

4-2019

**DAMIÁN FERNÁNDEZ, *Aristocrats and Statehood in Western Iberia, 300–600 C.E.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2017. 328 pp.**

Erica Buchberger

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*, [erica.buchberger@utrgv.edu](mailto:erica.buchberger@utrgv.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/hist\\_fac](https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/hist_fac)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Rosario Hernández, Erica Buchberger, Andrew D. Berns, Teresa Hancock Parmer, Noel Fallows, Frederick A. De Armas, Duncan Wheeler, Michael J. McGrath, Leticia Villamediana González, Montserrat Ribao Pereira, Federico Bonaddio, Klaus Schmider, Ann Davies, Diane E. Marting, Soledad Pérez-Abadín Barro, Fiona Clark, Evelyn Fishburn, Patricia Vilches & Fiona J. Mackintosh (2019) Reviews of Books, *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, 96:3, 527-551, DOI: 10.1080/14753820.2019.1595821

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact [justin.white@utrgv.edu](mailto:justin.white@utrgv.edu), [william.flores01@utrgv.edu](mailto:william.flores01@utrgv.edu).

DAMIÁN FERNÁNDEZ, *Aristocrats and Statehood in Western Iberia, 300-600 C.E.*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2017. 328 pp.

Damián Fernández faces a difficult task in his recent book, derived from his 2010 Princeton dissertation: painting a coherent and convincing picture of a place and time for which source material is so limited that it is common for scholars to simply treat it as a dark, impenetrable time and move on to earlier or later periods of Iberian history. That he is largely successful is due in large part to the novel methodology Fernández introduces here.

As Fernández himself admits (2), this is a book that would not have been possible thirty years ago. Part of this is because new excavations undertaken by Iberian archaeologists in recent decades have greatly improved the visibility of late antique Western Iberia. There are fewer aspects of this society about which we have no possible evidence. Another factor is a scholarly environment that encourages late antique Hispanists to train with and use both material and written evidence, a necessity when the available evidence is so scarce. Historiographical innovations have expanded the available lenses through which to view center and periphery, administrative structures, aristocracies, and language of individual and group agency. Finally, among scholars of late antiquity, more are realizing the necessity of crossing old borders of periodization. To evaluate aristocrats' actions and strategies on their own terms, it is important to not prejudge them as part of a collapsing empire or a new, barbarian world. Drawing on all of these conceptual tools, Fernández builds a unique and successful method that scholars of all periods can learn from.

Fernández's goal is to 'provide a model for understanding the dynamics of regional aristocratic power' in Western Iberia between 300 and 600 C.E. (21). He does so by examining three main windows into aristocratic behavior: monumental building, ways of enacting state power, and economic strategies by which aristocrats could mark themselves as part of the elite. After an introduction laying out his goals and scholarly foundations, chapters one through three address each of these in turn for the late Roman era (c.300-476), then chapters four through six do the same for the post-Roman period (c.476-600), with a short conclusion summarizing the argument. The structure of the book thus allows the reader to easily see the parallels from one period to the next. Each chapter also discusses variations that occurred in three microregions within Western Iberia, acknowledging the possibility of diverse strategies that nevertheless all fit within a common late antique trajectory. Through the comparison of regions and strategic approaches, Fernández portrays an elite class that, far from passively accepting the changes in their environment, 'actively pursued strategies to secure their social standing' and even affect the changed conditions they faced (2). Where in the late Roman period, an aristocrat might choose to claim elite status by funding city amenities or building a luxurious villa, in the post-Roman period they might build a church or repair a bridge; the 'vocabulary of monumentality' had changed, but the urge to participate in elite society through monumentality had not (133).

In the late Roman period, aristocratic status was based on legal ranks, but without these, post-Roman aristocrats had to find other ways to perform statehood and stand out from the poorer masses. A landowner who once produced goods for the wide imperial market might diversify for more local networks once disconnected from the rest of the empire.

The greatest strength of this book is the way Fernández coaxes so much out of so little. He reiterates that the absence of typical aristocratic markers, usually read as collapse in the case of Western Iberia, truly is *not* evidence of absence. He then proves it by pointing to field surveys that suggest the existence of, for example, more churches than we once thought, simply awaiting further excavation, or by highlighting the subtle hints that indicate, for example, that a simpler mosaic might have been the result of aristocratic strategy. Unfortunately, ‘hint’, ‘glimpse,’ ‘suggestion’, and ‘hypothesis’ are quite common in Fernández’s vocabulary. There is only so much that can be definitively teased out of sparse evidence, no matter how sound the theory and likely the argument made from such tantalizing possibilities. For some readers, this uncertainty will be problematic. For this reader, however, so long as we remember that Fernández offers likely possibilities, not certainties, the possible reconstruction of aristocratic strategies he presents here is a highly convincing and important contribution to better understanding the world of late antique western Iberia—and the ways scholars can read beyond the surface to illuminate any period of limited sources.

ERICA BUCHBERGER  
*University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*