

Unveiling a hidden subject: peasant agency in the Douro river basin (5th-7th centuries)*

by Eduardo Cardoso Daflon

The peasantry formed the most numerous group in the vast course of history in its dialectical diversity and specificity. However, the peasants' importance was not matched by an equal research effort from historians. Something especially true during any pre-capitalist context in which the absolute relevance of this social class is shaded by the historiographical fascination about the ruling classes of yore. Hence, the present paper aims to contribute for understanding the protagonism of the "hidden subject" that was the early medieval Iberian peasantry between the 5th and 7th centuries. This class is frequently seem as static or – at most – passive. To frame a clearer picture of such an elusive social group this text presents a regional analysis with the articulation of written and archaeological sources in order to capture the peasant agency in the process of struggle with the aristocratic powers. The main hypothesis is that the process of aristocratic weakening in the Douro river basin during the 5th century ensured greater autonomy for this region peasants and that between the 6th and 7th centuries there is a new onslaught of a renewed aristocracy articulated with the Visigoth state. There was, without a doubt, a partially successful aristocratic advance, however, I would like to emphasize precisely the resistance imposed by the peasantry in a long-lasting effort to preserve their living conditions.

Early Middle Ages, Iberian Peninsula, Peasantry, Class struggle.

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1. *Hidden Subject*

Although there are classic works and manuals that pointed to the centrality of rural areas in Middle Ages societies, the historiography in general disregards its importance.¹ The medievalists focus regularly falls on aristocratic, ecclesiastical, or monarchical elements. This is often justified by the lack of sources about the peasantry.² Even when there are sources, they are mobilized to express the peasant's domination by the aristocracy. More than eighty years ago, Marc Bloch synthesized: "fields without lords are fields without a history."³

In this sense, the historical discipline was since its birth – and even after the *Annales* renewal – very dependent on the texts. As a result, we have a double erasure of the peasantry from History. First, in the past for not leaving their own written traces and because aristocratic documentation register (if at all) their exploitation. The second erasure takes place in the present and is the result of the medievalists relative disinterest towards the medieval peasant.⁴ This continues to perpetuate yesterday's inequalities today. This becomes even more dramatic when we specifically consider the early medieval centuries.

Fortunately, the last few decades have offered a real renewal of the possibilities of studying the agrarian space and the European Early Middle Ages peasantry. Movement made possible through archaeology, being referred to as an archaeological turn.⁵ Something we can see as well for the Iberian, a context on which I will focus on this paper.⁶ This discipline has been revealing a series of direct records of material peasant life that are indispensable to understand these hidden subjects. However, another problem is posed even with this remarkable development.

2. *Iberian Early Middle Ages: two versions of the same reality*

Before proceeding, it is worth to establish the main narratives built about the Iberian peasantry during the so-called Visigothic Period. The initial point

¹ Baschet, *A Civilização Feudal*, 96; Bloch, *Historia Rural Francesa*; Le Goff, *Civilização do Ocidente Medieval*, 35.

² Daflon and Magela, "Porquês de uma História," 42-62. The concept of peasantry is quite controversial and it is not the main objective of this text. For a balance see Sevilla Gusmán and González De Molina, *Sobre a evolução*. I would also like to point out that recently I made a theoretical effort to apply the concept of peasant to understand the Early Medieval period Daflon, "Considerações sobre o conceito."

³ Bloch, *Feudal society*, 242.

⁴ Cardoso, "Camponês, campesinato," 24-9.

⁵ Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements*, 156-94; Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, 383-588; Escalona, "Early Castilian peasantry," 119-45.

⁶ Quirós Castillo, "Early Medieval Villages," 13-26; Tejerizo García, "Unearthing Peasant Societies," 75-108.

I would like to make is that these social agents are apprehended differently when studied by historians and archaeologists. Thus, it is necessary to know the interpretation advanced by each of these disciplines.

Apart from some specific studies, among historians, the peasantry is rarely the central focus of analysis.⁷ In general, peasants are mobilized as part of broader discussions. For example, one could highlight the debates on Visigothic (proto)feudalism, in which peasants appear as dependents on the aristocracy.⁸ Or this can even be seen the discussions about the prevalence of slavery during the Early Middle Ages.⁹

The historiography approaches these topics basically through textual documentation and historians tend to look at the whole peninsula in order to incorporate as many sources as possible. This would be methodologically justified by the relatively precarious peasant records. Consequently, it also blurs regional and chronological specificities, mainly because some of the main sources used are normative.¹⁰ In other words, sources that lack a precise geographic insertion and sometimes uncertain dating.

This blurred image of the history of the Early Medieval Iberian peasantry is evidently problematic and it does not allow a more complete understanding of that society. In addition, it ends up reinforcing a current view of the peasantry as an ahistorical being. In other words, a group that tends to be miserable and practically does not experience changes over time and space.¹¹

Besides that, little importance was given to material culture during most of the 20th century. That is related to the nature of the archaeological knowledge available about Visigothic society. Until then, archaeology was largely influenced by Francoism and focused on artistic or architectural aspects.¹² That is, until the rural archaeology boom of the 2000s, the available research had little potential to contribute to the understanding of the peasantry.

During the first decades of the 21st century, there was an increase in university research and especially in commercial archaeology, which accompanied the major infrastructure works in Spain and Portugal. This led to an undeniable increase in the number of published data.¹³ In archaeology, peasants have been studied based on specific excavations. This is done by avoiding drawing generalizations from a clear-cut archaeological context. Even so, a crucial result of this “archaeological turn” was the recent publication of re-

⁷ Thompson, “Peasant Revolts,” 11-23; García Moreno, “Campesino hispanovisigodo,” 171-87.

⁸ Barbero, and Vigil, *Formación del feudalismo*, 155-200; García Moreno, *Historia de España Visigoda*, 247-54; Manzano Moreno, *Historia de España*, vol. 2, 83.

⁹ Bonnassie, “Supervivencia y Extinción,” 13-75.

¹⁰ Bastos, “Escravo, servo ou camponês?,” 79-82.

¹¹ Handy, “Almost idiotic wretchedness,” 335-42.

¹² Olmo Enciso, “Ideología y Arqueología,” 157-60; Tejerizo García, “Arqueología y nacionalismo,” 150-6; Diarte-Blasco, *Late Antique*, XII-XV.

¹³ Vigil-Escalera Guirado, “Últimos 30 años,” 271-94; Tente, “Últimos 30 anos,” 49-94; Quirós Castillo, “Early Medieval Villages,” 13-26.

gional syntheses on the Iberian rural world that tend to point to a spread of villages and farms in the Iberian Early Middle Ages.¹⁴

These syntheses have sparked an important debate among archaeologists dedicated to this period. On one hand, some argue that the archaeological data reinforces what is shown by the texts and attributes this new landscape marked by village contexts as a product of aristocratic action.¹⁵ On the other hand, several authors point out that there was a rupture of aristocratic power in vast parts of the Iberian Peninsula leading to a reality of greater peasant autonomy.¹⁶

These two frames tend not to converge on the role that peasants played between the 6th and 7th centuries. Symptomatic of the current status of our understanding is the section entitled “The peasantry and the subjugated” in Santiago Castellanos’ recent manual on Visigoths.¹⁷ Castellanos had to write two different sections to discuss the peasantry: one derived from written sources and the other from archaeology. Therefore, there is a difficulty in combining textual and archaeological references to understand past peasant societies.¹⁸ However, the peasantry and their villages in the Visigothic past “existed regardless of today’s research, and it would be a costly failure if both perspectives should not converge on their shared object”.¹⁹ Thus, the present text consists of an effort to combine these sources that have different approaches for the construction of a more complete picture of the peasants and their agency in the historical transformations of the Iberian Peninsula during the Early Middle Ages.

To carry out this proposition, it will be necessary to adjust the scale of the analysis, which marks another difference between the works of historians and archaeologists. In general, the former start from a broad spatial-temporal perspective while the latter focus on the specific details of each context. So, to try to integrate texts and material culture, I will work from the point of view of an intermediate region. My focus will be a case study that has well

¹⁴ For example, we have synthesis works on the rural world for the Guadalquivir basin García Vargas et al. “El bajo Guadalquivir”; peninsular northwest Sánchez Prado, “Power and rural landscapes,” 140-68; López Quiroga, “Hábitat, poblamiento y territorio,” 163-79; Ebro basin Laliena Corbera, “Acerca de la Articulación Social,” 149-63, some areas of Portugal Tente, “Arqueología Medieval Cristã;” Carvalho, “O final do mundo romano,” 397-435; and the surroundings of Mérida Cordero Ruiz, *Territorio emeritense durante*. In addition, we have works of a more regional scope with a peasant archaeology perspective, that is, that treat peasants as fundamental agents of landscape organization. This is the case for the Douro basin Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*; for the Catalonia region Roig Buxó, “Asentamientos rurales y poblados,” 207-52; the Madrid region Vigil-Escalera Guirado, “Granjas y Aldeas Altomedievales,” 239-84; and the Basque Country Quirós Castillo, “Arqueología del campesinado altomedieval,” 385-403.

¹⁵ Diarte-Blasco, *Late Antique and Early*, 62; Olmo Enciso, “Materiality of Complex Landscapes,” 15-42; Ariño, “Habitat rural en Península,” 104-6.

¹⁶ Martínez Jiménez, Sastre De Diego and Tejerizo García, *Iberian Peninsula*, 193; Vigil-Escalera Guirado and Quirós Castillo, “Ensayo de interpretación,” 388-98.

¹⁷ Castellanos, *Los Visigodos*, 169-77. More recently the same author has made a similar volume, with some differences, in English, see Castellanos, *Visigothic Kingdom*.

¹⁸ Martín Viso, *Asentamientos y paisajes rurales*, 12.

¹⁹ Escalona, “Early Castilian peasantry,” 138.

systematized archaeological data and that has written documentation that is geographically contextualized and able to shed some light on rural realities. Therefore, I will focus my attention in the following pages especially on the region of the Douro river basin between the 5th and 7th centuries.

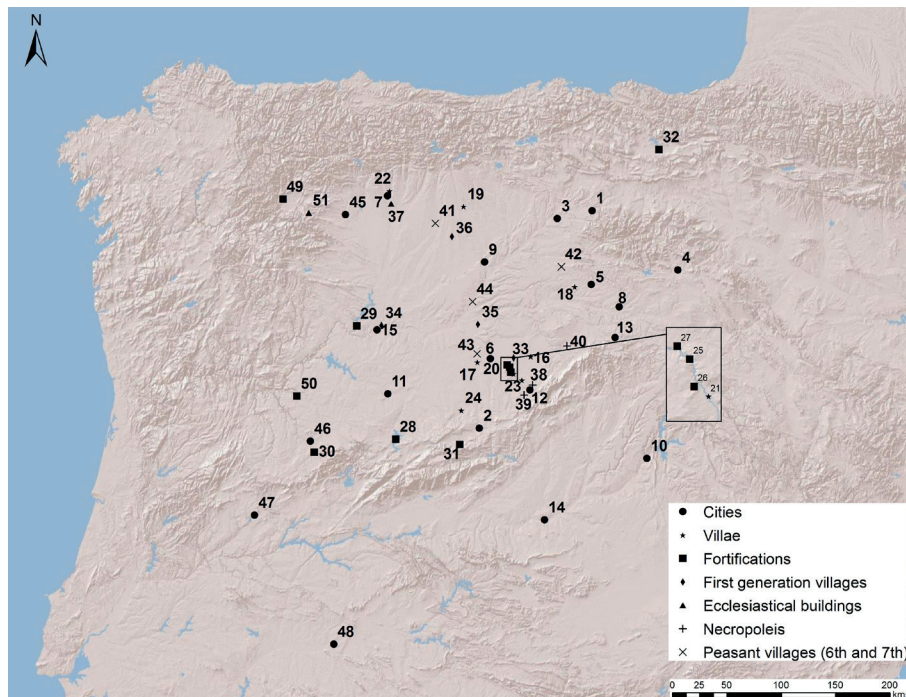


Figure 1. Map with the locations mentioned in this work. Cities: 45. Astorga 1. Auca 2. Avila 3. Burgos 4. Buitrago 46. Caliabria (Ciudad Rodrigo?) 5. Clunia, 6. Coca 47. Idanha 7. León 48. Mérida 8. Osma 9. Palencia 10. Reccopolis 11. Salamanca 12. Segovia 13. Tiermes 14. Toledo 15. Zamora; *Villae*: 16. Aguilafuente 17. Almenara-Puras 18. Baño de Valdearados 19. La Olmeda 20. Las Pizarras 21. Los Casares 22. Navatejera 23. Roda de Eresma 24. San Pedro del Arroyo; Fortifications: 25. Bernardos 49. Castro Ventosa 26. Cerro de la Virgen del Tormeón 27. Constanzana 28. El Cortinal de San Juan 29. El Cristo de San Esteban 50. Las Merchanas 30. Lerilla 31. Navasangil 32. San Pelayo; First Generation Villages: 33. Carratejera 34. El Judío 35. Las Lagunillas 36. Villafilar; Ecclesiastical Buildings: 37. Rural Church Marialba 51. Monastery in Compludo; Necropolis: 38. Espirido-Veladiez 39. Madrona 40. Duratón; Peasant Villages (6th and 7th centuries) 41. Canto Blanco 42. El Ventorro 43. Ladera de los Prados 44. Santovenia.

3. *The emergence of a new reality in the 5th century*

The area analyzed here through the combination of written and archaeological sources corresponds approximately to the territory of the North Plateau of the Iberian Peninsula. The information available to us so far points to deep changes in the second half of the 5th century after the breakdown of the Western Roman Empire, with regionalization and evident changes in material culture.

In urban spaces, for example, we see monumental areas becoming productive zones or necropolises, with the loss of prestige linked to those spaces.²⁰ Thus, cities like Clunia, Tiermes, Ávila, Salamanca, Segovia, Coca or Osma maintained an occupation between the end of the 5th and principles of the 6th centuries. However, they go through a process of de-urbanization and cannot be seen as an extension of the Late Roman Empire. In this sense, cities tended to become a fortified nucleus with few effective capacities to organize the territory.²¹

In addition to this shrinking relevance of urban centers, the ceramic record points, based on TSHT analysis, to more local dynamics that are linked to more restricted exchange networks.²² In turn, imported ceramics disappear from the archaeological record, indicating that they are not arriving from the coast to the interior of the peninsula.²³ This expresses a disarticulation of this area of Mediterranean dynamics and the emergence of much more localized ceramic productions.

In the countryside, there are also changes with practically all *uillae* from the Late Roman period. All of them show signs of a profound transformation. Unfortunately, it is a process that archaeologists struggle to determine a more accurate date.²⁴ Anyway, it seems possible to say that the *uillae* suddenly started to lose the functionality they had during the Roman period around 450 and the whole transformation was complete in less than one generation.²⁵

In *uillae* like La Olmeda, the old prestigious spaces started to be occupied by production environments and the building materials were reused for new structures at the same time as the register of local greyish ceramics appears. Some similar processes take place at other points such as Aguilafuente, Almenara-Puras, Los Casares, Las Pizarras and Baño de Valdearados.²⁶

In turn, we also see that necropolises developed within some of these ancient *uillae* around the middle of the 5th century. La Olmeda and Almenara-Puras are two places already mentioned where these burials took place, but there are other places with similar histories, such as San Pedro del Arroyo and Roda de Eresma. In the tombs, we find elements linked to a Roman past – such as *cingula militae*, “Simancas type” daggers, glass, TSHT ceramics – mixed with agricultural tools.²⁷

²⁰ Chavarría Arnau, “Romanos y Visigodos,” 188; Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 77-80.

²¹ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 92-3.

²² Diarte Blasco, *Late Antique and Early*, 50; Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 87-8.

²³ Vigil-Escalera Guirado, and Quirós Castillo, “Ensayo de interpretación,” 380-1; Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 89.

²⁴ Vigil-Escalera Guirado, and Quirós Castillo, “Ensayo de interpretación,” 362.

²⁵ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 93.

²⁶ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 110.

²⁷ TSHT or Terra Sigillata Hispanica Tardía is a Late Roman hispanic slip production. Tejerizo García, 110.

In other words, this mixture present in the funerary sphere presents us with the agency of new social groups that experienced a process of rapid transformation.²⁸ The elements linked to this Roman past progressively become rarer and ultimately disappear at the turn of the 6th century.²⁹ Thus, the functional changes added to these new burials form a picture of a permanent occupation. An occupation linked to new social agents, strongly anchored in a Roman space, but with a quite different form of existence.

In conjunction with the *uillae*'s disintegration, we have the appearance of fortified settlements called "first generation fortifications", such as El Cristo de San Esteban, Bernardos, Cerro de la Virgen del Tormejón, Las Merchanas, Navasangil or Constanzana.³⁰ These fortifications in the Douro formed an elaborate landscape and were occupied steadily between the 5th and 6th centuries.³¹ In turn, the architecture, location and findings inside – such as weapons, jewelery, glass and numerical *pizarras* – suggest that they were complex and elite spaces. The formation of these fortifications is part of the same process of de-urbanization, *uillae* crisis and reorganization of the local dominant class.³²

Another major transformation is not related to changes in existing settlements, but to the genesis of another type of occupation, the so-called "first generation villages".³³ They receive such denomination because they differ mainly in the degree of complexity from those that will emerge from the 6th century onwards with the expansion of the networks that interconnected villages and farms, which I will address later on. There are only four cases of these new 5th century villages excavated in the Douro basin – Carratejera, Las Lagunillas, El Judío and Villafilar – and even in these cases, the data we have is partial. Still, we can indicate some general characterizations.

Among them are low-floor constructions and storage silos that break with the Roman *horrea* storage method. This signals in a very direct way the profound changes in the scope of management, production and, therefore, of the social relations of the villages in the North Plateau of the 5th century. These 5th century silos are small, especially when compared with their 6th-8th century counterparts. Thus, the capacity of these storage sites in the 5th century North Plateau varied between 1,200 and 1,500 liters, in no case exceeding 2,000 liters.

It is possible to observe a functional organizational logic of the space, with similar typological structures that are relatively concentrated.³⁴ This signals the existence of communities that were far from having a spontaneous and

²⁸ Tejerizo García, 111-2.

²⁹ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades campesinas en la cuenca del Duero durante la Primera Alta Edad Media*, 114-5.

³⁰ Quirós Castillo, "Castillos altomedievales," 17-27.

³¹ Martínez Jiménez, Sastre De Diego and Tejerizo García, *Iberian Peninsula*, 195-200.

³² Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 108-9.

³³ Tejerizo García, 117.

³⁴ Tejerizo García, 120.

disorderly character in their forms of settlement. On the contrary, they were aware of a common territory and its spatial distribution. In addition, the analysis of stratigraphy, ceramics, funerary record and domestic architecture points to the presence of communities that have continuously inhabited the space for at least two generations.³⁵

Taking this into account, it is possible to say that the development of the North Plateau was marked by a very sharp disarticulation in the second half of the 5th century. It was a space that was no longer linked to the Mediterranean, nor was it incorporated by the new and incipient Suebi or Visigoth powers that were under formation.

We see a process of weakening aristocracies in that area, which sought to constitute new spaces of power through the fortified settlements. These were nodal points in the territory, but with a much lower convergence capacity than the ancient Roman cities. Even so, it is in these places that we see prestigious objects suggesting some ability to control the surpluses produced.

In any case, it seems clear that there was a prevalence of a peasant agency, signalled by the development of a domestic architecture vastly different from the one that existed during the Roman period. Villages developed over the ancient Roman *uillae* that point to a marked structural change in the landscape. Through archaeology, we can see in the second half of the 5th century the advent of village communities with a relatively small degree of internal differentiation.

Thus, it seems plausible to imagine that the disappearance of Roman imperial society had dramatic consequences for land ownership in the Douro basin. For example, through the case present in the *uita* of Melania the Younger, a noble woman that we know had difficulties selling her lands in Hispania at the beginning of the 5th century.³⁶ Although this source does not refer to the North Plateau, considering the set of information presented, it would not be surprising that this disruption would be felt in a similar way. So, it is possible that many absentee lords – who were members of a Mediterranean scope aristocracy – completely lost control over their lands and dependents with the disappearance of the Roman imperial system. This power vacuum may have been one of the fundamental elements in the temporary favouring of peasants in their confrontation with local aristocratic groups that seems to have been concentrated in fortified places.

Despite this trend, it is possible to observe in the most western portions of this territory a greater capacity for aristocratic articulation. Signs of this can be seen in Astorga, which experienced an increase in its ceramic production during the 5th century and played a relatively broad role in the regional supply of this product.³⁷ Or in Castro Ventosa, which was a qualitatively distinct for-

³⁵ Tejerizo García, 120-1.

³⁶ Clark, *Life of Melania*, 53.

³⁷ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 92; Martínez Jiménez, Sastre De Diego and Tejerizo García, *Iberian Peninsula*, 233.

tification with findings that indicate high social status and powerful political activity.³⁸

We also know of the contrasting capacity for supralocal articulation that the aristocracy of the western portions of the North Plateau possessed through some written sources. The letters from Bishop Montano attached to the Council of Toledo II indicate that Toribio – Bishop of Astorga in the middle of the 5th century – would have sent a set of books to the prelate of Rome against Priscillian heresy.³⁹ In addition, we are aware that at least one of León's aristocrats in the 460s was able to access the Roman bishopric by mail to intercede in favour of one bishop in the north of the Ebro basin.⁴⁰ Both signs of an aristocracy connected and structured by long-distance ties, absent in other parts of the North Plateau.

This distinct development is explained by the fact that León and Astorga were places that were linked to the strategies of power and domination promoted by the articulated aristocracy in the Suebi State.⁴¹ It is not impossible that this was also the case with Castro Ventosa.⁴²

In addition, the development of *uillae* in this part of the studied area follows a different path. Next to León, we have the case of the *uilla* of Navatejera, where the construction of a church potentially indicates a certain continuity as a space for post-imperial elites beyond the 6th century.⁴³ Also, in the vicinity of León, we have another example of greater continuity of aristocratic control of space: the rural church of Marialba, built in the 4th century and expanded during the 5th century.⁴⁴

Therefore, we see that around 450 there is a profound disruption in much of the North Plateau that leads to a peasant agency ascendancy in the face of the relative aristocratic weakening. However, at least in the western part of that territory, we see the presence of an aristocracy more articulated with the Suebi state constitution and which maintains, at least partially, its Mediterranean ties. This aristocracy, that in the second half of the 5th century signals a projection over the area of greater peasant autonomy, seems to suggest the dispersion of the ceramic record coming from Astorga.

4. *Panorama of peasant villages and farms in the 6th and 7th centuries*

From this context of the end of the 5th century, an original reality emerges at the beginning of the 6th century, in which peasant villages and farms were

³⁸ Fernández, *Aristocrats and Statehood*, 45; Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 107-9.

³⁹ Vives et al., *Concilios Visigóticos*, 49.

⁴⁰ Tejada y Ramiro, *Colección de cánones*, 962.

⁴¹ Díaz, *El Reino Suevo*; Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 93.

⁴² Martínez Jiménez, Sastre De Diego and Tejerizo García, *Iberian Peninsula*, 166.

⁴³ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 99.

⁴⁴ Diarte Blasco, *Late Antique and Early*, 118.

developed in the North Plateau.⁴⁵ Although only a relatively small number of these peasant spaces have been excavated, we know that the landscape of the Douro basin was densely populated by these settlements. Something evidenced by surveys such as the one carried out between the Voltoya and Eresma rivers that shows an average distance between the settlements of only 2 km.⁴⁶

These peasant sites were quite stable in time as indicated by the funeral records of places like Espirido-Veladiez, Madrona or Duratón. Places that have been in use for about 300 years, according to studies of materials buried next to bodies in cemeteries, represent a collective memory of the community.⁴⁷ In addition, its spatial location is quite interesting. Always being a few tens of meters away from water sources suggests a spatiality aimed at serving community interests.⁴⁸

Today, the data provided by archaeology allows us to build a general picture of these peasant spaces that were so central to the agrarian dynamics of that period. For this region, each of the domestic units in the documented settlements would consist of one or two vertical structures, between three and five low-floor huts and, perhaps, a well.⁴⁹ It is worth noting that there is a certain homogeneity in domestic architecture and that it does not have prestigious markers. Therefore, the construction of these habitats was probably the product of collective action, that is, it did not serve as an indicator of inequality within the village context.⁵⁰

The concentration of silos is often large. As an example, the Ladera de los Prados settlement concentrates a dozen of them in its central area and almost 30 in its southeastern zone and, in turn, Canto Blanco has in its central zone almost 40 storage silos.⁵¹ These concentrations could be explained by a domestic unit trying to enhance the cultivated agricultural space, but it can also indicate the presence of community logic, with the construction of this type of structure involving the community.⁵² These silos demonstrate the levels of complexity of these communities in the Douro basin and their ability to adapt. This is because we see a heterogeneity of the solutions adopted, which seem to be fundamentally correlated to the interests of domestic units in the short or medium-term.⁵³

⁴⁵ For further readings on these classifications Vigil-Escalera Guirado, "Granjas y Aldeas Altomedievales," 243-4.

⁴⁶ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 204-7.

⁴⁷ Tejerizo García, 185.

⁴⁸ Tejerizo García, 197-8.

⁴⁹ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 152; Vigil-Escalera Guirado, and Quirós Castillo, "Ensayo de interpretación," 373.

⁵⁰ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 131; Quirós Castillo, "Castillos altomedievales," 135.

⁵¹ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 152-3.

⁵² Tejerizo García, 152-3.

⁵³ Tejerizo García, 156.

In addition to the constructive solutions of these villages and farms being quite adapted to a local reality, the productive strategies also indicate the type of life that these communities experienced during the 6th and 7th centuries. Until recently, we only relied on data collected from written sources to imagine what rural production would be. More recently, bioarchaeological data applied to peasant communities has brought new perspectives for analysis.⁵⁴

What can be said with some certainty, according to the current state of research, is that the predominant animals in the Douro basin are cattle, goats and (to a lesser extent) pigs. The cattle, due to the marks of intense work, was used during heavy tasks as well as a source of milk. Goats were used mainly for wool, being sacrificed at a later age, and the pigs would have a more direct relationship with food, considering that they were sacrificed in general quite young. But bone records are found in apparently variable proportions in each location according to what we know.

In view of material culture on peasant production, it is necessary to contrast the information obtained with that which we can obtain from the written sources available to us. Contrast that more than just giving solidity to what we know from that past, it also allows us to have a better understanding. For example, in the life of Saint Fructuosus, written at the end of the 7th century, we have the reference that during childhood the saint went with his father – a *dux exercitus Spaniae* – to a region bordering the Douro basin, the mountainous territory of Bierzo. At that time, Fructuosus' father was going to list his flocks and hear from his shepherds, reinforcing the importance of animal husbandry in the region.⁵⁵ Most likely, this area corresponded to the region where he later founded his first monastery in Compludo, a few kilometers west from Astorga.

There are other cases in Fructuosus life that speak of the saint's relationship with a goat that followed him everywhere after being saved from a hunt and that is later killed by a young man, generating great anger in the saint's heart.⁵⁶ These cases highlight the importance of this animal in the territory considered here. In turn, Valerio of Bierzo's Autobiography talks about the retribution that the religious man receives in the form of a goatskin blanket.⁵⁷

The woman who sewed this blanket made a pilgrimage to the Saint Felix Church⁵⁸ and on the way she came across a group of men leading several oxen together. An ox accidentally ended up burying its horn in her without anyone being able to extract it, leaving her almost dead. Finally, a man – called by the title *dominus* – leaves the opposite side of Saint Felix Church and miraculously

⁵⁴ Peña-Chocarro, "La arqueobotánica," 83-98.

⁵⁵ Nock, *Vita Sancti Fructuosi*, 88-9.

⁵⁶ Nock, 100-5.

⁵⁷ Aherne, *Valerio of Bierzo*, 118-26.

⁵⁸ The exact location of this church is unknown, but it would not be unlikely that it was close to the Compludo monastery – founded by Fructuosus – and therefore just a few kilometers from Astorga.

ly restores her health. Here we have the reinforcement of the idea of animal husbandry as a central point of peasant activities and the primordial use of cattle as draft animals in this context.

Still, in Valerio's autobiography, we have the report that the religious received two horses from a "most illustrious man" to help in the activities of the religious man.⁵⁹ It is an animal that also appears sometimes in the fauna record of the settlements with marks of intense work. It was a gift that aroused such envy in the other monks with whom he lived that the prior of the monastery even ordered people to steal them.⁶⁰ Thieves were unsuccessful and return empty-handed to find divine punishment with their lands destroyed and their oxen stolen.⁶¹ Thus, horses seem to have been highly valued animals to the point of arousing such revolt on the part of the other monks.⁶² Perhaps it is even an animal linked to elite elements since the one who gives the horses to Valerio is a man from the aristocracy.

Pigs appear in just two *pizarras* and their use is not mentioned in any of the other written documents in the Douro basin.⁶³ This reaffirms what is apparent in the material record, which has a minimal swine presence. Thus, the pig was not a central element in the peasant resource management strategies, nonetheless, they were raised in order to diversify production and minimize risks. This animal's secondary role in peasant production is possibly linked to the fact that only its meat was used, while the others brought other benefits, such as wool, milk or enhanced the capacity for human effort in agricultural and transport work.

Regarding the crops, it is difficult to compare the written sources and materials since we are very much in need of studies on the seeds found in the excavated settlements in the North Plateau. But, through the texts of the *pizarras* we know about cereal crops – such as wheat and barley – as well as specific references to olives and mention of olive oil production and even the cultivation of vineyards.⁶⁴ Perhaps at least some of these cultivated vineyards supplied the monasteries linked to Saint Fructuosus' monastic rule.⁶⁵ Finally, the agricultural production of these villages and farms was supplemented with the consumption of vegetables and, to a lesser extent, chickens, and seafood, which had a minimal bone register in the settlements.⁶⁶

These peasant villages and farms were far from being autonomous. Considering some elements of material culture as indicators – such as metal ob-

⁵⁹ Aherne, *Valerio of Bierzo*, 101-3.

⁶⁰ Aherne, 103.

⁶¹ Aherne, 103.

⁶² Such appreciation is also suggested by the slate number 42. All references to the *pizarras* are found in Velázquez Soriano, *Pizarras Visigodas*.

⁶³ *PizVis* 54, 92.

⁶⁴ Wheat (*PizVis* 34, 54, 93, 95); barley (*PizVis* 31, 78, 79, 96); olive (*PizVis* 103); olive oil (*PizVis* 95); and wine (*PizVis* 116, 124, 149).

⁶⁵ Campos Ruiz and Roca Melia, *Santos Padres Espanholes*, 142-3.

⁶⁶ Campos Ruiz and Roca Melia, 142-3; Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 171.

jects, ceramics, glass, and toreutics – it is possible to observe the complexity of these settlements in the Douro basin, as they demonstrate various forms of circulation and integration.⁶⁷

The types of ceramics consumed indicate production and distribution at local and regional scales. On the other hand, we can perceive heterarchical forms between different settlements, with a micro-regional exchange of specialist artisans and, to a certain extent, an inter-village division of tasks. In turn, findings in bronze, glass or more refined metals express the relationship of Douro villages with productive and technological chains through vertical circulation and signal inequalities within the village contexts.

In other words, the material record points in the opposite direction to a very traditional view of rural communities basically focused on self-supply. It must therefore be understood that there is a complex network of production and distribution of many objects in the Douro basin, which met the daily needs of peasant life.⁶⁸

Having established this panorama of villages and farms, it really seems that we have a fractured reading. The spatial location of the villages near to water sources, the construction techniques, the organization of production and the forms of storage are material elements that suggest communities with high degrees of autonomy. On the other hand, in the written sources they register the presence of noblemen – *dux*, *dominus* and *uir illustrissimus* – with the capacity to subject dependents and some level of concentration of wealth.

However, I would like to reinforce here that we must be careful about regionalization and chronology of the historical processes. The sources that most clearly establish levels of hierarchy and social domination are late and concentrated in the western portions of the Northern Plateau. In other words, it was precisely those that since the 5th century had preserved an aristocratic class that ended up much more powerful than in the other parts of this zone. So, we need to understand this development process and how the peasantry is related to it.

5. *Transformations in villages and farms in the 6th and 7th centuries*

Due to the limits in the establishment of clear chronological sequences in the villages and farms in the Douro basin, it is often difficult to understand the details of the historical transformations that these spaces went through. However, some clues are noticeable through careful analysis of two elements: silos and cemeteries.

⁶⁷ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 159-68; Vigil-Escalera Guirado and Quirós Castillo, “Ensayo de interpretación del registro arqueológico,” 376-81.

⁶⁸ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 167-8.

About silos, these changes can be seen through their dimensions. About 75% of the silos in the North Plateau can be classified as small, that is, with a capacity between 500 and 1,500 liters. Around 20% would be average, with a volume ranging between 1,500 and 3,000 liters. In other words, around 95% of the silos would correspond to small or medium structures linked to the immediate consumption needs of the peasant families who managed the surplus.

Only about 5% of the silos could be classified as large, that is, with a capacity greater than 3,000 liters and an insignificant number of these silos would have had a capacity greater than 5,000 liters. It is interesting to note that these higher capacity silos are associated with late settlement phases, dated between the end of the VII and the beginning of the VIII, as in the case of El Ventorro, Ladera de los Prados, Santoenia or Canto Blanco. This allows us to raise the proposition that in these later moments there was an increase in the storage capacity in the silos.⁶⁹ This could perhaps be read both as a possible concentration of wealth on the part of some domestic units in late periods or the need to produce a larger surplus in order to meet external demands.

In turn, changes in burials follow a chronology like that of silos. Let us start with those that are undoubtedly the predominant funerary disposition in the Douro basin: the community necropolises.⁷⁰ As already mentioned, there is in general a prolonged use of these spaces and the data available to us allows us to perceive that there is a change in the logic of appropriation of space that takes place between the 6th and 7th centuries.⁷¹ Thus, it represents a second moment of rupture with the transformation that took place in the 5th century.

These burials in necropolises were for a long time seen as products of ethnic, Visigoth or Hispanic-Roman identities depending on the elements found in the graves. An interpretation that, despite not being totally outdated, finds much less support in historiography than a few decades ago.⁷² One of the most relevant findings in these cemeteries for this “ethnic” attribution by archaeologists were elements of dress, such as brooches.

However, these objects had a technological and specialized production chain linked to aristocratic production centers. Therefore, they refer less to an ethnic element and more to elements of social distinction within the com-

⁶⁹ Quirós Castillo, “Silos y sistemas,” 171-92; Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 156;

⁷⁰ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 184.

⁷¹ Tejerizo García, 186-7.

⁷² This is a very problematic position since the number of these brooches are found in just a few tombs and even less frequent when considering the total number of burials. Quantification that is nuclear, since the tombs were reused. Furthermore, in addition to burials, the findings linked to specific “ethnicities” are practically null in other spaces – such as the Toledo or Reccopolis region – where we know that the Visigoth aristocracy was concentrated. The ethnic explanation generates more problems than it solves. Thus, it may be more productive to think that through these burials we can find a difference in status due to the presence of this type of object. Diarte Blasco, *Late Antique and Early*, 131-2; Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 184.

munity. In this way, we could interpret these findings as signs of the different scales of power within the community, as well as their internal tensions. After all, there were concrete characters within rural areas capable of accessing these luxury goods, even when importing medium and long-range goods – such as ceramics or glass – was quite restricted or null.⁷³

Thus, both the changes in personal objects at burials and the appearance of brooches from the 7th century onwards are part of this dispute process in the communities. In turn, the brooches perhaps represented the use of strategies for domination of the individual or articulated aristocracy in the state for peasant domination.⁷⁴ After all, these objects had production processes that made them very restrictive. They enabled paths of social control carried out through the creation, consolidation or subsumption of local leaders through the granting of gifts.⁷⁵

We also have the appearance of isolated burials within the villages. In them, we also have objects deposited with the dead (such as knives, sickles, and ceramics), which are often similar and contemporary to those of the community necropolises. This is something that could indicate that this funerary typology was a type of prestige, translating to a greater competitiveness among the various domestic units during the 7th century. Thus, these types of isolated burials could indicate a greater autonomy of the domestic unit in relation to the community when it comes to disposing of the dead. This could indicate an internal dispute for memory and even for property, which would explain the proximity of these burials to housing.⁷⁶

The combination of information from silos and funerary spaces is a window for us to glimpse the changes that were taking place in the peasant communities of the Douro between 6th and 7th centuries. That is, they indicate new relations and internal tensions in the communities that were absent in previous periods.

So, through the archaeological data, there is almost no evidence for asymmetric social relations of any kind among peasants in the villages. Even when we can verify some material differentiation, we cannot speak of inequality in the strict sense. In other words, it is not possible to find any capacity for significant wealth concentration by some village members. However, a careful analysis allows us to glimpse the social “micro-stratification” that is reflected in differences in status and class. However, even though these inequalities exist between social groups in the peasant communities of the Douro, they are

⁷³ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 190-1.

⁷⁴ A detailed discussion on the historiography produced regarding the Visigothic state would escape the objectives of this text. For a valuable critical balance see Pachá, “Estado e Relações,” specially the first chapter. Here I understand the state as a social relationship. Some general reflections on this idea can be found in Bastos, “Os ‘Reinos Bárbaros,’” 1-11. I applied this conceptualization on another paper: Daflon, “Tumultos e Clamores,” 132-67.

⁷⁵ Carvajal Castro and Tejerizo García, “Teorizar el estado”; Godelier, *O enigma do dom*.

⁷⁶ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades* 181-4.

quite opaque. Despite this opacity, we can say that these differences and inequalities become more and more evident as we move through the 7th century.

6. *Fronts under aristocratic pressure*

Having established the villages' and farms' social structure in the Douro basin and their historical transformations, we still need to consider the processes that interfered with them and how they affected the class struggle and the condition of peasant existence. As argued in the previous sections, these transformations begin in the region of the Douro basin with the final disarticulation of the Roman Empire, which resulted in an adaptation of the elites. These elites started to occupy different spaces from the old Roman *uillae* with the construction of fortifications. The cities also showed signs of weakening aristocratic powers in much of the Douro basin. The exception seems to have been the western parts of the Douro, close to cities like León and Astorga where the ceramic distribution and the presence of rural churches dated between the 4th and 5th centuries would indicate a certain continuity of the aristocratic powers.

In this item, I want to try to understand how the aristocracy rearticulation process took place in the North Plateau and its consequent greater capacity to exploit the peasantry. Thus, the first important point concerns the broader processes of aristocratic rearticulations in the Iberian Peninsula, which were already happening in some form by the end of the 5th and beginnings of the 6th centuries.

As stated before, it is especially true for the regions of the peninsular north. This is something that could be related with the process of consolidating the Suebi state. However, it also showed its first signs in the areas of the Ebro valley, Catalonia, the Tagus valley, and Mérida with the formation of the Visigoth state in Hispania.⁷⁷

The state formation only gained well-defined contours after the reigns of Leovigild and Reccared.⁷⁸ Not because these were two "strong" monarchs, but because during the period they occupied the throne they were able to bring the aristocracy together through negotiation and violence. It is with these two kings that a more structured control over the peninsular territory is established, which translates into the materialization of constructive projects. These constructions were expressed on a smaller scale in rural churches and Christianization of the urban environment and within the scope of royal power with the foundation of Reccopolis and the monumentalization of Vega Baja de Toledo between mid-6th and mid-7th centuries. These were projects that

⁷⁷ Daflon, "Desvelando um Sujeito Oculto," 293.

⁷⁸ There is abundant bibliography that points out these reigns as turning points in the process of state formation and consolidation. For an overview, see Castellanos, *Los Godos y la Cruz*.

voraciously demanded peasant expropriation on a much larger scale than during the 5th or the first half of the 6th century.

Thus, even though there was a shaking in Roman forms of domination, it was relatively brief in several parts of the peninsula and each of them had a particular development. Thus, we must consider the evolution of the aristocratic articulation in the North Plateau with the state powers that began to integrate the entire peninsula during the 6th century. That is essential for us to have a better idea of the degree of peasant autonomy and of the historical transformations underway. It will also help us to have a better understanding of the peasantry's relative resilience and of the aristocracy's ability to extract surplus.

In order to do so, let us return to the previously mentioned letters of Bishop Montano of Toledo attached to the minutes of the Second Council of Toledo of 531.⁷⁹ These are references from the end of the first third of the 6th century that can shed light on the configuration of social relations in the North Plateau. The first letter is addressed "to you, dearest brothers and sons of the Palentine territory". The second is addressed to a figure called Toribio that we should not confuse with the one that corresponded with Bishop Leo of Rome in the 5th century.⁸⁰

The center of the dispute recorded in these texts is the fact that there was a disregard for the authority of Toledo's metropolitan bishop. That is because the clergy of Palencia called a bishop from another region to consecrate churches in the city. The other region to which they refer probably corresponded to the Suebi Kingdom because Montano said that this action was against the interests of the Visigoth monarch.⁸¹

After admonishing the Palentine clergy for their attitudes, we have the text addressed to Toribio. It is not clear who this individual would be, this being a heated debate that goes back decades in the past.⁸² A first possibility that we can quickly exclude is that he was the bishop of Palencia since this was a vacant seat for a long time at the time of writing these correspondences.

Much of the difficulty we face concerns the terms that Montano uses to refer to Toribio, calling him "*domino et filio*" first and then "*sacerdotis*".⁸³ The term "son" is generally used to refer to a layperson or member of the lowest rank in the clergy. As we know from the letter that Toribio is no longer in secular life, we could assume that he was someone of relevance as an abbot. However, the complicating element comes next when Montano calls him "co-bishop".⁸⁴ Thus, there is a direct mention of an episcopal dignity related to the

⁷⁹ Isla Frez, "Desde el Reino," 41-52; Martin, "Las cartas de Montano," 403-426; Martin, "Montanus et les schismatiques," 9-20.

⁸⁰ Vives et al., *Concilios Visigóticos*, 46.

⁸¹ Vives et al., 49.

⁸² Thompson, *Los Godos en España*, 406; Castellanos, and Martín Viso, "Local articulation," 12-3.

⁸³ Vives et al., *Concilios Visigóticos*, 50-1.

⁸⁴ Vives et al., 51.

figure of Toribio, reinforced by some other terms such as *celsitudo uestra* and *caritas uestra*, which in the period could also be used to refer to bishops.⁸⁵

In this sense, an interesting hypothesis is that Toribio could have been a bishop who served in the Suebi Kingdom, perhaps even in Astorga. In fact, it is possible that his name would indicate a potential kinship or the desire to claim the memory of the former bishop of the same name from the 5th century famous for having fought priscilianism. This kinship would not be impossible given the history of episcopal families in the Iberian Early Middle Ages.⁸⁶ Thus, these letters were meant to warn (threaten?) the alleged bishop of Astorga that the solution of the crisis in Palencia was in his interest. After all, it would avoid a Visigoth-Suebi conflict that had its main stage in the dispute for the North Plateau.

This interpretation seems adequate and in accordance with the picture offered by the dispersion of ceramics from Astorga. In other words, the western region of the Douro basin was linked to aristocratic dynamics, perhaps linked to the Suebi state, and it was making efforts to project its influence and capacity for domination towards the North Plateau. It was in a western portion in which the maintenance of aristocratic powers was much more vigorous than in other parts of the area considered here.

When Toledo began to assert itself as a central articulation pole for the Visigoth state from the Southern Meseta, in the beginning of the 6th century, the dispute grew between the Suebic and Visigothic aristocratic factions for the central zones of the Douro Basin. If we accept that Toribio was bishop of Astorga, it makes more sense to mention a certain privilege mentioned by the co-bishop of Astorga and agreed with Montano's predecessor at the Toledo see. According to the letters, the territories of Segovia, Buitrago and Coca were granted, this being done not by right, but in view of the dignity of the episcopal office and to curb "vile" interests. And, adds Montano, "(...) bear in mind it was granted to him only as long as it could help him. We wanted to take these measures so that in no way you omit the old customs[.]"⁸⁷

Within this line of interpretation, the reference to an agreement between the potential co-bishop of the Astorga See and the former Toledan prelate would expose distinct phases of the tensions between the Visigoth and Suebi powers throughout the North Plateau. The idea is that these letters reveal intense disputes to the point that there is the cession of the ecclesiastical territory of three municipalities to break and stabilize tension. The relations became unbalanced again when the representatives from the bishopric of Astorga went to consecrate basilicas in Palencia, a city that would be officially outside the established pact and, therefore, under the authority of Toledo.

⁸⁵ Isla Frez, "Desde el Reino," 46.

⁸⁶ Orlandis, *Historia del Reino Visigodo*, 31-2.

⁸⁷ Vives et al., *Concilios Visigóticos*, 51.

These letters allow us to talk about the beginnings of Christianization in the Douro basin region since the first half of the 6th century, with the construction of basilicas in Palentine territory. The churches appear in the archaeological record of rural areas just in more advanced periods. This is what makes us think that these documents signal the construction of churches within cities and their suburbs. However, this is something that the archaeological reality at the moment still eludes us. Anyway, we can read these church buildings – the consecration of which generated so much tension – within a process of rearticulation of the aristocracy that is now able to build places of worship where there were none before.

Thus, the written sources testify to a process of revitalization of the old urban environments. Somewhat like what archaeology informs us from the middle of the 6th century and that is consistent with the peninsular process of resuming the development of cities in the period between the years 550 and 650.⁸⁸ This period was marked by an aristocratic articulation through of the Visigoth state and potentially by expanding the peasantry's submission capacity.⁸⁹ However, despite this urban renewal, the absence of Mediterranean ceramics in the Douro basin from the 5th century onwards demonstrates its isolation from long-distance circuits.⁹⁰

Thus, the autonomy achieved by the North Plateau peasantry with the end of the Roman Empire started to change in the beginning of the 6th century. On the one hand, we have the rearticulation of the local aristocracy and the incorporation of this region within the broader logic that began to be formed from two nodal points, the Suebi and Visigoth states. Evidently, after the conquest of the Suebi Kingdom in 585, the fundamental link was Toledo, but without discarding the importance of local aristocracies and *Gallaecia*.

Perhaps it is even possible to map the progressive advances being made by the aristocracy through the creation of the few bishoprics in the Douro basin region. For example, we know that there was an episcopal see active in Palencia when the signature of Murila, prelate of that city, was registered at the Council of Toledo III in 589.⁹¹ He is one of the bishops who abhors Arianism during the conversion of King Reccared to Nicene Christianity.⁹² It is a significant fact that the person responsible for the Palentine see had until then been an Arian, given the closer ties that would link him to the Visigothic monarchy. This reinforces the thesis that control over a disputed region must have been the keynote throughout the middle of the 6th century. It is known that the tradition of the order of signature of the conciliar minutes is based on

⁸⁸ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 233.

⁸⁹ Martínez Jiménez, Sastre De Diego and Tejerizo García, *Iberian Peninsula*, 154-78; Martínez Jiménez, "Crisis or Crises?" 81-5.

⁹⁰ Diarte Blasco, *Late Antique and Early*, 76, 79.

⁹¹ Here we have a transmission error in the documents, Murila having been registered for the city of Valencia. Certainly, Murila is from the Palencia see, being mentioned in other documents linked to that city, see García Moreno, *Prosopografía del Reino Visigodo*, 139-40.

⁹² Vives et al., *Concilios Visigóticos*, 122.

the antiquity of cathedra. So, we can safely assume that Murila was already the bishop of Palencia around 579.

By this same logic, Proculus of Segovia must have started his episcopate around 580.⁹³ With regard to the Salamanca bishopric, we could establish its ordination between 585 and 586 due to its position in relation to the signatures of other bishops whose dates are clearer in the minutes of the Third Council of Toledo.⁹⁴ Another bishopric that points us towards the consolidation of aristocratic powers is Osma. This last one must have been founded in the last years of the 6th century.⁹⁵ The see of Ávila is mentioned for the first time in 610, with Bishop Justinian signing the decree of King Gundemaro and, finally, we have the diocese of Caliabria that was probably consecrated around 625.⁹⁶

Thus, we see that the oldest bishopric in the Douro basin after Astorga is the Palencia. It may have emerged precisely from this dispute previously narrated as a kind of projection of the Toledan aristocracy. Then we would have a movement of aristocratic inflection starting from the southeastern sectors of the Douro basin with the creation of the bishoprics of Segovia and Osma. This was perhaps related to an expansion of episcopal powers in the western zone of the high Ebro valley, with the development of see-like places as Auca within a similar chronology.⁹⁷ Only at the beginning of the 7th century did we have any inflection of the aristocratic powers through the bishoprics in the southwest area of North Plateau, through the creation of the dioceses of Ávila and Caliabria.

A notable sign of the consolidation of these episcopal powers that form in the Douro can be seen through a reference registered in the eighth canon of the Council of Mérida celebrated in 666. In it, we see that Bishop Sclua from Idanha complains before the episcopal assembly against Justo who was the prelate of Salamanca. The reason for this action was because the Salmantine bishopric had come to exercise control over a territory that would belong to the see of Idanha.⁹⁸

Even though the conciliar assembly fulfilled the function of exercising collective control over the individual voracity of the Salmantine bishop, this does not change the fact of the tension that existed. So, the fundamental thing I wanted to highlight is that throughout the 7th century the North Plateau ecclesiastical powers were no longer timid. On the contrary, they were able to

⁹³ Vives et al., 137.

⁹⁴ Vives et al., *Concilios Visigóticos*, 137; García Moreno, "Campesino hispanovisigodo entre bajos," 185.

⁹⁵ Vives et al., *Concilios Visigóticos*, 157.

⁹⁶ Vives et al., 137. Its exact location is uncertain, but apparently it was close to Ciudad Rodrigo as proposed by García Moreno, *Prosopografía del Reino Visigodo*, 174.

⁹⁷ Castellanos and Martín Viso, "Local articulation," 12-4.

⁹⁸ Vives et al., *Concilios Visigóticos*, 330-2. These conflicts possibly date back to the end of the 6th century with the redrawing of ecclesiastical borders after the conquest of the Suebi Kingdom in 585.

project themselves several tens of kilometers towards the Southern Plateau. A process that would only be imaginable if we understand this data in the sense of episcopal powers consolidation – i.e., aristocratic powers – in the region of the Douro river basin.

The fortifications are another aspect we need to consider if we want to understand the evolution of the peasant condition. As previously presented, the fortifications began to emerge with the collapse of the Roman system in the peninsula and remained active and occupied until around 550.⁹⁹ We need to reflect on its historical development in order to comprehend the aristocratic conditions and their potential capacities for peasantry exploitation.

This interval in the fortress's activities in the middle of the 6th century has a curious temporal correspondence with the bishoprics formative process. We lack data to state with certainty that there was a correlation between these two factors, but as a hypothesis, it could be proposed that the Douro aristocratic powers articulation was favoured by the approximation with state powers that were advancing on three fronts. From the south, we have the projection from Toledo (front 1), whose Montano's letters would be an interesting and early indication. There were inflections from the Ebro valley (front 2) during the 6th century where a network of important rural churches was being created. In this eastern sector, there is also the bishopric of Auca and the presence of aristocratic powers strong enough to be called senators.¹⁰⁰ To the West (front 3) we have the potential movements from Astorga at first under the Suebi and later under the Visigoths.

Bearing this information in mind, the reference that Leovigild did not need to militarily conquer the North Plateau unlike other parts of the peninsula is truly relevant.¹⁰¹ The exception would be the zones of Zamora or Burgos that offered resistance. This could indicate that the Douro was a space relatively well integrated with the Visigoth power in the second half of the 6th century. However, this perspective would be incongruous with what was presented in the previous pages.

There is an alternative explanation more consistent with what has been presented so far. The lack of conquest on the part of Leovigild may perhaps be understood as the comparatively fragile and disaggregated Douro local aristocracy quickly embracing integration with supra-local powers. An interpretation that makes clear a strategy that could strengthen local aristocracies and their capacities for action beyond the limited spaces that were able dur-

⁹⁹ Diarte Blasco, *Late Antique and Early*, 71; Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 100-9.

¹⁰⁰ The life of St. Milan records this process, which portrays a rural world in the process of Christianization with mention to a religious named Felix who worked at *Castellum Bilibium*. See: Vazquez e Praga, *Vita S. Emiliani*, 14-5 and 24-7. Another interesting fact is that rural churches are being found refer to a chronology of the 7th century, but until now we cannot discard that they might be older. See: Martínez Jiménez, Sastre De Diego, and Tejerizo García, *Iberian Peninsula*, 225.

¹⁰¹ Fernández, *Aristocrats and Statehood*, 186-7.

ing the 5th century.¹⁰² This would have caused the North Plateau aristocracy to abandon the settlements on higher grounds and to articulate again from ground level points through the bishoprics in formation throughout the second half of the 6th century and the beginning of the 7th century. Bishoprics were guaranteed and strengthened by their relationship with the monarchy and participation in councils.

This perspective even offers another interpretation for the Leovigild bellicose exceptions against Burgos and Zamora. This may have happened in this way because these are the spaces closest to more articulated and vigorous areas. Spaces with potential associations with other powers such as the Suebi or the aristocracies in the northwest of the Ebro valley. Therefore, these aristocracies yearned for greater autonomy in relation to the monarchic powers.

Thus, it can be argued that it would be an effective link with Toledo, which allowed an expansion of the aristocracy's capacity to advance peasant communities from the 6th and the 7th centuries, following different historical rhythms in each of the sub-regions. In other words, the association with the powers that were projected from Toledo was a strategy that had the potential to expand the local powers' authority over the peasant communities that maintained their autonomy in relation to the Douro aristocracy.

In this sense, it is a proposition that is in line with what Martín Viso suggests in his analysis of the Visigothic *pizarras* as a product of state action. He reviews data from well-contextualized places in order to better comprehend these documents of such arid interpretation. These places include the fortifications of Lerilla, El Cortinal de San Juan and Cerro de la Virgen del Castillo.¹⁰³ Due to the enormous distance that separates these fortified spaces, it would be more rational to point out that the *pizarras* were the product of social groups that had access to standardized forms of accounting. The reference to payments made by people with the title of "*domnus*" gives strength to this thesis of taxation over an area or contrast between those who pay *per mano sua* and those who pay *per sui domni mandate*. In addition, the number of names exceeds what would be expected for the inhabitants of a single village.¹⁰⁴

Therefore, the thesis that this type of accounting had a state origin seems to be reasonable.¹⁰⁵ This idea could be reinforced by the fact that this type of record has existed since the Roman period, as indicated by the rare finding of a *pizarra* in the stratigraphic context at San Pelayo.¹⁰⁶ That is, standardization and generalization would be related to taxes collected by the state, understood here with a supra-regional articulation of aristocratic powers.

¹⁰² Castellanos and Martín Viso, "Local articulation," 12-4.

¹⁰³ Martín Viso, "Tributación y escenarios," 273-5, 297.

¹⁰⁴ Martín Viso, 270.

¹⁰⁵ Martín Viso, 276.

¹⁰⁶ Dahí Elena, "Contexto cerámico," 79-104.

The findings of *pizarras* in large numbers would lead us to believe that it was something very widespread throughout the peninsular center. However, it is noteworthy that they are concentrated on some key points and their surroundings. Thus, the *pizarras* would be an indication of local powers in the Douro basin that, at some level, exercised control over the peasantry and were part of a broader social system that projected itself from Toledo.¹⁰⁷ This is what ultimately expanded the capacity of the local aristocracy to submit peasant communities.¹⁰⁸

Interpreted within this perspective, the *pizarras* give more elements to confirm that an articulation with the Visigothic state was a strategy of the Douro local aristocracies to expand their domination over the peasantry. A projection that seems to accompany the process described through the other sources that go back to the beginning of the 6th century with Montano's letters. The *pizarras* concentrated in the southwest region of the Douro basin correspond exactly with the area of bishoprics formation in the late 6th and 7th centuries.

However, it is noteworthy that these local powers – aristocrats, bishops, or members of the church in general – systematically negotiated these relations. For example, in the Autobiography of Valerio of Bierzo we see the need that the bishop of Astorga had to instrumentalize the actions of the Bercian monk.¹⁰⁹ Martín Viso also goes so far as to propose that the reference to Fructuosus' father at the beginning of his *uita* is describing an officer, a *dux*, going to collect taxes in the region.¹¹⁰ These constant renegotiations “would probably prevent the existence of continuous taxation, since its main goal was to symbolize the implementation of the Visigoth political authority, rather than obtaining a great revenue”.¹¹¹

It is also worth saying that in the Life of Saint Fructuosus we may have another clue to the process of local powers articulation with the *social relationship* that was the state. This is something that emerges when the hagiographer tells us that the saint was sought even by members of the Royal Palace.¹¹² Thus, we have one more testimony that would reinforce the hypothesis defended here.

It is also remarkable that there is an overlap between the *pizarras* concentration zone and the place of formation of episcopal powers in the Douro. Besides that, there is yet another expressive correspondence in the data. After all, it is in this same area that the aforementioned brooches were found in burials at the North Plateau.¹¹³ As we have seen, these items are characterized

¹⁰⁷ Martín Viso, “Tributación y escenarios,” 276.

¹⁰⁸ Martín Viso, “Prácticas locales,” 72-7.

¹⁰⁹ Martín Viso, 78.

¹¹⁰ Martín Viso, 78.

¹¹¹ Martín Viso, 78.

¹¹² Nock, *Vita Sancti Fructuosi*. 96-9.

¹¹³ Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades*, 228.

by being luxury objects and with complex production processes, and for that reason, their manufacturing was linked up to contexts of enormous political prestige such as the specialized production sites excavated in Reccopolis.¹¹⁴

In other words, we see the aristocratic powers converging strategies that were progressively consolidating their strength in the Douro basin between the 6th and 7th centuries. This consolidation was only possible through the ties between the local aristocracy – weak at first – and the *social relation* formed by the Visigoth state projected from Toledo. This articulation was necessary to reduce the internal cohesion of the villagers and increase domination over peasants by submitting the peasantry upper layers in favour of the aristocratic class interests. This can be perfectly understood if we take these brooches as gifts that not only demarcated a social hierarchy in peasant communities but also as objects used to reinforce it.¹¹⁵

7. Conclusion: peasant agency in the North Plateau

The proposed interpretation might at first seem like a contradiction between written and archaeological sources. However, it reveals itself to be different moments and territorialities of the same historical transformation. Its process signals the emergence of peasant communities in the Iberian Peninsula North Plateau. These communities achieved high levels of autonomy in the context of the Roman Empire's disarticulation and the consequent aristocratic weakening. After this fragile moment, we followed about 250 years of aristocratic attacks on these peasant communities promoted by both local and external aristocrats.

Throughout the 6th and 7th centuries, the written documentation produced in the North Plateau signalled the clear presence of a diversity of peasants subjected to domination. This reality was expressed in words like *libertus*, *conllibertas*, *mancipia*, *ancilla* and *serui*. From these sources, we could suspect a scenario of "widespread dependency". Nevertheless, the late 7th century archaeological record shows that the degree of stratification was still quite simple.

However, these micro stratifications are the elements that the aristocracy – articulated through the state – sought to exploit in order to fracture communities and expand its possibilities for extracting surplus. These actions certainly faced high community cohesion since there was a peasant agency capable to resist several aristocratic attacks for more than two centuries.

¹¹⁴ Olmo Enciso et al., "Construction and dynamics," 111.

¹¹⁵ Pachá, "Gift and conflict," 251-77.

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Eduardo Cardoso Daflon

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