

INTRODUCTION: THE PEASANT MODE OF PRODUCTION IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Introducción: el modo de producción campesino en la Alta Edad Media

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0 INTRODUCTION

Chris Wickham's *Framing the early Middle Ages, Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) is rightly lauded as a milestone in early medieval studies¹. Its panoramic exploration of a post-Roman world composed for the most part of materially impoverished successor kingdoms characterised by a broadly much less stringent (and in places, non-existent) tax regime, gave renewed impetus to the analysis of the socio-economic underpinnings of late antique societies. The scale of the book's coverage, taking us from one end of the Roman world to the other over four centuries, was matched by its intellectual ambition. Put simply, FEMA managed to integrate established but unfashionable historiographical concerns —commercial activity and its symbiotic relationship with state-funded infrastructure; pottery distribution as an index of that relationship; the modalities of peasant labour— with historical materialist theory in novel and exciting ways to offer a «framing» of early medieval society that remains, for now, without rival.

FEMA was recognised as a *locus classicus* soon after publication². It won the Wolfson History Prize in 2006 —an accolade rarely awarded to books on economic history, much less the early Middle Ages— and within a few years had been translated into many

¹ For the sake of convenience, the shorthand *FEMA* will hereafter be used throughout.

² Even scholars who dissented from Wickham's conclusions recognised the scale of his achievement: for example, Shaw, «After Rome», 92: «the author is without peer since Rostovtzeff».

major languages³. Before long it became clear that all serious efforts to understand the emergence of the post-Roman world would have to engage with *FEMA*'s exhaustive detail, theoretical acuteness and daunting dimensions. The book also served as a corrective to analyses based on overly literal readings of the written sources; indeed, all who had —before reading *FEMA*— considered archaeology little more than an auxiliary discipline, of limited use and occasional antiquarian interest, were comprehensively disabused of that notion. In short, *FEMA* was —is— that rare thing: a book that can genuinely be said to have marked a before-and-after moment in its field —in this case, the study of early medieval Western Eurasia and the Mediterranean.

Nonetheless, as is perhaps to be expected of a work that spans four hundred years and aims at something approaching synthesis, *FEMA* attracted lively criticism as well as plaudits. A handful of reviewers noted that Wickham paid little attention in *FEMA* to the cultural and intellectual frameworks through which new elites articulated their power⁴. Others, writing in a different key, lamented the absence in *FEMA* of an extended discussion of the vicissitudes that befell the institutional Church⁵. From elsewhere, including Italy, on which Wickham is a leading expert, came the suggestion that more should have been made of the interpretative possibilities of legal sources, about which Wickham tends to be sceptical⁶. Numismatists, perhaps less controversially, have asked why coins play so small a role in Wickham's analyses —a criticism which Wickham has accepted as wholly fair⁷.

Some scholars, on the other hand, have taken issue not so much with Wickham's emphases, nor with his comparative method, but with his reading of the evidence and the principal arguments he adduces from that reading. These matters cannot be investigated at length in this introductory essay, but let us take here, to choose an example that chimes with the theme of this special issue, the question of what the disintegration of the Roman state and its fiscal apparatus meant for peasantries across the empire. For Wickham, a consequence of these developments was a broadly more autonomous peasantry, characterised by a mode of self-directed production found in «leopard spot» fashion across much of the post-Roman world, set against a backdrop that, in modal terms, Wickham calls «feudal»⁸.

³ Other prizes bestowed upon the book include the James Henry Breasted Prize (American Historical Association) and the Deutscher Memorial Prize. For the translation into Spanish, of particular relevance for the principal audience of this journal, see *Una historia nueva*, transl. T. Fernández Aúz and B. Eguibar.

⁴ A point made, for instance, by Marios Costambeys in his review of *FEMA* in *Economic History Review*. See also the comments of John Haldon in his review of *FEMA* in *Historical Materialism*, in which, at 67-8, he regrets «the absence of any consideration of belief-systems as elements in the configuration and articulation of patterns of demand and exchange».

⁵ Wood, *Christian Economy*; cf. Moreland, «Land».

⁶ Giardina, «Marxism and Historiography». Banaji, «Aristocracies», 75. For more on *FEMA*'s reception in Italy, see the discussion in *Storica* 34 (2006).

⁷ Naismith, *Making Money*, 3. Wickham responded to all these criticisms in «Problems of Comparison».

⁸ For «leopard spots», see Wickham, *Framing*, 546. On the feudal mode, defined by Wickham as «a socio-economic system based on the exploitative relations of production between peasants, that is to say subsistence cultivators, and lords», see his extended discussion in «Feudal Economy», 9.

Key aspects of this stimulating thesis have not found acceptance in all quarters. Jairus Banaji, although equitable and generous in his praise for *FEMA*, profoundly disagrees with Wickham on several fronts, including the dynamics that characterised fiscal demand on the one hand and non-state-directed commercial activity on the other. Another area of disagreement concerns —crucially— the role played by the peasantry in those processes⁹. Indeed, when Banaji notes that «it is quite implausible to suppose that the money exacted by way of taxes accounted for all or almost all of the money in circulation» in late and post-Roman Egypt, he asks us by implication to imagine a more monetised rural labour force than Wickham would allow¹⁰. For sure, similar levels of monetisation did not persist in the West after the calamitous demise of political authority that unfolded from the 440s or so, but —Banaji contends— certain traditions of direct management of estates *did* persist, meaning that greater levels of peasant autonomy ought not to be taken for granted just because fiscal demand had abated¹¹.

Likewise, when Brent Shaw pondered, back in 2008, whether there were ever «enough aristocrats with sufficient expendable wealth in their hands to produce the level of demand that Wickham needs to sustain the immense long-range transport of basic bulk commodities that he sees as the heart of the system», he prompted an important series of questions that has yet to be persuasively contested¹². These include but are not limited to: 1) If peasants were, at least in the Eastern empire, much more implicated in commercial activity than Wickham proposed, then was their prosperity *ever* predicated to the extent Wickham suggests upon the fortunes of the Roman state and its ability to underwrite the costs of moving goods over vast distances? 2) Do the reduced circumstances in which elites found themselves in the post-Roman West satisfactorily account for the greater peasant autonomy and broadly simpler material culture Wickham identifies, or might we look for a more straightforwardly economic explanation —that is, to the «drying up of the monetary economy» in those regions?¹³ 3) When left to their own devices, why should we assume that peasants will invariably choose not to engage in market-based transactions?

These observations, and some of the many further questions they beget, are extremely suggestive; but insofar as they recognise the significant role played by peasants in Wickham's model, they do so at one remove, and from a top-down, state-centred perspective not entirely in keeping with Wickham's imaginative sympathies, which latter are most compellingly illustrated in *FEMA* in his section on Malling, a fictitious post-Roman southern English village¹⁴. The social structures and practices of Malling were essentially those of the peasant mode: reciprocity; gift exchange; a concern, above all, to be connected to the neighbourhood and to engage in collective consumption

⁹ Banaji, «Aristocracies»; Cf. Banaji, «Chris Wickham», which appeared as an appendix to the second edition of his *Agrarian Change*, 257-68. Note that here we intend only to touch upon Banaji's criticism for the purposes of illustration and do not aim to offer a detailed excursus on all the points Banaji makes about *FEMA* (which would indeed require another special issue).

¹⁰ Banaji, «Chris Wickham», 265.

¹¹ Banaji, «Aristocracies», 67-8.

¹² Shaw, «After Rome», 97.

¹³ Sarris, «Introduction», 7.

¹⁴ Malling: Wickham, *Framing*, 428-36.

rituals; social differentiation that was not structurally permanent; relatively weak internal hierarchies. For Wickham, these conditions did not simply make market exchange marginal or near-impossible; they made it undesirable and actively mitigated against it. Interestingly, neither Banaji nor Shaw, nor —to our knowledge— anyone else, has elected fashion with those parts of Wickham's model that have their roots in economic anthropology, and in particular in Wickham's clear sympathy for Substantivist positions on peasant economy¹⁵. And while none of the criticisms listed above, which can only be sketched in passing here, entirely misses its target, much remains to be said on the enduring persuasiveness or otherwise of Wickham's understanding of peasant society. Accordingly, in this volume we encourage our contributors to focus on what Wickham has called «peasant protagonism», and to trace its development *for its own sake*, especially in post-Roman contexts where fiscal and/or aristocratic demand were weak if not absent.

1 *FEMA* AND LATE ANTIQUITY

Whatever we make of the criticisms that scholars have made of some aspect or other of *FEMA*, the scale of Wickham's achievement cannot be doubted, and a word or two on historiographical context brings this point home to good effect. In hindsight it is tempting to consider *FEMA* the most significant of a handful of major publications, written in English in the early to mid-2000s, concerned with what Wickham himself once memorably called the «congeries of changes» that help explain «the end of the Ancient World in the West»¹⁶. These books, although different in their methodology, underlying ideological commitments, and emphases, share certain traits¹⁷.

One such trait is a certain tonal iconoclasm, by which we mean that their authors took leave of the elevated intellectual, cultural and religious milieu of «Late Antiquity» —so brilliantly evoked, above all, by Peter Brown since the 1960s— and brought their readers back down to earth with a bump¹⁸. Wickham's early Middle Ages, with their emphasis on managing the land, the siphoning off of surplus by militarised elites, and the waxing and waning of peasant fortunes, are distinctly more Blochian than they are Brownian, in both tone and coverage¹⁹. Bryan Ward-Perkin's *The Fall of Rome* takes a

¹⁵ Of the contributors to this special issue, Irene Bavuso explores this issue in the greatest detail.

¹⁶ For Wickham's striking phrase, see his «The Other Transition», 3.

¹⁷ The most significant of which, alongside *FEMA*, are Ward-Perkins, *Fall of Rome*, and Heather, *Fall of the Roman Empire*. One might point out that all these books propose a sharper economic break than that which is envisaged in McCormick, *Origins*.

¹⁸ Perhaps evoked most brilliantly of all in Brown, *World*.

¹⁹ For a book that was in many senses pioneering, just how resolutely old-fashioned *FEMA* was in 2005 —with its dual commitment to an exhaustive sifting of the archaeological evidence and a theoretical framework rooted in Anglo-Marxist historical materialism— is not missed by Walter Pohl in his review of the book, which appeared in *Speculum*: «At a time when culture, not economy, is the favourite explicative device in the humanities, this approach may seem limited, and many reviewers have made that point... But surely there will be room for another 1,000-page monograph on the cultural and religious framework of change to complement this one, building not least on the work of Peter Brown». Interestingly, Wickham recognizes his debt to Marc Bloch in the Introduction to *Framing*, 2, fn. 2: «Marc Bloch made the point first, as usual».

different tack but arguably goes further still, urging the reader to counterbalance accounts of late antique socio-cultural efflorescence with an awareness that the lives of ordinary people, broadly, became less comfortable in material terms after the fall of the western empire. For Peter Heather, in his *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, imperial politics and military logistics offer the most plausible answers when it comes to understanding why the West fell; Heather's Late Antiquity is indeed one of irascible generals and irritable Germans, all of them keen to be rid of a decidedly top-heavy state bureaucracy, with scarcely a Holy Man in sight. In short, the generation of British historians writing «big picture» books on the fall of Rome and the beginning of the early Middle Ages in the first decade of the twenty-first century chose to direct our focus —albeit in very different ways— towards a materially-rather than culturally-construed lived experience: towards bricks and mortar, land and labour, rent and tax²⁰.

For all that, Wickham is agnostic about whether the widespread material impoverishment that accompanied (and was indeed caused by) Roman political retrenchment should be read as a «good» or a «bad» thing. Indeed, the intellectual stimulus of *FEMA* lies not so much in the tale it tells of Roman collapse (which is actually rather conventional —conservative, even), but in its extraordinary capacity to help us imagine how new socio-economic and political realities emerged as the Roman state shrank, fell into disrepair and eventually disappeared entirely. The point remains, however, that *FEMA* charted a new course in early medieval studies because it sailed against the historiographical winds that prevailed at the time of its writing and publication. That those winds have, over the last twenty years, eased off in some areas and gathered speed in others, is testament to *FEMA*'s important legacy.

2 FRAMING THE PEASANT MODE OF PRODUCTION

Arguably *FEMA*'s most stimulating contribution, which serves as the organising principle of this volume, was a theory on labour relations in the countryside that proposed the existence between c.400 and c.800 of a mode of production that was neither «classical» nor «feudal»: the so-called «peasant mode of production» (discussed at length in *FEMA* and already mentioned above)²¹. Put in necessarily schematic terms, this theory posited that in many places the withering of Roman state structures saw politically and economically weakened aristocratic groups prove unable to extract tax and/or rent effectively; the result —so Wickham tells us— was a peasant golden age, in which many rural cultivators enjoyed freedoms denied them under the Roman empire²².

²⁰ For bricks and mortar (and ceramics), see especially Ward-Perkins, *Fall of Rome*.

²¹ Wickham, *Framing*, 536-40.

²² See the perspicacious remarks of Haldon, in his review of *FEMA* in *Historical Materialism*, 53, who emphasises that Wickham's multiple regional analyses of the early medieval peasantry cannot be separated from his understanding of how the structure of the entire early medieval economy worked. This is because, for Wickham, the scale of bulk exchange in early medieval Europe was in large measure dependent on how effectively aristocrats managed to extract resources from peasants, a point he has developed at greater length in a more recent book: Wickham, *The Donkey*.

As already indicated, some reviewers found fault with certain of *FEMA*'s central propositions, especially those concerning long-distance exchange and the extractive capacity of the Roman state and its successor kingdoms. Few scholars, however, engaged explicitly with Wickham's use of a modal category of his own, and those that did more often than not did so in reviews that appeared soon after the book was published, meaning that the questions they posed regarding the enduring usefulness of the peasant mode were then unanswerable²³. This special issue of *Studia Historica Historia Medieval*, timed to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of *FEMA*, proposes to tackle this question directly, asking what impact Wickham's peasant mode has had and continues to have, and how we see its influence at work across different centuries and geographies.

By the same token, we —the editors— have urged our contributors to consider the continued relevance of Wickham's model in the wake of more recent empirical findings and theoretical developments. In short: what are we to make of *FEMA* in 2025? Does the ever-growing archaeological register, with many more sites having been excavated since Wickham wrote in 2005, continue to support the broad outlines of his interpretations? Have contributions been made in the field of economic anthropology, or peasant studies more generally, that run counter to the logic undergirding Wickham's peasant mode? In this special issue, challenges to Wickham's model of the kind enumerated above are to be embraced rather than obscured, as we seek to redraw our paradigms in response to Wickham's inspiring example. What follows is a selection of essays by leading scholars, each focussed on a particular part of the post-Roman world. Beyond asking our contributors to focus on a particular region, a light-touch approach has informed the editorial process. In short, we have not been prescriptive with respect to methodology, approach or conceptual framing, merely asking all contributors, so as to lend the volume a certain coherence, to engage with the question of the peasant mode of production.

How they have chosen to do so varies from chapter to chapter —and thus, from region to region. As one would expect in a volume of this kind, the contributors agree on some matters and disagree on many others. On one fundamental matter, however, there appears to be something approaching consensus: not a single contributor rejects Wickham's peasant mode outright, nor takes issue with its underlying premise that where conditions changed significantly for peasants they did so primarily because the Roman state had retreated or fallen into abeyance. Peter Sarris comes closest of all to querying the peasant mode's general applicability, noting in his chapter that if Wickham's model works, he (Sarris) would expect it to do so only in those parts of the western empire where the collapse of the Roman state was most calamitous, sudden and far-reaching

²³ Carlos Astarita is an exception, but his arguments in support of the pervasiveness of the peasant mode in areas in which rich aristocrats clearly operated, such as the Frankish heartland, risk blurring the lines between the peasant mode and the feudal mode, rather than seeing islands of one mode, in leopard-spot fashion, embedded in the dominant mode, as per Wickham: Astarita, «Peasant-Based Societies». Note however that the late Mark Whittow seems to have foreseen that the persuasiveness of Wickham's peasant mode model turns on the extent to which one agrees with Wickham's argument that «Where the state was weak or non-existent, where aristocratic power was most local, peasants fared best». For the comment and argument, see Whittow, «Beyond», 700.

—lowland Britain, northern Gaul, northern Iberia²⁴. But while Sarris' reading of conditions in lowland Britain and northern Iberia tallies with that offered by Wickham in *FEMA*, the same is not true of northern Gaul, where Wickham does not believe the peasant mode likely to have been dominant.

Wickham is certainly happy to concede in *FEMA* that in the Merovingian heartlands the Roman state withered away throughout the late fifth century; but he also shows that throughout the sixth and seventh centuries aristocratic demand remained surprisingly strong in the region —so much so, in fact, that Wickham appears to discount the possibility that the peasant mode could have been modally dominant between the Seine and the Rhine, given the demonstrable scale of Frankish aristocratic wealth²⁵. Here, as indeed in most of western Europe for most of the period 400-800, the feudal mode, not the peasant mode, was dominant; but in and around these areas, as we have already noted, Wickham supposes that leopard-spot patterns of peasant-mode societies were to be found, spattered unevenly across the canvas of post-Roman Europe. Quite how this worked on the ground was perhaps not articulated in the detail it merited in *FEMA*. It ought to be noted, however, that Wickham made no bones about the fact that the peasant mode is no more than a theoretical construct, a «logical necessity» in the absence of public or private powers capable of systematic extraction²⁶; in other words, the peasant mode must be intuited in certain contingent circumstances – and discounted in others. All the same, where and how it might have operated is not always as easy to predict as we might expect. Merovingian Frankia is indeed a case in point because although northern Gaul experienced much disruption in its political and economic structures in the decades around 500, the peasant mode did not take root there because Frankish elite wealth was predicated, ultimately, on the continued exploitation of peasant labour: clearly, more «barbarians» —in this case Franks— did not *necessarily* mean freer peasants.

Things were rather different in the East, where the Roman state lived on after the fifth century, taxing —and thereby extracting wealth from— rural cultivators on a significant scale. Yet as Sarris reminds us, the peasant mode failed to establish itself as the dominant modal logic in a number of important western provinces too, including the central and coastal regions of the empire's western Mediterranean core: Spain, Gaul and Italy, and Africa. Why was this so? Sarris offers us a suggestive solution, arguing that in these places, relatively mild and sporadic episodes of civil unrest, and the subsequent emergence of «symbiotic and co-operative relations» between «members of the provincial Roman aristocracy and the new warlords in their midst», mean that we should expect there to have been «a very high level of continuity in the structures of the agrarian economy»²⁷. For Sarris, this was a continuity only broken, or at least shaken to its foundations, by the

²⁴ Note that in *FEMA* Wickham confined the peasant mode almost entirely to the geographical margins of the empire and indeed beyond it: «The peasant mode in its tribal form would have been dominant throughout our period in England, Wales, Ireland, and Denmark (and in other parts of the North as well), in Mauretania, and probably in parts of Spain by the eighth century»; Wickham, *Framing*, 540.

²⁵ Wickham, *Framing*, 540-1.

²⁶ Wickham describes it as a «logical necessity» in his response at the end of this volume.

²⁷ For the quoted text, see Sarris's contribution in this special issue.

social and economic consequences of the Justinianic Plague, to which disaster Wickham affords little lasting structural importance in *FEMA*²⁸.

Whether Wickham was correct to play down the effects of the Justinianic Plague on the underlying social structures of the West is for each and every reader to decide. But the question deserves consideration because it reminds us that we are on the lookout for possible causes of profound social change —be that epidemic disease or political crisis. The peasant mode, after all, did not emerge *sui generis*; it was only the concatenation of specific events in specific circumstances that *could* gave rise, in modal terms, to peasant societies rather than feudal ones. How we envisage these circumstances unfolding throughout the post-Roman world thus demands that we confront the question of structural continuity identified by Sarris. This is because when it comes to hypothesising the presence of the peasant mode in a given region at a given time, a great deal hinges on the depth and breadth of continuity we believe there to have been in the economic structures of that region at that time. Where neither the state nor landlords could take surplus in a systematic way, the peasant mode, in theory at least, *could* have flourished. On the other hand, if we accept that «a very high level of continuity in the structures of the agrarian economy» indeed prevailed in much of the former Western empire's Mediterranean heartlands, at least into the sixth century, as per Sarris, we must also accept that the economic autonomy of peasants was likely to have been much more limited²⁹.

Paolo Tedesco's chapter gets to grip with this question by considering two case-studies. Like all good comparative history, Tedesco's analysis brings to light telling differences between his chosen comparanda. The evidence from Byzantine Egypt is seemingly unequivocal: here, large landowners continued to deploy «their public and private power to subdue their resident peasants»³⁰, their estates underpinning the economic life of the countryside in the sixth and seventh centuries. In such conditions the peasant mode of production could not thrive. The evidence from North Africa, on the other hand, tells a different story, for while rich landowners from Thugga continued to stand apart from the peasant majority, by the seventh century they could no longer resort to their public coercive prerogatives, and as a result new opportunities opened up for entrepreneurial peasants. Here, in contradistinction to what we witness in Egypt, we see new conditions allow for the possibility of the emergence of peasant-mode societies, with rural cultivators now much less beholden to powerful actors. In these changed circumstances, did the peasant mode come to characterise the socio-economic reality of peasant life in parts of early medieval North Africa? On the one hand, the evidence could still be read to argue that elites remained wealthy and powerful enough to subdue peasants effectively; on the other hand, one could take the argument in an entirely different direction, stressing increasing peasant agency and the incipient signs of market exchange on the *fundus* Tuletianos, as Tedesco indicates³¹.

²⁸ Wickham, *Framing*, 548-9.

²⁹ See Sarris in this special issue.

³⁰ See the contribution of Paolo Tedesco in this special issue.

³¹ See the contribution of Tedesco.

Certainly, the opportunities that seem to have presented themselves to peasants in North Africa, such as supplementing income by working as tenants or day-labourers and accumulating surplus for sale, are not at first sight easily reconcilable with the logic of Wickham's peasant mode. After all, to pursue such opportunities risked social ostracisation and threatened the stability of the community in what were, Wickham would have us believe, societies in which gift-giving and the sharing of surplus between households were of paramount importance to social stability. But if the Albertini Tablets reveal a world in which peasant involvement in commercialised agriculture was pronounced and indeed served as the «engine of social stratification in the countryside», as Tedesco declares, what room for the peasant mode in such circumstances, we might ask³².

Tedesco's chapter is the longest in the volume, which in part reflects the fact that it covers a vast and well-evidenced part of the Roman world; but it also reflects the author's concern to discuss in some detail how Wickham's engagement with modal categories has not just informed the author's theoretical understanding of the internal workings of agrarian economies but also enlivened the field more generally. This much goes without saying but it does not mean that the impact of *FEMA* has been the same everywhere. Caroline Goodson, for example, reminds us that the explicitly Marxist position that Wickham adopted in *FEMA* was actually unremarkable in Italian scholarly circles, and especially among archaeologists³³. Rather, what struck specialists in Italy was Wickham's adherence to the comparative method (which was and remains unusual in a scholarly tradition in which entire monographs are given over to individual provincial cities), allied to his ability to sift and summarise a huge amount of material evidence. Goodson, an archaeologist, notes with some relish that Wickham's decision to foreground archaeology proved beyond doubt that it is to the ever-expanding material record that we must look for new insights. But herein lies a problem: the more material we find in peasant contexts (pottery, oil presses, evidence of metalworking), the more complex peasant participation in exchange systems seem to have been —and thus, the harder it gets to imagine circumstances in which the peasant mode could have flourished. What this must mean is that the peasant mode is at its most useful as a concept when we concede that it operated alongside and perhaps even within feudal societies, prominent in one subregion but not the next, in a bewildering number of different configurations. Faced with this reality, Goodson's notion of the «bifurcated economy where peasant self-sufficiency dominated inland rural areas while coastal zones maintained connections to broader networks of exchange» offers archaeologists an idea to test, to play with, and to modify, as we seek patterns and further clues³⁴.

Goodson also draws our attention to the ways in which, since *FEMA*'s publication, the research agenda of archaeologists has changed. Now, and not before time, many archaeologists actively seek evidence of the non-elite rural inhabitants of the post-Roman world, turning up findings that facilitate dialogue with Wickham's postulations in *FEMA*. Ceramics and post-holes continue to loom large in site reports, as they should,

³² See the article of Tedesco in this special issue.

³³ See the contribution of Goodson in this special issue.

³⁴ See the article of Goodson.

but storage systems in particular have been extensively studied since 2005, yielding suggestive results³⁵. Archaeologists, not least those working in Spain, where rural archaeology has come on leaps and bounds since *FEMA*'s publication (as Santos Salazar and Portass outline here), have shown that peasant communities, or perhaps even individual peasant families, were sometimes able to store impressive amounts of surplus³⁶. But what did they do with it? Distribute it equitably as need dictated; pass it on more or less reluctantly to otherwise invisible elites; or consider it a marketable good for sale? Consider the example of the village of Gasteiz in Álava, in which an 18m x 8m longhouse, inhabited from the post-Visigothic period through to the eleventh century, has been associated with no less than five aligned and synchronous silos, positioned adjacently³⁷. Were these silos the private property of village families of elevated social status, or did they belong to the community, an idea more in keeping with the logic of the peasant mode? Written evidence does not help us to establish ownership of these silos or even rights to the distribution of stored cereals, but it is clear that we need to ask questions about the operability of the peasant mode in societies in which surplus may have been collected or requisitioned by peasants themselves. How would this have worked on the ground and to whose advantage? Were some peasants perfectly aware that to control resources would give them leverage over their neighbours? Did they hope to make the superior status that they seem to have sought permanent —regardless of the effect it may have had on neighbours³⁸? These questions are far from straightforward, and are perhaps unanswerable, but indications of economic complexity in the archaeological record are no longer automatically associated with elites, nor read as a consequence of elite intervention —a development which is to be welcomed³⁹.

The «footprint» of peasants in the archaeology can be hypothesised in other ways too. Northern Iberia seems to furnish evidence of the beginnings of specialised itinerant pottery production of what were nonetheless rather basic wares from at least the ninth century and possibly earlier, and Alfonso Vigil-Escalera has underlined the role that rotary querns, tiles, and textiles played in peasant exchange networks in the Madrid region in the Visigothic and post-Visigothic periods⁴⁰. Ceramic distributions in parts of rural Italy, where productive specialisation was well-established by the eighth century, point in a similar direction, as do the findings of Portuguese scholars in the Alto Alentejo, where the peasant landscape was home to «buildings and rock-cut facilities for olive oil and wine production», denoting a «capacity for surplus production»⁴¹. In short, it seems likely that low-value pottery, as well as other goods, circulated more widely within and across certain internal regions of the post-Roman West than we were prepared to accept at the time of *FEMA*'s writing. Even a minimalist reading of the material would have to

³⁵ Vigil-Escalera, Bianchi and Quirós (eds.), *Horrea*; Vigil-Escalera, «Meeting Places».

³⁶ Portass, «The Archaeology of Peasant Protagonism».

³⁷ Quirós Castillo, «An Archaeology of *Small Worlds*», 17.

³⁸ Recent investigations of these questions include, Portass, «Peasant Proprietors».

³⁹ Tejerizo García, «The Archaeology of the Peasant Mode».

⁴⁰ Azkarate and Solaun Bustinza, «La cerámica»; Vigil-Escalera, «Meeting Places», 181.

⁴¹ Italy: Grassi, «Production»; Gliozzo *et al.*, «The Ceramic Vessels»; Brogiolo and Gelichi, *Le ceramiche*. Portugal: Tente and Prata, «Considering», 105.

conclude that «non-elite demand for inexpensive pottery (alongside demand for finer wares)» stimulated market mechanisms that saw relatively humble goods travel beyond the locality, production therefore demonstrably exceeding local needs⁴². Irene Bavuso, in her stimulating chapter, adds to this picture, showing that commercial exchange in the North Sea world was not only much more active than was thought to be the case twenty years ago, it clearly imbricated non-elite sections of the population, «the material culture in the cemeteries of the sixth century» indicating what she calls «a remarkable integration of the rural communities of southern England with the long-distance traffic with the continent⁴³». These considerations lead Santos Salazar and Portass, and Sarris too, to contend that one possible weakness of the peasant mode model is that it understates the potential of peasant communities to «generate and sustain economic complexity and networks of exchange»⁴⁴. Certainly, there is little room in the peasant mode for imagining peasants as economic actors engaging in what economists might call supply-side initiatives —that is, *deliberately* setting out to gather larger surpluses, or to buy greater landed resources, or to obtain fancier pottery, than their peers.

Bavuso's chapter ties these considerations together by reminding us that we only understand the core tenets of Wickham's peasant mode if we give due credit to the influence of the Substantivists on Wickham's thinking; and yet, as Bavuso also shows, the evidence for more complex non-elite exchange networks in parts of the post-Roman world is steadily growing, presenting proponents of the peasant mode with a challenging puzzle to solve. This notwithstanding, there are reasons to be optimistic about the enduring value of the peasant mode as a heuristic tool, for if the picture we paint in this volume remains impressionistic —given the nature and current limitations of the evidence—it is at least tonally striking. Clearly, in some parts of the post-Roman world, peasant communities were broadly more autonomous than they had been under the empire; but whether they then behaved as the Substantivists theorised —producing no more than they needed to sustain themselves, abjuring personal gain and avoiding risk at all costs—is a question that we will only get closer to answering by continuing to think hard about archaeology and economic anthropology in the way Wickham so magisterially outlined in *FEMA*. What seems clear is that the dynamics of gift-exchange cannot have been the sole factor in accounting for the plentiful exchange we now think characterised the peasant economy in many regions from the sixth century onwards. This is but one inference we might read into the archaeological data, but it is an exciting development all the same. Exciting, indeed, because it delineates a question to which we must surely now turn: in short, can Wickham's peasant mode accommodate a commercially-active early medieval peasantry, or is this to stretch it to breaking point? This question, and the others broached herein, promise to offer much food for thought to historian and archaeologist alike —for the next twenty years and beyond.

⁴² Portass, «The Archaeology of Peasant Protagonism», 258.

⁴³ See the contribution of Irene Bavuso in this special issue.

⁴⁴ See the contributions of Sarris and Santos Salazar and Portass.

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