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BONIVARD, François

Born in 1493 in Seyssel – died in 1570 in Geneva. Son of a noble Sabaudian family, he studied grammar in Pinerolo and then law in Turin (under Claude de Seyssel) and in Freiburg im Breisgau (under Ulrich Zasius). In 1514, he became prior of the Cluniac priory of Saint-Victor (in the Geneva suburbs), but was constrained to renounce in 1519 due to his hostility to the duke of Savoy. He tried to recover his benefice over many years, supported by the Genevan municipality and by the Swiss cities of Bern and Fribourg. In 1530, as a consequence of these struggles, he was imprisoned in the Sabaudian castle of Chillon, and was delivered from captivity by the Bernese only in 1536. His captivity inspired Lord Byron’s well-known romantic poem *The Prisoner of Chillon. A Fable* (1816). Returning to Geneva, he became a bourgeois (1537) and member of the ruling elite. Married four times, he spent most of his time writing chronicles and political and moral treatises.

In 1542, the Genevan authorities asked Bonivard to write an official chronicle of the city in order to have arguments for their legal fight against the duke of Savoy, who claimed sovereignty over the city. A first version was completed in 1551, covering the history of Geneva from its origins to 1530. The authorities were, however, dissatisfied with Bonivard’s work. The *Chroniques*, which were also examined by Calvin, were considered to be badly written, and some of Bonivard’s judgments about Berne and Fribourg were problematic and likely to cause political

problems. The manuscript was confiscated and its publication forbidden. This first version, known as the “Council’s manuscript”, is still preserved (Bibliothèque de Genève, ms. fr. 137) and shows many corrections and additions by Bonivard’s own hand. In 1831, David Dunant published a first edition which was marred by many mistakes. A second corrected edition, by Gustave Revilliod, was printed in 1867.

Starting from the 1550s, Bonivard began to work on a revised version of his chronicles, many unfinished copies of which are preserved (Bibliothèque de Genève, ms. fr. 138; Archives d’État de Genève mss. hist. 1 and 30). In 1563, he finally completed a second version of the *Chroniques*. Known as the “Turin manuscript” (Archivio di Stato di Torino, Paesi, Genève, cat.1, pag. 1, n° 2), this account was edited by Micheline Tripet (*Chroniques de Genève*, 3 vol., 2003-2014). The Turin manuscript presents a substantially revised account of the history of Geneva from the first version, and Bonivard also wrote in the revised version about the period from 1536 to 1563 (the first version ended with the year 1530). Bonivard had a providentialist vision of history: the political and religious strife which divided the city during the first half of the sixteenth century were sent by God to awaken the Genevans. And the final independence of the city was a gift of God’s mercy (“Dieu [...] nous a heu gardé de tyrannie et remiz en liberté”, Tripet, III, 78).

It is unclear whether Bonivard intended to ask the Council to publish this second version. However, it is unlikely that this new account would have been approved. In fact, the Turin manuscript offers an even more politically incorrect interpretation of Genevan history than the first version of 1551. Bern, which had an alliance with Geneva, was described as unfriendly and hostile (“les Bernoiz havoient avec Geneve aussy petite amitié come ilz havoient grande alliance”, Tripet, III, 326), and some of the ‘fathers’ of the Reformation received harsh judgments, such as Guillaume Farel, who was described as an annoying and narcissistic man, seeking only conflicts and discord (“home très importun”; “vouloit bien que bruit et renom courust de luy”; “rustre amateur de division”, Tripet, III, 150-53).

In both versions (1551 and 1563), Bonivard made significant use of archival sources in order to demonstrate that the city had been independent for a long time and that the claims of the House of Savoy were unfounded. In his last version of the *Chroniques*, refuting the Saxon origins of the House of Savoy, he described the Sabaudian chroniclers as barking dogs which everybody followed without thinking (“Quand un chien commence à abbaier, touz ceux qui l’ouïent le suivent”, Tripet, I, 90). Bonivard considered that the Sabaudian chronicles were mostly fabulous and deserved to be called panegyrics more than real histories (“pour la pluspart fabuleuses et plustost dignes d’estre rappellees panagyres que vray histoire”, Tripet, III, 6).

Bonivard also worked on a history of the Swiss Confederation, a work which he sometimes refers to in his *Chroniques de Genève* as the *Chroniques des Helvetiens* or *Chroniques des Ligues* (Tripet, I, 18 and 59). This work was to a large extent a French translation of Johannes Stump’s history of the Swiss Confederation (*Gemeiner loblicher Eydgnoschafft Stetten, Landen und Völckeren*

Chronickwirdiger thaaten beschreybung, Zürich: bey Christoffel Froschouer, 1548). However, in some parts, especially for the period from 1536 to 1549, Bonivard produced a more detailed and personal account. His interest in Stumpf's chronicles was certainly also connected with his work on the Genevan chronicles. Indeed, Stumpf counts among the sources used for the first part of Bonivard's *Chroniques de Genève* (from the origins to the twelfth century). Like the *Chroniques de Genève*, the *Chroniques des Helvetiens* was not published during Bonivard's life. Two manuscripts of this work (the first part of Bonivard's translation is lost) are still preserved (Bibliothèque de Genève, ms. fr. 71 and 736). A partial translation of book XIII of Stumpf's chronicles (ch. 33-35) was published in 1549 (*Histoire veritable et digne de memoire de quatre Iacopins de Berne, heretiques & sorciers, qui y furent bruslez*, [Genève]: [Jean Girard], 1549).

Probably in connection with this work, François Bonivard also composed a German grammar (written in French) and three Latin-German-French dictionaries. These works are unedited and the manuscripts are also still preserved (Bibliothèque de Genève, ms. fr. 131-133). Bonivard also left some poems and treatises connected with the history of Geneva during the early sixteenth century.

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