



**‘WAITING ONLY FOR A PRETEXT’: A NEW  
CHRONOLOGY FOR THE SIXTH-CENTURY  
BYZANTINE INVASION OF SPAIN**

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**ABSTRACT**

In the mid-sixth century, the Emperor Justinian sent an army to Spain, under the pretense of intervening in a dynastic dispute among the Visigoths. This expedition ended in the acquisition of territory for the Empire in modern Andalusia, Murcia and Valencian. Referred to as the province of Spania, this region would remain in Byzantine hands until the 620s. This article argues that the common modern version of the invasion, in which Byzantine forces arrived in 552, fought on the side of the usurper Athanagild until 555, and then fought against Athanagild for a brief period before concluding a treaty with him, is flawed and, relying on a more precise reading of the sources, proposes a new chronology and narrative, in which Byzantine forces did not arrive until 554. This new version has implications for the reign of Justinian and the motives behind his “restoration” of the Western Roman Empire.

**Metadata:** Late Antiquity; Western Roman Empire; Spania; Byzantine Spain; Athanagild; Justinian; Agila

**RESUMEN**

A mediados del siglo VI, el emperador Justiniano envió un ejército a Hispania con el pretexto de intervenir en una disputa dinástica visigoda. Esta expedición se resolvió en la adquisición de territorio para el Imperio en lo que hoy es Andalucía, Murcia y Valencia. Mencionada como la provincia de Spania, esta zona permanecería en manos bizantinas hasta los años 20 del siglo VII. El presente artículo argumenta que la normal versión moderna de la invasión, según la cual el ejército bizantino llegó en 552, combatió en el lado del usurpador Atanagildo hasta 555 y después luchó contra Atanagildo durante un breve periodo hasta concluir un tratado con él, es errónea, y propone una nueva cronología y narrativa según la cual el ejército bizantino no llegó hasta 554. Esta nueva lectura tiene implicaciones para el reino de Justiniano y la motivación que guió su “restauración” del Imperio romano de Occidente.

**Metadata:** Antigüedad tardía; Imperio romano de Occidente; Spania; Hispania bizantina; Atanagildo; Justiniano; Agila

## **‘WAITING ONLY FOR A PRETEXT’: A NEW CHRONOLOGY FOR THE SIXTH-CENTURY BYZANTINE INVASION OF SPAIN**

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From 533 to 555, the Emperor Justinian undertook his most ambitious project, the “restoration” of the Roman Empire, eventually reconquering Italy, Africa, and a portion of Spain, which had all been lost to Germanic invaders during the fifth century.<sup>1</sup> While the reconquests of Italy and Africa were well-documented by the historians Procopius and Agathias, that of Spain received almost no contemporary attention. Because of the lack of textual evidence, it has been necessary for modern historians seeking to reconstruct the invasion to work from indirect evidence and circumstantial arguments to answer fundamental questions.

The chronology of the Byzantine invasion is generally said to go something like this: In 551, a Visigothic nobleman named Athanagild rebelled against the king, Agila. One of them (it is uncertain which) requested assistance from the empire. Justinian sent a force that arrived in 552, in time to aid Athanagild in a battle against Agila’s forces at Seville. After two years of war, the Visigothic nobles became concerned by the Byzantine presence, and in 554 or 555 assassinated Agila. They elevated Athanagild to the throne, and he turned on the Byzantines, who conquered the southern part of the Peninsula for themselves. Athanagild eventually signed a treaty with them, and the Byzantine province was then slowly reconquered by his successors over the next eighty years.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 17-19.

<sup>2</sup> M. La Fuente y Alcántara, *Historia de Granada*, Paris, Baudry, Librería Europea, 1852, 1:141-142; Ch. Diehl, *Justinien et la Civilisation Byzantine au Vie siècle*, Paris 1901,

This paper argues that the initial expedition, generally dated to 552, should be dated to 554. Although this is a fairly minor change, it requires us to rewrite the chronology of the invasion, and makes the Byzantine expedition appear even more predatory than their invasions of Africa or Italy.

The Byzantine expedition has been dated to 552 on the basis of two pieces of evidence. The first is that Jordanes, who composed the *Getica*, a history of the Goths, in 551, says that an expedition was then leaving for Spain, to aid the Visigothic king Agila against the rebel Athanagild.<sup>3</sup> Jordanes is believed to have been writing, at the earliest, in the late spring or early summer of 551; therefore, the expedition would probably have arrived in Spain in the spring of 552.<sup>4</sup>

The second piece of evidence for a 552 arrival is a line in the *Historia* of Isidore of Seville, who wrote that Athanagild won a battle at Seville *virtute militari*. E. A. Thompson interpreted this phrase to mean “by the virtue of

204-207; R. Altamira y Crevea, *Historia de España*, Barcelona 1913, 183-184; P. Goubert, “Byzance et l’Espagne wisigothique (554-711)”, *REB* 2 (1944) 5-17; J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, New York, Dover Publications, 1958, 286-288; E. Stein, *Histoire du bas-empire*, 2 vols., Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1959, 560-564; J. W. Barker, *Justinian and the Later Roman Empire*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1966, 138-139; E. A. Thompson, *The Goths in Spain*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969, 323-329; J. Moorhead, *Justinian*, New York, Longman, 1994, 109; F. J. Presedo Velo, *La España bizantina*, Sevilla, Universidad de Sevilla, 2003, 32-37; R. Collins, *Visigothic Spain, 409-711*, Malden, Blackwell, 2004, 47-49; J. Vizcaíno Sánchez, *Estudio de la presencia bizantina en España a partir de la documentación arqueológica*, Murcia, Universidad de Murcia, 2007, 49-60; M. Vallejo Girvés, *Hispania y Bizancio: una relación desconocida*, Madrid, Akal, 2012, 141-151.

<sup>3</sup> Jordanes, *Getica*, ed. Th. Mommsen, *Iordanis Romana et Getica* (Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi 5.1), Berolini, apud Weidmannos, 1882, § 303: «Post quem Thiudigisclus regnum adeptus, non diu regnans, defecit, occisus a suis. Cui succedens, hactenus Agil continet regnum. Contra quem Athanagildus insurgens Romani regni concitat vires, ubi et Liberius Patricius cum exercitu destinatur.»

<sup>4</sup> W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (AD 550-800)*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988, 100. Goffart believes that 551 is not the actual date of composition, but simply a *terminus post quem*.

[Byzantine] soldiers”, requiring the Byzantines to have arrived before the battle took place.<sup>5</sup>

There are problems with both these arguments. Dating the expedition on the basis of Jordanes’s statement that «*Liberius Patricius cum exercitu destinatur*» is problematic, for two reasons, one circumstantial, the other chronological. First, he names the patrician Liberius as the commander of the expedition. Liberius is known to have been present at the Second Council of Constantinople, which met in May and June of 553, and to have died at his estates in Italy in 554. If he went to Spain in 552, he would have had to leave no later than March 553 to make it to the city in time for the council. In addition, Liberius was not particularly loyal to Justinian, was quite elderly, and had previously twice lost appointments as commander of the Byzantine forces in Italy because he tarried so long in Constantinople.<sup>6</sup> Although these facts does not necessarily disqualify Liberius as commander of the expedition, it at least requires further consideration. The second problem with Jordanes’s account is that, if Liberius was not the commander, then Jordanes provides us only an *ante quem non* for the invasion: the earliest date it could have left is 552, but there is no reason it could not have left later.

The second argument for an expedition in 552, the presence of the Byzantines at Seville, is impossible for two reasons, one textual, the other linguistic. First, Isidore records the arrival of the Byzantines after the battle at Seville, so that we are forced to think either that he is contradicting himself, or to throw out his entire ordering of the events. Second, Isidore consistently uses the word *miles*, ‘soldier’, to refer to the Byzantine troops, not *militaris*. Although the word *militaris* is related to *miles*, it is not identical. Isidore uses the word *militaris* fourteen times in his works, and in every case it is pared

<sup>5</sup> E. A. Thompson, *Goths* (cit. n. 2), 325 n. 3, referring to Isidore of Seville, *Historia Gothorum et Wandalorum et Suevorum*, ed. Th. Mommsen, *Chronica minora saec. IV. V. VI. VII. (II)* (Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi 11), Berolini, apud Weidmannos, 1884, § 46.

<sup>6</sup> J. J. O’Donnell, “Liberius the Patrician”, *Traditio* 37 (1981) 31-72, at 67; A. H. M. Jones – J. Morris – J. R. Martindale, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971-1992, 3A:677-81.

with a noun of the same number and case, making it clear that he is using it as an adjective meaning ‘soldierly’, not as a noun meaning ‘soldier’, so that we should translate this line to mean that Athanagild won the battle at Seville “by [his] soldierly virtue”.<sup>7</sup>

Given these problems, it seems that we should think of 552 as simply a date *ante quem non* for the invasion. It is also possible to determine a date *post quem non*. Besides Jordanes, there are two other sources for the invasion: Gregory of Tours and Isidore of Seville. Gregory writes that the invasion occurred before the death of the Visigothic king Agila, who was assassinated in 554 or 555 by his nobles; this can be dated independently of our sources for the invasion.<sup>8</sup> However, Isidore says that the assassination happened before the Byzantines’ arrival, and that their imminent invasion was the cause

<sup>7</sup> Isidore, *Historia* (cit n. 5), 24, 46, 64. Isidore, *Etymologies*, Paris, Belles Lettres, 1981-2011, 1.24 and 26, 5.7, 6.19, 9.3, 15.16, 18.3, 12 and 53, 19.24 and 33. It should be noted that there are two versions of the *Historia*, the so-called Short and Long versions, and that the word *militaris* appears exclusively in the Long. It is thought that the Long version, which includes a preface, afterward, and a large amount of extra material, was genuinely written by Isidore, and that the Short version is either an earlier, unedited version by Isidore, or is a reduced version of the Long written after his death. In any case, it seems that the choice of *militaris* was indeed Isidore’s, and not a later editor’s. For a discussion of the manuscript history and authorship of Isidore’s *Historia*, see C. Rodríguez Alonso, *Las historias de los Godos, Vandalos y Suevos de Isidoro de Sevilla: Estudio, Edición Crítica y Traducción*, León, Centro de Estudios e Investigación “San Isidoro,” 1975. For a definition of *militaris*, see J. F. Niermeyer, *Mediae Latinitatis lexicon minus*, Leiden, Brill, 1984, 886-887.

<sup>8</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, eds. B. Krusch – W. Levison, *Libri historiarum X* (Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptorum rerum Merovingicarum 1.1), Hannoverae, Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1937-1951, § 4.8: «*De Hispanorum regibus. Regnante vero Agilane apud Hispaniam, cum populum gravissimo dominationis suae iugo adterraret, exercitus imperatoris Hispanias est ingressus et civitates aliquas pervasit. Interfecto autem Agilane, Athanagildus regnum eius accepit. Qui multa bella contra ipsum exercitum postea egit et eos plerumque devicit, civitatisque, quas male pervaserant, ex parte auferens de potestate eorum*». For the date of Agila’s death and Athanagild’s accession, see K. Zeumer, “Die Chronologie der Westgothenkönige der Reiche von Toledo”, *Neues Archiv für ältere deutsche Geschichte* 27 (1902) 409-444, at 417.

of Agila's demise.<sup>9</sup> It is difficult to choose between their accounts: Gregory lived during the invasion, but was writing at a distance, while Isidore wrote a generation later, but likely had access to witnesses. It is possible that Isidore changed the order of events to make the Byzantines seem more predatory, but if this is propaganda, it is a very subtle sort. Given this, all we can say with certainty that the latest the invasion occurred between 552 and 555.

This exhausts the textual evidence, which comes to less than two hundred fifty words total. We therefore turn to three circumstantial arguments for dating the invasion to 554, rather than 552. The first argument is the silence on the matter of Spain by the historian Procopius of Caesarea. Procopius recorded in great detail the first twenty-six years of reign of Justinian, writing a history of his wars against the Vandals, Persians and Ostrogoths, a panegyric on the emperor's building activity, and the much celebrated Secret History, in which he claimed to reveal Justinian's darkest secrets. It seems unlikely that Procopius would have failed to record the departure of an expedition to Spain in 552 since the final book of his history concludes in October 552.<sup>10</sup> Recent work on dating Procopius puts his death in 553, shortly after he completed his history, and if the invasion of Spain occurred in 554 rather than 552 this would explain why he did not record it.<sup>11</sup> Procopius's history

<sup>9</sup> Isidore, *Historia* (cit. n. 5), § 46-47: «[46] *Ipse victus, ac miserabili metu fugatus, Emeritam se recepit. Adversus quem interjecto aliquanti temporis spatio, Athanagildus tyrannidem regnandi cupiditate arripiens, dum exercitum ejus contra se Hispali missum virtute militari prostrasset, videntes Gothi proprio se everti excidio, et magis metuentes ne Hispaniam milites Romani auxilii occasione invaderent, Agilanem Emeritae interficiunt, et Athanagildi sese regimini tradiderunt.* [47] *Aera DXCII, anno imper. Justiniani XXIX, occiso Agilane, Athanagildus regnum quod invaserat tenuit ann. XIV. Hic cum jamdudum sumpta tyrannide, Agilanem regno privare conaretur, militum sibi auxilia ab imperatore Justiniano poposcerat, quos postea submovere a finibus regni molitus non potuit. Adversus quos hucusque conflictum est. Frequentibus antea praeliis caesi, nunc vero multis casibus fracti atque finiti. Decessit autem Athanagildus Toleti propria morte, vacante regno mensibus V.*»

<sup>10</sup> W. Treadgold, *The Early Byzantine Historians*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 185.

<sup>11</sup> G. Greatrex, "Recent work on Procopius and the composition of Wars VIII", *BMGS* 27 (2003) 45-67, at 45.

was continued by Agathias Scholasticus, who does mention the Byzantine presence in Spain, both in his history and in his poetry.<sup>12</sup>

Another circumstantial argument involves the source of the troops for the invasion of Spain. In 552, the Byzantine army was occupied on two fronts. In the East, Belisarius was fighting the Sassanid Empire in what is now called the Lazic War, which would not end until 557. In the West, Narses was fighting the Ostrogoths in Italy. The Ostrogoths were finally defeated at the Battle of Mons Lactarius in October 552, although the next year Italy would face a surprise Frankish invasion, which was turned back at the Battle of the Voltumnus in October 553. It therefore seems likely that Justinian would have ordered that troops be sent to Spain from Narses's army in Italy, either after Mons Lactarius or after Voltumnus, meaning that they would have arrived in the early summer of either 553 or 554.

The final circumstantial argument concerns the extent of the Byzantine conquests. Although opinions differ on how much of Spain was conquered, all modern scholars agree that Byzantine territory consisted of the coast between Cartagena and Málaga, and a region somewhat farther inland: no more than a fifth of the peninsula, and possibly less than that. It seems unlikely that Byzantine forces, arriving in 552 and fighting for two years, would be unable to make any more headway than this against a defending force divided by civil war. The Byzantines had made short work of the Vandals, conquering Africa in only two years, and their initial conquest of Italy took only five before it was turned back by the plague. The small extent of the Byzantine holdings can be explained, in part, if they arrived not in 552 but rather in 554 and fought for at most a year.

Dating the initial invasion to 554 rather than 552 creates one possible conflict with the sources: it makes Liberius unavailable as the commander of the expedition, as he had passed on by then. However, this is resolved if we view Jordanes as recording not the actual setting out of the expedition, but only the planning for it. He writes, «ubi et Liberius Patricius cum exercitu

<sup>12</sup> Agathias, *Historiarum Libri Quinque*, ed. R. Keydell, Berlin, 1967, § 5.13. W. R. Paton, *The Greek Anthology*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1948, 4.3.83 ff.

destinatur». Although *destino* can mean ‘to send’, it also means ‘to appoint to an office’, so that we can see this line as describing his appointment as commander of the invasion force, but not necessarily its departure.

Given these arguments, a new chronology for the Byzantine invasion of Spain can be assembled: In 551, a Visigothic rebel named Athanagild rebelled against the king, Agila. One of them sent to the empire for assistance. Justinian made plans to send a force, but this was delayed by the wars against the Persians and Ostrogoths. When the force finally arrived in 554, they found the rebellion over and the rebel on the throne. There may have been a short conflict between the Visigoths and the Byzantines, although not necessarily. The Byzantines may have presented Athanagild with a *fait accompli* by seizing the southern coast, while he was further north with a force depleted by civil war. No source records any specific battles, and a total lack of conflict may explain why the Byzantine expedition to Spain was given so little attention by contemporary historians: there was no glory in a bloodless war. In any case, in 555, the Byzantines found themselves in control of a small strip of land in the south of the Peninsula.

This chronology, in addition to being more accurate with regard to the sources and the circumstances, is in line with the idea that Justinian was “waiting for a pretext” to conquer additional territory in the West.<sup>13</sup> In this version, rather than sending troops to aid in a dynastic dispute, only to end

<sup>13</sup> It is disputed whether Justinian’s policy of reconquering lost Western territories was planned at the time of the war against the Vandals (J. W. Barker, *Justinian* [cit. n. 2], 131), or if it is a gamble which paid off (J. Moorhead, *Justinian* [cit. n. 2], 63-64). The middle view, that Justinian had no explicit plan for expansion at the start but was looking for an opportunity, seems most reasonable; «Pour traduire en acte ses rêves ambitieux, Justinien n’attendait qu’un prétexte» (Ch. Diehl, *Justinien* [cit. n. 2], 173). It is more likely that the invasion of Italy was planned; Procopius hints that Justinian’s excuse for invading Italy (the murder of Queen Amalasantha) may have been contrived by the emperor or his wife (W. Treadgold, *History of the Byzantine State and Society*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997, 928, n. 9). In any case, by 551, Justinian’s *modus operandi* was well established (*ibidem*, 210-213 *passim*), although it is debatable whether, in the face of the Empire’s financial difficulties and the on-going war with Persia, continuing Western expansion was a good idea.

up with new territory, the emperor sent troops to take advantage of the confusion resulting from the dispute in order to seize territory. A section of Isidore's Chronicle (written at the same time as his *Historia*, but containing much less detail) indicates that this may be consistent with the way Justinian was seen in Spain at the time. Summarizing the events of Justinian's reign, Isidore writes: «In Africa, the Vandals were destroyed by Belisarius. In Spain, Roman soldiers invaded because of Athanagild. In Italy, as well, Totila the king of the Ostrogoths was overcome by Narses the Roman Patrician.»<sup>14</sup> This passage draws a parallel between the invasions of Africa, Italy and Spain, making them appear as part of a single project. Unfortunately, Justinian did not leave behind any writings of his own to make his intentions clear, but it appears that, in his invasion of Spain, he was calculating and mercenary, taking advantage of the Visigoths' momentary disorganization to continue his policy of restoration.

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<sup>14</sup> J. C. Martin (ed.), *Isidori Hispalensis Chronica* (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 112), Turnhout, Brepols, 2003, l. 399. Note that, like the *Historia* (see n. 7 above), there are two versions of the *Chronica*, a Long and Short version. This summary appears only in the Long version; the equivalent line in the Short reads «Afterwards he [Belisarius], having been sent by Justinian to Africa, annihilated the people of the Vandals.» Both versions are believed to have been composed by Isidore himself, and the Short version is thought to be an earlier, unedited version of the Long, which is the final product. See the introductory material to the *Chronica*, 18.