Late pre-industrial production and consumption in poor rural households (north-eastern Catalonia, 1750-1807)

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KEYWORDS: **probate inventories, production, consumption, poverty.**

JEL CODES: **D13, D18, N00, N33.**

This paper examines domestic production and consumption in poor rural households from north-eastern Catalonia during the second half of the eighteenth century. Using a database of probate inventories, a criterion was established to determine which of them corresponded to humble households and conduct a comprehensive analysis. The results suggest that at the end of the pre-industrial period, these domestic units had only limited access to land ownership and little involvement in domestic production activities, but their consumption patterns were improving. They incorporated new items related to eating habits, such as spoons, forks, and napkins. This apparent contradiction between production and consumption is discussed in relation to historiographical debates about the Industrious Revolution and the Consumer Revolution.

Producción y consumo en hogares rurales pobres a finales de la era preindustrial (nordeste de Cataluña, 1750-1807)

PALABRAS CLAVE: **inventarios post-mortem, producción, consumo, pobreza.**

CÓDIGOS JEL: **D13, D18, N00, N33.**

El objetivo de este trabajo es examinar la producción y el consumo en hogares rurales pobres de la Cataluña nororiental durante la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII. Utilizando una base de datos de inventarios post-mortem, se ha establecido en primer lugar un criterio para determinar cuáles podían corresponder a hogares humildes, para posteriormente analizarlos en profundidad. Los resultados sugieren que, hacía finales de la era preindustrial, estas unidades domésticas se caracterizaban por un limitado y disminuido acceso a la tierra, dedicarse a pocas actividades productivas en el seno del hogar y, sin embargo, estar mejorando sus pautas de consumo. Principalmente, incorporaron nuevos artículos relacionados con los hábitos alimentarios, tales como cucharas, tenedores y servilletas. Esta aparente contradicción entre producción y consumo se discute en relación con los debates historiográficos sobre la «revolución industriosa» y la «revolución del consumo».

Received: 2023-09-28 · Revised: 2023-12-15 · Accepted: 2024-04-08

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1. INTRODUCTION

Assessing the living standards of the poorest segments of society has always been a challenging task, and one that continues to generate controversy and debate. Indeed, despite numerous surveys and estimates carried out by statistical services, there is still a significant gap in knowledge about the most impoverished households[1]. Nevertheless, the inclusion of "reduced inequality" and "no poverty" as two of the Sustainable Development Goals within the United Nations 2030 Agenda highlights the importance of addressing these challenges[2].

Actually, the very definition of the term *poverty* is already controversial. While the other aforementioned goal (inequality) has a simple theoretical definition: "the absence of equity", the definition of poverty becomes more relative. As many authors have shown, setting a poverty threshold is always an arbitrary decision. Thus, any change in the value of the threshold or in the method of calculation, which is also arbitrary, will affect what is considered poor and what is not[3].

Hence, if determining poverty is already challenging today, given the wide array of tools available, it must have been far more complex in pre-industrial and pre-statistical societies. Documentary sources from the pre-statistical era exhibited various limitations that affected both the wealthy and the poor. These included difficulties in data collection, concealment, deliberate omissions, and methodological flaws during data processing. In addition, the study of the poorest groups presents an additional complication: the scarcity of their presence in the sources themselves. In some cases, this absence can be attributed to the financial burden imposed on the individuals concerned by the source. In other instances, while the sources carried no economic cost, the producing body or institution lacked interest in documenting specific types of impoverished families. For instance, sources related to direct taxation often excluded the poorest individuals because they were exempt from paying such taxes due to their lack of wealth (Alfani, 2021: 9).

In economic and social historiography, two common approaches have been explored to approximate the living standards: income analysis and the examination of wealth composition, *i.e.*, through either capital flow or capital stock. Both methods offer advantages and disadvantages. When it comes to income analysis, the prevalent approach has been

1. On this topic, see, among others, Hulme and Shepherd (2003), Brady (2003) and Balarabe Kura (2012).

2. Available online at: https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda.

3. See, among others, the works of Allen (2001, 2017, 2020) and more recently those of Sullivan and Hickle (2022), and Sullivan, Moatsos and Hickle (2023).

the study of wages[4]. At first glance, studying the incomes of the poor through wages may seem appropriate, given that this social group relies primarily on wage labour. However, numerous qualms persist regarding the nature of salaried work in the pre-industrial era. One key uncertainty is the number of days labourers worked per year. Many studies have assumed an annual work period of approximately 250 days, equivalent to five days per week. This implies a labour market with limited flexibility, contradicting empirical evidence that suggests high elasticity and variability, particularly in agricultural work, which is significantly influenced by climate and daylight hours (Hatcher, 2011: 8; Humphries & Weisdorf, 2019: 2868; Mijatovicć & Milanović, 2021: 435).

Secondly, the specific wage composition remains unknown, principally regarding the extent to which they could be paid in kind, such as meals and/or accommodation. These concerns are particularly relevant in rural and agrarian societies, where labourers frequently had to travel to the property of the landowner. Lastly, in agrarian societies characterized by a prevalence of small and medium peasant holdings, as may be the case in Old Catalonia (Congost, 2015: 13-5), estimating the standard of living through income becomes even more complicated, as a significant number of families might rely on wage labour during specific and unpredictable periods, which were influenced by changing circumstances throughout the life cycle of the family[5].

Then, if the income approach presents such drawbacks, it might seem more advantageous to explore the wealth composition. Nevertheless, this alternative is not without its own set of challenges. The predominant sources used to study and quantify the composition of wealth in pre-industrial societies have been those derived from direct taxation, particularly since the Late Middle Ages, when early fiscal states began to emerge and consolidate across Eurasia (Yun, 2012). Indeed, as direct taxes aim to assess the value of individual wealth to levy taxes based on it, they could serve as a proxy for household wealth. Undoubtedly, these sources are very useful for comprehending the economic performance of past societies, and even for assessing and comparing interpersonal wealth in pre-industrial contexts (Jackson, 2022: 20). However, when studying poverty, the above-mentioned tendency to often exclude those who lacked wealth could be an obstacle[6].

4 Regarding the wages approach for the early modern Spanish case, see, among others, Llopis and García-Montero (2011), López Losa and Piquero (2021).

5. In addition, it is also often difficult to measure the impact of other non-wage sources of income, such as access to communal goods and/or the possibility of carrying out certain activities such as gleaning.

6. This problem can be solved with different statistical approaches to estimate the number of propertyless (Alfani & García Montero, 2022), but for the specific study of poverty it remains a major obstacle.

This paper explores an alternative source that has demonstrated its usefulness as a proxy for assessing the composition of family wealth: probate inventories. The subsequent section will provide a detailed explanation of their main characteristics. Yet, it is important to note that, although probate inventories may be less systematic and homogeneous compared to tax records, they offer a more comprehensive analysis of family wealth, by providing a detailed list of every item comprising the wealth of a given family.

Hence, in this paper, we analyse a set of probate inventories from a rural region in north-eastern Catalonia spanning from the mid-eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, with the aim to examine land availability, evidence of domestic production and consumer goods stocks in the apparently poorest probate inventories within the database. So, the final objective is to enhance our comprehension of the living standards experienced by impoverished families during the final years of the Ancien Régime or pre-industrial times. Additionally, this research seeks to contribute to the historiographical discussions concerning consumption patterns and household economies in this era.

The paper is organized as follows: right below, the source is explained in greater detail (section 2) and afterwards, the data for our study case as well as a methodological approach to identify the humblest inventories are presented (section 3). Then, the next three sections address land availability (section 4), evidence of household production (section 5), and movable goods consumption patterns (section 6). Subsequently, the results are discussed and compared with existing literature on the topic (sections 7 and 8), before concluding with some final remarks (section 9).

2. THE SOURCE: PROBATE INVENTORIES

Probate inventories, which have their origins in medieval times, served as a legal tool used to create a detailed list of the assets belonging to a person upon their death (Moreno, 2018a: 12). They provide a precise –and precious– portrait of the wealth composition of a family at a specific moment in the life cycle, namely, the passing of the family head. One significant advantage of probate inventories is their ability to assess the entirety of items held within a household, encompassing not only consumer goods but also the assets instrumental in wealth generation, such as land, livestock, and labouring tools, among others. Therefore, probate inventories offer a composite estimate of wealth, being a reliable measure of material living standards (Bengtsson & Svensson, 2022: 51).

Either way, probate inventories have garnered significant attention from historians and have contributed to a vast body of literature, particularly for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in north-western Europe. During this period, there was a notable increase in the quantity, quality, and variety of goods found in households, leading to debates on concepts such as the "Consumer Revolution" (McKendrick, Brewer & Plumb, 1982;

Weatherill, 1988; Brewer & Porter, 1993) and the “Industrious Revolution” (de Vries, 1994, 2008). Furthermore, the study conducted by Overton *et al.* (2004) demonstrated the extensive potential of inventories for examining not only consumption patterns but also domestic production. While north-western (primarily Dutch and English) probate inventories are particularly well-known, similar records can be found in other regions of central and northern Europe, as well as Mediterranean countries like France, Italy, and Spain (Almenar, 2018: 19).

Despite its widespread use and research potential, probate inventories are a heterogeneous source with variations influenced by the laws and hereditary customs of each region. In some countries, such as Sweden since 1734, it became mandatory to compile a probate inventory after the death of the family head to facilitate the division of inheritance and also to apply a tax (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2018: 777). In contrast, in other regions, probate inventories were not mandatory or were only required in specific circumstances, as in the case of Catalonia, where male primogeniture prevailed, so there was often no inheritance to be distributed. Then, the obligation to create a probate inventory arose in certain situations, such as when tutors were appointed to manage the property of orphans or when a widowed woman had limited rights to the assets bequeathed by her late husband (Moreno, 2018b: 39-40). Moreover, in regions where probate inventories did not serve the purpose of inheritance distribution or tax assessment, it was uncommon to find monetary valuations of the assets included. This lack poses a challenge when attempting to compare these inventories with those from other territories where the value of all goods was typically recorded.

Also, it is important to acknowledge that the level of accuracy in probate inventories could vary significantly, not only between countries but also among notaries or even within the records of a single notary. In the best-case scenario, consumer goods would be listed individually, providing specific details about consumer items such as their location within the household, the material they were made of, their quality, and their state of preservation. In the case of immovable goods, the inventory would include precise geographical locations, sizes, and designated uses or purposes.

Whatever the case, the study of the poorest families through probate inventories has faced criticism due to concerns that they are underrepresented in these records. This is primarily because, in cases where probate inventories were not mandatory, the poorest families often did not have the means or inclination to visit a notary and create such a document. Most scholars working with probate inventories have acknowledged this limitation, with Overton *et al.* (2004: 26) noting that early modern English probate inventories may have excluded the poorest 40% of families, rendering them unrepresentative of the entire population. As a result, any interpretation would be skewed, with the experiences of the poor being overlooked in favour of the middling and elite social strata.

Fortunately, a more nuanced perspective has emerged regarding the limitations of probate inventories for studying the poorest families. In the case of England, significant progress has been made in understanding the possessions of the undoubtedly poor through a unique source known as pauper inventories. These inventories were specifically recorded by officials to document the belongings of individuals covered by the Poor Laws and provide valuable insights into the material conditions of the poorest segments of society (Harley, 2021).

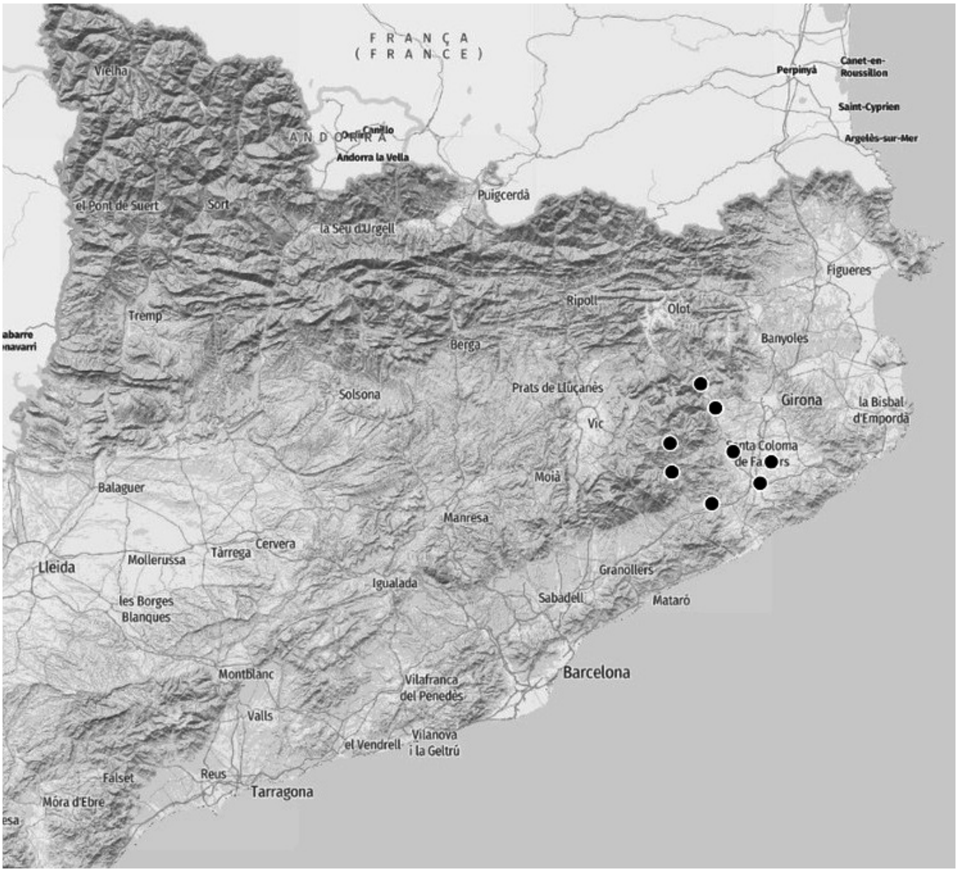
In other regions such as Sweden, where probate inventories were mandatory upon the death of the family head, their representativeness is less questionable. In recent years, considerable advancements have been made in studying the consumption patterns and living standards of all social strata, including labouring and/or disadvantaged groups, thus providing a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences within society (Bengtsson & Svensson, 2022; Falk, 2023). Likewise, in the Spanish region of Castile, although not compulsory, it used to include the monetary valuation of goods, allowing some progress to be made in comprehending the living standards of the peasantry (Bartolomé, 2004), as well as studies on wealth inequality and on the relationship between wealth and consumption demand and elasticity (Nicolini & Ramos, 2021; Ramos, 2001).

Regarding Catalan poor inventories, which are the subject of our study, it is important to highlight the significant work carried out by Moreno (2007, 2019). Their research involved the collection of a large number of inventories from landless day labourers and *rabassaires*, providing valuable insights into the material conditions of these humble families. Also, the studies conducted by Congost, Ros, and Saguer (2016, 2023) have been instrumental in tracing the trends in consumption patterns among rural labourers. Moreover, their research has demonstrated that Catalan inventories were not particularly subject to a social bias. This was partly due to the practice employed by many widows of labourers, who took it upon themselves to draft the inventories and then presented them to the notary (Congost & Ros, 2018: 72). This approach significantly reduced the cost of preparing an inventory by eliminating the need for notary travel expenses. Additionally, it is worth noting that the authors conducted cross-referencing between notarial records and parish registers. Through this comparative analysis, they determined that specific social groups or economic strata were not significantly under-represented in the inventories. Therefore, although the Catalan hereditary system only required the elaboration of probate inventories in certain circumstances –as explained above–, it does not seem that these casuistries were particularly biased from the point of view of the social stratum.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This paper seeks to contribute to the existing literature on the topic by utilising a database of 291 inventories, from which those that may correspond to poor households will be selected and analysed. These inventories were sourced from eight notarial offices located within a rural region in north-eastern Catalonia. Specifically, they encompass the interior of the present-day comarca of La Selva (as depicted in Map 1). This region offers a small but well-prepared setting for analysis as it features a diverse orographic landscape, including pre-coastal mountain ranges, as well as the cereal-growing plain which links this region with the city of Girona and its surroundings.

MAP 1
Location of the notarial offices analysed on a current map of Catalonia



Note: black circles represent the 8 notarial offices analysed, which were located in the current villages of Anglès, Amer, Arbúcies, Caldes de Malavella, Hostalric, Sant Hilari Sacalm, Santa Coloma de Farners and Vidreres.

Source: map created with Instamaps.

The data collection has been organized into three distinct chronological intervals, each spanning approximately 20 years, and covering the period from 1750 to 1807. Specifically, 106 inventories were collected for the period 1750-57, followed by 105 inventories from 1775 to 1782. Finally, 80 inventories were included from the years 1800 to 1807. The dataset includes all the inventories registered in the selected notaries during these specified periods, except for a few incomplete records that were excluded to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the analysis.

In regards to the representativeness of our sample, particularly about the lower strata of the wealth distribution, it is unfortunate to note that the preservation of parish records in the area covered by our study is not sufficiently comprehensive, especially for smaller and more dispersed parishes (Mas-Ferrer, 2023a: 4). As a result, we are unable to cross-check burial records with inventories to determine if there are any over- or under-represented social groups. However, we do have some indications that suggest the omission of some labourers from our sample. According to the 1787 census, in the region under analysis, labourers (*jornaleros*) represented 60% of the active population. In our sample of inventories, they account for approximately 33%[7].

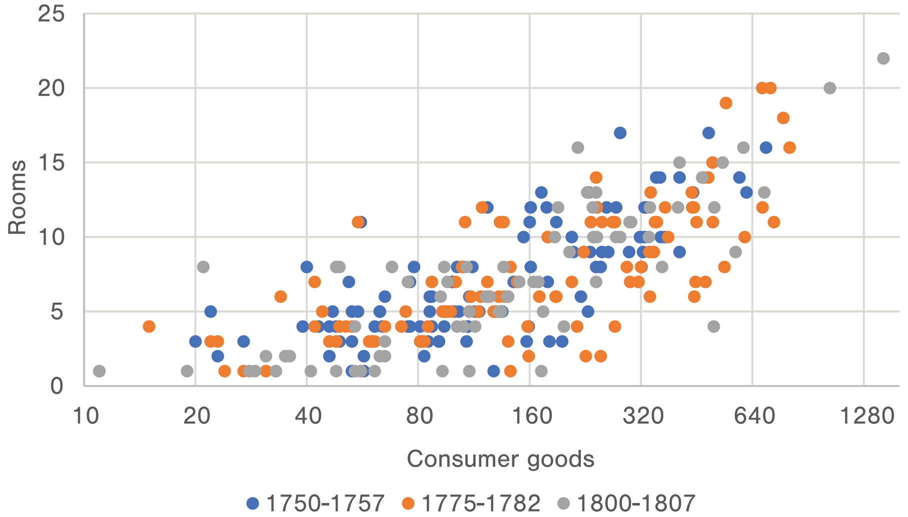
It is important to consider that probate inventories relate to the moment of death while censuses register individuals at very different moments of the life cycle. Hence, individuals recorded as labourers in the censuses may have had access to plots of land at some point in their lifetime, potentially leading to a change in their social label before death. Consequently, it is expected that there would be a higher number of labourers in the censuses compared to the inventories. Nevertheless, the discrepancy is significant enough to hypothesize that inventories may not fully capture a fraction of the labourers, particularly the most economically deprived ones. Despite this limitation, we consider that this sample could provide an approximation of the living standards of the poorest social groups, although it is important to acknowledge that it may present a somewhat idealized portrait as those in more precarious circumstances may not be totally represented.

Before delving into the results section, it is essential to address a crucial issue: the proper identification of poor inventories among the rest. As mentioned above, unlike in other regions, the Catalan inventories rarely include the monetary valuation of goods, making it challenging to establish a poverty threshold. To solve this, we began by examining two easily quantifiable aspects of probate inventories: the number of rooms per house and the number of consumer goods recorded. Upon conducting this initial assessment, a significant correlation between these two variables becomes evident (Fig. 1). Specifically, the more rooms, the more goods and vice versa. While this correlation may seem

7. In relation to the social structure of this region based on the census of 1787, see Mas-Ferrer (2023b).

obvious, it holds significant relevance for this study, as the presence of a certain quantity of consumer goods and a certain number of rooms in a house both serve as indicators of a minimum socio-economic status[8].

FIGURE 1
Relationship between the number of rooms and the number of consumer goods



Note: each dot represents an inventory. The horizontal axis is shown on a base 2 logarithmic scale to better appreciate the distribution at the bottom. The Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.765 for 1750-1757, 0.761 for 1775-1782, and 0.881 for 1800-1807.

Source: own elaboration, see text in section 3 for the description of the documentary sources.

Consequently, the correlation between the number of rooms and of the consumer goods, strengthens the basis for using both in order to establish a threshold to classify inventories as *poor* or not. For this work, it has been decided to categorize as *poor inventories* those having less than 0.75 times the median number of consumer goods and also less than 0.75 times the median number of rooms. Table 1 illustrates that approximately two to three out of ten inventories in our sample satisfy both criteria and are classified as such. It is worth mentioning that this particular threshold (less than 0.75 times the median number of rooms and assets) is a criterion determined ad hoc. It is based on the purpose

8. Following Ramos's (2001: 53) observation about consumption being determined more by permanent income than by disposable income at a given time, having a small stock of movable goods in a humble household should serve as a good proxy to identify households with a low wealth level. Furthermore, historians and archaeologists who study ancient times, when documentary sources were scarce, have effectively utilized housing complexity as a measure for inequality (Stephan, 2013; Olson & Smith, 2016). Likewise, in a recent work on medieval Catalan probate inventories, the number of rooms has been used to segment households according to their socio-economic status (Palarea, forthcoming).

of identifying the inventories that appear to be the most meagre while still including a number that is significant for carrying out a quantitative analysis. So, in no case is it intended to establish a true poverty line[9].

TABLE 1
Thresholds to determine a poor inventory

	1750-57	1775-82	1800-07
N inventories	105	106	80
Median consumer goods	109	142	133
Threshold poverty consumer goods (x0.75 median)	<81.75	<106.50	<9.75
Median rooms	6	6	7
Threshold poverty rooms (x0.75 median)	<4.50	<4.50	<5.25
N and % poor inventories	20 (18.9%)	23 (21.9%)	22 (27.5%)

Source: own elaboration, see text in section 3 for the description of the documentary sources.

Regarding the occupation of the deceased individuals associated with poor inventories (as shown in Table 2), it is notable that over half of them were identified with one of the three occupational labels related to land labouring: *bracer*, *treballador* (literally meaning "labourer"), and *roder*, a type of forestry worker primarily engaged in chestnut wood production, which was abundant in the studied region (Rams, 2002). The remaining individuals were primarily artisans and small merchants, with one in ten being *pagesos*, which is the social label that identifies those who lived and worked on those agrarian holdings known as *masos*[10].

TABLE 2
Occupational groups of the deceased from inventories classified as poor

	1750-57	1775-82	1800-07
Pagesos	2 (10.0%)	2 (8.7%)	2 (9.1%)
Land labourers	10 (50.0%)	16 (69.6%)	12 (54.5%)
Artisans and merchants	8 (40.0%)	5 (21.7%)	8 (36.4%)
Total	**20 (100%)**	**23 (100%)**	**22 (100%)**

Source: own elaboration, see text in section 3 for the description of the documentary sources.

9. Moreover, using the median could introduce a bias, in the sense that changes in the median value could be due to higher –or lower– consumption by better-off groups. This would alter the social composition of those below the threshold without them necessarily having to change their consumption patterns. The same could happen in reverse.

10. Regarding the characteristics of the social label *pagesos* and its difference with *labourers* in Old Catalonia, see Congost (2014) and Mas-Ferrer (2023b).

4. THE IMMOVABLE GOODS: HOUSE AND LAND

First of all, it should be noted that approximately half of the households classified as *poor* resided in rented houses, while the other half lived in owned ones. Either way, the structure of these households was characterized by simplicity, as it is indeed one of the criteria for being classified as *poor* (having less than 0.75 times the median number of rooms). In fact, one-third of the inventories corresponded to single-room houses. The remaining households had from 2 to 5 rooms. They typically comprised an entrance (where working tools were kept), a kitchen, a cellar, a barn, and a bedroom. In many cases, these spaces were merged and multifunctional: the entrance and/or the kitchen could also serve as areas for housing livestock or storing wineskins and foodstuff, mainly in houses without a barn or cellar.

Also, in 45% of the inventories, there was neither a designated bedroom nor any beds. As a result, the sleeping arrangements were located in the kitchen, with mattresses placed directly on the floor. This precarious housing situation may have had direct implications for the health and well-being of these families. Indeed, not only did they sleep in the same space where they ate and worked, but they often shared this limited space with animals.

Similarly, the relationship of these households with land was also characterized by precariousness. Table 3 provides a classification of inventories based on the extent of land possessed. The table differentiates land labourers (panel A) from artisans and merchants (panel B), as it is important to bear in mind that for the former, working the land would have been their main occupation, whereas for the latter it would have been more of a complementary activity.

Focusing on land labourers (panel A), it is noteworthy that none of them owned three or more hectares. It is important to consider that, based on the productivity of land during this period AND in this specific region, a minimum of around 6 hectares may have been necessary for assuring self-sufficiency (Congost, 1990: 79). Therefore, it can be argued that these households did not possess enough land to consider that they could somehow be self-sufficient. As a result, it can be hypothesised that they relied on the market to acquire essential foodstuffs, and to access it, they needed to engage in additional activities beyond cultivating their own plots, maybe salaried work. Furthermore, during the second half of the eighteenth century, it can be observed a decline in the number of individuals who owned between 1 and 3 hectares (from 30% to 16.7%), resulting in an increase of the landless and also of those owning less than one hectare, thus worsening the situation above described.

TABLE 3
Amount of land described[11]

Panel A: land labourers

	1750-57	1775-82	1800-07
Landless	20.0%	25.0%	25.0%
< 1 ha	50.0%	62.5%	58.3%
1-2,99 ha	30.0%	12.5%	16.7%
3-4,99 ha	0%	0%	0%
> 5 ha	0%	0%	0%

Panel B: artisans and merchants

	1750-57	1775-82	1800-07
Landless	20.0%	25.0%	25.0%
< 1 ha	50.0%	62.5%	58.3%
1-2,99 ha	30.0%	12.5%	16.7%
3-4,99 ha	0%	0%	0%
> 5 ha	0%	0%	0%

Source: own elaboration, see text in section 3 for the description of the documentary sources.

Regarding artisans and merchants (panel B), it is worth highlighting that very few of them were landless. However, the majority of these individuals rarely owned more than one hectare of land. In many cases, the extent of their land ownership was limited to an orchard attached to their house or a small parcel of land for various types of cultivation. Nevertheless, the possession of small plots of land was a common resource for these families, and must not be neglected when considering the features of the non-farming rural population[12].

Regardless if they were primarily engaged in agriculture or not, a clear pattern emerges from the analysis of these inventories: all the examined households lacked sufficient land to sustain themselves independently. Consequently, they were compelled to rely on the market as buyers of essential foodstuff. The inventories do not provide a direct answer to the question of how these families participated in the market (whether they were solely buyers or also engaged in selling). Nevertheless, some clues can be gathered through two avenues of investigation. Firstly, by identifying evidence of domestic production activities carried out within the households, which will be examined in the next section of the paper. Secondly, by examining the utilization of their limited land plots. Indeed, if their primary cultivations consisted of subsistence-oriented crops (mainly grains) it might suggest that their focus was on producing food for self-consumption. Nonetheless, if they included cash crops or products with commercial value, such as fruits or nuts,

11. Regarding the size of the samples analysed in this and the following tables, see Table 2.

12. According to Marfany (2020: 192), the possessions of land by artisans and merchants can be interpreted as a safeguard against the volatility of the commercial cycle.

it could indicate that they may have also sold part of these items and thereafter bought more pressing foodstuff.

TABLE 4
Diffusion of certain crops based on the share of inventories mentioning them

	1750-57	1775-82	1800-07
Grain	33.3%	43.8%	38.9%
Vine	53.3%	50.0%	55.6%
Olive	6.7%	0%	0%
Chestnut	13.3%	5.3%	5.6%
Other fruit trees	20.0%	18.8%	27.8%
Orchards and other irrigated crops	40.0%	50.0%	38.9%

Source: own elaboration, see text in section 3 for the description of the documentary sources.

As can be seen in Table 4, vineyards were the most common crop found in poor inventories, followed by orchards and unspecific irrigated crops. Also, the significance of fruit trees increased. Cereals (grains) ranked third and appeared in slightly over one-third of the cases. Thus, it is remarkable how these families, who probably lived near the threshold of bare subsistence, allocated most of their scarce plots of land to non-cereal crops. Wine, an essential part of their diet, was likely produced for self-consumption, given its price volatility compared to wheat (Vilar, 1966: 423-24). However, the considerable presence of fruit trees and irrigated crops suggests the possibility that they may have engaged in trading their fruit production to generate income, which they could then use to purchase baking cereals or another basic foodstuff[13].

Nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply voluntary participation in the market, as it is plausible that they dedicated their land to fruit cultivation because they could not compete with the wheat prices controlled by large landowners, or simply because the type of land they had access to did not allow for other crops. In this regard, it is worth noting the description of wine growing in the judicial district of Santa Coloma de Farners –which broadly coincides with our study area– provided by Madoz's Dictionary, as it states that such cultivation was limited to "dry, rough and stony land with exposure to the South"[14].

13. This statement is not meant to belittle the nutritional value of these foods, which is particularly relevant in the case of nuts due to their high value in fat and vegetable protein. However, if these families were to produce only for subsistence, we consider that cereals should be of greater relevance in their plots.

14. The original quotation, is "los terrenos secos, asperos y pedregosos con exposición al S[ur]" (Madoz, 1985: 300).

5. EVIDENCE OF DOMESTIC PRODUCTION

Once we have examined how the poorest families were connected to land cultivation, it is important to study the evidence of domestic production found in their inventories. In this analysis, both the presence and absence of certain items are significant. Indeed, the presence of tools and raw materials related to the primary occupation of the deceased would indicate a certain level of independence and self-sufficiency. Additionally, indicators of activities beyond their primary occupation suggest that the family unit could be engaged in multiple sources of income. Conversely, the absence of tools and raw materials directly related to the primary occupation could imply that they worked without access to the means of production, which may have been provided by the employer who hired them.

Therefore, up to seven different types of indicators related to domestic production have been examined: agricultural tools, draught cattle, sheep and goats, wineskins, textile manufacturing, items related to non-textile manufacturing, and finally, evidence of breadmaking. The presence of agricultural tools signifies a basic level of farming activity, while draught cattle suggest the utilization of a certain amount of land, as well as the economic capacity to maintain livestock capital. The inclusion of sheep and goats indicates livestock specialization and/or diversification, which provides wool for commercial purposes. In the case of wineskins with a storage capacity of more than 1,500 litres, it may suggest the ability to store a sufficient quantity of wine to meet the needs of the family throughout the year[15].

Then, the presence of evidence related to textile manufacturing signifies the capacity to produce clothing, whether for personal use or commercial purposes. Similarly, the presence of items related to non-textile manufacturing, as well as those associated with transport and retail, suggests the ability to engage in various non-agricultural activities. These indicators can signify either professional independence or engagement in domestic pluriactivity, depending on the occupation of the deceased. Similarly, the presence of items related to kneading and/or baking bread highlights the ability to produce this staple food, reducing dependence on the market for its procurement.

Table 5 presents a summary of the evidence regarding domestic production activities, categorized into four occupational groups: *pagesos*, land labourers, textile artisans, and non-textile artisans and merchants. Thus, by examining the presence or absence of domestic production indicators, we can gain insights into the significance of these activities for each social group.

15. This figure is not chosen arbitrarily but rather based on practical considerations. It aligns with the approximate maximum annual consumption of a family consisting of four adults, assuming that each person consumes, on average, one litre of wine per day (Saguer, 2005: 141), based on a 1916 report on peasants' diet.

TABLE 5
Evidence of domestic production in poor inventories[16]

	Agricultural tools	Draught cattle	Sheep and goats	Wineskins (>1,500 litres)	Textile manufacturing	Non-textile manufacturing / transport / retail	Bread making
Pagesos	100%	50.0%	16.7%	16.7%	0%	16.7%	50.0%
Land labourers	89.5%	21.1%	2.6%	7.9%	21.1%	10.5%	71.1%
Textile artisans	87.5%	12.5%	0%	12.5%	50.0%	12.5%	87.5%
Non-textile artisans	66.7%	33.3%	0%	16.7%	50.0%	83.3%	83.3%

Source: own elaboration, see text in section 3 for the description of the documentary sources.

Looking at the presence of agricultural tools it is notable that these were found in the majority of households, which is to be expected given that a large part of the poor families owned –small– plots of land. A closer examination reveals that these tools were predominantly used for digging and pruning tasks. On the other hand, tools specifically designed for wheat harvesting, such as scythes, were relatively low in the inventories of these poor families. This reinforces the above-mentioned hypothesis that wheat cultivation was not their primary agricultural activity, and they likely focused on growing other crops instead. Furthermore, ploughs were largely absent among the poor families, appearing in only three inventories. Indeed, the scarcity of ploughs suggests that the financial resources or access to such equipment may have been beyond the means of most poor families. Consequently, their agricultural practices may have been characterized by smaller-scale and less mechanized cultivation methods.

The latter is consistent with the limited presence of draught cattle, as only two out of ten labourers had any. Even in these cases, they were basically donkeys, which are less productive but more affordable to maintain. More efficient animals in agricultural tasks, such as oxen, mules, and horses were nearly absent from the humblest households. Also, the possibility that these animals were used for transport tasks, especially in non-agricultural families, has to be considered (Sales, 1983). However, the absolute absence of horses would continue to emphasise the precarious nature of these activities.

In addition, the inventories reveal a significant absence of wool animals, such as sheep and goats, within these households. Indeed, it was almost entirely restricted to a few inventories of tenant farmers, who kept these animals in the barns of the *masos* where they inhabited. In these cases, the notary usually indicated that the profits from these

16. To increase the sample size and obtain a broader perspective, we have grouped the inventories from the three chronological spans: 1750-57, 1775-82, and 1800-07 (see Table 2 for the sample size). However, by dividing the sample into different occupational groups, the results should still be interpreted with caution.

animals were to be shared with the owner. Accordingly, it looks more like an investment controlled by large landowners than a peasant specialisation.

Likewise, the proportion of poor families possessing wineskins with a capacity of over 1,500 litres was significantly lower across all social groups. Despite the above-mentioned prevalence of vine cultivation, this did not translate into sufficient storage capacity to ensure annual self-sufficiency. Insomuch as their landholdings were generally small, typically not exceeding one hectare in size, these findings are not unexpected. Notwithstanding, they underscore the notion that these households heavily relied on market interactions to fulfil their basic needs.

Regarding the presence of tools and raw materials for textile manufacturing, it must first be noted that there are instances of textile manufacturing activities in non-textile households, but these were typically on a small scale, involving hand-weaving tools and small stocks of coarse linen fabrics, likely intended for personal use only. Nonetheless, what is probably most striking is that half of the inventories of textile-engaged families did not include the necessary tools for their profession. Specifically, wool carders and linen weavers were often without the tools related to their trade, while tailors generally had at least a tailor's shear and a small stock of fabrics. It is essential to consider the specific circumstances captured in the inventories, as they represent a snapshot of a particular moment in the family life cycle, namely the death of the head of the household. Therefore, it is challenging to draw broad conclusions from these limited observations. However, it is noticeable that the same patron (increasingly carders and weavers without their means of production) was also detected in the Catalan town of Igualada in similar years and via probate inventories (Marfany, 2020: 205).

In contrast, the majority of inventories from individuals involved in non-textile manufacturing, transport, and/or retail, listed essential tools related to their respective trades. Whether they were blacksmiths, carpenters, masons, wheelwrights, or shopkeepers, they had hammers, rasps, trowels, wheels or scales at home, which may suggest that these individuals still maintained a certain degree of independence. Even so, it is important to note that possessing these tools does not necessarily guarantee stability or complete freedom from dependence on patrons or clients. For instance, we encountered instances of brickmakers who relied on foreign kilns to cook the bricks, as well as transporters who lacked carts and instead used saddlebags on the back of a mule.

Regarding the last column in Table 5, signs of bread-making were highly prevalent in the majority of households, mainly due to the widespread presence of the *pastera*, which is the name given to the tool for kneading. By contrast, evidence of actual baking was scarcer. Indeed, ovens are rarely mentioned and only in some cases, the notary listed the *pala de fusta per treurer lo pa del forn* (literally: "wooden shovel to remove the bread from the oven"). Be that as it may, the availability of wheat for kneading was perhaps the major concern for these families, particularly during the last decade of the eighteenth century when inflation soared due to a combination of poor harvests and political instability. Especially when considering that, as previously discussed, cereal cultivation was not the primary focus of the poorest families. Therefore, ensuring an adequate supply of wheat for the *pastera* may not have been a straightforward task for the households examined in this study.

In sum, the core idea from Table 5 is that evidence of domestic production in humble households is either scarce or non-existent. In contrast, if we were to examine the inventories of wealthier families, we would find a wide range of evidence indicating domestic production. This aligns with the study of Julie Marfany (2020: 204-05) about Igualada, where she found that affluent families had the privilege of stockpiling goods outside of the market, resulting in a greater presence of production-related evidence in their homes.

6. CONSUMER GOODS IN POOR HOUSEHOLDS

In this section, our focus is to determine the types and characteristics of consumer goods found in the poorest inventories. It may seem obvious, but it is worth noting that the inventories classified as *poor* contained very few goods, as one of the criteria for this classification was having less than 0.75 times the median number of goods. Moreover, the scarcity of goods is not only reflected in the quantity but also in the limited range of items owned by these families. Hence, in the kitchen, a simple table with a wooden bench, along with basic utensils for cooking and eating, were commonly found. Additionally, there were often a small sort of objects for transporting and storing food or grain as well as some labouring tools. In terms of sleeping arrangements, which often did not include a separate bedroom neither a bed, mattresses laid directly on the floor, accompanied by the most essential bedding: sheets and blankets. Pillows and bedspreads were rarely found. Some of the poor households also possessed a chest, in which they kept a small trousseau consisting of basic clothing and household furnishings.

Considering the absence of luxury or semi-luxury goods in the inventories, we have examined six indicators of household consumption patterns: sheets, tablecloths, napkins, spoons, forks, and lighting devices. The analysis, presented in Table 6, reveals that these poor families experienced improvements in their stock of consumer goods during the second half of the eighteenth century. Significant progress can be observed in items related to food consumption, which could suggest potential changes in their diet –although probate inventories did not record perishable goods. For instance, the presence of napkins increased from a quarter of households to a third, with a median quantity of three. Similarly, spoons became increasingly prevalent, with half of the poor households having them by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the median number of spoons tripled compared to half a century earlier, rising from two to six per household. The most remarkable increase was observed in the presence of forks: while they were absent in the poorest households in the mid-eighteenth century, they became a part of four out of ten inventories fifty years later[17].

Conversely, home linen like sheets and tablecloths did not vary, neither in percentage nor in quantity. Though, their quality improved and when comparing the inventories of 1750-57 with those from 1800-07 it has been detected that coarser fabrics gave way to finer ones. Indeed, in the mid-eighteenth century, most household clothes were made of *borràs*, which comes from the roughest part of the hemp plant (Torra, 1999: 103-04). In contrast, half a century later, the majority of households possessed *bri* textiles, which is the purest form of linen[18].

TABLE 6
Percentage of poor inventories which record various consumer goods and median amount

	1750-57	1775-82	1800-07
Sheets	85.0% / 4.0	87.0% / 4.0	90.9% / 3.5
Tablecloths	45.0% / 2.0	39.1% / 1.5	45.5% / 1.5
Napkins	15.0% / 3.0	21.7% / 4.0	36.4% / 3.0
Spoons	25.0% / 2.0	21.7% / 5.0	45.5% / 6.0
Forks	5.0% / 1.0	13.0% / 2.0	40.9% / 4.0
Lights	30.0% / 1.0	34.8% / 1.0	36.4% / 1.0

Source: own elaboration, see text in section 3 for the description of the documentary sources.

Lastly, the presence of lighting devices remained relatively static, with approximately only one-third of the households having a light and in a median of one. The acquisition of a brass lamp was not excessively expensive, particularly in the second-hand market. The primary cost associated with lighting might be the fuel required to keep it burning. In the context of these economically precarious families, the possession of lighting devices might not be considered a luxury but rather a practical necessity to dissociate work activities from the limitations of daylight. Therefore, an increase in their number could indirectly

17. The democratization of spoon usage was a phenomenon observed in many neighbouring regions, leading some authors to refer to the period as the "spoon revolution" (Codina, 1998: 52). However, the diffusion of forks occurred later in the rest of Spain, and their early adoption in the north-eastern region could be attributed to its proximity to the French border.

18. Cotton and silk were completely absent from these households, while wool is scarce but does appear on some cases.

indicate a growing industriousness, allowing individuals to work during evening hours. However, such an increase in lighting devices does not appear to have occurred within the families examined in this study.

7. DISCUSSION I: A THEORETICAL EXPLANATION FOR THE INCREASED CONSUMPTION

Based on the results presented in the previous section, it can be stated that, during the early nineteenth century, probate inventories contained a wider range of consumer goods, often made from better materials compared to those from a few decades earlier. This is a noteworthy development, particularly considering that it occurred during a period of significant inflation and declining purchasing power[19]. This raises the question of how these humble families managed to improve their possession of consumer goods despite these seemingly unfavourable conditions.

In the context of north-western Europe, Jan de Vries (2009) proposed the "Industrious Revolution" thesis to explain the apparent contradiction of increased consumption despite declining purchasing power. According to this theory, households sought to acquire the necessary resources to engage in the consumption of a wide range of goods. The desire for consumer goods, combined with a decrease in purchasing power, led households to adopt a more industrious and market-oriented approach to work, in order to earn a cash income that could be spent on these new consumer goods. Thus, greater industriousness would have made it possible to develop a "Consumer Revolution" in the face of adverse economic circumstances.

It is worth considering three complementary explanations for the increase in consumption observed here. Firstly, we must consider the possibility that those consumer goods, whose consumption has been detected to be on the rise, were favoured by a decrease in relative prices. This argument follows the suggestion of Ramos (1999: 120-21) who, in a study of Castilian inventories and a similar chronology, noted a significant increase in the consumption of household goods, the prices of which rose less than those of agricultural products.

Secondly, and partly related to the above mentioned, these new consumer goods were not excessively expensive, especially if purchased second-hand. For instance, in north-eastern Catalonia, based on public auction records from the late eighteenth century (found in the same notarial protocols as the probate inventories analysed here), a

19. Despite wages for agricultural labourers in rural Catalonia increased by approximately 50% in the second half of the eighteenth century, the price of wheat rose by 140% (Vilar, 1966: 387; Feliu, 1991: 26; Tello, Roca & Garrabou, 1999).

napkin could cost around 3-6 s, and a spoon or fork between 2 s and 3 s. At that time, a day labourer could earn approximately 9 s per day (Tello, Roca & Garrabou, 1999).

Thirdly and finally, another possible explanation for the increase in the number of consumer goods is the improvement in manufacturing materials. As mentioned earlier, there was a shift from coarser linen clothes to more refined fabrics, and also, during this period, kitchen utensils, such as spoons, transitioned from wood to brass (Mas-Ferrer, 2020: 84). With the availability of better and more durable materials, it is plausible that the larger stock of consumer goods observed in the inventories was not necessarily indicative of increased consumption, but rather a result of decreased obsolescence. Thus, consumer goods may have accumulated over time as they had a longer lifespan and were less prone to wear and tear –and/or the families were more careful not to spoil them. This hypothesis challenges one of the ideas of the "Industrious Revolution" thesis, which suggests that the new consumption patterns of the time favoured goods that were more fragile and prone to obsolescence but provided greater comfort and satisfaction to consumers (De Vries, 2009: 158)[20].

8. DISCUSSION II: CONTEXTUALISING THESE CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

Either way, placing our results within a broader comparative framework would make it easier to sharpen our arguments somewhat. While there have been limited studies specifically analysing the inventories of the most impoverished households, it is worth starting by noting the recent research conducted by Congost, Ros, and Saguer (2016, 2023), as they also focus on late pre-industrial north-eastern Catalonia. They analysed a large sample of probate inventories of individuals identified as labourers, shedding light on the emergence of a new middle social group within the agricultural workforce. According to the authors, these labourers experienced greater access to property rights in land and other means of production, accompanied by significant improvements in their consumption levels. However, it is important to note that their study analysed probate inventories from all individuals labelled as *labourers,* ranging from landless labourers to medium-sized landowners who did not own a complete estate (a *mas*), but still enjoyed a reasonably comfortable standard of living.

Then, if we focus on probate inventories of clearly impoverished Catalan households, a comparison can be made with the inventories of landless labourers in the Penedès region (Moreno, 2007: 48-53). Although some distinctions exist, such as the scarcity of forks in the Penedès inventories and, by contrast, a greater presence of textile goods, the

20. It should be noted that the author acknowledges this statement as empirically valid for the middle classes, as he did not have the data to extend it to the poor.

overall living standards inferred from the two sets of probate inventories are strikingly similar. In both cases, there is evidence of modest enhancements in consumer goods, albeit without reaching the realm of luxury or significant comforts. Furthermore, a notable commonality is the frequent absence of separate rooms within the dwellings, implying that the families were compelled to rest, work, and cook in shared spaces, often alongside their livestock.

At this point, it should be stressed that the eighteenth century in Catalonia was a period of profound productive transformations and economic growth (Vilar, 1966). Therefore, the results thus obtained, once compared with the previous studies above mentioned, seem to indicate that, as far as the agrarian world is concerned, the economic growth of the eighteenth century in some places and under certain circumstances allowed substantial improvements in the living conditions of a part of the labouring class; although there was still a sector of society that, despite an improvement in its consumption patterns, lived in precarious conditions.

Although the inventories in Castile respond to a different legal nature, it is worth highlighting the results obtained by Ramos (1999), as the author detected an increase in consumption, especially in household goods, which has certain parallels in time and manner with the results of our study as well as those of other studies on Catalan inventories.

Then, in a broader international context, it must be highlighted, the research conducted by Harley (2021) on the inventories of goods owned by individuals seeking relief under the Poor Laws in rural regions of Essex and Norfolk (England), spanning from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. In addition, the recent study by Bovenkerk and Fertig (2023) sheds light on north-west Germany during the early modern centuries, distinguishing families with holdings of less than five hectares from the others. Furthermore, the detailed analysis conducted by Falk (2023) offers a valuable comparative perspective, particularly since the work differentiates the consumption patterns among the poorest third of land-owning peasants and landless individuals in the south-eastern region of Sweden from 1680 to 1860. Hence, in the following paragraphs we will try to compare our results with those of these three studies from three different European regions.

Concerning the description of movable goods among individuals in Essex and Norfolk (Harley, 2021), it presents a stark contrast to the findings of our study. While the author also identifies the emergence of new movable goods during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the nature and extent of these consumption changes differ significantly from ours. For instance, beds were a common item in virtually every inventory of poor English households since the late seventeenth century, whereas in our study area, most poor families slept on mattresses or quilts directly on the floor. Similarly, chairs, which appeared in English pauper inventories from the 1760s onwards, were not prevalent among the poor households in our region who relied on wooden benches for seating.

Additionally, the presence of clocks and mirrors, which were exclusive to the elites in our area, was noted in nearly one out of every four poor English households. Furthermore, the presence of specific utensils used for consuming colonial products such as tea, coffee, or chocolate is another notable contrast between the inventories of poor households in England and our study area. In poor English inventories, the occurrence of these utensils increased significantly from 12% in 1750 to 76% in the first third of the nineteenth century. In contrast, in our probate inventories, as well as those from the Penedès region, the consumption of colonial products remained beyond the reach of the most destitute families (Moreno, 2007: 51).

There was little evidence of domestic production in poor households from Essex and Norfolk, with an average of 1.5 domestic activities per household and a declining trend from the early nineteenth century. This is consistent with our observation of a low emphasis on domestic production among humble families. Also in line with our findings, the author noted the widespread presence of agricultural tools, but fewer references to wheat cultivation and limited livestock ownership among the rural poor. Indeed, his concluding statement is entirely consistent with our findings: "the rural poor were involved in the small-scale growing of vegetables, and animal ownership was relatively low among the poor by the late eighteenth century" (Harley, 2021: 44)[21]. These similarities in domestic production patterns suggest that the pronounced differences in consumption cannot be attributed to divergences in the familiar organisation of labour.

In the case of the consumption patterns observed among the humblest rural households in north-western Germany, they fall somewhere in between those of England and ours. For instance, while mirrors and clocks were present in 36% and 29% of poor English households in the early nineteenth century, Bovenkerk and Fertig (2023: 567) found them in 20.8% and 8.3% of households with less than five hectares of land in the Borgeln region. Also, tea-related items were more widespread in English paupers than coffee equipment in north-western German peasants (76% *vs.* 50%). Either case, all these consumer goods were completely absent from Catalan poor inventories analysed in this paper.

The research conducted by Falk (2023) in southern rural Sweden reveals a more similar pattern in comparison to our study case. Firstly, by noting the absence of new indicators of comfort, such as clocks and mirrors, in the households of the landless and less wealthy peasants. Secondly, by indicating a significant improvement in the share,

21. The idea of poorer English households engaging in fewer forms of domestic production, compared to wealthier ones, can be found in Shammas (1990) and Overton *et al.* (2004).

quantity, and variety of more mundane objects throughout the eighteenth century. Indeed, everyday objects such as iron stoves, cupboards, earthenware, and glass began to appear and became common in the humblest Swedish houses from 1785 onwards.

The studies mentioned in the previous paragraphs used different methodologies to therefore examine inventories from distinct regions. It is also important to note that the legal nature and characteristics of these inventories can vary significantly across regions, which should be considered when drawing conclusions or making interpretations. However, the results discussed here seem to indicate that new consumption habits began to emerge at the end of the pre-industrial period, with the highest diffusion observed in England, followed by Germany and, to a lesser extent, Sweden and north-eastern Spain. Then, it appears that the further a region was from the main centres of new consumer goods diffusion (England and the Netherlands), the longer it took for these trends to arrive. Indeed, this is partly the conclusion reached by Bovenkerk and Fertig themselves (2023: 569):

> The study shows that the diffusion of new consumer culture in regions beyond the European North Atlantic economies took place with some delay. Even in an area that was economically, socially, and culturally closely linked to the pioneer Netherlands, the effects of a pre-modern consumer revolution can only be observed with some delay and to a limited extent.

From this perspective, the notion that the humblest social groups in the European periphery were inherently more backward than their counterparts in the north-west Atlantic may not necessarily be reinforced. Instead, it could be argued that the differences observed in consumption patterns were primarily a result of varying opportunities and access to affordable products. As certain goods became more accessible and cheaper, potentially through second-hand markets, they might be acquired and incorporated into more households[22].

9. CONCLUSIONS

In light of the aforementioned findings, a more precise portrait of the precarious families in this north-eastern Spanish region during the second half of the eighteenth century

22. The decline in the practice of conducting probate inventories in Catalonia from the early nineteenth century onwards limits the availability of reliable data for studying consumption patterns during that period. Nevertheless, the study conducted in Sweden provides valuable insights into the consumption habits of the poorest households until the 1860s. The findings reveal a significant adoption of new consumption trends, including items related to the consumption of hot colonial drinks (Falk, 2023: 23-4). This may support the notion that the observed variations in consumption patterns across Europe are more indicative of a delay in the adoption of new trends rather than fundamental divergence.

can be drawn. Firstly, these families had limited or no land, making self-sufficiency an unrealistic attribute, and likewise focused their scarce plots of land on non-cereal crops, primarily vines and fruit trees. Secondly, these households did not exhibit a diversification of domestic production activities. Indeed, there is limited evidence of commercial viticulture, animal husbandry, manufacturing activities or retail. Moreover, some households lacked tools related to the specific occupation of the family head. All these observations therefore suggest that these families heavily relied on the markets to fulfil their incomes and needs.

Nonetheless, this precariousness was not fully reflected in their consumption patterns. While their inventories were modest, lacking luxury or sumptuous items, there is evidence of new consumer goods during the late eighteenth century, particularly those related to eating habits, such as spoons, forks, and napkins. The increase in these goods could be attributed to three factors proposed in this paper: these types of consumer goods were probably favoured by relative prices, they were particularly cheap when acquired from the second-hand market, and they were made of better materials, allowing for accumulation over time. Improvements in durability might therefore have offset acquisition costs, enabling households to expand their stock of consumer goods, despite the economic hardship characteristic of the period, and with no need for increased industriousness driven by a consumerist desire.

Lastly, these consumption patterns have been placed in a comparative framework at the European regional level, revealing some interesting similarities with distant countries also located on the European periphery. On that basis, it is proposed than rather than a classic North-South divide, there may have been different rhythms of acquisition of new consumer goods in low-income households, influenced by proximity to the main centres of diffusion.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study has been developed within the framework of the project "¿Cambio social sin grupos sociales?: El seguimiento de trayectorias colectivas en el pasado desde una perspectiva relacional (siglos XIV-XX)" (PGC2018-096350-B-I00), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities. A first version of this work was presented at the European Social Science History Conference (Göteborg, 2023), in a session on rural inventories of poor households, organised by Rosa Congost and Rosa Ros and chaired by Christine Fertig. I am very grateful to them, to the other participants and to the audience for all the feedback received. I would also like to thank Enric Saguer for all his knowledge on the elaboration of databases, indispensable for compiling and analysing inventories. Many thanks to Gabriel Jover for encouraging me to try to publish in this journal and for reading and commenting on an early version of the manuscript. Finally, many thanks to the two reviewers for their valuable comments, as well as to the editorial board for all their work and for giving me the opportunity to publish with them.

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