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Frank Riess, *Narbonne and Its Territory in Late Antiquity: From the Visigoths to the Arabs*. Surrey and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2013. x + 288 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$134.95 U.S. (hbk). ISBN 978-1-4094-5534-9. (eb Kindle). 978-1-4094-5535-6.

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At its most essential, the Roman Empire was a polity of cities. The system of urban networks comprising the Empire was the basis for harnessing the loyalty of disparate governing elites across the Mediterranean and for centralizing the economic resources of a myriad of micro-regional agrarian regimes. One of the conventional narratives used to explain the passage from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages assumes the dissipation of political agency from cities into an increasingly seigniorial countryside as a result of the end of the western Roman Empire. However, in the face of archaeological and textual analyses that attest the sometimes dramatic economic and material changes that occurred in late-antique urban settings, a growing bloom of portraits of late-antique cities illustrates the sustained vitality of urban centers in western post-imperial contexts.[1]

Frank Riess' contribution to this field of study, a detailed portrait of the "evolving biography" (p. 45) of Narbonne, provides an important case study for how cities continued to anchor both political identities of a local region and trans-regional interactions after the end of the western Roman Empire. Indeed, as the volume under review amply illustrates, this essential function of a city did not fade with Roman imperial rhetoric. Rather, the early-medieval city was capable of appropriating new associations (cultural, religious, diplomatic, dynastic) in order to maintain regional cohesion. Formerly a classical city of the Empire and a chief nexus in contact between the Mediterranean and Atlantic-based provinces, Narbonne acquired an identity uniquely suited to its post-imperial context as a frontier liminal zone between emergent political cultures, primarily those of Frankish Gaul and Visigothic Hispania. The central claim of the book is that over time, the inhabitants of Narbonne and the surrounding territory of *Gallia Narbonensis* appropriated an idealized combination of Roman, Christian and Gothic elements. More interestingly, because the region was frequently contested between the rival claims of Roman, Visigothic, Frankish, Ostrogothic, and Arab power, the city of Narbonne was able to play an important role in anchoring the independence (not always successfully) of *Gallia Narbonensis* against the political dominion of its neighbors.

Riess structures his study with an introduction and eight chapters that shuttle primarily between the late-third and eighth centuries. The introduction begins with an episode from the Carolingian period, the visit to Narbonne by the famous scholar and prelate Theodulf, as an illustration of the city's role in the formation of a new political identity for Charlemagne's Empire marked by the Frankish defeat of Arabs at Narbonne in 759. This is one in a series of narrative points which illustrates junctures in the development of Narbonne's local identity and in the city's relations with various neighboring political entities. The remainder of the book analyzes various discrete episodes, such as Theodulf's embassy, to explain how Narbonne's role in *Gallia Narbonensis*, and in broader regional theatres, evolved over the course of roughly five centuries. Riess argues that each successive episode in the history of Narbonne became incorporated into the collective memory of the place and the behaviors of its residents. As Riess notes, substantially more is known about the earlier imperial history of Narbonne as a Roman colony

and its later Carolingian history, and the book aims to illuminate Narbonne's intervening late-antique period by bringing the available archaeological data and new interpretative methods for textual evidence together in one study. At issue for Riess is the extent to which modern national narratives (Catalan, French, Spanish) and the prevailing "continuity" and "rupture" paradigms for interpreting text and material culture have hampered a clearer understanding of Narbonne's role in the history of the region.

The chapters that follow progress more or less diachronically. Chapter one describes the topographical and productive geography of the city and coastal area of Narbonne, which in the early Roman period made the city so integral to the trans-imperial economy. Riess provides an excellent combination of literary and archaeological evidence for the city up to the fourth century, the point of which is to emphasize how Narbonne's earlier Roman identity had been fashioned through economic connectivity with the wider Mediterranean. A lengthy discussion of Ausonius' *Ordo Nobilium Urbium* illustrates how contingent the prosperity of cities such as Narbonne was upon their relationship to the wider administration of the Empire.

In chapter two, Riess introduces the Christian contribution to Narbonne's evolving identity. Examining the accounts of Orosius, Olympiodorus, Hydatius, and Philostorgius, Riess posits how classical, political history combined with sacred, ecclesiastical history and in the process constructed a new imaginative framework for understanding Narbonne, not only as an important destination in the wider Roman Empire, but as a constituent in an emergent Mediterranean Christian community. Riess' extended treatment of the *Dialogues* of Sulpicius Severus certainly enhances our understanding of Narbonne's place in this imagined community. Similarly, as Riess demonstrates, Sulpicius and other authors of the early- and mid-fifth century disclosed the terms (at times eschatological) by which the arrival of the Goths became integrated into Narbonne's collective portrait. In contrast to frameworks for conceptualizing Narbonne's membership in imagined wider communities, Riess also brings to bear epigraphic and epistolary evidence for one of Narbonne's first attested bishops, Rusticus, whom Riess identifies as an agent of ecclesiastical independence. Thus, as Riess demonstrates, Narbonne's regional identity was wrought in two discourses, trans-regional membership and local autonomy.

Chapter three examines the passing of *Gallia Narbonensis* from Roman to "barbarian" hands and expands further on Christian developments in the region during its occupation by Visigoths and Ostrogoths. The centerpiece for this chapter is an extended commentary on Sidonius' *Carmena* XXIII that explores the accommodation of classical cultural patrimony to "barbarian" presence. The chapter also examines fifth- and sixth-century literary and epigraphic evidence to expand the view of Christian (including Arian) settlement in Narbonne and its territory.

Where the first three chapters focus on discrete elements of what became Narbonne's collective heritage (Roman cultural heritage, attachment to trans-Mediterranean Christian discourse and the introduction of new "barbarian" ethnicities), the following chapters illustrate the development of a cohesive independence for the Narbonne region. In chapter four, Riess examines the political history of Hispania and southern Gaul in which the rival regional ambitions of Franks, Burgundians, Visigoths and Ostrogoths created a space for Narbonne to develop a tradition for viewing itself as an independent Gothic seat of rule. As Riess describes it, Ostrogothic administration of the region in the first half of the sixth century (507 to 548) encouraged a particular "cohesiveness and endurance" in *Gallia Narbonensis* (pp. 135-39). After the fall of the Ostrogoths in Italy, Visigothic rule asserted itself, with Narbonne clearly playing a role as a Visigothic *urbs regia*. Contrary to the conventional historiography, Riess maintains that Visigothic control of Hispania shifted from Narbonne to Toledo only gradually after the reign of Reccared. Riess persuasively contrasts the Christian rhetoric of John Bictar, who made Reccared's administration at Toledo emblematic for Christian unity in Hispania, with the distribution of contemporary epigraphic evidence that clearly indicates a preponderance for associating Narbonne with the center of Visigothic rule up to the end of Reccared's reign.

The conditions that allowed a conception to develop in Visigothic political geography in which *Gallia Narbonensis* appeared not as part of Hispania, but as a *ducatu*s, a frontier possession of the Visigoths, forms the subject of chapter five. Here, Riess mobilizes accounts from the later sixth and seventh centuries for the separatist tendencies of the region, including evidence for the periodic revolts of Gothic family groups in Narbonne. From the perspective of the Visigothic court in Toledo, Narbonne's proximity to Merovingian interests, such as claims that Brunhild and her Frankish relations pressed for particular cities in *Gallia Narbonensis*, made residents of Narbonne susceptible to the anti-Frankish rhetoric of the Visigothic court. As a result, sources from Visigothic Hispania increasingly portrayed the essential ethnic "otherness" of Narbonne's residents, in contrast to the unifying *gens Gothorum* of Visigothic Hispania. Riess further proposes, on the far less secure ground of onomastic habits, that the separatist tendencies of Goths in *Gallia Narbonensis* may be traced to the original settlement of Ostrogoths as administrators and leading families in the region a century earlier.

Chapter six continues the secessionist narrative of Narbonne with an analysis of the local revolt against the Visigothic king Wamba in 673. Riess elaborates on additional elements that encouraged residents of *Gallia Narbonensis* to view themselves as politically distinct, including the local ecclesiastical structure, a system of fortifications corresponding to the natural topographical boundaries of the region (the *clausurae*) and a local fiscal system that seems to have functioned with near independence from the government at Toledo.

Riess concludes the study with two very short chapters. In chapter seven, he ties the conquest of Hispania by invading Arabs in 711 to the divisions prevailing between Hispania and *Gallia Narbonensis*, with brief attention to sources for the conquest of the Narbonne region by Arabs between 719 and 721. The last chapter offers a reprise of how Gothic identity became an idealized element of Narbonne's accumulated biography, fused with the classical associations of the city's earlier Gallo-Roman past, but still distinct from Visigothic Hispania. Riess also offers additional thoughts on how the growing regional independence of neighboring Aquitania from the Merovingian *Teilreich* system in the seventh century would have had an influence on how the Visigoths of *Gallia Narbonensis* viewed themselves in relation to Toledo. Riess concludes with the observation that Narbonne evolved in tandem with wider regional politics, from a frontier held by Visigoths against the Merovingians in the sixth and seventh centuries, to a frontier held by Carolingian rulers against Arabs in the eighth and ninth centuries.

Riess' study of Narbonne is both thoroughly impressive and at times requires a great deal of intuition from the reader. Among the many virtues of the book, Riess persuasively argues that the region of Narbonne was integral to events ranging across Hispania and was in turn shaped by events in an even wider political theatre that involved Visigothic, Frankish, Burgundian, Ostrogothic, Byzantine and Arab interests. The study is also sensitive to the impact of unresolved historiographical debates on the history of Narbonne and immensely learned in quarrying a wealth of textual and material evidence (from classical historiography and Christian chronicles to burial and military archaeology). This command of evidentiary sources complements Riess' capacity for deft analysis of the interactions and polarizations of elite networks that gave rise to an independent political identity and also made the appropriation of *Gallia Narbonensis* attractive to external powers.

On a more critical note, the book has a tendency to move somewhat discursively from topic to topic within chapters, and the discussion does not always maintain tight focus on the city of Narbonne or *Gallia Narbonensis*. Riess clearly favors an approach that reconstructs elements in the cumulative memory of Narbonne (hence his frequent reference to the "biography" of the city), and his handling of the relevant texts is insightful. Indeed, consulting his explication of a good many of these late-antique texts should be preliminary to any forthcoming studies of the city and its territory. But the attention that Riess gives to the production of associative memories for Narbonne is not always sustained, and it is not always clear how these memories were transmitted to later generations. For example, in

discussing how Orosius, Hydatius and others anchored Narbonne in a more complicated narrative that involves the transition from secular, imperial history to sacred, Christian history (pp. 52-56), Riess does not comment on the extent to which Narbonne may have been merely incidental to these authors, nor is it clear how presumably incidental portrayals of Narbonne by authors may have entered the memories of subsequent generations. A similar question may be posed with respect to Riess' discussion of Sulpicius' *Dialogues* (pp. 72-76).

As a result, the book can at times read like a very perspicacious study of trees (text and material evidence) in an at times undefined forest (overarching history of Narbonne). Of course, the disjointed movement from topic to topic within a chapter also illustrates, perhaps unintentionally, the lacunose nature of evidence for a full narrative of Narbonne. In many cases, the book serves as an important reminder that the sources simply do not allow for a systematic line of questioning. Instead, they only represent answers to questions that were important to people at the time. In counterbalance, however, Riess' attention to archaeology is an encouragement to reverse a long-standing paradigm whereby material and literary evidence must be reconciled in agreement with one another, as opposed to allowing material sources to challenge text. But again, as a result of the style of exposition, a number of these important contrasts must be intuited by the reader. For example, more effort might have been made to explain the transition from a discussion of Sidonius' description of topography to a discussion of evidence for centuriation and local quarrying in the region (pp. 110-14) which appear on their face to have little direct relationship with each other.

A more serious criticism, which need not reflect the intentions of the author, but rather this discursive narrative habit, lies in the handling of the arrival of Islam in Spain. It is clear enough that the Arab invasion of Spain provides an important framework for the book. It opens with Carolingian events resulting from the "rolling back of the control of the Umayyad caliphs at the beginning of the ninth century" (p. 2), and closes with an epilogue that reflects upon the meaning that the defeat of the Arabs at Narbonne acquired for Carolingian rulers (pp. 238, 244-45). The brief chapter treating Narbonne's encounter with the Arabs (pp. 221-9) effectively ends with the Arab sack of the city in 719. The book skips the period of forty years (719-59) in which Narbonne was under Arab rule. In a book that describes the cumulative construction of Narbonne's cultural memory in terms of significant historical moments, the lack of attention to forty years under Arab rule effectively writes any Arab contribution out of Narbonne's history. Given that Riess has undertaken a project to illustrate continuity in the dynamism, vitality and regional importance of a port city that extends from the end of the western Roman Empire to the Carolingian Empire, the omission of Narbonne's Arab interlude seems like a lost opportunity to qualify further some of the more reckless assumptions of the Pirenne thesis.

#### NOTE

[1] For example, Giovanni Di Stefano, *Cartagine romana e tardoantica* (Pisa: Serra, 2009); Deborah Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Douglas Boin, *Ostia in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

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