STUDIA UBB. PHILOSOPHIA, Vol. 65 (2020), 1, pp. 173-185
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphil.2020.1.13

CRITICAL HISTORY, SUBVERSION AND SELF-SUBVERSION: THE CURIOUS CASES OF JEAN MABILLON AND RICHARD SIMON (I/II)

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ABSTRACT. This paper compares two programmes of historical criticism at the end of the 16th Century – Jean Mabillon's diplomatics and Richard Simon's biblical criticism. Although they were both conceived as philological and contextual reconstruction of texts, their relation with the authority of the texts and their engagement with political and institutional stakes were strikingly different.

Key words: *historical criticism, Richard Simon, Jean Mabillon, Theological-Political Treatise*

In the following pages, I will examine two momentous French contributions to the historical epistemology. Both were pre-Enlightenment attempts to deal with the crucial relation between texts and political authority and they both bred mutations in the realms of ideas and institutions, of concepts and representations of history; not least, they substantially changed the image of the power of history. Both belonged to that very productive intellectual sphere today named critical history: the biblical history and the *diplomatics*, that forced the development of historical thinking in France -, but, very importantly, without transforming history into an actual unitary disciplinary field[1].

In spite of their different contexts of emergence, of their divergent historical and ideological stakes and, not surprisingly, their contrasting intellectual and political consequences, these two instances of critical history do have in common a critical engagement with the traditional function of historical inquiry

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[1] For an inquiry into the specifically French reasons why in France historical practice was too epistemologically fragmented to fuze into a single discipline, see Chantal Grell, *L'histoire entre érudition et philosophie : étude sur la connaissance historique à l'âge des Lumières*, Paris: PUF, 1993.

that they willy-nilly disturb. To put it roughly, in early modern Europe[2], history was very often produced on the initiative of political authorities – either religious or secular –, with their infrastructural resources and often in their immediate interest. – There are surely exceptions to this rule, but, in general, it was the interest of political actors that stimulated the emergence of new types of history – even those associated with the Renaissance humanist philology, prompted, among other things, by conflicts between Rome and the Holy Empire and by the plurality of Italian urban jurisdictions[3]. Even the reputed example of Lorenzo Valla refuting the papacy's pretensions to the domination of the Western Roman Empire (his rigorous demonstration that the Donation of Constantine was an apocryphal forgery), an exquisite oeuvre of critical historical deconstruction, appreciated as (mostly) scientifically valid even today, was originally motivated by the implication of his patron in an immediate political conflict[4].

Moreover, traditionally, history was closely linked to questions of legitimacy and authority: authority (or entitlement) of an institution – be it the state or the church; authority of a text – documents demonstrating family lineages, titles of property, privileges conferred to guilds, urban communities, corporations and so on, all of them called "diplomas"; and, of course, that complex relationship between authority and texts.

As an erudite and specialized investigation, history was often practiced as a kind of genealogy, meaning the exploration of a specific authority or jurisdiction based on a specific text, while, as a speculative-philosophical activity, it often involved epistemological reflections and questionings of the relation between authority and text.

Or, in order to found authority on texts, which was instrumental for any political entity that might have wanted to state its rights emanated from birth, dynastic legitimacy, property titles, privilege charts etc., the historian had first to discriminate between the spurious document and the genuine, between the modern

[2] For comparison, the situation of ancient Greek historians was seemingly different. As the historian of historiography Arnaldo Momigliano has shown, ancient Greek history was not constrained by preestablished political functions or by institutionalization; besides, it did not have the mission to guard the national or dynastical traditions. Therefore, Greek historians could pursue their politically audacious interest for hot topics of recent and contemporary history, and develop a speculative and almost philosophical historical sensitivity for the specificity of their present and for the massive historical disruptions brought about by major events of their times. A. Momigliano, "Greek Historiography", in *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

[3] See Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship: Language, Law and History in the French Renaissance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1970.

[4] Lorenzo Valla, *La donation de Constantin*, préface de Carlo Ginzburg, Paris : Les Belles Lettres, 1993.

(or forged) and the antique (or the authentic), while denouncing the forgeries in the alternative narratives of the rivals and their patrons. In brief, the historian had to build his inquiries around a central epistemic category that was simultaneously scientific and political: **authenticity**. As a theoretician or methodological upgrader – a work that was often necessary for disposing of rival narratives –, he was meant to develop instruments, criteria and methods to produce and to demonstrate authenticity.

Indeed, the Renaissance humanists had already cultivated a special sensibility for the authentic as distinct from the false, as well as a consciousness of the importance of working with the archives, in opposition to working based on mere hearsay. (Valla is, again, a remarkable example for this.) They also anticipated the principles of auxiliary sciences of history: paleography, diplomatics, philology, source-criticism. And, as it is often pointed out, the development of critical and scholarly history benefited greatly, in the early modern era, from its connections with the legal traditions – in France – and the Bible philology – in the protestant countries in particular. – But, most of all, the early modern times are associated with frequent *bella diplomatica*, namely wars over titles among European princes, nobles, ecclesiastics that considerably contributed to the development of auxiliary sciences of history.

However, in spite of the great receding tide of humanist professional studies precipitated by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 – which led to a massive exile of protestant intellectuals and excellently trained humanists -, something that might be seen as a leap forward happened, in France, fomented by a very specific mode of organization of collective intellectual work, within the French monastic order of St. Maur from the Saint Germain monastery.

1. The Maurist revolution in historical studies

Founded by cardinal Richelieu and serving under the joint protection of the church and the monarchy, the St. Maur congregation of the Benedictine order had been known for centuries for its copyist clerks and for its meticulous studies of national or ecclesiastical antiquities. The Maurist were inspired by the most radical principles of the humanist critical philology: the interest for both the materiality of the sources (types of ink, parchment, sigils, stamps etc.) and the precise dating of the language and literary style, enabling them to historicize the texts, in other words to excavate the exact circumstances – and therefore meanings - of their writing.

But, while the humanist criticism was eventually preoccupied mostly with the sources of the classical Greco-Roman antiquity – the grand literary heritage[5]–, the Maurists made the bold move of applying the same methods to the so called "diplomas"– juridical texts, regional charts and local institutions demonstrating privileges, property rights, lineages, dynastic networks, but also to relics, statues, inscriptions, and other kinds of material and textual fossils of the historical past[6]. Significantly, their work extended to the history of the French provinces, and, boldly, even to the writings of the holy fathers of the church.

The most relevant intellectual mutation was made possible by the Maurist superior institutional organization, which produced, firstly, a groundbreaking way of collecting new manuscripts and material proofs, based on large correspondence networks and systematic explorative travels. Secondly, it was due to their organizing of large collective works through long-term (decades long!) research projects, a division of intellectual labor echoing the manufacture system and relying on sophisticated scientific specializations of individual researchers, which developed to the detriment of traditional individualist omniscient methods of work.[7]

Add to all these a quite remarkable relation with the temporality of work – the Benedictines were probably the first scholars trying to calculate the duration of tasks and to save time for each modest operation in order to increase their overall efficacy, with an almost capitalist view of time and productivity – and the result will be the formation of a genuinely new modern knowledge.

Maybe this efficient program of collective work contributed to Mabillon's insight that the classical text was not the mere product of the individual intellect, but a subordinate part of a cultural whole. It might also be one of the agents which led to a mutation, in his epistemology, affecting his notions of authorship and authenticity.

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[5] For a more complete picture, and for a depiction of the Renaissance legal humanism and its work of historical contextualization of legal documents, see Donald Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship*, as well as the works of Anthony Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship, i: Textual Criticism and Exegesis* (Oxford, 1983); ii: *Historical Chronology (Oxford, 1993)*; *The Footnote: A Curious History,* Harvard University Press, 1997; *What was History? The art of history in early modern Europe*, Canto Classics, 2007. –This flourishing tradition, however, was largely devitalized when most legal humanists fled France in fear of anti-protestant persecutions.

[6] Although they did not integrate archeological inquiries proper. For the belated interest that the French erudites manifested towards archeology, see Chantal Grell, Oxford: *Le dixhuitième siècle et l'Antiquitéen France*, 1670-1789, Voltaire Foundation, 1995.

[7] Blandine Barret-Kriegel, *Les historiens et la monarchie*, 4 vol., Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1988, vol. 3, *Les académies de l'histoire*, pp. 274-294.

2. Jean de Mabillon, the Cartesian document detective

The Maurist Jean Mabillon (1632-1707) published his most important work, *De re diplomatica*[8], in 1681. It was rightfully received by his contemporaries as a revolution in history[9]; it made him the greatest authority in critical history until late in the eighteenth-century and entitled him after his death to be buried close to Descartes. His method was famously called by a modern historian "Galilean"[10], to express its epoch-making importance, but, ironically, is was rather akin to the Cartesian because it represented, essentially, a discourse on the historical method by which Mabillon put in place a whole set of positive rules for distinguishing between what can be known with certainty as authentic and what is false.

Writing treatises in order to give (abstract as well as practical) rules for intellectual production of every kind was a frequent practice of the late seventeenth-century, not only for philosophy, but also for visual arts, literature or gardening etc. And the *De re diplomatica* was, first of all, a theoretical treatise meant to systematize universal rules for historical knowledge. Methodic search for new relevant documents, manuscript collation, detailed examination and dating of the writing materials (papyrus, parchments, cloth, cotton paper, inks), of the seals, signatures, types of calligraphy, literary style, spelling, tastes specific to particular historical ages and cultural environments, internal coherence of texts, comparison of text versions and transcriptions, identification of "hands", correlation of external information concerning the historicity and circumstances of writing with internal information read from each version of the text, etc. – all these were rules for the external or internal analysis that had to be applied systematically and simultaneously by every historian in order to certify the authenticity of each piece, as well as to survey the chain of transmission of historical information and to detect all sources of errors,

[8] See esp. *Editio Secunda ab ipso Auctore recognita, emendate & aucta Luteciae-Parisiorum*: Carolus Robustel 1709.

[9] Paul Bertrand, « Du *De rediplomatica* au *Nouveau traité diplomatique* : réception des textes fondamentaux d'une discipline », in Jean Leclant, André Vauchez, Daniel-Odon Hurel (eds.), pp. 607-609.

[10] Blandine Barret-Kriegel, *Les historiens et la monarchie*, vol. 1*, Jean Mabillon.* Barret Kriegel's book is the most significant among the (relatively) recent works on Mabillon, although, to my knowledge, the only consistent publications dedicated to Mabillon in the last decades have been the joint proceedings of two anniversary conferences: Jean Leclant, André Vauchez, Daniel-Odon Hurel (eds.), *Dom Jean Mabillon, figure majeure de l'Europe des lettres: Actes des deux colloques du tricentenaire de la mort de Dom Mabillon* (*abbaye de Solesmes, 18-19 mai 2007 ; AIBL, 7-8 décembre 2007),* Paris: Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, 2010.

anachronisms, forgeries.[11] Together, they were the principles of what Mabillon himself called "a new science".

However, Mabillon's *De re diplomatica* was also born out of an immediate and circumstantial practical necessity: it was an elaborate reaction to a simultaneously scholarly and skeptical assailing. The first blow was struckby another historian, a Dutch Bollandist colleague of Mabillon named Daniel Papenbroeck, who had recently published a text challenging the authenticity of a few Merovingians medieval titles attesting some ancient property rights belonging indirectly to the St Denis Abbey[12]. – In what was another attempt of an erudite historian to produce general rules for historical knowledge[13], Papenbroeck had asserted that one of the main guiding threads for the scholar should be the antiquity of the source: the older the text, the less credible will it be. The titles attested by the Benedictine's charters were old, thus meaning that they were simultaneously inaccessible to the expertise of the historian *and* inauthentic.

As a matter of fact, Papenbroeck had a philosophical motivation, as his text had been written under the joint influence of the old Cartesian disbelief in history and of some notions derived from historical phyrrhonism; but, practically, after such a historico-philosophical attack, both the secular reputation of the Benedictine order and its property titles were seriously endangered.

Earlier, in the previous decades, Mabillon had been commissioned as well by his order to produce a series of Benedictine *acta sanctorum*, a highly scholarly work dedicated to the lives of the Benedictine saints. He had edited the works of Saint Bernard in 1667 and, on that occasion, courageously suppressed many hagiographical myths – a purge of all the deeds falsely attributed to Saint Bernard, which actually resulted in a thoroughly scientific edition of the saint's life. But he was caught afterwards in a war of frictions and pamphlets and threatened with the interdiction to do research and publish. He answered to the accusations of impiety by writing – among other defenses – the *Brèves réflexions sur quelques Règles d'histoire*[14], a consistent piece of epistemology of history, never actually published

[11] For a detailed examination of the structure of the work, and for an illuminating description of these rules and their rationale in the *De Re Diplomatica*, see Jakub Zouhar, *"De Re Diplomatica Libri Sex" by Jean Mabillon*, Listy Filologické CXXXIII, 2010, 380.

[12] Bruno Neveu, *Érudition et religion au XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, Paris : Albin Michel, 1994, 203. Bernard Joassart, in R. Godding et alii, *Bollandistes, saints et légéndes. Quatre siècle de recherche*, Bruxelles, 2007, 97-100.

[13] A methodological introduction to a series of *Acta Sanctorum* that Papenbroeck had been commission to direct by the Bollandist order.

[14] *Brèves réflections sur quelques règles d'histoire*, préface et notes de Blandine Barret-Kriegel, Paris : P. O. L., 2010.

during his lifetime. This was Mabillon's first general methodological treatise born out of an immediate pragmatic concern.

De re diplomatica was then the second. And it was the most brilliant epistemic manifestation of a larger pre-Enlightenment intellectual culture where the historico-theological erudition was practiced as a martial art, increasingly refined during the controversies dividing "Catholics and Protestants, gallicans and Jesuits, rigorists and laxists, champions of *grâce* and Molinists".[15]

This second time, with Paepenbroeck's intervention, the immediate stakes of Mabillon's reaction were less a justification of his particular methodological choices, and rather a defense of his religious order mediated through an assertion of historical scientificity.[16]

But it was mainly the need to navigate between harmful skepticism (harmful both for the mundane interests of the Benedictines and for historical knowledge in the abstract) and the ignorant or interested credulity or mystification that pressed him to conceive a fully-fledged method. It was a practical need, as well as a philosophical one. For the roots of Papenbroeck's skepticism were, for Mabillon, his insufficient knowledge of inquiry methods, on the one hand, and his limited number of textual sources, on the other. Nothing could be proven by a historian unless his knowledge of the existing documents was exhaustive and, in this illuminating case, historical skepticism exposed itself rather as a philosophical ideology authorized by a precarious scientific knowledge.

Ironically, Mabillon was being confronted with similar issues as Descartes, the very philosopher whose strong endorsement of mathematical certitude was generally perceived as an exclusion of history from the encyclopedia of sciences. Although not motivated by a genuine philosophical ambition to lift the Cartesian embargo against history, Mabillon's *De re diplomatica* can be understood as one of the numerous endeavors that led many philosophers, theologians and other men of letters in the second half in the seventeenth century to struggle with the strictures of the Cartesian epistemology, while salvaging a spirit of Cartesianism. – For, far from actually inhibiting the development of history as a legitimate form of knowledge, as traditional history of ideas tended to assume[17], Descartes's pronouncements against

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[15] Bruno Neveu, „Mabillon et l'historiographie gallicane vers 1700 : érudition ecclésiastique et recherche historique au XVIIè siècle", in *Érudition et religion aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, Paris : Albin Michel, 1994, p. 192.

[16] To tell a long story short, after reading Mabillon's elaborate reply, the Dutch admitted his complete defeat in a generous and almost moving public letter (see the details in Leclant, Vuachez, Hurel (eds.), p. 568).

[17] See, for instance, the classical and for a long time influential assertions of Paul Hazard from *La crise de la conscience européenne, 1680-1715* (1935), although the trope is much older. Even Cassirer, whose momentous *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* is a correction to the long-lasting image of an anti-

history in the *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* and *La recherche de la vérité* stimulated a whole new range of theoretical reformulations and substantial reflections about the degrees of certainty, many post-Cartesian philosophers being led to restate the legitimacy of the categories of *probability* and *verisimilitude* and redefine the different types of certainty corresponding to specific fields of knowledge.[18]

Mabillon's method was, therefore, Cartesian, but only if we accept to use the term as vaguely as many of his Enlightenment followers and admirers did – and not as a name of a coherent body of thought; it was a special kind of Cartesianism, allowing to be supplemented by a kit of empirical procedures enabling the historian to verify the certainty of historical facts and documents. In other words, *De re diplomatica* was a response in technical terms to historical phyrrhonism (either skeptical in a proper sense or emanating indirectly from Descartes), but observing the Cartesian requirements for a method for the identification and rejection of the false and mere appearances. And, while the phyrrhonists' quest was a quest for errors, although relying on the principles of critical history[19] and diplomatics, the historian's quest, for Mabillon, was fundamentally a quest for truth.

Mabillon's professional self-consciousness was also informed by an analogy with the practice of the judge[20] and with the latter's examination of the certainty and authenticity of proofs. His writings were an enormously significant contribution to that crucial production of the notion of historical `source` – meaning the distinction and hierarchization between **original** and **derivative** or **secondary** – that

historical and rationalist Enlightenment, opposes this reconsidered, historically sensitive Enlightenment, to a Cartesianism that abhors history. See on this point the excellent Carlo Borghero, *La certezza e la storia. Cartesianesimo, pirronismo e conoscenzastorica*, Milan: F. Angeli, 1983.Borghero depicts here the complex reception of Descartes's attitude towards history and the sometimes reductionist way his refusal to acknowledge a scientific status to history was understood by his contemporaries or by later historians of ideas.

[18] The impetus Cartesianism paradoxically gave to the philosophical epistemology of history is the object of Borghero's *La certezza e la storia.*

[19] Unlike Mabillon, Bayle – who had him in very high esteem and who, for that matter, taught history for eighteen years in Sedan and Rotterdam (see Hubert Bost, „Bayle et Mabillon", in Leclant, Vuachez, Hurel (eds.).) - is, on the one hand, more idiosyncratic in his selection of study cases for criticism, and on the other, more interested in general judgments about history and the possibility of historical knowledge than in establishing in a positive fashion if a certain document can or cannot be used as a historical source. As he famously states in the *Critique Générale de l'Histoire du calvinisme* written a year after *De Re Diplomatica*, Bayle pretends to read history only in order to decipher the partisanship inherent in every historian's work. (*Critique Générale de l'Histoire du calvinisme de M. de Maimbourg*, *Œuvres diverses*, tome II, Hague,1727–1731, pp. 10–11.)

[20] This is more explicit in the *Traité des études monastiques*, where he also uses the terms "tribunal", "judgment", "judge".

a modern historian such as Arnaldo Momigliano considered to be the basic principle of modern historical philology.[21]

Moreover, Mabillon exploited and developed in his work the mutation engendered by Renaissance critical history of one vital category of historical epistemology, the authentic: while the medieval scholars had been motivated to identify the apocryphal and the genuine, they usually understood the genuine or authentic as deriving from a person or institution of authority, someone who could be trusted.[22] And, while the Renaissance philologist had already reversed this relation between authority and authenticity, making authority derive from authenticity and not the opposite, it was Mabillon who drove the conclusions, countering – once more - the undermining malice of the skeptics and relativists.

The consequences of this engagement with a new apprehension of the authentic was the following: the remote past could indeed be known and represented, for Mabillon, and the historian must no longer be temporally close to the events he is describing in order to be trustful, because the authenticity, however old the manuscript, can be established thanks to a system of rules and material investigations. In the previous century, the modern skeptics had appropriated for their own cause the ancient Greek argument that the historian should be contemporary to the events he is depicting: for the corollary was the inaccessibility of the remote past to any modern representation; furthermore, they were supplementing with their undermining arguments about the inapproachable nature of the past those Cartesian arguments about the unscientific nature of history in general. For Mabillon, though, it was the modern historian himself who was more reliable than the direct witness, thanks to his professional expertise and his "judge-like" discrimination on the sources, made possible in its turn by the division of labor and the advancement of historical learning (at least as long as the historians were able to follow the rules of their profession). This also meant that the historical knowledge could bridge the gap between the present and the remote past.

Even the object of the historians' judgment is, accordingly, more congenial with the legal material: because, for Mabillon, – who was not an investigator of social history, of course, but a detective of charts and official titles in the service of ecclesiastical and royal patrons – the truly trustworthy historical source was the public source: the official document, the most transparent and less confidential of all documents.

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[21] Furthermore, the diplomatics, that Mabillon and his fellows Maurist scholars transformed into a science, served in the eighteenth century, with its complex need of authentification and classification, as an epistemic model for natural history, while opening a crucial horizon for the understanding of cumulative knowledge.

[22] Blandine Barret-Kriegel, vol. 2, pp. 39-40.

Which also means that Mabillon's method crucially displaced the object of criticism and the locus of the certainty from the **knowing subject** to the independent **material object** under investigation, with all its material circumstances.

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This professionalization of the field was made possible above all thanks to an institutional infrastructure provided by monarchy and church and, indirectly, to their very particular political interests of self-legitimation. This was also a substantial condition for the future constitution of the public archives, from the middle of the eighteenth-century onwards – a sort of primitive accumulation of documents as indispensable to history as the development of its auxiliary sciences. Nonetheless, on the other hand, diplomatics became a historical science especially because it emancipated itself from the immediate political usefulness and began to function as a systematic method applied as thoroughly as possible.

Mabillon was, virtually, a public clerk, engaged in producing a public knowledge designed to eventually consolidate the absolutist state and the identity and secular entitlements of his order. His anti-hagiographic methods were perceived as disturbing and destructive by some, but, in the end, the nature of his criticism only engaged with the authenticity of texts and titles and did not touch other types of authority. In particular, *la critique* was not entitled to touch theological issues themselves, as Mabillon would make explicit in his *Traité des études monastiques* (1691)[23]. Although he later became an inspiration for the *philosophes*, his work was not conceived, as the historico-speculative work of a Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau, to challenge the relation between text and power, nor the nature of political and religious authority, but it only purged the titles invoked for some kind of legitimacy.

Mabillon's *diplomatics* was an intellectual device destined to a brilliant modern career, but one still having its face oriented towards the past. On the one hand, in a very modern fashion, Mabillon seemed to let his analysis be guided by

[23] Benedetto Bravo, "Critice in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and the Rise of the Notion of Historical Criticism", in Cristopher Ligota and Jean-Louis Quantin (eds.), *History of* Scholarship (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp 135-195. Bravo's article warns against taking for granted the meaning of the term "criticism" and retraces its complicated metamorphoses in the field of historical philological criticism. Bravo does not see any patent contradiction in Mabillon's attitude: "Receiving the deposit of tradition' by means of a 'critical' study of 'ancient ecclesiastical monuments' was not, for a Catholic, a theologically neutral activity. It implied the belief that the Roman Church as 'Ecclesia docens' was not in possession of the 'deposit of tradition', and that this 'deposit' could be known only through learned and responsibly 'critical' study, which any citizen of the République des lettres could undertake." P. 191.

an idea of the separation between the literary content of the text and his physical materiality. His was, virtually, a profound insight about the *unconscious* of the text: what does the document say unintentionally about itself? – it was a question that seemed to him to lead further than the mere attention towards its literary or dogmatic message.[24] While the signified content became more dependent on the circumstances of its signifier, each piece under investigation, then, looked more and more like the enigmatic fragments collected from an archaeological site than like the old textual object that incited the esthetic pleasure of the traditional consumer of ancient literature and history with a humanistic education.[25] On the other hand, the diplomatics was an excellent tool designed to satisfy a very traditional need: the authentication of charts and, in general, of official – political and ecclesiastical - narratives. As such, it was imbued with an epistemic optimism about the positive and constructive consequences of history that today might seem at least naïve. The underlying assumption of the erudite historical practices developed by the religious orders[26] was that, far from dissolving the truth of the revealed religion, as philosophical historians of the Enlightenment would later suspect, history was able to attest and recover this revealed truth.

A religious erudite historian like Mabillon could not foresee the subversive turn taken later by his critical principles in the writings of Enlightenment philosophical historians like Rousseau or Voltaire. The essentially restitutive intentions of the diplomatics and its attention mostly to details or authentication of individual pieces of documents[27] suggest that the critical branch of the erudite history was less

[24] Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible. Translation, Scholarship, Culture*, Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 102.

[25] Ibidem.

[26] The distinction between religious and secular erudition would fade away progressively, and in 1701 a newly reformed Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres – whose mission under Colbert had been the direct glorification of the king and which became afterwards increasingly independent in its intellectual activities and oriented towards the professionalization of historical knowledge – would adopt Mabillon as a honorary member.

[27] "La nouvelle culture intellectuelle et scientifique de certains érudits est justifiée par la volonté de ceux-ci de rendre respectable l'objet de foi, et de démontrer que la dévotion à tel saint a des fondements historiques sûrs ; il s'agit d'épurer, pour l'asseoir plus solidement, l'essentiel de la croyance, et de la protéger des feux des critiques. Une autre motivation de cette démarche a des origines spirituelles, et correspond chez certains moines à un retour aux temps évangéliques, à une soif de pureté, d'ascèse et de vérité. », Bruno Maes : « L'érudition critique de dom Mabillon et les livrets de pèlerinage des mauristes », in Leclant, Vuachez, Hurel (eds.), 80. As some modern historians observed, the Maurists had some significant affinities with the Jansenists and with their idea of a restitutive historical and doctrinal erudition. For Jansenists, the Catholic tradition had obscured the original truth of the Augustine doctrine, therefore it was the historian's task to uncover it.

concerned with the destiny of general narratives and had no substantial anxieties about the potential cognitive dissonances that it might cause. On the contrary, *De re diplomatica* was a guarantee that the malevolent pyrrhonists could be kept at distance.[28]

Sometimes, the application of the principles and methods of the diplomatics could be constrained and limited by external considerations, as it happened in the litigious case of the Sainte Larme de Vendôme – a hallowed relic that the Benedictine abbey from Vendôme desplayed as a holy tear that Christ himself had shed at Lazarus's death, collected afterwards by an angel and carefully preserved by Mary Magdalen. When this claim came to be contested in the name of a materialist criticism of the sources allegedly congenial with Mabillon' sdiplomatics, Mabillon, surprisingly, refused to pronounce himself on the matter of the relic's authenticity.[29] Not that the scientific criteria invoked by the accuser, the abbé Jean-Baptiste Thiers, were wrong, but they were misplaced. The abbé suspected then that the Benedictines were practicing a double standard: while developing inexorable methods of source criticism, they were nevertheless attempting to bypass the question of the implausible authenticity of one of their most precious resources of devotion.[30] Mabillon's response to Thiers[31], in turn, while discreetly betraying his intimate conviction that the Holy Tear might have not been truly genuine, stressed that the essential thing in the case of a relic was not to demonstrate its authenticity or falsehood, but rather to check the good conscience of its worshipers and the respectable venerability of its cults. By placing the legitimate discourse about the relic in the sphere of devotion pastoral practices, Mabillon made it immune to text criticism.

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[28] The other main figure of French erudite history, Bernard de Montfaucon, develops his main methodological work to answer to another pyrrhonist allegation: the hypercriticism – gone pathologic – of father Hardouin, who, once a highly respectable scholar, had come to believe that almost all the ancient pagan and Christian texts – with very few exceptions – were diabolical forgeries. Or, Montfaucon developed his ground breaking *Paleographiagraeca* (1708) in order to prove that "Greek manuscripts, hands, and letters have a history too complicated for one forger to produce. If all scribes unconsciously reveal their own historical context by the handwriting they adopt, a single forger could never duplicate the variety of unconscious historical signatures that mark the textual record." (Sheehan, 102) Bernard de Montfaucon proved to be a true follower of Mabillon and developed in a different area of study the principle of separation between the signifying content of the document and its materiality. His rejection of Père Hardouin's conspirationist theories was essentially an inquiry into the historical *and* collective nature of authorship.

[29] Daniel Odon-Hurel, « Mabillon, J.- B. Thiers et la Congrégation de Saint Maur », in Leclant, Vuachez, Hurel (eds.).

[30] *Dissertation sur la Sainte Larme de Vendôme*, 1699. Leclant, Vuachez, Hurel (eds.), 63.

[31] D. J. Mabillon, *Annales ordinis S. Benedicti*, t. IV, Paris, 1707, 531-534.

Although at hand, a cynical double standard should not be the main explanation here – albeit this allegation against Mabillon was not absent from abbé Thiers later interventions, nor is it absent today from the judgment of some modern historians.[32] Apart from the obvious and objective circumstantial embarrassment of being simultaneously a critical historian and a Benedictine loyal to the Benedictine order, Mabillon seems here to have a rather clear consciousness: there are certain situations when the (in)authenticity is not the crucial matter. These situations might reveal the specific and subordinate role of the diplomatics and historical criticism - which are not meant to disrupt piousness without a religious justification - without breaking the fundamental coherence of Mabillon's epistemology.

To summarize it briefly, diplomatics was a means to unify and integrate the field of historical inquiry, which was suffering, at the time, of a deep segmentation and fragmentation in parallel and enclosed subfields[33]. Be it only a humble piece in the history of a congregation, the historical work had to be integrated coherently in the larger - and already given - history of the French kingdom.[34]On the other hand, though, Mabillon imagined his methodological device as embedded in a larger intellectual project protected from skepticism and decay and, ultimately, in the larger goals of the Christian Church. This was the fuel for the fundamental epistemic optimism underlying the diplomatics. A positive science was about to be built, without any risk of upsetting the great founding narratives of the monarchy and the church.

The political interest of the patrons and the radical instruments of historical criticism lived, in this case, in peaceful harmony. But this was not always the case. Let us examine now the example of a deep conflict between the alleged final objective of criticism and the actual workings of the critical method.

[32] See, for instance, Bruno Maes'stext « L'érudition critique de dom Mabillon et les livrets de pèlerinage des mauristes » from the same collective volume (77-94).

[33] As superbly shown in Grell, 1993.

[34] Odon-Hurel, 72.