

MEMORY OF THE WORLD REGISTER

LIBRARY OF BEATUS RHENANUS

(France)

PART A – ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

1 SUMMARY

The books that made a man.

A man who made books.

What has become of the libraries of the great humanists, of Erasmus of Rotterdam, Guillaume Budé, Thomas More, Lefèvre d'Étaples or even of Pic de la Mirandole? Disappeared, dispersed ...

That of Beatus Rhenanus (1485–1547), “one of the greatest scholars of his time, alter ego of the prince of the humanists, Erasmus of Rotterdam”,¹ a philologist ennobled by the Emperor and whose texts and translations were references throughout Europe, survives to modern times as a coherent whole of almost 1,700 documents, including 1,300 printed works.

This collection is directly related to that of the famous Latin school of Sélestat and was used to educate men and shape minds. Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote in his “Praise of Sélestat” on this town and its school: “While other cities give birth only to men, you produce geniuses.”

Among those geniuses was the young Beatus Rhenanus, a native of Sélestat, son of a rich butcher. A studious pupil at the Latin school, as a student Beatus became an assistant teacher at the school and used books left behind by former pupils for his work as a teacher. In 1503, he left Sélestat to study at the University of Paris, under the stewardship of Lefèvre d'Étaples. During these university studies, he collected course notes, exercise books and texts — which are now rare and priceless evidence of education in his time.

As a student, he worked in the office of the printer Estienne as a corrector and used this income to expand his personal library. Thus, this man of letters, who bought his first volumes at the age of 15, already owned 253 by the age of 22, at the end of his stay in Paris.

Returning to the banks of the Rhine in 1507, he continued to study and became involved in publishing in Strasbourg and, in particular, in Basel, where he studied Greek. He became director of publications at the Froben publishing house in Basel. He corrected, annotated, commented and published ancient texts by Tertullian, Seneca, Tacitus, Titus Livius, Prudentius and Pliny the Elder, to name but the most famous. His contemporaries, humanists or reformers, also had their place in his publications, and included Jacques Wimpfeling, Erasmus and Thomas More. He was ennobled by the Emperor Charles V in 1523.

Following the religious conflicts that affected Basel, he returned to his home town in 1528. In Sélestat he spent the last 20 years of his life in study, reading and publishing more and more. He edited the complete works of his friend Erasmus, who had authorized him to amend certain texts from his correspondence. The biography of Erasmus and a monumental history of Germany were among the most remarkable of his own works.

On his death, Rhenanus left all works in his possession to the town's Latin school, following the tradition of those who had preceded him on the school benches. With this legacy, he doubled the quantity of works in the parish library's collection.

Thus, his life was made of books: those that had made him mingled with those that he edited, translated, adapted, written, pondered, assembled, bound, commented or annotated. The books that belonged to him have been preserved as a collection in the library of Sélestat. They paint for us an edifying portrait of a humanist, from the school benches to his death bed.

This extraordinary collection is almost intact today. Thus this unique library is a silent herald of that great movement that profoundly changed Europe: Humanism.

It is on this basis that we propose its registration.

2 DETAILS OF THE NOMINATOR

2.1 Name (person or organisation):

Joint proposal:

Town of Sélestat,

Mr Marcel Bauer, Mayor of Sélestat, General Councillor of Bas-Rhin,
Hôtel de Ville, 9 place d'armes, 67600 Sélestat.

Tel. 03 88 58 85 75

The Association of Friends of the Humanist Library,

Mr Raymond Muller, President,

1 Rue de la Bibliothèque,

67600 Sélestat.

Tel. 03 88 82 94 30

2.2 Relationship to the documentary heritage nominated:

The Town of Sélestat is the owner of the collection.

The Town has worked in close collaboration with the Association of Friends of the Library, which submits the nomination drawn up by Ms E. Jeannin.

2.3 Contact person (s)

Ms Olivia Fricker

Director of Culture

Town of Sélestat

Mr Laurent Naas

Head of the Humanist Library

Town of Sélestat

2.4 Contact details (include address, phone, fax, email)

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3 IDENTITY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated

The Library of Beatus Rhenanus, preserved within the Humanist Library of Sélestat.

3.2 Description

The Library of Beatus Rhenanus consists of manuscripts and, above all, printed material, which have been kept since 1889 in the former Corn Exchange built in the 1840s by the architect Gustave Klotz. Bequeathed by Beatus a short time before his death in the summer of 1547 to his town of birth, it is the property of the municipal administration of Sélestat which continues today to provide for its management and preservation. The library of Rhenanus is now preserved and exhibited in a chamber of the great exhibition hall on the first floor, behind a wrought iron gate.

The nomination file specifically concerns the works of Rhenanus preserved in this space.

The collection comprises 423 volumes containing 1,287 printed works, 264 preserved hand-written letters and some 33 volumes of manuscripts (94 works). The collection currently consists of 1,686 documents preserved in Sélestat.

The collection includes letters, works and also exercise books and course notes which provide precious evidence of humanist education. These works bear the mark of their owner: they are labelled with his ex libris, bound and grouped by weight (for practical reasons), interest and subject, one volume containing several works.

The numerous and methodical annotations are texts within the text, very commonly used by philologists.

Alongside these annotations are letters and documents which remain to this day unexpected and unpublished: among the scattered hand-written letters can thus be found an account of the earthquakes that took place in 1509, a contract between Beatus Rhenanus and a neighbouring farmer regarding a calf given to him for wintering and even a statement showing the cost of the burial of Beatus Rhenanus's father. In other words the collection conceals all sorts of information, from the best translated ancient text to the most enlightening details of everyday life.

Historiographic approach

Down the centuries, many references have been made to this library.

While Beatus was still alive, it was already recognized. After the decease of this "scholar of great fame", his collection attracted interest and envy. Thus, in 1549, the Froben and Episcopius printers of Basel wrote to the town of Sélestat, which had inherited the collection, in an effort to recover works and manuscripts that Beatus had borrowed from them.

Shortly after Beatus Rhenanus's death, when one of the burghers of Strasbourg enquired about the contents of the scholar's library, the town replied to him that the books had been transported to a location converted for the purpose and that they were being indexed.

It is also mentioned in Beatus Rhenanus's biography written by Jean Sturm in 1551.

Lastly, catalogues have been drawn up by Schöpflin (1694-1771) and by the librarian Joseph Walter, published in 1929, for example, attesting to the existence of this collection down the centuries.

4 JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION/ ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

4.1 Is authenticity established? (see 4.2.3)

4.2 Is world significance, uniqueness and irreplaceability established? (see 4.2.4)

Uniqueness and irreplaceability

The survival of such a coherent and important complete set of works of Europe-wide significance – some of them unique in themselves – is exceptional. Moreover, this collection has been preserved, since its establishment, in its town of origin.

Comparison with national libraries

It contains books of which all other trace has now been lost.

“As one looks through the first volume of the 1501 to 1510 chronological inventory of Parisian sixteenth century publications, one is surprised to note that it refers to the Humanist Library of Sélestat more often than any other French library with the sole exception of the national library. If one examines a modern bibliography of works printed in Basel by Jean and Jérôme Froben, one is astonished again: the collection kept in this small Alsatian town rivals that of Basel and possibly exceeds that of Paris, certainly that of London.”²

Comparison with personal libraries

By way of comparison, the 2,000 volumes of the Bibliotheca Corviniana, established by King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary during the Renaissance and now inscribed in the Memory of the World Register, have been dispersed. As another comparison, the library of Erasmus was sold during his own lifetime and then dispersed.

Pierre Petitmengin wrote on the subject of Rhenanus's library and its preservation: “It is a great good fortune if one considers the dispersal that befell the books of Erasmus or Budé

The only collection of the era which was as well preserved would be the Vadiana, left by the historian Joachim Vadian (1484–1551) to the town of St Gallen, of which he was mayor, but it lacks the breadth and the wealth of the lifelong collection of that man of letters, Beatus Rhenanus.”³

Some other remarkable Renaissance libraries do survive, but they are those of princes – such as that of Malatesta Novello in the Quattrocento, inscribed in the register of the Memory of the World Register – Popes, religious communities and institutions.

That of Sélestat was established by a single layman. Unlike Matthias Corvinus, Rhenanus used his books as the tools of the trade needed by this artisan to develop his thoughts, and they were not assembled for pure bibliophilic pleasure. These tools bear the marks of their user owing to his annotations, comments and choices made in assembling one volume or another. These books within books lead to the discovery of a humanist spirit as much as a collection.

It is the library of an active intellectual and not that of a well-read prince.

Universal interest

In this library, the variety of languages used, subjects, authors, eras and places of publication reflects the universal spirit that characterized the humanists.

This collection includes the works that Rhenanus collected from all European countries, drawing on his dense and vast network. Across borders, this scholar mixed with authors (Erasmus of Rotterdam, Lefevre d'Étaples, Guillaume Budé, and others), reformers (Melanchthon, Bucer and Zwingli), printers (Henri Estienne, the Parisian printer; Josse Bade, the Belgian printer; Matthias Schürer, the Strasbourg printer; Johann Froben and Jean Amerbach, the Swiss printers), royalty (Charles V), powerful men (the Fuggers), prelates (the Bishop of Worms) and even monks.

Thus, in Sélestat numerous books have been preserved that had been used as models for the printing of great editions of ancient texts which became references throughout Europe.

“The humanist library of Sélestat, thanks above all to the preservation of the personal library of Beatus Rhenanus, portrays most aptly the sixteenth and seventeenth century passion for letters. It attests, in manuscript form, to the way in which the famous printing house of Aldus Manutius (1449-1515) in Venice operated. Anyone wishing to study the coursework on Aristotle as taught at the University of Paris would find much of interest. Then, of course, the library's collection loyally and brightly reflects the intellectual life of Strasbourg and Basel and their printing houses: Erasmus (circa 1469-1536) is omnipresent here. Finally, the collection provides an insight into the essential role played by Germanic monasteries in the preservation of works from antiquity, whose manuscripts were zealously sought by humanists such as Beatus Rhenanus.”⁴

4.3 Is one or more of the criteria of (a) time (b) place (c) people (d) subject and theme (e) form and style (f) social, spiritual and community significance satisfied? (see 4.2.5)

(a) Time

The collection of documents throughout the life of Rhenanus (1485-1547) is an embodiment of the renaissance of arts and letters through rediscovery of ancient texts enriched through the invention of the printing press.

Thus, the collection mainly contains printed documents that have contributed to the cultural and scientific development of Europe.

The library of Beatus Rhenanus gives a glimpse of the Renaissance era, providing discreet but crucial evidence.

(b) Place

Assembled in Sélestat, on the Rhine axis – the literary and printing axis – these documents originated in numerous intellectual centres. The works collected by Rhenanus were published in Basel, Paris, Strasbourg, Venice, Haguenau, Nuremberg, Rome, Lyon, Augsburg, Cologne, Wittenberg, Louvain, Leipzig, Mainz, Vienna, Tübingen, Antwerp, Pforzheim, Milan, Freiburg im Breisgau, Erfurt, Zurich, Florence and Sélestat, all listed in decreasing order of frequency.⁵

These multiple origins reflect the web woven by humanists throughout Europe by means of the Latin language.

(c) People

The figure central to the library is Beatus Rhenanus: philologist, historian, writer, translator, editor and, of course, reader. The all-embracing nature of his areas of interest is the hallmark of the

humanist spirit. Owing to his relative wealth, he naturally did not seek the acquaintance of the rich and powerful in order to be granted their patronage, unlike many of his contemporaries. He also seems to have been characterized by discretion and modesty and thus seems to have been less famous than some of his contemporaries. His output was no less significant, however; quite the contrary, as his library attests.

The creator of this collection was a humanist scholar of the highest calibre. He was even considered by Erasmus to be his alter ego.

(d) Subject and theme

The themes of the works in the collection are varied, reflecting the universal character of humanism: theology, religious controversy, philosophy, history, politics, moral works, law, medicine, grammar, education, geography, sciences in antiquity, rhetoric, languages, technology, information, mathematics and astronomy, to name but a few.

(e) Form and style

The philological importance of this collection is evident: the languages used are mainly ancient languages, primarily Latin – the supranational language of culture and science in the Renaissance period – Greek, which Beatus had thoroughly mastered, and Hebrew. Erasmus wrote of him that Rhenanus was “learned in both the one and the other language”. There are also works written in modern languages: German – Beatus being of Germanic culture – Italian and French.

Furthermore, this almost complete collection reflects the literary practices of the Renaissance. It gives us the keys to understanding a humanist’s tools and relationship to books, specifically how he bought them, how he classified them, how he bound them, to whom he lent them, from whom he borrowed them, who gave them to him, from whom he inherited them, how they circulated, how he annotated them and corrected them and where he inserted loose sheets of paper, among other things. As enlightening as the content of his books is the way in which he treated them.

This collection is marvellous evidence of literary practices during the Renaissance.

4.4 Are there issues of rarity, integrity, threat and management that relate to this nomination?
(see 4.2.6)

These elements are detailed under sections 6, 8 and 9.

¹ Petitmengin Pierre, *Beatus Rhenanus (1485-1547), son activité de lecteur, d’éditeur et d’écrivain* – 18 September-18 November 1998. – Fédération française de coopération entre bibliothèques, Sélestat, 1998, p.15.

² Petitmengin Pierre, *Beatus Rhenanus (1485-1547), son activité de lecteur, d’éditeur et d’écrivain* – 18 September-18 November 1998. – Fédération française de coopération entre bibliothèques, Sélestat, 1998, p.15.

³ *Idem*, pp. 16-17.

⁴ Hirstein James, *Beatus Rhenanus (1485-1547), son activité de lecteur, d’Éditeur et d’Écrivain* – 18 September-18 November 1998. – Fédération française de coopération entre bibliothèques, Sélestat, 1998, pp.12-13

⁵ Hirstein James, *La bibliothèque de Beatus Rhenanus : une vue d’ensemble des livres imprimés*, in “Les Humanistes et leur bibliothèque”, Actes du colloque international, Bruxelles, 26-28 August 1999, Éditions Rudolf de Smet, Leuven, 2002, p.130.