06—Farming and local economy in the early medieval countryside 
(Castelo de Vide, Portugal)

Sara PRATA (IEM | NOVA FCSH)
Fabian CUESTA-GOMEZ (IEM | NOVA FCSH)

ABSTRACT

Our research on archaeological evidence from early medieval rural contexts from the territory of Castelo de Vide (Alentejo, Portugal) has been carried out from 2014 onwards, analysing data from surface field surveys, test-pits, excavations, and material culture. Our findings revealed that following the progressive transformations documented in former elite Roman estates (abandonment and/or reuse) that occurred throughout the 5th century, a new rural settlement pattern emerges in the countryside during the 6th and 7th centuries. By comparing data from settlement layout, architectural features, pottery production, and agricultural practices, we propose a change in the scale of production and the co-existence of three complementary production levels, shedding light into the different ways in which the post-Roman countryside might be organized.

KEYWORDS

Early Middle Ages; Rural settlements; economic practices; scale of production; Alto Alentejo (Portugal).

1. Introduction

This chapter will focus on archaeological evidence of early medieval rural settlements from the territory of Castelo de Vide (Alto Alentejo, Portugal) and elaborate upon the organization, scale, and scope of early medieval agriculture and craft production. Due to the acidity of granite soils and the contexts’ slow archaeological formation processes, organic remains are extremely scarce. As a result, our analysis of peasant practices will rely mainly on indirect evidence, such as settlement layout, architectural features, and material culture. Several of these aspects suggest mixed practices of crops and livestock, coherent with typical early medieval agriculture, characterized by less intensive and less specialized systems, as it has been suggested for other post-Roman European landscapes due to the disappearance of the pressure to supply both urban areas and army provisions (Hamerow 2012: 145). Concurrently, imported goods are minimal, and most of the material culture seems to be produced locally, even if a few elements suggest the existence of specialized trades (such as metalwork). At a first glance this would seem to be the material record of self-sufficient subsistence-based farmsteads. However, there is ample evidence for early medieval olive oil and wine production. The large amount and density of press facilities points to a surplus production, likely intended for supra-local trade, implying the integration of peasant groups in broader economic scales and power dynamics.

We will begin by briefly frame our research, and then proceed to present our findings and discuss which sets of material evidence we believe can be used to shed light into the range of early medieval agricultural practices and craft production. We will then propose an explanatory model for the management of

1 Funded by FCT, 2020.01697.CEECIND.
the different production processes, in which we suggest the co-existence of three complementary productions scales: household level, local/intra-regional, and supra-local/inter-regional. By examining the possible interconnectivity of such levels and comparing our results with those available for other peninsular territories, our goal is to elaborate on the complexity of early medieval peasant landscapes.

2. Research framework

Castelo de Vide is a Municipality located in Alto Alentejo, in east-central Portugal (Figure 1), where relevant remains from the early medieval period were recognized since the works for its archaeological inventory (Rodrigues 1975). The territory of Castelo de Vide (265 km²) incorporates the north-western edge of the small mountainous range of Serra de São Mamede, but consists mainly of penelopean landscape, fields with abundant seasonal streams, essentially used nowadays for cattle grazing combined with traditional cultivation systems, such as cork oak and chestnuts woods, olive groves and vineyards. The growth of mechanized agriculture during the second half of the 20th century meant little to territories such as this, where abundant rocky outcrops, a thin soil layer and the small size of most plots made mechanical ploughing unproductive. Apart from a few infrastructures works —the Cáceres railway branch inaugurated in 1880–1881, the hydroelectric dam of Póvoa e Meadas finished in 1928, and the national roadway N246 in the early 20th century— the economic uses and overall countryside configuration remained rather crystallized in today’s landscape².

In the early 1980s, the Municipality of Castelo de Vide encouraged a group dedicated to studying, protecting, and promoting archaeological heritage (see Cuesta-Gómez et al., in this volume). These favourable conditions, both natural and human-made, nurtured the continuity of archaeological works in the town and its region (field surveys, excavations, inventory) providing an impressive set of archaeological information. The field records, reports, photographs, drawings, and artifacts that resulted from 40 years of archaeological projects can be accessed by researchers. Furthermore, throughout the years the Municipality has emphasised their commitment to archaeological research.

Between 2014 and 2018 the authors carried out a research project about early medieval settlements in the territory of Castelo de Vide: PramCV—Povamento rural alto-medieval no território de Castelo de Vide³, it consisted of excavations, surface field surveys, material culture analyses, and a critical overview of previous works in the region. We are currently running a diachronic research project to update the archaeological inventory of the Municipality. This has allowed for further surveys, micro-scale analysis, and a better grasp of previously unknown areas. The following section is an overview of the works carried out so far, their major results, and our current hypothesis concerning the evolution of the early medieval rural settlements in this territory.

3. Archaeological data

3.1. Contexts and use sequences

The PramCV project carried out excavations on 6 different early medieval settlements where rock-cut graves, remains of stone buildings and pottery were visible on the surface. Our primary goal was to date the building remains, and confirm their concurrence with the graves, as suggested by their spatial

---

² Only in recent years have there been evidence of more aggressive mechanized field clearing actions and the significant advancement of photovoltaic farms.

³ The project was hosted by the Instituto de Estudos Medievais (NOVA FCSH) and supported by the Municipality of Castelo de Vide, allowing archaeology students to take part in the fieldworks. Between 2016 and 2018 it was funded by a FCT PhD Scholarship (SFRH/BD/115939/2016).
Figure 1: Geographical location of the municipality of Castelo de Vide (Copernicus EU-DEM). Detail of the areas excavated by the PramCV Project (red dots are sites with graves, green squares are early medieval building remains) (F. Cuesta-Gómez).
proximity. We also aimed to determine the exact functionality of these structures and recover data about landscape use, agricultural practices and production and circulation of material culture.

Our findings revealed a network of settlements structured in small farmsteads, combining structures for domestic use, enclosures and cattle pens, press facilities for olive oil and wine, and burial areas (Prata 2018a, 2019; Prata and Cuesta-Gómez 2020).

The examined contexts present analogous building techniques, use and abandonment sequences, and pottery assemblages, all of which find similarities with early medieval settlements that have been analysed in other central Iberian territories (see in this volume: Centeno Cea et al.; Rubio Díez et al.; Colmenarejo García et al.). Elements for fine-tune dating were unfortunately scarce, but this is evidently a post-Roman phenomenon: aside from the frequent reuse and repurpose of Roman building materials, additional technical features typical of this period are absent from both the constructions and the material culture.

Roman villas from the Alto Alentejo region that were excavated at greater length reveal complex processes of abandonment, transformation, and reuse from the 5th century onwards, which suggest a clear disengagement from the conventional Roman elite use (Carneiro 2017). In the territory of Castelo de Vide, surface data and results from older excavations have revealed a small number of Roman sites, some of which would have been medium sized villa estates and associated agricultural infrastructures,

Figure 2: Examples of early medieval remains in the territory of Castelo de Vide: 1. and 2. Rock cut graves; 3. Elements from a press facility; 4. Remains of a possible farmstead at the Colegiada site (© S. Prata; F. Cuesta-Gómez).
and a possible small temple or shrine in the riverside of Nisa stream. These were likely organized through a road system which connected the countryside to the nearby town of Ammaia (São Salvador da Aramenha, Mavão), a small-size town, possibly funded during the Augustan age, and elevated to civitas under Emperor Claudius, becoming a municipium probably during the 2nd century AD (Corsi et al. 2012). There is evidence to suggest that Ammaia struggled to maintain its status as an urban enclave as early as the mid-5th century, since later imported wares were not documented (Quaresma 2014). It seems possible that this was a result from its location, in a rather inland area of the Lusitania province, isolated from other towns which managed to maintain their standing during the early medieval period due to their economical, strategical, or religious importance, like Egitania (Idanha-a-Velha) or Pax Iulia (Beja) (Cordero 2020).

Our current hypothesis is that the early medieval dispersed settlement system starts to emerge in parallel with the transformations documented in the Roman estates, from the second half of the 5th century onwards. Both phenomena would be separate, albeit correlated, symptoms of a much larger process of landscape reconfiguration. This meant a change from a nucleated settlement system (medium size villas) to a dispersed one (small farmsteads) and resulted in necessary shifts in land ownership systems, scale of production, and the management of the agricultural practices, central issues that will need to be addressed in further detail.

The last moment of use of these early medieval settlements is also difficult to determine. They present brief occupation sequences, with no structural reforms in the buildings, no overlapping levels of use nor dense accumulations of discarded artifacts. Also, the contexts exhibit rather slow formation processes which suggest a generalized and simultaneous abandonment process all over the region.

For the time being, it was only possible to carry out radiocarbon dating at one site, Tapada das Guaritas II; here, charcoal samples of strawberry tree wood and a pinecone were collected in the first collapse level of the roof. The radiocarbon dating results suggest that the building was abandoned during the first third of the 8th century (Figure 3). Based on these dates, combined with the fact that the analysed contexts present no evidence of Islamic style pottery or building techniques, we propose that these settlements were abandoned throughout the first decades of the 8th century, likely as an indirect consequence.

---

4 Recent excavations at the forum area have revealed compartmentations with spolia that most likely reflect post-Roman moments of use, but these results and still been analysed in greater detail.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roman agricultural model</th>
<th>End of the Roman model</th>
<th>Early medieval rural settlement model</th>
<th>End of the early medieval rural model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st–4th cc.</td>
<td>mid-5th c. (?)</td>
<td>6th–7th cc.</td>
<td>mid-8th c. (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Territory marked by a small number of medium-size villas, located in areas with good agricultural aptitude integrated into a roadway system.</td>
<td>Abandonment of some buildings and properties.</td>
<td>Emergence of a new dispersed settlement pattern, consisting of a large number of small farms.</td>
<td>Evidence of an extensive abandonment process of early medieval farms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralized production aimed at the supply of products to the town of Ammaia. Integration in long-distance commercial networks: presence of import goods.</td>
<td>Reuse of old buildings with new features.</td>
<td>Occupation of areas with lower agricultural aptitude, next to water lines and close to roads and paths.</td>
<td>No evidence of destructive or transformative episodes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reuse of building materials.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Possible reuse of some agricultural parcels, namely, olive grove areas.</td>
<td>Investment into press facilities with lower productive capacity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deactivation of large torcularia.</td>
<td>Symbolic processes of claiming land-use rights: articulation of funerary spaces together with domestic areas.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Decentralized production aimed mainly at household consumption and local exchanges.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Evidence of surplus oil and wine production for payment of tax charges and/or supralocal exchange.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Diachronic sequence proposed for the countryside based on the different archaeological processes documented in the territory of Castelo de Vide.

of the progressive political and administrative changes as well as territorial transformations that the Iberian Peninsula faced from this moment onwards.

For now, it is difficult to determine the reasons for this apparent regional depopulation. This event could be correlated with the Muslim expansion, motivating a precipitated escape, or seeking refuge. But it seems more likely that the geo-political reconfiguration in the first moments of the peninsular Emirate could have created shifts in settlement patterns. Peripheral areas in relation to the new centres of power would become more isolated, previous networks and systems obsolete. Although there is evidence to suggest there was a generalized emigration processes from rural areas to urban peripheries.
or new settlements in Iberian territories during the “long eight century” (Hansen and Wickham 2000), additional research is needed to understand these local changes.

3.2. Building techniques and architectural features

Two of the excavated settlements, Tapada das Guaritas I (Prata 2017) and Tapada das Freiras, were interpreted as farmsteads, presenting ground level hearths and domestic pottery inside. At Junçal, an area of about 2000 m² presented remains of collapsed walls and several buried buildings. Here, the main excavation area revealed an olive oil facility with a lever-and-screw press mechanism. At Tapada das Guaritas II another lever-and-screw press was partially excavated, and an associated storage building (Prata and Cuesta-Gómez 2020). The archaeological remains of Colegiada (Figure 2.4), in the vicinity of the Nisa stream, were less intact and it was not possible to ascertain the exact functionality of the three buildings identified. The presence of a Roman altar stone (ara) repurposed as a press element, the abundance of sherds from storage vessels, plus fragments from domestic pottery and remains of a hearth, suggest that this was a multi-building complex which combined working areas and living quarters, as suggested for Junçal.

All the examined early medieval structures were built using a double-faced dry-stone system with locally available granite stones. In some settlements, remains of quarries suggest that these were extracted in the immediate vicinity. The reuse of stone elements from Roman buildings is also well documented, especially in the basin of the Nisa river (Prata 2018b). For now, there is no evidence to sustain the combined use of other building techniques, such as adobe or rammed earth. Charcoal samples of large trees from the *Quercus* genus suggest the use of wooden fixtures, most likely large beams for roof support, and the wooden components of the press facilities. Exceptionally large quantities of decorated ceramic roof tiles were recorded at all settlements (Cuesta-Gómez et al. 2018), indicating that this was the most common type of rooftop, although discrete evidence for thatched roofs is also present, as it seems to be the case of Tapada das Guaritas I, where both types could have been used (Prata 2017).

3.3. Pottery and craft production

Pottery is the most frequent find among early medieval contexts in this region. The domestic assemblages are characterized by forms associated with cooking (such as pots and plates) and food consumption (bowls, plates, and jars) (Prata 2017). Large storage vessels, similar to Roman *dolia*, are also present, particularly in the press facilities and associated buildings (Figure 4.5).

The limited formal variety of the ceramic repertoire, combined with heterogeneous manufacturing processes, reflect a pottery production with a low degree of specialization that would likely be carried out for self-supply and exchanges between farmsteads. The only ceramic production that was found to be homogeneous among the different settlements were roof tiles, which we consider to be the result of centralized production and intra-regional distribution. The large storage vessels, whose production and size would also require specific techniques and kilns, could also be produced by a similar system.

Fragments of iron objects and tools were also recorded, consisting of objects associated to wood building (like nails, pegs and hinges), and tools such as knives, a chisel, and a small sickle. The scarcity of iron tools recorded inside the excavated buildings could reflect the fact that these were valuable possessions that would have been taken when the farmsteads were abandoned. The presence of metal slags points to limited ironwork carried out in the surrounding areas. It is important to stress that since the excavations were carried out mostly inside domestic buildings, direct remains of ceramic kilns or bloomery furnaces were not identified. But we believe these would have been located near the domestic units.
There are several relevant objects that reveal semi-specialized masonry work. This is the case for the rock-cut graves, the stone quarries, and the buildings themselves, the press weights, and quern-stones (Figures 2.3 and 4.4). Another crucial evidence for craftsmanship is woodwork. This would have been employed in the wood components of the buildings, especially the timber roof trusses, but also the complex press mechanisms that would have been in place in the oil and wine facilities. About this matter, we should also stress the importance of the fact that both stonework and wood components of complex press systems, such as lever-and-screw presses, were preserved in these post-Roman times.

The presence of spindle whorls points to textile production with animal or plant fibres (Figure 4.1). We can also assume that several household items would have been built in wood and animal parts (bones, antlers, or horns). A carbonized spindle whorl identified in the fireplace of Tapada das Guaritas I was made from bone, and it seems feasible to assume that this was an available and fairly used raw material. The use of cork has been suggested for the Roman period (Carneiro and Bombico 2016), and identified in early medieval contexts of Beira Alta, such as the 10th century settlement of S. Gens (Tente 2019).

3.4. Agriculture and farming

The most conclusive find considering agricultural activity are the presses identified at Junçal and Tapada das Guaritas II. Among the charcoal samples identified in Junçal is an olive pit and portions of wood from Olea europaea L, attesting to the production of olive oil. Our current thesis is that in this territory the lever-and-screw presses would be linked to the production of olive oil, considering the investment (construction and maintenance) that these structures supposed. The grape processing, less demanding, could have been done in basic treading structures, such as vats and rock-cut tanks, documented during surface surveys (Prata and Cuesta-Gómez 2020). This theory might in time be validated by means of residue analysis, not yet available. In any case, this type of evidence points both to olive oil and wine production and attests the planting of vineyards and olive groves in the early medieval countryside. It is also feasible to assume that some of the old Roman olive groves might have been kept in use, this is an additional aspect to be taken into account when considering the spatial overlap between settlements of both periods.

It seems likely that additional plant specimens were produced by the early medieval peasants in this territory. Quern-stones and grindstones in domestic environments point to milling of cereals and/or grains, and during the excavation of Tapada das Guaritas II two carbonized lentils were collected. Additionally, fragments of several types of baking trays or plates (fire damaged thick coarse-ware pieces, with a diameter of 20–30 cm) identified at Tapada das Guaritas I, suggest baking of unleavened breads.

The location of early medieval farms, in well irrigated areas flowed across by seasonal streams where grazing land is available throughout the year, and the presence of large semi-circular structures that we have interpreted as cattle pens, point to animal keeping. But the information available to determine which animals were kept is extremely tenuous: a sheep-goat footprint identified on a tile (prior to cooking) at the Tapada das Guaritas I (Figure 4.3); and an equid tooth crown, at Junçal.

3.5. Funerary practices

All the archaeological settlements that were excavated by the PramCV project present rock-cut graves in the surrounding areas (Figure 1). However, if we analyse data from intensive field surveys, this relationship becomes even clearer. In Vale de Galegos, 13 of the 15 structures identified present at least one rock-cut grave within a radius of 100 m (Cuesta-Gómez and Prata 2021). We propose that in the territory of Castelo de Vide, and analogous regions of Alto Alentejo like Nisa and Marvão, the rock-cut grave phenomenon can be framed within the 6th–8th centuries and is visibly correlated to the
Figure 4: Evidence from early medieval settlements that reflect economic practices: 1. spindle whorls for weaving; 2. carbonized lentils from Tapada das Guaritas II; 3. roof tile with a hoof print from a goat/sheep; 4. granite saddle quern-stone; 5. large decorated ceramic storage vessel (© F. Cuesta-Gómez).
early medieval settlements that have been analysed so far. These are mainly individual graves, or small gravesites of 2–3 tombs (Figure 2.1 and 2.2), and their presence in peasant spaces should be understood as the manifestation of self-recognized family groups, where, among other interpretations, the dead could form part of a complex discourse that legitimized land use rights (Martín Visc 2012; Rubio Díez 2015).

We should also point out that while rock-cut graves are predominant, they coexisted with other burial structures, such as cist graves and sarcophagi. This might be, at least in part, a matter of archaeological visibility, since due to their physical characteristics, rock-cut graves are both durable and easier to recognize during surveys. Sarcophagi are easily repurposed in the modern countryside (often as fountains or mangers) and cist graves are more easily destroyed during agricultural works. Still, it is worth noting that cist graves are always built facing east. Even though there are a few examples of larger concentrations of cist graves: gravesites such as Santo Amaro, Boa Morte (Rodrigues 1978) or Vale da Bexiga (Cuesta-Gómez et al., in this volume), there are also some examples of individual cist graves or arranged in small groups, suggesting family grave sites. Grave goods, usually jars and bottles, but also pots, resemble domestic pottery collected at the excavated settlements, further suggesting synchronicity. However, there is yet no satisfactory explanation for the meanings behind the coexistence of different types of graves. They might reflect slight chronological changes that we are not yet able to perceive, but it also seems reasonable to assume different belief systems or separate priorities in burial practices.

3.6. “Prestige goods”

Finally, we must recognize the presence of a limited number of artifacts that appear to be brought from outside the peasant sphere. Small glass shards are present in the assemblages of all the analysed settlements, and while a few could be residual fragments from the Roman period, it is feasible to assume that others are early medieval productions, such as the blue cobalt glass beads collected at Tapada das Guaritas II (Prata and Cuesta-Gómez 2020). Likewise, some of the excavated cist graves preserved remains of adornment pieces in copper and bronze (fibulae, rings, earrings) (Rodrigues 1978). At Junçal, a signet ring was also collected as a surface find, near the rock-cut grave necropolis.

But the most remarkable find are the two tremissis from Mascarro: a piece of King Egica, coined in Toledo after 692 (Almeida 1971: 224–26); the other, from the blurry obverse published (Rodrigues 1975, Est. CXV, fig. 2), is a pseudoimperial Visigothic tremis, probably coined in the name of Anastasius I (491–518, group A3 from Tomasin).

These types of coins have been linked to the presence of local elites, attesting interactions between peripheral and central powers (Martín Visc 2008; López Sánchez 2009; Pliego 2015) and might be key to understand the dynamics in place in this early medieval landscape.

4. Discussion

We must now reflect on the production scales of peasant communities. As we have seen, the early medieval settlements analysed in the territory of Castelo de Vide consisted of small-scale farmsteads, which we estimate would be used and operated by single domestic units (according to the definition proposed by Vigil-Áscalera (2006: 90). The location of these new farmsteads has clear links with previous Roman infrastructures, namely villa estates and roadways, that would have been kept in use during this period. Other aspects played an important role, such as the availability of water sources and pastures. Settlements were built in a sequence (or row, Hamerow 2002: 54) or in clusters, but always in proximity,
in what can be described as a dispersed but articulated manner, implying close relationships between farmsteads.

In several of these settlements there is evidence of different types of productive processes, especially when wine and/or olive oil press facilities coexist with cattle pens, which points to extensive agriculture. In this context, it seems feasible to assume the coexistence of different scales of production. Considering the available data and taking as reference the production and circulation system of goods and services designed for the early medieval villages of the peninsular centre (Vigil-Escalera and Quirós Castillo 2013: 386), we propose three levels of production (Figure 5).

Level 1 includes the processes carried out at the domestic scale for self-sufficiency and entails what would have been the main daily activities of the farmsteads: animal keeping and farming; food processing, cooking, and preservation; recollection of wood and plants, and maybe limited hunting and fishing from nearby woodlands. This level would also include basic crafts, characterized by a low level of specialization, namely domestic pottery, textiles, and other trades not preserved in the archaeological record, such as basketry, but also wood, cork, and bone objects.

In Level 2 we include the activities that would require a certain degree of specialized knowledge, technical skills and/or specific tools: rooftiles and storage vessels; forge and ironwork; building constructions, which would include planning, stonemasons, and carpenters (especially relevant when considering the wood components of press facilities). Still, the technical demands of these different manufactures do not suggest the existence of fully specialized craftspeople, and so, the main difference with the previous group is that these activities would have been carried out locally, providing for several farmsteads, and thus this scale assumes service interexchange between separate settlements. It seems reasonable to assume that some of these activities could have even been carried out on a seasonal and/or itinerant basis.

At level 3 we would place, on the one hand, those commodities whose production would require specialized workshops and which we assume would be carried out outside the peasant sphere, namely, bronze or copper adornments and glassware. On the other, we would have a possible surplus production of oil and wine, that would likely be intended for supra local trade. This level positions peasant groups on a broader economic scale, and implies vertical relations, likely with local or regional elite groups.

The division of the production processes in these three levels assumes the coexistence of different supply and production patterns. On the one hand, we must recognize that to an extent some of the level 1 productions, managed domestically and mainly for self-supply, could have been integrated in level 2, productions intended for intra-regional product or service exchange. Likewise, a part of the production processes that we include in level 2 could have been carried out at a single household scale, since we
have yet no evidence of production centres for any of these crafts. But even with productions that imply a low level of specialization, it seems obvious that the technical skills and knowledge implicit in level 2 productions were not shared by all. In this sense, the conceptual line that separates these two levels is quite tenuous and the processes / products that would be managed at home or acquired in other farms would depend on the needs and capacities of each family unit on a given year.

Thus, while these would have been groups of peasants dedicated fundamentally to agriculture and livestock keeping, the existence of productions that would require a certain degree of specialization or exclusive dedication (albeit seasonal) suggests interchange relationships between different family units, reinforcing the notion of a dispersed but articulated settlement network.

However, olive oil and wine production involve a different explanation. Olive groves and vines cannot be considered just as subsistence crops, on the contrary, they imply a specialized kind of production. Furthermore, the high number of remains of press facilities in early medieval settlements suggest that a considerable part of these farmsteads was dedicated, as least partly, to these products, which would imply a surplus production that would exceed the needs of this specific territory. One of the possibilities is that these were used as a form of tax payment, or that they were intended for regional trade, which would point out to the integration of these farmsteads in broader economic and social scales (Peña Cervantes 2009).

None of the material evidence of rural settlements suggests that these farms functioned as a self-recognized group. On the contrary, the absence of shared burial grounds or work areas, and the presence, in turn, of family funerary spaces, directly associated with residential buildings, alongside the high number of different press facilities, indicate that each farmstead functioned as a self-recognized group and might have controlled their own production, at least to an extent.

In any such case, it seems unlikely that neither tax payments nor product exchange at a regional level would be managed directly by individual peasant families, and this is where we might perceive the existence of what could be described as local elites, predominant social groups that would mediate the relations between individual farmsteads and outside powers.

We have not yet been able to archaeologically determine the presence of these prominent social groups. Overall, the analysed settlements present very horizontal homogenous architectural features and material culture. Likewise, the type of settlements that in other territories have been traditionally linked with the presence of post-Roman local elites, such as hillfort settlements (Tente and Martín Viso 2012), seem to be absent in this region. Further direct evidence of these power relations, such as epigraphic slates (Martín Viso 2013), were also not identified.

But the small number of finds described above as “prestige goods” could be interpreted in this light. This explanation was offered for the early medieval settlements of the peninsular centre, where certain exotic materials, of which glass and bronze pieces would be examples, would constitute prestigious markers that suggested the existence of prominent individuals within the domestic units that would maintain relations with elites outside the rural settlements (Vigil-Escalera and Quirós Castillo 2013: 337).

We must also recognize that there are a number of different ways in which social differentiation might be expressed that is difficult to access from a material record point of view (Quirós Castillo 2016, 2020). We should add that this might be particularly the case when considering aspects such as diet, production and consumption patterns of livestock, cereals, or game, in assemblages like the ones we have worked

---

5 Except for a few possible exceptions, such as Santo Amarinho, Boa Morte or Vale da Bexiga, please see below.
upon, where there are no faunal nor carpological remains, nor bio-anthropological ones. Likewise, when considering how rural communities might express wealth, we should not be looking solely to household areas (their size or building techniques) but considering the investment in secondary installations (for crop and stock keeping) as well as the capacity to manage land, resources, and work force around each domestic unit (Vigil-Escalera, in press). This means to look beyond household structures and analyse the settlements surroundings areas, but also to acknowledge that there are ways in which social differentiation might be expressed that are not always noticeable in the material record. Finally, we must also account for regional variations of the possible meanings behind such phenomena, since aspects that might appear to be used as social markers in a specific social setting, do not necessarily hold the same meaning for different communities.

In the territory of Castelo de Vide, as we have seen, the analysed productive and domestic contexts are very homogeneous in terms of building techniques and material culture. However, in an region where most early medieval burial areas present a small number of graves, it might be worth recognizing the singularity of slightly larger gravesites, which could reflect the agency of prominent social groups. The case of Vale da Bexiga is revealed in greater detail elsewhere (see Cuesta-Gómez et al., in this volume) but gravesites such as Santo Amaringo or possibly Boa Morte could also be considered in this light. For the moment, we lack additional data to determine the singularity of the settlements associated to these gravesites, but a more holistic approach to the early medieval funerary landscapes will be considered in upcoming research.

Another possibility for this apparent imperceptibility of local elites in the analysed archaeological record would be their position outside our geographical frame. A proposal that we have previously suggested would be that the town of Ammaia could have maintained its importance at a local level in the post-Roman centuries —working at least as a regional trade centre where products, merchants and political elites converge under the shadow of its Roman past— but it is also necessary to recognize other relevant sites located in the neighbouring municipalities, such as Herdade dos Pombais (Marvão) (Fernandes 1987) or Patalou (Nisa) (Azezes 2010–2011), contexts still poorly known archaeologically but with significant early medieval evidence, which may have played a relevant role in the micro-scale dynamics of this territory.

6 Conclusion

For now, we have offered a glimpse into the early medieval countryside that has revealed a complex society. If on the one hand it seems clear that the early medieval peasant settlements in the territory of Castelo de Vide were integrated in economic scales that exceed mere local exchanges, a fact especially visible in terms of oil and wine production, it is not yet possible to propose a satisfactory model for the management of these processes. New questions arise: in these peripheral areas, what type of landownership regimes co-existed? What was the status of these communities living and working on the countryside? What was the level of peasant agency and the role played by horizontal and vertical relationships in the development of rural landscapes? As we have discussed, some aspects suggest the presence of prominent groups within the peasant sphere, although their depiction in the archaeological record is still elusive. We will need to determine where in the hierarchy these local powers would be placed, and whether they would operate directly as mediators between the peasant groups and the central power, or whether on the contrary there would be more scales, different steps, between these two poles. Understanding which of our findings are specific to this territory, and which were standard in the

6 For an eloquent example, consider the case of the Late Roman Farm at Great Holts Farm (Boreham, Essex, UK) where humble remains of a timber building reviled remains of large cattle, that might have been used as tractors to exploit heavy soils efficiently; imported plant foods and preserved fish; recreational hunting and even probably hawking, indicating the wide range of economic practices and lifestyle choices through which prosperity and status could be expressed (Murphy et al. 2000).
region will be among our future priorities. The PramCV project promoted comparisons between surface data and excavation results, making it possible to determine which material remains were relevant to reconstruct early medieval rural landscapes in this area and in analogous territories in the northern region of Alto Alentejo. These are, apart from the most recognized funerary remains (mainly rock-cut graves but also cist graves and sarcophagi), traces of stone buildings (specifically, double-faced walls), and transformation facilities (such as rock-cut presses and stone press elements). This information needs to be considered for surveys and inventories carried out in similar regions, and it will be taken into account for upcoming research considering the early medieval period in Alto Alentejo.

Bibliography


7 Unfortunately, misconceptions about the early medieval period still result in curious cases in which a rock-cut grave might be classified as early medieval, but a press weight or remains of ceramic building materials identified in the same area would be separately classified and Roman.


PARTE II—Territorios en transición y creación de nuevos paisajes


