Ms. Fr. 640 and the Béthune Collection

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Abstract

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Ms. Fr. 640 and the House of Béthune

Ms. Fr. 640 is a bound volume bearing the arms and monogram of Philippe de Béthune (1561-1649)1 (*Fig. 1*). It belonged, likely from the seventeenth century onward, to a nobleman who served the kingdom of France under the reigns of Henri III (1574–1589), Henri IV (1589–1610), and Louis XIII (1610–1643).2

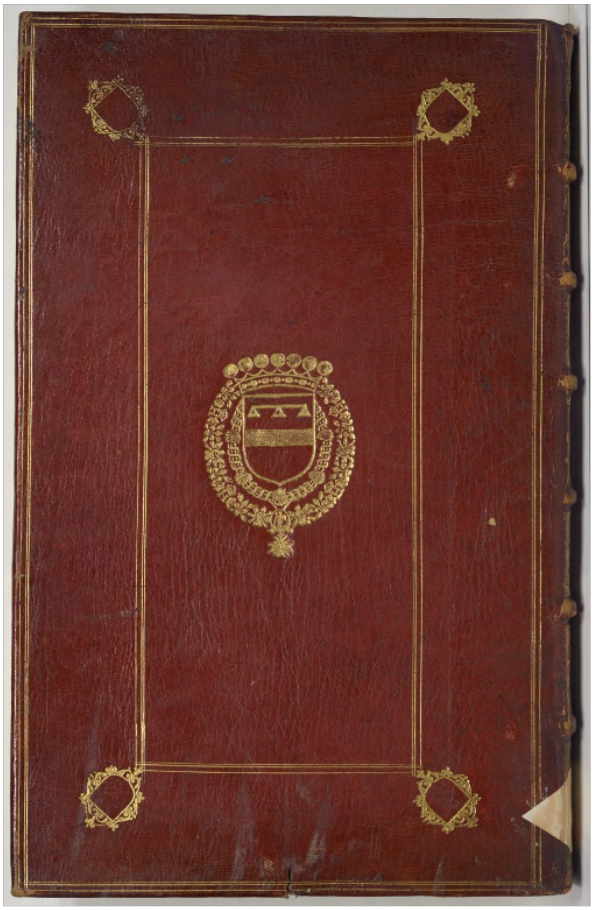

Fig. 1. Ms. Fr. 640 binding. Philippe de Béthune's coat of arms take up the center of the interior frame of the binding plates (*D'argent à la fasce de gueules, au lambel à trois pendants de même*); the ensemble is topped with a Count's crown and enhanced by the chains of the two most prestigious orders of knighthood: Saint Michael and the Holy Spirit. On the spine of the binding, Philippe de Béthune's monogram, composed of two interlaced Ps surmounted by the Count's crown, decorates the inter-nerves. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. Source: gallica.bnf.fr.

During this period, the house of Béthune stood out for its "character" and its "valor," thanks to the military, political, and diplomatic careers of two brothers: Maximilien (1559–1641)

(*Fig. 2*), better known as the Duke of Sully, Marquis of Rosny, Grand Master of Artillery, Peer and Marshall of France, Superintendent of Finance, and his younger brother Philippe de Béthune, Count of Selles and Charost (*Fig. 3*).3 The latter was one of Henri III's *mignons*, along with Duke Anne de Joyeuse, and was appointed *gentilhomme ordinaire de la chambre du roi* (member of the King's Private Council) in 1585.4 After the death of Henri III, Philippe, like his brother, sided with Henri de Bourbon and served in the army, although remaining a devout catholic.5 Subsequently, Henri IV granted him several positions of influence, such as member of the *Conseil d'État* (State Councilor) in 1599. Philippe de Béthune also excelled as a conciliator.6 He facilitated the resumption of French relations with Scotland (1599), London (1599), and Rome (1601–1605; 1624), where he played a part in the election of two popes (Leo XI and Paul V), and also with Holland (1610). He traveled to Italy to settle a dispute between the Dukes of Savoy and Mantua (1616), and to the Holy Roman Empire to put an end to the conflict between Emperor Ferdinand II and the Protestant princes (1620). These diplomatic achievements earned him the gratitude of the king: he was appointed Governor of Rennes and *lieutenant général du roi* to the government of Upper Brittany

(1605), tutor to Henri IV's younger son Nicolas (1607–1611), and he received the cross of Knight of the Order of the Holy Spirit (1619).

Fig. 2. Frans Pourbus (attr.), *Portrait of Maximilien de Béthune, Duke of Sully*, seventeenth century. Oil on canvas, 74.5 x 60.5 cm. Musée national du Château de Pau, P 1501. Photo: Tylwyth Eldar ().

Fig. 3. *Portrait of Philippe de Béthune, Count of Selles and Charost*, seventeenth century. Oil on canvas, 205 x 155 cm. Château de Sully-sur-Loire. © Département du Loiret / Josse.

Such important missions influenced his practical treatise on the proper governance of the State, *Le conseiller d'Estat ou recueil des plus generales considerations servant au maniement des affaires publiques*, that extolled the virtues of absolute power and was repeatedly reprinted during the seventeenth century.7 In 1638–1641 Maximilien de Béthune, for his part, published *Œconomies royales* to support Henri IV's politics and highlight his services to the kingdom, which had been attacked or disparaged by contemporaries in correspondence and memoirs.8

The Béthune Collection

Whether through his political action, his works or the testimony of prominent figures of the kingdom such as the *Grande Mademoiselle*, the image of Philippe de Béthune as a scholar and a virtuous statesman devoted to the royal household firmly established itself throughout the seventeenth century.9 This great house asserted its devotion to the French monarchy through yet another political act. In December 1662, Hippolyte de Béthune (1603–1665), the son of Philippe and the godson of Pope Clement VIII, *conseiller d'état d'épée* (1657) and the queen's *chevalier d'honneur* (*Fig. 4*), donated the collection of

manuscripts he and his father had built up throughout their lives to King Louis XIV.

Fig. 4. *Portrait of Hippolyte de Béthune, Count of Selles and Marquis de Chabris*, seventeenth to eighteenth century. Oil on canvas, 205 x 155 cm. Château de Sully-sur-Loire. © Département du Loiret / Josse.

In January 1664, the Paris Parlement and the Chamber of Accounts formalized the donation, which was not limited to manuscripts:

> *the aforesaid lord declared that he would willingly accept from his lordship the Comte de Bethune the present of two thousand volumes of original manuscripts, and original paintings and drawings by the most excellent painters from Italy and France, ancient and modern alike, and marble statues and busts and antique bronzes.10*

The “Béthune collection” is in keeping with a broader context of collecting practices since the end of the sixteenth century: the gathering and classifying documents, some of a diplomatic nature, for the *bibliothèque royale* in order to preserve memory and provide material for historians.11 Another advantage of the donation was the assurance that the long-established collection would be safeguarded “as a whole.” Otherwise its initial aim could not be achieved.12

Of the 2,000 manuscript volumes, Nicolas Clément only counted 1,567 in his first catalog established around 1670.13 They were classified into different sections: theology (118 vols.), “mixed histories,” including philosophy, medicine, mathematics, law and literature (263 vols.), as well as a series of memoirs “for the history of France” concerning the kings of France, ordered by reign from Philippe de Valois to Louis XIV. 14 The collection also included documents on “parlement, chambers of accounts, the treasury, charters” (29 vols.), “wars and artillery” (21 vols.), “catalogs or inventories of books” (9 vols.) as well as “novels in ancient verse” (50 vols.), “books of miniatures” (77 vols.) and papers concerning the “Nevers” family (57 vols.). In the inventory, Ms. Fr. 640, marked “*choses diverses*” (miscellany) on the spine, was recorded as “a collection of different sorts of varnish, molds for all types of metals &c.” and classified in the “mixed histories” section.15

The Toulouse library holds a copy of an illuminated two-volume book of hours16 that belonged to Philippe de Béthune, which proves his interest in painting. But a closer analysis of the inventory shows that he was passionately keen on works of history and autograph letters that he collected during his various

diplomatic missions. Hippolyte inherited this pronounced taste, which was sometimes mocked by his contemporaries. Pierre de Carcavy, who was in charge of the royal library from 1663 to 1683, considered that "Monsieur de Béthune's 1,923 manuscripts" were "of very little value," but admitted that the original letters and pieces accounting for over 950 volumes made up "a very precious collection."17 The reputation of the "Béthune collection" had reached beyond the borders of the kingdom: if we are to believe the poet Jean Loret's *Muse historique*, Christina of Sweden had tried to buy the collection that contained "excellent manuscripts, as well as several antiques, namely a number of medals, reliefs, portraits, pencil drawings, paintings" for a "sum of gold amounting to […] a hundred thousand *écus*."18

The collection rapidly became famous among connoisseurs, historians, and librarians of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Léopold Delisle has highlighted its historical interest, in particular the "unique collection of original letters which provide a step by step sequence of all the great events of our history from the accession to the throne of Louis XI up to the death of Louis XIII."19 Today, scholars consider

the collection to be one of the richest in the antique section of the BnF's manuscript department.20

Ms. Fr. 640 within the Béthune Collection

As Ms. Fr. 640 does not belong to the most famous section of the collection, it did not attract much attention over the years, however, its content can be linked to other volumes in the collection. Ms. Fr. 4836 is a compendium of seventeenth-century copies of royal decrees and documents about goldsmithing and coins dating from the thirteenth century to the reign of Louis XIII. Amid these historical documents lies a series of documents containing very precise technical data about the goldsmith's trade, such as an excerpt from the statutes of the Parisian brotherhood, "the subtle means to examine self-proclaimed master goldsmiths," and the "philosophical marks" and charts of the weights used by the masters. It also includes workshop techniques like those found in Ms. Fr. 640, but less precisely formulated, such as "how to gild all works with gold powder"21 or "to solder works of gold."22

A "Traicté du lapidaire selon l'opinion des Indois et de plusieurs philosophes, marchans et autres sortes de gens" (Treatise on

lapidary according to the opinion of the Indians and several philosophers, merchants, and other professions) follows these documents. It is one of the four documented manuscript versions of the fourteenth-century lapidary by Jean de Mandeville in which he relates his travels around the world. The narrative, which was published repeatedly up to the seventeenth century, was also considered to contain valuable knowledge about nature. Inserted at the end was a “fantastical lapidary” inspired by lapidaries of celestial (the zodiac and planets), natural (virtues), and Christian (holy stones) types.23 Because the precious stones were described in this lapidary from a more mercantile than medicinal point of view, the lapidary was presumably commissioned by a jeweler rather than by an apothecary.24

The interest of the manuscript versions of the lapidary, compared to the printed editions, lies in their length. Ms. Fr. 4836 offers another characteristic as well: it compiles a wealth of information and secrets that could be extremely useful to a goldsmith, a merchant-goldsmith, or a guild-master. Indeed, it ends with a series of secrets revealing “the way to make stones better than natural ones.” In this, we find an outlook similar to

entries on precious stones in Ms. Fr. 640 which hardly mention the minerals' virtues or their location, but deal instead with the methods tested by the author-practitioner to counterfeit and set them properly.

Didier Kahn's research has highlighted in the "Béthune collection" a set of 75 manuscripts compiling a series of notes on natural philosophy and chemistry, as well as reading notes on the Rosicrucian movement.25 Rosicrucian ideas were elaborated in several manifestos published in Germany in the mid-1610s, and attracted attention in Europe in the following decade: imbued with the dream of a universal medicine, this Christian philosophy proclaimed "the possible self-regeneration of man, allowing him to return to a state of Adamic perfection, characterized by immortality and universal knowledge."26 Addressing "heads of state, governments, and scholars of Europe, the first Rosicrucian manifesto (*Fama Fraternitatis*) promised to bring peace "and even more gold than the King of Spain can bring back from the two Indies." To attain that end, a "general reformation" of arts and sciences was called for. 27Among Béthune's volumes, Ms. Fr. 64128 should also be mentioned. Its author, Nicolas de Villiers, sieur de Chandoux,

and its contents are now well known, thanks to Sylvain Matton's research.29 In his letters, the sieur de Chandoux explained that he engaged in chemistry experiments in order to acquire the perfect knowledge of nature. He particularly praised the "perfection of true *aurum potabile*" (potable gold), from which he hoped the king would benefit.30 Chandoux's theoretical work was never published. The fact that Philippe de Béthune possessed several manuscripts concerning the doctor and chemist, reflects the intellectual context under the reign of Louis XIII. A time when different currents of scientific thought questioned scholastic Aristotelianism, chemistry was seen by some, like the sieur de Chandoux and Étienne de Clave, Philippe de Béthune's physician, as an efficacious means of renewing knowledge.31

Ms. Fr. 640 seems to fit within this small set of works, to which one could add an older Latin manuscript dealing with *aurum potabile* (Ms. Latin 7180). The contents of Ms. Fr. 640 can be linked to these texts that aim at a better understanding of nature and service to the commonwealth through the handling and transformation of materials, as well as to a knowledge of craftsmanship and advancing medical knowledge.

The handwriting of some autograph letters of Philippe, Maximilien, and Hippolyte de Béthune, housed in the Godefroy collection of the Institut de France, were compared to that of Ms. Fr. 640.32 There are also letters in the third person with different handwriting, which may belong to the Béthunes' secretaries.33 These comparisons showed that the script of Ms. Fr. 640 was quite different from all these, thus dispelling doubts about the Béthunes' direct involvement in the manuscript.

Conclusion

Nullium est jam dictum quod non dictum sit prius (Nothing is said now that has not been said before). The author-practitioner forges his own version of Terence's phrase in the entry "For the workshop" (fol. 166r (https://edition640.makingandknowing.org/#/folios/166r/f/166r/tl)): *nullum est jam dictum quod non dictum aut factum sit prius* (nothing is said now that has not been said *or done* before). In this entry, he records many classical authors and tags, and he champions the advantage of collecting "secrets," more particularly when they apply to arts and crafts. Alluding to Marcus Varro he adds, "one holds that all arts were invented in the space of a thousand years." Then, he draws up a list of

classical authors who borrowed from one another, and he rebukes those who claim they "are [not] able to invent anything new." In this regard, the author follows the principle of progress developed by Loys Le Roy in his treatise *De la vicissitude ou Variété des choses de l'univers* (1575) which left its mark on European thought in the second half of the sixteenth century.34 From this book stems the notion of "*ad artem redigere*" (systematizing). Inspired by the Ancients, it consists in assembling, organizing, and putting into writing practical know-how hitherto transmitted by word of mouth. The aim was to ensure better transmission, achieve tangible results, and serve the public good.35

Also of interest is the link with Philibert De l'Orme's *Nouvelles inventions pour bien bastir*, quoted in the list of titles on the last folio of Ms. Fr. 640 (fol. 170v (https://edition640.makingandknowing.org/#/folios/170v/f/170v/tl)).36 The book, published in 1561 by Philibert De l'Orme, merely a part of a larger work on architecture, revealed a new carpentry technique for which the king's architect took credit. It aimed thereby to disseminate this more efficient, practical, and economical innovation in writing instead of leaving it confined to the workshop or kept secret within a trade guild. Moreover, in

his *Premier tome de l'architecture* (1567–1568), Philibert De l'Orme explains his publishing venture by "the great will to learn" of "good craftsmen,"37 resonating with the author-practitioner's words:

> *As small peddlers lay open small wares in order to buy richer ones & to profit more and more, so I, from a desire to learn, am exposing what little is in my workshop to ~~have it~~ receive, through a common commerce of letters, much rarer secrets from my benevolent readers (fol. 162r (https://edition640.makingandknowing.org/#/folios/162r/f/162r/tl)).*

The logic of compiling secrets in order to test and improve ancient folk know-how through experiments, although not explicitly claimed by the author-practitioner, may have inspired the writing of Ms. Fr. 640. It is also somewhat reminiscent of Olivier de Serres' goals and method in his *Théâtre d'agriculture* (1600). Just like the author-practitioner, de Serres collected and tested a number of practices, benefiting as well from the expertise of his contemporaries.38 This comparison also shows

how Béthune's interest in Ms. Fr. 640 fits in the context of the economic policy initiated under Henri IV and carried on by his successors. In his *Conseiller d'Estat*, Philippe de Béthune considered that the founding of manufactories, along with trade and agriculture, would bring significant prosperity to a country. As the documents collected by the Béthunes show, casting and related arts (goldsmithing, minting, artillery, weapons, etc.) were part of a state policy that regulated and supervised artisanal crafts. Without this supervision, these activities might lead to an outflow of noble materials (e.g., gold and silver), whether raw or manufactured, and either directly or indirectly, could enrich and strengthen neighboring countries.

Hélène Vérin, following Chastel and Klein, among others, stated that these positive considerations about know-how and *homo faber* appeared at the onset of the Renaissance with Manetti, Alberti, Rabelais, and Vives for whom "the knowledge of craftsmen's skills was inherent to a proper education."39 These techniques contributed to the success of certain commercial, agricultural, industrial, and military ventures. In a wider sense, the "Béthune collection" is an illustration of the political expediency of this knowledge.

Collecting and disseminating practical knowledge about a craft or a trade in order to transmit its techniques and skills, uncovering the deceits or secrets of practitioners in order to serve the State and the public good, are examples of the method used by Nicolas Fromenteau in his *Secret des finances de France* (1581) to serve the nation's finances.40 This was probably the book, written by an experienced man, well-versed in the affairs of Guyenne and Languedoc, that appears in the list of books on fol. 1r under the title "le secret des finances à Lyon." Philippe de Béthune, who had called on his own experience to create his *Conseiller d'Estat*, wrote in 1633:

> *Prudence, as befits a Prince, must be accompanied by a universal knowledge of all sorts of sciences, not in detail, as if to make them his trade and profession; but he must know as much as is necessary to discern truth from falsehood and understand those who converse upon it as it may happen. His trade is not to be an Engineer, to build houses, to erect a bridge, to be a good cannon founder, but to recognize those who are best suited, and to make sensible use of people from all sorts of professions.41*

Thus, Philippe de Béthune strongly believed that the realm could be strengthened by the acquisition of technical knowledge, which perhaps explains why his attention was drawn to Ms. Fr. 640.

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