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**Early Medieval Spain: A Symposium ed. by Alan Deyermond,  
Martin J. Ryan (review)**

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*Deyermond, Alan and Martin J. Ryan, eds. Early Medieval Spain: A Symposium. Papers of the Medieval Hispanic Research Seminar 63. London: Department of Hispanic Studies, Queen Mary, University of London, 2010. Pp. 152. ISBN 0 902238 56 6.*

This collection includes seven articles on diverse aspects of –mainly Christian– Iberia from the Visigothic period through the eleventh century. All but one were read at the colloquium of the Medieval Hispanic Research Seminar at Queen Mary, University of London, on January 25, 2008. At Alan Deyermond’s request, the publication was dedicated to the memory of Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz (1924-2008) and it is prefaced by Andrew Fear’s warmly informative appraisal of his remarkable scholarship and illustrious career (13-16). As one of the last publications with which Alan Deyermond was associated before his death in 2009, the volume is a testimony to the extraordinary breadth of his interests as well.

Two short articles by Janet Nelson (“‘As ithers see us’: Some Thoughts on Spain and Francia in the Early Middle Ages”; 17-23) and Ralph Penny (“Early Medieval Iberia: How Many Languages?” 25-35) introduce the book. Nelson surveys three episodes in the relationships between “the Franks and people in Al-Andalus” (18): Charlemagne’s involvement in the Adoptionist controversy, the journey of 857 by Usuard and another monk of St. Germain-des-Près on a quest for relics, and the embassy of Abbot John of Gorze to Caliph ‘Abd al-Rahman III as an envoy of Otto I. Each illustrates how cultural, religious and regional boundaries filter and distort the perceptions and observations that color our sources.

Penny expertly charts the linguistic diversity of early medieval Iberia and outlines its origins and consequences. He considers various forms of diglossia (the co-existence of languages used for separate functions) and bilingualism, particularly for the early centuries of Muslim rule, and he traces the evolution of languages down to the separation of Latin and Romance in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Readers across disciplines will no doubt find this complex and dynamic linguistic landscape fascinating, though more ample references would have been helpful. Points of particular note include the lack of vernacular status for Hebrew among Jewish communities; the convergence –not fragmentation– of Latin in Roman times and the accompanying critique of the “tree-model” for the genesis of the varieties of peninsular Romance; and the transformation of the Latin/Romance-speaking world into “a two-language world” (33), following



–in accord with Roger Wright’s work– the reform of Latin orthography and pronunciation from the late eleventh century, the resulting development of a phonological script for Romance, and, finally, the standardization of the Iberian Romance languages.

Five longer studies anchor the collection. For the Visigothic period, Jamie Wood (“*Brevitas* in the Writings of Isidore of Seville”; 37-53) and Andrew Fear (“Moaning to Some Purpose: The Laments of Eugenius II”; 55-77) discuss the writings of Isidore of Seville and Eugenius of Toledo. Two articles address social, economic and political issues in territories occupied by Christians in the tenth century: Wendy Davies (“Countergift in Tenth-Century Northern Iberia”; 79-96) analyzes countergifts, mainly in the Leonese kingdom and county of Castile; Jonathan Jarrett (“Centurions, Alcalas, and *Christiani Perversi*: Organisation of Society in the pre-Catalan ‘Terra de Ningú’”; 97-127) explores the diverse communities of the Catalan frontier. Finally, Rose Walker (“Beatus by the Waters of Babylon: Lament in Exile from Hispania”; 129-46) sees evidence in the tenth-century Beatus manuscripts of the longing of Christian emigrants from al-Andalus for an imagined past.

By examining why Isidore and other seventh-century Iberian writers valued brevity, Jamie Wood tackles a feature of Isidore’s writing which, he admits, “has irritated generations of scholars” (37). He argues that brevity –a well-established topos among ancient and late antique writers– was a tool through which Isidore accomplished two of his primary goals in writing history: to serve a moral purpose and to do so usefully with a style that facilitated easy recollection and wide dissemination –as in the parallel use of the *sermo humilis* by Christian writers. Isidore built upon the links between brevity and utility emphasized in late antique historiography. As a result, he achieved, in Wood’s view, “what no earlier chronicler had been able to do: the creation of an easy-to-use outline of world history” (39). Indeed, Wood is most illuminating in his treatment of Isidore’s historical writing. His explanation of the brevity topos in other writings of Isidore and his contemporaries is somewhat strained, as in his discussion of Isidore’s fourteen-page long refutation of the heresy of the Acephali at the Second Council of Seville or his less-developed remarks on “*brevitas* and *sermo humilis* as cognate but not overlapping discursive and rhetorical strategies” (48).

Andrew Fear’s sensitive and insightful reading of the poetry of Eugenius of Toledo –the “only substantial collection” (55) of verse from Visigothic times–

thoroughly rehabilitates an author who has not fared well –when treated at all– in English-language bibliography despite the “long-standing popularity and prestige of his poems” (57) within medieval Iberia and beyond. Highlighting the long strand of pessimism and unusually personal voice in this varied *corpus*, Fear demonstrates effectively that “there is much more to Eugenius’s poetry than mere self-pity” (58). Well beyond the verbal gamesmanship which Raby scorned, Fear illuminates Eugenius’s “skilful manipulation of genre and metre” and crafting of “sermons in verse” (60). The poet’s complaints about summer’s ills (*Carm.* 20) yield an ingenious “anti-eclogue” where peace is found only in God (59). Across a variety of poems, Eugenius embraced the *compunctio cordis* as “a powerful preaching technique” (63), making his personal preoccupations with suffering and the fragility of life a vehicle drawing readers to this path to salvation. The fear of death and its inevitability are most apt for this purpose, whether in Eugenius’s autoepitaphs, his verses on mortality and the brevity of life (*Carm.* 2 and 5), or the epitaphs which echoed in funerary inscriptions for centuries. In this context, Fear challenges commonplace readings of the epitaph for King Chindaswinth as an expression of personal –or more widespread– hostility to the monarch and his iron-fisted rule. Speaking from the grave, the king issues a blistering indictment of his own conduct and character, but Fear interprets this self-criticism persuasively as a characteristic form of the bishop’s own *compunctio* and “the ultimate *exemplum* of...*vanitas mundi*” (72), themes that here may be construed as praising the king and admonishing his successor, Recceswinth.

Wendy Davies’ examination of the countergift offers another facet of her studies of the two thousand tenth-century charters from northern Iberia –excluding Catalonia– and the social relations, economic activities and scribal habits they reveal. Only seventy-four of these documents record countergifts, establishing that practice –or records of it– as uncommon. Remarkably diverse, these transactions occupy a murky borderland amidst large sets of documents plainly reporting sales, exchanges or outright gifts in well-established diplomatic. The greatest number of countergifts ensured the permanence of an earlier gift. About a quarter involve especially valuable countergifts, usually from churches to aristocratic donors: their size and context hint at sales or exchanges masked by scribal formulas. Might that also be true of more of the small countergifts –of an animal, for example– which Davies deems of “more symbolic value” (85)? In a world where sales worth pittance were committed to writing, the indeterminate



value of gifts of fractions of estates or uncultivated land might not exceed some of these modest “countergifts”. Classifications are inevitably risky among charters whose character and selective survival have been shaped by scribal choices, local histories and institutional practices obscured by the staggering loss of evidence. Davies admits some hesitation about her categories of countergifts and the boundaries –or scribal choices– separating some from sales and gifts, but she makes a more emphatic distinction between countergifts and sureties –even rarer in these charters– used to guarantee past and future obligations respectively. She is at her best, however, in teasing out the idiosyncrasies of particular cases. She persuasively identifies several motivations for these extra guarantees or their description by scribes as countergifts: close family or spiritual bonds between parties, aristocratic countergifts for royal grants, and the provisions of Visigothic law concerning vendors of questionable character.

If Davies offers tantalizing glimpses of the messy realities behind medieval formulas and modern typologies, Jonathan Jarrett pierces the darkness shrouding the “no man’s land” of the tenth-century Catalan frontier, marshalling material and textual evidence (though, alas, not a map) to “demonstrate that there was room for most forms of community the medievalist can imagine in these zones, and that such communities did exist” (114). Striding into the longstanding debate over continuities or interruptions of settlement in the borderlands of Iberia and the nature of Christian “repopulation”, Jarrett decidedly stands with those who argue for sustained occupation, complex social organization and a nuanced understanding of the repopulation “as an extension of political control” (98). With archaeological evidence or scant notices sifted from charters, he recovers a longer history for churches –and communities able to build and maintain them, though their records of consecration or Romanesque fabrics are no older than the late tenth century. While accepting the estimate of the clerical judges serving the counts at the turn of the millennium as “the best judiciary in Europe”, based on their training and “concern for the upholding of public authority in the form of the Visigothic law” (104), Jarrett uncovers a wider range of judges in frontier communities, from the judge of the Christians in Muslim Lleida who assisted neighboring communities to lay figures whose local authority was wrapped in archaic names and titles. Fortresses and towers furnish evidence of petty lords holding sway before their communities enter the documentation, but Jarrett also posits the existence of “communities . . . that operated communally rather than under a chief or warlord” (111). Each vignette engages the reader, but the

“stranger and older scenarios” (119) which Jarrett brings alive teach a larger lesson of the dangers of allowing well-documented epochs or centers of power to fill the documentary voids with their own narratives and definitions.

Rose Walker concludes the volume with a reflection on how Christians who emigrated from al-Andalus remembered, lamented and imagined their past. Specifically, she examines the illuminated manuscripts in which Beatus’ *Commentary on the Apocalypse* was paired with Jerome’s *Commentary on the Book of Daniel*. Here, she reinterprets the scene of the Siege of Jerusalem as, in fact, illustrating the Lamentations of Jeremiah after the city’s fall with a more purposeful adaptation of the biblical episode than John Williams supposed when he postulated the dependence of the illustrations of the *Commentary on Daniel* on illuminated Bibles. She identifies a “fairly coherent group” (136) from the mid-tenth century Morgan Beatus through the Facundus Beatus made for King Fernando I in 1047, after which there is a disjunction –marked by the absence of the scene in the Gascon Saint-Sever Beatus– and a dissolution of the image in twelfth- and thirteenth-century renderings. Her persuasive reading of these images contributes to discussions of the relevance of Beatus’ *Commentary* to contemporaries and it enriches our understanding of the tenth-century monastic flowering and the culture and aspirations of the Christian immigrants who helped sustain it. Less clear is her effort to compare or relate the sentiments of tenth-century emigrants to those whose exile immediately followed the eighth-century conquest, while the opening suggestion that the paper would be informed by modern studies of art in exile remains unfulfilled.

Together, these articles attest to the ways in which diverse disciplines, approaches and bodies of evidence can illuminate a period on the margins of English-language scholarship. The richness and complexity of the material is a refreshing change from dreary narratives of battles and royal successions, hardened visions of reconquest and repopulation, and the blinding splendor of a nearly mythical Cordoba. And, they are welcome testimony to the increased attention to early medieval Iberia in English-language bibliography, particularly in Great Britain where it is now finding its deserved place in studies of early medieval society, culture and politics.

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