

SENATORS OR CURIALS? SOME DEBATABLE *NOBILES* IN LATE ANTIQUE HISPANIA

¿Senadores o curiales? Algunos *nobiles* discutibles en la Hispania tardoantigua

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RESUMEN:

Las fuentes escritas sobre la Antigüedad tardía hacen frecuentes menciones de miembros de la élite hispana, sin aclarar si se tratan de senadores o de curiales. Estudios anteriores han sacado diversas conclusiones sobre el estatus de estos individuos. El presente estudio examina de nuevo varios ejemplos de notables hispanos, discutiendo su estatus probable.

PALABRAS CLAVE: curiales, élite, Hispania romana, magistrados, senadores.

ABSTRACT:

Written sources for Late Antiquity frequently mention members of the Hispanic élite, without specifying whether these are senators or curials. Previous studies have reached divergent conclusions about the status of these individuals. This article reexamines several examples of Hispanic notables and discusses their probable status.

KEY WORDS: curials, elite, magistrates, Roman Spain, senators.

Sources for the period following the barbarian invasions of A.D. 409 refer repeatedly to *senatores*, *nobiles* and the like, even though Hispania was no longer under Roman rule. Scholars have been divided into two camps on this issue: those who think these men are local curials, and those who think they are descendants of Roman senators¹. A third option is offered by Thompson, who thinks the term *senator* “probably meant no more than a very rich landowner”². Indeed, there is abundant archaeological evidence for the existence of wealthy *possessores* in Late Roman Hispania, in the form of luxurious rural villas, and we even know some of their names: Basilius at Torre de Palma (Portugal), Cardilius at Torres Novas (Portugal), Vitalis at Tossal del Mar (Girona), Dulcitus at El Ramalete (Navarra) and Maternus at Carranque (Toledo)³. We also have

¹ On the history of this debate, see K. Stroheker, “Spanische Senatoren der spätrömischen und westgotischen Zeit”, *MM* 4, 1963, 125-126. Cf. the use of the term *nobiles* to refer to local magnates in Republican Italy (Cic., *Cluent.* 8,23 and 39,109; Sall., *Cat.* 17,4). In medieval usage, *nobilis* “had no precise meaning and simply indicated... a certain distinction of birth, but it also implied a measure of wealth”: M. Bloch, *Feudal society*, London, 1962, 286.

² E.A. Thompson, *The Goths in Spain*, Oxford, 1969, 116.

³ J.M. Blázquez, “Las élites de la Hispania romana en el Bajo Imperio”, *Antiquitas* 22, 1997, 15-16 = idem, *España romana*, Madrid, 1996, 405-406; J. Arce, *Bárbaros y romanos*, 2nd ed., Madrid, 2007, 238 and note 113 (dismissing the hypothesis that the owner of the Carranque villa

surviving portraits of the *possessores* of late villas such as La Olmeda (Palencia), Olivar del Centeno (Cáceres) and Baños de Valdearados (Burgos)⁴. However, it has not been possible to determine whether these rich villa owners are senators, imperial administrators, or local curials. Similarly, while we can appreciate the lifestyle and aesthetic taste of the Late Roman élite from the decoration of their townhouses (*domus*) and private baths, we cannot identify the precise status of the owners⁵.

Certainly there were genuine Roman senators in Hispania prior to 409. However, of the spate of *Hispani* admitted to the Senate under Theodosius, the last one we hear of is Basilius (*praefectus urbi* in 395) who in 408 undertook an embassy to Alaric⁶. As Matthews points out, it is probable that as a result of the invasions, senators from the western provinces either lost their wealth and no longer qualified for the Senate, or returned home to protect their property⁷. In any event, residents of Visigothic Hispania could no longer become Roman senators except by emigrating⁸. However, the elasticity of the terms *senatores* and *nobiles* leaves ambiguity as to whether persons bearing these designations are descendants of old senatorial families, or local curials⁹. An examination of specific cases may clarify the status of some of these nobles.

There is little problem with the brothers Didymus, Verinianus, Lagodius and Theodosiolus, *iuvenes nobiles* and relatives of the emperor Honorius, the first two of whom raised a private army in 408 to oppose the pretender Constan-

is the famous senator Cynegius Maternus). On the problem of identifying the villa owners, see A. Chavarría Arnau, "Villas in Hispania during the fourth and fifth centuries", in K. Bowes and M. Kulikowski (eds.), *Hispania in Late Antiquity*, Leiden and Boston, 2005, 539-543.

⁴ Blázquez, "Las élites", 16-17 = *España romana*, 408; J. Arce, "Iconografía de las élites de Hispania en la Antigüedad tardía", in Y. Perrin and Th. Petit (eds.), *Iconographie impériale, iconographie royale, iconographie des élites dans le monde greco-romain*, St-Etienne, 2004, 265-278.

⁵ J.M. Álvarez Martínez, "Aspectos de las élites emeritenses en el Bajo Imperio a través de los programas iconográficos", *Anas* 19-20, 2006-07, 13-30; V. García-Entero, "La élite hispanorromana en la Antigüedad tardía a través de las transformaciones en los espacios domésticos: Las termas", in P. Fernández Uriel (ed.), *Momentos y espacios de cambio: La sociedad hispanorromana en la Antigüedad tardía*, Zaragoza, 2010, 59-74.

⁶ Zosimus 5,40,2-4, cf. *PLRE* I, 149. Cf. A. Chastagnol, "Les espagnols dans l'aristocratie gouvernementale à l'époque de Théodose", in *Les empereurs romains d'Espagne*, Paris, 1965, 269-292; J. Vilella Masana, "El *ordo senatorius* en la Hispania de Teodosio", in R. Teja and C. Pérez, *La Hispania de Teodosio*, Salamanca, 1997, 293-306.

⁷ J. Matthews, *Western aristocracies and imperial court A.D. 364-425*, Oxford, 1975, 360.

⁸ E.g. Flavius Merobaudes, a native of Baetica (Sidon., *Carm.* 9,297) of noble ancestry (*natu nobilis*: Hydat., *Chron.* 120). Moving to Ravenna, he seems to have been adlected into the Senate ca. 432, and became *magister militum* in Hispania in 443. See *PLRE* II, 756-758; F.J. García de Castro, "Prosopographia Diocesis Hispaniarum: De la Tetrarquía al Reino visigodo de Toledo", *Hisp. Ant.* 21, 1997, 455.

⁹ Cf. P. Díaz, *El reino suevo (411-585)*, Madrid, 2011, 185: "El término *nobiles* incluía a mediados del siglo V un abanico bastante amplio de estatus, desde la auténtica aristocracia senatorial al decurión de una pequeña ciudad de provincias".

tine III. They were captured and eventually executed, while the other two brothers fled eastward¹⁰. These were presumably either junior senators, or sons of senators, perhaps originally from Theodosius' hometown of *Cauca* (Coca). More enigmatic is the *vir honoratus* Aventinus, who died at *Tarraco* in 459¹¹. Since the east coast was still in Roman hands until after 476, he could be a Roman senator or a military commander, but he could also be a local magistrate or curial.

A spate of local leaders appear in the 460s. In 460, the Suevi put to death some of the citizens of *Lucus*, including its top official (*rectore suo*), a man of noble birth (*honesto natu*). This *rector* was identified by Reinhart as the senior administrator of the *conventus Lucensis*; by Torres Rodríguez as the tribune of the *cohors Lucensis*; by Thompson as the provincial governor of Gallaecia. But Arce is surely right to see him as the *defensor civitatis* of *Lucus*¹². Later that year, the informers (*delatores*) Dictynius, Spinio and Ascanius betrayed the Goths, causing their army to withdraw from *Lucus*, and helped the Suevi capture *Aquae Flaviae* (Chaves) and its bishop Hydatius. They may be members of the local élite¹³. In 463, the Gothic leader Cyrila came as an envoy to the Suevi, accompanied by Palagorius, *vir nobilis Gallaeciae*, who had previously gone to see the Gothic king Theoderic II. Palagorius, whose name is indigenous, has been classified as a local aristocrat, but whether a curial, and of which city, is unknown¹⁴. Pope Hilarus stated in a letter to the bishops of Tarraconensis in 465 that he had received letters in support of bishop Silvanus from the *honorati* and *possessores* of seven towns in the Ebro Valley: *Turiaso* (Tarazona), *Cascantum* (Cascante), *Calagurris* (Calahorra), *Vareia* (Logroño), *Tritium* (Tricio),

¹⁰ Oros. 7,40; Zosimus 6,4; Sozomen 9,12,1.

¹¹ J. Vives (ed.), *Inscripciones cristianas de la España romana y visigoda*, Barcelona, 1969 (henceforth *ICERV*) 192 = G. Alföldy, *Die römischen Inschriften von Tarraco*, Berlin, 1975, 946; *PLRE* II, 185.

¹² Hydat. 194; W. Reinhart, *Historia general del reino hispánico de los suevos*, Madrid, 1952, 49 note 34; C. Torres Rodríguez, "Un rector de la ciudad de Lugo en el siglo V", *Cuadernos de Estudios Gallegos* 12, 1959, 158-166; E.A. Thompson, *Romans and barbarians: The decline of the western Empire*. Madison, 1982, 169; Arce, *Bárbaros y romanos*, 252. So also P.C. Díaz Martínez, "La Hispania visigoda", in P.C. Díaz Martínez, C. Martínez Maza and F.J. Sanz Huesma, *Hispania tardoantigua y visigoda*, Madrid, 2007, pp. 293-294, though suggesting that the power of this local *defensor* may have reached a regional level.

¹³ Hydat. 196. Cf. *PLRE* II, 158 ("perhaps local Roman notables"); Kulikowski, M.: *Late Roman Spain and its cities*, Baltimore and London, 2004, 199 ("presumably prominent citizens of Lugo"); Arce, *Bárbaros y romanos*, 195 ("líderes romanos locales").

¹⁴ Hydat. 215. Matthews, *Western aristocracies*, 332 includes him among "members of local aristocracies". The name appears to come from Indo-European **agh-* "ox" plus **pel-* "pale" or **pel-* "skin, hide" (J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Bern, 1959, 803-804); therefore either "pale ox" or "ox-hide".

Libia (Herramélluri) and *Virovesca* (Briviesca)¹⁵. These *honorati et possessores* are undoubtedly members of the local élite, rather than Roman senators. The same year, at *Conimbriga*, the Suevi robbed and captured, presumably for ransom, the *familia nobilis* of a certain Cantaber. Stroheker assumed his family was of senatorial descent; but *nobilis* can simply mean a member of the curial class, and Alarcão is probably correct in seeing him as a local *principalis*¹⁶. In 468, *Olisipo* was betrayed to the Suevi by Lusidius, *cive suo et qui illic praeerat*, who subsequently served as a Suevic envoy to the emperor Anthemius. Lusidius has been variously interpreted as a “westgotischer(?) Befehlhaber” (Stroheker), “commandant” (Tranoy), “governador visigótico” (Alarcão) or “political boss” (Thompson); but Arce is probably correct to see him as the *defensor civitatis*¹⁷.

An epistle of Pope Felix III in 483 commended to bishop Zeno of *Emerita* in 483 the *vir clarissimus* Terentianus, who had come to Italy some time previously and spoken in praise of Zeno, who we know repaired the walls and bridge of *Emerita* the same year in synergy with the Visigothic count Salla¹⁸. Because he was knowledgeable about Zeno and was bringing him the Pope’s letter, Stroheker assumes that Terentianus came from *Emerita*¹⁹; but if so, why would he need a letter of introduction to his own bishop? It may be preferable to see Terentianus as a native of another Lusitanian city, who knew Zeno by reputation but had never met him; the Pope’s letter notes that Terentianus is returning *ad provinciam*, not *domum* or *ad patriam*. As for his status as *vir clarissimus*, it is not impossible that Terentianus, like Flavius Merobaudes a generation earlier, was an Hispanic *émigré* admitted to the Senate by one of the last Roman emperors or even by Odoacer. However, since Lusitania had been in barbarian

¹⁵ “honoratorum et possessorum Turiassonensium, Cascantensium, Calagurritanorum, Varen-gensium, Tritiensium, Leviensium et Veroviscensium... litteras”: Hilar., *Ep.* 16, in A. Thiel (ed.), *Epistolae Romanorum pontificum genuinae*, vol. 1, Braunsberg, 1867, 165-166.

¹⁶ Hydat. 225; Stroheker, “Spanische Senatoren”, 124, cf. *PLRE* II, 258-259 (“perhaps of senatorial descent”); J. de Alarcão, *Portugal romano*, Lisboa, 1974, 63 (“um dos principais da cidade”). Cantaber was also the name of a bishop of *Conimbriga* who attended the Council of Mérida in 666, though we need not agree with Diaz Martínez, “La Hispania visigoda”, p. 325 that this second Cantaber demonstrates the continuity of an aristocratic family. Pieces of late Hispanic *terra sigillata* excavated at the town bear the stamp “Cantabri”: M. Delgado, F. Mayet and A.M. de Alarcão, *Fouilles de Conimbriga*, IV, Paris, 1975, 205.

¹⁷ Hydat. 240 and 245; Stroheker, “Spanische Senatoren”, 124; A. Tranoy, *Hydace*, vol. 2, Paris, 1974, 126; Alarcão, *Portugal romano*, 63; Thompson, *Romans and barbarians*, 211, cf. 299 note 61; Arce, *Bárbaros y romanos*, 232. On the *defensor civitatis* as the highest authority in the city in the fifth century, see A.H.M. Jones, *The Greek city*, Oxford, 1940, 208; J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. XIV, Cambridge, 2001, 234. The name Lusidius is not Gothic but probably indigenous, cf. a Lusidius at Almoester, Lérida (*CIL* II, 310) and various other *Lus-* names in the Peninsula (Luso, Lusitanus, etc.).

¹⁸ “vir clarissimus Terentianus ad Italiam dudum veniens dilectionis tuae singularis exstitit praedicator”: Felix III, *Ep.* 5 (in Thiel, *Epistolae*, 242); *PLRE* II, 1058; Vives, *ICERV* 363.

¹⁹ “aus dieser Stadt [*Emerita*] stammende vir clarissimus Terentianus”: Stroheker, “Spanische Senatoren”, 124.

hands for over half a century, Terentianus is less likely to be a genuine senator than a descendant of an Hispano-Roman senatorial family. A similar interpretation would also explain the existence of three sixth-century *clarissimae feminae* in Baetica²⁰.

According to the *Chronicle of Zaragoza*, a series of marginalia found in some manuscripts of Victor of Tunnunna, a certain Burdunelus set himself up as tyrant in Hispania in 496, but was betrayed by his own men the next year and burned to death. And after capturing *Dertosa* (Tortosa) in 506, the Goths executed another tyrant, Petrus by name, and sent his head to *Caesaraugusta*. The status and background of these rebels is unknown, but they may be members of local élites²¹.

Probably to the period 530-550 belongs the story of the bishop Paul of *Emerita*, who inherited a fortune for performing a successful surgical operation on the wife of a nobleman of senatorial family. More surprising is the statement that none of the Lusitanian senators was richer than this couple. Who were these Lusitanian senators? The explanation is found in the description of the husband as a *primarius* of the city²². *Primarius* is another word for *principalis*, or a senior civic magistrate. Therefore the “senators” are local curials.

A host of regional notables during the period 550-573 appear in Braulio’s biography of Saint Emilian (known in Spain as San Millán). One of these is the *curialis* Maximus, whose daughter was exorcized by the saint. He is presumably a councillor in some town of Cantabria or the Rioja²³. Braulio also refers to the *senatores* Sicorius, Nepotianus, Honorius and Abundantius, with whom Emilian interacted in various ways²⁴. The first of these has an indigenous name, related to the river-name *Sicoris* (Segre) which is of Indo-European origin²⁵. Several scholars have interpreted the designation *senatores* to mean the proprietors of large landed estates, descended either from Roman senators or from the old

²⁰ Vives, *ICERV* 110, 111, 131. It is not certain that (A)emilianus in *ICERV* 145 is *vir clarissimus*, as assumed by García Castro, “Prosopographia”, 463.

²¹ *Chron. Zarag.*, in Th. Mommsen (ed.), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi* XI, Berlin, 1894, 222. Cf. Arce, *Bárbaros y romanos*, 195 (“se puede tratar de líderes aristócratas locales”); R. Collins, *Visigothic Spain, 409-711*, Oxford, 2004, 35-36.

²² “cuiusdam primarii civitatis ex genere senatorum nobilissimi viri... nullus senatorum in provincia Lusitania illis reperiretur locupletior”: *Vitas patrum Emeritensium*, ed. A. Maya Sánchez, Turnhout, 1992, IV,2. On this source see J. Arce, “The city of Mérida in the *Vitas Patrum Emeritensium* (s. VI AD)”, in E. Chrysos and I. Wood (eds.), *East and West: Modes of communication*, London, 1999, 1-15. On *primarii* see *CTh.* XII,1,39.

²³ Braulio, *Vita Aemil.*, 16 (23).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 11 (18), 15 (22), 17 (24), 22 (29), 26 (33).

²⁵ L.A. Curchin, “Place-names of the Ebro valley: Their linguistic origins”, *Palaeohispanica* 8, 2008, 15.

indigenous aristocracy²⁶. However, Braulio also mentions a *senatus*, to whose members Emilian predicted the downfall of Cantabria at the hands of the Visigothic king Liuvigild²⁷. Some have assumed that this “senate” is the city council of *Amaia* (Peña Amaya) in the upper Pisuerga valley, which happens to be the only town mentioned by Braulio²⁸. For others, the Cantabrian *senatus* would be an autonomous regional government, extinguished in 574 when Liuvigild overran Cantabria²⁹. An argument in favour of this interpretation is that Maximus is described as *curialis* (a member of a town council) but the others as *senatores* (presumably members of a higher-status body). The *senatores* named by Braulio should be interpreted as members of this senate.

Two other prominent locals come to light in connection with Liuvigild’s territorial expansion. One is Framidaneus, who betrayed the city of *Asidona* (Medina Sidonia) to the Visigoths in 571. His name is Gothic, from **fram-* “able, fit, brave” and **dan-* “Dane”; therefore, “brave Dane”³⁰. The status of Framidaneus is unknown, except that he was of sufficient importance to be named. Therefore he could be a local magistrate, like Lusidius of *Olisipo* who betrayed his city to the Suevi in 468. His loyalty was obviously not to the city, but to his Gothic compatriots. The other named individual is Aspidius, a leading citizen (*loci senior*) in the mountains of Orense (*Aregenses montes*) who was captured by Liuvigild in 575³¹. Aspidius is a name of uncertain derivation, though possibly from Gothic **asp-* “aspen”³². Various opinions have been offered concerning the status of Aspidius: he is seen by Keay and Díaz as a large landowner, and by Collins as “the ruler of the region”. More circumspectly, Balil regards his inclusion in the list of Hispanic senators as “insegura”³³. The meaning of *loci senior* can be elucidated with evidence from other western provinces. Councils of elders (*seniores*) are frequently encountered in Africa,

²⁶ A. Barbero and M. Vigil, “La organización social de los cántabros y sus transformaciones en relación con los orígenes de la Reconquista”, *Hisp. Ant.* 1, 1971, 229; García de Castro, “Prosopografía”, 472-480.

²⁷ Braulio, *Vita Aemil.*, 26 (33).

²⁸ J. Herrin, *The formation of Christendom*, Princeton, 1989, 224; Kulikowski, *Late Roman Spain*, 306. *Amaia* was captured by Liuvigild in 584: Johannes Biclaensis, *Chronica*, ed. K.B. Wolf, *Conquerors and chroniclers of early medieval Spain*, Liverpool, 1990, chap. 32.

²⁹ A. Barbero de Aguilera and M. Vigil Pascual, *Sobre los orígenes sociales de la Reconquista*, Barcelona, 1974, 54; R. Collins, “Mérida and Toledo: 550-585”, in E. James (ed.), *Visigothic Spain: New approaches*, Oxford, 1980, 190.

³⁰ Joh. Bicl., ed. Wolf, 17; J.M. Piel and D. Kremer, *Hispano-gotisches Namenbuch*, Heidelberg, 1976, 111-112 and 131-132.

³¹ Joh. Bicl., ed. Wolf, 36.

³² Piel and Kremer, *Namenbuch*, 85. Cf. an Aspidia at *Toletum* in the late fifth century (Vives, *ICERV* 68).

³³ A. Balil, “Aspectos sociales del Bajo Imperio (s. IV – s. VI): Los senadores hispánicos”, *Latomus* 24, 1965, 890 note 13; S. Keay, *Roman Spain*, London, 1988, 215; Díaz Martínez, “La Hispania visigoda”, p. 360; Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, 54.

not only in villages and *castella* but also in the Roman colony of *Cirta*³⁴. The acts of the first Carthage conference of 411 refer to the *seniores locorum*, who were urged to enforce the ban on Donatist activity³⁵. Gregory of Tours mentions *seniores loci* in Gaul, who “clearly represent the actual leaders of the town, powerful individuals who together form some kind of executive”³⁶. *Seniores* therefore appear to be equivalent to *principales*. The *seniores* of the *Aregenses montes*, like the *senatus* of Cantabria, may be a type of regional government that was suppressed by the Visigoths.

The kingdom of Liuvigild brings to an end all mentions of individual senators and curials. Descent from Roman senatorial families appears to have been forgotten, and local senates are not heard of again. Although curials are still mentioned in the *Formulae Visigothicae* compiled under Sisebut (612-621) and in a law of Chindasuith (642-653)³⁷, they had ceased to play a prominent role in civic administration, their activity being restricted to the certification of *gesta publica*. City government was henceforth invested in a *comes civitatis* appointed by the Visigothic king.

³⁴ *CIL* VIII, 1615-16 = 15721-22, 2714 = 18118, 8379 = 20216, 8836 = 20648, 15666-67, 15669, 17327, 27828. *Seniores Cirtensium* appear in the *Gesta apud Zenophilum* = appendix 1 to *S. Optati Milevitani libri VII*, ed. K. Ziwsa (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, vol. 26), Prague, Vienna and Leipzig, 1893, 189.

³⁵ *Gesta primae cognitionis Carthaginensis*, in J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 11, Paris, 1845, col. 1262B (“seniores singulorum locorum”) and 1419A (“seniores omnium locorum”). Cf. W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, Oxford, 1971, 288.

³⁶ Greg. Tur., *Hist. Franc.*, 8,31; J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Decline and fall of the Roman city*, Oxford, 2001, 132.

³⁷ K. Zeumer, (ed.): *Formulae Merovingici et Karolini aevi*, Hanover, 1886, 585-587, formulae 21 and 25; *Lex Visig.*, 5,4,19, in Idem (ed.), *Monumenta Germaniae Antiqua: Leges* I,1, Hanover and Leipzig, 1902, 224-225.