

## AN EARLY DISCIPLINARY TEXTBOOK OF THE NORBERTINE ABBEY OF METZ IN PARIS

(Summary of Basic Research)

### INTERNATIONAL CANON LAW HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER

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Over the past two decades, *Prof. Szabolcs Anzelm Szuromi* has repeatedly summarized his research results in codicology, paleography, comparative textual critical analysis, and the history of sources, literature, and institutions in medieval canon law and Roman law, based on the manuscript collections in Paris. Most recently, he provided a comprehensive overview in 2019.

**SZUROMI, Szabolcs Anzelm, *A 12<sup>th</sup>-century textbook from the Norbertine Abbey of Metz, containing patristic works, in the manuscript collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris)***

## **1 – Introduction**

The oldest part of the collection of the National Library of France (*Bibliothèque nationale de France*) originates from the royal palace library, which was established in 1368 by King Charles V (1364–1380), known as “the Wise.” The collection was significantly expanded by Louis XI (1461–1483), who founded the *Bibliothèque du Roi* in 1461. It is from this date that we count the establishment of the institution now known as the French National Library. Fortunately, the library’s first complete catalog (despite the collection having been moved several times) was completed between 1739 and 1753, so a comprehensive overview of the composition of the pre-French Revolution collection can be formed based on the descriptive methods used at the time. The institution was known as the “National Library” from 1792 onward, and during this period, the book collection increased significantly because of the secularization that took place during the Revolution (1789–1799), with materials coming from both the private libraries of the nobility and from various dioceses, monasteries, and parishes.



The secularized book collection arrived in Paris from all over France and its various towns during the Revolution. Thus, by gathering volumes not only from the capital but from across the entire country, one of the world's largest collections of medieval manuscripts housed in a single library was created. Among the medieval canon law codices, the most valuable are the volumes from the libraries of the *Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés* and the *Abbey of Saint-Victor*, as well as the medieval manuscripts of the *Sorbonne*. It should be noted that more than two million volumes were lost during the German occupation of World War II.

The medieval canon law manuscripts are found in the *Richelieu-Louvois* and *Arsenal* collections, which together contain approximately 31 million documents grouped into five separate sub-collections. This material, on which I have focused over the past two decades, concerns manuscripts currently located in Paris (i.e. Szuromi: 2019). It is noteworthy that in the last decade, significant programs—carried out through international cooperation—have been launched to promote the online accessibility of the French manuscript collections, particularly their medieval sections, and to provide them with reference tools (see the *Mantragona* Project, the *Gallica* Project, and the *Jonas* Database). The results of these projects available online (digitized volumes, codex descriptions incorporating the findings of new research, including up-to-date bibliographies) are constantly expanding. In these programs, preference is given to illuminated manuscripts (those with decorative elements) and codices of significant iconographic value. Thus, the re-examination of this vast manuscript collection—particularly in the fields of theology, patristics, and canon law—still relies primarily on individual research work.

## 2 – The Manuscript

It should be noted at the outset that the cataloging and thematic classification of individual manuscripts at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* are characterized by the same misunderstandings as those found generally at the international level: that is, the classification does not examine the thematic purpose used in compiling the manuscript as a entirety (whether the volume is the result of a single act of copying [containing one or more works], or consists of several units bound together subsequently [*colligatum*]). Thus, in many cases, scholarly research cannot treat the units contained within them in the full context of the volume. Instead, texts are often examined as sequences of independent works by different authors placed one after another. Unfortunately, this approach can lead to a work consisting of many units—whose details originate from numerous authors (i.e. *fontes formales*)—remaining hidden from analysts, similar to the case where a copy contains material compiled from multiple works (compiled from the works of the same or different authors), but researchers fail to uncover the possible specific purpose of the compilation, which could fundamentally alter the volume's genre or thematic classification (on the methodology of proper textual analysis, i.e. Szuromi: *Eph.I.C.* 2016). This may explain why previous research classified the manuscript under examination as patristic material and as part of the history of theology, without examining the content of the texts in the manuscript or the significance of their unique combination.



The only description of the manuscript under examination was published by Léopold Delisle (Paris, 1863–1871). The 19<sup>th</sup>-century inventory records the factual details of the content with considerable accuracy, but it provides no information regarding the manuscript's actual genre, place of origin, or approximate date of origin. Structurally, the 188-folio parchment manuscript (measuring 230x135 mm) consists of two main sections, the authors of which are also listed in Delisle's description. The first can be found on folios 5r–114v, and the second on folios 115r–187r. It can also be stated that the two units were likely copied by the same hand and bear the characteristics of the same scriptorium. The volume was not bound together later (i.e. it is not a *colligatum*). This is particularly significant because of the introductory section preceding the first unit—which Delisle did not examine in his description—extending from fol. 1r to 4v, also written by the same hand, and which could not have been added to the manuscript later. If we turn our attention to these four folios, we find a previously unknown theological and disciplinary summary explaining that if someone wishes to practice the religious-canonical (i.e. regulated canonical) way of life instead of the monastic way of life, they must learn certain principles, rules of life, and a daily schedule. Specific mention is made here of St.

Augustine and Bede the Venerable, whose works, when read regularly, provide guidance not only in the pursuit of spirituality, but also in leading an obedient and virtuous community life, as well as in the practice of regular examination of conscience and the identification of sins that corrupt the soul.

It is thus clear that the manuscript under examination was compiled for a community that was later taken over by canons regular, and whose original members were admitted into the religious-canonical community. After examining the content, codicological, and paleographic features (handwriting style, parchment quality, nature and color scheme of the decoration) and comparing all this with the characteristics of the codex identified in the manuscript collection of *Gonville and Caius College* (Cambridge, UK) (i.e. Szuromi: *Newsletter* III/5 [November 30, 2025] 1–5), the place of origin of the volume is most certainly Metz. The codex was thus also compiled at the Norbertine *Abbaye Sainte-Croix et Saint-Éloi de Metz*. I have previously described this Norbertine abbey in detail (Szuromi: 2025), so here I wish only to reiterate that the community, along with its associated church building and complex, was taken over by the Norbertines in 1135. The manuscript under examination—similar to the “canonical pocketbook” preserved in Cambridge—undoubtedly belongs to the earliest book collection of the abbey’s Norbertine period, meaning it must be dated between 1135 and 1140. This chronological and local determination is also supported by the characteristics of the handwriting identifiable in the manuscript, which shows significant similarity to one of the hands found in the afore-mentioned manuscript in Cambridge.

### **3 – Content-related Characteristics of the Manuscript**

The first section following the introduction consists of the Sermons (Sermones) of St. Augustine (†430), each of which is dedicated to obedience, the sanctification of the day through prayer, and the practice of penance (foll. 5r–114v). A distinctive feature is that, to the best of our current knowledge, each of the quoted sermons was given in Carthage; with two exceptions, none contains the full text of the sermon, but only quotes those sections that provide useful instructions for the life of community of canons. The two sermons copied in their entirety are St. Augustine’s famous 53<sup>rd</sup> sermon on the Eight Beatitudes (*Beatitudines*) and his 72<sup>nd</sup> sermon on the true good (*verum bonum*). The second section contains selected passages from Bede the Venerable’s (†735) commentary on the Gospel of Mark (foll. 115r–187r). It is well known that Bede’s exegetical method employs the so-called allegorical hermeneutic. He treats biblical passages with great liberty, which allows him to make references to contemporary church conditions and even to incorporate remarks on church discipline (for a detailed discussion of this issue, see Szuromi: *AfkKR* 2024). Each of the passages he adopts contains spiritual, moral, and penitential guidance, and repeatedly emphasizes the importance of daily communal prayer, the reading of Scripture, and the lectionary. Bede’s material undoubtedly draws on the writings of St. Augustine and St. Gregory the Great regarding community prayer and the reading of Scripture (for the context of this, see Szuromi: *Theology* 2025).

## Conclusion

The manuscript described above is another important witness to the written culture of the Norbertine Order in Metz, as well as to the early activities and expansion of the order. Together with the copy identified in 2025 in the collection of *Gonville and Caius College* (Cambridge), it not only provides insight into the regulations governing the daily life of early Norbertine communities and the theological and disciplinary sources used to regulate them, but also clearly illustrates the method applied in the monasteries and chapters taken over by the Norbertines with regard to the members of the joining communities. From the texts of St. Augustine's sermons and Bede the Venerable's commentary on Scripture, a fairly clear picture emerges of the doctrinal, spiritual, moral, and sanctifying ideal of life that the Norbertine canons sought to realize in community.



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