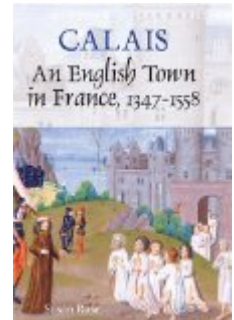


Susan Rose. *Calais: An English Town in France, 1347-1558.* Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008. 187 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84383-401-4.



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The seaport town of Calais was of huge strategic and financial significance to England in the Middle Ages and beyond, yet it has not received the attention it deserves. Susan Rose's book—the first full-length examination of Calais under English governance—explores both the political and military importance of the town, and its role as the center of the wool trade, a prime export product of medieval England. Rose uses such chronicle sources as the Cely and the Johnson collections of contemporary letters and papers, and a few other (scarce) sources to compose a new narrative of the major events in the town's history, such as its capture by the English king Edward III, the Burgundian siege of 1436, and its loss to the French in 1558. More thematic chapters survey the town's economic function, the significance of its merchants, the garrison's organization, and Calais's role in English politics in the fifteenth century. Especially the city's wool trade merits attention, because its financial and economic significance for the English Crown was crucial for its international power in the Middle Ages. Because no English

wool could be legally sold to continental merchants other than in Calais, this city was of vital importance for the English economy—and for the Flemish economy, which was the main customer for English wool in the later Middle Ages. Moreover, since those merchants could only buy wool with precious metal coins, the international gateway of Calais provided the English monarchy with the bullion needed for minting its money.

Rose, therefore, rightly argues that it was not its military function that made Calais an important English town in France. She claims that there is "room to doubt whether the town was ever of much use as a point of entry to France for English armies" (p. 173). The town was, however, invaluable as a diplomatic "listening post," with opportunities for gathering information from merchants and travelers. Its economic significance, of course, made the city important to maintain as an English base on the continent. Although the author does not provide proof for the following argument, it is, nevertheless, worth investigating.

She claims that it was as much due to the general changes in trading conditions and practices in sixteenth-century Europe that Calais became less important for the English Crown. Before the export trade in raw wool declined to negligible proportions, individual merchants, the Crown, and ultimately the English realm as a whole had benefited from the trade and prosperity it brought. In the sixteenth century, however, Calais's economy severely suffered from the decline of the Flemish cloth industry. Because English wool was no longer the main raw material for the production of Flemish cloth, and other trading centers (for example, Antwerp and Amsterdam) became economically more important than the Flemish cities in the course of the sixteenth century, Calais lost its status in the supply of raw materials for North-Western Europe. The English conquest of Calais in 1347 and its French occupation in 1558 were military facts, but the main reasons for Calais's importance for the English Crown in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and its downfall afterward, were economic.

Although Rose is aware of the economic and financial importance of Calais, she, nevertheless, underestimates the economic factor explaining why Calais remained in English hands for more than two centuries. One of the major attacks on the English governance of Calais, the Burgundian siege of 1436, failed for economic reasons. The failure to occupy Calais was not due to the military incompetence of the Flemish troops, which were hired by the Burgundian duke, as the author suggests. Rose is right when she argues that the Burgundian dukes had a chronic shortage of money and that their forces were anything but united. But she overlooks the main reason for the military failure of Philip the Good. Because she did not consult several publications about the political history of the so-called Members of Flanders (Bruges, Ghent, and Ypres) in 1436, Rose appears unaware of the fact that these members did not support the Burgundian duke in his war against

the English town in France.[1] The cities had reluctantly agreed with the siege in the beginning of Philip the Good's animosities vis-à-vis the English in 1436. The urban economy of the county of Flanders was highly dependent on the supply of English wool, and consequently the Flemish cities were indirect allies of the English king, as is proven by the political support they had given Edward III when he conquered Calais in 1347. In 1435, the Members of Flanders had agreed with Philip the Good to conclude a peace treaty with France, but they did not accept Philip's initiative to attack the port of Calais. The Flemish cities refused the ducal demand to finance his war out of economic interests; only in a second phase of the conflict did they promise to send troops to Calais. It was not their military incompetence that explains the Flemish inability to invade the city, nor their "cowardice," as a contemporary song claims. The troops simply left the siege in the summer of 1436, because the Flemish captains refused to fight against the economic allies of their mother cities. Moreover, when entering Bruges again, the urban militias started a revolt in their home town against the economic and military policies of Philip the Good, a revolt that would last two years. The story of the siege of 1436, therefore, demonstrates more effectively than Rose's book that the economy of Calais was of crucial importance for that city's remaining English in the Middle Ages.

In spite of this shortcoming, Rose's book will be of interest to urban historians, especially those who study how political relations give a new insight into the origins of an English town in France. Rose shows the interconnectedness of politics, business, trade, and money, and she illustrates how together these created an English town in France. Only by untangling the web of factors that created Calais do we understand its downfall.

Note

[1]. Jan Dumolyn, *De Brugse opstand, 1436-38* (Kortrijk-Heule: UGA, 1997); and Victor Fris, "Documents gantois concernant la levée du siège de Calais en 1436," in *Mélanges Paul Fredericq* (Brussels, 1904), 245-258.

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