4. The Seventh-Century Kingdom

Local Society in Town and Countryside

It would be interesting to know something of the social and economic life of the peninsula during the Visigothic period. Some indications can be drawn from the regulations of the law codes but these provide at best an abstract and generalised impression. The peculiar and probably largely localised circumstances that caused the promulgation of particular laws cannot now be known, and insufficient wariness has been displayed in looking out for the presence of anachronistic rulings preserved from the Roman past to fill out the Visigothic written codes. As will be shown, the circumstances of the issuing of the seventh-century codes suggest that their functions were intended to be other than primarily utilitarian. However, despite the pitfalls to be encountered in attempting to use this class of evidence for a picture of life and society in the Visigothic centuries, it is possible from other sources to get more penetrating and particular glimpses of local conditions.

This is especially the case with the important city of Mérida, provincial capital and seat of the metropolitan bishop of Lusitania. Thanks for this must largely be given to the survival of an unusual work of hagiography, the Vitae Patrum Emeritensium (sic) or Lives of the Fathers of Mérida. The author is anonymous, but he describes himself as being a deacon attached to the Basilica of Saint Eulalia, the city’s principal patron saint. It has been conjectured with good reason that he was writing around 630, and he explicitly stated that, following the lead given by Gregory the Great in his Dialogues, his aim in writing was to show from recent and local examples that miraculous happenings could still occur.¹ His principal interest was in miracles relating to departure from the body by the soul, either in a vision or at death. After three short accounts of the experiences of a boy in a monastery, of a gluttonous monk and of an African ascetic who came to Mérida, the author devotes the rest, by far the larger part, of his work to the lives of some of the sixth-century bishops of the city. Although retaining his special interest in aspects of the miraculous, he describes the origins and careers of three of these bishops in considerable detail, thus incidentally providing substantial accounts of their secular involvements and of the city in which they lived.

R. Collins, *Early Medieval Spain*  
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The wealth of information concerning town life and the activities of bishops within their sees given in this work is quite unparalleled in the evidence for the history of early medieval Spain and for most other regions of Western Europe. Its value is also enhanced by the fact that Mérida is unusually rich in archaeological remains of the Roman and Visigothic periods, thus permitting the making of some comparisons of the literary evidence with the material. Of course Mérida, as a metropolitan see and provincial capital, cannot be assumed to be typical of other Spanish towns of the time. Nor may it be assumed that what is true of the sixth century is necessarily so of the seventh. However, as evidence relating to virtually all other towns and regions of the peninsula in both centuries is lacking it is necessary to make the fullest use of what little is available.

The impression created by the Lives of the Fathers of Mérida is that the city was still enjoying a period of some prosperity in the sixth century, and the wealth of the architectural remains that have come to light seems to confirm this. The city, which had been founded as a 'colonia' for veteran legionaries of Augustus's Cantabrian wars, had been lavishly endowed with public buildings such as theatre, amphitheatre, temples and baths by Augustus's chosen successor Agrippa. In the second century, possibly by the Emperor Hadrian, these had been restored and augmented. During the Early Empire the city had been made the provincial capital of 'Hispania Ulterior' and numbered the future Emperor Otho (AD69) amongst its governors. Little more than a few inscriptions have been found from the third century, but the traces of town walls that survive may date from this period when southern Spain was occasionally threatened by raids from Berber tribes across the Straits of Hercules. The fourth century, however, saw another time of intensive building activity. After the conversion of Constantine I in 312, churches began to be erected and small shrines marking the burial places of local martyrs were transformed by the erection on their sites of full-scale basilicas. At Mérida, we know from the Lives of the Fathers of the existence of a basilica dedicated to St Eulalia, which was outside the city walls and erected over the place of her burial in one of the cemeteries. This basilica and other churches dedicated to Saints Faustus, Lucretia, Cyprian and Laurence, together with that of St Mary, also called the Church of Holy Jerusalem, which was the principal episcopal church inside the city, may well have been first erected in the fourth century. The same might be true of the adjacent Baptistery of St John and the