NOTES AND QUERIES

A QUERY ABOUT CHAPELRIES

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Recently I have been looking over some analyses of parish registers where the unit is notionally anomalous, being not a parish but a chapelry. I note that some researchers disregard the anomaly and proceed as if, for demographic purposes, a chapelry can be treated in exactly the same way as a parish. This may be dangerous. Little has been written about chapelries, either their general history or their demographic standing, so that their equation with 'the parish' in population analyses remains an open question. But until more work is done, it might be wise to proceed with some additional caution when investigating the registers of a chapelry. (For instance, it is far from clear that before the nineteenth century a chapelry had as defined and firm a territorial boundary as did a parish).

I suggest that any investigation of chapelry populations should begin by considering the ecclesiastical relationship of the chapelry to its 'mother parish'. Certain chapelries were (and are) totally dependent, to the extent that they were not allowed to carry out the church events which required a register. That is, baptisms, marriages and burials were all performed and registered at the mother church - so we have no problem. At the other extreme, some chapelries were so 'ancient' that they had long ago won the privilege of doing most of the things that a parish could do, which after 1537 could include the performance and registration of the above events (or at least certain of them). Many chapelries fell between these two extremes, having emerged or having gained a degree of independence only in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, and only step-by-step ascending to the privileged status of a separate register and total registration. Yet even in the case of an 'ancient chapelry', the chapelry was likely to differ from the parish in its clerical manning. Whereas every parish had to have a beneficed and possibly lifelong incumbent (that is, a vicar or rector) who had responsibility for pastoral care including parish registration - even when he was occasionally supported by short-term curates - any chapelry was liable to be served only by lesser clergy, hence often only by short-term curates. And perhaps this mattered for registration.

To move into the 'Dark Ages' of parish register study, another category of chapelries reached parish status only in the era of secular registration. Had their promotion (say, after 1860) any effect on local parochial registration? A before-and-after investigation might be revealing.
A point worth remembering with all parish register analyses is that entries are not mechanical and automatic productions, like a word-count on a computer, but are socially determined, each entry being the outcome of varying social interactions between families, clergy, and register clerk. Hence, before entries can be statistically analysed en masse, their validity and meaning as individual items need to be assessed and evaluated, in the present context by considering the behaviour of the participants. Questions that should be asked about a chapelry register might therefore include the following.

1. At any particular period, what was the exact constitutional relationship between the chapelry minister/priest who carried out the register-able events and the parish incumbent? What was the complex of current legal relations between the two, and between each and the registration ‘customers’, in terms of the laws both of the state and of the Church? Were some events reserved for the parish, and if so why - was it because of fees? And what were the rules regarding fees? How irregular or changing were the chapel ministers and did this affect their registration activities and even the entries? Which clergyman was pastorally responsible for encouraging families to cooperate on the register-able events, and did this affect whether the events appeared in the register of the parish or that of the chapel?

2. Who wrote the entries in the chapel register - if a layman, was it the parish clerk or another person? If the parish clerk, or the parish incumbent, where did he live and how well did he know the chapel locality and hence the chapel ‘customers’ (I suspect that degrees of recognition affected some entries, for instance, those of occupation)? Is the chapel register significantly different from the parish register of the same period, in care, in spelling, in particulars (for instance, degree of details of residence)? Again, does it display the same balance of opinion and expression in those entries which could involve subjective bias and whose meaning is therefore debatable (for instance, occupations and occupational nomenclature), suggesting that the same interpreting mind was at work?

3. Since at least those families who lived midway between the parish church and the chapel might well take their business to either (and it may be that this choice could be more general in many chapelries), is there any evidence of reasons other than mere geographical appropinquity likely to affect that choice? Such reasons might be differential fees, personal knowledge of a particular clergyman (for or against him), the prestige of a ceremony in the mother church, the desire to have a ceremony of a particular kind performed in the building where a previous ceremony of a different kind had been - and legally only could be - performed. Did families deliberately take some ceremonies to the more distant church/chapel, to avoid publicity (e.g. of bastardy), or, alternatively, to the nearest church/chapel, to gain publicity?

All these behaviour possibilities suggest that the normal relationship between a ‘parish’ register and an identifiable and fixed territorial area may not hold good in the case of a chapelry register - and hence, of course, in the case of the register of its mother parish. There could, for instance, be extensive ‘leakage’ of registration entries from the chapelry to the mother parish. Up to a point, these
possibilities may be proved or disproved by analyses of registers. To give a
single instance, I know of one eighteenth century Lancashire family which,
apparently without moving residence, registered baptisms alternately in a
chapelry and at the parish church.

A simple rule might be that a chapelry analysis always needs a mother parish
analysis to accompany it. Residence entries in each register may go some way
towards proving or disproving that the chapel and the parish church drew on
different geographical areas, thus assessing whether leakage was significant or
not. Unfortunately residence entries are not always supplied in registers.
Further, those that do appear may not always be reliable - customers from grey
areas between settlements might at different times be counted as belonging to
the particular settlement thought appropriate to the particular register, or might
themselves declare their residence differently to suit the register. Family
reconstitution may or may not help to clarify these issues. (While the issue of
leakage in one form or another occurs to some extent with any parish register,
it would appear to have special relevance where chapelries are concerned).

I do not know the answers to the questions above. Hence I do not know
whether my concern about chapelries represents a serious issue for population
studies, or is merely a false alarm. Can anyone help? First, we need information
about the legal niceties regarding chapelries, at different periods, not only about
the statutes but about the extent to which they actually operated (at a sheer
guess, differentially in different dioceses). Secondly, we need some checking in
those registers that happen to provide material that can answer some of the
questions. Possibly some of them have already been answered, explicitly or
implicitly, in research that has escaped me or publications I have overlooked.
Or it may turn out that here, as in many other historical matters, we lack the
evidence to get to the bottom of a puzzling issue - but at least we should ask
the questions and attempt the investigation. Meanwhile, extra caution in
drawing conclusions from chapelry analysis should probably be the order of the
day.