Relations between Hispania and Palestine in the Late Roman Empire

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At the end of the Late Roman Empire there were certain relations between Hispania and Palestine which, although not very deep, were nonetheless important, for the Jewish community in Hispania was itself an important one. The Elvira Council, held in Illiberri (Granada) at the beginning of the 4th century, indeed dedicated five canons to the Jews (XVI, XXXVI, XLIX, L, LXXVIII), thereby confirming the significance of this community. These canons regulate the relations between Jews and Christians, including certain prohibitions regarding the former. That the Jews performed a blessing over the fruits of the earth and ate at the same table with Christians, is known precisely because these two actions were forbidden by two of the above canons; while Canon XVI states that a Christian who married either a Jewish or a heretic woman was committing adultery, probably because such marriages, according to the Council bishops, led Christians astray from the Christian doctrines. Canon XXXVI prohibits the display of pictures on church walls; a possible result of Jewish influence on the Hispanic Church. However, several Doctors of the Church, such as Tertulian ¹, Irenaeus ², and Origen ³ note that Christians did not have images in their churches. The first known Christian church featuring images is that of Dura Europos, from the beginning of the 3rd century ⁴. The ban issued by the Elvira Council should thus probably be read as an archaic relict of the Spanish Church.

Gregory of Illiberri dedicated four homilies to the Jewish question, thereby reinforcing the theory of the importance and influence of the Hispanic Jewish community. Jewish communities are known to have existed in several important Spanish cities: from a tombstone in Tarraco we know of the important position held by the deceased in the synagogue there; while in Ibiza there was a flourishing Jewish community ⁵.
Hispanic travellers to Palestine

Palestine grew in importance in the 4th century as a result of Christians travelling to visit the Holy Places, following the example of Helena, Emperor Constantine's mother. Avitus, presbyter of Bracara Augusta, settled in Jerusalem in the year 409 CE. He translated the Greek text of the *Epistola de inventione corporis S. Stephani martyris* and sent it with the relics of the saint to Palconius, Bishop of Bracara Augusta, by means of the future historian Orosius.

According to Palladius, Melania the Elder, the daughter of the consularis Marcellinus and a woman of Spanish origin, together with her granddaughter Melania the Younger, founded a monastery on the Mount of Olives. The praefectus of Alexandria banished a group of Egyptian ascetics to Diocaesarea, Palestine, where they were taken in and helped by Melania the Elder, for which the consul of Palestine had her imprisoned. She lived in Jerusalem for twenty years and established a nunnery there with fifty virgins, where she offered hospitality to her friend Rufinus of Aquileja, as well as to bishops, maidens and the many pilgrims arriving in Jerusalem. This pioneering woman died in Jerusalem in 410.

Melania the Younger (383-439) belonged to a family of Spanish aristocrats and possessed one of the largest fortunes of the time, enjoying an annuity of 12,000 gold pounds. In spite of her elevated status, she played a prominent role within the Palestine ascetic movement. After her mother's death (ca. 431), she founded a nunnery with ninety women on the Mount of Olives; and when her husband Piniaus died in 432 CE she founded a monastery next to the Church of the Ascension. Melania the Younger built the *Apostoleion* in Jerusalem as her husband's final resting place as well as the Chapel of the Ascension. In the year 419 CE, following the pacification of Hispania, she was visited by a friend who brought her money, probably from the sale of her possessions in Hispania, indicating that it was possible to travel from Hispania to Palestine without hindrance.

Another lady of Spanish origin who went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem but did not remain there, was Egeria, according to Valerius del Bierzo (Bergidum Flavium), abbot of several monasteries in the Spanish region of Bierzo who died in 695 CE. He wrote an *Epistola de beatissimae Echeriae laude* to his monks, a work in which he purports that Egeria came 'huius occiduae plagae sera processione tandem refulssisset extremitas'. Egeria wrote an *Itinerarium* of her pilgrimage to Palestine and other Eastern places, a work important for its knowledge of the Christian liturgy, dated between the years 381-385 CE. Her description of the Jerusalem liturgy (*Itinerarium* 24.1) appears to have been drafted during her stay in the city (382-384 CE).
These three ladies—the two Melanias and Egeria—belonged to the aristocracy and were extremely wealthy. Emperor Constantine built a number of churches in Jerusalem which were visited by Egeria, such as the Martyrium in Golgotha, the basilica of Anastasis (on the site of the grave), and the church of Eleona on the Mount of Olives. In Bethlehem, also visited by Egeria, Constantine ordered the construction of the Nativity basilica, similar in its architectural structure to the Golgotha church. Pilgrims also visited other places, such as Mambré, where another basilica was built by Constantine; the grave of Lazarus in Betania; Hebron, where the tombs of the patriarchs were located; Carneas, where Job once dwelt; Mount Nebus; and Mount Sinai where Moses had received the law.

Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in Africa, sent to Jerusalem the Spanish presbyters Orosius and Jerome, as recounted in the Chronica by Marcelinus Cosmas (73.1): 'Orosius presbyter Hispani generis septem libris historia-rum descriptis, missus ab Augustino episcopo idem Orosius pro discendo animae ratione ad Hieronymum presbyterum reliquias beati Stephani tunc nuper iuventas reidiens primus intulit Occidenti.'

**Relations between Hispania and Palestine in the works of Jerome**

Jerome, who practiced the most strict Christian asceticism in Bethlehem, maintained a correspondence with various Spaniards, confirming that the relations between Hispania and Palestine were unencumbered and regular, as exemplified by his correspondence with Lucinus, to whom he wrote Letter 71 (dated 398 CE). Lucinus was a wealthy man, and sent six amanuenses to Palestine to copy the works of Jerome. A year later Jerome sent a second letter, Letter 75, to Lucinus' widow Theodora. This document reveals that Lucinus was connected with various churches in both Jerusalem and Alexandria, to which he sent large amounts of money.

The information Jerome provides in his work De viris illustribus, written in Palestine in the year 393 CE, proves direct knowledge of the reported events and of various Spanish figures, a knowledge which can only be explained through continuous correspondence and visits between Palestine and Hispania. This work was written at the request of another Spaniard, Nummius Aemilianus Dexter, an important figure who was proconsul in Asia between 379 and 387 CE, comes rerum privatarum of the East in 387 CE and praefectus of the praetorium in Italy in 395 CE. Jerome also mentions in this work one presbyter Juvenicus (84), who wrote the gospel in verse; Damasus, Bishop of Rome, a man extremely talented in the composition of verses (103); Gregory, Bishop of Illiberri, who composed treatises which were quite plain stylistically (105); Pacianus, Bishop
of Barcino, untiring in the attempts to improve his style (105); Acilius Severus, who relates his life as if it were a journey, combining prose and verse (111); Priscilianus, Bishop of Avila, who published many tracts, some of which were obtained by Jerome (121); Latronianus, a very learned man who could compete with the ancients in verse composition (122); Tiberianus, native of Betica, who wrote in a pompous and highly pedantic style an Apology in which he defended himself against an accusation of heresy, also directed at Priscilianus (123); Dexter, the son of Pacianus, who wrote a General History dedicated to Jerome, but which the latter had not yet read when he was writing his own work; Valerianus, Bishop of Calagurris, an eloquent man, the author of many works (136); and Prudentius, an excellent poet, who composed several poems against heretics and pagans and sang in high quality verses the mysteries of the Christian faith.

Jerome, living in seclusion in Bethlehem, was familiar not only with all the important Spanish ecclesiastics of his time but also with their works, which he discussed. He expressly states receiving these dignitaries, again indicative of the relations existing between Palestine and Hispania. Thus, he knew of the arrival of Marcus from Egypt who travelled from Aquitania, in Southern Gaul, to Hispania, and whom he mistook for a pupil of the Gnostic Basilides. He was aware that Marcus was somehow connected to the wealthy and that he addressed himself mainly to women (Epist. 75.3), by which he probably meant Priscilianus' followers. In a letter (71.6), dated 398 CE, he claims that the Eucharist was received daily in Hispania, just as it was in Rome.

Bishop Idacius and Palestine

The Bishop of Aquae Flaviae, the present-day town of Chaves, briefly recounts in his Chronica 20 the main events he witnessed in Hispania between the years 379 CE (when the chronicle of the Chronica begins) and 469 CE, coinciding mostly with the terrible events following the invasions by Swabians, Vandals and Alani, the tribes that invaded Hispania between 409 and 412 CE, plundering the country and continuing to fight until the final settlement of the Visigoths during the reign of King Eurichus between 466-484 CE, according to Iordanes 21.

In his Chronica, Idacius proves that he has some familiarity with the main Bishops of Jerusalem, indicating that the relations between Palestine and Hispania had not been broken: he mentions the Bishop of Aquae Flaviae (38), and the names of the Bishops of Jerusalem and Caesarea (John and Eulogios respectively). The former was bishop in Palestine between 404 and 410 CE. Idacius (58) claims that in 415 CE the body of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was found by the presbyter Lucianus, who confided his discovery to the Spanish
presbyter Avitus. The find occurred on the 3rd of December, after the burial place had been revealed to Lucianus in a dream. He went to Lydda to inform his bishop, John of Jerusalem, who was participating in a discussion of Pelagius. Bishop John, together with Eustonius of Sebaste and Eleuthere of Jericho, presided over the opening of the grave. The exact location of the grave remains unclear: possibly Beït-el-Djema, 40 Km. west of Jerusalem, or Djemnal, 25 Km. to the north, although the latter is the more likely location. On the 26th of December, 445 CE the relics were removed by John to Zion, the great church of Jerusalem. Iuvenalis then built the basilica that was to house Stephen's remains. This find is important because Orosius later transferred Stephen's body to Hispania.

Idacius appears to have had a thorough knowledge of Jerome's actions during those years in Bethlehem, where he settled in 386 CE and where he wrote most of his works. He is aware that Jerome was very familiar with the Hebrew Holy Scriptures, on which he used to meditate daily and that he knew the studies on the Law, attacked Pelagius' heresies and wrote highly valued works on these topics. Indeed, 415 CE was the year when Jerome's attack against Pelagius started, according to a Letter by Jerome himself to Ctesiphon, which he followed with a tract with three dialogues. Jerome's battle against Origen, whose work he knew very well, against Lucifer of Cagliari's followers, and against Arius' followers, took place during these same years. Idacius refers to these disputes, thus proving that he was kept very well informed of Jerome's activities in Bethlehem. There was a conflict between Jerome and his bishop, John, because of Origen's work. It was within this tense atmosphere that Idacius visited Palestine and met several of the figures mentioned in his Chronica.

The Bishop of Aquae Flaviae recounts that in 419 CE an earthquake shook the holy places of Jerusalem, and that John was the bishop at the time. John, however, had in fact died, but the news had not yet reached Hispania. As confirmed by the Cons. Constantinop. ad an. 419, an earthquake did occur in 419, but by then the Bishop of Jerusalem was Praylius, a fact ignored by Idacius. The Bishop of Aquae Flaviae also knows the name of the Bishop of Jerusalem in 435 CE, Iuvenalis (106). On this occasion Idacius provides an important detail about his source of information, writing that his knowledge came from a presbyter of Arabia called Germanus and through other Greeks who had arrived in Gallaecia.

As we can see from the above, there was ongoing travel between Palestine and Gallaecia, although its purpose is not known. The reference to the Greeks could indicate that they were traders. The presence in Gallaecia of people from the East is supported by the oriental influence on Spanish monastic life.
Idacius also seems to be aware that in 435 CE various important figures had died: John, Bishop of Jerusalem; Jerome, and others. It is interesting that he mentions the news being brought from Palestine. John's successor as Bishop of Jerusalem, Praylius, ruled the city's church from 417 to 422 CE. Jerome's death can be fixed at 419 or 420 CE; Eulogius of Caesarea died in 417 CE. Idacius knew of all these bishops' deaths. However, in this particular paragraph of the Chronica (106) Idacius proves to be mistaken, since he states that the council convened by Iuvenalis, Bishop of Jerusalem, with the other bishops of Palestine and the East, was not held in Constantinople but in Ephesus, in 431 CE, and it was there that Theodosius II fought the Ebionites' heresy that Arius, Bishop of Constantinople, had revived. Idacius has this information wrong. The council met against Nestorius, who was the Bishop of Constantinople between 428 and 431 CE.

The arrival of Stephen's relics at Mahon and the first persecution of the Jews in Hispania

Bishop Severus of Menorca's Letter 13, and the document titled Altercatio Ecclesiae et Synagogae, which has been attributed to the same author and refers to the same events, provide several reasons to account for the mass and compulsory conversion of the large population of Jews of Mahon, the Magone. At the time, the Jewish community maintained good relationships with the Christians, and the Jews held important positions in the administration. The situation changed when the future historian Orosius arrived at the island with Stephen's relics, recently discovered. This fact gave a new impulse to the Christian community - they burned down the synagogue, although the Jewish community managed to save the books and silver objects. Many Jews converted to the Christian faith, while others who had fled fearing retaliation, returned and also embraced Christianity. The synagogue became a church.

The arrival of Stephen's relics from Palestine prompted the first large-scale persecution against the Jews and, consequently, the first significant surge of forced conversion of Jews to Christianity in Hispania. The facts recounted by Severus would have occurred between 416 and 418 CE, or at least some time before 438 CE.

The Altercatio has been related to the conversion of the Mahon Jews. It could be a commonitorium of Severus, dated between 409 and 438 CE. Seguí and Hillgarth believe that very different characteristics define the two works. The Letter seems to be the work of Severus, because of its knowledge of the institutions, while the Altercatio is probably a later work, from the 5th century, based on the relevant descriptive details it provides.
Christian basilicas in Menorca (Balearic Islands) influenced by the art of the Palestine synagogues

Seguí and Hillgarth connect the events which occurred in Mahon to the Menorcan basilica of Son Bou. Palol attributes to Jews who had converted to Christianity the four basilicas whose pavements greatly resemble those of various synagogues in Palestine: Son Bou, La Illeta del Rei (Fig. 1), Es Fornás de Torelló (Fig. 2), and Puerto de Fornells. The floors of the basilica of La Illeta del Rei bear great similarity to those in Es Fornás de Torelló, which have in turn been compared to the pavement in the synagogue of Hamman Lif. Moreover, it features an inscription (...SANCTA SINAGOGA) that clarifies any doubts which could arise about the original identity of the building. The large hall of the temple of Es Fornás de Torelló offers a pattern of decoration similar to that of the diaconicon of the temple of the Propylaea in Gerasa, Palestine. Palol points out very specific similarities between the two pavements in Menorca and those of the Palestine synagogues: 'the mosaics of Menorca are an example of the influence of the Jewish sources and models in the Paleo-Christian art of the West.' He also stresses the fact that the mosaic craftsmen were familiar with contemporary mosaic pavements of synagogues, especially in Palestine.

The mosaic floors of Es Fornás de Torelló and La Illeta del Rei depict two lions symmetrically facing the Tree of Life, also depicted in the synagogue of Ma'on (Nirim), near Gaza, dated no later than 538 CE, where, however, the lions face each other, as in the mosaics of Menorca, where they flank the menorah next to the palm trees. Similar lions facing the building's dedication appear in the synagogue of El Hammeh; the synagogue of Na'aran; the mosaic of Beth Alpha, from the end of the 5th or the beginning of the 6th century, in which they face the Ark of the Covenant; the synagogue of Tiberias, from the 6th century; and the synagogue of Jaffa. From the floor of Santa María del Camí, in Majorca, six panels have been preserved offering a cyclical depiction of a scene in Paradise, with a lion and crows, Adam and Eve, and Joseph being sold by his brothers. These influences of Judaic art probably reached Hispania between the years 540 and 500 CE.

Schlunk and Hauschild disagree with the theory of the influence of the Palestine synagogues on the mosaics of the Balearic Islands, and suggest instead that the models, and even the craftsmen, came from Africa Procon-sularis. They also dispute the notion that the church of Elche, in the present province of Alicante, had been a synagogue in the 4th century, as has often been maintained in Spain because of a sign written in Greek that has been read as "synagogue" (Fig. 3). The authors regard that inscription as insufficient in itself since no other Judaic symbols appear. However, I believe such an absence to be
understandable in a building that had undergone various remodelings before finally becoming a Christian church. On the contrary, I find it very important that it has signs in Greek, quite extraordinary in a Christian building in Hispania; and the fact that a word has been read as "synagogue" I believe to be an element identifying the original function of the building. This could have belonged to a community of Eastern Jews, perhaps from Palestine, which settled in eastern Iberia. García and Bellido consider that after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 CE many Palestine Jews came to Hispania and settled for good in the Iberian Peninsula.
There is nothing remarkable in some of the mosaics of the Balearic Islands following the models of Syria-Palestine, as well documented by Fernández-Galiano in several Late Roman Empire Spanish mosaics, such as for example two mosaics in the Villa de Fraga (Huesca) with scenes of Eros and Psyche, and of Eros and Venus, whose style seems to be related to mosaics in Antioch and Syria. The mosaics of Bellophoron and the Chimaera of Puerta Oscura, Málaga, or of Plaza de la Compañía in Córdoba, depicting the four seasons, have been stylistically connected to mosaics of a late age in Syria-Palestine. A mosaic in La Almunia de Doña Godina, Zaragoza, from the 5th century, has
been linked with some mosaics in Paleo-Christian churches in Bethlehem.

Some geometrical motives which appear in the Spanish mosaics, such as the floral frames of the figured pictures with gods, in the Villa de Fraga, virtually unique in Hispania, are very common in the region of Syria-Palestine. The motive of the four alternate ivy leaves found at the Villa de Baños de Valdearados (Burgos), is also documented from Jericho, Gaza, etc., but is almost completely unknown in the West. These prototypes could have entered Hispania through Eastern craftsmen, as had occurred with the jewels of Elche; or through the patternbooks, which I believe more feasible. In the time of Theodosius I (379-395) the emperor was surrounded by a clan of highly influential Spaniards and relations with the East were probably more intense 37.

The Menorca Jewish community would have been a wealthy and populous one. Some of its members held important positions, according to Letter 4 by Bishop Severus. Theodorus, for instance, was Doctor of the Law, pater patrum of the synagogue, defensor civitatis and patron of the municipality, as well as holding possessions on the island of Majorca (4); Caecilianus was defensor civitatis and pater; and Florianus was pater senior (14). Bishop Severus claims that Caecilianus held the highest position of honor in the synagogue,
Fig. 2: Mosaic of the Church. Es Fornás de Toreló. Menorca.
Fig. 3: Mosaic of the Synagogue. Elche.
immediately after Theodorus. Other important Jews were Lectorius, who had been governor of the province and comes, and Inocentius, slave owner, a very learned man and expert in Greek and Latin literature. There is nothing extraordinary in the fact that these Mahon Jews had relations with Palestine.

From all the above we can deduce that there were uninterrupted relations between Hispania and Palestine in the Late Roman Empire. Important Spaniards visited Palestine in pilgrimage and returned home; others settled down and remained there. In turn, travelers from Palestine came to the Iberian Peninsula and the adjacent Balearic Islands. The influence of Palestine on Spanish art is obvious, both in the Roman motives and in the explicitly Jewish themes.

These relations between Hispania and Palestine can be viewed within the more comprehensive sphere of Hispania's relations with the East, widely reflected in art. This is exemplified in the sarcophagus and mausoleum in Las Vegas de Pueblanueva, in the province of Toledo 38, from the end of the 4th century; or Villa de Carranque, of the same province and chronology, which features splendid mosaics 39; and two basilicas, probably the grave of Maternus Cynegius, comes sacrarum largitionum between 381 and 383 CE, quaestor sacri palatii in 383, and praefectus praetorium of the East between 384 and 388 CE, whose body was brought for burial to Hispania by his wife Acanthia 40. Other outstanding works of art of Eastern influence are the sarcophagus of Écija (Seville) dated to the 5th century; of Alcaudete 41 (Jaén) of the 5th or 6th century; or the jewels of Elche, buried by a jeweler of the East, and found next to a semis of Arcadius (395-408 CE) coined in Constantinople and a solidus of Honorius (394-423 CE) 42. Greek artists too were the creators of those mosaics in which we can read names in Greek script, such as that of the Seven Wise Men in Augusta Emerita 43 and in Cabezón de Pisuerga (Valladolid), which features a Homeric theme 44.

NOTES

1 Tertulian, *De idolatria*, 5.
6 *PL*. 41. 805.
7 Palladius, *HL*. 46.1.
8 Murphy 1946: 59-78.
9 Pall. _HL._ 46-54.
10 Clark 1984: 118.
11 Ger. _Vita Mel._ 41-48.
12 Ger. _Vita Mel._ 34-37.
13 Ger. _Vita Mel._ 49, 57.
14 Ger. _Vita Mel._ 49.
15 Ger. _Vita Mel._ 57.
16 Ger. _Vita Mel._ 37.
19 Chastagnol 1965: 290.
21 Get. XLVII, 244.
22 Cons. Constantinop. ad an. 415.
24  _Epist._ CXXXIII.
25  _Epist._ LXXXII.7; LXXXIV.2.
28 Fontaine 1959 II: 897, n. 2.
33 Ovadiah 1987: 106-107; Pls. CXVI. 2-3.
35 _Ibid._: 143-147, Pls. 36-37.
37 Chastagnol 1965: 269-292.
41 Schlunk and Hauschild 1978: 150-153; Pls. 42-43, 45.
42 Schlunk and Hauschild 1978: 156-157; Pls. 48b-49b.

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Murphy 1947: P. Y. Murphy, “Melania the Elder, a Biographical Note”, *Traditio* V.
