed for Christ, she may pour forth all the more abundantly over the entire world the light, her devotedness and her faith (Hexameron 4.2.7, trans. John J. Savage).

The stars Isidorus says are to be seen as representing the holy men of the Church. Isidorus saw the stars to be receiving their light from the Sun, likewise holy men of the Church are made brilliant from their association with Christ. In addition, they are overwhelmed by the glory of God as the stars are by the light of the Sun. Again this appears in the work of Cassiodorus who wrote:

…the Lord at the beginning of the world established the stars of heaven with wondrous arrangement. This is to be referred to the holy men of whom this psalm is to speak. They are deservedly compared to the stars of heaven, for on earth they gleam with their heavenly style of life (Explanations of the Psalms Vol. 2 93.1, trans. P.G. Walsh).

The constellations are also described by Isidorus as having particular associations with the Church through which one may reach a greater understanding of Christian theology. Of the Septemtriones he writes that like the Church its stars shine with seven virtues, and can be seen as being composed of the Trinity as well as the four principle virtues. Like the Church, it never sets. The seven stars of the Pleiades he equates with the saints shining with the sevenfold virtue of the Holy Spirit. The fact that its stars are close together but do not touch represents the fact that the saints were equal in esteem, but temporally distant. Orion represents the martyrs. Its stars appear in the most difficult time of the year, like the martyrs appear during the most difficult periods of persecution for the Church. As the stars of Orion trouble the lands, the martyrs trouble the souls of the unfaithful. Lucifer he associates with Christ, for it heralds the light of day as Christ brings the light of faithfulness. He does acknowledge that there is another side to Lucifer, that of the Devil who tried to place his seat above the stars of God and thus fell and was broken.
into two parts. Vesper he equates with the Antichrist, because both bring darkness over the lands.

Isidorus also uses eclipses to further his readers’ understanding of the Scriptures. One can only assume such associations were of particular importance given the eclipses so fresh in Spanish memory at the time. Solar eclipses he associates with Christ, as both Christ and the Sun hid themselves from the world for a short time before reappearing. Eclipses of the Moon he says represent the Church in times of its persecution and the accompanying deaths of its martyrs. The face of the Moon becomes dark as if stained with their blood, and like the Church, after such trials both shine all the more brightly.

Some of these images are drawn from earlier ecclesiastical authors, but some would appear to be of his own devising, designed for his own particular circumstances and audience. In no other of the ecclesiastical authors are such detailed descriptions of natural phenomena drawn from pagan sources so closely united with Christian theology. As Fontaine writes, his originality “lies precisely in his assembly of diverse material.”338 This alone is enough to refute the accusations of many critics who have said that Isidorus was nothing more than a plagiarist.

While he is inspired by ecclesiastical authors such as Cassiodorus, Augustine and Ambrose, he does not follow them blindly, and selects those elements which suited his own particular purposes. His entire approach shows that he did not agree with everything they said. Augustine was opposed to the study of astronomy by laymen, fearing it would lead to astrology. Isidorus took a completely different approach, writing a work based on a pagan science to illustrate natural events so they could be understood on a practical level, and in this way he hoped to prevent people from turning to pagan superstitions to explain them.

338 Fontaine, Isidore de Seville et la culture classique, 585. My translation.
He also uses great originality in the use of scientific analogy to aid in the understanding of the phenomena he is describing. One example of this appears in his explanation of how the phases of the Moon would work if it produced its own light:

For if you make a ball from one part shining and from one part dark, then if you have that part which is dark before your eyes, you will see nothing of the light; when you began to turn that shining part gradually to your eyes, you will see it first just as horns of light, and from here gradually it grows, until the entirety of the shining part is placed opposite your eyes and nothing of the darkness of the other part is seen, however if you turn it gradually again, the darkness begins to appear and the light to be lessened, until once again it becomes horns and thus all the light is turned from the eyes and once again only the dark part is able to be seen (DNR XVIII.2, my translation).

This is also seen in his discussion of eclipses of the Sun:

Wise men say that the Sun runs higher, while the Moon is closest to the earth. Therefore when it comes to the sign or line in which the Sun is carried, it casts itself before the Sun and causes darkness of the whole sphere, which only happens at the time of the New Moon, for then the Moon is in the same part of the sign in which the Sun is carried, and therefore it is close to it and opposite to it its light seems to be obscured from our eyes: just as if someone placed a spread hand before another’s eyes, however big it was, by that amount he would be able to see less, moreover however far it is pulled back, by that much more all things are able to appear to him (DNR XX.1, my translation).

Occasional comments also indicate that he made his own observations of the phenomena of which he was speaking. Upon declaring that the Moon receives its light from the Sun he writes that it is “obvious and to those paying attention easily known” (DNR XVIII.4, my translation). In his discussion of the Pleiades he makes direct reference to his own personal observation, writing that “They are said to be seven, but I am not able to see more than six”(DNR XXVI.6, my translation). These are cases in which, if we take him at his word, it is clear that he was not merely copying the writings of earlier scientists, but was himself verifying their claims through his own observations.

Through these examples we see how Isidorus can accurately be described as a “bridge of contact” between the Classical and the Medieval worlds, as he is described by
Juan and Ventura,³³⁹ and that he truly “drank from the fountains of Classical knowledge.”³⁴⁰

This belief appears most commonly in the works of Spanish scholars, but while in some cases it has been adopted by other non-Spanish scholars, it is never with the strength of the Iberian opinions. The historical evidence provided here in addition to the evidence of Isidorus’ works will hopefully aid in the understanding of just how Roman Spanish society continued to be well into the Visigothic period, and that Isidorus is the perfect manifestation of this.


³⁴⁰ Ibid. My translation.
Chapter 5
Closing Remarks

Many authors in their studies of Isidorus’ Hispalensis make little reference to the history of Rome in Spain or even to Isidorus’ own background. He is identified as a scholar working in a period in which the dominant culture on the Iberian Peninsula is categorized as “barbarian” and he is simplistically labeled as a plagiarist whose only source is other Christian authors. They assert that he was far removed from the Roman culture of which he wrote and had no true understanding of the science.

In this work, however, I have taken a different approach. In developing an understanding of the historical situation that led to the creation of the society in which Isidorus lived and worked, one can better understand Isidorus’ influences. The traditional view of Spain is that after the fall of the western Roman Empire, Spain was devoid of Classical texts until the arrival of the Muslim invaders in AD 711. This view fails to acknowledge the ongoing strength of the Roman presence in Spain in the centuries preceding the Empire’s collapse and the continued presence of Roman culture and traditions on the Peninsula even after the dissolution of the Roman Empire. One of the main reasons for the perpetuation of Roman culture is that Spain was one of Rome’s earliest provinces. Roman culture was established there early and had many years of peace in which to become deeply ingrained, to the point that, as mentioned in Chapter One, Spain was culturally indistinguishable from Rome itself. This is seen not only in the archaeological record in the form of roads, theatres, baths and other traditionally Roman structures, but also in their administration. Most importantly for the understanding of Isidorus’ sources, Latin became the dominant language, entirely replacing the native Iberian languages. The strength of the Latin literary tradition on the Peninsula is shown by the fact that many of the most famous Roman authors were from Spain, and had received their education on the Peninsula.
Despite the strength of Roman culture in Spain under the Roman Empire, many authors argue that as a result of the barbarian invasion Roman culture and traditions were destroyed in many parts of the former Empire. This led to an intellectually barren period that in Spain, according to many authors, would not end until the arrival of Muslim scholars as part of the eighth century AD invasion. This is one of the main arguments put forward by those who say that Isidorus relied solely on secondary sources and not on original Roman texts.

More recently the opinion of the period following the fall of the western Roman Empire has changed. The Germanic peoples who came into the previously Roman territories have traditionally been viewed as culturally and intellectually uncivilized. Research has shown that this is not the case, particularly with the Visigoths, the people who moved into the Iberian Peninsula. Before their arrival, they had already had a long history of contact with Rome, including fighting on Rome’s behalf against other groups. The Visigoths became so closely allied with Rome that for a time some Visigoths were even able to attain positions of importance in the Roman administration. They also came to view Rome as the epitome of cultural attainment and sought to emulate its culture. As a result, when they moved into formerly Roman areas they made no effort to wipe out Roman culture and on the contrary were more often inclined to adopt the already established Roman traditions. This was the case on the Iberian Peninsula, and this revised understanding of the “barbarian” invasions must in turn lead to a revised understanding of Isidorus’ sources. The strong Roman literary tradition established in Spain with the arrival of Rome on the Peninsula must have persisted into the Visigothic period with the support of Visigothic nobility, with whom Isidorus was closely associated.
Isidorus’ own personal background reflects this union of cultures that existed in Spain, for he was the son of a Roman father and a Visigothic mother. Isidorus’ Visigothic mother converted to Catholic Christianity from the Visigothic religion of Arian Christianity, as almost all of the Visigoths in Spain would ultimately do. As a result there was no opposition in Isidorus’ family to his receiving a traditional Roman education, which he did first from his father, and after his father’s death from his older brother Leander. In this way he would have certainly been introduced to the great Roman authors, including scientific works such as that of Pliny which, as we saw, were very popular in Spain. Many members of the Roman elite in Spain moved into the Church as a means of retaining their status under the new Visigothic regime. Isidorus, as a member of this elite, would have been able to find within the Church Roman texts that would have been in the collections of Roman nobles. This also strongly supports the idea that Isidorus was able to refer to original Roman texts, and was not merely working from the texts of other Christian writers.

For evidence of his referral to Roman texts I chose specifically to look at the astronomical chapters of one of his less well-known works, the De natura rerum. In these chapters I found many examples of traditions that are also found in the earlier works of many Roman authors that were both scientific and poetical in nature. Indeed, some of the astronomical beliefs Isidorus refers to can also be found in the earlier works of Homer and Greek scientific authors. Though I make no claims that Isidorus was referring directly to some of the less well known Greek authors, I believe that the traditions found in their works were carried through to the Roman period and Isidorus found them in the works of Roman authors with whose works he was directly familiar. Based on his extensive education, it is not unreasonable to suggest that he was familiar with Homeric works directly. A point that it is important to make clear is that I did not feel it is necessary to find examples of verbatim
copying of passages or phrases from Roman authors in Isidorus’ own text to prove that he was able to refer to Roman texts. Rather, I believe that it is enough that Isidorus makes reference to traditions that are also mentioned in the works of Roman authors to demonstrate that he was directly familiar with Roman texts. It also demonstrates that many Roman traditions likely still existed as commonly held beliefs amongst the people of Spain well into the Visigothic period. As a result this evidence may be taken not only as proof of Isidorus’ ability to refer to primary Roman texts, but also of the continued survival of Roman culture on the Peninsula under the Visigothic kingdom. In this way one can argue that the true end of Roman culture in Spain did not come with the fall of the Western Empire, but rather with the arrival of the Muslim invaders, who although they may have reintroduced some Classical texts to the Peninsula, were at the same time responsible for ending Roman cultural dominance on the Peninsula by replacing it with their own.

The general opinion of Isidorus amongst very many modern scholars has been overwhelmingly negative, identifying him as a mere plagiarist with no true understanding of the subjects of which he was speaking. He has been held up by many as a symbol of the decline of scientific learning in Europe. One of the greatest errors made by many scholars in the study of the works of Isidorus is to look at his texts without an appreciation of the world in which they were created. Given the changes in our understanding of the barbarian invasions in Europe, this cannot help but affect our understanding of Isidorus and his influences. It becomes difficult to believe that he relied solely on the works of ecclesiastical authors for his information on pagan science when pagan literature was being promoted all around him by the Visigoths who now controlled the formerly Roman territory. Though they physically controlled Roman territory, they were themselves dominated by Roman
culture. Interestingly, this reluctance to view Isidorus as a direct inheritor of Classical traditions is not nearly as prevalent amongst Spanish scholars.

The simplicity of Isidorus’ descriptions of scientific phenomena is often cited as evidence for his own personal lack of understanding of that of which he speaks. Again this is unreasonable. In the specific case of the *De natura rerum* it is necessary to take into account the audience for which the work was intended, namely the common man who was being driven to pagan superstition by natural phenomena that he could not explain, and thus it is not necessarily an accurate representation of Isidorus’ personal comprehension of scientific theory. Isidorus sought to give his contemporaries simple answers to frightening questions. Naturally he would not burden his writings with the immensely complex mathematical astronomy that was found in the texts of many ancient astronomers. His ability to distill complex science into simple explanations for a particular audience should not go unacknowledged, and in this he shows himself to be a skillful writer, knowledgeable of both his audience and purpose. Given his background, which has the appearance of a very traditional Roman education, his comprehension was likely far more developed than is suggested by the works he wrote for the common man.

With respect to the most common criticism against Isidorus, that he is entirely lacking in originality, this too is without foundation. While the information he provides would appear to be drawn from pagan sources, and some (though not all) of the associations he draws between pagan science and Christian theology were developed by other ecclesiastical authors, he combined them in a way that had not before been seen. In no other work are pagan science and Christian theology so closely related, and cited with such equality. Beyond the uniqueness of the work itself, a study of only the astronomical chapters of this one particular work reveals more than one occasion of astute scientific analogy.
Many of these appear to be original, and indeed evidence of his own personal observations which show that he is not merely taking as gospel that which he is reading, but is performing his own observations to confirm what he has read. In this way he follows the process of any good scholar, and reveals an almost modern approach to the investigation and reporting of one’s research.

For these reasons I believe that a reevaluation of Isidorus, and indeed the period encompassing his life in Spain, is necessary. Modern scholarship has revealed that the period of the barbarian invasion was not nearly as intellectually barren as was previously believed. In the case of Spain, the Peninsula was not plunged into a cultural darkness that would not lift until the Muslim invaders brought with them Classical texts that were believed to have disappeared from Spain with the fall of the Roman Empire in the west. By placing Isidorus within a more clearly veracious historical framework, he is better understood not as a symbol of intellectual poverty, but rather as a symbol of the continued success of Classical scientific thinking in the new Visigothic world. Thus he should not be degraded as an inept plagiarist, but acclaimed alongside other scholars of Classical antiquity as one of their own.
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Appendix: Translation of Chapters XII to XXVII of the *De natura rerum* by Isidorus Hispalensis


Chapter XII: On the Heavens

1. Spiritually the sky is the Church, which in the dark times of life glitters with the virtues of the saints in the brightness of its stars. In several parts of the sky saints or angels can be distinguished by name, and accordingly we must receive the prophets and apostles from the sky, about which it is written: “The heavens recount the glory of God;” because they predicted the coming, the death, and also the resurrection of Christ and his glory to the world.

2. Concerning the name of heaven holy Ambrose speaks thus in the books which he wrote about the creation of the world: “The sky in the Greek language is called *Uranus*, among the Latins however it is called *caelum*, because it is said that the light of the stars was impressed on it just as an engraving (*caelatum*) holds images, and just as silver which glitters with raised images is called an engraving.” His writing also shows that its nature is subtle, saying, “the heaven hardens like smoke.”

3. The parts of heaven are these: the vault, the axis, the climes, the hinges, the arch, the poles and the hemispheres. The vault is that in which the sky is contained, as in Ennius:

   *Scarce to fill the whole vault of heaven with terrors.*

The axis is a straight line that passes through the middle of the sphere, and a clima is a region of the sky, such as the eastern and southern areas. The hinges are the far ends of the axis. The arch is the boundary of heaven. The poles are on the far edge of the circle of heaven, by which the greatest sphere is supported: of those the one looking to the north is
Boreus, the other opposite is called Austronotus. There are two hemispheres one of which is above the earth and the other is below.

4. Wise men believe that the sky is turned from east to west once in a day and a night. Moreover, they say that it is round and turning and burning, and its sphere is thought to be above water, so that it is turned in it and its fires are tempered. They also assert that the circle has neither beginning nor end, and because of its roundness, where the circle begins and where it may end is not easily learned, and indeed it is said to be brought together equally from every part and oriented to everything in the same way and separated from the centre of the earth in equal measures, and with this very equality thus it is stable, so that it does not lean in any way and it is borne without any support.

5. Plato, discussing the perfection of this sphere or circle with many arguments reasonably suggests the work of a creator of the world, in the first place because it rests on a single line, secondly because it is without beginning or end, thirdly because it is made from a single point, and, again, because it moves itself, and also because it is without evidence of angles and includes in itself all other figures, and because it has an unfltering motion, even though there are six other wandering motions, forwards, backwards, to the right and left, and up and down; and finally because it is brought about by necessity, as this line is not able to stretch beyond the circle.

6. There are two poles, as we said, on which the heaven is turned – Boreus, which we call Aquilo – the arctæ are here, that is the Big and Little Dippers, which are always visible to us – opposite to which is Notus which is called Austral – it is covered by the earth, as Cicero says, and is called aphanes by the Greeks. Moreover the pole is said to be borne with such great haste, lest it cause the ruin of the universe the stars run against its headlong course, as also appears in Lucan:
With the stars which alone moderate the flight of Olympus,
And they resist the pole, with a different power…

XIII: On the Seven Planets of the Heaven and their Rotations

1. Holy Ambrose in his book the *Hexameron* speaks thus saying: “We read in David: praise Him, Heaven of Heavens.” There is disagreement over whether there may be one heaven or many, while some say that there are many others on the other hand deny that there is more than one. The philosophers introduced the seven heavens of the world – that is the seven planets – with the harmonious movement of their spheres, and they speak of how all things are connected to their spheres, and they observe that they are linked to each other and that they are influenced to move backwards with a movement contrary to others (the stars). Accordingly in ecclesiastical books “the Heaven of Heavens” is read and the apostle Paul understood that he had been taken all the way to the third heaven. But concerning the number of the heavens human temerity assumes nothing. Moreover God made them neither shapeless nor disordered but graced them with a certain reason and with his ordering, for the heaven of the upper circle is distinguished by a boundary and he reveals it arranged with equal spaces on every side and in it he established the virtues of the spiritual creatures. Indeed God the Craftsman of the world tempered the nature of that heaven with waters, lest the conflagration of the higher fires burn the lower elements, and thereafter he created the circle of the lower heaven not with a uniform motion but with various movements, calling it the firmament because of its support of the upper waters.

XIII: On the Waters which are Above the Heavens

1. This is the opinion of Ambrose: “Wise men of the world say that it is not possible that there is water above the heavens, saying that it is fiery, and that the nature of the waters is
not able to be joined with it. They add that the circle of the heaven is round, turning and
burning and that on that turning the waters are by no means able to remain. It is necessary
that they would drain when the sphere turns upwards and through this they say that those
waters would not be able to remain there, when the axis of the sky would pour them out,
whirling about with its rapid movement.

2. But these men finally lay aside this madness and confused acknowledge that He who was
able to create all things from nothing, was also able to put water in the sky, granting it
stability by making it ice. For when those men say that the orb of heaven travels in a circle
gleaming with the burning stars, would not divine providence foresee that the water which
tempers the fires of the burning axis would overflow?”

XV: On the Nature of the Sun

1. These are the words of Ambrose in the Hexameron: “Philosophers, it is said, deny that the
Sun is fiery, because it is white, not red or the golden red of fire and therefore it cannot be
fiery in nature. If it is at all hot, they believe that it is the result of the great speed of its
rotation: therefore they think this must be the explanation, as it does not seem to consume
any of its humour, because where a humour does not have a natural heat, it is either lessened
or burned up. But they accomplish nothing when they propose such things, since it is
irrelevant whether something is hot by nature or from an illness or from any other cause.”

2. We, however, believe that just as it has the ability to give light, thus it also gives heat. The
Sun is indeed fiery, and moreover its fire gives light and burns. On the other hand some
men say that the fire of the sun is fuelled by water and from its contrary element it receives
its light and heat; we often see the Sun damp and dripping with dew, in which it gives
obvious evidence, that it employs the element of water in its mixture.
3. This much pertains to its nature. With regard to the understanding of its spirit, the Sun is Christ, as is written in Malachi: “For you who believe that the Sun of Justice will rise and that there is health in His wings.” Moreover Christ is rightly understood to be appointed the Sun, because having been born he perished following the flesh, and following the spirit from his setting he rose again. Likewise the Sun gives light and burns and in a dark time comforts the healthy, and burns the feverous with the heat of the burning of the force of its fire, and so too Christ shines on the faithful by invigorating the spirit of their faith, and he will burn the unfaithful with the heat of his eternal fire.

XVI: On the Size of the Sun and Moon

1. In the same work the same doctor declares: “The rays of the sun are neither closer to nor farther away for anyone. Likewise the sphere of the moon is the same size for everyone. The Sun is the same for the Indians and for the Britons when it is seen in the very moment of its rising and sinking in its setting it does not appear smaller to those in the East, and when it rises it is not thought to be smaller by those in the West than by those in the East. “However far away its rising is from its setting, that is in turn how far away it stands from itself, but the sun is not distant for anyone, it is neither closer to nor farther away from anyone.

2. “And it may not surprise anyone, that while it seems to be of one cubit in its sphere when it rises, it is necessary to consider how great are the distances between the Sun and the earth, insofar as a certain affliction and weakness of our vision is scarcely strong enough to stretch out enough.” Wise men establish that its size is greater than any part of the earth.

3. The ancients say that the Moon is smaller than the Sun; indeed all things which are close to us seem bigger, but with distance sight becomes weak. Therefore we see that the Moon is
near to us and that it does not seem bigger than the Sun to our sight; therefore since the Sun is by far higher than the Moon and nevertheless to us it seems bigger, if it were to approach near to us, it would be greater by far.

XVII: On the Course of the Sun

1. The ancients Aratus and Hyginus say that the Sun is moved by itself, not turned with the universe remaining in one place. For if it remains fixed, it would be necessary that it rise and set in the same place where it had risen the day before, just as the rest of the constellations of the stars rise and set; in addition if it were thus, it would follow that the days and nights would all be equal, and how long today’s day is, it would always be that length.

2. The night also for a similar reason would always remain the same. But because we see that the days are unequal and that the Sun will set in a different place tomorrow than we saw it to have set yesterday, therefore since it sets and rises in different places, philosophers think that in no way is it turned together with the world but is moved by itself. Then after it wets its burning wheel in the Ocean, through ways hidden to us it returns to the place from where it had emerged and with the circle of the night completed it swiftly bursts forth from its place once again, and indeed in a slanting and broken line it proceeds through the south to the north and thus it is returned to its rising. However, in the season of winter it runs through the southern region, and indeed in the summer it in vicinity of the north. When it runs through the south, it is closer to the earth; but when it is near the north it is raised high.

3. Therefore God created the different locations and seasons of its course, lest that always staying in the same places everyday it would consume them with its heat. “But,” as Clement says, “it undertakes different courses, by which the temperature of the air is managed by means of the seasons, and the order of the seasons and changes are preserved. While
climbing to the heights, the spring becomes temperate: when it has come to the top of the sky, it kindles raging heat, and descending again it restores the temperance of autumn; when indeed it has returned to the lowest circle, it gives to us the coldness of the frigid winter from the icy freezing of the sky.

4. From the Sun come the hours, from it the days when it rises, also from it the night when it sets, from it the months and the years are reckoned, from it the changes of the seasons are marked, and as it is a good servant, it is agreeable to regulating the changes of the seasons, nevertheless when God censures mankind, it becomes fiercely hot and burns the world with violent flames and the air is troubled, a disease of men and an attack is thrown against the lands, and a pestilential year in all things is brought in for mankind.”

5. Moreover because the Sun rises through the south – that is, the southern part – it has an invisible road and it hurries returning to its place. Clearly the world was made in the image of the Church, in which the Lord Jesus Christ, the Eternal Sun, moves through his journey, likewise from the southern part. Nevertheless, he does not rise in the north – that is the opposite place – as they say he does when he will have come to the Judgment: “The light of Justice did not shine for us and the Sun did not rise for us.” However to those fearing the Lord the Sun of Justice rises, and there is prosperity in his wings, just as it is written. Indeed there is night at midday for the wicked, just as it is read: “While they await light, night was made for them; while they uphold brilliance, they walked in the dark of night.”

XVIII: On the Light of the Moon

1. Holy Augustine says in his explanation of the tenth psalm: “It is asked – he says – from where the Moon has its light. So far two opinions are given, but which of these may be true, it is doubtful that anyone will be able to know.” For some say that it has its own light, and
that one part of its sphere gives light, and that the other part is dark and while it is moved in its circle, the part that shines is gradually turned to the earth, so that it can be seen by us, and therefore it shines first with a crescent-shaped light.

2. For if you make a ball with one part light and with one part dark, then if you have that part which is dark before your eyes, you will see nothing of the light; when you begin to turn that shining part gradually to your eyes, you will see it first just as horns of light, and from here gradually it grows, until the entirety of the shining part is placed opposite your eyes and nothing of the darkness of the other part is seen, however if you turn it gradually again, the darkness begins to appear and the light to be lessened, until once again it becomes horns and thus all the light is turned from the eyes and once again only the dark part is able to be seen. They say that it is done, that the light of the Moon seems to grow up to the 15th day and again up to the 30th day to lessen and to return to horns of light, until nothing at all of the light appears in it.

3. On the other hand others say that the Moon does not have its own light but receives light from the Sun, the Sun being also higher than it. When it is under the Sun, the Sun shines on its upper part, but the lower part facing the earth is dark. When it begins to withdraw from there, it is also illuminated on that part which is facing the earth, beginning with a horn-shaped light. And thus gradually with the Sun withdrawing farther away all of the lower part is illuminated, until the Moon on the 15th day is reached. However after the middle of the month when from the other semicircle it has begun to draw near the Sun, as much as it is illuminated on the top, by the same amount on that part which it turns to the earth it is not able to receive the rays from the Sun and therefore it seems to diminish.

4. It is obvious and to anyone paying attention it is easily known, because the Moon is not enlarged to our eyes unless withdrawing from the Sun and it is not made smaller until from
the other semicircle it draws near to the Sun. From the Sun, therefore, it receives its light and when it is under it, it is always small; indeed when it has moved farther away from it, it is made large and full in its sphere. If indeed it used its own light, it is necessary that it would always be equal and not be made small on the 30th day, and if it used its own light, eclipses of it would never happen.

5. Another thing pertains to its mystical understanding, that the Moon has the appearance of the world, since just as the Moon after reaching its fullness of the month fades, so the world running toward the completion of its times fails in daily diminishing. Certainly the Moon in the variety of its movement on different paths, disappears so that it may appear again; and therefore with its alternating movements it represents the stellar change, so that it teaches man that from his birth he is destined to die and from his death he is destined to live; and therefore when he grows old it shows the death of the body, when he is raised it proclaims the eternity of souls.

6. Sometimes indeed the Moon is also understood as the Church, as the Moon is illuminated by the Sun so the Church is illuminated by Christ. Just as the Moon grows and fades, so the Church fades and grows. Frequently after its failures it grows and with these it deserves to be enlarged, while by persecutions it is diminished and crowned by the martyrdom of its confessors. And just as the Moon is bountiful in dew and the guide of watery resources, so the Church is the guide of baptism and preaching; and in the same way as the growing Moon multiplies all crops and with its lessening they lessen; we do not understand the Church in any other way, in whose growth we grow as well. When indeed it suffers persecution and is lessened, we also suffer with it and are lessened.

7. The Moon has seven shapes, and the Church has just as many worthy gifts.
The division of the God-given gifts corresponds to the same number, which through the Holy Spirit are brought to the whole Church. The seventh section is halved and so is the 22nd, which is in the middle of its orbit. The other phases are proportional.

**XVIII: On the Course of the Moon**

1. “It is necessary that the Moon is moved and does not stand still given the differences in its rising and setting – Hyginus says – and this is more easily understood than in the case of the Sun, because when it receives light from the Sun and thus it seems to us to shine, it is not doubted that it is moved more than it stands still.” Moreover the Moon, near to the earth, is turned in a small circle and the path which the Sun completes in 365 days, the Moon runs through in 30 days, because of which the ancients set the months by the Moon, but the years by the Sun.

2. Thus the Moon, when it completes its course of thirty days twelve times, finishes a year, according to the Hebrews with some days added, and according to the Romans with a leap year once in four years with the addition of one day. Also, by that particular wonderful skill of Providence, with the Moon’s increases and diminishes, all that is brought forth is nourished and grows. For also with its disappearance the elements are in sympathy and with its progress those which were emptied are increased, as in the case of marine animals, since the sea-urchin and oysters are thought to be found fuller during the growth of the Moon.

**XX: On the Eclipse of the Sun**

1. Wise men say that the Sun moves higher, while the Moon is closest to the earth.

Therefore when it comes to the sign or line in which the Sun is carried, the Moon casts itself before the Sun and causes darkness of the whole sphere, which only happens at the time of
the New Moon, for then the Moon is in the same part of the sign in which the Sun is
carried, and therefore it is close to the Sun and being opposite it, the Sun’s light seems to be
obscured from our eyes: just as if someone placed a spread hand before another’s eyes,
however big it was, by that amount he would be able to see less, moreover however far it is
pulled back, by that much more all things are able to appear to him.

2. For the same reason when the Moon has come to the place of the line of the Sun, then it
is seen near to it and in its presence it appears to stop the Sun’s rays for our eyes, so that the
Sun’s light is not able to stretch out; when, however, the Moon withdraws from that place,
then the Sun throws forth its light and sends it to our eyes. Thus as the Moon moves before
the Sun, in the same way the Moon is blocked by the earth; and when neither of those lights
come to the earth, they are said to die. However others say that a failure of the Sun is
caused when a hole in the air through which the Sun pours its rays is contracted or stopped
up by some spirit. This is what physicists and wise men say of the world.

3. In addition, our scholars say that mystically the mystery of the eclipse culminates in Christ
when with the interrupted course of the eternal star unusually disturbed the elements lose
their order, when the true Sun himself, dreading the deed of the impious plot in the
dangerous darkness of the errors in the Jewish population, he hid himself in death for a
short time and lifted down from the Cross he concealed himself in a tomb, until on the third
day more majestic than before he showed the power of his brightness to the world – that is
to the people; just as the Sun shining in its virtue would illuminate the darkness of a shadowy
age.
XXI: On the Eclipse of the Moon

1. The Moon is not eclipsed but is shadowed and does not experience a diminishing of its body but with the earth imposed in front of it, it experiences the failing of its light. As a result, the philosophers defend the proposition that it does not have its own light, but that it is illuminated by the Sun, and since by the distance that the Moon stands from the Sun, if a line that is able to touch the Sun under the earth and the Moon above the earth was drawn through the middle of the earth, and the shadow of the earth extended all the way to the lunar circle, it happens sometimes that the rays of the Sun with the mass of the earth opposite it, or rather its shadow, are not able to reach it (the Moon).

2. Moreover it occurs on the 15th day of the Moon, up until it moves past the shadowy centre of the imposing earth and sees the Sun or is seen by the Sun. It is agreed that the Moon receives its light from the rays of the Sun and when with the opposing of the earth it does not behold the Sun, then it loses its light. And the Stoics say that the whole world is surrounded by mountains, the shadows of which are thought to cause the Moon to disappear. From this Lucan:

*Now Phoebe when with her whole sphere returns her brother’s light,*

*After rising turned pale struck by the shadow of the Earth.*

3. Figuratively, the persecutions of the Church are understood through the disappearance of the Moon, when with the deaths of the martyrs and the shedding of their blood, with the Moon’s failing and darkening it is as if it shows a bloody face, so that by the name of Christ the weak are frightened. But just as the Moon after its failure glows with a clear light, as if it truly seems to have felt nothing of its defeat, the Church after it poured forth its blood through the confession of its martyrs on behalf of Christ, shines with greater clarity of faith.
and having graced itself with a more conspicuous light it spreads itself far and wide throughout the whole world.

**XXII: On the Course of the Stars**

1. It is said that the stars are turned with the universe, not that the stars move with the universe standing still; except, indeed, those which are called planets – that is the wandering ones – which are moved in many ways. The others that are called *aplanes* are fixed in one place while the universe is turned. However, the planets – that is the wanderers – are called thus because they move through the whole cosmos with various movements.

2. These stars, moreover, are moved in different places from each other, for certain ones run higher, and certain ones run lower; those which are closer to the earth seem as if they are larger to us than those which are turned near heaven; because of their distance they seem to become faint. Hence it happens that because of the long distance between their circles some quickly returned to the beginning of their course, others slowly.

3. Certain stars are observed to rise more quickly and some to set more slowly, and indeed some having risen later than others come to their setting more quickly, and while certain stars rise together and do not set at the same time, all in their own time are returned to their own course. The stars impeded by the rays of the Sun become irregular, retrograde or stationary; concerning which a poet mentions it saying:

*The Sun divides the seasons of all time,*

*It changes day with night and with its powerful rays it prevents*

*the stars from going and delays their wandering courses in place.*
XXIII: Concerning the Position of the Seven Wandering Stars

1. In the orbit of the seven heavenly circles first the Moon was placed in the lower circle of the sphere and therefore placed near to the earth, so that at night it furnishes its light more easily to us. From here in the second circle the second star of Mercury was placed equal to the Sun in speed but with a particular strength that is, as the philosophers say, hostile. In the third circle is the revolution of Lucifer, which from there is called Venus by the people because of the fact that amongst the five stars it has the most light, for as we said before the Sun and the Moon and this star also cast shadows.

2. In the fourth circle the course of the Sun is placed, which is here because it is the light for all and thus was placed in the middle, so that it may supply light as much to those above as to those below; moreover it was established thus by divine reason, because all brilliant things must be in the middle. Farther off in the fifth circle the star Vesper is located, which they assigned to Mars. In the sixth the star Phaethon, which they named for Jove. Now in the highest circle – that is in the summit of the universe – the star of Saturn is placed, which indeed while it holds the height of heaven and is lofty to all, nevertheless is held by its frigid nature as Virgil confirms:

Where the icy star of Saturn returns.

3. Moreover these are called the wandering stars, those stars which the Greeks call planets, not because they themselves wander but because they make us wander. The rising and setting of the Sun and Moon are apparent to all, because the Sun and Moon are on the correct path, while the wandering planets, as was said before, are moved backwards or are made anomalous – that is when they add or take away small parts; moreover when they draw off a great deal they are said to be retrograde; however when they are immobile they stand watch.
4. Moreover the years of each star are those which pass in the lower sphere, and with those completed they come to the beginning of their circle through the same signs and parts. For the Moon is said to complete its circle in eight years, Mercury in 20 years, Lucifer in nine years, the Sun in 19 years, Vesper in 15 years, Phaeton in 12 years, Saturn in 30 years.

**XXIII: On the Light of the Stars**

1. They say that the stars do not have their own light but that they are illuminated by the Sun and that they do not ever withdraw from the sky but when the Sun comes out they are hidden. Indeed all the stars are concealed when the Sun rises, they do not set. For when the Sun sends forward the signs of its rising, it weakens all the fires of the stars under its brilliance, so that before the fire of the Sun nothing of the splendour of a star is seen. From this indeed the Sun was named, because it appears to be alone with all the stars concealed. This is not a thing particular to the Sun, for when the Moon is full and the whole night shines most of the stars do not shine; moreover an eclipse of the Sun also proves that the stars are in the sky throughout the day, because when the Sun is darkened with the orb of the Moon cast before it, the stars are seen to be brighter in the sky.

2. The stars, moreover, following a mystical comprehension, are understood as the holy men, concerning whom it is said: “They who number the multitude of the stars.” Just indeed as all the stars are illuminated by the Sun, thus also are holy men made illustrious by Christ with the glory of the heavenly kingdom; and just as before the brilliance of the Sun and the greatest strength of its light the stars are overwhelmed, thus also all the splendour of the holy men in comparison to the glory of Christ is overwhelmed to a certain degree; and in the way that the stars differ from each other in their clarity, so too the descriptions of the merits of these just men differ.
XXV: Concerning the Setting of the Stars

1. However, it is a common and false opinion that the stars fall at night, while we know that little flames falling from the air go through the sky and carried by wandering winds imitate the light of a star; the stars, however, remain immobile and fixed in the sky.

2. For this is what the poet says:

*Often indeed when a wind is threatening you will see*
*Stars thrown headlong from the sky and in the nights through the shadows*
*Long tails of flames glowing from behind.*

And again:

*Falling through the atmosphere plummeting on high the stars drag scattered tails*  
*But also those stars which are held fixed to the highest poles.*

But these poets voluntarily unite themselves to the opinion of the common people, while other philosophers, who are preoccupied with seeking for the plan of the universe, say that which was related above.

XXVI: Concerning the Names of the Stars

1. It is read in Job when the Lord speaks: “Can it be that you are strong enough to join the shining stars of the Pleiades and are to able to scatter the ring of Arcturus? Can it be that you produce Lucifer in its own time and do you make Vesper rise above the children of the earth?” And again elsewhere: “He who made Arcturus and Orion and the Hyades.” When we read these names of the stars in the Holy Scriptures we do not suggest belief in the empty nonsense of the poets, who assigned these names to the stars from the names of men or with the names of other creatures. Thus the wise men of the pagans gave the names of the stars just as they did those of the days.
2. Because the sacred scripture uses the same names, it does not therefore endorse their empty stories, but making from visible things the shapes of invisible things it included those names, which were known far and wide, so that men would recognize them, so that whatever unknown thing it shows, may be more easily known through that which is known to human senses.

3. Arcturus is that which the Latins call Septemtrio, which shining with the rays of seven stars rolls back on itself and is turned around itself, and therefore it is called the Wagon because it is rolled in the manner of a carriage and as soon as it raises three of its stars to the top, it lowers four of its stars. Moreover, positioned on the axis of heaven it is always turned and never lowered, but turns on itself until night is finished.

4. By Arcturus – that is Septemtrio – we understand the Church shining with its sevenfold virtue, for just as Arcturus is always lowered and raised back on the axis of heaven, so too the Church itself is humbled by different adversities, but soon rising it is raised by hope and virtues, and just as Septemtrio is made from three stars and four, thus the Church is made from the faith of the Trinity and the operations of the four principal virtues. From faith and from deeds man is forgiven.

5. Bootes is the star which follows the Wagon – that is Septemtrio – which also by the ancients is called Arctophylax or Minor Arctus, because of which certain men called it Septemtrio. They watch it, especially those who know how to navigate. On this Lucan wrote:

*Swift Bootes there in the night;*

because when it has risen, it makes its descent quickly.

6. The Pleiades are a group of many ever-flowing stars which we call a cluster because of its multitude of stars. They are said to be seven, but I am not able to see any more than six.
These rise from the East and with the light of day approaching its group of stars is diminished. The Pleiades were named because of their multitude, since the Greeks call their number *apo tou pleiston*. These the Latins called the Virgiliae, because they appear after spring, and because of this they are spoken of more than other stars, because with their appearance summer is welcomed and with their setting they indicate the beginning of winter, which is not done by other signs.

7. Moreover by these stars, of which there are seven that shine splendidly, all the saints are shown shining with the sevenfold virtue of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, from the fact that they are close to each other but do not touch, they represent the speakers of God who are near in esteem but separated by time.

8. There is a star….Orion. Orion was named for his sword, from which also the Latins call it the Cutthroat as it seems armed and because of the terrible light of its stars, which make it very difficult to ignore, as it seizes untrained eyes by the splendour of its brilliance. In addition these stars of Orion rise in the very depths of winter and with their rising they call up rains and storms and they trouble the seas and the lands.

9. The stars of Orion represent the martyrs, for just as they are born in the heaven in the season of winter, so the martyrs appear in the Church in times of persecution. With the appearance of Orion the sea and the earth are disturbed, and indeed the hearts of the worldly and the unfaithful are thrown into a storm when the martyrs arise.

10. Lucifer, the shining star, is seen to be brighter by far than all others, for like the Sun and Moon, this one also makes shadows. This star precedes the rising Sun and in the morning announcing the Sun, it scatters the darkness of night with the brilliance of its light. Its figure is that of Christ who, like Lucifer heralding the coming of the following day, was brought forth through the mystery of the incarnation and through Christ the light of faith is revealed.
11. However, Lucifer is double in nature, part of it being holy, just as the Lord says of himself and of the Church in Revelations: “I am of the descent and root of David, the splendid star of the morning,” and again, “He who conquers, I will give to him the star of the morning;” however a part of Lucifer is seen to belong to the Devil, concerning which it was written: “In what way did Lucifer who fell from Heaven, rise in the morning?” He also says that he placed his seat in heaven above the stars of God and falling from heaven is broken into two.

12. Vesper is the star of the west leading in the night. It follows the setting Sun and precedes the advancing darkness. Its figure copies the character of the Antichrist, who like Vesper, as Job says, rises above the children of the earth, so that with the approach of the dark night it blackens the hearts of worldly men; for this reason it was done by the Lord Creator, because for their earlier faithlessness by which they refused to trust in Christ they deserve to receive the Antichrist.

13. A comet is a star that streams from itself something like hair of light. When it is born, it is said to indicate a change of power or the coming of wars and disease. Concerning this Prudentius says:

_A sad comet ceases to exist._

And Lucan:

_And a comet changing the kingdoms on earth._

And Virgil:

_And the comets did not burn so often in witness of terrible things._

At certain times they say that all the wandering stars become comets and as each one is moved, they predict positive or negative things.
14. Sirius is a star, which the common people call the Dog Star. Sirius was named thus because of the whiteness of its flame, because it is of such a kind that it seems to shine before others. After it rises this star burns the world with the excessive flame of its heat and with its heat it burns the crops, and sometimes it afflicts bodies with illness, spoiling the air with the burning of its fire. The Dog Days are named because of it, since these burn with its fires more than the whole season of the summer.

XXVII: Whether the Stars Have a Soul

1. “One is often asked,” – says holy Ambrose – “whether the Sun, Moon and Stars are bodies alone or do they have some spirits as their guides, and if they have them, whether the spirits breathed into them and endowed them with life, just as the bodies of animals are given life through their souls or are they alone without any mixture present.” And while the movement of any body is not possible without a soul, the stars are moved with such great order and reason, that their course is in no way ever hindered, it is not easily understood whether they are living and rational.

2. Salomon when speaking of the Sun said: “Its revolving spirit advances and returns on its circles in turn,” making it clear that the Sun itself is a spirit and that it is an animal and that it breathes and is vigorous and completes in its course its year long orbits, just as a poet also says:

*Meanwhile the Sun is revolved in a great year.*

And elsewhere:

*And a spirit within nourishes the shining orb of the Moon and Titan’s star.*

Therefore if the bodies of the stars have souls, it is necessary to ask what will happen to them in the resurrection.