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Spanish Censuses of the Sixteenth Century

by George R. Ryskamp, J.D., AG

A genealogist tracing family lines backwards in Spain will almost certainly find a lack of records that have sustained his research as he reaches the year 1600. Most significantly, sacramental records in about half of the parishes begin in or around the year 1600, likely reflecting near universal acceptance and application of the order for the creation of baptismal and marriage records contained in the decrees of the Council of Trent issued in 1563. Depending upon the diocese between ten and thirty percent of parishes have records that appear to have been written in response to earlier reforms such as a similar decrees from the Synod of Toledo in 1497. Likewise most notarial record collections begin in these same years. Fortunately, censuses and census substitutes can provide a significant supplement in the absence or lack of detail of these more frequently utilized records.

Sixteenth century Spanish census records might be classified according to:

1) the place of origin of the order to take the census: local, crown or señoril;

2) the archives where they are currently found: national, provincial, municipal or that of a noble family; or

3) by the nature of the information contained in each entry, ranging from a mere list of vecinos (adult heads of household, usually men), to those censuses referred to as callehita, containing a description of each family found as the local official went along the street (calle) visiting each house, often listing every member of the household by name with ages and/or relationships.

This article will be organized under a combination of the first and second approach, looking both at the nature of the original order to take the census and where it may be found, and identifying the type of census to be expected and the detail of its content.

Crown Censuses

The Kings of Castile ordered several censuses taken during the years 1500 to 1599. Some survive only in statistical summaries; others in complete lists. In each case a royal decree ordered that local officials (usually the municipal alcalde or the parish priest) take the count, and often specified the manner in which that count should be taken. Whether or not each census exists for a particular town depends on whether the town was in the area where the census was ordered (often determined by whether it was a royal town or one belonging to a particular noble family), if the census was taken by local officials as ordered, and if a copy of the census has survived in one of several possible archives.

Vecindarios listing the vecinos (heads of household) were the most common type. These are generally tax lists of mostly adult married males with occasional widows and single women with property. The most informative of these are those prepared for the distribution of the tax known as the alcabala, which often gives the value of the property owned and indicates when a person is pobre (poor, without property). In most cases these include only the vecinos who were pecheros (commoners), as the nobles were not generally taxed and therefore not included. The alcabala tax list may include some nobles, apparently those involved in commerce. The same list, or a separate one that follows, will indicate for each person the assessment of the tax.

Some censuses were ordered to be taken in a form known as callehita, where the assessor went
street by street, from house to house, identifying all those who lived in the home. The most complete of these not only give the names of all residents in each household but often provide relationships, ages and even occupation and financial worth. They are similar to the eighteenth century Catastro de Ensenada and to censuses taken in many Spanish colonial cities in the 1770s and 1790s.

Censo de 1528-1536 (Revised 1541)

This vecindario census was taken to assess a tax known as the “servicio de su Majestad” and only included nobility in the provinces of Madrid, Soria, Ocaña, el Campo de Montiel and el Partido de Alcara. Numbers indicate not only vecinos, but widows, poor, minor children and those exempt from tax. On a national level only the statistical summaries were collected, but one should watch for copies in municipal archives of the original lists made to create the summaries.

Censo de 1561

The census of 1561 is the most interesting for the genealogist of the censuses of the 1500s, as it was very extensively taken and uses the callehita format. Found in the Archivo General de Simancas in the first 180 legajos of the section know as Expedientes de Hacienda (Treasury Files), it is accessed by use of a manuscript inventory kept in the Salon de Investigadores (Researchers’ Reading Room) of that archive. This inventory is an alphabetical list of subjects of the expedientes (files) found in each legajo, the vast majority being the names of cities and towns which had correspondence with the royal treasury. A single legajo has several small bundles or bound volumes, each for a different city. For example, Expedientes de Hacienda Legajo 164 included volumes, most about an inch thick, for several towns from all over Castille, whose names began with Santo.

The volume in Legajo 164 for Santa Olalla in the province of Toledo was about two inches thick, slightly larger than most, and was composed of about 325 folios. The volume included a wide variety of correspondence and collected data relating to sales and other economic activities, often giving names of sellers and buyers, what was sold, the price paid and tax charged. Not until folio 219 does the Padron de Vecindad de la Villa de Santa Olalla dated 3 January 1561 appear and it runs through folio 241. Completeness of individual entries ranges between a mere vecindario list and a complete description naming every person in the family, found in some callehita censuses. All list the names of male vecinos, indicating marital status, and widows. If the wife is a widow, the name of her first husband is also given. If there are servants or other non-family members in the household, these are named and some description is given. Occupations and a number in the margin indicating the Alcabala assessment also appear. The following translation from page 226 of Legajo 164, Santa Olalla, is an example of a fairly complete entry:

Grabiel de Sosa is married. He has [i.e. living with him, but not related] a child who is called Miguel Cano, a vecino of Pedrillan who cares for the mules. He also has two shepherds both called Alonso. One is Alonso de Balverde who is married and the other shepherd is this one’s son. He has a young girl named Catalina, an orphan whose guardian is Bartolome Prevo. He has another young girl named Francisca daughter of Juan Ruiz, deceased, who is a vecina of Ercilla where she has a mother. She has no assets that are not under control of her mother.

In Santa Olalla there is only one person identified with the noble indicator of Doña and none with Don. It is interesting to note that Grabiel de Sosa in the entry above is likely the same person who filed a petition in 1560 to have his hidalgo status determined by the Royal Chancellory Court in Valladolid, most certainly to prevent these types of tax assessment.

The appearance of the name of a town in the Section Inventory does not guarantee that there is a copy of the 1561 census preserved. Llanes in the province of Asturias appears with the reference to Legajo 119. A volume for Llanes in that Legajo
contains many pages of general economic reviews and mention is made of censuses in 1561 and 1596, but no complete list of vecinos is preserved. On the other hand, in that same Legajo 119, several vecindario lists appear that were taken between 1579 and 1596.11 The legajos above number 180 in this Expedientes de Hacienda section, follow the formats found in these two cities, mentioning censuses and even providing copies of some for years after 1561 (but very rarely that of 1561), including some as late as the 1660s like those found at the end of the Santa Olalla volume in Legajo 164.12

One can write to the Archives at Simancas and ask if a particular town appears in the index of the Expedientes de Hacienda section, and what the legajo numbers are for the town. Location of any censuses in the Expedientes de Hacienda section will require on-site research in Simancas, unless one wishes to pay to have an entire volume of several hundred pages photocopied on the hope that complete censuses will appear. Such services are provided by the archives.

For many towns, a search in the inventory of the Expedientes de Hacienda section yields no entries. Since all inhabitants in the Basque provinces of Alava, Guipuzcoa and Vizcaya were considered by birth to be hidalgos and exempt from payment of most crown taxes, those towns were not listed. Others, such as Garganta la Olla in Caceres province, do not appear because they were not owned by the Crown, but by specific noble families. Towns were categorized as real, señorazgo or abadnego, that is belonging to or ruled by the crown, by a noble family or by an abbot or bishop. You can determine if the town was real, señorazgo or abadnego and to what family it belonged if señorazgo, by consulting the Nomenclator de las ciudades, villas y lugares de España formado por las realltions de los intendientes.13 Censuses for this period for such Señorazgo towns might be found in the papers, when preserved, of the noble family who owned the town. The newly established Archivo de la Noblesa in the city of Toledo, containing an extensive collection of papers from several of the largest noble families in Spain, would be the place to start looking for such papers.

Reference personnel there are also aware of large collections of nobility records housed elsewhere in Spain that might be checked. Similar records may exist for Abadnego towns (owned by the clergy) in records of convents, monasteries or bishoprics.

Other Censuses Found in the Archivo General De Simancas

Many cities did vecindarios in 1571 as part of the distribution of Moorish citizens expelled from Granada in the year 1570.14 Summaries of some of these were published in 1829.15 The original summary statistics of those are found in Simancas. There were also summary statistics gathered for censuses done in 1552, 1561, 1587 and 1596, found both in the Archivo General de Simancas16 and the Biblioteca de el Escorial.17 Each is limited as to geographic completeness. Beyond their use to paint an excellent demographic portrait of the sixteenth-century population of the ancestral hometowns, the real value of these census summaries for a genealogist is to understand when, how and why they were taken, as copies of the actual vecindarios may be found in the legajos of the Expedientes de Hacienda section, in the Archivos de la Real Chancillerias in Granada and Valladolid, and in hundreds if not thousands of municipal archives throughout Spain.

Censo de Floridablanca, 1591

In 1591 a census was completed to distribute the tax called the Millones, authorized by the Castillian Cortes to pay for the heavy costs of the disastrous Spanish Armada launched by Felipe II against England the year before. As there were no exceptions to this tax, all persons were included. For every town in Castille except in the provinces of Alava, Guipuzcoa and Vizcaya, the summaries give numbers of vecinos pecheros, hidalgos, secular clergy and those in orders, with special mention of the Franciscans.18 These summaries have been published in 1591 Padron de Floridablanca, edited by Annie Molinié Bertrand, upon whose preface this author has relied heavily for details on these censuses found only in statistical summary format.19
Censo Eclesiastico, 1587-89

Between the years 1587 and 1589 each bishop was directed by the crown to take a census of his diocese. The summaries of these are found at Simancas and were published in 1829 along with several other such summaries, edited by archivist Tomas Gonzalez, as he found them during the reorganization of the Simancas archives following its close call with destruction by the French during the War for Independence.

Relaciones Topográficas de Felipe II, 1575-78

Beginning in the early 1570s Felipe II and his ministers desired to have a clearer picture of the country they ruled and taxed. It was determined that a series of questions should be answered concerning each town in the realm. These are not population or vecindario censuses. In modern census parlance they would be described as non-population schedules, although rudimentary population statistics were included in the answers. Questions dealt with basic facts such as the agricultural products, industries, occupations, tithing and taxes paid, public officials including the number of escribanos (notaries), local holidays, public services such as water and hospitals, the names of the parish(es) and diocese of the town and whether the town belonged to the crown or a noble family, and if the latter, to which.

Based on questions determined to be of interest to the crown, an initial list of interrogatories was drafted and sent out to the bishops with a request that the parish priests respond to the questions. Only those from the bishopric of Coria in the Extremaduran province of Caceres have been preserved. In 1575 a new set of interrogatories that expanded upon the earlier ones was sent out, this time to be answered by the local alcaldes. When many towns did not respond, a third set went out in 1578. Answers to all three sets of interrogatories were compiled into seven bound volumes, each containing about 600 pages. Responses were not received from all of Spain nor even from all of Castile. Other than those of the Coria diocese, nearly all of the answers were from towns in the modern autonomous communities of Madrid and Castilla-La Mancha, especially from the provinces of Toledo, Cuenca, Albacete, and Ciudad Real.

The original answers to the Royal Interrogatories are found in the Spanish manuscript collection of the Biblioteca del Escorial. A published catalog to that collection lists all of the towns which sent replies, giving the volume and page numbers where each town’s responses may be found. The vast majority have been published and appear in one of the books listed in the bibliography at the end of this article, all of which can be obtained in the United States through Interlibrary Loan.

For the genealogist, the primary value of the Relaciones Topográficas is not name identification, but to provide clues as to other possible records and to give to the family history a social and historical background for the ancestral hometown in the sixteenth century.

Local Censuses

Many of the municipal archives of Spain contain materials from the sixteenth century. For example, in the province of Salamanca, fifteen percent of the archives have materials from that period or before. Common among the documents retained are padrones (censuses or tax lists) of the types described in the section above on crown censuses. In many cases the municipality retains the original from which the copy sent to the royal council was made or from which the statistical summaries sent to the crown were drawn.

The challenge in working with such censuses in municipal archives is gaining access to those archival collections. In most municipalities there is no archivist and often no inventory. Fortunately, most are now organized into boxes and shelved, rather than stacked in bundles in out-of-the-way corners which
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was the case until about fifteen years ago. The key to successful access is to demonstrate that one is a legitimate historical researcher. This is best done by understanding the types of documents to be consulted and, where possible, by locating a description or even an inventory of the municipal archives of interest before going there. Descriptions of municipal archives, some very detailed, abound in the Censo­guia de archivos found at the Ministry of Education and Culture web site at www.mec.es. Published inventories of individual archives or descriptions of all in a province, such as those for the provinces of Salamanca and Valencia may be located by doing a search on First Search, the OCLC library catalog service on the Internet at www.firstsearch.org. As this is a paid service, use it at a large public or university library and then order the books through Interlibrary Loan. In First Search do an advanced search using the name of the town and the words archivo municipal and then a second search using the name of the province and the word archivo. A similar search should also be made online using a search engine such as at www.google.com, as some municipal archives have now created their own web page. If nothing has been published, then you might write to the mayor of the town, e.g. a letter addressed to Sr. Alcalde, Ayuntamiento, Garganta la Olla, Spain, asking for information about the municipal archives, especially any padrones that may be preserved there.

The success of such an approach can be seen in this author’s visit to the city hall in Santa Olalla in the province of Toledo. A three-page inventory had been printed from the Ministry of Education and Culture web site and carefully read, highlighting all ten collections that mentioned records before 1600. One of those was Padrones de la Cerca. The visit to the city hall began with a very skeptical lower level official. When told that it would be necessary to ask the Mayoress for permission to consult, the author readily acquiesced and patiently waited for nearly an hour until Her Honor was available. Once the interview began, the highlighted inventory was brought out and this, plus a clearly expressed interest in studying the early history of the town through the history of the particular family being researched, was sufficient to convince her and gain access to the archives. Once there, he found a legajo containing the book of padrones distributing a tax known as the Cerca with vecindarios for the years 1541, 1542, 1544, 1546 and 1549.21

The author has had similar successful experiences in dozens of municipal archives. Note that in some cases municipal archives are transferred to the local Archivo Histórico Provincial. When one finds materials only from about 1850 forward in the city hall, it is good idea to check at the provincial archives to determine if the municipal archives are stored there. In one case in the province of Albacete, in three different city halls, the author was told that there were no records over one hundred years old. No mention was made of older municipal records being deposited in the local Archivo Histórico Provincial, even though those from two of the three were found in the provincial archive.

Often, when a census list was prepared for distributing a tax assessment, a notary was present to authenticate the document. In many of those cases, the notary placed a copy of the original padrón in his protocolo for that year. While these are occasionally kept in the municipal archives, the vast majority of the notarial protocolos are found in the local Archivo Histórico Provincial. These are normally inventoried by the name of the town and, as he completes a page-by-page search of protocolos for the town looking for wills, contracts and other documents, the genealogist should also note any padrones that appear.

Copies of Padrones in the Archives of the Chancillerias Reales

From early in the sixteenth century until 1832, Castille had two supreme courts known as Chancillerias Reales (Royal Chancellories), located in Valladolid and Granada. The line dividing geographic jurisdiction between the two was the Tajo River. All towns and residents north of the Tajo had cases heard in Valladolid, and those south of the Tajo in Granada. In addition to appellate jurisdiction over most cases, these courts had original jurisdiction to determine whether a man had the right to claim hidalgo status and the rights derived therefrom.
including exemption from paying most taxes. These *hidalguía* petitions were processed in a separate tribunal of the Chancillería Real known as the *Salón de Hijosdalgos*.

Hidalgo status was proved in the written petition filed with the *Salón de Hijosdalgos* by establishing that one’s ancestors for three generations were *hidalgos*. This was often done by submitting copies of *padrones* from where the ancestors lived showing that they were listed as *hidalgos*, or if it was a tax assessment not listing *hidalgos*, showing that the ancestors did not appear. In some cases copies of the tax lists or a certified review of tax lists in the local city hall were sent and filed in the individual petitioner’s file. Most often, complete copies of local censuses were filed in a separate section of the Chancellory to which access could be had for any case. In Valladolid it still exists as a separate section known as *Protocolos y Padrones*. In Granada, disorganization and destruction caused by poor storage facilities and a major flood have caused the mixing of these documents in with the petition files.

In Valladolid the *Hidalguía* petitions are accessed by using an alphabetical index published in 1955-58, listing the persons applying, date of application and the places of origin. In the archive itself, however, the entire collection has been computerized and the archival staff can search in both *Protocolos y Padrones* and *Salón de Hijosdalgos* for a particular place. Such a search for Santa Olalla yielded a list of four *legajos* with *padrones* for that town for the years 1515, 1521, 1544, 1545, 1546, 1547 1548, 1549 and 1575. Actual review of the *legajos* yielded additional *padrones* that were included but not listed in the index, for the years 1516, 1517,1540, 1546, 1563, 1568, 1569, 1570, 1571 and 1573. All of these were lists of taxpaying *pecheros* and no *hidalgos* were listed. The fact that many towns away from the center of Spain were not as actively involved in this process is indicated by the fact that, at the same time as the index search for Santa Olalla, searches were made for Llanes in Asturias, Garganta la Olla in Cáceres, and Elgueta in Guipuzcoa, and nothing was found for them. There were, however, entries for several small towns such as Zorita and Logrosan also in Cáceres province. A researcher may write to the archives in Valladolid and ask that a search be made of their indexes for records of a particular town. Once records are identified, microfilm or photocopies can be ordered.

An index to Hidalguía records for the Archivo de la Real Chancillería was not published until 1982. That index included references to particular towns because the records such as *padrones* for a town were mixed with the *Hidalguía* petitions. For a list of petitioners from a particular town one would have to look page by page through the books or at the archives through the card index which included cards not only under the surname of each petitioner, but under his place of residence. In 1999 the index for the *Hidalguía* records was republished on CD, allowing one to search there by place as well as by surname. At the time of writing this article, the Granada archives had been closed for over two years so writing for copies as in Valladolid was not possible.

The format of census records found in the archives of the Reales Chancillerías is the same as those found in municipal archive from which they were copied, generally *vecindarios* listing heads of household. Interestingly, for Santa Olalla only five of the eighteen *vecindarios* copied and sent to the Real Chancillería still exist or at least were found in the 1999 search of that municipal archives. The absence in this list of any *padrones* taken after 1575, such as those that might have been taken in 1587, 1591 and 1596, as discussed above in the section on the *Archivo General de Simancas*, is explained by the fact that the last copies for Santa Olalla were made for a petition processed in 1584.

**Use of Census Records From the Sixteenth Century in Genealogical Research**

Census records in the sixteenth century serve many of the same purposes as in later centuries, but their potential greater value derives from the absence of or the inferior quality of other records in this period, especially parish records which, after the sixteenth century, form the backbone of Spanish genealogical research. The first of several uses of census records is as a locator. The presence of a
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person in the census confirms that he was living in the town as of the date of the census. Finding two persons of the same name and surname in the census may help sort out apparently contradictory information in other records.

Censuses provide estimates as to vital statistics, for example his appearance in the census means he was probably at least twenty-five years old, the legal age of majority. Presence in several sequential censuses allows for estimating an earlier birth date than merely subtracting twenty-five. Marital status is also often stated, but may also be inferred in many cases. When there are censuses for several sequential years, such as in Santa Olalla where there were eighteen years covered by censuses in the sixty years between 1515 and 1575, an approximate date of death may be ascertained from the absence of the person in a later census. The presence in a later census of a widow whose deceased husband’s name is given can also provide the often elusive name for the wife. Also the nonappearance of a person in later censuses and the simultaneous appearance for the first time of other persons with that same surname, may indicate that the latter are children of the former.

Censuses should be used in conjunction with records such as parish and notarial records and those found in the municipal archives. The fact that taxes were assessed, and how much was assessed, should lead to the search of existing land sale records and donations to local parishes and convents. In the case of Gabriel Sosa, who is the only person of that surname appearing in the 1561 census for Santa Olalla, a 1560 sale of property to the local parish of San Julian found in a municipal list of taxes assessed on such transfers gave the name of his wife. A search of that parish’s baptismal records, which begin in 1550, might yield the baptisms of the youngest children of that couple or those of other Sosas having children baptized who would likely be their sons and daughters appearing as parents. Likewise searching the parish death records which begin in 1582 or the notarial records in the Archivo Histórico Provincial of Toledo which begin in 1580 might yield records for Gabriel, his wife or their children.

Sixteenth-century Spanish censuses, which appear not to give definite information, can provide pieces of the ancestral puzzle. When combined with the often equally scant information in other records, together they may offer a picture of the ancestral families of the sixteenth century which can then be framed with the more general data provided by the statistical summaries and non-population censuses from this period to give fascinating views of these remote ancestors.

Notes

1. In the diocese of Albacete 45% of the parishes (37 out of 82) have sacramental registers that begin after 1600, 26% between 1500 and 1550 and two parishes have baptisms from before 1500. In the San Sebastian diocese 50% of the parishes (67 out of 133) begin after 1600, 17% between 1500 and 1550 and one parish before 1500. In the Plasencia diocese 46% of the parishes (57 out of 125) begin after 1600, 15% between 1500 and 1550 and no parishes before 1500. Anton Diaz Garcia, Archivo Histórico Diocesano de Albacete, Inventario (Albacete: Fundación Juan March, 1985), xix-xxi; Oficina de Estadística, Guía de la Iglesia en España (Oficina de Estadística: Madrid, 1954), 124-38 and 234-45.

2. Archivo Diocesano de Toledo, Decretos del Sinodo de Toledo, 1497.

3. For example, in Navarrathere are 73 towns with extant notarial records. Of those, 40% begin after 1600, 33% between 1500 and 1550, and only three towns start before 1500. Inventario de Protocolos, Archivo de Protocolos de Navarra (Pamplona, 2001), CDRom.

4. A town that belonged to a specific noble family whose titular head had been given by the crown the right, among others, to collect most taxes from the inhabitants of that town.

5. Much of this and the ensuing general discussions of crown census summaries was drawn from Annie
Molinie-Bertrand’s preface (“Comentario”) to Eduardo García-España and Annie Molinie-Bertrand, *Censo de Castilla de 1591* (Madrid: Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 1986) found on pp. 9-33. A review of this article will provide the reader with additional information about this period such as types and sizes of geographical divisions used in the sixteenth century and how they correlate with modern divisions; how to calculate population from the number of vecinos; abandoned towns; and other articles and books about the century and its demographics. A list of all towns found in the 1591 census with the names of their modern equivalents was published as separate addendum to the book.


7Ibid., 10.

8Found in Archivo General de Simancas, *Contadurias Generales*, Legajo 768.


10Archivo de la Real Chancillería de Valladolid, *Pleitos de Hidalguía*, Legajo 1, Expediente 5.


13*Nomenclator de las ciudades, villas y lugares de España formado por las relaciones de los intendientes* (Madrid: Imprenta Real, 1786). A copy is found in the reading room in the Archivo General de Simancas and a letter might be addressed to them to check on a particular town.


19Annie Molinie Bertrand, *Censo de Castilla de 1591*; especially “Comentario”, 9-33.


23P. Miguelez, *Catálogo de los códices españoles de la Biblioteca del Escorial: relaciones históricas e histórico-geográficas de los pueblos de España* (Madrid: Imprenta Helenica, 1917), I: Relaciones Históricos 261-68. This book is available from several libraries through loan, as well as at the Family History Library, Salt Lake City, and in Family History Centers as FHL INTL Film1573189 Item 8.
Archivo Municipal de Santa Olalla, Toledo, Legajo 12.
