Abstract: Following the proposal for the special issue, the aim of this study is to reflect on the potentialities and setbacks of a micro-historical approach to the archaeological record. This will be done by analysing the local organization of Early Modern husbandry in a territory in northwestern Iberia, where investigations have been carried out since 2017. I will apply the theoretical background of microhistory to four specific archaeological sites to delve into the social structuring and power relationships among the different agents involved in stockbreeding in the territory. In this regard, I will argue that one of the most compelling contributions of microhistory is to delve into the deep connection between the systemic and the quotidian, between structure and agency. However, this connection is not always straightforward and visible in the sources, and thus a deep theoretical and methodological background becomes necessary to understand questions such as how power was conceived and articulated at the local level and in daily life.

Keywords: rural societies, common lands, strategy, microhistory, social theory

1 Introduction

In 1642, Francisco de Alixo, a neighbour of the village of Casaio (Ourense, northwestern Iberia), wrote an official letter of complaint to the Marquis of Villafranca about his conflicts with the village council. Francisco had been appointed keeper of the mountains and rivers of the territory (guarda de los montes y ríos de Casaio), a property of the Marquis, albeit one managed, used and inhabited by the local community, organized in a century-old council. Francisco’s main duty was to police the correct use of the Marquis’ lands, following the rules negotiated between the lord and the communities. Francisco can therefore be considered a protector of the lord’s interests in the territory, which implied a counterbalance regarding the interests of the community, historically opposed to the Marquis’ interests. The conflict started when the council tried to appoint him for other tasks and duties – specifically those regarding his participation in the local council – which Francisco interpreted as a boycott of his functions and an attack on his loyalty to the Marquis. During the process, he argued that the community was misusing and trespassing the Marquis’ lands. For its part, the council of Casaio alleged that, according to their ancient customs and laws, they had the right to control the duties of each
community member.\textsuperscript{1} We do not know the exact outcome of this dispute, but the absence of any mention to other subsequent keepers in the written records suggests that the community of Casaio took the upper hand in this dispute.

This is one of the many examples of Early Modern conflicts we have encountered during our research in Casaio since 2017. The aim of this research is to understand the long historical process of transformation from peasant communities to industrial societies at a local scale in what we may call the process of modernity (Tejerizo García & Rodríguez Gutiérrez, 2021), following other experiences in similar contexts in the Iberian Peninsula (Ballesteros Arias, 2010; Gassiot Balbé & García Casas, 2014; López Gómez, Rodríguez Pérez, & Fernández Mier, 2022; Stagno, 2017). One of the challenges of this project was to thoroughly characterize pre-industrial societies as a first step to comprehend the changes brought about by the industrialization of the area during the first half of the twentieth century. For this matter, the territory of Casaio appeared as an ideal case study for several reasons, one of them being that there is quite a significant number of written sources, which could be contrasted with an abundant archaeological record still present in the landscape (Barros Alfaro, Tejerizo García, & Escudero Manzano, 2023; Tejerizo García et al., 2021).

Examples such as Francisco’s case can be read as a reflection of the inner complexities of past rural societies. Conflicts, when considered as the tip of the iceberg of the development of social relationships in Early Modern history, are excellent channels to better understand these societies from a bottom-up perspective, that is, from the point of view of the particular social context in which they take place (Saavedra, 1996; Stagno & Tigrino, 2012). Through these conflicts we are able to tackle crucial questions, such as the mechanisms through which the Marquis exercised power over the lands he owned; or perhaps delve into the complex social structuring of the local community of Casaio and their inner conflicts as a community; or even discuss these communities’ specific land uses, activating or deactivating practices which confirmed their own rights to it (Moreno, 2018); or just to mention a final example, the ways in which the struggle between possessors and proprietors crystallized at this specific point in time and space (Torre, 2011, 2021).

In any case it was clear from the very beginning that the deep connections among all these questions could not be solved from a top-down perspective or from deductive and abstract approaches. General laws and deterministic biases were not sufficient to understand the specificities of the case and the relevance it had in its context (Torre, 2021). Francisco’s story, thus, was only comprehensible within a specific set of social and power relationships instituted through a long historical process and displayed at the level of the local. On the other hand, we cannot just accept the case as an isolated and local anecdote but should instead be ambitious enough to try to connect it with the overarching context that made it intelligible to the actors involved (Orser, 2016). In other words, disentangling historical events such as the conflict with Francisco de Alixo implied an exercise both of thick description of the local and of considering its connection with the overarching political and economic context (Ginzburg, 1994).

It was at this point that the possibilities of microhistory appeared as an optimal framework to solve these issues at the local level, within the “small world” of Casaio (Davies, 1988; Quirós Castillo, 2020). Treated as an “exceptional normal” (Ginzburg, 1994; Man, 2013), or as a “singularization” (Orser, 2016), the case of Casaio’s keeper enters a new realm of analysis. One where the case study becomes a channel connecting the local and the global, agency, and structure (Callimicos, 2009, p. 17; Ribeiro, 2019). As Orser argues, the aim of such an approach would be to “understand the social network that operated within specific past historical contexts” (Orser, 2016, p. 180).

The main aim of this study is to delve into the configuration of local power in the Early Modern Iberian rural world through the analysis of local husbandry and social inequality using the conceptual framework of microhistory. Specifically, I will try to tackle the question of how power was articulated at the local scale and what characterized peasant social structuring (Stagno, 2018a). They subsequently become an “arena of struggle” (Long, 2011) through which questions of power relationships, social structuring, and economic inequality can be successfully tackled (Costello & Svensson, 2018; Long, 2007, 2011; Quirós Castillo & Tejerizo García, 2020). This will be done using an interdisciplinary methodology involving documentary, archaeological, and ethnographic data.

\textsuperscript{1} Archivo de la Fundación Medina Sidonia, box 5111.
Simultaneously, and connecting to the aims of this special issue, I will use some of the approaches and concepts of micro-historical analysis. Specifically, I find the concept of “strategy” as used by Giovanni Levy a compelling conceptual tool to be applied to this case study (Levi, 1985, pp. 3–5). While it does not differ very much from other similar concepts, such as “agency” or even “habitus” (Bourdieu, 2000; Giddens, 1984), the use made by this Italian historian in his analysis of seventh-century Piedmont seems quite appropriate to acknowledge not only the local perspective pursued in this study, but also the importance of such elements as community, intention, negotiation, and rationality. Thus, my aim will be to characterize the complexity of Casaio’s Early Modern society by analysing husbandry practices through four specific sites, trying to disentangle the presence of different agents in the territory whose strategies define the locus or “universe of relationships” (Grendi, 2004) through which power relationships are constituted.

2 Casaio and Lardeira: A Geographical and Historical Contextualization

The villages of Casaio and Lardeira are located in the northeastern part of today’s Spanish province of Ourense (Figure 1). They stand in a mountainous region known as the Serra do Eixe, one of the highest points in the

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2 In Levi’s words: “Questa razionalità può essere descritta con più precisione se si ritiene che fosse espressa non solo nella resistenza alla nuova società che dilagava, ma che fosse diretta a un’attiva opera di trasformazione e di utilizzazione del mondo sociale e naturale: in questo senso ho usato la parola strategia.”
territory, reaching 2,200 m above sea level at Pena Trevinca peak. The region’s landscape is characterized by valleys of varying degrees of steepness. The narrow streams crossing this natural frontier render it not particularly favourable for agriculture. It is situated in a natural frontier zone separating the mountainous region to the north and northwest from the plains of the northern Spanish plateau, which has made this area a natural pathway since prehistory, as attested by significant, and in some cases recently documented, rock-art sites (Santos Estévez, Tejerizo García, & Alonso Toucido, 2020). During Roman times, the gold mining site of Las Méndulas turned the region into a central economic landmark (Sánchez-Palencia Ramos, 2000). However, after Roman domination, it gradually became peripheral and marginal economically and politically (Svensson & Gardiner, 2009). It was only during the mid-twentieth century that it recovered a central position during World War II due to tungsten mining (Guirriarán, 2000; Thomás, 2010).

Until this moment, and specifically in the period between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, which I will be tackling here, the territory and villages of Casaio and Lardería can be generally described as a paradigmatic pre-industrial peasant society of the Iberian Peninsula ancien regime (Pérez Álvarez, Rubio Pérez, & Martín García, 2012), characterized by an agrarian economy based mainly on local husbandry practices deeply intertwined with agriculture and the collective use of the common lands (De Moor, 2015; Saavedra, 2007). In the specific case of Casaio and Lardería, local husbandry played a significant role, characterized by a short-distance transhumance of vertical displacements carried out by shepherds, normally members of the same household (Costello & Svensson, 2018).

Within this system, the regulation of rights of property and access to the land was critical (Lana-Berasain, 2012; Ostrom, 1990). Common lands, based on neighbour relations (i.e. owning a house and residence in the village; Bouhier, 1979), have been a central part of the social life of Casaio and Lardería’s historical objects of dispute since medieval times when the settlement pattern was consolidated, as suggested by our recent excavations in a settlement dated in the twelfth–thirteenth centuries in Casaio (Barros Alfaro et al., 2023). Most of the territory was owned by the nobility house of the Marquis of Villafranca, a lordship of medieval origins which played a key role in Early Modern Iberian politics (Franco Silva, 2007). During the expansion of its power at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and as a consequence of increasing tensions and conflicts with local communities over the territory (called La Cabrera), both signed a pact (foro) and specific repartitions (apeos) through which the properties of the Marquis were delimited and the community’s rights to access the lands regulated. As the dialectics between the different agents evolved, a century later, in the early seventeenth century, the local communities’ customs – probably of medieval origins – were put down in writing in the Ordenanzas de La Cabrera (Fernández Cuervo & Tascón Fernández, 1996). It is noteworthy to pinpoint that the documentary analysis suggests that Casaio – not Lardería – was actively opposed to the Marquis, as its council never signed a repartition (Barros Alfaro et al., 2023). This opposition explains the recurrent conflicts between Casaio and the Marquis throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which generated the documentary evidence upon which we have built our approach to the common lands, following other studies (Beltrametti, Cevasco, Stagno, & Tigrino, 2021; Stagno, 2018a).

However, it is very difficult to delve into the social structuring and power relationships in this territory only by considering written sources, as these are commonly generated from above and mainly reflect – at least at first sight – a lord vs peasant dialectics (Quirós Castillo & Tejerizo García, 2020). Since 2017, we have carried out different archaeological analyses that not only make visible pre-industrial landscape management (Costello & Svensson, 2018; Stagno, 2015), but also show the deep network of agencies working at the local scale. To exemplify this, we will look at four specific spaces where stockbreeding and social relationships played a key role in the development of the strategies of the different agents involved.

3 Local Husbandry and Household Economies: The Site of Mallos

The site of Mallos (Figure 2) is located 4 km southwest of the central nucleus of Casaio, at 1,200 m above the sea level. It has remained profoundly shaped by the slate industry until this very day. Until the mid-twentieth century, the site was characterized by a slight slope heading southeast towards the Valborraz stream, which
crosses this northeast-heading space. It is worth mentioning that there are two archaeological sites documented in this space, one of them probably from the Late Iron Age – currently buried under slate waste – and the other dated around the third century AD, attested by two enamelled brooches. These sites attest to the space’s adequacy for human and agricultural exploitation in the long historical duration.

What characterizes this site, however, is the presence of a significant number of stone structures related to local stockbreeding and grazing. We have documented a total of 61 standing structures distributed in an area of 60 hectares. However, these must have certainly been more abundant in the past. Historical aerial photography from the late 1950s shows the great impact of the slate industry, which partially or completely destroyed nearly 30 structures, allowing us to calculate a total of at least 90 structures on the ground. The structures are generally circular and built in drystone, with 2 m high walls and different inner divisions,
normally between two-aisled and four-aisled ones in the largest cases. One of these divisions often corresponds to a small interior hut of no more than 2–3 m², used as a shelter or a storage room.

We know from ethnographic research that these structures were used to herd flocks – mainly sheep and goats – to collect their dung during wintertime, when the upper grasslands of Casaio were not available. The inner divisions, therefore, may correspond to a room where flocks were kept for the collection of dung, used to fertilize the nearby croplands for rye, barley, linen, and mostly hay. Aerial photography has shown this relationship between the stone structures and the croplands. In the so-called Vuelo Americano (American Flight) of 1957, each of these structures correlates with a particular plot. Thus, each family or household from Casaio owned one or more of these structures. Moreover, interviewees have confirmed that some families have pens in several locations within Casaio, showing a scattered property system. In summary, the organization of the site of Mallos resulted from strict communal organization to use this space and thus a complex structuring, not only of the landscape but also of power at the level of the community, based on an instable and tense distribution of the capacity to use these lands and the necessity to negotiate their management.

Archaeological fieldwork in this area suggests that this particular use of the site of Mallos has a long history. Some of the structures present a very complex building stratigraphy, with two or even three relevant construction phases. Considering that these construction events in seasonal structures are commonly related to generational processes of structure renovation, an age of at least two centuries may be hypothesized for at least some of these structures and thus situating them, at least, in the eighteenth century. We have conducted archaeological excavations in one of the structures, confirming the absence of other prior structures, at least in the excavated profile. Land erosion and the slope generated a very scarce stratigraphy that impeded the use of radiocarbon dating. On the other hand, we have been able to date the definitive abandonment of the structure in the 1960s, thanks to the material culture it contained, which included a particular soda sold in that decade.

All in all, our current hypothesis – to be tested in the future – is that the appropriation of Mallos in particular through the construction of these structures originated in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, the site being part of the common lands of Casaio prior to that time. During this period, significant changes in the economic strategies geared towards an expansion of cattle have been detected in northwestern Iberia (Saavedra, 2011, p. 118), in parallel to a period of population growth in the territory suggested by palaeodemographic analyses (Castro Voces, 1993). In this situation, as we will see through other examples, pressure for the occupation of lands by local communities may have increased due to the presence of a range of agents and strategies acting in the same spaces, thus explaining the significant expansion of drystone structures in Mallos, considered as a permanent sign of possession of what would have previously been common lands (Stagno, 2015, 2018a).

4 Medium-Distance Transhumance and the Organization of the Community: The Site of Vianzola

The second example to illustrate the complexity of local husbandry is the site of Vianzola. It is located in the northern tip of the territory under scrutiny, a liminal zone which separates it from what is now another autonomous community, Castille and Leon. It is characterized by a relatively plain area with the presence of several wetlands at 1,520 m above sea level, quite adequate for activities such as haymaking and grazing.

As suggested by the documentary evidence, until the late twentieth century, this space fell within the Marquis’ properties but was managed as common lands by the community of Lardeira (García Tato, 2023). As a

4 José Amable Vázquez told us that his family had, at least, three of this corrales (pens) in different places in Casaio. Interview with José Amable Vázquez, Casaio, February 20th, 2019.
way of diversifying the strategies within local economies (Viader & Rendu, 2014), part of the territory was dedicated to temporal cultivations thanks to communal management of water through the yearly construction and repARATION of channels – something that we have recognized in other parts of the territory and which demonstrates the complexities of communal control of the commons as a social arena of negotiation and collaboration (Stagno, Narbarte-Hernández, & Tejerizo García, 2021).

However, the most important part of this space – at least in economic terms – was used for the so-called vacadas. A vacada (from vaca, cow in Spanish) was a communal husbandry practice – recorded since medieval times in many territories of the Iberian Peninsula (Borrero Fernández, 1992; Fernández Mier & Tente, 2018) – which consisted of the summer management of the cattle by one or two community members. They were elected or directly hired from the community itself, sometimes used as a mechanism to cope with social differences. Their task was to keep the cattle in Vianzola through a period of 2 or 3 months, just until the beginning of Autumn. Occasionally, people from other regions would include their cattle in the vacada, or even enjoy exclusive access to the space during some years, rendering it too a field of contact and inter-communal negotiation, what Fox calls “ impersonal transhumance” (Fox, 2012). These vacadas definitively disappeared around the 1970s, after the territory was purchased by the community of Casaio to the County (Freire Cedeira, Balboa López, & Rico Boquete, 2014), after which Vianzola was abandoned.

In contrast with that of Mallos, the materiality of Vianzola is scarce but very suggestive. We have documented mainly two structures related to husbandry practices, both in the eastern part of Vianzola. One of them, locally called corral da pedra (stone pen; Figure 3), is a stone-footed sub-rectangular structure of 23 m × 17 m enclosing a space of approximately 250 m². The structure’s wall uses a peculiar construction through rows of stones covered by big slates arranged upside down. This is a regional constructive tradition that we have detected in other buildings dating from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries in the area, mainly for division of plots. In the northeastern corner of the structure, there is a small hut (6 m × 4 m) with a slate roof used as a dormitory by the shepherds. Fieldwork survey suggests that the last moments of use of this space can be dated to the 1960s.

The other structure is located close to the former, about 100 m further west. It is a circular-shaped enclosure formed by the juxtaposition of erica bushes over a stone footed wall. This type of features have been associated with temporal cultivations, using this type of enclosures made by bushes as a way to keep animals away (Cevasco, 2007; Stagno, 2018b; Viader & Rendu, 2014). Stone walls, in turn, have been interpreted as a means for the permanent appropriation of temporal plots (Stagno, 2018a). Even though it is evident that the erica has grown after the construction of the wall, the most logical explanation for the formation of the structure is that the stone wall stands, for instance, over a prior phase of erica. In this hypothesis, this structure is formed by, at least, three different phases of use as an enclosure (1. Erica while used, 2. Construction of the stone wall, and 3. Erica while abandoned). Therefore, as in the case of Mallos, it can be suggested, as an hypothesis, that they were originally constructed around the eighteenth century, coinciding with a period of increasing conflicts with the Marquis over the appropriation and usurpations of lands by the local communities (Barros Alfaro et al., 2023).

Vianzola is thus a territory in which a wide range of activities took place with different social meanings. While the water management and the corral da pedra for the vacadas signal the communal organization of common lands, the erica pen points towards the appropriation mechanisms of these lands and, therefore, towards conflictive relationships within the community itself. Moreover, what is suggested is that both the vacada and the use of this small plot for temporal cultivations were contemporary, thus opening up the possibility that it was directly used by the shepherds as a way of complementing their revenues. Thus, the option to oversee the vacada could be strategically seen as an opportunity for the members of the community and therefore an element for competition, an arena of struggle, in moments of increasing pressure both on the local communities and the landscape, something also suggested by ethnographic work.\(^5\)

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\(^5\) During the nineteenth century, the Marquis of Villafranca become the County of Peñarramiro.

\(^6\) Leonisa Vidal Valle suggests that this work was very well-paid. Interview with Leonisa Vidal Valle and José Barrio. O Barco de Valdeorras, January 25th, 2018.
In recent years, long-distance transhumance and herding mobility have become major objects of study due to advances in the archaeological methods available to tackle this question. Costello and Svensson have underlined the importance of a deep understanding of transhumance from a contextual and relational approach to tackle a significant number of questions from the social strategies behind this economic practice to its long-term impact on environmental resources (Costello & Svensson, 2018). Moreover, the complex and diversified nature of transhumance can cause its different varieties to collide in the same spatial milieu, becoming an element of social dispute and conflict among different agents (Costello, 2020; Gardiner, 2018).

In our case study, we will be referring to long-distance transhumance as the herding practices controlled by the institution of the Mesta. This institution emerged in the thirteenth century to organize the increasing business of livestock and wool regarding the Merino sheep breed, highly appreciated in the Iberian and European context. It controlled the mobilization of flocks and herds from the winter pastures of Extremadura and Andalusia to the northern Iberian territories. This implied royal protection of the livestock paths (cañadas) and judicial and economic benefits for cattle owners (Klein, 1981). In the case of Casaio, it is difficult to date the Mesta’s earliest appearance in the scenario, probably in medieval times, but consolidating in the Early Modern period (Saavedra, 2011).

The use of pastures for Merino flocks was accorded between the Mesta stockbreeders – normally members of the urban bourgeoisie from Extremadura – and the Marquis. The latter rented part of the territories he owned for an annual fee which was eventually renegotiated. Such negotiations were evidently made at the expense of local communities, including not only Casaio, but also others as the territory used for livestock was large enough to spread across the common lands of several communities. Since large stretches of these pastures were used by the same local communities for their cattle, their use became a tense arena of struggle between many different agents, rendering them a perfect space to delve into local complexities and social strategies.

Within the territory of Casaio, we have documented at least three different areas relating to the activities of the Mesta, the most important of them being the space known by the toponymy of Sobredo and Campo.
Romo. These are located in a high heath at 1,800 m above the sea level. Even though conflicts between local husbandry and this long-distance transhumant livestock must have been recurrent, it was only when they affected the power of the Marquis that documentary evidence was produced. In 1776, there was quite an aggressive conflict between some local communities and one specific breeder regarding the use of this space of Casaio and the number of heads of cattle introduced in these spaces. Throughout this conflict, which is well documented in the archives, the owner of the Mestan flock appealed to the Marquis of Villafranca, who, in the end, and considering his own conflicts at the time with local communities, finally sided with Casaio (Barros Alfaro et al., 2023). In a context of expansion of husbandry in Northwestern Iberia, tensions escalated at the local level due to the development of the meat industry (Saavedra, 2011), and the resulting conflict may be introduced within the broader historical and economic frame while keeping in mind the local institutional framework.

We have been able to document several structures related to these transhumant activities in Sobredo and Campo Romo. In the northern part of this space, several stone-footed structures associated with a plateau are located in a place known as the “Fonte dos Gallegos” (Font of the Galicians), used for transhumant livestock in the past. Even though it is currently used for hiking and tourism, at least three big pens with several shepherd huts are still visible, similar to other examples recorded in the Cantabrian Mountains related to the Mestan shepherds (Fernández Mier & Tente, 2018), and to some communal structures documented in northern Europe (Costello, 2016). Furthermore, oral information points to the presence of dairy activities during the presence of transhumant livestock in Casaio, probably as a complementary activity for shepherds (Svensson, 2018).

Another interesting yet very ruined structure has been documented 1.5 km towards the west (Figure 4). The remains we see today correspond to a short stone-footed sub-rectangular wall measuring 50 m × 46 m. Historical aerial photographs show that there is another circular pen annexed to the right edge measuring 35 m × 36 m approximately. In total, these two structures enclose an area of 3,000 m², an extension that can only be related to large-scale livestock management. Having said this, ethnographic data confirm that this structure was used until at least the 1960s, to collect local cattle through the day (sesteo) and that these structures have been in ruins for as long as living ancient shepherds can remember. Moreover, one of our informants also told us about two small huts that are lost today, possibly suggesting a relationship with transhumant shepherds.

We excavated two small shovel test pits in these structures. Both confirm the structures’ precarity, not being, in origin, more than half a metre high and thus suggesting they were mainly devised for temporary use and probably repaired each year. Moreover, these structures’ position is quite striking, very exposed to the winds and in a very difficult terrain close to a very deep fall. Although future radiocarbon dating may or may not confirm this, our suggestion is that they were built by the Mestan shepherds precisely as a response to the local conflicts documented in the written record during the late eighteenth century and that, having been subsequently abandoned, they were used for local husbandry. Our hypothesis then, to be confirmed by future excavations, is that this structure was used by the transhumant breeders at moments of social tension between them and the local communities.

6 Social Differences and Common Lands: The Site of Sobredo

The last site I will be referencing here is that of Sobredo. It is located in the western part of Casaio at 600 m above sea level. It is characterized by a steep slope running north to south, where a significant concentration of apiaries — at least 16 — has been documented. Most of these apiaries (colmeares or alvarizas) have an oval shape of 14–20 × 9–10 m and are made up of high dry-stone walls crowned by big plain slates projected to the

7 Archivo de los González Gateras de Villar de los Barrios, docs. 98 and 99.
outside. These slates (cortines) were used as protections against bears, common in the area until the beginning of the twentieth century. Occasionally, apiaries present a small stone-footed hut used as a storehouse. This type of apiary is strikingly common in the territory around Casaio, where we have documented nearly a hundred – including some destroyed by the current slate industry. Apiaries can therefore be considered an intrinsic part of the local household economy and one closely intertwined with husbandry, as places with a concentration of apiaries – like Sobredo, Ana de Vacas or Rumiña – relied on livestock to clear the terrain to make these apiaries fully functional. This, along with the process by which inner social differences were made visible within Casaio, is the main reason to include the site of Sobredo in this analysis.

As stated, most of the apiaries in Sobredo are oval-shaped, taking advantage of the terrain for their construction. They were built over the rock, which avoided the need to use unnecessary earthworks. Their construction seems to be household-driven, like that of the structures in Mallos, although collective construction and use cannot be discarded. The apiaries are also built following the slope, in order to take advantage of as many sun hours as possible – when bees are active. Only one structure does not follow this pattern, that of “Sobredo-13” (Figure 5), located in the southern part of the cluster. This is a 25 × 17 rectangular structure with 2.5 m high walls made of engraved slate and well-performed corners. For its construction, massive earthworks were performed to seat the structure, creating a long-flattened floor which covers most of the 2.5 m southern wall. We know from oral sources that this was owned by one of the richest families in Casaio, related to the surname León – a common surname in Casaio we can trace back to the seventeenth century. Thus, it seems clear that its construction and the massive earthworks to flatten the apiary’s interior are the work of people either dependant or subordinated to that family.

In 2023, we excavated a 2 m × 1 m test pit in the central part of the rectangular apiary, aiming at getting some dating samples and to document the stratigraphical sequence of construction. After 1 m of earthworks, we documented a structure composed of slates, which was dated by radiocarbon at the sixth-century AD, showing the presence of a post-Roman context and, therefore, the long duration of occupation of Sobredo. Unfortunately, this tells us little about the chronology of the rectangular apiary, which we can only hypothesize to have been built in Modern times. However, documentary sources can provide more information.
The first documentary mention to the apiaries in Casaio dates to the eighteenth century as part of a purchase. However, their importance as elements of the territory’s local economy can be traced back to the sixteenth century. A 1,500 inventory of the Marquess of Villafranca, María Osorio Pimentel, mentions that the payment through wax made by some of the inhabitants of the territory was controlled by this nobiliary house (Franco Silva, 1981, p. 49). As a preliminary hypothesis, we may date the original construction of the big rectangular apiary to the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries, a moment when pressure over the common lands increased and social tensions and local inequalities became acuter. In this context, rich families within the community, such as the León family, could yield their power at the local scale, probably built upon husbandry practices, as the main economic arena to thrive in the social ladder, to perform symbolic actions like the construction of a sophisticated structure contrasting with the common apiaries of the other families. In this scenario, Sobredo and the apiaries, an intrinsic part of the husbandry-based household economies, appear as a social arena of struggle at the local scale through which social inequalities are being made visible.

7 Local Social Strategies and Power Relationships Through an Archaeological Microhistory

Considering the preceding case studies, the first idea that comes to the fore is that if they had been analysed isolated from one another and separately from the historical, geographical, and social context in which they are inserted, they would not have resulted in more than a superficial description of local territory management or the recognition of a myriad disparate social agents. In other words, as individual case studies, they
constitute a very limited positivistic description, or *histoire événementielle* that delves very little into the social and power relationships behind materialities, documentary evidences, or ethnographic accounts (Revel, 1994). It is at this stage of the investigation where social theory is needed in order to give meaning to the evidence, connecting the particular to the general (Giddens, 1979). In this case, social theory is based on a dialectical approach, in which society is understood as an unstable and dialectical ensemble of different groups with an uneven distribution of social power materialized through their social relationships and developed through time (Callinicos, 2009; Jessop, 2007).

As stated, a micro-historical approach allows for a creative inductive engagement beyond abstract generalities that, in the end, only accept those pieces of information that accommodate certain theories and discards those that do not confirm (Thompson, 1981). Microhistory is, above all, a question of analytical scale (Magnússon, 2003), which leads to thick descriptions of particular case studies departing from a specific historical question that inform general historical trends from the point of view of complexity, avoiding determinism and biased outcomes (Ginzburg, 1994; Grendi, 1994; Ribeiro, 2019). This is what Bob Jessop, taking a materialist relational point of view, named the “contingent necessity,” that is, the consideration of the impossibility of determining an outcome due to the multiplicity of causal chains and its combination in particular conjunctures (Jessop, 2007, pp. 225–233). Thus, what contingent necessity is coherent with all the evidence presented? Here I will only make some general remarks regarding the social structuring and power relationships in Early Modern rural Iberia.

As previously stated, the husbandry practices of pre-industrial peasant societies are an optimal space to delve into social structuring and the different strategies adopted by social agents (Costello & Svensson, 2018; Fernández Mier & Tente, 2018; Gardiner, 2018). The evidence presented reflects the diverse interests of the various social actors at play and its intersection in specific spatial locations or arenas of struggle (Bourdieu, 2000), or, following Edoardo Grendi’s approach, the “universe of relationships” that constitutes a *locus* (Grendi, 1977, 2004). Among them, we have recognized several: the Marquis of Villafranca; the local communities of Casaio, Lardeira, and others; the council of Casaio; the owners of the *Mesta* and its shepherds; Casaio’s families, represented in their domestic units; Francisco Alixo; local shepherds for the *vacadas*, and so on. This diversity of agencies and strategies illustrates the complexities of localities, irreducible to predetermined models (Torre, 2011). As Giovanni Levi stated, local communities cannot be described as an ideal image, but as conflictive and unequal instances framed in a particular scale (Levi, 1985). The recognition and characterization of these agents and their internal relationships, as microhistory proposes, is the essential starting point for historical inquiry (Raggio, 1990).

From a relational and dialectical point of view, what defines the strategies adopted by these agents is the particular set of relationships and interactions established among them within a determined structure and institutional milieu (Callinicos, 2009; Ollman, 2003). Thus, what it is evidenced is a myriad of social relationships taking place in specific arenas of struggle in which these strategies and actions are displayed (Bourdieu, 2000; Long, 2011). From this standpoint we are able to deeply contextualize the meaning of the archaeological sites. Mallos materializes the subtle negotiation of the domestic units and families of Casaio when ordering space, while Vianzola does the same, but also reflecting the relationships between different communities within a wider territory whose common lands become a space of inter-communal interaction and negotiation. Sobredo brings to the fore the social inequalities within them and their symbolic performance through materiality – in this case, the apiaries. Pedrosø, for its part, represents vertical disputes between the strategies of local communities against the interests of outer agents, such as the owners of the *Mestan* flocks.

One element to point out, which can only be apprehended through a micro-historical account, is the acknowledgement that neither these strategies are immutable, nor are their outcomes pre-determined. On the contrary, they are a historical process in themselves (Ribeiro, 2019). A very interesting case would be that of the conflict regarding the use of the Pedrosø/Campo Romo space. Here the general strategy of the Marquis from Early Modern times was to favour the *Mesta* and the benefits of renting this land for the Merino flocks, as

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10 In this sense, it is quite similar to the idea of “singularization” proposed by Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon and Charles Orser (Magnússon, 2003; Orser, 2016).
is visible in the documentary evidence through the negotiation of the rents between those agents. However, in the context of an intense conflict in a moment of increasing social tension with the local communities against the Mestan shepherds – whose strategy was to avoid conflicts – in the late eighteenth century, he decided not to push harder and ruled in favour of the local community of Casaio. An outcome of this dispute, in the hypothesis presented here, was the reconfiguration of the long-transhumance landscape with the emergence of new structures and ways of occupying the space.

This particular development of events only makes sense within a particular institutionalization of power relationships in which the Marquis is recognized as the mediator, ultimately sanctioned by a general structure affecting not only this territory, but most of northwestern Iberia (Baz Vicente, 1996). Connections with the economic context can be pushed forward. As we have suggested, although more archaeological information and dates are needed, most part of the structures seem to have been originally built around the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries. This period is also characterized by social tensions derived from various interconnected causes, such as the increasing importance of cattle and livestock and, therefore, greater pressure on the common lands, a moment of demographic expansion, or the strategy of local communities to extend crops and control over common lands – as seen in Mallos or Sobredo. Although in a preliminary stage of development, this is the type of inductive connection that microhistory aims to tackle (Grendi, 1977). As Osvaldo Raggio states, “le società locali erano stratificate e divise in gruppi, coalizioni e fazioni rivali, ma avevano nello stesso tempo una omogeneità culturale che si esprimeva in particolare nelle relazioni col mondo esterno e col governo centrale” (Raggio, 1990, p. 4). In other words, a micro-historical approach demonstrates that local economic practices were connected to different scales and levels of conflict channelled through specific social agents and not through abstract and impersonal structures (Callinicos, 2009; Giddens, 1979).

Something similar can be stated from the example of Sobredo, as it materializes communities’ inner social tensions and inequalities. In a moment of social pressure regarding the use of common lands, some individuals and families used the apiaries as a form of social distinction, only comprehensible by the agents involved and within particular local codes. This takes us to the question of social differences within rural communities. In our case study, and in its specific scale, husbandry is a social practice and mechanism that not only regulated the strategies of different agents, but also framed its materialization in terms of social negotiation (e.g. in Mallos or Vianzola) or conflict and dispute (e.g. Sobredo). In a nutshell, local social relationships and practices implied the emergence of subtle social inequalities and specific forms of social structuring within a particular set of institutions and rules codified and established locally, the locus where they are significative for the local agents (Levi, 1985).

8 Concluding Remarks: Possibilities and Setbacks of a Microhistorical (Archaeological) Approach

Following the initial proposal for this special issue, in this last section, I will briefly discuss some of the possibilities and setbacks of the relationship between microhistory and archaeology. The initial question is whether it is possible to carry out a micro-historical approach through the lens of materiality. Initially, the answer should be a resounding yes, as archaeology is, in a certain sense, a microhistory in itself whose methodological foundations deal with contexts in specific geographical locations in specific periods of time (Ribeiro, 2019). However, the question is not that simple. One of the main setbacks that one can argue is the level of high-resolution data required to apply a micro-historical approach to the archaeological record. This level is not available to all the archaeological contexts and depends heavily on the availability of resource investment (González-Ruibal, 2014; Orser, 2016). As we have seen, and other similar examples reveal, dating the archaeological contexts is a very complex, and expensive, task, sometimes resulting in ambiguities or even failures. This depends on the archaeological context and the ability and intelligence of the researcher to arrive at a correct contextualization of those contexts, even if it is not always effectively possible sometimes to achieve this aim. This is something that differs from the documentary evidence, in which the level of high-
resolution data is dependent on other types of factors, such as the archive formation available or even the arbitrariness of preservation (Ginzburg, 2013).

The reasonable outcome then is that a micro-historical archaeological approach is only possible if incorporated into an interdisciplinary analysis with multiproxy studies that can provide the type of high-resolution data required (Moreno, Montanari, Stagno, & Molinari, 2010). This is, for instance, something acknowledged by micro-historians themselves. In a volume dedicated to the works of Edoardo Grendi on the society of the Ancien Regime, Osvaldo Raggio and Angelo Torre wrote that: “the topographical approach guarantees the complete recovery of the documentary complexity of the landscape, pushes to multiply competences and knowledge of the territory, the only warrant of a non-formal classification of the sources of the local researcher” (Raggio & Torre, 2004). However, such interdisciplinarity as a requirement for high-resolution case studies unfortunately reduces the possibilities of micro-historical approaches to those specific cases in which the conditions are reached. In other cases – e.g. for most part of the prehistorical periods or those in which the written record is very limited – microhistory is simply not a possible approach.

Having said that, I do think that microhistory and archaeology should be further explored, as they not only counteract naïve abstract and deterministic approaches, but also push forward a complex analysis of the archaeological record. In most cases, as the one I presented here, microhistory can be a very stimulating approach to delve into topics such as, e.g. social structuring, power relationships, or the connection between agency and structure. When applied to an adequate scale of analysis, concepts, such as strategy (agency, habitus, etc.) or locus (arena of struggle, relational agency, etc.), allow not only for a deep description of historical and social contexts but also to connect them with the general structure that frames the historical process. Here, again, the ability to combine this difficult relationship between agency and structure through appropriate historical questions and methodologies comes to the fore.

In this respect, one of the major problems with microhistory, from my point of view, is its theoretical (calculated) ambiguity, something that has been repeatedly embraced by some of its proponents (Ginzburg, 1994; Grendi, 1994), but not by everyone (Levi, 1985). While microhistory grants social relationships and practices a central role (Grendi, 1994, p. 541), it does not necessarily imply a theory of society in itself – which, for instance, explains the structural differences among micro-historians (Revel, 1994; Ribeiro, 2019). I consider this theoretical background necessary to propose a coherent narrative of historical evidence, be they documentary or archaeological (Jessop, 2007). It is for this reason that in this study, I considered (local) society as an unstable ensemble of different individuals and groups whose position in the whole frames their agency in the world (Callinicos, 2009). From this point of view, materiality appears as a fundamental source of inquiry, as it directly deals with the agency and strategies of those agents in specific social milieus (Barrett, 2012; Dobres & Robb, 2005), once they are recognized, which has been possible thanks to the application of micro-historical analysis.

Before finishing, we may return now to the example of Francisco de Alixo. What was at the beginning a particular example of a conflict between the local community of Casaio and the Marquis of Villafranca regarding the distribution of competences on the land is presented now as one more piece, a logical one indeed, within the universe of relationships, the locus of the territory of Casaio in Early Modern times. An example, an exceptional normal one if we like, through which power relationships and social structuring can be read and interpreted in connection with a particular network of relationships. A network in which materiality, that of the local husbandry and common lands presented through this study, played a key role in establishing the context in which the agency of Francisco de Alixo makes perfect sense. One of many other agents to be illuminated by further inquiries from a micro-historical approach.

Acknowledgements: I want to thank Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo and Anna Maria Stagno for the invitation to participate both in the EAA Session and the subsequent special issue. I would also like to thank the peer-reviewers for their useful comments, as well as Peter Fermín Maguire for the proofreading of the text. All mistakes are my exclusive responsibility.

Funding information: This article is part of MSCA IF “INPACT -Industrialization and the process of modernity: the archaeological transformation of the rural world (18th–21st c.)” financed by the European Commission (GA
n.101032402). It is also part of the Ramón y Cajal grant, funded by MCIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and the FSE+.

Conflict of interest: The author states no conflict of interest.

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