

Visigothic Architecture - How did Visigoth churches get to Ireland from Iberia?

Architecture, Religion, Iberian Studies

Interview, Dissertation Excerpt, Lesson Plan

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Figure 1. Illustration commissioned by JES copyright @ 2011 Margaret Hurst

Editor's Introduction

How do cultural influences travel from place to place? It is sometimes easy to trace these lines of influence in the modern era, but how did this process work in the past? Looking at the past, how can we decipher which elements of architecture or music or literature came from which sub-culture? In her dissertation, the author looks closely at churches of the 9th century and finds that the architectural styles we have thought of as Anglo Saxon may actually be Visigoth. She cites a tiny Celtic colony called Britonia, located in the Galician region of what is now Spain, as a vehicle or agent for the transmission of Visigoth architecture to England.

The connections among these far-flung church structures indicate that, while it is easier for us to consider “English” history and “Spanish” history as separate, it was in some ways a single interconnected medieval world.

Elsewhere in the dissertation, the author points out that for many centuries in many cultures, “architecture” meant principally church architecture. You and I may take it for granted that all ancient churches are designed in more or less the same layout, but Prof. Higgs lays out a timeline of progression for each element of church architecture — It is also interesting how the content of the church service influenced the church’s design. As often happens, you cannot fully appreciate a single field of study without understanding several others – in this case, the spread of Christianity is linked with the spread of architecture.

The Iberian Peninsula is a term for what we now call Spain and Portugal.

Like all dissertations, this is written primarily for other scholars, so general readers like you and me have to slow down to sift through the scholarly references. All the footnotes have been removed from this excerpt and are available in the full dissertation (which is available in a file right next to this one). Also keep in mind that this excerpt takes passages from different sections of the dissertation. We are rewarded with Jamie Higgs’ view into a medieval world which, like ours, may have been unusually interconnected.

Some Observations on Visigothic Architecture and Its Influence on the British Isles

By Jamie L. Higgs

Interview with Jamie L. Higgs (July 2011)

Who are the Visigoths? What were they like?

The history of the Goths begins centuries before the Visigoths are identifiable as a separate group. During the first century C.E., they are part of the Wielbark and Cernjachov cultures which originates in Pomerania and the lands on the shores of the Baltic Sea to either side of the lower Vistula River. In the second and third centuries the Tervingi and Greuthungi Goths, among others, emigrate southward. During the third century, these groups settle in the area of the Black Sea, between the Don and Danube. They are known as raiders. By 250, the Goths become major players in the eastern and northern hinterlands of the Carpathians and the Black Sea region.

In 251, the Goths defeat the Romans in Moesia. For eighteen years, they raid and plunder the Balkan Peninsula and Asia Minor, attacking Athens, Ephesus, Pityus, Trapezus, Pontus, Bithynia, Propontis, Chalcedon, Nicomedia, Nicaea, Apamea, and Prusa. Later, in 270, they attack Anchialus and Nicopolis, and, because of their growing power, Emperor Aurelian concedes Dacia to them. During this period, the Gepids, a Germanic tribe from the southern Baltic region, drive a wedge between the Tervingi branch of the Goths, west of the Dneister, and the Greuthungi, east of the Sea of Azov.

By the fourth century, the dominion of the Tervingi Goths, known to the Romans as the Visigoths, extends from the Danube to the Don. At its fullest extent it spreads over a broad belt of territory running east from the Carpathian Mountains to the rivers Dnieper in the south and Donetz in the north. By this period, the Visigoths are part of the Roman imperial system.

The Visigoths are converted to Arianism during the fourth century by Ulfilas (311-383), who becomes the apostle to the Goths. Because Arianism is denounced by the Roman Emperor Theodosius I in 381, this conversion puts the Visigoths doctrinally at odds with their numerous Roman subjects in the centuries to follow. In 375, the Visigoths move south of the Danube River and into the Roman Empire and settled in Moesia. In 401 they are led into Italy by their king Alaric I (395-410), and they sack Rome in 408, 409, and in 410. They are allowed to settle in southwestern Gaul (Arles and Narbonne) as *federates*, military allies of the Empire.

Where and when did they rule?

The Visigoths begin to cooperate militarily with the Romans in Spain around 416 in order to rid the area of the Vandals. As a result, by 418, the Visigoths are given lands in the Gironne Valley between Toulouse and Bordeaux; in 419 they are given the area of Aquitaine. In 475 King Euric (466-484) declares his independence from Rome and expands his kingdom eastwards to the Rhone and southwards to the Mediterranean and the Pyrenees. By the end of the century, the Visigoths cross the mountains into Spain and many of them begin to live in the

Spanish provinces. They eventually win control of the entire peninsula apart from the kingdom of the Suevi in Galicia and the formidable mountain territory of the Basques north of Pamplona. Euric's son Alaric II (484-507) rules over the largest political unit in Western Europe. Apart from Galicia and the Basque mountains, his peaceful and orderly kingdom stretches unbroken from the south bank of the Loire to the Pillars of Hercules. Throughout his reign, however, the Franks of Gaul become increasingly threatening. In 507, Alaric II and the bulk of his army are destroyed by Clovis at Vouillé, near Poitiers. The Visigoths lose most of their Gallic possessions and, henceforth, apart from the province of Narbonensis, they are confined to four provinces of Spain—Tarrakonensis, Carthaginiensis, Lusitania, and Baetica.

What was distinctive about their architecture? What were other churches throughout Europe like?

Visigothic-period architecture utilized space compartmentalization and architectural barriers creating a sense of mystery with its alternation of light and dark pockets. Generally, other sixth and seventh century churches throughout Europe, namely in Rome, were open in their space planning considerations.

How did their architecture get to England?

Visigothic-period architecture per se is not found in England. That said, planning considerations of Visigothic-period churches, like space compartmentalization and architectural barriers, are observable in Anglo-Saxon period buildings. In rare cases, both north and south, this preoccupation with architectural barriers resulted in the construction of full walls separating the eastern and western ends of the churches. I contend that these commensurate space planning features are the result of similar liturgical needs. The church of Spain during the Visigothic period practiced the Mozarabic rite while many communities in England continued to maintain the Celtic rite. These rites are more similar to each other than to the contemporary Roman rite and may have required similar architectural space usage.

Where can we see this Visigothic influence?

We can see the influence of Visigothic-period architectural considerations in the use of complicated subdivisions, chancel barriers and even full-walls that were all in evidence to varying degrees in Anglo-Saxon period constructions.

Why is this significant?

Visigothic Spain can be counted among the ecclesiastical and architectural influences working in Anglo-Saxon Britain. Ideas from the south could have been indirectly transferred by way of the same routes that Iberian texts travel to the North, through the general comings and goings of traders and ecclesiastics. All of this suggests that Iberia was not an isolated enclave that much scholarship of the past has proposed. Rather, it is the case that this geographical region

and its respective culture was functioning as part of a much wider and interconnected early Medieval world.

What other cultural influences traveled from Iberia to Britain?

Connections can be shown to exist between Spain and the British Isles from as early as prehistoric times; the two regions are connected by Atlantic trade routes. Very early physical evidence for contacts between Iberia and the North includes two groups of megalithic building types, known today as Passage Graves, dating from 2500 B.C.E.—one in the southern and southeastern Spain, the other continuing this group northwards through Portugal. From this western Mediterranean center one primary sea-borne movement brings the earliest types of passage graves to certain points on the coasts of France, Britain, Ireland, and possibly eventually to northern Europe. Among other artifacts, a small bronze figurine with Iberian affinities from an Iron Age site (Period A, 500-200 B.C.E.) in Co. Sligo, Ireland indicates that the southern part of the Atlantic trade route is still open at this period.

Paulus Orosius, in his *Seven Books of History*, describes some localities in Spain: “There in Galaetia is situated the city of Brigantia which raises its towering lighthouse, one of the few notable structures of the world, toward the watchtower of Britain.” Orosius is probably a native of Braga, the ancient Bracara, some distance to the south of the later British church foundation of Britonia. His words, written about 418, testify to a traditional awareness in Galicia of Britain as a neighbor over the water. Surely, those in Britain are likewise aware of Iberia. Because the seaways connecting Britain, Ireland, and Spain are frequented from prehistoric times, a migration to Spain of Britons in distress later in the sixth century is not surprising.

As it were, some time during the sixth century, a number of people from Britain (estimates range from hundreds to perhaps tens of thousands) establish a colony in Galicia called Britonia. Gildas, in his work *De excidio britanniae*, describes how the British Celts, who occupy almost all of Britain at the beginning of the fifth century, in response to attacks by the Irish, Picts, and Anglo-Saxons, “make for lands beyond the sea” including northern Spain. The Britons occupy an area of land stretching presumably from the neighborhood of Mondoñedo northwards to the sea and also extending across the River Eo to Asturias, where they have a few churches. This area is an extensive tract of land, and its size suggests that it is no mere handful of Britons who land in Spain.

While the Celtic origin of Britonia is certain, we cannot be certain of the date of its foundation or to the identity of Mailoc, its earliest recorded bishop, who signs the acts of the Second Synod of Braga (572). It seems probable that Mailoc is at once bishop and abbot of a monastery, perhaps Santa María de Bretoña.

Spanish church councils include a number of canons that could be transmitted by way of ties between Spain and Britain, thus influencing the developing church of Britain. A detailed review of the attendees at these councils and the canons produced reveals the important liturgical practices of the day which could be disseminated. Furthermore, such councils present points of interest which demonstrate that influences from the North, like the style of tonsure

and the date of Easter, do indeed exist in Spain and it is improbable that such influences are only one way.

Furthermore, Charles Henry Beeson in his work *Isidor-Studien* discusses the role of the Irish in the transmission of Isidore of Seville. Isidore (560-636) is used by Irish writers from very early on. The anonymous *De duodecim abusivis saeculis*, written 630-650, draws upon the *Origines*; Lathcen (661) upon the *De ortu et obitu patrum*; and the Pseudo-Isidorian *De ordine creaturarum* upon the *Differentiae*. Already in the seventh century, the *Origines* is used by Cennfaelad in his *Auraicept Na n-Éces* and by the lost “Old Irish Chronicle” from which all extant annals appear to descend.

The Irish clerical scholars fixed on Isidore’s *Etymologies* calling it the *Culmen*, “the summit of all learning.” The first Anglo-Saxon writers of importance, Aldhelm and Bede, begin to write in the 670s and 700s respectively; they both cite Isidore. Scholars propose that Aldhelm and Bede receive Isidore’s work through Ireland. For some sixteen years Aldhelm, founder of St. Laurence at Bradford-on-Avon, had been a pupil of the Irish monk Máel-dubh. Mayr-Harting maintains, however, that “the Irish were not indispensable in introducing the Anglo-Saxons to Isidore’s writings.” Regardless of whether the Anglo-Saxons receive the works of Isidore directly, or by way of contacts with the Irish Celts, the literary presence of Spain is strong in the British Isles during the Anglo-Saxon period.



Excerpt from Higgs’ dissertation, *Some Observations Concerning Visigothic Architecture and It’s Influence upon the North: More Spanish Symptoms*, can be found [here](#), and the full dissertation can be requested [here](#).

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Postsecondary Lesson Plan to Accompany “Some Observations on Visigothic Architecture and Its Influence on the British Isles”

1. What is the authors’ thesis?



Figure 2. Battle between Clovis and the Visigoths (14th century).

2. How does she prove it?

3. The author characterizes Visigoth architecture this way:

Visigothic architecture is “like a whirlpool sucking in everything which fell within its grasp ..

Is American architecture like that? In your hometown, are there buildings where you see influences from different cultures? What are they?

4. What should a church look like? Should all churches look old? Do you like Richard Meier's Jubilee Church (<http://wirednewyork.com/forum/showthread.php?t=4168&page=1>)?

Which of these 10 churches is your favorite? Why?

<http://www.neatorama.com/2007/05/07/10-divinely-designed-churches/>

5. Archeology is just digging up things from the past – it shouldn't be controversial, should it? Please read this article on an extremely controversial "dig" going on right now:

"Controversy in Jerusalem: The City Of David,"

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/10/14/60minutes/main6958082.shtml>

Do you think the archeologists should be allowed to continue? Why or why not?

6. The author gives us a startling fact:

To speak of Visigothic Spain is to refer to the oligarchic rule of eight million indigenous Hispano-Romans by a governing class composed of perhaps no more than 200,000 Visigoths.

How could so few Visigoths rule 8 million people? Has this happened elsewhere, where a tiny number of “conquerors” rule a huge native population?

7. What will archeologists in the year 3012 find when they dig up your home? What deductions will they make about you and the way you lived?
