

Ralf BOCKMANN, Capital continuous. A Study of Vandal Carthage and Central North Africa from an Archaeological Perspective. Spätantike – Frühes Christentum – Byzanz, Kunst im ersten Jahrtausend, Reihe B, Studien und Perspektiven Bd. 37. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag 2013, 284 S., 25 s/w-Abb. und 14 farb. Abb. auf 18 Tafeln

The Vandals are making a comeback. They were conspicuous by their absence from the lively historiographical debates of the second half of the twentieth century on the end of the Roman Empire in the West and its consequences.¹ Now, the successors to Roman rule in the province of Africa (between their capture of Carthage in 439 and the reconquest under Emperor Justinian in 533) are making up for lost time. A proliferation of studies has set the Vandals and their kingdom in the context of revisionist work on the transformation of the Roman world. The Vandal kings are now portrayed as effective political operators ruling a prosperous society still modelled on familiar late Roman norms. Ralf Bockmann locates his engaging study (a revised version of a 2009 Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München PhD thesis) within this recent literature while emphasising his own unique selling point: close attention to the material evidence from more than a century of archaeological activity in North Africa. His book thus complements and nuances the emerging picture of Vandal rule as a distinctive appropriation of the heritage of the later Roman Empire.

An introduction (1-22) sets out a short narrative of the Vandals prior to their African conquest (2-13), a summary of the earlier historical and archaeological scholarship (13-19) and a sketch of the approach of the study (19-22). Bockmann establishes governance and elite life as the twin foci of the work and stresses the importance of competition for prestige as a 'cohesive factor' in general and a crucial aspect of Vandal rule in particular (20-21, at 21). This first chapter also introduces the geographical framework of the book, divided into chapters on Carthage (23-129), Vandal influence beyond their capital city (130-49), the 'backyard' of north-eastern Africa Proconsularis (150-78) and the 'outer range' of Southern Proconsularis, Numidia and Byzacena (179-247). This organising principle has an obvious benefit in setting each archaeological find in its broader settlement context, and each of the individual urban and rural case studies in its broader regional context. On the other hand, a more synthetic approach might

¹ A.H. Merrills and R. Miles, *The Vandals*, Chichester 2010, 16-22 and G.M. Berndt, *Konflikt und Anpassung: Studien zu Migration und Ethnogenese der Vandalen*, Historische Studien (Matthiesen Verlag) 489, Husum 2007, 44-51, provide useful surveys of the scholarship. Both note the gap which followed the path-breaking monograph of Christian Courtois in 1955 and the studies of Hans-Joachim Diesner in the 1960s.

have brought out more strongly a number of conclusions and parallels which tend to emerge in fragmentary form over the course of the book.

Chapter 2, 'The kings and the city – Carthage, royal capital', tours the extensive evidence, both literary and material, for royal activity, elite life and secular and ecclesiastical building work in the metropolis in the Vandal era. This is perhaps the least cohesive of the chapters; the sheer quantity of material, compounded by the necessity of further introductory digressions, overwhelms any attempt at framing. But what it loses in overarching structure, it gains in the vibrancy of its eclecticism and the conclusions which result from its juxtaposition of heterogeneous evidence. So, the Vandal kings made Carthage central to the legitimation of their rule (29-47), but the actual centre of the city and its old public monuments did not receive their attention; their euergetism was instead concentrated in the suburbs (47-68). Classicising poetry, polemical Nicene historiography, the remains of townhouses and the burials of so-called Vandals² are used to show considerable continuity in elite self-representation in the city (68-87). Similarly, old assumptions about persecution and destruction are jettisoned in an effective demonstration of activity in the many Christian monuments of the city, some of it plausibly associated with the Vandal kings' favoured "Arian" ecclesiastical faction (87-117).³

Much of the evidence for Vandal rule comes from or pertains to the city of Carthage; the next three chapters seek traces of Vandal influence elsewhere in Africa. Perhaps inevitably, the result is a mixed picture. The Hasding dynasty had theoretical control of the whole region and showed on occasion an impressive ability to reach into distant communities, but, as in any pre-modern state, the limitations on central power are obvious and effective control was at best intermittent and partial (130-31, 133-35). The Vandal army and navy maintained royal authority in the coastal regions, but further south, 'the influence zones of the Vandal kings seem to have been more and more diminished by autochthonous groups' (144). Nevertheless, with a few exceptions, the cities and rural settlements of Bockmann's chosen regions show considerable evidence of elite initiatives and royal influence across the period. These individu-

² The clothing and jewellery items of these burials are rightly re-interpreted as signifiers of a new fifth-century military elite rather than necessarily "Germanic" or ethnic symbols, following P. Von Rummel, *Habitus barbarus: Kleidung und Repräsentation spätantiker Eliten im 4. und 5. Jahrhundert*, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 55, Berlin 2007.

³ Bockmann justifies the maintenance of the term "Arian" as opposed to the more neutral "Homoian" at 13, n. 82 and 87, n. 543. Others have called for its abandonment: see e.g. D.M. Gwynn, *The Eusebians: the polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the construction of the 'Arian controversy'*, Oxford 2007, 7.

al case studies are the core of the book and take a consistent format: a basic introduction to the settlement, its late-antique history and its modern excavations; analyses of the various individual sites where activity has been, could be or should be attributed to the Vandal period; a concluding summary. Through detailed description and interpretation, Bockmann skilfully reconstructs the material fabric of settlements ranging from the lesser-known to the over-familiar; his re-interpretation of the so-called 'Christian quarter' at Hippo Regius is a particular highlight (185-92). He uses these finds to think through the internal dynamics of these communities in the Vandal period.

In aggregate (and alongside the Carthaginian material), these case studies have important implications which deserve emphasis. Close attention to intermediary finds between the normative phases attributed to the vast majority of these sites (late fourth- or early fifth-century build and Byzantine rebuild) allows Bockmann to identify an array of sites reconstructed or reused in the fifth century, some of which can be pinned down to the Vandal period. He highlights church construction or significant refurbishment in the period at Uppenna, Hippo Regius, Ammaedara, Theveste, Sufetula and in the rural *hautes steppes* (163-66, 185-92, 200-14, 215-25, 227-35, 240-42), while prudently foreswearing the hypothetical attribution of churches to particular ecclesiastical factions (see esp. 254; barring Hippo Regius, where the high number of "Germanic" names on burial inscriptions and the absence of an attested Nicene bishop after Augustine are used to suggest an "Arian" basilica [191, 197]). The continuous developments inside these churches are convincingly linked to the concerns of local communities and congregations, over and above royal ecclesiastical policies (esp. 164-66, 166-68, 177; see too 207-10). Bockmann rightly stresses the ability of congregations of various ecclesiastical affiliations to commemorate martyrs and renovate sacred spaces (165). He also underscores the evidence for shared modes of elite representation. Vandals and Romano-Africans both acted within a common sphere of aristocratic competition formed by the cities of Africa and the official hierarchy of the Vandal kingdom (20-21, 68-87, 125, 127-28, 148, 162, 176, 178, 213, 214, 221, 251-56; though cf. 145-47, which sets out an alternative set of criteria for "being Vandal"). Finally, Bockmann suggests that inscriptions dated by the reigns of Vandal kings and finds of elite individuals buried in costume which associated them with the court show the influence of the rulers across the region (156, 166, 199-200, 213, 214, 221, 225, 242, 247, 251-52). Basilica I at Madauros is a nice example; the interment of the bishop's son in February 531 was dated to the first year of Gelimer, showing a speedy reaction to the latter's usurpation even in a city in the west of the Proconsular province (199-200).

A final chapter provides a densely-packed recapitulation of the study's many conclusions (248-58). The book ends on an ambivalent note: even if the Vandals maintained control of the coastal regions, their frontier policies failed (256-58). In the final reckoning, the strong continuities in Vandal Africa are undercut by the loss of control in central North Africa and the break-up of Mediterranean trade (258). This contrast is recognised (if not resolved) by an enigmatic final sentence: 'Capital continuous – but not forever' (258).

One of the major merits of the book is the forensic excision of the faulty historical assumptions behind the dates and attributions of many archaeological sites, in particular the eagerness to associate destruction layers with Vandal initiatives and persecution, and corresponding reluctance to ascribe church-building activities to the period. (See e.g. Bockmann's remarks on previous dating of the complex at Theveste [223]). In many cases, the best attribution that can be made while doing justice to the evidence is an undifferentiated 'fifth century', which does not exclude a Vandal date; in others, activity in the Vandal period is highly plausible or even securely attested. Still, attributions based on deep-rooted historical assumptions occasionally escape the revisionist scalpel. The basilica at Uppenna is a case in point (163-66). A fragmentary inscription crucial for the interpretation of its phases is dated to the reign of Hilderic, following Dominique Raynal. The actual text is for the year of 'H...iricis' (an alternate reading would have the H as a IV, making it the fourth year of '...iricis'). Raynal himself noted that this could read *Huniricis* (i.e. Huneric), but quickly dismissed the suggestion, implicitly on the grounds of Huneric's anti-"Catholic" policies.⁴ Given Bockmann's important illustrations of the point that local ecclesiastical building activity does not conform to the attested Christian policies of contemporary Vandal rulers – and his prudence in avoiding the assignation of a denomination to this particular basilica – this alternative possibility should have been noted.

Perhaps more troublingly, there is also a tendency for dates to migrate into Vandal period, as the upstanding caution of the individual archaeological discussions hardens in the general summaries into stronger attributions. One crucial example is the renovation of the winter baths at Thuburbo Maius undertaken (according to an inscription) by a *flamen perpetuus* and *curator rei publicae* Optatianus. The *terminus post quem* is a coin dated c. 410-439. At first, the dating remains rightly tentative: a suggested date 'later in the fifth century' than the previous phase of renovation c. 395-408 (158). Optatianus 'may have been' a member of the local elite in the Vandal period (162). Yet the chapter conclusion states baldly that Optatianus 'engaged in restoration works in the fifth

⁴ D. Raynal, *Archéologie et histoire de l'église d'Afrique: Uppenna*, 2 Bd., Toulouse 2005, 408-11, 494-95.

century, after the establishment of the Vandal kingdom' and Thurburbo Maius thus becomes 'a document for the continuous activity of the late Roman curial class in a city of the Vandal kingdom' (176). These occasional slides into the Vandal period seem an over-correction – and an unnecessary one, given the fascinating and convincingly Vandal-era material Bockmann does use, and the conclusions which can be drawn even with more tentative dating attributions.

The language of the book demands comment. Bockmann should be commended for his decision to publish this important work in English. There is no previous English-language survey dedicated to this archaeological material and many site reports are hidden away in early twentieth-century journals. It thus seems churlish, if necessary, to point out the high number of spelling mistakes and typographic errors (many of which should have been rooted out at the editorial stage), frequent instances of cumbersome syntax, and sometimes strange formulations; the title itself sounds somewhat odd to a native English speaker. It is to the author's credit that these understandable slips rarely pose problems for comprehension. One exception is at p. 197: the previous discussion of continuities in elite life and the economy (196-97) seems to suggest that 'We have no reason to doubt that considerable changes occurred in this system in the Vandal period, apart from changes of ownership' should be 'We have no reason to *think* that considerable changes occurred ...'. The Greek of Cassius Dio also gets lost in translation at 44, n. 254.

Overall, *Capital continuous* represents an excellent summary of the extant material evidence for Vandal Africa. It marshals this evidence in combination with prudent use of some of the more important literary texts for the period to produce a series of thought-provoking conclusions on the nature of Vandal governance and elite life. Ralf Bockmann has made a valuable contribution to the flourishing debate on Africa under the Vandals.

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