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Sovereignty, Governance and the Exercise of Power in the Huguenot Monarchomach Treatises

Abstract: The French Wars of Religion, and in particular the period after the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, saw the emergence of a concept of popular sovereignty, whose most influential proponents were the so-called (to use the expression of Ralph Giesey) “monarchomach triumvirs”, François Hotman (1524-1590), Theodore Beza (1519-1605) and Philippe Duplessis-Mornay (1549-1623) as the presumed author of the treatise *Vindiciae, contra tyrannos*. This occurred in the context of the collapse of the mutual trust between the French Crown and its (Huguenot) subjects, which led to the discredit of the previous medieval model of a monarchy relying on the king’s willing adherence to commonly agreed ethical principles in order to prevent any abuse of power. The main feature of this concept of popular sovereignty, which had made the object of much discussion in the historiography of the French Wars of Religion and of the sixteenth-century political thought, the right of resistance and deposition was, however, only one aspect of the monarchomachs’ political model. Even though the monarchomach treatises were intended to provide a way to address the political crisis generated by unchecked tyranny, their authors also had to describe how the government of a kingdom where the sovereignty belonged to the people was supposed to function. This paper intends thus to move the historiographical focus from the specific issues of resistance and deposition of tyrants (but, obviously, without excluding them from the analysis) to the overall picture of the monarchomachs’ “constitution”, explaining the relationship between a king and a sovereign people and how power was to be exercised in such a kingdom, according to the vision of the three above-mentioned authors.

Keywords: Sovereignty, Huguenots, Monarchomachs, France, Sixteenth Century, Wars of Religion