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Changing to stay the same

Seventeenth-century French nobles and modernity

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Jonathan Dewald, *Status, power, and identity in early modern France. The Rohan family, 1550-1715* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015, xiii + 247 p., ill., index)

Jonathan Dewald is the leading Anglophone scholar of early modern French noble culture; his other monographs on this topic are well known, as is his survey of the early modern European nobility. This body of work established several lines of interpretation, many of which are reinforced in his newest book. Dewald has highlighted the aristocracy's success in re-inventing itself and surviving in changing structural and cultural contexts. In so doing, nobles embraced assumptions and practices related to modernity (rational calculation of interest and individualism, for example), while remaining attached to traditional values. Dewald's work explores the numerous contradictions that resulted, and portrays noble culture itself as regenerative; that is, inhabited by conflicting imperatives that produced synthetic change. For example, an apparently pre-modern preoccupation with family status could result in dynastic conflict among cousins that ultimately undermined their shared family identity. This volume investigates these themes anew in the context of a dynasty that began as Breton, and then arguably became 'European', and finally 'French'. Through the prism of the Rohan's experience, the reader views the practices and attitudes of the class that dominated early modern French society. Although the family's archives were partially destroyed and widely dispersed, Dewald pieces together enough material for five thought-provoking chapters.

The first chapter provides a broad narrative history of the family's accomplishments and self-representations, opening by remarking on the instability, rather than continuity, that characterized the early modern French aristocracy. The Rohan's ancestry was produced, not

merely received, through stories of their descent from fourth-century Breton kings or even from ancient Troy. More reliable accounts referred to their tenth-century castle at Josselin, and their preeminent position among late medieval baronial families in Brittany. The 1534 marriage between René I de Rohan and Isabeau d'Albert (brother of Henri and sister-in-law of Marguerite d'Angoulême) was a turning point for the family, as it placed them in line of succession to the kingdom of Navarre, linking them to the Bourbons and to Protestantism. René I's grandson, Henri (1579-1638), became the first duke of Rohan in 1603 and married Marguerite de Béthune, daughter of the future duke of Sully. The Rohan began to think of themselves as leaders of European Calvinism, a reputation created by Henri's break with the regent after Henri IV's assassination, his leadership of the Huguenot cause in the 1620s, and his eventual exile to Venice. After Henri's death, the family reconsolidated its resources and reconciled with the Catholic Church. They began building palaces in Paris and took up key roles at court. By the eighteenth century, a new kind of evidence-based history robbed the family of the power to shape its own past.

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Chapter two is a close examination of the political and mental world of Henri de Rohan. Among the startling conclusions reached here is that Henri seemed uninterested in 'Christianity, feudal lordship, and family pride', at least when compared to 'personal ambition, political calculation, and contemporary written culture' (38). While Henri seems modern in this sense, he was more interested in 'individual greatness' than in maximizing his revenues. Henri's education was rooted in Plutarch, Machiavelli, the chivalric ballets composed by his mother (Catherine de Parthenay), and a European tour in 1599-1601. This Huguenot leader saw religion as 'an obstacle to [political] unity, rather than (...) a set of important and true doctrines' (47), and believed that political decisions should be made for rational, not confessional reasons. Henri IV's assassination created an opportunity for Rohan, who (unlike the older Huguenots at court) had not yet had a proper military career. He became a leader of the hardline Protestant faction, and after 1621 won a number of victories. Dewald sees this activity as 'a political choice and an act of self-creation' (59); even after his exile in 1629, Henri managed to reinvent himself as 'a loyal servant of the monarchy' (67) and an agent of the French crown in Venice. There Henri enhanced his influence through a writing program (composing his memoirs, *De l'intérêt des princes*, and *Le parfait capitaine*) and through his appointment as the general of the Venetian armies in 1630. His fighting in the Valtellina in 1635-36 had mixed results, and he was eventually killed in battle.

The next chapter examines the role played by women in managing dynastic propertied and political interests. The Rohan women exemplified another contradiction in traditional aristocratic values: although early modern gender norms would have limited them to domestic activities, their husbands' absences routinely thrust them into very public positions of decision-making. This gave them the power to exercise legal rights and their own sexuality in ways that sometimes compromised the family's prestige – the romantic life of Marguerite de Béthune, who 'did little' to conceal her affairs during her husband's exile (109), best illustrates this point. The humanistically-educated Catherine de Parthenay, daughter of the lord of Soubise, tried to recreate the Soubise dynasty through her second son, Benjamin, who later died without children. His niece Marguerite (Henri de Rohan's only child) conveyed the duchy of Rohan to her Catholic husband, who became Henri de Chabot duc de Rohan. Mar-

guerite had converted prior to marriage, and then re-converted on her deathbed. Her daughter Anne married a Rohan from a different branch, and their mother transferred Soubise to them; Louis XIV then raised it to a principality. However, Marguerite accomplished this only by diminishing the status of her son Louis, whose patrimony was squeezed to provide for his sister's dowry. Dewald points out the tension between Marguerite's desire to establish her daughter and son-in-law, and her interest in 'the grandeur of the Rohan name and family' (100) as represented by her son's prominence.

Rohan estates covered a large portion of Breton territory in the seventeenth century; their revenues and the family's spending patterns are discussed in the fourth chapter. Most of these revenues came from non-agrarian sources – such as taxes on local commerce – and Dewald suggests that the family's fortunes improved during the 1600s not because of their careful management, but because of their lands' integration with the booming Atlantic economy. The Rohan 'exemplified the economic power of the great French aristocracy, but they also showed the limits of that power' (111). They controlled textile mills, iron forges, forests, and commercially vibrant towns. The precise annual value of these resources was difficult even for contemporaries to estimate. The Rohan received salaries and pensions from the crown, but also had to raise money to purchase offices such as governorships. Their spending patterns were typical, the trend over time being toward the construction of sumptuous Parisian residences. Their great wealth was thus matched by huge debts, creating 'two basic, contradictory realities [that] structured the Rohan's economic lives' (160).

The final chapter documents a shift in the Rohan's entourage after 1600. Earlier, their key followers were members of the regional nobility, but later came from other groups that 'had a more complicated relationship with their masters' (164). When Henri de Rohan died, Marguerite replaced his adviser Isaac Gouret, sieur d'Onglepié (whose ancestors had come from Navarre with Isabeau d'Albret) with Onglepié's broker in Paris, Gabriel Morel, sieur de La Barre, and then with Philippe Thévenin, whose financial network was also based in Paris. Dewald uses the example of Thévenin to identify a new kind of servant who was 'less a dependent than a business partner, who could access resources and social networks unavailable to his mistress' (181). Henri de Rohan's advisers were also a new breed, including Benjamin Priolo, who combined 'intellectual seriousness, violent adventurism, and shifting confessional commitments' (187). While the leverage of their sixteenth-century predecessors had been linked to their local power bases, these new advisers became indispensable through their more sophisticated skills and cultural resources. Meanwhile, back on the estates, the 'venality of seigneurial office detached whole groups of officials from any real connection to the family' (193).

This extended case study thus explores issues identified by Dewald in earlier works. Early modern nobles had to respond to changing structural and cultural contexts, but how did the Rohan's mode of adjusting compare to that of other noble families? Were other dynasties as uninterested in their family histories, their religious commitments, and their family identities as were the Rohan? How typical was the extent and timing of the shift of their managerial and financial network from their home region to the capital and/or court? How did the changing shape and character of their entourage compare to that of other noble families? These questions are beyond the scope of the present study, which nonetheless prompts

readers to wonder about comparisons, based on their own studies of early modern noble families.

One thirsts for more details about various aspects of the Rohan's experience; alas, existing sources seem to be inadequate to the task. It would be valuable, if it were possible, to know more about Henri de Rohan's suite (and those of his wife, daughter, and grandchildren), and their connections. Who were their secretaries? A few links between moneylending families and the Rohan's officers are mentioned, but one would wish for more information about the family's creditors, their financial networks, and their involvement in the Rohan's affairs. Why were such a small portion of the family's revenues constituted by agrarian production? Had such revenues had already been mortgaged off to creditors? Were they being exploited by revenue farmers whose payments were accounted for in ways not represented in the balance sheets cited? More important, who were the revenue farmers on whom the Rohan relied, and what (if any) were their connections to the credit markets in Paris? Dewald sketches in a few of the details, but knowing more would facilitate comparative assessments and new hypotheses. For example, might the fact that Thévenin 'had family connections with a town where the Rohan held property' (179) be part of a spatially-identifiable pattern, according to which brokers and lenders arranged loans that could be secured on assets that were contiguous or proximate to their own holdings? Henri's finances in particular invite questions. Why, for someone who aspired to international Protestant leadership, did Henri not develop financial relationships with lenders in England, the United Provinces, or the Swiss cantons, or in Venice where he resided for several years? How did he finance his military campaigns, which, as David Parrott and others have taught us, involved complex financial and logistical interactions? How did the Rohan's relationship to war financiers change over time?

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One of the most successful aspects of this book is in Dewald's portrayal of Henri as a noble who aspired to more than a leading political role in France, instead seeking European status, a royal title, or 'sovereign greatness' that 'offered the family a collective identity that mere nobility could not match' (36). This was a natural ambition given that 'the Rohan lived in a world of small principalities' (81). Dewald effectively situates Rohan in a specific pre-nation-state political environment – *L'Europa dei piccoli stati*, as described by Blythe Alice Raviola – in which grandes could still hope to rival their monarchs, constructing their identities accordingly. Dewald's account is especially compelling in its analysis of Henri's own ideas as expressed in his formal political writings. In *De l'intérêt des princes*, for example, Rohan praises Henri de Guise for being ambitious enough to have tried to usurp the crown of Henri III. Dewald concludes, based on these remarks, that Henri imagined a political world in which 'self-interest, ambition, competition, and potential violence permeate relations among individuals as well as among states' (75). One can only wonder what other gems one might have found – especially from the Rohan women – if more of the Rohan family's political correspondence had survived. My only criticism of this book is the absence of a genealogical chart – a significant shortcoming for such an otherwise brilliant study.

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