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Indexation, memory, power and representations at the beginning of the 12th century

The rediscovery of pages from the tables to the Liber de Honoribus, the first Cartulary of the Collegiate Church of St Julian of Auvergne (Brioude)

Jean Berger

The recent ‘rediscovery’ of fragments of the alphabetical tables of the first Cartulary of the Collegiate Church of St Julian of Auvergne, compiled at the beginning of the 12th century, would seem to have introduced a new milestone into the general understanding of the history of indexing. This article looks briefly at the chronology of the use of alphabetical order in the West and the appearance of the first indexes; analyses the distinctive features of the Brivadois fragments; and finally, looks behind the text and its formal distinctions at the human context in which it came into being, and sets out the religious, economic and social mechanisms which led to its appearance and were influenced by its use.

From alphabetization to indexing

Alphabetical order: from its origins to Christianity

Let me start with a quick review of the history of alphabetical order and the alphabetical classification of textual data, ‘alphabetization’ as Anglo-Saxon researchers, pioneers in the field, term it. Alphabetical order, the conventional order of written letters, was evident from the very beginning, in the 14th century BC in the kingdom of Ougarit. It has come down to us principally in the form of ABC primers (‘abécédaires’). This order was broadly accepted in the Semitic world and then, via the Phoenicians, was extended throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, in particular to the Greeks, the Carthaginians and the Romans. And the order was maintained in each of the linguistic areas which adopted the alphabetic system of writing. The 3rd-century librarians at Alexandria are credited with the first documentary application of an alphabetical classification. Although not alone, it was the Greek world which did most to develop the use of alphabetical classification.

Respect for alphabetical order, a fixed order linked to a consonant-based system, was observed, one by one, by all the nations adopting this particular system. Alphabetical order also had an important influence on the various religious systems. In the Hebrew tradition, alphabetical order was a consideration in the composition of the Psalms, Proverbs and Lamentations. And this heritage was passed on: psalms 25, 34, 37 and 118 in the present Biblical canon are subdivided into 22 acrostic strophes corresponding to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This last psalm (known as the abécédaire) by the glossators) in particular, was commented on at an early stage by Bishop Hilary of Poitiers (c 480–547) and introduced into the core of the monastic liturgy by St Benedict (c 480–547) for the recitation of the petites heures. From the moment of its official acceptance, Christianity used a fixed, alphabetical, order. It was a key argument in an African tract of the 6th century for the defence of the faith directed against arianism by St Fulgentius (468–533). The Alpha and Omega of the Revelations of John together with the labarum of Constantine and then the palaeochristian Chrismons are the very symbols of the new Christian order: the alphabet sublimates ‘the beginning and the end’.

With the end of antiquity, we enter into a period of a slow, general, decline in the practice of writing in the West. Classification according to alphabetical order withdraws to the safety of the ecclesiastical scriptoria. More markedly than in the Greek world, alphabetical ordering becomes increasingly sporadic, and above all, the preserve of a minority of the lettered classes, showing itself only occasionally in modest lexicons in imitation of the encyclopedism of ancient authors. Isidore of Seville (c 560–636) produced Book X of Etymologiarum, entitled De vocabulis, in which he attempted to explain the origin of about 300 names. But recourse to alphabetical order stopped at the initial letter. Thereafter, the words were arranged within paragraphs by derivation, i.e. according to their supposed etymology. The
Venerable Bede (c 673–735) counted among his numerous writings a short treatise, De orthographia, a compilation of rare terms from the scriptures classified in alphabetical order of the initial letter. Bede expands on the Latin grammatical characteristics of the terms and provides some definitions.

In the closing years of late antiquity, as it passed into the mediaeval epoch, some experts go so far as to speak of the use of alphabetical ordering sinking into oblivion. At best, it became rare, and survived essentially by virtue of an innovatory lexicographic practice.

Reconsidering the history of the index

From the medieval documents to our own dictionaries, alphabetical order is the very structure of the document. As for the index, it is an independent tool, supporting the document and providing a guide to the heart of the material, taking as its starting point (at least for documentary material) the idea of presenting an overall picture of the content of the given document with a system of markers taking the user to the point in question.

Until recently, the index has been thought of as originating in intellectual and scholastic circles in Paris in the course of the 13th century. The flood of new compilations then being produced, particularly in theology and canon law, required new ‘signposting’ systems. University exegetes and the reformed religious orders, returning ever more strictly to the Scriptures, gave a definitive structure to biblical material (definitive organization of the canon, division into chapters, pagination). The ‘indexer’ was thus freed from the problems of a text with no fixed structure, no ‘hooks’: from now on it was possible to think in terms of an alphabetical classification of concordances. In the 14th century the practice spread throughout literary circles, gradually – particularly with the arrival of printing – becoming the norm. But in the Middle Ages, there were more links in the chain to consider than just what came out of Parisian intellectual circles.

They are to be found in the more pragmatic matter of the management of archives, made essential in the old abbeys by the need to classify and make accessible their vast collections of charters recording ancient legal titles. The care religious communities took over the defence of their rights led to a precocious development of real indexing techniques which made it possible to get closer to the heart of this material. This trail was followed by two great mediaevalists, Pierre Toutbert and Etienne Hubert, who were interested in the work of the archivist of the Benedictine monastery of Farfa, Gregory of Catino. Gregory was responsible for the reorganization of the abbey archives. It was a long job in the course of which he was able, inter alia, to compile a voluminous register as well as a complete chronicle, all dedicated to the defence and celebration of the libertas of his community. He put the finishing touches to his work in about 1130, with the production of Liber floriger chartarum cenobii Farfensis. The volume took the form of a list, arranged in alphabetical order, of the names of places to which the abbey had made grants and which had been evoked in the compilations of previous grants of title. Like Papias, Gregorio set out his method and intentions in a preface, explaining his
choice of alphabetical order and its aims. The Brivadois archives were part of this movement.

Fragments of the alphabetical table to the first Cartulary of St Julien of Bavard
A rediscovery

The numerical and alphabetical tables, the last remaining evidence of the original Great Cartulary, now lost, were known but ignored by successive editors of the archives of St Julian, who based their work on modern copies.22 The tables were probably contained within a bundle held in the National Archives, in the middle of items which gave way to the more important story of the falsification of the Ancien Régime, the titles of the house of Bouillon. Faced with an abundant and contradictory literature by scholars and jurists from the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th centuries, historians chose to skirt round the delicacies of a dossier which had such a heavy tradition to contend with. But, following a minute examination and various analyses – dossier which had such a heavy tradition to contend with. But the underlying writing seems to be strictly palaeographic (script), codicologic (codes techniques), diplomatic (comparison of the form and content of the deeds) – there is no longer any doubt as to the authenticity of a number of these fragments.23 This alphabetical table is indeed a very early attempt at an index. The deeds to which it refers were written a little later than 1080 but before 1120.

Presentation

There are 12 original or pseudo-original items, ‘bifeuilles’ of parchment24 or fragments thereof, 360 × 240 mm in model format, representing the dispersed remnants of vast numbers of ‘quires’ of tables. Six are alphabetical. In graphical terms, the script is an archaic but well-formed Caroline miniscule, typical of the period. The presentation on the page of the alphabetical and numerical tables is similar. The number of each charter appears in the margin, and against it, in the body of the text, a short note, including, in the following order, the name of the property, the subject or subjects of the grant, its location in terms of the administrative district of the period (‘county’, then vicariate or aicis and possibly villa), then the number of villae, of manses or appendages (agricultural units corresponding to an agreed fiscal unit) making up the grant. This is followed by the name of the donor or donors (or testamentary executors) in the nominative. Each parchment page has thirty or so notes of the following type:

CXXIV Loberias in aice Brivatensis mansos VIII appendarias //xiii; Staphanos cedo

The ‘vedettes’ (sections), the geographical matter by name of the properties held by the Chapter, are brought together in ‘chapters’ in alphabetical order of the initial. The use of alphabetical order does not go further than this. Within the chapters, the vedettes appear in incremental order of the number of the charters to which they refer.

The vedettes sometimes reflect the nature of particular deeds: so pontifical and royal privileges are all classified as privilegium (CVIII, A.N. R² 74, Pièce 35 f° hr°). As an exception, the serf Frannaldus, exchanged by the Chapter, is the only person indexed.

The place names are in traditional Latin, in the nominative or ablative, but, as in many property lists of the period, one also gets the oblique case of the spoken (‘mesolithic’) form of the scripta latina rusticca. This explains why the majority of entries terminate in ‘as’ or ‘o’ alongside the pure Occitan or Latin forms, something of a hangover. The abandonment of the scripta latina rusticca can be dated to the emergence of a ‘diglossia’, a bilingualism marked by the creation, towards the middle of the 12th century, of a literary Occitan.25 The place names/vedettes would seem to refer to the title given to each charter in the body of the Cartulary rather than to the versions to be found in the actual text of the charter. Classification and archive work undoubtedly went on throughout the compilation of the index, this written product of Church lawyers lasting as long as the documentary labours.

Practice with respect to the treatment of the article in the classification seems to have varied. In A Fontabbem (CCLXXXIX, A.N. R² 74 item 35), classed under ‘F’, it does not appear. But it is taken into account for Ad illas Carras (CLXXV, A.N. R² 74 item 42), influenced perhaps by the importance of the article linked to a contraction in the eventual Occitan form.

By contrast, in vernacular writings, the archivists limited themselves to the main element. So, Bonafont (Super bona fonte CCLIX, A.N. R² 74 item 35) and Bona fonte (CCLXI, A.N. R² 74 item 36) appear under ‘F’, while another similar place name, in a more dialect form, Bonafont, appears under ‘B’.

As to editing of the tables, we note that there are frequent corrections, passages crossed out, erased then reinstated, indicating later changes, an updating in the light of practice. It should also be noted that some of the ‘pages’ are palimpsests.26 But the underlying writing seems to be strictly contemporary, and from a document of a form comparable in every respect. The ‘F’ ‘pages’ of the table are double sheets (A.N. R² 74, items 35 and 36). Finally, there are problems here and there with the spacing of the numbering, with a good deal of tidying-up.

The production of the Cartulary would seem from the evidence to have gone hand in hand with a long reorganization of the Charterhouse. The index to the Cartulary, to the book, to an object in the Cartulary, is also a catalogue of the community’s archival material. But this indexation is not just a novelty; by its form it remains the ultimate interpretation of the Carolingian archival heritage and lexicography, itself a contribution to the administrative practices of the Late Roman Empire.

The Index and the ecclesia

Within the framework of the ecclesia of St Julian, devising a way of accessing the content of the document had many important practical implications: it made it possible to get quickly to the original titles, which alone had probative value in case of litigation; it made collecting taxes easier; it celebrated the memory of benefactors etc. So we need
briefly to bring the production of the index back into its human context.

The Brivadois is situated on the borders of Velay, the Auvergne and the Gévaudan. According to the sources, it is here that the cult of the French martyr St Julian established itself, from 304 AD. It rapidly reached importance on the national scale and lasted throughout late antiquity and the High Middle Ages.

A diocese without a bishop, a county without a count, a veritable ecclesiastical state came into being, where the temporal and spiritual powers were entirely in the hands of the community of clerics responsible for the maintenance of the martyr’s tomb. In accordance with the Roman law of the late compilations and from what we know of the attitude of the Visigoth and Frankish sovereigns, the local Church made good the local gaps. Here it was the res publica, an autonomous, aristocratic, mini-Senate.27

The charters of the Cartulary, for the most part, are gifts of property to the Chapter by neighbouring aristocratic families. But the gifts are not just a matter of pious generosity. Family representatives, having transferred the actual ‘ownership’ of the property, normally kept ‘possession’ in the form of a life-interest in the usufruct, so keeping the old distinction between proprietas (ownership) and possessio (possession) in return for the annual payment of a rent calculated on the basis of the value of the gift. These gifts had an anthropological counterpart: in effect, the families made a contribution to the Chapter by giving up a younger son in each generation, thus contributing ‘in kind’ to the membership of the collegiate government. And by holding on to the usufruct they were certainly helped to make their contribution towards Chapter costs. In these ways, the families held the property (or ‘ownership’) as an ‘honour’ for which they put themselves under the dominium of the Saint.

The gift also worked to the benefit of the donor’s ancestors, providing the means of paying for the preservation of their memory and associating them directly with the community in charge of St Julian’s relics. Access to the names of the donors by the ‘placing’ of the landed property in question was essential for the cult of the dead at a time when ‘Books of Life’ or ‘Memory’ were turning into veritable necrologies.

For practical purposes, one might also think of this work of indexation as a register of taxation,28 a document recording tax liability. It was possible from each entry to calculate the tax due on property held in usufruct, listed by all the places where the community was to collect it. Payment of the tax, the motor of liturgical activity, took place principally at St Julian. The index certainly helped in the account keeping.

Finally, let us ask ourselves if the Chapter’s growing awareness of its properties was motivated, perhaps, by the ‘competition’. The end of the 11th century saw the creation, by two former members of the Chapter (St Robert of Turlande à La Chaise-Dieu and St Peter of Chavanon à Pébrac), of two reforming religious orders on the borders of the Chapter possessions.

Conclusion

Thanks to its index, the Liber de Honoribus is not just a monument to the power of the Chapter, a document of prestige. The apparent lack of organization in the document is misleading. Indexed, it becomes an important instrument for the cohesion of the patrimony of St Julian and for the Brivadois Church. Thanks to its tables, restored to favour as a result of documentary analysis, the Liber de Honoribus has revealed its potential, giving an access to the very heart of the text unique for the period. Kept at the time in the treasury, it determined the structure of the territory of the Brivadois, the driving force behind the economy of a region and the liturgical practice of the clergy. Not just a simple documentary technique, this experiment in alphabetical indexation is also a legal, economic and liturgical compilation of the very first importance, a veritable mirror of a whole ecclesia, a whole society.

Notes

1. [Translator’s note: St Julian of Brioude is more commonly known in English as St Julian of Auvergne, the style adopted here.]
2. A number of my observations are based on a study which remains indispensable: L. W. Daly, Contributions to a history of alphabetisation in antiquity and the Middle Ages, Latomus, Revue d’études latines, no. XCI, Brussels, 1967.
3. For some of the dozens of ‘ABC’ tablets, see the catalogue of the exhibition: The Kingdom of Ougarit, at the birth of the alphabet, Lyon, 2004.
4. Daly, op. cit., p. 94
5. See in particular the octagonal pillar of Halsarna, on the Island of Cos, on which the names of citizens taking part in the cult of Apollo and Ilerakes are engraved in alphabetical order. This dates from the beginning of the 2nd century BC. The inscription is published in W. R. Paton and E. L. Hicks (eds), The Inscriptions of Cos, 1891, no 368.
7. Revelations 1, 8; 21.6; 22.13, ‘Ego sum Alpha et Omega, principium et finis.’
8. [Translator’s note: the labarum is the monograph adopted by Constantine using the Greek letters, Chi (X) and Rho (P) (the initial letters of Christ), sometimes known as the Chrismon.]
11. On the question of alphabetical order in lexicography, see the recent publication of J.-Cl. Boulanger, Les inventeurs de dictionnaires: de l’eduba des scribes mésopotamiens au