

Article

The House of Villafañe of Santiago del Molinillo: Hidalguía, Kinship, and Long-Term Social Reproduction Between Castile and Spanish America (15th–20th Centuries)

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Abstract

This article examines how minor noble houses in the Hispanic world sustained social status under economic constraint and changing institutional regimes. Using the House of Villafañe of Santiago del Molinillo (Kingdom of León) as a case study, it conceptualizes the Casa as a social, patrimonial, and symbolic formation rather than a strictly genealogical lineage. The study combines a long-duration perspective with microhistorical analysis and historical genealogy, drawing on notarial documentation, parish registers, population censuses, and litigation concerning hidalgo status in both Castilian and colonial settings. The findings show that the house's continuity rested on adaptive strategies: the regulation of kinship, selective marriage alliances, flexible patrimonial arrangements, institutional participation, and the mobilization of symbolic resources such as lineage memory and public recognition of noble condition. The article further demonstrates that Atlantic mobility to colonial La Rioja and Cordova (Argentina) did not constitute a rupture, but extended established practices of social reproduction into new legal and social environments. The House of Villafañe emerges as a resilient collective actor that transformed structural constraints and geographic mobility into resources for long-term continuity, offering a productive scale for analyzing social reproduction and inequality in the Hispanic world.

Keywords: hidalguía; kinship; social reproduction; Spanish America

1. Introduction

Over recent decades, the study of long-term social reproduction and mobility has become a central concern within the humanities, particularly in relation to the historical persistence of inequality, privilege, and elite advantage (Sesé 2006). Rather than treating premodern societies as either rigidly immobile or fluidly open, this literature emphasizes the need to reconstruct the concrete cultural, familial, and institutional mechanisms through which social positions were produced, defended, and transmitted. In this perspective, kinship appears not merely as a structural background factor, but as a historically situated language and repertoire of practices through which actors articulated identity, legitimacy, and authority.

Within these debates, the Castilian minor nobility (hidalguía) offers a particularly revealing observatory. In Castilian legal and social terms, hidalguía referred to the condition of non-titled hereditary nobility, whose members enjoyed fiscal and honorific privileges



Received: 20 January 2026

Revised: 8 February 2026

Accepted: 12 February 2026

Published: 13 February 2026

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but generally lacked jurisdictional lordship. More specifically, the case examined here corresponds to *hidalguía de solar conocido*: a form of noble status grounded in long-standing territorial rootedness, collective recognition, and documented ancestry associated with a recognized ancestral house (*solar*). Rather than functioning solely as a legal category, this condition operated as a socially enacted status, reproduced over time through institutional participation, kinship strategies, and public recognition.

Because many *hidalgo* houses lacked extensive lordship and often faced constraints in economic capital, the maintenance of noble standing depended on cumulative practices: lineage memory, symbolic differentiation, visible institutional presence, and strategically managed marriage alliances (Villafañe 2024). In this sense, noble condition was not simply inherited as a fixed attribute; it was reproduced through historically situated mechanisms linking family organization, access to offices, and symbolic legitimacy.

These dynamics were not limited to the Iberian Peninsula. Research on colonial societies in the Gobernación del Tucumán—especially in La Rioja—has shown that kinship, genealogy, and the notion of house (*casa*) structured local hierarchies in contexts marked by conquest, demographic disruption, and chronic conflict (Boixadós 2001a). In frontier environments, elite status was negotiated not only through wealth or officeholding, but also through the capacity to be recognized as part of a legitimate house, to mobilize ancestry, and to exercise authority over households, dependents, and land.

This article offers a monographic analysis of the House of Villafañe of Santiago del Molinillo, a rural community in the Kingdom of León, treated as a historically specific social formation rather than as a generalized history of a surname (Moyano Aliaga 2003; Serrano Redonnet 1944). The *Casa* is approached as a configuration of kinship relations, patrimonial strategies, territorial anchoring, institutional roles, and symbolic capital. From the late medieval period onward, the house appears in local documentation as a recognizable collective actor engaged in the defense of *hidalgo* status, the occupation of municipal and ecclesiastical roles, and the construction of marriage alliances with families of comparable standing (Serrano Redonnet 1967).

From the early seventeenth century, this locally rooted trajectory acquired a transatlantic dimension through migration to Spanish America, particularly to La Rioja and later to Cordova (Boixadós 2003). In these colonial settings, houses and households served as key units of classification in censuses, land litigation, and jurisdictional disputes. Genealogical memory, affinity networks, and the capacity to present oneself as a legitimate representative of a *casa* shaped access to offices, land, labor, and honor. The Atlantic projection of the House of Villafañe thus appears not as a break with Leonese origins, but as a rearticulation of established strategies of social reproduction within new political, legal, and social conditions.

The article traces the House of Villafañe across more than five centuries to analyze the long-term reproduction of minor nobility in the Hispanic world. It focuses on kinship organization, marriage strategies, inheritance practices, and genealogical memory as historically situated practices structuring legitimacy and social distinction, while comparing peninsular and colonial trajectories within a single analytical frame. Rather than opposing legal–historical approaches to *hidalguía* and the House, this article seeks to place them in dialogue with an anthropology of reproductive practices, examining how legal categories acquired historical effectiveness through everyday social use.

The comparative relevance of this case lies in the specific characteristics of the two historical spaces it connects. In the Kingdom of León, rural *hidalguía* developed within dense local settings marked by demographic pressure, partible inheritance, and limited access to jurisdictional lordship, where status depended on continuous recognition through municipal and parish institutions. In colonial La Rioja and Cordova, peripheral societies of

the Gobernación del Tucumán reproduced comparable conditions of scarcity, frontier instability, and weak state presence, in which social hierarchy was likewise structured through households, kinship networks, and institutional participation. These shared constraints make León and the colonial interior of the Río de la Plata analytically commensurable spaces, allowing the House of Villafañe to be examined as a single long-term social formation whose strategies of reproduction were rearticulated—rather than transformed—across metropolitan and colonial contexts.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

2.1. *The Casa as an Analytical Category*

In Castilian society, the notion of *Casa* designated a social formation more complex than a dwelling or a purely genealogical lineage (de Bernabé and de Eugenio 2015). It integrated kinship relations, patrimonial resources, territorial anchoring, participation in institutional arenas, and symbolic markers such as surname practices, honorific memory, and public recognition. As such, the *Casa* functioned as a durable unit of social action: a framework for identity construction, social positioning, and intergenerational reproduction (García-Gabilan San Gil 2012).

Legal–historical scholarship has long emphasized the centrality of the House and economy as foundations of traditional social order, particularly following Otto Brunner’s interpretation of household authority, patrimonial continuity, and the embeddedness of social hierarchy in domestic structures. Building on this perspective, the present article does not approach the *Casa* as a primarily normative or juridical category, but rather as a historically enacted social formation whose coherence and durability depended on everyday practices, kinship strategies, institutional participation, and the management of conflict over time (Brunner 2010).

This approach is particularly relevant for the study of *hidalguía*, whose standing often rested less on lordship than on recognition, reputation, and continuity. For many *hidalgo* houses, noble condition was not a static attribute but an achievement continually produced and defended through everyday practices, documentary strategies, and cumulative institutional participation (Pérez León 2015). Treating the *Casa* as an analytical category thus helps overcome the limits of surname-based or purely biographical perspectives. It shifts attention from episodic success or failure to long-term patterns of persistence, adaptation, and negotiated continuity (Aranzadi 2001).

This perspective does not reject legal–historical approaches to *hidalguía* or to the House. On the contrary, it builds upon a well-established body of legal scholarship that has shown how notions of economy, household authority, and patrimonial continuity structured traditional social orders. Rather than focusing primarily on normative definitions or juridical classifications, the present approach displaces the analytical emphasis toward practices, uses, and mechanisms of social reproduction through which legal categories acquired effectiveness in everyday life. In this sense, the *Casa* is treated as a social and institutional reality enacted through law, but not reducible to law alone.

Conceived as a durable social formation, the *Casa* provides a robust observational scale for reconstructing strategies of long-term social reproduction, especially in uneven archival landscapes where diachronic and relational analysis can reveal coherence and stability otherwise obscured in cross-sectional approaches.

2.2. *Long Duration, Microhistory, and Historical Genealogy*

Methodologically, this article combines a long-duration perspective with microhistorical analysis, integrated through historical genealogy. The *longue durée* makes visible structural patterns and strategies of adaptation that remain obscure in studies limited to

a few generations. Microhistory, in turn, provides the resolution needed to reconstruct concrete practices, conflicts, and decision-making within a specific social unit. The Casa serves as an intermediate scale of observation between individual trajectories and macro-structural change.

Historical genealogy is treated not as a descriptive enumeration of descent but as an analytical tool for examining how kinship structured access to resources, offices, alliances, and symbolic capital. Genealogical reconstruction is systematically cross-read with notarial protocols, parish registers, population censuses, and lawsuits concerning *hidalguía*, allowing a contextual interpretation of family strategies and the interaction between kinship, law, and social practice over time.

3. *Hidalguía* and Its Spaces of Reproduction

Hispanic historiography has traditionally approached *hidalguía* either as a legal status defining access to privilege, as a component of the estate system, or as an indicator of social mobility and social ascent. These perspectives have produced essential insights into the juridical foundations and social boundaries of the lower nobility, but they have often treated *hidalgos* primarily as individuals rather than as members of durable family houses. By foregrounding the Casa as a collective and transgenerational actor, the present study shifts the analytical scale toward the mechanisms through which noble status was reproduced over the long term, emphasizing practices, institutional insertion, and kinship strategies rather than formal definitions alone.

Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, *hidalguía* formed the most extensive segment of the noble estate in the Crown of Castile, encompassing diverse social realities despite its legal definition as privileged condition (Moxó y Ortiz de Villajos 2003). In many local contexts, *hidalgo* status was rarely sustained by jurisdictional power or concentrated patrimony; instead, it depended on the capacity of a Casa to manage scarcity, fragmentation, and demographic pressure through adaptive strategies of reproduction (Peguero 1978).

In regions such as the Kingdom of León, *hidalguía* was articulated through dense local constellations of kinship, institutional participation, and symbolic recognition (Badiola 2021). The *concejo*—the municipal governing body composed of local household heads and responsible for communal administration, justice, and fiscal regulation—and the parish functioned as central arenas in which *hidalgo* status was enacted, stabilized, and transmitted (Moya 1994). Officeholding, fiscal exemptions, burial privileges, and visible participation in communal governance operated not merely as administrative facts but as mechanisms of distinction embedded in everyday practice (Díaz de Durana Ortiz de Urbina 2004).

Colonial evidence further suggests that, under conditions of constraint, the durability of *hidalgo* status often depended less on formal legal arrangements such as *mayorazgos* (entailed estates designed to preserve family property by restricting alienation and transmission to a single heir) than on flexible, cumulative practices. In early modern Castile, as in colonial peripheral societies, families of *hidalgo* origin developed strategies aimed at preserving the integrity of their social position despite the centrifugal effects of partible inheritance. These strategies included selective marriage alliances, differentiated access to offices, delayed or negotiated patrimonial partition, and the symbolic hierarchization of heirs. Even in the absence of formal entailment, households frequently adopted practices inspired by the logic of *mayorazgo*, privileging continuity over strict equality (Boixadós 1999).

For *hidalgo* houses, status was therefore reproduced through a repertoire of practices rather than through static legal definitions. The exercise of *concejo* offices, the cultivation of reputations as *hidalgos* *notorios*—that is, individuals whose noble status was publicly

recognized within the community and did not require formal judicial proof—recourse to litigation when hidalgo condition was contested, and the strategic management of kinship all contributed to the accumulation of local social capital. This capital was rooted in recognition, institutional presence, and memory, allowing families of hidalgo standing to stabilize their position over generations despite economic volatility (García-Gabilan San Gil 2013).

From a long-term perspective, hidalgo identity emerges as a performative and relational process. It was continuously produced through interaction with local institutions, inscribed in documentary practices, and transmitted through kinship strategies that linked lineage memory to material and symbolic resources. The spaces of reproduction were thus not passive contexts but active mechanisms through which families of hidalgo condition transformed structural constraints into opportunities for persistence.

The House of Villafañe of Santiago del Molinillo exemplifies these dynamics with particular clarity (Villafañe 2022). The lineage belonged to the category of hidalguía de solar conocido, whose social legitimacy rested on long-standing territorial rootedness, collective recognition, and the continuous activation of lineage memory within local institutions (ARChV 1677). Embedded in a small Leonese community, it operated within a social environment where hidalgo status required constant reaffirmation through municipal participation, parish privileges, and the strategic invocation of ancestry (García-Gabilan San Gil 2012). Its trajectory illustrates how a local Casa could secure long-term continuity by anchoring itself in communal institutions while deploying adaptive strategies comparable to those later observed in colonial elite households. In this sense, the House of Villafañe demonstrates that the mechanisms of social reproduction identified in colonial settings had deep roots in the practices of hidalguía in early modern Castile.

4. Formation and Consolidation of the House of Villafañe

The consolidation of the House of Villafañe in Santiago del Molinillo was a gradual process unfolding between the late medieval period and the early modern era, becoming fully visible in the sixteenth century, when the lineage achieved stable documentary anchoring (Villafañe 2024). Through population registers, parish records, notarial acts, and pleitos de hidalguía, the house emerges not merely as a family group but as a recognizable casa solar, endowed with territorial rootedness, institutional presence, and symbolic legitimacy (Villafañe 2025a).

This consolidation was neither spontaneous nor exclusively demographic. It resulted from deliberate strategies aimed at stabilizing lineage identity within a rural context characterized by competition among minor noble houses. Central to this strategy was the articulation between inherited symbolic capital and local institutional insertion. The sustained use of a compound surname functioned as an onomastic mechanism that linked the Molinillo branch to broader networks of noble recognition while simultaneously distinguishing it within the local hierarchy.

Marriage alliances played a decisive role in this configuration. The recurrent selection of spouses from neighboring hidalgo lineages contributed to the reinforcement of lineage cohesion and the consolidation of patrimonial and reputational assets. These unions operated not simply as biological continuities, but as social contracts that structured the circulation of property, offices, and symbolic capital, embedding the house within a dense web of kinship relations that extended beyond the immediate locality.

Equally fundamental were practices of legitimation enacted in institutional arenas. Participation in municipal government, the exercise of concejo offices, privileged burial within the parish church, and the repeated invocation of noble ancestry in legal contexts all contributed to the public affirmation of hidalguía. Through litigation, office-holding, and

ecclesiastical patronage, noble status was rendered visible, documented, and reproducible across generations.

Over time, these practices produced a cumulative effect. Reiterated institutional presence, consistent onomastic strategies, and the continuous validation of noble claims transformed recognition into tradition, and tradition into entitlement. The House of Villafañe thus consolidated itself not through jurisdictional lordship or exceptional wealth, but through the long-term stabilization of symbolic, institutional, and relational resources. In this sense, continuity itself functioned as a form of capital, anchoring the house durably within the local social order.

This locally consolidated configuration of the House of Villafañe—grounded in kinship strategies, institutional participation, and the cumulative legitimation of noble identity—constituted the structural and symbolic platform from which transatlantic mobility later became both conceivable and viable, enabling the projection of the casa beyond the Leonese rural milieu without severing its foundational ties to place, lineage, and memory.

In Santiago del Molinillo, the practices through which hidalgo status was reproduced can be observed with particular clarity. Members of the House of Villafañe repeatedly accessed municipal offices and parish privileges, including participation in the concejo and burial within the parish church—markers traditionally associated with publicly recognized hidalguía. These institutional positions were reinforced by marriage alliances with neighboring hidalgo lineages, notably the Gavilanes and Quiñones, which consolidated local networks of recognition and reciprocity. At the same time, the sustained use of a compound surname operated as an onomastic strategy linking individual actors to a collective lineage memory, allowing the Casa to present itself as a durable and legitimate social actor across generations.

5. Atlantic Projection and Colonial Integration

In colonial La Rioja, descendants of the House of Villafañe reproduced institutional practices already observable in León. Across successive generations, family members secured access to cabildo offices, encomiendas, and land, positioning themselves within the core structures of local governance and resource control. These were not isolated or exceptional achievements, but cumulative strategies deployed over time, as evidenced by notarial records, cabildo acts, and litigation concerning officeholding, inheritance, and property rights. The Atlantic projection of the Casa thus did not imply a rupture with peninsular practices, but rather their rearticulation within a new colonial setting.

From the early seventeenth century onward, members of the House of Villafañe participated in the transatlantic mobility that characterized a significant segment of northern Castilian hidalguía. This movement followed established patterns of kinship, patronage, and service to the Crown and should not be interpreted as a rupture with the Leonese Casa, but rather as a deliberate extension of its strategies of social reproduction into a new spatial and institutional context (Villafañe 2023). Atlantic migration thus functioned as a mechanism of diversification and consolidation, enabling the house to project itself beyond the constraints of the rural Castilian milieu (Badiola 2021).

A concrete illustration of this process is provided by the trajectory of Lázaro de Villafañe, whose arrival in the Gobernación del Tucumán took place within a gubernatorial and military framework that facilitated early access to offices and resources. Documentation from the *Archivo General de Indias* records his participation in administrative and service networks during the first decades of the seventeenth century, situating him within the circles of authority that structured frontier governance (AGI 1619, 1654, 1657, 1668, 1683a, 1683b, 1705; AHPC 1730; AMC 1611). His subsequent establishment in La Rioja combined

military service with access to land and institutional roles, illustrating how noble origin and service to the Crown operated jointly as mechanisms of colonial insertion (Villafañe 2025b).

Within colonial La Rioja, and later in Cordova, descendants of the house consolidated their position through a combination of municipal officeholding, access to encomiendas, and strategic marriages with locally established families. Records from the seventeenth century attest to the recurrent presence of members of the Villafañe lineage in cabildo offices and administrative functions, while notarial and judicial documentation reveals their involvement in land transactions and jurisdictional disputes that reinforced their status within the local elite (AGI 1654, 1657, 1668). These practices reproduced, in a colonial setting, the same logic observed in León: kinship structured access to resources, offices, and symbolic capital (Boixadós 1996).

Litigation also played a central role in stabilizing the house's colonial position. Petitions and legal proceedings concerning land, officeholding, and recognition of services before royal authorities demonstrate how members of the Casa mobilized Castilian legal categories within colonial institutional frameworks to defend accumulated advantages (AGI 1683a, 1683b, 1705). Far from being exceptional episodes, such disputes formed part of a broader repertoire of practices through which noble identity and institutional legitimacy were reaffirmed over time.

In these colonial environments, references to noble origin continued to operate as a form of symbolic capital. Recognition as hidalgos—even in the absence of formal titles—shaped access to credit, advantageous marriage alliances, and positions of authority, as reflected in provincial archival material from Cordova and La Rioja (AHPC 1730; AMC 1611). Noble identity, transplanted from Castile, was neither mechanically reproduced nor rendered obsolete in the New World; instead, it was selectively mobilized and re-signified within colonial hierarchies marked by frontier conditions, demographic constraints, and legal pluralism.

The Atlantic projection of the House of Villafañe thus illustrates how local identities and social models were transplanted, negotiated, and reconfigured in colonial societies. Rather than dissolving in the New World, the Casa persisted as a meaningful unit of social action, adapting to new institutional environments while preserving continuity rooted in origin, surname, and lineage memory. This case highlights the analytical value of approaching Atlantic mobility not as individual displacement, but as a long-term strategy of Casa through which rural Castilian hidalguía secured durability and influence across imperial space.

6. Family, Patrimony, and Conflict

The long-term reproduction of social status was inseparable from the management of patrimony and the regulation of conflict within the family. In both Castilian and colonial contexts, inheritance practices, credit relations, and disputes among co-heirs structured the internal dynamics of the Casa, revealing the enduring tension between normative legal frameworks and the strategic imperatives of social continuity (Boixadós 1997, 2001a).

Under Castilian law, partible inheritance constituted the formal principle governing the transmission of property (Salvat Monguillot 1961). Rather than producing uniform or strictly egalitarian outcomes, however, this distributive regime generated a wide range of adaptive practices aimed at preserving the material coherence and symbolic integrity of the house. Families resorted to differentiated bequests, delayed or negotiated partitions, intra-family transactions, complex credit arrangements, and the establishment of implicit hierarchies among heirs. These hierarchies tended to favor those individuals best positioned to sustain the collective standing and continuity of the Casa. Legal equality, therefore, was

not eliminated but reinterpreted through socially embedded mechanisms of distinction and negotiation (Martín Prieto 2008).

Within this framework, conflict was neither exceptional nor indicative of familial disintegration. On the contrary, it constituted a structural dimension of elite family life. Disputes over inheritance, authority, obligations, and debt exposed the friction between egalitarian legal norms and the imperative to maintain lineage cohesion, social differentiation, and patrimonial viability. Litigation, mediation, and negotiated settlements functioned as institutionalized arenas in which competing interpretations of kinship, rights, and hierarchy were articulated, contested, and provisionally resolved. Through conflict, families rendered explicit the otherwise implicit rules governing precedence, obligation, and belonging.

In colonial settings, these dynamics were further intensified by demographic dispersion, economic volatility, and the coexistence of multiple legal and institutional regimes. The management of patrimony required constant recalibration in response to frontier conditions, fluctuating access to land and labor, and uneven mechanisms of institutional enforcement. Despite these contextual differences, the underlying logic remained consistent with peninsular precedents: the preservation of the Casa as a coherent unit of social action over time (Boixadós 2004).

In the case of the House of Villafañe, litigation and negotiation surrounding property, credit, and familial obligations can be interpreted as mechanisms of adaptation rather than symptoms of decline. Disputes among relatives—whether resolved through judicial intervention or informal agreement—served to redefine internal hierarchies and redistribute responsibilities without dissolving the collective identity of the house (AHN 1514, 1577; ARChV 1495, 1514, 1520, 1529, 1576, 1577, 1580a, 1580b, 1582, 1612). Conflict thus operated as a productive force, enabling the Casa to absorb tensions generated by economic change and demographic growth while safeguarding its social position (Villafañe 2025c).

From a *longue durée* perspective, patrimony and conflict emerge as mutually constitutive dimensions of social reproduction. The capacity to manage disputes, negotiate inequality, and reconfigure internal arrangements constituted a crucial form of resilience. In this sense, the trajectory of the House of Villafañe demonstrates that continuity was achieved not through harmony or stability, but through the sustained ability to arbitrate tensions between law, kinship, and social ambition within the family itself.

7. Discussion

7.1. Social Mobility and Long-Term Persistence

From a long-duration perspective, the trajectory of the House of Villafañe offers a substantive contribution to debates on social mobility and the reproduction of inequality in premodern and early modern societies. While individual members of the lineage followed heterogeneous life courses—ranging from advancement to stagnation or relative decline—the Casa, understood as a collective and transgenerational social formation, maintained its condition of *hidalguía* across several centuries and across distinct institutional and geographic contexts. This contrast between individual variability and collective durability highlights the analytical importance of distinguishing personal trajectories from family-based structures of social reproduction (Aranzadi 2001; Sesé 2006).

Crucially, this persistence should not be read as a manifestation of social immobility. Rather, it was grounded in a sustained capacity for adaptation. Across shifting legal, economic, and political environments, the House of Villafañe mobilized kinship networks, recalibrated patrimonial arrangements, and selectively exploited institutional opportunities in both peninsular and colonial settings. Atlantic migration, service within municipal and imperial institutions, strategic litigation, and flexible inheritance practices did not undermine the coherence of the Casa; instead, they enabled the selective integration of

mobility into long-term strategies of reproduction, extending established social practices into new contexts (Boixadós 2001b; Villafañe 2022).

From a comparative standpoint, the Villafañe trajectory aligns with scholarship emphasizing the long-term persistence of social advantage. Formal openness in access to offices, land, or honor coexisted with markedly unequal outcomes shaped by cumulative advantages rooted in kinship, reputation, and institutional embeddedness. Social mobility thus appears less as a mechanism of leveling than as a selective process that allowed movement without substantially altering hierarchical structures. Over time, these dynamics contributed to the stabilization of elite positions in both Castilian and colonial societies, even in the absence of significant patrimonial concentration or formal titles (Moxó y Ortiz de Villajos 2003; Pérez León 2015).

The case further illustrates how inequality was reproduced through ordinary and legally sanctioned practices rather than through exceptional privilege or coercion. The activation of symbolic capital, sustained institutional participation, and the management of patrimony enabled the Casa to convert continuity itself into a resource. Within this framework, conflict, inheritance fragmentation, and geographic dispersion were not disruptive forces but mechanisms through which internal tensions were negotiated and reorganized, reinforcing rather than dissolving collective cohesion (Boixadós 1997, 2001a; García-Gabilan San Gil 2013).

7.2. Comparative and Historiographical Significance

Beyond its specific empirical scope, the case of the House of Villafañe carries broader comparative and historiographical significance. By foregrounding the Casa as a collective and transgenerational actor, this study contributes to debates on the reproduction of inequality, the durability of elite advantage, and the social mechanisms through which hierarchy is maintained across periods of structural transformation.

Comparatively, the framework developed here resonates with research on minor nobility, gentry, and non-titled elites in other European and colonial settings. In these contexts, as in the Hispanic world, social persistence often relied less on exceptional wealth or formal titles than on the cumulative activation of kinship ties, institutional participation, reputational capital, and the strategic management of inheritance and conflict. The Villafañe case shows how such mechanisms generated continuity without stasis, allowing mobility to be absorbed into strategies of reproduction rather than functioning as a force of social disruption.

The relevance of this approach lies not in direct analogy with later periods, but in its capacity to illuminate the long-term dynamics of inequality. Although the legal and institutional frameworks examined here are historically specific, the processes identified—intergenerational transmission of advantage, the conversion of continuity into social capital, and the mediating role of family-based structures—remain central to historiographical and interdisciplinary discussions on social stratification. Historically grounded case studies thus provide essential insight into the deep temporal roots of inequality, revealing patterns that transcend particular regimes or epochs.

By situating the Casa at the intersection of kinship, institutions, and symbolic practices, this study also contributes to recent debates in legal history. Rather than treating law as an autonomous or purely normative system, the analysis highlights how legal frameworks concerning status, inheritance, and household authority operated in practice through long-term strategies of social reproduction. In this respect, the case study also connects with a long-standing tradition in European legal and social thought that conceptualized the Casa and economy as foundational frameworks of household authority and social order, while demonstrating how these frameworks acquired historical effectiveness through concrete

practices, institutional participation, and long-term strategies of social reproduction in both metropolitan and colonial contexts.

8. Conclusions

This article has examined the House of Villafañe of Santiago del Molinillo as a case study for analyzing the long-term reproduction of minor nobility in the Hispanic world. By conceptualizing the Casa as a social, patrimonial, and symbolic formation—rather than as a purely genealogical lineage—and by integrating microhistorical analysis with a long-duration and Atlantic perspective, the study has identified the mechanisms through which hidalgo houses sustained continuity across profound political, economic, and institutional transformations.

The findings demonstrate that the persistence of noble status was not the result of inherited privilege or social immobility, but of sustained adaptive capacity. Through the strategic mobilization of kinship networks, flexible patrimonial management, institutional participation, and selective geographic mobility, the House of Villafañe transformed structural constraints into resources for continuity. Atlantic projection did not represent a rupture with the Leonese Casa, but an extension of established strategies of social reproduction into new spatial, legal, and institutional environments, where noble identity was selectively reactivated and re-signified.

Methodologically, the study underscores the value of combining historical genealogy with social history and long-term analysis. When treated as an analytical instrument rather than a descriptive exercise, genealogy reveals how kinship structured access to resources, offices, and symbolic capital over time. Embedded within a microhistorical framework, this approach makes visible the cumulative effects of everyday practices, negotiations, and conflicts that underpinned elite durability across generations.

Beyond its specific empirical focus, the House of Villafañe offers a transferable framework for comparative research on kinship, status, and social reproduction in early modern and modern societies. By foregrounding the Casa as the relevant scale of analysis, this article contributes to broader debates on social mobility and inequality, illustrating how hierarchy was reproduced not in spite of change, but through adaptive engagement with it. Extending this approach to other rural houses, regions, and transatlantic trajectories would further enrich our understanding of the long-term dynamics of elite formation and historical inequality in the Hispanic world.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, V.V. and J.H.V.; methodology, V.V. and J.H.V.; software, V.V.; investigation, V.V. and J.H.V.; data curation, V.V. and J.H.V.; writing—original draft preparation, V.V.; writing—review and editing, V.V. and J.H.V.; visualization, V.V.; supervision, J.H.V. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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