

Registering Social Change: How Historical Transformations Are Reflected in the “Livres de Raison” (c. 1400–1600)

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory research project has highlighted the potential of the livres de raison as privileged sources for understanding the impact of the macro-historical transformations from late-medieval to early modern society on the daily lives of the literate middle classes. Methodologically, the project has made the case for an approach that conceptualises the changes in the functions and format of the livres as the authors’ responses to the sociocultural pressures of a transformed society. While statistical analysis is complicated by the difficulty of defining the livres de raison, a good many sixteenth-century livres are at once more concerned with the memorialisation of family events and less concerned with lists of assets, revenues, and expenses. These twined developments amount to a repurposing of the traditional register defined by the late fourteenth century by its mix of notes on household business and family events into a record bearing a closer resemblance to family chronicle. These developments can be explained as responses to two major historical changes. First, the progress of pragmatic literacy and growing access to notaries led to the growth and diversification of accounting records. In this novel documentary environment, the single register in which the pater familias kept track of patrimony and business transactions (occasionally recording other consequential information as well) was largely obsolete. Second, with mounting socioeconomic pressures associated with a changing society and upward mobility, town notables began to use the livre de raison – now liberated of its duty as an accounting book – as a repository of family history, in an effort to shift the economic competition against upstarts on the more favourable terrain of prestige and cultural capital. Knowledge of the illustrious family line and prestigious matrimonial alliances could thus be preserved with a view to informing participation to public life.

1- Introduction

This project has set out to tackle a fundamental question in historical research, “how to trace the impact of macro-historical developments on the day-to-day life of the population”, in the specific context of the transition from medieval to early modern society and from the specific

angle afforded by the domestic registers known in France as *libri rationis* or *livres de raison*. Emanating from the literate middle classes and kept by the pater familias, the livres de raison are hybrid registers, compiling records about the family patrimony, acquisitions, revenues and expenses, alongside notes about family and

sometimes local events; some also include advice for posterity and the author's personal reflections, not unlike memoirs. Most entries in these registers were made with the practical aim of managing family affairs; as such, when broad societal trends are registered in the *livres de raison*, we can be more confident that they reflect the individuals' concerns and lived experience. Even with the proviso that the *livres*' authors were male, literate, and largely well-off – ordinary bourgeois, town notables, and also some gentry – these registers bring us closer to the everyday experiences of those below the ranks of the nobility.

2- Experimental details

The project was limited to four months, September–December 2024. Both edited and unedited *livres de raison* c. 1400–1600 were consulted, of which some were continued over several generations and thus extended into the seventeenth century (e.g., the Bodreau family register; Barilly-Leguy 2006); indeed, a number of early seventeenth-century *livres* were also examined. In fact, in view of previous work on late-medieval *livres de raison* (Epurescu-Pascovici 2021, pp. 119-52), the study of early modern registers has been prioritised during the four months of the project.

Local archival resources were also prioritised, notably in the case of the sixteenth-century Quarré *livre de raison*, preserved in manuscript at the Médiathèque of Orléans (MS 138). Work has also been done on compiling a list of key societal developments that are reflected with a high frequency in the *livres de raison* c. 1400–1600, in particular the increased attention to political events – both local and regnal – in the sixteenth century. After the first month of the project, however, research has taken a source-oriented turn, focusing on the transformations in the format, structure, and functions of the *livres de raison*. The IRHT's collection of printed *livres de raison*, microfilms, and digital resources have been instrumental for research on this project.

Le Studium's monthly seminar was an excellent opportunity for the presentation of work in

progress to an interdisciplinary audience, including the host scientist and Studium fellows researching the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. The feedback received has highlighted the need to problematise “medieval” and “early modern” as analytical categories, both in general and in the study of *livres de raison*. For the purposes of this project, these categories are used as a convenient shorthand, standing in for the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, respectively. Equally, the feedback received has suggested the merits of understanding the transformations of the *livres de raison* in the documentary context of the time.

3- Results and discussion

The project's key findings have to do with the transformations in the structure, functions, and ultimately nature of the *livres de raison* in the sixteenth century in response to macro-historical changes. Sixteenth-century *livres* are both more concerned with the memorialisation of family events – often in the specific historical context – and less concerned with lists of patrimonial assets, revenues, and expenses. The forays into the sources during the four months of the project suggest that these twined developments amount to a repurposing of the traditional register – defined by the late fourteenth century by its mix of notes on household business and family events – into a record bearing a closer resemblance to family chronicle. While more study is obviously necessary to validate and contextualise these findings, they can be explained as responses to two major historical changes.

First, the progress of pragmatic literacy and growing access to notaries as well as printed materials led to the growth and diversification of accounting records. In this novel documentary environment, that single register in which the pater familias kept track of patrimony and business transactions while also making other kinds of notes – the traditional *livre de raison* – was largely obsolete. Second, with mounting socioeconomic pressures associated with a changing society and upward mobility, town notables began to use the *livre*

de raison – now liberated of its duty as an accounting record – as a repository of family history, in an effort to shift the economic competition against upstarts and nouveau riches on the more favourable terrain of prestige and cultural capital. Knowledge of the illustrious family line, of ancestors who held municipal and regional offices, and of prestigious matrimonial alliances could thus be preserved and transmitted with a view to informing participation to public life.

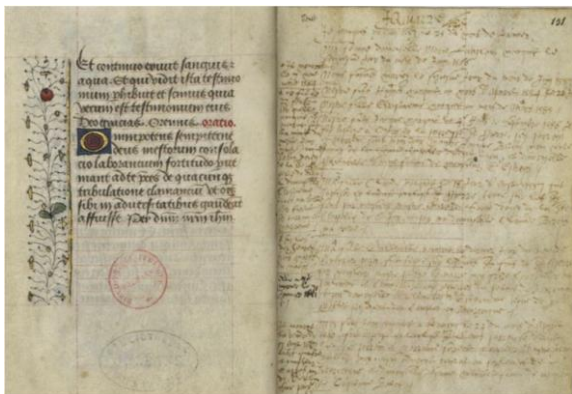


Plate 1. The late-sixteenth century Quarré *livre de raison* was written on the folios left blank at the end of an ornate fifteenth-century *livre d'heures* (*livre d'heures* ends on fol. 150v; *livre de raison* begins on fol. 151r and ends on fol. 155r).
Orléans, Médiathèque, MS 138, fols. 150r-151v (detail).

The growing concern for the memorialisation of the family past is reflected in the association between *livres de raison* and *livres d'heures*. The latter are high-quality, illuminated manuscripts and as such quite expensive. To use the blank folios in them to write down *livre de raison* material would hardly have been conceivable for a fourteenth-century pater familias: accounting was too mundane a concern to feature in these prestigious manuscripts, passed down from generation to generation as treasured possessions. In the sixteenth century and later, however, notes about family history – which are typical of the *livres de raison* from the second half of the fourteenth century – are occasionally written down in *livres d'heure* (usually at the end). Examples include Orléans, Médiathèque, MS

138 (Plate 1) and Annecy, BM Bonlieu MS 2 (and see Bergeron-Foote 2011 for another instance). The point was to inscribe the family history, which now the *livres de raison* seeks to extol, in a treasured and prestigious manuscript. The valorisation of the family history entails the valorisation of the records through which it is achieved, that is, the *livre de raison* in its novel incarnation.

In addition, the project has highlighted the growing attention to local and regional events in the *livres de raison* of the sixteenth century, in what might be labelled the “turn towards the public realm” of these family registers. It bears emphasis that the fifteenth-century precedents in this respect are modest (the notable exception is the *livre de raison* of Gerald Tarneau, combining notes on family events with the chronicle of a failed tax collection and its consequences for his Limousin town during the Hundred Years War).

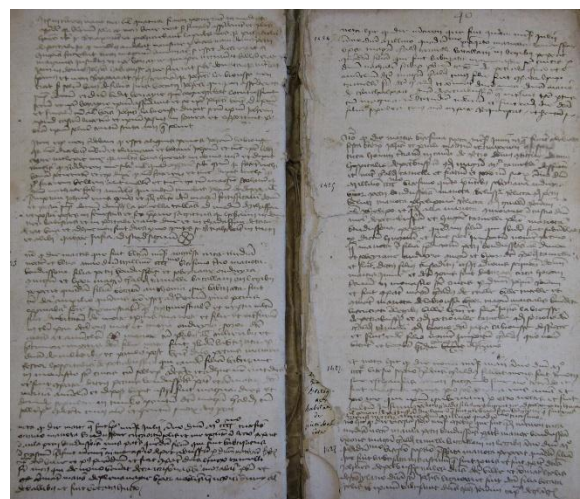


Plate 2. The *livre de raison* of Gerald Tarneau (first half of the fifteenth century).
Limoges, Bibliothèque francophone multimedia, MS 6, fols. 39v-40r.

The interest in genealogy in the early modern *livres de raison* has been noted in the historiography and related to a growing appetite for life-writing as well as practical – that is, juridical – aims (Mouysset 2010). Similarly, for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – the period succeeding the temporal focus of the present project – the interest of recently ennobled bourgeois for genealogical writings

has been highlighted (Burguière 1991). This project, however, situates the growing interest in family events within the trajectory of *livres de raison* as a genre (or type of document) from the late Middle Ages to the early modern period.

4- Conclusion

Although limited to four months, this exploratory research project has identified a major transformation in the nature of the *livres de raison* from the late Middle Ages to the early modern period, and has highlighted the *livres*' potential as privileged sources for understanding the impact of the macro-historical changes c. 1400 to 1600 on the everyday life of the literate middle classes.

5- Perspectives of future collaborations with the host laboratory

This exploratory research project has set the foundation for a broader study of the subject, on the basis of both *livres de raison* and related personal records, in a broader comparative perspective (e.g., France and Italy). What is more, the project's findings raise once again the question, "what is a *livre de raison*, c. 1400–1600?" – a fundamental if somewhat intractable issue, inasmuch as many of the registers labelled *livres de raison* in the historiography do not bear this (and often any) title. The problem deserves further in-depth study, which might also involve rethinking the relation between the hybrid late-medieval registers and the early-modern family histories that are both currently designated by the label *livre de raison*. The contacts established at the IRHT during the Studium fellowship will be useful for mobilising the research network needed to design and carry out such a project.

6- Articles published in the framework of the fellowship

During the four months of the project, a presentation of work in progress was given at the monthly Le Studium seminar: "Registering Social Change in the 'Livres de Raison', c. 1400–1600: Preliminary Findings and Methodological Gains", Hôtel Dupanloup, Orléans, 3 October 2024.

7- Acknowledgements

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