Sandra Coram-Mekkey et Christophe Chazalon (Eds.)


Once again the editors of the registers of the minutes of Geneva’s government meetings during Calvin’s years in Geneva have produced another fine work. Although the minutes and correspondence regularly use terms unfamiliar to readers of modern French, an extensive glossary at the end of the second volume provides much-needed assistance. The overall introduction (in volume one) and the preface to the set of documents surrounding the jurisdictional conflicts between Geneva and Bern in 1541 (in volume two) are invaluable aids in making sense of what was often a complex situation.

By 1541, Geneva was five years into its Reformation. The city government was trying to deal with multiple challenges, and its registers reflect these growing tensions.Externally, Geneva’s chief headache was the aforementioned conflict with Bern, its large and powerful Protestant neighbor. Bern had conquered much of the territory surrounding Geneva in 1536, and persisted in asserting its right to control revenues and church appointments, and exercise judicial sovereignty in the area. For its part, Geneva asserted that some of the territories were historically under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Geneva, and hence should continue under Genevan control. Added to this conflict was a succession of smaller infringements of rights on both sides, ranging from someone raising a Bernese crest on Genevan lands (p. 269) to two Genevans deciding to go chicken-raiding on Bernese territory by night (p. 10). Reaching an impasse in their conflict, Geneva and Bern decided to turn to the neighboring territory of Basle for mediation. However, by the end of 1541 all mediation efforts had failed, in spite of Geneva’s attempts to help their cause by providing gifts to the Basle adjudicators, including trout, pâtés, and chickens (p. 62) (presumably not the same chickens captured in Bernese territory during the earlier raid).

Another major issue perturbing the Genevan authorities throughout 1541 was concern over their coinage. Over the course of the year, a man was caught counterfeiting Genevan coins—he ended up executed (p. 405). Another man caught using fake coinage was kept imprisoned for months, threatened with execution, and finally released with a severe whipping (p. 559). Meanwhile, the master of the Genevan mint was fired after the authorities discovered that the coinage he was producing was of very poor quality (p. 588). This deep concern over coinage is entirely understandable when one recalls that each government minted its own coins, and that the stability of the economy depended on reliable and true-weight/true-value coinage.
Internally, Geneva’s main concerns were to ensure the safety of the city’s inhabitants and make sure that the Reformation took hold in the city. To achieve the latter goal, Geneva’s political leaders were keen to recall John Calvin from his period of exile in Strasbourg. Throughout 1541, letters and envoys went repeatedly from Geneva to Strasbourg to urge Calvin to return. The Genevan authorities also asked other Reformers to add their encouragement to Calvin to come back to Geneva. By September, Calvin was back in the city, and his wife and household joined him shortly thereafter. Before and after Calvin’s arrival, Geneva also relied on the work of other Reformers, including Pierre Viret, one of the earliest Genevan Reformers. Even before Calvin’s return, the pastors of Geneva pressed the Genevan government to set up a consistory to handle marriage issues and matters outside the government’s purview (p. 169). The city council stalled for months, only finally setting up the consistory with a syndic in the chair in December 1541 (p. 590). In the absence of a functioning consistory, the city council dealt with both religious and moral issues. They banned a man suspected of holding Anabaptist views from teaching school (p. 188), and did the same later for a suspected Catholic (p. 198), investigated rumors that one of the city surgeons had two wives (p. 168), ordered parents who had a Catholic baptism for their child to move to a Catholic area (p. 195), jailed and fined people for dancing (p. 327), and prohibited Genevans from celebrating Midsummer’s eve (p. 331).

Of particular interest is the government’s response to cases of adultery or fornication. There were several reported instances over the course of 1541, and what is striking is how variable the penalties were, depending on the gender of the culprit. In February, two women accused of fornication were banished from Geneva, while nothing is said about their male partners (p. 91). In April, a woman who committed adultery and got pregnant was forgiven by her husband (who was willing to take charge of the child) and released from prison, while her partner was banished from Geneva for life. In June, the male half of a couple committing adultery received six days on bread and water in prison and a fine, whereas his female partner (and her husband) were banished from Geneva for life (though the editors note that she was back in the city [with a new husband] already by 1545) (p. 308). In August, a man who committed adultery with his servant was punished with six days’ imprisonment and a fine, while the servant was banished for six years (p. 389). Overall, apart from the case where the husband forgave his wife, the penalties on women were harsher than on men. Further comparisons between the city council’s and consistory’s approach to sex outside marriage would be well worth pursuing.

Following Calvin’s return, the civil authorities put their weight behind the pastors’ vision for reform. Apart from setting up the consistory, the government
also worked to establish the ecclesiastical ordinances, that came into force in November (p. 560). The council also backed the pastors’ plans to hold prayer services during the week as well as the regular worship services on Sundays (pp. 518, 542).

These edited volumes of the Genevan council records offer an invaluable resource to scholars, providing a window into the day-to-day operations of an early modern town in the midst of its shift from Catholicism to Protestantism, with all the complexities and challenges that emerged as a result. Members of the city government did this work over and above their ordinary professional responsibilities. With few exceptions (p. 415), they accepted this task and worked diligently to ensure the safety and prosperity of their community. Graduate students and scholars interested in the implementation of the Reformation at the local level can find much to capture their attention in these volumes, as will those who focus on polity and early modern political and social structures.

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