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Brian Sandberg, *Warrior Pursuits: Noble Culture and Civil Conflict in Early Modern France*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. xxx + 393 pp. Table, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 10: 0-8018-9729-7.

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Brian Sandberg's *Warrior Pursuits* makes one thing very clear. Being noble in the early seventeenth century—at least in southern France, in the turbulent years between the Edict of Nantes (1598) and the monarchy's formal involvement in the Thirty Years' War (1635)—involved hard work. The pursuit of warfare, which contributed so much to what Sandberg calls “noble culture,” was a time-consuming, costly, and labor-intensive activity. It colored almost every aspect of warriors' existence.

The richest and most rewarding pages of Sandberg's book provide detail on the kinds of routine concerns that even students of the French nobility, or of military history, are prone to ignore or take for granted. In the chronically war-torn south, the château of almost any prominent nobleman doubled as an armory that could be used to equip dozens or even hundreds of soldiers in case of need. Sandberg details the armaments kept on hand at one such château in 1632; an inventory reveals 111 muskets, ten carbines, 150 pikeman's corselets, one coat of mail, sixteen military forks, four halberds, seven crossbows, five small cannon, three drums, and a war tent (p. 208). The men who made use of such equipment needed to be fed, and Sandberg usefully emphasizes that nobles who raised troops—whether in support of the king or in open rebellion against him—also took responsibility for keeping them adequately provisioned through battles, sieges, and raids. The château of Rieux held a thousand bushels of wheat, but it also contained two hay wagons, nine horses, a hackney, a nag, “and seven mules within its walls” (p. 209).

Other supplies and materials had to be purchased, of course, and *Warrior Pursuits* shows the nobility's steady involvement in the decidedly unheroic but essential activity of finding the money and resources needed to wage war. Noble warriors frequently dipped into their own coffers to cover bread rations and pay soldiers their back wages. They commandeered royal and diocesan tax machinery, negotiated with *commissaires des guerres* over billeting practices, arranged loans through their own creditors, and badgered royal ministers when payments fell into arrears. In this region so deeply marked by the presence of religious adversaries, roaming bandits, and always uncertain loyalties, noble captains also frequently felt compelled “to provide armed escorts to facilitate the transportation of any taxes that were collected” (p. 245).

While not waging war and paying for its execution, nobles prepared for it—by nurturing bonds of loyalty with other warriors, by extending their networks of influence (or *crédit*), and by recruiting foot soldiers for the next engagement. Sandberg does a good job surveying the seemingly infinite shades of the warrior's craft. His abundant evidence demonstrates that, for the war-making aristocrats of Languedoc and Guyenne, “nobility itself was a career” (p. 69).

Sandberg presses larger claims, however. He asserts that *Warrior Pursuits* offers “new perspectives on the characteristics of noble culture and practices of civil warfare” (p. 287). The

book “aims to produce a cultural history of civil conflict by probing the intersections of noble culture, state development, and civil violence” (p. xv). At this broader argumentative level, the book is not particularly effective. Sandberg makes much of his effort to merge the methods and concerns of cultural history and military history (pp. xxvii, 287), but his forays into cultural analysis usually leave the reader confused, frustrated, and unconvinced. The combination of the institutional and the cultural is certainly a worthwhile aspiration, but Sandberg, though strong on describing material realities, tends to lose his footing when he seeks to situate everyday realities within meaning-making cultural frameworks.

Sandberg’s treatment of noble culture mixes broad, usually unsurprising generalizations with a critical vocabulary that sounds contrived. Few will find it surprising, for example, that early-modern French nobles “valued honor very highly” and discussed it in their correspondence, or that they “often exchanged provocations, challenges, and insults in a noble culture that was contentious and preoccupied with honor” (pp. 151, 191). Warrior noble families, meanwhile, apparently “sought to expand their seigneurial wealth whenever possible;” nobles’ relations with individual clients “always carried some sense of personal obligation;” and nobles who exercised offices for the king also “advanced their own interests and attempted to fulfill their own desires” (pp. 56, 99, 140).

Other generalizations, in contrast to these common-sense assertions, are bracing because of the breadth of the claims made. “Early seventeenth-century French nobles,” the reader is told, “promoted piety and morality in their armed clienteles and military units” (p. 274). Really? This was true of all? Sandberg later seems to reinforce the point: “A noble officer’s reputation for piety was continually evaluated and assessed in army encampments” (pp. 274-275). The statement strains credulity. We are to assume that not a single commander in Languedoc or Guyenne used religion as a pretext while in pursuit of a political agenda? The encampment should be understood as a site of continuous moral policing carried out by devout noble commanders? Widespread religious intensity marked this period of French history, of course, and Sandberg includes a brief overview of the spirituality fostered by the Catholic Reformation (p. 278), but the idea that religious devotion was a distinctive cultural characteristic of southern noble warriors is asserted rather than proven. No statistical evidence is provided, and nowhere else in the book do we see how religious preoccupations might have shaped the decision-making or behavioral patterns of military nobles.

Sandberg surely did not really intend to claim that all the nobles of southern France promoted piety and morality as part of their military routines, but his rhetorical habit of centering the analysis on “nobles,” “warrior nobles,” and “southern French nobles” calls attention to and raises skepticism about every such generalization, of which each chapter contains dozens. No social group, no matter how carefully and narrowly defined, could possibly be so undifferentiated in its understanding of cultural norms, especially within the volatile and violent context that Sandberg describes. In matters of religion, would it not be more reasonable to assume that some warriors were devout, some kept up appearances, and others flouted religious convention?

Perhaps because he is inclined to view the terrain from panoramic heights, Sandberg also freely applies his own categories of analysis and description, the utility of which is generally asserted rather than demonstrated through evidence. The honor that nobles valued so highly, one learns, took four different forms: precedence (or rank), quality (or family standing), reputation (for personal courage), and—most dubiously—sanctity. Sandberg’s effort to distinguish and explain these forms leads to artificial compartmentalizing. He states categorically, for example, that “honor as reputation could not spring from birth” (p. 165). Reputation, according to his definition, had to rest solely on one’s own actions. The very text Sandberg cites in support of this idea, however, refers explicitly to the “nobility and generosity of blood,” though it is true

that this ancestral survey of the Duc de Montmorency gives rhetorical priority to the actions of the living descendant (p. 165). Surely the different ways of understanding honor overlapped in the minds of those who claimed to possess it, and some would have seen glorious family traditions—or offices held or precedence won—as lending support to personal reputation.

At least personal “reputation” can be easily assimilated to historians’ standard conceptions of honor. “Honor of sanctity,” by contrast, is a category seemingly invented by Sandberg himself, and he applies it without restraint. “French nobles conceived of honor as sanctity, a sense of holiness and character upheld by devotion to God” (p. 154). This conception of honor, he says, was shared by Catholics and Huguenots alike, and it evidently applied stringent requirements on those who laid claim to it. Catholics saw matters of conscience as “crucial” to their conceptions of honor, and Calvinists associated honor with “righteousness, believing themselves members of the elect according to the doctrine of predestination” (p.154). One can imagine this emphasis on piety and conscience being true for some, if not for all, but Sandberg is again categorical. “During this period of religious revival and confessional conflict, warrior nobles seem to have valued their sense of sanctity very highly, associating honor closely with religiosity” (p. 154).

Sandberg also alludes repeatedly to the “culture of revolt” in which his nobles were embedded, and he tells the reader that the culture had its own “gestures and language” (p. 221). But the diverse motivations behind this alleged inclination to revolt, and Sandberg’s own reasons for calling it a culture, are never fully explained. This lapse is surprising, given the existence of well-known frameworks for interpreting noble rebellion in this period. Sandberg mentions Arlette Jouanna’s influential *Devoir de Révolte*, but he simply ignores Jouanna’s central argument about the firm ideological foundations of noble rebellion in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries.[1] Another venerable interpretive tradition, one that explained noble pridefulness as the vestige of a chivalric taste for *gloire*, and of the form of personal autonomy that such heroism presupposed, is also omitted from the discussion.[2]

More generally, Sandberg refrains from exploring the connections between his own work and the historiographical canon. He discusses clientage and friendship, but he engages none of the various arguments over the meaning of the “language of fidelity.” He has a chapter on officeholding, but he fails to acknowledge that the rise of venality and of a more heterogeneous noble elite represented a wholesale challenge to traditional aristocratic identities in the period he is addressing. Sandberg might at least have invoked the old chestnut of a “crisis of nobility,” but with the exception of a few allusive passages, he leaves aside these rich debates—even though his bibliography indicates that he is familiar with all of the older classics.[3] Perhaps he assumes that the milieu he explores had such unique qualities that it needs to be considered in isolation from the wider world of nobility conveyed through the existing literature.

Sandberg claims that ritual and performance defined the noble culture with which he is concerned, but most of the rituals he describes do not seem particularly ritualistic, and the various military “performances” he considers in his final chapter could be more accurately described as violent acts. Is it ritualistic to claim that one’s decision to rebel is an act of self-defense? Does one engage in a ritual when one arms, clothes, and trains recruited soldiers? When a commander disrupts enemies’ lines of communication for strategic purposes, is he really performing a ritual? These activities sound like the nitty-gritty reality of warfare, but Sandberg groups them in a chapter that bears the subtitle “rituals of arming.” Ritual is represented as central to the nobles’ experience. “Rituals of arming... prepared early seventeenth-century French nobles for engaging in civil violence and influenced the development of conflicts” (p. 221). But the term ritual itself is unfortunately never defined. Similarly, why should “the exercise of command” be represented as “a vital performance for warrior nobles operating in the

culture of revolt" (p. 253)? Nowhere are we shown the specific modes of performance that "command" involved, nor do we see how the act of command functioned culturally within the value system of the nobility.

The terms ritual and performance, like the phrases "noble culture," "culture of revolt," "political culture," and "warrior noble honor culture" form part of a strained attempt to represent *Warrior Pursuits* as an innovative cultural history, but in this case the packaging deceives.^[4] The book offers a regional social and institutional history that shows how violence and the constant expectation of violence shaped the structures of routine life for an early seventeenth-century military elite. On the plane of social history, the study has valuable contributions to make. One suspects that the book could have been made to say even more if only Sandberg had been satisfied to present *Warrior Pursuits* as a broadly researched but relatively conventional study of a distinct social group, with emphasis on the group's upper echelon.

One long and revealing passage (p. 218) relates the Duc de Montmorency's efforts to raise three separate armies in the space of seven months in 1621. Readers would benefit from hearing more about the frenzied activity that enveloped Montmorency in these desperate months, as well as a probing explanation of how the Duc himself experienced, managed, and thought through the complicated logistics required to confront this prolonged military crisis. How had his education, his training, his experience as both patron and client, as well as his developing political acumen, enabled him to survive the threatening contingencies of 1621? More such glimpses of intimate social experience, and fewer lackluster applications of cultural methods, would have broadened the appeal of *Warrior Pursuits*.

NOTES

[1] Arlette Jouanna, *Le Devoir de Révolte: La noblesse française et la gestation de l'Etat moderne, 1559-1661* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

[2] On the aristocratic "cult of glory" and the gradual "demolition of the hero" see, respectively, Anthony Levi, *French Moralists: The Theory of the Passions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 177-201, and Paul Bénichou, *Morales du Grand Siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967; first edn. 1948), pp. 155-180. This general idea undergirded much of the historical literature that described a "taming" of the nobility by Louis XIV, a literature criticized, for example, by Andrew Lossky, *Louis XIV and the French Monarchy* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

[3] The exclusion of the "language of fidelity" theme is made more curious by Sandberg's inclusion of a sub-section called "The Exaggerated Language of Service" (pp. 143-145). Some of the texts he might have discussed include Roland Mousnier, "Les fidélités et les clientèles en France au XVIIe, XVIIIe, et XVIIIe siècles," *Histoire Sociale* 15(1982): 35-46; Sharon Kettering, "Gift-Giving and Patronage in Early-Modern France," *French History* 2(1988): 131-151; Arthur L. Herman, Jr., "The Language of Fidelity in Early-Modern France," *Journal of Modern History* 67(1995): 1-24; and the forum "Patronage, Language, and Political Culture," in *French Historical Studies* 17(1992): 839-881. On the crisis of the nobility, the rise of venality, and changing definitions of the aristocracy in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one could start, for example, with Davis Bitton, *The French Nobility in Crisis, 1560-1640* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1969); Jonathan Dewald, *The Formation of a Provincial Nobility: The Magistrates of the Parlement of Rouen, 1499-1610* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980); and Ellery Schalk, *From Valor to Pedigree: Ideas of Nobility in France in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986). Given the centrality of

violence in Sandberg's study, Sandberg should also have engaged more directly with Stuart Carroll's *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), even if there is a fair distinction to be made between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence in the lives of the nobility.

[4] Sandberg introduces political culture in his chapter on office-holding, and he cites Keith Michael Baker as a model, but the engagement with Baker is superficial and confused, and the term political culture ceases to function as an operative category after its first mention (p. 116). "Warrior honor noble culture" appears in the introduction to chapter six, on honor and courage (p. 151).

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