The Ancestral Library as an Immortal Educator

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European intellectual life underwent a major transition in the Renaissance and Reformation. For the first time, Christian intellectuals began to work primarily within the context of a familial household.\(^1\) As a result, erudition in the early modern period became a family business, cultivated and passed on from generation to generation and performed in the home. Families dominated early modern intellectual life by making scholarship their business in the same way that an artisan family might make printing, music, or shoemaking their family trade.\(^2\) Therefore, a

\(^1\) Some prominent examples of early modern scholarly families include the de Thous, the Dupuys, the du Tillets, the Sainte-Marthes, the Scaligers, the Camerarius, the de Valois, the Achillinis, the Pithous, the de Joly de Fleury, the Sansons, and the extended kinship between Reuchlin and his great-nephew Melancthon. See Sarah Ross, "The Birth of Feminism: Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2006); Gadi Algazi, "Scholars in Households: Refiguring the Learned Habitus, 1480-1550," *Science in Context* 16 (2003): 9-42; and Deborah L. Harkness, "Managing the Experimental Household: The Dees of Mortlake and the Practice of Natural Philosophy," *Isis* 88 (1997): 247-62. On the humanist revaluing of the family that caused the emergence of the scholarly family, see Anthony D'Elia, *The Renaissance of Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

family's success and failure can be traced by the development or dissolution of its library. Properly cultivated, a library allowed erudition to accumulate over the generations.

The Godefroy family manuscript collections exemplify the importance of the ancestral library. The Godefroy first became famous in the sixteenth century for their work in legal scholarship, in particular Denys I Godefroy's 1583 edition of the Corpus Iuris Civilis. They later worked as royal historiographers and conscientiously trained their sons to inherit their scholarly business, which was still rooted in the legal-historical humanism passed down from their ancestors. The education of Godefroy boys took place within the family library as sons copied new documents, checked over the work of the clerks, organized loose papers, created tables of contents and indices, and summarized texts. This work had three purposes: to familiarize the son with


the materials, teach the son skills in the practice of critical history, and make the library a better research tool.4

Erudition has always had a tragic element: it accumulates slowly but dissipates quickly. The Godefroy and other families like them sought to prevent this dissipation by creating a library whose organized erudition would survive each generation and provide a neophyte Godefroy with quick means of building on his ancestors' knowledge. Examining their manuscript library with this in mind illuminates the purpose behind their endless labors among the family papers: organizing, annotating, and summarizing served not just to help the scholar but to assist all of his descendants.

Ann Blair has shown the pervasiveness of the fear of "information overload" in the early modern period and the variety of attempts to handle a perceived overflow of information through assorted compendiums, reference works, and arts of memory.5 The powerful trope of "information overload" did not remain merely a scholarly concern; it drove the ascension of scholars as royal information providers from Francis I onward.6 No longer could a king have just one or two

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4 Thanks to Don Bailey for distinguishing between the familiarization of materials and the training in skills.


learned advisors to guide him. These advisors themselves now needed erudite advisors, and even these secondary advisors had recourse to other scholars to help them.

Professional scholars like the Godefroy convinced ministers like Richelieu and Mazarin that their knowledge was essential to statecraft and ignorance could be devastating to the interests of France. The order of the Parlement of Paris that commanded Théodore Godefroy and Pierre Dupuy to inventory the Trésor des Chartes in 1615 expressed anxiety over the "nonchalance" toward titles that had characterized previous reigns. Similarly, the instructions given later to Théodore Godefroy for his trip to

7 Francis I was certainly not the first king to have erudite advisors; many medieval French historiographers were able to write their histories because of their personal access to the king or other highly placed men. See, for example, Carla Bozzolo, ed., Un Traducteur et un humaniste de l'époque de Charles VI, Laurent de Premierfait (Paris: Sorbonne, 2004); and Rebecca Boone, "Claude de Seyssel's Translations of Ancient Historians," Journal of the History of Ideas 61 (2000): 561-75.


help the negotiators of the Treaty of Westphalia implied that only a man of his erudition could provide the appropriate treaties and documents for his mission.

The Godefroy family thus offered a solution to political nervousness over information through their research service. Kings, secretaries, noblemen, scholars, and diplomats all turned to the Godefroy for learned answers. A nobleman struggling to assert his right to a territory or a place of honor would call on them to make his case, just as Richelieu and Colbert used them to furnish justifications for royal rights. This work kept them busy, as is clear from the daily to-do lists Théodore composed that survive among his papers.11 These lists tend to be obviously overambitious, containing a week's worth of work, but they tell us the kinds of chores that occupied his working day. Then as now, many of the tasks Théodore had set for himself were either administrative or somewhat tedious, scholarship always being at least as much a labor as it is an art. As a patriarchal scholar in charge of the household business, Théodore's lists also included tasks relating to the family as a whole, including the duty of writing to his mother and sisters, who served as liaisons to Calvinist scholars, as well as a range of household and scholarly occupations, such as refurbishing clothing, buying cheese and a gun, making a copy of an inventory, sending letters, making collations, going to mass (one of the few items actually crossed off the list), offering presentation copies of his works to other scholars, taking care of keys, finances, and renting the house, dealing with Cramoisy the printer, and doing unelaborated tasks for a long list of other scholars. Most ominously, Théodore included the task of "arrang[ing] [his] papers" on his to-do lists. But arranging Théodore's papers was not a task of the same magnitude as "pay Simon" or even "work on the inventory of Switzerland and Germany." Arranging papers was a life-long job for Théodore and his descendants.

Every scholar has experienced the frustration that much of what he or she knows is never included in his or her

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11 See e.g. Bibliothèque de Institut, Godefroy Collection [hereafter Institut Godefroy] 67, fol. 55v. and 482, fol. 359v.
publications. The Godefroy tried to make their manuscript library the repository of all of this information that could never be contained in their books. Consequently, despite their extensive collection of books, their daily work took place among manuscript pages, which frequently contained two or three generations of their handwriting. Rather than relying on books, the Godefroy copied out materials from their books onto manuscript pages that could be more easily incorporated into their working documents. Thus, while books were an important means of making knowledge public, the family's private store of information—what was truly their wealth—was kept in manuscripts. When a Godefroy had a question, he turned first not to the books he owned but to the volumes of manuscripts at his disposal, which eventually totaled over 550 volumes of documents, fortunately preserved together in the Godefroy collection at the Bibliothèque de l'Institut.12

Théodore Godefroy first arranged this collection of manuscripts into a private library in Paris at the beginning of the seventeenth century. He chose to use geography, genealogy, and legal topics as the primary organizing structures for his fledgling archive. Although he was a historiographer, he used chronology only as a secondary form of organization within one of these larger schemes. Théodore expected that this way of organizing his materials would allow for easy expansion as his collection grew and that these schematics would match the topics on which his family was likely to be queried.

As importantly, Théodore insisted on the legibility of the materials that he added to his collection. Although careful with his money, he nonetheless spent extra on thick, full-sized paper and dark ink, even for personal notes. He wanted everything that he worked on to be easily readable and durable, and he selected his amanuenses for their tidy modern hands.13

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13 The major exception was his clerk Foiard, whom Théodore hired earlier in his career and who does not seem to have done much work for the Godefroy, judging by the relatively small number of his copies in the Godefroy Collection.
pages and always left large margins in which he could insert finding aids and other marginal notes for significant points. Théodore spent extra time and money in making his documents usable for future generations, and in fact the clarity and legibility of his documents help explain their enduring reach and reuse. His memoirs and memoranda circulated more broadly than those of his descendants not because of greater erudition but because of their legibility. As Théodore warned his son Denys II, "Make sure that everything you present [to other people] is well written, reread [for errors], and entirely clean – otherwise it is useless."

Théodore often copied and recopied his works as he drafted them. Rather than simply making copious notes on his first draft, Théodore instead had even small revisions worked into a new copy. Each version was quite clean, with only a few alterations marked onto it, and the changes from one to the other are very clear. Although this procedure involved considerable additional time and expense and meant diverting copyists from projects that would add documents to the family library, Théodore wanted the record of his revisions to be obvious so that his heirs could easily trace how and why his work had developed.

But Théodore was painfully unable to inculcate his handwriting preferences into his son Denys II, whose youthful bad hand only deteriorated with age as he abandoned himself to his scrawl; after his father's death, some of Denys' documents are little more than a series of inkblots. After his emancipation from his father's watchful eye, he also tended to hire clerks who wrote with more of a cursive flourish, which made the documents less

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14 Institut Godefroy 548, pièce 106.
15 This was a trait he shared with Isaac Newton; see Mordechai Feingold, *The Newtonian Moment: Isaac Newton and the Making of Modern Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). When giving Denys instructions from Münster on their compilation of documents from the peace conference, Théodore emphasized making a clean copy of everything before starting: Institut Godefroy 481, fol. 235.
easy to read. In fact, no less than Colbert criticized Denys' habits, sending him in 1675 a rather stern warning about the need to clean up his documents and employ writers who would keep their handwriting simpler:

I beg you meanwhile to continue to have copied those documents that you estimate to be the most important and to send them to me carefully; but it will be necessary for this that you have better writers than those who have done the notebooks that you send me, and that you take care that the handwriting will be more tight, and that there will be more lines on each page and more words on each line, because if you continue to have them written in the character of those notebooks I have received, with time you will create an entire library out of very little.16

These disastrously messy documents that Denys produced give the impression that he was not very well organized, but in fact Denys added tables of contents to the volumes of manuscripts and assiduously created a new system of adding summaries to the headers of the original letters in his collection to make the most important information in the letters more readily available to his heirs. Once one Godefroy had waded his way through a medieval document with its peculiar orthographies and script, he would spare his descendants the same pain by nicely drawing their attention to all of the important points contained therein. No generation of the Godefroy felt any compunction about adding notes to original documents. Even medieval parchments with palm-sized lead or wax seals were not sacrosanct and can be found in their collection with the annotations of later generations in the margins, headers, and footers.17 There was no self-consciousness about scribbling one's own notes next to the king's signature.

17 This is a habit that the family seems to have kept even when curating documents in the Lille archive. See, for example, the Latin "Memorandum concerning a proposed Marriage between Henry V and Catherine of France in 1414," published by J. Hamilton Wylie in The English Historical Review.
But the Godefroy did more within the library to assist their descendants than just organizing and annotating their documents. They also assembled memoranda that served as something like today's "executive summaries," with all of the most important information presented briefly, sometimes including rebuttals to possible counterarguments, and often followed by copies of documents as proofs. These memoranda and memoirs were kept in the volumes that contained other documents relating to the subject. They remained valuable as summaries of a field of information and could often be recycled for another purpose or incorporated into a future collection or publication. These memoirs, with simple syntheses of complicated legal-historical disputes, were the obvious place for each Godefroy to start when he needed to research a subject.

For example, Théodore's memoir on "the rights of Francis I over Lille, Douai, and Orchies" considered the claims of the French dating back to the 1369 treaty between Charles V and Louis de Male, the count of Flanders. Théodore then confirmed these rights by tracing them through subsequent documents, examining the specific conditions of the original treaty and outlining the subsequent political history of the land and the machinations of Emperor Maximilian to claim the territory due to his marriage to Marie, the daughter of the last duke of Burgundy. Théodore then explained the legitimacy of the French claim despite the treaties of Madrid, Cambray, Crépy, Cateau-Cambrésis, and Vervins and appended excerpts from these treaties.

Théodore originally wrote the text to serve an immediate political use, and by having Denys recopy it Théodore encouraged his son to learn the material contained within, which later became an introduction to the question of Flanders in 

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(1914): 322-3 which was stored in the Archives du Nord and which, Wylie noted, had on it "an analysis of its contents by Jean Godefroy." Note, however, that some documents that were in the Lille Chamber of Accounts ended up in the Godefroy collection and vice versa.

18 Institut Godefroy 326, fol. 22 et seq., as copied by Denys II from his father's original work.
Denys' work for Colbert. From there it also became a good summary of the French claim to Flanders for a third generation of Godefroy, who used it for their work relating to Lille. It, and hundreds of memoirs like it on other topics, thus became a starting point of knowledge and a quick reference guide for future generations, easily educating them on a subject that Théodore had probably researched for many days. The library improved their productivity and prevented duplication of effort. In addition to full memoranda, Théodore, Denys II, and Denys III also left a variety of notes that accumulated information, excerpts, and arguments on a subject. These notes were just as valuable to the family as the memoranda, since they also provided shortcuts for research and served as an instructor to the young. The thrust of the argument to be made from these notes was often obvious.

The family context of the Godefroy collection made it especially useful to them. Ann Blair observes that inherited familial notes were most likely reused by the descendants of the original scholar, which was quite certainly true in the case of the Godefroy. Other scholars, of course, were eager for the materials contained within it, asking for copies of their notes and extracts or having an extended replica made of one of the larger manuscript works. For a variety of reasons, however, none of the scholars who worked with the Godefroy papers managed to get as much use out of these materials as the Godefroy themselves. First of all, the Godefroy were more familiar with each other's handwriting, which allowed them easily to distinguish the approximate time period in which a text had been written and its

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relationship to other texts in different hands on the same subject. This familiarity with the hands also made it easier for the Godefroy to decipher trickier scribbles. It is probably not coincidental that the only full-length study of the Godefroy was produced by one of their descendants: all other scholars looked at Denys II's handwriting and moved on to more legible subjects.

The family connection to the manuscripts also gave the Godefroy more inherent interest in the old memoirs and notes than outsiders. The notes of one's grandfather or father have more intrinsic personal meaning to a scholar than fifty-year-old memoirs by someone else. Indeed, notes produced within one's own family have a longer lifespan and are less likely to seem obsolete to their familial readers than similarly aged memoranda from outside the family, particularly for a family like the Godefroy who were proud of their intellectual heritage.

Furthermore, the notes within one's own family collection can be used and appropriated more easily and with less guilt by descendants than can the fruits of the labor of unrelated scholars. Antoine Moriau, on acquiring the Godefroy collection, did not put his own notes all over it out of a sense of historical respect for the papers. Conversely, Godefroy-Ménilglaise, a nineteenth-century descendant, would be kicked out of the Bibliothèque de l'Institut for his insistence on improving his family's old papers by applying pen and scissors to them.\(^\text{20}\) Since they had originated in his family, he felt still entitled to modify them. In contrast, although Moriau had legitimately purchased the Godefroy papers, he could not bring himself to deface them with his own notes. Consequently, Moriau lost some of their value to his own work.

The Godefroy frequently republished and reused documents written by their ancestors, a key part of their continuing success. Having inherited the papers and the family name whose

\(^{20}\) For the scissors incident, see Institut Godefroy ms 531, fol. 40. His pen can also be observed scattered throughout the collection, where it has generally been applied in an attempt to complete the organizational projects of his forefathers.
reputation they were honor-bound to try to preserve, they also felt they had inherited the right to make use of their papers. Denys II could reprint or rework Théodore's writings – as he did in his *Mémoires et instructions pour servir dans les négociations et les affaires concernant les droits du roy*21 – but he cried foul when others took his father's research for themselves.22 Other scholars could never have the same relationship to the papers as the Godefroy themselves, so the Godefroy library served the family better than it could ever serve other scholars who worked within it. Conversely, publishers asked the Godefroy to update their own ancestors' works, expecting that descendants would have notes ready for a revised edition.23

The Godefroy themselves were perfectly aware of the relationship between their family and their papers. On his deathbed Denys II wrote to Colbert to plead for his two sons, Denys III and Jean, to be named joint historiographers, arguing,

> I have such a great collection of curious compilations of historical and political memoirs, and it would be a pity if that came to be lost.

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21 *Mémoires et instructions pour servir dans les négociations et les affaires concernant les droits du roi de France* (Paris: S. Cramoisy et S. Mabre-Cramoisy, 1665; Amsterdam: A. Michel, 1665). There are two further Parisian editions: one in 1681 by Journel and the other in 1689 by Lefebvre.

22 All the Godefroy participated in safe-guarding their family's reputation. A long-standing resentment that the Godefroy carried toward the Dupuy family revolved around the Godefroy's understanding that Jacques Dupuy had failed to acknowledge Théodore's role in the posthumously published treatise on the rights of the king by Pierre Dupuy. Similarly, Léon, a long-since rusticated member of the family and a canon at Montpezat-de-Quercy, wrote to his nephew to warn that Théodore's 1624 work on the kings of Portugal was being used without credit. See BNF ms fr. N.a. 5163, fol. 39. Léon eagerly followed up on some information (a "remarque" that he had written long before) that he had been trying to convey to his nephew and for which he selflessly urged his nephew to take credit in order to rectify public awareness of Théodore's work while simultaneously bolstering the nephew's career.

23 For example, the Elzeviers tried to get Jacques to produce a revised version of his father's *Corpus Iuris Civilis*. See Alphonse Willems, *Les Elzevier: Histoire et Annales Typographiques* (Brussels: G. A. Van Trigt, 1880), 330.
and dissipated without bearing fruit, for having been naturally
cultivated within the family, and having the genius and zeal for it, it
can only be that [my children] will become more and more capable of
well serving the king in this profession, far more so than if one tried
to cultivate newcomers who would not have such instruction and
intelligence, nor yet so many materials already prepared.  

Why, Denys asked, would one choose first-generation
historiographers instead of those whose ancestors had already
prepared a rich collection for them to use?

Thus the most devastating blow to the family's scholarly
inheritance was the sale of the main collection of manuscripts
and books in 1746 by an unappreciative and selfish twenty-six-
year-old heir named Denys. The son of Claude Godefroy, who
had died in 1738, this Denys had spent his inheritance on clothes
and pursuing a career as a violinist, and he decided to
supplement his income by putting the collection up for sale
rather than giving the books and manuscripts to his scholarly
cousins. This loss meant that the Godefroy lost contact with the
work and advice of the previous generations. The manuscript
library they had accumulated, with all of their notes, had allowed
each generation to build on the work of those before instead of
having to begin anew. The library had been a master educator
and a guarantor of the continuing influence of the previous
generations. When Denys II needed to answer a question quickly
for Harlay, Lionne, or Colbert, he would first turn to the notes
his father had left behind, just as Denys III searched his father's
and grandfather's compendiums when looking for information on
Abbeville or the function of the episcopal revenue.

In fact, the Godefroy manuscript library kept erudition alive
for descendants more effectively than family publications. The
sale of the library marked the end of Godefroy publications
based on the documents contained within it such as their multiple
editions of medieval historiographers, and it cut the Godefroy off
from the notes that had formed the basis for their research since
the beginning of the seventeenth century. The main scholar of

24 BNF, Baluze 337, fol. 110.
the generation that lost the collection, Jean-Baptiste-Achille Godefroy, would as a result publish almost nothing and instead would devote himself to work in the Lille Chamber of Accounts, hoping to build up a new reservoir of expertise for the family. Although the Godefroy continued to work on similar projects, they gave up on endeavors that depended on papers in the lost collection such as their multiple editions of Commynes or their plans to produce a revised and expanded edition of Théodore's 1649 unfinished masterwork *Le Cérémonial François*. This history suggests that an individual who came from a scholarly family with a rich manuscript collection was likely to spend his life working within the projects already suggested to him by the research guides at hand. It indicates a means of the transmission of knowledge and methods, as sons revised and expanded their fathers' work. It also warns us that the manuscripts we find in archives may have notes on them that were not necessarily self-directed: a scholar may have spent many days collating, arranging, annotating, and summarizing not so much for his own sake as for that of his progeny. Then again, this is perhaps not very surprising: since documents survive because someone else thinks that they are worth saving, notes written by a father for the benefit of a son's career would be particularly hard for that son to throw away. A modern-day scholar purging his or her files as he or she prepares to retire – all of those letters and legal pads and shoeboxes of index cards thrown away – is one of the saddest sights in academe. How much nicer and more economic it would be to pass them to one's children and hope that they would get some use out of them.

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