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Beauty and the Beast: Charters Under the Eyes of Scholars
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Sébastien Barret

(diaporama dans un fichier séparé)

Charters are, as well as books or other historical items, objects as well as texts, which might have been less reflected on than for some other types of sources – for instance, in that matter, books. Peter Rück had deplored the fact that diplomatics had lost its ground in comparison to “triumphant codicology” – and pleaded for thorough examinations of the material aspects of charters, and even for their analysis as pieces of arts (*Die Urkunde als Kunstwerk*). Only relatively recently did Paul Bertrand reflect on a “codicology of archival documents” to be developed for charters, but also chartularies or rolls of any type. In recent times, diplomatists have taken to focus a lot more on these aspects, as shown for instance by the works of Mark Mersiowsky.

This is certainly due to the fact that such documents have been very often considered more as a source of information or data than as subject of interest in themselves. This was, of course, reinforced by two inescapable facts: on the one hand, aesthetically refined charters remain, on the whole, notable exceptions; on the other hand, one has always had to use extensively later copies to constitute corpuses and editions, thus leading to scholars being effectively more drawn towards the textual aspects.

This is not to say that materiality was absent from such studies. In fact, Mabillon’s seminal *De re diplomatica* is rightly known for not having specifically separated what was to become our ‘auxiliary sciences’, and for having given much importance to palaeographical evidence. This is consequent with Mabillon’s aim, which was fundamentally the development of a method for discerning authentic charters and deeds from forgeries. To achieve this, he sought to give a maximum of elements taken from authentic documents for comparison; among those were of course graphical elements. This is also the reason why he gave facsimiles of charters and diplomas, as well as editions.

In doing so, Mabillon acts with a kind of paradoxical precision. The reproduction of scripts is extremely detailed, and sometimes more than even the still extant, and damaged originals can be. But the general layout and disposition of the document is not attentively reproduced, likely because of two factors: technical difficulties brought by the size of the documents; and the fact that it certainly was not deemed that important. In this example, Mabillon gives a *locus sigilli* which seems to be somewhat conjectural, if not invented, if one compares to what is left of the document **[image]**. This gives the impression that from its very beginnings, diplomatics has tended to treat graphical and material elements the way textual components were often seen: as a sequence of separate elements which can be analysed one by one – which could lead to consider more the parts than the whole.

True to his reputation as an early, 'rational' researcher, Mabillon does actually stay very factual – or would-be factual – in his assessment of scripts; and by the way, one can only wonder at his early interest for questions which were to be addressed by modern historical sciences only very later [juva reginas etc.]. But all the same, he does not either hesitate to remind us that the script he calls 'franco-Gallic' or 'Merovingian' had also been called 'barbaric' because of its difficulty and its *asperitas*. [image]

In fact, it seems that beyond the mere analytical, Mabillon's immediate and mediate heirs tended to let themselves be influenced in their assessment of documentary evidence, by considerations which one could describe as aesthetic. This is, in my opinion, rooted in several facts. One should be considered first, although it is not material – or maybe precisely for that reason: the language in which the documents were written. For a great part, they were written in Latin; and for many of them, in a Latin which could be very surprising for later scholars. Having often little to do with classical structures, this Latin tended to give scholars educated in neo-latinity the impression of barbarism and decadence; which could only influence their reception of the objects.

These objects could, of course, also be surprising for historians and scholars. It should be noted that for the earliest of those coming into consideration in this talk (in the sixteenth-seventeenth century), the medieval documentation still was part of a functioning system, which was to change in the following centuries – maybe more so in France than in other countries, though, were the French Revolution has made for a drastic cut in documentary practices, unlike the United Kingdom, which still has articles of the *magna carta* as part of its legislation. On the one hand, this could lead to more familiarity, or at least to more direct interest: the famed *feudistes* sought to use their historical and juridical competences for the service of living noblemen. On the other hand, maybe this greatest a-priori proximity could make the perceived differences in charter quality more shocking to the eye of the eighteenth-century beholder.

At any rate, this would explain in part why 'beautiful' seems so often to correlate with 'original' or 'authentic', or at least with 'interesting and worthy of attention'; and in other cases, with 'part of a working and rational system'.

A very good, and maybe extreme example of this can be found in this case [image]. Louis-Henri Lambert de Barive, working for the French royal *Cabinet des chartes*, made copies of documents he found in the Cluniac archives, as well as lists and descriptions of what he found. One of the reason I

find him to be a good example, aside from the fact that I know his work well, is that he was actually no genius like Mabillon; he was a lawyer trying to please his royal employer, and as good and precious his work can be, he was very much motivated by his financial interests. His work is solid and serious, but does not go beyond that – thus, he may be taken as a good example of the median level in scholarly works of his time. And interestingly, one finds him qualifying documents as ‘beautiful’, such as in this example: *bel original*. This is all the more interesting as the document he qualifies as such can in no way be an original. Moreover, and all due provisions made for aesthetical differences, I fail to understand at first glance how this document, which he is alluding to, can be said to be beautiful. It is of course striking when one mentally compares this to what would have been a real papal privilege of the time – that Lambert might have deemed not so beautiful because of its script, by the way. But also without thinking about what might have been a real original, in comparison to other documents he got to see and copy, this is really not a very fine exemplar. Of course, one of the reasons for this is certainly to appeal to his employer and show him how his work is important; such listings constituted the base for the evaluation of his work and further employment. But there might be something more. A very common practice in describing manuscript items, even perfunctorily, was to allude to the existence and state of given manuscript witnesses, charters and others. I think I am not alone in remembering with a sigh these innumerable mentions of older scholarship on the model *ex manuscripto quoddam authentico, ex manuscripto autographo de bibliotheca fratrum...* For all their unnerving imprecision, they often try to give an information which could be qualified as a general “good quality”. Experiences in that matter may differ, but my impression is that many of such qualification could be understood as meaning essentially “sound” – a word which one finds, in turn, very often in Lambert’s and others’ descriptions of charters, and basically means ‘in good state’, with a hint of ‘reliable’. This is what I would suspect under these ‘authentic’ and ‘autographs’ (more or less medieval, and at any rate looking like a reliable witness): and what I would see under the use of ‘beautiful’ by Lambert and others. Lambert himself makes intensive use of the word *sain*, meaning in a good state of preservation, above all with regards to the parchment itself and the legibility of the script – from the point of view of it being more or less erased. It also certainly means that the documents were untouched from the chemical experiments led by a certain monk to revive their script.

On the very basis of it, the use of near-aesthetic categories to describe charters, above all charters in their archival context, seems to be rooted more in the assessment of neatness more than of beauty. But it does seem that a certain ambiguity exists in that matter – which I was made vividly aware of by the terrified look on the face of an art historian colleague as I described a chartulary as ‘beautiful’ and had to realise that we obviously had very different ideas of what could and could not be described as such.

And so it seems that from an early date on, scholarship has got used to make some spontaneous equivalences between aesthetics and quality of some sort. These equivalences have grown from several sources, including ideas of documentary integrity and historical or pseudo-historical representations.

In some ways, it could seem that scholars of the nineteenth century did not, on the whole, pay a great attention to materiality, beyond the mere descriptive. It is, for instance, notable that I cannot say much about the way it could have affected, for instance, the deplorable edition of the Merovingian charters by Karl August Pertz: it is simply not part of the discussion – which, in that case, could well have to do with the fact that Pertz had mostly copied from earlier work, above all from Jean-Marie Pardessus. But that should not mean that materiality had no meaning – but it was often more of a negative one, and maybe more to be found were scholars dealt with less prestigious material. A very good example of this can be seen in the introduction to the edition of Cluniac charters by Auguste Bernard and Alexandre Bruel, which appeared between 1876 and 1905##. At several point, they allude to the barbaric aspect of the documents and of their language. This echoes, of course, Mabillon – who was speaking about other documents and scripts – but with a main difference: while the eighteenth-century Mauriste actually seemed to prefer more neutral terms for his own description (he was, after all, only quoting his colleagues), here Bernard and Bruel (actually, Bruel) insist on this point, making of it a central point in a kind of negative analysis: namely, that analysis is made almost impossible by those surprising forms. Of course, one must make provisions for the fact that they were discussing, so to speak, documents from two far ends of the diplomatic scale: the charters so chastised by Bruel are private deeds dating from the eleventh, tenth or eleventh century – and their forms are in fact hard to comprehend at first. But it is also notable that at least some of the documents obviously got little love from the very people that had spent so much energy not only working on them, but also making them come to the Bibliothèque nationale in an operation which can be described either as a rescue action or as an institutional theft made by central institutions at the expense of local authorities.

Bruel justifies his keeping the barbaric forms of the documents by the fact that it helps understand the decadence of Latin through the ages; and interestingly, he gives some elements of what he considers such as opposed to other documents he describes as “beautiful and well written”, in a footnote which sounds a little bit like “not all charters”. Concerning the ugly ones, he qualifies them as “bits of parchment”, which show how this material could be rare at the time; and goes on to tell that theses “écriture[s] fort barbare[s]” are hard to read, also because of the use of reactivities – unlike the beautiful ones. For the latter, he tells us a little bit later, commenting a sub-collection of charters, “the number

and the good preservation state of the documents, their big dimensions and the beauty of their script make this volume is [one of the most important acquisition to have been made by the Bibliothèque nationale]. For all my genuine admiration for Bruel's work, I must confess I that I at a loss to understand why the dimensions of charters make them better; and I am also bemused by the commentary on the script – the relevant collection contains for instance things like this **[image]** which I find fascinating, but I do not understand how they could be visually so much better than this **[for instance]**.

If one considers the documents Bruel probably finds beautiful, such as these **[image]**, one gets the impression that beauty, in such cases, means “apparent clarity and approximate conformity to prestigious models”. This is really interesting, because that is not what one would expect from a man dedicating his life to edit such charters; and because the underlying assumption seems to be that there is an intrinsic link between the fact that a charter is “beautiful”, “well-written” and the like, and its interest as historical document beyond documenting bare facts and the fall of the Latin language. And this is what one finds in the whole edition and in the side works made by Bruel, but also by others; somehow, the impression that chaotic-looking documents will tend to reflect an institutionally and socially chaotic situation.

Such an impression can be reinforced, and oriented, by factors one could described as extra-historical, although they were not perceived as such – and did depend from historical conditions. On a more general level, French and German historiographies have been deeply influenced by the conflictual relationships between the two countries; especially after the war of 1870. The fact that the two countries had indeed a good part of common history made their respective search for glorious and independent origins particularly difficult, at least when considering the early Middle Ages, and seeking refuge in Gallic or Germanic past was not always enough to be able to bring the effect historians more or less consciously sought: to show how different (and, of course, better) one was in comparison to the other. Basing on traditions which were already present – for instance, an understanding of the history constitution of the nation which was more geographical in France, more genealogical in Germany –, this led to the French side seeing light in Roman traditions and laws, as far as juridical and documentary practices were concerned.

For the analysis of such documents as those I am talking about, private deeds, this meant remembering that the origin of the *carta* was to be found in late antique practices, noticing that forms had changed and become irregular, and attribute this to a Germanic decadence made perfect by the dissolution of the Carolingian Empire. From this point of view, which might be somewhere at the bottom of Bruel's remarks, the looks of the charters were an excellent occasion to find decadence. This found its most accomplished expression in Alain de Boüard's *Manuel de diplomatique française et pontificale*. This is striking, even for someone used to certain cognitive dissonances in historical questions, like realising

that Germanic invasions are called migrations of peoples, and Napoleonic wars liberation wars in German. Boüard makes it the story of a century-long fight between “Romanism” and “Germanism” (that is, between civilisation and barbarity), which he sees lost in the tenth and eleventh century, and only won again in the course of the twelfth century, as notarial solutions of Italian (and lastly, Roman) origins begin to surface again on the territory of future France. And this is very strongly based on forms, on scripts, and on the idea that something looking “bad” must reflect something that is not rightly organised and cannot be deemed as being a coherent social system; and that this bad is, of course, the fruit of France’s hereditary enemy. It goes, in my opinion, far: in this instance **[image]** he wants to illustrate the practice of validation with a *festuca*; the original document is actually a fascinating case of two parchments having been knit together, which he absolutely ignores (but cannot have overseen), certainly because he simply lacks the idea that it could be really interesting and revealing of social structures (juridical and archival ones, in this case).

With or without the political component, this has long been a tacit component in documental analysis since, which was only to be really reassessed, in France at least, in 1997. It was certainly no mere chance that one of the main voices here was Olivier Guyotjeannin’s, who among other things specialised, and still does, in the charters of the first four Capetian kings, charters which are said to be influenced by private deeds, and have forms which certainly do not look as firm as those of, say, imperial acts of the time. And as well as their private counterparts, they were deemed to reflect more chaos than order, and this also on their face value, so to speak.

Even so, spontaneous aesthetic judgment of the document has continued to infuse their analysis. A very good example of this has been given by Benoît-Michel Tock. He observed the spontaneous equivalence made between ‘beautiful’ and ‘professional’, noting that researchers, without noticing it, went from ‘good-looking script’ to ‘skilful hand’ to ‘professional writer’ in a heartbeat, noting that professional actually only means ‘getting paid to do something’. And while it is normal to assume that a professional would do something better, or better-looking, than an amateur, it is certainly going too fast to think that something which we find does not have such a beautiful appearance was not done by a professional. The question is not purely a rhetorical one, not does it only touch the way we describe scripts: in fact, as these very documents are our only door to a wealth of social practices, this is deeply relevant to broader analysis. In that case, closing one’s mind to the possibility that even such **[image]** documents could have not been written by a professional hand would effectively lead to potential error – because they were certainly actually the work of people getting paid for it. And consider such charters as the sign that everything was not really working only because it does not look good, or neat, or pro would certainly be ignoring a large part of an actually functioning society.