In order to characterise the relatively autonomous peasant societies that predominated in the early Middle Ages after the collapse of the state, Chris Wickham has proposed the concept of ‘peasant mode of production’.¹ This concept refines his earlier category of ‘peasant-based society’, which the author presented as ‘deliberately anodyne’, better than the notions of ‘tribal’, ‘primitive communal’ or ‘kin-based’ societies, less naïve and restricted than that of ‘Germanic society’ inspired in Tacitus, and close to that of ‘rank society’ by reason of its distinctness from societies with class antagonism, which it shares with the former types, and its clearer recognition of internal hierarchies.² This perspective has furnished a paradigm for the analysis of the early Middle Ages societies as parts of a coherent whole, which justifies a reworking of the category of peasant-based society in terms of mode of production, a task undertaken by Wickham in Framing the Early Middle Ages (a peasant-based society would be a social formation dominated by the peasant mode of production). However, the author’s theoretical approach has had less of an impact than his achievements in the field of comparative studies and empirical research.

Although he proposes a new mode of production, Wickham does not go to great lengths in order to formulate its contents in the language of historical materialism and the traditions he admittedly draws from (mainly economic anthropology). The way the issue is presented – coupled with the mistrust with which a new mode of production is regarded – undoubtedly have had some bearing on the adoption of the concept by Marxist historians, who prefer the less precise but broader concept of peasant-based society. In order to contribute to an assessment of Wickham’s proposal, the first section of this analysis will

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¹ Wickham 2005, pp. 535–50. For a summarised account of Wickham’s concept of the peasant mode of production, see ‘Passages to Feudalism in Medieval Scandinavia’ in this book. I would like to express my gratitude to Chris Wickham, Carlos Astarita and Octavio Colombo for their comments on this text.

attempt a systematisation of the concept of the peasant mode of production. Given that the peasant mode, considered in isolation, corresponds to classless societies, we will follow Godelier’s guidelines on the components of a mode of production in ‘primitive’ societies, i.e. the elements that must be encompassed in the concept, or else the aspects to be studied when determining the mode or modes of production in a given society. Some traits of the peasant mode not explicitly stated by Wickham have been gleaned through deduction; others are inferred from the development of empirical cases, Malling’s imaginary village among others, where the author exemplifies the proposed concept and his general paradigm for analysis. In this sense, since we will refer to empirical examples, Wickham’s methodological perspective on the peasant mode as an ideal type will be replaced by another one in which the concept shall be reconstructed as a real abstraction, that is to say, not as a model but as a structure of reality. This reconstruction, though based on Wickham’s data, is still interpretive; indeed, the analysis yields elements not taken for granted (or even rejected) by the author, for example, the centrality of the Germanic mode of the Formen as property type.

We will then address the problem of clientelar relations between members of the feudal aristocracy and the peasantry, which in Wickham’s proposal constitutes the main articulation mechanism between modes of production and a vehicle for the transformation of peasant societies. We will avail ourselves of the benefactoria, a documented form of patronage found in the North of Spain during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, in order to examine how clientelar bonds underwent a transformation into relations of exploitation. We will posit that these bonds express social practices derived from the peasant mode, and that while they preserve their original appearance, their content tends to become subordinate to the dominant feudal logic of the area. Our analysis suggests that this transformation, which goes through different stages,

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4 These criteria are in Dhoquois 1973, among others. The use of ideal types has been criticised in da Graca 2008, where it is argued that the manner in which the universal term is elaborated may condition the exploration of phenomena and the conclusions drawn from the analysis. This is apparent, for instance, in Wickham’s assessment of aristocratic wealth levels in Northern France based on an ideal type of ‘aristocracy’, which leads him to emphasise nominal landowning over effective exploitation of lands.
5 The benefactoria has been considered as a lax social relation, in general terms, by Sánchez Albornoz 1976a and Estepa Diez 2003, pp. 39–80; a different approach appears in Martínez Sopena 1987, pp. 50 ff., and Martínez García 2008, who equates servitium with serfdom. On the ambivalent meaning of the word servitium in the early Middle Ages, see Davis 1996, pp. 227–8.