
H-France Review Vol. 13 (July 2013), No. 116

Stéphane Van Damme, *Métropoles de papier. Naissance de l'archéologie urbaine à Paris et à Londres (XVIIe-XXe siècle)*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012. 310 pp. Tables, bibliography, and index. 35.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-251-44446-8.

Review by Victoria E. Thompson, Arizona State University.

Métropoles de papier tackles a tricky question—urban identity—from an original angle, that of practices, networks and institutions. Stéphane Van Damme focuses on how the examination of antiquarians, scholars, scientists, architects, and engineers of the soil, flora, fossils and material artifacts of capital cities and their immediate surroundings produced proof of the “grandeur” of the city. Using the term *grandeur* as an indication of the extent of the metropolitan area, as a measure of its illustrious past, and as a description of its current magnificence, Van Damme emphasizes the processes by which an ideological framework—a myth—is created. We see this not through analysis of the discursive content of the myth, but rather through the networks and practices used to develop, reach agreement, and disseminate a “truth” about the history of Paris.

The impetus for this process was a crisis that began in the eighteenth century, as cities expanded in size and as the corporate and religious identity of the city waned in importance. Continued urban crises of urban renovation, inadequate infrastructure, and immigration kept this process of constructing an uncontested body of knowledge about the city alive into the twenty-first century. In Paris in particular, Van Damme highlights the importance of the destruction wrought during the 1871 Commune as a powerful motivator in the institutionalization of knowledge concerning the city. The focus of the book is primarily on Paris, but comparisons are made throughout with other cities, including London, Edinburgh and New York City. At its center, this book investigates why and how the city became such an important site of intellectual and scientific inquiry during the period under investigation, and argues that the urban knowledge produced during this period served to mitigate the alienating shock of urban life described by Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin and others.

Van Damme begins with the natural environment of Paris, analyzing how the efforts of amateur geologists, mineralogists, botanists and others introduced a new means of understanding the origins of the capital. The first chapter documents efforts by amateurs to systematize and catalog their findings, efforts that brought them in contact with others and thereby produced networks of scholars and scientists that crossed international boundaries. Practices associated with this development include the botanical promenade, which provided an occasion for sociability, with family and friends, but also with other naturalists. Seeking to expand the boundaries of their expertise, naturalists traveled to other cities where they also made contacts and compared both best practices and institutional support. These efforts shifted the debate on the city’s origins from one based on the discussion of minimal textual evidence drawn from ancient sources to one focused on what the natural environment revealed about the city.

This shift produced a new form of proof concerning the city’s identity and origins, which expanded the scope of Parisian history both in time, as “[l]es âges de la Terre offrent une profondeur historique bien plus large que le seul temps historique des sociétés humaines,” and in space (p. 47). For geologists, botanists, climatologists and others, Paris extended beyond the legal limits of the city to include

surrounding areas that were part of what we might today call the same ecosystem. The result of this expansion of the geographical field of investigation produced a larger metropolitan space, and an eventual justification for the expansion of the city; as Van Damme puts it, the “Bassin’ (parisien, londonien) [est] un environnement naturel à l’expansion de la métropole” (p. 70). The expansion of the field of investigation did not only occur horizontally; it also expanded vertically: upward, for amateur climatologists, and downward, for amateur paleontologists and archeologists.

If chapter one provides a coherent foundation for what is to follow, the remaining chapters overlap and intersect in ways that are both challenging for the reader and thought-provoking. While overall the book presents a clear chronological arc, the remaining five chapters are not organized chronologically. The exposition moves forward and back in time between chapters and within chapters. The remaining five chapters are also not differentiated by discrete themes. The use of history, textual production, the importance of the visual, the evolution of urban archeology, the development of associations and institutions devoted to producing and disseminating knowledge about the city, and the use of such knowledge by urban elites are themes that weave through multiple chapters. The result is a work that is at times challenging, as the reader must work to put all the pieces together. However, it also captures the complexity of the process Van Damme examines. Just as the networks of amateurs, associations, antiquarians, municipal authorities and institutions emerge as a highly complex web of actors, products and ideas, so too the author weaves a complex web within the text. He thus eschews a more teleological approach to the topic, implicitly arguing that the progress-oriented, scientific study of the city that takes form by the early twentieth century was only one possible way of making sense of the city.

Two inter-related themes introduced in chapter two are the development of a historiographical tradition and canon in writing about the city, and the beginnings of urban archeology. Van Damme places the start of the scientific search for the origin of Paris within the context of an eighteenth-century municipal crisis of identity, arguing that it was driven by a desire to establish a more exalted foundation for the city than that of a backwater Roman outpost, as well as by a felt need to establish the legal framework of the city’s autonomy. Henri Sauval and Dom Félibien were among the first to utilize archival material in constructing their histories of Paris, drawing on charters and other legal documents from the Middle Ages as well as coins, epitaphs, coats of arms, and other objects dating from the ancient and medieval periods.^[1] Their work encouraged the study of the medieval period as well as antiquity, and prompted an effort to collect and organize manuscripts. These were made accessible to the public in 1773 with the opening of the Bibliothèque de la Ville. The efforts of Sauval and Félibien also established a tradition of scholarly debate and commentary, as later historians of the city quoted earlier authorities and revisited the same questions concerning the city’s origins and history. Van Damme revisits efforts to publish works on and about the city, in chapter six, focusing this time on the emergence of an “encyclopedic” impulse in the eighteenth century “qui vise à tout dire sur la ville” (p. 197).

Histories of the city also became, especially in the nineteenth century, an outlet for national rivalries, through comparison among different capitals. Over the course of the nineteenth century, specialized societies and specialized journals were formed, producing a hierarchy of expertise through practices such as the publication of articles. Municipal authorities in Paris encouraged the creation of new knowledge, most notably when Baron Haussmann, Prefect of the Seine under Napoleon III, initiated a massive project to publish a general history of Paris. By the early twentieth century, the focus on studying a series of problems about the origins of the city gave way to a narrative based on certainty that provided an evolutionary view of the city’s development. Van Damme dates this view to a specific text, F-G de Pachtère’s *Paris à l’époque gallo-romaine*, published in 1912, in which “[a]ux discussions hasardeuses sur les origines de la cité succèdent des certitudes” (p. 229).

Chapter two also examines the emergence of urban archeology as a proto-discipline, exploring the way in which the search for antiquities dating from the Roman and medieval eras contributed to a history of the city that could increasingly be visualized through material remains of the past. Van Damme argues

that in the nineteenth century, as cities continued to grow in population and size, and as Paris in particular underwent massive renovation, archeological finds provided a means of establishing an “identité stable et ‘éternelle’” for the city, one that rooted the imaginary community of Parisians, and the actual community of scholars and scientists, in the city’s soil (p. 71). Archeology both reinforced the perception that the traditional city was disappearing and offered a remedy to the anxiety caused by this perception, by allowing Parisians to see their origins.

Van Damme traces the development of this local archeological tradition from its earliest “accidental” phase, when objects were found by chance and collected by antiquarians, to the creation of a systematic procedure for ensuring the collection and preservation of antiquities, as well as the earliest efforts by the city to present them to the public in a meaningful way, as with the Musée de Cluny, which opened in 1844. This was not a smooth path, however, as questions of property rights frustrated efforts to preserve objects by identifying both these objects and the soil in which they were located as property to which the public as a whole had a right (as in the example of the Arènes de Lutèce). Interestingly, the destruction wrought by the Commune in 1871 facilitated preservation efforts. The Commune produced an “archéologie du désastre,” in which the “peur de la disparition totale du passé devient une menace sérieuse qui va permettre une mobilisation des autorités publiques” (p. 107).

In chapter three, Van Damme develops in more detail a theme introduced in chapter two, that of the importance of being able to visualize the urban past. From illustrations in eighteenth-century sources to maps and eventually photography, visual sources supplemented scarce written sources, becoming over time more precise and geometric. These visual sources served a variety of purposes, as seen in chapter four, where Van Damme discusses the efforts of amateur London archeologist Charles Roach Smith to combat the pillage of antiquities from building sites. Objects found at these sites were sold to private collectors, making them inaccessible to researchers. In an attempt to interest municipal authorities in this problem, Smith published a catalog of antiquities. Smith’s catalog, as well as those produced for the same reason in Paris and Lyon, drew upon conventions of natural history and art history to organize images of found objects. As Van Damme stated, they “constituent avant l’heure les premiers musées imaginaires” (p. 140).

The emergence of a coherent “old city”—Old New York, *vieux* Paris, Old London—in the second half of the nineteenth century, discussed in chapter five, was due in part to the work that images, especially postcards, and practices such as historic walking tours, did in making the city’s past familiar. Catalogs and postcards are part of what Van Damme calls “vecteurs de la matérialisation de cet imaginaire historique,” which culminated in the museum (p. 154). Yet while images allowed Parisians to envision the past city in all its splendor, they also contributed, Van Damme argues, to the fetichization and folklorization of the city. The resulting “picturesque” image of the old city supported the efforts of authorities to clean up and embellish the city while also presenting the urban past as one absent of conflict and disorder (p. 186).

The emergence of the municipal museum is part of a shift in the late nineteenth century from the historiographical debate that characterized the earliest urban histories to a more explicit pedagogical approach. Pedagogy was not absent from earlier efforts; in the early nineteenth century, archeology courses brought together “collectionneurs, amateurs, et gens du monde,” but it was not until the 1880s that a network of institutions devoted to educating both the public and specialists was created (p. 161). While municipal elites were most eager to create libraries, museums soon followed. The Carnavalet museum in Paris, discussed in chapter five, was an early effort dedicated to the conservation of antiquities and other objects related to the history of Paris which also provided a space in which to present a coherent representation of the city’s history. Museum staff worked closely with scholarly societies and associations of amateurs, such as the Société de l’histoire de Paris et de l’Île de France, established in 1874. Like the Commission du Vieux Paris, created by the municipal government in 1897,

the goal of the Société de l'histoire de Paris et de l'Île de France was to create resources for studying the history of Paris, including scholarly studies, a photographic archive, and collections of documents.

Through the publication of visitors' guides, the Musée Carnavalet, along with the Musée de la Bibliothèque historique de la Ville, presented collections that were increasingly edited to provide a coherent and accessible version of the city's history. With this shift, "[1]'esthétique de l'amoncellement, du cabinet de curiosité ou du bazar de la boutique d'antiques, doit céder la place à un parcours pédagogique et historique" (p. 225). This same process of creating a coherent and certain body of knowledge occurred within educational institutions as well. By the early twentieth century, as the author discusses in chapter six, "la multiplication des commissions, des historiens professionnels qui cherchent et enseignent l'histoire de la ville, confère un rôle nouveau à l'histoire comme élément central d'une 'science communale'" (p. 230). At the same time, a new generation of municipal leaders studied the city's history at institutions such as the École des hautes études urbaines and the Institut de l'urbanisme. Scholars such as Marcel Poëte placed the city's history within an evolutionary paradigm, clearly delineating its chronological stages, and establishing criteria that could be used to compare cities in order to assess their level of "progress." These criteria presented the modern city as the highest achievement of a civilization, while also emphasizing order and rationalism. In this way, Van Damme argues, the "truth" of the city "transforme et donne sens au chaos" (p. 234).

An overarching theme in this work is the importance of history, as a discipline and as a frame of mind, to the development of the practices, networks and institutions dedicated to the study of Paris. In the eighteenth century, fears of collapse due to a soil weakened by underground quarries and concerns over the flooding of the Seine inspired efforts to establish chronologies of such events as a way to assess their frequency and to establish a comparative framework used to define the severity of any one event. History also provided a hope of control, as these data were used to study how such events might be prevented. Similarly, amateur geologists and paleontologists worked within chronological frameworks with the goal of placing the history of the city within a longer natural history. Archeologists built upon the tradition of textual proof of the city's origins established in the eighteenth century by Henri Sauval and Dom Félibien. In this way, writes Van Damme, "[1]'histoire, mode de connaissance, devient le vecteur de la découverte d'une vérité sur la ville" (p. 86). The historical approach lent itself nicely, by the early twentieth century, to a view of the city as progressing through distinct stages toward its modern form.

Throughout the book, Van Damme insists on the political character of the development of scientific practices, networks and institutions. By this he means primarily the role of the municipality, and eventually the state, in fostering these efforts. City and state governments were instrumental in the founding of scientific societies, archives, and museums. This support was not only crucial for those engaged in the study of the city, it also served cities well as they sought to recast their identities in more modern terms. For example, eighteenth-century histories and guides to Edinburgh promoted antiquarian societies, botanical gardens, academies and universities as urban monuments, while neglecting other forms of sociability. With this example, Van Damme raises the possibility that alongside the public sphere with which we are most familiar, rooted in institutions of sociability such as the salon, the Masonic lodge and the theater, there existed another public sphere of scholars and scientists that was more closely aligned with institutions of power. These spheres overlapped, as for example when the eighteenth-century historians of Paris attempted to interest not just local scholars, but all of the Republic of Letters in their debates.

From Van Damme's previous work, we know that close ties existed between these spheres, yet in *Métropoles de papier* Van Damme largely insists on the "vision institutionnelle de l'histoire urbaine," one that emphasized religious communities and public institutions in the eighteenth-century texts and was increasingly based, throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, in institutions devoted to studying the city (p. 79).[2] Similarly, the focus on institutional history largely neglects consumer

culture, despite hints that here too an overlap existed (as when he briefly discusses cinema as one means by which the “old city” was made visible). Further attention to the connections between scientific inquiry and commercial culture, as in Mercier’s *Le Tableau de Paris* [3], the physiologies of the early nineteenth century, or marketing brochures of department stores such as the *Bon Marché* that doubled as tourist guides, might have provided some insight into the relationship between a specialized scientific culture and a larger consumer culture in the creation of frameworks of knowledge.

Finally, while Van Damme convinces the reader that municipal authorities had specific reasons for encouraging the development of a body of knowledge about the city that emphasized progress and order, we are left wondering whether this body of knowledge worked as intended, and what alternate frameworks might have ultimately served cities such as Paris, London and New York better. Granted, this is a big question and perhaps one that the author will tackle in a future work. In the meantime, *Métropoles de papier* is a fascinating blend of urban history and the history of science, intellectual and cultural history, one that prompts us to consider not only what we know about the city, but also how we know it.

NOTES

[1] Henri Sauval, *Histoire et recherches des Antiquités de la ville de Paris* (Paris, 1724) and Dom Michel Félibien, *Histoire de la ville de Paris, depuis son commencement connu jusqu’à présent*, 5 volumes (Paris, 1722).

[2] Stéphane Van Damme, *Paris, capitale philosophique: De la Fronde à la Révolution* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005).

[3] Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris* (Neuchâtel, 1781).

Victoria E. Thompson
Arizona State University
victoria.thompson@asu.edu

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172