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THE PEASANT MODE OF PRODUCTION IN ITS IBERIAN LABYRINTH: FROM THE FIFTH TO THE EIGHTH CENTURY

El modo de producción campesino en su laberinto ibérico: siglos V-VIII

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ABSTRACT: This article proposes to interpret the impact that the use of the concept of the peasant mode of production, as theorised by Chris Wickham, has had on Iberian historical writing on the early Middle Ages. To that end, studies on different regions of the peninsula (from Galicia to Aragon, and from the Algarve to the Cantabrian zone), published by historians and archaeologists over the last few years, will be analysed in what follows. The objective of this article is to make sense of the historiographical dynamics underpinning a complex concept which has, with few exceptions, been employed more as a useful interpretative shortcut made necessary by the lack of empirical evidence, than as a research strategy in its own right, operative within the broader Marxist framework for which it was originally devised.

Keywords: peasant society; modes of production; rural archaeology; Iberia; early Middle Ages.

RESUMEN: Este artículo se propone interpretar el impacto que ha tenido sobre la historiografía medievalista ibérica el uso del concepto de modo de producción campesino tal y como fue presentado por Chris Wickham. Para ello, se analizarán los estudios publicados en los últimos años sobre diferentes espacios de la península Ibérica (de Galicia a Aragón y del Algarve al Cantábrico) tanto por especialistas en el documento escrito como en el

registro arqueológico. El objetivo es el de desentrañar las relaciones historiográficas de un concepto teórico complejo que ha sido utilizado sin excesiva reflexión crítica, y que, con algunas excepciones, aparece empleado más como un atajo interpretativo útil ante la escasez de datos empíricos, que como una estrategia de investigación de por sí, dentro del marco teórico marxista para el que fue concebido.

Palabras clave: sociedad campesina; modos de producción; arqueología rural; península ibérica; Alta Edad Media.

0 Introduction

Deciding to give this contribution a title that pays homage to Gerald Brenan's brilliant book on the background to the Spanish Civil War, *The Spanish Labyrinth* (1943), may seem an unlikely way to begin an article on Chris Wickham's *FEMA*. But the labyrinthine qualities of Wickham's book are readily apparent: after all, much like Brenan's masterpiece, *FEMA* is at once complex, allusive and suggestive. Wickham, like Brenan, reminds us that there is more than one path that societies might take in their historical development and that no endpoint or *terminus* is inevitable —a lesson we forget to our cost.

The principal theoretical pillar of *FEMA* is Wickham's concept of the peasant mode of production, discussed in detail elsewhere in this volume and characterised briefly below. In what follows, we intend to move swiftly beyond the shifting sands of historiographical and theoretical debate concerning the end of the Roman world and to survey the historiographical horizon as it now appears to us, some twenty years after *FEMA*'s publication[1]. This essay is not the place to address questions related to the abiding usefulness of the myriad different interpretations that historians have offered on the end of the Roman world, which would require another special issue dedicated to that purpose. On the contrary, the aim of this contribution is to confront the relatively muted response that greeted Wickham's theoretical construct —the peasant mode of production— in Iberian historiography, which latter was fragmented and inchoate at the time of *FEMA*'s publication and remains so. Analysing the peasant mode of production in Iberian contexts is further complicated by geography: from Galicia to the Algarve, and from the Meseta to the south-eastern Mediterranean littoral, the historical development of the peninsula in the early Middle Ages offers us a very uneven and highly localised picture of political and social change. This unevenness also characterises the source material: the written sources

[1] For an analysis of one such concept, and the dangers of its uncritical use, see Giardina, «Esplosione di tardoantico». For a more general assessment —which can be considered quasi-definitive— of the concept and its critics, see Brown, *Journeys of the Mind*. For modes of production and their theoretical space as a tool for historical research, it suffices here to cite, Banaji, *Theory as History*.

are scarce before the ninth century and cluster in some regions rather than others while the archaeology is rich and suggestive in some regions but almost non-existent in others.

In light of the foregoing, it is important to remind ourselves of the main characteristics of the peasant mode of production, as we understand them, in order to determine the Iberian landscapes in which it is possible to find similar (and thus, comparable) social dynamics. Thereafter, we will be better positioned to discuss the treatment of these dynamics in the burgeoning historiography of the last twenty years.

What, then, do we mean by the peasant mode of production and what, according to Wickham, were its most salient features? Societies characterised by the peasant mode of production were ones in which the state and elite groups were not able to extract surplus from rural cultivators in systematic fashion; in the early medieval West, they came about when the Roman state collapsed, leaving weaker and poorer aristocrats in its wake[2]. Peasants thereafter enjoyed more autonomy, farmed merely to sustain themselves, and had no incentive to produce surplus —or so the theory goes. The household economy underpinned the archetypal peasant-mode society and the logics of reciprocity and gift-exchange, rather than the market, governed the circulation of goods, all of which created a relatively egalitarian society. But if the peasant mode of production, as described and categorised in *FEMA*, describes «societies in which peasants are mostly independent producers, and the local rich and powerful are dominant only over a minority of the peasantry, or are partly direct producers themselves»[3], the question we must pose turns on being able to identify local societies in specific Iberian contexts in which Wickham's model seems theoretically operable. We also need to trace how Wickham's ideas have emerged from an analysis of the written sources and from the study of the material data, the dialogue between both having long characterised Wickham's research methods, a point which has not always been satisfactorily acknowledged.

Thus, in order to observe the precise ways in which Wickham's model seems to work (and where and how, perhaps, it does not), we will order our arguments first by methodological approach, concentrating on studies that have principally relied on written sources, before moving on to discuss the use that has been made of archaeological sources, which latter have had the greatest prominence and disruptive intellectual capacity in the last two decades.

1 Written sources: new approaches, familiar conclusions?

All the regions discussed in what follows have a common denominator: the scarcity, if not total lack, of written sources that describe in fine detail the social and economic realities specific to those regions during the period in question. This reality has hardly been a hindrance in terms of historiographical production: a number of studies published since 2005 have revisited interpretative problems raised by Wickham in *FEMA*, although

[2] Wickham, *Framing*, 534-48.
[3] *Ibidem*, 304.

only a handful have done so in methodologically innovative ways, thereby allowing the development of new approaches.

Consider, for example, the case of Vasconia, roughly the territory of the modern Basque Country and northern Navarre, between the rivers Bayas and Adour[4], which has been extensively studied over the last two decades. The most recent studies of this sub-region of northern Iberia (which include a recent monograph that treats the region *in toto*), make surprisingly limited use of the archaeological record, and have preferred to explore themes related to political forces and territorial organisation. This is partly due to the character of the sources, which illuminate almost exclusively the actions of the central authorities and ecclesiastical powers[5]; but it must also reflect authorial choice with respect to methodology and thematic emphasis. It is striking, in fact, that interpretations built largely upon re-readings of chronicles and other narrative sources, which offer little in the way of theoretical reflection and place significant weight on political structures, have remained prominent. Wickham's influence on certain areas of the historiography, in this respect, has been minimal.

Further east, in the Pyrenees, we have witnessed an important development: the discovery of a handful of documents from the sixth century related to the monastery of San Victorián de Asán (Sobrarbe, Aragon). The news of this discovery deserves to be celebrated; indeed, it is a palpable demonstration of the existence of hitherto unknown documentary collections dating from Late Antiquity —a discovery which offers scholars the hope of further findings. However, the Asán charters focus on the action of local powers well rooted in the political context of the sixth-century Visigothic kingdom and shed no real light on the peasantry. They attest a local landholding elite and a strong centralising kingdom capable of wielding considerable political influence, even in an upland area peripheral to the kingdom's core, such as Sobrarbe. The information they provide therefore appears to suggest that we should be wary of extending the peasant mode of production to mountainous areas located on the peripheries of solid political structures, with elites of demonstrable stature nearby, since, in such circumstances, it is hard to see how the peasant mode could have flourished[6].

Looking westwards, «Cantabria after Rome» has been part of a study dedicated to the village communities of two regions of northern Spain. In its pages it has become clear «that substantial Roman influence»[7] left its imprint on Cantabrian society. This

[4] On the problems of Basque and Spanish nationalist manipulation of the historical past of Vasconia, see Santos Salazar, «Medioevo basco».

[5] Pozo Flores, *Vasconia tardoantigua*. The only paragraph in the book devoted to some aspect of socio-economic organisation in Vasconia (300-3) does not consider the model proposed by Wickham. See also Larrea, «Las iglesias de los vascones»; Martín Viso, «La configuración»; and Santos Salazar, «A Periphery».

[6] Tomás Faci and Martín, «Cuatro documentos»; Tomás Faci, «The Transmission»; and Martin and Larrea (coords.), *Nouvelles chartes visigothiques.* For a mountainous area where the peasant mode of production could operate, one could consider Guipúzcoa, one of the few areas in Western Europe without any kind of documentation until well into the eleventh century: Besga Marroquín, «Guipúzcoa durante la Alta Edad Media».

[7] Portass, *The Village World*, 39-40, wherein the author acknowledges his debt to earlier work, such as: Bohigas Roldán, *Yacimientos*; and Gutiérrez González, «Poderes locales».

study has encouraged us to question the usefulness of well-established conceptual frameworks that were formerly held to be paradigmatic in Iberian historiography, for it is now far from clear that these frameworks can coexist in dialogue with the peasant mode of production[8]. Here we refer to the theories on the «tribal societies» (*sociedades gentilicias*) of post-Roman Cantabria and Asturias, devised by Abilio Barbero and Marcelo Vigil, that were so important for the renewal of Spanish early medieval historiography in the twilight of the Francoist period. These theories posited significant peasant autonomy in great swathes of these northern regions throughout the Visigothic period, and an absence of stringent rent or tax regimes, a precondition of the peasant mode of production. Wickham devoted his attention to Barbero and Vigil's influence in *FEMA*, and, in part, paid tribute to it; but quite where he stands on the shortcomings of their work is unclear[9]. If we consult *FEMA*, we see that Wickham subjected the concept of «tribal society» to mild criticism, taking aim, it would seem, at the economic primitivism inherent in Barbero and Vigil's model[10]. At the same time, he conceded that Spain was home to «mountainous microregions» in which the peasant mode could quite possibly have taken root by the seventh century[11]. The written sources, which before 800 consist of a handful of references to Cantabria in chronicles and hagiographies, cannot prove the existence of peasant-mode societies; but neither can they rule them out[12]. However, that there existed at least some small-scale aristocratic groups —such as the *senatus* harangued by Aemilian of Cogolla in the early seventh-century *Vita S. Emiliani*[13]— is clear enough, and it probably indicates that Romano-Visigothic landowning practices were present in Cantabria in this period. Furthermore, it must be admitted that there are no signs at all of «tribal» social units in the written sources, certainly after 500, and precious few in the little archaeology that has been done in the region. In short, if the peasant mode did come to characterise Cantabrian society in the post-Roman centuries, it did not emerge from within, nor impose itself on, societies previously untouched by the legacy of the Romano-Visigothic world.

And what of the rest of the northern fringe of the peninsula? Let us look, first, at Asturias, and begin, perforce, with a familiar story: the period spanning about 450 to 750 is obscure thanks to a paucity of written sources. Yet given the centrality of Asturias to the metanarrative underpinning the development of the peninsular Christian realms, the region has not wanted for attention. None of the accounts published in recent years, however, has changed the way we understand the early political history of the region, although there is now more acceptance of the significance of Galician and Navarrese

[8] On the «tribal» character of Cantabrian society, Barbero and Vigil, *Sobre los orígenes* and *La formación*. See also: Díaz and Menéndez Bueyes, «Romanos, visigodos e indígenas».

[9] Although he broaches the subject in his response to these articles in this special issue.

[10] Wickham, *Framing*, 228. Wickham's book explicitly cites the two main works written by Barbero and Vigil, recalling both the criticisms that have emanated from Spanish historiography, *ibidem*, 40, and his own doubts about «a society fully dominated by *gentilicio*, tribal models of social organization» all over those landscapes, *ibidem*, 227-9. See also Astarita, «Peasant-Based Societies».

[11] Wickham, *Framing*, 577.

[12] Portass, *The Village World*, 34-40.

[13] Vázquez de Parga (ed.), *Vita S. Emiliani*, 33.

aristocratic groups in the construction of the *regnum asturorum*[14]. We will come to recent developments in the archaeology of the peasantry shortly, but it is worth noting here, with reference to Asturias, that until the last twenty years or so attention was too narrowly focussed —by historians and archaeologists— on the admittedly extraordinary complex of royal buildings in and around Oviedo[15]. This imbalance has meant that scholars have focused on how archaeology has served elite interests in the projection of power rather than on how the resources required to sustain such building programmes were requisitioned and deployed. This approach, centred on the early Asturian monarchy and its leading powerbrokers, has generally shown little interest in theoretical reflection on the peasant mode. Things are broadly similar in Galicia; research agendas concerned with illuminating post-Roman and Suevic Galicia by means of the fragmentary extant written sources often focus on emphasising what was distinctive about Galician development —a noble enough aim, perhaps, but one that can lose sight of the bigger picture[16]. These studies betray few signs of the influence of Wickham's peasant mode, although quite how one could wrestle with its implications given the nature of the written sources, which are effectively limited to chronicles and various ecclesiastical documents pertaining to the organisation of the Church, is hard to say.

Asturias and Galicia have at least been better excavated than Cantabria in the last twenty years[17]. The same is probably true of northern and central Portugal, thanks to the work of Catarina Tente, Sara Prata and others; and the Meseta too, particularly the areas around Madrid and Toledo[18]. But in terms of historiographical advances based on innovative studies of the documentation, the picture is less encouraging. Once again, it is important to remember just how poorly documented this vast area is in terms of written sources between 400 and 800: the chronicles of Hydatius and Orosius, the laws and conciliar canons of the Visigothic kingdom and Church, and hagiographical material have all been mined for clues in recent years, as they were long before *FEMA* saw the light of day in 2005. But they offer us nothing of much use when it comes to trying to understand the viability of the peasant mode of production. An exception to this general rule with respect to the source base are the so-called *pizarras visigodas*, a collection of mostly seventh-century slate tablets found in greatest numbers near Diego Álvaro (Ávila), which record various aspects of small-scale estate management: rent-taking, sales, lists of outgoings. In these sources, where written text and archaeology meet in the form

[14] Fernández Conde, Mínguez and Portela, *El reino de Hispania*; Menéndez Bueyes, «Orígenes»; Muñiz López, «La formación».

[15] For a more succinct and nicely measured introduction, see Gutiérrez González, «La formación del territorio», 41-3.

[16] To cite two prominent examples, Andrade Cernadas and López Carreira, *O reino*; Díaz, *El reino suevo*. Sánchez Pardo, «Power and Rural Landscapes» offers something more akin to a rural sociology *à la* Wickham, albeit on a reduced scale.

[17] For reasons of space, here we only cite a handful of studies that we have found particularly useful. Asturias: Fernández Mier, «Peasant Communities»; Fernández Mier, «La génesis»; Fernández Fernández, «Arqueología de una aldea». Galicia: Sánchez Pardo and Rodríguez Resino, «Poblamiento rural»; Tejerizo García, Alonso Toucido and Torres Iglesias, «Cerámicas»; Blanco Rotea and Ballesteros Arias, «Aldeas»; Ballesteros Arias, «La arqueología rural».

[18] Portugal: Prata and Cuesta-Gómez, «Farming and Local Economy». Tente, «Os últimos».

of a locally abundant and surprisingly durable material, we see, in Wickham's words, «a Roman tradition reduced to the level of the microregion»[19].

The slates are the lineal ancestors of the thousands of Latin charters on parchment —the earliest of which date to about 800— that survive from across the northern half of the Meseta, illuminating peasant life in myriad ways. There has been a remarkable take-up in interest in these documents since 2005, particularly but not exclusively in Anglophone scholarly circles[20]. Accordingly, much of the most interesting work produced on Spanish early medieval rural society since *FEMA*'s publication, both within Spain and beyond its borders, has focused on the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, and over the last twenty years the most significant figure here has without doubt been Wendy Davies[21].

When we reflect on the work of Davies, and also that of Barrett and Portass, writing (mostly) in English, and then also consider the work of Martín Viso, Escalona, Santos Salazar, and Carvajal Castro, writing (mostly) in Spanish, the influence of Wickham's thinking is easy to detect. Davies' *Acts of Giving* (Oxford University Press, 2007), a seminal text in its own right, engages directly with some of Wickham's core postulations about the workings of peasant societies, showing that aspects of the lives of rural cultivators in tenth-century northern Iberia can be reconstructed by way of expert analysis of the charters. The gendered dynamics of peasant communities and the ingenious ways that peasants sidestepped inconvenient legal stipulations to preserve and protect their property also come to the fore in *Acts of Giving*, opening up yet more avenues of enquiry, including the pervasiveness of text at all levels of rural society, a topic explored to impressive effect by Barrett[22]. Interestingly, some of the best work in Spain to be inspired by Wickham's model of peasant society has drawn new, if elliptical connections, with the work of Barbero and Vigil, by diverting our attention to peasant use of commons and collective action[23]. Questions have also been asked, in works which aim to combine the study of charters with a renewed engagement with economic anthropology, about certain shibboleths of the peasant mode itself, putting some of Wickham's claims about peasant behaviour to the test. One could even say that in recent work on the internal hierarchies of peasant communities, the involvement of peasants in the production and distribution of surplus, and the social and economic logic underpinning those processes, we see Wickham's influence come full circle twenty years thence[24].

In sum, although the near-absence of written sources limits what historians can say about the northern Iberian societies in which Wickham theorized the existence of a peasant mode of production —to such an extent, indeed, that more detailed testing of the theory is in some sense impossible on the basis of the written sources alone— all is not lost. As we have shown, historians have continued to formulate questions germane to

[19] Wickham, *Framing*, 225.
[20] Carvajal *et al.*, «Towards a Trans-Regional Approach».
[21] Davies, *Acts of Giving.*
[22] Barrett, *Text and Textuality.*
[23] The best place to start for a flavour of this work: Carvajal Castro, Escalona, Martín Viso and Santos Salazar, «Collective Action».
[24] Portass, «Peasant Proprietors».

Wickham's peasant-mode model, asking these questions not of the sixth-, seventh- and eighth- century societies which are largely unreachable in the surviving written sources, but of the later societies that we can reconstruct in more detail thanks to the charter record.

At this juncture, a new question presents itself: if written sources cannot add to the picture, where do we turn next? Tellingly, to fill in the gaps, the writers of the works discussed so far have paid significant attention to the conclusions drawn by archaeologists working in the same geographical areas. No single new paradigm has emerged to mark a new direction of travel, however. In part, this may be due to a methodological divergence: the two registers, material and written, point in different directions, and too many historians still see archaeology as an auxiliary discipline, and *vice versa*. In this sense, the successful cultivation of fruitful dialogue between archaeology and history remains, to some extent, wishful thinking, some twenty years after *FEMA* made the case for just such a collaborative spirit.

There are signs that the tide is turning, however. For instance, evidence from the Iberian Plateau is now being brought together on a scale and with a methodological deftness that will soon allow attempts at synthesis[25]. And the fact that ever more (even if, still, not enough) analyses are being undertaken by historians in close collaboration with archaeologists is a sure sign that Wickham's insistence on interdisciplinary dialogue has been heard in some quarters[26].

2 Modes of production and modes of thinking

The works discussed so far explore the ways in which different political structures in the basin of the river Duero and the northern fringe of Iberia influenced the articulation of peasant communities between the fifth and the eighth centuries. As a general rule, it would seem, many of these local societies —which, due to the lack of data, are very difficult to decode in their internal organization— enjoyed considerable social, political and economic autonomy. This conclusion accords with Wickham's picture, but only up to a point: there are also reasons to be more cautious because between the second half of the sixth and the middle of the eighth century, certain elites, some in tandem with state powers, were able to dominate aspects of political and economic life in rural society at large, as Escalona and Martín Viso have shown[27].

Would it, then, be fair to say that political authorities in possession of significant resources asserted their power more forcefully in early medieval Iberia than Wickham implies? First, a familiar caveat: with the written sources at our disposal, there remain important weaknesses in our knowledge that prevent sophisticated analyses of the economic logics of local communities. This basic fact has not changed since *FEMA* appeared in

[25] Martín Viso, *En las sombras del estado*. We would like to thank the author for this information.

[26] As in Rubio Díez, Martín Viso and Centeno Cea, «Un asentamiento».

[27] Escalona, «Patrones de fragmentación»; Martín Viso, «Una periferia creativa» and «Organización campesina y dominios» to cite but a few.

2005. Nonetheless, looking back from our present vantage point, we are now more able to diagnose a pattern: namely, that where we do have charters (and archives), we generally encounter political and economic powers whose actions appear to have provoked processes of hierarchization in rural society. These processes —if we follow the logic of Wickham's model— most likely led to conditions that were incompatible with the existence of communities in which peasants were mostly independent producers. After all, when and where elites found themselves able to dominate peasantries such that they could systematically take their surplus, the balance had surely shifted.

These considerations open up another, much deeper problem, related to the theoretical challenge that the peasant mode of production has posed to historians. In short, historians engaging with the peasant mode of production in *FEMA* must decide whether they adhere to the explicit Marxist theoretical framework in which its postulations make sense. This reality, arguably, has produced a certain trivialisation of the concept of the peasant mode of production among scholars who do not work within the same tradition. And herein lies the problem: does the viability of the theory depend upon an *a priori* acceptance of the utility of modal definitions of production, or can an empirical basis of the peasant mode be established in its own right?

The best we can do as empirically-minded historians, whatever our ideological stance, is to try to detect in concrete terms those preconditions of the peasant mode that make its presence likely in a given society: namely, the absence of statist or lordly elites capable of extracting peasant surplus, and, at the village level, the dominance of the household economy and the prevalence of its concomitant social and economic logics. It is in contexts such as these that we are most likely to «encounter» the peasant mode, but it may still be best to think of the peasant mode and the feudal mode on a sliding scale, there being, variously, some societies in which the peasant mode was negligible and the feudal mode all but dominant, and *vice versa*.

3 Archaeology and peasants in Iberia

So much for the written sources; what of the material record? The first discussions of *FEMA* in Iberian historiography appeared shortly after its publication, and the book's potential impact was indeed soon apparent to archaeologists whose longstanding interest in early medieval settlement logics and the political articulation of communities in rural landscapes chimed resonantly with ideas encapsulated in Wickham's peasant mode[28].

In this context of reappraisal, the Basque case came to prominence and still stands out. The last few years of archaeological work carried out in the Álava region by the

[28] Quirós Castillo and Vigil-Escalera, «Networks of Peasant Villages». Other works of Vigil-Escalera stand out for having pioneered peasant archaeology in Spain, see *Los primeros paisajes*. Perhaps the first historian to pick up on this message was Julio Escalona, who wrote an illuminating essay on the centrality of archaeology to approaching the study of the early Middle Ages as early as 2009, offering us a theoretically informed spotter's guide to the main archaeological findings for Castile (that is, the eastern fringes of the Meseta): Escalona, «The Early Castilian Peasantry», esp. 119-25. Julio Escalona was also, among historians, one of the first to cite *Framing*, as early as 2006, in Escalona, «Patrones de transformación territorial».

groups led by Agustín Azkarate and, above all, by Juan Antonio Quirós, have served to make public a huge amount of data that have changed our perception of the early medieval world in the northern parts of the Iberian Peninsula[29]. The excavations and interventions of Azkarate and Quirós have furnished evidence of greater levels of peasant involvement in the circulation of ceramics and other goods, refocusing our minds on the extent to which peasant communities were integrated in commercial networks, and on what kind of scale[30]. Alfonso Vigil-Escalera's work on the Madrid district is equally valuable, highlighting the shifting shape of settlement patterns in Visigothic-period villages[31]. Excavations such as those at Gózquez speak to the existence of relatively autonomous peasant communities of the kind Wickham seems to have envisaged when writing about the peasant mode in *FEMA*[32]. The excavation of silos in the Basque country, and of infrastructure projects, such as the early medieval terracing located close to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, have also enriched our understanding of what peasants cultivated, how they did so, and how they planned to store and distribute the fruits of their labour[33].

These advances have led to the formulation of suggestive new questions of a type that archaeologists, let alone historians, were simply not asking before *FEMA*. How were infrastructure projects mediated and carried out and at whose command? Were elements of collective decision-making involved in such projects? What might the physical layout of the settlement and the strategies employed to produce and preserve food tell us about social hierarchies? As these questions demonstrate, a certain interdisciplinary ambition has characterised much of this work. To provide one further example, Margarita Fernández Mier and her team, working primarily on the rural society of the Asturian uplands, have incorporated insights garnered from place-name evidence to ask questions about collective memory. Their studies have also brought into sharp relief questions that engage with the fundamental suppositions of the peasant-mode model —namely, what kind of significance should we attribute to peasant agency in these processes?

Frustratingly, none of these scholars has offered a detailed explanation, much less a manifesto, setting out how they see Wickham's peasant-mode model at work in their own studies, but Wickham's influence on them all, and particularly on Quirós, who has written extensively on social structures at the village level, is manifest, for they all share an underlying interest in social dynamics and settlement patterns[34].

To find a research agenda in which Wickham's conceptual tool is explicitly foregrounded, one must read the work of Carlos Tejerizo García, a disciple of Juan Antonio

[29] Among the many works of both, it is sufficient to mention here the following summaries with further bibliography: Azkarate Garai-Olaun and Solaun Bustinza, «La cerámica altomedieval»; Azkarate Garai-Olaun and García Camino, «Erdi Aroko arkeologia», 15-45; Tejerizo García and Quirós Castillo, «Treinta años de arqueología»; and Quirós Castillo, «Lo *scientific turn* nella medievistica».

[30] Azkarate Garai-Olaun and Solaun Bustinza, «La cerámica altomedieval».

[31] Vigil-Escalera, «Meeting Places».

[32] Vigil-Escalera, «Granjas y aldeas altomedievales».

[33] Blanco Rotea and Ballesteros Arias, «Aldeas».

[34] Even though we cannot focus on it here, it is important to consider Portuguese archaeology too, where Wickham's influence is no less pronounced: see Tente, «Os últimos» and Cordero Ruiz, «El mundo rural».

Quirós. Consider, for example, Tejerizo García's excellent chapter in a recent volume about social inequality in early medieval Europe, which was, to all intents and purposes, a proclamation in support of the archaeology of the peasant mode of production[35]. Although only a few pages long, the chapter sets out the first systematic attempt to apply Wickham's model in a Spanish archaeological context. It is important because it focuses on the north and centre of present-day Spain, an area which includes various geographies studied in *FEMA* through the lens of the peasant mode of production. Second, Tejerizo García tries to join the dots between theory and hard evidence, an approach which underlies his attempt «to respond to — and explain — the empirical data, and to delve into the question of inequality in the specific context of peasant-based societies»[36].

The peasant mode of production is, for Tejerizo García, the most convincing analytical tool with which to confront the material record found in early medieval rural contexts of the Iberian Plateau; thus, he argues, its deployment «may help in the interpretation of the social and economic background» of peasants. In addition, Tejerizo García tells us, the peasant mode is useful because it allows us «to approach peasant societies through dialectics, that is to say, through a critical perspective on social conflict, inequality and social transformation, which underlines the exploitation of some groups by others»[37]. The peasant mode, understood in this way, is a heuristic tool used to decode social inequalities within rural societies.

While an awareness of the usefulness of considering social inequality[38] to understand early medieval rural societies has been gaining ground, other concepts have been revived in the wake of *FEMA*'s success, such as: scale and scale-change[39]; the workings of stateless societies[40]; local communities (sometimes understood as what Wendy Davies famously called «small worlds»[41]); peasant agency[42]; and microhistory[43]. All underscore the relevance of analyses of peasant-based societies to studies of the end of the ancient world and the emergence of medieval Europe, and it should not be forgotten that peasantries did not feature prominently in such discussions before *FEMA*, which, in retrospect, seems to have stimulated renewed interest in the peasant majority[44].

In an article of this length, it is not possible to describe the concepts listed above in detail without falling into terrible simplifications and voids. Each of these concepts

[35] Tejerizo García, «The Archaeology of the Peasant Mode of Production». See also his PhD Thesis, published in 2017, *Arqueología de las sociedades campesinas*.

[36] Tejerizo García, «The Archaeology of the Peasant Mode of Production», 333.

[37] *Ibidem*, 350 and 351 respectively.

[38] Quirós Castillo, «Equal and Unequal Societies».

[39] For investigations on this theme, see the articles in Escalona and Reynolds (eds.), *Scale and Scale Change in the Early Middle Ages*.

[40] Martín Viso, *En las sombras del estado*.

[41] Quirós Castillo «An archaeology of *small worlds*». The classic reference is Davies, *Small Worlds.*

[42] Portass, «The archaeology of Peasant Protagonism»; and Quirós Castillo (dir.), «Agencia del campesinado».

[43] See the special issue of the journal *Open Archaeology* devoted to Archaeology and Microhistory and, particularly, Quirós Castillo, «Editorial: Microhistory and Archaeology».

[44] Here we leave aside detailed reference to the development of the archaeological study of pottery, husbandry, land crops, or metalworking.

works differently and all need to be developed within their own epistemological framework. Nonetheless, every single work cited here is characterised, to a greater or a lesser degree, by being the intellectual legatee of the challenge launched by *FEMA*: in essence, Wickham's proposal, considered bold at the time of *FEMA*, was right: in a horizon of scarce written sources and complex material data, it is indeed possible to study peasant societies, and to do so on their own terms[45].

In short, *FEMA* has left a deep impression. Studies of local societies undertaken since 2005 continue to focus on social inequalities inside those societies, and this emphasis we owe to Wickham's example. Another result of these studies, and their growing influence in historiographical debates within and beyond Iberia, has been the abandonment, once and for all, of teleological approaches which had traditionally depicted early medieval peasant communities as underdeveloped groups, awaiting the onset of a process that Wickham would elsewhere memorably describe as the «caging of the peasantry»[46]. What this means in practice is that the archaeological studies of the last two decades have allowed us to understand peasant communities as the protagonists of their own history.

4 Complex answers to impossible questions

The challenge facing historians and archaeologists now, some twenty years after *FEMA*, is to reconsider the workings of peasant labour in historical contexts defined by the lack of a strong state, absent an aristocracy capable of controlling the land; that is, in contexts in which one might expect the peasant mode of production to have been modally significant.

Strong tax-based states and rich aristocracies are extensively studied in *FEMA*, and it was these powers, Wickham suggests, who were the main drivers of historical developments in much of the post-Roman world. Consequently, the apparent absence of strong states and rich aristocrats in certain Iberian regions, including the Cantabrian coast and the Meseta, obliged Wickham to contextualise these regions in more complex horizons; in these regions, peasant-dominated spaces existed, we are told, «in isolated patches»[47], surrounded by areas in which the feudal mode otherwise prevailed. Thus, Wickham postulated the existence of a broader socio-economic system that can be characterised as one in which the peasant mode of production was almost nowhere modally dominant; insofar as the peasant mode can be located, we should expect to encounter it, as he himself told us, in «leopard-spot» fashion, in small, isolated enclaves[48].

Has this aspect of the peasant mode found favour in Spain? For some scholars, the peasant mode of production is a historiographical leitmotif, useful —perhaps— for thinking with, but applicable only in the scattered local communities of the most mountainous and poorly connected areas of the Meseta and the Cantabrian coast. If these

[45] As also underlined by Da Graca, «Peasant Mode of Production».
[46] See Wickham, *The Inheritance*, 529-51.
[47] Wickham, «Productive Forces», 7.
[48] Wickham, *Framing*, 546.

more sceptical voices are correct, then, it is difficult to assert *a priori* that the peasantry had to be better off after 400 than it was under the Roman empire. Peasants may have given less of their crops to landowners and to the rulers of weak post-Roman states but excavations seem to suggest that their communities were internally hierarchised all the same. Quirós has expressed this doubt effectively:

> «Although some authors have seen here a kind of *golden age of peasantry*, Peasant Archaeology is questioning this assertion even though there were high margins of peasant autonomy regarding their politics and social organization of production»[49].

Take, for example, the case of Aistra. This is a locality in the eastern confines of Álava, in the Basque Country, very close to the mountainous areas of Guipúzcoa and the north of Navarre —in other words, an area where communities structured in accordance with Wickham's peasant mode might have existed. Aistra has been excavated in recent years, and the results of these archaeological interventions have finally come to light[50]. The earliest structures found at Aistra are to be attributed to the sixth century, which, in its development has been described as follows:

> «Aistra, in the sixth and seventh centuries, was home to a territorial elite that constructed an aristocratic identity through practices of ostentation, representation and negotiation, which involved the creation of alliances and clientelisms through the redistribution of foodstuffs endowed with a certain social value. It is a place of ostentation and distinction, but also a place of integration and convergence of micro-policies and balances that define local society. Moreover, its residents occupy other spaces of political participation in the local sphere, such as the funerary communities»[51].

A residential space, thought to have been a hall, has also been discovered at Aistra, and it has been linked to the agency of local elites because of its size and the important place it occupies in the general topography of the village. But thinking about settlements such as Aistra brings us face to face with another problem, already pointed out by Jairus Banaji: where did aristocracies, who seem to have been so materially impoverished compared to their forebears, live during the sixth and seventh centuries[52]? Now, thanks to excavations such as that at Aistra, we have more empirical data to tackle problems related to the inner structures and hierarchies of small rural settlements.

Of course, the disorganisation of the Roman world in Hispania followed such different rhythms and modes that there are other areas where no such archaeological clues have been found, even where excavation has taken place. Nonetheless, spaces like the territory between the Eresma and Voltoya valleys, in the province of Segovia (Castile), and the Jarama Valley (Madrid), show economic and settlement logics that seem to respond to the peasant mode of production during the sixth and seventh centuries. One

[49] Quirós Castillo and Tejerizo García, «Filling the Gap», 13-4.
[50] Quirós Castillo and Reynolds (eds.) *Arqueología de las sociedades locales*.
[51] *Ibidem*, 493.
[52] Banaji, *Agrariam Change*, Appendix 5.

feature of these sites, mentioned in passing above, is perhaps of particular importance, that is, the discovery of small and medium-size silos for storing cereal crops. These silos have been related to the existence of «a household type of consumption more than speculative management»[53], allowing archaeologists to map the peasant mode onto specific excavated sites.

5 Final remarks

Chris Wickham's *FEMA* was a groundbreaking work; a landmark study that proposed a theoretically-informed comparative approach to social history in general, and to peasant societies in particular. This point is widely recognised but it is important to underline it again. Wickham's book was a call to arms, warning us of the inherent dangers of teleology at a time when works of social history devoted to the early Middle Ages were few and not particularly influential. Its legacy, therefore, can be observed well beyond questions concerning modes of production, since *FEMA* urged us to recognise the significance of peasant societies in processes of historical change in a broader context.

The last twenty years of research show the influence of Wickham's insistence that archaeology should guide our efforts to understand the peasant mode of production, even if the embrace of archaeology was already partly underway before the book was published[54]. Equally influential has been Wickham's willingness to theorise the early Middle Ages. These two contributions are wholly positive and mutually reinforcing, for while we are now more aware, thanks to a corpus of archaeological information that has grown substantially since 2005, of a much more articulated and complex reality on the ground, we are —thanks to Wickham's example— also better equipped to theorise its internal logics.

Where, then, by way of summary, do we find ourselves now? One thing is for sure: the peasant mode of production, as a concept, is here to stay, and many scholars aver that it has something to teach us yet, with Julio Escalona claiming that «in a large part of early medieval Europe and northern Iberia, within peasant-based societies it is possible to document *bubbles* of PMP (*sic*) embedded in encompassing systems governed by other modes of production»[55]. Not all scholars would adopt this position with such confidence, but all who wish to understand the social history of early medieval Europe would do well to continue to ponder the peasant mode of production. Ultimately, all scholars of the rural society of the Iberian early Middle Ages, since *FEMA*, share a similar objective: to highlight the centrality of peasant communities and to recognise their role

[53] Tejerizo García, «The archaeology of the Peasant Mode of Production», 341-5, with further bibliography. This kind of silo has been considered «the best archaeological evidence of the peasant mode of production during the early medieval period», 345.

[54] As an example we can cite an article published in 2005, Castellanos and Martín Viso, «The Local Articulation».

[55] Julio Escalona, in private email exchanges with one of the authors of these pages [18.12.2024].

as key social and economic actors in a way that was hard to imagine twenty years ago inside the Iberian labyrinth.

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