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“Il a bien sceu jouer des haulx bois, et si n'estoit ménétrier”:*

A Sixteenth-Century Protest in the City of Sens against the Depletion of Wood Resources

Francesca Canadé Sautman

The early modern forest was an eminently lucrative space and a major source of conflicts. This is illustrated by an incident over wood ownership and management that took place in the city of Sens in 1557. The incident, mentioned in the *Mémoires* of Claude Haton, arose in relation to the depletion of local woods. Instead of handling the matter through official channels, the citizenry used theater to highlight what they saw as forest mismanagement, imputing harm to a powerful ecclesiastical owner's prerogatives over a natural resource. The performance featured masked men on stages who held cutting tools and pretended to saw, trim, and tie up bundles of logs. The incident channeled familiar public performance elements into a satire of forest misuse by powerful social actors, but its full meaning is complicated by the range of possible motives.

Claude Haton, a priest from the town of Provins, in the diocese of Sens, a city located about 45 kilometers away in the Champagne-Brie region, penned his memoirs beginning in 1553 and ending in 1582.¹ In a two-page narrative, he recounted the public protest enacted by

* Translation: “He played the oboe [*hautbois*]/tall trees well, yet, he was no musician”.

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¹ These are the dates recorded in the text, but the sole existing manuscript has many lacunae, missing ninety pages or more. Haton recounts contemporary events – local, which he often witnessed, as well as regional, national, and even international ones, often couched from memory. In 1857, the archivist Felix Bourquelot published a first edition in two volumes, with extensive notes and cross-references, omitting many things that he considered unimportant. Deploring Bourquelot's cuts and transcription corrections, a team of contemporary scholars, led by Laurent Bourquin, published the current scholarly edition in four volumes between 2002 and 2007. Laurent Bourquin et al., *Mémoires de Claude Haton* (2001–2007). Hereafter: “BT” followed by the volume number, year of the event, section number and page numbers.

inhabitants of Sens in 1557 against the Cardinal-Archbishop Louis of Bourbon-Vendôme, after the latter ordered the chopping down and sale of all the most mature trees (the *haute futaie* in French)² of his secular forest holdings. Haton begins his account with a sarcastic pun: “The said lord certainly knew well how to play the oboe [*hautbois*=*haut bois*], yet he was no musician,” meaning that he certainly knew how to profit from cutting all the *haut bois* (or tallest trees) within the forest parcels attached to his archbishopry, located near the towns of Brinon and Villeneuve l’Archevêque. He incurred much public disapproval for this, and on the feast day of the Holy Sacrament, as he was leading the procession “and carried the body of God” through the streets of Sens, a number of the “inhabitants” [*population*], staged a protest performance at different points of the city. As the sacred procession went by, Haton writes, “masked and disguised men [on prepared stages], holding several types of tools in their hands, such as crosssaws, pruning hooks, and axes,” mimicked working at cutting wood: “some pulled on the saw, the others carpented and the others made logs, ... without speaking nor saying a word.” Clearly taken aback at this odd silent performance, the archbishop asked for explanations, and “he was told that this had been done to let him know of the ill he was doing and had done of selling all his high timber and having it cut down.” Despite being quite irritated by this message and tempted to exact retribution on the actors of the “mystery” (i.e., the performance) and the people of Sens, he demurred, for “his benign and courtly nature prevented him from doing so, once his anger had passed.”³

The Sens protest took place at a specific moment in the history of French royal policies governing the management of forests, and during the wood supply crisis of the sixteenth century.⁴ For centuries, the French kings had attempted to regulate and prevent the overuse of forest resources by their subjects, issuing royal ordinances on hunting, fishing, and forests, in 1318, 1376, 1389, 1396–97 and 1402.⁵ By 1318, Philippe V had organized the Office of Water and Forests whose staff held administrative and judicial power. After a lull during the Hundred Years War, efforts resumed at the end of the fifteenth century.⁶ In the early sixteenth century, Francis I (r. 1515–47) implemented decisive measures of royal control on most French forests, with the ordinances of 1516, 1517, 1519, and 1529, built on protecting noble hunting privileges but extending much beyond.⁷ Intervention by the monarchy in the management of forests and the sale of wood was reflected in a massive expansion of the king’s control over privately owned forests through any of his partial legal stakes in them,⁸ bolstered by the threat of fines and physical punishments. By 1532, a royal edict required that ecclesiastical owners obtain permission in order to hew their tallest timber and sell it. This procedure was made more rigorous by obliging claimants to petition for special circumstances and written authorization to judicial units set up in the Parliament in Paris, rather than relying on the king’s beneficence. Subsequent kings upheld these policies, with Charles IX and Henry III issuing ordinances (in 1561 and 1579 respectively) reiterating the prohibition against the felling of valuable mature

² Devèze, *La vie de la forêt française*, vol. I, 121. In Troyes and Sens *haute futaie* is also called *haut bois*; these are trees that are not regularly cut, good for building and bearing acorns or other food, and located in places that have never been cultivated.

³ BT 1, 1557, # 12–16, 79–82, esp. # 13, 80–81: My translation of all quoted passages.

⁴ See Devèze, *La vie de la forêt française*, vol. II, 55–72.

⁵ Ibid, 64–67.

⁶ Plaisse, “La forêt de Brix”; Sommé, “Règlements, délits et organisation des ventes”.

⁷ Devèze, *La vie de la forêt française*, vol. II, 82–85.

⁸ These included legal categories such as the *tiers*, *danger* and the *droit de gruerie*, the latter exercised in the Middle Ages by many lords, but formalized and expanded by the sixteenth-century monarchy.

timber in ecclesiastical holdings.⁹ Further, Francis I sent an envoy to inspect and report on the forest of Grésigne in Languedoc, a paradigmatic case of depredations against forests taking place across the kingdom,¹⁰ paving the way for his large-scale 1542 reformation of forest management through controlled cutting and a reinforcement of the institution of *Eaux et Forêts*. An important take-away from this is that, by the time of the protest in Sens in 1557, royal policy had repeatedly asserted the prohibition on the cutting down and selling of mature timber by clergy in its temporal holdings.

Before attempting to unravel the varied motives at work in the Sens incident, we should note that an abundant historiography has examined the legal, political, and economic issues of early modern French forests. In the 1960s, Michel Devèze meticulously documented and thoroughly analyzed royal policy and administrative practices towards forests in France in the sixteenth century. Despite this pioneering work, however, thirty years later, Denis Woronoff claimed that the forest had not yet been truly “historicized” and remained “*un objet à construire*.”¹¹ The 1990s witnessed a surge in scholarly studies of the medieval and early modern French forest, of royal policies governing them, and of competing economic interests between conservation and the development of forest-based industries.¹² Interactions between humans and the forest in the early modern period were also examined¹³ and linked to studies of the environment.¹⁴ This “environmental turn” has become more apparent since the year 2000.¹⁵ Taking a long view, historians have also charted the gradual but dramatic modification of the balance between central power and communal access, which, by the eighteenth century, had significantly affected the very nature and configuration of forests.¹⁶ These decades of scholarship provide the scaffolding and parameters for my discussion of the Sens protest, which attempts to bridge the micro level – the meaning of a local protest – with a macro consideration of how attitudes towards the environment were developing in the sixteenth century.

Haton, the priest from Provins, played an essential role in the Sens protest, as he seems to have provided the sole testimony to the event. No record of the protest appears in the communal archives of Sens for that year, nor is there any mention of it in the ecclesiastical records in the Departmental Archives of the Yonne in the period before 1790. This is despite the fact that these records contain over 1500 mentions of woods [*bois*] as toponyms or in relation to gifts, sales, loans, rents, adjudication of rights, access permissions to locals and authorized cutting of trees

⁹ Blanchard, *Compilation chronologique*, 1, decrees against ecclesiastical cutting of good trees, cols. 511, 860, 883, 942, 1100–1101. Haton’s memoirs reproduce Charles IX’s entire response to the convocation of the Estates General in 1561, and its Article 29 details this prohibition to the clergy: “under penalty of their secular belongings being seized ... forbidding all persons, of any condition, to buy high timber wood from churchmen ... under penalty of losing the value of the sale even if already paid for”. BT, 1, 1561, 246 (my translation).

¹⁰ Bartoli, *Un commissaire de Francois I^{er}*.

¹¹ Trans: “An object to be constructed”. Woronoff, “Histoire des forêts françaises,” 1.

¹² Boissière, “Consommation parisienne de bois”; Keyser, “Wood for Burning”; Woronoff, “Histoire des forêts françaises”; and Warde, “Wood Shortage.”

¹³ Cavaciocchi, ed., *L’uomo e la foresta*.

¹⁴ Lunginbuhl, “Nature, paysage, environnement”.

¹⁵ Mérot et al., *Les forêts européennes*.

¹⁶ The “*libéralités progressivement rognées*” from the mid-seventeenth century and the “*grande réformation des forêts royales*” in 1661 and the Ordonnance of 1669 tightened public access, while during the Revolution, communities retook many forest spaces. Buridant, “Droits d’usage”, 264. See also Mukerji, “The Great Forestry Survey”; and Matteson, *Forests in Revolutionary France*.

and sales of cut wood, all involving the local clergy.¹⁷ Born around 1534, Haton died in 1605, after having stopped penning his memoirs and any further writing many years earlier, in 1582. Far from being merely a local secular priest with a floating parish, Haton’s memoirs indicate that he was well connected to local and Parisian centers of power. Apparently playing more of a role in contemporary secular affairs than in religious ones, Haton even served at one time as a soldier in the defense of Provins. He was present at several court events in Paris and freely circulated across the wider region and beyond, gathering information and direct observations about events, minor and major, from many sources and witnesses. His political allegiance lay squarely with the Duke of Guise, who presided over Provins as governor of the Champagne-Brie region. Early in the memoirs, the power and influence of the House of Guise were rising and extended well beyond Lorraine before the family became opponents of the Crown and led the ultra-Catholic League.

Throughout the Wars of Religion, the political and religious sensibilities of strongly Catholic Provins, Sens, and their vicinity, also largely reflected the Guise perspective. Haton remained an uncompromising advocate of Roman Catholicism as the sole legitimate religion of the nation and branded the Reformation, a “so-called religion [*prétendue religion*],” which elicited his hatred and constant invective.¹⁸ His evocations of conflicts, riots, and massacres remain unabashedly one-sided, claiming that the Catholics, even when unleashing lethal violence against their Protestant neighbors, were provoked to defend themselves, their families, their property, and, as he would say, the honor of God and the Church, against Protestant taunts, insults, and aggressions. Accounts of political strife and military actions from the First War of Religion through to the Seventh (1562–81) occupy substantial space in the memoirs, along with Haton’s own opinions and commentaries. Yet, the memoirs’ value transcends their partisanship – as a history of the quotidian, they brim with fascinating anecdotes regarding urban outbreaks of plagues, crime, vendettas between local families, popular religion, social unrest, folk beliefs and practices, and gender relations.

The tone of Haton’s description of the Sens protest was sympathetic to the protestors (“*habitans*”), validated as a community of interest and stakeholders in the matter, and mildly sarcastic towards the archbishop, whose virtues he also praised elsewhere. Haton continues the account of the Sens incident by naming the beneficiaries of this tree cutting and wood sale that provided substantial income for the cardinal’s three nephews, Condé, Navarre, and the future archbishop of Rouen.¹⁹ Haton speaks no ill here about them, but throughout the memoirs, he

¹⁷ Roughly one third of these entries in the *Inventaire sommaire des archives de l’Yonne antérieures à 1790, Archives ecclésiastiques*, série H, parts I and II, concerns the sixteenth century, but none connect local woods with the Archbishop of Sens, Louis de Bourbon, or with complaints by the inhabitants or the cutting and sale of wood – although all these items are recorded for other individuals and locations. No entries for the two locations mentioned by Haton as depleted woods, Briennon (sur-Armeçon or l’Archevêque) and Villeneuve-l’Archevêque, or for the archbishop during the years of his tenure (1536–57), yield a trace of that incident. There is an instance of litigation in 1562 between a cardinal and the local population over the legality of massive cutting of woods, but it concerns another locality and another cardinal. On this 1562 case, see « Enquête provoquée par le cardinal de Ferrare sur la convenance de pratiquer des coupes en 1012 arpents des bois de Saint-Pierre, et opposition des habitants », 418.

¹⁸ “Muslims” (*Mahometans*) and “Barbarians” (BT, 2, 1567, #77, 126; BT 2, 1567, #163, 159); “vermin” (BT 2, 1567, #94, 132, #165, and 159–60); and “satanic Church” (BT 2, 1567 #135, 147–48). In their baptism Huguenots were given the names of “pagan Turcs, infidels and dogs” “in detestation of names of the saints of paradise” (BT, 2, 1567, #271, 202).

¹⁹ BT 1, 1557, # 12–16, 79–82: #13. Haton makes this identification by recounting an anecdote in which, in the presence of the King and the Cardinal, the King’s jester, Brusquet, mocked him by joking that God would hold his Last Judgment near Brinon and Villeneuve-l’Archevêque, and inside the forests that had many tree stumps as seats

expresses contempt for Condé as Protestant leader, plotter, and traitor deserving execution for having led the Protestant armies from 1562 to his death at Jarnac in 1569. In 1557, the King of Navarre, Antoine of Bourbon, was not yet prominent as one of the young King Charles IX's governors, but, later in the memoirs, Haton depicts him actively participating in the civil strife following the death of Francis II.

Did Haton consider the cutting down of mature timber (*haute futaie*) as inherently reprehensible, or was it so because of the identity of the perpetrator and his beneficiaries? What other references, if any, does he make to the uses and destruction of forests? In his memoirs, Haton mentions two other instances of forest depletion, but in a very different tone. In the first, he notes that in 1556 (the year before the archbishop's misdeed) the areas of Champagne and Brie, and indeed France generally, were peaceful and rich with abundant grain and cattle; prices were low, including for wood logs in nearby Nogent because, that year, the oaks of its park, all of them mature (*haute futaye*), were felled.²⁰ Haton also details the malfeasance of a local parvenu family whose descendant, the *grand maire* of Donnemarie, kills a rival over a property dispute, is condemned and then pardoned, before finally retreating to his home at Chalaustre-la-Grand. Then in the mid-1560s he cuts down and sells the great oaks of the adjacent woods of Saint-Martin, at the edge of the Sourdu forest, despite the fact that they do not belong to him.²¹

Louis de Bourbon was the 97th archbishop of Sens,²² made cardinal in 1517. A prince of royal blood, he was the brother of two other cardinals who were influential with kings Francis I and Henry II. As a prelate, Louis was considered pious, charitable, and active in administering affairs of the Church with a view to reforming some of its practices.²³ This characterization of the archbishop as a person generally benevolent and not inclined to pettiness and anger is confirmed by his response to the performance by the people of Sens in 1557. Despite being furious at the public mockery, he nevertheless refrained from taking retaliatory measures and eventually took it all in his stride. The archbishop was also clearly cognizant of the legal procedures pertaining to the cutting down of high-grade trees in his temporal possessions. Indeed, in 1537, he had been denied authorization to cut down trees,²⁴ and there is no record of the 1557 felling having been allowed.

A defining but elusive voice in the incident belongs to the "*habitants*" of the ancient, wealthy, episcopal town. Nothing is said of the individual participants; for instance, whether any were involved in the wood trade and thus in direct competition with the archbishop's dispatch of large amounts of wood. Haton simply describes the street theater adopted by the protesters to make themselves heard. They chose this form of action rather than seeking redress through official channels because the archbishop's actions were a *fait accompli*, albeit a very clear breach of royal rules. Their performance staged and enacted realistic scenes of wood-cutting to suggest a second, symbolical, perhaps even allegorical, meaning. The wordless sketches were not played out as one seamless theater piece unfurling on a single stage. Rather, they were short and

to sit those present. Haton adds, "All these [three] princes were enriched solely with the temporal assets of the said archbishopry of Sens, the bishopry of Laon, and the abbeys of St-Denis, Ste-Colombe and other [ecclesiastical] benefices held by the said lord cardinal."

²⁰ BT 1, 1556, #2, 18.

²¹ BT, 2, 1567, #262, 198. Note: Chalaustre-la-Grand is also spelled Chalaudre-la-Grande (see BT, 4, Index, 563).

²² Blondel, *Révision critique du catalogue*.

²³ Biography in M. H. Fisquet, *La France pontificale (Gallia christiana)*, which refers to a Vita written by Jos. Ant. Petramellari.

²⁴ Devèze, *La vie de la forêt française*, vol. II, 85, note 4.

rendered through mime, set up on small stages, and performed at points of the city where the archbishop’s procession would pass by.

The performance by the “*habitants*” adopted the sort of structure used to mark royal and noble entries, when cities renewed their bond with a sovereign early in his reign, or honored his consort the queen, or for the visit of princes of the Church such as cardinals and archbishops,²⁵ or of a powerful regional ruler. Since the late fourteenth century, the typical royal entry included a procession to the outskirts of the city to greet the king, present him with gifts, receive confirmation of the city’s charter and rights, and hand over the keys to the city. The visitor’s retinue would then proceed through ornamented streets, accompanied by a parade of significant citizens (exclusively men) swathed in sumptuous dress, including the entire clergy, municipal military forces, members of the guilds, officials, young men, as cheering crowds gathered in the city’s streets and at buildings’ windows. The procession’s itinerary was dotted with *tableaux vivants*, pantomimes, and theatrical sketches, often devised by a local poet or artist (sometimes a famous one), with content designed to honor the visitor.²⁶

The Sens protesters adapted this traditional format derisively. In their rendition, the archbishop did not make a formal entry but instead led a solemn religious procession, and in lieu of the usual celebratory cortege, the sacred event moved through the streets, while the citizens provided the visual entertainment through their gestural performance. Far from celebrating the archbishop’s character and his noble deeds, the people’s performance of cutting, sawing, and logging constituted a confronting reminder of a thoughtless, irresponsible, and questionable commercial transaction. In this way, the Sens protest resembled an inverted, topsy-turvy, ceremonial entry. The creative channeling of familiar elements of public performance into a satirical “counter-entry” served to draw attention to an act of forest mismanagement committed by a wealthy and powerful social actor.²⁷

Given the simmering religious strife, the expression of derision towards a powerful Bourbon was perhaps tempting, especially for Haton, who may have weaponized this non-political incident to conform to his negative view of a family with some Reformation leanings. If he wrote his memoirs as things happened, Haton might also not have felt strong animosity at the time. Yet, just a few years later, he noted sourly that Navarre and Condé showed little grief over the death of Henry II.²⁸ Instances of weaponization of tree-cutting such as this did in fact occur. The first of this kind, directed against Henry of Navarre, the future Henry IV of France, was articulated in a famous poem by the leading poet of the time, Pierre de Ronsard, “Contre les bûcherons de la Forest de Gastine.” While this poem may resemble an early “environmental poem,” it has been shown to have targeted and cursed not a Greek mythological figure, but the contemporary Navarre, who was also selling the wood of valuable trees in small parcels in order to generate income.²⁹ Henry IV’s minister, Duplessis-Mornay, then later complained that the Guise family depleted the nation’s resources by clearing their own forests. By that time, such an act was clearly against established royal policy for secular and ecclesiastical landowners, and the

²⁵ On the ceremonial for a cardinal’s entry, see Cooper, “Legate’s Luxury.”

²⁶ On the structure and political messages of entries, see Bryant, *The French Royal Entry Ceremony*; de Merindol, “Le Prince et son cortège”; Russell and Vicentin, *French Ceremonial Entries*; and Wagner, Frappier, and Latraverse, *Les jeux de l’échange*.

²⁷ On a sixteenth-century theater of protest, see Roch, “Le roi, le peuple et l’âge d’or”; Bouhaik-Gironès, *Les clercs de la Basoche*; Doudet, “Statut et figures de la voix satirique”; and Canadé Sautman, “Personnifier l’époque”.

²⁸ He did mention that, for some things, he resorted to memory, after the fact. BT, 1, Introduction, x–xi.

²⁹ Devèze, *La vie de la forêt française*, vol. I, 255–57; and Morin, “Flaubert, Ronsard, et la gestion des forêts.”

impugning of political enemies by association with a reprehensible and illegal act may have been a trend.³⁰

The specific area of woodlands at the heart of this dispute were situated near the villages of Briennon and Villeneuve-l'Archevêque, 40 and 23 kilometers respectively from Sens. These woodlands were *bois* (woods) as opposed to *forêts* (forests), a term often designating wooded parcels, sometimes part of a larger forest, close to a village with only sometimes a sylvan toponym. Bri(e)non-sur-Armeçon is also referred to as Bri(e)non-l'Archevêque precisely because it belonged to the temporal possessions of the Sens archbishops. Sens (situated in the modern-day department of Yonne) lies at the intersection of several sub-regions with their own landscape characteristics and historical identity – the Sénonais, Gâtinais, and Puisaye, at the edge of Champagne – and is the westernmost point of Burgundy. The region includes several dense forests, which are larger in the eastern areas of the extended Burgundy region and Franche-Comté; a different topography from the vast open fields of Brie, where Provins is located. Modern forestry maps organize regional space differently from those of the sixteenth century, but the positioning of these two localities, then and now, remains consistent, at the confines of the large Forest of Othe, while Sens itself is situated in a less wooded sub-area.³¹

An accurate estimation of the damage wrought by the archbishop would require retracing the precise histories of specific segments of forests during this period through different sorts of records in order to ascertain their possible disappearance. A cursory review of ecclesiastical records (regular clergy) for the Yonne Department indicates that neither Briennon (mentioned often in various contexts) nor Villeneuve were actually fully deforested after 1557. Michel Devèze states that major logging in the forests of northern and eastern France had ended by 1525, and that the core of good timber of the Gâtinais and Vendomois had not been damaged³² – notwithstanding the polemics discussed in this essay around the depletion of the *haute futaie*, a consistent concern for jurists and the monarchical state.

What, then, might have motivated the citizens of Sens to enact their performance of public protest? Were they merely seizing an opportunity to underscore royal policy, or were they urged to ingratiate themselves with royal authorities? Or were they actually asserting their own interests? Several issues around forest usage may shed light on the meaning of the Sens protest. First, from the late medieval to the early modern period, cartularies, ordinances, edicts, legal cases, *livres de raison*, administrative documentation for the office of Eaux et Forêts (records of naturally dead trees, declarations for “*abattis d’arbres*”, and indemnisation requests) overflow with disputes between owners and local inhabitants over the usage of woods and forests. These conflicts usually revolved around the continued exercise of customary rights by local people to access the woods for their many economic needs – fuel for heating, pasture for grazing animals under trees, wood for construction, etc. – but not over an official owner cutting its mature trees. Further, these do not show local populations opposing the cutting down of such trees. In fact, quite the opposite; throughout the century, frequent inspections yielded complaints by powerful owners about excessive use of forests for various purposes, abuse of customary rights, unjustified felling of prized trees, and illicit removal of hundreds of healthy oak trees for

³⁰ Duplessis-Mornay, *Mémoires et correspondance*, vol. 2, 444. Among other crimes, the terrible Guises of Lorraine “*vendent les bois*”.

³¹ *Inventaire Forestier national*, [17–28]. Michel Devèze pointed out that the Coutume de Sens of 1506 was among the few to have a special section on forests and that the Sénonais was rich in forests. Devèze, *La vie de la forêt française*, vol. I, 80.

³² Devèze, *La forêt et les communes rurales*.

personal use.³³ Woods were precious for all concerned; thus, regulations stipulated meticulously what could be taken and when, and set down crucial differences, not only between *bois-mort* and *bois vert*, but also between *bois-mort* and *mort-bois*,³⁴ and between gathering wood from trees brought down naturally by winds and storms, and trees that were still standing and healthy, albeit showing some damage. The *coutume* of Sens regulated what constituted *haute futaye* and the different times of the year when locals were permitted to graze animals in the woods but made no mention of competing claims of collective and ecclesiastical ownership, or of those under autonomous *coutumes*.³⁵

The expansion of early modern furnace industries – such as glassmaking, ceramics, tile-making,³⁶ and even industrial cloth bleaching, which were massive consumers of burned wood – produced further conflict over forests.³⁷ Iron was regularly extracted and milled in the Yonne’s Forest of Othe from the early Middle Ages.³⁸ It was the constant burning of wood primarily by industries rather than ordinary villagers that resulted in the destruction of forests. While protecting forests from depletion was an imperative of royal policy, it stood in contradiction with another one: the marshaling of the nation’s natural resources for economic development and to generate wealth. Longstanding tensions between owners – including the monarchical state or ecclesiastical owners – and local populations over the use of woods and trees were exacerbated by industrial uses of the forests. With industries dependent on wood, forest owners stood to make steady and considerable profits. They were thus pitted against local users who simply felt entitled to help themselves to wood in order to satisfy their everyday needs.

These conditions, however, do not appear directly applicable to the situation at Sens. Perhaps this is because Sens was a city, not a rural area. But this itself could have produced another major source of conflict: ensuring the supply of wood needed for fuel and construction. Cities – Paris chief among them – consumed vast amounts of cut timber from the nearby forest cultures that harvested and produced it.³⁹ This was an issue of major economic import as well as a daily life concern, and by the early sixteenth century, France was experiencing a full wood supply crisis that successive kings attempted to resolve. Proximity to abundant wood did not guarantee towns or villages with supply of the highest quality wood needed for construction or various artisanal and industrial occupations (whose supply was even more tightly controlled by royal rules than wood for burning). It is thus very likely that the city of Sens needed the high-

³³ Guyard’s study on forests and salt works in Salins (Franche-Comté) since the end of the fifteenth century cites numerous such edicts and complaints. Guyard, *Les Forêts des salines*, vol. I, 369–404.

³⁴ For a detailed discussion of what one could take, see Gresser, “Forêt et vigne”.

³⁵ Richebourg, *Nouveau coutumier général*, vol. 3, 483; *Coutumes de Sens accordées et approuvées par les gens et officiers du Roy notre Sire audit Bailliage de Sens, l’an mil quatre cens quatre-vingt-quinze*, 494, 518, 551. Many small towns fell under Sens’s ecclesiastical jurisdiction, some of them might have had wooded parcels; yet, the map of towns under the rule of the Sens *coutume* might differ from the ecclesiastical map and many of the surrounding small towns in the list had their own *coutume*. See Klimrath, *Étude sur les coutumes*. Briennon, for instance, was actually under the bailliage of Joigny (*Coutumier*, 302).

³⁶ All these factors were present plus a demographic and building surge in the Normandy forest of Lyons. See Philippe, “La forêt de Lyons”.

³⁷ Belhoste, “Sylviculture”; Boissière, “Consommation parisienne de bois”.

³⁸ Beck et al., “Minières et ferriers de la forêt d’Othe”. Counts, abbeys and clerics were major owners, and large numbers of people were involved in production work.

³⁹ The need for wood for construction, for household fuel, and for industrial fuel, was a constant source of conflict in early modern French forestry. See Dufour, “Les forges et la forêt”; and footnote 12.

quality timber furnished by local woods, and that this extended to some small wood parcels in a larger forest.⁴⁰

Wood was ubiquitous in the early modern period and held enormous use and monetary value.⁴¹ Living trees provided sustenance through nuts and fruits, and were especially protected; cut wood used for kindling, logs, poles, and planks, was essential to every facet of the economic machine as well as to the domestic economy; and high-quality timber was increasingly crucial to France's military needs.⁴² It would thus not be surprising that the citizens of Sens viewed the archbishop's actions as constituting unfair competition for a prized commodity⁴³ to which the royal notion of "public good" might have allowed access.⁴⁴ Most likely, the archbishop had simply submitted to a profit motive, hoping that his status would let him get away with it.

The chronicler Haton used his pen to satirize, at least partially, political opponents through exposing the illegality of the felling of high-quality timber. In his memoirs, Haton extends his attention to surrounding nature, a distinctive trait of his compared to other texts of the genre. He offers minute consideration of the state of the land in scarcity and plenty, of agricultural techniques, climatic anomalies, harvest failures, and the disastrous effects of war on populations and regions. He alludes to the daily life value of trees and wood, quantifying prosperity through lists of goods, including logs and planks, which are noted according to exact type of wood (for instance, hornbeam versus summit fronds), measurement, asking price, and usage. In narrating the disastrous weather of the winter of 1564–65, whose harshness earned it a lasting place in the annals of the period, Haton recounts the destruction wrought by high winds or alternating freezes and thaws on living trees, especially walnut and fruit-bearing trees, and the suffering produced by the lack of wood for heating.

Much ongoing research seeks to retrieve early modern environmental attitudes. For instance, marshes and pond and fishery management in the early modern period elicited early forms of conservation.⁴⁵ The writings of ceramicist-scientist Bernard Palissy reflect emerging perspectives that we might term environmental, largely inspired by a Protestant worldview⁴⁶ – longing for the pristine form and transcendent beauty of nature, anxiety over the disappearance of living species, respect for the living fiber of plants by cultivating them without destroying them.⁴⁷ Trees, woods, and forests held a prominent place in managing nature, and since the late Middle Ages, there was awareness of the risks entailed by the depletion of forests.⁴⁸ Laws

⁴⁰ In fact, in 1520, the effective protected perimeter for the Paris supply of wood went through Sens on the Yonne river, which would have added pressure on Sens for its own local supply routes. Boissière, "Consommation parisienne de bois", 31.

⁴¹ Biget, Boissière, and Hervé, *Le Bois et la Ville*.

⁴² At the session on Environmental History during the 23rd George Rudé Seminar in French History and Civilisation in July 2022, Kieko Matteson raised the point that the rise of French transatlantic ventures and involvement in practices of transatlantic enslavement, may also have affected the demand for wood.

⁴³ On the high market value of different sorts of timber products, especially in wine-growing regions, see Buridant "Le Laonnais viticole," 230–32.

⁴⁴ It is also possible that economic and financial matters were a primary motive stemming from a micro-conflict. The population of Briçon had recently engaged in wood management transactions in concert with the archbishop and perhaps felt despoiled by his action. From the *Inventaire sommaire* (1882), 130: "*Transaction en vertu de laquelle l'abbaye a renoncé à ses droits d'usage, dans les bois de Bellechaume et de Briçon, moyennant cession par l'archevêque et les habitants de 100 arpents de bois (1551).*"

⁴⁵ Morera, "Marshes as Microclimates"; Hoffmann and Winiwarter, "Making Land and Water Meet."

⁴⁶ Duport, *Le jardin et la nature*, 31–34.

⁴⁷ Palissy, *Recepte*, 25, 26, 38

⁴⁸ Charruadas and Deligne, "Cities Hiding the Forests".

pertaining to the “forestry question,” and the work of forestry engineers have been seen as key to the emergence of environmental consciousness.⁴⁹

The meticulous precision of the vocabulary of laws and customs referring to species of trees and stages in their life cycle and place in the ecosystem, reflected in a chronicle such as Haton’s, signal a mindfulness, or at least profound awareness, of the surrounding environment. In relation to the Sens protest, it is tempting to recognize shades of this awareness, among its different social actors, beyond and alongside the weight of economic imperatives. However, can one truly equate it with a will to protect the environment as an abstract and essential good? Rather, in this case, as in the myriad other types of protests and conflicts arising in this period over forest usage between communities, rural and urban, and the authorities, overlords or royal representatives, the environment at stake is concrete, locally situated, and endangered by a specific policy or individual action.

A later incident which also took place in the general Burgundy region presents similarities that shed light on how populations openly expressed bitterness and resentment towards forest management by powerful actors. In May 1576, the famous satirical theatrical association, the “Mère Folle de Dijon,” performed, to great local acclaim, a derisive play⁵⁰ directed at the recently appointed Grand Maître des Eaux et Forêts for Burgundy, Elie du Tillet,⁵¹ sent to Dijon with royal orders to cut down and sell over 20 000 *arpents* of wood. Ostensibly, the play lambasted him for having publicly struck his wife in the face, while local tradition prohibited husbands from hitting or beating their wives during the month of May.⁵² The culprit’s punishment was being made to ride through the town backwards on an ass; a practice known as *asouade* in French. Given the Grand Maître’s high status, he could obviously not be forcibly paraded in this manner, but the play expounds at length on this loftiness, and, through symbolical judgment, with the latitude of its imaginary space, resolves that his punishment will indeed be carried out, as the *asnerie* (*asne*=ass) that the Dijon troupe gleefully promises to perform.

There is general agreement among commentators of the play that the instance of domestic violence merely provided the pretext for expressing the town’s displeasure towards royal forestry policies and the official envoy. The text of the play, after Mère Folle calls on her followers to mobilize by referring to each age and social group with names of trees or wooded sections (such as *haute futaie*), underscores Du Tillet’s title as Grand Maître des Eaux et Forêts and refers to him as “*réformateur*,” contrasts guardians of the forests (the god Pan) with evil foresters of the day; condemns his assignment to deplete the region’s open (that is, wooded) lands; and even names him by alluding to those who touch our “*tilleuls*” (linden trees), an obvious pun on his name.⁵³

Although the gap of twenty years between the Sens and Dijon protests is substantial, the similarity of issues is noteworthy: an extremely powerful entity (the archbishop or the king) orders the cutting of massive amounts of high quality wood for his own financial benefit against

⁴⁹ Luginbühl, *Du milieu à l’environnement*, 12.

⁵⁰ *Asnerie*, 87–123 in Valcke, *Mère Folle*. Alternative dates for the play have been asserted, but the 1576 date seems the most convincing. Valcke, *Théâtre de la Mère Folle*, 87–89. The play concludes with “*Vers satiriques*” in elevated style. The play was a local success and celebrated as an elaborate event. See Garnier, *Journal Breunot*, 31.

⁵¹ Devèze, *La vie de la forêt française*, vol. II, 299. He was appointed on June 27, 1575, as part of a major reform implemented by the King that replaced one Grand Maître for the kingdom with six regional ones. Du Tillet was assigned Champagne, with Provins, Burgundy, the Auxerrois, Lyonnais, Bourbonnais, Auvergne, Forez, the Mâconnais, the Marche and Limousin; a purview that indicates powers well beyond what the play suggests.

⁵² *Asnerie*, v 92, 149–168, 348–356.

⁵³ *Asnerie*, v 18–24; v 5–6, 27, 31, 46–49, 50–53, 149–50, 418; *Vers Satiriques*, 123; 6–8; 327–28.

the wishes of local people.⁵⁴ The Sens incident thus belongs to a long, albeit sporadic and often hidden, history of social protest around natural resources, sustenance, and understandings of community ownership⁵⁵ during a period when interdiction, inequality, and repression weighed heavily on protests that had to creatively circumvent them. While, as Devèze has demonstrated, the French monarchy, from the early sixteenth century, endeavored to conserve and protect forests as a matter of privilege, of financial gain, and of strategic interests, at the other end of the social spectrum, communities also acted upon their own claims of rights and their own visions of forest conservation.

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⁵⁴ The cuttings ordered by Henry III (among those that Du Tillet was to oversee) were so extreme that the King was opposed by the Estates General and, between 1576 and 1580, had to compromise and submit to Parliament a new order prohibiting massive and extraordinary cutting, only to reverse it himself the following year by a special order, resulting in huge and wasteful cuts in French forests between 1580 and 1589. Devèze, *La vie de la forêt française*, vol. II, 257.

⁵⁵ Detailing the complex local forest ownership rules in Burgundy and some of its attendant regions is beyond the scope of this essay, but suffice it to say here that Devèze identified five different categories of community-only ownership of forests and woods, four of them applicable, substantially or partially, to areas of Burgundy and Champagne. Devèze, *La vie de la forêt française*, vol. I, 204–209. It is thus possible that issues of communal ownership and rights influenced the perception of the populations engaged in these protests.

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