

## Book Review

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**BOOK REVIEWED:** SIMON ESMONDE CLEARY, *THE ROMAN WEST, AD 200-500: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY* (CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013), xv + 533 pp. ISBN: 978-0521196499

Professor Esmonde Cleary's book is one of the most expected publications in late antique archaeology, after over fifteen years of various historical publications on the transformation of the Roman West (as the author highlights in the introduction). Its archaeological approach is not new, but it tackles the main issues of the period from a new perspective, serving as a perfect companion (or counterpoint) to the main handbooks that deal with this issue.<sup>1</sup>

The geo-chronological limits are perhaps unusual. Chronologically, the book covers the third century but not the sixth, as Esmonde Cleary presents the second century as the benchmark, the standard of Roman material culture, against which the transformations of Late Antiquity are to be set (p. 7). Similarly, he argues that the fifth century is the ending point of these transformations, when the Roman system had disintegrated in the area of study. The regions considered in the book are above all Gaul and Spain; Britain, the Rhineland and Italy are also included to give further context and to validate his proposals. These regions are chosen because they are defined by coherent archaeological factors that allow (up to certain extent) assessment of the changes to the Roman world at different

<sup>1</sup> Above all: Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, 2006), Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800* (Oxford, 2005), Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History* (London, 2005), and Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376-568* (Cambridge, 2007).

geographical paces, which varied according to the degree of integration within the Roman imperial system.

The book is divided into ten chapters which cover various topics: the Third-Century Crisis (ch. 1), the militarisation of society (ch. 2), the transformations of towns (ch. 3) and of rural settlements (ch. 6), Christianisation (ch. 4), the transformation of the elites (ch. 5), and the changes in the economy (ch. 7). It only moves to the impact of barbarians and the breakdown of the Roman system in the last two chapters (chs. 8 and 9) before concluding with an epilogue justifying the chronological framework (ch. 10). As a whole, the structure clearly defines the evolution of the Roman West in various aspects, living up to the expectations of the title, clearly leaving open the floor for future publications on post-Roman material, which is not addressed.

The first chapter serves as a prologue on the Third Century Crisis and how this triggered the transformations that were to come later. Always from an archaeological perspective, the Crisis is introduced by the devaluation of the coinage and the increasing number of coin hoards, and paralleled to the data provided by extra-regional pottery distribution. This is presented as much more solid evidence for a crisis than the end of public inscriptions, and the author highlights the fact that there was no destruction of villas or in towns in this period, which is an overall re-interpretation of classical text-based explanations for the Crisis.

Chapter 2 covers the transformation and militarisation of Roman society, which is put forward as one of the main agents of transformation when compared to the classical past. Militarisation is shown as taking place at all levels as a result of the reorganisation and formation of provincial armies, although its effects can only be really noticed in the frontier zones and northern Gaul. The increasing fortification of towns with their reduced perimeters and the development of *burgi*, or fortified hilltops, not only explain the changing nature of territorial administration but also the real need to defend the frontier lands. The militarisation of the elites, and the use of the army as a model for legitimising indicators of rank explain the presence of military gear in burials dated to this period as in many instances the grave goods were neither weapons for use nor ethnic markers (as has been argued in the past, especially for Spain and Gaul) but simply social markers of prestige.

The chapter on urbanism, 'Reshaping the Cities', is an intensive survey on the evolution of the late Roman town, following the interpretative lines based on Wolf Liebeschuetz's proposals ('The End of the Ancient City', in *The City in Late Antiquity*, ed. by John Rich (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 1-50). Cities are defined as the essence of Roman territorial administration and characterised as being densely settled, providing services, acting as non-agricultural economic hubs, and adorned with monuments. The chapter covers the entire chronological scope of the period, describing the various processes that took place at different paces in different regions and at different moments. Thus, there is a transition between the second- and third-century euergetism, the decline and abandonment of the suburbs, the fortification of the fourth century and the final encroachment and dismantling of monuments by the fifth. Similarly, the author points out the transformation in elite housing, and how

our knowledge is limited to the major cities, as secondary towns are hardly studied (due to the nature of archaeological excavations). Overall, the underlying conclusion is that there was a degree of continuity in structure and ideology in urban contexts from the second to the fourth century which was only put to an end by the disruptions of the fifth century.

This chapter is followed by one on Christianity and Christianisation (ch. 4, pp. 150-97), which is perhaps the most defining element of the period AD 200-500. The process of Christianisation over the 'traditional religions' is explained from various perspectives both in towns and in the countryside. The main archaeological indicator is the development of churches and episcopal complexes, which is actually a late phenomenon, and this contributes to the explanation that there is no causal relationship between the process of Christianisation and the end of old public buildings. The development of new burial areas and Christian suburbs, however, seem to be a major feature in the transformation of urban landscapes. It is in these burial areas where the first Christian art and architecture develops, even in the countryside and villas.

The next topic tackled is that of the elites, who in this period are characterised by having other ways of reaching the top than land, wealth or military service. These were by entering the imperial central administration or else by ascending within the Church. Furthermore, the spread of the imperial elite into the provinces as a result of the relocation of the capital and the de-centralisation of the administration greatly benefitted those areas where the new power was established, as in Trier, Arles and even Córdoba, where large 'imperial' complexes were built. Villas, as the expression of elite lifestyle, and especially the elite material culture that goes along with them are described in depth, and the different regional trends of villa development in Gaul and Spain are contrasted.

Chapter 6 is an intensive study of the evolution of the rural landscape, considering both villas (at least villas as production centres) and non-villa settlements. As in other chapters of the book, the material here is presented regionally, proposing various regional patterns for northern Gaul, central Gaul, south-eastern Gaul, Catalonia and Baetica. The rural landscapes of regions such as Britain, the Basque Country or the territory around Madrid, which have been extensively studied by other scholars, are not mentioned here (although they briefly appear later in ch. 9). The evident conclusions point towards a decline in the number of villas and the emergence of isolated farms and other types of rural settlements, together with the development of a more localised material culture, which hint at the later development of villages.

Closely related to the study of the rural landscape is the study of the economy in the third and fourth centuries, which is dealt with in the following chapter. Esmonde Cleary rightly points out that there is no single 'Roman economy' and, following traditional anthropological approaches to the topic, explains the three different levels at which economical processes worked: market, redistribution, and reciprocity. Besides this, there was a political economy, driven by the requirements of the state to supply the army and the administrative centres. This affected regional distribution patterns and prompted the interconnection of distant regions: for instance, the imperial *fabricae* of Gaul of Ar-

gonne and Mayen wares are interpreted as having a market distribution even though this was politically fuelled. Similarly, the wide-range distribution of African exports is explained as a by-product of the imperial policies that promoted Africa. Despite this, although the Gaulish *DSP*, Spanish *TSHT*, and British Oxford wares are described and set as examples, African red slip wares are not mentioned at all in this section. 'Coarse wares' are also mentioned as indicators of local and regional networks, but glass productions are not, even if it may be argued that they provide the same information – if not more – about trading networks in this period. Likewise, low-denomination coins are set as indicators of day-to-day transactions and of a monetised economy.

Chapter 8 deals very generically with 'barbarians', and surveys the presence of non-Romans in the Empire during the fourth, but especially the fifth century by revising archaeological views on ethnicity. The 'Germanisation' of the Rhine frontier during the fifth century is presented as parallel to the increasing militarisation of the society and it is indeed argued that the 'Germanic' material culture should be understood not as an ethnic marker but as an indicator of status. Ethnicity is presented as being multi-layered, and grave goods present in burials are explained with the anthropological concepts of emic (what the owner thought the object meant) and etic (what external viewers thought the object meant). This proposal is not ground-breaking, but it summarises the most recent approaches to the topic. This interpretative framework is then used to study the Goths and the Franks as case studies. The study of the Gothic material culture is limited to grave goods and urban constructions in both Gaul and Spain, with only a short introduction to rural settlements. However, the interpretation of the material culture included is based on old discussions, and does not offer any current innovative analysis on the Spanish evidence, raising many questions that are left unanswered. When discussing the Frankish material culture, however, the author focuses on 'Germanic' settlement patterns and rural buildings types in northern Gaul dated to the fourth and fifth centuries, and indicates that no 'Frankish' element can really be labelled as such until the period of state formation led by Childeric and Clovis.

The whole chapter concludes that without sources it is not possible to discuss these peoples (p. 385), which raises the question of whether these labels found in the literature are really useful in archaeological analyses, especially when the author is aware of this. There are many problems linked to the methodology used in this chapter, although the overall conclusions are coherent in their own context. For instance, there is no criticism on the lack of proper studies with regard to Spanish material, such as the absence of anthropological studies of the remains associated with grave goods, lack of quantitative studies about the proportion of grave goods ('Germanic' vs. 'non-Germanic') in relation to the size of graveyards, and the location of these burials in relation to settlements, be they urban or rural. Furthermore, the problem of using stable isotope studies in the identification of foreign groups, as suggested, is not fully addressed. Besides the fact that most cemeteries probably included individuals who were second or third generation 'Germanic' migrants (and whose isotopic characteristics would have been local), isotopic studies can only propose a non-local provenance, based on the diet and the type of water. Thus, pinpointing the origin of a 'foreign' individual is virtually impossible, as there is no corpus of regional palaeogeological indicators that could be used to indicate the

origin: a non-local could potentially be from the other side of the river, the other side of the mountains, or the other side of the continent.

The penultimate chapter is devoted to explain the overall transformations of the fifth century, summarising the main conclusions that are put forward in the preceding chapters. This summary starts with a pair of theoretical conclusions, both on the nature of the evidence and on the disarticulation of the Roman world. The end of the Roman system in the western provinces meant the end of the integration of various regions that remained largely different, as Roman integration was not a Roman homogenisation. Archaeology shows that there was a quantitative decline in the material culture, but this does not imply a qualitative decline; therefore, this can give new interpretations that move away from the moralising agendas that characterised old historical accounts for this period. This is then followed by four sections that approach the transformations of the fifth century in different fields. The first focuses on the importance of regionalisation, and how the Spanish Mediterranean coast, the Spanish interior, southern Gaul, and northern Gaul and the Rhineland form distinctive regions with common characteristics. The text moves on to analyse fifth-century urbanism, presenting it as the point of no return for traditional Roman towns. Then it addresses the transformation of the elites and finally the emergence of a new rural landscape that was dominated by hill forts and villages. The final chapter is an epilogue in which the author justifies and explains his chronological limits on archaeological grounds, pointing out, quite rightly, that many times these limits are marked by the limitations of the available material.

Overall, it can be said that the book is well written and thoroughly illustrated with plans of sites, and it is evident that there is an enormous amount of research behind the publication. Even so, with regards to the Spanish material, most of the interpretative perspectives and the examples presented are derived from a limited number of publications done by authors who are not archaeologists themselves, or that are not directly involved in archaeological primary research (*i.e.*, M. Kulikowski, J. Arce, G. Ripoll, A. Chavarría and J. López Quiroga). This leaves aside not only general analyses and studies carried out by other Spanish scholars, but also publications of the excavated material, which offer newer and different perspectives based on primary research. Added to this, some minor errors and typos tend to appear in Spanish and Catalan names and toponyms. However, the only real mistake is calling Gaulish ceramic productions *TSHT*, that is, Spanish pottery productions: ‘the most studied ceramic in Gaul, *terra sigillata hispánica tardía* [...] the main centres of production of this fine, red-gloss pottery lay in the Rhineland and north-eastern Gaul’ (p. 29). Summing up, despite a few minor errors, the book covers and summarises a large body of material, presents it with rigour, and reaches coherent and interesting conclusions. It is an extremely useful manual and should be a reference for any future publication on the archaeology of the late Roman west.