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Archives and the Middle Ages: Materials for History

Claude Fagnen

Former Director, Archives of the Department of Finistère, France

Abstract

Archivists and rare-book librarians, necessarily well trained in Medieval Studies, work every day to preserve critical historical documents. They make these documents freely available to scholar researchers and to the general public, whom they assist by reading old manuscripts, explaining the medieval languages, and sharing historical information. But they are also careful to collect new documents, even ones that were undiscovered, and to restore them when necessary. By means of their publications or the exhibitions they create, they contribute deeply to the general knowledge of the past. They are the custodians of the memory of humanity.

On D-Day, June 6, 1944, when allied forces landed in Normandy to free France and to defeat the German army, they had to drop thousands of bombs, which destroyed many buildings in Normandy. Among those damaged buildings was the Manche Archives Office, in the small city of Saint-Lo. Unfortunately, that archives office held a wonderful treasure: the charters and documents of Mount Saint-Michel Abbey, one of the most important abbeys of France, especially between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Thus, during the battle in Normandy, thousands of precious medieval documents were lost. And why is this important? Since that battle, for example, modern medievalists are no longer able to evaluate exactly the abbey's wealth because the sources of this information, the abbey charters and grants, were lost. And the same is true with respect to the abbey's account registers, letters, various acts, and so on. That sad day, humankind lost thousands of essential pictures and thousands of documents.¹ It may be of some small comfort that enough documents still survive in other locations that help us determine the size of the loss. That is because the Manche departmental archivists had written (and printed) lists of documents preserved in the abbey. These appear in "*Serie H.*" Medievalists, then, can read those calendars and obtain a little knowledge of what was lost in the Mount Saint-Michel Abbey archives.²

Another example of catastrophic loss occurred during the same war when public authorities ordered French archivists to take significant precautions to preserve their documents. In response, the Loiret archivist (in Orleans, at the corner of the Loire River) ordered that documents from his archives be put into trucks and evacuated to hidden locations, far away from danger. The unintended consequence of this move, however, was that pilots of the Royal Air Force saw the long trail of trucks driving on the road and thought it was an enemy military convoy. As a result, they bombed the convoy, destroying every truck and, necessarily, the documents inside. In that little part of France, several important medieval abbeys (like Saint Benoit on the Loire River, Ferrieres-en-Gatinais, Notre-Dame de la Cour-Dieu, and Saint-Mesmin de Micy or Notre-Dame de Beaugency) are located. The archives of all these abbeys instantly disappeared along with all documents coming from the courts, administrative units, noble families, and commercial companies from the Loiret area. The loss was indeed huge, given that these important historical documents are irreplaceable.

These incidents vividly demonstrate the catastrophic consequences of the destruction of society's critical historical records. What exactly is at stake in the preservation of these documents? Often handwritten documents that antedate the printing press exist in only a single copy. If these single copies were to disappear, university professors and independent scholars would no longer be able to study them and would not be able to add to our understanding of cultural conditions at various points in our history. Of course, in war it is almost impossible to avoid these kinds of losses, but these dramatic examples offer a startling context in which to place society's critical need for archivists and rare-book librarians to protect these kinds of historical resources. While most medievalists already value this kind

¹ At least 3000 documents pertaining to Mount Saint-Michel Abbey and 1500 seals (pictures very useful to get some ideas of material civilization) disappeared. For Lassay Abbey, 3400 documents disappeared, and for Blanchelande Abbey more than 1300.

² Fortunately, former archivists François Dubosc (1860–1879) and François Solbet (1882–1911) took a number of notes about the documents, and these are all that remains after the disaster.

of effort, university administrators and the general public may not. Moreover, even medievalist scholars may not fully realize the scope and complexity of the activities carried out by archivists and rare-book librarians. Thus, by describing my own work as archivist for thirty years in the Department of Finistère in France and also by highlighting the contributions of other French archivists, I hope to offer a compelling picture of important aspects of this work and, by so doing, add additional support for the funding of medieval studies.

In taking responsibility for the preservation of these historical records, archivists and rare-book librarians must ensure the physical preservation of manuscripts. They must keep them in good condition, take any precautions possible to avoid damage and, when it occurs, repair them (Sánchez Hernampérez 2000). In the Finistère Archives Office, for example, there is a restoration shop, staffed by three employees, who are able to run specialized machines for this purpose, including a pressure cooker, a machine to apply paper paste (made by the Dutch Jezet Company), an acetone cleaner kit, a plastimaster, and an X-ray lamp used to make readable erased writs. In addition to the use of these tools, we have taken new precautions to protect the documents. When possible, we build air-conditioned rooms with iron shelves, avoiding the wooden shelves used in the past since chemicals in the wood could damage the documents. We are also vigilant about the damaging potential of insects and dust, and, when necessary, the Archives Office doesn't hesitate to pay to restore damaged documents.

Preserving documents requires knowledge about their materials, parchment or paper, for example. In the last years of the Middle Ages, paper began to compete with parchment and, in the fifteenth century, tended to overwhelm it. Methods of preserving paper are obviously different from those used to preserve parchment. Archivists, then, must be well-grounded in various chemical processes necessary to avoid the destruction of paper documents by several sources of danger, including, at times, the reading public itself, who are often full of good intentions but may be unaware of the proper precautions needed to preserve the documents from harm.

As a result, we are constantly updating the rules of the readers' room in the Finistère Archives. In 1990, new rules were established: we prohibited the use of ink pens, allowing notes to be taken only with a pencil, and our books could be read only at a special desk. In addition, we began an important campaign to copy our documents onto microfilm. Some years later of course, creating microfilms was replaced by the digitization of our documents. This means that readers could now access our fragile documents primarily through microforms or via computer; this practice saves wear and tear on the originals.

Archivists are schooled in a variety of essential skills. For example, I studied, many years ago, at the *École des Chartes*, in Paris (France), where I learned how to read medieval documents, to understand them, and to use them for the purpose of writing history. My experience is typical. Of course, since many texts were written in Latin, archivists have to be masters of that language well as other languages, such as Old French, medieval German, Old English, and medieval Spanish. Moreover, since medieval scribes wrote in scripts that were different from those now in use, archivists must be good paleographers. Other auxiliary sciences necessary for archivists are archeology and the history of the arts, heraldry, diplomatics, etymology, onomastics, and the authorities of history. Philology, linguistics, and the history of institutions and laws are also in the curriculum. In sum, an archivist has to be a historian, a philologist and a jurist at the same time.

These skills are critically important to societies with medieval roots. In France, like almost everywhere in Europe, record offices preserve medieval documents. Western Europe (France, Great Britain, Spain and Portugal, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands, and the Western part of Germany), where Latin culture ran deep, developed a written culture very early. In contrast, written culture developed more slowly in Eastern Europe. Slavic nations had to wait until the time of Saints Cyril and Methodus, who lived in the ninth century, to have an alphabet and then a written culture. Consequently, the earliest documents in Western Europe existed much earlier than those in the East. For instance, the oldest documents in the French National Archives in Paris date from the time of Merovingian kings (486–761). Other local archives keep treasures such as charters from the eighth century. For instance, in Marseille, at the Bouches-du-Rhone Archives Office, one can find some Merovingian charters, which are very well-preserved. Still, they are very hard to read because the letters were written very badly at that time. In fact, this explains the reason why, some years later, monks such as Eginhard or Hincmar created a new way of writing, called Carolingian minuscule, which created a cultural revolution in the history of writing.

In the Finistère Archives, the oldest document is a grant made by Henry II, king of England (1154–1189) to Locmaria Abbey, a Benedictine monastery located in the small episcopal city of Quimper, in the Western part of Brittany. That Latin text, written in 1172, recounts how Henry, who wanted peace with the Church after four of his knights murdered Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral on December 30, 1170, gave benefits to several abbeys and churches in order to obtain forgiveness. In 1172, peace was concluded in Avranches, a Norman episcopal city. On that day, King Henry was humiliated in public, made to kneel barefoot in only a shirt on the Avranches Cathedral steps, and ask for pardon from the Bishop of Avranches, Richard (1171–1183). The archival document, then, is evidence that Henry II tried to buy his pardon by giving benefits to churches in Brittany.³

Although the archive's documents are generally local, its holdings can also be seen as somewhat random. That is, during the French Revolution, the decision was made to divide historical documents into two large categories, and that division determined where they would be stored. Specifically, when revolutionaries attacked castles and churches, they found historical documents in almost every location and were faced with the question of how to dispose of them. Since this determination was often made by illiterate people, they divided the documents by physical attributes rather than by subject matter. Thus, while single-page documents were sent to archives offices, which were being established at the same time, documents in the form of bound books were sent to libraries. Cartularies, for example, which looked like books, were preserved in libraries. This artificial distinction makes the work of historians more difficult. For example, individual documents pertaining to the Landevennec Abbey of Saint Guenolé (one of the oldest in Brittany) are preserved in the Finistère Archives, but the magnificent Saint Guenolé Landevennec Cartulary is in the Quimper City Library.⁴ In the same way,

³ The document is preserved in the Finistère Archives Office under reference 27 H 2.

⁴ Landevennec is a small village, located in the Crozon peninsula in Finistère. The Landevennec Abbey archives are preserved in the Finistère Archives Office under reference 2 H (from 2 H 1 to 2 H 166, about 2 meters). The cartulary is MS 16 in the Quimper City Library.

the Quimper Cathedral Cartulary is found in the National Library collections in Paris.⁵ Thus, when researchers are trying to find medieval sources in a truly exhaustive search, French archivists and rare-book librarians can offer especially critical assistance by helping the researchers navigate their complementary collections.

There is sometimes a complementary administrative side to the work of archivists. During my tenure in office in Finistère, to improve the material conditions of our holdings, I asked the Finistère Council for the necessary funds to construct a new building.⁶ Upon reading my report (and my arguments about the technical conditions necessary for the preservation of documents, our lack of room for offices and public, technical shops and so on), the Counsellors agreed to fund my proposal. The building was completed in 1990. Thus, for the first time ever, the department's historical documents were housed in air-conditioned rooms. Moreover, under my leadership, we strengthened our staff to help better protect our collection. For example, we strengthened our maintenance team, which was divided into two parts. During the times of the day when the public had access, one team cleaned shelves in the document rooms. In the mornings and evenings, before the public and employees' arrival and after their departure, a second team cleaned the offices, public rooms, and the readers' room, in order to fight against the deleterious effects of dust, moisture, and insects.

In fact, large numbers of the general public came to the archives to have a look at medieval documents. The visits are good evidence that modern society is interested in its past. People want to know, for example, how their ancestors lived, even in very ancient times, not only out of curiosity but also to better understand the role of progress leading up to our own civilization and times. They wonder, for example, how our ancestors could live without power, or how they could live without the benefits of modern medicine. For the modern public, it is hard to imagine how their ancestors could live, eating poor food in dark and small houses without heat, light, water, or hygienic facilities, and almost without furniture.

Answers to these questions can often be found in medieval manuscripts. The beautiful illuminations found in the *Très riches heures du Duc de Berry* offer insights into the daily lives of both aristocrats and peasants.⁷ Another manuscript, less well-known, is entitled *Les profits champêtres* and was illuminated by an Italian living in Bologna, Pierre de Crescens, in about the year 1230. Translated into French in 1373 for the king of France, Charles V, it is also very useful.⁸

By means of their illuminations, both manuscripts convey information about medieval tools, houses, occupations in fields or in shops, diet, and animals that were bred or hunted. They also offer informative views of medieval landscapes, castles, and towns. Thus, without those precious documents, society would be unable to understand former ways of life as well as their evolution, losing critical keys to its own memory.

⁵ The Quimper Cathedral Cartulary, written in Latin in 1363, contains charters between 1201 and 1362 and is preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France under reference MS Latin 9890.

⁶ The first Finistère Archives building was built in 1884. Before that, documents were preserved in the Quimper court cellar. The 1884 building was renovated, and it was again improved in 1956, but it remained without air-conditioning. In 1973, a second building opened in Brest (about 80 kilometers north of Quimper) to keep documents for which there was no room in Quimper.

⁷ Preserved in the Chantilly Castle Library (north of Paris) under reference MS 65.

⁸ The Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal (in Paris) owns a copy of that manuscript, under reference MS 5064.

Beyond aiding the general public, archivists and rare-book librarians are a key resource for professional scholars of the Middle Ages, who contribute publications that help society understand its own past better. Those scholarly works have authority because they are based on texts or illuminations found in medieval documents, often discovered with the help of archivists or rare-book librarians. Such documents complement the artifacts preserved in museums or found by archeologists in the field.

Archivists, in fact, are often faced with surprises, and they have to be ready to react and to answer surprising questions. An archivist never knows what the next researcher will ask. One may be wondering about seventeenth-century institutions while another will ask about a noble family that lived in a certain castle in the fourteenth century. Another will be looking for documents relating to a certain church or a chapel. The reason is simple: everyone is allowed to come into the offices of the archives without charge and ask any question they choose.

Several examples from my own work illustrate this phenomenon. I remember someone who tried to write about medieval Breton fountains, which one can often find close to various chapels. In fact, since the early Christian church tried to assimilate the old Celtic cult related to water, Christian priests often built chapels or churches near water sources or fountains. In response to this particular query, I showed the researcher how to find the maps by means of which he could locate fountains. I then directed him to the documents he could consult to get other kinds of information about the fountains. I also directed him to various lives of the saints, whose statues were found close to them. Many times, I advised him how to read and understand the documents. As a result, some months later, I was happy to receive a small book, the fruit of his work, which contained many pictures and drawings and was very well done overall (Audin 1995). A copy of that book now resides on the shelves of the Finistère Archives and serves as a valuable resource for people who wish to learn more about Finistère's small fountains, an important part of its cultural heritage.

Archivists help not only scholars but also the general public and government officers. Once, for example, I busied myself helping such a person to study the medieval walls of old Concarneau, a walled enclosure built on a small island in the middle of a bay on the south coast of Brittany. This investigation was for a popular, not academic, audience since its aim was to produce a tourist information pamphlet. In fact, many tourist information officers come to the archives to glean historical information, which they, in turn, are able to share with visitors. In the end, the brochure was printed and distributed among visitors to Concarneau. This successful search by a tourist information officer was followed by many others.

Indeed, interest in the Middle Ages is widespread, and researchers do not always know how to manage archival documents to get answers. Archivists must help, often by reading the relevant documents, by explaining contexts, and, sometimes, by giving historical information about the life and language of the period. Thus, by providing these services, archivists can often prevent serious misunderstanding and even anachronisms.

Perhaps the most frequent occurrence concerns questions about language since the medieval forms of languages are often quite different from their modern forms. It often happens that an archivist has to explain the evolution of various words and to explain the form they had at the time the document was written. Archivists first need to know the approximative year in which the text was written. The examination of the vocabulary requires specific resources, and archivists know the

dictionaries dedicated to, for example, Medieval Latin or other old languages. Two examples, among thousands of others, can serve as illustrations. Frequently, the public asks about old professions, which sometimes they have never heard about. What service, for example, was provided by a French medieval *regrettier*? The archivist then has to explain that this man was in charge of collecting food which was not eaten. He then prepared it in a new way and sold it to others. In this way, our medieval forebears avoided the waste of precious food. It is the kind of work that no longer exists and looks quite strange to our modern eyes. A second example concerns the French word *honte* (shame), which has its own interesting history. In Latin, the Roman people used the word *verecundia*. This became, centuries later, the French *vergogne*, derived directly from Latin. In fact, in French literature you often find the expression ‘doing something... *sans (aucune) vergogne*,’ which, in turn, is derived from the Latin *sine ulla verecundia*. However, with the evolution of the French language, French speakers slowly replaced *vergogne* with a shortened form of *désbonheur*, *honte*.

A scholarly analysis of a piece of writing requires that the scholar reads the most authentic version of a given text since it is possible to have in hand only an inexact copy of the original. Thus, it is useful to study what the bibliographers call the ‘tradition’ of a document. An understanding of this ‘tradition’ enables scholarly editors to produce the most authoritative critical editions of various medieval works. Archivists and rare-book librarians can be of help here, too. Since they are thoroughly familiar with medieval manuscripts, they might be able to indicate where to look for different versions of a given work. They may also be able, since they are well trained in the reading of various medieval documents, to give an authoritative opinion about the order of these versions. And, thus, they can be a valuable resource in helping editors reconstruct the ‘tradition.’

Archivists and rare-book librarians also have another very important task: they must always be on the lookout for documents that are not in public collections because these ‘hidden’ manuscripts can often be critically important for researchers. Once, for example, I read in an auction catalog that a certain medieval cartulary would be for sale at an auction in the city of Brest. On the day of the auction, I was in the room, and I was able to purchase a few other documents, letters, and notarial acts. When it came time to auction off the cartulary in question, however, I was unable to purchase it. Unfortunately, a very wealthy man, well-known in the country, decided to purchase it for his private museum. My limited budget did not allow me to compete with the resources of this private individual, and he walked out of the hall with the cartulary. However, since I know who he is, I can share this information with researchers. Of course, they will have to ask permission of the owner to be able to study that medieval document, but at least they know where the document can be found.⁹

Archivists can also contribute social value by discovering new historical documents. Once, for example, when dismantling an old book to recondition it, the book-binder employed by the Finistère Archives found, by the most extraordinary coincidence, a medieval illumination painted on a little piece of parchment, used as a part of the book’s cover. It turns out that, during the French Revolution, due to a lack of materials for new administrative writs, pieces of parchment from old cartularies, musical books, missals, or antiphonaries were employed to make covers for registers. In this case, we recovered an important medieval remnant through the process of reconditioning an eighteenth-

⁹ For security reasons I am not allowed to publish the owner’s name nor to identify the document. When someone asks to read it, I must first ask the permission of the owner before giving out the information.

century book. In front of our eyes, we had a beautiful illumination, probably painted in the twelfth century, showing a woman in a twelfth-century blue suit, with a typical medieval hat called a *mortar* (a judge's cap) or a *touret*, when it has no top. In fact, that kind of hat came in France from Eastern Europe when Princess Anna of Kiev (1024–1089) got married to King Henry I (1018–1060, king from 1031 to 1060).

Since that wonderful illumination deserved to be known by the general public, the Archives decided to create an exhibition of documents, related, as close as possible, to twelfth-century Finistère. (Recall that our oldest document is a grant made by Henry II of England in 1172.) Our goal was to share documents related to that specific period in our cultural heritage with the general public. We chose to mount the exhibition in the entrance hall of the Finistère Archives, which was large enough to house it. Over three months during the summer of 1994, the exhibition was open to anyone wishing to learn about the Middle Ages. It attracted a large number of visitors. While we do not know the exact number, we can, however, estimate that it was well above two thousand. In fact, we wrote and printed a book, whose title is *Au temps des seigneurs (In the Time of the Lords)*, and put it on sale as a souvenir of the exhibition. We sold about two thousand copies of the book, but there were certainly many additional visitors who did not purchase the book (Fagnen and Yvonnou 1994).

That story conveys an important point: when archivists and rare-book librarians discover hidden materials in their collections, these new materials can reveal small steps in the slow evolution of humanity and material civilization, and, sometimes, they can offer important new insights into our history. But beyond the contribution to society at large, these discoveries also help educate the archivist him- or herself, who, thus, is prepared to contribute even more valuable insights for future researchers.

Indeed, sometimes archivists are called upon to answer general questions about medieval civilization. It may happen that non-specialists believe that they have a good notion of medieval history and culture because they have seen films such as *The Vikings* (with Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtis, 1958). Indeed, many people are familiar with the wrestling scene between the two heroes, on the keep, the strongest and most secure part of a medieval castle. Archivists, however, know how to be careful about images concerning the Middle Ages in popular media, in this case, with reason. The Vikings invaded Western Europe (England, France, and even Spain) during the ninth and tenth centuries. In 911, the king of France gave a part of his land to the Northmen chief, Hrolf Gaaganger (the French call him Rollon le Pieton), and that land became the Duchy of Normandy. However, the castle used as the setting of this scene, Fort La Latte, located on the North coast of Brittany, was built mainly during the fifteenth century. Since the wrestling scene is supposed to have happened about five hundred years earlier, the film creates what might be called a visual anachronism. Of course, this did not bother the movie producer, who certainly met with some trouble finding a beautiful castle for a natural-looking setting. However, in reality, some castles built in the fifteenth century do not really look like the wooden castles built in the tenth century. But who, among the moviegoers, knows that? Ironically, the same setting was used for other historical movies: some years later, in 1970, Fort La Latte was used for *Lancelot du Lac* and, even later, for *The Three Musketeers*, both obviously set in very different time periods.

It happens, however, that, to avoid such anachronisms, movie producers sometimes ask historians or archivists to be consultants for their movies. For example, two French archivists, Jean-

Claude Schmitt and Michel Pastoureau, were history consultants in 1986 for *The Name of the Rose*, featuring Sean Connery and Michael Lonsdale.¹⁰ The film was based on the bestselling novel of an Italian author, Umberto Eco, who set his story in a medieval monastery and its scriptorium, hence the need for specialized consultants.

Indeed, there is a final way that archivists and rare-book librarians contribute to the common good. Many of them write their own scholarly books and articles for professional periodicals. Some publish texts that they have read and deciphered, giving explanations. Others produce dictionaries, histories of various centuries, or even biographies. Among hundreds of names, several stand out. Among the most important are Henri Waquet (1887–1958), a former Finistère archivist, who wrote an important book about the arts in Brittany (Waquet 1933), and Raymond Oursel (1921–2006), a former Saone-et-Loire archivist and founder of the *Zodiaque* collection, a large collection of books about Roman architecture. The series was authored by a team of international specialists in Roman architecture, including Oursel, who wrote such books as *Bourgogne romane* and *Invention de l'architecture romane* (Oursel 1968; 1970). Also worth mentioning is one of the best-known archivists and paleographers, Leopold Delisle (1826–1910), who wrote more than a thousand books and articles, mostly about the Middle Ages (see, for example, Delisle 1903). Like academic medievalists, then, archivists and rare-book librarians are also important contributors to the corpus of scholarly publications about the Middle Ages.

Indeed, the contributions of archivists and rare-book librarians demonstrate, in several critical ways, the social value of Medieval Studies and, thus, deserve society's support. First, they are the primary guardians of the sources of medieval history. Documents they preserve form the foundation for academic studies or for information demanded by the general public. As such, these sources provide the critical resources necessary for the continuing task of refining our knowledge about and understanding of humanity's past. Thus, to enhance their ever-growing collections, archivists are always on the lookout for new documents, wherever they are. Once purchased, the documents, whether in paper or parchment, are carefully preserved by archivists and rare-book librarians so that they are readily available for use by academic scholars or anyone else. Unfortunately, the cost of preserving those treasures is very high, but, in truth, it is worth the expense. Although we have witnessed acts of massive destruction, such as those that occurred during the Second World War, archivists still preserve a vast (but incomplete) trove of documents that still need to be studied, a task that will take many, many more years.

Finally, as George Santayana, an American philosopher (1863–1932), wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (2011, 172). Thus, the refinement of our understanding of history, made possible by these precious documents, can offer society critical guidance, making it possible for leaders and members of democratic societies to be able to make wise and informed decisions for the future.

¹⁰ Jean-Claude Schmitt studies symbolism in Middle Ages and Michel Pastoureau is well known for his works about heraldry and the history of color.

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