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Author

Winer, Rebecca Lynn

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REVIEWS

STEPHEN BENSCH, *Barcelona and Its Rulers, 1096-1291* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 457 pp.

Barcelona and its Rulers is a well-written, thoroughly researched, crucial addition to both medieval urban and social history. Stephen Bensch not only enriches our understanding of a great city and its place within a powerful mediterranean kingdom, but also explores hypotheses concerning the "rebirth" and evolution of cities in the Middle Ages, drawing on Catalan, Spanish, German, French, Italian, and English scholarship. Bensch's study is singularly important for any scholar of medieval Spain because it is the first systematic study of Barcelona during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Bensch details the evolution of Barcelona, almost a century after most Italian cities, through a partnership between its patriciate and its count-king. The nobles of Catalunya did not play a major role in the city's evolution and they did not reside in the city after 1100. By 1200 the count-king had curbed his primary urban official, the vicar, replacing the vicar's self-serving, exploitative lordship with more efficient patrician bailiffs. It is notable that the count-kings were not coerced into signing over municipal rights to patricians to quell civil unrest; rather count-kings and patricians sought a mutually beneficial alliance. Patrician bailiffs acquired coveted municipal rights while lending the count-kings the funds required to finance their military campaigns. The municipal government assumed its basic form relatively late (between 1249 and 1274) and was shaped to satisfy both communal and royal requirements.

Bensch emphasizes that this partnership between count-kings and patriciate was as crucial to the economy as it was in institutional and political terms. This is especially apparent because Barcelona did not evolve along a smooth and seamless trajectory from a nodal point in an early medieval tributary economy to a prosperous Mediterranean commercial center. Instead, the city had "an aborted take-off" (85); land values increased almost steadily from 1000-1080, but then decreased sharply after 1090. Land values were certainly hurt by the

drying up of gold tribute payments from the Spanish Muslim *taifa* rulers after the 1080s and 1090s with the arrival of the Almoravids. The concomitant economic collapse from which the city would not recover for over fifty years, however, was due to a complete lack of harmony between the interests of the burghers and expansionist militaristic Catalan nobles. The eleventh-century period of growth failed to produce a merchant class in Barcelona, and it was the partnership between the count-king and this class that caused the city to develop.

Bensch illustrates that Barcelona did not regain its prosperity until after 1200, and that the patriciate of this new era had a different membership. New patricians were the children of small lenders, artisans, and shopkeepers, with tightly grouped property-holdings within the immediate countryside around Barcelona. These newcomers managed to revivify the local economy sometime after 1140. They maintained their places at the head of urban society: the *proboms*, informal municipal officials of the twelfth century, were the forefathers of magistrates of the thirteenth century.

The new patriciate did not emerge by 1200 fully ready to transact business across the Mediterranean; Bensch argues convincingly that Barcelona's patricians did not spearhead Catalan political expansion. Before the mid twelfth century no citizen of Barcelona is certainly known to have owned a ship. Trade was protected fiercely by the count-kings, who, for example, expelled all Italian bankers from the city in 1247. The count-kings' protection fostered patrician maturation in international commerce; in fact, after 1250 Barcelona's merchants were such excellent sailors that their count-king had to take measures to limit their acts of piracy.

Bensch maintains that the thirteenth-century patriciate was a cohesive group, but certainly not a rigid oligarchy. What distinguished patriciates was their wealth and position as landlords, holding prime property such as allods or church land. Their concept of family identity differed from that of many Italian patrician families; marriage strategies were relatively exogamous, and any family who could provide the requisite—enormous—dowry (1,000 gold morabatinis) was able to marry into the top several families. Patricians followed specific inheritance strategies, delaying the marriages and economic independence of sons past the age of twenty and marrying off daughters as young as age twelve. Despite their young age at marriage, Bensch suggests that the position of patrician women in Barcelona seems to have been relatively good. Married women had a

substantial interest in their husbands' property, and although they had already received dowries, they were not excluded from making further claims on the property of their birth families. Widows were a force to be reckoned with throughout the thirteenth century, although they lost some control over the distribution of their husbands' property after c. 1250, because of the increase in premortem agreements.

Barcelona's development cannot stand absolutely as a universal example for medieval cities. Bensch's work is a case study, significant in and of itself, but any generalization from its history is limited by Barcelona's regional specifics. Bensch does provide weighty evidence, however, that a city required a strong local economy before it could become an international commercial power. He also argues convincingly that the conception that all medieval cities were completely divorced from seignorial rule must be reconsidered.

Rebecca Lynn Winer
Department of History
University of California, Los Angeles