

Considering peasant agency in the Early Middle Ages. A diachronic analysis of the archaeological record in Central Portugal*

by Catarina Tente, Sara Prata

This paper analyses archaeological data on early medieval rural communities through the lens of peasant agency. Over the last 15 years systematic research has been carried out in different territories of the Portuguese inland, mainly in the centre-north of the country. Here we will be focusing on the areas for which we currently have more detailed evidence, Alto Alentejo and Beira Alta, and consider a broad chronological frame, between the 5th and the 11th centuries. However, the information available for the two territories is uneven, and it is not yet possible to offer a continuous chronological sequence in either of these areas. For this reason, we will analyse the available data collectively and from a comparative perspective. In both cases we will start by considering the new rural settlement networks that emerged from the 5th century onwards. Evidence of peasant communities in Alto Alentejo is clearer for the 6th-7th centuries, and in Beira Alta for the 10th-11th. Both are critical moments in the political sphere, coinciding with the emergence and affirmation of new administrative structures, but also necessary power vacuums where local powers emerge. By comparing the material record of peasant groups, we will reassess agricultural production, management of natural resources, artefact production, trade networks, and funerary areas, as arenas to discuss the notion of peasant agency.

Early Middle Ages, Alto Alentejo, Beira Alta, social peasant agency, archaeology, conflict, rural communities.

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1. Introduction

In the last 15 years a group of archaeologists from *Instituto de Estudos Medievais* (IEM – NOVA FCSH) has been carrying out research focused on the early medieval period. We have mainly worked on the inland regions of central-northern Portugal, a territory that spans from the northeast of the Trás-os-Montes region to the Alto Alentejo in the south, carrying out research projects, MA and PhD thesis. Through a combined approach which takes into consideration data from surface field surveys, excavations, material culture analysis, radiocarbon dating and comparative approaches, we have documented evidence of the progressive transformations that took place between the second half of the 5th century and the formation of the Portuguese kingdom (12th century), in both rural and urban settings. The gathered data are diverse, and each micro-territory presents its own chronological sequence and specificities. Nevertheless, the images defined for specific moments of these intervals expand our understanding of early medieval societies, which remain one of the least known periods in Portuguese research.¹

In this paper, we consider the available evidence through the lens of peasant agency. Agency, understood as the capacity of agents to act within a social structure,² is an established subject in social sciences, with significance for archaeology and past societies.³ However, agency has not yet been fully explored in regards to peasant communities, particularly in the early medieval period. There are several reasons for this, top-down approaches to peasant societies have promoted their view as passive social agents,⁴ and for early medieval times this is perhaps a result of historical narratives exceedingly focused on the role of aristocracies in social processes, combined with lasting primitivistic views of peasant communities.⁵ It has recently been argued that by focusing on archaeological evidence, agency can work as a common field in which different disciplines can analyse the dynamics of peasant societies in greater detail,⁶ while also promoting a specific conceptual framework for peasant archaeology.

We agree that we must work towards the understanding of peasant groups as active voices in the configuration of past societies, but we also need to recognize the limits of the archaeological record in this regard. Written sources which concern early medieval peasant communities are scarce, and there is a whole range of characteristics specific to the day-to-day of this social category that can only be grasped through archaeology. But we need to avoid oversimplifications, and as we will see, interpreting the material evidence of peasant

¹ Tente, “Os últimos 30 anos da Arqueologia.”

² Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*.

³ Dobres and Robb, *Agency in archaeology*.

⁴ Van der Ploeg, *The new peasantries*, 6.

⁵ Quirós, “Inequality and social complexity.”

⁶ Quirós and Tejerizo, “Filling the gap,” 8.

communities through this lens is not always a linear process. In this paper, we will be focusing on which aspects of peasant agency might be seen through the material record, and the problems that can arise from this analysis.

We will be doing so by presenting archaeological data from inland Portugal inland through a global approach, analysing rural transformations from a diachronic perspective, comparing settlement patterns, local economic strategies, and political frameworks. Burial grounds, as privileged areas for building and representing identities, will also be considered. For this, we will focus on the territories and specific timeframes for which the available evidence is clearer due to our ongoing research projects: Alto Alentejo during the 6th and the 7th centuries and Beira Alta during the 10th and 11th. These represent two critical moments. In Central Portugal, the first interval encompasses the transition between the Suevic and the Visigoth kingdoms, and the growing impact of the ecclesiastical structure in terms of territorial reconfiguration. The second timeframe sees Beira Alta as a frontier land between the north controlled by Asturians and the south by Muslims. These shifts also meant at times the existence of power vacuums, which might have promoted on the one hand the emergence of local powers, and on the other, some degree of isolation, and perhaps autonomy, for peasant communities.

In the context of this paper, we will use the term “peasants” to refer to families and communities who lived in rural areas and for whom farming was the main economic activity and a focal point in their social organization and interaction with their environment. Our analysis covers different geographies and an extended timeframe, a sequence of rural landscapes built by different peasant families and communities that must not be taken as an undifferentiated whole. Our goal is to compare the available evidence while recognizing the specificities of each territory.

In this context, it is important to stress that Alto Alentejo and Beira Alta are distinct geomorphologically. Beira Alta is located in the highlands of central-northern Portugal, between the Douro and the Mondego River basins. This results in a vast plateau, bordered by several mountain ranges: the Estrela to the east (the highest summit at 1,993 metres a.s.l.), and the Montemuro and Caramulo mountain chains to west, separating the region from the Atlantic seaboard. Due to anthropic deforestation (documented since the Neolithic period), fertile lands are located mainly in the lowest areas, in the foothills and in the river valleys.

Alto Alentejo is separated from Beira Baixa to the North by the Tagus River and bordered by Spanish Extremadura to the East. It can be considered a transition landscape between the southern plains and the mountain ranges of the Beira region. Here we have worked mainly on the norther territories, around São Mamede Mountain range which separates the drainage basin of the Tagus River to the north from the basin of the Guadiana to the south. In its highest point, São Mamede reaches 1,025 metres a.s.l., but agricultural areas are mainly situated in the lower penepains, crossed by seasonal streams.

Naturally, in both territories the geographic characteristics have played a role in the evolution of human settlement networks through time, and when comparing both sets of data, we must be aware of the differences between regions (Fig. 1).

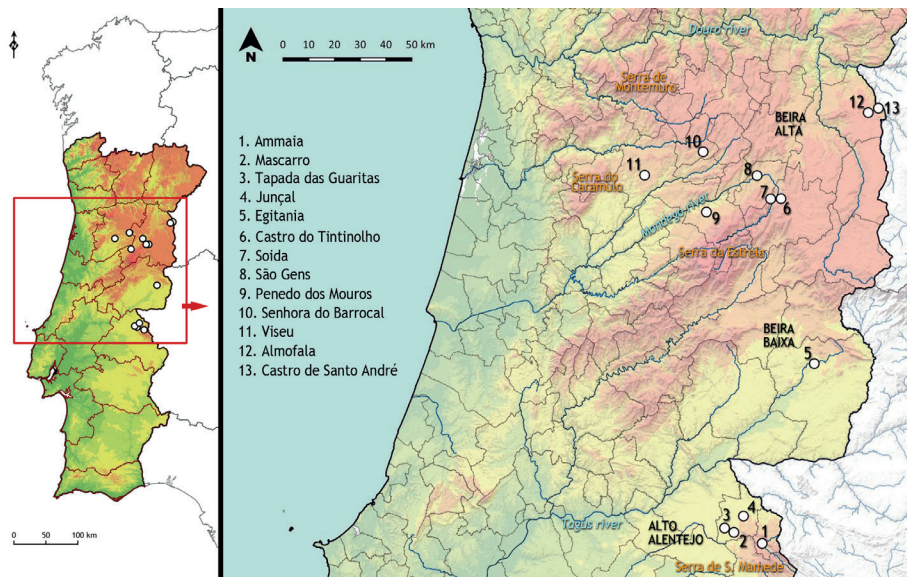


Figure 1. Map of the main places mentioned in the text.

2. A diachronic analysis of the peasant record

To adequately frame early medieval rural settlements, we must start by recognizing, even if briefly, the pre-existing Roman occupation models documented in both territories and the ways in which they were transformed during post-Roman times.

In Alto Alentejo there is evidence of medium and large villa estates, which seem to have been built around the 3rd century.⁷ Most of these villas were closely linked to this territory's single urban centre: *Ammaia* (S. Salvador de Aramenha, Marvão), a small-size town, probably funded during the Augustan age, and granted *civitas* status under Emperor Claudius, becoming a *municipium* during the 2nd century AD.⁸ While there is evidence of post-Roman phases in *Ammaia*, the abrupt reduction in imported fine wares suggests that it became isolated from long-distance trade early on (mid-5th century).⁹ The

⁷ Carneiro, *Lugares, tempos e pessoas*.

⁸ Corsi et al., "The Roman town of Ammaia (Portugal)."

⁹ Quaresma, "The fine wares."

fact that there is no further mention of this town in written sources from the Suevic-Visigothic period also indicates that it likely lost its position as an inland urban enclave, unlike other cities that developed into ecclesiastic centres.¹⁰

The villas that have been excavated in this area also present evidence of transformations at an early stage. In some villas we see the abandonment and reuse of former opulent reception rooms, in others, the emergence of religious buildings and associated privileged burial¹¹ areas,¹² suggesting different types of processes that might be occurring simultaneously. We have recently started to explore the possibility that some of the former Roman estates, in places like Mascarro (Castelo de Vide), might have maintained a local importance during the early medieval period.

While these profound changes are documented in the villas, during a still imprecise moment between the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 6th centuries, there is ample evidence of a new dispersed settlement pattern, characterized by a large number of small farmsteads which were built *ex novo*, but spatially associated with Roman infrastructures (previous estates and road system).¹³ New peasant settlements such as Tapada das Guaritas I (Castelo de Vide) contain simple rectangular houses built in stone and covered by rooftiles, which preserve the remains of pottery produced locally, a small number of iron tools, spindle whorls for spinning animal or vegetable fibres, and manual stone mills for grain and/or cereal grinding.¹⁴ Evidence for cattle farming can be perceived by the presence of large stone pens and the location of most settlements in shallow, well irrigated small valleys where pasture would be permanently available. Settlement layout indicates that the funerary areas (usually marked by one to three rock-cut graves) were created in close connection to the areas of the living and would possibly function as part of a land claiming discourse within the peasant sphere, as it has been suggested for other territories.¹⁵ Amid this peasant landscape we have press buildings and rock-cut facilities for olive oil and wine production. Large built complexes such as Junçal and Tapada das Guaritas II (Castelo de Vide), reflect a considerable investment in these facilities and a capacity for surplus production, and are perhaps the clearest indicator that these early medieval farmsteads were integrated in regional trade dynamics and possibly broader scales of power that transcend their mere local sphere.¹⁶ Simultaneously, the known settlements show rather horizontal material records, with an almost complete absence of prestige goods or prominent buildings. One of the ques-

¹⁰ Cordero, "La organización de la diócesis."

¹¹ Carneiro, "O final das villae."

¹² Maloney and Hale, "The villa of Torre de Palma." Cuesta-Gómez et al., "Una nueva lectura."

¹³ Prata, "Post-Roman land-use."

¹⁴ Prata, "Objectos arqueológicos;" Prata and Cuesta-Gómez, "Farming and local economy."

¹⁵ Martín Viso, "Enterramientos, memoria social."

¹⁶ Prata and Cuesta-Gómez, "Oil and wine."

tions we should consider is whether these farmsteads would somehow be able to function together as a self-recognized group, or if each household would be managed individually.

For now, detailed evidence of these types of peasant settlements is mostly circumscribed to the territory of the municipality of Castelo de Vide. But at least some of the territories neighbouring of Alto Alentejo, such as the municipalities of Nisa and Marvão, exhibit coherent surface finds (rock-cut graves, remains of double-walled structures, press facilities...) suggesting a similar pattern. A critical review of these data is among our current research priorities.

We should also mention that there is currently little evidence to indicate that the excavated farmsteads were in use after the first half of the 8th century. The excavated buildings, six so far, show no structural reforms, overlapping use sequences or accumulations of discarded pottery that might suggest otherwise.

On the contrary, they exhibit what can be described as a single short-lived level of use, no evidence for destructive or violent episodes and processes of structural decay that appears to have been rather slow. Careful consideration is necessary to adequately frame this abandonment process, but our current hypothesis is that this settlement network stopped functioning in Alto Alentejo due to the progressive administrative changes brought about by the Islamic conquest.

Likewise, we still lack a satisfactory explanation for where the former inhabitants of these farmsteads might have relocated. The next well documented phase is represented by the High Medieval castles and villages; a centralized settlement process that in the territories south of the Tagus River is dated from the 12th century onwards and closely related to the direct actions of the Portuguese monarchs and the military orders. While a widespread migration to distant regions seems unlikely, for the moment there is still no conclusive evidence for the Islamic period in this territory.

To understand what might have been happening in Portuguese inland rural areas directly before the formation of the Portuguese kingdom we must now turn to the archaeological data from Beira Alta. As will be explained, the documented chronological sequence for this region is different from what we have seen in Alto Alentejo. Several aspects might help to understand these disparities, from the obvious geographic and morphological characteristics of each territory to separate research backgrounds and approaches. Although we are aware that the key to understand the separate evolution of each territory might stem further back, we will once again start from the Roman settlement model.

Roman rural settlements documented in Beira Alta were smaller estates, mainly farmsteads. Places that were classified as villas seem scarce and small when compared with the southern territories. Viseu (*Vissaium*) was the larger city of Beira Alta. There were other capitals of *civitas*, but probably most of them were *civitas sine urbe*, like the capital of *Interminienses*, presumably

located in Guarda,¹⁷ *civitas Cobelcorum*¹⁸ or Bobadela (Oliveira do Hospital). These were places where the main urban functions (religious, fiscal, commercial, and administrative) were guaranteed, but where no significant population resided. Apparently, most of the Roman residents lived in small rural units, dispersed in the mountainous territory.

Although the archaeological data is scarce (mainly surface surveys and test-pits), the available information shows that rural farmsteads in Beira Alta were systematically abandoned between the 3rd century and the beginning of the 5th. Examples of these can be seen in the small villa of Monte Aljão (Gouveia) where the latest use sequence was dated between the end of the 4th century, and the beginning of the 5th century;¹⁹ in the small agricultural settlement of Torre (Fornos de Algodres), where the last use phase was placed in the 3th-4th centuries;²⁰ and in the farmstead of São Gens (Celorico da Beira), where the occupation sequence is framed between the 1st century and the beginning of the 4th century.²¹

This apparently early decline of the Roman rural system likely resulted in the emergence of a new settlement pattern that has not yet been documented. Information about the 5th century onwards is rather limited, mainly data from the episcopal city of Viseu and from ancient *civitas* capitals that continued to mint *tremisses* during the Visigothic period. We also witness the return to hillfort occupation, a process that has been linked to emergence of local elites who used those places to manifest power in the territories dominated by them,²² as illustrated by Castro do Tintinholo (Guarda)²³ or perhaps in Castro de Santo André (Figueira de Castelo Rodrigo) and Caliabria.²⁴ If the elites (local or episcopal) can be seen in the archaeological record and written record, the same cannot be said of the peasants. Rural settlements from the 6th to 8th centuries have not yet been documented in Beira Alta. It is possible that some of the sites identified in field surveys as late Roman farmsteads could in fact be early medieval, particularly in those cases where rock-cut graves are also present. But excavations are needed to validate this hypothesis.

Nerveless, an important change occurred in Beira Alta between the 7th and the 9th centuries and then again in the end of the 10th century/ beginning of the 11th century. Conclusive remains for the 8th century have not been identified so far, but we know that somewhere between the second half of the 9th century and the beginning of the 10th, new peasant settlements were estab-

¹⁷ Pereira and Ramos, “Sequência estratigráfica.”

¹⁸ Frade and Caetano, “Os Cultos na *Civitas Cobelcorum*,” Tente et al., “As placas de xisto numéricas.”

¹⁹ Tente and Pereira, “Monte Aljão.”

²⁰ Antunes, “Figueiró da Granja.”

²¹ Marques, *A ocupação romana*; Marques et alii. *S. Gens ao longo do Tempo*.

²² Martín Viso, “La ordenación del territorio.”

²³ Tente and Martín Viso, “O Castro do Tintinholo;” Tente, Martín Viso. “El castro de Tintinholo.”

²⁴ Tente et al., “As placas de xisto numéricas.”

lished. Some of them, like São Gens (Celorico da Beira), were built near the ruins of a previous Roman farm, whereas others, chose instead new locations with no previous occupations, cases such as at Senhora do Barrocal (Sátão), Soida (Celorico da Beira) and Penedo dos Mouros (Gouveia).

These new settlements occupy subtle positions in the landscape, aiming in most cases to obtain visual control over the territory whilst remaining unseen. Some of these settlements were surrounded by palisades, less frequently combined with stone walls. Inside the enclosures the domestic units were simple huts made of wood and branches. Usually, each hut had a central hearth around which the domestic space was organized. All the excavated sites revealed homogeneous pottery assemblages, and was also evidence for iron tools produced locally. Archaeological evidence suggests these were pluri-familiar settlements, but small in area; the number of families should be between three and six.²⁵ This would be consistent with a more centralised occupation pattern, especially when compared with the late Roman period.

All the excavated peasant settlements were destroyed by fires dated via radiocarbon between the second half of the 10th century and the beginning of the 11th century. Due to these fires, the dense combustion layers promoted the preservation of organic matter (animal bones and plant remains) which testified to the diverse economic activities of these rural communities.

Most of the sites were abandoned after these destructive events²⁶ and we do not know where the population from the burned settlements would have been re-located. Some of them probably went displaced to establish the medieval villages, where castles would be built during the second half of the 11th century. These fires and subsequent changes in settlement can be interpreted as a consequence of local struggles to control territories, in which peasant communities seem to have played a relevant part.

3. *Discussion*

As made clear in the above overview, for Portuguese inland territories, even those such as Beira Alta and Alto Alentejo for which comprehensive data is currently available, it is still not possible to trace a continuous use sequence from the end of the Roman Era to the formation of the Kingdom of Portugal. Likewise, each territory presents its own knowledge gaps. In both cases, early medieval rural landscapes stem from transformations resulting from the dismantlement of the previous Roman land-use model (estates, infrastructures, road network...), but only in Alto Alentejo do we see a new kind of rural settlement pattern that emerges and thrives between the 5th and 7th centuries, based on single family farmsteads. In Beira Alta, we have evidence of 5th

²⁵ Tente, "Social Complexity."

²⁶ Tente, "No smoke without fire."

to 7th centuries hillfort occupations, places that would be controlled by local elites and used in power dynamics, which for now appear to be absent in Alto Alentejo. In both territories, conclusive evidence for the 8th century is still lacking, a complex issue that will need to be fully addressed elsewhere. The first well documented evidence for the early medieval countryside in Beira Alta is related to concentrated multi-family settlements which appear in the 9th-10th centuries, all of which were destroyed by violent fires dated between the end of 10th century and the beginning of the 11th century. This was probably the result of an emerging political control system, and these settlements would have been destroyed as part of a local struggle to control territories and communities. It seems reasonable to assume that the population displaced from the burned villages would eventually incorporate newly established settlements, locations where castles would be built after the second half of the 11th century. Finally, in Alto Alentejo, further south, medieval villages and castles are quite late, founded only from the late 12th century onwards, and it is still not clear if they reflect the incorporation of outside population, a re-arrangement of current inhabitants, or perhaps a combination of both. Here, evidence for what might have happened in rural areas between the end of the early medieval settlement network and the development of the first High Medieval castles and villages is very limited.

Before continuing, we wish to emphasize that the takeaway from this comparative overview should be the presence of significant territorial reconfiguration processes which took place throughout the early medieval centuries. Both territories in which we have carried out our research lack a comprehensive diachronic sequence, however, in each case we have enough evidence to determine in which key moments the countryside was clearly restructured. In doing so the natural tendency is to frame these processes in light of larger historical events and interpret local changes as direct or indirect consequence of broader political changes. But how can we shift the focus in order to consider peasant agency in this context?

It seems apparent that at least some of these events express the direct action of outside powers with strategic interests in rural areas. But peasant communities surely played their own role in these dynamics. Considering the evidence available so far, it might be difficult to visualize the ways in which these tensions and negotiations between peasant communities and other social groups took place. However, for now, we are interested in focusing directly on the material record of these peasant communities, and will analyse which pieces of evidence can be interpreted in order to consider peasant agency.

3.1. Settlements and households

Archaeologically, the first aspect we will be exploring is settlement layout and landscape use, and perhaps the first question we should keep in mind is whether or not early medieval peasants were able to decide where and how to

build their houses, and the investment they entailed. As we have seen, the early medieval settlements excavated in Castelo de Vide consist of small farmsteads managed by single family units (Fig. 2). From surface field data, it is clear that at least a part of these settlements was built near previous Roman estates. The reasons for this may vary, but among the frequent arguments is the well-documented reuse of Roman construction materials in early medieval buildings.²⁷ However, as recently suggested, the reuse of Roman olive groves might have also played an important role.²⁸ Another important aspect of this spatial relation to previous infrastructures is the likelihood that the Roman road system was still in use, even if only partially and at a regional or even local scale. Concerning architectural features, it is important to note that these farmsteads were built entirely out of locally available granite stones and covered with roof tiles. Some of these buildings are quite large, particularly the press facilities and associated storage buildings, so their construction was certainly a considerable investment. Regarding the relationship established between different farmsteads, we have described this type of settlement network as a dispersed but connected pattern,²⁹ in the sense that even if they consist of individual peasant households, they were visibly built in close proximity to one another which must imply close social and economic contacts. One of the concepts that deserves to be further explored to understand the different ways in which these peasants were conceptualizing their environment and particularly social relations, is the degree of autonomy each farmstead would enjoy, or if there was some sense of community shared among different families. This would be particularly relevant when considering their interactions with outside social groups.

The early medieval settlements in Beira Alta from the 9th-10th century were, instead, small enclosures where several families lived. From the settlement the community had restrict visual control, mainly covering the adjoining agricultural areas. This might suggest some degree of peasant autonomy in selecting the areas where settlements were built. All sites were surrounded by a wall/palisade that defined very clearly the interior and exterior of the living areas. Inside we find the domestic structures and some labour spaces such as the one identified at São Gens for tanning animal hides.³⁰ Different huts with hearths suggest individual domestic units, but some activities and spaces were certainly communal.

Additionally, we can assume that other processes such as the construction of the settlement outer walls was carried out by several members of the community.

As previously stated, buildings were made mostly of readily available materials, mainly wood and branches, but also local granite stone. Remains of

²⁷ Prata, "Articulação da paisagem."

²⁸ Prata and Cuesta-Gómez, "Oil and wine."

²⁹ Cuesta-Gómez and Prata, "Se hace camino al andar."

³⁰ Tente et al., "Povoamento e modos de vida."



Figure 2. Remains of the early medieval farmstead of Tapada das Guaritas (Castelo de Vide).

these palisades, huts, and other fixtures (such as the oak bench identified at Penedo dos Mouros, in Gouveia, were preserved as charcoal, due the fires that destroyed these settlements.

The possible relation between the settlements is difficult to assess since they were not built in close spatial proximity. However, the economic activities recorded in some of these settlements might suggest some degree of complementarity between different communities.³¹

3.2. *Gravesites*

Another issue where there is ample evidence to examine peasant agency is the configuration of burial areas. In both Beira Alta and Alto Alentejo the most widely-documented funerary structure are rock-cut grave. It is currently accepted that this type of graves was used within the peasant landscape as part of a legitimizing discourse, within a complex process to claim land use rights among local communities.³² But their meaning and purpose was specific in each territory, and certainly varied through time.

In Alto Alentejo, the funerary areas are small, usually made of only up to three rock-cut graves, carved in granite outcrops. There is a clear correlation

³¹ Tente, “Social inequality.”

³² Martín Viso, “Enterramientos, memoria social;” Martín Viso. “A place for the ancestors.”

between the graves and the buildings, as spatial data reveals that most farmsteads had associated grave sites in about a 50 or 100 m radius.³³ These are clearly the remains of family cemeteries, and even if we assume the existence of additional types of funerary structures – such as cist graves and simple holes – which were less likely to be preserved, the systematic link between households and gravesites is plain.

In Beira Alta the very high number of places with rock-cut graves that have been documented were, mainly organized in scattered groups of fewer than ten graves. While the total number of sites with graves currently exceeds 550 (more than 2300 graves), it is impossible to establish accurate chronologies for all these sites based solely on surface data. They might not all have been in use simultaneously, but rather represent several moments in a changing rural landscape.

Apart from the small groups of graves, Beira Alta also presents evidence of slightly larger necropolises formed by scattered graves (in less than 4% of the known sites). The tombs do not follow a canonical orientation, nor a linear organization, but reflect what seems to be a family logic. In this context, the enclosure and necropolis of São Gens (Celorico da Beira) stand out. The necropolis, with at least 56 graves, was built around an ancient Roman farm and near the medieval settlement (Fig. 3). While the small enclosure comprised a mere 0.5ha, the graves were scattered over an area close to 6ha.

The spatial syntax analysis of the cemetery layout, estimations about grave reuse, and the archaeological data from the excavations inside the enclosure suggest that early medieval São Gens was used by a community of three to four families (i.e. self-identifying groups), over a period of about four generations. The general lack of spatial differentiation may suggest these were the graves of relatively equally ranked members of the community, albeit reflecting a household organization.³⁴ Considering this interpretation for São Gens, and the similar type of spatial organization seen in the smaller groups of graves, it is possible to propose that these burial grounds reflect the direct management of families and communities, and that the spatial organization seen in small gravesites or necropolis, would be a display of kinship relations. A more detailed spatial analysis of these graves might offer further insights into the relative importance of different settlements, distinct families within the same enclosure, and overall, how territoriality and social relations were conceptualized in funerary areas.

Early medieval gravesites in Beira Alta can also be interpreted as a reflection of the relative isolation of rural communities from dominating powers. It is interesting to note that most early medieval rock-cut graves are found around the foothills of Estrela Mountain Range, farther away from Viseu and Lafões, respectively the urban and diocesan centre and an aristocratic do-

³³ Cuesta-Gómez and Prata, “Se hace camino al andar.”

³⁴ Brooks et al., “Interpreting Rock-Cut Graves.”

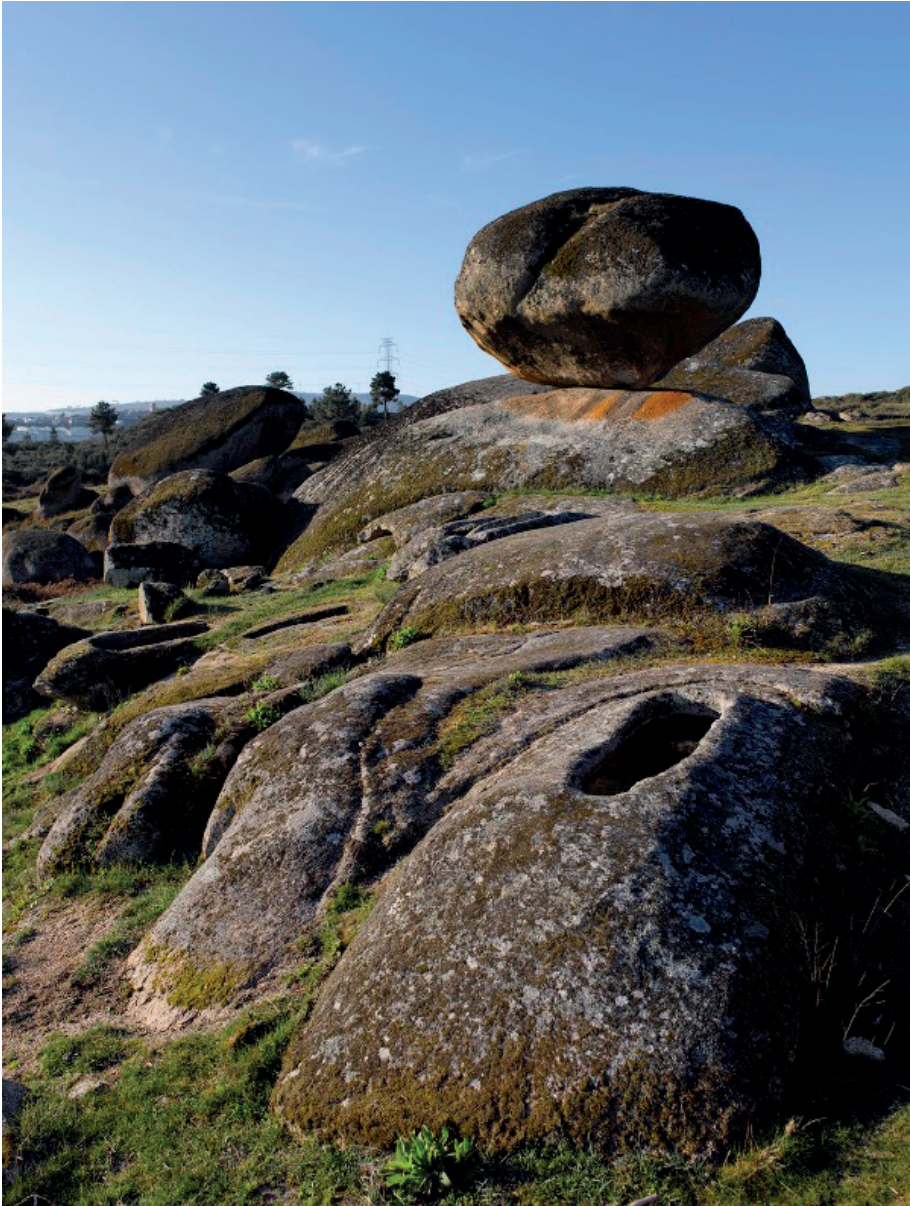


Figure 3. São Gens rock-cut graves necropolis (©Danilo Pavone Câmara Municipal de Celorico da Beira).

minium.³⁵ The material record and written sources show that churches were also scarce in these peripheral territories, certainly giving peasant communities more leeway to organize their own gravesites. This would change after the second half of the 12th century, when the emergence of parish cemeteries put an end to burial grounds managed by peasant families and communities.

3.3. *Material culture and consumption patterns*

Both in Alto Alentejo and Beira Alta it is quite evident that most of the analysed material culture was produced inside the early medieval peasant sphere. In Alto Alentejo, this is especially visible in domestic pottery, which was likely produced periodically by each farmstead and would sometimes be used in limited trade with other households³⁶ (Fig. 4). However, the technical requirements behind some objects such as ironwork, stonemasonry, and woodwork suggest the presence of specialized, or semi-specialized, workers. Likewise, in all the analysed settlements we have recorded exceptionally large quantities of rooftiles, probably resulting from a locally distributed centralized manufacture.³⁷ In turn, the occasional presence of what could be described as prestige goods, such as glassware and bronze pieces is indicative of interaction between peasant communities and elite groups, as suggested for the early medieval villages and farms in the centre of the Iberian Peninsula.³⁸

In Beira Alta, pottery production was remarkably similar between the 10th century settlements. It is possible to identify some variability, but results of clay petrographic and chemical analyses showed that the ceramics were produced locally, although it is not possible to confirm if this was carried out at a household level or if there were specialized productions inside the community.³⁹ Despite their small number, metal artefacts are found in every settlement and show diversified morphologies. Knives, axes, nails, links, buttons, and needles are the most common items. Recurrent finds of iron slags also indicate that ironworking was taking place in several settlements, rather than a centralised production of iron tools (Fig. 5).

Findings from the settlement of Senhora do Barrocal (Sátão) reflect a slightly different reality. Everyday pottery is quite similar to that seen in other sites, but a small number of sherds of Islamic pottery was also recovered there.⁴⁰ Besides being exogenous to the region, these are fragments from six high-quality, glazed and painted vessels. These products express the capacity to establish links with outside social groups and were most likely social

³⁵ Tente, "Rock-cut graves and cemeteries."

³⁶ Prata and Cuesta-Gómez, "Farming and local economy."

³⁷ Cuesta-Gómez et al., "Empezar la casa por el tejado."

³⁸ Vigil-Escalera and Quirós, "Un ensayo de interpretación."

³⁹ Tente et al., "A produção cerâmica."

⁴⁰ Souza et al., "The islamic pottery."



Figure 4. Early medieval local pottery from Castelo de Vide.



Figure 5. Metal artefacts from the early medieval enclosure of São Gens (Celorico da Beira).

markers of local elites. Additional evidence supports this hypothesis: an inscription carved in stone, mentioning a church dated from 972, and an iron spur, the first to be found in the region at such an early chronology. Finally, Senhora do Barrocal is the only settlement to preserve rooftiles; in all the other settlements only perishable materials would have been used to cover domestic structures. While the majority of the material evidence from Senhora do Barrocal is similar to that found in coeval settlements, these particular finds reveal a distinct community. It is possible then that Senhora do Barrocal was occupied by local elites, even though we do not know the exact role they played.⁴¹

3.4. *Farming activities*

Due to the acidity of granite bedrock soils, and the archaeological formation processes at the early medieval farmsteads in Castelo de Vide, botanical and faunal remains are almost inexistent, and thus, the analysis of agropastoral practices is difficult. The presence of cattle pens and the setting of the farmsteads in areas suitable for grazing, suggests stock keeping, while quern stones indicate cereal or grain grinding. This alone might lead us to propose diverse agricultural practices mainly focused on subsistence farming. However, excavation and surface data revealed a considerable number of press facilities (lever and screw presses and rock-cut tanks) from the 6th-7th centuries.⁴² The fact that several new presses were being built and used during this period points to a demand for transformed products (olive oil and wine), that exceeded the local needs in this specific territory. This in turn indicates a surplus production, intended for supra-local trade, or perhaps even tax or rent payments, which integrated peasant groups in complex vertical relations.⁴³

In Beira Alta, the 10th century communities exploited many of the locally available resources. There is direct evidence for agriculture, herding of sheep and goats, hunting of cervids and wild boar, and gathering of wild plant foods. These communities were also able to produce most of their utensils, such as pottery, iron tools and wooden items, using local resources. Some of their daily activities were carried out collectively. However, we can also see regional complementariness in some economic activities. The specialisation in hunting and tanning, as observed at São Gens – and the probability of a transhumance system, documented in places such Soida (Celorico da Beira) and Lameiros Tapados (Vouzela) – are signs of economic complementariness between settlements which reflect a complex social organization at this level. At the local level, subsistence practices ensured the survival of community

⁴¹ Tente et al., “O sítio da Senhora do Barrocal.”

⁴² Prata and Cuesta-Gómez, “Oil and wine.”

⁴³ Prata and Cuesta-Gómez, “Farming and local economy.”

members but, at the same time, they engaged in more specialized activities allowing them to integrate in complex networks external to the community.⁴⁴ Although at first glance these communities might seem to be similar in terms of economy and social standing, the archaeological evidence from Senhora do Barrocal showed the presence of local rural elites that were operating on differentiated social levels, distinct from the remaining local communities.⁴⁵

4. *Conclusion*

Despite being much more abundant than 15 years ago and having revealed previously unknown realities, the available archaeological record for Portuguese inland territories is still limited when it comes to finds that might help us determine the scope of peasant agency during the early medieval period. As a theoretical framework, we agree that this can be a fruitful approach to grasp the complexity of past societies, particularly since it invites us to articulate our discourse around peasant groups and to consider material evidence in a more eloquent manner.

But the approach to peasant agency through the archaeological record is not unambiguous; in fact, the same set of material evidence can be interpreted in contrasting ways. 1) Peasant communities are autonomous and capable of choosing how they adapt to both socio-political and environmental circumstances. These communities would have gained autonomy in certain regions after the disappearance of the Roman administrative system and the subsequent inexistence of an equally comprehensive system, leaving room for peasants in certain regions farther from the new centres of power to effectively possess the autonomy to design their own socio-political agenda. At a later moment, in the case of Beira Alta, from the 10th century onwards, these communities would not have been able to resist more encompassing powers and succumbed to pressure through force.⁴⁶ Or 2) the changes detected in the archaeological record of rural communities result from the intervention of more centralizing powers, eventually operating at different scales and times in the territories discussed here, but that influenced the way peasant families occupied the territory, used local resources, and socially interacted. This could be seen, for example, in the regular settlement layout in Alto Alentejo from the 6th century onwards and the need for these peasant families to produce surpluses of certain products. It appears that this land-use system and associated settlement network were abandoned in the beginning of the 8th century, and latter evidence has not yet been recorded. For now, we are still

⁴⁴ Quirós, "Inequality and social complexity;" Tente, "Social inequality."

⁴⁵ Tente et al., "O sítio da Senhora do Barrocal;" Souza et al., "The Islamic pottery."

⁴⁶ Tente, "No smoke without fire;" Tente, "Social Complexity."

unable to determine if this was due to an external imposition, or if on the contrary it would reflect peasant agency in deciding a new course of action.

It is our opinion that some aspects of the peasant sphere are particularly valuable areas to inquire for agency. This is the case of material culture production, especially when concerning local and domestic manufactures; the layout and configuration of living areas; the selection of plant and animal species; and the burial grounds, as privileged areas for the expression of social dynamics. However, we must be careful to avoid overly predisposed approaches as almost any set of evidence can be used to suggest peasant agency to a certain extent.

Peasants with capacity to control their destiny and determine the essential issues in their lives could coexist with families subjected to more encompassing powers, while retaining some control over daily activities. Early medieval social dynamics were certainly much more tangled, a combination of agency and inaction, submission, and negotiation. But our interpretations and hypotheses can be improved when framed through the lens of peasant agency, which places peasant communities front and centre in the historical and social debate.

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