Explosion in the History of the Nobility in French Historiography
Recent Approaches and Methods

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Abstract. For the past thirty years, the history of the nobility has been one of the fields of social history that have mobilized most researchers. This trend is largely due to the interest shown in new family collections, in correspondence and in private writings. We see this abundant mass of publications as being the reflection of the diversity of the nobility. A first block of authors have isolated noble categories: parliamentary nobility, "second" order nobility, poor nobility, etc. A second type of research has focused on personages emblematic of their milieus, and finally, some historians have been interested in comparisons with other European aristocracies. The second section of the article will show how the transformations of the monarchical state engendered mutations in the second order. Finally, it will be shown how scholarship on social changes has more particularly studied differences between town and country, material culture and mobility and noble culture.

Keywords: nobility, monarchy, Enlightenment, material culture, nobility mobilities, Parliament

Over the last thirty years the nobility has attracted the ceaseless interest of historians in varied contexts as well as in regional and family monographs, biographies and comparative studies of European countries, which now necessitates a historiographical survey. Responding to this growing interest, two reviews, quite different in their targeted readerships, opened their pages to the subject as the 2000s approached. In December 1995, *L'Histoire* featured a series of articles in which the editorial board flagged up a warning against received ideas:

> "The nobility is not a matter of heredity alone: it could be acquired in many ways, military prowess being just one among them. The grand personages of the realm, far from identifying with the monarchy took up arms against it in the uprisings of the Holy League and the Fronde, and

even opposed its absolutist principles. Also, there were many aristocrats among the theorists and activists in the Revolution."[1]

Thus, some of the paradoxes of a complex social category found confirmation in this. Four years later, the *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* devoted its January–March 1999 special issue to the "nobility in the modern era", emphasizing the diverse character of a multi-faceted group.[2] In his introductory article, Robert Descimon stressed the importance of historiographical issues and commended a comparatist approach, leading to "the conviction that starting out from similar social materials and mental tools, particular arrangements could, according to place and function, result in dissimilar structures, but ones whose continual changes, nevertheless, remain an exciting subject for investigation."[3] These two publications in fact convey a new interest in the second rank, or order, which has several interlinked causes. Doctoral theses produced in the 1990s gave some young scholars access to university posts,[4] where they guided their students' attention to this milieu. Moreover, new practices in career evaluation also helped to increase the numbers of such academics. This attraction to the nobility was matched by an interest in certain types of sources that enabled its study in a novel way.

Despite losses during the Revolution, families very often preserved fine archival material that invites exploration and research, all the more so as, with the passage of generations, reluctance to open these archives has become less frequent. Today we understand the importance attached to private writings and correspondence, especially for the history of sense and sensibility. Now, such documents are often too numerous for preservation in family archives, as is demonstrated in the collaborative construction of a fine work on Cardinal de Bernis.[5] There may be hundreds of documents involved, as Elie Haddad notes in connection with an undertaking similar to the present project. He stresses that it was impossible for him to list everything and that, accordingly, he was forced to be selective.[6] For this reason, his work is different from but completely complementary to the present undertaking, and it is advised that they should be consulted in parallel. This paper will assess the contribution of this abundant mass of publications before showing how they have made it possible to obtain a fresh view of relations between the monarchy and the nobility. Thus, far from reiterating the

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1   "Grandeur et décadence," 22–3. (All translations from French are by Professor Emeritus Moya Jones at the University of Bordeaux-Montaigne.)

2   "Les noblesses à l'époque moderne."

3   Descimon, "Chercher de nouvelles voies," 7.

4   In particular, we can cite, in alphabetical order, the works of Bourquin*, Noblesse seconde et pouvoir*; Chaline*, Godart de Belbeuf*; Figeac, *Destins de la noblesse*; Nassiet, *Noblesse et pauvreté*.

5   Montègre, ed., *Le cardinal de Bernis*.

6   Haddad, "L'histoire de la noblesse," 65.

traditional presentation of the nobility with fossilized attitudes, it will be demonstrated that in some of its features, there were certain innovative elements—measurable in economic activities, material culture, and even in mobility.

A wealth of studies for a kaleidoscopic nobility

The wealth of the historiography of the French nobility comes, above, all from regional monographs, which we tend to neglect today because of changing trends. In the wake of Jean Meyer's fine pioneering thesis,[7] it has been possible to cast light on and compare the diversity of situations. Examined in *Destins de la noblesse bordelaise: 1770–1830* from the highest state offices down to the king's scribes,[8] in some respects, the nobility in Bordeaux mirrors that in Nantes, for example, in the turn-over of personnel and in the interest in trade and the West Indies, while differing from it in that the Breton city was not the seat of a Parliament. Other studies have focused their analyses on specific groups, particularly parliamentarians, who in Aix-en-Provence[9] and Besançon[10] were predominant in the local nobility, justifying their epithet of "blue-blood cities". More recently, the works of Clarisse Coulomb[11] on the Dauphiné parliament and on Caroline Le Mao in Bordeaux[12] have ensured that the high offices of state are among the best-known categories.[13] Jean-François Solnon has done a model study of the mechanisms of social ascent based on the example of Besançon, which enabled him to reconstitute the careers of 215 king's scribes.[14] Laurent Bourquin has established in the case of Champagne, and more recently in the Loire area, the validity of the concept of a "secondary nobility", an intermediary nobility in royal service in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[15] Michel Nassiet has rescued from universal oblivion the world of country squires, whose importance has been recognized since Jean Meyer's pioneering article, though researchers have been discouraged by the difficulty in accessing sources.[16]

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7   Meyer, *La noblesse bretonne.*
8   Figeac, *Destins de la noblesse.*
9   Cubells, *La Provence des Lumières.*
10   Gresset, *Gens de justice.*
11   Coulomb, *Les Pères de la patrie.*
12   Le Mao, *Parlement et parlementaires*; Le Mao, *Les fortunes de Thémis.*
13   A multitude of conferences followed, among which we must mention: Aubert and Chaline, eds, *Les parlements de Louis XIV*; Chaline, ed., *Les parlements et les Lumières*; Le Mao, *Hommes et gens du roi.*
14   Solnon, *215 bourgeois gentilshommes.*
15   Bourquin, *Noblesse seconde et pouvoir.* For the second rank nobility in the Loire region, see Bourquin, "Les mutations du peuplement nobiliaire," 241–59.
16   Meyer, "Un problème mal posé," 161–88, and following him, Nassiet, *Noblesse et pauvreté.*

Another type of work is approaching the topic through a particular individual. This is not a result of the return to favour of biography as a genre, but rather of using an especially rich trove of archives to reconstruct a social environment, to see how one family might mirror a category of the nobility. This approach to the grander nobility has been adopted by Jean Duma in respect of the Bourbon-Penthièvre family,[17] by Jean-François Labourdette in his study of the wealth of the La Trémoille family[18], and by Jean-François Solnon, who studied the Ormesson family, a dynasty of great state servants.[19] In the parliamentary context, Olivier Chaline has taken us into the world of Rouen parliamentarians by way of Attorney-General Godart de Belbeuf,[20] who was in fact at the heart of judicial, administrative and political affairs in the province, and his notes give us his thoughts about the state, religion, the Enlightenment, and modernisation in Normandy. As for Brittany, in President de Robien, pioneer of the study of megaliths, we have a fine portrait of an Enlightenment judge masterly presented by Gauthier Aubert.[21] In their dissertations on two great families of the nobility of the sword, the Bonneval family in central France and the Lur Saluces in the south-west, Roger Baury and Marguerite Figeac-Monthus have demonstrated the idea of a nobility relaying the court to the provinces.[22] Thanks to their systematic exploitation of two particularly rich family archives, they have analyzed strategies in marriage, succession, and education, studied the patterns of patrimonial transformation, taken a close look at lifestyles and habits of thought, and assessed the effects of political change. Even so, the historian's gaze is readily drawn to successes and spectacular ascents, without always carefully looking at social decline and regression. It is in this area that Elie Haddad's investigation of the trajectory of the Belin family is particularly valuable to us.[23] This book opens up questions about the social characteristics of the middle nobility, its development, relations with royal authority, and mechanisms which made the ruination of a noble "house" possible in the seventeenth century. Lastly, in contrast with the great families who opted to serve the king, Pierre Serna has recently devoted a biography to Pierre-Antoine Antonelle, a dissenting noble from Provence, who is a perfect illustration of the diversity of the noble order, since he gave in to the attractions of revolution to the extent of joining Gracchus Babeuf and his conspiracy of Equals.[24]

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17   Duma, *Les Bourbon-Penthièvre*.

18   Labourdette, *La maison de la Trémoille*.

19   Solnon, *Les Ormesson*.

20   Chaline, ed., *Les parlements et les Lumières*.

21   Aubert, *Le président de Robien*.

22   Baury, *La maison de Bonneval*; Figeac-Monthus, *Les Lur Saluces d'Yquem*.

23   Haddad, *Fondation et ruine d'une «maison»*.

24   Serna, *Antonelle aristocrate révolutionnaire*.

His story is not so rare as might be supposed, and Serna's fine book makes for a better understanding of the courses taken by Condorcet, Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau, Héraut de Séchelles, along with about a dozen well-known figures.[25]

Besides studies organized around a category of the nobility, a personality or a family, François-Joseph Ruggiu has opened up another approach, a comparative history seeking a better understanding of European aristocracies. Among all the current studies, his method of comparing the noble milieus of two French towns (Abbeville and Alençon) with two English towns of comparable status (Chester and Canterbury) has certainly been the most novel and productive of insights.[26] The most recent studies by Eric Hassler,[27] Mathieu Magne,[28] and Bertrand Goujon[29] are by contrast focused on the highest strata of the European aristocracy and on Central Europe. This sudden abundance of high-quality studies requires an attempt at synthesis, and accordingly, in 2013, I also carried out one, focusing on the multiplicity of nobilities.[30] Among major developments, the reinterpretation of the positioning of the nobility in respect of royal power was a great advance, as also revealed by Elie Haddad.[31]

Changes in the nobility's relations with the Monarchy

Central to the history of the nobility between the beginning and the end of the modern period there was a great change in the manner of serving the crown, in accordance with essential ideological changes. Nicolas Le Roux's very fine work on *Le crépuscule de la chevalerie* (The Twilight of Chivalry) is a remarkable account of the ideology of the nobility at the time of the Italian wars.[32] The author is interested in the military experience of the upper-class men who followed Charles VIII, Louis XII and then François I into the Italian adventure, at a time when warfare was undergoing an unprecedented development in which the art of war was changing and the individual disappeared behind ever larger armies. The transition of Europe from being a society of warriors to a military society is at the heart of this study. The author emphasizes the continuing significance of the chivalric ideal, despite the reduction in the proportion of heavy cavalry in European armies, the reorganization of the military apparatus and the violence of military operations. The book

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25   For the nobility and revolution, see the conference *Les noblesses françaises* directed by Bourdin.

26   Ruggiu, *Les élites et les villes moyennes.*

27   Hassler, *La cour de Vienne.*

28   Magne, *Princes de Bohême.*

29   Goujon, *Les Arenberg.*

30   Figeac, *Les noblesses en France.* 25–57.

31   Haddad, "L'histoire de la noblesse," 65.

32   Le Roux, *Le crépuscule de la chevalerie.*

shows how important this ideology was for understanding the relationship between the nobility and martial violence which was more than ever thought of as a way of perpetuating a name, of confirming one's place in the nobility, and securing access to it. This ideal continued to be expressed in jousts and tournaments, in princely festivities, in some kinds of duel, and also in conventions of ransoms and prisoners of war. In this context, "Honour was the noise that virtue made, the amplifier that carried the merits of generals to the ears of the king and other great ones, and unleashed their generosity", was Arlette Jouanna's conclusion in an excellent article on the nobility and martial values in the sixteenth century.[33]

Jouanna is probably the historian who has best described the change in the second order and the development towards curialization following the Wars of Religion.[34] This transformation came to a head in the "Fronde des Princes", which was the last effort of the high nobility to threaten royal authority; Xavier Le Person's recent *habilitation* dossier should make for its deeper understanding. Apart from aspects related to the life of the Prince de Condé and his political and military career, this work is concerned with the political conduct of the nobility during the Fronde and under Mazarin's administration.[35] Nothing could better embody this type of conversion than La Rochefoucauld, author of the famous *Maximes*: the man who participated in the Fronde through simple family vanity, and in the fine eyes of the Duchess of Longueville, Condé's sister, emerged disillusioned, bitter and almost ruined and ended up as a man of the salon. He was to substitute the moderate ideal of the *Maximes*, the "honest man", for racial pride and the quest for glorious actions. The notions of nobility, virtue and glory gained new meanings. Since the values they had represented were now placed at the service of the prince, we should perhaps speak of a metamorphosis rather than an obliteration. Heroic conduct remained a very important ideal, but it was profoundly transformed, refined, and adapted to the new political conditions.

The sociologist Norbert Elias showed how a "court system" appeared under Henri III, who sought to impose an initial regularization of the court that only attained perfect operation in Louis XIV's Versailles.[36] In respect of ceremonial jurisprudence, the king operated a ritual centered on his person and ordered in accordance with the times of the day, from his rise in the morning to his retiring at night. This ritual was to make manifest, in symbolic acts, positions of prestige or submission. Thus, instead of just being a playground of aimlessness and vanity, the court

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33   Jouanna, "La noblesse française," 210.

34   For more details, see Jouanna, *Le devoir de révolte*; Jouanna, *Le pouvoir absolu*.

35   Le Person, *Le Grand Condé*. Our thanks to Xavier Le Person for having shared his first conclusions.

36   Elias, *La société de Cour*.

became a vital instrument for transmitting the king's orders and distributing the expected graces and favors. Should we however speak of it as a mechanism for "taming" the nobility? As Olivier Chaline has clearly shown, serving the sovereign was an honor, and more of a recompense than a constraint, as it afforded incomes and a stability that had been lost in the immersion into violence.[37] Was not the great Condé the first to accept this after 1659, while forgetting his own past in the Fronde? Revolts by the great ones soon disappeared from the crown's preoccupations. How does one account for this "contagion" of obedience? It was because Louis XIV reigned. He did not have favorites; he imposed on the great ones his own firm, coherent and impartial arbitration, which is what they needed. It is not correct to use the metaphor of "taming" as it is better to speak of a collaboration inaugurated by Henri II of Condé and made possible by the firmness of royal power. The king had managed to conquer the nobles by bringing together three elements whose conjunction had scarcely been tried: a feudal court—with the great nobles surrounding the king and his family, living according to the rhythms of hunting and battle; a salon—inspired by the best people in Paris, especially at *Hôtel de Rambouillet,* and a romantic dream expressed in such wonders as sumptuous festivities, and by the taste of the king and his heirs for the theatrical and operatic stage. The whole court was expected to become a society that was both real and extraordinary.[38]

It was here that provincial noblemen in service of the crown, and ministerial and aristocratic families were fused together in the same crucible. The unity of the realm was thus forged by way of its elites. In *Lettres persanes* (letter XCIX), Montesquieu had already accurately sensed that "the Prince impresses the character of his spirit on the court, the court on the town, and the town on the princelings. The sovereign's soul is a mould that shapes all others".[39] There may have been a great distance between Versailles aristocrats and country squires, but if conduct became more civilized and new fashions were disseminated, it is because court society was the crucible for the making of modern man.

This evolution can also be explained by the changes in the composition of the nobility, accompanying the development of the monarchical bureaucracy, as it was now possible to serve the king with the pen rather than with the sword. For the Renaissance, it is undeniable that our knowledge of the king's advisors has advanced considerably with the work of Cédric Michon.[40] The choice of the reign of François I is relevant because this ruler is supposed to have laid the foundations for a new style

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37   Among the many readings of the reign of Louis XIV, Olivier Chaline is the one who gives the best understanding of the nobility's behaviour: Chaline, *Le règne de Louis XIV*, 288–94.

38   Chaline, *Le règne de Louis XIV*, 294.

39   Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes,* 202–4.

40   Michon, ed., *Les conseillers de François Ier*.

of government. The King's Council as described by François I is a summary of the very essence of the French monarchy of the Renaissance, which is fundamentally a *monarchy of balance*. No attempt has been made to study the prosopography of the Louis XIV era, but a series of monographs on several ministers have created an awareness of a turning point with the development of the Versailles offices. Let us take the case of Minister and Controller General of Finances Claude Le Peletier under Louis XIV, who has been studied by Mathieu Stoll.[41] The author uses the Rosanbo *chartrier* (archives), the microfilms of which are kept in the National Archives[42], which is the basis of any biography of Le Peletier. The reconstruction of the Controller General's life led the author to examine the clerks of the Department of Finance, which did not yet possess all the characteristics of a Weberian-style bureaucracy. It lacked specific premises, while the multiple residences of the King and the Council obliged the staff of the control office to move between Paris, where most of the *intendants* (supervisors) of finances and the higher clerks worked, Versailles, the residence of the Controller General and of the services of the first clerk who kept the King's records, and Fontainebleau. Unquestionably, the reign of Louis XIV marked an acceleration in the process, as confirmed at the level of the War Department.[43]

The Louis XIV style monarchy finally attempted to take account of its nobility with the campaign of proofs of nobility and to redefine the criteria, in particular by standardizing the notion of merit. As Jay M. Smith's excellent book has shown, the 1675 creation of the Order of the Roll in the army was symbolic of a new scale of reference.[44] Individual value was thereafter replaced by an automatic mechanism linked to service or age. The new values of merit were accuracy, precision, value, work, and application, in other words, the values of an administrative monarchy, which aroused the wrath of Saint-Simon, for it was indeed an administrative vision that triumphed at the expense of the innate qualities of the individual. The military were in a way instrumentalized by their function, becoming the product of an impossible synthesis between the construction of a cold and rational state and the essentially personal relations between the king and his nobility. The Enlightenment only exacerbated this development, as the king was practically no longer present on the battlefields, and military promotion became mechanical. The sovereign now projected his presence through the kingdom in an abstract way: through the mediation of *Te Deum* hymns, statues, medals, calendar images.

The Enlightenment was marked by this unresolved contradiction: routinization and professionalization of the army, and individual merit recognized by the

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41   Stoll, *Servir le Roi-Soleil.*

42   Archive Nationale, Private Archives (AP), 259.

43   See for example: Gibiat, *Hiérarchies sociales et ennoblissement.*

44   Smith, *The Culture of Merit.*

king's gaze. But this view was increasingly absent: it was now the army's administrative machine that functioned and rewarded a bureaucratized merit. Moreover, in the eighteenth century, the words 'king', 'council', 'government', and 'administration', tended to be interchangeable. And this is how the absolutist culture of royal service contributed to the destruction of the nobility's identity. Since Michel Nassiet's work on the evolution of the number of nobles in the eighteenth century, we know that it was in free fall throughout the Enlightenment.[45] A figure of 234,000 individuals would characterize the situation at the beginning of the Enlightenment, whereas by the 1780s, the number of nobles had fallen to 140,000, which implies an enormous erosion of 41 percent! There are demographic reasons for this fast decreased: as Stéphane Minvielle has shown, the second order had embarked on "the contraceptive slide".[46] Nevertheless, this was far from being the only reason. By returning several usurpers to the ranks of the commoners, the famous campaigns of proof largely contributed to the numerical weakening of the order, which seriously affected the social framework of the countryside. Strangely, could absolutism therefore be regarded as one of the creators of its own weakening and one of the remote causes of the outbreak of violence in the summer of 1789?

Social changes in the nobility

Recent developments in historiography have led to a rethinking of the relationships of the nobility between town and country. As Arlette Jouanna wrote on the subject:

> "Country life and urban life are two arts of living, inspired by specific ideals and fuelled by sometimes different forms of wealth. In the sixteenth century, competition between the two ways of life was still open and it would have an ambiguous outcome, with the triumph of the land as an economic value and that of the city as a cultural value."[47]

The creation of Versailles had attracted part of the curial nobility, but it should not be forgotten that, as Mathieu Marraud has shown,[48] Paris remained the capital of the nobility, as many courtiers lived there and most of the ministerial departments were also located there. Fifteen to twenty thousand nobles resided in Paris permanently, only leaving the city during the summer. Close to the Court, this Parisian nobility was, by virtue of its aspirations and origins, a nobility of function which found in the princes and in the service of the king something to feed its appetite

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45   Nassiet, "Le problème des effectifs de la noblesse," 100.

46   Minvielle, *Dans l'intimité des familles.*

47   Jouanna, *Histoire des élites,* 85–6.

48   Marraud, *La noblesse de Paris.*

for profits and honours. The combination of the concentration of the state and the capital city had led to the emergence of an elite drawn from the Parisian pool of administrative officers, tax gatherers, aldermen and merchants, all of which allowed one to pass from the state of commoner to the state of nobility. In addition, the capital attracted the provincial nobility. Nobles came to settle in the big city often at the risk of their finances, and operated in networks structured by their geographical origin. In the provinces, the place of the second order was far from always identical and in fact varied according to the functions and the economic dynamism of the city. The cities with the richest and most numerous nobility were undoubtedly the seats of sovereign courts. Adopting a highly original comparative approach between France and England, François-Joseph Ruggiu has studied two cities that were however not part of the major lines of developments in France, since Abbeville went from 15,000 inhabitants in around 1750 to just over 19,000 around 1780, and the population of Alençon grew from 12,000 to 14,000. Nevertheless, the nobility of Abbeville constituted two thirds of the nobility of the Ponthieu, and in the election of Alençon, a third of the families lived in the town, but with the episcopal town of Sées twenty kilometers away, half of the noble families of the election lived in urban areas. In the much more rural region of Périgord Noir, the nobility of the Sarlat area was polarized by the towns very early on, though not abandoning their castles and seigneuries.[49] Conversely, there is a specificity in Brittany because in that province, the feeling about nobility remained very much associated with rurality and only a minority of the families of parliamentarians came from the urban patriciates.[50] The behavior of the nobles around the important and medium-sized towns confirms that it would be wrong to make a firm opposition between town and country, because several members of the second order divided their year, as that excellent observer of Norman reality, Lepecq de la Clôture, points out:

> "This class alternately follows and varies its habits and occupations with those of statesmen and people of the world. They have the leisure to indulge, for a few moments, in the torrent of society and to move in those circles. But the course of their lives is divided between the city and the country, where useful holidays, when their occupations are suspended, allow them to taste the delights of country life."[51]

In the eighteenth century, the lifestyle of the nobility was thus completely transformed by the city and its customs. In the capital and in the largest cities of the kingdom, new forms of consumption and a taste for luxury and comfort had taken hold,

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49   Royon, *La petite noblesse*.

50   Aubert, "La noblesse et la ville," 127–49.

51   Lepecq de la Clôture, *Collection d'observations*, vol. I, 267.

and the nobleman himself had become the promoter of progress, seeking to embellish the city and to improve its viability. At the same time, the cultural values of urban life, conveyed through education and practices such as reading, continued to gain ground.

All these elements lend themselves particularly well to an approach based on material culture, which has developed in recent years. In the wake of Daniel Roche's general work, *La douceur des Lumières* seeks to highlight cultural differences according to the nobility's milieu.[52] By taking five examples from the Parisian high nobility, the house of La Tremoille, the Fitz-Jameses, the Fleurys, the Coignys, and Princess Kinsky, Natacha Coquery has highlighted this permanent quest for whatever conveys distinction, this taste for comfort, for luxurious furniture and for fashions, from Orientalism to Anglomania, via a return to Antiquity.[53] The material environment worthy of great aristocrats was a construction caught in a network of economic, practical and social constraints. The aristocratic mentality favored spending over income, which meant that the demand for pomp weighed heavily on the finances of a household that had to support the monarchy with its fortune and engage in the conflicts of its time. As Marjorie Meiss-Even has shown in her first-rate monograph on the Guise family, as early as the sixteenth century, their material culture therefore had to be placed in the overall economic logic of the House of Lorraine.[54] In the same way, the entirety of all the objects necessary for an aristocrat's representation cannot be removed from the context of craft production and the commercial exchanges of the Renaissance. Where did the Guises obtain their supplies so as to project the image of grandeur expected of them? How did they choose the craftsmen with whom they placed their orders matching by their rank? Was it so simple at a time when traffic was slow and often dangerous to fill the Château de Joinville or the town house in the Rue du Chaume with the "empire of things" characteristic of the Renaissance? Relaying a very strong revaluation of noblewomen, Aurélie Châtenet-Calyste has managed to trace back "an aristocratic and feminine consumption at the end of the eighteenth century, that of Marie-Fortunée d'Este, Princess de Conti (1731–1803)".[55] This thesis, based on the analysis of the princely lifestyle and extant accounts, therefore reveals how the study of Princess de Conti's consumption demonstrates all or part of her individuality. All expenses are examined, including the costs of food, decoration, clothing, and health, as well as book purchases and religious expenses, with the idea that behind the dry accounts there is a personality, an identity. The aim of this study is to shed light on the princes of the blood. We still know little of this third circle around the king, particularly at the end

52   Figeac, *La douceur des Lumières*.

53   Coquery, *L'hôtel aristocratique*.

54   Meiss-Even, *Les Guise*.

55   Châtenet-Calyste, *Une consommation aristocratique*.

of the eighteenth century, which reinforces our metaphoric image of the *millefeuille nobiliaire* or "noble layer cake".

Finally, many works on the Age of Enlightenment highlight the noble milieu's capacity for innovation and mobility. The noble authors acted as patrons who protected the humbler literati and allowed them to benefit from their networks of relationships. Indeed, the enlightened nobility was the only population group capable of understanding and sponsoring the Enlightenment. All studies about the Academies, salons, masonic lodges, and cultural societies confirm that the nobility were at the heart of the intellectual establishment of the time. In his thesis on the provincial academies, Daniel Roche shows how they played a leading role in the urban concert of learned societies where they rubbed shoulders with jurists, doctors, artists, and businessmen.[56] In her study of Madame du Deffand's salon, Benedetta Craveri emphasises that "in a country where the press is supervised, but where freedom of speech is almost absolute, intellectuals need socialites to spread their ideas, to support their writings, to intercede with the authorities, to direct opinion, which, as has been repeated too often, plays the leading role in this century".[57] Scientists learned to adapt their science to facilitate their approach, philosophers to clarify their concepts, while the people of the world stimulated thinkers with their ever-increasing curiosity, as can be seen very clearly in Antoine Lilti's thesis on Parisian salons.[58]

Gauthier Aubert's major biographical study of President de Robien, a pioneer in making sense of the megaliths in Brittany, allows us to measure a great parliamentarian's extent of knowledge in all its breadth and limits. Coming from an old lineage of the provincial aristocracy, Robien was a collector, antiquarian and naturalist, and his fame went beyond the borders of Brittany. Through the study of character, the author identifies the ways in which the Enlightenment penetrated the dominant Breton milieus, by confronting the Robien case with its environment, in particular, thanks to the after-death inventories of the elites of his time.[59] This enlightened action can be observed in all fields, whether it be naturalism (Buffon, Lamarck, and Lacépède), philosophy (Montesquieu, Condorcet, and Condillac), or the great voyages of exploration (Lapérouse, and Kerguelen) among many others.[60] Numerous nobles were actors of the Enlightenment, as reflected by the sociological studies of the authors of the *Encyclopédie*. They were involved in the enterprise, not by virtue of their titles, but as specialists in a particular subject.

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56   Roche, *Le siècle des Lumières.*

57   Craveri, *Madame du Deffand.*

58   Lilti, *Le monde des salons.*

59   Aubert, *Le président de Robien.*

60   Even though it is not directly about the nobility, Bruno Belhoste's book gives an excellent idea of this: Belhoste, *Paris savant.*

The most famous case is that of the Chevalier de Jaucourt, who spent his life producing articles for the *Encyclopédie*. Having studied theology in Geneva, mathematics for three years at Cambridge, and medicine in Leiden, he was truly a member of the nobility, fully integrated into the networks of the European Enlightenment. The Marquis de Saint-Lambert (who in 1762 published a highly acclaimed article on luxury), Bouchard and the Count of Tressan, among others, contributed to the encyclopedic work. This attraction to intellectual activities and curiosity has led researchers to highlight the role of the second order in the acceleration of international circulation and intellectual exchange in the eighteenth century. Naturally, one must be wary of the influence of sources here and, in particular, of the fact that memorialists and epistolary writers are over-represented. International movement typical of the aristocracy is mainly in line with its demographic weight: they were involved mostly in pilgrimages, military campaigns, and labor migration.

The surprising category of migration mainly applies to the aristocrats with careers in the service of a foreign state, sometimes in civil administration, but more often in the army. In France, apart from the well-known case of the great captains—the marshals of Berwick, Saxony or Lowendal—there are many non-French born aristocrats in the so-called foreign regiments. Many had the position of lieutenant-colonel, which meant that they exercised effective command of the regiment on behalf of the titular colonel, who was a reigning prince: for example, the Baron de Clozen, a Bavarian by birth, for the Duke of Deux-Ponts (Royal-Deux-Ponts Regiment in the 1760s), or the Prince de Salm-Salm, himself the sovereign of a principality, for the Prince of Anhalt (Anhalt Regiment in the 1780s). Others had their own regiment, such as the Baron de Sparre, Swedish by birth (Sparre-Infanterie Regiment in 1690–1710, the predecessor of the Royal Swedish Regiment), which did not prevent him from returning to the service of his homeland as Swedish ambassador to France. Many of these moves could be multiform. Thus, in the midst of his German campaign of 1757, which took him from the battle of Hastenbeck to the submission of Hanover, the Marquis de Valfons took a day to visit the neutral city of Bremen with the Duke of Richelieu. Similarly, Prince Galitzine's stays as Russian ambassador in Paris and subsequently in The Hague in the 1760s and 1770s cannot be reduced to his diplomatic activities alone, although his time was largely devoted to the Republic of Letters and Sciences, as Diderot's writings show. This itinerancy and frequentation aristocratic sociability in Europe has been more particularly scrutinized by Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire in the context of Freemasonry networks, based on the correspondence of the Chevalier de Corberon.[61]

Jonathan Dewald seems to be largely on the wrong track when he argues in his synthesis of the nobility of modern Europe that European nobles were increasingly similar

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61   Beaurepaire, *L'autre et le frère* and Beaurepaire and Taurisson, *Les ego-documents.*

to each other as the modern period progressed.[62] In support of his argument, he points out that there were many poor nobles in the late Middle Ages, but in the modern period money was increasingly more and more necessary to lead an existence that conformed to the ideal of noble life, and to have access to the knowledge and entertainment that it required. In reality, as we have seen, economic hierarchies remained as heterogeneous as ever. Many families disappeared, but at least as much for biological as for political reasons, and the simplification of the second order is absolutely not evident. On the contrary. Faced with the evolution of the Enlightenment, this polymorphism continued to increase, particularly, as we have seen, under the influence of cultural factors. At the end of the *Ancien Régime,* we should no longer be surprised to witness the divisions and fractures in the nobility in the face of the Revolution.[63]

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62   Dewald, *The European Nobility.*

63   On this topic, see the excellent conference organized and headed by Bourdin, ed., *Les noblesses françaises.*

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