

# Post-Roman land-use transformations

Analysing the early medieval countryside in Castelo de Vide (Portugal)

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## Abstract

Lately we have seen a growing academic interest in the early medieval countryside across the Iberian Peninsula. The data concerning the centuries between the dismantlement of the Western Roman Empire and the Muslim occupation is still scarce; however, several patterns start to emerge, forming a patchwork of shifting landscapes. This paper focuses on the results of recent field surveys and excavations, carried out within a research project on the territory of Castelo de Vide (Alentejo, Portugal). Present findings show evidence of a complex process of adaptation throughout the post-Roman centuries (AD 500-800). The transition from medium-sized Roman villas to small-scale valley settlements results in noticeable changes in the management of local resources and economic activities. The new countryside is shaped through a network of small farmsteads in which production scale and focus shifts. Comparisons will be drawn between the Roman land-use model and the new settlement pattern. Based on the available archaeological evidence, it will be argued that in the period after the collapse of Roman imperial structures a new form of peasant community emerges.

**Keywords:** *Early medieval settlements, peasant communities, post-Roman land use, Castelo de Vide (Portugal).*

## Résumé

*Transformations post-romaines de l'utilisation des terres: étude du milieu rural dans la région de Castelo de Vide (Portugal) pendant le haut moyen âge*

Nous avons pu constater récemment un intérêt croissant pour les questions relatives au milieu rural médiéval dans toute la péninsule ibérique. Jusqu'à présent, les informations étaient encore rares concernant les siècles entre le démantèlement de l'Empire Romain d'Occident et l'occupation musulmane. Cependant, plusieurs modèles commencent à émerger dans une mosaïque de paysages changeants.

Cet article se concentre sur les résultats de récentes études sur le terrain et de fouilles réalisées dans le cadre d'un projet de recherche sur le territoire de Castelo de Vide

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(Alentejo, Portugal). Les résultats actuels fournissent des preuves d'un processus complexe d'adaptation tout au long des siècles post-romains (siècles V-VIII après Jésus-Christ). La transition entre les villas romaines moyennes et les petites fermes entraîne de profondes transformations dans la gestion des ressources locales et des activités économiques. Cette nouvelle campagne est façonnée à partir d'un réseau de petites fermes dans lesquelles produit et quantité de production changent. Des comparaisons seront faites entre le modèle romain d'utilisation des terres et un nouveau modèle d'établissement qui émerge. Sur la base des preuves archéologiques disponibles, il sera soutenu que dans la période après l'effondrement des structures impériales romaines une nouvelle forme de communauté paysanne émerge.

**Mots-clés:** *Communautés paysannes, Haut Moyen-Age, affectation post-romaine des terres, Castelo de Vide (Portugal).*

## Zusammenfassung

*Nachrömische Veränderung der Landnutzung: Erforschung des ländlichen Raums im frühen Mittelalter in Castelo de Vide (Portugal)*

Seit einiger Zeit steht der frühmittelalterlich-ländliche Raum auf der gesamten Iberischen Halbinsel im Fokus der Forschung. Derzeit sind die archäologischen Daten

zwischen dem Niedergang des Weströmischen Reiches und der muslimischen Besatzung noch begrenzt, doch können schon mehrere Muster der Landnutzung festgestellt werden.

In diesem Artikel werden Ergebnisse von archäologischen Untersuchungen und Ausgrabungen diskutiert, die im Rahmen eines Forschungsprojekts auf dem Gebiet von Castelo de Vide (Alentejo, Portugal) durchgeführt wurden. Die vorliegenden Befunde deuten auf einen komplexen Adaptionsprozess während der gesamten nachrömischen Jahrhunderte (ca. 500-800) hin. Der Übergang von mittelgroßen römischen Villen zu kleinen Talsiedlungen führt zu starken Veränderungen der Nutzung lokaler Ressourcen und wirtschaftlicher Aktivitäten. Der Raum wird nun durch ein Netzwerk von kleinen Gehöften geprägt, bei denen sich Produktionsumfang und wirtschaftliche Ausrichtung verschieben. Vergleiche zwischen dem römischen Landnutzungsmodell und einem neuen Siedlungsmuster werden gezogen. Auf der Grundlage der verfügbaren archäologischen Beweise wird argumentiert, dass in der Zeit nach dem Zusammenbruch der römischen imperialen Strukturen eine neue Form von bäuerlichen Gemeinschaften entsteht.

**Schlagwörter:** *Frühmittelalterliche Siedlungen, bäuerliche Gemeinschaften, post-römische Landnutzung, Castelo de Vide (Portugal).*

## 1. Introduction

Castelo de Vide is a municipality located in the central Portuguese region of Alto Alentejo. Its landscape is composed mostly of gentle plains crossed by seasonal streams and marked by granite outcrops. The fact that in recent years this rural territory has been used mainly as pasture with little mechanized agriculture has helped to preserve its many archaeological sites. Between 2014 and 2017 the PramCV research project, led by the author, has analysed archaeological evidence of the early medieval rural occupation in this area. Drawing on information available from previous local works and undertaking its own archaeological activities – surface field surveys, excavations, and material culture analysis – the PramCV project was able to gather a large volume of data concerning the early medieval countryside. Most of the collected information is still being processed; however, it is clear that new settlement patterns exist, based on local resource management, which contrasts deeply with the previous Roman-period land use, which was based on a centralized model (Carneiro 2014).

## 2. Archaeological evidence

The territory of Castelo de Vide is located 7 km north of the town of Ammaia (Marvão municipality) and was certainly incorporated into its countryside during the Roman period. Ammaia was a medium-sized town, probably founded during the Augustan age. It was elevated to *civitas* in the time of Emperor Claudius and likely became a *municipium* during the 2nd century AD (Corsi *et al.* 2011). Evidence available so far suggests that although the area of the city remained at least partly occupied during the early medieval period, Ammaia struggled to maintain its status right after the fall of the Western Empire. Information regarding the Roman rural occupation of the town's surrounding areas is scarce and fragmented. In Castelo de Vide the available archaeological data – 1 confirmed villa, at least 2 possible *vici*, and potentially 9 other Roman sites – suggests a small number of settlements most likely organized in close connection with the city needs.

For the Early Middle Ages, the archaeological remains that can be linked with the peasant occupation can be roughly divided into three groups: graves, farmsteads, and olive presses.

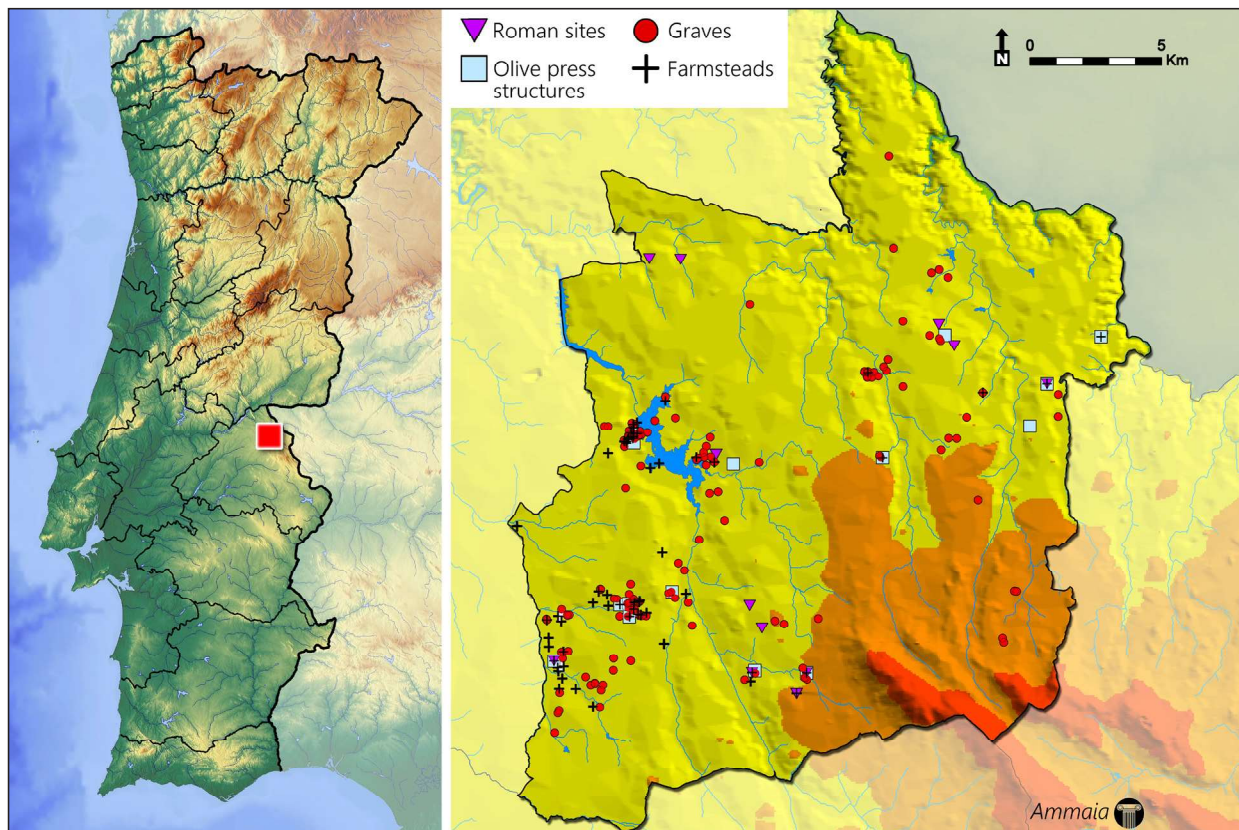


Fig. 1: Distribution map showing relevant Roman and early medieval sites identified in the territory of Castelo de Vide (© Fabián Cuesta-Gómez).

In surface field surveys, the most frequent finds are rock-cut graves, a type of early medieval funerary structure in use throughout the Iberian Peninsula. The analysis of rock-cut graves presents a number of problems, but nevertheless, recent research in this field has allowed for some consensus to be achieved (Rubio-Díez 2015; Martín-Viso 2017; Tente 2017; Brookes *et al.* 2017). It is currently accepted that this funerary trend was in use over a long period of time, between the 6th and the 11th centuries, and that it is the most visible aspect of peasant-led funerary practices. As local expressions, their meanings and period of use vary greatly from place to place. Nevertheless, the lack of connection to religious buildings, and their proximity to domestic and productive areas, indicates the peasants' agency in managing their dead.

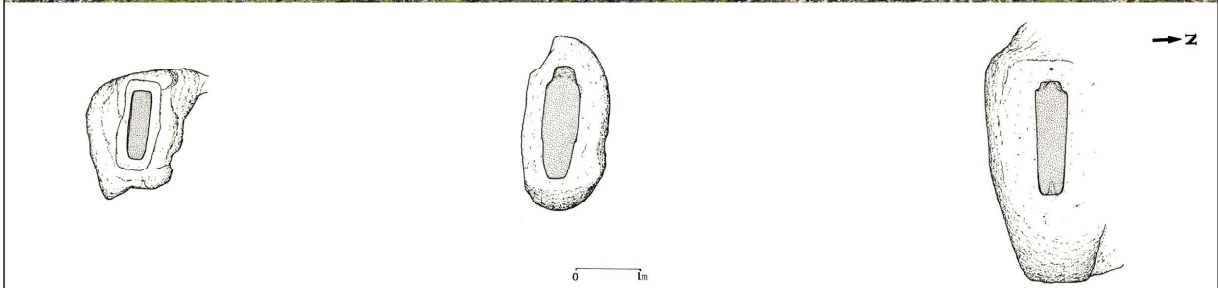
Rock-cut graves usually appear scattered in the landscape, individualised or in small groups of 2-3 graves; they are built in close connection to households and productive structures, within a radius of about 40 m. This behaviour of keeping the dead so close to the living has been linked with a need to claim land-use rights, in which the graves might stand for the memory of the ancestors (Martín-Viso 2012). As a result, rock-cut graves should be

seen as part of an anthropised landscape, and efforts made to understand them in connexion to other evidence of human action (Laliena – Ortega 2005; Martín-Viso *et al.* 2017; Tente 2017).

Rock-cut graves were not the only type of funerary structures used by peasant communities. In fact, in the territory of Castelo de Vide there are examples of sites where rock-cut graves seem to coexist with other forms of burial structures, such as cist graves and sarcophagi (Prata 2014). The motives behind the different types of graves are still unclear. The currently available surface data indicates 178 archaeological sites with early medieval funerary structures, giving a total of 263 graves known within the study area.

Within the framework of the PramCV project, excavations were carried out in a total of 6 areas where structures were preserved in association to rock-cut graves. It became clear that the basic living unit of these peasant communities was the single household farmstead. Surface findings point to around 60 of these farmhouses. The excavated structures share their main building characteristics: rectangular compartments made of stone walls, developing in a sequence of joined sections that share an entrance. On the outside there is evidence of







farmyards or cattle pens, in the form of semicircular larger structures, of which sector I of Tapada das Guaritas is a good example (Prata 2017).

The rooftops were covered with heavily decorated ceramic tiles and, less frequently, plant materials (Cuesta-Gómez *et al. forthcoming*). The floors were made of hard-

packed dirt, and the granite base rock could also be used, when exposed. Each house had at least one hearth, built at floor level, square shaped and marked by elongated stones, with a surface made of mortar, pebbles, or roof tiles. The material culture inside of the houses suggests different activities: ceramics vessels for food preparation, consumption, and also storage; manual mills for cereal and grain grinding; spindle whorls for weaving; and few metallic objects (Prata 2017).

The olive-press structures are architecturally similar to the farmhouses, although generally more robust, with several entrances and nearby interconnected structures. There is evidence of at least 14 press structures. Formally, most of the documented stone weights belong to screw presses (Peña-Cervantes 2011-2012). Botanical record analysis has confirmed the presence of olive tree (*Olea europaea*), and we see archaeological evidence for the different processes of olive oil production: crushing,

Fig. 2 (opposite page, above): Group of three rock-cut graves from Tapada das Guaritas sector II (© Fabián Cuesta-Gómez and João Magusto).

Fig. 3 (opposite page, below): Tapada das Guaritas sector I, an excavated farmstead structure with an associated rock-cut grave. Examples of domestic material culture are a stone mill and a cooking pot (© Fabián Cuesta-Gómez).

Fig. 4 (below): Tapada das Guaritas sector II. Remains of an olive oil press and associated storage building (1). Detail of a storage vessel (2) and the stone press weight (3) (© Fabián Cuesta-Gómez and João Magusto).



pressing, and decantation. The presence of large amounts of storage vessels' sherds, similar to Roman *dolia*, reveals that some areas were also used for storing. The existence of multiple olive presses in use simultaneously seems to reflect the interests of small individualized productions (Lewit 2009).

In both the domestic and the productive structures, most of the material culture is represented by pottery. The formal repertoire is fairly limited, composed mostly of cookware pots in the households, and storage vessels in the olive oil presses. Although less frequent, other forms such as plates, bowls, pitchers, and basins are also represented. The pottery production uses local clays and exhibits a great formal variety, a possible sign of domestic manufactures as opposed to a centralized production. The exception would be the roof tiles, consistent in all the documented settlements, suggesting a single manufacture with regional distribution (Cuesta-Gómez et al. forthcoming).

Due to the acidity of the granitic soils, organic materials are almost never preserved. During the excavation of sector II of Tapada das Guaritas, a large storage building associated with an olive oil press, it was possible to collect an unusual amount of charcoal samples. At least part of the samples were bush trees, identified within the first deposition level of fallen roof tiles, a likely indicator that shortly after the structure was abandoned it was overgrown with weeds. These botanical remains were preserved in the form of charcoal during a fire that affected the area. Two of these samples, a fragment of pine cone (*Pinus sp.*) and a strawberry tree branch (*Arbutus unedo*), were dated by <sup>14</sup>C analysis, setting the date of use of the structure before the first half of the 8th century.

### 3. Conclusions

At the current state of the research we have been able to confirm the growth of small- and medium-scale rural settlements during the early medieval period in the territory of Castelo de Vide. In all the excavated sites the structures seem to be abandoned voluntarily and there is no evidence of traumatic destructive processes. There is also no indication that these structures were used for extended periods of time, since these are very horizontal records where dense stratigraphic sequences are completely absent.

Additionally, several aspects seem to indicate a lack of community feeling amongst these houses: the absence of gathering areas; individualized burial grounds, and polarized productive structures. Yet, these settlements are still built in relative proximity and there were certainly social and economic associations amongst them. Amidst the known sites there is also no sign of hierarchy: settlement layout, building quality, and material culture is equivalent across all of them. This consistency seems

also to indicate that all these farmsteads and olive presses were built in close succession and were in use at the same time. It is also likely that their abandonment occurred at a similar moment, somewhere in the beginning of the 8th century.

All these features should be taken into consideration, when realizing how much this rural settlement pattern differs from the previous Roman model. With the collapse of the imperial administrative structures we see a progressive disintegration of large-scale agricultural productions (Chavarría-Arnau 2007). In the territory of Castelo de Vide a new early medieval countryside is shaped through a network of intricate small- and medium-sized farmsteads, a polarized reality with a family-based approach to productive strategies. This certainly indicates a clear shift in production scale and emphasis and, while some of the day-to-day productions were managed locally, and even domestically, other processes appear to be functioning on a microregional scale, as suggested by the amount of olive oil presses. Moreover, storage of olive oil might also indicate a production that exceeds domestic consumption. What remains to be seen is at what scale this territory was operating; which commercial routes might still be in use; and at what level peasant communities ensured their agency in such processes. Further research in the territory of Castelo de Vide will be able to show what powers emerge and at what scale the peasant communities were able to organize themselves, when a former urban structure failed to manage its countryside. In the future, careful comparisons should also be drawn between the territories around cities that thrived and cities that failed in the early medieval period.

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