

Introduction

This is a study of the production of leather and leather products and lives of the men and women who engaged in the Bordeaux leather trades during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The book pays special attention to the importance of artisanal and local identity in one of the most fervently independent regions of early-modern France. A comprehensive study of the Bordeaux leather trades affords the opportunity to explore the details of artisan culture and to examine the realities of the early-modern craft economy and its relation to the wider French political economy in one of the most important, but under-studied, eighteenth-century French towns.¹ The Bordeaux leather trade sector was illustrative of the organizational heterogeneity, diversity, and freedom that existed in the early-modern French and Bordeaux manufacturing economy. The men and women who engaged in the Bordeaux leather crafts—tanners, parchment-makers, shoemakers, cobblers, saddlers, and glove-makers—stood both inside and outside the corporate organization of work.² Although each trade community was theoretically independent of the others, the Bordeaux leather trade guilds often acted symbiotically for mutual benefit—to suppress rebellious journeymen and those artisans engaged in the trade outside the corporate framework—and at other times were in sharp conflict with each other over privileges and prerogatives associated with their professions. Indeed, the well-ordered world of work generally envisaged from the halls of Versailles was far different from that found in the humble districts of the thriving port city. Nonetheless, the Bordeaux leather trades remained integral components of the town's manufacturing economy during the eighteenth century and were of particular importance during times of war.