From *villa* to village? Relational approaches within roman and medieval Iberian rural societies

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Abstract
In the same way that Grand Narratives about roman rural societies have neglected peasantry and non-estates occupations emphasizing the role of *villae* and slavery, medievalism studies have promoted a notion of medieval peasants and villages based on the assumption that there was no connection between both periods and agents. The new scenario created by the disruptive recent development of rescue archaeology showing the relevance of non-*villae* sites, non-nucleated villages, smallholders and peasantries has opened new avenues for the study of roman and medieval rural societies in terms of settlement patterns, agrarian economy and domination.
This paper argues that the under-theorization of local societies has penalized the comprehension of peasantries and their archaeological records. Taking into consideration early medieval northwestern Iberian records, a relational social approach is proposed in order to analyse agrarian societies. In particular, this study explores relational identity, social risk and reciprocity, moral economy, closure theory and patronage relationships.

Keywords

1. Introduction
The pandemic caused by COVID 19 and the resulting lockdown that humanity is experiencing at the time this paper is being written highlights the contradictions of our lifestyle, the problems arising from hyper-connectivity, and the consequences of the dehumanization of political and economic relations. The globalization model of the capitalist society 4.0[1] does not only remind us how equal we are against disease, but also how different we are when dealing with crises of this nature. Numerous thinkers, media and critics suggest that this experience will change us forever, although it is not yet clear in which direction.

Some commenters have underlined the advantages of the rural environment over the hegemonic Western world urban environment in dealing with this emergency. The rural environment is less connected, more "autonomous", autarchic and resilient, and therefore aseptic when facing a pandemic. But are rural spaces really inhabited by "traditional" societies, isolated and distanced in spatial and social terms? To a large extent, this simplified and reified representation of the rural environment derives from a whole series of common places that, far from being a novelty, have been recurring for centuries[2]. And although new peasantries are emerging all over the planet in the remnants of the capitalist system[3], many narratives of the past remain penalized by an ill understanding and characterization of peasant societies.

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[1] Kaletsky (2010).
[2] Freedman (1999).
[3] Jan Douwe van der Ploeg has argued about a 'Repeasantization' process in progress, see Ploeg (2008).

This work aims to contribute to the theorization and characterization of past peasant societies from the material record, analysing the northwestern Iberian late-medieval period in particular. There are still many gaps and difficulties in characterizing pre-industrial peasantry because, despite occasionally participating in writing technology, the evidence preserved[4] is episodic, partial and limited. And although the archaeology of peasantry provides new forms of approach, this is a novel field of study. But beyond the nature of the sources, it is the theoretical and methodological approach that limits the understanding of peasant rationality patterns.

On this occasion, a long-term perspective is followed, taking into account the contributions recently made by studies on the Roman period[5]. It is argued that the low level of theorization of peasantry, represented in terms of alterity as a homogeneous passive subject, only reactive to the inputs of elites, inhibits the social understanding of (past and present) rural societies and their materiality. Conversely, this work intends to argue that a relational approach and a higher level of theorization provides greater analytical depth to the archaeology of peasantry.

This paper is divided in three sections. First, the intellectual genealogy of early medieval peasantry studies in Northwestern Iberia is considered, showing that the dominant paradigm encapsulates *rustici* in a process of teleological and rigid "transition". Secondly, three of this background's core topics are reviewed in the light of our current knowledge. Finally, some generalizations are proposed. But previously, some of the concepts that will be used throughout the work are considered.

2. Conceptual and theoretical framework

Peasants and peasantry are two categories of analysis which are difficult to define given their theoretical and historiographic backgrounds. As a result, they have often been rejected or overlooked by numerous archaeologists, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In Spanish, the term *campesinado* is very recent, while *campesino* comes from early medieval times, and coexists with other names such as *laborator*, *rusticum*, etc[6]. Since most people in the pre-industrial period were farmers, the rejection of these terms, or the use of alternative neutral terms (commoner, dwellers, non-elite, ordinary people, etc.), does not solve the problem of characterization of local societies. In abstract terms the notion of peasant is non-analytical, full of prejudices and includes a diversity of very broad social realities [7]. That is why it is necessary, in my opinion, to explicitly (re)construct it from solid and contextualized theoretical positions. Even more so when a long-term perspective intends to be adopted in order to overcome academic compartments[8].

First of all, peasants are farmers, direct producers. But the economic dimension does not exhaust the term. According to anthropological and ethnographical accounts, the notion of peasant society necessarily implies asymmetry, subalternity and hierarchical relations of dependency[9], so concepts such as peasant "spontaneity", "freedom" or "independence" are totally inadequate[10]. But in turn, this does not dispute peasantry's agency capacity, the coexistence of a diversity of sources of power and complex forms of interaction between the powerful and the peasantries. With the exception of slaves, even the humblest farmers

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[4] Kosto (2012).
[5] Bermejo Tirado (2014).
[6] Menéndez Pidal (2003).
[7] Horden and Purcell (2000); Ariño Gil and Chávez Álvarez (2019).
[8] Quirós Castillo (2020a).
[9] Wolf (1966).
[10] Sevilla Guzmán and Pérez Yruela (1976).

have never been passive recipients or fully dominated by the powerful, just as there are no peasant societies that are fully autonomous or disconnected from a complex network of relationships[11]. In the period considered, power relations coexist with sophisticated forms of domination. Networks, reciprocal relations, solidarity and negotiation mechanisms are as important to explain social dynamics as hierarchical relationships[12]. In other words, many narratives built over the past two decades in Roman and medieval studies using top-down and bottom-up approaches fail to adequately explain material records due to the limitations of theoretical approaches.

Secondly, while the notion of peasant is difficult, that of community is not less difficult/even more so???, and it directly connects with that of the village. While archaeologists identify the community as a group of neighbours who exploit a territory, for historians the concept is more restrictive and involves the existence of institutionalized relationships[13]. This contrast shows the heuristic limitations of the sources and perspectives used. In the period considered there are numerous forms of communities, although medievalism intellectual hegemony often influences an ideal model of village community that stars the historical accounts of the Late Medieval rural societies[14].

Thirdly, and for operational reasons, I will use the notion of elite, which is wider than aristocracy, to identify powerful people. This notion has been defined as ideal type by Chris Wickham from nine criteria: wealth, ancestry, public office or title, personal patronage, a legal definition of status, peer recognition, prestige, display, and finally expertise[15]. In the period considered, the concept of elite is more defined in terms of relations and scales of political action than stable social and political positions, thus including all active forms of domination within the framework of peasant communities, local societies and surrounding societies.

One way to use these categories analytically is to avoid normative and absolute definitions, placing them, in relational and contextual terms, in the form of processes rather than abstract concepts. This work uses a relational approach in order to make dense descriptions[16] of rural societies. To this end, I have used some seminal works and proposals made by scholars who, from very different perspectives, have studied local societies and micropolitical practices from strong theoretical positions[17].

In order to develop this proposal, north-western Iberia has been considered for three reasons (**fig. 01**). Firstly, the remarkable coherence and identity of local societies in the European and Mediterranean context, even though cities continued to have undoubted vigour in large sectors of the Iberian Peninsula[18]. Secondly, the fragmentation and contraction of political horizons that characterizes the early medieval period gives remarkable prominence to both vertical and horizontal asymmetrical relationships, in the context of a permanent process of reworking social action frameworks[19]. Finally, in recent decades an archaeology of early medieval peasantry has been explicitly conducted in Iberia, so there are solid records that help to develop a theoretical approach of such nature[20]. The interpretation of these records has been very conditioned by the very

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[11] Horden and Purcell (2000: 255).
[12] Pastor de Togneri and Rodríguez López (2000).
[13] Zadora-Rio (2012).
[14] Bourin and Durand (1984); Genicot (1990).
[15] Wickham (2011).
[16] In the sense of Geertz (1973).
[17] Alfonso Antón (1997); Wickham (2005); Grey (2011); Oosthuizen (2013); Portass (2017); Faith (2019).
[18] Wickham (2005).
[19] Innes (2000).
[20] Vigil-Escalera Guirado (2007); Tejerizo García (2017); Quirós Castillo (2019).

intellectual trajectory of early medieval history and archaeology, so this will be our starting point.

3. The genealogy of medieval peasant studies in northwestern Iberia

Since Marc Bloch published in 1939 and 1940 his influential volume *La sociéte féodale. La formation des liens de dépendance*[21]*,* a Grand Narrative about pre-industrial rural societies has been built throughout Europe, where the main feature was the struggle between a subdued peasantry and feudal lords legitimated in military and religious terms[22]. Subsequent works from perspectives such as Social History, Historical Materialism, the School of Annales or French Social History (**fig. 02**) have built the empirical and intellectual basis on which this interpretive line has been constructed, not only permeating historical studies but also the Archaeology of medieval times. The narrative and culturalist turn that has characterized European historiography since the 1980s has determined that studies on peasantry, and more broadly, the social and economic history inaugurated by M. Bloch, have suffered a sharp contraction within medievalism. From a European perspective it can be said that the episode of European rural societies social history reached a point of no return in the 90s[23].

However, the Spanish historiographical route has some particularities (**fig. 03**). The centrality that Social History had in the disciplinary renewal during the late Franco period and the early Transition explains the persistence of these traditions within some academic communities, and among medievalism in particular[24].

The overcoming of more traditional institutionalist narratives has been marked, since the 1960s, by a Social History first focusing on the analysis of monastic domains, and then on the formation of feudalism from the breakdown of village communities considered equalitarian. Only from the mid-1980s (in coincidence with the emergence of Medieval Archaeology) did Social History begin to nuance these positions and to pay increasing attention to the territorial dimension adopting a model of peasant colonization[25]. As a result, settlement patterns became, in the words of J. A. García de Cortázar, an index fossil for the study of feudalization and community structures[26]. Throughout the 90s a new generation of scholars carried out numerous doctoral theses focused on the feudalization process which were based on the characterization of the rural settlement and the gradual deterioration of peasantry conditions. However, the absence of a solid archaeology of rural landscapes did not allow for the construction of dense narratives about local societies. It is true that in these works, peasant societies were no longer passively and uniformly defined, but it was not possible to explore social landscapes in detail [27].

A quantitative analysis of roman and medieval peasantries studies in the 20th century in Spain reveals very interesting trends. The frequency of the terms 'Roman peasant' and 'Medieval peasant' in Google Books database shows that, although by 1920 the term 'Roman peasant' was much more used than that of 'Medieval peasant', during the first half of the twentieth century both got progressively closer until, in 1960 approximately, the trend was completely reversed (**fig. 04**). In other words, the affirmation of the slave *villae* paradigm among Roman specialists and the peasantry narrative among medievalists are

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[21] Bloch (1939).
[22] For instance Duby (1974).
[23] Schofield (2016).
[24] Wickham (2018).
[25] Escalona and Martín Viso (2020).
[26] García de Cortázar (1999).
[27] García de Cortázar and Martínez Sopena (2007); Larrea Conde (2008); Fernández Mier (2018).

two sides of the same coin. Since then, the history of medieval peasants disregards Roman peasantry, while the latter has virtually disappeared from scientific literature.

It is in this intellectual framework that the emerging Medieval Archaeology is inserted. As in almost all of Europe, the birth of Spanish Medieval Archaeology has been bicephalic. In part, it has been promoted by specialists from other disciplinary spaces (Prehistory or Classical Archaeology), who have expanded their interests in a chronological sense. But above all, documentary medievalists are the ones who have stimulated, or even led, its practice. This explains, in a way, the ancillary character that Medieval Archaeology has had in its first steps in theoretical, methodological and applied terms; but also, the relevance Social History has had in the construction of the archaeological research agenda.

However, while the Archaeology of Al-Andalus experienced a remarkable development from the 1980s, among other reasons, due to the absence of a documentary corpus and a tradition that conditioned and limited the research agenda[28]; the study of the northern societies has followed another path. Here, the take-off of Medieval Archaeology was much slower, and it took much longer to develop an autonomous research agenda. In other words, many of the topics which were analysed have been defined according to the gaps in the documentation preserved, the verification of hypothesis defined from the texts or the integration into existing narratives[29].

In this scenario, a new rescue archaeology has been promoted from the 90s from the periphery of the academia. Large scale projects have discovered new kind of sites, and numerous farms, villages ecofacts and other remains related to rural inhabitants have been found[30]. It is intriguing to note that this evidence geographical distribution is very uneven in the peninsular complex, and it is concentrated in some cities' surroundings and in areas where a large number of public works have been carried out. Besides, this movement must be contextualized within the ~~framework of~~ the profound renewal that archaeological studies of early medieval societies experimented in the Iberian Peninsula, involving academics and other agents. It is extremely difficult to synthesize the amount of data available briefly, although some regional and general synthesis have been recently made[31]. However, these first narratives show a profound disconnection with the progress made by Roman archaeology in recent years.

On the other hand, broad consensus has not yet been reached on the interpretation of the new records due to three main causes. Firstly, very few sites have been properly processed and edited, biasing their heuristic utility. Secondly, these rural records are complex, ambiguous and difficult to characterise in social and economic terms[32]. As a result, these sites have been usually read in the light of other sources or external frameworks. Thirdly, they have been read from a wide variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, including Christian Archaeology, Classical and Prehistoric Archaeology, the Archaeology of ethnicity, Social History, pragmatic epistemologies, etc. This epistemological pluralism and complex mosaic[33] of medieval archaeological studies is the background of many of the current debates.

Ten years ago J. Escalona published a paper entitled 'The early Castilian peasantry: an archaeological turn?' predicting a profound transformation of peasantry studies thanks to

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[28] García Porras (2014).

[29] Valor and Gutiérrez González (2014).

[30] Ballesteros Arias, Criado Boado, and Andrade Cernadas (2006); Vigil-Escalera Guirado (2007); Roig Buxó (2009); Tejerizo García (2017).

[31] Diarte-Blasco (2018); Martínez Jiménez, Sastre de Diego, and Tejerizo García (2018).

[32] Gutiérrez Lloret and Grau Mira (2012).

[33] Johnson (2020).

the development of archaeology, bio-archaeological studies and the creation of new chronological instruments[34]. These expectations have only been met due to the low theoretical level with which local societies in general, and peasantry in particular, have been characterized.

This work aims to test the use of a <u>relational approach</u> in order to illuminate the materiality of the "small worlds" that formed the puzzle of northwestern early medieval peasantry from a new perspective.

4. Settlement patterns, economy and patronage from a relation perspective

To carry out this exercise, there will be three themes analysed as they constitute some of the main problems addressed by north-western Iberian early medieval peasantry archaeology. Taking into account the work's approach, only a few specific examples will be cited, although geographical and chronological diversity is a fundamental pattern to understand these societies.

4.1. Settlement patterns and the elephant in the room

The study of settlement patterns has been the main resource used by historical archaeology to characterize rural landscapes in social terms. In a seminal book devoted to the transit from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, R. Francovich and R. Hodges used the significant title 'Villa to village'.[35] These are two landmarks in historiographical terms as well as two opposing forms of social organization. The *villae* are the arrival point of studies on roman rural landscapes, and their disarticulation is the inexcusable starting point for late Middle Ages specialists. Over the years the passage from the *villa* to the village has become the most influential and common framework for much of the synthesis and case studies carried out in virtually all Europe. In fact, in the case of the Iberian Peninsula this model has also exerted a remarkable influence, as seen in the most recent synthesises[36].

The villa-centred narrative and the predominance of specialized slave-based production has long been abandoned by much of roman archaeology, not only showing the existence of a remarkable diversity of sites, but also very heterogeneous regional patterns[37]. But despite this, the *villa* is still remarkably central in the scientific production of the Iberian Peninsula[38]. It is true that in recent years there have been important contributions making other types of occupations visible, but there is still a lack of territorial synthesis that values rural landscapes heterogeneity. And although there are undoubted steps being done in this direction[39], it is significant to note that the main excavations and published studies are concentrated in the *villae*, while other rural settlements are mainly known through surveys.

In turn, early medieval scholars have developed sophisticated proposals to analyse the disarticulation of the *villae*, villages and farm formation, the emergence of new rural central places, micro-displacements, fusion and fission, occupational persistence and overlaps of rural sites, etc.[40]. But a common feature of almost all these works is that it has been assumed that the starting point would be a homogeneous and hegemonic villa-

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[34] Escalona (2009).

[35] Francovich and Hodges (2003).

[36] Diarte-Blasco (2018); Martínez Jiménez, Sastre de Diego, and Tejerizo García (2018).

[37] Among others, Cleary (2003); Habermehl (2013); Smith et al. (2016); Allen (2017); Reddé (2017).

[38] Sánchez López and Bustamante-Álvarez (2019).

[39] Salido Domínguez, Fernández Ochoa, and Zarzalejos Prieto (2014); Bermejo (2017); Fernández Ochoa and Zarzalejos Prieto (2017).

[40] See Quirós Castillo (2009); Caballero Zoreda, Mateos Cruz, and Cordero Ruiz (2012); Ariño Gil (2013).

centred system, implicitly denying peasantry in roman times. In other words, peasantry, communities and villages would have been a medieval creation, assuming a social discontinuity throughout the 5th century. The debates, sometimes ideologically biased and full of demagogic approaches, have focused on aspects such as the persistence of great property even in the absence of monumental *villae*, the invisibility of elites' residences in the countryside, the impact of migrations, peasantry 'autonomy', the impact of climate change, the emergence of new centres of power, the transformation of cities, etc.[41].

What is the political and social role of the *villae* in the late roman period? The most recent studies carried out in many sectors of the Empire tend to relativize their importance in quantitative but also qualitative terms[42]. What kind of asymmetrical relationships would be established between the *villae* and the many farms discovered in the late roman landscapes? There is a rather widespread consensus when questioning the weight of slavery in the production of late *villae*. Was the *villae* system based on an extensive network of peasants? Was there room in the villa-centred system for smallholders[43] that participated in different political communities and economic systems? In short, can it be thought that late medieval peasantry is the result of the resilience of peasants, settlers, and different types of late roman farmers, now that some authors underline the continuity factors between ancient and medieval landscapes [44]? Numerous questions are raised when it comes to including roman peasantry, as it has been characterized in recent years[45], in the equation.

There is indeed consensus among specialists to accept that the roman settlement pattern would be predominantly dispersed in the Western Empire[46], so that the creation or the "birth" of the villages and compact communities would be a novelty in the early medieval period. Most scholars have proposed that the transit from the late roman dispersed settlement to concentrated forms would have been promoted by elites in terms of dominance and control[47], or the spontaneous agency of peasantries[48]. However, today we know that the early medieval settlement is heterogeneous, complex and a diversity of morphologies coexist[49]. Although there may be correlations, there is no direct causality between habitat morphologies and forms of domain[50].

Almudena Hernando has defined the concept of relational identity, opposed to individual identity, as a defining feature of reduced division of functions and specialization of work groups. This identity is not defined from a particular type of social relationships, but from the impossibility of conceiving themselves outside a framework of relationships and belonging practices that provide security to each of the individuals[51]. Two consequences that derive from this assumption is that, on the one hand, material culture would not only express membership in a group but would be an active instrument of building a shared social reality. In other words, social and economic differences in such societies would tend to be hidden and relativized in favour of a common identity project. And although the identification of social relations, including those of dependency, is always

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[41] Ariño Gil (2013); Reynolds (2015); Diarte-Blasco (2018); Chavarría (2013).
[42] Bermejo Tirado (2019).
[43] Netting (1993).
[44] Rippon, Smart, and Pears (2015).
[45] Bowes (2020).
[46] Monteil (2014); Grey (2011).
[47] Fossier (1982).
[48] Francovich and Hodges (2003).
[49] Vigil-Escalera Guirado (2007).
[50] Wickham (2005).
[51] Hernando (2017).

problematic from the material record[52], certain forms of collective organization based on co-residence explicitly pursue a certain degree of uniformity. This is, in fact, one of the main frustrations for archaeologists who study peasant occupations and aspire to carry out social analyses from domestic records: neither architecture nor material culture reflect the structure of local hierarchies in a simple way. One of the most significant examples are the early medieval villages studied in the Douro basin, where studies have shown a tendency to hide social and economic differences in domestic spaces[53].

Secondly, a basic cohesion instrument for communities is the construction of social memories that legitimize a particular social order and identify a group through the definition of collective consciousness. In the case of peasant memory, the relevance of local geography and the creation of meaningful narratives in contextual terms are two of its main features[54]. In material terms, the most recognizable technology of building shared memory, though not the only one, is the creation of a funerary space, which roots people to space and generates genealogical ties with ancestors. In fact, one of the main social tragedies of today's pandemic is the impossibility of participating in funeral ceremonies. In early medieval village and farm cemeteries the burials preserve a spatial identity over time, with very rare cases of cuts and overlaps. In addition, there are numerous cases of multigenerational reuse of the same grave. Another feature that characterizes funeral practices in the rural environment is the enormous diversity, both of burial sites and morphologies and rituals. Far from there being a one-to-one identity between the inhabited places and the necropolises, a wide variety of burial forms coexists in the same site[55]. There is no shortage of cases of scattered or nucleated occupations that generate one or more burial sites or lack their own burial spaces, showing that the construction of communities with their own social memory should not be based solely on co-residence. The complex settlement pattern from the Visigoth period documented, for example, on the occasion of the construction of Terminal 4 in Barajas airport is a good example of the alternation of nucleated habitats endowed with or devoid of cemeteries, farms with and without cemeteries, realities anchored to old or new foundation roman *villae*, etc.[56]. Any simple modelling is destined to fail.

And while the projection of the late medieval village community continues to determine the interpretation of early periods, peasant households participate in different networks and communities that transcend the village. In other words, beyond the concentrated or dispersed character of population units, the peasant universe is much richer and articulated in relational terms than it has been considered so far. Identifying under what circumstances the memorialization of shared identities are activated or hidden is therefore key to understand the social articulation of peasantry and other rural groups. From this perspective, the variability of funeral practices in the roman rural world is an important reference when it comes to visualising forms of sociability which were not based on co-residence, but in terms of belonging, segregation and exclusion[57].

In summary, the explicit recognition of the roman peasantry[58] not only forces to critically review the pristine narrative of early medieval social landscapes, but also raises new questions. The use of notions such as relational identity and the artefactual dimension of social memory are analytical tools of undoubted value. The roman and medieval

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[52] Witcher (2006).
[53] Tejerizo García (2017).
[54] Fentress and Wickham (1992).
[55] Vigil-Escalera Guirado (2013).
[56] See the special issue Zona Arqueológica 8 (2006).
[57] Bermejo Tirado (2019); Vaquerizo Gil (2002); Teichner (2016); Contreras Martínez (2017); Smith et al. (2018).
[58] Bermejo (2017).

peasantry were organized very differently, and an approach of this nature allows us to better understand what these differences consist of.

4.2. Rural economies and social networks
The economic trends between Antiquity and the Medieval age can be also reconsidered taking into consideration the role of Roman peasantries. According to the accepted narrative, the end of the Roman world would have led to a profound transformation in rural economy. Intensive and partly state-stimulated farming, systematic animal breeding and specialised production was replaced by a more varied rural landscapes, based on land use and crop diversification, including changes in animal husbandry[59] This general picture remains valid to a certain extent, but when local realities are taken into account, nuances lead to reviewing this characterization.

It is accepted that the degree of specialization and commercial orientation of agricultural production in the roman period was very variable in geographical and chronological terms. Indeed, P. Leveau has defined some general farming economy trends showing a noticeable complexity. Besides, these patterns do not perfectly overlap with the tendencies illuminated by pottery circulation[60].

On an interregional or sub-regional scale, the quantitative and qualitative relevance of roman large estates is very heterogeneous. How does rural economy actually work in the late roman period? What forms of economic subordination existed between the *villae* and the numerous farmsteads that have been recognized in recent years? Did provincial aristocracies and intermediate groups hegemonically control the means of production and transformation, distribution networks, or both? What role would intermediaries and local agents play, who are still apparently invisible? What role could smallholders have in the late roman period in economic terms? Again, the questions are numerous when it comes to locating peasant groups in an explanatory frame. In addition, the still imperfect integration of environmental records limits the reconstruction of farming economy, although it cannot be denied that this situation is destined to change shortly[61].

The authors who have dealt with post-roman rural societies in Hispania have suggested that some of the main features of economic trends have been the increasing role of a peasant rationality pattern based on risk aversion, the disappearance of scale economies and a cultural change in the use of material culture to build social relationships. The fragmentation of political frameworks and the social and spatial distance of aristocracies and intermediate elites with local societies would have favoured some degree of peasantry "autonomy" in terms of decision-making and the management of agricultural practices. As a result, farming economy based on the diversification of practices and spaces, the use of silos related to the storage of the normal surplus and other risk mitigation mechanisms, the investment in landesque capital oriented to the improvement and preservation of the ecologic bases of the agrosystems, or the use of low sophisticated items in absence of the contraction of high quality demand are some of the main features of the early medieval economy. But the interpretation of these changes has led to a hot debate between scholars defending the prevalence of a peasant mode of production, emphasizing peasant "autonomy", as opposed to those who defend the continuity of the great late roman property and the relevance of elites in everyday local societies[62]. In my opinion, neither of the two sides, with all their variations, can satisfactorily explain the complexity of post-imperial peasant archaeological records. But above all, both positions have assumed or

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[59] Chavarría, Lewit, and Izdebski (2019).
[60] Panella (1993); Leveau (2007).
[61] See Peña-Chocarro et al. (2019); López-Sáez et al. (2019).
[62] See Ward-Perkins (2005); Tejerizo García (2017); Fernández (2017).

denied socioeconomic inequality, thus naturalizing social asymmetries. I believe that a perspective that associates the concept of subsistence risk with the notion of social risk is more useful to understand the complexity of peasant societies and their materiality.

The concept of social risk comes from the assumption that the viability of the peasantry enterprise does not solely depend on the availability of economic means to overcome subsistence risk. The availability of ceremonial funds and the participation of complex social practices of reciprocity aimed at ensuring social balance within a shared moral space are equal to or more relevant than economic mechanisms[63]. Moral economy behaviours, developed among others by authors such as J. C. Scott, E. Thompson or R. Faith[64], are based on the existence of a series of shared values that guarantee the right of subsistence by establishing mechanisms of requested generosity and creating balances with the intention to maintain a social order. In fact, moral economy has often been opposed to political economy, which would explain the creation of asymmetrical forms of power and domination[65]. The centrality of moral economy in early medieval local societies explains some of the characteristics of peasant archaeological records, such as the existence of social pre-eminence forms that are invisible or based on economic terms[66], or the existence of forms of goods and resources redistribution by individuals or households, the holding of feasts and other collective practices[67]. Consequently, moral economy logic determines the establishment of networks of reciprocal obligation and mutual support among households within local societies. But they also set limits on the growth of economic inequality within communities, imposing more subtle forms of dominance based on influence, non-trade and reputation[68]. This type of social practices, attested in historical accounts and ethnography, explain some of the peasant material records. In this way, it is possible to overcome misconceptions such as autarchy, social independence and stability of local societies[69].

Moreover, since the peasant logics of risk aversion is embedded in social practices and determined by a shared moral order, not only just one pattern of peasant rationality can be defined. For instance, while the storage silos of normal surplus are located in the singular households in Iberian early medieval villages, in Languedoc and Southern Gaulle they appear clustered, and sometimes distant from the inhabited spaces, defining collective spaces[70]. Recognition of this variability provides important keys to understand the nature of non-nucleated and concentrated peasant societies.

Consequently, while food sovereignty is the key goal for the production and reproduction of peasant households, the achievement of this objective cannot be only explained through the identification of economic risk management markers[71]. Participating in and building local communities entails the creation of a shared moral space that has to be analysed from a relational perspective whose main objective is not only to identify hierarchical systems. What is more, Roman and Early Medieval rural economy shows that risk-avoiding exposure was not unique to peasantry, but to some extent it was also pursued by elites and aristocracies. Therefore, the search for specialization markers, even if they are partial, may not be the best way to characterize the economic trends of these periods.

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[63] Grey (2011).
[64] Thompson (1971); Scott (1977); Faith (2019).
[65] González-Ruibal (2012).
[66] This is the case of the Zornoztegi village, see Quirós Castillo (2020b).
[67] Sykes (2015).
[68] Some relevant analogy can be found in Clastres (1977).
[69] Horden and Purcell (2000); Pastor de Togneri and Rodríguez López (2000).
[70] Maufras (2006).
[71] Marston (2011).

4.3. Peasant societies and beyond: patronage and clientelisms

If the archaeology of peasantry has difficulties in identifying social inequality within communities and revealing economic logics, a third challenge is to understand the asymmetrical relationships that are established between peasant societies and elites in the local scale. While the materiality of the *villae* and other monumental sites makes it possible to describe late roman agricultural societies in hierarchical terms within the framework of the great property strengthening[72], the post-roman social landscapes are opaquer. Two of the main difficulties are, on the one hand, the characterization and identification of rents and taxes, given the lack of elites' patterns of feeding and consumption. On the other hand, many of the narratives on the forms of domination of the post-roman societies in the northwest peninsula have been aimed at identifying hierarchical relationships, often presented in terms of "continuity" and persistence with respect to the late roman period[73]. Besides, rural elites' sites seem to be almost invisible in large regions of the northwest peninsula.

According to ethnographic accounts and textual evidence, hierarchical relationships are far from exhausting the complex network of dependence relationships active in rural societies. Moreover, direct hierarchical dependence does not have to be the more relevance pattern in scenarios such as the post-roman period, when a contraction of the political horizons caused an experimental and negotiated social environment. Some scholars have highlighted the key role that the forms of domination based on patronage and clientelism acquire. Strong local communities founded on reciprocity practices anchored in moral economy, could provide a solid framework to tackle household, family or individual subsistence risk and social risk. However, these horizontal networks did not often meet all social safety nets, so local societies became complex arenas of interaction for different agencies.

Understanding the mechanisms and contexts in which such vertical and transversal relationships are activated poses numerous problems for archaeology because it forces it to penetrate the individual biographies of people and peasant societies. And as it has been emphasized several times throughout this work, a trait that defines their materiality is homogeneity. Does this mean that patronage and clientelism networks is forbidden to archaeologists? Not necessarily.

The apparent contradictions existing between the domestic, the funerary and the artefacts records in early medieval societies have long been highlighted. Sometimes lavish grave goods have been found in cemeteries in farmer sites; occupations; it is remarkable the lack of similar furnished burials in urban and central places cemeteries; in some cases, unusual and exotic material (e.g. imported wares, portable objects made in specialized worships) have been recovered in households similar to other farming houses, etc.[74] The interpretation of this evidence has led to heated debates: What would the discovery of valuables in peasant cemeteries in the Visigoth period mean? Why do the powerful sometimes show and sometimes seem to hide their wealth in cemeteries?

A. Vigil-Escalera has analysed these paradoxes taking into consideration the heterogeneous funerary universe recovered in Madrid and date in the 5th-8th centuries. He has made a strong comparison between the roman tradition grave goods found in the village of El Pelicano, founded on a roman *villae*, and the "visigoth" items recovered at

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[72] Chavarría, Lewit, and Izdebski (2019).
[73] Brogiolo (2012); Fernández (2017).
[74] Vigil-Escalera Guirado and Quirós Castillo (2013).

the site of Gózquez, a settlement founded in the 6th century without any roman background[75].

According to Vigil-Escalera, these items should be considered not only as a material expression of the unequal wealth of households and the existence of local elites, but also as a practice of affirmation and differentiation from others, building a hierarchy of representations, as the so-called closure theory argues[76]. While domestic records show remarkable homogeneity, these strategies of distinction based on public destruction of wealth are activated in the critical trance of intergenerational change, building social and symbolic capital.

Secondly, it is very significant that a village created over a late roman villae, such as El Pelicano, resorts to roman material culture, while a village resulting from a new agrarian occupation in the 6th century (Gozquez), prefer "visigoths" items in a context of land reclamation. In other words, "visigoth" goods are not a passive marker of a predefined normative identity, but an active instrument of negotiation aimed to create a particular social order. The Gramscian notion of hegemony, rather than the use of forms of emulation, is particularly useful for understanding the adoption of a certain set of symbols materialized through the furnished burials.

are damaged and/or repaired in these village necropolises. The cultural biography of objects approach has explored the complex forms of social use of material culture, beyond the economic logics of production-use-discard practices[77]. Even if it is very difficult to talk about a specific and distinctive "peasant material culture", but there are behaviours towards the objects that can characterize these societies. It may be suggested, for example, that certain objects were treasured for more or less long periods by a family in the form of heirlooms and were only used in the funeral ritual in certain contexts which were critical to the social group. On the other hand, it is particularly intriguing to note that in places like Catalonia repaired and reused "visigoth" personal objects are apparently more abundant than in other Iberian regions[78].

Fourthly, and perhaps more importantly, these practices show that some individuals and families could have objects which were not produced in villages acting as a symbol of distinction. Authors such as Pierre Bourdieu have stressed that identity symbolic items exchange are not commercial based but embedded in social relations[79]. In other words, some grave goods or the discovery of particular ceramic, glass and other items, is not a mere reflection of "wealth", but shows the existence of vertical relationships with external agents that can be defined in terms of patronage and clientelism. Establishing how these networks were used and articulated and on what basis their pre-eminence was based is much less evident: Are they local agents of the powerful? Are they local elites with aspiration to go beyond the narrow limits of peasant society? Are they owners with a certain capacity for social action? Aren't they peasants as such? So far, it has not been possible to answer these questions yet.

All these inferences allow us to characterize early medieval peasant communities as complex and dynamic social arenas with a collective and individual agency capacity. It is, in any case, a relational agency[80] in which multidimensional forms of power and domination are activated. Undoubtedly, this is not an exclusive phenomenon of the early medieval period, and there are solid studies carried out on the late roman or late medieval

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[75] Vigil-Escalera Guirado (2015).
[76] Hinton (2005).
[77] Kopytoff (1986); Gosden and Marshall (1999).
[78] Roig Buxó (2019).
[79] Bourdieu (2006).
[80] Robb (2010).

rural communities, among others[81]. In short, the change of scale of political systems and the contraction of the local action social horizons that took place in the post-roman period created certain opportunities in terms of agency and increase of the number of landowners. But they also created the conditions for stronger forms of interpersonal domination.

5. Final remarks

Specialists in local early medieval societies are encapsulated in an uncomfortable position between two powerful theoretical traditions. On the one hand, prehistorians, who have built sophisticated theoretical models to understand the material record of early peasantries. On the other hand, scholars dedicated to the study of the late medieval, modern and contemporary periods, who have detailed information resources, so they have developed a wide diversity of approaches. From this perspective, the archaeology of the roman peasantry has many more points in common with the late medievalists' trajectory than what we have imagined so far. The narratives of roman societies have been biased by the centrality of the slave-based *villae* and the Grand Narratives about the specialized and consumer market-oriented economy. The accounts of early medieval peasantry have moved between the primitivist models, which reduced them to little more than nomadic agents endowed with a material culture more typical of the Bronze Age than that of historical periods, and others where communities were represented as passive, homogeneous and agency-free social ensembles. The new archaeological records created in the last few decades have ended up sharpening these trends, generating unproductive debates due to the low level of theorization with which the study of their materiality has been addressed.

The relational approach outlined here from concepts such as relational agency, social memory, moral economy, relational identity, necessary reciprocity, or closure theory have tried to provide new avenues for critically re-examining a record that is complex. The recognition and conceptualization of roman peasantry not only requires overcome the argumentative naivety with which the pristine account of medieval peasantry has been built, but also allows comparisons in chronological terms to be made in order to improve the analysis of subaltern groups.

In short, the academic fragmentation that divides the specialists of the roman and medieval ages, as well as the division between specialist of things and words, limits the possibility of understanding past local societies. And although our post-industrial society looks at a distance, if not with suspicion, to peasantries, their understanding offers fresh perspectives to improve the conceptual and hermeneutic approaches used to the analysis of our past and, therefore, how our present is understood. The binary scheme that contrasts top-down vs bottom-up perspectives, power and subalternity, continuity and fracture, specialization and autarchy is enriched with notions of community, reciprocity, domination, patronage and multiple agencies.

The pandemic is showing us that individual well-being depends on the community, as it provides security in many ways[82]. Virtual social media communities cannot fully impersonate neighbourhood-based communities. A better understanding of how history's most resilient communities have worked should not therefore be a mere academic exercise in the "new normality" of post-Covid society.

Acknowledgements

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[81] For instance, Pastor de Togneri and Rodríguez López (2000); Grey (2011).
[82] Bauman (2003).

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CAPTIONS