

POLITIES, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND THINGS IN-BETWEEN¹

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In historical discourses early medieval polities occupy a sort of no-man's land between the 'ancient states' of Classical Antiquity and the 'modern states' of later medieval and early modern times. Both embody large-scale, sophisticated administrative and political constructs which are commonly presented as key moments in the genealogy of present-day states – one which acknowledges its classical foundations and modern developments, but is much less at ease with its medieval interlude. For many students of modern states, the significant changes in state governance that took place between the late Middle Ages and the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—mainly governments' ability to control and monopolize violence—are a convenient point of departure, thereby rendering developments further back in time inconsequential or trivial to the evolution of the 'state'.² Nevertheless, it makes little sense to argue that states—however imperfect compared both to modern and Classical ones—did not exist in Europe before the late Middle Ages.³ In fact medievalists have put considerable effort into identifying and debating at which stage different polities can be called states, an effort that has traditionally been affected by nationalistic history-writing, projecting desires to push the beginnings of statehood as far back as possible, although this is periodically counterbalanced by revisionist movements.⁴ The focus is normally set upon evidence for administrative, fiscal and judicial structures—

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² Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*. The effects of such a conceptual frontier are similar to the distinctions made in classical sociology between 'modern' and 'traditional' forms of society; see Wagner, *Theory, Culture and Society*, pp. 151-153. Late medievalists are also increasingly emphasising the importance of non-state polities in the Late Middle Ages, for example Watts, *The Making of Polities*.

³ Strayer, *Medieval Origins*.

⁴ Geary, *The Myth of Nations*, esp. pp. 15-40; Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*.

what Joyce and others have termed the ‘governmentalization’ of the state⁵—and the degree to which they can be said to have been controlled by kings. An alternative to this institutional view is the notion, encapsulated most clearly in Marxist history writing, that states are first and foremost about the production and reproduction of social inequality, and therefore primarily instruments of the social elites at any time. Examples of both approaches are abundant in the literature, including chapters in this volume.

Medievalists have offered a variety of responses to these theories, conditioned by the divergent trajectories that lead from Antiquity through the Middle Ages and into modern states. On the one hand, there is an interest in Rome’s successor states: the so-called barbarian kingdoms. Here, there is often particular emphasis placed on the ‘Frankish core’, where a considerable degree of post-Roman institutional continuity can be discerned, and where the key question is for many, not when the state appeared, but rather how much was it eroded in the post-Carolingian period, and how much of it needed to be reconstructed following the ‘feudal age’.⁶ On the other hand, there is the experience of regions of northern and eastern Europe that were never part of the Roman Empire, or, as is the case in Britain, where Roman institutions had mostly disappeared in the intervening period. Here, questions and theories about state formation are normally used to explain socio-political changes taking place in the ninth to thirteenth centuries, with an emphasis on distinguishing indigenous developments from Franco-Roman influences and models.⁷ Change in these regions is often presented as a progression from small-scale polities towards larger states; a view that is further complicated by the desire of many archaeologists to identify state-like structures in deep time. Examples supporting such ideas have included the early Viking Age in northern ‘non-Roman’ Europe;⁸ the late Iron Age in southern Britain;⁹ the late Bronze and early Iron Ages in regions like Gaul¹⁰ or Iberia.¹¹ In

⁵ Joyce, ‘What is the social in social history?’, p. 238.

⁶ The literature is immense. To cite only a few major references, see Pohl, ed., *Kingdoms of the Empire*; Airlie, Pohl, and Reimitz, eds, *Staat im Frühen Mittelalter*; Pohl and Wieser, eds, *Der frühmittelalterliche Staat*; Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, chapters 2 and 3; Garipzanov, Geary, and Urbanczyk, eds, *Franks, Northmen and Slavs*. For a maximum view of post-Roman continuity, see Durlat, *Les finances publiques. De Diocletien aux Carolingiens (284-888)*. Cfr. Wickham, ‘La chute de Rome’.

⁷ E. g. Bagge, *Cross and Scepter*; Blomkvist, ‘Eastern and Southern Scandinavia’. For a classical view on England see Campbell, ‘The late Anglo-Saxon state: a maximum view’ and furthermore Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxon State*.

⁸ E. g. Randsborg, *The Viking Age in Denmark*; Thurston, ed., *Landscapes of Power*.

⁹ Haselgrove, ‘Late Iron Age society in Britain’.

the latter cases the process of state formation is inconveniently interrupted by the Roman conquest. In presenting such models, there is often a great reliance on linear neo-evolutionary ideas that sit uncomfortably with the early medieval evidence, even if the traditional classification of bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and states¹² is modified to include sub-categories and concepts such as ‘heterarchy’, ‘network-polity’, or ‘centralized stratified society’ as an intermediate category between chiefdom and state.¹³

Collapse, continuity, rupture, linear evolution... no single approach can account for early medieval Europe as a whole, even if some work well in specific cases. The different conceptions of ‘state’, as well as the term’s notorious polysemy in different European languages, also serve to complicate the picture. A comprehensive understanding needs to account for both the variable survival of a strong Roman state, and the unprecedented penetration of state structures on the localities that this entailed, and for instances that remained untouched by Rome and its inheritance. It needs to combine evolution with other notions such as collapse, continuity and multi-linearity, all of which operated, to different degrees, in different cases.¹⁴ There is not one, but many roads that lead from Rome: some lead to statelessness; others along different paths to social complexity; some of which in turn lead to states. What is important to recognise from the outset is that early medieval neighbourhoods were part of polities that were immersed in processes of secondary, not primary, state formation.

1. Secondary state formation: the genie and the bottle

Evolutionary views of state formation that focus upon the ‘primary states’ of Egypt,

¹⁰ E. g. Arnold and Gibson, eds, *Celtic Chiefdom, Celtic State*.

¹¹ Chapman, *Emerging Complexity*; Ruiz and Molinos, *The Archaeology of the Iberians*.

¹² See especially Fried, *The Evolution of Political Society*; Fried, ‘On the Evolution of Social Stratification’; Sahlins, ‘Poor Man, Rich Man’ and Service, *Primitive Social Organization*. The scheme is not without detractors such as e.g. Cohen and Service, eds, *Origins of the State*, Claessen and Skalník, eds, *The Early State*; Claessen and Skalník, eds, *The Study of the State*; Feinman and Neitzel, ‘Too Many Types’; Johnson and Earle, *The Evolution of Human Societies*. However, it continues to be considered by many a useful tool for examining different types of societies; see, for instance, Renfrew and Bahn, *Archaeology*, pp. 174-77.

¹³ See Ehrenreich, Crumley, and Levy, eds, *Heterarchy*, Blomkvist, ‘Eastern and Southern Scandinavia’ and Kristiansen, ‘Chiefdoms, states and systems of social evolution’. See also Brumfiel, ‘Heterarchy’. For criticism, see Sanderson, ‘Evolutionism and its Critics’, pp. 154-91 and 263-79.

¹⁴ The best example of a multi-linear approach to post-Roman Europe is Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*.

Mesopotamia or Mesoamerica are of little help when dealing with the European early Middle Ages. Generally speaking, early medieval states simply did not come to exist in the same way as the great agrarian civilisations of Antiquity, and the attributes that are often seen as critical to these first states, as per Gordon Childe's famous check-list, are mostly absent.¹⁵ Our case-studies fall under the rubric of 'secondary state formation'; a crucial issue which has received relatively limited theoretical attention compared to the origins of 'primary' states. If 'primary states' are defined as political, economic, and other organizational structures that emerged from non- (or pre-) state conditions (e.g. 'chiefdoms') in pristine settings, the concept 'secondary state' can be used to designate the successors of 'primary' states, to non-state regions that are incorporated by existing states, as well as to describe what happens when a region develops state structures in response to states that have already come into existence.¹⁶ In practice these distinctions are not always clearly drawn and the general sense is that for many theorists secondary states are of relatively minor importance compared to their pristine/original, or modern/extant counterparts. As a result, even though the vast majority of all states that have ever existed are 'secondary', their bearing on the general issues of social evolution and state-formation is largely disregarded.

There are at least four main ways in which secondary state formation is relevant for the studies gathered in this volume. Firstly, there is direct inheritance. Roman structures of government did not fade out at the same pace and to the same extent everywhere. While crucial components of the state, such as taxation, probably disappeared almost everywhere between the fifth and seventh centuries,¹⁷ many others persisted to varying degrees, ranging from the practical (e.g. judicial procedures, systems of land proprietorship, legal processes), to the ideological (e.g. notions of public authority or political identities).

A second consideration concerns the introduction—or re-introduction—of features of more complex governance from outside, especially into peripheral regions. In fact, it is difficult to identify any political development in our case studies that is completely free from external influence. In some cases, imitation of, or contamination by, external states is seen as a determinant of indigenous change. Such is the case of Anglo-Saxon England, where a strong historiographical tradition contends that Carolingian governance was intensively adopted and re-interpreted to create a state system that was even more

¹⁵ Childe, 'The Urban Revolution'.

¹⁶ Price, 'Secondary State Formation'.

¹⁷ Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 56-150.

perfect and resistant than its model. But it is not just a matter of kings or would-be kings mirroring other kings. In many of the northern areas (England, Iceland, Norway, etc.) political change is closely related to the adoption of Christianity, which often entailed a general redefinition of identity and an ideological rupture with the past and with undesirable social structures. With Christianity were also diffused notions of hierarchy, concepts of power and legal traditions, sometimes in strong contradiction and problematic hybridization with existing ones. Even if these could not in themselves be triggers of state formation, they certainly embraced new ideological and legal resources which could be put to good use by the right actors to build social difference, authority, and, as the institutional Church gained ground, mechanisms for socio-territorial control.¹⁸

Thirdly, some territories were affected by external influence in a much more acute and visible way, namely by their direct incorporation by another polity, whether of similar scale or a larger, more complex one. Anglo-Saxon England provides examples of both situations, especially regarding the incorporation of smaller units by the expanding kingdoms of Mercia in the eighth century and Wessex from the late ninth century.¹⁹

Fourthly, in some cases there is almost the reverse situation, that is, territories where the political dynamics were linked to external powers which did not, or barely operated directly upon them. In these instances, it was undertakings from the periphery that were critical to affecting change.²⁰ Such processes are particularly noticeable in formerly independent polities or territories which were formerly part of a larger realm, but constituted semi-autonomous bubbles where elites preserved connections to external powers in order to exploit the political capital derived therefrom.²¹ Specific Carolingian

¹⁸ See, for England, Wormald, *The Making of English Law, 1: Legislation and its Limits*, and the studies collected in Gameson, ed., *St Augustine and the conversion of England*. For Iceland, Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland*; For Norway, see Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold*; Bagge, 'Christianization and State Formation' See also Vigil-Escalera's argument in this volume about the building of churches in locations of established social significance.

¹⁹ See the detailed discussion by Stuart Brookes and Andrew Reynolds in chapter 7. However, it is probably Walcheren, the strongly peripheral Frisian island engulfed by the Carolingian realm studied by Letty Ten Harkel (chapter 9), that provides the most striking case of social distance between the small and the large scale in this volume.

²⁰ The clearest example in this volume is Vésteinsson's discussion of the connections between the Icelandic elites and Norway (chapter 10), including their participation in partisan struggles and their direct or indirect links to the Norwegian monarchy before the 1220s.

²¹ See Werner's classical studies: Werner, 'Les principautés périphériques dans le monde Franc du VIII^e siècle'

peripheries, whether largely autonomous, such as Brittany, or more formally attached, such as Catalonia, can be read in this light, but also other kinds of peripheries, such as the county of Castile within the Astur-Leonese kingdom.²²

Regarding these four situations, it is important to bear in mind the often neglected issue of the resilience of statehood. The relatively abundant literature on collapse tends to emphasize the role of ‘creative peripheries’ in preserving social practices and modes of operation that are normally understood as being created, fostered, and/or enforced by the state after the demise of centralized powers.²³ Those may include a legal culture, notions of justice and authority, specialised literacy and numeracy or a even a diplomatic culture, as suggested by Wendy Davies in this volume. There are numerous examples of this kind of situations in parts of post-Roman Europe where aspects of Roman culture—from literacy and documentary culture to wider legal and political notions, even world visions—survived for a longer or shorter period in municipal or micro-regional governance after the collapse of the state. Such is the case in parts of Iberia, where in the southern province of *Hispania Baetica*, cities managed to keep alive a complex Roman culture for most of a largely stateless fifth century, or *Gallaecia*, in the northwest, where a more profound state collapse did not erase a world vision that conceived of the region as essentially part of the—much troubled—Roman world.²⁴ A similar worldview is expressed in the writings of the sixth-century British monk Gildas, and can be recognised also in the survival of Roman traditions of epigraphic literacy and time measurement in Celtic-speaking parts of Britain.²⁵

2. Rulers and the ruled

There is a strong tendency amongst anthropologists and archaeologists to study the development of complex, differentiated forms of political organization by focusing upon

and Werner, ‘Kingdom and principality’.

²² Brett, ‘Brittany and the Carolingian Empire’; Escalona, ‘In the name of a distant king’; Jarrett, ‘Engaging Élités’.

²³ Renfrew, ‘Systems collapse as social transformation’; Tainter, *The collapse of complex societies*; Yoffee and Cowgill, eds, *The collapse of ancient states*; McAnany and Yoffee, eds, *Questioning Collapse*. On regeneration after collapse, see Schwartz and Nichols, eds, *After collapse. The regeneration of complex societies*; Morrison, ‘All is not lost when the center does not hold’.

²⁴ In chapter 13 of this volume Wendy Davies makes a compelling case for the survival of a tradition of scribal training and charter-writing of Late Antique origin in northern Iberia alongside the more visible production from great ecclesiastical houses. See also Davies, ‘Local priests and the writing of charters’.

²⁵ Handley, ‘The Early Medieval inscriptions of Western Britain: Function and Sociology’

the figures of the rulers, and how they acquire, maintain and exercise their capacity to, in Weberian terms, ‘impose [their] own will upon the behaviour of other persons’.²⁶ Neo-evolutionary thinking allows for a bottom-up approach at the ‘primitive’ end of the socio-evolutionary process: change from band to tribe or segmentary society is not normally seen as a matter of powerful leaders uniting hitherto disparate bands under a single ruler, but rather of groups becoming larger because of other social and economic dynamics. However, at the ‘complex’ end—that is to say, at the level of chiefdoms and states—the machinations of leaders tend to be regarded as much more critical to developments.²⁷ There is an implicit circularity in this belief, as the exercise of power seems also to be the reason for its existence: the strong-man creates power by applying it. Can the inherent tendency of people in power to want more of it suffice as an explanation for the development of more effective and extensive political structures? A whole body of sociological theory recognizes that the matter is not so simple. Scholars like Hanna Arendt, Talcot Parsons, Leo Althusser, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault and Michael Mann²⁸—who disagree heartily on most things, including power—all appreciate that power resides in, and is drawn from, the group over which it is exercised.²⁹ In other words, it is the ruled, not the ruler, that, to different degrees, set the conditions of rulership.

In most of the early medieval peripheries studied in this volume, and in many other cases besides, rulers normally did not have the resources to hold and reproduce their power in disregard of the social body.³⁰ Rather, rulers’ authority was nested in a lattice of relations of different scales. In small-scale societies, rule is embedded in local social structures, personal relationships, and community dynamics, so that authority resides in the consensus that forms and legitimises the existence of a political centre. In many of the cases described here, this politics of consensus is institutionalised in the form of assemblies,³¹ so that the political community was in a sense identical to the gatherings of its stakeholders. The Irish *tuath*, Norwegian *fylke*, or Anglo-Saxon *shire* were simultaneously a territory, a community (or a representative section of a community), and the mechanism by which political authority was legitimated.

²⁶ Weber, *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. by Roth and Wittich, p. 942.

²⁷ Earle, *How Chiefs Come to Power*.

²⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*; Parsons, ‘On the concept of political power’; Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*; Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*; Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, 1.

²⁹ Also Barnes, *The Nature of Power*, p. 57.

³⁰ See Astill in chapter 2 of this volume.

³¹ Reuter, ‘Assembly Politics’.

This direct relationship between local communities and decision-taking political spheres is widely detectable amongst the (commonly pre-state and often small-scale) polities of northern Europe.³² Conversely, in the usually larger polities of southern Europe, local or micro-regional political assemblies do not seem to have had the same representational role. The general impression is that smaller-scale territorial communities were more important to the creation and functioning of government in those northern regions where early medieval polities evolved into larger aggregates from a situation of intense socio-territorial fragmentation,³³ than in the south where at least the idea, if not the actuality, of a wider state, with its notions of centralised authority, persisted throughout the period. Many historians, however, will stress that the concept of a political body or community formed by the ruled was of paramount importance—even if more ideological than practical—across medieval Europe.³⁴

This contrast between northern and southern Europe is, of course, overly simplistic. In most, if not all, parts of Europe higher levels of authority, not explicable by local dynamics, had existed at least since the Bronze Age. These higher levels are much more difficult to account for, not least because their impact on individual communities and peoples' everyday lives remained limited for much of the time. Kristiansen's notion of a 'centralized stratified society' attempts to characterize the relationship between these two tiers of authority in prehistoric Europe.³⁵ In this ideal model a society has a paramount chief or high-king who depends on recognition by sub-kings who exercise real control in their respective areas and who may only submit to the high-king symbolically or through cooperation in war. The power of sub-kings stems from their role as representatives of the small political communities from which their legitimacy derives, whereas that of high-kings mainly draws on their connections with sub-kings. In the absence of significant concentrations of resources, a ruler's ability to act is mainly dependent on consensus, either from the small territories in the case of sub-kings, or from sub-kings and in the case of high-kings. Such a system is, in a relative sense, stable at the small scale, but characteristically volatile at higher levels, where dynastic and/or clientele links remain

³² Carroll, Reynolds, and Yorke, eds, *Power and place*, I Æthelberht; VI Æthelstan 8.1–8.3, see Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, 1.

³³ Compare Iversen in chapter 11 and Vigil-Escalera in chapter 7 of this volume.

³⁴ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*.

³⁵ Kristiansen, 'Chiefdoms, states and systems of social evolution'.

highly personalized.³⁶

A hallmark of such systems is that neither level of authority is predicated to a significant degree on command over resources, and the higher level not at all. The high-kings had as a rule no authority or control over resources in the areas governed by their sub-kings. A key issue is therefore why and how some polities and not others developed control mechanisms which allowed interference in the localities by the higher level of authority. The variables affecting the outcome depend more on scale and social distance (i.e.: on varying degrees of social complexity and inequality) than on population size, as argued by neo-evolutionists.³⁷ While instability dominates the higher level, the basic political communities of the lower levels may endure as the primary venues for decisions affecting people's lives; as higher levels become more stable, the basic political communities tend to be superseded, sometimes totally dismantled, or recycled into administrative units. In these cases, the process of administrative regularisation was often accompanied by the replacement by, or downgrading of, sub-kings to the status of local officials, whose principle roles shifted from representing localities and arbitrating disputes, to supervising policing, collecting royal dues, and enforcing the policy decisions of high-kings. From the point of view of dominant kings, the practice of replacing sub-kings with bonded officials may have been seen as a preferable option, curtailing any potential political re-fragmentation of the kingdom; for sub-kings, official status may have had its own appeal, opening the door to more intensive forms of local power. With greater centralised administration, the role of assemblies diminished, particularly with the development of proto-parliaments that governed continuously rather than periodically. Whilst periodical assemblies could persist, their role in higher politics became symbolic rather than real. The annual general assembly at Þingvellir in Iceland is an example of a long-lived institution of local representation that persisted despite gradually losing influence over the polity it represented, becoming instead an element in the administration of the larger polity. Anglo-Saxon England witnessed a comparable wholesale deletion of small early Anglo-Saxon polities, and their replacement with a network of ready-made administrative districts, whose assemblies were essentially detached from high political decision-making, as statehood unfolded.

On either side of this transition a change in the socio-economic foundations of the

³⁶ See, for example, Davies, *Patterns of power*.

³⁷ Cfr. Carneiro, 'On the relationship between size of population and complexity'; Bodley, *The power of scale*, pp. 8-13; Quigley, 'Introduction: The Character of Kingship'.

elites can often be observed, from focusing on extra-economic activities, such as the redistribution of prestige goods from plunder or trade within client networks, to a preoccupation with land ownership and the extraction of peasant surplus as rent. For small-scale societies the political implications of aristocratic estates (even if fragmented and scattered), worked by peasants who are subject to more intense surplus extraction, cannot be overestimated,³⁸ and neither can their role in the emergence of the systems of ‘durable inequality’—to borrow Charles Tilly’s concept—which ultimately became states.³⁹ Scale determines the capacity to create social distance: a highly fragmented political landscape militates against the emergence of strong, land-based aristocracies from within individual communities, because these are unable to turn most of their fellow men—to whom they are personally tied through kin, free-clientship and community links—into dependent peasants that can be managed from afar and used as a source for substantial, durable surpluses.⁴⁰ External resources obtained through warfare and plundering can help surpass the economic threshold of aristocratic accumulation, but this is either unpredictable and unstable—today you win, tomorrow you lose—or else tends to develop into more stable relations with neighbouring territories based upon tribute-taking. What emerges in these cases is the creation of a larger, twofold operational scale: the territories from which tribute is extracted, and the ‘core’ areas it flows to.⁴¹

In deeply fragmented contexts, scale-growth can be seen as a necessary condition for aristocratic accumulation of wealth and power, because the ‘critical mass’ for the creation of a strong aristocratic class is more easily achieved extensively over a number of territories than intensively in a single one. By extending their power over alien communities, with whom no ‘organic’ links—kinship, clientship, representation—exist, aristocrats are more easily able to impose tougher mechanisms of surplus extraction, particularly if these communities are incorporated by force.⁴² Mere force, however, can hardly sustain the ‘social construction of scale’;⁴³ rather it is a combination of top-down and bottom-up agency. On the one hand, increasing the social distance between the local

³⁸ Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 570-588; Faith, *The English Peasantry*, pp. 153-177; Faith, ‘Forces and Relations of Production’.

³⁹ Tilly, *Identities, boundaries and social ties*, pp. 71-90.

⁴⁰ On the important role of egalitarian notions in preventing excessive internal differentiation within communities, see Boehm, ‘Egalitarian behavior and reverse dominance hierarchy’.

⁴¹ See a very lucid discussion in Charles-Edwards, ‘Early medieval kingships’.

⁴² See Escalona and Reyes Téllez, ‘Scale change on the border’.

⁴³ Marston, ‘The social construction of scale’; Cox, ‘Representation and power in the politics of scale’.

and the supra-local facilitates the development of land-based aristocracies. On the other hand, community identity has to adapt and become accustomed to more extensive landscapes of power. How communities navigate between the local and supra-local reflects ultimately the resilience of communities to changing social conditions, as we shall discuss below. These kinds of processes may be reflected in the transition from large units of ‘extensive lordship’ to smaller aristocratic estates of ‘intensive lordship’ as is seen in several of the chapters in this volume.⁴⁴ Wickham’s timely caveat that in the clearest instance of this process—Anglo-Saxon England—the creation of large-scale aristocratic estates came late in the state-formation process, indicates that ‘feudal’ land-tenure does not need to be quantitatively dominant in society to trigger the creation of a ‘feudal’ aristocracy, and that it can be, and often is, combined with other, more political mechanisms of accumulation, like booty, traded prestige goods, and foodstuff from tributes.⁴⁵

Diversity is another important factor in scale growth. Environmental variations in terrain, climate, soils, or hydrology, have a bearing on the form and level of local lordship, the ways in which territories might be incorporated, and the varying degrees of aristocratic imposition and direct royal control that could result. The combined roles of physical and social geography in shaping the patchwork of social and territorial organisation is explored by Stuart Brookes and Andrew Reynolds in chapter 6. Not only were there regional variations, but situations could change dramatically from one settlement to the next. Astill’s remarks in chapter 2 about the need to override uni-linear models and account for coexisting divergent situations, from direct state intervention on agricultural production, to more, or less, intense lordly control, to largely autonomous peasant self-organisation, are equally relevant to this argument. Despite—and perhaps thanks to—the homogenising cover represented by legal systems and religion, this kind of variability is a paramount component of the early medieval and later experience.

A final, but important point is that, although the issues (ruler-to-ruled relationships, political representation, scale-change, the development of land-based aristocracies) can be ordered in a linear evolutionary sequence, as indeed they often are in northern Europe, these processes are equally relevant to all the other modes of secondary state formation cited above. Furthermore, the more complex these polities—both structurally and in their historical process—the more likely it is that they will contain an intricate patchwork of

⁴⁴ For Anglo-Saxon England see Astill in chapter 2; for northern Iberia, see Fernández Mier (chapter 3) and Carvajal (chapter 12).

⁴⁵ Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 345-351.

situations, including pockets of city–hinterland dependence, coherent royal/aristocratic estates, central places, rural areas controlled by warlords and their clients, areas of largely autonomous free peasants, and so on. In the end, no single model can account for the great variability on the ground.

3. The Local: Communities, Territories and Identities

Although a ‘neighbourhood’ is commonly understood as a localised community within a city wherein interpersonal relationships are based mainly upon proximity and everyday contact,⁴⁶ in this volume we have chosen to use it as a convenient label for the people living in a ‘locality’, as the latter term evokes ideas of space rather than people.⁴⁷ In our early medieval case-studies, local societies tend to contain distinctive features that single them out from phenomena at the higher scales. These include—but are not limited to—the tendency to organize themselves into communities, and their development of particularly intense connections to their local space. Closer inspection quickly reveals, however, that the early medieval local scale can be just as diverse as the supra-local, if not more so.⁴⁸ A major break-through in the making of this volume has been to understand the local not as an absolute term, but as a something that needs to be constantly re-defined in the context of the wider social system. Settlement forms, economic activities or social structures can superficially appear to be very similar, but may work entirely differently depending on the articulation of the social body they are embedded in. Comparisons of one or several of these features may therefore be misleading without a consideration of the wider particular context.

The local community, as a form of organization by which multiple peasant households jointly occupy and exploit a defined space, is recurrent in studies of early medieval rural society. However, three important caveats to this conception need to be posed. Firstly, local sociability is not limited to community ties. In some contexts networks of kinship, patronage, or other kinds of association which transcend spatial boundaries, were equally or more important in binding people together. Secondly, the supra-local levels also have their communities which may have similar or greater importance. Thirdly, a mechanical relationship between archaeologically-defined settlement forms and community

⁴⁶ See Mayhew, *A Dictionary of Geography*, s. v. ‘Neighbourhood’.

⁴⁷ Jonas, ‘Locality’.

⁴⁸ Many of the problems related to the definition of the local have come up in previous works by our group and are thoroughly discussed in Davies, ‘Populations, Territory and Community Membership’.

relationships cannot be assumed. The form of early medieval rural settlements varies considerably, but can be reduced to the two major categories of farms and villages, the first corresponding to scattered individual households exploiting their immediate surroundings, and the second to groups of households (with varying degrees of nucleation) jointly exploiting a shared space (with varying forms of organization).⁴⁹ These two types, and many sub-types, co-exist throughout the early medieval regions discussed in this volume. Archaeologically, local scale may be understood as either an individual farm or a whole village, with obvious repercussions for our understanding of ‘community’. The crucial issue is the scale of community relationships. Thus, in some of the case-studies in this volume, such as Iceland or Norway, which are dominated by farm-type settlements, the household is the most visible manifestation at settlement level. However, Vésteinsson has showed that, more than ‘independent’ isolated farmsteads, these formed networks of several farms collectively managing essential common resources such as pasture and water. In thinly-populated Iceland these widely spread networks of farms are equivalent to the large, dispersed village community one sees in more densely settled landscapes.⁵⁰ Likewise, in chapter 11 of this volume Iversen suggests that pre-Viking political organisation in parts of Norway saw farms aggregated into larger units whose strong community bonds were expressed at periodical political assemblies. It is this political constituency, Iversen argues, that defines the local, even if the archaeological evidence manifests itself as individual farms/households.

Villages can be more easily related to community organization, but can take a variety of forms.⁵¹ In England, for example, the emphasis has traditionally been placed on open-field agriculture as a form of household co-operation which triggered the development of the ‘community of the vill’.⁵² However, open-field farming is only recorded relatively late in the first millennium AD and generally only in specific areas of midland Britain, which would foster the idea that rural communities were a late and regionally distinct phenomenon. In chapter 2 Grenville Astill questions the emphasis placed on open-field farming, stressing the need to recognise other, more general forms of peasant co-

⁴⁹ A thorough discussion of settlement patterns in Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements*. See also Quirós Castillo, ed., *The archaeology of early medieval villages*, pp. 13-112; Roberts, *Rural Settlement in Britain*.

⁵⁰ Vésteinsson, ‘Communities of Dispersed Settlements’.

⁵¹ See the comparative discussion in Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 383-518.

⁵² The literature is abundant; see by way of landmarks Cam, ‘The community of the vill’; Taylor, *Village and Farmstead*; Hall, *The Open Fields of England*; Faith, *The English Peasantry*.

operation such as the management of commons.⁵³ This observation aligns the English debate more closely with that of other European areas where different technical and ecological conditions didn't lead to open-field agriculture.⁵⁴ In these areas community bonds are more clearly expressed in the regulations of access to pasture, water, and other common resources. In Iberia the concept of the village community is more a dominant historiographical orthodoxy that needs to be critiqued to include other co-existing forms of community. Unlike northern Europe, nucleated villages are recognized in some parts of central Spain as early as the sixth and seventh centuries.⁵⁵ Clustered housing, village cemeteries and their like, help to identify these sites as the setting of community interactions based upon neighbourhood and the sharing of common economic spaces. However, as Alfonso Vigil-Escalera suggests in chapter 12, the scale of such communities cannot be defined by merely proposing hypothetical boundaries between identified settlements. In some cases there existed supra-local community links, such as inter-village relationships and commons management, alongside dwellings and agricultural activities operating at the village scale. This two-tiered system of nested community relationships has also been identified in the ninth- to eleventh-century context of the north Iberian plateau, where the concept of the isolated village community has hitherto been the dominant historiographical model.⁵⁶ In a similar vein, the La Genestosa site, discussed by Iñaki Martín Viso in chapter 5, with its segmented household-scale focus along a small valley, is strongly reminiscent of the aforementioned Icelandic pattern – an indication that no single model can account for the observed variability even at the regional scale.

4. Local Landscapes and Local Knowledge

A key aspect of local communities is the intensity of their relationship with local space. 'Locality' generates an attachment and a belonging to place, mainly through 'local dependence', that is, through the spatial confinement of a large proportion of people's investments, economic activities, the exchange of goods and services, and social interactions.⁵⁷ To build a house, to plant a vineyard, to get to know one's neighbours, to be

⁵³ See, for example Oosthuizen, 'Archaeology, common rights' and Banham and Faith, *Anglo-Saxon Farms*.

⁵⁴ See the discussion of Breton early medieval communities in Davies, *Small worlds : the village community in early medieval Brittany* and Astill and Davies, *A Breton Landscape*.

⁵⁵ Quirós Castillo and Vigil-Escalera Guirado, 'Networks of peasant villages'.

⁵⁶ See chapter 12, and also Escalona, 'Mapping Scale Change'.

⁵⁷ Cox and Mair, 'From localized social-structures'; Cox, 'Spaces of dependence, spaces of engagement and

recognised as a community member in discussions about common resources, or in witnessing a neighbour's sale of land; all these elements develop over time and generate feelings of belonging and identity within a 'relatively localised social structure'.⁵⁸ Even if the boundaries of localities are not neatly defined, and even if, of course, local people's lives are not restricted to their locality, still it can be argued to greatly determine their experience.

Personal and collective experiences of space, both through everyday activities and formal events, structured perceptions of landscape. Medieval people understood the world around them through, amongst other things, religion, memory, folk tradition, family, labour and the social order.⁵⁹ These combined to make landscape powerful places in which the social and natural worlds fused. Dense local knowledge, a kind of understanding that can only be achieved through participation and production of local sense of place, is part-and-parcel of agents' essential equipment, and also a major factor of local dependence.⁶⁰ It can also be excluding: in order for immigrants to develop similar deep local knowledge requires painstaking effort and long time. In chapter 13, Escalona's definition of community as 'dense local knowledge' as opposed to external 'supra-local extensive knowledge' chimes with current concerns about the conflicting relationship between localities and the supra-local in globalization contexts.⁶¹ Although most of its manifestations are forever lost to scholarship, traces of it can be recovered through place-names, small-scale land transfers or funerary landscapes, of which this volume presents several examples.

The issue of endurance is also of some significance. Local spatial knowledge, especially when strictly oral, can yield a misleading impression of timelessness, as if distilled from centuries of repeated social practices over an unchanging landscape. Generally speaking, such a view may be appropriate when discussing many European villages during the long period of stability between the eleventh century and the industrialization of rural

the politics of scale, or: looking for local politics'; Lovell, 'Belonging in need of emplacement?'

⁵⁸ Cox and Mair, 'From localized social-structures'.

⁵⁹ Ingold, 'The temporality of the landscape'; Gosden, *Social Being and Time*; Bradley, *An Archaeology of Natural Places*; Smith, 'Inhabiting settlements'; Miles, 'The South Oxfordshire Project'.

⁶⁰ Anthropological views of local knowledge often build upon Geertz, *Local Knowledge*. See further Tilley, *A phenomenology of landscape*; Escalona, Alfonso, and Reyes Téllez, 'Arqueología e historia de los paisajes medievales'; Johnson, *Ideas of Landscape*, at pp. 127–30; Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

⁶¹ Pottier, Bicker, and Sillitoe, eds, *Negotiating local knowledge*, especially Pottier, 'Negotiating local knowledge : an introduction' and Arce and Fisher, 'Knowledge Interfaces'. See also Antweiler, 'Local Knowledge and Local Knowing' and Scott, *Seeing like a State*. Indeed, from these debates it is interesting to see the ways in which 'locality' is increasingly politicized as a virtue in opposition to globalization.

areas, which in the south sometimes did not occur until the mid-twentieth century. It cannot be as usefully applied to the early medieval period when rural settlements and territories were much less stable, partly because of the absence of strong administrative systems. The exceptionally detailed archaeological record for England makes it possible to identify a number of dramatic changes in settlement patterns and field-systems taking place over the course of the early medieval period. This, Grenville Astill contends in chapter 2, is an important warning against immobilistic views of the early medieval landscape. It also highlights the fact that local oral memory could be short-lived. Population turnover, migration, changes in literacy are but some of the internal factors that could affect the (im)permanence of social memory. In other cases change was forced on localities by supra-local forces, such as the building of castles, aristocratic residences, churches, monasteries, or the carving out of restricted jurisdictional spaces, to mention but a few.⁶² Local communities adjusted to change and, in the absence of written records, this updating could erode obsolete visions of landscape. Adaptation was not, however, always possible. The complete abandonment of most of the components of a highly monumentalized funerary landscape, studied by Martín Viso (chapter 5), shows a clear rupture in the transmission of local knowledge, that points to a major cultural disruption in that region of central Iberia.

Neighbourhoods and the Wider World

We contend that the local and the various levels of the supra-local cannot be understood as mutually exclusive spheres. Just as people and goods travelled across early medieval landscapes, so were local people's mental universes much broader than is usually acknowledged. The most immediate form of supra-local interactions were between neighbouring communities. As Charles Tilly noted, sharing a frontier implies a certain degree of participation in each other's local knowledge, but also entails a peculiar kind of relationship distinguishing people from both sides from others farther afield.⁶³ Long-distance communication routes across the landscape were not only devices for top-down territorial control, but also key elements in local people's connectedness to the wider world.⁶⁴ Moreover, local people had and transmitted visions of the political 'world beyond', in which notions of authority and power combined with those of belonging and group membership, and even reproduced locally cultural notions and practices that historians

⁶² Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space*; Davies, 'Protected space'. See also Fernández Mier in chapter 3 of this volume.

⁶³ Tilly, 'Social Boundary Mechanisms'.

⁶⁴ See Langlands in chapter 14 of this volume.

more often relate to the higher spheres of learned culture or the state, as it is the case with the charter-writing traditions studied by Davies in chapter 11 of this book.

Identity looms large in our group's work.⁶⁵ This is hardly surprising given the concept's proliferation in the Social Sciences and the Humanities, including medieval studies, especially since the emergence of post-modernism in the 1970s.⁶⁶ Medievalists, for their part, are commonly more concerned with some strands of identity approaches than others, in particular issues such as individual and gender identity, embodiment, or social, ethnic and national identities.⁶⁷ Of these, ethnicity is an especially challenging—and much debated—area of early medieval scholarship, particularly for those working with funerary remains and associated material culture.⁶⁸ An ongoing issue is whether or not it is possible to reconcile material culture with ethnic labels derived from textual sources, and whether it is possible to untangle ethnicity from other forms of social identification.⁶⁹ Certainly it is clear that there was much regional and chronological variation in the expression of early medieval identity; but more rigorous contextual analyses of material culture, in combination with emerging molecular methodologies in archaeological science, suggest that a more nuanced view of this complexity is slowly emerging.⁷⁰

The underlying crucial questions are if and how highly localised groups connected to larger scales of aggregation and how these relations in turn affected group identity.⁷¹ Building on theoretical developments that emphasize the role of practices in the making of social structures, modern scholarship has incorporated a multi-layered approach to the connections between 'individual' and 'collective' or 'social' identities.⁷² People possess not

⁶⁵ Davies, 'Introduction: Community Definition and Community Formation'.

⁶⁶ Wetherell, 'The field of identity studies'.

⁶⁷ Trexler, ed., *Persons in Groups. Social Behavior as Identity Formation in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*; Forde, Johnson, and Murray, eds, *Concepts of national identity*; Cohen, *Medieval identity machines*.

⁶⁸ Especially Pohl and Reimitz, 'Strategies of distinction. The construction of ethnic communities, 300-800'; Pohl, 'Archaeology of identity'. See also Gillett, ed., *On Barbarian Identity*.

⁶⁹ Amongst a wide literature see especially Shennan, *Archaeological Approaches to Cultural Identity*; Halsall, *Cemeteries and Society*; Halsall, 'Ethnicity and early medieval cemeteries'; and more recently Hakenbeck, *Local, Regional and Ethnic Identities*.

⁷⁰ Williams, 'Rethinking early medieval mortuary archaeology'; Hedges, 'Anglo-Saxon Migration and The Molecular Evidence'; see also, recently, the special issue in *Post-Classical Archaeologies*, 3 (2013), especially Marinato, 'Gli studi di bioarcheologia'.

⁷¹ Compare the case studies by Chavarría and Martín Viso in chapters 4 and 5 of this volume.

⁷² Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*; Giddens, *Central problems in social theory*. See Wetherell, 'The field of

one, but many identities, which are best seen as a set of resources which are deployed (or not) depending on the audience. In this way actors adapt their behaviour so that they are perceived according to existing standards and expectations.⁷³ Their identity at any moment is shaped, not only by their personal characteristics, but also by their positions in societal processes—the roles they play in different social contexts, the groups they belong to—and those positions are categorized (named) according to a shared set of notions and values. Audience is the crucial factor in the (re)production of social identities.⁷⁴ Individuals' performances are verified against social expectations by other actors: in the case of role identities, by those involved in the role process; in the case of group identities, by other members.⁷⁵ Yet, in any complex society there is rarely total agreement about codes and expectations. The range of audiences (both internal and external) is normally multiple and often incoherent or contradictory.⁷⁶

As context-dependent repertoires of self- and group-representations, social identities are also part-and-parcel of the 'localised social structures' that constitute the 'locality'.⁷⁷ Through everyday contact, neighbourhoods repeatedly verify individual identities, as local actors participate in collective interactions based upon roles (a head of household, a mother, a priest) and groups (households, gender groups, age groups) which are more recognizable locally, and of which community membership—when it can be defined—is paramount. 'Local identities' can, therefore, be read in two ways: as the sets of identities that individuals deploy within their local context, or as the collective identity of the locality itself as agent.⁷⁸ From the standardization of the parish system in the eleventh century and later, rural communities can be described as one of the most durable frameworks for collective identity in European history, surviving well into the present in many cases. Their endurance owes much to their stability as the lowest level of administrative networks, which favoured long-term identification between a community

identity studies', pp. 10-11.

⁷³ Burke, 'Identities and Social Structure'. See also Hsu and Hannan, 'Identities, Genres'.

⁷⁴ In R. Trexler's words, 'to have an identity means to have done things in the presence of others', Trexler, 'Introduction', p. 4.

⁷⁵ Burke, 'Identities and Social Structure'.

⁷⁶ Hsu and Hannan, 'Identities, Genres'.

⁷⁷ Cox and Mair, 'From localized social-structures'.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

and its continuous, legally recognized territory.⁷⁹ Institutionalization also implied the existence of similarly durable external audiences—mainly the state—to repeatedly verify these identities by recognizing rural communities as belonging to the same ‘category’ or ‘organizational form’.

The combination of strong legal/administrative definition, intense territorialization and trans-generational stability, however, is much more blurred in the early medieval period.⁸⁰ Localities (‘localised social structures’) of course existed, and must have produced collective identity and belonging, as well as more-or-less defined territorialities, as is the case in any other historical period, but they probably were more fluid than in more institutionalized contexts. The contributors to this volume approach early medieval identities through different strategies, including the study of place-names, landscape markers and boundaries, the location of cemeteries and funerary monuments, the morphology of settlements, fields, and territories, or site-distributions. In general, they agree on the nested character of social identities, so local notions of belonging are seen as only one component of a more diverse set that includes supra-local identities. It also includes larger-scale identifications. To which extent ethnic identities are part of wider ‘political’ feelings of aggregation or more locally grounded manifestations of shared cultural elements is a matter for debate. There is no such a thing as the ‘pure’ locality: the local is more likely the point of convergence—often conflictive—of locally-rooted, multi-scalar agencies; the interface for social complexity.

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⁷⁹ Escalona, ‘Territorialidad e identidades locales’.

⁸⁰ Davies, ‘Populations, Territory and Community Membership’

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