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## Guest Editorial

# Agrarian archaeology in Early Medieval Europe



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## 1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, the archaeological study of agrarian and animal husbandry activities of historical societies has seen an impressive development as a result of the synergy of different factors. One of the major events allowing this renovation has been the great amount of rescue and preventive archaeological projects carried out all over Europe. As a consequence of the massive realization of linear works such as highways, gas pipelines, railways, and the urbanization of entire residential areas, thousands of projects have brought to light extensive new sites and new kind of archaeological sites unknown until now. On the other hand, paleoenvironmental disciplines traditionally interested in prehistoric times, such as geoarchaeology, bioarchaeology or paleoclimatology, have extended their studies into historical times, facing problems studied until now with the written evidence (ie [Leveau et al., 2002](#); [Crabtree, 2010](#); [McCormick et al., 2012](#)). However the asymmetry between different European traditions is quite evident. While in Britain or Scandinavia Archaeological Science is heavily consolidated in academic and professional terms and, as a result, there is a strong tradition in the study of paleoenvironmental historical records, the situation is very different in southern Europe. In this area rescue archaeology and single initiatives have promoted the first bioarchaeological and geoarchaeological studies conducted by scholars who usually have a prehistoric background. Finally, a theoretical and methodological renovation of historical archaeology has had an important role in the renovation of classic archaeology into a wider social science.

The study of the Early Medieval period is one of the scenarios where the impact of this renovation has been more evident. The half millennium between the end of the Roman Empire and the feudal age (5th–10th AD) is a historiographical controversial period taking into account the diversity of interpretations given in the last century. Encapsulated between the long shadow of the collapse of the Roman world and the emergence of the medieval urban society, its historical analysis has undergone important disagreements among the specialists. The study of the Early Medieval period has balanced between catastrophic and negative approaches (which have underlined the collapse of the roman lifestyles),

'transformation' models (which have highlighted slow changes in long terms) to far more nuance approaches that have emphasized the Carolingian economic changes, relativizing the more negatives points of view. Even if in the last decades it is possible to count on new records and interpretations, substantially the old paradigms are still in use ([Wickham, 2005](#)).

Otherwise, the European Early Middle Ages is an interesting field of study because it is a good laboratory for the analysis of complex historical and paleoenvironmental processes given that its study exceeds the limits of regional history. Historical and archaeological Early Medieval sources can be used to study the effect of the collapse of an empire into the transformation of landscapes, to analyse the emergency of states and their impact in farming and husbandry activities, or the disappearance and formation of urban life. Although this agenda could be considerably extended, the point is that the inferences and generalizations that can be made using these records go beyond the sectorial interests.

The discussion and integration of records of different natures, such as historical, archaeological and paleoenvironmental, is not always easy ([Albarella, 1999](#)). In fact, the more important synthesis about Early Medieval period made by the lead historians in the last ten years have taken into consideration, for the first time, archaeological records such as pottery or settlement archaeology. However, only a few scholars ([McCormick, 2008](#)) have discussed other records as bioarchaeology or paleoclimatology. Paradoxically although the volume of paleoenvironmental data available is growing, academic compartmentalization and the needs posed by the discussion of these records have determined that there has not been a chance to discuss and explore their implications in historical terms. Also, most of the archaeological projects and technical studies are unpublished or are accessible to only a very small group of scholars.

The collection of papers included in this issue derived from the conference held at the University of the Basque Country in November 2012 entitled 'Archaeology of Farming and Animal Husbandry in Early Medieval Europe (5th–10th centuries)'. The videos of the conference are available at <http://ehutb.ehu.es/es/serial/index/id/1140.html#2682>, and the abstract book of the conference can be downloaded here <https://sites.google.com/site/farmingandhusbandry/>. The aim of the conference was to promote a holistic debate between different disciplines and scholars in order to study the farming and husbandry activities in relation with the social construction of Early Medieval landscapes. The chosen format was the introduction of regional synthesis, leaving space aside for the discussion of single case studies.



Fig. 1. Map of the main sites and regions cited in this volume.

Although not all the papers and posters presented at the conference have been included in this volume, these twelve papers provide a good range of the approaches used in different areas of Europe to study farming and animal husbandry activities. The reader will notice the lack of papers devoted to the study of the core of the Carolingian Empire (Fig. 1). There are only a few syntheses about the Early Medieval bioarchaeological records of different areas of the continental area (i.e. for France [Ruas, 2005](#) and [Ruas, 2010](#)) in comparison with other peripheral European sectors. On the other hand, some papers from Eastern Europe have been included, taking into account that these studies are rarely available in English.

Given the nature and the range of the papers, it is not very easy to include them into different groups, but they concern three main topics.

## 2. Archaeology of peasant communities

Undoubtedly, one of most important contributions achieved by the recent historical archaeology in Europe has been the discovery of the materiality of Early Medieval peasant communities, overshadowed in the written evidence. Rescue archaeological projects carried out all over Europe in the last twenty years have uncovered hundreds of villages and farms that give voice to the forgotten. Even if only a few of these projects have been processed and edited, the first territorial syntheses available have changed our idea about peasant agency ([Hamerow, 2002](#); [Francovich and Hodges, 2003](#);

[Peytremann, 2003](#); [Hamerow, 2012](#)). Indeed, traditional approaches have characterised the Early Medieval peasant by very poor living standards as a result of the collapse of the complexity of roman economy. Some authors do not hesitate to talk about a return to Prehistory ([Ward-Perkins, 2005](#)). This 'primitivism approach' has taken shape in different versions, but usually involves the replacement of the farming peasant economy by other traditional systems based more upon pastoralism ([Hooke, 2011](#)). Actually, some scholars such as R. Fossier have linked the emergence of lordships and the formation of villages with the extension of farming activity around the year 1000 ([Fossier, 1982](#)).

Even if in Britain and in some areas of western and northern Europe there is a solid tradition in the study of farming activity based on the analysis of bioarchaeological records ([Rackham, 1994](#); [Dark, 2000](#); [Hamerow, 2002](#); [Van Der Veen et al., 2013](#)), in southern Europe the influence of 'primitive approaches' is still very relevant. However, the new archaeological evidence has completely changed this framework. The study of the farming and animal husbandry evidence has played an important role in the interpretation of these sites, as some of the papers included in this volume show.

The site of Gozquez is the best-studied village of the Visigothic period in Iberia ([Vigil-Escalera Guirado et al., 2014](#)). The site, located in the South of Madrid, was extensively excavated due to an archaeological rescue project providing a complete occupation sequence from the 6th to the 8th centuries. Indeed the largest number of preventive projects has been conducted in the surroundings

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