

On the changing size of nobility under Ancien Régime, 1500-1789*

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Abstract

This master thesis attempts to address the issue of the changing size of the nobility in France under Ancien Régime, between approximately 1500 and the Revolution. First we present a detailed analysis of the methodological and conceptual issues associated with the measurement of the number of nobles. Next we attempt to reconcile the various existing estimates and document a striking decline of the size of the nobility, from about 1,5% in 1500 to 1% around 1700 and less than 0,5% around 1789. The 18th century is characterised by a 41% fall of the number of noble households. Finally we discuss the various possible explanations for this evolution, contrasting on the one hand the likely willingness of the king to restrict the size of the group (partly for fiscal and political reasons), and on the other hand the possible desire of part of the nobility to form a smaller elite under the protection of the centralized state (thereby adopting fertility and matrimonial strategies pushing toward a shrinking group). We conclude that the first channel is probably more important than the second one, while stressing that available data does not allow us to rule out the possibility that the second channel also plays a significant role.

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1 Introduction

"What a strange problem". This is how [Dauvergne \(1973\)](#) introduces its article, intrigued by the fact that even in 1973, it looked like it was impossible to know exactly how many nobles were they during the Ancien Regime. The second order, who was one of the key element of the political system, at the centre of the French Revolution, could not even be estimated in number. Many methodological problems arose. The first one is that the world family in French can either mean household or lineage. This created a lot of confusion. For example, [Boiteau \(1861\)](#) estimates the number of nobles under 100 000 and is convinced of the validity of his result because he found the same number of "family" as [Chérin \(1788\)](#). However, Boiteau is counting household whereas Cherin is counting lineage. Therefore, where Boiteau is multiplying by a coefficient of 5, Cherin is multiplying by a coefficient of 20 and estimate the number of noble around 340 000. We see that the difference is huge. The second one is that there are no coherent sources across the whole territory. There is no regular estimation across the 1500-1789 period, sources are spread apart in time, in space and the documents that can be used are in various departmental archives. Fortunately, historians made some progress, although the results can be even more puzzling.

We identify an important change in the period of the Ancien Regime that we use to split this period in two parts. In 1695, Louis XIV introduced the capitation, a direct tax on all orders. It goes against the feudal foundations of the Ancien Regime. As [Kwass \(2000\)](#) recall, in the feudal system, each of the three orders where contributing to the Crown differently. The Clergy was praying, and their property were sacred so it could not be taxed. The nobles were the fighters, they were contributing with their blood so they were exempted of taxation. Then the Third state was contributing by working and paying taxes. Even if the Clergy was exempted of capitation on the paper, they were doing "gifts" (dons gratuits) to the Crown that were negotiated. Therefore we see the importance of such a tax and the turning point it represents. Even the nobility, the ancient order of "warriors", was taxed. The thesis of Kwass is that by introducing this tax, the King also had to introduce the concept of equality

with respect to taxes, that was one of the cornerstone of the French Revolution.

The capitation is also a change in the sources for the estimation. Before 1700, the main problem is to find reliable and coherent sources. The capitation on the other hand provides a nationwide and coherent source through the 1700-1789 period, making estimations more reliable. This is why we are going to split the discussions on the estimations methodology because the problems that arose are different between those 2 periods.

Estimations of the pre-capitation period give an important variation of the number of household, it vary from 20 000 to 40 000 at the beginning of the Ancien Regime. Although, it seems that we can be certain of an increase in absolute number until 1700. Then the sources for the 18th century, more reliable, show a surprising fall of 41% of the number of noble households. Even though some local evidence suggest that the peak of population was around 1650, the sudden decrease of the 18th century need to be explained. Several reasons can be put forward. In 1660's, Louis XIV started enquiries on the usurpation of nobility that made it more difficult to enter nobility. Part of nobility was very poor, and the degrading economic conditions could make them exit nobility if they had to work to survive (it was prohibited for noble to work). Finally, the nobility made its demographic transition before the general population, the fall during the 18th could be the consequence of this change in behaviours.

To treat this issue, the essay will be as follow. First, we are going to see how we can define a noble. Secondly we will do a brief historiography of nobility. Then we will treat the estimations methodology and results. In the forth part we will be studying the period going from 1500 to 1700, before the capitation and the fifth part will treat the use of capitation as a source of estimation. After a synthesis putting forward the fact that the 18th century saw a decrease of the number of noble household, we are going to treat in the last part the possible explanations of such phenomena and then conclude.

2 Who is a noble ?

Before diving into the estimation methods, we need first to know how nobility is defined. In the Ancien Regime, there are 3 orders, inherited from the middle age : the clergy, the nobles and the third state. The clergy regroups all the people working for the Church, from the priest of the local parish to the archbishop. The Third State regroups all the people that are not from the clergy and not from nobility. The Second order is harder to define properly and this will be the aim of this section.

A good way to understand who was a noble is to look at ennoblement, the process that make someone enter nobility. There are, to summarize, 3 ways :

- A Letter of ennoblement
- Buying an office that ennobles
- Silent ennoblement

The letter of ennoblement is a letter written by the King that states that a person and his descendants are now nobles. It could be use to reward some exceptional service, or as a way to get money. Louis XIV is known for selling letter of ennoblement as a way to get cash in the state's treasury.

Offices (office) were functions that you could occupy in the French Administration. It could be judge in the parliament¹ (Parlement), tax collector and other variety of functions that also had different levels of ennoblement. The fastest one, that was nicknamed "la savonnette à vilain" (the washing machine of commoners), needed the person to occupy it for 20 years and would give a permanent ennoblement to the owner and its descendants. At the opposite, some offices would give nobility only to the person occupying the function and not to its heirs, or not give ennoblement at all.

The last one is silent ennoblement (annoblissement taisible) which consist in faking

¹In the Ancien Regime, the Parliament is a court of Justice that is in charge with the most important cases

nobility. The idea is that nobility was a way of living : having a fief², wearing the sword, being called knight... A rich man could easily pretend to be noble by living this way. Another characteristic, is that the nobles were not paying a tax that was called the taille. Only people of third state were liable, but you could buy an exemption. The Crown often made enquiries to ensure that people not paying the taille were nobles. Until Louis XIV, oral testimonies that the lord and their family had been living "distinguishly", that they were always called Knight, or that we could not see them in the tax role of the taille were the usual proofs to ensure that a family was noble. If an enquiry was successful to prove nobility, the family was then officially considered noble.

To summarize, by buying a fief, a taille exemption (or not paying it), making people call you knight, a powerful man could take all the characteristics of a noble and then fake his way into nobility. However, the great enquiries of Louis XIV in the 1660's made ennoblement difficult to "fake", written proof became the norm (for example a notarial act where the person is called by its title). The King was now more or less controlling the entries into the second order. Therefore, at the beginning of the 18th century, the frontier between nobility and third state is less fuzzy than it could have been by the past.

This definition is quite simple and does not reveal the richness and difficulty of definition of the second order that we will approach in the next part.

3 Nobility : an historiographical overview

Nobility is complex and documents on the second order are numerous : fiscal data, political essays, letters to the king, inventory of their heritage, marital contract... This is why essays on nobility are often delimited on precise aspects.

The simplest narrowing of the subject is geographical delimitation. We can cite the major works of Meyer (1966) and his thesis about nobility of Brittany during

²Fief is a noble land, it inserts the owner in a chain of vassality. He is the vassal of an overlord and his subject are his vassals

the 18th. The major characteristic of Britany's Nobility is its virulence against the development of the French State. The great enquiries created a lot of tensions and in the end, nobles were very defensive against what they perceive as threats to their power : the state, but also the rising bourgeoisie. Feeling threatened, they used whatever they could to reinforce their power. The rising of the agricultural prices in 1735 make them increased their seigneurial taxes, which were too heavy for the rural farmers. Inside this group is the Nobility of the Parliament, a small group but even more aggressive. They can use their judiciary power to defend their privileges and were accused of being the defender of the land owners.

However, the constraint of the great enquiries gave a certain consistency and social cohesion to the highest part of nobility. As Meyer concludes : "Therefore, from the end of the Middle Age to the beginning of the 20th century, Britany offers without doubt the unique example of a region ruled by the same order, constituted for a large part with the same families."

Nicolas (1977) wrote on Savoie during the 18th century. He chooses to study the elite that are nobility and bourgeoisie, because the documents allow for a long time study. His approach is focused on the links between those two groups. At the beginning of the century the repartition of power is clear, the nobility is dominant whereas the rich commoners, from diverse origins and professions, see nobility as a model to pursue. Until the 1750, nobility is still powerful, through its land and professions. However the changes of the economical structure, several crisis, mean that the wealthiest part of the bourgeoisie are increasing in number (whereas the nobility is decreasing) and in power. In 1731 a reform of the cadastre make it difficult for the noble to prove that their goods were noble and make a majority of them liable to the taille, the tax of the commoners. This is perceived as an aggression and their anger is turned toward the richest commoners, accused of plotting this reform. Even though there exist a certain convergence in terms of idea, professions, the reaction of nobility makes it impossible for a certain fusion of the elite and the Revolution will definitely seal the division.

Then another point of entry is the nobility of the robe (noblesse de robe), the nobles of the Parliament, who detain a particular power in the Ancien Regime. The

parliament is a Court of Justice that judges the most important cases and can be a counter-power to the king's decision.

[Bluche \(1960\)](#) studies the member of the parliament in Paris between 1715 and 1789. He shows that this nobility is completely integrated in the nobility of Ancien Regime. It is not, as some thought, a young nobility made of freshly ennobled commoners. Only 10% are recruited in the Third state. This society is also quite static, what we observe in terms of fortune, seniority of nobility, and other objective characteristics, are the same in 1715 and in 1789. This is due to the fact that recruitment is mainly done by co-option. The nobility of parliament is in fact a mirror of the high nobility of Paris in terms of diversity of origins but also by the professions. Nobles of the parliament or their heirs can also go into military careers. This is why the author argues that the distinction between a young nobility of the robe, and an ancient nobility of the sword, is erroneous. The distinction is only a distinction of professors rather than two different societies inside the same order.

The same was done in Provence by [Cubells \(1984\)](#). The Parliament's noble are, definitively, a conservative group. However Cubells wants to emphasize their situation in nobility, what solidarities exist but also what oppositions characterised them. For example, are they in conflict with the nobility of the sword ? Their economic status is the one of the noble land owner (fiefé), which they defend more than nobility, it is illustrated when they refused to sit with the noble assembly that allowed noble without fief. Here we see that they would rather defend their class than their order. They are more partners with the military nobility than adversary, although some antagonism exist between them, it is not a definitive fracture. One of the strongest divide is between them and the nobility of the court, superior to them and that they can not access.

Because of their profession, their ideology is turned toward a monarchy regulated by a strong court of justice, which created conflicts with the clergy. If this class as a whole gives the impression to be immune to the new ideas of the enlightenment, some part of it make their way, like the idea that fief is more a land than a source of dignity, or that a judge should be a cultivated individual rather than just a technical expert.

One of the distinctive point of Franche Comté is that when it was integrated to France, the office became tradable in 1692, which was contradictory with the custom of the region. This is one of the point of entry of the work of [Gresset \(1975\)](#). The judiciary world of Franche Comté was short lived, gestating in 1674, to a death in 1790. It was also one of the most important profession with more than 400 magistrate of the Parliament. The impact of the sale of offices on the judiciary was double. For the subalterns, it created social mobility. Commoners had a batter access to the office of advocate for example. However, the heredity of the office made the magistrate of the Parliament, the highest position, more introverted on itself. This is why the subalterns of this system were very vocal during the revolution, they felt that the highest distinction were not attributed through merit but rather due to privileges.

More generally, some authors studied the socio economic structure of nobility, on one hand [Richard and Chaunu \(1974\)](#) showed that some nobles were pioneers in the industry. The trading nobility (noblesse commerçante) was the attempt of the monarchy to evolve with its time. The Crown tried to authorise working in trade for the nobles without derogating i.e losing nobility (dérogance). However, it was in total contradiction with the ideology and what was expected from the second order. These attempts failed, and the social order could not be reformed. Nevertheless, if trading nobility was not a social class, it corresponds to a reality. Richard identifies 5 categories. The first one is made of what we can call capitalists. They are actively participating in trade and industrial business and are at the cutting edge of the what will be the industrial revolution. Secondly, the most numerous category, nobles that see industrial activity as a simple continuation of traditional activities associated to the land. Those exploit mines, metallurgic activity, forest industry... Thirdly, at the frontier between bourgeoisie and nobility are the ennobled from trading and manufacture. Then the last two categories are the rural noble glass-maker and the nobles doing retail trade (which was cause of derogation) thanks to local custom allowing it.

On the other hand [Nassiet \(1993\)](#) showed in the case of Bretagne that existed a very poor nobility. Around 1700, there are 4600 noble family, which represents 1%

of Britany's population. Inside this nobility, 2/3 are what can be called poor nobles (paying less than 20 livres of capitation or sleeping nobility). What appears from his study is that the great enquiries of Louis 14th sealed the frontier of nobility and as a result, prevented some individuals to enter nobility, but also some of the poorest lineage to lose their title. The 17th and 18th century saw poor noble stayed in the second order whereas during the 16th century, numerous lineages disappeared. One of the reason is the economic and fiscal conditions that increased the charges of being noble during the 16th century and alleviated it for the two following centuries. Another reason is on the source of nobility that was rather associated to a way of life and oral tradition in the 16th. Therefore, a poor noble that would stop wearing distinctive signs, then for different reason be taxed like a commoner would not be perceived anymore as noble. However with the great enquiries, a title, a written form, would be a decisive and long lasting proof of nobility.

Investigating a lineage or particular figures was also a interesting way to approach nobility. Families and their networks (sometime called "nebulae"), were carefully studied. We can cite [Solnon \(1992\)](#) work on the Ormessons. A simple fact can make us understand the particularity of this dynasty : "12 generations of [Ormesson] served the state, from the 16th century to nowadays, from François 1er to the 5th Republic". How can we explain such a longevity ? To Solnon, it is due to its careful tradition of serving the state, rather than a party or an idea. The first reason is that education was better transmitted through family. Universities at the time of the Ancien Regime were mediocre. Therefore the Ormesson, with their tradition cautiously transmitted through the generations, represented valuable assets in the administration. Another characteristic is their willingness to stay apart from politics, defending the rule of the law rather than a party. This is how, even if Olivier the 3rd opposed Louis 14th in the trial against Fouquet, the Ormesson came back at the service of the state. Or again, after the Revolution, 2 of them served the new regime.

Whereas the Ormesson are known for their submission to the state, the Condé are known for their insubordination to the Crown, their submission to Louis 14th is often seen as the symbol of the fall of nobility as a counter-power to the King, crushed

by its iron fist. The idea behind that is that the network of those powerful nobles was getting less and less influential, profitable, and that the revolt of the Fronde (La Fronde) in 1651 was the last breath of a decaying power. [Béguin \(1999\)](#) shows that this is not the case. The Condé and there nebulae was growing in strength thanks to their clever positioning with respect to the king. The Fronde is in that case more paradoxal, why rebeling against a power that was rewarding. The author argue that the reason needs to be find in the scarcity of resources delivered by the king and a fight for their control. The Condé Nebulae did in fact survived to this revolt.

Another dynasty is the Bourbon-Penthievre that could be studied by [Duma \(1995\)](#) thanks to the mass of archives they kept. It is one of the most powerful families during the 18th century, they are princes of royal blood until 1717 when the lineage become illegitimate. Only 3 families have the same title at that time. There fortune is also extraordinary : 100 million of livres of wealth, 4 milion of annual revenue. Most interestingly Duma focuses on the nebula surrounding this princes. He shows how the Bourbon-Penthievre are very cautious in the management of their fortune, frugal with their personal spending, and ostentatious when it is a matter of showing your rank.

Less impressive is the fortune of the Sully, "only" 5 millions, but still one of the most important of the realm. [Aristide-Hastir \(1990\)](#) unravelled how the duke of Sully made its wealth. This fortune is quite surprising for two reasons. He became rich in only ten years when he was minister of Henri IV. He even achieved to be duke and pair (duc et pair). Secondly, after he left its minister a few month following its king's death, he still succeeded to double its wealth in 30 years. This is surprising because he could not benefit anymore from the favours of the king, and even had to face political adversity. The success of his fortune lies in the acquisition of land ownership and a trustful network of administrator, even though he always kept a hand on the management of its fortune. Land ownership was a way to have a certain revenue which could be the base for more profitable investment. It is the balance of tradition and innovation that ensured his heirs to have a legacy without any debt.

The relationship between the king and the second order were also crucial to understand the formation of the modern state.

[Chaussinand-Nogaret \(1976\)](#) explores the openness of the nobility during the 18th century and its links with the bourgeoisie, arguing that nobility might be more open than what we think. His thesis is that the conflict that resolved itself with the revolution was not between the bourgeoisie and nobility, but between 2 nobilities : feudal nobility and royal nobility. With the development of the court system and the absolutism under Louis 14th, the king required a royal nobility under its power that would be loyal. They replaced the feudal nobility that was more independent, linked with its region and more prone to contest the central power. This royal nobility was open to the bourgeoisie, through the letter of ennoblement, the selling of offices, whereas the mobility for the poorer nobles inside the second order started to fade. Wealth was the driving force behind the access to the highest rank of the order, the less fortunate nobles saw their chance of upward mobility diminish whereas it was easier for the richmen. This created a conservative reaction, where the poorer noble reaffirmed the idea of nobility as a race and military order since they did not have the fortune to access the highest positions.

[Constant \(1989\)](#) Introduces the concept of second nobility (*noblesse seconde*). Those are nobles chose by the king for their loyalty and their local implantation. They are the relay of the Crown power on the regions. He studies how this particular nobility become aware of its strength during the assembly of nobility in 1651. The convocation of this assembly aims to call the "Etat Generaux", an assembly representing the three orders, to challenge the increasing power of the King. They express their willingness of a monarchy tempered by the three orders. This form of political expression is new, and this is why according to the author the second nobility should be carefully studied.

This concept will be at the center of [Bourquin \(1994\)](#), a study of second nobility in Champagne during the 16th and 17th century. This region is at the border of France, and therefore a strategic point militarily speaking. This is how powerful noble became valuable assets for the king, through there military skills. Then, with the French Wars of Religion (*Guerres de Religion*) between 1562 and 1598, the power of the crown is threatened again but by the local population. This is another occasion for the second nobility to prove their loyalty. However, this military specialisation

made them useless in Champagne when the Kingdom of France extended its border after 1659. Therefore, their skills could only be useful if they went where the conflict was happening, far from their land. Moreover, with the centralisation of the state under Louis XIV, this second nobility disappeared.

[Le Roux \(2001\)](#) studies of the king's favourites during the second half of the 16th century show how it was central for the development of the modern state later on. The difficult part is that there is no definition of a favourite, it rather is a position in a system of power. The methodology he uses it based on testimonies cross-checked with objective acts. What appears is that the favourite system places the king in a position of superiority with respect to all of his subjects, and more particularly with respect to the most powerful lineage. From a King associating the most influential families to the exercise of power, we go to a King distributing the honors, asserting the superiority of the Crown. The favourite system places the legitimacy of the second order in the service to the King. Those changes are key to understand the development of a royal administration, more and more independent from the power of nobility.

The concept of noble and nobility, its evolutions, was at the center of [Schalk \(1996\)](#) on the period 1500-1650. He asks the question what is considered noble and how it changed during this period. He finds that until 1570, nobility is associated to the military service, a noble is a warrior. This is what he calls the medieval conception. This conception of the role of nobility makes it a very autonomous group, with its own rule, which enters in contradiction with the increasing power of the Crown. The modern concept of nobility, as a legal status which grants privileges is, on the other hand, perfectly adapted to a strong central power that would then be the only one able to control the entry in this order. The idea of race, hereditary of nobility, has appeared around 1570 and was then at the centre of the definition of nobility. He also argues that, despite this notion of heredity, since it is the prerogative of the crown to deliver the entry to nobility, this social class is more open than before.

Some authors also tried international comparisons. For example [Ruggiu \(1997\)](#)

provides a comparison of the relationship joining nobility and the city between France and England during the 17th and 18th century. The methodology is the study of 4 comparable cities : Chester, Canterbury, Alençon and Abbeville. What appears is that the two countries share the same openness of society and similar evolution of the urban life. However the main difference lays on what was the purpose of social mobility. For the French nobility, the renewing of the second order had for purpose military service and loyalty to the king. Nobility was the social ideal and its role was debated in the last moment of the Ancien Regime. On the other hand, in England, the gentry did not cut itself from other social group, which maintained a continuum between the social group instead of a fracture. In the end, it was in France as easy as in England to get into nobility, although once inside it, the French nobility maintained its social difference with the others.

Those are just major works, and we do not pretend in anyway to have an exhaustive bibliography but rather multiple recognised work to show the complexity of the subject. Finally, the work of synthesis done by [Bourquin \(2002\)](#) and later by [Figeac \(2013\)](#) are essential for anyone who wants a way of entry on this subject. Bourquin has a thematic approach that make it easy to look for particular subject, whereas Figeac has a chronological approach showing the different crisis the nobility is going through.

4 Estimations from 1500 to 1700

4.1 The problem of the sources

Silent ennoblement creates a zone of uncertainty between a rich commoner having a fief and a true noble. This is why enquiry or census of nobility could be done in various district to ensure that people not paying taille were really noble. Another reason was to know how many nobles could be mobilised in case of conflict. However those are particular situation, there are no national census repeated over time that could be used as a nationwide source of data. For this period, sources are very

different and rest mostly on particular examples carefully studied. The most frequent and reliable source of this period is the roll of the "ban et arrière ban". As we said, a fief insert its owner in a chain of vassality, the ban is the assembly of vassal under the same lord, and the arrière ban their own vassals. They were therefore registered in those roll so that the lord could know who were his vassals and who could be call to arms.

4.2 The use of density

To tackle the issue of multiple sources, [Constant \(1984\)](#) introduces a new variable. To prove the need of it, he does a case study of the estimations of [Orlea \(1980\)](#). The latter wants to confront the estimation of contemporaneous authors of that time with data he can collect. They argued that there were between 20 000 and 30 000 noble family end of 15th. He extracts rolls of fief for the ban and arriere ban of 24 bailiwick (baillages) on 93 existing, which represent around 25% of the total. He calculates that in average one bailiwick has around 200 nobles with fief, therefore in total he estimates that there are 21 000 nobles household around 1500. He acknowledges that his sources might have counted several times nobles possessing various fief, but argues there is the same proportion of noble without fief that are not accounted. He states that the two bias compensate. However, [Wood \(1980\)](#) found that in 1552 in Bayeux, 25% of the nobles did not have a fief whereas the number of noble with several fief is much lower. This means that the estimation can be seriously underestimated. This is one of the drawback of the ban and arriere ban, the nobles without fief are not reported.

Confronting Orlea and Wood, Constant argues that estimating a percentage of noble includes a lot of variables that can fluctuate : the unit of measure (household vs lineage), multiplicative coefficient and total population. For example in Beauce, during the 16th century, a household was composed in average of 6,15 individuals, whereas it was 5,60 in 17th century. The coefficient for lineage also changes and goes from 7,74 to 10,05. This is why Constant wants to fix definitely the variables

so that the uncertainty is reduced to the minimum. This is where he introduces a new concept : the density of household. 2 variables that are the easiest to measure and precise : households and kilometres. The households are more precise than counting lineage since a lineage can be either a whole dynasty or the last member of a family. The size of a geographical unit can be precisely known thanks to the various maps and essays that exist. Then he computes the number of noble household per kilometres for various area to show how this notion can be used.

This methodology will be the one used, if possible, for the estimations on the period between 1500-1700.

4.3 At the beginning of the Ancien Regime, 1500

We already have the number of Orlea, 21 000 noble household, but as we saw it seems underestimated. [Contamine \(1998\)](#) provides estimation on the nobility during the middle age and in particular an estimation for the 15th century.

What is striking with the way he estimates it, is the variety of sources in terms of origin, geography but also data collected. He uses 10 particular cases that are as different as the whole region of Britain and the small city of Craon with 160 inhabitants. We also notice that some cases have the square kilometres accounted for, to be used to estimate densities.

The first case study is the Bearn in 1385. This one is quite precise since he has the number of noble households (300) and the total households (12 500) which means a noble population of 2,4%. But this is not the case for all the data he collects. In his forth case, he only has the number of "nobles", which later becomes noble family, but without any account of the total population. Or in the 7th case, Bayeux, he has the number of parishes (255) and the number of noble household (211).

Using this cases, Contamine argues that the number of noble is around 1,5% at the end of the century. Considering a population of 14 millions around 1500 he gets 200 000 nobles individuals, and dividing by a coefficient of 5, he obtains 40 000 noble family. Those 10 cases are used as a comparison with the estimation of the period

before, showing that there is a slow decrease but not a major change.

4.4 The 16th and 17th century

For the 16th century, we have the work of [Nassiet \(1999\)](#). As he states himself, this estimation is "coarse and provisory", his objective is just to obtain a lower and upper bound for the population of noble.

The core of his paper is the various reforms of the ban and arrière ban. He wants to rehabilitate the idea that this institution can be a useful source. The main issue with the ban and arriere ban is that not everyone is coming to the convocation, a majority being nobles too poor to equip themselves. However he identifies various reforms that try to tackle this matter. A major one is in 1541, when the King introduces different type of service according to the revenue. The richest would have to serve in the heavy cavalry whereas the poorest would be serving in the infantry. Then was introduced a system of contribution, nobles too poor to equip themselves could unite their fortune to equip one warrior fully.

In the end what is interesting is that the problem of the pauperized nobles is not only a problem for the historians now but was also a major problem for this institution, that the different kings tried to correct. Therefore, it means that rolls precise enough exist and that they take into account noble without fief, nobles too poor, and that they are a useful and reliable source for the estimations.

Relying on local density of some districts, he makes several hypothesis and computation for the year 1470 :

- For Normandy he finds density of 0,09 in the east, so he accepts it as the lower bound and increases it to 0,1 for the high estimation
- in Bourgogne, Nivernais, Auvergne and Poitou the average density is 0,05, this is what he uses for the rest of the realm as a lower bound and computes the upper estimation with an average density of 0,59.
- Languedoc is a more dense region, so he adds it to the upper bound estimation.

Then to get an estimation for the year 1500 he adds the enlargement of the realm

with a density of 0,05 but does not explain how he computes the increase of the upper bound.

The results are on table 1.

	hypothesis			
	caclulation km2 x noble/km2	low	caclulation km2 x noble/km2	high
Bretagne		10 000		10 000
Normandie	32 300 x 0,09 =	2 907	32 300 x 0,1 =	3 230
Languedoc			42 289 x 0,1	4 229
Rest of the Realm	383 780 x 0,05 =	19 189	341 491 x 0,059 =	20 148
Total Households Estimation in 1470		32 096		37 607
Enlargment	90 720 x 0,05 =	4 536		4 808
Total Households Estimation in 1500		36 632		42 415

Table 1: Estimation of the range of the noble population, 1470 and 1500

In 1470 the noble population is between 32 000 and 37 000 noble households, and in 1500 between 36 600 and 42 415. This seems to fit with the estimation of Contamine. For 1560 he simulates the increase of this population with a 5% growth rate, which he justifies by the fact that some areas (Troyes and Limousin) saw extreme growth rate of the noble population (respectively 12,7% and 8,7%) and obtain the following bounds : between 41 615 and 50 248.

This article shows how effective is the concept of density. It make the computation easily understandable and comparable. However it does not resolve the main problem of the period, the lack of sources. Local evidences suggest that their might be a peak of noble population around the mid 17th century. [Bourquin and Constant \(2001\)](#) report the following data :

We see that there are huge diversity of profiles. Normandy is very dense and even increase in density, whereas density is nearly divided by 2 in Chateauf-en-Thymerais. Nevertheless, we see that 8 areas on 10 with data for 1550 and 1700 have a diminution in density showing that there is a decrease before 1700.

The estimations on this period are imprecise, the sources are not uniform and

Location	1550	1700	1789
Election de Bayeux (Normandie)	189	252	
Baronnie de Chateaubriant (Bretagne)	71	29	13
Election d'Angers		69	65
Election de Saumur (partie angevine)		53	71
Haut-Maine	80	47	
Doyenne de Saint-Calais	90	45	28
Sénéchaussée de Château-du-Loir	57	49	27
Bailliage et election d'Orleans	60	60	
Baillage de Chateaneuf-en-Thymerais	120	70	50
Baillage et élection d'Etampes	100	60	
Election de Troyes	33	27	
Haut-Limousin	46		
Bas-Limousin	24	19	

Table 2: Sample of Noble per square kilometres in 1550, 1700, 1789

very diverse. Still they give an idea on the evolution. The density of noble is a crucial variable for the 1500-1700 period because it provides homogeneity on the estimation process. Not taking into account the geographical diversity, it seems that during the 16th century the noble population increased and reached its peak during the 17th century. However the current estimations are not precise enough to know the significance of the augmentation and the period of the peak.

On the opposite, the estimation for the 18th century have a great advantage : the tax rolls of capitation.

5 Estimations from 1700 to 1789

5.1 Capitation as the main source

Capitation is a direct tax with 22 classes. As described in [Guery \(1986\)](#), each taxpayer in the same class pays the same level of tax. However inside the classes there are different ranks so that the social hierarchy still holds and that commoners are not mixed with nobles. After different modification, the capitation in 1698 holds 22 classes and 569 ranks.

The taxpayer is the chief of the household, and the tax roll account separately the

different orders. You can either count the number of taxpayer in the category noble, or, if the intendant was cautious, a summary is present and you directly have the number of noble taxpayers. Counting the "cotes" (=taxpayer) might lead to an overestimation since the noble children of more than 25 years are taxpayer even if they still are in their parent's house. The advantage of the capitation is that it is homogeneous through the 18th century. Even if it was repealed several time, it always come back until the French Revolution with the same principle : a direct tax on the chiefs of households according to their social class.

Those characteristics of capitation made it a very interesting source to estimate the number of nobles. But it took time to exploit it since the the tax roll were spread apart in the different departmental archives.

5.2 First use of capitation

The first one to use capitation to estimate the number of nobles is [Chaussinand-Nogaret \(1976\)](#). Extracting the tax roll around 1789 for 13 districts (generalité) on a total of 34, he counts the number of noble taxpayer. This cover approximately 38% of French territory. He obtains the [Table 3](#)

He notes 10 547 taxpayers, which gives an average number of 811 taxpayers by district. Multiplying it by 34 (the total number of district) he obtains 27 574 taxpayers. Then, arguing that the number of taxpayers is an overestimation of the number of family, since spouses without property are taxed, widows, or unmarried women, he rounds up the count to 25 000 family, in the sense of household. Then depending on the multiplicative coefficient, he set the number of nobles between 110 000 and 120 000 individuals.

This is a important first step on the estimation of the population of nobles. A second one was made in 1995.

Area	Cotes = taxpayers	Individuals (*4,5)	Totale Population	Percentage
Bourges	480	2 160	528 424	0,409%
Amiens	602	2 709	530 062	0,511%
Grenoble	613	2 758	669 812	0,412%
Rouen	1 079	4 855	731 978	0,663%
Limoges	725	3 262	647 686	0,504%
Bordeaux	1 860	8 370	1 393 167	0,601%
Moulins	533	2 398	648 830	0,370%
Orléans	706	3 177	707 304	0,449%
Caen	1 575	7 087	654 082	1,084%
Chalons	673	3 028	800 706	0,378%
La Rochelle	365	1 642	471 285	0,348%
Franche-Comté	613	2 758	707 272	0,390%
Montauban	723	3 253	541 294	0,601%
Total	10 547	47 641	9 031 902	0,527%

Table 3: Counts of tax roll in 13 districts, in 1789

5.3 An idea of downward mobility

[Nassiet \(1995\)](#) wrote a major article on the estimation of noble population. His strength is that he was able to provide an estimation in 1700 and improve the estimation of [Chaussinand-Nogaret \(1976\)](#) around 1789.

His objective is to have the evolution of the number of nobles along a period in order to have an estimation of a phenomenon that is not very well known : downward mobility. It is true that for various reasons, people can get out of nobility. The main one is due to the rules of nobility. With the privilege of being a noble came a certain code to respect, and the most important was that most forms of work were prohibited. In his thesis, Nassiet is shedding light on a not very well known phenomena : poor nobility. This category of nobles that could be struggling to sustain themselves was a category very sensitive to the fact that they could lose their privilege if they had to work to survive.

Therefore, to look at the evolution, he needs reliable source that are coherent throughout the century. For the beginning of the century (more exactly around 1698) he uses the "memoires des intendants pour l'instruction du Duc de Bour-

gogne". Those are essays realised by the intendants that describe the district under their jurisdiction. The one about Paris for example contains information about the population but also a precise description of the geography and other characteristics. They were done to be used as material for the education of the "duc the bourgogne", Louis XIV's son. Nassiet acknowledges that, on the question of the population, they might not be very precise. The questionnaire sent to the intendants asks vague questions like "how many distinguished people live in the region". However, the period of this big enquiry coincide with the first application of the capitation.

His main argument is that, the most reliable of those essays are based on the role of capitation to account for the noble population. The way the count is done in those mémoire shows that they used the rankings of the capitation. Some distinguish the nobles without fief, other nobles that are not lord of a parish, they precise that they count the number of chief of households, all those are distinctions that are done only in the tax roll of capitation. For some districts, the tax roll still exists and by crosschecking with the mémoire, he ensures that the number are similar. Therefore, the mémoire are just a copy of some part of the capitation tax roll and are much more reliable than the original questionnaire. He succeeds to cover 51% of the surface of the realm around 1700. To estimate the noble population at the eve of the French Revolution, he extends the database of Chaussinand Nogaret and covers 53% of the surface of the realm.

The details of his results are on [table 4](#) and [table 5](#).

Region	Surface in km2	Year	Number of family	Density	% of population
Caen	9779	1695	3398	1,56	2,55
Rouen	10588	1703	2148	0,91	1,22
Alençon	10731	1695	2084	0,87	1,70
Bretagne	35064	1695	4000	0,52	1,08
Languedoc	42289	1695	4486	0,48	1,31
Orléans	19802	1698	1649	0,37	1,22
Bordeaux	32107	1703	1929	0,27	0,65
Paris	17284	1698	1039	0,27	0,33
Tours	26411	1698	1530	0,26	0,64
Bourges	16107	1698	879	0,25	1,36
Amiens	9049	1698	500	0,25	0,43
Grenoble	20160	1698	1059	0,23	0,88
Lyon	8226	1698	325	0,18	0,40
Haute- Alsace	4000	1698	100	0,11	
Total	261597		25126	0,43	

Table 4: Number of noble families around 1695-1703

Region	Surface	Year	Number of taxpayers	density noble/km2	population	variation
Caen	9779	1780	1577	0,72	1,10	-9,0
Alençon	10731	1786	1280	0,54	0,97	-5,4
Rouen	11778	1784	1082	0,41	0,55	-9,3
Bretagne	35064	1760-89	3220	0,41	0,60	-2,4
Amiens	9049	1784	653	0,32	0,49	+3,1
Laon	2774	1787	180	0,29		
Montauban	11525		721	0,28	0,57	
Bordeaux	32107	1786	1854	0,26	0,56	
La Rochelle	9161	1785	468	0,23	0,41	
Lyon	8226	1762	400	0,22	0,27	+3,3
Limoges	16873		725	0,19	0,43	
Riom	12869	1780-89	525	0,18	0,35	
Franche-Comté	17222	1788	613	0,16	0,41	
Orléans	19802	1785	718	0,16	0,39	-9,7
Mans	4186	1781	140	0,15		
Bourges	16107	1788	495	0,14	0,37	-6,4
Grenobles	20160	1788	622	0,14	0,43	-6,0
Moulins	17710	1787	532	0,13	0,32	
Chalons	24230	1788	680	0,13	0,37	
Haute-Alsace	4000	1776	112	0,12		+1,4
Total	293353		16597	0,25		
Kingdom estimation	541869		30657	0,25	0,49	

Table 5: Number of noble taxpayer in the capitation, around 1780-1789

The most striking result is the fall in the number of noble. It is estimated to 234 000 around 1700 and decreases to 140 000 around 1785, a fall of 41%.

Geographically, we see that there are huge regional differences between French Regions. In 1700, 2,5% of the population of the region of Caen are nobles, which is 6 times the number in Lyon. Focusing on the number of nobles by square kilometres, we see that the main area of noble density is Normandy. Then follows Britain and the South-West of France. Surprisingly Paris is not the most dense area in nobles, even though it is the city of the Court Nobility. Around 1780, this geographic repartition still holds with a general decrease for the regions that are in both samples.

To Nassiet, the brutality of the decline is an evidence that the cause it to be found in the economic conditions of living for the countryside noble : not all were rich and a fraction of them were poor enough to be under the threat of derogating (derogance), which meant losing your nobility for having a profession.

6 The evolution of noble population, a synthesis of what we know

Those various estimations, summarized on table 6 and table 7 allows us to identify the following trends :

- The number of noble households seems to increase from 1500 to 1700. The range of this increases is between 10 000 and 20 000 households, due to the limitation of the sources
- There is a brutal fall of the number of households between 1700 and 1789, from 50 000 to 30 000 households at least
- The population increased much more rapidly, from 14 million in 1500 to 27 million in 1789. This means in terms of percentage that the noble population with respect to the whole population kept declining during the Ancien Regime - More hypothetically, local evidences seem to indicate a decline before 1700, therefore a peek around 1650

This is shown on the figure 3 and figure 4. The continuous line represents the estimations for the number of households and the dash line the percentage points. There are regional differences that seem to hold through time. Britain and Normandy are the region with the most important density but also with the highest percentage in terms of population. Figure 1 and 2 published in Nassiet (2006), shows a geographical repartition of nobles in 1700 and 1789

The most puzzling fact, and this one seem reliable, is the sudden decrease during the 18th century. Historians have two kinds of explanations. First, the conditions of living of a rural nobility that was more vulnerable to derogation. Secondly, the nobility did its demographic transition earlier than the general population.

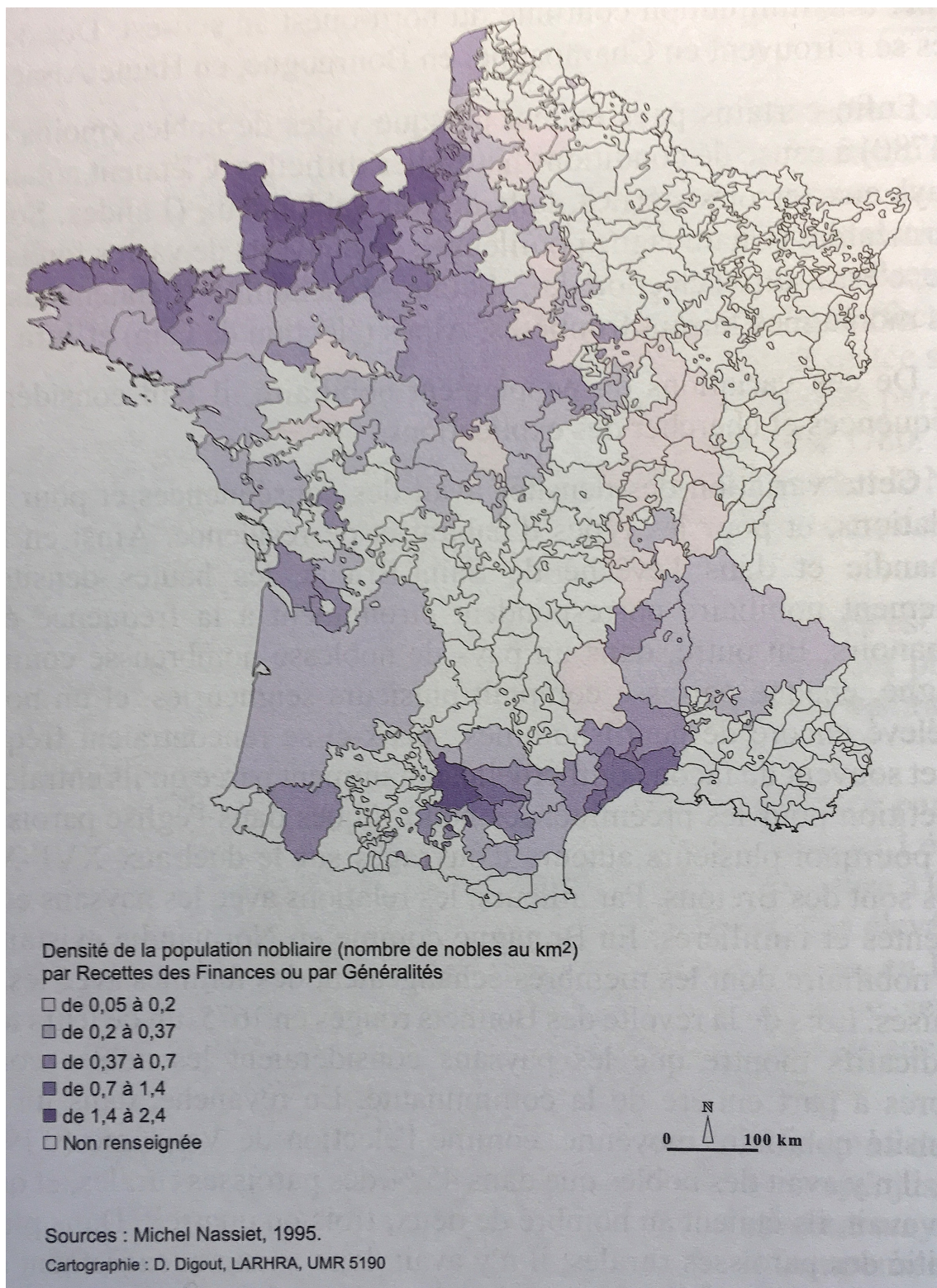


Figure 1: Repartition of noble population in 1700

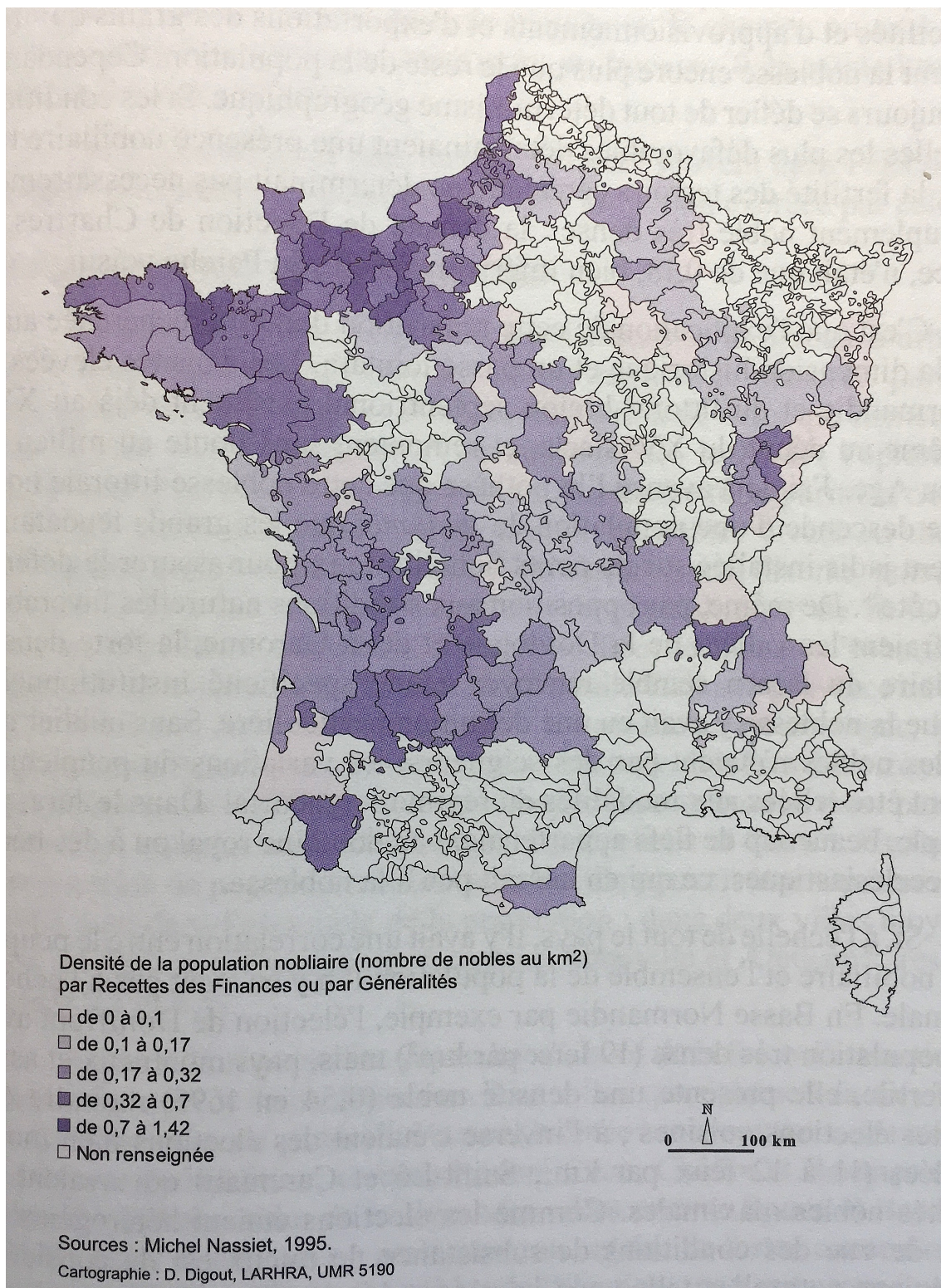


Figure 2: Repartition of noble population in 1789

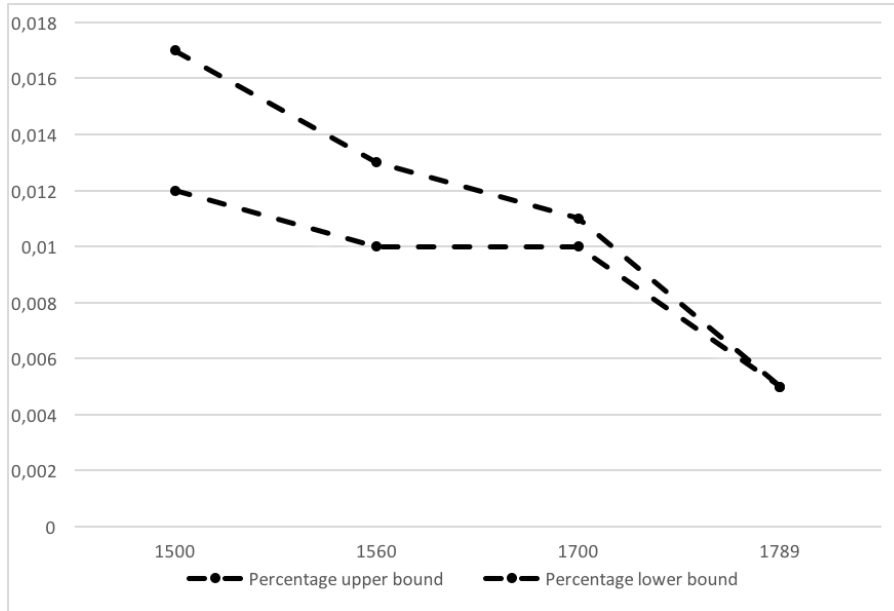


Figure 3: Evolution of the percentage of noble, 1500-1789

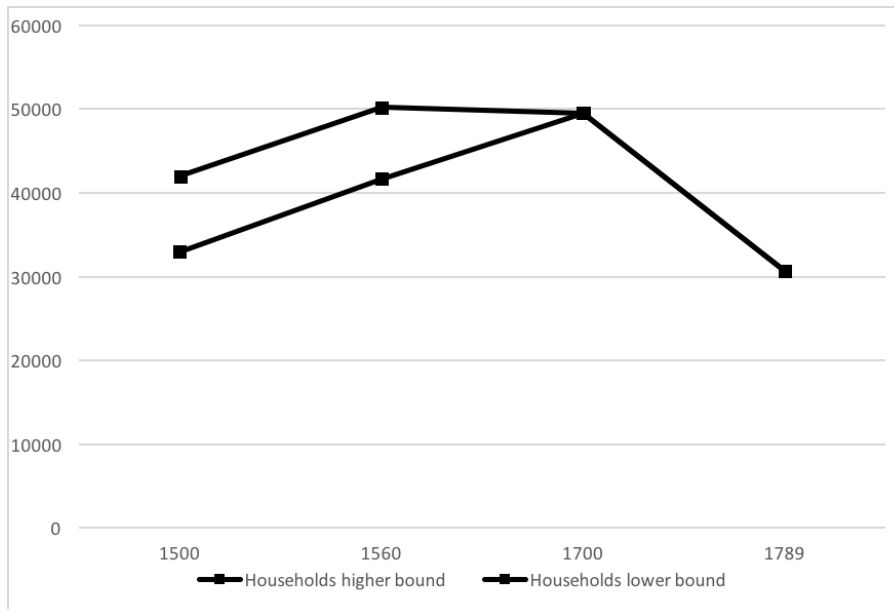


Figure 4: Evolution of the number of noble household, 1500-1789

Author/Year	1470	1500	1560	1700	1789
Chaussinand-Nogaret (1976)					25 000 ?
Orlea (1980)		21 000 ?			
Nassiet (1995)				49 512 22M	30 657 27M
Contamine (1998)		40 000 14M			
Nassiet (1999)	32000/37600 10/12M	36600/42400 ?	41600/50200 18M		

Table 6: Synthesis of the various estimations, number of households and total population, 1500-1789

Author/Year	1470	1500	1560	1700	1789
Chaussinand-Nogaret (1976)					? ?
Orlea (1980)		? ?			
Nassiet (1995)				1,1% coef : 4,5	0,5% coef 4,5
Contamine (1998)		1,5% coef : 5			
Nassiet (1999/2000)	1,2%/1,7% coef : 4,5		1,0%/1,3% coef : 4,5		

Table 7: Synthesis of the various estimations, percentage and multiplicative coefficient, 1500-1789

7 Conditions of living vs Way of living

7.1 A more difficult renewing of the second order

Obviously, if in the imagination nobility is associated to wealthiness and luxury, it is because it is part of the reality. For example, the Bourbon-Penthievre dynasty had various properties evaluated to 100 millions livres tournois just before the French Revolution. In comparison, according to [Morrisson and Snyder \(2000\)](#), the medium income in 1788 for a class they call "peasant-factory worker" is 3 000 livres tournois. The duc and pairs were the richest of the Kingdom.

Land was not the only source of revenue. Some nobles were pioneers in investing in the emerging industries. The work of Chaussinand-Nogaret and Guy Richard showed that the nobility impulsed the French metallurgic industry. However they are particular cases. Usually the nobles would only bring capital rather than being directly concerned with the management of the industry. Offices or lending to the king where other way of ensuring a regular entry of money. As [Grenier \(1996\)](#) says, the economy of the Ancien Regime is "an economy of exchange and uncertainty", therefore covering against those risks was a good method to ensure the continuity of the lineage.

If we look more precisely at capitation, it is made with 22 social classes. People in the same classes pay the same taxes [Bluche and Solnon \(1983\)](#). However there are honorific ranks inside those classes to reaffirm the social hierarchy. What is interesting with this capitation is that nobles are inside the same classes than commoners. The poorest nobles can be taxed the same amount than some peasant rich enough to be taxed. This shows that the nobility is a social class that is more complex that we can first imagine and proves the existence of this block that is hard to apprehend : poor nobles.

As we said, in the 1660's, Louis XIV started several waves of enquiries about nobility. The objective was to limit fraud of the nobility. The first act of Louis XIV against usurpation is in 1661 when he raises the fine to 2000 livres tournois,

in addition to the obligation to erase any visible trace of nobility for anyone proven guilty of usurpation. Similar ordinances are taken but the most striking one is the 19 march 1667, where nobles had to prove to the intendant of their district (*généralité*) all the papers indicating that their dignity was anterior to 1560. This dried up one of the way of entry to nobility : silent ennoblement. This was an important one and it ensured in the countryside the renewing of the elite. Decaying nobility could be replaced by rich commoners in the long term. Poor nobles leave very few traces but it seems that they are an important one. Michel Nassiet found that in a parish in Britain, 45% of the nobles were in the lowest class of taxation (meaning they had very low revenue) at the beginning of the 18th century, and were only 7% a few decades later. This change is either due to their death or to them being outed of nobility for having to work.

The beginning of the century is also characterised by 2 famine in 1693-1694 and 1709 that could have been very rough for the rural nobility.

Nicolas (1977) finds interesting numbers in terms of succession for Annecy. During the first half of the 18th century, 54,5% of the nobles with at least 2 kids chose a unique heir for their family whereas in the second half of the century, this number went up to 70%. This is due to the fear of falling down of the social ladder and the will to protect the lineage by reinforcing the legacy of one of the heir at the expense of the others. However, he also note that nobles marry later which, as he says, gives less "demographic tonus" to the group. This particular case brings to our attention the demographic behaviours of this social class that we are going to examine more precisely in the next section.

7.2 Different family behaviours

In this part we will have a more demographic approach and therefore we need to precise the basic concepts that will be used. First we call fertility the average number of children for a woman along here life. Legitimate fertility (*fertilité légitime*) is the number of children of a married couple. It is the easiest variable to calculate because

of the existence of various sources like for example the registers from the parishes that keep record of every marriages, births and deaths. Natural fertility is the level of fertility where we cannot demonstrate the existence of conscious mechanism to regulate birth after marriage. The Ig index was created by the University of Princeton and is a way to compare the number of birth observed with an estimation of the number of birth this population would have had without birth regulation. The Hutterites population, anabaptists not practicing any way of contraception, are used as a benchmark of natural fertility. If the Ig index is superior to 0,600, birth control is of low probability.

An essential article to understand the behaviours of the high nobility, is the one wrote by [Lévy and Henry \(1960\)](#). They study the demographic characteristics of the "ducs et pairs", which can be translated by dukes and pairs. Those are the highest titles of nobility just after the King. For example, the son of the King is automatically a duke and pair (duc et pair). The King could raise someone to the title of duke with a letter that needed to be approved by the Parliament. The dukes and pairs are therefore the top of the high aristocracy. From 1650 to 1799, Henry and Levy use genealogical data of 58 lineage that have at least one duke and pair who's marriage is inside this period.

One of their most striking result is in the following figure 5

The number of children for the women married before their 20th birthday is falling : between 1650-1699 it is 6,15 per couple, in 1700-1749 it goes down to 2,79 to finally be 2,0 between 1750-1799. This result does not seem to be limited only to this very particular social class in the nobility. [Bourquin \(2002\)](#) reports that Parliament's nobility of Franche Comté saw the average number of kids per household go from 7,1 in 1692-1715, to 5,7 in 1740-1771 to 3,2 in 1771-1790. In Provence, the trend seem to be the same as [Cubells \(2002\)](#) shows, Provence magistrates under Louis XIV were 41% to have more than 5 kids, and were down to 10% during the second half of the century. This is a surprising result and it asks the question how can this be obtained.

Nombre d'enfants	Époque du mariage		
	1650-1699	1700-1749	1750-1799
0.....	3	5	7
1.....	1	6	3
2.....	3	2	3
3.....	2	—	2
4.....	2	4	2
5.....	3	4	2
6.....	7	2	—
7.....	3	—	1
8.....	3	—	—
9.....	—	1	—
10 et plus.....	7*	—	—
TOTAL.....	31	21	20
Nombre moyen d'enfants par famille.....	6,15	2,79	2,00
*Détail des 10 et plus : 3 fois 10, 2 fois 11, 1 fois 13, 1 fois 21.			

Figure 5: Repartition of families of the women married under 20 years

As [Minvielle \(2010\)](#) summarize, there are 3 obstacles to natural fertility :

- Age of marriage, reducing the period when the female is fertile
- Breastfeeding, a longer period of breastfeeding slows down the return of the cycles
- Adult mortality

Those are obstacles and it can still be unconscious. However, even at that time, contraceptive technique existed. The most important ones were : withdrawal technique, abstinence and the spacing of birth. If the first technique is impossible to observe (also some writings suggest that people are using it), the two other ones can be measured directly.

The slow down of fertility seem shared by all the nation with 2 distinctions. First a divide between urban and countryside. The urban population reduced their fertility much earlier than in the countryside. In Rouen, [Bardet \(1983\)](#) talks about a "contraceptive waterslide" (le toboggan contraceptif). The Theoretical progeny of women married aged from 15 to 49 goes from 7,37 between 1640-1669 to 4,54 between 1760-1789. The second one, within the first one, is the difference between the elite and the commoners. The elite saw their fertility reduced before the commoners with a difference in the contraception method used. The urban elite seem to have

used the abstinence technique, the age when the mother has her last child is getting lower and lower. On the other hand, the rural nobility used the spacing technique, with the age between the children being more and more important.

8 Conclusion

Estimating the number of nobles has been a very difficult subject for the historians. Nowadays, it looks like a certain consensus has been reached. We saw that capitulation represents a brake in terms of ideology of the Ancien Regime but also a valuable source. The estimations before are less accurate but still very helpful. It seems very probable that the population of noble was never higher than 2% during the Ancien Regime. Since the French population augmented massively, in terms of proportion the nobility decreased between 1500 and 1789. In terms of number of noble household, the 16th century saw an increase, the size of it still being unclear. On the other hand, the 18th saw a drastic fall. Uncertainty still remain around where is the peak. Local evidences suggest that the maximum of noble household could be around 1650.

The explanations for the fall of the 18th century can be divided in two category : exogeneous and endogeneous reasons. There existed an important rural nobility that had precarious conditions of living, the beginning of great enquiries of Louis XIV around 1660's and the two famines in 1693 and 1709 might have been too much. We can not totally rule out the influence of the change in demographic behaviour. They modified profoundly the structural rate of reproduction of this elite. If the peak of noble is really at 1650, the demographic change could explain the first decrease between 1650-1700. However a strong argument in favour of conditions of living is the one suggested by [Dupâquier \(1979\)](#). He argues that the count of household is not very sensitive to the change of population. For example, if all the children are dead in a family, there will be still counted as a household. This could mean that the fall we observe might even be more substantial.

An idea for future research would be an estimation in 1720, around the end of the

great enquiries, it could allow us to be more confident of the channel. If we are at the level of 1789 in 1720, this indicates that the famines of 1693 and 1709 along with the great enquiries were the crucial events of this fall. At the opposite, a slow decrease around 1720 could mean that the reduction was later on and rather due to the demographical transition of the elite. With respect to the current literature, identifying new sources for the 16th and 17th century, bringing them together with the existing one is an important field for future research to clarify the evolution of noble population.

9 Glossary

Bailiwick (Baillage) : administrative unit

Capitation : direct tax on all orders

Derogation (Dérogeance) : losing nobility because of the occupation of a prohibited profession

District (Généralité) : administrative unit

Duke and pairs (Ducs et pairs) : highest title of nobility after the King

Intendant (Intendant): representative of the King's Power in a district

Office (Office) : profession delivered by the King

Parliament (Parlement) : court of justice

Silent ennoblement (Annoblissement taisible) : faking nobility

Second Nobility (Noblesse seconde) : nobility locally powerful that can be use as a relay between the Crown and the regions

Taille : direct tax paid only by the third state

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