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*Theoretische Erwägungen
zur „pragmatischen Schriftlichkeit“ Roberts von Torigni*

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Abstract:

This article offers some theoretical considerations on the literacy of Robert of Torigni (1106-1186), monk/prior of Le Bec (départ. Eure, cant. Brionne) and abbot of Mont-Saint-Michel (départ. Manche, cant. Pontorson), and one of the most celebrated historians of the twelfth century. In recent years, scholars have shown a renewed interest in Robert as an author and scribe, including his handwriting, his librarianship, his use of archival sources, and his working methods as a historian. At the same time, however, there is no study that approaches Robert's relationship with the written word from a conceptual point of view. The present article attempts to fill this lacuna by revisiting Robert's literary activities in the light of what is known amongst medievalists as the concept of "pragmatic literacy".

Keywords: Robert of Torigni, pragmatic literacy, monasticism, community, memory, historical writing

Résumé:

Cet article offre quelques réflexions théoriques autour de l'écriture de Robert de Torigni (1106-1186), moine/prieur du Bec-Hellouin (départ. Eure, cant. Brionne), abbé du Mont-Saint-Michel (départ. Manche, cant. Pontorson) et célèbre historien du XII^e siècle. Ces dernières années, les chercheurs se sont intéressés à Robert en tant qu'auteur et scribe en se penchant notamment sur son écriture, sa bibliothéconomie, son utilisation des archives et ses méthodes

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1. This article is based on an oral communication held in the medieval chapter house of Mont-Saint-Michel on 5 September 2018. Whilst expanded in places and furnished with notes and a bibliography, the communication's original tone and style of expression have been maintained on purpose. I would like to thank the members of the audience for their helpful comments, particularly Véronique Gazeau and Stéphane Lecouteux, as well as the two anonymous experts whose detailed suggestions have been of great value in revising the article for publication. All URLs cited throughout this article were last accessed on 16 December 2021.

de travail. Cependant, aucune étude n'aborde la relation de Robert avec l'écrit d'un point de vue conceptuel. Cet article se propose donc de combler ces lacunes en réexaminant les activités littéraires de Robert à la lumière du concept d'« écriture pragmatique » bien connu des médiévistes.

Mots-clés: Robert de Torigni, écriture pragmatique, monachisme, communauté, mémoire, écriture de l'histoire

Riassunto:

Questo articolo offre alcune riflessioni teoriche sulla scrittura di Roberto di Torigni (1106-1186), monaco/priore di Bec-Hellouin (Eure, Brionne), abate di Mont-Saint-Michel (Manche, Pontorson) e famoso storico del XII secolo. Negli ultimi anni, i ricercatori si sono interessati a Robert come autore e scriba, concentrandosi in particolare sulla sua scrittura, la sua biblioteconomia, il suo uso degli archivi e i suoi metodi di lavoro. Tuttavia, nessuno studio ha affrontato il rapporto di Robert con la parola scritta da un punto di vista concettuale. Questo articolo si propone quindi di colmare questa lacuna riesaminando le attività letterarie di Robert alla luce del concetto di "scrittura pragmatica" ben noto ai medievalisti.

Parole chiave: Roberto di Torigni, scrittura pragmatica, monachesimo, comunità, memoria, scrivere la storia

Zusammenfassung:

Dieser Aufsatz bietet einige theoretisch-methodische Erwägungen zum Schriftverständnis und zum Schriftgebrauch Roberts von Torigni (1106-1186), des Mönchs und Kloster-Priors von Le Bec (départ. Eure, cant. Brionne) und späteren Abts von Mont-Saint-Michel (départ. Manche, cant. Pontorson), der zu den bekanntesten Geschichtsschreibern des zwölften Jahrhunderts zählt. Jüngere Forschungen haben erneut Interesse an Robert gezeigt, insbesondere an seinen Funktionen als Autor, Schreiber/Kalligraph, Bibliothekar und Benutzer archivalischer Schriften, sowie an seinen Arbeitsmethoden als Historiker. Eine konzeptuelle Untersuchung zu Roberts Beziehung mit unterschiedlichen Gebrauchs- und Ausdrucksformen mittelalterlicher Schriftlichkeit ist hingegen bislang nicht versucht worden. Der vorliegende Aufsatz widmet sich diesem Desiderat, indem er Roberts Schrifttätigkeit erstmals konkret im Rahmen "pragmatischer Schriftlichkeit" durchleuchtet.

Schlagwörter: Robert von Torigni, pragmatische Schriftlichkeit, Klosterkultur, Gemeinschaft, Erinnerung, Geschichtsschreibung

Robert of Torigni requires few words of introduction amongst scholars and students of medieval Normandy and the Anglo-Norman world. Born in Torigni-sur-Vire (départ. Manche, cant. Condé-sur-Vire) in 1106, Robert entered the Norman monastery of Le Bec (départ. Eure, cant. Brionne) in 1128, advanced to the rank of prior in or around 1149, and was made abbot of Mont-Saint-Michel (départ. Manche, cant. Pontorson) in 1154, an office he held until his death in 1186². A prolific and skilled writer of history or "chronography", he is probably best known for his redaction of William of Jumièges' *Gesta Normannorum ducum* and, in particular, for his most ambitious and original work, a continuation of

2. SPEAR, 2004; EMBREE, 2010; see also GAZEAU, 2007, vol. 2, p. 220-225.

Sigebert of Gembloux's world chronicle known as the *Chronica*³. Apart from his historiographical and annalistic oeuvre, Robert has also attracted scholars' attention thanks to, for example, his interest in genealogy and prosopography, his close relationship with the English king Henry II, to whom he dedicated the *Chronica*, and his association with other contemporary and near-contemporary writers of history such as Orderic Vitalis, Hugh of Fleury, and Henry of Huntingdon⁴.

In recent years, scholars have shown a renewed interest in Robert's "profile" as an author and/or scribe, thereby facilitating productive discussions and collaborations, as well as conducting detailed case studies of, for example, Robert's handwriting, his librarianship, his use of archival sources, and, lately, his working methods as a historian⁵. Taken together, these studies have generated important insights into Robert's broad portfolio of activities and his involvement with the everyday life and routine of his two monastic communities. What so far has been missing, by contrast, is a study that approaches Robert's relationship with the written word – that is to say, his "literacy" – from a conceptual point of view. The present article aims to move the conversation more firmly into this direction by offering some theoretical considerations of Robert's literacy that take their primary inspiration from scholarship on what is known as "pragmatic literacy". As I hope to show here, adopting (and adapting) existing terminologies and conceptual frameworks for studying pragmatic forms and uses of medieval literacy can help us identify some important characteristics of Robert's authorial and scribal profile, enabling us to contextualise his life and career within the wider socio-literary developments in the twelfth century.

"Pragmatic literacy" – what is it?

The notion or concept of "pragmatic literacy" (in German: *pragmatische Schriftlichkeit*; in French: *écriture pragmatique*) is not a new one amongst medievalists. In fact, it has come to represent an increasingly interdisciplinary and international area of study – if not yet a "field" in its own right – that first rose to prominence in the 1970s before experiencing a particularly prolific spell during the later 1980s and 1990s⁶. Some subject disciplines and national

3. *The Gesta Normannorum Ducum of William of Jumièges, Orderic Vitalis, and Robert of Torigni*, E.M. C. VAN HOUTS (ed.); Robert of Torigni, *Chronique de Robert de Torigni, abbé du Mont-Saint-Michel*, L. DELISLE (ed.); Robert of Torigni, *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I*, vol. 4: *The Chronicle of Robert of Torigni, Abbot of the Monastery of St. Michael-in-Peril-of-the-Sea*, R. HOWLETT (ed.); the most recent edition/translation of Robert's *Chronica* is now Robert of Torigni, *The Chronography of Robert of Torigni*, T.N. BISSON (ed.), but its introduction must be used with great caution; see my critical remarks in POHL, 2021a.

4. CHIBNALL, 1967; VAN HOUTS, 1989; KEATS-ROHAN, 1993; VAN HOUTS, 1994; VAN HOUTS, 2006; BATES, 2012; CHAZAN, 2014; GAZEAU, 2014; POHL, 2015; POHL, 2016a; POHL, 2016b.

5. BISSON, 2012; POHL, 2014; POHL, 2018; LECOUEUX, 2018b; cf. also PIGEON, 1986; GIBSON, 1981.

6. A concise summary, based mainly on the German (or rather German-speaking) tradition, is provided by ANDERMANN, 2007. For the French tradition, see BRETTHAUER, 2012; DEWEZ, 2012. The anglophone tradition is discussed by BRITNELL, 1997; cf. also LACEY, 2012; STUTZMANN and BARRET, 2012.

scholarly traditions were quicker to engage in these conversations than others, and it appears that the concept's true potential was only recognised (or at least explicitly acknowledged) comparatively recently, with various promising avenues of research still ongoing and others waiting to be explored⁷. Whilst this is not the place to recapitulate more than forty years of scholarly discussion and debate, it is necessary and useful to introduce briefly the most important terminological and methodological considerations, along with some of the major criticisms that have emerged over the last few decades, followed by a working definition of “pragmatic literacy” that will be used throughout the subsequent sections of this article.

As with any theoretical concept or paradigm, it is not always easy to define precisely what is meant (and what is not meant) by “pragmatic” (or indeed by “literacy”), a challenge that is intensified further when placed in an international and multilingual context. In some instances, most notably in more recent anglophone scholarship, the term “pragmatic” has been (and still sometimes is) used to denote specific kinds or “genres” of texts and distinguish them from other genres such as literary works, thereby suggesting that “pragmatic” should be defined as object-specific⁸. By contrast, the German(-speaking) tradition and those following in its wake tend to think less in terms of genres and more along the lines of a wider methodological approach or analytical lens, thereby implying, and indeed explicitly proposing, that most (or perhaps all) texts can potentially be studied with regard to their pragmatic application(s) – though admittedly certain kinds of texts such as administrative, legal, and official records more regularly constitute the subjects of these studies than others⁹. According to this definition – introduced and advocated, first and foremost, by the interdisciplinary members of a *Sonderforschungsbereich* (SFB) at the University of Münster active 1986-1999 (“SFB 231: Träger, Felder, Formen pragmatischer Schriftlichkeit im Mittelalter”; succeeded 2000-2011 by “SFB 496: Symbolische Kommunikation und gesellschaftliche Wertesysteme vom Mittelalter bis zur Französischen Revolution”)¹⁰, the term “pragmatic” can thus be applied, in theory, to all contexts in which written texts are used in ways that aim directly at pragmatic action or seek to inform human behaviour through the provision of knowledge¹¹.

The main emphasis here is on the “forms of usage” (*Formen des Gebrauchs*) and the “provision of knowledge” (*Bereitstellung von Wissen*), rather than on the intrinsic attributes of the textual objects themselves. As a consequence,

7. Cf. the discussions in STUTZMANN and BARRET, 2012; BRETTHAUER, 2012, p. 16-17.

8. This is the case with, for example, BRITNELL, 1997, p. 3-6. Cf. also the discussions in LACEY, 2012, p. 43-44; ANHEIM and CHASTANG, 2009.

9. See ANDERMANN, 2007, p. 53-57.

10. KELLER and WORSTBROCK, 1988; cf. also the SFB's final report (*Abschlussbericht*): “Der Sonderforschungsbereich 231 (1986-1999)”, 1999.

11. KELLER, 1992, p. 1: “Als pragmatisch verstehen wir dabei alle Formen des Gebrauchs von Schrift und Texten, die unmittelbar zweckhaftem Handeln dienen oder die menschliches Tun durch die Bereitstellung von Wissen anleiten wollen”; cf. also ANDERMANN, 2007, p. 37.

pragmatic literacy becomes closely attached to acts of symbolic representation, performativity, and ritual, and it is no coincidence to find that these aspects were incorporated, and sometimes foregrounded, in subsequent studies, particularly in the context of the French(-speaking) tradition¹². Generally speaking, recent French scholarship on the subject – whilst extremely heterogeneous in its own right and often hesitant to acknowledge non-French scholarly contributions – has remained highly critical of the object-specific definition of pragmatic literacy, most notably the supposed opposition between pragmatic and literary texts¹³, and instead has favoured inclusive approaches that focus on the production, communication, and reception of pragmatically motivated knowledge¹⁴. This is reflected further in terminological distinctions such as those between *écriture* and *scripturalité* in French¹⁵, and between *Schriftlichkeit* and *Verschriftlichung* in German – semantic distinctions that are rather more difficult to express in English, though neologisms like “literalization” have been proposed in an (not altogether successful) attempt to describe “the process of becoming literate”¹⁶. A similar and indeed related preference of approach can be detected in the research outputs produced since the mid-1990s by scholars affiliated with a project hosted at the University of Utrecht under the directorship of Marco Mostert, whose written legacy, the publication series *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* (Brepols), features more than fifty titles to date (as of September 2021)¹⁷. It was this “Utrecht school” that, in a sense, helped bridge the gap between the different national traditions introduced above by identifying some important synergies between, for instance, the Münster SFBs 231/496 and the anglophone scholarship of Malcolm Parkes and Michael Clanchy, some of whose studies had been published as early as the 1970s¹⁸.

Whilst there is, perhaps unsurprisingly, no single obvious point at which the various approaches to pragmatic literacy outlined above converge, it is nevertheless possible, and useful, to propose a working definition that acknowledges the plurality of possible applications and, crucially, shows an awareness of their limitations. For the purposes of this study, “pragmatic literacy” can be defined and understood as a *modus operandi*, that is, a non-exclusive way of using written texts (including those that may be classed as “literary”) with the specific intention of codifying and/or communicating knowledge which may serve to inform individual or collective behaviour, even – and perhaps especially – if this was not the original (or at least not the primary) motivation behind the

12. For example, WEBER, 2010.

13. BRETTHAUER, 2012, p. 10-13.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 5-6; STUTZMANN and BARRET, 2012.

15. BRETTHAUER, 2012, p. 4-5; DEWEZ, 2012, p. 20-21; SCHREINER, 1992.

16. LACEY, 2012, p. 48, with reference to CLANCHY, 1999, p. 3.

17. LACEY, 2012, p. 47-51. For the *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* series and its titles, see <http://www.brepols.net/Pages/BrowseBySeries.aspx?TreeSeries=USML>.

18. Especially PARKES, 1973; CLANCHY, 1979, now in its 3rd edition (2012). A particularly useful resource from the *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* Series remains the dual-publication *Transforming the Medieval World*, F.-J. ARLINGHAUS et al. (eds.).

production of these texts. In certain cases, this pragmatic *modus operandi* might be suggested or prescribed by the prevalent socio-literary contexts, whereas in others it might reflect more of a deliberate choice on the part of the texts' user(s). In proposing this working definition, I am adapting the existing definitions by Keller, Mostert and Clanchy quoted above, at the same time as incorporating useful contextual discussions by scholars including Armando Petrucci, Bernard Guenée, and, mentioned already, Parkes¹⁹. Parkes, in his influential study on the literacy of the medieval laity, distinguishes between three general types of *literati* – the “pragmatic”, the “professional”, and the “cultivated reader” –, emphasising that these are not absolute categories, and that a single individual can act in more than one of these capacities²⁰. In a similar vein, pragmatic literacy should be considered neither an inherent condition nor an intrinsic quality, but, as this study will argue, a contextual one, perhaps even a choice²¹.

Before we (re)turn to our case study of Robert of Torigni, one more caveat must be added regarding chronology. Scholarship on pragmatic literacy generally tends to focus on the later Middle Ages, and few studies explicitly concern themselves with the period prior to 1200. There are reasons for this, of course, most prominently perhaps the general increase in literary activity, both quantitatively and qualitatively, from the late twelfth and early thirteenth century onwards, which was accompanied by unprecedented diversification that included various individuals and groups who previously had been marginalised or excluded altogether from the *milieu littéraire*. Literacy and education experienced a shift towards “widening participation” as they outgrew the ecclesiastical monopoly of the early to central Middle Ages and became incorporated more fully into secular spheres. The rise of vernacular writing amplified this diversity further, even though certain areas of written culture remained much more conservative than others in continuing to rely on Latin as their primary (and sometimes sole) medium of expression. Add to this the major structural changes and fragmentation in governance and the increasing institutionalisation and professionalisation of legal, commercial, and administrative practices, particularly in the context of Europe's growing urbanisation in the later Middle Ages²², and it comes as no surprise to witness a stark increase in the use and production of pragmatic forms of writing from the thirteenth century onwards. The period c.1250-1330/50 has recently (and aptly) been referred to as something of a “revolutionary age” for the production of “everyday writing(s)” (*écritures ordinaires*)²³, an age that “witnessed a mushrooming of record production and record keeping”²⁴. Amongst the primary beneficiaries and carriers of this “mushrooming” were not only later medieval Europe's vibrant urban centres with their old and new

19. GUENÉE, 1980, p. 77-128; amongst the most pertinent titles from Petrucci's substantial oeuvre is his seminal article PETRUCCI, 1984 (tr. 1995).

20. PARKES, 1973, p. 555.

21. Arguing in a similar vein are STOCK, 1983, and BÄUML, 1980.

22. BRITNELL, 1997, p. 6-13; ANDERMANN, 2007, p. 37-39.

23. BERTRAND, 2015 (tr. 2019); cf. my comments in POHL, 2021b.

24. SWANSON, 1997, p. 148; cf. also BRIGGS, 2000, p. 400-401.

elites, but also powerful secular courts, government officials, and bureaucratic organisations, including ecclesiastical ones, and it is these individuals, groups, and institutions that usually form the subjects of most pragmatic literacy studies to date. And yet, as Hagen Keller and others have highlighted, the beginnings of these developments often stretch back into at least the eleventh century, if not further still²⁵. Rather than concentrating on the *longue durée*, the life and career of Robert of Torigni, specifically his years as a monk/prior at Le Bec (1128-1154) and, subsequently, as abbot of Mont-Saint-Michel (1154-1186), offer an intriguing opportunity to study an individual's relationship with the written word on the cusp of what is generally considered the breakthrough period of pragmatic literacy.

Robert's early career and his relationship with the written word

To develop a better sense of how pragmatically driven (or not) Robert's relationship with twelfth-century literary and documentary culture really was, we must commence our investigation at the very beginning of his career. Unfortunately, nothing concrete is known about the first two decades of Robert's life, though scholars usually place his family amongst the ranks of Normandy's twelfth-century aristocracy²⁶. The first tangible event is his entry into the monastic community of Le Bec in 1128, when Robert, aged twenty-two, took the habit and made his profession to the then abbot, Boso (1124-1136)²⁷. Boso was not well at that point, having grappled for decades with a progressively incapacitating illness which during the final years of his life left him almost paralysed²⁸. Due to his rapidly deteriorating health, Boso became increasingly unable to fulfil his abbatial duty of personally overseeing the monastery's daily life and routine, let alone governing it and administering its considerable estate. Whilst such a permanent indisposition of the abbot surely would have been problematic for any monastic community, it was particularly challenging for one the size and influence of Le Bec. Founded in 1034 by a Norman knight-turned-hermit called Herluin, the once humble cell erected on the latter's ancestral lands had grown into one of the wealthiest and best-connected abbeys in Normandy, and, by the time of Robert's profession, its extensive demesne and kinship networks stretched far beyond the local territories and across the English Channel²⁹.

With Boso "out of action", the abbey's governance and administration fell entirely to his second-in-command, Theobald, who, after having held the office of prior for ten years and serving as "acting abbot" since at least 1134 (if not earlier), was elected abbot upon Boso's death in 1136 and became archbishop of

25. KELLER, 1992, p. 1.

26. GAZEAU, 2007, vol. 2, p. 220-225 (p. 221); SPEAR, 2004; Robert of Torigni, *Chronicle...*, p. ix-x; now see Robert of Torigni, *Chronography...*, vol. 1, p. xxvi-xxvii.

27. GAZEAU, 2007, vol. 2, p. 221; POHL, 2018, p. 114-115.

28. PORÉE, 1901, vol. 1, p. 296-298; GAZEAU, 2007, vol. 2, p. 16; GIBSON, 1981, p. 168.

29. On the foundation of Le Bec, see FOULON, 2018; GAZEAU, 1985. On the abbey's kinship networks, see POTTER, 2014; POTTER, 2018. On Le Bec's demesne, see CHIBNALL, 1968.

Canterbury two years later³⁰. Robert in his *Chronica* reserves nothing but praise for Theobald, applauding his moral excellence (*probitas/bonitas*) and knowledge (*scientia*), and stressing his instrumental role in the coronation of King Henry II, Robert's patron (see below), in 1154, the year of Robert's election as abbot of Mont-Saint-Michel³¹. In fact, Robert was not the only one to refer to Theobald in such glowing terms. The brief hagiographical account of Theobald's deeds as Le Bec's abbot and later archbishop of Canterbury – which is little more than a short notice, rather than a fully-fledged *gesta abbatum/episcoporum* – composed by one of his contemporaries, possibly Le Bec's own "cantor-historian", Milo Crispin, commences by listing a set of similar qualities (*vir genere clarus, moribus ornatus, vita honestus*, etc.), before emphasising that the celebrated abbot had been *litteris bene eruditus*³². In the most general sense, we may translate this as "well-educated in the use of letters/the written word", though perhaps in this context a more specific translation of *litterae* as "records/accounts" or "charters/deeds" might be preferable to reflect Theobald's managerial and diplomatic activities, first as prior acting on behalf of his abbot, then as abbot proper, and, from 1139, as archbishop³³. Indeed, the term *littera(e)* was used frequently during the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries to designate charters and diplomatic records, especially in the Anglo-Norman and Angevin realm³⁴.

Le Bec's medieval monastic archives, though fragmentary and often reconstructed with difficulty on the basis of later copies and transcriptions, provide at least some general indication as to the nature and scale of the administrative duties of its institutional superiors, including both Theobald and Robert³⁵.

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30. GAZEAU, 2007, vol. 2, p. 18-19; GIBSON, 1981, p. 169. On the Canterbury years, see SALTMAN, 1956; TRUAX, 2012; BRANTL, 1972.
 31. Robert of Torigni, *Chronique...*, vol. 1, p. 208 and 289-290. On Robert's relationship with Theobald, see POHL, 2018, p. 117 and the references provided there.
 32. "Vita venerabilis Theobaldi, quinti abbatis Becci, postea archiepiscopi Cantuariensis", J.-P. MIGNE (ed.), col. 733. On the *Vita*'s authorship, see most recently VAN HOUTS, 2018, p. 128. On the subject of medieval "cantor-historians", see the various contributions in *Medieval Cantors and Their Craft*, K.A.-M. BUGYIS et al. (eds.).
 33. See NIERMEYER, 2002, vol. 1, p. 804; cf. also HABEL and GRÖBEL, 1989, p. 224.
 34. One of many examples is King John's invitation to the prior and monks of Christ Church Cathedral Priory, Canterbury, to return from exile in 1216, which survives in the original (London, Lambeth Palace Library, ms Cartae Antiquae XI.7) and is endorsed *Littere I(ohannis) reg(is)*. Further examples from Henry II's reign can be found in, for instance, *The Royal Charters of the City of Lincoln*, W. de GRAY BIRCH (ed.), *passim*; see also the list of charters and privileges pertaining to Lewes Priory entitled *Summa litterarum prioratus Lewensis*, which comprises several *litterae regis Anglie* alongside various *litterae comitis/comitisse d'Irondela*, etc.; printed in *Monasticon Cluniacense Anglicanum*, G.F. DUCKETT (ed.), vol. 1, no. 437, p. 208-210.
 35. The reconstruction of Le Bec's medieval monastic archives is a rather complex subject that cannot be treated at length here, but the main sources and issues have been discussed succinctly by POTTER, 2014, vol. 1, p. 46-49. Potter's unpublished dissertation includes a valuable appendix volume that collects and (partially) edits a total of 627 charters relating to Le Bec issued during the period 1034-1204, along with another 178 charters from the same period that relate to the abbey's dependent priories in Normandy and England. Of these c.800 charters, about a dozen were issued and/or witnessed by Theobald; *ibid.*, vol. 2, nos. 306, 312-315, 343-344, 439, SL5, SP15, and SN13. Cf. also CHIBNALL, 1968, p. 1, 2, 7, 12 (= nos. I, II, XI, and XXII) and the edition of Theobald's archiepiscopal charters by SALTMAN, 1956, p. 233-534.

An important question to ask is where they might have learned the pragmatic skills and knowledge necessary for conducting these activities in the first place. In other words, where and when did people such as Theobald and Robert receive their literacy and education? One possibility is that the monastery provided this kind of education internally, allowing its monks to "learn on the job", whereas another, and perhaps more likely, is that it took place outside the cloister, for example, in one of Normandy's cathedral schools or, alternatively, in the secular milieu of a court or aristocratic household³⁶. We will remember that, just like Robert, Theobald had been brought up in the secular world as the son of a Norman knight with landholdings located on Le Bec's monastic demesne³⁷. Theobald became prior within a decade of having joined the monastery in 1117, a promotion that took Robert about twice as long, and chances are that he, too, had only taken the cowl as an adult. Theobald's accelerated progression through the ecclesiastical ranks, whilst not exactly atypical for Le Bec's monks – we only have to think of, for example, Lanfranc, Anselm, and, not least, Robert –, suggests that he had been well-connected before he decided to become a monk, and that he cultivated and expanded these networks further in his capacity as prior, abbot, and, eventually, archbishop. The same can also be said for Robert, who appears to have been taken under Theobald's wing when he first entered the monastery – a close mentoring process which was not unusual practice at Le Bec, where, from the early days of Lanfranc and Anselm, senior monks can be seen regularly looking after and tutoring new recruits, especially if a novice showed particular intellectual promise and/or capacity from the outset³⁸. That Theobald was not mistaken about the potential of his protégé and fellow aristocrat-son from Torigni-sur-Vire is shown not only by Robert's subsequent appointment as Le Bec's prior, virtually following in Theobald's footsteps, but also by his prolific literary activity on behalf of the monastic community.

It is true, of course, that in quantitative terms the early decades of Robert's career at Le Bec are significantly less well documented than his thirty-two-year abbacy at Mont-Saint-Michel, which is reflected much more comprehensively in the surviving records³⁹. This is not altogether surprising, however, given the extremely low survival rate of Le Bec's pre-modern book collection, specifically because of the large-scale destruction and dispersal of its eleventh- and twelfth-century library and archives. As the recent studies by Jenny Weston and Laura Cleaver have shown, fewer than thirty of the more than 250 volumes recorded in

36. On monastic education and pragmatic literacy, see SWANSON, 1997, p. 162-164; cf. also OLIVA, 2013. For Normandy specifically, see now MÜNSTER-SWENDSEN, forthcoming; cf. also DE JONG, 2020. On the administrative training of abbots and priors, see particularly HEALE, 2016, p. 101-138. On the secular influx in medieval monastic education, see GARDNER, 1996.

37. GAZEAU, 2007, vol. 2, p. 18 makes a compelling case for identifying Theobald's family estate of *Tierricivilla* with Thierville (départ. Eure, cant. Montfort-sur-Risle).

38. See GIBSON, 1981, p. 169. On the careers of some of Le Bec's other monks, see VAUGHN, 2012. An example of the personal tutelage provided by Le Bec's senior monks for their most promising protégés is discussed in POHL, 2020.

39. POHL, 2014, p. 54-70; POHL, 2018, *passim*.

Le Bec's twelfth-century book lists (now Avranches, Bibl. patrimoniale, ms 159, fol. 1v-3r) can be identified with manuscripts whose whereabouts are known today, resulting in a meagre survival rate of just over 10%⁴⁰. More recently still, Stéphane Lecouteux has revisited and revised these figures in his comprehensive investigation – the most detailed one to date – of the formation and dispersion of Le Bec's book collection between the eleventh and the nineteenth century⁴¹. In addition to the books listed by Weston and Cleaver, and, previously, by Geneviève Nortier, Lecouteux has been able to identify a small number of additional volumes whose provenance he compellingly connects to Le Bec⁴², though the overall survival rate of the abbey's medieval library still remains humble by any standard, especially when compared with the large(r) number of books known to survive from the collections of other Norman monasteries of similar or even smaller size.

As has been demonstrated elsewhere, however, it is nevertheless possible to reconstruct a sizeable corpus of written texts that Robert used and, in several cases, helped produce during his twenty-six years at Le Bec thanks to later medieval copies or early modern transcriptions⁴³. These texts include detailed commemorative and administrative records that played a vital part in the organisation of the community's day-to-day life, for example, the long lists of monastic professions (*Nomina monachorum*) and lay benefactors (*Nomina fratrum familiarium*), which originally might have been combined with the abbey's necrology to form a single "book of life" (*liber vitae*), but also various chronographical and computistical tools such as a liturgical calendar, a martyrology and a set of annotated Easter Tables⁴⁴. Robert regularly made use of these texts during the period of his priorate (1149-1154), and possibly during previous years, too. This is evidenced by the fact that the detailed prosopographical information contained in these documents – their "raw data", so to speak – figures prominently throughout Robert's own historiographical compositions⁴⁵. Indeed, this data has been identified as constituting a key source for the composition not just of Robert's redaction of William of Jumièges' *Gesta Normannorum ducum*⁴⁶, but also of a number of shorter historiographical works that can be attributed, at least partially, to his authorship. The latter

40. WESTON, 2018; CLEAVER, 2018. Cf. also NORTIER, 1971, p. 34-60.

41. Stéphane Lecouteux first presented these new findings in an oral communication ("État de la recherche sur la dispersion de la bibliothèque monastique du Bec") at the half-day colloquium "Le renouveau historiographique du monachisme en Normandie, autour de l'abbaye du Bec", which was held at the abbey of Le Bec-Hellouin on 7 September 2018. The printed version consists of two parts: LECOUTEUX, 2018a; LECOUTEUX, 2019.

42. LECOUTEUX, 2018a, p. 268 and 271-275; cf. also NORTIER, 1971, *passim*.

43. POHL, 2016a, p. 344-366; cf. also LECOUTEUX, 2018b, p. 42-44.

44. On these lists, see POHL, 2016a, p. 357-366.

45. POHL, 2016a, p. 366-371; GAZEAU, 2014, p. 255-259. A useful comparison for the use of such "raw data" in historiographical compositions during earlier periods is offered by ROSÉ, 2017.

46. See VAN HOUTS, 1989, p. 233, who in rehabilitating Robert's reliability as a genealogist also draws attention to the significance of oral tradition and communicative memory amongst the monks of Le Bec. On the inaccuracies in Robert's genealogies, see further KEATS-ROHAN, 1993.

include both a "rudimentary" monastic chronicle of Le Bec and a series of annals, whose recent re-examination seems to indicate a greater level of authorial involvement on Robert's part than previously thought, revealing him not merely as a continuator, but as the compiler of a serial abbatial biography – a *chronica abbatum* – covering the period from 851 up to 1128, the year of Robert's entry into the community of Le Bec⁴⁷. Whilst this is not the place to offer a detailed discussion of these works or their manuscript tradition, fascinating though they may be, we may at least ask what Robert's frequent use of such texts can tell us about his pragmatic literacy and why he was, and continued to be, so deeply invested in chronicling the history of the individuals and families connected to his monastic community.

To some degree, the answers to these questions are likely to be found in the wider socio-political and socio-literary developments of the twelfth century, a period often described as a "renaissance" *avant la lettre*⁴⁸. Without doubt, one of the areas that were affected and transformed most dramatically by the general increase and widening participation in twelfth-century forms of literacy was that of information networks; that is, the channels and milieus of communication that connected different individuals, groups and institutions – both ecclesiastical and secular – through the collection, codification and cultivation of knowledge⁴⁹. The sources that can help us trace and reconstruct these wide-ranging networks include, for example, the aforementioned lists of professions and benefactors drawn up at Le Bec during the twelfth century, some of which were maintained and continued well beyond the Middle Ages⁵⁰. Indeed, amongst the most common manifestations of pragmatic literacy were precisely these (and similar) kinds of lists⁵¹, whose detailed accounts of the individuals and families connected to a particular institution – or, in some cases, as part of pan-institutional networks and confraternities – offered important spiritual benefits through the commemoration of the dead and their *cura animarum*⁵². At the same time, however, these institutional(ised) forms of record keeping also served some vital pragmatic functions within the everyday life and

47. LECOUEUX, 2017. For a previous study and edition and translation of *De abbatibus*, see BISSE, 2012.

48. The existing literature on this subject is vast and cannot be referred to in full here. For some of the principal arguments and debates, see SWANSON, 1999; *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, R.L. BENSON, G. CONSTABLE and C.D. LANHAM (eds.); *European Transformations*, T.F.X. NOBLE and J. VAN ENGEN (eds.); *Anglo-Norman Political Culture*, C.W. HOLLISTER (ed.); DAMIAN-GRINT, 1999. A helpful selection of relevant sources and excerpts is provided by NOVIKOFF, 2016. On the use(s) and development(s) of manuscripts during this period, see the recent contributions in *The European Book in the Twelfth Century*, E. KWAKKEL and R. THOMSON (eds.). Cf. also KELLER, 1992, p. 3.

49. Recent contributions to the study of such communication networks and literary/historiographical milieus include TAHKOKALLIO, forthcoming; TAHKOKALLIO, 2019; WETZSTEIN, 2014. For earlier periods, cf. GILLET, 2020.

50. POHL, 2016a, p. 357-360; POTTER, 2018, p. 362-365.

51. ANDERMANN, 2007, p. 49.

52. SWANSON, 1997, p. 152-154.

administration of medieval religious communities, for example, by providing the monks with a regularly updated index of their extended kin groups and socio-political networks – a “living directory” of their monastic *familia*.

When seen in this light, lists of professions and benefactors such as those used by Robert share their pragmatic contexts of application with the inventories of the community’s other spiritual, legal and material assets, as well as, more generally, with the cartularies (and so-called “cartulary chronicles”) that were produced in rising numbers by monasteries and their leaders from the mid-eleventh century onwards, a development which has been referred to as a *mutation documentaire*⁵³. Also, in this context belong books of accounts, fiscal and diplomatic registers, and other kinds of accounting materials. Many of these had their origins in ecclesiastical contexts of administration, but by the later twelfth century they had become increasingly widespread in secular contexts, too, especially amongst large aristocratic households and princely courts⁵⁴. In studying the pragmatic applications of these and similar archival documents, some scholars distinguish between “evidential” and “utilitarian” texts, with the former being defined as witnessing an original legal or administrative act, whereas the latter are considered primarily referential in nature⁵⁵. Whilst useful in some contexts, such distinctions do not address the wider socio-literary discourses and the different types of education that determined the use and reception of these documents, nor can they assist us in studying the documents’ “users” and their relationship with the written word.

Robert’s involvement with archival and administrative forms of writing

The fact that Robert frequently used archival documents during his time at Le Bec, and the likelihood that he began to do so shortly after his profession in 1128, raises some intriguing questions regarding his education. Robert Swanson has argued compellingly that the literacy skills required for engaging with these kinds of documents in a meaningful way were usually obtained through both practice and repetition⁵⁶, which creates the possibility that Robert’s pragmatic literacy had been, if not necessarily fully formed, then at least of an operational quality by the time he became a monk at the age of twenty-two. Similarly, his comprehensive knowledge regarding the genealogies of some of Normandy’s most powerful aristocratic families might have been due not merely to their association with the monastic community of Le Bec, but also, and importantly, to Robert’s own upbringing in a household whose members likely saw themselves, if not quite on a par with, then at least as peers of families such as the Clares, the Beaumonts, the Crispins, the Giffards, and the lords of Gournay and

53. MORELLE, 2009, p. 15. Cf. also SCHREINER, 1992, p. 40 and 64-67; SWANSON, 1967, p. 147-149; OLIVA, 2013, *passim*.

54. ANDERMANN, 2007, p. 39-45.

55. See SWANSON, 1967, p. 158-159 and the references provided therein.

56. SWANSON, 1967, p. 163.

Brionne⁵⁷. There is a possibility, therefore, that Robert's claim to have relied on oral information and memory when composing his genealogies might not be quite as exaggerated as has sometimes been suggested, and that he might have used the documents in Le Bec's monastic library and archives to supplement and cement his existing knowledge about Normandy's aristocratic networks⁵⁸. Indeed, it seems difficult to explain the prominence of these aristocratic families amongst the subjects of Robert's works solely on the basis of the abbey's patronage network, considering that neither his redaction of the *Gesta Normannorum ducum* nor the *Chronica* – the two works which exhibit the most prosopographical detail – were conceptualised as institutional histories of Le Bec itself. It thus seems plausible that Robert's continuous interest in the fortunes of Normandy's secular elites was rooted, at least in part, in his earlier career and education.

The twelfth century is widely held to have witnessed an expansion of opportunities for the acquisition of pragmatic literacy skills, and Richard Britnell has categorised them into three main groups: basic, professional, and bureaucratic⁵⁹. There can be little doubt that Robert must have obtained at least basic-level literary training before he entered Le Bec, something which until c.1250 was offered primarily by monastic and cathedral schools prior to the emergence of equivalent institutions across Europe's urban communities – a shift from ecclesiastical to secular models of education which seems to have been largely complete by the end of the thirteenth century⁶⁰. It is not impossible, of course, that the young Robert had been a lay pupil at one of Normandy's well-known monastic or cathedral schools, perhaps even at Le Bec, given that since the days of Lanfranc the abbey's distinguished grammar school had been accepting male children of the local and regional aristocracy alongside its own novices and child oblates, even though the number of lay pupils was reduced under Anselm's leadership⁶¹. Following his official admission into the community, Robert presumably had every opportunity to "upskill" and elevate his literacy to the next level, that of the professional, which in Britnell's definition is closely associated with legal and ecclesiastical administration⁶². The period ranging from Prior Theobald's "quasi abbacy" (due to Boso's protracted indisposition) to Robert's own appointment as prior would have provided a particularly appropriate context for this progression.

Whether Robert's twenty-six years at Le Bec saw him advance to the level of Britnell's bureaucratic *litteratus* is difficult to ascertain. If he issued any legal or

57. VAN HOUTS, 1989, p. 221-225; POTTER, 2018, p. 346-347; POHL, 2016a, p. 334-336.

58. For Robert's statement, see *The Gesta Normannorum Ducum...*, vol. 2, p. 266, 272. A critical discussion is provided in POHL, 2016a, p. 327-329, though perhaps not enough credit is given there to the significance of the non-written tradition. That said, I still maintain that Robert's genealogies are extremely unlikely to have been composed exclusively on the basis of oral information, given that some of them extend back over several generations, sometimes spanning entire centuries and covering substantial geographical areas; *ibid.*, p. 328.

59. BRITNELL, 1997, p. 6-7.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

61. VAUGHN, 1993; VAUGHN, 1987, p. 69-70. On the monastic school of Le Bec, see also the recent study by KUHLE, 2018.

62. BRITNELL, 1997, p. 7.

administrative documents on behalf of the monastery during his short priorate (1149-1154), none of them are known to survive today, nor does his name appear amongst the witnesses of the extant charters and cartulary copies from this period⁶³. What we do know, however, is that Robert later demonstrated a considerable degree of bureaucratic literacy as abbot of Mont-Saint-Michel. Within a year of his appointment, he began to issue charters and legal documents that saw him forge crucial diplomatic relationships not only with Normandy's secular and ecclesiastical elites, but also with the rulers of foreign kingdoms and principalities, as well as with the Roman papacy⁶⁴. Given that hardly any of Robert's charters survive in the original, but almost exclusively in the form of later copies and transcriptions, it is impossible to know exactly how many of them Robert drew up *manu propria*, or whether instead he relied primarily on *amanuenses* as he did regularly for the codification of his other historiographical compositions, including the so-called "working copies" of his *Chronica* (Avranches, Bibl. patrimoniale, ms 159) and his redaction of the *Gesta Normannorum ducum* (Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, ms BPL 20), both of which Robert had copied out by his assistant scribes whilst limiting the use of his own pen to authorial interventions and corrections⁶⁵.

Thanks to a fortuitous find in the Archives départementales du Calvados, we now possess, if not the original itself, then at least a photographic reproduction of one of Robert's abbatial charters⁶⁶. Richard Allen recently rediscovered this glass-plate photograph amongst the transcriptions of no fewer than ninety charters from Mont-Saint-Michel's medieval monastic archives made during the early twentieth century by Henry Chanteux (1904-1995) prior to their destruction in 1944. In this particular charter, issued c.1172, Abbot Robert grants the abbey's rights to the forest of Bévais to William of Saint-Jean (or St John), and he does so in the presence of both King Henry II (*Hec autem concessio facta est H[enrico] rege Anglorum, duce Normannorum et Aquitanorum, et comite Andegavorum presente et assensum prebente, et munimine sigilli sui et auctoritate*

63. POTTER, 2014, vol. 2, nos. 319-344.

64. Robert's charters and his administrative correspondence from the period 1154-1186 have been collected on the basis of Mont-Saint-Michel's monastic cartulary (Avranches, Bibl. patrimoniale, ms 210, fol. 112v-118r) and other manuscripts in Robert of Torigni, *Chronique...*, vol. 2, p. 237-341. The cartulary has been edited as *The Cartulary of the Abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel*, K.S.B. KEATS-ROHAN (ed.); see also KEATS-ROHAN, 1999.

65. POHL, 2014, p. 78-80. Cf. also LECOUTEUX, 2018b, p. 6-21 for a recent discussion of Robert's possible additions to the annals of Mont-Saint-Michel. On Avranches, Bibl. patrimoniale, ms 159, see most recently PASSABÌ, 2021.

66. The photograph of Robert's charter forms part of Caen, Arch. dép. Calvados, 1 J 6, and is discussed and reproduced in ALLEN, 2018, p. 45-82. I would like to thank Richard Allen for kindly giving me access to this important article prior to its publication. The same William of Saint-Jean also appears as a beneficiary in another charter issued by Abbot Robert in November 1165, as well as in a grant made in 1196 by Richard of Saint-Georges; see "Acte 2778" (<https://www.unicaen.fr/scripta/acte/2778>) and "Acte 4251" (<https://www.unicaen.fr/scripta/acte/4251>), in *SCRIPTA, Base des actes normands médiévaux*, P. BAUDUIN (ed.); William further received land in Mellow, Surrey, according to a notification issued by King Henry II at Windsor in 1163-1166; cf. *The Letters and Charters of Henry II, King of England 1154-1189*, N. VINCENT (ed.), vol. 4, no. 2361, p. 456.

confirmante) and his son, Henry the Young King (*Presente etiam Henrico filio eius rege Anglorum, duce Normannorum, et comite Andegavorum et assensum suum prebente*)⁶⁷. What is of particular interest here is that the charter is written in what can perhaps best be described as a "chancery hand" that either closely imitates or indeed belongs to Henry II's royal chancery. The scribe is almost certainly not Robert himself, yet the fact that the act would seem to have been drafted and prepared – somewhat unusually – by its issuing authority (*Aussteller*), rather than by its recipient/beneficiary (*Empfänger*), suggests that Robert, as abbot of Mont-Saint-Michel, might well have been involved personally in its wording, even if he did not have a hand himself in the document's scribal preparation. With his royal patron present for the confirmation and performance of the legal business, Abbot Robert thus demonstrated and "staged" his command of bureaucratic literacy in a way that conformed not just to local traditions within the Manche, but also, and importantly, to the English king's chancery.

An insightful parallel is provided by another charter involving both Abbot Robert and King Henry II, this time dating from 1158. Sometime between late September and early October of that year, shortly after the feast of St Michael, Robert welcomed Henry II to Mont-Saint-Michel and obtained his confirmation and renewal of a previous grant made by Henry II's grandfather, King Henry I, who had given Mont-Saint-Michel and its abbots control over the local churches of Pontorson (dep. Manche, cant. Pontorson)⁶⁸. The charter itself is lost, but a notification sent to Archbishop Hugh of Rouen survives, if only in photographic form (the original was, again, destroyed in 1944), in the Archives départementales de la Manche (fig. 1). What is more, the royal confirmation was issued not just anywhere in the monastery, but in Robert's "new abbatial chamber" (*in nova camera abbatis*) that formed part of a large complex of buildings constructed to the west/south-west of the Romanesque abbey church during the early years of Robert's abbacy (completed c.1164)⁶⁹. The people present included, amongst others, Ranulf, the monastery's then prior, Master Gervase of Chichester, clerk to Henry II and Thomas Becket, and – of particular interest here – Adam, the abbot's personal scribe (*scriba Roberti abbatis*). As argued elsewhere, Robert's newly constructed abbatial residence likely housed the monastic archives and continued to do so under his twelfth-century successors⁷⁰. There is no

67. ALLEN, 2018, p. 49, with a reproduction of Robert's charter; the charter's wording is printed in *Calendar of Documents Preserved in France*, J.H. ROUND (ed.), vol. 1, no. 753, p. 274.

68. Henry II's visit to Mont-Saint-Michel in 1158 is described at length in Robert's *Chronica*; see Robert of Torigni, *Chronography...*, vol. 1, p. 210-211; Henry I's charter is not known to survive; Henry II's confirmation is extant in several later copies; see *Letters and Charters of Henry II...*, vol. 3, no. 1862, p. 493-494; ALLEN, 2018, nos. 43-44, p. 65-66; Robert of Torigni, *Chronique...*, vol. 2, nos. v-vii, p. 265-267. On Robert's abbatial building campaigns, see principally GOUT, 1910, vol. 2, p. 448-459.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 210.

70. See my forthcoming monograph on the involvement of medieval abbots in the writing of history (under contract with Oxford University Press).

them (*unum habere scriptorem specialem*)⁷². Whatever we may choose to call these specialist scribes working for abbots inside their private lodgings – secretaries, notaries, *amanuenses*, etc. –⁷³, there can be little doubt that at least some of them were not regular members of the monastic community proper, but hired professionals who resided temporarily, and sometimes semi-permanently, inside the monastery, and who were paid for their services from the *mensa abbatis* or other specifically allocated revenues⁷⁴. We do not know whether Robert's personal scribe Adam was a monk of Mont-Saint-Michel or a hired professional, but the title of *scriba abbatis* given to him in Robert's *Chronica* suggests that the abbot could delegate at least some of his scribal and administrative work to trained assistants. This is not to say, however, that Mont-Saint-Michel's medieval abbots did not "get their hands dirty" on occasion by writing certain books and documents *manu propria*, and certainly for Robert there is some evidence to suggest he did.

Robert's first-hand work in Mont-Saint-Michel's archives and "scriptorium" – if indeed this term can be applied to the mid-twelfth-century monastery and its facilities – has been the subject of much study, and whilst the exact extent of these scribal endeavours still provokes some debate amongst scholars, most now agree that the identifiable examples of Robert's own handwriting primarily concern specific pieces of information, for example, personal and place names, chronological dates, regnal years and titles, as well as dynastic and family relationships⁷⁵. Similar to Robert's involvement with Le Bec's library and archives – a resource he continued to use for many years after he had left the community in 1154⁷⁶ –, much of his scribal activity as abbot of Mont-Saint-Michel was dedicated to recording and cultivating the wide-ranging personal and institutional networks that connected his new abbey to the secular and ecclesiastical elites of the Anglo-Norman world. This regularly involved engaging with the records of the distant past, which Robert unearthed from the monastic archives and furnished with information about the more recent history of events to which he himself had been privy or which he gathered from contemporary sources. In doing so, Robert was motivated by more than just antiquarian curiosity. His primary concern typically appears to have been with the pragmatic application(s) of these written texts and the information they contain, specifically the ways in

72. *Gesta abbatum monasterii sancti Albani*, H.T. RILEY (ed.), vol. 1, p. 192; English translation: *The Deeds of the Abbots of St Albans*, D. PREEST and J.G. CLARK (ed.), p. 300.

73. Cf. the important discussion by GAZEAU, 2015.

74. Again, for further discussion I refer the reader to my forthcoming monograph; on the use of professional scribes in eleventh- and twelfth-century monasteries, see GULLICK, 1998; THOMSON, 2018, p. 71-72.

75. VAN HOUTS, 1989, p. 217-221, with photographic reproductions of two pages from Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, ms BPL 20, fol. 29v-30r; POHL, 2014, p. 54-70, 84-86, featuring photographic reproductions of Robert's handwritten corrections from a wider selection of manuscripts; LECOUEUX, 2018b, p. 14-18. Thomas Bisson's recent contribution to this debate has generated no genuinely new insights, and its methodology remains questionable; BISSEAU, 2019; cf. my comments in POHL, 2021a, p. 297-298.

76. POHL, 2014, p. 65. See also STIRNEMANN, 1993; ROUSE and ROUSE, 1990.

which historical knowledge could be used to shape communal and institutional identity, and to provide concrete guidance and instruction for the monks' behaviour in the present.

Sometimes this meant interpolating and/or continuing existing works such as the monastic annals of Mont-Saint-Michel (Avranches, Bibl. patrimoniale, ms 211, fol. 67r-77v), whereas at other times Robert composed new texts himself, for example, his "primitive redaction" of *De abbatibus* (Avranches, Bibl. patrimoniale, ms 213, fol. 178r-181v) and the somewhat polemical treatise *De immutatione ordinis monachorum*, a first draft of which Robert seems to have finished at Le Bec and brought to Mont-Saint-Michel for correction and completion⁷⁷. Another example are the extensive episcopal catalogues that today survive appended to two twelfth-century copies of Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum* (now Cambridge, University Library, ms Gg.2.21 and Paris, BnF, ms lat. 6042). Robert had at least one (possibly both) of these books with him at Mont-Saint-Michel⁷⁸, and the latter certainly contains additions and corrections in his own hand. Across these works, Robert exhibits an acute awareness of the need to establish and maintain a continuous tradition of written records that served both to establish and maintain his community's institutional identity and locate the abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel within its network of friends and neighbours, patrons, benefactors, confraternities, and rivals. These are not, I contend, the natural dispositions of an obsessive book lover or "bibliophile", rather the pragmatic considerations of an abbot and historian – indeed, an "abbot-historian" – who saw himself as one of the main intellectual architects in building his community's personal and institutional relationships.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence reviewed in this article, Robert's relationship with the written word emerges as a complex and flexible one that eludes straightforward classification. That said, much of his literary behaviour was profoundly pragmatic in character. His habitual *modus operandi* was not – or not primarily – that of the literarian, poet and wordsmith who read and wrote for pleasure or in pursuit of personal gratification, but rather that of the professional, administrator, governor, networker, and, on occasion, bureaucrat. This is not a value judgement, nor does it diminish the quality of Robert's literary and historiographical compositions, though it is fair to say that he was neither the most imaginative historian nor, as his most recent editor has observed⁷⁹, the most accomplished

77. On the annals of Mont-Saint-Michel, see LECOUEUX, 2018b, p. 6-21; BISSE, 2011, *passim*; cf. also ALEXANDER, 2011, p. 104-117. On *De abbatibus*, see LECOUEUX, 2017, p. 3-14, who refers to Robert's redaction for the years 506-1153 as *la rédaction primitive* (*ibid.*, p. 3); cf. also LECOUEUX, 2018b, p. 28-42; BISSE, 2012, p. 163-169.

78. POHL, 2014, p. 64-66. See also POHL, 2015, p. 154-157.

79. See Robert of Torigni, *Chronography...*, vol. 1, p. cix, with Bisson observing that Robert's writing style "valued clarity (and accuracy) more than readability".

Latinist of his day. But then again, these are unlikely to have been his ambitions. As a consequence, does this allow us to conclude that Robert was essentially, and by default, a literate pragmatist – a pragmatic *literatus*? Is that all he was? Probably not. Pragmatic literacy as evidenced by Robert's use of and his relationship with twelfth-century written culture was less a permanent state of being – an *état d'être* – than it was a temporary state of mind that could be adjusted to suit different needs and circumstances. Just like Parkes' "pragmatic reader" could on occasion be a "professional" and/or a "cultivated reader"⁸⁰, so Robert could be at once a pragmatic, bureaucratic, and even recreational writer. These were not mutually exclusive categories, but *inclusive* ones. Flexible and adaptable though Robert's literacy might have been, one thing it certainly was not was undiscerning. Throughout his long life and career, Robert's relationship with written culture rarely seems to have been characterised by the indiscriminate and obsessive kind of *bibliophilia* we encounter in later medieval and early modern antiquarians or book collectors, though this is exactly how he appears in the romanticising nineteenth-century portrait by Édouard de Bergevin, who imagined Robert as a bookish-looking character, a true *homme de lettres*, with an uncontrolled shock of white hair and a quill in his hand, posing proudly amidst his beloved collection of books⁸¹. Deconstructing these images, appealing and persistent though they may be, reveals a man who was often more practically driven in his use of books than we might imagine, deliberately employing them as a means by which to instil a historical consciousness at the very heart of his monastery. Robert's use of his own literacy on behalf of the monastic communities of Le Bec and Mont-Saint-Michel fulfils many, if not quite all, of the key criteria that Keller and others have defined as "pragmatic"⁸². Most importantly, perhaps, it generated knowledge, specifically historical knowledge, with the intention of informing collective human behaviour both in the present and the future. In this sense, Robert's literacy – and his literary activity – repeatedly served a pragmatic aim: by writing history, he actively promoted a sense of community.

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80. PARKES, 1973, p. 555.

81. See POHL, 2018, p. 96-100 for a critical discussion on Robert's alleged *bibliophilia* and a photographic reproduction of de Bergevin's portrait (*ibid.*, p. 97).

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