

THE PEASANT MODE OF PRODUCTION AND THE EARLY MEDIEVAL ECONOMIES OF ITALY

El modo de producción campesino y las economías de la Italia altomedieval

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the concept of the peasant mode of production in early medieval Italy. Wickham's categorization of the peasant mode echoes earlier understandings of Italian economic structures. Recent archaeological advances, including fine-grained analysis of small settlements, bioarchaeological studies, and research on storage facilities, have expanded our understanding of early medieval peasant life, suggesting that peasants may have occupied the landscape in even more dispersed ways than previously considered. Limited coin circulation and changing storage practices in the early Middle Ages might reflect shifts in economic organization. The integration of textual evidence with archaeological data, including organic remains and environmental data, permits an increasingly nuanced picture of rural society in post-Roman Italy.

Keywords: Peasant mode; early medieval Italy; rural economy; archaeological methods; extraction systems.

RESUMEN: Este artículo examina el concepto del modo de producción campesino en el contexto de la Italia de la Alta Edad Media. La conceptualización de este modo de producción sugerida por Wickham evoca formas anteriores de concebir las estructuras económicas italianas. Avances recientes en las ciencias arqueológicas, incluido el análisis pormenorizado de pequeños asentamientos, estudios bioarqueológicos e investigaciones sobre espacios de almacenamiento, han expandido nuestro conocimiento sobre la vida campesina en la Alta Edad Media. Todo esto sugiere que los campesinos quizás hayan poblado el paisaje de manera mucho más dispersa de lo que se pensaba previamente. Es posible que la limitada circulación de monedas y los cambios en las prácticas de almacenaje en la Alta Edad Media reflejen cambios en la organización económica. La integración de evidencias textuales y datos arqueológicos, incluyendo restos orgánicos y evidencias medioambientales, nos permite una cada vez más detallada visión de la sociedad rural en la Italia posromana.

Palabras clave: modo de producción campesino; Italia altomedieval; economía rural; técnicas arqueológicas; sistemas de extracción.

SUMMARY: 0 Introduction. 1 Italy, the current state of scholarship, and reception of *FEMA*. 2 Archaeology and its role in analyzing early medieval economies of Italy. 3 Further directions. 4 Conclusions. 5 Works cited.

0 INTRODUCTION

Chris Wickham argues in *FEMA* that the seventh and eighth centuries were, in most parts of the West, marked by greater peasant autonomy than before and after. The dominance of the late antique landlord or estate owner in earlier centuries had been consistent across many parts of the Roman Empire¹. Who the landlords were (élites? emperors or kings? religious institutions?) varied across the territories of the former Roman Empire, but their grips on rural labour forces weakened in the fifth and sixth centuries, faster in some places, slower in others. From the sixth to eighth centuries, the shape of peasant settlements changed. In late antiquity, rural settlement tended to be sparse, with isolated houses or hamlets and the occasional large villa. This form of territorial occupation might have been shaped by the needs of the overall estate owner. From the eighth century, people increasingly lived in nucleated settlements of villages, and villagers' agricultural activity was organized by «territorial forms of cooperation»². The economic logic of this system, as Wickham sketched it out, is that:

«Household economies are linked together for mutual support. They exchange goods, both to cement societies (gift exchange) and to obtain products they do not produce. ... In the peasant mode, surpluses are not easily accumulated; after the acquisition of essential goods like tools and utensils, they are generally given away, as part of the social network, to kin first, to friends next, to other neighbours thereafter; or else they are collectively consumed, in celebrations of different kinds... Occasionally, villages will divide up specialisms (a village of potters, a village of woodworkers, a village of smiths), but there will have to be a stable local network for this to develop. Markets for external, commercial exchange exist, but they are marginal in most versions of the peasant mode»³.

To be clear, for Wickham, the peasant mode existed alongside the feudal mode, which was characterized by large estates and extractive landlords⁴. In each of his regions there was a tipping point at which the existing Roman structures of landholding and taxation stopped, and something else, inevitably a mix of peasant mode and feudal mode, took over («catastrophe flip»). This sketch was deliberately loose, so that it might hold true across different historical realities. The main lines are clear: less extraction from above, less pressure to produce, less organization of the labour of others means a relatively horizontal, relatively modest (materially speaking) society, which is necessarily

¹ For Italy, see the classic Cracco Ruggini, *Economia e società*; more recently, Vera, «Massa fundorum». See also De Francesco, *La proprietà fondiaria*.

² Wickham, *Framing*, 488, also 514-18, 560.

³ *Ibidem*, 537.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 541-3.

collaborative. This argument sought to shift the conversation away from tired debates about the Fall of the Roman Empire to evaluating the varied strategies people used to get by and get along, and which gave rise to the new and entirely different social and political structures of the Middle Ages. In the context of Italy, for instance, Wickham points out that the Lombard invasions from the northeast did not produce considerable seizure of estates⁵. Wickham suggests that «the confusion of the Lombard invasions encouraged a general sense among peasants in the Lombard zones that their local relationships mattered more than who owned their land»⁶. Political disruption thus might increase peasant autonomy, prompting local networks to supplant larger or more rigid structures. His assessment of the peasant mode in sixth- to eighth-century Italy also challenged existing chronologies of the transformations of the post-Roman world. Since the time of Pierre Toubert, Italian landholding had been seen as mostly shaped by the late Roman pattern of lowland village and cities, which supposedly lasted until the late tenth or eleventh century, when local lords relocated settlements into fortified hilltop sites⁷. Wickham suggested that at least some of the shift in settlement happened well before *incastellamento*.

Wickham insists, rightly, on regional distinctiveness within large-scale transformations. «My intention in this study has been to argue for a primacy of causal factors internal to regions when assessing economic change in our period»⁸. Italy is a region in his study, but of course the peninsula comprises very different regions, and while early medieval Italy has historically been considered through very different lenses from contemporary France or Germany, most scholars of Italy undertake research on a single area (Northern, Central, or Southern Italy and, perhaps, the Islands). The political trajectories of these areas after the fifth century were indeed varied, and analysis of different regimes of land tenure within them, or occasionally comparing them, remains a core research interest in scholarship on Italy.

1 ITALY, THE CURRENT STATE OF SCHOLARSHIP, AND RECEPTION OF *FEMA*

The context of Italy warrants particular attention in discussion of the transformations of the Roman world because of the richness of the archaeological evidence and the depth of the textual record; we can know quite a lot about Italy and compare our different categories of evidence⁹. Further, the tradition of documentary culture from the late Roman period produced a continuity of terminology and legal frameworks, and it

⁵ *Ibidem*, 210.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 488.

⁷ Toubert, *Les structures*. For discussion see Wickham, *Framing*, 483-5; Costambeys, «Settlement», 95-6; Francovich, «The Beginnings of Hilltop Villages».

⁸ Wickham, *Framing*, 819. See also Wickham, «The Problems of Comparison», 230.

⁹ For a sense of the scale and quality of the archaeological work, see the journal of *Archeologia Medievale*, which has been published annually since 1975, alongside a very substantial series of site publications and collected volumes in the Biblioteca di Archeologia Medievale. For recent surveys on the textual record of Italy in this period, see essays in Brown *et al.*, (eds.), *Documentary Culture*; Internullo, «Il papiro»; Martin, Peters-Custot and Prigent (eds.), *L'héritage byzantin en Italie, I*.

encouraged the very use of documents to record efficiently structures of ownership which endured into the early Middle Ages¹⁰. Naturally, Wickham's characterization of peasant society derives importantly from Italian material; one of his three case studies is Lucca, whence the largest collection of original documents we have from the eighth century in Italy¹¹. The deep and wide array of evidence available for Italy makes clear that —as with nearly anywhere else in the post-Roman world— in the countryside crops were grown to feed rural peasants, or enable those peasants to pay their landlords, or fulfil obligations to others, in different combinations. Agriculture was surely mixed, with different regions producing more or fewer olives, wine grapes, and different kinds of cereals, alongside the vegetables, herbs, legumes, and fruits which rounded out every meal¹². Olives, wine grapes, cereals, and nut trees such as chestnuts were necessarily grown in suburban or rural lands. None of these needed the intensive maintenance that garden vegetables did, and all could be grown at scale. Oil, wine, and grain required processing to be useful, and this need for transformation into secondary products encouraged a certain degree of collaboration, or permitted a further degree of exploitation. The diversity of landholdings (individuals often held many parcels across a territory) and the frequency of small owners (that is: many individuals held their land apparently independently) alongside those who held large portfolios are evident in the Lucca charters, meaning that peasants operated in a fluid social situation, less defined by village solidarity or major aristocratic patronage than elsewhere in the early medieval world¹³.

Archaeology also provides evidence for the transformation of economies. In Italy, there has been active research interest in medieval archaeology since the 1970s. For many years excavations focused either on Roman villa sites, and thus research focused on their eventual abandonment, or on medieval fortifications, and thus the study of their origins¹⁴. Questions about the end of Roman villas and the origins of fortified settlements relate directly to matters of economic modes. Villas can attest to the abandonment of Roman economic systems of production, circulation, and consumption; the villa was an elite residence in a large-scale productive landscape. New rural sites speak to the chronology and nature of the process of *incastellamento*, the transformation of lowland sparse settlement to highland nucleated, fortified sites. These two archaeological interests have shaped the lines of research in this field considerably. Further, the use of extensive surface survey in Italy, and the wide-spread efforts to develop a *Carta archeologica* for different regions which includes archaeological evidence from even the early Middle Ages, means that we have detailed and comparable evidence. Wickham's arguments on peasant economies have drawn much evidence from the production and circulation of pottery, or the failure to produce distinctive pottery or for that pottery to move beyond the sub-region

¹⁰ A major new project is underway to re-examine this, see Internullo and Tomei, «Scrivere le strutture».

¹¹ *Framing*, 387-93.

¹² Montanari, *L'alimentazione*; Andreolli, «Paesaggi della vite»; Pini, *Vite e vino*; Dalena (ed.), *Mezzogiorno rurale*; Castelletti *et al.*, «L'agricoltura dell'Italia settentrionale».

¹³ *Framing*, 390-1.

¹⁴ Major surveys of research on these topics were published in the late 1990s and early 2000s: *Dopo la fine delle ville*, Francovich and Hodges, *From Villa to Village*, 22-5; Barceló and Toubert (eds.), «L'incastellamento».

where it was produced; we might also consider evidence for the formation of new settlements, visible in surface survey, or the interactions between cities and countryside.

Wickham's characterization of economies of the sixth to early ninth centuries as peasant-mode has, per se, not been taken up widely by scholars in Italy. While his Marxian recategorization of peasant economies has been a focus of considerable attention in English scholarship, in Italy this aspect has drawn perhaps less interest¹⁵. This is in part due to the fact that it already squares neatly with existing paradigms: *archeologia medievale* has, since its inception, been undertaken in a Marxian framework and much early medieval history in Italy has been concerned, for decades, with land use and the relations between lordship and peasants¹⁶. By contrast, his comparative methodologies have garnered attention in Italy, in part because they are so different from how research is carried out in Italy. Alessio Fiore (one of the team who translated *FEMA* into Italian) set out to explain the book's uses of Ideal Types for the Italian readership and to define the four key terms which were used distinctively in Wickham's book: «lo stato, aristocratico, società feudale e società tribale»¹⁷. As Fiore noted, some of these themes are key to the study of medieval history in Italy and thus familiar. But because research on medieval Italy remains mostly focussed on regions within Italy, the interpretative value of a heuristic such as «the state» remains limited to statecraft as practiced within medieval Italy, and not, therefore, focused on comparison. The same remains true for «aristocracy» and the other terms.

Wickham's scholarship is widely consumed in Italy and recognized as paradigmatic. He sits on the Comitato scientifico of major publications such as *Archeologia Medievale*, *Rivista storica italiana*, and *Reti Medievali*, as well as others, and has been a fellow of the Accademia nazionale dei Lincei since 2000 and a member of Società Italiana per la Storia Medievale since it started in 2016. He publishes extensively in Italian, and his book *FEMA* was translated into Italian in 2009¹⁸. *FEMA* has been read in Italy, to be sure. There was a special issue of the journal *Storica* in 2006, edited by Sandro Carocci and E. Igor Mineo, which collected a number of short essays by eminent, senior scholars (all of whom are men, for some reason), which intentionally or otherwise, concentrated on the implications of the arguments elaborated in *FEMA* for the history of Italy. Andrea Giardina focussed on the challenges posed by the periodization used¹⁹; Sauro Gelichi stressed the complexity of the archaeological record of Northern Italy and the relevance of elite or, better, lower elite/«middle class» behaviours for economic modes, a reassertion of the interpretative value of high-value luxury goods for the creation of elites²⁰; Paolo Cammarosano revealed the inflections produced by specific methodological choices

¹⁵ See the special issue of the *Journal of Agrarian Change* 9/1 (2009) and *Historical Materialism* 19/1 (2011).

¹⁶ For this ideological underpinning in Italian archaeology, see the special issue of *Archeologia Medievale*, *Quarant'anni di Archeologia Medievale*, edited by Sauro Gelichi. For historical research on lordship, the literature is vast. See the compilations of *Agricoltura e mondo rurale*; Sergi (ed.), *Curtis e signoria rurale*; Andreolli and Montanari (eds.), *L'azienda curtense*; Andreolli, *Contadini*.

¹⁷ Fiore, «Grandi narrazioni».

¹⁸ Wickham, *Le società dell'alto medioevo*.

¹⁹ Giardina, «Economia e società».

²⁰ Gelichi, «Economia e società».

made by Wickham²¹; and Paolo Delogu on earlier iterations of Wickham's position on the role of cities, the function of the state (broadly defined) in economic dynamics), and the relative poverty of elites/aristocrats²². In these essays, Wickham's arguments regarding the «modo di produzione contadino» and «modo di produzione feudale» were noted, and even applauded as some of the best pages of the book, yet they were generally put to one side as other considerations, listed above, were more pressing²³.

This is because the changes in landholding and taxation at the end of antiquity have been for many years a key topic of research in Italy, as has the reconfiguration of estates into the bipartite system in parts of central and Northern Italy, as noted above²⁴. Scholarship on Italy has tended to focus on two key questions: what did the contraction of interregional exchange networks, apparent in the fifth and sixth centuries, mean for local societies? And: how much did external influence (especially from Carolingian Frankia) shape the emergence of the estate structures in the later eighth and subsequent centuries? Wickham's characterisation of the local and large-scale changes which are intrinsic to the end of Roman taxation and the rise of post-Roman forms of governance thus builds upon longstanding research initiatives and contributes to active discourses. A recent collection of articles on different paradigms of state extraction in Italy in the transformations of the Roman Empire revealed the quantity of work still to be done on the fates of imperial properties and fiscal lands after the late empire, and the role of documents in the process of extraction²⁵. For example, recent research through major nationally funded projects and ERC-funded projects has developed these questions:

- Fiscal Estate in Medieval Italy: Continuity and Change (9th-12th Centuries), 2020-2023 (Università di Bologna, Pisa, Roma Tre and Turin) PRIN 2017.
- «LEXICONOMY. Writing the Structures of Landholding in a Changing Italy (5th-8th Century)» (Università di Pisa, Roma Tre) PRIN 2022.
- nEU-Med (ERC) (Università of Siena) 2015-2020.
- The Archaeology of Regime Change: Sicily in Transition (ERC) (Università di Roma Tor Vergata, University of York) 2016-23²⁶.

It is also the case that Wickham himself has put greater emphasis on the feudal mode than the peasant mode. In his essay «Rethinking the Structure of the Early Medieval Economy», published in 2008, he does not actually use either term²⁷. The explanation of peasant society in *The Inheritance of Rome*, written in 2007 and published in 2009,

²¹ Cammarosano, «Economia e società». He also notes that a major contribution of Wickham's work is his emphasis on regional/micro-regional variations of societies.

²² Delogu, «Economia e società». On the terminology of elite or aristocrat, see 160.

²³ Giardina, «Economia e società».

²⁴ See above n. 2, 16 and Vera, *I doni di Cerere*.

²⁵ «Dalla Res privata». See the synthesis in Paolo Tedesco, «Conclusioni».

²⁶ <https://fiscuslive.unibo.it/en>; Internullo and Tomei, «Scrivere le strutture»; Bianchi and Hodges (eds.), *The nEU-Med Project*. Many other projects relate to these research questions. See, for instance: «Paesaggi rurali italiani tra tarda antichità e medioevo: insediamenti, produzioni, chiese, poteri. Storia, archeologie e tecnologie: sistemi integrati di fonti e metodi» PRIN (Università Suor Orsola Benincasa, 2010/2011).

²⁷ Wickham, «Rethinking the Structure».

appears to reflect the economic context of Italy (perhaps even the rest of Europe) more accurately than the one presented in *FEMA*. In *The Inheritance*, intended for a less expert audience than that of *FEMA*, there is no discussion of peasant mode, but rather a clear statement that:

«The early medieval peasantry, even if they were landowners, were circumscribed by their aristocratic neighbours, who were so much more wealthy and powerful than they, but in the last two millennia the period 500-800 was probably when aristocratic power in the West was least totalizing, and local autonomies were greatest —taking into account regional differences, as we have seen²⁸.»

Thus the mechanisms of surplus extraction whether the payments went to a landlord who is one's neighbour, a nearby religious institution as a regular gift, or to the agents of a ruler who demanded payment in coin were never very far from the horizontal collaborations of the peasant mode. And, fundamentally, the supply of elite households provided the major economic motor for the early Middle Ages²⁹.

2 ARCHAEOLOGY AND ITS ROLE IN ANALYZING EARLY MEDIEVAL ECONOMIES OF ITALY

One of the most significant aspects of Wickham's *FEMA* (and indeed Wickham's research throughout his career) has been the extensive use of archaeological data for exchange and for economic strategies. This has been noted extensively in responses to the book, mostly laudatory for his embrace of datasets which are unyielding to non-archaeologists but which reveal fine-grained details about economic processes³⁰. There have been challenges to this methodology. Mark Whittow developed the consideration of archaeological data from regional perspectives to examine the end of the Roman fiscal structure and its local impacts³¹. Peter Sarris pointed out that when landlords lived off the same products that tenants and peasants did, the archaeological record does not reveal much about the degree of exploitation of one over the other; and this remains a critical point for societies without materially significant hierarchy³². The material poverty of the peasantry of the seventh to early ninth centuries —and even more broadly speaking: peasant life in the early Middle Ages in Italy— has recently been the subject of review by Richard Hodges on the basis of his work in Molise at S. Vincenzo al Volturno, and Montarrenti³³. Those surveys in Molise were carried out in the 1980s, before ceramics clearly datable to the seventh and eighth centuries were identified, and published only subsequently³⁴. Nonetheless, Hodges emphasized the richness of farms of the fifth century in terms of ceramics imported interregionally (and the other products that travelled with those

²⁸ Wickham, *The Inheritance*, 106. See also 105.

²⁹ This is spelled out very clearly in «Rethinking the Structure», 23-4.

³⁰ See Gelichi, «Economia e società», 135; Delogu, «Economia e società», 150; Haldon, «Framing».

³¹ Whittow, «How Much Trade».

³² Sarris, «Introduction», 7-8.

³³ Hodges, «The Primitivism».

³⁴ Baker *et al.* «The Field Surveys», especially 33.

ceramics), and their poverty in the eighth and ninth centuries, in terms of archaeological materials³⁵.

The archaeology of the peasantry has taken considerable leaps forward since the publication of Wickham's book in 2005. This has been most true in Spain, where exciting new work, highlighted elsewhere in this special issue, has developed considerable new insights into daily lives and economic patterns of peasant society³⁶. In Italy further surface survey projects have been undertaken, and inevitably more excavations too, making possible greater understanding of rural settlement in the early Middle Ages³⁷. This new research does not fundamentally contradict the picture laid out by *FEMA*, though provides a sharper picture of regional patterns. New methodologies for the analysis of rural societies were developed in the course of the Roman Peasant Project, led by Kimberly Bowes and Cam Grey at the University of Pennsylvania. That project (2009-14) carried out targeted campaigns of excavation on Roman sites in the area of Cinigiano (GR) which had been identified as rural residential or productive areas through field survey³⁸. The excavations aimed at the most modest sites, and these emerged as even more materially poor than the surface scatter might have suggested. Bowes and her team suggest that in many cases peasants made use of multiple sites over time, relocating to perform the labour required at that moment. The suggestion is that this sparsely populated landscape was occupied in a fluid and even intermittent way, and the people who worked it do not appear to be closely connected with any major estate holder, though in the later imperial period, there was a villa nearby at Santa Marta³⁹. The focus of this research is very much the rural life of this area in the first to third centuries, the Roman period, though some sites show phases of occupation in the fourth or fifth centuries. The findings from this project may not be reproducible beyond this rather remote part of Tuscany, but the methodology of fine-grained analysis of the smallest-scale settlements has revealed unexpected insights. One of the principal contributions of the Roman Peasant project is the application of archaeological sciences to reconstruct crops, landscape, and diet, and the wider environmental context⁴⁰.

The analysis of pollens, seeds, animal remains, and residue on pots permits a reconstruction of the strategies of nutrition for the peasant population and how they have changed. This kind of information has long been sought by historians of the medieval peasantry in Italy by looking to the textual record for payments in kind or indications of

³⁵ Hodges, «The Primitivism».

³⁶ For instance: Tejerizo-García, «The Archaeology», and Portass and Santos Salazar in this special issue.

³⁷ For recent surveys and topographic analyses of regions which contribute to our understanding of the period c. 600-800, see Augenti *et al.*, «Archeologia dei paesaggi»; Several articles (by Nicola Busino (Buonalbergo, Benevento), Flaminia Alberini (Valle Dell'Aterno), Roberta Leuzzi (Navelli/Aterno), and Stella Patitucci and Giovanni Uggeri (Sicily), collected in Patitucci Uggeri (ed.) *Archeologia del paesaggio*.

³⁸ Bowes (ed.), *The Roman Peasant Project*. On the methodology, see 11-13, 22-25. See also earlier reports in Ghisleni *et al.*, «Excavating the Roman I»; Vaccaro *et al.*, «Excavating the Roman II».

³⁹ See Fentress, «Review». For Santa Marta, see Campana and Vaccaro, «Santa Marta».

⁴⁰ Arnoldus *et al.*, «Agriculture and Land Use»; Bowes *et al.*, «Diet, Dining».

crops grown and animals raised⁴¹. Archaeological data has only occasionally been available for Italy before; British researchers have collected faunal remains much more consistently, as part of the toolkit of medieval archaeological methodologies, than Italian teams until very recently⁴². A recent survey of animal remains collected from excavated hilltop sites in Tuscany has contributed significantly to our understanding of the subsistence strategies of the early Middle Ages and the increased use of secondary products, such as milk and wood, which went along with the rise in artisanal craft production and the emergence of local social hierarchies at some sites⁴³. This kind of integrated archaeological research to reconstruct in high-definition early medieval contexts is surely the way of future research⁴⁴. Through materials analysis and the incorporation of research on the material remains of plants, animals, and even people, we are more and more able to point to small- and large-scale changes in how people used their environments, and how their environments changed in our period. When cemetery excavations are included in the analysis of a site, we are also provided with clues in the form of marks left on human skeletons. For the UK and indeed the Northern Sea world of the early Middle Ages, bioarchaeological research has been a staple of research for some time, producing demographic sketches of places and times, and the lives of individuals⁴⁵. This kind of research is only beginning for early medieval Italy⁴⁶. Where it has been undertaken it often focusses on questions of ethnicity, where aDNA research has sought to explain patterns of migration and cultural interaction between different early medieval societies⁴⁷. However, when applied to early medieval burials more broadly, and in conjunction with the application of other archaeological sciences, the study of human remains stands to provide entirely new data about early medieval peasantry and its patterns of consumption, as the research of the project Sic Transit, in Sicily, has begun to reveal⁴⁸.

⁴¹ Montanari, *L'alimentazione*. See also the special issue dedicated to *Problemi di storia dell'alimentazione nell'Italia medievale*, *Archeologia Medievale* 8 (1981).

⁴² Studies carried out by the British team at San Vincenzo al Volturno in the 1980s in Clark, «The Animal Bones»; Giorgi and Constantini, «The Plant Remains». For recent work carried out integrating archaeobotanical and archaeofaunal remains see the sixth- to seventh-century site of Supersano in Puglia: Arthur *et al.*, *La storia nel pozzo*; the outcomes of the Sic Transit project which integrated bioarchaeological and environmental data with analysis of structures and settlement formations: Carver, Molinari and Orrechioni (eds.), *Castronovo di Sicilia*; Molinari and Meo (eds.), *Mazara/Māzar*. For a very recent statistical consideration of the environmental data from all of Italy, see Ragno, *Peasants*.

⁴³ See the synthesis by Salvadori, *Uomini e animali*. For the case of Sicily, see Aniceti, *Animals and their Roles*.

⁴⁴ On «high-definition archaeology» see Raja and Sindbæk, *Urban Network Evolutions*.

⁴⁵ For a striking example of how this kind of analysis reveals subtle but fundamental distinctions in the qualities of daily life of early medieval peasants, see Fleming, *Britain after Rome*, 346-64.

⁴⁶ Barbiera, *Memorie sepolte*; Barbiera and Dalla-Zuanna, «Population Dynamics».

⁴⁷ Vai *et al.*, «A Genetic Perspective»; Giostra (ed.), *Migrazioni*.

⁴⁸ For an example of this kind of integrated analysis, see *Castronovo di Sicilia*.

3 FURTHER DIRECTIONS

Two matters which featured rather little in Wickham's analysis of the peasant mode or in other examinations of the practicalities of early medieval exchange in early medieval Italy are the matters of storage and transport containers, and coined money. I suggest that these are critical for exploring if surplus was accrued, and —if it was— how, and how exchange might have worked in commercial system or otherwise.

Storage of agricultural products is essential to the maintenance of a household, to render foods available across the seasons, and to mitigate against poor yields or other failures at harvest. As a workshop organized by Giovanna Bianchi, Alfonso Vigil-Escalera Guirado, and Juan Antonio Quirós made clear, there is a significant body of evidence for the storage of agricultural goods, in warehouses, barns or pits, from across early medieval Europe, but there are challenges in drawing that evidence together, as the structures often escape attention and are tricky to date⁴⁹. For Italy, excavated examples of small pits (diameter of 1-2m) for storage associated with houses for the sixth and seventh centuries, or *dolia* (ceramic storage containers) associated with larger residences, especially in Sicily and sites connected with Eastern Roman control⁵⁰. From the mid-eighth to mid-ninth century, there are larger storage facilities, such as those at Rocca degli Alberti, interpreted as collective storage for grain and legumes, perhaps at village level⁵¹. There is of course a great risk in drawing conclusions from disparate information; a survey of all known excavated silos from Italy produced a list of 154 sites dating from the fifth to fifteenth century, but only 14 of these predate the year 1000⁵². Nonetheless, consideration of the mechanisms, scales, and topographies of storage seems to me to be an important way to register how surplus and its extraction worked in different contexts. Sicily clearly played a key role in supporting the military down to the end of the seventh century, and the control of grain cultivation and storage was clearly a significant part of this⁵³. Facilities for grain storage at scale, and possibly also wine, were not the size of Roman-period imperial granaries, but nonetheless related to provisioning beyond a household, and thus point to different economic systems in different places and times⁵⁴. In a related fashion, the production of transport containers, such as amphorae, points to places where surplus products were stocked and prepared for shipment.

Globular amphorae were produced in the seventh to ninth centuries in a few centers, including at Misum (Naples), and Otranto. They were transport containers for medium to long-distance shipping of liquids like wine. Some of these may have been associated with the payment of taxes (from Capri to Naples, in the early eighth, for instance)⁵⁵, or

⁴⁹ See discussion in Gelichi, «Conclusioni».

⁵⁰ For the late Roman period, see Vera, «Gli horrea frumentari»; Prigent, «Le stockage»; Alfano and D'Amico, «La conservazione».

⁵¹ Bianchi and Grassi, «Sistemi di stoccaggio».

⁵² Ebanista, «La conservazione», building upon the work of Bianchi and Grassi, «Sistemi di stoccaggio».

⁵³ Prigent, «Le stockage».

⁵⁴ Alfano and D'Amico, «La conservazione».

⁵⁵ Arthur, «Byzantine «Globular Amphorae».

army supply, as Wickham recently suggested⁵⁶. The limited production of these transport containers, concentrated in specific centres with connections to state administration or military organization, reveals the persistence of institutional extraction alongside peasant autonomy. This evidence complicates the concept of the peasant mode by demonstrating that even during periods of relative peasant freedom, specialized production for elite consumption or state functions persisted at scale (though surely less than the Roman period). The distribution patterns of these amphorae —found primarily along coastal routes and at administrative centers— further suggests a bifurcated economy where peasant self-sufficiency dominated inland rural areas while coastal zones maintained connections to broader networks of exchange. These varied storage practices provide evidence for evaluating the peasant mode model. Small household storage pits of the sixth and seventh centuries align with Wickham's characterization of an economy organized around household units engaged in localized exchange and consumption. The transition to larger, possibly collective storage facilities in the eighth and ninth centuries suggests a shift in economic structures, where village-level cooperation became more formalized, potentially indicating the beginnings of a transition toward more hierarchical organization. Storage structures thus serve as material indicators of the shifting balance between peasant autonomy and elite extraction over this crucial period.

Wickham's discussion of peasant economies placed great interpretative value on ceramics as indicators of economic exchange and production, giving little space for discussion of coins and monetary systems⁵⁷. This methodological choice is understandable given the archaeological record; as I have discussed elsewhere, there have been very few actual coins recovered from Italian archaeological contexts, hoards, or antiquarian collections for the whole period from about 600-1200. However, the relative absence of coins themselves constitutes important evidence about the nature of exchange in this period; peasant economies may have operated primarily through non-monetary transaction systems; this is a point that deserves more attention in our conceptualization of the peasant mode⁵⁸. Before the early eighth century, coins circulated in certain regions of Italy. Lombard and Byzantine areas of Italy had a bi-metallic system up to the 740s, and Byzantine coins from Constantinople, Carthage, for instance, were used alongside Italian-minted coins⁵⁹. However, from the mid-eighth century practically no coins were in active use; very few coins have been recovered from excavated sites⁶⁰. Some new coins were evidently made, because coins from Italian mints appear in the archaeological record outside of Italy⁶¹. While commercial transactions can certainly occur without physical currency, actual coinage —varying in denomination— has traditionally been viewed as important for facilitating trade. Archaeologically, we see coins, in part, where people used them

⁵⁶ Wickham, «Some Concluding Observations».

⁵⁷ See Wickham's comments on the criticism, «The Problems of Comparison», 229.

⁵⁸ Goodson, «Coins, their Absence». See also Rovelli, «Coins and Trade»; Arslan, *Repertorio*.

⁵⁹ Rovelli, «Some Considerations».

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 205.

⁶¹ Coupland, «The Italian Connection».

and lost them. The lack of physical currency should therefore encourage us to consider alternative exchange mechanisms⁶².

We know that in the late Roman period, commercial exchange increasingly took place in periodic regional markets as the Mediterranean-wide system of commerce splintered into regional networks of greater and greater simplicity⁶³. By the sixth century, all systems of commerce in the West had contracted to increasingly regional and local systems, whereby everyday goods were supplied from a regional territory and the large-scale exchange of bulk goods —grain, wine, olive oil, fish sauce, textiles and clothing— that had been typical of the Roman period gradually contracted to local suppliers and consumers, and only the very rich or very important were able to import bulk goods over longer distance. In Italian cities it has long been assumed that markets were held in the places of the ancient forum down into the Middle Ages —and there is some evidence that this is true, but we must not imagine anything on the scale of ancient *macella* or streets lined with shops with wooden shutters at the front⁶⁴.

As it had been in antiquity, the right to hold a market, and to collect tolls from sales at market, was a public good, issued by rulers. Over the early Middle Ages, holding a market, creating the physical space as well as hosting the various social elements which came together for a regional market or fair, became increasingly a desirable privilege, because it provided a source of income for the person, or office-holder, or institution who held the concession. Very few concessions for markets exist prior to the year 800; and the scale of exchange at those few markets is not clear, nor is it evident what precisely was bought and sold⁶⁵. Each region had its own conditions. Thus, famously, the residents of Comacchio, on the Adriatic, were awarded rights to sell products along the Po, including oil, garum, pepper, and salt produced locally; of the excavated pottery at Comacchio a great proportion takes the form of transport containers, and archaeologists have been happy to consider Comacchio a great emporium of goods even from long-distance⁶⁶. The concentration of evidence from Comacchio is exceptional however. This corner of the Adriatic developed as a funnel for luxuries from the Eastern mediterranean from the late eighth century and the rise of small-scale exchange of products in the Po Valley is evidence of long- and medium-distance trade. This evidence from this region does not, however, reflect a burgeoning mercantile society already in the eighth century throughout the Italian peninsula, as has sometimes been argued⁶⁷.

⁶² Naismith, *Making Money*.

⁶³ Goodson, *Cultivating*, esp. 124-6. On late Roman marketing systems, see De Ligt, *Fairs and Markets*, 4.

⁶⁴ Goodson, *Cultivating*, 131-6.

⁶⁵ Rapone, «*Il mercato*», 128.

⁶⁶ *Un emporio*; Grandi, «Un delta in movimento». On the wider networks of the Po valley, with a conservative assessment of their economic reach, see Balzaretto, «Cities, Emporia», and discussion of a shared Anglo-Saxon position by Gelichi, «Economia e società», 137-8.

⁶⁷ McCormick, «Comparing and Connecting».

4 CONCLUSIONS

Wickham's concept of the peasant mode explains a key part of early medieval Italian rural economies. As he claimed at the time, and as has been shown through subsequent research: peasant autonomy existed alongside extraction systems. Consideration of the peasant mode in early medieval Italy reveals both the strength of Wickham's conceptual framework and the need for continued refinement based on accumulating evidence. Two key directions emerge for future research:

First, we need a greater understanding of the textual record and its significance, specifically how the apparatus of record-keeping and archives functioned in the management of extraction systems. Current projects such as Internullo and Tomei's LEXICONOMY promise to illuminate how documentary practices evolved out of late Roman systems as they adapted to new social realities. These studies put the focus on the technologies of documents in the process of extracting surplus, and they will sharpen our tools for reading the documentary record in this light. Second, increased attention to organic material through archaeological sciences offers potential to reconstruct the lived experience of early medieval peasantry. Analysis of animal remains, preserved plants and pollens, and human skeletal evidence can reveal dietary patterns, health conditions, and environmental adaptations that textual sources rarely address. The integration of these approaches with more traditional archaeological and documentary evidence can provide a more textured understanding of how peasant communities navigated changing social and economic landscapes, and show in high relief the differences between one valley and another, and the degree to which one area might fall into the orbit of major lordship while another may not.

What emerges from this research is not a simple narrative of peasant freedom following Roman collapse, but rather a complex picture of communities actively negotiating their livelihoods within transformed power structures. Regional variation remained significant, with some areas experiencing greater autonomy while others maintained more robust systems of extraction. By acknowledging this complexity, we develop a more nuanced understanding of early medieval Italian societies. The study of Italy within the wider picture of the post-Roman Mediterranean reveals several different economic systems.

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