Hendrik Hess: Das Selbstverständnis der gallo-römischen Oberschicht. Übergang, Hybridität und Latenz im historischen Diskursraum von Sidonius Apollinaris bis Gregor von Tours. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2019 (Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 111). VIII, 232 S. € 99.95/$ 114.99/£ 91.00. ISBN: 978-3-11-062613-1.

In this work, which originated as an ambitious Ph.D.-thesis submitted at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn in 2017, Hendrik Hess aims to use discourse analysis to tackle a longstanding and torturous problem in the study of the transitional phase between the Roman and Medieval world, namely how the intellectual elites of Gaul self-identified. In the process, he provides a fine introduction to and survey of the question with new and up-to-date terminology and an extensive bibliography (188–221), including most of the relevant work in German and English. Relevant French and Italian work is, however, often absent and less well integrated even when it does appear in the bibliography, the recent *Prosopographie Chrétienne du Bas-Empire* being a particularly glaring omission.

Ever since Karl Friedrich Stroheker's seminal work on the Senatorial Nobility of Late Antique Gaul,[1] there has been a general tendency, particularly pronounced in the German-speaking world, to see a strong continuity between the elites of the last centuries of the Empire and the first centuries of the barbarian kingdoms that succeeded it in the West. The periodization of Brown, extending Late Antiquity well into what had until then commonly been considered the Middle Ages,[2] only facilitates the continued use of the labels of the Roman empire, such as 'senator', 'patrician', or 'barbarian'. This can result in an overly simplistic schematization, according to which people are assigned to one of two categories, Roman or barbarian, often based on rather slim prosopographical evidence, such as the manner of burial or onomastics.

By drawing heavily upon the framework provided by Michel Foucault in his *L'Archéologie du Savoir* – any reader weary or wary of the over-use the term "discourse" has enjoyed in the last decades can expect no quarter – as well

1 K. F. Stroheker: Der senatorische Adel im spätantiken Gallien. Tübingen 1948.

2 P. Brown: The World of Late Antiquity. From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad. London 1971.

as by Pierre Bourdieu's *Le Sens Pratique*, Hess endeavors to solve two problems inherent to the modern search for meaningful designations, namely their externality and their lack of nuance. In order to solve the first problem, rather than ascribe *Romanitas* to anyone based on presumed signifiers of identity, Hess limits himself to what is explicitly mentioned in the sources, on which basis he is better placed to judge which traits contemporaries considered distinctively Roman and which were not necessarily so. In order to solve the second problem, he introduces a more nuanced set of terms, distinguishing between Romans, hybrid or transitional Romans ("Übergangsrömer") and latent Romans ("Latenzrömer"). Whereas a full Roman would feel that he belonged to the Roman Empire in a political sense, the "Übergangsrömer" is at peace with the new political situation; he is not the displaced subject of the emperor in Constantinople but a citizen in the new state, even if he continues to pattern as a Roman and proudly and self-consciously practices Roman *mores* as far as circumstances permit. Thus, at one extreme, Sidonius, after coming to terms with the Visigothic conquest of Gaul, may be termed an "Übergangsrömer", as may the lawyers helping formulate the Germanic law codes. The "Latenzrömer" is distinct from the "Übergangsrömer" in so far that he may continue to adhere to Roman behavioral patterns, continue to exhibit Roman values, but he and the society around him no longer perceive these traits as distinctively Roman. They are defunct as effective social markers of distinction. Thus, Gregory of Tours has a plethora of characteristics in common with the Late Roman aristocrat, but it is doubtful whether he himself would perceive them as Roman rather than merely as appropriate for a bishop, a man of letters, or a magnate regardless of cultural background. This terminology makes a more qualified gradation possible, allowing for a more informed debate as to who was the last of the Romans in Gaul, be it Sidonius, Syagrius, or even Desiderius of Cahors, as Ralph Mathisen would have it.[3] By making the terminology clearer, semantic confusion and the ensuing arguments are avoided.

Large sections of the work summarize previous scholarship, survey the biographies of the ancient authors and establish methodology, none of which is new material. It would, after all, be a stretch to consider forty-year-old sociological theory revolutionary. Such material takes up about a third of the

3 R. W. Mathisen: Desiderius of Cahors. Last of the Romans. In: St. Diefenbach/G. M. Müller (eds.): Gallien in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter. Kulturgeschichte einer Region. Berlin/Boston 2013 (Millennium Studien 43), 455–469.

work,[4] which, considering that the book with its 183 pages from introduction to conclusion is relatively short, seems excessive. But while the introductions to the career of the Ruricius of Limoges or Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* may seem superfluous to the reader well-acquainted with the field, they do make a recondite topic accessible to a more general audience, which is undoubtedly a virtue.

Against whom is Hess arguing? One of the stated goals of the book is to show that the Roman elite was by no means a reactionary group, pining for reunification with the empire while desperately preserving the value system of a bygone age (5). While this may be a useful palliative for those who have read little published on the subject since Stroheker or a reader who still imagines Edward Gibbon's almost romantic Boethius whenever he hears of a Roman at a Barbarian court, I struggle to think of any prominent scholar active today who does not take a more nuanced view of the so-called *Romanitas* of the post-imperial Romans. When for example Mathisen, who is repeatedly cited as a representative of the old order,[5] argues that Desiderius may be considered the last of the Romans, he surely does not mean to imply that Desiderius shared all the values of Sidonius – let alone Vergil or Cicero – but merely wishes to stress the literary continuity with these authors, as well as a familial connection with the first mentioned; a continuity that was, in his view, first broken in the subsequent generation.[6] This does not seem to conflict with Hess's concept of the latent Roman – Mathisen makes no claim that Desiderius self-identified as a Roman – which raises the question whether Hess's disagreement with his predecessors is merely one of terminology or actually substantive. In places, it opens him up to the charge of setting his predecessors up as strawmen. In fact, owing to the summarizing nature of many chapters, Hess's work seems more valuable when viewed as historiography, a survey of the *status quaestionis* with the occasional editorializing remark or digression on relevant theory and terminology rather than an attempt to alter the debate.

4 By my reckoning, the sections 1–48 and 130–142 are purely introductory. Add to this the necessary introductions every time the subject is changed, which is often, and the occasional chapters introducing concepts, e.g. "Latenz" on the pages 170–175 – rather late for a core concept advertised on the cover – and the better part of the work becomes exposition.

5 E.g. 5 n. 13, 176 n. 6.

6 Mathisen (see n. 3) 466–467.

Hess, however, does make a more substantial contribution to the modern discourse surrounding *Romanitas* by anchoring it squarely in the ancient discourse. His insistence on the 'Selbst' in 'Selbstverständnis' is often salutary, if only in a negative way. It is nothing new to extrapolate the social markers that signified belonging to the Roman upper class from the value judgements of Roman blue bloods such as Sidonius. It is, however, valuable to establish the chronological and spatial boundaries of the field within which these markers were effective and reliable. Thus it should surprise no one that Sidonius treats holding public office as a distinct social marker of *Romanitas* as evidenced by his protreptic letter to Eutropius.[7] In a brief section, Hess demonstrates that Sidonius' distraught declaration that public office would no longer serve as a marker turned out to be remarkably prescient and was no mere topos of decline.[8] The topic is picked up again for a later period to show diachronic development (150–153), confirming the developments and trends outlined earlier. This conclusion would hardly make, say, Danuta Shanzer or Ian Wood, Avitus' translators and commentators,[9] tumble from their chairs, gasping in astonishment, but it is helpful for the student acquainted with Sidonius' concept of what makes a Roman to know to which degree the same applies in Avitus. Other markers, such as *amicitia*, *luxus* and the possession of estates receive similar brief treatments that make for good reference entries of the value assigned to each of these concepts as identity markers. While Hess, as a rule, does not treat any of these topics extensively enough to alter the current consensus, he does shear the debate of some unfounded assumptions by limiting himself to the evidence in his corpus, providing a starting point for further discussion.

The corpus under consideration is extensive; perhaps too extensive given the nature of the work. The pessimistic statements of Sidonius and Gregory of Tours are used as loose chronological boundaries for the period under consideration. The authors receiving the most thorough consideration are the early epistolographers, Sidonius, Ruricius and Avitus. Even here, some superficiality sneaks in. For example, no attempt is made to distinguish between the authorial letter collection of Sidonius and the archival compilation

7 Cited 1, topic resumed 49–53. Sidon. epist. 1.6.

8 54–57. Sidon. epist. 8.2.

9 Avitus of Vienne: Letters and Selected Prose. Translated with an introduction and notes by D. Shanzer and I. Wood. Liverpool 2002 (Translated Texts for Historians 38).

of Avitus' letters that significantly post-date its author's death. Curiously absent from the list of authors under consideration is Ennodius, who was after all of Gallo-Roman stock, but this may be explained by the fact that most of his letters were written in an Italo-Gothic context. He is thus excluded by the same principle of selection that allows for the inclusion of Venantius Fortunatus, who along with Gregory of Tours forms the other major section of the work.

Between the epistolographers and these late authors there is a section entitled "Zwischenräume", treating the laws, the chronicle of Marius of Avenches and the saints' lives. This compendious material receives no more than twelve pages of discussion (118–130). That Hess could wring no more than one and a half pages out of the topic of *Romanitas* in saints' lives or only write a single solitary page on epitaphs suggests limited attention to the subjects in question. The topics should either have received a more substantive treatment or they should have been omitted. As it is, one has the impression that the saints' lives were only mentioned for the sake of completeness, out of a sense of obligation to mention every significant type of literary source. Rather than preempt the complaint 'Why did Hess not consider X, Y, or Z?' it invites it by calling to mind any number of texts that could have been relevant but were not discussed in detail. Similarly brief sections are dedicated to the laws, and although one could well have argued that the Roman lawgivers formulating the Germanic laws are the very essence of "Hybridrömer", the discussion never attains sufficient depth to actually advance this argument or mention the individuals who were involved. That many of these laws distinguish explicitly between Romans and barbarians, such as the Visigothic marriage laws cited 121, is summarily dismissed as useless for our purposes because the laws do not specify what constitutes Roman-ness and were in all likelihood never enforced. Be that as it may, the existence of such formal legal categories surely merits more than half a paragraph of discussion. The investigation could potentially have benefitted greatly from a narrower scope, which would have allowed Hess to devote more time and energy to the study of the authors with whom he is clearly best acquainted while dropping the Germanic legal codes.

Furthermore, it is not entirely clear what qualifies these sources as belonging to an intermediate stage, as much of the material is either contemporary with Sidonius or contemporary with or even posterior to Gregory and Fortunatus. Marius of Avenches is termed a "Hybridrömer" on the basis that he uses

consular dating, whereupon Georg Scheibelreiter's claim that Marius was a *civis Romanus* is rebutted as founded on insufficient evidence.[10] This is based on the assumption that Scheibelreiter understood *civis Romanus* to mean a full-fledged Roman patriot, loyal to the emperor in the East, which, as Hess rightly stresses, is not borne out by the evidence. Scheibelreiter does indeed engage in mindreading to an uncomfortable degree as he lays the psyche of the Bishop of Avenches bare, attributing to him a desperately reactionary worldview. A solid dose of skepticism is welcome, cutting down some untenable propositions that had been advanced with more confidence than the evidence merited. Still, Hess's maximalist reading of Scheibelreiter is less than generous.[11] At the same time, Hess's classification of Marius as "Hybridrömer" rather than "Latenzrömer", implying that Marius occupies a significantly different position in the discursive space than Gregory of Tours or Venantius Fortunatus, his exact contemporaries, seems somewhat arbitrary and unfounded as well. Why is the author who referred to his own language as a "Romulean whisper" in pointed contrast to the barbarian runes painted on ashen staves less self-consciously Roman than the historian using an antiquated dating system?[12] On the basis of the definitions given and evidence cited, one could easily have swapped them.

The section on Gregory of Tours and Fortunatus is fuller and provides a good summary of the survival of Roman values in both authors. The avid student of Fortunatus will detect some rather odd omissions in the bibliography, most notably Michael Roberts' monograph,[13] but overall, Hess does the topic justice. It is perhaps not surprising that the scholarly works that immediately spring to mind for the philologist may not be the first to occur to the historian, and Hess should be lauded for his willingness to engage seriously with poetry. However, this section is restricted to two of the most

10 127–129. G. Scheibelreiter: Die barbarische Gesellschaft. Mentalitätsgeschichte der europäischen Achsenzeit 5.–8. Jahrhundert. Darmstadt 1999, 70–72.

11 Scheibelreiter (see n. 10) calls him "Römer" in scare quotes (72) and "Romane" (147), suggesting that he too felt the need for a term for the not-quite-Roman, and Scheibelreiter is on the whole an advocate for nuanced intermediary steps of identity, cf. e.g. 95.

12 Ven. Fort. carm. 7.18. The poem is briefly mentioned on page 154, only to be dismissed with the remark that the purity of the Latin language was not an existential issue to Fortunatus as it had been to Sidonius.

13 M. Roberts: The Humblest Sparrow. The Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus. Ann Arbor 2009.

studied figures of the Merovingian age, and it would have been interesting to see Hess apply his analytical tools to lesser-known authors as well. As it is, much is a recasting of the work of scholars like Beat Näf within a new framework.[14] Hess produces few new insights here as well. The question for the future will be, whether his terminology, his most significant innovation, takes hold.

To end on a positive note, I can say from the perspective of a non-native speaker that the German is clear and intelligible, despite being written in the ponderous "Nominalstil" much favored by German academics. The stylistic and syntactical complexity is never used as a cover for unclear or fallacious thinking, making for sharp and clear presentation.

14 B. Näf: Senatorisches Standesbewusstsein in spätrömischer Zeit. Freiburg/Schweiz 1995 (Paradosis 40).

Willum Westenholz, Universität Wien
Institut für Klassische Philologie, Mittel- und Neulatein
willum.westenholz@univie.ac.at

www.plekos.de

Empfohlene Zitierweise

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