

## CHAPTER 13

# Identity, Bells, and the Nineteenth-Century French Village

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### BELL, SPACE, AND TERRITORY

#### Center and Boundary<sup>1</sup>

The emotional impact of a bell helped create a territorial identity for individuals living always in range of its sound. When they heard it ringing, villagers, townsfolk, and those “in the trades” in the centers of ancient towns experienced a sense of being rooted in space that the nascent urban proletariat lacked. Bell ringing was one of a range of markers obviating the quest for an identity of the sort that defined the very being of the proletariat<sup>2</sup> who, as a migrant, was isolated in a condition that all too often resembled exile.

The bell tower prescribed an auditory space that corresponded to a particular notion of territoriality, one obsessed with mutual acquaintance. The bell reinforced divisions between an inside and an outside, as one might infer from the pejorative use of terms such as *l'esprit du clocher*. Marcel Maquet has identified a set of concentric circles containing a zone of mutual acquaintance, a zone of marriage alliances, a zone of leisure activities, and a *zone of hearsay* that define social acquaintance in rural societies.<sup>3</sup> The range of a bell should be analyzed in very much the same terms.<sup>4</sup>

This auditory space is not much affected by the acceleration that swept the nineteenth century along, and entails no tendency toward mobility and speed. Listening to a bell conjures up a space that is by its nature slow, prone to conserve what lies within it, and redolent of a world in which walking was the chief mode of locomotion.<sup>5</sup> Such a sound is attuned to the quiet tread of a peasant.

The territory circumscribed by the sound of a bell obeyed the classical code of the beautiful—the schema of cradle, nest, and cell. It was an enclosed space structured by the sound emanating from its center. The bell tower was supposed to be situated in the middle of its auditory territory. Received wisdom has long rested on the assumption that such bounded spaces, inasmuch as they served to perpetuate the notion of walking distance, were in stark contrast to the coherent space of the nation and republican citizenship,<sup>6</sup> and that the advent of democratic regimes presupposed the construction of a new kind of territoriality. We are obliged, however, to qualify such claims once we scrutinize the imaginary attributes of the space upon which the triumph of republicanism was based. The landscape enshrined in the official ideology of turn-of-the-century France was construed in terms of classical harmony; it consisted of village cells, each permeated by the sound of

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bells. The Third Republic succeeded in rebuilding this reassuring notion of territory in its own image. It might be truer to the terms of the debate staged in those years to speak of the construction of a space, the basic structure of which was preserved while an attempt was made to desacralize its key markers, namely, bell tower, public square, crossroads and all the sites where public announcements might be made or the inhabitants might assemble.

The range of a bell, inscribed in a classical perspective of harmony, served to define a territory that was haunted by the notion of limits as well as the threat of their being transgressed. The crucial functions of the bell tower were to raise the alarm and ensure the preservation of the community. A sort of correlation was thereby established between bell and boundary, and between bell ringing and processions. Both served to define a space with readily perceptible limits.<sup>7</sup> Another correlation thereby arose between the loudness of a bell and the extent of a parish or commune's territory. It was important to ensure that no part of that territory remained obdurately deaf to public announcements, alarms, or commands, and that there were no fragments of isolated space in which the auditory identity was ill-defined and threatened to impede rapid assembly.

Bells shaped the habitus of a community or, if you will, its culture of the senses. They served to anchor localism,<sup>8</sup> imparting depth to the desire for rootedness and offering the peace of near, well-defined horizons. . . .

In the nineteenth century, at least in the countryside, bell ringing defined a space within which<sup>9</sup> only fragmented, discontinuous noises were heard, none of which could really vie with the bell tower. After all there were as yet no airplanes, which nowadays are capable of competing with, overwhelming and, above all, *neutralizing* the sound of bells. Aerial sounds have been desacralized. Since the dawn of the twentieth century, bell and cannon have ceased to be the sole rivals of the mighty thunderbolt.

The continuous noise of the internal combustion engine, electric motor, or amplifier were also unknown. People liked, therefore, being sporadically deafened, primarily by the ringing of bells, but also by the sound of cannon being fired or the explosion of "firecrackers," all of which were regarded as indispensable compliments to public rejoicing. The charivari, or "rough music" we tend to regard as unwelcome disturbance, was all the more appreciated for its breaching of a habitual silence and for its links with the structure of the auditory landscape. Let me reiterate, however, that nothing in a milieu of this kind could vie with the bell.

Owing to the regularity with which they were rung, bells played a part in the periodic "sacral recharging of the surrounding space."<sup>10</sup> Whatever degree of religious fervor of the local population, the church served to define a small space at the very heart of the village that was generally respected.<sup>11</sup> From this center of padded silence emanated the sound waves that extended their "sacralizing" hold over an aerial space undisturbed by any other din.

Since the dawn of the Catholic Reformation the church has aspired to such a mastery of airborne sound. It has tried, although not entirely successfully, to hierarchize bell ringing. According to norms laid down by Carlo Borromeo in the sixteenth century,<sup>12</sup> a cathedral was supposed to have between five and seven bells while a collegiate church might have three, and a parish church two, or at the most three. Monastery bells were not supposed to drown out those of a parish church. Ringers were expected to respect the "rules of deference" that reflected the hierarchy of edifices. The Council of Toulouse (1590) prohibited the "ringing of bells in any church before those of the Cathedral or of the mother church [sic] had given the signal."<sup>13</sup> Such refinements had been unknown during the Middle Ages but equivalent norms nonetheless existed. When a church was first founded its filial status was emphasized by its being permitted just the one bell.<sup>14</sup>

In truth, there was such a quantity of bells and such a love of peals in modern France that it was very hard to maintain any control over the messages they emitted. Doctor Billon, the man responsible for inaugurating the campanarian survey in 1853,<sup>15</sup> found that in the eighteenth century it was the custom to accord preeminence to cathedrals. In the following century this principle of deference in the sphere of bell ringing seems to have been observed in the episcopal towns. A romantic traveler perched on a hill could readily make out the aerial music that emanated from such places that used to be known as "ringing" towns.

A bell was supposed to be audible everywhere within the bounds of a specified territory.<sup>16</sup> As we [know], this implied adjusting the loudness of a ring of bells so that it could cover the surface area of the parish or commune and surmount any obstacles in the terrain. "We have found," Rémi Carré noted in 1757, "that bells may be heard further on the plains than in the mountains, and that bells in the valleys may be heard still further than those on the plains."<sup>17</sup> A mountainous terrain called for both a loud bell and early announcements. The 1837 regulation stipulated that in the valleys of the Pyrénées the offices might be rung a full hour before the service was due to start.<sup>18</sup> The 1885 regulation deemed even this advance notice insufficient in the Haute-Savoie.

The archives are full to bursting with complaints that a ring of bells did not cover a given territory. Consider the department of Finistère. On 19 June 1808 the inhabitants of Ouessant unsuccessfully petitioned the prefect, requesting a bell "whose sound could be heard in every corner" of the island.<sup>19</sup> Three years later the Mayor of Plouider reminded the same magistrate that his commune had given four bells during the Revolution, among them "the loveliest in the land," which "could be heard from a great way off."<sup>20</sup> Plouider, however, now only had one very soft bell that could not cover portions of "mountain" and *sea* supposedly lying within its range. Once again, in 1892, the inhabitants of Plounéour-Lanvern complained that they could not hear their only bell more than a kilometer away from the town, and that it rang a *sol* though "the wish of the local population" was to hear a *fa*.<sup>21</sup>

A large number of complaints about the failure of bells to carry concerned ringing in secular contexts. The clergy reserved the loudest and most solemn bells for announcing religious services, leaving only the small bell used for low masses for other kinds of ringing. Sometimes a community would therefore claim the right to use the largest bell under all circumstances.

In 1880 the priest in charge at Ceffonds (Haute-Marne) refused to ring the curfew with the great bell although this was what the town council had requested. In his view, custom decreed that it should be rung by "the second." The dispute divided the commune for several years. At first opposition to the priest led the council to withhold the bell ringer's fee to stop the ringing of the curfew. In November 1884, however, emboldened by the new political circumstances, the municipality began reinstating the practice, this time "with the largest bell." The mayor appointed a bell ringer and the municipality decided to offer him remuneration for this task alone. The parish priest complained to the authorities and the dispute then led to a heated exchange between the subprefect and the bishop of Langres. When challenged by the *ministre des Cultes*, who had been alerted by the bishop, the prefect sought to justify the mayor's point of view. He stressed that the "second" bell was "none too loud," and that the affair had erupted around five years ago when the hamlets far from the center of Ceffonds repeatedly complained. Today, he said, the great bell was in use "to the general satisfaction of all." In his opinion the size of the commune fully justified the innovation. The dispute ended in May 1886 with victory for the municipality.<sup>22</sup> . . .

One of the functions of a bell was to orient travelers or navigators within the space covered by its sound. Local customs, as much in the mountains as in coastal areas, but also in hilly regions, on

the fringes of forests, and sometimes even in flat country, bear traces of the protection offered by such instruments. The monks of Grand-Saint-Bernard used a bell located forty minutes from the monastery that rang to orient straying travelers.<sup>23</sup> In the mountains of the Auvergne “it is the custom to ring the bells from five to six o’clock in the evening, and until eleven o’clock at night whenever the countryside is covered in snow.”<sup>24</sup> The bell in Aubrac rang every evening for the same reason.<sup>25</sup> In some communes of the Puy-de-Dôme, “the Angelus is rung at eight in the evening, for a long time.” In the canton of Saint-Béat (Haut-Garonne), the bell began ringing at ten o’clock at night in winter for the same reason. This practice was also followed at Haudricourt (Seine-Inférieure), a wooded, very hilly commune. Likewise the mayors of the Meuse, who had refused the prefect’s request made in 1852 to ring at ten o’clock on summer evenings,<sup>26</sup> acknowledged that it was useful in winter to let the bell be heard at nine o’clock to reorientate travelers who had lost their way in the forest.<sup>27</sup>

Along the coast where there was no lighthouse, and everywhere when the fog came down, it was bell ringing that served to guide—and sometimes, it was said, to lead astray—disorientated sailors. In Dieppe (Saint-Valéry-en-Caux) and Bourg-d’Ault (Seine-Inférieure), the bells were rung in bad weather. In 1864 Tréport municipal council had a bell installed on the jetty.<sup>28</sup> In Sables-d’Olonne there was a rescue bell. It was placed “high on the bell tower dome” and “it rang in time of storm.” In 1881 the parish of Ile-Tudy (Finistère) requested a second bell “to be better able to signal to sailors the precise location of the coastline in times of thick fog, which obscured the lighthouses.”<sup>29</sup> The minister granted the sum required.

### The Path of the Good Angels

Bells were supposed to preserve the space of a community from all conceivable threats. This prophylactic virtue was perhaps the one that aroused the fiercest passions; alone it justified the deep attachment to bells until the symbolic tie between ringing and communities began to unravel.

There was perfectly respectable theological justification for this function, as expounded by the abbot Jean-Baptiste Thiers in the *Traité des cloches*, one of his posthumously published works. Invoking the church fathers, John Chrysostom in particular, as well as the key texts of the Catholic Reformation, Thiers distinguished faith in the preservative virtue of bells from the cluster of superstitions that he set out to denounce in order to purify beliefs.<sup>30</sup> As far as he was concerned the formulas used in the benediction justified belief in the preservative virtue of the sacred bronze.

Demons dwelt in the air and were responsible for the spread of plagues and epizootic diseases. They precipitated swarms of insects, unleashed storms, provoked floods, and produced frosts. Above all, their aerial presence prevented prayer.

The point is that the demons were horrified by the sound of bells; they had only to hear them and they would let witches fall on the roads to the sabbath, and take flight. Bells were credited with the power to drive away thunder, thunderstorms, and tempests, and cleanse the air of every infernal presence. “Such effects are not achieved naturally,” Jean-Baptiste Thiers elaborated, “but through the divine virtue impressed upon them when one blesses them, or when one rings them against these meteors.”<sup>31</sup>

Bells also possessed the crucial power to summon angels. Belief in this virtue may be traced back to the angelology of the Catholic Reformation, which says that the universe was peopled with large numbers of supernatural beings.<sup>32</sup> These “holy undulations of the consecrated bronze,” the abbot Sauveterre would write many years later, are chiefly intended to “open up a passage for

the good angels."<sup>33</sup> Jean-Baptiste Thiers observed that bells were rung "to invite the angels to join in the prayers of the faithful." As a "palace of heaven," the church is by nature "the residence of angels,"<sup>34</sup> as John Chrysostom and, much later, Carlo Borromeo, never tired of repeating.

Bells had the power to break up the maleficent clouds that impeded the perpetual movement of angels and prevented contact between heaven and earth. There is nothing surprising, then, about the way campanarian epigraphy returns again and again to the same themes. Right up until the middle of the nineteenth century the bronze of the bells still proclaimed their protective virtues, which were inscribed on the older instruments and engraved upon the new. The phrase *Fugo fulmina* or "I drive away thunderbolts" is the inscription on the bell in Vebret (Cantal); the local inhabitants' trust in it is such that they have nicknamed it "Saouque Terre de Vebret."<sup>35</sup> The term *Sauveterre* is frequently found in the region, for example in Marcillac-la-Croizille and Concèze in the department of the Corrèze. The tenor bell in Forcalquier, in the Basses-Alpes, was nicknamed "Maria Sauvatera." "Wherever my voice goes, none shall perish by storm" we read on two bells at Montain (Tarn-et-Garonne). Likewise in Saccourvielle (Haute-Garonne) and Sulac (Gironde), where the inscriptions liken the voice of the bells to the voice of God, which has the power to subdue tempests.<sup>36</sup> . . .

In 1868 the tenor bell at Saint-Mammès Cathedral in Langres was recast. The new bell still bore the inscription *nimbus fugo*,<sup>37</sup> which led the astronomer Camille Flammarion to voice his objections in *Le Siècle*. Two years before, in his *Causeries*, Edmond About had warned with irony that simply to repeat ancient phrases would be to risk a loss of meaning. He wondered whether the archaeologist of 1965, upon reading such inscriptions, might not naively assume that all Frenchmen under the Second Empire still believed in the magical properties of bronze.<sup>38</sup> I shall take this as a cue to turn to the question of actual practice in this period.

In the eighteenth century there is evidence everywhere for the customs associated with such beliefs, so there is no need to labor the point. In Ambert (Puy-de-Dôme) the inhabitants of the countryside would come when there were thunderstorms and ring from six in the morning to six in the evening. The townsfolk would take over for them during the night. "The parish priest would give in his Sunday sermon the order to ring in cases of bad weather."<sup>39</sup> Parishioners unable to play their part were supposed to arrange for someone to take their place, paying for this service a fee of between fifteen to twenty *sols*. In some villages the schoolmaster was responsible for organizing the bell ringing under such circumstances. In Sennely-en-Sologne "they rang three times a day and sometimes hourly," especially between 25 March and Ascension Day, to ward off thunderstorms and evil influences.

In 1772 the fury of the local people was so great that the bishop of Metz was forced to retract, at least in part, his ban on ringing during thunderstorms and springtime frosts.<sup>40</sup> This practice was then one of the bell ringers' customary obligations. If we read "the regulation governing the ringing of the bells at Cormicy," dated 1767, we find that "the ringers shall be expected to ring whenever there are thunderclouds, day or night."<sup>41</sup> Likewise, in 1792 Mr. Vinot was hired by the municipal council of Plappeville (Moselle) to carillon during thunderstorms.<sup>42</sup> . . . As we have already seen, resistance to the silencing of the bells by the First Republic was often due to deep attachment to the practice of ringing during storms.<sup>43</sup>

Such practices were consistent with the "deep temporality" presupposed by the daily struggle with the devil,<sup>44</sup> yet the more enlightened bishops were irked by them. Enlightenment rationalism and the concern of élites to set a distance between themselves and the system of popular beliefs<sup>45</sup> together fostered the view—despite the arguments of Jean-Baptiste Thiers—that the protective

properties of bells should be branded superstition. Such notions were thought to be often found coiled up within even the most dogmatically pure beliefs.

This new attitude of distrust led to the adoption of two distinct approaches. The first involved suggesting natural explanations for a property so often attested to. For example the power of bells could be accounted for in terms of neo-Hippocratic explanations of airborne contagion, theories of infection, and in some ways, the new field of pneumatic chemistry that was growing out of the analysis of the constituent elements of air. A bell's sound, the worthy abbot Pluche recognized, could perhaps "mechanically penetrate" a cloud.<sup>46</sup> This scientific explanation had been advanced long before but Jean-Baptiste Thiers rejected it out of hand. Nonetheless, the Illiers affair had reinforced the hypothesis. On 17 May 1703, as Parent recorded in a 1710 issue of the *Journal des Savants*,<sup>47</sup> the Beauce was devastated by massive hailstones. The residents of Illiers, however, "rang so vigorously that the thunderstorm split above their parish and divided into two parts, each of which went its own way. The result was that this parish alone, in the midst of thirty others that did not have such good bells, suffered virtually no damage." Blavignac assures us that similar stories were told almost everywhere.

The sound of a bell, according to some Enlightenment scholars, might serve to "rarefy" the air; it would stir up health-giving currents capable of disturbing, and therefore *correcting* the atmospheric mass. In short, the sound waves from a bell possessed properties that some ascribe to canon. Elsewhere I have shown how coherent such theories were.<sup>48</sup> In the case of bells, however, this sort of explanation was far from convincing the majority of enlightened minds.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, advocates of the Enlightenment preferred to emphasize the risks involved in ringing during thunderstorms and would compile lists of the accidents that had occurred. It was far more common at this time for the dangers of electricity to be denounced than for the purificatory properties of bells to be celebrated. Abbot Pluche, without denying the capacity of bells to pierce a thundercloud with their sound, assured his readers that on five separate occasions he had seen lightning strike bell towers in which people were ringing.<sup>49</sup> He said he had been informed of twenty such accidents; the number of bell ringers struck by lightning was, according to him, beyond count. Churches that remained silent during a thunderstorm seemed better protected from catastrophe than were the ringing churches. Some also noted that ringing bells in the mountains could set off massive avalanches.<sup>50</sup>

Such considerations may account for the tightening of sometimes ancient prohibitions. As early as the sixteenth century, several regulations had banned ringing during thunderstorms<sup>51</sup> in, for example, Lausanne and the canton of Vaud. In 1747 the Académie Royale des Sciences spelled out the dangers of such a practice and, as we have already seen, an episcopal statute of 1768 banned bell ringing during thunderstorms and springtime frosts in the diocese of Metz. On 15 May 1781, a circular signed by a councillor at the court of Nancy called upon parish priests to acquaint their parishioners with the truth in this matter. Finally a judgement of the Parlement de Paris, dated 29 July 1784 and ratified in 1787, "prohibits all persons from ringing the bells during thunderstorms."<sup>52</sup> The regulations published by prefects and bishops at the beginning of the nineteenth century reiterated this ban.

The episcopate was now willing to regard the sound of the bell as *a prayer* addressed to God, calling upon Him to dispel the thunder. Whereas people had always believed, the abbot Sauveterre objected in 1859, in these "mysterious signs of its metal that were supposed to guarantee its efficacy with God," here the sound of the bell was interpreted as no more than a "discreet

invitation to prayer.”<sup>53</sup> The abbot was right to stress how much the scope of thunderstorm bell ringing had been reduced.

In truth, there are numerous accounts of opposition shown by local people to such disciplinary measures. Among the clergy themselves and in the ranks of the theologians there was stiff resistance. Admittedly, Monsignor Giraud, bishop of Rodez, in a pastoral letter on bells read in November 1841 and designed to serve as a point of reference, urged his listeners to view bell ringing as prayer and to stop resorting to bells the moment the thunder began. Conversely, other ecclesiastics remained loyal to the old beliefs, basing their position on the ritual of blessing the bells and the study of their symbolism. They regarded the old beliefs as forms of resistance to modern rationalism. In 1838 the learned François Arago furnished them with an unanticipated weapon. “In the current state of science,” he wrote in *L'Annuaire du bureau des Longitudes*, “there is no proof that the sound of bells renders thunderclaps more imminent and more dangerous, nor that a loud noise has ever caused a thunderbolt to fall.”<sup>54</sup>

Be that as it may, people almost everywhere went on believing in the preservational property of bells.<sup>55</sup> According to Blavignac, peasants were often heard to say: “in such-and-such a year, on such-and-such a day, and at such-and-such an hour, no sooner had our bell begun ringing than we saw the hail receding.”<sup>56</sup> In 1865 Dieudonné Dergny confirmed that the practice of thunderstorm ringing was still widespread in the nineteenth century, particularly in the Midi.<sup>57</sup> . . .

In Labrousse (Cantal) a bloody battle erupted in 1831 between the residents of the upper village and those of the lower village; “the former wishing to ring the bells, and the latter claiming that [for this reason] they were forever suffering thunderstorms.” There was bloodshed<sup>58</sup> and the church was laid under an interdict. In 1837 the mayor admitted to the prefect that he dreaded a repetition of such a drama. In this department the practice survived until the very end of the century. On 10 and 11 July, wrote the Mayor of Roannes-Saint-Mary in 1896, some thunderstorms afflicted the region; “bells were rung so as to halt or *divert* their advance.” On this same date the prefect reprimanded the Mayor of Leucamp for permitting ringing during a thunderstorm. Those who did not ring, as had been the case formerly with the residents of the lower town in Labrousse, believed that the practice was effective since they complained of being the victims of their neighbors who had rung. In 1897 the Mayor of Marcolès informed the prefect of his grievances, which were phrased so as to make it plain that he shared this belief.

In 1846 the practice of ringing during thunderstorms seemed ineradicable in the Puy-de-Dôme. In the commune of Chauriat-par-Vertaizon the ban introduced by the parochial church council in 1817 was never respected. In the region as a whole, M. du Miral observed in a letter to the *ministre de la Justice et des Cultes*, “very few parish priests oppose these forms of illegal bell ringing because they believe that they pay homage to religion.”<sup>59</sup> However, he continued, many of these “troublemakers do not believe in God.” . . .

## INTERWOVEN RHYTHMS

The relations binding bell ringing to the flow of time consist of an interweaving of aims, meanings, issues, and conflicts, all of which call for careful analysis. We need here to take into account the complex organization of auditory signals in the nineteenth century along with peoples' many different experiences of time. The temporal architecture of life, the habitus, and the culture of the

senses have altered so much that there is a grave risk of our losing the meaning of this history altogether.

One of the most obvious processes, of which scholars have long been aware, is only indirectly of concern to us here. I am referring to the shift from a “qualitative time” to a “quantitative time,”<sup>60</sup> and therefore to the tension between announcements respecting the flow of the continuous, measured, precise time of the clock, and the marking through bell ringing of a few, privileged moments in the year, the week and the day, the repetition of which served to anchor the sense of immobile time. . . . Control over quantitative time conferred increasing power upon the winder, especially in “clock regions” such as northeastern and east central France.<sup>61</sup> It precipitated a host of local disputes, chiefly over the guarding of the presbytery, the holding of keys, and the accessibility of bell tower ropes.<sup>62</sup> The clergy did not deny the usefulness of the clock and its striking of the hours, but they looked with distrust, especially in the countryside, on the introduction of measured time, the implacable regularity of which led insidiously to the desacralizing of the days.

What concerns us here is the role of bell ringing in the temporal architecture of communities at a time when public clock and private clock alike were rare, and everyday use of a watch was still the preserve of a tiny élite. “Most residents have no clock,” observed the Mayor of Velaines (Meuse) on 28 March 1852,<sup>63</sup> although such instruments were more widespread there than in most other regions of France. “The great majority [of farm hands] do not have a watch,” wrote the Mayor of Recoubeau (Drôme) in 1890.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, ownership and use should not be confused, especially in this sphere. At the beginning of the twentieth century a field hand who owned a watch would scarcely “wear” it at all, except on Sundays. On 25 August 1907, the Mayor of Les Bottereaux (Eure) remarked upon the fact that “the laborers generally do not bring their watches for fear of losing them in the harvesting.”<sup>65</sup> Conversely, since nuances are crucial in such matters, it did not take many laborers in the fields wearing a watch for it to become something to which the group might refer. In 1866 the parish priest of Autrécourt (Meuse) wrote regarding “agricultural laborers”: “*Several* nowadays accord themselves the readily granted luxury of a portable watch. . . . consequently, it is enough to catch sight of *one* woman making her way back [at eleven o’clock] to prepare the midday meal, prompted by one of these watches, for the other women to take the same road,” inasmuch as “work-gangs toil within sight of one another.”<sup>66</sup>

The study of the part played by bells in the construction of the temporal markers of individuals and communities represents a page in the history of the habitus, and of the way in which it is attuned to biological rhythms. Such a study helps us understand how existences were once shaped. The sound of bells dictated the meaning of delay, the sense of being ahead or behind, and the forms assumed by haste. The act of getting dressed on Sunday mornings and preparing for one’s entrance on the public stage was punctuated by bells and governed by a jerky estimation of the flow of time. The regulations agreed between bishop and prefect regarding the spacing, duration, and grading of announcements were fixed with a degree of precision that might surprise us. Until the end of the nineteenth century prelates did what they could to have the bells rung on Sundays and feast days several times, and for at least half an hour before morning and afternoon service. The prefects, on the other hand, tried to restrict every manifestation of this auditory ascendancy.

When dealing with so complex a subject of study one should be wary of being snared by too unambiguous an interpretation. The act of listening to bells and the various modes of attention it entailed were subject to imperceptible slippages in meaning, and to substitutions so subtle as to all but elude us. These were linked in turn to the confused spread of new rhythms and increasingly to the requirement that everything be understood in terms of continuous clock time. A listener



hearing both the striking of the hours and the more solemn pauses marking services or ceremonies had to cast his response in terms of a double temporal system. It is very hard for us to reconstruct the gradual transfer of emotion achieved at the expense of a cyclical notion of time—the sacred nature of which was attested to by the changing colors of priestly vestments—and to the advantage of remorseless, continuously flowing time. Yet in every case it was the signals emanating from the bell tower that at the same time reflected and shaped this virtually imperceptible process.

A bell ringer had to avoid confusing the reiteration of signals evoking immobile time, which established a sacral ascendancy, with the punctuation effected by the gong of a clock or the sounding of the alarm and the making of public announcements—forms of bell ringing that were strictly conjunctural and served the material interests of the community. In short, nineteenth-century bell ringing simultaneously sustained the traditional architecture of existence and responded to the ever more clamorous demands of modernity that were driven on by the need to come to terms with all-embracing systems for the measurement and evaluation of time. . . .

## THE PROCLAMATION OF SOCIAL DIVISIONS

### Reading the Bronze

The bronze of bells and peals of honor expressed social hierarchies and reflected social mobility. They served as a record of shifts in dominant values and of transfers of authority.<sup>67</sup> For historians interested in the social foundations of power, campanarian epigraphy offers an abundant corpus. In villages, or urban *quartiers*, no inscriptions were more numerous, more considered, more concerted, and often more contentious than those seen on bells. Yet no phrases were more mysterious, since the bell tower remained inaccessible to most of the population and such texts, though carefully weighed, languished in a semidarkness that rendered them illegible.

Nevertheless, as we read through the abundant corpus of inscriptions engraved in relief on the bronze, we are able to discern, in the context of each region, the hierarchy of prestige and domination as well as the relative efficacy of the various authorities. It bears emphasizing that in order to arrive at a real understanding of clerical pretensions and municipal claims, one should banish the simple notion that they stood face to face with faith on one side and unbelief on the other.<sup>68</sup> The fluctuating balance between secular authority and ecclesiastical power,<sup>69</sup> between the profane and the sacred, and between the lay and the religious underwent an incessant but sometimes furtive process of rearrangement within communities characterized by a degree of religious fervor where the citizens shared the same beliefs. Campanarian epigraphy helps us pin down this often subtle balance.<sup>70</sup> . . .

On no other official monuments do references to women—except where they are symbols—feature so prominently as on the sacred bronze of bells. Generally they are in a subordinate position. In such inscriptions the name of the godmother follows that of the godfather; it is he *who chose her*. Moreover, the majority of women accorded such an honor owe it to being wife, daughter or, more rarely, mother of the godfather.

Mention of children on bells was more surprising; it was a rare and belated phenomenon. At the end of the century, shortly before the introduction of private communion, the attention paid by the church to the early years of life sanctioned, although belatedly, the rise of a sentiment identified some years ago by Philippe Ariès. There arose a custom whereby the children of the parish might

collectively be the godfather. This was the case in the Dordogne.<sup>71</sup> One of the bells cast in 1882 bears the following inscription: "I am the angels' bell. For godfathers and godmothers I have the children from Nontron from one to seven years old." In Champagne in 1890, a bell that was also dedicated to the holy angels "had for godfathers all the small boys of the parish and for godmothers all the little girls." The new bell of Eygurande (Dordogne) reads: "The godfathers and godmothers [are] the children of the first communion of 1 June 1899." Likewise an inscription on the bell in Cabans informs us that it was recast through the good graces of the children of the parish.<sup>72</sup> On bells from the Bray dating from the latter half of the century it is not uncommon to find the names of the sons or daughters of the godfather and godmother, who are then regarded as "little godfathers" and "little godmothers." This seems to be a way of expressing the hope that a line of notables might be perpetuated.<sup>73</sup>

The traditional élites plainly left their mark on the bronze, a fact that is in no way surprising. Between 1814 and 1830, especially, while ancient formulae were being reintroduced and titles of nobility and honorific references<sup>74</sup> were proliferating on bells, the attempt was made, in this domain as in others, to effect a social restoration, although it varied in extent from region to region. We cannot help noticing the phenomenon in the Bray and it was plainly operative in Périgord, although there was barely a trace of it in the Ardennes. It served to inspire the nobility's generosity toward the patrimony of specific communities, as Michel Denis has shown in the Mayenne, and Claude Brelot in Franche-Comté.<sup>75</sup>

By the very end of the century the bronze of the bells had ceased to count for much, and the secular authorities no longer had any real ambition to have their inscriptions added. Campanarian epigraphy became the preserve of a nobility nostalgic for bygone glories and of a small élite of zealous clerics. We should not let ourselves be misled by the ascendancy of categories more and more deeply rooted in rural society that remained attached to honorific procedures increasingly devoid of meaning.<sup>76</sup>

Madame Armande Félicité Barbetet, the godmother of the bell at Saint-Lucien (Seine-Inférieure) cast in 1858, lived in the château of La Hallotière, her own property; she "is the benefactress of the *area* in general, and of her own parish in particular."<sup>77</sup> The commune of La Hallotière had granted her in perpetuity a plot in the cemetery near to the church. Her husband was buried there. "The pious donor has had a chapel built for her own private use. Because a section of the wall has been taken down, she can attend services in the church, of which the little oratory seems to form part." Here the sponsorship of the bell serves to complete and, in some way extend, the presence of notables, which is in some sense guaranteed within the parish church. This form of sponsorship at once reflects and reinforces the ascendancy aimed at by the region's great families, whose genealogies and coats of arms Dieudonné Dergny, with his obsessive desire to renew the chain of time, takes such delight in detailing.<sup>78</sup>

It sometimes happened that a local community fervently wished to reserve for its benefactors the honor of sponsoring the bell. In 1869, 103 residents of Marigné (Maine-et-Loire) protested the Saint-Sulpice parochial church council's choice for godfather and godmother of persons "who have not done good in the parish." This decision was detrimental to the Carrier *family*, who had given proof since time immemorial of the utmost devotion to the community. The signers of the petition declared: "*We want*, recognize, and choose M. Joseph Carrier and Mme Philomène Carrier, his mother, as godfather and godmother of *our* bell."<sup>79</sup> In this way a majority<sup>80</sup> of a community's members could assert their power to choose, and demonstrate the importance attached to the election of those honored enough to preside over the "christening" of the bell.

During the nineteenth century new forms of sponsorship arose. The Bonaparte dynasty saw to it that it was itself featured on the consecrated bronze. In 1809 following a proposal from the mayor, the municipal council of Lombes (Gers) dedicated the principal bell in its parish church to the "great Napoleon" as a token of "its love, gratitude, allegiance and respect." The council delighted in the thought that the bronze would resound down the generations: "Long live Napoleon the Great."<sup>81</sup> Manufactured during the reign of Saint Louis, the bell broke as it was celebrating the entrance of the French into Vienna. Under the Second Empire, imperial bells were cast in series and generously dispatched to the departments.<sup>82</sup> This procedure forms part of the staging of imperial authority, a topic analyzed in various works in progress. At the same time the names of officials began to feature in campanarian inscriptions, even under the First Empire. In 1807 the bell of Brioux (Deux-Sèvres) had the subprefect for its godfather and the subprefect's wife for its godmother. In Secondigné (Deux-Sèvres) in 1811, the godfather was the subprefect of Melle and the godmother was the mayor's wife.<sup>83</sup>

I have already referred to the inscriptions that attributed the ownership or sponsorship of the bell to the local residents or an immigrants' association. While on the topic of democratization of campanarian texts, I should mention how common it was for godfathers to be identified simply as "farmers,"<sup>84</sup> even as early as the First Empire and the Restoration. "In the year of 1824, on 25 August,"<sup>85</sup> we read on the small bell at Compainville (Seine-Inférieure), I was blessed . . . and named Joséphine by Étienne Legoux, farmer, and by Joséphine Leclerc, wife of J.-B. Duputel, landowner at Compainville, in the presence of François Cauchois, mayor and farmer in the aforesaid place, and of the members of the municipal and parochial church councils. I owe my existence to the diligence and zeal of residents of Compainville."<sup>86</sup> . . .

It had been the custom under the Old Regime to inscribe the names of consuls, syndics, or the mayor beside those of the parish priest and the churchwarden; in the nineteenth century inscriptions featuring the name of the leading magistrate were very common. Such names sometimes functioned as a reference point for a system of dating. A mayoralty would then appear alongside a pontifical and/or royal reign. All the bell in Nanteuil-de-Bourzac (Dordogne) had by way of inscription was: "Has been cast in 1817 under the mayoralty of M.E. Modenel."<sup>87</sup> It was common, however, for the mayor's name to appear on its own without any temporal reference, as was the case with twelve bells in Périgord.<sup>88</sup> . . .

The prestige of things municipal is also reflected in the listing of council members. Such lists feature on the bell in Jussy (Moselle) that was cast in 1806,<sup>89</sup> on each of the three bells in Saint-Fergeux (Ardennes), recast in 1847,<sup>90</sup> and on the bell in Grumesnil, recast in 1841.<sup>91</sup> From 1830 on, the name of the deputy mayor featured prominently alongside that of the mayor in inscriptions. At least this is one of the most obvious findings to emerge from a study of the accounts given by researchers. Conversely, it was rare for the deputy mayor's name to appear without that of the leading municipal magistrate. The formula inscribed on the bell in Gomont (Ardennes) that was cast in "the year 1831, first year of the reign of Louis-Philippe I, King of the French," suggests a particular concern to pay homage to an individual. The godfather is described as a "*rantier*" [sic] while the godmother was the mayor's wife; it is further stated that they gave their name to the bell "in the presence of the deputy mayor."<sup>92</sup> . . .

It is somewhat surprising to find that in many places the name and Christian name of the *schoolmaster* appear on the bell, an honor perhaps due to the fact that he often performed the duties of bell ringer. The inscription on the bell in Avaux (Ardennes), cast in 1816, links the names of mayor, deputy mayor, and schoolmaster.<sup>93</sup> On the bell in Guessling (Moselle), which dates from

1848, the schoolmaster's name is accompanied by that of the parish priest.<sup>94</sup> The inscription on the bell in Le Thil (Seine-Inférieure) reads "cast in 1815 through the diligence, and *under the auspices* of M. Boulanger, schoolmaster of Le Thil, with the help of the residents of this parish."<sup>95</sup>

For all the dryness of such inscriptions, they seem imbued with a yearning to satisfy ambition, quench a thirst for recognition, and safeguard honorific capital, whether individual or familial. Bells give us a sense of how conflicts arise. The drafting of inscriptions gave local authorities the opportunity to boost their prestige by finding a place for themselves within a cascade of references—a sort of pyramid of powers and statuses. This may well have been the case with the mayor of Saulx-Saint-Rémy (Ardennes); when its bell was cast within the commune itself in 1817, the following lines were inscribed upon it: "To the glory of God in 1817 . . . under Pius VII, Pope, Louis XVIII, King, François Cassiaux, of Saint-Thomas-en-Argonne, parish priest, P. Guilhaume Riffart, mayor, Maurice Badu, deputy mayor."<sup>96</sup>

Inscriptions sometimes embodied a desire for the harmonious accommodation of each and every claim. One may read on the middle bell in Le Thour (Ardennes), "I was cast in 1834, *through the efforts* of M. Jean-Baptiste Nivelles, parish priest; Joseph Fergeux Sorlet, mayor; Nicolas-Catherine-Olive Philippot, deputy mayor [note the inclusion of all the Christian names]; Pierre Malhomme, municipal councillor for the commune of Le Thour; and *at the expense* of the residents and of the parochial church council."<sup>97</sup> The godfather was the viscount of Virieu and the godmother was his wife.

Sometimes where many bells had been cast it was possible to satisfy several ambitions at once. The case of Rethel in 1826 is relevant here.<sup>98</sup> The first bell had the archbishop for godfather, the second, the subprefect—who was a chevalier of the royal order of the Légion d'honneur—the third, the mayor, a doctor, and a surgeon, the fourth, a mill owner and a member of the general council. This hierarchized grouping was wholly characteristic of the Restoration. . . .

### The Peal of Pride

The promise "To be rung in one's own lifetime" went even further to satisfy the thirst for prestige than the knowledge that one's name was inscribed in the semidarkness of a bell tower. Thus the ringing of the "bells of honor" was a fiercely defended tradition. Under the Old Regime, and quite apart from the peals that constituted one of the elements of baroque pomp arranged for by private citizens at funerals, it had been the custom to ring in honor of the lord and the members of his family, and of the bishop and the parish priest. A decree by the Parlement of Toulouse, dated 1743, required the parish priest of Saint-Martin-Gimois (Gers) to have the bells rung for forty days at the death both of its lord and master and his wife.<sup>99</sup> On 3 July 1703, the parish priest of Herpy bequeathed three pounds to the sexton "to ring for a whole month after his demise an evening *lesse*" with the great bell and "to ring for a whole year on fine days at the first stroke of matins, with all the bells great and small, for the space of a quarter of an hour."

On the eve of the Revolution villages and towns echoed the sound of these peals, bearing witness to an enduring society of orders. Article 48 of the law of 10 Germinal Year X, however, silenced these displays of obsessive concern for individual status. Social historians have not taken into account the scope of this massive and drastic reduction in the social discourse of bell ringing. The regulations jointly agreed to by bishops and prefects severely curtailed the use of *bells of honor*. Nevertheless, many parish priests and mayors, wishing to celebrate whomsoever they pleased, overstepped the mark and, by so doing precipitated other disputes over bells.

Bell ringing was one of a series of practices that reinforced existing social divisions. A number of parishes were torn asunder . . . by disputes over the order of participants in processions and, above all, over *pews* of honor. The town hall and presbytery were often at odds over such matters. It is also worth noting the exceptionally close links that existed, as it happens, between pew and bell. In the tower of the church in La Chapelle-d'Alagnon, near to Murat in the Cantal, there is an inscription from 1828 that reads as follows: "M. Pierre Valeri de Saurret du Jarousset, priest, and honorary canon of Saint-Flour, has paid for the bell on condition that the owners of the château of Le Jarousset shall have the right to a pew in the church of La Chapelle."<sup>100</sup>

First, let us consider the legitimate uses of honorific ringing. Bells might, for example, be rung to welcome the bishop or vicar general when paying a visit to the parish, or to celebrate the prelate's return to his episcopal town. As the regulation of 6 November 1806 specified, "*all the bells* shall be rung upon the arrival of Monsignor the Bishop of Quimper when he has been absent a whole month from his capital."<sup>101</sup> Under the Old Regime one of the bells in Avranches cathedral served no other purpose but to solemnize the bishop's return.<sup>102</sup>

Napoleon loved the sound of bells above all else. It is therefore not surprising to find the decree of 24 Messidor Year XII requiring *all* bells to be rung when the first consul, and subsequently the emperor, entered the territory of a commune.<sup>103</sup> Throughout the century the obligation to ring a peal of bells at the passage of the sovereign and members of his family was maintained and, it seems, observed. The survey conducted in 1884 and 1885 at departmental level to discover whether mayors approved or disapproved of ringing in honor of Jules Grévy, were the occasion to arise, shows that there would have been little opposition to it. At most there was a touch of reluctance here and there.<sup>104</sup> The decree of 16 June 1907 concerned with "secular honors" likewise stipulated that "at the entrance of the president of the Republic into *each* commune, *all* the bells [must] ring a peal." The observance of this injunction during the numerous journeys made by Raymond Poincaré in 1913 and 1914 was much criticized in the pages of *L'humanité*. The editors saw it as a symbol of renascent "reaction."<sup>105</sup>

When the sovereign visited it was not only the communes directly affected that saw fit to ring. The inhabitants of Saint-Riquier-en-Rivière (Seine-Inférieure), whose bell was "one of the loveliest sounding in the region," "could find nothing more apt to do, upon Louis XVIII's return, than to ring for a whole day." So lustily did they ring that the bell broke, bringing their rejoicing to an end. Yet the commune in question was not on the king's itinerary. In 1829, during a journey by Charles X through the departments of the East, all the bells in the region of Nancy were simultaneously set ringing.<sup>106</sup>

The other honorific peals, now illegal, gave rise to many problems. To go by archival documents, a parish priest would only rarely have the bells rung simply because he wished to celebrate the presence of a personage he thought to be of note. Nevertheless, it is impossible to judge how commonplace such a practice was since there are only traces of it when the perpetrator was denounced. In 1835 the parish priest of Cerizay (Deux-Sèvres) was accused of having rung a carillon "so as to celebrate the *arrival* and the *passage* of the wife of M. de Chauvelin, brother-in-law of M. de La Rochejaquelein." The parish priest admitted "to having been well pleased" that "Mme de Chauvelin heard the sound of a bell, of which she had been godmother, and for which she had in part paid."<sup>107</sup> This interesting remark points to the symbolic identification and emotional tie linking the notable's wife to the bell bearing her Christian name. . . .

The ringing of a peal to mark and celebrate the arrival of the prefect or subprefect caused much debate, even though the regulations made no provision for such an honor. In the Vosges this peal

was current until the drafting of the 1840 regulation.<sup>108</sup> In August 1859, the mayors of the two cantons of Maure and Pleurtuit (Ille-et-Vilaine) gave instructions for the bells to be rung upon the arrival and departure of the prefect. According to the archbishop, those parish priests who refused to comply were subjected to “threats and very nearly to violence” at the hands of the municipal magistrates. Minister Rouland delivered a stinging rebuke to the prefect and expressed his regret at “these deplorable conflicts.” “No secular authority,” he went on, “should tolerate its being accorded honors that, in the temporal sphere, are the prerogative of his Imperial Majesty.”<sup>109</sup> On 11 May 1869, the municipal councillors of Fontaine-l’Abbé (Eure) denounced the parish priest, who had refused to ring when the subprefect of Bernay came even though the mayor had instructed him to do so. Needless to say, the prefect, pressed on this point by the bishop of Évreux, in the end had to rule in the cleric’s favor.<sup>110</sup>

Oddly enough, this type of conflict seems to have become rarer under the Third Republic whereas the peals for the fourteenth of July, for the Angelus, and for secular burials occasioned innumerable disputes. Nevertheless, it is perhaps worth recording that in 1901 the parish priest of Parnes (Oise) chose to loop up the bell ropes to prevent the mayor from ringing to celebrate the arrival of republican dignitaries. In reaching up to grab the rope the unfortunate magistrate slipped and injured himself.<sup>111</sup> On the regulation signed in the Manche in 1885, we read that where the tradition was already established, it was permissible to ring for the prefect’s first visit,<sup>112</sup> suggesting that in some communes in that department the practice of honorific ringing did exist. Once again, at least as far as bells were concerned, the territory became a patchwork of local usages.

Of more immediate relevance to us here are the disputes over honors bestowed upon local authorities. The “rectors” from Finistère enjoyed such power and prestige that they felt able to ring when they saw fit. In October 1831, the Mayor of Pont-Croix took his grievances to the prefect: “The bell ringer took the liberty of ringing *in full peal*, at six o’clock in the morning, for at least a half an hour, to celebrate the return of the parish priest, and this at the bidding of the curate, he has told me.”<sup>113</sup> In Créancey (Haute-Marne) in September 1876, it was his own departure that the parish priest had rung. The sexton was ordered to give four *lesses* of a “lugubrious sound” which, according to the mayor, “threw the commune into a state of alarm.”<sup>114</sup>

In 1860 the Mayor of Lannilis (Finistère), vexed at being denied the right to honorific peals, pointed out that a carillon had celebrated the arrival of the rector in the parish. “Ever since then,” he went on, “every year, on the *eve* of Saint-Yves, his birthday, a *great Angelus* has been rung in his honor.”<sup>115</sup> In the departments of Brittany and Basse-Normandie, priests in charge seem to have rung as and when they chose without paying the regulations much heed. On 2 May 1817, the parish priest of Saint-Cornier-des-Landes (Orne) marked the death of his heroic sexton by having the bells rung *throughout the day*.<sup>116</sup>

The municipal authorities were as uncompromising in this sphere as the clergy. In many regions it was the practice to ring an honorific peal when a mayor or municipal council was installed. According to the prefect, this was the case in the Orne in 1833. In 1884 honorific peals of this type were still current in the Vosges and in eighteen communes in the Manche.<sup>117</sup> Some parish priests were opposed to the practice, however, so conflicts arose, especially under the July Monarchy.

On 24 April 1845, the mayor of Brasparts (Finistère) complained to the subprefect of Châteaulin. Contrary to established usage, the priest in charge had refused to have the bells rung to celebrate “the recent installation of the deputy mayor.”<sup>118</sup> Much later, on 12 January 1875, the mayor of Milizac complained to the subprefect. “An incident, occurring on Sunday the tenth,” he wrote, “has made me the laughingstock of the whole commune.” The parish priest interrupted the

verger as he was beginning to ring in honor of the installation of the municipal council. When, however, he mounted the pulpit and gave the reasons for his ban, his words "caused some residents to *burst out laughing*." The mayor was a notable who traded in livestock. According to the prefect, he could count on over 25,000 francs in rent; he was a "tried and trusted conservative." He had succeeded his father, himself mayor of the commune for forty-six years. . . .

Throughout the century the government ruled against municipal authorities, reminding them that bells rung in honor of mayor, deputy mayor, or councillors were contrary to regulations. Nevertheless, in a number of communes the ringing continued. In all these disputes, as in those over honorific pews, mayors and deputy mayors had to give way in the end. . . .

There was another way for a bell ringer to celebrate an individual and proclaim, where necessary, powers and hierarchies. This involved modifying the use of bells that solemnized rites of passage or celebrated the memory of the deceased. I have in mind here *peals of pride*, which were claimed as a right by some families. The "unanimous knell," rung by all the bells in a given town, like the emblazoned pall, constituted in the eighteenth century one of the elements of the baroque funeral services studied by Michel Vovelle and François Lebrun. In actual fact this practice was already being contested on the eve of the Revolution by élites concerned about showing discretion and breaking with the more spectacular forms of funerals. In 1812 the prefect of the Haut-Rhin gave a clear account of the history of the practice. "*This kind of honor*, being formerly reserved for *persons of distinction*, is nowadays lavished upon anyone who can meet the expense. The priests take great pains to present the death peal as a religious duty, so that the poor man and the rich man alike, one out of fanaticism and the other out of ostentation, pay this tribute." The prefect thought that "the bells should only announce a *public mourning* when society loses one of its members who has given outstanding service to the state, that it is unseemly that the demise of the most obscure of men should be announced with as much ceremony as is that of a magistrate, and that at all times of day we should disturb a numerous population to announce that an artisan, often unknown to his closest neighbors, has ceased to exist."<sup>119</sup> This text, which deserves to be quoted in full, seems to reflect at the same time a wish to forestall an egalitarian use of bells, a rejection of the privileges of birth and money, the cult of the great man who has served the city well, and a sense of a division between public and private.

At any rate, the prefect of the Haut-Rhin went on, the recent destruction of many bells made it harder to mark distinctions that had once been articulated in terms of rank. Under the Old Regime the "great peal" and the "small peal" were easy to recognize. Since the restoration of religious worship Colmar could only call upon two bells "so that there could not be too much difference between peals reserved for persons of distinction and those accorded to private persons."

The former procedures, though preserved here and there, gradually took on a vestigial quality. In 1872 the mayor of La Roche (Haute-Savoie), a region that had only been incorporated into France in 1860, wrote that, "according to an old custom, the bells of our little town announce the demise of members of the nobility and clergy with *knells of lamentation*, which are repeated on the day of burial." However, he hastened to add, "this usage, standing condemned by the principles underlying our society, no longer has any reason to exist, and public sentiment calls for its abolition." He therefore called for the suppression of the "knell of lamentation" on the grounds that it was a "special peal," and the parochial church council concurred.

Several of these honorific peals<sup>120</sup> survived here and there in the countryside, which is, after all, the focus of the present study. In 1886 the residents of Poumarous (Hautes-Pyrénées), disagreeing in this regard with the parish priest, wished for a peal to be rung on the great bell for the

burial of an adult, and *both* for that “of an adult who was, or who at any time in the past had been, a town councillor.”<sup>121</sup> Such, they went on, was the custom in several neighboring localities. This was anyway simply a restoration, since the death of a councillor from Poumarous had once been marked in this fashion.

Despite vestiges of such practices, the use of bells was becoming more democratic, a general tendency that is consistent with our analysis of the extension of godparenthood. Parochial church councils, however, intent on exploiting vanities and social ambitions in order to boost their all too meager revenues, set about recreating distinctions, although this time they would rest on wealth alone. Over the course of the nineteenth century the practice spread of modulating the size and duration of peals to match the generosity of the family in question. The regulation agreed to in 1885 between the archbishop of Rennes and the prefect of Ille-et-Vilaine reflected such a policy. A burial called for six peals: two “on the eve, after the midday and evening Angelus, the third on the day itself after the morning Angelus, and the three others before, during, and after the ceremony.”<sup>122</sup> The number of bells and the duration of these peals depended on “the class” of the deceased.<sup>123</sup> The archives contain hundreds of such tariffs drawn up by parochial church councils and approved by the prefect. They are as monotonous as can be.

Occasionally, however, some resistance was shown. In 1865 the commune of Void (Meuse) was divided over such policies. The municipal council, when it met on 14 March 1865, wanted burial to be the same for all, rich or poor. In particular, it called for three bells to be used for everyone. Paupers felt that distinctions in this sphere were “an insult to their poverty.” On 4 November the parish priest of Void presented his own case in a long letter addressed to the bishop of Verdun. On 5 March, as a pauper was being rung with two bells, the mayor had communicated an order through the rural guard for the three bells to be rung. This, then, would be a “great peal.” The parish priest, who was at that moment at the altar, had put up some resistance but had then advised the bell ringer to obey the magistrate. Such was the episode that unleashed the conflict. The parish priest made himself out to be the defender of “honorific peals.” He went on to explain that families were at liberty to choose. When a child was to be interred, many wanted only a single bell. For the past thirty-six years only two bells had been rung for paupers. The other members of the congregation opted for a “lavish peal.” According to the parish priest, the rich valued such honors. As he saw it, one would do better not to confuse “natural equality and civil equality with social equality,” which he regarded as the “negation of every honor, of all hierarchy, and consequently of society itself.” Void’s parish priest said he could not understand how the municipal council could speak of an “insulting, humiliating, and irksome measure” when generalized use of the third bell would in fact imply the “subversion of the foundations of society.”<sup>124</sup>

Parish regulation of peals, where it existed, often reflected membership of confraternities. In this fashion hierarchies arose within the community. According to a text composed by the parochial church council of Loubressac (Lot), the great bell was rung for all the deceased. When, however, the dead person had been a member of the Confraternity of the Holy Sacrament, one “pulled” the second bell as well. Conversely, if he belonged to the Confraternity of the Rosary the small bell would accompany the great bell. When the dead person had belonged to both confraternities he had the right to all three bells. In 1855 the parish priest decided to increase the annual subscription paid by members of the Confraternity of the Holy Sacrament. The fee, now one franc instead of twenty-five centimes, served to exclude a number of parishioners who were consequently much offended.



On Sunday 2 September 1860, Adeline Bombezy was buried. She belonged only to the Confraternity of the Rosary and so had no right to the second bell. A group of women, indignant at the thought of their friend being thus deprived, went into the church and took it upon themselves to ring all three bells. The parish priest was unable to make them stop. The rural guard and sergeant finally managed to expel them from the sanctuary. With the help of a young farmer the women renewed their attack and rang once again. The parish priest refused to proceed with the removal of the body while regulations were being flouted. The following night some cabbages were taken from the presbytery garden. In Quercy this seems to have been the usual way of displaying hostility toward the parish clergy.

In spite of the obstacles put up to block its deployment, it is worth noting how keen the desire for *honorific bell ringing* was, especially in societies where everyone knew everyone else. By the same token, we should note how intense the disappointment was when requests were turned down. The bell was one of the "semiophores" so coveted by the new nineteenth-century élites. For a factory owner who wished to found a lineage, but also for a well-to-do farmer or a wealthy "laborer," campanarian inscriptions promised to render their names eternal. This was all the more so given that, as we know, the history of bells is closely linked to the procedures of "long memory" through which social representations, in villages at any rate, were ordered. The members of rural communities, sometimes the residents of mere hamlets, mayors, deputy mayors, "councillors," and notables by birth or fortune were plainly moved to hear a bell symbolically proclaiming their rank, prestige, and honor.

To be denied the symbolic gratification of ringing "a peal" may have seemed cruel, if not humiliating, especially in regions where this form of solemnization—being so firmly rooted in local custom—was taken very much to heart. This seems to have been the case in the west, north, and east of France. It is hard for us nowadays to grasp the impact of bell ringing, let alone of silenced bells, on the social world. This brief foray may perhaps encourage others, at least I hope, to pay fresh attention to these peals that occasioned so many conflicts and such deep bitterness; they did so much to anchor, through emotion, contrasted systems of social representations.

Through bells an individual was better able to apprehend the identity of the group to which he belonged. They helped him locate himself in space and time. They audibly proclaimed to him the order of the society within which his life unfolded, and made manifest the power of the constituted authorities. Yet this was not the whole story; in the countryside bells were the most important medium of communication, and their history is chiefly concerned with this fact.

## Notes

- 1 This is the constant refrain of those who deplore the loss of territorial frameworks through which the memory of individuals or groups was built up, and the representations of society delineated. Cf. the already fairly old study by Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Alcan, 1925). On the perceptual structuration of space, "the territorial sentiment," and the distinction between territoriality and rootedness, see Marcel Roncayolo, in *Territoires*, ENS, no. 1 (Paris, 1983), pp. 4–21, and in particular, his observations on Marcel Mauss's contribution to the debate.
- 2 Cf. the works of Jacques Rancière.
- 3 Marcel Maget, "Remarques sur le village comme cadre de recherches anthropologiques," in *Bulletin de psychologie*, t. 8, special issue no. 7–8 (April, 1955), pp. 376–382. . . .
- 4 Marcel Maget also studies the ways in which each group was emblazoned, a process in which the bell was plainly involved.

- 5 See Christophe Studeny, *Le Vertige de la vitesse: L'accélération de la France (1830–1940)* (thesis in 5 vols., EHESS, 1990). Likewise, Jacques Léonard, *Archives du corps: La santé au XIXe siècle* (Rennes: University of Rennes II, 1986), especially pp. 18–20.
- 6 In this regard, Olivier Ihl, “Du politique au sacré: Les fêtes républicaines dans les campagnes de la Creuse (1870–1914),” in *Mémoires de la Société des sciences naturelles et archéologiques de la Creuse* (forthcoming), and, above all, Ihl, *La Citoyenneté en fête: Célébrations nationales et intégration politique dans la France républicaine (1830–1914)* (thesis, EHESS, 1992, supervised by Mona Ozouf).
- 7 “In towns with several parishes,” we read in the regulation for peals agreed upon between the archbishop of Rennes and the prefect of the Ille-et-Vilaine in 1885, “the bells shall be rung when the procession passes across the territory of one of the parishes, and in the church of that parish” (Archives Nationale [A.N.], Series F<sup>19</sup> 4375, Ille-et-Vilaine).
- 8 On the meaning of localism and on the existence of particular discourses and territories, local memory, and the culture of local space, cf. Thierry Gasnier, “Le local: Une et indivisible,” in Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 3, pt. 2, “Traditions” Paris 1992, pp. 463–525.
- 9 For an inventory of such sounds, see the pioneering article by Guy Thuillier, “Les bruits,” in *Pour une histoire du quotidien au XIXe siècle en Nivernais* (Paris and The Hague: EHESS-Mouton, 1977), pp. 230–244.
- 10 A. Dupront, *Du sacré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 447.
- 11 Cf. Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside*, trans. Martin Thom (New York, 1988), pp. 206–207.
- 12 Cf. J.D. Blavignac, *La Cloche: Etude sur son histoire et sur ses rapports avec la société aux différents âges* (Geneva, 1877), pp. 22ff.
- 13 A ruling confirmed by the Congregation of Rites on 21 March 1606 and 9 February 1608.
- 14 Before 1240 the Franciscans were not permitted bells. Subsequently, as a token of humility, their monasteries very often only possessed one of them.
- 15 Cf. Corbin, *Village Bells*, p. 292.
- 16 Conversely, according to ancient law (cf. Blavignac, *La Cloche*, p. 256), the extent of a given jurisdiction was sometimes defined in terms of the range of its bell.
- 17 Don Remi Carré, *Recueil curieux et édifiant . . .* (Cologne, 1757), p. 7.
- 18 A.N. F<sup>19</sup> 4373 and A.N. F<sup>19</sup> 4377, Haute-Savoie.
- 19 Archives Départementales [A. D.] Finistère, IV9.
- 20 *Ibid.*, IV276.
- 21 *Ibid.*, IV276. For another example of this type of complaint, in the Dordogne, in 1863, A.N.F<sup>19</sup> 4373.
- 22 A. D. Haute-Marne, 48V2.
- 23 D. Dergny, *Les Cloches du pays de Bray . . .* (Paris: 1865), 2:18.
- 24 Dergny, *Les Cloches*, and A. Trin, *Les Cloches du Cantal* (Aurillac, 1954), p. 13.
- 25 Dergny, *Les Cloches*, 2:18–21 for the examples that follow.
- 26 Cf. p. 299. A. D. Meuse, 37 VI.
- 27 In Normandy, it is claimed that William the Conqueror was saved in 1044, while in the neighborhood of Bayeux, by the peal from an evening bell. He thereafter gave the order for the curfew to be rung in every town and village in the Duchy to put lost travelers back on the right road.
- 28 For all these examples, cf. Dergny, *Les Cloches*, 2:21.
- 29 A. D. Finistère, IV276.
- 30 Jean-Baptiste Thiers, *Traité des cloches* [n.p., n.d.]. On the aims of Thiers, see Jean-Marie Goulemot, Introduction to Thiers, *Traité des superstitions: Croyances populaires et rationalité à l'âge classique* (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1984). Regarding the virtue of bells acknowledged at the dawn of modern times, Thiers refers in particular to the provincial council of Milan of 1565, to the Roman pontificates of Clement VIII and Urban VIII, to the Roman ritual of Paul V, and to many diocesan rituals.
- 31 Thiers, *Traité des cloches*, p. 136.
- 32 Cf. Dupront, *Du Sacré*, p. 72.
- 33 *Essai sur le symbolisme de la cloche dans ses rapports et ses harmonies avec la religion* (Poitiers, 1859), an anonymous work usually attributed to the abbot Sauveterre, p. 89. The author, whoever it was, was fully convinced by the argument that the bell was a “salutary preservative” (p. 90).
- 34 Thiers, *Traité des cloches*, pp. 136 and 142.
- 35 Trin, *Les Cloches du Cantal*, p. 51.
- 36 Fernand Pottier, *La Voix du Seigneur dans nos cloches* (Montauban, 1895), p. 5.
- 37 M. Brocard, *Études campanaires: Les cloches de la cathédrale Saint-Mammès de Langres* (Langres, 1924), pp. 38–40.
- 38 Quoted by Blavignac, *La Cloche*, pp. 164–65.
- 39 Trin, *Les Cloches du Cantal*, p. 49; G. Bouchard, *Le Village immobile* (Paris, 1972), p. 318.