

Article

Making *loca sacra* in Visigothic Iberia: The Case of Churches

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Abstract: Curiously, we have no previous studies that deal monographically with the question of the sacralisation of spaces in Visigoth Iberia. It is intended in the following pages to fill this historiographical gap by focusing on the particular case of the churches. By means of the compilation and exhaustive analysis of all the available documentary sources, particularly the available conciliar canons, it is aimed to identify the different prescriptions and strategies that were used to sacralise new places of worship in Iberia during the Visigothic period. Particular emphasis will be placed on ritual procedures, which are mandatory for the consecration of any church, but also on material and sensorial factors as complementary determinants in the definition of sacred space. The final result obtained provides us with a reality dominated by a heterogeneity of situations that were sometimes far from conforming to the reality desired by canon law.

Keywords: canon law; consecration; custom; Late Antiquity; rituals; sacred spaces

1. Introduction

“Sacra sunt loca divinis cultibus instituta, ut pote ea in quibus altaria litantibus de more pontificibus consecrantur” (Isid. *Hisp.*, *Etym.* XV, 4, 1)

With these words, Isidore of Seville defined sacred places as those consecrated to divine worship and as having an altar on which to make sacrifices. Although the bishop of Seville had the Roman past and its temples in mind with such a description, this was not contradictory to his present reality—in fact, it excludes any nuance that opposes the two historical contexts. Furthermore, according to the *Obitus beatissimi Isidori Hispalensis*, seeing his death was imminent, he decided to go to the church of San Vicente in Seville and to place himself beside the altar of the basilica to receive the Eucharist and forgiveness for his sins (Redempt. *Hisp.*, *Obit. b. Isid. Hisp. ep.* 2–4). According to the *vita* dedicated to Fructuosus of Braga, the altar of a church was also the place he chose to spend the last hours of his life. Death would surprise him while he was immersed in prayer (VF 20). It is evident that both holy men saw these places as a means of direct communication with the divinity or, in other words, they considered churches and their altars to be sacred spaces. As children of their time, it is to be expected that the rest society in Visigothic Iberia would also have had a similar perception. But what instils a sacred nature in these places? Was it innate to them or was some kind of agency required to afford them sacredness? What defines a sacred place? Were only churches considered sacred? These are just a few of the questions that arise when analysing the issue of sacred spaces in Visigothic Iberia and which will be study in this text.

There is, unfortunately, no universal definition of a “sacred space” or “sacred place”, so we can only highlight characteristics that may refer to one, such as having a special bond with the supernatural, i.e., with the “sacred”, or its gaining consensus within the community about its special significance (Benzo 2014, p. 22). Mircea Eliade ([1958] 1997, pp. 367–87) defined “sacred places” as those where the terrestrial, celestial and underworld spheres intertwine, where the supernatural sphere manifests itself (hierophany).¹ By their very nature, sacred places stand in contrast to ordinary places, imposing certain restrictions



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on everyday behaviour and the obligation to adopt a different one as a form of recognition and deference to the exceptional character of that place and its relationship to divinity (Hubert 1994, p. 11). Applying the terminology employed by Eliade himself (Eliade 1987), sacred spaces contrast with “profane” contexts, although it must be acknowledged that such a dichotomy does not allow us to understand the former in all their complexity (Bacci 2021, p. 17). Beyond their religious significance, “sacred places” also emanate inestimable social and ideological power for those who enjoyed their control and who benefited from the spiritual capital of these spaces (Sánchez-Pardo and Shapland 2015, p. 9).

Characteristics such as these appear in Iberian churches of the Visigothic period (507–711).² Since late Roman times, these were seen as privileged religious places where the divine presence was most evident (Sotinel 2005, pp. 417–19). As far as society in Visigothic Iberia was concerned, the *ecclesiae* or *basilicae* served as the main sacred references.³ Although the Visigoths were Arian until they embraced the Nicene faith in 589, until then and throughout the Visigothic period, the majority of the population of the Peninsula was Catholic and, therefore, the Church and its places of worship dominated the Iberian religious landscape. Churches were, therefore, the preferred settings for communication with the divine plane.⁴ For example, in a regulation on asylum scenarios, they were used as a unit of reference when delimiting a sacred space in the 12th Council of Toledo, in this case up to 30 paces from the ecclesiastical centre (Conc. XII Tol. [a. 681], c. 10).⁵ The big issue that arises is what provides a church with its sacredness? In the following pages we will try to answer this question.

2. The Ritual Issue

As we shall see, the sources offer the idea that churches, so as to function as such, were required to be consecrated through a ritual act. This played a pivotal role because, apart from signalling the status of the place, it had legal implications of immense importance, as it removed the space from civil jurisdiction (Bueno Sánchez 2022, p. 2). It was a public ceremony that was originally performed in the name of the Roman state and in the presence of its magistrates (Thomas 2002).⁶ In the Visigothic reality, this legal principle is expressed most directly in the recognition of churches as places of asylum for those (presumed) criminals persecuted by secular justice who sought refuge and protection in the Church (LV V, 4, 17; VI, 5, 16; VI, 5, 18; IX, 3, 1–4).⁷ Of course, the right to asylum also had a religious significance that—insofar as the sources allow us to understand—is explained by a simple fact of “reverence” for the sacredness of the churches (*reuerentia loci*) (Conc. VI Tol. [a. 638], c. 12). On an eminently religious level, the initial role of churches’ consecration rituals was to emphasise the Christian character of these places as opposed to those of a non-Christian nature, but they also had a theological component as a means of “introducing” this place into the bosom of the Church, as was done with every Christian through baptism (Repsler 1998, p. 17).

On the other hand, the consecration of a church not only served to imbue the space with sacredness, but also defined the place where the individual encounters the divine realm (Bruun and Hamilton 2016, p. 202). From that point on, churches could not be desecrated, and allusions to divine punishments suffered by those who violated their sacredness were common in the texts (Hyd., *Chron.* 79 [89]; Isid. *Hisp., Hist.* 73). Perhaps the most paradigmatic case is that of the desecration of the church in Cordoba consecrated to the martyr Acisclus during the military campaign against the city waged by the Visigothic King Agila, an episode that, according to Isidore of Seville, ended in divine punishment (Isid. *Hisp., Hist.* 45). The desecration of churches could take various forms, from the looting of their goods and, in particular, of their sacred objects (Iul. Tol., *Hist. Wamb.* 26), to simply carrying weapons inside, but also outside the church (LV IX, 3, 1–2; Iul. Tol., *Hist. Wamb.* 12).

In creating the consecratory rituals, a primary issue addressed by the Church was determining those legitimised to perform them. The conciliar canons are reiterative in claiming and attributing consecratory exclusivity to the bishops (Conc. I Brac. [a. 561], c.

19; *Conc. II Hisp.* [a. 619], c. 7; *Conc. VIII Tol.* [a. 653], c. 7). Curiously, such a prerogative does not acquire a theological justification, since, as Isidore of Seville himself recognises, the ability to consecrate—conferring or giving what is sacred—belongs to both bishops and priests (*Isid. Hisp., Etym.* VII, 12, 17; VII, 12, 21–22). We must, therefore, perhaps look for the cause of such exclusivity in more mundane explanations. It must be remembered that the liturgical *performance* itself when consecrating churches would have provided bishops with a magnificent opportunity to legitimise their authority in their diocese, and indeed in the consecrated church (Bruun and Hamilton 2016, p. 184).⁸ It is perhaps this factor that explains the episcopal interest in appropriating such competencies.

In many cases, however, the reality is quite different. The sources reveal cases of churches being consecrated by priests or religious agents other than bishops, sometimes due to the neglect of the latter (*Conc. II Hisp.* [a. 619], c. 7; *Conc. VIII Tol.* [a. 653], c. 7), but also out of pragmatism, since they could not always be present themselves.⁹ Monasteries and, therefore, their churches, which functioned as the vital centre of all their activity (*Isid. Hisp., RI* 1; 13; 24; *Fruct. Brac., RF* 1; 4; 7; 20; 22; *Reg. Comm.* 14; *VSPE* V, 8, 1–5), were often not consecrated by the episcopal authorities. The *Vita Fructuosi*, for example, makes no mention of the episcopal consecration of Fructuosus' numerous foundations but only emphasises his role.¹⁰ The *Regula Communis* deplores those priests who found monasteries with the intention of collecting money without the consent of the bishops. Likewise, it denounces those laymen who consecrate churches dedicated to holy martyrs in the bosom of their houses for the ultimate aim of founding a monastery there (*Reg. Comm.* 1–2; Díaz 1999, pp. 178–79). That is, the rule deplores such foundational initiatives without episcopal authority (Díaz 2017, p. 491). One may even ask whether the majority of private churches in the hands of elite laymen were consecrated by bishops, not only before the Visigothic period but also during a good part of it. We must, therefore, consider the possibility that the claim for episcopal exclusivity in the consecration and, therefore, definition of new sacred spaces was above all a *desideratum* that was applied unequally. The case of Valerius of Bierzo perfectly illustrates this idea. The ascetic hermit directly questioned the exclusivity of the official ecclesiastical hierarchies as agents of divine intercession, claiming preferential access to “the sacred” for himself (Martin 2015, pp. 69–70).

With regard to the very ritual procedure aimed at consecrating churches, curiously the Church did not show the same regulatory concern when it came to determining its agents. The existence of such rituals is evident. The specification in a consecratory epigraph from Toledo in the time of Reccared regarding the ‘*in catolico*’ consecration of a church dedicated to Saint Mary speaks of a particular, albeit unspecified, rite being performed (*ICERV*: 302). We have more inscriptions that record the consecration of churches. These inscriptions highlight the author of the act, even more so than the name of the promoter of its construction, in what can be understood as a way of legitimising the “sacredness” of the place (Treffort 2008, p. 251).¹¹ Paradoxically, however, such inscriptions would not have formed part of the process to consecrate the place; they did not contribute to reinforcing its sacredness but only left testimony of the liturgical act. Perhaps, at most, and following recent proposals, they functioned as evidentiary elements, with legal value, to confirm the removal of that place from civil jurisdiction (García Lobo and Martín López 2011). Therefore, epigraphy is not particularly useful for reconstructing the consecration rituals. The other sources do not allow us to paint a rosier picture either. There are no contemporary texts detailing the consecration ceremonies (Bueno Sánchez 2022, p. 5).¹² Nor do we observe any attempt to standardise or regularise a specific liturgy to consecrate churches in the Visigothic period. There was not even a concern for it in the process of liturgical unification that took place during the seventh century across the whole kingdom (Díaz 1999, pp. 193–99).¹³

We understand, therefore, that the bishops were allowed to exercise freedom in designing the services and masses for the consecration of churches. We can even raise the possibility that each territory had its own ritual customs.¹⁴ Nevertheless, we can presuppose some common minimums, such as the mandatory celebration of a consecratory

mass (Repscher 1998, pp. 20–21). Equally diverse could be the meanings with which such rites could be endowed, based on the interests of their executors, but also of their audience, who would perceive them differently (Bruun and Hamilton 2016, pp. 186, 202). Canonical regulations prescribed that consecrations of new churches were to take place on a Sunday (*Conc. III Caesar*. [a. 691], c. 1; Vives 1942, p. 259). But, again, we cannot be sure that the canons were strictly adhered to, although not all scholars agree. José Vives, for example, questioned the supposed cases of transgression of this canonical regulation, considering that it only applied to private churches. For Vives, it was unthinkable that the consecrator would leave a record of such a transgression in an inscription (*Ibidem*).¹⁵ However, there is evidence that proves that churches were consecrated on days other than a Sunday (Martínez Tejera 1996, pp. 81–82). In this aspect, as in so many others, including liturgical and ritual ones, canonical transgressions by the clergy were ultimately quite common.

A prominent, if not starring, element in many of the consecratory rituals were the relics. Their deposition was perhaps the most decisive moment in the sacralisation of the ecclesiastical space (Sotinel 2005, p. 422). Relics were, in the eyes of the Church, vehicles to connect the earthly plane and divinity (Castillo Maldonado 1997, p. 40).¹⁶ By extension, and by virtue of this capacity for intercession with the spiritual plane, the places in which they were deposited became sacred in themselves (Castillo Maldonado 1997). In the earthly realm, the presence of relics would also have served as the main attraction of the centres of worship, for example, as places of pilgrimage (Díaz 2000, 2002), but also as instruments of power for those bishops who knew how to capitalise on them to assert their leadership within their respective communities. This is due to the capacity of relics to enhance the social cohesion of the Christian community that worshipped them (Castellanos 1996).

There are some epigraphic testimonies that point to the deposition of relics (*ICERV*: 304–310). However, their presence was not enough to entitle a place, in this case a church, to be afforded a sacred nature. It required the intervention of the liturgy, of the ritual and symbolic factor (Bueno Sánchez 2022, p. 5). However, we do not know of a particular rite for the deposition of relics, although we do not rule out its existence, as was the case, for example, in the Roman context (Repscher 1998, pp. 21–22). On the other hand, we know that not all consecrated churches had relics to their name.¹⁷ To echo the words of Claire Sotinel, “la déposition des reliques dans les églises est de règle au VI^e siècle, même si elle n’est pas une condition nécessaire à la dédicace” (Sotinel 2005, p. 414). This was a relatively early phenomenon, for in the letter sent by Pope Vigilius to Profuturus of Braga in 538 concerning those churches that had been desecrated or rebuilt, a distinction is made between those in which relics were not originally deposited and those in which they were. While in the first case it was only necessary to celebrate a mass, the second involved purifying the space with water sprinkled on the walls, to celebrating the consecration ritual again and returning the relic to its place (*Vigil. Epist. ad Profuturum ep.* 4).

From here on, there are still more unknowns than certainties. Was it necessary to bless all the churches that were built *ex novo* and that had relics with holy water or only the reconsecrated spaces? There are no explicit cases in this respect for Visigothic Iberia, although we do have confirmation of the second assumption for other geographical locations. In a letter sent to Abbot Melitón, Gregory the Great urges him, instead of destroying the Anglo-Saxons’ pagan places of worship, to bless them with water, build altars for them and deposit relics there.¹⁸ Although not referring to the specific case of churches, in an episode of the *Vita Aemiliani* we find the holy man blessing the house of the “senator” Honorius to exorcise the presence of the devil by means of water mixed with salt and blessed according to the “*more ecclesiastico*” (Braul. *Caesar.*, VSE 24). Perhaps this was the procedure followed in the integration and reconsecration of churches that, until the reign of Reccared, had operated according to the Arian creed. Canonical regulation prescribed that such places of worship be reconsecrated according to the Nicene faith, without further specification (*Conc. II Caesar*. [a. 592], c. 3). The allusion in the aforementioned epigraph from Toledo in the time of Reccared regarding the ‘*in catolico*’ consecration of a church dedicated to Saint Mary speaks of a particular reconsecration rite being performed (*ICERV*:

302). But what happened to the Arian places of worship that possessed relics? Were they recognised by the Catholic Church? The Second Council of Saragossa in 592, which brought together the bishops of Tarraconensis to integrate Arian structures into their own, established that Arian relics should be subjected to the ordeal of fire (*Conc. II Caesar*. [a. 592], c. 2).¹⁹ Another issue that arises is whether such churches were provided with new relics when they failed the test.

3. The Altar's Prominence

Relics were usually placed in the altar (Dourthe 1995).²⁰ This was the most sacred place in the church, which functioned as a means of direct contact with the divine plane and, therefore, functioned as the main stage of the liturgies (Godoy 1995, p. 49; González Salinero 2009, p. 25).²¹ Such an importance is stressed constantly in the sources. We should recall the desire of Isidore of Seville and Fructuosus of Braga to spend their last moments prostrate before the altars (Redempt. *Hispan.*, *Obit. b. Isid. Hispan. ep.* 2–4; VF 20). Likewise, the latter and Valerius of Bierzo—but also others—sought to place their respective cells next to the altars, since they believed they gained direct access to the divinity in this way (VF 6; Val. Berg., *OQ* 4.3. Martin 2015, p. 78).²² It was also where people went when they wanted to obtain divine inspiration or favour (VSPE, IV, 2, 40–50; V, 5, 50–60; V, 13, 45–54). Likewise, it is in front of the altar of Saint Peter's and Paul's church in Toledo that King Wamba was anointed (Iul. Tol., *Hist. Wamb.* 4). From a juridical standpoint, and because of their status as the most sacred places, altars were the most suitable places to preserve the right of asylum (Osaba 2003, p. 89). Of course, as sacred places, they were also attributed with the ability to work miracles. We see this in Valerius' own work, but also in other texts (Val. Berg., *RS* 11.1).²³ Relics could be superfluous to the consecration of a church but not the altar. It is in fact from it, as the place where the Eucharist takes place, that sacredness was originally extended to the space in which it is rooted, i.e., the church (Déroche 2009, p. 128; Caseau 2016, p. 256). By extension, the entire architectural arrangement of churches was based on it, emphasising its location (Godoy 1995, p. 49; Arbeiter 2003). It is, therefore, no coincidence that the episcopal chair was located just behind the altar (*Lib. Ord.* 86, col. 212).

As the most sacred places, altars were also subject to restrictions and prohibitions. For example, it was forbidden to spill blood on them or even to officiate at the liturgy that had the altar as its main stage with blood on one's hands (*Conc. Ilerd.* [a. 546], c. 1; VSPE, IV, 2, 16–20). Neither could monks who were impure in their thoughts approach them.²⁴ To these prohibitions would be added those that affected churches as a whole but particularly the altar, such as the carrying of weapons near them (See *supra*). Furthermore, not everyone was allowed access to the presbytery where altars were located, which were even enclosed with symbolic barriers such as chancel screens. Only the clergy had access to the altar (*Conc. I Brac.* [a. 561], c. 13; Puertas Tricas 1975, p. 156; Arbeiter 2003, pp. 177–78; González Salinero 2009, p. 19; Fernández Jiménez 2018). However, in the liturgy, only the officiant of the mass and his assistant could stand next to the altar, with the choir reserved for the rest of the clergy (Godoy 1995, pp. 55–65; González Salinero 2009, pp. 21–22).²⁵ This does not imply that the choir was devoid of all sacredness; it was in fact also the scene of miracles (VSPE IV, 7, 1–4; IV, 9, 7–10). The faithful were also forbidden access to the choir and had to stand in the part furthest from the altar (*Conc. I Brac.* [a. 561], c. 13; *Conc. IV Tol.* [a. 633], c. 18). Only (presumed) criminals taking refuge in churches could access the area reserved for the altar and the choir, and they could only be removed from these spaces with priestly authorisation (LV VI, 5, 16). As Raúl González Salinero (2009, p. 19) explains, “esta articulación del espacio obedecía a un principio litúrgico conforme al cual el grado de sacralidad del escenarios cultural disminuía en virtud del alejamiento respecto de la zona reservada al altar”.²⁶ The same legislative precept concerning asylum in churches points to this, since it considers that, beyond the altar and the choir, it is as if one were practically outside the church (LV VI, 5, 16).

By virtue of its special sacredness, it is no coincidence that the altar stars as one of the few canonical references to the ritual consecration of sacred spaces. The Council of Agde

of 506, for example, prescribes that altars be sacralised, not only through the anointing with chrism but also through priestly blessing (*Conc. Agath.* [a. 507], c. 14). Thanks to the subsequent Second Council of Seville in 619, we can deduce that such a prescription affected the original act of consecration of the altar and that this, including its anointing and blessing, was reserved solely to the bishop and in no case to the presbyters (*Conc. II Hisp.* [a. 619], c. 7). Likewise, if we assume that the Antiphony of the Cathedral of León includes original ritual practices from the Visigothic period, the consecration ritual for the altars detailed in it could serve as an example. It states that, after the deposition of relics on the altar, the bishop was to consecrate the altar and its ornamentation with ritual objects (Brou and Vives 1959, p. 443). The question that arises here is whether the act of consecrating the altar was independent of that of consecrating the church as such, or whether the former was the only one required to sacralise the whole religious space. Epigraphic evidence points to both assumptions. While the inscriptions found on an ancient Roman altar reused in Cabra point to the consecration of both elements, another epigraph in Dos Hermanas (Seville) (*ICERV*: 308)²⁷ referring to the foundation of a church only alludes to the altar as the hero of the consecration rituals (*ICERV*: 313).²⁸ It cannot be ruled out, therefore, that a variety of customs would also have prevailed in this respect.

4. Material and Sensorial Factors

While the consecration rituals of the church and altar were fundamental, there were other elements that contributed to defining and reinforcing the sacredness of the space, such as its outward appearance, i.e., its materiality (Hamilton and Spicer 2006, p. 6), but also the use of other sensory agents. Even their orientation played a role in this respect. According to Isidore of Seville, temples had to face east so that the faithful could pray in this direction (*Isid. Hisp., Etym.* XV, 4, 7). However, not all churches comply with the Isidorean principle. Cristina Godoy (1995, pp. 51, 71–74) argued at the time that this was because such buildings were not originally intended for Eucharistic worship, but only later (Godoy, pp. 51, 71–74), but it is perhaps too much to extrapolate this principle to all churches that have a different orientation.

With regard to the materiality and sensoriality of sacred spaces, we must mention the visual items, such as decorative and lighting elements. The inclusion of iconographic and stylistic elements is worth mentioning in regard to the former (Bacci 2021). The *Passio Mantii* or the *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium* are quite eloquent in recording the concern by builders of the places of worship in embellishing them with the use of marble, coffered ceilings, ornate columns, mosaics, gold or silver, among other artistic and architectural elements, in order to emphasise the sacredness of the place (*Pass. Mant.* 104–16; *VSPE* IV, 6, 24–32). Echoing the words of Raúl González Salinero (2009, p. 26), “la iglesia, lugar en el que se entraba en contacto con la divinidad y se recordaba el ejemplo aleccionador de los mártires que se habían mantenido firmes a la fe, debía ser fiel reflejo de una realidad sublime que expresase la distancia existente entre la perfección divina y el despreciable mundo terrenal”. As well as these elements, there were others of a movable nature, such as the votive crowns, those from the Guarrazar treasure being good examples of this. Thomas Deswarte (2011) gives them a key liturgical role, specifically during Holy Week.²⁹ Their religious significance is emphasised in Julian of Toledo’s *Historiae Wambae*, where it is said that Reccared gave a golden crown as an offering to honour the memory of Saint Felix of Nîmes (*Iul. Tol., Hist. Wamb.* 26). This liturgical role, however, would not be contradictory to the decorative one (Gros i Pujol 2003, p. 72). The granting of such crowns by monarchs to certain churches can be understood as royal recognition of that religious centre, while the action itself imbued that place with greater importance and, therefore, greater sacredness.³⁰ Apart from votive crowns, we should also mention the use of other liturgical, but equally decorative, elements, such as those sacred objects that dressed the altar and which, except in exceptional situations, it was essential that they remained there (*Conc. XIII Tol.* [a. 683], c. 7). Examples of these would include silver vessels (*Conc. Agath.* [a. 506], c. 7; *Iul. Tol., Hist. Wamb.* 26)³¹ but also fabrics (Ripoll 2005, pp. 50–53). Not necessarily associated

with the altar, churches had other decorative elements that would have fostered a sacred atmosphere, such as curtains (*Conc. Narb.* [a. 589], c. 13; Ripoll 2005, pp. 45–50). With regard to light, the 13th Council of Toledo expressly allowed the clergy to keep *luminaria* outside the church only in the event of danger in war contexts (*Conc. XIII Tol.* [a. 683], c. 7). The casuistry of exceptionality used in the rule shows the importance of lighting elements, such as votive crowns, but also candles or lanterns to define the sacred space (*Conc. Tol.* [a. 597], c. 2; *Conc. IV Tol.* [a. 633], c. 9; Puertas Tricas 1975, p. 156). Hence liturgical lights are sometimes the main feature of miracles, such as that recorded in the *Vita Aemiliani* that speaks of the lamp which, by divine intervention, was filled with oil which was not available (Braul. Caesar., VSE 36).

For other geographical contexts, such as the Eastern Roman Empire, we know that olfactory agents—such as incense or perfumes—also played a key role in reinforcing the sacred atmosphere of Christian religious spaces. In the Visigothic case, the evidence for these olfactory elements is scarce. Isidore of Seville, for example, devotes a chapter to them in his *Etymologiae* but affords a more medical role to them (Isid. *Hisp., Etym.* IV, 12). On the other hand, canonical regulations do not indicate the introduction of olfactory agents anywhere in the liturgy. Fortunately, in the immediate context of a Sunday mass, the *VSPE* mentions deacons as censer-bearers, so we note that incense was used in the liturgy in some churches at least (*VSPE*, IV, 6, 6–9; Puertas Tricas 1975, p. 156).³² The same text evokes the aroma of incense as an offering to God by Bishop Fidelis of Mérida during his prayer (*VSPE* IV, 9, 35–37). In the end, as sacred spaces, churches were inconceivable without the interweaving of multi-sensory effects that reinforced the sacred atmosphere of the place.³³ We thus conceived the sacred space “as a context of interactions between multiple factors” (Bacci 2021, p. 16). The aim was to build a space where the religious phenomenon could be experienced, i.e., where the divine could be sensed to be close at hand.

5. The Impact of Other Factors

Beyond the elements that defined the sacredness of the churches, we must ask ourselves about the existence of a hierarchy, i.e., an unequal assessment of these spaces in their link with the divine plane. Valerius of Bierzo recognises the capacity of some places to work miracles compared to others, regardless of the author’s own emotional attachment to these spaces. This is the case, for example, with the church founded by his disciple and rival, Saturninus (Val. Berg., RS 11.1). As Céline Martin (2015, p. 83) suggests, “il serait peut-être un peu simpliste d’y voir une réminiscence païenne, mais le fait est que pour Valérius la puissance des saints paraît plus active en certains lieux qu’en d’autres”. Does this mean that there were spaces with a sacredness that was not constructed but innate to these places? This is the possibility raised by some scholars (Sánchez-Pardo and Shapland 2015, p. 9: “Sacred places are not chosen: here, in this place, has the sacred ever been manifest [. . .]”), but there are also those who argue that sacredness is not inherent to any place in Christianity (Hubert 1994, p. 14: “Thus the sacredness of the church is not something that is inherent in the place itself. Ritual leaders can create a sacred place, and uncreate it.”). What is certain is that we can observe the spiritual capital of certain spaces being exploited, such as ancient places of worship of pagan origin—or perhaps even earlier (García Quintela 2014; González García and García Quintela 2016)—that continued to play a key role in collective memory and tradition. Valerius of Bierzo highlights this phenomenon in the church dedicated to Saint Felix and run by the presbyter Flainus (Val. Berg. RS 1.2). There is no doubt that, to a greater or lesser extent and irrespective of their religious origin and significance, certain peasant sectors continued to worship the waters, considering some of their spaces as sacred (*Conc. XVI Tol.* [a. 693], c. 2; Veas Ruiz and Sánchez 1990, pp. 490–91; Velázquez Soriano and Ripoll López 1992, p. 570). Perhaps as a response to this, certain pagan places of water worship maintained their religious significance in Visigothic times under the invocation of a Christian saint (*Ibidem*, p. 566). Isidore of Seville recognises the existence of centres of worship provided with waters with a special religious significance (Isid. *Hisp., Etym.* XV, 4, 9–10). Likewise, Recceswinth founded the church of San Juan

de Baños in a thermal site that had been noted in Roman times for the worship around the spring (Velázquez Soriano and Ripoll López 1992, pp. 560–61). However, Christianity required that the sacredness of a church was sanctioned according to prescriptive practices, such as those analysed above—irrespective of the previous importance of the place. It is also true that, as Valerius' work again shows, there were places where no church was built and which were intrinsically sacred in nature, allowing a direct connection with the divinity to be conveyed without the need for the intercession of any other factor or agent beyond prayer (Val. Berg. OQ, 1.2; RS 1.3). For example, when speaking of his solitary retreat in the Aquilian Mountains, the ascetic hermit considers that the place on the mountain where he lived was consecrated to God, as if it were his own particular desert (Val. Berg. OQ, 1.2; RS 1.3; Díaz 2012, pp. 392–93). Then there would be those places that, even with human publicity, did not, at least apparently, result in the construction of a church. For example, the *Vita Aemiliani* speaks of a place where the saint performed a miracle by making timber—that was too short for its purpose of constructing a barn—grow through prayer. According to the hagiographic text, this wood, and thus this place, became famous in later years for its ability to work healing miracles (Braul. Caesar., VSE 26).

The reuse and consecration of these traditional spaces afforded special religious significance, at least to pragmatic ecclesiastical agents who did so for their own benefit.³⁴ In a phenomenon common in other geographical locations, the significance of places that had been sacred since ancient times is exploited, not so much to show ritual continuity but to capitalise on it in favour of those promoting the Christian re-signification of the place (Bradley 1993, pp. 113–29). We, therefore, see the roll out of certain strategies of what would be called “marketing” today, aimed at attracting parishioners. New churches would also have been dedicated to “fashionable” saints whose worship was in full swing at the time. On other occasions it was not even a matter of consecrating new places of worship to saints who were particularly attractive from a social standpoint but of locating them in places that had enjoyed the presence of a revered holy man. This is the case of Saturninus, a disciple of Valerius of Bierzo, who consecrated a church in a place related to Fructuosus, although the church was dedicated to the Holy Cross and to Saint Pantaleon, as well as to other martyr saints. As Valerius himself acknowledges, Saturninus would have sought to take advantage of the worship in that place, and perhaps of his relationship with Fructuosus, in order to enhance his own reputation (Val. Berg. RS 13; Martin 2015, pp. 82–83).

A final question that arises in connection with churches and their sacred nature is whether the latter, after the consecration of the place, was maintained forever or, on the contrary, could be lost. It is well known that spaces can become non sacred in Christianity today (Hubert 1994, pp. 13–14),³⁵ either voluntarily or involuntarily through “contamination”. The latter assumption is negatively confirmed by the casuistry discussed previously, which shows the need to reconsecrate spaces that have been desecrated or reconstructed (See *supra*). Curiously, such an imperative was not necessary for churches in ruins and/or in those where ecclesiastical services were not regularly held (Conc. XVI Tol. [a. 693], *Tomus*; c. 5). However, we must assume that the sacredness of the churches in these cases would have had less power than their well-maintained and functioning counterparts. After all, in a certain manner and frequently, the liturgy celebrated in churches—particularly the Eucharist—renewed the sacredness of the place of worship,³⁶ and thus the concern of the councils to ensure that the Eucharistic services were celebrated in all the churches can be partially understood (Conc. XVI Tol. [a. 693], *Tomus*; c. 5).

6. Conclusions

The Visigothic Church, and in particular its bishops, sought to set themselves up as the exclusive agents of the sacredness of sacred spaces through the intervention of the ritual factor, i.e., consecration. By extension, in a principle that continued in the subsequent phase (Schmitt 1992), but which was already reflected in Justinian's *Institutiones* (*Inst. Iust.* II, 1, 8), the bishops considered, at least ideally, that only those spaces that had been

previously consecrated acquired a sacred nature in a clear attempt to monopolise access to it. Reality, however, would take a different path. Beyond the canonical prescriptions, what is certain is that the bishops were unable to project their supposedly exclusive rights over the whole of the Visigothic reality in Iberia, and the consecration of new centres of worship without their involvement was commonplace. Likewise, beyond the episcopal *desideratum* of monopolising the definition of sacred spaces, the truth is that not all religious agents shared this vision. The case of Valerius of Bierzo has highlighted the existence of places inherently afforded sacredness without the need for any bishop to imbue them with such a condition.³⁷

However, those prescriptions that required the ritual consecration of places of worship were more widely observed. Another issue is the lack of concern shown by the episcopal hierarchies when establishing common consecration rituals. Thus, freedom of action, local custom and, as a consequence, heterogeneity of behaviour dominated the dynamics of church sacralisation in Visigothic Iberia. This does not imply that transgressions of canonical regulations were not committed, including by the bishops themselves, for example, when consecrating churches on days other than a Sunday.

Apart from the ritual factor, there were other elements that determined the process of sacralising churches. Particularly important was the deposition of relics, where they existed, as these functioned as the main vehicle to connect the earthly and spiritual planes. The deposition site, the altar, indicated the most sacred space in the church. Consequently, and regardless of whether or not relics were present, altars functioned as the main liturgical settings and their presence was essential in determining the sacredness of a church. It was not in vain that the entire architectural arrangement of the church was based around the altar. In addition to the altar, other elements—including sensory—contributed to reinforcing the sacred atmosphere of the churches, such as their orientation towards the east, the lighting, olfactory and decorative components. In short, beyond the determinism of the ritual factor, what is certain is that the sacredness of churches was also defined by the intertwining of so many other material and sensory elements. Other practices, such as the requirement to wash the altars and the church, as well as to purify the sacred vessels, every Maundy Thursday should be understood in a similar vein (Isid. *Hisp.*, *De eccl. off.* I, 29).

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Notes

¹ For another proposed conceptualisation of sacred spaces, see [Bachmann-Medick et al. \(2021\)](#).

² For a characterisation of sacred spaces in the Christian realm, [Schmitt \(1992\)](#). We must not, however, confuse sacred spaces with “holy places”. They are not dichotomous phenomena, since a holy place can be equally sacred but not vice-versa. Their fundamental difference lies in the special relationship of “holy places” with divinity: intrinsically afforded divine attributes due to their particular role in the Christian religious narrative, whereas sacred spaces require minimal human publicity to be defined and confirmed as such. [Bacci \(2021\)](#), pp. 17–18).

³ On these terminological issues and, above all, on their conception as a sacred space, see [González Salinero \(2009\)](#).

⁴ “L’église est désormais présentée comme un lieu d’épiphanie divine, de dialogue entre les fidèles et les résidents du Paradis et d’intervention miraculeuse du Christ, de la Vierge et des saints”. [Caseau \(2016\)](#), p. 257). An example in: *VSPE*, IV, 7, 1–4.

- 5 Secular legislation, for its part, also frames the church exterior, particularly its porticoes, as *loco sancto*. *LV IX*, 3, 2. This is an *antiqua* rule, well before the canonical one, so it is possible to raise the question of whether the development of a sacred space beyond the church building itself came as a later development.
- 6 On the consideration of churches as sacred spaces and the legal implications in the late Roman Empire, [Sotinel \(2005\)](#), pp. 429–32). See also ([Farang 2021](#)).
- 7 This legislation also draws on the late Roman and Byzantine reality. *CTh.* IX, 45, 1–5; *Dig.* I, 2. Visigothic canon law also deals with the issue of asylum, although it draws its inspiration from its Merovingian counterpart. *Conc. Ilerd.* (a. 546), c. 8; *Conc. VI Tol.* (a. 638), c. 12; *Conc. VII Tol.* (a. 646), c. 1; *Conc. XII Tol.* (a. 681), c. 10; *Conc. XIII Tol.* (a. 683), c. 11. See ([Osaba 2003, 2009](#)).
- 8 Consecratory epigraphy, in which the prominence of bishops as executors of consecration rituals is emphasised, illustrates this assumption. See, for example, *ICERV*: 304–6, 308–9, 310, 313, 315, 317, 319, 322.
- 9 Montanus of Toledo, for example, opens the door to delegating the consecration of churches to trusted clerics. *Conc. II Tol.* (a. 531), 202–10.
- 10 This is in contrast to those foundational initiatives undertaken by bishops while exercising the episcopal ministry. Offering a fairly complete casuistry: [Díaz \(2017\)](#), pp. 476–80).
- 11 On the consecration inscriptions of churches in the Visigothic reality, [Martínez Tejera \(1996\)](#).
- 12 This phenomenon is not exclusive to Visigothic Iberia, but was widespread during the Roman Empire, and also in the subsequent medieval West. ([Repscher 1998](#), pp. 17–39; [Bruun and Hamilton 2016](#), p. 178).
- 13 Evidence in later liturgical texts, such as the *Liber Ordinum* or in the Roman-Hispanic *ordo* of Narbonne, may offer some insight from the Visigothic period in Iberia, but it is very difficult to distinguish which.
- 14 It is worth noting here the Isidorian principle that called for toleration of the different religious customs of each place. *Isid. Hisp., De eccl. off.* I, 44. The canonical regulations, on the other hand, called for maintaining unity at least at the provincial level. *Conc. Gerund.* (a. 517), c. 1; *Conc. IV Tol.* (a. 633), c. 2; *Conc. XI Tol.* (a. 675), c. 3. The prominence of custom is also evident in the foundation of monasteries. For example, in the *Vita Fructuosi*, when the foundational activity of the saint is recorded, reference is made to the dedication of a monastery “with the customary practice”. *VF* 7. Although we opt for this reading, it is true that the text gives rise to alternative interpretations, such as that offered by Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz who, at the time, denied that liturgical rites were being mentioned, but rather the imposition of monastic discipline. [Díaz y Díaz \(1974\)](#), p. 91).
- 15 Also advocating habitual compliance with canonical prescriptions, [García Lobo and Martín López \(2011\)](#).
- 16 On the importance of relics, [Brown \(1981\)](#).
- 17 Not thinking the same: [Castillo Maldonado \(1997\)](#), p. 46).
- 18 *Greg. Magn., Reg. Ep.* XI, 56.
- 19 It is to be expected that this test be passed by Catholic relics previously appropriated by the Arians. Although frustrated, it is worth recalling here the attempt by King Leovigild to appropriate the tunic of Saint Eulalia of Mérida. *VSPE V*, 6.
- 20 The *Passio Mantii*, for example, explicitly states the altar as the burial place of the holy man. *Pass. Mant.* 103–4. [González Salinero \(2009\)](#), p. 25). See also, *VSPE V*, 5, 50–54; *ICERV*: 313.
- 21 Presenting a theological argument from Isidorian work, Thomas [Deswarte \(2011\)](#) sees a joint embodiment of the figure of Christ, the Church and the saints in the altar. An archaeological perspective on altars: ([Ripoll and Chavarría Arnau 2005](#); [Sastre de Diego 2013](#)).
- 22 A similar behaviour is sensed in the cases of Paul of Mérida. *VSPE*, IV, 4, 35–40.
- 23 A similar episode can be observed in the *Vita Fructuosi*. *VF* 6. See also *VSPE V*, 8, 1–5; *Ild. Tol., De uiris illustr.* 2. Another issue is whether this ability was received as a container of relics, themselves a source of miracles, or independently of them. See [Castillo Maldonado \(1997\)](#), p. 40). The *Vita Aemiliani* would confirm this assumption. It records the episode of a sick girl who sought healing at the “altar” consecrated next to the tomb of the holy man. *Braul. Caesar., VSE* 38.
- 24 Such a prohibition was especially prescribed for those monks who had had wet dreams. *Isid. Hisp., RI* 13. For other restrictions regarding the altar and monasticism: *Fruct. Brac., RF* 11.
- 25 The choir was also the place reserved for monks. *Isid. Hisp., RI* 1. Laymen could only enter the choir when it received the blessing by the giving of oblations. *Lib. Ord.* 68, col. 170. On the discrimination of spaces inside churches, [Arbeiter \(2003\)](#), p. 177).
- 26 On a general level, see ([Déroche 2009](#), p. 128; [Lauwers 2010](#)).
- 27 Pointing in the same direction: *ICERV*: 316.
- 28 A different phenomenon would be the deposition of relics in pre-existing churches. *ICERV*: 309.
- 29 Giving them a liturgical role, [Gros i Pujol \(2003\)](#).
- 30 In a similar vein, albeit more supported by theological argumentation, [Deswarte \(2011\)](#).
- 31 Not all clergy were allowed to carry the sacred vessels. *Conc. I Brac.* (a. 561), c. 10; *Conc. II Brac.* (a. 572), *Cap. Mart.* 41; *Isid. Hisp., De eccl. off.* II, 8–10. Likewise, such vessels could not have alternative uses to liturgies. *Conc. III Brac.* (a. 675), c. 2. On the general importance of sacred vessels, see [Lauwers \(2012\)](#).

- 32 Echoing the words of Béatrice Caseau (2016, p. 259), “cette notion de l’église comme fenêtre ouverte sur le Paradis était volontairement renforcée par l’atmosphère parfumée de l’espace ecclésial”, “ce maintien de l’odeur permettait ainsi aux églises d’acquérir une ambiance olfactive particulière qui dans l’imaginaire chrétien deviendra un marqueur de la sacralité des lieux”. In general, albeit for a later timeframe, dealing with the role of light and smell in the consecration of churches: Gauthier (2007).
- 33 Although applied to other contexts, (Hamilton and Spicer 2006, pp. 7–8; Zchomelidse 2021).
- 34 “se constata una tendencia bastante generalizada en las distintas culturas y religiones a asociar determinados lugares (como los árboles, las cuevas, las cimas de las montañas, etc.) con la presencia de la divinidad y de ahí que esos lugares susciten gran respeto en los visitantes. Se trataría de una especie de ubicación preferente para honrar a los dioses de cualquier religión. La idea que los lugares conservarían su carácter sagrado a pesar de la suplantación de diferentes ritos.” Torres (2007, p. 96).
- 35 This falls foul of the principle put forward by Mircea Eliade ([1958] 1997, pp. 368–69), who considered consecrated spaces as maintaining their sacredness permanently.
- 36 Ideally, masses should be celebrated daily (*Conc. I Tol.* [a. 400] c. 5; *Isid. Hisp., De eccl. off.* I, 18; *Conc. Emeret.* [666] c. 3; *Val. Berg. RS* 9.3), or at least as often as possible. The celebration of Mass every Sunday should at least be assumed. Fernández Alonso (1955, pp. 325–30).
- 37 The words of Jean-Claude Schmitt (1992) are quite fitting: “l’« institution du sacré » (l’Église) ne pouvait prétendre maîtriser toutes les formes du sacré dans le christianisme. [...] il faudrait prendre la mesure d’un sacré « sauvage », échappant plus encore au contrôle ecclésiastique”.

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