

REVIEW

ESSAYS ON HISTORIOGRAPHY IN LATE ANTIQUE IBERIA

Purificación Ubric Rabaneda, ed., *Writing History in Late Antique Iberia: Historiography in Theory and Practice from the 4th to the 7th Century*. Late Antique and Early Medieval Iberia 10. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022. Pp. 312. Hardback, €124.00. ISBN 978-94-6372-941-3.

Writing *History in Late Antique Iberia*, edited by Purificación Ubric Rabaneda, is the tenth book in Amsterdam University Press' series on late antique and early medieval Iberia. It is the result of two funded projects and a workshop held at the University of Granada in Spain. An introductory chapter by the editor and fourteen further chapters by an international slate of contributors together explore why and how history was written in late Roman and Visigothic Iberia, and how changing circumstances affected history writing. Chapters (four in Spanish and eleven in English) range from case studies of a particular author or century to overviews of a specific genre across the duration of the fourth through seventh centuries.

In the first chapter, Ubric Rabaneda sets out the volume's aims. Foremost among these is to reflect 'on the motivations underpinning the writing of history in Late Antique Iberia, emphasising its theoretical and practical aspects' (8) and outlining the varied implications. Doing so means considering to what degree authors 'followed the existing theoretical parameters' (10) of history writing. All were members of the aristocratic elite, all were Christian, and generally they viewed history as serving a didactic purpose.

Chapter two by Gonzalo Bravo is a historiographical essay on the purpose of history. It begins with a manifesto about needing to consider ancient and modern historiography together, rather than treat them as separate things. He then proceeds to discuss the different types of historiography that existed in late antiquity, from Eusebius to Orosius. Regardless of type, authors increasingly emphasised the role of divine providence in history and sought to understand Christian historiography as developing from its classical predecessors. The biggest challenge for late antique historians was how to modify pagan historiography to suit a Christian world; the models they created set the standard for what Christian historiography could and should be.

Chapter three examines one type of Christian historiography in detail: ‘national’ history. Immacolata Aulisa argues that Hydatius, John of Biclar, Isidore of Seville, and Julian of Toledo all drew on Eusebius’ vision of a universal history of the Christian world despite focusing especially on Iberia. In Hydatius’ case, the Iberian focus might have been a result of isolation due to invasion and conflict, but for the others it was, at least in part, tied to the Visigothic court’s propagandistic aims. The result, though, is the same: Iberia is held up as an example of developments in the divine plan for humanity. Barbarian invasions are ‘a form of divine punishment resulting from Priscillian’s heresy’ (47) in Spain and Visigothic kings are presented as ‘God’s deputies’ (58). To make such arguments, late antique authors interweave ‘the universalistic ambition of the old Eusebian model and the ethnic particularism of modern national histories’ (58).

Andrew Fear also explores the local dimension of history in chapter four, using the example of Orosius. He applies the concept of ‘creole nationalism’ from Latin American Studies, which envisions a hybrid identity born from indigenous adoption of colonial culture combined with local pride, to explain how Orosius could be both a Roman loyalist and an Iberian patriot. Orosius’ history tracked the development of a divine plan through different ages of the world, and in his own age portrayed Spain as playing a ‘key role in bringing God’s plans to fruition’ (70) within the Roman empire.

Those plans included bringing salvation to barbarians, as Maijastina Kahlos details in chapter five. In a period when the Roman empire faced many miseries, Orosius sought to demonstrate that even those miseries were an important part of the divine plan. He used barbarians in his history as ‘auxiliary forces in the narratives and rhetorical battles’ who could hold a mirror up to Roman wrongs and demonstrate ‘the civilising force of Christianity’ (97).

In chapter six, Laura Marzo analyses the use of time and omens in Hydatius’ chronicle. Hydatius’ personal conception of historical time was strongly ‘Roman-centric, Christian, and apocalyptic’ and spoke to ‘the profound anxieties of his age and his people’ (103). His lexical choices show how much he despaired that the end of both the empire and the world was imminent—and that for him the two were essentially synonymous.

With chapter seven, the focus shifts from individual authors back to a broader examination of a theme. Francisco Salvador Ventura highlights the influence of political context on ‘chronicles, lives of illustrious men, and national histories’ (117) in turn. For John and Isidore, the chronicle was a useful vehicle for universal Christian history, though centred on its fulfilment in the Visigothic kingdom. The *De viris illustribus* genre also proved useful to highlight prominent local figures. Isidore selected his subjects based on religious activity,

while Ildefonsus of Toledo chose individuals of moral rectitude and model behaviour, especially if they happened to glorify Toledo, which was both his episcopal see and the Visigothic capital. Isidore's history of the Goths, Vandals, and Sueves carried both geographical and ethnic overtones and portrayed Gothic control of the peninsula as right and natural. Finally, Julian of Toledo's history of Wamba's reign promoted defence of the kingdom and its monarch.

In chapter eight, Hervé Inglebert delves into the meaning of the word *historia*. Discussing solely Isidore, the chapter presents his explicit definitions within literary and exegetical spheres and the particular aims he envisioned for it. Not all narratives telling about the past could be *historia*; they had to report true facts about nature, the human past, or the sacred past. Isidore used it 'to connect words and things with their original meaning' and to 'write about the past by collecting, sorting, and prioritising known data' (152).

Jamie Wood continues the Isidorean focus in chapter nine, though in comparison with other Iberian authors. Using the depiction of bishops in historical writing as a lens, he seeks to understand how historians 'balanced the varying demands of theory, context, and practice' (156). He begins with Isidore's view that history served a moral purpose and the ways his writing reflected that aim; keeping accounts brief also kept them focused, structuring accounts by reigns cast individual kings as examples of good or bad rulers, and discussing the deeds of illustrious bishops promoted an idealised image of the episcopal office. Wood then lists references to various bishops and compares Isidore's accounts with others' when available. Turning finally to the *Lives of the Fathers of Mérida* and Julian's *Historia Wambae*, he demonstrates how bishops played roles in local and royal politics, and obscured conflict among their own ranks.

Interaction between local and central powers is at the heart of Santiago Castellanos' contribution in chapter ten. While John and Isidore's frequent listing of kings' campaigns against local military powers might seem to be simply building an inventory, Castellanos astutely argues that lexical analysis shows these were in fact part of 'a very specific ideological project' (182): justifying the Goths' central power over the peninsula. Both authors exalted the Goths over the Byzantines and over the leaders of cities and regions. Both also regularly employed language of tyranny and rebellion that cast the Goths as the rightful rulers of Iberia. Repeated mention of campaigns against these various enemies cemented the idea that conquest was a key achievement of many Visigothic kings, that it ultimately brought glory to Catholic Christianity, and that it happened in a more decisive, linear fashion than was probably true.

Chapter eleven takes the reader back in time to the fourth century and the late Roman empire. José Fernández Ubiña dissects the vision of history presented in the *Libellus precum* by Faustinus and Marcellinus, written as an appeal to the reigning emperors for protection from religious persecution. The authors omitted events from church history that did not advance their cause, described attacks on their compatriots as especially aggressive and savage, and deliberately juxtaposed deaths of their faction's opponents within their narrative to imply God's judgement in their favour. Fernández Ubiña concludes that part of the reason Faustinus and Marcellinus made these choices was that they were '[b]linded by their intransigence' (206) and had a 'lack of understanding of the consensus policies carried out in the religious sphere by various emperors' due to 'deficient theological formation' (214).

Chantal Gabrielli's chapter twelve remains in the fourth and early fifth centuries, with a focus on orthodoxy and heterodoxy. By examining both episcopal and imperial decrees, Gabrielli shows how the bounds of orthodoxy were delineated against religious dissent, especially pagan behaviour and Priscillianism. As orthodoxy as a concept developed, it became itself a useful tool in this fight.

Jews were, of course, also placed outside the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. In developing a Christian historiography based on a divine plan, Christian authors created a 'History of Salvation' (247–8) that meant Jews were excluded from history—or 'expelled' as Raúl González-Salineró shows in chapter thirteen. Surveying a variety of Iberian authors across the period, from Juvencus and Pacianus to Tajo of Zaragoza and Julian of Toledo, González-Salineró tracks the development of this vision of history over time. By the end of the seventh century, Christian historiography had appropriated Jewish scripture to provide Christians with a respectably ancient past, justified poor treatment of Jews as divine punishment for their rejection of Christ, and de-Judaised Jesus and his contemporaries so much that an 'anti-Jewish' ideology became inevitable.

Chapter fourteen is concerned with time and hagiography. Pedro Castillo Maldonado argues that Christian narratives depended on temporal elements; a divine plan could not unfold in history without developments over time. In the *Vitae* written in Visigothic Iberia—of Desiderius of Vienne, Aemilianus, the Fathers of Mérida, and Fructuosus—we can see both historical and hagiographical time. The former appears in biographical data and historical events within which a saint's experience is situated. The latter crosses the boundary between the past and present, often through miracles or signs that show the saint continues to be active in the world.

In the final chapter, Silvia Acerbi and Ramón Teja question King Leovigild's depiction as an evil persecutor in the *Lives of the Fathers of Mérida*.

Because the text is heavily influenced by hagiographical conventions, they argue, we should assume accusations against Leovigild's religious policy are simply rhetorical tropes of the martyr vs. the tyrant, not reflective of reality. As evidence that Leovigild was actually 'a monarch whose religious policy was characterised by tolerance' (293), they point out that no source mentions Arian-Catholic conflict in Iberia during the multiple decades of coexistence prior to this, as well as Leovigild's willingness to modify Arian doctrine to accommodate Catholics and his respect for Catholic sacred sites in Mérida as shown by his desire to incorporate them into his Arian church. The text's religious emphasis disguises political motives: Mazona's support of the rebellious Hermenegild and conflict over how much authority kings, councils, and bishops should all have in the kingdom.

That this volume originated from a workshop is evident in the way many chapters speak directly to each other and to the volume's theme. Jamie Wood, for example, refers the reader back to Hervé Inglebert's discussion of Isidore's theory of history before delving deeper into one particular aspect of that theory. The idea that history-writing encompassed multiple genres, not just chronicles and histories, runs through the whole work. So does a recognition of the varied purposes of history-writing and the impossibility of separating the author from his historical context. The result is a collection of essays that both broaden and problematise how we understand late antique historiography. The range of contributions across the late Roman and Visigothic periods and from scholars in a variety of countries is also to be commended. The former especially facilitates comparison and a greater understanding of how history-writing evolved according to time and circumstance. Multiple contributions address the degree to which late antique historians borrowed themes, ideas, and rhetorical devices from their classical, pagan predecessors and why and how changes like the rise of Christianity and the devolution of political control from empire to locals to a Visigothic centre affected their historiographical choices.

Given such range, it is surprising that so much expertise is assumed of the audience, especially in terms of bibliography. Some chapters limit their Works Cited to secondary sources despite including primary sources in footnotes. Some include some of the primary sources referenced in footnotes but not all. Many include abbreviations that are nowhere explained, as if a single abbreviations page for the volume was expected but did not materialise. Some chapters also lean heavily toward the early or late end of the centuries covered by the volume and are clearly pitched for experts on that particular century. Together, these features narrow the audience of the volume. An expert on the third and fourth centuries might know very well the context for the *Libellus precum* and recognise '*Pac. Pan.*' and '*Basilus, Epp.*' and know where to find

them, but will someone whose scholarly focus is the sixth to eighth centuries? Perhaps more relevant for readers of *Histos* is the reverse: a scholar of the sixth-seventh century Visigoths will know what significant events took place in Sisenand's reign that make a *Vita* set during it especially historically interesting, and will be able to quickly determine what '*MGH Script. Ant.*' refers to, but would a historian of the Roman republic, or even the hypothetical third-fourth century expert mentioned above?

All of this means that the audience who will find this volume most interesting and valuable is specialists in late antique and early medieval Iberia—and this is clearly its intended audience. However, there is much here about the nature of history within a late antique mindset, struggles with how to employ Christian models of universalism and more locally focused histories of a kingdom, and deliberate attempts by writers of history to manipulate their material and their audience that will appeal to scholars of adjacent periods and geographical regions. There is much useful food for thought here, but non-specialists will need to be prepared to look up some referenced sources and events for themselves to get the most out of the volume.

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