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The entangled history of nobilities and borders in the sixteenth century

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Violet Soen and Yves Junot (eds), *Noblesses transrégionales. Les Croÿ et les frontières pendant les guerres de religion*, Burgundica XXX (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021, 432 p., ill.)

Noblesses transrégionales is the most recent product of the collaboration between Violet Soen and Yves Junot, who publish regularly on the border regions of the Burgundian-Habsburg Netherlands, against the background of religious or political upheaval. In the volume under review, their fruitful partnership produced a detailed account on how sixteenth-century magnate families navigated between loyalty, political and financial self-interest, and confessional allegiance. The volume is the result of a symposium held in commemoration of the 450th anniversary of the death of Antoine de Croÿ (1539-1567), prince of Porcien ('Construire la frontière. Les Croÿ, Montcornet, et les guerres de religion', 26-27 May 2017). As such, the legacy of this prince and *Pair de France* constitutes the heart of this volume.

This study is one of a succession of publications focussing on transregional history, a method developed by Violet Soen, Bram De Ridder, Alexander Soetaert, Werner Thomas and Johan Verberckmoes in order to understand sixteenth century developments in border regions in and around the Low Countries (see their website: <https://transregionalhistory.eu/>). The volume is presented as an analysis of one family's conscious choice to extend their dynastic endeavours across political and religious frontiers. The border regions between France, the Habsburg Low Countries and Lorraine are of paramount importance, as all these border-crossing actors are confronted with a vast array of ever-changing geopolitical circumstances. The detailed attention to these circumstances adds more interest to the volume. It is telling that this book starts with a contribution by Jonathan Spangler (p. 55-68) on the spe-

cific aristocratic identities that these geographical regions produced. The Croÿ were part of a distinct group of noble lineages adapt at playing with these transregional realities and turning them to their advantage (a group Spangler first analysed in ‘Those in between: Princely families on the margins of the Great Powers – The Franco-German frontier, 1477-1830’, in: Christopher H. Johnson et al. (eds), *Transregional and transnational families in Europe and beyond: experiences since the Middle Ages* (New York, 2011), 131-54. In the ‘micro-sovereignties’ of these regions, astute individuals of the La Marck (Aurélien Behr), Condé (Alain Joblin) or Croÿ families, and even urban communities (Olivia Carpi), could escape the centripetal forces of monarchy. In the peripheral borderlands, the Peace of Augsburg’s adage, ‘*cuius regio, eius religio*’, could be set aside. Instead, the specificities of these borderlands allowed original politico-confessional constructions, such as bi-confessional societies, a *simultaneum* like in Sedan (Aurélien Behr), or engendered ultra-catholic ideas within urban communities who took matters into their own hands (Olivia Carpi). These discussions form the first part of the volume.

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In the second part, the contributions by Odile Jurbert and Tomaso Pascucci reconstruct Antoine de Croÿ’s short life: Croÿ realised the patrimonial and political ambitions of his lineage, navigated the confessional minefields of the early stages of the French wars of religion, became a successful military commander in Condé’s army and carved out a role for himself as Protestant defender of religious freedom. The contributions by Gustaaf Janssens, Sanne Maekelberg & Pieter Martens, and Violet Soen concern other family members from the Croÿ-Aarschot and the Croÿ-Havré branches. These contributions give the reader a solid dynastic context, which is most welcome considering the scarceness of sources on Antoine de Croÿ’s life. It’s these contributions that make this volume less of a biography and more of a dynastic reconstruction of the success and failures of a sixteenth century lineage.

As an historian interested in dynastic identities, I appreciate how this volume lays bare the defining identity markers of the Croÿ family. Religion in itself doesn’t define the Croÿ, despite certain staunch Protestant or Catholic protagonists within the family. Patrimonial marriage strategies are important factors in the financial and political status of the family, but are not notably different from the marriage strategies developed by their peers. The same can be said of their military functions, their lifestyle, etc. As the editors acknowledge, the Croÿ are not exceptional, they are representative (p. 41). The defining marker of Croÿ dynastic identity is precisely the ‘transregional’ nature of the strategies they developed. Profiting from the fluidity of borders, building on the innate weakness of borderlands in times of conflict, their loyalties navigate between France or the Empire. Multiple transregional Croÿ branches are the result, which sometimes found themselves on opposite sides of the religious divide or entangled in decades of litigation caused by complicated patrimonial marriage or inheritance strategies. Despite these differences, they all acknowledge the importance of the dynasty as a whole. This volume shows convincingly that dynastic identity is a multi-faceted kaleidoscope, where various factors that ‘make’ a family interact with each other. In the Croÿ case the central facet around which religion, power and patrimony revolve is this distinct vision of operating ‘in between’, as Spangler puts it.

Conference proceedings bring together contributions of a various nature. Inevitably, this can create inconsistencies or, in this case, unfortunate choices. The volume has an excel-

lent introduction and is divided into three parts, each containing four to five chapters: ‘The border and the wars of religion’ (*‘La frontière et les guerres de religion’*), ‘The Croÿ as party leaders in the civil and religious wars in Europe’ (*‘Les Croÿ chefs de parti dans les guerres civiles et religieuses en Europe’*) and ‘Aristocratic women, committed, mediators, in the margins’ (*‘Femmes aristocrates engagées, médiatrices, marginales’*). The way the editors chose to arrange these contributions is somewhat confusing.

First of all, I understand why Jonathan Spangler’s contribution features so prominently in the volume, considering almost all contributions deal with geopolitical questions. Spangler becomes the proverbial coat rack to which all other articles are hooked. His contribution is then followed by three articles on other ‘micro-sovereignities’ (Behr, Joblin and Carpi). On the other hand, the choice to put these studies first, means the ‘*personnage clef*’, Antoine de Croÿ, is referred to regularly in the first part, but is only properly introduced in the second part. Various tedious repetitions are the result. For this reason, Odile Jurbert’s contribution on central figure Antoine de Croÿ, which opens the second part, feels somewhat lost. Secondly, the choice to create a separate part on ‘women’, when most of the contributions in the first two parts again and again stress how pivotal a role aristocratic women played in the political and religious repositioning of dynasties, is somewhat regrettable. There is a very faint hint of the ‘*histoire bataille*’ in the second part, where every contribution revolves around a male Croÿ individual. Is this a remnant of old-school family history, where only men were of interest? I can’t imagine this was a conscious choice of the editors. Instead of separating the men and the women (while leaving out some notable ‘Croÿ women’), it would have been better to focus on certain themes. Tomaso Pascucci’s contribution in the third part of the book on the marriage strategies developed for Antoine de Croÿ, would have made sense directly after Odile Jurbert’s biographical contribution in the second part. Both develop crucial arguments on the life of Antoine de Croÿ. The two articles on Marie de Brimeu (by Sylvia van Zanen and Anne Mieke Backer) and on her horticultural network and talent (also in the third part), would have been excellent following the account of Sanne Maekelberg & Pieter Martens on the architectural patrimony of her husband Charles of Croÿ (part two). Suffice to say, if there is anything I can criticise at all about this volume, it’s the fact the editors seem not to know about the booming research on aristocratic and ruling women (‘Queenship studies’ are particularly popular, with for instance Ellie Woodacre as an exceptionally prolific contributor to the field). That Charles of Croÿ, duke of Aarschot, is presented as the ‘last Croÿ-Aarschot’, despite having a younger sister Anne, heiress to his title and possessions, is symptomatic and slightly disappointing.

Despite this criticism on form, there is nothing wrong with the content. The contributions in this volume are well written, provocative and interesting and the historiographical references are mouth-wateringly complete. The methodology and focus on transregional history clearly have great potential. Considering the often-challenging details on geography or on the politico-religious conflict, this is not an easy read for amateur historians. However, for every historian working on the early modern nobility (especially of Habsburg Europe or France) this is a must-read.

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Aristocratic collecting practices in Belgium and the Netherlands (c. 1780-1950).

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