ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, *ETYMOLOGIAE*, CA. 625

INTRODUCTION

Isidore, bishop of Seville (ca. 560–636), left an intellectual heritage marked out by his interest in grammar and philology. His massive encyclopedic work, the *Etymologiae* (or *Origines*), had a vast influence across the Middle Ages as a lasting authoritative resource, giving rise in turn to other encyclopedias and lexicons.[1] The work dates to the first quarter of the seventh century. It was left unfinished at Isidore's death and was edited posthumously in twenty books by his friend Braulio, who also authored an important bibliographical essay of Isidore's works.[2]

Intended as a Christian alternative to the comprehensive pagan works of learning such as Pliny's *Natural History*, the *Etymologiae* dealt with all aspects of knowledge (books 1–4 on the *artes liberales* and medicine; 5 and 6 on law, time, books and libraries, organization of the religious year, cult), and in addition covered theological, moral, and natural sciences. In the words of the translators of the recent (and only) complete English version of the text, "[Isidore's] aims were not novelty but authority, not originality but accessibility, not augmenting but preserving and transmitting knowledge."[3] The work belongs in the context of a monastic educational program, but was also destined for the governing classes of the Visigothic kingdom, consisting of political and ecclesiastical administrators. For both parts of his intended audience, the work would impart the "preliminary skills that make intelligent reading, especially of Scripture, possible."[4]

[1] On Isidore, see especially Fontaine, *Isidore de Séville et la culture classique* and *Isidore de Séville: genèse et originalité*; Amsler, *Etymology and Grammatical Discourse*, 133–72. On the *Etymologies*, see now the new translation by Barney et al., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (this appeared when the present book was nearing completion). For the title of the *Etymologiae*, cf. Codoñer Merino, "'Origines' o 'Etymologiae'?"

[2] The so-called *Renotatio*: see the edition by Martin, *La renotatio... de Braulio de Zaragoza*, CCSL 113B.

[3] *The Etymologies*, trans. Barney et al., 10–11.   [4] Ibid., 18.

The *Etymologiae* derives from three distinctive ancient intellectual traditions: etymology, encyclopedia, and lexicography (of which etymology may also be considered a part).[5] The etymological tradition thrives throughout classical antiquity.[6] Isidore's most important predecessor in the encyclopedic tradition was Varro (116–27 BC), whose *Disciplinae* (covering what became the seven liberal arts, along with medicine and architecture) does not survive. Pliny's *Natural History* (AD 77) is another important precedent for encyclopedism. In fact, Pliny may be one of only four named sources that Isidore used directly (with Jerome, Augustine, and, importantly, Donatus).[7] Isidore's main sources remain unacknowledged. They are Solinus, Servius, and Cassiodorus.[8]

Isidore sets great conceptual store on beginnings (*exordium, primordium, origo, etymologia*).[9] The discursive strategy of etymology is used as an organizing principle in his work, which means that disciplines are dissected into their constituent terms, and the etymologies serve to gain epistemological access to the underlying concepts by explaining why something has the name it has. The name works first heuristically, but then functions as an epistemological archive. The etymologies thus also serve a mnemonic function.[10] Language itself will reveal the truth of the world and is thus an instrument of divine providence.[11] Apart from etymologizing, Isidore also avails himself of the technique of distinguishing *differentiae*: apparent synonyms,[12] words easily confused, are given their distinctive semantic properties.[13] This contributes to a proper use of words, and to a better grasp and more precise knowledge of the world.[14] Apart from briefly discussing *differentiae*

[5] See the overview ibid., 12.   [6] See also the introduction to the etymology dossier, Part 2, pp. 339–44.

[7] For the importance of Donatus, see Magallon, *La tradicion gramatical de differentia y etymologia hasta Isidoro de Sevilla*, and Gasti, "Isidore e la tradizione grammaticale." On the "Christianized" Donatus see below, p. 257.

[8] *The Etymologies*, trans. Barney et al., 14.   [9] Fontaine, *Isidore de Séville: genèse et originalité*, 283ff.

[10] See Carruthers, "Inventional Mnemonics and the Ornaments of Style: the Case of Etymology."

[11] Cf. Valastro Canale, "Isidoro di Siviglia: la vis verbi come riflesso dell' onnipotenza divina."

[12] Cf. Pérez Castro, "Acerca de los *verba idem significantia*, la *synonymia*, y la sinonimia." In ancient rhetoric, the figure of *synonymia* was a combination of words with complementary (not same or similar) meanings: they combine to express one thing (from different angles).

[13] See Codoñer Merino, "Differentia y etymologia, dos modos de aproximación a la realidad, II," and *Isidoro de Sevilla, Diferencias, Libro I*, ed. and trans. Codoñer Merino.

[14] Cf. Codoñer Merino, "Differentia y etymologia," emphasizing the *differentiae rerum*, the distinctions in the ordering of the universe on the level of the "significates," rather than the signifiers. In the preface to his work *Differentiae*, Isidore states that words that are now confused are in fact distinguished by their proper "origins" [*propria origine*]. This shows the relation between etymology and *differentiae*. The confusion was brought about by the metrical exigencies of poetry, which then became normal usage also for the *auctores*: "plerique veterum sermonum *differentias distinguere* studuerunt subtilius inter verba et verba aliquid indagantes. Poetae autem gentilium necessitate metrica *confuderunt* sermonum *proprietatem*. Sicque ex his consuetudo obtinuit pleraque ab auctoribus *indifferenter accipi*, quae quidem quamvis similia videantur *quadam tamen propria inter se origine distinguuntur*" (*Isidoro de Sevilla, Diferencias, Libro I*, ed. Codoñer Merino, 84 [emphasis added]).

in the context of the first book of the *Etymologiae*, Isidore also wrote separate treatises on *Differentiae* and on synonyms.[15]

We present excerpts from the first book (*De grammatica*) and excerpts on rhetoric from the second book (*De rhetorica et dialectica*). In the first book, Isidore combines a technical approach to grammar with a more mystical view on the value of letters as an indication of moral truth.[16] The summary of rhetorical doctrine in book 2 is a product of the late antique preference for rhetorical compendia, and in turn served as an authoritative compendium of the art for many centuries. It is important to note that Isidore's treatment of the figures and tropes is to a large extent based in grammatical sources.[17]

Selections from book 1 (Grammar) translated from *Etymologiarum sive originum libri xx*, ed. Lindsay, by permission; translation of selections from book 2 (sections on Rhetoric) reprinted (with minor adaptations) from *Etymologies book II: Rhetoric*, ed. and trans. Marshall, by permission.

From Book 1: Grammar

i. Discipline and Art

1. *Disciplina* ["discipline"] has got its name from *discere* ["to learn"]; hence it can also be called *scientia* ["knowledge"]. For *scire* ["to know"] is named after *discere* ["to learn"], since none of us *scit* ["knows"] unless he *di-scit* ["learns"]. Or else *disciplina* ["discipline"] <has got its name> because it *discitur plena* ["is learned fully"].[18]

2. *Ars* ["art"] has got its name because it consists of *artis* ["strict"] instructions and rules.[19] Others say that this word is derived from the Greek *apo tês aretês*, i.e. from virtue, the name they used for knowledge.[20]

---

[15] See Fontaine, *Isidore de Séville: genèse et originalité*, 167ff. for these different types of grammatical works.

[16] On the structure of Isidore's "grammar," cf. Holtz, *Donat et la tradition de l'enseignement*, 259–60.; see also Amsler, *Etymology and Grammatical Discourse*, 133–72, esp. 147–58. For the chapter on etymology itself (a part of grammar, *Etymologies* I 29), see the etymology dossier in Part 2, pp. 349–51.

[17] See excerpt from 2.xxi below and note; and see the introduction to Part 1, above, p. 70.

[18] This etymology also accounts for the second half of the word *disci-plina*.

[19] *Ars* connected to *artus* ["narrow, strict"].

[20] Based on the identification by Plato's Socrates of virtue and knowledge.

3. Plato and Aristotle drew this distinction (*differentia*) between art and discipline: that art is in things that can also be different; but discipline deals with those things which cannot happen differently. For when something is set out in true disputations, it will be a discipline; when something is discussed which is likely and subject to opinion, it will have the name of art.

ii. The Seven Liberal Disciplines

1. There are seven disciplines of the liberal arts. First, grammar, i.e. the expertise of speech. Second, rhetoric, which is held necessary especially in civil controversies because of its beauty and the abundance [*copia*] of its eloquence. Third, dialectic, also named logic, which distinguishes what is true from what is false through the subtlest argumentations.

2. Four, arithmetic, which includes the causes and divisions of numbers. Five, music, which consists of tunes and songs.

3. Six, geometry, embracing the measures and dimensions of the earth. Seven, astronomy, which is about the laws of the stars.

iii. Common Letters[21]

1. The basis of the art of grammar are the common letters, used by elementary teachers of writing and arithmetic.[22] Learning them is as it were the infancy of the art of grammar. That is why Varro calls this stage *litteratio* ["letter-learning": instruction in reading and writing]. Letters are indices of things, and signs for words. They are so powerful that the words of those who are absent speak to us without a voice. [For they introduce words through our eyes, not our ears].[23]

2. The use of letters was invented in order to remember things. To prevent them from fleeing away through oblivion, they are tied down by letters. For given the great variety of things they could neither all be learned by hearing about them, nor be contained in memory.

3. Letters are so called as if they were *leg-iter-ae* ["reading-roads"],[24] because they offer a path to the readers, or because they (*in*) *leg-endo iter-entur* ["are repeated in reading"].

---

[21] On the chapters on letters, see Fontaine, *Isidore de Séville et la culture classique*, chapter 2.

[22] Letters would also be used in arithmetic, see also below 1.iii.10 and 11.

[23] Text bracketed as inauthentic by editor.   [24] Cf. section on Priscian, above, pp. 173–4.

4. It seems that the Latin and Greek letters originate from the Hebrew ones. For they had the name "aleph" first, then alpha was derived from that among the Greeks on the basis of its similar pronunciation, then the A among the Latins. For a translator set up that letter on the basis of a similar sound in the other language, so that we may know that the Hebrew language is the mother of all languages and letters. Now the Hebrews use twenty-two letter elements according to the number of books of the Old Testament; the Greeks have twenty-four. The Latins take the middle road between the two languages, and have twenty-three elements.

5. Hebrew literature starts from the Law by Moses. Syrian and Chaldaean literature starts through Abraham. That is why they agree with the Hebrews in number and sound of the letters, and differ in the shapes only. The Egyptian letters were invented and handed down to the Egyptians by queen Isis, the daughter of Inachos,[25] who came from Greece to Egypt. Among the Egyptians, the priests had one set of letters, the people a different set. The priestly letters are the *hierai* [Greek: "holy ones"], the vulgar ones are the *pandêmoi* ["demotic"] ones.[26] The use of the Greek letters was first invented by the Phoenicians. Hence Lucan: "If one believes the stories, the Phoenicians were the first / who dared to mark voice that was to be preserved with rough shapes."[27]

6. This is the reason why chapter headings of books are also written in the Phoenician color, because letters originated with them.[28] Cadmus, the son of Agenor, was the first to import seventeen Greek letters from Phoenicia into Greece: *A B Γ Δ E Z I K A M N O Π P Σ T Φ* [a b g d e z i k l m n o p r s t ph]. In the Trojan War Palamedes added three: *H X Ω* [ê kh ô]. After him Simonides from Melos added another three: *Ψ Ξ Θ* [ps ks th].

7. The letter *Y* [u/y] was first given shape by Pythagoras of Samos to exemplify human life.[29] Its lower stem signifies the first years, evidently uncertain and not yet devoted to vices or virtues. The cross roads, which form the upper part, starts from adolescence. Its right-hand part is steep, but leads to the happy life. The left-hand side is easier, but leads down to destruction and death. Persius says the following about it: "and where the letter had led its Samian branches for you, / it showed an ascending road on the path to the right."[30]

8. The Greeks have five letters that are mystical. First the upsilon [u/y], which signifies human life—the one we just spoke about. The second is theta [th], which signifies death.[31]

[25] This rests on a late antique identification between Isis and Io.
[26] Correct distinction between hieroglyphics and demotic script.   [27] Lucan, *Pharsalia*, 3.220.
[28] Reference to the decorations in red ink of first letters or section headings ("rubrics").
[29] Amsler, *Etymology and Grammatical Discourse*, 151 speaks about the "moral orthography" of this letter.
[30] Persius, *Satires* 3.56.   [31] First letter of the Greek word for "death," *thanatos*.

For judges would put the same letter theta by the names of those whom they were sentencing to death. It is called theta *apo tou thanatou* [Greek, "from death"], i.e. from death. That is why it has a stroke through the middle, which is the sign of death. Someone wrote about it: "O letter theta, much unhappier than the rest (of the letters)."

9. The third is the letter T which exhibits the shape of the cross of the Lord, which is why it is translated "sign" in Hebrew. In Ezechiel the angel is told about this letter [Ezechiel 9,4]: "Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem: and mark [the sign of] TAU upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and mourn."[32] The other two Christ claims as the earliest and last. For he is the beginning and he is the end, in his words [Apocalypse 22,13] "I am Alpha and Omega." For they meet among themselves as A rolls down all the way to Omega, and Omega turns back to A, so the Lord shows within himself the course of beginning to end and of the end to the beginning.

10. Among the Greeks all the letters form words and make up numbers. For with them the letter Alpha is called "one" as a number. When they write Beta, it is called two. When they write Gamma, among their numbers it is called three. When they write Delta, among their numbers it is called four. And in this way all the letters betoken numbers for the Greeks.

11. The Latins however do not count their numbers with letters, but letters form words only, with the exception of the letters I and X; the latter signifies both the shape of the cross and as a number represents "ten."

iv. Latin Letters[33]

1. The nymph Carmentis was the first to teach the Latin letters to the Italians.[34] She is called Carmentis, because she sings of the future in her *carmina* ["songs"].[35] Her proper name, however, is Nicostrate.

2. The letters are either common or liberal. Common letters are so called because many people use them "in common," for reading and writing. They are called "liberal," because they are known only by those people who write books and know how to speak correctly and to compose in writing.[36]

[32] T is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This sign (in the shape of a cross) would save the ones so marked from the general destruction.
[33] On the letters, cf. e.g. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 1.4.6ff.
[34] Cf. Hyginus, *Fabulae* 277.2; Tacitus, *Annales* 11.14.   [35] Cf. Ovid, *Fasti* 1.467.
[36] *Litterae* can refer both to the letters of the alphabet ("common letters") or to "literature" ("liberal letters").

3. There are two types of letters: for their main division is into two parts, vowels and consonants. Vowels are the ones that are pronounced in different ways through a controlled opening of the throat without any collision. They are called *vocales* ["vowels"] because they fill out the sound [*vocem*] all by themselves, and form a syllable by themselves without any consonant being connected to them. Consonants are the ones that are produced through different motions of the tongue or the pressing together of the lips. And they are called *consonantes* ["consonants"], because they do not *sonant* ["sound"] by themselves, but they *con-sonant* ["sound in conjunction with"] the vowels which are connected with them.

4. These are divided in two parts: semi-vowels and mutes. The semi-vowels are called that name because they have some half [*semi*] [of the characteristics] of the vowels. For they start with the vowel E, and end in their natural sound [e.g. F, L, M etc.].[37] The mutes are called that name because they never break forth unless a vowel is added to them. For if you take away from them the last sound, that of a vowel, their murmuring sound will be locked up within the letter [e.g. B, G, D etc.]. Vowels, semi-vowels, and mutes were called "sounding" [*sonae*], "half-sounding" [*semisonae*] and "not-sounding" [*insonae*] by the ancients.

5. Among the vowels, the grammarians attribute various values [*significationes*] to *i* and *u*.

6. Sometimes they are vowels, sometimes semi-vowels, sometimes "intermediary." They are vowels because they can form a syllable by themselves, and because they are connected with other [letters, namely] consonants. They are considered consonants because they are sometimes followed by vowels which form part of the same syllable, e.g. *Ia-nus, va-tes*,[38] and then they are considered consonants.

7. They are called "intermediary," because they are the only ones that have an intermediary sound by nature, e.g. *illius, unius*.[39] When they are joined with others, they have a thicker sound, e.g. *Ianus, vanus*. For they sound one way when by themselves, and another way when joined. *I* is called double sometimes for this reason because whenever it is found between two vowels, it is regarded as two consonants, e.g. *Troia*.[40] For there its sound is doubled.

8. Similarly, the letter *v* is sometimes nothing, because in some places it is neither a vowel nor a consonant, as in *quis*: it is not a vowel, for it is followed by *i*; it is not a consonant, for it is preceded by *q*. Therefore, when it is neither a vowel nor a consonant,

[37] I.e. if one pronounces the name of the semi-vowel it will be EF, EM, EL etc.

[38] /v/ and /u/ both written [u] in Latin.

[39] The point here is that *i* and *u* are fairly close together and hard to distinguish in pronunciation. Cf. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 1.4.8; Donatus, *Ars maior* 1.2, *GL* 4:367.12ff; Priscian, *Institutiones* 1, *GL* 2:7.15ff.

[40] Heard as Troi-j-a.

it is without doubt nothing. This same letter is also called digamma [*digammon*] by the Greeks when it is joined to itself or to other vowels. It is called digamma because it is double, just like the letter F, which has two gammas [on top of each other]. By analogy the grammarians tended to call conjoined vowels "digamma," as in *votum* ["prayer"], *virgo* ["maiden"].[41]

9. Among the semi-vowels some are called *liquidae* ["fluid"] because sometimes when they follow other consonants in one syllable they do not count and are excluded from the meter [*deficiunt et a metro excluduntur*].[42] Two of them are fluid [*liquescunt*] among the Latins, L and R, as in *fragor, flatus*. The other two, M and N, are "fluid" to the Greeks, as in Mnesitheus.

10. The old script consisted of 17 Latin letters. They are called "legitimate," on the grounds that they either start with the vowel E and end in a mute sound, as happens with the consonants, or they start with their own sound and end in the vowel E, as happens with the mutes [and they are A.B.C.D.E.F.G.I.L.M.N.O.P.R.S.T. and U].

11. The letter H was added later to stand for aspiration only. Therefore, most people consider it an aspiration, not a letter. Accordingly, they call it the "sign of aspiration,"[43] because it elevates the voice. For aspiration is a sound proffered more broadly; its opposite is prosody, a sound evenly modulated.

12. The letter K was first added to the Latin ones by the schoolmaster Salvius, in order to make a sound distinction in between the two letters C and Q. People call it superfluous, because with the exception of *Kalendae* ("first day of the month") it is deemed redundant; for we express everything through the letter C.

13. Neither Greeks nor Hebrews make the sound of Q. No language besides Latin has it. First it did not exist. Therefore that letter too is called redundant, because the ancients wrote everything with C.

14. The letter X was not in use in Latin until the time of Augustus [and it rightly appeared then, in the time when the name of Christ became renowned; for through this letter the written sign is made that forms the sign of the cross].[44] In its stead they wrote C and S, which is why it is called "double," because it is used for C plus S. That also explains why its name is composed of those same letters.

[41] I.e. where "u" is understood as a fricative consonant (our "v") when placed next to another vowel.

[42] When *muta* + *liquida* "do not make position," i.e. are taken together as the beginning of a syllable, they are ignored for metrical purposes, i.e. they cannot make the preceding syllable long "by position." The alternative is that muta and liquida are divided over two syllables, in which case a preceding short vowel could yield a long syllable still for metrical purposes.

[43] Cf. Donatus, *Ars maior* 1.2, *GL* 4:368.9–10.   [44] Editor's brackets.

15. Latin borrowed two letters from the Greeks, Y and Z, because of Greek names of course, which were not written among the Romans until the time of Augustus. Instead of Z they put two Ss, e.g. *hilarissat* [*"he makes happy"].[45] For Y they wrote I.

16. Every letter has three *accidentia*: its name [*nomen*], what it is called; its form [*figura*], how it is drawn; and its force [*potestas*], which one is a vowel, which a consonant. Some also add "order" [*ordo*], that is which letter comes first, which one follows, so that A comes first, then B.[46] The A is the first letter among all people, because it is the beginning of speech for babies.

17. People gave names to the letters on the basis of the sound of their own language, having taken note of and distinguished the sounds they produced. For having noticed the letters, they imposed names and forms. The forms are partly imposed at will, partly on the basis of the sound of the letters, e.g. I and O: the former has a slight sound, and thus also a slight line, the latter has a fat sound, and thus also a full form.[47] The force [of the letters] was given by nature, the order and *apex* by will.[48]

18. The ancients also put the *apex* among the forms of the letters. It is called *apex* ["top," "peak"] because it is far from the feet [*a pedibus*],[49] and is put on the top of a letter. It is a line lying straight over the letter. [The "form" is the way the whole letter is written].[50]

v. *On Grammar*

1. Grammar is the knowledge [*scientia*] of correct speaking, and it is the origin and foundation of the liberal arts [*liberalium litterarum*]. Among the disciplines this one was

---

[45] From *hilaris*, connected with Greek *hilaros* "cheerful," "happy"; a Greek verb *ˈhilarizô* is not otherwise attested.

[46] Originally, this fourth distinction referred to the combinatory possibilities of the letters, i.e. which ones are "prepositive" to which other ones and which ones are "postpositive." For instance, R can follow T at the beginning of a word, but not at the end. Cf. e.g. Priscian, *Institutiones grammaticae* I, *GL* 2:7.2ff; 37.4ff.

[47] Several attempts were made in antiquity and later to construe a natural relationship between the shape of letters in writing, and the sound they represent, motions accompanying them, position of the organs of articulation etc. See e.g. the section on Middle English treatise on the Seven Liberal Arts (within, pp. 869–70) for iconicity between position of the organs of articulation and the written shape; and Sluiter, *Ancient Grammar in Context*, 239–40 and note 267 for Greek examples.

[48] *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *apex* 5: "a mark placed over a vowel to show that it is long." These marks are not compulsory parts of orthography, and in fact Quintilian points out that it is useless to write them over vowels that everyone knows are long; they can be added for clarity's sake (*Institutio oratoria* 1.4.10; 1.7.2).

[49] This is, of course, an attempt at etymology: *a-pe(dibus): apex*.   [50] Editor's brackets.

---

invented after the common letters, so that whoever had learned how to read and write would know the theory of speaking correctly through grammar. Grammar has taken its name from the letters. For *grammata* is what the Greeks call letters.

2. *Ars* "art" is called by that name because it consists of *artis* "narrow" instructions and rules.[51] Others say that this word is taken over from the Greeks, *apo tês aretês*, i.e. "from virtue," the name they used for knowledge [*scientia*].

3. *Oratio* "speech" is called as it were *oris ratio* "oral account." For *orare* is to speak and to say. *Oratio* is the coherent structure [*contextus*] of words with meaning. Structure without meaning is not *oratio*, because it is not "an oral account." Complete *oratio* consists of meaning, sound, and letter.

4. The divisions of the art of grammar are counted to be thirty by some, namely the eight parts of speech; articulate sound, the letter, the syllable, the [metrical] feet, accents, punctuation marks [*positurae*],[52] critical signs [*notae*], orthography, analogy, etymology, glosses, differences [*differentiae*],[53] barbarisms, solecisms, errors, metaplasms, schemata, tropes, prose, meters, fables, histories.

From Book 2: Rhetoric

[In his account of rhetoric Isidore mostly follows Cassiodorus, but reorganizes that material to conform to the etymological *quod/quia* format.[54] Other sources are Augustine, Boethius, Diomedes, Jerome, Lactantius, Marius Victorinus, Martianus Capella, and Tertullian. Notable through absence are Cicero and Quintilian.[55]]

i. *Rhetoric and its Name*

1. Rhetoric[56] is the science of speaking well on civil questions; eloquence is a flow of words, designed to persuade people to the just and the good.[57] The name "rhetoric" is

---

[51] See above, at 1.1.2, with note 19.   [52] Also called *distinctiones*, cf. Donatus, *Ars maior* 1.6, *GL* 4:372.16.

[53] The distinction of near-synonyms.   [54] Amsler, *Etymology and Grammatical Discourse*, 158.

[55] See *Etymologies Book II*, trans. Marshall, 5–7.   [56] Cf. Cassiodorus, *Institutiones* 2.2.1.

[57] Note the addition of this moral element (not in Cassiodorus), cf. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 4.17.34.