

Book Review

Julián M. Ortega Ortega. *La conquista islámica de la Península Ibérica: Una perspectiva arqueológica*. Serie Arqueología y Patrimonio 14 (Madrid: Ediciones de la Ergástula, 2018), 414 pp, 9 figs. ISBN 978-84-16242-30-6. Price: €28.00 (paper).

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This work offers the first comprehensive archaeological analysis of the Islamic conquest of the Regnum Gothorum/Spain, from the landing of Ṭāriq b. Ziyād in Gibraltar at the westernmost tip of Algeciras Bay in 92/711 to the consolidation of the Iberian Peninsula's conquest around 100/718–19, which eventually brought the Islamic armies to Narbonne, Septimania, Northern Catalonia, and neighboring areas. Julián Ortega takes the Islamic conquest of 92/711 as the watershed moment marking the inception of a new society, a new country, and a new culture—al-Andalus. Understanding this set of changes requires a close reading of settlement patterns and material culture, the main research fields of archaeologists. The meticulous and thorough attention to detail that Ortega invests to provide a clear explanation of this process is one of the main strengths of this book. The reader should

not expect a book infused with textual criticism, warranted or unwarranted, of the Arabic or Latin sources—withstanding the author's knowledge of the postmodern approach to written sources—nor one that tackles the Sisyphean task of collating a cogent and plausible account of the conquest from the available source material—a task that has not yet been accomplished. Rather, Ortega has used the archaeological remains of material culture to detect and understand the Islamic conquest and the distinctive appearance of al-Andalus.

The book begins with an introduction, which is followed by eleven chapters and a conclusion, a bibliography, and analytical indexes. The chapters' titles are quite straightforward and explanatory, even for a readership not used to the history of al-Andalus or the High Middle Ages: chapter 1 (pp. 25–35), “(De)limiting the scope of the sources”; chapter 2

(pp. 37–58), “Prolegomenon”; chapter 3 (pp. 59–87), “The conquest (*al-fath*) without rhetoric: Toward a calibration of military operations”; chapter 4 (pp. 88–108), “The spoils”; chapter 5 (pp. 109–28), “The treasury and coinage”; chapter 6 (pp. 129–60), “The urban imprint of the conquest”; chapter 7 (pp. 161–72), “The territorial arrangement of the occupation”; chapter 8 (pp. 173–222), “Migration and colonization”; chapter 9 (pp. 223–54), “Taking root: Green revolution or agrarian reform?”; chapter 10 (pp. 255–90), “Aristocracies, tribes, and slaves”; and chapter 11 (pp. 291–328), “The people of the conquest: Ethnogenesis and islamization.” The main issues treated in these chapters are discussed below.

The introduction starts with the anonymous *Crónica del 754*, written by a cultured priest whose acquaintance with Byzantine and early Islamic history is extensive and who considered the demise of the Visigothic kingdom an unparalleled tragedy. The dramatic, almost apocalyptic account of the disappearance of the realm and the Islamic conquest found in this highly sophisticated Latin source is followed by the account that prevailed amongst historians of the treatment meted out by the Muslim conquerors—a tale also infused with overtones of catastrophe, upheaval, radical change, destruction, loss of life and property, and the end of times. Ortega manages to show clearly not only how Spanish medieval and Arabist scholarship has dealt with the existence of al-Andalus but also how heavily knowledge of the conquest and the inception of Andalusian society relies on a full and thorough grasp of the changes taking place in what we can label early Islam in

the Middle East, Arabia, and Egypt, and how the issues scholars and archeologists have raised about these changes should be used to develop a balanced and nuanced approach to the High Middle Ages in the Iberian Peninsula. In the closing remarks of the introduction, Ortega acknowledges explicitly that intellectual production, including this very book, must be conceived of as a collective endeavor; this statement allows the author to present the names of the scholars and other people to whom he is indebted for their help and advice.

After his up-to-date and astonishingly rich appraisal of Islamic historiography on the two ends of the Mediterranean, Ortega comes to grips with the nature, availability, and reliability of the written and material sources. Two points inform the author’s approach to both kinds of sources. The first, made by Th. Glick and F. Curta (p. 23), is the capital contribution of medieval archaeology to the knowledge of al-Andalus’s early history—the second/eighth to fifth/eleventh centuries—which is unparalleled in the fields of medieval history and Spanish Arabism. The second is that the recent prominence of archaeology is directly related to the changes taking place in the study of Late Antiquity, the end of the Roman empire, and the successor states, a development that has come to encompass the Umayyad caliphate in the East and that A. Giardina in 1999 labeled the “explosion of Late Antiquity” (p. 24, n. 41). Within this framework, Ortega proceeds to consider the relevant data that can be obtained from different layers of the source material, with particular attention to texts, toponymy, numismatics and, in a more detailed way, archaeological research and fieldwork.

Ortega's approach to original sources shows his expertise with the issues associated with the Arabic sources. These are plentiful but late and beset by contradictions, and their reliability and trustworthiness, both for Islamic history in the Middle East and for the central and eastern Mediterranean, are questionable. Ortega argues that the age in which archaeologists try to illustrate and elucidate source data by means of data from the field has come to an end. Literary and annalistic source scholarship and the archaeological fieldwork of surveys and excavations each follow their own paths, and the search for historical truth should not be guided exclusively by written sources. Nevertheless—and this is a major asset of the book—Ortega never loses sight of the written sources and constantly checks the raw data, even if scarce and inconclusive, yielded by the Latin and Arabic sources against the data provided by excavations, field surveys, and the theoretical field of anthropology.

Toponymy has received a good deal of scholarly attention, as it provides clues about the settlement of Arabic and Berber groups in the countryside after the conquest. Their presence left an imprint in toponyms containing the word *Beni*, analyzed for the first time by Jaime Oliver Asín in 1973 and thoroughly investigated by Pierre Guichard in 1976. Juan Zozaya has studied the imprint of toponyms formed or derived from the Latin or Romance word for “five”—Quintana, Quintos, Quintanilla, Quinto—which had a direct relationship with the fifth (*khums*) of war spoils and landed property that was allotted to the state in the wake of the conquest. And Manuel Ación has researched toponyms related to *qalʿa* (pl. *qilāʿ*; fortress,

stronghold, citadel), such as Calatañazor, Calatayud, Calatrava, and Alcalá la Real, which were conceived as new settlements in the conquered countryside. Ortega also devotes attention to the research of Ramon Martí, who has traced the names of palaces and lighthouses in Catalunya and Septimania. If the attention that Ortega gives to toponymy—a single page (pp. 27–28)—might profitably have been expanded, he is nonetheless truly aware in his work of the issues associated with the data provided by toponyms and advocates for a study of place-names that relies more on geography and fieldwork than on dictionaries and bibliographies (p. 28).

Numismatics has long since left the traditional field of antiquarianism and joined the areas of historical and archaeological research. The production, supply, and circulation of coins and their stratigraphic distribution in excavations and fieldwork are now the mainstays of numismatic research. The problem is that the lifespan of a coin in the High Middle Ages, whether Arabic, Greek, or Latin, stretches beyond the chronological strata in which it may be found; this fact requires a very nuanced approach to the information afforded by excavations. The data provided by archaeological research show that the second/eighth century witnessed the utter decay and even cessation of the elite's ability to exert power. This means that the footprint of the Regnum Gothorum in material culture, architecture, and symbolic expressions of power in this period becomes very weak and rather difficult to identify in the field, a trend that does not change until the Umayyads' arrival in al-Andalus in the second half of the second/eighth century. Ortega argues that powerful states

allow the development of a traditional archaeology, with historicist overtones, well suited for tracing the exercise of power and furnished with index fossils and clear and well-coded pottery typologies. This approach is poorly suited, however, to the age of the Islamic conquests in the Mediterranean basin and the last years of the Regnum Gothorum (p. 31). Besides the problems associated with what may be called the poverty of the material culture of the elite, and despite the advances in ceramics typology and geochronological C¹⁴ dating, there is neither a cohesive chronological framework nor a clear-cut typology for the first half of the second/eighth century. Notwithstanding these challenges, Ortega offers the reader a list of index fossils for a wide range of daily use pottery, tableware, metal tableware, glass, and clothing accessories. He concludes with a remark about the use of radiocarbon dating and the issues associated with it for a period that covers half a century. He notes, wisely, that medieval archaeology is best placed to assess what are the pertinent questions and issues to be addressed, and these should be considered not only by archaeologists but also by scholars working on written sources.

After a detailed appraisal of the nature of the source material, easily readable even by non-archaeologists (a trait that numbers amongst the main strengths of the book), Ortega gives due attention to the context of the Islamic conquest. This brings to the fore his critical explanation of the relationship between the Umayyad caliphate in Damascus, the leadership of the conquest armies, the ideology of *jihād*, and the governance and control of the conquered areas, which can also be seen through the lens of the almost dialectical

relationship between center and periphery. Ortega emphasizes the fluid and changing nature of the administrative arrangements made during the consolidation of Umayyad power in the Middle East. This fluidity went hand in hand with the autonomy enjoyed by the conquerors, who benefited from a wide network of clientship (*walāʾ*) and, in the case of the conquest of the Islamic West, the systematic inclusion of Berbers/Amazigh in the conquering armies of Mūsā b. Nuṣayr. The reader should be aware that the Islamic conquest of the Regnum Gothorum followed administrative reforms ascribed to ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 65-86/685-705) and their consolidation under the aegis of his son and successor al-Walīd b. ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 86-96/705-15). It would therefore be very difficult to ascertain which instructions were followed by the armies of Ṭāriq b. Ziyād and Mūsā b. Nuṣayr, if there was a set of centrally sanctioned conquest practices at all. In fact, even if we acknowledge that the degree of centralization and control exerted by the Umayyads of Damascus remains debated, there does not seem to have been a clear policy to be followed for every eventuality, as indicated by the variegated formulae and legends that appear on the Islamic coinage, whether Latin or Arabic or mixed, minted shortly before and immediately after the conquest of 92/711.

Ortega's next step in narrating the Islamic conquest and the creation of al-Andalus is to outline the military conquest by the armies of Ṭāriq b. Ziyād and Mūsā b. Nuṣayr. The main lines developed are the building of fortified settlements (*amṣār*) and their relationship with the progress of the conquering armies, the use of the standing network of ancient Roman roads, the role of city walls in the defense

of resisting local communities, the remains of violence that have been found, and the development of an archaeological reading of surrender covenants (p. 59). Ortega, whose knowledge of current debates on the Islamic conquest is considerable, concludes that the few data points in the material record pointing conclusively to destruction, loss of life, and war can be explained only in the framework of a very careful and well-conceived strategy that he qualifies with the very contemporary word “surgical.” According to Ortega, violence and the clash of the Islamic armies with the inhabitants of the *Regnum Gothorum* was restricted to selected strategic locations—mostly cities—while the countryside was left to its own devices except for the wealthiest and most protected settlements. In fact, even if the written sources and field surveys point to at least two *amṣār* (one, near Écija, has not yet been located, and the other, located near Huesca, awaits a full excavation campaign), these temporary army camps built to house besieging armies never became true *amṣār*, which are not to be found in either the Maghreb or al-Andalus. The lack of *amṣār* in the latter could be explained by a very fast conquest followed by a comprehensive settlement pattern.

The Islamic conquest fueled itself and maintained its pace, Ortega argues, with substantial amounts of booty and spoils, both human and material. This statement appears contradictory with his earlier claim about the poverty of the material culture of the elite. But members of the *Regnum Gothorum* elite measured their own status and social relevance in the kingdom by the gold and treasure that they were able to store. Accordingly, in addition to the official *thesaurun*

Regnum Gothorum, there were abundant treasures, lay and ecclesiastical, with varying degrees of complexity, richness, and sumptuousness; some have been lost altogether, others have been recovered, and a small handful are seemingly datable to the aftermath of the Islamic conquest because they were found in conditions and contexts that indicate hurried and haphazard efforts to hide them. These treasures have received a great deal of attention in Arabic sources. The Solomon table—the most valued item of the state treasury—and the lead seals of Septimania, mostly from the settlement at Ruscino and other areas, were found during field surveys or rediscovered in museums and on antiquarians’ shelves. They show that the distribution and allotment of booty and spoils was a matter of concern, and accordingly it was regulated from the beginning. Although the inscriptions on the lead seals are sometimes difficult to read and lacking some words, and the locations at which the seals were found are mostly unknown, they show that the booty and the spoils were allotted following a previously established set of fiscal practices. As far as the human booty is concerned, Ortega acknowledges that finding archaeological evidence of slavery is very difficult, but he argues that the brief upsurge in cave settlements, which ended around the third/ninth century and was concentrated in the northern areas of Cantabria, Aragón, Euskadi, and Catalunya, may point to a need for shelters and hideaways for people fleeing the awful prospect of slavery (pp. 97–100). Such escapees would have been part of the human booty of the conquest in the Maghreb, in the Iberian Peninsula, and the Middle East.

The inevitable corollary to a treatment of booty and spoils is a discussion of tributary practices and coinage, the tools par excellence of state building, booty distribution, and wealth accumulation. Ortega takes up these topics and thoroughly discusses the production, use, distribution, and currency of golden coinage (*dīnār*), silver coinage (*dirham*), and copper coinage (*fals*). The distribution patterns of hoards and single coins found and dated to the first half of the second/eighth century show, on the one hand, the geography of the power exerted by the Islamic governors of al-Andalus, reflected in the amount of coinage found in each region, and, on the other, that those governors managed to build an efficient and working fiscal system shortly after the events of 92/711.

Ortega continues with an analysis of the imprint the conquest made on the urban landscape of the country, providing an updated and minute study of housing, household items, mosques, city ramparts, and pottery. The rural landscape, which is not restricted to the hinterland of cities and receives detailed attention, is the theater of hilltop fortified settlements, new fortresses (*qilāʿ*) built in the first years of the conquest, and a network of lighthouses (*fars*) and settlements (*balāṭ*), mostly located in Catalunya and Septimania, whose purpose was to enhance the authority and control of the conquerors over the countryside.

The Islamic conquest involved the arrival of conquering armies and settlers from the Maghreb, Ifrīqiya, Egypt, and the Middle East. Ortega studies their settlement patterns, the areas where they settled, and their relationships with the new landscape and with the Iberian

Peninsula's native people, both Christian and Jewish. There has not been enough field research or excavations to produce a detailed and thorough map of even the settlements that have been identified, and most settlements await discovery. In fact, the existing research on the settlement and distribution patterns of the first wave of settlers, the so-called *baladiyyūn*, who arrived in al-Andalus during and shortly after the conquest, and of the second wave, the so-called *shāmiyyūn*, who arrived with the defeated Syrian army of Balj b. Bishr around 123–124/741–742, allows only a sketch of general features established mainly through a close reading of the available written sources, which offer a consistent and credible account. From the vantage point of material culture, both waves, when they settled in rural areas, left few traces of radical change or of a substantial and distinct material culture. Instead, one finds a novel rearrangement of the late antique settlement tissue, which was clearly disrupted by the disappearance of a sizeable number of settlements and the creation of others.

The next subject Ortega deals with is the ability and resources of the new settlers to adapt and change the landscape to their own ends. Ortega addresses here A. Watson's controversial theory of an "Islamic agricultural revolution" in order to determine whether there really was a such a transformation from an agriculture adapted to a "Mediterranean ecotype" to one suited to a "hydraulic ecotype" and, if there was, how it would have been reflected in material culture (pp. 223–24). According to Watson, this transformation was brought about by the conquerors through a panoply of new techniques, plants, and practices and the allegedly

widespread diffusion of small settlements closely associated with irrigated areas. This is not the place to review this theory and the critical responses that it has occasioned. Suffice it to say that such a “revolution” has often been understood as a direct and lasting result of the Islamic conquest. Ortega holds, however, that there was no green revolution, but the innovations introduced between the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries nevertheless radically altered the Iberian landscape for the remainder of the Middle Ages (p. 253).

The author then turns to the social organization of the newcomers and their relationships with the original Iberian population. This topic prompts a discussion of segmentary lineages/tribes, the vocabulary used to identify them in the Arabic sources (mostly the term *qawm*), the relationships among tribes and lineages and between them and political authorities, and the problem of recognizing segmentary arrangements in material culture and settlement structure, as well as of identifying their influence, or lack thereof, on the original Iberian population.

The book's last chapter is a proposal to use ethnogenesis as a conceptual tool for understanding the full array of changes triggered by the Islamic conquest, the demise of the Regnum Gothorum, and the settlement of Arabs and Berbers in a postimperial and late antique milieu. Ortega also gives full attention here to the meaning and use of the concept of Islamization, its relevance, and the ways it can be assessed in material culture. Settlement structures, the building of mosques over either functioning or deserted churches, the layout of

cemeteries, and the orientation and placement of corpses in graves show that the pace of Islamization reflected in Islamic burials was as fast as it was heterogeneous and early. In fact, Ortega contends that it would not be surprising if future excavations were to uncover mosques in the countryside besides those already found and excavated, especially in places quite far from cities. If so, Bulliet's thesis about the incompleteness and slowness of Islamic conversion in al-Andalus will need a thorough review (pp. 309–10).

To readers well versed in scholarship on al-Andalus, Ortega's concluding remarks may appear a set of truisms, devoid of novelty and imbued with anthropological jargon. Yet this is the kind of judgment that, not so long ago, would have been encountered in book reviews written by classical archaeologists and punctilious armchair scholars about new publications in archaeology. Ortega offers the reader a refreshing and readily verifiable set of assertions about the Islamic conquest: it was well conceived, cohesively arranged, and the expected result of a proven previous strategy. It was not, in other words, the lucky outcome of a single and decisive battle or of some hypothetical factionalism among the *potentes* in the Regnum Gothorum. It entailed a rural and urban colonization by Arab and Berber peoples, who developed a set of agrarian practices but not a colonial regime. Above all, Ortega's book shows that the study of the conquest is in need of renewed and fresh approaches. My recommendation to potential readers of Ortega's book will thus come as no surprise: the book must be read with the care and attention due to true scholarship and to long-term, careful, detailed, and difficult research, usually

done neither in the best of institutional frameworks nor with the required funding.

At the end of the book, Ortega provides an analytical index of persons and place-names, a very welcome and rather unusual addition that enables readers to look for and trace the settlements and the people, whether historians, archaeologists, or historical actors, mentioned in the body of the text. In addition, the book contains ninety-five figures, maps, and graphs, clear proof of Ortega's exhaustive knowledge of the difficult and costly archaeological research done in the field. I do not understand why this book has not been published also in PDF, EPUB, or another digital format, a step that has been taken by other publishing houses. The paperback with jacket format, the typeface, and the quality of the images is not as good as one would have expected, and these

shortcomings would have been averted in a digital edition. I strongly recommend, therefore, that the book receive a new edition that takes into account the archaeological expeditions, field surveys, and rescue excavations undertaken between 2018 and 2021. The new edition should also correct the unexpected error of the claim that the seven-branched candelabra (menorah) and Solomon's table can be seen in Trajan's column (p. 88); in fact their location is the Arch of Titus. Some spelling and agreement mistakes and some inadequate references that lack page numbers could also be corrected in the new edition that this book deserves. Overall, Ortega's work is an outstanding masterpiece that must be read by everyone concerned with an accurate understanding of the Islamic conquest of the Iberian Peninsula.