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978-0-521-88309-2 - A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France

William Beik

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A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France

A magisterial new history of French society between the end of the middle ages and the Revolution by one of the world's leading authorities on early modern France. Using colorful examples and incorporating the latest scholarship, William Beik conveys the distinctiveness of early modern society and identifies the cultural practices that defined the lives of people at all levels of society. Painting a vivid picture of the realities of everyday life, he reveals how society functioned and how the different classes interacted. In addition to chapters on nobles, peasants, city people, and the court, the book sheds new light on the Catholic church, the army, popular protest, the culture of violence, gendered relations, and sociability. This is a major new work that restores the *ancien régime* as a key epoch in its own right and not simply as the prelude to the coming Revolution.

WILLIAM BEIK is Emeritus Professor of History at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. His previous publications include *Urban Protest in Seventeenth-Century France: The Culture of Retribution* (1997) and *Louis XIV and Absolutism: A Study with Documents* (2000).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521709569

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First published 2009

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Beik, William, 1941–

A social and cultural history of early modern France / William Beik.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-88309-2

1. France–Civilization–1328–1600. 2. France–Civilization–17th century.

3. France–Civilization–18th century. 4. France–Social life and customs.

5. Social classes–France–History. 6. Social structure–France–History.

7. Social change–France–History. I. Title.

DC33.3.B45 2009

944'.03–dc22 2008053627

ISBN 978-0-521-88309-2 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-70956-9 paperback

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William Beik

Frontmatter

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*For Carl Kauffman,
in loving memory of
Eric Kauffman*

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William Beik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>List of tables</i>	xiii
<i>Preface</i>	xiv
Introduction: France and its population	1
The creation of France	1
Diversity of geography and culture	4
Population and long-term economic environment	8
1 Rural communities and seigneurial power	15
Origins of the village community	23
The seigneurie	25
2 Peasant life, agriculture, and social distribution	43
The agricultural unit: fields, commons, and <i>prélèvements</i>	43
The rural community	55
Men, women, and families	58
Conclusion	62
3 Domination by the nobility	66
The nobility in society	72
Levels and lifestyles	77
The magnates	85
Conclusion	95
4 City life and city people	98
Life in the city	100
Town governments	105
Merchants and professional “middle classes”	107
The world of artisans	113
Women’s work	119
The urban poor	123

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88309-2 - A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France

William Beik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

Contents

	The shape of the urban population	126
	The rise of seafaring ports	128
5	The monarchy and the new nobility	134
	The world of venality and royal office	135
	The financiers and the royal fiscal system	146
	Rise of a new robe-ministerial elite	152
6	Ecclesiastical power and religious faith	164
	Social background and role in society	166
	Royal power and Catholic decadence	175
	The challenge from the Huguenots	180
	Confessional interaction on the local level	186
	Resurgent Catholicism	190
7	Warfare and society	204
	Life among the troops	213
	Civilians and the scourge of war	217
	The army in the eighteenth century	222
8	Social bonds and social protest	224
	Family relations	225
	Social relations in the community	227
	Conflict, protest, revolt	237
9	Traditional attitudes and identities	255
	The culture of the majority	256
	Catholic rituals	258
	The annual cycle of rituals	264
	Popular honor and popular violence	268
	Culture of the traditional nobility	273
	The political culture of the grandees	281
	Conclusion	285
10	Emerging identities – education and the new elite	289
	The culture of civic leaders	294
	The culture of high officeholders	301
	The culture of the Jansenist opposition	305
	Conclusion	309
11	Monarchs and courtly society	313
	The royal household	313
	Court culture	316
	The court of Louis XIV	325

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88309-2 - A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France

William Beik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

<i>Contents</i>	ix
The eighteenth-century court	336
Conclusion	337
12 Aristocracy's last bloom and the forces of change	342
Forces of change	343
Paris and the beginnings of a consumer society	353
Conclusion	362
<i>Appendix 1: A brief synopsis of early modern French history</i>	367
<i>Appendix 2: Genealogy of the French Monarchy</i>	372
<i>Notes</i>	374
<i>Index</i>	393

Illustrations

Map

Map of early modern France	page xviii
----------------------------	------------

Figures

1 Regional contrasts. Photos by author	6
2 Chateau and village of Sévérac. Photo 2(a) by Emeraude from Wikipedia Commons. Others by the author	17
3 The agricultural seasons by the Master of the Geneva Boccaccio (fifteenth century). Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource	45
4 The open fields. Detail of a land survey of Ouges, Burgundy. Courtesy of Jeffrey Houghtby and the Mairie d'Ouges	47
5 A nocturnal <i>veillée</i> by Jacques de Stella. Bibliothèque Nationale de France	60
6 The baron de Saint-Vidal by Jean Burel. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Municipale of Le Puy-en-Velay, France	79
7 Anonymous, <i>Ball at the Court of Henry III</i> . Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York	89
8 View of Lyon about 1650. From <i>Topographia Galliae</i> published by Caspar Merian (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1661)	99
9 View of the “Paris gate” in Troyes. Musées de Troyes. Photo: Jean-Marie Protte	101
10 Narrow street in Troyes. Photo: the author	103
11 Anonymous, eighteenth century. Saint Crespin as a shoemaker. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York	114
12 Three beggars. Jacques Callot, <i>Beggar Woman Receiving Charity</i> ; <i>Mother and Three Children</i> ; and <i>Beggar with Dog</i> , all from the Rosenwald Collection,	

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88309-2 - A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France

William Beik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

<i>List of illustrations</i>	xi
National Gallery of Art, Washington, courtesy of the Board of Trustees	125
13 Nicolas Lancret (1690–1743). <i>Lit de justice</i> at the Parlement, February 22, 1723. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York	137
14 <i>The Money-changer Orazio Lago</i> , by Leandro da Ponte Bassano. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource	147
15 Wealth of the robe and finance. Photos: the author	151
16 Anonymous, <i>Louis XIV Holding the Seals</i> , 1672. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York	156
17 Étienne Martellange, view of the bishop's palace in Béziers in 1616. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. View of the bishop's palace in Albi. Photo: the author	167
18 <i>The Massacre at Sens</i> , April 1562, from Jean-Jacques Perrissin and Jacques Tortorel, <i>Histoires diverses qui sont memorables touchant les guerres, massacres et troubles aduenues en France en ces derniers années</i> (1581). Bibliothèque Nationale de France	184
19 Massacre at Le Puy, October 16, 1594, from the <i>Mémoires</i> of Jean Burel. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Municipale of Le Puy-en-Velay, France	185
20 François de Sales blessing the Sisters of the Visitation. From Henri Cauchon de Maupas Du Tour, <i>La vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu François de Sales</i> . Bibliothèque Nationale de France	194
21 Abraham Bosse (1602–76), <i>Works of Mercy: Visiting the Prisoners</i> . Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York	199
22 Jean Paul, <i>The Siege of Maastricht</i> , June 29, 1673. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York	206
23 Jacques Callot, <i>Recruiting the Troops</i> . Private Collection (T.E.L.). Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource	214
24 Jean Burel's sketch of "Croquants" (peasant rebels). Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Municipale of Le Puy-en-Velay, France	249
25 Jacques Callot, <i>The Fair at Xeulilly</i> (detail) (Rosenwald Collection). Courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington	265

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88309-2 - A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France

William Beik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

List of illustrations

- | | | |
|----|---|-----|
| 26 | Jacques Callot, <i>The Duel</i> . Private Collection (T.E.L.).
Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource | 275 |
| 27 | A page from the manuscript memoirs of Jean Burel.
Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Municipale of
Le Puy-en-Velay, France | 290 |
| 28 | <i>Game of Quintain</i> by Antoine Caron. Courtauld
Institute of Art Gallery, London | 319 |
| 29 | <i>The Water Festival at Bayonne</i> , June 24, 1565,
by Antoine Caron (1521–99). The Pierpont
Morgan Library, New York | 322 |
| 30 | After Henri de Gisse (1621–73). The Grand Carrousel
of June 5, 1662. Photo: Réunion des Musées
Nationaux/Art Resource, New York | 323 |
| 31 | Antoine Dieu (1662–1727). The marriage of the duc de
Bourgogne to Marie-Adelaide de Savoie. Photo:
Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York | 333 |
| 32 | Étienne Allegrain (1644–1736), <i>Promenade of
Louis XIV in the Gardens of Versailles</i> . Photo:
Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York | 335 |
| 33 | Adam Perelle (1640–95), <i>View of Paris from the Red
Bridge</i> , 1680. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art
Resource, New York | 354 |

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88309-2 - A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France

William Beik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Tables

1.1	Land ownership in Saint-Nicolas (Normandy)	<i>page</i> 20
1.2	Property assessments in Coudray-Saint-Germer (Beauvaisis) and Le Bosc (Languedoc)	20
1.3	Ownership of seven seigneuries in the Hurepoix (south of Paris)	22
3.1	Levels of wealth of the eighteenth-century French nobility	73
3.2	Origins of noble families in the Beauce in 1667	75
4.1	Social distribution of taxpayers in Lyon, 1545	127

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88309-2 - A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France

William Beik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

Constructing a social and cultural history of early modern France is a fascinating but intimidating project. It requires an exploration of every level of society and an understanding of each group's life experiences, fears, hopes, beliefs. It requires knowledge of their access to resources, their collective efforts, the disparity of their class positions. Attempting to attain these goals was a humbling experience for me. Instead of simply formulating and organizing the accumulated knowledge of many years of teaching and research, I found myself scrambling to fill enormous gaps in my knowledge. Contrary to my intention of mastering the monographic literature on each topic, I ended up having to cite certain key studies without acknowledging many others.

The concept of social history is vast and undefined. There is no such thing as a master narrative that puts all the parts in their places. A would-be commentator must decide which aspects to feature and how they are to be connected. The result will be one particular story out of the many possible stories that someone else could put together by making different choices and exclusions. In my case the primary goal has been to explain how the social system operated in the period of royal rule, while at the same time conveying an appreciation of the lives and experiences of the working majority. I have tried to explain clearly the workings of institutions and processes that will be unfamiliar to a modern reader. The "culture" in the title is meant in the anthropological sense of customary behavior, belief systems, and ritual practices. This culture complements and extends an understanding of the social. I do not mean "high" culture in the sense of the creative arts, literature, philosophy, and science. Those achievements are lightly covered or not at all.

My approach to social history is no more value-neutral than anyone else's. Certain choices have colored my account. First of all, I emphasize the "otherness" of early modern French society. This

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88309-2 - A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France

William Beik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xv

means stressing the ways it was distinctive, not the ways it was becoming modern. It means thinking of the society as a system, held together by power relationships, cultural habits, and economic forces. This approach, which might be called “structural,” is decidedly out of fashion. But unless we think, however tentatively, of each element as part of a larger system, there is no way to assess the relationship of the parts to the whole or to each other, and consequently no principle for the selection of which elements to study. Why explore literacy, women’s roles, the lives of servants, or crop rotations, for example? Focusing on structure also means emphasizing long-term continuities, but without denying the importance of change. There is no need to adopt the extreme position of certain *Annalistes* who think in terms of a Braudelian *longue durée* or of *l’histoire immobile*. Change is everywhere, and progress needs to be explored, but that is not the primary goal here.

Second, this is not a book that emphasizes conflicting interpretations. My goal has been to offer one coherent, descriptive interpretation which readers can grasp and use. The best way to understand a society is to acquire one consistent view of it and then to criticize that view by exploring alternatives, rather than approaching each issue as a heated debate. I encourage readers to approach my book in this spirit. Many alternative views can be found in the lists of further reading after each chapter. The emphasis is on accessible books in English, but I have also included certain key monographs in French.

Third, I concentrate on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the center of gravity of this distinctive society which spans the years from 1400 to 1789. Those two centuries saw at its height the classic France of powerful monarchy, elegant society, and dominant nobility. Each chapter explores a different aspect of that society and its evolution throughout the period. Some go back to medieval origins, others follow through into the eighteenth century, but the focus is always on the central sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Fourth, my focus is the extensive France of many provinces, not the king, the court, and the city of Paris. Many vital events did take place at the center, but Paris was not France, and it is important to remember that we are dealing with a large, diverse country filled with tens of thousands of active participants who were not easily swayed by anything that happened at court or in the capital.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88309-2 - A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France

William Beik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Finally, I often highlight longer, descriptive examples, drawn in many cases from lesser-known monographs, in order to convey more concretely the distinctive nature of life in those times. These longer descriptions occupy the space that might have been devoted to discussion of the many regional variations that were so characteristic of French society. Readers will have to accept on faith that the examples given are fairly representative of common characteristics, despite the fact that there were a great many variations on these common themes.

Choices also imply omissions. Those familiar with my book on absolutism may be surprised to find that I do not directly discuss state institutions or the way the political system worked. Issues of power and state development are important, of course, but I have avoided the complicated and tedious task of explaining how the government operated. Readers will therefore need a certain familiarity with the political history of France, because I do not discuss the reigns of kings or provide any political narrative. The brief synopsis of early modern French history provided on pp. 367–71 may help with their orientation.

Other dimensions are also omitted. Aspects of economic history, such as patterns of trade, systems of manufacturing, or types of business enterprises, are only lightly covered. Colonies and naval activities are slighted. Cultural values, as defined above, on the other hand, provide a natural complement to social–historical questions by adding psychological factors such as identities, motivations, and behavior to the material factors provided by social history.

The chapters begin with basic social and economic arrangements involving nobles, peasants, and towns. They move on to the rise of the new judicial–financial class, the many dimensions of religious life, the impact of the royal army, the sociology of group solidarities and conflicts, traditional cultural practices, and the rise of new cultural influences. The last two chapters explore the aristocratic forces at court and, finally, the changing world of the eighteenth century.

This book would never have been finished without the calm and intellectual stimulation I enjoyed as Senior Fellow at Emory University's Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry in 2005–6. I am deeply grateful for this privilege. I was also assisted in 1999 by a research grant from the University Research Committee of Emory. I want to thank Richard Fisher and Michael Watson at Cambridge Press for their longstanding editorial support.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88309-2 - A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France

William Beik

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xvii

But above all, I want to acknowledge my deeper obligation to all the friends, colleagues, and students who have provided inspiration and encouragement during the long academic career that produced this book. My thanks go out to the students of History 311 at Northern Illinois University and History 315 at Emory University; and to graduate students who became friends from both institutions, including Greg Andrews, Darryl Dee, Carolyn Eichner, Amy Enright, Viviana Grieco, Chris Guthrie, Colleen Guy, Jeff Houghtby, Brian Kaschak, Nancy Locklin, Michael Perri, Doug Powell, Steve Reinhardt, Mike Rogers, and Jay Smith. A project like this is sustained over the years by more than just scholarly influence. Friends and colleagues, new and old, have been supportive and inspirational in many different ways. These include Wally Adamson, Yves-Marie Bercé, the late Tom Blomquist, Sue Bowen and the late Ralph Bowen, Jim Collins, Natalie Davis, Robert Descimon, Jonathan Dewald, Jim Farr, Margot Finn, C.H. George, Janet and David Greene, Alain Guery, Al Hamscher, Mack Holt, David Hunt, Jitka Hurych, Stephen Kern, Sharon Kettering, Charles McColleston, Jamie Melton, Judith Miller, Otto and Corinne Olsen, David and Margaret Parker, Matt Payne, Larry Portis and Christiane Passevent, Richard Price, Jonathan Prude, Marcus Rediker, Paul Robinson, the late Nancy Roelker, the late Marvin Rosen, Jacques and Danielle Sennelier, Helen Shirley and the late Jim Shirley, Jerry Soliday, Sharon Stocchia, and the late Chuck Tilly. Finally, above them all, there is Millie, friend, partner, lover, critic, whose influence has been immeasurable. This book is dedicated to Carl Kauffman in loving memory of his brother, Eric Kauffman.



Map. Map of early modern France

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