

"Between the city and the countryside: The economic strategies of the rural elites in the kingdom of Valencia during the 14th and 15th centuries"

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The *paysans-marchands* of Lower Brittany, the *marchands-laboueurs* of Toulouse, the *fermiers-laboueurs*, the *gros fermiers* or the *coqs de village* from Île-de-France; the farmer-entrepreneurs of the Dutch Linge, the German *bauern*, the Castilian *caballeros villanos*, the English farmers and yeomen and the *prohoms* of the Crown of Aragon: a broad spectrum of names to describe a single historical reality. Over the last two centuries of the Middle Ages, rural elites flourished throughout Europe. This phenomenon probably emerged from a long historical process which was already apparent in the High Middle Ages and which would continue during the Early Modern age. What differentiates it from earlier periods, however, is the intensity and generalization it acquired towards the end of the medieval period. The greater amount of available archival and archaeological sources have made this segment of the rural population particularly visible to researchers; however, beyond the fact that the available sources are both more abundant and of better quality, the society that emerged from the transformations that took place during the mid-14th century was also far more dynamic, with more intricate networks of exchanges both at the national and international levels. Thus, this scenario offered new fields of action, new possibilities for exchanges that were hitherto inexistent or

inaccessible to members of the rural elite. In this new context, the village elites managed to anchor and perpetuate themselves at the head of their communities far more decisively than ever before. In this paper, I intend to analyse the economic activities that promoted the wealth of Valencian rural elites in the Late Middle Ages.

The first defining feature of medieval rural elites is their varied social origins. Indeed, the term “rural elite” is a concept created by historians and which does not correspond to any social or professional category in the Middle Ages.¹ For this reason, it is often difficult to identify which families could be defined as rural elites, requiring both research and historical debates. In the broadest possible terms, it is possible to venture that most members of the rural elite belonged to the wealthier sectors of the peasantry. Nevertheless, it would be biased to attempt to establish a direct equivalence between wealthy peasants and rural elites. On the one hand, it is necessary to discount wealthy peasants who lived in the city or in its nearest hinterland – a radius of about 5 to 10 kilometres – due to the fact that, in spite of deriving their wealth from agricultural activities, their field of action was clearly the city, first and foremost.² On the other hand, rural society, as Rodney Hilton pointed out, was

¹ Thus, the term “rural elites” allows us to group the regional particularities of wealthy families in the European Medieval and Early Modern periods under a single term. Its acceptance has been practically unchallenged in the field of historiography, especially after the meeting at Flaran in 2005 and the later edition of materials in 2007. For a historiographical survey see L. Feller and R. Le Jan, dir., *Les élites au haut Moyen Âge. Crises et renouvellements* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006). *Les Élités Rurales dans l'Europe médiévale et moderne, Acte des XXVIIes Journées de Flaran 2005*, ed. F. Menant and J. P. Jessenne (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2007). R. Le Jan, “Historiographie des élites”, in *L'historiographie des élites dans le haut Moyen Âge* <http://lamop.univ-paris1.fr/IMG/pdf/introduction.pdf> (15, julio, 2013). A. Furió, “Las élites rurales en la Europa medieval y moderna. Una aproximación de conjunto” in *El lugar del campesino. En torno a la obra de Reyna Pastor*, ed. A. Rodríguez (València, PUV, 2007), p. 391-421. F. Aparisi, “Las elites rurales en la edad media como objeto de estudio. De la marginalidad al centro del debate historiográfico”, *Historia, Instituciones, Documentos*, 40 (2013), p. 9-34.

² On wealthy peasants in urban environments see F. Garcia-Oliver, “Peasant Elites in the Shadow of the City of Valencia: the Castellenes Family”, *forthcoming*.

not only made up of peasants. There were also artisans, schoolteachers, notaries, small merchants and low-ranking clergymen.³ They all came from or were related by marriage to families that did work on farming, and, to a certain extent, they owned land that was tended to by other members of the community, confirming them in their agrarian nature. These social and professional groups would also give rise to families that would manage to rise to the fore of their communities and enter the circles of local power.

The position of local elites as the leaders of their communities was based on their wealth, which was mostly characterised by its diversity. Indeed, it could be stated that their specialisation resided in the diversity of their sources of income, their «*capacité à entreprendre dans tous les secteurs de l'économie*».⁴ For this reason, rather than farmers, livestock owners or merchants, they could be described as true “village entrepreneurs”. Indeed, the wealthier sectors of the rural world did not base their prominence on a single source of income but rather, as we shall see later on, they took part in a broad spectrum of economic activities, each of which held a different level of importance in the family economy in each case. These investments involved farming and livestock breeding activities, but also trade, essentially of agricultural products, as well as leasing land, leasing municipal, ecclesiastical and lordly rents, and leasing food processing tools – mills, oil presses and ovens – as well as extending credit, acquiring both public and private debt, and lending money

³ R. Hilton, *Bond men made free. Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (London: University Paperback, 1973, repr. 1977), p. 33-38.

⁴ F. Menant and J. P. Jessenne, “Introduction”, in *Les Élités Rurales dans l'Europe médiévale et moderne*, pp. 7-82, particularment pp. 26-28.

to other members of the community, including the feudal lord. All in all, they did not exert a single activity, but rather, *pluri-activité*.⁵

The rural elites were a heterogeneous social group, which was highly diverse from a social and professional point of view, including clergymen and lesser nobility. The common element that united these wealthy rural families was the considerable variety of economic sectors in which they participated. Their wealth was first and foremost characterised by the diversity of their sources of income. Doubtless, there was always one economic activity that stood above others. However, beyond their professions, they all participated in the agricultural surplus market, in leasing rents and taxes and in acting as creditors for other members of the community to some extent. All in all, however, the economic field is but one facet of the strategy for social promotion of these families, or, rather, lineages. Indeed, for the wealthier sectors of rural society, matrimonial alliances, socio-professional categories or holding local positions were all part of a careful strategy whose immediate goal was to consolidate them at the head of the community. Ultimately, however, such families sought to move to the city and integrate themselves, as far as possible, into the wealthier urban sectors.

⁵ P. Jarnoux, "Entre pouvoir et paraître. Pratiques de distinction et d'affirmation dans le monde rural" in *Les élites rurales dans l'Europe médiévale et moderne*, p. 129-148. C. Dyer. *A Country Merchant, 1495-1520. Trading and Farming at the End of the Middle Ages*, (Oxford: OUP, 2012).