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Voting on Faith

Mapping Reformation Ballots with the Methods and Tools of Digital History

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As the Reformation ideas spread throughout the Swiss Confederacy in the 16th century, a significant number of ballots were held in the Swiss cantons in order to choose between either the reformed ideas or the teachings of the Roman Church. “Putting faith to the ballot” may seem to be a strange choice [Christin, 2014a]. Although voting on common matters was the usual decision-making process in Swiss communes, voting on faith was unprecedented and raised a crucial question: Could the “true faith” be chosen by a majority without risking a potentially catastrophic choice that would threaten the salvation of all? In order to understand why a vote was sometimes considered as the right path to a wise religious choice and under which circumstances the ballots were organized, the Swiss National Science Foundation funded the research project “Reformation and Ballots” [p3.snf.ch/project-162968], whose members work at the University of Neuchâtel and at the Laboratoire de recherche historique Rhône Alpes (LARHRA) in Lyon [<http://larhra.ish-lyon.cnrs.fr/>]. Based on a conference paper presented at the 2019 DARIAH-CH workshop in Neuchâtel [<https://dariah-ch-ws19.sciencesconf.org/>], this article explains how digital methods and tools give us new insights in some crucial aspects of the ballots and help mapping the Reformation process in Switzerland.

I. VOTING ON FAITH IN SWISS CANTONS

In Abraham Ruchat’s, Karl-Ludwig von Haller’s or Heinrich Bullinger’s chronicles of the Reformation times, numerous accounts on the adoption of reformed principles by a majority decision can be found [Ruchat 1727; Haller, 1839; Bullinger, 1838]. Such votes echo the Swiss political traditions according to which decisions concerning the whole community had to be made by the communal assembly, the city council or the *Landsgemeinde* [Maissen, 2006; Würgeler, 2013]. Which persons were allowed to cast a vote on public matters depended on local constitutional structures but an elected assembly whose members dedicated themselves to the common good was seen in all cantons as the best form of government. This principle was applied to religious matters since the very beginning of the Reformation process [Elsener, 1969; Christin, 2014b]. In April 1525, the Great Council of Zurich voted to abolish the mass,

confirming thereby the reform-oriented course followed since 1523 under the influence of Ulrich Zwingli. Three years later, the Council of Bern adopted the reformed principles after a disputation held in January 1528.

Following Zwingli's teaching, the councils of Zurich and Bern considered the promotion of reformation principles as their duty, but they had only limited influence on religious decisions made by their allies in the Confederacy and most cantons remained faithful to the Roman Church [Burnett and Campi, 2016]. Nevertheless, both cities went to great lengths to promote the new faith in their sphere of influence. Their tactics are well documented for the *Gemeine Herrschaften*, territories over which they shared lordship with catholic allies [Holenstein, 2005; Head, 1997] Bern and Zurich claimed that since the cantons disagreed on which faith their subjects should follow, the parishioners had to be consulted: The religious choice would then proceed from a majority decision, hence the designation of ballots as "Mehr" or "Plus" [Christin, 2014a/b]. In Orbe, where Bern shared lordship with catholic Fribourg, ballots were held in the 1530s and the majority of the parishioners chose the Roman rites [Strickler, 1876]. However, Bern managed to guarantee the celebration of the protestant religious office and the community asked for a new vote a few years later. In July 1554, 123 of 227 people voted to abolish the mass and the catholic minority had to leave the town soon afterwards [Deschwanden, 1886].

Ballots held in the common lordships were events of high political and religious importance, often making one town or village the center of a conflict raising significant jurisdictional questions and prone to lead to diplomatic tensions. Documents produced in this context were kept by the cantons in order to legitimize their course of action when challenged by opponents, meaning that there is sufficient information to study the entire process leading to a vote on faith as well as its aftermath. Complaints about the validity of a vote, lists of potential voters or letters between magistrates and delegates overiewing the process give us insight into the complex negotiations preceding and following nearly each ballot held in the common lordships.

II. WORKING ON REFORMATION DATA WITH THE *SYMOGIH.ORG* VIRTUAL RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

In 2017, the project team chose the *symogih.org* [<http://symogih.org>] virtual research environment (VRE) to host and analyze the data harvested in the source material. Created by the LARHRA in Lyon, this modular VRE designed for historical research is organized around an event-centered, extensible data model [Fig. 1]. It is compatible with CIDOC CRM, a standardized data model for the cultural heritage domain (ISO 21127:2014) and complies therefore with FAIR principles [<https://www.go-fair.org/fair-principles/>]. The *symogih.org* VRE allows to collect, organize and analyze relevant information about the Reformation ballots. It also contains information from different past or ongoing projects, therefore giving us access to other relevant datasets, but also allowing other researchers to re-use our data even after completion of the SNF-funded part of "Reformation and Ballots". The long-term and evolving perspective, as well as the interoperability of

symogh.org are the principal benefits of working within this VRE rather than building a specific database for our project [Fig. 2].

Every actor, institution and place found in the source material is encoded in the VRE. Furthermore, these items are situated as precisely as possible on the timeline as well as geolocated using geographical coordinates, thus allowing their subsequent visualization with a temporal dimension on a map or within a graph. The data is structured by using existing classes and properties already available in the VRE, or by creating new ones, specifically devoted to our project's needs. For example, since it is crucial to consider the various alliances and overlapping jurisdictions which linked authorities, communes and parishes together to understand the vote itself, all collective actors concerned by a ballot had to be created and carefully linked up with already existing information. The relations between these collective actors are characterized by using different classes of time-related relationships. One of the most important of them is the "power relationship", which allows to model different sorts of jurisdictional ties, political or religious [Fig. 3]. After all the information is encoded and cleaned up in the VRE, the identification and description of patterns characterizing Reformation ballots can begin.

III. THE CASE OF TAVANNES IN THE MOUTIER-GRANDVAL BAILIWICK

In the 16th century, the Moutier-Grandval bailiwick was under the lordship of the bishop of Basel. However, many of its communes had entered alliances with Bern and Solothurn to protect their privileges: These alliances gave Bern useful leverage to promote reformed ideas in the region and though their lord was a catholic prelate, all southern villages of the valley chose the Reformation through ballots intensely promoted by Bern between 1530 and 1531 [Aberle and Christin, 2019].

One of the bailiwick parishes, Tavannes, chose the Reformation as early as June 1530, almost a year before the rest of the valley. This early vote can be explained with unprecedented accuracy thanks to *symogh.org*: Since all collective actors concerned by the vote had been created in the VRE, it was relatively easy to identify the complex relationships between the parish, adjacent communes, the bishop and the Council of Bern. For example, all villages depending of the Tavannes parish are linked with the latter using a "power relationship" class typed as "spiritual jurisdiction", which means that these temporal entities depended of Tavannes in religious matters. The burghers of the Tavannes commune were also in a *combourgeoisie* relationship with Bern, a protective alliance through which the City Council could enforce the parishioners right to vote on their faith, even if their temporal lord was the bishop of Basel and the abbot of Bellelay the parish collator [Herminjard, 1868]. As the parish included the five communities of Tavannes, Reconvilier, Saules, Saicourt or Loveresse, a vote would have a large impact on the religious landscape and Tavannes consequently played a key part in the Bernese Reformation strategy for this region. The data in the *symogh.org* VRE therefore reveal the complex pattern of jurisdictions in which collective and individual actors were entangled, a crucial step in order to determine under which

conditions a community was allowed to choose the new faith. This also enables us to understand how a parish could remain reformed when the decision was challenged or why it had to go back to Catholicism [Fig. 4].

In a second phase, we examined the ballot itself. People did not vote on “the Reformation” as a whole concept or as a coherent system of rules and doctrines but pronounced themselves on the mass, on devotional images or on financial matters like the tithe [Strickler 1844]. It is therefore crucial to break down the rather vague concept of “vote” into its components and to show which aspects were discussed in each case. In order to achieve that goal, specific “abstract objects” such as “abolition of the mass” or “removal of the images” were created to describe purpose and outcome of each ballot as precisely as possible. In Tavannes, the event “vote on faith” which took place on June 5th, 1530 was tagged with the abstract object “introduction of reformed preaching” to show that the parish’s vote was about the sermon. The information type “to be concerned” then allows to link the vote with the collective or individual actors who participated in the organization of the ballot or cast their votes in it [Fig. 5]. Examining both relation patterns between the actors and data on the vote procedure itself reveals how the conditions to be fulfilled varied from one community to another and shows that the results of the ballot could always be challenged.

IV. PERSPECTIVES

An online map prototype is currently under development in order to allow dynamic geographical and chronological visualizations of the voting process. A first map describing the progress of religious reform in Moutier-Grandval will be published on a dedicated website. Based on this experience, the prototype will be refined in order to build an evolving mapping system that allows the visualization of the Reformation process in other bailiwicks like Sargans or Orbe-Echallens and ultimately in every region of the Swiss Confederacy where ballots took place. Furthermore, diagrams and graphs will illustrate the relations between communities and temporal or spiritual jurisdictions, leading to a better understanding of the network of political and jurisdictional relationships. The website will eventually show in an interactive way that the success of reform-oriented politics depended on local power configurations and relations between institutional actors rather than on a supposed ‘magical’ efficiency of the reformed ideas or on the persuasive power of ‘enlightened’ preachers. Digital methodologies, and virtual research environments in particular, can thus make a significant contribution to advancing our understanding of the past.

V. FIGURES

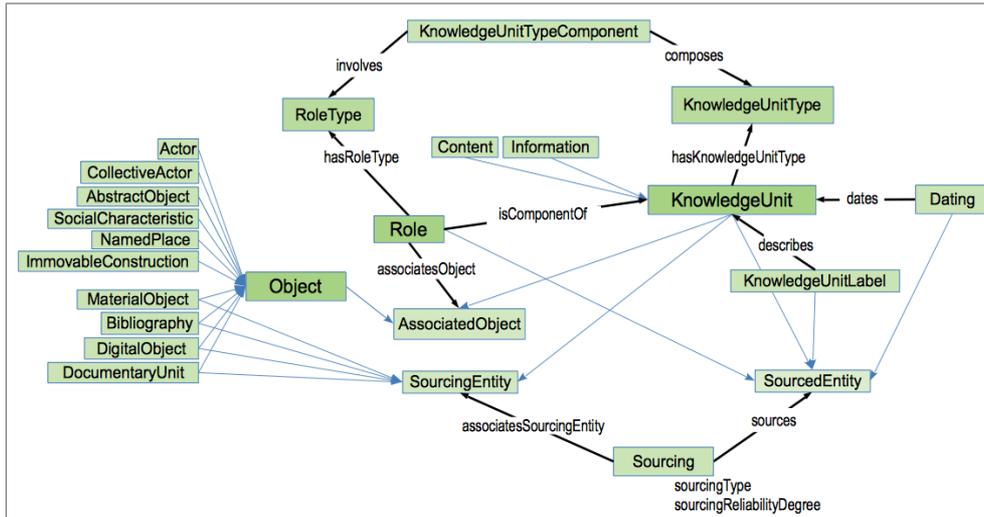


Fig. 1: *symogih.org* generic data model.

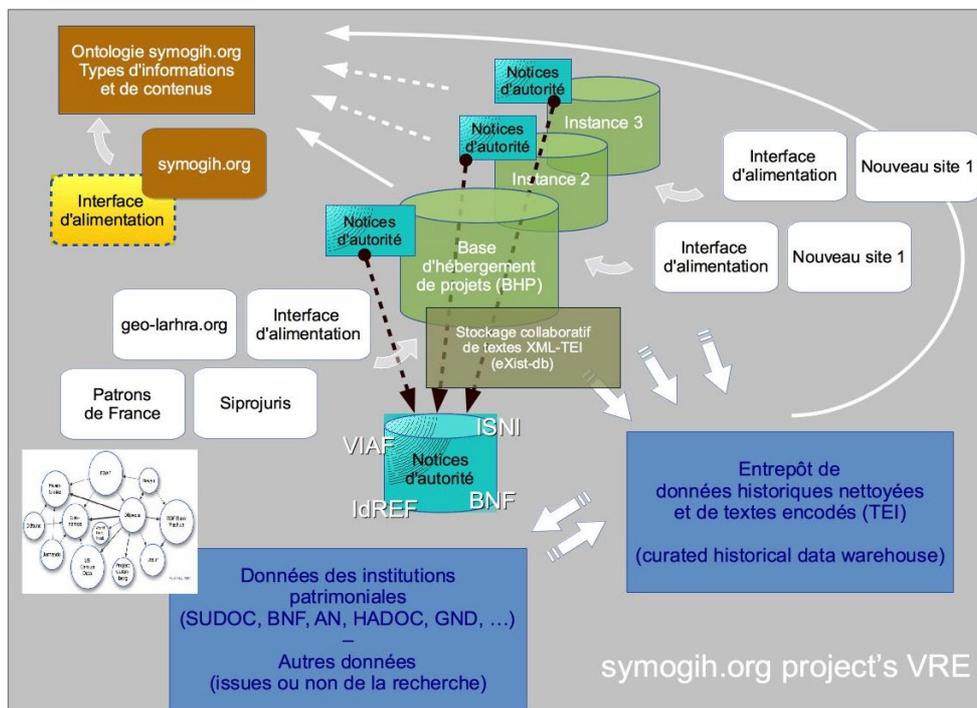


Fig. 2: *symogih.org* project's VRE: The different hosted projects work in a common research space. Data in the VRE are connected to external authority files and published as linked open data.

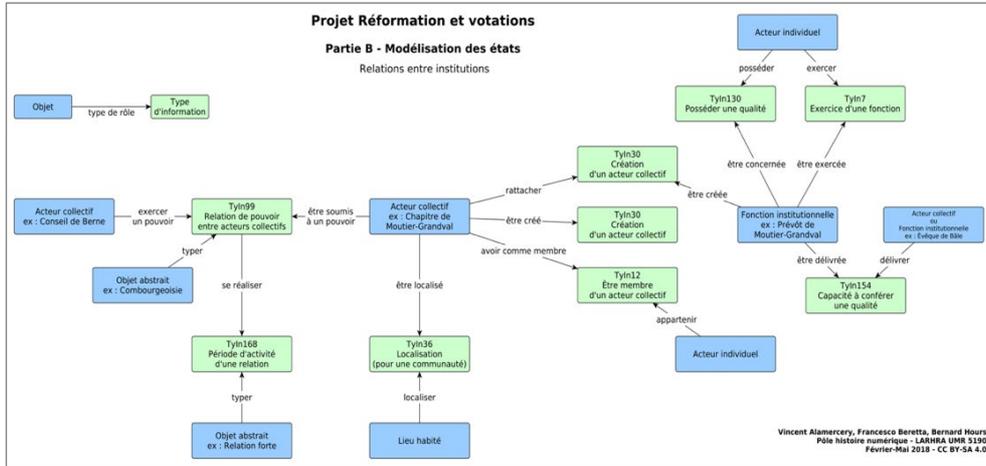


Fig. 3: Modelling of power relationships between actors in the “Reformation and Ballots”-project.

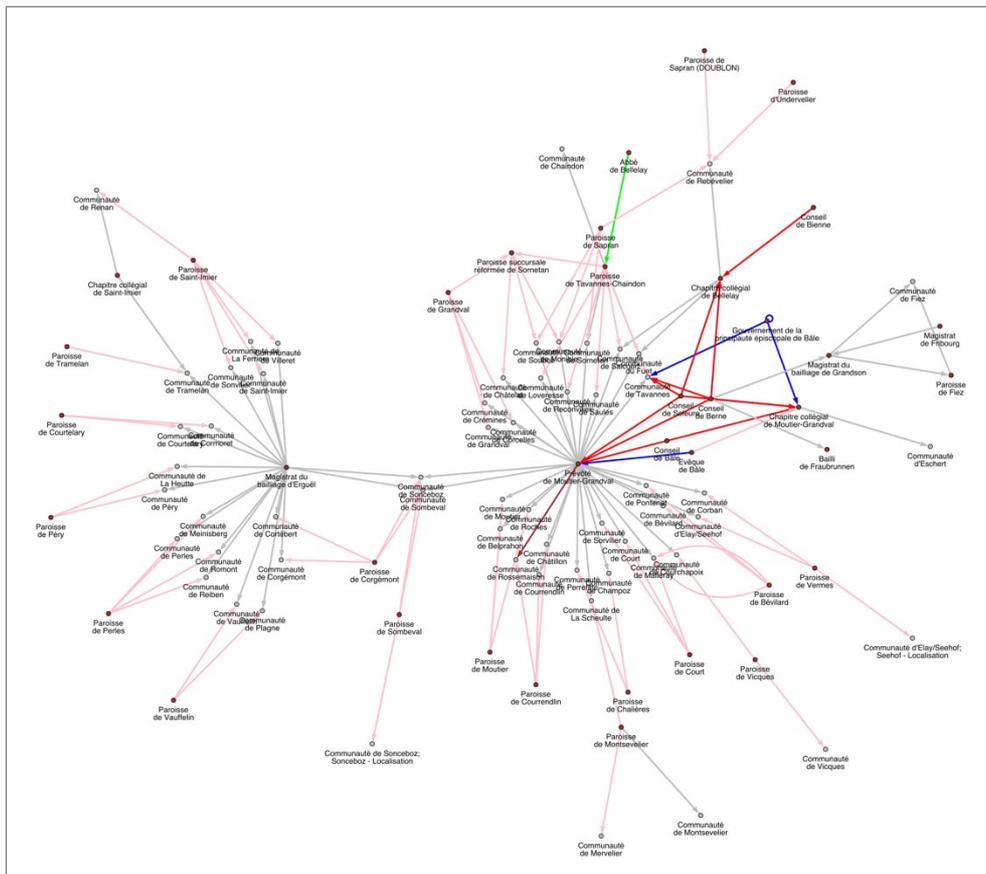


Fig. 4: Relationship graph for the Moutier-Grandval bailiwick, working draft. *Pink arrows*: Spiritual jurisdiction of a parish over a community; *blue arrows*: direct suzerainty of a magistrate over a community; *red arrows*: *combourgeoisie*-relationship; *green arrows*: patronage and collator rights; *grey arrows*: confirmed temporal jurisdiction over a community, but of unknown nature and extent at the time of publication.

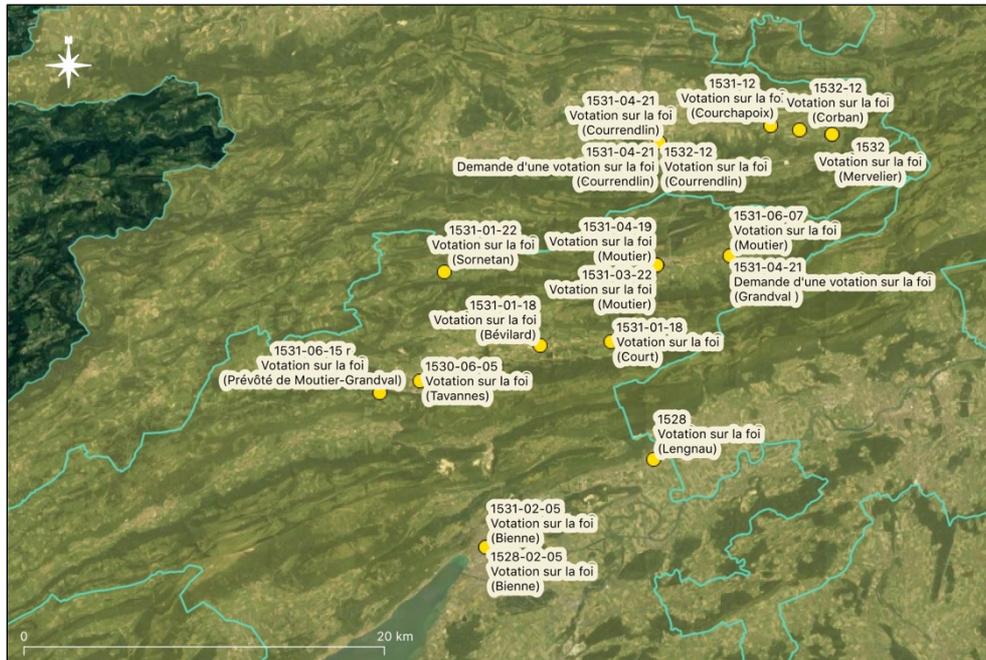


Fig. 5: Ballots held between 1528 and 1532 in the Moutier-Grandval bailiwick, in Biel/Bienne and in Lengnau, working draft. Most votes took place in 1531.

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