

International Scene

Monks, Monasteries, and Manuscripts: Archival Sources for Eleventh-Century France

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Abstract: The investigation of producing and preserving records in a specific historical context such as eleventh-century France can add to our understanding of the place of archives in contemporary society. Although relatively isolated and underdeveloped at that time, French society produced many documents, called charters, similar to those in modern archives. Charters recorded gifts, sales, legal judgments, and even court testimony of someone in authority. As the only literate institution, the Church had a near monopoly on the production and preservation of these documents. Our vision of that era is shaped less by its historians than by its humble record keepers—the medieval counterpart of the modern archivist.

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A CLEAR DEFINITION OF its proper role in society has been a fundamental concern for the archival profession. On this definition hinge all discussions on education, performance, and morale for archivists. Usually any attempt to provide such a definition is framed within a context of society and archives as they exist today; yet the production and preservation of records are virtually coeval with civilization itself. An investigation of the historical context might therefore add depth and perspective to our understanding of the profession.¹

Eleventh-century Europe provided a crucial formative period for western society and is, consequently, an excellent starting point for this discussion. Within Europe, France perhaps best exemplifies the forces that shaped much of western history. It had been the core of the great Carolingian Empire and would lead the way in the creation of the brilliant "High Medieval" civilization of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The vast majority of the French population in the eleventh century, however, was illiterate and the production of records of any sort was a major undertaking, given the fact that the written language, Latin, was different from the spoken language. In the preceding century France had suffered serious political and social disruption due to destructive civil wars and foreign invasions. By 1000 A.D. Europe could best be viewed as an isolated and undeveloped region, dominated by more advanced societies in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. All public administrative, military, and judicial power had fallen into the hands of local lords. In stark testimony to the harshness of conditions the lords' favorite term for themselves was *milites*, a Latin word we now translate as "knights" but which actually means simply "soldiers."

Despite this there is evidence of a slow intellectual revival that resulted in an increase in literary works of a historical nature. Especially in Normandy the prestige of powerful dukes such as William the Conqueror resulted in the production of chronicles extolling their deeds. Monasteries kept annals listing significant events for each year while a few important individuals published anthologies of their own letters.

While these are all important sources of information, they have their limitations, chiefly that there are so few of them. The collections of letters are self-conscious literary productions that fall far short of being administrative correspondence. The annals devote only a sentence or two to each year and often skip many years. The chronicles, while our most informative sources, are focused almost exclusively on the great deeds of the topmost ranks of society and do not provide much information even about them.

To give an example, the *Ecclesiastical History* of Orderic Vitalis, by far the most detailed account of any portion of the eleventh century, mentions one particular lord, Robert the Burgundian, only once and no other chronicle mentions him at all.² Yet he was the nephew of the king of France, son of the powerful count of Nevers, lord of strategically important castles in the border area fought over by the Angevins and Normans, and right hand man of the counts of Anjou. If we equate the king of France with the president of the United States and the count of Anjou with the governor of Illinois, then Robert would be the mayor of Chicago. Yet this is the only mention of him in contemporary histories. The literary histories then can provide only a frame-

¹Ernst Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972) is an excellent introduction to the topic.

²Marjorie Chibnall, ed. and trans., *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963-73). Orderic concentrated on the deeds of the great Norman lords. The grace of Chibnall's translation makes this work a good introduction for the general reader interested in medieval historical writing.

work for a study of eleventh-century society but, as one medieval historian has said, "the hard core of the historian's information has to be derived from documents issued by those in authority," that is, the type of documents housed in modern archives.³

Fortunately for the historian, such documents, called charters (from the Latin *carta*), do exist. Considering the conditions of the eleventh century, it is remarkable that the texts of tens of thousands of these charters have survived for over nine centuries. Many of them have been edited and published, but many more exist only in manuscript form in various state repositories throughout France. The specialized study of these documents, called "diplomats" (from *diploma*) is the cornerstone of any study of medieval France.⁴ Until recently diplomats formed the core of French archival theory and education.

Simply put, a charter is a written record of a juridical act of someone in authority such as a count or a lesser lord. The act was often a formal gift of land or privileges such as an immunity from paying certain taxes. A brief example reads:

I, Rainard of Amné, give to God and the monastery of Saint-Vincent whatever I possess in the villa of Novion for the salvation of my soul and the souls of my father Joscelin, my mother Adelaid, my brother Geoffrey and the health of my sons, namely Geoffrey and the others. This gift includes the church of Saint-Germain with all of its revenue, houses, lots for new houses and a garden returning 8 *denarii* in rent. For this Abbot Ranulf and the monks give me the fellowship

of the monastery and ten pounds of the money of Le Mans.⁵

This last clause shows that sometimes the "gift" was actually a straightforward sale of property masquerading as a pious donation. The charter would then take on the characteristics of a bill of sale.

Almost as often the acts recorded were legal decisions of powerful lords acting as judges in court cases involving land ownership and the rights and privileges associated with the land, as in the following example.

A judgment was made in Angers in the presence of Count Fulk between us, the monks of Saint-Nicolas, and Odo of Blazon concerning the rights of justice over the lands given to us... by Count Geoffrey the Hammer. At the order of the count, Robert the Burgundian pronounced the verdict in favor of the monks. The count and his barons approved and confirmed this verdict.⁶

Occasionally such charters assumed the character of a court transcript, giving testimony of various witnesses almost verbatim. Two such records were made of Robert the Burgundian's extensive testimony before the archbishop of Tours regarding the claims of the monks of La Couture on the church of Saint-Malo de Sablé. After refuting the monks in detail, Robert concluded, "And if [the monks] say otherwise, they are not able to prove it!"⁷

⁵Bibliothèque Nationale, latin 5444¹, pp. 154-5. Published in S. Menjot d'Elbenne, ed., *Cartulaire de Saint-Vincent du Mans* (Le Mans: A. de St-Denis, 1913), no. 364.

⁶A summary of this charter is in Bibliothèque Nationale, Dom Housseau collection, vol. XIII¹, no. 9549, unpublished.

⁷The original of the proceedings containing Robert's testimony is in the Archives départementales d'Indre-et-Loire, H306, no. 3, published in E. Laurain, ed., *Cartulaire manceau de Marmoutier* (Laval: Librairie Goupil, 1945), 2:69-76. A slightly different version of Robert's testimony is found in *ibid.* 2:67-69.

³Jean Dunbabin, *France in the Making, 843-1180* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 2.

⁴For a brief introduction to this discipline, see Leonard E. Boyle, "Diplomatics," ed. James M. Powell, *Medieval Studies* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1976), 69-102.

Because a lord had administrative, military, and judicial authority over his lands, almost anything he did or said could be construed as an act. His act, whether a gift or a judicial decision, would be made as publicly as possible with enough ceremony to impress itself upon the minds of an illiterate audience. Everything was acted out in a concrete fashion. If a lord swore fealty to the count, he literally placed his hands between those of the count. If a gift of land were given to a monastery the donor placed a small object such as a piece of wood to represent the gift on the monastery's altar. One man placed on the altar "a small folding knife," in other words, a jackknife. It was vital to the validity of the act that this be done before men of a character suitable to give testimony in a court of law. It was this living memory that was initially more important than any written record and, in fact, most acts were never recorded in writing. When a lord granted a fief to a vassal, for example, it was marked by an oral agreement that was rarely written down.⁸

Yet many were written down, almost always by monks or other clerics who had a virtual monopoly on literacy. Possibly relying on notes taken during the public act, the scribe wrote out the provisions of the act, now translated into Latin, listed all the important witnesses, carefully noted the approval by interested parties such as the donor's lord, spouse, or children, and added a formulaic opening and closing. Often the written document itself took on a ritualized character with a public ceremony of its own in which the witnesses touched the document to demonstrate that they had heard the contents read aloud and approved. The participants of the act might actually sign the document with a cross, usually with untutored hands and much spattering of ink.⁹

Finally, if the participants were important enough they might add their seals, pressed in wax to add more validity to the document.

A short extract from one of Robert's acts reads:

And so that this gift by which I, Robert the Burgundian, and my wife Hadvisa seek perpetual grace shall itself remain perpetual and inviolable, we had it confirmed by the authority of Philip, king of the French, while he was at the siege of Chaumont, and by Baldwin... the count of Flanders and by Count Geoffrey..., his wife Julienne and his brother Fulk. [This is followed by a very elaborate monogram for the king.]¹⁰

Once the charter was literally signed, sealed, and delivered, it could then be produced if there were ever a dispute over the ownership of properties and privileges mentioned in the original act. Such disputes were adjudicated by the claimant's immediate lord or, more frequently, by a panel of lords acting as judges. The aim was not so much to render a verdict in the modern sense as to reach a compromise acceptable to both parties that avoided armed conflict. To validate his claim the claimant was expected to produce either suitable witnesses or a written document. It was not uncommon for a witness to testify to specific details that he had observed as a boy. In one case involving a dispute over the parish boundaries of the nunnery of Ronceray, the witnesses actually led the entire assembly around the boundaries that they had seen being laid out years before.¹¹ In

tementes de Maine-et-Loire, 40h1, an authorization of Landric of Beaugency, 1037-1047.

¹⁰Original is in Archives départementales d'Indre-et-Loire, H 306, no. 2, published in *Cartulaire mancel de Marmoutier* 2:59-63.

¹¹Cartulary of Ronceray, Bibliothèque d'Angers, ms. 844, no. 7, and ms. 845, nos. 11 and 45. Published in Paul Marchegay, ed., *Cartulaire de l'abbaye du Ronceray d'Angers* (Paris: Picard et Fils, 1881), no. 47.

⁸F. L. Ganshof, *Feudalism*, trans. Philip Grierson (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 40.

⁹An interesting example is in the Archives départ-

other cases an "expert witness" might be called, as in 1052 when the forester Mainard was called upon "because he was better acquainted than the others with the ancient laws of Count Geoffrey's lands in the county of Vendôme."¹² Note that the laws were not written down anywhere. All other witnesses might be dead but if the man could repeat the details under a sacred oath it was accepted. Only when there were no living witnesses was the written charter accepted as solid evidence. This was the case when the priest Girard claimed part of a church from the monastery of Saint-Vincent. The charter reads:

...the abbot [of Saint-Vincent] handed over his charter which the abbot of Saint-Peter read aloud. Then lord Robert asked the priest Girard what his claim was and the priest was not able to say validly since neither he nor any of his followers had been present when [the original owner] had given the church to Saint-Vincent.¹³

It was up to the recipient of a charter to preserve his own copy. If the king of France had the monks write a charter attesting to his gift of land to a lord, he did not keep a copy for his royal archives. There were none, nor were there any other repositories for records. The written word was simply not that important among laymen and there were often times when claimants had neither suitable witnesses nor charters. For those cases there was always trial by combat, although one lord when faced with this alternative is reported to have replied "in no way!" (*nec modo*).

During the course of the eleventh century a different attitude toward the preservation of records grew within the church,

principally among the monasteries. A monastery functioned not only as a religious community but also as an economic unit, a type of agricultural corporation. It possessed farms, barns, water mills, ovens, shops, peasants working its extensive lands, settlements of craftsmen and merchants and even knights owing military service to the abbey.¹⁴ Even more significant, a monastery never died and so never alienated its properties by dividing them among its heirs. Rooted in the cosmology of the Bible, monasteries had a sense of perpetuity, of an institutional existence not merely for generations but for the ages. Such an organization needed something a bit more permanent than what an aged man could remember about an event he saw as a child. The monks were so aware of this that they often began charters with a phrase such as this one from 1059: "We can commend the acts of our time to the memory of posterity by no more faithful emissary than a written document."

In fact, the monasteries were well suited for producing and preserving records. Almost all charters, even those of laymen, were written by monks. It was expected that at least a few monks of a monastery be literate. Producing Bibles, prayer books, and other religious writings had been an important monastic function since the ninth century. Any respectable monastery could be expected to have a *scriptorium*, a room set aside for the production of written works.¹⁵ Thus the monasteries had the means, the trained personnel, and above all the need to produce written records. Every time a lord made a donation to the mon-

¹²Cartulary of the Trinity of Vendôme, Bibliothèque Nationale, nouvelle acquisition latin 1935, fol. 23v, no. 66, published in Charles Métais, ed., *Cartulaire de l'abbaye cardinale de la Trinité de Vendôme* (Vendôme: Clovis Ripé, 1893), 1: no. 77.

¹³Bibliothèque Nationale, latin 5444¹, pp. 165-166, published in *Cartulaire de Saint-Vincent*, no. 394.

¹⁴For a picture of monastic life in this period, see Penelope Johnson, *Prayer, Patronage and Power: The Abbey of la Trinité, Vendôme, 1032-1187* (New York: New York University Press, 1981).

¹⁵A recent novel by Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), and the subsequent film of the same name have an excellent portrayal of such a *scriptorium*, set in a fourteenth-century monastery.

astery of land and privileges a charter was drawn up by the monks and retained for future use.

Still, it should not be imagined that these documents comprised carefully tended archives. Documents were often treated cavalierly and occasionally were lost as happened when the abbot of the Holy Cross of Talmond had to admit that he could not produce a charter to a claim because the former abbot had carried it off to Britain. The abbot promptly lost his case.¹⁶ If the pious monks found they were lacking a charter, they sometimes fabricated a new one, adding whatever details they thought were appropriate. Scholars must beware of such false charters, which may be very convincing, albeit completely bogus.

By the end of the century monasteries had become more careful about preserving their records. Charters in particular, or at least short extracts called notices, were copied in books called *cartularies* (from *carta*), often identified by the color of the binding, thus the “Black Book” and the “Red Book” of Saint-Florent. The cartularies then became the “archives” of the monastery, containing a complete record of lands, serfs, buildings, and privileges given to the monastery in a convenient compact volume. While relatively few original charters have survived, a large number have been preserved as copies from twelfth-century cartularies.

As the centuries passed, however, the value of such cartularies decreased. Royal chanceries and private notaries replaced the monks as scribes and archivists. The cartularies were relegated to the mustier corners of the monastic library as their information became outdated. In the seventeenth century a new spirit of secular inquiry arose and scholars began to examine

the monastic documents for historical information, mainly to establish the genealogies of noble families. At this time the first collections of charters were published. Here again, though, churchmen took the lead as in the St. Marthe family’s monumental *Gallia christiana* that attempted to document the history of the church in France.¹⁷ To this day it remains a major source for documents otherwise unpublished.

In the eighteenth century several ambitious projects were undertaken by scholars of the church to copy once again as many of the existing charters as possible. The largest of these was the Benedictine Dom Housseau’s collection for the Touraine containing over ten thousand handwritten charters bound into more than a dozen volumes. Angevin studies for the eleventh century would hardly exist without this collection.

It is fortunate that Dom Housseau and others made this effort because by the end of the century vast numbers of charters were destroyed in the anti-clerical excesses of the French Revolution. Many of the most important documents survive today only as copies in such collections as Dom Housseau’s. The impact of the Revolution was not entirely negative, however. The surviving monastic repositories were confiscated by the state and are now permanently preserved in the splendid French departmental archives and the manuscript collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

The wealth of information contained in these documents is amazing. Details are embedded in the legal acts describing farms and estates; the construction of castles, monasteries, and towns; the clearing of woodland; the use of ovens and mills; the

¹⁶Bibliothèque Nationale, collection Baluze, vol. 139, fol. 242, published in *Cartulaire saintongeais de la Trinité-de-Vendôme*, (Saintes, 1893), no. 33.

¹⁷Scévola and Louis Sainte-Marthe, *Gallia christiana*, 12 vols. (Paris: Edmond Pèpingue, 1656) reprinted as *Gallia christiana in provincias ecclesiasticas distributa*, 12 vols. (Paris: Typographia Regia, 1744 and 1853).

prices of land, clothing, horses, and almost anything else. People of every social level and occupation make their appearance: counts, knights, abbots, monks and priests; but also squires, foresters, toll collectors and other minor officials, carpenters, horse-traders, itinerant merchants, craftsmen and even complete families of serfs over several generations demanding their rights. After reading through a mass of this material one is tempted to believe that a complete and accurate picture of eleventh-century French society is available.

Yet this would be a mistake. The information in these records is both incomplete and biased. It is incomplete not simply because of the ravages of time but because the documents were created for a specific and limited purpose. Of all the juridical acts performed, only those of monasteries were likely to be written down. The disputes, judgments, and transactions of laymen are lost to us. The biased nature of the surviving charters is revealed in a curious way. When the monks of a monastery made a claim upon some property, they used the word *causa*, a lawsuit, to describe their action. When, on the other hand, a claim was made *against* the monks, the word they

wrote was *calumpnia*, a calumny, a false claim by definition. In their view, all of their claims were legitimate, while those of their opponents were always false. The central historiographical fact of eleventh-century studies is that our vision of that era is shaped not by its historians consciously writing for posterity, but by its humble recordkeepers serving the practical needs of their institutions.

As the monks constantly remind us in their charters, the living memory is fleeting and is gone in an instant but the written record endures. This is only true, though, if someone has the will and the means to produce the record in the first place and then the breadth of vision to take steps to ensure its preservation. In the age of the laser printer and the word processor this is difficult to keep in mind. Production is as common as breathing, yet the choices made in terms of creation and preservation are as vital as ever. Eleventh-century French society, whose paucity of written records allows us to see the importance of preservation in uncluttered clarity, provides a revealing basis for comparison by modern archivists as they speculate on their role in society.