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## Review Article

Nicolas Poirier\*

# Contribution of the Microhistorical Approach to Landscape and Settlement Archaeology: Some French Examples

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**Abstract:** In this article, we study the contributions of the microhistorical approach to landscape and settlement archaeology in the French context. First, we outline the reception of microhistorical concepts in France. The micro-analytical scale allows a renewal of the questionings, of the approaches, and therefore of the vision of the studied societies. In the particular case of archaeological research on landscape and settlement, we argue that the microhistorical approach proposes the spatial micro-scale as a framework, but it must be surpassed by a comparative approach capable of discerning common trends and local particularities. This approach thus makes it possible to question major macro-historical questions that still lack clear and consensual answers, such as the modalities of transition between major historical phases, the nucleation of settlement into the medieval village, the extension of the finages and the possibility of agricultural growth in the early Middle Ages, or the modalities of management and exploitation of natural resources.

**Keywords:** microhistory, middle ages, landscape, village, agriculture

## 1 Introduction: The Reception of the Microhistorical Movement in France

Microhistory was born of proposals put forward by a group of Italian historians gathered around a journal, *Quaderni Storici*. The best-known in France are undoubtedly Carlo Ginzburg, Carlo Poni, Edoardo Grendi, and Giovanni Levi.

The reduction of scale has allowed another reading of the social. While the dominant social history reflected on anonymous aggregates followed in the long term, the *Quaderni Storici* proposed another way of conceiving social history by following individuals and groups of individuals from a marker. Microhistory could thus be defined as a “science of lived experience,” close to the ambitions and practices of the ethnologist.

This movement can be understood as a reaction to the current of the social history and the school of the Annals which sought to turn away from the unique, the accidental, to invest itself entirely in the study of the regularities of the social. We can thus understand why this history was more likely to highlight the phenomena of stability rather than change. As J. Revel recommends in the preface of one of the first Italian works translated into French, the microhistorical approach consists “in creating the conditions of observation that will make appear forms,

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organizations, new objects” (Revel, 1989, p. XVI). In presenting the work of G. Levi (*Le pouvoir au village – Histoire d’un exorciste dans le Piémont du 17<sup>e</sup> siècle*), he underlines the multiscale character of the analysis:

It is by resorting systematically to variations of the focal point, which allow to inscribe Santena [the studied village] in a series of nested contexts, that this history takes sense little by little. At each level of reading, the reality appears different, and the game of the microhistorians consists in linking together these realities in a system of interactions with multiple entries. [...] The deliberate manipulation of this set of scales suggests a completely different landscape, as well as a different idea of the representativeness of a local case. What is played out on the spot is, of course, unique, but can only be understood, even in its particularity, at the price of being resituated at the different levels of a historical dynamic.

Italian microhistorians were not the first to focus on villages and small groups for significant historical research. In 1975, for example, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie published *Montaillou. Village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Le Roy Ladurie, 1975), which could have been considered by some observers as a work of microhistorical orientation. The author uses Jacques Fournier’s inquisition registers to retrace the life of the inhabitants of Montaillou in Haute-Ariège, which was under the influence of Catharism. The book is set in a context that saw the emergence of historical anthropology and is based on a biographical approach. In reality, for the Italian historians of the 1970s and 1980s, Montaillou was the opposite of the program they advocated: according to them, Le Roy Ladurie had extracted the judicial sources concerning the Occitan Cathars from their very specific context, abusively building on them a book of historical anthropology of the Middle Ages (Davis & Bourguet, 1979; Guzzi-Heeb, 2016).

More recently, the work of Samuel Leturcq on the village of Toury (near Paris) has taken advantage of the microhistorical approach to test certain paradigms of rural history such as the rigidity of the parish framework in the organization of agrarian space (Leturcq, 2005, 2007). The agrarian structure of Toury en Beauce contradicts in many respects the stereotypical image of the open field insofar as it is clearly distinct from institutional and fiscal frameworks. The constraints it imposes are flexible, and it is open to inter-communal practices. In the Beauce region, which is supposed to be the most characteristic expression of the “open field system,” this result demonstrates the heuristic value of the microhistorical approach (Trécourt-Codine, 2009).

In the same way, Verna’s book (2017) is based on a microhistorical approach insofar as it is based on the analysis of thousands of notarial acts from the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries, making it possible to reconstruct the biographies of rural entrepreneurs who were the driving force behind the circulation of products, capital and knowledge within the Vallespir valley, which borders the Canigou massif (Pyrénées-Orientales) (Verna, 2017). The project goes beyond the monographic interest by proposing a global apprehension of the rural industry. The individual trajectories are examined not in order to build a new model but to relativize the dominant model. The nuances introduced are due to the desire to take into account the human springs in the productive activity and the complexity of the statuses as well as the inter-individual relations (Bernardi, 2018).

In this sense, these few examples of French micro-historical work are fully in line with the project of the Italian micro-historians who affirm that: “Micro-history can in no way be satisfied with verifying, on its own scale, the macro-historical (or macro-anthropological) rules that have been developed elsewhere. One of the first experiences of those who venture into the micro-historical approach is precisely to discover the weak, and sometimes null, relevance of the scans constructed on the macro-historical scale [...] Hence the decisive importance of comparison” (Ginzburg & Poni, 1981).

## 2 Microhistory and Archaeology of Landscape and Settlement

We consider here that the microhistorical approach in archaeology is closely dependent on the spatial scale of the archaeologists’ work. No strict threshold can be identified to distinguish the micro approach from the macro approach. Here, it is the monographic approach, that of the case study, which is considered to be the micro approach, whether it concerns the excavation of a site (a few hundred square metres) or the study of the settlement dynamics of terroir (a few square kilometres), even if the issues tackled and the paradigms discussed are not exactly the same. In this section, we will argue that the archaeological approach is micro-scalar in nature, insofar as it has been part of the excavation process from the very beginning of the discipline,

which is necessarily spatially limited to areas of a few square meters for the study of the material framework of the life of ancient societies. Landscape and settlement archaeology approaches are necessarily limited in space, given the time required to compile field data, acquired by field survey in particular, which is very time-consuming compared to the surface area documented.

We will also show that archaeological data served to illustrate and validate the macro-historical models established through written sources for the medieval period (first in the case of deserted villages at the end of the period and then in the case of rural settlements at the beginning of the period). Finally, we will see to what extent the spatial micro-scale applied to archaeology allows, thanks to a quantitative and comparative approach, the development of its own models, which allow us to question in a new way certain paradigms underlying the history of medieval settlement dynamics.

## 2.1 The Micro Spatial Scale is the “Natural” Setting for Archaeology

Micro-analysis is a scientific choice defended, among other things, in a book that brings together the contributions of several advocates of the “micro” (Revel, 1996). The main argument is that the micro-analytical scale allows for a renewal of questions, approaches, and, therefore, of the vision of the societies studied. However, there is a difference in opinion among various researchers. Some believe that no scale has a privilege over another because it is precisely the variation of scales that is the richest in terms of lessons learned. “To vary the focal length of the lens is not only to increase (or decrease) the size of the object in the viewfinder, it is to modify its shape and pattern” (Revel, 1996, p. 19). Others believe, on the contrary, that the “micro” generates the “macro” and defend the privilege of the former since it is at this level that efficient causal processes take place, according to the postulate that “knowledge about the whole requires prior knowledge about its parts” (Revel, 1996, p. 83). However, we must be aware that in the observation of social processes such as spatial processes, the whole cannot be the sum (or multiplication) of the parts. Indeed, the choice of an analysis scale determines the questions asked, the sources used, and hence, the results obtained. The results of the two analyses carried out at different scales cannot be compared (Revel, 1996, p. 91).

The variation in the scales of analysis is not only a procedure favourable to a gain in knowledge, but above all, an obligation dictated by the sources. Just as each type of source has its own identity and logic, each is only effective and informative at a given scale of analysis. Thus, micro-historical analysis (micro-regional in this case) proposes to enrich the spatial analysis of the material correlates of societies by making the variables more numerous, complex, and mobile (Revel, 1996, p. 22). On the other hand, it raises the question of the historical representativeness of the sample studied and the possibility of generalization from this sample.

### 2.1.1 For an Approach to the “Everyday” Spatial Practices of Ancient Societies

The object of study being the relations between successive societies and their space, the anthropization of the environment and its appropriation by Man, it is necessary to place oneself at the scale of almost daily intervention of past societies. This scale is that of close movements: from one village to another, from the village to the hamlet, from the hamlet to the field, from the field to the forest. The object of study is the finage, a form of appropriation of space through the definition of agrarian territories, probably as early as Protohistory. It is a question of restoring the rhythms of appropriation of space by ordinary rural communities.

A fine spatial resolution also makes it possible to take into account an extended chronological scale, and this is necessary insofar as the imprint of Man on the environment is legible at least from the Neolithic period. The challenge is to take advantage of a small study area where information – particularly archaeological information – is well controlled in order to measure the rates of evolution of the various components of the anthropized space: settlement, road network, land parcels, and resources. This is from Protohistory to the nineteenth century.

### 2.1.2 For Optimal Data Collection Resolution

Taking into account the long term implies the integration of information delivered by different sources. The choice of the micro-scale provides the ideal framework for their cross-referencing and comparison and makes it possible to enrich the results obtained from each of them. A micro-regional study mobilizing sources of various kinds favours different perspectives on the same object of study: the formation and transformations of the landscape. The contribution of an archaeological field survey is decisive because it is often the only source documenting the periods prior to the eleventh century. Our knowledge of the settlement and occupation of the land from Protohistory to the early Middle Ages is directly linked to the quality and scope of the ground survey operations. The micro-scale makes it possible to subject the archaeological data collected to very detailed questioning, linked to agrarian practices for example, where they can be compared with other sources (archives or physicochemical data).

If archaeological data are rare and acquired at the cost of a lot of time, written sources are directly available and in increasing quantity as time goes by. The micro-scale therefore allows for a thorough mobilization of these data: systematic recording of all mentions of topographical elements, approach to agrarian territories, restitution of the limits of immaterial territories (courts, tithes, parishes) that also contribute to the construction of space, which would be impossible on a smaller scale. Finally, the micro-scale is that of the survey and the initial use of the old plans integrated. The old cadastre is constructed by the commune, composed of sheets surveyed at 1:2,500 or 1:5,000. The resolution of the information allows us to study the basic unit of territorial division: the parcel. If we consider the parcel of land as a possible witness of the land development of the past, it is at the scale of the cadastral survey that we must place ourselves. The same is true for the older plans that are also taken into account: the “terrier plans” surveyed on the scale of a landlordship can be used at scales of between 1:2,000 and 1:5,000. They can be directly compared with the old cadastre.

At the micro-regional level, the ambition to analyse all the components of the space appropriated by ancient societies therefore requires all available sources to be taken into account. This means drawing on a multitude of disciplines, from geography to history, each with its own historiographical traditions and methodological specificities. The modalities of this interdisciplinary dialogue are a challenge in themselves (Chouquer & Watteaux, 2013).

## 2.2 Beyond the Case Study: The Need for Comparative Approaches

In the present article, microanalysis is understood as a monographic approach, on the scale of the excavation of a site or the analysis of a terroir. We propose to consider that it is through a comparative approach that we can access a form of macro-analysis by examining common trends and local particularities. After having served mainly as an illustration of macro-historical models, French landscape and settlement archaeology has contributed to building its own models of land use dynamics by aggregating numerous case studies and developing a comparative approach that goes beyond the microanalytical framework in order to identify common trends and local particularities.

### 2.2.1 Collective Research Projects on the Rural Settlement of the Early Middle Ages

If archaeological excavation, for a long time confined to the strict confines of residential buildings, forced the medieval archaeologist to carry out a forced micro-analysis, the development of preventive archaeology in the 1980s and especially the 1990s allowed the accumulation of numerous field data concerning rural settlements of the early Middle Ages. The first few sites, excavated between the 1960s and 1980s, contributed to illustrating the miserable image of the Alto-medieval period based on the scarcity of written sources. The structures made of perishable materials and the short duration of occupation allowed the reconstruction of precarious and ephemeral settlements, which were supposed to testify to the poverty of agrarian techniques and the weakness

of the demography, in a supposed context of generalized crisis. In the 1990s and 2000s, the series of these numerous habitats within the framework of collective research projects made it possible to read the typology and chronology of land occupation in the Early Middle Ages on a regional scale. The publication of synthesis of these different projects then made it possible to appreciate the common trends and local particularities in the methods of implantation, structuring, and dynamics of these settlement networks (Faure-Boucharlat, 2001; Gentili, Lefèvre, & Mahé, 2003; Le Boulanger, 2023; Lorren & Périn, 1995; Peytremann, 2003; Valais, 2012).

In this case, the microhistorical analysis linked to the excavation and interpretation of each individual site could be overcome in order to build models of land use and settlement dynamics valid at higher scales (Section 2.3).

### 2.2.2 Archaeomedes and Archaeodyn

At the micro-regional scale, as we have seen above, the spatial micro-scale is first of all a methodological choice allowing a balance between the different categories of sources mobilized to reconstruct landscape dynamics: archaeological sources acquired at the cost of considerable fieldwork, written and planimetric sources that are abundant as the focus is widened (Poirier, 2021).

Here again, if the micro-historical approach has made it possible since the 1980s to read, in the long term permitted by the spatial micro-scale, the first spatio-temporal trajectories of rural spaces developed by ancient societies (Astill & Davies, 1997; Buchsenschutz, Coulon, & Gratier, 1988; Poiriot, 1998; Zadora-Rio, 1987), the comparative approach has long been made difficult both by the rarity of this type of approach and by the methodological biases linked to the acquisition and processing of data: variable field procedures in pedestrian survey, quality and quantity of written sources, varied political and natural contexts. These obstacles have been partially overcome and quantitative and comparative approaches have been developed in the framework of two collective research projects carried out between 1990 and 2010: Archaeomedes and Archaeodyn.

The European Archaeomedes program marks a step forward in the approach to the relationship between landscape and settlement by taking into account a broad chronological spectrum running from 800 BC to 1600 AD and a systematic study of the relationships maintained between habitats and their environment and of the respective evolutions of each of the components of the system. Its objective is to study “the interactions between social dynamics on the one hand and natural dynamics on the other”, in the long term, in order “to elucidate the complex dynamics of land degradation [...] in vulnerable circum-Mediterranean environments. It focuses in particular on the relationships between the natural processes involved and the socio-economic dynamics underlying human interaction with the environment” (Van Der Leeuw, Favory, & Fiches, 2003, p. 11). The French team involved in this program mobilized the data available in the lower and middle Rhone Valley and compared them with environmental data. This has made it possible to demonstrate that the changes that occurred in the density of the habitat in the second–third century AD cannot be interpreted as a depopulation of the countryside and that the reorganization of the habitat networks bears witness more to a process of “rationalization of the production system” than to a change in climate or soil exhaustion (Van Der Leeuw et al., 2003, p. 202). This program is not only one of the first experiments in France to model archaeological data on a regional scale for historical periods, but also one of the first attempts to model settlement dynamics using archaeological data, written sources, and maps. The Archaeomedes program marks a step forward, in particular by the definition and implementation of new methodological tools and descriptive criteria of rural settlement dynamics. Examples include the calculation of the ratio of the number of created sites to the number of abandoned sites to measure the weight of each time step, the degree of anthropization of the surrounding environment (measured by adding the occupation periods of all the settlements occupied prior to the creation of the site within a radius of 500 m), or the weighting for each period of the number of sites by the total area occupied. Many of these indicators are now routinely used in rural settlement studies.

The ArchaeDyn programme, “Spatial Dynamics of Territories from Prehistory to the Middle Ages” was conducted in two phases: between 2005 and 2007 (Gandini, Favory, & Nuninger, 2012) and between 2009 and 2012 (Gauthier, Georges-Leroy, Poirier, & Weller, 2022). It contributed to broadening the research problem initiated by the European programs Archaeomedes I and II (Durand-Dastès et al., 1998; Van Der Leeuw et al.,

2003), by approaching the dynamics of territories, considered from several new angles of study, both thematically, chronologically and spatially. It was conducted by a group of nine teams from six “Maisons des Sciences de l’Homme” (Besançon, Clermont-Ferrand, Dijon, Nanterre, Nice, Tours). The aim of the project was to deepen the analysis of spatial interactions between social groups, the resources they exploit to ensure their subsistence, to produce objects and to exchange with other groups at short, medium, and long distances, and the itineraries that govern the flows at different periods. The collective work was structured along three thematic axes – 1. “Supply areas, terroirs and finages”; 2. “Settlement, networks and territories”; 3. “Circulation of raw materials and objects” – complemented by an axis 4 dedicated to “Methods and tools for spatial analysis” (Saligny et al., 2012). Compared to the analyses centred on habitat sites developed in the Archaeomedes I and II programs, the Archaeodyn collective has instead focused on the factors that contribute to producing a more or less dynamic environment according to land use modalities. Thus, for all of the thematic axes, the aim was to answer three major questions: what spaces are permanently occupied? Which spaces were conquered and then abandoned? Which spaces were used regularly but never permanently? The comparative, spatial, and diachronic approach required the design and development of indicators whose calculation had to be strictly reproducible across study areas, despite the apparent heterogeneity of the field survey methods and the scientific, historical, and environmental contexts specific to each. The study of agrarian manurings puts the weight of socio-environmental constraints into perspective, showing the capacity of ancient societies to overcome them in order to expand their agrarian space despite, for example, the agro-ecological limits of soils, topographical conditions, or the distance from settlement centres. Variations in the extent of amended spaces and the intensity of amendments over the long term define the trajectory of rural space development, which is complementary to that of the settlement system. This examination leads to revisit certain historiographical topoi such as the massive and generalized impact of Roman colonization in terms of rural development, the “abandonment” of Late Antiquity, or the economic sluggishness of the High Middle Ages (Section 2.3). The comparison of study areas, both northern and southern France, illustrates the diversity of situations and compensates for the very local vision of the analysis of the terroir.

## 2.3 Questioning the Paradigms of Rural History in a New Way

These quantitative and comparative approaches have made it possible over the last 20 years to revisit, enrich, or question certain paradigms – developed on a macro scale, essentially on the basis of written sources – that have until now underpinned medievalist approaches to land use dynamics. We will address three of these in particular: the modalities of transition between the ancient and medieval periods, the phenomena of polarization of activities leading to the emergence of village agglomerations, and finally the existence of early phases of medieval agricultural growth.

### 2.3.1 The Transition From Antiquity to the Middle Ages

Initially shaped by the scarcity and paucity of written sources, the idea of a break between Antiquity and the Middle Ages was also based on the observation of the change in construction methods, from the mortar and stone of the Roman period to the perishable materials of the architecture of the High Middle Ages. This architecture of perishable materials that is difficult to read was initially interpreted as an indication of the ephemeral nature of the occupation. But the vestiges observed do not allow us to judge the quality of the constructions, which can be very well done, even in earth and wood. The supposedly ephemeral nature of the settlements has influenced the vision of the agrarian economy of the early Middle Ages, particularly in relation to the continuity of present-day villages. This difference was attributed to a supposed failure of early medieval agriculture, where the exhaustion of the soil would have led to the abandonment of settlements to cultivate new land. In reality, we will see that this ephemeral image was linked to the small size of the excavated surfaces, which did not allow us to see a form of continuity of occupation, but with small displacements.

In Brittany, there is often a continuity of occupation between Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Catteddu & Le Gall, 2023; Le Boulanger, 2023). Small farms and villas remained in place, even though facilities such as thermal baths, which were costly to maintain, were quickly abandoned or converted. In some cases, wooden buildings, often small-scale, were built around the earlier domains. Trade routes were maintained, particularly with the British Isles and northern Europe. From the sixth century onwards, there appears to have been a break with the past. The earlier settlements were gradually abandoned, and new areas were created in cultivated zones. The settlements uncovered in the east of the peninsula correspond to farming units set in regular quadrangular plots, often using a plot grid inherited from Antiquity. In the west of the peninsula, settlements were built in circular, oval, or horseshoe-shaped enclosures. They were either scattered or grouped together in small hamlets, often reusing the ancient plots and roads.

In the north-west of France (Valais, 2012), the analysis of the chronological distribution of settlements excavated in rescue archaeology shows a low representation of the occupations of the late antiquity, a significant increase in the number of sites around 600 and especially from 700 to relapse at the end of the millennium, and the existence of late sites implanted *ex-nihilo* in the eighth or ninth century and lasting until the twelfth or thirteenth century, the fruit of chance or places isolated from the ancient territories and implanted during phases of Carolingian growth or the Central Middle Ages.

In central France (Nissen, 2014), the transition between Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages remains difficult to understand, particularly because of the difficulty in identifying fourth-century occupations. The occupations of the fifth-sixth centuries, on the other hand, are well represented in both the preventive excavations and the territorial surveys. The identification of these phases of occupation has been made possible by the progress made in the study and dating of ceramic production in this region (Husi, 2022). At the scale of the settlements, most of the occupations lasted two or three centuries, but the excavations that revealed a duration of four centuries or more are almost as numerous. This apparent stability does not, however, reflect a topographical anchorage: on closer inspection, the longest occupations reveal slight shifts in the habitat. The sites are constantly evolving, their spatial organization changes over time, and certain phases are often distinguished by a particularly dense occupation. This raises questions about the precise meaning of dating, based on ceramics with chronological margins that are often of the order of one to two centuries, and about the scope of the excavations, which rarely cover the entirety of the habitats. This mobility, characteristic of early medieval sites, has long been wrongly considered a sign of weakness in ancient research. In reality, this mobility testifies to a constant interaction between the habitat and its environment.

In the Lyon region (Faure-Boucharlat, 2001), gallo-roman material is frequently discovered on early medieval habitat sites, but it is qualified as residual or erratic by the excavators, because it cannot be associated with built remains. It is difficult to distinguish between a real continuity of occupation of the settlements after the Late Antiquity Period and the resumption of occupation after a phase of abandonment. Sometimes we observe a form of determinism in the spatial organization of the settlements, which suggests a relationship with the ancient plot of land. The most frequent situation is the installation of communities in ignorance of what came before. The earliest of these settlements created *ex nihilo* begin at the end of the fifth century, but for the most part, the occupation is centred on the seventh century. The Carolingian period is particularly poorly represented, whether one considers the settlements that appeared at the beginning of the Middle Ages or those that took over from older settlements, with or without an interruption in occupation. The turn of the millennium is manifested by a densification of the occupation. Some settlements were established in places that had been unoccupied during the early Middle Ages and were considered to be new settlements. The phenomenon is not only reflected in creations *ex nihilo* but also affects sites that had been occupied in the early Middle Ages. It is indeed in the middle of the Middle Ages that the densest and most structured phase of occupation occurs.

In the south-east region (Schneider, Fauduet, & Odenhardt-Donvez, 2007), on the threshold of the fourth century, the history of the dynamics of settlement and the transformations of rural habitat in Mediterranean Gaul is first placed in a long movement of decrease of the number of occupied sites. The phenomenon is not sudden but stems from an earlier shock wave, the first signs of which are perceptible from the end of the first century, and become considerably more pronounced in the second half of the following century and the third century. Two systems of settlement would be opposed to each other. The centrifugal system of the abundance



of creations during the brutal growth phase of the High Empire, which invested the space around poles – agglomerations or domains – and the centripetal system of the Late Empire, in which the rural economy was refocused around less numerous but more grouped settlements. The movement of creation of new sites, which begins to be perceived from the fourth century onwards, becomes more and more evident in the course of the fifth century, especially at the junction of the fifth and sixth centuries. On the threshold of the sixth century, the situation appears to be clearly different from what it was a century earlier. The emergence of new rural centres on the margins and the restructuring that can be seen in areas of ancient settlement, such as Lunel-Viel (Garnier, Legrand, Mercier, & Raynaud, 1995; Raynaud, 2007), are the first signs. Other signs are the significant increase in the number of new sites and a wider occupation of the space. The analysis of the chronological distribution of the surveyed and excavated sites highlights the essential role of the sixth century as a threshold of change in the domanial landscape, while suggesting that these transformations are far from having completely erased the topographical stability of the network of domanial centres in the first half of the first millennium.

The vision of a High Middle Ages in the continuity of Antiquity was forged quite early by the written sources (with the integration of many Germans among the Roman elites), but the archaeological data indicate a break that can be seen through the abandonment of many villae in the third century. However, a greater continuity of ancient structures can be observed in the south of France. Finally, regional differences lead us to subdivide the Early Middle Ages into two periods: fifth–seventh centuries and then seventh–eleventh centuries. The hinge of the seventh century corresponds to the conjunction of several factors that announce the beginning of a growth cycle: population growth, diffusion of new techniques, organization of work, trade, and urban life. These chronological revisions, made possible by a series of micro-scalar archaeological observations, have recently led to the proposal of a new chronological division of the Middle Ages which places less importance on a supposed break in the tenth–eleventh centuries and more on a better characterization of these processes over the long term (Mazel, 2021).

### 2.3.2 Polarization: Towards the Village

Just as Gallo-Roman archaeology has long concentrated on the study of the residential parts of the villae, so the archaeology of the medieval rural habitat, dominated by the problems defined by the written sources, was mainly interested in the phenomenon of deserted villages at the end of the Middle Ages (Beresford & Hurst, 1990; Demians D’Archimbaud, 1980). Then, following the evidence of the great mobility of the medieval rural habitat by surveys and especially preventive archaeology work, the interest of medieval historians and archaeologists shifted from the late Middle Ages to the periods of the tenth–twelfth centuries, following the thesis of P. Toubert describing the *incastellamento* model (Toubert, 1973). Developed from written sources, it expresses the transformation of the habitat and the reorganization of the land induced by the establishment of feudal society. It emphasizes the role of the castle in the concentration of the habitat. Robert Fossier, while expanding the model (from the *incastellamento* to the *encellulement*), notes that in most regions of Europe, between the tenth and twelfth centuries, territorial structures – lordships and parishes – were set up to provide a framework for society on a micro-scale (Fossier, 1982). Thus, the numerous abandonments of dispersed settlement sites around the year 1,000 would be part of a process of nucleation in favour of the ancient villages that we still know today but which are very rarely the subject of archaeological surveys.

From the 1990s, French medieval archaeologists began to question the possibility of archaeologically documenting the “birth” of the village, given the diversity of scenarios that were becoming apparent as a result of the increasing number of excavations of early medieval rural settlements. First of all, they pointed out the need to distinguish between the “physical” village accessible to archaeology and the “social” village described by written sources (Zadora-Rio, 1995). Second, a close examination of the chronologies of the creation and abandonment of rural sites made possible by preventive archaeology has enabled us to nuance the role of the turn of the millennium in the evolution of the settlement pattern (Peytremann, 2003, 2013). The most recent positions rightly call for the historical object of the “village” to be reintroduced into a broader study of the forms and dynamics of rural settlement between the fifth and fifteenth centuries (Catteddu, 2021;

Catteddu, Raynaud, Le Goff, & Chauveau, 2015; Lauwers, Watteaux, & Catteddu, 2021; Peytremann, 2014; Watteaux, 2003).

If the search for a “birth of the village” is illusory, the fact remains that the polarizing role of the church was manifested in the first stage by the progressive grouping of burials within the framework of the affirmation of the parish and its Christian cemetery. This has been particularly demonstrated on a micro-scale by the monographic approach of ecclesiastical and cemetery sites such as the emblematic cases of Rigny-Ussé in Touraine or Vilarnau in Catalonia.

At Rigny-Ussé (Indre-et-Loire, Center of France), the excavation of the area around the church conducted between 1986 and 1999 revealed a very long period of occupation of the site, from the seventh century in the excavation area – and from the High Empire in the immediate environment – until the middle of the nineteenth century. During the first period of occupation, in the seventh and eighth centuries, despite the existence of a place of worship at Rigny, the inhabitants of the colony were buried elsewhere, probably in a necropolis located at a distance. From the middle of the eighth century onwards, burials gradually occupied the ruins of the buildings and the spaces in between. The burial area is very sparse and extends along a north–south axis. The church, near which burials were made, does not seem to be a focal point for burials. The construction of a new church on the same site at the end of the tenth or beginning of the eleventh century coincides with a first reduction in the burial area, which corresponds to a reorganization of the burial space around the church. This development is not the result of external pressure, since the space freed by the shrinking of the burial area was not occupied by buildings until two centuries later. Nor is it due to a decrease in the burial population, since the reduction of the burial area went hand in hand with an increase in the density of burials. It should therefore be seen as a stage in the establishment of the parish organization marked by a new interdependence of church and cemetery. At the beginning of the twelfth century, a new reduction of the burial space is accompanied by the construction of a fence wall which materializes the limit of the cemetery (Zadora-Rio et al., 2020).

The church of Vilarnau (Pyrénées Orientales, Catalogne) was probably already built at the end of the ninth century and the dimensions given to it at that time did not change until its destruction at the end of the eighteenth century. At that time, the church seemed isolated in the middle of the plateau, but it quickly polarized a first cemetery that extended around the building, the furthest tombs never being more than 30 m away. The immediate environment of the church of Vilarnau evolves radically during the second half of the tenth century or at the very beginning of the eleventh century with the temporary installation of a habitat on the bangs of the cemetery. This grouping around the church coincides with the abandonment of many nuclei of settlement – isolated farms or hamlets – located in the nearby countryside. The habitat that settled around the church faded away before the twelfth century. The cemetery and the church continue to be used but are not sufficient to fix the habitat in their immediate contact to the benefit of regrouping around the castle, located only 500 m to the northeast. The fact that the building continues to be maintained and that its cemetery is used shows that there is no break, but a redistribution of the habitat within a territory that probably already forms a parish (Passarius, Donat, & Catafau, 2010; Passarius, Donat, & Catafau, 2008).

### 2.3.3 Medieval Agrarian Growth and Decline

The scarcity of excavations of rural settlements from the Early Middle Ages until the 1980s led to the interpretation of this period as a phase of the crisis in the countryside, characterized by precarious and ephemeral settlements linked to failing agriculture. However, historians of written sources such as G. Duby had already identified signs of growth from the eighth century onwards through an apparent retreat of the forest, a multiplication of settlement sites, or a quantitative reading of written sources, all of which indicated a certain demographic growth during the last centuries of the first millennium.

Within the framework of the *Archadyn* program described above, we have for the first time compared the trajectories of agrarian development of areas located in both northern and southern France. For this purpose, we have developed a quantitative and comparative approach to the remains of manuring revealed by the material collected off-site during systematic pedestrian surveys. The calculation, for each workshop

area and for each period, of the sum of the surveyed plots having delivered at least one evidence of amendment (at least one shard), makes it possible to read the pulsations of the amended spaces in the long term in terms of extension or retraction. If we observe everywhere an extension of the amended spaces during the Roman period, we also record everywhere a certain abandonment during the late Antiquity. In three cases, the decrease in amended areas continued during the High Middle Ages. The developments are very diverse for the Central Middle Ages. Although three workshop zones show approximately the same score around one-third of the amended area, this proximity masks real disparities in the trends observed. Among the two workshop areas that had shown a significant increase in the amount of land amended during the previous phase, one saw this confirmed by a new increase in the amount of land amended, while the other showed a new decrease in this area. On the other hand, the three workshop areas that had been abandoned in the early Middle Ages show a more or less strong recovery in the central and final Middle Ages.

This study thus makes it possible to document the debated question of the existence and modalities of a certain form of agricultural growth in the early Middle Ages (Devroey, 2008; Leturcq & Mazel, 2021). The various readings and re-readings of Carolingian cartularies and polyptychs crystallized the debate in the 1980s (Centre culturel de l'abbaye de Flaran, 1990). While data from preventive archaeology now provide occasional information on this question – by uncovering areas for the silage of agricultural products (Carme & Henri, 2010), organized plots of land, and numerous agricultural establishments (Carré, 2011; Faure-Boucharlat, 2001; Gentili et al., 2003; Peytremann, 2003) – the estimated surface area occupied by cultivated areas is a key piece of information for assessing this growth. It is very clear in Touraine and Berry, where the increase in amended areas is spectacular; it is much more difficult to identify in southern contexts. This study has finally demonstrated the capacity of ancient societies to overcome certain geographical constraints. If the growth of cultivated areas is made up of successive takeovers and abandonments, it is evident over the long term. The production needs of agricultural commodities have led successive societies to integrate into their cultivated areas geographical contexts that are a priori unfavourable: steep slopes or those with little sunlight, heavy or acidic soils, and marginal areas far from inhabited areas. This integration had to be accompanied by technological progress and additional efforts in terms of soil improvement, as shown by the increase in the density of manure-spreading material. The comparative approach makes it possible, not to question existing macroeconomic models in their entirety, but to observe their local modulations by going down to the micro-regional level and varying the contexts of observation.

### **3 Towards a Continuous Spatial Approach of the Medieval Finages at Micro-Scale: Case Study in the South-West of France**

In the South-West of France, rural settlements from the early Middle Ages are less well known (Hautefeuille, 2020). They are only rarely found in preventive archaeology. Either the ancient sites were occupied for a longer period of time, or the settlements occupied today were established and fixed early on so the low mobility of the habitat in the early Middle Ages does not allow us to observe any remains today. This particular region has also been left out of the major systematic pedestrian survey campaigns of the 1980s–2000s and the deployment of Lidar from the 2010s onward. It is necessary to develop ambitious, micro-scale research programs, mobilizing all available sources to document landscape dynamics in the spatial continuity linking inhabited centres to marginal areas of the terroirs.

#### **3.1 REPERAGE Project**

The REPERAGE project aimed to study the human settlement processes of the Garonne Valley and low terraces, using, among other methods, systematic pedestrian survey campaigns. Following the planned route of a High Speed Line between Bordeaux and Toulouse, the project aimed to develop a comprehensive and non-invasive

archaeological strategy that combines high-resolution mapping of artefacts found in the field, low-level aerial surveys using drones equipped with multispectral and Lidar sensors, and geophysical surveys (Ground Penetrating Radar, magnetometer). The aim was to obtain a high level of non-invasive knowledge of diachronic settlement systems and dynamics, the relationships between past human societies and the natural environment, prior to the implementation of preventive archaeology field operations (Poirier, 2021). The main historical and archaeological questions of this study are linked to the major issues of the medieval period in south-western France, and concern the nature of ancient and late-antique occupation as well as the establishment of settlement centres in the High Middle Ages, the articulation between grouped and dispersed settlements in the Middle Ages and the medieval organization of the territory.

Between 2014 and 2018, systematic pedestrian surveys covered almost 850 hectares of a sector of the Tarn-et-Garonne, most of which are located in the immediate vicinity of the future High Speed Line. These surveys led to the discovery of some 40 potential archaeological sites dating from prehistory to the present day. They also allowed the collection of nearly 60,000 off-site artefacts, including 15,000 shards of pottery, the only material remains of manure spreading since Protohistory (Poirier & Nuninger, 2012). The study of the ceramic material is still in progress, but the main trends in the dynamics of land occupation are in line with the models generally established for France. Sedentary occupation is identifiable from the end of the Bronze Age and during the Iron Age; it extended and intensified during the Roman period before decreasing slightly during the Middle Ages and rising again in the modern period. However, it should be borne in mind that medieval and modern sites still occupied today cannot be taken into account in these calculations. The challenge of our work is precisely to specify the dates of settlement of these present-day occupations by observing the halo of dispersal of off-site material that can be detected around them. For example, an examination of the distribution of the scattering material reveals that the highest densities can be observed closest to the present-day villages, whether for the modern period, the Middle Ages, or even the Roman period (Poirier 2021, Figure 13). This can be seen as a form of validation of the hypothesis of an early and lasting fixation of the centres of settlement.

### 3.2 RHEFOREST Project

Since 2020, the RHEFOREST\_81 project has been looking at the history of three current forest areas in Occitania, two of which are located mainly in the Tarn department: the Grésigne state forest and the Montagne Noire on the border between the Tarn and Aude departments. The objective is to restore the place of these forest areas in the long-term development of rural landscapes. The team's work is organized around four themes: forest management and exploitation (wood distribution, sustainability of management), artisanal activities (charcoal-making, metallurgy, and glass-making), long-term land use (the forest before the forest, expansion and retraction phases, and regional context), and enhancement of the forest heritage (how to reconcile forest exploitation and conservation/enhancement of the remains?).

Lidar coverage of these three areas was carried out. In the Grésigne state forest, these Lidar data revealed for the first time the layout and precise context of several small hillforts that are well known locally but very little studied. These particular sites, which have not yet been dated and which can date back to the proto-historic period as well as to the Middle Ages, bear witness to a time when the forest space had a different aspect from the present one. Their dominant position demonstrates a search for visual control of the surroundings which excludes a settlement in the heart of a dense woodland.

As elsewhere (Rassat et al., 2016), the Lidar data revealed innumerable traces of charcoal burning. More than 2,500 charcoal platforms were detected. Although their density is particularly high at the edge of the forest, they are also found in the heart of the massif. The charcoal pits will be an excellent proxy for documenting the ancient layout of the forest and the methods of its management, thanks to anthracological studies (Fouédjeu et al., 2021). Indeed, despite its intensity, and because of its longevity, charcoal burning bears witness to the skills of ancient rural societies in the sustainable management of wood resources. Moreover, these forests also provided the necessary fuel for numerous glass workshops that operated between the end of the Middle Ages and the end of the modern period.

Finally, we conduct a regressive study of landscape dynamics, using for example the Napoleonic cadastre and earlier census records, in order to place the forest in a wider micro-regional context. We want to know whether or not these forest areas, protected as such at least since the Middle Ages by their belonging to the royal domain or to the temporal domain of large monastic establishments, were wooded islands in the heart of areas largely used for agriculture.

## 4 Conclusion: Microhistory and Archaeology of Landscape and Settlement in France

These few examples demonstrated that the modalities of transition between major historical phases, the nucleation of settlement into the medieval village, the extension of the finages and the possibility of agricultural growth in the early Middle Ages, or the modalities of management and exploitation of natural resources can be highlighted by the microhistorical approach specific to the various facets of archaeological disciplines, from the ultra-local approach of the sedimentary core point (restitution of vegetation contexts by palynology), to the micro-regional scale of pedestrian and aerial survey campaigns (restitution of settlement dynamics and agrarian spaces), passing through the plot scale of excavations. These have, for example, made it possible to document the grouping of burials and then of the habitat around medieval churches, the strong need to store cereals in the early Middle Ages in grouped open field silage areas, or the sometimes very local dynamics of the settlements thanks to the large-scale stripping of preventive archaeology. Meticulous small-scale excavations during development work in the heart of present-day villages have made it possible to gradually gain a better understanding of the origin and processes that led to their formation, whether it occurred *ex-nihilo* or in the continuity of previous ancient occupations.

We finally would like to point out that the microhistorical approach in landscape and settlement archaeology is essentially due to the spatial micro-scale of the investigations carried out, determined by both epistemological and practical imperatives (Section 2.1). This micro-spatial scale has made it possible to take into account a long chronological period, which we have not discussed much here, but above all implies a comparative approach that is able to identify common trends and local particularities (Section 2.2). This comparative approach is rich in information for broadening the range of possibilities by observing the local modulations of global models. The monographic micro-scale of archaeology was first used to validate or illustrate (a “top-down” approach) the macro-historical models established by historians of written sources. The identification of fields of research inaccessible to the written sources then made it possible to use the spatial micro-scale of landscape and settlement studies to develop models of land use dynamics in a “bottom-up” approach (Section 2.3).

There is no doubt that in the future, the micro-scale approach will continue to enrich landscape and settlement archaeology in regions that are still cruelly lacking in reference frameworks in these fields.

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