CHAPTER FIVE

THE LIBRARY OF THE BRETON JURIST AND HISTORIAN
BERTRAND D'ARGENTRÉ IN 1582

Malcolm Walsby

The library of the jurist and historian Bertrand d'Argentré was one of the largest private collections of Renaissance France. It is documented in a long manuscript volume entitled “Inventaire de la librairie de messire Bertrand d'Argentré, senneschal de Rennes, sieur de Gosnés” preserved in the municipal library of Rennes. The importance of this inventory arises in part from the sheer number of works enumerated: the manuscript lists almost 3,000 different titles.1 With the advent of print, amassing large libraries was no longer the preserve of the richest members of society. In a clear break from the manuscript era, the most substantial collections of books in Renaissance France were not, on the whole, owned by powerful noblemen seeking to assert their prestige through patronage but instead tended to belong to wealthy jurists, ecclesiastical figures and men of letters. Although Catherine de Medici and the kings of France had amassed considerable collections, this did not encourage the rest of the nobility to form large libraries. Instead, by in the mid-sixteenth century, prominent figures of the French legal world and renowned bibliophiles such as Pierre Lizet, Jean le Ferron and Antoine du Prat put together collections that ranged from a few hundred to just over a thousand books.2

With the notable exception of the extraordinary library of the governor of Forez, Claude d'Urfé, the largest French collections of the second half of the century belonged to jurists.3 But the information we have on these

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1 Inventory of Bertrand d’Argentré’s library, 1582, BM Rennes, Ms. 568.
libraries is very limited and we are forced to rely on approximate estimations. Thus the library of the magistrate and historian Claude Fauchet was thought to comprise approximately 2,000 books whilst it is estimated that the treasurer-general Jean Grolier had collected as many as 3,000 volumes during his lifetime. The difficulty with such estimations is establishing whether or not they were based on an informed evaluation of the number of volumes actually present or whether this was simply a way of reinforcing the idea that they owned lots of books. Certainly, it has been suggested that these appraisals may well have exaggerated the importance of the collections. More precise data has been provided by a study of the books owned by another jurist, the counsellor of the Paris Parlement Claude Dupuy. His library was the subject of a detailed post-mortem inventory by the Parisian printer and bookseller Denis Duval in 1595. Despite the fact that Dupuy died at just the relatively modest age of 49, he had amassed a considerable collection of some 2,000 printed and manuscript volumes.

In this context, it is unsurprising that a celebrated jurist such as Bertrand d’Argentré would have put together an important collection of books. But with almost three thousand volumes, Argentré’s library was as large as or larger than those of his contemporaries. Furthermore, this is the largest collection in Renaissance France for which we have a full inventory. Thanks to the document analysed here, we can have a precise indication of the titles that composed the library, even if it is often hard to identify exact editions that Argentré would have owned. What makes the list of Bertrand d’Argentré’s books all the more interesting is that, unlike all the other libraries owned by the jurists we have mentioned, this was the only collection entirely kept in provincial France. Lizet, Le Ferron, Du Prat, Grolier and Fauchet all spent the vast majority of their career in Paris where they were surrounded by the world’s largest print industry and a substantial and successful network of local booksellers who could easily obtain books from all over Europe. That Argentré was able to collect so many volumes in Rennes can seem more surprising.


6 J. Delatour, Une bibliothèque humaniste, p. 4.