

Condensing cultural knowledge in 7th-century Spain: The «inventors of letters» in Julian of Toledo's *Ars grammatica*

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La condensación del saber cultural en la España del siglo VII: Los «inventores de las letras» en la *Ars grammatica* de Julián de Toledo

The *Ars grammatica* attributed to Julian of Toledo contains two paragraphs (II 1.3–4) on the inventors of the respective alphabets that had played a role of importance in the literate cultures surrounding the Mediterranean. Both paragraphs first present the information in question-and-answer format and subsequently quote a poetic *exemplum*. The second *exemplum* reproduces *carmen* 39 by Julian's teacher Eugenius II of Toledo, which is itself based on Isidore of Seville's synthesis of «pagan» and Christian learning. The present contribution reconstructs the process of condensation and codification leading up to the relevant paragraphs in Julian's *Ars grammatica*, and draws a number of conclusions regarding the intellectual climate of 7th-century Spain.

Key words: inventors of letters; Julian of Toledo; Eugenius II of Toledo; Isidore of Seville; condensation of cultural knowledge; «Isidorian renaissance».

Cómo citar este artículo / Citation: Denecker, Tim 2018: «Condensing cultural knowledge in 7th-century Spain. The «inventors of letters» in Julian of Toledo's *Ars grammatica*», *Emerita* 86 (1), pp. 151-162.

La *Ars grammatica* que se atribuye a Julián de Toledo incluye dos párrafos (II 1.3–4) sobre los inventores de los respectivos alfabetos que desempeñaron un papel importante en las civilizaciones «letradas» en el ámbito del Mediterráneo. En estos dos párrafos la información viene presentada en primer lugar bajo forma de preguntas y respuestas, después se da un *exemplum* poético. El segundo *exemplum* reproduce el *carmen* 39 del maestro de Julián, Eugenio II de Toledo, este último texto basándose en la síntesis de erudición «pagana» y cristiana realizada por Isidoro de Sevilla. La presente contribución reconstruye el proceso de condensación y codificación que condujo a los párrafos pertinentes dentro de la *Ars grammatica* de Julián de Toledo, y destaca conclusiones respecto al ambiente intelectual de la España del siglo VII.

Palabras clave: inventores de las letras; Julián de Toledo; Eugenio II de Toledo; Isidoro de Sevilla; condensación del saber cultural; «renacimiento isidoriano».

Along with linguistic rules and peculiarities, grammars often transmit a broader load of knowledge that is considered culturally relevant or valuable¹. This certainly holds true for Latin grammars from late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, many of which (from the late 4th century onwards) were strongly influenced by the *Ars minor* and/or *Ars maior* composed by the famous grammarian Aelius Donatus (*fl.* 354–363), and by the commentaries produced on these works². An illustrative case occurs in the *Ars grammatica* which in some manuscripts is attributed to Julian (c.640–690)³, archbishop of Toledo from 679/680 until his death⁴. In fact, the *Ars grammatica* at issue should probably be regarded as a collection of course notes (dating to around 685) edited by a student or acquaintance of Julian's who attended his lectures on the subject⁵. For the sake of convenience, the work will here simply be referred to as «Julian's *Ars grammatica*». Paragraphs II 1.3–4 of this work are devoted to the inventors of the respective alphabets that had played a role of importance in the literate cultures surrounding the Mediterranean. This is in line with a «heurematic» fascination for the «first inventor» of various realities, an important commonplace in ancient thought which also gave rise to a self-standing literary genre, viz. that of the *heuremata* catalogue⁶. In «pagan» Latin literature, the specific topic of the «inventors of letters» had been dealt with by (among others) Varro,

¹ This contribution is part of a postdoctoral research project on Latin language manuals from late antique and early medieval Western Christianity, funded by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO). Thanks are due to prof. Pierre Swiggers and the two anonymous reviewers of *Emerita* for their valuable remarks on earlier drafts of this contribution.

² Holtz 1981; for the life dates, see pp. 15–16.

³ The *Ars grammatica* is closely connected to a shorter *De partibus orationis* also attributed to Julian, edited by Munzi 1980–1981 and 1983. For a comprehensive analysis of Julian's grammatical doctrine, see Giannini 1996.

⁴ Sehlmeier 2002, Jeudy 2009.

⁵ Fontaine 1959, pp. 206 and 864, Riché 1972, p. 402, Maestre Yenes 1973, pp. xxi–xxvii, *CCSL* 115, p. xv with n. 2. Older important studies of Julian and his *Ars grammatica* are Funaioli 1911 and Beeson 1924.

⁶ See Kleingünther 1933, Thraede 1962a and 1962b, and the general statement made with regard to Isidore of Seville by Fontaine 1959, p. 755: «L'importance essentielle accordée par Isidore aux concepts d'origine et de qualité originelle, dans la perspective de l'explication étymologique, devait naturellement attirer son attention sur un autre genre de l'érudition hellénistique: la recherche "heurématique", celle des inventeurs qui ont contribué aux progrès de la civilisation par leurs trouvailles matérielles, ou qui ont créé et fait progresser les arts, les sciences et la philosophie».

Caesar, Pliny the Elder, and Tacitus⁷. The relevant passage in Julian's *Ars grammatica* reads as follows⁸:

[§3] Latinas quis adinuenit litteras? Nicostrata, Euandri mater, in Italia non quia ipsa eas inuenisset, sed quia de Graeco in Latinum illas transtulisset. Quo nomine post adinventionem litterarum uocata est? Carmentis nympha. Quomodo? Eo quod carminibus suis futura caneret. Da eius exemplum:

«Et Carmentalem Romano nomine portam
quam memorant, nymphae priscum Carmentis honorem,
uatis fatidicae, cecinit quae prima futuros
Aeneadas magnos et nobile Pallanteum.»

[§4] Quot sunt genera litterarum? Septem. Quae? Hebraeae, Atticae, Latinae, Syrae, Chaldaicae, Aegyptiae, et Geticae. Quis quales adinuenit litteras? Moyses Hebraeas, Phoenices Atticas, Nicostrata Latinas, Abraham Syras et Chaldaicas, Isis Aegyptias, Gulfila Geticas. Da eius exemplum:

«Moses primus Hebraeas exarauit litteras,
mente Phoenices sagaci condiderunt Atticas,
quas Latini scriptitamus, edidit Nicostrata.
Abraham Syras, et idem repperit Chaldaicas,
Isis arte non minori protulit Aegyptias,
Gulfila prompsit Getarum, quas uidemus ultimas.»

As can be seen from the above quotation, Julian makes a considerable effort to present the relevant material in a didactically apt way. In accordance with his usual approach, the information is first concisely supplied in question-and-answer format, and subsequently repeated in the form of *exempla*, i.e., illustrative passages in verse. With regard to the sources for §3, the following can be said. The identification of Carmentis / Nicostrata/-e as the inventor of the Latin letters is absent from Donatus' works (at least from those that have come down to us), but was (re)introduced in the tradition of commentaries on Donatus by Servius (*fl.* late 4th century) and further elaborated upon by Pompeius (*fl.* late 5th / early 6th century)⁹.

⁷ See Desbordes 1990, pp. 135–160; for treatments of the topic by Carolingian scholars, see Treffort 2013.

⁸ Ed. Maestre Yenes 1973, pp. 114–115; reviews of Maestre Yenes' edition are Holtz 1974 and Munzi 1976.

⁹ Resp. ed. *GL* 4, p. 421, and *GL* 5, p. 98; on Servius and Pompeius, see Kaster 1988, pp. 139–197.

However, as the probable sources for §3, Maestre Yenes singles out the commentator of Donatus known as «Sergius» (perhaps not to be distinguished from Servius), next to Isidore of Seville¹⁰. The relevant passage from the former's *Explanaciones in artem Donati* I p. 519 already includes the verses from Vergil's *Aeneid* (8.338–341) quoted in Julian's §3¹¹, and reads as follows¹²:

Latinas litteras inuenisse dicitur Carmentis, mater Euandri, quae proprio nomine Nicostrate dicta est. Carmentis autem ideo nomen accepit, quod carminibus uaticinaretur, unde Vergilius
 «Et Carmentalem Romani nomine portam
 quam memorant, nymphae priscum Carmentis honorem,
 uatis fatidicae, cecinit quae prima futuros
 Aeneadas magnos et nobile Pallanteum.»
 Haec enim quae Carmenta dicta est, quando cum Euandro ad Italiam uenit, tunc transtulit in Latinum usum litteras Graecas.

The relevant passage from Isidore (c.560–636), archbishop of Seville¹³, may itself be based on the exposition given by «Sergius» or on the other commentators of Donatus already mentioned (Seruius, Pompeius and «Sergius» are among the grammatical sources usually excerpted and conflated by Isidore)¹⁴. The passage at issue can be found in book I of the *Etymologiae*, i.e. the treatment of grammar with which Isidore's encyclopaedia opens, viz. at I 4.1¹⁵: *Latinas litteras Carmentis nympha prima Italis tradidit. Carmentis autem dicta, quia carminibus futura canebat. Ceterum proprie uocata [est] Nicostrate*¹⁶. The etymological explanation for «Car-

¹⁰ Maestre Yenes 1973, pp. 114–115 (*app. font.*); also see Alberto 2012, p. 273.

¹¹ For the identification of the verses from Vergil's *Aeneid*, see Maestre Yenes 1973, p. 115 (*app. font.*). With 270 quotations, Vergil is by far the most often quoted author in Julian's *Ars grammatica* and *De partibus orationis* (Carracedo Fraga 2002, p. 291). The fact that Julian quotes Vergil by way of «Sergius» aligns with his general tendency to quote Vergilian *exempla* in an indirect way; see Strati 1986.

¹² Ed. *GL* 4, p. 519.

¹³ Röwekamp 2002, p. 361, Poirel 2009.

¹⁴ On Isidore's grammatical sources, see Fontaine 1959, pp. 187–207, Gasti 1997, and Holtz 2006.

¹⁵ Ed. Lindsay 1911; on Isidore's grammatical doctrine, see, most importantly, Fontaine 1959, pp. 27–207.

¹⁶ On Carmentis, see Desbordes 1990, p. 146.

mentis» given in Julian's *Ars grammatica* is somewhat closer to Isidore than to «Sergius», but apart from this, the principal source for §3 indeed appears to be «Sergius»¹⁷.

The situation is different for §4. In this paragraph, the number of «alphabet types» (*genera litterarum*), viz. 7, their sequence, their names, and the names of their inventors are distilled directly from the poetic *exemplum* (composed in catalectic trochaic tetrameters)¹⁸ that then follows. As Maestre Yenes indicates¹⁹, this *exemplum* reproduces *carmen* 39 (*De inuentoribus litterarum*) in the *Libellus carminum* by Eugenius II of Toledo (d. 657)²⁰. Eugenius served as monk and archdeacon under Braulio, bishop of Saragossa²¹, the friend and correspondent of Isidore to whom the latter dedicated his *Etymologiae* and who procured the final redaction of this encyclopaedia²². From 646 onwards Eugenius was archbishop of Toledo, where in the cathedral school he taught Julian, who would become archbishop of the same city in 679/680²³. The subsequent poem in Eugenius' collection, *carmen* 40, forming a variation on the same theme, is unfortunately distorted by a number of lacunas²⁴.

In the *apparatus fontium* accompanying *carmen* 39, its editor Alberto notes that Eugenius relied on Isidore of Seville, viz. *Etymologiae* I

¹⁷ It must be emphasized, however, that it always remains possible that Julian relied on other, more «remote» sources.

¹⁸ Riou 1972, p. 13 n. 1, Alberto 2004, p. 32, Alberto 2012, p. 269.

¹⁹ Maestre Yenes 1973, p. 115 (*app. font.*); also see Alberto 2012, p. 273.

²⁰ On the *Libellus carminum*, see Fontaine 1959, p. 744 n. 4 and p. 864, Riché 1972, p. 402. This is not the only *carmen* of Eugenius' that was integrated as an *exemplum* in Julian's *Ars grammatica*; see Boas 1930, p. 196: «Julianus war ja ein Verehrer des Eugenius, eines seiner Vorgänger auf dem Bischofsitz von Toledo (647–657), der prima sedes Spaniens. Eine Reihe Zitate aus seinen Gedichten hat er als Schulbeispiele in seine *ars* aufgenommen». Also see Riou 1972, esp. p. 16, Maestre Yenes 1973, p. xxxvii, and Alberto 2004, p. 32.

²¹ Riché 1972, p. 344.

²² Reichert 2002, p. 130.

²³ Surmann 2002, Sehlmeier 2002, Jeudy 2009, p. 772. On the posterior circulation of *carmen* 39, see Riou 1972, pp. 17–18, Alberto 2004, pp. 32–34, *CCSL* 114, pp. 129–130 and 150, and Alberto 2012, pp. 273–278 (up to the early modern period).

²⁴ *Carmen* 40 reads as follows (ed. *CCSL* 114, p. 254): *Moysees Hebraea primus ***** notavit. / Phoenices Graeca form ***** signis. / Littera Romulea nympha Carmente reperta est. / Chaldaea Syraque ***** ramine coepit. / Iside regina Aegyptus conscribere dis-cit. / Imbuit ***** renus Gulfila Gothos*. For a discussion of this *carmen*, see Alberto 2004, pp. 34–39, Alberto 2012, pp. 270–271.

3.5–6 and I 4.1, *Historia Gothorum* 8, and *Chronicon* 350²⁵. In what follows, I quote the Isidorian source passages mentioned by Alberto, with a number of supplements. The numbers between square brackets indicate to which verses in Eugenius' poem the possible sources correspond²⁶:

Moyses primus Hebraeas exarauit litteras, [1]
 mente Phoenices sagaci condiderunt Atticas, [2]
 quas Latini scriptitamus, edidit Nicostrata, [3]
 Abraham Syras et idem repperit Chaldaicas; [4]
 Isis arte non minori protulit Aegyptias, [5]
 Gulfila prompsit Getarum quas uidemus ultimas. [6]

The possible sources in Isidore's works are the following²⁷:

Etymologiae I 3.5²⁸: Hebraeorum litteras a Lege coepisse per Moysen [1]: Syrorum autem et Chaldaeorum per Abraham [4]. Vnde et cum Hebraeis et numero et sono concordant, solis characteribus discrepant. Aegyptiorum litteras Isis regina, Inachis filia, de Graecia ueniens in Aegyptum, repperit et Aegyptiis tradidit [5]. Apud Aegyptios autem alias habuisse litteras sacerdotes, alias uulgus; sacerdotales ἱεράς, πανδήμους uulgares. Graecarum litterarum usum primi Phoenices inuenerunt [2]; unde et Lucanus [III 220–221]: «Phoenices primi, famae si creditur, ausi / mansuram rudibus uocem signare figuris.»

²⁵ *CCSL* 114, p. 253; also see *CCSL* 114, p. 150. In an article preceding the 2006 *CCSL* edition, Eugenius' editor Alberto 2004, p. 32, likewise stated that *carmen* 39 «retoma el elenco registrado en las *Etimologías* de Isidoro (1,3,5–1,4,1), al que adiciona una información presente en la *Historia Gothorum* (*Goth.* 8) y en la *Chronica mundi* (*chr. mund.* 350)». In a later article, however, Alberto 2012, pp. 269–273, doubts that Isidore provided Eugenius' source, since the order of the inventors in *carmen* 39 differs from that maintained by Isidore, and since Gulfila[s] does not feature among the «inventors of letters» in book 1 of the *Etymologiae*. Indeed, it cannot be excluded that Eugenius relied on other sources in addition to Isidore. However, if Eugenius was able to combine material from dispersed and presumably more recondite sources, he was able as well to combine and chronologically arrange material excerpted from within the oeuvre of as influential an author as Isidore.

²⁶ Ed. *CCSL* 114, p. 253.

²⁷ Also see Alberto 2004, pp. 36–38 (with regard to the sources of *carmen* 40).

²⁸ Ed. Lindsay 1911.

Chronicon rec. 615–616 and rec. 626 §55²⁹: Hoc tempore Iudaei per Moysen simul cum lege et litteras habere coeperunt. *Etymologiae* V 39.9³⁰: Moyses annos XL. Hebraei litteras habere coeperunt. [1]

Etymologiae I 4.1 (see above)³¹: Latinas litteras Carmentis nympha prima Italis tradidit. Carmentis autem dicta, quia carminibus futura canebat. Ceterum proprie uocata [est] Nicostrate. *Etymologiae* V 39.11³²: Iair annos XXII. Carmentis Latinas litteras repperit. *Chronicon* rec. 615–616 §97³³: Hac aetate Carmentis nympha Latinas litteras repperit. [3]

Etymologiae VIII 11.84³⁴: Fuit autem Isis regina Aegyptiorum, Inachis regis filia, quae de Graecia ueniens Aegyptios litteras docuit, et terras colere instituit; [5]

Historia Gothorum 8³⁵: Tunc Gulfilas eorum episcopus Gothicas litteras condidit [rec. breuis: adinuenit] et scripturas noui ac ueteris testamenti in eandem linguam conuertit. *Chronicon* rec. 615–616 §350³⁶: Tunc Gulfilas eorum episcopus Gothicas litteras repperit et utrumque testamentum in linguam propriam transtulit. [6]

The selectiveness displayed by Eugenius' condensation of grammatical and cultural knowledge can be observed from the portions of *Etymologiae* I 3.5 that have not been underlined in the above quotation³⁷. Furthermore, as is indicated by Alberto (see above), relevant information can also be found in *Etymologiae* I 3.6, which contains a detailed account of the origins of the Greek alphabet. In this paragraph, it is stated among other things that *Cadmus Agenoris filius Graecas litteras a Phoenice in Graeciam decem et septem primus attulit*³⁸. However, nothing of this paragraph is integrated in the condensed account of cultural knowledge that Eugenius' poem constitutes. As a consequence of this omission, the verse on the Greek alphabet is the only one where a nation (viz. the Phoenicians) is accredited with the invention of letters, instead of an individual mythical or pseudohistorical figure, which in

²⁹ Ed. *CCSL* 112, pp. 40–41.

³⁰ Ed. Yarza Urquiola and Andrés Santos 2013, p. 141.

³¹ Ed. Lindsay 1911.

³² Ed. Yarza Urquiola and Andrés Santos 2013, p. 143.

³³ Ed. *CCSL* 112, p. 54.

³⁴ Ed. Lindsay 1911.

³⁵ Ed. *MGH AA* 11, p. 270.

³⁶ Ed. *CCSL* 112, pp. 166 and 168.

³⁷ On «condensation» of grammatical knowledge, see Swiggers and Wouters 2010.

³⁸ Ed. Lindsay 1911.

this case would have been Cadmus, the «inventor» of Greek letters also singled out in *Chronicon* (both recensions) 62 and *Etymologiae* V 39.10.

We have seen that the identification of Carmentis / Nicostrata/-e as the inventor of the Latin letters was common in the Latin grammatical tradition from Servius onwards. However, Isidore seems to have been the first to integrate heurematic notes of this kind for foreign alphabets in a Latin grammar. Evidently, Isidore himself also relied on a variety of sources – both Patristic and «pagan» ones – that are often difficult to pinpoint. One example that is clear is Augustine's (354–430) *De ciuitate Dei*, which – as Fontaine has noted³⁹ – provided Isidore's source for his information on «oriental» alphabets (Syriac and «Chaldaean» [i.e. Aramaic], Hebrew, Egyptian) and their «inventors» (Abraham, Moses, Isis). However, Isidore considerably simplifies and even distorts the information found in Augustine in order to fit his own topic and aim. In his *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum* II 69 Augustine had formulated the question whether (a) both the Hebrew language and the Hebrew letters date back to the first people (Adam and his immediate descendants), or (b) exclusively the Hebrew language, the Hebrew letters being introduced only by Moses. Leaving this question unanswered in the *Quaestiones*, in *De ciuitate Dei* XVIII 37 and XVIII 39 Augustine straightforwardly argues that both the Hebrew language and the Hebrew letters go back to the first people. On this account, the Hebrew letters (and the tradition of learning associated with them) would be by far older than the Egyptian ones, which were introduced only by Isis, whose father Inachus began to reign over the Argives as late as during the lifetime of Abraham's grandsons. From this Augustine concludes that the Jewish-Christian tradition is by far anterior and superior to that of «pagan» learning. In this case, Isidore simplifies his source material to the extent that he contradicts Augustine, by stating that the Hebrew letters were invented by Moses. This can partly be explained by the fact that for Isidore, unlike for Augustine, there is no longer a need to polemicize against the «pagans». As we have seen, after Isidore the notion of Moses as the inventor of Hebrew letters persists with Eugenius and with Julian.

On the basis of the above, two general observations can be formulated. First, the source analysis of §4 of Julian's *Ars grammatica* has shown that the process of codification resulting in this paragraph entails a high degree of condensation and simplification. At the beginning of this process stands

³⁹ Fontaine 1959, p. 59.

(among others) the extensive passage in Augustine's *De ciuitate Dei*, dealing with the origins of literacy in a critical and differentiated way. In a second stage, the information found in these passages is integrated by Isidore of Seville in book I of his *Etymologiae*, on grammar. As a result of the didactic plan of this grammar, the cultural knowledge presented in Isidore's sources is strongly simplified, to the extent that some of the sources are reused to state the opposite of what they originally said (cf. Moses as the inventor of the Hebrew letters). In a third stage, Eugenius composes two poems on the «inventors of letters» (only one of which is preserved in full), by condensing what he finds in Isidore. For reasons that are difficult to reconstruct, Eugenius neglects Isidore's information on Cadmus and simply states that the Greek letters were invented by the Phoenicians. In a fourth and last stage, Julian in his teaching develops a typology of alphabets by distilling this cultural knowledge back out of Eugenius' poem – hence the number of 7 *genera litterarum*, their sequence, the reference to the Phoenicians instead of Cadmus, and the less apt designation *Atticae* for the Greek letters. In order to do justice to the variety of sources excerpted by the author of the *Ars grammatica*, it should be repeated that in §3 Julian (or a student-redactor of his) seems to rely directly on Isidore and, primarily, on the commentator of Donatus known as «Sergius».

A second observation concerns the role of Isidore of Seville. It has been noted that Isidore was the first to introduce heurastic notes regarding foreign alphabets in a Latin grammar moulded in last instance on Donatus, and that he did so on the basis of «pagan» as well as Christian sources. Fontaine has emphasized that like in many other cases, Isidore's approach of this topic resulted in a remarkable reconciliation of both traditions⁴⁰, a reconciliation which Julian would adopt⁴¹. What is in fact more remarkable is that in only about 60 years, this specific cluster of cultural knowledge was drawn together by Isidore, turned into a poem by Eugenius and subsequently distilled back out of this poem in Julian's *Ars grammatica*. One could cautiously suggest that this upsurge in fascination for the origins of literacy somehow relates to an ongoing «esoterization» of cultural knowledge, viz. from the public sphere into narrower clerical circles, and – concomitantly – to an increased «valorization» of mere literacy. This suggestion is of course supported by the inti-

⁴⁰ Fontaine 1959, p. 201.

⁴¹ Riché 1972, p. 403.

mate connection between letters, γράμματα, and the *ars grammatica*, which Isidore in *Etymologiae* I 5.1 (following Cassiodorus, *Institutiones* praef. 4) proclaims the *origo et fundamentum liberalium litterarum*⁴². Be that as it may, one can safely state that this upsurge of fascination for the origins of literacy bears witness (1) to the shared interests that ran across the network of episcopal educators in Visigothic Spain⁴³, active in the cathedral and episcopal schools of Seville, Saragossa, and (primarily) Toledo; (2) to the results obtained by the «Isidorian renaissance» on the Iberian peninsula, which was buttressed exactly by, but also largely restricted to this episcopal intelligentia, and which would be halted by the Arab invasion of 711⁴⁴; and (3) to the successful codification of Latin grammar in book I of Isidore's *Etymologiae*⁴⁵, which is here shown in its immediate effects, but which would retain its influence for several centuries throughout Western Europe.

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GL: *Grammatici Latini* (H. Keil)

MGH AA: *Monumenta Germaniae Historica – Auctores Antiquissimi*

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⁴² Ed. Lindsay 1911.

⁴³ One can add that the repeated references to Gulfila[s] and his «invention» of the Gothic alphabet testify to a persisting pride about the Gothic past even after the Visigoths' conversion to Catholicism.

⁴⁴ Fontaine 1959, pp. 863–888, Riché 1972, pp. 350 and 401–409, Banniard 1989, pp. 110–115.

⁴⁵ Swiggers 1984.

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Fecha de recepción de la primera versión del artículo: 09/11/2016

Fecha de aceptación: 29/11/2016

Fecha de recepción de la versión definitiva: 21/12/2016