

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 11 (October 2011), No. 232

Diane E. Booton, *Manuscripts, Market and the Transition to Print in Late Medieval Brittany*. Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010. xviii + 469. Illustrations. £75.00. ISBN 0-75-466623-9.

Review by Daniel Hobbins, Ohio State University.

Every medievalist knows that manuscripts and printed books coexisted for a century or longer after Gutenberg's invention. If only our scholarship were so integrated. Most of the research on manuscripts and early printed editions is published in separate journals, which might as well be airtight containers. Specialists in each field receive different training, learn a different technical vocabulary and methodology, and rarely talk to each other, even though manuscripts and printed books stood right next to each other on the shelves of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century libraries. It is thus a pleasant surprise to open this book and find that Diane Booton seems oblivious to such segregation.

Booton organizes her survey of the book market in Brittany from 1364 to 1532 into two sections: book production (chapters one to three) and book ownership (chapters four to six). Chapter one, "The Economics of Manuscript-Making," investigates the craftsmen who helped to produce manuscripts, from parchment- and paper-makers to scribes, illuminators, and binders. Booton uses all available evidence—which is admittedly very fragmentary for Brittany—to determine the cost of the different components of a manuscript. From a list of dated and localized manuscripts, she identifies the primary centers of manuscript production in the duchy. There was no danger of the demos overtaking the book industry. Even in the late fifteenth century, clerics generated most of the demand for manuscripts.

In chapter two, "The Illuminated Page," Booton searches for the distinctiveness of Breton illumination. This is no easy task. Unlike other regions in France, we do not know the name of even one Breton illuminator. Booton emphasizes the dialogue between Brittany and the rest of France, particularly the artistic and commercial centers of Angers, Paris, Tours, and Bruges. The body of illuminated manuscript evidence for Brittany is not large: only ten manuscripts, eight of them service books. Earlier scholarship had detected the influence of Jean Fouquet on a group of manuscripts at Nantes, and the influence of the "Orléans Master" (responsible for the Hours of Marguerite d'Orléans) at Rennes. Yet recent scholarship has called into question this entire network of influences. To her credit, Booton refuses to force the evidence. Acknowledging the problems with these earlier claims, she finds a situation in Breton manuscript illumination that resists easy genealogical mapping. Artists from other regions accepted commissions in Brittany but without working in the duchy. Likewise, Breton bookmakers happily worked outside of Brittany. Boundaries, it seems, were too porous for the creation of a unique regional style.

Chapter three, "Printing and the Market," provides context for the introduction of print, which reached Brittany as early as 1484. Here again Booton confronts an earlier scholarly tradition that claimed a certain degree of organization and sophistication for the early Breton book trade. Her painstaking analysis of surviving Breton editions undermines such claims. Printers came

and went, moved from place to place, and left little evidence of their trade, producing only fifty titles over a period of nearly fifty years. Their earliest efforts were entirely local productions, with blotchy letters that moved around on the page. Eventually, itinerant printers taught Bretons the technique of woodcut illustration. Meanwhile, Paris utterly dominated the early print market in France. Nantes, home to a university after 1461 and then made into the capital by the Breton duke François II, only acquired a printing press in 1493.

In Chapter four, “Ducal Patronage and Ownership,” Booton goes in search of the libraries of the dukes and duchesses of Brittany. Unfortunately, they seem to have cared little for books. Whereas Edward III of England (d. 1377) had a library of 160 volumes (Booton seems relieved that fifty-nine of them are romances, and not just all liturgical or devotional books), we know of not one manuscript owned by Duke Jean IV (r. 1364–1399) or by his first two wives (p. 137). Finally, his third wife came to the rescue. We know of five codices that belonged to her, though she acquired some of these after she became queen of England in 1403. The duchesses always owned more books (usually prayer books) than the dukes.

Chapters five and six explore the libraries of the Breton lay nobility and the clergy. Chapter Five, “Breton Book Collectors,” describes the size and contents of these libraries, which Booton finds to be broad in their coverage of devotional literature, history, and romance. Chapter Six, “Readership and Patterns of Collecting,” compares the contents of these libraries with the recommended reading of Philippe de Mézières, Jean Gerson, Geoffroy de La Tour Landry, and Christine de Pizan. No clear pattern emerges, although she sometimes finds Breton readers following their own devices despite the recommendations of the authorities. In the end, it seems that Bretons owned and read the same kinds of things that everyone else was reading. The quintessential Breton reader proves elusive. Booton also traces the “modes of circulation” through which Bretons acquired books. She finds evidence for a society still “based largely on a gift economy” (p. 205).

The conclusion provides a welcome opportunity for synthesis. In the sphere of Breton book production, Booton finds little evidence of organized and sustained employment among artisans in the book trade. As for illumination, she emphasizes that it was France and not England that exerted artistic pressure upon Brittany, especially through migrating French craftsmen—an interesting finding given the shifting political situation of the Hundred Years War. But her codicological examination of things like quire structure and page layout reveals nothing peculiar to Breton book culture. The private owners of books, she finds, had a “growing consciousness of the value of books” in their collections (p. 217). If there is one word to summarize the Breton book market, it might be “transient.” Artisans came and went, books themselves moved easily across boundaries and give little indication of anything distinctly Breton in their makeup.

Following the conclusion are two valuable appendices. The first lists more than one hundred “book artisans” in late medieval Brittany during the period under study. The second, much longer (over one hundred pages), lists all owners of manuscripts and printed editions in Breton private libraries along with references to the volumes themselves.

Booton has combed the libraries of Europe for every trace of a manuscript or early printed book with some connection to Brittany. Everyone who studies the history of the book should be grateful to her for the years of painstaking research that went into the making of this book. The result is an important local study, based on firsthand examination of all available evidence. For that reason alone, as a convenient repository of evidence clearly presented, this book will surely remain unsurpassed for a long time. To add a valuable comparative dimension to her study, Booton also exploits studies of other regions, particularly those of Carla Bozzolo, Ezio Ornato,

and Richard and Mary Rouse on the book market in Paris. Scholars can be grateful for a study that invites comparison to the rest of Europe.

The book is not without problems. In general Booton does better with straightforward presentation of evidence than with any interpretive thrust, and one could wish for a stronger narrative tissue linking the whole. More fundamentally, the significance of the study is limited by the fact that Booton never really grapples with the basic problem of Breton cultural unity. What exactly are we dealing with when we talk about Brittany and Breton culture? Obviously there is the political entity that creates the geographical boundaries for this study. Brittany was politically independent throughout this period (it was incorporated into the kingdom of France in 1532, where Booton ends her analysis). And the Breton language obviously had some role in creating a culturally distinct region. (Booton does not address this issue.) But from the evidence she presents, it seems that Breton book culture was not much different from book culture elsewhere in France, or even in the rest of Europe (though this is less clear), partly because book artisans tended to move around, and partly (a point she does not address) because readers in Brittany belonged to national and even international networks. The Breton court and nobility intermarried with European nobility. Clerics, especially those in the upper clergy or those who had been to a university, would have felt some identity not just as Bretons but as members of the Church—the one truly international network throughout the European Middle Ages.

It seems that Booton would like to find a coherent regional style, but she is too honest a scholar to reach that conclusion. The Breton book market situated “at a crossroad of trade routes and geo-political struggles...reflected a combination of regional and outside influences” (p. 2). The illuminations in her manuscripts reveal a dialogue between Brittany and beyond. Still, she concedes, we may not be able to talk about a “definitive regional style” because of all the diversity in these paintings and the influences from beyond the duchy (p. 39). Finally, in the conclusion, Booton states that political instability—shifts in power and relocations of the court—“threatened the book trade’s economic viability within the duchy” (p. 218). Booton suggests that this prevented the formation of a permanent and clearly distinct book market. In effect, the Breton market—book artisans generally, but also book buyers—turned outward. Frequently when reading this book, I felt that one could draw similar conclusions about the European book market generally. That does not undermine the value of what Booton has done. In fact, the integration of the Breton book market into the rest of France and Western Europe is itself a significant finding.

One specific problem concerns chapter six, where Booton compares actual Breton libraries with the recommendations of various authorities. This seems like a good approach in theory. Such a comparison can be useful even if we acknowledge that Breton readers may not have known the works of authorities like Gerson, whose recommendations appear in a text that circulated in just three manuscripts, none of them in Brittany. But Booton sometimes forgets this basic limitation of the evidence. She says, for example, that the Breton nobility “did not readily take to” Gerson’s recommendation to read the Church Fathers (p. 199). Again, we have no evidence that Breton readers actually knew of Gerson’s recommendation (we can be pretty sure that they did not), so we have no basis to say how they responded to it.

The book is slightly marred, not in any serious way, by a few factual or technical mistakes. The phrase *pro religatione librorum de mandato cappeli* refers to the binding of multiple books, not just one (p. 24). Josephus lived in the first century, not the first century BCE (p. 178). I know of no biblical commentaries written by Nicole Oresme, Boethius, or Giles of Rome (p. 198). Likewise, I would not call Peter Comestor’s *Historia scholastica* and the *Bible historiale* biblical commentaries (p. 197). The first is a paraphrase or abstract of the Bible, the second a translation into French.

Booton's study seems to suggest, though I am not quite sure that she would go this far, that the book market in France was largely homogenous. This probably has something to do with the cultural dominance of Paris which had begun centuries earlier. But it also testifies to the strength of networks throughout France and even Europe, not only human networks such as the European nobility and the clergy, but material networks such as roads and bridges. On the other hand, books in this period were simply not as common on the periphery as in the center. Even Breton dukes were slow to build their libraries. The gears of the European book market turned slowly, but by the fifteenth century they had brought books and even printing to Brittany.

Daniel Hobbins  
Ohio State University  
[hobbins.7@osu.edu](mailto:hobbins.7@osu.edu)

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172