

Village formation and peasantry agency. The case study of Gorliz (Bizkaia)*

by Teresa Campos-Lopez

The study of medieval village formation has generated an intense debate throughout Europe regarding the construction of agricultural landscapes, the initiative of the elites, the weight of the lordships or the importance of the peasantry. To evaluate this task, we will become the analysis of the Early Medieval archaeological contexts documented in the town of Gorliz (Biscay, Spain), where early medieval villages appear as true elements gestated from the peasantry in dialogue with different central and local powers. Also we focus on the need to carry out archaeological and historical analysis with a multifocal perspective, so we can overcome the limitations of unilateral approaches, due to a global and holistic strategy.

Early Middle Ages, 7th-10th centuries, Gorliz, Community, Peasant Agency, Habitat.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to carry out an approach to the emergence of villages during High Middle Ages in parameters of organization of space, forms of socialization, as well as the organization of agricultural landscapes. In this sense, the formation of villages during the high medieval period is one of the most worked on topics in Western Europe in the last 40 years.¹ Actually, the

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¹ Quirós, “Village formation, Social Memories and Archaeology,” 301.

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dense historiographical base created, allows us to approach this issue from archaeological and historical perspectives.

In the post-war period, at the same time as the mechanization of agricultural tasks and the use of plows capable of carrying out deeper work is standardized, non-visible deposits until that date began to emerge. The increase in the number of interventions in this type of archaeological settlements since the 70s, not only helped to carry out the first syntheses and general studies, but also served to lay down general bases of the question, and to address an historical model approach with a theoretical perspective of archaeological documents. Therefore, on the one hand, the study of uninhabited areas and agricultural spaces, and, on the other, the necessary new focus of the studies associated with this type of sites from new perspectives such as the *naissance du village* and the *incastellamento*² have allowed analysing the archaeology of the peasantry and the formation of feudalism from new approaches.³

A basic reference work is the volume by Robert Fossier and Jean Chapelot (1980),⁴ in which textual and material sources come integrated to address the phenomenon of the birth of the village through the notion of *encellulement*. This concept assesses how the implementation of feudal society would have determined a spatial, social and political framework of peasantry under the lord domination. Working on examples and reports from different sites in France, but also including others from Scandinavia, the United Kingdom and Central Europe, these authors established that the emergence of the village as a unit of habitat, as an element of the socioeconomic framework and as an architectural fact, in the European geographical area, occurs around the 10th and 11th centuries within the context of the consolidation of feudalism.

During the last decade of the 20th century, thanks to the rising of development-led Archaeology and the development of the archaeology of the villages due to the increase of the number of documented sites, a reformulation and reinterpretation of this model took place under new historiographical traditions.⁵ In this context, contradictions between the archaeological records, that were being generated and the hypotheses and models derived from the study of written sources, appeared. This disagreement led Elisabeth Zadora-Rio,⁶ for example, to speak of “historians’ villages” versus “archaeologists’ villages”.

Later on, the first syntheses based on archaeological data appeared, processing the results of the numerous projects carried out in previous years. Among the main works, those written by Riccardo Francovich and Richard Hodges, in 2003,⁷ or the synthesis carried out by Edith Peytremann⁸ (2003)

² Toubert, *Les structures du Latium medieval*; Augenti and Galetti, *L'incastellamento*.

³ Quirós, *Arqueología del campesinado medieval*.

⁴ Fossier and Chapelot, *La village et la maison au Moyen Âge*.

⁵ Quirós, “Village formation, Social Memories and Archaeology,” 301; Campos-Lopez, *Las Aldeas Altomedievales en Bizkaia*.

⁶ Zadora-Rio, “Early medieval villages and estate centers in France.”

⁷ Villa to village. *The transformation of the Roman Countryside in Italy, c. 400-1000*.

⁸ *Archéologie de l'habitat rural dans le nord de la France du IV^e au XII^e siècle*.

are some of the main ones. Therefore, the relation between village formation, nucleation and the introduction of lordships is a more complex process: on the one hand, the ways in which lordships worked inside a system of villages that was already formalized during the Early Medieval times; and, on the other hand, social agency for village formation.

In the last twenty years, we have witnessed the creation of new synthetic works with new perspectives raised from the reading of the different archaeological records. Among them, we can highlight the works of Helena Hamerow (2002)⁹ or Chris Wickham (2005),¹⁰ in which, from a social comparative analysis, assess that when aristocracy was powerful enough, they could dominate either dispersed or concentrated peasant societies. More recently, one of the latest publications by Christopher Loveluck (2012),¹¹ settle on a comparative perspective, assesses the analysis of how the power and the intentions of the elites found resistance in the actions of some groups, such as peasants, artisans and merchants, both in the rural world and in the urban world; these tensions will give rise to intentional and other unintentional social changes. Consequently, over the last few years, a new research agenda is built from a more holistic approach, focusing on rural landscapes understood as a materialization of social practices.¹² In sense, we can address that the major topics which are currently under debate are the study of the sub-regional diversity of landscape transformations, social agency, the chronologies of these transformations and field systems, and the social characterization of rural settlements.

This articulated picture sharply contrasts with the state of studies in Iberia. The underdevelopment of the medieval archaeology in this area has determined that these topics have not been studied until recent times.¹³ Actually, the first approach to this problem took place through other territorial markers, such as necropolises or churches.¹⁴

In fact, social historians have analysed the earliest villages from documentation, focusing more on village communities than on the villages themselves. Later, under the influence of the French medievalism, the debates about the birth of the village or the *incastellamento* were also improved. But, during the 90s, when preventive archaeology first, and new projects (aimed

⁹ *Early Medieval Settlements*.

¹⁰ *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe*.

¹¹ *Northwest Europe in the Early Middle Ages*, 13: "One of the principal aims of this book is to explain how the power and the intentions of elites were confronted by the aspirations and actions of the diverse rural peasantry, and artisans and merchants in rural and urban settings, producing both intended and unintended social changes. Hence, the past emphasis on the role of elites as catalysts promoting the development of towns, trade and reorganisation of the rural world is placed in the context of stimuli coming from other agents of change from beyond the territories that they ruled".

¹² Quirós, "Village formation, Social Memories and Archaeology," 303.

¹³ Quirós, 303.

¹⁴ Quirós, 301; Campos-Lopez, *Las Aldeas Altomedievales en Bizkaia*.

at the analysis of societies and rural landscapes) provided a new scale of research, once solid archaeological records were landed.

In this case, we present a case of study to assess the origin and consolidation process of villages from the 7th to 10th centuries in the region of Biscay (North of Spain) through the analysis of the early medieval archaeological levels documented in a development-led rescue archaeological excavation, that took place in the northern area of the Church of the Immaculate Conception, in the town of Gorliz (Biscay), during 2007 and 2008.

In this site was documented an uninterrupted historical sequence from the 7th century to the present, found in the northern upper part of a hill, in the central area of the Gorliz-Elexalde neighbourhood. Therefore, the documented sequence makes it a reference site, since it is one of the few existing examples in the Basque Country in which this historical continuity and long chronology has been recorded.

Thus, this paper analyses the initial moment of the occupation of this site, which links to a specific and differentiated use – as an area of habitat –, distinct use from other later periods, which are associated with necropolis levels, structures and some other elements.

For too long, archaeology has emphasized questions like when and why of the processes it documents; however, we consider that it would be more necessary – and more difficult also – to respond to how were these processes produced.¹⁵ Nevertheless, considering all this, this article assesses the formation process of the village of Gorliz during the Early Middle Ages and the development of the village network within the processes of change and reorganization that occurred in the 7th and 10th centuries in the Biscayan geographical context. In addition to this, it raises the examination of the transformation and abandonment of this village: how they occurred, the progressive appropriation of a central space documented by a necropolis, or the configuration of a new model of settlement. Overall, all this will be accompanied by the analysis of the role played by the peasant agency as an active subject in these documented processes.

In the same way, we defend the potentiality of preventive archaeological interventions as generators of scientific knowledge. The role played by this type of projects in the development of the archaeology of the peasantry in recent decades is undeniable.¹⁶ These new perspectives and new archaeological records syntheses have drawn a new panorama. Undoubtedly, the interest aroused by this topic responds, therefore, to the development of preventive archaeology and of paleoenvironmental archaeology as well; research areas around which the archaeology of peasantry and villages is being solidly established. And, when, in cases like the one we have discussed, preventive archae-

¹⁵ Quirós, "Archaeology or early medieval peasantry," 21.

¹⁶ Quirós, "La arquitectura doméstica," 65-84; Campos-Lopez, "¿Para qué sirve la arqueología preventiva? 223-59; Campos-Lopez, "La arqueología de las aldeas en Bizkaia," 225-40.

ology is equipped with tools that allow it to go beyond a fieldwork completion report, it is confirmed that the results and the transmission of knowledge are assured.¹⁷

Furthermore, it is intended to highlight the role of the fieldwork methodology used, in order to appraise the quality of the archaeological record. In this way, we will be able to evaluate the possibilities offered by this site within a global and multifocal context, and how they could be improved from the perspective of preventive or rescue archaeology making a critical assessment of the results obtained.

Therefore, this work is structured in the following sections: first, an approach to the sequence and the results obtained it is going to be settled. Second, a series of analysis and discussion topics will be analysed, such as the process of village formation and the appearance of the cemetery space. Finally, a series of contributions will be addressed in order to induce an open debate about the role of the peasant agency and the relevance of its study and analysis.

2. A case study: the early medieval village of Gorliz

2.1. The preventive project

Like many other preventive archaeological interventions, this one, carried out on the north side of the Church of the Immaculate Conception of Gorliz, was determined by the initiative of the City Council to prepare the space next to the church as a parking lot, for which it was necessary to lower the ground level of the area.

Thus, in the first place, stratigraphic drillings were done in order to assess the archaeological potential of this lot, and, considering the results, a more exhaustive intervention was carried out in a total area of 1117.83 m², between the years of 2007 and 2008. This intervention allowed the profiling of the results obtained in the surveys carried out a year earlier, in addition to documenting that the archaeological potential of this area was much greater than originally was estimated.

In general, the intervention has documented the uninterrupted occupation of the upper and northern part of the hill, where the church is located, from the 7th century to the present day. From the 7th to 10th centuries, the period that we address in this work, we have testimonies of a habitat area with different phases documented. Towards the second half of the 10th century, part of the village is abandoned and a burial space appears above it. Later, in the 11th century, another cemetery phase is registered, this time located to the south of a small cult structure. With some variations, the space dedicated

¹⁷ Campos-Lopez, ¿Para qué sirve la arqueología preventiva?.

to the cemetery continues in time without interruption until the 18th century, when the current church is built with a new plant and the last of the documented cemeteries is cancelled.

Table I. Periodization table of the Gorliz deposits (Bizkaia).

<i>Period</i>	<i>Structures</i>	<i>Chronology</i>
1 st	Structure 1.1 Structure 1.2 Structure 1.3	7 th Century
2 nd	Structure 2.1 phase 1 Structure 2.1 phase 2 Structure 2.2	VIII-IX centuries
3 rd	Structure 3.1 Structure 3.2	10 th century, 1 st half 10 th century
4 th	Habitat displacement Country necropolis	10 th century-2 nd half
5 th	Chapel Necropolis Vertical typology bell oven	11 th and 12 th centuries
6 th	Necropolis E-W orientated wall	13 th and 14 th centuries
7 th	Horizontal typology bell oven Ossuary	16 th and 17 th centuries
8 th	Cemetery wall Cemetery	17 th and 18 th centuries
9 th	Cemetery-last period.	18 th period
10 th	Contemporary uses	20 th century

Therefore, as we have referenced before, the data and results presented here have to do with a developed-led rescue archaeological activity, even though it is not common for these type of interventions – those that are carried out under the umbrella of preventive archaeological practice – to present certain continuity as far as the research is concerned.¹⁸ However, in this case, once the intervention was completed, some other research works have been developed.

On the first hand, a research project¹⁹ with the anthropological study of some of the individuals from the necropolis and cemeteries,²⁰ stratigraphy and plans review, absolute dating, and the study of the numismatic material– approaching the monetary circulation in the north of the peninsula.²¹ On the other hand, we can mention an academic study and some other dissem-

¹⁸ Campos-Lopez, *¿Para qué sirve la arqueología preventiva?*, 223-59.

¹⁹ Campos-Lopez, *Estudio de los datos y materiales obtenidos en el yacimiento*.

²⁰ Mendizabal, *Las sociedades medievales del País Vasco*.

²¹ Martín, Grañeda and Campos-Lopez, “Los Hallazgos Monetarios de la Necrópolis de la Iglesia,” 1155-76.

Martín, Grañeda and Campos-Lopez, “Monedas en el Más Acá y en el Más Allá,” 313-38.

ination texts.²² All these, have made possible to complete the archaeological and historical sequence of the site with new data and investigations that have addressed the study of the record documented in this archaeological intervention.

2.2. The sequence of Gorniz

Thus, thanks to these researches, we can stand that in the northern area of the Church of the Immaculate Conception, the oldest levels of the city of Gorniz have been documented until now, and, without a doubt, we can identify those with the origin of the current population. Moreover, as we are going to analyse, differences and evolution patterns can be settled, but also some persistence in some of the elements documented.

In this specific case, the documented sequence is penalized by the absence of an abundant archaeological record, a quality biological record and even by the excavated area, aspects that have conditioned the social characterization or functionality of some spaces.²³ In addition, we must indicate the difficulty of documenting and registering these types of linear structures, in which there used to be many reforms and have a weak archaeological footprint.²⁴

The recorded sequence begins around the 7th century – without evidence of a previous occupation –, with the conditioning of the highest area, creating a kind of artificial plateau in which the different domestic spaces will be located.

Thus, a first phase, which we have called 1st period, is defined by a series of domestic units (4 in total) with a divergent orientation and rectangular plan, made at ground level, and with perimeter posts that delimit the interior space, which has no internal divisions. They present a dispersed spatial grouping, that is, “the domestic units are spread throughout the space without sharing dividing walls or adjoining, remaining isolated and independent from each other”.²⁵

We propose, therefore, that during the 7th century, in this first phase of Gorniz’s early medieval habitat, we can describe this area as a settlement with typological similarity and divergence in their orientations. However, we believe that a very incipient urbanism can be documented, although without the degree of complexity and organization that it will acquire later, as we will see.

²² Campos-Lopez, *Las Aldeas Altomedievales en Bizkaia*; Campos-Lopez, “La arqueología de las aldeas en Bizkaia,” 225-40.

²³ Campos-Lopez, *Las Aldeas Altomedievales en Bizkaia*

Campos-Lopez, Martínez and Cajigas, “Los orígenes altomedievales de Gorniz,” 457-64.

²⁴ Quirós, *Arqueología del campesinado medieval*.

²⁵ Gutiérrez Lloret, “Gramática de la casa,” 156.

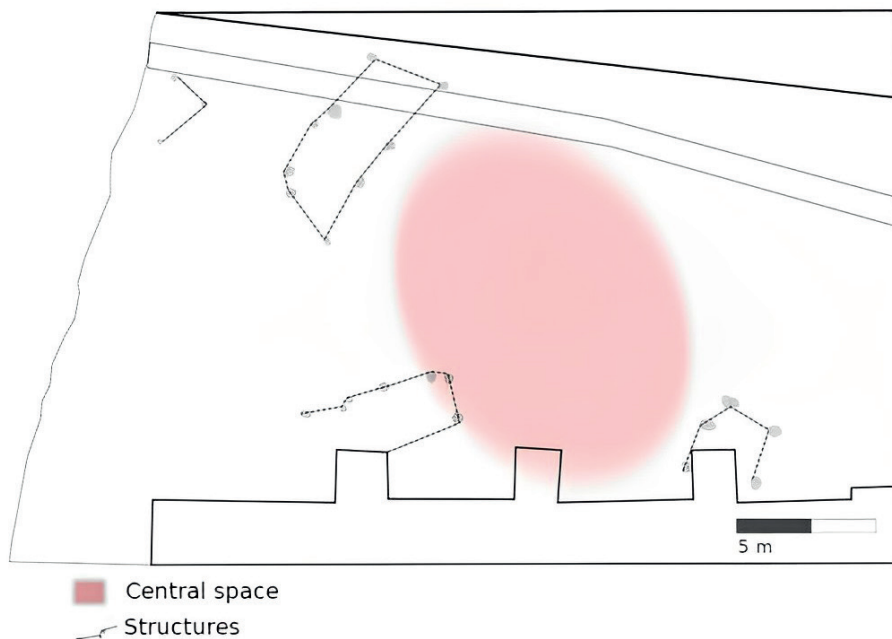


Figure 1. Plan of the structures documented in 1st period (7th century).

At the beginning of the 8th century, there is going to be a change in the constructions models and types. In the following period, the second one, the structures appear with grouped spatial organization,²⁶ and substantial changes in the morphology of these domestic spaces can be assessed. Therefore, at this time, it has been possible to link certain areas to specific activities like a yard.

It will be, also, at this moment, when an open central space is defined clearly (this element will be analysing in detail later). On the east area of this central area, two structures, which have similarities in their typology and morphology, were defined. They present some characteristics that make them different in relation to the previous occupation units. First, larger diameter post-holes, that are sometimes combined with chases made in the natural base. Also, in one of these structures, an attached area identified as a yard has been documented, showing the subdivision based on specific activities in this domestic space. The second of them has not been able to be fully documented.

²⁶ Gutiérrez Lloret, 139-64.

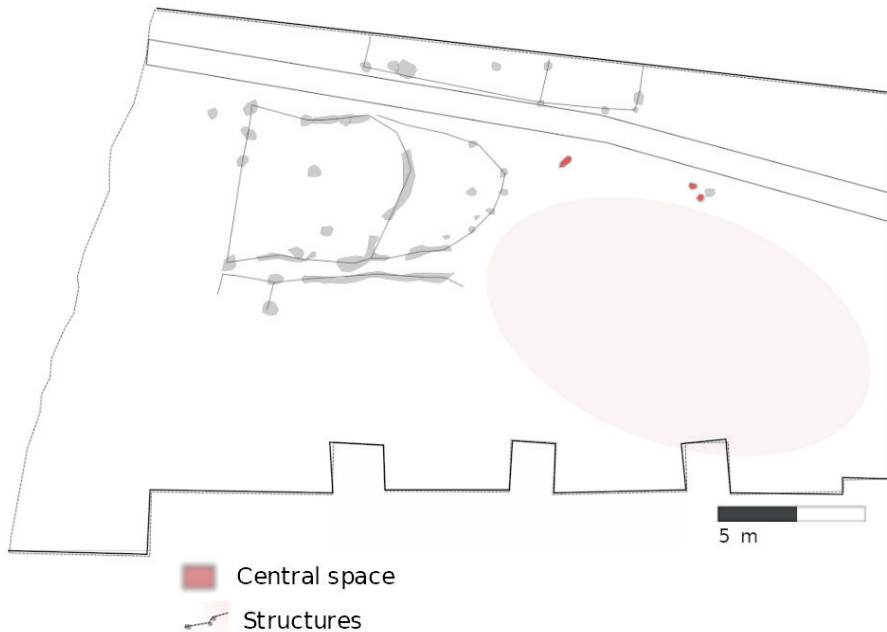


Figure 2. Plan of the structures documented in 2nd period (8th and 9th centuries).

Along with these two domestic units, there is a third one with the same east-west orientation, but with a very different floor plan, since it is a rectangular one. The constructive elements documented are mostly holes or post-holes, although, at a certain moment, a small fissure is made in the rock to mark an interior compartmentalization. Structures of this type have also been documented in some settlements in Alava, e.g. Aistra, Zaballa and Zornoztegi,²⁷ and there is another structure of this type documented in the investigation carried out in the Cathedral of Vitoria-Gasteiz.²⁸ In Bizcay, in Argiñeta's interventions, the remains of an internally compartmentalized rectangular structure also appeared.²⁹ Associated with this second phase of the domestic space; we must focus on the reuse of a posthole as a perinatal burial. Actually, this is the only burial registered associated with the early medieval habitat of the site.³⁰ In this regard, the existence of infant burials linked with dwelling structures is an archaeologically widespread fact, both temporally and geographically, being, apparently, an Indo-European tradition extended throughout the entire Mediterranean basin.³¹ In relation to the arrangement

²⁷ Quirós, "La arqueología de las aldeas en el noroeste peninsular," 225-56.

²⁸ Azkarate and Solaun, *Arqueología e Historia de una ciudad*.

²⁹ Anibarro and García Camino, "Argiñeta," 173-7; Anibarro and García Camino, "Argiñeta," 210-5; García Camino, "Argiñeta: Un lugar donde," 140-9.

³⁰ Mendizabal, *Las sociedades medievales del País Vasco*.

³¹ Fernández-Crespo, "Los enterramientos infantiles," 199-217.

of the bodies, they are usually buried individually, flexed postures predominate – as is our case – and grave goods are very rare. Other documented examples would be some such as the individual from the depopulated early medieval of Aistra,³² or Zornoztegi, where the partial remains of a fetus or young child associated with a posthole were documented,³³ although with a chronology between the 4th and 5th centuries.

This type of burials in domestic contexts is associated with children who died naturally and were deposited with intention and care near the domestic spaces, responding to certain spiritual beliefs.³⁴ Also, could be linked to the believing of preserving the bond between children and adults, between the community of the living and that of their ancestors.³⁵

Therefore, in this second period, a more clustered spatial pattern is documented: thus, a domestic morphology based on a unicellular model and structures with a more complex plant. Also, a great densification and compaction can be observed, as well as a space organization.

Lastly, in the third of the documented periods, first half of 10th century, once again we recorded important changes both in the arrangement of the structures, in their morphology and typology. In the first place, just one single structure has been documented in the excavated area, with a southeast-northwest orientation; that is, marking a difference with the previous structures. It would be a rectangular or longitudinal space – partially excavated – made at ground level and raised with large wooden posts and a central supporting element. Attached to this structure, there are two other elements with a smaller size, two spaces with a square plan, which are accommodated by grains in the rock. These elements would not be dedicated to be used as domestic space, but could be linked to different activities – possibly agricultural ones – that were carried out in the village, or even for storage, such as high barns. In this space, homes and canals made in the rock have been also documented.

Concerning the survivals or elements that we can still documented and evaluate from the previous period, it is clearly seen that the central open space is maintained, since the registered structures are arranged around it. However, it will be in this period when there is a clear use of this element as a circulation space, since a conditioning of the central part is carried out, placing a kind of paving. The centrality and symbolism of this space will be highlighted during this period, but, even more, when, from the central years of the 10th century, and placed directly on it, a necropolis, a series of burials linked to this community appear. This moment coincides with the abandonment of the inhabited structures, such as we will analyse below.

³² Fernández-Crespo, 199-217.

³³ Quirós, “La arqueología de las aldeas en el noroeste peninsular,” 225-56; Quirós, *Arqueología de una comunidad campesina medieval*.

³⁴ Fernández-Crespo, “Los enterramientos infantiles,” 199-217.

³⁵ Sofield, “Living with the Dead,” 351-88.

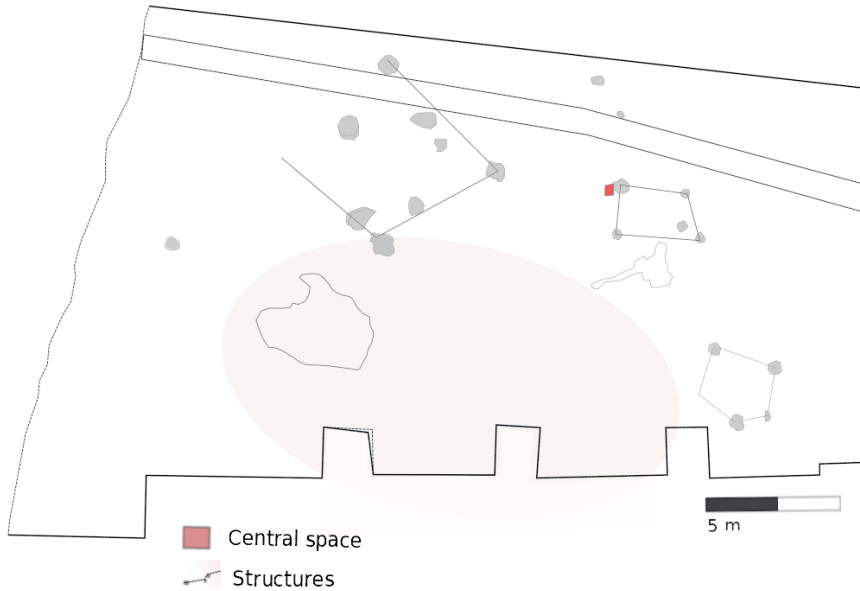


Figure 3. Plan of the structures documented in the 3rd period (10th century).

3. Main topics for analysis and discussion: Gorliz's contribution

Once the documented sequence has been examined, we will carry out the evaluation of a series of topics to analyse if we can elucidate the role played by the peasant community in the process of village formation, as well as in the space management, always based on the contributions and data offered by this settlement.

3.1. The village formation process

Taking all this data into account, we can establish that the levels of early medieval habitat, according to the records kept in the Basque Country, can be located on areas in where previous low imperial occupation is documented, although with a different functionality and social organization from the one documented at the time – examples of such are of Santa María de Zarautz³⁶ or other settlements in Alava like Laguardia or Aistra –.³⁷ Likewise, there are

³⁶ Ibañez-Extelbarria and Sarasola, “El yacimiento arqueológico de Santa María de Zarautz,” 12-85.

³⁷ Quirós, *The archaeology of Early Medieval Villages*.

also examples in which there is no evidence of that previous occupation, such as the case of Vitoria-Gasteiz or Gorniz itself.³⁸ That is, these occupation sites, far from being the consequence of a single implantation pattern, are originated from heterogeneous starting contexts.³⁹

Thus, in the area of the Basque Country, during the 6th and 7th centuries, the occupation of the territory responds to a reality of small groups of houses (single-family farms) that may be in use for one or two generations and, in which, there is no clear evidence of active elites at local scale. Therefore, we can see a notable difference with some of the contexts documented in other areas, such as the Iberian Plateau.⁴⁰ All this shows differences both in social geography and in the different power structures that are articulated in each territory,⁴¹ as we can see in La Erilla (La Puebla de Arganzón, Burgos), the first levels documented in Zaballa (Iruña de Oca, Alava) or in the Zornoztegi site (Salvatierra, Alava), where an occupation of little entity formed by a single house with some annexed construction that has lasted during this period.

For that reason, we could define the first occupation periods as a farm or maybe a group of them, whose structures present a similarity in their typologies and with the beginning of a central space in an embryonic stage. As it happens in the village of Gasteiz when at the end of the 7th century they decide to occupy the hill where the village will be located – occupation that continues until the present time –,⁴² in Gorniz, the upper area is conditioned creating an artificial plateau in which the different registered domestic structures will be located.

In other settlements such as Argiñeta (Elorrio, Biscay) during the 8th century,⁴³ or Lendoño de Arriba (Orduña, Biscay),⁴⁴ preparation prior to the settlement is also recorded. In fact, in the specific case of Argiñeta, created a flat surface to install three wooden constructions, of which their postholes remain, and slightly separated from each other. In addition, for the 8th and 10th centuries, another series of structures with posts set directly on the ground and one of them with a stone plinth are identified in the northern area. It is interesting to note that the specificity of one of them: one protected a silo⁴⁵ and another one, an oven.⁴⁶ Associated with one of these enclosures, the researchers define an open space, perhaps a patio (due to fewer postholes). The existence of two agricultural exploitation units formed by different structures

³⁸ Azkarate and Solaun, *Arqueología e Historia de una ciudad*.

³⁹ Quirós, "Village formation, Social Memories and the Archaeology," 11-32; Quirós and Santos Salazar, "Territorios sin ciudades," 139-74.

⁴⁰ Quirós, "La arquitectura doméstica en los yacimientos rurales," 65-84.

⁴¹ Quirós, "La arqueología de las aldeas en el noroeste peninsular," 225-56; Castillo and Santos Salazar, "Territorios sin ciudades," 139-74; Quirós and Vigil-Escalera, "Networks of peasant villages," 79-128.

⁴² Azkarate and Solaun, *Arqueología e Historia de una ciudad*.

⁴³ Anibarro and García Camino, "Argiñeta" *Arkeoikuska* 14, 204-9.

⁴⁴ Solaun Bustinza, "Zedelika y Lendoño de Arriba," 187-210.

⁴⁵ Anibarro and García Camino, "Argiñeta" *Arkeoikuska* 12, 173-7.

⁴⁶ Anibarro and García Camino, "Argiñeta" *Arkeoikuska* 13, 210-5.

– which underwent repairs over time –, and separated by a palisade, is hypothesized.⁴⁷ In the absence of a more definitive study, it cannot be ensured that the cemetery is contemporary with these structures, some post holes seem to indicate that also here the graves were opened on an area previously occupied as a place of habitation.⁴⁸

However, throughout the 8th century there is a moment of transformation, with a different nature and meaning depending on the territory to which we approach. These changes appear in different archaeological records such as the structures of power centres or the transformation of production and exchange systems, something that will have to be related to deep changes of social nature.⁴⁹

Thus, the most profound transformations are registered in the geographical area that we are studying: being a territory characterized by the absence and weakness of local powers, the 8th century supposes the verification of a new balance that will define this area as a structured territory with a political articulation, where the role of rural communities is more than notorious and decisive.

In this sense, taking into account the specific case of Gorliz, we refer to what Agustín Azkarate and José Luis Solaun stated when referring to the productions of “coarse wears” documented in Gorliz. They high levels of specialization achieved by these productions have called into question the current paradigms among other aspects because “they denounce that these productions were also part of distribution circuits at the regional level”.⁵⁰

Also, at this moment, a restructuring of the site is defined: the type of documented structures, their orientation and morphology are completely different from those of the previous period. This aspect is not only characteristic of this settlement, in other examples such as Zornoztegi, Zaballa,⁵¹ San Andrés (Salinas de Añana) or San Martín de Dulantzi, all of them in Alava; this fact is linked to a process of population densification.⁵²

All these transformations cannot and should not be understood on an exclusively urban or typological aspect, not even on a local scale, since all these changes recorded in different archaeological records must be put in relation to deep social changes. In other words, there is a direct relationship between the transformations of this rural landscape – which began around the year 700 A.C. – and the maturation of an active elite at local scale and also with a centralization process in which Gorliz is taking part.

⁴⁷ Anibarro and García Camino, “Argiñeta” *Arkeoikuska* 14, 204-9.

⁴⁸ Anibarro and García Camino, “Argiñeta” *Arkeoikuska* 14, 208.

⁴⁹ Quirós, “La arqueología de las aldeas en el noroeste peninsular,” 225-56.

⁵⁰ Azkarate and Solaun, “La cerámica de la Alta Edad Media en el cuadrante noroeste,” 193-228.

⁵¹ Alfaro, “La arquitectura de Zaballa,” 496-527.

⁵² Quirós, Loza and Niso, “Identidades y ajuares de las necrópolis altomedievales,” 215-32.

In the last period documented, period 3, dated to the first half of the 10th century, once again we record important changes, both in the arrangement of the structures and in their morphology and typology, as we have already seen.

However, despite these documented discontinuities in this settlement, there are elements that will remain, although with variations throughout the entire sequence. The most important finding, without a doubt, has been the central space. This element is documented in an embryonic stage in the initial period of the occupation (7th century) and whose evolution has been documented throughout the different subsequent periods. The transformation of the meaning and function of this space in the middle of the 10th century, after being occupied by a necropolis, therefore, will lead to the abandonment of the habitat site documented in this intervention until that moment.⁵³

This area inherited from the first documented period, is in the second much more defined, since we find it framed by a series of structures that have it as a reference, appear also perfectly aligned, which shows us an incipient planning of the settlement area, in addition to greater compaction and density.

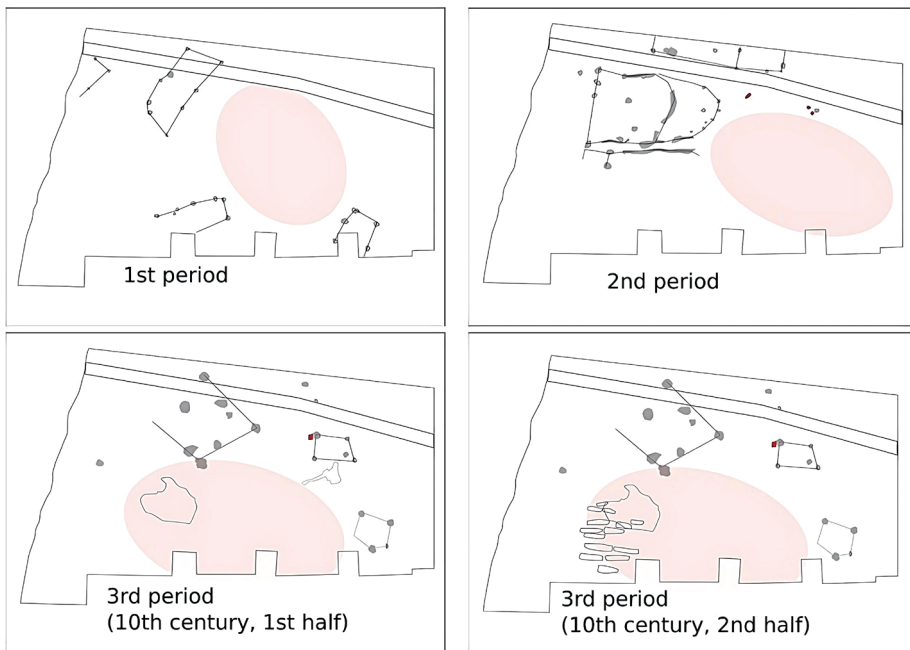


Figure 4. Evolution of the central open space documented in the different periods.

⁵³ Azkarate and Solaun, "La cerámica de la Alta Edad Media," 193-228; Campos-Lopez, "Las Aldeas Altomedievales en Bizkaia."

This pattern is repeated in contemporary European settlements;⁵⁴ as well as in Visigothic villages⁵⁵ and others closer geographically such as Zaballa (Iruña de Oca, Alava)⁵⁶ or in the Cathedral of Santa María de Gasteiz (Vitoria, Alava) where the structures are organized around two open areas.⁵⁷

Likewise, the fossilization of this 'central space' is not exclusively documented in Gorniz. In the case of Gózquez (Madrid), it has been found that, during the 225 years of occupation of the site, the housing units and attached structures change and are relocated, giving rise to three different phases of occupation. However, the boundaries between these constructions remained stable, as well as these empty spaces between them, identified as cultivation spaces.⁵⁸

During the last moment of occupation, in the 10th century, in addition to documenting an important restructuring of the urban plan, in this central space the surface is conditioning by placing a pavement in different points.

However, when defining its uses, we see that it is undoubtedly an element that is difficult to characterize. Even so, the change in its functionality is clearly observed in the different documented periods: while during the periods 1 and 2 we could speak of a possible use of cultivation or circulation; but, in period 3, the use as a circulation space or with an external use of a construction is definitely clear. This would indicate that, on the one hand, there is a clear intention in the definition of this space, and, on the other hand, of the existence of an organization in the arrangement of the community's habitat structures in a clear way. Domestic units and some other minor ones will be placed having this space as the axis or central element. In our opinion, it is, consequently, a circulation space in which a community use would have to be taken into account, since the original nucleus of the necropolis will be installed in this space in the central years of the 10th century.

⁵⁴ Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements*.

⁵⁵ Vigil-Escalera, "Primeros pasos hacia el análisis," 367-76; Vigil-Escalera, *Los primeros paisajes altomedievales*.

⁵⁶ Quirós, *Arqueología del campesinado medieval*.

⁵⁷ Azkarate and Solaun, *Arqueología e Historia de una ciudad*.

⁵⁸ Vigil-Escalera, "Primeros pasos hacia el análisis," 367-76.

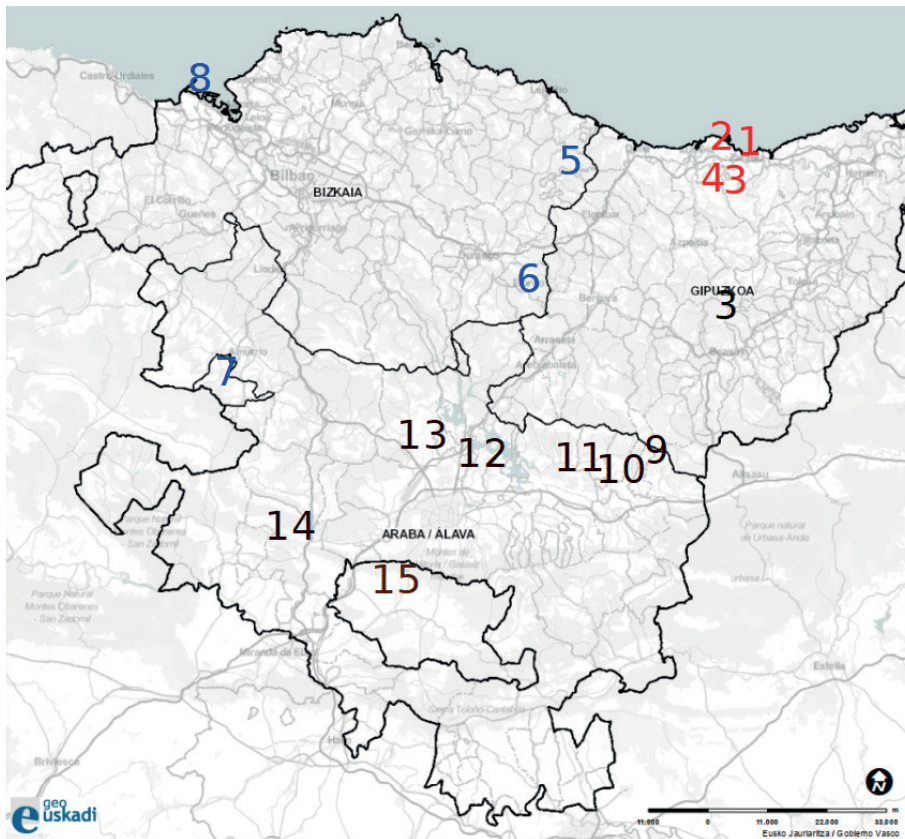


Figure 5. Geographical location of the different archaeological sites.

3.2. *The appearance of the necropolis*

In the case of the settlement of Gorliz, one of the most interesting documented moments takes place, as we have commented previously, in the mid years of the 10th century when, directly above that central open space, a series of burials associated with this community appear. The appearance of the necropolis implies the abandonment of other documented structures, so that is, located occupying an area for community use, as we have referred.

This change of use in a given space is verified: from a habitat area to a necropolis area. Nevertheless, this new function must be understood as the original nucleus of different necropolises and later cemeteries, which will continue until the 18th century.

This first documented necropolis is not associated with any religious structure, being one of the few places of this characteristic documented in the Basque Country till the date. However, a small hermitage associated with a

second period of burials with an 11th century chronology has been documented. The tradition of building different temples one on top of the other has already been abundantly collected in the bibliography (San Salvador de Getaria, San Miguel de Irura, San Pedro de Iromendi all of them in Gipuzkoa, or San Jorge in Santurtzi and Santa Lucia de Gerrika in Bizkaia ...),⁵⁹ so we would be inclined to think that, if there was an older temple, the remains of it should have been documented (as well as it happens with the hermitage from the 11th century and others from later cult structures). Therefore, all this would indicate us a “management and care of the memory of the tombs” and that it always “demonstrates the respect of a minimum distance between the most peripheral graves of the community necropolis and the nearest structures of use”.⁶⁰

In addition to this, the documented graves – of varied typology, organized in rows and without reuse – aligned and no intersections among each other, will suggest that the living community kept the physical memory of the place of deposition or that perhaps they were marked, such as it happens in the necropolis of San Martin de Dulantzi in Alava. In fact, in this case, although for chronologies of the 8th century, the new location of the necropolis located outside the basilica building causes the amortization of some of the habitat structures, that is, they are moved to some other place, which is indicative of a strong functional division between the funeral area or sector and the residential sector.⁶¹

From this moment, 10th and 11th centuries, a much more complex and articulated context is going to take place. During this period, the existence of a village network is verified, since these differentiation processes will develop into the appearance of clearly differentiated elites groups.

Other elements that have a relevant influence in this reorganization, elements that will be consider like ‘most visible’ ones will be churches, seen as a effective record of the Christianization of the territory. For instance, in the specific case of Zaballa (Iruña de Oca, Alava), it is at this moment when the church of San Julian is built in the nuclear area of the village, so that the houses are moved down to the valley.⁶² Also in Argiñeta (Elorrio, Bizkaia, at the end of the 10th century, the populated area was abandoned, it is probable that the inhabitants moved to another space, since the cemetery is still active –until the 12th century – and even expanded, occupying the old habitat area.⁶³ These are not isolated examples, since in Santa María de Zarautz (Guipuzcoa), an old church and an associated necropolis are documented as early as the 9th century, reusing old Roman structures.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Ibañez-Extbarria and Sarasola, “El yacimiento arqueológico de Santa María de Zarautz.”

⁶⁰ Vigil-Escalera, “Comunidad política aldeana y exclusión,” 12-3.

⁶¹ Quirós, Loza and Niso, “Identidades y ajuares de las necrópolis altomedievales,” 215-32.

⁶² Quirós, *Arqueología del campesinado*.

⁶³ Anibarro and García Camino, “Argiñeta.” *Arkeoikuska* 2014, 208.

⁶⁴ Ibañez-Extbarria and Sarasola, “El yacimiento arqueológico de Santa María de Zarautz.”

4. *Contributions to a (open) debate*

Once the sequence has been examined, and several analysis issues have been developed, we propose different points on which we would like to build an open debate around the role of the peasant agency and the relevance of its study and analysis:

- 1) The study of medieval village formation has generated an intense debate throughout Europe. It is – indeed – a very complex issue regarding the construction of agricultural landscapes, the initiative of the elites, the weight of lordships or the centrality (or not) of the peasantry. Regarding to the Basque Country, the first approach to this problem took place through other territorial markers, such as necropolises or churches. However, it is a subject in which, little by little, progress is being made, but we still lack a synthesis of the whole set.⁶⁵ For this reason, cases like the one that concerns us here, together with other ones such as Argiñeta, become fundamental. In them, one can glimpse the presence of the peasant agency, of groups not defined as elites.
- 2) In the area of the Basque Country, for chronologies of the 6th and 7th centuries, the existence of farm-type settlements is documented. But, on the contrary, there is no clear evidence of active elites at a local scale,⁶⁶ something that makes a notable difference with the contexts documented in the Iberian Plateau, for example.

For instance, during the first of the periods investigated in our intervention, no spatial organization or elements documented may indicate the presence of elites groups. Nevertheless, the data about villages during the 8th-9th centuries reinforce this idea of social change and the emergence of elites on a local scale, although it will be in the 10th century when the existence and presence of these village elites is clearly recognized and hierarchies will be defined in settlements. A circumstance that we see again in Gorniz, through a new spatial reorganization and the urban plan, and the use of more complex types of room units.

In fact, there is a reuse of the space, which is significant when it comes to understand domestic structures as the main units of production and reproduction and their importance in the construction and transformation of these villages.⁶⁷

- 3) Gorniz, understood as an early medieval village, is part of a type of rural occupation whose general characteristic could be total invisibility on the surface due to the nature of its constructive forms and the type of its structures, that is, the domestic architecture that characterizes them.⁶⁸ These settlements, usually, occupy very wide areas, in which the exist-

⁶⁵ Quirós, "Village formation, Social Memories and Archaeology," 304.

⁶⁶ Quirós, "La arqueología de las aldeas en el noroeste peninsular," 225-56.

⁶⁷ Quirós and Tejerizo-García, "Filling the gap," 1-19.

⁶⁸ Quirós Castillo, "La arqueología de las aldeas en el noroeste peninsular," 225-56.

ence of large empty spaces, in some cases dedicated to cops, and in which archaeological remains are not usually found, are part of their definition. Therefore, the archaeological methodology to be used should be in accordance with these characteristics, so the development of extension excavation protocols is vital in order to improve data.

- 4) The existence of community spaces – as is the case of Gorliz –, which are difficult to recognize in the archaeological record, can suggest a communitarian exploitation of resources, and their existence is critical in the construction of identities and in the negotiation of new forms of social interaction, often not visible in a domestic scale.⁶⁹ Even so, the archaeological record suggests the existence of a complex relationship between the individual or family and the community, all linked to a specific economic and social practice.⁷⁰

In our case, these tensions can be seen at the specific moment in which the community space is occupied by a necropolis, which also marks the abandonment of that habitat space, maybe moving to another near place, as the presence of the necropolis in the next phase could indicate. Although, this kind of replacements (habitat that becomes necropolis or necropolis that becomes church...) are well documented in this area.⁷¹

Therefore, the question is obvious: which is the meaning behind this type of performance. Until the appearance of the hermitages or churches, other factors such as the Christianization of local elites or the territory will not come into discussion. But, until then, these burial places in habitat contexts may be somehow reinforcing land rights, in this case, the settlement land. In addition to this, the fact of placing these burials in inhabited spaces can mean an important point in the very existence of the settlement;⁷² in the present case, it implies the transformation of this specific space. We believe that it could be suggested, as we pointed out previously, at this very moment is when the memory of the village community is formalized through the creation of a community cemetery. This could be the result of internal transformations of the village community in political terms, as well as the modification of the village social ties.

- 5) Along with all this, if we understand the active role of the peasant community and its capacity to process this social experience and perpetuate it, we can also propose that approaching these issues through concepts such as peasant agency, understood as a platform in which to incorporate both the historical past and the archaeological record of the peasantry together with the dialogue between different disciplines,⁷³ can be under-

⁶⁹ Quirós and Tejerizo-García, “Filling the gap,” 1-19.

⁷⁰ Quirós, “Archaeology or early medieval peasantry.”

⁷¹ Different examples are documented in the *Arkeoikuska* 2021 volume.

⁷² Sofield, “Living with the Dead.”

⁷³ Quirós and Tejerizo-García, “Filling the gap,” 1-19.

stood as a common place of work and analysis, although there may be more sceptical opinions in this regard.

In this sense, we figure necessary to carry out a re-reading of different historical sequences as early medieval landscapes can be considered now in order to analyze the social foundation of community life.⁷⁴ Regarding the village formation, it would be interesting to advance in the study of the settlement model in which different nature realities must be articulated: farms and also villages (the appearance bases of the *villas* are settled now, heirs of the reorganizations and changes documented in the 10th century), and also to figure how to fit this model into the oldest levels documented in the Basque farmhouses (levels that show structures that predate the 16th century buildings).⁷⁵

- 6) Finally, we want to raise the need of the study of these peasant communities. Far from the idea of being an issue with no future in medium or long term, now that the peasant world is being engulfed by a supposed modernization, the validity of the study of its dynamics, relationships, formation and development becomes fundamental. Not only to be able to understand what came after, but also to be able to apprehend a memory and the inheriting identity of these processes. Actually, our peasant history is what is particular to all human been, and it is where we are able to build identity and common places.

In this sense, from an archaeological and historical point of view, the challenge is enormous, since we are faced with processes of a different nature, complexity, with archaeological records with great historical value, but not monumental – and, therefore, not attractive – and that will need a multifocal historical development, far from teleological, one-sided and conscious approaches in terms of dissemination strategies.

Thus, in this new post-COVID world, we must take into account the new meanings of social relationships, the role of communities and the centrality of the peripheral, of the local,⁷⁶ building common places as we have in the peasant agency. Therefore, the study of the peasant world and its agency is a powerful tool for the evaluation of social practices and dynamics in the past, overcoming partial and unilinear approaches, and shedding light on the interaction between the different participating agents and the internal articulation of groups.⁷⁷ All this will allow the understanding of local political systems, especially in the areas where the cohesion and identity of the local communities were stronger, being the Iberian Peninsula, and, we believe that the example we are dealing with here, is especially significant in this sense.

⁷⁴ Quirós, “Village formation, Social Memories and Archaeology,” 304.

⁷⁵ Campos-Lopez, “Los caseríos en el País Vasco.”

⁷⁶ Escribano-Ruiz, “The centrality of the margins,” 273-90.

⁷⁷ Quirós, “Archaeology or early medieval peasantry.”

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