

BOOK REVIEW

Aristocrats and Statehood in Western Iberia, 300-600 C.E. By DAMIÁN FERNÁNDEZ. Series: Empires and After. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. Pp. vii + 310. Hardback, \$65.00. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4946-0.

In this book, Damián Fernández sets out to track “how a group of individuals in late antique Western Iberia enacted the idea of the state as a path to gain social ascendancy” (1) during the transition from late Roman to Visigothic rule. Although the study is geographically and chronologically constrained by clearly articulated boundaries, the way that Fernández frames the mechanisms of change and the motivations behind aristocratic behavior allows for ready comparison with other geographical regions, with other parts of Hispania, Gaul and North Africa all offering obvious targets. This book thus builds a useful analytical framework with implications that go well beyond the immediate region of study.

Part I of the book builds a portrait of the late Roman aristocratic classes of Western Iberia, from the imperial and senatorial aristocracy down to the local *curiales*. A key point here is that all of them, from top to bottom, participated in the same shared language of status assertion, whose clearest expressions can be traced in the written sources and especially through the archaeological remains. Competitive self-representation within this shared language achieved for the aristocrats – at the local through imperial levels – both heightened social standing and authority. The “state” also benefited from the actions of these aristocrats, as it was through their participation that taxes could be extracted, justice could be observed and a reasonably orderly way of life could be ensured. All this required only the relatively minor investment of official salaries and class distinctions, sometimes accompanied by land grants, on the part of the imperial regime.

The approach provides ample opportunity for discussion of some important – and sometimes highly contentious – issues in late antique scholarship, among them taxation, the urban/rural divide, economics and conspicuous consumption (to name only a few). Fernández avoids getting too bogged down in any of the debates, instead choosing to articulate a clear position while pointing the reader to abundant bibliography in the endnotes. It is worth noting in this context that while

Fernández identifies (apparently) as a historian, the entire book is awash with current archaeological research from within and outside Western Iberia, and the archaeological record is generally handled responsibly and with acuity. This is particularly valuable in tracing the rural record from both late-Roman and post-Roman periods, where significant advances in archaeological and theoretical approaches have been achieved in recent years.

Part II of the book follows the aristocrats of the later Roman period as they try to navigate the slowly changing post-Roman world. This is the portion of the book that must fight against a scholarly tradition that often focuses heavily on the losses incurred during the collapse of the Roman Empire in the west: economic, artistic, urban, epigraphic, etc. By shifting the subject of study to the aristocracy themselves, Fernández insists that we should instead consider how the aristocrats adapted their strategies of status assertion to their changing circumstances. Here Fernández must call on all available resources – literary, legal, epigraphic, numismatic and archaeological – in order to weave together a nuanced and generally compelling reconstruction of aristocratic adaptations to the post-Roman context.

In Fernández's reading, aristocrats almost always found themselves under "statehood" conditions, meaning that they rarely, if ever, operated in a period of an official power vacuum – "In other words, aristocrats could not exist as such outside of the state sphere while the state could not exist without individuals able to enact it" (225-226). This follows on from the overriding perspective that continuities were far more pronounced across the period between 300 and 600 than were changes. For example, both the Suevi in the 430s and 440s, and then the Visigoths from the 450s onward, followed Roman models of statehood sufficiently closely that the aristocratic strategies needed in order to compete under their regimes remained reasonably constant (163-165).

Fernández's interpretation follows other recent work in late antique Hispania, allowing the local aristocracy a level of agency not often granted under a more traditional model. If this new approach rests on some unprovable assumptions, it nevertheless offers a better explanation for the apparently peaceful acceptance of so much structural change, especially from the landed (and often vocal) aristocracy in the post-Roman period. That said, Fernández consistently emphasizes throughout the book the potential for regional and even local variability in responses to change. It is this variability that helps to characterize one of the clearest divides between the late-Roman and post-Roman contexts: "Perhaps the most important trend was the formation of uniform strategies of status display

during the late Roman period and the more regionally fragmented practices of the post-Roman world” (226).

Fernández’s prose is enjoyable and easy to read, which belies the depth of the theoretical analysis that often underlies the discussion. There are a fair number of editorial errors in the text, but these did not ever lead to any confusion. The presentation of the book is pleasant, with frequent section breaks and headings to signal the progression from one key theme to the next throughout, and the figures (almost all b/w line drawings) are straightforward and easily understood. Overall, then, Fernández has produced a valuable contribution to the field of late antique studies, one which will reward readers interested in Iberia in particular and in the late-Roman/post-Roman transition more broadly.

DANIEL OSLAND

University of Otago, dan.osland@otago.ac.nz