

H-France Review Vol. 19 (March 2019), No. 33

Benjamin Deruelle, *De papier, de fer et de sang: Chevaliers et chevalerie à l'épreuve de la modernité (ca 1460 – ca 1620)*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015. 671 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. €45.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-85944-910-0.

Review by Brian Sandberg, Northern Illinois University.

Chivalry allegedly died an inglorious death on battlefields in Italy during the sixteenth century. The diffusion of gunpowder artillery and firearms, the growing importance of infantry forces, and the emergence of modern warfare during the Italian Wars (1494-1559) purportedly displaced knights and led to the decline of the nobility. Chivalric literature seemed to confirm the irrelevance of nobles in the modernizing world of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The figure of Don Quixote embodies the irrelevant noble, famously tilting at windmills and uncomfortably inhabiting a world barren of chivalric values. According to this view, chivalric ideals lived on only in nostalgic dreams of a return to a lost world of knightly deeds and in heroic tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

A “decline of nobility” thesis has long reinforced this image, due to Norbert Elias’s influential interpretation of a “civilizing process” and absolutist narratives of state development.[1] These parallel lines of historiography have emphasized growing royal power over court society, government administration, and military forces—all resulting in a gradual decline of the nobility. Although studies of noble “decline” and “domestication” have dealt with noble elites across early modern Europe, French nobles have provided crucial examples for historians associated with the “decline of nobility” thesis.

*De papier, de fer et de sang. Chevaliers et chevalerie à l'épreuve de la modernité* reexamines chivalric ideals and realities in sixteenth-century France, challenging the linked notions of a decline of chivalry and a domestication of the nobility. Benjamin Deruelle examines the *noblesse militaire*, or warrior nobility, as a distinct group within early modern French society that held a special relationship to chivalric culture. He aims “de reconstruire la culture chevaleresque de la noblesse militaire et d’en comprendre les évolutions au regard des tensions politiques, sociales et religieuses du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle” (p. 41). Deruelle is hardly the first historian to challenge the “decline of the nobility” thesis, but his reassessment of chivalric culture directly criticizes the concepts of a “civilizing process” and absolutism in new ways.[2] The book demonstrates the continuing importance of chivalric ideals in French noble culture and questions the opposition between “guerre chevaleresque” and “guerre moderne” during the Italian Wars and the French Wars of Religion (1559-1629) (p. 24).

Deruelle considers chivalric culture as a broad construct that encompassed concepts, ideals, and practices shaped by classic works of chivalric literature and also by a wide range of manuscript and printed writings on nobility, weapons, dueling, and war. Deruelle assesses the impact of major chivalric novels such as Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, and Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, which were translated into French during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Other chivalric works such as *Tirant le Blanc*, *Amadis de Gaule*, *Godefroy de Bouillon*, *La vie de Bayard*, *Doolin de Maïence*, *Cycles des barons révoltés*, *Quatre fils Aymon*, and *Cycle de la Table ronde* are also explored. The book examines memoirs, commentaries, chronicles, essays, and histories by Michel de Montaigne, Blaise de Montluc, François de Belleforest, Pierre de Bourdeille seigneur de Brantôme, and other authors. Royal declarations, *lettres patentes*, and *ordonnances* provide rich detail on sixteenth-century military practices. Deruelle exploits contemporary paintings, portraits, frescos, and prints to demonstrate the visual dimensions of chivalric culture. The author contextualizes these sources within a dense framework of historical studies of the nobility, monarchy, court culture, ceremonial, and literature in early modern France.[3]

Deruelle's analysis blends historical and literary methodologies to highlight interrelationships between these sources and to reveal new aspects of chivalric culture. He employs the methods of cultural history, concepts history, history of representations, and history of war and society to contribute new findings to the history of the nobility.[4] Deruelle simultaneously utilizes literary techniques to explore language, paratext, intertextuality, and intermediality in chivalric literature and print culture. The analysis demonstrates that chivalric culture was not confined merely to the royal family and courtiers, but instead pervaded the ethos of the entire warrior nobility.

The book began as a dissertation, written under the supervision of Hervé Drévilion, and is organized into three thematic sections. Part one, *Une chevalerie entre Antiquité, Moyen Âge et Modernité*, examines chivalric ideals and noble culture in sixteenth-century literature. The second part, *De l'idéal guerrier à l'idéal politique*, explore representations of nobles' royal service, military endeavors, and political activities. The final part, *De l'idéal éthique à l'idéal social : la chevalerie, un ethos nobiliaire*, analyzes nobles' militant practices through dueling, military education, cavalry service, and warrior comportment.

Throughout the book, Deruelle treats warrior nobles as inhabiting a specific culture, with a separate identity as a distinct social group that embraced chivalric culture intimately. He argues that "l'exaltation de la chevalerie, de ses valeurs et de ses modes de vie continue donc d'être le marqueur d'une identité sociale" (p. 76). Deruelle finds that authors of chivalric literature utilized a dual pedagogical approach that was both "éducative et émulative," making their works "authentiques miroirs de la noblesse, répertoires des valeurs, de l'éthique militaire et des attitudes exemplaires de la noblesse" (p. 93). The book aims to provide "une réévaluation des rapports de la noblesse aux pouvoirs laïcs et religieux, car la chevalerie était vécue comme une véritable religion" (p. 35).

For warrior nobles, then, living nobly involved embracing martial activities and chivalric ideals. Chivalric culture was hardly static, however, and Deruelle attempts to trace the gradual evolution of chivalric culture throughout the sixteenth century. The book portrays warrior noble culture as resilient and adaptive: "la persistance de cette culture repose sur sa capacité à se

renouveler en permanence, à faire siennes les interrogations qui traversent le second ordre et à s'adapter aux évolutions de la société" (p. 89).

Deruelle sets warrior nobles and military writers into the broader humanist movement that guided intellectual culture in sixteenth-century France. Deruelle employs the term *humanisme militaire* to describe contemporary military thinking, elaborating on a concept that Hervé Drévilhon has developed (p. 91).<sup>[5]</sup> Warrior nobles wrote memoirs, military manuals, and other texts that contributed to humanist debates on chivalric virtues, military arts, and the laws of war. Nobles patronized translations and editions of military manuals and works of chivalric literature. According to Deruelle, "les efforts de traduction et d'édition de l'humanisme militaire" fournissent une matière essentielle à la reformulation de l'idéal chevaleresque" (p. 176). Nobles were also major consumers of the writings of *humanisme militaire*, reading texts and collecting books for their libraries. Deruelle stresses that "la composition des bibliothèques aristocratiques confirme, jusqu'à un certain point, la continuité du lien entre culture chevaleresque, noblesse et guerre au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle" (p. 165). The book draws on studies of inventories of nobles' libraries in their *châteaux* and *hôtels particuliers* to demonstrate warrior nobles' keen interest in chivalric culture and military arts.

The Italian Wars provided a perfect site for the renewal of chivalric ideals among warrior nobles. According to Deruelle, "loin d'avoir abandonné l'ambition d'être socialement utile, l'idéal chevaleresque du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle est revêtu d'un ensemble de fonctions qui en font un système culturel cohérent" (p. 138). Warrior nobles strongly desired to restore chivalry through feats of arms in Italy and advance its ideals in French society. "La restauration de la tradition chevaleresque s'inscrit enfin dans la recherche des origines du royaume et dans la revendication de la *translatio imperii* initiée par les humanistes du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle" (p. 155). Far from becoming demilitarized, warrior nobles championed military service and discussed ways of re-forming the French nobility in order to promote a return to chivalric virtues. Warrior nobles' chivalric ideals and military practices stressed personal courage and prowess, while promoting *le métier des armes* as a genuine profession (p. 107, p. 134).

Warrior nobles' military service in royal armies shaped their understandings of monarchy during the sixteenth century. Deruelle shows that "l'idéal chevaleresque est intégré aux représentations collectives de la monarchie" (p. 199). Royal imagery frequently displayed chivalric culture, allowing the king and the warrior nobles to share chivalric ideals, attributes, and rituals. "Le roi ne dispose pas du monopole de la dignité chevaleresque dans le cérémonial. En effet, une partie de la noblesse défile également et arbore comme lui le harnois blanc et les éperons dorés" (p. 215). Occasionally, kings would still perform individual and collective ennoblements directly on the battlefield (pp. 188-189). Warrior nobles frequently displayed their social position by their proximity to the king and royal family members during royal ceremonies, entries, and processions. Deruelle contends that "la persistance de la symbolique chevaleresque dans le cérémonial témoigne des espoirs et des valeurs morales et politiques portés encore par une partie au moins du corps social" (p. 201).

One of the most innovative sections of the book examines noble education and the formation of the warrior nobility. Young noblemen served as pages, learning fencing, horsemanship, and noble comportment. Nobles engaged in martial exercises with swords, lances, firearms, and other military weapons. Deruelle emphasizes that the rigorous physical pedagogy of this apprenticeship in arms essentially served as an education in the "art de tuer" (p. 424). Many young

nobles entered academies for a more rigorous and structured formation in arms, equestrian arts, and military arts. Jousts and tournaments served as competitive training grounds for nobles in the art of the lance, which prepared them for heavy cavalry warfare.

Nobles gained military experience in the *compagnies d'ordonnance*, heavy cavalry companies that were maintained by the French royal state. Deruelle argues that “Les compagnies d'ordonnance sont donc aussi une institution de formation, où l'esprit chevaleresque est entretenu par les usages guerriers” (p. 441). Service in the *compagnies d'ordonnance* forged social bonds among noble cavalymen and provided them combat experience. The *compagnies d'ordonnance* championed a culture of the lance and “la pratique de la lance continue d'être perçue comme un marqueur identitaire et comme une voie d'élévation sociale” (p. 493). Heavy cavalry continued to be crucial to military operations during the Italian Wars and the French Wars of Religion, as exemplified by the *charge en haie* with lance that defined their military effectiveness (pp. 468-475). Military manuals and treatises by Johan Jacob von Wallhausen, Pierre de La Noue, and Antoine Pluvinel stressed the importance of heavy cavalry, developing new “scientific” approaches to horsemanship, equestrian arts, and cavalry tactics. Deruelle stresses that “les pratiques chevaleresques contribuent à la régulation des rapports entre les gentilshommes, et entre la noblesse militaire et le reste de la société” (p. 467).

Deruelle focuses on the concept of *bonne guerre* and its applications in regulating *jus in bello*, or the customary laws governing the practices of war. Juridical writings on the laws of war elaborated immunities for certain individuals and groups: disarmed combatants, clergy, women, children, and elderly persons. Yet, the laws of war contained deep tensions and contradictions, since the same laws of war provided for the legitimate execution of all rebel subjects, regardless of their social station. During the wars of the sixteenth century, humanists and jurists debated the principles and applications of the laws of war in diverse publications. Deruelle argues that “cette entreprise de codification des usages de la ‘bonne guerre’ rompt définitivement avec la conception médiévale selon laquelle la justice de la cause détermine la licéité des comportements” (p. 525).

Putting the ideals of *bonne guerre* into practice involved complicated considerations of the treatment of prisoners and non-combatants. French nobles often described surrender as a personal act that established a new relationship between captive and captor. Deruelle points out that “l'échange de promesses scelle donc la reddition et accorde au vaincu le statut de prisonnier de guerre” (p. 534). The exchange of promises between captors and captives and the negotiation of ransom effectively represented a form of hospitality. The growing use of collective capitulations during the wars of the sixteenth century posed new problems, especially in the context of garrison capitulations following sieges. As armies grew and became increasingly transnational in composition, the problem of alterity posed new challenges for the treatment of combatants of differing nationalities, social stations, and ranks. War could easily degenerate into *mauvaise guerre* or *guerre cruelle* when soldiers pillaged peasant villages and sacked cities (p. 545).

Although chivalric culture has often been described in essentially secular terms, Deruelle demonstrates the religious dimensions of chivalry. The archetypes of the *chevalier chrétien* and the *miles christi* promoted a martial imitation of Christ and an ideal of bloody self-sacrifice (pp. 326-327). Military service represented both a civic and sacred duty for the warrior nobles as members of the *militia christi* (p. 258). Some warrior nobles expressed their chivalric ideals through their service in national and transnational military orders such as the Ordre de Saint-Michel, the Ordre

de Malte, or the Ordre de la Toison d'Or. Notably, the chevaliers de Saint-Michel portrayed themselves as defenders of the Christian faith, the French crown, and the public (p. 277). French chivalric writers depicted Archangel Saint Michel as the "premier chevalier" and the conqueror over Satan (p. 278). Warrior nobles thus embraced crusading ideals of just war against heretics, infidels, and unbelievers.

The ideal of the Christian knight took on new confessional meanings during the French Wars of Religion, as Catholic and Calvinist nobles developed opposing notions of an ideal Christian warrior. Huguenot nobles focused on moral discipline and spirituality, while Catholic nobles developed a new Crusading spirit and militancy directed against internal heretics (pp. 182-184). Saint Michel had long served as the patron saint for soldiers, but Protestants rejected veneration of all saints and Saint Michel now became a symbol of the defense of the Catholic faith against Satan and the forces of evil. Deruelle points out that in the context of confessional struggles, Saint Michel came to symbolize righteousness and truth as patron saint of a "Most Christian" kingdom and protector of royal authority (p. 504). These fascinating observations could be expanded with further research into noble religiosity and confessionalization. Chivalric culture seems potentially to have fractured over religious concerns, moral questions, and confessional politics.

The French Wars of Religion also revealed fundamental tensions within noble culture and changing relationships between warrior nobles and the royal state. The diffusion of rapiers and the pervasive civil wars transformed the practices of dueling during the sixteenth century, yet diverse forms of dueling remained (p. 385). Warrior nobles challenged political rivals to formal duels, but also engaged in private feuds with adversaries and their families. The concept of a *monarchie mixte* continued to shaped warrior nobles' relationship with the king and with the royal administration, but political instability and pervasive civil war disrupted noble bonds and chivalric ideals. Deruelle focuses on the ways in which Henri III's creation of a new military order in 1578 fomented tensions within Catholic chivalric culture. The Ordre du Saint-Esprit aimed to promote Catholic chivalric ideals and restore concord in the kingdom, but its restrictive membership also heightened jealousies and prompted criticisms of Henri III's favorites (p. 285). Deruelle sets the creation of this order into a broader pattern of the monarchy's progressive "monopolisation de l'idéal chevaleresque" that he believes continued throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (p. 273).

*De papier, de fer et de sang* greatly enhances our understanding of early modern French noble culture. This impressive book demonstrates how chivalric ideals shaped the distinct culture of the *noblesse militaire*, but also influenced court culture, French literature, and broader French society. Deruelle convincingly argues that the cultural practices of chivalry defined many of the social rules and normative constraints that warrior nobles followed. The complex concept of *honneur* was central to chivalric culture and provided the symbolic capital for warrior nobles' assessments of their personal behavior and their social relationships. Chivalric culture provided a rich language of virtue and *honneur* that warrior nobles employed to describe their martial endeavors and their social realities. Warrior nobles' embrace of chivalric ideals and their continued engagement in the exercise of arms ensured that chivalric culture would continue to thrive throughout the early modern period.

## NOTES

[1] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Ellery Schalk, *From Valor to Pedigree: Ideas of Nobility in France in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Davis Bitton, *The French Nobility In Crisis, 1560-1640* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969).

[2] Hamish Scott, “‘Acts of Time and Power’: The Consolidation of Aristocracy in Seventeenth-Century Europe, c. 1580-1720,” in *German Historical Institute London Bulletin*, Bd. 30.2 (2008): 3-37; Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); James B. Wood, “The Decline of the Nobility in Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Century France: Myth or Reality?” *Journal of Modern History* 48 (March 1976): 1-29.

[3] Jonathan Dewald, *The European Nobility, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jay M. Smith, *The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600-1789* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Jonathan Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience and the Origins of Modern Culture: France, 1570-1715* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Arlette Jouanna, *Le devoir de révolte: La noblesse française et la gestation de l'État moderne, 1559-1661* (Paris: Fayard, 1989); Kristen B. Neuschel, *Word of Honor: Interpreting Noble Culture in Sixteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Mack P. Holt, *The Duke of Anjou and the Politique Struggle during the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Jean-Marie Constant, *La Noblesse française aux XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris: Hachette, 1985); Robert R. Harding, *Anatomy of a Power Elite: The Provincial Governors of Early Modern France* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1978).

[4] Ariane Boltanski, *Les ducs de Nevers et l'état royal. Genèse d'un compromis (ca 1550 – ca 1600)* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2006); Laurent Bourquin, *Les nobles, la ville et le roi. L'autorité nobiliaire en Anjou pendant les guerres de Religion* (Paris: Belin, 2001); Hugues Daussy, *Les huguenots et le roi. Le combat politique de Philippe Duplessis-Mornay (1572-1600)* (Genève: Droz, 2002); Stéphane Gal, *Lesdiguières. Prince des Alpes et connétable de France* (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 2007); Nicolas Le Roux, *La faveur du roi. Mignons et courtisans au temps des derniers Valois (vers 1547 - vers 1589)* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2000); Mathieu Lemoine, *La Faveur et la gloire. Le maréchal de Bassompierre mémorialiste (1579-1646)* (Paris: Presses de l'université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2012); Xavier Le Person, “Pratiques” et “Practiqueurs”. *La vie politique à la fin du règne de Henri III (1584-1589)* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2002); Michel Nassiet, *Parenté, noblesse, et états dynastiques, XV<sup>e</sup>-XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2000); Stuart Carroll, *Noble Power During the French Wars of Religion: The Guise Affinity and the Catholic Cause in Normandy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[5] Hervé Drévuillon, *L'individu et la guerre: Du chevalier Bayard au Soldat inconnu* (Paris: Belin, 2013).

Brian Sandberg  
Northern Illinois University  
[bsandberg@niu.edu](mailto:bsandberg@niu.edu)

Copyright © 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for

---

nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172