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H-France Review Vol. 5 (May 2005), No. 47

Kathryn L. Reyerson, *Jacques Coeur: Entrepreneur and King's Bursar*. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005. ix + 187 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, glossary and index. \$? U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-321-08537-X.

Review by Gayle K. Brunelle, California State University, Fullerton.

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Kathryn L. Reyerson's biography of the life of Jacques Coeur, an entry in the series "The Library of World Biography," is a brief but elegant synthesis of Coeur's life and contribution to French commerce and state-building. Coeur lived during the fifteenth century (circa 1395-1456), aptly termed the "Cinderella century" because it is generally viewed as the century in which French society and culture made the transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern era. This is the century in which the tide turned in the Hundred Years War, and France gained the upper hand over the English and in the process carved out the foundations of the more centralized "Renaissance" monarchy, with for the first time a permanent system of taxation focused on the *taille* (a tax on either heads or hearths depending on the region) and the *gabelle* or salt tax. The king drew upon a growing bureaucracy of "new men," drawn from what in England are called the "middling sort," whose incomes initially derived from commerce or the more elite artisan trades, but who rose to prominence and, often, noble status, through royal service. Jacques Coeur derived from precisely such a milieu, and as a successful luxury merchant and *argentier* (master of the royal mint) his rapid, spectacular rise, and even more breathtaking downfall upon losing royal favor, have always been controversial precisely because they have been enmeshed in the historical controversies over the origins of the "robins" or robe nobility, and the role of commerce, and of graft and venality, in the political and economic fortunes of such men. Was Coeur, then, the epitome of the successful medieval merchant, along the lines of such Italian merchants as Francesco Datini of Prato, as Michel Mollat argued in 1988, or was he primarily an *officier*, a royal office holder whose career was wrapped up in royal service, as Jacques Heers averred in his 1997 study? [1]

Despite the synthetic nature of her book, intended presumably mostly for an undergraduate audience, Reyerson to her credit does not shrink from addressing these historiographical and interpretive issues. Too often works of this type present students with a seamless narrative that elides the many debates and controversies that can make history seem perplexing, even disturbing, for those students who seek simple, changeless truths, but which also are what make history meaningful and interesting to professional historians. Reyerson has her own interpretation of Coeur, and although she sides more closely with Mollat than with Heers, ultimately she comes down somewhere between the two. She astutely points out that the whole question of whether Coeur was a merchant *or* a royal official, like that of whether Coeur was a medieval *or* an early modern figure, is anachronistic. People in this era did not self-consciously perceive themselves living in a period of transition between a medieval and a modern world. Neither did they see any necessary contradiction between holding office and commerce.

The entire debate focusing on the tensions dividing sword nobles and robe nobles, or nobles and office-holders from merchants, seems mostly a product of the seventeenth century, when increasing royal *recherches de noblesse*, along with a growing crisis of confidence within the nobility, led to a flurry of complaints in reports at the Estates General and a sizable body of literature on these subjects. Moreover, this rhetorical debate belies the strong ties of kinship, financial investment, and personal friendships that continued to link "old" noble, robin, and mercantile families throughout the early modern era, just as Reyerson convincingly demonstrates that they did in the fifteenth century. Jacques Coeur's life evinced the new opportunities for intelligent commoners in royal service. But he could not have succeeded in his office as *argentier* without his equally successful and extensive commercial

experience, because, as Reyerson points out, it was precisely Coeur's ability to draw upon his commercial contacts and experience that gave him the expertise and resources to carry out his royal office.

The *argentier* did much more than mint coins. He also had to procure a constant stream of quality luxury goods to make available to members of the royal court and other prominent nobles. Coeur's father had been a trader in luxury furs, indispensable know-how no doubt passed on to Coeur. Most of Coeur's closest associates were merchants who, like Coeur, combined commerce with some measure of royal service, in the form of short or long term commissions obtained often, and typically, through Coeur's patronage. Coeur was then both a patron and a client, and as Sharon Kettering and Annette Finley-Croswhite, among others, have shown for the early modern period, the clientage networks of royal officials such as Coeur always including many urban merchants, not only because these officials usually derived from this milieu and often still depended on some sort of commercial or financial investments as a prop to their fortunes, but also because such clients were vital to the ability of men such as Coeur to mobilize capital and other resources for royal service. Coeur himself was a major lender to Charles VII, and it is likely that his downfall, in part at least, derived from Charles' inability and/or unwillingness to repay those debts.

Coeur clearly had a huge fortune of his own upon which he drew to make these loans to the king, which is one reason why he no doubt felt that the occasional graft in which he indulged was justified in that he knew it was unlikely that he would ever recoup fully the principal, let alone any interest, from his loans to his royal patron. Office holders and financiers tended to view the likelihood of never collecting on such loans as just another cost of doing business and retaining the royal favor so vital to their own fortunes. At the same time, they expected that the king would turn a blind eye to their own "profit taking" activities, even if they were technically illegal. Coeur was in many ways an innovator in this respect, in his close relationship to the king despite his non-noble origins, in the size of the fortune he amassed, in his multifarious commercial ventures, especially in the Mediterranean, in the ties he cultivated and the amazing loyalty he elicited from churchmen, merchants, and nobles, old and new alike, throughout France. These loyal supporters were invaluable to him in Coeur's flight from France and reestablishment under Papal protection in Rome, until his death on a crusade in Chios in 1456. Still, in many ways Coeur's career was not that different from those of the royal financial officers of the seventeenth century whose careers Daniel Dessert analyzed so thoroughly in 1984.[2]

The similarity between Coeur's career and those of legions of early modern royal officials and financiers does not, however, make him less of a merchant with at least one foot in the Middle Ages. As Reyerson shows, his closest and most trusted associates were, in fashion typical for medieval urban merchants, fellow merchants, mostly from his home town of Bourges and the surrounding region. Although he placed his older sons in the Church or the legal profession, also typical of his milieu in the late Middle Ages and throughout the early modern period, he brought his youngest, and least gifted, son Ravand into his commercial ventures. Reyerson emphasizes Coeur's commercial legacy in pioneering France's *rapprochement* with the Mediterranean Islamic world in order to insert French merchants into Mediterranean Islamic trade routes, on whose European termini before Coeur the Italians maintained a tight grip. Thus Coeur opened the way for the French, especially later under Francis I, to negotiate advantageous commercial treaties with the Muslim rulers in the Mediterranean, although at this time Coeur focused his efforts on Islamic rivals of the Ottoman Empire, whereas by the sixteenth century Francis I was obliged to treat with the Ottomans themselves, by then the dominant power in the Mediterranean.

These quasi-diplomatic activities to Reyerson were at least as important an accomplishment as Coeur's role in helping Charles VII finance his ultimately successful military struggle to drive the English out of

northern France, while also establishing royal finances on a more stable footing than they had been in the previous century. Yet this diplomacy in the Mediterranean sphere was also a facet of Coeur's private commercial ventures in the region, ventures that he revived during his exile in Rome after his fall from favor in France. Reyerson probably goes too far when she argues that Coeur anticipated Colbert and mercantilism, especially as many economic historians are doubtful whether mercantilism as a systematic program ever existed outside of the minds and writings of a handful of economists and royal strategists. But she is correct that Coeur remained a merchant throughout his life, and was likely the merchant in France with the clearest long-term vision of the commercial potential of long-distance trade to enrich France, and the French monarchy in the process.

Finally, Reyerson also addresses another accusation some nineteenth- and twentieth-century French historians have lobbed against Coeur, that his commercial vision was too narrow, in that he failed to venture into the Atlantic, or push Charles VII to sponsor expeditions along the lines of those the Portuguese and, to a lesser extent, the Spanish, were launching in what has been termed the "Atlantic Mediterranean." Reyerson again points out that this critique is anachronistic. Coeur was a man of his time, who looked to the Italian Mediterranean for financial techniques and commercial models. And why shouldn't he have, since in the fifteenth century it was the Italians who were still making the most money from commerce? Constantinople only fell to the Turks in 1453, and there was no reason to believe in Coeur's lifetime that the Ottoman Empire inevitably would rise to dominate the Mediterranean, and to squeeze the profits of the Italians from the spice trade to the point that the much longer and riskier spice routes around Africa actually could become lucrative. The Portuguese did not really reconnoiter much of Africa's coastline below the Senegal River until the second half of the fifteenth century. For most of that century, the bulk of the wealth derived from the Atlantic Islands the Portuguese and Spanish explored and conquered came not from trade, Coeur's specialization, but from sugar cultivation. Expertise in sugar cultivation and refinement was mostly lacking in France until the late sixteenth century, when a few Portuguese Jewish merchants began to establish a handful of refineries in cities such as Rouen. Most of the Spanish and Portuguese involvement in Africa in this period grew out of crusading fervor and a desire to access the gold trade below the Muslim sphere of influence in the Sahara and the Sahel. Finding routes to Asian spice markets by rounding Africa became more important only when developments in the Mediterranean that took place mostly after Coeur's death made "protection costs" on the eastern spice route rise.

The French in the nineteenth century, during the "Second Wave" of European colonization, fretted extensively over France's "late start" in the colonial race, and sought to understand why the French seemed to lag as colonizers in the early modern period. The debates that ensued, while leading to much new and illuminating research on the early modern French economy, were for the most part too anachronistic to be very helpful to historians in assessing the significance of a figure such as Jacques Coeur. Reyerson's balanced but enthusiastic appraisal of Coeur's life and career here is valuable because she discusses the historical debates about Coeur, assesses the arguments on each side, and advances a clear interpretation, all in lively and accessible language.

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## NOTES

[1] Michel Mollat, *Jacques Coeur ou l'esprit d'entreprise au Xve siècle* (Paris: Aubier, 1988); Jaques Heers, *Jacques Coeur 1400-1456* (Paris: Perrin, 1997).

[2] Daniel Dessert, *Argent, pouvoir et société au Grand Siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1984).

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