“Une chose fort à craindre et bien mal aisée à découvir”:
The Transgression of Borders in Sixteenth-Century France

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[D]eux François et Anglais qui sont d'une mesme religion ont plus d'affection et d'amitié entr'eux que deux citoyens d'une mesme ville, sujets a un mesme seigneur, qui servoient de diverses religions ... ce qui eslongne le sujet de porter obeissance a son roy et qui engendre les rebelions.
L'Hôpitale, “Harangue prononcée à l'ouverture de la session des États généraux à Orléans le 13 décembre 1560,” 83-84.

So declared Michel de L'Hôpital, Chancellor of France, best known for his advocacy of a royal policy of religious toleration, during a speech to the Estates-General in 1560. Suspicion of Protestant activities and, particularly, of contacts with their coreligionists abroad, was a constant theme of Catholic invective during the French religious wars. This observation by a moderate figure such as L'Hôpital, regarding the rebellious potential of religious division, further demonstrates how widely held such views were. For those policing the frontier regions and strategic entry-points of France, such as ports and provincial capitals, religious tension was a matter of repeated concern and need for vigilance. For much of the 1560s, relations with England were particularly tense, especially after the seizure of the Norman port of Le Havre by English troops with Huguenot connivance in 1562-63. Although this was an old enmity, it was exacerbated by the confessional gulf which now separated the two countries and heightened anxiety about interference in each other’s affairs in support of a religious minority, often encouraged by confessional exiles. Maritime activity was one concern, but so too, was the evidence of intelligence-gathering and illicit correspondence. Commercial and other routine transactions could be seen as a cover for something more sinister. Thus, merchants and other regular travellers were carefully observed, and foreigners were subject to suspicion. Returning refugees were particularly suspect, as were the activities of high-ranking Huguenot exiles at the English court. Yet, while the Channel was perceived by some as a frontier and a barrier between nations, others embraced it as an interface for confessional, economic and diplomatic exchange (Morieux 24-28, 111-15, 127-29).

In many circumstances, frontiers and borders (“lieux limitrophes et de frontière”) prove fluid and permeable, and historians have long emphasized their liminal and changeable status. However, they were also very “real” to those responsible for policing them, as well as for those caught up in jurisdictional disputes. Definitions of, and distinctions between, frontiers, borders and boundaries have been fruitful for our understanding of both the states who governed them and the people who lived there (Altink and Gemie 5-8; Cruz and van Tuyll; Febvre). Yet,

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they also point to a surprising diversity of experience and perception. Thus, while the Anglo-French frontier could not be described as a "place where cultures with previously unique and isolated histories meet," it did experience "long periods of balanced cultural accommodation" (Jones 1-2).

Border studies has become an interdisciplinary field in its own right with a well-developed historiography too extensive to be fully rehearsed here (Altink and Gemie 1-18; Kaiser; Morieux 17-27; Nordman; Sahlins 4-7; Wilson and Donnan). It intersects with recent discussions about the relationship between centre and periphery and the burgeoning area of global studies, but has a longer pedigree going back at least to the Annales School (Febvre). This field is concerned as much with the cultural memory of difference and notions of identity as with the clear demarcation of physical boundaries and jurisdictional conflicts. Boundaries are often conventional as well as geopolitical, forming structured areas with their own dynamic social relations. Frontier zones or border regions, we are told, are where national and local interests overlap and mutually reinforce each other in a story of communal agency and appropriation rather than of central imposition and control, as used to be thought (Sahlins 8-9; Greengrass 6-7, 19-20; Potter, 19). They reveal the "complex relationships between territory, sovereignty and identity," as well as acting as zones of both conflict and contact (Altink and Gemie 5). The importance of "local determinants" as much as the operation of "state power" to the formation of national identity during the Reformation, however, should not make us overlook the emergence of such identities at least a century earlier (Curry 149; Potter 19). Yet, confessional division and civil warfare added a new and potent dimension to existing tensions and developments in border communities, a fact which has been insufficiently acknowledged by historians of the period.

Many of the frontier regions of France in the sixteenth century had only recently been absorbed into the kingdom and were subject to foreign influences at a time of increasing domestic and international instability. As a result of the Reformation, French Huguenots looked to support Dutch rebels against Spanish overlordship; French Catholics gave aid to Scotland in its struggle against Protestant England; German mercenaries bolstered the troops on both sides in the French religious wars; and the English and Spanish sought to exploit French weaknesses. At the same time, diplomatic exchanges were becoming more sophisticated, and finding out what your neighbours were up to was an important part of the ambassadorial brief. In addition, most peace treaties were negotiated against a backdrop of mutual distrust and preparation for a return to war. In such circumstances, the frontiers of France were on high alert for foreign infiltration and insider betrayal. The border with Spain, to the south, and, even more so, that with the Empire and the Spanish-ruled Low Countries, to the east, were vulnerable to Habsburg aggression and forays by German Protestant princes intent on supporting their coreligionists. To the north, the governors of coastal towns in the provinces bordering the English Channel – Brittany, Normandy and Picardy – and to the west, ports vulnerable to attack from the Huguenot