



Edited by Purificación Ubric Rabaneda

Writing History in Late Antique Iberia

Historiography in Theory and Practice
from the 4th to the 7th Century

Writing History in Late Antique Iberia



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Late Antique and Early Medieval Iberia

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*Historiography in Theory and Practice
from the Fourth to the Seventh Century*

*Edited by
Purificación Ubri Rabaneda*

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1. Writing History in Late Antique Iberia: Theory and Praxis

Purificación Ubric Rabaneda

Abstract

This collective volume reflects on the motivations underpinning the writing of history in Late Antique Iberia, emphasising its theoretical and practical aspects and outlining the social, political, and ideological implications of the constructions and narrations of the past. The writing of History in Late Antique Iberia was penned by ecclesiastics, most of them bishops, linked to the privileged sectors of society and intimately connected to groups of episcopal, monastic and political power, who were also the main recipients of their writings. Their vision of History became one of the main propagandistic agents of the ideology of the elites in the final centuries of the Roman Empire and in the nascent barbarian kingdoms, especially in the Visigothic Catholic Kingdom of Toledo.

Keywords: Historiography, Late Antique Iberia, Historian, Church, History Writing

In antiquity, there was no such figure as the professional academic historian as we understand it today. Transmission of and reflection on past or present was conceived of as a service to the state, society, God, or the Church.¹ It was

¹ On historiography in Antiquity, see, among others, Feldherr and Hardy, *The Oxford History*; Liddel and Fear, *Historiae Mundi*; and in particular in Late Antiquity, Adler, 'Early Christian Historians and Historiography'; Brunhölzl, *Histoire de la littérature latine du Moyen Âge*; Croke, 'Latin Historiography and the Barbarian Kingdoms'; Deliyannis, *Historiography in the Middle Ages*; Inglebert, *Les romains chrétiens* and *Interpretatio Christiana*; Ghosh, *Writing the Barbarian Past*; Calderone, *La storiografia ecclesiastica nella tarda antichità*; Sánchez Salor, *Historiografía latino-cristiana*; Milburn, *Early Christian*; Siniscalco, *Il senso della storia*; Rohrbacher, *The Historians*; Young, Ayres, and Louth, *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*; Pohl and Wieser, *Historiography and Identity I*; and Heydemann and Reimitz, *Historiography and Identity II*.

done by persons belonging to the elite, who utilised History as a source of social power. The writing of History in Late Antique Iberia was penned by ecclesiastics such as Hydatius of Lemica, John of Biclaro, Isidore of Seville or Julian of Toledo, among others; most of them bishops, linked to the privileged sectors of society and intimately connected to groups of episcopal, monastic, and political power, who were also the main recipients of their writings.² According to their vision, God was the *rerum actor* of historical events. In line with this perception, the *rerum gestarum scriptor* became a passive figure, a mere transmitter of the divine incidence in human history.³ A careful examination of the historical works by ecclesiastics shows us, however, that the Christian *rerum gestarum scriptor* was not an impartial or passive emissary of the events of the past. On the contrary, his presentation and reflection on that past, which, on many occasions, was about his own present, was active and committed and obeyed particular political and ideological motivations and interests. In effect, these ecclesiastical writers did not act in the service of God – although most of them pretended to do so and even believed it in good faith – but in that of the established ecclesiastical and civil powers – the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries and the Visigothic kingdom in the sixth and seventh centuries – building and propagating an image of the past according to their own interests.

This collective volume reflects on the motivations underpinning the writing of history in Late Antique Iberia, emphasising its theoretical and practical aspects and outlining the social, political, and ideological implications of the constructions and narrations of the past. It is the result of research Project HAR2016-75145-P – ‘Para qué la Historia. La reflexión sobre el pasado en la Hispania tardoantigua’ (What is History for?: Reflection on the Past in Late Antique Hispania) – funded by MCIN/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033 and by ‘ERDF A way of making Europe’,⁴ in collaboration with the project ‘Libertad, convivencia e integración religiosa, social y cultural. Propuestas desde el cristianismo tardoantiguo’ (Freedom, coexistence and religious, social and cultural integration: Proposals from Late Antique Christianity), funded by the University of Granada. The contributions, which were discussed at an international workshop held in

2 On historiography in Late Antique Iberia, see, among others, Benito, ‘La historiografía en la Alta Edad Media española’; Carreras, ‘La historia universal en la España visigoda’; Domínguez del Val, *Historia de la antigua literatura latina hispano-cristiana*; Hillgarth, ‘Historiography in Visigothic Spain’; and Wood and Leonard, ‘History-Writing’. On groups of power, Fernández, *Aristocrats and Statehood in Western Iberia*.

3 Sánchez Salor, *Historiografía latino-cristiana* studies this conceptions in detail.

4 I thank these institutions for their support and for funding the publication of this volume.



Granada, are borne of recognised specialists in the subject from Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom, Finland, Romania, and France. The volume includes general topics related to the writing of history, such as historiographical debates on writing history applied to Late Iberia historians (Bravo, Aulisa, Salvador), the praxis of history writing and the role of central and local powers in the construction of the past (Wood, Castellanos), the legitimacy of history (Ubiña), the exaltation of Christian history to the detriment of other religious beliefs (Kahlos, Gabrielli, Ubiña, Salinero, Acerbi, and Teja), and the perception of time in hagiographical texts (Castillo). Another point of interest in the volume is the specific studies on the historiographical culture; that is, the contextualisation of individual historians and their works. This is the purpose of the chapters by Fear and Kahlos on Orosius, Marzo on Hydatius, and Inglebert on Isidore's definitions and uses of *historia*. All these issues are analysed from an innovative perspective that combines traditional subjects, such as the genres, characteristics, purposes, composition, principles, content, form, and style of Christian historiography, its novelties and singularities with respect to Greco-Roman historiography or the passage of classical Roman history to the 'national' histories of the barbarian kingdoms,⁵ with new historiographical topics, such as the configuration of historical discourse through another type of documentation like councils, hagiography, or legislation, not just historians and their writings.

One of the main purposes of the book is understanding how historians in Late Antique Iberia balanced the varying demands of writing history in theory, context, and practice. This involves considering how the shifting historical context in which historians lived affected their praxis of writing history. Indeed, the complex and transformative historical context in which Late Iberia historians wrote, from the fourth to the seventh century, is crucial to understanding the great historiographical richness of their works. From the decline of Roman power and the emergence of the new barbarian powers, narrated by Hydatius, to the final stages of the Visigothic kingdom, recorded in Julian of Toledo's History of King Wamba, the accounts of historians of Late Antique Iberia cover a wide range of events and reflections. During these centuries, historians of Late Antique Iberia witnessed the end of the Roman world and the emergence and consolidation of the Catholic Visigothic kingdom. It was a very conflictive period, in which historians had to adapt themselves and their writings to the new rulers, giving them

5 These issues are well known to us thanks to meritorious studies carried out by philologists, theologians, and historians, such as those cited in this volume.



their full support, even in the alternative of Roman continuity offered by Byzantium.

Another point covered in the volume is whether historians followed the existing theoretical parameters on the writing of history, or were forced to introduce some changes or particularities into their stories, why and how they did it (Wood). A very significant example in this sense is Isidore of Seville, who, as Inglebert remarks, not only reflected on *historia*, but also wrote historians' works, a *Chronicon* in three forms and the stories of the Germanic peoples who settled in Iberia, *Historia Gothorum*, *De origine Gothorum*, *Historia Wandalorum*, and *Historia Sueborum*.

According to their theoretical parameters, History had a teaching, moral, and providential purpose for historians of Late Antique Iberia. In effect, as Inglebert points out, the aim of history for Isidore was to preserve the memory of past events, allowing the experience of previous generations to be taught in the present. Similarly, Hydatius, at the beginning of his *Chronicon*, says that the purpose of his work is to pass on the knowledge of the events that led to the present decline to the next generations (Aulisa and Marzo). For his part, Julian of Toledo intends his History of King Wamba to serve as an example from which to draw useful reading and to become a source of information for future times (Salvador). As Inglebert shows for the case of Isidore, the educational objective justified the Christian use of classical and secular historians. Inglebert also underlines how the historian – as a trustworthy witness, an investigating author, or a transmitting historiographer – was supposed to tell the truth. Wood adds that, on many occasions, the moral goal of the historian implied that some episodes considered potentially uncomfortable for author and audience were obscured, modified, or suppressed. For their part, Bravo, Kahlos, and Salinero emphasise the providential role of History in their chapters, in which God, who traces the paths of history, is the main protagonist, through Christian triumphalism and history of salvation. Thus, as Salvador points out, historical writing results from intertwining disparate vectors, such as the exemplary intention with apologetic content and an undeniable political dimension.

As Inglebert shows, knowledge of the past transmitted by historians of Late Antique Iberia is incomplete thematically and chronologically discontinuous. In effect, the events that were considered most important by historians and, therefore, worthy of being narrated and passed down, were those related to political and military aspects of history, where leaders and Christianity were the main protagonist. Thus, as Wood remarks, the models of historians were rulers, emperors, kings, and bishops.



To write their history works, Late Antique Iberia authors used several historiographical genres, such as history, chronicle, biography, or monograph.⁶ The election of one genre or another determined and conditioned the type of historiographical discourse offered by the historian, as each genre had its advantages and its limitations. As Wood shows, historians were aware of these aspects and kept them in mind when writing their works. Thus, as Inglebert remarks, the *Chronicon* would be composed of a selection of military, political, or cultural events, religious aspects and prodigious events, while the *Historia* would be structured, above all, by the actions of kings.

In almost all chapters, the works of historians of Late Antique Iberia are compared with classical historiography and also with Christian historiography, providing elements of innovation and continuity. Thus, as Aulisa points out, although Late Antique Iberian historians had many things in common with the ancient historiographical works and continued using already established models (such as that of *Chronicon*), they adapted these models to their particular objectives, interpreting ecclesiastical and political events according to a providential conception of history.⁷ Marzo studies the particular case of the *prodigia* in the work of Hydatius and their reminiscences with the thought of Livy. Bravo, for his part, analyses the profile of the historical discourse of this period: a moderate use of the rhetorical means, the desire for truthfulness, the ability to persuade to the reader, the instructional purpose of the writings, anonymous protagonists in the 'great characters' of the previous historiography, new scenarios of everyday life, and a new theologically based political theory, among others.

In addition to the traditional historical writings, the volume also considers other sources for the historical analysis of Late Antique Iberia, such as councils, legislation, and apocryphal (Gabielli), hagiography (Castillo, Acerbi, and Teja) and prophecies and omens (Marzo). Thus, hagiographic texts, which were long despised as a historical source, are valued by Salvador, Castillo, and Acerbi and Teja as a historical genre. Castillo shows some of their historical elements and peculiarities, for example, how hagiographical authors calmly confess whom they have copied and openly recognise that they do not reflect reality, but invention. For her part, Marzo underlines the importance of prophecies and omens, how they are used by Hydatius, and what they mean to him and what symbolism they reveal.

6 Thus, Salvador studies the various historiographical models that we find in historians of the Visigothic kingdom and their characteristics, which mainly imitate previous models.

7 In this sense, as shown in her chapter, Aulisa follows the modern historical criticism thesis.



Based on these theoretical premises, the practice of history writing by Hispanic historians is approached in this volume from various perspectives. One of them is what episodes were narrated and why certain events were chosen over others. In effect, Late Iberia historians were first-hand witnesses of their time. Thus, their writings show, for instance, their perception of the end of the Roman Empire, of whom Orosius or Hydatius were loyal followers (Bravo, Aulisa, Fear, Kahlos, Marzo), or, in subsequent centuries, from the pen of Isidore of Seville, John of Biclaro, Julian of Toledo, or the anonymous authors of the *Vitas Patrum Emeritensium* (VPE), the emergence and consolidation of the Catholic Visigothic kingdom of Toledo (Salvador, Wood, Castellanos, Acerbi and Teja). At the same time, the writing of historical works is conditioned by the political context in which Late Antique Iberian historians wrote. Thus, although Hydatius intended to write a universal chronicle, he would be limited in his aspirations by the turbulent period in which he lived (Aulisa, Marzo). Orosius was also influenced by the events of his time that led him to write his *Histories Against the Pagans*, in which he tried to demonstrate Christian superiority over the pagan past (Kahlos). The writing of a work could also be motivated by relevant events experienced by the historian. Thus, John of Biclaro wrote his *Chronicle* to celebrate the conversion of the Goths to Nicene Christianity at the Third Council of Toledo in 589, and Julian of Toledo composed the History of King Wamba to record, in a manner clearly favourable to the monarch, Wamba's triumph over the rebel Paul in the mid-670s, without any foreshadowing of the Visigothic kingdom's imminent end (Aulisa, Salvador, and Wood).

Particularly appreciated in Hydatius and Orosius is their vision on the barbarian peoples who invaded the territory in which they lived to become the new lords. From a Catholic Roman point of view, their perceptions differ from each other. Orosius presents barbarianism in a positive light, as a key point in the legitimation of the Christian success history, where the question of whether barbarians are Christians or not is fundamental (Kahlos). For Hydatius, by contrast, barbarians are hostile because they are the cause of the end of the Empire, even the Suevic Catholic King Rechiarius (Aulisa and Marzo). The historians who succeeded them totally changed their vision on barbarians, to the point of becoming – in the case of the Visigothic kingdom of Toledo – their main legitimators⁸ (Wood, Salvador, Inglebert).

8 An exhaustive analysis of the challenge that involved the transfer of Roman power to the barbarians, in particular for the aristocracy in Gaul, in Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats in Barbarian Gaul*. Something similar would take place in Iberia.



If circumstances or certain interests required it, historians sometimes also changed their accounts of history over time or narrated them in a particular way. This issue is analysed by Wood and Salvador. Specifically, they refer to the two redactions of Isidore of Seville's *Chronicle* and *Histories*. The second version, where some passages were corrected and – in particular – added, was written in the aftermath of the expulsion of the Byzantines from Hispania. At other times, some historians rewrote the past in an interesting manner, emphasising the events most favourable events to their cause and silencing inconvenient aspects. This is the case of the *Libellus Precum* of Faustinus (and Marcellinus), analysed by Ubiña.

Another issue discussed in the book is to what extent Hispanic authors were interested in events that concerned their territory or where they had broader interests that included their entire known world. Thus, the volume shows that historians of Late Antique Iberia wrote about Iberian issues, but also other events with a broader geographic scope. Orosius composed a universal history in seven books, *Histories Against the Pagans*, but, in the case of the Roman period, as Fear shows, he highlighted the events in which Hispanics intervened. Thus, Orosius paid special attention to incidents from the Iberian Peninsula, such as the siege of Numantia and the Cantabrian Wars, or to relevant Iberian characters, as Viriatus, or Emperors Trajan, Hadrian, and Theodosius to underline the importance of their local contributions to the empire, presenting his countrymen as morally – as well as martially – superior to their Roman opponents. From Fear's point of view, the example of Orosius shows that the response of provincials to their membership of the Roman Empire was varied and wide. As mentioned above, Hydatius tried to write a universal chronicle of the events from 379 to 468 but his project remained wanting, as political circumstances did not afford him access to information beyond his nearby territory (Aulisa). It can be noted, however, that, even though he offers a local historiographical reconstruction, the prophecies and the warnings about divine punishment and the arrival of Judgement Day were addressed to all citizens of the empire (Marzo). In the case of Isidore's *De viris illustribus* and *Vitae*, their characters were mainly chosen from his contemporary Hispanic background (Wood and Salvador). Furthermore, although John of Biclaro and Isidore of Seville considered events on a universal scale, they gradually gave significance and exaltation to the Visigothic kingdom of Toledo in their works (Salvador and Aulisa). For his part, Julian of Toledo, from a Hispano-Visigothic patriotic stance, tried to equate the history of the Visigothic Empire to that of the glorious Imperial Rome (Aulisa).

Wood and Castellanos address another relevant topic, namely, how the discourse between the centre and the periphery was constructed by Late



Antique Iberian authors. As Castellanos points out, the reconstruction of the past of the Visigothic kingdom by clerics, monks, and bishops in seventh century was done in the service of the ideology of the central power. Thus, Isidore of Seville and John of Biclaro narrated the conquest of peripheral territories by the Visigothic kingdom presenting them as a linear process, when nowadays we know – from archaeology and other sources – that this was a much more diverse process. For his part, Wood shows the way in which some histories were written with the purpose of reconciling potential tension between Visigothic royal power, focused on Toledo, and great cities elsewhere in the peninsula. Through a comparison of centralising writings like those of Isidore with other historical and hagiographical works focused on regional and local histories he shows that ‘history was written – and rewritten over time – as part of the struggle of elites to construct usable pasts for themselves and their communities’. Wood underlines the role that saints’ cults, liturgy, and other commemorative activities had in this process, reminding a local community of its own sacred past and tying it into the history of the universal church. Control of the saint’s cult therefore not only connected the community with the divine, but also with its own history. The study by Teja and Acerbi is a good example of this issue. In effect, they show that the fight between orthodox and heretical groups regarding Eulalia in Merida masked a more complex socio-political reality. Wood also remarks how historians obscured historical instances of disputation over episcopal office at the local level. Furthermore, he underlines the role played by the personalities that Isidore chose for his biographies in the consolidation of Toledo as a central point within a Hispano-Visigoth ecclesiastical organisation chart.

In his individual study, Castillo combines present and past, analysing how the time idea was applied to hagiographical writings, where a historical and a hagiographic time coexist. Using examples taken from the lives of Desiderius, Emilianus, and San Fructuosus and the VPE, he shows how the Christian religion is essentially historical. For Christians, time always refers to something already lived, that is being lived or that is expected to be lived, everything is unrepeatable and connected. Consequently, past, present, and future have an absolute value. All these issues are very well reflected in martyrdom stories, where the past (the narrative of martyrdom itself) and the present (location of the relics and various celebrations) coexist. Thus, the present – with its witnesses – serves to credit the past, in the same way that the past gives legitimacy to the present. Moreover, the present does not forget the past: the festival is a commemoration, that is, a re-actualisation of the past, and the references to the *locus reliquiarum* are ultimately an



affirmation of the contemporary value of the past martyr in question. Current information is therefore intermingled with the account of past events, and confusion increases when past and present are identified: both are scenarios of the supernatural.

Another aspect studied in the volume is the sources and resources that historians used to write their works. Thanks to them, as Wood suggests, it is possible to enquire about 'the uses that our historians made of their sources, their ability to access information about past events, and compare their writings with those of others in order to gain a fresh perspective on how and why accounts might have differed'. In their writings, historians often mention the sources from which they extract the information they transmit. Thus, Hydatius drew his data from written sources, oral accounts, legates, and his first-hand experience of the events (Aulisa, Marzo). Other sources for historians were their own readings of other authors, whether contemporary or past, both Christian (such as Eusebius of Caesarea or Jerome) and pagan (Livy or Sallust), and sometimes, like John of Biclaro, the royal archives (Aulisa). As Inglebert points out, Isidore also uses a common and obvious knowledge that is unverifiable but which is supposed to be true; he refers to this as 'the history', 'the stories', or 'a historian'. Wood, for his part, draws attention to the brevity of Isidore's historical writings, not just those that referred to the distant past, but also to his own day. In effect, despite having a wide range of sources at his disposal, his works are all concise in the extreme and lack 'facts' and narrative detail. From Wood's point of view, brief writing enabled the author to focus on what was most important in any particular subject and it aided communication with his various audiences. It also served to underline the didactic thrust of Isidore's moral argument.

As Salvador reveals, historians made use of a series of resources in their discourses of power. Among them are the inclusion of speeches, the use of emotion and drama, and, in the case of the *History of Wamba*, the contrast between the virtues of the monarch and his followers and the defects of his enemies. Orosius, for his part, as Kahlos remarks, employed different rhetorical techniques to challenge the traditional Roman view of the glorious Roman history. One of them was the use of the barbarian figure as a tool of contrast, providing both a negative and positive counterpoint to the Greeks and Romans. Hydatius, for his part, utilised prophecies and omens as a sign of the fall of Rome and the end of time – as Marzo points out. In addition, Salinero shows how Christian authors such as Juvencus manipulated concepts, terms, and proper nouns related to the essence of Judaism and applied them to what they wanted to communicate. Castillo, for his part, focuses on how some temporal indications appear in hagiographical

texts with the purpose of accentuating the extraordinary character of the events. Along with the proliferation of proper nouns and ecclesiastical offices, reference to reliable men and geographical details, hagiographical authors introduce details that are apparently unnecessary but that lend credence to the narrative.

Another of the volume's aims is to underline how Late Antique Iberian historians, who were Catholic Christians, approached the specific question of other religious beliefs. The main topic they addressed in this sense was the relationship between orthodoxy, identified with their own creed, and those beliefs, in particular Arianism and Priscillianism, that were considered heterodox. Another point of analysis is how Christian authors conceived Jews and Judaism. Several chapters of the volume – Ubiña, Gabrielli, Acerbi and Teja, and Salinero – focus on this issue. Thus, Ubiña analyses the *Libellus Precum* of Faustinus (and Marcellinus); a document of minor importance but very revealing, which deals with some matters related to Hispanic clergy. He shows how their authors intentionally manipulated the historical past in order to explain their current situation, particularly the doctrinal rectitude of some Nicenist loyalists who were unjustly persecuted by Catholic opportunists with the purpose of attracting imperial favour. Taking the case of Priscillianism in fourth and fifth centuries, Gabrielli shows how the image of orthodoxy and heterodoxy was built and how this view influenced the construction of Christianity. With this purpose, she analyses canons of councils, imperial legislation, and other types of ecclesiastical writings, including the Apocrypha. As Wood remarks, the central role of bishops acting corporately in councils under historical threat from heresy features in some of the bishops-writers' work. In their chapter, Acerbi and Teja analyse the episode of the confrontation between Mazona and Leovigild in the VPE, wondering what 'historical truth' may be behind a hagiographic text like this one. They compare the version of the VPE with what we know from other sources and from the most recent studies, reinterpreting the events in a new light. In their opinion, Leovigild was not the evil and persecuting king portrayed in the VPE, as his religious policy was characterised by tolerance; nor was Mazona the victim of the persecutor king.

For his part, Salinero focuses on how the Christian image of the history of salvation was built, by analysing the writings of several Late Antique Iberian authors. He underlines the Christian appropriation of Jewish history to justify their antiquity and to label themselves as *Verus Israel*. Thus, by establishing the coming of Christ at a certain moment in the past, Christianity was linked to an event situated in history. This allowed a distinctive chronological system to be established, dividing time into two eras from the



birth of Christ as a point of temporal demarcation, which, in turn, favoured a theological and teleological reading of history. In this way, divine purpose was introduced into human discourse, subordinating historical facts to a purely religious dimension. In fact, history became 'History of Salvation', uniting the destiny of all men in the same direction and subjecting their lives to inscrutable divine purposes. For this reason, when approaching history, Christians paradoxically turned their gaze to the past with a view to the future, creating a vision in eschatological perspective that was both historical and metahistorical. Arguably, they wrote about history primarily for theological reasons, trying to 'Christianise' and harmonise the history of the Gentile peoples and the biblical history of the Jews as much as possible. They also introduced the idea of evolutionary change in history, overcoming the old Greek conception of cyclical time in the succession of empires.

Finally, the book refers to the influence of historians of Late Antique Iberia on later historians. For example, Fear makes some observations about how Orosius's vision influences the view of Spain in the *Chronicle of Ambrosio de Morales*.

In sum, this volume shows that the ecclesiastics who wrote History in Late Antique Iberia did so with the purpose of sustaining the ideological perception of the dominant aristocratic elites, selecting and transmitting those facts or events that were most interesting to justify the past or their present. Thus, the vision of History of these authors became one of the main propagandistic agents of the ideology of the elites in the final centuries of the Roman Empire and in the nascent barbarian kingdoms, especially in the Visigothic Catholic Kingdom of Toledo. The historical legacy of these ecclesiastics, therefore, is essential to understanding the interests and debates, not only of their circles and more immediate times, but also of later ones, since they have constituted the basis for the reflection and subsequent reconstruction of the past.

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