



# Cathedral Clergy in the Iberian Peninsula in the Early Modern Period: The Example of the City of León

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The aim of this study was to analyse the canons in the cathedral chapter of the city of León, from the broad perspective of social history<sup>1</sup>. I shall focus on their social origins, their access to the institution, their family connections and the composition of their households. Demography is closely associated with social history and shall be used to determine the age at which they became chapter members or died. The main sources used were the blood purity documents and the *Récesit* books, which recorded all the stages of an individual's ecclesiastical career, from the award of a prebend until his death or transfer, although those responsible for record-keeping were not always as meticulous as one might have wished<sup>2</sup>. Other sources consulted besides these documents included the family book of the Catastro of Ensenada (a large-scale census carried out in Spain in 1749), deeds contained in notary public records and the chapter records.

**Key words:** *Early Modern Period, Spain, León, religiosity, canons*

## INTRODUCTION

The last few decades have witnessed a proliferation of studies on all aspects of church history, adopting an economic, moral or theological perspective and using increasingly advanced methods. Notable among this research are studies of the cathedral chapters, which in Europe have formed the subject of numerous investigations focusing on the Early Modern Period, but

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<sup>2</sup> The documentation is deposited in the Historical Archive of the Cathedral of León, the Diocesan Historical Archive of León and the Municipal Historical Archive of León.

also on earlier and later periods (López, 1966; Villacorta, 1974; Dobson, 1979; Seiler, 1989; Lepine, 1995; Desachy, 2005; Ribeiro, 2010). Such studies have undergone marked changes in terms of the central theme and the methods employed. Initially, the focus was on the institution: how it was formed, its economic trajectory and its administration. However, with the passage of time, research attention has turned to sociological aspects of its members, with all that this encompasses, such as their social and geographical origin, daily life or age of access to the canonries and dignitaries; the broad universe of world views, in which culture or attitudes to death played a significant role; conflicts within and beyond the institution; and ceremonies and protocol.

The present study focused on the cathedral chapter of the city of León, located in the autonomous region of Castile and León (Spain). In the Early Modern Period, León was the capital of the kingdom and a city with a vote in the *Cortes* [Spanish parliament], which despite transforming it into a major administrative centre, did not affect its demographic or economic bases. During this period, the number of inhabitants ranged from 3,846 in 1591 to 6,051 in 1787. It was not until 1860 that the city approached the emblematic figure of 10,000 residents. León was a very rural city, not only because it was the place of residence of the income-earning segments of society, but also because of the importance of the primary sector, whose capital was in the hands of a small group of nobles and ecclesiastics who exploited it indirectly.

The choice of the chronological framework, from 1650 to 1800, was determined by two entirely different issues: the greater availability of some of the documentary sources, such as blood purity and chapter records, in the case of the start date, and in the case of the closing date, the death of the last bishop of León to be totally imbued with the cultural and intellectual movement of the Enlightenment, Antonio Cayetano Cuadrillero.

## THE LEÓN CATHEDRAL CHAPTER: ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

Chapters were centres of spiritual life that wielded great power and influence. The origins of the León chapter date back to the 4th and 5th centuries, having begun life as a group of ecclesiastics, the *presbyterium*, who assisted the bishop and lived in community. It was not until the 9th century that independent economic resources were established for the chapter, and some time later, these were subdivided into as many benefices as there were members of the chapter, which was the legal owner of the livings. Subsequently, in the early 12th century, a large-scale reform was carried out under the mandate of Bishop Diego, which led to consolidation of this system. It was then that the chapter began to take legal shape and, as in other Spanish, Portuguese and French cities, the life in community that had been practised until then was abandoned and there was a tripartite division of resources, which was further consolidated in the following century (Cavero, 2004; Iglesias, 2012a; Barrio, 1982, Ribeiro, 2010; Desachy, 2005). First, those pertaining to the episcopal and chapter council were separated, followed by those allocated to the *fábrica* (referring to any local church). Likewise,

the prebends were reorganised to endow them with resources, and the number of canons — 40— and dignitaries —6— was established.

Later, the chapter constitutions were drawn up, not without controversy, by Pelayo Galván, having been commissioned by Pope Honorius III in 1224. Among other questions, these defined the chapter structure, instituted rules to prevent abuses by the canons and ensure that they fulfilled their obligations, and set the value of the prebends. The constitutions essentially remained in force, with a few amendments and additions, until the end of the 18th century, when Bishop Cuadrillero drew up new regulations consisting of a compilation of the earliest and then subsequent successive statutes, agreements and concordats that had been drawn up over the course of the chapter's history to address specific issues.

From the 14th century onwards, chapter meetings began to gain more autonomy from the authority of the bishop. The latter's presidency of the meetings gradually gave way to occasional attendance reserved for important or contentious situations, and he frequently delegated someone else to attend.

Thus, by the beginning of the Early Modern Period, the chapter was a well-established and organised institution, although new developments continued throughout this historical period. Those derived from the Council of Trent were of particular importance (Fernández, 2010).

In terms of the number of its members or prebendaries, the León chapter in the Early Modern Period was a surprisingly large institution in comparison with those in other Spanish cities of similar characteristics, especially considering that it was located in a small city with another chapter in the same province, in nearby Astorga. As in Barcelona and Oviedo, the number of canons was reduced on two occasions for economic reasons (Risco, 1787; López, 2010; Barrio, 2010). Until 1634, the chapter consisted of 70 canons, 12 dignitaries and 4 canonry offices; after that date, and not without controversy, the first group was reduced to 55. A more drastic restructuring took place in 1761: the number of canons was further reduced to 28 and four of the 12 dignitaries were given an office.

Throughout this historical period, there was constant friction between canons and bishop over pastoral visits, protocol, provisions and changes related to the number of chapter members, with all that this implied when it came to reorganising the prebends. During the *ad limina* visit in the 1730s, Bishop Pascual Herrero complained that in the three and a half years he had been bishop of León, he had been involved in several lawsuits to defend episcopal rights against the chapter and that there would have been more if he had not desisted in order to alleviate the discord between the two institutions.

By the mid-18th century, the clergy accounted for 6.2% of households in the city of León, a percentage very similar to that in the neighbouring city of Burgos, which had a comparable population (Sanz, 2006). The highest percentage in this group corresponded to households

headed by members of the cathedral chapter. This institution had considerable economic power in the city since it controlled a substantial number of properties. Besides owning a considerable number of houses, the clergy also owned 69.5% of the agricultural and grazing land, a significant share of the livestock and many mills, in addition to receiving income from tithes and assets owned outside the city.

## **THE CATHEDRAL'S HIGH-RANKING CLERGY: CANONS, DIGNITARIES AND OFFICES**

A total of 352 blood purity records dating from 1650 to 1800 were analysed to shed light on aspects of the sociology of the members of the León chapter, such as their origin, age on entry or at death and family connections. The information provided by these documents is uneven. Those from the first and last years of the study contributed the least, but for different reasons. The records kept in the second half of the 17th century often omitted the academic and ecclesiastical rank held by the candidates at the time, and not all of them provided baptismal certificates, since in some parishes those responsible still did not scrupulously observe the mandates of the Council of Trent. Meanwhile, from 1785 onwards, the custom was abandoned of appointing canons to verify that the blood of aspirants was untainted, and instead, parish priests or vicars from the applicant's place of origin began to be asked to carry out such investigations. The information they provided was limited to the individual's family lineage and confirmation of his good conduct.

To occupy a canonry was unquestionably a privilege reserved for the wealthier segments of society, given the high costs entailed in providing proof of blood purity and information that "corresponded to the canonry by virtue of the apostolic bulls" (Vázquez, 1999; Morgado, 1990). This expense did not prevent some families from placing more than one descendant in the chapters. Between the late 16th century and the first third of the 19th century, at least 31 families in León had two sons admitted and some even three.

Of the 352 people who entered the León chapter between 1650 and 1800, 61.7% did so to occupy a canonry, 17.4% as coadjutors, 10.6% passed a competitive examination to take up an office and 10.3% to gain access to a dignity. These percentages varied throughout the study period, sometimes as a result of changes in the number of posts, such as the reduction following the reform of 1761, and at other times because of ecclesiastical regulations, as in the case of the position of coadjutor, which was abolished in 1745.

It is noteworthy that the number of coadjutors in the León chapter was lower than that in other Spanish cities (Irigoyen, 2001; Vázquez, 2008; Díaz, 2009; Iglesias, 2014). The system consisted of the holder of a prebend requesting the chapter to appoint an auxiliary who, after obtaining the corresponding bull, had the right to succeed him, an arrangement that benefitted incumbent and aspirant alike. The former relieved himself of part of his obligations and the latter guaranteed his future and immediately began to receive some income. The procedure was

widely criticised from all sides, because applicants were not primarily assessed on merit. It was seen as a means of “prostituting and circumventing the ordinary mechanism for allocating prebends”, of accruing wealth for the canons and dignitaries, and even of expanding clientelist networks within the chapter (Barrio, 2010). Clientelist and family networks were eventually copied by the laity (Cabeza, 2000).

An important question was whether entry to the highest echelons of the chapter was by appointment by the Holy See, until the Concordat of 1753 when this power passed to the monarch, or by free appointment by the bishop in the months designated for this purpose. In principle, the bishop appointed less than a third of the beneficiaries. Thus, the overall result was consistent with the proportion of apostolic and ordinary months. However, turning exclusively to the canons, who accounted for the majority of the sample, the figure rose to 42.2%, which was higher than in other Spanish cities (Vázquez, 2008). In general, therefore, the bishops made heavy use of their power, well beyond that dictated by the distribution of appointments. There is no doubt that the appointment of relatives was a popular way to wield influence in the chapter, especially given the discord that frequently reigned between the two institutions (Jiménez, 1999, Díaz, 2005). However, the bishops’ capacity in this respect was conditioned by the number of vacancies that might arise during their mandate. Evidently, the longer a bishop headed the dioceses, the greater the chances that a vacancy would become available and he could exercise his discretion. Over the course of the century and a half analysed, the prelacies of Aparicio, Roger Lupia and Cuadrillero stand out in this respect. They headed the diocese for 16, 17 and 23 years, respectively, when the average was just over 8 years. Aparicio had the opportunity to appoint 21 prebendaries, eight of whom were his nephews, Roger Lupia five and Cuadrillero eight.

The baptism certificates that appear in the blood purity records, three quarters of which corresponded to the canons and coadjutors, cross-referenced with the *Récesit* books, make it possible to calculate their age on entry and at death, and therefore, how many years they served in the chapter. In principle, only 4.3% of those who were admitted with the corresponding dispensation were below the minimum age established by the Council of Trent. Overall, they were tested for blood purity at 34.4 years of age, 33.7 for the canons and 27.6 for their auxiliaries. In the second half of the 18th century, the average age on entry increased by about three years as a result of the Concordat of 1753, which required a more rigorous intellectual preparation, and the reform of 1761, after which fewer places were available in the León chapter. The period between accreditation of blood purity and taking office was only a few months. The average age at death was 58.3 years, slowly rising from 56.6 years old between 1650 and 1659, to 60.1 years old in the 18th century. Members thus served in the León chapter for about a quarter of a century. With slight variations, these figures are similar to those for other Spanish chapters (Coronas, 1986; Morgado, 2000; Quintana, 2004; Latorre, 2009; Díaz, 2012).

There are few records of the activities in which these clerics were engaged prior to their entry to the canonry. In this respect, the records for those who were appointed by the bishop are more complete than for those appointed via the apostolic procedure. For those familiar with this information, it is worth mentioning the judicial vicars who served in the diocese of León. Attaining this position, which was freely appointed by the bishops, presupposed a prior relationship between elector and elected, and most probably a close bond of trust between the two (Artola, 2010). Therefore, when the opportunity arose to grant a lifelong position, especially when this occurred in the ordinary months, the bishop would thank them for their work by appointing them to the vacant canonry or dignitary, which did not imply continuing with the work they had been carrying out, as long as their mentor was not transferred (Iglesias, 2012b). The same procedure for promotion served for the secretaries of some bishops or those belonging to his “family”. These three bodies accounted for 50% of the clerics whose occupation before joining the cathedral chapter is recorded. Another important group was that of the chaplains, beneficiaries or canons from other cities. Lastly, in a lesser proportion, came the parish priests, vicars or university professors.

It is difficult to ascertain the ecclesiastical rank reached by the canons joining the León chapter, since this was often recorded as the generic ‘cleric’. According to the 182 records that gave this information, more than half of them had attained the major orders, and of these, three quarters were in possession of the highest order, presbyter. However, even taking the latter figure into account, it was not until the second half of the 18th century that one of the Council of Trent decrees was fulfilled: that half of the chapter members should be priests. Nor is it easy to glean the academic level they had attained. This can only be generalised from a small sample of just over 50 of them, for whom the studies they had completed at the time of entry were recorded. Those who were already in possession of a degree would undoubtedly have been eager for this to be recorded as a positive attribute, whereas those who had not yet graduated would have preferred not to mention the fact, but did refer to their time spent at colleges and universities. Among the former, there was an overwhelming predominance of graduates (86%) over doctors of philosophy (10.5%) and bachelors (3.5%). Given the small size of the sample, it would be unwise to draw conclusions about the cultural level of all the members of the León chapter. However, in the hypothetical case that the sample provides a true reflection, the figure was not very far from the Council of Trent provision that half of the chapter should be graduates or doctors, although it has not been possible to determine whether the León members were qualified in canon law or theology. Given the high number of those who indicated that they had attended colleges and universities without specifying their qualifications, one can assume that many had received a university education, albeit perhaps an incomplete one.

In the León chapter, a first major social division of the chapter members can be made with reference to whether their place of origin was urban or rural, the latter including towns. Only a little over 23% of them came from a city and, of these, 12.2% were from León. There was, therefore, a predominance of people from rural and semi-urban areas, who accounted for

practically one out of every five people entering the chapter, whether it was to occupy a canonry, office or dignity. This overall distribution changed in the first half of the 18th century, firstly as a result of an increase in the percentage of canons from other urban areas under the protection of a bishop, while the number of native canons remained stable, and secondly, because of an increase in the number of coadjutors, in this case with a high proportion coming from the capital of León.

As was the case with other chapters, these canons were recruited from the wealthier classes with greater social power, including, in varying proportions, the aldermen, the lower and middle nobility, the high-ranking military and professionals. On the highest social rung in the León chapter was a small group of canons directly related to the nobility. Another, smaller group was linked to manor houses, while a larger group was formed by the prebendaries who were sons or brothers of aldermen in León, other cities or their places of origin (Fatjó, 1993; Quintana 2008). However, the sons of liberal professionals, farmers and merchants unquestionably formed the largest group.

The highest body in the chapter was that formed by the dignitaries. It has been possible to reconstruct the profile of 88 of them, from the second half of the 17th century —when the blood purity records begin to provide more information than just the family lineage— up to 1800. This information has been supplemented by other sources, including chapter and diocesan records, bearing in mind that the people mentioned in these records sometimes occupied more than one dignity.

The majority (40.9%) of those who entered the most distinguished rung of the chapter —a dignity— did so directly, while a smaller percentage had previously held a canonry (35.2%), a phenomenon more frequent in the 17th than in the 18th century: 13.6% entered by the conditional route, starting at the bottom as coadjutors, and 10.2% had previously held an office. This latter case mainly occurred in the second half of the 18th century, following the reform of 1761. Subsequently, although the process took a few years to complete, the responsibility for four dignitaries fell to four different offices. This meant that 25% of the body had to pass a competitive examination.

As regards those holding a dignity, the majority (63.3%) accessed the position via the ordinary route or by papal bull. The rest benefitted from the episcopal prebend, a system applied more frequently to the canons, as was logical bearing in mind that there were fewer ordinary months, when the bishop could name appointments, than apostolic months, and much fewer dignitaries than canons. Therefore, the chances of both circumstances —the bishop's turn and a vacancy— occurring at the same time would be lower.

The average time for promotion from canon to dignity was around 11 years. However, if these calculations are made taking into account the route taken to enter the chapter, a very different reality emerges: for those who entered with the support of the bishop, there was a

much shorter interval of seven years, compared to sixteen years for those who entered by apostolic authority or monarchical decree, after 1753. However, this interval might be even shorter if the bishop who appointed them remained in the episcopal see.

Within the canons, another more specific body, that of the offices, was formed from mediaeval times onwards. It comprised the readers, canons penitentiary, preachers and doctors in canonical law. It remains unclear when this body constituted in the León chapter, but everything indicates that it was the earliest to form, and had as its reference the third and fourth Lateran Councils (Villacorta, 1996). The council held in Valladolid in 1228 decreed that the Castilian and Leonese chapters should have two people whose duties were equivalent to those of the canon penitentiary. The preacher's position also dates back to the same time, although, as in the previous case, what was decreed was the dedication of one member of the community to the performance of what would be the duties of this position, and it was not introduced as an office until 1474, following the papal bull of Pope Sixtus IV, *Creditam nobis*. This also led to the creation of the office of doctor in canonical law, and even if this had not been the case, it would have been in operation shortly before the mid-16th century.

The first regulations for the provision of these positions were drawn up in 1525 and were definitively implemented a decade later. It was revised in 1544 and was essentially maintained throughout the Early Modern Period for the four canonical offices (García, 2004). The fact that access was regulated by an examination benefitted the institution and the candidates alike. For the former, it guaranteed a certain level of culture, as applicants had to have at least a university degree, while for the candidates it represented a social opening, as it enabled upwards social mobility based on personal merit acquired through study.

In the early 1760s, in response to a request made by the cathedral chapter to the monarch and the Holy See to reduce the number of chapter members, the four offices were merged with as many dignitaries, which corresponded to those of lesser seniority. In this order, these were that of prior, abbot of San Guillermo, treasurer and master of schools, to which were added the offices of canon penitentiary, reader, preacher and doctors in canonical law, respectively, which meant an increase in the workload, but also in the stipend, by half a prebend.

The examination records from the 18th to early 19th centuries that have been preserved, combined with summaries of candidates in other competitive examinations contained in the chapter records, provide a more detailed picture of the candidates who aspired to form part of this body in the León chapter. In principle, the average number of examination candidates was 5.9, a lower figure than that for other, more prestigious chapters (Morgado, 2008).

Within the chapter, it was the body of the offices that theoretically possessed the best intellectual preparation, as access was only open to those who possessed a university degree: 56% were graduates and the rest doctors, whose numbers increased throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries. Candidates sat the examination aged around 32 years old, some seven



years after completing their studies, although there were some who required a licence to take the examination as they had not yet reached the stipulated age of 30. In the interval between gaining a degree and sitting the examination, the candidates were involved in other activities. The largest group was that of the parish priests, predominantly from the diocese, followed by those who were already practising the office, or a different one, in another chapter. These were the most successful in the examination. The rest formed a varied group which included prosecutors, solicitors, some abbots, such as the abbot of Teverga, lawyers and even a rector.

Many had obtained their degrees at the University of Ávila, which was not exactly the most prestigious university, but it was where the cost of obtaining a degree was not high. Normally, they would have studied previously at a more important centre, where they would acquire a lesser qualification before moving on to Ávila to obtain a higher one (Barrio, 2000).

As evidenced by the blood purity records, those who passed the examination came from the gentry or other nobility and several of them had relatives in the civil and ecclesiastical administrations. The largest group were descendants of small families from the untitled gentry holding a small manor, who held positions in local government. Just over 57% were from dioceses in León or adjoining dioceses in Asturias and Valladolid.

The *Recésit* book recorded all stages of the canons' professional career, from their entry until their death. Focusing on those who did not move from the León chapter, one of the first steps in their career was promotion from coadjutor to canon, which usually took just over 7 years, whereas the leap from a canonry to an archdeaconry often took a decade. Of all the members of the chapter, the ones who had the most opportunities for promotion were those who belonged to the body of offices. Some 56% left the León chapter when the opportunity arose to enter another, more prestigious chapter, and some even received a bishopric.

## THE HOUSE AND FAMILY

The family book of the Catastro of Ensenada (a large-scale census carried out in Spain in 1749) sheds light on the composition of the households of the members of the León cathedral chapter in the mid-18th century. At that time, 56 capitularies were recorded, of whom 11 were dignitaries, 37 were simple canons, four were offices and another four were coadjutors. Of those 56 capitularies, three were absent, and of those who lived in the city, three lived in the bishopric, one in the seminary, two in the family home and seven shared a house with other canons—three with an uncle, two with a brother and another two with an unknown relationship to the head of the household. Thus, of those present in León, 39 (69.6%) kept an open house.

These 39 households headed by capitularies were home to 208 people. Therefore, the average number of people per household was 5.3, a figure very similar to that found in other nearby cities but lower than that in cities with a powerful chapter (Dubert, 1987; Sanz, 2006; Irigoyen,

2010). Only 25% of the households consisted of the incumbent and domestic servants (Rey, 1990).

Of these two hundred individuals, the largest group consisted of domestic servants, who accounted for 60.6%, followed by the canons (23.6%), their relatives (12.5%), and a diverse group of people (3.4%), which I shall refer to as *others*. Starting with the relatives, 15 members of the cathedral chapter (38.5%) had a dependent relative, all of them in collateral or descending lines. The most frequent, in the following order, were: nephews, nieces, sisters, female cousins and brothers. Some of the nephews were studying for their ecclesiastical careers while others were being trained under the canon's wing. As regards the female relatives, there was probably a double hierarchy: the closer relatives would help to run the home, and even use this protection and shelter as a gateway to a good marriage, while the more distant relatives would have a less privileged role almost comparable to that of a domestic servant. Although the difference is very small, households that included female relatives had a lower average number of female servants than those that did not. The generic group "others" included chaplains and a small number of nephews being helped, or rather given some kind of support, as their circumstances were different from those of the nephews cited earlier in that they were already working, some of them even outside the city. Thus, attaining a higher social position implied not only personal economic solvency, but also the ability to provide for other family members, whether by giving a one-off donation to a widowed sister or a poor female cousin, or by paying for a nephew's studies.

All the households had domestic servants, the average number of which coincides with the modal value: three per house, although some, such as that of the archdeacon of Saldaña, employed up to seven people. There were more female than male servants, with housekeepers and maids accounting for 59.5% of staff, versus 40.5% of male servants. However, households run by dignitaries or offices, rather than simple canons, had an average of 2.3 servants, and male servants predominated. This was because the former were fond of having specialised servants who endowed the household with social standing, such as footmen, a butler or coachman (Eiras, 1984). Within this group, it is necessary to distinguish between pages and servants. The former, all students, accounted for 72.5%, and some of those considered servants were also studying. It must be assumed that there were no close family ties between pupils and tutors, because otherwise these would have been recorded, as in the case of the nephews who were being trained.

The canons employed an average number of 2.1 female servants—few had more than three—and only the dean and an archdeacon had four female servants in their houses. Infrequently, there was a hierarchy between them, of housekeeper and maid, or older maid and younger maid or kitchen maid. This detail, which is very clear in some wills, is not reflected with the same clarity in the Catastro of Ensenada. This hierarchy was not only evident in the degree of responsibility held within a household and in salaries, but also often in bequests, when the capitularies rewarded their faithful service. Likewise, although not abundant, there are cases of



maids whose name is preceded by “doña”, a mark of respect for women, or who came from the same place of origin as the canon.

It is also relatively common to find some kind of kinship between the maids, the most frequently being sisters or aunt and niece. However, there may have been other relationships, whether distant relatives or coming from the same place of origin. To return to a point made earlier, some of these household heads had female family members who helped to run the house. Of course, their status would not be the same, as the sisters would have enjoyed a privileged position while female cousins would perhaps have been at a level very similar to that of the maids, although the situation could vary.

Finally, it should be noted that at the time of death, the canons were very mindful of their family members, who were heavily favoured in the distribution of their goods. Nevertheless, they also made charitable donations in their wills to maids, the poor, hospitals or institutions for those most in need.

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to contribute to the historiography of chapter clergy in the Iberian Peninsula between 1650 and 1800. The behaviours analysed proved similar to those observed in other chapters examined from the same sociological perspective. The León chapter was a medium-sized body, as were most of the Castilian chapters. In terms of the social background of its members, it was far from being the wealthiest or most prestigious chapter. Nevertheless, it was instrumental in advancing the social prosperity of local people and others from neighbouring territories, and of the relatives of the bishops who occupied the diocese of León.

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