

Cambridge University Press
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INTRODUCTION

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Introduction

We are pleased to present the first complete English translation from the Latin of Isidore’s *Etymologies*. Isidore, Bishop of Seville, compiled the *Etymologies* (also known as the *Origins*) in the late teens and twenties of the seventh century, and left it nearly complete at his death in 636. In the form of an encyclopedia, it contains a compendium of much of the essential learning of the ancient Greco-Roman and early Christian worlds. In his important study of the Latin literary culture of medieval Europe, Ernst Robert Curtius spoke of the *Etymologies* as serving “the entire Middle Ages as a basic book.”¹ It was arguably the most influential book, after the Bible, in the learned world of the Latin West for nearly a thousand years.

To get an idea of what a seventh-century Irish monk, or a lecturer at a cathedral school in the eleventh century, or an Italian poet of the fourteenth century, or a lexicographer of the sixteenth century could learn from the *Etymologies*, one might pick a bit of lore from each of the twenty books in which the work has come down to us. From Isidore, then, we learn that:

- Caesar Augustus used a code in which he replaced each letter with the following letter of the alphabet, *b* for *a*, etc. (I.xxv.2).
- Plato divided physics into four categories: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy (II.xxiv.4).
- The term ‘cymbal’ derives from the Greek words for “with” and “dancing,” σὺν and βαλά (III.xxii.12).
- A physician needs to know the Seven Liberal Arts of Grammar, Rhetoric, Dialectic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy (IV.xiii.1–4).
- In ancient times execution by sword was preferred as speedier (V.xxvii.35).

¹ “Grundbuch des ganzen Mittelalters,” in *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (Bern, 1948), trans. by W. R. Trask, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York, 1953: 23).

- Architects use green Carysteian marble to panel libraries, because the green refreshes weary eyes (VI.xi.2).
- Esau had three names, meaning “red” (for the stew he made), “bloody” (for his complexion), and “hairy” (VII.vi.33–34).
- Aristotle says that Zoroaster, the first magician, composed two million verses (VIII.ix.1).
- A soldier (*miles*) is so called because once there were a thousand (*mille*) in one troop (IX.iii.32).
- The word for a garrulous person (*garrulus*) derives from the name of the constantly chattering bird, the jackdaw (*graculus*) (X.114).
- In the womb, the knees (*genua*) are pressed against the face, and help to form the eye-sockets (*genae*); hence their name (XI.i.108).
- The ibis purges itself by spewing water into its anus with its beak (XII.vii.33).
- Because of its brightness, lightning reaches the eyes before thunder reaches the ears (XIII.viii.2).
- Gaul is so named from the whiteness of its people, for “milk” in Greek is γάλα (XIV.iv.25).
- Minerva is ‘Athena’ in Greek; she is reputed to be inventor of many arts because various arts, and philosophy itself, consider the city of Athens their temple (XV.i.44).
- Amber is not the sap of the poplar, but of pine, because when burned it smells like pine pitch (XVI.viii.6).
- An altar was dedicated in Rome to Stercutus, who brought the technique of dunging (*stercorare*) fields to Italy (XVII.i.3).
- The battering ram takes its name ‘ram’ from its character, because it butts walls (XVIII.xi.1).
- The women of Arabia and Mesopotamia wear the veil called *theristrum* even today as a protection from heat (XIX.xxv.6).
- Wine (*vinum*) is so called because it replenishes the veins (*vena*) with blood (XX.ii.2).

4 INTRODUCTION

In the following introduction we provide sketches of Isidore's historical setting, of his life and works, of the

sources of the *Etymologies*, of the character of the work, and of its influence.²

Historical background

When Isidore was born around the middle of the sixth century, the Western Roman Empire no longer existed as a political entity. Gaul was now ruled by the Franks, and in Italy the Ostrogoths had just been defeated by Byzantine forces, who had also taken over North Africa from the Vandals a short time earlier. Spain, meanwhile, had been under Visigothic rule for over a century.³

The Visigoths, like the Ostrogoths, were a Germanic people, originally settled north of the Danube. In 376, under increasing pressure from the Huns, they were allowed by Roman authorities to cross the Danube and settle in Thrace. Their dealings with Rome within the Empire were rocky from the outset, and they soon rebelled, raiding throughout Thrace before defeating Roman forces outside Adrianople in 378. Fighting continued until the two sides reached an agreement in 382 which established the Visigoths as Roman allies bound to supply troops in return for subsidies and a certain amount of autonomy. By the end of the century relations had deteriorated again, however, and the Visigoths, led by Alaric (reigned 395–410), entered Italy and sacked Rome in 410 after they were unable to reach an agreement with the Emperor on the subsidies they were to receive. Still at odds with the Romans, they made their way to Southern Gaul in 412, and from there were driven by Emperor Constantius into Spain.

The Roman province of Hispania had been overrun a few years previous to this by a loose alliance of Germanic tribes, the Alans, the Vandals, and the Sueves. The Visigoths, faced with food shortages due to a Roman blockade, came to an agreement with Constantius to fight these earlier barbarian invaders on Rome's behalf. After some success, they were resettled in Gaul in 418.

In 456, under Theodoric II (reigned 453–466), the Visigoths invaded Spain again, where the Suevi had become the dominant power in the meantime. Theodoric's forces did not manage to conquer the entire peninsula, however; areas held by the Suevi, Galicians and others continued to assert their independence for some time, and the Basque territories were never completely subdued.

In 507, Clovis, the king of the Franks, attacked the Gaulish part of the Visigothic kingdom, and over the next quarter century the Visigoths lost all their Gaulish territory apart from the region around Narbonne known as Septimania. From this point on, the Visigothic kingdom was essentially confined to the Spanish peninsula.

It should be pointed out that although the Visigoths were rulers of Spain they probably only made up a small percentage of the population throughout the period under their rule; the majority of the inhabitants were Hispano-Roman. The new rulers retained a large part of the Roman administrative structure; Roman governors and officials continued to collect at least some Roman taxes⁴ and enforce Roman law.⁵ The two groups remained socially distinct, however; a ban from imperial times on intermarriage between Goths and Romans, for example, apparently remained in effect until the later part of the sixth century.⁶

Visigothic Spain was a politically unstable kingdom throughout most of the sixth century. Four successive kings were murdered (Amalric, Theudis, Theudisclus, and Agila). From 544, Byzantine forces intervened in Visigothic affairs, possibly at the invitation of Athanagild in his rebellion against Agila. By 557, the Byzantines occupied the southeastern coast of the peninsula, including the port city of Cartagena. Isidore's parents appear to have left Cartagena at about this time, quite possibly as a result of this invasion. In the meantime,

² The fullest recent account of all these matters is the extensive General Introduction by Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz to the Spanish edition of the *Etymologies*, ed. Oroz Reta and Marcos Casquero 1993²: 3–257. No good general treatment of Isidore is available in English; the study by Brehaut (1912) is outdated.

³ For a recent overview of the whole period see McKitterick 2001.

⁴ Land tax, custom tolls, and *collatio lustralis* continued to be collected, for example; see Heather 1996: 194–95.

⁵ There is some controversy over whether the Gothic inhabitants were subject to a separate code based on traditional Gothic law; see, among others, King 1980, Collins 1995: 24–31, Heather 1996: 194–96, Velázquez 1999, and Wood 1999.

⁶ Wood 1999: 193.

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relations with the Franks to the north deteriorated and they began to threaten Visigothic Septimania and the Ebro Valley.

Following Athanagild's death in 568, the Visigothic nobility chose Liuva to be king, and after Liuva's death in 571 or 573, his brother Leovigild (the Visigothic monarchy was not hereditary, although sometimes a son did succeed his father to the throne). Under Leovigild, the kingdom saw its strength increase. The new king's military successes restored territory that had been lost to the Byzantines and regained political control over rebellious areas (the city of Cordoba, for example, which had been in a state of rebellion since 550) and bordering regions in the northern part of the peninsula.

Leovigild's attempt to win new converts to Arianism met with less success. Arianism was a form of Christianity that held that the three members of the Trinity were not equal and co-eternal – specifically that the Son was not God by nature but created, and not eternal like the Father.⁷ Catholic Christians condemned Arian doctrine as heresy at the Council of Nicaea in 325. The Goths, however, had already accepted Arianism when they converted to Christianity, and they continued to hold this doctrine as they moved westward into Gaul and then into Spain. Until Leovigild, the Gothic rulers had made no attempt to convert their largely Catholic subjects, and had apparently made little restriction on the practice of Catholicism, although the Catholic clergy had been deprived of some of their privileges. Under the Arian rulers, the Catholic Church in Spain had been free to convene synods, construct new churches and found monasteries, correspond with the Pope, and circulate their writings openly. The two Churches coexisted independently of each other, each with its own clergy, shrines, and other institutions.

⁷ For a discussion of the theology of Gothic Arianism see Wiles 1996:45–51.

⁸ Some historians have suggested that the Franks first converted from paganism to Arianism, and then from Arianism to Catholicism; see D. Schanzer, "Dating the Baptism of Clovis: the Bishop of Vienne vs. the Bishop of Tours," *Early Medieval Europe* 7 (1998): 29–57.

⁹ *Dialogues*, iii.31. See Collins 1980:215–18 for further discussion of Leander's role in Hermenigild's conversion.

¹⁰ Collins 1995:54.

¹¹ See Stocking 2000:59–88 for a discussion of the Council; records of the Council may be found in G. Martínez Díez and F. Rodríguez, eds., *La Colección Canónica Hispana*, V, Concilios Hispanos: segunda parte (Madrid, 1992).

Leovigild, however, mounted a serious campaign to expand Arianism, choosing persuasion and rewards as his instruments, rather than force. In 580 he summoned the first Arian synod held in Spain, and ruled that converts to Arianism no longer needed to be rebaptized, which presumably also made the process of conversion more appealing to Catholics. According to Gregory of Tours (*Libri Historiarum* X, 6.18), Leovigild also attempted to win converts by redefining Arian doctrine to hold that the Father and Son were equal and co-eternal and only the Holy Spirit was not equal. Although he managed to win over a few important Catholic figures, including the Bishop of Saragossa, he lost ground in his own family, for by 582 his older son Hermenigild had converted to Catholicism.

Hermenigild's conversion may have been based as much on political considerations as religious conviction. He had rebelled against his father in 579, soon after his marriage to a Frankish princess (Clovis, the king of the Franks, had converted to Catholicism around the beginning of the sixth century),⁸ and had declared himself the independent monarch over the southern part of the peninsula. For three years, Leovigild seems to have accepted the situation, making no attempt to regain control, while Hermenigild, for his part, did not seek to expand the territory under his rule. Some time around 582, Hermenigild converted to Catholicism, under the influence of Isidore's brother Leander, according to Pope Gregory I, a friend of Leander.⁹

In 583, Leovigild finally moved to retake the territory held by Hermenigild, and by 584 he had regained control and exiled Hermenigild to Valencia, where he was murdered the next year. Leovigild, in the meantime, continued his military successes, conquering the Suevic kingdom before he died in 586.

Reccared, Leovigild's other son and Hermenigild's younger brother, became king at his father's death, and converted to Catholicism the following year. Again, as with Hermenigild, Leander of Seville was apparently instrumental in his conversion¹⁰. Reccared began systematically disassembling the Arian Church structure, reassigning Arian churches to the Catholic dioceses where they were located, and allowing Arian bishops who converted to retain their sees, even when this meant having two bishops in a single see. Most of the groundwork for these changes was laid at the kingdom-wide church Council convened by Reccared at Toledo in 589.¹¹

Although he ordered the destruction of Arian books (and in fact no Arian documents are preserved from Visigothic Spain), there was little if any other persecution of Arians who refused to convert. In the first four years following his conversion, Reccared faced several Arian conspiracies and attempted revolts led by Gothic nobles, but these did not turn out to be serious threats, and within a generation Arianism appears to have died out.

One result of Reccared's conversion to Catholicism was the formation of close ties between the monarchy and the Church. From this point forward, the Visigothic kings exercised control over the appointment of bishops and other decisions that had hitherto been made by the Church alone (see Letters IV and V in the Appendix). In return, the Church, in particular the council of bishops, was given the authority and responsibility for overseeing secular offices like local judges and agents of the treasury estates.

Reccared died in 601, shortly after Isidore became Bishop of Seville, and was succeeded by his seventeen-year-old illegitimate son Liuva II. Less than two years later, Liuva was deposed by Witteric, a Gothic noble. Witteric had Liuva's right hand cut off to prevent him from retaking the throne (Visigothic tradition required that the monarch be able-bodied), and then, in 603, had him executed. Witteric himself was assassinated in 610. The assassins and their motivations have not been recorded, but Witteric was by all accounts not a popular king. Isidore speaks of him with disapproval, and other contemporaries complained of injustices suffered under his

rule. Gundemar took the throne after Witteric's death, and involved himself, as Reccared had, in the councils of bishops, before dying two years later.

Sisebut then became king. He was a man of some intellectual attainment and authored, among other works, a poem on lunar eclipses (written in 613 as a response to Isidore's cosmological treatise, *De Natura Rerum*) and a Life of St. Desiderius of Vienne.¹² He was also noted by contemporaries for his personal piety, which led him to become deeply involved in the activities of the Church. According to Isidore, Sisebut's anti-Jewish policy of forced conversion was based on zeal rather than knowledge.¹³ (Isidore may be referring to this campaign in *Etymologies* V.xxxix.42.) Isidore did not entirely approve of this policy but apparently reserved his criticism until after Sisebut's death.

Sisebut died in 621, of natural causes, or an overdose of medicine, or deliberate poisoning, depending on which account one credits.¹⁴ Reccared II, his young son and successor, died shortly thereafter, and Suinthila took the throne. He began his reign by pushing back a Basque incursion into the province of Tarragona (see Letter II). A further triumph followed a few years later when he succeeded in driving the Byzantines out of Spain. In one version of the *Historia Gothorum*, written during Suinthila's reign, Isidore is lavish in his praise of the monarch. However, Suinthila was deposed in 631 by a group of nobles with Frankish assistance, and Sisenand was made king. Little is recorded about Sisenand's reign aside from his participation in the Fourth Council of Toledo. He died in 636, the same year as Isidore.

Chronology

- 557: Byzantines occupy Cartagena.
- ca. 560: Isidore is born.
- 572: Leovigild becomes king.
- ca. 579: Hermenigild rebels.
- 586: Death of Leovigild; Reccared becomes king.
- 587: Reccared converts to Catholicism.
- 600: Leander dies. Isidore becomes Archbishop of Seville.
- 601/2: Reccared dies. Liuva II becomes king.
- 603: Witteric dethrones and murders Liuva II, and becomes king.

- 610: Witteric assassinated. Gundemar becomes king.
- 12 See J. Fontaine, "King Sisebut's *Vita Desiderii* and the Political Function of Visigothic Hagiography," in James 1980.
- 13 Isidore, *History of the Goths*, 61, translated in Wolf 1999:105; see Stocking 2000:132–6 for further discussion of Sisebut's and Isidore's views on conversion.
- 14 Isidore, *History of the Goths* in Wolf 1999:106: "Some claim that he died a natural death, others, that he died as a result of an overdose of some medication." In an earlier version of the *History of the Goths*, the possibility of poisoning was mentioned (see Stocking 2000:135 fn. 69).

611/12: Death of Gundemar. Sisebut becomes king.
613: Isidore dedicates *De Natura Rerum* to Sisebut.
621: Sisebut dies. Reccared II becomes king and dies shortly thereafter. Suinthila becomes king.

624: Suinthila drives the Byzantines completely out of Spain.
631: Suinthila is deposed. Sisenand becomes king.
636: Sisenand dies. Isidore dies.

Life and works

Few details can be given about Isidore’s life with any certainty. He was born some time around 560, about the time when his father Severianus relocated the family to Seville from Cartagena, where invading Byzantine forces had taken control. Isidore’s parents died while he was still young, and he was brought up and educated in Seville under the care of his older brother Leander, very likely in the monastery school where Leander was abbot (Riché 1976:289).
Leander, who became Bishop of Seville before 580, was an active and influential churchman.¹⁵ He was a personal friend of Gregory, later Pope Gregory I, whom he encountered on a visit to Constantinople and who dedicated his *Moralia* to Leander. A connection of greater consequence for the kingdom of Spain was Leander’s friendship with King Leovigild’s sons Hermenegild and Reccared, the future king; it was under Leander’s guidance that both his royal friends converted from Arianism to Catholicism.

After Leander’s death, and shortly before Reccared died, Isidore was made Bishop of Seville, most likely in

the year 600. His other brother, Fulgentius, as well as his sister Florentina, also chose to go into the Church; Fulgentius became Bishop of Ecija and Florentina entered a nunnery. As one of the leading churchmen in the country, Isidore presided over important Church councils in Seville (in 619) and Toledo (in 633). The close ties that had been established between the Visigothic monarchy and the Catholic Church after Reccared’s conversion make it likely that Isidore had some political influence as well. His relationship with King Sisebut (reigned 612–621) was particularly close, extending beyond practical matters of government to a personal friendship based on shared intellectual interests. Also important was his friendship with his younger colleague, Braulio, who was archdeacon (and later, in 631, bishop) of the Church in Saragossa. Their correspondence (see the letters attached to the *Etymologies* in the Appendix) provides a valuable glimpse of Isidore’s personality and daily life.

Isidore was deeply admired by his contemporaries for his scholarship and intellectual gifts. Although their praise for his Greek and Hebrew is perhaps unmerited (his knowledge of these languages appears to have extended only to disconnected Greek terms and phrases, and a smattering of Hebrew words), the breadth of his learning is nonetheless impressive.¹⁶ He was happy to draw on pagan authors as well as Church Fathers, and was familiar with works as various as Martial’s *Epigrams*, Tertullian’s *On Spectacles*, and Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*. In spite of the demands of his episcopal office, Isidore nevertheless found time to produce a substantial body of writing. Braulio compiled a list of these works, the *Renotatio Librorum Isidori*, presented in the order in which they were written, shortly after Isidore’s death in 636:

Isidore, an excellent man, bishop of the Church at Seville, successor to and brother of Bishop Leander, flourished from the time of the Emperor Mauritius and

15 Good biographies of Leander, with accounts of his combat against Arianism and his writings, are L. Navarra, *Leandro di Siviglia: Profilo storico-letterario* (Rome, 1987), which prints and translates his *Homilia in Laudem Ecclesiae*, and J. Madoz, “San Leandro de Sevilla,” *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 56 (1981): 415–53, printing the basic documentary sources for Leander’s career.
16 The kind of Greek known by Isidore and others from the sixth century on has been the subject of a number of studies: see Bischoff 1967:246–75, Riché 1976:44–45, W. Berschin, *Griechisch-lateinisches Mittelalter, von Hieronymus zu Nikolaus von Kues* (Bern and Munich, 1980), revised and expanded by the author and trans. J. C. Frakes as *Greek Letters and the Latin Middle Ages, from Jerome to Nicholas of Cusa* (Washington, DC, 1988) and especially M. Herren and S. A. Brown, eds., *The Sacred Nectar of the Greeks: The Study of Greek in the West in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1988), esp. Herren’s introduction (v–xii), and the studies by Dionisotti (1–56), Herren (57–84), Berschin (85–104), and Riché (143–68) in the same volume. Isidore’s knowledge of Hebrew was restricted to names interpreted by Jerome (Riché 1976:302).

8 INTRODUCTION

King Reccared.¹⁷ Our own time indeed found in him a likeness to the knowledge of antiquity, and in him antiquity reclaimed something for itself. He was a man educated in every kind of expression, so that in the quality of his speech he was suited to both the ignorant audience and the learned. Indeed, he was famous for his incomparable eloquence, eloquence appropriate to the occasion. An intelligent reader can now very easily understand from his diverse undertakings and well-crafted works just how great Isidore's wisdom was. Accordingly, I have noted down these thoughts about the works that have come to my notice. He published:

Two books of *Differences* (*Differentiae*), in which he used subtle distinctions to differentiate the meaning of terms whose use is confused.

One book of *Introductions* (*Proemia*), in which through brief notes he pointed out what each book of Holy Scripture contains.

One book *On the Lives and Deaths of the Fathers* (*De Ortu et Obitu Patrum*), in which he noted with thoughtful brevity their deeds and worthiness, their deaths and burials.

Two books of *Offices* (*Officia*), for his brother Bishop Fulgentius, in which he set out the origin of the Offices and why each Office is performed in the Church of God, with interpretations of his own pen, but not without the authority of our forefathers.

Two books of *Synonyms* (*Synonyma*), with which, through the intervening exhortation of reason, he encouraged the reader to a consolation of the soul and a hope of receiving forgiveness.

One book *On the Nature of Things* (*De Natura Rerum*), addressed to King Sisebut, in which he resolved certain obscure matters concerning the elements, relying on his study of both the Doctors of the Church and the philosophers.

One book *On Numbers* (*De Numeris*), in which he touched in part on the discipline of mathematics, on account of the numbers which are inserted in Sacred Scripture.

One book *On the Names of the Law and the Gospels* (*De Nominibus Legis et Evangeliorum*), in which he shows what the people who are mentioned signify in a mystical sense.

One book *On Heresies* (*De Haeresibus*), in which, following the examples of our forefathers, he gathers diverse topics, being as brief as he can.

Three books of *Sentences* (*Sententiae*), which he ornamented with flowers from the book of *Morals* by Pope Gregory.

One book of *Chronicles* (*Chronicon*), from the creation of the world up until his own time, collected with great brevity.

Two books *Against the Jews* (*Contra Judaeos*), at the request of his sister Florentina, a virgin (i.e. a nun) in her way of life, in which he demonstrated everything that the Catholic Church believes based on the evidence of the Law and of the Prophets (i.e. based on the Hebrew Scriptures alone).

One book *On Illustrious Men* (*De Viris Illustribus*), to which we are adding this entry.¹⁸

One book of the *Monastic Rule* (*Monastica Regula*), which he tempered most fittingly for use in this country and for the souls of the weak.

One book *On the Origin of the Goths, and also The Kingdom of the Suevi, and The History of the Vandals* (*De Origine Gothorum et Regno Suevorum et etiam Vandalorum Historia*).

Two books of *Questions* (*Quaestiones*), which the reader may recognize as an abundant anthology of ancient treatises.

The *Etymologies* (*Etymologiae*), a codex of enormous size, divided by him into topics, not books. Although he left it unfinished, I divided it into twenty (or, "fifteen," in some manuscripts) books, since he wrote the work at my request. Whoever thoughtfully and thoroughly reads through this work, which is suited to philosophy in every respect, will not be ignorant of the knowledge of human and divine matters, and deservedly so. Overflowing with eloquence of various arts with regard to nearly every point of them that ought to be known, it collects them in a summarized form.

There are also other minor works by this man, and abundantly ornamented writings in the Church of God. After such misfortune in Spain in recent years, God encouraged him, as if he were setting up a prop – to preserve the ancient monuments, I believe, lest we decay into rusticity. To him we may fittingly apply the philosopher's comment (Cicero, *Academica Posteriora* 1.3): "Your books have brought us back, as if to our home, when we were roving and wandering in our own city like strangers, so that we might sometimes be able to understand who and where we are. You have laid open the lifetime of our country, the description of the ages, the laws of sacred matters and of priests, learning both domestic and public, the names, kinds, functions and

17 The Byzantine Emperor Mauritius reigned from 582 to 602, and Reccared, king of the Visigoths, from 586 to 601. The present translation follows the edition by J. C. Martín (2006), pp. 199–207.

18 On the *De Viris Illustribus* see below. Braulio's list was appended to a manuscript of Isidore's treatise. It is edited from the manuscript León 22 by P. Galindo, pp. 356–60 in C. H. Lynch, *San Braulio* (Madrid, 1950).

causes of settlements, regions, places, and all matters both human and divine.”¹⁹

The proceedings of the Council at Seville, at which he was present, declare how with a flood of eloquence he pierced through the heresy of the Acephalites (see VIII. v. 66) with the arrows of divine Scripture and the testimonies of the Church Fathers. In this council he asserted the truth against Gregorius, leader of the aforementioned heresy.

Isidore died during the reign of the Emperor Heraclius and of the most Christian King Chintila.²⁰ He was outstanding above everyone with his sound doctrine, and very generous in his works of charity.

All of these works except *On Heresies* (the subject of *Etymologies* VIII.v) are still extant. They range in date from what is presumably the earliest, the first book of the *Differentiae*, around 600, to around 625. Four of them focus closely on the Bible. The *Introductions* gives a brief description of each book of the Bible, and the *On the Lives and Deaths of the Fathers* is a collection containing short biographies of important Biblical figures. In spite of Braulio’s description, *On Numbers* is a religious rather than mathematical treatise; in it Isidore discusses the symbolic interpretation of numerals contained in the text of the Bible. *On the Names of the Law and the Gospels*, also known as the *Allegories* (*Allegoriae*), is a similar discussion of the symbolism of Biblical names.

Against the Jews is an attempt to win converts from Judaism to Christianity by means of rational persuasion; it was most likely written around the time of King Sisebut’s campaign of forced conversion (see above, p. 6),

and may be seen as an alternative approach in contrast to Sisebut’s harsher measures. In the first book Isidore argues that Old Testament prophets foresaw the birth, death, resurrection, and divinity of Christ, while the second book presents passages from the prophets that Isidore interprets as condemning Jewish rituals.

The four other surviving theological works deal with the Church and the duties of Christians. The first book of *Offices* (also the subject of *Etymologies* VI.xix) gives a history of the Catholic liturgy, and is an important source of information about the Mozarabic liturgy. The second book deals with the various ecclesiastical offices and their duties. The *Monastic Rule* and the *Sentences* are more instructional works, the first providing an introduction to monastic life in simple and straightforward language, and the second a guide to Church doctrine and Christian conduct of life. In the *Synonyms*, Isidore presents a contemplation on sin and conversion, relying on synonyms to reiterate and emphasize each point of his message.

On the Nature of Things is a detailed cosmology dealing with astronomy, meteorology, and other natural phenomena, as well as with the human conventions of time-keeping and calendars.

The *Chronicles*, although a useful source for the history of Visigothic Spain, is otherwise mainly derivative of earlier chronicles, particularly Eusebius’s chronicle (ca. 326), translated and continued by Jerome (ca. 378), and Prosper of Aquitaine (ca. 455) and others. Like the *History of the Goths*, it draws from Julius Africanus, Eusebius’s universal history, Orosius’s *History against the Pagans*, other works of Jerome, Augustine, and Cassiodorus. There are two versions, both by Isidore, one completed in 615/16, during Sisebut’s reign, and the other completed in 626. *Etymologies* V.xxxix incorporates an abbreviated version of the chronicle; the fact that it uses materials found in the 626 version shows that the work dedicated to Sisebut before 621 was not the complete *Etymologies* as we now have it.²¹ There are likewise two extant versions of *On the Origin of the Goths*, one that ends with the death of Sisebut in 621 and one that continues up through 625, in the middle of Suinthila’s reign. It is not clear which is the later version; it may be that the longer account was written first and that Isidore thought it prudent to excise the final section after Suinthila’s fall from power.²² *The Kingdom of the Suevi* and *The*

19 Braulio would have read Cicero’s encomium of Varro, the great predecessor of Isidore, in Augustine’s *City of God* 6.2.

20 The Byzantine Emperor Heraclius reigned from 610 to 641, and Chintila from 636 to 640.

21 Both the *Chronicon* (*Chronica Maiora*) and the shorter version (*Chronica Minora*) included in the *Etymologies* are edited by T. Mommsen, MGH, Auct. Ant. xi, 391–497 (Berlin, 1894). The new edition of the *Chronica* (615/16 and 626 redactions) by Martin (2003) contains the most recent full bibliography of Isidore studies and a thorough account of Isidore’s sources. See also P. M. Bassett, “The Use of History in the *Chronicon* of Isidore of Seville,” *History and Theory* 15 (1976): 278–92. See further the materials on the *Chronicon* and *The History of the Goths* in Wolf 1999.

22 On the *History of the Goths* see the edn. by Mommsen, preceding note, pp. 267–303, and the edn. by C. Rodríguez Alonso, *Las Historias de los Godos, Vándalos y Suevos de Isidoro de Sevilla* (León, 1975), with full introduction, and G. Donini and G. B. Ford, *Isidore of Seville’s History of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi* (Leiden, 1970), with trans. See also J. N. Hillgarth, “Historiography in Visigothic Spain,” in *La Storiografia altomedievale* (Spoleto, 1970: 287–302).

History of the Vandals, although Braulio speaks of them as if they and *On the Origin of the Goths* were a single work, appear to be brief but separate histories, which have been appended to the larger work. In *On Illustrious Men*, Isidore presents thirty-three brief biographies of important Christian figures, mainly writers, from various countries (many Spaniards) and eras, including his brother Leander. It is a continuation of works with the same title by Jerome (ca. 392) and his continuator Gennadius (ca. 490); all three sketch the lives of prominent Christians, as an answer to Suetonius Tranquillus’s *De Viris Illustribus*.²³

Like the *Etymologies*, the *Differences* is closely concerned with the form and meaning of individual words. The first book explains the distinctions between pairs of words that are either synonyms or homophones, and gives instructions for correct usage. The second book focuses on the differences between things; between angels, demons, and men, for example.

A second early notice of Isidore and his works was included by Ildefonsus, bishop of Toledo, in his work *On Illustrious Men*, a continuation of the Jerome–Gennadius–Isidore tradition.²⁴ Ildefonsus was reputed to have been a student of Isidore’s; he completed the work shortly before his death in 667. The notice (cap. 8) follows:

Isidore held the bishopric of the see of Seville, in the Province of Baetica, after his brother Leander. He was a man esteemed for both his propriety and his intellect. In speaking he had acquired a supply of such pleasing eloquence that his admirable richness of speech amazed his listeners. Indeed, someone who had heard a sermon of his a second time would not approve unless it were

repeated still further. He wrote not a few exceptional works, that is:

The Types of Offices,
The Book of Prefaces,
The Births and Deaths of the Fathers,
A book of lamentations, which he himself called the *Synonyms*,

Two little books written for his sister Florentina, *Against the Iniquity of the Jews*,

A book for King Sisebut, *On the Nature of Things*,

A book of *Differences*,

A book of *Sentences*.

He also collected into one place from various authors what he himself called the *Exposition of the Secret Sacraments*. It is also known as the *Questions*.

Finally, in response to a request from Braulio, Bishop of Saragossa, his book of *Etymologies*. He tried to fulfill this request completely over the course of many years, and seemed to finish his final days engaged in this work.

He was active during the reigns of Reccared, Liuva, Witteric, Gundemar, Sisebut, Suinthila, and Sisenand. He held the honor of the bishopric for almost forty years, and maintained the distinction of its holy doctrine, its glory as well as its propriety.

Obviously a good deal of Isidore’s earlier writing was taken over into the *Etymologies*, which Isidore must have considered the *summa* of his scholarly career. Presumably he began work on it before the death of Sisebut early in 621, and he left it unfinished at his death in 636.

Isidore was officially canonized as a saint in 1598, and was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1722. His feast day is April 4.

The sources of the *Etymologies*

Isidore acknowledges, in the dedication (before 621) to King Sisebut prefaced to an early draft (perhaps Books I–X) of the *Etymologies*, that his work compiles material “gathered from my recollection (or, “record”) of readings from antiquity” (see the appended Letter VI). This is no mere topos of humility; nearly the whole work, in fact, consists of intricately woven excerpts and paraphrases of the works of earlier writers. To assess Isidore’s achievement we cannot look to original researches or innovative interpretations, but rather to the ambition of the whole

design, to his powers of selection and organization, and to his grand retentiveness. His aims were not novelty but

23 The main part of Suetonius’s work still extant is *De (Claris) Grammaticis et Rhetoribus*. The Jerome and Gennadius works are edited by E. C. Richardson, *Hieronymus: Liber de Viris Illustribus*. Gennadius: *Liber de Viris Illustribus*, *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* 14, 1. (Leipzig, 1896). On these and Isidore’s *De Viris Illustribus* see R. McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge, 1989: 200–02).

24 C. Cordero Merino, ed. and trans. into Spanish, *El ‘De Viris Illustribus’ de Ildefonso de Toledo* (Salamanca, 1972).