



Civic Commitment in the Post-Roman West: The Visigothic Case Study

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1 INTRODUCTION

The emergence of cities marks the end of pre-history, since these settlements require complex systems of socio-economic administration and redistribution of resources. However, the concentration of people in large numbers in these spaces with poor sanitation and irregular food supplies led to exceedingly high mortality rates. This makes the existence and growth of cities in pre-industrial contexts a paradox. The pre-industrial city as a settlement type, therefore, could not rely on natural growth and depended on a steady input of rural populations.¹ This appreciation is one that was acknowledged by ancient authors: Martial, Horace, Juvenal, and Seneca's vivid descriptions of Roman cities, even satirical as they were, underline that this perception of dirty streets and floods of rural migrants

¹ McNeill's paradox, described in Guillermo Algaze, 'Entropic Cities. The Paradox of Urbanism in Ancient Mesopotamia', *Current Anthropology* 59, no. 1 (2018): 23–54.

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is not only crafted by historians.² This opens the valid question that can be asked about the importance of urban settlements for their inhabitants in Antiquity: what bound town dwellers together? What kept cities from imploding?³ No single reason can be given to answer this question, naturally, and a combination of factors (from military safety and economic stability to religious duty and state coercion) can be given.

One of these many aspects could have been psychological: the feeling of attachment, the sense of belonging, and the integration in a community that satisfies a series of emotional and physiological needs. Psychologists from the 1930s onwards have underlined how a person who is comfortable where they live will develop this attachment naturally. Moreover, they will invest resources (capital, effort, surplus, etc.) into preserving the settlement's status quo that allows them to survive, and this is something that can be extended to group behaviour. This shared interest is one of the pillars that forms place-based identities: a sense of identification with a shared environment and its local landmarks.⁴ These processes have been studied through the lens of Place Theory by anthropologists, social geographers, sociologists, and environmental psychologists, and there is an extensive body of literature covering how these processes develop nowadays.⁵ However, there has been little to no use of this theoretical perspective to study groupings in historical periods—especially in the early Middle Ages.⁶

² Alex Scobie, 'Slums, Sanitation, and Mortality in the Roman World', *Klio* 68 (1986): 399–433. Cf. Mart. 6.93.4, 10.5.5 and 10.12; Sen. Ep. 56.1 and 104.6; Hor. Ep. 1.17.6; Juv. 3.62–4.

³ For the Mesopotamian examples, cf. Augusta McMahon, 'Early Urbanism in Northern Mesopotamia', *Journal of Archaeological Research* 28 (2020): 289–337.

⁴ Marco Lalli, 'Urban-Related Identity: Theory, Measurement, and Empirical Findings', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 12 (1992): 285–303; Jeffrey Smith and Ricardo Aranha, 'Cognitive Mapping as a Method to Assess Peoples' Attachment to Place', *Geographical Review* 112, no. 1 (2022): 6–26; Clare Twigger-Ross and David Uzzel, 'Place and Identity Processes', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 16 (1996): 205–220.

⁵ Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 3rd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008 [1996]); Gerard Delanty, *Community*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2018 [2010]); Gary Fine, 'The Sociology of the Local: Action and its Publics', *Sociological Theory* 28 (2010): 355–377; Stephanie Taylor, *Narratives of Identity and Place* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁶ David Wheatley, 'Making Space for an Archaeology of Place', *Internet Archaeology* 15 (2004); Javier Martínez Jiménez and Carlos Tejerizo García, 'Assessing Place-Based Identities in the Early Middle Ages: A Proposal for Visigothic Iberia', *Early Medieval Europe* 31 (2023): 23–50.

In Classical Antiquity, urban administration relied heavily on elite expenditure. Private investment was part of the social contract, as defined in municipal statutes, by which elites invested in the city in order to obtain honours and public office. This munificence (also called euergetism) was specific to an urban government where magistrates were (s)elected from members of the few chosen families that formed the local council.⁷ Membership and participation in these activities was restricted through municipal citizenship.⁸

This municipal model and its associated monumentality has, for a long time, determined our perception of the ancient city, and has been set as the golden standard and benchmark against which other periods are compared, making later phases pale in comparison.⁹ However, it is clear that there was public munificence after Classical Antiquity. At least into the sixth century, part of this investment of private capital continued to exist within the systems arranged by and for the local, lay administration. And yet, these ‘traditional’ forms of lay, civic investment existed in parallel to pious charity.¹⁰ Lay munificence and religious largesse are social manifestations of the same social agreement: to invest into the community’s needs. Place Theory can explain this as different manifestations of the ongoing social commitment from the elites towards the local community to preserve the urban fabric to ensure the continuity of the city. They are two sides of the same coin, where resources of the few are re-invested back into the space they share with the rest of their fellow town dwellers.

In this paper, I want to analyse through this sociological lens the different ways in which early medieval urban dwellers invested resources in their cities, presenting these investments out of charity/civic duty as evidence for community commitment. Investing in infrastructure maintenance and new public monuments were ways of reinforcing the religious,

⁷ Arjan Zuiderhoek, ‘Euergetism’, in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*; Accessed 16 March 2022.

⁸ Clifford Ando, ‘Local Citizenship and Civic Participation in the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire’, in *Civic Identity and Civic Participation in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Cédric Bréaz and Els Rose, CELAMA 27 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 39–63.

⁹ Bryan Ward-Perkins, ‘Continuists, Catastrophists, and the Towns of Post-Roman Northern Italy’, *Papers of the British School at Rome* 65 (1997): 157–176.

¹⁰ Michele Salzman, ‘From a Classical to a Christian City: Civic Euergetism and Charity in Late Antique Rome’, *Studies in Late Antiquity* 1, no. 1 (2013): 65–85.

social, and political ties that bound urban communities, preserving and maintaining the structural fabric, and ensuring the social and economic viability of the settlement. To exemplify how this worked in the early medieval Latin West, I will focus on urban examples from the Iberian Peninsula during the Visigothic period, paying particular attention to its state formation phase (560s–630s). In the end, I will conclude that in the first post-Roman centuries, Roman civic behaviour had adapted to new social circumstances. Lay and ordained urban leaders still invested in their cities despite the changes in which these were performed, all for the sake of their community’s survival.

2 EARLY MEDIEVAL CITIES AS PLACE-DEFINED COMMUNITIES

In order to assess the psychological aspect of early medieval urban investments as part of a community’s commitment to its environment, it is necessary to introduce the concept of place and place-defined communities, since these are terms that are not usually encountered in the archaeological or historical literature.¹¹ Then we will move on to look at different aspects of the early medieval city in Gaul and Italy that can be understood or re-interpreted from this perspective (citizenship, local leadership and communal involvement), before we can focus on the Visigothic case studies.

2.1 *The Psychology of Place*

From a psychological perspective ‘place’, ‘space’, community, identity, and commitment are intimately interconnected, and they explain each other. In Place Theory, ‘space’ and ‘place’ are not synonymous. ‘Space’ is a frame of reference, the physical surroundings that can be natural or anthropic. As a space, the Cartuja Campus of the University of Granada is located on a hill, to the north of the medieval city, and its layout is defined by the different faculties that have been built on it, plus the green spaces in between. ‘Place’ is the product of a cognitive process; place is the subjective understanding of the surroundings. As a place, the Cartuja Campus is different for each individual that lives, works, or studies in it; it

¹¹ Wheatley, ‘Making Space for an Archaeology of Place’.

is the accumulation of memories and those spots that accumulate the most (the library, the cafeteria, the corridors) are more relevant in the conception of the campus. Space is the same for everyone, but the perception and understanding of place varies. Similarly, place is multi-dimensional, as it includes individual memories and handed-down histories, adding the local past as an extra point of reference.¹²

At a psychological level, individuals tend to cluster and form groups because they recognise in other people emotions and problems that mirror their own. This sympathetic perception and the emphasis on shared interests (the transition from being-with-others to being-for-others) prompt the development of these groupings into communities when common objectives and self-regulating norms and rites arise.¹³ Such communities can, because of spatial proximity and through the development of *habitus* associated to their cohabited space, become communities that define themselves according to their shared perceptions of place. Members of these communities can choose to use this form of belonging (individually or collectively) to define themselves against outsiders, promoting place-based identities. These layers of identity, therefore, emerge from: (a) the shared understanding of place and (b) the pre-existing bonds of loyalty and solidarity that outsiders cannot replicate. This means that place-based forms of identity are not completely dependent on insider validation (they are more inclusive), but rather depend on localised, continuous interactions, and can form stronger and more stable forms of self-presentation at group levels.¹⁴

Place-defined communities are as stable as their shared environment, and it is perfectly possible for communities to dwindle, and spaces to be

¹² Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014), 7–14; Chris Post, ‘Making Place Through Memorial Landscape,’ in *Explorations in Place Attachment*, ed. Jeffrey Smith (London: Routledge, 2017), 83–96, here 84–85; Fine, ‘The Sociology of the Local’.

¹³ Phillip Lersch, *La estructura de la personalidad* (Barcelona: Scientia, 1971 [*Der Aufbau der Charakter*, 1938]), 220–224; Michel Richard, *Los dominios de la psicología* (Madrid: Istmo, 1974 [*La psicología et ses domaines: de Freud a Lacan*, 1971]), 275–277; Sigmund Freud, *Psicología de las masas* (Madrid: Alianza, 1984 [*Massenpsychologie und Ich-analyse*, 1921]).

¹⁴ Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 106–110; cf. Ellen Badone, ‘Ethnicity, Folklore, and Local Identity in Rural Brittany’, *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (1986): 161–190. Cf. Mateusz Fafinski, *Roman Infrastructure in Early Medieval Britain: The Adaptations of the Past in Text and Stone* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 16.

abandoned.¹⁵ It is as a result of this danger that we see commitment towards place and towards the local community developing as part of the group's norms. Communities develop mechanisms to ensure their long-term survival, and these put extra emphasis on those in positions of power and with disposable wealth, who nevertheless rely on their local power base to retain their status.¹⁶ Private investment of resources (and the redistribution of public wealth) for the benefit of the local community in the form of civic munificence and religious charity can be seen in this light. Even if they respond to different individual motivations, the social process is still the same. These examples of individual commitment exist in parallel to other forms of group participation; shared rites, *habitus*, and customs with a specific local-focused meaning that help in the development of a sense of cohesion.¹⁷ With this in mind, perhaps, we may see the archaeological evidence for the cities of the sixth and seventh centuries from a new perspective.

2.2 *Citizenship and Community Belonging*

Commitment to a place required the recognition of a community of inhabitants, separating those *in* from those *out*. In Antiquity, this was done through a legal form of belonging, one ruled by citizenship, which depended on a combination of residence, heritage, and active participation.¹⁸

¹⁵ Patricia McAnany and Maxime Lamoureux-St-Hilaire, 'An Archaeological Perspective on Recursive Place-Making and Unmaking', in *Detachment from Place. Beyond an Archaeology of Settlement Abandonment*, ed. Maxime Lamoureux-St-Hilaire and Scott Macrae (Louisville, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2020), 11–23.

¹⁶ Richard Stedman, 'Toward a Social Psychology of Space. Predicting Behaviour from Place-Based Cognitions, Attitude and Identity', *Environment & Behavior* 34, no. 5 (2002): 561–581; Lalli, 'Urban-Related Identity'.

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (Paris: Seuil, 2000). Cf. Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town. The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), here 188–189; John Sheid, *The Gods, the State, and the Individual* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 105.

¹⁸ Javier Martínez Jiménez and Robert Flierman, 'The Uses of Citizenship in the Post-Roman West', in *Citizenship in Antiquity: Civic Communities in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Jakub Filonik, Christine Plastow, and Rachel Zelnick-Abramovitz (London: Routledge, 2023), 669–690.

In classical Roman thought, citizenship (*civitas*) was a complex concept,¹⁹ especially as civic language was used to describe belonging to the overall Roman political system while also preserving local connotations related to municipal duties.²⁰ Overall, citizens were understood to be a community with shared customs and laws, an idea that had its roots deep in Greek precedents.²¹ In late Antiquity, Augustine nuanced this take by defining citizens as a group of people bound by loyalty (*hominum multitudo aliquo societatis vinculo conligata*).²² This sense of citizenship representing the local interests of an urban community was preserved in the post-Roman centuries: Cassiodorus in sixth-century Italy underlined this local involvement by declaring that ‘to each citizen, their city (*urbs sua*) is the common good (*res publica*)’;²³ later, in the seventh century, Isidore of Seville explained in Augustinian terms that ‘citizens (*cives*) are called such because they live together (*quod in unum coeuntes vivant*) so they may live more honourably and safer together’.²⁴

The return to (or, rather, the continuity of) the local connotations of civic language is noticeable in other Latin authors from the sixth and seventh centuries, from whom we get the impression that *civis* was one way to describe a city dweller; a member of the urban populace and its local community.²⁵ In Isidore’s words, again, the citizen body was made up by the people (*populus*) and the city elders (*senioribus civitatis*),²⁶

¹⁹ Claude Nicolet, *The World of the Citizen in Republican Rome* (London: University of California Press, 1980); Adrian Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973).

²⁰ Ando, ‘Local Citizenship’.

²¹ Plato, *Prot.* 322.c-d; Arist. *Pol.* 1.1252.b; Cic. *Rep.* 6.9.13, where *civitas* is a cluster of people bound by law; cf. Neal Wood, *Cicero’s Social and Political Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 159–165. See also: Josine Blok, *Citizenship in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²² Aug. *Civ. Dei* 15.8.

²³ Cass. *Var.* 9.2.

²⁴ Isid. *Hisp. Etym.* 9.4.2.

²⁵ Ralph Mathisen, ‘Personal Identity in the Later Roman Empire’, *Civic Identity and Civic Participation in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Cédric Bréaz and Els Rose (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 215–248; Javier Martínez Jiménez, ‘Urban Identity and Citizenship in the West Between the Fifth and Seventh Centuries’, *Al-Masaq* 32, no. 1 (2020): 87–108; Els Rose, ‘Citizenship Discourses in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages’, *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 55 (2021): 1–21.

²⁶ Isid. *Hisp. Etym.* 9.4.6.

which is to say the town dwellers and the leaders.²⁷ From an anthropological perspective, we can see these post-Roman forms of defining citizen bodies as self-defined communities linked together by residence, shared understandings of their environment, and divided according to unequal distribution of wealth and power.

These forms of local belonging were validated by opposition and recognition,²⁸ and were recognised as such in the post-Roman period in ways that echoed those from the Classical past. For instance, the way the monarchy could promote and demote settlements by creating and dismantling bishoprics was one of the ways of acknowledging certain local communities with an urban tradition as potential foci of the central administration.²⁹ Similarly, the way cities demanded exemptions and privileges shows a degree of community self-awareness³⁰—something that can also be seen in competitive construction projects (but more on that later). The best way a community had to validate itself, however, was by acting as one towards itself. It is here that the urban leaders and neighbourly expectations come into play.

2.3 *Leading the People, Managing the City: Elites and Civic Commitment*

Cities as groups of citizen dwellers (*civitates*) acted as place-defined communities, and the existence of local forms of citizenship show that city-defined communities could see themselves as groups with shared space focused interests. However, we should also note that the social divisions within the civic community reflected a division of power. Members of local elites, lay and ecclesiastical alike, represented the municipal institution that continued into these centuries. As such, their sociological role was framed as it had been in the Roman past; they were those with means to invest back into their shared space. Sociological models tell us that it was socially and politically expected from them to invest and commit

²⁷ Cf. Gaius, *Inst.* 1.3 (*sine patriciis ceteri cives*) and *Dig.* 50.16.238 (*plebs est ceteri cives sine senatoribus*).

²⁸ Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 102–206.

²⁹ Pablo Poveda Arias, ‘La diócesis episcopal en la Hispania Visigoda: concepción, construcción y disputas por su territorio’, *Hispania Sacra* 71 (2019): 9–24.

³⁰ E.g. Greg. Tur. *DLH.* 5.28, 9.30; Cass. *Var.*, 3.40, 3.42, 4.20; *Vita Caesaris*, 1.20; Toledo XIII, can. 3.

resources. The mechanisms of how this was implemented in a historical context, however, are less clear.

The issue of who ruled the post-Roman city is hotly debated.³¹ The evidence is scarce and patchy, so it is impossible to make generalising assumptions about the West as a whole or about any of its regions in particular. Furthermore, the different evolutions of main cities vs. secondary nuclei make any analysis more complex. For these reasons, it is with great care that we must understand the legal aspects of running a late antique city on the one hand, versus the anthropological expectations of a place-defined community on the other.

The administrative changes imposed during the fourth-century reorganisation of the Roman Empire had already transformed the way cities levied taxes; the growing demands from the central administration meant that town councils relied more on the substantial fees individuals had to pay in order to hold office (known as liturgies/*litourgiai*, *summa honoraria* or *civilia munera*), and early Roman offices like the *duumviri* or the *aediles* disappeared.³² In late Antiquity there was still a local public career (a *cursus honorum*) and local aristocrats (*honestiores*) still had to belong to the local council (the *curiales*), but appointments to office did not rely any longer on public participation/election. Most executive powers had been transferred to centrally appointed figures like the *comites* (counts)—all of this while a parallel, local career emerged through the church, offering local elites a way to obtain political power without having to spend personal fortunes into public office.³³

After the fifth century, the picture we have for the running of cities is much blurrier, and it varies greatly from one region to another. The resilience of some urban systems and the disappearance of others happened at an extremely regional level and independent from the degree

³¹ Julio Cesar Magalhães de Oliveira, 'Le quotidien institutionnel des cités tardives', *Antiquité Tardive* 26 (2018): 23–46.

³² Jean-Michel Carrié, 'La législation impériale sur les gouvernements municipaux dans l'Antiquité tardive', *Antiquité Tardive* 26 (2018): 85–125; Mark Whittow, 'Ruling the Late Roman and Early Byzantine City: A Continuous History', *Past and Present* 129 (1990): 3–29.

³³ Bryan Ward-Perkins, 'The Cities,' in *The Cambridge Ancient History Vol. XIII: The Late Empire, AD 337–425*, ed. Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 371–410; J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, 'The End of the Ancient City', in *The City in Late Antiquity*, ed. John Rich (London: Routledge, 1992), 1–50.

of Roman-like centralisation of the overarching successor state.³⁴ Counts and bishops remained, overall, as the central individuals running the city. In the sources, the bishop emerges as the main local figure, representing the interests of his flock, but we must remember that most of the sources backing this are hagiographical or ecclesiastical in nature, and the political influence of bishops might be overrepresented.³⁵ Besides, we know from written documents from sixth-century and seventh-century Gaul and Italy that local city councils still existed. Members of these councils still were expected to act as magistrates with administrative responsibilities, mostly clerical and bureaucratic, especially as registrars and notaries.³⁶ It is this expectation of *caritas civica* praised by Cassiodorus that underlines the local relevance of civic commitment by urban elites.³⁷

Much of the late antique literature on the taxation system seems to underline the complaints about these burdensome payments, but there is no evidence to suggest that these were any heavier than in previous

³⁴ See: Daniel Osland, ‘The Role of Cities in the Early Medieval Economy’, *Al-Masāq* 35 no. 3 (2023): 343–363, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2023.2211882>.

³⁵ Simon Loseby, ‘Gregory’s Cities: Urban Functions in Sixth-Century Gaul’, in *Franks and Alamanni in the Merovingian Period: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. Ian Wood (San Marino: Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Social Stress, 1998), 239–270.

³⁶ For Italy: Francesca Sansoni, ‘I papiri di Ravenna: gesta municipalia e procedure di insinuazione’, in *L’héritage byzantin en Italie (VIIIe–XIIIe siècle). I. La fabrique documentaire*, ed. Jean-Marie Martin, Annick Peters-Custet, and Vivien Prigent, Collection de l’École Française de Rome (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2011), 9–32; Niels Paul Arends, *Fragments from the Past. A Social-Economic Survey of the Landholding System in the Ravenna Papyri* (PhD diss., University of Leiden, 2018). Other references to the role of councils can be seen in the letters of Gregory the Great (2.9, 2.8, 8.15, 9.58, 9.71, 9.98, 13.18, etc.). I would like to thank Andrew Wallace-Hadrill for pointing these out. See also: Merle Eisenberg and Paolo Tedesco, ‘Seeing the Churches Like the State: Taxes and Wealth Redistribution in Late Antique Italy’, *Early Medieval Europe* 29, no. 4 (2021): 505–534. For Gaul: Josiane Barbier, *Archives oubliées du haut moyen âge. Les gesta municipalia en Gaule franque (VI^e–IX^e siècle)* (Paris: Champion, 2014).

³⁷ Cas. *Var.* 1.21.1 (citizens and *amor patriae*), 3.10 (duty towards local city), 3.49 (*caritas civica*), 7.44 (civic duty towards local monuments); Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, ‘The Cities of Cassiodorus: The Resilience of Urban Values’ in *Remembering and Forgetting the Ancient City*, ed. Javier Martínez Jiménez and Sam Ottewill-Soulsby (Oxford: Oxbow, 2022): 23–44.

periods,³⁸ and since the cull on local taxes from municipal lands,³⁹ town councils appear to have relied on these payments to fund their expenses. A regular expenditure could have been writing equipment and material like parchment and papyrus (the sort that Gregory of Tours complains about).⁴⁰ These materials are essential in the running of councils, which evidently produced paperwork at a rate which is higher than what we can imagine based on the surviving evidence. Most funds would have been invested back into the city through the maintenance of infrastructure. Imperial legislation underlined the need of local involvement in the preservation of hydraulic infrastructure, for example.⁴¹ Some of these laws relieved local councils' burdens and expected private landowners to keep public aqueducts that crossed their lands clean,⁴² but public workmen in charge of aqueduct maintenance still existed in sixth-century Gaul and Italy.⁴³ Similarly, investment into public baths seems to have come to a halt, and although some continued (perhaps through leases to private individuals), municipal funds had traditionally been also invested in fuel and maintenance.⁴⁴

³⁸ Harmut Ziche, 'Making Late Roman Taxpayers Pay: Imperial Government Strategies and Practices', in *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices*, ed. H. Drake (London: Routledge, 2006), 127–137, here 127–128.

³⁹ Hendrik Dey, *The Afterlife of the Roman City. Architecture and Ceremony in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 30; Ward-Perkins, 'The Cities'; but we should remember that '[t]here is no satisfactory account of municipal taxation under the Empire': Luuk de Ligt, *Fairs and Markets in the Roman Empire: Economic and Social Aspects of Periodic Trade in a Pre-industrial Economy* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 208, n. 31.

⁴⁰ Greg. Tur. *DLH*, 5.20. Cf. Robert Flierman, 'Gregory of Tours and the Merovingian Letter', *Journal of Medieval History* 47, no. 2 (2021): 119–144.

⁴¹ Christer Brunn, 'Roman Emperors and Legislation on Public Water in the Roman Empire: Clarifications and Problems', *Water History* 4, no. 1 (2012): 11–34.

⁴² *CTheod* 15.2.1 = *CIust* 11.43.1.1.

⁴³ Gaul: Greg. Tur. *DLH*, 2.33: *artifex ille cui de aqueducto cura manebat*. Italy: Cass. *Var.*, 7.6.2 and Yuri Marano, "'Watered... with the life-giving wave". Aqueducts and Water Management in Ostrogothic Italy', in *Ownership and Exploitation of Land and Natural Resources in the Roman World*, ed. Paul Erdkamp, Koenraad Verboven, and Arjan Zuiderhoek (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 150–169.

⁴⁴ Douglas Underwood, *(Re)use Ruins: Public Building in the Cities of the Late Antique West, A.D. 300–600* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 71–88.

Municipal investments became fewer and rarer as the number of public infrastructures that demanded these commitments declined.⁴⁵ Private individuals, however, still invested in public constructions, although these were mostly religious in nature.⁴⁶ The construction of churches by bishops or donations by private individuals were still part of the social contract even if the political circumstances were different. In these cases, it was done so to invest in the spiritual and religious needs of the people, which were as high on the list of early medieval community needs as municipal infrastructure. Preserving or modifying the space in these ways allowed for the creation of a place that fitted better the needs and expectations of its community. And yet, the social contract worked both ways; it was not only the elites who had to do something for the community, the people also had a role to play.

2.4 *Popular Participation and Community Involvement*

Popular participation in the post-Roman city is more difficult to trace than elite investment: mentions in the sources are anecdotal, and laws and council acts may reflect ideal situations rather than actual practices. But still, in the Isidorian conception of the city (*civitas*) as a group of people bound by residence and networks of loyalty and solidarity, the *hoi poloi* still mattered—if anything because there would be no city without them.⁴⁷

At one level, the participation of city dwellers was essential in certain political appointments of public offices, in a way that was altogether unrelated with pre-existing forms of civic assemblies.⁴⁸ These were not necessarily elections, but popular acclamations and confirmations. These acts of communal agreement were a sign of civic consensus and were essential in the consecration of bishops and other members of the local

⁴⁵ For an overall survey, see: Underwood, (*Re*)use Ruins.

⁴⁶ Carlos Machado, *Urban Space and Aristocratic Power in Late Antique Rome: AD 270–535* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 66–69; Salzman, ‘From a Classical to a Christian City’.

⁴⁷ Julio Cesar Magalhães de Oliveira, ‘Late Antiquity: The Age of Crowds?’, *Past & Present* 249, no. 1 (2020): 3–52.

⁴⁸ Peter van Nuffelen, ‘A Relationship of Justice. Becoming the People in Late Antiquity’, in *Civic Identity and Civic Participation in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Cédric Brélaz and Els Rose (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 249–270.

clergy.⁴⁹ This need for compromise also applied to the appointment of lay figures like counts, where urban factions could clash and cause revolts if consensus was not achieved.⁵⁰ The actual political impact of these popular demonstrations is difficult to gauge, but the idea of consensus as part of the urban order is ingrained in the sociology of place-defined groups.⁵¹

The participation in pagan civic cults had been a defining element of ancient citizenship,⁵² but Christian cults (especially that of local saints) took over these community-binding ceremonies during late Antiquity.⁵³ Local martyrs and saints were essential in the re-definition of urban communities as Christian ones, as if by sharing the same earthly (municipal) citizenship these saints could act as intermediaries between their fellow town dwellers and the Almighty. These cults, moreover, with their local, place-focused narratives, helped to create a Christian landscape with new memories that re-defined what it was, for the local community, to live in that city. Besides, Mass and other religious celebrations like public penitence, burials, weddings, and processions were rituals in which the congregation came together and was expected to participate,⁵⁴ consolidating the links between local cults, local inhabitants, and the shared understanding of the environment.

We must also mention that processions were other events in which the urban community participated either actively or as spectators. From an anthropological perspective, processions are nothing more than ritualised *habitus* that link various key places in the city.⁵⁵ Processions connected sites which were perceived as important landmarks (palaces, churches,

⁴⁹ Susan Loftus, 'Episcopal Elections in Gaul: The Normative View of the Concilia Galliae Versus the Narrative Accounts', in *Episcopal Elections in Late Antiquity*, ed. Johan Leemans and Shawn Keough (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 423–436.

⁵⁰ Italy: Cass. Var. 7.3; Gaul: Greg. Tur. *DLH*, 5.48, 8.18, 8.58.

⁵¹ Erin Araujo, 'Consensus and Activism Through Collective Exchanges: A Focus on El Cambalache, Mexico', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 36, no. 11 (2016): 741–755.

⁵² Cf. Blok, *Citizenship*.

⁵³ Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 129–132.

⁵⁴ Els Rose, 'Plebs sancta ideo meminere debet. The Role of the People in the Early Medieval Liturgy of Mass', in *Das Christentum im frühen Europa: Diskurse – Tendenzen – Entscheidungen*, ed. Uta Heil (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 459–476.

⁵⁵ Martínez Jiménez and Tejerizo García, 'Assessing Place-Based Identities'.

shrines, gates, etc.), and their central importance was only strengthened in the collective cognitive maps by these linear rituals. They also are occasions for the community to participate, to see and be seen, and reinforce local bonds of belonging by participation and sharing experiences.⁵⁶ These were forms of participation that could also take place alongside other festivals linked to the agricultural calendar, games linked to weddings, or public banquets in celebrations and funerals.⁵⁷

The running of a city across cultures and across history requires collaboration, commitment, investment, and some degree of coercion. In the classical Roman period, this was organised through municipal local governments, the bare concept of which was preserved into late Antiquity and the post-Roman period. Local elites, even in this late period, were still expected to invest in the community, which they did for a combination of reasons, from civic duty to moral obligation, Christian charity, and the community's social expectations. Based on the information preserved in inscriptions or texts we can prove very little about the actual workings of the city, but public urban infrastructure was a governance resource. This is an element that facilitated the management of a space; and controlling it aided in the preservation of the sense of place that bound the community together.⁵⁸

This broad and theoretical proposal works as an introductory interpretation that explains the social, cultural, and political needs behind civic commitment in late antique and early medieval urban communities. More examples from across the Mediterranean can improve our perception, and for the rest of this paper I shall look into the cities of sixth- and seventh-century Iberia to further analyse civic commitment and investment as expressions of the urban social contract that was in place in Visigothic cities.

⁵⁶ Leslie Brubaker and Chris Wickham, 'Processions, Power, and Community Identity: East and West', in *Empires and Communities in the Post-Roman and Islamic World, c. 400–1000 CE*, ed. Walter Pohl and Rutger Kramer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 121–187.

⁵⁷ Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul: A.D. 481–751* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 217–224.

⁵⁸ Fafinski, *Roman Infrastructure*, here 23–34.

3 COMMITMENT, CONSENSUS, AND CONTRIBUTION: CIVIC COMMUNITIES IN VISIGOTHIC IBERIA

From the departure of the Roman troops and government officers in the first half of the fifth century and up until the mid-sixth century, local populations in the Hispanic provinces were left to self-rule—in a way, perhaps, not that different from what happened in Britain at the same time.⁵⁹ Some areas to the north and west became integrated into the Suevic kingdom, but most of the central and southern regions were seemingly left to their own devices. The Visigoths began to establish themselves in the peninsula as allies of the Empire already in the 440s, but beyond nominal presence at a few strategic locations (including centrally located Toledo, well-fortified Barcelona, and economically powerful Mérida), actual control was not implemented up to the second half of the sixth century and the first decades of the seventh century.⁶⁰ This period of state formation (560s–630s) marked the point when royal control became effective across the territory, prompting a collaboration between the monarchy, its military elites, and the local landowning aristocrats, reaching a level of Roman-like centralisation that the Frankish or Lombard kingdoms lacked.⁶¹

Cities in early Medieval Iberia continued to function as place-defined communities,⁶² and were perfectly integrated into the new post-Roman administrative system, since the monarchy needed the collaboration of the city-based landowning elites. While the literary sources are scarcer than for Gaul or Italy, there is perhaps enough that can be combined with

⁵⁹ Fafinski, *Roman Infrastructure*.

⁶⁰ Javier Arce, ‘The Visigoths in Hispania: New Perspectives on Their Arrival and Settlement’, in *The Visigothic Kingdom: The Negotiation of Power in Post-Roman Iberia*, ed. Sabine Panzram and Paulo Pachá (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 59–78; Santiago Castellanos, *The Visigothic Kingdom in Iberia: Construction and Invention* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Edward Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians: The Decline of the Western Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 74.

⁶¹ Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 95.

⁶² Javier Martínez Jiménez, ‘Local Citizenships and the Visigothic Kingdom’, in *The Visigothic Kingdom: The Negotiation of Power in Post-Roman Iberia*, ed. Sabine Panzram and Paulo Pachá (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 195–212.

the archaeological record to explain in more detail the workings of civic commitment in the Visigothic case study.

Public investment in municipal infrastructure during the Visigothic period is an obscure subject. Municipal government appears to have been reduced to appointed magistrates and a council in charge of the bureaucratic aspects of administration. Naturally, in larger cities and administrative hubs (Córdoba, Mérida, Barcelona, Tarragona, Lisbon, Valencia, Braga, Narbonne, etc.) it is likelier that local government held more traces of a wider municipal administration than in secondary towns. However, there were still powerful figures in these cities who acted as leaders, investing private and public resources in updating their urban space in order to improve their shared sense of place. It seems that these magistrates and councils still had access to public funds, which they invested in the maintenance of public infrastructure.

3.1 *Powerholders in Visigothic Cities*

In Visigothic cities, the main figure in the lay administration was the count (*comes*), which was centrally appointed to rule a city. This was a position that technically (but not always actually) seems to have existed alongside the higher, military/provincial governor, the duke (*dux*).⁶³ In the case of Claudius of Mérida (*dux Emeritensis civitatis*), his ducal rank came from his role in the royal military, but he appears to have also been the leading officer of Mérida (itself a provincial capital).⁶⁴ Immediately below, there was a municipal council that was restricted to local ‘notables’ (variously named *primates*, *primarii*, *senatores*, *curiales*, etc.).⁶⁵

⁶³ Pablo Poveda Arias, ‘The Role of the Military Factor in the Political and Administrative Shaping of the Visigothic Kingdom (Sixth to Seventh Centuries)’, in *Early Medieval Militarisation*, ed. Ellora Bennett, Guido M. Berndt, Stefan Esders, and Laury Sarti (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 115–129. Cf. *LV* 12.1.2.

⁶⁴ Roger Collins, ‘An Unreliable Witness?: Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium and Religious Conflict in Visigothic Spain’, *Revista Diálogos Mediterráneos* 21 (2021): 36–58.

⁶⁵ de Oliveira, ‘Le quotidien’; Michael Kulikowski, ‘Cities and Civic Identities in Late Roman and Visigothic Spain’, in *Civic Identity and Civic Participation in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Cédric Bréaz and Els Rose (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 195–212.

These filled, at least into the seventh century, whatever public magistracies still existed as well as their position as members of the local councils, which were still relevant in the running of the city.⁶⁶

These local councils were very different from the municipal institution that had existed five centuries prior, but inasmuch as it served the interests of the city protected by local legal customs, it can still be considered to be a post-Roman form of civic government that honoured its elite rulers with titles and positions. The roles of the council itself were mostly clerical and bureaucratic, especially as registrars and notaries, although the evidence is tenuous.⁶⁷ These magistracies (broadly described as *iudices* in the sources), were still desirable posts, as they were key steps to achieve a position in the central administration (the *officium palatinum*) later on. We do not know what these junior/local positions were precisely, but the few leading positions in the cities of the Visigothic period (the *curator*, the *defensor*, and the *numerarius*) were appointed from among those eligible to the council and held certain roles as *iudices*.⁶⁸

Besides the purely lay administration, bishops appear to have played a key role in running the city, a responsibility partly inherited from the late Roman model. While this is supported by some royal documents like the *De fisco Barcinonensi*,⁶⁹ ecclesiastical sources like the *Lives of the Fathers of Mérida* might have exaggerated their role. Bishops, in any case, belonged to the landed class of a city; in that way, bishops were part of the traditional elites of these urban communities, but they had opted for a route to power that was, by the sixth century, firmly established. The way they looked after their flock and assisted the lay authorities in their

⁶⁶ During the reign of Chindaswinth (r. 642–653) a law still existed (*LV* 5.4.19) that still expected *curiales* to pay taxes for their property to the *arca publica*, although it is unclear what administrative and political local duties they had; Leonard Curchin, ‘Curials and Local Government in Visigothic Hispania’, *Antiquité Tardive* 26 (2018): 225–240.

⁶⁷ For Spain: Kulikowski, ‘Cities and civic identities’; Curchin, ‘Curials and Local government’; Damián Fernández, ‘Transformaciones institucionales y liderazgo cívico en la Hispania post-imperial’, in *Urban Transformations in the Late Antique West: Materials, Agents, and Models*, ed. André Carneiro, Neil Christie, and Pilar Diarte (Coimbra: Coimbra University Press, 2020), 259–279. They might have existed, to a degree, in Britain: Fafinski, *Roman Infrastructure*.

⁶⁸ Céline Martin, ‘Administration and Justice’, in *The Brill Companion to Visigothic Iberia*, ed. Jamie Wood, Molly Lester, and Javier Martínez Jiménez (Leiden: Brill, forth.).

⁶⁹ Damián Fernández, ‘What Is the De fisco Barcinonensi About?’, *Antiquité Tardive* 14 (2006): 217–224.

duties does not mean that municipal government had been overturned and abandoned, simply that the local elites had two alternative ways to secure political power (and of fulfilling the community's expectations).⁷⁰

These urban leaders, regardless of the way they held or achieved local power, had inherited from the Roman past a series of political privileges and fiscal exemptions, but these came with municipal responsibilities. These magistrates had to collect taxes or act as jurors, but they still had to make *ex officio* payments into the public treasury.⁷¹ These payments were the main forms of income for municipal councils which they could use to invest back into public property and infrastructure, but the needs of urban communities surpassed what the municipal institution could offer, which is where charitable donations and private largesse come into play.

3.2 *The Many Faces of Civic Commitment*

Urban elites in Visigothic Iberia invested back into their local communities in three main ways, just as we have described for early medieval Europe as a whole: through the lay (municipal) administration, through the local church, and at an individual level. In doing so they justified their political power, secured their networks of patronage, and reinforced the sense of community by reverting wealth back into the shared space, aiding in the consolidation of a shared perception of place. The individual motivations and institutional justifications might have varied, but the net result remains the same. But it was not only the elites who had a role to play in the consolidation of a place-based community—town dwellers also had to partake in certain aspects, so beyond institutionally-backed contributions and private examples of munificence, we must remember that there were forms of communal action that helped reinforce a city's urban community.

⁷⁰ Pablo Poveda Arias, 'Coexisting Leaderships in the Visigothic Cities: A 'Cooperative' Model', in *Leadership, Social Cohesion, and Identity in Late Antique Spain and Gaul (500–700)*, ed. Dolores Castro and Fernando Ruchesi (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 159–183.

⁷¹ For the *munera* see: Curchin, 'Curials and Local Government'; cf. Enrique Melchor Gil, 'Summae honorariae y donaciones ob honorem en la Hispania romana', *Habis* 25 (1994): 193–212 and *LV* 5.4.19.

Institutional Contributions

Public expenditure for institutional investment in the Visigothic period was very limited, but it was not non-existent. The first question that emerges here is, naturally, if there were any public funds and where they could have possibly come from. Public funds came from the payments of the *civilia munera*, but other local taxes might (and I should underline this ‘might’ as a possibility) have also been collected. The royal administration collected, through its customs officers (the *telonarii*), tariffs on the import and export of luxury items.⁷² Other, basic products seem to have been exempt from these royal tariffs, and could have easily been taxed locally as it had happened in Roman times. A sales tax similar to the *ansarium* of Ostrogothic Italy can be inferred from the wording of a seventh-century law against the Jews, who are levied an extra tax different from other, general ones.⁷³ The 541 law on processual charges, similarly, hints that a tenth of the fine’s cash was to be returned to the *iudices* (i.e., the magistrates).⁷⁴ Lastly, we should consider that all other sorts of local rents derived from public urban plots and concessions (including market rights) and fines would have, similarly, been paid to the city’s treasury.⁷⁵ None of these incomes, even combined, would have been able to make up for the loss of the taxes and rents on rural public properties (these had been usurped by the central administration already in the fourth century), but it shows that councils had other potential forms of income. Moreover,

⁷² LV 12.3.1. *aurum, argentum, vestimenta vel quelibet ornamenta*. Cf. LV 12.2.18, where the *cataplus* is also a place. Also: Salvador Maríekurena, ‘Puertos y comercio marítimo en la España visigoda’, *Polis* 11 (1999): 135–160; Francesc Rodríguez Martorell, ‘Acerca de los conceptos telonum, catabolus y cataplus en las fuentes francas y visigodas: el caso del puerto de Tarragona’, in *Oppidum-Civitas-Urbs. Städteforschung auf der Iberischer Halbinsel zwischen Rom und al-Andalus*, ed. Sabine Panzram (Münster: Lit, 2017), 811–832.

⁷³ LV XII.2.18; Pilar Fernández Uriel, ‘Alguas precisiones sobre el sistema fiscal romano’, *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma II* 8 (1995): 159–181; Santiago Castellanos García, ‘The Political Nature of Taxation in Visigothic Spain’, *Early Medieval Europe* 12, no. 3 (2003): 201–228.

⁷⁴ LV suppl. II. *De ea vero, que exigerit; decimum num[mum] pro suo consequatur exercitio; hac conditione [ad]dita ut si commodatas exigerit pecunias, suprascriptum commodi modum, exactores a reddente poena[m] recipientem recipiant.*

⁷⁵ Although this scenario is more fitting for the fifth than the sixth century; Curchin, ‘Curials and Local Government’, 233; cf. Manuel Ruiz Bueno, ‘La desarticulación del callejero hispanorromano: cambios en la infraestructura viaria y de saneamiento entre los siglos II y VII d. C’, *Archivo Español de Arqueología* 91 (2018): 143–162.

the use of small-denomination coins in urban contexts at these dates and the minting of new *minimi* demonstrate the continuity of a cash economy in the larger cities of the peninsula.⁷⁶ A monetised economy of this type could facilitate trade and local markets, as well as local taxes as those described.

With this kind of available funding, we can take a step forward to give historical explanations to archaeological questions, especially those linked to urban infrastructure. After all, the money collected in cash from these indirect commercial transactions could later be invested back into the city through low- and intermediate-level salaried administrators and it could have also been used to fund contractors employed for the maintenance of public infrastructure, although larger projects (which would have required larger budgets) might have been excluded.⁷⁷

Most public buildings inherited from the Roman past were, in the sixth century, out of use. Buildings like circuses, theatres, and amphitheatres had been abandoned, converted, or dismantled as the spectacles associated with them had ceased to be popular, feasible, or affordable from the fourth century onwards.⁷⁸ Most fora and civil basilicae, similarly, had been allowed to be encroached upon, quarried, or repurposed.⁷⁹ The maintenance and preservation of these structures would have been

⁷⁶ Ruth Pliego, 'The Circulation of Copper Coins in the Iberian Peninsula During the Visigothic Period: New Approaches', *Journal of Archaeological Numismatics* 5, no. 6 (2015–2016): 125–160; Ruth Pliego, 'Rethinking the Minimi of the Iberian Peninsula and Balearic Islands in Late Antiquity', *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2020): 125–154; Ruth Pliego and Tawfiq Ibrahim, 'La ciudad a través de las emisiones monetarias y sigilográficas de la Península Ibérica de la Antigüedad Tardía a la conquista Omeya', in *Entre civitas y madina*, ed. Sabine Panzram and Laurent Callegarin (Madrid: Casa de Velazquez, 2018), 135–155.

⁷⁷ The monarchy did invest its economic resources (and cash) in new constructions (like cities and walls): Andrew Kurt, *Minting, State, and Economy in the Visigothic Kingdom: From Settlement in Aquitaine Through the First Decade of the Muslim Conquest of Spain* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 262; cf. Javier Martínez Jiménez, Isaac Sastre de Diego, and Carlos Tejerizo García, *The Iberian Peninsula 300–850: An Archaeological Perspective* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 170–180.

⁷⁸ Juan Antonio Jiménez Sánchez, 'Un testimonio tardío de ludi teatrales en Hispania', *Gerión* 21, no. 1 (2003): 71–377; idem, 'Los últimos ludi circenses realizados en Hispania en época visigoda', *Faventia* 28 (2006): 99–113; Martínez Jiménez et al., *The Iberian Peninsula*, 80–82.

⁷⁹ Pilar Diarte Blasco, *La configuración urbana de la Hispania tardoantigua: transformaciones y pervivencias de los espacios públicos romanos (s. III–VI d.C.)* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2012).

the responsibility of councils and magistrates like the aediles, something that imperial legislation had been adamant about.⁸⁰ But these buildings belonged to a past phase of the city, their original purpose did not fulfil a social need any longer,⁸¹ so letting them be recycled or occupied was only natural. Other urban infrastructure, however, preserved their social relevance and their role in articulating the city, and it is in these that we can infer council intervention.

Aqueducts, even if not essential, had become in the late antique world an urban expectation. Preserving the water supply ensured the continuity of a way of living that had been honed for centuries, and was an integral part of the conception of the city as a place. The fact that a handful of aqueducts continued in use into the sixth and seventh centuries in the main cities of the Visigothic kingdom (including those of Valencia, Lisbon, Barcelona, Córdoba, Tarragona, and Mérida; Fig. 1) can only be explained due to regular maintenance of the conduits as opposed to one-off large-scale repairs.⁸² Only the regular cleaning of conduits and sluices of sand, sediment, and debris ensured the viability of aqueduct supply in the long term.⁸³ In fact, the one example we have of a major reconstruction (one of the pillars of the aqueduct of Los Milagros, in Mérida, Fig. 2), belongs to a failed attempt.⁸⁴

The construction of new public fountains in fifth-century and sixth-century contexts is also worth noting. The best example is that of Lisbon (Fig. 3), which was clearly connected to a pipe, but it is possible that there was a late fifth-century fountain linked to an inscription built in Tarragona and there was certainly a public water distribution point at

⁸⁰ Cf. Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Cities of Cassiodorus'.

⁸¹ Javier Martínez Jiménez, 'Foundational Grids and Urban Communities in the Iberian Peninsula in Antiquity and the Middle Ages', in *Rome and the Colonial City*, ed. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill and Sofia Greaves (Oxford: Oxbow, 2022), 237–264.

⁸² Javier Martínez Jiménez, *Aqueducts and Urbanism in Post-Roman Hispania* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2019).

⁸³ Trevor Hodge, *Roman Aqueducts and Water Supply* (London: Duckworth, 1992).

⁸⁴ Miguel Alba Calzado and Pedro Mateos Cruz, 'El paisaje urbano de Emerita en época visigoda', in *Recópolis y la ciudad en la época visigoda*. Zona Arqueológica 9, ed. Lauro Olmo Enciso (Alcalá de Henares: Museo Arqueológico Regional, 2008), 261–273, here 268.



Fig. 1 Map of the Iberian Peninsula indicating those aqueducts that continued in use after the fifth century

the new city of Reccopolis.⁸⁵ In the absence of any direct evidence, it is impossible to confirm if these were public or private initiatives, but they show that, by building these fountains, the aqueduct was expected to keep on functioning—which was a public responsibility.

Something similar could be said about streets. In most cities, the flagged and cobbled surfaces of the earlier Roman phases had been abandoned during the fourth century in favour of trampled earth and streets metalled with gravel, clay, and lime.⁸⁶ This transition from one surface to another affected urbanism at many levels, including the rising of street circulation levels, and the blocking of accesses to underground

⁸⁵ Martínez Jiménez, *Aqueducts and Urbanism*, 68–72; Javier Martínez Jiménez and Joaquín Checa Herraiz, ‘The Water Cycle in Reccopolis’, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 36, no. 1 (2023): 157–185.

⁸⁶ Ruiz Bueno, ‘La desarticulación del callejero’; Cf. Luke Lavan, *Public Space in the Late Antique City* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), vol. 1, 146–149.



Fig. 2 Failed sixth-century repair of a pillar of the Los Milagros aqueduct, Mérida



Fig. 3 The late antique fountain of Lisbon. Note the reused masonry and the groove for the pipe

sewers (Fig. 4).⁸⁷ But this transition was not simply a process of lack of care or abandonment; these new road surfaces were the result of direct, active action that promoted a new road surface that was easier to maintain and repair on the long term. The fact that street alignments and directions were, overall, preserved shows both a degree of municipal ruling and evident prioritising of main avenues vs. secondary streets and back alleys.⁸⁸ Moreover, streets in this period had changed from convex surfaces (where water ran off to side drains) to concave ones (with a central gutter), still facilitating the drainage of rainwater. This is a transition from a model that can be seen from fourth-century Mérida and Córdoba. It had become standard practice by the late sixth century in Reccopolis. Even in those places where public streets are encroached

⁸⁷ Cf. Jesús Acero Pérez, *La gestión de los residuos en Augusta Emerita. Siglos I a.C. - VII d.C.* Anejos de Archivo Español de Arqueología 82 (Mérida: CSIC, 2018).

⁸⁸ Lavan, *Public Space*, loc. cit.; Martínez Jiménez, 'Foundational Grids'.

upon by private structures (like the baths of the Domus of the Marbles in Mérida or the apse of the basilicas of St. Fructuosus in Tarragona and the cathedral of Valencia),⁸⁹ the streets are never blocked and even alternative diversions are created.

Considering the direct archaeological evidence at our disposal, it would seem that the minting of local coins (especially those with the CIVITA[S] legends), together with the maintenance of streets and, to an extent, of water supplies were the only ways in which municipal councils invested



Fig. 4 Archaeological site of Morería, Mérida: first-century street level with flagstones up to the portico and post-fourth-century structures encroaching the portico built on top of the trampled earth late antique street level

⁸⁹ Jordi López Vilar, *Les basíliques paleocristianes del suburbi occidental de Tarraco. El temple septentrional i el complex martiriàl de Sant Fructuós, Tarragona* (Tarragona: ICAC, 2006); Arnau Perich Roca and Ferran Gris Jeremías, ‘Las fases tardorromana y visigoda de al “Casa de los Mármoles” (Mérida, España). Análisis arquitectónico y nuevas propuestas de restitución’, *Oppidum. Cuadernos de investigación* 11 (2015): 171–198; Albert Ribera Lacomba, ‘Origen i desenvolupament del nucli episcopal de València’, in *VI Reunió d’arqueologia cristiana hispànica*, ed. Josep Maria Gurt Esparraguera and Albert Ribera Lacomba (Barcelona: Institut d’Estudis Catalans, 2005), 207–243.

in their city's infrastructure. It may not seem as much, but these actions underline the continuity of institutionalised forms of community investment out of political duty but also a result of the social contract and the urban inhabitants' expectations.

Having said this, there are a few new constructions that might have housed the new municipal administration, including some 'palaces' that are associated with counts in Córdoba, Gerona, Barcelona, and, perhaps, Mérida (Fig. 5).⁹⁰ While these new spaces of political representation probably belonged to the centrally imposed administration, it is possible that the municipal order was involved in their construction, especially since its traditional buildings of representation (fora and basilicae) were not the main focal points of political power any longer.



Fig. 5 Fifth-to-sixth-century public structure built in the temenos of the temple of the imperial cult in Mérida

⁹⁰ Manuel Ruiz Bueno, 'Transformaciones en la topografía del poder de Córdoba entre los siglos III y VII', *Al-Mulk* 18 (2020): 93–122; Martínez Jiménez et al., *The Iberian Peninsula*, 170–173.

The continuity of some form of municipal administration in the cities of the Visigothic kingdom can be expected because the vast majority of these cities had existed as self-governing settlements for centuries.⁹¹ The fact that this was a model that was part of the early medieval concept of the city and that was still valid in late-sixth and seventh-century contexts can be seen in the case of Reccopolis. The city of Reccopolis was a new urban foundation of the 570s. It is a perfect case study of Visigothic urbanism—or at least of what the urban ideal was in the late sixth century.⁹² The colonists of the new city were granted urban and rural plots, certain, undefined *privilegia*, and a new urban environment: the perfect circumstances to develop a place-defined sense of belonging and to form an urban community.⁹³ The royal foundation replicated the ideal of a city in sixth-century Visigothic politics, and that had to include some form of local administration. While the excavated area in the city is quite small, the known streets show a continuity of metalling maintenance and drain and fountain management. Small change has also been found in the commercial street, but the city was also a recurrent mint whose coins bore the RECCOPOLIT(ANA [CIVITAS?]) legend. The city had at least one main basilica and an axial layout that would have favoured processions. We cannot know if the legal figure of the *civis reccopolitanus* existed, but Reccopolis functioned like other cities of its time—at least into the eighth century. Regardless of the initial royal input, the existence of the city into the Islamic period is a testament to the interest of the community and the commitment of its inhabitants, replicating the urban and civic life of other cities of the Iberian Peninsula.

Private Donations

As in earlier periods, private investment usually outdid public monumentality, mostly because such displays of conspicuous consumption of

⁹¹ Pieter Houten, ‘Civitates Hispaniae. Urbanisation on the Iberian Peninsula During the High Empire’ (PhD diss., University of Leiden, 2018).

⁹² Joachim Henning, Michael McCormick, Lauro Olmo Enciso, Knut Rassman, and Eyub Fikrit, ‘Reccopolis Revealed: First Geomagnetic Mapping of the Early Medieval Visigothic Royal Town’, *Antiquity* 93 (2019): 735–751.

⁹³ Lalli, ‘Urban-related identity’; Javier Martínez Jiménez, ‘Civitatem Condidit. City Building and Community Formation in the New Visigothic Urban Foundations’, in *Lived Spaces in Late Antiquity*, ed. Carlos Machado and Rebecca Sweetman (London: Routledge, forth.).

architecture exceeded the monetary capabilities of councils and it reported larger benefits to single individuals. We have explored already what councils could have done but we must remember that private investments had always been a fundamental part in the construction and maintenance of city infrastructure. Private individuals had access to more resources, and their position of power generated more expectations in the community for them to return something to it. Elite munificence is, in this sense, much more straightforward to identify, and examples of individual largesse are better known because of the limited but ongoing epigraphic habit.⁹⁴

Investment in infrastructure were rarer in this period, and we only have certain examples for the fifth century; the repair of the walls and bridge of Mérida by Bishop Zeno in the 480s.⁹⁵ These repairs were commemorated with a metric inscription that praises the bishop for having done these repairs because of the damage caused by old age (*ruinosa vetustas*) out of *amor (patriae)*.⁹⁶ After this unique example, however, most privately-funded investments were religious in nature.

Parishes, funerary basilicas, monastic sites, cathedrals, and episcopal complexes became prominent elements in urban landscapes, especially from the sixth century onwards. We find plenty of archaeological, literary, and epigraphic examples across the peninsula (Mérida, Córdoba, Valencia, Tarragona, Barcelona) and Septimania (Narbonne, Nîmes).⁹⁷ The way some of them reoccupied public spaces (like amphitheatres or forum areas, Fig. 6) hint at some degree of municipal collaboration and, perhaps, regulation, but we must see private initiative behind these constructions. Whether these result from ecclesiastical or lay patrons is certainly a matter for debate,⁹⁸ but they were the result of elite investment in the type of

⁹⁴ Cf. Daniel Rico Camps, 'Arquitectura y epigrafía en la Antigüedad Tardía. Testimonios hispanos', *Pyrenae* 40, no. 1 (2009): 7–53.

⁹⁵ Daniel Osland, 'Text and Context: Patronage in Late Antique Mérida', *Studies in Late Antiquity* 3, no. 4 (2019): 581–625.

⁹⁶ ICM 10 = ICERV 353, lines 1 and 14.

⁹⁷ Martínez Jiménez et al., *The Iberian Peninsula*, 161–168; Frank Riess, *Narbonne and Its Territory in Late Antiquity. From the Visigoths to the Arabs* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁹⁸ Andrew Kurt, 'Lay Piety in Visigothic Iberia: Liturgical and Paraliturgical Forms', *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2016): 1–37; María de los Ángeles Utrero Agudo and Francisco José Moreno Martín, 'Evergetism Among the Bishops of Hispania Between the Sixth and Seventh Centuries: A Dialogue Between Archaeological and Documentary Sources', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 23, no. 1 (2015): 97–131.

monumental architecture that urban communities required. The origins of Christian architecture in the urban landscapes were in the suburbs, and originated as memorial shrines associated to funerary areas, but these early spaces were insufficient for the needs of sixth-century urban congregations. By funding these cult buildings, urban elites consolidated their positions of power and, within a Christian rhetoric, earned merits for the Afterlife, but they also provided social and spiritual hubs to meet the demands of their fellow city dwellers. These churches would also become focal points in the communities' conceptions of place.⁹⁹

Other examples of private munificence that have been understood through the lens of Christian piety but that also underline the importance of local solidarities for the integration of place-based communities are charitable constructions and donations.¹⁰⁰ From the *Life* of Bishop Masona of Mérida, despite the elegiac nature of the hagiography, we know about the distribution of a dole (a local *annona*) and the construction of a hostel-hospital (*xenodochium*).¹⁰¹ Another aspect of episcopal charity that reflected on the well-being of the community was the redeeming and ransoming of captives.¹⁰² Such acts of charity were not uncommon in the period,¹⁰³ and a structure excavated in Mérida has been identified as the *xenodochium*. This structure would have been part of a suburban monastic complex dedicated to service the local community and any pilgrims coming to the city.¹⁰⁴ The construction of a set of baths adjacent to the episcopal complex of Barcelona¹⁰⁵ suggests that similar, Church-sponsored, public constructions set within this pious version of

⁹⁹ Martínez Jiménez and Tejerizo García, 'Assessing Place-Based Identities'; Kurt, 'Lay Piety'.

¹⁰⁰ Salzman, 'From a Classical to a Christian City'.

¹⁰¹ *VPE*, 5.3. There are also mentions of a city *annona* (*annona civitatis*) in later Visigothic laws (*LV* 12.1.2).

¹⁰² William Klingshirn, 'Charity and Power: Caesarius of Arles and the Ransoming of Captives in Sub-Roman Gaul', *Journal of Roman Studies* 75 (1985): 183–203.

¹⁰³ Raquel Homet, 'Formas de la caridad en la España visigoda', *Estudios de Historia de España* 3 (1990): 5–28.

¹⁰⁴ Pedro Mateos Cruz, 'A propósito del edificio identificado como el xenodochium de Masona en Mérida. Aspectos cronológicos y funcionales', *Spal* 31, no. 1 (2022): 426–442.

¹⁰⁵ Virginia García-Entero, *Los balnea domésticos –ámbito rural y urbano– en la Hispania romana*. Anecjos de Archivo Español de Arqueología 37 (Madrid: CSIC, 2005), 213.



Fig. 6 Foundations of the sixth-century basilica (under standing walls of the later, medieval church) built in the Roman amphitheatre of Tarragona

uergetism were not uncommon.¹⁰⁶ In contrast, it is more than likely that the sixth-century public baths of Mérida (Fig. 7) were privately built

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Bryan Ward-Perkins, *From Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Urban Public Building in Northern and Central Italy AD 300–850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 140.

and run, although it is impossible to say if these were the result of lay or episcopal initiative.¹⁰⁷

Most of these private investments in monumental architecture and public services can also be seen as ways of singling the city in opposition to its neighbours, underlining its individuality and their differences; as peer-polity interaction.¹⁰⁸ Having a new cathedral, larger than the nearest local neighbour's, or preserving a functioning aqueduct when the nearest city had lost its supply, could be seen as a source of local content. The hunt for the holy and the collection and accumulation of multiple relics was not



Fig. 7 Sixth-century baths near the theatre complex in Mérida

¹⁰⁷ García-Entero, *Los balnea*, 527–529.

¹⁰⁸ John Ma, 'Peer Polity Interaction in the Hellenistic Age', *Past & Present* 180 (2003): 9–39; Colin Renfrew and John Cherry, *Peer Polity Interaction and Socio-Political Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

only a lucrative business, but a matter of local pride.¹⁰⁹ This form of inter-community competition further helped to validate place-based identities and to strengthen the sense of belonging.¹¹⁰

Lastly, we should note that, as opposed to what had happened in the early Roman period, there were fewer options when it came to investing private resources into public festivities. Horse or chariot racing might have continued into the sixth century, and there is a reference to *ludi teatrales* in the 620s linked to private initiative, but these have to be seen as anecdotal occurrences.¹¹¹ Most other forms of public entertainment in the Visigothic period were feasts and festivities linked to saints' celebrations. Similarly, civic and religious processions also helped to bring the community together for locally focused ritual performances. These public acts, however, can be hardly singled out as examples of either council duties or private munificence, and are better seen through the lens of overall community involvement and interaction.

Communal Action

Finally, and as outlined above, we must remember that popular participation was a defining element in the community life of the medieval city; a way to balance out the power of the ruling elites, codifying the social consensus that regulated the norms of the group. In the Visigothic period, we have limited information for public displays of civic participation, but there is evidence that shows the agency of the urban population in certain political and religious events that brought the community together.

Popular participation was key in episcopal elections and the confirmation of certain magistrates.¹¹² These were not real assembly-like elections

¹⁰⁹ Sean Lafferty, 'Ad Sanctitatem Mortuorum: Tomb Raiders, Body Snatchers and Relic Hunters in Late Antiquity', *Early Medieval Europe* 22, no. 3 (2014): 249–279; cf. Sabine Panzram, 'Mérida contra Toledo, Eulalia contra Leocadia. Listados "falsificados" de obispos como medio de autorrepresentación municipal', in *Espacios urbanos en el occidente mediterráneo (S. VI–VIII)*, ed. Alfonso García (Toledo: Toletum visigodo, 2010), 123–130.

¹¹⁰ Martínez Jiménez and Tejerizo García, 'Assessing Place-Based Identities'.

¹¹¹ See above, Footnote 51.

¹¹² Toledo IV, canon 19; cf. Santiago Castellanos, 'The Significance of Social Unanimity in a Visigothic Hagiography: Keys to an Ideological Screen', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11, no. 3 (2003), 387–419; Peter Norton, *Episcopal Elections 250–600. Hierarchy*

like those of the Republican Roman period, but rather public acclamations of nominated candidates intended to demonstrate social consensus. Figures like the *defensores civitatis* ('defenders of the citizenship'), the *adsertores pacis* ('enforcers of peace'), and the *numerarii* (agents of the fisc) required an 'election' (*electus ab episcopis vel populis fuerit*).¹¹³ In fact, not even kings were exempt from popular demands and acceptance, and King Sisebut (r. 612–621) complains to Isidore in his poem on the eclipse that he is unable to concentrate because of the ruckus in the city (*latrant fora*) of the people demanding attention.¹¹⁴ In rural contexts we know that peasant communities would gather at moot spots (*compita*) and were represented by some sort of 'public assembly of neighbours' (*conventus publici vicinorum*),¹¹⁵ but if these were a reflection of urban practices it is impossible to tell.

Other civic activities that brought the people together and required popular input were processions which, as we have seen, played a key role in reinforcing the understanding of place by linking specific landmarks through chosen pathways. From sixth- and seventh-century sources we know of civic and religious processions. Some of them were linked to royal parades and coronations in Toledo, some to the civic ceremonies of *adventus*, while some others were part of specific events in the liturgical calendar.¹¹⁶ On top of these, we also know of impromptu processional demonstrations of religious zeal.¹¹⁷ Reccopolis is designed following an

and Popular Will in Late Antiquity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Johan Leemans et al., eds., *Episcopal Elections in Late Antiquity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011).

¹¹³ *LV* 12.1.2.

¹¹⁴ Sisebut, *Astron.*, l. 6; Cf. David Ungvary, 'Clarifying the Eclipse: Ascetics, Politics, and the Poetics of Power in Post-Roman Iberia', *Vigiliae Christianae* 73, no. 5 (2019): 531–563.

¹¹⁵ Isid. *Hisp. Etym.*, XV.2.15. *Compita sunt ubi usus est conventus fieri rusticorum; et dicta compita quod loca multa in agris eodem competant; et quo convenitur a rusticis*; Eduardo Daflon, 'Tumultos e clamores: assembleias rurais e resistência camponesa na Hispânia Visigoda (séculos VI–VIII)', *Brathair* 15, no. 2 (2015): 132–167.

¹¹⁶ Dey, *The Afterlife*, 140–160; Guy Halsall, 'The Decline and Fall of the Ancient Triumph', in *Der römische Triumph in Prinzipat und Spätantike*, ed. by Fabian Goldbeck and Johannes Wienand (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 555–568.

¹¹⁷ Greg. Tur. *DLH*, 5.4.

axial layout, following a Constantinopolitan inspiration, and with this kind of processional demonstrations in mind.¹¹⁸

Religious celebrations and festivities were the main occasions for popular participation. These brought all the people together to celebrate local cults, reinforcing the sense of belonging by actively taking part in shared rites that reinforced the connection with the locally defined past, and substituting the theatre and circus spectacles of the Classical period. Canons from church councils clearly show how popular these were, even if they usually turned into celebrations beyond their original religious meaning. We find descriptions of ‘un-religious customs’ (*inreligiosae consuetudines*) and ‘lewd dancing’ (*saltationes turpes*) in these occasions.¹¹⁹ Even night vigils, another, more solemn popular gathering, could have a more ‘celebratory’ turn in the darkest corners of cemeteries.¹²⁰

4 COMMUNITY AND INVESTMENT IN THE EARLY MEDIEVAL CITY—SOME CONCLUSIONS

It is easy to talk about the transformations and even the decline of both the city and of the municipal institution in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages.¹²¹ The regional variation and centrifugal forces that characterise the post-Roman centuries make it difficult to make broad statements that hold true for every city and, moreover, a careful archaeological assessment shows that many cities continued to exist even to this day. The transformation of the way these cities were run can only be seen

¹¹⁸ Lauro Olmo Enciso, ‘Reccopolis: The Representation of Power in a Complex Landscape’, in *The Visigothic Kingdom: The Negotiation of Power in Post-Roman Iberia*, ed. Sabine Panzram and Paulo Pachá (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 215–233.

¹¹⁹ Toledo III (589), canon 23. *Inreligiosa consuetudo est quam vulgus per sanctorum sollemnitates agere consuevit. Populi qui debent officia divina attendere saltationibus turpibus invigilant.*

¹²⁰ Elvira (early 4th c.?), canon 35. *Placuit prohiberi ne feminae in cimiterio pervigilent eo quod saepe sub obtentu orationis latenter scelera committant* = ‘It pleases [us] to ban women from partaking in vigils in the cemetery because often, under the pretence of praying, they may commit crimes [i.e., prostitution] without being seen’.

¹²¹ J. H. W. G. Wolf Liebeschuetz, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

in terms of ‘decline’ if cities of this period are judged against a theoretical Augustan standard; an anthropological understanding of the way place-based communities work shows that cities functioned in similar ways and that community commitment was at the heart of civic life. Priorities, means, norms, and motivations might have changed—as it is only natural—but the social expectations and the participation in shared rituals and *habitus* of town dwellers and urban elites alike were not that different.

Cities were still cities for better and for worse (here again, we are reminded of McNeill’s Paradox), but their survival required commitment and investment, something that could only come from city dwellers themselves. I hope to have illustrated, with the help of the Visigothic example, how the survival (and thriving) of post-Roman cities can, in part, be explained because of the social bonds that ruled them. City-based communities in the early Middle Ages had inherited a lot of baggage from the Roman period, in terms of urban infrastructure, civic culture, and understanding of place, but they had also inherited a series of expectations and commitments to their built environment and their fellow town dwellers. The balance between elite investment and redistribution and ritualised participation ensured (or, if necessary, corrected) the established social order and the continuity of the civic status quo. Preserving a public water supply and paving roads while providing the city with cultic buildings, regardless of the scale, show the investment and commitment of the ruling elites and that was as important for the city as the confirmation of a bishop, donating liturgical furniture, or the celebration of a procession. In all cases, the inhabitants were participating in ways that benefitted their city and their fellow citizens; it was a way in which the *cives* preserved their *civitas* in an early medieval understanding.

The main case study in this paper has been the Visigothic kingdom, with its network of old and new cities with active and thriving urban communities. Urban elites in the Visigothic period fulfilled, to an extent, their role of investors and redistributors of private and public wealth back into the community. Their motivations varied from civic duty, religious piety, political advantages, and expectations of tax exemptions, but they showed a commitment to their surroundings (to their space and place) in order to preserve their status. Similarly, non-elite urban dwellers had social duties to fulfil and communal rites to participate in, since these were essential in preserving the social order and the local bonds of belonging—the same elements that were essential in the conception of post-Roman municipal citizenships. These commitments (economic,

social, participative) were part of the civic understanding of the community, and ritualised and regulated as such. It was the social contract that bound the inhabitants together.

Early medieval cities (with some noted exceptions) lacked large public construction programmes and large works of civil engineering or infrastructure. Civic inscriptions and public honours, which had been so visible and noticeable in the Roman centuries, all but disappeared. The rhetoric in the existing sources talks about a ‘crisis’ of the curial class that begins in the fourth century but the same situation is still ongoing in the sixth and seventh centuries—perhaps not a crisis but an established new pattern. The Christian nature of the monumental phases of this period and the religious re-definition of the elites add another layer of distortion. The city of the seventh century was clearly (but obviously) not a ‘Roman’ city inasmuch as it does not conform to the urban patterns of the first century. But the city of the seventh century still functions as a place-defined community. At an anthropological and sociological level, the cities of early medieval Europe relied on the commitment of their inhabitants and the leading role of the elites. The basic functioning of how communal norms that preserve space and place is comparable if not the same in both periods. That the early medieval city post-dates the ‘classical’ one means that some aspects had to be reinterpreted, preserved, or recycled.

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 Aug. *Civ. Dei* = Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*.
 Cass. *Var.* = Cassiodorus, *Variae*.
 Cic. *Rep.* = Cicero, *De re publica*.
CIust = *Codex Iustinianeus*.
CTheod = *Codex Theodosianus*.
Dig. = *Digestum*.
 Gaius, *Inst* = Gaius, *Institutiones*.
 Greg. Tur., *DLH.* = Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*.
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- Juv. = Juvenal, *Saturae*.
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