

Jesús BERMEJO TIRADO – Ignasi GRAU MIRA (Hgg.), The Archaeology of Peasantry in Roman Spain. Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter 2022, VIII + 299 S., 74 Abb., 7 Tab., EUR 89,95. ISBN: 978-3-11-075720-0

This book is the product of a seminar held in 2018 at the Universidad Carlos III, focused on the Roman peasantry in Hispania. It is undoubtedly a significant contribution to archaeological and historical studies since it offers an alternative to the heavy dependency on written sources and seeks to question the hegemony of the *villa* as the paramount feature of Roman Spain's rural reality. On top of it, this is the first articulated work on the topic that uses archaeological data until recently limited to so-called "gray literature", that is, excavation reports and other low-impact publications that only describe some finds. Another central aspect of the book is the valuable collection of different methodological approaches.

The introduction by the book editors, Jesús Bermejo Tirado and Ignasi Grau Mira, starts with a theoretical discussion on the concept of peasantry, which clarifies their perspectives. That is unusual for works about ancient and medieval archaeology and history, but for us, it constitutes a valuable asset for the book. However, we highlight that the focus is given almost exclusively to the Peasant Studies – from Alexander Chayanov to Teodor Shanin – offering little regarding the field's renovation and lacking other essential authors, especially Jan Douwe van der Ploeg. In this presentation, the editors also lay the book's objectives, establishing these as: 1) "to search for the best archaeological proxies to identify the presence and to analyze the living conditions of the peasant communities in the diverse rural areas of Roman Spain" and 2) "the possibility of defining the social and economic structures of those communities in the same way as other authors focused on several historical and cultural contexts". To achieve these objectives, the editors divided the book into three parts: I) "From Traditional to New Approaches: Methodological Insights"; II) "Beyond *Villascapae*: Peasants in Landscapes"; and III) "Comparing *Villae* and Peasants Habitats in Settlement Systems". There is also an Introduction and a Conclusion. Puzzlingly, the chapters are not numbered. The book also presents a list of contributors, a list of figures, and an (onomastic) index.

The first part ("*From Traditional to New Approaches: Methodological Insights*") comprises three chapters. The first ("*Early Imperial Roman Peasant Communities in Central Spain: Agrarian Structure, Standards of Living, and Inequality in the North of Roman Carpetania*"), by Jesús Bermejo Tirado, distances itself from the *villa* paradigm by analyzing ten non-elite sites in the territories between Complutum, Mantua, and Titulci. The main frame of analysis is household archaeology, with

the author focusing on archaeological proxies, the patterns of tableware consumption, and habitat size. From this analysis, Bermejo Tirado concludes that he is dealing with a reality consistent with a peasant society, one whose levels of inequality would have been kept stable from the 1st to the 3rd century.

The second chapter (*“Perceiving the Countryside: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Agrarian Cycles and Tasks in the Mosaics of Roman Spain”*), by Luz Neira, analyzes several mosaics from Roman Spain dated between the 3rd and the 5th century. While most of these mosaics represent viticulture, these representations are straightforward ones. Given their importance in the region during this period, there is also a noticeable absence of representations of olives. As expected, the author’s conclusion points to the symbolic nature of mosaic representations. Moreover, Hispanic *domini* used these symbolic representations to stress their links with the Roman state.

The third chapter (*“Investigating Livestock Practices in the Countryside of Roman Spain: An Archaeozoological Approach”*), by Lúdia Colominas and Abel Gallego-Valle, focuses on analyzing the archaeozoological evidence, emphasizing osteological analysis. The authors framed three different contexts between the 1st century BC and the 3rd century AD: a coastal rural site (Tolegassos), a rural mid-mountain site (Can Rubió), and an eastern Pyrenean site (Llívia). By establishing a good dialogue with the theoretical aspects presented in the volume’s introduction, Colominas and Gallego-Valle show how the evidence supports the general theoretical proposal advanced in the work. Thus, cattle diversity appears as a “security strategy”; cattle rearing practices vary with the communities’ environments’ conditions; and, lastly, a dual economy system connects *villae* with diverse peasant communities. The grouping of these three articles under the same part is well thought out and a good choice, as it demonstrates how very different methodological approaches illuminated a variety of aspects while, at the same time, arriving at convergent conclusions based on the dialogue with the shared theoretical perspectives.

The second part (*“Beyond Villascapas: Peasants in Landscapes”*) also comprises three chapters. The first chapter (*“A Peasant Landscape in the Eastern Roman Spain. An Archaeological Approach to Territorial Organization and Economic Models”*) was written by Ignasi Grau Mira, and it is a work that uses the criticism of the *villa*’s paradigm to express the author’s concern with the diachronic transformation of the landscape. Grau Mira studies the Alcoi Valley region from before the Roman presence until the early imperial period and, through this case study, demonstrates that there was a relative continuity between pre-Roman occupation patterns with a progressive monumentalization of the rural areas. Hence, his conclusion points

to a process of adaptation of traditional Iberian structures to a new Roman socio-economic model.

The following chapter ("*Exploring the Complexity of Roman Agrarian Landscapes. State of the Art and a Study Case from the Southwestern Iberian Peninsula*") by Victorino Herrera, Luis Perea, Cristina García, and Martina Parini also begins with a case study, this time Contributa and its surroundings, in a long chronological perspective from prehistorical times until the 20th century using surveys as its methodological approach. This chapter's main merit is the possibility of understanding the landscape as a palimpsest, trying to understand the changes in human activity over time.

Jesús García Sánchez wrote this section's last chapter ("*Roman Peasantry, Spatial Archaeology, and Off-site Survey in Hispania*"), and it begins with a defense of the surveys as a valid and important methodology for rural archaeological research. This study focuses on the manuring process – with ceramic dispersion – as an aspect of peasant agency, which could even be compared with the Amazonian *terra preta*. García Sánchez highlights the importance peasantry played in the social organization, demography, economic strategies, and cultural ambiance during the passage from the late Iron Age to the Roman period through surveys in two zones of the Iberian Peninsula: the *ager Segisamonensis* (in the Duero basin) and some areas in *Lusitania*. For him, one of the main aspects of understanding the landscape changes after the region's incorporation into the Roman world is precisely the indigenous resilience, mainly in areas without colonization. Once again, it is very adequate to group these works as the book's second part because all chapters emphasize that the *villa* model is insufficient to explain the historical dynamics observed in Roman Spain. Besides, they offer an exciting possibility by considering the surveys and what they can provide as sources of information about the peasant agency during the development of Roman Spain.

The book's last part ("*Comparing Villae and Peasants Habitats in Settlement Systems*") comprises four chapters. The first of those ("*On the Margins of the Villa System? Rural Architecture and Socioeconomic Strategies in North-Eastern Roman Spain*"), written by Victor Revilla, questions the presupposed incompatibility between the *villa* system and the peasant economy. By analyzing building types usually seen in opposition to the *villa* system, the author shows how they were interrelated. The early imperial sites are located in the Northeastern parts of Spain, and most are very compatible with the workings of the *villa* system. Thus, while it is important not to identify these diverse types of sites with *villas*, it is also clear that these were related to strategies of "property dispersion strategy habitually used by the Roman aristocracy".

The next chapter ("*Villae and Farms: Early Imperial Rural Settlement in the Adaja-Eresma Basin (Central Roman Spain)*") is the contribution from Margarita Sánchez-Simón, and its main objective is to understand the Adaja-Eresma Basin rural configuration between prehistory and the Roman imperial period. The data presented in the chapter points to a very dense habitat presence, mainly near water sources, and shows how other activities were probably important to these sites, such as the local exploration of salt and iron. Besides these elements, the text also gives an essential defense of the association of data from surveys and excavations as a way to understand rural realities better.

The third chapter in this section ("*With the measure you use you will be measured back... Late Roman and Early Medieval Peasants in Central Spain on Examination*") was written by Alfonso Vigil-Escalera Guirado. The chapter's main argument is related to the contrasting evidence for the Roman and Early Medieval peasantry in Iberia. That is explicit regarding the scarcity of evidence on Roman peasants' dwellings and burial places, while there is much more evidence for the Early Medieval peasants. The chapter's main question asks if it is possible to characterize as peasants "those who lived and worked in rural compounds during the late Roman period on the same terms as those usually used in relation to *rustici* from the Visigothic and Early Medieval periods" (p. 233). The author's conclusion is primarily negative, emphasizing the differences between the evidence for the two periods and his uncertainty in characterizing those late Roman people as peasants.

The last chapter in the third part ("*From Villa to Village? Relational Approaches within Roman and Medieval Iberian Rural Societies*") is by Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo. This chapter is one of the few in the volume that starts with a conceptual discussion about the peasantry. Even more, it advances the discussion beyond what the editors proposed and incorporates more updated literature about peasants, mainly through Van Der Ploeg. It is also one of the few chapters engaging in historiographical discussion, as it stresses the development of medieval peasant studies in Europe in general and in Spain in particular. The author points to how the interpretation of peasant society is challenging not only because of our sources but mainly because of inadequate theoretical and methodological perspectives. In that way, Quirós Castillo concludes that academic fragmentation (both chronological and regarding the types of evidence) is one of the main limits to our understanding of past peasant societies. Nevertheless, he also argues that understanding those societies is a critical way to improve our approaches to analyzing our past.

The editors, Grau Mira and Bermejo Tirado, wrote the volume's final chapter ("*Conclusions*"). It aims to highlight some of the volume's central aspects: as the

preceding chapters make clear, the villa paradigm appears patently insufficient as a framework for the current research. Given the source's scarcity, the editors emphasize how it is precisely the interdisciplinarity and the diverse methodologies that have been driving these new developments in our knowledge of the Roman peasantry. In that way, Grau Mira and Bermejo Tirado, argue that this "volume can only be considered as a first step in a direction that needs much more research" (p. 280), pointing to the need for more and broader comparative analysis – both in regard to spatial and chronological scales.

This volume is a significant contribution that, for the first time, gathers essential information about the peasant world in the Iberian Peninsula. As usual in collected volumes, the book could be more systematic in its approach: for example, it shifts from particular case studies to more general reflections on the question. Regarding the images in the book, all are in black and white. This editorial option is a problem, especially for the second chapter in Part I, which deals with mosaics (and also the figures on p. 129-130). Tables (p. 40) and diagrams (p. 35, p. 258-259) are usually smaller than they should be, making them hard to read. Despite the book's interesting theoretical approach, as seen in its discussion of the concept of peasantry, most chapters do not systematically engage with this conceptual framework. In this sense, the book is more of a collection of papers focusing on the Roman rural world beyond the *villa* paradigm. Thus, the book's introduction and several chapters explicitly position themselves as theoretical and empirical critiques of the *villa* paradigm. Considering this more specific focus, another possible title for the volume would be "Against the *villa*". Nevertheless, a few chapters also develop this critique from the perspective of the Roman and Early Medieval peasantry, such as the contributions by Quirós Castillo and Vigil-Escalera. In no way should these minor remarks distract the reader from the importance of this volume, which we hope to see followed by others – both by collecting more case studies and by further developing the theoretical and methodological approaches for studying the Roman and post-Roman peasantry.

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