



# HOUSEHOLD GOODS

IN THE EUROPEAN MEDIEVAL AND  
EARLY MODERN COUNTRYSIDE

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edited by CATARINA TENTE & CLAUDIA THEUNE

RURALIA XIV



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# Social inequality and household goods in central Iberia during the Early Middle Ages

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## Abstract

We present in this paper the preliminary results of an archaeological and spatial analysis of household objects from two sites from the early medieval period in central Iberia. Our basic hypothesis is that the critical and detailed study of household goods may serve to illuminate social differences and inequalities within peasant societies in this period. Our conclusion is that, even though a general impoverishment at the level of household goods is detected, the presence of particular commodities may also serve as a social mechanism to represent status in a context of power control at the local level.

**Keywords:** *Rural archaeology, early medieval villages, peasant societies, inequality.*

## Résumé

*Inégalités sociales et biens ménagers dans la péninsule ibérique centrale au haut Moyen Âge*  
Nous présentons dans cet article les résultats préliminaires d'une analyse archéologique et spatiale des objets domestiques concernant deux sites du début du Moyen Âge dans la péninsule ibérique centrale. Notre hypothèse de base est que l'étude critique et détaillée des articles ménagers peut servir à aborder les différences sociales et les inégalités au sein des sociétés paysannes de cette période. Notre conclusion est que, même si un appauvrissement général au niveau des articles ménagers est détecté, la présence de biens particuliers peut également servir de mécanisme social pour représenter le statut dans un contexte de contrôle du pouvoir à la base locale.

**Mot-clés :** *archéologie rurale, village du Haut Moyen Âge, sociétés paysannes, l'inégalité.*

## Zusammenfassung

### *Soziale Ungleichheit und Hausrat in Zentral-Iberien im Frühmittelalter*

In diesem Beitrag stellen wir die vorläufigen Ergebnisse einer archäologischen und räumlichen Analyse von Haushaltsgegenständen zu zwei frühmittelalterlichen Fundorten in Zentral-Iberien vor. Unsere Grundhypothese ist, dass die kritische und detaillierte Untersuchung von Haushaltsgegenständen dazu dienen kann, soziale Unterschiede und Ungleichheiten innerhalb

## Introduction

One of the most stimulating advances currently unfolding in the field of medieval history in Western Europe is the emergence of an archaeology of peasant societies (*Escalona Monge 2009; Quirós – Tejerizo 2020*). After decades of excavations in the European rural milieu, hundreds, if not thousands, of rural villages and farmsteads have been identified – although only a small portion of these sites have been the subjects of good-quality publication (*Chapelot 2010; Quirós 2009*). All of this information has furthered our knowledge on a variety of topics regarding the early medieval peasantry from the composition of the houses (*Peytremann 2012*), the articulation of settlement patterns (*Hamerow 2011*), the exploitation of economic resources (*Vigil-Escalera et al. 2014*) to diet and mobility (*Hakenbeck et al. 2010*).

However, the questions of how early medieval peasant societies were structured and how social inequality and power was configured within these villages are still major concerns and few satisfactory answers have been proposed in relation to this topic (*Quirós 2016*). Indeed, we know from written sources that these inequalities effectively existed at the level of local communities, and also that they played a major role in, for example, the development of early medieval states through the actions of local and territorial rural elites (*Carvajal 2017*). However, there are still many questions surrounding social inequalities within peasant-based societies in early medieval Iberia and, in this regard, archaeology may be the methodology through which we can approach them (*Quirós 2020c*).

The main aim of this brief paper is to explore the possibility of engaging with the question of social inequality within early medieval peasant societies by means of exploring materiality and in particular household goods within the context of the village. The starting point will be a contextual and comparative approach and a methodology based on spatial analyses at the site level (as proposed, for example, in *Peytremann 2020*). Our basic hypothesis is that only through detailed analysis at both the micro local and the territorial levels can we understand how social inequality operated within peasant societies during the early medieval ages. For this purpose

bäuerlicher Gesellschaften in dieser Zeit anzugehen. Unsere Schlussfolgerung ist, dass, obwohl eine allgemeine Verarmung auf der Ebene der Haushaltsgüter festgestellt wird, das Vorhandensein bestimmter Waren auch als sozialer Mechanismus dienen kann, um den Status im Kontext der Machtkontrolle auf lokaler Basis darzustellen.

**Schlagwörter:** *Archäologie im ländlichen Raum, frühmittelalterliche Dörfer, bäuerliche Gesellschaften, Ungleichheit.*

we will focus on two case studies coming from the central part of the Iberian peninsula dating between the 7th and the 10th centuries.

Both the location and the period constitute good frameworks to approach this question. The central part of the Iberian peninsula has repeatedly been the subject of some of the most important historiographical debates about Iberian history, such as the collapse of the Visigothic kingdom, the depopulation theories, or the process of the so-called Reconquista of the Andalusian state (*Escalona Monge – Martín Viso 2020*). Moreover, this territory has recently been subjected to important excavations on different rural sites that, in the near future, are bound to change some of the paradigms used to interpret the Iberian peninsula's early medieval history (Fig.1). Besides, the chronological scope we are going to tackle here constitutes a good case study as it is considered a period in which the processes of collapse, scale change, and re-emergence of territorial polities contributed to the generation of new mechanisms to articulate social complexity and inequality (*Escalona Monge – Reynolds 2011; Martín Viso 2021*). Thus, it is a period in which social inequalities acquired a specific set of characteristics worth exploring from the point of view of complexity (*Quirós 2020b*).

In this paper we will focus on two particular case studies, the sites of La Coba and La Legoriza, both recently excavated early medieval rural sites at which we are currently undertaking archaeological research and the first preliminary results of which we are presenting here. Our starting point is, taking into account the obvious differences from the point of view of materiality and household goods between the two sites, the question of whether a spatial and contextual analysis of all the archaeological data can inform us about social inequalities within peasant societies, as a first step towards tackling this topic in future research.

### **La Coba (San Juan del Olmo, Ávila)**

La Coba is a site located in a slight valley in a mountain range called the Sierra de Ávila. This site was known

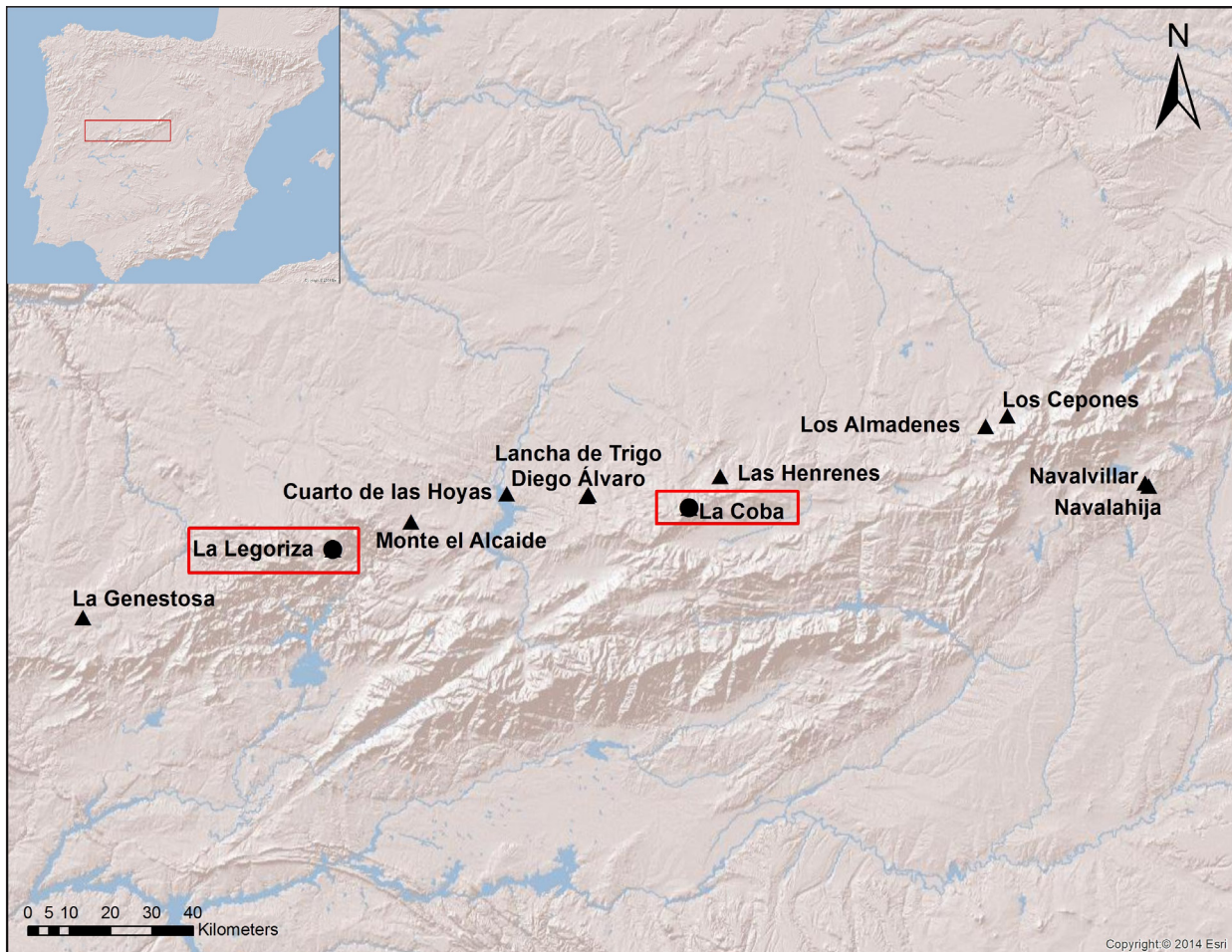


Fig. 1. Main early medieval sites in the analysed area. (© C. Tejerizo García, J.P. López García, I. Martín Viso, G. Panzarino and I. Aguilera Díez using a map by Esri © 2009 Esri).

for the presence of a significant number of rock burials, 83 of which have been identified and that are distributed in at least 5 different nuclei in a space of 30 ha coexisting with a small communal cemetery of 12 cist burials (Martín Viso 2012). The latter nucleus was the subject of an archaeological excavation in 2012, which uncovered a furnished burial dated in the 7th-8th centuries AD (Castellum 2012). Although some structures were recognised at the centre of this site during field surveys, no domestic structures were identified until the beginning of our archaeological project. Since 2020 a community archaeological project has been carried out that directly involves communities from the surrounding area in both the archaeological study of the site and in the creation of a new identity and heritage resources (López 2020). The archaeological work has consisted of a geophysical survey that was extremely positive in documenting at least 10 different domestic units and structures, implying the existence of a very complex nucleated village (Fig. 2).

So far we have excavated one complete structure and parts of two other domestic units. Regarding their chronology, radiocarbon dating indicates a general occupation between the second half of the 7th and the 10th centuries AD. It is difficult at the moment to confirm the specific functionality of each of the structures, but it is precisely at the level of the household goods and the materiality located in each of them that we find the best clues for approaching this question. Regarding the larger structure (La Cobra 2), the presence of a varied set of different markers leads us to think of a multifunctional productive space, at least for the two rooms considered. A jar was embedded in the floor of the smaller room, 7 m<sup>2</sup> in size. It is difficult to associate a specific function to this object, but our initial hypothesis is that it is related to a repetitive task that was one of the steps in the making of bread. This would fit with the possible small oven we have located in the other excavated room. The presence of this potential oven together with a hand mill and a hearth may reinforce the hypothesis of a productive space.

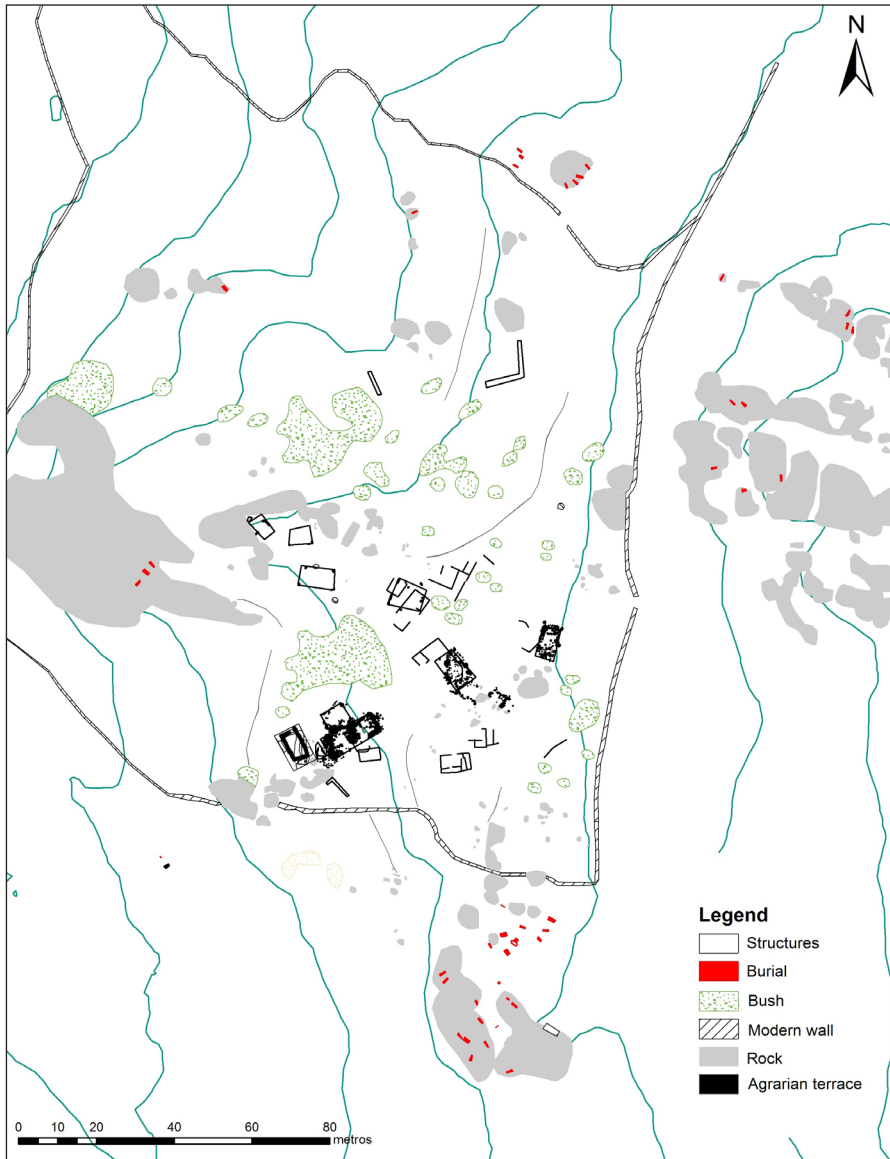


Fig. 2. Site plan of La Coba (© C. Tejerizo García, J.P. López García, I. Martín Viso, G. Panzarino and I. Aguilera Díez).

In contrast with the other excavated structure, materiality found at this domestic unit seems to exclude functions related to exhibition of wealth, at least in the area we have excavated so far.

The production of bread is therefore our main hypothesis for the function of this structure, an idea that may be reinforced by the results obtained in the excavation of the northern structure (La Coba 3). Here we have exhumed a rather interesting structure, at least from what we know from other contemporary sites (*Tejerizo García 2012a*), that can be interpreted as a small barn, due to the presence of a very significant amount of cereal seeds. We think that this granary is replicated in other structures we have documented in the big building mentioned before, which reinforces the hypothesis of a multifunctional building in which bread was possibly

made. Regarding possible functions for this large structure and the question of household goods, we have documented in the southeastern corner of this building two metal objects, one of them a possible hinge, which may be related to a small chest. As we will see below, the presence of this chest may be not an accident.

After all is said and done, the most impressive elements were to be found in the southern aisled structure (La Coba 1). Our first hypothesis was that this building corresponded to a domestic room within a bigger building within a humble peasant village. However, the presence of some luxurious objects and household goods exceeded all our expectations. Thus, in the north-western corner of the room, and probably coming from the same specific context, a liriform brooch and two rings were found in the abandonment layers of the structure (Fig. 3). The



Fig. 3. Liriform brooch and rings from La Coba (© C. Tejerizo García, J.P. López García, I. Martín Viso, G. Panzarino and I. Aguilera Díez).

archaeo-metallurgical analyses of these objects show the use of a particular alloy presenting hints of silver, which points towards high-quality production. Moreover, although further analyses are needed, the similarities in their composition may suggest a common origin in a single workshop, one that, judging by the manufacture of these objects, was clearly highly sophisticated.

Another interesting result, considering the presence of household goods in early medieval peasant contexts, is that the liriform brooch presented some organic remains, which are interpreted as coming from a small box that was burnt in contact with the brooch. This highlights the significance that wooden technologies had for these societies (Fournier 1982), and also points towards the presence of particular elements of prestige important enough to be kept inside a box or chest. In summary, what we propose for this specific structure is that it was the storehouse of a potentially wealthy family within the context of La Coba.

### La Legoriza (San Martín del Castañar, Salamanca)

La Legoriza is an early medieval village which is relatively well known within Spanish historiography. It is located on a plain within the mountainous region of the Sierra de Francia, in the south-eastern part of the current province of Salamanca. It was discovered archaeologically in 2004, when an early medieval engraved slate was recorded at the site. Excavated between 2004 and 2008, it was one of the first early medieval rural villages excavated in central Iberia and a type site for archaeologists, despite the fact that only one minor publication (Gómez Gandullo 2006) and a partial revision of the ceramic materials was published by

Sarah Dahí (Dahí Elena 2012) are available. Excavations revealed a total of 14 different structures (Fig. 4) that form an ensemble of at least 4 different domestic units. Two elements have been traditionally highlighted from this context: the appearance of a significant assemblage of the so-called Visigothic slates (Martín Viso 2006; Velázquez 1989) and the recovery of a very important deposit of metal slag, more than 100 kg according to the official reports. This has led to the interpretation of the site as a Visigothic metallurgy workshop (Gómez Gandullo 2006). Additionally, the presence of some specific household goods, such as cowbells and horseshoes, suggest an economy based, at least partially, on husbandry.

The revision proposed here started with a re-consideration of the site's chronology in the light of other similar sites. La Legoriza was initially dated to a general Visigothic period ranging from the 5th to the 8th century AD, even though it was considered to have clearly been occupied during the 7th century AD (Dahí Elena 2012; Gómez Gandullo 2006). However, our revisiting of the pottery assemblages in light of the most recent research on early medieval pottery analyses (Martín Viso et al. 2018; Tejerizo García 2020; Vigil-Escalera – Quirós Castillo 2016) and comparison with the material from other sites such as La Coba and La Genestosa (Casillas de Flores, Salamanca) (Martín Viso et al. 2017) suggest that all of these sites are contemporary and thus date to between the 7th and the 10th centuries AD.

In order to delve into the archaeological analyses of this site, we carried out a review of the entire archaeological record, particularly of the pottery assemblages, which are currently under study. We were able to analyse a total of 3187 fragments (a total weight of 74,3 kg.) distributed in 101 different stratigraphic contexts of the site. Regarding the site's chronology and occupational sequence, the spatial distribution of pottery types (Fig. 5) – differentiating between hand- and wheel-made pottery as significant chronological markers for this period (Vigil-Escalera 2006) – suggest two different phases within the early medieval occupation. Thus, the northern part of the site could be the earlier phase, while the eastern part may show an expansion or even a subsequent phase of occupation. This would fit with the differences observed in the domestic units in terms of construction and disposition, the northern part being mainly formed by three- or one-aisled buildings and the southern part of the site being formed by a complex compound with an open interior space, a feature that has also been suggested as a chronological marker on the Iberian Peninsula (Gutiérrez Lloret – Grau Mira 2014; Vigil-Escalera 2003).

When dealing with the site of La Legoriza, our starting hypothesis was that a spatial analysis of the archaeological record would provide some evidence not only concerning the functionality of each of the structures, but also for the



Fig. 4. Site plan of La Legoriza (© C. Tejerizo García, J.P. López García, I. Martín Viso, G. Panzarino and I. Aguilera Díez).

potential presence of social inequalities (Peytremann 2020). Even though this idea should be further developed in future studies, we can make some general points here.

The specific pottery analysis that we have carried out, carefully distinguishing the different types of production and specific quantification and its spatial distribution within the village, in tandem with the presence of other structures such as hearths and inner benches, is helping us to grasp the functionality of each of the structures and their rooms. For example, the differentiating features of domestic and cooking spaces from those dedicated to storage are relatively easy to point out. In any case, what these analyses seem to confirm is the presence of typical early medieval domestic units composed of the tripartite division of storage, domestic (both living and cooking) and productive spaces (Tejerizo García 2012a). However, the impression is that many of these structures were used as a rubbish dump in their last phase of use or, most probably, in different phases of abandonment, which distorts the interpretation of their original functionality (Cameron 1993; Tomka – Stevenson 1993).

This process of abandonment may also help us to understand the chaotic distribution of engraved slates of which we cannot detect any specific concentration or coherent spatial distribution; they were mainly found in a secondary context. Something similar is the case with the metal slag, which shows a wide distribution within the contexts, although there are some important concentrations in specific structures that might suggest production sites. Regarding this, in the northern part of the site a probable sarcophagus cut in the rock was excavated in 2006, resulting in the recovery of 98 kg of slag that was interpreted as the result of metal production in that particular spot. Moreover, in the original reports it is mentioned that a portion of the slag was in the form of the sarcophagus, confirming its use as a metal kiln. It is very difficult to relate this metal production chronologically with the contemporary occupation of the domestic units and it is possible that they were used in different phases. An alternative hypothesis is that it was effectively used as a kiln in a subsequent period, re-using previous archaeological structures in late medieval or

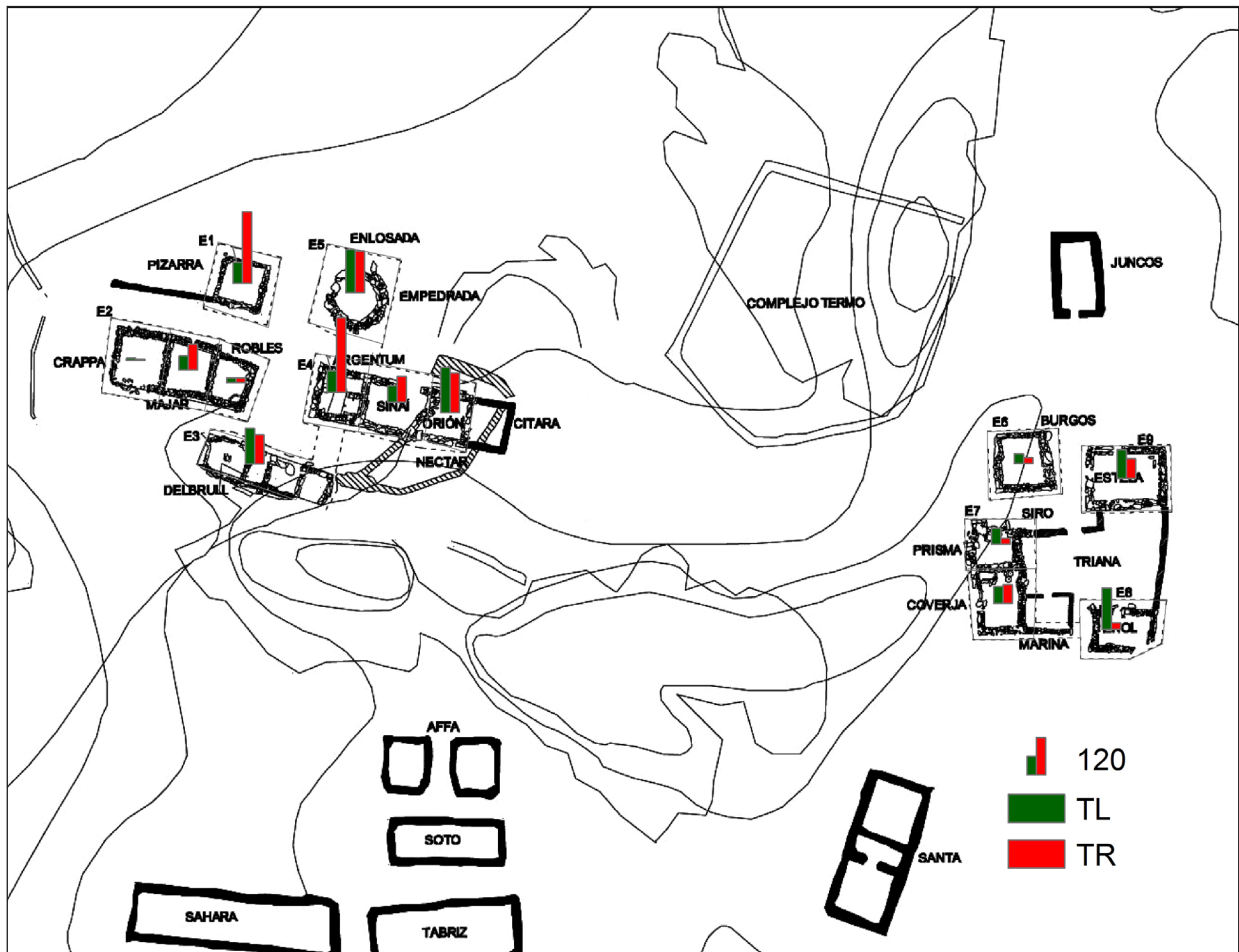


Fig. 5. Spatial distribution of pottery from La Legoriza: TL=handmade and TR=wheel made (© C. Tejerizo García, J.P. López García, I. Martín Viso, G. Panzarino and I. Aguilera Díez).

modern contexts. Thus, at this stage of the research we should be careful with the interpretation of La Legoriza as an early medieval centre for metal production.

Having said this, the preliminary conclusion of the spatial analyses carried out is that, in the particular case of La Legoriza, there is no marker at the level of household goods for inferring social differences between the domestic units. Neither pottery nor other archaeological objects show any degree of specific social differences when their spatial distribution is analysed. Glass is a good example of this; it is a particular household good that may show internal social differences at the level of the village (Martínez Jiménez *et al.* 2018). Even though the amount of glass documented was quite limited, it is equally distributed in all the structures, without any significant concentrations. However, as stated, this may be a consequence of the abandonment processes, which may be distorting the original distribution of objects to the point of blurring these particular differences. It is noteworthy that another liriform brooch, similar to

that documented in La Coba, was supposedly recovered from La Legoriza, following older accounts (Gómez Gandullo 2004). Although analysis of the significance of this type of brooch in terms of social differences is still insufficient (Ripoll 1998; Vigil-Escalera 2020), it is likely that they can be related to incipient forms of social inequality in the local context of the village.

In summary, at the site of La Legoriza, preliminary spatial analyses do not show social differences between the domestic units at the level of household goods. This may point towards a community in which there were no major social inequalities, at least from the point of view of consumption.

### **Social inequality in early medieval peasant-based societies: some general remarks based on the analysis of household goods**

These preliminary conclusions from the analyses of La Legoriza are not very surprising, as we have set out the difficulties of analysing internal differences and social

inequalities within early medieval peasant societies when considering their domestic units and their household goods at the level of a single site. At this point it may be useful to understand the workings of social inequalities at the territorial level. Here we will make some general considerations before concluding.

The first one is that, at the level of household goods, the evidence shows a general scarcity and low diversity of household goods in both La Coba and La Legoriza, something similar to the general trends observed at rural sites in this period in central Iberia (*Quirós Castillo 2013*). This may be related to conservation problems, especially considering the potential importance of wooden elements for post-Roman societies. Notwithstanding this, when comparing the quantity and quality of household goods between Roman and post-Roman societies – for example, taking into account Roman sites near La Coba and La Legoriza (*Ariño Gil 2018*) – an evident change emerges in the patterns of production, distribution and consumption (*Ward-Perkins 2005*). This is coherent with the general framework of a scale change in the patterns of consumption both in post-Roman and post-Arab conquest contexts (*Wickham 2005*).

However, this context of general impoverishment of the early medieval peasant societies at the level of household goods should not be equated either with the idea of indigent societies, a characterisation recently defended by scholars such as Richard Hodges (*2020*), or with the presence of equalitarian and pristine societies, as 19th- and 20th-century nationalisms have tended to imagine (*Tejerizo García 2012b*). It is in the intersection between the micro scale and the general context in which the evidence of these sites makes sense.

As we have seen, the question of social inequalities at the level of household goods in the context of early medieval peasant societies is a difficult issue. The general conclusion – this is something already known – is that there are no clear general markers of social distinction at the level of the domestic units within a singular context (*Quirós Castilla 2020a*). However, some hints point towards the existence of subtle social differences between the domestic units of the villages, such as the presence of significant burials (e.g. the one excavated in La Coba), specific household goods (e.g. rings or liriform brooches) or even specific spaces, such as the storehouse in La Coba. The presence of such elements both in La Coba and La Legoriza suggests the existence of some specific individuals or families whose positions within the social contexts allowed them specific forms of representation through materiality. Such forms of representation only had significance at the local or territorial scale, as was common within post-Roman societies (*Halsall 1995*; *Theuvs 1998*). Thus, this may suggest that household goods are a potential marker of social inequality in early

medieval rural societies only when analysed in the local context and compared with other social and political scales.

Moreover, what we can suggest is that even though there is a general context of impoverishment in early medieval Iberian rural societies, taking into account these subtle hints of social differences, the specific use of household goods for social representation may be related to social choices in particular contexts. In this regard, we may understand these elements from the point of view of local societies: as a way of controlling power (*Clastres 1978*; *Scott 1985*). In other words, certain objects were used as devices for the representation of status, but, at the same time, in a context where power is largely controlled by the peasant community. From an anthropological point of view, and according to a Chayanovist perspective (*Chayanov et al. 1966*), peasant societies tend to an equilibrium between the necessities of the domestic unit and the necessities for their reproduction (*Shanin 1971*). This equilibrium is also translated into a particular *habitus*, which regulates the symbolic use of objects and household goods. By means of this approach the luxurious liriform brooches at both sites discussed here and at other sites nearby such as Las Henrenes (Cillán Ávila) (*Díaz De La Torre et al. 2009*) that were restricted to particular domestic units and in a general context of scarcity and humbler household goods may be better understood. This is a hypothesis worth exploring in the future.

In conclusion, even though household goods will not solve the question of social inequality within early medieval peasant societies, we should not underestimate their importance when considering this complex but fascinating period.

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