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Peasants and the Powerful: Peasant Socio-Economic Organization in Early Medieval Iberia

400-1000 CE

Drake Ogden

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Recent decades have seen a renewed examination of the place of peasantry in Early Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean, after the subject had been mostly neglected by earlier generations of historians. The lack of quality written sources can certainly be ascribed to as a major cause of this; peasants in all periods of history often find little representation in surviving manuscripts, which is all the more the case when examining a period that is already known for a dearth of written sources. Recent innovations in archaeology, however, as well as the increasing number of finds dating to the Early Medieval Period allow a deeper investigation of the subject than ever before.

Using northern Spain as a case study, we can see how various circumstances affected the changing status of peasants. In particular, the withering of the Roman administrative apparatus led to the eventual disappearance of taxation and the emergence of a freeholding peasantry. In the post-conquest period in northern Christian Spain, a nascent aristocracy cooperated with royal authority and new church institutions in order to consolidate vast land holdings into the hands of a few, thus dispossessing a significant segment of the peasantry.

One of the most interesting discussions regarding the peasant classes in this period is that of their relation to powerful people and institutions. Much scholarship has already been devoted to this subject, as historians such as Chris Wickham, Robert Portass, and Helena Hamerow have all touched on the subject of peasant relationships to landholders, the church, and state entities (where they may have existed during this time). Through lenses of archaeology, primary source criticism, and anthropological theory, they have developed myriad perspectives on the true nature of peasant life during the Early Middle Ages. For all the differences in opinion, however, there is one common thread of understanding that can be agreed upon by academics: Due to the fractured nature of the post-Roman world, any study of the subject of peasantry will have to be very

specific in both geographical and chronological context. Northern France in the 7th century was in many ways a different place from North Africa at the same time, and perhaps just as much so as France just a century earlier or later.

For this reason, it would be useful to study the subject with a specific region in mind, so as to develop conclusions that do not overreach, since for every possible observation it would be easy to point out a possible exception somewhere else. The object of this study is to examine peasant lifestyles and socio-economic organizations as they related to powerful people and institutions during the Early Medieval Period in the Iberian Peninsula (referred to in this paper occasionally as *Hispania*). The study is meant to examine the changes in socio-economic organization between the end of Roman rule and the collapse of the Umayyad Caliphate in 1031 CE. Inevitably, these six centuries encompassed major changes for the region, and previous scholars have already begun to speak to how the political and religious history of the peninsula may have affected the daily lives of the rural population.

In this study, the state of the peasant class in Hispania will be examined through multiple lenses: An archaeological one, where modern research and findings are analyzed to develop a clearer image of how peasants organized their living spaces, did work, and maintained themselves and their dependents across the span of this period. The second lens is a textual one, which looks at the ways in which written sources can inform us of the lives of peasants and their relation to the powerful figures of their society. This can include legal codes, hagiographies, donation charters, and even books on theology, philosophy, and etymology. These sources are of course valuable because they allow us to examine specific documented interactions of the peasant class, as well as to contextualize archaeological finds by drawing on written accounts. Perhaps most interestingly, they can give modern historians a chance to examine just how

familiar the peasant population was with the written word and literacy, and how written documents played a role in the legal, social, and religious aspects of their lives.

The final lens, which converges with the previous two, is one of geographic comparison. Findings in Spain and Portugal can be compared and contrasted with those from other parts of the post-Roman world. Although a one-to-one comparison could not be made between the situation of 6th century Italy and that of Hispania, there exists many commonalities between regions that can allow historians to make inferences about those aspects of the subject which are detailed in one region and absent in the other. Comparisons between regions is especially useful considering the common background of many of these regions, having been former Roman territories that were part of the wider Roman world in culture, language, legal custom, and economic organization. As a result, it would be safe to say that not only are the findings by academics in other areas of Europe and the Mediterranean relevant to Hispania, but that those in Hispania also have wider implications in the socio-economic history of the entire post-Roman world.

The study of early medieval peasantry, despite being a rather obscure subject on its own, has been addressed in the works of many academics, whose opinions on the subject of peasants and their status was heavily influenced by their general beliefs about the late antique and early medieval world. There are multiple key issues which academics have discussed with regards to the early medieval peasant: the first would be the issue of freedom, or lack thereof. Some writers, such as Chris Wickham, claim that the collapse of the Roman state led to an “emancipation” of the peasant population, which was relieved of many of the tax burdens of the Roman bureaucracy, as well as the power of rich senatorial landlords, who either fragmented their holdings to conform to the territories of one of many post-Roman states, or else fell into

obscurity, as their villas and land holdings were parceled out by local inhabitants, who claimed these properties for their own households as allodial lands.

Wickham, in both *Framing the Early Middle Ages* and *The Inheritance of Rome* speaks to this point, describing the nature of peasant autonomy, as revealed by surviving documentation, as representative of a society which has escaped the authority of powerful landlords and where peasant proprietors often held their own lands independently of any ties of obligation to a more powerful figure or institution.¹ The dissolution of the Roman state, therefore, allowed for peasants to gain, in many areas, a great deal of autonomy in their dealings, and greater control over the produce and exchange of their lands. This perspective is mirrored in the writings of other modern historians, such as Robert Portass, who has made use of monastic records in Iberia to point to similar trends among peasants there between the 9th and 11th centuries, as peasant communities frequently would stand independently as witnesses, donors, and buyers and sellers of land.

This current thread of scholarship stands in opposition to the prevailing opinion of earlier academics, who tended to view the early medieval period as the beginning of the imposition of “feudal tyrannies,” as the chaos of the fall of Rome gave an opportunity to ambitious warlords to subjugate peasants in return for protection, laying the foundation of the manorial system which would flourish throughout the high and late medieval period. This idea was substantiated through the use of Carolingian polyptyques, which described estates in the environs of Paris which were firmly under the control of aristocratic and monastic landlords, with most of the peasantry being unfree tenants on their estates. As pointed out by many since then, however, these sources provide an incomplete view of the wider early medieval world, with the case of northern Gaul

¹ Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2006), 551, and Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 205-210.

being a rather unique one, as it lies so close to the major palace centers of both the Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties in the Frankish empire. It also reflects what is now widely believed to be the end point of centuries of social changes, evidenced by both earlier documentation and modern archaeological analysis.

The status of peasant communities in Hispania, as anywhere else, were greatly affected by the political and social shifts of the Early Medieval Period, and so it is fitting to summarize the various major events of this period, all of which contributed to the molding of rural life across the peninsula. The collapse of the Roman state in the 5th century CE left a major power vacuum, filled in due time by the emergent Visigothic kingdom of Toulouse, which for a time reigned as the most powerful of the post-Roman successor states. The Visigoths would face their own shock, however, when the Franks under Clovis I crushed them in battle at Vouille in 507 and proceeded to seize nearly all their lands in Gaul, forcing them to relocate their center of power to their Iberian lands.

Visigothic political history from this point until the reign of Leovigild (568-586 CE) was one of chaos and disorder, as the nascent state first underwent civil war and domination under the Ostrogoths, followed by several wars between royal claimants and invasions from Justinian and the sons of Clovis. Several parts of the kingdom broke away on their own as well, including Cordoba, which repelled an attempted siege, seizing the royal treasury and killing the king's son. This period marks the second major breakdown in order in Hispania within a century, and this undoubtedly had major implications for the rural population.

Prior to the collapse of the Roman state, an economy organized around manorial estates had emerged in Hispania, with prominent local aristocrats and senatorial elites both holding vast amounts of land, which was centered on countryside villas which served as both elite residences

and centers for collection and redistribution of rural surpluses. The rural population, by the start of the 5th century, consisted of both agricultural slaves, who worked predominantly on the major estates of the aristocracy, and of *coloni*, who were half-free sharecroppers who were tied to the lands which they worked, in a system that would be rather similar to later medieval serfdom.²

This system, based as it was around the protective authority and extractive power of the Roman state, faced major issues as that same state began to dissolve. The taxes raised by the Roman state, which were often imposed directly on tenant farmers rather than the landlords, became less common and less heavy over time, and while the Visigothic kingdom likely imposed its own taxes in the Roman tradition, they seem to have been, like those of other post-Roman states, both much less intensive and more sporadically collected from the general population. During the late Roman period, it has been theorized that as much as 30-40% of the yields from agriculture could be taxed by the state, to say nothing of the rent owed by peasants to landlords if they were tenants.³

While taxation did not disappear immediately after the Roman Empire, it was less strenuous, and increasingly the kings of post-Roman Europe relied on the income of their personal holdings as well as tolls and tariffs in lieu of a general tax, which had proven both unpopular and unnecessary in a system where military service was compulsory for landholding freemen, as was the case in all of the post-Roman kingdoms. The instability of the immediate post-Roman period, especially after the extinction of the Balti dynasty of Visigothic kings and ensuing civil wars certainly did nothing to help relieve the situation. Archaeological evidence from the period shows, similar to other parts of Europe, a gradual shift away from the villa economy which had dominated up to this point. By the end of the 6th century, the vast majority of

² Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2006), 521.

³ Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2006), 64-65.

Roman-era villas had been either abandoned or converted into churches, storehouses, workshops, cemeteries, or subdivided into smaller living units.⁴

It was into this vacuum that new methods of rural settlement and social organization would begin to form, as will be discussed further below. The Visigothic kingdom found new strength following the (re)conquests of King Leovigild, and the conversion of his son and successor Reccared I (586-601) to Catholicism from the Arian heresy. This reconstitution of something resembling a centralized state power, now working in tandem with the church in Spain, allowed for a new social order to emerge, dominated by a mixed Gotho-Roman aristocracy that itself was separated between a central palace elite and disparate regional potentates, who frequently feuded over control over the kingship and other key royal offices in the *Urbs Regia* of Toledo, the new and final capital of the Visigoths.

The Visigothic kingdom's conquest in the 710s by the invading Umayyad forces would massively change the landscape across Iberia, as a new state would be established in the Umayyad emirate, while in the north several Christian holdouts would begin to crystalize under the control of local warlords turned kings. Archaeological evidence details a major disruption due to the destruction of the original invasion, with some rural sites being entirely destroyed during the period of conflict. The conquest not only created new instability for the peninsula, but opened up a highly contentious frontier between the Christian kings in the north and the Islamic rulers of the south.

The rule of the Umayyad dynasty introduced the *jizya* tax to the non-Muslim population, as well as new methods of irrigation and agriculture. They also replaced, to varying degrees, the

⁴ Santiago Castellanos, *The Visigothic Kingdom in Iberia: Construction and Invention* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 6.

elite class that had been established in Iberia with their own Arab-Berber ruling class, while the remnants of the Gothic nobility coalesced in the newly founded Kingdom of Asturias. Those populations in Asturias and the other northerly regions of Spain had always been less dense in their settlements due to the rough terrain and scarcity of arable land, but the immediate post-Visigothic period reveals a remarkable level of peasant autonomy, with minimal interactions with aristocratic, state, or ecclesiastical powers.

This began to shift from the 9th century to the 11th century, as the relative power of the aristocratic class increased, thanks to connections with both the church and the royal court; both institutions served as means by which gains in landed wealth could be crystallized and legitimated, concentrating the holding of land and power within a singular family line. At this same time, the peasantry were increasingly bound to secular and ecclesiastical power, as the powerful sought to spread influence over their neighbors and the rural population attempted to secure patronage and assistance from well-resourced individuals, even if that meant making binding commitments of their own land and rights as freemen. A state of half-dependency was perfectly acceptable to many peasants, so long as it connected them to a lord that could provide for them in times of want, protect them from violence, and grant them aid in legal disputes by providing witnesses.⁵

This entire dynamic has its parallels in other parts of post-Roman Europe. While in some places the power of the aristocracy over the countryside remains firm even after the collapse of the empire (such as in southern Gaul, Sicily, etc.), the prevailing theme in most regions is that of a weakened upper class, which gives way to a peasant society and economy that exerts much more autonomy, and which shows great socio-economic mobility, with families amassing wealth

⁵ Robert Portass, *The Village World of Early Medieval Northern Spain* (New York City: Boydell Press, 2017), 159.

and influence in one generation for it to dissipate between the heirs in the next one. Throughout Europe there is also a common thread in the ways by which aristocracies formed and asserted themselves, namely through association with the church and state/royal power.

With this general outline, it would be appropriate to begin with the late Roman period, and see how the Roman economic and social order shifted, or in some cases collapsed, in the wake of the political changes of the 5th-6th centuries CE. The Roman empire, with its massive civil and military apparatus, was both a major extractor of wealth from its subjects as well as a reliable distributor, especially with regards to paying and supplying its massive military, necessary for controlling the massive frontiers with Germanic tribes in Europe. The Roman tax system was a highly developed one, but also very unequal in who it extracted surplus from, and in what quantities. The senatorial and military elites of the empire felt the strain of taxation far less acutely than the lower classes, especially the *Coloni* who worked as tenants on the *villas* of both local and imperial aristocrats.

The *coloni* (singular: *colonus*) were a class of rural peasants who, under the reforms of emperor Diocletian (284-305 CE), where the *coloni* were required to pay taxes on the land which they leased from their landlords, and on a basis which ignored their ability to pay without making themselves destitute. *Coloni* increasingly found themselves in desperate straits economically, and their relationship with their landlords required them to render labor services on the *villa* in addition to the rents and duties already owed. There was, from a top down perspective, very little consideration as to the material condition of this class of peasantry, and the Roman state was sufficiently sophisticated to enforce massive extractions from this vast body of rural farmers, with detailed record-keeping and a strong, coercive state system.⁶

⁶ Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2006), 521-522.

Resistance to these circumstances came about in conjunction with other major disruptions to the Roman empire. The *Bagaudae* have confused historians for many years, as a series of local peasant uprisings, which spanned from the 3rd to 5th centuries. The motivations of these rebels were likely quite diverse, but one major cause, acknowledged even by writers of the time, was the mistreatment of rural farmers by the ruling class, as well as the Roman state's harsh taxation.⁷ The inability of the emperors to sufficiently protect the population from raids and invasions during this period also likely contributed to a sense of dissatisfaction with the current system.

The villa estates of the Roman provinces were organized in a very centralized manner, with peasant households and slaves overseen by their landlords and their appointed stewards.⁸ Taxation, as well as other functions of the state were mediated through this relationship, so that aristocrats themselves were often responsible for executing the will of the state on behalf of their tenants. This position gave them enormous leverage and a privileged position socially and economically, but would face new challenges as the Roman state neared its final collapse in the west. The rise of the post-Roman kingdoms would lead to a breakdown of this system in many parts of the former empire, not least of which being Hispania, where the Visigoths would establish a new kingdom that would last from the 5th century to the early 8th.

The archaeological record shows clear connections between the breakdown of the Roman state and the dissolution of some or all aspects of the "villa economy" as seen in Iberia as well as other parts of the Roman world. One common theme is the changing condition of the villa building itself. The villas of the Roman world faced myriad fates over the course of the 5th to 6th centuries, as the Roman state unraveled and the old proprietors either were reduced in wealth and status, or were forced to abandon their estates due to one threat or another. The fate of Roman

⁷ Edward Thompson, "Peasant Revolts in Late Roman Gaul and Spain." in *Past & Present*, no. 2 (1952): 19.

⁸ Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2006), 270-272.

villas can generally be divided into three categories: rapid abandonment, gradual abandonment, and repurposing. All of these represent a new system of landholding and management, and can be used as measures of the condition of the older, Roman-style economy in a post-Roman environment.⁹

Rapid abandonment can usually be attributed to disasters of one kind or another, which forced the inhabitants to flee or abandon their land holdings in the area, and the devastation of wars, plagues, and other issues made it so that they either could not or would not return to the area. In these cases, the ruins of the villa center were usually taken as *spolia* by locals, who used the brick and stone for their own constructions. The exact proportion of villas that suffered this fate varies widely from place to place. Iberia, like most parts of the western empire near the Mediterranean sea, had fewer cases of this than places such as northern Gaul and Britain, where the sudden and total abandonment of country estates appears to be much more common. These abandonments did not always mean that the owner of the property lost the land or fled completely, as it is known that, in the later Roman empire, many senatorial elites neglected their provincial estates, leaving their management to local custodians¹⁰.

Because these villas functioned both as residences and depots for the collection and transportation of surplus, their joint functions faced a crisis during the 5th century, as in many areas the existing taxation system and bureaucratic framework either suffered major shocks or else entirely dissolved. Roman landowners had to readjust their system of relations to those who worked the land, as both the coercive power of the Roman state, as well as the system that necessitated their own position had become insolvent. The gradual abandonment of villa sites

⁹ Santiago Castellanos, *The Visigothic Kingdom in Iberia: Construction and Invention* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 5-8.

¹⁰ Devroey, Jean-Pierre. "The Economy " in *The Early Middle Ages: Europe 400-1000*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 113-114.

reflects the situation of such aristocrats, who slowly lost their power and influence, and thus their wealth which was necessary for the maintenance of their estate. Sites across Spain show that this was a common trend for an elite class that was contracting in wealth and influence, as these areas of rural resource collection lost their main purpose and slowly decreased in maintenance.

These sites would slowly but surely lose their prominence and positions in society along with their owners, and would ultimately end up, like the sites discussed above, being completely abandoned. However, many sites managed to avoid such a fate, as they were repurposed after the Roman state's collapse. The new purposes of these villas could be quite varied, from cemeteries to store houses to churches, and they even could be subdivided into smaller living spaces through the construction of new walls which parceled larger rooms into smaller individual homes.¹¹ A similar phenomenon can be found for large edifices in urban areas across Europe at this time. A common trend among these villas is the fact that religious or ecclesiastical purposes seem to be a very common fate consigned to them. The specific causes for this cannot be determined for certain, though the two most likely explanations may be either pious donation from the old owners, seeking to offload unprofitable and dilapidated properties in exchange for divine favor, or that such sites, soon after abandonment, were repurposed by local religious leaders as both a source of construction material, and perhaps as an area of pre established significance for the local community.¹²

Archaeological findings from the Iberian peninsula indicate that the majority of villa sites would be entirely abandoned, or else reused for more mundane agricultural purposes, such as

¹¹ Javier Martínez Jiménez "The Rural Hinterland of the Visigothic Capitals of Toledo and Reccopolis, between the Years 400–800 CE," *Authority and Control in the Countryside*, (2018): 102. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004386549_005.

¹² Santiago Castellanos, *The Visigothic Kingdom in Iberia: Construction and Invention* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 5-8.

storage of grain. The peasants in the local area also seem to have often elected to salvage building materials from these sites, though the exact fate of those bricks and stones cannot usually be determined. A reorganization of settlement patterns is also observed following this collapse of the villa system, with peasant households becoming more distant from one another, with each homestead possessing its own facilities for the storage of foodstuffs and other goods, as well as barns for animals. These findings can be construed to mean that the peasants who once had lived as dependents or even slaves in the villas now found themselves exerting much more autonomy over the collection and distribution of resources, regardless as to whether the old proprietors remained active in the region after their villa went into disrepair.¹³ Those villas that did persist did so in a changed form, usually repurposed for ecclesiastical foundations. These villas did survive, but were greatly changed by their new status, with baths turned into baptistries and halls converted into churches. These ecclesiastical centers, almost ironically, would eventually come to play a similar role in the rural society and economy that the villas they were built upon had.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in various other parts of the Roman world during this period. Archaeological studies in the area of Gaul and Germany reveal that the status of villas was either of total abandonment or repurposing for primarily religious functions. Archaeological research by academics such as Guy Halsall, Helena Hamerow, and others reveal that the fate of villas in these areas was marked by a similar trend. With the exception of certain areas nearer to the Mediterranean, villas by and large disappeared by the 6th century, either being built over or left in ruins. Research into settlement patterns and burial rites in the countryside during this period also has revealed a highly fluid social dynamic, where individuals and families

¹³ Roger Collins, *Visigothic Spain: 409-711* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 205.

can amass wealth in one generation, only for it to be fractured and lost in the next.¹⁴ Patrick Perin, writing on the subject of Merovingian settlements and their associated cemetery sites, notes a unique form of settlement pattern after the end of the Roman state, where independent households become more widely dispersed, with their own outbuildings (often referred to as *Grübenhäuser*, from the German term denoting a partially-sunken hut) organized around a central wooden hall for residence. Many of these sites were short lived, and appear to have been abandoned themselves by the 9th century. Perin posits that the appearance of these settlements represents a demographic shift, while their disappearance, which appears neither nonviolent nor sudden, is related to changes in landholding and aristocratic power, which will be touched upon further later on.¹⁵

The disappearance of the villa economy leaves open the question of what became of the coloni, slaves, and other dependents who worked in and around the villa, producing the surplus which maintained this aristocratic class of Romans. It would be overly simplistic to argue for a total “emancipation” of the peasantry, and even more so to claim that an event as impactful as the end of the empire had no major effect on the lives of the rural lower classes. By reviewing the archaeological evidence of peasant households and rural settlements in Spain and Portugal in the centuries after, the peasantry can be seen to exercise increased autonomy in their patterns of settlement, which is supported by textual evidence from the period as well. The independent, allodial holding of land seems to have become more common, and in place of the supremacy of aristocratic families over vast villas and a mass of dependents, the new order from the 6th century onwards appears to be one of a more independent peasant class, which nonetheless

¹⁴ Guy Halsall, *Settlement and Social Organization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 252-260. For a summary of this theory, see Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2006), 179 & 340-341.

¹⁵ Patrick Perin. “Settlements and Cemeteries in Merovingian Gaul.” In *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Boston: Brill, 2002), 79.

maintains many old systems of landholding and exchange from the Romans, creating a complex social order of the countryside where peasants buy, sell, rent, and donate both land and movable goods to one another, while the post-Roman aristocracy survives off of more fractured landholdings, exacting rents from properties across Spain and Portugal.

It may be considered “putting the cart before the horse” to claim that the disappearance of villas in the countryside signaled a sudden “emancipation” of the peasantry, as well as to suggest that the end of the villa economy necessarily equated to a decrease of power of major landlords over peasant tenants. What can be gathered from the sources, however, is that the end of the villa economy, in some cases dramatic and in some more gradual, gave peasants some sense of “breathing room” to act more freely with their resources, with reduced burden from rents or labor duties to landlords, and in time the total elimination of the Roman tax system which had, as stated earlier, extracted so much of a peasant’s already meager wealth.

During the Visigothic era, there was undoubtedly a well-established elite class still in power, governing the kingdom from the royal capital of Toledo, as well as regional aristocrats of varying levels of wealth. The conquests of king Leovigild in the second half of the sixth century either broke down or tied the remaining native aristocracy to this new royal court, after decades of disorder for which little can be said for certain, chiefly due to the lack of substantive contemporary sources. The Visigothic kingdom which emerged maintained a tax system over its territories in Iberia, extracting wealth from both the major cities and the countryside, which supplemented incomes of royal lands, toll and tariffs, and the fees associated with the courts and their judgements.

However, the power of the Visigothic state, as well as the associated power of this nobility which governed it from Leovigild’s reign onward, both were reduced quite significantly

from the days of Roman rule. Although historians of Visigothic Hispania in the modern day argue that the Visigothic state maintained a strong degree of sophistication and centralization, as inherited from their Roman forebears, as evidenced by the complexity of their law codes and palace organization and ritual,¹⁶ it is also evident from those very same sources that the king often struggled to maintain the obedience of his subjects in following his laws and commands, especially with regards to the maintenance of military duty and taxes among those eligible and expected to obey.¹⁷

During this period, the organization of settlements again shifts, though perhaps some continuity can be found, lining up with the degradation, but not total collapse of state structures and the tax system. In the Visigothic period, settlements referred to as *castellae* emerged in various parts of the peninsula, especially within close proximity of urban centers. These locations are nucleated settlements, often with defensive structures such as walls or ramparts, and can range greatly in size. In addition, isolated farmsteads and nucleated village settlements can also be found, and the diversity of these rural settlement types seems to indicate that, with the collapse of the villa system, several new modes of settlement and levels of connection to central, elite authority emerged in the kingdom.

Beginning with the village sites, archaeologists have often found evidence of peasant societies which lack large degrees of socio-economic differentiation, as even the largest gaps in

¹⁶ Anonymous, trans. Samuel Scott (Boston: The Boston Book Company, 1910), 64-75. The Visigothic law code features several sections detailing the importance of authenticated documents for even quite benign transactions between individuals, which are subject to review by magistrates. It goes without saying that the importance of the written word to a government that wishes to extract taxes and tolls is great, and the final end of the tax system would lead to a shift in the importance of literacy and documentation for legal affairs and transactions, as will be detailed below.

¹⁷ Santiago Castellanos, *The Visigothic Kingdom in Iberia: Construction and Invention* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 79.

household wealth are negligible compared to what came before, during the Roman period.¹⁸ These village communities can be seen to represent a countryside that has slipped from the strong control of aristocrats and the state, and have now concentrated around local communities where social difference is generally minimal, and resources, if not held in common, are freely exchanged and disposed of within the community, without fear of long-term alienation of property for any household. While elite influence likely was still felt in these communities, their lands (and therefore their wealth) may have been more widely distributed between many villages or hamlets, with parcels of land held in each of them. In this way, Visigothic Iberia may be compared with the situation of other, contemporary societies in Europe.

Chris Wickham has in particular examined Frankish Gaul and Lombard Italy regarding the status of peasantries, and has found phenomena that seem to echo those of Iberia under the Visigoths. The Lombards may be the most apt comparison, as they also inhabited a Mediterranean region, and maintained a monarchy based on Roman precepts, and which did not (at least, for any significant time) hold a single royal dynasty, instead relying on elective kingship to choose successors. In both cases, we find the aristocracy concentrated around a royal court situated in a capital city, be it the Lombard Pavia or the Visigothic Toledo. The legal records of both kingdoms do not distinguish between free males of any level of wealth; they are all entitled to the same rights, and bound by the same obligations, namely to serve in military matters if called upon and to attend their local courts as required. The peasants therefore managed to exercise much autonomy and self direction, partly thanks to the privileges granted by the state and partly due to its weakness, or in some cases the complete lack of state control.

¹⁸ Javier Martínez Jiménez "The Rural Hinterland of the Visigothic Capitals of Toledo and Reccopolis, between the Years 400–800 CE," *Authority and Control in the Countryside*, (2018): 106. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004386549_005.

Peasants often made up an important part of the military apparatus for these kingdoms, and so they had access not only to the same rights as wealthier freemen, but also to similar political or economic opportunities.¹⁹ Social advancement for these lower-class populations was, therefore, a real possibility, given that they made themselves useful to their superiors.

The villages, hamlets, and farmsteads of Iberia, juxtaposed with the old villa economy of Rome, give credence to the information gleaned from textual evidence. In many ways, it could be argued that, in Spain as well as elsewhere, the aristocracy existed mainly as a “service aristocracy,” which derived what wealth they had not necessarily from hereditary privilege, but from how useful they, and perhaps their heirs, could be to the central apparatus of government, embodied in this period by the royal court. Nobles could frequently be made and unmade, and this dynamic certainly would help to explain the situation in the countryside, where we do not see large, aristocratic manors emerging at this time.²⁰ The Castellae mentioned earlier therefore may connect less to an entrenched local aristocracy, and more to the central authority of the Visigothic kings, whose chosen officers and representatives may have reaped some higher wealth and status by association, but were not as able to entrench their wealth in any specific region of Iberia.²¹

The castellae seem to represent a connection between royal power and local communities. As previously mentioned, the Visigothic kings continued to extract taxes for a long period after the end of the Roman state, as well as operating courts of law and performing other

¹⁹ Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 215-216.

²⁰ Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2006), 224-225.

²¹ Although some authors do claim that the Castellae are indicative of a regional elite class, their preponderance near urban centers, as well as the consistent presence of defensive works, indicates less the private domicile of an elite, and more the center of local administration. None of this is to say that these Castellae were not the homes of important and wealthy individuals, only that those individuals did not enjoy lasting, entrenched status, nor that their children could expect to inherit such privileges.

necessary functions, such as the mustering of troops for campaigns. All of these functions required not only trustworthy agents to carry them out, but a site which was both secure and prominent in the local area to which members of the community could be summoned, for one purpose or another. And so, while peasant societies enjoyed considerably more autonomy in their economic and social spheres, they remained connected to the beating political heart of the Visigothic kingdom through these sites and the royal agents present within, who could both dish out punishments for disobedience and offer material and social reward for compliance with royal demands.²² It was by these means that the powerful remained in contact with the lower classes, and managed to maintain some level of influence on their lives, even if their direct control in any specific community was quite variable.

Commonalities between Spain and other regions can be found in this respect. Firstly, the idea of all free men as social equals existed in most parts of the post-Roman west during the sixth to eighth centuries, at least. In Italy under the Lombards, the free men of the kingdom were explicitly referred to as men of the army, all of whom were expected, in one way or another, to contribute to the military needs of the king and country.²³ In the region of Lucca, we find peasants operating with a great degree of independence from secular or religious powers, although they often remained connected to them in one way or another. In the surviving documents of the seventh and early eighth centuries, mostly derived from monastic records, the Lucchese shows a vibrant and mixed society of landless peasants, peasants who own some land and rent other properties, peasants who are entirely independent, and peasants who have amassed enough wealth to establish tenants of their own. At the very same time, lay and clerical elites also share in landholding throughout the countryside, but not to such an extent that they can

²² Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 213-215.

²³ Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2006), 560-561.

dominate the affairs of any specific community, or consolidate their power over any area.²⁴

Aristocrats cared greatly about amassing land and wealth, but did not do so on a systematic, region-specific basis.

Finally, the sources we have for the religious history of Iberia during this period help us to understand how monastic and ecclesiastical involvement in the life of the countryside came to evolve during this era. From the sixth through eighth centuries, various saints' lives and other texts speak frequently of the efforts of hermits, monastic founders, and bishops to proselytize to the rural population, founding churches and monasteries (often with royal or aristocratic aid) and building new communities of the faithful. Fructuosus of Braga stands out as an example of the kind of individual who contributed much to this trend.

Fructuosus was the son of a Gothic aristocrat, and from a young age took to religious life. He became determined to take monastic vows, rejecting the worldly pleasures of his family, and to venture into the northern reaches of Spain in order to both proselytize and seek isolation for his own spiritual edification. Over the course of his life, he would found several monasteries with his followers, which would in turn become major institutions within the region, attaining both fame and wealth thanks to the pious donations of others.²⁵ He was but one of many such monastic founders, the equals of men such as Columbanus, Benedict of Aniane, and others who operated throughout the Christian world during the early Medieval Period. These holy men (and sometimes women) laid the foundation for a greatly changed rural environment, as monasteries would quickly become more than the homes of hermits and theologians, adopting functions and powers that would rapidly enhance their wealth and status in whatever locality they found themselves.

²⁴ Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2006), 388-390.

²⁵ Valerius, Trans. Andy Fear, *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), 125-126.

The emergence of these new patterns of life and settlement among the rural population therefore reflects both new elements, such as the emergent villages, the redefined status of free men under Visigothic law, and the rise of monastic communities. At the same time, we see evidence of the maintenance of elements of the Roman period, such as with the *castellae*, which in turn represent the powers of the Visigothic kings to both levy taxes and exert judicial authority over the countryside, much like the Roman emperors of old. Even if the villa economy had fallen, the aristocracy remained solvent and the power of the rulers could be felt through them into the many villages, hamlets, and farmsteads that dotted Iberia at the time.

The Arab conquest in the early eighth century would cause yet another major shift to the lives of Iberian peasants. The speed and violence of the conquest can be seen clearly in the archaeological record. The majority of rural sites faced either abandonment or major reorganizations, which can be attributed to not only the main conquest, but the ensuing conflicts, revolts, and civil wars that became endemic to the peninsula thereafter.²⁶ The new Islamic emirate, under the Umayyad dynasty, would maintain its own tax system in the form of the *Jizya*, and establish an organized, if often embattled, state in central and southern Iberia. The effect of all of this was that regions that had once maintained sophisticated networks of *Castellae* and villages, such as the hinterland of Toledo, now became more militarized, with populations either scattering into more isolated settlements, or establishing themselves close to an increasing number of fortified settlements for defense.

The destruction of the old Visigothic kingdom and its associated nobility, along with the introduction of a new ruling class certainly contributed to this trend, as the networks created by

²⁶ Javier Martínez Jiménez "The Rural Hinterland of the Visigothic Capitals of Toledo and Reccopolis, between the Years 400–800 CE," *Authority and Control in the Countryside*, (2018): 117. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004386549_005.

the old regime were, intentionally or otherwise, dismantled and replaced. Overall, some sense of continuity can be found in Muslim Spain and Portugal, compared with the Visigothic system before them, where fortified sites representing state power and the associated elites became focal points, as part of a society based around a centralized regime and which relied on the extraction of taxes and other obligations from the population, both rural and urban, to sustain its ruling class, which operated the organs of government.²⁷

In the north, where Christian holdouts remained and new kingdoms would emerge in the eighth century, we find an even greater departure from the Visigothic order, as the power of the state appears to have entirely disappeared in many areas, along with a disappearance of the associated elite class. In these areas, from the eighth century at the latest, we see a peasant society operating almost entirely on its own, with little to no interaction with powerful individuals or institutions. The evidence for these findings can be found in the form of archaeological evidence, as well as a surprisingly plentiful number of charters, records of sale, and other documents that would be preserved in the monastic houses found in the region. They reveal, really for the first time in Iberian history, the day-to-day interactions between peasants, without the influence of powerful landlords or a domineering state apparatus; It is only in this period that the reality of peasant life comes into some level of focus.

Historian Robert Portass has done extensive research into the dynamics of this peasant society and economy, aided by charters from several monasteries in the area. What he has found reveals a community where land and other resources are freely exchanged between households, and where wealth and status within a community can be amassed within a generation, only to dissipate thereafter. The peasants of the region of Liebana, in the Asturias, for example, often

²⁷ Roger Collins, *Caliphs and Kings* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 130-132.

relied on gift exchange between households, as well as actual sales, to supplement their own resources. Reciprocity was an essential part of this culture, as it is in many subsistence societies, and even those records which show evidence of an exchange still may have connotations of gift exchange, as the deal itself is meant to cement ties between family and neighbors.²⁸

The reason these records survive to our day is that the documents detailing the exchanges between lay families became the property of these monasteries, which were the only institutions to maintain copies of their records in the long-term. The fact that these charters show transactions between non-monastic members of the community tells us something about how the members of the community engaged with the written word, as well as how monasteries began to play an important role in country life. Literacy would not have been uncommon among the elite classes of Visigothic society, and certainly any respectable member of the clergy would possess at least the most basic skills for reading and writing throughout the timeline covered in this paper,²⁹ but the presence of written legal documents amongst the rural peasantry shows how valuable the written word was as a source of unchallenged authority and the legitimization of public agreements and transactions. Even after the Visigothic kingdom collapsed, local communities looked for written records as a way to secure their property from claims by others. Monasteries, containing a plentiful number of monks who can read and write, took up the function of notaries and archivists, who created and maintained records within their communities.

Peasant households in Iberia seem to have maintained the Roman system of private land ownership, and therefore did not participate in collective ownership of land in their communities.

²⁸ Robert Portass, *The Village World of Early Medieval Northern Spain* (New York City: Boydell Press, 2017), 49. The first footnote details the nature of gift-exchange, and its place in the study of Medieval history.

²⁹ Roger Collins, "Literacy and the Laity in Early Mediaeval Spain," in *The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (New York City: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 114-118.

Despite this, land was very frequently exchanged, given as gifts, and donated by peasant households, with it even being possible to track the growing and shrinking of possessions in certain peasant households.³⁰ The picture revealed is one of complex relationships between neighbors, as peasants buy and sell land from one another, pay rent for properties, claim usufruct on shared fields or vineyards, and find many other ways to gain and distribute landed property with one another in a community. All the while, the church serves as a public source of officiation, maintaining records and drawing up contracts between individuals. To this end, they are the only public authority, as the power of the state, whatever that may have been, has since evaporated.

This was not a completely egalitarian society, where everyone had the same status and resources. The status of women, unfree persons (be they dependents only or exist as slaves, which is rare but not unheard of in the charters), and other marginalized groups attests to that, not to mention the fact that we do see certain individuals and their households accrue more wealth and influence than others. What makes this period significant is that, unlike the Romans and to a lesser extent the Visigoths, an elite class does not entrench itself, or solidify control over the countryside in any way, at least not in the first couple of centuries following the Arab conquest. This dynamic existed in a sort of cycle that seems to have perpetuated itself for quite some time, until changes during the ninth to eleventh centuries established a more stratified society, dominated by a new elite class.

The emergence of this new class of nobles can be attributed to multiple factors. The first, and arguably the most important, would be the role of the church and monasteries in concentrating land and pulling out of the active “market” which peasants participated in. As is

³⁰ Robert Portass, *The Village World of Early Medieval Northern Spain* (New York City: Boydell Press, 2017), 60-63.

well known, many monastic houses gained great wealth and influence from the donations of the pious, and much has been discussed about how these donations served not only the interests of the monastic community, but also those of the donor and their families. One constant throughout this entire period is that the inheritance of property is partible, meaning that the wealth of an individual, in land and in other properties, was expected to be divided between several heirs, be they children or other relations. This division of inheritance is one of the key reasons behind the inability (or perhaps unwillingness) of families to maintain gains in wealth and influence over generations.³¹ Monastic communities, meanwhile, do not die and pass on property to heirs, and so their accumulation can go unchecked for centuries. In parts of Galicia in northwestern Spain, monastic records detail a rapid accumulation of land by monasteries, which, backed by a specific family of local importance, often with a member reigning as abbot, were able to control the lands of the monastery, and by extension come to dominate the affairs of the community.³²

It is likely that the peasants involved in this process did not think any differently about their gifts or sales to monasteries than they did with their own neighbors. In fact, it is more than possible that, in the same way they saw exchanges with other peasants as a necessary way to build and maintain reciprocal relationships, they saw a similar value in associating themselves with a monastery by donation. The sheer size and wealth of a monastery could perhaps even motivate locals to increase their commitments to it, as it could be a source of support and stability in trying times.³³ These waves of donation created a sudden upward momentum which allowed the individuals in charge of the monastery to gain and secure supreme influence over

³¹ Robert Portass, *The Village World of Early Medieval Northern Spain* (New York City: Boydell Press, 2017), 195-196.

³² Paul Fouracre, "The Origins of the Nobility in Francia," in *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe*, ed. Anne Duggan (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 200), 22-23.

³³ Matthew Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages* (New York City: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 17-22.

their locality in as little as a single generation, which could then be passed on to the next generation entirely intact.

Along with the ecclesiastical aspect, there was also the issue of secular authority. Medieval nobility were known not only for possessing wealth and influence, but for being able to exert their power through judicial and military means. The source of this authority would extend, ultimately, from the heights of secular power, that is to say the king and his court. The new kings of Christian Spain after the conquest would model their power structures off of the same basis which the Visigoths had done, and would go so far as to claim that they were upholding or restoring the legacy of the royal court in Toledo.³⁴ As such, the offices of the old monarchy, such as the many appointed counts, dukes, and judges, would be employed by the Asturian kings in their own dominions.

The Asturian rulers, and later the kings of Leon, faced the challenge, however, of asserting their authority over the lands of northern Spain, divided as they were by geographical barriers. To this end, they came, far more than previous rulers from Roman or Visigothic times, to rely on the support and loyalty of powerful individuals and families in these localities, so that they could enforce the royal will on their behalf. The royal court thus made itself a legitimizing force for this nascent elite, which was able to help them survive the passing of generations through association with the powers of the crown, and through intermingling and marriage with the elites of other parts of the kingdom, allowing them to create a network of aristocrats that both bound the kingdom together and solidified their own privilege as a higher order in this new society.

³⁴ Roger Collins, *Caliphs and Kings* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 59-64.

In Galicia, Portass witnessed the ascendance of a family of local notables, centered around a man named Rosendo, managed to tie themselves to the patronage of the kings of Leon, leveraging their preexisting influence over the rich monastery of Celanova to secure additional donations from the king. Later on, with royal patronage, Rosendo would be made a bishop, tying him and his family to the power of the kings, and other members of the family would be empowered as counts, given the authority of the crown to govern on their behalf, something they could easily do given the wealth and influence they had already amassed.³⁵ This final step secured their long term authority, officially divorcing them in status from the rest of the population by investing them with royal sanction, full permission to employ the power they had in the name of the king and his court.

This trend, observed in northern Iberia from the ninth to eleventh centuries, has its parallels in other parts of Europe during the same period. In Brittany, the records of the monastery of Redon show a highly autonomous peasant society which, through the influence of Redon and other monastic houses, came to be more stratified, under the control of a smaller number of aristocratic households which tied themselves to both the monasteries, as well as the Frankish rulers in the area.³⁶ The rise of monastic foundations can be seen to have coincided with the rise of a fixed elite class in many instances. In another part of the Frankish world, Matthew Innes has studied how the charters of Rhineland monasteries shed light on the accumulation of influence and power for specific families, who then build connections with other elites and the royal court to maintain this authority in the long term.³⁷ By allying themselves with royal authority, local leaders could cement their power by turning their private strength and personal

³⁵ Robert Portass, *The Village World of Early Medieval Northern Spain* (New York City: Boydell Press, 2017), 182-183.

³⁶ Wendy Davies, *Small Worlds* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 174-176.

³⁷ Matthew Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages* (New York City: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 121-122.

judgments on disputes and issues in a community into a public sphere under their control, legitimizing their use of power in the area. This was an essential step because not only did it secure their right to exert the influence they had, but it also safeguarded this power so that it could be passed onto future generations.

By the start of the new millennium, much change had occurred in the Iberian countryside, from the end of the Roman villa economy which led to a more independent peasantry in the Visigothic period, which itself still remained tied to the state through a reduced tax system and the assertion of royal authority through public courts and the military levy, which peasants were both willing and expected to participate in. The sudden collapse of the kingdom with the Visigothic conquest greatly disturbed this system, which was evidenced through the shifting archaeology, as the *castellae* of the earlier period were replaced by new fortified sites, and the power of the state in many parts of the peninsula collapsed. The peasant society which emerges at this stage, specifically in northern Spain, is almost entirely independent of outside influences, with peasants freely exchanging land and other resources as they need to, with little sign of economic stratification between neighbors, and with wealth not remaining concentrated in the hands of specific families for more than one to two generations.

This all changed eventually, thanks first to the influence of those same monasteries, which, as the record keepers of public transactions, served a major role as the legitimizing force of the community regarding sales, gifts, and other deals between laypersons. At the same time, the donations of land by the pious continued to swell the wealth and influence of these monasteries, which soon became the premier landlords in their area. Those individuals and families which had the most influence on these monasteries in turn were able to secure their wealth through them for generations. The final step for these families was turning this wealth and

status into real power over their locality, by connecting themselves with other elites in the royal court. Inter-marriage among other wealthy families could ensure that inheritance, even if it were split, would remain substantial, and service to the crown would guarantee rewards of land, titles, and other privileges that would allow these aristocrats to exert their power on the king's behalf, who in turn would benefit from having strong supporters of his will in their area.

The final question, then, is what these findings tell us about the nature of Medieval peasantry, and peasants as a whole throughout history. The clearest conclusion would be that the status of peasants, and their relationship to power, can be quite varied over time and place. Peasants can live essentially as serfs, as in the Roman *villae*, where they are tied by obligations to their landlord and exert very little agency in their own lives, or they can live as those in the Liebana region did after the Arab conquest, where they managed to enjoy a large degree of independence, freely dealing with their neighbors on equal footing, and acquiring or distributing land as it suited them and the needs of their households. In the middle the Visigothic kingdom can be found, a place with an established elite class, but one which does not exert major influence over any specific locality, and where peasants, although in many ways more autonomous than in previous centuries, still maintained connections with central authorities, which continued to extract surplus while also providing opportunities for free peasants to enjoy social mobility of some kind through service.

The elite class, then, usually represented some degree of "interference" with the lifestyle of local peasantries, as an extractive force which uses its wealth to control local society through the law, religious authority, and other means. The findings of this paper line up in many ways with the preexisting findings of sociology on the ways in which subsistence agriculture operates in rural communities. A name of particular importance is Alexander Chayanov, an early

twentieth century agronomist and sociologist who studied the operation of peasant communities in his own time. He found that peasants, far from being motivated by a profit incentive or an interest in “getting ahead” of their neighbors in wealth and status, generally worked only to sustain their households, being unwilling to expend extra labor hours to produce a surplus they had little use for (since they did not participate in a capitalist market economy where they could exchange their goods for currency).³⁸ The amount of labor expended, and the amount of land cultivated, therefore revolved around the needs of the family unit.

The peasantry, therefore, seek only to work more intensively and acquire more land as they need to sustain a bigger household, creating something of a natural life cycle for a peasant household, which grows as children are born and dependents are added, and thus naturally seeks to secure more land in order to sustain these dependents, a burden which becomes much easier as children grow to a working age, and eventually establish households of their own, at which point these lands become divided or sold off by an aging household that is neither able nor willing to commit as many labor hours to cultivation.³⁹ This mirrors much of what was seen with the peasant communities of post-Visigothic Iberia, where peasants are seen amassing and distributing landed properties as they need to, in order to sustain their own families, but not necessarily seeking greater wealth than their neighbors, since to do so would require a much greater amount of labor. A peasant economy, therefore, is generally self-regulating, and although individuals may grow in their personal wealth, they remain peasants who still must farm for their

³⁸ Alexander Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, trans. & ed. Basile Kerblay, R. E. F. Smith, and Daniel Thorner (Homewood, IL: The American Economic Association, 1966), 6-8. Chayanov makes special note of how the “drudgery of labor” is a motivating factor for why peasants would not expend more hours working than they needed to, an idea not at all difficult to understand given the sheer physical strain of farm work.

³⁹ Alexander Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, trans. & ed. Basile Kerblay, R. E. F. Smith, and Daniel Thorner (Homewood, IL: The American Economic Association, 1966), 56-61. Chayanov discusses how the “worker-consumer ratio” defines much of the economic decisions made by peasant households.

own subsistence, and their possessions ultimately will be divided again amongst heirs and neighbors to whom they have sold or leased property.

How, then, can the emergence and persistence of aristocracies, and social stratification be explained? Chayanov touches on this, noting that the emergence of the “feudal economy” of the high Medieval period was based upon the extraction of goods from the countryside for sale in urban centers, where a cash economy had begun to form, and agricultural goods could be valued by merchants and artisans in increasing quantities.⁴⁰ This too lines up with the observations of this study, as the period of urban growth which occurs in the tenth and eleventh centuries coincides with this reemergence of an aristocratic class which is able to make greater use of the surplus extracted from the countryside by interacting with these growing towns.⁴¹ The rise of monastic wealth, as well as the new connections between the wealthy and powerful through the secular power of the king and his court both served to put in motion a transition away from the peasant economy towards a more stratified and strictly defined economic and social system, which would persist into the following centuries.

What, then, to make of all this? It seems that the shifting status of peasants in Iberia, as in many other parts of Europe, depended greatly on the political and economic influences outside of their own communities. When left to their own devices, peasants exerted great agency and operated a fluid exchange of land and other resources with their neighbors. The long-term accumulation of wealth appears to have been neither attractive nor feasible, due to the nature of inheritance, and the unwillingness of peasants to work more than they needed to to satisfy their

⁴⁰ Alexander Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, trans. & ed. Basile Kerblay, R. E. F. Smith, and Daniel Thorner (Homewood, IL: The American Economic Association, 1966), 20-21.

⁴¹ Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 543-549. The rise in number and size of cities and towns in Europe was both a cause for aristocratic power's expansion, as well as an effect of their increased wealth, and demand for goods, which stimulated the growth of merchant and artisanal classes in the cities.

needs. The peasant economy was changed primarily through the interference of outside institutions, as the monasteries, the powers of the state, and the ability of certain families to connect themselves to these institutions all allowed for a new elite class to come into power and protect their status, cementing the real authority they had gained and legitimizing it through the church and the crown. These influences, which waned from the Roman collapse to the Arab conquest, but slowly reemerged thereafter, can be seen to play a key role in the status of peasants and the way they controlled the land (or did not). The accumulation of wealth and power is not guaranteed as a hereditary privilege unless systems are put in place to concentrate control of wealth, as well as to legitimize and express that power in the community.

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