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Olivier Cabayé. *Albi au XVIe siècle: Gens de bien et autres "apparens"*. Albi: Presses du centre universitaire Champollion, 2008. 901 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, annexes, index. 30€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-915699-60-9.

Review by Gayle Brunelle, California State University, Fullerton.

In *Albi au XVIe siècle: Gens de bien et autres "apparens"*, Olivier Cabayé has in a massive nine-hundred-page thèse d'état used the ample notarial records of Albi to follow the fortunes of forty families of the city's ruling elite of merchants, office-holders and clerics, from the closure of the Hundred Years War through to the end of the Wars of Religion. It was this period, Cabayé asserts, that witnessed the solidification of the ruling elite that dominated Albi through to the end of the Ancien Regime. Cabayé reconstructs the creation of Albi's elite and analyzes how these families perpetuated their status over generations. This book is a classic French thesis in the "old school" strain of Annales social history, involving a length, type of meticulous archival research, and comprehensive yet detailed analysis that few American dissertation students these days would undertake to write, and still fewer dissertation advisers to direct. Nor would it be easy to find a publisher in the "Anglophone" academic publishing world for a work of this size and density.

Albi au XVIe siècle shares both the advantages and the drawbacks inherent to this type of work. On the positive side, the book contains a wealth of detailed research about the elites of the city of Albi and the changing economic base of their social status and political power. As in most of France during this era, the elite of Albi shifted the bulk of their assets from commerce to a combination of municipal and regional offices and landholding. They also began to shift their identities and the epithets surrounding their names in notarial documents to reflect their self-identification with the nobility. Like many such voluminous theses, however, *Albi au XVIe siècle* has a central theme—the nature of Albi's elite and how they navigated the disruptions of the Wars of Religion to maintain their preeminent status in Albigeois society—but does not really coalesce around a central argument. Cabayé presents the results of his research in a meticulous, carefully structured manner that renders the book a mine of information for specialists on Albi and its region, but the sheer weight of the evidence, much of which is repetitive, reduces the usefulness of the work to non-specialists. Ironically, a more concise, comparative, and analytical work would have increased the impact of Cabayé's findings.

The central and most significant theme that emerges from Cabayé's research is also reminiscent of the Annales approach in its emphasis on deep social and cultural stability underlying apparent economic or political shifts. Cabayé asserts that most of the same families that constituted the elite of Albi at the beginning of the "long" sixteenth century examined in this book—from about 1500 through about 1650—continued to constitute the city's elite at the end of the period, despite great changes in Albi's economy. A few families relatively new to Albi at the beginning of the sixteenth century, such as the Assaguel, rose into the ranks of the elite during the course of the century, while a few others, such as the Lafont and one branch of the Nupces, receded. But for the most part the Albigeois elite remained remarkably stable during the sixteenth century and long after despite the economic vicissitudes resulting from religious warfare. These families were able to adapt to the changing economic conjuncture, including the decline of Albi's international commerce, and cemented such a firm

dominance in the city that they remained its governing elite until the French Revolution. This accomplishment was even more impressive given the limited opportunities in Albi, which lacked a parlement or any other major royal institutions, for obtaining the types of offices that sustained elite families shifting their assets out of commerce in other French cities. Nevertheless, the strategies of the Albigeois elite mirrored those of their counterparts throughout urban France in the early modern era. They intermarried heavily in networks centered around a half dozen of the most prominent and powerful families, purchased and consolidated large tracts of land surrounding the city, and to the extent they were able acquired offices in Albi's ecclesiastical establishments--the bishopric and the cathedral--as well as the municipal government and the court of the local seneschal. Some of the most successful families were able to place sons in royal or regional courts in Toulouse, Carcassonne or Villefranche-de-Rouergue.

By the end of the sixteenth century the mercantile elite that had dominated Albi a century earlier was now an elite of bourgeois rentiers and medium-scale office holders, but comprised for the most part of the same cadre of families as before, transformed from merchants to landholding nobles or pseudo-nobles. The mercantile elite that had dominated the city through their wealth in 1500 fused with their junior partners, the office-holding and clerical families. The wealthiest merchants ceased placing their sons in commerce and marrying their daughters to other merchants and instead sent their sons to read the law and married their daughters to lawyers and office-holders. The two career paths of commerce and office-holding traded places in the hierarchy of status and wealth because Albi declined during the religious wars from a node in France's network of international commerce to a mere regional market. With less wealth to be made in commerce, the status of merchants in the city fell and those families that remained in commerce by the end of the century were no longer able to intermarry with the city's now non-mercantile elite or to compete with them for political power or offices. In other French cities that maintained or expanded access to international markets in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Nantes, Bordeaux, or Marseille, a similar process of upward mobility and flight from commerce characterized the governing elite.

Given the risks and instability that religious warfare created in commerce both in France and in many of France's markets in the Low Countries and central Europe until the mid-seventeenth century, it is not surprising that wealthy mercantile families would increasingly pull their assets out of commerce and invest them in land and offices. But in cities where commerce recovered during the seventeenth century, new families replaced those who had left commerce, creating a new commercial elite, some of whose members also eventually joined the ranks of the office-holders. The difference in Albi, therefore, was less the strategy of upward mobility its elites employed than the narrowing economic and political horizons of the city and the absolute decline in the commercial base. The smaller economy that emerged in Albi after the religious wars led the elite to close ranks and focus their efforts on maintaining control of the limited number of institutional careers available in the city. Higher endogamy and very little upward social mobility of new families into the ranks of the elite was the result.

Albi was not unique in this shift, however. Rather, in the declining importance of commerce Albi resembled Rouen albeit on a much smaller scale.^[1] In Rouen, commerce after the Wars of Religion never regained the central role it had played in the city's economy prior to 1572, and much of the city's international commerce shifted into the hands of Dutch, English, and Portuguese merchants operating in the city, with a concomitant decline in the status of native merchants as a result. Rouen's economy remained more commercial than that of Albi during the seventeenth century, but by the end of the century Rouen had become primarily an institutional center governed by an elite of robe nobles--albeit with access to a much higher echelon of offices than in Albi due to the presence in the Norman capital of a parlement and a host of other royal courts.

No doubt the governing elites of other regional centers with declining commercial bases and limited access to royal offices closely resembled those of Albi in 1650. One major difference between Albi and

cities such as Rouen, however, seems to be the relative absence of tax-farming and other sorts of financial investments beyond the acquisition of local rentes, public and private. The Albigeois were active in farming the local and regional ecclesiastical and seigneurial revenues owned by the city's bishop. But in cities such as Rouen, public finance and in particular tax-farming on a regional and even national scale played a significant role in the social ascension of wealthy mercantile families into the ranks of office-holders and the robe nobility, and for many merchants this movement from "active" commerce to "passive" investment in tax-farms seems to have been as important a stage in this career shift as purchases of land and rentes, and often to have preceded the acquisition of offices. It is possible that investments in tax farms simply were not recorded in the notarial contracts that provide the bulk of Cabayé's evidence, but if their absence is not merely an anomaly of the documentation, it would be interesting to know why public finance beyond the level of the episcopal and seigneurial revenues seems to have played such a small role in the fortunes of Albi's elite families. Was it due to lack of capital, lack of opportunity, or lack of interest?

Albi au XVIe siècle is a book rich in sociological data regarding the wealth and lifestyle of Albi's elite families; their investments, their homes and possessions, their marriage strategies, even the customary wedding gowns and gifts are discussed in detail. Cabayé has thoroughly mined the notarial documents to create a composite image of the city's elite families during the early modern era. Most of his conclusions will come as no surprise to early modern historians well-acquainted with the strategies of upward mobility France's urban elites employed to maintain their wealth, power, and status during and after the Wars of Religion. More surprising is the lack of acknowledgement of the role of religious strife as a causative factor in the decline of commerce and growing political and economic instability that obliged wealthy French urban families to employ the very strategies Cabayé analyzes in this work. Albi was a Catholic city in a predominantly Protestant region and was besieged on more than one occasion. Surely the disruption religious warfare created in local, national, and international commercial networks was a prime reason for the shrinking profits and markets with which Albi's merchants had to contend. Elite families naturally would have sought to shelter their fortunes by shifting their assets to safer if not always more profitable investments in land, rentes, and royal offices, not only in Albi, but throughout France, where religious conflict made movement of goods and merchants dangerous and depressed markets. Cabayé is correct in pointing out that it was the declining profitability of commerce that lowered the status of this career path rather than the other way round in Albi. This was probably true in the rest of France as well.

But if this was the case, and if the Wars of Religion were, as seems likely, a major factor in the disruption of French commerce after 1560, then the wars had a much bigger and longer-lasting impact on France's economy and social structures than historians have acknowledged. To what extent, in other words, was the rise in status of office-holding as a career path in French cities such as Albi due to the shock to France's national and international commerce resulting from a century of religious warfare in France and in France's prime European markets? To what extent were "cultural" and "social" choices—to opt for the stability of landed income and institutional careers—the result of revised economic circumstances, as seems clearly to have been the case in Albi? And to what extent did religious warfare fundamentally change the economic landscape of France? Micro-studies such as *Albi au XVIe siècle*, while rich in data and suggestive in the limited analyses they offer, are of greatest use when they can be woven together in a comparative, synthetic investigation of the relationship between economic and cultural change in early modern France.

NOTES

[1] Gayle K. Brunelle, *The New World Merchants of Rouen 1559-1630*. Volume XVI, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies. (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Press, 1991), especially Chapter 4, "Principal and Profit: Land, Loans and Economic Security," 83ff.

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