

Matthew Vester

Transregional Lordship and the Italian Renaissance

René de Challant, 1504-1565

Amsterdam
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Transregional Lordship
and the Italian Renaissance

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Table of Contents

Abbreviations	9
Acknowledgments	11
1. On the edge of the Italian Renaissance	13
The Italian Renaissance	19
The Renaissance nobility	25
Spatial analysis and mobility	35
2. René's early career to 1536	53
René's early life	53
René and Sabaudo-Swiss politics prior to 1536	61
The lordship of Valangin and the counts of Neuchâtel	68
Before the storm, 1531-1534	72
3. René's growing influence during the war years, 1536-1553	77
The invasions of 1536	77
Valangin, the Reform, and relations with the Countess of Neuchâtel	83
Political leadership and mobility during a time of uncertainty	89
Struggling for the sovereignty of Valangin, 1542-1565	98
4. René and Duke Emanuel Filibert	109
René and Emanuel Filibert	109
Vercelli capture and efforts to get released	113
The twilight of a career	116
Family matters and René's last years	122
Historiographic perspectives of René's life	130
5. Kinship and noble life	139
Kin relations	143
Relations with wives and children	147
Nobles and domestic life	153
Legal issues	167

6. The Challant political networks	179
René's network	182
The regional scope of René's ties	182
René's ecclesiastical network	196
René's key subordinates	198
Mencia's network	200
Letters and information	206
Relations with officials	211
 7. Finance and brokerage	 221
Nobles and finance	221
René as borrower and broker	224
The financial situation inherited by René	224
1526-1536: Finances and Swiss negotiations	226
Finance during the war years to 1545	229
From the 1545 'restructuring' to the second imprisonment	234
The financial implications of ransom	237
Financial recovery	244
 8. Lordship	 251
Valangin during the war years	255
Beaufremont	265
René and the practice of lordship	268
Fiefs and fiscality	268
Sample castellany accounts: Châtillon, 1559-1560	273
Administration of the fiefs	275
 9. The embodiment of spatial politics	 287
 About the author	 309
 Index	 311
 Maps and Tables	
Map 1	René's transregional lands. 12
Map 2	Challant fiefs in the Valle d'Aosta. 54
Map 3	The western Swiss area, with Valangin and its villages. 67
Table 1	A simplified genealogy of the Challant. 142
Table 2	Some of René's fiefs and their castellans. 269

Figures

- | | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 1. | The decapitation of Saint Catherine, traditionally identified as Bianca Maria. | 58 |
| 2. | The castle and <i>bourg</i> of Valangin, ca. 1786. | 83 |
| 3. | Coin representing René as sovereign of Valangin. | 104 |
| 4. | Mencia, Philiberte, and Isabelle. | 124 |
| 5. | The courtyard of the castle of Issogne. | 164 |
| 6. | A receipt sealed with René's blood. | 299 |

Abbreviations

ADA	Archives départementales de l'Ain (Bourg-en-Bresse, France)
ADS	Archives départementales de la Savoie (Chambéry, France)
AEN	Archives d'État de Neuchâtel (Neuchâtel, Switzerland)
AHR	Archives historiques régionales (Aosta, Italy)
AHSS	<i>Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales</i>
ANA, CT	Archivio notarile d'Aosta, Tappa di Châtillon (Aosta, Italy)
APSV	Archivio parrocchiale di St. Vincent (St. Vincent, Italy)
art.	Articolo
ASMn	Archivio di Stato di Mantova (Mantua, Italy)
AST ₁	Archivio di Stato di Torino, prima sezione (Turin, Italy)
ASTR	Archivio di Stato di Torino, sezioni riunite (Turin, Italy)
BCT	Biblioteca civica di Trento (Trent, Italy)
Beatrice	Beatrice of Portugal
BHR	<i>Bibliothèque d'humanisme et Renaissance</i>
BNF, Mss. Fr.	Bibliothèque nationale de France, manuscrits français (Paris)
Boyvin	<i>Mémoires de Boyvin du Villars in Choix de chroniques et mémoires sur l'histoire de France</i> , ed. J.A.C. Buchon (Paris: Librairie Charles Delagrave, 1884)
BSBS	<i>Bollettino storico-bibliografico subalpino</i>
cat.	catégorie / categoria
Ch III	Charles III of Savoy
DBI	<i>Dizionario biografico degli italiani</i>
DHS	<i>Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse</i>
'Diverse lettere al Duca Carlo 3 ^o '	AST ₁ , NS, mz. 1 bis, no. 31, 'Diverse lettere al Duca Carlo 3 ^o , ed al Maresciallo di Savoia sulli movimenti delle Truppe de Bernesi,'
EF	Emanuel Filibert of Savoy
EHR	<i>English Historical Review</i>
FC	Fonds Challant
FCC	Fonds du Conseil des Commis
FHS	<i>French Historical Studies</i>

Fornaseri	Giovanni Fornaseri, <i>Le lettere di Renato di Challant, governatore della Valle d'Aosta a Carlo II ed a Emanuele Filiberto</i> (Turin: Deputazione Subalpina di Storia Patria, 1957)
'Histoire généalogique'	AST1, Duché d'Aoste, mz. 3, Challant, no. 18, 'Histoire généalogique de la maison de Challant par l'Archevêque Madruz de Trente comte de Challant' (1638)
HJ	<i>The Historical Journal</i>
IGTDS	Inventaire générale des titres du duché de Savoie
Jeanne	Jeanne de Hochberg, Duchess of Longueville and Countess of Neuchâtel
JFH	<i>Journal of Family History</i>
JIH	<i>The Journal of Interdisciplinary History</i>
JMH	<i>The Journal of Modern History</i>
LP	Lettere di particolari
MSI	<i>Miscellanea di storia italiana</i>
mz.	Mazzo
NS	Negoziazioni cogli Svizzeri
PD	Protocolli ducali
PP	<i>Past and Present</i>
Recueil	AST1, Cité et Duché d'Aoste, mz. 1 d'addizione, no. 8, '1522 en 1657. Recueil des Matieres plus essentielles de tems en tems traittées dans le Conseil des Commis du Duché d'Aoste sous les respectifs secretariats; avec insertion de plusieurs patentes, ordres, et provisions des Ducs de Savoye en faveur du dit Duché.'
René	René de Challant
RHMC	<i>Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine</i>
RLC	Registri di lettere della corte
RQ	<i>Renaissance Quarterly</i>
RSI	<i>Rivista storica italiana</i>
SCJ	<i>The Sixteenth Century Journal</i>
SKB	Staatsarchiv des Kantons Bern (consulted online)
Villarsel	Charles de Challant-Fénis, Lord of Villarsel
ZHF	<i>Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung</i>

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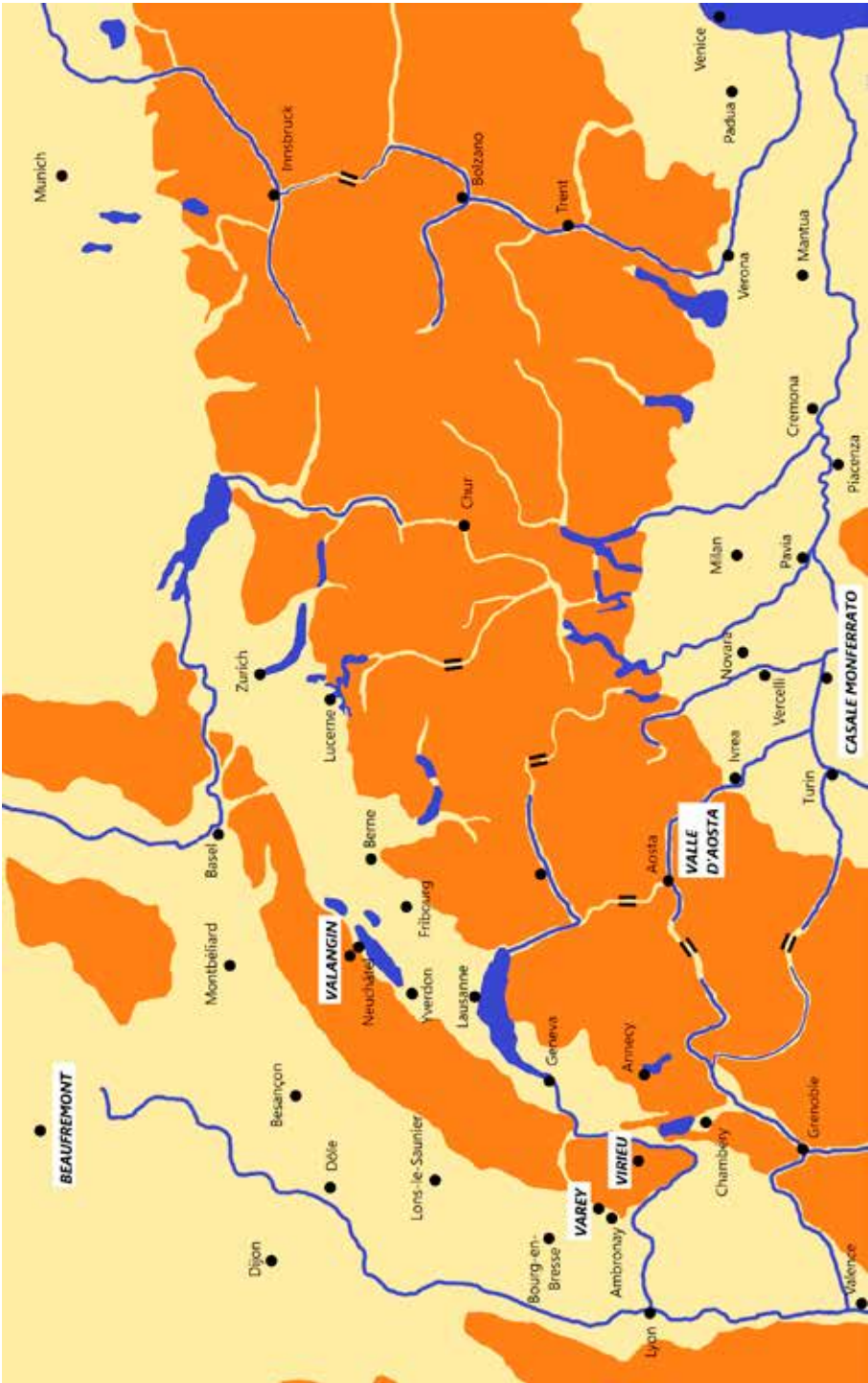
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Map 1: Ren 's transregional lands (mountainous areas shaded). Map by author.

1. On the edge of the Italian Renaissance

Abstract

This chapter situates René de Challant on the edge of Renaissance historiography in several ways. The geographic reach of his fiefs and political activities spanned from northwestern Italy across the Alps into the borderlands between France and the Empire. His service to the House of Savoy raises questions about the boundaries of scholarly work on the Italian Renaissance. His activities as a feudal lord with pretensions of sovereign status help us to reevaluate the relationship between the historiography on the European nobility and studies of Italian Renaissance elites. Biography as a genre of history is perched between contextual narrative description and comparative analysis. Recent work on the spatial dimensions of early modern history draw our attention to this material dimension of René's experiences.

Key words: Italian Renaissance, historiography, nobility, spatial history

In 1559, René de Challant seemed to be at the height of his powers. The unquestioned leader of the most powerful magnate family in the Valle d'Aosta, he held fiefs not only throughout the valley, but also in the transalpine Sabaudian lands (in what is, today, western Switzerland), in the duchy of Lorraine, and in the marquisate of Monferrato. As Marshal of Savoie, he was the chief military commander for the House of Savoy and swore allegiance to that Duke for most of his lands. The Challant family had appeared in the Valle d'Aosta by the twelfth century (when the valley accepted Sabaudian overlordship) and began acquiring fiefs and offices. François de Challant received the comital title in the fifteenth century but had no direct male heirs, so the head of another branch of the family, Jacques de Challant-Aymavilles, acquired his titles. Jacques's great-grandson René reaped the benefits, also inheriting from his mother the lordship of Valangin and the barony of Beaufremont north of the Alps. He was a transregional noble with strong service ties to a dynasty whose states themselves spanned the

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Alps, embodying in his person and lands an Italian Renaissance that was itself spatially dispersed.

The force of René's influence might be one reason why the Duke of Savoy assigned him to a command that was naturally exercised from Savoie, across the Alps from his power center in the valley. Indeed, the anonymous author of a *Memoriale* presented to the Duke of Savoy in 1560 pointed out the number of strategic castles held by the Count of Challant throughout the valley, and the potential danger that these represented to the Duke's dominion there. Andrea Boldù, Venetian envoy to the court of Savoy, reported in 1561 that René had 'twenty-four castles with capital jurisdiction, and some that are fortresses; and he enjoys 30,000 *scudi* in revenues'.¹ René's influence was thus rooted in his transregional landed position, in the valley and elsewhere. His lordship over these places was directly linked to other sources of authority: his kinship relations and marriage alliances, his political networks, his roles in governance and military affairs, and his financial activities. René de Challant was a powerful Renaissance noble whose authority was tied to the spatial distribution of the places that he ruled – indeed, the fact that his patrimonial lands were located in modern-day Italy requires us to reconsider transregional lordship as a neglected element of the history of the Italian Renaissance.

The Renaissance has enjoyed a long historiographic relationship with urban life, commercial culture, and forms of artistic production associated with both, especially in the cities of northern and central Italy, whether ruled by *signori* or by republican oligarchies. Partly in response to pressures created by the academic job market (in the Anglophone world), scholars over the past couple of decades have discussed the 'Mediterranean Renaissance' or even 'global Renaissances'. Among those working on the Italian Renaissance specifically, recent historiography has begun to extend the history of the Italian Renaissance beyond well-trodden parameters – studies have examined the Venetian Empire and cultural interactions with the Ottomans, Italy's relationship with transalpine kingdoms such as Hungary, and parts of Italy that have often been left in the shadow of Renaissance studies.² But rural lordship has remained neglected by most historians of the Renaissance, despite the fact that chivalric culture has been seen as an inspiration for families like the Este or Gonzaga, who sought to legitimize their recently usurped authority. Feudal lords were thought to have belonged to an older

¹ Boldù, 439.

² See, for example, Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople*; O'Connell; Howard; *Italy and Hungary*; Dauverd; and Marino, *Becoming Neapolitan*.

medieval order that had been displaced by the Renaissance, especially when their lands stretched across multiple regions from northern Italy. For example, the Sabaudian lands and the areas just beyond the Western Alps, despite their location in northwestern Italy and their continual military, financial, and commercial links to the rest of the peninsula, are routinely excluded from Renaissance history and seen as extraneous to 'Italian' culture.

I argue that René de Challant, whose holdings ranged from the Monferrato northwest and over the mountains, was an Italian and transregional dynast. The spatially dispersed kind of lordship that he practiced and his lifetime of service to the House of Savoy, especially in the context of the Italian Wars, show how the Sabaudian lands, neighboring Alpine states, and even regions further afield were tied to the history of the Italian Renaissance. Even merely to situate René de Challant, his network of relations, and his experiences on the edge of the Italian Renaissance helps us to analyze several key historiographic themes with more precision. A study of René's life also draws attention to other themes connected to the spatial dimensions of transregional lordship that have been obscured due to the traditional tendencies of Renaissance studies. It uncovers an 'Italy' whose boundaries extend not just into the Mediterranean, but into regions beyond the Alps.

This book straddles traditional biography – in this case, one in which the empirical evidence has never been comprehensively compiled – and a comparative approach that situates René with respect to other Italian and European nobles. Nobles' conceptions of themselves and their place in society have been studied through analysis of the language that they used to describe these things, especially in correspondence, with an eye to the relationship between norms and practices.³ Even in the absence of family archives and extensive sources, Edoardo Grendi has managed to write a deeply contextualized history of the Balbi family of Genoa,⁴ and Joseph Morsel studied the social space of a family belonging to the lesser nobility.⁵

Historians are divided in their assessment of the utility of the biographical approach,⁶ which can be conceptualized within the framework of a microanalytical global history that illuminates historical forces by focusing

3 Broomhall and Van Gent.

4 Grendi, xxiv (for quotation), xiv, xxiii; see Donati, 'Nobiltà e Stati,' for an appreciation of Grendi's study.

5 Morsel, discussed in Demade, 'Parenté, noblesse.'

6 Robert Rotberg viewed biography as crucial for history-writing; see Rotberg, 305. G.R. Elton was dismissive of biography (see Prestwich, 326). Prestwich argued that biographies can in fact advance new historiographic interpretations.

on the lives of 'certain unusually cosmopolitan individuals' and combining macro- and micro-analyses.⁷ Whether one is writing biography or another form of history, one faces the same interpretive challenges. These might relate to the problem of understanding 'strategies',⁸ the possibility that there were historically specific ways of understanding the political implications of historical evidence,⁹ or assumptions about motives based on concrete actions described in the sources.¹⁰ In biographies and other histories, sequence matters, temporality points to multiple causality, and cultural context works as a dialectic between systems of meaning and practices that constantly transform each other.¹¹ But both biographical and historical research are based on surviving sources and must respect the interpretive limit constituted by those sources, which creates challenges for writing broad cultural histories of groups like 'the Renaissance nobility'.

Biographers and other historians face questions about which categories of analysis to employ, especially with respect to political units. A recent move by scholars of early modern politics is to analyze small states, and the problems that they pose for uncritical assumptions about sovereignty, boundaries, and political networks.¹² By taking into account political units that were readily dismissed by nineteenth-century historians, such scholars have reacted against 'methodological nationalism', investigating instead new analytical units 'that cross borders without claiming to encompass the polities and cultural areas they slice through'.¹³ Narratives situated on large spatial scales 'also tend to use large temporal scales', which can result in a disconnect 'from the time scales of human lives' and from understandings of personal experience and historic causation.¹⁴ However, what might be called 'transnational biography'¹⁵ permits one to recover 'actors and agency' and to

7 Aslanian et al., 1445.

8 Historians of kinship often fail to offer precise definitions of 'family strategy'; see Dolan, 292, 301. Michel Nassiet makes a similar argument in *Parenté, noblesse et États dynastiques*, 18.

9 Millstone, 84-85, 89-90.

10 Pollock, 157.

11 Sewell, 169-71. Angelo Torre has explored this relationship between cultural representations and practices, warning about a kind of history that 'sussuma le pratiche all'interno delle rappresentazioni e che rinuncia all'incrocio delle fonti documentarie'. This could lead to a new kind of idealism by viewing the sources *only* according to the logic of their production (and not as signifiers of any other reality) (see Visceglia, 308-9, discussing Torre, 'Percorsi della pratica').

12 Schnettger, 639; Raviola, *L'Europa dei piccoli stati*.

13 Pomeranz, 2-3. This 'transnational' approach had been pioneered much earlier by *Annaliste* historians such as Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch, and Fernand Braudel (see Struck et al., 573-75).

14 Pomeranz, 5.

15 This term seems to be of recent vintage; see Meneghello.

analyze 'the spatial multiplicity of individual actors' lives and experiences ranging from the local micro-scale to macro-levels including national or global scales'.¹⁶

This study of René de Challant takes up the challenge of showing how biography can facilitate an integration of different scales of analysis. If looked at from the perspective of only one regional history, the transregional dimension of a life such as René's is invisible. Only by reconstructing a dense context of the person's activities and relationships does the spatial significance of René's biography come to light. Close observation is what makes it possible to see the ways in which lordship, finances, diplomacy, kinship, and political networks were intertwined and spatially articulated. As we will see in the conclusion, this spatial dimension also comes to the fore in language, but only when that language can be contextualized in social and material ways. Further, as the weight of specific fields of activity is clarified, it becomes possible for the narrative to dial back the scale of analysis to a more comparative setting, and to relate René's experiences to those of other Renaissance nobles. Each of this book's two parts (Part One chronicles events while Part Two examines themes) alternates between close-up views of René's actions and relationships and wider-angle views of more macro-level events and thematic comparisons. Each part informs the other: the significance of René's experiences over time is lost if no categories for comparison are available, while comparison is meaningless if totally abstracted from a diachronic context. Close reading of all available sources relating to René's biography brings to the fore not only the importance of the transregional dimension, but also enables the identification of relevant fields of comparison.¹⁷

This book thus positions itself on the edge between biography and comparative history, but centrally engaged with the methodological, and particularly transregional, concerns of each. Very little has been written in English on the Sabaudian lands, not to mention the Valle d'Aosta, during the period between the late Middle Ages and early modern times, and there is no book-length biography of René de Challant in any language. A singular case like that of René is important both for its own sake and for what it shows us

16 Struck et al., 577; Pomeranz, 22. Historians must clarify what kind of meta-narrative is framing their research when the nation-state no longer serves as a useful category of analysis (Struck et al., 579). A biographical mode of history-writing guards against the creation of transhistorical conceptual entities that exist only as the historical products of their specific times, or were simply constituted as such by historians, untethered to any historical documentation (see Green, 552 n. 1 for the critique by Simona Cerutti and Robert Descimon of transnational studies).

17 On microanalysis and biography, see Renders.

about the limits of our broad categories of historical understanding. The fact that René's political involvement, and political imagination, does not fall within categories that are immediately recognizable in Italian Renaissance scholarship, underscores Dipesh Chakrabarty's call for a 'nontotalizing conception of the political' and a heterogeneous historical imagination.¹⁸ In other words, the specific case that seems unimportant due to its detachment from conventional narratives is crucial precisely because it reminds us of the heterogeneity of 'the political' in past times.¹⁹ But René's experiences can also contribute to our understanding of a number of thematic issues relating to Renaissance and early modern nobility, lordship, and politics. A close reading of an individual life can raise unexpected issues in ways that prompt one to rethink historiographic categories. In the case of René de Challant, the geographically dispersed nature of his noble tenures, his near-constant movement back and forth across the Alps throughout his life, and the peripheral location of his Italian lands with respect to the rest of Italy draw attention to the spatial dimension of Renaissance lordship and politics. Being aware of the material and spatial elements of noble power in turn sheds a different light on historiographic topics such as family relations, noble networks, information management, financial brokerage, and dynastic prestige. This book thus combines attention to a singular Renaissance life with a variety of themes in the historiography of the European nobility between 1400 and 1700. The two-part structure of the work reflects this approach, the first half focusing on the events of René's life, and the second part examining those aspects of his relationships – family connections, political networking, financial ties, and the practice of lordship – that have been studied by other historians of the European nobility. In each part, I will argue that the spatial dimension, both material and imagined, of René's experiences as a Renaissance lord was an integral part of his self-understanding and of how others perceived him. Each part will also demonstrate the degree to which, through transregional nobles like René, 'Italy' spilled over into other parts of Europe.

The remainder of this introduction will examine some of the themes in recent scholarship relating to the Italian Renaissance and the European nobility, and issues of space and mobility with respect to both topics. Just as the history of northwestern areas of the peninsula has been at the edge of Italian Renaissance studies, so has the history of lordship. René embodied both, as a 'quasi-sovereign' lord on the brink of complete political

18 Chakrabarty, 149, 178–79.

19 For a similar approach in art history, see Kaufmann.

autonomy – but also as a feudal noble who enjoyed extensive contacts with urban merchant-bankers in the Swiss cantons and was a self-declared '*bourgeois de Berne*' thanks to his fief of Valangin. Italian, but not quite; feudal lord, but a Renaissance courtier; sovereign Prince of Valangin, but loyal vassal of the Duke of Savoy (and others); landed dynast, but closely tied to Swiss burghers: in several ways, René was a liminal figure. The next several pages examine what historians have written on the themes of the peripheries of the Italian Renaissance, the place of the nobility in Renaissance historiography (discussing nobles in Italy, relations between European nobles and other social groups, and the political role of semi-sovereign nobles and small states) and the ways in which spatial analysis and mobility sheds light on these topics.

The Italian Renaissance

A transregional understanding of the Italian Renaissance can encompass a figure like René de Challant, who wrote in French and held patrimonial lands in the 'intra-mountain state' of the Valle d'Aosta. There are a number of thematic and geographic realities that have been far from the center of a traditionally urban-centered Renaissance historiography – rural areas where feudal ties remained strong, Alpine Italy, the Sabaudian states, and even transalpine zones (such as the Swiss lands) with strong links to Italy – and the question of their relation to the Renaissance remains open. Historians of France have discussed '*la France italienne*', detailing the remarkable influence of Italian Renaissance culture at French courts and among the French nobility who felt 'the lure of Italy' during the early sixteenth century.²⁰ This impact created an anti-Italian backlash during the second half of the sixteenth century, and a sense that Italians had taken over French culture.²¹ Just as the France of Francis I and Henry II has been included in our geography of the Italian Renaissance, so should the border areas around northwestern Italy.

The social and cultural history of the lands formerly ruled by the House of Savoy is an in-between topic, residing comfortably neither within early

20 Marjorie Meiss-Even notes that 'all of the key posts in the Lorraine stables were held by Italians'; see Meiss-Even, 52.

21 Joanna Milstein cautions that historians 'tend to treat the Italian community in France as an undifferentiated whole,' rather than as representatives of specific places (Milstein, 1, 2, 5). See also H. Heller.