

## Pots, chicken and building deposits: The archaeology of folk and official religion during the High Middle Ages in the Basque Country

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, a particular type of unusual archaeological deposits found at some high medieval (12–13th centuries CE) sites located in the Basque Country (northern Iberian Peninsula) is examined. These structured deposits consist of inverted pottery vessels containing the remains of a chicken, placed in pits created on purpose for keeping them, and are generally found in archaeological contexts related to the foundation or reconstruction of public buildings, including churches and city walls. The implications of the occurrence of these rituals in Christian contexts are discussed in the framework of folk religion, suggesting that medieval religion was hybrid and dynamic, even after the Gregorian Reform (11th century CE) that, supposedly, unified the Christian administration and liturgy. It is suggested that the occurrence of such public ritual practices in the Basque Country during the High Middle Ages might be related to the formation and negotiation of new social and political communities.

### 1. Introduction

The archaeology of religion has undergone recently an enormous theoretical and applied development, once the criticisms of classical processualism and post-processualism to the analysis of religion as an active agent of social construction and transformation were overcome (Insoll, 2004). Some recent syntheses and studies dealing with world religions (Insoll, 2001), the archaeology of religion in the Ancient world (Raja and Rüpke, 2015), the study of religion in the Post-Medieval period (King and Sayer, 2011), or the archaeology of ritual and religion (Insoll, 2011), have proved the potential of these analytical approaches, especially when they are developed from a holistic perspective that surpasses the limitations of the mere analysis of liturgy, worship buildings and those places that commonly served to the construction of social memory (Rowan, 2012; Fennel and Manning, 2014).

During the Middle Ages, the Iberian Peninsula was a cultural melting pot where three faiths intermingled: Christianity, Islamism and Judaism. Studying how these complex cultures were constructed and negotiated is of central interest, but it is also very challenging. The co-existence of these different religious and political communities makes of medieval Iberia a valuable ‘laboratory’ where intercultural interaction, religious syncretism and the construction of social identities can be analysed. However, Iberian Medieval Archaeology in general has

used until now an excluding approach to treat the different religious and political communities. Thus, in the Iberian Peninsula, the archaeology of medieval Christian and Islamic societies developed separately. Moreover, the study of Jewish communities, of Christian communities living in Muslim kingdoms or of Muslim communities living in Christian territories, has been relegated to the analysis of minorities (Valor and Miguel, 2014). In the last few years, however, new archaeological evidence, new theoretical frameworks, and the use of new methodologies, have allowed viewing the role that religion played in the processes for constructing social identities. For instance, recently, the existence of multi-faith cemeteries in early medieval Spain has been recognised (Vigil-Escalera, 2015). Also, religious identities played a key active role in the construction of local identities, in the context of the aftermath of the Islamic conquest of the Iberian Peninsula after year 711 CE, and it has already been suggested that the early construction of an Islamic identity might have been a native phenomenon, rather than imported (Inksip, 2016: 263). In places and periods of socio-political stress, such as the consolidation of ethnically based kingdoms after Roman times (Goetz et al., 2003) or the Islamic conquest (Manzano, 2006), the conditions were met in order for religion (both doctrine and liturgy, theory and practice) to constitute a tool for the construction of socio-political communities and identities at a local scale.

Institutionalised religions set aside, some recent works have

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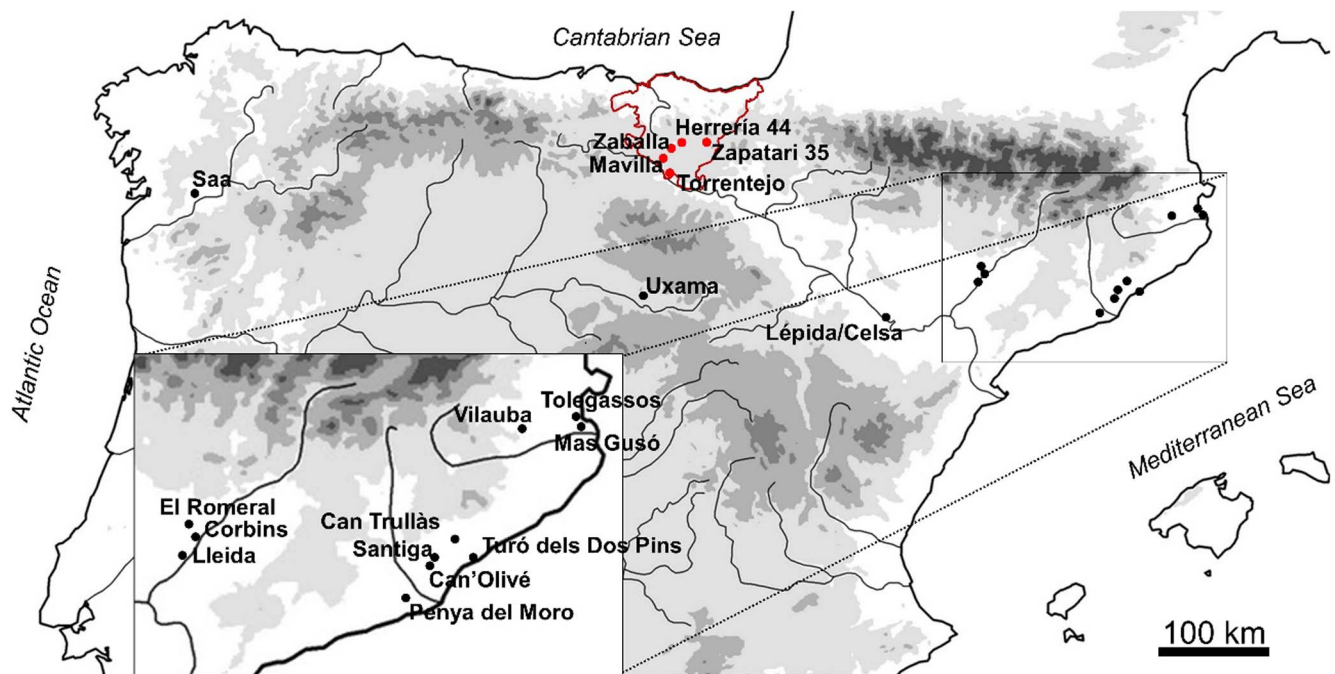


Fig. 1. Map showing the location of the sites mentioned in the text. In red, deposits examined in this work, in the Basque Country; in black, other sites (listed in Table 1). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

explored the dynamic and hybrid dimension of medieval religiosity, focusing on the material forms and expressions of people's beliefs. This has led to the use of different names to describe this concept, such as folk, popular or vernacular religion (Primiano, 1995; Dever, 2005; Gilchrist, 2012; Hukantaival, 2013; Kapaló, 2013; Hukantaival, 2016). Central to this paper, folk religion is here understood as “the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion” (Yoder, 1974: 14). This way, the contrast between institutionalised religion and popular religion can be overcome, understanding that the existence of forms of folk religion is consubstantial to the practices of official religion, and that the two spheres coexist and interact in a dynamic way (García, 2003; Pyysiäinen, 2004; Hukantaival, 2013; Kapaló, 2013; Johanson and Jonuks, 2015). Nowadays, it seems clear that the multidimensional and changing character of religious practices constitutes one of the main features of the religious experience, even in situations where there is an ideological, political and social hegemony of well-established religions (Gilchrist, 2012).

One of the main consequences of the development of such approaches has been the creation of new conceptual frameworks that allow reinterpreting the so-called ritual deposits, special deposits, or intentional/structured deposits in archaeology (Richards and Thomas, 1984; Bradley, 2005). The literature on the ways these ritual activities can be identified in the archaeological record and interpreted (generally thanks to ethnographic parallels) is absolutely enormous. Although in the past this topic was mainly investigated by prehistorians (e.g. Brück, 1999; Gerritsen, 2003), in recent years, there is an increasing interest on this subject among researchers dealing with world religions and historical archaeologies (e.g. Hukantaival, 2007; Gilchrist, 2008, 2014; Baron, 2012; Fennel and Manning, 2014).

In Spain, the study of medieval structured deposits that do not seem to correspond to official liturgical practices has been neglected. They have normally been analysed from a perspective that is unaware of religious practices, linking them to magic or pagan rituals that are difficult to disentangle. This marginal character explains why they are rarely given further consideration. Many cases can only be found in ‘grey literature’ or very local publications, and overviews of the

evidence are still lacking. As an example, some special archaeological deposits found in some funerary contexts have been reported in northern Spain (e.g. at the Monastery of Corias –García, 2011- and Santa María of Castro Urdiales –Marcos, 2013), but their interpretation was difficult due to the limited known cases. In general, for medieval Spain, mainly funerary rituals have been studied to some extent, but other forms of material expressions of beliefs, such as the performance of non-“official” rituals in non-funerary contexts, has not been investigated so far. This has led to a very incomplete way of understanding religiosity in the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages, as well as its cultural dimension (Geertz, 1993).

The present paper is the first analysis and discussion of a particular type of archaeological deposits that constitutes direct evidence of non-official ritual practices, in Spain only known until now in the Basque Country (northern Spain), during the High Middle Ages (12–13th centuries CE). It is argued here that these deposits must be interpreted in the framework of folk religion practices that consubstantially existed with the official religion. The coexistence of both types of communicational and social cohesion systems played complementary roles in the construction processes of socio-political communities that were active at various scales.

This work is structured in three main sections: first, the location and characteristics of the deposits are explained; afterwards, the components of the ritual and possible precedents are examined; and last, this paper discusses the social meaning of this ritual, and explores the relevance of this new archaeological evidence for understanding religiosity in the Middle Ages. This paper is based on a set of Spanish examples which, to date, constitute unique and rare archaeological evidence of folk religion in medieval southern Europe.

## 2. The sites

In this section, the archaeological evidence will be examined briefly, explaining the nature and the location of the deposits, in each of the Basque archaeological sites that have been examined here, all located in the Basque southern province of Álava, in the municipalities of Labastida, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Salvatierra-Agurain, Iruña de Oca and Armiñón. A preliminary work on some of the zooarchaeological

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