

*Registres du Consistoire de Genève au temps de Calvin: Tome IX (15 février 1554–31 janvier 1555)*. Wallace McDonald, Isabella M. Watt, and Jeffrey R. Watt, eds.

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With a brilliant introduction that explains their context, these registers contain the minutes for eleven-and-a-half months of the weekly meetings of the Genevan consistory, a church court instigated by John Calvin and his supporters in 1542 after his recall to Geneva from his ministry in Strasbourg (1538–41). Calvin, with a legal education, was well aware of the gap left by the absence of Roman Catholic ecclesiastical courts after the Protestant Reformation in Geneva. During Calvin's first sojourn in Geneva (1536–38), he and the pastors tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade the Genevan governing councils to remedy the situation, especially with regard to marital law. Thus it is no surprise that this consistory volume, like others, paid attention to cases involving sex and marriage: adultery, breach of promise, bigamy, fornication, sodomy, and illegitimate children. However, amid the cases of sexual promiscuity (especially of masters with female servants), there were attempts, sometimes successful, to reconcile spouses, neighbors, relatives, and friends. After all, pastors of Geneva were consistory members. Rarely did the consistory allow separation, but divorce with the right to remarry came in with

Protestant churches in the mid-sixteenth century. In these minutes for 1554, divorce was rarely granted, except for desertion or extended unjustified absence of a spouse. Adultery also was grounds for divorce in Geneva.

Heresy and blasphemy are also the preserve of church courts, which in Geneva included lapses into Catholicism. Almost twenty years had passed since the Reformation in Geneva, so there were fewer cases of prayers to saints or in Latin than in the first volumes of consistory minutes. There was, however, a midwife before the consistory who had prayed to the Virgin Mary over a mother dying in labor, and there was no tolerance for “Nicodemites” who attended Catholic Mass in France, after having communed in the Reformed Church. The consistory demanded acknowledgment of guilt, called witnesses in case of denial, and castigated the guilty party for unacceptable behavior, which included dancing, gambling, drunkenness, and criticizing the French refugees or Calvin. The consistory wanted repentance, but the only power the consistory had was to deprive one of communing in the Genevan quarterly celebrations of the Lord’s Supper (the Eucharist). Sometimes the consistory deprived a penitent of Communion even after repentance. Genevans believed that deprivation from the Lord’s Supper risked their eternal salvation. There was contention over whether the consistory or the government should have power to excommunicate in this volume.

The consistory and the city council of twenty-five appeared to be acting hand in glove in this volume—no surprise since almost half of the members of the consistory were also members of Genevan governing councils. The consistory referred unresolved cases or recalcitrant individuals to the city council where there was a possibility of being condemned to beatings, imprisonment, or even banishment for incorrigible individuals who the councilors preferred not to allow to remain in Geneva. Punishments could be draconian. On December 20, five boys were imprisoned for sodomy, the three older ordered to be beaten and chained to a wall for three months.

This volume is well indexed in three separate categories: subjects, places, and names of persons. The index of places is especially useful for scholars who are working on research projects that require knowledge of the minute geography and place names of Geneva, France, and Savoy. The copious footnotes identify every locale, just as they identify individuals and cite occasions when individuals appeared before the consistory before this volume or would appear later. The useful appendix lists syndics and members of the council of twenty-five, other officers, and dates of the Lord’s Supper for 1554.

Invaluable especially to the social historian, a minute progression through the minutes reveals the details of daily life and gives one a feel for the conventional wisdoms of the era. Transcribed from some of the most difficult sixteenth-century court reporting by experts in French paleography, these volumes of consistory minutes are indispensable for academic libraries and serious scholars. Church libraries will also find these volumes useful.

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