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Denis Gabriel, *La 'Maison des pauvres maîtres' de Robert de Sorbon: Les débuts de la Sorbonne (1254-1274)*. Classiques Garnier, 2014. 315 pp. 39.00€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-81324-3089-3.

Review by Tanya Stabler Miller, Loyola University Chicago

The name “Sorbonne” is today frequently used to refer to the University of Paris, obscuring its medieval origins as a small boarding house for secular clerics pursuing doctorates in theology. Its founder, the relatively unknown Master Robert from the tiny village of Sorbon, represents a quaint but rather forgettable starting point in the Sorbonne’s long history. Medievalists, of course, recognize Robert of Sorbon as an intimate of King Louis IX’s court. Intellectual historians, also, situate his foundation within the context of the bitter conflict between the secular and mendicant orders at the University of Paris in the 1250s. Nevertheless, in most publications on medieval religion and culture, Robert of Sorbon barely rates a mention. To be sure, during the 1950s and 1960s, historians writing on the institutional history of the medieval university—namely Palémon Glorieux and Astrik Gabriel—devoted important publications to Robert’s college, its foundation, and growth. Yet few intellectual historians have incorporated these studies into research on the medieval university and its culture. Indeed, intellectual historians have largely ignored Robert of Sorbon, since no known scholastic work or quodlibetal disputation has yet been attributed to him. Moreover, because there is no evidence that Robert engaged in the major university controversies of his time, he has not struck historians as particularly interesting. As the great historian of the medieval university Astrik Gabriel lamented in 1953, “who [today] says a prayer for Robert of Sorbonne, the very founder of the College?”[1]

In his new book, which originated as his doctoral thesis (2011), Denis Gabriel seeks to remedy these historical oversights. While the Sorbonne is usually approached from the perspective of what it later came to represent—first the faculty of theology and later the entire University of Paris—Gabriel focuses on its origins as a boarding house for secular clerics, highlighting the novelty of the institution and the personal initiative of its founder. Relying principally on Palémon Glorieux’s 1953 edition of the Sorbonne’s cartulary, Gabriel’s book draws on administrative and financial documents dating between 1254 and 1274—specifically from the time Robert took the first steps to create the foundation until the year of his death—to provide a narrowly focused study of the early years of the “maison des pauvres maîtres.”[2] It is this process of foundation, in all of its complexity, that provides insight into Robert’s personal motivations and initiative, the social and economic needs of Paris’s secular clergy, and the diverse and multivalent interests that came together to help bring Robert’s idea to fruition. A skilled negotiator with close ties to the royal court and the university, Robert was adept at establishing friendships and partnerships across political and ecclesiastical divides. Even as he advanced the cause of the secular clergy, Robert pointedly avoided association with the anti-mendicant polemic of his colleague William of Saint-Amour. That his project drew support from members of William’s inner circle as well as the mendicant orders’ most powerful advocates—namely King Louis IX and Pope Alexander IV—is a testament to Robert’s diplomatic skill.

Gabriel's book has three primary objectives, each treated in the book's three parts. In Part One, Gabriel offers an updated biography of the Sorbonne founder and sketches the historical context for the Sorbonne's foundation in the mid-1250s. Synthesizing and critiquing the most recent biographical overviews (particularly that of Palémon Glorieux) in chapters 1 and 2, Gabriel situates the known facts of Robert's life against the backdrop of recent work on the political and ecclesiastical context of Robert's birthplace, the tiny village of Sorbon near Rethel in the Ardennes.[3] Conceding that his biography offers little new information about Robert's origins, the chapters mainly serve to remind us how little concrete information we have on Robert before he embarked on his signature project. Such is unfortunate since, as the author laments, it would be interesting to uncover the path that brought Robert, a man of modest means, into the Capetian court as a "*clerc du roi*."

Chapter 3 focuses on the broader Parisian context for the college's foundation, particularly the financial, educational, and social needs of secular masters and students in thirteenth century Paris. Secular clerics lacked the support of a religious order, often relying on the income from ecclesiastical benefices to support their studies in Paris (a practice that laid them open to charges of absenteeism.) The regular orders, by contrast, benefited from the support of their orders and the protection of the papacy, effectively freeing them from having to concern themselves with the attainment of benefices. Although there existed in Paris several houses for "poor" scholars (for example the Collège des Dix-Huit and the Collège des Bons-Enfants), secular clerics who wished to pursue doctorates in theology were unable to compete with the regular orders, who enjoyed numerous privileges, accommodation, and communal support. Moreover, the mendicant orders were able to claim the moral high ground by virtue of their poverty, portraying themselves as obedient and humble in contrast to the arrogant and greedy secular clergy. Finally, as preaching orders, the mendicants had developed an effective system for training scholars, soon outcompeting secular clerics in the race for resources, students, faculty positions, and the alms of the laity. Within the context of secular-mendicant conflict, which exploded in the mid-1250s in response to the mendicant orders' refusal to participate in a university-wide strike, Robert's foundation appears as an apparent attempt to provide secular clerics a level of economic and communal support similar to that enjoyed by the mendicants in order to better compete with the friars.

In laying out this context, Gabriel relies primarily on Michel-Marie Dufeil's thorough account of the secular-mendicant conflict of the mid-thirteenth century, which centered on the most vocal critic of the mendicant orders, Robert's secular colleague William of Saint-Amour.[4] In his account, Gabriel reinforces the prevailing historical portrayal of Robert as someone who diplomatically avoided publicly criticizing the mendicants while seeking a workable solution to the secular clergy's disadvantaged position. Still, Gabriel subtly shifts the narrative a bit by drawing attention to the broader context of the university and its mission to serve society. As church councils emphasized the need for educated, able masters and pastors, ecclesiastical authorities had to reconcile the need to train scholars with the need to fund their educations using parish resources, a situation that fueled absenteeism. The Sorbonne, as a college ostensibly for "poor scholars" offered a novel option: scholars could acquire theological training without relying directly on benefices.

In Part Two, which constitutes the center of the book, Gabriel mines the Sorbonne's cartulary to lay out the slow coalescence of the Sorbonne as a college for secular clerics. While the first part of Gabriel's book expanded upon previous research, Part Two offers an original approach to the history of the Sorbonne by presenting a closely researched study of Robert's actions and initiatives in the mid-1250s. Through a careful analysis of the dating and terminology of the cartulary acts, Gabriel methodically charts the progress of Robert's efforts to establish a house for secular clerics.

Chapter 4 "*Lente naissance de la maison de Robert de Sorbon*" aims to recover the intentions of the founder and his supporters. As an institution that changed over time, Gabriel's stated goal is to

understand the Sorbonne at the time of its founding rather than in light of what it would later become. Such an endeavor requires close attention to terminology. Here, the cartulary acts provide an important source for how royal, papal, and canonical supporters of Robert's foundation perceived the house during its earliest years. Pope Alexander IV (1254-1261), for instance, emphasized the Sorbonne's value as an institution that would fulfill the church's need for effective preachers. Papal documents also suggest the prominent role of the French king, to whom the pope gave sole credit for the college's foundation in 1259. Gabriel reasonably suggests that this view was one likely encouraged by Robert, who understood that the royal association would only help advance the cause of his project, particularly at a time when the secular party at the university was in open conflict with the papacy over mendicant privileges.

Gabriel's analysis of the terminology used in the cartulary acts shows that Robert was sensitive to the need to appeal to a range of potential patrons. For instance, tapping into current discourses about pastoral care and the purpose of the university, cartulary acts reference the Sorbonne as a solution to the shortage of trained preachers. Other acts describe the house as a refuge for "poor masters" (*magistri pauperes*), tying the Sorbonne to an older, more established charitable tradition of houses welcoming poor students.

Turning his attention to the terms used in acts initiated by Robert himself, Gabriel argues that Robert's personal intentions for the community are evident in his preference for the term *congregatio* over *collegium* or *domus* in his descriptions of the foundation. Robert's foundation was novel in the sense that it aimed not just to house Arts students, but to bring together secular clerics pursuing theological training. Its residents lived in common, but not permanently and not as members of a religious order. The acts initiated by Robert attest to his efforts to create and ensure a sense of community, stability, and permanence (even if its residents would only live in the house for a limited number of years).

The acts also pinpoint Robert's success in securing institutional permanence for his foundation. In 1268, Robert succeeded in petitioning Pope Clement IV (1265-1268) to issue a document laying out the university's administrative leaders' obligation to name Robert's successor as provisor of the "congregation of poor masters." Through this act, the community came to belong to, and became permanently attached to, the university. In addition to naming the director of the Sorbonne, the faculty of theology were tasked with reviewing the Sorbonne's accounts every year, making the house a concrete manifestation of the faculty and university.

Chapter 5: "Assise Immobilière" moves from how the foundation was conceptualized to how it grew and developed as a permanent house both in the material and the institutional sense. In this chapter Gabriel illustrates Robert's savvy understanding of the real estate market of thirteenth century Paris. Drawing attention to Robert's position as a secular canon, which would have made him familiar with such transactions and negotiations, Gabriel provides a sketch of Robert's strategic acquisition of urban rents and properties. In a series of exchanges with King Louis and his agents, for example, Robert was able to piece together adjacent properties on the rue Coupe-Gueule, sufficient to provide a physical space to house the first members. Illuminating yet again the multivalent interests brought to bear, Gabriel shows that the property transactions also benefited the French king, who promoted projects like Robert's in order to affirm his presence and power in the city.

Chapter 6: "Les Fondateurs" turns to the ecclesiastical, papal, and royal patrons to whom the Sorbonne owed its existence. In addition to eliciting royal support for the foundation, Robert successfully tapped into a network of secular canons spanning north from Paris into the Franco-Flemish borderland cities of Cambrai, Amiens, and Liège. Invested in the continuity of their pastoral and ecclesiastical work, northern French canons funded scholarships for clerics from their home regions to attend the Sorbonne. Indeed, the Sorbonne's earliest benefactors oriented the college towards these northern regions with

stipends reserved for students from their own dioceses. The first members (or *socii*), then, were not simply “needy scholars.” They were well-connected men from the same region and milieu.

Part Three (chapters 8 and 9) examines the statutes of the early Sorbonne, which Robert composed several years into the community’s existence. Thus, Gabriel argues, the statutes reliably reflect Robert’s efforts to resolve issues that arose within the Sorbonne and to promote community and collegiality within the house. To draw out these themes, Gabriel examines the statutes alongside sermons copied into Robert’s personal manuscripts, manuscripts he later bequeathed to the Sorbonne and that have heretofore not been the subject of scholarly analysis.

Chapter 8 “Les statuts et la maison” as in previous chapters, reflects the author’s interest in disentangling Robert’s concerns and priorities from those that came to be attached to the college in later centuries. The first statutes of the college (included in Appendix 1), which Gabriel argues were composed by Robert himself around 1270, emphasized the preservation of the community’s reputation, collegiality, and progress in learning. To highlight the originality of the Sorbonne and the particular concerns of its founder, Gabriel compares the Sorbonne’s statutes with those of other houses for students and scholars, specifically the foundation of the Dix-Huit, Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre, Saint-Nicolas in Soissons, the Bons-Enfants of Reims, and other comparable charitable foundations, including the Hôtel-Dieu.

Gabriel’s comparison shows that Robert was particularly concerned with fostering community and minimizing tensions among the various members of the house. They also reveal that recruitment was not on the basis of poverty, in spite of the college’s identity as a “maison des pauvres maîtres.” Drawing on the work of Nathalie Gorochov, Gabriel argues that the Sorbonne principally recruited men with good reputations and academic promise. Members of the Sorbonne were “poor” in the sense that they relied on their stipends and not on the income from a prebend. Thus, as Gabriel emphasizes, the Sorbonne was not modeled on the mendicant *studia*. Rather, it was a response to the needs of the secular clergy, the university, the church, and the parishes. Nevertheless, the Sorbonne’s identity as a house for “poor masters” was important in that it helped situate Robert’s foundation within a preexisting tradition of houses for “poor scholars.”

Chapter 9 (“Être étudiant dans la maison de Sorbonne”) draws on the statutes and Robert’s sermons and moral treatises to sketch student life. During Robert’s provisorate, organized scholarly activity did not take place within the college, though Robert instructed his students to read, reflect, and memorize texts. More importantly, he exhorted the *socii* to discuss texts in common. Thus, while there is no clear evidence of formal teaching within the early Sorbonne, it is clear that the “poor masters” worked and studied in common and were routinely exposed to Robert’s pastoral and moral teachings.

This is a useful and original study of the early years of one of Europe’s best known colleges, one whose name continues to resonate. Although Gabriel does not emphasize the broader contributions the book makes to scholarly understanding of the medieval university and city, it will be of interest to scholars of intellectual life, urban space, and medieval institutions.

NOTES

[1] Astrik Gabriel, “Robert de Sorbonne,” *Revue de l’Université d’Ottawa*, 23 (1953), 473.

[2] Palémon Glorieux, *Aux origines de la Sorbonne*, vol. II – *Le Cartulaire* (Paris: Vrin, 1965)

[3] Palémon Glorieux, *Aux origines de la Sorbonne*, vol. I – *Robert de Sorbon* (Paris: Vrin, 1966).

[4] *Guillaume de Saint-Amour et la polémique universitaire parisienne, 1250-1259* (Paris: Picard, 1972).

Tanya Stabler Miller
Loyola University Chicago
tstabler@luc.edu

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