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Malcolm Walsby, *The Counts of Laval: Culture, Patronage and Religion in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century France*. Aldershot, Hampshire and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2007. xii + 220 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 U.S./ £55 U.K. (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-5811-5.

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As their contemporaries well recognized, the Lavals were one of the most prominent noble houses in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century France. From their territorial base in Maine and Eastern Brittany, the counts of Laval built a vast network of clients from across the social spectrum who served as agents and symbols of their power. The formation, composition, and function of this network over two centuries is the subject of this book. Its broad chronological sweep is fundamental to the author's central thesis that, despite the tumultuous changes of the sixteenth century (which included the Lavals' conversion to Protestantism), the Lavals continued to think and act much in the same way as their fifteenth-century ancestors had. Consequently, adherence to traditional dynastic politics and noble values, not confessional identity, often held sway as the family navigated the upheavals of the period.

In focusing on the Lavals and their clients, Walsby taps into an ongoing debate among historians regarding the ways in which nobles interacted with each other and other members of society. Scholars have long recognized the decline of formal feudal obligations between lords and vassals in the late middle ages. More flexible relationships emerged as a result, which bound lords and their supporters in new ways. What exactly to call this system—clientage, patronage, affinity—are among the contenders—has proven to be more contentious. Walsby side-steps the debate by worrying less about vocabulary than about the nature of the phenomenon itself and what it reveals about the scope of noble power and influence. For this reason, he extends his analysis beyond the Lavals' household to include the whole of the affinity.

Walsby's ability to paint such a broad picture of the Lavals testifies to his admirable tenacity as a researcher. Over time, many of the family's papers (charters, registers of accounts, and other documents) were lost or destroyed, while others were scattered in private collections and archives across France. Traveling from archive to archive, Walsby pieced together extant documents with contemporary memoirs and descriptions to reconstruct the history of the house of Laval in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. According to Walsby, in choosing to focus on the Lavals and their clientage, he took his cue from the sources; as they reveal, "[n]othing preoccupied the Lavals more over these two centuries than their relations with social equals and inferiors. Cultivating an affinity or clientage played a role in almost every aspect of their business . . ." (p. 2).

Having laid out the basic framework of his study, Walsby methodically walks his readers through the Lavals' history in five chapters. His approach is largely chronological: the Lavals' rise to prominence in the fifteenth century thanks to their political savvy and ability to attract the regional elite into their entourage (chapter one); their "golden age" in the first half of the sixteenth when, building on their predecessors' carefully-crafted network of clients, the Lavals reached the height of their power (chapter three); and the family's conversion to Protestantism in the late 1550s and its myriad consequences (chapters four and five). Although Walsby's heavy reliance on descriptive narrative makes for slow reading at times, he takes pains to highlight the significance of the details at hand. Understanding

family marriage patterns is not simply a matter of interest, for example; rather it reveals one of the many strategies the Laval family used to broaden the base of their support and draw new social contacts into their web of influence. It also reveals how vulnerable this web was to the vagaries of dynastic demography when the family receded from the historical spotlight with the death of the last count of Laval in 1605.

Throughout these chapters, Walsby also interweaves the stories of a variety of individuals in the Laval family's affinity to exemplify a broader point. For instance, in chapter 4 we meet the Catholic nobleman Antoine des Brosses who helped to protect the Laval family's interests in Brittany, even as the count was in open rebellion against the king (pp. 144-46). By following the paper trail left by des Brosses during more than thirty-four years in the Laval family's service, Walsby convincingly demonstrates how the nobleman's long-term loyalty trumped religious differences and how the family, in turn, recognized the value of such loyalty in maintaining authority in a region that remained largely Catholic.

In chapter two, Walsby diverges from the chronological and narrative format to take the reader into the heart of the Laval family's affinity in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: its composition, its workings, its influence. To achieve this task, Walsby created a prosopographical database, "drawing information from all surviving documentary sources" (p. 47). Comprised of more than 1200 people who were part of the Laval family's affinity, the database reveals remarkable consistency over time in the types of clients linked to each count's person and position and how they functioned within the Laval family's orbit. Among the most striking patterns to emerge is the social diversity of the Laval family's following. Although wealthy noblemen dominate the list, humbler men appear as well, as do a number of women. The layers of influence within the affinity also remained constant, with family at the center, followed by the court and the administration. The counts depended on each of these layers to help them run their affairs, resolve disputes, and the like; the Laval family's success, in fact, depended on such contacts, and on the family's ability to have both the financial resources and prestige needed to maintain its clients' support.

For all its strengths, chapter two also points to the limitations of Walsby's study. The size of the database is impressive but he does not explain what categories of "information" in the sources determined who was included in the database and who was not. Some people's connections to the Laval family were very straightforward—they were on the counts' payroll and thus appear in court registers—but other connections were less tangible and more fluid. Without a clear idea of Walsby's methodology, it is difficult to assess his database's accuracy and its potential value as a basis of comparison to records from other noble households. He acknowledges in a footnote the inherent difficulties of compiling just such statistics but does not elaborate (p. 47, n. 16). This is unfortunate given Walsby's effort to use the Laval family as a window onto the late medieval and early modern French aristocracy in general.

Chapter two also includes several tables and charts based on a quantitative analysis of the contents of the database, which likewise would have benefited from a fuller discussion. A table displaying the following information on the counts of Laval provides a case in point (p. 59): it lists the total number of people in the family's affinity with a breakdown by gender during eight specific years from 1471 to 1577. As Walsby notes, written sources capture official connections but not ties that were primarily oral and private. Women fell largely within this last group, thus making it hard to assess the full extent of their place within the affinity (p. 49). The table in question seems to bear this conclusion out with one striking exception: in 1527, the number of women on the payroll in the count's household was twenty-nine (compared to three, six and zero in other years). Why such a large and short-lived rise in women's traceable presence? Walsby never raises the question.

These limitations aside, Walsby's study provides a valuable starting point for understanding more fully the relationship between great noble houses and their clientage in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For all the changes in this period, Walsby makes a compelling case that continuity remained a powerful force shaping social interactions among all levels of society, including the nobility.

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