

Evil and politics in the Visigothic hagiography: the life of Saint Desiderius and Saint Bishop Masona*

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Introduction

The relationship between religion and politics is a subject much discussed by researchers of Antiquity and the Middle Ages. There are countless facts, events, documents and archaeological remains that give a glimpse of the extent of the importance of these issues within societies and cultures. In this work it will be analyzed a set of sources that, once relegated to a second plan in historical studies, over the past two decades have been reconfigured as a significant document for the study of society and imagery in the late-ancient and medieval periods: hagiography. It is important to note that the word “hagiography” is not contemporary to the production of these texts. This term is used only since the seventeenth century, when the systematic study of the saints, their history and worship began to designate both this new branch of knowledge, and the set of texts about saints with religious goals. Even though the term was born then relatively recently, Christian hagiographic literature began still with the early church when, based on Roman official documents or eyewitness reports, the tortures of the martyrs were registered¹. Considering these elements, and the great array of sources available, this article will focus on two hagiographic

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¹ Delehay, 1973, p. 24.

works specifically: the *Vita Sancti Passio Desiderii a Sisebuto Rege Composita (Vita Desiderii)*, written by king Sisebut, the monarch who ruled Hispania between the years 612 and 621, and the *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium*, an anonymous author's work.

In the *Vita Desiderii*, this study proposes to identify and assess the passages in which the Devil is present stressing which aspects this character is associated with. It is possible to analyze the hagiographic document as a historical source about the Devil and how this figure is used in discourses, specially through understanding that the main characters of these stories are, in general, directly involved in a struggle against the forces of evil and their emissaries represented, in this case, by a combat between spiritual and secular power.

Regarding the *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium* in particular, the focus turns to the figure of evil in *Incipit Vita vel virtutibus Sancti Masonae Episcopi* (Life and Virtues of the Holy Bishop Masona), a report dating back to the religious disagreements between two clerical Christians groups, Catholics and Arians, whose ideologies differed on Christianity in the period of the narrative (6th century and early 7th century).

Work, authorship and historical context

Firstly, it is necessary to establish that those two works come from a Hispanic Visigothic context of the early seventh century. In the *Vita Desiderii*, it is possible to see that the context is linked to the death of Gundemar who let the throne of Toledo vacant and the beginning of the Sisebut's reign, who got great fame both in regard to the war, as in his relationship with the Catholic creed.

Sisebut undertook several campaigns in North and South Hispania. The king himself directed two successful campaigns, probably in 614-615, against the Byzantines in the South², bringing them almost to total defeat. The patrician Cesarius, General Governor of the Byzantine province, had made numerous peace proposals after to the slaughter undertaken by Sisebut and Visigoths generals. He wrote to the king evoking the slaughter the war produced, arguing that "Catholic blood flowed from both sides"³, and discussing the number of prisoners taken by both armies. The king agreed to negotiate a

² Thompson 1971, p. 186.

³ *Ep. Wis.* 3

peace treaty and sent a representative to visit the Patrician⁴. The religiosity of Sisebut, as pointed out by Jose Orlandis, also inspired his policy toward the Jews. In the first months of his reign, the monarch enacted laws restricting the rights of Jews⁵.

The new king's personality, as says García Moreno⁶, is certainly one of the most interesting and best known of the wide range of Visigoths monarchs. The King's superb literary background, with knowledge of the Holy Scriptures and the profane lyrics, is unmatched by any Roman-German statesman of the seventh century⁷. Unlike his predecessors, Sisebut had been educated more like a Roman than a Goth. He spoke and wrote Latin and had a "good Catholic" fame, being pious and erudite. The monarch maintained close friendship relations and collaboration, at least in the early part of his reign, with the increasingly influential prelate of the reign Bishop Isidore of Seville⁸.

His solid education is demonstrated in the poem dedicated to Isidore, the *Astronomicum*, in *Vita Sancti Passio Desiderii*, and some epistles to Cesarius, governor of the Byzantine province in Hispania. It is possible to see in Sisebut's figure a learned man, refined, showing great interest in arts, concerned with fomenting them. He proved to be a good writer, as evidenced by his Catholic works, a subject that linked his personality to Isidore of Seville, who dedicated to the monarch the first version of his *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX* (Etymologies) and his treatise *De natura rerum*⁹.

In these few lines it becomes known that Sisebut, by the long duration of his reign, if compared with the trajectory of the Visigoths Monarchs (nine years), maintained a close relationship with Church and letters. He is the sole Visigoth monarch who writes a hagiography, despite the saint to whom the report is dedicated does not belong to the Visigoth context. Sisebut died in March 621 and, according to Orlandis, there are different versions about the cause of his death: sickness, poison or ingestion of an overdose of medicine,

⁴ *Ep. Wis.* 4.

⁵ Orlandis 1973, p. 104.

⁶ García Moreno 1989, p. 147.

⁷ García Moreno 1989, p. 147.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Collins 2005, p. 79.

which is the most likely¹⁰. Sisebut left a young son Reccared II, who reigned briefly and died just after his rise to power.

Vitae Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium, differently from *Vita Desiderii* that is dedicated to only one saint, is organized into five small works almost entirely independent, having their core in Chapters IV and V, in which the “lives” and “achievements” of the city’s bishops Paul, Fidel and Masona are told. The most important chapter is dedicated to the latter.

In *Vita Masonae*, the deeds are set in Merida in the sixth century, an important pilgrimage center because of the martyr Eulalia. According to the tradition, her mantle lies in that city’s basilica. The large number of pilgrims heading to Saint Eulalia’s Basilica also favored the development of urban activities, especially trade and services in Merida and its surroundings. With a large number of churches, an important Episcopal see and the Basilica of Saint Eulalia, Merida had crystallized in its architecture the urban force that could be compared to Seville, Zaragoza and, some time later, Toledo¹¹. The writing of the work, however, took place close to 633, certainly during the bishopric of Esteban of Merida (633-638), according to data from the text itself¹².

The narratives are set between the reigns of Leovigild (569-586) and his son Reccared (586-601), which, even though has a localist character, since it is limited to the city of Merida, does not exclude broader events, especially when considering the report on Masona’s life, where it is described political and military events that have major implications for the religious and political instability in the reign, as pointed out by García Moreno:

“Attention is given in particular to the period before the final conversion of the Visigoth barbarians, from the Arian version of Christianity to the Catholic, when the bishopric relations, then headed by Masona, with royalty were strained. Despite it be narrated the attempts of Leovigild to convert this bishop to Arianism”¹³.

In this way, Esteves makes us a brief reflection on the period that is present in this discussion:

¹⁰ Orlandis 1973, p. 107.

¹¹ Zetola 2005, p. 59.

¹² Velázquez 2005, p. 12.

¹³ García Moreno 1989, p. 12.

“The Visigoths, after a long path which runs an extensive territorial strip in Roman Empire, come to Hispania for the first time in 415. After the victory over the Sueves in 456, the settlement of Visigoths became peaceful. For fifty years, at irregular intervals, they reached the peninsula. Established the capital in Toledo, they power in Hispania extended for almost the entire peninsula under the aegis of Leovigild. His son Recaredo was the promoter of conversion of the people to Catholic doctrine, after a long discussion with Arianism, thus initiating the era of the Catholic Visigoth monarchy, which lasted until the early eighth century. The first discussion that is put in question is how the conversion operated after Recaredo in the reign of subsequent monarchs”¹⁴.

It is important also to consider that the text was written, as stated above, in the third decade of the seventh century, around the time of the completion of IV Council of Toledo (633), the first general council after the conversion of the Visigoths to nicene Christianity, a period of political instability within the kingdom of Toledo that led to a privileged space for political affirmation of the Visigoth bishops. Therefore, it is not possible to ignore the two contexts that comprise the *Vita*, the events it describes nor its production, elements which will be fully considered in the present work.

Evil in Vita Desiderii and Vita Masonae

Christian ideas about the devil date back, on the long duration, to the beliefs of early Christianity, which, in turn, are a heritage of the demonology of the apocryphal and Jewish apocalypses, also used within the New Testament. Luke presents the work of Jesus as a struggle against demons. The texts of the other three evangelists, similarly in the New Testament, show us that the devil and his role in the march of history occupy a prominent place¹⁵.

Several authors deal with the theme of demons in Christianity. Justin, in his *Apology*, written in the mid-second century, sets out the criteria that demons had thrown a veil in the divine teachings of Christ in order to separate them from men. As Christ’s kingdom opponents, this idea is already expressed in the New Testament in several

¹⁴ Esteves 2011, pp. 26-27.

¹⁵ Blázquez 1998, p. 528.

places¹⁶. The fall of the evil angels occurred because they, by transgressing God's command, allowed themselves to be overcome by their love for women and had children with them, which are called demons, explanation found in the apocalypse of the Jews; in turn, the punishment given to evil angels, the eternal fires of hell, begins with the second coming of Christ¹⁷. The theme was also present in the writings of the Holy Fathers.

In the fourth century, the bishop of Jerusalem, Cyril, in his catechesis, dealt with the devil and his betrayals. Athanasius of Alexandria, who in his *Vita Antonii* introduced a real treatise on demons, assigns himself a homily addressing the theme; Origen, in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, considers that the sacrifices for the idols are sacrificed to demons, a position also advocated by the Roman theologian Novatian in his treatise *De Cibis iudaicis*; John Chrysostom, in turn, call the theater an "assembly of Satan" because of its profanity, in the work *Against the circus games and theater*¹⁸.

In biblical text there are several passages advocating the transformation of the worship of demons in the worship of idols (Lev 17.7; Deut 32.17; Ps. 95.5., 105.37; Is 24.21; 1Cor 10.20). As shown by Ronaldo Amaral, Church Fathers and especially the priests of the desert, more sensitive to spirituality, had already spoken about the possession of the demons in humans, and especially in this case, their level of right and power of possessing them and manipulating them¹⁹.

According to Amaral, theorists of monastic spirituality – and Christian spirituality in a wider way, as well – as Origen, Evagrius Pontico, John Cassian, among others – had pointed out that demons ruled the world and could get hold of any man, of his very soul, his body and his mind, especially when he was stuck with the worldly, vicious emotions and thoughts. Although acting often by God's consent – and so "evil" should have the ultimate goal of a greater good – the Devil and his satellites would exert great influence over humans and even in nature. Because of that, it was necessary to fight him, and to be absolutely effective in this battle, man needed to be close to God's things. If the weapons of demons were the thoughts, desires and men's excitations connected to the mundane reality, the shield of the Christian and his powerful weapon would be his

¹⁶ Blázquez 1998, p. 529.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Blázquez 1998, pp. 530-531.

¹⁹ Amaral 2007.

dedication to the things of the spirit, to asceticism and the contemplation of divine things.

Bearing these brief considerations in mind, it is possible to go on with the analysis proposed in this paper. To this aim, theoretical and methodological references will now be assessed. Bronislaw Backzco shows that:

“[...] During the long historical path, it was formed progressively an instrumental and utilitarian attitude towards the social imaginary. The conflict situations between competing powers stimulated the invention of new fighting techniques in the imaginary domain. On the one hand, these were aimed at the creation of a devalued image of the opponent, trying particularly invalidate its legitimacy; on the other, extolled by aggrandizing representations, the power which cause they defended and for which wanted to get as many adhesions”²⁰.

According to Platagean, “[...] Ideologies and utopias form privileged places where the discourses that convey the social imaginary are”²¹. Thus the concept of ideology emerges as a key to analyze religiousness and their connections. Considering the range of meanings the term can grasp, the point of view of Georges Duby is one to be addressed, conceptualizing it “[...] not as a lived reflection, but as a project of act about it”²². The author defines the meaning of ideology:

“[...] Justifier utopias, reassuring [...] images, or rather, set of overlapping images, which are not a reflection of the social body, but which, designed over it, would intend to correct its flaws, guide its walk in a settled sense, and which are simultaneously near and far from sensible reality”²³.

In this context there are the metaphysical and transcendent realities that, in dialogue with human formulations and perceptions, that have written History and signed up through imaginary and its projections in social, raised behaviors, words and works, literary and artistic. Le Goff notes that:

²⁰ Baczko 1985, pp. 297-300.

²¹ Patlagean 1978, p. 310.

²² Duby 1982, p. 21.

²³ Duby 1993, p. 113.

“[...] The imaginary belongs to the field of representation, but it occupies a part of the non reproductive translation, not simply transposed in an image of the spirit, but creative, poetic in the etymological sense of the word”²⁴.

Vita Desiderii fits into a category where the martyrdoms or Passions are, by narrating the life and death of the holy man, the saint. In this way, as shown by Fernando Baños Vallejo regarding the composition of this category, “The first structure characteristic of Passions consists of the confrontation of two groups (martyrs and persecutors) and its concrete consequences: arrest, interrogation and martyrdom”²⁵. This shows, however briefly, the general content of martyrdom and how such hagiographic genre is presented²⁶.

Leaving the textual design itself, there is a complex relationship between an author and his readers. As shown by Thomas J. Heffernan, aesthetics in hagiographic text should have its value diminished because it is not designed to reflect individual skill or virtuosity, but it is part of a tradition that postulates a different orientation between author, text and audience²⁷. What unites an author to his audience is how the text reflects the tradition that has its locus in the community. The nature of this complex relationship can reveal a lot about the work being dealt in this study²⁸.

To start examining the *Vita Desiderii* of Sisebut of Toledo, based on the hagiographic genre in which it fits, it can be said that, as preliminary consideration, it fits in grade as the main *topos* related to martyrdom: the saint is presented as a strong man full of virtues, persecuted for no reason by corrupted people incited by the Devil.

²⁴ Le Goff 1980, p. 12.

²⁵ Baños Vallejo 1989, p. 38.

²⁶ Extending on the analysis, there are some features more intrinsic that can be added to this study, as De Certeau explains: “The life of a saint indicates the relationship a group has with other groups. The «martyrdom» prevails there where the community is marginal, faced with a threat of death, while the «virtue» represents an established Church, epiphany of social order in which it operates. From this point of view, it is enlightening the story of the battles of the hero (saint) with social images of the Devil; or the character, controversial or panegyric, of the hagiographic discourse, or the obscuring the scenario where the saint stands out through more strongly marked miracles; or the structure, binary (conflictual, antinomian) or ternary (mediated and “in balance”) of space where the actors are set. Cfr. De Certeau 1997, p. 270).

²⁷ Haffernan 1988, p. 18.

²⁸ Haffernan 1988, p. 19.

However, God does not forsake his servant, but make him a privileged object of his favors, which are manifested in Desiderius' ability to perform miracles. The first direct testimony of his holiness, which is directly related to his martyrdom for being strong in his preaching in favor of his people and the attacks to the Devil servers.

In that work, in general, king Sisebut narrates the life of Desiderius, a character who achieves prestige for his intelligence and his virtues and who is appointed Bishop of Vienna, remaining in the bishopric between 596 and 607. The report starts with a brief introduction about Desiderius, his ancestry and how through his virtues he achieved a prominent place in society he lived in. Nevertheless, the Devil with envy of the saint's fame puts against this man of God, the kings Theodoric and Brunhilda of Burgundy. Consider the following:

“While he was doing these things with Christ's aid, the enemy of the faithful and ally of the faithless, the deviser and friend of death, groaned and, having armed himself with every kind of weapon, came himself to fight the soldier of Christ. But in no way did the cunning of the enemy prevail: his dread wickedness harmed not the man of God whom the grace of the Redeemer armed with weapons of the Spirit. At last, the worthless spirit stung with his serpent's venom a man of evil mind, and poured from itself allegations of crimes into his entrails like cups of poison so that spewing forth disgraceful slander which he made all the greater through his own malign nature, he defamed the athlete of God. He won over some colleagues to his cause and, deceiver that he was, forged certain documents to incriminate the servant of the Saviour. At that time Theuderic, a man of extreme stupidity, ruled with Brunhilda, a woman who enthused over the worst vices and was a great friend to the wicked. Both of them made a pact with a certain lady who was of noble stock, but deformed in mind. Though called Justa, she was in fact a wicked woman. She had a glorious name, but her acts were all the more inglorious for it. While lacking in goodness, she was possessed of an astounding number of vices, and, though a stranger to the truth, was never dissociated from crime. Summoned before the council, she made complaint that she had once been ravished by the most blessed Desiderius. All were amazed that the servant of God should have been implicated in such things, but thought that the charges against him would be cast aside. Those presiding, however, in accordance with schemes they had devised beforehand, pronounced in their rash temerity a most unjust sentence against an innocent man. Straightaway men were sent to carry out his

punishment. They stripped him of his office and banished him into exile to a monastery on an island. His exile was the highest good fortune, these insults made his sanctity all the more obvious, and his degradation brought him that happiness which lasts for eternity. In his place was appointed a false priest, Domnolus, a servant of the Devil, who soiled himself by his disgraceful deeds to the same degree that the man of God flourished through his manifold virtues”²⁹.

In this passage, it is possible to see that the hagiographer describes evil as opposed to the virtues of Desiderius, introducing the first conspiracy against the holy man by the kings Theuderic and Brunhilda of Burgundy, associated with the Devil in evil imoral characteristics in collusion to remove the saint of the Episcopal see of Vienna. Accused of rape by a woman named Justa, who carries with her the worst vices, Desiderius is exiled, and in his place a Bishop named Domnolo, a Devil’s servant, takes the diocese of Vienna.

After a period of great spiritual growth in which Desiderius lives in exile, the people of Vienna begins to inquire into the circumstances of the expulsion of the servant of God from his bishopric, and thus the divine vengeance falls on those who first positioned themselves, through the Devil’s action, against the saint:

“While the Lord was bringing such things to pass through the kindness that is his wont, the talk of the people brought to the attention of Theuderic and Brunhilda alike that the servant of God had been exalted through his magnificent miracles and that, through the grace of the power of the Almighty, he had been given power to heal which could not be denied. At once trembling and filled with the great dread, they looked into this great matter, seeking to know how they might return to the exile his rightful office or whether they should make the man they had condemned in vain an exile for ever. While they were carefully investigating the solution of this problem, divine vengeance justly fell upon the sorcerer who had devised the fell plan and had brought about the condemnation of the soldier of Christ. I have written of his horrible end in full detail in the account which follows. This poisonous individual of ill-omened memory was detested for his many vices and crimes. Amongst his vile habits was a criminal lust for material possessions and love of slander. These were the things which roused up a great host of the people to kill this vile monster. For one day while he was standing in the presence of his

²⁹ *Vit. Des.* 4.

patron, Theuderic, he was dragged to his destruction by a rioting mob of Burgundians. His bloody corpse was ripped apart and left scattered around. In this way the wretch lost both his life and his damnable soul and on the point of his death of his own free will entered the gates of Hell. “What shall I say of her who was unjustly called Justa and might justly have been called Injusta? Whom the bloody one had carried off as if she were his own possession? At the same time when he of whom we have just spoken rightly perished, with equal justice a evil spirit entered her and this deadly slave coming again from his hellish dwelling place drove out the entire stock of lies which she had once devised; the confession produced was as follows: ‘I know that I have done wrong to a servant of God, I know the cause of this, and I know all the more the penalty that I deserve. Let the Almighty Avenger allot the blame for these things to their deviser, Brunhilda. Let Him bring down this penalty on her in His vengeance, and let His avenging right hand inflict in her the torments of torture; she whose fleeting blandishments dragged me to my doom, whose damnable gifts brought me to death, mid whose fatal promises to being beyond hope of salvation’. When she stopped speaking, the author of all sin put an end to her life, bound and choked as she was, and carried her off with him to burn for ever among the flames of vengeance”³⁰.

When the hagiographer starts the description of Justa, he does it by predicative strategies that assign derogatory values to women, with a number of adjectives that make the direct link with the Devil. Still acting through his mediators, Theuderic and Brunhilda, who are responsible, in Justa words, for masterminding the attack against the holy man in this passage, it is demonstrated to the readers the involvement of women which comes to justify their behavior compatible with the evil aspirations.

The death of those who caused the expulsion of Desiderius of his bishopric, in the words of Sisebut, is shaped more like a divine punishment than actually an evil action. It is he Devil who gives the punishment, and hell is the ultimate end of the two who plotted against the saint. The detail that calls our attention, however, is that the hagiographer makes a direct connection between these kings and the Devil. Theuderic was the “protector” and Brunhilda was responsible for the plot that culminated in Desiderius’ exile. The saint went back to Vienna, which rejoices in the presence of its helmsman. By the apparent monarchical weakness of Theuderic and Brunhilda in

³⁰ *Vit. Des.* 8-9.

the regency of Burgundy, Desiderius decides to intervene to save his people:

“Now with the Lord’s aid, I will give an account, as it has been reported to me, of his sufferings and how he commended his blessed soul to our almighty Lord. When Theuderic and Brunhilda were seen not to be helping, but harming their realm, ruining rather than ruling it, to be full of vice, and, falling back into the sin of perjury, sacrilegiously abandoning the promises of their oath, treacherously not attempting to live up to it, nor leaving one single crime or evil unattempted, the martyr of God, bishop and examiner of their sins, sounded forth the trumpet blast in the manner of the prophets and whole-heartedly took himself off to drive out all their sins in order that he might make God’s people those whom the Devil had made strangers to him, mindful of this saying of divine authority: He which converted the sinner from the error of his ways shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins. But the vessel of wrath, the fomentor vice, and fruit of damnation brought them bitterness not sweetness, harshness not gentleness, and balms that brought death instead of salvation. The enemy besieged their hearts all the more fiercely and the cunning serpent held them captive in his power. Nor were they whom the deadly brigand had bound in ever tighter chains able to walk freely to the gate of salvation. Sated with his lethal drafts, they began to bark out rabid rantings against the servant of God, spewing forth their disgusting words in raucous tones. But mortal threats did not break the martyr of God, nor did the wrath of perjurers weaken him, nor the frenzy of the mad move him. He held himself immobile to suffer in order that justice be carried out until he should receive from the Lord the promised heavenly realm”³¹.

It is clear in this passage that Desiderius, eager to save Vienna and its people from insolent kings who only perpetrated evil, try to warn and make them change their position regarding their evil conduct. Sisebut also makes a characterization from a political point of view which strongly emphasizes the idea of the betrayal of the commitments assumed by both in their capacity as rulers³². The saint’s strategy, however well intentioned, is barred again by a diabolical force, directly attacking the servant of God:

³¹ *Vit. Des.* 15.

³² Martín Iglesias 1997, p. 129.

“The enemy of mankind, on seeing his steadfast constancy, occupied completely the hearts of Brunhilda and Theuderic which he never left, treating them as if they were his own home, and in imperious tones drove them all the more to the doom which they deserved, for he promised them the foremost place in the execution of justice if they could extract the soul of Christ’s soldier from its mortal chains. Straightaway the king’s sacrilegious mouth, full of foul speech and ever ready-armed with impiety in debate, snarled out his sentence: “It pleases us to see Desiderius, critic of our life and enemy of our deeds, stoned and afflicted with all manner of tortures”. Swiftly his servants and accomplices in crime who were sinfully to carry out the command to do this vile deed gave their word that they would do so without as much as listening to the sentence. Nor did the struggles of his task lie hidden to the martyr of God, who had been marked out, or rather forewarned, to receive as his prize the crown of martyrdom³³.

At that time, Desiderius’s death sentence is decreed. At this time the diabolical figure, in the hagiographer’s words, completely occupies the hearts of the Burgundian monarchs like his own home. Sisebut thus strives to raise the maximum exponent, connecting Theodoric and Brunhilda with the Devil. Those who, at the behest of the Burgundian monarchs, killed Desiderius are characterized as follows: “[...] a raging of madman appeared, bringers of death, terrible to look upon, with savage expressions, brutal eyes, of hateful appearance, and terrible in the way they moved [...]”³⁴. Regarding the moral characterization, “[...] They have twisted minds, depraved morals, lying tongues, spoke in obscenities, [...] they were enemies of God, thought eternal friends indeed of the Devil, men all too willing to be damned”³⁵.

The text also shows with few details the death of Theodoric, also dragged to eternal damnation, for “abandoning God or having been abandoned by God [...] he was seized by a disease of the bowels, ended his vile life and a friend came to possess it for eternity”³⁶. After the death of Theodoric, Sisebut narrates the death of Brunhilda. Differently from her grandson, Brunhilda’s death acquires in the monarch’s words a more cruel and harsh tone:

³³ *Vit. Des.* 16.

³⁴ *Vit. Des.* 18.

³⁵ *Ibidem.*

³⁶ *Vit. Des.* 19.

“Concerning her end, it will not irk me to relate what I have learnt from common opinion. There is a hunched beast with a huge body and naturally possessed of certain humps (the top of its back is thick and broad, higher than the rest of its frame, and very well fitted for carrying loads) and is more useful for carrying loads than any other animal. She was stripped of her clothes and raised up onto this proud central place and paraded in humiliation before the gaze of her enemies. For a short while she offered this sorry spectacle to her onlookers, then, bound to some unbroken horses, she was dragged over some pathless rocky terrain. Thus her body, already broken by old age, was plucked apart by these spirited horses and her limbs, bloody and nameless, scattered abroad. And so her soul freed from its mortal flesh was deservedly cast down to eternal punishment and to bum in seething waves of pitch”³⁷.

On the other hand, historiography says that the death of Brunhilda was given by concrete consolidation of the Franks sub-realms of Clotaire II (584- 629). After a long political dispute between the noble groups and the monarchs of the Frankish kingdom, the result of a failed attempt to seize power through his great grandson, Sigebert, and a betrayal promoted by the aristocracy in the hands of Clotaire, Brunhilda met her end³⁸.

Now, giving some attention to the other hagiography, *Vitae sanctorum patrum emeretensium* is constituted, as mentioned earlier, by five distinct parts, each one related with a different narrative of holy priests who lived in Merida in the second half of the sixth century. The life of Masona sets up as the longest record of these *vitae* in the course of the narrative, it was chosen because there are various, interesting and important passages that directly speak of the malevolent figure and provides another perspective to the interpretation of this category of texts. Here is the first passage:

³⁷ *Vit. Des.* 21. Sisebut extends the reporting and presents a certain theatricality to the scene. Regarding the animal that carries Brunhilda, Sisebut does not make explicit if it is a camel, dromedary or donkey. The camel carries the symbolic sense of service, described in several passages (Gen 24.64; Zec 14.15; Matt 19.24; 23:24; Lk 18.25). The donkey or ass already carries a pejorative sense, being the emblem of the dark and satanic trends. In the episode of Jesus in the manger, it is opposed to the ox, as are the evil tendencies opposed to beneficial ones; the entry of Christ into Jerusalem, represents the forces of evil being overcome by the Redeemer and, in addition, as Satan or the beast represents sex, the libido, the instinctive element in man, a life that unfolds entirely on the earth plane.

³⁸ Geary 1988, pp. 151-154.

“Joy entered into all, peace came upon everyone, no one was a stranger to happiness, perfect charity flourished in every heart. The peace that brings joy prevailed so strongly on the passions of everyone that the Ancient Enemy was conquered and the Serpent of olden times overthrown. No-one was troubled by grief or afflicted by sorrow nor was anyone struck by terror or affected by jealousy or envy so that He shook with the virulent pangs of that cunning reptile, but all were filled with perfect charity. Rejoicing with God’s aid through the grace of their pious father and unperturbed, they all continued in constancy with their praise of God free-from any fear or dread”³⁹.

The saint’s presence in Merida makes the city shine, and no harm afflicts its inhabitants. The joy and peace under the holy protection sweep away all kinds of harm that could be caused to the population of the city. It is clear the concern of the hagiographer to emphasize the harmony between Catholic Christianity against the hardships that, implicitly suggested in the text, are observed in the absence of the soldier of God. The harmony, however, is broken. In the second pass, clashes between Masona and Leovigild start:

“Whence it came to pass that through his reputation his deeds came to the notice of Leovigild, the savage, cruel king of the Visigoths. Then vile serpent of his envy, always envious of good works, pricked him with its sharp goads, struck at the heart of the prince with its viper’s venom and poured its poisoned chalice into his innermost soul. 3 At once having drunk of this deadly cup, armed with a diabolical scheme and driven on by his envy, he sent messengers back and forth time and again to the holy man Masona and commanded him to abandon the Catholic faith and turn to the Arian heresy along with all the people in his charge”⁴⁰.

In this passage the hagiographer seeks to highlight a link between the Visigoth king and the Devil, emphasizing the choice of the monarch for the Aryan creed and also transpiring thus their connection with Catholic Christianity. The passage shows the concept of unity of the Visigoths Christians in one faith, already present in the Third Council of Toledo, as Leovigild wanted Masona to turn to the Arianism or, in the hagiographer’s words, the “Arian heresy”, quality

³⁹ *Vit. sanct. part. em.* V, II, 5-6.

⁴⁰ *Vit. sanct. part. em.* V, IV, 2-3.

that reduces the creed professed by the monarch and further exalts the figure of the saint and his faith. Thus, in the third passage referring to the Devil:

“When that most cruel tyrant learnt that he could not either by threats or gifts make the soul of the man of God apostatize from the true faith to his heresy, as he was wholly a vessel of wrath, a fomentor of vice, and the fruit of damnation, the Enemy possessed his breast the more fiercely and the cunning Serpent held him captive in his sway so that he brought to his people bitterness not joy, brutality instead of gentleness and in place of health salves that brought death”⁴¹.

Before the king’s investees, the holy man remains unyielding, not moving away from the “true faith”, nor with threats, nor with gifts. This is where the characterization of Leovigild appears more strongly associated with evil, being described as “a vessel of wrath and fuel of vices” under the Devil’s domain. This situation makes him, according to the hagiographer, a monarch who does not deserve his position because he offered to his people roughness and deadly drugs, diverting them from the paths of salvation.

In the sixth passage, the longest in the report, it is also possible to find the longest excerpts referring to the diabolical figure:

“Finally the evil spirit compelled the oft-mentioned King of the Arians to remove the holy man from his see and bring him into his presence. His ministers sharing in his crime swiftly obeyed his command coming to Merida forced the blessed man to travel in all haste to the city of Toledo where the king held court”⁴².

When they arrived there, they searched with diligence everywhere, but did not find it and so returned empty-handed to their king. When they told him of their failure, the Devil gnashing his teeth raged all the more fiercely against the man of God. When Masona was brought into his presence, Leovigild said to him, ‘Tell me where the thing which I seeks lies, and know that if you do not speak, you shall be severely tortured and then exiled to a far-away place, where

⁴¹ *Vit. sanct. part. em.* V, V, 1.

⁴² *Vit. sanct. part. em.* V, VI, 4.

afflicted with many tribulations and suffering a lack of every necessity you shall die a cruel death⁴³.

Then the Evil Spirit opened the sacrilegious mouth of the tyrant ever armed as it was with abuse, with these vile words and at once he barked out the infamous sentence devised by his impiety: “Masona, ever opposed to our way of life, enemy of our faith, and opponent of religion, we order you to be taken swiftly from our sight and sent into exile”⁴⁴.

After this a false priest called Nepopis was set up in his place and made the man of God’s replacement in the city of Merida. He was a profane man, a true servant of the Devil, an angel of Satan, a harbinger of the Antichrist, and a bishop of another town. And just as the man of God flourished with his many virtues, so this man in contrast besmirched himself with his vile deeds⁴⁵.

In this passages, the evil figure is responsible for tempting Leovigild to take out the saint of his see in Merida and get the relic, the sacred mantle of Saint Eulalia, which was in his power. Frustrated in his attempt because Masona hides the mantle in his clothes, the monarch sends the bishop into exile and replaced him with another one. The new bishop is characterized as a wicked server of the Devil, the Antichrist announcer, directly connected to the monarch that, on his own, is characterized as a tyrant, singing sacrilegious words and vehemently keeping his association with the Devil. As a result of this association, as describes the hagiographer, the following occurs:

“Now Leovigild, who hindered rather than helped the land of Spain and was its destroyer rather than its ruler, for whom there was no crime or evil deed that he could not justly claim his own, abandoning God altogether, nay being abandoned by God, wretch that he was, he lost at one and the same time both his kingdom and his life. Through the judgment of God he was seized by a fatal disease, lost his vile life and obtained eternal death for himself. His soul cruelly wrenched from his body, subject to perpetual torments and eternally enslaved in the depths of hell, is rightly bound down there to bum for ever amongst the ever-rolling waves of pitch”⁴⁶.

⁴³ *Vit. sanct. part. em.* V, VI, 15-16.

⁴⁴ *Vit. sanct. part. em.* V, VI, 23.

⁴⁵ *Vit. sanct. part. em.* V, VI, 29.

⁴⁶ *Vit. sanct. part. em.* V, IX, 1-2.

It is visible that when narrating the death of Leovigild, the hagiographer strives to qualify him as an evil monarch, unworthy of his duties as the ruler of Toledo. Therefore his death happens due to divine will. It is God himself who dismisses him from the throne by sending it a terrible disease. The king finds, after his death, not the heavenly rest, but the underworld of Tartarus, where his soul, according to the hagiographer, is deservedly retained to burn in an always boiling tar water. But attempts to do away with the life of Masona do not cease and one more conspiracy against the saint takes place:

“Sunna, the Gothic bishop of whom we have made mention above, goaded by the Devil won over by a Devilish plan certain noble Goths who were most distinguished by birth and wealth, and not a few of whom had been appointed Counts in various cities by the king. He separated these with a countless host of the common people from the ranks of Catholics and the bosom of the Catholic church, devising deceitful plans against the servant of God, bishop Masona - plans designed to kill him”⁴⁷.

The attempt to do away with the saint's life appears again as the Devil's work that by inciting and using the bishop Sunna, convinces a group of Goths of noble lineage, including Witteric who later would be king of the Visigoths. However, the attempt fails miraculously: the sword of one of his pursuers does not come out from the sheath and the others, realizing that they could not kill the saint, give up and return to their homes.

After the death of Leovigild and the rise of his son Reccared to power, there is an uprising against the Catholic faith caused, according to the hagiographer, directly by the Devil. Although this information is not in the same source, it certainly reinforces the diabolical role in *Vita Masonae*⁴⁸. This event could be interpreted as a political maneuver of the Aryan ruling group, which, needing a larger representativeness towards the Catholic bishop, undoubtedly was able to use up its privileged access to the king, who professed the same religion, in their attempt to achieve spiritual supremacy, keeping in their hands the most revered objects by popular devotion. The success of this venture would have given to the Aryans the monopoly of

⁴⁷ *Vit. sanct. part. em.* V, X, 1-2.

⁴⁸ *Vit. sanct. part. em.* V, XII, 1.

access to the martyr through its material relics, specifically the mantle of Saint Eulalia. Unfortunately it is not known how many churches gathered members of Aryan community or what the number of its clergy was.

In the context at hand, regardless of what was the reality of the number of believers, it is known that, in fact, there was a smaller number of Aryans compared to the number of Catholics. The association between the Visigoth elite and the Arian clergy, however, would bring a great obstacle for the Visigoth king to change his religious choice. To change creed would imply a dangerous political maneuver. If Goth nobility supported the Arian hierarchy, it was unlikely that the king had possibilities to act.

Final considerations

When Sisebut, the only one of Hispano-Visigoth hagiographers who is not a member of the Church, writes *Vita Desiderii*, he represents the demonic figure against those in the same post that he holds, showing through the holy man's fight against Brunhilda and Theodoric, what were the main features that could be associated with a bad monarch. There is, therefore, in his discourse, a political function in which the Devil assumes a greater role not only in opposition to the holy man, but also close to the Burgundian monarchy. Within the relationship between hagiographer and the public, in the case of a work that narrates the martyrdom of the saint, imputation and association of crimes committed with the help of diabolical figure to antagonists are more important than the exaltation of the holy figure and his holiness. The divine vengeance against those who conspire and act against the saint would be a warning to those who, within the noble groups that were part of the Visigoth monarchy, full of conflict and instability, tried to conspire against his monarch post.

The speech made by the anonymous author of *Vitae sanctorum patrum emeretensium* seeks, first, the exaltation of the holy fathers and bishops of Merida in the second half of the sixth century and, second, exalt the city itself as a great Episcopal see. The argument used by the hagiographer, who underlines geographical and historical details, indicates a strong commitment to demonstrate, in many different ways, the fight between the characters mentioned above and the Devil, by means of a detailed description of their actions against the saint.

Regarding the bishop Masona, the hagiographer's discourse has a clearly religious and political tone, the Devil is in close liaison with Leovigild, who professed the Arian creed and tried in every way to convert Masona to his "heresy" or inflict physical and psychological harm against the saint. Ally of the Devil and the "Antichrist", according to the text, the king is characterized as lazy and oblivious to crimes. A person who turns away from God, unworthy of the post he holds, killed by a disease that was brought by divine will and sent forever to Hell. The Devil, in this passage, occupies a key role in characterizing the king, his actions against the holy man. His end in eternal damnation is a way to characterize those who professed Arianism, seen as a heresy and therefore easily associated with the error, or rather the diabolical aegis. Furthermore, as stated by Velázquez, since the report is composed a century after the events narrated, that work has a symbolic significance that, through the narrative of the lives of the great Fathers of the city, aimed to revive and reaffirm its power towards other dioceses, mainly Toledo, through the memory its glorious years.

Abbreviations and Bibliography

Ep. Wis.: Epistulae Wisigothicae, in Gil 1972, pp. 1-59

Vit. Des.: Sisebuto, *Vita Desiderii* in Gil 1972, pp. 70-112 = Fear 1997, pp.1-14

Vit. Mas.: Anonymous, *The lives of Fathers of Merida (Vita Masonae)* in Fear 1997, pp. 73-105.

Vit. sanct. patr. em.: J.N. Garvin (ed.), *Vitae sanctorum patrum emeretensium*. Washington [DC] 1946

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