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Guillebert de Mets, *Description de la ville de Paris 1434*. Text, translation, and notes by Evelyn Mullally. Textes vernaculaires du Moyen Âge 14. Turnhout: Brepols, 2015. 180 pp. Translation, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. €65.00 (pb). ISBN: 978-2-503-55496-9.

Review by Daniel Hobbins, University of Notre Dame.

Only three medieval works set out to describe Paris. The earliest is the *Tractatus de laudibus Parisius* by Jean de Jandun, composed in 1323. The latest is a work in Latin verse composed in 1451 by Antonio d'Asti, an Italian visitor to Paris who likewise wrote in praise of the city. The *Description de la ville de Paris* by Guillebert de Mets, completed in 1434, was the only one composed in French. All three works praise the city, but the *Description* is much more precise in its details. Precision, sadly, is not always the best recipe for an entertaining account. Still, the *Description* does supply historians with a wealth of information about early fifteenth-century Paris, and about how one informed layman imagined his city's past.

Guillebert de Metz, the work's author, was born around 1390 in Geraardsbergen, a town in eastern Flanders. He came to Paris in his youth, perhaps before 1407, when he began work on one section of the text. Presumably it was in Paris that he trained as a copyist. His accomplishments in this arena somehow drew the attention of the dukes of Burgundy, by 1410 at the latest, when he refers to himself as the *libraire* of Duke John the Fearless. What that office entailed is unclear. We know in any case that he returned to Geraardsbergen later that decade and may have remained there, with occasional visits to Paris. By then, he was moving among wealthy Flemish burghers. By 1420, he married the daughter of an alderman, and remained in Geraardsbergen for years, serving as an alderman himself every year until 1436. He also continued to work as a copyist; clearly such work was lucrative.

Around 1430 he acquired an inn, the "Ecu de France" in Geraardsbergen, where he lodged important guests. In one colophon he even refers to himself as the host of the inn, evidence of how important this position was to his self-perception. By this point he was also overseeing important negotiations following a rebellion in Geraardsbergen. He had reached the pinnacle of his career, attending important weddings and serving as a book agent for Duke Philip the Good.

Copying and composing were closely linked in the medieval mind, so closely in fact that it is sometimes impossible to know when scribal work becomes authorship. Scribes themselves were perhaps confused over the distinction. In Guillebert's case, his copying work apparently motivated him to supplement a description of Paris that he had composed in 1407 but probably never circulated. In the early 1430s he received a commission to copy Raoul de Presle's translation of the *City of God*. The stimulus for his further description of Paris was not Augustine's text but Raoul's digressions, including what Evelyn Mullally calls an "incidental essay on Paris" at book 5 chapter 25 (p. 17).

Guillebert cut and pasted Raoul's digressions, along with passages from *A toute la Chevalerie* by Jean de Montreuil, into the first, historical section of his *Description*, which he dated to 1434. This supplemented

his original topographical description from 1407, which constitutes the second section of the work. It is not surprising that a man who made a career as a copyist should, when composing a work, have difficulty finding his own voice and thus copy heavily from other sources. He did not hide the fact. The *titulus* acknowledges the borrowings: the work was “transcript et extrait de pluseurs aucteurs.” The second section likewise depends on earlier sources, though much here is Guillebert’s original description.

The *Description* is not an easy text. It follows in the tradition of works in praise of a city. Yet Guillebert’s strategy for demonstrating the city’s excellence was often simply to amass data. The work includes long lists of street names, bridges, churches, abbeys, hôtels, great houses, gates, even university masters, almost as though Guillebert was taking an inventory of the city. He uses the word *item* in these lists, as one might expect in an inventory or will. The very fact that he knows that there are 194 streets in the lower part of the town and 310 in all of Paris (p. 101) suggests a mental tendency toward counting, perhaps the mind of a bureaucrat, and Mullally is no doubt correct that Guillebert thought that the best way to praise the city was by listing its sheer size and quantifying its appetite: that every week the citizens of Paris consume 3,000 sheep, 240 cattle, 500 calves, and 500 pigs. Everything was bigger and better in Paris, even its plagues: he tells us that more than 30,000 people died in the Hôtel-Dieu alone during the epidemic of 1418. One might wish the author to have said more about the allure of Paris. We sometimes catch glimpses of beautiful women, including one with the simple designation of “belle,” but even these are reduced to a list as though Paris is one giant warehouse of roads and bridges, barrels of wine, and beautiful women.

This is not really my idea of a good read and the work has little of the color and interest that one finds in the so-called “Parisian journal” (*Journal d’un Bourgeois de Paris*). Mullally observes that despite his contacts in high places, Guillebert shows no interest in the world of power politics, nor for that matter in current events of any kind at all. One of the most interesting passages is the description of the house of Master Jacques Dussy, one of five “grands bourgeois” whose vast wealth earns them the designation of “little kinglets” (*petiz royetaux*) (p. 43). The historical section, though important for providing a sense of how history was mediated to a figure like Guillebert, is entirely derivative. Today we would call it plagiarism.

Nonetheless, this is an important account of the city and well-deserving of the care that Evelyn Mullally gives to the work. The last edition of the text in 1867, in the green elephant folio volumes of the *Histoire générale de Paris*, included extensive notes. But of course scholarship on medieval Paris has made great strides in the past 150 years. Mullally has mastered this literature and has confidently edited the text from the single manuscript, copied by Guillebert himself. Rather than focus on the text as a source for the history of Paris, as did the previous editors, Mullally focuses on the author, “his intentions, his sources and his text and what is needed to understand them” (p. 24). Her effort is especially apparent in the invaluable notes to the text. The translation is superb. A partial translation appeared in 2002 in a collection of translated sources from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries.[1] That translation still serves a purpose as a teaching text, but all serious work on the text should now begin with Mullally’s edition and translation.

NOTE

[1] Robert W. Berger, ed. and trans., *In Old Paris: An Anthology of Source Descriptions 1323-1790* (New York: Italica Press, 2002).

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