

QUIRÓS CASTILLO, Juan Antonio (ed.)*Social Inequality in Early Medieval Europe. Local Societies and Beyond*

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The origins of this book go back to an international symposium held in September 2016 at the University of the Basque Country Vitoria-Gasteiz under the title «Archaeology of Social Inequality in Early Medieval Europe: A Tribute to Chris Wickham». For various reasons, not all papers presented at the conference could be included. On the other hand, additional contributions have been integrated into the volume (pp. 7, 9).

In his introduction, «Equal and Unequal Societies in Early Medieval Europe» (pp. 11-29) Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo states that the book aims to examine the phenomenon of «social inequality in early medieval Western Europe through several case studies based on both material and textual evidence» (p. 14). The following fourteen articles collected in the volume are divided into three thematic sections: «State Formation and Socio-Political Complexity» (2 papers), «Economic Specialization, Elite Demand and Social Inequality» (5 papers) and «Small World' and Social Inequalities» (7 papers).

The book focuses primarily on areas in northern Portugal, northern Spain and northern Italy, but for comparative purposes, other case studies from Carolingian Europe and one from North America have been included. In particular, the «exotic» contribution of Robin A. Beck, «Maize, Mounds, and Cosmos. Durable Inequality in the Mississippian World (AD 1000-1250)» (pp. 55-72) offers stimulating theoretical impulses. Yet, without a doubt, it is the contributions on the Iberian Peninsula that form the core of the volume's content.

An important overall result of the volume is already highlighted in Julio Escalona's contribution «Towards an Archaeology of State Formation in North-Western Iberia» (pp. 33-53). Escalona emphasizes that in addition to external powers, local societies and local elites were also an essential factor in the process of «state formation» in the early Middle Ages. In particular, the archaeological finds of fortifications as well as churches can not necessarily always be traced back to rulers' initiatives. They are by no means unambiguous «expressions of centralization», but must be seen in the context of more complex social and political processes.

This is also underlined by Francesca Grassi in her contribution «Social Complexity in Peripheral Areas in the Light of Pottery Production Between Sixth and Tenth Centuries (Alava, Basque Country, Spain)» (pp. 99-129), which focuses on an area characterized by the absence of central sites such as monasteries, imperial or Roman-founded towns and the lack of a central power directly controlling the area. Through a combined analysis of patterns of production, distribution and consumption of pottery products, Grassi is able to show that periphery does not always mean subsistence and social simplification.

In her contribution «Social Complexity in Local Communities During the Tenth Century in Central-Northern Portugal» (pp. 149-163), Catarina Tente comes to similar conclusions. She analyses four excavated settlements near Viseu. On the one hand, the finds show a broad trend towards social equality and small-scale subsistence economy. At the same time, however, they also point to the economic specialization — and economic complementarity — of the respective populations. In the case of Senhora do Barrocal, finds such as roof tiles, prestigious

pottery products and an iron spur indicate the presence of local elites.

Drawing on the rich documentary evidence for the 10th century in the north-west of the Iberian Peninsula, in his article «Unequal Small Worlds. Social Dynamics in Tenth-Century Leonese Villages» (pp. 255-279), Iñaki Martín Viso explores the question of social inequality in local societies in the León area. He shows that the inhabitants of the villages in the León region were not only free small farmers. There were instead individual families that distinguished themselves economically and socially from the broader local population through land ownership, by holding local offices (secular as well as ecclesiastical) and through connections to larger ecclesiastical institutions and other «external agents».

This new view of local societies in the León area is complemented by the contribution of Álvaro Carvajal Castro, who deals with «Collective Action and Local Leaderships in Early Medieval North-Western Iberia. Ninth-Eleventh Centuries» (pp. 281-299). He too challenges the traditional view of peasant communities — especially with regard to collective action and peasant struggles in the León area, which older scholarship all too often simplified to «class struggle».

Likewise, Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo emphasizes in his article on «Village Formation, Social Memories and the Archaeology of Rural Communities in North-Western Iberia» (pp. 301-329) that the formation and concentration of settlements as well as rule over them in the early Middle Ages were complex phenomena. In view of the results of modern settlement archaeology he also concludes that conventional evolutionist and teleological models do not do live up to the multi-layered reality.

All these impressions from different areas of the northern Iberian Peninsula are deepened by several contributions concerning areas in northern Italy. In his article «The Primitivism of the Early Medieval Peasant in Italy?» (pp. 165-174), Richard Hodges underlines that the decline of Italy's rural areas from the 6th to the 7th century has been underplayed in older archaeological research in favour of continuity theories. «Hodges emphasizes that it was not until the Carolingian period that «positive] changes occurred, leading to economic growth that had an positive impact not only on the lives of the rural elites, but also on the rural population as a whole.

In his article «Pottery as Inequality? Systems of Production and Distribution in North Italian Societies During the Early Middle Ages» (pp. 75-97) Sauro Gelichi uses the example of northern Italian cities (emporiums such as Venice and Comacchio as well as ancient cities such as Ravenna, Rimini and Cesena) to explore the degree to which pottery reflects social diversity. He highlights the strong homogeneity of pottery in early medieval northern Italy — a reason why pottery was not considered a particularly sensitive indicator of social variability. Gelichi shows that pottery could be an indicator of social variability. However, he emphasizes that it is not necessarily the fineness of pottery, but the restriction of its use to certain social groups that makes it an element of social distinction and inequality.

In his contribution «Rural Communities and Landscapes in Northern Italy (Ninth-Twelfth Centuries AD)» (pp. 227-254), Fabio Saggiore focusses on excavations carried out in recent years in Nogara, San Benedetto di Leno, Bovolone and Canolo di Mezzo in the Po Valley. Saggiore points out that it is difficult to find signs of the existence of local elites in the material he has studied.

Igor Santos Salazar, on the other hand, in his article «Fiscal Lands, Rural Communities and the Abbey of Nonantola. Social Inequality in Ninth-Century Emilia (Italy)» (pp. 203-225), traces the emergence of local elites in the second half of the 9th century. By examining the legal documents from the archives of the influential abbey of Nonantola, he is able to show how traditional representatives of local societies (referred to as *populus* or *homines*) were replaced by protagonists (often from the same families) who appear to be closely connected to Nonantola, either as *advocati* or in other functions, and also partly through other clientele ties.

Two other articles, although dealing with areas in Francia, also discuss the impact of big ecclesiastical institutions on local societies. The first is by Jean-Pierre Devroey and Nicolas Schroeder: «Land, Oxen and Brooches. Local Societies, Inequality and Large Estates in the Early Medieval Ardennes (c. 850-c. 900)» (pp. 177-202). Using the polyptych of Prüm, they examine the social stratification of the inhabitants of Villance (in the Ardennes), a manor belonging to the abbey of Prüm. They show that the relationship between legal status and the economic situation of the inhabitants was not linear, but, on the contrary, very complex. Special attention is paid to those *mansi* that were inhabited by more than one tenant. In contrast to older research, Devroey and Schroeder do not interpret this phenomenon as a sign of overpopulation, land hunger and the decline of a «classical» system of estate organisation, but «as evidence of the flexibility of the estate organization». Moreover, the «overpopulation» of farms could be seen in a much less dramatic perspective if arable farming was only one branch of the economy among others.

In her contribution «Indications of an Estate Economy from a Renewed Analysis of Sites of Rural Settlements» (pp. 131-148), Edith Peytremann deals specifically with the influence of large ecclesiastical institutions on a local environment. Due to specialised agricultural activity, textile production, metallurgical activity and the simultaneous absence of domestic structures, Peytremann identifies an excavation site at Sermersheim in Alsace as an estate centre (*curtis dominica*) of the abbey of Ebersmunster.

As the editor Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo himself acknowledges in the introduction to the book, «given the nature and the diversity of the papers, they are not easy to group together into closed sessions» (p. 15). For the same reason, it is not simple to review the present volume without simply summarizing its contents. As already pointed out in the «Conclusions» by Chris Wickham (pp. 355-360) «the real strength of this book is the way it has focussed on the complexities of early medieval social inequality as a problematic which both historians and archaeologists must face» (p. 355).

The contributions clearly show that the standard, simplified medieval counter-positions of «lord and peasants» often turn out to be wrong. Even in peripheral, local rural societies social relationships were far more complex, and peasant agency was active in all of them. Local societies of the early Middle Ages were not «monolithic» and static, but fluid and mobile. Even at the local level there were different, sometimes conflicting individual and group interests. Therefore, conventional evolutionist and teleological models very often do not do live up to the complex and multi-layered reality.

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