
Review by Brian Sandberg, Northern Illinois University.

Over the past decade, a new history of early modern nobles has emerged. Previous scholarship on European elites in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had relied heavily on the sociological theories of Norbert Elias and Max Weber to analyze nobles' patron-client ties, modes of sociability, and roles in state development.[1] During the 1980s and 1990s, historians such as Arlette Jouanna, Jean-Marie Constant, Ellery Schalk, Jonathan Dewald, Sharon Kettering, William Beik, Robert Harding, Mack P. Holt, James Collins, and Kristin Neuschel forged social and cultural interpretations of early modern French nobles that destroyed older caricatures of the frivolous royal court and models of the “nobility in crisis.”[2] Building on this groundbreaking work, a new wave of historians of nobility have now begun to explore French archives with new anthropological and cultural methods to consider dynasticism[3], political culture[4], and noble violence.[5]

Matthew Vester’s recent monograph, *Renaissance Dynasticism and Apanage Politics: Jacques de Savoie-Nemours, 1531-1585,* offers a biographical study of Jacques de Savoie, duc de Nemours (1531-1585), a cadet of the ruling Savoie dynasty who served as a military leader and courtier in France during the Habsburg-Valois Wars and the French Wars of Religion. As a young man, Jacques de Savoie served in the armies of Henri II, fighting in Italy and the Netherlands in the 1550s. He later became a powerful Catholic leader during the early religious wars of the 1560s and 1570s, but ultimately abandoned Henri III’s court in 1576 and returned to Savoie. The career of Jacques de Savoie presents an opportunity to examine noble culture and politics across France, Savoie, and northern Italy. *Renaissance Dynasticism and Apanage Politics* is a translation of the original French edition of the book, entitled *Jacques de Savoie-Nemours: L’Apanage du Genevois au cœur de la puissance dynastique savoyarde au XVIe siècle,* reflecting the transnational interest in this subject.[6]

The career of the duc de Nemours raises intriguing questions about noble identities and Renaissance individualism. Vester comments that “one is initially tempted to view Jacques as a poster child for successful ‘Renaissance self-fashioning’” (p. 3). The book might have addressed the serious criticisms of Stephen Greenblatt’s concept of “self-fashioning” as constructed, as well as the recent attempts to move beyond the opposition between Jacob Burckhardt’s individualism and Greenblatt’s “self-fashioning” in analyzing early modern identities.[7]

Vester’s approach instead mines the manuscripts of the Archivio di Stato di Torino, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and several Archives départementales to construct a detailed portrait of Jacques de Savoie and his princely *apanage* of the Genevois. Vester defines *apanages* as “parcels of the dynastic patrimony that were set aside to provide the household expenses of younger sons of the ruler, and were generally inherited by the eldest son of the apanagiste until the direct line ended. Then they reverted to the ruling branch of the family” (p. 16). Jacques deftly negotiated with his cousin, Emanuel Filibert, duc de Savoie, to maintain his *apanage* privileges and succeeded in getting the Genevois erected as a duché in
1564. The duc de Nemours-Genevois utilized the prestige and wealth of his apanage and other
landholdings to construct châteaux in the Genevois and hôtels particuliers in Paris. The apanage thus
represented the key source of Jacques de Savoie’s prestige and honor.

The book proposes a transnational approach to early modern political culture, focusing on small states
and on non-state actors. Vester’s study “portrays a Jacques de Savoie who was emblematic of the
international, cosmopolitan nature of late Renaissance politics in which layered sovereignty and
composite polities (not incipient national states) were the rule” (p. 6). Vester examines the duc de
Nemours’s use of political patronage in his apanage of Genevois and within the duché de Savoie in
general. Here, he constructs prosopographical sketches of Genevois officials and largely follows Stuart
Carroll’s model of “affinities” to explain noble patronage and clientage (pp. 189-190). Savoyard political
patronage remained centered on the ruling dynasty, according to Vester, allowing local elites “to
amplify but ultimately contain Jacques’ political influence both within the Savoyard domains and
abroad” (p. 210). Jacques’s frustrations in his projects to retake Calvinist Genève and in his attempts to
manage the passages of troops on the Spanish Road through Savoie reveal the serious limits on the
political ambitions of the duc de Nemours (pp. 213-229).

The Savoyard dynasty plays a central role in the book’s analysis through the categories of “dynastic
interests,” “dynastic prestige,” and “dynastic self-conception” (pp. 11-12). Vester describes “dynasticism
as a political force” (p. 15), asserting that “the [Savoie] dynasty can be said to have been a political actor
in its own right, taking action through the choices of its members” (p. 4). Although Jacques de Savoie
served four French kings, Vester argues that he maintained a constant loyalty and the Savoyard
dynasty, serving as an informer, mediator, and negotiator for the ducs de Savoie. The author concludes
that “dynasticism provided a mechanism—inheritance—by which junior members of a house always had
an interest in maintaining the integrity of the dynasty’s sovereign claims, since devolution was always a
possibility” (p. 168).

These concerns with dynasticism challenge previous models of Savoyard absolutism and centralizing
state development. Vester sees Jacques de Savoie as operating “on a political stage that was not national,
but European in dimension,” effectively critiquing national models of noble politics that have often
portrayed nobles as hindering state development (p. 28). Vester refers—somewhat problematically in
this reviewer’s opinion—to a “feudal sensibility” that “permeated the state itself” (p. 8). Rather than
emphasizing Savoyard state building, Vester argues that “like the Guises, the sovereign house of Savoy
also showed itself to be remarkably capable of preserving dynastic unity and prestige during the
turbulent later sixteenth century” (p. 252).

The book explores the dynastic concerns with marriage politics and clandestine marriage through an
analysis of the scandal surrounding Jacques de Savoie’s purported marriage to Françoise de Rohan.
After giving birth to a child, Françoise filed a lawsuit claiming that Jacques had secretly married her,
leading to a lengthy legal battle that exposed conceptions of sexuality and female honor. Rather than
focusing on a gendered reading of the case, Vester examines the dynastic interests and noble politics
that ultimately allowed Jacques de Savoie to avoid acknowledging Françoise de Rohan and instead
marry Anne d’Este in a carefully negotiated alliance that benefitted the Savoyard dynasty and Jacques
himself.

Despite this fascinating exploration of Jacques de Savoie’s career, the book also reveals the limitations
of biographical approaches to noble culture. The detailed portrait of the duc de Nemours at times becomes
somewhat myopic, as when Vester claims that “Jacques de Savoie was clearly one of the most famous
courtiers of his age” (p. 7). Contemporaries and later historians certainly celebrated the duc de Nemours,
but they have also held up François de Lorraine, duc de Guise, Anne de Montmorency, duc de
Montmorency, Henri de Lorraine, duc de Guise, Anne de Joyeuse, duc de Joyeuse, Louis de Gonzague,
duc de Nevers, Jean-Louis de Nogaret de La Valette, duc d’Épernon, and many other nobles as ideal
courtiers at the French royal court during the religious wars. The biographical focus prompts some hyperbole, as when the book describes Jacques de Savoie as having “one of the most celebrated careers enjoyed by any Renaissance prince in Europe” (p. 25). Vester seems to envision Jacques de Savoie playing a particular role in a famous dispute between the duc de Montpensier and the duc de Nevers in 1580, yet virtually the entire royal court and many prominent provincial nobles were involved in efforts to mediate this quarrel (p. 145-146).

The book might have usefully explored Jacques de Savoie’s participation in religious violence in more depth. The duc de Nemours was intimately involved in several key episodes of religious violence. He led the force that captured the Huguenot conspirators who plotted to seize François II and remove his Catholic advisers at Amboise in 1560. Jacques seems to have been involved in a 1561 plot to entice the young Henri de Valois duc d’Orléans (the future Henri III) to flee from the royal court to protect him from Calvinist influence. With the outbreak of civil war, the duc de Nemours was appointed as a lieutenant-général to command royalist forces in southeastern France, where he coordinated with Italian forces arriving in France and launched an attempt to retake Lyon, which had been seized by Huguenots. Jacques de Savoie’s engagement in duels invites a reexamination of noble violence that might reevaluate recent interpretations of dueling and feuding.[2] The duc de Nemours participated in the rescue of Charles IX at Meaux and fought at the battle of Saint-Denis in 1567. He led Catholic forces in 1568 and 1569, but he quarreled with the Claude de Lorraine, duc d’Aumale over command, and abandoned the army to return to the royal court, subsequently playing little direct military role in the religious wars of the 1570s. The book might have considered the duc Nemours seriously as a malcontent, comparing his frustrations and his ultimate retreat from court with those of other prominent Catholic nobles such as the duc de Nevers.

Through its compelling portrait of Jacques de Savoie, duc de Nemours, Renaissance Dynasticism and Apanage Politics contributes significantly to the histories of Savoie and early modern France, offering new perspectives on small states, transnational noble politics, and European political culture. The poignant depictions of Jacques’s “glorious suffering” from gout and his preparations for death in 1585 (pp. 241-247) succeed in reinforcing the image of a Renaissance noble who desired military glory and princely power, but was ironically restricted by dynastic politics and his cadet position in the Savoyard household—the very basis of his apanage power and prestige.

NOTES


Brian Sandberg
Northern Illinois University
bsandberg@niu.edu

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