

Old Age and Generations in Monastic Communities in Northwest Spain

Abstract

The monasteries of medieval Galicia (Northwest Spain) comprised, like those of the West as a whole, intergenerational societies. Children, adolescents, adults and the elderly lived together in them. Children are only documented as having lived in Spanish monasteries until the 12th century. The older monks maintained a role of vigilance with the *oblato* and with the monks of other ages, ensuring internal order. Within the monasteries, elderly people could be found who can be grouped into different categories: Firstly, there were the monks who had reached old age. But there were also lay people who, having reached an advanced age, decided to enter a monastery to spend there their last years of life, thanks to the formula of the *familiaritas*. The reasons that led them to make this decision varied and could include the desire for improved personal security, health care and spiritual care. This makes monasteries a kind of precedent for modern nursing homes. The panorama is somewhat different in the 14th and 15th centuries. The *familiaritas* has disappeared but, instead, we can show that a number of the monks managed to reach an advanced age. In this case, we can even compare the life expectancy of monks and nuns by studying the length of the mandates of abbots and abbesses. From this analysis, we can conclude that the nuns lived longer than the monks.

1 Introduction

Those familiar with the Early Middle Ages know how important monastic documentation is. It is, without a doubt, our main window for attempting to visualise society during those centuries. A window which, however, is still only precisely that. A viewpoint that focuses on only part of the landscape, without encompassing an image of society as a whole. Starting with this caution may seem unnecessary and exaggerated. I would rather, however, prefer to err on the side of caution than to make the mistake of assimilating the part with the whole. Monastic sources, for example, have a clear social bias. Most monasteries were aristocratic foundations, and their members were often also members of these elite groups. In their documents, simple peasants and other humble people are

mentioned but, when they are, it is normally to record a relationship of domination, and never as them being the protagonists of the documented information. I would like to proceed with a second introductory caution, in this case of a spatial type. I am not going to refer to the whole of the medieval West but rather to a specific area: the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula, more specifically present-day Galicia. This region possibly sheltered the first 'Germanic' kingdom that emerged in the territory of the Western Roman Empire: the *Regnum Suevorum*.¹ A Galicia which, from the 9th century onwards, became increasingly known in Christendom for housing the supposed remains of the Apostle Saint James. In medieval studies concerning Galicia, the economic and social aspects of monasticism have been the centre of interest. The other dimensions of monastic life, however, have received less attention. Among these neglected issues are the topics of old age and intergenerational relationships, the analysis of which has only recently started.

2 The Early Middle Ages. Oblates and Elderly Monks

Individuals of all ages were present in monastic communities. Perhaps most surprisingly, seen from our modern perspective, was the presence of children as a part of monastic life. Many of them would have entered the monasteries as *oblato*.² They were children offered to the Church by their parents at a tender age, usually at the age of seven, in the hope that when they reached maturity, they would opt for their future life as monks. These minors had a very similar lifestyle to that of the adult monks, although they had more relaxed schedules and were not as strictly subject to fasting and other food restrictions. These little 'apprentice monks' were linked to the older members of the community in several ways: For example, the children's dormitory was guarded by elderly monks, and the children served and helped the older members of the community in the refectory.

Trained as monks and by monks, the children who lived in the mediaeval monasteries were still precisely that, namely children. On occasions, monastic written records refer to their behaviour as 'naughty', or at least 'reckless'. A recklessness which, at times, had serious consequences. One of these cases, which has frequently been mentioned, consisted of starting a fire that led to the destruction of the monastery. One of several scenarios that could arise, is described in the preserved documents of the small Galician monastery of San Pedro de Rocas, that was located in the province of Ourense. The

1 Pablo C. Díaz, *El reino suevo (411–585)*, Madrid 2011 (Akal universitaria).

2 Mayke de Jong, In Samuel's Image. Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West, Leiden-New York-Köln 1996 (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 12).

document dates from 1007 and was written on the occasion of the restoration of the monastery.³ The writer describes, as is usual in this type of text, a history of the monastery and in it we find the information that interests us. The monastery had to be rebuilt and repopulated by monks, because it had been destroyed by fire. The text speaks for itself in describing the circumstances surrounding the event: “per negligentiam puerorum qui ibi in scola aduc degentes literas legebant, domus ipse ab igne de nocte est succensa” (“due to the negligence of the children that learned their letters there in the school, the house was destroyed by fire during the night”). It goes on to state that the monastery was completely destroyed, including the historic texts conserved in the archive. Children started to be mentioned more rarely and only on very singular occasions from the end of the 12th century onward. The main reason for this, is that entry into the monastery was delayed until adolescence, with novices taking over from the oblates as the youngest members of the community.⁴ As a result, children, teenagers, adults, and the elderly all made up monastic societies. It is this last group, the elderly, that will be the focus of our attention from now on.

Some of the elders who lived under the protection of medieval monasteries were, of course, the monks themselves who had grown old. The monastic rules are very detailed in terms of the information they contain about them, referring to their diet as well as to the demands of their schedule. Both with respect to diet and schedule, they received a gentler treatment than did the rest of the community. For example, in the Order of Saint Fructuosus, established in the northwest Iberian Peninsula in the 7th century, it is specified that the oldest monks have to sleep in their own cells, the access to which was forbidden to the rest of the community. In it, the elderly could even eat their meals away from the community.⁵ Far from being perceived as a means of alienation, this can be considered a privilege, as a sign of the special treatment that elderly monks should receive.

The Benedictine Order, in turn, paid a little less attention to old monks. They are equated with children and given the special treatment they require.⁶ In spite of this

3 El monasterio de San Pedro de Rocas y su colección documental, ed. by Emilio Duro Peña, Ourense 1973 (Publicaciones del Instituto de Estudios Orensanos “Padre Feijóo” 2), p. 134.

4 José Miguel Andrade Cernadas, Las edades del hombre en los monasterios benedictinos y cistercienses. De la infancia a la vejez, in: José Angel García de Cortazar / Ramon Teja (Eds.), El ritmo cotidiano de la vida en el monasterio medieval, Aguilar de Campóo 2015, pp. 111–142, at p. 136.

5 Julián Campos, Santos Padres españoles. San Leandro, San Isidoro y San Fructuosus, Madrid 1971.

6 Georges Minois, Histoire de la vieillesse de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance, Paris 1987, p. 125.

common consideration, the attention given to the elderly by the Benedictine Order was much less than that given to children. However, we know that they were regarded as special advisers to abbots, and as experts of the collective and institutional memory of their monasteries. In addition, they sometimes played a very important role in certain lawsuits and judicial disputes. Finally, they were considered as guarantors of certain virtues and the maintenance of order, as evidenced by their role as watchmen in the common bedroom, or the role they played in introducing adolescents to the rules of the community. The 63rd chapter of the Benedictine Rule contains a paragraph worth mentioning: “*Iuniores igitur priores suos honorent, priores minores suos diligant. In ipsa appellatione nominum nulli liceat alium puro appellare nomine, sed priores iuniores suos fratrum nomine, iuniores autem priores suos nonnos vocent, quod intelligitur paterna reverentia*”.⁷

An example of the old monk embodying the authorized voice of the community can be found in a hagiographic text written in 12th century Galicia. I here refer to the “*Vita Rudesindi*”, which narrates the life and miracles of Saint Rudesind.⁸ The protagonist of this story was a Galician bishop in the 10th century who was, besides many other activities, an active founder of monastic houses, with one standing out above all the rest: Celanova, a powerful institution from the outset, where Rudesind himself lived for most of his life.⁹ In one of the accounts of his miracles, it is said that a nobleman had taken possession of Celanova and subjected its monks to all kinds of hardships. One day, the nobleman decided that the community would not receive the usual dinner, which greatly angered the monks. The protest was led and embodied by a very old monk, who went to the tomb of Saint Rudesind and hit it with his cane, pleading and demanding that the saint come to the aid of his monks. That same night, the violent nobleman died in great pain, and his followers quickly abandoned the monastery. The old monk was regarded as being closer to God. Therefore, his voice was better heard and the saint intervened quickly and favourably.

7 *Regula sancti patris Benedicti*, ed. by Edmund Schmidt, Regensburg 1880 (*Vita et regula sancti patris Benedicti 2*), ch. LXIII, p. 65. “The juniors, therefore, should honour their seniors, and the seniors love their juniors. In the very manner of address, let no one call another by the mere name; but let the seniors call their juniors Brothers, and the juniors call their seniors Fathers, by which is conveyed the reverence due to a father” (own translation).

8 Ordoño de Celanova, *Vida y milagros de San Rosendo*. Edición, traducción y estudio, ed. by Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz / María Virtudes Pardo Gómez / Daría Vilariño Pintos / José Carro Otero, A Coruña 1990 (*Galicia histórica*).

9 José Miguel Andrade Cernadas / Manuel Castiñeiras / Francisco Singul (Eds.), *Rudesindus. San Rosendo. Su tiempo y su legado*, Santiago 2009.

It is possible that the presence of elderly monks may be seen as a reflection of the average life expectancy of monks, which was higher than that of the rest of society at the time. One can assume that they were better nourished than most of their contemporaries: it is no coincidence that all monastic rules deal with matters relating to food in great detail.¹⁰ On the other hand, and as I will explain shortly, they received considerably more meticulous medical and welfare supervision than did most of their contemporaries. In addition, we imagine that they were more protected, in principle, from violence or war. All this leads us to surmise that the monastic communities would have had a percentage of elderly people among their members that was clearly higher than the average for their society.

But while all this is relevant, what is most significant in historical terms is the role that monasteries acquired from an early stage on as, in the words of Minois, “the first blueprint for an old people’s home, a shelter and a ghetto at the same time”.¹¹ Many of the Spanish monasteries prior to the end of the 11th century were what we could roughly define as “family monasteries”. Abbeys were founded, and in one way or another led, by aristocratic groups with a half patrimonial and half spiritual purpose.¹² This type of monastery also used to serve as a place of retreat for the elders of the founding family. The case of the widows of these aristocratic groups has been studied in particular detail. Many of them were integrated into a kind of specific clerical category, the “order of widows”, *ordo viduarum*, while others passed into the category of *famula Dei*, which was something like the equivalent of nuns.¹³ This allowed them to be near the place of burial of their predecessors, to remain close to their families with whom there must have been regular contact, as the cloistering was far from strict, or to have guaranteed medical care and assistance. All this was in addition to their very important function as establishers

10 Antoni Riera i Melis, Alimentación y ascetismo en la Edad Media. Génesis de la dietética benedictina, in: Marina Miquel i Vives/Margarida Sala (Eds.), *Tiempo de monasterios. Los monasterios de Cataluña en torno al año Mil*, Barcelona 2000, pp. 140–167.

11 Minois, *Histoire de la vieillesse* (see note 6), p. 186.

12 For information on Galician monasteries it is worth reading, Ermelindo Portela/María del Carmen Pallarés Méndez, Elementos para el análisis de la aristocracia altomedieval de Galicia. Parentesco y patrimonio, in: *El Museo de Pontevedra* 43 (1989), pp. 39–54.

13 Emmanuelle Santinelli, *Des femmes éplorées? Les veuves dans la société aristocratique du haut Moyen Âge*, Villeneuve-d’Ascq 2003 (*Histoire et civilisations*).

of monasteries and churches and curators of the memory of the family, which are topics that have recently been studied in some depth.¹⁴

It should be remembered that, well into the 11th century, monasteries were practically the only places where medicine was studied and practiced with a minimal academic basis.¹⁵ The emergence of medical schools such as those in Salerno or Montpellier, the reception of Arab-Islamic medicine and, finally, the emergence of universities, would put an end to the monopoly of the monastic cloisters on medicine. In spite of this, especially in many of the European regions lacking a university of reference or an urban framework of minimum size, the role played by the monks and their monasteries in terms of medical knowledge and care continued to be the only alternative to traditional medicine and quackery. This characteristic is undoubtedly one of the reasons why many people decided to spend the last years of their lives under the protection of the monastic orders. Besides this, there can be no doubt that reasons of a strictly spiritual nature should also be taken into account. In other words, confidence in the unique value of the monks' prayers and assimilation into their community in the final stages of life was seen as being beneficial: being able to profess as monks and nuns was considered to be a good credential for a smooth transition to the Hereafter. Finally, it should be remembered that many of the elderly who chose to seclude themselves in monasteries did so because, like so many of our elders today, they probably lacked a family of their own, or because the family they had was unwilling or unable to care for them. And so, the 'monastery option', considered as a care home *ante litteram*, was the best way for many people to ensure that they had access to food, clothing, and both physical and spiritual care.

The system by which these elders entered the monasteries was known as *familiaritas*, meaning that they became a part of the monastic family. It was a contractual relationship, by which the people who intended to enter a community gave part of their belongings (and in rare cases, all of them) to the monastery and were welcomed as brothers and sisters, relatives, partners or *prebendarii*.¹⁶ The family member then went on to have the doors of the community open for religious life. Even so, this situation did not separate him or her fully from the lay life outside the cloister, although he or she had the possibility of finally taking holy orders as a monk or nun. In this case we are talking about

14 Therese Martin (Ed.), *Reassessing the Role of Women as 'Makers' of Medieval Art and Architecture*, 2 vols., Leiden-Boston 2012 (*Visualising the Middle Ages* 7).

15 Guenter B. Risse, *Mending Bodies, Saving Souls. A History of Hospitals*, New York-Oxford 1999, p. 104.

16 Charles de Miramon, *Embrasser l'état monastique à l'âge adulte (1050–1200)*. Étude sur la conversion tardive, in: *Annales* 54 (1999), pp. 825–849.

a “late vocation”, a formula that became consolidated and expanded from the 12th century onwards.

We will now turn to the documentation from the northwest Iberian Peninsula, to see how this situation was embodied in specific cases. Few references for the 9th to 11th centuries have been found: in fact, there are only seven. Four are from the documentary archive of the monastery of Samos,¹⁷ two from the collection of the abbey of Celanova,¹⁸ and one from the “Liber Fidei” from the Cathedral of Braga in Portugal.¹⁹ Two of these examples refer to married couples and inheritance. In the year 931, Elarino and Gundilo, a couple who presented themselves as “exigui serui uestri”, made a donation in favour of the abbey of Samos. In the preamble to the document, and as a justification for their action, they stated that “deuenimus in senectute absque filios” (“we have reached old age, without having had children”).²⁰ A very similar case was the donation made in 978 by Hermenegildo, who refers to himself as the *famulus* of the monastery of Samos, and his wife Eldonza. This couple had been married for a long time (“essemus in coniugio per annos plurimos”) and, like the previous couple, had no children. For this reason, and relying on what the “Lex Gotica” specified in this regard, they could freely dispose of their patrimony, which they intended to donate to the above-mentioned monastery.²¹ In both cases, we can infer that the donors expected more from Samos than the intermediation of the monks through their prayers. In the case of two elderly, childless couples, the option of joining a monastery, or taking part in its welfare and clientele network, seems to have been the most plausible reason.

Much more precise, in this respect, are our third and fourth examples. Both date from the 11th century, and it comes as no surprise that this was the period when the effective establishment of many of these elders in monasteries, in different ways, is most clearly noted. The first of these documents is from around the year 1080. Pelayo Velasco, who describes himself as “exiguus et inutilis”, makes a donation of half of his possessions to the abbey of Samos. Although he is not clearly identified as being an old man, the fact that he is already a grandfather could indicate this. In addition, the *quid pro quo* that Pelayo hopes to obtain from the monastery that receives his donation, also seems to endorse the fact that he was an old man. What were his intentions? He asks to be admitted

17 El Tombo de San Julián de Samos (siglos VIII–XII), ed. by Manuel Lucas Álvarez, Santiago 1985.

18 O Tombo de Celanova, ed. by José Miguel Andrade Cernadas, Santiago 1995.

19 Liber Fidei Sanctae Bracarensis Ecclesiae, ed. by Avelino de Jesús da Costa, Braga 1978.

20 El Tombo, ed. by Lucas Álvarez (see note 17), p. 119.

21 Ibid., p. 132.

to the monastery, where he will receive temporary sustenance in the form of food and clothing: "... pro quod me colligitis in ipsum monasterium ... ad habitandum ... et pro eo quod mihi datis subsidium temporale, tegumentum et victum".²² This latter request is clearly detailed in the document, and provides us with information on the variety of clothes and fabrics available to the members of the monastic communities, and the power of attraction they could have had for the lay people who joined them. Equally precise were the demands of a woman called Meirina. According to a Portuguese document dating from 1072, she made a gift to the monastery of Santo Estêvão de Faiões, situated close to the city of Chaves. In exchange for her gift, she requests of the monks that "gubernetis et vestiatis me in mea senectute et sepelliatis",²³ in other words, that they attend to her and dress her in her old age and attend to her burial.

Not only lay people used these formulas of familiarity; they can also be found among the priests. An example is that of the Father Ermorigo. In 1090 he made a donation to a church belonging to the monastery of Celanova. The explanation of his act is due "pro post beneficia que mihi in hunc locum in senectute mea vigarii de Cellanova faciunt".²⁴ In other words, the representatives or curates of the monastery would have looked after the old man, who wished to compensate them with his donation. Finally, it seems clear that the choice of this formula had a clear social bias. Apart from spiritual motivations, it seems that those who took advantage of it had some kind of patrimony to offer to the monasteries. At the very least, only the monasteries have left behind written evidence. The fate of the majority of the elderly in these centuries is simply unknown to us and, as Homet recalled, the percentage of those cared for by their families is impossible to determine.²⁵

3 The "Golden Age" of the Elderly? The Late Middle Ages

If we move forward in time and examine the Late Middle Ages, we find an era in which the elderly lived what Georges Minois has defined as their "golden age".²⁶ The percentage

22 Ibid., pp. 309–310.

23 Liber Fidei, ed. by da Costa (see note 19), p. 360.

24 O Tombo, ed. by Andrade Cernadas (see note 18), p. 609.

25 Raquel Homet, *Los viejos y la vejez en la Edad Media*. Sociedad e imaginário, Rosario 1997, p. 120.

26 Minois, *Histoire de la vieillesse* (see note 6), p. 278.

of elderly people in society as a whole grew in comparison to previous periods²⁷. In addition, the demographic calamity of the 14th century, which seemed to have been especially vicious to the young, meant that the opinions and knowledge of the elderly were especially valued. Considering this background, we should turn our attention to the monasteries once again. Thanks to the fact that late medieval documentation is much more abundant and diversified, it is possible to learn more about the life of the people of that time. The records tell us how long the abbots and abbesses were in charge, and from this one can assess how long they lived. This, in turn, permits us to confirm that there were relatively frequent cases of office holders with great longevity.

It is true that, as previously mentioned, the general living conditions of the members of the monastic communities were considerably better than those of most of the population. However, on the other hand, it seems that they were much more exposed to the spread of some of the serious illnesses that had plagued the West since the mid-14th century than was the rest of society. By this time, both male and female monasticism were clearly defined and differentiated, allowing us to compare the average duration of the terms of office of abbots and abbesses in monasteries and in nunneries. In order to ascertain the average length of the terms of office of abbots in monasteries, we have used the cases of the Benedictine communities of Celanova²⁸ and Samos²⁹ plus the Cistercian community of San Clodio do Ribeiro³⁰. For the nunneries, we have used the documentation of the Benedictine nunnery of San Pedro de Ramirás³¹ and that of the Cistercian nuns of Santa María de Ferreira de Pantón³². The details, broken down by centuries, are shown below. Findings from the 10th and 11th centuries are compared with those from the 14th and 15th centuries (see table 1).

27 Minois, *Histoire de la vieillesse* (see note 6), p. 277–327; Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*. “Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain”, London-New York 1997, p. 33.

28 Colección diplomática do Mosteiro de San Salvador de Celanova (ss. XIII–XV), ed. by María Beatriz Vaquero Díaz, Santiago 2004.

29 Ernest Zaragoza i Pascual, *Abadologio del monasterio de San Julián de Samos* (ss. VIII–XX), in: *Estudios Mindonienses* 12 (1996), pp. 469–503.

30 *El monasterio de San Clodio do Ribeiro en la Edad Media. Estudio y documentos*, ed. by Manuel Lucas Álvarez/Pedro Lucas Domínguez, Sada 1996 (Galicia medieval. Fontes).

31 *San Pedro de Ramirás. Un monasterio femenino en la Edad Media. Colección diplomática*, ed. by Manuel Lucas Álvarez/Pedro Lucas Domínguez, Santiago de Compostela 1988.

32 *Colección diplomática del monasterio de Santa María de Ferreira de Pantón*, ed. by José Ignacio Fernández de Viana, Lugo 1995.

Tab.: Average Years of Tenure of Abbots and Abbesses in Galician Monasteries (10th–15th Centuries)

Name of Monastery/Nunnery	Average Years of Tenure of Abbots/ Abbesses (10 th Century)	Average Years of Tenure of Abbots/ Abbesses (11 th Century)	Average Years of Tenure of Abbots/ Abbesses (14 th Century)	Average Years of Tenure of Abbots/ Abbesses (15 th Century)
Samos (Benedictine monastery)	19	9	20.8	11.2
Celanova (Benedictine monastery)	25	18	9.5	37
San Clodio do Ribeiro (Cistercian monastery)	–	–	9.8	29.5
Santa María de Ferreira de Pantón (Cistercian nunnery)	–	–	15	44.5
San Pedro de Ramirás (Benedictine nunnery)	–	–	18	24
Mean: Average Years of Tenure (monasteries)	22	13.5	13.4	25.9
Mean: Average Years of Tenure (nunneries)	–	–	16.5	34.3

The comparison between the two periods is not as striking as one would expect in principle. Only the data from the 15th century indicate that the longevity of the abbots was clearly superior to that of the early medieval period.

When focusing on the Late Middle Ages, it is important to start by noting that the data from the 14th century should be interpreted with some caution. In several of the monasteries studied, this was a time of great turbulence. For much of this century, San Clodio, for example, was almost totally dependent on a noble family, in this case, the powerful Sarmiento family. This loss of independence, together with a clear relaxation of the observance of their spiritual rules, led to the decline of the various functions of the abbey, for example the care for the sick and elderly. Something similar must have happened in Celanova. Throughout the 14th century, there were twelve different abbots, one after another, and one finds fewer periods in which there is no abbot mentioned in the documentation, as opposed to others, when there were two abbots at the same time. The case of Samos is virtually the opposite; the abbots succeeded each other without interruptions, and two of the abbots of that period were in office for more than 30 years, while another was in power for more than 20. It should also be noted that the two abbots who were in power following the arrival of the Black Death of 1348, Rui González (1343–1367) and Arias González (1368–1403), were precisely among the longest serving of the

century.³³ This may well indicate that the disease did not have very harmful effects on this community, if indeed it was affected in any way at all.

The image of the selected nunneries is also one of remarkable stability and relative longevity. In both cases, the average tenure of the abbesses is far greater than that of the abbots, although only during the 14th century. This perceptible difference allows us to address the question of whether women lived longer than men in the late Middle Ages. There are several authors who speak of an early medieval period in which men seemed to live longer, while they noted an increase in the lifespan of women in the final part of the medieval period.³⁴ Several demographic studies confirm this trend in female longevity. It is now more than 30 years since David Herlihy revealed how in several urban areas of Switzerland, France and Germany, in the 15th century, the female population surpassed the male population with ratios ranging from 109–120 women per 100 men.³⁵

In the specific case of gender-differentiated longevity within the monastic world, diet could be one of the possible causes for this difference. The male communities of the Late Middle Ages lost, to a large extent, the healthy and austere dietary rules imposed by the Benedictine Order. On the contrary, they went on to eat in a very similar way to the secular nobility: high levels of consumption of animal proteins, high fat intake, and increased levels of alcohol consumption. Barbara Harvey, studying the Benedictine community of Westminster during the medieval period, observes how the variety and quantity of meat dishes consumed by the monks is something that equates them with the aristocrats of the time.³⁶ Moreover, it is not only a question of quality but also of quantity. The copious diet and the lack of physical activity of the monks lead to the assumption that a significant part of the community would have suffered from obesity and, consequently, from the health problems resulting from it.

Without having the same abundance of sources used by Harvey, we can assert that the dietary behaviour of the Galician monks during the period in question coincides, basically, with what we have described above. On the contrary, the female communities, although less well studied in dietary aspects, seem to have maintained a more balanced and healthy diet than that of the monks, which could have undoubtedly had repercussions for a general state of health that was much more favourable to reaching old

33 Zaragoza i Pascual, *Abadologio* (see note 29), p. 476.

34 Minois, *Histoire de la vieillesse* (see note 6), p. 294.

35 David Herlihy, *Life Expectancies for Women in Medieval Society*, in: Rosemary T. Morewedge (Ed.), *The Role of Woman in the Middle Ages*, Albany 1975, pp. 1–22, at pp. 12–13.

36 Barbara Harvey, *Living and Dying in England. 1100–1540. The Monastic Experience*, Oxford 1995, p. 52.

age. Furthermore, it should be considered that, without necessarily offering an image of extreme cloistering, the nunneries had less contact with the outside world, which would have protected them, to a greater extent than the monks, from possible infection and disease. Finally, we should also take into account that the nunneries suffered less than the monasteries from the wave of violent incidents, especially those involving the Galician nobility, which affected cloistered life during most of the Late Middle Ages. Beyond the average lifespan of abbesses, we find some unique cases of longevity. For example, the last two medieval abbesses of Ferreira de Pantón bear witness to this. Constanza Pérez controlled the nunnery for 39 years, while her successor, María López, was abbess for half a century.³⁷ In Ramirás we find similar cases. The first abbess of the 14th century, María Fernández IV, is documented as being such between 1295 and 1339, i. e. almost 44 years. The most remarkable case of longevity, however, is found in the life of Ona Beatriz Álvarez, who headed the community of Ramirás between June 1420 and June 1472, meaning that she was abbess for 52 years.³⁸

4 Concluding Remarks

The increasing numbers of the elderly and the profound changes in society as a consequence of the crisis of the Late Middle Ages, affected what up until that point had been the traditional means of providing care for and attention to the elderly³⁹. The greater social influence of the elderly was not always accompanied by a parallel effort to better care for them: for example, monastic institutions seem to have abandoned or at least relaxed their option to provide charity and shelter to the elderly in the later centuries of the Middle Ages. For all these reasons, it is not surprising that, at that time, new ways of caring for the elderly appeared, for example new forms of contracts and hospitals, and other forms of caregiving became more widespread, for example within the family. Most of them no longer had anything to do with the monastic world, in contrary to the situation in the previous five centuries. The presence of elderly people in monasteries, with the exception of the monks themselves, became a memory of the past. The monasteries of modern and contemporary times lost their welfare character and caregiving functions that had been typical of them for much of the medieval period. The closure to the

37 Colección diplomática, ed. by Fernández de Viana (see note 32), p. 346.

38 San Pedro de Ramirás, ed. by Lucas Álvarez/Lucas Domínguez (see note 31), p. 619.

39 Cf., for example, Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound. Peasant Families in Medieval England*, New York-Oxford 1986, p. 232.

secular world and a high degree of seclusion marked the monastic panorama during the centuries that followed the Middle Ages.

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