

The Church's role in the politics of Visigothic Spain

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“great mass of men who made up Visigothic society remained wedded to the primitive and continued to act the self-interested, anarchic, vicious, violent and corrupt fashion of the primitive. And this is as true of the clergy as of anyone else the reasons—and the Eigenkirche system, on the one hand, the ‘Germanisation’ of the episcopate by a king dependent upon faction support, on the other, can hardly have helped matters—the Visigothic clergy were guilty of the same lawlessness and unscrupulousness as their lay subjects” [1, 27]. The above observation by P. D. King remains a somewhat accurate description of the Visigothic kingdom in the seventh century. Most kingdoms in the West experienced some form of political struggle. Britain was composed of many competing small kingdoms, while Francia struggled with dynastic infighting throughout the sixth and seventh centuries [2, 48]. Violence was a means for political success, and, in most cases, a method of maintaining power. Spain shared a lot of commonalities with other Western European kingdoms in the sixth and seventh centuries: unstable politics, an unstable church, violent conflict, to name a few. However, the scholarship on Spain in this period tends to shift the political problems and eventual failure of the Visigothic kingdom away from the Church and focuses more on the political tensions between the nobility and the king. This ignores the important role of the Church in government, the influence and relationships exercised by bishops, and the monarchial policies aimed at the Church in response to problematic autonomy and discipline [3, 284]. This research resituates the Church's role in the politics of the period from 586 to 712 and underscores its role in the fragmentation of Visigothic Spain. There were some distinct political attitudes that defined the seventh century Visigothic Spain. The Spanish elite were quick to voice their opposition to dynastic kingship after 586, allowing few families to hold the kingship for more than two generations [4, 89]. The Visigoths had a very Roman and comprehensive legal system based on trial by peers. Many of the orthodox bishops acted autonomously, and the autonomy of the Visigothic Church as a whole from the papacy permitted freedoms that proved difficult to control. Eigenkirchen, proprietary churches, and proprietary monasteries, offered an opportunity to practice autonomous behavior in many cases, not only for secular founders, but also for bishops. Autonomy within the Church and among nobles consistently threatened the stability and authority of the central government in the seventh and early eighth centuries. A kingdom without dynastic rule was subject to wildly varying policies from wildly varying kings, and, indeed, this is exactly what happened throughout the seventh century. Each king was keen to maintain his position and power, and most of the kings recognized different institutions as credible threats to their kingship, but they often reacted in different ways; some embraced the Church, while others avoided the

Church, some cracked down on the nobility, while others made concessions to nobility [5, 68]. At the Third Council of Toledo, in 589, Reccared I formally converted the Visigothic people to orthodox Christianity. Feeling that he and his kingdom were vulnerable to internal rebellion—his encounter with three conspiracies against his kingship perhaps illustrated this to him—Reccared sought stability in religio-political unity, just as his father had attempted to do with Arianism. This unity came, not only in the form of conversion, but through integration and reliance on the Church to provide a balance to an otherwise unstable government under Reccared. The integration included giving bishops the role of overseeing local court cases, assessing judicial decisions made by secular judges, determining secular officials' salaries, advising government officials on local taxation, and legitimizing the kingship through divine sanction. While this integration took place and, fundamentally, inserted the Church into the political structure that was the Visigothic government, the Church had significant internal problems it had to overcome in order to provide stability in the kingdom through its new role. Church discipline had caused in the secular realm. Wamba's policy, and others like it, attempted to secure the kingship and the kingdom and to provide stability. These policies were a response to regional religio-political alliances, stemming from the deep-rooted self-interested autonomous practices by bishops and local nobles, which sometimes manifested themselves in rebellions. The unforeseen result of Wamba's policies was the collapse of the Visigothic kingdom in the face of a very small Muslim invasion in 712 and monasteries were filled with slaves, peasant families, and criminals. In part, maintaining such monasteries provided profits and tax immunities for the unscrupulous bishops and nobles who founded or ran these institutions, and the monasteries were permitted to operate autonomously due to the paucity of councils and the inability to legislate and enforce canon law against this autonomy. Criticism was levied by religious men like Valerius of Bierzo (c. 670-690), and defenses were made against such accusations, such as the *Vita sancti Fructuosi* (c. 670s/680s), the hagiography about the holy dual-bishop of Dumio and Braga. These texts, along with others, argue that not only had discipline gone unchecked, but now monks were terrorizing communities with theft and murder [6, 57]. The third period begins with Ervig's accession in 680. E. A. Thompson described Ervig's reign as one "of far-reaching concession, . . . [and] almost of total surrender, to the nobility and bishops." After ninety-two years of trying to centralize, the Church was officially centered in Toledo, councils were convened on a regular basis, and Bishop Julian of Toledo was appointed the kingdom-wide primate, but all of this was accomplished to the detriment of the kingship and the central secular authority. The palatine nobility gained immunity from accusations of conspiracies against the state, those who had lost their property had it returned, and all back taxes were forgiven, an unparalleled act. Parts of Wamba's devastating conscription law were repealed. Bishops continued to wrestle with their discipline issues, which remained the same, but they now had more control in Toledo and were benefitting from the king's concessions [7, 74].

We can conclude that there were several factors at work here. First, the author of the RMC, like Valerius, saw a corrupt monastic system caused by ill-intentioned founders, whose main goal was to fill monasteries, with little regard to who filled them. Second is the source of this movement, the nobility and bishops, both of whom were accused of corruption. The accusation was not foreign, for we have seen that the councils from 589 to 694 have continually pointed out the corrupt practices of bishops, nobles, and the clergy, even at times using the same terminology.

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