
Review by Darryl Dee, Wilfrid Laurier University.

In the classic historiography of the French absolute monarchy, the noble governors of the provinces fared rather poorly. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was argued, these unruly aristocrats had used their military and political control over their provinces to raise rebellion against the crown. Successive French kings responded by forcefully reducing their posts to little more than prestigious sinecures while shifting real power in the provinces to the *intendants* and other royal commissioners.[1] However, the rise of a new approach to the early modern French monarchy, one that emphasizes the constraints on royal power as well as the collaboration between kings and traditional elites, has led to a reevaluation of offices and institutions once thought to have been bypassed by the triumphal march of absolutism. New studies of the provincial Estates, for example, have shown that they were important, dynamic, even innovative bodies down to the Revolution.[2] The time has clearly come for a second look at the governors.

Perhaps the most prominent of the provincial governors were the members of the house of Condé. Princes of the blood and among the wealthiest aristocrats in the kingdom, the Condé were governors of the great *pays d’état* of Burgundy almost continuously from 1631 to 1789. Beth Nachison has examined their preponderant role in Burgundian affairs during the Grand Siècle.[3] In his new book, Stéphane Pannekoucke takes the story of the Condé prince-governors into the century of Enlightenment. He convincingly argues that the Condé remained powerful and influential political actors. They were not only vital intermediaries linking Burgundy to the royal court, but more importantly, they took an active and effective part in the day-to-day administration of the province.

Pannekoucke bases his assessment of the Condé governors on the following premise: “définir le gouverneur moins par ce qu’il est d’un point de vue institutionnel, que parce qu’il fait, concrètement, dans la province qui lui est confiée, la Bourgogne” (p. 26). Furthermore, he examines their part in the workings of the French royal state, especially in relation to other agents of the monarchy. Pannekoucke is able to focus on the governors in action because he makes extensive use of the Condé’s rich archives preserved at their principal seat, the Château de Chantilly. In particular, he draws on the voluminous correspondence between the governors and their representatives in Dijon and Paris.

Pannekoucke tracks the ebb and flow of Condé power over the course of the careers of Burgundy’s three eighteenth-century governors. Louis-Henri de Bourbon—called Monsieur le Duc after his title of Duc de Bourbon—held the office from 1710 to 1740. One of the chief courtiers of the early reign of Louis XV, Louis-Henri was briefly the king’s first minister. After his fall from power in 1726 and his exile to Chantilly, he devoted much of his attention and energy to his governorship. Under him, Condé power in Burgundy reached its zenith: the royal intendant declared that Monsieur le Duc governed the province as a veritable viceroyalty. At his death in 1740, however, his heir, Louis-Joseph, was just three-and-a-half years old. The royal ministers, particularly Louis Phélypeaux, comte de Saint-Florentin, the
secretary of state in charge of Burgundy, saw in this situation an opportunity to reduce Condé power in
the province while increasing their own. The king appointed Paul-Hippolyte de Beauvillier, duc de
Saint-Aignan, as interim governor until Louis-Joseph turned eighteen. During Saint-Aignan’s tenure,
the royal ministry appropriated much of the formal power and authority that the Condé had wielded.
Louis-Joseph therefore came into a diminished office in 1754. Yet, he was able to use his status as a
prince of the blood as well as the still considerable resources available to him to revive much of the
Condé’s influence and authority. Although Louis-Joseph could hardly aspire to be viceroy of the
province like his father, he nevertheless remained a key figure in Burgundy until 1789.

By the eighteenth century, the Condé princes had come to treat the governorship of Burgundy as part of
their patrimony. Thus, when the Duc de Bourbon entered office in 1710, he inherited an already well-
established “système Condé” consisting of four key attributes: the possession of extensive landholdings
in the province; the control over access to offices in the provincial power structure; the ability to appoint
loyal clients to key posts; and the role of intermediary between crown and province. The Condé,
however, were rarely present in Burgundy themselves, tending to make only brief visits during the
triennial meetings of the provincial Estates. They therefore needed loyal servants who could provide
information as well as act on their behalf. Two officials from the princely household came to carry out
these functions. In Dijon, the Condé’s own intendant (who is not to be confused with the royal intendant
of police, justice, and finance) was responsible for both the public duties of the governor and the private
affairs of the prince. During the eighteenth century, the intendant also held the powerful office of
treasurer of the Estates of Burgundy. This key post was monopolized by three families with long
histories of loyal service to the Condé. The intendant in turn maintained close links with the second
official, based in Paris, the prince’s secrétaire des commandements for Burgundy. The secretary
corresponded with all authorities who had an interest in the province and, more importantly, served as
the prince’s closest advisor on Burgundian affairs. Together, the intendant and the secretary constituted
what amounted to “un petit département administrative spécialisé” (p. 109). Furthermore, both officials
possessed extensive networks of clients and allies in both Paris and Dijon that they mobilized in the
service of their master.

As intermediary between crown and province, the governor’s most important task was dealing with the
Estates of Burgundy. The Condé princes fulfilled this task with great skill, and in so doing, proved
themselves dependable agents of the king. During the eighteenth century, the royal ministry assigned
ever more administrative tasks to the élus, the permanent commission of the Estates, until it became “un
veritable gouvernement provincial” (p. 152). The governor supported the expansion of the élus’
competence, even though it stripped other provincial corps of power and authority, but the governor
most visibly exercised his intermediary function when he presided over the triennial meetings of the
Estates. Even before the assembly convened, he carefully vetted its agenda. Only after he was certain
that nothing in it was contrary to the royal interests did he allow it to be formally adopted. Once the
Estates were in session, the governor exercised close supervision over their debates. While these
procedures were designed to preempt any opposition to the monarchy, the Condé governors also acted
in the province’s interests. For example, they continued the custom begun during the reign of Louis
XIV of securing a moderation in the province’s contributions to the royal treasury.

The governor’s intermediary role was conspicuously on display during episodes of open political conflict
in Burgundy. Pannekoucke examines the actions of Louis-Joseph during the Varennes affair of 1760 to
1763. The affair pitted the Parlement of Dijon against Jacques Varennes, secretary of the Estates, in a
dispute over tax assessments. At stake was authority over taxation. Consistent with the Condé position
that the governor’s principal responsibility was to uphold royal authority in Burgundy, Louis-Joseph
threw his weight squarely behind Varennes, mobilizing the Condé’s extensive client networks at court
and in Burgundy on his behalf. As the negotiations between the Parlement and the royal ministry
intensified, the prince attempted to block the former’s attempts to force Varennes from office. When
Varennes was finally compelled to resign as part of the settlement ending the affair, Louis-Joseph secured for him the post of receiver general of the Estates, a promotion from his old office of secretary.

The lynchpin of the Condé system was control over access to office in the provincial power structure, which allowed the prince-governors to appoint loyalists to key posts and also to build an extensive clientele. Until 1740, this power was extraordinarily expansive. Monsieur le Duc appointed the élus as well as the administrators of the Estates and also named the mayors and other magistrates of Burgundy’s municipalities. After his death, the royal ministers moved quickly to appropriate this power. Instead of the governor, the king would henceforth make appointments to all positions in the Estates and the municipalities. When Louis-Joseph became governor in 1754, however, he worked to reassert control over the appointment process. Whenever a municipal position came open, he vigorously lobbied the royal ministers to appoint the candidate he most favored, and the royal ministers almost invariably complied with his wishes. Louis-Joseph therefore successfully replaced his father’s de jure power of appointment with a de facto one.

In all of their activities in the province, the Condé governors had to deal with the king’s commissioners, particularly the royal intendant and the military commandant. But the powers of the prince-governors proved to be so extensive that they limited those of the royal agents. Moreover, the Condé’s exalted status at court allowed them to exercise considerable influence over appointments to these two posts. As a result, far from being one of competition and conflict, the relationship between the governors and the royal agents was marked by cooperation and collaboration.

In showing that the Condé princes were dynamic political actors and active administrators throughout the eighteenth century, Stéphane Pannekoucke’s fine book definitively overturns the classic interpretation that the noble governors of early modern France were shunted aside by the agents of a rising absolute monarchy. Yet his study raises two further questions. First, how representative of the provincial governors were the Condé? Pannekoucke argues convincingly that they were uniquely powerful because of their status as princes of the blood and their long hold over Burgundy. Yet, more work needs to be done on other governors before this argument is completely settled. One family of aristocratic governors comparable to the Condé were the ducs de Villeroy, who governed Lyon and the Lyonnais from 1612 to 1794. Gregory Monahan has shown that the Maréchal de Villeroy played an indispensable role as intermediary between Lyon and the royal court during the great famine year of 1709. It was largely thanks to his energetic lobbying of Louis XIV and his ministers that food aid was sent to save the starving city.[4] Of course, studying other governors must deal with the problem of adequate sources. None, perhaps, have archives as rich and concentrated as those of Chantilly.

Second, what does the experience of the Condé tell us about the development of the French royal state? Pannekoucke argues that 1740 represented a decisive break in which a better developed, more specialized royal administration seized a long awaited opportunity to take direct control over Burgundy from its princely viceroys. The last Condé governor was undoubtedly weaker than his predecessors. Yet, as Pannekoucke himself shows, the royal ministers nevertheless had always to reckon with Louis-Joseph’s lobbying. This suggests that the traditional politics of status and patronage persisted for at least as long as the monarchy itself.

NOTES


Darryl Dee
Wilfrid Laurier University
ddee@wlu.ca

Copyright © 2011 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 edistribution/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