Catholic Activism in South-West France, 1540–1570

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ASHGATE
Contents

Acknowledgements  vi
List of Abbreviations viii

1. Themes and Sources 1
2. The Birth of Catholic Activism at Bordeaux 18
3. The Bordeaux Syndicate 34
4. The Nobility of the Bordelais 50
5. Catholic Consolidation at Bordeaux 67
6. Coalition and Consensus at Agen 83
7. The Defence of Agen 97
8. Confrontation and Insurrection at Toulouse 110
9. Militant Ascendancy at Toulouse 124
10. Rebellion and Wider Catholic Activism: Béarn and Navarre 143
11. Conclusion 159

Select bibliography 167

Index 183
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Kevin Gould
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Abbreviations

ADG    Archives départementales de la Gironde
ADHG   Archives départementales de la Haute-Garonne
ADLG   Archives départementales de Lot-et-Garonne
AHG    Archives historiques du département de la Gironde
AHR    American Historical Review
AMB    Archives municipales de Bordeaux
AMT    Archives municipales de Toulouse
ARG    Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte
BMB    Bibliothèque municipale de Bordeaux
BN     Bibliothèque nationale de Paris
BSHPF  Bulletin de la société de l’histoire du protestantisme français
EHR    English Historical Review
FH     French History
FHS    French Historical Studies
HGL    Histoire générale de Languedoc
HJ     Historical Journal
JMH    Journal of Ecclesiastical History
JMH    Journal of Modern History
P&P    Past and Present
SCJ    Sixteenth Century Journal
Perceptions of Catholic conduct during the French Wars of Religion (1562–98) have traditionally been shaped by two episodes: the bloodlust of the Saint Bartholomew’s massacres of 1572 and the militancy of the Catholic League during the 1580s and 1590s. Protestant contemporaries observed Catholic behaviour during these periods as provocative, ferocious and brutal, a characterization that gained greater licence as subsequent historians determined to interpret the conflict as a struggle for legitimacy by a persecuted minority in the face of uncompromising Catholic aggression. The pre-eminence of studies of League belligerence in the historiography of Catholic endeavours has done little to lessen this partiality, with the result that Catholic faits et mentalités during the first decades of the wars have been largely overlooked. Scholars have only recently begun to redress these imbalances. A.N. Galpern, Philip Benedict and Robert Sauzet were among the first to reappraise earlier Catholic pursuits, adopting a more sensitive approach that balanced traditional accounts with fresh archival research, and which set Catholic conduct within its regional milieu rather than as a facet of conventional narratives such as court faction, noble intrigues and international conspiracies.

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Denis Crouzet’s two-volume opus, *Les guerriers de Dieu*, published in 1990, was a significant milestone in this approach. Crouzet argued that Catholic activism was certainly not the preserve of the elites of France but had been embraced by many among the urban and rural communities from the mid-sixteenth century, the early confessional clashes heightened by a pervading sense of millenarian *angoisse* and growing penitential fervour.4

The affinity for localized studies during the 1990s did much to develop this perspective. Barbara Diefendorf’s and Ann Ramsey’s work on Paris, for example, showed how Catholics sought to unify the community against an increasingly potent reform movement by reinforcing traditional concepts of orthodoxy: confirming doctrine, re-emphasizing ritual and collective piety, employing polemic.5 David Nicholls’s examination of confessional relations at Tours found that it was the usurpation of local institutions by leading Catholic magistrates rather than Catholic military prowess that was the key to countering Protestant hegemony – a policy Penny Roberts has revealed was also employed by militant Catholics at Troyes.6 Wolfgang Kaiser’s work on the port of Marseille assessed the growth of militant Catholicism in an urban setting devoid of the influence of a sovereign court and lacking the strong participation of royal officials, while Marc Venard detailed how the presence of numerous well-established confraternities and a Jesuit school facilitated greater authoritative control for Avignon’s Catholic leadership.7 Such revisionist

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methodology underscored Stuart Carroll’s assessment of militancy within Normandy and Mack P. Holt’s evaluation of Catholic ascendancy within the staunchly orthodox province of Burgundy, while Olivier Christin’s examination of the Catholic riposte to Protestant iconoclasm provided valuable new insights into confessional contention within the communities of France.8 Catholic endeavour in the volatile south-western provinces of Guyenne and Western Languedoc is served by several apposite studies. Jonathan Powis’s work on contestation at Bordeaux scrutinized the political wrangling between Catholics and moderates within the town’s parlement and civic administration, while the articles of Joan Davies and Mark Greengrass offered a detailed analysis of confessional strife at Toulouse during the first religious war.9 Both René Souriac’s analysis of government and local bureaucracy at Comminges and Michel Cassan’s assessment of confraternal activism at Limoges proffered comprehensive studies of Catholic organizational and administrative skills, while Philip Conner’s analysis of Protestant government at Montauban revealed Catholic reaction to the loss of political power within an important urban centre.10

One theme evident in these latter studies is the ferocity and violence of sectarian relations in the south-west. James Wood’s review of the impact of war in the 1560s on the communities of France demonstrated this

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phenomenon succinctly. Wood showed that of the seventeen dioceses of
France worst affected by financial ruin, twelve (71 per cent) were located
in or on the borders of Guyenne and Western Languedoc, with Guyenne
witnessing especially high levels of abuse against Catholic priests and
cannons throughout the decade.\footnote{J. B. Wood, “The impact of the
Crouzet concurred, calling the region ‘a laboratory of violent experiences’,\footnote{Crouzet, Les guerriers de Dieu, I, p. 524. Crouzet devoted more attention
to the south-west than any other region in his Les guerriers de Dieu, even
titling one section: ‘Pourquoi le sud-ouest?’} a view supported by contemporary
Catholic testimony: a report from the Toulouse parlement to the crown in
January 1562 asserted that ‘by violence and insidious means, the reform-
ers are conspiring to be dominant in this kingdom’,\footnote{Parlement of Toulouse to
Charles IX (7 January 1562). A. de Ruble, Jeanne d’Albret et la guerre civile
(Paris, 1897), p. 101.} while the governor of Narbonne, Raymond de Pavie,
sieur de Fourquevaux, informed the French ambassador in Spain six months
later that ‘the seditious of Guyenne are the worst of all’.\footnote{Fourquevaux to
Saint-Sulpice, ambassador of Charles IX in Spain (17 June 1562), Edmond
Cabié, Guerres de religion dans le sud-ouest de la France et principalement dans
de la Quercy, d’après les papiers des seigneurs de Saint-Sulpice de 1561 à 1590. Documents transcri-
scrits, classés et annotés (Paris, 1906), pp. 5–6.} Indeed, the scale of military activity
across the region during the 1560s caused Florimond de Raemond, a conseiller of the
Bordeaux parlement, to remark that Guyenne had now become ‘a shop of soldiers and the breeding ground of armies’.\footnote{Paul Courteault, Histoire de Gascogne et de Béarn (Paris, 1938), p. 210.} Several
factors exacerbated these tensions: the large reform population in the
south-west (almost 10 per cent of the region by 1561); the high percent-
age of urban centres of the region that featured substantial Protestant
communities, and that subsequently fell under Protestant control over the
1560s; and the large number of landholding nobles that converted to ‘la
nouvelle religion’ across the countryside, thereby ranging their armed
retinues against those of local Catholic elites. Indeed, Crouzet has
concluded that it was the scale and intensity of the Protestant expansion
that resulted in such explosive sectarian tensions across the region during
the 1560s.\footnote{Crouzet, Les guerriers de Dieu, I, p. 524.}

With confessional affairs so strained, Catholics of the south-west became
energized from an early stage, and began to form associations to better
defend their communities. Confederation and coalition soon became the
standard medium for security for Catholics, with the result that Guyenne
and Western Languedoc would witness Catholic ‘leaguing’ on a scale rarely
seen elsewhere in France at this time. Yet, while a number of these militant bodies are identified within historical commentaries, the specifics of their evolution and the mechanics of their organization and activity have rarely been assessed in any detail: of the few dedicated surveys, Joseph Lecler’s short paper proved effective, while the narrative essays of James Westfall Thompson, A. Dupré and Charles Dartigue offered only limited fare. Why such a paucity in the historiography? The long-standing, and largely unchallenged, assumption that the Leaguers were the pre-eminent Catholic activists of the wars is partly to blame, as it identified all earlier episodes of militancy as little more than precursors to the Sainte Union. Lecler typified this approach, examining the associations of the 1560s as antecedents to a later construction rather than as independent entities in themselves, even framing his discourse under the title: ‘Aux origines de la Ligue’. Another contributory factor was the reluctance of historians to see pre-League Catholic bodies as anything other than disparate, localized entities, whose parochial nature tended to render them inconsequential in provincial affairs.

This book will refute the assumptions that have bolstered such historiographies, and will present in their place an alternative history of Catholic militancy in south-west France. At Bordeaux, Toulouse, Agen and Cadillac, for example, elite-led foundations and multifarious collectives offered formal vehicles for Catholic dissent. At their core were authority and community figures alike: high and low nobles, court officials, local clergy and confrères, and an energized citizenry. The vitality of popular sentiment often drew upon the experience of confronting reform evangelism at local levels, and in some cases served to prepare the ground for the emerging associations. Significantly, in most instances individual Catholic militant bodies united in solidarity with neighbouring and regional allies across the south-west to form potent entities – they were certainly not the ‘limited, ephemeral, unconnected’ ligues as described by Lecler. For John Bossy, the failure to explore such complex forces in greater detail has precluded valuable insights being made into Catholic mentalités during the early years of sectarian conflict, a time, he asserted, of seismic shifts in Catholic perspectives and posture.


in wider controversies being marginalized in deference to the obsession with League studies. The existence of widespread militancy in the south-west during the 1550s and 1560s, for instance, challenges the historiographical axiom that places the Council of Trent at the centre of the sixteenth-century movement of Catholic renewal in France. The nascence of so many associations suggests that Catholicism did not wait upon Trent, not in Guyenne and Western Languedoc at least, but instead determined individuals sought to defend orthodoxy long before the Tridentine decrees ever reached the royal court, insistent that heresy should not prevail within their community. This posits a new schema for the profile of Catholic activism, positioning the militant bodies of the mid-decades of the century at the vanguard of Catholic renewal, and the associations of the 1560s as arbiters of the Catholic counter-offensive, rather than the post-1584 Leaguers as assumed in existing historiographies.

This study will reflect on these controversies and will provide a detailed analysis of Catholic militancy across the south-west of France during the pre-League period. It will examine three distinct loci: Bordeaux and the Bordelais; Agen and the Agenais; and Toulouse and its environs. This delineation is a natural one. Not only were these regions hotbeds of Catholic activism from the early 1540s, but the three towns were the only sizeable urban centres of the south-west to resist fully the inexorable gains made by the reform movement over the period. Chapters Two to Five will examine key elements of activism at Bordeaux and the Bordelais: the defence of Catholic traditions and practices within the community and the emergence of confraternal activism during the 1540s and 1550s; the creation of a syndicate of militant officials within the sovereign court during the early 1560s; the formation of elite associations to secure Bordeaux’s hinterland after 1563; and the usurpation and domination of government offices by Catholic activists after 1567. Chapters Six and Seven will assess events at Agen and across the Agenais: the formation of a coalition ‘government’ of Catholic notables to maintain authority over local institutions; its subsequent union with proactive elite associations intent on leading a Catholic counter-offensive within the region; and the coalescing of local Catholic bodies into an entity capable of defending the town from a concerted Protestant onslaught after 1567. Chapters Eight and Nine will focus on Toulouse and its environs: pre-war communal and confraternal activism across the town; the Protestant coup of May 1562 and the Catholic response; the creation of an oath-bound elite league and subsequent coalition council to confront Protestant gains within the locality; and the reinvigoration of Catholic missionary zeal through the calling of a crusade. Chapter Ten will explore the involvement of militants of the south-west in the Catholic rebellions in the neighbouring territories of Béarn and Navarre, and the interconnectedness of
Catholic forces in the decade-long attempt to oust the monarch of these lands, Jeanne d’Albret, from power.

Why the south-west? The rising Protestant population, the aggressive posture of evangelicals, the infiltration of council chambers by reformed officials and the violent sectarian confrontations have been noted above, but there were several extraneous circumstances that also heightened tensions across the south-west. The support offered to militants at Bordeaux and Toulouse by external Catholic powers such as Spain and the papacy was one such factor. As frontier provinces, Guyenne and Languedoc had long resisted military, political and economic pressure from exterior powers. During the 1550s and 1560s, however, resident Catholics actively sought alliances with neighbouring co-religionists to bolster their standing, trading intelligence for funds and military provisions. The resulting influx of papal gold and Spanish troops complicated matters, with Protestants asserting repeatedly that Catholic captains were colluding with the enemies of France and taking bribes to ‘sell’ the kingdom to the highest bidder. Another extenuating factor that intensified the instability of the south-west was the lack of effective governorship and grandee influence. Robert Harding and Sharon Kettering have identified the provincial governor as a leading determinant of the strength of regional political government in sixteenth-century France. It was through the office of governor that patronage networks, local alliances and bonds of fidelity usually permeated, especially at times of weak central authority, as occurred during the religious wars. Yet during the 1550s and early 1560s, neither Guyenne nor Languedoc saw their incumbent for any length of time. The governor of Guyenne, Antoine de Bourbon, king of Navarre, was absent from his seat of office for long periods, preferring to administrate by communiqué from the royal court, while Languedoc’s governor, Anne de Montmorency, the Constable of France, rarely visited his province either.

Surprisingly, this power vacuum was not filled by leading grandee families of France, with the result that royal officials and local elites of the south-west profited from this rupture in the traditional hierarchy of provincial authority and managed their affairs with a licence not

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21 The two heirs to these seats of power fared little better during the 1560s. At the death of Navarre in November 1562, his office remained vacant as his son, Henri de Bourbon, was too young to assume the title and so remained disenfranchised until late in 1569. The successor to the Constable in Languedoc, Henri de Montmorency-Damville, fared only slightly better, spending a short time in his gouvernement in 1564 before leaving to head the royal army as marshal of France after 1565.
normally tolerated under the auspices of a dominant governor. The
dearth of Guise influence here is especially unexpected, given that the
machinations of this powerful Catholic family are seen as integral to most
studies of the French Wars of Religion, and that Catholicism in the region
badly needed a potent patron during much of the 1560s.22 There are three
possible reasons for Guise absence from the south-west. Firstly, the great
distance from the region to the north-eastern centres of Guise patrimony
may have been too constraining. Communication between the crown and
the region had proved troublesome enough, so it was unlikely that the
Guise’s evolving influence would have fared any better. Secondly, as
Stuart Carroll has outlined, the main factor determining political strategy
for the Guise at this time was their feud with the Admiral, Coligny, and so
involvement in sectarian confrontations in the south-west would have
been peripheral to court rivalries.23 This is confirmed by Harding and
Benedict, who have argued that, despite their bluster, it is doubtful that
the Guise intended to undertake a concerted campaign to extirpate
Protestantism from France during the early 1560s.24 That the family was
adopting a circumspect approach at this time is evident from two contem-
porary sources: the minutes of the Assembly of Fontainebleau, in August
1560, at which the provincial governors and local officials were
cautioned that large-scale repression of the reform movement would be
more of a threat to public order than a cure; and a royal directive of early
1561 that warned the militant duke d’Etampes, governor of Brittany, that
‘as long as Protestants, in praising God make no scandal for others and
assemble in small numbers and peaceably, they should not be prevented
from so doing ... In the times we are in, we must conduct all things
cautiously with reason, great calmness, and moderation, precipitating
nothing’.25 Certainly, such reticence may well have been a realization of

22 The Guise had risen to prominence following their part in the military successes of the
1550s, with the duke, François, playing a leading role in the Italian campaigns against
Spanish forces, while his brother, Charles, cardinal of Lorraine, became a successful and
highly prominent diplomat. The defining moment for Guise ascendancy came with the
defeat and capture of the Constable of France, Anne de Montmorency, by Spanish troops at
Saint-Quentin in August 1557. Until this point, the Montmorencies had edged the rivalry
between the two houses. Now, with François promoted to lieutenant-général of France in
the Constable’s absence, and with the cardinal of Lorraine appointed to oversee domestic
and foreign policy, the brothers were the new dominant force at court. See Carroll, Noble
Power; Jean-Marie Constant, Les Guise (Paris, 1984); Henri Forneron, Les ducs de Guise et
24 Harding, Anatomy of a Power Elite, pp. 49–51; Philip Benedict, ‘The Saint
25 Charles IX to Étampes (March 1561), quoted in Harding, Anatomy of a Power Elite,
p. 51.
the difficulty any pogrom would encounter: one moderate voice at Bordeaux warned in 1560 that ‘at this moment royal ministers may be unwilling to proceed with a policy aimed at the total annihilation of Huguenot supporters’,26 while Jean de Monluc, bishop of Valence, writing in 1562, noted that ‘the number of sectarians of the new religion is so great and they are so firm and constant in their belief that those who would oppose them would have to kill them all, otherwise those that survived would resuscitate their movement’.27

A third factor that may explain Guise absence is that their client network rarely penetrated into the south-west. This was, after all, the heartland of Bourbon patrimony, and while the region did feature three high-ranking former clients of the Guise – Christophe de Roffignac, président of the parlement at Bordeaux; George, Cardinal d’Armagnac, lieutenant du roi at Toulouse; and Blaise de Monluc, lieutenant-général (later lieutenant du roi) in Guyenne – their affiliation had occurred earlier in their careers during service in the north of France. On their return to the south-west, all three had little contact with their former patrons. Events surrounding Monluc’s association capture this succinctly. The Gascon captain had served in the royal army under the Guise in Italy during the 1550s, gaining promotion to the post of colonel-général des gens de pied in May 1558, and fighting alongside the duke in the victory over the Spanish army at Thionville later that year.28 But relations had become strained as a result of the backlash that greeted Monluc’s promotion. Essentially the office had become a focal point of renewed hostility between the Guise and Montmorency families at court: François, duc de Guise, now lieutenant-général of France, had removed the incumbent colonel-général, François de Châtillon, seigneur d’Andelot, the nephew of the Constable, to spite his adversary. Monluc had become a pawn in the manoeuvrings of the Guise; the office a poison chalice. Courteault stated that Monluc was sufficiently insignificant in court circles to prevent civil war breaking out at his appointment, but would serve as the perfect scapegoat should the French military offensives of 1558 ultimately fail.29 Monluc was equivocal about the d’Andelot affair in his Commentaires, claiming that it was regrettable that the Constable had

28 Monluc’s career had seemingly reached a new height – from archer in the Gascon regiments of Francis I to colonel-général of Henry II’s royal army. For further details of his military service under the Guise at Picardy in 1558, see Jules Andrieu, Histoire de l’Agenais (2 vols, Agen, 1893), I, p. 211.
been offended, and that he had only accepted the role after being urged to do so by the king and the cardinal of Lorraine.\textsuperscript{30} There may be a glint of truth in this as, when Montmorency was returned to power and reinstated as Constable in November 1558, Monluc immediately resigned his commission and allowed d’Andelot to resume his office so as to avoid any recriminations. In fact, Monluc seems to have been keen to extricate himself completely from this situation, as he requested permission to leave the royal army and join the king of Navarre’s military expedition against rebel forces in Béarn and lower Navarre.\textsuperscript{31}

Yet Monluc’s affiliation to the Guise would still cause problems. When Henry II died in July 1559, François de Guise seized power at court, isolating Catherine de Medici, the king’s widow, Montmorency and Antoine de Bourbon, the first prince of the blood, who most expected would assume the role of regent for the boy king, Francis II. This put Monluc in an awkward position, for he was now settled at Navarre’s court at Pau. To choose one party and sever ties with the other would have been political suicide at such a fluid time, so Monluc became a pragmatist, serving Navarre in the south-west, but staying in contact with the duke of Guise through his brother, Jean, bishop of Valence.\textsuperscript{32} The situation became more complicated in May 1560, though, when Monluc’s intervention in the trial of two Calvinist ministers at Agen, Jean Voisin and Jacques Fontaine, resulted in complaints from local reformers to Navarre. Monluc received a reprimand from Pau for presiding over the case without official jurisdiction, but, when further sanctions were mooted, the duke of Guise intervened to spare Monluc further censure.\textsuperscript{33} While Guise mediation may suggest that ties were still strong between the two parties, Paul Courteault believed that the duke’s motive was to secure a spy in the south-west to watch over Navarre. Monluc had the perfect credentials for the task, and this may account for his recall to the royal court in August 1560, and the flurry of correspondence with the cardinal of Lorraine later the same year.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{31} When his release was granted in January 1559 by the \textit{conseil privé}, Monluc withdrew with haste to the security of his homeland of Guyenne, leaving the Guise and Montmorency families to resume their power struggle without him. See A.W. Evans, \textit{Blaise de Monluc} (London, 1909), p. 19.
\textsuperscript{34} Courteault, \textit{Blaise de Monluc. Historien}, p. 390.
It would be a short-lived reconciliation, though, as the death of Francis II in December 1560 released Monluc from his obligations. This time, Catherine de Medici wasted no time securing the reins of power, promoting Montmorency and sending for Navarre so as to counter the Guise element within the royal council. With the Guise ostracized from court, Monluc was able to return to Guyenne, to remain there as lieutenant-général after December 1561.

Their relationship after this point is unclear. Communications between the two were rare during the 1560s, and the Guise seemed too preoccupied with affairs in the north and north-east to intervene in Catholic intrigues in Guyenne or Languedoc. Mark Greengrass did find a tentative connection between the parties in his examination of the indentures of a client of the Guise, Guy de Daillon, comte de Lude, with transcripts, dated August 1563, revealing that Lude promised to serve the Guise family faithfully, but also to recognize Monluc as ‘lieutenant-général and head of the enterprise in Guyenne’. This is supported by archival evidence that revealed Lude to be an active supporter of Catholic activists at Bordeaux (he would be identified by moderates within the court as one of those Catholic nobles accused of attempting to usurp power in September 1563) but little additional material survives to confirm or reject the supposition that Lude was a conduit between the Guise and Monluc at this time. What should be remembered, however, is that, in February 1563, François de Guise, Monluc’s patron during the 1550s, died at Orléans, and so it was his son, Henri de Guise, who now headed the family. Perhaps the lack of Guise involvement in Catholic affairs of the south-west is explained by the fact that Henri did not enjoy the same bond with the militants there as had his father. A brief examination of the diminishing relationship between another leading Catholic activist of the south-west, George, Cardinal d’Armagnac, and the Guise tends to confirm this supposition. Armagnac had acted as diplomatic envoy on many of François de Guise’s foreign campaigns during the early 1550s, and had also served on several diplomatic missions for the duke’s brother, the cardinal of Lorraine, during the same period. Indeed, it was on one such campaign in Italy that Armagnac met and became friends with Monluc – the beginning of a long-standing friendship that would prove pivotal to the extensive relations between Catholics of Guyenne and those

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36 D’Escars to Catherine de Medici (6 September 1563), BN nouv. acq. français, 20 598, fo. 197.