

LEASING THE SEIGNEURIAL RENTS: *REMENCES* AS LESSEES IN GIRONA (14TH-15TH CENTURIES)

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ABSTRACT

Becoming wealthy in the Middle Ages was as viable as in any other period of history. However, the feudal system imposed many limitations, especially on those who did not belong to the privileged elites. My goal in this paper will be to point out and analyse one of the strategies of enrichment used by the *remences*, unfree peasants, of Old Catalonia during the 14th and 15th centuries: leasing the collection of seigneurial rents.

KEYWORDS

Middle Ages, *Remences* (unfree peasants), Rural History, Feudalism, Catalonia.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Medium Aevum, *Remences* (agricolae non liberi), Historia ruralis, Feudalismus, Catalonia.

1. Introduction¹

Becoming wealthy in the Middle Ages was as viable as in any other period of history. However, the feudal system imposed many limitations, especially on those who did not belong to the privileged elites. The process by which artisans, merchants and other dwellers of the medieval cities enriched themselves has been studied for some time now: their economic improvement stemmed from and, at the same time, triggered the revival of urban economy. On the other hand, the approaches focused on the medieval rural world are still in the minority. This is not least due to the fact that the documents do not facilitate this kind of analysis. My goal from now on will be to point out and analyse one of the strategies of enrichment used by the peasants of Old Catalonia during the 14th and 15th centuries: leasing the collection of seigneurial rents.²

However, before going any further, it is necessary to clarify a couple of fundamental issues without which the contextualization of our discourse would be rather difficult. First, all these peasants lived in manses. A manse, just to point out some of its features, was a farmhouse with its lands, a forced residence inhabited by a nuclear family and subjected to seigneurial exactions, which constituted a fiscal unit. All these manses made up dispersed settlements instead of nucleated villages. They were composed of a house, sometimes other buildings, and several lands, some of them devoted to grow cereals, vineyards, orchards, uncultivated areas and forests, separated and scattered over a single parish or several nearby parishes.

The inhabitants of these manses belonged to the rural community, which was organized around the parish but, in most of the cases analysed in this study, either there was no nucleated settlement or it was of minor importance.³ No relevant artisanal or commercial activity is documented in these villages. They had nothing to do with towns or small cities such as Peralada, Torroella de Montgrí or Banyoles.

Second, all the manses of our study were of servile condition, that is, they were not free and depended on their lords for almost everything. They were *remences*, a name given to Catalan serfs because they had to pay the *remença* (“redemption”) in order to purchase their own freedom. In Old Catalonia, *remença* peasants were a majority. Being a serf depended on the status of the land itself: those who possessed, lived in and held property rights over a servile manse, were serfs. Therefore, the

1. This article has been prepared in the framework of the “Ni èlits ni pobres” project (financed by the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad HAR2014-54891-P), the project “Castells, monestirs i palaus” (financed by the Generalitat de Catalunya, CLT009/18/00046), and also as a result of the research team MAHPA of the Universitat de Barcelona. Used abbreviations: ADG, Arxiu Diocesà de Girona; AHG, Arxiu Històric de Girona.

2. What I will present hereafter is a work in part only begun and in part almost completed, hence its irregularity.

3. In general, the villages of the Old Catalonia had little to do with the settlements of the New Catalonia and even less with Valencian villages. These peasant villages have been, and still are, thoroughly studied in all respects, especially as far as the economic differentiation and the social stratification of their inhabitants is concerned.



owners of a *remença* manse became *remences*, even without knowing it.⁴ On the other hand, serfdom was also transmitted from fathers to sons: the descendants inherited the servile status, even unknowingly. Therefore, some *remences* were such because they lived in a servile manse, others because their parents had been serfs and many others because of both reasons.

Serfdom entailed a certain legal status, but it did not involve a specific economic status. The lack of freedom was not at odds with the possibility of enriching or impoverishing oneself, at least in theory. Until last century, scholars had associated *remences* both with the lack of freedom and with a uniform and precarious economic capability. A notion founded on the fact that, on the basis of servitude, the seigneurial regime provided lords with extraordinary revenues by means of the so-called bad customs (*mals usos*), servile exactions suffered by Catalan *remences* in addition to the customary feudal levies. But the most recent studies leave no room for doubt: the economic inequalities among *remences* are unquestionable.⁵

2. The Leasing of the Collection of Seigneurial Rents

The *remences* managed to find opportunities that allowed them not only to increase their profits but also to diversify them. Moreover, some of these practices brought about their economic and social differentiation, granting these *remences* a privileged position among their neighbours. One of these mechanisms was the purchase or leasing (both possibilities are documented) of seigneurial rents;⁶ often enough, even the rents of the parish where they resided and paid their own *censi*.

From the 12th century onwards, Catalan kings resorted to credit to supply their need for money, which had important effects on the way they managed their dominions since the urgency of having money also entailed the temporary leasing

4. Lluch Bramon, Rosa. "El mas i la servitud en els segles XIV i XV. Una aproximació", *El mas medieval a Catalunya*. Banyoles: Centre d'Estudis Comarcals de Banyoles, 1998: 85-94; Lluch Bramon, Rosa. *Els remences. La senyoria de l'Almoïna de Girona als segles XIV i XV*. Girona: Associació d'Història Rural de les Comarques Gironines – Universitat de Girona, 2005. Lluch Bramon, Rosa; Orti Gost, Pere; Panero, Francesco; To Figueras, Lluís, eds. *Migrazioni interne e forme di dipendenza libera e servile nelle campagne bassomedievali dall'Italia nord-occidentale alla Catalogna*. Turin: Centro Internazionale di Studi sugli Insediamenti Medievali, 2015.

5. Lluch Bramon, Rosa. "Remences pauvres, remences riches: les inégalités économiques (Vieille Catalogne, XIV-XVI)", *Schiavitù e servaggio nell'economia europea, secc. XI-XVII, XLV Settimane di Studi*. Florence: Firenze University Press, 2014: 175-184; Orti Gost, Pere; To Figueras, Lluís. "Serfdom and Standards of Living of the Catalan Peasantry before and after the Black Death of 1348", *Schiavitù e servaggio nell'economia europea, secc. XI-XVII, XLV Settimane di Studi*. Florence: Firenze University Press, 2014: 155-172; Marcó Masferrer, Xavier. *La senyoria feudal en un vessant de les Gavarres. Els dominis territorials de la vall d'Aro al segle XV*. 4 April 2019 <<http://www.gavarres.cat/documents/noticia/noticia280.pdf>>.

6. In the case of the Generalitat of Catalonia, "sale and lease contract" are used interchangeably, Sánchez de Movellán, Isabel. *La Diputació del General de Catalunya (1413-1479)*. Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans – Generalitat de Catalunya, 2004: 299.



or sale of their revenue.⁷ Through this process they obtained money, which, in fact, constituted a loan guaranteed by means of the transfer of certain incomes on the part of the king. Soon afterwards, and following in the footsteps of the monarchy, the great noble houses and the most important Catalan monasteries also began to lease the rents they received from their territorial dominions.⁸ In the case of the monasteries of Sant Cugat del Vallès and Santa Maria de Amer, this practice was already consolidated at the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th.⁹ The same happened in other feudal territories, and the practice remained in use until much later.¹⁰ Undoubtedly, the increasing monetization of the Late Middle Ages forced lords to handle hard cash, which, quite often, came solely from lease money.¹¹ Therefore, lords capitalized their rents in exchange for a single monetary payment previously agreed upon with the lessees and, furthermore, the resort to leasing avoided the alienation of their patrimony.¹²

2.1. *The Leasing of the Collection of Seignorial Rents: the process*

The *Costums de Girona*, the medieval compilation of consuetudinary law of the Diocese of Girona, also contemplated and regulated these sales or leaseings of the levies of feudal lordships.¹³ According to the *Costums*, the lessees had to pay an agreed price and, in return, they received all the regular revenue together with half of the extraordinary payments.

7. Sánchez, Manuel. *El naixement de la fiscalitat d'Estat a Catalunya. Segles XII-XIV*. Vic: Eumo, 1995: 38-47.

8. The entries of the registries of Terrassa in the first half of the 13th century, record many operations of sale of rents carried out by both lay and ecclesiastical lords, Salrach, Josep Maria. "La senyoria", *Història Agrària dels Països Catalans. Edat Mitjana*. Barcelona: Universitat dels Països Catalans – Fundació Catalana per a la Recerca, 2004: 550, Puig Ustrell, Pere. *Capbreu primer de Bertran acòlit, notari de Terrassa: 1237-1242*. Lleida: Fundació Noguera, 1992.

9. Farías, Víctor. "Sobre la reorganización del señorío rural y la figura del 'baiulus' en la Catalunya del Noreste de los siglos XII y XIII". *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 30/2 (2000): 887-916; Farías, Víctor. *El mas i la vila a la Catalunya medieval. Els fonaments d'una societat senyorialitzada (segles XI-XIV)*. Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2009: 150-151.

10. See, among others, De Valdeavellano, Luis G. *Curso de Historia de las Instituciones españolas (De los orígenes al final de la Edad Media)*. Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1968: 596. Duran, Montserrat. "L'evolució de l'ingrés senyorial a Catalunya (1500-1799)". *Recerques*, 17 (1985): 7-42, Feliu, Gaspar. "El negocio de los arrendamientos de rentas señoriales: examen de un libro de cuentas". *Revista de Historia Económica*, 1 (1985): 31-54.

11. García-Guijarro Ramos, Luis. *Datos para el estudio de la renta feudal maestra de la Orden de Montesa en el siglo XV*. Valencia: Institución Alfonso el Magnánimo, 1978: 49.

12. Benito, Pere. *Senyoria de la terra i tinença pagesa al comtat de Barcelona (segles XI-XIII)*. Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2003: 276.

13. Pons Gurí, Josep Maria. *Les col·leccions de Costums de Girona*. Barcelona: Fundació Noguera, 1988: 293; Mieres, Tomàs. *Costums de Girona*, ed. Antoni Cobos Fajardo. Girona: Biblioteca d'Història Rural, 2001: 86-87. According to Jaime Cots, the only chapter of the rubric XIV dealing with the leasing of the profits fell into disuse due to lack of application after the *sentencia arbitral*, Cots i Gorchs, Jaime. *Consuetudines Diocesis Gerundensis: estudio y transcripción según los mm. ss. más antiguos del siglo XV: contribución al estudio del derecho consuetudinario foral de Cataluña*. Barcelona: Librería Casulleras, 1929: 99.



On the other hand, the statutes of certain territorial seigneuries also compelled to lease the rents. For instance, the article III of the statutes of the *Almoina* of the Cathedral of Girona, enacted in 1347, established that all *censi* had to be leased.¹⁴ However, it was clearly understood that leasing all the rents was not advisable, sometimes due to their high value, some others due to their low price,¹⁵ their proximity or complexity, etc. Avoiding direct management, on the other hand, the administrators of this institution could devote their forces to fulfilling their assistance mission: distributing bread among the poor.

Several factors were involved in the establishment of the price of the leasings, which are rather difficult to fathom nowadays, such as the flexibility of the market, the proximity of the purchased parish, the possibility of controlling incomes, previous knowledge of some extraordinary payment due, expectations of a good harvest, etc. Although we cannot be certain about this process, the fact that many lessees repeatedly opted for a leasing indicates that it was likely a profitable business.¹⁶

As a result of these sales, seigniories managed to both get paid in hard cash and stop receiving payments in kind in the midst of a context of increasing monetization. At the same time, they received all payments in one go in place of separately, avoided going to the market to sell the products they had received, and could instead acquire only what they needed and when they needed it. All the above reasons led them to believe that it was better that all this work was undertaken by certain intermediaries who would be interested in collecting the rents and, in addition, would become excellent allies in order to control unexpected circumstances, the daily activity and the vicissitudes of the seignury while avoiding fraud in the payment of rents. In that sense, we should also bear in mind the little sympathy inspired by the rent collector, especially in such a tumultuous period, which would result, at the end of the 15th century, in the War of the *Remences*, where several lessees and a lot of peasants took part.

Those lords willing to sell the rents they were due advertised them in the markets and other public places, both within and outside their own dominion.¹⁷ For instance, in the case of the *Almoina* of Girona, there is an extant document that records the

14. III. *Que sunt arrendada. [...] quod omnes et singuli redditus, proventus, decime, molendina, furnus vel furni qui et quo sunt et pro tempore fuerint dicte Elemosine ubicumque vendantur et arrendentur ad certos annos [...]*. Guilleré, Christian. "Una institució benèfica enfront les adversitats de l'època: la Pia Almoina de Girona (1347-1380)", *Diner, poder i societat a la Girona del segle XIV*. Girona: Ajuntament de Girona, 1984: 176-177, 199.

15. In the account books of the *Almoina* can be found entries such as: *Los fruyts de Riudelots de la Creu no s'acostuman de arrendar com sian de poch valor* ("The fruits from Riudelots de la Creu are not usually bought because they are low-value ones"). AHG. Hospici. 1452-1453, f. XXXV.

16. Feliu, Gaspar. *El funcionament del règim senyorial a l'Edat Moderna: l'exemple del Pla d'Urgell*. Lleida: Institut d'Estudis Ilerdencs, 1990: 96. Feliu claims that in the Pla d'Urgell in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, lessees obtained a return between one and a half and two times the original price they had paid for the leasing.

17. For instance, in Sitges and Barcelona, the rents and impositions were sold in public auction. Moreover, the councilmen of Barcelona usually complemented the leasings with an extraordinary bonus in order to contribute to the expenses of the organization of the tax collection, Banegas, Ramon. *L'aprovisionament de carn a Barcelona durant els segles XIV i XV*. Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona (PhD Dissertation), 2007:



public offer of all the rents and tithes available for sale, classified according to the parish they correspond to.¹⁸ Furthermore, some of the parchments in the archives of the *Almoïna* record the sale in public auction of the rents of some parishes.¹⁹ Obviously, the people in charge of the advertisement of the leasings were paid for their work.²⁰ We also find records showing that, sometimes, the administrator of the institution travelled in person to certain parishes in order to appraise the bulk of the rents due, thus making it easier to find a suitable buyer.²¹ On those occasions, everything seems to suggest that the intention of the lord was to find a local buyer who lived in the parish, knew all its inhabitants, and was therefore better suited to demand the eventual extraordinary levies.

2.2. The Lessees of Seigneurial Rents

Many of the rent lessees were not related to the rents themselves or to the seigneurie they belonged to. They were either inhabitants of neighbouring villages and towns, or ecclesiastics of different ranks. In theory, their goal was to diversify their businesses and add supplementary and, to some extent, guaranteed profits to their usual income. Although probably, some merchants bought rents in order to acquire the goods of their trade: they obtained cereals and other food products directly from the producers, and at a cost previously agreed upon. Undoubtedly, several groups and individuals specialized in the purchase of seigneurial rents everywhere. For instance, in 14th-century Valencia, many Jews complemented their activity as moneylenders with the purchase of seigneurial rents and ecclesiastical tithes.²²

266, 275. The process of leasing of the rights of the Generalitat is described in full detail in Sánchez de Movellán, Isabel. *La Diputació del General...*: 300-305.

18. *Tothom qui vulle arrendar les rendes e delmes de le Almoïne devall scrites vagen a concordar ab lo pabordre e demanen tal mercat que y gonyen la maytat. Primo les rendes de Fonoyeres ab sos circumvehins. Item los delmes e rendes de Brunyole, de Sent Dalmay e de tot lo terme. Item les rendes de Vilavenut, Juhiques e Croanyes e Borgonya. Item lo terç del delme e rendes de Marenya e rendes de Palau Borrell. Item lo terç del delme de Sent Pere Pescador [...]* ("Everyone who wants to buy the following rents and tithes have to search the Almoïna's provost and agree with him, they will obtain half of the incomes. First the incomes of Fonolleres with their places around. Item the tithes and rents of Brunyola, of Sent Dalmay and of all the term. Item the rents of Vilavenut, Juigues and Croanyes and Borgonyà. Item the third part of the tithe and income of Marenya and the incomes of Palau Borrell. Item the third of the tithe of Sant Pere Pescador"). AHG. Hospici. 62, 1483-1484, separate sheet.

19. For instance, on 10 June 1377, the provost of the *Almoïna* sold in public auction the rents of the parish of Vilavenut for the following four years to Pere Batlle, a *remença* peasant of the same parish, for 620 sous a year: ADG. Pia Almoïna. Vilavenut, 140 bis.

20. On 19 October 1371, the *Almoïna* of Girona paid two brokers (*corredors d'orella*) in order to sell the rents due to the institution in different parishes. One of them received 155 sous for selling eight rents and the other received 170 sous for the leasing of ten parishes (ADG. Pia Almoïna. Àpoques I, No. 70).

21. For instance, *[ané] a Viladases per vendra les rendas del dit loch* ("[I went] to Viladasens to sell its rents"). AHG. Hospici. No. 34 (1404-1405), f. CLXXVII (*Anar deffora*).

22. García Marsilla, Juan Vicente. "Feudalismo i crèdit a l'Europa medieval". *Quaderns d'Història*, 13 (2007): 120.



On the other hand, sometimes, the lessees were peasants, usually from the same seignery and parish. C. Guilleré analysed all the leasing documents in the account book of the Almoina of Girona during the 1347-1348 period, confirming that in 13% of cases, the lessees were peasants, whereas the remaining percentage were ecclesiastics or people involved in some sort of “urban” trade.²³ M. Richou documents a peasant who, in 1439-1440, leased the tithes of Vilassar, where he lived, together with an artisan from Barcelona, and had to demand it several times from some of his neighbours.²⁴ In like manner, X. Marcó, discussing the leasing of the tithes of the Valle de Aro, claims, it was a no isolated event that even *remença* peasants leased seigneurial rents.²⁵

It seems that in many lordships the lessees were the bailiffs, who complemented their work as representatives of the lord and collectors of all payments²⁶ with the rent business.²⁷ In this way, they increased their influence and economic and social power over their neighbours.²⁸ As P. Benito notes, in moments of crisis throughout the 12th century, the bailiffs became rent lessees and acted as creditors of their own lords.²⁹ In fact, J. Shideler describes some of these bailiffs as “bailiff-financiers”,³⁰ and, according to J. Vilaginés, among them stood out some rural owners, and at the same time financiers, who achieved a considerable degree of social and economic success.³¹

In some cities, the lessees of the exactions were professionally related to such obligations, and many of them were the jurors and councilmen of the village, so that those who held political power also achieved economic power through these leasing. Therefore, the leasing of municipal taxes contributed to the economic polarization of the community.³² As a matter of fact, long ago J. A. García de

23. Guilleré, Christian. “Una institució benèfica enfront les adversitats de l’època: la Pia Almoina de Girona (1347-1380)”. *Diner, poder i societat a la Girona del segle XIV*. Girona: Ajuntament de Girona, 1984: 182.

24. Richou, Montserrat. *La terra, la família i la mort al Baix Maresme (1348-1486)*. Barcelona: Fundació Noguera, 2012: 140, 148.

25. Marcó Masferrer, Xavier. “La senyoria del delme de l’Almoina del Pa de la Seu de Girona a Santa Cristina d’Aro al segle XV”, *Les senyories a la Catalunya baixmedieval (ss. XIII-XV)*. Hostalric: Ajuntament d’Hostalric, 2009: 128; in 1403, the owner of a *remença* manse leased the rents of the seignery he belonged to for 900 *sous* and, in 1410, another *remença* did the same for 1,720 *sous*.

26. Benito, Pere. “Elites rurales et intermédiaires de la seigneurie en Catalogne (XIIè-XIVè s.): fortunes et stratégies d’acroissement”. *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome - Moyen Âge*, 124/2 (2012): 417-428.

27. Over the years, quite a few bailiffs would amass remarkable fortunes by sharing in the dominion’s revenue, Farías, Víctor. *El mas i la vila...: 142*.

28. Farías, Víctor. *El mas i la vila...: 150-151*.

29. Benito, Pere. *Senyoria de la terra...: 276, 324*.

30. Shideler, John C. *Els Montcada: una família de nobles catalans a l’Edat Mitjana (1000-1230)*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1987: 165-166.

31. Vilaginés, Jaume. *El Paísatge: la societat i l’alimentació al Vallès Oriental: segles X-XII*. Barcelona: Publicacions de l’Abadia de Montserrat, 2001: 183.

32. Muntaner, Carme. *Terra de masos, vila de mar. Vida, economia i territori al castell de Sitges i el seu terme entre els segles XIV i XV (1342-1418)*. Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona (PhD Dissertation), 2013: 243-244.



Cortázar, described the lessees of feudal rights as the ‘village aristocracy’ of peasant communities.³³

2.3. *The Distribution of Seigneurial Rents*

Once the rents were leased, the lords left the direct management of revenue in the hands of those who had bought it. They saved themselves the trouble of collecting *census* while maintaining similar economic profits –sometimes even higher, sometimes lower- and preserved other “extraeconomic” benefits. The lord did not receive the regular levies: the payments recognized in the *capbreus* and emphyteutic leases. This implied that, instead of receiving huge amounts of agricultural products in different measurements and different places, they received an amount of money previously agreed upon.³⁴

On the other hand, the extraordinary payments or *foriscapis* were evenly distributed between the lord and the lessee. The *foriscapis* were the payments satisfied in specific moments and circumstances, most of them related to both the land market and servitude. Obviously, the collection of half of the *foriscapis*, ensured lords not only economic profit but also, which is even more important, the control over the changes in the tenancy of the land and the families who belonged to their seigneuries. Thus, they could stay well informed about the evolution of their immovable patrimony and the serfs bound to it. And, in addition, they obtained the fundamental assistance of buyers, who were utterly interested in collecting as much as they could, in the control over the dominion. The geographical proximity of most lessees allowed them to be kept apprised as to the debtors, the circumstances and the eventualities that could entail an extraordinary levy.

Frequently, the payment of the *laudemium*, due to the land market, or the bad customs, specifies that part of it had to be received by the lord, and the rest by the lessee. This detail is quite important since the payments derived from the servile status were not popular among *remences*. On several occasions, they complained before the king, the Church or the jurists about the injustice of being forced to pay them. In such protests, before, during and after the War of the *Remences*, they always denounced the bad customs. In fact, one of the unquestionable victories they achieved was their “abolition” after the *Sentencia Arbitral* of Guadalupe. Through the bad customs, the lords had precise knowledge about the lives of the *remences*; their

33. García de Cortázar, José Ángel. *La sociedad rural en la España medieval*. Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1988: 161.

34. Many products spoiled before they could be sold and sometimes the transportation between the peasant’s household and the lord’s manor had to be paid for by the latter, which makes it difficult to appraise the real cost of the collection of the *censi*. For instance, in the entries corresponding to the collection of wine in the account book of 1342-1343, the provost of the *Almoína* of Girona recorded the use of part of the wine while *totum alium vinum remansit a Camos que putrefactum*. AHG. Hospici. No. 8 (1342-1343), f. XXXIX. Lluch Bramon, Rosa. “La renta de la tierra de una parroquia gerundense (siglos XIV y XV)”. *Edad Media. Revista de Historia*, 11 (2010): 235-262.



payment entailed an economic cost but, moreover, set them apart from those who were exempted from these levies, thus advertising their status as unfree peasants.

Despite the struggle of the *remences* to abolish the bad customs,³⁵ some *remences* received half of these servile exactions in their condition as rent lessees; they benefitted directly from the juridical condition of those who were like them, that is, they collaborated with the lords in one of the most hateful (and public) aspects of servitude. Therefore, they enriched themselves thanks to servitude, and it seems that they had no objections to it. Several documents from the *Almoïna* of Girona record the collection of a half of the revenue exacted through a bad custom by a *remença* who leased the rents.³⁶ Exceptionally, the lessee could give up the collection of his part, as was the case in the purchase of the freedom of a man from the parish of Vilavenut, in 1386, where the lessee renounced to his due 45 *sous* because the man was his nephew.³⁷

3. The *Remences* as Rent Lessees: Some Examples from the *Almoïna* of Girona

In 1347, the statutes of the *Almoïna* of Girona stipulated that all the revenue generated by its seignery had to be leased *ad certos annos*. From that same year onwards, the provosts leased the rents (and sometimes the tithes) produced by the castle of Brunyola, which included several parishes. The *Almoïna* was the major territorial lord there and it also held jurisdictional lordship from 1381 onwards. As a result, Brunyola provided more income per year to the institution than the rest of its dominions.

During the second half of the 14th century, the rents of Brunyola were most often leased, as fifteen out of the sixteen extant account books show;³⁸ only the book corresponding to the 1398-1399 period specifies that the rents ‘non arrendatur isto anno’. In fact, the rents were not leased again until a hundred years later, in 1498-1499, after the armed conflict and its pacification. They were not leased probably because they were the most valuable ones, thus it was better to keep its direct management in order to better control the territory and its inhabitants. Undoubtedly, the *remences* of Brunyola participated quite actively both in the pre-

35. According to several historians, that was the main reason behind the armed uprising of the *remences* against their lords, Vicens Vives, Jaume. *Historia de los remensas (en el siglo XV)*. Barcelona: Ed. Vicens-Vives, 1978 and Freedman, Paul H. *Els orígens de la servitud pagesa a la Catalunya Medieval*. Vic: Eumo editorial, 1993.

36. For instance, among many other examples, in 1315 both the abbot of the monastery of Amer and its lessees received 7.5 *sous* for the redemption of a peasant from Caldes (ADG. Pia Almoïna. Cassà de la Selva, 558).

37. *Lo dit rander ac la sua part [...] se atura per tal com era son nabot e los li dóna* (“the lessee gives up the collection of his part [...] because the man was his nephew and gives him the money”). AHG. Hospici. No. 26 (1386-1387), f. XXXI.

38. 1347-1348, 1347-1348, 1348-1349, 1349-1350, 1350-1351, 1351-1352, 1352-1353, 1354-1355, 1358-1359, 1376-1377, 1377-1378, 1378-1379, 1381-1382, 1385-1386 and 1386-1387.



war period and in the conflict itself: in 1462 they even abducted the provost and occupied the castle.

The aforementioned account books show that the duration of the leasing period was typically for two or four years. In 1347-1348, the lessees were two inhabitants of Girona who paid 2,200 *sous*³⁹ a year. The four following books record that the lessee was one of the bailiffs of the *Almoïna* in Brunyola, G. Palau, who paid 900 *sous* during the first two-year period and 1,100 during the second one. In the account book corresponding to the 1354-1355 period, a cleric from Girona and three *remences* from the territory of Brunyola (who belonged to other parishes) associated in order to buy the rents for 1,500 *sous* a year.⁴⁰ After a gap in the records of the *Almoïna*, the books of 1376-1377, 1377-1378 and 1378-1379 list a single lessee of the rents of Brunyola, Pere Devesa, from the manse of Devesa, who paid 3,541 *sous* a year.⁴¹ The following extant book, which corresponds to the 1381-1382 period, mentions the lessee and his son, Miquel Devesa, who had to pay 3,630 *sous* a year during the following four years. In 1386-1387, the lessee was another *remença* of the *Almoïna*, Pere Pla from Sant Dalmai, a neighbouring parish, whose rents were leased together with those of Brunyola for 4,005 *sous* during a 4-year period.⁴²

Another of the parishes within the territory under the jurisdiction of the castle of Brunyola was the parish of Estanyol. Its rents were leased between 1376 and 1379 by Pere Devesa himself for 780 *sous* a year. During at least four years, the owner of the manse of Devesa invested money, time and effort in the rents of the seignery where he himself was a *remença*, and not only in his parish but also in another one within the same dominion, that is, he participated twice in the rent business. Between 1381-1382 and 1386-1387, the lessees of the parish of Estanyol were also *remences* of the *Almoïna*, all of them from the territory of the castle of Brunyola.

Thus, we find that, except for just one case where the lessees of the rents of the *Almoïna* were inhabitants of the city of Girona apparently unrelated to the territory, the usual lessees were local *remences* (as recorded on ten occasions).⁴³ From a certain moment on, as the second book with information on the leasing of rents shows, the lessees came from the same dominion, and it is not difficult to imagine why. Their knowledge of the properties, the changes, the harvests, the production and the vicissitudes that could involve an economic exchange was unquestionably far more accurate than that available to a stranger. In those cases, these *remences*, whether

39. In the account books of the *Almoïna*, a hen cost between two and four *sous*.

40. In the entry corresponding to the collection of this leasing, the provost wrote: *recepti per manum Sibillie, ancille mee, pro dicto G. de Stagnolo 90 sous*.

41. The spectacular variation of the rent price may be due to the fact that the parishes and revenues leased together with Brunyola were not always the same ones. However, this point should be analysed in much more detail.

42. In 1351, the owner of the manse of Pla leased the rents due to Bernat de Vilademaný, lord of the castle of Brunyola, for 980 *sous* (ADG. Pia Almoïna. Brunyola, 165).

43. Three books have lost the pages related to Brunyola therefore we cannot be sure about the leasing of rents or guess who were the eventual lessees.



bailiffs or not, would be more attentive not to lose any extraordinary income, which would increase their investment and their business.

Although we have just analysed a small sample of cases, everything seems to suggest that, in the area of Brunyola (far from the city of Girona), the *Almoïna* of Girona preferred to entrust direct management to *remences* who belonged there, who lived and laboured there, who paid part of the rents and who had a direct peer-to-peer relationship with the rest of the rent-paying peasants.

Let us now focus on the manse of Devesa, whose owners leased rents, at least from 1376 to 1384: the Devesas participated actively in the business of seigneurial rents, moreover, they did so in two different parishes at the same time. The fact that the son kept on leasing rents indicates that it was a profitable business, a good strategy to achieve prosperity. Although maybe not that much, since soon after 1386 he stopped doing so and, unlike his father, he never leased the parish of Estanyol. However, his father's demise can probably account for these changes.

On the other hand, and in contrast with other lessees, the Devesas usually paid their rent in person, at the seat of the *Almoïna* in the city of Girona, at least according to the account books. They usually paid in hard cash but also in a variety of objects, some of them almost luxurious by 14th-century standards: wheat, hazelnuts, pigs, cloaks, cups, lambskin, copper mortars, silver objects, etc.; objects which were certainly indicative of their economic status and could also point to a momentary lack of hard cash.

All the lessees of Brunyola received, more than once, a half of the revenue exacted from their *remença* neighbours through several bad customs; the hateful exactions they themselves had been forced to pay. For instance, in the case of the Devesas, they paid both dowry obligations and redemptions at some point.⁴⁴ However, it is true that they only did so until 1350, at least according to the extant records. This could also be a proof of their status and the strategies they developed, since they managed to avoid not only an extraordinary payment but also the intrusion of their lord into their family lives. Throughout the 14th century, the participation of the Devesas in the land market was constant. Without a doubt, they increased their wealth considerably through several purchases and the establishment of houses, lands, forests and other unspecified properties.⁴⁵ They also sold a part of their patrimony, although everything seems to indicate that their goal was to get rid of the less productive and most remote lands while acquiring more profitable and nearby properties. In the 14th century, however, the circumstances of the manse changed.

One of the distinctive features of the manse of Devesa is that it ended up without an owner twice during the 15th century. However, this situation did not bring about its economic decline. In fact, in 1404, the *Almoïna* of Girona summoned Arnau Devesa and his wife, who lived in Barcelona, to inhabit and labour in the manse of

44. AHG. Hospici. No. 8 (1342-1343), f. XXVIII, AHG. Hospici. No. 15 (1348-1349), f. XIX; and AHG. Hospici. No. 17 (1350-1351), f. XX; ADG. Pia Almoïna. Brunyola, 721.

45. Lluç Bramon, Rosa. "Remences pauvres, remences riches...".



Devesa to which they were bound. The Devesas agreed to look for someone who would take care of the manse and pay the corresponding *census*; they even specified that they had been living in Barcelona for five years and, as citizens, were defended by the jurors of the city. A lawsuit ensued, whose resolution is unknown to us. At any rate, it does not seem that the Devesas were living poorly in the city, on the contrary: they were well established and intended to keep holding the property rights over the manse without living in it or paying its *census*. In 1436-1437, the situation was rather different. The owner of the manse of Devesa was described as *vagabundus et quasi mentecaptus* and the *Almoïna* redeemed him willingly with the goal of retrieving the manse in order to re-establish it together and all its lands.

It does not seem that the actions of the Devesas caused disagreements with their neighbours. In 1448, fifteen years before the Wars of the *Remences*, King Alfons the Magnanimous authorized the *remences* to organize a syndicate. On Sunday, 27 October 1448, the men of the parish of Brunyola were summoned before a notary and two witnesses. One of the witnesses of such meeting was Pere Devesa from the manse of Devesa, and he was one of the twenty-seven peasants who gathered in the square of Brunyola to discuss their demands.⁴⁶

4. First Conclusions

Once again, the image of the *remences* as mere victims of both their lords and the arbitrariness of the feudal system is far from reality. As research develops, it is becoming more evident that some *remences* enriched themselves over the 14th and 15th centuries, and to that end they took every advantage within their reach. They even sided with the lords in order to enhance their profits and their position within the peasant community, and they collected *census* and other servile exactions from their neighbours and relatives. Undoubtedly, they collaborated in the control exercised by the lords over his serfs. They were unquestionably unfree peasants who participated openly in the business of seigneurial rents, thus prospering. With regard to the 16th and 17th centuries, Pere Gifre claims that for the peasants of the manses feudalism had become a business as much as a burden.⁴⁷ It seems that this statement also applies to the late medieval period, when the payments related to servitude also became a part of that business.

On the other hand, the image of legally unfree peasants as passive and suffering observers of reality is progressively vanishing. Some *remences* managed to benefit from the same system which impeded their freedom. Some of them had a fairly active role and placed themselves above their community and at its side at the same time. As Pere Gifre notes in the case of the modern period, the owners of

46. Homs i Brugarolas, M. Mercè. *El sindicat remença de l'any 1448*. Girona: Ajuntament de Girona, 2005: 161-162.

47. Gifre, Pere. *Els senyors útils i propietaris de mas: la formació històrica d'un grup social pagès: vegueria de Girona, 1486-1730*. Barcelona: Fundació Noguera, 2012: 85.



mances crossed the line of the community, which approximated them to landlords.⁴⁸ Some *remences* acted as financiers and moneylenders for the seigneuries to which they belonged.⁴⁹ They bought their rents and those of their neighbours. Thus, they collaborated actively in the exaction and collection of rents and in the control over all those circumstances which entailed ordinary and extraordinary levies, and participated in the personal profits that resulted from it; while other *remences* survived as best they could.

So far, it does not seem that this active participation of some *remences* in the collection and exaction of rents stirred up internal conflicts. No disagreements can be perceived among the members of the same peasant communities: among *remences* who collected the bad customs from other *remences*. Although the documents of our study would probably not record such disagreements, it would be understandable that tension grew between those who paid rents and the lessees of those rents (as indeed happened in the Valencian urban milieu), since the latter could be seen as the true beneficiaries of the system.⁵⁰

To conclude, everything seems to suggest that the legal status was just one among the many factors which determined social or economic position, but it was far from pivotal; or maybe it was, but in a rather unexpected way. Thus, servitude facilitated certain social and economic inequalities and allowed some serfs to prosper, since it was closely related to the property of land.

48. Gifre, Pere. *Els senyors útils i propietaris de mas...*: 901.

49. On other occasions, the loan was direct; according to J. Bolòs, in 1458, one of the peasants of the monastery of Santa Maria de Serrateix (Berguedà) bought from the monastery a perpetual *census* (*censal mort*), Bolòs, Jordi. *Diplomatari del Monestir de Santa Maria de Serrateix (segles X-XV)*. Barcelona: Fundació Noguera, 2006.

50. In the eyes of tax payers, the privatization of a public service implied that some individuals were perceived, to a good extent, as the true beneficiaries of the municipal fiscal system, which caused tensions, Guinot, Enric; Mira, Antonio J. "Fiscalidad urbana y distribución y consumo de la producción agraria en Valencia (siglos XIV-XV)", *Los tributos de la tierra: fiscalidad y agricultura en España: (siglos XII-XX)*. Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2008: 154.

