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A virtual Renaissance for the manuscripts of Chartres damaged during World War II

Claudia Rabel

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What do we lose when we lose a library?

**Proceedings of the conference
held at the KU Leuven 9-11 September 2015**

Conference organized by
KU Leuven · UC Louvain
the Goethe Institut · the British Council

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the Goethe Institut and the British Council

Conference Chair: Lieve Watteuw
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A virtual Renaissance for the manuscripts of Chartres damaged during World War II

Claudia Rabel

Chartres is famous worldwide for its Gothic cathedral, which has miraculously survived intact from the Middle Ages until the twenty-first century. Sadly the same cannot be said for its ancient libraries. Until 1944, the collection of medieval manuscripts in the municipal library at Chartres was one of the richest in France. It was also one of the most prestigious, because it was directly related to the history of its schools, especially the celebrated cathedral school, so vigorous in the first half of the twelfth century. The catalogue published in 1890 listed 518 medieval manuscripts (Omont *et alii* 1890). The great majority came from the cathedral chapter and the Benedictine abbey of Saint-Père-en-Vallée, the two centres of intellectual life in Chartres since the Carolingian period, one dominating the city from a high plateau, the other situated in the lower city.

One year before the end of the Second World War, on the 26th of May 1944, American aircraft accidentally dropped bombs on Chartres. In the ensuing conflagration, the municipal library, installed in the town hall, was destroyed. The flames devoured nearly two thirds of the medieval manuscripts. The rest escaped in different states of preservation, from carbonized relics to bundles of leaves that were almost untouched. Immediately attempts were made to save whatever remained. In Paris, in the restoration atelier at the Bibliothèque Nationale, leaves were detached from volumes now transformed into compact blocks. Starting in 1948 at Chartres, identified fragments were regrouped by shelf-mark. Luckily, scholars in Chartres had long been devoted to their manuscript heritage, and the rescue teams had at their disposal a very detailed catalogue published in 1890 by Henri Omont and collaborators, as well as the work and photographs of the canon Yves Delaporte, who in 1929 published the catalogue of the illuminated manuscripts in the library.

What did we lose when we lost the library of Chartres?

The reputation of the School of Chartres, the emblematic crown jewel of the twelfth-century intellectual renaissance, was established by Abbé Clerval in his thesis, published in 1895. In 1965 Richard Southern called into question the very existence of that “School”, igniting a lively debate. Today it is accepted as certain that the “Chartrain masters” taught in the shadow of their cathedral, as witnessed by the Liberal Arts and their classical masters on the Royal Portal (Jeauneau 2009). Clerval, himself a canon of the cathedral, made remarkable use of the manuscripts in the library. Their material loss created an enormous void, depriving us of the possibility of continuing his work on the originals, in the light of today’s knowledge and questions.

The fire and its consequences have rendered the manuscripts that escaped extremely fragile. Some break easily, others were illegibly blackened by the fire or, conversely,

washed out by water, contracted, pleated, vitrified by the heat, sometimes reduced to crumbs. These martyred manuscripts must be handled with extreme care. Consequently, since 1944 they may be consulted only in exceptional circumstances. By and large, the collection was consigned to oblivion, and the idea that it was destroyed, or at least inaccessible, became a commonplace among scholars.

What can we retrieve?

Since 2005, an ambitious project at the Institut de Recherche et d'Histoire des Textes (CNRS, Paris) has intended to provide 'A virtual Renaissance for the damaged manuscripts of Chartres'. It is directed by Dominique Poirel and, since 2009, by myself, with a lot of help from Patricia Stirnemann (the only one of us who is truly a specialist of Chartrain manuscripts and their illumination!). The project is being carried out by the Institute in close collaboration with several partners, notably the Médiathèque l'Apostrophe de Chartres (also known as the Municipal Library) where the manuscripts are kept. It has received public funding from several sources.

In order to catch up with research that was brutally interrupted in 1944, we have embarked on several parallel pathways. A primary task has been to determine more precisely what exists and what has been lost. In the complicated situation of the manuscript collection in the library of Chartres it is impossible to count the number of manuscripts. New survivors appear, others whom we thought had made it, cannot be found, and still others are sometimes found mixed up under a single shelf-mark in the same box. Important discoveries had been made in the "surprise packets"—a cupboard full of nearly 400 envelopes of manuscript fragments classified as "unidentified". Among them we have already recognized 38 medieval manuscripts on parchment thought to have been destroyed, which can be added to the 164 previously identified.

Reproduction, legibility and image enhancement: « relaxation » and multispectral Imaging

One of the essential objectives of IRHT since its foundation in 1937 has been the preservation and systematic reproduction of medieval manuscripts. As of today, we have digitized 143 of the damaged manuscripts of Chartres. At the outset, we hoped that the legibility of the deformed fragments would be improved by relaxing and stretching the parchment. But in the end, this has been useful for only 22 manuscripts. The others needed no treatment, or the fragments were too small, or the damage to the parchment prohibited treatment. From 2009 to 2012 two restorers undertook this work in the technical centre of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France at Bussy-Saint-Georges. They 'relaxed' the folios in a humidifier or between sheets of sympatex, cleaned their surface, kept them stretched as they dried, digitized the folios, and placed them in specially conditioned boxes, made to measure.

As can be seen for manuscripts 83 and 137, the “relaxation” has quite efficiently removed the wrinkles in the parchment and rendered both the text and illumination legible (<http://www.manuscrits-de-chartres.fr/en/restauration-et-reproduction>). The wooden bindings of a few manuscripts survived, for example that of ms. 17, whose folios have also survived well. The boards of ms. 149 are still decorated with the “tunic of the Virgin”, the cathedral’s most important relic, which was used as the heraldic bearings of the chapter. The manuscripts can be consulted in the Institute’s virtual manuscript library, the Bibliothèque virtuelle des manuscrits médiévaux (<http://bvmm.irht.cnrs.fr/>). Multi- or hyper-spectral photography is another promising aid. For the manuscripts of Chartres this technique can solve the problem of overlapping lines of script, recto and verso, on transparent parchment. The procedure is very time-consuming and justifiable cases must be pinpointed, based on the importance of a specific passage of text and the historic or literary value of the book.

Putting the manuscripts in order

Once photographed, scholars begin to put the fragments into their correct order. Luckily, the foliation still exists on some of the better preserved fragments. But much more often the sorting relies on the identification of the texts, and this is arduous, time-consuming work. Three examples of manuscripts from the cathedral library illustrate the difficulties. Occasionally a microfilm made before the war provides help, as with the *Opuscula medica* in manuscript 62, a tenth-century book thought to have come from the abbey of Fleury. Otherwise, sequencing the folios requires that a passage of text be taken from each page, identified in a printed edition, and given a relative position in the manuscript. For a two volume bible containing more than 900 pages, ms. 139, the task was not difficult, but very laborious. The bible was probably copied in Chartres, but painted by the Almagest Master, one of the most gifted of the Parisian illuminators at the beginning of the thirteenth century. It was known before only from a few black and white photographs. Dominique Poirel was our detective for manuscript 205, a thirteenth-century book containing a remarkable collection of theological texts from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, some of them very rare.

The web site

The web site devoted to Chartres, “A la recherche des manuscrits de Chartres” (“Rediscovering the manuscripts from Chartres”, <http://www.manuscrits-de-chartres.fr/>), presents all the documentation we have found for each manuscript from the medieval libraries at Chartres. A listing gives access to a short entry concerning the manuscript. From there one can access the volume’s bibliography, occasionally a detailed description, the digitized facsimile of the book in its present state, and pre-war photographs. Textual editions are also noted. The site intends to open up wider avenues of research, becoming a tool for the study of the influence exercised by the masters, authors and books from Chartres on intellectual and artistic history in the Middle Ages. To this end, the site

includes a “who’s who” of the main Chartrain authors. Little by little the manuscripts of their works will be listed, dated and localized, which will help scholars to evaluate their place in time and space. The site also intends to create an inventory of manuscripts made in Chartres, but housed elsewhere today, such as the bible in two volumes commissioned by Abbot Suger for Saint-Denis (Paris, BNF, lat. 55 and 116) and the bibles made for the count Thibaut de Champagne and saint Bernard of Clairvaux (Troyes, BM, mss 2391 and 458).

What have we learned during the last ten years?

Today, we have a much more precise understanding of the documentation. Our improved knowledge is also a source of frustration, because among the preserved volumes there are many legal and liturgical manuscripts which are difficult or even impossible to put back in order. The fire seems to have spared them in greater number than the rare texts that interest so many scholars. One exception is the work that symbolizes the school of Chartres in the twelfth century, the two volumes of the *Heptateuchon* made for Thierry de Chartres, manuscripts 497-498. We have the pre-war microfilms of the volumes, and there are fragments remaining. In this unpublished *Bibliotheca* of the liberal arts, Thierry collected works, mostly by classical and Arabic authors, for an encyclopedic teaching programme. One of the sources must have been manuscript 214, a collection of texts on astronomy and mathematics that perished, but we discovered the reproduction of an extraordinary drawing of a *nocturlabe* (a nocturnal clock that uses the stars to determine time) and Jean-Patrice Boudet was able to write a very detailed “ghost description” of the manuscript.

Thanks to another old photograph, we also have an idea of the frontispiece of the *Apothecarius moralis*, manuscript 1036 written in 1373. In this manuscript, the monks of Saint-Père provided an inventory of their 224 books, and gathered together an entire *Bibliotheca* of scattered Latin and French texts found in their library. Alas, for the moment only a few fragments of the book have been found.

Where can we go from here?

More than seventy years after the fire, it is high time, and now possible, to examine the manuscripts and the ancient catalogues of the medieval libraries of Chartres with renewed vision and today’s questions concerning the networks of people, knowledge and books. It is also time to say honestly that the manuscript collection at Chartres is rich, but not in witnesses to the cathedral school of the twelfth century, famous for the teaching of its masters on grammar, natural science, the Bible and theology, the philosophy of Plato. On the contrary, already in the late sixteenth-century catalogue of the library of the cathedral, which contains 209 volumes (Paris, BNF, ms. Dupuy 673, ff. 133-138), one searches in vain for the works of Gilbert de la Porrée, Guillaume de Conches, John of Salisbury.

The chapter library was very much alive, and constantly used by the canons in the Middle Ages, as we learn from a register begun at the end of the thirteenth century, which mentions their book loans—books that were borrowed but not always returned (ms 1007-1008). In 1303, for example, Landolfo Colonna returned the “very old” volume containing Livy’s fourth decade which was previously unknown (his deluxe copy, made in Rome, is now in Paris, BNF, lat. 5690). But Landolfo did not return the volume of Lactantius, which is housed today in Oxford (Bodl. Lib., Canonici Patr. lat. 131). During the following centuries, the wandering humanists and bibliophiles continued to fill their shopping carts with the manuscripts of Chartres. The eleventh-century obituary-martyrology is famous for its miniature of Bishop Fulbert preaching to the faithful in the cathedral, which he had built after the fire in 1020. The manuscript left the city already before the French Revolution and ended up in the library at Saint-Etienne, which gave it back to Chartres after the war (ms. nouv. acq. 4). After the Revolution, many of the oldest manuscripts, such as two copies of medical works (lat.9332 and lat. 10233), were removed from the chapter library and carried off to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Manuscripts from the abbey of Saint-Père have also been identified there, including the works of Bishop Fulbert (lat. 14167, 11th c.) and Yves de Chartres (lat. 2892, 12th c.).

The library of Chartres is nonetheless exceptional, even as it existed at the end of the nineteenth century. It is rich in Carolingian manuscripts, which attest to the existence of schools already at that time and the study of ancient authors. At Saint-Père they read Flavius Josephus (ms. 29) and studied Virgil, as we can see from a commentary on the *Bucolics*, written partially in tironian notes (ms. 13). The library is rich in liturgical manuscripts that inform us about the offices celebrated in the cathedral and other churches in the city. Although these books have often perished or exist only in a fragmentary state, some can be studied using pre-war reproductions. It is rich in cartularies, obituaries and other diplomatic documents, which are key sources for economic and political history, local and regional history. These manuscripts have been partially published, but when the editions are compared to the originals, new information always comes to light. In 2015-2016, history students at the University of Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, under the direction of Pierre Chastang and Isabelle Bretthauer, have studied one of these historical documents of the cathedral, the book of rentals for the bishopric (*Livre blanc*, ms. 1138).

We hope to have raised scholarly interest for the manuscripts of Chartres, whether they have survived or not. The fire in 1944 caused irreparable losses, but important new discoveries continue to surface. Perhaps the most spectacular has been made by Patricia Stirnemann. She examined the list of 35 books bequeathed to the cathedral in 1180 by its bishop John of Salisbury, one of the greatest twelfth-century humanists. She has identified several of the books on the list with manuscripts described in the 1890 catalogue, all destroyed. With the exception of one, which was no longer in the library at the time. And it is the most important of all, namely John’s personal copy of his greatest work, the *Polycraticus*, a treatise on political and moral philosophy written for Thomas Becket. It is a manuscript of English origin, now housed in the municipal library at Soissons, ms. 24. But that is another story, which has been told by Patricia Stirnemann herself on the 1st of October 2015 in Metz, at a colloquium devoted to John of Salisbury. “test”

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