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Xavier Hélyary, *L'ascension et la chute de Pierre de La Broce, chambellan du roi (†1278). Étude sur le pouvoir royal au temps de Saint Louis et de Philippe III (v. 1250-v. 1280)*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2021. 520 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. €78.00 (pb). ISBN 9782745355522.

Review by Sean L. Field, University of Vermont.

Xavier Hélyary's previous books are well known to specialists on Capetian France. His first three monographs--on the battle of Courtrai, the French royal army, and Louis IX's crusade of 1270 [1]--drew on his five-volume *thèse de doctorat* defended in 2004 at Université Paris-IV (directed by Jacques Verger) [2] and advanced him from maître de conférences at Université Paris-IV to professeur d'histoire médiévale at Université Jean-Moulin Lyon III. Hélyary's new study now encapsulates the first volume of the *mémoire inédit* from his *habilitation à diriger des recherches* defended in 2013 at Université Paris-IV (sponsored by Dominique Barthélemy)[3] and has recently spurred his election as professeur d'histoire médiévale at Université Paris-Sorbonne. This meticulous and insightful work cements Hélyary's place as the acknowledged expert on the reign of Philip III (1270-85) and thus as the intellectual heir to Charles-Victor Langlois. More broadly, it marks him as a worthy successor to his mentors, including Élisabeth Lalou, Bernard Guenée, Jean Richard, and Philippe Contamine (who contributed a preface to the present book), and establishes him as a leader among the talented younger generation of French Capetianists that includes Olivier Canteaut, Marie Dejoux, Alain Provost, and Julien Théry.

It is useful to first take note of the book's subtitle. In the broadest sense, this is truly a study of how power could be accumulated and exercised at the French court in the decades between 1250 and 1280. The first four chapters--on Philip III, his barons, the royal *hôtel*, and the dynamics of the court--comprise the state-of-the-art study of this king's overlooked reign. These 160 pages (together with the *Essai d'interprétation* that forms chapter twelve) should be the starting point for any scholar looking to understand the way royal power worked during the later years of Louis IX's reign and across the fifteen-year reign of his son. In particular, chapters two and three provide a broad and deep prosopography of French elites (seculars and churchmen alike) in this period, illuminating the careers of great nobles, royal officials (including chamberlains), leading knights, and prelates. These chapters pack a great deal of information into a short space and will be a boon for researchers.

Chapters five through nine then trace the rise and fall of Pierre de La Broce, the overmighty chamberlain who is usually portrayed as an obscure figure who became the first great "royal favorite" in the history of France. One of the virtues of Hélyary's study is to ground Pierre de La Broce in his real historical context. Pierre's father was a vassal of the seigneur de Bray but became

a sergeant in royal service by 1248; he may well have departed with Louis IX on the crusade of that year and was referred to as *chevalier* by 1253. One of Pierre's grandmothers had earlier been referred to as "noble" in an extant document. Evidently the family's standing was not entirely obscure. Pierre de La Broce followed his father into the *hôtel* of Louis IX, appearing as *chirurgien et valet de la chambre* by 1261 and as chamberlain by 1266. He took part in Louis IX's ill-fated crusade of 1270, during which he seems to have forged a close relationship with prince Philip, who became king with his father's death on 25 August 1270. To this point a moderately important figure (one chamberlain among several) in the royal household, Pierre suddenly appears as one of the executors in Philip III's will (2 October 1270) and that of queen Isabelle of Aragon (19 January 1271) and as part of the proposed regency council should Philip III die before his son reached maturity (ordinances of October 1270 and December 1271). Clearly his personal relationship with the new king afforded him a sharp rise in status and influence. His ascent over the next six years can be seen most clearly in his landed acquisitions, documented in the evidentiary base at the heart of this study, the *fonds Pierre de La Broce* in layettes J 726 to 730 in the Trésor des chartes at the Archives nationales (see the "Note sur le chartrier de Pierre de La Broce," pp. 431-433).

By 1277 Pierre had certainly built up an impressive patrimony of lordships (most importantly Langeais and Châtillon-sur-Inde), lands (notably [in addition to La Broce] Mouliherne and Chémery in the west; Fins in the east; and Damville and Charnelles in Normandy), various rents (calculated to around 700 *livres tournois* per year), and residences (including in Paris on the rue Sainte-Geneviève). Without doubt he was far richer and more powerful than his father the royal sergeant had been a generation earlier. But was this really such a stunning acquisition of wealth? As Hélyar shows, it was in fact more or less in line with the way comparable figures—for example, Pierre de Chambley, who became a chamberlain about the same time as Pierre de La Broce—were rewarded. Pierre de La Broce may have been greedy and grasping, but perhaps not notably more so than his peers. In terms of pure wealth, the documentary evidence does not reveal him to have been an all-powerful court favorite. Similarly, the marriages of Pierre La Broce's children, though they did tend to be upwardly mobile, were actually less illustrious than those of Pierre de Chambley's offspring. Pierre de La Broce was sometimes called "noble" in contemporary documents (though never those issued by the crown) but he was never formally knighted as his father had been. Still, he evidently did everything he could to present himself as a noble lord, for instance by freeing himself from ties of vassalage except directly to the king.

If Pierre de La Broce's rise appears less precipitous in Hélyar's analysis than later chronicle accounts (see below) would have us believe, his fall was nevertheless spectacular. For reasons that remain unclear (even in light of Hélyar's meticulous investigation), in 1276 Pierre de La Broce and his wife's kinsman Pierre de Benais (archdeacon then bishop of Bayeux) attacked Philip III's second wife, Marie de Brabant, in essence accusing her of poisoning at least one of the king's sons from his first marriage. The extant evidence for the twists and turns of the resulting inquiries is fascinating but extraordinarily convoluted, revolving around what the visionary holy woman Elizabeth of Spalbeek may or may not have claimed that God had revealed to her about the king and queen. In my own work I have offered slightly different interpretations of the evidence for the four separate inquiries sent to interrogate Elizabeth [4], but Hélyar's readings are closely reasoned, carefully supported, and generally convincing. In the end, the powerful party of relatives and nobles supporting the queen won out, and Pierre de La Broce was arrested in the last days of December 1277 or more likely around 11 January 1278 (while Pierre de Benais fled to Rome). Whatever legal process was pursued against Pierre de La Broce over the next six

months was kept entirely secret (so that, alas, there are no “trial” records to analyze, or even a formal sentence to parse). He was executed (probably hanged on the gallows at Montfaucon) in summer 1278 and his patrimony confiscated. Interestingly, after 1285, under Philip IV, his family was largely rehabilitated, and Pierre de Benais was even allowed to return to his diocese.

The sudden nature of Pierre de La Broce’s disgrace and the total secrecy around his condemnation left room for chroniclers to exercise their imaginations. Hélyary provides a thorough analysis (chapters ten and eleven) of their perspectives (especially chroniclers at the royal abbey of Saint-Denis), in the process letting us see how distorted ideas about Pierre came to be enshrined in French historical memory. Three well-known and fascinating “moral” texts also survive: the *Complainte de Pierre de La Broce*, the *Jeu de Pierre de La Broce*, and the *Dit de Fortune*, all found in a single manuscript (BnF ms. fr. 837). Together with several other less direct contemporary commentaries on the same theme, these literary works reflect on the fickle nature of fortune and the speed with which someone on top of the world may find himself staring at his own destruction. The chroniclers (and to some extent the literary meditations) tended to make Pierre de La Broce “le maître de toutes choses” (p. 418) in order to tell a dramatic story and to explain his mysterious fall in terms of an overweening pride and unquenchable lust for power. In fact, however, “Pierre de La Broce n’est pas omnipotent. Si on peut penser que son avis pèse d’un poids particulier auprès du roi, le chambellan n’emporte pas nécessairement tout avec lui” (p. 418). He had the king’s confidence for a time, but “Pierre de La Broce ne mène pas pour autant le gouvernement royal; ce n’est pas lui qui prend les décisions, dans aucun domaine que ce soit” (p. 420). In Hélyary’s analysis, Pierre de La Broce appears less like an overly ambitious aberration and more like a typical example of how those around the king could amass power and influence. If his exact relationship with Philip remains difficult to define, and if his ill-fated attempt to attack the queen appears foolish in the extreme, Pierre de La Broce nevertheless offers a well-documented example of how a capable figure could make (and lose) his fortune at the Capetian court.

This is an exemplary study of great clarity and impressive insight. It balances detailed analysis with a stylish prose that never loses focus or descends into jargon. Xavier Hélyary has given us not only what will surely stand for a generation as the standard study of *L’affaire Pierre de La Broce*, but a significant step forward in comprehending the realities of power under Saint Louis and his far less famous son.

## NOTES

[1] *Courtrai. 11 juillet 1302* (Paris: Tallandier, 2012); *L’armée du roi de France. La guerre de Saint Louis à Philippe le Bel* (Paris: Perrin, 2012); *La dernière croisade. Saint Louis à Tunis (1270)* (Paris: Perrin, 2016).

[2] “L’ost de France. La guerre, les armées, la société politique au royaume de France (fin du règne de Saint Louis—fin du règne de Philippe le Bel.”

[3] The *mémoire inédit* bears the same title as the monograph under review.

[4] Sean L. Field, *Courting Sanctity: Holy Women and the Capetians* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), ch. 3; Sean L. Field and Walter Simons, “A Prophecy Fulfilled? An Annotated

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Translation of the Sources on the Death of Crown Prince Louis of France (1276) and the Interrogations of Elizabeth of Spalbeek (1276-1278),” *The Medieval Low Countries* 5 (2018): 35-91.

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