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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kevin C. Robbins. *City on the Ocean Sea: La Rochelle, 1530-1650: Urban Society, Religion, and Politics on the French Atlantic Frontier.* Leiden and New York: Brill, 1997. xvi + 464 pp. $150.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-10880-6.

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Published on H-Urban (February, 1999)

Laboratory La Rochelle: Civic Calvinism, Confessional Networks and Constitutional Overthrows

With the city of La Rochelle, Robbins undoubtedly chose the right laboratory to conduct his shrewd analysis of urban power, royal politics, ecclesiastical policy, and religious mentalities. Through more than a century, the author follows the "most eventful era" of a French port town on the Atlantic coast that was an outstanding Protestant stronghold throughout the sixteenth century. Taking the example of a prosperous and self-confident urban community, the study focuses on major issues of early modern French history: first, the long-lasting conflict between the city's struggle for civic independence and the crown's increasing interference in urban politics; second, the historical context of the urban Reformation and its impact on Rochelais town politics and society; and third, the role of social networks and kinship ties in the functioning of the urban community. Covering the long period from the beginning of the Protestant movement to the establishment of a Catholic bishopric on royal order, Robbins succeeds in combining historical description, statistical analysis, selected "microhistories," and stimulating historical interpretation.

Robbins' originality, most agreeable to the reader, appears in his opening chapter which situates La Rochelle in the threatening and hostile environment of the high sea and the muddy marshland inhabited by an "unsettling" population widely unimpressed by the disciplining efforts of secular and religious authorities. Hence, the urban space emerges as an imposing fortress destined to protect civic values and social hierarchy against the subversive powers of its harsh surroundings. The study and understanding of these ordering principles and practices represent the core of Robbins' work. With a population reaching a total of about 23,000 inhabitants by the beginning of the seventeenth century and thanks to its prosperous international commerce, La Rochelle became a powerful and strategic location on the border of the French kingdom that the crown was eager to preserve as a faithful ally against foreign invaders.

The first part of Robbins' study, dealing with city politics before the official establishment of the Reformed church, outlines the bargaining between the urban oligarchy and the French crown. In order to secure the city's loyalty, the king was willing to grant extensive privileges as far as municipal self-administration and tax policy were concerned. However, the monarch did not hesitate to withdraw these franchises as a form of punishment for urban disobedience (e.g. in establishing a perpetual mayorship that lasted for thirteen years until 1548). Consequently, the city fathers had to pay dearly for the re-establishment of the former status quo, filling the king's empty treasury. The relative absence of influential aristocrats and the paucity of the ecclesiastical infrastructure opened the way for a town government largely dominated by a small group of wealthy mercantile families. Robbins' main contribution to the understanding of early modern La Rochelle consists in his scrutiny of real and fictive kinship ties among the families of this ruling elite. Basing his research on the rich notarial archives and the Protestant *etat civil*, one of the few remaining sources of Rochelais history (the transcripts of the Town Council and the records of the Consistory being almost entirely lost), the author unveils the machinations of family clans which underlay everyday policy. The cornerstone of the Rochelais network was the practice of "resignation," i.e. the habit of leaving one's office of "echevin" or "pair" to a close kinsman (mostly to the son or son-in-law), a procedure that became commonplace from the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Robbins' long term study analyses the composition of the ruling elite from the 1550's to the 1650's, demonstrating the continuity of this leading principle of town politics. Urban nepotism was not even challenged by the absolutist monarch who relied on existing Catholic networks to execute his policy. Only the constitutional changes achieved by the bourgeois rebellion in 1614 (revoked with the city's defeat in 1628) allowed a broader participation which included political

"newcomers," especially merchants whose families were not native to the city.

Being one of the urban safe zones for Calvinists since 1570, La Rochelle played an important role in the development of French Protestantism. Contrary to the general view, Robbins focuses from the start on the stubborn unorthodoxy of the Rochelais faithful. Throughout the study, three fields of conflict between the Rochelais Protestants and their Calvinist pastors become apparent: first, the reluctance to accept the Church's censorship as far as popular beliefs, traditions, and moral behavior were concerned (e.g. the continuity of the carnival and "bazoche" tradition; the persistence of magical customs); second, the general disagreement of the Rochelais brethren with the hierarchical structure of the Calvinist church (congregationalist ideas, stressing each church member's responsibility to the detriment of synodal policy found eager supporters within the city); third, an increasing discontentment with the clergy's open alliance with the ruling elite (the kinship ties between local pastors and members of the governing elite became operative in the 1614 rebellion, as the clergy took sides with the representatives of the old system). In analyzing the fluctuating amounts of testamentary gifts made to the pastors and church institutions, Robbins convincingly demonstrates the growing alienation of the Calvinist clergymen. Trying to compensate for the lack of Consistory records, the author has recourse to until now largely neglected judicial evidence that seems to underline the weakness of the churchmen's authority (a fact likewise deplored by the contemporary pastor and diarist Merlin). However, Robbins should have taken into account that the cases brought before the tribunal are possibly not the most representative ones. In my mind, the loss of the weekly proceedings of the Consistory compel us to make more careful conclusions, especially as far as the relationship between secular and ecclesiastical institutions is concerned (in fact, Robbins' statements remain unclear and contradictory in this respect, see p. 238 n. 98 and p. 397).

One of the particularly appealing elements of Robbins' study is his thorough exploration of the bourgeois rebellion in 1614, a subject neglected by earlier historians who concentrated either on the Rochelais Reformation or on the spectacular siege of 1628. With his sociogenesis of the rebel captain Jean Tharay, Robbins presents to us the Rochelais specimen of the rebel leader Casaulx in Marseilles (unfortunately, the author neglects to compare the similar destinies of the two port towns, although he mentions elsewhere Wolfgang Kaiser's exhaustive study of sixteenth century Marseilles[1]). The rebellious group of disenfranchised wealthy merchants that gradually succeeded in undermining the old oligarchy was firmly intertwined through kinship ties. Their well established complementary links to middle and lower class Rochelais and the skillful instrumentalization of these vertical client relations (e.g. through the political strengthening of the militia companies), however, consolidated and justified the newcomers' position. Beginning their political activities in a shadow government, the rebels obtained within fourteen years two-thirds of the posts within the old town council, thus reforming the regime from within. In fact, the bourgeois' clever political tactics (gradually occupying key positions, replacing deceased councilmen) and the soft "embourgeoisement" of the ruling elite give a rare example of a successful urban rebellion in early modern France (see p. 351f). It was national politics, dominated by royal efforts to assert more control over formerly relatively independent towns, that brought the new regime down.

In the last part dealing with the enforcement of royal politics after the city's disastrous defeat in 1628, the author makes two relevant contributions. First, he underlines the continuity of the oligarchical structure of town government although with contrary religious affiliation (it was the Catholic group that was put in charge of daily town politics and not external royal magistrates or intendants). Second, he argues that the Counter-Reformation was not only promoted by the newly established religious orders, but likewise by the existing judicial institutions. Through the amusing example of Saturday street cleaning, Robbins illustrates the impact of tribunal decisions on confessional politics. Judicial evidence, mostly lacking in works on French urban confessionalization, appears as a vital source for the study of religious remodeling.

Robbins offers us a long-term study which intelligently concentrates on lesser known episodes of Rochelais history, putting them into the context of the great events that shaped early modern La Rochelle. In reconstructing the political infighting among the leading groups, Robbins shows how the struggle for the Protestant cause was checked by less idealistic interests, such as the efforts to maintain the city's franchises. The methods adopted in his historical analysis, especially the network studies that he carried through for three different political regimes, turned out to be fruitful for the understanding of the political and social transformations within the urban community. Last, but not least, despite a few disturbing repetitions (e.g. pp. 30f, 64f, 319f), the book is very pleasant to read and full of stimulating insights that a short review cannot adequately convey.

Note

[1]. Wolfgang Kaiser, *Marseille au temps des troubles 1559-1596: Morphologie sociale et luttes de factions*. Trad. de l'allemand par Florence Chaix. Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1991.

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Citation: Ingeborg Jostock. Review of Robbins, Kevin C., *City on the Ocean Sea: La Rochelle, 1530-1650: Urban Society, Religion, and Politics on the French Atlantic Frontier*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. February, 1999.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2753

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