

FRENCH NOBLES AND URBAN CLIENTELES IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY LANGUEDOC

by

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During the French Wars of Religion of 1562-1629, many southern French nobles formed *urban clientele*s through their municipal offices and urban connections. Unlike nobles in northern France, nobles in Languedoc and Guyenne often had urban dwellings and occupied key offices in the municipal government. These elites with urban connections did not represent merely the newly ennobled families, but many of the highest-ranking warrior noble families in southern France. The Montmorency family, for example, had urban holdings in Pézenas and many other warrior nobles had an urban presence in key cities such as Toulouse, Montauban, Montpellier, and Nîmes, and Privas. Urban clienteles depended on nobles' residence in or near cities, and also on their close involvement in urban culture and religious politics. This paper aims to analyze the complex urban networks of French nobles in the province of Languedoc during the latter stages of the French Wars of Religion, a key transitional period during which urban elites interacted in new ways as they participated in religious and civil violence. I want to suggest that early modern French urban studies may have underestimated the significance of noble involvement in urban politics and concentrated too much on non-noble judicial and municipal elites.

Nobles in Languedoc and Guyenne purchased urban space and built *hôtels*, or townhouses, to display their importance within towns and cities. Nobles competed to build residences on prestigious sites within urban areas, and many remodeled their residences or built entirely new *hôtels* in the early seventeenth century. When urban space was limited or overly expensive, nobles built *châteaux* in the *faubourgs* and periphery of cities to act as semi-urban residences. Architectural treatises increasingly fed nobles ideas and advice about how to use their status wealth in building projects.¹ Such building projects often required nobles to develop urban clienteles and close relations with municipal officers. For example, a noble building a *hôtel* in the city of Montauban engaged in negotiations regarding the extension of his home along the city walls.²

Nobles' *hôtels* and urban *châteaux* were built to impress, with elaborate balconies and stairways built around open courtyards. Festivities, concerts, plays, and ceremonies could all be held in the *hôtels* to assert and show off the status wealth of their noble owners. Early modern French nobles invested in lavish furnishings for their *hôtels* and urban *châteaux* as ways of displaying their status wealth to urban communities. Historians have long recognized the importance of lavish spending for early modern noble families, and French nobles spent vast sums on clothing, furnishings, art, and other luxuries for themselves and their households.³ While

¹ For example, Pierre Le Muet's architectural treatise. Roche, *A History of Everyday Things*, 99-100.

² "Verbal pour le sieur baron de Meauzac pour prendre jour sur la muraille de la ville ce que les consuls et syndics luy accordent." AC Montauban, 3 EE 2, liasse 76, n° 53.

³ Cite literature on noble households....[Finish Note! Discuss Crouzet, Michel, LeRoux, and LePerson....]

nobles' displays of wealth have often been seen as frivolous extravagances, recent work stresses the importance of conspicuous consumption as a vital means of establishing and securing nobles' status and self-identities. Nobles defined themselves partially through their ability to 'live nobly', that is, to be able to afford a luxurious lifestyle and a standard of living befitting a French noble on the basis of peers' judgments. The extravagant displays of wealth so popular with early modern nobles established status wealth, but also represented long-term investments that could later be sold when noble families needed to raise cash or when the prices of the increasingly sought after land in cramped urban areas rose. Southern French nobles' homes were often adorned with ornate furniture, embroidered tapestries, paintings, and art objects.⁴ One Languedoc noble family was able to afford a number of Flemish tapestries, as well as several tapestries from Bergamo and the Ottoman Empire.⁵ The opulence and grandeur of nobles' belongings and furnishings served to display their status wealth to all visitors.

Hôtels' defensive roles allowed nobles to further their religious-political aims during civil conflicts. Hôtels could easily act as fortifications since they were usually constructed with heavy gateways which opened into rectangular dwellings surrounding central courtyards. Nobles could provide protection to urban clients by using their hôtels as places of refuge during civil conflicts within the town. Nobles invested in huge stockpiles of arms and ammunition to create armories in their hôtels and châteaux. The size of these armories went well beyond the needs of nobles' households, amounting to magazines that could be used to raise troops if needed. Warrior nobles also invested large sums in fortifying châteaux and improving defenses, as a means of providing protection and of improving their status within their local areas. Many patrons found clients and recruited troops in urban settings. The large number of Protestant infantry commanders from the city of Nîmes, as Steven Mark Lowenstein has noted, reveals how tight-knit urban connections could be.⁶

Warrior nobles' urban properties also offered warrior nobles ways of enhancing their prestige and status through their urban clienteles. Nobles surrounded themselves with large retinues of followers as shows of status wealth and of power. Nobles outfitted large households with huge numbers of servants and bodyguards which required investing in clothing, armor, arms, equipment, supplies, and horses for their followers. Warrior nobles competed to have the largest and most impressive households in their regions. Household servants and bodyguards sometimes wore liveries, often consisting of identical doublets, designed to distinguish their noble patriarch and confirm his status.⁷ All of this spending on households went well beyond conspicuous consumption, though. Bodyguards and noble retainers also

⁴ For a general discussion of furniture and furnishings, see Jardine, *Worldly Goods*, prologue, chapter 1.

⁵ An altar occupied a key place in a Catholic noble family's home, and religious art including crosses, crucifixes, and images of the Virgin Mary were prominent. Protestant nobles viewed such religious art objects as idols and avoided having them in their homes. The Huguenots tended to have more sober decoration in their châteaux and hôtels. AD Aude, 2 E 17, f° 12.

⁶ Lowenstein, "Resistance to Absolutism: Huguenot Organization in Languedoc, 1621-1622," 78-78a.

⁷ Elements of spending on households also amounted to economic investment, though. For example, nobles actively engaged in the buying and selling of expensive horses, often reaping huge profits from the horse trade. Eurich, *The Economics of Power*, 173-174. On horse collecting and trading, see Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 74-76, 309-313.

provided nobles with personal protection and a means to intimidate others, especially in urban contexts.

Warrior nobles extended their influence in urban political culture through municipal officeholding. Nobles whose families had occupied consular office often had extensive urban clienteles. While consuls could certainly have administrative clienteles, the temporary and provisional nature of consular authority tended to prevent the development of significant consular administration. The rotating nature of the *consulat*, with most consul posts having a duration of only one year, made official administrative connections difficult for nobles to cultivate as consuls. Since civic bureaucracy was fairly limited and consuls performed duties with few official subordinates, warrior nobles elected as consuls exercised power through their urban clienteles instead of relying on administrative connections. Consular office acted as an important sign of prominence for a warrior noble with an urban clientele, giving his clients enhanced status during his term. Local warrior noble families and other noble elites often vied for control of the *consulat* in elections. Warrior nobles frequently held consul posts, especially in the region of Bas Languedoc, and those who held, or ran for, consular office could be expected to have substantial urban clienteles. In some towns, elections were tightly controlled by the town governors or by a group of nobles acting as an oligarchy within the town.

During the Wars of Religion, the composition of the *consulat* was often vital in determining the religious fate of a town. Consuls not only ran civic government and administration, but made religious policies, determined loyalties, and controlled access during civil conflicts. Religious conflict during the Wars of Religion led to increased competition over consul offices between urban clienteles. Many towns in Languedoc had a mixed *consulat*, with *consuls* of both Catholic and Protestant faiths. Nobles of each confession tried to strengthen their clienteles and win control of the *consulat* by gaining more consul posts. La Cassagne, first consul of Nîmes in 1629, had a company of chevaux-légers and a large urban following. When he was imprisoned by Catholic forces, La Cassagne remained confident in his position and he “resisted the threats and promises of the court with much magnanimity.” But the duc de Rohan feared that La Cassagne’s urban clientele would allow him to act independently: “for, being the first consul of Nîmes and having credit there, he hoped, by this means, to make a powerful party there and to detach it from the reformed.”⁸ As in Nîmes, urban clienteles participated in localized religious struggles throughout southwestern France.

Sénéchaux, baillis, and town governors also developed significant urban clienteles. The administrative demands of governing towns provided governors with connections to consuls, militia commanders, and elite families within the towns. Henri de Fain, baron de Péraut was governor of the town and château of Beaucaire and developed an urban clientele there.⁹ Other governors were only able to maintain administrative or military clienteles in an urban setting, because of a lack of local urban connections. Friction and mutual hostilities often divided governors of towns from other urban nobles, preventing them from producing effective urban clienteles.

A number of powerful warrior nobles lived in or near Toulouse, a city known as *la ville rose* for its many buildings constructed with a combination of rose-colored brick, white mortar, and white stone. Rose-colored *hôtels*, or townhouses, served as residences for the warrior noble families such as the Montlucs and for other urban

⁸ Rohan, *Mémoires du duc de Rohan*, 406-407.

⁹ AD Hérault, B 22615.

elites who lived in the city. Toulouse was the largest city in Haut Languedoc in the early seventeenth century with a population of about 40,000, making it one of the largest cities in all of France in the early modern period. The city developed a reputation as a cosmopolitan city with a vibrant urban culture, and the literary and theatrical activities of Toulousins attracted warrior nobles such as the prince de Condé, duc de Montmorency, duc de Ventadour, and their followers for extended stays.¹⁰ Toulouse also had a deserved reputation as a center of militant Catholicism, and the vast majority of prominent nobles in the Toulouse region seem to have been staunchly Catholic. Toulousins had persecuted, attacked, expelled, and massacred Calvinists throughout the early French Wars of Religion. The city later acted as a base for Counter-Reformation Catholicism through its numerous lay confraternities and its support for the Catholic League. The influential Catholic Nogaret de La Valette family controlled the archbishopric of Toulouse in the 1610s and 1620s and established a significant presence in the city.

The clientele of Jean de La Valette, baron de Cornusson provides an interesting example of a Catholic urban clientele in the city of Toulouse. The La Valette family had regional influence and was based at a village just northeast of Toulouse. Jean de La Valette was sénéchal of Toulouse, an administrative position from which he could gain an urban following. As sénéchal, La Valette was able to surround himself with prominent local nobles, including counselors to the sénéchal of Toulouse, who seem to have usually been significant nobles who contributed to the *ban et arrière-ban* tax. Because Toulouse was a large city with many powerful nobles and administrative bodies, including the parlement of Toulouse, the baron de Cornusson was forced to compete for local prominence.¹¹ The baron got an opportunity to expand his urban clientele when he was charged with raising a company of gendarmes and an infantry regiment for the 1621 siege of Montauban. He assembled local nobles to take up positions as captains in his regiment and they recruited in the city. La Valette's regiment served under the duc d'Angoulême in Haut Languedoc, then under the eyes of the king at Montauban. After the failure of the siege, Cornusson's regiment was demobilized, but his urban connections continued to develop.¹² La Valette commanded a gendarme company during much of the 1620s, and one of his subordinate officers in 1624 was from the du Pins family in Toulouse. The baron again raised a cavalry company in 1627 to serve with the duc de Ventadour in 1627, his company of 120 was much larger than his gendarme company had been in 1621.¹³ When Huguenots began to raise armies in Languedoc in 1629, Richelieu drew up a plan to oppose them. The list of nobles who could quickly raise troops within Languedoc included Cornusson.¹⁴ Cornusson's Toulousain clients could evidently be counted on to support him.

¹⁰ Robert A. Schneider, *Public Life in Toulouse, 1463-1789: From Municipal Republic to Cosmopolitan City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), chapter 1, 136-155.

¹¹ AM Toulouse, EE 5. "Rolle des principales & plus ancieñes maisons de Languedoc donc J'ay peu avoir memoire." BNF, Mss. fr. 20235, f° 300-310.

¹² AD Haute-Garonne, C 708. Deliberations of the Estates of Languedoc held at Toulouse in 1621. AD Hérault, C 7059, f° 94. AD Haute-Garonne, B 413, f° 230. Charles de Valois, duc d'Angoulême to Louis XIII, 4 September 1621. BNF, Clairambault 378, f° 37-38. "Tableau du siege de Montauban 1622. Dedic a Messieurs de lassemblee generale de La Rochelle." Deliberations of the Estates of Languedoc held at Béziers, 29 October 1621. AD Hérault, C 7059, f° 70-72.

¹³ AD Tarn, C 890. BNF, Languedoc-Bénédictins 107, f° 53-60.

¹⁴ Richelieu to Marie de Médicis. Suze, 29 April 1629. In Avenel, *Lettres, instructions diplomatiques et papiers d'état du cardinal de Richelieu. Volume III: 1628-1630* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1858), 291-294.

The powerful prince de Condé also developed an urban clientele in Toulouse. Condé frequently visited Toulouse during the civil wars of the 1620s, using the town as a base of operations. The baron de Cornusson had to learn to deal with Condé's intermittent presence in Toulouse and his growing influence. Condé attended a session of the parlement of Toulouse in January 1628 to ensure that his directives were implemented.¹⁵ The prince worked closely with the first president of the parlement of Toulouse during the 1628 campaign, a sign of his growing urban clientele. Condé's close ties to the Toulousain urban elites may have prompted him to issue a directive forbidding the lodging of troops in Toulouse in 1629, exempting the Toulouse nobles from paying for costly maintenance and lodging of soldiers.¹⁶ Catholic nobles' urban clienteles in Toulouse reinforced Toulouse's reputation as a Catholic bastion and promoted Counterreformation efforts in the city's hinterland.

Montpellier, an inland hilltop city about halfway up Languedoc's Mediterranean coast, offers a glimpse into urban clienteles in a mixed-religious community that increasingly became Catholicized after a siege of the city in 1622. A town of perhaps 30,000, Montpellier was one of the few major cities of the kingdom with a heavily mixed population of Protestants and Catholics. The city was known for its medical faculty at the University of Montpellier and its white stone hôtels.¹⁷ Here, the Montlaurs and Roquefeuil played a major role in the city's urban culture. The Cailla de Saint-Bonnet family similarly involved themselves in Montpellier from their nearby landholdings, including Restinclières. Other warrior nobles resided in and around the small towns and villages of Assas, Lunel, Mauguio, and Vauvert which lay east of Montpellier. Catholic noble La Croix de Castries became first consul in Montpellier as part of attempt to establish Catholic control over the town after the peace of Montpellier in 1622.¹⁸ Catholic nobles like La Croix de Castries acted to exploit Catholic military victories by expanding their urban clienteles. A royal decree of 1631 reinforced this tendency by imposing a requirement that the first consul must always be Catholic, weakening Protestant warrior nobles' abilities to form effective urban clienteles.¹⁹

In contrast, Montauban, a key Calvinist center in southwestern France, managed to remain predominantly Protestant, and municipal officials maintained close relations with Huguenot nobles throughout the religious wars. Following the Edict of Nantes of 1598, Catholic nobles attempted to assist the Catholic population in and around Montauban and to reestablish Catholic religious practice in the city, with some limited successes.²⁰ A long siege of the city by a Catholic army in 1621 attracted regional Protestant nobles and prominent *grands* such as the duc de Rohan. Many of these nobles remained closely involved in Montauban's urban affairs because Catholic troops continued to blockade the city and threaten siege during the successive religious conflicts in the 1620s. When Montauban finally submitted after the Peace of

¹⁵ *Arrest de la cour de parlement contre les rebelles* (Toulouse: Raymond Colomiez, 1628). AD Tarn, C 207.

¹⁶ Gilles Le Masuyer to Richelieu. Toulouse, 22 April 1628. Grillon, *Papiers d'état de Richelieu*, 3: 214-215. Ordonnance du prince de Condé. Villemur, 5 July 1629. AM Toulouse, A 22, f° 153.

¹⁷ For a detailed account of early modern Montpellier, see Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *The Beggar and the Professor: A Sixteenth-Century Family Saga*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Jean Baumel, *Montpellier au cours des XVI^e et XVII^e siècles. Les guerres de religion (1510-1685)* (Montpellier: Éditions Causse, 1976), 207-208.

¹⁹ *HGL*, 11: 1049. Sauzet, *Contre-réforme et réforme catholique en Bas-Languedoc: Le diocèse de Nîmes au XVII^e siècle*, 275-276.

²⁰ AC Montauban, 19 GG 1.

Alès of 1629, an increasing Catholic noble presence began to modify city, but incompletely.²¹

Another Huguenot city in Languedoc experienced a much more drastic and sudden transformation. Privas, a small city nestled in foothills of the Cévennes mountains, had a predominantly Protestant population throughout most of the religious wars, and close connections with regional Protestant nobles. There are some indications of occasional tensions between Privas residents and their governor, René de La Tour Gouvernet, in the early seventeenth century. However, it was on La Tour Gouvernet's death that Privas's Huguenot status became threatened by the possibility of the establishment of a Catholic urban clientele there under the new governor, Claude d'Hautefort, seigneur de Lestrangle. Religious politics exploded in civil warfare around Privas that lasted throughout the 1620s and culminated in a Catholic siege of the city in 1629 that left the urban center a burned, nearly deserted shell.²²

In conclusion, the experiences of southern French urban communities during the latter stages of the French Wars of Religion show the dynamics of nobles' urban clientele networks and their importance in early modern political culture. Noble and non-noble civic elites conducted politics and promoted their religious programs through powerful nobles' urban clienteles. Hôtels and urban châteaux provided vital sites for religious-political activity in urban spaces during the French Wars of Religion. These brief examples hint at a much broader significance of the roles nobles played in early modern urbanization and state development, which are only now beginning to be appreciated.

²¹ The construction or renovation of the bishop of Montauban's residence and Catholic nobles' hôtels offer some indication of the slowly growing Catholic presence in the city.

²² AD Ardèche. [Finish note.]