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Nekrologe

JACQUES LE GOFF

(1924–2014)

It is difficult to believe that Jacques Le Goff is no longer with us, that we can no longer join him on Monday afternoons to hear his brilliant comments on the past and on the latest scholarship, that we cannot look forward every year to new and imaginative publications and stimulating interviews with a man who was as sympathetic as his learning was magisterial. True, he was 90 years old when he died on 1 April 2014, but he was forever young in spirit. He was a man who loved life, a man of warmth and affection who embraced the world he knew as well as the world's past and all its inhabitants, living and dead. He loved the past as he loved the present, and in his encompassing affection he yearned to link past and present and communicate to the living the realities of those long dead. He reached out through his voluminous writings, through his appearances on television and radio, and through the seminars to which his students and colleagues thronged. Through all this he communicated the love of the past he so cherished. He radiated this affection, and those who were privileged to know him responded in kind. As one of my American colleagues aptly said many years ago, »To know Jacques Le Goff is to love him«.

It is our good fortune that the period of the past to which Jacques Le Goff was particularly drawn was that long stretch of time we know as the Middle Ages. Le Goff infused this much maligned term with new significance in transforming it into the »long Middle Ages« and making us aware of the perduring influence of so many aspects of its life and culture. Because of Le Goff's dedication to the Middle Ages, millions of individuals with no special affection for history or for the past became interested in and fascinated by those who lived and worked and imagined centuries ago. His enthusiasm and rare clarity of exposition led his readers to explore further, and to read the works of others of us as dedicated as he to the period he loved but lacking the expository gifts that he possessed in abundance. It was his special gift to interest and entice.

Jacques Le Goff loved to write, he loved to speak. He did both with rare eloquence, rare elegance, and rare directness. He spoke clearly, without pretension. There was never any doubt about what he wished to convey. These qualities informed his countless books and articles, some directed at his colleagues, others aimed at a far broader audience. All were important to him. He set great store by the young, in whose hands the future rests. He reached an immense audience with his books on images and on postcards related to the Middle Ages he had acquired in a long lifetime of collecting, as he did with the descriptions of the Middle Ages he wrote for children, and with the »Dictionnaire raisonné de l'Occident médiéval« that he published in 1999 with his colleague of many years, Jean-Claude Schmitt¹. Every year saw the appearance of a book or two directed at the vast public that depended on Jacques Le Goff for their interest in and knowledge of the past. He would have been delighted by the remark made by a youthful commentator shortly after his death, »What we know of history, we learned

1 Paris 1999.

from Jacques Le Goff. The chief star of »Les Lundis de l'Histoire«, launched in 1966, Le Goff, together with a roster of distinguished colleagues, made the programs occasions not to be missed by either professional historians or amateurs of history.

His masterworks were read by professionals and amateurs alike. His first, a sweeping study of »La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval«, was published in 1964, when he was just forty. Called by one reviewer une »œuvre militante«, the complex book studied medieval society and the influence it exercised on the individuals who lived in those times of instability, fragmentation, and the englobing power of Christianity and the Church². More than one medievalist credits this book with luring her from other fields into the study of the period treated here with verve and brilliance. Then, in 1981, »La naissance du purgatoire«³, gave new life to the study of the imaginations of medieval people and the influence of their visions on their lives, the art they fashioned, and the literature they created. His final masterpiece, »Saint Louis«, which appeared in 1996⁴, together with the defense of biography he published in the »Times Literary Supplement« in 1989⁵, restored to this genre the allure and respectability it badly needed⁶. One of my own special favorites is a short book, published in 2001⁷, in which Le Goff presented brief but penetrating studies of »Cinq personnages d'hier pour aujourd'hui: Bouddha, Abélard, saint François, Michelet, Bloch«. Who but Jacques Le Goff would have thought of choosing such diverse but complexly interrelated individuals; who but he could have brought each of them to life with a few strokes of his pen? Among his numerous articles, many gems of brilliant inspiration, his early study of trifunctionality demonstrated the importance and complexity of the idea⁸, and his generous appreciation of Georges Duby's and others' later studies revealed a master's grasp of the notion's many facets and nuances⁹.

Jacques Le Goff combined a talent for grand ideas, for analysis and generalization, with an ogre's appetite for human flesh. Both hedghog and fox, he married the virtues of both approaches to the past. He had enormous affection for a range of people who lived long ago: for kings and commoners, bankers and businessmen and farmers, holy men and those who recorded their deeds. His sympathy was greatest for those who shared his own values, and he had little inclination to attend to those who did not. His approach to the historian's craft was closely linked to Marc Bloch's, of whom he often spoke¹⁰. It reflected the variety of his experiences after being classically educated at the École normale supérieure, and before, in 1960, being named Directeur d'études à la VI^e section de l'École pratique des hautes études, whose headship he assumed between 1972 and 1977, and which, with Fernand Braudel, he transformed into the

2 Published in Paris by Arthaud. See the review by Alain TOURAINE in: *Revue française de sociologie* 6 (1965), p. 533–535.

3 Published in Paris by Gallimard.

4 Again, published in Paris by Gallimard.

5 After *Annales: The Life as History*, in: *The Times Literary Supplement* (April 14–20, 1989), p. 394, 405.

6 Note also his publication of *Saint François d'Assise*, Paris 1999, and *Héros du Moyen Âge, le saint et le roi*, Paris 2004.

7 In Paris by La Fabrique.

8 *Note sur la société tripartite, idéologie monarchique et renouveau économique dans la Chrétienté du XI^e au XII^e siècle*, in: Aleksander GIEYSZTOR, Tadeusz MANTEUFFEL (ed.), *L'Europe aux IX^e–XI^e siècles: aux origines des états nationaux. Actes du Colloque international sur les Origines des états européens aux IX^e–XI^e siècles*, tenu à Varsovie et Poznań du 7 au 13 septembre 1965, Warsaw 1968, p. 63–72, reprinted in Jacques LE GOFF, *Pour un autre Moyen Âge. Temps, travail et culture en Occident*, Paris 1977 (Bibliothèque des Histoires), p. 80–90 (reprinted in the collection »Tel« by Gallimard in 1991).

9 See his review in: *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 345 (1979), p. 1187–1215.

10 See LE GOFF's preface to Marc BLOCH, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien*, Paris 1993.

École des hautes études en sciences sociales. The years between 1948 and 1959, which he spent teaching, reflecting, and savoring involvement in the politics of Prague, Amiens, Oxford, Rome, Lille, and, always, Paris, were for him years of re-invention and discovery that deepened his appreciation of the diversity of human life and of the human past.

If he had a fault, it stemmed from one of his chief virtues, his tolerance. He was perhaps too willing to sympathize with those who, like the producers of »Le nom de la rose«, had less concern for accuracy than they should have had, and with scholars who lacked his sensitive appreciation of fine scholarship and his unrivalled ability to grasp and communicate the fruits of his colleagues' research. For Le Goff valued his colleagues and viewed them and their ideas with the same affection and respect he viewed the world. He promoted and encouraged, avoiding the hyper-criticism that stifles and daunts. He read omnivorously and with singular discrimination in his thirst to understand more fully both past and present. He delighted in exchanging ideas and enjoyed collaborating with colleagues whose interests complemented his own. With his razor-sharp intelligence, he perceived implications of ideas undreamed of by their authors. As he was working on »Saint Louis«, he devoted one seminar after another to different facets of Louis's personality, his reign, and the evidence that remains, reveling in (and profiting from) the debate and discussion that inevitably developed.

Much as he loved the world in general, Jacques Le Goff had quite special affection for his family, his adored Hanka and their two children, Barbara and Thomas. The joy he derived from their presence and their accomplishments greatly overshadowed the inevitable frustrations of parenthood. His book, »Avec Hanka«¹¹, is a testament to all he and Hanka shared during the forty-two years of their marriage, before her death in 2004.

The subject of Jacques Le Goff's last two published essays was laughter, a subject that had long attracted him. Focusing on Jacopo da Voragine's »Golden Legend«, he made clear in a tribute to Daniela Romagnoli-Scotti how little use he had for mocking and derisive laughter, and how much he admired and enjoyed »le rire débridé«, »le rire de joie«, or »le rire de bon cœur«, as others call it¹². In the »Golden Legend«, among the nine instances of laughter that are recounted, he found only one that he called real laughter, »le rire de bonheur, un bon rire«, namely the laughter of Pope Clement when he saw Saint Peter bringing him his long-lost mother. At the end of his essay he turned, predictably, to his heroes, Saint Francis, and also to Saint Louis, whom he described as »un roi facétieux animant la cour par son rire *rex facetus*, mais aussi un roi saint dont le rire était compatible avec la justice, la dévotion, la charité et l'ordre qu'il voulait apprendre à ses sujets«¹³. In the introductory essay of the catalogue of the exhibition devoted to Saint Louis, Le Goff featured this same theme, assuring his readers that in Joinville's Life of the saint they would find many stories of Louis's laughter. Having described Louis's acts as »most Christian king«, his acquisition of precious relics, his construction of the Sainte-Chapelle, his two Crusades, having emphasized Louis's concern for dynasty and his love of books and learning, he challenged Louis's image as a devout ascetic and called attention to »another Louis, more alive, happier, more sociable, who, like Saint Francis, knew how to laugh, sometimes at himself«¹⁴. For those impressed by Louis's repressive, authoritarian, judgmental, harshly uncompromising acts, his savage impulses towards Jews, his hatred of gaming, the harsh punishments he had inflicted on blasphemers and prostitutes, it is difficult not to

11 Published in Paris by Gallimard in November 2008.

12 Le rire dans la »Légende dorée«, in: »Per una severa Maestra«: dono a Daniela Romagnoli, Fidenza 2014, p. 15–18. See also Agnès HUMBERT, Notre guerre. Souvenirs de résistance, Paris 2004, p. 176.

13 Ibid., p. 18.

14 Jacques LE GOFF, Et le rire du roi ..., in: Pierre-Yves LE POGAM et al., Saint Louis (exhibition catalogue, Paris, La Conciergerie, 8 October 2014–11 January 2015), Paris 2014, p. 17–18.

wonder whether in linking laughter with his special heroes from the medieval past, Jacques Le Goff was not emphasizing in them the joyful, good laughter and geniality that were so integral to his being. In an interview with Romagnoli-Scotti just a week before he died¹⁵, which he told her was »a little like my spiritual testament«, he ended their conversation by insisting on his optimism and the hopes he cherished for human destiny, emphasizing the progress he observed in the eradication of war in Europe, in whose cultural and spiritual unity he firmly believed. Even as he acknowledged the numerous grave injustices and violence that exist in the world, he invoked the men and women who today and in the future would, attentive to these problems, continue to advance the cause of human progress. Le Goff's optimism, the hopes he nourished, his generosity of spirit, informed all he wrote and all his discourse and made them uniquely his. His greatness as a human being undergirded and insured his greatness as a rare and very special historian, who will long be remembered and admired.

Elizabeth A. R. BROWN, New York

15 The interview is published in Japanese in the journal *Shiso*1087¹¹ (2014), p. 136–150. It will appear in English (and also in the original French), together with Daniela ROMAGNOLI-SCOTTI's article, *Il giro del mondo di Jacques Le Goff* (in English and Italian), in: *Imago Temporis. Medium Aevum* 8 (2014). I am grateful to Daniela Romagnoli-Scotti and Vittorio Scotti Douglas for having shared with me the interview, her article, and their recollections of the time they spent with Jacques Le Goff shortly before he died.