



## Peasant-Based Societies in Chris Wickham's Thought

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### Abstract

This engagement with Chris Wickham's *Framing the Early Middle Ages* argues that Germanic kings settled as political authorities in fiscal lands, and granted districts to some of the loyal members of their entourage over which they exercised power. This process relates to the fact that kings preserved *fiscus*-taxes, but that system had already deteriorated and finally disintegrated in the sixth century. In the long run, the problem was expressed in an organic crisis of the ruling class. In consequence, popular revolts against taxation ensued. These revolts are an indicator that the collapsed ancient machinery of domination was not replaced by another in the short term, thus giving way to a political vacuum. The fugitive slaves or serfs reflected in the laws are an indicator pointing in the same direction. Under these conditions free peasant-communities multiplied. These events take us to the concept of peasant-mode societies that Wickham contributes to our understanding of the period. Despite the importance he attaches to this concept, he observes nuances; not in all regions, he claims, did peasant-logic prevail. The evidence allows us, on the contrary, to extend the scope of the concept and to establish a single theoretical basis for the construction of the feudal system on a European scale.

### Keywords

Marxism, peasantry, Chris Wickham, peasant-mode of production, feudalism

### Taking issues

Chris Wickham's *Framing the Early Middle Ages* ranks alongside the great works both of medievalism and of British-Marxist historiography. This positioning sheds light on its qualities. A thousand pages of comparative analysis with an extensive bibliography and sources that range from Denmark to the Near East and Africa to Gaul, Italy and Spain, is a very impressive feat. No less notable is the explanation of the categories used, which draw both on classical (Marx and Weber) and modern social theory. In short, the book straddles description and theory with amazing erudition, intelligent reading of sources and a clear conception of method: it marks a turning-point in historiography.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Similar to what Marc Bloch's *La société féodale* signified.

More than that, Wickham has outlined a concept of a peasant-mode of production that, or so I shall argue, provides him not only a powerful grammar by which to decipher the nature of the period after the fall of Rome in the West, but which can also be pushed further than Wickham himself does. Paradoxically enough, my extension of Wickham's concept of a peasant-mode is inspired by his earlier theoretical contributions to these debates.<sup>2</sup>

For the purposes of my argument, I shall compare Europe in the period discussed by Wickham with later periods. This manoeuvre is due less to a professional inclination than to a methodological disposition: a concern with recognising the development of social forms. This premise must not be regarded as a teleological standpoint (the idealistic determinism Wickham warns us against). Rather, it arises from a materialist exercise by which we are able to conceive historical evolution and to establish the connection between genesis and structure.

*Framing the early Middle Ages* holds a clear position among Marxist studies on the subject of the late-Roman/early-medieval watershed. Apart from some shrewd but unsystematic suggestions by Engels, and some other more empirical elaborations, this problem only began to be considered by Marxists around 1970. There were two predominant explanations. One stressed the crisis of the third century, when the slave-system was supposed to have collapsed for causes (class-struggle, fall in the rate of profit, non-reproduction of slaves) as diverse as the debaters, to be replaced by Roman and Germanic proto-feudalism.<sup>3</sup> In the second explanation, free peasants (subject to fiscal taxes) and slaves coexisted until around the year 1000. At the beginnings of the new millennium, the *seigneurie banale* replaced ancient society by means of a sociopolitical mutation. In this thesis, analysis of the mode of production was downplayed for a focus on the socio-economic formation, including its political organisation.<sup>4</sup>

Wickham examines all these issues. From the fifth century onwards, he claims, the Roman fiscal system fell, mainly, due to the settlement of Germanic armies on the land and the transformation of Germanic aristocrats into landowners which, along with simpler state-structures and a more restricted civil administration, reduced the need for tax. The new aristocracy received lands, rents appeared and power became more localised, weakening the state in the process. In this context, free peasants appeared, although they were not completely free from aristocratic control. The relationship between the latter

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2. I express my intellectual debt, especially to a seminar given by Wickham at the University of Buenos Aires in 1995.

3. Schtjajerman 1975; Anderson 1979a; de Ste Croix 1981.

4. Bonnassie 1975–6; Bois 1989.

and the peasantry brought about a great regional variety, ranging from areas in which aristocratic domination was intense to northern Europe, where peasants were predominant. In any case, even where the logic of the feudal mode of production was predominant, as in the region of Paris by 700, enclaves of free peasants could still be found. The image Wickham uses here is that of the spots on the skin of a leopard: in general terms, aristocrats extended their lands and political activities thanks to their position as landowners. Far from claiming immutability of structures until the eleventh century as the mutationists have argued, Wickham establishes change, the movement of structures by social action. If, by 750, the feudal mode of production was already established in certain areas, others would go that same direction after 800. The basis of his thesis lies in the nature of Germanic settlement. This is a controversial issue. According to Walter Goffart, the Germanic peoples were given not shares in the land but shares in the tax-system. Wickham rejects this view, observing that not a single text clearly backs up Goffart's theory.<sup>5</sup>

### Germanic settlement

The absence of explicit writings does not, however, preclude our partial subscription to the Goffart-hypothesis on tax-distribution, if we perceive the problem as one that should be addressed from the perspective of social differentiation. Let us examine the problem in its historical development.

When Germanic kings conquered portions of the Empire, they settled as political authorities on fiscal lands, surrounding themselves with warrior-entourages that lived in the king's *palatium*.<sup>6</sup> By virtue of a theoretical right of property over what was conquered (which did not imply its full possession) and as the highest authorities of an ideally patrimonial state, they granted districts to some of the loyal members of their entourage to exercise power over (*ad imperandum*). This is how counts appeared, at first urban residents (*comes civitatis*), with some of them originally being humble servants of the royal household.<sup>7</sup> These revocable concessions were granted as a consequence of their political function. In Visigothic Spain, for example, this is shown by their strategic location outside the area of greatest Gothic settlement-concentration, the Tierra de Campos in the Duero valley.

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5. Goffart 1980; Wolfram 1990. Barnish 1986 opposes this view.

6. Sánchez Albornoz 1942; Sánchez Albornoz 1943, pp. 35ff.; Dopsch 1986, pp. 252, 270.

7. Arndt and Krusch 1885, V, 48.

The numerous confiscations carried out by kings indicate that this landed aristocracy was not really landowning.<sup>8</sup> This squared with their objective of seizing power in the state; that is why high officials aspired to acquire ‘*honores*’, that is to say, political and military authority.<sup>9</sup> Their status itself was determined by holding power (*mundium*, *bannus*) as a personal attribute. This explains why, for instance, there is ‘little secure evidence of widespread appropriation of Roman landed property; although there must have been some . . . there were certainly Roman aristocratic families continuing’ when the Lombards invaded Italy in 568–9.<sup>10</sup>

But, besides these sites, there was another form of settlement by peasant-colonisation, that was reflected in Spain in places such as Godin, Gotones, Revillagodos, etc.<sup>11</sup> Toponymy indicates that villages such as Sort, Suertes, Tercias or Consortes arose from distribution of portions of land for production. Visigothic laws envisaged the right to seize uncultivated lands in full property, a practice carried out by peasants in the Duero valley later in the ninth and tenth centuries, and the notion that only individual ploughing meant actual property persisted for a long time.<sup>12</sup> Free peasants were thus constituted, though they were subject to some obligations, such as war-service, which accounts for the difficulties faced by the Visigoths in recruiting those who resisted, abandoning their lands.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in Francia, frontier-Merovingian *coloni*-soldiers (*franci homines*) had hereditary lands in exchange for war-services under the direction of a chieftain.<sup>14</sup> Lombard armies were also formed by small and medium landowners.<sup>15</sup> It must be therefore admitted that a significant non-noble stratum was frequent in Germanic military organisation.<sup>16</sup> This was how the decline in Roman supplies for the army was compensated for, and it explains why counts, who did not receive significant tribute (for reasons we shall soon explore), did not have large armed entourages.<sup>17</sup>

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8. Vives 1963, pp. 415–16; Arndt and Krusch 1885, IV, 39; Arndt and Krusch 1885, V, 47, 48; Arndt and Krusch 1885, VII, 22; Kerneis 1998, p. 49.

9. Werner 1998, pp. 34, 175–86, 234–5; Kerneis 1998, p. 83; Arndt and Krusch 1885, III, 23, king’s assets.

10. Wickham 2005, p. 210.

11. Sánchez Albornoz 1970, pp. 14–15; Menéndez Pidal 1957, pp. 188–9. Alans and Sueves also left their traces in toponymy.

12. Zeumer 1902, I, X, 2, 4, pp. 392–3; Domínguez Guilarte 1933.

13. Zeumer 1902, IX, 2, 8; Zeumer 1902, IX, 2, 9; Jones 1964, p. 256.

14. Werner 1998, pp. 164, 212; Werner 1980.

15. Wickham 2005, pp. 214–15; Gasparri 2005, pp. 159–60; Azzara and Moro 1998, N° 10, Volume 2, Year 801; Azzara and Moro 1998, N° 11, tit. 13, Years 806–10.

16. Heather 1999; Poly 1998, pp. 187–8.

17. *Pactus legis Salicae*, Echardt 1962, p. 163.

This system continued in the Asturian kingdom that was born in the north of Spain after the Arab invasion of 711. Its first kings may have been Visigothic district-chieftains who refused to subordinate themselves to the Muslims.<sup>18</sup> Asturian counts (lay or ecclesiastical), held offices granted by the kings, who could claim them back or confiscate their *ad imperandum* lands; and until *circa* 1000 there were still aristocrats who had not consolidated their property.<sup>19</sup> Their armies were formed by free peasants, subject to general obligations derived from the primitive public nature of land (although, already by the early-ninth century, these districts were becoming seigneurial property), a situation not very different from what Frankish sources indicate.<sup>20</sup> In correspondence with this form of the army, and also with the limited importance of agrarian rents until the ninth or sometimes even the tenth or eleventh centuries, these small entourages surrounding counts persisted for a long time. In Spain, some members of the entourage were called *jueces*, *merinos* or *sayones*, and they were in charge of surveillance and tax-raising.<sup>21</sup>

In short, had landed property been a quality relevant for aristocratic status, this would have been reflected in the documentation after 800. What can be found, however, both in Asturian and Frankish writings, are chieftains exercising political power over direct producers. This must have derived from socially differentiated forms of ‘settlement’.

### Taxation and collapse of the state

This relates to the fact that kings preserved public taxation and sought the support of the tax-collecting agents they found in the *curiales*, medium-scale landowners with urban residence (although there were marked differences between them). But that system had already deteriorated: references to deserted lands (*agri deserti*) began to appear in the fourth century to denote areas where taxes could not be raised, and this coincided with a growing inefficiency of the *curiales*.<sup>22</sup> By punishing the *curialis* with seizure of his assets if he failed in his task, the state threatened his reproduction as private owner, and with this

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18. Montenegro and del Castillo 1992; Pastor Díaz de Garayo 1996, pp. 119ff.

19. Sáez 1987, Document 51, Year 920; Del Ser Quijano 1994, Document 76, Year 1015. These chieftains led rebellions in Muslim Spain; see Ación Almansa 1997.

20. Fernández del Pozo 1984, Document X, p. 248. Feudal chivalry partially arose from the peasantry; see, Muñoz y Romero 1847, p. 31; Chandler 2002, pp. 25, 28; Boretius (ed.) 1883, N° 48, Year 807; Boretius (ed.) 1883, N° 50, Year 808; Boretius (ed.) 1883, N° 73, Year 811.

21. See Del Ser Quijano 1994.

22. Heather 2005, pp. 111, 114; Jones 1964, pp. 737ff.

undermined him as a civil servant. This found expression in the *curiales*' refusal to support an organism that ruined them; that they may have even joined the *bagaudae* cannot be ruled out.<sup>23</sup> The political centre responded by stressing the need for tax, to provide for the army that defended Roman society against external threat, and by trying to hold *curiales* in their offices. Despite this, the system underwent involution and finally disintegrated in the sixth century.

This degradation was reflected in the recruitment of individuals lacking in capacity to secure authority. Bastards and clerics dismissed from office for dissolute behaviour were successively incorporated as *curiales* and compulsorily attached to their office.<sup>24</sup> The lack of prestige of these civil servants can be represented in the regulation that allowed judges to punish them physically.<sup>25</sup> In the early-seventh century, the institution had disappeared even in the areas where it had been firmly established.<sup>26</sup> It is therefore understandable why, in 683, the Visigothic king Ervig, faced with a delay in tax-collecting, decreed a pardon for those who had not paid until the first year of his rule.<sup>27</sup> This decree also shows that kings *wanted* to use this system, but *could not* maintain it. Aristocrats or agents of the monarchy answered personally for what was raised, a pretention that measures the long survival of state-ideology devoid of practical effect. An illustration of the deterioration of the fiscal system is that the Arabs had to work hard to reconstruct it when they arrived in Spain and they did so by using aristocrats of the Asturian kingdom as tax-gathering agents.<sup>28</sup>

Wickham has considered the disintegration of the Roman state a 'major turning-point', although he does not ascribe this fall to a structural crisis but to a slower process of substitution in the means of aristocratic maintenance, particularly in that of the armies. An ideal-type definition of state taken from Henri Claessen and W.G. Runciman underlies his thesis.<sup>29</sup> His parameters are

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23. Drinkwater 1992.

24. *Lex Romana Visigothorum, Constitutio Theodosii et Valentiniani*, XI, 1, *Interpretatio*; on clerics, *Lex Romana Visigothorum, Constitutio Theodosii et Valentiniani*, XVI, 1, 5. They had obstacles placed to prevent them from selling their assets, *Lex Romana Visigothorum Novellarum Maioriani*, I, *Interpretatio*. If they moved to another city, they had to serve both: *Lex Romana Visigothorum*, XII, 1, 2 (*Codex Theod.*, XII, 1, 12), *Interpretatio*. Laws quoted and analysed in Sánchez Albornoz 1943, p. 29, N° 56 and N° 58; p. 39, N° 105 and N° 106.

25. *Lex Romana Visigothorum*, XII, 1, 5 (*Cod. Theod.*, 1, 47), *Interpretatio*, quoted in Sánchez Albornoz 1943, p. 35, N° 90.

26. Circulation-taxes remained unchanged. As an example among the Franks, see Boretius (ed.) 1883, N° 90, Year 781?; Isla Frez 1992, pp. 151ff.

27. Vives 1963, pp. 413, 419; Zeumer 1902, pp. 479–80.

28. See the pact with Theodomir, in Lèvi-Provençal 1938, p. 78. Among the Merovingians, it was the counts who collected tax in the cities, see Arndt and Krusch 1885, VI, 22.

29. Wickham 2005, p. 57.

the centralisation of legitimate authority, specialisation in government-rôles, the concept of public power, stable and independent resources for those in power and a class-system of surplus-extraction.

The critical aspect of this definition lies in the fact that it underestimates the mechanisms of bureaucratic reproduction and the way in which bureaucracy articulates with the dominant class. This is not a general, but a specific problem. In the precapitalist East, for instance, the élite (family, superior community) which dominated landed property also held that property from the state. Marx's elaborations on this situation, in which tax is confused with rent, are still valid.<sup>30</sup> In these systems, civil servants were dominated by the proprietor/monarch, and, when he granted concessions, these rarely escaped his control.<sup>31</sup> The ideal type used by Wickham corresponds with this situation, one in which there is a direct and relatively simple relationship between the owner of the means of production and coercion and his civil servants (which does not exclude other critical issues such as the articulation between the state and a clan-society in the economic base). On the contrary, when economic activity is based on private property as in the late Empire, or under developed feudalism or capitalism, the link between private interest and bureaucracy is delicate and essential. In the ideal-type construct, such specific traits as these are usually not perceived.

This implies that a fiscal taxation derived from the transformation of a slave-society had to ensure that there was room for the reproduction of the private economies on which its civil servants were sustained. This was achieved, under different conditions, by the monarchies of the late middle ages. After *circa* 1250, the state, by now based on a commercial bourgeoisie or on rich peasant-patriciates, guaranteed the reproduction of these non-feudal social classes whose members acted in the reproduction of feudal relations of production<sup>32</sup> as agents and rent-collectors for central power. Differences can be seen in comparison with the system of the failed Roman-Germanic kingdoms. Whilst, in the late middle ages, each moment of reproduction of the state was a moment of reproduction of the patriciate (and of the economic system from which it derived its private profit), between the fourth and sixth centuries, each moment of the reproduction of the state was a step toward the weakening of its bureaucratic stratum, toward the deterioration of its political vertex. It may also be possible that the fourth-century increase in production (on which there is now consensus) may have implied the growth of private economies, establishing a situation that hastened the contradiction between

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30. Marx 1977, p. 799.

31. Ibn al-Kardabus 1993, pp. 85–7; Ibn 'Idari 1993, p. 15; Cahen 1963.

32. Astarita 2005, pp. 85ff.

the interest of urban élites as economic subjects and their lack of interest as political ones. Social differentiation within the group was an inevitable side-effect. In the long run, the problem was expressed in an organic crisis of the ruling class related to bureaucratic non-reproduction. In consequence, popular revolts against taxation ensued.<sup>33</sup>

### Power-crisis and social rebellion

These revolts are a first indicator that the collapsed ancient machinery of domination was not replaced by another, either immediately or in the short term, thus giving way to a political vacuum. This created different conditions for the existence of *servi*.

One cannot but agree with Wickham in that these *servi* were mainly peasants subject to rent (serfs), although there may have also been ancient-type slaves among them.<sup>34</sup> In terms of an analysis of them as a class with status [*ständische Klasse*]<sup>35</sup> they could be referred to as enslaved serfs, an expression that privileges the material relations of existence of an economically and politically dependent peasant without disregarding his legal qualities – which reveal the slowness of the transformation. This peasant, just like traditional slaves (*mancipia*) were, was part of a workforce at the service of kings, bishops or lay aristocrats. But he was subject to feeble exploitation.

A reference in the XVI Council of Toledo of 693 shows that, in Spain, the labour of ten *mancipia* corresponded to an extremely poor church; and that, if any, could not summon even that labour-force, it could not keep a priest and was to be incorporated under another church.<sup>36</sup> How should we interpret this relationship between the number of workers and the feebleness in accumulation? We have reasons to think that the *servi* of the Visigothic period were an unruly workforce, inclined to show ill-will towards compulsory labour and to defy the system with daily sabotage.<sup>37</sup> In the same way that fiscal uprisings reflect a social situation not controlled by dominant groups, the fugitive slaves or serfs described in the Visigothic laws are an indicator pointing in the same direction.<sup>38</sup> *Servi* escaped compulsory labour, sometimes encouraged by others, a statement

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33. Rouche 1988, p. 89; Arndt and Krusch 1885, III, 36; Arndt and Krusch 1885, V, 28; Arndt and Krusch 1885, VII, 15.

34. Zeumer 1886, 8, 9; Lehmann 1888, 1, XII.

35. Kuchenbuch and Michael 1977.

36. Vives 1963, pp. 484, 502.

37. Beyerle and Buchner 1954, Chapters 30 and 31; Boretius (ed.) 1883, N° 3, pp. 3–6.

38. Zeumer 1902, IX, pp. 351ff.



that reveals a network of complicities. Rewards were offered for their capture.<sup>39</sup> In the early-eighth century, the Visigothic king Egica claimed that there barely existed places without runaway slaves and that they hid, aided by those who took them in.<sup>40</sup> The text reflects collective flights and commands that, wherever they went, all the population should chase them. Burgundian laws bear witness to the same phenomenon of slaves or serfs who fled and were aided by free men or others of their same condition.<sup>41</sup> The situation was similar in Italy.<sup>42</sup> Here, seventh-century *servi*, besides having popular support and probably thanks to it, organised themselves to attack manors and liberate slaves, in a movement that consolidated further in the following century.<sup>43</sup> From Italy, fugitives covered great distances and, by 782, it was necessary to search for them in very distant places, such as northern Gaul.<sup>44</sup> Western roads were peopled with a prowling mass that found in social banditry an option for survival and for resisting persecutions.<sup>45</sup> As Moses Finley argued, the reiteration of fugitive serfs suggests that the law was regularly violated.<sup>46</sup>

Other references back up this feebleness in controls. The councils of 506 and 517 in Spain forbade the liberation of slaves. This was the usual practice (at least it was aimed to withhold dependence of the manumitted).<sup>47</sup> But the significance lies in the fact that it was claimed to be unfair that monks should work in rural tasks while slaves were liberated.<sup>48</sup> The monastic labour reflected in these dispositions was, by no means, a way to combat idleness: Isidore's rule expects monks to work in vegetable-gardens and in the kitchen, although it states that construction-building and farming the land were occupations for *servi*.<sup>49</sup> This anxiety to limit slave- or servile emancipation corresponds with an anxiety to preserve the available workforce.<sup>50</sup> In 619, a norm of the Council of Seville that represses fugitives makes further reference to clerics that worked

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39. Zeumer 1902, IX, 1, 5; Zeumer 1902, IX, 1, 6; Zeumer 1902, IX, 1, 9, 14.

40. Zeumer 1902, IX, 1, 21.

41. De Salis 1892, *Liber Constitutionum*, VI.

42. Azzara and Gasparri 2004, Edict of Rothari, tit. 267, 269, 270, 271, 273, 276. In the early-eighth century; Azzara and Gasparri 2004, Laws of *Liutprand*, 44, 88. Azzara and Moro 1998, N° 10, Volume 8, Year 801; N° 12, t. 20, Years 806–10.

43. Bonnassie 1992, p. 64. Doehaerd 1974, pp. 122–3. Azzara and Gasparri 2004, Edict of Rothari, t. 279, 280.

44. Azzara and Moro 1998, Chapter 5.

45. Zeumer 1902, IX, 1, 19; De Salis 1892, XX, p. 59; García Moreno 1989, pp. 248–9.

46. Finley 1982, p. 163.

47. Vives 1963, *Concilios*, Years 589 and 633, c. LXVII and LXIX.

48. De la Cruz Martínez 1987, p. 122, N° 266; Maassen 1893, c. VIII, p. 21.

49. Campos and Roca Meliá 1971, *Regla de San Isidoro*, c. V, c. IV.

50. Vives 1963, XI, Year 675, c. VI.

the lands of the Church.<sup>51</sup> Another piece of evidence from sixth-century Gaul uncovers monks labouring with hand-mills. The dispositions of the 572 Council of Braga forbid diocesan clerics from serving the bishop as slaves. The 636 Council of Toledo prevents bishops from reducing monks to servitude. All these speak of a shortage of subordinate labour.<sup>52</sup> Information of this nature on the lack of agrarian labour is frequent for the whole period, and it is possible that it led to intensification in the capture of slaves.<sup>53</sup>

Records of social resistance by freedmen also exist.<sup>54</sup> The 666 Council of Mérida complains that, upon the death of the bishop who manumitted them, his beneficiaries hid the charters of liberation and claimed total emancipation.<sup>55</sup> This reiteration in councils that freedmen should continue in the service of the church would indicate that here lay an issue that was not easy to settle in the ecclesiastical interest.<sup>56</sup> The 619 Council of Seville gives evidence of a freed slave who tried to poison the bishop.<sup>57</sup> The same canon refers to the manumitted who must be enslaved again in order to be reduced to obedience.

This antagonism included disapproving gossip against a dead bishop.<sup>58</sup> The state of mind of landowners is palpable when we see presbyters, who had fallen ill, torturing their slaves for having cast a spell on them.<sup>59</sup> Given all this, we can assert that when Visigothic laws established that a freedman could be charged with slander, beating or accusing his master, they make reference to a dangerous and conflictual relationship, and not a hypothetical case.<sup>60</sup> In the second half of the eighth century, we find a projection of these battles for freedom in the rebellion of serfs or freedmen in the Asturian kingdom.<sup>61</sup>

Under these conditions, free peasant-communities multiplied; some adopted the form of monasteries and were condemned by the Church.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, Visigothic kings had to carry out repeated campaigns against

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51. Vives 1963, c. III.

52. Gregorio de Tours, *Vita patrum*, Chapter 18, quoted by Latouche 1957, p. 79. Vives 1963, III Council of Toledo, c. XX. IV Council of Toledo, c. LI. II Council of Braga, c. II.

53. Doehaerd 1974, pp. 32–5.

54. Vives 1963, IX Council of Toledo, c. XIII.

55. Vives 1963, c. XX.

56. Vives 1963, I Council of Sevilla, c. I. IV Council of Toledo, c. LXVIII, LXX.

57. Vives 1963, c. VIII.

58. Vives 1963, Council of Mérida, Year 666, c. XV.

59. Vives 1963, Council of Mérida, c. XV. The crime of casting a spell appears in all Germanic laws.

60. Zeumer 1902, V, 7, 10.

61. Bonnaz 1987, Chronicle of Alfonso III, 10.

62. Campos and Roca Meliá 1971, *Regla Común*, c. I.

free peoples such as the Asturians, Cantabrians and Basques.<sup>63</sup> The latter, who were used to roaming freely in the mountains, responded with offensive raids.<sup>64</sup> In 572, the Visigothic king Liuvigild occupied during the night the long-rebellious city of Córdoba, reinstating under his control many cities and fortifications after killing a large number of peasants (*rustici*). The same king shortly after, in 577, entered (probably) the Sierra Morena and incorporated the region after defeating the local peasants in revolt.<sup>65</sup> There is archaeological evidence for peasant-societies on the coast from Alicante to Murcia, and in inland Spain from the seventh to the ninth centuries.<sup>66</sup> In the historical Extremadura, south of the Duero, free communities persisted until the end of the eleventh century.<sup>67</sup> Independent enclaves are also verified outside of the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>68</sup>

In short, between *circa* 500 and 700, we witness a heterogeneous social movement of oppressed and threatened free peasants, joining their predecessors, the *bagaudae*, who between the third and mid-fifth centuries destroyed many large estates.<sup>69</sup> The passage from *villae* to villages, the new peasant-habitat that was established with this ‘social liberation’, can be included in this context.

### Peasant-mode societies

These events point towards the concept of peasant-mode societies which Chris Wickham contributes for the analysis of the period. Despite the importance he attaches to this concept, he observes nuances; in not all regions, he claims, did peasant-logic prevail.

On the contrary, however, the cited evidence allows us to extend the scope of the concept, and to establish a single theoretical basis for the construction of the feudal system on a European scale. If, in England, the centrality of the peasant-mode was the result of early Roman withdrawal, and, in Denmark, the consequence of internal evolution; in Spain, Italy and France it was the product of a multiform social struggle in a context of weakening political power. These factors are, in my view, underestimated by Wickham, even

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63. Bonnaz 1987, *Chronicle of Albelda*, 24, 25, 31; Bonnaz 1987, *Chronicle of Alfonso III*; Lemici 1893a, Year 574, p. 213; Lemici 1893b, c. 59. Also see, against the Franks, Arndt and Krusch 1885, IX, 7.

64. Lemici 1893b, c. 63, p. 292.

65. Lemici 1893a, p. 215.

66. Wickham 2005, pp. 230, 488–93, 749–50; Gutiérrez Lloret 1998.

67. Astarita 1993.

68. Reflected in Beyerle and Buchner 1954; Echardt 1962.

69. Thompson 1981; Bonnassie 1992, pp. 62–6.

though he gives stress both to the decline of peasant-exploitation and free peasants.

The most solid example provided by Wickham to argue against the extension of the scope of this concept is that of Neustria. It is evident that the feudal mode of production appeared in the Ile-de-France earlier than in other regions. Despite this, its precocity should not be overestimated. In the early-sixth century, the peasant-base of social organisation is reflected in the *Pactus legis Salicae*, written in Neustria, as Wickham observes. The image of destruction and pillage given by Gregory of Tours for the second half of that century is also known. These circumstances would not be favourable for the regular exploitation of labour. Fractures appear within the manorial system.

In this context, scholars have asserted that the Merovingian manor, with its many uncultivated lands and forests, and with scattered and small human settlements, had less cultivated land than the Carolingian one.<sup>70</sup> Archaeological findings uncover new settlements not accounted for in written sources, in the same way that they reveal continuity and not collapse in the population (as was previously believed). Something similar has been established for Castile: Muslim sources, too, make reference to villages not mentioned in Christian ones.<sup>71</sup> These silences are eloquent, since they indicate areas not controlled by the aristocracy. This squares with the feebleness of relations of exploitation. A 572 charter of the bishop of Le Mans also reflects this feebleness; it describes the *villa* (manor) of Tresson: very large but uncultivated, laboured by only ten slaves and servants lodged in the landowner's household.<sup>72</sup>

This evidence cautions us against the danger of reading the nominal possession of a territory as the actual enforcement of relations of exploitation. Furthermore, the scale of wealth established by archaeology (especially in the study of ceramics) that is part of the evidence for Wickham's proposed geographical restriction for peasant-based societies is a significant but imperfect track of the constitution of the feudal class.<sup>73</sup> Wealth could have originated from pillage, especially when kings went to war for their treasure, and their appropriation was seen as equivalent to the conquest of a people.<sup>74</sup> This

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70. Devroey 2001, p. 117; Fourquin 1975, pp. 317ff; Le Jan 1995, pp. 101–2. Gregory of Tours 1974: 'Chilperic... went off to his manor of Chelles, which is about a dozen miles from Paris. There he spent his time hunting' (p. 379).

71. Pastor Díaz de Garayo 1996.

72. Fourquin 1975, p. 319; Latouche 1957, pp. 55ff.

73. On the limits of archaeology, see Gutiérrez Lloret 1998, p. 163.

74. Duby 1976, pp. 61ff; Gasparri 2004, pp. 50ff; La Rocca, p. 129. Arndt and Krusch 1885, II, 39, 42; Arndt and Krusch 1885, III, 10. This coincides with aristocratic types of wealth: gold, silver, cattle, silk-robos; see Arndt and Krusch 1885, V, 1; Arndt and Krusch 1885, VI, 10; Arndt and Krusch 1885, VII, 22, 40.

‘external exploitation’ was present even in the first revival of exchange: Carolingian trade originated in the slave-trade of the eighth and ninth centuries.<sup>75</sup>

Pillage was not insignificant either for Merovingians or for their successors, but these expeditions do not tell us whether peasant-subjection in the core-Frankish territories went beyond isolated *corvées*. In fact, towards 800, the adscription of *coloni* to land (as it was known in the fourth century) had lost momentum due a lack of the means for the state or landowners to enforce its practice.<sup>76</sup> In the ninth century and even later, lords continued to take over free allods, and only in the tenth century would they manage to break free from the monarchy.<sup>77</sup> The chronology of the growth of the productive forces in the manorial system corresponds with this. If that growth depends, as Wickham shows, on the mobilisation of peasant-labour, a regular level of labour-exploitation was not reached in the manors until after 750 or perhaps 800. By 850, ‘peasants complained that they were subject to new impositions where there were none before and that they were subjected to heavier impositions than had been customary.’<sup>78</sup> An expert on the subject, Pierre Toubert, places the beginnings of the ‘take-off’ in the eighth century, but his data on windmills, the reduction of demesne to the benefit of tenant-plots (a rationalisation that led to higher productivity) and market-revival belong to the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>79</sup> His evidence is consistent with the chronology of the emblematic texts of the Carolingian manor: the *Capitulare de Villis* was written between 770 and 800 or 794 and 813, the Saint-Germain-des-Prés polyptych between 806 and 829. Neither would the absence of Merovingian accounting documents be a casual coincidence; those of Saint-Martin de Tours are an exception.

As a consequence, Merovingian wealth, even if it was superior to that of other kingdoms, must have remained at a moderate level, and that would explain the material absence of the *palatia*, kingly residences, that sources

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75. Lindkvist 1991; McCormick 2001, pp. 758ff.

76. Boutruche 1973, p. 123. Also, Shoichi 1998.

77. Wickham 2005, pp. 197–9, claims that the Merovingian aristocracy did not attempt independence before because it chose to support the monarchy; political fragmentation would have threatened its power. On the one hand, I do not believe that the aristocracy had global-strategic thinking; on the other, there is a lot of evidence to show that it tried to keep taxes and other traditional remnants of power. The correlation of power had not yet tipped in its favour. Significantly, the first counts to gain independence were on the frontiers of the Empire. See Chandler 2002, pp. 23ff.

78. Davies 1996, pp. 234–5.

79. Toubert 1990, pp. 69, 83–5.

refer to. Wickham states they have not been found.<sup>80</sup> That is significant in itself, and would correspond to the fact that the palace was a symbolic rather than a monumental place. This is what comparative analysis suggests. In Castile in 1076 it was established that when the king or count went to the peasant-community of Sepulveda (on the frontier) he should eat with the judge of the place *in palatio*.<sup>81</sup> This ceremonial reciprocity-meal was carried out in a place that can only be construed as an ideal space of superior power, devoid of real physical sophistication. *Palatium* has a figurative sense in Carolingian capitularies as well.<sup>82</sup> Other features of Frankish documentation that we will look at in a moment allow for the unification of the specific traits of their society with that of the West as a whole. This supports a single chronology for Western Europe:

- a) Between 400/450 and 750/800, a peasant-based-society logic dominated. Relationships of different degrees of subordination between aristocracies and peasants were established, including some taxes on exchange (direct land-taxes disappeared with the *curiales* in the seventh century).
- b) Between 750/800 and 1000/1050, the feudal-mode-of-production logic began to prevail, slowly but surely. The free peasants who survived in those years found themselves increasingly subordinated to feudal lords who had turned rent into their means of livelihood. This was subject to many local variations, but by *circa* 1050 feudal logic prevailed.
- c) Between 1050/1100 and 1250/1300, we witness the spatial reproduction of the feudal mode of production, a growth in which peasant-communities played a major rôle. This phase culminated in the predominance of this mode of production in France, Germany, Spain, Italy and England. The basic unit of production was founded on rent. The free peasants that then remained constituted small local aristocracies, legally included in the reproduction of dominant relations and not hiding their desire for ascent into the nobility and for the accumulation of assets and money.

### **Social and economic attributes of the period**

The concept of peasant-based society allows us to address common issues in different areas of the Western early middle ages, for instance, the conditions of social existence. The archaeological revision that Wickham presents leaves no

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80. Wickham 2005, p. 506.

81. Sáez 1953, t. 25; García de Cortázar 1989, p. 290.

82. Azzara and Moro 1998, N° 7, Years 787–8, t. 5.

doubt about the simplicity of material culture. His explanations for this impoverishment alternate/oscillate between feebleness of exploitation and cultural choices.<sup>83</sup>

Faced with this dilemma, only written sources allow us to take a position. When we learn about ecclesiastics of the Iberian Peninsula who, forced by need, eat the bread that should be offered at the altar, and of centres of worship in ruins with such scarce rents that they could barely survive, this simplicity forces us to recognise that this was an unwanted situation for a poor dominant class.<sup>84</sup> This evidence can be compared with archaeological findings in Spanish rural churches which, because of their small size (and their funerary use), have generated the hypothesis of private aristocratic use.<sup>85</sup> The latter is possible, but does not rule out the possibility that these constructions speak of a state of hardship and not of a cultural choice. No less significant is the fact that in a violent period, Merovingian aristocracy lacked fortifications (they were feeble and only urban).<sup>86</sup> What is more, this coincides with the anthropological point of view Wickham adopts in relation to classless societies which fail to produce surplus because they lack the social reasons to do so. The centrality of peasant-based formations for our understanding of this aspect is evident. The change in the situation, after 800, corresponds with the reconstruction of relations of exploitation and the rise of a feudal logic, that is to say, a logic of surplus-production and of private accumulation.

Exchange fits with the same system. On this matter, Wickham also oscillates in his explanations. At some points, it seems that it was exchange-opportunities between regions that were the economic motor, which allowed lords to choose between several alternatives to intensify labour-control; surplus was generated as a result. Circulation is thus presented as the key that constituted the social relations of each region.<sup>87</sup> At other times, he places causal priority on internal factors, that is to say, on taxation, relations of exploitation and on aristocratic demand.<sup>88</sup> In one case, he prioritises the cost-benefit equation; in the other, he returns to a British-Marxist historiography which has opposed the market as an economic demiurge. This description is, at the same time, made more complex by another issue. Wickham divides the types of exchange into two: that for which profit is the objective, and that which has a non-commercial

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83. Wickham 2005, pp. 201, 481, 486.

84. Vives 1963, pp. 503, 484, 485, 502.

85. Chavarría Arnau 2004a, pp. 21ff.

86. Samson 1987, pp. 290–5, 302ff.

87. Wickham 2005, pp. 265, 271, 273, 277, 280, 285, 289, 458, 699.

88. Wickham 2005, pp. 691, 730, 739, 813, 819.

origin.<sup>89</sup> These interpretations can, however, give rise to a commentary which expands on Wickham's consideration of the problem and thus arrives at a partial reformulation.

As Wickham claims, aristocratic rents allowed for a rise in demand and of the level of exchange. This is, in my view, a brilliant starting-point that neoclassical conceptions only darken. Let us examine the problem in a brief synopsis.

In precapitalist systems, circulation is not the objective of production; it appears as a result of a surplus after consumption, not as an economic objective. Its objective is the production of use-values which, under certain labour-conditions, is achieved through the mediation of the market. Here is where the problem of the general dichotomy between profit and use-value unfolds. However, following in Sombart's footsteps,<sup>90</sup> Wickham presents the two as single blocks. Analytical reasoning helps to shed light on the issue.

- a) The feudal lord, insofar as he has larger rents at his disposal, assigns part of his surplus to the market in order to obtain other use-values.
- b) When independent merchants (as in the case of some mentioned in Carolingian texts) intervene in this transfer, two concurrent and contradictory logics are presented.<sup>91</sup> On the one hand, that of the lord, interested in a use-value; on the other, that of the merchant, who seeks a monetary profit. Here is where the logics of the lord as producer and consumer (Commodity-Money-Commodity) and that of the capitalist (Money-Commodity-Money) meet. This means that, as the lord generates exchange to demand use-values, he creates the conditions for the accumulation of money-capital. A marginal but essential note to understanding these considerations lies in the fact that this money-capital is increased by an exchange of non-equivalents (due to the imperfect functioning of market-value law), that is to say, through the alienation of value in the circulation-process.<sup>92</sup> Exploitation is thus disguised by formal exchange.

After the decline in the Mediterranean exchange of the Roman world in the early middle ages, socially hierarchical long-distance exchange was marginal when compared to that of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This reveals

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89. Wickham 2005, p. 694.

90. Sombart 1919.

91. For what comes next, including a comparison with the late middle ages, see Astarita 1992.

92. The feebleness of trade in the sixth century was reflected in the feebleness of commercial capital; see Lebecq 1998, p. 188.



the differences between a society based on a peasant-logic and that based on a feudal one. It was the conditions of the period in which this new dominant class was built that led luxury-trade to be economically exiguous, not its own nature. Towards the late-thirteenth century, however, a multiple economic activity revolved around the cloth-trade. This quantitative aspect was due to the fact that cloth was consumed by the whole of the dominant class, from its 'internal' strata to its 'external' connections, from the king to his esquires on the one hand, and his servants on the other. These prestige-goods are, therefore, not characterised by their scarcity, but by their abundant and socially-restricted consumption. This aspect relates to another dimension that stresses the economic importance of this exchange from a qualitative point of view: it contributed to one of the many non-verbal discourses that, by making power explicit and delimitating hierarchies, underpinned the conditions of the reproduction of the dominant class.

Nor is the concept of peasant-based society unlike that of 'class-struggle without classes' in this period, to use an expression of British Marxism. A mixture of slaves, dependent freedmen, serfs, fugitives with no social context, and free peasants opposed the state-apparatus and the aristocracy. Only when peasant-subordination to the lord became more stable did this manifold social struggle begin to die out. The contradiction between peasants and lords over rent-raising will have had, as from around the tenth century onwards, silent daily forms that are hard to trace, with the exception of very localised movements directed by community-élites. A prolonged phase of feebleness for class-struggle was at its beginnings. It would last until the fourteenth century, and it was a presupposition for the systematic surplus-extraction of the central middle ages and the spatial reproduction of the feudal mode of production in the same period.

### **Peasant-based societies and genesis of the feudal system**

Wickham describes Northern-European society in this way: free peasants with military obligations, feeble and intermittent taxation, reciprocity with chieftains out of a recognition of their function, regular assemblies and limited subjection of the labour-force or tenants. These concessions, typical of a status-society, aristocracies were obliged to make, because surplus-redistribution among free men weakened the accumulation of wealth. In my opinion, these practices can also be detected, though in a less visible way, in Spain, Italy and France.

The élite of the late-Roman Empire tried ways of constructing relationships in which coercion was not paramount. This was a consequence of necessity.

Senators, affected by the invasions, looked to episcopal offices to recover their political influence.<sup>93</sup> Faced with a divergence between their status and their class, they resorted to evergetism, a practice related to reciprocity, which constituted the first large-scale attempt of a strategy that provided them with a way out of their social predicament in the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>94</sup> They carried out an organisational rôle in moments of shortage, and protected the population from the abuses of political officials.<sup>95</sup> The precept by which the increase of ecclesiastical patrimony should not threaten the donor's minimum physiological level of reproduction may have fitted this same rationale.<sup>96</sup> Thus, adequate moral and physical propriety was envisaged as necessary for the choice of bishop, besides the consent of the urban population.<sup>97</sup> The contrast with the *curiales*, many of which were recruited from socially undignified sectors, can be seen in these new requirements. Allusions to visits by lay or ecclesiastical officials to local communities, which included banquets and gifts, have survived in Visigothic and later documentation.<sup>98</sup> These practices confirm the importance of centres ruled by counts in the construction of the feudal mode of production.

For a long time, the centre that coordinated and directed activities exceeding the possibilities of individual peasant-families (such as offensive war or defence) corresponded with the collective interest of protection of the area, and consequently observed a principle of reciprocity and social function. The chieftain had to reinforce his social networks through personal commitment, becoming an authority by his actions rather than by arbitrary power. He had to build local relationships with his own skill on each occasion, as can be seen in the kings of the Asturias after 711. Physical handicap disqualified, as in the case of Sancho the Fat, the same way as failure meant irretrievable discredit, as in Vermudo I's military defeat. This reveals that chieftains constructed their social networks on the basis of concrete functionality. A similar impression can be derived from the road- and bridge-services organised by counts.<sup>99</sup> Taxation of the circulation of goods could also be related to the royal protection

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93. Pietri 1986; Arndt and Krusch 1885, I, 44; II, 11, 13, 21, 26; III, 17; V, 45; VI, 7; VI, 39; VIII, 39.

94. Arndt and Krusch 1885, IV, 35.

95. Vives 1963, IV Council of Toledo, c. XXXII; Arndt and Krusch 1885, II, 24; III, 34; IV, 11; V, 42; VII, 1.

96. Vives 1963, IV Council of Toledo, c. XXXVIII.

97. Vives 1963, IV Council of Toledo, c. XIX; Arndt and Krusch 1885, II, 13; IV, 7, 11, 15; V, 14; VII, 16.

98. VII Council of Toledo, c. IV. Bonnaz 1987, Chronicle of Albelda 22. Sáez 1953, Year 1076, tit. 25 and 34. Also, Arndt and Krusch 1885, VIII, 1.

99. González 1830, t. V, p. 26, Year 1085. Rodríguez Fernández 1990, Document 4, tit. 3.

of local transactions.<sup>100</sup> The king's services gave the system a distributive quality.

A series of Spanish texts from the ninth century onwards show how, from these political centres, and from a slow transformation in social practices due to an imbalance in power-relations, rent was imposed on an originally-free peasantry. The foundation-charter for the settlement of the population of Brañosa (Palencia) of 824 (though this date has been contested) granted by a count to five peasant-families can be taken as an example.<sup>101</sup> It delimited an area of settlement and exempted peasants from guard-services, forcing them instead to give tribute and rent. This document expresses a sequence: the passage from military obligations to agrarian rents, in labour or kind, which in many areas included intermediate forms such as building fortifications. No less significant is the use of the words 'tribute and rent [*tributum et infurtione*]', an expression in which the slow passage of fiscal land into patrimonial *seigneurie* is contained. In Italy, counts also demanded agrarian labour in the early-ninth century.<sup>102</sup> Another aspect of this issue was reflected in a Carolingian capitulary that denounced bishops, abbots and counts for exempting peasants from war-services in exchange for transferring them their assets.<sup>103</sup> In an 844 capitulary of Charles the Bald addressed to the county of Barcelona, the king declared that if somebody gave assets as gifts to the count this could not be regarded as tribute or census, nor were the count or his successors allowed to turn it into custom.<sup>104</sup> The priority of political power in peasant-subjection is unquestionable.<sup>105</sup> This manifold process, turning district-chieftains into lords, had begun with the private appropriations carried out by counts since the beginnings of the Roman-Germanic kingdoms.<sup>106</sup>

The logic of a peasant-based society was contained in the concrete ways in which small domestic units of production were absorbed. The count, already acting as a lord towards the year 1000, did not impose himself only through violence. Drawing on principles of social functionality already present in his ancient rôle as district-chieftain, he imposed himself as an authority that regulated peasant-relationships, repressing conflicts or punishing violations of

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100. Del Ser Quijano 1981, Document 9, Year 916. Rodríguez Fernández 1981, León, Year 1017, tit. 28.

101. Muñoz y Romero 1847, pp. 16–18.

102. Azzara and Moro 1998, N° 16, t. 6, Year 813.

103. Boretius (ed.) 1883, N° 73, Year 811.

104. Boretius and Krause 1890, N° 256, p. 260.

105. Boretius (ed.) 1883, Year 811, N° 73; N° 78, Year 813; N° 76, Year 812. Azzara and Moro 1998, N° 7, t. 13, Year 787–8; N° 13, Year 806–10.

106. Zeumer 1902, Law of Reccared, XII, 1, 2; Krusch 1902, I, 17; Sánchez Albornoz 1943, p. 57; Dopsch 1986, pp. 256, 270, 271.

peaceful coexistence. He thus plunged into a peasant social logic in order to transform the society from within. This is shown, among other instances, when he acted as the 'tribal banker' to preserve the survival of a family, while absorbing pieces of land due to the debtors' difficulties in returning loans. Social functionality and distributive conduct were ancient practices that the lord did not make up; he inherited them and gave them a new significance in the feudal context. From 1100 onwards, these practices would be carried out by peasant-communities, which, by then, were organising themselves institutionally, and from then onwards the lord's struggle for status would concentrate on his relationships with the other members of the nobility.

Wickham takes a different stand. In free communities, he claims, there existed economic differences, especially in quantity of land, which would give way to structural bonds of dependence between rich and poor peasants.<sup>107</sup>

In this respect, it is possible to argue that peasant social differentiation, a universal phenomenon, does not explain the specifically feudal form that social relations adopted. This form can be perceived in Spanish documents of the late-tenth and early-eleventh centuries. Among the peasants who owned a horse, who, in this period, began to hold political and military functions for the lord in exchange for fiefs (*milites*), landownership did not decide upward-mobility.<sup>108</sup> The basis for the latter lay in the subject's function within the system of political subordination, and this corresponded to a general situation. Comparative study reveals that, in classless societies, economic differentiation was just one among many factors of status-distinction (*caballeros* and *peones*, *alcaldes* or *jueces* and *vecinos*, freemen and slaves). When feudal logic became dominant, this status-differentiation was superseded by economic differentiation. As seigneurial juridical homogeneity constituted a single legal class of dependants, economic aspects became predominant, as would be shown by the case of the rich peasants who established a structural subordination over poorer sectors of local society by means of wage-labour. Yet, even in the late middle ages, the above criteria would still stand. After 1200, the stratum of the lower nobility could be filled with *milites* who, originally, were landowners of local importance, but, for them to obtain concessions of village-fiefs in vassalage, service to a powerful lord, often the king, was still decisive.<sup>109</sup>

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107. Wickham 2005, pp. 558–9.

108. They could own small estates, as can be seen in Menéndez Pidal 1956, pp. 35ff. They could even be non-proprietors of land and provide special services to the lord since they owned a horse, see Rodríguez Fernández 1981, *Fuero de León*, c. XXVI. Also, see Muñoz y Romero 1847, pp. 37–8. For comparison, see Sáez 1953.

109. De Moxó 1981, pp. 421ff.; Moreno Núñez 1992, pp. 73ff.; Asenjo González 1986, pp. 266ff., 349ff., 356ff.

A peasant-based society also allows us to understand that the seigneurial property was conditioned. Had the lords been large landowners since primitive times, this quality would be incomprehensible. Absolute property was only legally consecrated in the late middle ages when, as Marx said, the lord no longer inherited land; it was the land that inherited the lord.

It also explains the slowness of transformations from reciprocity to rent by a gradual change in social customs. In conclusion, this common base explains the chronological consistencies in these transformations, even though we can only state them if we make an abstraction of local differences. In Italy, the aristocracy began to increase its landed property in the ninth century, and managed to subordinate the peasantry even later than this; there was a similar process in England, and, as has been said, in Spain.<sup>110</sup> The situation would not be that different in Germany, taking into account that polyptychs only appear there from 1024–5.<sup>111</sup> The precocity of Gaul is not enough to constitute an exception. The feudal system began to have a single dynamic that would be ratified by the great expansion of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries onwards.

### **A very long mutation**

This construction of power allows us to assess the importance that the fall of Roman state-domination had, as a requisite for the new mode of production. The passage from senators to bishops and from Germanic chieftains to counts, and of all of them into feudal lords, was not a peaceful transformation of cultural practices, nor can it be reduced to élite-discontinuity. It was a structural change. There was a profound difference between the tributary mode of production, which tried to establish itself from the fourth century, and the feudal mode, which would develop from 800 onwards. They were not two sub-types of a single mode of production.<sup>112</sup> Feudalism meant a reformulation of the totality of social relations (that is to say, of essence in the traditional Hegelian-Marxist sense). Even when surplus continued to be raised by non-economic coercion, due to the concession of fiefs, it had turned into the private appropriation of the product of labour and this, in turn, determined private property over land. As Perry Anderson argued, in feudalism the political factor penetrates social relations of production; it constitutes the mode of

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110. Wickham 2005, pp. 203, 204, 215, 330, 342–9. Also, Feller 2000, p. 526.

111. Rösener 1990.

112. Wickham 2005, p. 60. Coincides with Berktay 1987 and Haldon 1993.

production.<sup>113</sup> That is why its genesis was not the result of a change in strategy of the dominant class but, instead, of the collapse of the state and of a whole social organisation. In that collapse lay the condition of possibility for the development of private political domination over the peasantry in a systematic and not a contingent way. This crisis of the state constitutes a Western peculiarity. To give an example of the opposite, in al-Andalus, the crisis of the state in the early-eleventh century resulted in the formation of small states that reproduced the same principle as the caliphate; but private sovereignties, fiefs, did not appear.<sup>114</sup> That is why scholars who defend the concept of feudal mutation are right, not only when they prioritise the political factor when explaining how the new society was organised, but also when they argue for the concept of a deep rupture. Their mistake lies in conceiving a sudden change of what was, until the year 1000, an immobile structure.

The proposition of a ‘rupture’ is opposed to the now-prevailing theses which, drawing on the studies by Peter Brown and Walter Goffart, replaced words like ‘collapse’ and ‘crisis’ of the Empire for that of ‘transformation’, derived from a ‘peaceful barbarian accommodation’.<sup>115</sup> Economic and political research thus shifts towards conceptions of immutability (permanence of the ancient world) or of smooth evolutionism (imperceptible transformation without really annulling pre-existing structures). Rejecting these currently-fashionable parameters does not imply falling into catastrophist notions such as Roman ‘suicide’ or German ‘assassination’ of the Empire, images that evoke a non-existent accidental collapse. The disintegration of the system of domination of the Roman Empire was a long process that took place between the fourth and sixth centuries. It was as long as that of the subsequent construction of a new power-class. Inland Spanish *villa*-archaeology confirms that the decadence of *villae* had already begun in the fifth century, vanishing towards the seventh, although they had already by then lost their rôle as aristocratic residences.<sup>116</sup> That long decline of an archetypical Roman construction of the world accompanies both the crisis of the ancient dominant class and the points made in this article.

I wish to point out once more that these arguments owe much to the research Chris Wickham has been carrying out in recent years.

*Translated by Marcia Ras*

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113. Anderson 1979, pp. 407ff.

114. Wasserstein 1985.

115. Brown 1971; Goffart 1980. See Ward-Perkins 2005; Halsall 1999.

116. Chavarría Arnau 2004b, pp. 67ff.

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