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Henning Hillmann, *The Corsairs of Saint-Malo: Network Organization of a Merchant Elite Under the Ancien Régime*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. xii + 322 pp. Appendix, acknowledgments, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$140.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780231180382; \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780231180399.

Review by Jeff Horn, Manhattan College.

Henning Hillmann, a professor of economic and organizational sociology at the University of Mannheim, delivers a penetrating historical analysis of the role of privateering in the formation of Saint-Malo's merchant elite from the Age of Louis XIV until the French Revolution. Though somewhat repetitive, his narrative lays out a number of important arguments about the role of networks and of the importance of social cohesion to economic behavior that contribute in multiple ways to diverse literatures. Among a number of recent works on distinct elements of French commerce and society, Hillman's work stands out for the questions it asks and its approach to answering them.

Based on rich sources from the Ille-et-Vilaine departmental archives, most notably the Fonds de l'Amirauté, and a thorough, nuanced reading of the relevant literatures, Hillmann has produced an impressive study of Saint-Malo's merchant elite that is both latitudinal and longitudinal in its conception. Through a rigorous analysis of 3,250 share partnerships registered at Saint-Malo between 1681 and 1793, he is at pains to illustrate that the investment practices of these merchants formed a recognizable network and that this network provided "social cohesion" for the merchant community, thereby facilitating the city's success. For Hillmann, the "linchpin" of the network of investments—which also included Newfoundland fishing, coastal trading especially with Spain (*cabotage*), and the slave trade—was investment in *la course* (privateering) (pp. 3-4). Hillmann has largely succeeded in achieving these aims in this well-written, interdisciplinary book.

In his sociological consideration of the emergence of the Atlantic economy, Hillmann seeks to elaborate how "a truly global network of commerce changed the outlook of the members of the local merchant elite" (p. 5). In the first two chapters, he clearly and concisely lays out the expanding horizons of *les Messieurs de Saint-Malo*, the city's merchant elite. Longstanding ties to Spain and the British Isles were supplemented by commitment to fishing the Grand Banks in the trade links of these merchants in the mid-seventeenth century. The ability of Saint-Malo's merchants to take advantage of the opportunities that emerged after 1650 was based on that commercial elite's social cohesion. This social cohesion stemmed from their acting as brokers or organizational linchpins of networks that functioned informally as a means of "integrating

diverse sets of actors and their relationships” through investing sequentially in commercial ventures (pp. 8-10).

Saint-Malo’s utility as a case study is based on its uneven trajectory. The city’s economic peak from the 1680s to 1715 was succeeded by a major decline until a minor revival began in the 1750s. Unlike most of the French ports engaged in Atlantic trade, war represented a vital opportunity both for short-term profit and to develop longer-term commercial linkages, mostly in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. These possibilities depended on the wholehearted embrace of privateering by *les Messieurs de Saint-Malo*. Given its limited economic hinterland and certain other structural disadvantages such as the lack of major administrative institutions, the city’s merchant elite exploited repeated maritime wars to change their economic position, both individually and collectively.

Although much of the methodology and some of the research questions are based on economics and sociology, Hillmann is deeply engaged in the historiography of Malouin commerce, and much of the book is an extended conversation with historian André Lespagnol.[1] Hillmann is at pains to confront Lespagnol’s contention that the decline of Malouin commerce should be attributed to merchants taking their profits and investing in land and office as part of a multigenerational effort to join the nobility, a process that has been noted in France’s other trading cities (p. 13). While taking on Lespagnol’s argument, Hillmann also highlights what was different or unique about Saint-Malo. That triple engagement—with social science methodologies, local historiography, and broader socio-economic developments—is the great strength of this book and sets it apart from other recent case-studies of early modern French commerce.[2]

Across the seventeenth century, Saint-Malo profited from fishing, the export of textiles (linen and woolens), and the import of Spanish silver (pp. 29-33). But it was the late wars of Louis XIV’s reign, the Nine Years War (1688-97) and War of Spanish Succession (1702-13), that enabled Saint-Malo to experience its golden age despite its military vulnerability to Anglo-Dutch attack. The Malouins adopted “an alternative maritime strategy, the *guerre de course*” (p. 40). In wartime, corsairs, or privateers with letters of marque, enjoyed the legal sanction of the state to take and sell prizes. This “private war at sea,” which Hillmann characterizes as “a genuine economic form of warfare,” (p. 41) was a more decentralized, cheaper strategy to fight the coalitions that opposed Louis XIV after his failure to establish a more traditional naval hegemony.

Les Messieurs de Saint-Malo embraced privateering because naval war threatened their traditional sources of income. For them, “the *course* was a second-best choice in the absence of viable alternatives” because it “complemented both traditional and novel trading opportunities” (p. 44). The novel opportunities afforded by war included the “South Sea”—direct trade with Spanish colonies on the Pacific Coast of Latin America—expeditions to the Arabian Peninsula (for coffee), the subcontinent of India, and China. Chartered companies with royal privileges played key roles in generating and maintaining interest among Saint-Malo’s mercantile elite (pp. 45-46, 51-54).

One of the most useful aspects of Hillmann’s study is that he goes beyond process to profitability, providing a sense of the returns not just for outstanding individual entrepreneurs like Noël Danycan, sieur de l’Épine, but also for the city as a whole (pp. 47-48) and devotes a thoughtful chapter to “Returns of Privateering.” However, Saint-Malo’s run as a hub of global commerce did not long survive Louis XIV. The Treaty of Utrecht inaugurated both a period of peace for France and, for Saint-Malo, of economic decline.

In Chapter 3 “Social Sources of Economic Growth,” Hillmann follows Lespagnol in arguing that much of the flexibility and entrepreneurship underpinning Saint-Malo’s success was based on “the social relational fabric of the merchant elite” (p. 65). He explores the sources of solidarity of “an oligarchy of eminent merchant families, unlike other cities that played a leading role in the French Atlantic Economy” (p. 66). Although there were exceptions and newcomers, this elite lived in the same two neighborhoods, shared a fervent Roman Catholicism, intermarried frequently, and practiced a “*fidelité au commerce*.” Hillmann argues that the key factor in maintaining social solidarity lay in the function of commercial apprenticeship (p. 73) as both socialization and professionalization (p. 75). This elite was joined by a strong admixture of aspiring entrepreneurs from small towns and cities in Brittany and Normandy, younger sons of provincial nobles, and established merchants who came to Saint-Malo in search of opportunity. These groups blended in relatively seamlessly with existing elites (pp. 69-70), and the homogeneity of the merchant elite facilitated the city’s economic success by encouraging joint ventures.

The fourth chapter on “The *Course*” makes clear the difference between privateering and piracy, though a number of the stories of individual entrepreneurs and voyages offer strong hints of those romantic adventurers. Although he provides details of privateering from the ships and crew to the targets and legal arrangements, Hillmann’s focus is on the investment partnerships that funded this profit opportunity in the guise of economic warfare. His database of partnerships permits a valuable explication of the costs and benefits of arming a privateering expedition that differs from the accounts of earlier historians (p. 135). This interest in the effect of institutions on economic behavior is central to Hillmann’s study because, for *les Messieurs de Saint-Malo*, “venture partnerships, in trade or privateering, were indeed at the very heart of their *collective* identity” (p. 105). Based on the work of Amalia Kessler, Hillmann emphasizes social bonds fostered by partnerships among kin as an extension of the family that were also an expression of “merchant virtue” (pp. 124, 104).^[3] But those bonds rested on a solid base of widespread, enduring profitability (p. 140).

“The Dynamics of Partnership Networks” is, unsurprisingly, the most social scientific chapter. Here Hillmann analyzes the 3,250 partnerships and 6,298 individual shareholders for affiliation networks and their coherence, broken down into six periods based on wars or their absence. Only one-third of the shareholders participated in more than one voyage (the rest averaged six), and these 2,142 merchants are the focus of much of the chapter. However, his key finding embraces them all. He found that for the entire 1681-1792 period, 85 percent were affiliated through a joint commercial investment, concluding that “social cohesion was indeed pervasive” among the merchant community (p. 162). The network of shared investments was less dense between 1713 and 1740, supporting the contention that it was privateering that brokered affiliations among merchants (p. 163). Hillmann attempts to explore other factors such as kinship, residence, geographical origins, and other commercial opportunities. Scrupulously, he admits that, “it might have been the sheer size, and not any genuine social relational or organizational quality specific to *course* ventures, that placed them into their linchpin positions” (p. 188). In chapter six, Hillmann is more effective at ruling out other explanations than in making his own case.

Hillmann seeks to undermine Lespagnol’s argument by exploring how, after 1740, but more clearly in the 1760s, a different group of entrepreneurs seized on the opportunities of privateering to restore some of Saint-Malo’s lost economic luster. In addition to privateering, they took

advantage of the end of the French East India Company's privilege in 1769 to send expeditions to the Indian and Pacific Oceans and entered the slave trade. Coming back once more to Gabriel-François, abbé Coyer's *La noblesse commerçante* (1756), Hillmann asserts that many scions of nobility were among the new men which helped to explain their predilection for privateering and their preference for high risk/high reward investments (pp. 208, 216-217).

The final brief chapter on "The Coming of the Revolution" rehearses some of the political conflicts of revolutionary Saint-Malo and provides Hillmann another opportunity to restate his central arguments. It does not engage with current historiography on the effects of the Revolution on commerce and commercial institutions, nor does it consider the fate of Malouin new men in comparison to other related work on the subject. A romantic-tinged final paragraph did not distract from a rather desultory conclusion.

As I hope has been made clear, *The Corsairs of Saint-Malo* is a very strong work, but a few of its shortcomings deserve comment. First, although Hillmann read widely and deeply, he did not always consult other sources that might have engaged his arguments. He discusses an "apparent paradox" of merchant elites leaving trade at the height of their economic power in order to rise into the nobility (pp. 77-78, 191). This is not a paradox at all, and not for the reasons Hillmann articulates. Robert Forster's deep dive into the economic logics of social mobility for a merchant family from La Rochelle could have provided a framework to understand this behavior without undermining the analysis.[4]

Second, there is a distinct tension between Hillmann's claims and his sources. He makes broad claims about the nature and effectiveness of social solidarity based on small, even tiny subsets of the impressive numbers of partnerships and investors trumpeted in other places (pp. 84, 155, 159, and esp. 234). I think that many of Hillmann's assertions may, indeed, be accurate, but I would need more evidence than the statistics offered here. Hillmann did impressive work in the departmental archives, but he did not consult the National Archives, the Archives of the Marine, the Colonial Archives, or seemingly even spend much time in the municipal archives. The sources in those depositories might have allowed him to reread the sources used by others and read them against the grain to illustrate the working of investment networks. In particular, I was looking for investigations of religious confraternities, guild activities, or other signs of either formal or informal social solidarity that additional sources might have provided. It is always easy for a reviewer, especially one from another discipline, to suggest that someone should do a *lot* more research, but in this case, I was forced to wonder how much more convincing this book would have been if that additional work had been done.

Hillmann's *The Corsairs of Saint-Malo* provides valuable insight into the achievements of the city's mercantile elite and how they were able to accomplish so much. The numerous charts and visual representations of data clusters complement a well-crafted narrative that has enough recourse to the actions of colorful individuals and profitable partnerships to maintain interest and put a human face on the wealth of statistical analysis. His painstaking scrutiny of the data from the departmental archives will be of interest to many historians and economists. The emphasis on network organization and social cohesion will engage those of a more sociological bent. In short, many will find this book well worth a read.

NOTES

[1] See André Lespagnol, *Messieurs de Saint-Malo. Une élite négociante au temps de Louis XIV* (Saint-Malo: Éditions L'Ancre de Marine, 1991) and *Entre l'argent et la gloire. La course Malouin au temps de Louis XIV* (Rennes: Éditions Apogée, 1995) among his many works.

[2] For an up-to-date bibliography of recent work on France's ports, see Alan Forrest, [*The Death of the French Atlantic: Trade, War, and Slavery in the Age of Revolution*](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), chapter 2. In terms of conceptual approach, Hillmann's book is most comparable to Junko Takeda's *Between Crown and Commerce: Marseille and the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

[3] Amalia Kessler, *A Revolution of Commerce. The Parisian Merchant Court and the Rise of Commercial Society in Eighteenth-Century France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

[4] Robert Forster, *Merchants, Landlords, Magistrates: The Depont Family in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). This argument is an updated and expanded version of a major interpretation of bourgeois social mobility by Elinor Barber, *The Bourgeoisie in 18th Century France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955).

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