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Sebastiaan Derks

Frontier interactions

René de Challant and transregional lordship

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Matthew Vester, *Transregional lordship and the Italian Renaissance. René de Challant, 1504-1565*; Renaissance History, Art and Culture 5 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020, 329 p., ill., index)

This important monograph by Matthew Vester sets out to uncover and understand the political culture in the sixteenth-century Western Alps. It does so by taking the life of René de Challant as a prism through which to view and understand the spatial dimension of lordship. Born into the most prominent noble family of the Valle d'Aosta, Challant inherited lands throughout the valley, as well as in the Marquisate of Monferrato to the southeast, and in the Sabaudian territories and the Duchy of Lorraine to the northwest. Thanks to his family's long-standing tradition of service to the Savoy dynasty, he was directly elevated to the highest echelons of the ducal court and became a right-hand man to Duke Charles III. This lofty position was further reinforced by his second marriage to a cousin of Duchess Beatrice and his appointment as Marshal of Savoy, with chief command over the Sabaudian forces. By carefully analysing René de Challant's activities and connections, Vester builds an integrated understanding of the geographic reach of lordship on the borders of late Renaissance Italy, between imperial, French, and Swiss spheres of influence. Along the way, his book demonstrates the importance of examining kinship, political networks, financial brokerage, and territorial administration in order to understand how lordship was practiced in the Alpine regions.

Vester focuses mostly on the link between spatiality and noble family identity. Although some aspects of this link have been studied before, his book aims to take a wider and more comprehensive approach. Embracing the perspective of transregionalism, Vester organizes his argument around the idea that dominion over dispersed lands, and the resulting interac-

tions with multiple other noble rulers, was decisive for the way Challant perceived his family authority and identity. He advances his argument by building on recent trends to study noble lordship in a more contextual manner. As Vester notes, scholars have increasingly moved away from discussing Italian rural aristocracy in reductive terms and have begun to pay closer attention to the heterogeneity of Renaissance nobles and their intricate regional and cultural interactions. He thus positions himself among a new cluster of historians who have recognized that noble rulers with lands in multiple regions have much to tell us about the many diffuse ways in which territorial lordship was enacted in the premodern period. Research is increasingly focused on the importance of small polities in frontier zones, the autonomy claims of noble families, dynastic behaviour, and the reciprocities between cities and feudal lords. Yet while all these different strands play an important role in recent scholarship on noble lordship and are thematically interdependent, they are rarely drawn together. In doing so, Vester convincingly shows that by investigating the spatial element in nobles' lives during the Renaissance, we stand to gain a significantly more comprehensive view of their 'political' realities.

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This approach requires a thorough understanding of the nobility in the lands ruled by the Dukes of Savoy and the ability to bring together the many forms and layers of lordship in a clear narrative. Already in the substantial introductory chapter, in which the author surveys a vast body of international scholarship and points to the limitations of our historical knowledge of premodern lordship, Vester demonstrates that he is well qualified for this task. He is known for his endeavours to broaden our perspective on the history of the Sabaudian realms, which have found their elaboration in a monograph on Jacques de Savoie-Nemours, cousin of Emanuele Filiberto, Duke of Savoy (*Renaissance dynasticism and apanage politics*, 2012), a volume of essays on the political culture of the Savoy dynasty and its lands (*Sabaudian studies*, 2013), and a co-edited volume on the many-faceted influence of France and Spain on the Sabaudian territories (*Tra Francia e Spagna*, 2018). Expanding on this earlier work and applying the lens of transregional lordship, Vester has now turned most of that expertise into this first book-length treatment of René de Challant's life for an English-language audience.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first (chapters 2-4), Vester offers a careful account of the career of René de Challant, and introduces the most important actors and groups in the Alpine region. The strength of his account is its grounding in long-neglected correspondence housed in the archives of Aosta, Turin and Neuchâtel, from which Vester quotes extensively. Chapter two explores Challant's formative years and details the ways in which the young ruler quickly rose to prominence among the Sabaudian nobility, consolidated his family's lands in the Valle d'Aosta, Savoie, Valangin, and Beaufremont, and acquired territories in Monferrato. Vester goes on to clarify the possible strategies behind the two marriages with Bianca Maria Gaspardone and Mencia of Portugal-Braganza, but also gives us a clear view of how Challant became increasingly involved in diplomatic interactions with Swiss cantons, attending to the affairs of the Savoy rulers and those of his own. His circumstances changed abruptly in 1536, when Bernese and French forces invaded the Sabaudian lands. The dynamics and consequences of this war are the subject of chapter three. In analysing René de Challant's continuous service to Duke Charles III and his defence of the Valle d'Aosta, Vester indicates that the count showed himself to be an able and much respected commander, and a staunch ducal loyalist. Throughout this tumultuous period, he also had

to deal with a serious dispute with the Longueville heirs over the sovereign authority over his lordship of Valangin. Chapter four then addresses Challant's last years, in which he devoted himself to furthering the return of the occupied western Sabaudian lands to the ducal family. Just as René de Challant was beginning to secure control over the government of the remaining ducal territories after the death of Charles III, he was captured in a French surprise attack on Vercelli and spent nearly two years in captivity in Turin. Vester devotes particular attention to the crucial role that his wife Mencia played in safeguarding security of the Valle d'Aosta during his absence. After his release, Challant met Emanuele Filiberto, the new Duke of Savoy, at the Habsburg court in Brussels and pushed for his own reinstatement as ducal lieutenant general. Following the restoration of the Sabaudian territories, by the peace treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis in 1559, Challant was restored to the positions he had held before the war. Taken together, these chapters vividly demonstrate how he constantly moved back and forth between northern Italy and transalpine Europe to represent Sabaudian interests as well as his own. Moreover, they suggest that the Savoy connection, despite the undeniable tensions and constraints, was central to Challant: it gave him opportunities for gaining influence and authority, it formed a major component of his family identity, and it was the means by which he could protect his landed holdings.

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The second part (chapters 5-8) makes it clear that this book is not conceived as a conventional, personality-focused biography. Instead, the author emphasizes his interest in blending biographical narrative and comparative history. According to Vester, this allows him to situate the specific experiences of René de Challant in the context of other Renaissance nobles, and, in particular, to fit them into broader scholarly conversations on premodern lordship. The four remaining, thematic chapters examine kinship and noble life, the political networks of the Challant family, the handling of financial affairs, and the practice of territorial rulership. One of Vester's main achievements is that he draws upon an impressive array of archival evidence. For instance, in his treatment of the power networks of the Challant, Vester makes subtle and thorough use of correspondence, deeds, household accounts and inventories to shed more light on the way Challant and his relatives built up their followings and forged alliances to extend their already 'tremendous political influence in the Valle d'Aosta and beyond' (179). The Challant family had several high-ranking contacts at the French and Habsburg courts, and sent various envoys to these courts to represent its interests. Vester's overview of the principal friendships and patronage relations shows that many of these overlapped with the network of the Savoy. In his analysis of Challant's financial management and brokerage, the author provides strong insights into patterns of financial brokerage, borrowing and lending practices, ransom payments, and debt restructuring. Throughout these chapters, Vester periodically compares the Challant dynasty with its European counterparts and highlights some similarities and differences between them, such as René de Challant's striking lack of interest in spiritual devotion. Nonetheless, questions remain about the extent to which the Challant practices of lordship were representative of premodern transregional nobility.

In the final chapter, we are offered a conclusion, as well as a preliminary excursion into the bodily and spatial language in letters from and to René de Challant. Vester presents a wealth of references related to hands, touch and other bodily aspects of power relationships and spatial control. He explains that references to things that were in, under, or touched by



The Challant castle of Verrès. The building was modified in 1536 by René de Challant (*Wikicommons: CC BY-SA 3.0*)

the ruler's 'hands' were common and used in a variety of situations ranging from acts of war, territorial control, access to residential spaces, to contacts between nobles and their subjects. Here, these written expressions of spatial and physical connections are seen as embodiments of the intensely personal nature of Challant's territorial lordship.

This book offers fresh insights into practices of sixteenth-century lordship and the spatial attitudes of René de Challant in particular. For example, even though his relations with the Dukes of Savoy have received ample scholarly attention, few have noted his financial brokerage on behalf of Charles III and Emanuele Filiberto, which constituted a crucial factor in his role as a ducal marshal in Savoy and as envoy in the Swiss cantons. 'Take pity,' Challant pleaded with Duke Charles in May 1542, 'and consider the great expenses and losses that I suffer due to these damnable rents and interest payments to the Swiss, most of which I have taken on by your command, in your service, and do me the favor of examining the accounts and satisfying me' (231). Although Vester might have given more attention to the symbolic forms which Challant and his relatives employed to assert family identity, and to how others perceived him and his ancestry in diplomatic interactions, this is a wide-ranging study of an important but often neglected Sabaudian grandee, which takes us deep into the transregional networks of the Renaissance Alps. As such, this book broadens and enriches our understanding of Italian landed nobles and their complex interactions across sixteenth-century frontier regions.

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