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On the Definition and Uses of a Medieval Notebook

(Ad van Els, *A Man and His Manuscripts. The Notebooks of Ademar of Chabannes (989-1034)*, Brepols, Turnhout, 2020, 337p. Translated by Thea Summerfield)

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Ad van Els's book, *A Man and His Manuscripts. The Notebooks of Ademar of Chabannes (989-1034)*, has a positivist approach. Many pages contain paleographical descriptions of Ademar's writing (Els 2020, 31-88, 127-238). Els uses his detailed study to identify other manuscripts than the Vossianus Latinus Octavo 15 for which Ademar was the scribe, gathering an impressive list of such pieces. The second positivist aspect is represented by the detail-oriented account of codicological aspects of the Vossianus Latinus Octavo 15, which leads to the reconstruction of the original order of the quires (Els 2020, 89-125). The book is clearly the work of a specialist who uses all the tricks of the trade to reconstruct the initial form of the material that he is working with.

This would, however, be impossible without a larger framework that surpasses the descriptive approach, and *A Man and His Manuscripts* delivers on this aspect as well. Ad van Els defines the notion of author and explains in what way he uses it, he redefines the term "autograph", and finds a definition for the term "notebook" within the medieval book culture. This framework proves useful for researchers that are not directly interested in Ademar of Chabannes but preoccupied by how note-taking functioned in the Middle Ages.

In consequence, it presents a special interest not only since it provides an exhaustive biography and bibliography for a very fascinating medieval intellectual, Ademar of Chabannes, but also because it insists upon certain more general aspects regarding the study and definition of medieval notebooks.

The fact that we use a certain type of terminology to describe practices from our past to make them accessible to the contemporary reader

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needs further exploring, and this is exactly what Ad van Els offers us on several occasions. For instance, he does so in defining what can be considered an autograph (Els 2020, 32-34) as well as when he tries to find an appropriate definition for what we might call a notebook (Els 2020, 106).

His solution to the first issue is quite interesting and innovative, given how broadly he defines what can be considered an “autograph”:

“In order to avoid this problem of a sliding scale, I favour a very broad definition where Ademar’s autographs are concerned. Thus, any text, drawing, or musical notation that can be identified (on palaeographical or other grounds) as the handwritten product of a person who is known by name deserves to be regarded as an autograph. In other words, my definition is governed purely by material circumstances: a text by Prudentius that was copied by Ademar counts as an Ademar autograph.” (Els 2020, 34).

Although the author only applies it to his case study, I believe that this principle could be used as a rule of thumb when we decide whether a notebook is an autograph or not. If we know the scribe by name and we also know that he took a series of notes with a specific purpose in mind, then we can call that grouping of notes an autograph, regardless of their actual originality. Despite originality not being a factor in deciding whether a text is an autograph, van Els does classify autographs according to originality. So, we can have a literal copy, a copy with some adaptations (to fit personal needs), an adaptation, a compilation or a text composed and written by the author himself (Els 2020, 34).

The definition of a notebook (*libellus*) that Ad van Els settles on is not necessarily original. It is extracted from James O’Donnell’s article “Retractions”, published in the volume *The Whole Book. Cultural Perspectives on the Medieval Miscellany*, edited by S.G. Nichols and S. Wenzel where a notebook is defined as:

“<...> an open-ended collection created and arranged for its usefulness to the owner/author, making sense purely in terms of the owner’s/author’s needs.” (O’Donnell 1996, 171-172)

Although the user’s needs are not to be neglected when talking about a medieval notebook, we should mention that there was a certain intention of surpassing the strictly personal use when an author compiled a notebook. The proof for this is that in many situations the notebooks were sold or donated. So, despite being primarily guided by personal individual interests, notebooks were in a way meant to be useful to an entire community.

The same can be said for the notebooks of Ademar, gathered in Vossianus Latinus Octavo 15. The way in which they were organized made it indeed very difficult for somebody other than Ademar to navigate them – the interventions of later owners of the manuscript having further complicated the matter – as is very aptly demonstrated by Ad van Els. (Els 2020, 89-125)

Johann Friedrich Lindemann (1792-1854), the editor of Priscian's *Praeexercitamina* is invoked by the author to emphasize this exact point. He collated the text from Vossianus Latinus Octavo 15, Ademar's notebooks (in 1817), and famously exclaimed:

“For there are found in this manuscript so many inconsistencies, so many worthless things, so many trivialities, so many distortions and so much that is worn-out that one hardly knows where to find the patience to examine it all painstakingly (*Nam tot varia, tot discrepantia, tot vilia, tot parva excerpta, tot male habita et detrita, in eo inveniuntur, ut nescias, qua animi patientia omnia perlegas.*)” (Els 2020, 90)

Be that as it may, the intention behind the gathering of the material was, even in the case of Ademar of Chabannes, that of serving his community. He collected some material in notebooks that he considered he could reuse to teach his own students in Angoulême, he himself having studied in Limoges and having returned to Angoulême in 1014 (Els 2020, 21). Upon his return he already had some notebooks meant to be used in that precise purpose. This point is further developed in the fifth chapter of the book, “Ademar as a Teacher: Collecting, Storing and Transmitting Knowledge” (Els 2020, 239-261), and is best summarized by the final statement of the chapter which characterizes the collection in Vossianus Latinus Octavo 15:

“Diversity, a handy format and open-endedness are the constructive principles of the collection as a whole, as it had to respond to the skill and changing needs of a schoolmaster.” (Els 2020, 261).

The theoretical framework proposed by van Els works well for the finality of the book as a whole. It would, however, have been interesting to see a more ample discussion of certain aspects. Take for instance the definition of a notebook: other authors who establish criteria for such artefacts might have been cited, such as Lucia Gualdo Rosa who sketches the main traits of a notebook (Gualdo Rosa 1993, XVII), a comparison between the notebook of Ademar and other, later, such artefacts could have been made, so as to be able to answer some more general questions, such as: How is this notebook different from later medieval ones? How is it

similar? Why should we even talk about notebooks in this case?

The purpose of this review was to outline two aspects that could serve in further theorizing on the definition and uses of medieval notebooks put forward by the book *A Man and His Manuscripts. The Notebooks of Ademar of Chabannes*, authored by Ad van Els: what can we call an autograph? And what is the pragmatic definition of a “medieval notebook”? More precisely, how can we define a notebook by its intended uses? The two aspects are elegantly touched upon in the text. The book has many other interesting points, among which the reconstruction of Ademar’s biography (Els 2020, 19-29) and the comprehensive study of his scribal activity stand out (Els 2020, 31-88, 127-238). These points, however, are beyond the intentions of the present contribution.

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