

Cistercian Nunneries in Aragon and Castile (12th-15th Centuries): New Institutional Perspectives

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Abstract: Long underestimated, and more important for Cistercian nunneries than for male Cistercian abbeys, aristocratic patronage played a primary role in the institutional situation of these communities. In Aragon and Castile, it gave them considerable autonomy from the authority of the Cistercian Order, and from that of other ecclesiastical and secular powers. Therefore, they did not need any form of self-organized federation in order to confront them and, indeed, their mutual contacts were more rare than has long been thought. Their ability to deal with the growing pressure of Cistercian authority over time depended on the continuation of patronage in the late Middle Ages. Royal patronage, as in Las Huelgas of Burgos, was merely an exception to the norm.

Keywords: women's studies; Cistercian studies; women religious; monastic studies; patronage.

Abadías femeninas cistercienses en Aragón y Castilla (siglos XII-XV): nuevas perspectivas institucionales

Resumen: Infravalorado durante mucho tiempo, y más importante para las abadías cistercienses femeninas que para las masculinas, el patronazgo aristocrático desempeñó el papel más importante para determinar la posición ocupada por una comunidad en las instituciones medievales. En Aragón y en Castilla, el patronazgo ofreció a las comunidades mucha autonomía respecto a la autoridad de la Orden cisterciense y de otros poderes eclesiásticos o seculares. Por tanto, no necesitaban ninguna forma de federación autoorganizada para hacerles frente, y sus contactos mutuos eran más escasos de lo que se ha pensado durante mucho tiempo. Su capacidad para resistir a la creciente presión de la autoridad cisterciense a lo largo del tiempo dependió de la continuidad de este patronazgo en la Baja Edad Media. El patronazgo real, como en Las Huelgas de Burgos, era sólo una excepción a la norma.

Palabras clave: estudios de las mujeres; estudios cistercienses; mujeres religiosas; estudios monásticos; patronazgo.

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This contribution is intended to offer a new synthesis of the research I have been carrying out for more than twenty-five years concerning the situation of the Cistercian nunneries in the Crowns of Aragon and Castile, based on the analysis of diplomatic sources. This will bring to light new material and change the point of view of the former synthesis that I wrote about Cistercian nunneries in Castile (Baury 2017), in Aragon (Baury 2023a), and concerning abbeys of both genders in Castile (Baury 2019) and in Aragon (Baury 2021a). I will emphasize here the main specificity of these communities, i.e., their belonging to the Cistercian Order, which has several direct institutional implications. This article will also survey the part played by the other major institutional actors in these monasteries, that is to say the patrons, who, by virtue of the right of patronage, intervened in the relationship between the communities and the Order. The history of each of these communities was therefore determined by the tension between the dictates of the Order and the will of the patrons. These phenomena will be studied over a period of three and a half centuries, between the time of the foundation of the first communities, in the mid-twelfth century, and the end of the Middle Ages.

1. Group portrait

Some 64 Cistercian nunneries appeared in Aragon and Castile between 1142 and 1444, either founded or affiliated. There were about twice as many in Castile (forty-four) as in Aragon (twenty), a difference in numbers which is consistent with the difference in size of both areas. The chronological distribution (Fig. 1) shows a first concentration of the foundations in the 1170s and 1180s (with fifteen new nunneries), and a second concentration in the 1240s (six). In the following two centuries, there were only nineteen foundations or affiliations, of which no more than five occurred after 1440. The overall trend clearly shows that the phenomenon quickly lost momentum from the mid-thirteenth century on. One of the goals of its study is to understand why this happened. Another phenomenon which is not represented in a histogram is the disappearance of some of these institutions during the same period: nine of them were suppressed before 1500, and two more in 1502. This means that out of 64 institutions, more than one in six was affected. Several were very short-lived, with only a few years or decades of existence.¹ They can be considered as failed foundations. The others managed to operate for over a century, but eventually succumbed to material problems at some point in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries.² The reasons for those suppressions are very diverse and it is not possible to conclude that there was a global movement of suppressions at any given time.

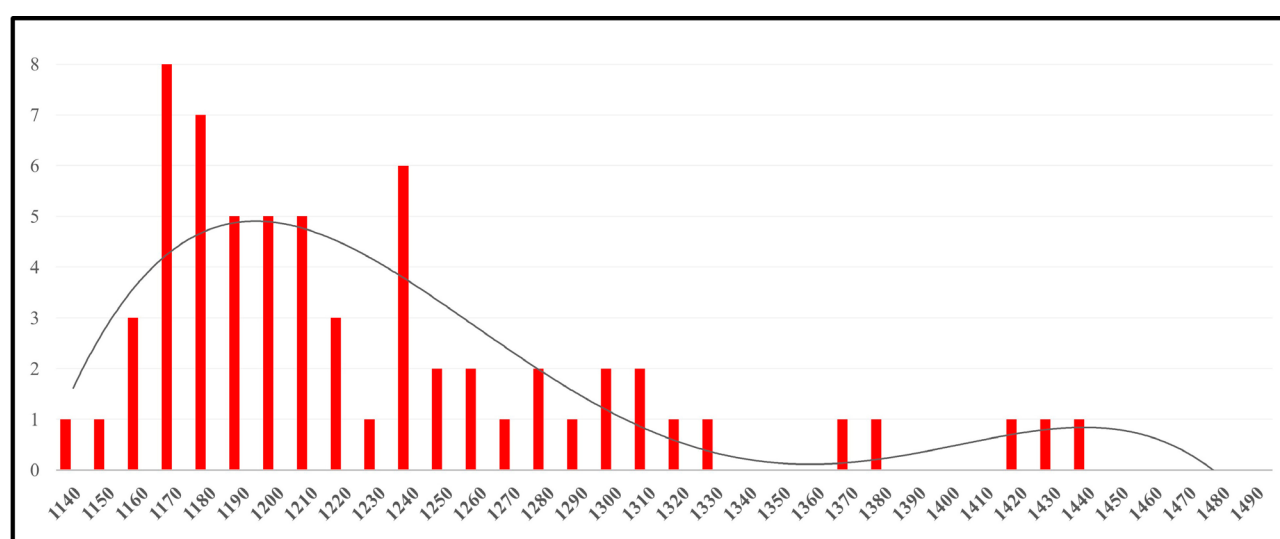


Fig. 1. Number of Cistercian nunneries founded or affiliated in Aragon and Castile by decade and general trend.

¹ Genrozo only existed from 1142 to 1145; Aza, from 1182 to 1201; Vimbodí, from 1194 to 1218; Nogueirosa, from 1161 to 1216; San Millán of Ávila, from 1444 to 1502; Tardesillas, from 1203 to 1285; Santa Escolástica of Ávila, from 1425 to 1502.

² Buenavía was founded before 1212 and suppressed in 1352; Contodo, after 1252 and before 1412; Valldaura, in 1241 and 1461; Bonrepòs, in 1210 and between 1453 and 1459; Les Franqueses, in 1186 and 1474.



Fig. 2. Geographical distribution of medieval Cistercian nunneries in Aragon and Castile.

This timeline explains the main characteristic of the geographical distribution of the nunneries (Fig. 2). There is a remarkable difference between north and south of the Iberian Peninsula, with the Douro and Ebro rivers marking a border. 44 out of 64, more than two thirds, are concentrated in the northern part, and only four can be found south of the Tagus or of the Júcar. This is logically due to the chronology of the conquest of Al-Andalus by the Christian kingdoms: when most of the nunneries were founded, between 1160 and 1220, the areas south of the Tagus in Castile had not yet been conquered (Cordoba only fell in 1236, Seville in 1248), and in Aragon, the Júcar was only reached with the conquest of Valencia in 1238. Even in the 1240s, it was still too early to start founding these kinds of institutions in the conquered areas that were being reorganized.

This set of nunneries can be split into two main types. The first one highlights the difference between foundations *ex nihilo* and mere affiliations to the Cistercian Order of convents previously founded under another obedience. The latter were much less numerous: only 17, about a quarter of the total. I did not include in this enumeration foundations suspected to have taken place on an old abandoned monastic site (such as Barria) nor convents of nuns installed in the place of previous communities of monks, such as in Lervão in Portugal, in Bonrepòs, (where the community of nuns replaced a former group of hermits) and in Vallverd, a former double monastery, to cite a few examples. The former existence of an institution is rarely well-documented, and there is always room for doubt. This number of 17 only includes (probable) Benedictine communities and one example of Penitent Nuns—Montsant—that adopted the Cistercian obedience, since this continuity in change raises specific questions about the institutional process, but also about daily interactions or relations with other actors. So far, no model of evolution has been proved to work for this specific group.

A second way of splitting the group into two categories is to differentiate between “rural” and “urban” institutions. Here, I classify as “rural” the abbeys located in or near villages, and “urban”, those settled in cities or in their immediate surroundings. In Aragon and Castile, most Cistercian nunneries were rural: 47 out of 64, nearly the three quarters. There is, however, a general tendency towards founding these institutions in or around towns in the Late Middle Ages, whereas almost all foundations were rural during the period 1180-1220, with the exception of Las Huelgas near Burgos. But from the mid-thirteenth century on, the majority were urban. This evolution is confirmed by the attempt to move three rural communities to cities during the fourteenth and

fifteenth centuries.³ Many more followed in the second part of the sixteenth century following the instructions issued by the Council of Trent concerning nunneries.

2. Relations with the Cistercian Order

The thrust of the history of the Cistercian nunneries is, of course, the practical significance of their belonging to the Cistercian Order. Until at least the 1960s, Church History took a rather static view of ecclesiastical institutions: nunneries were supposed to be members of the Order or not, and if they were, they were assumed to comply with the norms issued by the General Chapter of Cîteaux. Research on Cistercian nuns all over Europe since the 1980s has shown that the reality is much more complicated. The example of Castile shows that the history of relations between the abbeys of nuns and the Cistercian Order in the Middle Ages developed in three stages (Baury 1999, 258-274 and 429-441; 2012, 113-193): the first stage being from the time of the first foundations to the 1230s; the second, from the 1230s until 1335; and the third from 1335 until the end of the Middle Ages.

In the first decades of the existence of the Iberian nunneries, the Cistercian Order did not have any institutional framework for these types of abbeys (Baury 2001). Indeed, the General Chapter of Cîteaux only started to issue rules for nuns in 1213. Between 1213 and 1228, this central institution tried to determine their status within the Order as well as the official process of foundation to be followed. The nunneries founded before these dates were ordered to comply with these new rules, but they usually remained in a grey area and, further, they had no direct links to the Order, as they were not allowed to attend the General Chapter.

The usual way for a female community to become recognized as Cistercian was to draw close to a male abbey, often a neighboring abbey. But before 1230, in Aragon and Castile, a father abbot seldom took part in the foundation process or in the ensuing relations between the nunneries and the Order.⁴ When one appeared, he usually seems to have played a secondary and passive role. A very close and ongoing relationship between a nunnery and an abbey of monks is nowhere to be seen and, for instance, there are no records of visits by abbots to nuns' monasteries during this period.

A second way of entering the institutional structure of the Order before 1230, much discussed among specialists of Cistercian nuns, was the possible existence of filiations between female abbeys. Between 1187 and 1199, the King of Castile tried to force seven nunneries to recognize his new foundation of Las Huelgas in Burgos as their mother abbey, but this had little actual effect on their general relationship with the Order (Baury 1999, 244-246; 2012, 138-145). To this number, we must add two Castilian nunneries officially founded in the 1220s under the institutional authority of Las Huelgas of Burgos, Vileña and Villamayor, another two probably founded in the 1170s with some kind of help from the previously-founded Navarrese nunnery of Tulebras, Perales and Gradefes, and one case in Aragon where a filiation between nunneries is documented between Bonrepòs and its mother abbey, Vallbona. The links between nunneries were nevertheless very weak, since they did not involve moving nuns from the mother to the daughter abbeys. Moreover, those communities were scarcely populated (usually less than 20 nuns) and their nuns remained closely connected to the surrounding society, with no reason to move from their abbey.

Out of 39 pre-1230 abbeys, 17 (some of them with a well-preserved documentary corpus) did not have even this weak indirect link to the Order. Given this situation, it is obvious that the relations of the Iberian nunneries with the Order were very loose during this period. Nevertheless, they still operated as Cistercian abbeys, following the Cistercian customs and wearing a Cistercian-like habit. Above all, they were officially recognized as Cistercians by the ecclesiastical and political authorities. They could also avail themselves of general Cistercian privileges. That means that there was a way of becoming officially Cistercian without having any formal contact with the Order, through the influence of other institutional actors, especially those local to the abbey in question.

³ Valldaura moved to the city of Manresa in 1398, after a failed project of transferring it to the city of Berga in 1328-1340. L'Eula moved to Perpignan between 1363 and 1375. Cambrón moved for a short time to the city of Huesca between 1453 and 1475.

⁴ Only five out of twenty-three foundations in the Crown of Castile seemed to have an active father abbot, the nunneries of Galicia (Genrozo, Nogueirosa, Moreira and Ferreira) and Aza; in Aragon, only four out of sixteen (Vallbona, Valldonzella, Cambrón and Casbas).

The second stage started in the 1230s, when the General Chapter managed to enforce its norms for nunneries in the Iberian Peninsula, and it lasted a hundred years. From that moment, the founders were actually compelled to follow the process dictated by this assembly, which was much different from what had gone before. The approval of the General Chapter had to be sought prior to the official foundation. Then the site of the future abbey had to be inspected by two Cistercian abbots, and a father abbot was immediately appointed. The links with the Order were thus much stronger. As a result, the whole process was made more difficult and limited the autonomy of the nunneries, therefore making them less interesting to potential founders. It might well have played a part in the sharp decrease in the number of new foundations in the mid-thirteenth century.

At the same time, the General Chapter also had to recognize officially that the already-existing nunneries were part of the Order although they had not been through this process. This implied building a new link between these abbeys and the Order, which was made through the appointment of a father abbot. The latter was meant to enforce the rules for nuns, published by the General Chapter from the 1220s onwards, during his visitations that were, in theory, to be undertaken once a year. In practice, this institutional relationship was much looser than the General Chapter expected, and it seems that visitations seldom happened. It took a long time to have father abbots appointed, and there seems to have been a passive resistance from the nunneries. Moreover, the institutions of the Order entered into internal crisis in the 1260s. They later suffered greatly from the confrontation of the abbot of Cîteaux with Philip the Fair of France around 1300. This context disturbed the normal functioning of the General Chapter and of the Order as a whole, and it facilitated the resistance of both recent and pre-1230 nunneries to the central authority of the Order. All in all, it seems that the Order's authority over the nunneries was neither immediate nor definitive after 1230, despite a clear increase in its global influence. The documentary evidence up to 1300, processed as numerical data in a study of the social network between nunneries and male abbeys in Castile, confirms this impression (Baurý 2022). No head emerges in this pretty much interconnected network. Horizontal relations seem to have been more important than vertical ones. If the Cistercian Order had really managed to enforce strongly its authority over the nunneries, it would have shown a hierarchy headed by abbeys of monks.

A third phase started for the Cistercian nunneries in 1335, when Pope Benedict XII issued the bull *Fulgens sicut stella* in order to reform the Cistercian Order. Benedict XII was a former Cistercian monk, and he knew very well the situation in the Iberian Peninsula because he had been abbot of Fontfroide, an abbey in the southern part of the kingdom of France, next to the Aragonese Roussillon, and which had at least one nunnery under its authority, L'Eula. The pope took steps to ensure that visits by abbot fathers to male or female abbeys would be made more regularly, and also imposed new economic rules that meant closer and more frequent control by the abbot father over the female abbeys, for fear of abuses. There was to be a regular rendering of accounts in order to check that the administrator's actions did not harm the institution. The nunneries were also forbidden to alienate without authorization the monastery's properties. Since these were times of economic difficulties, sales were frequent, so it meant that the abbesses grew more dependent on their father abbots when it came to budget planning.

In order to make visitations more frequent, the principle of a general delegation of power to an abbot or a Cistercian monk appointed "visitor and general reformer" was established from the 1360s on (Baurý 2023b). This delegation was valid for a year or more over large areas corresponding to geopolitical entities, the Crowns of Aragon or of Castile, or both of them, or even more than both of them, with the addition of the kingdom of Navarre, of the kingdom of Portugal, or of some dioceses in Southern France. Thus, visitations to nunneries, even those with a father abbot in Burgundy—the abbot of Cîteaux being the official father abbot of several of them but being rarely seen in the Peninsula—started to happen in practice and strengthened the link between the nunneries and the Order.

As a result of this new regime, nunneries were more in touch with local abbots after 1335 than before. In Aragon, for instance, Cistercian abbots took active part in the elections of abbesses in their daughter nunneries and in the blessings of their novices. The "reform" made the authority of the Cistercian Order more onerous for the nuns, but also allowed them to develop more horizontal contacts with other nunneries or with abbeys of monks, which could prove to be an advantage in some circumstances: they could for instance send criminal nuns from one monastery to another, or obtain different forms of support from an abbey of monks.

All in all, contrary to what was thought up to the 1960s, there is no such thing as a single model of relations between the nunneries and the Cistercian Order from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. Firstly, there are different models for the three phases we have determined, 1140s-1230s, 1230s-1335 and 1335 to the end

of the Middle Ages, with a general tendency towards the strengthening of the relations. Secondly, and most important, at any point in time, the Iberian nunneries would follow different models according to their own particular history.

3. The interference of canonical patronage

The relation with the Order was in particular influenced by another institution, the patrons, such as they were defined by canonical law.

Although the right of patronage has been very well studied in Church History since the nineteenth century, it has been long neglected in Monastic History. This is maybe due to the fact that the documents seldom allude directly to its existence: I could only find four mentions of it in the medieval charters of the Cistercian Iberian nunneries (Baurý 2021b, 49). The Cistercian normative documentation, especially the statutes of the General Chapter, hardly mentions it, which is not very surprising, since it was a practice that the white monks were fighting. Still, its existence in a monastic context was very clear in the general references of Canon Law: known as the *Jus Patronatum*, it was the same for monastic churches and parish churches. In the Iberian Peninsula, it was detailed in the *Partidas* of Alfonso X, and no exceptions were made for Cistercians. The effects of patronage on the history of each of the abbeys are also indirectly documented.

Historians specialized in medieval monasticism and Cistercian Studies nevertheless neglected the institutional role of patronage until the end of the twentieth century. The late medieval application of this canonical right also creates some confusion: from the fourteenth century on, benefactors would receive the right of patronage over a chapel that they would have built, even within a church of which they were not the general patrons. This created an intricate situation in most cathedrals, parish churches, and also monastic churches. It contributed to spreading of the idea that the right of patronage was something diluted, or a right that would be conferred automatically to all benefactors—which it was not. Moreover, in the Anglophone scholarship, the same word is used for the *Jus Patronatum* and for any kind of artistic patronage, adding to the confusion. Offering a stained-glass window or a statue to a monastery, for instance, did not make the donors actual “patrons” in the canonical sense of the word. Patronage, especially in the earlier periods, is a much more exclusive relationship with an individual and his heirs than has usually been thought. My research on Cistercian nunneries in twelfth and thirteenth-century Castile contributed to the notion that they were the main actors in the first decades of the nunneries’ existence (Baurý 1999; 2012, 41-111).

It is necessary to examine the documentation of an abbey in order to understand all the implications of the right of patronage for that particular abbey. Unfortunately, very few of the abbeys have surviving charter collections that are substantial enough or broad enough to enable any useful study of the right of patronage. As an in-depth study is required, it is mandatory to carry out a dedicated monographic work that raises this specific question, involving not only the study of the collection of charters from the monastery, but also the documentation of the surrounding area and the documentation related to the lineage of the patrons, once it has been identified. But until recently, monographs have not focused precisely on this point. Within our group of 64 Iberian nunneries, there still remain various abbeys whose patronage has not been studied despite the importance of their collections of charters.⁵ Research should then focus on the reciprocal obligations of the abbey and of the patrons, which were diverse. The fact that it was a kind of synallagmatic contract must always be remembered. The patrons could legitimately expect benefits from their patronage, which started with the initial gift that allowed the abbey to come to life. The ecclesiastical authorities had themselves created the right of patronage in the Early Middle Ages in order to encourage aristocrats to found churches or monasteries when there were very few of them. It amounted to a concession that they were granted.

The most important of these benefits for patrons was the “right of presentation” which, in the specific context of monasticism, meant control of the elections to abbatial office. This secured their control of the institution. The patrons could use this right in two different ways. Some strictly reserved the office of abbess for a woman of their lineage so that, when there was no candidate, the abbey could be left for some time without an abbess, although that was not in accordance with general monastic norms. Still, there are some documented cases when the prioress would for several years govern the daily life of the community. The patrons could also

⁵ The most promising documentations to be studied are San Andres de Arroyo, Cambrón, Santo Domingo el Antiguo, San Clemente de Sevilla, La Zaydia and Las Huelgas of Valladolid.

ensure the appointment of an abbess belonging to the family of one of their vassals, so that she would obey them. Sometimes—and it is most difficult to be sure whenever this happened—they could simply leave the nuns free to choose their abbess, as long as the one elected recognized their authority.

Another important benefit for the patrons was the control they retained over the lands they (or their ancestors) had granted to the abbeys. This characterized the economy of the Cistercian nunneries, which was not the same as the economy of the male Cistercian abbeys (Baury 2013). While the communities of monks developed a strategy of their own for the acquisition of lands soon after their foundation, there were no such strategies in nunneries. Whereas the initial donation to monasteries of monks was limited to their initial site and had to be accompanied by small gifts from other benefactors, the nunneries usually had an exclusive founder and benefactor who gave them not only the initial site but also a larger set of geographically coherent lands. This made it unnecessary for the nunneries to purchase or exchange properties in order to improve the overall organization. The nunneries were therefore more indebted to their patrons than male abbeys and their relationship with them was more exclusive. Having been more generous, the patrons also expected to keep an eye on the lands. This is why some insisted so much on having a female relative as an abbess, or as “lady (*señora*) of the monastery”. From the point of view of those women, it was a way of ensuring they would hold a position of power, thanks to properties coming from family inheritance. From the point of view of the patrons, it was also a way of keeping-while-giving, of making the family estate inalienable once converted into a monastic estate.

Other aspects of patronage allowed the nunneries to be more influential, institutionally and politically, thanks to the intercession of their patron at the royal court or with the ecclesiastical authorities, or thanks to their support in judicial matters. The obligation of the patrons to watch over the economic health of the nunneries was also a valuable safeguard. In return, the nunneries conferred a certain sacredness on the power of the patrons, provided a permanent shelter or a position of power for their kinswomen, and served as a local promoter of the past and present power of their lineage. The owners of the right of patronage could use them as a place of accommodation, a military stronghold, or even a provider of funds whenever they were in trouble. All of this would sometimes go further than what was theoretically allowed in Canon Law or in monastic regulations.

The right of patronage was also an asset that could be inherited, so that it created a long and lasting relationship between a nunnery and a lineage, and not a link that would perish with the founder. Being an asset also meant that the right could be alienated, either sold or donated to someone outside the lineage. Therefore, most nunneries experienced an interruption of their patronage at some point in their history. That could originate from a change in the geographical base of their patrons or in the biological extinction of the lineage. Such a situation is not always easy to spot and needs to be cautiously researched in the documentation when undertaking a monographic study.

Patronage could thus interfere with monastic practices. In the first phase of the existence of the Iberian nunneries, from the 1140s to the 1220s, their relationship with the founders and their heirs was very close and beyond the control of the Cistercian Order for lack of direct contacts. They could then freely exchange services with their patrons and both had a very profitable relationship. This is probably why there was such a wave of foundations of Cistercian nunneries and very few foundations of other types of nunneries during this period. A fashionable trend for Cistercian spirituality would not be sufficient to explain such an important phenomenon.

In the second phase, between 1230 and 1335, the Cistercian General Chapter tried its best to enforce its regulations for nunneries. This limited the exchanges between the nunneries and the patrons, as the new norms reduced the freedom of action of the abbesses and prohibited several interventions of the patrons. It made the foundations much less attractive for the great aristocracy and could explain why foundations ceased so suddenly. It is a far more convincing hypothesis than the idea that Cistercian spirituality had simply gone out of fashion. For nunneries founded during the previous phase, the power over the nunneries that the General Chapter now gave to the father abbots interfered with the established relationship with their patrons. In many cases, the patrons helped the abbesses resisting the authority of the Order. Sometimes, these new requirements discouraged patrons from expecting the services they had previously received from the nunneries and eroded the relationship to the detriment of both parties.

In the final phase, from 1335 until the end of the fifteenth century, patronage seems to have played a much less significant role. The relationships between the nunneries and the patrons were much looser than in the previous period, and in many cases, even broke up entirely. It happened partly because of the changes in the higher Iberian aristocracy during this period, caused by the advent of the Trastámara dynasty in Castile and later in Aragon. But the fading of patronage was also partly due to the developments that made patronage

a burden without any expected profit. The patrons had to continuously provide for the economic needs of the nunneries, defend their interests in justice, advocate their demands before other powers, ensure their military protection but, at the same time, could scarcely hope to benefit from them economically or even politically.

4. Other secondary actors

Three other types of actors played a role at some point in the history of many Iberian nunneries: the royalty, the episcopate, and the urban authorities, in order of significance.

The part played by the monarchs is frequently overemphasized because of a few abbeys in which they were very influential, and which happen to be the most powerful and best documented. About forty years ago, it was even thought that “the introduction of Cistercians” in Castile or in the Iberian Peninsula was a tool of government used by royalty (Álvarez Palenzuela 1978). It was later proven that the royalty did not play the decisive role in most of the male or female foundations (Pérez-Embid Wamba 1986). The patrons of the first phase of Cistercian foundations were mostly members of the higher aristocracy of the *ricos hombres*. What has been often misleading is the almost systematic existence of royal privileges that confirmed officially the foundations shortly after they happened. This was clearly the usual application of the voluntary jurisdiction of the royal court. The founders wanted official recognition of the existence of their abbey and asked the royal chancery for it. Indeed, there was no reason to deny it to them, since it contributed to the power of the ruler and the costs of the delivery were supported by the applicants. The existence of royal confirmations thus cannot be interpreted as part of a royal monastic policy.

Some nunneries were nevertheless directly connected to the monarchs because they had been founded by reigning kings, and the right of patronage passed on to their successors. Out of the 64 abbeys in Aragon and Castile, only eight were of royal patronage, and only seven of them were actually founded by kings: in the last case, Les Franqueses, the king of Aragon inherited the right of patronage in a later phase, in 1334, while the nunnery had been founded around 1186 by the counts of Urgel.⁶ One has to be very careful with traditions of royal patronage in the Middle Ages: many abbeys tried to claim royal patronage in the sixteenth century because of the many benefits it brought at that point in time, and, for this reason, they distorted their own history. On the other hand, from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century, local historians have also been prone to imagine royal patronages that never existed. Therefore, many erroneous or anachronistic traditions of royal patronage of certain nunneries are still to be found today in the bibliography. Present-day historians have to read over the original documents in order to fully understand the foundation processes without the interference of those later traditions.

Only one case reveals the existence of a broader policy towards Cistercian nunneries during a short period of time, the famous foundation of Las Huelgas of Burgos in the 1180s and the subsequent actions of its founder, King Alfonso VIII of Castile up to 1199 (Baury 1999, 244-246; 2012, 138-145). Its official foundation took place in 1187, when there were already several existing Cistercian abbeys of monks and nuns in the kingdom. The founder chose to establish a nunnery rather than an abbey of monks, and located it in the outskirts of Burgos, one of the two main cities of Castile at that time, the other being Toledo. These choices were meant to ensure the closest possible relationship between Las Huelgas and its royal patrons. Immediately afterwards, the king tried to create an artificial hierarchy amongst nunneries, not so much an ecclesiastical one as a feudal one, which involved an oath of obedience to the abbess of Burgos being taken by the other abbesses. That did not match the canonical criteria, since the older institutions were supposed to hold hierarchical authority over the newer ones as a matter of principle.

In 1189, Alfonso VIII managed to trick seven Cistercian abbesses into coming to Las Huelgas, allegedly for a conference with Cistercian abbots about monastic matters.⁷ They were then required to take an oath of obedience, which several of them sought to delay somehow. The idea was also to make these meetings regular events, following the example of the General Chapter of Cîteaux, so that this new hierarchy could be enforced. The abbesses resisted this and never again met in Las Huelgas. The king nevertheless succeeded in having the

⁶ The nunneries of royal patronage were, in Aragon: Trasobares, Buenavía, Montsant and Les Franqueses; in Castile: San Clemente of Toledo, Las Huelgas of Burgos, San Clemente of Sevilla and Las Huelgas of Valladolid.

⁷ These were the abbesses of Perales, Cañas, Fuencaliente, San Andrés de Arroyo, Torquemada from Castile, Gradefes and Carrizo from León.

theoretical existence of this “Chapter of abbesses of Las Huelgas” recognized by the ecclesiastical authorities and by the Cistercian Order, especially thanks to the visit of the Abbot of Cîteaux to Burgos in 1199. From then on, the foundations of new nunneries in Castile had to be made under the official supervision of the Abbess of Burgos.⁸

This meant that Alfonso VIII had seen the Cistercian nunneries as an instrument of power wielded by groups of the higher aristocracy against the royalty, when he fought against them in his younger days, in the 1170s. He later sought a way to somehow control these nunneries: Las Huelgas of Burgos and the “Chapter of abbesses” were intended to serve as a means of neutralizing this political threat. The founding of this nunnery was not so much a part of a monastic policy as a political measure to reduce the power of the *ricos hombres*. Queen María de Molina partly reproduced the pattern set for Las Huelgas of Burgos, probably for the same reasons, more than a century later, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, when she founded a new Cistercian nunnery, also named Las Huelgas, in Valladolid, the new main city of northern Castile. This time, there was nevertheless no attempt to control other “aristocratic” Cistercian nunneries.

Another institutional actor played a relevant part in the history of the medieval Cistercian nunneries of Aragon and Castile: the diocesan bishop (Baurý 2015). His authority over them was reduced compared to non-Cistercian nunneries, since the Cistercian Order enjoyed the privilege of exemption from diocesan authority, and even nunneries could take advantage of this privilege, at least partially. The diocesan bishop still retained the right to bless the nuns and receive the oath of obedience from the abbess, so he wielded more power over nunneries than over male Cistercian abbeys, which were not affected by these obligations. But wherever the link of patronage was strong and active, the patrons helped the nunneries make sure that the bishop did not infringe on their rights, and that episcopal influence was limited. The only exceptions were nunneries founded by their diocesan bishop, who then owned the right of patronage. There were nonetheless very few of them, probably no more than three.⁹

A last actor played a part in the nunneries in the Late Middle Ages, at least the “urban” ones, from the fourteenth century on: the municipal authorities. As an institution, they were interested in maintaining good relations with the communities since many nuns were members of the local elites. It is also likely that, in some cases, the councils had acquired the rights of patronage, but no thorough study has so far been undertaken on the subject.

Conclusions

By way of conclusion, we must keep in mind the great diversity of situations amongst the 64 Cistercian nunneries of Aragon and Castile. Their connection to the Cistercian Order differed substantially from one abbey to another depending on the moment of their foundation, their location, the identity of their patrons and how their relationship with their patrons evolved over the course of these three and a half centuries. It is of note that there does not seem to be any fundamental difference between Aragon and Castile. When revisiting today the history of any single nunnery it is important to remember that there were several possible models of relationship with the Order. To determine which one is applicable, it is necessary to look closely at the state of the relationship with the patrons at any given time. We must also remember that it was a very delicate balance and that it could quickly evolve over time so that a single abbey could experience very different situations in relatively quick succession. To believe in the existence of a unique pattern, universally valid, is a mistake to avoid at all costs. The specific evolution of one particular Cistercian nunnery can only be established by a fresh reading of the medieval documentation.

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⁸ That was the case in the founding processes of Vileña, Villamayor de los Montes and Villabuena.

⁹ Pinilla, Valldonzella and Gómez Román.

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