



Power and rural landscapes in early medieval Galicia (400–900 AD): towards a re-incorporation of the archaeology into the historical narrative

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This paper aims to bring together hitherto neglected archaeological data about the early medieval landscapes of Galicia (north-west Spain), in order to understand the social transformations this 'peripheral' region underwent between the fifth and the ninth centuries and to frame them in the context of wider European debates. Despite its many limitations, the archaeology reveals that until the middle of the seventh century, the late antique society of Gallaecia experienced a previously unsuspected vitality. At this point a socio-political fragmentation occurred, which was characterized by the strengthening of local power, until a further change took place with the progressive incorporation of Galicia into the Asturian kingdom in the ninth century.

I. Introduction

In the last few years there has been a major reinvigoration of the early medieval archaeology of northern Spain, including the appearance of new works that have moved away from the traditional focus on monuments and other significant buildings.¹ As result of these advances, developments in northern Spain have been increasingly considered within wider European debates on the social transformations that followed the end of

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¹ Significantly, J.A. Quirós Castillo (ed.), *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Villages in Europe* (Bilbao, 2009); for a critical review of which see H. Kirchner, 'Sobre la arqueología de las aldeas altomedievales', *Studia Historica. Historia Medieval* 28 (2010), pp. 243–53.

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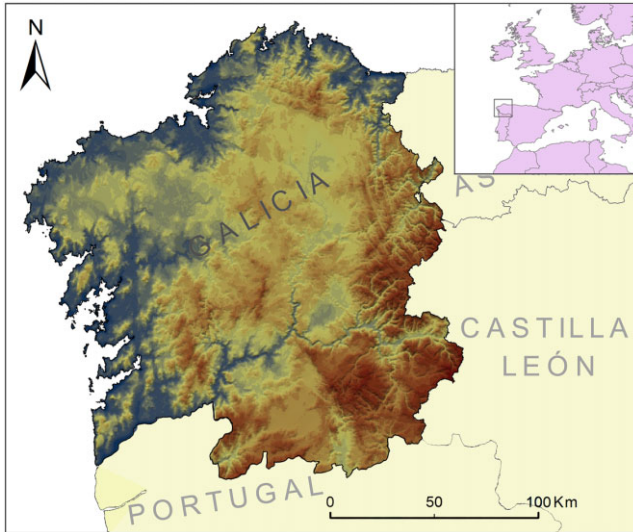


Fig. 1 Galicia in relation to the Iberian Peninsula and western Europe

the Roman empire.² However, most of this work deals with very specific areas, mainly the plains zones like Álava, Salamanca and Madrid. By contrast, the other geographical and cultural spaces of northern Spain remain almost unexplored. Such is the case for Galicia.

Galicia is a highly individualized region both within the Iberian Peninsula and within western Europe. On the one hand, it is located in a peripheral geographic position, in the north-west corner of the Iberian Peninsula and in one of the most westerly points of Europe, separated from the rest of the peninsula by a large mountain range and surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean on its northern and western sides (Fig. 1). Internally Galicia is also geographically fragmented, with gentle valleys interspersed with more mountainous zones. But on the other hand, Galicia enjoys a considerable wealth of natural resources and throughout history has always had a high density of human occupation. So Galicia has therefore often been considered an 'Atlantic *Finis Terrae*', an area with a high degree of historical continuity in its rural landscape, especially in periods like the early Middle Ages.

² C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford, 2005); J.R. Davis and M. McCormick (eds), *The Long Morning of Medieval Europe: New Directions in Early Medieval Studies* (Aldershot, 2008); G.P. Brogiolo and A. Chavarría, *Aristocrazie e campagne nell'Occidente da Costantino a Carlo Magno* (Florence, 2005); R. Francovich and R. Hodges, *Villa to Village: The Transformation of the Roman Countryside in Italy, c. 400–1000* (London, 2003); H. Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements. The Archaeology of Rural Communities in North-West Europe 400–900* (Oxford, 2002).

Since the 1970s there has been a well-established tradition of studies on the organization of space in early medieval Galicia, based on ecclesiastical sources.³ This work has made important contributions to our knowledge of the social and economic aspects of Galician landscapes from the ninth century. However, it is now clear that these textual approaches have considerable limitations since they only draw on evidence produced by the workings of monastic power at the end of the early medieval period. Archaeology, then, has the potential to further advance our knowledge of this topic. However, as stated above, archaeological studies of this period are scarce and, with the exception of some recent works,⁴ have focused on a few famous sites like the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.⁵ Rescue archaeology in Galicia over the last fifteen years has revealed important and interesting new information for the early medieval period, but so far most of this data has been ignored by medieval historians.

Concentrating especially on recent discoveries, this paper will try to compile and synthesize for the first time archaeology's main contributions to the knowledge of the social transformations in Galicia that occurred between the fifth and ninth centuries, and to frame them in the context of wider European debates about change in the post-Roman world. Given the breadth of the topic, this article can neither offer detailed descriptions of archaeological sites and artefacts, nor an exhaustive analysis of the early medieval history of Galicia. Rather, I will focus on six main elements of the landscape as valuable – and so far unexplored – sources of information for the evolution of the dynamics of power in this region after the end of Roman authority, giving especial emphasis to the integration of archaeology into the traditional text-based history of this period. In order to achieve this, two analytical perspectives recently developed and applied to northern Spain and other European areas will be taken in account: the concept of scale and scale change in early medieval societies,⁶

³ Some of the most representative: M.C. Pallares and E. Portela, *Galicia en la época medieval* (A Coruña, 1991), pp. 62–79; M.C. Pallares and E. Portela, 'La villa por dentro. Testimonios galaicos de los siglos X y XI', *Studia Historica. Historia Medieval* 16 (1998), pp. 13–43; E. Portela, *Galicia y la monarquía leonesa* (León, 1995); F. López Alsina, *La ciudad de Santiago en la Alta Edad Media* (Santiago, 1988), pp. 198–208; C. Balañas, *Do mito á realidade: a definición social e territorial de Galicia na Alta Idade Media (seculos VIII e IX)* (Santiago, 1992).

⁴ J. López Quiroga, *El final de la antigüedad en la Gallaecia* (A Coruña, 2004); A. Rodríguez Resino, *Do imperio romano á Alta Idade Media. Arqueoloxía da Tardoantigüidade en Galicia (séculos V–VIII)* (Noia, 2005).

⁵ M. Xusto and J.M. Eguileta, 'Arqueología medieval gallega: consideraciones metodológicas', *Gallaecia* 13 (1992), pp. 273–302; F. Fariña and J. Suárez, 'Arqueoloxía medieval en Galicia: unha aproximación', *Traballos de Antropología e Etnología* 28 (3–4) (1988), pp. 49–77.

⁶ J. Escalona, 'The Early Middle Ages: A Scale-Based Approach', in J. Escalona and A. Reynolds, *Scale and Scale Change in Early Middle Ages: Exploring Landscape, Local Society and the World Beyond* (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 9–30.

and the study of the articulation of power between local and central authorities.⁷

It is important to note that the archaeological data available is still partial and often contains a number of problems of definition and chronology. In addition, important sub-regional differences can be found throughout Galicia, so it is difficult to generalize. In this sense, this current study is only a first attempt to incorporate the so-far neglected archaeological information of this area into an interpretative framework for the early Middle Ages. Moreover, it should be noted that because of administrative issues in the collection of information, this study will be restricted to the territory of the present Autonomous Community of Galicia, although the discussion will sometimes deal with the wider territory of *Gallaecia*, which was the main political entity throughout the period. The paper is in two parts. The first presents a critical synthesis of the most significant archaeological advances on settlements, agrarian spaces, ecclesiastical buildings, economic axes and communications, burials and fortifications in early medieval Galicia. Based on this information, the second part attempts an analysis and periodization of the socio-political dynamics reflected in early medieval Galician landscapes.

2. A brief review of the archaeological information on the early medieval rural landscapes of Galicia

2.1. *Rural settlements* (Fig. 2)

I have elsewhere recently reviewed the archaeological problems of late Roman and early medieval settlement in Galicia.⁸ Consequently only some key ideas will be listed here as a starting point for the following discussion. It is now clear that a relatively large number of late Roman Galician sites survived the collapse of the western Roman empire in the second half of the fifth century.⁹ Some of the late antique *vici* (towns or semi-urban settlements) like Iria, Vigo, Ourense and Tui continued into the early medieval centuries.¹⁰ Many Roman *villae* also remained occupied until the central decades of the sixth century. A large number of these late Roman *villae* (e.g. Noville, Toralla, Centroña, Adro Vello,

⁷ S. Castellanos and I. Martín Viso, 'The Local Articulation of the Central Power in the North of the Iberian Peninsula', *EME* 13 (2005), pp. 1–42.

⁸ J.C. Sánchez Pardo, 'Poblamiento rural tardorromano y altomedieval en Galicia. Una revisión arqueológica', *Archeologia Medievale* 37 (2010), pp. 285–306.

⁹ López Quiroga, *El final de la Antigüedad*, p. 292.

¹⁰ F. Pérez Losada, *Entre a cidade e a aldea. Estudo arqueo-histórico dos 'aglomerados secundarios' romanos en Galicia* (A Coruña, 2002).

Bares) are located on the coast, and benefitted from maritime trade and the production of salt.¹¹ Inland, the proportion of Galician *villae* with evidence for a certain level of luxury seems to have been relatively low,¹² at least in comparison with the great *villae* of the Meseta. Only the cases of Currás-Tomiño, Moraime, Cirro, Roupar, Doncide, Porta de Arcos, Agro de Nogueira and Agrade show luxury features like mosaics, baths or stucco.

Besides these richer late Roman settlements there is a larger, but virtually unexplored and unpublished, amount of data on small and medium late Roman agrarian settlements: farms, factories and hamlets spread across Galicia.¹³ This scenario of scattered settlements is similar to that found in other areas of late antique Atlantic Europe.¹⁴ The only site of this type which has been excavated, although only partially, is As Pereiras, discussed below. The rest have been identified simply by surface findings such as *tegulae*, bricks, potsherds or sided stones, which reveal the existence of modest hamlets or farms, very often in the immediate surroundings of traditional rural villages, as in the cases of As Telleiras, A Gándara, Paleo or Seara.¹⁵ It now seems to be accepted that these typically 'Roman' building materials remained in use after the fifth century, so it is likely that many traditional datings of late Roman sites in Galicia could be changed in the coming years, as has happened in north Portugal.¹⁶

Based on late Roman materials found in a number of hill forts, some authors have proposed a general 'hill fort re-occupation' in north-west Iberia in late antiquity caused by political insecurity and social instability.¹⁷ But a deeper analysis of these cases reveals that many of them correspond rather to either the expansion and vitality of nearby late Roman settlements, which occupied old hill forts as productive areas, or to a process of territorial hierarchization and political control.¹⁸ Only a

¹¹ F. Pérez, F. Fernández and S. Vieito, 'Toralla y las villas marítimas de la Gallaecia atlántica', in C. Fernández, V. García-Entero and F. Gil (eds), *Las villae tardorromanas en el Occidente del Imperio* (Gijón, 2008), pp. 481–506; E. Carlsson-Brandt, 'Las villae romanas del Conventus lucensis', dissertation, University of Santiago (2009).

¹² Carlsson-Brandt, 'Las villae'; F. Pérez Losada, 'Os asentamentos na Galicia romana', in *Historia de Galicia I* (A Coruña, 1991), pp. 403–42.

¹³ Sánchez Pardo, 'Poblamiento rural tardorromano', pp. 289–91.

¹⁴ J. Taylor, *An Atlas of Roman Rural Settlement in England* (Oxford, 2007).

¹⁵ Sánchez Pardo, 'Poblamiento rural tardorromano', pp. 289–91.

¹⁶ L. Fontes, 'Braga e o norte de Portugal em torno de 711', in *711. Arqueología e Historia entre dos mundos* (Madrid, 2011), pp. 313–34, 326.

¹⁷ López Quiroga, *El final de la Antigüedad*, pp. 260–2; J.M. Novo Guisán, *De Hidacio a Sapiro. Los castros durante la época visigoda y la primera reconquista* (Lugo, 2000).

¹⁸ J.C. Sánchez Pardo, 'Castros, castillos y otras fortificaciones en el paisaje sociopolítico de Galicia (siglos IV–XI)', in J. Quirós and J. Tejado (eds), *Los castillos altomedievales en el norte peninsular desde la Arqueología* (Bilbao, 2012), pp. 29–56.

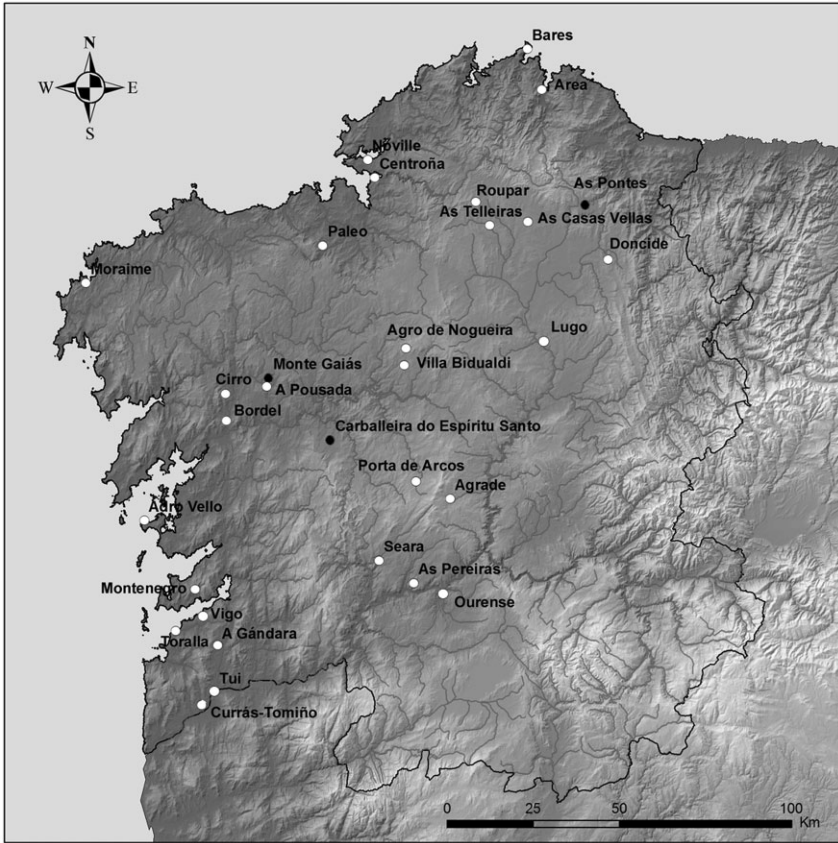


Fig. 2 Settlements (white circles) and agrarian spaces (black circles) mentioned in the text

few cases of hill forts with hidden late Roman coins hoards can be seen as corresponding to a need for defence arising at the beginning of the fifth century.¹⁹

The archaeology of Galician rural settlements of the seventh to tenth centuries is much more problematic. So far, only seven sites of this period have been archaeologically studied, and all of them only to a very limited extent. The site at A Pousada (near Santiago) offers the first complete sequence of the evolution of an early medieval settlement in Galicia, although only a small part of the site has been excavated. It is a small rural site with continued occupation from the sixth/seventh century until the

¹⁹ López Quiroga, *El final de la Antigüedad*, p. 260.

late Middle Ages, in close proximity to a traditional village.²⁰ Another remarkable excavation occurred at the As Pereiras site,²¹ in which remains of walls, ditches, fireplaces and a furnace were identified. The authors interpreted this site as part of a small, open agrarian settlement used from the third century, which endured until – or was reoccupied during – the first centuries of the Middle Ages. But again the information is scarce, as only an area of 3x9 metres was excavated. The other excavations of early medieval settlements have failed so far to offer a precise chronological frame. These are the sites of Villa Bidualdi, Montenegro, Bordel, As Casas Vellas and Area, all characterized by the identification of pits and/or postholes, and some wall structures and stone foundations.²²

2.2. *Agrarian spaces* (Fig. 2)

Agrarian spaces are another key focus of recent early medieval Spanish archaeology.²³ Over the last ten years their study has proved to be one of the most interesting approaches to the early medieval landscapes of Galicia. This research, led by P. Ballesteros, studies the elements of the traditional agrarian landscape from archaeological perspectives.²⁴ A major focus of study is that of agricultural terraces. In terms of their dating and evolution, the twelve radiocarbon dates published so far show a surprising consistency. The origins of the terraces are dated generally between the fifth to the eighth centuries, following the chronology of palaeosoils and the first accumulations of sediments. Dates from the eighth century usually correspond to further earth layers lying over those established terraces.²⁵ This is the case in Monte Gaiás, Carballeira do Espiritu Santo²⁶ and As Pontes.²⁷ Furthermore, these studies also indicate that during the early Middle Ages, and especially in the first three centuries, there was a significant, and hitherto unidentified, collective effort by these communities to open up and exploit areas that until then had been non-productive because of their excessive slope. This development implies

²⁰ R. Blanco, M. Prieto, P. Ballesteros and L. López, 'El despoblado de A Pousada', in *Reconstruyendo la historia de la comarca del Ulla-Deza (Galicia, España)*, TAPA (Traballos de Arqueoloxía e Patrimonio) 41, pp. 111–20.

²¹ R. Aboal and I. Cobas, *La Arqueología en la Gasificación de Galicia 10*, TAPA (Traballos de Arqueoloxía e Patrimonio) 13 (Santiago, 1999).

²² Sánchez Pardo, 'Poblamiento rural tardorromano', p. 292.

²³ H. Kirchner (ed.), *Por una arqueología agraria. Perspectivas de investigación sobre espacios de cultivo en las sociedades medievales hispánicas* (Oxford, 2010).

²⁴ P. Ballesteros, *La Arqueología en la Gasificación de Galicia 17*, CAPA 18 (Santiago, 2003).

²⁵ P. Ballesteros, 'La Arqueología Rural y la construcción de un paisaje agrario medieval: el caso de Galicia', in Kirchner (ed.), *Por una arqueología agraria*, pp. 25–39, at pp. 37–8.

²⁶ P. Ballesteros and R. Blanco, 'Aldeas y espacios agrarios altomedievales en Galicia', in Quirós (ed.), *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Villages*, pp. 115–35, at pp. 126–7.

²⁷ Ballesteros, 'La Arqueología Rural', p. 30.

well-planned work by the communities, and involved the mobilization of a large number of people.

In addition, Galicia is one of the Iberian areas where a higher quantity of pollen analysis has been carried out, so it is possible to get an interesting overview of its land use from the fifth to the tenth century. At first glance, the pattern observed is similar to that of other areas in Spain:²⁸ in the last two centuries of the Roman period a brief reforestation took place, which indicates a decrease in ploughing and the rise of livestock activities, then around 1300 BP there was intensive deforestation and the expansion of areas under agrarian cultivation. However, unlike the rest of the Iberian Peninsula, pollen analysis in the north-west shows an abrupt but extraordinarily dynamic episode of deforestation and agricultural intensification roughly between 550 and 650 AD.²⁹ This is also the moment when the chestnut began its important expansion in Galicia.

2.3. *Burials and cemeteries* (Fig. 3)

In form, burials at the beginning of the early Middle Ages in Galicia continue the late Roman tradition. They are usually made of tiles or bricks arranged as a cover or roof, and can be dated between the fourth and seventh centuries.³⁰ Interestingly, most of the cemeteries seem to have remained in use in later centuries, when other kinds of burials are introduced, and in fact, many of them correspond to current parish cemeteries. Among many other examples, these include the late Roman necropolises of Tines, Iria, Santiago de Ois and Paleo.³¹

From around the sixth to seventh centuries the so called 'Germanic necropolis' appears. It must be acknowledged that most of the studies of this kind of burial were made many decades ago using merely typological criteria and ethno-cultural categories such as 'Suevic' or 'Visigoth'. In this sense, new chronological and social-cultural reviews of this topic are much needed.³² Be that as it may, it seems clear that three main types of burial can be distinguished within this second phase. First, the use of stone sarcophagi as, for example, the so-called 'double stole tombstones', which certainly reflect a higher socio-economic status. The second group

²⁸ E. Ariño, S. Riera and J. Rodríguez, 'De Roma al medieval', *Zephyrus* 55 (2002), pp. 283–309; E. Ariño, J. Gurt and J. Palet, *El pasado presente. Arqueología de los paisajes en la Hispania romana* (Salamanca, 2004).

²⁹ A. Martínez Cortizas, T. Mighall, X. Pontevedra, J.C. Novoa, E. Peiteado and R. Piñeiro, 'Linking Changes in Atmospheric Dust Deposition, Vegetation Change and Human Activities in Northwest Spain during the Last 5300 Years', *The Holocene* 15,5 (2005), pp. 698–706.

³⁰ Rodríguez Resino, *Do imperio romano*, pp. 98–100.

³¹ Sánchez Pardo, 'Poblamiento rural tardorromano', p. 294.

³² J. Suárez Otero, 'Sobre las laudas de "doble estola" en Santiago e Iria', *Abrente* 29 (1997), pp. 41–7.

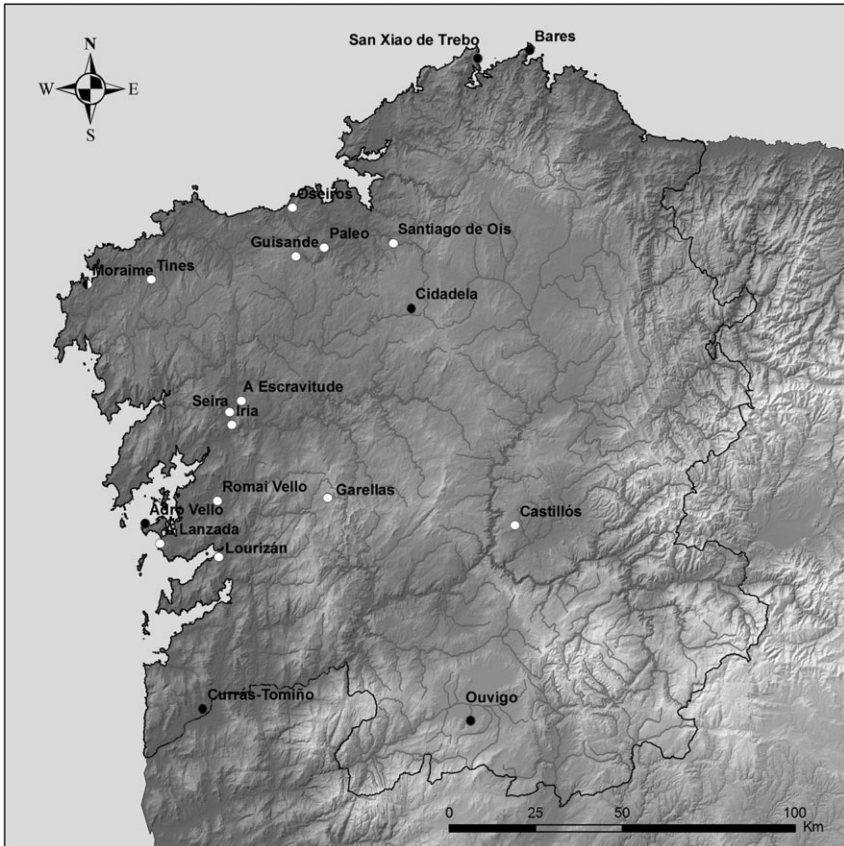


Fig. 3 Cemeteries (white circles) and churches/monasteries (black circles) mentioned in the text

are grave stones, generally simple stone slabs arranged in the form of a coffin. This type of burial has an extensive chronology of use. Finally, and usually located in small groups, are the tombs cut or excavated in the rock, often with anthropomorphic forms.³³

As noted above, some cemeteries seem to begin in the late Roman period and remain in use from then onwards. In that sense, the cemeteries are one of the more evident connections between the late Roman and early medieval world in Galicia, and show a certain degree of stability in communities' use of their burial sites. Only in cases like Guisande, A Lanzada, and others linked to old hill forts like Garellas or Lourizán, was the cemetery completely abandoned before the seventh century.

³³ Rodríguez Resino, *Do imperio romano*, pp. 91–2.

However, having said all this, in many other early medieval cemeteries there is no evidence of these earlier stages of development. What seems clear is that most of these cases are located, again, in parish cemeteries or in their immediate vicinity, as in, for example, Romai Vello, A Escravitude, San Lorenzo de Seira, and Moraime.³⁴ Only some rock-cut tombs are located in more remote areas.

2.4. Rural churches and monasteries (Fig. 3)

Churches, along with burials, have been for decades the most studied topic in the medieval archaeology and history of art of north-west Spain. However, most of the resulting research is based on old 'monumentalist' perspectives, which by focusing on specific buildings take into account neither the landscape, nor the social context of a church's foundation.³⁵ In addition, in recent years many of the traditionally assumed chronologies have been questioned within the framework of the intense debate about the 'Visigothic churches'.³⁶ Thus, only stratigraphical excavations in rural churches such as Eirexa Vella de Bares, Adro Vello, Cidadela, San Xiao de Trebo, Moraime, Ouvigo or Currás-Tomiño can at the moment provide reliable data.³⁷

In a recent survey I have proposed the existence in Galicia of a very dense network of churches and monasteries before the ninth century, the written traces of which can also be detected in the few texts which have been preserved from late antique north-west Spain.³⁸ The earliest cases of Christian buildings in the Galician countryside are rather small private chapels or funerary monuments in late Roman *villae* in the fifth/sixth centuries. Proper rural churches seem to appear from only the second half of the sixth century, and are mainly linked to the most dynamic areas of Galicia: the major roads, the coast, and the environs of the episcopal sees. Sometimes they show rich and imported decorative elements. But from the mid-seventh century, these kinds of rich foundations decrease, and instead, a growing number of small churches and monasteries built with poor or reused materials start spreading throughout Galicia, including in

³⁴ Sánchez Pardo, 'Poblamiento rural tardorromano', p. 295.

³⁵ R. Yzquierdo, *Arte medieval (I)* (A Coruña, 1993); M. Núñez, *Arquitectura Prerrománica* (Santiago, 1978); J.C. Rivas, 'Algunas consideraciones sobre el prerrománico gallego', *Boletín Auriense* 1 (1971), pp. 61–125.

³⁶ Two different views in: A. Chavarría, 'Churches and Aristocracies in Seventh-Century Spain', *EME* 18 (2010), pp. 160–74; M.A. Utrero, 'Late-Antique and Early Medieval Hispanic Churches and the Archaeology of Architecture', *Medieval Archaeology* 54 (2010), pp. 1–33.

³⁷ J.C. Sánchez Pardo, 'Iglesias y dinámicas sociopolíticas en el paisaje gallego de los siglos V–VIII', *Hispania* (forthcoming).

³⁸ Sánchez Pardo, 'Iglesias y dinámicas sociopolíticas'.

the mountainous areas.³⁹ This trend does not seem to stop with the brief and partial Muslim occupation of north-west Iberia between 714 and 740. Only in the realm of the Asturian kingdom in the ninth century, are higher-quality ecclesiastical buildings gradually reintroduced to this area.⁴⁰

2.5. *Economic axes and communications* (Fig. 4)

Its geographical position means that north-west Iberia has historically been a nodal point in the Mediterranean–Atlantic maritime routes, offering good natural harbours in the middle of these long and dangerous journeys. In Barry Cunliffe's words, Galicia was an unavoidable 'stepping stone' on the route between the main centres of northern Europe and the Mediterranean, although it was never itself an area of high demand or the main destination of the cargoes.⁴¹ Archaeology has revealed in recent years an important number of late antique sites and materials related to coastal and maritime activities in Galicia. On the one hand, many small to medium late Roman fishing and salting factories (such as at Bares, Area, Adro Vello, Moraime, Noville, Centroña and Toralla) have been detected along the Galician coast, peaking between the fifth and sixth centuries.⁴² But above all, an impressive quantity of Mediterranean and Atlantic ceramic imports dating from the fourth to the mid-seventh centuries have been found in rescue excavations at the harbour at Vigo. The study of these materials by A. Fernández has brought about a real revolution in our understanding of late antique Galicia, revealing Vigo to have been a major late antique port with intense long-distance trade, both with the Mediterranean (mainly North Africa and the Byzantine Near East) and the Atlantic world (especially west Gaul).⁴³ The main imported goods seem to have included Mediterranean wine, olive oil or alum, along with small luxury goods and fine potteries. The exports from Galicia probably consisted of wood, leather and, most importantly, its rich mineral resources like tin and gold.

Linked to the latter, recent analysis of atmospheric lead depositions show an important increase in mining/metallurgy activities in north-west Iberia between c.550 and 650 AD.⁴⁴ Unlike the early imperial, large-

³⁹ P.C. Díaz Martínez, 'Monasteries in a Peripheral Area: Seventh-Century *Gallaecia*', in F. Theuvs, M. de Jong and C. van Rhijn (eds), *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2001), pp. 329–59.

⁴⁰ Sánchez Pardo, 'Iglesias y dinámicas sociopolíticas'.

⁴¹ B. Cunliffe, *Facing the Ocean. The Atlantic and its Peoples* (Oxford, 2001), p. 34.

⁴² Pérez *et al.*, 'Toralla y las villas marítimas'.

⁴³ A. Fernández, *El comercio tardoantiguo (ss. IV–VII) en el Noroeste peninsular a través del registro arqueológico de la Ría de Vigo*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Vigo (2011).

⁴⁴ Martínez Cortizas *et al.*, 'Linking Changes', p. 703.

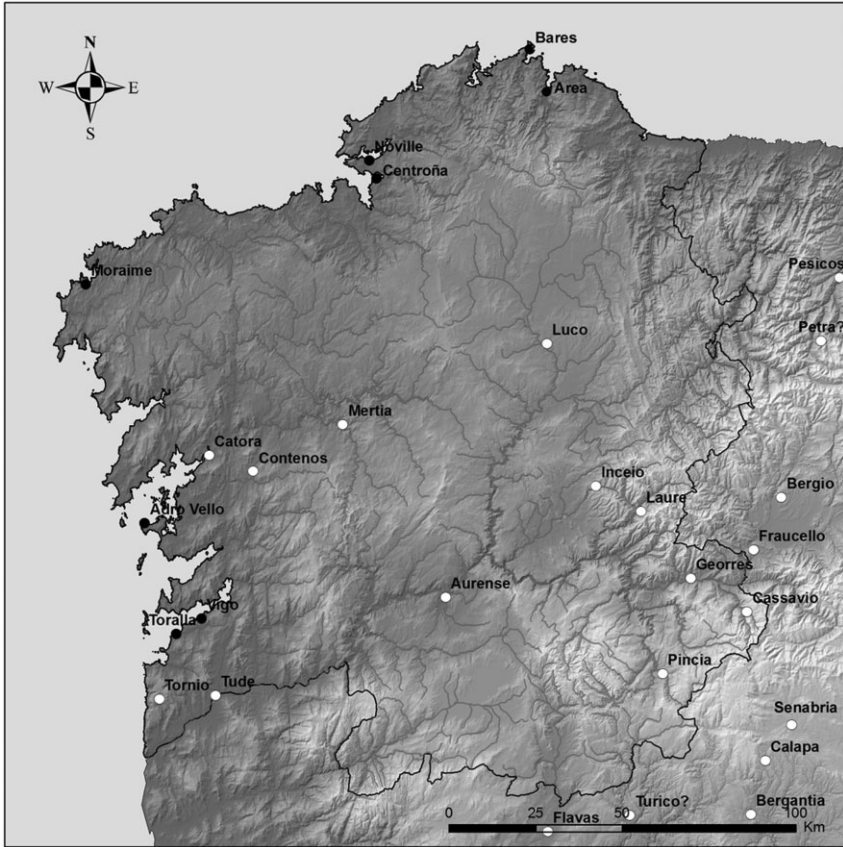


Fig. 4 Productive/commercial sites (white circles) and Visigothic mints (black circles) mentioned in the text

scale operations, the sixth- to seventh-century mining operations were probably based on small, scattered workings, which often belonged to the state.⁴⁵ It can be no coincidence that the increase in mining activities in Galicia by the mid-sixth century coincides with the end of the Byzantine trade with south-west Britain, which was also a likely source of metal resources like tin.⁴⁶ Perhaps Galicia from 550 (after a period of instability) caused the end of Byzantium's long-distance contact with south-west Britain, since it offered the same products to the Byzantine traders, but was much closer.

⁴⁵ J.C. Edmonson, 'Mining in the Later Roman Empire and Beyond: Continuity or Disruption?', *Journal of Roman Studies* 79 (1989), pp. 84–102, 97.

⁴⁶ E. Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports to Atlantic Britain and Ireland AD 400–800* (York, 2007), pp. 130–2.

Late antique Galician coinage can also, to some extent, be linked with this dynamic economic scene around 600 AD. A recent study by R. Pliego⁴⁷ shows a higher number of Visigothic mints in north-west Iberia than has traditionally been believed. The density and peculiarities of mints in this peripheral area have always puzzled researchers. Most of them were small and scattered centres of gold coinage, with only a short production span, mainly between 585 and 640. These gold coins did not have commercial purposes, but were rather the mechanisms for fiscal articulation or gift exchange between the king and local elites.⁴⁸ Interestingly, many of these mints are located in mining areas, revealing probably the royal delegation of mining activities to local elites.

By contrast, evidence from after the first half of the seventh century shows mainly locally based economic dynamics, as in much of the rest of the north of the Iberian Peninsula in this time. Although Roman roads were kept in use during the early medieval centuries,⁴⁹ and certain craft and commercial activities (e.g. metalworking, textile production) are believed to have existed between 650 and 800 AD in Galicia, the pottery of this period indicates production and circulation mostly on a local scale.⁵⁰

2.6. Fortifications (Fig. 5)

A surprisingly high number of early medieval fortifications have been detected in north-west Spain in the last few years, although most of them remain undated.⁵¹ Nevertheless, some provisional trends can already be distinguished. The first is the constant reuse of Iron Age hill forts between the fifth and ninth centuries as elements of the territorial articulation of power by local elites.⁵² They are not mere shelters for times of danger, as has sometimes been suggested, but real centres of power and spatial hierarchization on a local scale. In this sense, they could have had residential, productive and symbolic functions for the elite, as did other enclosed high-status settlements in Atlantic Europe.⁵³ These centres of

⁴⁷ R. Pliego, *La moneda visigoda* (Seville, 2009).

⁴⁸ M. Hardt, 'The Accumulation of Wealth in Early Medieval Aristocracies', in G.P. Brogiolo and A. Chavarría (eds), *Archeologia e società tra Tardo Antico e Alto Medioevo* (Mantova, 2007), pp. 253–6; Pliego, *La moneda*, pp. 215–29.

⁴⁹ E. Ferreira, *Los caminos medievales de Galicia* (Orense, 1988), pp. 61–5.

⁵⁰ J.A. Gutiérrez, 'Nuevos desarrollos en el estudio de las cerámicas medievales del norte de España', in C.M. Gerrard, A. Gutiérrez and A.G. Vince (eds), *Spanish Medieval Ceramics in Spain and the British Isles* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 67–87.

⁵¹ Sánchez Pardo, 'Castros y castillos'.

⁵² Novo Guisán, *De Hidacio a Sampiro*.

⁵³ S. Rippon, 'Landscape Change during the "Long Eighth Century" in Southern England', in N. Higham and M. Ryan (eds), *Landscape Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 39–64, at p. 48.

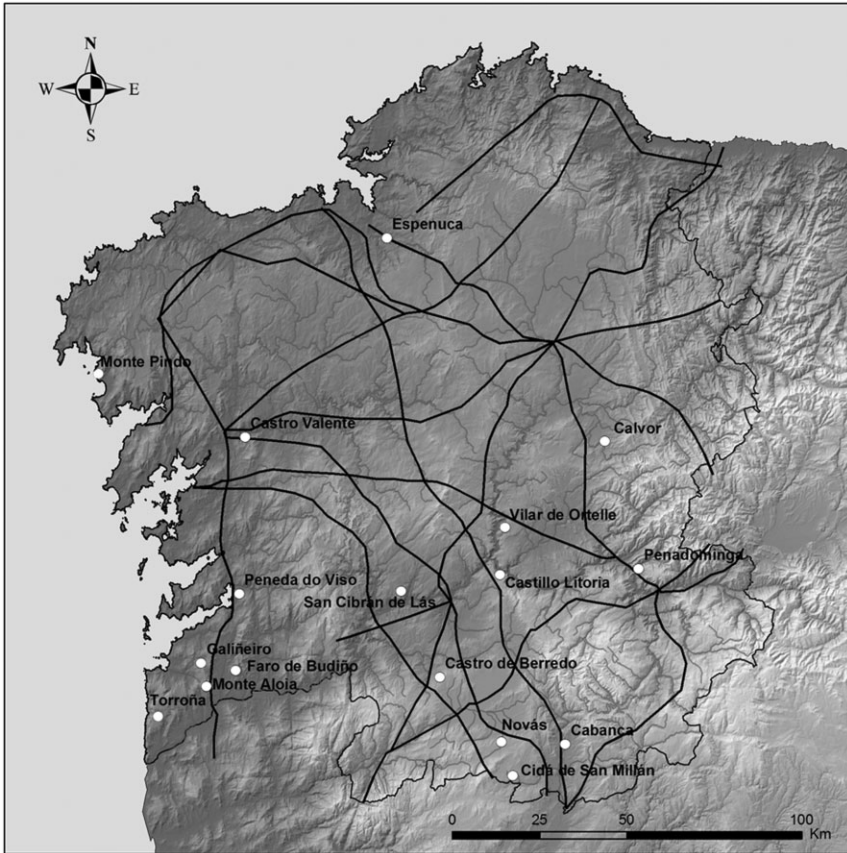


Fig. 5 Fortifications (white circles) and main Roman roads mentioned in the text

elite power spread throughout the territory of Galicia, but are found mainly in valleys and richer agrarian areas, as in the cases of Vilar de Ortelle, Novás, Calvor or Berredo.

The second trend concerns the partial uncovering of networks of fortifications located in inaccessible places with high visibility, and linked to the control of main roads and the coast. This second group of fortifications seems to relate to central power, both that of the Visigothic and the later Asturian kingdoms. Some of these fortifications have been built over the most defensive pre-existing hill forts (like Penadominga, Litoria, Cabanca, Espenuca and Peneda do Viso). But others are new creations, generally characterized by simple, but massive, stone enclosures, using where possible the natural rocks and located in the most inaccessible reaches of mountains with a high visibility, like Galíñeiro, Faro de

Budiño or Torroña.⁵⁴ In addition, there is growing evidence (both through analysis of place names and of undated structures) of a network of fire-signalling beacons linked to these fortifications, which allowed messages to be conveyed across long distances. Given other parallels, as in Catalonia, these beacons may perhaps be dated between the seventh and ninth centuries.⁵⁵

The third point to be noted is that unlike the examples above, which have small to medium dimensions (0.1–5 ha.), there is a smaller number of very large fortifications, both hill forts and new fortresses (like Aloia, Castro Valente, Pindo, Cidá de San Millán or San Cibrán de Lás), ranging from 6 to 24 ha. They are characterized by large walled spaces which always contain a church, and to some extent they relate to the Mediterranean trend for late antique *oppida*.⁵⁶ However, the Galician examples show very little evidence of structures within the walls. It is difficult to offer an interpretation given the current lack of available data, but the impossibility of defending such impressive precincts, together with their proximity to episcopal sees (like those of Iria or Tude), suggests these large fortifications were the residences of members of the high aristocracy with large spaces for cattle within the walls, rather than straightforward defensive sites.

3. Power and local communities in the early medieval Galician landscape in the light of the archaeology

Based on the preceding archaeological information, the following discussion offers some reflections on the social-political dynamics of early medieval Galicia. However, as a way of incorporating this information into the generally accepted historical narrative, I will follow the traditional political periodization.

3.1. Late Roman Galicia in the Suevic kingdom (c.400–560 AD)

Texts of this period like Hydatium's Chronicle emphasize ideas of barbarian destructions, economic crises and revivals from the pre-Roman period. However, the archaeological evidence for this phase in Galician history does not match this dramatic vision.⁵⁷ It seems increasingly clear that the fifth to sixth centuries were a complex but dynamic period in *Gallaecia* – in economic, political and social terms – in which a transformation, but not an end, of the late Galician-Roman world took place.

⁵⁴ J. Garrido, *Fortalezas de la antigua provincia de Tuy* (Pontevedra, 1987), pp. 29–41, 163–71.

⁵⁵ R. Martí (ed.), *Fars de l'islam, antigues alimares d'al-Andalus* (Barcelona, 2008).

⁵⁶ Brogiolo and Chavarria, *Aristocrazie e campagne*, pp. 69–85.

⁵⁷ P.C. Díaz, *El reino Suevo (411–585)* (Madrid, 2011).

At a political level, the traditional view of the Germanic impact in north-west Iberia and the creation of the Suevic kingdom (411–585) must be reconsidered. The Suevic kingdom was a dynamic socio-political structure that lasted for nearly two centuries. It was the first kingdom established in the Roman empire, and the first to mint its own coin and to convert to Catholic Christianity.⁵⁸ However, there is little evidence of any ethnic-cultural Germanic impact in Galicia. Suevic contingents were proportionally scarce and most of them settled in the urban centres of south *Gallaecia* like *Tude*, *Portum Cale* and *Bracara*. There they quickly assimilated into the local aristocracies. Typical Germanic burials with grave-goods, so common in other areas of Spain, are very scarce in Galicia.⁵⁹

Neither does the society of Galicia in this period match the ideas of 'low Romanization' and pre-Roman survival suggested by Barbero and Vigil's influential works of the 1970s.⁶⁰ 'Romanization' is now widely understood as more than a simple imposition and standardization by the Roman empire, and different authors have emphasized the importance of the long and bi-directional symbiotic relationships between imperial power and subordinate communities.⁶¹ In this sense, the 'north-west Iberian model of Romanization'⁶² refers to a specific and slower process in this area, but equally led to a deep cultural transformation.⁶³ This idea is especially visible in the landscape.

Of most importance, by the end of the empire the landscape of *Gallaecia* does not match the classical Roman binary pairing of city–countryside.⁶⁴ The urban world had little importance in the life of Roman north-west Iberia, serving only an administrative function. Instead, a series of secondary or semi-urban centres provided services to a wider and scattered rural population. Moreover, unlike Mediterranean areas, there is little evidence in Galicia of large and luxurious rural Roman villas. Rather, a scheme better adapted for the region developed from, and for, the countryside.⁶⁵ Thus, the persistence of indigenous place names in late antique texts must be simply linked with an efficient Galician-Roman scattered territorial organization.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Díaz, *El reino suevo*, p. 11.

⁵⁹ Yzquierdo, *Arte medieval (I)*, pp. 67–9.

⁶⁰ A. Barbero and M. Vigil, *La formación del feudalismo en la Península Ibérica* (Barcelona, 1978).

⁶¹ G. Woolf, 'Beyond Romans and Natives', *World Archaeology* 28.3 (1997), pp. 339–50.

⁶² G. Pereira Menaut, 'Un pobo e unha natio moi particulares', in G. Pereira Menaut (ed.), *Galicia fai dous mil anos* (Santiago, 1997), pp. 237–49; L.R. Menéndez Bueyes, *Reflexiones críticas sobre el origen del Reino de Asturias* (Salamanca, 2001), pp. 261–4.

⁶³ A. González Ruibal, *Galaicos. Poder y comunidad en el Noroeste de la Península Ibérica (1200 a. C.–50 d. C.) Brigantium 18–19* (A Coruña, 2007).

⁶⁴ Brogiolo and Chavarría, *Aristocrazie e campagne*, p. 151.

⁶⁵ Pérez Losada, *Entre a cidade*, p. 335.

⁶⁶ Díaz, *El reino suevo*, pp. 191–206.

All this means there are important differences in the starting point for our analysis of the early medieval landscape. Unlike the Castilian plateau,⁶⁷ no sudden breakdown of the economic landscape of Galicia has been detected for the middle of the fifth century. There is, of course, evidence of economic decline in this phase. Pollen analysis, for example, indicates a stage of forest recovery and a decrease in agricultural activities during this period. But this crisis seems more gradual and less dramatic than in other 'central areas' because of the lower dependence on the Roman system of 'city–countryside'. In this sense, some productive sites, such as Noville, maintained activity – perhaps even increased productivity – until the middle of the sixth century. Material culture remained fully 'Galician-Roman' in this period.⁶⁸ And there are signs of a high degree of continuity, with the late Roman settlement pattern persisting into the early Middle Ages: as explained above, urban and semi-urban sites like Iria, Tui, Lugo or Ourense remained occupied in the following centuries, and many late Roman rural sites – small scattered farms and hamlets – later became the basis of early medieval villages.

Thus, rather than a collapse between the fifth and the first half of the sixth century, archaeology shows instead a transformation of the late Roman Galician landscape. There are, of course, important regional differences in the manifestation of these transformations, but in general they can be related to an increasing social polarization. Indications of this process of wealth concentration include the creation of the first rural oratories like Ouvigo; the importing of rich marble sarcophagi, such as those at Lourenzá or Portosín; data showing increasing territorial hierarchization, like the re-occupation of Peneda do Viso or Cidá de San Millán hill forts; the desertion of some villas at the time that others have their peak; and the increasing restriction of maritime trade to elites.⁶⁹

3.2. *The flowering of Gallaecia between 560 and 640 AD*

Based on the scarcity of written references, it is generally believed that the incorporation of the Suevic kingdom into the Visigothic state in 585 meant the beginning of an uneventful phase in the evolution of Galicia. However, the combination of archaeological, textual and palaeoenvironmental data reveals that the roughly eighty years between 560 and 640 were an extraordinarily dynamic episode in Galician history, even in comparison with wider Peninsular and European developments. There is

⁶⁷ J.A. Quirós, 'Arqueología del campesinado altomedieval: las aldeas y las granjas del País Vasco', in Quirós (ed.), *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Villages*, pp. 385–403, at p. 388.

⁶⁸ F. Arias, 'O proceso de xermanización', in E. Ramil (dir.), *El mundo romano en Galicia* (Lugo, 1994), pp. 49–63, 57.

⁶⁹ Fernández, *El comercio tardoantiguo*, pp. 654–94.

a range of overlapping evidence for social, political and economic vitality in Galicia within this short period. Some of these findings have already been noted, such as the signs of increasing organization and socio-economic hierarchization in the last three decades of the Suevic kingdom. According to P.C. Díaz, this process was driven by the church, especially by the bishops.⁷⁰ Interestingly, architectural evidence for the first rural churches also appears in this period, and exhibits a high degree of artistry, as in the reliefs of the Saamasas or Setecoros churches. It is therefore possible to link these foundations with the emergence of strong episcopal supra-local power, as the extraordinary text, the so-called 'Suevic Parish List', demonstrates.⁷¹

More surprising is the discovery in north-west Spain of a short but important productive and commercial economic system during these decades. From the mid-sixth to the mid-seventh century, when the other Galician coastal productive sites had already been abandoned, Vigo became the site with the greatest proportion of eastern Mediterranean pottery (*Focean* wares) in all of western Europe. This reveals that the harbour at Vigo was the focus of an intense, and so far unsuspected, trade with Byzantine merchants, oriented to the acquisition of wine and luxury products in return for Galician tin and gold. As already explained, mining activity has been detected by palaeoenvironmental analysis for precisely this period.⁷² All the evidence indicates that this was a very specific commercial productive system, controlled by a small but very rich elite.

As Chris Wickham has recently argued, the exchange capacity of aristocracies is directly linked to their agrarian wealth.⁷³ In fact, pollen analysis shows a very marked deforestation from c.560 until the mid-seventh century in Galicia. In contrast to other areas, this early forest clearance is closely linked to crop expansion and the introduction of the chestnut, a species that played a very important role in the peasant economy in the following centuries. It is interesting that C14 chronologies of the creation of several agrarian terraces at the Monte Gaiás site again fit this period perfectly. They also imply a significant and coordinated collective effort to increase yield and, perhaps, produce a surplus.

Although data about burials needs a more precise chronology, it seems probable that the transition from typical late Roman burials to early

⁷⁰ Díaz, *El reino suevo*, p. 195; Pallares and Portela, *Galicia en la época medieval*, pp. 43–7.

⁷¹ Sánchez Pardo, 'Iglesias y dinámicas'.

⁷² Martínez Cortizas *et al.*, 'Linking Changes', p. 703.

⁷³ C. Wickham, 'Rethinking the Structure of the Early Medieval Economy', in Davis and McCormick (eds), *The Long Morning*, pp. 19–31.

medieval ones took place around this period. The more humble late Roman burials made with *tegulae* gave place to others built with slabs, while the rich imported marble sarcophagi for elites were replaced by stone tombs with the so-called 'stole' decoration.⁷⁴ But in most cases this transition occurred in the same location, without the abandonment of existing burial sites. It is clear that these differences in burials imply that in Galicia the cemetery was also the setting for social competition.⁷⁵ But here, again, we are very far from discerning any military or ethnic connotations. Here too economic wealth and socio-political status are instead the keys to social differentiation.

In connection with the agrarian changes, the few clear archaeological findings on settlements also indicate a transformation during this short period. As shown, new early medieval sites (such as A Pousada) had their origins at this point (between the sixth and seventh centuries), and in fact, the high density in Galicia of place names deriving from the first landowners seems to confirm the creation of new settlements in this period. On the other hand, the abandoning of small late Roman sites (like As Pereiras) seems also to have happened at this time. However, as previously mentioned, not all of the older sites came to an end. Many of them at this point underwent a physical 'adjustment', often in their immediate surroundings (generally less than 200 metres), which became the site of traditional rural villages, which are clearly identified in documents from as early as the ninth and tenth centuries. This spatial relationship does not necessarily imply social continuity, but it clearly points towards a higher stability in the settlement pattern here than in other areas. Further evidence for this stability comes from the 'Suevic Parish List', since many of the places names in this ecclesiastical text written around 580 AD still exist today, and correspond to Galician and northern Portuguese rural villages.

Thus, it seems that a physical reorganization of the occupied landscape took place around the seventh century, characterized by a certain degree of spatial stability with regard to the late Roman settlement pattern, as observed in the continued use of burial sites, unlike in other European areas.⁷⁶ This does not always mean, however, a simple tendency towards nucleated settlements. Given the characteristics of the Galician landscape it seems that the trend was more often towards poly-nucleation: the

⁷⁴ Suárez Otero, 'Sobre las laudas'.

⁷⁵ G. Halsall, *Settlement and Social Organization. The Merovingian Region of Metz* (Cambridge, 1995); V. Bierbrauer, 'The Cross Goes North: From Late Antiquity to Merovingian Times South and North of the Alps', in M. Carver (ed.), *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300–1300* (York, 2003), pp. 429–442.

⁷⁶ Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements*, p. 105; Halsall, *Settlement and Social Organization*.

distribution of population in different small cores, scattered but near each other,⁷⁷ as also happened in other Atlantic areas.⁷⁸

All these transformations indicate a dynamic society in north-west Iberia during this period. This social vitality seems to relate to a complex power structure which can be divided into three interconnected political spheres. The first represents central power: the last Suevic and then the Visigothic kings, who articulated their presence in the territory through delegates like the *duces*. We know the names of some of them, like the *dux* Dogilano, who lived in Lugo in the first half of the seventh century.⁷⁹ It is also known that many of the territory's fiscal resources, such as the mining areas, were under royal control.⁸⁰ Second, at the local level, peasant elites probably played an important role in the aforementioned restructuring of the agrarian and habitat spaces. Drawing on parallels, it is possible that this physical reorganization represented the transformation from small family settlement groups like *villae*, farms and hamlets, to another model based on village communities. This change can be observed, albeit with many local differences, in many areas of western Europe between the seventh and ninth centuries.⁸¹ But a 'village community' does not necessarily imply a physical grouping of people. Above all, feelings of solidarity and connectedness played a very important role in the creation of village communities. Crucially, some of these links came to be embodied in the following centuries in the church and the parish community.

In addition to central and local power, it is obvious that powerful intermediate regional aristocracies also operated in Galicia in this period. The economic vitality (mining, long-distance trade, rural churches), reorganization of the landscape (agrarian terraces, settlement changes, creation of village communities) and territorial articulation (mints and the defining of ecclesiastical territories from 560), cannot be explained simply by either the monarchy or peasant activity, but seem to imply a strong level of intermediate articulation of authority. We already knew that these elites were well connected with other regions, since texts attest to such things as their frequent assistance at councils, pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and embassies to Merovingian kingdoms. But now it seems

⁷⁷ Sánchez Pardo, 'Poblamiento rural tardorromano', p. 302.

⁷⁸ S. Rippon, *Beyond the Medieval Village. The Diversification of Landscape Character in Southern Britain* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 106–37.

⁷⁹ J.M. Novo Guisán, 'Lugo en los tiempos oscuros (IV y V)', *Boletín do Museo Provincial de Lugo* 9 (1999–2000), pp. 219–30.

⁸⁰ Edmonson, 'Mining in the Later Roman Empire and Beyond', pp. 95–9.

⁸¹ Among many others: Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements*; Francovich and Hodges, *Villa to Village*; R. Jones and M. Page, *Medieval Villages in an English Landscape. Beginnings and Ends* (Macclesfield, 2006); Rippon, *Beyond the Medieval Village*.

clear that they had close links with the Byzantine world in this period too, as evidenced by commercial exchange, Byzantine artistic elements within ecclesiastical architecture, burials and jewellery,⁸² and the eastern influence found in Galician Christianity, for example, in saints' names and strict forms of monastic observance.⁸³ As discussed above, Galicia was also perhaps the reason for the ending of Byzantine trade with south-west Britain by the middle of the sixth century.

These regional elites are the real key for understanding the social dynamics of this period. They acted like a hinge between the royal realm and high-status locals.⁸⁴ In this sense, the density of Visigothic mints between 585 and 631 in north-west Iberia can be linked with these pacts between central and regional powers. Perhaps mining was one of the activities delegated by the kings to regional elites, since most of these mints correspond to the main tin and gold-mining areas. This regional aristocracy would enjoy a higher level of control over fiscal resources at a local level, at least in the 'core areas'.⁸⁵ In this sense, it seems possible to relate the transformations of the settlement pattern and the intensification of agrarian production to a higher level of fiscal pressure from supra-local powers. Unfortunately, we do not know who exactly these regional powers were, but it is clear that they included bishops, as the latter played an important part in territorial articulation of local authority by founding rural churches and establishing the first ecclesiastical organization.

3.3. *The retreat to the local: from the end of the Visigothic period to the beginning of the 'reconquest' (640–780 AD)*

The evidence for social dynamism apparently quickly comes to an end around the middle of the seventh century. Now we witness the cessation of long-distance trade in Vigo, the dramatic concentration of the previously scattered mints into three major centres, a marked decrease of metal pollution from mining/metallurgy activities, and a change in the pollen indicators of deforestation. All these transformations suggest a social scenario largely restricted to a local scale, with the decrease of central and regional power in a context of growing territorial fragmentation.⁸⁶ On the

⁸² Yzquierdo, *Arte prerrománico (I)*, p. 69.

⁸³ Núñez, *Arquitectura Prerrománica*, pp. 62–5.

⁸⁴ Castellanos and Martín Viso, 'The Local Articulation', p. 10.

⁸⁵ Wickham, 'Rethinking the Structure', pp. 24–7.

⁸⁶ I. Martín Viso, 'La sociedad rural en el Suroeste de la Meseta del Duero (siglos VI–VII)', in G. Ser and I. Martín Viso (eds), *Espacios de poder y formas sociales en la Edad Media* (Salamanca, 2007), pp. 171–88; J. Escalona, 'Patrones de fragmentación territorial: el fin del mundo romano en la Meseta del Duero', in I. Álvarez (coord.), *Comunidades locales y dinámicas de poder en el norte de la Península Ibérica durante la Antigüedad Tardía* (Logroño, 2006), pp. 165–99.

one hand, this situation is a reflection of the political instability (sometimes also called 'proto-feudalization') of the last decades of the Visigothic kingdom, with constant aristocratic rebellions and an increasing social tension – as can be perceived in our area through Valerio of Bierzo's writings.⁸⁷ But from a wider perspective, this picture matches a general southern European transition from late antique political formations to early medieval 'principalities'.⁸⁸ Using the proposal formulated by Julio Escalona and Andrew Reynolds, this process can be explained as a change in scale from the middle of the seventh century.⁸⁹ Kings lost control over many areas since they lacked the collaborative support of intermediate regional powers, as indicated by the reduction in the number of mints. This does not mean the complete absence of indications of supra-local authorities in Galicia, at least until after the Muslim invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 711 (for example, there is a possible network of fortifications – like Galíñeiro and Faro de Budiño – around the important city of *Tude*), but these supra-local authorities have become restricted to only a few 'core' areas.⁹⁰

Instead, there is growing evidence for a dynamic local picture, under the leadership of community elites. The activities of these local powers are reflected in two elements of the Galician landscape: the foundation of private churches and monasteries, and the reuse of prehistoric hill forts as places of territorial control. For the former, an important spread of small monasteries and private churches takes place in this period across Spain, at the same time as the acts of church councils reflect the bishops' progressive loss of control of these foundations.⁹¹ In the case of Galicia this process often took place through the means of a very particular institution: the small family or community monastery. This kind of religious-economic institution was so common that a specific monastic rule (the *Regula communis*) was written in an attempt to organize its spread through north-west Spain.⁹² These monasteries, characterized by limited abbatial power and the maintenance of family or neighbourhood links, demonstrate the vitality of local communities. But above all, these private foundations seem to reflect local elites' strategies for economic and political consolidation within their own areas. As in other Atlantic

⁸⁷ R. Frighetto, *Valerio do Bierzo. Autobiografía* (Noia, 2006), pp. 42–6.

⁸⁸ M. Rouche, 'La crise de l'Europe au cours de la deuxième moitié du VIIe siècle et la naissance des régionalismes', *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 41.2 (1986), pp. 347–60.

⁸⁹ Escalona, 'The Early Middle Ages'.

⁹⁰ A. Isla, 'El lugar de habitación de las aristocracias en época visigoda', *Arqueología y territorio medieval* 14 (2007), pp. 9–19.

⁹¹ Chavarría, 'Churches and Aristocracies', p. 168.

⁹² Díaz Martínez, 'Monasteries in a Peripheral Area'.

European areas, these religious foundations acted as elements of aristocratic power consolidation, wealth accumulation and territorial articulation of authority at the local level.⁹³

As also previously explained, both archaeology and later texts seem to indicate that a number of old hill forts underwent some kind of military/defensive occupation during this period. Such cases include Berredo, Xanrozo, Vilar de Ortelle, Cabanca and Calvor.⁹⁴ Unlike the highly defensive royal fortifications at the top of inaccessible heights, these hill forts are humble constructions that reuse the walls of old Iron Age settlements. These fortifications were not aimed at supra-local control; instead, they were more efficient as places of local power, as 'enclosed high-status sites', each one controlling its own area, perhaps with residential functions, but above all acting as the symbolic embodiment of a local elite in its properties or domain.⁹⁵

Thus, it seems that relatively independent and dynamic local elites operated in Galicia in this period. But who exactly were these local aristocrats, and did a linear relationship exist between them and the previous late Roman and/or Visigothic landowners?⁹⁶ This is a fundamental problem which requires further research. However, it seems clear that these aristocracies based their power on land wealth, and not kinship or military activity.⁹⁷ Their strategies for generating surplus are unknown, but they probably had only a very limited tax-collecting capacity at a local level, as has been observed in other northern Iberian areas.⁹⁸ Given the absence of large agricultural estates, it seems clear that Galician elites did not have big unitary properties but rather scattered pieces of land in different places, as can be observed in later documents of the ninth to tenth centuries. This fact suggests a slow and complex process of acquisition though the previous centuries, as well as a more unstable power structure. Perhaps the origins of this peculiar political structure go back to the absence in this region of large late Roman *villae* and other important poles of economic articulation. Moreover, it is easy to imagine that some of these local elites would have possessed a recognized political and

⁹³ R. Le Jan, 'Convents, Violence and Competition for Power in Seventh-Century Francia', in Theuvs, de Jong, van Rhijn (eds), *Topographies of Power*, pp. 243–69; S. Turner, *Making a Christian Landscape. The Countryside in Early Medieval Cornwall, Devon and Wessex* (Exeter, 2006).

⁹⁴ Sánchez Pardo, 'Castros, castillos'.

⁹⁵ I. Martín Viso, *Poblamiento y estructuras sociales en el Norte de la Península Ibérica. Siglos VI–XIII* (Salamanca, 2000).

⁹⁶ Isla, 'El lugar de habitación'.

⁹⁷ Pallares and Portela, *Galicia en la época medieval*, p. 86.

⁹⁸ Martín Viso, 'La sociedad rural en el Suroeste', p. 183.

judicial power, based on property ownership and with different scales of influence, as noted by Wendy Davies for other Atlantic regions.⁹⁹

Another important issue for this period are the consequences of the Islamic invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 711. Today most authors agree in rejecting the idea that this event had much of a social-economic impact across most of Galicia.¹⁰⁰ The invasion only implied for several decades an even deeper isolation of this territory from any superior political structure. It has been demonstrated that the documents from the following century reflect the stability of the landscape organization, a stability which seems to go back to at least the eighth century.¹⁰¹ Archaeology confirms this view: no evidence of changes in settlement structure has been detected at this point, unlike other areas of the Iberian Peninsula such as Madrid,¹⁰² Salamanca¹⁰³ or Alava.¹⁰⁴

Thus, it seems we are able to identify a certain isolation, but not rupture, in the local territorial structures of eighth-century Galicia. This implies that during the first half of the eighth century the trends towards territorial fragmentation and the relative independence of local elites continued or even increased. These elites come to light in the record again only at the end of the century, when Asturian chronicles describe the rebellion of aristocratic groups in Galicia against the expansion of the new kingdom. This picture corresponds to a map of fragmented, but not necessarily weak, local authorities controlling their own areas.

At an economic level, then, our region could fit into the second micro-regional model proposed by Chris Wickham for the 'long eighth century'; that is, it is an area of local and simplified dynamics and production, but not necessarily rude or poor, without cities, but situated within a general framework of continuity with the basic models of rural society.¹⁰⁵ Of course, this conclusion must be qualified by highlighting the need to pay due attention to the area's important geographical diversity.

⁹⁹ W. Davies, *Patterns of Power in Early Wales* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 28–9; *eadem*, 'La comunidad local en las sociedades célticas en la Alta Edad Media', in Álvarez (coord.), *Comunidades locales y dinámicas de poder*, pp. 91–114, at pp. 103–7.

¹⁰⁰ Pallares and Portela, *Galicia en la época medieval*, pp. 62–81; Balañas, *Do mito á realidade*.

¹⁰¹ Portela, *Galicia y la monarquía leonesa*.

¹⁰² A. Vigil-Escalera, 'Granjas y aldeas altomedievales al norte de Toledo (450–800 d.C.)', *Archivo Español de Arqueología* 80 (2007), pp. 239–84.

¹⁰³ Ariño *et al.*, 'De Roma al medievo'.

¹⁰⁴ Quirós, 'Arqueología del campesinado'.

¹⁰⁵ C. Wickham, 'Overview: Production, Distribution and Demand, II', in L. Hansen and C. Wickham (eds), *The Long Eighth Century. Production, Distribution and Demand* (Brill, 2000), pp. 345–77, at p. 365.

3.4. *The incorporation of Galicia into the Asturian kingdom (780–900 AD)*

From the end of the eighth century, a progressive increase in the power of some Galician elites took place in the context of the integration of the region into the Asturian kingdom. However, according to all the evidence above, it seems that Galicia was not a mere conquered territory, as has traditionally been believed, but a key part of the new political entity, feeding with its social and economic dynamism much of the expansion of the new kingdom. The Asturian power core was, originally, similar to other local political structures in the territory of the former *Gallaecia*. However, from the mid-eighth century, through battles and pacts, this power structure began a slow expansion over neighbouring regions, soon heading toward the nearby Galician territories. During this expansion, the Asturian kingdom received important help and influence from the Hispanic-Visigothic refugee groups arriving in north-west Spain in the eighth century. From a wider perspective, the evolution of the Asturian kingdom is not exceptional in the European context, as was traditionally believed, but rather fits into the general trend of strengthening supra-local power and state formation that characterizes much of Europe during the 'long eighth century'.¹⁰⁶ Very early in this process, the Asturian power core found in the more highly populated, dynamic and rich – albeit politically fragmented – neighbouring region of Galicia, the necessary resources for its subsequent expansion.¹⁰⁷ But this expansion could not take place whilst the Galician local aristocracy remained independent. According to the chronicles, Kings Fruela and Silo encountered strong resistance (called 'rebellion' by these pro-Asturian texts) from the Galician elite, which can be interpreted as a contest between the locals and the new (but still weak) supra-local power for the control of lands. These conflicts gave way, during the reign of King Alfonso II, to a new strategy of pacts and negotiation, which symbolizes another change in scale and the consolidation of a new socio-political power structure in our region.¹⁰⁸ As Ermelindo Portela Silva has established, bishops again played a crucial role in this political articulation of authority.¹⁰⁹

Therefore, from the late eighth century and into the ninth, Galician elites increased the scale of both their authority and their actions through

¹⁰⁶ Hansen and Wickham (eds), *The Long Eighth Century*; Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements*, pp. 191–4.

¹⁰⁷ C. Balañas, 'De Covadonga a Compostela: Galicia en el marco de la construcción del Reino de Asturias', in *La época de la Monarquía Asturiana: actas del simposio celebrado en Covadonga* (Oviedo, 2002), pp. 367–90.

¹⁰⁸ Balañas, *Do mito á realidade*, pp. 86–96.

¹⁰⁹ E. Portela, 'El rey y los obispos. Poderes locales en el espacio central leonés durante el período astur', in F.J. Fernández and C. García de Castro (eds), *Symposium Internacional: Poder y simbología en Europa. Siglos VIII–X* (Oviedo, 2009), pp. 215–25.

negotiating their integration into the kingdom of Asturias. This important change is clearly reflected in the landscape. Let us start with settlement. Contrary to the traditional explanations offered by Sánchez Albornoz, it is now accepted that no strategic depopulation occurred in north-west Spain in the eighth century. However, it seems true that a strong territorial reorganization in some areas of Galicia did take place between the eighth and ninth centuries in relation to the implementation of the new political structure and an increasing pressure on the land. In this sense, pollen indicators show clearly the intensification of deforestation around 800 AD.¹¹⁰ This can be linked with two processes. On the one hand, the arrival of groups of people from the north and south of the Iberian Peninsula implies the acquisition of lands and the creation of new settlements.¹¹¹ More importantly the increasing power of local elites, which became more and more articulated at a supra-local level and thus more capable of imposing fiscal authority, led to the colonization of uncultivated areas and the creation of new villages. Many of these villages can probably be recognized by their 'Germanic' place names deriving from the first landowners, as for example can be observed around Lugo.¹¹²

The expansion of the new supra-local power structure was closely linked to the foundation or restoration of churches/monasteries as elements of political articulation and local lordship. Both textual and archaeological evidence reveals an important increase in ecclesiastical foundations in this period.¹¹³ This is the case, for example, for Calvor and Atán, or the churches created by Bishop Odoario in the eighth century. In the ninth century, ecclesiastical authorities, in collaboration with the kings, were already able to restore the episcopal sees, and through the cult of Saint James promoted Compostela as a new religious and political centre of the kingdom.

Finally, the integration of Galicia into the Asturian kingdom resulted in an increasingly controlled landscape, as exemplified by the creation of military fortifications which are connected with the consolidation of comital power.¹¹⁴ All these developments indicate an unstoppable advance towards a new phase in Galicia's history. But they cannot be understood without the historical background – less visible but crucial – of change and continuity over the preceding centuries.

¹¹⁰ Martínez Cortizas *et al.*, 'Linking Changes', p. 703.

¹¹¹ Balañas, *Do mito á realidade*, pp. 160–209.

¹¹² J. D'Emilio, 'The Legend of Bishop Odoario and the Early Medieval Church in Galicia', in T. Martin and J. Harris (eds), *Church, State, Vellum and Stone* (Boston, 2005), pp. 47–83.

¹¹³ Sánchez Pardo, 'Iglesias y dinámicas'.

¹¹⁴ Sánchez Pardo, 'Castros, castillos'.

4. Conclusions

Despite its many limitations, this archaeological review of the elements of the early medieval landscape in Galicia offers a number of new and interesting keys to a better understanding of the social dynamics of this peripheral European area between the fifth and the ninth centuries. Unlike other Iberian and Mediterranean areas, there is no evidence of a systematic collapse of the Roman social-economic system in Galicia in the fifth century, probably because of its lesser dependence on the binary organization of 'city–countryside' and the accompanying large-*villae* system. Further, the Germanic invasions and the general processes of militarization undergone by other late antique societies had relatively little impact in this area. After a period of social polarization, the end of the so-called Suevic kingdom and the first decades of Visigothic *Gallaecia* (between roughly 560 and 640) seem to have been a phase of extraordinary vitality, as observed in settlement changes, marked deforestation, creation of agrarian terraces, the spread of the first rural churches, and the existence of an intense productive-commercial economic system. This period is characterized by a solid articulation of supra-local powers, as the episcopal control of rural churches, the extension of small mints, or the close relationships with Gaul and Byzantium reveal.

However, a little before the middle of the seventh century this scenario changed very quickly. A multi-faceted trend towards socio-political fragmentation is detected throughout north-west Spain: the end of long-distance trade, the creation of private churches and monasteries outside of episcopal control, forest recovery, and the end of mining. This trend to 'localization', so common in many areas of Europe at this time,¹¹⁵ seems to have been especially marked in our area because of its physical fragmentation, the inadequacy of the system of large estates, and the success of the smallholding and poly-nuclear settlement pattern. In this sense, the first half of the eighth century, traditionally considered in the Iberian Peninsula as a milestone of rupture because of the Islamic invasion, in most of Galicia was a simple continuation of previous trends, without changes in local power or settlement structures.

It is from the end of the eighth century that a new change in scale seems to take place in Galician social-political structures, with its progressive incorporation into the expanding Asturian kingdom. However, because of the existing local conditions, Galicia became not a simple annexed territory, but rather a key piece that, with its social and

¹¹⁵ Rouche, 'La crise de l'Europe'.

economic wealth, supported the nascent political structure within a general European trend of 'state formation' led by the Carolingian powers.

From a wider perspective, the case of Galicia represents an interesting case study of the permanent dialectic between two pairs of opposing historical tendencies: dynamism versus fragmentation, and external influences versus isolation. These trends can be detected, to differing extents, throughout the European early Middle Ages, but show an especial polarization in such a specific geo-historical area as Galicia: a peripheral territory in the western part of Continental Europe but playing a key role in maritime contacts, with a wealth of economic resources but a natural disposition to scattered and fragmented organization, and a relatively high degree of Romanization followed by later isolation from major early medieval political centres. All this seems to have shaped a peculiar evolution, in which the internal dynamics participated in, and changed under the influence of, long-term European processes: late antique contact, political fragmentation from the fifth to the eighth centuries, the 'long eighth century' or the trend to 'state formation'. Thus, as J. Escalona proposes, it is necessary to move from a simple binary model of 'continuity–discontinuity' in the early Middle Ages, to reflect instead on 'structural heterogeneity' and its internal complexity.¹¹⁶ For this task, comparison and the search for similar trends in other areas becomes crucial.

In this sense the Galician landscape not only shows similarities with the neighbouring territories, such as northern Portugal¹¹⁷ and Asturias,¹¹⁸ that together comprised ancient *Gallaecia*, but also with other Atlantic European areas.¹¹⁹ Like Galicia, south-west Britain is characterized by a greater continuity of the late antique landscape and the appearance of a new medieval landscape in the seventh to eighth centuries.¹²⁰ Also in Wales, the preservation of a scattered traditional settlement pattern has been detected at least until the tenth to eleventh centuries.¹²¹ Local communities in dispersed settlements dominated the landscapes of Brittany too, until the impact of growing monastic power from the ninth century onwards.¹²² By citing these examples I do not intend to suggest any kind of historical determinism or the operation of simplistic 'Celtic'

¹¹⁶ Escalona, 'Patrones de fragmentación', p. 165.

¹¹⁷ Fontes, 'Braga e o Norte'.

¹¹⁸ M. Fernández Mier, *Génesis del territorio en la Edad Media* (Oviedo, 1999).

¹¹⁹ Davies, 'La comunidad local'.

¹²⁰ Rippon, *Beyond the Medieval Village*, pp. 106–37; S. Turner, 'The Medieval Landscape of Devon and Cornwall', in S. Turner (ed.), *Medieval Devon and Cornwall. Shaping an Ancient Countryside* (Macclesfield, 2006), pp. 1–9.

¹²¹ Turner, 'The Medieval Landscape', pp. 8–9.

¹²² G. Astill and W. Davies, *A Breton Landscape* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 90–110.

parallels, but rather propose certain similarities of historical and geographical contexts: they are all Atlantic peripheral areas found in the vicinity of powerful expansive political structures, and it is perhaps not therefore surprising that they experienced similar, but not identical, evolutionary trends.¹²³

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¹²³ Cunliffe, *Facing the Ocean*, p. 567.