



ARTICLE

DOMINANCE WITHIN THE *ECCLESIA*: THE CASE OF LATE MEDIEVAL PORTUGAL¹

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Abstract

This article aims to demonstrate the effectiveness of a theoretical perspective. It argues that, in medieval society, the *ecclesia*, in its threefold sense (the community of the faithful, cult buildings and ecclesiastical hierarchies) played a determinant role in organising different interlocked social relations. Thus, this role is critical to understanding the reproduction of dominant groups, whose organisation must be conceived through the *ecclesia*. This article is based on the Portuguese aristocracy. The historiographical production of the last few decades on different themes is synthesised and organised according to this theoretical perspective, seeking to highlight its operability and the paths it opens for a more grounded understanding of medieval social dynamics.

Keywords

aristocracy – nobility – Church – *ecclesia* – *dominium*

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ARTIGO

DOMINAR DENTRO DA ECCLESIA: O CASO DE PORTUGAL NO FINAL DA IDADE MÉDIA³

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Resumo

Este artigo tem como objetivo demonstrar a operatividade de uma perspectiva teórica. Defende-se que, na sociedade medieval, a *ecclesia*, no seu sentido triplo (a comunidade dos fiéis, os edifícios de culto e as hierarquias eclesiais) desempenhava um papel ordenador de relações sociais de diferentes tipos, imbricadas entre si. Assim, esse papel tem necessariamente de ser tido em conta para compreender a reprodução dos grupos dominantes, sendo imperativo conceber a sua organização através da *ecclesia*. Neste artigo, usa-se o caso da aristocracia portuguesa. Procede-se à síntese da produção historiográfica das últimas décadas em diferentes temáticas, organizando-a de acordo com aquela perspectiva teórica, procurando evidenciar a operatividade e as vias que ela permite forjar para uma compreensão mais fundamentada da dinâmica social medieval.

Palavras-chave

Aristocracia – Nobreza – Igreja – *Ecclesia* – *Dominium*.

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This article argues that adopting a holistic and integrated vision, based on the historically situated idea of a society founded on and framed by ecclesial references, is fundamental to understand medieval social dynamics. Ecclesial references played a vital role in structuring a wide array of social relations, which a modern-day observer would implicitly perceive as independent (politics, economics, religion). This article's theoretical perspective should help overcome a division within historiography that is largely inherited from conceptual ruptures produced throughout the 18th-19th centuries and perpetuated by chronological and thematic divisions amongst academics who perceived ecclesial references as merely 'religious' aspects. This article is based on research in Portugal, over the last forty years, covering several subjects largely perceived as independent⁵: the history of the nobility and social elites, and the history of the Church and devotional practices. We propose a synthesis of these subjects according to a specific theoretical position in order to build a comprehensive understanding of medieval society, particularly the organisation and social reproduction of the dominant groups.

Based on the concept of *ecclesia*, we will focus on three topics: the laity's role in the Church and the aristocracy's positions in ecclesiastical institutions and cult buildings.

Reframing historiography according to a theoretical perspective

After the 1970s, history of the nobility and the Church—considering the latter's various institutional aspects and the laity's devotional practices—were among the most fruitful fields of Portuguese historiography. Academic research on these subjects produced theses and publications, largely, but not exclusively, monographic. For various reasons (including the availability of sources, largely dependent on ecclesiastical institutions), most of those works recognised that thematic interdependence is necessary to understand complex social phenomena. This research dynamic resulted in the accumulation of specialized publications⁶. Although obeying specific stages and demands to construct and accumulate knowledge, these contributions require a holistic and integrative vision, based on historically founded theoretical perspectives.

⁵ We will not consider a systematic review of Brazilian historiography on medieval Portugal. Nevertheless, a general overview of this historiographical production is cited below. Specific contributions to the argument sustained in this article are also referred.

⁶ A review of this production up to 2010, seeking to list all the works produced, can be found at MATTOSO; ROSA; SOUSA & BRANCO, 2011.

One of the precursors of Portuguese historiography's great renewal, J. Mattoso, became aware of the importance of studying aristocratic groups, their power and kinship structures, through surveys he carried out on the history of the Porto diocese's monasteries in the 11-12th centuries (MATTOSO, 2002). The study of the aristocracy—an important part of monastic foundations—led the author to test interpretative hypotheses about the group's organisation and function within the social order and in the 'political' history of the kingdom of Portugal in its first centuries (MATTOSO, 1985 [1982], 2001). Dispersed across some Portuguese universities and under his supervision, different researchers pursued J. Mattoso's analytical hints, to a great extent refining previously outlined hypotheses and conclusions (VENTURA, 1992; SOTTOMAYOR-PIZARRO, 1999; SOUSA, 2000). J. A. de Sottomayor-Pizarro focused on the connection between ecclesiastical institutions and the aristocracy, using a type of source that highlights this relationship's centrality until the 14th century, namely the "*Lista dos naturais do mosteiro do Grijó*", a document produced in 1365 to organise how much the monastery should pay the descendants of the institution's first patrons, a right equally transmitted by maternal and paternal descent (SOTTOMAYOR-PIZARRO, 2011)⁷. However, the interactions between monastic institutions and social elites in the final centuries of the Middle Ages remained largely unstudied⁸. Regarding lay religiosity, Maria de Lurdes Rosa followed an approach inspired by historical anthropology to overcome the conceptual barriers created by the emergent liberal societies, thus conferring coherent meanings to a vast set of social practices abundantly represented in the documentation, which cannot be reduced to 'private' or 'folkloric' aspects (ROSA, 2004, 2010, 2017). Overall, most of these research paths relied on written records produced or archived by ecclesiastical institutions.

The present article attempts to combine different approaches and historiographical results based on a set of theoretical formulations, to then outline new research paths. Some 'technical' aspects of historiography stress the need for a specific research focus. However, specialization is largely the result of partitioning academic work into thematic areas that in turn subdivide the already debatable chronological division, therefore reifying and substantializing constructions about time and social orders that are anything but 'natural'. Therefore, an excessively specialised logic can obviate a holistic comprehension of the functioning of the social order.

⁷ The list "*naturais do mosteiro de Grijó*", studied in his master's dissertation, was dissected in a recent article in terms of its significance for understanding the group's kinship structures.

⁸ L. M. Rêpas' doctoral thesis gave considerable attention to the interactions between aristocratic groups and female Cistercians monasteries (RÊPAS, 2021). Monographies and academic dissertations/theses on monastic institutions in the 15th-16th centuries have mostly focused on institutional overviews.

Using social relations as the basic framework, one can embrace the multiple facets such relations can assume (kinship, spiritual, material, ‘feudal’, etc.), accept they are largely ‘embedded’ in each other (to use K. Polanyi’s idea) and that understanding their specific dynamic is the result of abstract reasoning. Stating that one cannot make the history of the aristocracy without understanding the history of the Church (the two dominant poles of medieval society) might sound like a truism. But it is necessary to demonstrate from which perspectives this combination can be pertinent, and how it is theoretically grounded and methodologically feasible.

***Ecclesia and dominium; spiritus and caro:* the theoretical foundations of another approach**

A. Guerreau developed the idea of a “conceptual fracture” that emerged in the 18th-19th centuries, thus rendering the foundations of pre-liberal (and one might add pre-industrial) European societies incomprehensible (GUERREAU, 1980, p. 2017-258; 2001, p. 23-39). For Guerreau, the functional triad that has characterised European societies since then—politics, economics and religion, as (in principle) autonomous fields and macro-concepts—produced a social dynamic largely alien from the preceding period. Simultaneously, this triad supplanted the former binomial that, according to the author, explained the medieval period’s social dynamics: *dominium* and *ecclesia*. Dominion over men and land, conceived as inseparable elements that were also incorporated in the broad framework of multiple social relations provided by the *ecclesia* in its triple meaning: the community of the faithful, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the cult buildings. As in the Trinitarian dogma, none of the three components could be separated, thus laying the foundations of the *ecclesia* as a “total institution” (GUERREAU-JALABERT, 2003) and a society founded on and perceived through the Christian founding myths.

The church’s importance was expressed in its institutional dimensions, but also created a system of conceptual representations based on what A. Guerreau-Jalabert conceived as “*analogie généralisée*” (GUERREAU-JALABERT, 2015)⁹. From the Patristic writings onwards and based on homologies between conceptions of human beings and society, a binary scheme was therefore progressively designed and internalized. For lay and clerical people, this scheme became the implicit way of

⁹ As clearly demonstrated by Philippe Descola, this was one of the main systems of organising social representations around the world. Although the author gives particular attention to other societies, he highlights that this system also characterised Western Europe in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period: DESCOLA, 2005.

perceiving the world. *Spiritus* came to be identified as something good and according to God's will, and *caro* as something bad and against God's will. There was no fixed structure. Rather, their essence lay in the relation between different elements, allowing for an application to every possible aspect. For example, celibacy could be considered spiritual when compared to marriage, but marriage was certainly perceived as spiritual when contrasted with fornication (i.e., sexual conduct outside the Christian framework of marriage). This binary system is central to the perspective defended in this article, since it demonstrates that a great deal of the social legitimisation achieved by dominant groups depended heavily on 'spiritual' behaviours, for example regarding the use of wealth. A semantic study of the notion of treasure demonstrates that a positive perception of wealth resides not in its concealment, but in its charitable circulation (GUERREAU-JALABERT, BON, 2008). Such notions are fundamental to frame the data explored in this article, for example, underling how the lay aristocracy adopted 'spiritual' behaviours to assert themselves atop the social hierarchies.

The *ecclesia*, in the above-described simultaneously triple and unitary notion, sustained and built the structure upon which the *dominium*—i.e., the ecclesiastical and aristocratic control of the population and the system of production—was exercised, and therefore in which society functioned. In some sense, the *ecclesia* was a large social institution whose role can be compared to the Market in contemporary societies. Obviously 'markets' existed in medieval society—the local market, a market of some scale for specific commodities—but *the* Market as a global institution, connecting, integrating, and organising societies and individuals, is a contemporary paradigm in the history of human civilizations.

Dominium and *ecclesia* are, therefore, concepts that represent two sides of the same coin; they constitute a theoretical perspective to understand medieval social dynamics. They have since gained some traction in French historiography, although their understanding and transfer to scientific inquiry have varied greatly (MORSEL, 2023; PERREAUX, 2023). In a recent book, A. Fontbonne proposes an articulation between historiography and sociology. Revisiting the common links between the two—the epistemological separation of the 19th century, the medieval origin of certain sociological concepts, and the application of sociological theories and concepts by medievalist historiography—the author presents several propositions about how interactions between the two fields are enriching. One resides precisely in the role of the *ecclesia* seen through the notion of "field" as forged by P. Bourdieu for the study of various subjects. Fontbonne thus proposes the notion of "ecclesial field": the social fabric was organised into a "field" wherein positions were defined and determined within the ecclesiastical framework, produced largely by the ecclesiastical structures themselves (but going far beyond them), insofar as this frame-

work is inevitable to interpret the world and the structure of a very broad set of social relations (FONTBONNE, 2023, p. 78-92, 123-136, 289-302). Thanks perhaps to Anglo-Saxon dominance in the global landscape, and to a lack of translations into English, these perspectives are still little known in the English-speaking world (WEST, 2018). Their reception in Brazilian and Latin American medievalism is also ambivalent, mostly because of theoretical debates regarding topics such as continuities, colonialism, and Eurocentric approaches: a debate that has unfortunately separated Brazilian and Portuguese medievalists, and that still requires a common program to foster scientific knowledge (BERTARELLI, AMARAL, 2020. ROSA, BERTOLI, 2010).

Although the historical actors made an effort to delimit areas of influence—particularly the ecclesiastical hierarchy, desirous of creating a separate body, ‘spiritually’ superior to the laity, and therefore able to guide the social body—, the working hypothesis is that, in reality, the frontiers were quite porous and the social dynamics much more interdependent than this discourse would have us suppose¹⁰. This position does not deny tensions and rivalries between lay dominants and ecclesiastical authorities, nor accepts that all dominants were sincerely pious individuals according to ecclesiastical perspectives; rather, it argues that one needs to understand the *ecclesia* as a macro-structure upon which central social relations were organised¹¹. Considering the centrality of macro concepts such as *ecclesia* and *dominium* and the global scope of the *spiritus/caro* analogy brings logic and coherence to social practices. After this first theoretical clarification, we present contributions from different thematic historiographic fields covering Portugal in the 14th-16th centuries to highlight the thematic and explanatory interdependencies between the history of the aristocracy and the history of the Church, where the latter is understood in its triple (and historically functional and situated) meaning. This will become evident in the transposition between the meanings and subjects analysed: the laity’s devotions and their structural importance, which fits in with the *ecclesia* as the community of the faithful received by baptism and participating in the Christian rituals (essentially rituals of social integration and cohesion); the importance of the positions occupied in the ecclesiastical structures, matching the *ecclesia*’s in-

¹⁰ Moreover, one may suppose that the contemporary conception of the division between ‘state’ and ‘church’ contributes to the implicit acceptance of this partition. We highlight the importance of the work by Maria Filomena Coelho, criticising the entrenched contemporary conceptions when analysing the interaction between the monarchy, the nobility and monasteries: COELHO, 2016, p. 118-124.

¹¹ We refute a common critique of the concept as proposed by Guerreau (ASTARITA, 2003-2004, p. 188-191), which usually attributes to his model a lack of consideration of the inherent tensions within the dominant poles of this society.

stitutional dimension; and, finally, the physical spaces occupied by the aristocracy in churches, particularly in choosing burial places but also through investments in cult buildings. The latter aspect pertains to the *ecclesia* as a physical space, or “*l’église contenant de l’Église*”, in D. Iogna-Prat’s formulation (IOGNA-PRAT, 2006).

Through the lens of the aristocracy (but not only), we seek to demonstrate the indispensable need to consider the *ecclesia* as a fundamental structure for a very broad set of social relations, going far beyond the sphere which, today, we implicitly attribute to religion. Based on the work of M^a de Lurdes Rosa, we will show that the dominance of the elites (even the lay elites) depended on their prominent position within the community: as donors; as pious figures endowed with a refined devotional culture; as vigorous agents in community life, acting largely through the institutions or rituals more or less linked to (and controlled by) the Church, despite some tensions with ecclesiastical authorities. Then, based mainly on two strands of historiographical production—the history of the nobility and the social history of the Church¹²—, we will argue that ecclesiastical positions were central in structuring dominant groups and their growing interdependence. This field had, after all, greater porosity and interdependency, wherein relations cannot be perceived merely according to the classic binomials (lay–ecclesiastic; first-born sons living secular lives –‘surplus’ children sent to the Church). Finally, we will observe these dynamics in space. Guerreau considered the medieval conception of space to be essentially based on a notion of polarisation: in this case, structured around proximity to the most spiritual elements such as cult buildings and, within them, the altar and the relics (GUERREAU, 1996). His formulation gave rise to important interpretations of, for example, the configuration and arrangement of images in churches (BASCHET, 2008); and helped to explain the emergence of a central space within medieval community life, such as the cemetery (LAUWERS, 2005). Through different works—particularly the contributions of M^a de Lurdes Rosa in her research on chantries (ROSA, 2012)—we will attempt to demonstrate how the relational dynamics between the aristocracy and the Church was transplanted— or rather, exercised, in a lively and tangible way— onto the places they occupied in cult buildings, thereby inscribing the stratified social fabric of the city of men in these central and spiritual communitarian spaces.

¹² It is not our intention—nor would it be feasible—to present an exhaustive list of the publications that can be used in both thematic domains. As mentioned in a previous footnote, a global panorama of the publications in the different fields until 2010 can be found in the collective book *The Historiography of Medieval Portugal*. Here, we merely seek to evoke some titles and to demonstrate, for the sake of the arguments presented, the pertinence of the theoretical position defended.

Specifying the context: the *ecclesia* and the aristocracy in Portugal in the 14th – early 16th century

To clarify the context, let us begin with the ecclesial structures, which were defined gradually alongside the construction of the kingdom. There were nine dioceses, including the two archdioceses in Braga and Lisbon (the latter elevated to that status in 1393). Between the early 15th and early 16th centuries, these dioceses were complemented by new foundations overseas (Ceuta, Tangier and Safim, in Morocco; Funchal and Angra, in Madeira and the Azores) (ALMEIDA, 1930 [1910], vol. 1, p. 174-193; vol. 2, p. 5-14, 20-22). Despite the irregular management of the dioceses, especially in a general context marked by the Schism and the appointment of foreign prelates, the stable territory turned the diocesan institutions into fundamental structures. They were complemented by a evolving monastic network, characterised by the appearance of new orders (such as the *Jerónimos*), the decay of the old Benedictine monasteries in the north, and the reforms of the mendicant convents. Throughout the 15th century there was a great dynamic of foundations, and by the end of the century there were 272 monasteries in Portugal (215 for men and 57 for women); many foundations were under the intense patronage of aristocratic figures (GOMES, 2014, p. 153-160).

The term aristocracy is used in a conceptual and operational perspective. It includes the socially dominant groups (identified heterogeneously in the period's documents as *fidalgos*, *cavaleiros*, *homens bons*), as well as the great merchants of the kingdom's main towns and cities. The relevant perspective concerns the actual social relations and their dominant axes, rather than the taxonomy used in the documentation which, far from purely descriptive, was intended above all to organise a social structure implicitly perceived as stratified, and reflect competition between social groups (MORSEL, 2004; CRAWFORD, 2014; AGUIAR, 2021, vol. 1, p. 94-122). Moreover, as we will emphasise, an integral part of the social legitimacy of these different groups relied, in one way or another, on the ecclesial frameworks, which simultaneously reinforced this institution's centrality in the global social organisation.

The *ecclesia*, understood in its multifaceted institutional sense, and aristocracy, as an operative concept that sets together different dominant social groups, are not monolithic concepts. Although there were simultaneous relationships of concurrence and cooperation between and within them, they are explanatory macro-concepts.

I: Aristocracy in the *ecclesia*: the role of the laity

The representation of the social body rigidly divided between the ecclesiastics—the specialists in manipulating the sacred, its practical organisation and building overall theories of the world—and the universe of lay people—theoretically subject to clerical domination—was primarily designed by ecclesiastical hierarchies (IOGNA-PRAT, 2000 [1998], p. 19-30). An order arising from an interpretation of the Christian founding myths paved the way to the (historically constructed) idea that ecclesiastic figures ought to control the instruments connecting to the sacred, becoming decisive to the social fabric's very functioning. More than a description, this image of the social order became an idealised and performative programme. The relevance of all social representations lies in their power to transform reality through the perceptions inculcated into social actors; they are not, however, totally transparent, or faithful portraits of the actual functioning of social systems. In this article, it would be unwise to fully and acritically accept the endogenous and functional representation of medieval society as a simplistic division between 'active' and 'passive' agents, as far as the codes and rituals of the sacred are concerned. The notion of "ecclesial field", as developed by A. Fontbonne, provides an important key. The laity, especially the dominant groups, far from a passive role, needed to actively manage the symbolic and ritualistic codes related to the ecclesial field. For these groups, a truly dominant and prominent position had to be sustained through the referential universe framed by the *ecclesia*. We exclude a 'psychologizing' analysis, based on 'faith' and 'belief', whether authentic or not. These aspects are impossible to determine and are secondary to the type of analysis intended.

Research on the laity's devotion should be analysed and presented through the theoretical framework suggested above. First, refuting the image of a clear separation between spheres, which would translate, for example, into the hypothesis of the laity's total ignorance of the mysteries of theology or the meanings of the liturgy, facing their rituals and beliefs merely as a 'popular' devotion devoid of critical meaning¹³. Rather, a significant number of young people in the social elites integrated the ecclesial learning circles early on, taking clerical orders, even if only a minority proceeded to sacred orders (MARQUES, 1988, p. 982-991; ROSA, 2004, p. 499)¹⁴. In other words, a broad scope of people from these social groups were in

¹³ Notion criticised by authors such as Eamon Duffy, who justify the use of the notion of "traditional religion" to study belief systems and practices of late medieval England (DUFFY, 2022 [1992], p. 2-6).

¹⁴ See namely the registrations of the archdiocese of Braga published by FERNANDES, 2002.

contact early on with the Church's teachings. As we will demonstrate, aristocratic kindred had relatives, consanguineous or by affinity, with greater or lesser proximity, in ecclesiastical positions, thus mitigating the idea of an overly substantial distance.

Furthermore, the dominant lay people, to assert themselves socially, needed to be active inside the *ecclesia*, and to act according to spiritual principles; they needed to stand out within the community of the faithful by performing a complex set of rituals, during their lives and at their death (ROSENTHAL, 1972, p. 29-30). They manifested a set of behaviours highlighted in the various studies by M^a de Lurdes Rosa and used here as a reference base. Through wills and donations, aristocrats could plan their funerals, expressing and promoting a refined liturgical devotion, grounded on the knowledge of the sacred texts, theology, and the ample meanings and possibilities contained in a flourishing liturgy in the late Middle Ages. Alternately, they could assert their high social status by planning a ritual marked by humility, proudly stripped of all earthly honours (ROSA, 2012, p. 417-470; 2017, p. 224-225, 251-252).

As mentioned, such options were grounded on knowledge frequently stated in wills. In 1525, Violante de Távora, mother of the Count of Castanheira, exhorted her son to fulfil her wishes by using the image of the Father and the Son as a single person; consequently, the pains or rejoices of one were the pains or rejoices of the other¹⁵. The pressure on the son was manifested in his handling of a central image of Catholic dogma. Given the aristocracy's level of knowledge, they were perfectly aware of the specific types of suffrages that could be used for the benefit of their souls and/or those of their ancestors and relatives; by knowing the rituals and their meanings, testators and donors were able to proclaim their wishes or to negotiate them with ecclesiastical institutions. The wide array of possible combinations of mass cycles produced an overlap between individual/familial salvation and an increase of service rituals in the community (DUFFY, 2022 [1992], p. 139-141, 327-337)¹⁶. The testators and donors, both men and women with earthly possessions, inscribed themselves and their dead in the Christian calendar. In chantries, suffrages were thought to be celebrated until the day of the Last Judgement, but at the same time assumed a cyclic dimension since they were constantly repeated and inscribed in

¹⁵ Violante de Távora. Will, 1525, British Library, ADD MS 20957, fls. 50-61

¹⁶ Regarding one type of source abundantly preserved – obituaries – one should point out the project carried out at the University of Coimbra and directed by Maria Amélia Campos and Ana Isabel Ribeiro: *COMMEMORTIS – What survives after death? Parish communities and death commemoration strategies in the medieval city* (<https://commemortis.wixsite.com/my-site>).

a calendar that annually recreated the life of Jesus and the saints (BASCHET, 2006 [2004], p. 419-473). Such men and women negotiated these provisions using a significant part of their estates. Regularly, they did not resign themselves to a passive position, but rather, as patrons, assumed prominent and perhaps conflicting positions regarding the clerics and the churches they sponsored (ROSA, 2012, p. 384-391).

The repeated presence in ecclesial structures was also materialised in charitable gifts that reconverted material goods, obtained in earthly life through God's goodwill, into spiritual ones through charity and increased worship. *Caritas*, the bond that should unite the human species in its intent to reach the city of God (a society organised according to God's will) presupposed giving, especially according to spiritual principles (GUERREAU-JALABERT, 2000; ROULLET, 2020). The need to reconvert earthly into spiritual goods is quite frequently expressed in wills and reaffirms the laity's internalization of this scheme. Throughout the 13th-14th centuries, but not only, hostels and hospitals assumed an essential expression of these concerns (ROSA, 2004, p. 460-470). They materialised the care for the poor (ROCHA, 2019) and the remembrance and prayers for the founders. In the 15th-16th centuries, money and estates left for masses commissioned in wills became the most common solution (CHIFFOLEAU, 2011 [1980], p. 297-368). Individual concerns for the souls were affirmed, shielded by the belief that repeated and reasserted memory of the dead implied they did not disappear from the universe of the living, perhaps benefiting from a smoother passage through Purgatory. In addition to this individual dimension, there was increased worship, whereby the divine presence was felt more frequently and in more places, thus benefiting the communities. This type of practice could correspond to the need to save one's soul—and therefore to an eminently individualistic procedure. However, the symbolic and sociological dimension of these choices fits traditional schemes of liberality and philanthropy, typical of stratified and admittedly unequal societies. One can argue that such meanings are consistent with the "ecclesial field" and the *spiritus/caro* analogy as inescapable dimensions of the medieval social fabric: individual and collective concerns cannot be exercised outside the "ecclesial field", demonstrating the inseparability of universes implicitly seen as independent, according to contemporary conceptions born of the "conceptual fracture".

Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries (and earlier), the knowledgeable and critical stance of the dominant laity allowed them, in their different configurations—the high court nobility, the elites of the administrative and judicial structures of the crown, the aristocracies of the municipalities—to assume an intervening and critical stance in the life of the Church. This attitude was grounded in the environment promoted by the dynasty of Avis (which reigned Portugal from 1385 onwards), who were interested in reforming the Church and fostering a moralist

context. The dominant groups, certainly not indifferent to such dynamics, associated themselves, for example, with the reformist movements that transformed the monastic landscape. The laity absorbed part of the cultural codes previously manipulated by the clerics and claimed a more preponderant position in the Church's institutions, contributing to revive the topic of Church reform or "nostalgia of the 'primitive purity' which had already been present in the history of Christianity many times" (ROSA, 2004, p. 492-497). According to Rosa, this "deep and enlightened personal commitment", the impossibility of conceiving salvation outside the symbolic and ritualistic universe provided by 'religion', led sectors of the courtly and traditional nobility to support the reform of the convents. Largely since the late 15th century/early 16th century onwards, the dominant groups assumed ambivalent positions between the figure of the austere and enlightened courtier, sometimes guided by reputed figures of the new or renewed religious orders, and the *fuga mundi*, occasionally in a clear rupture with familial projects and interests. Such a contradiction is clearly exposed in a case that took place in 1439: Nuno Martins da Silveira assaulted the austere convent where his son and heir had taken refuge to embrace a contemplative life, bringing him back to secular life and his quality as heir, embodying the lineage continuity (ROSA, 1995, p. 132-156). Nevertheless, such dynamics can be seen as specific evolutions of much older types of relations that were central to the social fabric. Indeed, the relationship between monasteries and aristocracy had a long history of mutual support—human, material, and spiritual—, but also of tensions and competition (BOUCHARD, 1987; MATTOSO, 2002; SOTTO-MAYOR-PIZARRO, 2014). Regardless, such interactions reflect an essential relation that must be considered in the evolving panorama of 15th/16th-centuries monachism (GOMES, 2014; ATIENZA LÓPEZ, 2010).

This excursus into the role of the laity aimed to emphasise that the formally established demarcation between clerics and laity should not correspond to the assumption of a simplistic active-passive hierarchical relation. This assumption does not erase the symbolic subordination that the clerics, in principle, were able to impose upon the laity. A more complex approach recognises that, in this social system, the dominant groups could not conceive themselves—and certainly could hardly imagine a world—outside the referential universe provided by ecclesial symbology, even if this might imply disputes with the ecclesiastical hierarchies. On the contrary, the pervasiveness of what we nowadays intend as 'religious' symbology constituted part of the mental and practical framework within which the aristocracy assumed a dominant status in the social system, even when they asserted a martial— and supposedly not very Christian—way of life (KAEUPER, 2009). Devotional practices, among the other elements previously outlined, had much wider implications regarding social relations as complex embedded dynamics.

II: Aristocracy in the church: institutional positions

Some authors refer to the functioning of the Church as based on “de-parentalized” principles (MORSEL, 2007 p. 118-120). The attribution of clerical positions did not necessarily obey parental logic, refusing the idea of familial dynasties. In principle, ecclesiastical recruitment was based on merit and competence, and the simple mention of nepotism confirms that, as a rule, value and merit were the primary factors when promoting someone to a certain position. Beyond the discourses, however, there were more and less visible dynamics that explain the functioning of the social order. Objectively, the aristocratic groups were interested in filling the most desirable posts in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, as a factor of social ascension and/or consolidation¹⁷. Moreover, they valued the existence, in their close networks, of figures specialized in the sacred codes of salvation: chantries’ institutors regularly preferred to recruit chaplains among their own kin. Both aspects contributed to obtaining decisive material and symbolic gains and, reciprocally, provided important bases for the reproduction of ecclesial structures¹⁸. Regarding the position of the aristocracy in Church institutions, we need to consider three aspects in complex interaction: 1) the role of ecclesiastical careers within the options available to aristocratic groups; 2) the role of ecclesiastics in their familial structures; 3) the growing importance of female monasticism¹⁹.

Ecclesiastical careers were not a mere solution for ‘extra’ sons; quite the opposite, men who followed such careers aimed at truly central positions in the social system. A successful career could lead to positions of maximum power, which were simultaneously beneficial for the familial group. Benefits could include the return of wealth accumulated via dowries and donations to nephews and nieces; the management of important networks that could benefit other relatives; or the supervision of kindred businesses, as we shall have the opportunity to demonstrate. That some ‘surplus’ children (male and female) were directed to ecclesial structures demonstrates the importance these structures assumed in the social fabric, and re-

¹⁷ In this sense, the work on the kinship ties of the archbishops of Santiago de Compostela is paradigmatic (PARDO DE GUEVARA Y VALDÉS, 2012). For the case of Coimbra between the 11th and the 13th century see also COELHO, MORUJÃO, p. 129-131.

¹⁸ One should point out that an extensive and comprehensive study on these relations such as the one carried out by BOUCHARD, 1987 (regarding this issue, especially p. 71-90) remains to be done.

¹⁹ It is important to stress the data available in Spanish historiography on Medieval/Early Modern periods: DIAGO HERNANDO, 2011; PRIETO SAYAGUÉS, 2020. The complexity of all these aspects is clearly illustrated in the case-study by A. Rouillet on the Sottomayor lineage in the 16-17th centuries: ROULLET, 2021.

ciprocally how the laity nourished them to further their interests. To analyse these subjects, we used notarial records dealing with kinship organisations (such as marriage contracts, wills, and partition deeds) obtained in the fonds of seigneurial/familial houses and monastic institutions deposited in Portuguese public archives.

Let us start with a particularly well-documented case: Gonçalo Vaz de Castelo Branco. In the last quarter of the 15th century, this nobleman was connected to the crown's bureaucratic-judicial structures. He achieved an upward path for his lineage, which culminated with his son obtaining the title of Count of Vila Nova de Portimão. Gonçalo wrote his first will in 1471, before leaving with the armada that would conquer the city of Asilah, in Morrocco²⁰. Behaving like a true Christian *pater familias*, Gonçalo detailed material matters (namely instructions regarding the payment of debts to servants), as well as stipulations regarding his children's future. The eldest son, Martinho de Castelo Branco, would succeed his father as *Vedor da Fazenda* (an official charged with the financial management of the crown) and would learn the necessary techniques for that role. The matrimonial plans of Gonçalo's daughters were detailed, demonstrating that marriage was the main way of providing a valid social destiny for women. Such planned matrimonial alliances were also the very embodiment of the social pacts that constantly built the aristocratic structures and networks. One of the sons, João, was destined for a clerical life. The testator requested that the Archbishop of Lisbon takes charge of the boy "and take good care of him".

Gonçalo Vaz de Castelo Branco was familiar with the bureaucratic structures and accustomed to moving within the circles of power and handling the legal and material instruments necessary to be successful in the royal court's social space. Therefore, given his observation and knowledge of this context, he was able to explain in detail the destinies of his children. Whether the destinies outlined were in line with the children's 'psychological' characteristics is unintelligible. The social roles they were attributed—the first-born reproducing the father's profile, the second-born man destined for an ecclesiastical career, and the women fundamentally dependent on matrimonial plans—were determined by the very constraints that affected and shaped the aristocratic families.

Gonçalo survived the conquest of Asilah and died in 1493. In the partition deed of his estates²¹, one can confirm that João followed an ecclesiastical career since he received money from his father for his studies in Siena. The first-born was therefore responsible for continuing the father's profile, in a context of increasing symbolic

²⁰ Published by AGUIAR, 2021, vol. 2, p. 100-113.

²¹ Published by AGUIAR, 2021, vol. 2, p. 156-171.

combination between the father and the first-born in the succession mechanisms. The second-born João was confirmed as bishop of Lamego and earned the trust of king João III, acting as his ambassador in Rome (GÓIS, 2014, p. 126-127; FARIA, 2016, p. 119, 123, 126).

The range of possible careers for aristocratic men (serving at court, in the royal bureaucracy, in the new war arenas) was broadened. Part of these options—especially in the warrior context of North Africa or, from the 16th century onwards, in India—implied great risks and dividends, falling within a relational framework between the kings and the aristocracy tied to the ‘ideological’ spectre of chivalry (AGUIAR, 2015, 2018). However, the various options could be considered simultaneously, explaining, as aforementioned, why many aristocrats took minor orders, but not all of them followed ecclesiastical careers *a posteriori* (MARQUES, 1988, p. 982-991, ROSA, 1995, p. 151-152). The example of Gonçalo Vaz de Castelo Branco will illustrate the degree of planning that necessarily conditioned aristocratic lineages; the choices made by or negotiated with the *pater familias*; the interests and possibilities of the familial group; and, perhaps, the individual characteristics of every child.

During this chronology, with the ascension of entails and succession mechanisms generally based on the primacy of the first-born son, only very rarely were the first-born sons directed to ecclesiastical careers (AGUIAR, 2021, vol. 1, p. 503-515). These options were probably conditioned by the discipline imposed on these figures, associated with the increasingly reinforced profile of the ‘successor’ as a link in the chain between founders and heirs. This profile was greatly shaped by entails (*morgadios* and *capelas*), as M^a de Lurdes Rosa underlines (ROSA, 2020). Although one must regard data with caution, cases such as Gonçalo da Cunha, bishop of Guarda, seem to be rare: despite being the first-born son, Gonçalo followed a career in the secular clergy, formally renouncing his succession rights to the crown’s estates, so that his brother could possess them without the threat of a future conflict (AGUIAR, 2021, vol. 1, p. 232-233). Even in the Hispanic context, certain local oligarchies in the Early Modern period favoured the creation and maintenance of clerical ‘dynasties’ and hypergamous marriage for women as the central focus of their strategies (DÍAZ, 2014). The context could dictate different strategies, with a distinct use of ecclesiastical positions (OLIVAL, MONTEIRO, 2003). In any case, the ecclesiastical institutions provided decisive support for the organisation of aristocratic groups, even if, in practice, this relationship could assume different configurations.

Men of aristocratic extract who became top figures in the ecclesiastical hierarchies played a prominent role in their families. In the 14th century, these dynamics were especially visible in the cases of bishops and archbishops who founded entails for several branches of their lineages, favouring nephews and nieces at the time of their marriages. This happened, for instance, with Gonçalo Pereira, the archbishop

of Braga, who founded several entails: for his niece Joana Vasques Pereira in 1330 when she married Diogo Lopes Pacheco and, between 1340 and 1344, three entails for his nephew Rui Vasques Pereira (AGUIAR, 2021, vol. 1, p. 368-374). He then channelled part of his wealth to his nephews, providing them with material sustenance when they married and giving substance to the social pacts thus sealed with other aristocratic lineages.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, the intervention of these figures in the affairs of their relatives was particularly visible in matrimonial negotiations. After a brilliant career, Jorge da Costa, archbishop of Lisbon, negotiated the marriage of his sister to Pedro de Albuquerque in 1467²². With a significant material investment in the union, he inserted his family into the network of one of the most significant and prestigious aristocratic lineages at the time. Moreover, even when they did not play such a direct role, bishops regularly appeared as negotiators and participated in their relatives' dowries. In 1512, Diogo de Sousa, archbishop of Braga, contributed to amassing the dowry of his niece, Guiomar de Meneses, for her marriage with Simão Fogaça²³. In 1522, Diogo Pinheiro, bishop of Funchal, acted as a proxy for his niece Violante de Távora in the negotiations of her son António de Ataíde's marriage to Filipa de Vilhena, offering guarantees for the return of the dowry and payment of the dower²⁴.

These cases, among many others easily identifiable in the vast bibliography on top clerical figures and aristocratic groups, illustrate how these figures were preponderant in the organisation of their kindred. In a certain sense, many 'fabricated' the lineage if they were the vehicle of their relatives' social ascension (VILAR, 1999, p. 106-109); others, thanks to accumulated wealth, consolidated new branches of the lineage, eventually compensating the parents' incapacity to conveniently endow all their children with good marriages. By assuming preponderant positions, top figures also had access to a wider range of social relations, both within the ecclesiastical and secular spheres (GONZÁLEZ NIETO, 2022). Their key importance in the social fabric explains why Portuguese kings consistently used their influence to appoint members of the royal family to the most significant episcopal chairs, especially from the 15th century onwards (VILAR, 2004, p. 243-244). However, such figures were not necessarily products of a 'nepotist' dynamic, as one might easily suppose within our worldviews: quite the opposite, key figures such as D. Fernando da Guerra, archbishop of Braga in the 15th century (MARQUES, 1988), or the cardinal D. Hen-

²² Marriage contract published by AGUIAR, 2021, vol. 1, p. 84-89. On this figure's career see VENTURA, 2018.

²³ Marriage contract published by AGUIAR, 2021, vol. 2, p. 245-249.

²⁴ Published by AGUIAR, 2021, vol. 2, p. 296-300.

rique, archbishop of Évora and briefly king of Portugal in the 16th century (POLÓNIA, 2005) are clear examples of highly educated and competent clerical figures.

Within the Portuguese historiographic context, more data and studies are needed on the intermediate levels of the ecclesiastic hierarchies and the interactions they formed with the local social fabric (FARELO, 2005). However, the information on the composition of cathedral chapters, available in certain studies, clearly points to the formation of local power networks through these institutions (VILAR, 1999, p. 165-172). Finally, adopting a holistic point of view is necessary as, hypothetically, this values the massive documentary fonds of many ecclesiastical institutions, still largely unexplored. This hypothesis argues that replicating such studies under the aforementioned theoretical perspective will foster more consistent investigations of the interactions between the aristocracy (in its different hierarchies and compositions²⁵) and the Church; and, conversely, of the ecclesiastical institutions' role in the very reproduction of the stratified social structures of the world of the laity²⁶. Such surveys can perhaps complement the information from studies on municipal networks, which mostly consider secular relations and largely ignore ecclesiastical institutions—and frequently their vast archives—in the local social fabric.

While men could obtain positions of maximum power, the aims for women presented distinct outlines. The data on the kinship structures of the Portuguese aristocracy, from the 14th to the 17th century, shows the residual secular celibacy of women: progressively, their destiny became confined to marriage or convent (SOTOMAYOR-PIZARRO, 1999, vol. 2, p. 489-490; MONTEIRO, 2003, p. 75-76; AGUIAR, 2021, p. 658-661; 2023). Within these privileged circles, women had to be framed formally by marriage or a vow and conventual life. In some Portuguese localities, one of the arguments for founding female convents lay precisely in the creation of structures that could accommodate the daughters of aristocratic groups: a royal letter of 1495 justified the foundation of the convent of Nossa Senhora da Piedade, in Tavira (Algarve) to house the daughters of the region's honourable people (SILVA, 2021, p. 301).

In any case, entrance into an important monastery was important to the reproduction strategies of the aristocratic lineages. As an example, one can cite a set of letters that clearly show the breadth of networks and influences mobilised by the lineages who disputed the succession in the powerful Cistercian monastery of

²⁵ 'Aristocracy' is perceived as a working concept, such as proposed by Morsel: one can easily detect dominant groups that can assume different social configurations; endogenous representations of social categories are thus social constructs primarily aimed at ordering the world and are the product of competing groups (MORSEL, 2004).

²⁶ A little like the multiple questions raised by the project that resulted in the book *Transacciones sin mercado*: PASTOR DE TOGNERI, PASCUA ECHEGARAY, RODRÍGUEZ LÓPEZ, SÁNCHEZ LEÓN 1999.

Arouca, in northern Portugal²⁷. In 1437, Álvaro Gonçalves de Ataíde and Guiomar de Castro sent several letters to D. Gomes, abbot of Santa Maria of Florence, asking him to intercede at the papal curia for Isabel de Castro's nomination as abbess. Guiomar de Castro sent several missives insisting her daughter be given that position, starting with a letter in March 1437 in which she gave an account of the former abbess' death, indicating that the nuns were divided between two candidates in the election of her replacement. These efforts went against the king's wishes and in 1438 the conflict was still unresolved. Given this monastery's power, king Afonso V sent a letter to his ambassador in Rome in 1457, informing of the abbess' death and asking him to beg the pope to appoint Beatriz Pereira, granddaughter of a lord who, in 1437, had also sought to have his daughter made abbess (AGUIAR, 2021, vol. 1, p. 266-267). This case reveals the existence of strong networks of interests around a powerful female monastery, endowed with great seigniorial and material resources, and of profound spiritual symbolism. It also shows the reproduction of kinship networks in conventual spaces (REPAS, 2005, 2021). In a scenario of this kind, the conventual life designed for women must be perceived, along with strategic matrimonial alliances, as a central part of intertwining kinship and power strategies, filtered by ecclesiastical institutions. Feminine monasteries could also be communities of autonomy and "sorority", which greatly complexifies the interpretation of women within such institutions (ANDRADE, 2015; ATIENZA LÓPEZ, 2019; CONDE, 2023).

Even the widespread assumption that a monastic vow meant a cheaper or easier solution compared with matrimonial dowries—which, at least for medieval Portugal, is far from clearly demonstrated (ANDRADE, 2011, p. 252-268)—, needs to be nuanced. In monastic funds and other sources, there are documentary records that provide evidence that nuns participated in the sharing of family estates. Such data indicate that they intervened within the family discipline, contributing to solutions that sought to maintain the estates (especially real estate) in the hands of their secular brothers. In certain contexts, they claimed significant inheritances, even if part of the wealth was later inherited by secular relatives. In 1466, Mécia Pereira, a nun in the convent of Santa Clara of Santarém, agreed to sell her brother Afonso Pereira her rightful claim to their mother's inheritance, in exchange for a cash payment and a rent during her lifetime. In 1493, the daughters of the aforementioned Gonçalo Vaz de Castelo Branco, who had professed at the monastery of Chelas, on the outskirts of Lisbon, shared their father's estates with their brothers and received a portion of equal value. The portions included, among other things,

²⁷ This epistolary record was published by GOMES, 2017, p. 382-383, 434, 493.

the sums spent by their father to provide the spaces where they were to live in the monastery. In a widely documented process that led to the foundation of the *morgadio* of Taipa, in 1538, three sisters who had taken monastic vows gave up their inheritance in exchange for rent during their lives, so that the entail could include the totality of the mother's estates, ultimately benefiting the lay brothers²⁸.

In sum, we sought to attest to the validity of the working hypothesis, which can easily be corroborated by consulting the vast bibliography on these subjects. This apparently obvious hypothesis argues there is no fundamental contradiction between secular and clerical interests (which does not mean they could not be competitors, as they frequently were), at least when the analysis is framed by a holistic understanding of the functioning of the social order that assumes the aristocracy's insertion in a social dynamic largely shaped by the *ecclesia*. Much of the aristocracy's reproductive capacity depended on the ability to insert its members into the institutional positions of the *ecclesia*. Such men could attain, particularly through episcopal chairs, positions of maximum power, possibly gaining significant returns for their lineages. Although the solution of placing women in convents was possibly partly related to a consistent increase in matrimonial endowments (AGUIAR, 2021, vol. 1, p. 567-585), it also needs to be nuanced, interpreting such options according to the central hypothesis that the *ecclesia* was the great social macro-structure, providing fundamental support for the functioning of aristocratic groups. But can the same be said about the Church? How dependent was it on the aristocratic groups? Only a profound study of the social composition of the ecclesiastical structures will allow the formulation of more sustained conclusions regarding the degree of penetration of the laity's interests and dynamics in the functioning of these structures. In other words, only this consideration can allow answering questions such as: to what extent was the Church a 'meritocratic' institution? Over the centuries, was it governed by this principle, or did it become more sensitive to 'nepotistic' logic? If ecclesiastical institutions provided fundamental support to the aristocracy, to what extent were aristocratic groups essential for the running of ecclesiastical structures?

²⁸ Documents published by AGUIAR, 2021, vol. 2, p. 77-79, 156-171, 328-355.

III: Spatial positions

Let us consider one last aspect of insertion in the *ecclesia*, namely the cult buildings, through two dimensions: aristocratic patronage of the construction or renovation of churches, or the acquisition of liturgical and devotional equipment; and the choice of burial sites. These dimensions are deeply connected. According to medieval conceptions, investing in cult buildings was one of the most spiritual ways to dispose of wealth and, in this way, put it to good use. They were understood as one of the trinitarian elements of the concept of *ecclesia*, as used in this article. A building of worship is understood by A. Guerreau as the foundation of an essentially polarised conception of space (GUERREAU, 1996). D. Iogna-Prat also pointed out that each building of worship contains within itself the universal Church (*“l’église contenant de l’Église”*, IOGNA-PRAT, 2006). These buildings were simultaneously places of worship and places of exhumation, thus symbolizing the *ecclesia* as a community formed by the living and the dead united under the promise of Salvation (LAUWERS, 2005).

For the late Middle Ages, the data regarding investments in cult buildings is more abundant for the nobility and other elites structured around the crown. The committed sponsorship of the foundation of new monastic houses was accompanied by considerable material investments to build or renovate churches and monastic spaces, as happened, for example, with the convent of Santo António da Castanheira by the local counts (FONTES, ANDRADE, 2015-2016), or with the monastery of Santa Maria da Rosa in Lisbon, whose foundation owed much to Joana de Ataíde (MARTINS, 2020). On certain occasions, such investments accompanied the entry of a daughter into the convent. In 1530, the daughter of Álvaro da Costa, a figure very close to king Manuel I, entered the convent of Nossa Senhora do Paraíso, in Évora; part of her inheritance was used for her conventual dowry, and Álvaro da Costa also contributed to the convent’s new church, namely to constructing the chancel, the portal, and windows (LEME, 2013, p. 54).

Within the cult building itself, social superiority could be expressed by proximity to the relics and altar, the place of the cyclical and universal transubstantiation of the body and blood of Christ. Occupancy regarding the sacred ritual and in the division of space reflected another hierarchical division between clerics (the holders of the monopoly of the word and sacraments) and the laity. Precisely because of these notions, proximity to the altar simultaneously became the cause and consequence of an upper position in the social hierarchy. Such dynamics were also manifested when contracting burial places, tendentially inside churches and close to the altar (CHIFFOLEAU, 2011 [1980], p. 154-155, 166-180). We lack a systematic study, based on Portuguese sources, of the burial places elected in wills and their relation-

ship with a vast set of important items for social analysis²⁹: social status, complexity of pious legacies, stratified disposition of space, etc. Following this article's theoretical approach, such a survey could disclose data and insights that far exceed the 'simple' wishes regarding burial places.

Chantries, founded with increasing frequency in Portugal from the 14th century onwards, were the most complete form of inserting the dead into the sacred space. As M^a de Lurdes Rosa clearly demonstrates, the entailment of estates for this purpose by the social elites, often establishing forms of administration entrusting these missions to lay relatives and descendants, immediately reveals the concern with managing and caring for the dead within a network primarily formed by blood ties. Chantries were perceived as "houses of the soul", and the estates and their management were consigned to the law dictated by the founders, whose voice ought to be heard after their death *in saecula saeculorum* (ROSA, 2012). Exquisite forms of devotion were often foreseen, expressing the ideas presented in the first part of this article regarding the insertion of the laity in the *ecclesia* through the handling of symbolic and ritualistic codes. In several cases, the chantry as a legal concept also gained materiality and tangible spatiality, negotiated with the ecclesiastic authorities: new chapels were built, generally attached to the churches, and opening into them through an archway, occasionally topped with the lineage's coat of arms. In their interior, the corpses were buried in graves or placed within refined tombs. Both regularly contained epitaphs identifying the dead and recounting their deeds. Such narratives and the symbols engraved in the tombs almost always reported to knightly references: chivalry thus encompassed the honour generated by the service to God and the king (PONTES, 2008; SOLEY, 2021). On certain occasions, as in the chapel of the Captain of Ceuta Pedro de Meneses, the flag, weapons and banner were hung over the monumental tomb where his body lay (ROSA, 1995, p. 126-127). Together, these symbols evoked the warrior deeds that allowed this lord to recover his lineage after 1415, the year of the conquest of that North African city (CAMPOS, 2004). The case of the chapel associated with the Esporão entail, in Évora cathedral, illustrates the complexity of these investments, leading to negotiations with the chapterhouse for its construction (TÁVORA, 1971), in a dynamic frequently visible in monastic churches.

In short, the social marks of the world of the laity were transplanted to the symbolically central space of this society, perpetuating, perhaps even more markedly, the functioning of the social order. Hence, there was a perpetual mark repre-

²⁹ For Castille, one must point out the study by PRIETO SAYAGUÉS, 2022.

senting a society that fully accepted its stratification, in contrast with the Christian mythology of the creation of men and the promise of salvation rooted in profoundly egalitarian principles. All these aspects, in addition to expressing how this society could not conceive its organisation outside the *ecclesia*, ultimately mean that elevated social positions were asserted within the spatial matrix of the cult buildings themselves, understood as the visible repetition of a Christian cosmology poured into social organisation. An affirmation negotiated with the clerical figures, but which inserted the prominence of lay aristocrats within the house of God, in a discourse on the order of the world projected until the end of time.

Conclusion

Rather than arrival points synthesising the largely segmented historiographical production, the theoretical perspective proposed in this article should manifest itself in constructing other types of research. Following such perspectives, one may even shed new light, for example, on the vast records of ecclesiastical institutions, many of which are still largely unexplored, and thus counterweigh the frequent lament of an ‘absence of sources’. Family archives similarly offer a vast and rich material awaiting to be exploited. Rather than diving into these sources like a detective seeking a hitherto unknown document or information, one must assume a holistic and appropriately constructed theoretical position, fostering another type of questioning and methodology and allowing a richer and more complex understanding of medieval social dynamics. A perspective grounded on a conception of social relations as ‘embedded’, and as the basic structure of every society. And, as far as medieval society is concerned, a perspective attributing to the *ecclesia* a fundamental role in organising different kinds of social relations, far exceeding the contemporary notion of ‘religion’.

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