



The secret of my succession: dynasty and crisis in Vandal North Africa

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The system of royal succession in the Vandal kingdom of North Africa has long been regarded as idiosyncratic within the early medieval west, but its fullest implications have rarely been investigated closely. The present article examines the origins of succession by agnatic seniority under the strong rule of King Geiseric, and argues that it was one of several innovations intended to establish the emergent Hasding royal house against other aristocratic challenges. The article goes on to explore the consequences of this law in the two major dynastic crises of the Vandal kingdom: under Huneric in c.481 and under Hilderic in 530. In both cases, the standard narratives of events are challenged, and with them assumptions about the 'constitutional' status of Geiseric's law of succession.

Few individuals dominate the history of the fifth century like the Vandal king Geiseric. Under this physically unprepossessing ruler, the Vandals underwent an unlikely transformation from being a small and unimportant group of mercenaries in the southern plains of Spain to being the masters of Carthage and the Mediterranean shipping lanes.¹ Geiseric oversaw the settlement of the Vandals and their allies in the rich lands of Africa Proconsularis and their emergence as a major player on the international scene. His diplomatic brinksmanship infuriated the Visigoths,

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¹ C. Courtois, *Les Vandales et L'Afrique* (Paris, 1955) remains seminal on the group. Important recent studies include those of M.E. Gil Egea, *África en Tiempos de los Vándalos: Continuidad y Mutaciones de las Estructuras Socio-Políticas Romanas*, *Memorias del Seminario de Historia Antigua* 7 (Alacala, 1998), and now G.M. Berndt, *Konflikt und Anpassung. Studien zu Migration und Ethnogenese der Vandalen*, *Historische Studien* 489 (Husum, 2007). For further bibliography and discussion see P. von Rummel, 'Zum Stand der afrikanischen Vandalenforschung nach den Kolloquien in Tunis und Paris', *Antiquité Tardive* 11 (2003), pp. 13–19; and A.H. Merrills, 'Vandals, Romans and Berbers: Understanding Late Antique North Africa', in *idem* (ed.), *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa* (Aldershot, 2004), pp. 3–28. Geiseric's own physical appearance is described by Jordanes, *Getica* 168, ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH AA* 5.1 (Munich, 1882), p. 102.

inflamed the Huns, led to the cataclysmic sack of Rome in 455, and ultimately provoked a succession of increasingly ambitious imperial campaigns against his kingdom.² But it also led to the betrothal and eventual marriage of his son Huneric to the Theodosian princess Eudocia, and to the strong Vandal patronage of the late imperial pretender Olybrius. Naturally, this vertiginous political rise resulted in massive social and political changes among the Vandals themselves, but by a combination of pragmatic land distribution, military reorganization and the brutal suppression of revolt, Geiseric presided over a relatively peaceful kingdom down to his death in 477.

Yet a kingdom founded upon the strong personality of a king was not a stable state, as Geiseric well recognized. After his death, the Hasding line was hardly marked by a distinguished lineage of kings, but the founder of the African state did his best to smooth the path for his successors. Among the best known of Geiseric's political innovations was his establishment of a clear law of succession for the rulers who came after him.³ In place of the existing system of inheritance (the workings of which are unknown, but are generally assumed to have been based on primogeniture), Geiseric instituted a succession by agnatic seniority – rule by the eldest surviving male member of a ruling house.⁴ The principle is explained clearly by Procopius and Jordanes, two sixth-century Byzantine commentators:

Geiseric, after living on a short time, died at an advanced age, having made a will in which he enjoined many things upon the Vandals and in particular that royal power among them should always fall to that one who should be the first in years among all the male offspring descended from Geiseric himself.⁵

Before his death he summoned the band of his sons and ordained that there should be no strife among them because of desire for the kingdom, but that each should reign in his own rank and order as he

² For a survey of Geiseric's foreign policy, see M.E. Gil Egea, 'Piratas o estadistas: La política exterior del reino vándalo durante el reinado de Genserico', *Polis* 9 (1997), pp. 107–29 and the excellent study of F.M. Clover, 'Geiseric and Statesman: A Study of Vandal Foreign Policy', Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago (1967). The subject is addressed further in A.H. Merrills and R.T. Miles, *The Vandals* (Oxford, 2010).

³ H. Schultze, *De Testamento Genserici. Seu de antiquissima lege successoria in Germanorum regnis* (Jena, 1859) and D. Claude, 'Problem der vandalischen Herrschaftsnachfolge', *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 30.2 (1974), pp. 329–55 provide general overviews. Courtois, *Vandales*, pp. 238–44 gives a useful survey.

⁴ For speculation on earlier royal practice among the Vandals, compare Courtois, *Vandales*, pp. 239–40; Schultze, *De Testamento Genserici*, pp. 14–15; F.M. Clover 'Timekeeping and Dyarchy in Vandal Africa', *Antiquité Tardive* 11 (2003), pp. 46–7 and 59–61.

⁵ Procopius, *De Bello Vandalico* I.7.29, ed. and trans. H.B. Dewing, *Procopius. History of the Wars Book III: The Vandalic War*, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1916), p. 72.

survived the others; that is, the next younger should succeed his elder brother, and he in turn should be followed by his junior. By giving heed to this command they ruled their kingdom in happiness for the space of many years and were not disgraced by civil war, as is usual among other nations; one after the other receiving the kingdom and ruling the people in peace.⁶

Procopius refers to the law as Geiseric's *diatheke* or 'will', Jordanes to his *praecepta*.⁷ The law clearly had a resonance beyond Geiseric's direct heirs and was intended to stand in perpetuity. This was not merely a royal will, but an attempt to promulgate a lasting law. In this sense, the term *constitutio Genserici*, employed by the North African historian Victor of Vita, better illustrates the import of the ruling.⁸

On the face of it, the *constitutio* was a resounding success. Geiseric's eldest son, Huneric, succeeded him, followed in 484 by Gunthamund, the son of Theoderic and the oldest living Hasding. Gunthamund was succeeded in 496 by his younger brother, Thrasamund, who was then followed in turn by Hilderic, Huneric's eldest son and the eldest male member of the family. According to laws of primogeniture, Hilderic would have succeeded Huneric in 484, and would have come to the throne relatively young. Instead, he succeeded as an old man upon the death of his cousin in 523. The system only failed in 530 when Hilderic's own heir designate – Gelimer, his first cousin once-removed – lost patience with the elderly king and rose in revolt. Gelimer's own rule was then cut short by the Byzantine invasion under Belisarius – an imperialist programme of 'regime change' justified in part by the unconstitutional usurpation (Fig. 1).

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship on the Vandal state frequently placed Geiseric's law of succession among the king's most important innovations.⁹ Very little is known of Vandal legislation beyond

⁶ Jordanes, *Getica* 169, ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH AA* 5.1 (Munich, 1882), p. 102. The translation used is that of C.C. Mierow, *The Gothic History of Jordanes* (Princeton, NJ, 1915).

⁷ Cf. Proc. BV I.9.10, ed. Dewing, p. 86 and Jordanes, *Getica* 170, ed. Mommsen, p. 102. On the significance of *diatheke*, see Schultze, *De Testamento Genserici*, pp. 13–14.

⁸ Victor Vitensis, *Historia persecutionis Africanae provinciae* II.13, ed. S. Lancel, *Victor de Vita*, Budé (Paris, 2002), p. 127 and cf. Courtois, *Vandales*, p. 238.

⁹ Compare Schultze, *De Testamento Genserici*; *idem*, 'Geschichtliche Entwicklung der fürstlichen Hausverfassung im deutschen Mittelalter', *Zeitschrift für Rechtsgeschichte* 7 (1868), pp. 323–405; J. von Pflugk-Harttung, 'Zur Thronfolge in den germanischen Stammesstaaten', *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte Germanische Abteilung* 11 (1890), pp. 177–205; and D. Martroye, 'Le testament de Genséric', *Bulletin de la Société nationale des Antiquaires de France* (1911), pp. 232–6. E.-F. Gautier, *Genséric. Roi des Vandales* (Paris, 1929), pp. 227–9; L. Schmidt, 'The Sueves, Alans and Vandals in Spain 408–429. The Vandal Domination in Africa 429–533', in H.M. Gwatkin and J.P. Whitney (eds), *The Cambridge Medieval History, I* (Cambridge, 1924), p. 318 argues that the *constitutio* is 'rightly . . . reckoned in history among the most remarkable facts relating to public law'. Courtois, *Vandales*, p. 238 terms it 'presque comme une constitution au sens actuel du terme' – at least in the eyes of later Byzantine commentators.

the *constitutio*, and almost nothing at all of secular law in the kingdom.¹⁰ More significant still is the fact that Geiseric's was the earliest known attempt to establish a legal basis for royal (or imperial) succession, and provides a rare glimpse into the legal institutions of 'Germanic' kingship before the sixth century. For many commentators, the *constitutio* represented a valuable survival of prehistoric patterns of 'Germanic' kingship into the late antique period, and a missing link between the primitive systems of tribal government described in Tacitus' *Germania* and the more familiar monarchic apparatus of the Middle Ages.¹¹ The fact that the eventual overthrow of the law under Gelimer was commonly ascribed to the political dissatisfactions of a still-powerful Vandal aristocracy (a viewpoint which the account of Procopius certainly encourages), further suggested that this was a moment of profound political transition from the ancient to the medieval worlds.¹²

Few scholars in the early twenty-first century would have confidence in such bold teleologies, of course. Tacitus is no longer read as a reliable source on the barbarian societies of the first century, let alone the fourth, fifth or sixth, and attempts to view in his text the embryonic outline of later political institutions have largely passed out of favour. So, too, has the notion of a single 'Germanic' identity shared by a variety of different polities across the late antique and early medieval world. As the state structures of Ostrogothic Italy, Merovingian Francia and Visigothic Spain are increasingly examined and appreciated in their own provincial contexts, the uncritical importation of fragments of information from elsewhere is (correctly) viewed with distrust. Most scholars would now agree that Tacitus' *Germania* can provide little illumination on Geiseric's law of succession, and that it in turn can tell us little of direct value concerning the later development of Gothic, Lombard or Anglo-Saxon kingship. But as a means to explore the political reality of the Vandal kingdom, the

¹⁰ G. Vismara, 'Gli editti dei re Vandali', in *Studi in Onore di Gaetana Scherillo*, 3 vols (Milan, 1972), II, pp. 849–78 provides an overview of Vandal law-making. The paucity of material is illustrated by the cursory treatment in both H. Conrad, *Deutsche Rechtsgeschichte. Band I. Frühzeit und Mittelalter* (Karlsruhe, 1962), pp. 61–3 and P. Classen, *Kaiserreskript und Königsurkunde. Diplomatische Studien zum Problem der Kontinuität zwischen Altertum und Mittelalter*, Byzantine Texts and Studies 15 (Thessaloniki, 1977), pp. 107–10.

¹¹ Discussed in Claude, 'Problem der vandalischen Herrschaftsnachfolge', pp. 330–3. The implication that Geiseric's *constitutio* was a reflection of an ancient 'Germanic' institution is refuted by the absence of comparable institutions in the other successor kingdoms – a point noted by Vismara, 'Gli editti dei re Vandali', p. 853. The closest parallel is found in the Visigothic royal succession of AD 451–84, in which Theoderic I was succeeded in turn by his sons Thorismundus, Theoderic II and Euric. The fact that Thorismundus and Theoderic II were both violently deposed by their younger brothers suggests that the succession was not formally ordered. Euric was eventually succeeded by his own son Alaric (II) although it is not clear whether any older members of the family were alive at that time. See J.R. Martindale, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, vol II. AD 395–527* (Cambridge, 1980), stemma 40.

¹² See for example, Claude, 'Problem der vandalischen Herrschaftsnachfolge', p. 352.

operation of royal power and the role of tradition in its articulation, the *constitutio* remains of tremendous significance.

Crucial to the appreciation of the *constitutio* is the recognition that it was not an abstracted political ideal, floating above the brutalities of Vandal *Realpolitik*, but a law that was fundamental to these struggles. This was true of the origin of the legislation, and also of its application over the generations that followed. To illustrate the point, one need merely reflect that our knowledge of the law is dependent upon sources ostensibly hostile to the Vandal state itself. Victor of Vita was an outspoken critic of the Hasding court, and never accepted its legitimacy, yet happily condemned the actions of its kings for their supposed rejection of the *constitutio*; Procopius and Jordanes were less directly critical of the Hasdings (writing, as they were, almost two decades after the fall of Carthage to Belisarius), yet presented the emperor Justinian as the only true defender of Geiseric's *testamentum*. These authors framed their discussions around two periods of intense political crisis in the Vandal kingdom: first in AD 480/1 when Huneric sought to consolidate his own position on the throne through the removal of political rivals, and then in AD 530 when Gelimer successfully usurped Hilderic's rule and claimed authority for himself. Critics of these kings found in the *constitutio* a useful rhetorical device to frame their condemnation, but there is every reason to suggest that both Huneric and Gelimer felt themselves to be acting in the spirit of Geiseric's law. It is the intention of the current article to explore the contexts of these two major constitutional crises, and to examine the role of the succession legislation within it.¹³

It is necessary first to examine briefly the political context in which the law was formulated. The motivations behind Geiseric's law have been variously explained. The king had himself succeeded to the throne in rather murky circumstances following the death of his half-brother Gunderic. Popular rumour suggested that this was followed in short order by the murder of Gunderic's widow and children – vicious acts which may reflect the dubious legality of Geiseric's claim to the throne.¹⁴ While some have suggested that the institution of agnatic seniority was intended to circumvent the succession of a minor, and hence to avoid the sort of dynastic crisis that had hit Ravenna in the early fifth century, others have noted that Geiseric might have been motivated by a desire to legitimate retrospectively his own ascent to the throne.¹⁵

¹³ These themes are explored briefly by Courtois, *Vandales*, p. 240.

¹⁴ A rumour happily reported by Vict. Vit. HP II.14, ed. Lancel, p. 129. On the dating of these murders to early in Geiseric's reign, see Claude, 'Problem der vandalischen Herrschaftsnachfolge', pp. 330–6.

¹⁵ Courtois, *Vandales*, pp. 239–40; H. Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and its Germanic Peoples*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Berkeley, 1997), p. 165.

For Geiseric himself, however, the firm statement of dynastic principle that the *constitutio* represented also had immediate political implications. In many ways, the whole of Geiseric's reign may be viewed as a conscious and deliberate construction of a new form of Vandal kingship for a group redefining itself within the rich African provinces. Jordanes implies that the *constitutio* was promulgated on the king's deathbed, and hence was among the last of Geiseric's actions, but important political innovations can be traced back throughout his reign, and it is certainly possible that the formal establishment of the Hasding succession was made long before the king's death. As early as AD 442, Geiseric had laid the foundations for a strong monarchy within the Vandal state.¹⁶ Prosper reports the suppression of a major aristocratic rebellion against the king's rule in that year;¹⁷ Procopius implies that there was a fundamental reorganization of the Vandal army at around the same time, and various sources describe the diplomatic manoeuvrings which followed the formal peace treaty with Valentinian III in the same year.¹⁸ It was in this period, too, that the Vandals were formally settled within North Africa – a process which was to have fundamental implications for royal power within the group.¹⁹

The practical operations of the settlement in AD 442 have been the subject of considerable recent scholarship, and need not detain us excessively here. Broadly, disagreement among modern scholars has centred upon the nature of the land confiscations themselves, and whether the invaders were physically settled on estates within their new homeland, or simply supplied by a proportion of the tax revenues taken from lands nominally made over to them.²⁰ While the popular consensus seems to be

¹⁶ On the year AD 442 as a turning point, see E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire. Tome Premier. De l'État Romain à l'État Byzantine (284 – 476)*, trans. Jean-Remy Palanque (Paris, 1959) p. 326; Gil Egea, *África en Tiempos de los Vándalos*, pp. 314–15; Berndt, *Konflikt und Anpassung*, pp. 149–50; as well as Merrills and Miles, *Vandals*, pp. 61–70.

¹⁷ Prosper, *Chronicon*, a. 442, ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH AA 9* (Berlin, 1892), p. 479.

¹⁸ The reorganization of the army is implied at Proc. BV I.5.18–20, ed. Dewing, p. 52. For discussion, see Gil Egea, *África en Tiempos de los Vándalos*, pp. 333–4.

¹⁹ The crucial sources on the settlement are Proc. BV I.5.11–17, ed. Dewing, p. 50 and Vict. Vit. HP I.13, ed. Lancel, p. 102.

²⁰ The former thesis broadly follows the brilliant argument laid out by W. Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans A.D. 418–584. The Techniques of Accommodation* (Princeton, 1980), which is primarily concerned with *hospitalitas* in Italy, Spain and Burgundy. For summary of this work and the scholarship since, see now G. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West. 376–568* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 422–7. The same model was applied to North Africa by J. Durliat, 'Les grands propriétaires africains et l'État byzantin (533–709)', *Cahiers de Tunisie* 29 (1981), pp. 517–31; *idem*, 'Le salaire de la paix sociale dans les royaumes barbares V^e–VI^e siècles', in Herwig Wolfram and Andreas Schwarcz (eds), *Anerkennung und Integration. Zu den wirtschaftlichen Grundlagen der Völkerwanderungszeit 400–600*, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Kl., Denkschriften, 193 (Vienna, 1988), pp. 21–72; and has since been restated by A. Schwarcz, 'The Settlement of the Vandals in North Africa', in A.H. Merrills (ed.), *Vandals, Romans and Berbers. New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa* (Aldershot 2004), pp. 49–57. Prior to Goffart, it was always assumed that Vandal settlement had depended upon extensive

leaning towards the former view – not least because of the extensive lamentations regarding lost lands in a variety of textual sources from the period – much of this discussion has missed a particularly significant feature of the settlement: both Victor and Procopius note a clear distinction between the *sortes Vandalorum* assigned to the ‘Vandals’ as a whole, and the royal estates divided up between Geiseric and his sons.²¹ Both stress further that the *sortes Vandalorum* were limited to the province of Africa Proconsularis, while the Hasding lands included all of the confiscated territories in Numidia and Byzacena, as well as some holdings in the Proconsular province. These royal holdings evidently included vineyards, mines, lakes and urban palaces as well as agricultural estates and villas.²² The treaty of 442 established the Vandals within North Africa, but it also provided a social and economic foundation for the power of the Hasding family among them. Just as important as the provision of sustenance for the Vandals was the formal institution of a distinction between the royal family and their followers. This was accentuated still further by Geiseric’s surprising innovation of establishing a court for each of his sons.²³ Victor of Vita alludes to bureaucratic personnel at the court of the crown prince Huneric, and notes further that the entourage of the younger prince Theuderic was itself an important political focus during the reign of his father.²⁴ Throughout his legislation, Geiseric was evidently anxious to secure the position of his sons. The *constitutio* both established the status of the princes during the founding king’s lifetime and provided for their continued prosperity after his death.

All of this had several lasting results. Geiseric’s concern to establish *all* of his sons successfully underscored his ambitions for the Hasding house: following the suppression of the aristocratic revolt in 442 we hear of no challenge to the Vandal throne coming from outside the family. The generous distribution of lands and influence created a series of alternative political foci within the Vandal kingdom, however. While Geiseric himself was still alive, this seems to have posed few problems, but it proved to be a lasting threat for his successors. Under Huneric, it was the

land appropriations. The case for this has now been eloquently re-articulated by Y. Moderan, ‘L’établissement territorial des Vandales en Afrique’, *Antiquité Tardive* 10 (2002), pp. 87–122 and *passim*. M. Innes, ‘Land, Freedom and the Making of the Medieval West’, *TRHS* 16 (2006), pp. 39–76, at p. 48 persuasively argues that the distribution of lands within Vandal Africa must be considered separately from processes in operation elsewhere in the western empire. His promised analysis of this is eagerly awaited.

²¹ Vict. Vit. HP I.13, ed. Lancel, p. 102; Proc. BV I.5.11–14, ed. Dewing, p. 50.

²² Mines – Vict. Vit. HP III.68, ed. Lancel, p. 210 and *Notitia provinciarum et civitatem Africae* II.76, ed. S. Lancel, *Victor de Vita*, p. 257. Vineyards – Vict. Vit. HP I.44, ed. Lancel, p. 117. On Vandal palaces, cf. n. 72 below. Cf. L. Schmidt, *Histoire des Vandales*, trans. H.E. Del Medico (Paris, 1953), p. 220, n. 5.

²³ Proc. BV I.5.11, ed. Dewing, p. 50.

²⁴ Vict. Vit. HP I.45, ed. Lancel, p. 117; I.48, ed. Lancel, p. 119.

presence of powerful rivals which precipitated the first crisis; under his son Hilderic, it was the creation of new power blocs within an expanding Hasding family which was the greatest danger.

Huneric: blood and irony

Huneric's own succession cannot have been in doubt upon the death of his father in 477. As the eldest son of Geiseric, and the oldest living member of the family, his claim to the throne could scarcely have been challenged. His marriage to the princess Eudocia, daughter of the late Valentinian III, would have lent him legitimacy in the eyes of observers in North Africa and beyond, and his period as a hostage in the imperial court at Ravenna doubtless further strengthened his credentials.²⁵ This imperial cachet had been purchased at a high cost – Geiseric's rejection and mutilation of Huneric's first wife, an unnamed Visigothic princess, probably in around 442 – but on the international stage of the mid-fifth century, this was evidently felt to be a price worth paying.²⁶ Shortly after coming to the throne, Huneric sent envoys to Constantinople, renouncing all Vandal ambitions in the Mediterranean in return for recognition in the east, and made similar concessions to Odoacar in Italy shortly before his death. But for all of these advantages, Huneric's proved to be an unstable reign. The period is known to us almost exclusively through Victor of Vita's alarmist *Historia Persecutionis*. As the title of his work suggests, Victor's principal concern was with the persecution of the African Nicene church, first under Geiseric and then under his successor, particularly during the bloody repression of 484. As has long been recognized, Victor's polemical intentions fundamentally shape the form of the *Historia* as a whole, and the fragments of secular history which appear within the text need to be viewed as contributions to this rhetorical programme.²⁷

The account of the first half of Huneric's reign provides an obvious case in point. According to Victor, Huneric was initially welcomed within the kingdom. His persecution of the Manichaeans was regarded as commendably regal behaviour by even this most virulent Nicene, and

²⁵ Proc. BV I.4.13–14, ed. Dewing, pp. 36–8; Merobaudes, *Carmina* I.7–8, ed. F. Vollmer, *MGH AA* 14 (Berlin, 1905), p. 3 which may refer to Huneric while in Ravenna. See F.M. Clover, *Flavius Merobaudes. A Translation and Historical Commentary*, Transactions of the American Philological Society, ns 61 (Philadelphia, 1971), pp. 20–1 for translation and discussion.

²⁶ Jordanes, *Getica* 184, ed. Mommsen, p. 106. On this marriage cf. Clover, 'Geiseric and Statesman', pp. 107–8.

²⁷ C. Courtois, *Victor de Vita son oeuvre. Étude critique* (Algiers, 1954) remains central on Victor. And see now T. Howe, *Vandalen, Barbaren und Arianer bei Victor von Vita* (Berlin, 2007). The recent edition and commentary of Lancel, *Victor de Vita* has made criticism of the text immeasurably easier.

under pressure from Constantinople the king allowed the ordination of Eugenius as bishop of Carthage – the first to hold the post since the death of Deogratias twenty-four years earlier.²⁸ Thereafter, however, things apparently went downhill. In 480 or 481, Huneric engaged in a substantial dynastic purge, first killing or expelling various members of his family, and then alienating the church through his clumsy attempts to redefine the legal succession of the Vandal realm in favour of his son, Hilderic. In effect, Victor describes three stages to this political extirpation, although the relationship between them is not completely clear. First is the active purge of the Hasding house – the murder of some members of the family, the exile of others, and the torture of an unspecified number of Vandal aristocrats for their supposed involvement in a plot. Second was the removal of Geiseric's *comitatus*, a small group of close advisers who had been loyal to the earlier king and had (Victor tells us) been specifically recommended to Huneric by his father. Third came Huneric's rather peculiar scheme to gain Catholic episcopal support for his redefinition of Geiseric's *constitutio*. This provides a precursor to the religious persecutions proper.

Victor's account is fullest on the actions taken by Huneric against the members of his immediate family.²⁹ According to the *Historia*, Huneric's earliest political actions were directed against the family of his brother, Theoderic. The first of these victims was Theoderic's wife, who was murdered on suspicion of stirring her husband and her son into revolt. This son (who is not named in Victor's account) was the next of Huneric's victims and was also put to death.³⁰ From here, the historian recounts a catalogue of horrors with relish. First, the Arian 'patriarch' Jucundus, was publicly executed on the strength of his association with Theoderic's household – a political connection which stretched back at least as far as the reign of Geiseric.³¹ Theoderic himself died in exile, and his younger son and two adult daughters were also expelled from the kingdom. The final phase of this political pogrom witnessed Huneric attack the numerous counts and nobles associated with his brother, apparently burning some and executing others.³² At around the same time, or shortly thereafter, he exiled Godagis, the son of his youngest brother Genton, and harassed the surviving members of Geiseric's court circle who had been recommended to the new king by his father. This included Heldica, the

²⁸ Vict. Vit. HP II.2–6, ed. Lancel, pp. 122–5.

²⁹ Vict. Vit. HP II.12–16, ed. Lancel, pp. 127–9.

³⁰ Vict. Vit. HP II.12–13, ed. Lancel, p. 127.

³¹ Vict. Vit. HP II.13, ed. Lancel, p. 127. The length of Jucundus' association with the court of Theoderic is suggested by HP I.44, an episode which took place when Geiseric was still king and Jucundus still a *preshbyter*.

³² Vict. Vit. HP II.14, ed. Lancel, p. 128.

praepositus regni of Geiseric's kingdom, who was publicly executed along with his wife, and his brother Gamuth, who was repeatedly humiliated, condemned to menial labour and flogged each month for a period of five years.³³

From the start of his account, Victor is at pains to stress that this whole brutal process was motivated by Huneric's desire to secure the succession of his own son, in preference to the agnatic seniority instituted by his father. The point is established at the outset of the episode:

This man, who had until then shown himself mild to everyone, wished to assign the kingdom to his sons after his death; as it happened this did not come to pass.³⁴

The composition of the bulk of the *Historia Persecutionis* is normally dated to 484. Consequently, the allusion here to Huneric's death and the succession of Gunthamund must have been a later interpolation, and is generally thought to have been the historian's own, rather than the work of a later redactor.³⁵ At any event, Victor himself was evidently keen to emphasize the underlying motivation behind Huneric's actions, and its unconstitutional nature. The point is made again in the description of Huneric's second murder:

Afterwards, that son, who had received a higher education, was killed as well; to him, in particular, according to the *constitutio* of Geiseric, the chief rule was due among his nephews, because he was senior of them all.³⁶

Compelling as this narrative may seem, the principal motive for Huneric's actions cannot have been so straightforward.³⁷ A concern to secure the succession of Hilderic in opposition to Geiseric's legislation

³³ Vict. Vit. HP II.15–16, ed. Lancel, pp. 128–9.

³⁴ Vict. Vit. HP II.12, ed. Lancel, p. 127.

³⁵ Lancel, *Victor de Vita*, pp. 297–8; cf. Courtois, *Victor de Vita*, pp. 16–17; S. Costanza, '“Uuandali-Arriani” e “Romani-Catholici” nella *Historia Persecutionis Africanae Provinciae* di Vittore di Vita. Uno controversia per l'uso del latino nel concilio cartaginese del 484', in *Oikoumene. Studi Palaeocristiani pubblicati in onore del concilio ecumenico Vaticano II* (Catania, 1964), pp. 223–41, at p. 241.

³⁶ Vict. Vit. HP II.13, ed. Lancel, p. 127. Moorhead's rendering of *inter nepotes potissimum* as 'eldest' among the nephews probably reflects Victor's intended meaning, but the superlative may hide a subtlety behind the succession convention which is now lost.

³⁷ Most secondary accounts have followed Victor uncritically. H. Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and its Germanic Peoples* (Berkeley, 1997), p. 174; Lancel, *Victor de Vita*, p. 297, n. 137; Claude, 'Problem der vandalischen Herrschaftsnachfolge', pp. 338–42. Courtois, *Vandales*, pp. 241–2 acknowledges that there is more to the episode than meets the eye, but still assumes that the whole episode reflected Huneric's dynastic ambitions, rather than a pragmatic response to an immediate threat.

explains neither Huneric's strategy of piecemeal execution and exile towards other Hasdings, nor his brutal purge of the secular and episcopal aristocracy. Even if we accept Victor's statement that Theoderic's son was older than Hilderic, and hence stood to inherit the Vandal throne before his cousin, the politic execution of the prince would scarcely have improved Hilderic's position. According to Geiseric's law, Huneric's immediate successor would have been Theoderic himself as the oldest living Hasding. Genton, Huneric's youngest brother, died before 477, but he left behind four sons, at least three of whom were older than Hilderic, and thus had priority over him in the succession.³⁸ Victor states that Godagis was the eldest of these sons, and that Huneric simply sent him into exile.³⁹ Victor says nothing of Gunthamund (who was eventually to succeed Huneric), Thrasamund (the next king after that), or Geilarith (the youngest of the four sons, but who still may have been Hilderic's senior).

The implications of this deserve some discussion. Huneric's actions against his own family cannot have been motivated by the simple desire to ensure the seamless succession of his son to the throne, as Victor explicitly states. Of the five Hasdings who certainly stood to come to the throne before Hilderic (Theoderic, Theoderic's son, Godagis, Gunthamund and Thrasamund), Huneric killed one and exiled two more but seems to have taken no action against the others. Furthermore, we know two further Hasdings who may also have been older than Hilderic (and hence senior to him in the eyes of the law) – Theoderic's younger son, and Genton's youngest son Geilarith. The former was sent into exile with his father, the latter apparently left unharmed.

Huneric's actions are far more easily explained as a straightforward response to a specific political threat, focused around Theoderic's elder son.⁴⁰ By executing the prince and his mother, as well as Jucundus and other long-standing allies of Theoderic's court, Huneric acted against a direct threat to his own power, not a perceived danger to that of his son. The fact that Theoderic and Godagis were merely exiled, and other Hasding princes left unharmed, further suggests that this was a purge with an immediate political function. Quite how this related to the subsequent persecution of Geiseric's former followers is unclear. They may have been implicated in the plot surrounding the anonymous prince, or might have fomented rebellion of their own. They may even have fallen from favour for entirely unconnected reasons. But these were pragmatic responses to an immediate political threat, not putative state-

³⁸ Genton's death is reported in BV I.8.1, ed. Dewing, p. 72.

³⁹ Vict. Vit. HP II.14, ed. Lancel, p. 128.

⁴⁰ Courtois, *Vandales*, pp. 240–1.

ments of dynastic ambition. Indeed, Victor rather gives the game away in his concluding statement on the episode:

Having therefore in short time disposed of all those he feared and made his reign secure, as he thought . . . he turned all the missiles of his reign towards a persecution of the Christian Church.⁴¹

Huneric's concern was to halt a rising against his own rule, not to secure the position of his son. That initiative would come later.

Victor's insistence that Huneric's actions were determined by dynastic ambition, rather than political pragmatism is explained easily enough. As the historian himself acknowledged, secular events rarely fit comfortably within the *Historia Persecutionis*.⁴² A work intended for the edification of Catholics had little use for accounts of the *political* persecution of Arians. Victor nevertheless included these passages, with the ostensible purpose of illustrating the insanity and irrationality of the persecutors. The purge of prominent Vandals fits well within this schema. Victor's enumeration of the public execution of Theoderic's widow and son, the sufferings in exile of Godagis, and the desperation of the Vandal noble Gamuth in taking refuge in a church cess-pit highlight the cruelty of the king, in vivid anticipation of the religious persecutions that were to follow. The reference to the classical education of Theoderic's son, and the political prominence of many of his fellow victims, similarly underscores Huneric's perceived barbarity in carrying out these purges – a theme to which Victor repeatedly returned. Finally, by presenting all of these actions as an expression of Huneric's dynastic pretensions – as a direct contradiction in other words to the *constitutio* of his father – Victor could present the new king as an illegitimate ruler in the eyes of his own laws. Huneric's actions could be demonized easily enough without this dissimulation, but the conflation of his later political pretensions with his earlier pragmatism proved to be an easy enough process for the Catholic historian.

Victor was helped in this misrepresentation by the fact that Huneric did eventually attempt to redefine the Vandal succession in favour of Hilderic, but this was probably not connected directly with the political purges of 480/1. In a peculiar passage midway through the third book of the *Historia Persecutionis*, Victor describes Huneric's assembly of a number of Catholic bishops in Carthage, at the site of the former Temple of Memoria.⁴³ Here, Huneric apparently blackmailed the episcopal

⁴¹ Vict. Vit. HP II.17, ed. Lancel, p. 129.

⁴² Vict. Vit. HP II.13, 16, ed. Lancel, pp. 127, 129. For discussion, Costanza, 'Uuandali-Arriani', pp. 233–4.

⁴³ Vict. Vit. HP III.17–20, ed. Lancel, pp. 182–4.

aristocracy, effectively intimating that religious freedom might be theirs in return for support in his new dynastic scheme:

That piece of chicanery read as follows: 'Swear that, after the death of our lord the king, you wish his son Hilderit [Hilderic] to be king, and that none of you will send letters to lands across the sea, for if you give your oath concerning this, he will restore you to your churches.'⁴⁴

This oath vividly illustrates the continued political authority that the Nicene episcopate enjoyed, even towards the latter stages of Huneric's reign. Apparently reluctant to present the church and state in such close proximity, Victor's interpretation of Huneric's actions is typically eccentric. Incredibly, he suggests that the main motive for Huneric's overture was not to establish the position of his own son on the throne, but to trick the more receptive Catholic bishops into breaking Christ's commandment at Matthew 5.13 against the taking of oaths. Victor's Catholic solipsism is such that a genuine attempt at political reform is presented simply as an esoteric attack on the coherence of the church.

Huneric's gambit, however, was not a success. After the king's death, his nephew Gunthamund acceded to the throne, and very probably instituted a political purge of his own. There is certainly some suggestion that supporters of the deceased king, perhaps including the poet Dracontius, found themselves out of favour.⁴⁵ Whether this is best regarded as a triumph for Geiseric's *constitutio*, or a reflection of the realities of political power in the Vandal kingdom of 484, is unclear. We simply know too little about the reign of Gunthamund to state with certainty the circumstances of his succession.

Gelimer

By 530, the political landscape of Vandal North Africa had changed greatly. The vigorous pollarding of the Hasding family tree under Geiseric and Huneric doubtless did much to secure the peaceful succession of Gunthamund, Thrasamund and Hilderic, and hence lent the *constitutio* the patina of institutional antiquity.⁴⁶ By the second quarter of the sixth century, however, the family branches were again starting to spread and new dynastic tensions began to emerge.

⁴⁴ Vict. Vit. HP III.19, ed. Lancel, pp. 183–4.

⁴⁵ For discussion see A.H. Merrills, 'The Perils of Panegyric: The Lost Poem of Dracontius and its Consequences', in *idem* (ed.), *Vandals, Romans and Berbers. New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa* (Aldershot 2004), pp. 145–62.

⁴⁶ Courtois, *Vandales*, p. 242.

The ruling monarch at the time of the second crisis was Hilderic, Huneric's ill-starred son, who had finally gained the throne in 523. Hilderic had probably been born around 456, shortly after the arrival of his mother Eudocia from Rome, and certainly no later than 472 when she left Carthage for the Holy Land.⁴⁷ Consequently, the new king was at least fifty-one, and perhaps as old as sixty-seven at the time of his succession. He was caricatured after his death as a frail and somewhat indecisive king, and seems to have entrusted to others the thankless struggle with the neighbouring Moorish polities of the south. But despite this, his reign was marked by significant innovation. His conversion to Catholicism was the most dramatic cultural change in the history of the kingdom, and was apparently made against the dying wishes of his predecessor Thrasamund.⁴⁸ Scarcely less momentous was the axial shift in foreign policy which he instituted, imprisoning and later executing Amalafrida, the Ostrogothic widow of Thrasamund, in favour of increasingly close ties to Justinianic Byzantium.⁴⁹

The challenge to Hilderic's rule came in the person of the Hasding prince Gelimer. The son of Genton's youngest son Geilarith, and hence the nephew of Gunthamund and Thrasamund, Gelimer was the eldest living Vandal after Hilderic and stood to inherit the kingdom after his death. All of our sources for the episode present the crisis from an essentially Byzantine perspective, and all agree that the usurpation was the action of a restless and violent subordinate against an ineffective, but ultimately inoffensive, elderly ruler.⁵⁰ Procopius' *Vandal War* provides the fullest account of these events: in it, Gelimer's usurpation is explicitly cited as a central justification for the Byzantine intervention in Africa. The appeal of this narrative is illustrated by the alacrity with which later writers adopted Procopius' account, both in Constantinople and beyond.⁵¹ In his epic *Iohannis*, written in celebration of the Byzantine

⁴⁷ Cf. Martindale, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, vol II., pp. 564–5 (Hildericus) and 407–8 (Eudocia 1).

⁴⁸ Victor Tunnunensis, *Chronicon*, a. 523.2, ed. A. Placanica, *Vittore da Tunnuna Chronica: Chiesa e Impero nell'età di Giustiniano* (Florence, 1997), p. 36 followed by Isidore of Seville, *Historia Gothorum, Wandalorum, Sueborum*, 82, ed. C. Rodríguez Alonso, *Las Historias de los Godos, Vandalos, y Suevos de Isidoro de Sevilla* (Léon, 1975), p. 302; cf. also Ferrandus, *Vita Fulgentii*, 28, ed. and trans. G.-G. Lapeyre, *Vie de Saint Fulgence de Ruspe* (Paris, 1929); Proc. BV I.9.1, ed. Dewing, p. 82.

⁴⁹ Proc. BV I.9.4–5, ed. Dewing, p. 84.

⁵⁰ Proc. BV I.9.10, ed. Dewing, p. 86; Corippus, *Iohannidos* III.262–4, ed. J. Diggle and F.R.D. Goodyear, *Flavii Cresconii Corippi Iohannidos Libri VIII* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 57. The text is usefully translated by G.W. Shea, *The Iohannis or De bellis Libycis of Flavius Cresconius Corippus* (Lewiston, NY, 1998).

⁵¹ Sources influenced by Procopius: Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 6026, ed. C. De Boor, *Theophanis Chronographia* (Hildesheim, 1963), pp. 186–217 (which provides a compression of Procopius' narrative with some minor changes); see also C. Mango, R. Scott and G. Greatrex, trans. and comm., *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History*,

occupation, the North African poet Corippus presents the usurpation as the result of an ambitious tyrant exploiting an exhausted province.⁵² In the *Chronicle* of Victor of Tunnuna – another North African with strong Byzantine sympathies – Gelimer again is presented as a usurper, but with no explanatory context.⁵³

Yet there is certainly more here than meets the eye.⁵⁴ Procopius may have damned Gelimer to posterity, but the text of his *Vandal War* does not do a particularly good job of hiding the tensions which bubbled beneath the surface of the crisis. Procopius sets out Gelimer's justification for revolt:

... allying with himself all the noblest of the Vandals, he persuaded them to wrest the kingdom from Hilderic, as being an unwarlike king who had been defeated by the Moors, and as betraying the power of the Vandals into the hand of the Emperor Justinus, in order that the kingdom might not come to him because he was of the other branch of the family; for he asserted slanderously that this was the meaning of Hilderic's embassy to Byzantium, and that he was giving over the empire of the Vandals to Justinus.⁵⁵

The usurpation itself seems to have been carried out with little difficulty. Gelimer seized the throne with substantial support from the Vandal military, and imprisoned Hilderic and his two nephews Hoamer and Hoageis.⁵⁶

Procopius goes on to describe the prolonged diplomatic exchange with Constantinople which followed the usurpation in AD 530.⁵⁷ Justinian, an ally and patron of Hilderic, lambasted the new tyrant for his unconstitutional actions. In the first of his letters, Justinian demanded that Gelimer relinquish his power and wait for the throne to pass to him in the

AD 284–813 (Oxford, 1997). Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* IV.17, ed. J. Bidez and L. Parmentier, *Evagrius Scholasticus: Historia Ecclesiastica* (London, 1898), and trans. M. Whitby, *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus* (Liverpool, 2000), pp. 217–18. (Evagrius is silent on the usurpation, but dwells at some length on the subsequent triumph).

⁵² Corippus, *Iohannidos* III.262–4, ed. J. Diggle and F.D.R. Goodyear, *Flavii Cresconii Corippi Iohannidos seu de Bellis Libycis Libri VIII* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 57; trans G.W. Shea, *The Iohannis or De bellis Libycis of Flavius Cresconius Corippus* (Lewiston, 1998).

⁵³ Vict. Tun., a. 531, ed. Placanica, p. 38, and a. 533, ed. Placanica, p. 38; followed by Isidorus Hispalensis, *Historia Gothorum, Wandalorum, Sueborum* 82–3, ed. Cristóbal Rodríguez Alonso-Núñez, *Las Historias de los Godos, Vandalos, y Suevos de Isidoro de Sevilla* (León, 1975), pp. 304–6.

⁵⁴ For the standard narrative, see J.R. Martindale, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, vol IIIA. AD 527–641* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 506–8 (Gelimer). Again, Courtois, *Vandales*, p. 242 recognizes suspicious features in the received account, but does not explore the full implications of the division.

⁵⁵ Proc. BV I.9.8, ed. Dewing, pp. 84–6.

⁵⁶ Proc. BV I.9.9, 14, ed. Dewing, pp. 86, 88.

⁵⁷ Proc. BV I.9.10–26, ed. Dewing, pp. 86–90.

natural course of things, according to the will of Geiseric. In response, Gelimer dismissed Justinian's envoys, kept Hilderic and Hoageis incarcerated and blinded Hoamer. In a second letter, an unspecified time later, Justinian berated the usurper for his actions, threatening imperial intervention in the name of Geiseric if the deposed Hasdings were not sent to Constantinople.

Gelimer's response to this approach is not certain. Procopius states that the usurper insisted upon the justice of his revolt against Hilderic who was himself 'planning a revolution against the house of Geiseric', and effectively provoked Justinian into action.⁵⁸ John Malalas claims that Gelimer took a more conciliatory tone, but was himself rejected by the emperor, who then set about appealing to the Ostrogoths in Italy as part of a grand coalition against the Vandal kingdom.⁵⁹ Having established his position, Justinian then used the Hasding succession crisis as one of several pretexts for his intervention within North Africa. Procopius, Lydus, Malalas, the Latin chronicler Victor of Tunnuna and the short king-list conventionally known as the *Laterculus regum Vandalorum* all agree that Belisarius' landing in Africa led Gelimer to initiate a purge of Hilderic's family, including the murder of the former king and his two nephews, although we are told that his children and grandchildren escaped to Constantinople.⁶⁰

At first blush, this episode reads as a fairly straightforward opposition between Vandal barbarism and Byzantine legality – which is surely the impression that Procopius and the other sources wished to give. Gelimer is cast as a militaristic usurper, encouraged in his actions by a coterie of aristocratic traditionalists who founded his rebellion upon a deep-rooted suspicion of the *Romanitas* of the ruling monarch. The whole episode, indeed, is a close anticipation of the Gothic aristocratic agitation against the Athalaric in Procopius' *Gothic War*.⁶¹ Gelimer's barbarism provides the only causal explanation for his usurpation – an action determined by his irrational impatience at taking up his position on the throne and an unreasonable suspicion at the cultured pretensions of Hilderic and his courtiers.

The usurpation has almost always been interpreted in these terms, but it is perhaps appropriate to pay Gelimer the compliment of taking his

⁵⁸ Proc. BV I.9.20–26, ed. Dewing, pp. 88–90.

⁵⁹ John Malalas, *Chronographia*, 459–60, ed. L. Dindorf (Bonn, 1981), trans. E. Jeffreys, M. Jeffreys and R. Scott, *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, Byzantina Australiensia 4 (Melbourne, 1986), p. 459. Theophanes AM 6026 provides a further account of the diplomatic exchange, in which Gelimer made the first contact with Justinian – despite the likelihood that Procopius was the chronicler's only source on the episode.

⁶⁰ Proc. BV II.9.13, ed. Dewing, p. 282; Vict. Tun., a. 534.1, ed. Placanica, pp. 38–40.

⁶¹ Procopius, *De Bello Gothico* I.2.1–22, ed. and trans. H.B. Dewing, *Procopius. History of the Wars Books V and VI*, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1919), pp. 14–20.

political grievances seriously. Procopius notes that Gelimer's fear that the rule of the kingdom 'might not come to him' was a major motivation behind the rising.⁶² More specifically, Hilderic's own machinations against 'the house of Geiseric' are cited by Gelimer as his central grievances.⁶³ Procopius implies, of course, that this fear was based upon the unfounded suspicion that Hilderic wished to surrender Vandal independence to the eastern empire, and thus reflected Gelimer's barbarism. The wholesale betrayal of the Vandal kingdom to Constantinople seems inherently unlikely, but there is every reason to suspect that Hilderic's burgeoning *Romanitas* did, in fact, represent a direct threat to Gelimer's inheritance. Circumstantial evidence from Hilderic's reign, and the peculiar behaviour of Gelimer upon seizing the throne, encourage the view that the usurpation arose from a genuine split within the Hasding house – between the aspirations to 'Roman' rule on Hilderic's side of the family, and the necessarily more traditional leanings of Gelimer and his supporters. Hilderic may not have planned to hand his kingdom over to Justinian, but he may well have intended the kingship to pass to his immediate family after his death, rather than see the rule pass to a distant side of the family. This is entirely conjectural, but does allow the climactic crisis of the Vandal kingdom to be viewed from a different perspective. What may well have been at stake, then, was not the *constitutio Geiserici*, but precisely the form of dynastic rivalry that Geiseric's law was intended to avoid.

Hilderic's *Romanitas*

The most striking evidence for Hilderic's dynastic pretensions comes from the *Latin Anthology*, an eclectic compilation of Latin poetry which was probably compiled in North Africa during the early years of the Byzantine occupation. Among the texts therein are the two verses on Hilderic's palace. The better known of the two was composed by Luxorius:

The remarkable edifice of King Hilderic gleams, erected with skill, toil, talent, riches, wealth. From it the sun itself takes its rays to pass on here. Another day can be believed <to dwell> in the marble. Here the firm pavement seems like thick snow spread about. When your feet stand upon it, you would think they could sink into it.⁶⁴

⁶² Proc. BV I.9.8, ed. Dewing, pp. 86–8.

⁶³ Proc. BV I.9.21, ed. Dewing, p. 88.

⁶⁴ *Anthologia Latina* 194, ed. D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Teubner (Stuttgart, 1982), I, p. 145: 'Hildirici regis fulget mirabile factum | arte, opere, ingenio, divitiis pretio. | hinc radios sol ipse capit, quos huc dare possit; | altera marmoribus creditur esse dies. | hic sine labe solum nix † iuncta et † sparsa putatur; | dum steterint, credas mergere posse pedes.'

The second is an anonymous *ekphrasis* dedicated to the king and written in celebration of the grand wall decorations within the same palace:

Powerful Vandal-king, inheritor of a twinned diadem,
 You adorned your own through your great deeds!
 Theodosius the avenger suppressed the aggression of armies,
 Capturing the barbarians, in an easy contest.
 Honorius subjected the enemy with arms of peace
 his better prosperity conquered.
 The courage of Valentinian, known to the world in its greatness
 by the enemies reduced to his mercy, is displayed through the art of his
 grandson.⁶⁵

Both of these poems belong to a tradition of self-consciously classicizing verse common to the collection as a whole.⁶⁶ Among the better known examples from the *Anthology* are Florentinus' poems in honour of Thrasamund's Carthage, Luxorius' description of the tower of the Vandal noble Fridamal, and a *consolatio* on the death of Hoageis' young daughter.⁶⁷ The celebration of Hasding building projects is also a common enough theme: five short poems were composed in honour of Thrasamund's construction of an elaborate bath complex at *Alianae*.⁶⁸

Little is known of Hilderic's palace foundation at Anclae beyond what appears in these poems. According to Procopius, 'Aclas' was a suburb of Carthage, which Belisarius occupied at the time of Gelimer's surrender, presumably taking residence in the royal buildings.⁶⁹ The neighbourhood – and hence the palace – may well have taken its name from a large waterwheel, known as the 'ancla' and celebrated in another poem of the *Latin Anthology*.⁷⁰ Similar devices are known to have been erected by

⁶⁵ AL 206, ed. Shackleton Bailey, I, p. 154: 'Vandalirice potens, gemini diadematis heres, | ornasti proprium per facta ingentia nomen. | belligeras acies domuit Theodosius ultor, | captivas facili, reddens certamine gentes. | adversos placidis subiecit Honorius armis, | cuius prosperitas melior fortissima vicit. | ampla Valenti<ni>ani virtus cognita mundo | hostibus addictis ostenditur arte nepotis.' On this poem, see Michel Chalon, Georges Devallet, Paul Force, Michel Griffe, Jean-Marie Lassere and Jean-Noël Michaud, 'Memorable factum: Une célébration de l'evergétisme des rois vandales dans l'Anthologie Latine', *Antiquités africaines* 21 (1985), pp. 207–62, at pp. 242–7.

⁶⁶ On the political and cultural significance of the collection, see Chalon *et al.*, 'Memorable factum'; R.T. Miles, 'The *Anthologia Latina* and the Creation of Secular Space in Vandal Carthage', *Antiquité Tardive* 13 (2005), pp. 305–20 and the references therein.

⁶⁷ AL 371, ed. Shackleton Bailey, I, pp. 286–8 (Carthage); AL 299, ed. Shackleton Bailey, I, pp. 246–7 (Fridamal); AL 340, ed. Shackleton Bailey, I, pp. 269–70 (Hoageis).

⁶⁸ AL 201–5, ed. Shackleton Bailey, I, pp. 150–3. On these poems, see Chalon *et al.*, 'Memorable factum', pp. 226–41.

⁶⁹ Proc. BV II.7.13, ed. Dewing, p. 268.

⁷⁰ AL 278, ed. Shackleton Bailey, I, p. 201. Cf. Chalon *et al.*, 'Memorable factum', pp. 243–4.

royal initiative elsewhere in the Vandal kingdom, but the precise circumstances of this particular project are unknown.⁷¹ What is certain is that the Anclae foundation was distinct from the royal palace complex on Byrsa Hill, which was the principal seat of Hasding power.

Hilderic's development of the complex at Anclae need not be read as a conscious rejection of the Byrsa Hill complex – many of his predecessors are known to have spent time on their own estates, rather than in the capital.⁷² What is notable, however, is the precise form of wall decoration described within the anonymous poem. Here, despite the peculiar formulation of the opening apostrophe to the *Vandaliricus potens* – 'powerful Vandal-King' – the imagery is resolutely imperial. The poet describes images which celebrate first Theodosius' victories over the *gentes*, then Honorius' diplomatic success, and finally Valentinian's *virtus*. The link between the Vandal subject of the poem and the imperial images on the palaces is made explicit in the last couplet: these are the triumphs of Hilderic's ancestors, his grandfather (Valentinian III), and two earlier scions of the Theodosian house, Honorius and Theodosius I. When Hilderic is addressed as the inheritor of the 'twinning diadem', then, it is for his unification of these two royal lines, not for the hoary claims to rule over the 'Vandals and Alans' made by his father, and later revived under Gelimer.⁷³

This reinvention of royal genealogy was nothing new, of course. When Dracontius celebrated Gunthamund's heritage in his long *Satisfactio*, he had the tact and good sense to omit Huneric from his encomium on Gunthamund's royal line.⁷⁴ Other Vandal kings made little obvious effort to link their own rule to the prehistoric past – a conceit which may have suited the tastes and ingenuities of Byzantine antiquarians better than the

⁷¹ AL 382, ed. Shackleton Bailey, I, p. 295, is a verse by Cato on a *coclea*, or Archimedes screw erected by Huneric. On this poem, see E. Malaspina, 'L'idrovora di Unirico. Un epigramma (A.L. 387 R. = 382 Sh.B). e il suo contesto storico-culturale', *Romanobarbarica* 13 (1994–1995), pp. 43–56.

⁷² Vict. Vit. HP I.17, ed. Lancel, p. 104 (Geiseric at Maxula); AL 371, ed. Shackleton Bailey, I, pp. 286–8, AL 201–5, ed. Shackleton Bailey, I, pp. 150–3 (Thrasamund at Aliaanae); AL 194, ed. Shackleton Bailey, I, p. 145 (Hilderic at Anclae); Proc. BV I.14.10, ed. Dewing, p. 128 (Gelimer at Hermiana). Further foundations (perhaps royal) are alluded to at BV I.17.8, ed. Dewing, p. 150 (Grasse) and AL 286, ed. Shackleton Bailey, I, pp. 238–9 (an unknown estate with a fish pond).

⁷³ *Contra* Gautier, *Genséric*, p. 229. The title *rex Vandalorum et Alanorum* is attested in Vict. Vit. HP II.39, ed. Lancel, p. 139 and III.3, ed. Lancel, p. 175 and also appears on a silver salver (as CIL VIII.17412). On the title, see Clover, 'Timekeeping', p. 47 and esp. A. Gillett, 'Was Ethnicity Politicized in the Earliest Medieval Kingdoms?', in Andrew Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity. Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2002), pp. 85–121, at pp. 109–10.

⁷⁴ Dracontius, *Satisfactio* 49–52, ed. and trans. C. Moussy, *Dracontius Oeuvres II*, Budé (Paris, 1988), pp. 178–9. On which see Merrills, 'The Perils of Panegyric', pp. 157–8. It is surprising how frequently Dracontius is cited as evidence for the solidity of the Hasding lineage, rather than its flexibility. See, for example, Gil Egea, *África en Tiempos de los Vándalos*, p. 313.

barbarian kings of the period – but this failure may itself be illustrative.⁷⁵ The Vandals betrayed little interest in the history of their campaigns in Gaul and Spain in the first three decades of the fifth century, and none at all in the period before that; it seems they were happy to eschew their claims to distant origins in favour of celebrating their position as the rightful children of Carthage.⁷⁶ Hilderic's decision to recast his own authority in an imperial guise was an entirely understandable action in the light of his descent from Huneric and Eudocia.

But the golden light of this newly important Roman heritage only fell on half of the Hasding family. At its centre, of course, was Hilderic himself, *Vandalrice potens*, and first-born offspring of a Hasding king and a Theodosian queen. Alongside him stood his own children and grandchildren, but also his two nephews, Hoamer and Hoageis. Procopius leaves little doubt that these brothers were two of the major heroes of the late Vandal state. Hoamer he boldly nominates as the 'Achilles of the Vandals', while Hoageis is celebrated in Luxorius' poems as a *dominus* ('Lord': a title reserved for those of the royal house), and the father of the 'royal child' Damira.⁷⁷ As the children of Hilderic's sibling, they too could claim inheritance from both royal bloodlines and evidently were celebrities of no small stature within the kingdom. Among those excluded from this celebration, however, were the four sons of Geilarith: Tzazo, Gunthimer, Ammatas and of course Gelimer, who could make no such claim to imperial ancestry. As the Hasding house folded in on itself, Hilderic's propaganda may have indicated the new direction he wished the Vandal monarchy to take.

Hilderic's celebration of his own Theodosian lineage, and the implied recasting of Hasding power in the light of this heritage had still wider implications for the nature of Vandal identity. Crucially, the celebration of Theodosius, Honorius and Valentinian as Hilderic's ancestors not only eclipsed Geiseric's position at the ideological heart of Vandal kingship, it also sought to obscure the firmly masculine grounding of Hasding legitimacy that the agnatic law of succession had established. Hasding rule was

⁷⁵ See W. Goffart, 'Does the Distant Past Impinge on the Invasion Age Germans?', in Andrew Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity. Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages 4 (Turnhout, 2002), pp. 21–37, for a typically provocative discussion of the relevance (or otherwise) of historical traditions within the successor states.

⁷⁶ The Vandals may not have been greatly interested in their history, but they did not ignore it *entirely*. Procopius alludes to Vandal sources on events in Gaul and Spain at BV I.3.33, ed. Dewing, p. 32 and I.22.1, ed. Dewing, p. 184 but none of these seems to have been written, and all are predictably ambiguous. BV I.3.1–2, ed. Dewing, p. 22 and I.22.1–10, ed. Dewing, pp. 184–6 may be regarded as Procopius' own interpretation of the Vandal past. On the Hasdings as the children of Carthage, see Florentinus in AL 371, ed. Shackleton Bailey, I, pp. 286–8, and the discussion in F.M. Clover, 'Felix Carthago', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 40 (1986), pp. 1–16.

⁷⁷ Proc. BV I.9.2, ed. Dewing, p. 82; AL 364, ed. Shackleton Bailey, I, p. 283; AL 340, ed. Shackleton Bailey, I, pp. 269–70.

limited to men, of course (itself scarcely an unusual situation in the successor kingdoms), but the erasure of women within the ruling family went still deeper. The only royal women we hear of in the entire history of the Vandal kingdom are unnamed, with the exception of the infant Damira and the princesses Eudocia and Amalafrida, both of whom came from outside the kingdom.⁷⁸ Women had no place within Geiseric's law of succession but were central to Hilderic's proposed redefinition of Hasding authority. The role of gender within the formation of Vandal identity is a subject that deserves extensive consideration, not least because of the famous role of the 'Vandal women' in the political and economic disputes that followed the Byzantine conquest.⁷⁹ At the very least, however, Hilderic's emphasis upon his matrilineal origins must be regarded as a major conceptual shift within the ideological politics of the last years of the kingdom.

Gelimer's tyranny

Gelimer's behaviour following his usurpation supports this image of a divided Hasding house. When he established his junta after the coup, all of his most important lieutenants came from his own household. Both of his brothers were given central positions of responsibility within the military. Ammatas supervised the execution of Hilderic and the family when news of Belisarius' approach reached Carthage; he was later killed resisting the Byzantines at the climactic battle at Ad Decimum.⁸⁰ Gelimer initially entrusted the government of Sardinia to his *domesticus* Godas, who was clearly an important member of the household if not a blood relation.⁸¹ When Godas himself rebelled, the king turned to another brother Tzazo to recover the island and the troops thereon. Tzazo later returned to Gelimer and joined him in their final stand.⁸² We also hear of Gelimer's appointment of two further relatives, Gibamundus and Gunthimer, to military posts.⁸³ These were either his cousins or (more probably) his nephews by Tzazo or Ammatas.

The most telling detail comes with Gelimer's treatment of Hilderic's circle. The king himself was imprisoned of course, and was later executed as Belisarius' troops approached Carthage. Hoageis suffered the same

⁷⁸ For Damira, see n. 67 above.

⁷⁹ On the centrality of gender to the formation of political identities within this period, see J.M.H. Smith, *Europe after Rome. A New Cultural History 500–1000* (Oxford, 2004), esp. pp. 115–50; and Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, pp. 96–9 and 482–8. The importance of gender to Vandal identity is discussed in some detail in Merrills and Miles, *The Vandals*, pp. 106–8.

⁸⁰ Proc. BV I.17.11–12, ed. Dewing, p. 152.

⁸¹ Proc. BV I.10.25–34, ed. Dewing, pp. 98–100.

⁸² Proc. BV I.11.23, ed. Dewing, p. 106; I.25.19–26, ed. Dewing, p. 204.

⁸³ Proc. BV I.18.1, ed. Dewing, p. 154; Vict. Tun., a. 534, ed. Placanica, pp. 38–40.

punishment, but it is the blinding of Hoamer which deserves particular comment.⁸⁴ This episode is without parallel in the kingdom, and the absence of extant Vandal law codes makes it impossible to infer the crime from its punishment. But blinding occurs frequently enough as a symbol of irrational tyranny in contemporary western texts to encourage the suspicion that Procopius included the information simply as an illustration of Gelimer's barbaric tyranny.⁸⁵ But if Hoamer actually was blinded (and the episode was not an invention of the Byzantine historian), it is worth noting that the vast majority of known instances of this punishment, from early Byzantium down to the fate of Gloucester in *King Lear*, are linked to political disputes, and specifically to the punishment of *lèse-majesté*. Procopius himself cites an example from Persia, which notes that blinding rendered an individual ineligible for royal succession in the kingdom.⁸⁶ According to the mid-seventh-century law of Chindaswinth in Visigothic Spain, capital punishment for treachery against the crown might be commuted to blinding and the loss of property at the discretion of the king.⁸⁷ Further examples abound from the early eighth century, in both Byzantium and Carolingian Frankia. Through the act of blinding pretenders to the throne, the king or emperor expressed his ineffable authority within the state.⁸⁸

These comparanda provide nothing more than circumstantial evidence: the direct identification of blinding as a punishment for *lèse-majesté* can only be attested with confidence in the eastern Mediterranean in the sixth century, and in the west from the middle of the seventh. Consequently, Gelimer's punishment of Hoamer in the 530s represents something of an outlier. But the new king's insistence that his revolt against Hilderic was motivated by the latter's betrayal of Geiseric's *con-*

⁸⁴ Proc. BV I.9.14, ed. Dewing, p. 88. On blinding as a punishment, see J. Lascaratos and S. Marketos, 'The Penalty of Blinding during Byzantine Times', *Documenta Ophthalmologica* 81 (1992), pp. 133–44 on Byzantium; and G. Bühner-Thierry, 'Just Anger' or 'Vengeful Anger'? The Punishment of Blinding in the Early Medieval West', in Barbara H. Rosenwein (ed.), *Anger's Past. The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1998), pp. 75–91 on the western tradition.

⁸⁵ Bühner-Thierry, 'Just Anger', esp. pp. 75–8. Typified by the description of Chilperic in Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum* VI.46, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM I* (Hanover, 1937), pp. 319–21.

⁸⁶ Procopius, *De Bello Persico* I.11.3–4, ed. and trans. H.B. Dewing, *Procopius. History of the Wars Books I and II*, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1914), p. 82; BP I.23.4, ed. Dewing, pp. 208–10; BP II.9.12, ed. Dewing, p. 340. And cf. other examples in Lascaratos and Marketos, 'The Penalty of Blinding', pp. 133–5.

⁸⁷ *Lex Wisigothorum* II.i.8, ed. K. Zeumer, *MGH Leges nat Germ.* 1 (Hanover, 1902), p. 55. See Bühner-Thierry, 'Just Anger', p. 78.

⁸⁸ Expressed neatly by Bühner-Thierry, 'Just Anger', p. 91: 'when the emperor blinded someone who had attacked his *ministerium* in the hope of usurping or tarnishing it, he did not abuse his power nor commit an arbitrary act inspired by uncontrollable anger. He acted within a clearly defined framework: if not a law code, at least a system of references and ideas that recognized his monopoly on this particular form of violence.'

stitutio, may provide a context for his actions. A fear of disinheritance in favour of Hoamer would explain Gelimer's otherwise perplexing decision to rebel, his policies upon seizing the throne and the justification of these actions to the Byzantine court. Hilderic's obvious attempts to reposition the Hasding monarchy along pseudo-imperial lines may be regarded as an early stage in the same process.

The final piece of evidence in support of this interpretation comes from a surprising direction. The *constitutio Genserici* was evidently a subject of relatively common knowledge in Justinianic Constantinople. The emperor was able to invoke Geiseric's ruling in his letters of appeal to Gelimer, and the law was sufficiently familiar for both Procopius and Jordanes to provide competent summaries in the 550s. But why was this law so familiar? And why did Justinian turn to it so readily in his exchange with Gelimer? The usurper was not, after all, acting in direct contravention of Geiseric's law of succession in seizing the throne for himself. He was behaving illegally, certainly, and might justifiably be labelled a tyrant (as he was), but if Gelimer was to be condemned, Geiseric's law provided poor grounds on which to do so. While Justinian may simply have wished to appeal to the long-standing Vandal reverence for their founding (great grand-) father, the specific legal allusion remains peculiar. It is possible, however, that it was Hilderic, and not Gelimer, who had first brought the law to the attention of his allies in Constantinople. Any attempt to rework the succession would have necessitated an engagement of some sort with the hoary traditions of the Hasding house. When this failed – thanks to Gelimer's timely usurpation – the ancient law of Geiseric had little legal relevance, it simply provided further a cudgel with which Hilderic's Byzantine allies could lambast the new tyrant. Gelimer was not specifically acting in breach of his great-grandfather's *testamentum*, it just made sense for his political opponents to state that he was.

Conclusions

Geiseric's *constitutio* had an important role to play within the articulation of royal power in the early years of the Vandal kingdom. It took its place alongside a variety of social and economic innovations which both created a strong political core to the new kingdom and firmly distinguished the ruling Hasding family from rival groups among the Vandal (and Romano-African) aristocracy. The subsequent prominence of the law in the writing of Victor of Vita, Procopius and Jordanes indicates that Geiseric's innovation retained an ideological authority over the remainder of the Vandal century, but this should not obscure the complex means by which royal power was constantly renegotiated over this period. Two

major succession crises within the Vandal kingdom illustrate this particularly effectively, but Huneric's attempt to rework the succession in favour of his own son, and Gelimer's later usurpation, were not the only examples of Hasding power straying beyond the careful guidelines laid down by Geiseric. Close investigation of each case suggests that Huneric and Gelimer were themselves responding to direct institutional challenges to established systems of royal power: in one case in the person of a young royal pretender, in the other through a recrafting of the Hasding line as descendants of the house of Theodosius.

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