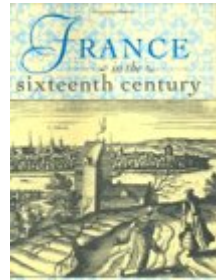


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frederic J. Baumgartner. *France in the Sixteenth Century*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. xvi + 352 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-15856-9; \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-09965-7.

Reviewed by Gerard F. Denault (Harvard University)  
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In *France in the Sixteenth Century*, Frederic J. Baumgartner provides a clear, readable narrative of the 130 years that he defines as the “long sixteenth century.” The writing is crisp, fast-paced, and informative, and the presentation is informed by the needs and interests of the classroom. Although he indicates in his Introduction that he has organized his book along the lines of corporative institutions and groups such as lawyers and artisanal guilds, Baumgartner refers primarily, in fact, to the traditional orders, or estates.

The history is divided into three main sections of six chapters; the Introduction adds a seventh chapter to the first section as the Epilogue adds a seventh to the last. Because Baumgartner believes that the personalities of the monarchs in sixteenth-century France were of tremendous importance, the initial chapter of each section traces the acts of individual kings and their governments. Although the influences of Anne de Beaujeu and Catherine de Medici are noted, this study concentrates on them much less than have previous histories.[1]

The first section deals with the years from 1484 to 1530, and can be characterized by the title of its first chapter, “The Monarchy: Ascendant.” The subsequent chapter titles provide a thumbnail sketch of their contents: “The Church: Unchallenged”; “The Nobility: Contented”; “The People: ‘The very hens are safe from violence!’”; “Justice: ‘The Most Worthy of Virtues’”; and “Culture and Thought: A Bursting Forth.” The reputations of monarchs whose chief role was to provide justice and thereby to maintain order were increased by peace and prosperity. Their reputations were also increased by the glorious pageant that was the French Renaissance.

The true “Glory of the French Renaissance” blossomed between 1530 and 1562: Francois Rabelais, Pierre

de Ronsard and the *Pleiade*, and the Loire *chateaux*. Baumgartner narrates a solid tale of cultural achievement including a nuanced updating of art history.[2] During these same years, however, France witnessed the birth of the problems that would dominate the remainder of the century. The continued war against Charles V led not only to defeat but to financial distress for the royal government. The result was a larger royal debt and increased taxes. Who would pay? As Baumgartner notes, recent analysis suggests that the tax-exempt nobles remained in a good financial position, but that they were anxious about their position and their ability to remain free of taxation. The clergy was threatened both by Protestantism and by the efforts of the nobles and the Third Estate at the end of these years to have the clergy sell some of its landholdings to solve the government’s financial difficulties. Inflation hit the artisans the hardest because of the strict control of their wages. Urban and rural unrest resumed. France’s population was greater than ever before, and there was not enough grain to feed the people. After Henry II’s fatal injury at the tournament celebrating peace in 1559, the quick succession of his three young sons to the throne led to a protracted struggle for position, power, and influence.

The third section presents the “short sixteenth century,” the one that inspired Baumgartner’s own dissertation.[3] Baumgartner describes France on March 1, 1562, as a country ready for anarchy. Francois de Guise’s slaughter of the Huguenots at their conventicle in Vassy was simply the spark that set France ablaze; another incident would have provoked the time of troubles if this had not occurred. Why? In the previous thirty years, the great court nobles had formed factions, as their position and power became linked to royal favor and royal favorites. Court factions became linked to religious fac-

tions. The Catholic clergy remained corrupt and left itself open to criticism. Financial burdens increased for the tax-paying Third Estate, as warfare continued to drain the treasury and continued to inspire financial expedients. Magistrates, tainted by heresy and venality, were less able to inspire belief in the equity of royal justice.

The chapter titles again reveal the main lines of Baumgartner's interpretation.[4] The chapter on culture and thought is subtitled "On to Classicism," and it summarizes the thrust of the presentation. The first five chapters—"The Monarchy: Order Out of Anarchy," "The Church Tempered and Strengthened," "The Nobility: A Return to Arms," "The People: Depression, Devastation, and Recovery," and "Justice: The Bulwark of Absolutism"—provide the itinerary. Baumgartner credits Henry IV with returning to the process of strengthening the monarchy after the interlude created by the sudden death of Henry II and the reigns of his three sons. Through the programs that Henry IV initiated between the peace of 1598 and his assassination in 1610, he effected "subtle enhancements of royal authority", which had precedents in the reigns of Francis I and Henry II.[5]

The Wars of Religion forced the Church to compete with the Huguenots for the minds and bodies of the French. The hierarchy organized itself through the Assemblies of the Clergy to resist raids on its wealth and authority and to gain royal favor through cooperation.[6] The resumption of warfare permitted nobles to take up their military profession. In fact, the new technology of firearms, by diminishing the usefulness of armor and permitting lighter horses, enabled poorer nobles, hitherto excluded from warfare by the high cost of armor, to return to the battlefield.[7] But the nobles continued to feel that their place in society was threatened. The people suffered disruption and inflation in the years between 1562 and 1614. Commerce was interrupted, prices rose, and the towns were not always supplied with wheat. Some French workers even emigrated to Spain in search of better conditions. In literature, Ronsard's lyric poetry was replaced with a utilitarian proto-scientific literature heralding the work of Rene Descartes and Blaise Pascal. The highly individualized products of Mannerist art and architecture were replaced by the more stylized Classical. The investigations of legal, historical, and social writers of the mid-century were replaced by Charles Loyseau's attempt to reintegrate, describe, and define the laws governing contemporary society.[8] Baumgartner concludes that the magistrates had become more committed and effective servants of the monarchy as a consequence of the Wars of Religion.

Has anything been lost through Baumgartner's perspective of 130 years? I believe that his treatment of the period 1562-1614 highlights a weakness in this vision. Although the royal claims of both Francis I and Henry IV are described as traditional, over fifty years of violence and argumentation separated the two reigns, the two rulers, and their publicists. During these years several alternative interpretations of the French polity, society, law, and history were presented. Even the argument for the traditional, hereditary monarchy was modified to criticize the person of the monarch and to justify the withdrawal of obedience. The sixteenth century witnessed the creation of the myth of the Carolingians supplanting the *rois faineants* (their do-nothing, idle Merovingian predecessors), the myth of the oath of the Aragonese, and references to French kings who undermined their own rule by failing to render justice.[9]

How anomalous was the "short sixteenth century" in the history of the development of the Ancien Regime? What contributions did these fifty years make to French history? Did resistance theory disappear from French political thought entirely between 1596 and 1648? Were there any elements that persisted? We know that political Machiavellism, another strain of thought during these fifty years, had an interesting subsequent history.[10] Baumgartner certainly does not ignore these questions, but he does devote less attention to them than would many other *seiziemistes*.

The book contains a few minor blemishes. The copyediting of the book is deficient. Among several errors, the following stand out: on p. 126, the reader is startled to read that Henry II, having been injured in a tournament on June 30, 1559, died on July 10, 1557; something is missing on p. 233 before the word "crues; the term *haute-bourgeois* (p. 27) joins a feminine adjective to a masculine noun.

I also have minor criticisms on two substantive issues. First, Baumgartner investigates the process of recording customs with great clarity (pp. 84-85), and he notes that the redacted customs remained in effect as recorded until the French Revolution. He fails to mention that the customs of some areas were collected and recorded several times—hence changed. Similarly, although his discussion of the impact of Roman Law in France is useful, any brief discussion of this complex topic can be misleading. Although Roman law was studied in French universities, for example, French legists generally held that the authority of Roman law in France was itself that of customary law. Where the local custom was deficient, the text of the

written Roman law could be invoked to help interpret it. The extent to which Roman law was accepted in filling out local custom varied considerably from one locality to another. Although it is a meaningful generalization to speak of *pays du droit écrit* and *pays du droit coutumier*, describing France divided east to west into areas of *droit coutumier* and *droit écrit* fosters expectations of a uniformity that did not exist. In addition to geography, the history of a locality and the intellectual background of the royal agents who collected the local custom played an important role in defining the role assigned to Roman law in the local custom.[11]

Despite these reservations, I must reiterate that Baumgartner has provided an extremely clear, readable text for middle-level courses that introduce sixteenth-century France. Not only is it the only text in print devoted solely to this period of French history, but it is a very serviceable one. Baumgartner's honesty leads him to question his own interpretations and to provide guidance on opposing views through his bibliographic references. Although the conclusion that "The society and government that would be destroyed by the French Revolution was already mostly in place in 1614" (p. 314) remains arguable, the study's method and insight open a wide vista to student inquiry.

What is needed is a more unified interpretation of sixteenth-century France. Generally, studies of specific events and personalities have been situated in either a "short sixteenth century" dominated by the Wars of Religion or a "long sixteenth century" tracing the building of the "New," administrative, or judicial monarchy. Sixteenth-century France holds a specific, definable location in the web of history; historians should take greater pains to acknowledge and identify this location in both their research and teaching. Although Baumgartner makes progress in achieving this goal, his initial caution that he is dealing with the "long sixteenth century" forewarns the reader that he has not produced a completely integrated narrative.

#### Notes

[1]. The emphasis put on Catherine's role by J. E. Neale, *The Age of Catherine de Medici* (New York, 1962; 1943) and Jean Orieux, *Catherine de Medecis* (Paris, 1986) is not present in Baumgartner's work. Anne de Beaujeu's role is emphasized in Paul Pelicier, *Essai sur le gouvernement de la dame de Beaujeu, 1483-1491* (Chartres, 1882).

[2]. On architecture, Baumgartner replaces the traditional succession of Renaissance, Mannerist, Baroque,

and Classical styles with the newer interpretation that in France the impact of Renaissance art and architecture was always somewhat different. The persistence of Gothic elements symbolized not backwardness but the merging of Renaissance and Gothic in the new Mannerist style, the precursor to the French Classical style. The studies he cites nuance the more traditional interpretations such as Wylie Sypher, *Four Stages in Renaissance Style* (Garden City, 1955).

[3]. Frederic J. Baumgartner, *Radical Reactionaries: The Political Thought of the French Catholic League* (Geneva, 1976).

[4]. Baumgartner's interpretation is not new in its basic elements. Older texts were directed by a similar vision; for example, see: Donald Stone, Jr. *France in the Sixteenth Century, A Medieval Society Transformed* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969) or Albert Guerard, *France in the Classical Age: The Life and Death of an Ideal* (New York, 1928). Baumgartner uses recent scholarship to modify and to improve this approach.

[5]. In *L'Assassinat d'Henri IV* (Paris, 1964), Roland Mousnier notes that by 1610, Henry's policies had stimulated opposition among many political factions. Henry's government had not solved the problems facing France. But the assassination itself created the myth of Henry IV, and the myth strengthened the religion of kingship.

[6]. See Frederic J. Baumgartner, *Change and Continuity in the French Episcopate: The Bishops and the Wars of Religion, 1547-1610* (Durham, N.C., 1986).

[7]. For a further elaboration, see Frederic J. Baumgartner, *From Spear to Flintlock: A History of War in Europe and the Middle East to the French Revolution* (New York, 1991).

[8]. Whether one interprets Loyseau to have been a sixteenth-century or a seventeenth-century theorist, it is clear that his three treatises were meant to define society around 1600. Baumgartner, following Roland Mousnier and Boris Porchnev, sees this definition as a description; I have argued that it is prescriptive (Gerard F. Denault, "The Legitimation of the of the Parlement of Paris and the Estates General of France, 1560-1614" [Ph.D. diss.: Washington University, 1975], pp. 555-76).

[9]. Edward Peters, "Roi Faineant: The Origins of an Historian's Commonplace," *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance*, 30 (1968): 537-47. And there is the much-told tale of the old woman who confronts the king (or Roman emperor) by the wayside asking for justice. On

being refused she responds, “Ne soit donc roi!” See also Ralph Giesey, *If Not, Not: The Oath of the Aragonese and the Legendary Laws of Sobrarbe* (Princeton, N.J., 1968).

[10]. Etienne Thuau, *Raison d'état et pensée politique à l'époque de Richelieu* (Paris, 1966).

[11]. See John Philip Dawson, *A History of Lay Judges* (Cambridge, 1960); John Philip Dawson, *Oracles of the Law* (Ann Arbor, 1969); Rene Filhol, *le Premier president Christofle de Thou et la reformation des coutumes* (Paris, 1937).

Author's Response:

Frederic Baumgartner comments (6 December 1996)

Making available book reviews on-line is one of the most useful services provided by H-France, in part for drastically reducing the amount of time before the review appears, but also for allowing the author of the book to respond immediately after the review. There have been times in the past when I would have liked to have responded to a review of my work, but the format of the journal did not allow it.

Concerning Professor Denault's review of my history of sixteenth-century France, however, there is little in his fair and constructive review on which I feel a need to make any comment. I do feel I made it clear in the introduction that I organized the book around the theme of “the king in his Estate,” not the corporations, but it is true that the First and Second Estates were co-extensive

with corporate bodies—the clergy and the noblesse. The Third, however, was a collage of corporate bodies, such as the urban communes.

Professor Denault raises the broader issue of how best to deal with the “the short sixteenth century,” the era of the wars of religion and their aftermath. Any effort to describe a period of such enormous dislocation as the religious wars will face a serious problem. To concentrate on that era runs the risk of suggesting that France had undergone enormous change; to take the longer view risks under-emphasizing the extent of the social and political anarchy and the radicalness of the ideas which mark the religious wars. I certainly would not suggest that there was a complete return to normalcy after 1594, but Henry IV deserves proper recognition, if not necessarily credit, for restoring France to stability with relatively little change in its social and political structures. Certainly, the civil wars made a permanent impact on France, but I see there being essential continuity between the pre- and post-war eras. I wish to thank Professor Denault for a thoughtful review, and I hope that many of those who read it will heed his advice to use the book for French history courses.

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