

The Early Medieval State: A Strategic-Relational Approach

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Abstract

The state is a contested concept in the historiography on early medieval societies. Debates have frequently revolved around its heuristic validity, but few scholars have addressed its broader theoretical implications. Those who have tend to reduce the state to its institutional features and privilege the role of the dominant groups in the analysis of state-building processes and the workings of the state. This paper contends that a richer conceptualisation of the state can overcome the limits of the debate as it has been framed so far and provide a deeper insight into how social relations shaped and were shaped by the development of early medieval polities. After reviewing the most significant historiographical contributions to the debate, the paper introduces the Strategic-Relational Approach to the state, as formulated by B. Jessop, as one that can provide a more nuanced understanding of early medieval polities. Particular emphasis is made on the analysis of class relationships and the articulation of hegemonic projects as two particularly fruitful lines of inquiry. Finally, the paper focuses on one particular instance of early medieval political practice, the politics of the land, as a means to illustrate the potential of the approach.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the concept of the state for the study of medieval societies is highly disputed.¹ Twenty years ago, the *Journal of Historical Sociology* hosted an exchange between S. Reynolds (2003) and R.R. Davies (2003) that captured the essence of the debate. Davies argued that it is anachronistic to use a concept forged centuries later to

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categorise medieval polities.² Reynolds, for her part, defended its use as an ideal-type.³ As much as they differed, both positions shared a fundamental trait: a narrow understanding of the state as an institution, derived from a failure to engage more fully with state theories.⁴

This paper contends that the state is a valid heuristic tool for the study of medieval societies and considers how the Strategic-Relational Approach to the state, as formulated by B. Jessop, can deepen our understanding of medieval polities. More specifically, it focuses on early medieval polities, which are particularly difficult to characterise. Institutionally, they were radically simpler than their late medieval counterparts, and yet their degree of socio-political complexity – at least in many parts of Europe – does not warrant their being thrown into the ragbag of stateless societies.⁵

Early medieval polities and the state: a historiographical review

Since the publication of Reynolds's and Davies's papers, research on early medieval polities has become more attentive to the variety of social and material conditions in which early medieval polities developed – territorial diversity is now regarded as one of their defining features –, to the multiplicity of actors that participated in their building and their workings, and to the myriad of relationships and to the principles that structured political practice at all social levels. The image we can now draw of early medieval polities escapes the narrow limits of traditional institutionalism, and yet it remains unclear how we should best account for it theoretically. While some significant efforts to reassess the concept of the state have nonetheless been made,⁶ for the most part, historians and archaeologists have resorted to proxy concepts like kingship and, more recently, governance.⁷

Those who argue against the use of the concept of the state usually wield the arguments of anachronism and teleology, which unfold at two different levels, epistemological and ontological. At an epistemological level, it is argued that the concept of the state only emerged centuries later to categorise modern political organisations, and thus that its use distorts our understanding of pre-modern polities.⁸ As an alternative, Davies and others have proposed that we should build our categories using terms that contemporaries would have understood.⁹ This, however, has two significant shortcomings. First, it presumes that we can directly apprehend the meaning of medieval terms from the sources, ignoring the explicit and unspoken assumptions that mediate how we build and interpret the empirical record.¹⁰ Also, it neglects the fact that early medieval categories – including some analogous to the state – were not merely descriptive, but were rather part of broader political discourses that contributed to the advancement of a certain order of things.¹¹ Looking through those lenses we risk seeing early medieval societies as the dominant groups wanted them to be.

At an ontological level, it is argued that early medieval polities lacked the complex administrative systems that contemporary states have; power was embedded in social relations rather than institutionalized, and so were the mechanisms aimed at maintaining public order.¹² This is a forceful critique of old institutionalist accounts, and allows for the recognition of the multiple agencies that shaped early medieval polities at different social and territorial scales.¹³ However, the argument is built in contradistinction to modern states, based on a narrow conceptualization of the state as an autonomous realm of political organisation distinct from the economic.¹⁴ The idea that the political and the economic constitute two different realms has been criticised, though, both for modern and pre-modern – or rather capitalist and pre-capitalist – societies.¹⁵ Moreover, defendants of this argument usually find themselves at odds as they acknowledge that at least certain socio-political relationships were relatively formalised – and struggle to find a term to characterise them.¹⁶ As S. Baxter (2009, pp. 503–504) has noted, a more fruitful approach should depart from the idea that in early medieval polities informal power structures were not incompatible, but rather interdependent with the existence of relatively strong institutional realms. The question, paraphrasing J.R. Davis (2008, p. 245), should rather be what institutional realms can be identified and how we can best account for the practices and relationships that constantly reshaped them.

Other authors have sought to overcome the 'horror of anachronism' (Wormald, 2006, p. 189), and yet have run into similar difficulties. Since the 1980s, state-formation theories have had a certain influence, particularly in northern Europe.¹⁷ The more general critiques to state-formation theories apply, namely, that the state is portrayed as a necessary outcome of historical development, either as a conscious product of the elites or as an organisational need derived from increasing social complexity – the agency of subordinate groups is seldom considered. Moreover, the state is rendered as an ahistorical construct, for it is only its coming into being that is accounted for, while its reproduction and transformation over time are left aside from historical inquiry.¹⁸ Also, state-formation theories were originally formulated to account for the formation of pristine states. In Europe, polities developed in a context profoundly marked by the inheritance of Rome – even in those areas where the burden of the Roman Empire was lighter – and by the presence of complex political organisations from a relatively early stage, which influenced political developments around them.¹⁹

Other scholars have sought to adapt definitions of the state as an *Idealtypus* to medieval societies. Reynolds built upon Weber to define the medieval state as 'an organization of human society within a more or less fixed area in which the ruler or governing body more or less successfully control[led] the legitimate use of physical force' (Reynolds, 2003, p. 551).²⁰ This definition is rather a question about the extent to which medieval polities were similar to their modern counterparts, and thus runs into the trap of teleology and contradistinction that we have previously noted.

C. Wickham definition, for its part, is specifically based on observable features of early medieval polities and seeks to situate the state within its social context. For this author, early medieval states would be characterised by:

'the centralization of legitimate enforceable authority (justice and the army); the specialization of governmental roles, with an official hierarchy which outlasted the people who held official position at any one time; the concept of a public power, that is, of a ruling system ideologically separable from the ruled population and from the individual rulers themselves; independent and stable resources for rulers; and a class-based system of surplus extraction and stratification' (Wickham, 2005, p. 57).²¹

This definition presents two main advantages, though they are not without problems. First, it directly addresses institutionalization and the continuity of the state not as a given but as a historical problem – as opposed to definitions like Reynolds', which place the focus on the capacities of rulers and governing bodies and take the existence of the institutional scaffoldings for granted. However, in his narrative, Wickham personifies the state as a social actor, conveying the idea that there existed a coherent group of elites, detached from society, who enjoyed the capacity to act univocally by means of some unspecified institutional mechanisms.²² Ultimately, the mask of the state precludes a deeper analysis of its institutional intricacies and of the multiplicity of social actors, sometimes with contradictory interests and strategies, whose agencies and relationships may have shaped it over time (Abrams, 1988, pp. 59–63).

Another important aspect of Wickham's definition is that, in introducing the question of surplus extraction, it is a call to analyse the state within its specific social and material context – something that most approaches neglect, except for some versions of state-formation theories. However, he provides no indication as to how the 'class-based system of surplus extraction and stratification' relates to the state *per se*. Is it an *a priori* condition for the state to exist, or is it consubstantial with it? The question has bearing on how we conceptualize the relationship between the reproduction of social inequality and the state. If the state is reduced to an institutional and ideological ensemble that is superimposed over pre-existing social relationships, its reproduction over time cannot be assessed against the changing nature of the social relations of production – which, at the same time, limits the possibility of analysing how the state may have contributed to the articulation, reproduction, and transformation of the latter.

Furthermore, Wickham provides a partial approach to class relationships in relation to the state. He argues that the endurance and relative strength of the state depends on the capacity of those who embody it – the ruler and his or her agents – to enjoy a source of revenue distinct from all other groups within the dominant class (cf. Barrow, 1993, pp. 130–134). Competition between state elites and other dominant groups is thus assumed as the

driving force behind political dynamics and the configuration of the state. The capacity of subordinate groups to affect those processes – if only in as much as they could influence the configuration of class relationships by resisting the extraction of surplus – is disregarded, and their initiatives are portrayed as apolitical, either as external to the state – as in the case the Saxons in the face of the Carolingians – or as occurring only at the socioeconomic level – as in the case of conflicts over land and service between peasants and lords (Wickham, 2005, pp. 585–588; 2003; 2017; cf. Carvajal Castro & Tejerizo-García, *Forthcoming*).²³

A different approach is that of J. Haldon's *The State and the Tributary Mode of Production* (Haldon, 1993), which must be credited as the most systematic attempt to place the analysis of the social relations of production at the core of an endeavour to theorize pre-capitalist states. Setting out to refute Mann's (1986b) thesis on the absolute autonomy of the state and following N. Poulantzas (1968), Haldon argued that the state is ultimately constrained by the existing configuration of class relationships, and thus that is only relatively autonomous (Haldon, 1993, pp. vii, 266–273).²⁴ Beyond that, he provides a rich framework for considering the weight of institutions and ideology in the formation and reproduction of pre-capitalist states that opens the path for a more complex understanding of how they were articulated and endured over time (Haldon, 1993, pp. 33–34, 140–154).

In the most theoretical parts of his book, Haldon comes close to realising his claim – at one time he even opens the possibility of reinstating peasant agency as overtly political (Haldon, 1993, pp. 153–154, 187). However, he ultimately fails to incorporate it consistently to both his theoretical framework and to his historical analysis. At the beginning of the book, Haldon claims that the state has certain autonomy of political action, though constrained by the social relations of production. He reduces the latter to 'economic relations', thus separating the realm of the economic from that of the political, in which the state is placed (Haldon, 1993, p. 3). Class relationships are thus taken for granted as a necessary background for the state, and the analytical focus is placed, on the one hand, on elite competition for the distribution of surplus as the driver of political dynamics, and on the other, on the organizational and ideological aspects of the state, which are regarded as the key to understanding its configuration and dynamics (Haldon, 1993, pp. 7, 18–9, 105, 185, 199, 202–18, 264). Moreover, in his historical analysis, Haldon portrays the state as a social actor with interests and purposes of its own.²⁵ Indeed, towards the end of the book, he reveals that he uses the concept to refer to the 'rulers and their immediate entourage, or state elites on a wider basis' (Haldon, 1993, p. 264). The theoretical framework he builds thus collapses as the state is reduced to a social group, or rather to the agency of rulers and their supporters personified as a social actor in its own right.

Ultimately, the review of the approaches so far considered, while necessarily a partial account of works that are much richer in nuance, enables us to identify some of the weaknesses they have in common. First, they are frequently based on a restrictive view of the state as a set of institutional and governmental features, and fail to question how institutions are themselves built and sustained or transformed over time. Second, they do not account for the articulation between the political and the economic realms. Partly as a consequence of this, and third, they only contemplate the agency of the elites in the shaping and workings of the state, neglecting the agency of other social actors.

A Strategic-Relational Approach to early medieval states

Our aim in the following pages is to show the Strategic-Relational Approach (SRA) to the state can help us build a theoretical framework that overcomes these difficulties. The SRA, developed by B. Jessop (2007), builds upon Poulantzas's (1978, p. 73) characterization of the state as a social relation.²⁶ The fundamental tenet is that the state can be best understood as 'the specific material condensation of a relationship of forces among classes and class fractions'.²⁷ The implications of the formulation unfold at five different levels. First, it departs from a complex view of the articulation between the economic and the political realms, drawing attention to the material basis of the social formation. Second, it situates the dialectics of class struggle at the core of the concept of the state, and acknowledges the analytical relevance of the agency of the subordinate groups in the articulation of the state in all

its different dimensions, including the economic, the political, and the ideological – an idea that could be further pursued theoretically by resort to a relational approach to agency (Poulantzas, 1978, pp. 12–13, 45).²⁸ Third, it overcomes the instrumentalist view of the state as a tool in the hands of the dominant classes (Engels, 1902 [1884]; Lenin, 1992 [1917]; Miliband, 1969; cf. Barrow, 1993, pp. 13–50; Jessop, 1982, pp. 12–16). As a condensation of conflictive relationships, the state becomes itself an arena of struggle in which different groups, including different fractions of the dominant class, confront their interests. Fourth, the reproduction of the state over time is problematized, in as much as it is addressed in relation to changes in social relationships (Gallas, 2017). In this regard, Jessop insists that changes over time must be addressed in terms of ‘contingent necessity’, that is, bearing in mind the impossibility of determining both the manner in which the multiplicity of causal chains that necessarily condition each conjuncture may combine and interact, and the outcomes that will result from these combinations and interactions (Jessop, 1982, p. 212; 2007, pp. 225–233).

To account for the way in which social relationships and institutions mutually condition each other, Jessop, drawing on G. Therborn (1980, pp. 34–35), introduces an analytical distinction between state institutions (or apparatus) and state power (Jessop, 2007, p. 28; cf. Poulantzas, 1978, p. 61). As a condensation of social relationships, the state materializes as a particular ensemble of institutions that result from the formalization of certain social relationships that are dynamically reproduced and transformed through specific social practices. These institutions define rules and resources for social actions and provide opportunities for and impose constraints on social behaviours (Jessop, 2001).²⁹ They do not determine the outcome of particular actions and may frame initiatives aimed both at realising and reproducing particular forms of domination, as well as others aimed at challenging domination (Jessop, 2007, pp. 29, 31; Poulantzas, 1978, pp. 146–148, 251–265). However, in as much as they are informed by the existing balance of forces between different social actors, they tend to favour outcomes that are beneficial for the dominant groups – this is what Jessop characterizes as the ‘strategic selectivity’ of the state, a notion that is central to the SRA (Jessop, 2002, p. 40; 2007, pp. 21–53). State power, for its part, refers to the bundle of relationships between different social groups as specifically mediated by the strategic selectivity of state institutions (Jessop, 2007, pp. 29–37; Therborn, 1980, pp. 34–35). It is not the capacity of the state to act, for the state, ‘as a set of institutions [...] cannot, *qua* structural ensemble, exercise power’ (Jessop, 1990, p. 8). It is only the construction of the effects of the initiatives mediated by state institutions as state actions that generates the ‘state effect’, that is, the personification of the state as a social actor (Jessop, 2016, p. 55).³⁰ Ultimately, for Jessop, the relationship between the state apparatus and state power is structural and contingent, in as much as social practices and relationships shape and transform the state institutions while at the same time the latter mediate social practices and relationships (Jessop, 1990, pp. 258–262).³¹

Social relations of production and early medieval states

How can we apply this to the study of early medieval societies? Here we will consider to main lines of inquiry. The starting point must be the characterization of the social groups and relationships condensed in the state. Then we will address the issue of hegemony.

The social relations of production need to be considered first as they define the material limits of the state and are the basis upon which other relationships – conflictive or otherwise – are built. In early medieval state societies, the position of the dominant groups was founded upon the exaction of surplus derived from agrarian production – whether as tax or rent –, which was rarely based upon the direct control of the productive processes.³² There were other forms of exploitation in agrarian production, including slavery, but overall they were less significant (Rio, 2017). Others, such as crafts production and commerce, developed somewhat autonomously in some regions (Loveluck, 2013), but in general terms contributed to feed the position of the dominant groups, whether through the control of the production and circulation of goods, through taxes, or as a result of the influence that the dominant aristocratic groups had as the main consumers.

The forms that tributes adopted and their relative weight depended on the conditions under which they were exacted, which could vary locally. Lordly claims to land, or to rents or taxes deriving from the exploitation of agrarian resources, depended on the lords' capacity to enforce them in the face of local individuals and groups – for land was appropriated both individually and collectively. This was hampered by the complexity of local societies, in which individual positions and trajectories were conditioned by a multiplicity of factors, and in which different forms of social aggregation could develop.³³ Moreover, such claims were sometimes met with resistance, even if rarely to judge from the record – which poses the question of how consent to domination was achieved locally (Pastor, 1986). Ultimately, the capacity of the dominant groups to exact agrarian surplus depended on the agency and specific practices of local actors and cannot be regarded merely as an imposition from above.

The position of the dominant groups was built at a supralocal scale (Escalona, 2001).³⁴ Locally, the position of elite groups could be constrained both by the economic and moral limits to the accumulation of wealth and the development of power relationships, and its reproduction over time compromised by different factors, from partible inheritance to unlucky matrimonial strategies (Wickham, 2005, pp. 260–261, 535–547; cf. Astarita, 2011; Faith, 2009). There were means to overcome such limits, such as the major ceremonial investments made in burials, but in the long run they could still fail (Halsall, 1995). At a supra-local scale, however, elites could accumulate land, and thus built an income basis larger than that of those acting within the limits imposed by local resources, social relationships, and moral economies. Different dominant groups could also build relationships with each other beyond family ties, whether through marriage, friendship, or political alliance and some of these relationships were ultimately institutionalized. Ultimately, it was at this supra-local scale that the individuals and groups with sufficient resources found the opportunities that allowed them to reproduce a socially dominant position (Innes, 2009).

The material basis upon which the dominant groups built their position was limited by two main factors. On the one hand, the amount of surplus they could appropriate was conditioned by the existing forces of production. We should not posit a direct causal relationship between the development of the forces of production – and the consequent increase in the availability of produce – and increasing rates of socio-political complexity.³⁵ The latter could also respond to growing inequalities in the distribution of produce, as when the dominant groups imposed increasing demands of rents and taxes on the peasantry (Wickham, 2008).³⁶ Ultimately, though, agrarian production was limited, and the dominant groups depended on their capacity to acquire more land to maintain and enhance their social position. Competition for land and existing surpluses was one of the factors behind conflicts within the dominant groups, as well as behind the territorial dynamics of early medieval polities (Sánchez León, 1993; Teschke, 2011). On the other hand, the dominant groups depended on their capacity to make their claims over land effective on the ground, and this partly depended on their capacity to articulate networks of clients and supporters that could realize their aims locally. How were those client networks established? And most importantly, given their interpersonal nature, what explains that the social relations of production so forged endured over time? It is in order to explain this that the concepts of hegemony and hegemonic project are useful.

HEGEMONY AND THE HEGEMONIC PROJECT

Gramsci's preoccupation in elaborating the concept of hegemony was to understand the constitution and functioning of politics in capitalist societies.³⁷ The concept, however, has been taken up successfully for the study of pre-capitalist societies, something in which archaeological studies have been particularly instrumental (McGuire, 2002, pp. 163–166). For B. Routledge (2014, p. 36), the notion of hegemony articulates 'the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules'. In this reading, what is crucial is the realization that beyond its discursive aspects, the production of hegemony depends on specific material conditions and social relationships, as well as on specific social practices. These include gender relations and practice, as well as any other asymmetrical relations (Hill Collins, 1990).³⁸ Moreover, given that the material conditions and social

relationships and practices change over time, hegemony must be regarded as unstable and open to dispute. An account of how hegemony is produced and reproduced over time must thus focus not only on how consensus is built, but also on resilience, contestation, and resistance at all social levels. Indeed, at its most fundamental, it is important to consider not just how disparate interests become aligned, but also what the shared tenets are regarding how conflicts between different groups may be resolved (Bourdieu, 2012, pp. 15-16).

Routledge's definition of hegemony must be further qualified, for it only contemplates the relationships between ruling and subordinate classes. However, the dominant class is never homogeneous. Rather, it should be regarded as an aggregate of groups with variegated social positions coalescing around what are constructed as shared interests. It is to the strategy deployed by a particular social group to attain and reproduce a socially and politically dominant position, and to obtain consent for it, that we may refer to as a 'hegemonic project', following Jessop (1982, pp. 200-201; 1990, pp. 8, 208-209; 2016, p. 69). The concept contemplates the ideological articulation, and the different social practices and relationships involved in its realization, that enable a particular group to build a relatively cohesive social bloc under its leadership (Poulantzas, 1968, pp. 241-243). From this perspective, the state can be regarded as the dialectical realization of a particular hegemonic project. Importantly, it needs not be the only existing hegemonic project. Other groups may have alternative projects that challenge and compete with the state project, or with the dominant hegemonic project within the existing political order.

In early medieval western European societies, hegemony was built against the background of the debris of the Roman Empire. Overall, the material conditions were significantly impoverished, thus limiting the opportunities for the development of ambitious territorial projects, and social relationships and practices were significantly redefined (Esmonde Cleary, 1989; Gerrard, 2013; Ward-Perkins, 2005). The legacy of the Empire provided some institutional and ideological scaffolding that varied depending on the regions. With this we refer not only to what we may most readily identified as pertaining to Roman institutions, such as the fiscal lands that had so much weight in certain early medieval polities in Italy (Santos Salazar, 2011), but also to particular practices or sets of social and territorial relationships and institutions that may have endured beyond the collapse of the Empire. The centrality of cities in Gaul beyond the fifth century is one example (Brogiolo et al., 2003; Henning, 2007), and so is the survival of certain scribal practices and their associated legal notions (Rio, 2008).

Regardless of the relative weight of continuities and ruptures in the configuration of post-Roman societies, the question that interests us here is how, in such context, different elite groups acting in different regions managed to build and reproduce a dominant position and even to enhance it over time – or failed to do so. In a manner peculiar to each territory and group, the dominant groups made use of elements of both the former Empire and their Germanic background to produce new frameworks defining new sets of opportunities and constraints for domination and political practice. The polities thus built resulted not from the imposition or development of homogeneous administrative systems but rather from the articulation of varied assemblages of socio-territorial practices and relationships at different scales (Escalona et al., 2019a; Escalona & Reynolds, 2011).

Among the dominant groups, a certain degree of cohesion was attained through the construction of shared identities. This is not to say that monolithic identities were thus created and embraced by all those living in the realm. We should rather think in terms of overlapping identities of varying relevance at different social scales, some of which could cut across and articulate different social scales – ethnicity played a fundamental role in this last regard (Wickham, 2009, p. 123).³⁹ They contributed to bind disparate social groups from different social and territorial backgrounds around shared notions of how the political order should be constituted. These identities partially permeated through society by means of particular material practices, binding local elites and thus bridging the emergent political centres and the localities. For example, the circulation of identity markers, such as certain types of brooches, which sometimes appear in burials located in rural cemeteries, could indicate not the arrival of alien people to local communities, as they were traditionally interpreted, but rather the existence of a strata of local elites that had become tied to the newly developing socio-political frameworks, assuming their associated identities (Halsall, 1995; Tejerizo-García, 2017). The weight of ethnicity in later times – as with neo-Gothic identity in late

ninth-century Asturias or English identity in late ninth-century Wessex (Isla Frez, 2019; Molyneux, 2015) – further evidences the extent to which they subsequently conditioned the formulation of hegemonic projects.

Religion also played a significant role in the articulation of these shared and distinctive identities. Ecclesiastics were central in the formulation of the ideological tenets of the post-Roman state projects, and provided discursive frameworks that legitimised class relationships – of which ecclesiastical institutions themselves benefited (Higham, 1997; Patzold, 2008; Pohl & Heydemann, 2013). At the time, however, the Church was not an all-encompassing institution permeating all spheres of social life and lacked the relative coherence that it would later attain (Guerreau, 1984, pp. 201–210). Rather, regional churches were tightly bound to their specific territorial frameworks and were very heterogeneous in institutional and organizational terms, while churches and monasteries under lay patronage proliferated (Brown, 1996; Wood, 2006). The development of episcopal authority, the construction of wider networks of ecclesiastical institutions around key abbeys, the development of religious territorialities – from the parish to the diocese – or the creation of new *habitus* and social practices linked to the ecclesiastical and religious life were the result of complex social processes that unfolded throughout this period.⁴⁰

Central for those hegemonic projects that succeeded in the ordering of polities – those that we may term as the state projects of early medieval polities – was the figure of the sovereign. The sovereign embodied the political order and was attributed the capacity to act in different manners on its behalf – that is what is commonly referred as kingship in the historiography –, though this also entailed some limitations regarding the scope of what was deemed acceptable for a king to do (Duggan, 1993). Loyalty and service to the sovereign were also instrumental in forging consensus among the aristocracy – both lay and ecclesiastical – but they did not exhaust aristocratic identity (Airlie, 2006). There was room for dissension and with it for the articulation of alternative hegemonic projects, some of which eventually triumphed – as with the Carolingians. Importantly, however, conflict between the dominant groups did not necessarily lead to the disarticulation of the whole political edifice, even if it entailed the displacement of one ruling group by another. While a given political order could break down once the project that held it together was exhausted, in many instances conflict developed within shared assumptions about the existing political order and even a minimal consensus about how conflict should be pursued and settled (MacLean, 2003; West, 2013). The figure of the sovereign, its attributes, and the relationships, practices and notions upon which it was funded transcended individual rulers (Kozioł, 1992). Beyond the aristocratic circles, political communication, both face-to-face and beyond, whether through charters or by other means such as seals or coins, or even prayers and the taking of oaths, further contributed to weaving the image of the sovereign within the fabric of society, and thus to build a certain consensus that incorporated social groups beyond the dominant ones (Barrow, 2007; Garipzanov, 2008; Kozioł, 2012; McKitterick, 2009).

The contexts in which these hegemonic projects were articulated and reproduced varied depending on social scale. With regards to the aristocracy – including the kings and their families –, these groups shared a number of spaces and occasions that enabled them to socialize and build ties between them. Royal centres like Aachen or Recopolis, but also the patterns of royal itinerancy, provided the socio-spatial contexts (Bernhardt, 1993; Innes, 2001; Lavelle, 2007; Ripoll López and Gurt Esparraguera, 2000). Royal assemblies, as well as other gatherings such as military campaigns, provided the occasions, with the royal court itself playing a key role in the education of aristocrats.⁴¹ In those events, participants had a chance to display and enhance their social position and authority, and also, more broadly, to articulate shared identities, projects, strategies, and discourses – whether aligned with those of the kings or not (Airlie, 2003; MacLean, 2006; Reuter, 2001). It was thus not only social relationships, but also certain *ethoi* that were produced and realised or transformed. Beyond that, the formalization of local assemblies linked, however weakly, to the overarching political order, such as the English *hundreds* or the Frankish *mallus*, together with the passing of certain legislation, as well particular occasions such as military campaigns – in which the non-aristocratic members of society could participate as members of aristocratic and royal retinues or merely performing military obligations –, could also contribute to inscribing certain shared assumptions about power and authority into local social relationships and practice (Barnwell, 2004; Lambert, 2017). Importantly, this does not mean that kings and their agents could act locally at will; and we must also bear in mind that even where

these local assemblies were seemingly more integrated in their encompassing institutional realms, local dynamics, relationships and custom may still have had a significant weight (Rabin, 2014; cf. Reynolds, 2009).

Royal power, the appropriation of land and early medieval states

The specific practices through which hegemonic projects were articulated and reproduced were very varied. Key among them, however, was gift-giving. The granting of land and moveable objects is widely attested as a means through which relationships between individuals at the same or different social scales were articulated (Bijsterveld, 2007; Charles-Edwards, 1979; Curta, 2006; Davies & Fouracre, 2010). In such exchanges, it was not only the economic value of the gift that mattered, but also the whole set of notions informing the relationships so built, including disparities in rank, power, and authority. In fact, the alleged reciprocity of gift-giving practices frequently veiled the asymmetry of the relationship between the donor and the donee.⁴² Gift-giving was thus one the different practices that contributed to building and reproducing certain forms of social inequality and power relationships, but also of constructing and sustaining a certain consensus about the existing order of things. The 'politics of land', that is, the strategic use of grants of land to articulate networks of client relationships, were a particular aspect of those gift giving practices (Wickham, 2005, pp. 58–60). The following remarks are intended to show that these 'politics of the land' should not be regarded merely in functional terms as an expression of early medieval politics but rather as an element that played a constitutive role in their production and reproduction. They are mainly based on the case of NW Iberia but are formulated generically, drawing parallels from other European regions, to show that they are also relevant for other regions.

In as much as they contributed to tying aristocratic individuals and family groups, as well as ecclesiastical institutions, around the figure of the sovereign, the 'politics of the land' were central in providing certain coherence to the political order as a whole.⁴³ Their implications unfolded at different levels. First of all, ideologically they were anchored on the notion of royal largesse as an attribute of kingship. A good king was a generous king; by realizing this ideal publicly, the kings generated the expectation of further royal largesse in the future. This is important, secondly, because royal grants did not necessarily precede the rendering of services to the kings. Royal service could be also built upon the expectation of future rewards (White, 2003). Thus, royal grants did not automatically function as a means to building reciprocal ties. Rather, they could be manipulated in order to negotiate power relationships within shared – but also debated – notions of royal power and authority. Thirdly, different and even contradictory expectations affected not only who could benefit from royal largesse, when and on what basis, but also what a king could grant. In strictly material terms, the availability of land that kings could enjoy was limited, but also changing, and was conditioned by multiple factors, from the possibility of building upon previous resources – such as Roman fiscal lands – to the capacity to appropriate new lands.⁴⁴ Grants may have been a drain on royal lands but they were not the only dynamic affecting their extent. Moreover, it was not only the land itself that was significant – however important the resources the kings may have obtained from it, which they needed to fund other aspects of royal political practice (Carocci & Collavini, 2014; Fouracre, 2009). Royal power cannot be understood without the relationships so articulated (Fouracre, 1995; Wickham & Reuter, 1995, pp. 6–7).

Moreover, granting land did not entail losing all control over it. On the one hand, there may have existed estates that were specifically set apart to be granted temporarily to royal agents while in office, and which could then be transferred to the next incumbents.⁴⁵ When they effectively granted them, the kings could recover lands and distribute them through confiscation (West, 2019). Also, they could retain certain prerogatives over it, whether in the form of renders and obligations due from those who inhabited it, or notionally, with regards to the holding of land over time. This is less clear in the case of lands donated to ecclesiastical institutions, as it can be presumed that they were made on the assumption that they would always remain in ecclesiastical hands – even if subsequent confirmations of previous royal grants indicate that there were times in which they needed to

be re-enacted.⁴⁶ In the case of lay donees, however, the fate of a land after the death of its holder could be contested, as it was not always clear whether it could be passed on directly to his or her descendants, whether this required a royal confirmation, or whether it should simply return to royal hands. Debates and conflicts in this regard are particularly apparent at times of crises and could lead to political fractures, though even in these moments the sovereign remained a central figure against which landholding was defined (Carvajal Castro, 2017a; Stafford, 2001).

Furthermore, it was not only in relation to royal lands that such relationships were built. In areas in which the kings held no land it could be based on mutual recognition between the monarchs and locally or regionally based actors. The establishment of such relationships could actually be formulated as a grant, whether from the king to the local or regional elites or vice versa (Carvajal Castro & Martín Viso, 2013). Thus, lands not formally belonging to the king began to sustain not only their owners' position, but also the overarching political regime as a whole. This does not mean that distinctions between land entrusted by the kings and inherited land became blurred, and conflicts over landholding remained at the core of many land disputes, but it does entail a certain assimilation between both types of land, which facilitated the circulation of landed assets and, more importantly, the articulation of those social bonds around them.⁴⁷

Royal grants had further implications on the ground. After all, it was actual land, or rather the capacity to exact revenues from a certain land, that was granted, and this had practical consequences with regards to the actual access to land, its produce, and the labour and services of those who occupied or exploited it. We have already considered the need for landholders to implement the mechanisms that made that possible, including the network of client relationships. We now have to consider how royal authority informed the realization of land claims on the ground.

In this regard, conflicts over land provide us with an excellent window. Disputes over lands granted by the king are rare, which suggests that in most contexts such claims went unchallenged, or else that the challenges posed did not reach the level of the extant record. This could be either because the lands had long been under the control of the rulers, or else because they had successfully managed to appropriate them or build some form of superior ownership over them – as in the case of the commons on which kings claimed ultimate ownership, even if direct management remained in local hands (Martín Viso, 2019, 2020). There are, nonetheless, land disputes in which royal authority, and more specifically royal grants when they existed or could be manufactured, were wielded as a means to support a land claim, and in which this was the basis upon which the conflict was settled (Tejerizo-García & Carvajal Castro, 2021). This shows that royal authority could be effectively built into the relationships determining access to land at the local level.

At this scale, royal authority could be wielded by different actors and was not always sufficient support for a claim. For example, in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula royal authority and former royal grants were usually invoked by lordly actors, both lay and ecclesiastical. These are usually the parties that win the disputes – rather unsurprisingly, given that the judicial assemblies in which these cases were heard usually had an aristocratic and ecclesiastical bias (Davies, 2016, pp. 205–211). The dispute between the inhabitants of *Flexum* and the monastery of Nonantola, in northern Italy, provides an interesting contrast, for in this case it was the local peasants who argued that they had a royal charter to support their claims.⁴⁸ Unfortunately for them, this was disregarded at a court dominated by notables, including two bishops and a count.⁴⁹ These disputes show that different actors could use the same arguments strategically to advance their claims, but also that the existing institutional biases – in this case in the way in which judicial assemblies were constituted, in as much as they were dominated by high-standing individuals – could condition the outcome of their initiatives.

Ultimately, then, royal authority was central in sanctioning certain forms of land appropriation, and this contributed to make land claims on the ground effective, but also to assimilate different forms of land ownership, facilitating grants of land among the elites and thus contributing to building and reproducing client networks; in the last instance, to building and reproducing the position of the kings, in as much as it was dependent on the articulation of such client networks around it. This was accompanied by the weaving of certain notions of power and

authority into such relationships. It is in this sense that we can speak of the 'politics of land' as a practice that was central for the articulation of hegemonic projects, and more particularly, in as much as these were centred in the kings, of state projects in early medieval societies. Importantly, the 'politics of land' were not deployed in the void. On the one hand, they were conditioned by capacity of landholders to realize land claims locally and to build effective and enduring client relationships, and this depended on local conditions on the ground and could be challenged by individual and collective actors at all levels of society. On the other, such social interactions were partially modulated by certain formalized frameworks of social interaction, such as judicial assemblies, and these were informed by biases that conditioned the initiatives of social actors at different social scales – a 'strategic selectivity' that tended to favour positive outcomes for the dominant groups.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article we have shown how the SRA can contribute to resituating the agency of individuals and groups at all social scales, the dialectical relationships between them, and the institutions mediating social interactions, at the core of any exploration of early medieval polities. This allows us to overcome old institutionalist approaches, as well as the difficulties posed by models built upon the notion that in state societies the political-institutional and the socioeconomic are separated domains. The analysis of the 'politics of land' has illustrated how this can be effected, furthering the understanding of a practice that has long been considered as a key feature of early medieval aristocratic politics, but which had also a constitutive dimension in early medieval polities.

This is but a preliminary approach to a much larger problem. Further work should refine the concepts so far presented and explore other features of early medieval societies in order to enrich the theoretical framework for the analysis of early medieval polities. The specificities of the different post-Roman polities, resilience and resistance among subordinate groups, the church, law and judicial practice, and contacts across polities are some of the topics that could be the object of such inquiries. Ultimately, this could foster more complex theoretical approaches and nuanced accounts of past polities and, in the last instance, contribute to enrich current theories of the state. Furthering our understanding of past polities can help us question those aspects of current state theories build in contradistinction to the assumed features of pre-capitalist polities, which veil rather than illuminate the nature of contemporary states and thus hinder our capacity to articulate better responses to the challenges they pose.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For an overview of the use of the concept of the state in medieval studies, see Grunin, 2019. See also Werner, 1992.
- ² On the history of the concept of the state, see Skinner, 1978.
- ³ See also Reynolds, 1997.
- ⁴ For a parallel that shows that this is how the debate was framed more broadly, cf. Campbell, 1995; Foot, 2005.
- ⁵ On late medieval polities as states, see Ertman, 1997; Fédou, 1971; Guenée, 1971; Harding, 2002; Laliena Corbera, 1996. See also, from historical sociology, Tilly, 1990.
- ⁶ For a recent historiographical review, see Santos Salazar, 2021, pp. 15–27. See also the works collected in Airlie et al., 2006; Pohl and Wieser, 2009.
- ⁷ On kingship, see Duggan, 1993. On governance, see Brookes and Reynolds, 2009–2011; Davis, 2015; Santos Salazar, 2021.
- ⁸ E.g.: Davies, 2003, pp. 280–281; Foot, 2005, pp. 126, 130–133. The wealth of historical, archaeological, and anthropological studies on pre-modern states – from the works of V.G. Childe, M. Fried, and E. Service to more recent contributions – is simply disregarded by the defendants of this view.
- ⁹ R.R. Davies (2003, p. 295) proposed that this could be *dominium*. Note the influence of Brunner, 1992.
- ¹⁰ For this methodological critique, see Gilchrist, 2009.
- ¹¹ For the debate on how early medieval thinkers categorised political organisations at the time, see, most notably, Fried, 1982; Goetz, 1987, 2006. See also Halphen, 1939; Genicot, 1984.
- ¹² See, among others, Innes, 2000, pp. 291–292; Charles-Edwards, 2000, p. 523. An extreme formulation of the weight of social relations as the scaffolding of early medieval polities would be the portrayal of the state as an aristocratic *Personenverbandsstaat*, advanced by T. Mayer in the 1930s – and a product of the affirmation of National Socialism in Germany. See, among others, Mayer, 1937. For a reappraisal of the weight of personal bonds, see Althoff, 2004. Specifically, on the state and the maintenance of public order, T. Lambert (2020) dismisses the idea that there was anything like a state judicial hierarchy distinct from society itself. See also Geary, 1986. P. Hyam (2001) leaves more room for the state in his assessment of the feud.
- ¹³ See, paradigmatically, Ganshof, 1971. Cf. Costambeys et al., 2011.
- ¹⁴ For example, S. Foot defined the state as ‘the political organisation which is the basis of civil government – an overarching, disembodied network of institutions exercising power over a territorially defined area –’ (Foot, 2005, p. 126), drawing on the definition provided in Mann, 1980. For Mann’s insistence on the autonomy of the state, see Mann, 1986a. Paradoxically, Mann himself found no problem in applying the concept of the state to the analysis of pre-modern societies, and indeed argued that medieval states were ‘overwhelmingly, narrowly political’ (Mann, 1986b, p. 17).
- ¹⁵ See the comments on Haldon, *infra*. For capitalist societies, see Rioux, 2013. See also Holloway, 2002, p. 92; cf. Callinicos, 2009, p. 84; Gerstenberger, 2011, pp. 67–68. For a critique of the separation between the economic and the political in M. Weber’s works and some strands of Marxism, with a specific preoccupation for a historical understanding of state building processes, see Teschke, 2011, pp. 49–53.
- ¹⁶ An example of this is M. Innes’s ‘sphere of legitimate ruling action’ (Innes, 2000, p. 254).
- ¹⁷ See, among others, Bassett, 1989; Hodges, 1982; Renfrew and Cherry, 1986. For a more recent approach along this line, see, among others, Bagge, 2009.
- ¹⁸ For a detailed critique, with an extensive review of previous theoretical works, see Smith, 2003, pp. 30–77.
- ¹⁹ See Escalona et al., 2019b; Escalona, 2020. See also Wickham, 2009.
- ²⁰ See also Reynolds, 1997. Reynolds based her definition on Weber’s definition of the modern state. She neglected the fact that in his writings, Weber regards the modern state as a specific type of the state, corresponding to a particular

stage of historical development. Weber provides a more general definition of the state together with the more restrictive one he formulates for the modern state. See Weber, 2013, pp. 54-56.

- ²¹ Note the influence of Runciman, 1989, p. 154.
- ²² For example: 'moves where moved from place to place by the state'; 'the state needed'; 'large-scale use of coin by the state'; 'the capacity of the state to dominate'; 'the withdrawal of the state'; 'fugitives were pursued by both the late Roman state and by landowners' (Wickham, 2005, pp. 72, 75, 128, 257, 310, 524). It must be said, though, that his portrayal of the early medieval aristocracies is nuanced enough to preclude any caricaturing of the dominant class as a homogenous group (Wickham, 2005, pp. 153-258).
- ²³ For the theoretical approach to the relationship between resistance and the state, we draw on Gailey, 1987; as well as on González-Ruibal, 2014.
- ²⁴ See also Banaji, 2010, p. 23.
- ²⁵ E.g.: 'state's efforts to secure its control over resources'; 'states tend to attribute to themselves a degree of permanence'; 'the Mughal state maintained its armies'; 'whether states are able to develop bureaucratic means of doing this' (Haldon, 1993, pp. 118, 147, 226, 263).
- ²⁶ For Jessop's reading of Poulantzas, see Jessop, 1985. See also Sotiris, 2017. On the possibility of applying this approach to pre-capitalist polities, see Jessop, 2007, pp. 9-11; Poulantzas, 1968, p. 197.
- ²⁷ Poulantzas, 1978, p. 129.
- ²⁸ For the relational approach to agency, see Burkitt, 2016; Long, 2001.
- ²⁹ For more recent approaches to institutions, see Hall et al., 2014; Ostrom, 2005.
- ³⁰ See also Abrams, 1988, pp. 75-80; Bourdieu, 2012, pp. 25-26.
- ³¹ See also Haldon, 2011, pp. 56-57.
- ³² The consensus now is that tax and rent represent two different forms of surplus exaction within the same mode of production, rather than as specific features of two distinct modes of production. Cf. Berkay, 1987; Haldon, 1993; Wickham, 1984, 1985; 2005, p. 60. On feudalism and the control of productive processes, see Wickham, 2000, 2005, p. 536. More recently, on the feudal mode of production, see Wickham, 2021.
- ³³ On local societies the classic work is Davies, 1988; and see also Wickham, 1988. For a recent overview at European level, see Zeller et al., 2020. On the factors conditioning individual positions and social mobility, see Bougard, 1996; Bullimore, 2005; Feller et al., 2005. On different types of groups, see Carvajal Castro, 2020.
- ³⁴ See also the works collected in Escalona and Reynolds, 2011.
- ³⁵ On agrarian growth in the early Middle Ages, see Duby, 1962; Marquette, 1990. For a critical review and more recent approaches to this issue, see Arnoux, 2012; Schroeder, 2018.
- ³⁶ Strategies aimed at intensifying control over agrarian production and its processing are evident in some areas. See Banham and Faith, 2014; McKerracher, 2018; Henning, 2009; McCormick et al., 2014.
- ³⁷ See Gramsci, 2015, pp. 175-182; Jessop, 1982, pp. 192-202.
- ³⁸ On women and gender relations in early medieval Europe, see Bitel, 2002; Gilchrist, 1999; and specifically with regards to early medieval states, see Smith, 2009.
- ³⁹ On ethnicity and political communities, see Goffart, 1980.
- ⁴⁰ For the processes mentioned, see Blair and Sharpe, 1992; García de Cortázar, 2006; Mazel, 2016; Patzold, 2008. Also, on the emergence of the medieval parish, see the articles collected in *Médiévaux* 49 (2005).
- ⁴¹ On royal assemblies, see Gleeson, 2012; Roach, 2013. On warfare, see Bachrach, 2001; Isla Frez, 2010. On the court and the education of the aristocracies, see Nelson, 1998.
- ⁴² For an anthropological perspective on gift-giving and social inequality, see Weiner, 1992; Godelier, 1996.
- ⁴³ See Haldon, 1993, pp. 35-36. On the politics of land and the articulation of early medieval polities, see Carvajal Castro, 2017b; Molyneux, 2015, pp. 65-68; Santos Salazar, 2021.
- ⁴⁴ For an overview, see the works collected in Bougard and Loré, 2019.
- ⁴⁵ So much seems clear for Anglo-Saxon England, on which see Baxter and Blair, 2006; Lavelle, 2014. See also Baxter, 2007.

- ⁴⁶ As noted, for example, in Davies, 2016, pp- 93-94; for analogous practice in a different location, see Costambeys, 2007, p. 35.
- ⁴⁷ See Alfonso, 1997; Brown, 2001.
- ⁴⁸ On *Flexum*, see Lazzari, 2012; Santos Salazar, 2020.
- ⁴⁹ Wickham, 2005, p. 582.

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