

Walsby, Malcolm, *The Counts of Laval: Culture, Patronage and Religion in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century France*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007; hardback; pp. xi, 220; 12 b/w illustrations; R.R.P. £55.00; ISBN 9780754658115.

In *The Counts of Laval: Culture, Patronage and Religion in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century France*, Malcolm Walsby offers an impressive account of the rise of the influential Breton house of Laval in later medieval and Renaissance France. Through the lens of Laval patronage and clientage, Walsby ambitiously seeks to explore ‘the whole of the [family’s] affinity’ (p. 3) in order to understand the scope and nature of the Lavals’ power within Brittany and at the royal court. One of a growing number of case-studies focussed on an individual house, *The Counts of Laval* engages with the larger historical questions surrounding the changing socio-political relationships

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enjoyed by the nobility throughout this period. It also considers how noble families grappled with such challenges as demographic attrition, Protestantism, and war. Walsby's predominantly chronological exposition draws on a rich array of archival material, in both print and manuscript format, to argue that the nature of relations between the Laval family and their affinity was remarkably consistent across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Walsby presents his arguments across five chapters. Chapter 1 traces the pre-history of the baronial Laval family before exploring how they acquired socio-political influence over the course of the fifteenth century. Having cautiously balanced support for the French king with regional obligations towards the dukes of Brittany in the early 1400s, the Laval barony was elevated to comital status by the king in 1429. As individual members acquired important administrative and military positions at both royal and ducal courts, a series of judicious marriages enhanced the Laval family's territorial possessions. The author clearly shows how each of these phenomena contributed to the widening of the Laval sphere of influence as they developed a network of ties with individuals and families within Brittany and beyond.

Prior to analysing the composition and structure of the Laval affinity itself, Chapter 2 clarifies the complicated issue of terminology. In reviewing debates surrounding the definition and application of phrases such as 'patronage' and 'clientage', Walsby emphasizes the horizontal and vertical (both ascending and descending) nature of relations implied in the latter term. To an extent, some of this discussion might usefully have preceded or been integrated into Chapter 1, where these key terms are deployed without explanation.

Chapter 2 goes on to outline the author's investigative method before examining the different elements of the Laval affinity. Informing the chapter is an extensive prosopographical database comprising the details of 1200 people identified by Walsby as 'part of the affinity of the counts de Laval' (p. 47). Drawing on this database, the author illustrates the multilayered and intersecting relationships between the individuals and groups comprising the affinity. Members ranged from princes and noble relations by marriage, to court and territorial administrators, household officials, and vassals.

The second chapter paints a clear picture of the myriad ways in which influence could be exerted in various circles to the mutual advantage of the Laval counts and their clientage. However, it also raises some problems for the author. First, Walsby acknowledges that his identification of members of the Laval affinity depends on the presence of names in official documents,

thereby excluding those people whose ties with the Laval were cultivated orally, in private, or informally (p. 49). He is thus unable to consider 'the whole of the affinity' as stated in the Introduction. Second, we are not given details as to how individuals were identified as affinity members prior to their names entering the database, aside from their apparent links with the Laval counts. Further, given the author's recognition of the important place of the extended Laval family among the affinity, the role of the affinities of the counts' brothers and close female relations in advancing comital interests is presumably pertinent to the wider discussion. In particular, this reviewer would have been interested in extended analysis of the networks that developed around important female heads of the family, such as Anne de Laval and Guyonne, whose clientage is only briefly touched on.

Chapters 3 and 4 advance the analysis of the Laval and their affinity into the sixteenth century. Walsby's third chapter characterizes the early mid-sixteenth century as the apogee of Laval power, as suggested by the counts' consistent occupation of prestigious administrative, diplomatic, and military positions, and their accretion of land. Challenges to Laval authority in the shape of divided leadership and minority rule, Protestantism, and war are the focus of discussion in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 contextualizes the position of the Laval explored in the previous sections by comparing and contrasting their activities with those of their nearest Breton rivals, the house of Rohan.

The text is supported by a series of illustrations and genealogical tables, the value of which might have been enhanced had they been explicitly integrated into Walsby's analysis. Although various typographical errors and stylistic infelicities were identified (e.g. pp. 25, 26, n. 51, 58, 61, 76, 116, 133, 164, 193-4), these did not distract overly from one's reading of the narrative. Whether the result of citation style or typographical error, this reviewer did find some of the footnotes confusing (e.g. p. 8, n. 23). Perhaps a note on the construction of the index may also have been useful, as the omission of the counts from Guy XIV onwards (including Guyonne) seems unusual.

In sum, *The Counts of Laval* offers much of interest to historians of the nobility and their power bases in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Walsby provides a valuable case-study to accompany the extensive theoretical literature on patronage in this period. Moreover, by demonstrating the continuity in the nature of the relationships between the Laval and their affinity, the author

successfully challenges notions that the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries witnessed an evolution from 'medieval' to 'early modern' modes of socio-political relations among the nobility.

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