

**SOCIAL COMPLEXITY IN
EARLY MEDIEVAL RURAL
COMMUNITIES**

**THE NORTH-WESTERN IBERIA
ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD**

Edited by

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Cover illustration: Early medieval agrarian terraces in the site of Torrentejo (Álava, Spain)

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Preface

Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo

This book has been made in the framework of the research Project Social Inequality in the Landscapes of Northern Iberia: the archaeological markers (HUM 2012-32514) funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. The main aim of the Project has been the development of conceptual tools for the analysis of early medieval rural communities in Northern Iberia through significant case study. In this four-year project a set of twenty European scholars specialized in social history and archaeology have been involved. The participation of this multidisciplinary research group has allowed the study of social complexity and social inequality in local societies, lacking monumental records, deep settlement hierarchy and large access to prestige items. The studies carried out show how difficult the social analysis of these local societies is, and the role of material culture hiding and showing social practices.

This book has all the advantages and the limits of any short time research project in terms of diversity of case studies and approaches, and the nature of the analysis conducted. Indeed, some lines of enquiry should be extended in the future. Actually, some chapters are

related to PhD projects (such as the cases of Idoia Grau, Carlos Tejerizo and Maite García), very specific research projects (such as the EARMEDCASTILLE project funded by the European Union) or to new research activity.

The 5th International Meeting held in the University of Lleida in July 2015 gave us the opportunity to discuss an early version of the papers of the book in comparative terms. The debt of gratitude with the Consolidate Research Group on Medieval Studies of this University and Flocel Sabaté is very big.

It is also necessary to extend our gratitude to all colleagues, students and friends who have participated over the years in the project, the fieldworks and the laboratories analysis carried out by the Heritage and Cultural Landscape Research Group of the University of the Basque Country.

Finally, we would thank the Archaeopress editor for welcoming this volume in their catalogue.

Inequality and social complexity in peasant societies. Some approaches to early medieval north-western Iberia

Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo¹

Abstract

This introduction provides an overview of the two main topics analysed in this book in the framework of medieval peasant studies: social inequality and social complexity in peasant communities. The chapter is divided into three sections. Firstly, Iberian case studies are presented, followed by an explanation of the concepts and terminology used throughout the book. Secondly, the single chapters that follow are contextualised from the perspective of settlement patterns, food, craft production systems and social practices. Finally, some generalisations are made in order to connect single case studies with general trends.

Keywords: *Encompassing societies, social complexity, social inequality, peasant communities, local societies*

1. Introduction

In the last twenty years a true ‘silent revolution’ has taken place all over Europe² as a result of an unprecedented increase in rescue archaeology projects. This has resulted in an increased visibility of new types of settlements and a detailed examination of the historical dimension of current landscapes (Catteddu 2007; Demoule 2012; Bofinger and Krause 2012). Without doubt, one of the main novelties of this archaeological practice has been the discovery of an incredible number of low-intensity rural settlements spread across wide areas and related to peasant communities in different historical periods. Previously, we had only partial and fragmented knowledge of these sites and consequently they were rarely considered in the main archaeological syntheses. There can be no doubt therefore that the study of early medieval peasant societies is one of the fields that has benefited greatly from the development of rescue archaeology. Peasantry played a key role in the Grand Narratives of the medievalists who analysed lordship formation and feudalism in the 20th century, based on works by authors such as Marc Bloch or Georges Duby. Thus, the social history of the Early Middle Ages in the last third of the century gave significant weight to peasant communities, even though they are notably underrepresented in the textual documentation. However, the postmodern turn, the change from a social to a cultural history and the progressive fragmentation of the topics and scales of analysis in the last twenty years have brought about a turning point in the study of

medieval peasantry, to such an extent that the subject has been almost virtually abandoned in the new millennium (García de Cortázar 2007). Nevertheless, the availability of new archaeological records from rural societies, adequately presented in several regional or national syntheses all over Europe, has favoured the reactivation of studies of peasantry and local societies in recent years, especially by archaeologists. Although the archaeology of early medieval rural societies is substantially the archaeology of peasant communities, these have rarely been the object or main subject of archaeological analysis. This is due to several reasons of a theoretical and methodological nature.

The first difficulty has to do with the material visibility of the communities and their social structure. In Southern Europe, the emergence of an archaeology of the peasantry is very recent, due, among other reasons, to the fact that their production, representational and domestic spaces are neither as consistent nor as easily recognisable as the monumentalised spaces of the elites, who have previously been the primary object of medieval archaeological studies. On the other hand, the social analysis of peasant communities is complex, as their domestic records are usually invisible in other than large scale archaeological projects. These reasons explain, to a certain extent, why the archaeology of peasant communities has until recently not been a part of the working agenda of many researchers and why large-scale rescue archaeology has enabled the identification of a practically unknown material universe (Quirós Castillo 2013). It should be taken into account that the lack of archaeology of the peasantry is not confined to the medieval archaeology of Southern Europe. Our ignorance, in archaeological terms, of the peasantry in recent prehistory or in the Roman and modern periods shows that this bias is quite generalised.³

¹ University of the Basque Country, Spain. This work has been financed by the Research Group in Heritage and Cultural Landscapes IT315-10 funded by the Basque Government and the Research Project ‘Desigualdad en los paisajes medievales del norte peninsular: los marcadores arqueológicos’ (HUM2012-32514) funded by the Spanish Minister of Economic Affairs and Competitiveness and the Unidad Asociada UPV/EHU – CSIC ‘Grupo de Estudios Rurales’.

² The only exception might be Italy, whose administrative and legal framework has not allowed the undertaking of large rescue projects.

³ Although there are some exceptions. For recent prehistory, in Iberia the work by Díaz del Río 2001 can be mentioned. For the Roman

A second problem arises from the scant importance given to the agency of communities in the explanatory accounts of the Middle Ages. Although landscapes and medieval monuments can only be explained as a result of the direct or indirect action of peasant communities, an important part of medieval archaeology continues to prioritise the analysis of places and objects, without properly identifying the social subjects of the analysed processes.⁴ On other occasions the historical relevance of the communal action has been undervalued, as the ability to make historical changes is only attributed to aristocracies, the Church and the political elites (e.g. Brogiolo and Chavarria 2005). Finally, other authors have explained local dynamics in the light of Grand Narratives. Consequently, peasant agency substantially reflects processes acting on a large scale.⁵ Ultimately, rural settlements have been a platform for analysing the agency of elites and aristocracies.

Thirdly, the apparently unfathomable nature of early medieval peasant communities, both in written documents and in the material record, has resulted in the spread of primitive and simplistic characterisations of them, especially from a material perspective (Fossier and Chapelot 1980). And although some critical voices that have questioned the concepts and the primitivist theories used to characterise early medieval peasantry,⁶ until the upsurge in rescue archaeology it was considered that the life of early medieval peasants was miserable and impoverished; that they were semi-nomads living in dispersed settlements who made their living from farming and practised shifting agriculture. Although these arguments have served to explain the lack of evidence, rather than to develop a rigorous characterisation of medieval peasantry, they have been set in stone in the main historical accounts (e.g. Fossier 1982). As a result of the new discoveries made in rescue contexts, it has been necessary to dismantle the argumentative basis of these interpretations. The debate in France around the concept of *naissance du village* is a perfect reflection of this new situation.⁷

In fourth place, Marxist archaeologists, who have indeed constructed the archaeology of peasantry in these years, have focused mainly on the analysis of the socio-economic dimension of peasant communities within the framework

of the class struggle. Two main lines of analysis have been followed: on the one hand, the patterns and forms of the settlements have been studied on the assumption that the process of authoritarian concentration that took place around the year 1000 in several areas of Southern Europe should be regarded as the material visualisation of the introduction of feudalism (e.g. Francovich and Wickham 1994). On the other hand, Spanish medieval archaeology has developed an agrarian archaeology centred on the analysis of agricultural production. The study of production areas, storage spaces and patterns of consumption are the thematic axes around which this archaeological practice has been organised.⁸ However, this archaeology has seen peasantry mainly as a homogeneous social class and has emphasised the dialectical inter-class conflicts and, above all, the forms of resistance. Consequently, there has not been much space for the internal social analysis of the communities in terms of inequality, identity and forms of exclusion. And, although in recent decades medievalism has replaced the classic contrast between lords and peasants (Duby 1973) with a more complex and nuanced approach based on the analysis of the interactions between local communities and feudal powers (Álvarez Borge 2001), the archaeology of rural settlements in Southern Europe is still encountering difficulties in articulating social analyses of peasant communities. Defining different categories of peasants in archaeological terms is very complex, as has recently been pointed out by Richard Hodges (Hodges 2012: 42), as is defining the agency of peasant communities. However, it cannot be denied that, on the few occasions when written documentation is sufficiently explicit on a local scale, it is possible to observe the extent to which medieval peasant communities were unequal in a horizontal and a vertical sense. The economic diversity of peasantry and the existence of asymmetrical relationships are common, both in small cohesive villages, such as those in Lucca in the Early Middle Ages, and in those villages with a more marked identity, such as those in Castile. Likewise, it is common to find peasant families who participated in a complex patronage network through which the relationship between peasantry and the encompassing societies is channelled (Wickham 1995a; Alfonso 2007). However, despite all this, archaeology still has difficulties in visualising the micro-stories that characterise medieval peasant communities. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to evaluate the role of the communities and their internal dynamics in the processes of social landscape construction and the socio-political dynamics of the encompassing societies.⁹ Finally, social

period it is worth mentioning: The Roman Peasant Project led by the University of Pennsylvania (<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/romanpeasants/index.html>), and The Rural Settlement of Roman Britain: an online resource (<http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/romangl/>).

⁴ This situation was denounced in Barceló 1998.

⁵ Some of the most significant studies are Faure-Boucharlat 2001; Hamerow 2002; Francovich and Hodges 2003; Peytremann 2003; Valenti 2004; Schneider 2007; Hamerow 2012; Valais, 2012; Loveluck 2013; Quirós Castillo 2013; Mahé-Hourlier and Poignant 2013; O'Sullivan, McCormick, Kerr, Hamey and Kinsella 2014.

⁶ Regarding the concept of village, see Zadora-Rio 1985; regarding early medieval livestock, see Wickham 1985. It should be noted that these two works were prior to the explosion of rescue archaeology.

⁷ Carré *et al.* 2009; Watteaux 2003. For Late Antiquity see van Ossel 2006.

⁸ Kirchner 2010. Regarding the concept of Agrarian Archaeology see Quirós Castillo 2014.

⁹ "Peasants are not primitives, that is, the culture of a peasant segment cannot be understood in terms of itself but is a part-culture to some larger integral whole" (Wolf 1955: 545). In other words, peasant communities must be analysed within the framework of the encompassing societies to which they belong.

mobility is another neglected topic in early medieval local societies, although some new studies have been published recently (Carocci 2010).

The main objective of this book is to contribute to the analysis of the social and political complexity of local early medieval societies, through the study of the archaeological records of peasantry in north-western Iberia. That area has not been chosen by chance, as comparative studies of written documents have shown that its peasant communities had stronger identities than in the rest of Latin Europe (Wickham 2005). In the written evidence, early medieval north-western Iberian communities had churches and their own political agendas, they were involved in disputes over the borders of their villages and possessed highly structured collective goods. In other words, north-western Iberia is the right place for such a study. In addition, the early medieval period is a perfect laboratory for the study of local societies, since it is a period of notable localisation of social and political action.

From a theoretical point of view, this work intends to explore the possibilities of studying inequality in early medieval communities by establishing what these forms of inequality were and how they can be seen in material terms. Likewise, it intends to evaluate how far it is possible to study the complex forms of interaction between peasant communities and the encompassing societies from an archaeological perspective. From a methodological point of view, this analysis has been carried out from a multifaceted perspective, taking into consideration a diversity of procedures, records and approaches that allow us to visualise the nuances and the practices that took place in these peasant communities.

This introduction aims to explain the structure of the work, as well as to point out some of the main conclusions obtained from the analysis of the local societies in north-western Iberia. Firstly, it intends to briefly characterise the analysed territory and some of the concepts used. Then, the contents of the work are presented by grouping them into four main topics. Lastly, a series of paradoxes that characterise the social analysis of the local communities are discussed and some general considerations are formulated.

1.1. Peasant societies in north-western Iberia

As already pointed out in the preface, this work is the fruit of a research project on the north-western Iberian Peninsula carried out over four years at the University of the Basque Country. In a way, this has determined the limits and the treatment of the case studies considered. In the studies of Iberia in the Early Middle Ages, the north-western Iberian Peninsula –which broadly speaking covers almost 200,000 square kilometres and includes

northern Portugal, Galicia, Asturias, Cantabria, the Basque Country, La Rioja and Castile and León– has a certain importance and tradition of studies, as it is in this territory that the kingdoms of Asturias, León and Castile were formed.

This territory was characterised in the Early Middle Ages by an unstable and ever-changing political geography. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, it was ruled by up to four different states (Visigoth, Andalusian, Astur-Leonés and Castilian) in a framework of highly localised socio-political action.¹⁰ It is precisely this fragmentation of local societies that allows for the existence of extensive spaces of political experimentation. These margins have already been explored from the perspective of the complex negotiations between the local powers and the territorial articulation of the central power (Castellanos and Martín Viso 2005). The role played in political terms by peasant communities and how the local communities were articulated in north-western Iberia in the Early Middle Ages are much less known. This is largely because the preserved written documentation is not sufficiently explicit at a local level to illustrate the internal dynamics of the communities. And although some villages are better documented, they are not comparable to any other territories in Southern Europe, such as Catalonia or Lucca.¹¹ In social terms north-western Iberia is regarded as a simple and little-stratified territory, so that authors like Chris Wickham have not hesitated to use the tribal society concept to analyse some of these areas (Wickham 2005, p. 40-41; 227-230). Nevertheless, new studies carried out in recent decades raise questions about these approaches.

Historical studies of early medieval rural societies in Iberia have undergone a profound transformation since the 1970s and 80s. This has allowed their progressive inclusion in several debates and problematic areas analysed on a European scale (García de Cortázar and Martínez Sopena 2003).

One of the main reasons for this transformation is that, in the last decades of the past century, research in the north-western Peninsula found in social history a touchstone for the analysis of early medieval societies. The primitivist and institutionalised paradigms of the 1960s and 70s were replaced in the 80s and 90s with narrations from a plurality of perspectives. Based on regional studies.

¹⁰ A general presentation in English can be found in Davies 2007, pp. 1-22 and Collins 2006.

¹¹ As examples, the studies of Rabal and Bovadela in Galicia (Portela and Pallares 1998), Villagonzalo in La Rioja (García de Cortázar 1986), Villobera in Tierra de Campos (Martínez Sopena and Carbajo Serrano 1983), Apardués in Navarra (Jusué Simonena, 1988, pp. 83-89), Vilela in the Bierzo (Rodríguez González and Durany Castrillo 1998) and Aspra in Asturias (Torrente Fernández, 1986) can be cited. Only from the 10th century on do we have enough documentation on a local scale, and this becomes more abundant from the 11th century. Other examples of peasant communities in conflict with lords during the 10th and 11th centuries appear in Pastor 1980.

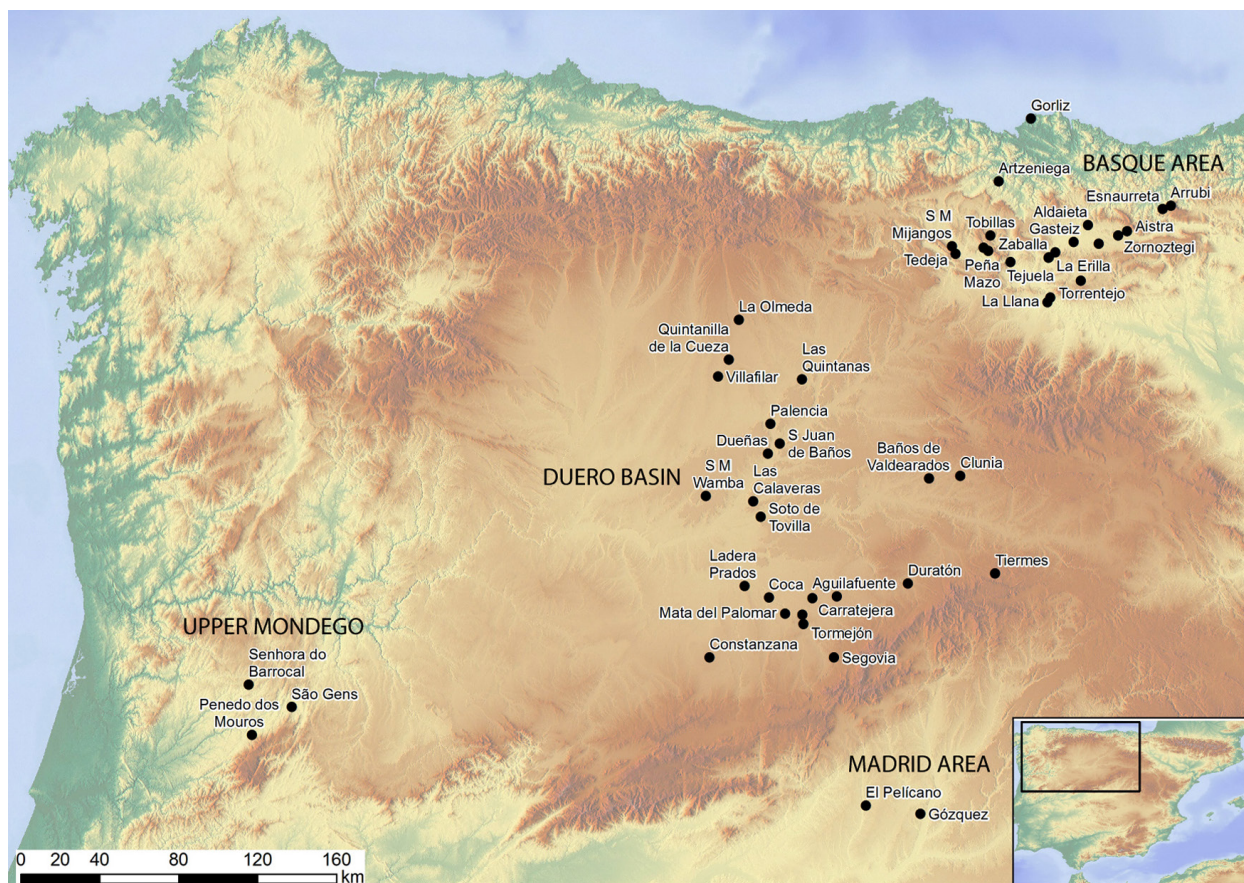


FIGURE 1. MAP WITH SITES MENTIONED IN THE BOOK.

they analysed the erosion of peasant freedoms under the feudal yoke and the implantation of feudalism as a system (García de Cortázar 1999).

This universe of conflicting or opposing schools of thought has resulted in a diverse scenario in recent years, in which the ‘models’ are less hegemonic and above all less activist (Larrea 2008). Therefore, the studies carried out in the new millennium are more nuanced and the scale of analysis and observation has moved more towards the area of local societies (Martín Viso, Portass and Santos Salazar 2013).

Also in Iberia, there has been an explosion of rescue archaeology in the last twenty years, which has resulted in the recognition of numerous peasant settlements, especially in the north-western Peninsula and around some highly-urbanised cities, such as Madrid and Barcelona (Quirós Castillo 2009).

The circumstances in which this archaeological activity has taken place in our country have determined that the materials, structures and bio-archaeological records

have rarely been studied and at the most mentioned in administrative reports. Therefore, it can be considered a somewhat clandestine archaeology, as few case studies have been published and no narrative has yet been built up from these records. In parallel, other archaeological projects have focused on the study of early medieval peasant societies in the last few years (Fernández Mier *et al.* 2014).

However, an archaeological synthesis is still to be performed based on the comparison of the different territories, the social analysis of the records and the critical dialogue with the dominant historical paradigms.

In fact, another of the objectives of this study is precisely to introduce some of the records into the discussion that has been generated over these years. The examples analysed in this work are situated in the area of the Basque Country, the Douro basin and plateau, the surroundings of Madrid and Alto Mondego in Portugal (Fig. 1), territories where the research project on which this work is based has been carried out.

1.2. *The categories of analysis*

The concepts used in this book need some clarification. The notions of social complexity, social inequality, peasant communities or peasant societies, and local societies do not have the same meanings in the different study traditions.

The relationship between complexity and social change has been used in different ways by archaeologists, although they have not always been explicitly defined (Kohring and Wyne-Jones 2007). For social evolutionary approaches, social complexity refers to the different stages of the socio-political development of societies in the past, establishing a connection between complexity and inequality (Flannery and Marcus 2012). For other authors, social complexity is a way of measuring the scale of social practices observed through records such as settlement, energy capture, monument building, inequality and heterogeneity, so that the changes in scale enables the study of the nature of the social changes (Morris 2009). For other authors, the increase in social complexity must be identified in terms of greater interconnectivity and integration between different levels and agents of socio-political action, separating it from teleological and evolutionist approaches (Chapman 2012). All these approaches, which are not the only ones and need not be mutually exclusive, can create a certain amount of confusion when analysing social complexity in such societies as peasant communities.

This is due, firstly, to the nature of the relations established within the encompassing societies in which early medieval peasant communities participated. The level of complexity of the spatial, political and social articulation of peasant communities does not necessarily determine the level of social complexity, because, for example, several communities shared exploitation or decision-taking spaces in very fluid and heterogeneous contexts, as happened in the Early Middle Ages. Ultimately it depends on the encompassing societies in which peasant communities are located and the existing ways of intermediation on a local scale.

Secondly, at an operational level, a series of social practices are only developed on a local scale and show different degrees of social complexity only at this level. This local area refers above all to dynamics of wealth, generosity and status. However, on a local scale it has been possible to detect the institutionalisation of inequality as a result of the transformation of informal and negotiated statuses into stable asymmetric relationships supported and legitimised by agencies external to the community. In the end, the study of social complexity in peasant communities does not only depend on internal practices, but also on the forms of interaction within local societies.

The concept of social and economic inequality is also problematic and this study has in fact been undertaken to explore its nuances on a local level. In theory, and from a materialist perspective, inequality exists when socially distinct entities have differential access to strategic resources.¹² However, the most recent studies have shown that, strictly speaking, there are different forms of inequality and, moreover, a simple, linear correlation between complexity and social inequality cannot be established. What is more, the perception and expression of inequality is often situational and shifting (Loveluck 2011; Sykes 2014b), so that it is necessary to analyse in contextual terms the social practices that can be identified as expressing inequality, and the material culture that is the expression of this inequality.

Our aim therefore in this book is to analyse the visibility of inequality in the communities of north-western Iberia from a twin perspective: within the communities and in relation to the encompassing societies.

Peasant communities are the main subject of the historical analysis in this publication.¹³ Although these communities are not always an innovation of early medieval peasant societies, the archaeological record in the north-west shows their importance in articulating the territory from the 5th century on (Vigil-Escalera 2015a). In addition, archaeology has shown that settlement forms varied notably in the Early Middle Ages, so it is the social subject and not the morphology of the inhabited place that determines social practices. In principle, a community will be considered a group of collective practices with which the members of a specific group of producers are identified and defined through variables such as internal identity, external recognition, collective practices and, very frequently, the existence of communal goods (Sánchez León 2007; Ostrom 1990; Oosthuizen 2011).

Finally, the term local society has also been used in the study of the Early Middle Ages to analyse, in the main, the political practices that arose as a result of the interaction between peasant communities and the subjects who were not active producers on a local scale (Martín Viso, Portass and Santos Salazar 2013). In other words, it is a scale of observation, rather than an object of analysis in itself.

2. Structure of the book and lines of inquiry

Once the analytical concepts have been discussed briefly, in this subsection we intend to present the

¹² Paynter 1989, p. 369. Similarly, it has been pointed out that: "Economic and social inequality is generally measured by the extent of enduring differences among people or families in access to valued goods, services, or status" (Bowles, Smith and Bergerhoff Mulder 2010: 8).

¹³ Regarding the concept of community in archaeology see Kolb and Snead 1997; Gerritsen, 2006; Birch 2012.

different papers that make up this book. It consists of eight chapters that analyse, from different records and with distinct theoretical and methodological approaches, inequality and social complexity on a local scale. The starting point for these studies has been to analyse the forms of inequality in peasant communities through the identification of archaeological ‘signatures’ and based on the study of a wide range of material records and their contextual analysis. In heuristic terms, each of the single records analysed shows limitations, sometimes significant ones, when studying the articulation of peasant societies.

In addition, the meaning of each of these signatures can vary in time and space. This is the reason why the eight works in this volume take into consideration different records and different geographical and chronological frameworks. There is, nonetheless, some overlapping among the different chapters and topics, as sometimes the same sites are analysed, or because they deal with common topics. Although this means the studies cannot be easily grouped into fixed categories, it is possible to group them around four main axes: settlement patterns, diet, production, and consumption patterns and social practices.

2.1. Settlement patterns

The study of settlement hierarchies is one of the most widely used procedures in social archaeology for all historical periods. Indeed, medieval archaeology in Southern Europe has also resorted to the analysis of settlement hierarchies in order to understand socio-political inequalities in rural territories.

Without doubt, the discussions fostered by French historians from the 1970s and 80s on regarding the formation of villages and the phenomenon of *incastellamento* inspired the birth of the archaeology of the medieval territory in Southern Europe (Fossier and Chapelot 1980; Toubert 1973).

Although they assume different premises and distinct markers (in one case villages and in the other fortified settlements), both proposals claimed that, given the existence of dispersed settlement in the Early Middle Ages, the process of population concentration around the year 1000 would have been the consequence of the crystallisation of territorial lordships. This conceptual framework has fed generations of studies that, in the end, have placed more interest in the form of the settlements than in the settlement hierarchies. However, this methodological approach has been radically dismantled in recent years, for two main reasons.

On the one hand, comparative studies have shown that there is no direct correlation between concentration and aristocratic dominion, so that when aristocrats are

strong enough they can dominate both concentrated and dispersed settlements (Wickham 2005). Secondly, the excavations carried out in the last few years have shown that the forms of peasant settlements varied greatly in the Middle Ages and it is not possible to speak of a process of concentration around the year 1000.

In most of the cases studied, *incastellamento* consisted of the fortification of concentrated settlements that had been formed in Early Middle Ages. However, the villages were not a creation of the year 1000, but rather early medieval peasant communities that frequently formed concentrated settlements.

The two chapters devoted to this topic analyse settlement hierarchies and, therefore, the relations between peasant communities and the encompassing societies, rather than the forms of settlement. The scale of analysis in each study is very different and, consequently, the visibility of the forms of interaction between local communities and the encompassing societies is also very different.

Carlos Tejerizo’s study of the Douro basin and plateau shows the profound transformations the hierarchies in rural settlements underwent following the collapse of the Roman Empire. It also shows that the configuration of peasant villages was not a linear and directed phenomenon, but a story of successes and failures that shows the how the peasant communities were made up. In particular, two main stages can be observed in the articulation of rural landscapes in the 5th and 8th centuries in the Douro basin and plateau: a first stage corresponds to the emergence in the 5th century of a first generation of villages and a series of castles that translate in material terms to a new social hierarchy; a second stage is defined around the year 500 when a second generation of villages and farms is formed at the same time as many of the castles are abandoned and the existence of population hierarchies becomes less evident. However, in the author’s opinion, this homogeneity is only superficial. While it is not visible in domestic spaces, mainly because peasant societies tend to minimise social differences in order to preserve social order, it is on the other hand reflected in funerary spaces. In addition, this apparent stability of peasant societies is really an indirect reflection of the stability of the encompassing socio-political system.

A change in the cultural and socio-political context determined that the domestic spaces in which the social order of the late Roman period was reflected and built became an instrument of cohesion for rural communities. The hidden inequalities in these communities are revealed in funerary rituals. In other words, this study shows that archaeological signatures can take on different meanings in different social contexts.

Catarina Tente's study of the mountainous territory of Alto Mondego (Portugal) is likewise extremely thought-provoking. The discovery of a series of fortified occupations of a peasant nature occupied by a few families for a short period in the 10th century is intriguing.

While in São Gens and Penedo do Mouros there is a total lack of material markers of social complexity or differential access to prestige goods, at Senhora do Barrocal the storage of already processed seeds, the find of a fragment of glazed ware of Andalusian origin and the existence of a church around 971 are the main references for defining the level of local social prioritization. This is undoubtedly not very substantial and paints a simplified social picture.

This simplification is even more evident when Alto Mondego is compared to the nearby region of Lafões, where not only is the presence of county figures documented from the 9th century, but there is more substantial material evidence of social hierarchies. However, the example of Alto Mondego in general and that of São Gens in particular are especially instructive.

The socio-economic complexity of these occupations is not determined by their internal dynamics, but by the way they integrated into the encompassing societies, resulting in this case in the specialisation of their economy. On a local level, we find economic practices of self-subsistence that guarantee the survival of the community (livestock and arable production, iron reduction and forging of iron tools in situ), but at the same time São Gens specialised in processing wild animal furs.

In fact, to date São Gens and Aistra¹⁴ are probably the early medieval rural sites with the largest proportions of wild animal remains in Iberia. The existence of specialised productive centres in the Early Middle Ages also requires a stable socio-political network, which shows that São Gens and the network of fortified settlements were part of an articulated system on at least three levels (São Gens-Senhora do Barrocal-encompassing system). The high level of specialisation and external systematic dependence may be precisely the key factor that explains the short duration of these occupations.

In summary, both papers show that the study of population hierarchies and peasant communities cannot forget the analysis of the encompassing societies of which they form part. In the Douro basin and plateau, socio-political stability results in an apparent equality of the peasant communities. In the case of Alto Mondego, although apparently invisible, it is the encompassing system that determines the viability of the same specialised peasant communities. Although the degree of interaction with

the external socio-political levels was different in each of the Portuguese centres, when a transformation of the system occurred it affected all the sites equally. The interaction was very low in Penedo do Mouros, but much more important in São Gens and Senhora do Barrocal. However, when the system succumbed, all the sites were abandoned at the same time.

2.2. Food

Although the records relating to the production, processing, storage and consumption of food are probably the most significant discoveries at peasant sites, there is still no social archaeology of diet as such. This may be due to the low level of interaction between the different disciplines and researchers working on records related to diet (pottery, archaeobotany, archaeozoology, isotopic geochemistry, physical anthropology, etc.).¹⁵ Although each of these disciplines has underlined on several occasions the notable heuristic potential of a holistic approach to diet, the truth is that such projects are not very common.

Diet is not only a passive reflection of inequalities in local societies, it is also an active instrument for building identities and inequalities within communities. This perspective has become very obvious in recent years with the generalisation of isotopic studies of human remains, which allow us to identify the eating patterns of specific individuals. Therefore, it has been possible to begin analysing dietary patterns taking into consideration variables such as status, gender, age and lifestyle.¹⁶

The first chapter in this book, which is in fact devoted to diet, is a study of a Visigothic-period (6th-8th centuries) peasant site at Gózquez (Madrid) carried out by Maite Iris García. The theoretical starting concept is that access to food is conditioned by economic position and that is normally linked to social status. The author proposes three main markers for identifying social inequality within a well-defined community: range of standard deviation, protein consumption and the existence of peasant strategies of productive diversification seen through the consumption of C₄ plants.

Gózquez is without doubt the best-known Visigothic peasant village in Iberia.¹⁷ While the domestic records at Gózquez do not show marked social differences, the funerary practices reveal that the community built and visualised their social distances in the critical moment of death. More precisely, the finds of grave goods in a

¹⁴ The Aistra archaeozoological record is discussed in Grau Sologestoa 2015.

¹⁵ Nottingham University publishes the series 'Food and Drink in Archaeology', in which they provide a holistic treatment of the archaeology of food. Moreover, the 2016 International Medieval Conference held at the University of Leeds considered food in a very integrative way.

¹⁶ So far, only the United Kingdom has preliminary syntheses on diet in medieval societies based on isotopic studies. See Müldner 2009.

¹⁷ A general presentation of the site can be seen in Vigil-Escalera 2013a.

third of the 6th-century graves in the communal burial ground suggest that social status was renegotiated constantly within the community. In other words, there are not enough elements to suspect that there were forms of institutionalised inequality within the community.

The most interesting point is that it was determined that the community members, whether they were buried with or without grave goods, had a similar diet. Neither were any significant differences seen in the diets of individuals excluded from the communal burial ground (see below). That is, social inequalities were not shown in different eating patterns or the social distances were much shorter than can be inferred from the items of metalwork used as funerary objects.¹⁸

The second chapter relating to diet was written by Idoia Grau, author of the first doctoral thesis written on faunal remains in rural communities in Iberia (Grau Sologestoa 2015). There is a long tradition of studying social inequality in the Middle Ages from the perspective of archaeozoology and in recent years meat consumption patterns have become one of the most widely used means of identifying high status occupations in early medieval rural settlements (e.g. Clavel and Yvinec 2010; Loveluck 2013; Salvadori 2015).

In this case the inequality markers identified are hunting and consumption, kill-off patterns and the quantity and quality of the meat consumed. The study of the faunal remains in 5th-10th-century rural communities in the Basque Country does not allow intra-site analysis, as happens in many rural sites in the Southern Europe.

This is due, among other factors, to the complex formative processes of the archaeological deposits, which mean that primary deposits are very scarce (Grau Sologestoa 2014). This limitation prevents us from analysing inequality within peasant communities and it places the scale of analysis on a sub-regional level.

One of the first consequences of analysing different sites has been to observe that the consumption of wild animals is not a direct and simple way of identifying high status places, although forms of emulation are detected at some peasant sites, supporting the idea that diet builds local identities. Another important contribution of this work is a critical discussion of the interpretation assigned to certain high-status markers accepted by the community.

Given the widespread idea that the low proportion of pigs in early medieval contexts and their concentration at high status sites¹⁹ suggests that this type of meat is characteristic of elites and aristocracies, this author

proposes an alternative hypothesis. The characteristic of high social status would be the consumption of meat in general, and not of pork in particular. However, because pigs are only meat-producing animals, it is logical to think that their presence would be more frequent in meat-consumption contexts compared to other species.²⁰ However, the most important contribution of this study is that it has been possible to analyse social diversity among the different peasant communities at a sub-regional level. The conclusion is clear: in a place that was generally considered simple in social and economic terms, archaeozoological analysis shows that there are signs of economic complexity and social inequality among early medieval rural communities in the Basque Country.

2.3. Craft production systems

Another of the classical topics explored by archaeologists when analysing inequality and social complexity is the study of craft production and the distribution mechanisms of craft products using the consumption contexts (Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Hendon 2008). Social archaeology in particular has analysed topics such as craft specialisation, forms of the social organisation of production and the contextual meaning of craft products in relation to social complexity (Costin 2001).

Early medieval archaeology in north-western Iberia has also explored these lines of research, so that in many studies it is assumed that there is a correlation between specialised craft production and the status of the owners or the complexity of the social system.²¹ In this way, the discovery of prestigious objects in burial grounds is regarded as an indicator of elites and territorial aristocracies, establishing an identity between portable wealth and social status, despite the nature of the evidence obtained in the burial grounds of peasant communities in this territory. In fact, in the inner Iberian Peninsula it is not unusual to find peasant burial grounds with grave goods that imitate or re-elaborate funerary practices traditionally thought to provide identity on a local scale (Quirós Castillo and Vigil-Escalera 2011).

The study of craft productions in early medieval rural societies is hindered by the assumption that rural societies were impoverished and the difficulty in establishing a complex characterisation of peasant societies in material terms (Van Ossel 2006). One of the fields in which this difficulty is most obvious is the study of iron instruments. The medievalist narrative that linked settlement nucleation to the affirmation of lordships around the year 1000 was based on a characterisation of early medieval peasantry as poor with no place for iron instruments.

¹⁸ A similar situation has been found at the site of Dulantzi in the Basque Country, Quirós Castillo, Loza Uriarte and Niso Lorenzo 2013.

¹⁹ However, in Italy pigs are equal in every kind of site (Salvadori 2015, 101-114).

²⁰ Argument made in Grau Sologestoa 2016.

²¹ Regarding the problems of defining craft specialisation and the social value of craft objects, Costin 2005.

While some medievalists have overcome this characterisation (Devorey 2003, p. 124-127), many archaeologists still consider that the discovery of a large number of iron objects should be considered as a high-status marker (Legros 2011). These proposals are called into question in David Larreina's archaeometric studies in this volume.

Metallographic studies of some tools have shown the use of good quality standards in their manufacturing and, on occasion, sophisticated techniques have been detected. Moreover, there is no evidence of object recycling, which, added to the lack of forges, suggests that in the Basque Country in the Early Middle Ages there was a complex small-scale system of iron production and distribution that provided a regular supply to peasant villages.

Reduction workshops and occasionally forges have been found in various sectors of the territory, normally near mineral outcrops. There is even one case in which it has been possible to identify a settlement that may have specialised in metal production. All these archaeological indicators show the existence of a high level of economic and probably political integration in the rural communities of the Basque Country in the Early Middle Ages.²²

However, the main archaeological marker used to study the complexity of the trading systems and the articulation of local societies has been pottery. Its abundance at peasant sites and its presumably low cost, meaning it is easily replaced, has made early medieval archaeologists in the north-western Peninsula pay great attention to it (Vigil-Escalera, Quirós Castillo 2016). In this volume, Francesca Grassi makes a comparison between the systems of production and the practices of ceramic consumption in peasant societies in Tuscany and Old Castile. Based on the study of Rocchette Pannochieschi and several villages in the Ebro valley she makes a characterisation of consumption patterns, production systems and distribution mechanisms. Through the pottery record, the impact of overarching social systems in both territories is very evident on a local scale. Imported pottery is very scarce in the two areas studied, but the existence of a very active productive system in Tuscany in the Early Middle Ages determines a very different social meaning for glass, metal and pottery finds in Rocchette Pannochieschi and the Castile area. Even the social structures of the two case studies are very different and no easy comparison can be made just by looking at single sites. In Rocchette, aristocracy agency is linked to mining activities, while Castilian sites are mainly diversified rural communities. As Grassi points

out, social complexity on local scale occurs in different ways in Tuscany and Castile. Concealment and distinct social practices are deployed, depending on political and cultural habits linked to supralocal societies and trade systems. Consequently, an archaeology based on the definition of non-situational 'social signatures' can be misleading in the interpretation of the material culture (see also Loveluck 2013 and Sykes 2014b).

2.4. Social practices

The last set of papers focuses on the analysis of complexity and inequality, not so much through archaeological signatures, but through the analysis of specific social practices, such as the exclusion phenomena within peasant communities and the processes of memory construction²³. In recent years Alfonso Vigil-Escalera has analysed the funerary spaces of early medieval peasant communities in the inner Iberian Peninsula, demonstrating the heuristic capability that these records possess when analysing the dynamics of local societies (Vigil-Escalera 2013a; Vigil-Escalera 2013). On this occasion, attention is focused on a phenomenon that is not exclusive to the north-western Peninsula or early medieval sites, but is very important in the medieval villages in this territory: the phenomenon of social exclusion in funerary rituals. Apart from the communal burial grounds, where collective identity is represented and built, and the scattered tombs, in several villages and rural settlements in the north-western Peninsula it is quite common to find human remains in non-funerary spaces, such as silos, wells and trenches in 6th-8th century contexts. Taking into consideration the range of the phenomenon, there are numerous interpretative suggestions in the literature which attribute either a ritual, catastrophic or peculiar nature to these funerary rituals. A starting point that has been assumed throughout this work is to consider that inequality and exclusion practices are situational and contextual, and therefore, excessive generalisation should be avoided. The almost absolute predominance of young individuals and the numerous traumas documented lead the author to suggest that they could be domestic slaves from the peasant families themselves.²⁴ The existence of subservient groups in peasant communities is well documented in Castile in the high medieval period, and in particular the presence of children in the workforce has been identified. This has been seen as a form of resistance as it allowed adults to continue with their work (Alfonso 2007, p. 98-100). Likewise, legislation in Visigothic times shows the importance of domestic slaves and these employed in craft and agricultural tasks, although strictly speaking it does not allow for the recognition of the existence of

²² Over the last few years major advances have been made in the study of iron production in the Basque Country. See Franco 2014; Orue-Etxebarria Urkitza, Apellaniz Ingunza and Gil-Crespo 2016; Quirós Castillo 2016.

²³ For the study of social exclusion in the early medieval period, the seminal work is Reynolds 2009.

²⁴ An idea already mentioned by Roig Buxó 2009 p. 239. Regarding the difficulty of archaeologically analysing slavery in the rural environment, see Roskams, 2006, p. 512-515.

slaves in peasant communities (Thompson 1971, p. 315-323).

One of the most interesting conclusions in this project is that, even though this group was clearly excluded from the communal burial ground, their diet was similar to that of the rest of the community. This could be due to the fact that slaves were very valuable possessions and had to be suitably looked after. Moreover, there may not have been much difference in the ways of life of peasants and domestic slaves, except for the fact that the latter died at a young or a very young age. Finally, although it is not easy to identify different types of peasants through material records, in some circumstances it is possible to observe the hierarchies in some peasant communities.

However, one of the major dangers that threatens the study of inequality in peasant communities is trying to establish a direct correlation between the hierarchies that emerge, sometimes diffusely, from the textual documentation and material evidence. This is precisely the objective of the chapter by Igor Santos, in which the existing ontological differences between both types of record are underlined, i.e. the words and things highlight social inequalities in a different way, also on an intra-community level. To illustrate this line of argument the author analyses a specific case study, the medieval village of Torrentejo (Alava, the Basque Country), which is one of the best-documented village in the whole of the Basque Country in the second half of the 9th century, even though it only has around twenty references. The micro-history in Torrentejo is conditioned by the memory filter that written culture imposes, but also in this case by the drafting of a documentary compilation that succinctly summarises the content of purchases made by the dominant monastery in the area. However, the analysis of the archaeological record is mediated by the filter of memory loss resulting from the abandonment of the site, the disaggregation of the community and the dysfunctionalisation and pillage of the material evidence. Unlike what occurred in San Gens, the textual narrative of Torrentejo shows us the complexity of the encompassing society in which the village community participated. The material evidence shows the processes of ownership of built spaces and the reorganisation of domestic areas, the monumentalisation of representative architectures and the reconfiguration of identity spaces in the community, such as the collective cemetery that was moved as a consequence of the construction of Santa María Church which appears in the year 1075 in King Sancho IV's hands. However, rather than solving problems, the integrated analysis of this case study poses many questions, due to the entity, as well as the nature of the information available. Peasant societies are prevalently oral and only occasionally and indirectly do they appear in texts (Wickham 1995b). Perhaps the main conclusion of this paper is that written and material documentation show the existence of

different forms of inequality on a local level that are articulated through different instruments and strategies.

3. The archaeology of peasant communities in north-western Iberia

The picture that emerges after reading these chapters is well articulated, since the different records analysed show different levels and even different concepts of inequality. What we observe in the texts is mainly the use of titles and forms of resource appropriation. Through the material records, we observe consumption patterns, settlement hierarchies, types of diet, forms of exclusion and participation within the communities.

Every one of the different analytical procedures used has its limitations and interpretation problems. For example, isotopic analysis allows us to analyse the diet, but not the food consumed. In other words, consumption in similar proportions of milk or meat from old or ill animals will provide the same isotopic value as the consumption of young animals. At the same time, archaeozoological records from early medieval villages in Iberia are very scarce and problematic when performing intra-site analysis. Therefore, holistic approaches that combine different records are the only way to carry out rigorous social archaeology. Early medieval societies are extremely fluid in social and political terms and in the forms of occupation and exploitation of the space, making them difficult to classify and categorise. However, our conceptual device is also too simple or too dependent on historians' narratives to build an archaeology of peasant communities (O'Sullivan and Nicholl 2010, p. 89).

Throughout the different chapters, the reader will see that common sense is not enough to interpret these records and that there are numerous (visible) paradoxes in the peasant records in this territory. In summary, I would like to point out five of the paradoxes and challenges that are dealt with in this book:

1. The paradox of São Gens: the latent inequality. The study of Alto Mondego shows the interpretative difficulty hindering the material analysis of peasant societies. The material reality of São Gens and other nearby communities is characteristic of an autarchic situation, where inequality on a local scale is invisible and there are no substantial internal differences. However, a significant part of the economic activity at São Gens is highly specialised and aimed at external markets. And although there is not necessarily any correlation between economic specialisation and socio-political complexity, the treatment of wild animal furs implies that São Gens, and probably the rest of the fortified occupations, were part of a complex socio-political system, despite the fact that the encompassing society only becomes visible in Senhora do Barrocal.

2. The paradox of Gózquez or how inequality is shown in some social practices. In the case of the Visigoth village of Gózquez, clear forms of social exclusion have been identified through the analysis of funerary practices. Some individuals found in non-funerary contexts have been identified as domestic slaves and anthropological analysis has revealed an interesting contradiction. While the life of these individuals is shorter and the traumas they suffer are more serious than in the rest of the population, the eating patterns are similar to those of the rest of the community, whether they are buried with or without grave goods. Is then diet an adequate marker for the analysis of social inequality, or do the forms of distinction not affect all social practices? In the end, specific practices allow us to explain and detect social inequality.

3. The paradox of peasant sites: living and dying in the countryside. In various chapters of this book it can be seen how the formulae for the material expression of social inequality are articulated differently in the inhabited places and the funerary areas.²⁵ Perhaps in this case it would be necessary to include a chronological corrector as, while in the 5th-7th centuries funerary practices reflect social distances more obviously than domestic spaces, things change from the 8th century. From the year 700 on, in some sectors of the north-west, a change in the dimensions, technologies and permanence of houses can be observed and this is accompanied by radical changes in funerary practices. Thus, the social characterisation of a cemetery without further context or an isolated domestic space is very problematic because the formulae of representation and construction of collective identities varied greatly during this period. Another of the main contributions made by large-scale rescue archaeology has been to provide a social context for early medieval burial grounds that until now had been regarded as isolated, independent elements.²⁶

4. The identity paradox: Visigothic peasants. In any case, we have enough evidence to know that funerary rituals in peasant communities could have been very elaborate and complex, resulting from the re-elaboration of a series of signs and symbols on a local scale. It is striking to note that to date no Visigothic cemeteries have been found in cities such as Toledo, Mérida or Barcelona, where the Visigothic state was organised from and where the political elites who were recognised as Visigothic lived (Arce 2011). However, all the Visigothic cemeteries associated with domestic spaces analysed so far have proven to be cemeteries for internally-structured peasant communities.²⁷

²⁵ A common phenomenon in other European sectors (Loveluck 2013, p. 75; Búcker and Hoepfer 1999, p. 449).

²⁶ As a consequence, I. Cartron has recently suggested abandoning the classic concept of necropolis "au plein champ" (Cartron 2015, pp. 33-36).

²⁷ The existence of peasant cemeteries with grave goods is also common in other European sectors, see Theuvs 2008, p. 218; Henning 2008, p. 44).

Some families, probably local elites, resorted to the public destruction of wealth in order to claim or renegotiate a non-institutionalised status. At the same time, these grave goods are the result of the forms of interaction of encompassing societies on a local scale, except in the aforementioned case of São Gens. An interpretation of this kind would also explain the accumulation of ritualised signs of a different meaning and nature. Therefore, for example in the case of Gózquez, not only are there Visigothic grave goods, but also lateral niche burial mounds characteristic of Semitic communities (Vigil-Escalera 2015b). In conclusion, archaeological markers of inequality, inclusion and exclusion have complex contextual meanings and resist any form of normalisation and generalisation.

5. The paradox of the living standards. While the first step for building a social archaeology of peasant communities requires more holistic and higher quality material records, the next step is to compare the social structure of different sites and the different archaeological markers of inequality. In this respect, C. Loveluck's studies are very stimulating and have served to make us question many of our assumptions about the meaning of high status sites and to define some analysis criteria for the definition of different lifestyle markers (Loveluck 2013). However, the analysis of the cases in north-western Iberia shows that records can sometimes be ambiguous. Although the large-scale consumption of pork has, in theory, been considered a high-status marker in Iberia (Morales Muñiz 1992), Idoia Grau claims in this volume that it is not the consumption of pork, but that of meat, which defines social distinction. In other words, the analysis of the cut of meat might be more significant than the taxonomic classification. Likewise, it is thought that the consumption of young animals is an indicator of high status. This may be significant in an asymmetrical relationship of a feudal nature based on the payment of rents. Can this criterion be applied when explaining the diversity within a peasant community? On the other hand, we know that local prestige is accompanied, on occasions, by food redistribution practices, rather than the consumption.²⁸ In this case the lack of evidence would be the best marker of social status.

4. Conclusions

In this book we have tried to review critically some of the assumptions used in north-western Iberia to analyse early medieval peasant communities in social terms. One of the main conclusions obtained is that peasant societies are unequal throughout the period, but in a different way in each territory and in the different centuries. More precisely, it is possible to identify both local elites and more prosperous peasants as forms of exclusion from

²⁸ There is a vast bibliography on gifts and redistribution of goods and food in the Early Middle Ages; see Moreland 2010; Sykes 2014a: 159.

the social body. These social distances can be detected on occasions, although they cannot be analysed with the same logic and procedures with which early medieval elites and aristocracies have been detected so far. The traditional approaches that have been used to evaluate aspects like wealth, inequality and hierarchies in the material record are not always the most suitable for the internal analysis of peasant communities (Van Ossel 2006: 542-547).

Secondly, it is easier to visualise village elites through the material record than to explain their agency within the communities. Some local elites may be legitimised for participation in the encompassing societies, at least on the Central Meseta during the Visigothic period. However, this participation is less evident in other sectors of the north-west, such as the Basque Country or Alto Mondego in the 8th-10th centuries. These communities act as crucibles of complex interactions between different social and political actors. In other European areas, these actors work in well-defined contexts. In north-western Iberia, political experimentation at the local level was particularly intense given the constant processes of collapse and coalescence of political systems in the early medieval period. As a consequence, it is possible to observe bishops acting on a very local scale, as well as to detect wealthy peasants using strategies of distinction and even to find elites lacking those signatures. Local societies are fluid frameworks and very appropriate for the analysis of social mobility, even if those processes are frequently blurred by the limits of the evidence and the use of binary theoretical approaches.

Thirdly, peasant communities cannot be defined or analysed independently of their encompassing societies.²⁹ Supra-local systems are permanently above the local area, although in places like Alto Mondego or the Douro basin they are virtually invisible. In other words, there is no direct correlation between inequality on a local scale and social complexity; everything depends on the encompassing society and the forms of interaction established between the different levels of socio-political agency within the local societies (Morris 2009: 523). Besides, there is no simple or linear correlation between the complexity of encompassing societies and the nature of local socio-political dynamics. The comparison between inner Iberia under the domination of the Visigothic state and other early medieval local societies, such as those of Portugal or the Basque Country, has revealed considerable internal diversity in terms of social inequality. This diversity and the scale of the local system can be only partially related to the nature of the central power and the homogeneity of aristocratic power.

For this reason, the socio-political agency of peasant communities should not be undervalued and, in fact,

²⁹ A conclusion that has already been reached from other perspectives by authors such as Eric Wolf (Wolf 1955, p. 504).

an increasing number of archaeologists are focusing on the role of peasantry as a factor for historical change (Theuvs 2012). That is why it is inappropriate to study early medieval local societies from primitivist, liberator or merely aristocratic approaches. Reducing local social and political dynamics to the improperly-named 'chaotic models' obscures their complexity. On the other hand, the ability to bring about historical changes did not only lie in the hands of elites.

Fourthly, although it is possible to identify a series of archaeological signatures at early medieval peasant sites, their detection and interpretation can only be made in contextual terms, as inequality practices are tremendously changeable and situational. In other words, the extent to which the social practices of distinction, exclusion and concealment are developed within a peasant community requires wide interpretative flexibility and the use of holistic methodological procedures that enable the identification of nuances, emulation processes and dialogue with the encompassing societies (Kolb and Snead 1997).

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