Visigothic Law and the Settlement of Disputes in Northern Iberia, c. 900–110[1]

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Abstract: The Visigothic code known as *Liber Iudiciorum* was extensively referred to in the tenth- and eleventh-centuries judicial records from the kingdom of León. However, its dispute settlement was mostly governed by unwritten rules, rather than Visigothic provisions. This excerpt aims to revisit the role played by the code in the Leonese legal procedures by focusing on the extent to which it might have been accessible to anyone other than judges and used directly in the social interactions of the time. The relationship between the Visigothic law and the unwritten rules applied in courts is considered within the framework of 'substantive legalism,' a concept introduced by Stephen D. White.

The Visigothic code known as Book of Judgments[2] (*Liber Iudiciorum,* seventh century) was extensively referred to and quoted in the tenth- and eleventh-centuries charters from northern Iberia. However, many of the citations were purely formulaic and probably created without consulting the text of the code itself. These quotes undoubtedly played a crucial role in supporting the charters' authority, yet it is by no means certain whether these extracts were either drafted or taken into consideration directly during legal procedures they were aimed to legitimize in writing. It has been argued that the Book of Judgments was intended as an ideological and religious, rather than a practical guide during the Visigothic period, let alone after the Moorish conquest.[3] In the tenth and eleventh centuries this code was invoked in a new social and political climate which was increasingly at odds with its prescriptions. Moreover, the first centuries of the Reconquest probably saw a diverse legal environment, and the Book of Judgments was employed only selectively and inconsistently in it. Among its many regulations covering almost every aspect of life, just a limited number concerned with property, inheritance and judicial procedures were referred to in the Leonese charters of the time.[4]

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[1] Earlier versions of the present excerpt were delivered at the Comparative Legal History Workshop 'Law in Transmission: The Movement of Practices, Texts and Concepts across Time and Space, c. 400–1500' (zoom webinar hosted by the University of St Andrews, 5–7 May 2021) and the Leeds International Medieval Congress (online conference hosted by the University of Leeds, 5–9 July 2021). I would like to express my gratitude to their audiences for their questions and to Roger Collins personally for his invaluable remarks on my presentation. Needless to say, I am solely responsible for any remaining errors of fact or judgment.

[2] 'Liber Iudiciorum sive Lex Visigothorum,' ed. Karl Zeumer, in *Leges Visigothorum*, MGH Legum sectio I, ed. Zeumer (Hannover, 1902), 33–456.

[3] For instance, see: Céline Martin, 'Le Liber Iudiciorum et ses différentes versions,' *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* vol. 41, №2 (2011), 17–34.

[4] See: Claudio Rodiño Caramés, 'A lex gótica e o Liber Iudicum no reino de León,' *Cuadernos de estudios Gallegos* vol. 44, №109 (1997), 25–38, 47–49; Jeffrey A. Bowman, 'From Galicia to the Rhône: Legal practice in northern Spain around the year 1000,' in *Culture and society in medieval Galicia*, ed. James D'Emilio (Leiden–Boston, 2014), 349–350; Graham Barrett, 'The written and the world in early medieval Iberia,' University of Oxford D. Phil. thesis, 2015, 188–232;

The fact that standard court procedures were applied across a wide geographical area of northern Spain prompts many researchers to suggest that there must have been a common corpus of written Visigothic law behind them.[5] From this perspective, the very basic steps in conflict resolution process of the time such as witnesses' testimony can be interpreted as evidence for the code's influence on the Leonese legal practice. However, the abundant contradictions between the invoked Visigothic regulations and the actual Leonese practice indicate that the role played by the code was purely symbolic on both procedural and substantive levels.[6] Even when the written law was indeed employed in the dispute settlement process, it was in fact governed by the unwritten rules which were implicitly embedded in social interactions of the time and formed what Stephen D. White called 'substantive legalism.'[7] Despite being inconsistent and not clearly articulated, such rules seem to have been familiar to the participants in legal practice.

As for the written law, the extent to which it was known and understood beyond the domain of literate legal specialism is much less clear. Claudio Sánchez Albornoz suggested that in León recourse to a particular court specialized in dealing with the Visigothic code was available to litigants from the tenth century onwards.[8] He also argued that this court was jurisdictionally separate from the rest of the dispute settlement system. The hypothesis is mostly based on later sources dating back to the thirteenth century at the earliest, and, in the more recent scholarship, such institutional separation of courts is conventionally believed to be anachronistic in relation to the tenth century.[9]

André Evangelista Marques, 'Between the language of law and the language of justice: The use of formulas in Portuguese dispute texts (tenth and eleventh centuries),' in *Law and language in the Middle Ages,* ed. Matthew W. McHaffie, Jenny Benham, and Helle Vogt (Leiden, 2018), 159.

[5] Roger Collins, 'Sicut Lex gothorum docet: Law and charters in ninth and tenth century León and Catalonia,' *English historical review* vol. 100, №396 (1985), 494; Javier Alvarado Planas, 'A modo de conclusiones: el Liber Iudiciorum y la aplicación del Derecho en los siglos VI a XI,' *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* vol. 41, №2 (2011), 117; Wendy Davies, *Windows on justice in northern Iberia 800–1000* (Oxford–New-York, 2016), 26–27, 246–247. For the role played by the code in legal procedures of the time, also see: José López Ortiz, 'El proceso en los reinos cristianos de nuestra Reconquista antes de la recepción romano-canónica,' *Anuario de historia del Derecho español* №14 (1942–1943), 190; Michel Zimmermann, 'L'usage du Droit wisigothique en Catalogne du IXe au XIIe siècle: Approches d'une signification culturelle,' *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* vol. 9, №1 (1973), 235; Amancio Isla Frez, 'La pervivencia de la tradición legal visigótica en el reino Asturleonés,' *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* vol. 41, №2 (2011), 80; Barrett, 'The written and the world,' 201–208.

[6] Yolanda García López, *Estudios críticos y literarios de la 'Lex Wisigothorum*' (Alcalá de Henares, 1996), 134; Graham Barrett, 'The text of Visigothic law in practice,' *Visigothic symposia* №4 (2020–2021), 18–63.

[7] Stephen D. White, 'Inheritances and legal arguments in western France, 1050–1150,' *Traditio* vol. 43 (1987), 84–89. For the unwritten rules, see also: idem, "'Pactum... legem vincit et amor judicium:' The settlement of disputes by compromise in eleventh-century western France," *American journal of legal history* vol. 22, № 4 (1978), 289–292. For the term 'substantive legalism' applied to other regional contexts, see: Richard E. Barton 'Making a clamor to the lord: Noise, justice and power in eleventh- and twelfth-century France,' in *Feud, violence and practice. Essays in medieval studies in honor of Stephen D. White,* ed. Belle S. Tuten and Tracey L. Billado (London–New-York, 2010), 213–238; Matthew Innes, 'On the material culture of legal documents: charters and their preservation in the Cluny archive, ninth to eleventh centuries,' in *Documentary culture and the laity in the early Middle Ages*, ed. Warren Brown, Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, and Adam J. Kosto (Cambridge, 2013), 316.

[8] Claudio Sánchez Albornoz, "El 'juicio del Libro' en León durante el siglo X y un feudo castellano del XIII," *Anuario de historia del Derecho español* №1 (1924), 382–390.

[9] See: Agustín Prieto Morera, 'El proceso en el reino de León a la luz de los diplomas,' in *El reino de León en la Alta Edad Media: Ordenamiento juridico del reino,* ed. Manuel Lucas Álvarez, vol. 2 (León, 1992), 444–447; García López, *Estudios*

Still, many historians argue that in the early Middle Ages the Visigothic code was the preserve of the specialist professionals. For instance, Yolanda García López suggests that not any judge, but a specialist one was responsible for applying the Visigothic law during the litigation.[10] Indeed, some of the citations surviving in the Leonese charters imply encyclopedic knowledge of the code as they include a range of norms on different topics. At the same time, judges with an explicit legal expertise were not always present when the Visigothic law was invoked,[11] so what could the relationship between the code and the vast majority of those participating in conflicts have been? And did they actually consult the written law during the dispute settlement process or, rather, at the point of recording its result, once the conflict itself had been already resolved?

This excerpt is aimed at examining to what extent the Visigothic code went beyond the domain of learned judges and was used directly in the social interactions of the tenth- and eleventh-centuries Leonese kingdom. It is a case study focusing on the relationship between the Visigothic code and the implicit rules according to which conflicts were generally resolved at that time. Although most of the legal quotations in our charters can be identified in the Book of Judgments as we know it from the classical *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* publication, I will be exploring them in the context of particular cases, rather than the code as a whole and its textual transmission.[12] As many of the sources I examine have already been commented on in the extensive scholarship on this topic, the present excerpt aspires to add a fresh perspective to it. My analysis is based on charters from Asturias and León.[13] These regions seem to be of particular interest for my subject as, in terms of textuality, they are conventionally considered to have been less developed, compared to other parts of the Leonese kingdom at that time. And as to specialized judges, we mostly have evidence of their existence in Galicia and Portugal, rather than in the east.[14]

The handling of the code can be better understood through the charters which record different steps in the dispute settlement process separately (according the classification by Wendy Davies, these are 'mixed' documents).[15] A charter of 1019 from Otero de las Dueñas serves as a useful example. It provides an insight into the trial of a man who was accused of robbing Count Pedro Flaínez and

críticos, 132–133; Pascual Martínez Sopena, 'El uso de la Ley Gótica en el reino de León,' in *Remploi, citation, plagiat. Conduites et pratiques médiévales*, ed. Pierre Toubert and Pierre Moret (Madrid, 2009), 114.

[10] García López, *Estudios críticos*, 133–134.

[11] For instance, see: *Colección documental del archivo de la catedral de León*, ed. José Manuel Ruiz Asencio, vol. 3 (León, 1987), doc. 772 (1020).

[12] For the transmission of the code, see: Manuel Cecilio Díaz y Díaz, 'La Lex Visigothorum y sus manuscritos. Un ensayo de reinterpretación,' *Anuario de historia del Derecho español* № 46 (1976), 163–224; García López, *Estudios críticos*; Barrett, 'The text of Visigothic law in practice,' 18–63.

[13] The following abbreviations are used below: CDS = *Colección diplomática del monasterio de Sahagún*, ed. Marta Herrero de la Fuente, vol. 2 (León, 1988); CDOt = *Colección Diplomática Santa María de Otero de las Dueñas (León)*, ed. Gregorio del Ser Quijano (León, 1994).

[14] For more details on the judges, see: Roger Collins, 'Literacy and the laity in early medieval Spain,' in *The uses of literacy in early medieval Europe*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge, 1990), 129–131; Rodiño Caramés, 'A lex gótica,' 39–43; Isla Frez, 'La pervivencia,' 81; Davies Wendy, 'Judges and judging. Truth and justice in northern Iberia on the eve of the millennium,' *Journal of medieval history* vol. 36, №3 (2010): 193–203; eadem, *Windows on justice*, 160–164.

[15] Ibidem, 51–52.

undermining his authority (*mandacione*) in Lorma.[16] The first part of the charter is an agreement between the defendant and the count's representative pledging to appear before the judge on a specific date in order "to find the law from the Book" (*pro inquirere lege de libro*) and to comply with it (*facia que lex mandare*).[17] The title from the code is cited right after this commitment implying that the law was already found by the time of the recording. In terms of its spelling, the quotation does not differ significantly from the rest of the document, and its language is closer to the so-called 'Leonese vulgar Latin,' than to Latin. The lines quoted say that those instigating others to commit a robbery should pay compensation, and this provision seems to be roughly relevant to the case.[18] However, when it came to resolving the conflict, it was not taken into consideration since the matter was eventually settled through negotiations held during a second hearing on another day and described in the second part of our charter.

On this occasion, once the defendant pleaded guilty as charged, the amount of the compensation was discussed with the mediators involved (*per colacione de omines bonos*).[19] The agreement reached as a result was called '*ativa'* which is believed to be a term of Arabic origin. It was not so uncommon at the time, particularly in the documents from Otero, but, apart from the obvious linguistic diversity, we do not know precisely how much legal pluralism its use evidences.[20] Pascual Martínez Sopena has suggested that the Arabic word was chosen to highlight the legal nature of such agreements and negotiations behind them, as opposed to more common Latin terms such as '*rogo.*'[21] Regardless of why the term was employed, in this context, the code might have been invoked during the hearings themselves but only to qualify the defendant's actions against the count as a disruption of social order.

Further details on the handling of the code can be found in two documents of 1022 from Otero. They describe two stages in the trial of a man who was accused of kidnapping a chambermaid of count

[16] CDOt, doc. 87 (1019): 'Teniente Pedru Flainiz mandacione de dado de reie domno Adefonso, ic in Lorma, in suo iure cum ganado et omines, quantum in sua nodicia resona, si se leuabit Zidi, gognomento Andrias, per uiolencia e derubit ipsa mandacione et sakabit inde ganado de iure de Pedru Flainiz, quantum in nodicia resona, et adflamauise Zidi ad alia podestade.'

[17] Ibidem: "Et pro tali kausa rouorauit Gontrico, qui obtine uoce de Pedru Flainiz, et isto Zidi, qui desuper resona, placido *pro inquirere lege de libro*: '*Siquis ad eribiendum alios inuidare* reperiuntur, ad *unde cunpla* sacdifacione *conpeladur* exolbere.' Et que de a Contrico firmamentu quale lex ordinaberit, et Cidi, cognomento Andria, accibiat ipso firmamentu."

[18] We can identify this provision as LI VIII, 1, 6 in the code as we know it from the classical *MGH* publication: 'Si ad diripiendum quisque alios invitasse repperiatur. *Si quis ad diripiendum alios invitaverit*, ut cuiuscumque rem evertat aut pecora vel animalia quecumque diripiat, illi cuius res direpta est in *unde cuplum* que sunt sublata restituat. Hii vero, qui cum ipso fuerint, si ingenui sunt quinos solidos conponere *conpellantur*, aut si non habuerint, unde conponant, quinquagena flagella suscipiant. Si vero servi hoc sine domini volumtate conmiserint, centenis quinquagenis flagellis verberentur, et ab eis res onmis in statu reddatur.'

[19] CDOt, doc. 87 (1019): "Et pro tali kausa deuenimusinde *per colacione de omines bonos ad atiba* per probrias nostras uoluntades. Et dedit Zidi, gonnomento A[n]drias, pro ipso pacto que abuit ad pactare, ubi dicet 'Siquis ad eribiendu alios inuidare reperiuntur.' Dedit pro inde *in atiua* terras qui sunt in terridurio Lormensis."

[20] Xosé Lluis García Arias, *Arabismos nel dominiu llingüísticu Ástur* (Uviéu, 2006), 140; *Lexicon latinitatis medii aevi regni Legionis (s. VIII–1230). Imperfectum. Léxico latinorromance del reino de León,* ed. Maurilio Pérez González (Turnout, 2010), 81.

[21] Pascual Martínez Sopena, 'La justicia en la época asturleonesa: entre el Liber y los mediadores sociales,' in *El lugar del campesino. En torno a la obra de Reyna Pastor,* ed. Ana Rodríguez (Valencia, 2007), 256–257; idem, 'El uso de la Ley Gótica,' 110–111.

Froila Muñoz. The first one of the two charters is an agreement between the defendant and the count's representative. They both commit themselves to appeal to the law *(vadamus at lege)* and to fulfill what it demanded (*que lex ordinare, et nos faciamus*).[22] Other sources suggest that the code might have been forced upon the litigants, but in this case the invoking of it is presented as initiative from the parties themselves. However, such a declaration, typically expressed in our charters as *'ire ad Librum,'* is likely to have been purely formulaic, and it does not necessarily mean that the litigants should go to some other place or judge. I would suggest that, with such formulas, the parties simply agreed to accept the ruling from their particular court.

In addition to that, on this occasion they also pledged to appear before the judges three days later with the law from the code *(cum lege de Libra Iudicum)*. However, the quotation from it follows right after this commitment meaning the three days adjournment was not caused by the need to consult the law.[23] All the source states is that the extract was somehow found (*invenimus in libra*) and we can only assume it was the judges who did that. The regulation cited prescribes enslaving the defendant to the women he kidnapped and prohibits resolving the matter by marriage. However, according to our second charter dated three days later, the couple were both enslaved to the count instead because the chambermaid did not want to be separated from her kidnapper.[24] This clear contradiction against the Visigothic law probably did not matter for those involved as the quotation fulfilled its goal of legitimizing the charter, regardless of the mismatch. With regard to the hearings themselves, I would suggest that the law was invoked just as a concept, while both the documents including the exact quotation from the code were drawn up after the settlement had taken place in order to comply with some formulaic template.

Less formulaic sources allow us to suggest that the procedure of consulting the law might have acquired certain symbolic meaning during the proceedings. For instance, a charter of 1067 from Sahagún describes a conflict between this monastery and Count Munio Núñez about some property.[25]

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[22] CDOt, doc. 118 (1022): 'Didago et Enego rouoramus placitu, per manu saione Quintila, per scriptura ligauile firmitatis, in presencia iudices nostras Pelaio Asurizi et Martino Lilazi, que uadamus ad lege con istos asertos et isto manifesto; et in III die reuertamus ante ipsos iudices cum lege de Libra Iudicum, que lex ordinare et nos faciamus.'

[23] Ibidem: "*Inuenimus* in libra III, titulo III, et sentencia II: 'Si ingenus ingenua rapit muliere, liceat ilia uirginitate perdere et tamen non ualeat. Si uero ad inmundicia quam uoluer[…] potueri peruenire in coniungio puele uel uidue et mulieris quam rapuerat, per nunla conposicione iungantur et cum omnibus rebus suis tradatur ei cui uiolentus fuerit, et [...] in conspectum omnium accipia flagelorum et careant ingenuitatis sue.'" We can identify this provision as LI III, 3, 1 (erv).

[24] CDOt, doc. 118 (1022): 'Enego rouoro placitum uel pactum per scriptum firmitatis [... Froila] Monuzi et de Amuna *pro ipso rapto que fecit*... Pro inde rouoramus uobis placitum ut faciamus [...]ad Froila Monuzi et de sua muliere Amuna [...] et nos, si Froila Monuzi et Amuna migrarent de oc seculum [...] que nos ingenui et liueri remanescamus. Et si ego Enego et Midona, conomento Uita, de uestro mandato exierimus, aut ad alio domno raptus fuerimus in ruga, aut ad alio domino no nos [...]uerimus [...] Froila Monuzi et Amuna fueritis, tunc abeatis licitum adprendere nos ubi nos inueneritis…'

[25] CDS, doc. 663 (1067): 'Tunc fecerunt querimonia ipse abbas domno Gundissaluus abba et omnem congregationem ipsius in Legione, ante conspectu gloriosissimi principis Adefonsi… Postremo uero dederunt testamentum ipsius superius dicte atque relatas, una de Oueto et aliarum multarum scripturarum testimonium iudicum, ante predictum regis et eius iudicibus, et *inuenerunt in Libro Iudicum* II, titulus IIII, sentential III, De inuestiganda iustitia, dicit: "Quia in duobus testibus quos prisca legum sanxit auctoritas deuet firmare iudicius"; et alia sententia in titulo V, sententia VII: "Deus iudex iustus"; et in titulo I, sententia V: "Ut nulla res ab alio possessa absque iudicio usurpet."' We can identify these provisions as LI II, 4, 3; IV, 5, 6; VIII, 1, 5, respectively.

Once the parties had produced their written evidence, three provisions were found in the code at the royal assembly in the presence of the king and his judges. Two of these regulations state basic legal and religious principles, such as "God is a righteous judge," while the third one prescribes the court ruling to be based on testimony from two witnesses. Explicitly following the latter provision, the assembly commanded the abbot to back his statement by giving oath alongside the two other witnesses, which eventually secured the contested property for the monastery. In contrast to our previous examples, in this case, the code was seemingly taken into consideration in the course of the trial, although it was done in relation to the procedure only. The number of witnesses required at that time could vary quite significantly and, in this case, it was probably adjusted to the code's prescription and ascribed some symbolic meaning. However, I would not interpret this as an attempt by those involved in the assembly to actually reconstruct the judicial procedure from the code.

Even more symbolism is suggested by the handling of the treason law which was invoked against the rebels at that time. A charter of 1012 from Otero refers to the reign of Bermudo II (985–999) in the story of a traitor called Ablabel who was put on trial in order to legitimize the forfeiture of his property. Our source describes the occasion as a celebration of the political order, rather than an actual trial as the defendant was not even present during the proceedings. The assembly was chaired by the monarch himself who sat on his throne surrounded by his people, and all those gathered 'examined (*facta est questio*) the entire manuscript of laws (*volumine legis*) regarding those who abandon the king.'[26] This highly rhetorical account implies that not only the judges but a wider audience could have dealt with the code in some way or another. I am not aware of any sources that would shed light on whether the code was read out loud on such public occasions, in contrast to the charters which at that time might have been made accessible to the gatherings in this way. It has even been suggested that the law was not supposed to be understood by anyone except the judges.[27] However that may have been, all those involved in the conflict resolution process were probably familiar at least with the concept of the Visigothic law, if not its content.

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To summarise, in the tenth and eleventh centuries some elements of the Visigothic heritage might have continued as a living legal tradition going back to the earlier periods. However, our sources allow us to suggest that the Visigothic law was rather perceived as a text or a volume by those involved in the proceedings. The recourse to the law meant locating relevant provisions within the code, which implies that it was directly accessible only to those literate participants. As for the rest of the community, only in rare cases do our sources suggest some kind of active engagement with the code on their part. Generally, however, the Visigothic law might have occupied a symbolic position for the

[26] CDOt, doc. 69a (1012): 'Et dum talia preuideret rex, sedente in solio suo, et omnis cetus in sinodo, facta est questio per omnem uolumine legis *de is contra princibem, uel gentem, aut padriam refugi uel insolentes existent*.' The norm quoted here is LI II, 1, 8: 'De his, qui contra principem vel gentem aut patriam refugi sive insulentes existent.'
[27] Rodiño Caramés, 'A lex gótica,' 43.

majority of those taking part in the dispute settlements process at that time. A typical formula *'ire ad Librum'* is often ascribed to the litigants in our sources, yet it did not necessarily imply any particular actions on their part. The relevant Visigothic regulations were searched for by the judges or rather scribes, and my hypothesis is that most of this work was done at the point of recording the charters, sometimes years after the conflict had been resolved.

As for the code's role during the litigation itself, there was hardly any attempt to adjust its provisions to the ongoing social interactions. The Book of Judgments was employed mostly to qualify an action as a disruption of social order and to enforce the measures which were worked out regardless of the Visigothic legal requirements. Despite being highly authoritative in the eyes of participants in legal practice, the code played but a secondary role to that of the 'unwritten rules.' At the same time, even such use of the Book of Judgments might have contributed to the 'substantive legalism' in the sense that it made the *modus operandi* of court to some extent different from the everyday morality, common beliefs, and customs generally observed in society.[28]

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[28] Cf.: Fredric L. Cheyette, 'Suum cuique tribuere,' *French historical studies* vol. 6, №3 (1970): 287–299; Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and communities in Western Europe* (Oxford, 1984), 19.

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