

A periphery without cities: Social complexity and political articulation in the Upper Ebro Valley between the sixth and ninth centuries¹

“Vici et castella et pagi hi sunt qui nulla dignitate ciuitatis ornantur, sed uulgari hominum conuentu incoluntur, et propter paruitem sui maioribus ciuitatibus adtribuuntur”.²

Fourteen centuries later, these words of Isidore of Seville are, consciously or unconsciously, still influencing the perception of the urban phenomenon in the transition between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. The city as the highest expression of civilization, the centre of social and political power and the nucleus of the economic life in its rural hinterland:³ ultimately the last heir of the Roman *civitas*, the last proof, indeed, of the conservation of the dignity of the ancient social system. Not surprisingly, one of the main topics of historiographical discussion has developed around the period in which this picture evolved into crisis. This is thought to have happened earlier in the peripheral areas of the Western Roman Empire (*Britannia* and northern sectors of *Hispania*), lasting much longer, but with significant changes, in its central *regiones*: the East (Balkans excluded), parts of Italy, southern Gaul or south-western *Hispania* as well.⁴

Obviously, the panoply of questions about the urban phenomenon and, also, the appropriation of space by urban elites between the sixth and ninth centuries, gains in richness and complexity when the causes of such crises and renewals are investigated: were they motivated by issues related to disorganisation and reorganisation of complex economic networks? By social changes? Were they due to cultural changes? Were they destroyed, instead, by war? Did they continue with its centrality as a platform for new power elites?

In modern historiography, from the reflections dedicated to the city by Max Weber and Henry Pirenne,⁵ economic concepts in the interpretation of the urban phenomenon and forms of socio-political and economical appropriation of the urban hinterland have been of essential significance for both historians and archaeologists of the Early Middle Ages. An influence that has had the merit, beyond the definition of the city as a Weberian *idealtypus*, of forcing historians to reflect on this phenomenon as a much more ambitious tool for analysis, capable of overcoming teleologisms, favouring interpretations of ways in which power was exercised in each historical period. In short, a renewed perspective that has been of great use when it comes to analysing territories with clearly hierarchical social systems;

¹ This study was undertaken within the research project “Desigualdad en los paisajes medievales del norte peninsular: los marcadores arqueológicos”, HUM 2012-32514” y de la actividad del “Grupo de Investigación en Patrimonio y Paisajes Culturales/Ondare eta Kultur Paisaietan Ikerketa Taldea” (IT315-10) of the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) supported by the Basque Government. I am most grateful to Maximilian Diesenberger and Katharina Winkler for inviting me to the “Appropriation of Space at the Borders of the Frankish Empire” round table, to the participants there for their suggestions, and to Juan Antonio Quirós for discussing this material with me. I would like to thank Robert Portass for his revision of my English text.

² Isidori Hispalensi Episcopi, *Etymologiarum sive originum. Libri XX* (ed. Wallace Martin Lindsay, *Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis*, Oxford 1911) Lib. XV, II, 11.

³ Andrea Giardina, *L'Italia romana. Storie di un'identità incompiuta* (Roma 1997) 193–232.

⁴ For a whole panorama on these problems, see *The idea and ideal of the town between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Gian Pietro Brogiolo/Bryan Ward-Perkins (*The Transformation of the Roman World* 4, Leiden/Boston/Köln 1999) and *Towns and their Territories Between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Gian Pietro Brogiolo/Nancy Gauthier/Neil Christie (*The Transformation of the Roman World* 9, Leiden/Boston/Köln 2003).

⁵ Max Weber, *The city* (trans. and ed. Don Martindale/Gertrud Neuwirth, Glencoe 1958). Henri Pirenne, *Les villes du Moyen Âge, essai d'histoire économique et sociale* (Bruxelles 1927).

territories which nonetheless lack cities as the theatre where the appropriation of space and other socio-political strategies of dominion could be formalised.

This was the case in the area that I am about to analyse following an exposure that will be based both on written and archaeological sources: the Upper Ebro Valley, that is to say the southern strip of the Basque Country (particularly the present province of Álava), and some areas of modern Castile and Rioja [Map. 1].

1 THE ROMAN CITY AND ITS SETTING

In the northern sector of *Hispania*, the density of urban structures was lower than in other areas of the *diocesis* (*Baetica* or *Lusitania* for example),⁶ but the urban networks between the Ebro River and the sea were much stronger than historians supposed twenty years ago⁷. In the fifth century this picture changes: the Hispanic eastern end of the Bay of Biscay points to the disappearance of urban networks⁸. At the same time, some kilometres to the south, in Álava, the *civitas* of *Veleia* shows a significant reduction of the inhabited space during the tetrarchic period, when the city walls were constructed. The city was finally abandoned in the first years of the sixth century⁹. Although we lack systematic work devoted to the final stages of many other centres, such as *Uxama Barca*, the analysis of secondary settlements, the *stationes* and *mansiones* situated along the main communication route that cross the territory, *Ab Asturica Burdigalam* (the Iter XXXIV), show similar trends of disorganisation, with the end of public euergetism and abandonments in the second half of the sixth century.¹⁰

MAP: MAIN PLACES CITED IN THE TEXT

Thus, there is sufficient evidence to believe that, with the exception of urban centres around the Ebro River, already in its Riojan section, such as *Calagurris* (Calahorra) and other small secondary settlements,¹¹ we find ourselves looking at spaces which were predominantly rural from the sixth century onwards, in particular in those lands located north of the Roman Iter XXXIV.¹² Not coincidentally, the urban network consolidated during the first century A.D. was based on weak foundations. When the Roman state went into crisis in our zone, its fate was marked by the subsequent process of political and territorial fragmentation documented throughout the first decades of the Early Middle Ages. We might consider much of the northern urbanism as consisting of ‘artificial’ cities, to use the words of Paul Arthur, politically and economically supported by or reliant on the imperial bureaucratic system.¹³ The

⁶ A comparative perspective in Igor Santos Salazar, *Trasformazioni e dinamicità del popolamento e della territorialità fra Tardoantico e Alto Medioevo (450–950). Il ruolo dei poteri centrali in tre casi a confronto*, in: *Melanges de l’École française de Rome. Moyen Âge* 122/1 (2010) 97–125 at 100–103.

⁷ Koldo Larrañaga, *El hecho colonial romano en el área circumpirenaica occidental (Anejos de Veleia. Series maior, 12 Vitoria 2007)*.

⁸ For a general view of urban crisis in the Cantabrian Basin, see Pablo Díaz/ Luis Menéndez-Bueyes, *The Cantabrian Basin in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries: from Imperial Province to Periphery*, in: *Hispania in Late Antiquity. Current Perspectives*, ed. Kimberly Bowes/Michael Kulikowski (Brill 2005) 265–297.

⁹ Idoia Filloy/Eliseo Gil, *Vida cotidiana al abrigo de las murallas. Novedades de las investigación sobre el recinto amurallado tardorromano de Veleia (Iruña de Oca, Álava, País Vasco)*, in: *Murallas de ciudades romanas en el occidente del Imperio. Lucus Augusti como Paradigma*, ed. Antonio Rodríguez Colmenero/ Isable Rodá de Llanza (Lugo 2007) 469–480.

¹⁰ Eliseo Gil Zubillaga, *El poblamiento en el territorio alavés en época romana*, in: *1^{er} Coloquio Internacional sobre la romanización en Euskal Herria: la actualidad de la investigación arqueológica*, Isturitz 8–9 (1997) 23–52.

¹¹ For post-Roman urbanism in modern Rioja, see Urbano Ruiz Espinosa, “*Civitates*” y “*Territoria*” en el Ebro medio: continuidad y cambio durante la antigüedad tardía, in: *Comunidades locales y dinámicas de poder en el norte de la Península Ibérica durante la Antigüedad Tardía*, ed. Urbano Ruiz Espinosa/Santiago Castellanos (Logroño 2006) 41–100.

¹² The Roman road entered Álava crossing the Ebro River at *Deobriga* (south of Lantarón). From there, passing through the central plains of modern Álava, the road reached the city of *Veleia* and entered Pamplona after leaving the *stationes* of *Suessatio*, *Tullonio*, *Alba* and *Aracoeli*. *Itineraria Antonini Augusti et Burdigalense* (ed. Otto Cuntz, *Itineraria Romana* 1, Leipzig 1929) 453,5.

¹³ Paul Arthur, *Alcune considerazioni sulla natura delle città bizantine*, in: *Le città italiane tra la tarda antichità e l’alto medioevo*, ed. Andrea Augenti (Firenze 2006) 27–36.

aristocrats who attended the dismantling of its network could not or did not want to maintain these urban realities, which would explain the high percentage of abandoned cities in the whole zone.¹⁴

2 THE INFLUENCE OF TOLEDO IN A FRONTIER AREA

The process of regionalisation went further around the beginnings of the sixth century. Very briefly we should distinguish between three spaces that articulate different social and political experiences.

1) In the northern areas (that is the modern provinces of Biscay and Guipúzcoa and the northern part of Navarra), where the existence of a quite dense Roman occupation is clear, especially on the coast, the second half of the fifth century shows the end of every urban settlement after the quick collapse of the social and political logics that supported the imperial system, and the use of those rural landscapes by internally hierarchical and highly fragmented local communities about which we know almost nothing,¹⁵ except for their appearance in Visigothic and Frankish written sources, defined, from the sixth century onwards, with the ancient ethnic label of “Vascones”.¹⁶ This is a label with classical echoes that demonstrates the difficulties experienced by the central powers when it came to including in their areas of influence those societies living in a frontier area between two kingdoms,¹⁷ in which warfare and looting were central to the ability of local aristocracies to crystallise their hierarchical systems of power.¹⁸

2) The situation is much more highly articulated in a second strip that we can locate in Álava, which functions somewhat like a hinge between the Basque coast and the Ebro Valley. Here, recent and numerous archaeological excavations have been offering new findings that allow us to draw a mixed picture: on the one hand we need to take account of the existence of minor rural occupations, often formed by a very small number of households, some lasting long (Erilla) into the seventh century. Other sites show the development of social communities characterised by clear strategies of distinction, as in Aistra.¹⁹ But, above all, the cemetery of Aldaieta is the most important archaeological discovery in this zone. Dated between the sixth and seventh centuries, Aldaieta is a graveyard in which there have been a total of 104 burials excavated, 87% of which contain objects of personal adornment, thus constituting by far the richest cemetery of the Iberian Peninsula for that period (Fig. 1).²⁰ This evidence shows a very

¹⁴ A similar process has been studied in the Upper Duero Valley: Julio Escalona, *Patrones de fragmentación territorial: el fin del mundo romano en la Meseta del Duero*, in: *Comunidades, locales y dinámicas de poder en el norte de la Península Ibérica durante la Antigüedad Tardía*, ed. Urbano Ruiz Espinosa/Santiago Castellanos (Logroño 2006) 165–200.

¹⁵ The main archaeological data available in this area comes from its cemeteries, as in Finaga and Momoitio (in modern Biscay), cemeteries in which the internal hierarchies of such societies were displayed: Iñaki García Camino, *Arqueología y poblamiento en Bizkaia, siglos VI–XII: la configuración de la sociedad feudal* (Bilbao 2002) 61–118.

¹⁶ The geographical limits of ‘Vascones’ have changed over time since the first century B.C. In the sixth and seventh centuries it moved to the north and penetrated much further into southern Gaul (modern French Basque Country and parts of Aquitania) but its limits can be fixed less clearly than once was believed. Significant proof of this social and territorial dynamism can be found in the written sources: no leader of this group defined as ‘Vascones’ was ever named, nor their political boundaries ever described. The most systematic approach to these problems is in Armando Besga, ‘Domuit Vascones’. *El País Vasco durante la época de los reinos germánicos (siglos V–VIII)* (Bilbao 2001).

¹⁷ Iñaki Martín Viso, *La configuración de un espacio de frontera. Propuestas sobre la Vasconia tardoantigua*, in: *Comunidades*, 101–140 at 113.

¹⁸ Santiago Castellanos, *Astures, Cantabri and Vascones: the peoples of the Spanish North during the Late and Post-Roman Period*, in: *Neglected barbarians* ed. Florin Curta (Brepols 2010) 479–502. Scott de Brestian, *Vascones and Visigoths: creation and transformation of Identity in Northern Spain in Late Antiquity*, in: *Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World* ed. Ralph W. Mathisen/Danuta Shanzer (Farham 2011) 283–297. This latter essay is also useful to differentiate between Ancient and Early Medieval ‘Vascones’, Basque-speakers and modern boundaries of Basque Country and Navarre. These differences are not always clear to the academic community. For the Basque language and the lack of a specifically Basque speaking political unit between the sixth and eighth centuries, see R. Wright, *Linguistic and Ethnic Identities in the Iberian Peninsula (400–1000)*, in: *Sprache und Identität im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. Walter Pohl/Bernhard Zeller (*Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters* 20, Wien 2012) 99–108 at 100.

¹⁹ Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo, *Early medieval landscapes in north-west Spain: local power and communities, fifth-tenth centuries*, in: *Early Medieval Europe* 19/3 (2011) 305–306.

²⁰ Agustín Azkarate Garai-Olaun, *Aldaieta. Necrópolis tardoantigua de Aldaieta (Nanclares de Gamboa, Álava)* (Vitoria-Gasteiz 1999).

competitive social space, although there are differences with regard to interpretations of the political scales of action of its leaders: Azkarate and García Camino have interpreted these findings in terms of highly militarised territorial aristocracies linked to the dynamics of the frontier,²¹ while it is possible to characterise this society as one endowed by local leaders that operate on a reduced political scale but with clear capacities, thanks to their economic surpluses, to develop consciousness of their rulership in a very dynamic political space, as demonstrated by the presence of jewels and Frankish weapons in some tombs or by the construction of churches as in Dulantzi (10 km from Aldaieta). This building, dated to the sixth century, was constructed with Roman materials and equipped with a baptismal area. In the cemetery placed near the church (Fig. 2), also in use between the sixth and seventh century, 19 tombs with jewels and weapons similar to those documented in Aldaieta have been found.²² In any case, another indicator of the minute scale of political action of these different local elites is pottery: from the first decades of the sixth century the traditional Roman pottery disappears and only low-quality materials are identifiable, with a very limited range of forms, based on domestic production.²³

3) Álava does not have castles or centralised forms of military power documented in the third strip of territory analysed here, in a zone located between the Ebro Valley and the Duero Basin, something that reflects a much more complex world. The *castra* are situated in an intermediate position with respect to several ancient *territoria civitatis*, a characteristic which can be interpreted as an indicator of the declining competencies of urban centres to govern their hinterland during Late Antiquity, an aspect denoting new political realities in those peripheries.²⁴ Although there are few examples, sometimes it is possible to link these fortifications with the action of the central power, and more specifically with the extension of the Visigothic state in the whole zone: this is the case with Tedeja, a *castrum* with a related church at the foot of the hill, which has an inscription that commemorates the reign of Reccared († 601).²⁵

Other examples have very different meanings, such as Peña Amaya, a site of great extension, in which a long occupational sequence from the Neolithic to the Middle Ages has been documented. Peña Amaya is well known through geographical and narratives sources, since it appears in several late Roman itineraries and had an important political character in the sixth century, when the chronicler John of Biclaro expressly recalls this place as conquered by Leovigild in 574, in the context of his wars of expansion and consolidation of the Visigothic kingdom in the Upper Ebro Valley. In the last decades of the seventh century it was also an episcopal see, then occupied by Muslims and, thereafter, by the kingdom of Asturias.²⁶ Even in the ninth century it still had a significant territorial relevance; this explains the action of Rodrigo, the first Castilian count, who conquered it in 860.²⁷ Unfortunately there are no systematic excavations of Peña Amaya beyond some limited surveys, all of which are insufficient to understand a site of this complexity, which is, moreover, central to our efforts to understand the forms of appropriation of space undertaken by the different central authorities that governed parts of northern Spain from the sixth to the ninth century.

²¹ Agustín Azkarate Garai-Olaun and Iñaki García Camino, El espacio circumpirenaico occidental durante los siglos VI al X d.C según el registro arqueológico: algunos interrogantes, in: Asturias entre visigodos y mozárabes, ed. Luis Caballero/Pedro Mateos/César García de Castro (Madrid 2012) 331–352 at 348.

²² Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo/Miguel Loza Uriarte/Javier Niso Lorenzo, Identidades y ajuares en las necrópolis alto-medievales: Estudios isotópicos del cementerio de San Martín de Dulantzi, Álava (siglos VI-X), in: Archivo Español de Arqueología 86 (2013) 219–224.

²³ A. Azkarate Garai-Olaun/J.L. Solaun/ J. Nuñez, ‘Materiales y contextos cerámicos de los siglos VI al X en el País Vasco’, in, Cerámicas tardorromanas y altomedievales en la Península Ibérica, ed. L. Caballero Zoreda/P. Mateos Cruz/M. Retuerce Velasco (Madrid, 2003) 366.

²⁴ For a definition of peripheral areas in Early Medieval Hispania, see Pablo Díaz, Monasteries in a peripheral area: seventh-century *Gallaecia*, in: Topographies of power in the Early Middle Ages, ed. Myke de Jong/ Frank Thews/Carine Van Rhijn (Brill 2001) 329–336.

²⁵ José Ángel Lecanda Esteban, El epígrafe consacratorio de Santa María de Mijangos (Burgos): aportaciones para su estudio, in: Letras de Deusto 65 (1994) 173–196.

²⁶ Javier Quintana López, Amaya, ¿capital de Cantabria?, in: Los cántabros en la Antigüedad. La Historia frente al mito (Santander 2008) 229–264.

²⁷ Annales Castellani Antiquiores, I.7: In era DCCCLXLVIII (a.D. 860) populauit Rudericus commes Amaya (ed. José Carlos Martín, Los Annales Castellani Antiquiores y Annales Castellani Recentiores: edición y traducción anotada), in: Territorio, Sociedad y Poder 4 (2009) 203–226, at 208.

These processes linking the crown and local communities in complex and often violent ways, can also be seen a little further east, inside the ill-defined political space of the *Vascones*, an area in which the ‘city’ of *Victoriacum* was founded in order to anchor to the kingdom those peripheral lands after Leovigild’s wars in the north²⁸. In the Ebro Valley the *Vita Sancti Emiliani* also shows in *Cantabria* (parts of modern Castile and Rioja) local aristocracies, owners of lands and slaves, able to challenge Visigothic kings.²⁹ Braulio of Zaragoza, a Gothic bishop close to Isidore of Seville, used to describe those Cantabrian aristocracies, significantly using words such as *senatores* and *curialis*, reminding us of the centrality, for court intellectuals, of language infused with urban reference points in describing social realities in the periphery of the *regnum*, where the city and its institutions were only a faint memory of a distant past.

Therefore, in central places like *castra* (such as Bilibio on the Ebro River),³⁰ cities and bishops were key for the kings as an instrument of appropriation of those rural landscapes. In addition, bishops were able to relate to local elites (if not of local aristocratic provenance themselves).³¹ One such example would be the bishop of *Auca* (modern Villafranca de Montes de Oca, Burgos): known to have been active in the consecration of the church of Tedeja on behalf of the king,³² the prelate Asterius shows his political personality as an effective agent of central power in the local scenarios that are identified with *Cantabria* in narrative sources such as *Vita Sancti Emiliani*. Even in those areas in which the city (the traditional seat of the bishop’s cathedral) did not exist or was very weak and problematic, bishops and local aristocracies appear interacting with kings.

Visigothic political and military actions do have, however, certain content for the interpretation of the spatial appropriation processes in the Ebro Valley and the lands that fall to the east of the Iter XXXIV, up to and including the ancient city of *Pompaelo* (modern Pamplona) within the *Regnum*. The Roman road thus acted as the real vector of Visigothic control in the whole area after the military actions of the last quarter of the sixth century, and the land of *Vascones* acted as a complex frontier³³ in which Frankish military actions are also documented from the seventh century.³⁴ The strategies of dominion were thus mainly sustained by the political role and charisma of local bishops liable for the representation of the central power in areas around Amaya, Tedeja or Pamplona.³⁵

Other evidence of the relations between Toledo and local communities are the epigraphs written in caves located in southern Álava (Las Gobas) relatively near the important political vector of the Ebro

²⁸ *Leovegildus rex partem Vasconiae occupat et civitatem, quae Victoriacum nuncupatur, condidit* (a. 581) Iohannes Biclarensis, *Chronica Minora*, (ed. Theodor Mommsen, MGH Auctores Antiquissimi 11, Berlin 1894) II, 216. The failure of *Victoriacum*, a “city” never again mentioned in the sources, the precise location of which is not even known, demonstrates the weakness of Visigothic power in the area. Javier Arce recently proposed the interpretation of *Victoriacum* as a platform of fiscal control, beyond the royal propaganda of the Visigothic intellectuals, interested in depicting their king as *urbis conditoris*, Javier Arce, *Visigodos y Vascones*, in: *Los Vascones de las fuentes antiguas. En torno a una etnia de la Antigüedad peninsular* (Barcelona 2009) 243–251 at 249.

²⁹ Santiago Castellanos, *Poder social, aristocracias y “hombre santo” en la Hispania visigoda: la “vita aemiliani” de Braulio de Zaragoza* (Logroño 1998).

³⁰ The castro Bilibensi, mentioned in the *Vita Sancti Aemiliani*, of the sixth-century, J. Oroz, *Sancti Bravlionis Caesaravgvstani episcopi. Vita Sancti Aemiliani*, *Perficit* 9 (1978) 165–227, at 189.

³¹ Iñaki Martín Viso, *Organización episcopal y poder entre la Antigüedad tardía y el Medioevo (siglos V–XI): las sedes de Calahorra, Oca y Osma*, in: *Iberia: Revista de Antigüedad* 2 (1999) 151–190.

³² Lecanda Esteban, *El epígrafe* 188.

³³ Céline Martin, *La géographie du pouvoir dans l’Espagne visigothique* (Lille 2003) 31–141.

³⁴ *Teudebertus et Teudericus exercitum contra Wasconis dirigunt ipsoque Deo auxiliante deiectionis suae dominatione redeiunt et tributarius faciunt*, Fredegarii, *Chronicae* (ed. John Michael Wallace-Hadrill, *Frédégaire: Chronique des temps mérovingiens. Livre IV et Continuations* (Turnhout 2001) IV.21. The fourth book of Fredegarii includes more information about Frankish interests south of the Pyrenees but much of it is unreliable: Armango Besga, *Sobre la credibilidad del pasaje IV, 33 de la llamada “Crónica de Fredegario”*, *Letras de Deusto* 77 (1997) 9–38.

³⁵ The characteristics of the insertion into the kingdom of the city of Pamplona and its aristocracies is almost unknown. Only the presence of some bishops and clerics of the bishopric of Pamplona can be documented between the sixth and seventh centuries in the Visigothic Council enactments. Juan José Larrea, *El obispado de Pamplona en época visigoda*, in: *Hispania Sacra* 97 (1996) 124–147. An article which caused a deep debate on the bishopric of Pamplona: Koldo Larrañaga, *Sobre el obispado pamplonés en época visigoda*, in: *Hispania Sacra* 99 (1997) 279–317, Larrea’s reply in *De nuevo en torno a los primeros siglos del obispado de Pamplona*, *Hispania Sacra* 99 (1997) 319–326 and, finally, Koldo Larrañaga, *A vueltas con los obispos de Pamplona de época visigoda: apostillas a una réplica*, in: *Hispania Sacra* 101 (1998) 35–62.

River (Fig. 3). These *graffiti* have served to identify Visigothic cursive of the seventh centuries which denotes the access of their authors (living in very complex settlement landscapes) to not strictly local cultural spheres,³⁶ at the same time in which archaeological records show the birth of a whole complex network of settlements, showing the profound transformation of social landscapes which took place between Álava and the Cantabrian Sea in the last decades of the seventh century.³⁷

In any case, the relatively short duration of the Visigothic political adventure in these territories, with Toledo controlling modern Rioja, northern Burgos and parts of Alava up to Pamplona, does not allow us to hypothesise about the possible evolution of the logic of territorial appropriation nor the types of relationship between the centre, imposed by the central power (through *civitates*), and the spaces arising from the political and military interests of local elites and aristocracies (based on *castra* and fortified villages). The rapid disappearance of Visigothic power after the defeat of Guadalete and its replacement by an Islamic social formation thus remains unaffected, even when the process is clarified. Islamic armies gained control with treaties over the territories that were once under Toledo's rule, as can be shown in the Ebro Valley with Count Casius³⁸ and in Pamplona. Here, the archaeology of the dead has now reinforced the written references to a Muslim garrison within its walls, thanks to the finding of rings with Cufic inscriptions in the city cemeteries.³⁹ Once again the valleys of the Pyrenees remained a frontier buffer with Cordova and with the Carolingians.⁴⁰

Subsequently, the Muslim withdrawal to the northern Iberian plateau during the mid-eighth century (including parts of northern Castile and Álava, but not Rioja, firmly in Muslim hands),⁴¹ caused the third failure, after the disappearance of Rome and the Visigothic defeat, in the construction of channels of interaction between exogenous political authorities and local communities. Thereafter, the scarce sources give an image of a grey frontier zone located in the periphery, very active militarily as the backdrop for the emergence of new aristocracies linked to rural landscapes and liable to maintain relations with the kingdom of Asturias. Significantly, Pamplona, which is now the only city in the Christian territory north of the Ebro River, will be the cradle of a new kingdom.⁴²

³⁶ Agustín Azkárte Galai-Olaun, *Arqueología cristiana de la antigüedad tardía en Álava, Guipúzcoa Vizcaya* (Vitoria 1988) 323–325.

³⁷ J.A. Quirós, *Early medieval landscapes 306–310*.

³⁸ Jesús Lorenzo Jiménez, *La dawla de los Banu Qasi: origen, auge y caída de una dinastía muladí en la frontera superior de Al-Andalus* (Madrid 2010).

³⁹ Patxuka de Miguel, *Mortui viventes docent. La maqbara de Pamplona*, in: *De Mahoma a Carlomagno. Los primeros tiempos (siglos VII–IX)* (XXXIX Semana de Estudios Medievales Estella Pamplona, 2013) 351–375.

⁴⁰ In the context of Carolingian military actions over Pamplona, even Einhard could describe the societies active around the Pyrenees without any mention of a city nor of Pamplona itself: [...] *salusque Pyrinei superato, omnibus, quae adierat, oppidis atque castellis in deditionem acceptis, salvo et incolomi exercitu revertitur; praeter quod in ipso Pyrinei iugo Wasconicam perfidiam parumper in redeundo contigit experiri. Nam cum agmine longo, ut loci et angustiarum situs permittebat, porrectus iret exercitus, Wascones in summi montis vertice positos insidiis – est enim locus ex opacitate silvarum, quarum ibi maxima est copia, insidiis ponendis oportunus – extremam impedimentorum partem et eos qui novissimi agminis incedentes subsidio praecedentes tuebantur desuper incursantes in subiectam vallem deiciunt, consertoque cum eis proelio usque ad unum omnes interficiunt, ac direptis impedimentis, noctis beneficio, quae iam instabat, protecti summa cum celeritate in diversa disperguntur. Adiuvaat in hoc facto Wascones et levitas armorum et loci, in quo res gerebatur, situs, e contra Francos et armorum gravitas et loci iniquitas per omnia Wasconibus reddidit impares*, (Einhard, *Vita Karoli Imperatoris* (ed. G. H. Pertz, MGH Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum 25, Hannover/Leipzig 1880) 9. The references to mountains and to the roughness both of the landscapes and of the Vascones echoes the Visigothic and Merovingian chronicles. For this kind of 'rhetoric of denigration' in the frontiers of Carolingian realm, see Julia M. H. Smith, *Confronting identities: the rhetoric and reality of a Carolingian frontier*, in: *Integration und Herrschaft. Ethnische identitäten und Soziale Organisation im Frühmittelalter*, ed. Walter Pohl/Maximilian Diesenberger (Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 3, Wien 2002), 169–184 at 177. For the ambiguity of written references in regions beyond the Carolingian boundaries such as the middle Danube, see Maddalena Betti, *The Making of Christian Moravia (858–882). Papal power and political reality*, (Leiden/Boston 2013) 138–154.

⁴¹ Lorenzo, *La dawla*.

⁴² Juan José Larrea, *Construir un reino en la periferia de Al-Andalus: Pamplona y el Pirineo occidental en los siglos VIII y IX*, in: *Symposium internacional: Poder y simbología en Europa. Siglos VIII–X*, ed. Francisco Javier Fernández Conde/César de Castro Valdés (Oviedo 2009) 279–308.

3 LANTARÓN AND ÁLAVA: BISHOPS AND COUNTS IN THE LATE NINTH CENTURY

That time of strong political changes did not affect the consolidation of a network of villages through the eighth century. Moreover, in the following decades, written sources (Christian and Muslim chronicles and, for the first time, notices included in private documents copied in cartularies)⁴³ show the consolidation of new logics of political articulation on a supra-local level. In fact, the sources dating from the ninth and tenth centuries illuminate the consolidation of new political territorialities such as the counties of Lantarón and Álava, and from an ecclesiastical point of view, the birth of the bishopric of Valpuesta and Álava.

In this new political context, the most detailed narrative sources on the northern territories were written in Asturias, within the intellectual entourages of the court of Oviedo, thanks to works like the *Albedense Chronicle* and the *Chronicle of Alfonso III*, both written in the late ninth century. Notices which provided information (better: propaganda) on Asturian conquests date from the eighth century: in the description of Alfonso's and Fruela's attacks on urban centres, which are located along a vast Iberian space from Braga and Lugo to Osma and Clunia.⁴⁴ What stands out is the reference, for the first time in centuries, to four cities in the Upper Ebro Valley: a ghostly re-appearance of the ancient cities of *Auca* and *Veleia* now accompanied by the mentions of *Miranda* and *Reuendeca*. All of these cities are named very occasionally, making it difficult to reach any conclusion about them, beyond their role as structures for organising their respective territories in the mind and the intentions of the author of the chronicle. These mentions thus serve to complicate the picture, rather than helping us to understand it.

The two versions of the *Chronicle of Alfonso III* later indicate Álava and other nearby territories: *Eo tempore populantur Primorias, Libana, Transmera, Supporta, Carranza, Bardulies que nunc appellatur Castella et pars maritima Gallecie: Alaba namque, Bizkai, Alaone et Urdunia a suis incolis reperiuntur semper esse possesse, sicut Pampilona [Degius est] atque Berroza*.⁴⁵

More than a true reflection of the internal nature of those areas, this list provides an image much closer to the ways in which Oviedo understood and described the space between the Ebro and the sea (and also other spaces placed beyond its borders, like Pamplona); areas clearly characterised as political units over which the kingdom of Asturias was interested in expanding its influence. The unknown author of the *Chronicle* drew a political map of the Cantabrian fringe, naming a single city, Pamplona, the centre of a new authority. In other provinces and territories with a clear political personality, such as Álava, Biscay and Castile, which continued to be active throughout centuries, there were no cities. This is a reality that contrasts sharply with the *civitates* conquered by Alfonso and Fruela, especially *Veleia*, the ancient Roman city in Álava, that will reappear in the *Albedense* mentioned as a bishopric when the chronicle lists the sees of the kingdom.

Let's focus on this fact: it is highly significant that the *Albedense* identified two bishops with two ancient Roman cities situated in Álava: *Albarus* in *Ueleia* and *Felemirus* in *Uxama* (which is Osma de Valdegovía, near Valpuesta).⁴⁶ But are we not talking about an area without cities?

As in the Visigothic period, Asturian writers held, during the ninth century, the bishop-city binomial as a rhetorical instrument of dominion, using the traditional identification of the prelate with his urban see, even in areas where the city was a memory of a distant past. Indeed, the bishops of Valpuesta and Álava never exercised their offices within the walls of a *civitas*. These bishoprics were rural and their bishops were people from local aristocracies, as written evidence from the ninth century demonstrates through documents preserved in successive copies included in the major monastic cartularies of Castile (Valpuesta and San Millán de la Cogolla). The sees of Valpuesta and Álava show how those institutions arise in spaces controlled by aristocracies that did not require the presence of any city in order to establish their dominance and, furthermore, to be recognised by the Asturian kings and their political entourages from the last decades of the ninth century. Reasons of prestige explain the rhetorical

⁴³ Juan Antonio Quirós and Igor Santos Salazar, I villaggi medievali dell'Alto Ebro alla luce dei testi e dell'archeologia. L'emergere di *leader* dei villaggi e l'articolazione dei poteri territoriali nel X secolo, in: *Paesaggi, comunità, villaggi medievali*, ed. Paola Galetti (Spoleto 2012) 257–279 at 263–277.

⁴⁴ *Crónicas asturianas* (ed. Gil Fernández J., *Cronicas Asturianas. Crónica de Alfonso III. (Rotense y «A Sebastián»)*), Crónica *Albedense* (y «Profética»), Oviedo 1985.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, cap. XIV.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* Crónica *Albedense*, cap. XII, 9. The passage was written around the year 881.

strategies conducted in Oviedo, where the court resolved to link ancient landscapes (through references to Roman cities in the chronicles) to new, rural bishoprics.⁴⁷

Despite these differences, however, the bishops moved on similar rhetorical rails to those documented in Carolingian Europe⁴⁸ thanks to political experiments conducted within the *condados* of Lantarón and Alava, counties overlapping with the areas of influence of the prelates of Valpuesta and Alava, respectively. In fact, the bishops were equipped with a charisma that is supported both by their inclusion in the narratives of Asturian power (in particular in the *Albeldense*, as has been seen), and their cooperation with local lay aristocrats recognised as counts by the same Asturian kingdom.

In these territories, strategies of distinction had, since the end the eighth century, operated within a complex society characterised by the existence of strong hierarchies both from an ecclesiastical and military point of view. The cooperation of counts and bishops, and their inclusion in the kingdom, served to empower both in their spaces of political and economic action, as the documents preserved in the monastic cartularies of Valpuesta and San Millán de la Cogolla demonstrate, displaying the joint strategies of Felmiro de Valpuesta and Gonzalo Tellez,⁴⁹ the count in Lantarón, or those of Diego de Valpuesta and Fernán González, the count in Lantarón and in Castile respectively,⁵⁰ all of them operating under the rule of Asturian kingdoms, in spite of periods of rebellion.⁵¹ From the bishops of Valpuesta to counts, proximity to central powers was fundamental to being able to exercise considerable political weight on a supralocal scale.

But what is important to emphasise here is the fact that Lantarón and Valpuesta are separated only by seven miles as the crow flies. This closeness did not lead to their convergence into a single place of urban (or proto-urban) character in the way that has been documented in the great monasteries of Italy or Anglo-Saxon England⁵². Nothing is known about Valpuesta's capacity to establish itself as a great centre of consumption and exchange because Valpuesta has not been excavated.

The government of the territory appears, therefore, to have been intimately linked to episcopal and comital authority but, in order to make both work effectively, counts and prelates needed to rely on more than the charisma attached to their title (we are, of course, far removed from the formal lay and ecclesiastical hierarchies visible in the Carolingian Europe, despite the similarities with the latter shown by the bishops and counts operating in Lantarón-Valpuesta). On the other hand, the exercise of power in Lantarón needed tangible material bases, namely, landed estates, forests and livestock, which often appear appended to the private control of proprietary churches⁵³. Churches seem to be the structure upon which the economic supremacy of bishops and counts was organised.⁵⁴ This represents a strategy

⁴⁷ The see of Álava with the ancient city *Veleia* and Valpuesta with *Uxama*. A study of the genesis of the bishopric of Valpuesta in Igor Santos Salazar, *Obispos, abades, presbíteros y aldeas. Una aproximación a las formas y las bases del dominio social en la Álava del siglo IX* in: *Mundos Medievales. Espacio, sociedades y poder. Homenaje al Profesor José Ángel García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre* (Santander 2012) 885–899 at 893–896.

⁴⁸ On the role of bishops in the ninth centuries M. de Jong, *Ecclesia and the early medieval polity*, in: *Staat im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. Stuart Airlie/Walter Pohl/Helmut Reimitz (*Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters* 11, Wien 2006) 113–133 at 132 and Steffen Patzold, *Die Bischöfe im Karolingischen Staat, Politisches Wissen über die politische Ordnung im Frankereich des 9. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Staat im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. Stuart Airlie/Walter Pohl/Helmut Reimitz (*Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters* 11, Wien 2006) 133–162.

⁴⁹ *Los Becerro Gótico y Galicanos de Valpuesta* (ed. José Manuel Ruiz Asencio/Irene Ruiz Albi/Mauricio Herrero Jiménez, Madrid 2010) doc. n. 10 (13/V/911) but including information about the last years of the ninth century.

⁵⁰ *El Becerro Galicano de san Millán de la Cogolla* (ed. Fernando García Andreva, *El Becerro Galicano de San Millán de la Cogolla. Edición y estudio*, San Millán de la Cogolla (Logroño 2010) 914: *Hec termino supra dicto vel hereditate ego, comite Fredinando Gondissalviz* (in Lantarón and Castile), *per lingua domnus meus, Didacus episcopus* (of Valpuesta), *agnovi, sensum dedi et confirmavi* (01/VIII/947).

⁵¹ *...rege Adefonso in Oveto et comite Gondissalvo Telliz in Lantarón* in Justo Pérez de Urbel, *El condado de Castilla* (Madrid 1945) III, 281 (a. 897).

⁵² Richard Hodges, *Light in the Dark Ages. The Rise and Fall of San Vincenzo al Volturno* (London/Ithaca 1997). John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford 2006) 246–290.

⁵³ For a wider context, see Wendy Davies, *Acts of Giving. Individuals, Community and Church in Tenth-Century Christian Spain* (Oxford 2007).

⁵⁴ The centrality of proprietary churches in the strategies of distinction of the aristocracies of Álava-Lantarón in J.A. Quirós/I. Santos Salazar, *Funding and Owning Churches in Early Medieval Álava: The Creation, Transmission and Monumentalisation of Memory*, in: *Churches and Powers in Early Medieval Europe. Integrating archaeological and historical approaches 400–1100 AD*, ed. Javier Sánchez Pardo/Michael Shapland (Turnhout, Forthcoming).

of social distinction, which other people, such as priests and lay elites (as in the case of Avitus and his church of Tobillas),⁵⁵ also drew upon, but on a lesser scale when compared with the assets accumulated by bishops, which must have been accompanied by privileges stemming from their recognition by the Asturian monarchy.

Thus, counts and bishops, as social leaders, did not need the city (or its ideological rhetoric and symbolism) to build effective strategies of domination in their zones of influence, nor to interact comfortably within the complex political network of the kingdom of Asturias. Moreover, the Asturian kings, contrary to what the Visigothic kings had attempted, could not influence the logic of appropriation of the political space created autonomously by counts and bishops⁵⁶. The Islamic example corroborates this hypothesis: a strong state can, and indeed could, change in its own favour the articulation of a territory controlled by aristocracies rooted in ancient cities. From this point of view, the foundation of new cities across Al-Andalus during the tenth century (and in the Ebro Valley we have the case of the Muslim city of Tudela) shows how the phenomenon of urbanism in the Early Medieval Ages was related to the political capacities of the central powers⁵⁷.

Thus, in the Valpuesta–Lantarón–Álava area the phenomenon of urban foundations as a platform for the appropriation of space by central powers had to wait until the second half of the twelfth century, when the first foundations of royal '*villas*' by the will of the kings of Navarre and Castile took place. Meanwhile, the written sources provide data about rich aristocracies operating in sub-regional spheres that can be identified with the political players within the Lantarón–Valpuesta construct, integrated into the kingdom of Asturias, but where royal authority was, in fact, rather superficial and largely based on local aristocracies. In fact, Asturian kings did not, and probably could not, found *ex novo* any urban centre as a mirror to reflect their power in the area, something which is in itself telling. On the contrary, they added to their political authority by boosting episcopal sees and counties created by local aristocracies in areas without cities but with huge social and political complexity, as has been seen.

4 CONCLUSIONS

With archaeological and written records now available, it is difficult to make claims for the total collapse of complex forms of political organisation north of the Ebro River, despite the weight that the Spanish historiographical tradition and its primitivist theories have had in the vision of early medieval northern Iberia, from the Asturias to the Pyrenees; that is, imagining a space of very simple political structures, the main engine of which was always identified as war and looting until, at least, the tenth century.⁵⁸

A new critical reading of the historical sources shows, however, a society controlled by aristocracies, which did not need an urban setting to articulate the exercise of their political prerogatives within different political structures, nor to oversee the imposition of their social hegemony in areas like Lantarón or Álava. Thus, the disappearance of almost all *civitates* after the disruption of the Roman Empire (with different rhythms between the sea and the Ebro Valley, as we have seen) meant the end of the urban world in the area between the sixth and the twelfth century, but all these processes cannot be identified with the end of complex social and political structures in the same landscapes.

Therefore, to analyse social hierarchies in rural spaces such as those which are occupying these pages, we have tried to emphasise the strong relationship between the city and the central authority: the city as a privileged centre of the state (Roman, Visigoth or Muslim), as a tool for political and social appropriation of a particular area, and as a place of residence for its officers and intellectuals; as rhetorical centres of power similar to those celebrated by Isidore of Seville.

⁵⁵ Juan José Larrea Construir iglesias, construir territorio: las dos fases altomedievales de San Román de Tobillas (Álava), in: Monasteria et territoria. Elites, edificación y territorio en el mediterráneo medieval (Siglos V–XI), (Madrid 2007) 321–336. An archaeological analysis of the church of Tobillas.

⁵⁶ Political articulation that can also be found in the mountains between modern Cantabria and Castile. Robert Portass, The contours and contexts of public power in the tenth-century Liébana, in: Journal of Medieval History 38/4 (2012) 389–407.

⁵⁷ Santos Salazar, Trasformazioni 115–116.

⁵⁸ Theory advanced by Abilio Barbero/Marcelo Vigil, La formación del feudalismo en la Península Ibérica (Barcelona 1979) which has had an enormous influence on the Spanish historiography.

Examples such as Amaya or Lantarón–Valpuesta confront us with realities less sharp and more problematic about the notions of city, but also about authority or the nature of the state in the Early Middle Ages. What mechanisms determined the infeasibility of an urban centre centralised around the Lantarón–Valpuesta axis? What alchemy enables the success of a state over a territory and, therefore, the perpetuation of the city as a symbol of their ability to take over and rule in certain favoured large areas? What kind of social complexity hides behind the image created by written sources whose structure passes exclusively through the filter of ecclesiastical archives?

These questions still await the development of new archaeological projects and new approaches to documentary texts, but one gets the impression that, at times, it was the will and the nature of the aristocracies themselves which favoured other types of settlement articulation and other ways of social distinction, a choice that has nothing to do with levels of political complexity reached by a society at a given time. In northern Spain, therefore, cities, as well as areas without them, are actually optimal when it comes to reflecting on the territoriality of the local and central authorities. They also serve a purpose, when we meditate on the problems related to the ‘*Staatlichkeit*’ and its different meanings, which reflects the complexity of an age characterised by strong political experimentations.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Walter Pohl, *Staat und Herrschaft im Frühmittelalter. Überlegungen zum Forschungsstand*, in: *Staat im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. Stuart Airlie/Walter Pohl/Helmut Reimitz (Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 11, Wien 2006) 9–38.