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Towards an Archaeology of State Formation in North-Western Iberia

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To discuss state formation in the context of a more general reflection on social inequality inevitably feels a bit like ‘building the house from the roof down’, as we say in Spain. In many ways the state can be seen as a point of arrival in social stratification; a point at which social inequality becomes embedded in a formal organisation that outlives individuals and facilitates its transgenerational reproduction. How such systems of ‘durable inequality’ — to borrow Charles Tilly’s term — came to exist in early medieval Europe has long been recognised as a crucial topic for both historians and archaeologists.¹ There are nevertheless important divergences in the approaches to this subject in both camps, to the point of complicating any effort to combine the two of them into a single theorisation.

Archaeological approaches mainly derive from the social anthropological theory of the mid-twentieth century on, which was dominated by linear evolutionary models that seek to define a sequence of stages of social structuring eventually leading to statehood.² Linear evolutionary models have been, and in many respects still are, hugely influential; they have a lot to say, and they are important to take into account.³ However, applying evolutionary theory to early medieval state formation often feels like running in circles, even though elements of evolutionary thinking come up time and again in early medieval studies. Anthropological and

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¹ C. Tilly, *Durable Inequality*, Berkeley, 1998; see also C. Tilly, *Identities, boundaries and social ties*, Boulder, USA, 2005, pp. 71–90. On the development and impact of Tilly’s work see K. Voss, ‘Enduring Legacy? Charles Tilly and Durable Inequality’, *The American Sociologist*, 41–4, 11/06 2010, pp. 368–74. See also Robin Beck’s contribution to this volume.

² See especially M. H. Fried, *The Evolution of Political Society: An Essay in Political Anthropology*, New York, 1967; E. Service, *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective*, New York, 1971.

³ K. V. Flannery and J. Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire*, Cambridge, MS, 2012.

archaeological evolutionary models were originally developed with a focus on the early states of the Near East and Mesoamerica, which emerged under environmental and economic conditions that were very different from those of early medieval Europe, as was their long-term evolution into large-scale units that from a medieval perspective would be called empires.⁴ Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, linear evolutionism naturally privileged the study of ‘primary states’, that is, stateless societies that turned into states through different mechanisms and due to different causes, but always representing the first cases of statehood in areas where states did not previously exist. This is, of course, at odds with the fact that the predecessor of many early medieval polities was the Roman state, meaning they do not qualify as ‘primary states’. Indeed, primary states represent an absolute minority among the processes of state formation throughout history, while the majority of cases are difficult to assign to a single evolutionary track from pre-statehood to statehood.⁵

Accordingly, scholars gradually shifted the focus towards the differential developments that, in areas like the Near East, led to the creation of a world-system comprising a ‘spatial hierarchy of dependent social formations’ organised in centres and peripheries that ‘advanced the frontier of civilisation, interrupted by cycles of collapse and resistance’.⁶ In the late twentieth century, world-systems theory and centre-periphery approaches highlighted the importance of short- and long-distance interactions between non-state and state societies in the study of social and political change.⁷ As the focus shifted from linear to non-linear approaches to state formation, a richer anthropological and archaeological agenda emerged, which accommodated for stagnation, disruptions, interruptions, forks, and regressions on the road to statehood and beyond.

Among them, the issue of ‘collapse’ became a favourite theoretical motif in two steps. In the context of the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union, the late twentieth-century literature was most interested in collapse derived from structural economic, military and organisational mismatches.⁸ Then, around the turn of the millennium, rising concerns about climate change and global sustainability triggered an eco-determinist view with apocalyptic overtones that gained remarkable popularity, despite the theoretical and empirical weakness of its application to the demise of past polities.⁹ A natural development of scholarly reflections on collapse was the theorisation of the aftermath of collapse, through concepts such as ‘resilience’ and ‘regeneration’, as the realisation set in that collapse rarely leads to annihilation, but rather

⁴ Hence maybe the marginality of the Early Middle Ages in global approaches to empires; see S. E. Alcock, T. N. D. D’Altroy, K. D. Morrison and C. M. Sinopoli (eds), *Empires. Perspectives from archaeology and history*, Cambridge, 2001.

⁵ For an early attempt towards theorisation, see B. Price, ‘Secondary State Formation: An Exploratory Model’, R. Cohen and E. R. Service (eds), *Origins of the State: The Anthropology of Political Evolution*, Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Philadelphia, 1978, pp. 161–224.

⁶ The quotations are from K. Kristiansen, ‘Chiefdoms, states and systems of social evolution’, T. Earle (ed.), *Chiefdoms: Power, Economy and Ideology*, 2, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 16–43, at p. 41. See also the critical remarks in S. J. Shennan, ‘The history of social hierarchies’, *European Journal of Archaeology*, 6, 2003, pp. 91–97.

⁷ For a paramount example, P. S. Wells, *Farms, villages and cities. Commerce and urban origins in late prehistoric Europe*, Cornell, 1984.

⁸ J. A. Tainter, *The collapse of complex societies*, Cambridge, 1988 and N. Yoffee and G. L. Cowgill (eds), *The collapse of ancient states and civilizations*, Tucson - London, 1995 were probably the most influential among archaeologists, while P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict From 1500 to 2000*, New York, 1987 had considerable impact on the general public. See also the Special Issue on ‘The Rise and Fall of States and Empires’ in *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 10–13, 2004.

⁹ The flagship study was J. Diamond, *Collapse: How societies choose to fail or succeed*, New York, 2005. See the criticism in P. A. McAnany and N. Yoffee (eds), *Questioning Collapse. Human Resilience, Ecological Vulnerability, and the Aftermath of Empire*, Cambridge, 2009, esp. pp. 1–17.

to different versions of recovery, and eventually to the reconstruction of complexity under alternative terms and conditions.¹⁰

These recent developments are better suited to the early Middle Ages. Of particular importance is the progressive replacement of unilinear evolutionism in favour of more complex views of interconnected socio-political change — including collapse and regeneration — within networks of polities having different degrees of complexity. The new understanding that most cases of state formation are in fact instances of ‘secondary state formation’ is also of obvious interest to medievalists. However, the impact of modern anthropological and archaeological theories on the study of early medieval state formation is limited and uneven. They are most often applied to European regions without a Roman past, such as Central Europe, Ireland, and especially Scandinavia, where archaeology takes the lead and the direct transition from Late Prehistory into the Middle Ages welcomes evolutionary and post-evolutionary views. However, such theories are similarly detectable in British archaeology as well.

In trying to make sense of how the northern stateless societies made their way to statehood, notions of bottom-up agency play a major role, especially through the operation of local or micro-regional assemblies that are seen to constitute the first steps in the construction of a political body.¹¹ The existence of small-scale political communities with a notion of representative rather than coercive rulership is seen as a crucial factor for the transition toward increasingly complex, larger-scale political systems.¹² Scale growth seems to have played a key part in the evolution from representational politics into statehood. Within larger territorial aggregates, it is possible for central powers to break free from too much dependence on local communities and override local constraints, gradually limiting the role of the lesser assemblies — and communities — to strictly local affairs. The best illustration of this dialogue between small basic political units and larger-scale constructs may be the ‘classical’ three-tiered view of the early Irish polities.¹³ The fundamental unit, the *túath*, was a small community based on an ‘organic’ relationship of proximity between the society and a petty king who in anthropological terms was essentially a ‘chieftain’.¹⁴ Above the *túath* level, the political articulation consisted

¹⁰ K. D. Morrison, ‘All is not lost when the center does not hold’, *Science and Archaeology*, 315, 2007, pp. 42–43; G. M. Schwartz and J. J. Nichols (eds), *After collapse. The regeneration of complex societies*, Tucson, 2006.

¹¹ See A. Pantos and S. Semple (eds), *Assembly places and practices in Medieval Europe*, Dublin, 2004; F. Iversen, ‘Concilium and Pagus: Revisiting the Early Germanic Thing System of Northern Europe’, *Journal of the North Atlantic (Special Volume)*, 5, 2013, pp. 5–17; F. Iversen, ‘Community and Society. The Thing at the Edge of Europe’, *Journal of the North Atlantic*, 8, 2015, pp. 5–21. A wider European discussion is to be found in C. Wickham, ‘Consensus and Assemblies in the Romano-Germanic Kingdoms: A Comparative Approach’, V. Epp and C. H. F. Meyer (eds), *Recht und Konsens im Frühen Mittelalter*, Ostfildern, 2017, pp. 389–426. On the role of political assemblies in early medieval polities see T. Reuter, ‘Assembly politics in Western Europe from the Eighth Century to the Twelfth’, P. Linehan and J. L. Nelson (eds), *The Medieval World*, London, 2001, pp. 432–50 and P. S. Barnwell and M. Mostert (eds), *Political assemblies in the earlier Middle Ages*, Studies in the early Middle Ages, 7, Turnhout, 2003.

¹² The similarities with the anthropological concepts of ‘chieftain’ or ‘big man’ are obvious. See D. Quigley, ‘Introduction: The Character of Kingship’, D. Quigley (ed.), *The Character of Kingship*, Oxford - New York, 2005, pp. 1–23.

¹³ The highly idealistic traditional model of early Irish kingship is largely derived from the discourse of legal texts. The key references are D. Binchy, ‘Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship’, Oxford, 1970 and F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, London, 1973. Subsequent research has highlighted the differences between that notional model and the actual workings of power relationships. See, among others, D. Ó Corráin, ‘Kingship and the Royal Dynasties (Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland)’, R. F. Foster (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, Oxford 1989, pp. 25–31; D. B. Gibson, *From chieftdom to state in early Ireland*, Cambridge, 2012 and C. Doherty, ‘The evolution of kingship and government in early medieval Ireland’, H. Oudart, J.-M. Picard and J. Quaghebeur (eds), *Le prince, son peuple et le bien commun: De l’antiquité tardive à la fin du Moyen Âge*, Rennes, 2013, pp. 397–410.

¹⁴ For more details, see T. M. Charles-Edwards, ‘A contract between king and people in early medieval Ireland: Críth Gablach on Kingship’, *Peritia*, 8, 1994, pp. 107–19.

of overkings — ideally in two levels — who established their power over the petty *túath* kings through links of kinship and clientele. In this scheme the *túath* was both the most stable level, and also the one in which the king's domination was least coercive, as it depended closely upon the community he embodied. By contrast, at the higher levels, power relations depended upon the pyramidal networks that higher kings were able to develop and maintain with their sub-kings and their retinues of military aristocrats. Such networks were larger and more powerful, in military terms, than any of the small *tuatha*, but also much more volatile, because — in the absence of institutionalisation at the top level — they depended on the contingencies of warfare, kinship, marriage and political developments of all sorts, and this kind of relationships can easily fall apart within a person's lifetime.¹⁵

In a model like this, in which complexity grows from the bottom up through the aggregation of smaller blocks, the institutionalisation of the upper levels entails a separation between the higher political spheres and the local communities, as in the case of Norway, where the local *things* tended to become gradually disconnected from upper-tier politics and limited to local affairs.¹⁶ In Anglo-Saxon England, the growth of the great kingships of the eighth and ninth centuries, like Mercia or Wessex, was brought about by erasing many smaller pre-existing polities and replacing them with a different, top-down driven organisation: the hundredal network.¹⁷

By contrast to Northern Europe, in the areas that were once part of the Roman Empire, archaeological theory has made much less of an impact. This is not just because of the different historical trajectories of the two areas. Crucially, by the time archaeology entered the scene of medieval studies, the debate on post-Roman state formation had largely run its course among historians. Their views were therefore mostly based on written sources and determined by legal conceptions about social structuring and the state that were established independently from any archaeological evidence. The twentieth-century interwar period may perhaps be taken as the crux of the debate for most of the following decades. During those years, and largely as a reaction against the highly idealistic conceptions favoured by the German 'Verfassungsgeschichte', early and high medieval political structures were reformulated by emphasising the role of ties of personal dependence: royal power relied upon the king's personal estates and the networks of fidelity he could control.¹⁸ Personal ties between kings and aristocrats became the main factor to shape the stateless polities that succeeded the Roman Empire — the so-called 'Germanic' or 'Barbarian' kingdoms. This became a widespread paradigm, although often hybridised with many elements of old constitutional history, which was never completely abandoned.¹⁹ Seen from an archaeological/anthropological perspective, a notion of political power based upon person-to-person patronage links would seem easy to reconcile with the chieftom phase of evolutionary anthropology mentioned above, and could be handily applied, for example, to the upper layers of Irish political construction. However,

¹⁵ See D. Ó Corráin, 'Prehistoric'; N. B. Aitchison, 'Kingship, Society, and Sacrality: Rank, Power, and Ideology in Early Medieval Ireland', *Traditio*, 49, 2016, pp. 45–75.

¹⁶ F. Iversen, 'Community and Society'; F. Iversen, 'Concilium and Pagus'.

¹⁷ The literature is vast. See for reference S. R. Bassett (ed.), *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, Leicester, 1989; B. Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, London, 1990; M. P. Brown and C. A. Farr (eds), *Mercia: An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe*, Continuum, London, 2001. On the development of the hundredal system, compare the classical works by H. R. Loyn, 'The hundred in England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries', and H. Hearder and H. R. Loyn (eds), *British Government and Administration Studies presented to S. B. Chrimes*, Cardiff 1974, pp. 1–15, with recent developments in J. Baker, S. Brookes and A. Reynolds (eds), *Landscapes of Governance: legal geographies and political order in Anglo-Saxon England, AD 400–1066*, forthcoming.

¹⁸ S. Reynolds, 'The historiography of the medieval state', M. Bentley (ed.), *Companion to Historiography*, London, 1997, pp. 109–38.

¹⁹ See the sharp remarks in M. Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages. The Middle Rhine Valley, 400–1000*, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 4–12.

the primary target of such theories was instead the large-scale, far more complex Merovingian and Carolingian kingdoms, and especially the latter. To what extent Carolingian Francia was a successor to Rome, what its real character was, or how it ended and what kind of society replaced it, became crucial questions that could easily be exported to other medieval contexts — most notably Anglo-Saxon England — but were never given definitive answers. As Susan Reynolds put it, ‘Historians of medieval Europe may in some ways have found their view of the state impeded by all the work that has been done’, and the race seems to go on and on.²⁰

Clearly, a model focused on networks of personal dependence cannot, on its own, account for the political articulation of the Frankish kingdoms. They simply contained too many elements of statehood, even though personal links did play a significant role (as was also the case in Rome). This may explain how in the mid-twentieth century, during the heyday of French influence over medieval studies and the pushback against the ‘Germanic kingships’ models, an alternative narrative was developed in Francophone scholarship arguing that Late Antique statehood never fully faded out in the Frankish realm. The fundamental components of state governance survived — reinterpreted within a Christian framework — until the year 1000, at which point the so-called ‘feudal revolution’ or ‘feudal mutation’ swiftly led into the feudal dismantling of state structures. This model flourished and became dominant in the post-World War II period thanks to historians such as Duby, Bonnassie, Poly or Bournazel. One particular strand — the so-called ‘fiscalist’ school — took on aspects of Ganshof’s neo-constitutionalism to produce a vision of the post-Roman Frankish state as essentially identical to Rome.²¹

The notion of a continuation of ‘public power’ after Rome and until the crisis of the Carolingian state, followed by a ‘feudal revolution’, was a hugely influential model that still colours the way we think about most regions inside or on the periphery of the Carolingian core, and tended to set the standards by which all other neighbouring statehoods were gauged.

Alternative visions emerged as the end of the century approached, giving way to a well-known international debate on the topic.²² Scholars are now, in general, more open to recognising early medieval forms of statehood in Carolingia and elsewhere, although the focus seems to be firmly set upon the higher political elites and the legal and religious foundations of power and authority. Bottom-up approaches are preferentially explored in the turn-of-century historiography through ideological notions such as ‘ethnicity’ and ‘identity’, to the detriment of more structural and social analyses.²³ In 2005 Chris Wickham called on scholars to break

²⁰ S. Reynolds, ‘The historiography of the medieval state’, p. 109. Compare R. Davies, ‘The medieval state: the tyranny of a concept’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 16, 2003, pp. 280–300 and S. Reynolds, ‘There were states in medieval Europe: A response to Rees Davies’, *ibid.*, pp. 550–58.

²¹ F.-L. Ganshof, *Qu’est-ce que la féodalité*, Office de publicité, Bruxelles, 1944. The model is pervasive, even among authors with very different historiographical orientations. Compare G. Duby, *Guerriers et paysans, VII-XI^e siècle; premier essor de l’économie européenne*, Paris, 1973; P. Bonnassie, *La Catalogne du milieu du X^e à la fin du XI^e siècle: croissance et mutations d’une société*, Toulouse, 1976 or G. Bois, *La mutation de l’an mil. Lournand, village mâconnais de l’Antiquité au féodalisme*, Paris, 1989. From that trunk further debates branched out, such as the one on the continuation of Roman taxation advocated by J. Durliat, *Les finances publiques. De Diocétien aux Carolingiens (284–888)*, Thorbecke, 1990 (on which see C. Wickham, ‘La chute de Rome n’aura pas lieu’, *Le Moyen Age*, 99, 1, 1993, pp. 107–26), the debate on ‘incastellamento’ initiated by P. Toubert, *Les structures du Latium médiéval. Le Latium méridional et la Sabine du IX^e siècle à la fin du XII^e siècle*, Rome, 1973, or the ‘feudal revolution’ or ‘feudal mutation’, a favourite of the turn of the twenty-first century that prompted much literature from opposing historiographical fields (see C. West, *Reframing the Feudal Revolution: Political and Social Transformation Between Marne and Moselle, c. 800-c. 1100*, Cambridge, 2013).

²² See especially S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300*, Oxford, 1984.

²³ See J. L. Nelson, ‘Kingship and Royal Government’, R. McKitterick (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, 2 (c. 700–c. 900), Cambridge, 1994, pp. 343–430; J. Nelson, ‘Rulers and Government’, T. Reuter (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History III c. 900–c. 1024*, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 95–129; P. Fouracre, ‘Conflict, Power and Legitimation in Francia in the Late Seventh and Eighth Centuries’, I. Alfonso Anton, H. Kennedy and J. Escalona (eds), *Building Legitimacy. Political Discourses and Forms of Legitimation in Medieval Societies*, Leiden/Boston, 2004, pp. 3–26. On ecclesiastical involvement in the workings of the state, see especially M. De

free from the continuity/discontinuity straightjacket by focusing upon the enormous regional differences within the Roman Empire and the many possible ways of ‘ceasing to be Roman’.²⁴ Regarding states, he distinguished three main variants in the fragmentation of the Roman ‘strong state’: a) the still ‘strong’ Byzantine state, where taxation fuelled complex bureaucratic and military machineries; b) the ‘weak’ post-Roman Barbarian kingdoms, which preserved formal governance and some bureaucracy, but where taxation gradually faded out as the funding for the army shifted from state payments to land assignments; and c) the non-state polities that emerged especially in the non-Roman parts of Europe, or wherever Roman structures were fundamentally destroyed, as in Britain²⁵. Wickham’s proposal focuses upon the resources that states were able to control and the capabilities they developed with these resources. In doing so, he departs significantly from mainstream historical arguments on medieval state formation, which tend to revolve around the emergence of political identities²⁶ and the institutionalisation of governance, instead broadening his scope to include crucial functions such as warfare, justice and lawmaking, or coinage and taxation, or even Weber-inspired sociological approaches based on state control of violence/force.²⁷

Wickham’s rejection of the continuity/discontinuity dilemma as a false problem could be easily extended to the theoretical approaches to state formation that I have briefly discussed above. In a wider context of secondary state formation and close interconnections between areas, none of these models can fully account for the political developments in any region of early medieval Europe. Rather, certain elements of each of them can be detected in all situations, whether due to internal factors or external influence. Interestingly, the role of inequality and domination in state building tends to be neglected from most points of view.²⁸

Jong, ‘The state of the church: *ecclesia* and early medieval state formation’, W. Pohl and V. Wieser (eds), *Der Frühmittelalterliche Staat: Europäische Perspektiven*, Wien, Institut für Mittelalterforschung der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien, 2009, pp. 241–54. See more generally the contributions to S. Airlie, W. Pohl and H. Reimitz (eds), *Staat im Frühen Mittelalter*, Forschungen Zur Geschichte Des Mittelalters, 11, Wien, 2006; W. Pohl and V. Wieser (eds), *Der frühmittelalterliche Staat - Europäische Perspektiven*, Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters, 17, Wien 2009.

²⁴ C. Wickham, *Framing the early middle ages. Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800*, Oxford, 2005, pp. 3–14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁶ The study of collective identities linked to and legitimating the emergent early medieval polities (whether state or non-state) grew immensely in the late twentieth century, especially thanks to Walter Pohl’s notion of ‘ethnogenesis’ and Patrick Geary’s work on the roots of European nations, with a host of further studies. See, among many other titles, W. Pohl (ed.), *Kingdoms of the Empire: The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity*, The Transformation of the Roman World 1, Leiden-New York-Köln, 1997; W. Pohl and H. Reimitz (eds), *Strategies of Distinction. The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800*, The Transformation of the Roman World, 2, Leiden-New York-Köln, 1998; S. Forde, L. Johnson and A. V. Murray (eds), *Concepts of national identity in the Middle Ages*, Leeds, 1995; P. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*, Princeton, NJ, 2003; I. H. Garipzanov, P. Geary and P. Urbanczyk (eds), *Franks, Northmen and Slavs. Identities and state formation in early medieval Europe*, *Cursor Mundi*, 5, Turnhout, 2008; W. Pohl, C. Gantner and R. Payne (eds), *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300–1100*, Farnham, 2012.

²⁷ S. Airlie, W. Pohl and H. Reimitz (eds), *Staat im Frühen Mittelalter*; W. Pohl and V. Wieser (eds), *Der frühmittelalterliche Staat*. On state control of force see quintessentially S. Reynolds, ‘The historiography of the medieval state’.

²⁸ Though hardly the only one, R. Faith is a notable exception: R. Faith, *The English Peasantry and the Growth of Lordship*, Leicester, 1997; and recently R. Faith, ‘Forms of Dominance and the Early Medieval Landscape’, *Medieval Settlement Research*, 23, 2008, pp. 9–13. See also M. Innes, ‘Property, politics and the problem of the Carolingian state’, W. Pohl and V. Wieser (eds), *Der Frühmittelalterliche Staat: Europäische Perspektiven*, Wien, 2009, pp. 299–313.

State Formation in North-West Iberia

The second part of this paper is an exploratory approach to early medieval state formation in the north-western quadrant of the Iberian Peninsula (hereinafter NW Iberia, for the sake of brevity). In NW Iberia there was no primary state formation. All the polities involved represent secondary developments through one or more of four basic vectors:²⁹

- a. 'Direct inheritance', that is, states that developed from an earlier form of state, as is the case of the post-Roman Barbarian kingdoms.
- b. 'Reintroduction' of elements of statehood from outside into areas where state structures had collapsed. This is an important factor in the Christianisation of the north, where the spread of the Church brought with it crucial notions of statehood.³⁰
- c. 'Satellitisation' of territories on the periphery of states that do not operate directly upon them, but influence their internal political dynamics.
- d. 'Incorporation' of non-state societies into states.

a. Direct Inheritance

Early medieval state formation in NW Iberia must be considered within the framework of the dismantling first of the Roman state in the fifth century, and then of its Visigothic successor in the eighth. The region had always been peripheral and subjected to 'colonial' dynamics in the Roman period. Its elites never rose to the highest senatorial echelons of imperial society, as those from *Baetica* sometimes did. The richest layer of Late Roman *villae* in the Duero Plateau points instead to external magnates who owned luxury estates there. The urban network was highly dependent upon state agency and the town-countryside relationship was vulnerable.³¹ When in the early fifth century the westernmost part of the Iberian north fell into the hands of the Sueves the region's large-scale economic networks and territorial control were severely disrupted.³² In the fifth and sixth centuries a long-distance trade route survived, still linking the Mediterranean with high-status sites in south-west Britain and Ireland, arguably with Bordeaux as its main middle point. Recent archaeological research has unveiled traces of this maritime circuit at certain sites in Galicia like Vigo,³³ and similar cases could be made for Portugal and the Cantabrian coast as well, although the evidence for these latter areas is so far less

²⁹ These categories are presented and thoroughly discussed in a collaborative work with Orri Vésteinsson and Stuart Brookes for a forthcoming book: J. Escalona, O. Vésteinsson and S. Brookes, 'Politics, Neighbourhoods and things in between', J. Escalona, O. Vésteinsson and S. Brookes (eds), *Polity and Neighbourhood in Early Medieval Europe*, Turnhout, forthcoming. They are as much my contribution as that of my two co-editors.

³⁰ S. Bagge, 'Christianization and State Formation in Early Medieval Norway', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 30–32, 2005, pp. 107–34.

³¹ See a more developed argument in J. Escalona, 'Patrones de fragmentación territorial: el fin del mundo romano en la Meseta del Duero', U. Espinosa and S. Castellanos García (eds), *Comunidades locales y dinámicas de poder en el norte de la Península Ibérica durante la Antigüedad Tardía*, Logroño, 2006, pp. 165–200.

³² See P. C. Díaz Martínez, *El reino suevo (411–585)*, Madrid, 2011, esp. pp. 55–68.

³³ A. Fernández, *El comercio tardoantiguo (ss. IV–VII) en el Noroeste peninsular a través del registro cerámico de la ría de Vigo*, Oxford, 2014, (Roman and Late Antique Mediterranean Pottery, 5).

compelling.³⁴ Trade along this route was active throughout the Suevic period. Nevertheless, just how far inland its effects permeated, or whether it was a strictly coastal phenomenon, are questions that remain unanswered.

Meanwhile, in the Duero Plateau the high-status Roman *villae* vanished at a quick pace³⁵ as the entire settlement pattern underwent crucial changes, with hilltop sites emerging on the peripheries of waning over-sized municipal territories, a process that seems to mark the rise of a different kind of regional rural elites, as suggested by Iñaki Martín Viso.³⁶ Other medium- and low-status rural settlements suffered a similar contraction that ultimately led to the first phase in the creation of the village-type peasant settlements that by 900AD were dominant in the regional landscape. The recognition of these rural sites represents perhaps the most important advance in Iberian medieval archaeology over the last two decades.³⁷

Between the fifth-century Roman collapse and the reconstruction of an Iberia-wide state by the Visigothic monarchy in the early sixth century, the peninsula underwent decades of instability. Some regions, like *Baetica*, had well-developed cities and a strong town-countryside articulation, which allowed them to remain firmly in the hands of the regional aristocracies and navigate the period so as to maintain the basic elements of statehood.³⁸ This was not the case

³⁴ J. M. Iglesias, 'Establecimientos portuarios en el sector central del mar Cantábrico', M. Urteaga and M. J. Noain (eds), *Mar exterior: el Occidente atlántico en época romana*, Roma - Irún - San Sebastián, 2006, pp. 109–22; J. A. Quirós Castillo, A. Azkarate Garai-Olaun, R. Bohigas Roldán, I. García Camino, A. L. Palomino Lázaro and J. M. Tejado Sebastián, 'Arqueología de la Alta Edad Media en el Cantábrico Oriental', A. Llanos (ed.), *Medio siglo de arqueología en el Cantábrico Oriental y su entorno*, Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2009, pp. 449–500.

³⁵ A. Chavarría Arnau, 'Interpreting the Transformation of Late Roman Villas: The case of Hispania', N. Christie (ed.), *Landscapes of Change. Rural evolutions in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Aldershot, 2004, pp. 67–102. See also T. Lewit, '“Vanishing villas”: what happened to élite rural habitation in the West in the 5th-6th c?', *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 16, 2003, pp. 260–74.

³⁶ I. Martín Viso, 'Central places and the territorial organization of communities: the occupation of hilltop sites in early medieval northern Castile', W. Davies, G. Halsall and A. Reynolds (eds), *People and Space in the Middle Ages (300–1300)*, Turnhout, 2006, pp. 187–208; I. Martín Viso, 'La sociedad rural en el suroeste de la meseta del Duero (siglos VI–VII)', G. Del Ser Quijano (ed.), *Espacios de poder y formas sociales en la edad Media: estudios dedicados a Ángel Barrios*, Salamanca, 2007, pp. 171–88; I. Martín Viso, 'Tremisses y potentes en el nordeste de Lusitania (siglos VI–VII)', *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez. Nouvelle série*, 38–31, 2008, pp. 175–200; A. Vigil-Escalera Guirado and C. Tejerizo García, 'Asentamientos fortificados altomedievales en la meseta. Algunas distorsiones historiográficas', R. Catalán Ramos, P. Fuentes and J. C. Sastre (eds), *Las fortificaciones en la tardoantigüedad: Élite y articulación del territorio (siglos V–VIII d. C.)*, Madrid, 2014, pp. 229–46; C. Tejerizo García and J. Canosa-Betés, 'Power, control and social agency in post-Roman northern Iberia: An archaeological analysis of hillfort occupations', *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*, 10–13, 2018, pp. 295–323.

³⁷ J. A. Quirós Castillo and A. Vigil-Escalera Guirado, 'Networks of peasant villages between Toledo and Velegia Alabense, northwestern Spain (V–Xth centuries)', *Archeologia Medievale*, 33, 2006, pp. 79–128; A. Vigil-Escalera Guirado and J. A. Quirós Castillo, 'Early medieval rural societies in North-Western Spain: Archaeological reflections of fragmentation and convergence', J. Escalona and A. Reynolds (eds), *Scale and Scale Change in the Early Middle Ages: exploring landscape, local society and the world beyond*, Turnhout, 2011, pp. 33–60; A. Vigil-Escalera Guirado, *Los primeros paisajes altomedievales en el interior de Hispania. Registros campesinos del siglo quinto d.C.*, Bilbao, 2015; C. Tejerizo García, *Arqueología de las sociedades campesinas en la cuenca del Duero durante la Primera Alta Edad Media*, Bilbao, 2017.

³⁸ Recent archaeological research in Córdoba has revealed the creation of a dense, dynamic network of high-status villas in the Emirate and Caliphate periods that was strongly dependent upon a former network of peri-urban Roman *villae* and their associated irrigation infrastructures. More than straightforward continuity in settlement patterns, this seems to indicate a relatively healthy town-to-countryside relationship in the post-Roman period, which may be a sounder mark of operating regional elites and governance. See J. F. Murillo, A. León Muñoz, E. Castro, M. T. Casal, R. Ortiz and J. González, 'La transición de la civitas clásica cristianizada a la madina islámica a través de las transformaciones operadas en las áreas suburbanas', D. Vaquerizo Gil and J. F. Murillo (eds), *El Anfiteatro Romano de Córdoba y su Entorno Urbano. Análisis Arqueológico (ss. I–XIII d. C.)*, Córdoba, 2010, pp. 530–47; J. F. Murillo Redondo, 'Grandes Residencias Suburbanas en la Córdoba Omeya. Estado de la Cuestión', *Al-Mulk*, 12, 2014, pp. 85–108.

of NW Iberia, where the small Suevic kingdom stayed independent in the far west until the 580s, while the lands east of it became a sort of marginal cul-de-sac which, until well into the sixth century, knew no effective state agency other than sporadic military campaigns launched from the Roman-controlled *Tarraconensis* or, later, from the Visigothic kingdom of Toulouse. This can only have accentuated the decline of the towns, bringing about the severe disruption of the territorial patterns in the region. The radical changes that show up in the episcopal network and the ecclesiastical divisions until the mid-sixth century are an additional expression of the region's overall disarticulation.³⁹

This process of fragmentation placed serious limitations on the reintroduction of state power in the sixth century, including the annexation of the Suevic territory in the 580s. The regional elites that the Visigothic state had to deal with were very different from the contemporary aristocracies of south and east Iberia or the *Narbonensis*, and they seem to have maintained an unstable relationship with central power that became increasingly rarefied as state taxation retreated.⁴⁰ The Visigothic state — a case of Wickham's post-Roman 'weak states' — could not reverse the region's situation. If anything, it arguably slowed down a process that resumed at high speed in the eighth century, after the Arab conquerors brought most of the Visigothic kingdom under the control of the Umayyad Caliphate of Damascus, but failed to establish similarly permanent bases in the north-west, a fact that became clear from the mid-eighth century onwards.⁴¹

The situation of NW Iberia between the mid-eighth and the mid-ninth century is reminiscent of the fifth-century statelessness discussed above. The region became a disarticulated periphery on the borders of the large-scale Emirate of Al-Āndalus. From the 720s on, the emergence of a small polity in the central Asturian mountains and its later expansion is an essential component of the standard narratives of Spanish history centred upon the notion of Reconquista that were dominant in the mid-twentieth century and, in many respects, still enjoy much currency today.⁴² The Asturian expansion proceeded southwards in successive bands until the late eleventh century, when it came to dominate the entire Duero Plateau. However, the earlier phases of the Asturian kingdom are ill-understood, among other reasons because of the wholesale revision of the Asturian past that was effected during the reign of Alfonso III (866–910). This period marks the real take-off of the kingdom, and it finds its best expression in the group of texts commonly known as the Asturian chronicles.⁴³ Precisely because it is only at this relatively late date that the first articulate narratives were produced, and because the number of preserved charters from before the 860s is almost negligible, historians have tended to overstress the social disruption across NW Iberia after 711. Starting in the 1920s, Sánchez-Albornoz advocated the theory that the Duero Plateau had essentially been depopulated in the eighth century, and was not repopulated until efforts by the Asturian kings starting with Ordoño I

³⁹ A. Barbero de Aguilera, 'Las divisiones eclesiásticas y las relaciones entre la Iglesia y el Estado en la España de los siglos VI y VII', M. J. Hidalgo de la Vega (ed.), *Homenaje a Marcelo Vigil Pascual*, Salamanca, 1989, pp. 169–90; C. Martín, 'Las cartas de Montano y la autonomía episcopal de la Hispania septentrional en el siglo VI', *Hispania Antiqua*, 22, 1998, pp. 403–26.

⁴⁰ See I. Martín Viso, 'Tributación y escenarios locales en el centro de la Península Ibérica: algunas hipótesis a partir del análisis de las pizarras 'visigodas'', *Antiquité Tardive*, 14, 2006, pp. 263–90 and I. Martín Viso, 'Tremisses y potentes'. On the kingdom's higher aristocratic levels and their role in the construction of the Visigothic monarchy, see S. Castellanos, *Los godos y la cruz. Recaredo y la unidad de Spania*, Madrid, 2007.

⁴¹ E. Manzano Moreno, *Conquistadores, Emires y Califas: Los Omeyas y la formación de Al-Andalus*, Barcelona, 2006, esp. pp. 34–120; A. García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica de la Península Ibérica y la tergiversación del pasado*, Madrid, 2013, pp. 384–439.

⁴² See the criticism in J. Escalona and I. Martín Viso, 'The Life and Death of an Historiographical Folly: The Early Medieval Depopulation and Repopulation of the Duero Basin', S. Barton and R. Portass (eds), *Beyond the Reconquest*, forthcoming.

⁴³ J. Gil Fernández, J. L. Moralejo and J. I. Ruiz de la Peña (eds), *Crónicas Asturianas: crónica de Alfonso III (Rotense y 'A Sebastián'), Crónica Albeldense (y 'Profética')*, Oviedo, 1985.

(850–866).⁴⁴ It was not until the late 1970s that this theory was strongly refuted by Barbero and Vigil. However, the alternative they offered was an overly primitivist model by which all of NW Iberia would have been dominated by tribal social structures of pre-Roman origin that would have survived under the Roman and Visigothic dominations and, in the absence of any superior state, would have become widespread in the region until the emergence of feudalism.⁴⁵ Neither of these views is accepted by most scholars today. Perhaps as a reaction, in the last two decades there has been a trend to consider that the Cantabrian north was as ‘Roman’ as any other part of Roman Hispania or, later, as ‘Visigothic’ as the rest of the kingdom. However, disregarding the extreme regional diversity within both states is unfortunately not very helpful.

We can gain a more nuanced insight by considering that the strong Roman state could very well have had enough capillarity to permeate local settings and, thus, some aspects of governance and social structuring, which at first sight seem to depend on continuing state enforcement, could in fact have become embedded in the local societies and outlived the Roman or Visigothic states themselves. In recent years Wendy Davies has shown that the charters from NW Iberia contain traces of a legal culture of Late Antique pedigree that lived on locally but was gradually superseded in the tenth century by more recent uses fuelled by the Leonese kingship and the great monasteries. This included not only notions of ‘public’ justice in dispute settlement, but also significant elements of a documentary culture and charter-making practices that were strongly rooted in local secular contexts.⁴⁶ Graham Barrett’s recent study on literacy points in a similar direction regarding the continuation of written culture.⁴⁷ All this might indicate ‘residual statehood’, directly inherited from Late Antiquity, and expressed in a range of state-like ways of doing things — dispute settlement, the recording of legal affairs, and notions of law, rightfulness and authority — that went on without an operating state, simply as ‘the way things should be done’. Notions of public authority and the common good could very well form part of this ‘residual statehood’, and indeed could have favoured the reconstruction of state governance under the Leonese kings starting in the mid-ninth century, although they may also have run up against other elements, like the spread of aristocratic and ecclesiastical lordly powers.⁴⁸ This can be seen as an example of the resilience of disrupted complex societies.⁴⁹

b. Reintroduction

In parallel to the partial survival of Late Antique statehood, we may interpret as ‘re-introduction from outside’ the much undervalued role played by the Christian clerics from Al-Āndalus who

⁴⁴ C. Sánchez-Albornoz, *Despoblación y Repoblación en el Valle del Duero*, Buenos Aires, 1966; on the success and decline of this theory see J. Escalona and I. Martín Viso, ‘The Life and Death’.

⁴⁵ A. Barbero de Aguilera and M. Vigil Pascual, *La formación del feudalismo en la Península Ibérica*, Barcelona, 1978.

⁴⁶ W. Davies, *Acts of giving. Individual, community and Church in tenth-century Christian Spain*, Oxford, 2007; W. Davies, *Windows on Justice in Northern Iberia, 800–1000*, Abingdon, 2016; W. Davies, ‘Local Priests and the Writing of Charters in Northern Iberia in the Tenth Century’, J. Escalona and H. Sirantoine (eds), *Chartes et cartulaires comme instruments de pouvoir. Espagne et Occident chrétien (VIII^e–XII^e siècles)*, Toulouse, 2013, pp. 29–43; W. Davies, ‘Summary Justice and Seigneurial Justice in Northern Iberia on the Eve of the Millennium’, *The Haskins Society Journal*, 22, 2010, pp. 43–58.

⁴⁷ G. Barrett, *The Written and the World in Early Medieval Iberia*, unpublished doctoral thesis defended at the University of Oxford, 2015. I am most grateful to Dr Barrett for letting me use a copy of his unpublished work.

⁴⁸ Á. Carvajal Castro, *Bajo la máscara del Regnum: la monarquía asturleonense en León (854–1037)*, Madrid, 2017, pp. 165–206.

⁴⁹ See K. D. Morrison, ‘All is not lost when the center does not hold’ and, specifically for NW Iberia, I. Martín Viso, ‘Colapso político y sociedades locales: el Noroeste de la península ibérica (siglos VIII–IX)’, *Reti Medievali Rivista*, 17–12, 2016, pp. 335–69.

in the late ninth century relocated in the north and became the political aides of Asturian king Alfonso III. The newly arrived ecclesiastical elites brought with them a powerful political discourse that dramatically modified and enhanced the self-representation of the monarchy as the natural successor of the Visigothic state. This meant the deployment of a new ideological and legal weaponry built upon material from the Visigothic kingdom (the laws, a complex ecclesiastical organisation, notions of ideology and royal authority), which combined with the remnants of statehood that were already present in the north to create a powerful political programme aimed at buttressing Alfonso III's position in the Iberian north.⁵⁰

c. Satellitisation

The notion of 'satellitisation' can also be applied to NW Iberia, in at least two different directions. On the one hand, being the neighbour of the Emirate entailed steady contact with a powerful state that had a complex economy and an intellectual and artistic culture which necessarily had an impact beyond its borders. One aspect of this influence might be the adoption of an accounting system for valuations and transactions moulded upon Andalusí coinage. This seems to have expanded first in the plateau and more slowly in the further reaches like Galicia and Liébana, where the Visigothic system based on the gold *solidus* remained dominant for accounting until the early tenth century.⁵¹ Archaeologists are also increasingly aware of the fact that the material culture of NW Iberia, especially in the Duero Basin, includes a range of objects — mainly pottery — that can be interpreted as either imports from Al-Āndalus or local production following southern models.⁵² The widespread occurrence of Arab personal names (often extending beyond given names to encompass the full Arabic onomastic system) within an utterly Christian context also suggests that, at least in the centre and south of the plateau, cultural contacts had resulted in some degree of bilingualism.⁵³ On the other hand, the Asturian kingship seems to have undergone a crucial phase of growth in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, when establishing links with the Carolingian rulers became an important factor in gaining legitimacy and strengthening royal power, especially under Alfonso II (783 and 791–842) and up to the end of the reign of Louis the Pious (814–840).⁵⁴

⁵⁰ J. Escalona, 'Family Memories. Inventing Alfonso I of Asturias', I. Alfonso, H. Kennedy and J. Escalona (eds), *Building legitimacy. Political discourses and forms of legitimation in medieval societies*, Leiden / Boston, 2004, pp. 223–62.

⁵¹ E. Manzano and A. Canto, 'The value of wealth: coins and coinage in Iberian early medieval documents (9th–11th centuries)', R. Portass and S. Barton (eds), *Beyond Reconquista*, Leiden, 2019 (forthcoming).

⁵² A. Gutiérrez González and F. Miguel Hernández, 'La cerámica altomedieval en León: producciones locales y andalusíes de Puerta Obispo', J. Zozaya, M. Retuerce Velasco, M. Á. Hervás and A. De Juan (eds), *Actas del VIII Congreso Internacional de Cerámica Medieval*, 1, Ciudad Real-Almagro, 2009 pp. 443–62; A. Gutiérrez González and F. Miguel Hernández, 'Cerámica altomedieval en León y su entorno', A. Vigil-Escalera Guirado and J. A. Quirós Castillo (eds), *La cerámica de la Alta Edad Media en el cuadrante noroeste de la Península Ibérica (siglos V–X): sistemas de producción, mecanismos de distribución y patrones de consumo*, Bilbao, 2016, pp. 139–72.

⁵³ See the pioneering work by V. Aguilar Sebastián and F. Rodríguez Mediano, 'Antroponimia de origen árabe en la documentación leonesa (siglos VIII–XIII)', *El Reino de León en la Alta Edad Media*, 6, 1994, pp. 497–633.

⁵⁴ J. Escalona, 'Family Memories', esp. at pp. 226–32.

d. Incorporation

In the Iberian NW, the reconstruction of statehood was largely a consequence of its ‘incorporation’ into the Asturian-Leonese kingdom. However, this was a much smaller and weaker form of state and, crucially, in its earlier phases, amounted to hardly more than a state in the making. The Asturian expansion happened in several stages and differed greatly from one area to another, not only because of regional diversity but also because the Asturian kingship itself changed radically throughout the process. By the time this expansion gained momentum with Alfonso III, it had completely reinvented itself with the indispensable help of clerical aides from Al-Āndalus, who brought with them the idea of a ‘Visigothic revival’.⁵⁵ Alfonso III was presented as the legitimate heir of the Visigothic monarchs, and the champion of all Iberian Christians. Such a political programme has traditionally been considered the point of departure of the so-called ‘Reconquista’, but at the time it could hardly have been considered anything more than wishful thinking. Alfonso III could not foster much hope of actually ridding Spain of the Muslims, but claiming to be the only legitimate ruler aspiring to do so worked well for strengthening the roots of royal power within his realm and in the eyes of other Christian rulers.

A crucial aspect of incorporation — in the Asturian case as in so many others — is two-way agency.⁵⁶ Recent work by Álvaro Carvajal has shown that beneath the apparently uniform blanket of Asturian-Leonese royal power, the areas where kings really held direct control were rather limited. The county of Castile on the eastern borders is an extreme case of this situation.⁵⁷ Most of the kingdom’s territory was connected to central power by means of two different kinds of interposed actors: either the high aristocracy, which was firmly linked to the monarchy, or lesser, less defined groups that held local control of specific areas. Carvajal’s work is particularly important in that he identifies some of the latter as the native elites of the Duero Plateau, who had to negotiate their incorporation into the emergent polity.⁵⁸ The Asturian-Leonese kingdom is thus reframed as a patchwork of different patterns of authority that became increasingly interwoven thanks not only to the development of royal governance, but also to the spread of great lordly, and especially monastic, domains.

Given the paucity of the resources that the ninth- and tenth-century kings could deploy, it is unlikely that they could have subjected the vast regions south of their original Asturian core without local involvement. The local and micro-regional elites of the Duero Basin might have played an important role in the incorporation into the Asturian realm, a process that has traditionally been seen only as a top-down imposition, and in which the importance of bottom-up agency is only beginning to emerge.⁵⁹ The notions of ‘satellitisation’ and ‘incorporation’ can also help theorise the situation of specific territories within the Asturian-Leonese kingdom, like Castile. Rather than just an administrative district, Castile was more of a satellite on the

⁵⁵ For a detailed analysis of the neo-Visigothic ideology, see T. Deswarte, *De la destruction à la restauration: l'idéologie du royaume d'Oviedo-León (VIII^e-XI^e siècles)*, Turnhout, 2003.

⁵⁶ J. Escalona, ‘The early Middle Ages: a scale-based approach’, J. Escalona and A. Reynolds (eds), *Scale and Scale Change in the Early Middle Ages: Exploring landscape, local society and the world beyond*, Turnhout, 2011, pp. 9–30, pp. 17–20.

⁵⁷ J. Escalona, ‘In the name of a distant king: Representing royal authority in the county of Castile, c. 900–1038’, *Early Medieval Europe*, 24–21, 2016, pp. 74–102.

⁵⁸ Á. Carvajal Castro, *Bajo la máscara del Regnum*, pp. 128–30.

⁵⁹ J. Escalona and F. Reyes Téllez, ‘Scale change on the border: The county of Castile in the tenth century’, J. Escalona and A. Reynolds (eds), *Scale and Scale Change in the Early Middle Ages: exploring landscape, local society and the world beyond*, Turnhout, 2011, pp. 153–83; J. Escalona, ‘Military stress, central power and local response in the county of Castile in the tenth century’, J. Baker, S. Brookes and A. Reynolds (eds), *Landscapes of Defence in Early Medieval Europe*, Turnhout, 2013, pp. 341–67.

kingdom's eastern fringes. The fact that since the 880s Castile underwent its own territorial expansion, as another independent polity, is a crucial, often overlooked indicator. Given the limited direct agency of the Asturian-Leonese kings inside Castile, and the great autonomy of its counts, I have suggested elsewhere that the Castilian elites conceivably found in their connection to the Asturian kingdom the fuel to join forces and expand their territory up to a scale at which, despite their limited seignorial resources, they could consolidate their social dominance.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, 'elite' is an eminently relational notion. Any elite must be defined in the terms of the society over which it enjoys superiority, and there is much ground for variation. In tenth-century NW Iberia there were local elites in the rural communities, and also in central places (whether 'urban', 'proto-urban' or otherwise),⁶¹ and there were different scales of supralocal elites up to the aristocracy in the royal entourage. The development of statehood might have been in the interest of many or all of those elites, albeit in different ways. The local elites of the Duero Basin that were incorporated — willingly or not — into the Asturian kingdom found themselves in a wholly new social landscape, with a huge social distance between the political core and the localities. There was much more room for social differentiation and personal promotion. Even if the local communities might have tended to resist the newly imposed power, their elites had a choice of strategies at their disposal. They could perhaps reinforce their distinction from ordinary community members (for example by emulating the aristocratic way of life: holding weaponry, having a horse, perhaps building a chapel or a tower); they could try to escape the community and join the lower ranks of the aristocracy; or, failing that, they could use their local leadership to become seignorial agents. All of these avenues are documented in the tenth-century charters from NW Iberia⁶².

The archaeological visibility of state formation in NW Iberia

To detect the archaeological traces of the state has long been a major challenge, and it remains so in many respects. Archaeologists naturally tend to focus upon the kinds of material culture that can be more readily linked to state organisation, like large-scale irrigation networks, complex systems of military defence, large-scale monumentality (secular or sacred) or coinage.⁶³ All these, however, are easier to relate to fully operating states than to state formation processes. The aforementioned caveat about the resilience of state-related cultural traits after collapse applies here too.

In NW Iberia the situation is no different. In the absence of coinage (the Asturian-Leonese monarchy did not strike any), maybe the most obvious — and most commented upon — archaeological indicator is the investment in monumentality, namely churches. Building and patronising churches is a prominent attribute of the Asturian kings beginning in the early or

⁶⁰ J. Escalona, 'In the name of a distant king'.

⁶¹ I think the towns of this period are better understood not in terms of economic specialisation or market functions, but as communities controlling a hinterland with subordinated rural settlements and some sort of surplus flow towards the centre. See J. Escalona, *Sociedad y territorio en la Alta Edad Media castellana: la formación del alfoz de Lara*, Oxford, 2002, pp. 223–31. See also J. Escalona, 'Supra-Local Territorial Units: on the origins of *Behetría* lordship', C. Jular and C. Estepa (eds), *Land, Power and Society in medieval Castile*, Turnhout, 2009, pp. 29–58.

⁶² See the chapters by Iñaki Martín Viso and Álvaro Carvajal in this volume.

⁶³ See the classical discussion in B. Trigger, 'The archaeology of government', *World Archaeology*, 6, 1, 1974, pp. 95–106.

mid-ninth century (depending on whether the royal-founded church of Santullano (Oviedo) is considered as dating from the reign of Alfonso II (783 and 791–842) or Alfonso III (866–910) as recently proposed by M. A. Utrero).⁶⁴ During the reign of Ramiro I (842–850) there seems to have emerged a building programme fostered by the monarchy in the so-called ‘Asturian style’ that irradiated from the royal see in Oviedo to the surrounding region, but — significantly — not to the whole kingdom. Starting one half century later, and extending well into the tenth century, the growth of the Asturian-Leonese kingship under Alfonso III produced a new constructive programme, this time heavily influenced by the sophisticated architecture of the Caliphate of Córdoba, a style that is commonly — if inaccurately — termed ‘Mozarabic’. This programme had its centre in the new royal see of León, from which it mainly irradiated to the surrounding areas in the central Duero Plateau. The result is an assemblage of top-quality buildings that, albeit quite different from one another structurally, keep to a common aesthetic language. Over the tenth century, however, the same style was adopted by a wider range of buildings. Therefore, not every church in the ‘Mozarabic’ style must necessarily be seen as the product of royal initiative. It is safer to simply consider that they all speak a language that was ultimately promoted from the political centre. Taken together, the two Asturian styles seem to mark two crucial steps in the development of political centralisation. Not every church is an expression of statehood, though. Most of the hundreds of churches that are recorded in the ninth- and tenth-century charters from these regions should be ascribed to the initiative of local communities, local elites, or aristocrats, with no primary state involvement. Moreover, building churches and monasteries seems to have been a strategy for middle-ranking elites seeking to buttress or enhance their position and make it durable.⁶⁵

Defence arrangements are much more difficult to gauge. A large number of defensive sites and fortifications have been detected that are coetaneous with the rise of the Asturian monarchy, but most of them are impossible to connect to any centre-driven large-scale programme of defence.⁶⁶ The written sources sometimes trace royal associations for specific sites, but only one such case has been thoroughly investigated. This is the site of *Gauzón* (Asturias), which recent excavations define as a coastal stronghold controlling access to the Avilés estuary.⁶⁷ There is no indication, however, that *Gauzón* formed part of a defensive network with other fortifications. On the other hand, linear earthworks similar to, but shorter than Wansdyke or Offa’s Dyke in England, have recently been detected on the summits of the Asturian mountains, controlling the old Roman road that connected the plateau to the port of

⁶⁴ M. Á. Utrero Agudo, ‘La Basílica de San Julián de los Prados, Alfonso III, Selgas y Schlunk’, M. Á. Utrero Agudo (ed.), *Iglesias altomedievales en Asturias: arqueología y arquitectura*, Madrid, 2016, pp. 11–38.

⁶⁵ J. J. Larrea Conde, ‘Construir iglesias, construir territorio: Las dos fases altomedievales de San Román de Tobillas (Álava)’, J. López Quiroga, A. M. Martínez Tejera and J. Morín de Pablos (eds), *Monasteria et Territoria. Élités, edilicia y territorio en el Mediterráneo medieval (siglos V–XI)*, S1720, Oxford, 2007, pp. 321–36; J. A. Quirós Castillo and I. Santos Salazar, ‘Founding and Owning Churches in Early Medieval Álava (North Spain): The Creation, Transmission and Monumentalization of Memory’, J. C. Sánchez-Pardo and M. Shapland (eds), *Churches and Social Power in Early Medieval Europe. Integrating Archaeological and Historical Processes*, Turnhout, 2015, pp. 35–68. On the archaeological recognition of early medieval fabrics, see L. Sánchez Zufiaurre, *Técnicas constructivas medievales. Nuevos documentos arqueológicos para el estudio de la Alta Edad Media en Álava*, Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2007.

⁶⁶ For a recent review of fortifications, see J. A. Quirós Castillo, ‘Defensive Sites of the Early Middle Ages in North-West Spain’, J. Baker, S. Brookes and A. Reynolds (eds), *Landscapes of Defence in Early Medieval Europe*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2013, pp. 301–39. See also J. A. Quirós Castillo and J. M. Tejado Sebastián (eds), *Los castillos altomedievales en el noroeste de la Península Ibérica*, Documentos de Arqueología Medieval, 4, Bilbao, 2012.

⁶⁷ I. Muñiz López and A. Álvarez Busto, ‘El Castillo de Gauzón (Asturias. España) y el proceso europeo de feudalización entre la Antigüedad tardía y la Edad Media a través de las fortificaciones’, *Munibe*, 61, 2010, pp. 289–328.

Gijón on the Asturian coast⁶⁸. Fortifications of this kind are very difficult to date with any precision. Unsurprisingly, given the bearing that inherited historical commonplaces have on the interpretation of any sort of Asturian archaeological evidence, these linear works have been presented as a response to the Arab invaders of 711AD by the Asturian rebels that first challenged them in the probably mythical battle of Covadonga, and then proceeded to found the Asturian kingship under their first king Pelayo. In theory, to build, man and maintain such a wall would require some kind of continuous centralised organisation, which seems more likely in a situation of repeated, systematic attacks, as occurred in NW Iberia from the very late eighth century onwards. However, in the current state of research it seems safer not to put too much interpretative weight upon the linear earthworks.

The best evidence so far for large-scale military arrangements comes from the Asturian expansion on the Duero River in the first years of the tenth century. On the western side, the textual evidence from the chronicles finds a very good match in Iñaki Martín Viso and Álvaro Carvajal's analysis of the strongholds south of the Duero River that were ephemerally seized and fortified by the Asturian monarchy, but were soon lost to the newly-founded Caliphate when it sought to reinforce its positions on the north-western frontier.⁶⁹ The creation of a line of fortresses was accompanied by an effort to incorporate the area's elites that left an imprint via the apparition of a distinct kind of neatly-arranged cemetery associated with the strongholds, which stand in contrast to the existing pattern of smaller, less organised burial sites.⁷⁰ On the eastern side of the Duero Valley, similar processes formally took place in the name of the kings, but were actually carried out under the aegis of a group of Castilian aristocrats.⁷¹ The textual evidence shows how the defence system on that stretch of the frontier was organised on the basis of fortified strongholds evenly spaced along the natural border formed by the river, together with a network of lookouts where garrisons provided by the local elites conducted surveillance service. The latter, however, have only occasionally been investigated archaeologically.⁷²

Perhaps the most obvious conclusion to be drawn from this rather meager survey is that the quest for state formation cannot limit itself to prominent top-down expressions of centralisation like monuments and defences. In fact, no single site or group of sites holds the key to understanding state formation. It is necessary to adopt a more systemic approach focusing upon pivotal changes in social complexity. As noted at the outset, state formation is a way of stabilising and reproducing social inequality. The traces of this sort of evolution can be

⁶⁸ J. Camino Mayor, R. Estrada García and Y. Viniegra Pacheco, 'A propósito de las fortificaciones lineales ástures de El Homón de Faro (La Carisa) y El Muro (La Mesa)', *Territorio, sociedad y poder*, 2, 2007, pp. 53–64; A. Gutiérrez González, 'Fortificaciones visigodas y conquista islámica del norte hispano (c. 711)', *Zona Arqueológica (Special Issue 711. Arqueología e historia entre dos mundos, I)*, 15, 2011, pp. 335–52.

⁶⁹ I. Martín Viso and Á. Carvajal Castro, 'Historias regionales de la repoblación: Los reyes asturleonenses y las 'políticas de la tierra' en el oeste de la meseta del Duero', P. C. Díaz Martínez, F. Luis Corral and I. Martín Viso (eds), *El Historiador y la Sociedad. Homenaje al Profesor José M^a. Mínguez*, Salamanca, 2013, pp. 39–52.

⁷⁰ I. Martín Viso, 'Ancestors and Landscape: Early Medieval Burial Sites in the Central-Western Regions of the Iberian Peninsula', J. Escalona, O. Vésteinsson and S. Brookes (eds), *Polity and Neighbourhood in Early Medieval Europe*, Turnhout, forthcoming.

⁷¹ C. Estepa Díez, 'La Castilla primitiva (750–931): condes, territorios y villas', F. J. Fernández Conde and C. García de Castro Valdés (eds), *Poder y Simbología en Europa, siglos VIII–X (Actas del Symposium Internacional, Oviedo, 22–27 de septiembre del 2008)*, Oviedo, 2009, pp. 261–78; I. Santos Salazar, 'Competition in the frontiers of the Asturian kingdom: The comites of Castile, Lantarón and Álava (860–940)', R. Le Jan, G. Bühner-Thierry and S. Gasparri (eds), *Coopération. Rivaliser, coopérer dans les sociétés du Haut Moyen Âge (500–1100)*, Turnhout, 2018, pp. 231–51.

⁷² J. Escalona, 'Comunidades, territorios y poder condal en la Castilla del Duero en el siglo X', *Studia Historica. Historia Medieval*, 18–19, 2000–2001, pp. 85–120; J. Escalona, 'Military stress'. An early — but now rather outdated — archaeological exploration of fortifications and watchtowers along the Duero frontier is F. Reyes Téllez and M. L. Menéndez Robles, 'Sistemas defensivos altomedievales en las comarcas del Duratón-Riaza (siglos VIII–X)', *II Congreso de Arqueología Medieval Española*, 3, Madrid, 1987, pp. 631–39.

expected to appear, on the one hand, at elite sites that, even if not royal, can help define the class interests behind state formation. So far NW Iberia has not revealed any secular aristocratic residence comparable to the luxurious late-seventh or early-eighth century villa of Pla de Nadal (Valencia) or the lavish Islamic-style villas (*almunias*) surrounding tenth-century Córdoba.⁷³ However, from the tenth century there is significant written evidence for the existence of estate centres (*palatia*) that served to organise the largely dispersed ensembles of property that constituted most aristocratic estates and where rent in kind and livestock was stored.⁷⁴ It is only recently that pioneering work by J. A. Quirós and his group has begun to unearth the first material evidence for this kind of sites, but much more work remains to be done in order to characterise the different types of *palatia*, from royal ones to those of the regional elites.⁷⁵ In detecting and investigating such sites, it will be crucial to bear in mind that although estate centres were locally situated, they nevertheless operated well beyond their surrounding territory, through territorially discontinuous long-distance connections.⁷⁶

In many senses, building churches and estate centres can be seen as an expression of the growth of the aristocracies, the preferential beneficiaries of state formation. The process, however, is wider and more complex. It is connected to social change (an increase in social difference and the creation of a bounded peasantry),⁷⁷ and this in turn depends on overall economic growth. The connection between early medieval economic growth and increasing social and political complexity has been formulated, among other areas, for Scotland and Ireland, and can be pursued for other European regions as well.⁷⁸ Increasing division of labour, with specialised personnel (craftsmen, bureaucrats, warriors, clerics) working full time for the elite is one of its visible traces, as is the spread of technological advances such as the water mill, extensively evidenced in the surviving charters from NW Iberia, but as of yet largely under-investigated archaeologically. The archaeology of agricultural fields and irrigation could similarly benefit from fresh approaches.⁷⁹ Specialised production resulting in supra-local economic dependencies, and centre-to-hinterland articulations is another promising vector. The charters from the Duero Plateau contain indicators that seem to point to an early phase of urban development around the 950s and 960s which is not yet archaeologically defined but could be

⁷³ E. Juan Navarro and J. V. Lerma Alegría, 'La villa aúlica del "Pla de Nadal" (Riba-Roja de Túria)', A. Ribera i Lacomba (ed.), *Los orígenes del cristianismo en Valencia y su entorno*, Valencia, 2000, pp. 135–42. For Córdoba, see above, n. 39.

⁷⁴ J. Escalona and I. Martín Viso, 'Los *palatia*, puntos de centralización de rentas en la Meseta del Duero (siglos IX–XI)', A. Vigil-Escalera, G. Bianchi and J. A. Quirós (eds), *Horrea, barns and silos. Storage and Incomes in Early Medieval Europe*, Bilbao, 2013, pp. 103–26. J. Á. García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre and M. E. Peña Bocos, 'El palatium, símbolo y centro de poder en los reinos de Navarra y Castilla en los siglos XI a XII', *Mayurqa*, 22 (Homenatge al Prof. Alvaro Santamaría), 1989, pp. 281–96.

⁷⁵ I. Santos Salazar, 'Words, things and social inequality: The village of Torrentejo', J. A. Quirós Castillo (ed.), *Social Complexity in Early Medieval Rural Communities. The north-western Iberia archaeological record*, Oxford, 2016, pp. 125–33; see a summary of the site's archaeological sequence in J. A. Quirós Castillo and C. Tejerizo García, 'Despoblado de Torrentejo o Santa Lucía', *Arkeoikuska*, 16, 2016, pp. 81–85.

⁷⁶ See the enlightening discussion of dispersed Carolingian domains in J.-P. Devroey, 'Gérer et exploiter la distance. Pratiques de gestion et perception du monde dans les livres fonciers carolingiens', P. Depreux, F. Bougard and R. Le Jan (eds), *Les élites et leurs espaces: mobilité, rayonnement, domination (du VI^e au XI^e siècle)*, Turnhout, 2007, pp. 49–65. For Castile, see the discussion and cartography of the vast domains of the 'comital' monasteries of Covarrubias and Oña in J. Á. García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre and E. Peña Bocos, 'Poder condal ¿y mutación feudal? en la Castilla del año mil', M. I. Loring García (ed.), *Historia social, pensamiento historiográfico y Edad Media. Homenaje al Prof. Abilio Barbero de Aguilera*, Madrid, 1997, pp. 273–98.

⁷⁷ See the always illuminating work of R. Faith, *The English Peasantry*.

⁷⁸ See S. Driscoll, W. S. Hanson and E. A. Slater, 'The archaeology of State formation in Scotland', 1991, pp. 81–111 and W. Davies, 'Economic change in Early Medieval Ireland: the case for growth', *Settimane di studio (Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo)*, Spoleto, 2010, pp. 111–33.

⁷⁹ Ongoing work by Wendy Davies on gardens and by Margarita Fernández Mier and Juan Antonio Quirós on common land and common rights may provide interesting developments on this issue in the near future.

in the near future.⁸⁰ A more traditional field, such as the study of pottery, could contribute a great deal by helping to differentiate local and micro-regional productions from long-distance imports and from the first wave of native large-scale ceramic styles, as seems to be the case of the red painted pottery in the county of Castile.⁸¹ In recent years, the development of archaeobiology is providing new avenues for the study of inequality at the village level.⁸² This crucial but difficult issue can be studied through the anthropological evidence of cemeteries or plant and animal remains, but also through the spread of churches and the creation of a parish system. However, a view to the broader picture is indispensable. While wealth or diet differences in a local cemetery may reveal inequality within the community, socially ‘flat’ cemeteries may actually indicate the consolidation of stronger social inequality beyond the village level.

Conclusions

By way of conclusion, it is first of all worth admitting that, as of today, the archaeology of state formation in NW Iberia looks more like a wish list than anything else. There are, however, reasons for anticipating major advances on this issue. The most important is perhaps that the decades-long gap between historians and archaeologists is shrinking, not just in methodological terms (that is, the joint use of texts and the archaeological record) but, above all, theoretically. Younger scholars are willing to engage critically on the two strands of thought about state formation that I discussed in the first part of this paper. Those diverging paths can and should converge, if only because it is now clear that the topic cannot be dealt with satisfactorily from either of them separately.

As usual with early medieval NW Iberian archaeology, the main problem is one of critical mass. The corpus of excavated sites is still too small and fragmentary to enable sound generalisations, let alone inter-regional comparisons. Unless a new building and development frenzy takes hold in the country for a second time this century (something that no one in their right mind would hope for), the body of empirical data can only be expected to increase gradually by means of painstaking, characteristically under-funded, research projects. This state of affairs does, however, have a silver lining. Slower progress may pay off if it allows the fieldwork to be steered towards more consistent research-driven strategies.⁸³

Regarding state formation, it is nevertheless essential to bear in mind the signs that we will recognise as indicators of early statehood. I hope that my discussion has made clear that no single criterion — whether textual or archaeological — will suffice to spot our nascent early medieval states. A systemic, holistic approach is needed, and its major target must be the detection of durable, institutionalised inequality. There is no magic wand for this task. In general, there is much work to be done, but also a very promising future for thinking about state

⁸⁰ J. Escalona, ‘Aspectos del Pastoreo en la Península Ibérica’, *Historia Agraria*, 11, 1996, pp. 181–86.

⁸¹ F. Grassi, ‘Production, consumption and political complexity: early medieval pottery in Castile and Southern Tuscany (7th-10th centuries)’, J. A. Quirós Castillo (ed.), *Social complexity in early medieval rural communities. The north-western Iberia archaeological record*, Oxford, 2016, pp. 91–112; see also her contribution to this volume.

⁸² See the contributions to J. A. Quirós Castillo (ed.), *Demografía, paleopatologías y desigualdad social en el noroeste peninsular en época medieval*, Documentos de Arqueología Medieval, 10, Bilbao, 2016 and to J. A. Quirós Castillo (ed.), *Social Complexity in Early Medieval Rural Communities. The north-western Iberia archaeological record*, Oxford, 2016.

⁸³ J. Escalona, ‘L’archéologie médiévale chrétienne en Espagne: entre recherche et gestion du patrimoine’, E. Magnani (ed.), *Le Moyen Âge vu d’ailleurs: voix croisées d’Amérique latine et d’Europe*, Dijon, 2009, pp. 253–74.

formation in NW Iberia. Every aspect of archaeological research ultimately ties in to this all-encompassing topic. The study of state formation calls for the consideration of changes in agrarian technology and in landscape change in general, as well as monument building or defence as indicators of elite growth, the structuring of inequality, and the implementation of institutionalised governance. Imaginative approaches are needed in order to build a case for the growth of statehood, and they should bear as a major component the four variants of secondary state formation outlined above (as well as other possible variants). Distinguishing emerging centre-driven from locally resilient statehood will be a major challenge. Ultimately, early medieval states did not have any anniversary to celebrate. State formation is a gradual, non-linear process. Future models will have to allow not only for the slow development of state procedures, but also, crucially, for very uneven implementation in local and regional contexts. The extremely variable patterns of seigneurial, ecclesiastical and royal authority that have been so masterfully described by the late Carlos Estepa for central medieval Castile are obviously rooted in the early medieval period.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ C. Estepa Díez, *Las behetrías castellanas*, Valladolid, 2003.