

Paul Bertrand, Documenting the Everyday in Medieval Europe. The Social Dimensions of a Writing Revolution, 1250–1350. Translated by Graham Robert Edwards, Turnhout (Brepols) 2019, X–491 p., 81 b/w fig., 39 graphs (Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy, 42), ISBN 978-2-503-57990-0, EUR 120,00.

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This is the English translation and partial updating of a work first published in French in 2015¹. Its contents are therefore already well-known to scholars working in the Francophone world, with reviews noting and praising, in agreement with Michael Clanchy, whose foreword to the French edition is here translated, the breadth, richness, and significance of Bertrand's arguments². That these should now be accessible to an English-speaking audience, in particular students, is therefore especially welcome, even more so given that Bertrand has produced a work of scholarship that, if its primary focus is a body of texts constrained by precise typological, geographical, and chronological parameters, is nevertheless what one reviewer of the French edition termed «a veritable reflection on the written word» («une véritable réflexion sur l'écrit») and its place in the long 13th century³.

The book itself is divided into seven chapters. Its chronological boundaries are made clear by its title, although Bertrand frequently considers matters well beyond such constraints. As for its focus and aim, Bertrand has set out to write what he calls an «historical sociology of the written record» (p. 9), and while his field of analysis is ostensibly restricted to those «pragmatic writings» (charters, account rolls, quittances, schedules, etc.) of Flanders, the Low Countries, and the borders of the Empire, his survey is one that frequently ranges well beyond these confines to set his findings in a much wider context.

Such breadth becomes clear from the very first chapter, which is the first of five to place the written sign at centre stage. Focusing on what Bertrand calls «the life expectancy of documents», it looks to identify those records to which medieval people accorded

¹ Paul Bertrand, *Les écritures ordinaires. Sociologie d'un temps de révolution documentaire (entre royaume de France et Empire, 1250–1350)*. Préface de Michel Clanchy, Paris 2015 (*Histoire ancienne et médiévale*, 138).

² See, for example, the review by Jean Dunbabin: Paul Bertrand, *Les écritures ordinaires. Sociologie d'un temps de révolution documentaire (1250–1350)*, in: *English Historical Review* 132/556 (2017), p. 681–683.

³ Review by Anne Kucab, Paul Bertrand, *Les écritures ordinaires. Sociologie d'un temps de révolution documentaire (entre royaume de France et Empire, 1250–1350)*, in: *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes* (2015), p. 5. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/crm/14113> (08/05/2020).



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»sanctuary status« (p. 24), namely a desire to elevate above the ordinary and to ensure an object's importance (and consequently its survival) in perpetuity. Key to this was the creation of dedicated repositories such as the French royal Trésor des chartes, whose contents, much like the relics next to which the Trésor was eventually housed in the Sainte-Chapelle, were imbued with a sacral quality that placed them in what Bertrand refers to as the »divine time zone« (p. 49) within which medieval life, in particular that lived by the religious so often responsible for producing the written word, was conceptualised.

Of course, as the second half of the first chapter makes clear in its analysis of more ephemeral forms of writing (wax tablets, leases, schedules, notelets), not every document produced in the Middle Ages was designed to be perpetual. The point is expanded upon in the second, relatively short chapter (p. 81–107), which examines the malleable or »living« nature of documents, in particular cartularies and liturgical and necrological texts, whose physical form and written contents evolved and expanded in this period.

This theme of the malleable, living document is explored further in the book's third chapter, which looks at the ways in which thirteenth- and 14th-century scribes, and literary or biblical book producers, compiled, abbreviated or downsized their works, both physically and textually, often in relation to wider social phenomena, such as the fight against heresy or the growth of universities. With regards to more practical, archival documents, Bertrand's detailed analysis shows that it was a technological development, namely the increase in the production of paper, as well as the influence of individuals, rather than old, established institutions, that resulted in the creation of small, portable, oblong notebooks, a format that »turned out to be useful for all sorts of documents: cartularies, lists of dues and rents, accounts, [and] records of income collection« (p. 152). Similar analysis is applied to the schedules of the Chamber of Accounts of the counts of Flanders, now housed at the Archives départementales du Nord, and while Bertrand's findings, which show a correlation between the chronology of production, the size of documents, and the ways of managing the written word within them, can in no way said to be universal, they show the value of conducting such granular, data-driven analysis, and provide a useful model for doing so.

If worthwhile, however, such techniques often try and impose upon (and then find within) medieval documents the standardisation that most often defines their modern counterparts, much in the same way as the archivists of the 19th and 20th century, to whom Bertrand draws attention, inadvertently influenced the work of historians by attempting to neatly categorise the contents of medieval manuscripts »that even specialists of the 13th and 14th century had difficulty in pinning down and identifying« (p. 213).

The inherent complexity of the medieval written word, and the subsequent difficulties scholars encounter when trying to identify and classify its norms of production, are themes that dominate the book's fourth and fifth chapters. Here, Bertrand examines the ways in which 13th-century scribes went about ordering the layout of the documents they produced, focusing in particular



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on the use of alphanumerical techniques, rubrication and titles, and the signs, symbols and forms of writing they employed. The result, if its approach is at once broad (tally sticks are among the symbols explored by Bertrand) and focused (Bertrand returns to the abovementioned schedules of the Flemish Chamber of Accounts to analyse the use of different handwriting styles), is one that reminds us how the production of the medieval written word was shaped by the scribe's individual choices, ones that he was either free to make himself (how to order a document, what script to use), or those that circumstance happened to thrust upon him (the quality of his parchment, that of his quill, the type of ink he found in his well, and even the crudely controlled temperature or lighting of the space in which he was writing). As Bertrand himself puts it in relation to the scribes responsible for categorising items within an Artois rent register, »each did as he saw fit« (p. 194).

This is not to suggest, of course, that this was not a period in which scribes, along with those who employed them, sought to develop a uniformity of style that helped create trust in the records they created. The point is made by Bertrand throughout the book, and is illustrated most vividly in relation to the aforementioned analysis of the handwriting of the abovementioned schedules, even if it must be acknowledged that the corpus of documents examined is relatively small (582 in total), does not include some social categories, and is divided according to definitions that Bertrand admits are »crude but systematic« (p. 264).

It is to the idea of system, and the individual scribes and the networks with which they operated, that the book's final two chapters are dedicated. As Bertrand notes, if earlier periods of medieval writing have had their outputs assigned by specialists to somewhat artificial and utilitarian categories (charters, cartularies, ordinances, etc.), the 13th century »witnessed the sudden growth of a mass of unclassified and unclassifiable documents« (p. 273), to the extent that Bertrand's aim is not to apply old categorisations or come up with new ones, but rather to identify and examine the documentary systems in which contemporaries created »many and diverse documents and [then] link[ed] them up« (p. 274).

Of course, the names of very few scribes have come down to modern scholars, but Bertrand is not only blessed with figures such as Thierry d'Hireçon, whom Michael Clanchy calls the book's »hero« (p. 3), but makes good use of them to illustrate how innovations spread well beyond the personal archives within which they were developed (p. 332–344). As to those whose work remains anonymous, Bertrand uses script analysis to draw a distinction between true experts (*litterati*) and those whom he calls the *semi-litterati* (p. 350), who had mastered only some aspects of literary culture. The conclusions he draws here are then expanded to those who commissioned the writing of documents, with Bertrand arguing that those with a history of ordering written records (major ecclesiastical and secular authorities) continued to insist on expertise, while newcomers such as merchants, knights, and smaller religious houses cared more for accuracy of wording than the aesthetic quality of the script. Admittedly, the relatively small corpus of documents upon which such arguments rest is the same collection of Flemish schedules, but Bertrand's work is exacting and



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contextualised enough to shed important light on a little-studied topic.

In closing this review, it is worth noting that this book, like many of the documents it studies, is the work of more than one individual. Bertrand's translator, Graham Robert Edwards, has done an admirable job, to the extent that the highest praise this reviewer can give is to say that one would have little reason to suspect that this was a work of translation were it not announced on the title-page. Indeed, there are only a few instances when the original French bleeds through, such as when cartularies are described as being »like overblown balloons; if they did not explode, they certainly began to lose credibility« (p. 37). (The original – »Les cartulaires, gonflés comme des baudruches, explosent ou ne sont plus crédibles« – is at once elegant and concise in a way that is difficult to capture in English.) Likewise, »une horreur du vide« should probably have been translated as an abhorrence or dislike of empty space, rather than »a horror« (p. 181), while to describe the work of another scholar as being pursued with »febrile enthusiasm« (p. 248), rendered in the original as »avec fébrilité et enthousiasme«, is to retain a flourish that a scholar writing directly in English would almost certainly never use. In some instances, however, there is little Edwards can do – there is simply no better way to translate »parasitage documentaire« than the clunky »parasitised documents« (p. 91).

If there is anything to complain about with this important and stimulating book in comparison with its equally important and stimulating French counterpart, it is on the issues of appearance and price. Thus, unlike in the original, the numerous illustrations are reproduced in black and white rather than colour. This particular shortfall has both aesthetic and practical consequences, especially when Bernard turns his attention to rubrication and the use of colours (p. 202–212), frequently referring to illustrations that lack the very colour to which he wishes to draw the reader's attention. As for price, the French version retails for a very reasonable 32 €, while the translation reviewed here is a whopping 120 €, thereby meaning that the student audience for whom its contents would be most useful are likely to find it unaffordable (as are many university libraries).

Happily, at the time of writing, the French original is available for free download online⁴. As such, this reviewer would advise anyone interested in Bernard's work to download (or purchase, if so inclined) this version. That said, in either English or French, the reader will discover a book that is of importance not just for those scholars interested in the period and documents at its heart, but for anyone wanting to understand more about the development and control of the written word throughout the Middle Ages.



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⁴ <https://books.openedition.org/psorbonne/29449> (08/05/2020).