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Panel Session  
Negotiating the Crisis: the Role of Sanctuaries as Places of Resilient Religious  
Experiences  
(Panel Chairs: Ada Campione, Laura Carnevale, and Angela Laghezza)

## Sacred places, economic risk and the moral economy of the peasant in Late Antique Hispania

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### **1. Identifying agricultural dangers**

Our presentation deals with the ways in which religion identified agricultural calamities in Visigothic Hispania, what kind of resources it offered to overcome them, who offered these resources and who resorted to them. We depart from a premise: the perception of risk and uncertainty –in this case, the risk of spoiling the crops–, does not answer to objective descriptions of reality; it is instead a cultural construction that depends on a social code that regulates it.

The sources for the study of this topic are not many. In general, agricultural disasters mentioned in post-roman sources are limited to weather variations, locusts' plagues and epidemics that decimate the population and livestock. Other kinds of misfortunes that may affect land productivity and that can be objectively distinguished, like fungal plagues, parasites, lack of nutrients in the soil or other related troubles are excluded. The redundant repetition of the same calamities makes us think that these disasters act as synecdoches that bring together the whole range of affections that agricultural fields may suffer. Nonetheless, even if the identification of agricultural dangers responds to a repetitive pattern, its causal explanation does not. In some cases, agricultural misfortunes are symptoms of political unrest; in other instances, they are the result of reprehensible moral behaviour. The devices deployed to avoid them are likewise varied and are not limited to technological or economic measures; they also include symbolic resources. Our attention will be focused on these last ones.

To illustrate the range of situations associated with events of perceived risk in the fields, the relationship they had with the moral economy of the peasant and the role played

by sacred places in the mobilisation of risk-reduction strategies, we are going to analyse two study-cases. The first one is an event narrated in the *Vitae Sanctorum Patrum Emeritensium*. The biography of Innocentius of Mérida (606-616) mentions how the bishop, every time there was a long drought, went over the basilicas of the saints in the region together with the inhabitants of the city, praying God; as he walked through the fields, the skies opened and an abundant rain quenched the lands. The second example we are going to present here is an inscription written on slate discovered in Carrio (Villayón, Asturias). It is a phylactery against hail with a prayer composed of several literary traditions interwoven: the passions of st. Christopher and st. Bartholomew, and the apocalyptic tradition of the *Book of Enoch*. But before going any further, it would be convenient to define what we consider as the “moral economy of the peasant”.

## **2. The moral economy of the peasant**

Unlike the golden age of roman imperialism or Al-Andalus agricultural revolution in the XIth Century, the post-roman kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula did not produce geoponic treatises destined to the maximisation and rational optimisation of agricultural production in large estates. This is coherent with VI-X Centuries proto-feudal land tenure, in which the *potentes*, the owners of large estates, did not exploit them directly; instead, they got their rents from different fiscal systems they imposed to their peasants, who had a wide-ranging juridical status of dependency: *rustici*, *servi*, *tenues*, *coloni adscripti*, *liberti in obsequio*, etc. It is here where the concept of the moral economy of the peasant makes sense. According to James C. Scott’s work, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant. Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, 1976, the small peasant communities of Southeast Asia during the colonial period –small owners, tenants, day laborers...–were governed by a subsistence ethic based on the “safety-first” principle. Living close to the subsistence margins, their behaviour was risk-averse and tried to minimise the subjective probability of economic loss instead of opting for profit maximisation. In the informal calculations of costs and benefits they made for predictions of future incomes, the peasants included the prospects of benefit sharing derived from the responsibilities emanating from patron-client bonds. Local rich landlords had the moral obligation of offering social assurance materialised in the form of loans, care and a minimal provision in case of need, gifts, and festivals and ceremonies funding.

To a great extent, the scenarios of economic vulnerability of southeast-asian poor peasants described by Scott are similar to those of the post-roman peasantry in Hispania

between the VI-IXth Centuries. Inside Scott's interpretive framework on the construction of dependency bonds, our interest here relies on the responsibility of *potentes* and *domini* to offer resources to mitigate risk perception to their dependent small peasants. Evidently, these resources varied depending on the nature of the property of the land, its size, the patterns of dispersion/concentration of the population living in it, or the degree of responsibilities transferred from the landlord to the individuals in charge of the estate's management and exploitation. These same factors had an impact in the diversity of cult places that gave shape to the religious geography of the rural landscape, the kind of services they provided to the peasant communities or the types of social relations that took place there. The following two study cases will let us settle on our theoretical frame.

### 3. The miracle of Innocentius of Mérida

The *Vitae Sanctorum Patrum Emeritensium* tell the following of bishop Innocentius of Mérida:

“He is said to have possessed so much sanctity and to have been so conscientious that when the rain failed and a long drought had burnt up the land, the citizens of the town gathered as one body and went with him round the basilicas of the martyrs calling on the Lord in prayer. And whenever they went before him straightaway rain sufficient to water the land well would fall in abundance from the heavens. Whence there was no doubt that they had been able to obtain this and greater benefits from almighty God through his tears springing as they did from a man of humble and honest mind.”<sup>1</sup>

The sequence of this account shows how the citizens of Mérida turned to the bishop when the lands suffered from drought, and it was him who organised and led a procession that went from one basilica to the other, ensuring the much-needed rain that fulfilled the fields. According to this plot, the churches of Mérida's *hinterland* did not seek for a solution of their own, but delegated their functions to the ecclesiastical authority of the city. Two questions can be set out from this narrative scheme: what can we know about the basilicas visited by the procession? and, who were the individuals who went to the bishop to request a miracle?

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<sup>1</sup> VPE V, 14: *Tante denique sanctitatis et conpunctionis fuisse peribetur ut, quotiens pluvia deerat et estu nimio terram longa siccitas exurebat, collecti in unum ciues urbis illius cum eodem per basilicas sanctorum precibus Dominum exorantes pergebant, repente uero quotiensquumque eum precedebant pluvia celitus largiflua tribuebatur, que plenissime terram satiare potuisset.*

According to the information provided by the *VPE*, there was a period of great growth in the foundation of churches in the outskirts of Mérida between the VIth and VIIth Centuries,<sup>2</sup> but not all of them were necessarily built upon the initiative of the Church. It has been suggested that the erection of rural churches during this period reflected a process of reorganisation/renewal of the urban elites and their agrarian properties. Accordingly, if we recognise the existence of basilicas built upon lay and ecclesiastical initiative in Innocentius' tour, then the account of the miracle presents a (hypothetical) harmonious conviviality between the rural churches and the episcopal authority. This conviviality coincides with the precepts of the III council of Toledo (589), where one of the five metropolitan bishops was precisely Innocentius' predecessor – bishop Masona–, and whose canons 4, 15, 19 and 20 aimed at assuring the submission of the lay aristocracy and the churches they built in their properties to the ecclesiastical rule. Bishop Innocentius' biography is not just an hagiographical tale, but an ideal representation of the bishop's duties, who visits, takes care of and personally administers the churches of his diocese.

From the viewpoint of the moral economy of the peasant, bishop Innocentius' account is also informative. The passage we have mentioned tells how the citizens of Mérida gathered around him visited the rural basilicas and prayed together to avert the drought. The expression used by the anonymous author of the *VPE* to refer to Mérida's inhabitants is *cives urbis*. The status of citizenship understood as adult male with full political rights and privileges lost its semantic meaning since the *constitutio antoniniana*. From that moment, the socio-juridical distinction between individuals with more or less privileges in the Roman Empire is established through the opposed terms *honestiores/humiliores*. The Germano-roman kingdoms inherited to a great extent the roman distinction established in 212. In general terms, the concept *civis* during the Visigothic period is used to distinguish slaves from free, or the urban population from the rural, and that is what we find in the *VPE*.

Nonetheless, the narrative of bishop Innocentius has some peculiarities. All of the citizens of Mérida, regardless their social condition, may have address the bishop and beg him to end the droughts. In this case, we would be reading an account in which all the entire social spectrum of the rural world is subject to the needs of the consumer city. But if we read the passage from the point of view of the production centers, the supply-side,

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<sup>2</sup> The *VPE* mention the basilicas of st. Eulalia, st. Faustus, st. Lucretia and an unspecified number of basilicas of martyrs.

the interpretation is quite different. The author of the VPE could have used a generic term such as *rustici* to designate the mobs of peasants who were losing their crops and, thus, their basic sustenance. Instead, the author employs the expression *cives urbis*. Which members of the urban inhabitants could be interested in guarantying a high return of the agricultural production? Most probably, the same urban elites involved in the boom of the foundation of rural churches in Mérida's countryside between the VIth and VIIth Centuries. Moreover, the detailed analysis of the term *civitas* and its cognates conducted by Carolina Lo Nero in the Hispanic Visigothic sources is revealing: even though the Visigothic legislation resorts to the terms *civis*, *cives* or *civium* rarely, when it does, it designates special privileges or the recognition of a superior moral status. The semantic meaning of the term *civis*, then, was far from being an empty shell.

We have suggested above that the bishop Innocentius' hagiography reflects the archetype of the ideal bishop during the following years of the III council of Toledo but, if we are right considering that the expression *cives urbis* is referring to the *seniores civitatis*, the account is also describing the ideal archetype of the lay *dominus*. The 16<sup>th</sup> canon of the III council of Toledo sanctions the duties of the landlord towards the doctrinal righteousness of his dependents. The canon refers to the obligations of the *dominus* in prosecuting idolatry among his servants and dependents, that is, the religious accountability of his estates depends on him. It is unlikely that these obligations were really exercised by the *domini* due to their frequent absenteeism; it is more likely that this function was transferred to his *vilicus*, to his *actor* or to the priest of his church (who were occasionally designated by the *domini* themselves), but in its ideal conception it would be the *dominus* who was in charge of guarantying to his dependents the symbolic tools, including those destined to perceived risk reduction, and these tools would go through the obedient recognition of the superior authority of the bishop.

#### **4. A phylactery against hail**

If the account of bishop Innocentius' miracle brings together behavioral ideal-types in the mobilisation of religious strategies to avert perceived agricultural risk, the inscription from Carrio is a paradigmatic example of factual ritual action. The text was inscribed on two slate-sheets folded one over the other, pierced with a nail and buried in the crop-lands of a village in Asturias, north of the Iberian Peninsula. Its composition date has been largely discussed, but the text includes an interpolation from st. Bartholomew's Passion—unknown in the Iberian Peninsula before the Xth Century—, so recent studies tend to date

it between the end of the IXth and the beginning of the Xth centuries. For our purposes here, it is worth quoting the following passage:

(pentagram). Therefore from the [--] day I received the requisite *nonias* of the inhabitants and labourers, I, the servant of God Cecit[--], entreat you, all the patriarchs, Michael, Gabriel, Cecitiel, Uriel, Raphael, Ananiel, Marmoniel, who hold the clouds in your hands; may the small village (*villa*) named [--]cau be free, the dwelling place of the servant of God Auriolus, [and the?] cemetery, together with his brothers and neighbours, [--] and all his possessions; let it be driven out from the town and the houses; let it wander the mountains, where neither the cock crows nor the hen clucks, where neither the ploughman tarries nor the sower sows, where no name resounds.<sup>3</sup>

Compared to Innocentius' account, the inscription from Carrio reveals a strictly local negotiation in the identification of agricultural risk and the strategies to cope with it. Apparently, neither the diocesan authority nor the lay aristocracy took part in it. First, the text of the inscription mentions a *vila nomine [--]cau*. The meaning of *villa* in an IX-Xth Century inscription does not correspond to the social grid typical of the large-estate late-antique *villa*. It rather refers to a model of rural settlement characterised by the autonomy of its peasants and the lack of direct influence of *potentes*. High medieval *villae* in the north-west of the Iberian Peninsula were small villages without marked social differences apart from families whose resources were superior to the average and owned some more properties. Inside the logic of the moral economy of the peasant, these wealthy families would be in charge of sponsoring actions that contributed to guarantee the minimal income for the community. The individual named Auriolus in the inscription would be one of these "big-men". He would have been the one requesting the phylactery and financing its costs, but its prophylaxis would have resulted in the benefit of the entire community: *...livera de vila nomine [--]cau ubi avita famulus D(e)i Auriolus p[.]su cineterius cum fratribus vel vic[i]/nibus suis [et?] o(m)n(e)s posesiones eius*.

Second, just as in this setting a *dominus* or one of his delegates in charge of guarantying the crop production do not exist, the religious management of perceived risk is not transferred to the urban ecclesiastical authority. In this regard, it has been proposed that the phylactery was prepared by a wandering specialist who received as a reward a 9<sup>th</sup> part of the village's crops, and whose name may have been Cecitiel (*famul(us) D(e)i Cecit++*). We consider that the religious specialist who made the Carrio inscription was

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<sup>3</sup> *AEHTAM* 1755 = *AE* 2005, 849

familiar with monastic intellectual circles and would have been a figure similar to that described by Isidore of Seville:

The fifth kind is that of the wanderers (*circumcilliones*), who wander under the visage of monachi, carrying around hypocrisy, going around provinces, being sent nowhere, being planted nowhere, staying nowhere, sitting nowhere. Some make up things that they never saw, valuing their own opinions as those of God. Others trade in limbs of martyrs. Others make their phylacteries broad, and enlarge their fringes, winning glory from men.

There are several reasons that induce us to think that. Firstly, the Carrio inscription refers to the prophylactic power of St. Christopher's relics:

God, in whatever place, or region or city (that there be any) of my relics [give them] the grace [of salvation], Lord, for all the inhabitants of the region, for the abundance of their harvests.<sup>4</sup>

Although this sentence is part of the *passio*, its inclusion in the inscription points towards a possible presence of the relics in a hypothetical local church (with no archaeological record), in which case, the village's priest would have also been involved in the election of the ritual expert. But it is also possible that the religious expert was carrying himself alleged relics of St. Christopher that could have sold to the villagers, like the corrupted monks criticised by Isidore.

The second reason that make us think that the ritual expert was a monk or was closely linked to monastic culture is the literary references he employed to create the phylactery. St. Christopher's passion was probably introduced in Hispania through the monastery of Agali (next to Toledo), where Syrian and Egyptian monks took refuge as a consequence of Islamic expansion during the first half of the VIIth Century. Once in Agali, the passion was translated into Latin, introduced in Hispanic liturgies and popularised.

Moreover, as we have stated before, the Carrio inscription reproduces a sentence that appears in the latin version of st. Bartholomew's passion: "let it (the evil, i.e. hail) wander the mountains, where neither the cock crows nor the hen clucks, where neither the ploughman carries nor the sower sows, where no name resounds". Again, the first references we have in the Iberian Peninsula to this passion date back to the Xth Century.

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<sup>4</sup> *AEHTAM* 1755 = *AE* 2005, 849: *D(eu)s sive locus sive regio sive civi[tas] / uvi de reliq(ue) [g]ratiā [- -]u m[- -]s a[- -]n[- -]tas D(omi)ne om(ne)s / avi(tan)tes in regio lavore culture ad[f]luenter*

They correspond to the *liber passionarium* of Silos monastery, put together at the end of the Xth Century, and to a mass included in the *Liber Misticus* of Silos with a similar date.

Lastly, at the beginning of the phylactery, seven archangels (named *patriarcas* in the inscription) are invoked: Michael, Gabriel, Cecitiel, Uriel, Raphael, Ananiel and Marmoniel. Whereas Michael, Gabriel and Raphael are three canonic archangels, Uriel and Ananiel belong to the apocryphal tradition of the *Book of Enoch*. We have not found direct references to enochic literature in the high-medieval literary sources of the Iberian Peninsula, but there is an anonymous treatise called *Indiculus de adventu Enoch et Eliae*, written between the end of the VIIIth and the end of the IXth Centuries most probably in the same monastic ambience of the *Commentary on the Apocalypse* by Beatus of Liébana, that considers Elias and Enoch as the two prophets who will witness the end of the world, while previous apocalyptic exegesis –specially the *Commentary* of Beatus of Liébana, the main source for the *Indiculus*– considers that the prophet who will be with Elias is Jeremias, and not Enoch.

Regardless the nature of the religious specialist who made the Carrio phylactery, we would like to underline for the interests of this panel how the identification of agricultural risk was negotiated, who participated in this negotiation and what kind of religious means were mobilised to cope with it. While the example of bishop Innocentius' biography reveals ideal, exemplary procedures to avert risk –the *potentes* of the affected lands addressed the bishop of the city, and he then organised prayers and a procession that went from rural church to rural church–, the phylactery from Carrio shows a paradigmatic instance of “order without law”. In this case, the search for a way out a perceived risk ignored the ecclesiastical juridical order. Instead, the community accepted the decision of one of his prominent members, who disregarded the legal validity of the ritual course of action. We see here a kind of behaviour identified long ago by legal sociologists: in everyday experience, social conflicts, or, as it is the case here, collective processes of negotiation, tend to be solved outside the juridical or institutional order. In addition, the particular case of the Carrio inscription shows how the concept of “sacred place” is not limited to a fixed and stable architectural building or to a prominent natural setting; the landscape is also marked with ritual practices as ephemeral as the act of burying a slate-sheet in the fields. After all, we are talking about social spaces, and religious experience and action only walk with the individuals who pass through them.

Thank you.