

# **Local Societies and Relational Agency in Medieval Iberia.**

## **Two Avenues for the Study of Subaltern Groups**

by Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo

This book was written in the framework of two research projects funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation focusing on the agency of peasantry and local societies in medieval southern Europe. This introductory paper discusses the goals, approaches, conceptual framework, and some of the major statements presented in each chapter. For this reason, it introduces the notions of relational agencies and subaltern collective action, as well as micropolitics and the arenas of struggle in which social life occurred. It is argued that these approaches provide a nuanced and multiscale comprehension of preindustrial rural societies, taking into account case studies from the medieval period. Finally, some general trends and proposals for future research are suggested.

Middle Ages, Al-Andalus, Central Europe, localities, peasantry, elites, social practices.

### **1. *Introduction***

This book was produced within the framework of two research projects funded by the National Research Plan of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation devoted to studying the agency of the peasantry and analysing local medieval societies.<sup>1</sup> The first project sought to define the peasantry and

<sup>1</sup> Projects “Peasant agency and social complexity in north-western Iberia in the medieval period” (AEI/FEDER UE HAR2016-76094-C4-2R), and “Archaeology of the local societies in Southern Europe: identities, collectives, and territorialities (5<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries) (PID2020-112506GB-C41) funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.

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subaltern groups as historically active agents and not merely reactive to external stimuli. To do this, these social groups' social and political practices were studied in a theoretical framework that took into account different forms of domination, including non-coercive ones. The second explored the mechanisms of the exercise of power and social inequalities based on micropolitics and practices undertaken on a daily basis in pre-industrial rural spaces. In this case, the study was based on the theories of practice developed by such specialists as Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens.

There are two key concepts at the heart of these projects. The first is the notion of peasant agency. As formulated by several of the studies included in this compilation, the agency is understood as the capacity of different agents to act within a social structure in order to analyse the causalities of the social phenomena observed in the past.<sup>2</sup> In general, there are no qualms when it comes to attributing agency capacity to the elites and the powerful since this is one of the fundamental criteria that define their identity.<sup>3</sup> It is much less evident to think about, identify and define the agency capacity of the collectives and individuals belonging to dependent groups. This is a subject that has not yet received sufficient attention from scholars, and we intend to address this issue through an analysis of the peasantry.

In recent decades, numerous historians and archaeologists have avoided or rejected outright the use of the term "peasantry", considering it a "dirty word", an ideologically connoted concept or one influenced by negative representations.<sup>4</sup> However, the alternatives (dwellers, commoners, non-elites, etc.) have turned out to be elusive, ambiguous and imprecise. Consequently, the peasantry has been under-theorised, and the dominated groups have been presented as passive, uniform, non-active subjects. However, the study of peasantry agency capacity within the framework of multiple agencies of a relational nature opens up new avenues to give voice to those who usually lack it.<sup>5</sup>

The second conceptual frame of reference is that of local societies. The term has been used in the past with very different meanings,<sup>6</sup> but in this project we wished to give it a specific significance. The notion of local society does not primarily refer to a scale of analysis or an object of study, but to a recurring arena of sociopolitical interaction involving a diversity of agents (surrounding societies, elites active on different scales, regular people and subaltern groups, invisible groups, etc.) that operate and make up a diversity of sociopolitical horizons. For this purpose, of particular importance is Pierre

<sup>2</sup> Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory of Social Practice." The ability to make a difference in the world, either through maintaining the status quo or by challenging accepted 'norms' of how to act as part of a larger collective. Barrett, "Agency: A Revisionist Account."

<sup>3</sup> For the medieval period see Bougard, Bühner-Thierry, y Le Jan, "Les élites du haut Moyen Âge;" Wickham, "The Changing Composition of early élites;" Devroey, Feller, y Le Jan, *Les élites et la richesse au Haut Moyen Âge*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*.

<sup>5</sup> Quirós Castillo y Tejerizo García, "Filling the gap."

<sup>6</sup> Zeller et al., *Neighbours and stranger*; Coss et al., *Episcopal power and local society*.

Bourdieu's concept of *field*, which defines a social space of contention, action and influence in which social relations are established through the creation, destruction, re-elaboration and negotiation of forms of domination.<sup>7</sup> Resorting to approaches typical of microhistory (the analysis of specific case studies to address large issues, comparative studies, and attention to multiple agencies), the hypothesis sustained in this project is that the analysis of these fields of action through the identification of practices also allows us to visualise the agency of dominated groups. A perspective of this type allows us to overcome the (false) dichotomy between top-down and bottom-up approaches.

This introduction presents the analytical categories used in the volume, contextualises this study within the framework of recent works devoted to the peasantry, introduces the chapters included, and proposes some perspectives for future studies.

## *2. The context: peasant studies*

On opening a book that aims to offer new perspectives for studying subaltern groups, it is useful to ask why we would want to analyse the peasantry in the medieval period. Several reasons determined this choice.

While the projects and publications devoted to the study of the elites and powers of the medieval period have undergone a particular development in recent decades, the same cannot be said of the peasantry.<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, in recent years, the informative records capable of shedding light on the peasantry have continued to increase as a result of the huge rise in preventive archaeology, the increasing availability of publications critical of medieval documentation, and the impulse of the digital humanities. However, perhaps the main innovation is not empirical, but theoretical, methodological, and social.

In the last few years, the Social Sciences and Humanities have developed an increasing interest in the study of peasantries and subaltern groups from such perspectives as economic inequality or political domination in the framework of the 2008 recession, the COVID-19 pandemic, and an understanding of the limits of national-state welfare policies. It could be argued whether the historical-archaeological studies of the peasantry are actually a novel phenomenon or whether they have remained in the mainstream. In any case, there is no doubt that an ontological rethinking of historical causalities has taken place based on a profound theoretical reconceptualisation of the role of dependent groups and the tension between agency and structure.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu, "Espacio social y poder simbólico."

<sup>8</sup> The scientific production is massive. Among others, it is worth mentioning the collective project carried out in France on the élites, or the growing attention to the study of early medieval states (Carvajal Castro y Tejerizo García, *El Estado y la Alta Edad Media*; Monsalvo Antón, *La construcción del poder real*.) These trends can be traced in Wickham, *Medieval Europe*.

<sup>9</sup> Barrett, "Agency: A Revisionist Account;" Dobres y Robb, *Agency in archaeology*.

In theoretical terms, the consideration of the peasantry as an endangered, if not totally extinct, species has been questioned by numerous observers as latent within a social history that, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, has underlined, in the first place, the existence of the process of “re-peasantisation” understood as the retreat of non-peasants or former peasants into “defensive” or “autonomous” peasant-like forms of production oriented significantly around subsistence.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, several active political movements, mainly in non-European contexts, advocate for the peasant reappropriation of social, political and physical landscapes in order to pursue food sovereignty and promote deglobalisation following the dramatic episode of the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, there has been growing interest on the part of a renewed social history in reconceptualising the peasantry as a historical subject.<sup>12</sup> Although this exercise has resulted in a gap between peasant studies and the historical studies of peasantries,<sup>13</sup> bridges are being built between these and other disciplines.

In methodological terms, numerous initiatives are positively affecting the promotion of historical and archaeological studies of the peasantry. The growing involvement of experimental sciences in the study of the past is one of these vectors.<sup>14</sup> The explosion of the archaeological sciences, the development of palaeoclimatology or landscape studies driven by the climate crisis, and the search for forms of socio-ecological sustainability illustrate these trends. Likewise, the end of the hegemony of history based on Great Narratives has opened the doors to important innovations and trends ranging from subaltern studies to multi-scale analyses, innovative quantitative approaches, or the growing relevance of comparative studies in the context of consolidating global histories.

In short, the history and archaeology of the medieval peasantry have seen significant development in recent years. In fact, this volume is not an isolated initiative, but must be inserted into a broader, theoretically oriented and often politically engaged intellectual and academic movement. It is neither possible nor opportune to make a detailed and precise list of these works here, although there are some important contributions that should be mentioned.<sup>15</sup>

Without doubt, the United Kingdom is one of the places where this type of study has been developed to the highest degree, to the point that in one of the studies included in this volume, Ladislav Čapek and Lukáš Holata refer to it in terms of “peasantology studies”.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ploeg, *The new peasantries*.

<sup>11</sup> Among others, see *Vía Campesina*: <https://viacampesina.org/es/>

<sup>12</sup> Schofield, *Peasants and historians*.

<sup>13</sup> Quirós Castillo y Tejerizo García, “Filling the gap.”

<sup>14</sup> Haldon et al., “History meets palaeoscience.”

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the most evident testimony of this multiplication of peasantry studies is that the European survey published fifteen years ago has been totally superseded, Alfonso Antón, *The rural history of medieval European*.

<sup>16</sup> Among other recent studies, see Dyer, *Peasants Making History*; Mileson y Brookes, *Peasant perceptions of landscape*; Kilby, *Peasant perspectives on the Medieval landscape*.

In the French-speaking sphere, the studies of the *paysannerie médiévale* are undergoing a certain development, although with conceptual and methodological parameters very different to those of the British.<sup>17</sup> Among many other initiatives, the magazine *Histoire et Sociétés Rurales*,<sup>18</sup> published by the *Association d'histoire des sociétés rurales*, is the meeting point for a broad scientific community.

In Italy, particular mention should be made of the works of Luigi Provero.<sup>19</sup> They add to the solid tradition of rural history studies, despite the centrality the study of towns has had and continues to have in transalpine historiography.

In the case of Spain, the resilience of social history gestated in the context of the end of Francoism has determined that the study of the peasantry has been one of the cherished topics, particularly among early medievalists. Also on this occasion, the journal *Historia Agraria (Agrarian History)* has played, and continues to play, a notable role in the revitalisation of this field of study.<sup>20</sup> However, one of the most interesting innovations has been the growing importance of archaeology of the peasantry.<sup>21</sup> Features that characterise these works are their cross-sectional nature in chronological terms and the theoretical and methodological broadening of the study topics.<sup>22</sup>

Taking into account this reference context and the conceptual framework presented in the first section, the main questions addressed in this volume are:

- a) To what extent does the proposed conceptual and methodological framework allow the history of groups lacking in history and demarcated by the great narratives to be related from an innovative perspective?
- b) How can the capacity for agency and sociopolitical action of dominated groups be defined in conceptual terms? What are their limits and capacity to influence and participate in social life based on the analysis of the peasantry?
- c) How can this capacity for agency be investigated, recognised and analysed, taking into account the numerous documentary and/or conceptual filters that have been have accepted by the humanities when defining, representing and analysing subaltern groups?
- d) To what extent is an approach of this nature capable of promoting transverse readings that go beyond the traditional academic taxonomies that

<sup>17</sup> Dierkens, Schroeder, y Wilkin, *Penser la paysannerie médiévale*.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.cairn.info/revue-histoire-et-societes-rurales.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Provero, *Contadini e potere nel Medioevo*; Provero, *Le parole dei sudditi*.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.historiaagraria.com/en/>

<sup>21</sup> View the critical balances of Portass, "The archaeology of peasant protagonism," Escalona, "The early Castilian peasantry."

<sup>22</sup> Among other works, see Bermejo Tirado y Grau Mira, *The Archaeology of Peasantry*; Quirós Castillo, *Archaeology and History 1*; Quirós Castillo, *Archaeology and History 2*; Vigil-Escalera Guirado, *Los primeros paisajes altomedievales*; Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades campesinas*.

divide historical from archaeological studies, the study of Islamic and Christian societies, medieval history from the modern age, etc? The most recent studies have shown that it is precisely the more transversal works that provide the most interesting results when it comes to analysing the social practices of both the dominant and the dominated groups.

### 3. *The content of the book*

To address these challenges, the collection of papers included in this book look into case studies from the Iberian Peninsula, although a study devoted to Central Europe has also been included. The papers cover a wide range of local Christian and Muslim societies and are authored by American and European scholars working from different archaeological and historical traditions. Most of the contributions analyse early medieval societies. These are considered an ideal laboratory for analysing the agency of subaltern groups, although other chronologies have also been explored and, furthermore, attention was paid to long durations.

Given the nature and range of the papers, it is not easy to divide them into different groups, although it is possible to distinguish three main topics: the theoretical aspects, the methodological challenges, and the analytical contexts through which it is possible to define this agency capacity.

#### 3.1. *Theoretical aspects for studying the peasantry*

In a more or less rhetorical manner, some of the studies included in this book ask to what extent the peasantry had agency capacity or was it precisely their subaltern nature that prevented this possibility. Some of the main underlying problems, however, reside in knowing how collective and individual agency was articulated, how it was deployed in terms of horizontal and vertical relationships, what limits peasantry agency was subjected to, and how tensions between the structuring frameworks and agents' actions were resolved. These theoretical aspects are analysed in two of the contributions included in this book.

Álvaro Carvajal Castro approaches these questions in light of the textual documentation from the northwestern Iberian Peninsula, taking as his starting point the difficulty in defining and delimiting collective action and individual agency in the case of subaltern groups. To do this, he proposes resorting to a relational approach to agency by which social relationships are continuously produced, reproduced and transformed through different practices. Using this approach, it is possible to assess to what extent peasants' initiatives were able to influence and transform the conditions of subordination and overcome the basic, classic lords-peasantries contraposition. To develop his argument, he considers three main themes: the notion of property in early

medieval times, the management of common resources, and gender relationships. The resulting picture is highly evocative when it is based on a relational approach, which should not be confused with the theoretical apparatus developed by the new materialisms.<sup>23</sup> This relational agency is organised around specific social practices that become, from this approach, the focus of historical and archaeological analysis. In this way, normative concepts are dissolved in favour of a denser analysis in social terms.

However, one of the main risks of excessively emphasising the agency of the peasantry and subaltern groups is that of building segmented, partial and distorted narratives of social life. Carlos Tejerizo points out in his contribution that some of the risks of this overoptimistic understanding include misinterpreting records, forgetting or undervaluing the importance of local identities and localities, and losing the meaningful context of the material culture. To reassess this challenge, the author resorts to the notion of areas of struggle, understood as a formula for spatialising the practices around which social life is organised. He also makes use of the concept of relational agency as an instrument to relocate the tension between elites and peasants in dialectical and conflict terms (larval or open). To test this analytical proposal, he uses two case studies from the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula based on the study of population patterns and an analysis of funerary areas. He argues that the systemic collapse of the Western Roman Empire favoured the agency capacity of subaltern groups, the most tangible result of which was the creation of the medieval peasantry. And although they are not always expressive in monumental terms, the material records show how the local communities of the Duero basin were subjected to sociopolitical stress that determined both the development of important internal inequalities and the progressive insertion of the elites into these local realities.

### *3.2. Powers and peasants. How is it possible to study peasantry agency?*

The medievalist Luigi Provero has argued that the main challenge of studying the peasantry is not to admit their capacity for sociopolitical action, but rather to identify these actions from partial and biased sources, conditioned by numerous filters and silences<sup>24</sup>. And this is the main concern that characterises the second of the blocks that make up this book.

Jesús Bermejo's study introduces some critical concepts and reflections for the study of the peasantry between the end of the Roman era and the beginning of the Middle Ages. This is a particularly important work given the recent increase in the number of known subaltern groups in the Roman

<sup>23</sup> In particular, these studies emphasise the agency of acting and non-acting actors, deconstructing anthropocentric interpretations in ontological terms, Witmore, "Archaeology and the New Materialisms."

<sup>24</sup> Provero, *Le parole dei sudditi*.

period. Beginning with the concept of subaltern debris, described by James C. Scott as a material manifestation of everyday peasant resistance, the significance of the end of the Roman *villae* is reviewed. This subject has been considered as an end point for classical archaeologists and a starting point for specialists in the medieval period. As a consequence, the faint evidence of non-monumental material elements dated between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries has often been considered as marginal or the result of anomalous uses by squatters and occupiers. Based on a renewed conceptual and methodological apparatus, the agency of the peasant communities is explored by revisiting this evidence, which has rarely been reviewed in depth. The late antiquity occupation of Fuente Álamo (Puente Genil, Spain), taking into account the material culture and other evidence, provides the opportunity to shed light on a series of individual peasant households, offering a fresh perspective on the analysis of the peasantry.

The work of the Brazilian researcher Eduardo Cardoso Daflón is particularly indicative, as he goes right to the heart of the question when he points out the difficulty in combining the written and material sources referring to the early medieval peasantry on the Iberian Peninsula, and specifically the Duero basin between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. The texts mainly deal with large landowners and territorially well-established powers, while the archaeological evidence is much sparser when it comes to showing social hierarchies, forms of domination and social asymmetries. The amount of evidence is still limited in both cases, but this contraposition has given rise to a more or less formalised debate between the different specialists. To unravel this skein, the author undertakes a detailed geographical and chronological analysis. He evidences both the micro-stratifications generated within local communities as a result of internal tensions and the mechanisms through which religious and secular elites affirmed themselves in the local sphere. These were long processes spread over 250 years after the peasantry had enjoyed a period of relative autonomy following the fall of the Western Empire. Of particular interest is the relationship established between the abandonment of first-generation castles, the affirmation of urban bishoprics, and the creation of a new social model. In this way, a highly articulated proposal is formulated on the agency capacity of the early medieval peasantry.

Undoubtedly, such a study is faced with precariousness and the meagre number of preserved sources. Having said that, is it easier to study peasantry agency in more recent centuries, when the volume of information is much greater? This is the challenge faced by Josu Narbarte and Mattin Aiestaran in their study of the transformations of agricultural practices in the modern period. More specifically, the authors question the role played by the peasantry in the agrarian revolution that introduced American crops, the new methods of forest resource management, the different forms of communal land appropriation, and the mutation of the rural communities in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. For this purpose, they take into consideration a well-recognisable practice through both texts and agrarian archaeology: the use of lime to fer-



tilise crop fields and maintain highly intensive agricultural methods that has been documented in the eastern Cantabrian area since at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Particularly interesting results were provided by the multiproxy research combining the study of written sources, toponymy, field surveys, excavations in currently inhabited domestic spaces and geoarchaeology in Aizarna (Gipuzkoa) and Amaiur (Navarra). The authors conclude that the agronomy improvement narrative fails to adequately explain the way in which this practice has been used, the implementation of which has far-reaching social consequences that transcend the dominant economic and functionalist logic. The *chaîne opératoire* of lime production, the forms of use or absence of lime, and the methods of crop rotation configured dense social landscapes shaped by peasantry agency. Despite its chronological proximity, this case study shows that mere recourse to written memory does not allow us to adequately focus these dynamics.

The last chapter in this block was written by Ladislav Čapek and Lukáš Holata and deals with the eastern part of Central Europe. This densely packed chapter makes it possible to compare the Iberian experience with other underrepresented or absent academic trajectories in the debate on the peasantry of Western Europe. The paper has three main objectives: to present in historiographical terms the theoretical and conceptual framework with which the peasantry in central Europe has been studied; to carry out a survey of some of the main themes studied by the archaeology of the peasantry in the area of the Czech Republic, Germany and Hungary; to present a research programme for the future, identifying some of the most promising topics, as well as the methodological and conceptual instruments to address their study. The starting point is that the agency of the medieval peasantry, or even the peasantry itself, has not yet received the attention it deserves from historians and archaeologists in Central Europe. The proposal presented is based on different study traditions, and more specifically on those from the United Kingdom, Germany and the Central European nations, and is organised around eleven main themes: village formation and settlement patterns; domestic records; agrarian and craft production; food; markets; environments and landscapes; rural elites; churches and parishes; living standards; social identities and village desertion. It is true that the results provided are still provisional, but they are of particular importance to contextualise peasant studies in a broad geographical area. In fact, the contribution introduces a large number of case studies published in languages that are not very accessible to our academy.

### *3.3. Inhabited landscapes and peasantry agency capacity*

However, if there is consensus among specialists when it comes to analysing the agency of the peasantry, it is that inhabited spaces and social landscapes are the ideal scenario for the analysis of dependent rural groups. The third block of contributions considers this aspect. Teresa Campos examines

the agency capacity of the peasantry in one of the main processes analysed by European medieval archaeology: village formation. This is a subject that has been the object of study by traditions such as those of the French or the British, since it has been assumed that the “crystallisation”, formalisation or creation of medieval villages would have been the material translation of the establishment of lordly power relations<sup>25</sup>. The issue has been widely debated and has often been resolved in terms of opposition between those who give centrality to secular and religious powers, versus those who emphasise the role of the peasantry. And although nowadays more nuanced and multivariate narratives have been proposed, it is interesting to analyse this process in early medieval Bizkaia, an area characterised by a certain weakness of the local powers. An analysis of the occupational sequence, the archaeological materials and other indicators suggests that in the case of Gorliz the peasantry was the protagonist of the founding of this locality, although it is an internally diversified and hierarchical subject. Gorliz, like other examples investigated in the Basque area, sheds light on the process of creating marked social differences from within the neighbouring communities themselves. In addition, and in contrast to more traditional approaches, this example shows the profound functional, morphological and social transformations to which medieval rural spaces were subjected.

The analysis of settlement and agricultural production is also the argumentative axis of the work presented by Catarina Tente and Sara Prata dedicated to two Portuguese territories, Alto Alentejo and Beira Alta. They are, without doubt, two of the best researched early medieval zones in Portugal in recent years and allow a comparative analysis of two multi-year projects. The trends observed in settlement patterns or burial areas reveal notable differences, as well as in the economic patterns that characterise the wide valleys of Alentejo with respect to the Beira mountains. However, there are also some traits the analyses have in common. Firstly, the analysis of agricultural production and everyday artifacts reveals how these peasant societies participated in active sociopolitical systems on various scales, as well as the existence of regional elites that did not always resort to forms of monumentalisation and flaunting of their positions. Secondly, the existence of microstratifications within the local communities defined by the neighbourhood and the construction of shared social memories is intuited. However, perhaps the most important contribution of this study resides in the fact that the authors suggest that the reading of the archaeological records of peasant societies can be contradictory if a solid theoretical apparatus is not used. In other words, the contrast between lords and peasants, or even the more elaborate contrast

<sup>25</sup> There is an abundant bibliography. Among other studies see Chapelot y Fossier, *Le village et la maison au Moyen Âge*; Zadora Rio, “Le village des historiens;” Rippon, *Beyond the medieval village*; Hamerow, *Rural Settlements and Society*; Klapste y Nissen Jaubert, “Rural settlement.”

between powers and local communities, is inoperative and limiting for conceptualising the dynamics observed in local societies.

The study carried out by Karen Álvaro and Esther Trave once again considers how to study the agency of the peasantry through the forms of settlement and transformations that took place during the Early Middle Ages. For this, they consider the example of present-day Catalonia, which is undoubtedly one of the most interesting and best researched regions in which to study the agency capacity of the peasantry. In fact, important contributions have been made over the last three decades from the perspective of both rescue and preventive archaeology, as well as by academic research projects. This region also has the most abundant documentary records of the entire Iberian Early Middle Ages. It is currently therefore one of the best known regions in the Western Mediterranean.<sup>26</sup> However, as in other places, the exponential increase in archaeological interventions and the complex processes involved in their publication make it difficult to count on up-to-date syntheses and suitable interpretative theses. In this paper the authors argue that by analysing the transformations of the inhabited landscapes it is possible to detect the strategies deployed by the peasantry during the Early Middle Ages. To do this, they divide their survey into two main stages: Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages. The thesis defended is that the agency of the peasantry contributed to the transformation of rural settlement and the emergence of medieval society. The end of the late-Roman *villae* is related to the establishment of a new kind of settlement following patterns that accentuated the geographical and chronological diversity between the coast and the interior. The eighth century represented a turning point in the territorial organisation, marked both by a transformation of rural economies and the creation of new inhabited landscapes. Of particular importance in this context is the process in which the number of churches in the towns multiplied, since they reorganised the rural occupations based on new logicalities. In short, the study shows the importance of peasant initiatives and how the forms of domination by the elites were changing.

The final study included in this section of the book is that of Alberto García Porras. Its purpose is to explore the agency capacity of the peasantry in societies characterised by strong tax-based states, such as the Nasrid Kingdom. To do this, it argues that the farmhouse towers constitute the appropriate setting for understand how the relationship between the state, the peasantry and the local powers was organised. Previous studies have identified this type of construction as shelters for local communities, as watchtowers, or as the residences of aristocracies and/or representatives of the state. One of the best studied

<sup>26</sup> The bibliography is very extensive. Among other works, worthy of mention are those of Roig Buxó, "Prácticas funerarias de época visigoda;" Roig Buxó, "Asentamientos rurales y poblados tardoantiguos;" Folch Iglesias, "Territorios y poblamiento en el noreste;" Martí Castelló y Negre Pérez, "Assentaments i espais agraris;" Pratdesaba i Sala, *El procés de fortificació i reocupació del territori*.

examples in recent years is the Agicampe tower<sup>27</sup> in Loja. The site has been the subject of an intensive study that has included territorial surveys, geoarchaeological studies of cultivated fields (micromorphology, phytoliths), the study of the architecture, and the excavation of the construction. All these records have made it possible to analyse the long-term transformations of the site, from recent prehistory to the present. The main conclusion proposed is that the tower was built by the peasantry in the context of the agrarian intensification that characterised the Almohad period. Moreover, these towers would have had a notable importance in the reproduction of peasant communities and the maintenance of the tax-based state domination. And although it is not formalised as such, in this study we see the re-emergence of the notion of relationship agencies that are one of the main focuses of the studies included in the volume.

#### 4. Coda

To conclude these brief notes, we wish to focus on three of the main contributions made by the studies that make up this volume.

Firstly, both the chapters included in the book and the other studies<sup>28</sup> cited reveal that, although the notion of peasantry has been defined mainly on the basis of economic criteria (direct producers, submission to the payment of rents and/or taxes<sup>29</sup>), their capacity for agency goes far beyond the economic sphere. In fact, assuming this perspective, it is possible to question the organisation of the social life of subaltern groups from new perspectives. The 20<sup>th</sup>-century research agendas of peasant studies had insisted, above all, on peasant revolts and resistance, the progressive degradation of the socio-economic conditions of the peasantry, and the narrative of a progressive and inevitable affirmation of the elites over the rural groups. And without ceasing to be central themes in the analysis of medieval societies, there is no doubt that the use of more sophisticated theoretical frameworks based on relational approaches allows us to significantly widen the analytical scenario. Just to give one example, it is of particular interest to point out how I. Martín proposed approaching the study of *sernas*, community cultivation spaces that are frequently mentioned among the assets of the monarchy and early medieval aristocracies. This author proposes differentiating a double level of action in the *sernas*. On the one hand, peasant families would have built, farmed and used these cultivation spaces on a daily basis, and on the other, there was a higher level of safeguarding that guaranteed the correct use and defence of those rights. This second level defined the agency of the elites in the local

<sup>27</sup> A more analytical and detailed presentation of the archaeological record is available at García Porras, Pluskowski, y Banerjea, "Gestión de los recursos agrícolas."

<sup>28</sup> See notes 17-22. In addition, Alfonso Antón, "Iglesias rurales en el norte de Castilla."

<sup>29</sup> Wolf, *Los campesinos*; Ploeg, *Peasants and the art of farming*; Shanin, *Peasants and peasant societies*; Redfield, *The little community, and Peasant society and culture*.

sphere and constituted an instrument of eminent domination<sup>30</sup>. Likewise, the implementation of perspectives such as that of the “resistance of the weak”<sup>31</sup> contributes decisively to articulating richer and more organised narratives.

Secondly, the elusive and tenuous nature that characterises the testimonies and preserved evidence related to subaltern groups causes evident difficulties in terms of social characterisation. The three main resources used by the authors of these studies were a high level of theoretical conceptualisation, the selection of records of high chronological and social resolution, and the use of microhistory approaches. It is not a mere methodological deployment or a strategic approach, as much as the verification that the studies oriented around the “small worlds” provides the opportunity for a more intensive understanding of the relational agencies interwoven in local medieval societies<sup>32</sup>. It can be affirmed that there is an inverse correspondence between the degree of theorisation of subaltern groups and the possibility of understanding the capacity and limits of agency, not only of the peasantry, but also of the elites. Several of the studies included in this collection are very eloquent when it comes to showing how “microstratifications” are formed within local communities; the processes of mobility and social promotion that take place in them; and the mechanisms used by the ecclesiastical and secular elites or the state when it came to reconfiguring the relations of domination.

Finally, another line that emerges strongly in the works included in this volume is the importance of localities, understood not as mere “landscapes” or “scenarios” of social life, but rather as active components, as well as social and cultural constructions configured by their production, reproduction and continuous transformation. In particular, I believe to be of particular interest the concept of production of localities proposed by the second generation of Italian microhistorians, who have developed their proposals through the study of local societies in the modern period<sup>33</sup>. The peasant societies of the *ancien régime* provide a perfect setting for carrying out this type of study as, on the one hand, they offer enough testimonies and evidence to carry out a detailed case analysis. On the other hand, they were “traditional” societies in which interpersonal relationships were negotiated in spatialised terms, building relationships, meanings, perceptions and practices that configured localities. Although these perspectives are more complex to use in older chronologies, I believe they provide a rich framework for studying local societies.

In short, this book aims to offer a series of analytical concepts, examples and situations that can be applied to other chronological and geographical contexts.

<sup>30</sup> Martín Viso, *Pastos, iglesias y tierras*. 53

<sup>31</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the weak*.

<sup>32</sup> The reference work is of course Davies, *Small Worlds*. See also Quirós Castillo, “An archaeology of ‘small worlds’;” Portass, “Rethinking the ‘small worlds’;” West, “Visions in a Ninth-Century Village;” Wickham, *Community and clientele*; Wickham, *The mountains and the city*.

<sup>33</sup> Torre, “La produzione storica dei luoghi.”

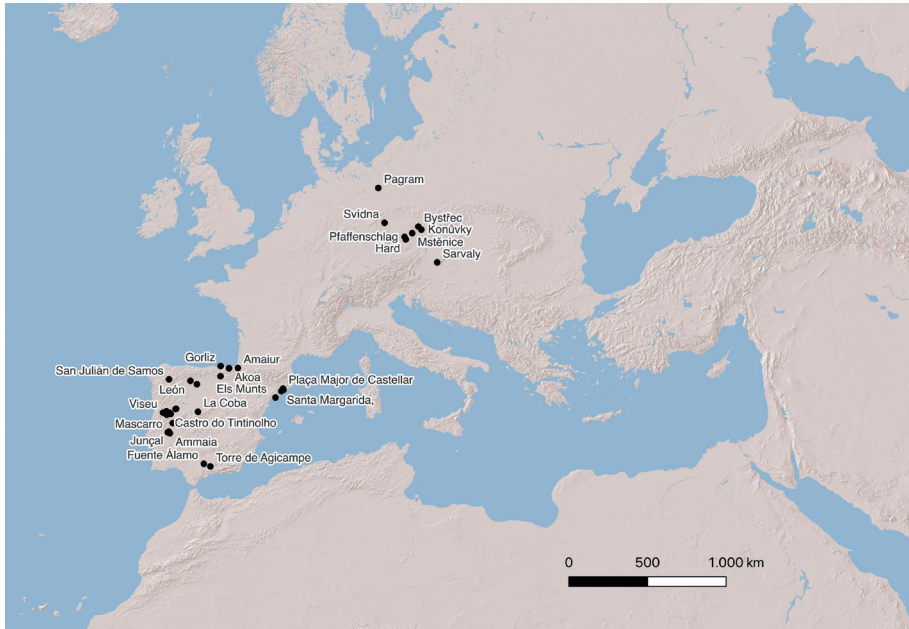


Figure 1. Map of the main sites and regions cited in this volume.

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