



Compte rendu: Justine Firnhaber-Baker, The Jacquerie of 1358: A French Peasants' Revolt

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Justine Firnhaber-Baker, *The Jacquerie of 1358: A French Peasants' Revolt*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xxii+307. \$100. ISBN: 978-0-19-885641-2.

Rather surprisingly, this is the first dedicated monograph to be published on the northern French peasant revolt of 1358 known as the *Jacquerie* since Siméon Luce's *École des chartes* thesis of 1859. Luce's foundational research in both chronicle and archival material was revisited and expanded in the later twentieth century by Raymond Cazelles and Françoise Autrand, amongst others, but in the form either of articles, or of studies whose focus lead them to be classed as exclusively political history. Douglas Aiton's 2007 thesis remains unpublished. The result has been a slippage in interpretation amongst historians both left-leaning and conservative, who tend to follow the 'anti-explanation' advanced by Jules Flammermont in 1879 in which the revolt is the nihilistic act of 'rude peasants, without education or direction, dazed by poverty and drink'. Thus even Michel Mollat and Philippe Wolff saw the revolt as being as 'incoherent as it was spontaneous', an amorphous outpouring of long-held social animus fundamentally explained by poverty. Historians from Jonathan Sumption to David Green concur. In the light of recent research which stresses the rationality and structure underlying medieval revolts, the time seems ripe to reconsider how Cazelles' emphatically political interpretation, in which the *Jacquerie* is 'remote-controlled' from Paris by Étienne Marcel and the reformers, might be tweaked to give due prominence to peasant priorities and modes of action.

A monographic approach enables Justine Firnhaber-Baker to show how the political was dominant in this revolt, yet not as something controlled by political professionals in Paris. Instead the *Jacquerie* took form through peasant initiatives based on their knowledge of events and the structures of peasant social organisation. Numerous subtle but essential revisions

make it possible to fill in this new picture. This is a cumulative process, based on a thorough analysis of *lettres de remission* (pardons accompanied by narratives that both detail their recipients' crimes and justify them, granted both to rebels and to the nobles who violently suppressed them), *Parlement* litigation, more miscellaneous sources in provincial archives, and a thorough re-reading of the chronicle material. To start with, Firnhaber-Baker shows that the Jacquerie was not a revolt against lords, but against nobles, the second estate which had so badly failed at Poitiers, and especially those who resisted reform. Ecclesiastical lords, for example, were not attacked, and only two churchmen were victimised, and not because they were clerics. The interpersonal violence which the chronicles put centre-stage was a relatively minor aspect of the revolt next to the destruction of noble castles, fortresses or houses which were often more markers of noble status than military redouts. Only 27 identified individuals were killed by the rebels, 9 of these, including the probable heir of the marshal of Normandy recently murdered by the Parisians, in the incident at Saint-Leu-d'Esserent on 28 May 1358 that marked the beginning of the Jacquerie. Meanwhile, some 32 castles, 2 fortresses, 1 tower and over 27 manor-houses can be identified as destroyed in the documentation, and this is surely the tip of the iceberg. The action at Saint-Leu should be seen as an attempt to stop Charles, duke of Normandy, the king's eldest son, from cutting off Paris' supply lines via the river Oise by garrisoning the castle of Creil, as he had done on the Seine at Montereau and on the Marne at Meaux. So this was a pro-Parisian action, but the initiative was local, and the Parisians were not aware of it in advance. The rebel captains of whom the most famous was Guillaume Calle were home-grown leaders, from the immediate vicinity, although they later joined forces with troops sent from Paris. These were the *Jacques Bonhommes* mobilised by the summons of the *arrière-ban* in 1355 and 1356, but whom the king had, fatally, not taken with him against the Black Prince. Moreover, their action was more pre-emptive than reactive. The region north and east of Paris where the Jacquerie broke out had not yet suffered

from post-Poitiers military violence, and later activity further east in Champagne seems to have consisted entirely in tentative peasant self-defence initiatives, interpreted by nobles as sedition and violently suppressed as such.

The analysis of the *lettres de remission* enables Firnhaber-Baker to reject the chronicler-derived clichés which portray the *Jacques* as impoverished marginals without accepting Cazelles' picture of a revolt of educated officials and well-off artisans. She identifies 498 rebels in the remissions, 27.8% of which include a clause specifying that the pardon will enable the recipient to return to their agricultural occupations, and many of the 15.5% identified as artisans would likely also have pursued agricultural trades. This was thus emphatically a peasants' revolt, although it involved cooperation with towns, both Paris and, more effectively, with locally active towns such as Senlis. Communal mechanisms for information circulation, assembly and mobilisation were its sinews, made effective and legitimate by their frequent use in the cause both of the community and the king. Arguably, however, this ordinariness or normality was also one of the rebels' weaknesses, for the sense it gave of legitimacy was decidedly not shared by the nobles. It seems likely that news circulating from Paris and elsewhere made Charles of Navarre seem a potential ally, convincing Guillaume Calle to parley with him at Mello and Clermont without asking for hostages. Their leader captured, the Jacques were cut down by Navarre's forces, and Calle was murdered soon after. A quarter-century later, Wat Tyler had still not learned the lesson that you can never trust a noble.

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