VISIGOTHIC MONASTIC HISTORY: OLD PATHS AND NEW DIRECTIONS

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Abstract

Half a century ago, the evidence for monastic life and practices in the Visigothic kingdom consisted entirely of literary sources of very unequal merit, both in the value of their contents and its interpretation, and in the quality of the editions of them. Over recent decades, the latter has improved, though the lack of a proper critical edition of most of the monastic rules of the period remains a great weakness. After a slightly hesitant start, caused by disagreements over chronology, archaeology has come to play a central role in uncovering and understanding the evidence for Visigothic monasticism. Comparisons with discoveries made in several other geographical contexts, ranging from Egypt to the islands of the Hebrides, can enhance understanding of its scale and importance in the Iberian Peninsula in the post-Roman centuries. While much work remains to be done, it seems from what has now been achieved that Hispanic monasticism was far more extensive and more varied in character than would have been believed fifty years ago. Textual editing and study now need to be accelerated, to keep pace with expected further archaeological discoveries, to provide a better understanding of this important aspect of the history of the Visigothic kingdom.

Key Words:
Monasticism, Visigothic Kingdom, Spain, Historiography

Resum

Fa mig segle, les úniques evidències de la vida i les pràctiques monàstiques del regne visigòtic procedien de fonts literàries, encara que de mèrit molt desigual, tant pel valor dels seus continguts i la seva interpretació, com per la qualitat de les seves edicions. Durant les últimes dècades, aquesta darrera qüestió ha millorat, tot i que la manca d'una edició crítica adequada de la majoria de les regles monàstiques de l'època continua sent un punt feble. Després d'un inici lleugerament vacil·lant, causat per desacords sobre la cronologia, l'arqueologia ha començat a tenir un paper central a l'hora de descobrir i entendre els testimonis del monaquisme visigòtic. Les comparacions amb descobertes fetes en d'altres contextos geogràfics, que van des d'Egipte fins a les illes Hèbrides, poden millorar la comprensió de la seva escala i importància a la península Ibèrica en els segles postromans. Encara que queda molta feina per fer, però podem aventurar-nos a dir que el monaquisme hispànic era molt més extens i de caràcter més variat del que s'hauria cregut ara fa cinquanta anys. Per això és important accelerar l'edició i l'estudi de textos per seguir el ritme dels descobriments arqueològics, per entendre millor aquest aspecte important de la història del regne visigot.

Paraules clau:
monaquisme, regne visigot, Espanya, Historiografia

Fifty years ago, when I first began research on Visigothic Spain, the study of its monastic history was in a rather different state to that in which it finds itself today.[1] This is hardly surprising, as the scholarly understanding of the period more widely has also changed considerably over the intervening decades, as has the historical and archaeological investigation of monasticism generally across the Mediterranean and Western Europe in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.[2] Some of the most marked features of that time were an over-literal approach to the literary sources, the inadequate nature of the editions in which some, though not all, of these works were to be found, and the limited contribution then being made by archaeology.[3] Although Spanish scholarship of the period was overly focussed on arguments about national identity, these did not impact so directly on the study of monasticism as elsewhere.[4] Early Irish monasticism, for example, was and in some quarters still is held to owe its evidentially obscure origins to supposedly distinctive 'Celtic' traditions and spirituality (Thom 2006: 7-34).

As was true of other predominantly Catholic countries, Spanish monastic history was largely the preserve of members of the religious orders and other clerics.[5] It effectively belonged to a separate category of ecclesiastical history, which intellectually and institutionally kept itself apart from its secular equivalents of social and political history. One consequence was that what might be called 'the bigger questions' about the origins and spread of the ascetic movement in Christianity were rarely asked, as monasticism was taken to be a natural development and its

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1. This half-century anniversary, which can probably be dated precisely to the second week of January 1972, when I happily abandoned Ennodius of Pavia in favour of Visigothic Spain, is of no significance to anyone beyond myself, with the sole exception of my wife, whom I first met at the very same time, and who has been involved in all my research ever since. To her I dedicate this article.

2. I am deliberately avoiding the rather pointless question of when the first one ends and the second begins. If, as has been argued, the Umayyad period is Late Antique in nature, then the Iberian Peninsula theoretically passes out of Late Antiquity into the Early Middle Ages around 456, and then goes back in again in 711! On definitions, I am using 'monastic' in the broadest sense, to encompass both eremitical and coenobitic forms of ascetic life.

3. A good example of the first of these was the study of 'Priscillianism', whose nature and extent have been exaggerated by dependence on hostile evidence, taken as objective reporting. This problem remains, but I am confining myself in this article to the Visigothic period proper, that is from the mid-fifth century to the early eighth. But see Collins 2020a: 5*-33*.

4. Monroe 2021: 216-231. For a case in which it did, Irish scholarship was insistent that monastic ideas and institutions were received directly from Egypt, with no intermediaries. Influences from Britain in particular could be vehemently denied, e.g., Ó Riain 1999: 187-202.

5. The leading practitioners were Dom Justo Pérez de Urbel (1895-1979), a monk of Silos and first abbot of the monastery of the Valle de los Caídos, author of *Los Monjes españoles* (1945), and Fr. José Orlandis Rovira (1918-2010), a member of *Opus Dei* and professor in the Universidad de Navarra; see Orlandis Rovira 1993 and 1971.

consequences unsurprising.[6] But the origins of the Christian ascetic tradition, in later third century Egypt, demands fuller investigation and an open-minded approach to possible answers. For example, it could be asked if any influence came from outside the Roman world, notably from not incomparable equivalents in North-West India, transmitted via the ports on the Red Sea, near which the earliest Christian ascetics established their hermitages (Power 2012: 19-60; Andrade 2018: 94-136).

Similarly, the speed with which ascetic ideals and monastic institutions spread from Egypt across the whole of the Mediterranean and northwards to the British Isles by the mid-sixth century at the latest requires explanation, particularly in the light of the social and economic consequences. In 1776 Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) raised the question of the contribution of the rise of monasticism to the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West (Gibbon 1897: II, 1-70). While a modern enquiry would see this as too crudely expressed, it must be asked why so many individuals and whole families committed themselves to a life of monastic regulation, and the voluntary renunciation of wealth that could have been acquired over several generations (Wood 2022: 27-77). To take a specific Spanish example, what prompted all the children of the wealthy Severianus to commit themselves to monastic life and for the three male members, Leander, Isidore and Fulgentius, to acquire episcopal office at the price of ending the family line? There may be no way of knowing in such individual cases, but the causes of the wider phenomenon are far from self-explanatory.[7]

Around half a century ago, the evidence for the history of monasticism in the Visigothic period consisted of a small body of texts of different character, together with a number of inscriptions referring to monastic institutions, hardly any of which could be located, and to a few individuals who are described as *abbas* or *monachus*.[8] The first and most obvious of these literary sources are the monastic rules, particularly those ascribed to Isidore of Seville (d. 636) and Fructuosus of Braga (c.650/60), but also including Leander's treatise addressed to his and Isidore's sister Florentina, and the anonymous *Regula Communis* that claims to be the work of Fructuosus.[9] Allied to these sets of instructions on the monastic life are hagiographic works either

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6. Further consequences of the divide between ecclesiastical and other historical research include certain types of evidence, notably liturgical texts and theological treatises, being left to religious specialists, ignoring the wider contributions that they can make to the understanding of a society in which they were of central importance. This remains the case.

7. On the family see Fontaine 1983: 349-400.

8. Vives Gatell 1969: n. 278, 286 for *coenobium*; n. 150, 208, 277, 279 for references to monks and monastic life; nos. 281-286 are epitaphs of abbots. For Baetica see Sánchez Ramos, Barroso Cabrera, Morín de Pablos & Isabel Velázquez Soriano 2015: 221-265.

9. Allies 2009: 16-24 argues correctly that this was not formally a monastic rule. Also, unlike the three other Hispanic texts, it does not feature in Benedict of Aniane's *Codex Regularum,* nor is it a component of his *Concordia Regularum.* It is included here both for convenience and because such texts may have been generically more fluid than the argument allows.

devoted to monastery founders or other holy men. In contrast to Merovingian Gaul, where their use in liturgical performance led to the production of a substantial hagiographic corpus, the saints' lives of the Visigothic period are few, though generically wide-ranging in character. The nature of each work needs careful analysis, and questions about their dating and authorial intention are hard to answer.

The *Vita Fructuosi*, which comes from the late seventh century, is the only 'Life' of a Spanish bishop of the period, but the work, which is anonymous, is concerned almost entirely with his acts of monastic foundation, which are described as occurring in various locations in the west of the Iberian Peninsula, extending from the Bierzo to the vicinity of Seville (Díaz y Díaz 1974).[10] The other ascetic or monastic subject of a *Vita* is the charismatic hermit Aemilian, whose life and miracles, mainly in the area of Cantabria and the Rioja, is recounted by Bishop Braulio of Zaragoza (c.630/50).[11]

Other saints' lives or similar texts include information about ascetic practices or individuals who engaged in them. A good example is the anonymous work that has been called the *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium*, a generically peculiar composition focussed on various bishops of Mérida from around 560 to 630, and also on a small number of other holy men or miraculous events related to the city.[12] Its evidential reliability and its probable date of composition in the 630s were not questioned half a century ago, and it was much used, as today, by both historians and archaeologists involved in the study of this important city. Its witness may be less reliable than usually assumed.[13]

In addition to the monastic rules, inscriptions, and hagiographic works, the monastic life features in the acts of the several councils, both provincial and plenary, of the church in the Visigothic kingdom. The earliest of these is found in the proceedings of the council held in Tarragona in 516, and it suggests an already well-established monastic presence, at least in the province of *Tarraconensis*, by that date (Vives Gatell 1963: 37, n. XI). These *acta* of the sixth and seventh century councils across the kingdom have provided invaluable source material for studies of many aspects of monastic life in the Visigothic period.[14] The main problem with such evidence is the normative nature of such texts, which means there is no way of knowing how far and in what ways they were applied in practice. It could well be that a general regulation issued by a council, which thereby became a canon law precedent, was prompted by no more than a single incident. It would be unwise to assume anything thus condemned was necessarily widespread in time or place.

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10. See also Díez González, Rodríguez Fernández, Roa Rico, Viñayo González 1966: 171-278, López Quiroga, Martínez Tejera 2007: 243-247.

11. Vázquez de Parga 1943; see Santiago Castellanos 1999.

12. *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium*, ed. Maya Sánchez.

13. Collins 1980: 189-219 takes a very literal approach; see now Collins 2021a: 36-58.

14. Orlandis 1971: 20-205; Díaz Martínez 1987, and many subsequent articles.

Half a century ago, the overall impression of monasticism in Visigothic Spain was that it had a limited geographic presence in the kingdom, at least until the middle of the seventh century. Where it appeared to have made itself felt most strongly prior to that time was in two regions, the south of the Iberian Peninsula and the north-east.[15] These were the recipients of two separate currents of influence, coming from North Africa and southern Gaul respectively. The former was accentuated by the migration of monastic communities from Africa to the Iberian Peninsula, driven by deteriorating security and theological conflict with the imperial government in Constantinople over 'The Three Chapters'.[16]

Before the foundations of Fructuosus of Braga, just a small number of named monastic institutions feature in the sources, including *Agali*, in the vicinity of Toledo, *Servitanum* on the Mediterranean coast near Valencia, *Cauliana* near Mérida, and Asán in the foothills of the Pyrenees. Except for Asán, where there is argument for continuity with the monastery later dedicated to San Victorián, none of these can be precisely dated. Their foundations date from different parts of the sixth century. Asán may have been established in the short reign of Gesalic (507-511), and it was certainly in existence by the early 520s (Collins 2021b: 23-25). *Cauliana* is probably a later sixth century foundation. *Servitanum* was functioning under its second abbot by the time of the holding of the Third Council of Toledo in 589, and the unnamed founder of Agali probably died around 600.[17] Although texts from the seventh century testify to the importance of each of them, as well as indicate the existence of several other usually unnamed monasteries, very little is known of their history. Nor, except again in the case of Asán, do any documentary records survive relating to them (Tomás Faci, Martín-Iglesias 2017: 261-286).

Fifty years ago, archaeology was unable to provide much help either. No sites had been found that could be identified as monastic with any degree of confidence. Problems of establishing the chronology of many types of sites thought to belong to the fifth to early eighth centuries remained unsolved or the solutions suggested rested upon methodologies that now seem insecure, as in the reliance on stylistic comparisons. These were employed to create hypothetical models of development that were then used to assign chronology.[18]

While this approach was most prevalent in the study of cemeteries, it also affected the understanding of a small group of churches thought to be of Visigothic origin, and which had survived at least partially intact to the present. Five of these

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15. A third was that of the Suevic kingdom in the north-west, where Martin (d. 579) established a monastic household at Dumio near Braga, which became his episcopal see. For its few traces see López Quiroga 2017: 175-177.

16. Modéran 2017: 39-82; Collins 2004: 147-161 for the impact on Spain.

17. Ildefonsus, *De viris illustribus*, ed. Codoñer 1972: 120-27; Helladius, bishop of Toledo (615-633) had been the second abbot of Agali.

18. For an acute analysis of the problems, see Caballero Zoreda 2006: 101-141.

were still seen in the 1970s as the prime exemplars of Visigothic-period architecture, with dates assigned to various points in the second half of the eighth century on supposed indications of stylistic development in their design and ornamentation (Palol, Hirmer 1967: 16-20).

One of these, the church of San Pedro de la Nave (Zamora), was regarded by some as having been a monastic foundation, even though no other structures had been detected in its vicinity that might have been part of any such an institution. Indeed, this was hardly surprising, as the entire building as it now stands had been dismantled in the early 1930s and moved to a new location, roughly a kilometre away, and there reconstructed, not as it had been before the move, but according to early twentieth century ideas of how it ought to have looked in its original state (Utrero Agudo 2004: 65-75).

This process of relocation and reconstruction on a theoretical basis was rarely mentioned in the general accounts of Visigothic period architecture or in any claims made about the structure and decoration of the church. As it was often cited as the archetypal model of Visigothic church architecture, this omission seemed troubling, all the more so when it might explain some of the problematic features of the building in its present state, such as the incomprehensibly large doors in the northern and southern ends of the transepts (Utrero Agudo 2004: 299-321). A similar process of reconstruction, carried out in the 1930s and based on the groundless assumption that it was intended to be the burial place of Fructuosus of Braga, explains why the church of San Fructuoso de Montélios (Braga) looks so surprisingly like the 'so called' mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, which dates from two centuries earlier (Schlunk, Hauschild 1978: 209-211).

The publication of a new critical edition of the *Epistolae* and the *Formulae Wisigothicae* in 1972 was one of several advances at this time in the textual resources for the study of the history of Visigothic Spain, and for its monastic life.[19] Previously, many such sources had to be read in antiquarian editions that were not always easy to find. This was true, for example, for most of the works of Isidore, other than the *Etymologiae,* and for the monastic rules of Visigothic date.[20] In general, for reasons of greater accessibility or mere convenience, such texts were usually consulted in the reprinted versions found in the many volumes of J.P. Migne's *Patrologia Latina.* These, however, always added new typographic errors to those already to be found in the books from which their contents were copied.[21]

Some working editions of key texts existed by the 1970s, including those of the *Vita Aemiliani* and the writings of Valerius of Bierzo.[22] The Spanish Civil War,

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19. Gil 1972: 2-49, 70-112; others include the initiation in 1975 of the multi-volume edition of Isidore's *Etymologiae,* under the direction of Jacques Fontaine, and Carmen Codoñer's edition of Ildefonsus' *De viris illustribus* (see note 23 above).

20. *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX*, ed. Lindsay.

21. On Migne, see Bloch 1994.

22. *Sancti Braulionis Caesaraugustani Episcopi Vita Sancti Emiliani,* ed. Vázquez de Parga; and *San Valerio.*

followed by the Second World War, limited their dissemination outside of Spain, and also affected the preparation of new editions, such as those in theses supervised by Mgr. Aloysius K. Ziegler (1895-1979).[23] New texts of the *Vita Fructuosi*, the *Vitas Patrum Emeretensium* and the 'autobiographical' works of Valerius of Bierzo were published by the CUA Press in the 1940s. For the English-speaking world, these offered translations facing enhanced Latin texts, together with copious commentary, though most of this was related to literary and grammatical rather than historical issues. The practical problems of the period, just mentioned, meant that not all the manuscripts of the various works were known to or seen by these editors, but until their replacement in more recent years, this series was a valuable resource, at least for those who had access to them.[24]

Another publication of the early 1970s was the first modern edition of the Spanish monastic rules of the Visigothic period, consisting of Leander's letter to his sister Florentina, Isidore's Rule, that of Fructuosus of Braga and the *Regula Comunis* that attributes itself to Fructuosus, together with its related *Pactum* (Campos, Roca 1971). Previously these texts had been only available, other than via the *Patrologia Latina*, in editions of sixteenth to eighteenth-century date.

Of these the most significant was the *Codex Regularum Monasticarum,* edited by the papal librarian Lucas Holstenius (1596-1661) in Rome in 1661; but particularly in the revised and augmented edition of it, made by the Scottish monk Marianus Brockie (1687-1755) and published in Augsburg in 1759. In both editions, to take but one example, the Rule of Isidore was printed from the evidence of just a single manuscript, though several more exist. So, before the appearance of Campos and Roca's edition, published texts of the Hispanic Rules were poorly grounded.[25] Even their new edition of 1971 has its own problems, as it does not include all the known manuscripts and it omits a critical apparatus to the texts.[26] It is expected that an entirely new critical edition of all these texts will appear in the *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* in the not-too-distant future.

Such an edition will need to take account of a particular feature of the textual transmission of the Visigothic monastic rules, which is their inclusion (except

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Obras, ed. Fernández Pousa.

23. His own thesis is Ziegler 1930. Its bibliography (pp. xi-xiii and 208-216) shows how much more limited still were the resources available nearly a century ago.

24. *The Vita Sancti Fructuosi. Text with Translation, Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Nock 1946, now replaced by ed. Díaz y Díaz 1974; *Valerio of Bierzo, an Ascetic of the Visigothic Period,* ed. Aherne 1949, now replaced by ed. Díaz y Díaz 2006.

25. Barlow 1969: 148 refers to the edition he used (Holste-Brockie as reprinted in *Patrologia Latina*, 87) as "far from satisfactory, often corrupt, but no more recent study of the text has been made from manuscripts known to exist in Spain and Portugal."

26. Leandro de Sevilla, *De la instrucción de las vírgenes y desprecio del mundo,* ed. and trans. Velázquez: 87-88, for manuscripts not used in their text of Leander. Even a quick comparison shows numerous textual variations between the manuscripts of, for example, Fructuosus' Rule.

for Leander's Epistle to Florentina) in the *Concordia Regularum*, initiated in 817 and compiled by the monastic reformer Benedict of Aniane (d. 821).[27] It took the form of a systematic collection organised by topics, with texts for each taken from a variety of Latin monastic rules, some of which had previously used by Benedict in compiling a corpus of rules around c.800, known as the *Codex Regularum*.[28] While a few of these are only known thanks to Benedict's two collections, the three Visigothic rules can also be found in a small number of manuscripts of Spanish origin, mainly of tenth and eleventh century date.

Carolingian cultural influence in the Iberian Peninsula, including al-Andalus, was much stronger and more diffuse in the ninth and tenth centuries than is often recognised (Collins 2020b: 11-25). So, it is possible that the texts of the Visigothic rules preserved in these Hispanic manuscripts derived either wholly or in part from Benedict's *Corpus* or *Concordia Regularum*. If a 'pre-Benedict of Aniane' text form of any of them can be recovered waits to be seen. There also exists the related possibility that a Spanish *Codex Regularum*, comprising the Hispanic rules and Latin translations of some of the eastern ones, was formed in the Visigothic kingdom, and may indeed have served as an inspiration for Benedict's work (Velázquez Soriano 2006: 531-567). Such questions of priority and the direction of influence will not be easy to resolve.

A second issue is that of the very notion of the existence of a single original and authoritative form of each of these rules. The search for such *ur*-texts has been at the heart of philological enquiry, particularly amongst classicists, for centuries but is probably misplaced. More recent emphasis on the study of texts in their specific chronological and geographical contexts, and thus how they were known in practice rather than in a reconstructed authorial form, has grown in importance. It is particularly relevant in the case of monastic regulations, in which variation to meet the needs of specific communities could be far more important than fidelity to a standardised text, however revered its supposed creator. This has been shown to be the case, for example, with the textual history of the Coptic rules attributed to abbot Shenoute.[29] Similarly, it has been persuasively argued that such texts were far less normative in practice in western monasticism prior to the Carolingian period and were certainly very rarely cited in surviving hagiographic and canonical sources.[30]

While ascetic teachers and small aristocratic ascetic communities existed in the Iberian Peninsula since at least the later fourth century, larger scale coenobitic

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27. Bonnerue: 29-69 for the man, the work, and the earlier editions; CCSL 168A for the text.

28. Diem 2011: 53-84. This also discusses the nature and purpose of Benedict's *Codex Regularum*, showing it was neither a unique nor an entirely comprehensive corpus of the monastic rules then circulating in the Carolingian empire.

29. *The Canons of Our Fathers: Monastic Rules of Shenoute*, ed. and trans. Layton 2014: 11-49.

30. Diem 2011: 56-58 (see note 28 above).

monasticism may have been slower to develop.[31] It is recorded first in the early sixth century in the north-west, and then more widely as the century developed. In his continuation of Isidore's *De viris illustribus*, Ildefonsus of Toledo states that «it is said» (*dicitur*) the African abbot Donatus, who jointly founded the monastery of *Servitanum* with an aristocratic lady called Minicea, was the first to introduce a monastic rule into the Iberian Peninsula.[32] Unfortunately, Donatus's rule has not survived, any more than the monastery of *Servitanum* itself.

Donatus's Rule, like the other extant ones, was unlikely to have been an entirely original composition in terms of its components, even if it were so in respect to the way they were combined by him. As a refugee from North Africa, it may be assumed that African elements will have been particularly marked in its contents. Textual borrowings or reminiscences in the extant Hispanic rules are suggested in Campos and Roca's edition.[33] In the case of Leander's letter to Florentina, these consist of selected works from a small group of authors, comprising Cyprian, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine and Cassian. The strongest debt seems to be to Jerome's lengthy Epistle 22, which he addressed to his aristocratic female disciple Eustochium.[34] Written in 394, this is more treatise than letter and is Jerome's fullest presentation of his ideal of a celibate ascetic life for women, making it an obvious exemplar for Leander.[35]

Isidore's Rule is to be found in just a few more manuscripts than any of the others.[36] It is the only Spanish rule for which an independent statement of its purpose exists. In his *Renotatio,* Braulio lists among Isidore's other works «One book of a monastic rule that he adapted very suitably for (the use of) his homeland and of weaker spirits» (Martín-Iglesias 2006: 203). This would imply the deliberate adaptation of an existing rule or rules better to suit conditions in Spain, and with particular attention to the needs of those less experienced in monastic life.

This seems to be born out by the textual debts in his work, not least to the *Rule* of the Egyptian monastic founder Pachomius in its Latin translation by Jerome, and to Augustine's *de opere monachorum*.[37] Also used by Isidore were two other works of Augustine that were not intended by their author to be monastic rules, but which

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31. The earliest are likely to be associated with Late Roman villa sites in which evidence of re-use for ecclesiastical purposes has been found, as for example the villa site of *Los Villaricos* in Mula (prov. of Murcia), where the hall was transformed into a basilica in the sixth century, with contemporary burials in the adjacent patio; also, the Villa of Fortunatus at Fraga (prov. of Huesca): see Collins 1998: 129-132 and Chavarría Arnau, Alexandra, 2007.

32. Ildefonsus, *De viris illustribus*, 3, ed. Codoñer 1972: 120-123; reprinted in 2007: CCSL 114A.

33. These will need to be confirmed and augmented in any future critical edition.

34. Ed. Campos, Roca 1971: 21-76. See also Leandro de Sevilla 'rule' *De la instrucción de las vírgenes y desprecio del mundo*, ed. and trans. Velázquez, 1979: 30-42 on the sources and 49-88 on the manuscripts and previous editions.

35. Jerome, *Ep.* XXII, ed. Wright, 1933: 53-159.

36. Ed. Campos, Roca 1971: 84-86. See Allies 2010: 1-18.

37. Ed. Grote 2013: I, 360-367.

came to be treated as such after his death (PONESSE 2013: I, 462-467).[38] A possible influence from Dionysius Exiguus's translation of the *Life of Pachomius* has been suggested, though this is questionable, and in general there is little or no overlap between hagiographic sources and monastic rules in the literature of the Visigothic period. A claimed influence on Isidore of the *Rule of Benedict* is wishful thinking, based on the mistaken assumption of its early spread in the Iberian Peninsula (JANINI 1958: 259-260).

His *Rule* is described in a subheading as being addressed by Isidore to 'the holy brothers living in the *monasterium Honorianense*. The location of this monastery is unknown, and this is the only evidence of its existence. Braulio makes no reference to it, and he seems to imply that Isidore intended the work for a wider readership. A study of the textual tradition may help resolve this when a full critical edition becomes available.

The *Rule of Pachomius* in its Latin form was also an inspiration for that of Fructuosus. Other influences here came from works already mentioned, the *Disciplina monasterii* and the *ad servos Dei* of Augustine, which came to be known as his second and third rules, Jerome's Epistle 22 to Eustochium, and some of Cassian's *Institutes.* All these influences were shared with Leander and/or Isidore's monastic regulations.

On the other hand, the *Regula Communis,* which claims to be the work of Fructuosus, took its inspiration from a different set of sources. There is no hint of Pachomius or of Augustine, and the epistles of Jerome used do not include the very influential twenty second. There is a trace of Cassian's *Institutes,* but the main inspiration comes from the *Rule of Isidore* and to an even greater degree the *Rule of Fructuosus.* Surviving in few manuscripts, the *Regula Communis* was long accepted as what it claimed to be, but the authorship of Fructuosus must be denied, even if the work was composed where the bishop's memory was revered, perhaps one of his own monastic foundations. It must predate the early ninth century, as it was one of the texts included in Benedict of Aniane's *Concordia Regularum,* but it could still postdate the Arab conquest, as there are no grounds for believing that Christian monastic life in general came to an end with the Visigothic kingdom; indeed, in al-Andalus quite the opposite was the case.[39] It is quite conceivable that new or revised rules were compiled for monasteries outside of, as well as within, Christian-ruled territory after 711.

Hagiographic works of definite or probable Visigothic date can, as discussed, provide important details on monastic foundations and the cults of ascetic saints such as Aemilian. Direct borrowings or reminiscences in their texts can also reveal more of the monastic literature available in the kingdom than the Rules. For example,

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38. For the text see VERHEIJEN 1967 and cf.VEGA 1933.

39. Even if this is not always recognised. See COLLINS, *The Christian Culture of Islamic Spain* (forthcoming -a-).

the first modern editor of the *Vita Fructuosi* detected several influences on its anonymous author, including Sulpicius Severus's *Vita Martini* and his *Dialogues,* the *Vita Aemiliani* of Braulio, the *Dialogues* of pope Gregory the Great (593), and the anonymous work known as the *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium.* The latter is also in itself the earliest evidence for the knowledge of the Gregorian *Dialogues* in Spain. Additionally, and unsurprisingly the *Vita Fructuosi* is indebted to the *Rule of Fructuosus,* and to some of the writings of Valerius of Bierzo.[40]

As previously suggested, doubts can be raised about the generally accepted dating of the *Vitas Patrum Emeretensium.* Its literary associations with the *Vita Fructuosi* and its links to the text collection compiled by Valerius (in the 690s?) provide the first secure chronological indicators for its existence in the form we now have it, in other words at around the end of the seventh century. The point is that in themselves the textual influences detected in the *Vita Fructuosi* do not establish a wider or earlier circulation in Spain of works such as the Gregorian *Dialogues* and even the *Vitas Patrum Emeretensium.* They may have been more generally known and at dates earlier than the late seventh century, but this cannot just be assumed.

Moving on from 'the tools of the trade' to the way in which the monastic history of the Early Middle Ages and of the Visigothic kingdom was understood half a century or more ago, the predominant role of ecclesiastical scholars meant that many of the questions being asked, and the answers given, were based on *a priori* assumptions. For example, the central place accorded to the Rule of Benedict in monastic regulation across much of western Europe from the Carolingian period onwards led to unquestioned assumptions that it must have been equally influential in the Iberian Peninsula. This prompted a search for evidence of its influence in Spain even before its promotion in the Frankish empire under the Carolingians (Linage Conde 1973: I, 211-290).[41]

While monastic regulations, both eastern and western, were often interpreted far too literally, hagiographic sources, which provide much of the literary evidence for early monasticism in practice rather than in theory, tended to be mined for supposed nuggets of fact, while otherwise being regarded with incomprehension and some distrust. The stories of miraculous events and supernatural appearances, with which most of them abounded, could not be taken seriously, and were thus ignored. Their authors, often anonymous, were seen as credulous and superstitious, and their works as pandering to irrational popular tastes that were assumed not to have been shared by the intellectual elite. Or if they were, this was yet another sign of degeneracy and a symptom of the social decline that would ultimately lead to collapse and conquest by "barbarians" of whatever sort.

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40. See the apparatus of the edition by Nock 1946. Díaz y Díaz 1974: 74 praises it, but see his own study of its sources, pp. 24-31.

41. For doubts as to the origin and history of the text of the 'Rule of St. Benedict' see Diem 2011: 67-77; on its standing in the Carolingian period, see Diem 2016: 245-259.

In the case of the Iberian Peninsula this would be a process that was repeated, with the "Germanic" Visigoths replacing Rome, only to fall victim themselves three centuries later to the Arabs and Berbers. Even otherwise hard-headed and meticulous studies of the functioning of law in the Visigothic kingdom, such as that of David King, could be underpinned by a belief in the rotten state of its social fabric and the moral decline of its population. It was, he wrote in 1972, "a demoralised and disintegrating kingdom bent on self-destruction" by the time it faced the invading Arab army (King 1972: 22). Another British scholar, who otherwise opened up the study of the Visigothic kingdom for an English readership, looked for an essentially racial explanation for this supposed decline, notably in the take-over of the Spanish episcopate by bishops of Gothic origin (Thompson 1969: 289-296). In Spain too at this time the period was still being understood largely in terms of 'decadence and catastrophy' (García Moreno 1975).

Unsurprisingly, there was little sympathetic or imaginative understanding of stories of the miraculous or even any willingness to search for a more sophisticated interpretation of texts that were just read literally and then largely dismissed. A good case in point are the short works of Valerius of Bierzo that together describe phases of his own life as ascetic, priest and monastic leader. Their apparently autobiographical subject matter led their American editor to see them exclusively in that light and therefore to interpret Valerius's statements of his own motivation and descriptions of his supernatural encounters as the products of a difficult personality. From such judgements only a re-evaluation of the nature and purpose of his works could rescue him (Aherene 1949: 62-63; Collins 1986: 425-442).

Just as improved editions of texts began to appear in the 1970s, so too did more sophisticated ways of understanding them. This involved, not least, a new way of interpreting the role of the miraculous in Late Antique Christian literature and of the significance of charismatic holy men and women in the societies in which it was written. In lectures given in Oxford from 1970, and in a series of books and articles that followed, Peter Brown offered a sympathetic interpretation of the supernatural in Late Antique society and how it came to be presented in literature, particularly in hagiographic texts.[42] Other scholars soon followed him, but the quantity and range of hagiographic texts in several languages associated with eastern Christianity in Late Antiquity is not matched in the west. For this or other reasons, a comparable degree of intellectual excitement and originality is missing from the study of western monasticism. Instead, there has been more focus, especially in the context of

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42. The lecture series, entitled 'Society and the Supernatural from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad' was given annually with significant changes and new ideas each time, until Peter Brown left Oxford in 1975. From it derived his influential book *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971). Among many important articles, particular reference should be made to Brown 1971: 80-101. For some background see Collins forthcoming -b-.

Visigothic Spain, on administrative and socio-economic issues, rather than any attempt to uncover what can be called 'the thought-world' of the ascetic movement in this period. This still waits to be more fully explored, and certain stultifying myths await their demise.[43]

After the Arab conquest and particularly from the end of the eighth century onwards, various types of documentary records, both in original form and in later cartulary copies, provide evidence for the geographically widespread distribution of monastic institutions of various sizes in all the Christian ruled states in the north of the Iberian Peninsula. Many of these monasteries were very small, often comprising no more than eight to twelve members, and in some cases both male and female. What is hard to determine is whether the processes documented in the texts from after 711 were also occurring before that date. Was there a major expansion of monastic institutions in the Visigothic period or was their proliferation a new phenomenon, perhaps triggered by the Arab conquest and its immediate aftermath?

While hardly any charters, whole or fragmentary, are known from the Visigothic kingdom, a collection of model texts from that time has survived thanks to a copy made in the late sixteenth century from a now long vanished manuscript found in Oviedo by Ambrosio de Morales.[44] The collection was created from actual examples of each type of text contained in it, but with names and dates generally omitted. Despite this, those documents that retain any evidence of dating are all of Visigothic origin, and in particular from the reign of king Sisebut (611/2 -619 or 621). Two relate explicitly to gifts made to a church or monastery, in one case by an illiterate donor, while another two of them contain texts for the royal foundation or endowment of a monastic house.[45] In themselves these model texts created out of actual examples imply that such acts of foundation and or donation were sufficiently frequent as to deserve inclusion in a collection like this, which otherwise consisted of items of clearly practical purpose.

The same manuscript also includes a collection of eighteen letters, again some with explicit royal connections.[46] Particularly interesting for the present enquiry is one that was sent by a monk called Tarra to king Reccared (589-601). From his literary style, he must have been a member of the social elite. He was accused by his fellow monks of consorting with prostitutes, and he wrote to the king protesting his innocence. Another of the letters was directed by king Sisebut to Teudila, one of his sons (possibly illegitimate), and who had just become a monk. A second letter of Sisebut was sent to bishop Cicilius of Mentesa, who had abandoned his episcopal

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43. For a superb example of the demolition of myth see the article by Albrecht Diem on "Iro-Frankish" monasticism in this issue of the journal.

44. *Formulae Wisigothicae*, ed. Gil 1972: 70-112. See Collins 2014: 609-632.

45. *Formulae Wisigothicae*, ed. Gil 1972: n. VII-X, 78-86.

46. *Epistulae*, ed. Gil 1972: 2-49; previously edited by Gundlach 1957: 658-690, under the title *Epistolae Wisigothicae*.

duties to enter a monastery, for which he was sternly admonished by the king. A fourth item in the collection is a letter from a monk named Maurice, which according to its heading in the manuscript was addressed to a certain Agapius, possibly the bishop of Córdoba.[47]

Although a small and seemingly random selection, it is interesting to note how frequently monks and monastic topics features in these few letters. They testify to the appeal of the renunciation of secular obligations and the adoption of a monastic lifestyle in early seventh century Spain, not least among the wealthy elite of the kingdom, as also evidenced by the careers of Isidore of Seville and his three siblings, whose collective episcopal careers were unlikely to have occurred without the additional inducement for their congregations of their substantial financial resources.

The relatively small quantity of the literary evidence, with a significant amount of it dating to the last fifty or so years of the kingdom's existence, may distort our perspective on both the chronology and the scale of monastic life and its importance in the Visigothic period. The same may be said of North Africa in the period following the death of Augustine. This literary evidence is so limited in its extent and quantity that no discussion was possible of what a monastic institution might have been like, either in appearance or in its daily functioning. Archaeology provides the best hope for progress here. Several potential monastic sites have been suggested, including one in the port of Seville, but without excavation these remain no more than exciting possibilities (Sánchez Velasco 2018: 205-207, 277-280).

Perhaps surprisingly, more is known of the architecture and organisation of early monasteries in northern Britain and Ireland, such as Jarrow, Whithorn, Iona, Hoddom, Clonmacnoise and High Island, amongst others, than is the case with most of the lands of the western Mediterranean.[48] Monastic sites in North Africa, which may well have been numerous, remain largely undetected. In France some historically well attested monastic sites have provided archaeological evidence, but it is generally quite limited (Bully, Destefanis 2020: 232-257). The same is true of Italy too. The problems are various, and they can range from later construction over or continuous occupation of an early site to serious security problems making the search for possible locations too dangerous to undertake, as currently in Algeria.

Other practical questions that might be raised relate to the role and functioning of monasteries in their local contexts. Even for the supposed founding fathers of the Egyptian ascetic tradition, Anthony, whose priority was claimed by Athanasius, and Paul, for whom the case was made by Jerome, a retreat 'into the desert' was not to

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47. *Epistulae*, ed. Gil 1972: I, VII, IX, XVII, 3-6, 15-19, 28-29, 45-47. On these letters individually see Martín-Iglesias, Díaz, Vallejo Girvés 2020: 419-425, 478-487, 517-530.
48. Cramp 2005, recording excavations from 1959-1988; Hill 1997; Argyll 1982; Lowe 2006; King 1998 & 2003; Marshall, Rourke 2000; also, Edwards 1990: 104-127.

locations as remote as the phrase might suggest.[49] Both established their hermitages, which became places of pilgrimage and sites of significant monastic communities, close enough to routes between the Nile valley and the Red Sea to be accessible to a growing number of devotees.[50] The coenobitic communities of the Nile, as can be seen today, were located on the very edge of the narrow strips of cultivatable land flanking the Nile, and thus not very far removed from village life in the valley (Goehring 1996: 267-285; Blanke 2019: 169).

The absolute divide in Egypt between the dessert and the irrigated land that could sustain settled existence was perhaps more extreme than in any other geographical context, but neither individual anchorites nor monastic communities could survive in total isolation. They all depended upon some degree of interaction with wider society, however minimal, and despite the impressions given by writers of hagiographic texts. For the hermits, as for the pillar dwelling saints of Syria, basic sustenance was required on a regular basis, and for the communities created by Pachomius and by others who followed his example. Their growing size, although this is exaggerated in some hagiographic texts required complex relations with their neighbours if they were to be able to maintain themselves.[51] Hence, the role played by production and trade.[52]

In Egypt many if not all monasteries depended upon their members engaging in crafts such as basket making, creating goods that could be exchanged for the wider range of items needed by their community to sustain itself.[53] We need to imagine that similar constraints were placed on monastic bodies in Visigothic Spain, and indeed some evidence has been skilfully deployed to suggest that specialist production, for example in the preparation of papyrus for documents, was a feature of the regular life in the Iberian Peninsula too, as it was elsewhere in the west.[54] Surplus agricultural products and livestock from a monastic community would also provide opportunities for trade.

Another function that might be performed by a monastery is that of teaching. The prime target of this would have been boys given to the community at a young

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49. Both of these works need to be treated with great caution. See Brakke 1995: 201-272 and Kelly 1975: 60-61.

50. Vivian 2002: 1-20; Swanson 2008: 43-59; also, Lyster 2008: 1-21.

51. Blanke 2019: 129, for archaeological disproving of the claimed number of monks in the White Monastery.

52. A dimension ignored or unanticipated in older discussions, for example Walters 1974. For the historiography of Egyptian monasticism see Hedstrom 2017: 1-39.

53. Blanke 2019: 130-149, and 154-169 for the Red Monastery. For basket-making, see Rousseau 1985: 82-83.

54. Sales-Carbonell 2014: 423-463; also, Sales-Carbonell 2013: 469-499. A particular kind of black jewellery made from oil shale may, from the finds on the site and in its vicinity, have been at least one of the specialist crafts practised in the monastery of Inchmarnock in the Firth of Clyde: Lowe 2008: 193-202.

age, with the intention of their become members of it. Such child oblates would require enough training as to be able to read the scriptures and participate in the liturgy. It is unlikely this educational work would also have been intended as a benefit for local lay society, though children of the social elite might in some cases have received at least elementary education without being intended by their parents for religious life.

Definite evidence of an early medieval monastery that did engage in teaching, and of the physical location of the school within it comes from the monastic site on the island of Inchmarnock in the Firth of Clyde in the west of Scotland. Here a collection of incised slates has been found, several of which contain exercises in writing. Because the site had remained effectively untouched, these slates were found concentrated in one location that can be shown to be part of the main monastic complex, and so may be a possible school room (Lowe 2008: 114-175).

The use of slate for such documents and the nature of what is written on them have immediate reminiscences of the more numerous Visigothic *pizarras*, particularly those identified as having an educational function.[55] While not concentrated in large numbers, the functional and physical similarities between these Spanish slate documents and those from Inchmarnock raise the possibility that at least some of the former may, like the latter, have been created in a monastic context. Where more than one such 'exercise' slate has been found in the same location, then the chances of a monastery having existed in the vicinity may be all the greater. The existence of a slate inscribed with a Psalter text is another very likely indicator.[56]

One of the great "known unknowns" of Visigothic monasticism is its cultural dimension. With the sole exception of Valerius of Bierzo, all the identifiable authors of works written in the period are bishops. On the other hand, many of them were raised in monastic contexts. Thus, a series of metropolitan bishops of Toledo in the seventh century were trained in the monastery of Agali, somewhere in the vicinity of the city, as is reported by Ildefonsus, who was one of their number.[57] But for all that, we cannot say what the distinctive traits of such an education might have been. Other monasteries that served as 'nurseries of bishops', as Lérins had done in the first half of the 5th century, include Asán in the Pyrenean foothills and what may be assumed to be the family monastery in which Isidore was trained, though neither of these continued to be as influential as Agali.

We know some of the roles played by monastic houses in Britain and Ireland, Francia and Italy as centres of learning and of the production and dissemination

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55. For example, Velázquez Soriano 2000: I, docs. 105, 106 from Lerilla (Salamanca).

56. Velázquez Soriano 2000: I, doc. 29, from Navahombela (Salamanca); Maloy: 2020: 59.

57. Ildefonsus, *De viris illustribus*, VI and VII, ed. Codoñer 1972: 124-127; for a possible location of Agali *en el arrabal de Toledo* see de Pisa 1605: 102 recto. Storch de Gracia y Asensio 1990: 568-569.

of manuscripts, from at least the sixth century onwards.[58] These must have been exceptional. The great majority of monastic establishments will not have had a scriptorium of their own, let alone a distinctive house script. In the period before the 'Carolingian Renaissance', only a few such centres can be clearly identified. Agali, which does not seem to have long survived the Arab conquest, must have been one of them. However, as the discovery and excavation of monastic sites continues across the Iberian Peninsula, the hope must be that one or more of them may provide evidence at least of the production of parchment, as in the recent case of the Pictish monastery at Portmahomack in Easter Ross in Scotland, which established for the first time that this was a literate society (Carver 2008: 119-125; cf. Forsyth 1998: 39-61).

The suggested production and dissemination of papyrus, still used for documents until the late seventh century, from at least one possible Spanish monastery of Visigothic date has already been mentioned, and it is worth considering that monastic communities of all sizes may have provided scribes for the making of documentary records, on a variety of materials, for local societies in that period; just as they would in the much better recorded centuries following the Arab conquest.[59]

Other than the publication of improved textual editions from the 1970s onwards, the most significant advance in the study of Visigothic monasticism came from archaeology, with the excavation of the site of Santa María de Melque by Luís Caballero and his team leading the way (Caballero Zoreda, Latorre Macarrón 1980). They identified it as a monastery, with traces of buildings adjacent to the well-preserved church and an enclosure wall. The days of trying to make such an identification from a church alone were definitely at an end, but although Melque's status as a monastery has not been questioned, its excavators subsequently changed their minds about its chronology, and also that of all the other supposedly archetypal examples of Visigothic church architecture (Caballero Zoreda 2000: 207-248; Chavarría Arnau 2010: 160-174). For reasons, both sound and debatable, they have reassigned all these buildings, Melque included, to dates in the late eighth or ninth centuries, citing possible influence of early Ummayad decorative features from Syria. While no consensus on this question exists, the strength of the case is such that a post-Visigothic dating seems clear, even if there is ongoing uncertainty as to exactly what that should be.

While the chronology of Melque remains controversial, other sites have now emerged as those of possible monasteries of Visigothic date (Martínez Jiménez, Sastre de Diego, Tejerizo García 2018: 223-224). A recent one of these, El Bovalar

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58. E.g., Chazelle 2019: 1-12, 236-310 for the remarkable book production at early eighth-century twin monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow.

59. Sales-Carbonell 2014: 423-463; for the continued use of papyrus in the making of documents and its decline see Collins 2021b: 22-23.

(Seròs, Lleida) was originally identified as a late seventh-century village, despite the peculiar arrangement of buildings around two courtyards being attached directly to the southern wall of a church (Sales-Carbonell 2014: 423-463), itself of sixth century date.[60] A scattering of varied objects of everyday life, including agricultural implements, across the whole site might have suggested the idea. Unfortunately, the excavation was never published, other than in very summary form. (Palol i Salellas 1989; Palol i Salellas 1986: 513-525). Another scatter across the site, this time of gold coins of early eighth century date, including some of king Achila (711-714), remains in need of explanation (Palol i Salellas 1986: 513-525). In general, lacking full publication, the evidence remains ambiguous.

More securely based, though a much less well-preserved site, is Santa Cecilia de Els Altimiris, also in the Province of Lleida, but in the foothills of the eastern Pyrenees. Although evidence of occupation has been found that extends from the mid-fifth to the early eleventh centuries, the period of most intense occupation has been dated to the sixth and seventh centuries, when it has very plausibly been identified as a monastic complex (Sancho i Planas 2019: 19-32). This consisted of a small and simple church, a residential building, three huts or workshops, one of which was devoted to ironworking, and three cisterns, all within a walled enclosure.[61] The production of aromatic resins on the site from trees cleared in its vicinity, probably intended for use as a substitute for incense from the Near East, is another interesting possibility (Sales-Carbonell, Sancho i Planas, de Castellet 2017: 107-113). The discovery of more such small-scale monastic complexes with evidence of production and exchange may be expected, adding to the probability of a widespread dissemination of monasteries of different kinds and sizes in the Iberian Peninsula in the Visigothic period. This includes urban monasteries, which present their own problems of identification (Moreno Martín 2009: 275-307).

If, in the case of Melque, an apparently clear example of a monastic site of Visigothic date was both confirmed and then denied, less controversial evidence from other sites was emerging in the same years, and this included ones involving rather different forms of construction. Notable in this respect are the cave churches and associated residential chambers carved from the rock, that have been found in several geologically suitable locations across the Iberian Peninsula.[62] That they were occupied by anchorites and small monastic communities seems highly probable. Some of them may have developed around a central cave site associated with a holy man, as in the case of Aemilian and the subsequent monastery of San Millan de

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60. For the Egyptian monastery of Apa Jeremias that was originally identified as a village, see Hedstrom 2017: 225-237.

61. For another example of ironworking in a monastic site see Lowe 2006: 137-144. That this could also be true of a monastery in an urban context see Hodges 1997: 62, referring to evidence from Rome.

62. Monreal Jimeno 1989; Azkarate Garai-Olaun 1988: 113-498. More have been discovered since these pioneering publications, including in the south.

la Cogolla. There are similar examples from Egypt. It may also be that the church carved from the rock over a cave site in what has been claimed, not very convincingly, to be the location of Bobastro has nothing to do with Ibn Hafsun, but is another example of a later monastic community that venerated a local saint associated with a cave dwelling (Mergelina 1925: 159-176).[63]

The main problem with all these caves and rock carved churches and chambers is establishing dates of occupation. Only when inscriptions have been found can palaeography serve to suggest a chronology for at least some of the period of occupation (Velázquez Soriano 1988: 315-319). Even so, the existence of these sites argues for a wider presence of forms of the ascetic life in the Visigothic period than the literary texts alone would suggest.

By way of conclusions to drawn from these considerations, the first must be that, in comparison with half a century ago, the growth in the quantity and range of evidence, particularly archaeological, implies that monastic life, both anachoretic and communal, was far more widespread across the Iberian Peninsula in the sixth and seventh centuries than might once have been assumed. Furthermore, it was more varied in character and in the size of its institutions than previously understood. Secondly, monastic rules in general and those from the Visigothic period in particular present more numerous and complex textual and interpretational problems than was realised back in the 1970s. A proper critical edition of the Visigothic monastic rules is an urgent necessity. Thirdly, as is true in several other ways, the Arab conquest of 711 does not necessarily represent a change or turning point in Iberian monastic history. The only exception here may be the impetus given to monastic development in the emerging Christian states in the north, not so much by the conquest but by the disturbed conditions across the centre of the Peninsula in the middle decades of the eighth century (Sánchez-Pardo, Blanco-Rotea, Sanjurjo-Sánchez 2017: 1011-1026).

Finally, the roles played by monastic institutions of all sizes, and indeed possibly by individual holy men and women, culturally, economically, and socially in the Visigothic period were both greater and more varied than has been recognised. Archaeological study of Visigothic period monasticism is becoming increasingly dynamic and generating exciting results. But historians are perhaps still too absorbed in describing the anatomy of the subject, when more imaginative methods are needed, if new life is to be infused into its inanimate body.

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63. For arguments against, see Collins 2012: 124-125.

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