

## Pre-enclosure European Women Religious through Basque Serora's Lens: A Comparative Approach

Mikel Larrañaga Arregi\*

*Freelance Researcher*

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**Abstract:** This paper is an initial comparative approach among the Basque serora's institution and other European women religious' institutions. The main issue is suggested by the hypothesis -held in my doctoral thesis- that sets the beginnings of the serora's institution in pre-Benedictine eremitical and monastic women religious' experiences. Though traditional authors viewed these ancient experiences as strict and enclosed, new approaches to the topic are revealing that ordinary forms of European Christian women religious' lifestyles (eremitical, monastic, diaconal, etc.) were mainly unenclosed, which would guide to consider post-enclosure semi-monastic experiences in a continuation line, as new forms of already traditional religious choices for women. The serora would represent a long-lasting case or evolution of the pre-enclosure type of women religious, still present in Basque culture's area until the end of 18th century, and related to a huge variety of activities, including social, religious and economic assistance, healthcare, commerce and administration, conforming an influential social group in Basque society of Medieval and Modern Ages. It is concluded that an extensive comparative study could reveal the role that this type of women religious had in Late Antiquity-Early Medieval European societies as sustainers of social welfare and cohesion, and as protective and creative background for women in general.

**Keywords:** Serora, Christianity, Enclosure, Basque

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### Introduction

The hypothesis exposed in this paper had its first formulation in the research done for a chapter of my Doctoral Thesis about the Basque institution of the serora, concretely the one dedicated to the origins of the institution (Larrañaga Arregi 2015, pp. 41-165). Some of aspects and processes exposed here are synthesis that need a larger exposure and more references, so that in some cases my thesis (accessible in internet) will be referenced with the pages in which the related aspects are larger explained, and further references can be found.

I'll begin explaining the general characters of the ancient pre-enclosure forms of Christian women religious, to then come to the Basque cultural area, and show its particular social and religious evolution, by which it can be seen that a particular archaic women religious' institution of the area, that of the serora, might be the closest descendant of those ancient women religious.

### Ancient pre-enclosure forms of Christian women religious

History of European Christian women religious shows that before three main facts influenced the scene, the scope of lifestyles for women religious was much wider; these three facts were: the generalisation of the Benedictine Rule, Gregorian Reforms and Papal Enclosure, which happened approx. between 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> c. After these three facts conformed the new scenario, the "official and accepted form" for a women religious came to be that of the enclosed nun (*ibid.*, pp. 53-91).

But ancient forms of Christian women religious included Deaconesses, as well as the more controversial Priestesses, and even, as some researchers support, Bishopesses. These women would become rejected by

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Corresponding Author E-mail: [anderixon@yahoo.es](mailto:anderixon@yahoo.es)



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church authorities as the aforementioned facts came to scene, being the highest status' for women religious in a cultural context that emerged from a deeply patriarchal greco-roman background, and provided high quotes of religious and social power, and a not less important economic autonomy. In the case of Deaconesses (the most "accepted" ones), they would finally become rejected and forbidden in Western Europe by aprox. 10th-11th c., and yet later in Eastern Europe (Hannon, 1967, LaPorte, 1982, Rossi, 1991, Torjesen, 1996, Macy, 2000). Nonetheless, and although related to some nuns ("monjas que son letradas"), one of the latest attested mentions of "diaconissas" comes from Western Europe, from 14<sup>th</sup> c. Segovia (Spain) (Martin, Linage Conde, 1987, 234).



Figure 1. *Theodo(r)a Episcopa, Bishopess Theodora (9<sup>th</sup> c., mosaic in the Church of Saint Praxedis the Martyress, Rome). The last (ra) from her name was in later times erased, but the figure is clearly feminine, and Episcopa is the feminine form for Episcopus. Source: Wikipedia.*

Deaconesses and Priestesses usually got these lithurgical status after belonging to widows' and virgins' "orders". These "orders" developed towards the cloistered monastic lifestyle in a parallel process to that of the elimination of the lithurgical Christian religious forms for women. Widows and virgins had a very active religious and social life, and so did their followers, known by a large series of ambiguous terms such as *puellae ancillae, sanctae virginiae, matres, sacratae feminae, deovotas, discipulas, mulieres sanctae* or *sorores*, that wouldn't become reduced to the posteriorly common *monachas, moniales* or *sanctimoniales* until the "regularisation" of them was made under the guidance towards enclosure. As ascetic principles became widespread from Eastern Christianity to the Western, widows' and virgins' lifestyles were assumed to eremitical, coenobitic and monastic ones. Although the ideal of the separation of the world (and material goods, and flesh, etc.), as happens with their male counterparts, is consubstantial to this perception of life and of the relationships with God, the transition from the "model" to the "rule" covers a very wide time-frame (Bajo, 1981-85, Elm, 1991, Navarro Sáez, 1991, Pedregal, 2005).

In opposition to what traditional monastic historiography held, new approaches on these collective forms of religious life have come to the conclusion that they were mainly unenclosed until the Gregorian Reforms came in force and Papal Enclosure was decreed, by the 12th-13th c. Supported by the main data of Caesarius of Arles' *Regula virginum* (written in the year 512 DC) and the influence that this first western rule for women had in the making of posterior rules, traditional historiography (written mainly by male and religious authors) used to hold a view in which ancient primary forms of these collective lifestyles would be strict and enclosed, to become relaxed and even mundane over time, being in need of reforms by the time Benedictine influence was widespread and Gregorian Reforms came. But new and more detailed approaches on the theme have revealed a very different landscape. Before the Benedictine rule was widespread as the "one and only", the main custom was the making of *regula mixta* or "mixed rules", that is, the making of a particular rule for each community by selecting paragraphs from other known rules. The new approaches have come to make clear that, although Caesarius' rule was used as a basic text in the making of other rules, enclosure was generally not demanded in the selections of paragraphs made in these others, being in some case even explicitly rejected by considering it non-convenient (Tibbets Schulenburg, 1989, Greer, 2012).

In fact, these considerations are only valid for those widows and virgins living in feminine or double communities, but most of them didn't even have written rules, and the scope of lifestyles was really much wider. Women following ascetic principles as individuals in populated areas or as hermits were common, until they had a great decline between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> c., due to the increasing Benedictine influence and the Gregorian Reforms. Once this processes set the control among them, their number started to grow up again in the 11th and 12th c. (King, 1983, Heuclin, 1988, pp. 99-102, 131-133, Labarge, 1988).

And apart from solitary ascetic life, feminine or double monasteries were not the only chance for women living in religious community. There were other types of monasteries and religious communities in which women lived, the most common of which seems to have been the *familiar monastery*, in which more or less extense families and related people gathered in a monastery to follow an ascetic type of life. They seemingly began to spread in the 6<sup>th</sup> c., and although they would disappear in the majority of Western Europe with the expansion of the Benedictine models of monasticism by the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> c., they would continue expanding and reach their highest peak in northern Spain in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> c., surviving until the 12<sup>th</sup> c. in the whole area (Orlandis, 1971, pp. 125-202, Linage Conde, 1990, Fernández Conde, 2008, pp. 222-273). And Basque culture's area is precisely the one with the latest survivals, in which churches continued being called "monasteries" until the 14<sup>th</sup> c.; there is even proof that 16<sup>th</sup> c. people considered that the patrons of churches and monasteries of their time had been called "abbots" of monasteries before, even being married and with children (Curiel Yarza, 2009, Larrañaga Arregi, 2015, pp. 115-125). Needless to say, there was no enclosure for women in this type of monasteries.

Finally, there is yet another phenomena that deserves to be mentioned here. All these types of monasteries could develop diverse ways to relate to the surrounding population, in terms of religious, social and economic links. Under the name of *familiaritas*, partial contracts could be made between monasteries and individuals, married couples with or without other familiars, or even small communities and towns, by which in exchange of a gift, the person or persons would come to benefit from some of the advantages of the members of the monastery. The variety was very wide: from the single assistance in determined moments of life, to a nearly complete membership (Orlandis, 1971, pp. 217-378, Giordano, 1995, pp. 169-182). The combination of relations determined by these customs created situations in which whole towns and villages became guided by monastic life's dynamics, a situation that seems to have happened in some northern parts of the Iberian Peninsula, extended in Basque culture's area's case to the other side of the Pyrenees.

This type of organization, indeed, may have its relative paralell in the *Céli Dé* or *Culdee* communities created between 8<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> c. in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England, and the attested presence of celtic Christian communities in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> c. Gallaecia (a wider area than nowadays' Galicia, Spain) enforces this possibility. Furthermore, this is the space and time-frame in which the so-called Pactual Monasticism was created and expanded to the East reaching the Basque territories by the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> c., an original contractual type of monasticism that could have extended, too, to the most common monasteries of the area, that is, the

familiar monasteries. But this relations and influences, though they could have happened, have not yet enough basis to be positively asserted (Larrañaga Arregi, 2015, pp. 71-75).

### Ancient women religious and the Christianization of the Basque cultural area

As happened in other monasteries, in lifestyles practiced from familiar monasteries to "monastic towns", the terminology by which women religious were known was very undetermined, being difficult to know which name corresponds to one or the other type of life. And this is precisely what happens with the use of the term *serora* in Basque from its first written records to the 18th c.: the term was simply used to talk about women religious, may their lifestyles be individual or collective, enclosed or unenclosed. Its important to stress, too, that the root of the term goes back to latin *soror*, and does not derive from posterior romanic evolutions. And it happens the same with their male counterparts, since Basque has no name for the presbyters, the secular religious men, except those becoming from monastic contexts and derived from latin. *Apez*, *apaiz* and later derivations as *abade* all come from latin *abbas*, just as does the english *abbot*. The term *abade*, indeed, is used both for presbyters and abbots. The other -and main- languages in which documents about women religious of the Basque area are written, Spanish and French, use to reflect the differences, naming differently the enclosed and the unenclosed, as well as individual and collective lifestyles, and assuming them usually to other women religious or semi-religious from their cultural spheres (*ibid.*, pp. 97-114).

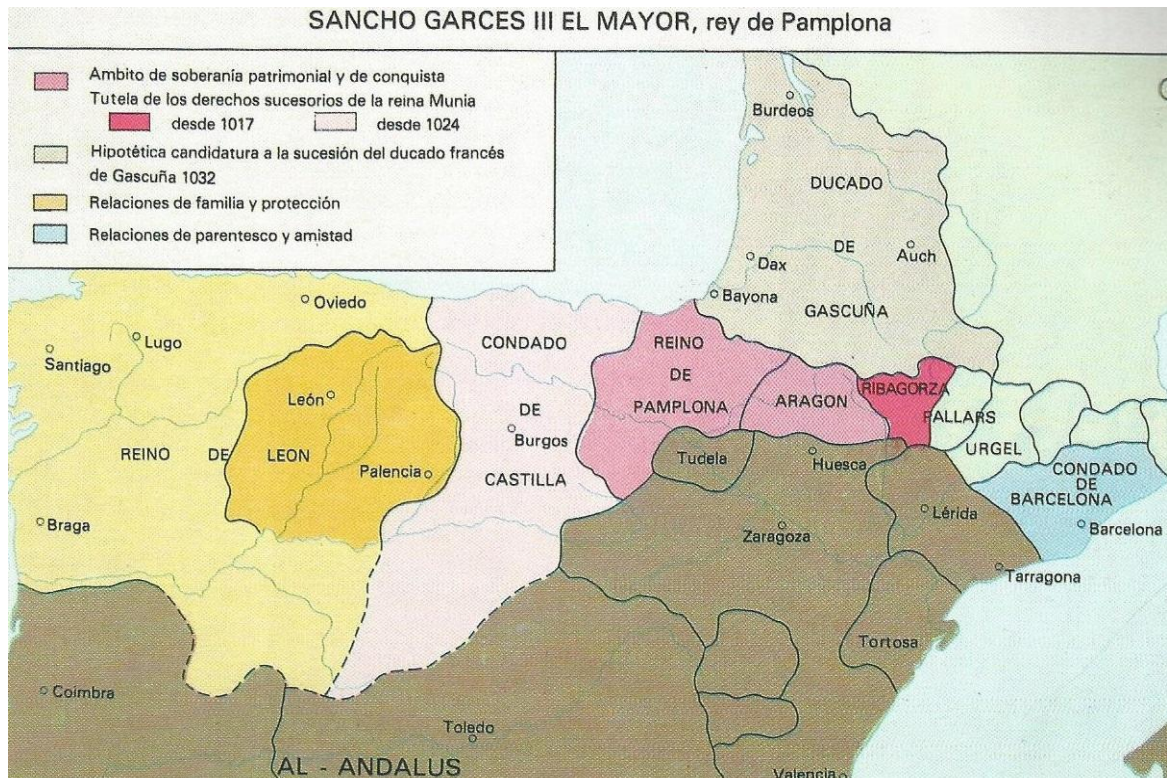


Figure 2. The Kingdom of Iruña (Pamplona) and its related territories in the reign of Sancho the Great (1004-1035), when the -non-mixed- Benedictine rule reached the area with the Cistercian Order. Source: Pastor Díaz de Garayo, 2004, p. 224 (from: *Gran Atlas de Navarra, II*, 1986).

The particular historical evolution of Basque religious culture gives an explanation for this. Put aside the polemical discoveries from the roman city Iruña-Veleia, even when main cities had Christian communities by the 4th c., the Christianisation of the area was very slowly made, so that syncretism with paganism was long held (last pagan burials date from the 12th c.). The process had a big lack of institutional control until the plain Middle Ages and yet later, and as the mentioned religious terms and other historical data show, ascetic or monastic patterns were the main ones (e.g., González Echegaray, 1982, Sayas Abengoechea, 1985,

Larrañaga Elorza, 1989 and 1999). With regard to women's participation in this "irregular" Christianization, a virgin named Ceresia or Cerasia is known to have evangelized in the Vasconic area in the late 4<sup>th</sup> c., and it is known that women hermits helped saint Emilian in his elder days, in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. We have the mention, too, by the 16<sup>th</sup> c. historian Friar Martin de Coscojales of two stone-graves of seroras, identified as such by himself and named *Deludelux* and *Delutrocoida*, located in respective rural churches very close to each other, one of which was in Argiñeta (Elorrio, Bizkaia), a place where a complex of stone-graves subsists, which's earliest chronology has been set in the 7<sup>th</sup> c. (Larrañaga Arregi, 2015, pp. 91-94).

This slow Christianisation process advanced in a very unstable political landscape, as the so-called Vascons remained relatively free from the surrounding emerging and expanding kingdoms between 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> c., with different political formulations and usual periodical intrusions and wars against Visigoths, Franks, Suebi and others, followed by the coming of the Arab conquerors in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. The first strong political structures would emerge with the Kingdom of Iruña (Pamplona) in the 9<sup>th</sup> c., as small settlements conformed the main populating landscape. These villages had mostly monasteries as centers (though not always), monasteries that at a first moment seem to have been ruled by councils (*concilium*), but would soon come under the rule of kings and landlord elites, already by the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> c. (see e.g. Azkarate Garai-Olaun, 2004, García Camino, 2004, Pastor Díaz de Garayo, 2004). The Benedictine influence got to the area in the reign of Sancho the Great in the 11<sup>th</sup> c., when the Cluny reform was already in force, and it encountered a situation in which, with some exceptions in the centers of bishoprics, the main religious context was that of a familiar monastery merged with the surrounding village or town and headed by a secular owner, considered as an "abbot". Indeed, bishoprics had a very similar structure, since the abbot-bishop system was by then very common, not only in the Basque cultural area, but in the whole Iberian Peninsula. The Cluny reform gave birth to hierarchical submissions between Benedictine monasteries and related temples; elites from kingdoms that supported this transformations followed a donation policy by which the order increased its power-structures, and Gregorian Reforms banned familiar and double monasteries and converted the owners of monasteries and churches in "patrons". This was happening in the Iberian Peninsula in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> c., and guided to the extinction of familiar monasteries. But none of this happened in most of the Basque cultural area, in which the donation policy was very scarce, and most monasteries and churches continued being property of elites until 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> c., in which the urban areas that had emerged mainly between 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> c. had enough power to overcome the landlord elites, and bishoprics began to exercise a more direct and severe control among local religious institutions (e.g. García de Cortázar 1981, 2000 and 2012, Jimeno Aranguren, 1999, Pastor Díaz de Garayo, 2004, Curiel Yarza 2009, pp. 239-263, Larrañaga Arregi, 2015, pp. 114-125).

All this had its consequences in women religious' situation, because Papal Enclosure promoted since the 13<sup>th</sup> c. almost didn't have any influence in the area, and enclosure policy would have to wait until 16<sup>th</sup> c.'s Council of Trent's decisions began to be applied in the 17<sup>th</sup> c., and wouldn't become generalized until the very late 18<sup>th</sup> c. (Arana, 1992, Piquer, 1996, Larrañaga Arregi, 2015, pp. 183-188). In the meanwhile, the power of landlord elites among the monasteries and churches, and the emulation of their same religious structures by the empowered urban areas' bourgeois elite, created a religiously oldfashioned scene, in which women religious' ancient forms survived in the figure of the serora. These was enforced by the fact, supported by other various historical data, that women had more power in Basque culture than in surrounding ones.

### **The serora's characters and the possibilities of a comparative approach**

Historiography about seroras has held from its beginnings that the institution had derived from ancient Deaconesses. The 18<sup>th</sup> c. historian and philologist priest Manuel de Larramendi already talked about these origins, and mentioned some common aspects, such as the existence of appointment rites and determined ecclesiastical benefits (as presbyters and other church employees), and tasks as the cleaning of the temple and its ornaments (altars included), heading and ruling the mourning of the women (and even say the last prayer and "Rest in peace"), and opening and closing the churches (Larramendi, 1985, 135-138). Wenworth Webster, an English clergyman and scholar who settled in the Basque Country in the late 19<sup>th</sup> c., reaffirmed these origins by mentioning the following tasks from Deaconesses, which, *mutatis mutandis*, he found were parallel to those of the seroras: (1) keep the door for women and establish their corresponding place in the

*matroneum*; (2) teach the catechism to women and assist them in the baptism; (3) take care of the ill and the poor; (4) assist women in the marriage ceremony; and (5) wash and shroud the bodies of the dead for burial (Webster 1911, 141-142).

Some appointment documents of seroras in rural churches talk about the giving not only of the keys of the temple, but also of the missal and the chalice (Arana, 2004, 847, Garmendia Larrañaga, 2007 -1991-, 20). These elements symbolically refer to those aspects remarked in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. by the Italian canonist Henry of Sergusio, when he talked about why women couldn't be ordained Priests: "For women may not receive the tonsure... nor may their hair be cut... nor can any woman exercise the power of the keys... nor serve the altar..., though a woman may recite the Gospel during matins" (Raming, 1976, 83-87; translation from the Latin by John Wijngaards in [www.womenpriests.org](http://www.womenpriests.org)). "The power of the keys", as can be read in the same author, was a medieval concept that included functions as to "teach, preach public sermons" or "hear confessions", and the missal and the chalice are evident liturgical elements.

In regard to public preaching, Henry of Sergusio only allowed women to "recite the Gospel during matins", but in the 14<sup>th</sup> c. Segovia (Spain), their task was others. Some nuns who knew reading could become Deaconesses, could say their prayers out loud (which was allowed only to the clergy), and though they could not read the Gospels and minister the altar, they could read the homily in the matins (Martin, Linage Conde, 1987, 234). And thus, as the homily is a commentary that follows the reading of the scriptures (and interprets them in their application to everyday life), we see they took somehow part in the task of "teaching and preaching public sermons".

The advance of the process of prohibiting the participation in liturgical functions and access to sacred spaces to women was, in effect, irregular. But, if we focus on the actions taken against women who had access to the altars, sacred vessels (as chalices), and stoles and other sacred ornaments, the parallels between the actions that were taken between 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> c. in Germany, Italy, France and the Iberian Peninsula, and those taken from the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> on in the Basque territories, the idea that this last territories remained in an archaic religious situation for a long time is enforced. For example, in the parish of Saint Michael in Oiñati (Gipuzkoa), the tasks of the sacristan and of the serora had to be specified in 1425, because the serora used to "serve" ("sirva") inside the altar's space ("ant'el cuerpo santo de Dios y reliquias dentro de las gradas mayores"), what corresponded to the sacristan (Ayerbe Iribar, 1985, 536-537). But yet in 1517, the visitor of the bishop had to menace the sacristan with suspension, because he didn't fulfill his task of "governing or ruling" the altars ("rregir los altares"), specially in high mass time. And he menaced the seroras in the same mandate with excommunication, since it was them who did what the sacristan had to do (even in high mass time) (Larrañaga Arregi, 2015, 203). And examples of this type are not few (see e.g. *ibid.*, 202-206, 218-224).

But we must remember there were, too, the seroras whose lifestyles relates us to the beginnings of the ascetic, eremitic and monastic patterns, with ancient church's widows and virgins. It must be stressed that widows and virgins have been attested to have participated in liturgical functions too, which is not strange, since the limits between them and Deaconesses seem to have been very diffuse. These women came to be named so, in effect, after an ordination rite, too, and they and their Medieval followers had several characteristics that are common to these other seroras. As mentioned above, being an "ecclesiastical" widow or virgin seems to have been, sometimes, the "first step" to be ordered Deaconess, and some of them used to make donations to churches, becoming in return temporary rents, that, significantly, were called with the same term used for the male clergy's rents: *stipendium*. Moreover, linked to churches or not, widows and virgins could live, as many seroras would later do, with their families, or in their own particular houses doing solitary life, or in communities. They lived in rural spaces, as well as in cities, and these extensive possibilities were present, too, for their Medieval followers, as well as for the Basque seroras (Bajo, 1981-85, Elm, 1991, Navarro Sáez, 1991, Pedregal, 2005, Larrañaga Arregi, 2015, pp. 61-63). And this happened too with the various helpers that a main serora from a church could have, helpers that usually were named *serora* too, or *coadjutora* (coadjutor, assistant), and in the case of the northern Basque territories (nowadays' France), *brayine*, *braine* or *braguine* (see e.g. Henao, 1980, pp. 135-138, Frank, 2001).

Another key aspect that must be mentioned is the economic autonomy of these women, who once entering the religious life, could stand outside masculine economic control; which was not, of course, the situation for enclosed nuns. For clergymen who wanted widows and virgins to have an enclosed life, as Saint Leander of Seville (6<sup>th</sup> c.), the need to earn a living by themselves was, indeed, held to be a reason to forget their service to God (see e.g., Bajo, 1981-1985, Saint Leander, 1971). But they were more powerful being economically autonomous, and related to this, it could be remembered that in Gaul, a third of the farmland was acquired by the Church between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> c., greatly due to powerful widows' and virgins' donations (Goody, 2001).

Just as we know that some widows acted as lenders (Bajo, 1981-1985), so did some seroras, being able to become very important in the surrounding economic activities. Their debtors covered a very wide frame of social strata, from the poorest peoples to the wealthiest ones, reaching to merchants, aristocracy, churches and even whole towns. In addition, they were particularly important for women's economic activities, since they usually lented what we nowadays call "micro-credits" to those women who weren't wealthy, and acted, as well, as economic background for wealthy widows (Larrañaga Arregi, 2015, pp. 566-613).

Other aspects of the seroras' activities are more related to the aforementioned contexts of familiar monasteries and "monastic towns", which as we have seen, seem to have been the most usual social structures from which the Basque society of Modern Ages emerged. The above mentioned women's tonsure rejected by Henry of Sergusio in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. was an ancient specific ascetic and monastic haircut that was prohibited and extinguished along Europe, but it not only survived in the Basque areas; it even became the identifying haircut for maidens or non-married women under the name of *beacumial*. The custom was attested by several foreign travellers (from Germany, Venice, Spain and France) as exotic and exclusive of the Basque area between 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> c. (Garate, 1989, Díaz de Tuesta, 2006). This shows that the custom had been by then eradicated along Europe, and that the Basque cultural area had had a peculiar evolution that preserved it.



Figure 3. A girl with Beacumial tonsure or hairstyle, by the traveller and german printer Cristobal Weiditz, from 1529. Source: Garate, 1989, p. 73.

But not only the presence of the *beacumial* speaks in favour of the generalisation of monastic patterns. *seroras* were also responsible for the performance of specific burial rites and attendance of familiar stone-graves (considered to be “part of the house”), which in a big part of the Basque area were located inside the church and structured following power preferences. Burials inside churches were several times prohibited by medieval church laws and reserved to religious and aristocratic elites, but, as in other several parts of Europe, this had no effect in Basque areas, and the custom even became traditional (Ariès, 1992, pp. 46-50, Larrañaga Arregi, 2015, pp. 473-516). And the scheme of the Medieval and Modern Basque communities can be easily compared to the one that would be created in precedent times in the familiar monasteries and the populations related to them by *familiaritas* type links: a wealthy and powerful family would have the property of the monastery, the surrounding population would become submitted in different grades of power and wealth through *familiaritas* relations, and all of it would come to have a public expression in the stone-graves' preference structures (and rites linked to them). Burial rites, locations of stone-graves inside churches and the preferences in church offerings conformed, indeed, along with matrimonial rites, the main spheres where the power structures of the populations were socially expressed. And the *seroras* used to play key roles and even rule by themselves these spheres, so that their social power was very notable (*ibid.*, pp. 473-516, 758-789).





Figure 4. Funeral procession going to Church. Wall paintings in the apse of the Church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción of Alaiza (Iruraiz-Gauna, Álava-Araba), 11th-13th c. Men carry the deceased, a woman, allegedly a *serora*, guides the procession (followed by another one, not seen on the photograph), and another alleged *serora* rings the bell. Source: AUÑAMENDI EUSKAL ENTZIKLOPEDIA, Muerte. <http://www.euskomedia.org/aunamendi/82465#39>.

The mentioned aspects may suffice to show that the hypothesis of the continuity and particular evolution of the ancient forms of Christian women religious in the Basque area has enough basis to be held. But the here exposed hypothesis not only speaks in favour of this continuity and evolution, but opens the door to the fact that non-enclosed feminine semi-religious institutions in Medieval and Modern Europe wouldn't be new phenomena, but already traditional lifestyles for women in a new context in which only the figure of the enclosed nun would become promoted as an ideal for women religious. And some of the names that the Basque *seroras* received in Spanish, indeed, apart from the same *serora* or *sorora*, were those given to these semi-religious women, such as *freila* (or *freyra*, *freyla*, etc.), *beata*, or *emparedada*.

And this was very logical, since these semi-religious women had plenty of characteristics in common with the *seroras*, as well as with the ancient types of Christian women religious. But we won't get to explore these relations, because it's not the principal aim of this paper, and it would take too long. Nevertheless, we do feel in the need to try to answer to a question: how did the transition from non-enclosed to enclosed lifestyles happen, shifting the old religious forms to the "semi-religious" sphere?

A clear perspective for the understanding of the process is the one that can be set by following the evolution of the *deodicatae*, *deovotae* and *deodada* in the Catalonia of the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c., since it is a space where documents from these centuries have survived; centuries in which womens' transition to enclosed life did reach the area. Apart from the *deodadas* and *deodados* who gave their goods to a family, receiving food and clothing in return, these names were given to women who lived collectively in monasteries, as well as to those who lived by themselves taking care of churches, in their *cella*'s. These last two types appear in the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> c. documents administering their goods freely, and living a non-enclosed life. But by the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> c., as Benedictine rules' application widespread, and as their names came to appear associated to the *sanctimonialis* and *monialis* terms, the cases of *deodicatae* and *deovotae* (or *deosacratae*, etc.) who actively administered their goods diminished, and in the monasteries, the abbesses took charge of the administration of the goods of their members (as ordered in the Benedictine rule). By the 14<sup>th</sup> c., the *deovotae* term that began to be

associated in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> c. to the *sanctimonialis* and *monialis* terms had changed from being a substantive to become an adjective, *devota*, applied to a pious person.

Yet, the *deodada* term was still present in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. as applied to women taking care of rural churches, very significantly, with appointment documents which's general characters appear to be very similar to many that would be delivered mainly in the Modern Ages for the Basque seroras: they had to submit to the priest, who, for their commitment to live in the church and take care of it, in return, had to feed them and provide their clothing; and they had to have a chaste and honest life, as well as to collect and administer the alms of the faithful in order to maintain the temple and the cult. But these women would become greatly diminished by the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> c., and were moved to more populated areas, using an argument that would be used in the extinction efforts against the seroras between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> c.: the supposed defencelessness of women living in isolated places without masculine protection.

The above mentioned shifting of names from substantive to adjective not only happened with the Catalanian *deovotae*, *deodadas*, etc., since it is the same process that happened with the Spanish *beata* and French *béate* and *benôte* in the 17<sup>th</sup> c., very significantly, in the time-frame in which these semi-religious institutions had been persecuted and pushed into the background, in a context where enclosed nuns had become the promoted ideal for women religious (Cabre i Pairet, 1989, Serra i Clota, 1989, Larrañaga Arregi, 2015, pp. 95-97, 135-136, 145-148).

## Conclusions

Along the precedent exposure, we've seen how ancient Christian women religious had a gradual loss of power in the European context since its first Christianisation, a process that led to the ideal of the enclosed nun, that became promoted with the generalisation of the Benedictine rule, the Gregorian Reforms and Papal Enclosure, aprox. between 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> c. And we've seen, too, how the peculiar evolution of Basque religious institutions allowed them to remain in an archaic state until the next big efforts to reform religious institutions was brought forth by the Tridentine Reform, that wouldn't reach the Basque territories until the 17<sup>th</sup> c. The serora's institution remained, so, as the last and most faithful descendant of ancient women religious' institutions, until they could be rejected and prohibited by both secular and religious institutions in the late 18<sup>th</sup> c.

An extensive comparative study between the seroras' and ancient women religious' institutions could, therefore, be very useful to understand the characters of the latter, since the documents about the seroras of the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> c. reveal several aspects that cannot be reached through the scarce documentation regarding ancient forms of women religious. I expect this can be seen by the several aspects in common, proofs and arguments that have been presented in this paper, and I believe that further efforts in this sense would be very fruitful.

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