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Mack P. Holt

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[See table of contents](#)

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**Vester, Matthew.**

***Transregional Lordship and the Italian Renaissance: René de Challant, 1504–1565.***

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. Pp. 330. ISBN 978-9-4637-2672-6 (hardcover) €109.

Matthew Vester's latest book is a revisionist biography of René de Challant (1504–65), a noble of distinction who served as both marshal and lieutenant-general of the House of Savoy, yet who also held fiefs of his own that stretched from northwestern Italy, beyond the Alps and western Swiss territories, into Lorraine and the borderlands between France and the Holy Roman Empire. He was Count of Challant, Baron of Baufremont, and Lord of Valangin among his many titles, with pretensions of feudal sovereignty in all of his fiefs dispersed throughout western Europe. Challant was also a principal military leader and diplomat to successive dukes of Savoy during the Italian Wars, and although he was imprisoned by first the Spanish and then the French for roughly two years, he nevertheless served as a vital diplomatic envoy of the duke to the emperor and the French king among many others. Yet for all that, except for specialists of Savoy, René de Challant is virtually unknown to historians of early modern Europe. Vester's book thus makes a convincing case that his career has much to offer to anyone interested in sixteenth-century Europe.

What is revisionist about Vester's biography is that it does not focus on the count's service to the House of Savoy, or his imprisonment and diplomatic service during the Italian wars; instead, it explores the administration of the fiefs that made up Challant's spatially dispersed lands. In short, Vester's main purpose is not to add to what we know about the life and career of the count, but to demonstrate how he functioned as a feudal lord. Lordship is a word that medievalists use frequently, especially given the way that the f-word—feudalism—has been redefined by medieval scholars of late. But it is a word that is hardly ever used by early modernists to refer to how nobles administered and practised their feudal privileges and responsibilities. What Vester demonstrates explicitly is that Challant used kinship ties, his lands as collateral in brokering loans and other financial deals, and regional political and ecclesiastical networks in the Valle d'Aosta where many of his fiefs were located, as well as his own political and military skills, to administer his fiefs adroitly and conscientiously—at the same time remaining a loyal servant and

vassal of the dukes of Savoy. And sometimes those duties collided. Challant had to balance the House of Savoy's efforts to oppose Protestantism with the fact that many of his fiefs, such as Valangin, were majority-Protestant territories. As Vester demonstrates nicely, lordship often required lords to be bi-confessional in administering their fiefs, as consistency in political and religious ideology was often simply impossible. All in all, this is a thoroughly researched study based on vast archival materials in over a dozen different archives in France, Italy, and Switzerland. And as a study of lordship—the exercise of noble privileges and responsibilities, or as the author puts it, the exercise of spatial politics—this is a fascinating and significant case study that deserves a wide readership. Moreover, it is useful to be reminded that since so many noble holdings all across Europe were dispersed in this period, any policy of administration had to be spatially specific.

My only real question concerns an argument made in passing in the title and introduction: that René de Challant was a transregional noble “embodying in his person and lands an Italian Renaissance,” that his lordship was “a neglected element of the history of the Italian Renaissance” (14), and that Challant was “on the edge of the Italian Renaissance” (13). Vester appears to mean by this only that the Alpine lands around Savoy have normally been unjustly ignored in any discussion of the Italian Renaissance or of the northern Renaissance, both of which focus on princely courts, cities, and towns, and this seems fair enough. But what does it mean to embody “in his person” an Italian Renaissance? And what does it mean to refer to Challant even as “an Italian” (15)? He wrote and spoke in French and referred to himself and signed his name as René de Challant rather than Renato di Challant, but was French not his first language? It is true that most of Challant's lands were in the Valle d'Aosta in what is today part of Italy, but that was not true in the sixteenth century. So, in what specific sense was he an Italian? Moreover, there is hardly a consensus about exactly what is meant by the term Italian Renaissance. The most basic definition of the Renaissance was that it was an intellectual and artistic movement that attempted to resurrect the classical ideals of antiquity. Of course, it was also much more than that; nevertheless, the word humanism does not appear anywhere in Vester's book. Indeed, the brief discussion on how Challant challenged and engaged with the Reformation seems much more significant than his embodiment of the Italian Renaissance. This is a minor caveat, however, and may simply be the result of an effort to fit the book into the

press's Renaissance History, Art, and Culture series. And it takes nothing away from Vester's exemplary study of transregional lordship and how it operated in practice in the person of René de Challant. I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in the lived experience of noble life in the sixteenth century.

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