

DESCRIBERS' PREFACE

Almost all of the manuscripts in the present volume were subject to the upheaval and change brought about by the French Revolution. Most of our manuscripts were originally the property of religious houses. Three decrees of the new Revolutionary government's *Assemblée Constituante* are relevant to the foundation of the Municipal Libraries of France:

- (1) 1789, 2 November: a decree ordering the putting of all the goods of the clergy, including the libraries of religious houses, at the disposition of the nation;
- (2) 1789, 14 November: a decree ordering religious communities to produce a report on the state of their libraries and to put their catalogues in the hands of the nearest authorities;
- (3) 1790, 13 February: a decree stating that religious vows would no longer be recognized and that the religious orders should be suppressed.

Notwithstanding the reluctance of religious orders to cooperate with any enthusiasm with these decrees, the secularization and the making of inventories of the books of religious houses throughout France applied immediately, with a view to preserving them for the nation. In May 1791 clear instructions for the compilation of catalogues were prepared by *Les Comités d'Administration Ecclésiastique et d'Aliénation des Biens Nationaux*. Items were to be alphabetized on cards, copied into a register, and the cards were to be sent to Paris in special boxes. Cataloguers were also provided with a questionnaire for manuscripts by the directors of the operation, as follows:

1. In which century was the manuscript written, or, is the writing ancient or modern, clean and regular or ill-formed and difficult to read?
2. Is the manuscript on vellum or paper?
3. Is it big or small, in-folio or . . . ?
4. What material is treated?
5. Is it written in Greek, in Latin, in French, in Italian . . . ?
6. Does it have one or two or three columns per page?
7. Is every line resting on a bar drawn by stylet?

8. Can the name of the author be found? The colophon is precious.
9. What works does it contain?
10. Is it decorated with miniatures or paintings? Be precise about their quality.
11. Is the volume well conserved?
12. Are the big letters at the beginning painted in gold or in color? Are they really fresh?

In spite of such meticulous guidelines, making the monastic manuscript-collections available to the nation was difficult to put into practice in a troubled period. While awaiting an administrative decision, books and manuscripts were kept in revolutionary depots throughout the various regions, often in conditions not conducive to their conservation, exposed to damp, damage, and theft, not to mention strings of official visitors. Any new institution which received books catalogued and regulated them methodically. No manuscripts could be lent. An early idea was to give books and manuscripts to the newly established *Écoles Centrales*. This was the case at Boulogne, the choice of volumes being given to one man, Jean-Baptiste Isnardi. He formed his collection from depots which included Arras (the monastery of St-Vaast) and St-Omer (the monastery of St-Bertin). Subsequently, when the schools were abolished, these books became the *fonds anciens* of the Bibliothèque Municipale at Boulogne. Other manuscripts from the Monastery of St-Bertin are in the Bibliothèque d'Agglomération de St-Omer (as MS 150).

Often local authorities showed good sense in choosing a former monk to make an inventory of their confiscated books and manuscripts, and sometimes to organize their new town library. At Rouen, François Gourdin, one-time Maurist from the Abbey of Jumièges, who became the first secular librarian, was even involved in the collection and transport of items from surrounding religious houses. At Angers, two former Benedictines, Jean-Pierre Braux of the Monastery of St-Nicholas and Jacques-Octave Locatelli from the monastery of St-Aubin, managed so skillfully that the new public library there opened in 1798. They were allowed to sell off duplicate volumes, and Braux was authorized by the Minister of the Interior to visit the Paris depots to bring back 1200 volumes to compensate for books lost from the local depot either through damp or pilfering.

Some books and manuscripts did not move far from their pre-Revolutionary location. The present Bibliothèque Municipale at Angers is on the site of the abbey of Toussaint and not far from the remains of St-Aubin. In Arras, the entire monastery of St-Vaast was taken over into secular ownership, and the present Bibliothèque Municipale lies within its eighteenth-century buildings. In these instances, the manuscripts have probably resided in or near their present location for more than a millennium. Not so fortunate in their experience of the Revolution were the books and manuscripts of Moyenmoutier. In

the earlier eighteenth century they had been under the care of Dom Humbert Belhomme (Abbé, 1705–1762), builder and book-collector extraordinaire. His cataloguing and rebinding program in the early part of the century, coupled with his inclusion of a new library in the rebuilding of the abbey on a scale likened at the time to Versailles, had made his house one of the great intellectual centers of the Vosges region. The collection certainly remained in its monastic setting, but uncared for and exposed to weather and leaking gutters until 1824, when books, manuscripts, archives, and their beautiful shelving were taken into the nation's care at Épinal. A former monk of Moyennoutier, Joseph-Benoit Didelot, did, however, make the revolutionary inventory, and it can be seen today at Épinal side by side with Belhomme's own catalogue, silent witnesses to the huge changes that took place around and to their contents within the space of about eighty years.

Two of the manuscripts in this volume are now to be found in libraries which predate the French Revolution. A public library already existed at Dijon, to which most of the manuscripts confiscated from the nearby monastery of Cîteaux (including MS 574) were transferred. The Humanist Library at Sélestat was founded in 1452, and received extremely rich donations in the sixteenth century. It did not benefit from the dispersal of former monastic libraries.

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