

The early Castilian peasantry: an archaeological turn?

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Notions and interpretations of the peasantry of early medieval Castile evolved significantly during the twentieth century, along the lines of major historiographical changes. After a period largely dominated by the paradigm of legal and institutional history, the incorporation of social and economic approaches in the 1960s gave way to a significant increase in the volume of research and a deeper understanding of the articulation of local communities within the broader framework of early medieval Castilian society. This development was firmly rooted in changing visions of settlement and territorial structures and strongly biased towards social-political, rather than economic issues. This article aims to argue that we are now in the initial phase of a major turn defined by the sudden rise of the archaeology of early medieval peasant settlements. The combination of material culture and environmental date recovered from those sites are quickly forming a substantial body of fresh information to combine with a stable well-known documentary corpus. These changes are opening the gate to a new, exciting horizon for research in this field, although they also pose a great challenge for both historians and archaeologists, who will need to build a hybrid conceptual space where the hitherto dominant textual information and methodologies can accommodate the increasing impact of archaeology.

Keywords: early middle ages; Castile; peasantry; historiography; archaeology

In his presentation to the 2008 *Medieval Peasants Revisited* conference held at The Huntington Library, in Los Angeles, Piotr Górecki commented:

The peasants are a subject currently moving quite rapidly into the center of historians' interests. In the United States (though less so elsewhere) the past fifteen years had witnessed a relative de-emphasis on agrarian, economic, and social history, in favor of inquiry more closely tied to cultural matters, certain aspects of collective cognition (especially memory), and, perhaps above all, the autonomy of the text, in preference to the realities to which that text refers. Recently, in this country as elsewhere, there has been a return to interest in the concrete and the material – an interest which is now enriched and well informed by cultural, textual, and cognitive issues.¹

Few will contend that there has been a relative eclipse of the socio-economic under a dominant wave of studies strongly biased towards the cultural and the textual, a forum where peasants' own voices – even if “tormented” – can rarely be heard,² but the patina of scholarly globalization should not mislead us. Over the fifteen years to which Górecki refers, particularly in Europe, social and economic research – including

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¹Górecki, unpublished presentation, delivered at the *Medieval Peasants Revisited* conference, 16–17 May 2008.

²Bisson, *Tormented Voices*.

research into the medieval peasant societies – has continued to play a prominent role,³ now enhanced by a more theoretically informed understanding of the textual sources.⁴ However, this article aims to suggest that the most important development that can be anticipated in the immediate future, as far as early medieval Castilian peasant studies are concerned, is not as much related to the objectivism–subjectivism controversy or to a defence of the value of socio-economic research, as it is to the very recent take-off of the archaeology of early medieval rural communities. The role of archaeology, both in scholarship and in the context of Spanish academic structures, may well be the crucial challenge for the present generation.

“Early medieval Castile” needs some clarification, not least because the name “Castile” changed its meaning as the territory it designated expanded during the Middle Ages. In this paper, I am concerned exclusively with the early medieval notion of Castile, stretching until the end of the comital period in 1038. Therefore, my spatial framework shall be the territory controlled by the Castilian counts in their heyday, roughly the lands between the Cantabrian Sea and the river Duero, and between the mountains of the Sistema Ibérico on the east and the river Pisuerga on the west.⁵ My temporal framework spans from the early fifth to the early eleventh centuries, even though I am aware that Castile as a territorial notion did not exist for much of this period, and that it did not cover this entire geographical range until the very end of it.

Castile’s specific historical trajectory is another key factor to consider. In the wake of Roman rule, all of the Iberian north-western quadrant – the whole Duero basin, the Cantabrian Mountains and Galicia – underwent intense territorial fragmentation: a general disruption and downscaling of geospatial relations and hierarchies, including town–country links, production and distribution networks, and settlement hierarchies.⁶ The area that would later become the county of Castile remained a remote, ill-articulated periphery for most of the early Middle Ages: beyond reach of the Suevic kings, loosely integrated in the Visigothic kingdom from the sixth century and then again detached from any central power after the 711 demise of the Toledan monarchy and the failure of the Arab invaders to establish firm power bases in the region.⁷ Castile as a territorial unit was born in the context of the expansion of the Asturian monarchy over the Duero basin, a process of enormous historical and ideological significance, and one that looms large in the historiography of the region.

Our written sources are dependent on the limitations imposed by this historical trajectory. The approximately 700 extant charters are very unevenly preserved; originals are few, and many pieces are dubious. With few exceptions, before the 930s – when a boom in production and archiving occurs – socio-economic information from written sources is rather patchy, and the overall historical narratives lack the local detail and interest in the peasantry to be of much help in this area of study.⁸

³While admitting to a relative loss of popularity, a recent survey shows that the medieval rural world and its peasants have been much researched in recent times: Alfonso Antón, *The Rural History of Medieval European Societies*.

⁴Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*.

⁵Martínez Díez, *El Condado de Castilla (711–1038)*, I, 7–18.

⁶Escalona, “Patrones de fragmentación territorial;” Chavarría Arnau, *El final de las villae en Hispania*; and “Interpreting the Transformation of Late Roman Villas.”

⁷Castellanos García and Martín Viso, “The Local Articulation of Central Power.”

⁸The so-called *First Castilian Annals* (c. 940), edited by Gómez Moreno, *Anales Castellanos*, is the only such piece written in Castile; the rest are either Arabic authors or the Astur–Leonese royal chronicles, which place Castile within the broader framework of their neo-Gothic reinvention of the past. See Monsalvo Antón, “Espacios y fronteras,” 63–70.

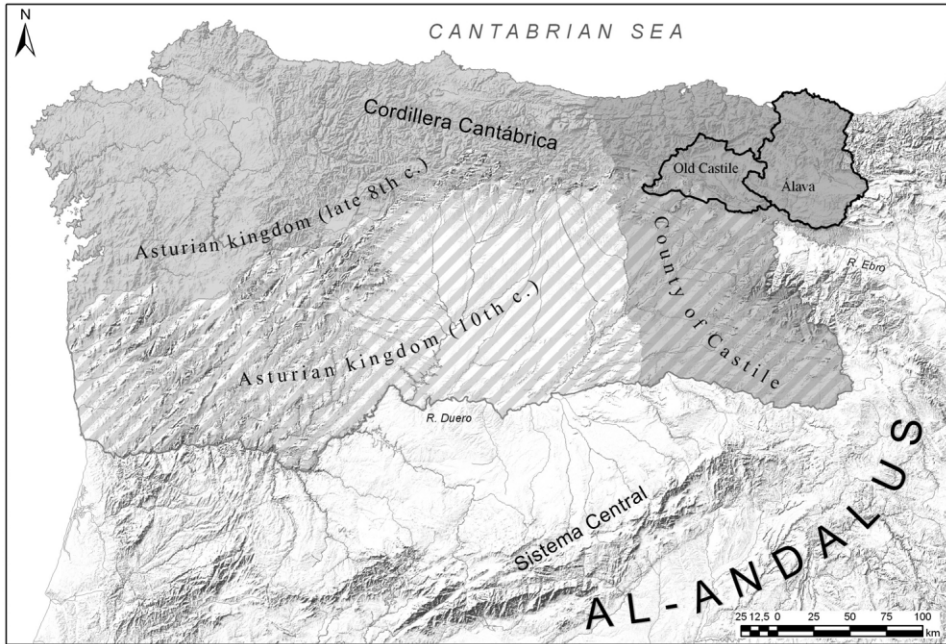


Figure 1. Northwestern quadrant of Iberia showing the main political entities mentioned in the text.

Early Castilian peasants in the historiography

Although peasants have played a major role in the general characterization of Castilian society and its historical evolution, they have more often been a component of studies focusing on other issues, like the history of law or social structures as a whole. Settlement and territorial control, in particular, seem always to have been more central subjects than peasants themselves, although it is obvious that, when studying early medieval settlement, it is mostly peasants and their actions that are under scrutiny.

Historians' approaches to the early Castilian peasantry changed considerably during the twentieth century. For the sake of clarity, and at the risk of oversimplifying, I would suggest a threefold distinction in approaches, characterized by distinct sets of concerns, conceptions and interpretations, which are roughly successive, but overlap. They are arranged as chronological phases, but, of course, not all scholars follow the same path at any given moment, neither are all periods characterized by a recognizable academic consensus.

(a) 1900–1960. Institutional history and “depopulationism”

From the late nineteenth century, history writing in Spain – as elsewhere in Europe and beyond – became an increasingly professionalized activity carried out in the universities and, since 1907, the *Junta para la Ampliación de Estudios*, later transformed into CSIC.⁹ This turn was marked by a few figures of colossal importance, like

⁹Puig-Samper Mulero, *Tiempos de investigación*.

Manuel Gómez Moreno, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, Américo Castro or – more relevant to our topic – Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, whose intellectual influence encompassed the entire twentieth century.¹⁰ Those were highly trained professionals, usually competent in law, ancient and modern languages and instrumental disciplines, like palaeography and diplomatics. Some received further training abroad – France and Germany being their preferred destinations – and they often kept up with, and engaged in international debates.¹¹ However, their notion of Spain's Middle Ages was highly dependent on a background of Spanish historical traditionalism – the quest for territorial and religious unity under the shelter of a single monarchy – invigorated with the set of essentialist concerns about Spain's historical identity triggered by the 1898 intellectual crisis. The differences between Castro – who created an arguably idealized picture of a multicultural, multi-religious medieval Spain, and others – like Sánchez-Albornoz, who was happier with the notion that Spain imposed a common, overlapping identity over all its settlers – were rather variations within a shared ideological frame. However, to this armoury of meta-historical motifs, this generation added a growing body of well-deployed arguments, strongly rooted in sophisticated empirical analyses and careful exploitation of the sources.¹²

In this period, early Castilian peasants were usually analysed within the normative, essentialist perspective of legal and institutional history.¹³ The peasantry was rarely addressed as such; individuals, families and households were considered in studies of kin, property and inheritance law, and the like, but it was the institutional expression of peasant communities – the *concejos* [councils] – that attracted most attention as a historical object. The legal capacity of rural councils to own land and control their territory, originating in the medieval period, had been a sensitive issue in Spain since the eighteenth century.¹⁴ Opposition to the mid-nineteenth-century policy of confiscation and privatization of community land led some scholars to investigate the origins of collective property rights within local communities. Joaquín Costa took the inquiry back even to a highly idealized prehistory, although, beyond more or less sophisticated philological–anthropological analogies, the earliest hard evidence for *concejos* was in fact medieval.¹⁵ In general, during the first half of the twentieth century, *concejos* were

¹⁰See, among others, Glick, “Américo Castro;” Portolés, *Medio siglo de filología española*; Pastor Baños et al., *Sánchez Albornoz a Debate*; Rodríguez Mediano and Pérez, *Humanismo y progreso*.

¹¹This is even more true of those who, like Sánchez-Albornoz or Castro, developed a great part of their careers in exile in the Americas. I am grateful to Simon Doubleday for his suggestions in this respect.

¹²Never is this more evident than when comparing Sánchez-Albornoz's studies of specific textual or institutional issues with his more general works, in which the ideological charge is clearly visible: see Sánchez-Albornoz, *España, un enigma*. The same is true of Castro's flagship synthesis, *España en su historia*. Ultimately, it was the deep traditionalist roots that underlay Sánchez-Albornoz's historical thought that made possible the paradox that his work should become in the 1950s to 1970s the quintessence of Spanish conservative historical orthodoxy, despite the fact that he was himself an ex-member of the Republican government and an exile from Franco's regime. See Pastor Baños, “Claudio Sánchez Albornoz,” and Martín, “Un historiador metido a político.”

¹³This was the work of a number of scholars, stemming from Eduardo de Hinojosa and Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, with Julio Puyol, Álvaro d'Ors or Luis García de Valdeavellano as main representatives. See López Sánchez, “La Escuela Histórica del Derecho madrileña.”

¹⁴See Sanz Fernández, “La historia contemporánea;” Castrillejo, *La desamortización de Madoz*.

¹⁵Costa, *La religión de los celtíberos*; and *Colectivismo agrario en España*.

perceived as the quintessential form of social organization of rural Spain, with a constitutional identity firmly rooted in timeless custom and in the kind of oral normative traditions that philologists like Menéndez Pidal invoked to explain the archaic qualities of the Castilian epics whose traces they were unearthing.¹⁶ Of course, the constitutional period for those local communities varied much from one author to another, depending on which part of Spain was under scrutiny and how the issue of post-Roman cultural continuity or rupture was dealt with. However, a certain consensus was reached – at least for the Castilian–Leonese areas – as Sánchez-Albornoz’s thesis of the depopulation and repopulation of the Duero basin gained acceptance.

Sánchez-Albornoz did not invent the concept, but he was the first to produce a detailed formulation of depopulation and repopulation, and he went to great efforts to give it unquestionable empirical foundations. He started from a face-value reading of the 880s Asturian chronicles to argue that the entire Duero basin was depopulated by King Alfonso I (739–757) to create a strategic no-man’s land between the Arabs and the emergent Asturian kingdom. In his view, most Christians sheltered in the northern mountains, and the void was not filled again until the kingdom’s ninth- and tenth-century waves of expansion down to the river Duero. The parts of the northern plateau south of the river remained depopulated until the occupation led by Fernando I and Alfonso VI in the eleventh century.¹⁷ The question had more than factual significance.¹⁸ Within Sánchez-Albornoz’s overall vision of the Spanish Middle Ages, it served the crucial function of severing the ninth- and tenth-century Duero basin from the earlier past, by removing – physically and demographically – the populations that could carry a post-Roman and Visigothic inheritance. Conversely, by means of the aristocrats who allegedly emigrated to the north, the new-born Asturian kingdom would concentrate all of the Visigothic ideological and institutional inheritance. Thus most elements of political or institutional continuity in tenth- and eleventh-century Castile and León had to be ascribed to Asturian royal agency, as part of their all-encompassing “national” project of *Reconquista*. With regard to settlement, Sánchez-Albornoz – under the explicit influence of Turner’s American frontier¹⁹ – envisaged a wave of settlers moving south to reoccupy the lands of their forefathers. Although he admitted a variety of settlement forms and initiatives, his favoured model, and the one to which he conceded the highest interpretative relevance, was that of official operations, conducted by either kings or their appointees, bringing the new settlers from their northern lodges to populate new settlements or reoccupy the ruins of former villages and towns: very much a top-down process, in which peasants were allocated a largely submissive role.

For post-1898 regenerationists, Castile played a great role in defining Spain’s historical personality. When, in the 1930s and 1940s, the first excavations of so-called Visigothic cemeteries seemed to suggest a concentration of Visigothic settlement in the eastern side of the Duero plateau, the theory of “popular” Visigothic settlement in Castile emerged to argue for a significant Germanic blood component in the Castilian

¹⁶Menéndez Pidal, *La Leyenda de los Infantes de Lara*; and *Reliquias de la poesía épica*.

¹⁷Sánchez-Albornoz, *Despoblación y repoblación*. A critical review in the context of the early 1990s can be found in García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, “Las formas de organización social.” On the impact of depopulationism, see Escalona, *Sociedad y territorio*, esp. 7–14. For a criticism in English of the theory’s textual bases, see Escalona, “Family Memories.”

¹⁸Sánchez-Albornoz himself declared, in an opening note addressed to a sceptical Menéndez Pidal: “The depopulation of the Duero valley is the basis of all my theses on Spain and Castile’s institutional and vital history.” *Despoblación y repoblación*, 5.

¹⁹Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier.”

rural population.²⁰ Menéndez Pidal, then, added flesh to the bones by pointing to traces of Germanic popular oral poetry in medieval Castilian epics.²¹ Therefore, Castile was imagined as a society of free warrior-peasants, much attached to their cultural traditions and with the kind of Germanic lord-to-follower relationship that explained the successful leadership of the tenth-century counts. However, Sánchez-Albornoz – for whom race was a secondary affair, as the Spanish homeland tended to “hispanicize” the peoples who settled there – rectified this picture. He associated the Visigothic inheritance not so much with the input of “popular” settlers as with the “proto-feudal” institutional developments of the Toledan kingdom, and for him those were firmly rooted on the Asturian–Leonese side. On the Castilian periphery, he argued, after the depopulation of the Duero basin, the settlers who rushed to repopulate those deserted spaces were mainly a mix of Iberia’s northern peoples, the Germanic demographic component being hardly relevant. He did nevertheless allow for Castile’s distinctiveness on a more sociological note. By contrast with the Leonese lands, where repopulation was much of an official affair, Sánchez-Albornoz imagined for Castile a more spontaneous process, in the hands of small groups of pioneers, led by an elite of chieftains, more than aristocrats, and with less royal involvement. In this context, a widespread class of free land-owning peasants was created, bonded cultivators being an exception. Sánchez-Albornoz investigated in depth the social and legal situation of early medieval peasants in León and in Castile. In the case of León, he described a more intense subjection to their landlords (*iuniores*, *homines de mandatione*), while Castile was defined by the much lighter *behetría* lordship, which he saw as a relationship of free commendation between peasants and their lords.²² This image of Castile as “an island of freemen” became another brick in the wall of the mythical, para-historical narrative of medieval Spain.²³

(b) 1960s to 1980s. The dominance of social history

From the 1960s, the nationally obsessed, self-enclosed tendencies that set in after the Civil War gradually gave way to new historiographical approaches and themes more in tune with international trends, with a profound influence of French scholarship in which the so-called *Annales* School was hegemonic.²⁴ Although the dominant historical narrative remained largely unaltered, the 1960s saw the introduction of an agenda of economic and social issues, adapted to specific Iberian concerns. Thus, works like Georges Duby’s *L’économie rurale* – and to a lesser extent *Guerriers et paysans*²⁵ – with its emphasis on economic growth and the construction of rural space (*ager*) by colonization of the wilderness (*saltus*) seemed to dovetail nicely with the dominant depopulation/repopulation thesis: an extreme case of colonization of deserted land. The notion of a medieval society *à la Bloch*, defined by the opposition between lords

²⁰Reinhart, “La tradición visigoda.” For race-based readings of funerary archaeology, see Olmo Enciso, “Ideología y arqueología.”

²¹Menéndez Pidal, “Carácter originario de Castilla.”

²²Sánchez-Albornoz, “Homines mandationis y iuniores;” “Las behetrías;” “Muchas más páginas.”

²³Sánchez-Albornoz, “Castilla, islote de hombres libres;” Estepa Díez, “Sánchez Albornoz y el feudalismo castellano.”

²⁴Pellistrandi, *La historiografía francesa del siglo XX*.

²⁵Duby, *L’économie rurale*; and *Guerriers et paysans*. On Duby’s influence in Spain, see Pastor, “La recepción de la obra de Georges Duby.”

and peasants, was less at ease with the dominant institutionalist approaches to peasant dependence and the notion of a total lack of feudalism in Spain, except Catalonia. However, in the 1970s, with the growing influence of Marxism, social – more than economic – issues of differentiation, aristocratic domination and peasant dependence became the core of a renewed medieval history.

The new orientation crystallized in the format of studies of seigniorial – mainly monastic – domains.²⁶ After Jean Gautier-Dalché's pioneering research on Santo Toribio de Liébana, José Ángel García de Cortázar's work on San Millán de la Cogolla and Salustiano Moreta's on San Pedro de Cardeña inaugurated for Castile a stream of research in this direction.²⁷ As new studies were produced, with exhaustive descriptions of the processes of creation of peasant dependence and seigniorial rights, the mechanisms of domination and surplus extraction were progressively disentangled and an image of tenth-century monks as not only *oratores*, but also estate managers was developed. A new conception of medieval Castile as a lord-dominated society, based upon the subjection of dependent peasants, opposed itself to Sánchez-Albornoz's ubiquitous freemen. However, studies of seigniorial domains suffered from adopting the perspective of the archival collections they drew upon. On the one hand, the number of pre-1000 charters available for each institution – Cardeña excepted – was usually low, which placed most of the interpretative weight on the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The earlier phases remained too obscure to be described in detail unless by retrospective, often teleological interpretations in the light of later developments. On the other hand, lordship-based research tended to adapt to the structure of its object (seigniorial domains) and sources (archival collections), which partially determined the results. Tenth-century seigniorial domains were a far cry from the sophisticated organizations of later times. They were sets of extremely fragmented, largely unconnected pieces of property and rights.²⁸ The components of each domain normally lacked territorial continuity: a land plot in one village, a vineyard in another, bonded peasants here and there, but rarely a whole village or territory, which tended to obscure peasant forms of aggregation.²⁹ Fresh research was quickly colouring an image of society structured by the lords-to-peasants class relationship, but lordship-based studies had the effect of privileging the lords – how far monasteries were a model for secular lordships remained an issue – while blurring the peasantry into a scarcely organized, largely passive mass of households subjected to lordship structures. Another consequence was that, although the topical notion of Castile as a “land of the free” persisted, lordship-based studies did not really

²⁶Such studies had to face the lack of modern editions, as lamented by García González, “Edición de fuentes eclesiásticas;” and “Estudios de economía monástica.” Until the wave of new editions of the 1980s, most of the material for early Castile derived from the works of Luciano Serrano or earlier authors.

²⁷Gautier-Dalché, “Le domaine du monastère de Santo Toribio de Liébana;” García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, *El dominio del monasterio de San Millán de la Cogolla*; Moreta Velayos, *Génesis y desarrollo del dominio del Monasterio de San Pedro de Cardeña*. Other Castilian monasteries were slower to find their historians. A PhD thesis on Arlanza was published in three short articles: León-Sotelo Casado, “Formación y primera expansión;” “La expansión del dominio monástico;” “El dominio monástico de San Pedro de Arlanza;” while monographs on Covarrubias (by Gerardo Marraud), Silos (Magdalena Iardía) and Puerto (María Isabel Loring García) remain unpublished.

²⁸See Álvarez Borge, *Poder y relaciones sociales*, 109–25; García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre and Peña Bocos, “Poder condal;” Ayala, “Relaciones de propiedad;” and Davies, *Acts of Giving*, 113–38.

²⁹Escalona, “De ‘señores y campesinos.’”

show great differences in peasant conditions between León and Castile. In fact, most studies tended to address the whole area, with no special distinction for Castile.

(c) 1980s to 1990s. Village communities and territory-based studies

In the context of the momentous political changes of the late 1970s, and largely thanks to increasingly popular Marxist approaches, the interest in exploring the details of lords-to-peasants class relationships grew in Spanish medievalism. As attention began to shift from lordships to peasant organizational frameworks, the traditional topic of rural *concejos* was renewed, leaving aside their legal aspects and concentrating on their inner social articulation. Thus, a fresh wave of research on the “village community” took off, albeit the concept was variedly interpreted.³⁰ On the one hand, there was the French-inspired notion that the village communities were the characteristic form of rural settlement and organization under the cover of *banal* lordship.³¹ On the other, early medieval village communities were understood by most Marxist historians as internally coherent micro-systems that became eventually de-articulated and superseded as peasants were subjected to dependence by lords. Village communities were thus seen as an evolutionary phase preceding the creation of feudal domains and standard villages of dependent peasants.³² As a new conception of Iberian medieval society as fully articulated by feudal relations began to rise,³³ the central role assigned to the mechanisms of subjection of village communities to feudalism drew greater attention to the changes of the tenth century, which were explored in detail during the next decade.³⁴

Although studies of monastic domains continued, the focus started to move from lordships to rural spaces, in an attempt to place peasants in a social context richer than the fragmentary image produced by monastic domains. Again under explicit French influence – this time of historical geography – and again with García de Cortázar as its promoter, a whole research strand called “the social organization of space” began to produce results on two fronts: (a) the vocabulary and components of rural space;³⁵ and (b) monographic studies of specific territories.³⁶ Aiming to approach space as a

³⁰On the historiography of village communities, see Estepa Díez, “Comunidades de aldea;” and, more recently, Larrea Conde, “De la invisibilidad historiográfica;” and Davies, “Lordship and Community.”

³¹García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, “Les communautés villageoises,” was highly influential in this strand.

³²This approach was pioneered by Barbero de Aguilera, “La integración de los ‘hispani,’” originally published in 1966, and developed in Barbero de Aguilera and Vigil Pascual, *La formación del feudalismo*, 354–80.

³³The impact in those years of the works of Abilio Barbero, Marcelo Vigil, and Reyna Pastor cannot be exaggerated: Barbero de Aguilera and Pascual, *La formación del feudalismo*; Pastor, *Resistencias y luchas campesinas*.

³⁴Álvarez Borge, “El proceso de transformación;” and *Poder y relaciones sociales*; Estepa Díez, “Formación y consolidación.”

³⁵García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, “La serna, una etapa del proceso de ocupación;” Botella Pombo, *La serna: ocupación, organización y explotación*. The study of the vocabulary of agrarian space was being also renewed by authors like Alfonso Antón, “Las sernas en León y Castilla;” and Faci Lacasta, “Vocablos referentes al sector agrario.”

³⁶The research line was presented by García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre and Díez Herrera, *La formación de la sociedad hispano-cristiana*. In 1985 the first general overview of space in the medieval Crown of Castile was published: García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, *La organización social del espacio*; followed by the first synthesis of rural society in medieval Spain: García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, *La sociedad rural en la España medieval*. Settlement studies were also highly influenced by Martínez Sopena, *La Tierra de Campos Occidental*.

means to understand the society that organized it, the group led by García de Cortázar built a model of the development of settlement and territorial structures that was very influential for more than a decade.³⁷ In terms of process, it drew upon the notions of acculturation and colonization. Depopulationism – in those days increasingly under siege – was rejected as a general theory, but had a great practical influence in explaining the creation of rural space.³⁸ The anthropological notion of acculturation served to designate the various situations allegedly created by the eighth-century migration to the northern mountains of people from the plateau, who brought with them their “Mediterranean” economy in a gradient of influences that was more intense in Asturias, less in Cantabria and virtually zero in the Basque areas. In terms of process, the model offered a tripartite division: (a) the never depopulated northern mountainous lands, where large valley communities of dispersed settlements, whose origins dated back to a remote “tribal” past, were the dominant pattern; (b) the largely deserted plateau down to the river Duero, where peasant colonization yielded a mass of undifferentiated village communities with no further hierarchical articulation; (c) the void lands south of the river, where the official repopulation of the eleventh century produced a region dominated by “town and land communities” (*comunidades de villa y tierra*) consisting of large territories articulated by an urban or urban-like centre (*villa*) and a number of dependent villages (*aldeas*).³⁹

Roughly at the same time, a wave of rejection of depopulationism was gaining momentum. By virtue of the lack of archaeological research, this did not depend as much on the gathering of new data to falsify Sánchez-Albornoz’s thesis as on a close reappraisal of its heuristic basis, whose ultimate goal was to expose the instrumental role of depopulationism in supporting the traditional *Reconquista*-laden discourse of medieval Spain. In a ground-shaking work, Barbero and Vigil deconstructed the discourse of both the Asturian chronicles and Sánchez-Albornoz’s thesis many years before constructivism became an issue for medievalists.⁴⁰ The impact on territorial studies was great. If depopulationism was rejected, it was possible to pose issues of long-term continuity, and to wonder about the weight of structures inherited from Late Antiquity, instead of imagining the creation of entirely new settlement patterns from scratch. The 1990s thus became a period of outstandingly open debates: depopulationism was still alive, although no longer an orthodoxy; meanwhile, the models based on colonization gained the greatest acceptance, but arguments more strongly focused upon dynamic continuity were beginning to gain support.

In this context, there was a fresh wave of research on Castilian territorial structures by a new generation of scholars. Preceded by a seminal paper by Carlos Estepa on the origins and character of Castile’s earliest administrative districts, the *alfoces*,⁴¹ between 1987 and 1999 seven PhD theses were produced on society and space relationships in early medieval Castile,⁴² of which none followed the old depopulationist model and

³⁷Sesma Muñoz and Laliena Corbera, *La pervivencia del concepto*.

³⁸See an early criticism in Escalona, “Algunos problemas relativos a la génesis.”

³⁹García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, “Del Cantábrico al Duero;” and *La sociedad rural*, 1–54.

⁴⁰Barbero de Aguilera and Vigil Pascual, *La formación del feudalismo*, 232–78. Also relevant in this context: Estepa Díez, “La vida urbana en el norte.”

⁴¹Estepa Díez, “El alfoz castellano.”

⁴²By date of PhD dissertation defence: Díez Herrera, *La formación de la sociedad feudal en Cantabria* (1987); Peña Bocos, *La atribución social del espacio en la Castilla altomedieval* (1990); Álvarez Borge, *Poder y relaciones sociales* (1991); Reyes Téllez, *Poblacion y sociedad en el Valledel Duero* (1991); Pastor Díaz de Garayo, *Castilla en el tránsito de la Antigüedad al feudalismo* (1995); Escalona, *Sociedad y territorio en la Alta Edad Media castellana* (1996); Martín Viso, *Poblamiento y estructuras sociales* (1999).

four adopted a long-term approach, linking Antiquity and the early Middle Ages by bringing into the discussion archaeological and topographical data, besides the traditional charter collections. Regressive analysis of written sources, though, played the greatest role when dealing with the pre-tenth-century period. The models that emerged had little to do with those of the mid-twentieth century. The main debate was on the definition of the socio-spatial structures that existed between the Late Roman world and the tenth century. A more or less general consensus existed on the crucial role of village communities and the processes that led to their subjection by an emergent aristocracy of feudal lords. There was less agreement, though, on how the earlier phase should be conceived, the positions ranging from a scattering of unarticulated peasant settlements (Pastor) to a more complex model of small supralocal territories encompassing several settlements (Escalona, Martín Viso).⁴³ Further research up to the present has made it clear that the old divide between the Late Roman/Visigothic period and the post-711 early Middle Ages can now be more confidently crossed.

Where are we now?

The body of literature on early Castilian peasants and peasant-related issues is now substantial. The present generation turned the balance from legal and institutional history to social/political matters, mainly from the perspective of the history of power. Forms of lordship and peasant dependence are much better understood now than they were thirty years ago.⁴⁴ In particular, *behetría*, formerly considered the quintessentially early medieval Castilian form of lordship, is now seen, thanks to Carlos Estepa's work, as a central medieval development which emerged from a variety of relationships that were not exclusive to Castile.⁴⁵ Our understanding of lordly landownership has improved dramatically. The image of central medieval ecclesiastical estates, such as those of San Pedro de Cardeña, San Pedro de Arlanza or San Salvador de Oña, is better distinguished from their earlier phases, whereas the distinction between ecclesiastical and secular estate structures is beginning to be more neatly traced. Extreme fragmentation and territorial discontinuity are now marked as the most outstanding features of tenth-century lay estates. Of those, the properties of Castile's comital kindred seem to have been the only ones to range across all of the territory, while other aristocratic groupings seem to have worked on a much lesser scale and, in some cases, showing a trend to form sub-regional clusters, with estates, albeit fragmented, concentrating in one particular area or another.⁴⁶

When focusing on peasants, peasant dependence and community structures seem to have attracted most attention. In parallel with the recognition that lordship in its different forms was very irregularly distributed and seigniorial situations tended to differ much from one locality to the next, peasant dependence is now granted a similarly diverse character. The image of a widespread free landowning peasantry championed by Sánchez-Álbornoz for Castile⁴⁷ has been partially restored after a period in which the emphasis was set on dependence. As a consequence, we can now

⁴³Compare García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, "Formas de organización social;" and "Movimientos de población."

⁴⁴Álvarez Borge, "Estructuras de poder en Castilla," 278–89.

⁴⁵Estepa Díez, *Las behetrías castellanas*.

⁴⁶Álvarez Borge, *Poder y relaciones sociales*, 100–4; Pastor Díaz de Garayo, *Castilla en el tránsito*, 254–68.

⁴⁷Sánchez-Albornoz, "Castilla, islote de hombres."

work with a richer picture of mixed levels of dependence in different settlements and within settlements.⁴⁸ The coexistence of free landowners and several degrees of dependent cultivators within a single local community is now widely accepted as a key factor of local social structures, with interesting implications for community membership and cohesion.⁴⁹

Whether peasant social interactions are conceived as based solely on individual villages or as a layered system of local and supralocal arrangements,⁵⁰ community relationships are handled in an increasingly sophisticated way. The normative, largely static picture created by legal historians under the institutional label of rural *concejos* has given way to richer, more dynamic approaches derived from sociology and anthropology. Old subjects, such as the community's role in defining patterns of land use and access to shared resources, or the importance of community membership in providing limits and gateways for the intromission of lordly powers – a favourite topic of Marxist historians of the 1970s and 1980s – are now refreshed and combined with new concerns, like individual agency and social mobility within community structures, or conflicts and disputes, whether internal or external.⁵¹ Most scholars nowadays would agree that Castilian rural communities up to the year 1000 were substantially different from their central medieval successors.⁵² The pace and intensity of the changes may be described differently from one area of the county to another, but it seems clear that the earlier communities were less formalized, both in their institutional workings and in their subjection to lordship; were less territorially encapsulated; and their wider context was more open to social mobility than it was in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

There are nevertheless important weaknesses in our knowledge. Particularly striking is an almost complete lack of research on the economy, implying that many highly sophisticated analyses of social structures lean on an insufficient understanding of society's material basis. Written sources are admittedly hard to harvest in the search for strictly economic information.⁵³ More often than not, they will render impressionist glimpses of crops, tools, cultivation techniques, animal species, products or the names and typology of agricultural spaces, but very little can be confidently squeezed out from them by way of quantifying production, surplus or change trends. It is, however, possible to make some advances in this direction, as Wendy Davies's study of prices and valuation in tenth-century charters shows,⁵⁴ a fact which seems to indicate that this is not just a problem of source availability but, by and large, an effect of the dominant focus towards the social and the political.

The lack of studies on economic issues becomes even more relevant when related to environmental studies on which there is precious little research as of yet. By contrast, a whole body of assumptions on early medieval economic growth and landscape change, largely derived from French models imported in the 1970s and 1980s,

⁴⁸Álvarez Borge, "Estructuras de poder en Castilla," 290–4.

⁴⁹Escalona, "Vínculos comunitarios y estrategias de distinción."

⁵⁰Compare Pastor Díaz de Garayo, *Castilla en el tránsito*; Martín Viso, "Territorios, poder feudal y comunidades;" Escalona, "Comunidades, territorios y poder;" "Mapping Scale Change."

⁵¹Alfonso Antón, "Campesinado y derecho."

⁵²Davies, "Lordship and Community;" García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, "Movimientos de población," 129.

⁵³Stock-breeding and pastoralism is a relatively favoured area. See, among others, García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre and Peña Bocos, "La atribución social." Compare with Fernández Mier's work on Asturias: Fernández Mier, *Génesis del territorio*.

⁵⁴Davies, "Sale, Price and Valuation."

seem to survive without need of confirmation. This, combined with the problems of source availability mentioned above, has determined the persistence of an overall conception of economic and environmental change that minimizes early medieval developments and over-stresses the period round about the year 1000 as crucial in the creation of rural space.⁵⁵ No doubt, imported models and the weight of a historiography too keen on colonization models can explain this situation to some extent, but a significant role must be assigned to the crude empirical fact that things only seem to start to happen when the written sources begin to mention them. In Castile, this means the charter boom from the 930s onwards. True, charters often seem to depict processes of change, from which some aspects of the previous situation that was being transformed can be inferred, but most scholars feel on safer grounds by taking the 930s as a point of departure. Nevertheless, charter information rarely becomes locally abundant before the eleventh century, so the bulk of research is strongly biased towards the ending of the early medieval period. The eighth and ninth centuries are often set aside, while the tenth century is often taken as a prologue to the eleventh, whose more defined image tends to be projected back – with much distortion and circularity – upon the tenth.

Texts can and must still be exploited with good results, but there certainly are limits beyond which questions simply cannot be answered on the basis of inappropriate sources. Instead, most of the basic economic and environmental issues mentioned above are better approached archaeologically. Castile, however, is no exception to the general underdevelopment of medieval archaeology in Spain, which remained almost non-existent for much of the twentieth century, and then knew an abrupt, over-optimistic take-off in the 1980s, which was also abruptly scaled down in the 1990s.⁵⁶

Between the 1930s and the 1960s, Visigothic archaeology branched from the quarters of classical archaeology and art history, with a strong bias towards religious monuments and cemeteries, and little interest in post-711 archaeology, which was in tune with the emergent depopulationist views that stated a major gap between Late Antique and early medieval settlement networks. Early medieval archaeology in Castile, albeit admittedly precocious,⁵⁷ was no less concerned with churches and cemeteries. This could have been a good starting point for an archaeological investigation of local communities had it not been hampered by the absolute dominance of the depopulationist orthodoxy. Far from defying it, archaeologists used the theory to provide chronologies for hard-to-date items like rock-dug graves, with the result that depopulationism became circularly reinforced.⁵⁸ Archaeology – with few exceptions – had little to say for historians. The main narrative was constructed out of texts, archaeology serving, if at all, as a mere illustration. A major additional factor that explains the weakness of early medieval archaeology – and one that remains an issue to the present day – is the lack of an academic context where it could take root. Since neither in classical archaeology nor in history or art history departments did it seem to be accepted, the number of researchers and initiatives remained characteristically low, and therefore, incapable of providing any serious alternative to text-based history.

⁵⁵Quirós Castillo, “Las aldeas de los historiadores.”

⁵⁶Escalona, “L’archéologie médiévale chrétienne.”

⁵⁷Besides the pioneering, largely under-appreciated efforts of Silos monk Saturio González Salas, the key figure is Alberto del Castillo; see, among others: Castillo Yurrita, “Cronología de las tumbas.”

⁵⁸Reyes Téllez and Menéndez Robles, “Aspectos ideológicos.” On the historiography of rock-dug graves, see Martín Viso, “Tumbas y sociedades locales.”

Adopting the 1990s as an observation point, the impact of this situation on peasant studies seems highly relevant. Excavations of churches and fortresses were very few and mainly on a modest scale. Funerary archaeology had managed to raise a body of data of some significance, but it was riddled with sterile discussions on grave typologies and ill-based chronologies.⁵⁹ Above all, settlement structures were the crucial gap. Although some dwellings of uncertain chronology had been excavated on hill forts and elevated sites, for all the historiographical debates on the pivotal role of villages, the structures of early medieval peasant habitat had not been yet recognized as such.⁶⁰ As a result, a variety of conflicting models of early medieval settlement existed, mostly text-derived, although archaeological evidence was gradually finding a place in the arguments. Yet the empirical foundations remained feeble and all proposals had a highly speculative character, which made them as hard to verify as to reject. In the retreat of depopulationism, there was very little by way of consensus, but the image of an overly “primitivistic” early medieval spatial structure occurred now and then. With no villages or farms detected, the hypothesis of high structural instability seemed to make good sense, though this was as circular as depopulationism, albeit on a more modest scale. Early medieval rural settlement was often imagined as highly dispersed and unstable, in connection to similarly ephemeral field patterns, subject to slash and burn and long fallow cultivation. Churches and cemeteries – the most visible archaeological features – were seen as the only stable landmarks within unstable local landscapes, around which aggregated villages would emerge in a process largely contemporary with the booming of charter evidence in the tenth century.

An archaeological turn?

As far as early medieval Castile is concerned, we are currently going through a major turn whose key component is the rise of archaeological research. This is happening with a noticeable delay from parallel developments elsewhere in Europe, which should be no surprise in the light of its previous underdevelopment and the sudden 1980s take-off. The boom of medieval archaeology in those years was directly dependent on the creation of the first heritage policies in Spain and the ensuing legislation, since 1985, on heritage management and professional archaeology. With the dramatic increase in housing and infrastructure developments of the 1990s, the amount of archaeological fieldwork carried out as preventive or rescue interventions grew exponentially, especially in areas more intensely affected by large-scale developments like highways, high-speed railways, or airports. Similar processes took place in other EU countries during those years or slightly earlier. The main difference in the Spanish case was that medieval archaeological research carried out within academic institutions was almost non-existent. During the boom, medieval archaeologists were only exceptionally incorporated into academic departments, with the result that, although the bulk of information grew very quickly, most of it was generated in management contexts, with no connection to research agendas or research strategies.⁶¹ Surfing through a mass of

⁵⁹ Azkárte Garai-Olaun, “De la Tardoantigüedad al medievo cristiano” is the most comprehensive synthesis of post-Roman funerary archaeology heretofore.

⁶⁰ Escalona Monge, “Paisaje, asentamiento y Edad Media.”

⁶¹ An early criticism in Barceló Perello, *Arqueología medieval*. More recent suveys in Quirós Castillo and Begoetxea Rementería, *Arqueología (III)*, 59–65; and Escalona, “L’archéologie médiévale chrétienne.”

data of various qualities, scattered in a myriad of typically small-scale, arid excavation reports, is a burdensome task that few undertook, and without which the wealth of fresh information never made it into scholarly debates. As a result, historical literature until recently has remained largely ignorant of archaeological developments, even years after the first archaeological arguments have started to change the direction of the debate.⁶²

The fact is that, despite all the setbacks and difficulties, archaeology is now in a position to change forever the terms of scholarly debate on early medieval Castile, and it is doing so at a swift pace, whether historians recognize it or not. At least three major developments that have made the new situation possible deserve comment.

(a) *The revolution of chronologies*

For years, the lack of high-resolution chronologies has been a major setback for Iberian early medieval archaeology. Ceramic materials, especially, were traditionally assigned dating-spans so wide – eighth- to eleventh-centuries, for example – that the information became almost unusable, and impossible to conciliate with historical data. In recent times our knowledge of Late Antique fine and coarse wares up to the seventh century has improved significantly, and the same is true for central medieval wares, leaving in the middle a great deal of uncertainty. Significant advances are nonetheless being produced thanks to an increase in dated stratigraphical contexts.⁶³ Where the information is dense enough, economic models of changing production and distribution patterns are already being suggested.⁶⁴ However, the greatest change relates to analytical dating methods, mainly radiocarbon. After the introduction of AMS (Accelerator Mass Spectrometry) dating, which needs very small samples to yield results, radiocarbon dates are now achieving greater accuracy even for recent periods, while the creation of new laboratories has reduced significantly the costs. Excavators can now afford to have a large number of samples dated, with the result that their data are set into more reliable and precise chronologies. True, radiocarbon does not yield a precise date, but rather a dating-bracket, which varies depending on sample quality and calibration. Currently used calibration curves are difficult to interpret for a significant part of the early medieval period, with the added problem that dendrochronology – a fundamental complement for radiocarbon dating – is still seriously underdeveloped in Spain, lacking series that go back into the early middle ages. Some recent studies have produced extremely interesting results, but early medieval studied samples still remain as “floating sequences”, which cannot be connected to modern series with absolute dates.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, an emphasis in applying and refining archaeological dating

⁶²Compare the role assigned to archaeology in Martínez Sopena and García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, “The Historiography of Rural Society” with García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, “Movimientos de población,” 129–31.

⁶³Caballero Zoreda, Mateos Cruz, and Retuerce Velasco, *Cerámicas tardorromanas*. For advances on early medieval pottery of the Duero basin, see Gutiérrez González and Bohigas Roldán, *La cerámica medieval*, where the county of Castile is not represented. Also see Menéndez Robles, “Cerámicas altomedievales en el Valle del Duero;” and Larren Izquierdo et al., “Ensayo de sistematización.”

⁶⁴Solaun Bustinza, *Erdi aroko zeramika Euskal Herrian [La cerámica medieval en el País Vasco]*.

⁶⁵Alonso Matthías, Rodríguez Trobajo, and Rubinos Pérez, “Datación de madera constructiva;” Rodríguez Trobajo, “Procedencia y uso de madera de pino silvestre.”

methods is an absolute necessity if archaeological data are expected to find a place in a historical discourse that is used to a much finer chronological grain, derived from charter dates.

(b) *The development of environmental archaeology*

Another relevant aspect is the growth of the disciplines specialized in extracting biological and environmental information from the material records. Over the last three decades, human, animal and vegetable remains have been examined for data with which to reconstruct a wide variety of socio-natural interactions and environmental conditions, like climate and vegetation, or human impacts on landscape change.⁶⁶ Here, the role of palynologists is relatively independent because they can not only study the pollen components of excavated archaeological soils, but also obtain – in proper conditions – long-term sequences of pollen deposition on non-archaeological settings. When the deposits are good enough, the possibility of applying a large number of radiocarbon data to pin down the sequences to absolute dates may yield high-resolution diachronic images of vegetation and landscape.⁶⁷ In several Iberian regions, a growing number of studies are recently colouring the history of the environment with enough resolution to provide historically usable information on otherwise largely unrecorded processes, like the momentous phase of deforestation that seems to take place in the early medieval period, arguably related to changing patterns of land use and economic activity.⁶⁸ On the other hand, archaeozoological, carpological and anthracological studies of husbandry and agricultural technologies – livestock breeding, production and preservation of cereals, etc. – are expanding our knowledge of society's economic basis, a relatively neglected field, as I have indicated.⁶⁹ This is surely a different, much more technology-oriented kind of archaeology, but one that can fill very relevant gaps in our understanding of early medieval peasant life. However, pollen profiles and other series of palaeoenvironmental data are extremely difficult to interpret for the non-specialist, so this is another field that calls for dialogue between historians and environmental scientists.

(c) *The recognition of early medieval peasant settlements*

While medieval village communities were a major concern for historians, peasant settlements remained a total blank until the late 1990s. However, in the context of the intense fieldwork carried out in the Madrid region, rescue archaeology started to detect ensembles of structures such as post-holes, sunken-featured buildings (SFB) or grain storage pits [*silos*], already familiar to archaeologists in other European countries and

⁶⁶Albarella, “Exploring the Real Nature of Environmental Archaeology;” Durand, *Les paysages médiévaux du Languedoc*; Lewit, “Pigs, Presses and Pastoralism.”

⁶⁷López Sáez, “Reconstrucciones paleoambientales.” An outstanding example of chronological resolution for the northern Catalan coastal area can be found in López Sáez et al., “Historia de la vegetación en el litoral norte de Girona.”

⁶⁸Riera Mora, “Cambios vegetales holocenos;” López Sáez et al., “Contribución paleoambiental;” Ariño Gil, Riera i Mora, and Rodríguez Hernández, “De Roma al medioevo,” were early examples of the potential of this approach for the Duero basin.

⁶⁹Morales Muñiz, “35 years of Archaeozoology;” Morales Muñiz, “Zoohistoria;” Moreno García, “Musulmanes y cristianos en la Sierra de Albarracín.”

which were eventually recognized as early medieval peasant houses.⁷⁰ The importance of those findings is profound. Excavations in the south of the province of Madrid have generated a repertory of sites in such detail and density that, barely ten years after the first identifications, it is now possible to discern different types of settlement, from scattered farms to nucleated villages, as well as to suggest chronological cycles: in Madrid, farms and villages seem to start in the late fifth century – after the collapse of the villa-based Late Roman landscape – and most of them seem to have been abandoned by the late eighth century, arguably in relation to the strengthening of the Emirate.⁷¹ The information for Castile is much more tenuous, but a number of sites investigated by surface survey or rescue archaeology are now being identified as early medieval peasant settlements.⁷² In particular in Álava, a larger number of those structures have been detected and research projects are being carried out in this field that are laying the foundations for wider research in other areas. However, the first conclusions hitherto, even if provisional, are enough to draw attention to the power of archaeology to modify text-based visions of settlement. For instance, the widespread notion of an early medieval dispersed settlement preceding the crystallization of villages in the late ninth or tenth centuries does not sit well with the material evidence: in Madrid, nucleated villages seem to have been in operation since the sixth century, whereas in Álava the process may have been slower, albeit nucleation is clear by the eighth century. Similarly, increasing recognition of settlement structures (post-holes and SFB) underlying the foundations of a number of churches in the Basque area seems to contradict another repeated motif of settlement history: the role of churches as poles for village nucleation. In many cases, peasant house structures seem to be the forerunners of churches, rather than the opposite (accordingly, the Madrid villages, mostly abandoned before the ninth century, all lack churches).⁷³

Housing and storage structures are only one side of the coin of peasant archaeology; the other is the development of landscape archaeology with an extended concept of “site”, comprising not just habitat and immediately adjacent structures, but also the whole pattern of land use and human activity associated with settlement. It is not without interest that such an approach saw an early development in prehistoric and Roman archaeology – in which territoriality, land use and field structures are harder to recognize on present-day landscapes and more open to speculation – and much slower to enter medieval research, where the degree of certainty in those respects is much higher. In recent times, the study of whole village territories as a single site has been attempted, including the excavation and radiocarbon dating of agricultural earthworks, which has produced, for example the first sequences of early medieval dated terrace systems in Galicia, between the fifth and tenth centuries.⁷⁴ This kind of

⁷⁰The first call for attention is to be credited to Vigil-Escalera Guirado, “Cabañas de época visigoda,” after which the new findings were set into a wider west European context by Azkárate Garai-Olaun and Quirós Castillo, “Arquitectura doméstica altomedieval.” See also Quirós Castillo and Begoetxea Rementería, *Arqueología (III)*.

⁷¹See Vigil-Escalera Guirado, “El modelo de poblamiento rural en la Meseta;” Quirós Castillo and Vigil-Escalera Guirado, “Networks of Peasant Villages;” and Vigil-Escalera Guirado, “Granjas y aldeas altomedievales al norte de Toledo.”

⁷²See Palomino Lázaro and Sanz, “Las aldeas altomedievales en Castilla y León.”

⁷³Quirós Castillo, “Las iglesias altomedievales en el País Vasco.”

⁷⁴Ballesteros Arias, Blanco-Rotea, and Prieto, “The Early Mediaeval Site of a Pousada;” Ballesteros Arias, Criado Boado, and Andrade Cernadas, “Formas y fechas de un paisaje agrario.”

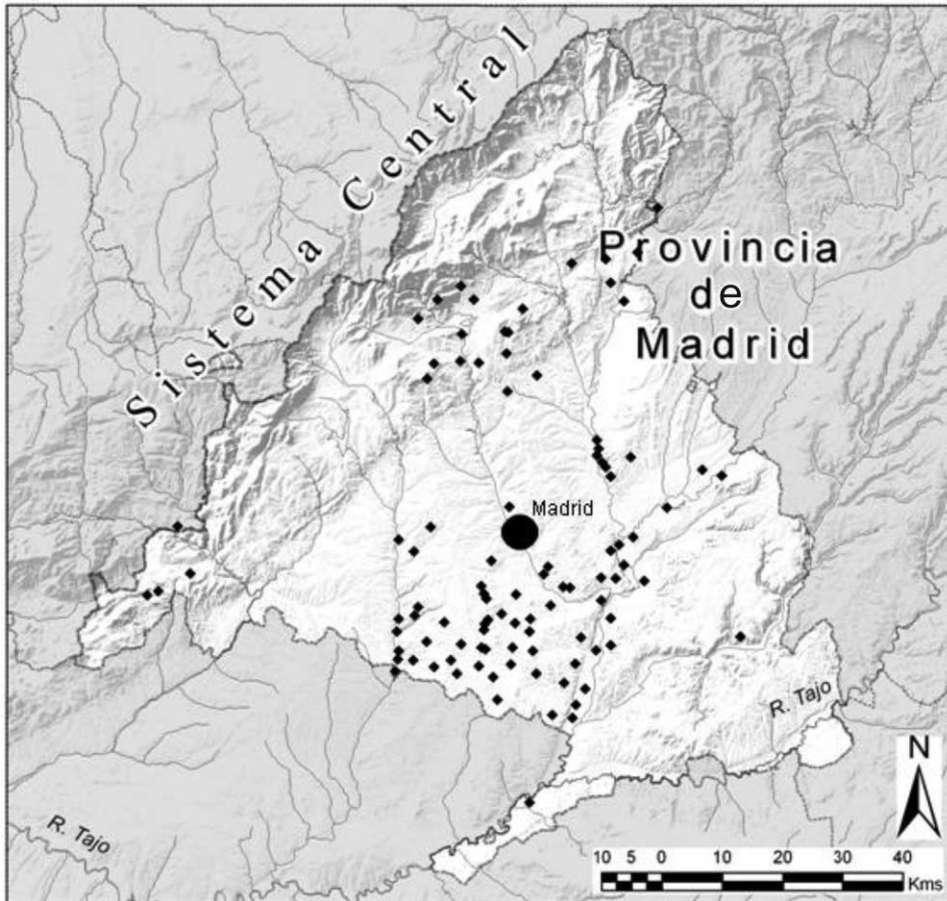


Figure 2. Early medieval settlements recognized in the modern province of Madrid, redrawn after Quirós and Vigil-Escalera, “Networks of Peasant Villages,” 85, by kind permission of Juan Antonio Quirós and Alfonso Vigil-Escalera.

research has only been attempted tentatively in Castilian territory,⁷⁵ but the future for such methods is extremely promising.

Problems and challenges

Early medieval archaeology has entered a path of innovation that has the potential to change dramatically our knowledge of Castilian peasant communities in a rather short term. In actuality, this is already happening, although the move is not yet consolidated and the obstacles are many. There are two that I would like to comment on specifically, by way of conclusion.

The first is the interaction between professional and academic archaeology. As I have suggested, for twenty years the bulk of the growth of archaeological data has been due to heritage management and rescue archaeology, depending on building and infrastructure development, with the result that research strategies mean little in data

⁷⁵Quirós, personal communication.

collection processes. Fieldwork undertaken by contract professionals often has no explicit aims for research – not even for producing scholarly publications – and it is, of course, carried out wherever need comes up, regardless of research priority areas or subjects. On the opposite side, medieval archaeology is still crudely under-represented in academic institutions. Wherever significant groups of archaeologists have joined the academy, relevant advances are obtained, but the situation is most uneven. Let us take three cases. First, the Madrid region, where the recent building and development frenzy



Figure 3. Aerial view and map of the early medieval site of Gózquez (Madrid), by kind permission of Alfonso Vigil-Escalera.

has meant that many sites have been excavated – and many destroyed too – while a huge amount of material and data has been flowing into the stores of heritage administrative units. The input from research archaeology in the Madrid area, though, has been comparatively low, the most relevant results being due to exceptional cases of research-committed professional archaeologists. Secondly, in the Basque country, building and development have been less intense, although infrastructures like highways or the currently ongoing high-speed railroad construction have had similar effects for heritage management and rescue archaeology. The main difference in this case is that the university system hosts a number of medieval archaeologists with great involvement in both research and heritage management. As a consequence, large-scale projects, combining research with heritage preservation and valorization are being carried out. Moreover, the dialogue between professional and academic archaeologists is much easier in this context, and, as a result, a rapidly growing body of good quality records is being generated. Third, most of the territory included in “early medieval Castile”, as defined in the opening section of this article, has seen neither one nor another development. Within the large and thinly populated Comunidad Autónoma de Castilla y León, the growth in housing and infrastructures has not been intense enough to produce similar effects, which means that few sites have been detected and excavated – comparatively few have been destroyed too. Besides, some crucial initiatives, like the making of the high-speed railroad Madrid–Valladolid, which triggered the detection of several early medieval settlements in the province of Segovia, miss the Castilian heartland, where such cases are exceptional. With a very low input from research archaeology, the final, disheartening image is one of lack of relevant research projects, lack of defined research strategies and lack of influence on how heritage management and rescue archaeology are conducted. As a result, early medieval Castile remains a largely unexplored archaeological field, and one that should be tackled in the future in the light of the current developments in nearby Álava.

The second strategic issue is the dialogue between historians and archaeologists. In the 1980s and 1990s, when territorially focused studies took off, written sources clearly dominated the scene, provided the models and set the limits. Even if a minority of scholars tried to bring in archaeological data and arguments, the academic structure failed to realize its potential and to take the steps needed to make it grow. The dominant historical discourse remained largely ignorant of recent archaeological advances, on the grounds of its shortcomings of ten or fifteen years ago. Medieval archaeologists have had to fight hard to find a place in academia, often by overstressing their distinctiveness from historians. We have now reached a point at which the possibility of an effective convergence of historians and archaeologists looks more promising than ever, as we are approaching the point at which archaeological data and arguments may well take the lead from texts in building models of early medieval peasant life. However, such a convergence is under serious threats. On the one hand, there is a clear epistemological problem: the interaction of history and archaeology must not be done at raw data level.⁷⁶ The ways in which knowledge is extracted from texts and material remains are different, and arguments from one should not be employed to interpret the other as has been often done in the past, for example, by dating archaeological artefacts or features on the grounds of historical data or theories. However, if history and archaeology go on to construct entirely separate discourses, mutual dialogue is bound to be impossible. The soundest way to bridge both fields lies at the level of concepts.

⁷⁶Moreland, “Archaeology and Texts.”

Will scholars be able to redefine their conceptual baggage to make room for each other's arguments? Tellingly, the dilemma is sometimes posed already, most clearly in the concept of "village". Whether in Spain or abroad, the dominant historical notion of village does not sit well with archaeologists' findings and criteria.⁷⁷ History-based notions of "village" have existed and dominated for many years; archaeology-based notions of "village" are more recent, but gaining strength. Early medieval villages, though, were neither "historical" nor "archaeological"; they existed regardless of today's research, and it would be a costly failure if both perspectives should not converge on their shared object. In this case, both history and archaeology can make substantial, complementary contributions, but before, both need to resign "ownership" of the notion, and allow for the construction of a shared conceptual ground. Are archaeologists and historians prepared to collaborate on this scale? Moreover, is the academic establishment of history prepared to accept that the bulk of research on early medieval peasants should lean on the side of archaeology and that archaeological data must ultimately take the lead in modelling the history of early Castilian rural society? Early medieval Castilian peasants are today in a better position than ever to emerge from the darkness, but it is the relationship between present-day scholars that needs to change, if any light is to be shed on them.

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⁷⁷Zadora-Rio, "Le village des historiens;" Quirós Castillo, "Las aldeas de los historiadores."

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