PART I

 SOURCES AND METHODS
CHAPTER ONE

BEYOND THE TEXT:
MEDIEVAL DOCUMENTARY PRACTICES

Historians have their method, just like anyone else, and they’re jealous of it, but the Iliad shames any history of Greece, and Dante stands supreme above the world’s collected medievalists. Of course, the medievalists don’t know it, but everyone else does. As a way to arrive at the truth, exactitude and methodology are, in the end, far inferior to vision and apotheosis.

Mark Helprin

Medieval Charters, Then and Now

According to the Carolingian poet Rabanus Maurus, writing served best the interests of the truth and was the perfect norm of salvation. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, Gerald of Wales commented that “writing is an exacting business. First you decide what to leave out, and then you have to polish up what you put in.” Writing, from both perspectives, encompassed a wide variety of forms: manuscripts, documents, seals, engraved metals and stones. Such written sources are cited interchangeably by medievalists who use them as primary materials, as a solid basis from which, and in continuity with which, to project their own historical writings.

I propose to discuss a specific class of the documentary sources available for Northern France between 1000–1230, so-called documents of practice, pragmatic records, otherwise known as charters.

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4 The following sources have been used in this chapter: Chartae Latinæ Antiquiores, ed. Albert Bruckner and Robert Marichal. Vol. XIII: France, ed. Helmut Atsma.