



Spirituality and Monasticism, East and West

WOMEN RELIGIOUS CROSSING BETWEEN CLOISTER AND THE WORLD

NUNNERIES IN EUROPE AND THE AMERICAS, ca. 1200–1700

Edited by

MERCEDES PÉREZ VIDAL

ARC HUMANITIES PRESS



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This publication has been financially supported by the Government of the Principality of Asturias through the FICYT, project SVPA-21-AYUD/2021/57166.



British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ISBN (Hardback): 9781641892988

ISBN (Paperback): 9781802700442

e-ISBN (PDF): 9781641892995

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Printed and bound in the UK (by CPI Group [UK] Ltd), USA (by Bookmasters), and elsewhere using print-on-demand technology.

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Chapter 3

BEYOND THE WALL: POWER, PARTIES, AND SEX IN LATE MEDIEVAL GALICIAN NUNNERIES

MIGUEL GARCÍA-FERNÁNDEZ*

MARRY OR BECOME a nun? There were few other options for medieval women who otherwise risked marginalizing themselves in the eyes of medieval European society. If marriage meant staying in society did taking vows mean leaving it? Recent research has shown the major role nuns played beyond the walls of their nunneries. In fact, nuns' social and economic involvement could be even more prominent than that of many married women.¹ Although this paper analyzes nuns beyond the monastic walls—which *a priori* should imply isolation and enclosure—we should recognize the social networks of married women, which did not mean “lay seclusion” but a large number of socio-economic, religious, and cultural relationships and activities. The collective imaginary of medieval society, misogynistic or at least patriarchal in nature, can be observed in legal, ecclesiastical, and literary rhetoric and in iconographic representations. I wish to argue here that sources, particularly documents showing legal practice, such as wills, sale and purchase agreements, donations, lawsuits, show wide spaces for female agency.² Despite ecclesiastical authorities insisting on separating nuns and the secular world through enclosure, were nuns truly isolated? Sources tell us the opposite. In fact, documents inform us about the interaction of nuns and their institutions with their surroundings.

* This work was undertaken within the framework of research projects FFI2014–55628–P, HAR2017–82480–P, PGC2018–099205–A–C22, 2018–T1/HUM–10230, and PID2019–108910GB–C22.

1 See the classic work by Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, and more recent books such as Burton and Stöber, eds, *Women in the Medieval Monastic World*, which has an extensive bibliography. For Galicia, see the reference work: Rodríguez Núñez, *Los conventos femeninos en Galicia*. For work on the role of nuns in medieval Galicia: Fernández Fernández, *O mosteiro feminino de San Miguel de Bóveda*; Pallares and Portela, “Las señoras en el claustro”; García-Fernández, “La proyección del monasterio femenino de San Salvador de Sobrado de Trives”; and García-Fernández, “¿Libertinaje o libertad?”

2 Some initial findings are in García-Fernández, “Vivir y morir en femenino.”

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I will show how nuns crossed the monastic wall, as well as how they helped other people to gain access to the convent. Nuns' involvement in late medieval Galician society is an undeniable reality. Despite their "historiographic oblivion," medieval nuns' social and economic functions were well reflected in the documents of their nunneries.³ This is evident in the criticisms made by those (mostly men, it cannot be forgotten) in favour of monastic reform, which spread across all religious orders at the end of the fourteenth century and during the following century. The later and better known phase in this long process in Spain was instigated by the Catholic Monarchs at the end of the fifteenth century and the first decades of the sixteenth. The aim of the reform was to force monks and nuns to obey the precepts of their monastic rules strictly.⁴

Although I do not intend to analyze monastic reform in Galicia,⁵ I will consider various documents written for this purpose. After several earlier attempts, the great reformer of convent life in Galicia was Friar Rodrigo de Valencia, prior of San Benito de Valladolid. Protected by the Papacy and the Catholic Monarchs, Friar Rodrigo visited the convents which he wished to reform and he achieved his goals. In the case of the reform of the Benedictine nuns, it consisted in closing nunneries where one, two, or three nuns lived, and bring them together in a single convent, that of San Paio de Antealtares.⁶ In 1499 this medieval male monastery in Santiago de Compostela was converted into a nunnery.

To achieve their aim, the reformers collected information to use against abbesses in Galicia. They sought to prove that the nuns had not respected the Rule of St. Benedict, that they had managed the monastic estate poorly, and that they had led dissolute lives.

3 A few short overviews of nunneries in Galicia exist, like Martínez, "Los monasterios de monjas en Galicia"; Fernández de Viana y Vieites, "El monacato femenino en Galicia"; two articles by López Morán, "El monacato femenino gallego en la Alta Edad Media (La Coruña y Pontevedra)," and "El monacato femenino gallego en la Alta Edad Media (Lugo y (Orense)"; Pérez Rodríguez, *Mosteiros de Galicia*, 127–67, and bibliography at 317–30; or Pérez Rodríguez, *Los monasterios del reino*, 2:1067–144. Employing the history of art, see Moure Pena, "Monasterios benedictinos femeninos en Galicia."

4 See the contributions of Duval and Pérez Vidal in this volume.

5 On this general reform and with information and documents related to Galicia, see García Oro, *La reforma de los religiosos españoles*; García Oro and Portela Silva, *Los monasterios de la Corona de Castilla*; and by the same authors, *Los monasterios de la Corona de Castilla* and their "La monarquía y los monasterios gallegos en el siglo XVI." On the reform of Benedictine convent life in Galicia, see the synthesis by Colombás, *Las Señoras de San Payo*, 27–80. Equally important are the works by Ernesto Zaragoza Pascual where he has published material and sources on the reform in Galician monasteries. Some of them will be used in this essay.

6 The nunneries which disappeared as independent institutions were: San Miguel das Negradas (Lugo), San Xiao de Lobios (Ourense), San Miguel de Eiré (Lugo), San Pedro de Vilanova de Dozón (Pontevedra), San Fiz de Cangas (Lugo), San Xoán da Cova (Lugo), Santo Estevo de Chouzán (Lugo), Santa María de Pesqueiras (Lugo), San Pedro de Ansemil (Pontevedra), Santo André de Órrea (Pontevedra), San Salvador de Albeos (Pontevedra), San Pedro de Lobás (Ourense), San Pedro de Ramirás (Ourense), and San Salvador de Sobrado de Trives (Ourense). This appears in a document given by Queen Juana I: Zaragoza Pascual, "Documentos inéditos sobre la reforma de algunos monasterios benedictinos gallegos y castellanos," 677, doc. 8.

This was intended to discredit them from holding their posts.⁷ I believe that it is possible to gain factual information about Galician nuns and their practices in the Late Middle Ages thanks to the legal proceedings held against abbesses. However, the documents distort part of the female monastic reality by emphasizing negative aspects. Discrediting the abbesses in order to take control of their convents and emphasizing every mistake and violation of a norm offers a biased view of reality. Where reformers saw only debauchery, I believe we can see the wide margins of female freedom which existed in medieval monastic life.

Galician abbesses were powerful, resolute women who had important contacts among the nobility and with the people who lived near their nunneries. For this reason some of them confronted the reformers by barricading themselves into their convents, at least initially.⁸ Others fled and were accused of defiance.⁹ Still others died before the reform ended, so their convents were easily incorporated into San Paio de Antealtares.¹⁰ Some of the nuns became enclosed in San Paio de Antealtares, but continued to resist. In fact, some of these nuns escaped from the convent in Santiago de Compostela for one night and returned to their previous convents,¹¹ from where they continued to disregard the reform. There was also an attempt to plot with the head of Santiago's Royal Hospital so that he could help the nuns remain in their convents until their death.¹² Finally, although a number of nuns litigated in ecclesiastical courts for years, they eventually reached agreement that after their death their small nunneries

7 A general approach to the accusations made against these nuns can be seen in the inquisitorial visitations that some of the abbesses, nuns, and witnesses had to undergo: Zaragoza Pascual, "Procesos de reforma contra la abadesa de Lobios y la priora de Pesqueiras," 369–71, doc. 7; and by the same author, "Proceso de reforma contra la abadesa de San Salvador de Albeos," 574–75, doc. 4.

8 That is what the abbess of Trives did. When the reformers arrived at the convent, ten or twelve armed men approached them and it is said that they hit the abbot, hit the prior's head with a stick, and the governor with stones: Archivo General de Simancas, Registro General del Sello, Leg. 149901, 274.

9 This is what doña Inés de Sanabria, abbess of San Pedro de Lobás, was accused of by the reformers. She had fled when the reforming friar Rodrigo de Valencia visited her convent. Friar Rodrigo said that "she could not be found and he did not know a house or a place where that abbess could be": Zaragoza Pascual, "Reforma de los monasterios de Lobás, Dozón y Ansemil," 92–93, docs. 3–4; 98–101, doc. 9; 104–110, docs. 12–14. But doña Inés defended herself and appealed against the sentence pronounced against her. Her defence was that "she absented herself for fear of you [the reformer], so that you could not catch her as you did with other abbesses and nuns who are in San Paio [de Antealtares]": Zaragoza Pascual, "Reforma de los monasterios de Lobás, Dozón y Ansemil," 111–12, doc. 16.

10 This happened with the convents of Vilanova de Dozón and Ansemil, both of which were in doña Isabel de Ulloa's hands, who died during the reform: Zaragoza Pascual "Reforma de los monasterios de Lobás, Dozón y Ansemil," 116–24, docs. 19–20.

11 Among them the abbesses of Ramirás, Albeos, Lobios, Eiré, and Lobás: García Oro, *La reforma de los religiosos españoles*, 56 and 538, doc. 443.

12 This was the case of the abbesses of Cova, Albeos, Ramirás, Lobios, and Eiré; see Zaragoza Pascual, "Procesos de reforma contra la abadesa de Lobios y la priora de Pesqueiras," 383–86, doc. 20.

would fall under the Benedictine cloister, San Paio de Antealtares.¹³ In conclusion, the reformers destroyed the nuns' sociability by moving them away from their convents and by imposing enclosure inside the walls of San Paio de Antealtares. This new reality put an end to the Benedictine nuns' previous lifestyle.

Power and Status inside and outside the Cloister

Most Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries in medieval Galicia had aristocratic founders. Monastic life offered men and especially for women the opportunity to hold a prominent position in medieval society. Beyond devotion and the protective role of monasteries, especially for widows, their transformation into corridors of power turned this vocation into an excellent resource for the aristocracy, who could thereby control a large number of material resources and strengthen their own power and authority. In this light, the birth of many nunneries was an expression of their founders' power and a mechanism through which the founders attempted to keep their memory alive and create a vocation for themselves and their descendants.¹⁴ The founders' voice was heard inside the monastic walls for many centuries,¹⁵ as we will see later. This explains why it was usual for the abbesses of these convents to belong to the founding families, or at least to aristocratic ones.¹⁶ This granted them a privileged position both inside and outside the convent, expressed their own social status and that of the monastic community. In fact, some of these women, like doña Guntroda Suárez, founder of the San Pedro de Vilanova de Dozón convent, were called *domine atque abbatisse*, with all the symbolism meaning that being called a lady implied.¹⁷ Interestingly, the title *Ona* used by the abbesses of San Pedro de Ramirás seems to derive from the honorific *miona*,

13 Between 1511 and 1528 abbesses started making pacts with San Paio. The last one to do so was doña Inés de Quiroga, abbess of Sobrado de Trives, who finally resigned in 1528 in exchange for a life pension: Zaragoza Pascual, "Procesos de reforma contra la abadesa de Lobios y la priora de Pesqueiras," 361–62.

14 In 1138 Vermudo Pérez de Traba founded the convent of Santa María de las Dueñas for his daughter doña Urraca Vermúdez. He considered the possibility that other women from his family would enter the convent, although they should always be under the rule of the abbess: "Hoc autem tali statuimus ut si ab aliqua gentis meae faemina ad sanctitatis huius ordinem et habitum sanctimonialium venire voluerit: statim ibi recipiatur eo tenore et pactione seruata: ut nullum habeat in eodem monasterio iure haeredetario dominium nisi licentia et voluntate abbatissae quae aliis praefuerit": Archivo de la Real Academia Gallega, Depósito 4, Subsección: P Caixa 8, *Tombo das Cascas*, fol. 27r.

15 On aristocratic patronage of Cistercian nunneries in Castile, see Baury, *Les religieuses de Castille*, 41–111.

16 Even at the end of the Middle Ages, nunneries were headed by women from aristocratic families. For example, the abbess of San Xoán da Cova was doña Juana de Lemos, so reformers were afraid to enter, for fear of doña Mayor, the abbess's mother, who was sister of the Earl of Monterrei: Pérez Rodríguez, *Mosteiros de Galicia*, 143.

17 Fernández de Viana y Vieites, *Colección diplomática do mosteiro de San Pedro de Vilanova*, 49, doc. 24.

whose origin is the Latin expression *mea domina*.¹⁸ Because of their social origin, their leadership inside the community, and their role as heads of a noble institution, abbesses were genuine *dominae* and they were seen as such by other people.

Women from the founding family had great power from the outside over convents. This was the case of Santa María de Ferreira de Pantón, a convent where several women were given the title of *domina*. The first was doña Fronilde, who was the (re) founder when Ferreira became a Cistercian nunnery. She was followed as *domina* by her daughter, doña Guiomar, then by a woman called doña Marina Fernández (a doña Guiomar's daughter?), as well as by women from another noble lineage connected to Ferreira de Pantón, the Castro family: doña Milia (widow of Fernán Gutiérrez de Castro, and *custos et domina* in Ferreira), her daughter-in-law, doña Mencía González, wife of Andrés Fernández de Castro, and finally doña Mencía's daughter, also called doña Milia, wife of Martín Gil de Riba de Vizela. These women constituted two lineages of female power cast from outside into the cloister and which placed them at a level above the nuns themselves, lasting from the twelfth to the early fourteenth centuries. We can also see the importance that some *parentibus* or *heredum* continued to have in other convents like San Salvador de Sobrado de Trives in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, despite the separation that the Gregorian reform attempted to impose between clerics and lay people.¹⁹

The patrons' power was a determining factor in the social relations among influential nuns, and could be beneficial or controversial, depending on whether the convent's power was strengthened or limited. A type of "controversial relationship" arose due to abusive practices on the part of patrons, for example appropriation of income and property or intervention in appointments. The nuns and religious authorities would then resist their lay patron's intervention inside the convent. This worsened in the later Middle Ages when the economic crisis led many aristocrats not only to demand their patronage rights, but also to increase their interventionism inside convents through the practice of *encomienda*. Under this practice, the convent sought a patron, generally a noble person, who would benefit from some income or rights in return for helping the institution. However, many of these noblemen eventually became problematic by insinuating themselves into the monastic estate. The San Miguel de Eiré convent suffered from these problems. This is why in 1419 the king addressed Vasco Gómez das Seixas to ask him to return to the abbess doña Aldara Fernández and the nuns from Eiré some properties which he had usurped by holding them "in the *encomienda* system against the nuns' will."²⁰ So, the intervention of lay people in nunneries was a fact. Often it was simple abuse, but sometimes they claimed rights that they considered to be their own. For example, in the late fifteenth century doña Inés de Sanabria was appointed as abbess of San Pedro de Lobás by Fernando de Camba, after the previous abbess had suffered

¹⁸ Azevedo Maia, "'Ona,' un arcaísmo galego portugués."

¹⁹ Pallares and Portela, "Las señoras en el claustro," 176–77; D'Emilio, "Widows and Communities," 228–34.

²⁰ Archivo Histórico Universitario, Santiago de Compostela, *Sección Apeos*, Leg. 57, n° 24.

a mental illness and had left.²¹ Even the reformers who tried to isolate nuns from laymen and instructed the abbess to not allow any man or woman into the convent made an exception for don Fernando de Camba visiting his daughter. However, he must enter alone and could not have lunch, drink, or sleep inside the convent.²²

Therefore, many nunneries were born out of expressions of power of men and women who, from inside and outside these institutions, exploited them to strengthen their position in medieval society. For these people, nunneries were places of great importance, not just for seclusion, but also where you could live and socialize from a position of power. The nuns' social status was above all defined by the power relationships between convents and the founding families.

Women's—and men's—integration into medieval society depended on the position that their families had in the social hierarchy, so it is significant that many nuns, especially abbesses, originally had close ties with the local nobility and aristocracy. This made the existence of a twofold set of social relations around the convents where they lived possible. Wide horizontal social relations with relatives and peers belonging to the same level in the social hierarchy, as well as vertical relations with other religious women, peasants, people who depended on convents, ecclesiastical authorities, and the monarchy. Even the nuns from a lower social class took part in these dynamic social relationships, but for them they was not "power relationships." At most, belonging to an ecclesiastical order gave them some prestige or authority over the people from their social class.

Family ties did not break when women entered a monastic community; on the contrary, they were perpetuated in a profitable way, especially for those who had engaged their daughters, sisters, or mothers in the management of properties, income, and monastic rights.²³ Power was a key element in the connection between nuns and their families outside the cloister. Many abbesses came to power thanks to their relatives' influence, who in return received land charters, income, and rights over monasteries.²⁴ This was evident to the reformers of the Late Middle Ages, who accused several

21 Zaragoza Pascual, "Reforma de los monasterios de Lobás, Dozón y Ansemil," 105–6, doc. 12. The last prioress in Pesqueiras, doña Inés de Guitián, testified that after having become a Benedictine nun in Lobios convent, she finally achieved her position as a prioress thanks to the Earl of Lemos: Zaragoza Pascual, "Procesos de reforma contra la abadesa de Lobios y la priora de Pesqueiras," 371, doc. 7.

22 Zaragoza Pascual, "Reforma de los monasterios de Lobás, Dozón y Ansemil," 89, doc. 2.

23 It is no surprise, therefore, that the abbess of Lobios, doña Constanza Vázquez de Somoza, gave her brother three silver cups and some money in order to become abbess, as apparently other people were also attempting to gain control of the nunnery. It is significant that the cups had been lent by "her relatives and friends." That is to say, everyone realised how important it would be to have a woman from the family or a friend running a nunnery. Zaragoza Pascual, "Procesos de reforma contra la abadesa de Lobios y la priora de Pesqueiras," 373, doc. 8.

24 For example, in 1341, doña Elvira Fernández, abbess in Trives, gave a land charter to her nephew Vasco Rodríguez: Martínez Sáez, "El monasterio de San Salvador de Sobrado de Trives," 2:303–4, doc. 151. The closeness of the abbesses' relatives can also be observed when seeing some of them appear as witnesses in monastic documents. In 1264, the prioress of Trives, doña Sancha Pérez, sold some properties to the bishop of Lugo with the abbess's consent, and a knight named F. Martin,

abbesses of taking advantage of their powerful position to benefit those people with whom they had friendship or family ties, as well as of wasting the wealth and income of their monasteries.

This misuse of power is confirmed by some witnesses who were called to testify in the lawsuits against Galician abbesses. The nun Mencía de Figueredo testified against doña Beatriz Cabeza de Vaca, abbess of Albeos, in 1499. According to Mencía, doña Beatriz had given her daughter a dowry of goods, money, and land charters from convent properties located both in its demesne lands and in Portugal. All this was in return for a small rent which the married couple never paid. The nun even reported that she had been dishonoured by the abbess's son-in-law for not agreeing with what was going on. She also said that the abbess had given her son-in-law a barrel, bread, and wine and had also paid for her daughter's and her son-in-law's clothes as well as clothing for the people who served them, all at the house's expense.²⁵

Conversely, nunneries could benefit from the protection and security provided by nuns' relatives. In 1282, doña Urraca Pérez, abbess of Sobrado de Trives, made her will, in which she asked Gonzalo Yáñez de Robreda, "my relative and my friend, to protect and defend the monastery for the love of God, for restraint, and for the debt which he has with me."²⁶

Family relationships also occurred inside the community, since different women from the same family could live together in the convent. For example, in 1226 doña Urraca Gómez, abbess of Vilanova de Dozón, made her will and left her niece Sancha Fernandez, also a nun, a rural property "si perseveraverit in ordine" (provided that she remained in the order).²⁷ Power was a factor in the social relations among nuns, especially if we bear in mind some nuns expected to succeed the women of their family in certain posts, particularly the post as abbess.

These relationships among family members inside and outside the cloister were encouraged by their mutual interest in holding and exerting power. However, we also

doña Marina Rodríguez's nephew, is a signed witness after the nuns, but before the clergymen in Sobrado: Martínez Sáez, "El monasterio de San Salvador de Sobrado de Trives," 2:87–88, doc. 43. This also happened in other convents. In 1459, Lopo Pérez, doña María López's nephew, abbess of Ferreira de Pantón, is the first witness in a land charter: Fernández de Viana y Vieites, *Colección diplomática del monasterio de Santa María de Ferreira*, 237–38, doc. 190. More evidence of the perpetuation of family ties among nuns and their secular relatives can be seen in the will of doña Teresa Suárez, abbess of Ramirás, who named her nephew Lourenzo Anes as legatee of her last will and testament: Fernández de Viana y Vieites, *Colección diplomática del monasterio de Santa María de Ferreira*, 446, doc. 248.

25 Zaragoza Pascual, "Proceso de reforma contra la abadesa de San Salvador de Albeos," 570–71, doc. 2. This testimony was confirmed by other later witnesses, one of whom states that he gave a favourable contract to his son-in-law which included everything that the convent had in Portugal, apart from another one in favour of a certain Fernando de Fuengas for a rent of fifty maravedies, when he should have asked for five hundred maravedies: Zaragoza Pascual, "Proceso de reforma contra la abadesa de San Salvador de Albeos," 588, doc. 13.

26 Martínez Sáez, "El monasterio de San Salvador de Sobrado de Trives," 2:115, doc. 57.

27 Fernández de Viana y Vieites, *Colección diplomática do mosteiro de San Pedro de Vilanova*, 68, doc. 45.

must consider the vertical relationships, both ascending and descending, in which nuns and their monasteries participated, in order to understand power as a factor in social relations. Once again, these relationships took place within the cloister but also beyond the monastic walls.

To a great extent, monasteries reflected the hierarchical and social differences that existed in the Middle Ages. The monastic community was organized according to an internal hierarchy headed by the abbess's power and authority.²⁸ Her privileged social origin and the post she held were two important factors in understanding her powerful position in the network of social relationships within the nunnery and those generated around the institution that she ran. The same can be said about prioresses, second in the hierarchy, many of whom later became the abbess. The other nuns in the monastic community and the men and women who worked and lived under the nuns' orders and protection were under their authority and power. Among them were a great number of clergymen, men who were appointed to their posts by the nuns and who acted at the service of and dependent upon the abbess.²⁹ These male clerics were significant agents in the external profile of monasteries, particularly in the cure of souls and in the management of wealth.³⁰ The nuns' internal relationships are therefore conditioned by power. However, did internal hierarchy imply the nuns' absolute submissiveness to the abbess? Some documents show disagreement among nuns and during the reform of Galician monasteries some nuns testified against their abbesses.³¹ Personal revenge, differing opinions, external pressure, envy, whatever the case, these documents can confirm female opposition to the abbesses' power, as well as the existence of tension in nuns' relationships within the monastic walls.

Let us now turn to life beyond the wall and focus on the vertical relationships which derived from the nuns' economic and jurisdictional use of power.

Although nunneries in medieval Galicia were less numerous and mostly smaller than male monasteries, they were still noble institutions with their own estates from which the nuns obtained not only income but also the socio-economic basis behind their power. They exercised this institutional power from inside the cloister towards the out-

28 In the Sobrado de Trives case, the monastic staff consisted of the abbess, the prioress, the nuns—the maximum number it reached was seventeen in 1273—, chaplains, clergymen, scribes, and people with specific jobs like cooks. Other men and women were added to these, the abbess's or the nuns' servants, like those mentioned in doña Urraca Pérez's will: "I send all the salaries to the young men and women who served in the convent." Martínez Sáez, "El monasterio de San Salvador de Sobrado de Trives," 1:141–55. For San Pedro de Ramirás, see Lucas Álvarez and Lucas Domínguez, *San Pedro de Ramirás*, 17–39.

29 In 1409 the abbess and the Vilanova de Dozón nunnery appointed clergyman Fernán Pérez as chaplain of their Santo Andrés chapel, at least until he "achieved another church and benefit or a better chaplaincy." Fernández de Viana y Vieites, *Colección diplomática do mosteiro de San Pedro de Vilanova*, 186–87, doc. 180.

30 Pallares and Portela, "Las señoras en el claustro," 179–82.

31 At Albeos, a nun named Mencía de Figueredo was especially critical of her abbess: Zaragoza Pascual, "Proceso de reforma contra la abadesa de San Salvador de Albeos," 568–72, doc. 2.

side and over men and women who had to recognize the nuns' feudal status and declare themselves their vassals.³²

Running and managing a convent implied stepping outside the daily religious reality within it. Exercising feudal power was an epitome of the social relationships at work, which from the historian's point of view is reflected in the production of extra-mural documents. In the case of agreements reached with people in their locality, it is difficult to imagine that the nuns did not personally speak to them before reaching an agreement. They may have reached agreements using notaries—many of them clergymen—who would act as agents of the nuns' "indirect social relationships." However, on other occasions it was necessary for them to cross the walls themselves. This is why nuns are mentioned in documents as being outside the cloister. Going out undoubtedly implied socializing, intended as a "direct relationship" with the people around them: people to whom they leased property in exchange for rent, from whom they bought and sold land, or against whom they brought lawsuits. In the fifteenth century, doña María de Souto-maior, abbess of Santa María de Tomiño, had even crossed between Galicia and Portugal and was in Ponte da Lima. While there, a squire showed her the lease which doña Guiomar Álvarez, a previous abbess of Tomiño, had signed concerning the estate the convent held in Portugal.³³ Notwithstanding, the lease had been signed inside the convent in Galicia, "being all [the nuns] together with the bell tolling [...] as was customary for us."

What do the sources tell about who the nuns socialized with, directly or indirectly, in their exercise of power? In relation to power relationships with social inferiors, where the nuns were in a higher or privileged position, we find a large number of charters, especially *foros* (in Galician, or *fueros* in Castilian, being longterm feudal contracts) which were useful in establishing social, economic, and power relationships between the nuns and the men and women nearby. In fact, these charters are the most numerous monastic documents preserved, and were the basis of monastic property management.³⁴ The nuns, as managers of the convent's estate, usually transferred the usufruct of their properties to peasants, often for several generations, in exchange for rent in coin and/or in kind. Besides, the peasants or *foreros* very often had to recognize the nuns' authority and power by considering themselves their vassals and by paying some symbolic taxes, apart from the rent, in homage to their status.³⁵ So, we can say that the nuns' economic power derived from a "relationship of pre-eminence."

32 A study of the economic, social, and power relationships of a particular nunnery and its environment can be seen in Fernández Fernández, *O mosteiro feminino de San Miguel de Bóveda*, 39–96. Also, García-Fernández, "La proyección del monasterio femenino de San Salvador de Sobrado de Trives."

33 Iglesias Almeida, "El monasterio de Santa María de Tomiño," 99–101, doc. 3.

34 In the case of Sobrado de Trives, one of the largest and richest documentary collections in a nunnery, 67 percent of the documents, or 276 in total, are *foros*: Martínez Sáez, "El monasterio de San Salvador de Sobrado de Trives," 1:216. The *foros* are also a majority in Ramirás: Lucas Álvarez and Lucas Domínguez, *San Pedro de Ramirás*, 101–47. Elsewhere, almost all the documents preserved by small convents are *foros*.

35 In the documents of Ferreira de Pantón, abbesses grant *foros* to men and women asking them repeatedly "to be obedient and submissive vassals of that convent." Fernández de Viana y Vieites,

To have the power to give peasants the usufruct of their lands, the wealth of their convents had obviously been built on property given by their founders, donations from men and women from all social groups or testamentary dispositions.³⁶ Even if given exclusively for religious reasons, the receipt of these estates confirmed the nuns' status, or at least their power to mediate between God and people, which was the root of the deep relationships between nunneries and the people who lived beyond the wall.

However, not only did the nuns manage their inheritance, but they themselves acted to grow it or reorganize it; they participated in purchases or sales, exchanges, and so on.³⁷ This active role forced them to deal directly with their economic and social neighbours.

Contrary to the vow of poverty, medieval nuns retained personal and real property of their own. They received inheritances, they held charters over land, sold and bought property, and, at the end of their lives, they could even allocate their estate in their own will.³⁸ This explains why everything we have stated about the management of the monastic estate equally applies to the management of individual estates, which could also be important for convents. This helps us understand some references to lawsuits like that which was brought against nun Urraca Eriz in the first half of the thirteenth century by Maior Fernández, abbess of Vilanova de Dozón, and Maior Sánchez, prioress of Chouzán: "super Orracam Eriz, sanctimoniale, et hereditatem suam."³⁹ The lawsuit led to the questioning of over thirty witnesses, both lay and ecclesiastical people, among whom more than ten nuns and even the brother of the nun whose estate was in dispute, "miles A. Eriz." We can deduce that Urraca Eriz was a nun from a good family whose estate was coveted by two of the convents where she had lived.

Being landowners or managers of the monastic estate and of their own, these were women with economic power. Beyond that nuns were feudal ladies, and by royal grant they had jurisdictional power over specific territories, the *coutos*, whose inhabitants were exclusively their vassals: "quod nullus, neque miles, neque alius homo, habeat vassallum in cautis vestris" (that no-one, neither knight nor any other man, may have

Colección diplomática del monasterio de Santa María de Ferreira, for example (from the first quarter of the fifteenth century alone), docs. 109, 113, 114, 120, 126, 132, 136, 140, 146, etc. This formula appears, identically or similarly, in most *foros* of this and other convents throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

36 Martínez Sáez, "El monasterio de San Salvador de Sobrado de Trives," 1:236–43.

37 See Martínez Sáez, "El monasterio de San Salvador de Sobrado de Trives," 1:235–36 for sale and purchase agreements; examples of land exchanges (243); and agreements like that established with clergyman Juan Domínguez in 1271 about the inheritance of his sister, Urraca Domínguez (244).

38 Documents throughout the Middle Ages show that nuns managed personal estates with the consent of the abbess, so community property overlaps with private property. In 1265, for example, the nun doña Maior Fernández asked the abbess in Santo Andrés de Órrea to sell her brother some properties which she had inherited from her mother: López Morán, "El monacato femenino gallego en la Alta Edad Media (La Coruña y Pontevedra)," 159–60.

39 Fernández de Viana y Vieites, *Colección diplomática do mosteiro de San Pedro de Vilanova*, 73–76, doc. 50.

a vassal on your *coutos*)⁴⁰ With the concession of such *coutos*, territories protected by royal immunities, the “relationship of pre-eminence” only increased. Moreover, their privileged situation as feudal ladies could lead nuns to take advantage of the weakest, just like other lords.⁴¹

Their power and the “relationship of pre-eminence” that derived from the exercise of their status were achieved thanks to the nuns’ relationships with both ecclesiastical authorities and the monarchy. This “institutional relationship” with their social superiors, where the nuns were lower in status, meant the nuns tried to gain royal or pontifical privileges, which apart from religious questions and donations of properties, contributed to strengthening the power of nunneries over their surroundings. Gaining *coutos*, tributes, or rights and their protection all increased their local standing.⁴² Convents were in constant interaction with these superior powers, but they also participated in horizontal “institutional relationships”—sometimes controversially—with other monasteries. Some nunneries even depended on monasteries, although it is difficult to determine the degree of dependence.⁴³

Not only did the nuns receive privileges as a favour, but the actively sought them and litigated over rights they considered their own but which were disputed. In 1230, the abbot of Oseira judged a lawsuit related to tributes between Maior Sánchez, prioress of Chouzán, and the clergyman Marín Rodríguez.⁴⁴ We know of lawsuits involving other nunneries like the one from 1259 in which the nuns of Ramirás turned to the bishop of Ourense concerning patronage rights over churches, and five documents from 1287 in which abbess doña Sancha Rodríguez defended the feudal rights of the nuns of Sobrado de Trives.⁴⁵ In 1274, once more the abbess of Ramirás took legal action over certain rights and she did not hesitate to stand up to one of the foremost monasteries of medieval Galicia, San Salvador de Celanova.⁴⁶ In 1301, King Fernando IV helped the nuns of Ramirás by taking their side in a lawsuit that the abbess had brought against the Concejo de Milmanda, which had prevented the nuns from appointing a judge and a notary for

40 Fernández de Viana y Vieites, *Colección diplomática do mosteiro de San Pedro de Vilanova*, 53–54, doc. 30.

41 In 1411 don Juan Rodríguez, archdeacon in Dozón, reprimanded the abbess of Eiré, doña Elvira Díaz, because she charged her vassals more taxes than she should: López Morán, “El monacato femenino gallego en la Alta Edad Media (La Coruña y Pontevedra),” 65.

42 In 1260, for example, Pope Alexander IV gave his protection to the convent of Sobrado de Trives and confirmed its rights and privileges, whether from ecclesiastical or civil authorities. And in 1286, King Sancho IV confirmed the privilege granted by King Alfonso IX of León in which he had awarded the *couto* to the Sobrado de Trives convent: Martínez Sáez, “El monasterio de San Salvador de Sobrado de Trives,” 2:31, doc. 39; 2:130, doc. 65.

43 Such was the case of Santo Estevo de Chouzán in its earliest years, on which Santa María de Oseira depended, or that of San Salvador de Ferreira de Pantón, on which Santa María de Meira depended: Pérez Rodríguez, *Los monasterios del reino*, 2:1083–89.

44 Pichel Gotérrez, *Fundación e primeiros séculos do mosteiro bieito de Santo Estevo de Chouzán*, 139–41, docs. 24–25.

45 Pallares and Portela, “Las señoras en el claustro,” 183–85.

46 Lucas Álvarez and Lucas Domínguez, *San Pedro de Ramirás*, 394–96, doc. 197.

the inhabitants of their *couto*.⁴⁷ These examples show the nuns' struggle to defend their rights and their close relations with authorities and people around them when exercising their power.

As ladies with lands and vassals, nuns socialized widely: with their notaries, their dependants, their neighbours, and with the authorities, who strengthened and legitimized their power inside medieval society. This power was cast beyond the cloister, but it was exercised from within the convent, which became, from the twelfth century onwards, a visible expression of their social pre-eminence. In fact, nuns encouraged the construction of beautiful Romanesque churches and the embellishment of certain monastic walls which, as documents show, were not an impenetrable border, but permeable walls which gave nuns a privileged position in their relationship with the outside.⁴⁸ This backdrop of power—and the nuns were powerful women—is key when studying the nuns' social relationships in the Middle Ages.

In summary, although the nuns' existence and their role in medieval society must be understood in the context of the religiosity of the times, the nuns held an important position in society thanks to their access to landed property and the exercise of feudal power. Landed possessions and feudal power show how the exercise of power, both economic and legal, were one of the main factors in the social relations of these women, both inside and outside the cloister. Inside the cloister because the women would have needed to communicate in order to make decisions together, which meant speaking to each other and to clergymen from other monasteries. And outside the cloister because the decisions made affected the relationships which they kept with men and women beyond the walls and because their power was strengthened thanks to the privileges given by ecclesiastical authorities and by the monarchy.

One might wonder if the reformers' wish to impose enclosure, apart from a religious impetus, might have had the aspect that, once implemented, it would allow them (men) then to manage the nuns' economic and feudal power. By limiting their social relationships and exerting more control over them, clergymen and the nuns' notaries would have been prime beneficiaries. Limiting the abbesses' and nuns' relationships was synonymous with limiting their power and consequently, their independence.⁴⁹ Their direct or personal relationships were limited, but not completely cancelled. It is hard to imagine nunneries as isolated entities even after the changes applied at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Social contact still existed, but nuns became more distant from those men and women over whom they exercised power, as reformers questioned and limited their relationships. A new way of life opened, but the nuns were reluctant to relinquish power and the social relationships bound up with their exercise of power.

⁴⁷ Lucas Álvarez and Lucas Domínguez, *San Pedro de Ramirás*, 452–54, doc. 255.

⁴⁸ Moure Pena, "Monasterios benedictinos femeninos en Galicia."

⁴⁹ Accusations against the nuns' dissolute life and bad management as a prior step to removing them from their posts and even to taking over their convents had been used previously, for example to close down the San Miguel de Bóveda monastery as an independent convent and place it under the monastery of San Clodio do Ribeiro: Fernández Fernández, *O mosteiro feminino de San Miguel de Bóveda*, 97–104; 189–94, docs. 44–45; 205–9, doc. 53.

Nuns beyond the Monastic Walls

Nuns could leave the cloister on business, as we have seen. They still kept in touch with people and with landed property and were likely to have used these outings to make decisions on the management of the monastic estate and to exercise the power which would lead them again out of their convents. In the trial against the abbess of Albeos, Gregorio de Sexemil testified that he had once seen the abbess outside the nunnery accompanied by a nun and her butler on their way to Celanova and another time on their way to Ourense and he had heard her say that “she was going there on business related to her nunneries.”⁵⁰ Were such outings exceptional or habitual?

The fact that nuns could cross the threshold of the convent seems to have been common in medieval Galicia. Nuns walked along medieval paths for several reasons, and not only to manage the monastic estate.

On some occasions, these religious women left the convents where they had professed their faith and never returned. They changed institutions and sometimes even their order, as Abbess doña Beatriz Cabeza de Vaca stated. She professed in the Dominican nunnery of San Pedro Mártir in Mayorga (Valladolid) and then went to the Dominican nunnery of Belvís in Santiago de Compostela with an aunt. Her aunt, who was the prioress there, asked her if she wished to become the prioress of Santa María de Conxo, a Benedictine convent. Doña Beatriz accepted and, although she never received a dispensation, a Dominican friar absolved her with an assumed authorization from the bishop of Ávila in return for some money. After the death of the abbess of Albeos, doña Beatriz moved into this convent in the diocese of Tui, paying four silver marks for the title of abbess, although they had asked for five.⁵¹ It is obvious that doña Beatriz travelled considerably and managed to obtain important posts in different convents thanks to her family and money.

Urraca Eriz's presence outside the cloister is also documented with the change of institution. In fact, some witnesses declared having seen her in different places and having heard her complaints. Clergyman I. Petri said that while he was in *Vilaiusti*, Urraca Eriz arrived, “cum ira abbatisse de Vilanova, et dixit ital: ‘ego sum infelix et perdo animam, quia non vado ad Iouzan, unde sum soror, ubi feci professionem.’” This quotation not only gives us an insight into a medieval nun's voice and feelings, the witness also declared that another clergyman arrived with two horses and together they went to Vilanova convent. Doña Urraca was also seen in *Requeixu*, where the layman P. Pelagii de Lama, “audivit ei dicere quod volebat ire ad monasterium de Iouzan ut habitaret ibi.”⁵²

Sancha Rodríguez, abbess of Lobás, must have felt unhappy too. According to statements made by Arias Mosquera in 1499, Sancha left her nunnery voluntarily and

⁵⁰ Zaragoza Pascual, “Proceso de reforma contra la abadesa de San Salvador de Albeos,” 576, doc. 5. She was also seen in Celanova by a witness called Gregorio Rodríguez: Zaragoza Pascual, “Proceso de reforma contra la abadesa de San Salvador de Albeos,” 577, doc. 6.

⁵¹ Zaragoza Pascual, “Proceso de reforma contra la abadesa de San Salvador de Albeos,” 567–68, doc. 1.

⁵² Fernández de Viana y Vieites, *Colección diplomática do mosteiro de San Pedro de Vilanova*, 74, doc. 50.

returned to the house of her mother and relatives, leaving her convent headless, until a local aristocrat named Fernando de Caba gave her position to the abbess doña Inés de Sanabria.⁵³

Let us turn now to a type of outing that demonstrates the nuns' active social involvement with their milieu and which reflects that their lives consisted in more than just praying and managing property. They were also women who participated in parties and pastimes.

Documents demonstrate that Doña Beatriz Cabeza de Vaca was an abbess who enjoyed attending local celebrations. A nun from her San Salvador de Albeos convent stated in 1499 that she witnessed her attending weddings, baptisms, and inaugural masses, i.e., masses that newly consecrated priests celebrated for the first time, and that her daughter and her son-in-law often accompanied her, and a nun or a servant at other times, "and that she always ate and drank there when she went with all of them."⁵⁴ Other witnesses confirm her "festive social contacts." An unknown witness declared that he saw the abbess going to fairs and markets in Melgaço (Portugal). García de Peñalta's statements about doña Beatriz's amusements were more explicit. He stated that he had heard many people assert that in some weddings the abbess had "friends" and that she seemed to have men willing to put their "member" at her disposal: "se ayudaba bien del rabo" (she made good use of their members). He also affirmed that he himself had seen the abbess eating and drinking in a wedding like the other people; she ate meat and was not wearing the nun's habit, but a sleeveless dress. He even affirmed that she seemed to be exposing her breast: "sus pechos y tetas descubiertas" (her breast and nipples exposed). According to the priest Juan Vázquez, Doña Beatriz did not wear the black habit of a Benedictine nun; she attended "weddings, baptisms, and parties smartly dressed."

Not only did nuns leave their convents to attend celebrations, but it also seems that on some occasions the parties were held inside the monastic walls. This was claimed by some witnesses in the trial against the abbess of Albeos herself.⁵⁵ This abbess celebrated her daughter Francisca's wedding in the convent. Moreover, the celebration was not discreet, since "she celebrated it with drums in the convent and with a lot of people who had been invited" and there they were even given "loaves of bread and money, as was usual in this kingdom of Galicia when such weddings were held." Fernando Martínez states that he attended the wedding and saw the abbess give her daughter money, clothes, and trousseau from the convent. He says the dowry amounted to about fifteen or sixteen thousand maravedíes. He also mentions a property she had purchased for her daughter and provides more information about the wedding of doña Beatriz's daughter: "some of the guests had lunch in the cloister and some others in the church." Clearly the convent walls no more kept the nuns in as kept outsiders out.

Apparently, her daughter's wedding was not exceptional. According to Mencía Figueredo, her convent fellow, she had seen the abbess having lunch quite often with her

53 Zaragoza Pascual "Reforma de Lobás, Dozón y Ansemil," 105–6, doc. 12.

54 Zaragoza Pascual, "Proceso de reforma contra la abadesa de San Salvador de Albeos," 572, doc. 2.

55 Zaragoza Pascual, "Proceso de reforma contra la abadesa de San Salvador de Albeos," 568–89, docs. 2–13.

daughter and her son-in-law, with several clergymen, and with many other secular people. "They [the nuns] never had lunch in the nunnery, but dined together in the abbess's chambers for a year," since the refectory and the bedroom had collapsed because of the abbess's lack of attention. Juan Vázquez also stated that the nuns in Albeos ate and drank with their friends and stayed with them inside and outside the convent with full knowledge of the abbess. He knew this because "he had seen it many times."

Doña Beatriz's case does not seem to have been unique.⁵⁶ One of the witnesses who testified in the trial against doña Inés de Guitián, prioress of Pesqueiras, admitted to having seen her in "weddings, markets, parties, and baptisms outside the convent." Even there she did not give the impression of leading the sober or secluded life expected of a nun, but she took an active part in the celebration. The prioress participated in games and she even played nickname games at those parties where she behaved like other secular people. The same witness, Vasco de Marçaas, also stated that he had seen the prioress eating meat, wearing colourful clothes, and wearing a cloak as if she were a lay woman, that is, she wore it to weddings and parties. In addition to this, she did not keep to the cloister or the vow of silence.

The prioress admitted to "having attended weddings and baptisms and sometimes having had lunch there, although other times she went back to her convent for lunch." Doña Inés also stated that she lived alone in the nunnery, but sometimes secular and ecclesiastical people ate at her table. Regarding the vow of silence, she did not deny that they had not remained silent as they did not know that they had to because they had not been taught to.

Finally, the case of doña Constanza Vázquez de Somoza corroborates what we have seen so far: nuns' presence outside their nunneries including attending various celebrations.⁵⁷ In fact, the abbess of Lobios insists on presenting herself as a virtuous nun who "maintained Saint Benedict's order, who 'could read' and lead the nuns' religiosity as well as or even better than her predecessors did," although she could not sing because she was ill. She also states that she managed the convent income, dressed and fed the nuns and the other people who lived there, to whom she also paid their salaries, and also did not deny that "she went to weddings, baptisms, and inaugural masses many times, like her predecessors did." Furthermore, she says that she sometimes took chaplains or other nuns with her and that she sometimes ate there, but other times she did not. Aldonza Rodríguez, a nun in the nunnery, confirmed this: "this abbess sometimes attended weddings with other people but without nuns and at times she took some nuns, sometimes she sat and had lunch in those weddings, but other times she did not." She also mentions doña Constanza's active involvement in these celebrations, since "she sang and danced like other secular people did in those weddings."

It seems that socializing with their associates was commonplace for these nuns and did not seem contrary to their religious life. They seem aware that certain attitudes and

⁵⁶ Zaragoza Pascual, "Procesos de reforma contra la abadesa de Lobios y la priora de Pesqueiras," 365–72, docs. 5 and 7.

⁵⁷ Zaragoza Pascual, "Procesos de reforma contra la abadesa de Lobios y la priora de Pesqueiras," 373–76, docs. 8 and 9.

behaviour in their daily life broke rules, but they felt the rules were not being broken if they left the convent to go to ceremonies related to religious celebrations like baptisms or weddings. Enclosure, or isolation from the world, seems to have been alien to the experience of Benedictine nuns, at least before the Late Middle Ages. This is why it was not exceptional to see them outside the cloister, attending various celebrations and taking part in receptions, the most profane part of these parties, in which they were likely to socialize with other men and women.

The reformers were not just worried because the nuns associated with secular people outside their convents, but due to the clothes they wore. The fact that everyone recognized that the nuns did not observe the monastic Rule upset the reformers, who were also worried about the impression the nuns made, especially when they left their nunneries. Nuns should dress appropriately. As Benedictine nuns, called *touquinegras*, they should wear their black wimples, a habit dyed in black.

In the case of the abbess of Albeos, nun Mencía de Figuerado did confirm that “she wore a black habit on celebration days and when she went out.” However, this seemed to happen only when she left the cloister, as “she did not wear it on the other days.” Mencía also mentions that when the abbess arrived from Castille at the Santa María de Belvís convent in Santiago de Compostela, where she first lived, the future abbess of Albeos wore yellow clothes. So, breaking the rules on religious clothing occurred not only in the north-west of the Iberian Peninsula.⁵⁸ However, other witnesses do not remember seeing her with her habit outside the nunnery. Only priest Juan Vázquez says that “she was wearing a black veil, but she dressed up when she went to weddings, baptisms, and festivities.”⁵⁹

On balance, and tempering the information provided by witnesses in the reform trials, it seems that the lives of Galician Benedictine nuns did not mean enclosure, silence, or sobriety in food or clothing, at least at the end of the Middle Ages. The nuns wandered abroad, sometimes without their habits, and not only to go from one convent to another so as to manage their estate or the convent’s estate, but also to enjoy themselves with other women and men. Life took place beyond the walls and nuns also celebrated life as part of medieval society.

Nuns and Sex: Rumour or Fact?

Sex should have been alien to any religious woman,⁶⁰ at least once she joined a nunnery.⁶¹ However, the nuns’ deep social relationships that we have seen, and the existence of emotional ties to people around them must have allowed potential “affective–sexual relationships.” Although it is difficult to reconstruct the nuns’ feelings, the reformers’ docu-

58 Zaragoza Pascual, “Proceso de reforma contra la abadesa de San Salvador de Albeos,” 570.

59 Zaragoza Pascual, “Proceso de reforma contra la abadesa de San Salvador de Albeos,” 584.

60 Most ecclesiastical regulations throughout the Middle Ages emphasized the importance of keeping the vow of chastity. Constant reiteration, which we see in Galician synods, implies that the religious failed to comply. See Martínez Domínguez, *Os clérigos na Idade Media*, 25–69.

61 We need to be wary about children borne by monks and nuns, since some men and women entered monasteries after having been widowed or after reaching an agreement even when their

ments at the end of the Middle Ages prove sexual practice on the part of abbesses, implying that lay people could cross the monastic walls. Since the public was said to be aware of many of these relationships, the division created by the nunnery's walls did not mean that those who lived outside remained absolutely ignorant as to the realities and events happening inside. This explains why not only abbesses testified about their sex life, but also the nuns who lived with them inside the nunnery, some clergymen who crossed the monastic wall, and also other people who lived outside but who knew the people involved or had heard a repeated rumour. Were their statements true or false? While it is possible that some statements were based on fact, not necessarily all were true.

A series of statements given between the end of 1498 and January 1499 reveal information about three Galician nuns: the abbess of Lobios, the prioress of Pesqueiras, and the abbess of Albeos.⁶²

Under questioning, the abbess of Lobios, Doña Constanza Vázquez de Somoza, admitted that "she had committed some sins so far, but she had already confessed them to the prelate that she had earlier and to the confessors with whom she had made her confession and that she had been absolved and given a penance for them and she had fulfilled it." This explains why she mentioned that if they wanted her to testify about her alleged transgressions before a notary instead of testifying before a confessor, she preferred to seek a lawyer's legal advice and would testify only if he advised her to do so.

She answered another question by saying that she had never had "a friend," either a clergyman or secular man, but when she was asked if she had any children, she replied that "she had already said what she had to say on that matter." Was this one of her transgressions? Well, she stated that she did not supply her sons or daughters with income or money from the convent.

It is remarkable that doña Constanza testified that she "had heard somebody say that some of the nuns who were in the convent had friends, but she had never consented to it." She also said that "she had never seen them have or give birth to sons or daughters, and that she had heard that those friends were clergymen." So here the abbess admitted to possible affective-sexual relationships in her convent.

Doña Constanza seems to conceal the particulars. For this reason, the statements made by Aldonza Rodríguez, a nun in the Lobios convent, are of interest. This woman knew the abbess well, as she describes having spent between seven or eight years with her. She offers sensible answers and, unlike what happened with other abbesses, the nun seems to support doña Constanza.

Aldonza stated having heard from some people, "whose names she does not remember," that the abbess "had had friends and that she had had children with them, but she

spouses were still living. Consequently, many of these men and women had had children before they took their vows.

62 Statements about the abbess of Lobios are to be found in Zaragoza Pascual, "Procesos de reforma contra la abadesa de Lobios y la priora de Pesqueiras," 373–76, docs. 8–9; on Pesqueiras priory: Zaragoza Pascual, "Procesos de reforma contra la abadesa de Lobios y la priora de Pesqueiras," 365–72, docs. 5 and 7; and on the abbess of Albeos in Zaragoza Pascual, "Proceso de reforma contra la abadesa de San Salvador de Albeos," 568–89, docs. 2–13.

had not seen them and she did not know how many they were." She expanded her statement by saying that she had heard that an Archpriest had had children with doña Constanza and that they were in the convent and people said they were his. Aldonza admitted that some nights the Archpriest had entered the convent with other people, but she "did not know what he came for and what they did." Then there is her reference to the fact that "she saw someone giving clothes to two girls who were in the nunnery," who may have been the abbess's daughters.

The sex life of the abbess of Lobios had also surfaced in the lawsuit against Friar Fernando de Castelo, abbot of San Vicente del Pino, in Monforte de Lemos in 1498.⁶³ Friar Juan de Monforte, prior of San Pedro de Valverde, stated that he "had heard his servants say that the abbot slept with the abbess of Lobios and with the convent butler's wife."⁶⁴ He even said that the abbess had visited the Monforte monastery once and she had slept there, although at other times it was the abbot who went to the Lobios convent.⁶⁵ As we can see, the monastic walls were pervious and abbesses and abbots had opportunities to maintain sexual relationships both inside and outside the walls of their own monasteries or of others.

Doña Inés de Guitián was the last prioress of Pesqueiras and was similarly questioned. Among other irregularities, the prioress's sex life became an incentive to proceed against her. One of the witnesses was Vasco de Marçaas, a squire, who knew her well, having seen and talked to her many times. According to the squire's evidence, the prioress had an affair with her chaplain, Juan Rodríguez. He even stated that she had had a son and a daughter with her "friend," and he had seen them many times in the nunnery. She was pregnant "by her chaplain" when she moved to the convent in Santiago. The witness, who knew the abbess and the chaplain's children directly, had obtained this information from the chaplain himself. But proof that doña Inés was a mother strengthened when de Marçaas said that he "had heard" that Pero Gato had had a son or a daughter with her and everybody knew about it in the convent.

Doña Inés testified some days later. She stated flatly that she "had not had any friends or relationships with any men" before entering the Pesqueiras convent. However, when she was meant to answer the tenth question, namely "if she had had friends publicly or secretly after having been appointed prioress, and if they were religious men, friars or secular, married or single, and if she had had children with them and how many," the prioress asked to obtain advice from a lawyer and said that she would declare only what the lawyer advised her to declare. If doña Inés was reluctant to reveal information about her sex life, silence was certainly best. If it was true that the convent's neighbours were aware of her sexual past and her children, as Vasco de Marçaas had claimed, it would be difficult to hide the truth from the reformers. However, she was reluctant to incriminate herself, risk being banished from her convent, and her social networks and standing destroyed. Doña Inés stated rather that she had never given charters of land to "friends, sons, daughters, relatives, or any other people" in such a way that could harm the nunnery.

⁶³ Zaragoza Pascual, "Proceso de reforma contra el abad de Samos y Monforte."

⁶⁴ Zaragoza Pascual, "Proceso de reforma contra el abad de Samos y Monforte," 429, doc. 1.

⁶⁵ Zaragoza Pascual, "Proceso de reforma contra el abad de Samos y Monforte," 450, doc. 10.

The statements related to doña Beatriz Cabeza de Vaca, abbess of Albeos, describe an intense affective–sexual sociability with men in her milieu. Mencía de Figueredo, nun in the same convent, states that doña Beatriz had given birth to a son and a daughter before becoming an abbess. Her best documented daughter was the previously mentioned Francisca, who married Juan Rodríguez Pedregáns. Gregorio Rodríguez, related to Juan, was in fact one of the witnesses and not only did he confirm doña Beatriz's motherhood, but he also spoke about a certain Cristóbal Vaca, who was the abbess's son according to some people, or her nephew according to others.

It was said that the abbess of Albeos had “a bad reputation” due to her relationship with two clergymen and chaplains of the convent, Pero Vázquez and Vasco das Seixas. In fact, nun Mencía claimed that Vasco had injured Pero in the head and his hand. The statements made by other witnesses give the reason behind this attack: Doña Beatriz had affairs with both clergymen. One day the abbess was in bed with Pero when Vasco arrived. Vasco attacked and stabbed the abbess's other lover. The witnesses seem to be reliable and to have first-hand knowledge of the story. In fact, Gregorio de Sexemil claimed to have heard it from Pero Vázquez himself and to have helped mediate. Juan García de Novoa also stated that he saw both clergymen injured the following morning when he visited the convent. De Novoa also asserted that Vasco removed the abbess's clothes; the abbess then complained to the abbot of Crecente, a mile away, who replied that he would rather she were not such a “puta carcavera” (alley whore).

Fernando Martínez made it clear that jealousy was the reason for this attack when he stated that both clergymen “stabbed each other for her love.” This was also confirmed by clergyman Juan Vázquez, who declared that Vasco had struck and hurt Pero when he found him in her bed and that he had done it “for love of the abbess.” He added that the abbess had run away that night, but Juan said that he had convinced the abbess and Vasco to be “friends” again.

The relationship between the abbess and the clergyman Vasco appears complex, as many witnesses stated that he mistreated her. Not only did the nun Mencía, an eyewitness, confirm it, but also people far away, like Gregorio Rodríguez. He asserted that Lope Torto, the squire and servant of the count of Camiña had told him that “Vasco das Seixas punished that abbess and sometimes whipped her because he was jealous of others.”

Statements made by Vasco das Seixas himself have survived; he revealed that he had known the abbess for about fifteen years. The clergyman affirmed that doña Beatriz had given birth several times and he had even observed some dishonest people in the monastery, and the abbess had offered them food and drink at the monastery's expense. He confirmed that their relationship had lasted “six or seven years,” but they had not had sexual relations for the last five. He also described the encounter with Pero Vázquez: he “went into the bedroom where she was sleeping and he found her with Pero Vázquez, a clergyman.” In addition to admitting to the fight with the abbess's lover, he admitted that “he sometimes hurt the abbess,” but he said that it was “to punish her immoral behaviour,” but said nothing of jealousy being a motive.

Other names are mentioned as “friends” and lovers of the abbess and even as fathers of her children. Mencía de Figueredo said that she had given birth to a daughter whose father was Juan das Costas, a clergyman of San Xoan de Albeos, but she had died.

This information was confirmed by clergymen Juan Vázquez and Vasco das Seixas, and by the layman Gonzalo Ferreiro, who declared that she had given birth to that girl when she was the prioress of the nunnery.

The married layman Juan Ferreiro also appears as one of her possible lovers. We have evidence from Gonzalo Ferrero, Juan's son. Gonzalo said he had heard that his father had a relationship with the abbess and "his father and mother had frequent quarrels about it, but his aforesaid father always denied having slept with that damned abbess." Was this gossip or fact?

Reference to this abbess's sex life concludes with nun Mencias's assertion that the abbess "had been pregnant and given birth two other times."

According to these various witnesses, doña Beatriz Cabeza de Vaca had had sex and even children both before and after becoming the abbess of Albeos. Not only laymen but clergymen appear among her "amigos y enamorados" (friends and lovers), as Juan García de Novoa calls them. Her behaviour seemed to have been followed by other nuns, as Mencía de Figueredo stated that a prioress in the convent had given birth twice with the abbess's knowledge and consent.

Nuns' constant contact with their chaplains, confessors, and other clergymen explains the existence of affective-sexual relationships between them. The opportunities were numerous and this explains why, in 1498, reformers had asked the abbess of San Pedro de Lobás not to engage a man called Alonso Fernández as chaplain, but to seek another chaplain "who is over forty or fifty years old and who is honest." Was Alonso an attractive young man who might socialize excessively with nuns? The reformers also ordered the abbess not to let any men or women into the convent. They also instructed the nuns to not exit the convent, except to visit the orchard, which was located next to the nunnery wall. They could not converse with any men or women, except in the abbess's presence and with her permission. They recommended other methods using walls and locks as an attempt to isolate nuns.⁶⁶ By limiting the nuns' social contacts, the reformers would also restrict illicit sexual behaviour.

The detail with which witnesses mention names and describe events seems to demonstrate that we are facing true facts. It is possible that the witnesses who testified—nuns, clergymen, or laymen—may have been chosen by reformers because they were jealous of or had argued with the abbesses who were being prosecuted. However, I believe that the witnesses testified to daily realities which were not necessarily considered as unacceptable in the heart of a medieval society which did not set the nuns apart but integrated them into it; nuns maintained a deep sociability in their economic, familial, social, religious, and affective environment. This kind of sociability conflicted with the Benedictine rule, but often nuns scarcely knew it.⁶⁷ If we add lack of spirituality,

66 Zaragoza Pascual "Reforma de Lobás, Dozón y Ansemil," 89–91, doc. 2.

67 Doña Inés de Guitián, prioress of Pesqueiras, stated that "she had never seen nor read the Rule until she had entered San Paio [de Antealtares] convent," and she also said she lived in the same way as other abbesses and prioresses of the order did: Zaragoza Pascual, "Procesos de reforma contra la abadesa de Lobios y la priora de Pesqueiras," 371, doc. 7. Mencía de Figueredo also stated that "at that time I did not know what the Rule of Saint Benedict was or what it was like" and after

the isolation of some small rural monastic institution, barely supervised by ecclesiastical authorities throughout the Middle Ages, we can hypothesize that we should not be surprised if Galician abbesses and nuns had wide margins of freedom. We should not be surprised if nuns broke their vows of silence, poverty, or chastity.

The evidence so far of these nuns' sex life has been based on documents from reformers, but we have other less biased evidence of limited significance.⁶⁸

Let us now highlight the existence of many dispensations for illegitimacy, *super defectu natalium* or *de illegitimis*, granted by the papal Curia between 1449 and 1533.⁶⁹ We still possess about 1,408 dispensations which show the existence of illicit or extra-marital sexual relationships solely from the dioceses of Galicia. This number amounts to 15.6 percent of the total number granted across the Iberian Peninsula, and Galician dioceses are among the top twenty for the number of dispensations. In terms of mothers, most of them, namely 1,204 (82.5 percent) were single women; 158 (11.2 percent) were married women with children by a man other than their husbands; but only 22 (1.5 percent) were nuns.⁷⁰ We are interested in the following:

	Lugo	Mondoñedo	Ourense	Santiago	Tui	TOTAL
Benedictine abbess	0	0	0	0	1	1
Nun	2	0	0	1	0	3
Cistercian nun	0	0	1	0	0	1
Franciscan nun	0	0	0	1	0	1
Dominican nun	0	0	0	2	0	2
Augustinian nun	0	0	0	1	0	1
Benedictine nun	2	0	2	1	1	6
Poor Clare nun	0	0	4	0	1	5
Religious woman	1	0	1	0	0	2
TOTAL	5	0	8	6	2	22

Table 3.1: Illegitimacy dispensations granted to nuns, by Galician diocese, by the Papal Curia between 1449 and 1533.

The greater number of nunneries in the dioceses of Ourense, Santiago, and Lugo account for the greater number of children given birth to by nuns. We should stress that there is only one Benedictine abbess—an abbess in Tui—so table does not record any of

the prior told her what the rule entailed, she said “she did not have or keep anything about it”: Zaragoza Pascual, “Proceso de reforma contra la abadesa de San Salvador de Albeos,” 569, doc. 2.

68 In a letter of 1523 we find a reference to a “*vir* [man], Andrés, son of Inés de Quiroga, the abbess of Sobrado de Trives”: Zaragoza Pascual, “Noticias sueltas sobre la reforma de algunos monasterios benedictinos,” 211, doc. 5.

69 Aznar Gil, “Hijos ilegítimos en Galicia.”

70 We should add eight whose condition is unknown (2 from Lugo, 1 in Mondoñedo, 2 in Ourense, 2 in Santiago and 1 in Tui): Aznar Gil, “Hijos ilegítimos en Galicia,” 412–13.

the children mentioned in the lawsuits of 1499. However, we should emphasize that Benedictine nuns are the most highly represented, with a total of six cases.

The following chart lists who the mother and father of the children who asked for papal dispensation were:

	Lugo	Mondoñedo	Ourense	Santiago	Tui	TOTAL
Clergyman + Benedictine nun	0	0	0	1	0	1
Married man + Benedictine nun	0	0	0	0	1	1
Member of a military order + Poor Clare	0	0	0	0	1	1
Cistercian monk + Cistercian nun	0	0	1	0	0	1
Cistercian monk + Benedictine nun	0	0	1	0	0	1
Presbyter + nun	1	0	0	0	0	1
Presbyter + Dominican nun	0	0	0	2	0	2
Presbyter + Augustinian nun	0	0	0	1	0	1
Presbyter + Benedictine nun	1	0	1	0	0	2
Carmelite presbyter + nun	0	0	0	1	0	1
Augustinian presbyter + Poor Clare	0	0	1	0	0	1
Religious man + Religious woman	1	0	1	0	0	2
Franciscan religious + Poor Clare nun	0	0	1	0	0	1
Religious of the Order of Penance + Poor Clare	0	0	1	0	0	1
Single man + Benedictine Abbess	0	0	0	0	1	1
Single man + Franciscan nun	0	0	0	1	0	1
Single man + Nun	1	0	0	0	0	1
Single man + Benedictine nun	1	0	0	0	0	1
Single man + Poor Clare	0	0	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	5	0	8	6	3	22

Table 3.2: Details of the mother and father of children from nuns who asked for illegitimacy dispensation between 1449 and 1533, by Galician diocese.

The table presents a wide variety of situations: the children borne with single men are just five, only one is the result of a relationship with a married man, and most of the nuns' children were born after a sexual relationship with churchmen, either monks or priests.⁷¹ But they demonstrate relationships between nun and men, both inside and outside the convent.

⁷¹ Aznar Gil, "Hijos ilegítimos en Galicia," 418–20.

This data supports the possibilities of what was said by witnesses in the trials against Galician abbesses. But this data may underestimate this issue. Sexual intercourse might not end in pregnancy and pregnancies might end in abortions. Moreover, not all the children of nuns asked for dispensations for illegitimacy.⁷² Clearly we cannot make a general assessment about how widespread sexual relationships were among nuns. But sex was a natural consequence of, and perhaps also a reason for, the nuns' relationships with men in their vicinity, both laymen and ecclesiastics.

Conclusions

In the eyes of a layman, beyond the convent wall there lived a group of women who, despite devoting themselves to pray for everybody's souls and lead a contemplative life, invested great importance in their daily lives to a wide range of relationships, both within the convent and permeating its walls. In the eyes of the nuns, beyond the wall there were not only the material bases they had to manage so as to be able to subsist and to devote themselves to a life of prayer, but also the world with which they could not stop interacting and with which they did not want to stop being in touch. Their families and the authorities they needed to defend them were out there, and also their neighbours, friends, and properties.

As we have seen, the aristocratic origin of a considerable number of abbesses in medieval Galicia and the feudal character of these institutions are key in understanding how power lay at the heart of social relationships inside and outside the cloister. Beyond the exercise of economic and jurisdictional power which took them out of the cloister, there were also other personal and profane reasons which resulted in the nuns' presence beyond the wall. These religious women were part of society and this is especially evident if we consider their presence at celebrations such as weddings and baptisms. Festivities were a reality in the life of medieval women and men. According to our sources, they featured too in the social life of medieval nuns.

Affective–sexual relationships developed too, perhaps the result of their wide relationships with men in their milieu. The existing closeness between the convent chaplains and clergymen and the nuns seems to have given rise to sexual relationships, and sometimes to the birth of children. Rumour and evidence both show that these relationships could also arise between nuns and laymen, which once again proves the fragility of the monastic walls as a physical border between nuns and the world.

Power, parties, and sex are causes and consequences of the nuns' sociability. However, it is important to mention that while "power sociability" has been recorded across a wide number of documents, nuns' affective–sexual relationships and their participation in celebrations are recorded more exceptionally, often through gossip and thanks to the processes of reform initiated to dismiss abbesses. Moreover, this kind of sociability

72 Note that just eight out of the 108 dispensations given in Galicia were for women: Aznar Gil, "Hijos ilegítimos en Galicia," 422. Did nuns only have sons and no daughters? The examples which we have studied show that this is not true. We have noted the case of Francisca, daughter of the abbess of Albeos.

was more complex. Depending on the person or group with whom nuns and their convents interacted, we can distinguish between upward, horizontal, and downward-facing relationships. Their social contact could be direct or personal on the part of the nuns themselves; and indirect, such as through notaries, based on the exchange and the drawing up of documents.

It is unquestionable that many nuns' social relationships favoured their full integration as women and as feudal ladies into medieval society. These relationships also explain the close links which compelled men and women who lived near the convents to support them and even physically fight the reformers, as happened in San Salvador de Sobrado de Trives⁷³ during the monastic reform started in Galicia by the Catholic Monarchs. It also explains why members of the nobility helped abbesses who escaped from the cloister in San Paio de Antealtares to return to their convents.⁷⁴ These are testimony to deep and successful relationships of Galician nuns throughout the Middle Ages. When reformers attacked these nuns' way of life and especially their social relationships, the strength of these century-old ties between religious women and their environment surfaced.

Although ecclesiastical rhetoric speaks repeatedly of the necessity of nuns' seclusion and enclosure, the documents preserved about some nunneries in Galicia in the Late Middle Ages prove that the enclosure favoured by ecclesiastical authorities was one desired only by them, and was far from reality. The nuns cast their influence and relationships beyond the monastic wall while on other occasions they let others through the walls to approach them. There was great permeability in the monastic wall, and this is a reflection, cause, and consequence of the social life of medieval nuns. That is why it has proved interesting to study the power they wielded, the celebrations they attended, and their affective–sexual relationships, among other aspects of their sociability. Nuns were part of medieval society, a society of men and women in constant flux and interaction.

73 Apart from this episode, according to which ten or twelve armed men hit the reformers (Archivo General de Simancas, Registro General del Sello, Leg. 149901, 274), some months later friar Rodrigo de Valencia tried to visit the convent at Sobrado de Trives again in order to implement the reform, but he did not achieve it "because there were a lot of armed people in the convent who were in favour of the abbess." Colombás, *Las Señoras de San Payo*, 35.

74 "Those abbesses with the support from the Countess of Camiña and other people have entered the convents and eat and distribute its rents": García Oro, *La reforma de los religiosos españoles*, 56 and 538, doc. 443.

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