FRANCE AND THE TRANSMISSION OF
LATIN MANUSCRIPTS

Ofelia N. Salgado

The study of the migration of manuscripts, as part of the history of libraries, is one of the most interesting chapters in the history of culture. It provides us with a clear picture of the contribution of every nation to the foundations of modern civilization. France is particularly interesting in such studies, since it was on its territory that a large number of ancient classical manuscripts were kept and copied in the Middle Ages.\(^1\) Or, in Léopold Delisle’s words, “Where the hearths that slowly prepared the progress of modern times shone for a long while.”\(^2\) Delisle uses the metaphor of ‘foyers’ (‘hearth’) for ancient manuscripts, which is also found in the writings of Jean de Gagny, the theologian from the University of Paris and chaplain of King François I.\(^3\) The deeper we enter these studies, the more we are amazed at the splendour of the mediaeval French libraries. Their magnificence was very early acknowledged by the Italian Renaissance, whose representatives searched for classical texts at old French monasteries in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

It was the French origin of some of the most beautiful manuscripts from the schools of Saint-Denis, Saint-Bénigne of Dijon, Lyons, Tours, Orléans and St-Benoît-sur-Loire that “the noted book-thief Libri” tried to suppress after stealing them from French libraries in the 1840s.\(^4\) With the help of expert calligraphers he altered the attribution of many manuscripts to give them a false Italian provenience.\(^5\) But those manuscripts, witnesses of one of the French glories, were subsequently reattributed to their original producers as documents of truly French origin, and they returned to France after an exile in England of about forty years.\(^6\)

---

1 Delisle 1888: lxxv–vi.
2 Id. lxxxvi.
3 Gagny 1537: fol. [α3].
4 Lowe and Rand 1922: 44.
5 Delisle 1888: xiv, xx et passim.
6 Id. lxxxvi and xiv.
Ten of these manuscripts, now at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, are of classical Latin authors: Ovid (*De Remedio Amoris*) and Persius, thirteenth century (BN lat. 8246); Horace, twelfth century (BN n. a. lat. 1625); Solinus, twelfth century (BN lat. 6812); Virgil, eleventh century (BN n. a. lat. 1624); Statius, eleventh century (BN n. a. lat. 1627); Hyginus, tenth century (BN lat. 8728); Cicero, ninth century (BN n. a. lat. 454); Lucan, ninth century (BN n. a. lat. 1626); and Justin, ninth century (BN n. a. lat. 1601). Two of them, BN lat. 8246 and n. a. lat. 1601, had belonged to Pierre Pithou, the famous sixteenth-century man of letters and manuscript collector, while an Oribasius of the seventh or eighth century (BN n. a. lat. 1619) was in the possession of his younger brother François. Other collectors in the sixteenth and following centuries, such as the Dupuys, Petaus, Bouhiers and Fauchet, were also credited with ownership of some of the manuscripts later stolen by Libri, who “directed [them] on an interesting pilgrimage,” as E.K. Rand said of the *Codex Bellouacensis* or *Riccardianus* of Pliny’s *Epistles*, now *Ashburnhamensis* R 98 in the Laurentian Library in Florence, which suffered a similar fate at Libri’s hands.

As Delisle comments, every time a new item from a mediaeval French library was catalogued by the staff of the Department of Manuscripts of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris it was an occasion for celebration because they could record along with a manuscript the name of a famous owner in the past. For, as Delisle says, we ought to thank not only French mediaeval ecclesiastical institutions for the preservation of both Christian and classical ancient manuscripts, but to express our gratitude to private collectors who diligently kept them safely in times of religious wars and civil unrest, thus making it possible for those relics to continue on their silent career from late antiquity or the Middle Ages to modern times.

One of the glories of French mediaeval monastic and capitular libraries was that they had the wisdom to keep for centuries some of the most remarkable palaeographical monuments of antiquity, such as the famous *Schedae Vergilianae* (‘Dionysianus’ or ‘Augusteus’) in square

---

7 Id. xc and n. 1.
8 Id. lxxxix n. 1.
9 Lowe and Rand 1922: 44; cf. also Havet 1883: 251–254.
10 Delisle 1888: lxxxix.
11 Id., *ibid.*