

## Conference Report

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SYMPOSIUM TITLE: ISIDORE OF SEVILLE: TRANSFORMING KNOWLEDGE FROM SCRIPTORIUM TO CYBERSPACE

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ISIDORE OF SEVILLE: TRANSFORMING KNOWLEDGE FROM SCRIPTORIUM TO CYBERSPACE

Isidore of Seville (d. 636 AD) is a crucial figure in the selection, preservation and propagation of Classical and Patristic learning. He put such learning to varied use in his own day, in the process ensuring that it could be made useful for future generations. Because of the depth of what he preserved and the breadth of its diffusion, Pope John Paul II proclaimed Isidore the patron saint of the Internet in 1997.

This one-day symposium was held at the Spanish cultural centre, the Instituto Cervantes (<http://manchester.cervantes.es/en/default.shtm>) on Deansgate in Manchester, UK on Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> April 2013. We'd been working on the social, cultural and religious history of late antique Spain for the past few years and had been thinking about putting on a symposium on Isidore for a couple of years. Last year we started to think about this a bit more seriously and realised that

there were actually quite a lot of people in Manchester (and who had left only recently) who had researched and published on aspects of Isidore's life, times and works. The aim to the symposium was to take a look at Isidore's impact in long-term perspective. We tried to get together a selection of papers that would explore the sources on which Isidore drew, how he selected and arranged them for future use, and what posterity made of his legacy.

We ended up with nine papers, which wasn't a bad turnout as the symposium took place in term-time. Although we didn't manage to cover 'Isidore and the Internet', Pliny (the Elder one!) to Golden Age Spain seemed like a decent spread. The papers presented on the day can be arranged into three groups.

### SOURCES AND CONTEXT

First, four papers looked at the sources on which Isidore drew and the immediate context in which he composed his writings. **Mary Beagon**, Reader in Classics and Ancient History at the University of Manchester, kicked things off with a paper entitled 'Variations on a Theme: Isidore and Pliny on Human and Human-instigated Anomalies' in which she compared the views of Isidore (from the *Etymologies* mainly) and Pliny the Elder (from the *Natural History*) to demonstrate how Isidore was able to negotiate pagan texts into an epistemology centred upon Christian time, belief and meaning. For Isidore, Pliny truths should be preserved as evidence of the Christian Truth. Thus the transparent similarities between the views of Pliny and Isidore served as cultural nodal points by which readers could learn about the world while simultaneously have their Christian faith reinforced. Mary's paper raised questions on Isidore's interpretations about the universality of knowing and knowledge, the relationship between image and aesthetics, and the importance juxtaposition of nature and time.

Complementing Mary's presentation, **Andy Fear**, Senior Lecturer in Classics and Ancient History at the University of Manchester, gave a paper, 'A Grand Design: Isidore and the natural world', in which he considered the question of whether or not Isidore's, *De Natura Rerum*, meant to replace a similar, earlier work by the pre-Christian, Roman writer Lucretius. Isidore, Andy convincingly argued, replaced the pagan doubt in Lucretius', *De Rerum Natura*, with the certainty of Christian Truth. By this we can see, as in the case of Isidore on Pliny, the re-appropriation of the temporality of nature with the infinity of Christian Truth, and thus a pattern in Isidore's work. However, reading this against the earlier paper, we might consider why, although the

advancement Truth is evident in both instances, Isidore decides to replace this Roman text while in many ways preserving another one? Why replace Lucretius and adapt Pliny? Are we seeing an earlier style of Isidore versus the later one of the Etymologies?

**Jamie Wood**, Lecturer of History, University of Lincoln), ended the morning session with ‘A family affair: Leander, Isidore and the legacy of Gregory the Great in Spain’ in which he explored three aspects of Pope Gregory I’s connections with Spain: (1) the contacts he had with Spanish correspondents during lifetime; (2) his relationship with Leander of Seville, Isidore’s elder brother; and (3) the reception of Gregory’s works and the propagation of Gregory’s memory by Isidore. He argued that the family connection to Leander and Isidore was vital to the positive reception and therefore subsequent transmission of Isidore’s works to Spain in the Visigothic period and beyond.

**Michael Kelly**, a PhD student of Professor Ian Wood in the School of History at the University of Leeds, gave a paper later in the day – ‘Witness to an Unpronounced Rivalry: the Inception of Spanish Historiography on Isidore of Seville’ – which also explored the context in which Isidore was writing, arguing persuasively that the ‘Isidorian moment’ personifies what was a hotly contentious rivalry of ‘schools’ of thought and centres of power in the Visigothic kingdom of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and that this is clearly evident in the production of the memory of Isidore in Spain. These competing historiographies shaped the remembrance and interpretation of Isidore not only within Spain but within the other early medieval kingdoms, as a result of the timing and provenance of manuscripts transmitted from the peninsula.

#### EARLY TRANSMISSION(S)

The next group of papers examined the transmission, and in some cases transformation, of Isidore’s works in early medieval Europe. **Martin Ryan** (History, University of Manchester) gave a paper on ‘The Reception of the Writings of Isidore in the Atlantic Archipelago in the Early Middle Ages’ in which he gave a thorough overview of the various ways in which Isidore’s works were received in Wales, England, Scotland and Ireland in the couple of centuries following his death. Certain works, especially the grammars, seem to have been particularly popular among the monks of this period. Importantly, Martin also picked out a couple of as yet unidentified instances of direct usage of Isidore’s works in sources from the ‘Atlantic Archipelago’.

**Melissa Markauskas**, a doctoral student of Professor Kate Cooper in Classics and Ancient History at Manchester, offered an excellent paper ('Rylands MS Latin 12: A Carolingian example of Isidore's reception into the Patristic Canon?') on the previously unacknowledged contribution of one of Isidore's lesser-known works, the *De ortu et obitu patrum* to a manuscript held in the Rylands library in Manchester. How many other unrecognised Isidorian fragments (and pieces of work by other earlier authors) lay within early medieval manuscripts?

We remained in the Carolingian period with the next contribution in which **Laura Carlson**, a postdoctoral fellow at Queen's University (Canada), gave a fascinating paper on 'The use of Isidore in the *Opus Caroli* arguing that a careful analysis of the use to which Isidore's works were put in the *Opus Caroli* can tell us a great deal about Carolingian conceptions of the relationship between texts and images.

#### LATER RECEPTION(S)

Two papers in the final session of the day looked at the reception of Isidore's works, legacy and memory in the later medieval and early modern periods. **Jeremy Tambling**, Professor of Literature at the University of Manchester, offered us detailed and convincing literary analysis of the single reference to Isidore in the *Paradiso* in a paper entitled 'Dante's Isidore'.

This was followed by 'Isidore and the Spanish Golden Age' by Professor **Jeremy Lawrance** of the University of Nottingham who charted the fascinating transformation of Isidore's legacy in late medieval and early modern Spain, focusing particularly on the reception of Isidore within Spain in the near generations after the encounter with the New World. Jeremy thoroughly demonstrated how Isidore became increasingly and rapidly marginalized entering the early modern period, being removed from his standing as a source of information in the Middle Ages to a rarely-cited novelty of the Spanish past. The growth of new knowledges and encounters facilitated by exploration sent writers looking beyond the existing and into alternative territory.

#### SUMMARY

There were a number of connections between the papers beyond the groupings outlined above and our eventual aim is to publish the proceedings of the symposium, possibly with the addition of papers from a few colleagues who were unable to attend on the day but who worked on the Isidorian corpus and its reception. Hopefully this will help us to fill in a few of the gaps. As we collect and edit the papers we're sure that even more interconnections will become apparent but key themes from the day included the following:

- Isidore's works had practical use for thinking about topics of pastoral and intellectual importance – e.g. in organising church and society (Ryan; Kelly); in establishing the liturgical calendar (Markauskas); in making the works of his predecessors accessible to later audiences (Wood; Beagon); in engaging with difficult theological, theoretical or grammatical concepts (Carlson; Beagon; Fear).
- Although his status was high in subsequent centuries (Tambling; Lawrance), in general Isidore seems to have possessed a sort of 'second-level' status, especially when compared to writers such as Augustine and Gregory and this might help to explain why many of the citations to his works were unacknowledged both by medieval authors and later scholars (Markauskas; Ryan; Carlson).
- Overall, Isidore's legacy was appropriated both selectively and creatively by later authors and copyists who took what they found useful in his works and left out what they didn't want (Markauskas). In many ways this is appropriate because this is exactly the same approach which Isidore seems to have taken to the sources that he engaged (Beagon) and, we would argue, in how he envisaged that his works would be used in future (Kelly; Wood).

Finally, we'd like especially to thank to Instituto Cervantes for their support in hosting this event in their excellent facilities.