

Power and charity within local government in France under the Old
Regime: The involvement of Bordeaux elites in the poor relief
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In France under the Old Regime, as the absolute monarchy intensified its intervention in urban administration, in order to unify the kingdom, Louis XIV ordered the foundation of “*hôpital general*” in the cities for the purpose of maintaining social order by means of the imprisonment of beggars. While the interest of historians has focused to date on the trend toward centralization and secularization of the poor relief system, the author of this article has chosen to draw attention to the behavior of elites who practiced charity under the influence of the Catholic Reformation in the provincial capital of Bordeaux, in an attempt to highlight the reality of local government under the absolute monarchy through the prism of poor relief.

An analysis of elites involved in Bordeaux hospitals reveals that local initiative played an important role and that these hospitals, by claiming a religious calling inspired by the Catholic Reformation, remained in tact to meet the needs of the local community, despite the royal will. In fact, the policy to imprison beggars ended in failure shortly after being implemented in the main provincial towns in accordance with the royal prescription issued during the second half of the seventeenth century; while the elites took the initiative in rescuing abandoned children and disabled poor, rather than trying to suppress mendicancy.

Such local autonomy in poor relief was maintained through the action of each elite who practiced charity, in the hope of saving his own soul and/or maintaining order in the local community. These elites gave, as benefactors, a part of his fortune to benefit the foundation or to financially support the hospitals, intensified, as administrators, the efforts of the Catholic Church in the relief and the edification of the poor.

In the city of Bordeaux with its autonomous system of hospitals, although the development of international trade accelerated the rapprochement between the

nobility and the bourgeoisie to form new elites, only a handful of them were able to directly devote their talents, their fortunes and their time to the administration of the hospitals and assume the task of administering the poor. Moreover, their achievements opened new pathways to rise above the rest of society, thus further strengthening the oligarchy maintained by a minority of elites.

It was in this way that existing social relationships were maintained on the local level, by the efforts of elites who fulfilled the charitable obligations attached to their power and wealth and ensured law and order in urban society.