

St. Isidore of Seville
John Bonaventure O'Connor
The Catholic Encyclopedia

“Born at Cartagena, Spain, about 560; died 4 April, 636.

“Isidore was the son of Severianus and Theodora. His elder brother Leander was his immediate predecessor in the Metropolitan See of Seville; whilst a younger brother St. Fulgentius presided over the Bishopric of Astigi. His sister Florentina was a nun, and is said to have ruled over forty convents and one thousand religious.

“Isidore received his elementary education in the Cathedral school of Seville. In this institution, which was the first of its kind in Spain, the trivium and quadrivium were taught by a body of learned men, among whom was the archbishop, Leander. With such diligence did he apply himself to study that in a remarkably short time mastered Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Whether Isidore ever embraced monastic life or not is still an open question, but though he himself may never have been affiliated with any of the religious orders, he esteemed them highly. On his elevation to the episcopate he immediately constituted himself protector of the monks. In 619 he pronounced anathema against any ecclesiastic who should in any way molest the monasteries.

“On the death of Leander, Isidore succeeded to the See of Seville. His long incumbency to this office was spent in a period of disintegration and transition. The ancient institutions and classic learning of the Roman Empire were fast disappearing. In Spain a new civilization was beginning to evolve itself from the blending racial elements that made up its population. For almost two centuries the [Visigoths] had been in full control of Spain, and their barbarous manners and contempt of learning threatened greatly to put back her progress in civilization. Realizing that the spiritual as well as the material well-being of the nation depended on the full assimilation of the foreign elements, St. Isidore set himself to the task of welding into a homogeneous nation the various peoples who made up the Hispano-Gothic kingdom. To this end he availed himself of all the resources of religion and education. His efforts were attended with complete success. Arianism, which had taken deep root among the Visigoths, was eradicated, and the new heresy of Acephales was completely stifled at the very outset; religious discipline was everywhere strengthened. Like Leander, he took a most prominent part in the Councils of Toledo and Seville. In all justice it may be said that it was in a great measure due to the enlightened statecraft of these two illustrious brothers the Visigothic legislation, which emanated from these councils, is regarded by modern historians as exercising a most important influence on the beginnings of representative government. Isidore presided over the Second Council of Seville, begun 13 November, 619, in the reign of Sisebut. But it was the Fourth National Council of Toledo that afforded him the opportunity of being of the greatest service to his country. At this council, begun 5 December, 633, all the bishops of Spain were in attendance. St. Isidore, though far advanced in years, presided over its deliberations, and was the originator of most of its enactments. It was at this council and through his influence that a decree was promulgated commanding all bishops to establish seminaries in their Cathedral Cities, along the lines of the school already existing at

Seville. Within his own jurisdiction he had availed himself of the resources of education to counteract the growing influence of Gothic barbarism. His was the quickening spirit that animated the educational movement of which Seville was the centre. The study of Greek and Hebrew as well as the liberal arts, was prescribed. Interest in law and medicine was also encouraged. Through the authority of the fourth council this policy of education was made obligatory upon all the bishops of the kingdom. Long before the Arabs had awakened to an appreciation of Greek Philosophy, he had introduced Aristotle to his countrymen. He was the first Christian writer to essay the task of compiling for his co-religionists a summa of universal knowledge. This encyclopedia epitomized all learning, ancient as well as modern. In it many fragments of classical learning are preserved which otherwise had been hopelessly lost. The fame of this work imparted a new impetus to encyclopedic writing, which bore abundant fruit in the subsequent centuries of the Middle Ages. His style, though simple and lucid, cannot be said to be classical. It discloses most of the imperfections peculiar to all ages of transition. It particularly reveals a growing Visigothic influence. Arévalo counts in all Isidore's writing 1640 Spanish words.

“Isidore was the last of the ancient Christian Philosophers, as he was the last of the great Latin Fathers. He was undoubtedly the most learned man of his age and exercised a far-reaching and immeasurable influence on the educational life of the Middle Ages. His contemporary and friend, Braulio, Bishop of Saragossa, regarded him as a man raised up by God to save the Spanish people from the tidal wave of barbarism that threatened to inundate the ancient civilization of Spain, The Eighth Council of Toledo (653) recorded its admiration of his character in these glowing terms: "The extraordinary doctor, the latest ornament of the Catholic Church, the most learned man of the latter ages, always to be named with reverence, Isidore". This tribute was endorsed by the Fifteenth Council of Toledo, held in 688.

Shedding light in dark places

A review of

The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville

edited by Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach and Oliver Berghof
Cambridge, 488pp, £85, ISBN 0521837499

Dot Wordsworth

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“Scholars who want to accuse others of ignorant obscurantism have long taunted them with the phrase *lucus a non lucendo*. This is supposed to exemplify the stupidest kind of concocted etymology, and here it is in Book XVII of Isidore's stout old compilation: 'A "sacred grove" (lucus) is a dense thicket of trees that lets no light come to the ground, named by way of antiphrasis because it "sheds no light" (non lucere).' So, if Isidore was

so dim, why should anyone be interested, after 1,400 years, in an English translation of his magnum opus, The Etymologies? First because we have missed something big. The Etymologies was one of the most influential books from the time of its compilation around the year 620 until into the Renaissance and beyond. His book was one of the first to be printed, with 11 editions published before 1500. The span of its career is suggested by Chaucer quoting it when it was already older than the centuries that have elapsed between Chaucer and the present day. It penetrated all Europe; fragments survive of a seventh-century manuscript written in an Irish hand at the monastery of St Gall, in what is now Switzerland.

“This extraordinary mix of encyclopaedia and dictionary must be the most historically important work never to have been translated into English... Compare another great book that few read now, Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy, already translated by King Alfred 1,100 years ago (and again, rather badly, by the young Elizabeth I). Even the Pseudo-Dionysius, now of minority interest but once in every medieval library, is available in a popular paperback English version.

“Isidore was active at the time St Augustine of Canterbury was labouring to get Christianity into the heads of the barbarian English. Isidore was in a similar position. As Archbishop of Seville he was dealing with Visigothic kings who had only just been weaned off the sub-Christian heresy of Arianism. If the Dark Ages ever gave way to anything lighter, it was only because men like Isidore gathered their word-hoards from the ancients and bequeathed them to their successors. His contemporary reputation was as an heir of antiquity.

“For Isidore, learning and Latin were equivalents. He knew some Greek and discussed a few words of Hebrew that he found in Jerome. But one strand of The Etymologies was to refine Latin vocabulary in order to establish the right choice of word for the right thing.

“More ambitiously, the 20 books of The Etymologies divide up the universe analytically. They work down from grammar at the outset, via God and his angels, the Earth and all it contains, to men's wars, ships, furniture, food and clothes...

“As for *lucus a non lucendo* I have heard it attributed to Varro (116-27 BC), though I cannot find it in his surviving work. (It is certainly to be found in the fourth-century commentary on the Aeneid by Servius, one of Isidore's authorities.) Doubts about its truth appeared early. 'Are we to admit the derivation of certain words from their opposites, and accept *lucus a non lucendo*, since a grove is dark with shade?' asked Quintilian (AD 35-100).

“The last laugh is that a present-day scientific etymological dictionary of Latin like Ernout and Meillet does find a connection between *lucus*, no matter how dark it is, and *lucendo*. Both come from the Indo-European root *leuk-* that gives us Old English *leah*, 'wood' or 'clearing', as well as Latin *lux*, *lumen* and *luna*. Isidore was brighter than his shady detractors.”