

Nancy LAFFARGUE, "President Barbot. Correspondence and life during the Lumières in Bordeaux" [Président Barbot. Correspondances et vie des Lumières bordelaises], master thesis in modern history, directed by François Cadilhon, university of Bordeaux Montaigne, 2019, 419 p.

« M. le président Barbot, secrétaire de notre Académie, est un des hommes du monde que j'aime le plus. Il s'est toujours appliqué aux sciences, mais comme un gentilhomme. Il sait comme les savants et a de l'ardeur comme les mécènes. »

These words, taken from a letter from Baron de la Brède Montesquieu of 14 February 1744 to President Barbot, reveal the first veil on his identity and on what his life was like until 1771. It also invites the reader to enter into an intense epistolary exchange that President Barbot has maintained throughout his life. Born into a family of noble lineage that has made its place in the cultural life of Bordeaux, Jean-Baptiste Barbot joined the Guyenne aid court in 1718 but also and above all the very prestigious Academy of Fine Arts, Sciences and Arts of Bordeaux the same year thanks to the support of his faithful friend Montesquieu.

Jean-Baptiste Barbot's correspondence remains quite fascinating because it reveals two aspects of his life that are somewhat different but that may finally cross paths. The letters are a testament to an individual's complete dedication to a function that is here that of academic secretary. Written between the mid-1710s and his death in 1771, the letters give us an academic life not only on the scale of a city, a country but also more broadly of all this Europe penetrated by the Enlightenment. It is at the heart of a vast community that the reader is invited "to join" it, gathered around values and a common interest that is science here. But this epistolary exchange also offers a somewhat new way to access the character's intimate life, his deepest secrets and above all the most interesting friendship that Montesquieu has with him. Between confidences and truths, moments of joy and misfortune, gossip and debate, passion for heart and mind, the letter never ceases to amaze the reader as the pages go by...

This thesis thus aims to answer several questions about what the 18th century, usually defined as the Enlightenment, can raise.

How is the city of Bordeaux animated by these 18th century writers, philosophers and scientists, including President Barbot? How is Barbot positioned within the Bordeaux Academy? How does he maintain this "academic culture" and particular taste for science? In what way does his correspondence constitute the central point and dynamic of an academic network? And how does it illustrate the state of science in the 18th century?

And of a more private nature, the letters tend to lead the reader to discover a history of intimacy and friendly practices through the actions of President Barbot: what is really a written document from the private forum? How can the letter constitute a key to the interpretation of intimacy in the 18th century?

It is these questions that this work aims to answer. The aim here is to show how interesting it is to study this precious document, the letter, both in its "institutional" and its private aspect. It is with this in mind that the assistance provided by the Committee for the History of the Post Office is of interest because how to study the letter and its content without taking a look at the postal system of the 18th century, which marked the rhythm of epistolary life at that time.

It is with this brief presentation that the reader is invited to open the first page of this brief in order to discover the life of the very mysterious President Barbot...