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), Dulcitius 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.
surviving portraits of the *possessores* of late villas such as La Olmeda (Pallencia), 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 owners\(^5\).

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 Alaric\(^6\). 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 property\(^7\). In any event, residents of Visigothic Hispania could no longer become Roman senators except by emigrating\(^8\). 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 curials\(^9\). 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 Constant-

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\(^8\) E.g. Flavius Merobaudes, a native of Baetica (Sidon., *Carm.* 9,297) of noble ancestry (*nativus 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 Hispaniariam: De la Tetrarquia al Reino visigodo de Toledo”, *Hisp. Ant.* 21, 1997, 455.

tine III. They were captured and eventually executed, while the other two brothers fled eastward. 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 459. 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. 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 élite. 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 unknown. 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),

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

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Libia (Herramélluri) and Virovesca (Briviesca)\textsuperscript{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\textsuperscript{16}. In 468, Olisipo was betrayed to the Suevi by Lusidius, cive suo et qui illic praerat, who subsequently served as a Suevic envoy to the emperor Anthemius. Lusidius has been variously interpreted as a “westgotischer(?) Befehlhaber” (Stroheker), “commandant” (Tranoy), “governor visigótico” (Alarcão) or “political boss” (Thompson); but Arce is probably correct to see him as the defensor civitatis\textsuperscript{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 Salla\textsuperscript{18}. Because he was knowledgeable about Zeno and was bringing him the Pope’s letter, Stroheker assumes that Terentianus came from Emerita\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{15} “honoratorum et possessorum Turiassonensium, Cascantensium, Calaguritanorum, Vare-gensium, Tritiensium, Leviensium et Veroviscensium...litteras”: Hilar., Ep. 16, in A. Thiel (ed.), Epistole Romanorum pontificum genuinae, vol. 1, Braunsberg, 1867, 165-166.

\textsuperscript{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 principiais 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 Díaz 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.


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

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 Baetica\textsuperscript{20}.

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 élites\textsuperscript{21}.

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 city\textsuperscript{22}. 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 Rioja\textsuperscript{23}. Braulio also refers to the senatores Sicorius, Nepotianus, Honorius and Abundantius, with whom Emilian interacted in various ways\textsuperscript{24}. The first of these has an indigenous name, related to the river-name Sicoris (Segre) which is of Indo-European origin\textsuperscript{25}. Several scholars have interpreted the designation senatores to mean the proprietors of large landed estates, descended either from Roman senators or from the old

\textsuperscript{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.


\textsuperscript{23} Braulio, Vita Aemil., 16 (23).

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 11 (18), 15 (22), 17 (24), 22 (29), 26 (33).

\textsuperscript{25} L.A. Curchin, “Place-names of the Ebro valley: Their linguistic origins”, Palaeohispanica 8, 2008, 15.
indigenous aristocracy\(^{26}\). However, Braulio also mentions a *senatus*, to whose members Emilian predicted the downfall of Cantabria at the hands of the Visigothic king Liuvigild\(^{27}\). 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 Braulio\(^{28}\). For others, the Cantabrian *senatus* would be an autonomous regional government, extinguished in 574 when Liuvigild overran Cantabria\(^{29}\). 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 575\(^{31}\). 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,


\(^{27}\) Braulio, *Vita Aemil.*, 26 (33).


not only in villages and castella but also in the Roman colony of Cirta. The acts of the first Carthage conference of 411 refer to the seniores locorum, who were urged to enforce the ban on Donatist activity. 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.” 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), 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.

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