

Santiago Castellanos: *The Visigothic Kingdom in Iberia. Construction and Invention*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2020. XIV, 183 p., 6 ill., 1 map. \$ 79.95/£ 64.00. ISBN: 978-0-8122-5253-8.

Santiago Castellanos is a professor of Ancient History at the Universidad de León in Spain. A well-known figure in Visigothic Studies, he is the author of many books and articles dealing with the Visigothic Kingdom and the Late Roman Empire. This book – *The Visigothic Kingdom in Iberia: Construction and Invention* –, published in English by the University of Pennsylvania Press, does not seem to be the translation of previous work in Spanish but, judging by the book’s acknowledgments, the result of original work developed in connection with a stay at the University of Notre Dame in 2016 (p. 185). As stated in its preface, the book is not an overview of Visigothic history but rather a “thematic study of how the kingdom rooted its structures in what had been Roman Hispania” (p. x). Starting from two main questions – “How did the kingdom of the Goths manage to establish itself in Hispania? What were the keys to this process?” (p. ix) –, the book’s main objective is “to show how this process [the Visigothic Kingdom’s construction] developed and how it involved problems, splits, and contradictions” (p. xi). As the author repeatedly states, the focus on this construction process gives the work clear chronological boundaries: from the end of the fifth century until the mid-seventh century. The book is divided into five chapters, plus a Preface and a Conclusion. In addition, it also contains a Chronology, a Bibliography, and an Index.

The first two chapters – “The Collapse of the Roman Empire in Hispania: Between the Texts and the Archaeological Revolution” (pp. 1–8) and “Political Overview: The Beginnings of the Gothic Kingdom in Iberia” (pp. 9–29) – have introductory objectives. Chapter 1 is presented as “a necessary starting point” (p. 1) to understand the development of the Visigothic Kingdom in Iberia. The chapter’s first part focuses on the transformations brought about by the appearance of Vandals, Sueves, Alans, and Goths in the Iberian Peninsula at the beginning of the fifth century. Castellanos highlights that “the end of the Roman Empire in Iberia, as elsewhere in the West, was a gradual process” (p. 5) and that both the increasing Gothic interest in Iberia and the growth of local powers are two essential aspects of this process. The chapter’s second part focuses on the “archaeological revolution”. In it, Castellanos shows how Iberian archeology was profoundly trans-

formed in the last decades, making it possible to abandon the idea of decline and argues for a transformation in the use of space and the emergence of new structures during and after the fifth century.

In chapter 2, Castellanos presents a very general political narrative of the Visigothic kingdom from the battle of Vouillé (507) to the association of Recceswinth to his father's throne (649). Castellanos' first point regards the establishment of the Gothic kingdom in Iberia: noting that the Goths had a "military presence in the province of Tarraconensis beginning in the 470s" (p. 9), he argues that from this period until Leovigild's reign (568/569) there was a growing interest of the Goths in Iberia, but also that this was a not a linear process (p. 29). Leovigild, in turn, would represent the apex of this process, understood in terms of territorial unity. The author's second point is to stress the progressive rapprochement between the Visigothic monarchy and the Catholic Church, the conversion of the kingdom in 589 being a significant turning point to its development and an argumentative strand that Castellanos will highlight throughout the book as a "pact between the royal power and the Catholic Church" and also "the basis for what may be termed 'the invention of the kingdom'" (p. 26). This chapter's third and last point is to state what Castellanos calls the "the fissures in the political system" (p. 28). That is to say, the conflicts between the magnates and the kings – "the contradictions of a system dependent on the will of the Gothic magnates to put a king into power or remove him from it" (p. 26). Castellanos concludes this chapter by affirming that "the political history of the construction of the Gothic kingdom in Iberia was, above all, one of relationships with local powers and the search for a legitimizing discourse" (p. 29), the first being the kingdom's 'construction' and the latter its 'invention'.

Chapters 1 and 2 put forward ideas that Castellanos further develops in the following chapters. However, the author's choice to confine the political narrative – albeit in a very general way – to these first chapters makes the subsequent ones much more structural and less dynamic than they could be. The political narrative appears as the superficial way the kingdom's structure manifests itself, but that also means that the structure appears almost impervious to its own political dynamics.

Chapter 3 ("Structures of Power: Magnates and Dependents", pp. 30–58) focuses on social structure, specifically "magnates and peasants" (p. 31). Castellanos explicitly states that the available sources are limited and biased, arguing that the *leges* are not "a sort of photograph of reality" (p. 31). More-

over, *leges* indeed are the primary source for this chapter, but the author rightly integrates the slates, hagiographies, and formulae in his argument as a way to produce a broader picture. Magnates are characterized as great proprietors and *domini* of dependent peasants. These, in turn, appear as the basis of their local power (p. 35–36). Castellanos also highlights that the bishops are an integral part of this group of magnates (p. 39).

The author praises the development of rural archeology, permitting a better understanding of peasant communities, highlighting both the debate on the level of their autonomy and their internal inequality (p. 40–44). Castellanos links these findings with the more classical debate on Visigothic slavery, aiming for a balanced approach and stressing the diversity of peasant statuses, as “the examination of sources and contexts points to not all *serui* being slaves as such, while at the same time some of them definitely were” (p. 48). Even if Castellanos recognizes the variety and complexity of dependent statuses, he also argues that “in practice, the essential differentiation was between *domini* or *potentes* and the remainder” (p. 48). By way of a conclusion for this chapter, Castellanos argues that *serui* might be enslaved or not and peasant villages could be more or less autonomous, but the basic structure of Visigothic society was the division between magnates and peasants (p. 57).

In chapter 3, magnates and peasants are presented mostly in separation, which hinders the analysis of their essential relationship. On the one hand, this approach reveals the limits of the sources, as Castellanos rightly points out at the beginning of the chapter; on the other hand, it also is a feature of the author’s model and the focus of his analysis. As his model is centered in the relationship between the monarchy and the local powers – as chapter 5 shows – the relationship between magnates and peasants is less important and can be presented in this general manner. Magnates and peasants appear here as building blocks necessary to characterize the Visigothic Kingdom in Iberia, but there is no dynamism in their reciprocal relationship. Once each block is characterized, it stays solidly in its own place.

Chapter 4 (“Negotiating and Imposing: Kings and Local Worlds”, pp. 59–82) focuses on the relations between the central and local powers, that is to say, “how the central power fits into the world of local matters, whether through imposition or negotiation” (p. 60). While Castellanos frames Leovigild’s territorial expansion as more based on the imposition of the central power over the local urban and rural powers, he also highlights that the latter

was able to resist, albeit temporarily. In this process, Leovigild used confiscations as a mechanism to regulate the monarchy's relation with the local powers. According to Castellanos, after 589, Reccared's pact with the Catholic bishops guaranteed theoretical strength to the monarchy, but its practical fragility would be even more explicit. This fragility, in turn, made the monarchy dependent on the collaboration of local elites, both urban and rural, for the continuing existence of the kingdom. As Leovigild used confiscations to punish local powers' opposition, Reccared and later kings added donations as a complementary mechanism to reward the collaboration of local powers (p. 65).

Castellanos then turns to how the monarchy was able to anchor the kingdom at the local level. The author points both to the organization of a central administration around posts and, crucially, to the articulation between the central power, the cities, *castella*, and even the network of churches accessible to the central power after 589. Castellanos exemplifies this articulation of several levels through his analysis of the fiscal system. Thus, he shows how the central power was able to penetrate at the local level, as "in the context of the organization of power in the *regnum*, it is clear that the *civitates* were the crucial points, but account must also be taken of smaller entities, such as these *castella* or even churches" (p. 76). Therefore, returning to his question at the beginning of the chapter, Castellanos concludes that "the construction of the kingdom in Iberia was thus no mere sudden imposition but rather the result of a systematic engagement with local powers" (p. 82).

There is much merit in Castellanos's analysis of how the central power was able to anchor the kingdom at the local level. By showing that collaboration between the central and local powers was the main feature of this system, Castellanos breaks with a historiographical tradition that structurally opposed these two instances of power. Nevertheless, this result is the consequence of characterizing the monarchy as theoretically strong and practically weak, which transposes the former binarism to a more complex formulation, albeit one still predicated on the idea that the theory and practice of power can exist in opposition. This, in turn, derives from seeing the kingdom as an effect of the monarchy and not of the same relationship between central and local powers.

The fifth and last chapter – "Inventing a Kingdom: Projecting Messages" (pp. 83–110) – is arguably the book's core and the most original part. For that reason, this chapter deserves a closer look. The chapter focuses on how

a given image of the kingdom was invented and projected. Castellanos defines this invention as creating a linear version of a complex process: “A simplistic image of the triumph of Catholicism and Gothic kings had to be given roots in history” (p. 85). Castellanos identifies a small group of bishops and monks (mainly Leander of Seville, John of Biclaro, and Isidore of Seville) as the primary agents of this process. This group used several mechanisms to create a specific image of the kingdom, such as law, the councils, the networks of churches, sermons, and history. According to the author, the invention of the kingdom “rested on a minimum of two major ideological supports” (p. 83): ethnicity and unity (Catholic religion and monarchy).

Ethnicity appears in this chapter as a way to investigate how ethnic unity was achieved between the late sixth and mid-seventh century as an ideological process, its result being “the political idea that the term *Gothi* was a generic allusion to the inhabitants of the *regnum Gothorum*” (p. 91). By 633, “the identification of the *gens Gothorum* with the whole of the regnum and its subjects seems clear” (p. 93). This conclusion is based on a particular reading put forward by some authors. However, Castellanos tends to homogenize different positions (regarding both chronology and the nature of this ethnic unity) to state that “ethnicity no longer functioned as an excluding label from the end of the sixth century and even less so in the early seventh century. The use of *Gothi* was extended in overall political terms” (p. 93–94). This rhetorical device appears in other sections of the book, where the author highlights that a given debate exists in contemporary historiography but does not engage fully with the diverse positions and strives to conclude with a more or less balanced position. While this can give more fluidity to the text, it is not the best way to present diverse positions within important historiographical debates.

Castellanos frames the theme of religious unity to understand how the later agreement between the Gothic aristocracy and the Catholic Church in Iberia was projected to the kingdom’s past. All the previous conflicts were reinterpreted or hidden under “a blanket of supposed unanimity” (p. 102). According to Castellanos, the kingdom’s conversion to Catholicism was the “linchpin of this past” (p. 96). The conversion also expressed “the Gothic elite’s pact with the Catholic bishops” as the “essential basis for the ideological designing of the kingdom and the construction of a tale of its formation” (p. 103). Thus, the bishops developed a version of the past before the conversion from a post-conversion standpoint. As unity was the principal

preoccupation, the period before the conversion was simplified through the opposition between the figures of Leovigild – the ultimate enemy of the church – and Reccared – the champion of Catholicism. A more ambiguous figure like Hermenegild did not fit into this model and had to be framed as a mere traitor whose own conversion to Catholicism was carefully silenced by peninsular authors. Castellanos concludes this section by noting that “control of the past permitted the hegemony over collective memory” (p. 103). That is to say, the pact between the Gothic aristocracy and the Catholic bishops resulted in the creation of this simplified and linear version of the kingdom’s history, i.e., its ‘invention’.

The remainder of the chapter investigates how shared memories were constructed at the local level, Emerita being its primary case study. Castellanos defines the *Vitae sanctorum patrum Emeretensium* (VSPE) as the promotion of a “collective memory that was fixed in a text” (p. 104). In this text, Castellanos finds evidence of both how the bishops’ version of the kingdom’s past was reproduced at the local level (the suppression of the memory of Hermenegild) and how the conflicts that challenged unanimity were also registered (Masona’s defiance of Reccared’s sentence against Vagrila), including within the local episcopate (the opposition of Eleutherius against Masona and the archeological discovery of his funeral inscription). On this basis, Castellanos argues that despite the projection of a linear version of the past, the “texts allow detection of the fragility of this linear version” (p. 107). Castellanos concludes this chapter by stating that “The invention of the Visigothic kingdom in Iberia was the outcome of an ideology of power created by the Catholic bishops. Once the aristocracy and the Gothic kingdom had been converted to Catholicism, the bishops provided the system with a religious justification for its existence and for its monarchy” (p. 110).

The choice of these two themes – ethnicity and unity – is interesting but developed unequally. While the question of unity is the backbone of the chapter, ethnicity is confined to a few pages in it, where the author argues that the idea of gothness became applied to all of the kingdom’s inhabitants. Given that Castellanos sees other ideological supports of this process, one wonders if ethnicity was highlighted among the other possibilities because it would be less straightforward to build an argument so centered on ideas of unity while also maintaining that ethnic distinction continued to play a role in the kingdom’s development during the seventh century.

The brief conclusion (pp. 111–114) recovers and synthesizes the arguments made in the previous chapters, emphasizing how the invention of the kingdom “was possible thanks to very specific historical circumstances, that is, the ‘construction’ of the kingdom” (p. 112). While Castellanos recognizes that the kingdom’s system “did not succeed in providing itself with stable mechanisms in practice” (p. 114), nevertheless “it did have a sufficient basis in its construction and invention for it to endure for around two centuries” (p. 114).

Overall, this volume is a valuable work in two senses: first, as a contemporary snapshot of the field of Visigothic Studies; second, it is the development of an interesting thesis about the ‘invention’ of the Visigothic kingdom. As the former, we highlight Castellanos’s ability to deal with a vast documental corpus, aptly articulating the written and archeological evidence. He is also able to synthesize many of the historiographical developments of the last thirty years around the ideas of construction and invention of the kingdom. This aspect is well expressed in the work’s many footnotes and the comprehensive bibliography. However, as is the case of any snapshot, it shows as much as it hides, and the selection is significant. Thus, Castellanos glosses over many of the debates in favor of a more coherent and unanimous perspective that helps to build the author’s argument. As the latter, the author is able to present an interesting thesis centered on the ideas of construction and invention of the kingdom in Iberia. While the invention part is the more original one, the relationship between the two parts is aptly constructed and exposed clearly. Given that the book aims not to be an overview of Visigothic history but rather a thematic study, one wonders if this part could have been more developed. Nevertheless, the book will be very useful for readers who need an introduction to the Visigothic kingdom and specialists who wish to establish a critical dialogue with Castellanos on the kingdom’s invention.

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