

An archaeology of the “small worlds”: Social inequality in early medieval Iberian rural communities

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This paper uses the archaeological record to analyse the forms of social inequality that existed within early medieval rural communities. Although scholars consider that the early medieval period was a critical moment in the (re)definition of grouping and social organisation at the local scale, these processes are poorly understood given the limitations of the written evidence preserved. On the other hand, the long-term perspective of archaeology provides the opportunity to re-examine the processes of complexity and social differentiation that took place throughout the Early Middle Ages from a new perspective. This paper takes as its case study Álava, where there is a significant density of high-resolution archaeological records making it possible to compare the nature of the changes that took place within various peasant communities, and explore their interactions with active domain structures at the local and supralocal scale. Therefore, a bottom-up multilayer perspective has been used, based on the contrast between the logics of political economy and moral economy. Three main themes are explored: the formation of medieval villages and village communities; the hierarchisation of peasant communities; and the interaction between these communities and the networks of aristocratic power. As opposed to narratives that have analysed this period in terms of the progressive and necessary subjection of the peasantry to the power of the lordship, it is concluded that local societies constituted very active arenas of negotiation, counter-positioning and experimentation in the Early Middle Ages, which, although barely visible in the written documentation, generated multiple forms of dominance, and asymmetric social cooperation and conflict.

Keywords

Álava, Storage systems, Social Inequality, Social complexity, Moral economy, Political economy, Silos.

1. Introduction

Social complexity in past societies has been a key topic of the social sciences, and in particular anthropology and social archaeology. Throughout the twentieth century several generations of scholars have approached this topic from the perspective of social evolution, theorising “social progress” in terms of growing complexity. For this purpose, different typological approaches have been used in order to demonstrate and explain the transition from egalitarian societies to state formation.¹ The inevitability and the unilinearity of these approaches, as well as their Eurocentric or even racist character, have been rejected in recent decades in favour of more nuanced and articulated perspectives. On the one hand, proposals based on a multilinear evolution analysis have been developed, emphasising and rejecting direct connections between “progress” and social change.² On the other hand, rather than identifying social complexity with social inequality, stratification and hierarchy, these topics have been redefined, introducing

¹ Pluciennik, *Social Evolution*.

² Johnson and Earle, *The evolution of human societies*.

new concepts and themes.³ In addition, in recent years the study of the emergence and reproduction of social inequalities has acquired a notable role in light of the 2007-2008 financial crisis.⁴

It is within this intellectual context that we should situate the recent renewal in the social history of medieval Iberia. On the one hand, the research agenda has been broadened, surpassing the classic topics of study of the last third of the 20th century. Moreover, it has started to overcome the explanatory models that emphasised elite agency and presented the subordinate groups as passive subjects teleologically submitted to the elites. However, perhaps the key factor most decisively contributing to this renewal is the emergence of a powerful archaeology of early medieval rural societies.⁵

As in other European contexts, new archaeological records have been created in Iberia in the last few years.⁶ However, the circumstances in which this “involuntary archaeology” has taken place, limits the creation of territorial models and detailed comparison with historical accounts. Above all, a new research agenda is needed in order to exploit the new records to their full potential.

In this paper it is argued that one of the most fruitful lines of inquiry to analyse these rural archaeological sites is the study of the forms of inequality that developed within local societies over the long term. In theoretical terms, the main intellectual references are Italian microhistory,⁷ and especially the social history of “small worlds” that has been promoted by various British social historians.

Despite the fact that the socio-political localisation and regionalisation of economic and political dynamics are two of the main factors that characterise this period, the nature of the preserved evidence and the attention to the Great Narratives explains why early medieval local societies have rarely been studied by historians of the early medieval period. Only on occasion have a handful of historians been able to draw clear pictures of local realities or “small worlds”⁸ in areas well interconnected with the interests of certain monasteries or ecclesiastical institutions.⁹ On these rare occasions it has been possible to analyse the complexity of local realities, the role of local elites in social life, as well as rural communities and lordship relationships at the local scale, at least during the brief periods for which the documentation is sufficiently dense.¹⁰

Even though the starting point of archaeological analysis is precisely single local realities, early medieval Iberian archaeologists have usually tried to extrapolate very big pictures out of single case studies. In addition, the almost obsessive search for elites and high-

³ Kohring and Wynne-Jones, *Socialising Complexity*; Chapman, *Archaeologies of complexity*; Flannery and Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality*; Douglas Price and Feinman, *Pathways to Power*.

⁴ Milanovic, *Global Inequality*; Scheidel, *The Great Leveler*.

⁵ We still lack critical historiographical balances of a certain depth, but among others, see García de Cortázar, *La historiografía de un tema hispano*; Fernández Mier, *De la Arqueología del paisaje*.

⁶ Among the most important European work see Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements*; Peytremann, *Archéologie de l'habitat rural*; Francovich and Hodges, *Villa to Village*; Hamerow, *Rural Settlement*; Loveluck, *Northwestern Europe*. In Iberia they have also started to appear some synthesis as those by Martínez-Jiménez, *The Iberian Peninsula*; Diarte-Blasco, *Late Antique and Early Medieval Hispania*.

⁷ Levi, “On microhistory”.

⁸ I use the term coined by W. Davies in her exemplary study of Breton landscapes, Davies, *Small worlds*.

⁹ In early medieval Iberia, see among other examples Martínez Sopena and Carbajo Serrano, “Notas sobre la colonización”; García de Cortázar, *Estudios de Historia Medieval*; Martín Viso, “Los “pequeños mundos””; Portass, *The village world*; Carvajal Castro, *Bajo la máscara del “Regnum”*.

¹⁰ Among others Davies, *Small worlds*; Wickham, *The mountain and the city*; Innes, *State and Society*; West, “Visions in a Ninth-Century Village”.

status occupations, ever on the lookout for “signatures” and “markers” of status in order to study sites that otherwise would have appeared too homogeneous, has precluded the possibility of creating an ontology of subordinate groups.¹¹

How can the archaeology of early medieval rural societies study social change within the “small worlds”? Is the archaeological evidence detailed enough to analyse social complexity at the very local level? How can local and intermediate elites be defined in material terms, and how do they transform over time? In the end, what new contributions can archaeology offer in order to shed light on the study of social inequality in the “small worlds”?

This paper aims to explore the socio-political articulation of rural communities using a bottom-up approach, highlighting the role of the peasantry as an active agent in social change.¹² This perspective will make it possible to analyse the dynamics of rural communities while avoiding teleological interpretations, and to examine topics such as the emergence of local elites, the mechanisms of social promotion, the success and failure of social mobility, and the dense networks of connections existing between local communities and their surrounding societies.

To do so, we will employ high-resolution records to define the materiality and nature of these communities and to analyse their transformations over the long term. This paper will be divided into three main parts. First, I will briefly address more theoretical aspects involved in characterising local societies, as well the archaeological approach adopted. Then, I will analyse local societies in a sample territory for which we have this type of high-resolution records. Lastly, I will propose a set of generalisations, bearing in mind that the main goal of this paper is not to propose broad explanatory models, but rather to understand the processes at play in specific contexts.

2. Towards an archaeology of local societies

With the concept of local societies, I am referring to the arena or context in which social reality is built as a result of negotiation, confrontation, and tension between different agents. Therefore, it is not only a scale of analysis, but also a path for the study of localised socio-political systems, which dominated early medieval social landscapes. Although the main scenarios for the analysis of local societies are villages and rural landscapes where the peasantry lived and worked, the objects of analysis are by no means limited to peasant societies. However, the study of this archaeological evidence is complex and at times frustrating. While the historical accounts of “small worlds” show internally hierarchical and dynamic local societies, with varying degrees of autonomy from the lordships,¹³ rural archaeological records often offer a much opaquer picture. In most cases houses are homogeneous, and economies are not specialised but rather involve a considerable diversification of small-scale productions. Signs of complexity, such as local churches or lavish burials, are uncommon, and it is not easy to determine residents’ social status.¹⁴

The starting point to unravel this apparent contradiction is the analysis of peasant societies and economies. During the 60s and 70s, economic and political anthropology

¹¹ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades campesinas*.

¹² Erickson, “Intensification, Political Economy”; Netting, *Smallholders, householders*.

¹³ Van Onaker, *Village elites and social structures*, 272.

¹⁴ See Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements*; Peytremann, *Archéologie de l’habitat rural*; Francovich and Hodges, *Villa to Village*; Hamerow, *Rural Settlement*; Vigil-Escalera, “Granjas y aldeas altomedievales”.

developed a dense theoretical body regarding peasant societies, which has been used, above all by prehistoric archaeology. Authors such as A. Chayanov or M. Sahlins argued that the economic horizon of the peasantry was not the maximisation of profit, but the search for long-term stability while minimising risks.¹⁵ Only social stress or demographic pressure could determine the introduction of technological changes or an increase in labour in order to increase production, as suggested by E. Boserup.¹⁶ If this is true, then how does social change occur in peasant societies? Throughout the last third of the 20th century, Hispanic early medievalists came to reject the romantic characterisation of a free peasantry and the weakness of Iberian feudalism, in favour of proposals pointing to the existence of profound social asymmetries. Some scholars have focused their explanations on external factors, such as demographic growth or the role of external agents and pressure from the lordship, while others have proposed models of internal development.¹⁷ In any case, most authors have opted to identify prime movers that unleashed the historical change in question.

The present study seeks to develop a dialectic interpretative approach. The analysis of these “small worlds” could be made in terms of contrast and permanent tension between political and moral economies, understood in terms of power relations.¹⁸ The main difference between political and moral economies is that the former provide the basis for the generation of permanent and structural inequalities, while the latter use mechanisms to mask and limit them. Political economies are a set of practices and strategies that provide the framework for the emergence and reproduction of inequality, leadership, relationships, tribute, prestige-good systems, production and management of surpluses, and so on.¹⁹ From a political economy perspective, the peasantry is defined in terms of subordination, because their surpluses are transferred to a dominant group of rulers in a systematic manner. This notion has been widely used by archaeology and anthropology, especially as a scale of analysis of social complexity.²⁰ By contrast, moral economy focuses on collective practices, based on regulations and obligations that mediate the social, political and economic relationships of a given group. They include mutual aid and reciprocity, communal rights and obligations, goods, and social practices, and they play a major role in the balance of peasant and local societies. As a result, better-off peasants would be forced to regularly redistribute their surplus among their relatives, friends and neighbours.²¹ This would create reciprocal obligations, but would also have prevented elites from amassing significant accumulations of goods.²² Unlike the previous concept, this line of work has not been

¹⁵ Chayanov, *La organización de la unidad económica*; Sahlins, *Stone age economics*.

¹⁶ Boserup, *The conditions of Agriculture Growth*.

¹⁷ García de Cortázar, “La formación de la sociedad feudal”; Sabaté, “El temps i l’espai del feudalisme”; Larrea, “De la invisibilidad historiográfica”; Escalona, “The early Castilian peasantry”; Fernández Mier, “El paisaje rural medieval”.

¹⁸ This opposition was proposed by Cultural Anthropologist in the 70s, see Scott, *The moral economy of the peasants*. Here I follow the statements made by González Ruibal, “The Politics of Identity”, even if he uses these concepts from different perspectives.

¹⁹ For example, Scarborough, “Intensification and Political Economy”; Feinman and Nicholas, *Archaeological Perspectives on Political Economy*.

²⁰ Feinman and Nicholas, *Archaeological Perspectives on Political Economy*.

²¹ Scott, *The moral economy of the peasants*.

²² Scott, *The moral economy of the peasants*, 42.

widely used by archaeology yet, but has been employed by several generations of historians, starting with the influential work of E. P. Thompson.²³

The coexistence of both mechanisms in local societies explains why no relevant internal social distances were created, and also why it was so difficult to establish asymmetric forms of domination, which, indeed, is what the ambiguity of the archaeological record reflects.²⁴ However, this does not mean that these societies were not deeply unequal and in tension. In fact, reciprocity practices sometimes collapsed in one direction or when external agents were imposed, causing structural changes across the whole socioeconomic system.

C. Wickham has been the most acute author to implement these theoretical concerns, in his seminal work on the Mediterranean and early medieval Europe. He has defined a contrast between two ideal models, which he has called peasant production mode and feudal production mode, in order to analyse political and moral economy in peasant societies.²⁵ In empirical terms, he suggests that the prevalent trend of the distribution of these models in Western Europe could be defined in terms of a leopard-spot geographical pattern, characterised by the coexistence of heterogeneous realities. There are areas of peasant society dominion alternating with spaces of aristocratic control. And even though he has tried to use archaeology to create and analyse these models, this is a difficult task, especially in Southern Europe, where only a handful of micro-territories have been sufficiently studied.

However, new rural archaeological datasets can provide very vivid local-scale pictures for the purpose of modelling social inequalities and social change in early medieval rural societies. This paper will study the territory of the Álava Plain in Northern Iberia, where a significant number of archaeological projects have been carried out in the last fifteen years. As a consequence, some internal comparisons can be made, following the approach used in most of the historical accounts on “small worlds”.

3. The Álava Plain: a case study

The Álava Plain is a structural depression covering approximately 500 km² that is drained by the river Zadorra, a tributary of the Ebro, located on the Mediterranean side of the Basque Country (**fig.1**). The city of Vitoria-Gasteiz, capital of the region, is located in the centre of the plain, just a few kilometres away from the old Roman city of Veleia²⁶. The plain is delimited by various mountain ranges with forest and pasture areas, which today are communal properties that in some instances are shared by several rural communities. At the bottom of the plain there is a large number of small villages of medieval origin, most of them located a short distance from one another.

Northern Iberia was an area of intense political and social fluency throughout the Early Middle Ages, when there was series of state formations, military conquests and political collapses²⁷. Between the 5th and 11th centuries, this area was alternatively dominated by the Roman Empire, the Suevic state first and Visigothic state later, al-Andalus, the Astur-Leonés and Navarran kingdoms, and, finally, the Castilian kingdoms. Álava, like all

²³ Thompson, “The Moral Economy”. For an archaeological application see Trawick, “The Moral Economy of Water”.

²⁴ Although the importance of other factors for homogenisation should not be ruled out, such as the creation of collective identities through domestic spaces, see González Ruibal and Ayán Vila, *Arqueología*, 319.

²⁵ Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, 535-547.

²⁶ Azkarate Garai-Olaun and Solaun Bustinza, *Arqueología e Historia de una ciudad*.

²⁷ Martín Viso, “Colapso político y sociedades locales”.

the Basque Country, has always been on the periphery of these central powers, and only from the 9th century on does it show more defined contours along the eastern fringes of the Astur Kingdom, in the vicinity of the County of Castile. Its location within a fluid context enabled a wide range of political experimentation, especially at the local level.²⁸ In the Early Middle Ages, the area of Álava had no cities, and there is no evidence of any significant fortification.²⁹ This does not mean that there was not a hierarchical organisation, but it was less structured than other Spanish territories. Indeed, in recent years archaeology has revealed the existence of several “islands of authority”,³⁰ following a leopard-spot pattern in line with Wickham’s model. One of the main characteristics of this “islands of authority” is its remarkable diversity, as well as its modifications over time.

One such “island” is Dulantzi, located in the centre of the plain, where a church with a baptistery founded in the 6th century has been found. Inside the church there were several furnished graves dating from the 6th and 7th centuries, with grave goods including weapons and some gold items. However, the related domestic architectures do not show signs of architectural complexity. After the 8th century the use of grave goods was abandoned, but a new churchyard was created, and the domestic structures were moved to another location.³¹

Still, the domestic architecture is sometimes eloquent enough to indicate possible aristocratic nuclei. One of the best examples is the estate centre of Aistra, located in the eastern area.³² This is an aristocratic occupation characterised by the existence of very large longhouses with associated auxiliary structures. Two main occupation phases have been found. In the first one, a longhouse with a boat-shaped structure has been discovered. The frequent rebuilding of the structure suggests that it was in use for several generations. Nearby, a series of domestic negative features have been found, dug directly into the rock. At the beginning of the 8th century the settlement was completely transformed. A new funerary area was established, a new 25 x 10 m longhouse was erected at a different angle, and other structures were built around a central open courtyard. A further group of complex buildings divided into two clearly separated spaces, each of them with an independent entryway, were also built nearby. Again, all these buildings were repaired frequently, so cases of double postholes are not uncommon. Radiocarbon dating shows that the longhouse was in use until the 10th century, when a church with new regular carved ashlar was built. A lily-shaped buckle found in a domestic context or a diet based on significant consumption of hunting and young animals, particularly pigs, completes the social picture.³³

Other aristocratic spaces are not well known, but they would become more numerous starting in the second half of the 9th century, particularly in areas where the rural episcopate of Álava and Valpueda emerged and where the counties of Álava and Lantarón were based. Among other markers, this spatiality can be detected through the distribution of rural churches made with sophisticated technologies (**fig.2**),³⁴ since

²⁸ Regarding Álava in the Early Middle Ages see Martínez Díez, *Álava Medieval*.

²⁹ Quirós Castillo and Santos Salazar, “I villaggi medievali nell’Alto Ebro”.

³⁰ The term has been coined by I. Martín Viso, *Fragmentos de Leviatán*, 98.

³¹ Loza Uriarte and Niso Lorenzo, “La basilica tardoantigua”; Alfaro Suescun, “Iglesias, rentas y sistemas de almacenamiento”.

³² Quirós Castillo, “Longhouses, biografía de la casa y complejidad social”.

³³ Grau, “The Zooarchaeology of medieval Alava”.

³⁴ Sánchez Zufiaurre, *Técnicas constructivas medievales*.

before the 10th and 11th century private castles continued to be practically absent. However, these “islands of authority” are confined to very specific spaces, so peasant societies clearly played an important role throughout the entire period. Indeed, the excavations carried out in recent years in and around the Álava Plain have revealed the presence of villages and settlements of a remarkable simplicity. What we find is mainly silos (storage-pits) and postholes dug into the rock, some sunken structures, and domestic waste in the fillings.

To analyse the dynamics of the political and moral economies in these local societies, three lines of enquiry have been chosen: the formation of village communities, internal hierarchy within the communities, and lordship actions at the local scale. I will focus on long-term processes that took place between the late 7th and late 10th century.

4. Community village formation

Village formation is one of the classic topics studied throughout Europe over the past 50 years, due to the connections established between this process and other socio-political and landscape dynamics such as the implantation of feudalism, the creation of English open fields or the Mediterranean *incastellamento*.³⁵ However, over the last two decades, results obtained through preventive archaeology have ultimately weakened or disproven such connections.

In social terms, the formation of a village is the result of the creation of a new community, or at least of a new kind of community, based on vicinity and co-residence. However, this does not mean that there have been no other forms of active communities in non-nucleated contexts or that this is the only form of active grouping in the Early Middle Ages.³⁶

The archaeological concept of community based on vicinity is ambiguous.³⁷ In fact, not all authors consider that these early medieval agglomerations should be defined as villages or related to communities, or that living together creates cohesion and bonds of identity strong enough to establish moral economy practices.³⁸ Here I will use a notion of village community based on four criteria, apart from vicinity (**fig.3**): the existence of communal resources, the existence of collective practices, the existence of an identity, and, where appropriate, external recognition. Not all these variables must be present at the same time, nor do they have the same intensity, but they do provide an ideal model in Weberian terms.³⁹

In Álava there is evidence of non-resident communities all throughout the early medieval period, but it is only from the second half of the 7th century that a complex process of nucleation is attested, which is at the base of the creation of new communities based on co-residential relations.⁴⁰ It is not surprising, therefore, that it is from this moment on when there is a significant increase in the anthropic signature on

³⁵ Among the extensive bibliography on village formation see Zadora-Rio, *Le village des historiens*; Francovich and Hodges, *Villa to Village*; Peytreman, “La notion du village”; Thomas, “The prehistory of medieval farms”; Verspay, *Village formation in the Netherlands*; Quirós Castillo, “Village formation, social memories”.

³⁶ Quirós Castillo, “Village formation, social memories”.

³⁷ Gerritsen, “To build and to abandon”, 37; Gerritsen, *Local Identities*; Gerritsen, “Relocating the House”.

³⁸ Indeed, E. Peytreman refers to this theme as “le délicat sujet de la communauté rurale, villageoise ou d’habitants”, Peytreman, “La notion du village”, 89.

³⁹ Ver Larrea, “Aldeas Navarras y Aldeas del Duero”; Sánchez León, “El poder de la comunidad”.

⁴⁰ Quirós Castillo, “Village formation, social memories”.

both valley spaces and nearby mountain areas, environmental records that even today are part of the communal property of nearby villages.

For instance, in Prados de Randulanda, the pollen record has shown that from the 7th century on there was an intense process of degradation of the forest resulting from the opening of pasture spaces in communally owned areas.⁴¹ Also, in the Sierra de Urbía or in Aralar there is evidence of a significant increase in the collective exploitation of pasture spaces. Therefore, these changes could be related to the creation of common goods and collective practices in the context of the formation of co-resident communities.⁴²

Village formation processes are very diverse, since on occasion they are the result of the densification of previous occupations (true nucleation), but sometimes there is a hiatus between old and new occupations and, in most cases, there is evidence of new foundations and coalescence processes. In all the cases, however, a profound change of property patterns and social relationships clearly took place.

Sometimes the analysis of settlement morphology and households provides keys to understanding the village formation process. As in other areas of Europe, villages in Álava are formed by farmstead clusters. The location of constructions typically moved about inside fixed plots, as they were rebuilt in a cyclic and continuous way following a wandering pattern. Only the storage spaces, where the silos are concentrated, exhibit functional stability.

Zornoztegi is a small village located in the eastern Álava Plain,⁴³ near the town of Salvatierra (**fig.4**). Occupied starting in the late Roman period, during the 6th and 7th centuries it was occupied through a single long structure located near the Roman farm. On top of this, a village was created around the 8th century as a result of the densification of the previous occupation, forming a community of 10-12 domestic units. About 300 m south of the old long structure, a new construction of remarkable dimensions (ZOR 8, **fig.5**) has been discovered, which was related to other auxiliary structures, silos and a sunken building. The new house, formed by about 40 postholes and measuring approximately 110 m², was repaired on numerous occasions, and was in use between the 8th and 11th centuries. This is very unusual in early medieval Iberian villages. While the other houses in the village were rebuilt in generational periods, this building and its auxiliary structures were constantly being repaired. Consequently, this household was a social and spatial reference from at least the foundation of the village until the 11th century.

Applying a cultural biography framework, Fokke Gerritsen has pointed out that the lifespan of houses cannot be explained by technical factors, but rather is a matter of social and cultural practice.⁴⁴ When buildings and structures lasted through generations it is reasonable to assume that there is a continuity of both ownership and social attitudes and relationships. If we can assume intergenerational ownership of property, then these households would be related to prominent families in a context where property and control over resources were the sources of social and political power at

⁴¹ Pérez Díaz, “Prados de Randulanda”.

⁴² Agirre, “Los elementos físicos”; Fernández Mier and Quirós Castillo, “El aprovechamiento de los espacios comunales”.

⁴³ Quirós Castillo, *Arqueología de una comunidad campesina*.

⁴⁴ Gerritsen, “To build and to abandon”; Gerritsen, “Relocating the House”, 163-4. See also Brück, “House, Lifecycles and Deposition”.

the local scale.⁴⁵ Thus, these families are likely to have exercised some social dominance. The interesting point of this case study is that the silos and the consumption patterns of this house have similar dimensions and characteristics to those of the rest of the village. In other words, this is a form of social pre-eminence that does not generate relevant accumulation (or at least storage) of surplus, or even very distinctive items and practices. Given that this construction was built at the same time as the formation of the new community, but at a distance from the farm of the 6th-7th century, it can be inferred that this household had a significant role in the formation, negotiation and cohesion of the new community, and did not have any link with the previous residents. This is not the only case of long-lasting houses. The village of Zaballa is located at the opposite end of the Álava Plain (**fig.6**).⁴⁶ A community began to form in this place in the early 8th century out of a series of small, scattered occupations located in the surroundings of the abandoned Roman city of Veleia. The extensive excavation of 4 ha has unearthed a similar occupation pattern to that of Zornoztegi. The houses, which are very homogeneous, rarely exhibit morphological differences, and the silos of all the households have very similar dimensions and characteristics. Although the houses were regularly reconstructed and relocated, there is one house (ZAB 8) that was in use throughout the 9th and 10th centuries. In a first phase this was a medium-dimension house made with posts, and in a second phase was made with a stone base. This is not a construction of remarkable size or technological complexity, as we have seen in Zornoztegi or in the longhouses of Aistra. Moreover, its construction took place several generations after the village was founded. In short, it could be suggested that the role of the residents of this house was related to a social mobility process within the community, whereby they may have attained a different status than that of the other residents of Zornoztegi.

In Torrentejo, a village located to the south of the plain on the banks of Ebro River, the first signs of communal action are represented by the collective agrarian arrangements based on terrace systems first made in the mid-7th century.⁴⁷ These are numerous small-scale terraces for domestic production, and they cover a wide sector of at least 5 ha (**fig.7**). The creation and maintenance of this highly anthropogenic landscape, documented throughout the 8th and 9th centuries, not only entailed established forms of collective labour, but also provided an internal social identity to the community.⁴⁸ Even more than housing clusters, landscape arrangements evidence the formation and dynamics of new communities.

Since the connection between village formation and feudalism, *incastellamento* and open fields, has come under discussion, scholars have proposed a wide range of explanatory and dynamic frameworks in order to analyse why and when nucleation took place.⁴⁹ And yet, perhaps less attention has been paid to understanding *how* this process took place, seeking to demonstrate the processes at work rather than proposing explanations. The examples discussed show that village formation and the creation of

⁴⁵ Gerritsen, "Relocating the House", 168. Temporality life cycle of houses and people have been also studied in medieval contexts, see Hamerow, *Rural Settlement and Society*, 33-7; Graves and Gerrard, "Embracing new perspectives", 44-6; Blair, *Building Anglo-Saxon England*, 84-6.

⁴⁶ Quirós Castillo, *Arqueología del campesinado medieval*.

⁴⁷ Quirós Castillo, "Reconstructing past terraced agrarian landscapes".

⁴⁸ Erickson, "Intensification, Political Economy"; Gerrissen, *Local Identities, Landscape and Community*, 179-180.

⁴⁹ Rippon, *Beyond the Medieval Village*; Verspay, *Village formation in the Netherlands*.

co-resident communities were the result of complex interaction and negotiation between social subjects internally diversified in a changing historical context. In this context, the key role of structured and hierarchical communities should be stressed.

5. Hierarchisation processes within peasant communities

A second point that can be made is that villages are spaces open to social mobility, challenging the traditional assumption of egalitarian peasant societies.⁵⁰ Using archaeological evidence, we can try to understand what this social mobility consisted of, and what political horizons these emerging elites could aspire to. Storage systems are one of the best forms of evidence available to analyse hierarchies and moral and political economy practices.⁵¹

In the northern sector of Zornoztegi, a new domestic unit was created starting in the 10th century, as indicated by the presence of a series of aligned and synchronic silos. Silos or underground storage pits are just holes made in the bedrock intended for the storage of cereal. Based on ethnographic accounts, experimental archaeology, and written documentation, we know that a silo is a form of hermetic preservation of cereal used for medium- or long-term storage. They are not everyday pantries but mechanisms created by peasant families in order to reduce risk.⁵² Their use is well documented in Iberia throughout protohistory, but they disappear during the Roman period when cereal storage was centralised and large *horrea* were created in *villae* and towns.⁵³ From the 5th century on, after the collapse of the empire, silos appear again in urban and rural areas, a sign of state weakness in the reception, storage and redistribution of cereal.⁵⁴ Within early medieval villages they reflect the agency of a peasantry that was capable of providing, at the family scale, resources to guarantee their own economic independence. In addition, they were powerful tools for social action, including moral and political economy strategies. The fact that such structures are so widespread is also a sign of the decentralisation of agricultural practices in post-Roman societies, even in areas subject to strong aristocratic control. Beyond these generalities, the study of silos, including their dimensions, location, and characteristics, constitutes a useful guide for analysing social change in rural areas.⁵⁵ According to experimental and ethnographic accounts, the efficiency of this underground storage system is based on adjusting the maximum volume of the silo to the storage expectations in order to avoid any loss. For this reason, by calculating silo volumes we are not only able to estimate peasants' expectations regarding surplus, but also to infer their social practices.⁵⁶

In the aforementioned case of Zornoztegi, three aligned and synchronous silos were dug out in the 10th century, on the opposite side of the village to where house ZOR 8 was located (**fig.8**). A sudden increase in the storage capacity of a specific household should

⁵⁰ Regarding social mobility in the Early Medieval period see Bougard and Le Jan *Quelle mobilité sociale* and Loveluck, *Northwestern Europe in the Early Middle Ages*.

⁵¹ Boogard, *The Archaeology of food surplus*; Manzanilla and Rothman, *Storage in Ancient Complex Societies*.

⁵² Sigaut, *Les réserves de grains*; Reynolds, *Arqueologia experimental*; Miret i Mestre, *L'experimentació sobre sitges tradicionals*.

⁵³ About storage systems in protohistoric and Roman Iberia see García Huerta, *Sistemas de almacenamiento* and Arce, *Horrea d'Hispanie*.

⁵⁴ Vigil-Escalera, *Los primeros paisajes altomedievales*.

⁵⁵ See Vigil-Escalera, *Horrea, barns and silos*; Manzanilla and Rothman, *Storage in Ancient Complex Societies*.

⁵⁶ Miret i Mestre, *Les sitges per emmagatzemar cereals*.

be understood as a reflection of a change in their economic status. Perhaps the residents acquired more or better lands, draft animals, iron implements or other technologies or social arrangements. Although we cannot know if there was a contrast between the two spatial nuclei, it is interesting to note that several generations later a parish church was built near these synchronic silos, at the same time that the old house ZOR 8 was abandoned. We can infer that the increase in production capacity could have created the conditions for an economic-based leadership different from the one that was practised in the household ZOR 8.

However, the interpretation of aligned and synchronous silos may be different in other contexts. Thus, in Zaballa they have appeared in association with a house located at the bottom of the valley that shows no signs of having reached a permanent relevant position.⁵⁷ By contrast, in the village of Gasteiz there is a correspondence between the increase in storage capacity and the consolidation of a relevant social and economic position.⁵⁸ Gasteiz, the village that preceded the present city of Vitoria, was bigger than almost all the villages in the Álava Plain from the time of its founding in the second half of the 7th century. Moreover, from an early date stable craft activities and other facilities were located here. Indeed, not all villages in the Álava Plain were similar, and opportunities for social mobility varied from place to place. In the north of the village, an 18 x 8 m boat-shaped longhouse defined by approximately 30 wooden poles and a perimeter trench (A1) was built in the mid-9th century. Like the longhouses of Aistra, this building was repaired on several occasions, lasting for a century and a half. Associated with this longhouse, other auxiliary structures as well as five aligned and synchronous silos have been found. Despite the fact that bio-archaeological records do not show aristocratic consumption patterns similar to those of Aistra, an 8th-century Islamic coin from North Africa has been found in the filling of a silo and imported pottery has been recovered as well. As such, it has been suggested that the residents of this longhouse reached a relevant position at the local level and maintained it over multiple generations.⁵⁹

In light of all these examples, it can be concluded that Álava village societies were spaces open to different kinds of social mobility. The ambitions of certain families allowed them to reach a charismatic position within their communities. Some of these positions could be inherited and last for longer or shorter periods, but on other occasions they did not become permanent. In addition, local conditions determined residents' political and economic aspirations.

6. Beyond the local scale

So far we have focused our attention on peasant agency, and in particular that of peasant elites. To conclude our empirical analysis, village societies will be briefly analysed in relation to other agents and external aristocratic subjects. Analysing interaction between neighbouring communities in archaeological terms is elusive. In fact, in legalistic sources it is often possible to observe actions between different types of groups that do not necessarily belong to neighbouring communities. Likewise, such texts do not consider all the inhabitants of a locality, nor do they indicate, in short, that the degree of cohesion of early medieval communities was sufficiently formalised to

⁵⁷ Quirós Castillo, *Arqueología del campesinado medieval*.

⁵⁸ Azkarate and Solaun, *Arqueología e Historia*.

⁵⁹ Azkarate and Solaun, *Arqueología e Historia*.

appear as a single subject.⁶⁰ In the same way, the study of the forms of supra-local organisation constitutes another difficult area to detect and analyse in archaeological terms.⁶¹

Archaeology is better suited for the study of the relationships between local communities and aristocratic networks. Paradoxically, although several archaeological projects have interpreted early medieval rural archaeological records as an expression of elites and the aristocracy based on the analysis of monumental architecture,⁶² the patterns of production and consumption, or the nature of the settlements,⁶³ we do not know much about the materiality of elites in Álava. As a consequence, it is not easy to define the complexity of the aristocratic groups and lordship practices at the local scale in archaeological terms. Nevertheless, some observations can be made.

Zornoztegi, as well as the rest of the examples considered in this paper, was not a village of free peasants isolated from aristocratic networks, as the romantic and liberal models had represented early medieval society in Castile. Bioarchaeological records provide the most significant evidence to characterise lifestyles and social patterns. For example, the study of the anatomical distribution of pig remains recovered at the site reveals the total absence of leg bones from the Early Middle Ages. There is no doubt that the hams and shoulders of pigs bred in the village were consumed elsewhere. Likewise, the slaughter patterns of draft animals also indicate dependence.⁶⁴

However, the most obvious example of the actions of the lordship at the local level has been observed in Zaballa.⁶⁵ Around the middle of the 10th century, a church was built directly on top of the village. The church, part of a monastery documented in the following century, was erected right in the heart of the old village, forcing the whole community to move to the nearby Zaballa Valley. The longstanding household ZAB 8 was literally cut off by the new church (**fig.9**). As no aristocratic house has been found in its place, it is thought that this church was promoted by a non-resident lordship, and some kind of internal mediator must have existed. This also opened the door to new forms of social mobility in the now-displaced community from the 11th century on. But the most obvious sign of lordship action was the creation of huge silos for rents collection, located in the proximity of the church (**fig.10**). These silos are no longer instruments of risk prevention, but true speculative mechanisms waiting to be used in times of poor harvests in order to impose new forms of social and economic domination within the framework of relations of feudal character, to use Wickham's expression.⁶⁶

This is not an isolated case. From the 10th century on lordship agency becomes more and more evident within some villages. In the very first castles, such as Treviño, very large silos have been found as well.⁶⁷ Sometimes series of synchronic silos were made instead of large silos, as has been observed inside the church of Dulantzi.⁶⁸ However, in the estate centre of Aistra the most striking fact is precisely the absence of silos during

⁶⁰ Carvajal Castro, *Bajo la máscara del Regnum*.

⁶¹ But see now Reynolds, *Lineage, genealogy and landscape*.

⁶² Sánchez Zufiaurre, *Técnicas constructivas medievales*.

⁶³ Azkarate and Solaun, *Arqueología e historia*; Quirós Castillo, *Longhouses, biografía de la casa*.

⁶⁴ Grau, *The Zooarchaeology of medieval Alava*.

⁶⁵ Quirós, *Arqueología del campesinado medieval*.

⁶⁶ Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*.

⁶⁷ Quirós Castillo, *L'eccezione che conferma la regola*.

⁶⁸ Alfaro Suescun, *Iglesias, rentas y sistemas de almacenamiento*.

this period. Old rural aristocrats did not have speculative silos⁶⁹ here, but they were not worried about long-term storage, probably because supplies were guaranteed and their ambitions were fulfilled through other paths. Summing up, the Álava case study shows that there is a difference between an old and conservative aristocracy, and an enterprising new elite in the 10th century that was more proactive in terms of social domination.

7. Discussion and conclusions

Collective agency and the study of local elites offer a good guide for the analysis of social inequality at the local level in the Early Middle Ages. The integrated analysis of settlement patterns, architectural lifespan, storage systems, and consumption patterns provides a new picture that challenges the traditional characterisations of rural communities. Moreover, this analysis points to a number of general trends.

In the first place, hierarchisation is not a process necessarily addressed by encompassing societies or external agents, as Rodney Hilton or Henri Mendras have pointed out.⁷⁰ In the case of Álava, it has been observed that during the 7th-8th centuries differences of social inequality documented within villages are the result of hierarchical processes that took place within the local communities in a highly experimental framework. We have not found clear evidence of local elites acting as lords or external-agent mediators (gifts, prestige goods, etc.). Only from the 9th century on, and especially as of the 10th century, the presence of non-resident elites in the local sphere becomes more evident, which in turn favours a widening of the internal differences in the communities. Outside the Álava Plain, also from this period on we can see the prominence that certain village elites acquired, in particular certain priests, in terms of constructing strategies of distinction and networks of patronage.⁷¹

In other words, social inequality can be explained following internal developments in the early stages of villages, but later internal and external agents overlap and converge.⁷² However, we do not know if the lack of gifts and other evidence is due to their absence, to the forms of preservation and use of these objects, or to the existence of other social practices of redistribution or feasting with scarce material visibility. This is good reason to call into question normative approaches based on the identification of “archaeological markers”, even if analysed in situational terms.

In the second place we have noted that there are some local elites that could be defined mainly in terms of social pre-eminence and prestige, while others based their status on a favourable position in economic terms. The social pre-eminence of the Zornoztegi house ZOR 8 was maintained over several generations, and despite having a larger and longer-lasting house, there is no evidence of high economic status in comparison with their neighbours. Perhaps moral economy redistribution practices limited, generation after generation, the accumulation of resources. On the other hand, it seems that solid economic foundations could not always guarantee social pre-eminence. The residents of the Gasteiz longhouse probably reached the top of the most relevant village in early medieval Álava, but this is an uncommon example. Zaballa and Zornoztegi show that

⁶⁹ For the notion of speculative silos see Quirós Castillo, *Silos y sistemas de almacenaje en el cuadrante noroccidental*.

⁷⁰ Hilton, *Class Conflict and the crisis*; Mendras, *Les sociétés paysannes*, 120.

⁷¹ Quirós Castillo and Santos Salazar, “I villaggi medievali nell’Alto Ebro”.

⁷² Jesenne and Menant, “Introduction”, 26-7.

climbing up the social ladder was neither so simple nor so hereditary in the long term. In other words, social status based only on an economic foundation could be inherited, but it could also be lost. Social pre-eminence based on prestige, charisma and redistribution may have been more stable. And while social and symbolic capital, in the terms of Bourdieu, would often go hand in hand with wealth, the examples analysed show that this does not always apply. As long as economic distance was not very large within the village communities, extra-economic issues made the difference between leading peasants and their neighbours.⁷³

In the third place, following Wickham's model, scale change could take place when a household was able to procure enough income to stop working their own land. Sometimes, when a family had enough resources to get involved in social investments, they promoted or created connections with social and political agents outside the "small worlds", and the documentary evidence shows that this pattern existed all around early medieval Europe, with the foundation of local churches, the creation of palaces, or another kinds of social investment.⁷⁴ And yet none of this has been found in the Álava Plain for the period prior to the 9th century. Taking into account the social structures of early medieval villages in northern Iberia, the fine line between peasants and non-cultivators could be very narrow in archaeological terms. Even in the Gasteiz longhouse, there are no traces of aristocratic lifestyle, and indeed only draft animals were consumed.⁷⁵ Only for the 10th-11th centuries is there more clear evidence of these distinctions, but as not all attempts to demonstrate differentiation have been successful, teleological and evolutionist narratives should be avoided.

Another implication of this analysis is that peasant rationality, as proposed by Chayanov and Sahlins, does not adequately describe early medieval peasant societies in north-western Iberia. These villages were an open field of experimentation which allowed for the permanent or temporary rise of certain ambitious families, even alongside certain regulation mechanisms. Thus, the general picture differs greatly from the ideal concept of stagnation that has traditionally been used to define peasant economies.

In addition, all this must lead us to rethink the characterisation of early medieval rural societies in terms of leopard-spots in which areas of dominance of feudal production mode and peasant production mode alternate.⁷⁶ The analysis of the Álava Plain should lead to a reformulation of this picture, wherein we see an alternation of centralised places – characterised by the persistence in time of forms of inequality and accumulation of an important symbolic and social capital – and dynamic places – endowed with a high degree of experimentation and social mobility. The forms of interaction between the two spheres would be very complex throughout the early medieval period, and in fact before the years 850-900 their visibility in material terms is rather elusive.

The lines of enquiry explored in this paper clearly do not exhaust the heuristic capacity of the archaeology of "small worlds" to analyse both social inequality and equality in local societies.⁷⁷ For instance, over the coming years, the increasing growth of isotopic

⁷³ Jesenne and Menant, "Introduction", 26-7.

⁷⁴ Defined in terms of "ceremonial funds" by E. Wolf, *Peasants*. About the churches see Sánchez Pardo and Shapland, *Churches and Social Power*; Carvajal and Narbarte, "Royal power and proprietary churches"; about the *palatia* see Escalona and Martín Viso, "Los *palatia*, puntos de centralización".

⁷⁵ See Azkarate and Solaun, *Arqueología e Historia*.

⁷⁶ Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, 541.

⁷⁷ Quirós Castillo, *Social complexity in Early Medieval rural communities*.

studies should enable the exploration of correlations between the geographical and social mobility of the peasantry, among other topics.

In conclusion, the archaeology of local societies reveals the agency of village communities, as well as the agency of local elites and aristocratic groups. The peasantry is not a uniform, conservative and static collective that can be studied in the framework of lordship agency, but a dynamic social body in tension that should be analysed in its own right. The contraposition between moral and political economy provides an avenue for a new understanding of these dynamics. However, this analytical perspective can only reach its full potential when applied in comparative terms in differentiated contexts.

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Figure captions

Fig. 1. Map with the main locations quoted in the text.

Fig. 2. Early medieval churches archaeologically identified in Álava.

Fig. 3. Picture on the concept of community employed in this paper.

Fig. 4. General plan of the deserted village of Zornoztegi (Salvatierra, Álava).

Fig. 5. Plant of House ZOR08 of Zornoztegi (Salvatierra, Álava) in the 8th-11th centuries.

Fig. 6. General view of the deserted village of Zaballa (Iruña de Oca, Álava).

Fig. 7. System of early medieval agrarian terraces of the deserted village of Torrentejo (Labastida, Álava).

Fig. 8. Early medieval synchronic silos found in the deserted village of Zornoztegi (Salvatierra, Álava).

Fig. 9. Early medieval church of Zaballa implanted in the 10th century over the village.

Fig. 10. Rent silos found in the proximity of the early medieval church of Zaballa (Iruña de Oca, Álava).