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## REVIEWS

Simon Barton, *The Aristocracy in Twelfth-Century León and Castile*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 366 pp.

In this impressive book, Simon Barton examines an extremely wealthy, powerful elite whose role in society was essential, diverse, and not entirely unique in the Western medieval context. Narrative sources of the period are few and devote little attention to the nobility, with the exception of the *Historia Compostellana* and the *Chronica Adefonsi Imperatoris*. Thus, Barton relies mainly on contemporary charters, which themselves are skimpy; throughout the book, careful source criticism, coupled with liberal readings “between the lines,” permits a lively discussion of aristocratic lives and even *mentalité*. Barton is further aided in his methodology by reflection on northern European history and historiography, lending perspective on developments in León and Castile and enriching our understanding of the north as well. For this reason, this study will be of interest to scholars whose special purview is not solely medieval Iberia.

A brief history of the realms of León and Castile in the twelfth century contextualizes Barton’s study of noble power. Participation in a “society organized for war” was key for the fortunes of the aristocracy. By the twelfth century, this “small group of interrelated families...enjoyed a spectacular increase in its wealth, authority and prestige.” (p. 29) The most elite achieved comital rank, which became heritable but never entailed the independent juridical privilege it did elsewhere in Western Europe. Other magnates, without titles, held equal wealth and power; yet others were knights bound to more powerful men by ties of vassalage. The most humble group was the *caballeros villanos*, whose role as a “quasi-noble military class” was shaped by the demands of plains warfare. (p. 35) Military service, intermarriage, and royal favor enabled social mobility in this relatively open society.

Bilateral kinship relations directly affected landholding and inheritance patterns. Women transmitted property, and theoretically received equal shares of any inheritance, which then were held in common with their co-heirs’ shares rather than being partitioned. Whereas in northern Europe rigidly agnatic lineages emerged, imbued with a highly masculine consciousness of family, in Castile and León widespread male primogeniture did not become common until the late fourteenth century. Barton suggests that a demanding monarchy prevented magnates from developing familial residences, and that abundance of land eased the pressures that formulated such patrilineal identification in the north. Honorific titles and administrative offices, however, were offered exclusively to men; and the use of surnames, heraldic devices, and especially family pantheons all signaled a shift in the development of “the bonds of collective family consciousness” in this period. (p. 45)

In initially acknowledging his study’s limitations (chronological, for example), Barton admits “regret that the activities of aristocratic women receive such limited attention...this is to be attributed...to the fact that with the exception of their numerous acts of piety, their lives remain almost a closed book to us.” (pp. 6–7) Aristocratic women, however, fairly leap off the pages of Barton’s book and play a large role in the charters he appends. It is not absence, but lack of analysis and uncertainty over the practice of women’s history, that presents the difficulty.

Following Barton's own example by coupling this information with parallels elsewhere in Europe, we can ascertain that, their acknowledged piety aside, noble women often were self-interested, litigating over property, working with husbands (who nearly always included wives in their charters), siblings, or children. Marriage, an "important tool of dynastic ambition," carried with it economic, moral, biological, and political imperatives, as Barton himself recognizes. Although some women had dowries, the custom of *arras*, or marriage endowment, remained strong in Castile and León during this time. (p. 56) Women also were significant as mothers. Rather than losing women behind a veil of domesticity and privacy, Barton and others should seek to understand maternity, as well, as a significant aspect, certainly a public one, of these women's lives.

Barton shows how a far-flung patrimony might be derived from both inheritance and *gananciales*—properties obtained by a married couple. Sources are, predictably, scattered but show that the Leonese, Castilian, and Galician aristocracy actively participated in land markets. (p. 73) Generally, nobles pursued a conscious economic strategy, accumulating possessions gradually and through a variety of ways, depending on their status at court and power as local lords. (pp. 77–80) While the true index of wealth and power remained rural holdings and activities, this period witnessed an upsurge in commercial activity and the acquisition of urban property, as well as the availability and use of cash. (pp. 83–84) Nobles spent their money on property, religious patronage, maintenance of their households and entourages, and conspicuous display. Peripatetic noble households were modeled on the royal household, with the greatest maintaining household officers and sometimes a chancery. Visigothic-script autographs suggest some noble literacy. Noble entertainment came, however, mostly from performance: troubadours, bullfighting, hunting, and riding.

Barton succinctly surveys the "feudal debate," both generally and in specific reference to medieval Iberia, neither embracing fully nor rejecting definitively the so-called "construct" of feudalism. His acceptance of the medieval terminology indicates, however, the premise that an identifiable form of feudalism did indeed exist in this time and place. Thus, hispanists wedded to the concept of Iberian "difference" may find his analysis problematic. Barton's analysis of lord-vassal relations considers both noble and peasant vassals. Noble vassals included men influential in their own right, but also men of humbler means, for whom vassalage was a major source of income. Furthermore, Barton analyzes fifteen complete aristocratic *fueros* governing peasant-lord relations surviving from twelfth-century León and Castile, (Table 3.2) to find it a period during which peasant commendation increased and burdens imposed on peasants were considered less onerous than in the past.

The lord-vassal bond was distilled in the essential relationship between the nobility and the crown. (p. 107) Barton uses the itinerary of the court and household of Alfonso VII in 1146 as a case study of normative noble-royal relations. Using court chancery records and chronicles, Barton distinguishes between the curia (the public formal gathering of notables) and the royal household, which was private. Witness lists reveal the fluctuations of curial membership, and Barton finds a direct correlation amongst attendance, noble power, and influence in the king's household. The role of the nobles at the king's court was "largely consultative," but "actively so," especially as they lobbied for grants or privileges for themselves or others. The curia was important judicially

and ceremonially, called to lend grandeur to, and emphasize the prestige and power of, the king. Barton tries to get at the elusive quality of Iberian kingship in its ritual and sacramental dimensions, in this case in the context of the king's relationship to the nobility.

The military function of the nobility indeed would seem to have been the most essential aspect of male noble identity, their very *raison d'être*. Self-conception and training aside, nobles were motivated to participate in military adventure for the potentially enormous material rewards, as well as by ideological or religious reasons. Using Alfonso VII's itinerary again, Barton concludes that "participation in war for many magnates was as much a regular duty for them as was attendance at court." (p. 181)

In discussing the relationship of nobility and crown, Barton distinguishes between the nobility and the clergy, which is a historiographically strong distinction. In his final chapter, given the now ubiquitous title of "Piety and Patronage," however, his examination of the close relationship between these two social orders prompts the question whether this is a false dichotomy. In the early twelfth century, the deeply rooted tradition of proprietary churches was still strong. Over time, however, as the result of clerical opposition, papal reform, and episcopal pressure, the Castilian and Leonese nobility relaxed their fierce hold on ecclesiastical property. Complete restitution was not achieved; likely nobles retained interests in the form of part-shares.

As the monarchy became more involved in the appointment of bishops, and as the reconquest progressed, bishops achieved their own territories directly, without noble patronage, changing their dependent status. The great magnates apparently were not interested in entering the church because the church was increasingly less willing to tolerate lay interference, and impoverished bishoprics could not compare with the great material rewards of secular life. Some bishops came from the lesser nobility; others were foreigners. The origins of abbots are even more obscure; however, "abbesses of great nunneries continued to be of the very highest rank." (p. 192) Barton does not explain the continued attractiveness of religious life for elite women, but other scholars have done so, and his discussion might have been strengthened by reference to them.

Monastic patronage, on the other hand, brought spiritual and social "dividends" for those who could afford it. Barton suggests that the popularity of the Cistercians and Premonstratensians derived mainly from patrons' belief that these austere orders were more effective in their roles as spiritual mediators. Phrases such as "Just as water extinguishes fire, so alms extinguish sin" (p. 206) were not merely formulaic, according to Barton, but indicate noble donors' states of mind. Patrons' insistence on their right to be involved in the future of their foundations, however, posed a persistent problem. This often included the important right to retire to the cloister and burial rights there as well. Barton does not note Cistercian proscriptions against lay burial, which were, of course, roundly ignored; rather, he sees the development of family pantheons as a lucrative opportunity for religious institutions. The question of noble artistic and literary patronage might be reopened, I suggest, in conjunction with examinations of religious patronage, especially in regard to such family pantheons. Thus, the twelfth century was a "watershed" in church-noble relations; lay interference was waning, while continued involvement prevented a complete separation—which, Barton implies, would have been neither desirable nor practicable. (p. 220)

In his brief conclusion, Barton returns to the problem of sources. Reading between the lines, however, shows that Visigothic custom, characterized here by inheritance shared amongst all heirs, male and female, began to be overshadowed by male lineage. (p. 222) Furthermore, Barton identifies a growing exchange economy affecting noble exploitation of labor and land, increasing warfare, a changing relationship between church and aristocracy, and a generally less “provincial” world view. (p. 223) The pace of change would only increase in the thirteenth century, when noble power was unleashed in full force during the rebellions against Alfonso X.

Finally, Barton has compiled several very useful appendices. The first is an annotated list of the forty-eight known magnates who held comital rank in twelfth-century León and Castile. Appendix Two carries selected genealogical tables, and Appendix Three contains twenty charters used in the study. Sixteen are previously unpublished, and they document, among other things, *arras*, commendation, dispute settlement, and religious patronage.

No book can please all people; this one was truly an excellent, well researched, well written, and interesting study. The footnotes and bibliography alone form a gold mine; and the maps, tables, and especially the appendices will serve scholars well. Thus, some readers may find my above criticisms mere quibbling. As Barton himself suggests, however, the study and analysis of aristocratic women remains a desideratum, not only for the sake of the very interesting women themselves, but also to form a clearer picture of the aristocratic society as a whole.

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