The "arenas of struggle"
of peasant agency in early medieval times:
a theoretical and archaeological approach

by Carlos Tejerizo García

The main aim of this paper is to explore the possibilities and limits of the application of the concept of agency to tackle early medieval peasant-based societies. While this concept has achieved great success in archaeology since the 1980s onwards, it has rarely been applied for medieval contexts. However, recent historiographical developments and approaches within medieval archaeology invite to consider its applicability to expand our understanding of this social group. Through two case studies located in central Iberia considering the emergence and development of post-Roman peasant-based societies, I will argue that an archaeology of peasant agency during early medieval times is not only possible, but also necessary in order to overcome over-optimistic and biased approaches to these societies. Furthermore, it will be argued that this archaeology depends on the complex analysis of the relationship between agency and structure and the detection of those "arenas of struggle" through which the agency of different social groups are displayed.

Middle Ages, peasant-based societies; structure; settlement pattern; Iberian Peninsula; materiality.

1. *Introduction: the "agency outbreak" in early medieval archaeology*

In a 2016 interview, Anthony Giddens was asked if there was any element in his work that he considered to be the most important for those pursuing social and political change. He answered that

It would be the format that we're talking about: the immense subtlety of the interaction between how people make their own lives and at the same time are creatures of

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the larger structures of which they are part. That's as true in politics as in other areas. Well-intentioned policies are never enough and can often rebound.[1]

He was specifically referring to the agency vs. structure debate that has centred much of the sociological debate of the 19th and 20th centuries,[2] being the concept of agency one of the major contributions of Sociology to Human Sciences as a whole. After the hegemony of structuralism in Western academia throughout most part of the 20th century, the notion that individuals have a real capacity of intervention in the world gained momentum, even becoming one of the fundamental bases of postmodernism during the 1980s and 1990s.[3] It is obvious that the concept of agency, as well as the agency vs. structure debate, is complex enough to just being reduced to one close definition or author. However, what I want to underline here is its crucial role in advancing Social Sciences in the second half of the 20th century, including archaeology.

The impact of the different analyses on the agency in archaeology was both immediate and immense, articulated mainly – but not only – through the works of A. Giddens and P. Bourdieu, which were widely applied to archaeological analysis.[4] As a reaction to narrow functionalist and behaviourists approaches, concepts such as those of action or agency "promised instead to document the informed choices of sentient humans in context."[5] It is indeed one of the major basis of what has been named as the postprocessualist school.[6] The founding books of this approach, those of Shanks and Tilley profusely discuss Bourdieu's work, while Ian Hodder's first theoretical books use Giddens structuration theory to incorporate the individual to the historical processes against reductionist accounts based on narrow structuralist or materialist approaches.[7] This was followed by other contributions that expanded the possibilities of an approach through the ideas of agency and/or *habitus* to the archaeological record.[8] The common reference for all of them is the idea that, far from being just a passive subject of the context (i.e. structure, history, society, etc.), individuals and groups have an active participation in the construction of the social milieu and that in this interaction, materiality also plays an active role.[9] This outbreak of the agency in archaeology was quite successful, and by the change of the century, some of the most outstanding ar-

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[1] Kolarz, "Sociology, politics and power."
[2] Giddens, *The constitution of society.*
[3] Lyotard, *La condición postmoderna.*
[4] Dobres and Robb, "Agency in archaeology."
[5] Wobst, "Agency in (spite of) material culture," 40.
[6] Trigger, *A history of Archaeological Thought.*
[7] Shanks and Tilley, *Social theory and Archaeology*; Shanks and Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology;* Hodder, *Symbols in action*; Hodder, *Reading the past.*
[8] Barrett, "Agency: a revisionist account"; Dobres and Robb, "Doing Agency."
[9] I am voluntarily excluding here the new materialist approaches, as they are indeed very critical of this conceptualization of human agency Witmore. "Symmetrical archaeology."

chaeologists gathered to discuss its limits and possibilities.[10] As these authors state in the introduction of the volume dedicated to agency in archaeology:

> the common ground among these disparate approaches to "theorizing the subject" was the claim that historical contexts of social and material interaction, along with non-discursive perceptions of the world, served as the proximate boundary conditions within which ancient people negotiated their world, while simultaneously creating and being constrained by it.[11]

In summary, an approach from the idea of agency to the archaeological record not only re-introduced the individual into discussion, but also its capacity to interact with the political, social and economical milieu and even to create counter-narratives through different social strategies, such as resilience and/or resistance.[12] Moreover, this concept was flexible enough to be applied to different contexts, engaging with multitemporal approaches, which was undoubtedly part of its success within archaeology.[13]

Although with a little delay, this process has also impacted medieval and early medieval archaeology, being also the concept of agency commonly used for better understanding the archaeological record, especially regarding the funerary contexts but also other economic and political processes such as state emergence.[14] This approach from the idea of agency has expanded to other topics. Recently, in the context of the emergence of an early medieval peasant archaeology, J.A. Quirós and myself proposed that an approach from the perspective of relational agency can be a successful strategy to overcome some problems and gaps in peasant studies, such as the lord vs. peasant reductionist narratives or the active role that peasantries played in the construction of early medieval societies.[15] In short, what began as a proposal from Sociology has permeated to other disciplines such as medieval archaeology, pushing forward the research in the last decades.

However, and in a similar historiographical process to other concepts,[16] the application of the concept of agency to early medieval peasant contexts rises some concerns regarding its uncritical use and what can be named the "overoptimistic vision" of agency.[17] This optimistic vision may produce some analytical and interpretative problems, such as "seeing" agency and/or resistance everywhere, or ignoring the context of power in which these societies are placed into, just to mention two of them.[18] In other words, an uncritical appli-

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[10] Dobres and Robb, *Agency in archaeology.*
[11] Dobres and Robb, "Agency in archaeology," 7.
[12] Pauketat. "The tragedy of the commoners," 113-29.
[13] Barrett, "Agency."
[14] Halsall, *Early Medieval Cemeteries*; Theuws, "The integration of the Kempen Region."
[15] Quirós and Tejerizo, "Filling the gap."
[16] Tejerizo, "The archaeology of the Peasant Mode."
[17] González-Ruibal, *Archaeology of Resistance*, 7.
[18] Barrett, "A thesis on agency."

cation of the concept of agency may produce the involuntary consequence to empty its potentialities for understanding early medieval peasant contexts.[19]

The aim of this paper is to critically discuss the validity and limitations of the concept of agency in order to better understand early medieval ages and particularly early medieval peasantries. For that purpose, in the first section, I will try to frame the concept of agency within the parameters of a materialist approach through a theoretical discussion of the agency vs. structure debate, while discussing its possibilities of application to tackle peasant-based societies. These potentialities and limitations will be subsequently discussed through two particular case studies located in central Iberia, those of the birth of the village during the 5th century AD and the role of power relationships within the limits of the village through funerary remains. Finally, I will propose a methodological and theoretical frame in which incorporate agency as a valid concept, dealing with a relational approach.

2. *An archaeology of (early medieval peasant) agency?*

In a paper written in 2004, historian Mark Tauger makes a very compelling criticism to what he calls the "resistance interpretation" of peasant responses to Stalinist collectivization, which is commonly seen as the epitome of repression and negation of human individuality.[20] Historians have tended, he argues, to look at peasantries during the process of creation of kholkozes as pre-eminently resistant against totalitarianism. However, critically looking at the written record shows that not only active resistance to collectivization was a minor response, but also that these were not against the system, but against what they contextually felt was an attack to their "traditional" moral economy,[21] something common within peasant-based societies[22]. For instance, the main strategy of rebellion was not open contestation or violence, but to divide the collective land into individual fields to harvest.[23] Tauger's approach is, thus, a critic to those approaches which sees every action from subaltern groups not only as a materialization of their agency but also a form of resistance, following an extreme reading of Scott's weapons of the weak.[24] The problem, Tauger states, is one of representation and, therefore, of contextualization: "such anecdotal reports are problematic... because it is impossible to determine whether they are representative."[25]

[19] Quirós and Tejerizo, "Filling the gap."
[20] Scott, *Seeing like a state*; Tauger, "Soviet peasants and collectivization."
[21] Tauger, "Soviet peasants," 74.
[22] Thompson, *Tradición, revuelta y consciencia de clase.*
[23] Tauger, "Soviet peasants," 75.
[24] Scott, *Weapons of the Weak.*
[25] Tauger, "Soviet peasants," 76.

In the other extreme of the analysis of the capacity of human beings to express agency even in the most severe contexts, we can cite an example coming from the archaeology of the Spanish concentration camps. By analysing the materiality of these camps, Alfredo González-Ruibal argues that "material culture was central to the totalitarian project… by using every place at their disposal as a concentration camp, the new regime achieved their fascist dream: transforming every corner of Spain into a space of control." Concentrations camps in Spain were the ultimate materialization of repression as well as a way to undermine resistance and re-shape individuals to fit into the new regime: "the places used as concentration and forced labor camps did not just serve to humiliate, punish, and re-educate the vanquished, they were also a powerful, yet unconscious means of reinforcing political clichés: so unconscious, in fact, that those who created them were not fully aware of their role in depriving the prisoners of their humanity." At the level of materiality, even in these extreme conditions, prisoners had the opportunity to express individuality and collective through means such as graffiti, the reconditioning of their barracks (creating artistic entrances with colouring stones) or the creation of specific *habitus* and petty contestations and meetings (Fig. 1). However, from González Ruibal's point of view, this was just a subtle and unconscious way of strategies at the service of power: "graffiti, then, allowed the prisoners to leave a physical trace of their predicament, before being wiped out of history – but at the same time rendered them more transparent and legible before power."[26]

These two examples, even extreme, synthesize both the possibilities and setbacks of the concept of agency when used to tackle social and political interaction in past and present societies, and, specifically, as I will be discussing in this paper, peasant-based societies. A first consideration to be made here is related to what has been referred before as the "overoptimistic" approach to agency and resistance. In Alfredo González-Ruibals words:

> I argue that the concept of resistance has been trivialized and exaggerated in recent times. There is a far too optimistic notion of the agency of the subaltern. This ascribing of agency purportedly aims to give them a voice but may actually betray the iniquities of their situation. By granting too much capacity for resistance to the oppressed, either practical or moral, we run the risk of downplaying their suffering and exonerating the brutality of the repressive instances.[27]

In other words, abusing the concept of agency to interpret the archaeological record may result in a romantic distortion of the past, overestimating the real capacity of agents to express their identity and to consciously interact with social inequalities and relations of power. From this standpoint, every piece of material culture then may be a direct representation of agency and resistance, resulting in, as Dobres and Robb states, an archaeology of agency that "begins to look somewhat like "the archeology of breathing" – a dynamic

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[26] González-Ruibal, "The archaeology of internment," 68-9.
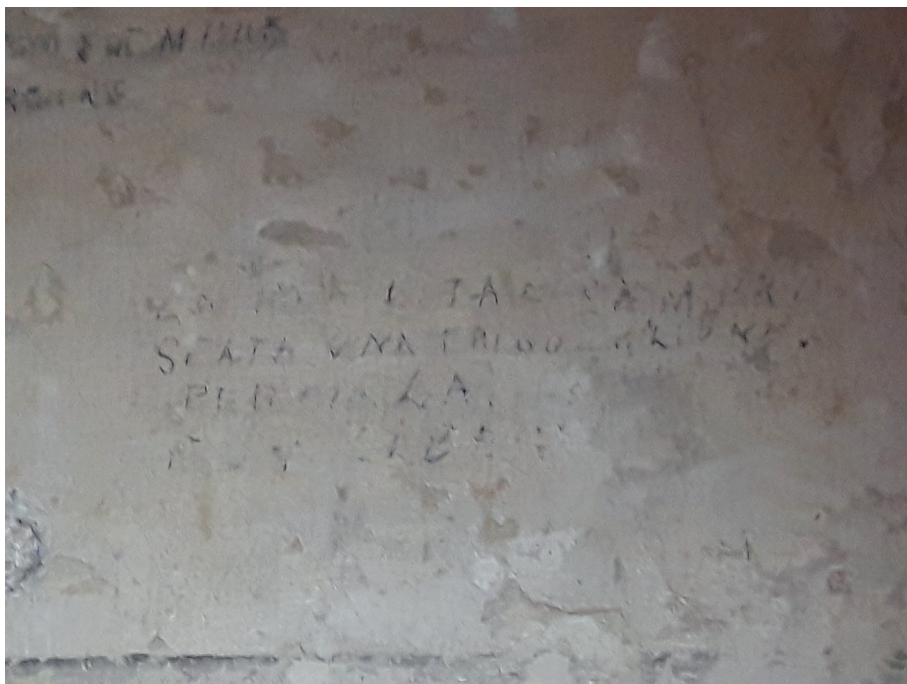[27] González-Ruibal, 68.

Figure 1. Graffiti as the material expression of prisoner's identity. Casa dello Studente (Genoa). Photo by author.

so universal and inescapable that, without further linkage to something more specific, it is difficult to see how it can illuminate particular aspects of the past."[28]

Critically departing from this optimistic view on agency what I would argue, regarding the archaeology of early medieval peasantries, is threefold: first, that we run the risk of misinterpreting the archaeological record in favour of biased approaches when confronting early medieval times; second, that we may neglect, or even erase, the relevance of some instances of identity, such as the condition of peasants or local identities, on behalf of others, such as ethnicity or religion,[29] in other words, to blur the relations of power behind action and agency; finally, that optimistic approaches to agency tend to neglect the specific context in which material culture is placed.[30] The analysis of early medieval personal adornments as ethnic markers is a classic example that has been repeatedly assessed by different authors.[31] Understood as a di-

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[28] Dobres and Robb, "Doing Agency," 160.
[29] Martínez and Tejerizo, "Assessing place-based identitites."
[30] Barrett, "A thesis;" Wobst, "Agency in (spite of) material culture."
[31] Recent compilations in López, Kazanski and Ivanišević, *Entangled identities*; Quirós and Castellanos, *Identidad y etnicidad en Hispania*.

rect materialization of ethnic agency, its interpretation neglects not only other instances of identity represented through these objects, but also blurs the political, economic and social milieu in which they are displayed.[32] Furthermore, even interpretations of these objects as a representation of communal or peasant identities may be neglecting their use as a political tool for making these societies legible for the emergent early medieval Germanic states and their relations of power.[33]

All these examples illustrate the idea that agency, in fact, exists everywhere, but it does not always represent neither the free will of the agents nor the naive idea that every act is resistant or counter-hegemonic.[34] Moreover, they draw attention to be cautious about seeing what we want to see in a multifaceted social context, calling for a complex and deeper understanding of the concepts of both agency and peasantry in order to analyse the archaeological record[35]. This is even more true for the medieval times, where the empirical evidence is less clear that in the abovementioned examples from contemporary history and archaeology. For that reason, it is important to make some framing remarks on the concept of agency and the necessity to assess it from a contextual and complex approach. Thus, I will develop some brief remarks on the conceptualization of the agency in order to better tackle the general question of early medieval peasant agency in general and the subsequent empirical examples in particular.

Even though the concept of agency, as stated at the beginning of the paper, has received a lot of attention in the last decades and, therefore, developed many different definitions and variations, I will depart by the definition given by A. Giddens who formulates action or agency "as involving a stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world."[36] This definition encapsulates the main aspects I want to stress here: the relationship between agency and structure, the centrality of practice,[37] the possibility of considering agency beyond the individual, and the specific condition of peasantries (as "corporeal beings") regarding agency and active involvement in the world.

As previously suggested, even from the most radical structuralist standpoint, the ontology of agency is out of the question as there is always a causal interaction with the world.[38] The problem stems in the formal question of how action interacts with the world, how to connect "a notion of human action

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[32] Halsall, "Ethnicity and early medieval cemeteries;" Pohl, "Telling the difference."
[33] Carvajal and Tejerizo, "The early medieval state;" Scott, *Seeing*.
[34] González-Ruibal, *Archaeology of Resistance*.
[35] Quirós and Tejerizo, "Filling the gap."
[36] Giddens, *Central problems in social theory*, 55. In essence, this is not very different from the definition of agency given by the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines agency (from the Latin *agentia* or doing) as "action or intervention producing a particular effect", or "a thing or person that acts to produce a particular result."
[37] Pauketat, "The tragedy of the commoners," 115.
[38] Dobres and Robb, "Doing."

with structural explanation," that is, the old question of how structure and agency interrelates. For instance, Giddens considers a fallacy to separate one from the other, because they presuppose one another[39]. In this regard, in order to tackle agency is necessary to introduce the structural milieu in which this agency takes place[40]. Here I will be following the work of Alex Callinicos, who defines "structure" not just as constraints, but as "power-conferring relations," that is, that "what social structures do, then, is to give agents powers of a certain kind".[41] This materialist understanding of structure derives in many implications, but I should underline here four: 1) agents are determined by these structures but they don't obliterate their agency and capacity of interact with the encompassing context; 2) power and politics are mainly relational and thus, depending of the specific *habitus* and social relationships;[42] 3) the starting point is the material context, and, thus, quoting Callinicos, following Gerald Cohen: "what is materially possible defines what is socially possible";[43] and 4) against vulgar determinism, the impossibility of foreseeing the results of social relationships even though they are defined by them, what has been conceptualised by Bob Jessop and others as "contingent necessity".[44]

Returning to Tauger's paper, he emphasises two interesting ideas that I consider relevant for my purposes here. First, that peasant agency is only comprehensible when introduced in a specific historic and political context, and second, that it is possible to acknowledge agency beyond the individual. Regarding the first issue, Giddens suggests that for a complex understanding of agency it should be incorporated in a specific temporality and in particular set of power relations, both as containers of human agency[45]. This implies, therefore, to acknowledge human action regarding, as Tauger stated, whether they are representative or not of a specific intention, i.e. resistance. Regarding the second assertion, one of the most compelling ideas coming from the concept of agency is to go beyond the individual in search of a complex interpretation of collective action.[46] Against methodological individualism, which states that only the individual is capable of intentional action and structure is just a mere abstraction[47], ideas such as *habitus*, structuration or structures as power-conferring relations opens the possibility to tackle collective forms of agency within a specific historical context[48]. In other words, agency, when analysed from the point of view of collective action, is dependent of the power relations in which they are integrated. This network of relationships is what

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[39] Dobres and Robb, 53.
[40] Barrett, "A thesis."
[41] Callinicos, *Making history*, XX.
[42] Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique.*
[43] Callinicos, *Making*, 54-69.
[44] Jessop, *State power.*
[45] Giddens, *Central problems*, 54; Johnson, "Self-made and the staging of agency."
[46] Barrett, "A thesis."
[47] Callinicos. *Making*, 34-7.
[48] Dobres and Robb, "Doing," 162.

authors such as Ian Burkitt conceptualise as "relational agency", based on social relationships that constitute "the very structure and form of agency itself".[49]

Practice, as said, is crucial for an analysis from the point of view of agency. Being Bourdieu's well-known *habitus* or Giddens structuration theory, the key element is that agents interact with the world through actions. It is precisely through this practice that agents materialise in the world, leaving those numerous evidences that we can track through the archaeological record. However, from the point of view of the network of relationships that defines the relational agency through which material culture will be approached here, a central concept will be that of the "arenas of struggle" defined by sociologist N. Long upon Bourdieu's work. Arenas of struggle defined as those specific material spaces where social interaction (that relational agency) occurs and through which agency is built.[50] Arenas that, following what has been previously said, are contextual to the social milieu and not previously predetermined.

This framing of the concept of agency leads us to question how peasant-based societies can be specifically analysed from this point of view and whether there is an specific peasant agency to be tackled through the archaeological record. As Jan Douwe van der Ploeg has stated: "peasant studies have been weak in acknowledging *agency,* which evidently is an (unintended) consequence of its epistemological stance," which figures peasants as "passive victims."[51] A perspective from an archaeology of peasant agency is only possible as far as we acknowledge a complex understanding of peasant and peasant societies.[52] This is not the space to delve into the concept of peasantries, but it is useful to briefly underline three ideas regarding the specificities of peasant-based societies. First, that peasant must be addressed as a particular social group or class in order to be understood in its own terms,[53] while introduced in specific historical contexts and processes.[54] Second, that practice is crucial to define peasants, as argued by van der Ploeg: "Being involved in peasant agriculture is what makes people peasants. Peasants are not just engaged in agriculture... they organize and develop agriculture in a specific way".[55] And third, the centrality of the domestic unit to define and historically (and archaeologically) characterise peasant-based societies.[56] Thus, following M. Johnson, the strategy is not to develop cross-cultural models of agency, but

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[49] Burkitt, "Relational agency."
[50] Long, *Development sociology.*
[51] Van Der Ploeg, *The new peasantries,* 6-7.
[52] Quirós and Tejerizo, "Filling the gap," 13-4.
[53] Chayanov, *The theory of peasant economy.*
[54] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class.*
[55] Van Der Ploeg, *The new peasantries,* 8.
[56] Shanin, *Peasants and peasant societies.*

models for "particular historical epochs or periods,"[57] in this case, post-Roman and early medieval peasantries.

All said, the proposal made here is close to what J.C. Barrett calls an "archaeology of inhabitation," which summarises the main ideas of this discussion. An archaeology of inhabitation that "considers the various possible structuring principles which agents practices in their movement through time/space, given the structural conditions that were available to them," by characterizing elements such as the existing material structural conditions operating at any particular time," "the practical use of available stocks of knowledge" and "the practical reworking of the structuring principles which secured these communities" identities."[58] These are the conceptual and theoretical basis which I will try to mobilise in the following sections through some case studies coming from early medieval Iberian archaeology.

3. *Peasant-based societies in central and northwestern Iberia: some case studies*

Agency, from the abovementioned perspective, implies a specific contextualization, both spatially and historically. In the following section, I will present two case studies with the aim of using the theoretical background towards the discussion of the possibilities of an archaeological analysis of peasant agency in early medieval Iberia (Fig. 2). Evidently, this is not about offering a definitive account of the topic, but to give some empirical background for future research. All case studies share a geographical space, that is, the central and northern parts of the Iberian Peninsula, and a specific time span, that of post-Roman times between the 5th and the 10th century AD. This is a logical proposal considering the necessity, as stated, of creating particular models for specific times and epochs. Besides, these case studies will be considered within the same analytical frame, focusing on three basic elements: the historical and political context (i.e. structure as power-conferring relations); the "arenas of struggle" or those material elements that in these contexts may illuminate peasant agency; and the relational agency through the presence of social inequalities and tensions.

3.1. *The origins of European peasantries: a "golden age"?*

I have argued in other seeds that, if we take seriously a strict definition of "peasant" following authors such as Eric Wolf, Teodor Shanin, Robert Redfield, etc., based on the idea of the extraction of peasant production by other

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[57] Johnson, "Self-made," 214.
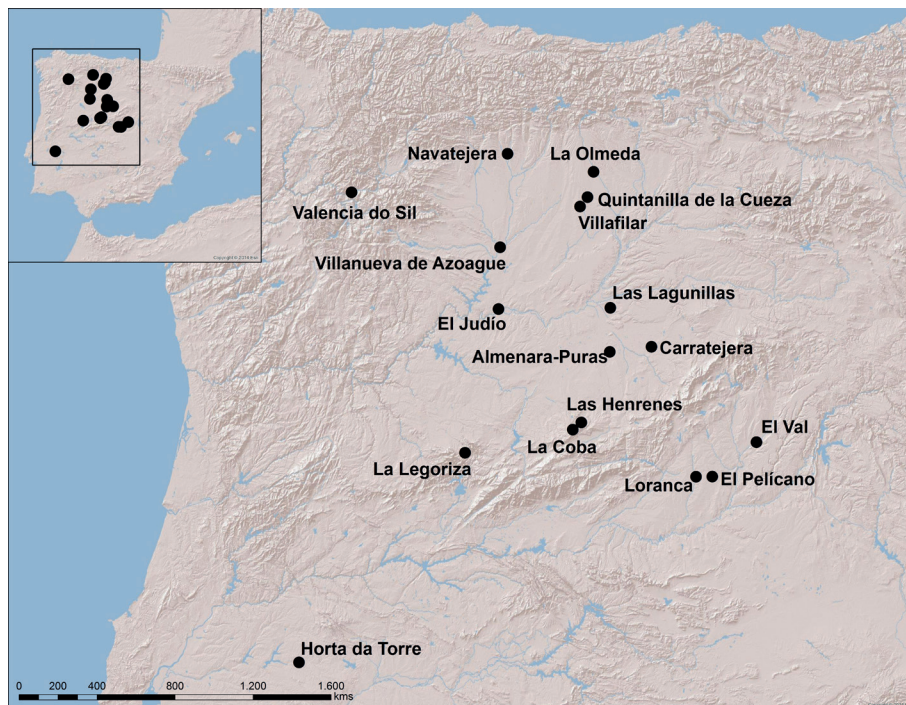[58] Barrett, "A thesis."

Figure 2. Sites mentioned in the paper. Map by author.

agents through rent, then the logical conclusion is that the origins of European peasantries should be placed in the aftermaths of the dismantling of the Roman Empire, as I will argue later. This idea, nonetheless controversial, has been shared by other authors such as Werner Rösener, whose history of the European peasantries begins precisely with the dismantling of the Roman Empire, or Michael Mitterauer, who argues that the specific development of the medieval domestic unit is what configures the specificities of European history.[59] Even not explicitly argued as such, Chris Wickham states that it is precisely with the dismantling of the Roman state that the autonomy of the peasantries increased, establishing a particular "Peasant Mode of Production" which dialectically confronted the Feudal Mode of Production.[60] This idea has had some impact in archaeological studies. The specific analysis of the archaeology of central Iberia led Alfonso Vigil-Escalera to establish the 5th century as the moment of emergence of the first peasant landscapes in the Iberian peninsula.[61] An extreme vision of this idea proposes that the early me-

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[59] Rösener, *Los campesinos en la historia europea*; Mitterauer, *Warum Europa?*.
[60] Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*.
[61] Vigil, *Los primeros paisajes altomedievales*.

dieval ages was some sort of a "golden age" for medieval peasantries, something that has been criticized by other scholars, considering the economic crises of the 5th century AD which implied the impoverishment of the whole Western Mediterranean, peasant-based societies included.[62] In this section, I will argue that the archaeological record suggests a causal relationship between the two phenomena, that it is precisely because of the increase of the level of autonomy of rural societies – and therefore, of its agency and capacity to act in the world – that the general picture has been read as one of economic crisis.

The period between approximately 400 and 450 is a crucial period that will pave the way for the next centuries. As Wickham states, nobody during the 4th century would have guessed what will happen in the next century as there was any signal of crisis in the change of century.[63] This seems to correspond with the archaeological record of the central and northwestern parts of the Iberian Peninsula. During the second half of the 4th century there are practically any fundamental nor structural transformations in the settlement pattern or the material culture. In fact, what we usually detect are transformations indicating more investment by the elites such as reforms in the big rural villas, the investment of both rural and urban communities in the funerary rituals or the economic expansion in the landscape. A good example of the latter is the site of Valencia do Sil, located in the region of Valdeorras, current Galicia. This site, dated between the 4th and mid 5th century AD and interpreted as a hub for the exploitation of metal, suggests the economic expansion of the territorial elites during the 4th century.[64] Contemporarily, this was the peak of the expansion of the Roman rural villas and the investment of the elites on them as a way of promoting their status and control over the territory,[65] which included the control over the complex network of little farmsteads and settlements, better known for other territories,[66] but still very visible in the Iberian landscape.[67]

Since the second third of the 5th century onwards, the evidence of structural change multiplied both in the urban and the rural world. Focusing on the latter, two are the main features I will be considering here: the abandonment and subsequent reoccupation of some spaces in the rural villas and the emergence of a new settlement pattern, spatially – but not functionally – linked to the rural villas. The final of the Roman villa in Western Med-

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[62] Hodges, "The primitivism of the early medieval peasant in Italy?;" Ward-Perkins. *The fall of the Roman Empire.*
[63] Wickham, *The inheritance of Rome.*
[64] Tejerizo, Rodríguez, et al., "El final del Imperio Romano."
[65] Chavarría, *El final de las villae.*
[66] Bowes, *The Roman Peasant Project 2009-2014.*
[67] Bermejo, "Roman peasant habitats"; Bermejo and Grau, *The archaeology of peasantry in Roman Spain.*

iterranean has been a major topic of inquiry in the last decades,[68] including specific analyses in the Iberian peninsula.[69] Even though there is yet a lack of particular case studies, a general overview shows hints of transformation in the rural villas during the first half of the 5th centuries, which included significant changes such as, for example, the construction of productive spaces in previous domestic areas.[70] This was documented in the villa of Navatejera (Villaquilambre, León), where an oven was constructed in the northeastern part of the villa during the first part of the 5th century.[71] Similar changes occurred in the site of Villafilar (Cisneros, Palencia), where an oven was built partially destroying a prior barn.[72] (Fig. 3)

While these changes are significant enough, they can be interpreted still within the economic logics of the Roman Empire.[73] Probably they are showing the last attempts of the territorial elites to resist the economic and political crises of the 5th century at the expense of their status display in the Roman villas. However, this will not last long, and by the mid and third quarter of the 5th century many Roman villas were abandoned, such as the big and sumptuous villas of La Olmeda, Almenara-Puras, Quintanilla de la Cueza and many more.[74] Moreover, many of them show signs of reoccupation through the presence of postholes, precarious walls, or temporal uses of spaces. Well known examples are the villa of El Val, where a cluster of postholes breaking a mosaic were interpreted as the construction of a hut inside the villa,[75] or La Olmeda, where mudwalls were documented in the domestic spaces of the villa.[76] Traditionally, these reoccupations have been interpreted as the remnants of squatters, sometimes related to the barbarian invasions, using the ancient villas as shelters.[77] However, new excavations are considering alternative explanations. A recent project at the Villa da Horta da Torre (Fronteira, Portugal) conducted by André Carneiro has unearthed different hints of occupation after the abandonment of the residential part of the villa which included animal bones, fireplaces or possible huts.[78] According to the excavators, these evidences may effectively suggest the presence of (non barbarian) squatters or temporary uses by passersby, but also the stable use of the villa by rural communities in the surroundings: "This population was familiar with the landscape and saw the villa as a salient ruin in their mental maps of the area.

[68] Brogiolo, Chavarría and Valenti, *Dopo la fine delle ville*; Castrorao, *La fine delle ville romane in Italia*; Lewit. *Villas, farms and the Late Roman rural economy*; Van Ossel, "De la 'villa' au village."
[69] Carneiro, "The fate of villae;" Chavarría, *El final*.
[70] Chavarría, *El final*, 125
[71] Benéitez and Miguel, "Relectura arqueológica de la villa romana de Navatejera (León),"120-1.
[72] Strato. *Excavación arqueológica en extensión en el yacimiento de "Villafilar"*.
[73] Tejerizo, "The end of the world."
[74] Chavarría, *El final*.
[75] Rascón, Méndez and Díaz, "La reocupación del mosaico," 195-7.
[76] Palol and Cortes, "La villa romana de la Olmeda," 19.
[77] Lewit, "Vanishing villa;" Rascón, Méndez and Díaz, "La reocupación del mosaico."
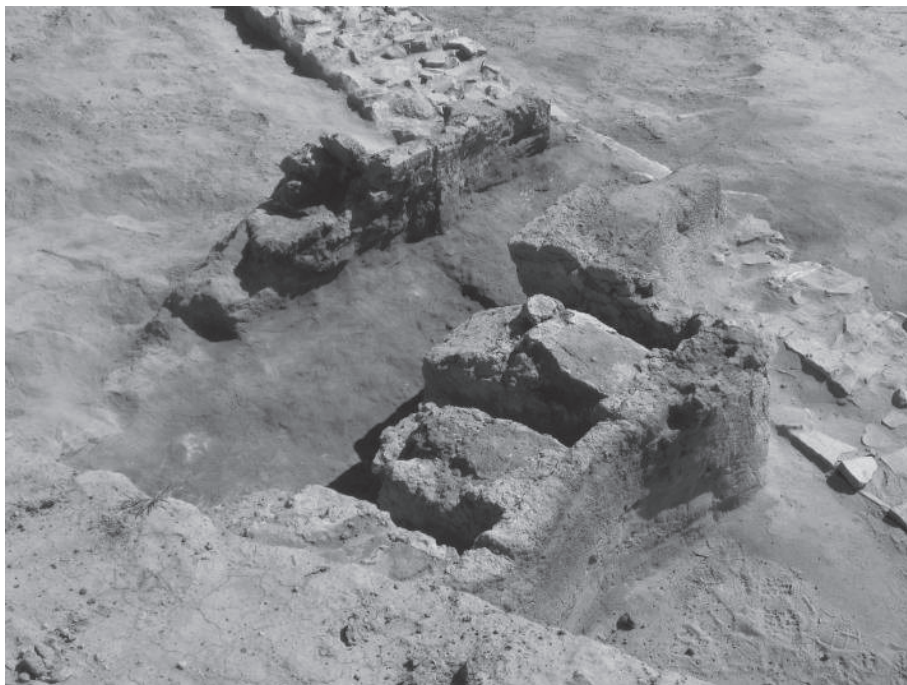[78] Carneiro, "O final das villae na Lusitânia romana."

Figure 3. Oven partially destroying a Late Roman barn in Villafilar. Photo by STRATO.

This same population may also have felt some form of fascination concerning the dwelling."[79]

This last interpretation is coherent with the emergence, contemporary to these changes, of a new type of settlement territorially related to the Roman villa, but with a very different functional and structural layout. These contexts are generally characterized by the presence of sunken featured buildings, mainly storage silos and huts, and little stone-footed buildings constructed close to a Roman villa and dated in the mid or second half of the 5th century. Perhaps one of the best examples known for the Iberian Peninsula is the site of El Pelícano (Arroyomolinos, Madrid), a rural settlement occupied between the 4th and the 8th century AD widely excavated (aprox. 175,000 m²).[80] In the so-called sectors 09 and 10, some fireplaces and landfills were documented over a Late Roman complex dated in the first part of the 5th century. By the mid and last third of the 5th century, different sunken-featured buildings associated with a little cemetery – which included some furnished burials dated in the mid and second half of the 5th century –, were located close to the prior

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[79] Carneiro, "The fate," 175.
[80] Vigil and Strato, "El registro arqueológico del campesinado," 177-200.
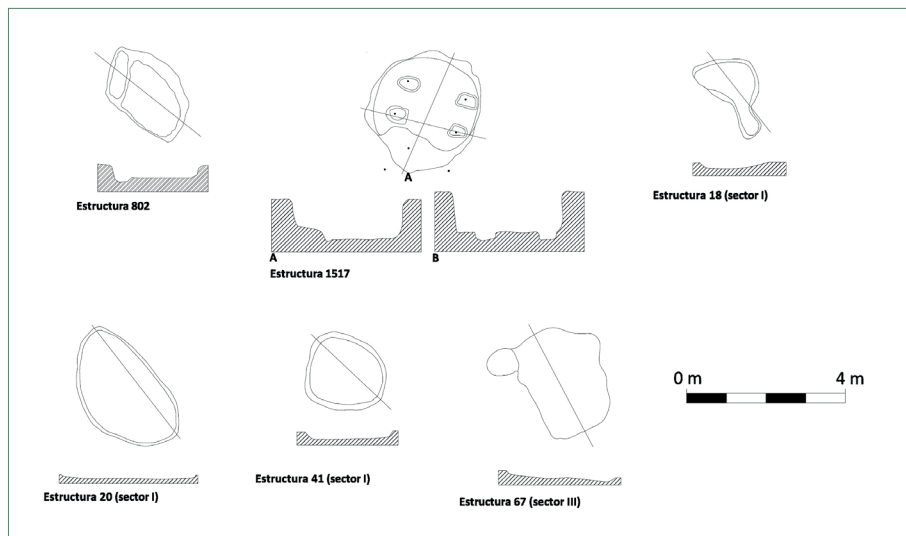
Figure 4. Sunken featured buildings in Carratejera, including the wine press used for a special deposit. Drawing by author.

evidence. This settlement was subsequently transformed in a dispersed village formed by different domestic units.

A similar case study is the site of Loranca (Fuenlabrada, Madrid). This site was extensively excavated between 2005 and 2006, unearthing a very complex rural site consisting in an Early and Late Roman rural complex altogether with two early medieval cemeteries.[81] As El Pelícano, the excavators documented both stone-footed buildings related to sunken featured buildings and storage silos dated in the 5th century AD. Before the 6th century AD these buildings were abandoned and the stone blocks were used for the construction of some of the burials of a poorly known early medieval village.[82]

A last good example could be the site of Carratejera (Navalmanzano, Segovia). This site was excavated in 2003 and 2007 as a consequence of the construction of a highway, which allowed for an extensive excavation.[83] (Fig. 4) The sequence of the site can be divided in two phases. The first one refers to a Late Roman rural occupation – including an oven abandoned in the first part of the 5th century – related to a Roman villa probably situated 200 m. away, while the second shows the common features already described such as a cluster of 47 storage silos and near six sunken featured buildings. This second phase is dated in the mid 5th century considering the stratigraphical sequence and pottery assemblages. A very interesting feature coming from

[81] Oñate, "Las necrópolis altomedievales de Loranca;" Oñate and Barranco, *Memoria final*.
[82] Oñate and Barranco, *Memoria final*.
[83] Marcos, Sanz, et al., "La ocupación tardorromana en el yacimiento de Carratejera."

this site is a rich deposit of metal objects – including horse blinkers, agrarian tools or personal objects – reusing the possible basis of a wine press and dated in the first half of the 5th century. Even though the nature of this type of deposits is unclear,[84] what is interesting to highlight here is that it shows a distinct rupture with the prior Late Roman occupation.

Although El Pelícano, Loranca or Carratejera are good examples of this phenomenon, they are not unique. Other sites that show these types of new settlements from the mid 5th century are, for example, the abovementioned site of Villafilar, Villanueva de Azoague,[85] El Judío[86] or Las Lagunillas,[87] just to mention some of them.[88] Thus, this type of settlement, far from being an exception, seems to be more the rule of a widespread process yet to be fully studied. However, what I would like to underline here are three main ideas. First, that there is a clear rupture in the settlement pattern during the 5th century AD closely related to the emergence of a new type of contexts that we can relate to peasant-based societies.[89] Second, that the material culture displayed in these sites suggests a high level of autonomy of these communities regarding the development of the domestic units, the management of their funerary rituals and the exploitation of the territory. Moreover, I would suggest that, in this historical context, the Roman villas acted as an arena of struggle for peasant agency, as they acted as a crucial node for the establishment of the new settlement pattern against the ancient Late Roman elite agencies. These peasant communities progressively disengaged from the old economic context, and thus, the general impression of an impoverishment of the conditions of life. In summary, if there is really a "golden age" of peasant autonomy, that will be, in the case of central and northwestern Iberia, the mid 5th century AD. But, as Wickham stated, this type of peasant-based societies did not last long given than the elite and feudal powers "tended to be so much stronger than the former",[90] something that will have enormous consequences for peasant agency during the early medieval ages.

3.2. *The funerary contexts of early medieval villages as arenas of struggle for peasant agency: the case of La Coba (San Juán del Olmo, Ávila)*

One of the key topics within the Spanish medieval historiography has been the period between the collapse of the Visigothic kingdom and the emergence of the new states both in northern and southern Spain. A topic that, from the

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[84] Morris and Jervis, "What´s so special?."
[85] López and Regueras, "Cerámicas tardorromanas de Villanueva de Azoague."
[86] Strato. *Trabajos de excavación arqueológica en el yacimiento de "El Judío".*
[87] Centeno, Palomino and Villadangos, "Contextos cerámicos."
[88] For a more complete view on the phenomenon, see Tejerizo, *Arqueología de las sociedades campesinas*, 116-23.
[89] Vigil, "Apuntes sobre la geneología política."
[90] Wickham, "Conclusions," 358.

beginning, has been subjected to controversies due to ideological approaches, that has burdened historical interpretations.[91] Recent researches, however, have tended to focus both in the local scale and the archaeological record to surpass these controversies in the pursuit of a coherent historical narrative.[92] My point here, altogether with other scholars,[93] is that a perspective from the development and dialectics of peasant-based agencies and how they managed their practices in the world may be a good strategy to overcome the setbacks of a still controversial issue. In particular, funerary remains, as has already been acknowledged (see above), and is still one of the best parcels of materiality to tackle the issue of agency and structural framing. For that purpose, I will focus on a particular case study from the central part of the Iberian Peninsula, that of La Coba (San Juan del Olmo, Ávila).

La Coba is a site located in a slight valley in a mountain range called the *Sierra de Ávila*, forming part of the *Sistema Central* which divides the Iberian Peninsula in two big plateaus. Specifically, La Coba was built occupying the central part of a valley which was used as a traditional pathway for cattle as it connects the highlands of the *Sierra de Ávila* with the lowlands of the Amblés valley, where the city of Ávila stands. These highlands have been the object of some archaeological projects which have documented a quite complex settlement pattern during the early medieval ages.[94] In the context of a community archaeology project, we have been excavating in the site from 2020 onwards, documenting an extensive early medieval village dated from the 7th to the 10th centuries AD. Moreover, what we were able to document is the presence of two different phases of the village, one which can be dated between the mid 7th century to mid 8th approximately, and a second phase centered in the 9th to 10th centuries. This second phase supposed the restructuration of, at least, part of the settlement.

All said, this site was previously known precisely for its funerary remains. Surrounding the domestic areas there is a significant number of rock burials, 83 already recognised, and distributed in at least five different nuclei in a space of 30 hectares coexisting with a small communal cemetery of a dozen cist burials.[95] (Fig. 5) This coexistence is something interesting in itself, as it is quite rare in the context of early medieval ages in central Iberia. Furthermore, our hypothesis, to be confirmed in subsequent excavations, is that each of these nuclei of rock burials are related to different domestic units occupying the valley, which implied then the presence of a network formed by a central settlement of about 10-12 domestic units and 3-4 little farmsteads in the surroundings. For its part, the communal cemetery was the object of an

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[91] Escalona and Martín, "The life and death of an historiographical folly"; García, "Denying the Islamic conquest."
[92] Escalona, "The early Castilian peasantry."
[93] Quirós, "An archaeology of 'small worlds'."
[94] Martín and Blanco, "Ancestral memories."
[95] Martín, "Enterramientos, memoria social y paisaje."

Figure 5. Rock burials at the site of La Coba. Photo by author.

archaeological excavation in the year 2012, which resulted uncovered a furnished burial dated in the 7th-8th century AD.

Another interesting aspect of La Coba, shared with other settlements in the surroundings such as Las Henrenes or La Legoriza, is that the material culture shows some hints of social inequalities within the community itself. Specifically, in all these sites liriform brooches and different types of rings – dated in the 7th to 8th centuries – were in domestic contexts, which can be interpreted as the property of significant individuals or families of the village. These objects contrast starkly with the rest of the material culture, absent of pottery imports, other personal objects, or elements of prestige. In summary, early medieval villages characterized by peasant-based communities formed by relatively equal domestic units but with the presence of some inner subtle inequalities.

What is interesting in the case of La Coba is the possibility to make crisscross analysis of the funerary and the domestic contexts, something that is not very common in the Iberian context.[96] Our hypothesis, considering all the available information, is that there is a correspondence between the development of the domestic and the funerary contexts. In other words, that the communal cemetery corresponds to the first phase of the site and the extension of the rock burials with the second occupation of La Coba. In quantitative terms,

[96] Quirós and Castellanos, *Identidad y etnicidad*.

this is very coherent in the sense that the number of burials and the chronological scope of the domestic occupation in both phases seems logical (15-20 cist burials for a one century occupation and near 85 rock burials for two and a half centuries). Moreover, the only furnished burial that was excavated is very coherent with the chronological span of the first phase of La Coba, between mid 7th and mid 8th century approx.

This potential correspondence is highly interesting in terms of peasant agency as it shows two ways of displaying the funerary ritual regarding two structural and social milieus, understood as those "power-conferring relations." Here I would like to underline some ideas as working hypothesis regarding the question of peasant agency. One of them is that there is an interesting connection between the type of funerary ritual and the political background in which they are displayed. The late 7th century seems to be a period of important changes at the local scale in central Iberia, where an expansion of new formed settlements seems to be occurring in the highlands.[97] The specific agents behind this expansion are not clear. Some scholars tend to underline the role of the Visigothic state while others highlight the role of the territorial elites. However, in both the scenarios, local peasant-based communities seem to be under a relevant political and economic pressure whose arena of struggle is the village and, specifically, the funerary rituals. As it has been repeatedly argued, early medieval cemeteries are (one of) the locus of communal tensions and identities regarding social inequalities at the level of the community.[98] Thus, what we usually find is communal cemeteries in which all the community is buried but, at the same time, with differences in the specific materiality used, showing the existence of social differences.[99]

This panorama completely changes during the 8th century AD with the collapse of the Visigothic state and, moreover, of the structural milieu in which the elites operated which also affected the agency at a local scale.[100] The control of territorial elites had to be reconstructed under other premises (or other structure) and thus under other material forms. The hypothesis is that all these political changes had some correspondence with the changes at the level of villages such as La Coba, which probably was concentrating the prior settlement pattern. A second life of the village in a different social and political milieu which required different expressions for the death. In this case, and following the analysis by I. Martín Viso, rock burials in the central part of the Iberian Peninsula are especially underlining the agency of the domestic units.[101] What I would add to this idea is that this occurs at the expense of the prior importance of the community, or better, that this new language

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[97] Martín, "Espacios sin Estado."
[98] Halsall, "Ethnicity and early medieval cemeteries."
[99] Pohl, "Introduction. Strategies of identification"; Vigil, "Prácticas y ritos funerarios."
[100] Carvajal and Tejerizo, "The early medieval state."
[101] Martín, "Enterramientos."

expresses a new form of constructing communities and, therefore, a new form of displaying the agency.

4. *Towards an archaeology of early medieval peasant agency in central and northern Iberia*

These two case studies tried not to exhaust all the possibilities of a potential archaeology of early medieval peasant agency, but to show the utility of the theoretical concept of agency applied to peasant-based societies in early medieval ages as a particular historical epoch, as suggested by Barrett through his proposal of an archaeology of inhabitation (see above). In this regard, I would argue that not only a complex conceptualization of agency – as the one I have tried to delineate in the first section of the paper – may illuminate the materiality of peasantries in the past, but also to do justice to their contribution to history, as Christopher Dyer has recently defended.[102] However, as all the examples previously discussed show, this archaeology of early medieval peasant agency should consider some specificities in order not to fall in the trap of the overoptimistic approach to agency.

The first one is to analyse peasant-agency contextually, always in dialectical opposition to the structure in which it is inserted.[103] This complex understanding of peasant agency gives the possibility not only to clearly define what are its specific material expressions in a determined locus, but also to make a historical account of it. The structural context of the 5th century Iberia offered the material conditions for the emergence of a specific form of peasant-based societies in large parts of Europe as the dismantling and collapse of the Roman state and, therefore, of the forms of control of territorial elites, left a space for the development of this type of communities. However, this process has its own history and dialectics, and the development of the subsequent network of farmsteads and villages during the 6th to 8th centuries took place in another structural milieu as well as those peasant-based societies of the 8th century onwards. In summary, the acknowledgement and analysis of the structural conditions in which agency displays is crucial for building specific narratives and models for "particular historical epochs or periods", retaking M. Johnson's words.[104] Moreover, what I have tried to show through the case studies is that this parts from the recognition of the specific arenas of struggle in which this agency is materially displayed. Thus, settlement pattern in the 5th century and funerary remains in the 7th to 10th century in the specific contexts analysed here have been proposed as those arenas of struggle for considering peasant agency. Other possibilities may be equally good, such as,

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[102] Dyer, *Peasants making history.*
[103] Callinicos, *Making.*
[104] Johnson, "Self-made," 214

for example, storage silos, agrarian practices, or local churches, as analysed in other seeds.[105] Quoting Gerald Cohen again, "what is materially possible defines what is socially possible." In any case, this proposal opens the possibility to an archaeological analysis of peasant agency in the long duration and also to reconsider the question of resistance during early medieval ages.

On the contrary, other evidence in some contexts may be not delving into peasant agency but, as Alfredo González Ruibal's abovementioned example showed, the capacity of the system to blur power relationships. For example, in a compelling analysis of the use of supernatural elements to cope with everyday life, Thomas Kohl suggests that elements such as saint's election, the rituals for the control of the weather or the choice of a local church to pray are expressions of peasant agency. However, as he also cautiously states, these may work also as a tool for making peasants more legible before power: "Still, peasants made conscious decisions about the way in which they wanted to interact with supernatural forces – which saint they venerated, which shrines they visited in times of crisis, which offerings they made to them. In doing this, they also considered the people and institutions who were linked to the saints, because they controlled the saints' resting places".[106] The warning here is to be cautious when reading materiality through the lenses of agency for not confusing agency with making actions or the capacity to act in the world with the power relationships upon which social inequality and exploitation is built.

This leads us to a second specificity of the archaeology of early medieval peasant agency, that is the integration of the relational agency as a central element for analysis. Following the definition of peasant suggested here, one of its characteristics is that it depends on the relationship with other social groups, mainly the elites that extracts part of their production.[107] This relationship, altogether with the structural milieu shapes peasant agency, as seen in both the examples. In the case of the 5th century settlement pattern, the increasing of autonomy of peasant-bases societies relates with a reduction of the level of control by the elites. Furthermore, the agency displayed in the funerary contexts of early medieval villages relates to a dialectic tension between the domestic unit, the peasant community, and the local and territorial elites. It can be suggested through these examples that the capacity of peasantries to display agency and resistance is in dialectical opposition to the capacity of control by the external agents, be the state or the territorial and local elites.[108]

This is a line that is being currently explored by other scholars, opening new and compelling avenues of future research. A good example in this regard is the one developed by Antoinette Huijbers on the peasant culture of the Meuse region. Building on an anthropological perspective of how peasant culture is built through practice regarding other groups actions and its spatial

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[105] Quirós, "An archaeology of 'small worlds'"; Tejerizo and Carvajal, "Confronting Leviathan."
[106] Kohl, "Peasant agency and the supernatural," 113.
[107] Wickham, "How did the feudal economy work?," 37.
[108] Carvajal and Tejerizo, "The early medieval state."

implementation, she analyses the changes on this culture through the long duration, concluding that "peasants and aristocrats shaped one another on the basis of their shared history of mutual involvement".[109]

In summary, what I wanted to stress here is that, if we aim to make complex narratives of peasant societies in the past, we should acknowledge the inner complexity of the concept itself. Complementary, in order to overcome naive approaches to the effective capacity of these societies to impact the social milieu and their response to the surrounding system we should take care of how we interpret their specific agency through the material record. What I have argued here, a relational and materialist approach both to peasant-based societies and their agency seems a very compelling path to explore and to reflect on in the future. As Dobres and Robb states: "Agency does not provide an endpoint but a starting point for making sense of the materiality of social reproduction, past and present. The goal of constructing appropriate methodologies for studying agency is not to 'find agency' in the archaeological record" but to better tackle the complexities of past societies.[110]

[109] Huijbers, "Peasant culture of the Meuse-Demer-Scheldt region."
[110] Dobres and Robb, "Doing," 164.

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