H-France Review Vol. 22 (October 2022), No. 177

Yann Potin, *Trésor, écrits, pouvoirs. Archives et bibliothèques d'État en France à la fin du Moyen Âge.* Preface by Patrick Boucheron. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2020. 271 pp. Tables, black-and-white figures, notes, bibliography, and index. €25.00 (pb). ISBN: 978-2-271-13239-0.

Review by Zrinka Stahuljak, University of California, Los Angeles.

A reader might mistake this book for another publication on medieval libraries and collections, or for a history of the science of the archive in France, but its erudite and modest presentation of a collection of articles published between 1999 and 2008 hides a treasure, as it were. A major contribution to institutional history, the history of collections and libraries, and the history of the French state, Yann Potin's study should be required reading for historians of France who work in the period from the thirteenth to the early twentieth century. Potin, co-editor of the best-selling and controversial *Histoire mondiale de la France* [1] and an archivist at the Archives nationales de France, represents a brilliant generation of historians influencing a renewal of French historiography and historical methodology. As an archivist, Potin knows intimately that "archiving" is not a natural process but a highly selective one that depends as much on imagination, chance, and personality as it does on intention. It is this selective process of "archiving" (*la mise en archive*), which Potin painstakingly and lovingly traces and brings to light, that should consequently result in a reconsideration of institutional history and the history of the French state. It should have no less impact on scholars working on medieval collections in north-western Europe.

The book is divided into three parts, each of which serves as the cornerstone for a revision of a segment of the history of France and of the history of the library (including archival studies, history of the book, and manuscript studies). The first part takes the Trésor des chartes, which the historiography of the French state considers to be the thirteenth-century inception of the "archive" of the French state, as the starting point for the exploration of the polysemic notion of "treasure/treasury" in all of its extended medieval meanings and uses. The second part takes up the case of the royal library of the Louvre and subsequently interrogates our modern definition of the medieval "library." The third part returns to the thirteenth-century Trésor des chartes to present the random, incremental, and selective becoming of the Archives Nationales and the foundational role of the Trésor's documentary "wreckage" in nineteenth- and twentieth-century national histories of France.

The first three chapters of part one unpack the originary moment, the historical and topographical kernel, of the Archives nationales de France in the Trésor des Chartes during the reigns of Philip Augustus (1180-1223) and Louis IX (1226-1270). The collecting function and

the symbolism of accumulation of the "treasure/treasury" are rehearsed in three chapters that center on the "trésor(s) du roi," the "rois collectionneurs," and the "roi-trésorier." The "king's treasury" was made of multiple "king's treasures" that mixed the personal and the public, the king's jewels, fiscal treasury, charters, manuscripts, and the crown's *regalia* and relics. Most importantly, the treasury mixed inalienable and alienable goods and objects. The inventory of 1380, undertaken a few months before the death of Charles V, would seem to indicate that the French kings were collectors. But, as God's representatives on Earth, they were guardians of the inalienable Passion relics (acquired by Louis IX in 1238-1241). Similarly, the treasures of an itinerant king, containing the king's jewels and movable goods (e.g. cloth, tapestries, dishes) and dispersed in different places, were not a royal collection. The king was not yet a collector because the treasury was first defined by its functionality: either as a reserve of gifts that in a system of fealty constructed loyalty through the circulation of values or as utility of its contents for the administration. As state administration grew, the question of in/alienability of the objects and monies from the treasury became crucial: was the king a treasurer for the kingdom or was the treasury the king's personal reserve? Potin here brings to bear the important lessons from anthropology on the gift economy, as reread by Maurice Godelier and Annette Weiner. [2] A treasure of in/alienable values, the Trésor des Chartes is what will become the modern archive, museum, library, and, importantly, fiscal administration. While the Trésor des Chartes is the origin of each of these taken together, none of their modern iterations can claim juridical, administrative, or topographic continuity with the Middle Ages.

Based on this insight, part two is a sweeping reconsideration of the "medieval library," focused on the library of the Louvre, the royal library that was first recorded in 1368 and then disappeared in 1429 after the transfer by the English Duke of Bedford to Rouen (one of the consequences of the Hundred Years' War). Much of the three chapters that constitute this section appear to be a sustained corrective of Léopold Delisle's edition of BNF Ms. fr. 2700, a manuscript that gathers together four inventories from 1373, 1380, 1411, and 1424.[3] The purpose of Delisle's edition was bibliographic; he did not reproduce the inventories but merged them in an attempt to render the inventory as catalogue. Delisle's edition gave the inventory a heritage and monumental function--document as national monument--that he believed the collection should have by the modern standard. But, as Potin demonstrates, the inventories actually had an accounting and administrative function that was ever increasing in the later Middle Ages. Thus, while the 1380 inventory was kept by the king, the 1411 inventory was made for the king and kept in the Chambre des comptes. Potin compares the inventories to propose two logics that govern them: each inventory begins with the arrangement of books by their physical placement in the room (which is their "classification") but evolves into a chronological order of acquisitions. Part two also continues the discussion of the gift economy, highlighting how the record-keeping of the manuscripts' circulation, their entries and withdrawals emphasized the administrative, managerial aspect of the inventory. This again undermines the patrimonial idea of the library and highlights instead its functionality. It also corrects the generally held view of profligacy under Charles VI. The other effect of Delisle's artificial "catalogue" of the library was the creation of the manuscript as an isolated object of study, despite the fact that the treasury combined books with other movable possessions of value. Does the inventory nevertheless capture synchronically the disposition of books as a form of medieval organization of knowledge? Potin argues that the library catalogue's modern thematic and disciplinary distribution of books is reductive for the medieval mind. Rather, the medieval library proceeds by nodes, which explain multiple copies of the same works (a total of 117 or 40 percent of the collection, with twenty works or 15 percent of the collection that are present in five copies). The same few works repeatedly serve as anchors

around which networks of knowledge are configured. Network analysis, based on library inventories, makes visible a nodal principle of library organization, which counters two modern tendencies, disciplinary or thematic organization and the search for a patrimonial function of the library.[4] The knowledge network that the library was represents the sole veritable "archive" of monarchy and its power.

Part three changes how we think about Louis IX's reign and the foundational myth of the French state in fundamental ways. From the book's opening pages, the difference from the English case, "l'oasis documentaire" (p. 237) that was analyzed by Michael Clanchy,[5] haunts the historical narrative of the foundation of French administration and state: administrative centralization began early but was not accompanied by a centralized archive of written record. There is no inaugural gesture or charter, just "la figure mystérieuse du trésor" (p. 141). Based on nineteenth-century national reconstitutions, where "l'original se confond avec l'origine" (p. 151), the creation of the royal archives is dated to Philip Augustus in 1204. The actual material gesture belongs to Louis IX, who placed the archives in the sacristy of Sainte-Chapelle in Paris (1248), above the treasure containing the relics of Christ's Passion and the crown jewels. Applying the same analytical approach (the medieval library to the archive), Potin demonstrates that the archive is not a systematic depository but a functional one governed by the administrative use of documents in a performative construction of the State. Indeed, Gérard de Montaigu, treasurer from 1371 to 1390, classified the registers as useful, useless, and completely useless. Moreover, in a key chapter, among "titres authentiques et épaves consacrées" (chapter 9), the administrative inquests of Louis IX's reign that the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians have relied on to describe "une monarchie tempérée, juste et contractuelle" (p. 181) were classified in the fourteenth century by Montaigu as "inutiles" (p. 186). Potin retraces the inquests' accidental entry in the archives that ultimately led them to be seen as a source for the myth of royal reform.

Had not the historians of the French nation assimilated the state to royal power, they would have studied the documents of the Parliament as carefully as those of the Trésor des chartes, since by default they could not consult the documents of the Chambre des comptes that perished in the 1737 fire. Having emphasized the power of the archival imagination throughout the book, Potin ends on its potentiality that lies in its decentralized nature across regions and cities. Then, "une autre histoire de l'État médiéval en France" could see the day (pp. 154–55).

NOTES

[1] Patrick Boucheron, Nicolas Delalande, Florian Mazel, Yann Potin, and Pierre Singaravélou, eds., *Histoire mondiale de la France* (Paris: Seuil, 2017) / Patrick Boucheron with Nicolas Delalande, Florian Mazel, Yann Potin, and Pierre Singaravélou, eds., *France in the World: A New Global History*, Stéphane Gerson, English-language ed., trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan, Jane Kuntz, Alexis Pernsteiner, Anthony Roberts, and Willard Wood (New York: Other Press, 2019).

[2] Maurice Gaudelier, *L'Énigme du don* (Paris, Fayard, 1996); Annette B. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: the Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[3] Léopold Delisle, *Recherches sur la librairie de Charles V*, 2 vols (Paris: Champion, 1907).

[4] For a similar approach and conclusions on the library of the Valois dukes of Burgundy, see Zrinka Stahuljak, *Médiéval contemporain: pour une littérature connectée* (Paris: Éditions Macula, 2020); and Zrinka Stahuljak, "World Collecting: Patronage, Spoliation, and Forms of Government," in Christine Chism, ed., Kenneth Segneurie, general ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to World Literature, Vol. 2: 600 CE to 1450 CE* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), pp. 1181-1189.

[5] Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066-1307*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

Zrinka Stahuljak
University of California, Los Angeles
zs@humnet.ucla.edu

ISSN 1553-9172