

**Simon Esmonde Cleary, *The Roman West, AD 200-500. An Archaeological Study.*** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xv + 533. 99 B&W figures. ISBN 978 0 521 19649 9 (Hb). US \$120/ £50.

Esmonde Cleary sets out to address his subject through the medium of archaeology, in contrast to most considerations of the later Roman west which have been dominated by attempts to understand the subject by reference to the written sources. The result is a deeper and more nuanced volume that succeeds on virtually all levels.

The study area is Gaul, the Iberian Peninsula and Germania, with Britain being drawn in where it 'provides complements, comparisons or contrasts to the mainland areas of the West'. The volume is well-structured, with the Introduction providing a clear summary of the author's intentions and the academic context. The first chapter further sets the scene by exploring 'the third-century crisis', in terms of the perceived impact of the '*invasions germaniques*' and other military pressures, along with political instability, both of which were recognised in antiquity, coupled with modern scholars' concern with financial and economic issues. What emerges through the volume is a clear understanding that the 'crisis' did not cover the whole of the study area and where it did have an impact its form and results could be very different.

Chapter 2 disaggregates the Western Empire by recognising in the archaeological evidence differing trajectories of change in different areas. In northern Gaul and the Rhineland Esmonde Cleary accepts the likelihood of a military crisis that led to the militarisation of previously civilian areas and a proliferation of new defences on 'urban' sites, as well as the creation of new hilltop fortifications and a decline in villas. These changes contrast starkly with what was happening south of the River Loire and into Spain where fortifications were sparse and many urban centres remained undefended into the fourth century.

Turning to the cities the differences across the study area serve to demonstrate the inadequacies of previous generalising models. Although the importance of Christianity and the power of the Bishops in late Roman cities is well-known, Esmonde Cleary's careful consideration of the variable evidence, demonstrates that, at least in the present state of research, clear differences can be seen between the various regions with, for example, Spain having few intra-mural Episcopal complexes and there being limited evidence of fourth- and fifth-century urban churches in the northern half of Gaul. The brief consideration of 'the traditional religions' provides a rapid survey of evidence for later Roman building works on a number of key temple sites. This is enough to allow Esmonde Cleary to challenge researchers to reassess the established view that in the continental Western Roman Empire most pagan temples were in decline or abandoned in the third and fourth centuries.

The importance of those sites that can be identified as, or suggested to be, imperial or aristocratic residences perhaps cannot be overstated as they provide both evidence of the continuing ability of the elite to command resources for massive building programmes,

as witnessed by the palace complex at Trier, and also to act as foci for economic activity to service them and the broader state apparatus as indicated by the presence of mints and *fabricae* in association with palace sites. They also see continued Imperial investment in public facilities such as baths and circuses. Outside the palace and city the Imperial economic reach is demonstrated by the creation of the walled Langmauer covering 220 km<sup>2</sup> north of Trier and incorporating a number of villas.

Aristocratic villas, such as that at Montréal-Séviac in south-west France attest to the continuing ability of the elite in some areas of the Western Empire to invest massively in display during the fourth century, as was also happening at some villas in Britain, such as Woodchester. In contrast their contemporaries in northern Gaul, away from the immediate hinterlands of key centres such as Trier, had generally abandoned villa-living and where villas did persist they were on a much-reduced scale. Esmonde Cleary also discusses the importance of portable expressions of wealth, status and culture, typified by late Roman silver plate, such as the Missorium of Theodosius from near Mérida in Spain, which again demonstrate the availability to some of significant amounts of surplus resource.

Moving away from the elite the volume considers ‘rural settlement and economy’, recognising the advances, particularly in aerial survey, that have allowed researchers to challenge previous theories of a widespread collapse of the villa economy. That earlier view was based largely on the evidence from northern Gaul, which as noted above is not typical of the whole of the Western Empire. Whilst our knowledge of non-villa settlements is undoubtedly still highly partial, it will, in some areas, allow considerations of variable rates of settlement creation and decline. Esmonde Cleary introduces the reader to these emerging data and, as elsewhere in the volume, demonstrates and discusses regional variability. However that regionality is also shown to exist in a wider context, particularly with reference to what is discussed as ‘super-regional integration; the political economy’. The political economy is defined as those elements that were necessary to service and support the state structure, the army and the cities of Rome and Constantinople, and which were drawn from a very wide catchment.

The volume finishes with two chapters that consider the barbarian invasions of the fifth century and the disintegration of the Western Empire through into the sixth. However, again the picture painted is not one of widespread consistency. In Arles, the seat of the praetorian prefectures of the Gauls from the early fifth century, we are shown a place of ‘simple one- or two-room structures or [buildings] parasitic within larger, earlier structures’; while Marseille is presented as vibrant and expanding, with an associated villa economy. A similarly mixed picture is painted of the Iberian Peninsula and south-western Gaul appears, on the basis of Toulouse, Bordeaux and Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges to demonstrate relative resilience. The evidence from the countryside across the various regions is shown to be similarly variable.

Esmonde Cleary claims AD 200–500 as a definable period, with broad consistencies that unite it internally and distinguish it from what went before or followed. He

concludes that at the end of the fifth century ‘we have reached a ‘threshold of change’ [...] the archaeology of the fifth and sixth centuries has ceased to be explicable in the terms used by Roman archaeologists’ (p. 454).

Criticisms are few. At times the volume is not an easy read, although this reflects the deep scholarship and complex arguments presented. A greater concern is the poor reproduction of some of the photographs which seem somewhat dark and therefore lack clarity. Similarly a number of maps and overall site plans appear over-reduced and others could have benefitted from more labelling to aid the reader unfamiliar with the area or site under consideration.

With respect to a volume of this importance such niggles are minor. Esmonde Cleary’s easy command of his subject provides readers with a marvellous introduction to, in particular, the French, Spanish and Portuguese evidence, much of which will be new to many Anglophone readers. This review has necessarily only touched on a few aspects of his wide-ranging discussion, but there should be no doubt that he has produced a book that should become the standard introduction to what is a fascinating and complex subject.

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