

# HERMENEGILDVS REX



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# HERMENEGILDVS REX

Prince, Usurper, and Martyr.  
A Critical Study on the Rebellion  
of St Hermenegild (578-585).

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*Nisi granum frumenti cadens in terram mortuum fuerit, ipsum solum manet;  
si autem mortuum fuerit, multum fructum affert*

John 12: 24

*Parasti in conspectu meo mensam adversus eos qui tribulant me  
inpinguasti in oleo caput meum et calix meus inebrians quam praeclarus est*

Psalms 22: 5



## Evocation of St Hermenegild: a silenced history, a pending claim

He was never what you might call a lucky man. Neither as a prince did he manage to occupy the throne to which he was destined by lineage, nor as a saint did he obtain in his homeland the recognition he undoubtedly deserved. Practically neither in life, nor after his death was any merit recognised to the eldest son of the great Leovigild, one of the most illustrious monarchs who occupied the throne of the Kingdom of Toledo. Abandoned by his Byzantine allies for the price of a handful of coins, defeated by the force of arms by his father the king, first exiled to Valencia and then imprisoned in Tarragona, Hermenegild ended his days executed by a slayer for refusing to renounce his faith. It can well be said that the palm of martyrdom was his only triumph.

Undoubtedly, the figure of the young prince who opened the doors of the Catholic faith to the people of the Goths constituted for centuries an uncomfortable case for chroniclers and men of the Catholic Church. In his role as a prince whose martyrdom had served to unify the nation, he could have been a magnificent patron of Spain, but in the hard days of struggle against Islam, the Spaniards preferred to turn their eyes towards one of the Sons of Thunder instead of doing so on the son of the Arian Leovigild, thus sealing in some way the course of our medieval history towards Europe and not towards the Gothic past. The figure of Hermenegild only obtained a late recognition during the reign of the Austrians, in the times of Philip II and Charles II, for very different reasons and we could almost say trivial – due to coincidence with the birth of the future Philip III, in the first case, and due to the desire to strengthen the Habsburg ties with their Germanic past, in the second – and, later, in the Bourbon era, with Ferdinand VII, whose devotion to the memory of the Gothic prince was due to more spurious interests than those of his predecessors: to show himself as the prince-son unjustly persecuted by the king-father.

Certainly, fortune did not accompany Hermenegild. Already among his contemporaries he was considered ‘miser’ in its literal sense, not in the pejorative as has been repeated so many times by a defect of translation, but in its meaning of ‘unfortunate’ or ‘that moves to compassion’.<sup>1</sup> Nor did it help excessively, it must be said, the fact that, according to the Spanish chroniclers, he rose ‘tyrannically’ against his father the great King Leovigild. Not even after his death did he share in the earthly glory that radiates around other martyrs, being practically erased from the memory of the Church and the chronicles by the complicated political circumstances that allowed the consummation of the Catholic victory at the Third Council of Toledo.<sup>2</sup> His early death in distant Tarragona, executed by a dark hitman of whom barely his name and a brief mention of his infamous end are recorded, undoubtedly marks the absolute failure of Hermenegild’s earthly mission. Only interested foreigners, such as Pope Gregory the Great or

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<sup>1</sup> Orlandis 1962a: 11.

<sup>2</sup> In 1585, Pope Sixtus V authorised the cult of the martyr at the request of Philip II. However, it would not be until 1639, when Philip IV was king of Spain, that Pope Urban VIII universally promoted him.

the Frank Gregory of Tours, collect the details of his martyrdom in some detail, and in passing turn their pens against the figure of his father.

For the rest, a practically unanimous silence surrounds Hermenegild until the times of the Counter-Reformation, when we witness a first attempt at rehabilitation of his memory by King Philip II and some of the intellectuals of the royal environment, such as Ambrosio de Morales or Cardinal Quiroga, great friend of Ignatius of Loyola, which explains in part the interest of the Society of Jesus in the figure of the prince. Also some famous playwrights, i.e. Lope de Vega and Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz, knew how to exploit the dramatic point of the story – after all, as Paul Goubert well appreciated, the conversion of Spain to Catholicism is born from a family drama – although, as has been said, it was the Jesuits who knew how to see in the martyrdom of the Gothic prince an effective tool in the struggle for the defence of Catholic orthodoxy, as well as a powerful model to oppose the Protestant heresy that had taken root in German lands.<sup>3</sup>

However, past the frenzy of the Counter-Reformation, the name of Hermenegild is once again plunged into the most absolute silence, shelved in his role as patron of the Spanish monarchy. And yet, there is no doubt that the history of Spain would have taken very different paths were it not for this young prince murdered in the prime of life in a gloomy dungeon in Tarragona. A tragic fate undoubtedly, but a fate that reserved for him the glory of opening the way to the conversion of the Gothic people to the Catholic faith and with it to illuminate the birth of Spain as a nation. If, as Tertullian said, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of new Christians, the blood shed by the young Hermenegild was necessary to engender a new kingdom.

Already in his time, Pope Gregory the Great understood it this way when, after learning of the conversion of Reccared and the people of the Goths, he exclaimed with joy:

‘And it is that in relation to this conversion we must think that all this could not have been carried out in any way if King Hermenegild had not died for the truth. Indeed, as it is written: “If the grain of wheat does not die falling into the earth, then it only endures; but if it dies, it produces much fruit”. And we see that in the limbs the same thing happens that we know has happened in the head. And so, in the people of the Visigoths, one died so that many would live, and falling a single faithful grain to achieve faith, a copious harvest of souls sprouted.’<sup>4</sup>

It can well be said, then, that the death of Hermenegild imprints an unexpected course to the peninsular history destined to open the way to an original political conception of the old *regnum Gothorum*. Thus, shortly after the death of the prince, St Isidore will identify this *regnum vel patria Gothorum* – a protocol formula that mimics the classic *Senatus Populusque Romanus* – with the old Roman province of Hispania. From this identification made by the bishop of Seville would be born the medieval concept of Spain.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Muneroni 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Greg. I. Dial. 3 31: *Qua in re considerandum nobis est, quia totum hoc nequaquam posset, si Hermenegildus rex pro veritate mortuus non fuisset. Nam sicut scriptum est: 'Nisi granum frumenti cadens in terram mortuum fuerit, ipsum solum manet; si autem mortuum fuerit, multum fructum affert'. Hoc fieri videmus in membris, quod factum scimus in capite. In Visigothorum etenim gente unus mortus est, ut multi viverent; et dum unum granum fideliter occidit ad obtinendam vitam animarum, seges multa surrexit* (PL 77: 289-294; ed. Juan Galán 2010: 184s). The quote is taken from the Gospel of St John (12: 24).

<sup>5</sup> Maravall 1954.

‘Spain, sacred and always happy mother of princes and peoples, the most beautiful of all lands that extend from the West to India... And for this reason, rightly, long ago golden Rome, head of the peoples, desired you and, although the same Roman power, first victorious, possessed you, nevertheless, in the end, the flourishing nation of the Goths, after countless victories throughout the world, eagerly conquered you and loved you, and until now enjoys you safely among royal insignia and very abundant treasures in security and happiness of empire.’<sup>6</sup>

The nuptial metaphor that St Isidore uses to describe the union of the matron Hispania and the illustrious people of the Goths comes to celebrate the origin of a new holy nation, in the style of Old Testament Israel. A chosen nation – *gens bona Gothorum... electus Domino populus*, defined by the great Alcuin of York – that with the passing of the centuries would also be destined to be her – like a new island of Scandza, the ancestral homeland of the Goths – *uagina gentium*, mother of a multitude of peoples on the other side of the Ocean. And indeed, if for centuries millions of men and women from Hispanic America and the Philippines have prayed, lived and celebrated their faith under Catholic orthodoxy, it has been largely thanks to the blood shed by this young Gothic prince on the eve of Easter in the year 586. Because yes, much to the chagrin of Américo Castro, the Visigoths – at least the Visigoths of the 7th century – were, and felt, in some way Spanish. And if that were so, our unfortunate prince was undoubtedly largely to blame.<sup>7</sup>

Seen in this way, it is hard to understand why St Hermenegild has not had greater popular recognition in his own homeland. Unlike other national patron saints – i.e. Stephen of Hungary, Edward the Confessor in England, Prince Casimir in Poland – the cult of the martyr was almost exclusively restricted to the monarchy and, only belatedly, to the militia. Perhaps to the son of Leovigild could be applied the biblical saying that no one is a prophet in his own land. But, as it has often been said, the designs of the Lord are inscrutable and his judgments incomprehensible (Romans 11: 33) and perhaps one day not too far away Hermenegild, like a new Arthur or Sebastian, will see his figure vindicated from on high and definitively occupy the place in history that rightfully belongs to him.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, this current study does not intend to be a religious rehabilitation of the prince, something that, as is easy to understand, is quite far from our intentions, but an approach to an historical character from the literary and archaeological sources that better place him in the rarefied historical and political framework of his time. Hermenegild is, without a doubt, one of the characters that has caused the most controversy among historians practically since his death and, therefore, also one of those who has made the most ink flow over pages and pages of history. In fact, as we will have the opportunity to see, the bibliography about the Visigothic prince is vast, although very polarised between those who considered him a simple rebel rising against the legitimate king, and those who saw him a champion of the fight against tyranny and

<sup>6</sup> Isid. Hisp. HG. *Laus Spaniae. Omnia terrarum, quaquae sunt ab occiduo usque ad Indos, pulcherrima es, o sacra semperque felix principium gentiumque mater Spania... iure itaque te iam pridem aurea Roma caput gentium concupivit et licet te sibimet eadem Romulea virtus primum victrix desponderit, denuo tamen Gothorum florentissima gens post multiplices in orbe victorias certatim rapuit et amavit, fruiturque hactenus inter regias inflas et opes largas imperii felicitate secura* (ed. Mommsen 1894: 267).

<sup>7</sup> Castro 1949: 246-263.

<sup>8</sup> See Barroso – Morín – Sánchez 2021: 7 n. 8.

in defence of the sacred rights of religion. We, for our part, have tried to delve directly into the problem, leaving behind prejudices and historical interpretations that have done nothing but entangle the question, leaving aside the usual practice in post-modern historiography of systematically repeating already consolidated arguments while basic works that are simply sidelined by their antiquity are unknown. Our academic training obliged us, on the contrary, to exhaustively collect the main studies dedicated to the problem and review the original literary sources to try to solve a question that until now is stranded in a dead end.

In any case, for better or worse, the figure of Hermenegild emerges in the history of Spain as an ambiguous and somewhat confusing model, hence the reluctance he caused at the time and the difficulties found later in the spread of his cult. And indeed, on the one hand, Hermenegild, as a rebel against the legitimate king, seems to be inscribed in the long list of usurpers who, like Argimundus, Froya, or Paulus, to name only the most well-known cases from Visigothic Spain, failed in their attempt to seize the Toledan throne; on the other hand, in a more commendable aspect, the rebellion of the young prince also marks the start of a true sacralisation of royal power that will shape in a novel way the political practice of Visigothic royalty by assimilating it to the theocracy of ancient Davidic Israel. This last aspect, the sacred conception of royalty materialised in the solemn rite of royal anointing, is perhaps the most interesting – and in many cases unknown – of our study as it supposes the oldest antecedent of a political theory that will be current in the Middle Ages and that, although sometimes discussed, will endure in Europe until the French Revolution. In this precise sense, it does not seem exaggerated to say that Hermenegild, as a political model to follow, had the distinction of playing a pioneering role in the history of Western culture.

In Toledo, 13 April 2020,  
Easter Monday and feast-day of St Hermenegild, King and Martyr.

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