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Review of Jerónimo Sánchez Velasco, *The Christianization of Western Baetica: Architecture, Power, and Religion in a Late Antique Landscape* and Erica Buchberger, *Shifting Ethnic Identities in Spain and Gaul, 500-700*

Norman Underwood  
*New York University*, nu9@nyu.edu

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**Sánchez Velasco, Jerónimo. *The Christianization of Western Baetica: Architecture, Power, and Religion in a Late Antique Landscape. Late Antique and Early Medieval Iberia.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017. ix + 284 pp. + 44 ill.; Buchberger, Erica. *Shifting Ethnic Identities in Spain and Gaul, 500-700. Late Antique and Early Medieval Iberia.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017. xxi + 149 pp.**

It is no coincidence that the first Roman emperor born in the provinces, Trajan, hailed from southern Spain. The Iberian littoral integrated early in the Roman imperial project, and there the assemblage of custom, culture, and values, which the Romans termed *Romanitas* (Roman-ness), took deep roots. *Romanitas* was not unchanging though. Each one of these monographs addresses how *Romanitas* evolved on Iberian soil in the twilight of antiquity.

The first of these studies, Jerónimo Sánchez Velasco's *The Christianization of Western Baetica* investigates the process through which Christianity became a key feature of the physical and social topography of the western portions of the Roman province of Baetica (modern Córdoba, Badajoz, Seville, and Huelva). The main argument of this detailed archaeological study is that the Christianization of Baetica "happened faster and deeper than generally admitted" within the immediate 75 years after Constantine's Edict of Toleration, 313 CE (25). As the author succinctly puts it, "[i]n this short period (even less) *Romanitas* and Christendom became one" (308). Putting aside the blatant anachronism of the term "Christendom" in the late Roman context, Sánchez Velasco makes a cogent case for a rapid and sometimes violent Christian displacement of traditional Roman civic religion in the archaeological record:

Basilicas consecrated to the martyrs took over the necropolises. Churches and cemeteries arose in urban centres, on forums and baths, whose pagan decoration was destroyed. Episcopal complexes occupied large areas of the city (25).

Even the countryside, often seen as the last refuge for paganism, fell under Christian sway more quickly than one might suppose. This work, then, is a regionally-specific study, but one with heady implications for the larger Christianization of the Western provinces of the Roman Empire.

The book is divided into three uneven parts with twelve total chapters. Part 1 consists of three introductory chapters respectively on the initial Romanization of Baetica (Ch. 1), the urban geography of the province (Ch. 2), and major developments between Constantine and the Islamic Conquest (711 CE). The bulk of the book lies in the second part, which consists of a series of intensive archaeological chapters on the individual dioceses of western Baetica (Córdoba, Cábrida, Écija, Seville, Italica, and Niebla). With ample illustrations and photographs, these dense chapters exhaust the available material evidence for these

dioceses. Confessedly, these chapters are highly technical, and the author presumes much of his reader's familiarity with both art historical terminology and early Christian practices. The lay reader might wonder, for instance, what a "*mensa* for the *refrigeria*" is (a table for a funerary meal in an early Christian graveyard) or what *opus vittatum mixtum* is (a type of Roman walling)—brief explanations of technical jargon would make these chapters much more accessible. Nevertheless, from these chapters a clear composite image emerges of an explosion in Christian architecture and funerary monuments across Baetica over the fourth and fifth centuries.

The last section of the book, entitled "Christianization: An Archaeology of Ecclesiastical Power," attempts to extrapolate from the surviving archaeological evidence a general profile of the Christian Church's footprint in Baetica. The first chapter of this section (Ch. 11) indexes the various types of Christian buildings uncovered across Western Baetica, categorizing them by building-type, e.g., churches or funerary structures, and by form, e.g., tau-shaped or quadrangular baptistries. This section will be of great use to art historians and archaeologists. The last chapter explores the socio-economic structures that facilitated and catalyzed Christian building programs in Baetica. Prime among these structures were the burgeoning land-portfolios of bishoprics, new habits of patronage among the Christian Roman aristocracy, and the emerging ecclesiastical funerary industry. Sánchez Velasco's emphasis on the Christian burial trade is particularly welcomed since historians tend to focus on the pious largesse of elites at the expense of the modest payments made for burial by the general Christian population. As the author astutely points out, "[e]veryone needed to be buried somewhere" (302).

That said, Sánchez Velasco's discussion of ecclesiastical finances and the Church's novel prominence in the late ancient economy lacks in both detail and citations. This is the result of his almost telescopic focus on Iberian sources. In contrast to other parts of the Roman Empire, little evidence survives for ecclesiastical finances in late ancient Spain; however, ample evidence survives for the Church's economic activities in Egypt and to a lesser degree in Italy. *Comparanda* would very much flesh out Sánchez Velasco's correct case that the Church's new economic power materialized in the architectural domination of urban and rural spaces. Why Sánchez Velasco's does not reference A. H. M. Jones' 1960 publication on late ancient church finances or his economic and administrative survey, *The Later Roman Empire*, is perplexing. It is equally as baffling why there are not more references to studies on aristocratic patronage or on the Christianization of the aristocracy such as Michele Renee Salzman's *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*.

Sánchez Velasco's transition from archaeology to an "archaeology of ecclesiastical power" is at times vague and clumsy. For instance, throughout Sánchez Velasco characterizes the Church as "an institution that behaves as a

State,” arguing ultimately that “[b]ishops overtook the urban *curiae* [city councils] and the State in the administration of cities and territories” (297). While the increased prominence of bishops in late antiquity is historiographical gospel, even in the most “lawless” former provinces of the Roman Empire bishops shared the “administration” of territories with military and civilian potentates. I would also like clarification on what services and functions were entailed by “the administration of cities” (the author does not specify). His most prominent example for the Church’s new administrative role is the proximity of a monastery to the main port of Seville: “the possible location of a monastery in the port of Seville can only be in response to the effective control by the Church of the economic activity generated by the port” (309-310). This is a plausible hypothesis, but I would prefer there to have been examples of other bishoprics that were involved in administering former state-operated facilities. It is well-documented, for example, that the patriarchate of Alexandria in Egypt had a leading role in that city’s grain trade—it even possessed a fleet of riverboats to facilitate the provisioning. A similar observation holds for the author’s assertion that the sixth-century emission of unofficial, small denomination coins after Roman imperial withdrawal “is undoubtedly the work of the bishoprics” (319). As Michael Kulikowski among others has stressed, we simply do not have sufficient evidence for how the cities of Spain were administered after the provinces succumbed to barbarian rule.

A few other points will irk some scholars of late ancient Iberia. For example, I would like to know what ancient source implies that Bishop Isidore of Seville was “probably of Jewish descent” (61). Most critics, however, will concentrate on Sánchez Velasco decision to gloss over the distinction between “Catholic” Romans and heretical “Arian” Visigoths in this period. A plethora of ancient sources make it clear that Arian barbarians patronized their own ecclesiastical hierarchies and even conducted the liturgy in their own Germanic language. Were some of the fifth or sixth-century buildings discussed in fact built by Arian elites? Sánchez Velasco simply disregards any attempt “to partition Iberian elites” into closed groups as “a methodological error” (58). There are many defensible reasons not to distinguish elites by their ethnicity or theological persuasion, but I wish that Sánchez Velasco had spent a few more pages of exposition as to why this thought-provoking study chose to avoid these “methodological errors.”

In distinction, the “identity politics” of the early Middle Ages lie at the heart of Erica Buchberger’s *Shifting Ethnic Identities in Spain and Gaul, 500-700*, a volume also published in the *Late Antique and Early Medieval Iberia* series. In this delightfully readable monograph, Buchberger address a perennial question of the early Middle Ages, namely *how did entire populations of individuals once identified as Romans come to be labeled under the Germanic ethnicities of their respective barbarian kings?* As Buchberger explains in her lucid introduction, for some thirty years most historians have accepted the consensus view that over the

sixth and seventh centuries ethnic barbarian labels such as Visigoth and Frank steadily lost their limited “ethnic meaning” and took on a more “inclusive political meaning” (9). Subjects of barbarian kingdoms regardless of their actual ethnic background were simply folded into the “ethnic group” of their barbarian king, with Roman-ness being subsumed into new political identities. Buchberger challenges this scholarly consensus as an over-simplification of more intricate cultural developments. Across an impressive range of texts (histories, hagiographies, legal codes), she enumerates the complex, multivalent, and even paradoxical ways that authors in the Visigothic and Frankish kingdoms deployed and renegotiated *prima facie* “ethnic labels.”

Part 1 of the book concerns Visigothic Iberia. The first chapter explores the dynamic relationship between religious and ethnic identity in the periods preceding and following the mass “conversion” of the Visigoths from heretical Arian Christianity to Catholicism under the royal mandate of King Reccared I in 589 CE. In this chapter Buchberger highlights a strong tendency across Iberian sources ca. 600 CE to promote religious unity over ethnic divisions. Reccared’s predecessor Leovigild, for instance, attempted to impose Arianism on both his Roman and Visigothic subjects after he had; in turn Reccared in the celebrated Third Council of Toledo foisted Catholic unity upon his diverse subjects. At the same time “ethnically” Roman authors began to emphasize the Catholic solidarity shared between Romans and righteous Visigoths. Importantly, as Buchberger notes, these “authors associated Roman identity almost exclusively with the Byzantines” who perceived as the foreigners conquerors of southern Spain (50).

The second chapter focuses on the emerging political and religious consensus after the unification of the Catholic and Arian churches. The main proponent of this new unity was the kingdom’s most important bishop, Isidore of Seville, brother of Bishop Leander of Seville who himself had presided over the Visigothic conversion. Buchberger, very much following the insights of Jamie Wood, maps Isidore’s ideological influences on his fellow bishops in ecclesiastical legislation issued at kingdom-wide episcopal councils at the royal city of Toledo. As she emphasizes, the decrees of these semi-regular councils attended by bishops, nobles, and kings were crucial in fusing Catholic identity with political Gothic identity—much to the detriment to the kingdom’s Jews who found themselves increasingly categorized as both religious and political outsiders (73-74). The final chapter of part 1 investigates the period after the issue of the so-called Visigothic Code (654 CE), in which the distinctions between Roman and Visigoth finally disintegrated. It is in this period that the political / religious hopes of the architects of unity (Reccared, Leander, Isidore, etc.) fulminated as the inclusive title of Visigothic came to signify all political subjects of the Visigothic monarchy.

The second part of Buchberger’s study focuses on the Merovingian Frankish kingdoms. This portion, like the first, is concise but scrutinizes a much

wider range of authors: the prolific and sometimes impenetrable Gregory of Tours (ch. 4); the poet and hagiographer Venantius Fortunatus (Ch. 5); the chronicler Fredegar (Ch. 6); and three anonymous hagiographers who composed the notable saints lives of Caesarius of Arles, Gaugeric of Cambrai, Eligius of Noyon (Ch. 7). Across these chapters Buchberger shows that Gallic authors had a strong proclivity to reference ancestry, parental lineage, and local origins, even as an obvious trajectory emerged for Gallo-Roman authors to identify with their Frankish rulers. Noting that a person was of Roman stock or from an illustrious family of local Roman aristocrats merely became a way of emphasizing noble heritage. Such remarks were devoid of any connotation about the person's cultural or political allegiances. In this practice, Frankish Gaul diverged from Visigothic Spain where Roman identity entirely disappeared in seventh century sources. The overall argument of part 2 is convincing, but some readers will be skeptical about the final chapter's use of anonymous authors to prove "that the focal shift from a Roman to a Frankish society was not solely the invention of a few cunning authors but a trend occurring throughout their society" (165). All the authors in part 2 were clerics or monks within institutions patronized by Frankish elites, if not by members of the reigning Merovingian dynasty. How much those below the lay and ecclesiastical elites appreciated the transition from Roman to Frankish society is difficult to assess. That said, Buchberger makes an elegant case that among the upper strata of the Visigothic and Frankish kingdoms identities were pliable and multifaceted with many valences (ethnic, political, religious, civic, genealogical). On these last two points, I would have preferred more fulsome discussions on family naming practices and civic affiliations in the post-Roman landscape—though this likely would have required the incorporation of other forms of evidence beyond the work's scope such as funerary inscriptions and charters.

**Norman Underwood**  
**New York University**