CHAPTER 2

THE PUBLICATION OF DOCUMENTS RELATIVE TO FRENCH HISTORY

The eighteenth-century medieval scholar not only had to provide the bare means of reading sources in the vernacular, he had to discover and catalogue those sources themselves. The importance of catalogues had been recognized in the late seventeenth century by those scholars and historians who felt the need to establish history on a more solid basis than it had hitherto enjoyed. Mabillon, Jacques Lelong, Montfaucon, and Humphrey Wanley set out to discover and list the manuscript sources of history. Sainte-Palaye continued this work.

The principal manuscript sources to be catalogued were of two kinds: documents (charters, diplomas, treaties, etc.) and texts (annals, chronicles, literary works in prose and verse). Sainte-Palaye and his colleagues worked with both.

In 1746 Secousse, Sainte-Palaye, and Foncemagne set a proposal before the Contrôleur Général Machault for a Table chronologique des diplômes, chartres, titres et actes imprimés concernant l'histoire de France. Bréquigny, who took over the direction of the project in 1763, later explained the motives which prompted the three scholars to make their suggestion. "Ceux qui veulent étudier à fond notre Histoire," he wrote in his Preface to the first volume of the Table, "doivent puiser leurs connaissances dans deux sources différentes: les Écrits historiques qui contiennent les récits des faits; et les Diplômes, les Chartes et autres Pièces authentiques, qui servent de preuve ou de supplément à ces récits." Hitherto—he added—historians who have written of the general history of

2 Table chronologique, Preface, vol. 1, p. iii.
France, while they have not absolutely neglected these sources, have drawn back aghast at the magnitude of the task facing them if they were to make full use of the original documents. The *Table chronologique* was conceived as an attempt to facilitate this task, and was to be considered as a supplement to Lelong’s *Bibliothèque historique*.

Compared to Leibniz’s *Codex juris gentium diplomaticus* (1693) or to the even greater undertaking it inspired, Rymer’s *Foedera*, the scheme was a modest one. It was to be simply an inventory of all the material which had been published in existing histories or collections of documents, such as those of Labbe, d’Achery, Baluze, or Mabillon. Bréquigny emphasized that, though much of the material in these collections concerned the ecclesiastical antiquities of France, it was also relevant to the general history of the *nation*: “Si on examine avec soin les Chartes dont nous ne pouvons indiquer que le sujet principal, on n’en trouvera presque aucune qui ne renferme incidemment des traits propres à répandre du jour, soit sur les parties essentielles de l’Histoire générale, la Chronologie, la Géographie, les Généalogies; soit sur les parties les plus intéressantes de l’Histoire particulière, les Loix, les Usages et les Moeurs de nos ancêtres.”

The task of the editors of the *Table chronologique* was thus not a purely mechanical one. It required a systematic classification of the material, indicating where and in what sources information about or reference to specific points of history was to be found. The editors appreciated that this was largely a problem of indices. Secousse had always set great store by indices, and had spent much time on those for the *Ordonnances des Rois de France*, while Bréquigny stressed in his Preface to the second volume of the *Table* that the indices were intended to transform the work from a simple inventory into a genuine tool of historical research. The *Table chronologique* was a remarkable and imaginative scheme precisely because it was an attempt to relate a great deal of isolated material, published for a diversity of reasons, mostly political or religious, in

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5 Secousse describes the tedium of compiling indices and at the same time the importance he attached to them in a letter to Bouhier of 3-3-1744. (B.N. Français 24420, fol. 82.)  
6 *Table chronologique*, Preface, vol. 2, p. iii.
according with the historical viewpoint of the Enlightenment.⁷

Shortly after Sainte-Palaye took over the direction of the project from Secousse, on the latter’s death in 1754, Bertin, the comptroller-general of finance, and Moreau, the historiographer royal, spurred on by the success of Rymer’s *Foedera*,⁸ conceived the idea of a *Cabinet des Chartes*, in which copies of all the deeds and charters relative to French history in provincial, private, and foreign collections would be deposited.⁹ At a later date, it was planned to publish a selection of the more important of these in a work of far greater scope than either the *Foedera* or Leibniz’s *Codex*.¹⁰ To the Benedictines was assigned the task of combing the provincial and private archives of France, Bréquigny was sent to London, Dom Berthod to the Low Countries, and finally La Porte du Theil to Rome. By 1762, the work had been set on foot in France, and by 1764, the Benedictines were proceeding apace. If time was not to be lost copying documents already available in print, the publication of the *Table chronologique*, which had now become an adjunct to the far more ambitious scheme of Bertin and Moreau, became an urgent necessity. As early as 1762, Moreau began clamoring for it. Sainte-Palaye, who was busy with other projects and unable to give the *Table* his undivided attention, resigned the editorship in favor of Bréquigny,¹¹ but the following year, when Bréquigny left for London, Sainte-Palaye again found himself in charge of the *Table*. Throughout this period Moreau constantly badgered him to publish.¹² Sainte-Palaye protested that, though the work was well under way—we have Bréquigny’s word that when he took over again from Sainte-Palaye in 1763 this was indeed so—

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⁷ Cf. F. M. Powicke, *Modern Historians and the Study of History, Essays and Papers* (London, 1955), p. 186: “A characteristic of the best modern work upon texts is its regard for the relation between the texts and general history. Texts are no longer flung out as the useful Hearne flung them out. The days of the indiscriminate thesaurus or anecdota or miscellanea are gone. We demand an intelligent purpose, even though it can only be revealed in an index.”


¹⁰ Nouv. Acq. Fr. 20255, fols. 1–2, ‘Projet de travail pour la Table des Chartes MSS de l’histoire de France,’ sec. 5. From the charters collected by the Benedictines a selection will be made comprising those “qu’on croira devoir entrer dans le corps des titres de l’histoire de France lorsqu’il s’agira de le publier.”

¹¹ Moreau 1436, fol. 11, letter to Moreau, dated only 1762.

¹² Bréquigny 157, fol. 228, Sainte-Palaye to Moreau, 21.7.1764.
it would be a mistake to publish it as it stood. A mere list of documents available in print would be useless to the historian, he explained, and he begged for time to complete the subject index and the indices of place-names and of persons, which would open up the documents to the general historian.\textsuperscript{13} Bréquigny had been in charge of an important part of Bertin’s scheme since 1762—he was overseeing the research of the Benedictines\textsuperscript{14}—but he appears to have shared the views of his older colleague. In 1766 he wrote Sainte-Palaye from London asking him to supervise the printing of the first part of the \textit{Table}.

The outbreak of the Revolution interrupted publication at the beginning of the fourth volume, but the reconstituted Académie des Inscriptions thought it worthwhile to resume and complete the work on the basis of notes left by Bréquigny. It was finished in 1876, thanks to Pardessus and Laboulaye, filling by then eight folio volumes. To this day it is a useful source book for historians of the first seven or eight centuries of the French monarchy.\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Moreau 1436, fol. 10.
\item Nouv. Acq. Fr. 20255, fol. 3, ‘Instructions sur les recherches des chartes MSS.’ These indicate that all communications are to be addressed to Moreau, who will pass them on to Bréquigny. In Bréquigny 157, fol. 239–41 there is a copy of a circular in which Bréquigny advises the monks how he wants the work done.
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