

To war with the Turk

A new reproduction of *Les Passages d'Outremer*, a chronicle of the Crusades, is giving the modern reader access to the manuscript for the first time, says *Thierry Delcourt*

THE ILLUSTRATED manuscript of *Les Passages d'Outremer* is now preserved in the Department of Manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, in Paris.

The book was hand-copied by an anonymous scribe shortly after the text was completed by its author, Sébastien Mamerot, and was illustrated under the supervision of one of the best painter-illuminators of the 15th century, Jean Colombe — who was active in Bourges from around 1465 to 1493.

The book was commissioned by one of the great figures of the period, Louis de Laval-Châtillon, a member of the inner circle of Louis XI of France, who lived from 1411 to 1489, and thus experienced the latter stages of the Hundred Years' War, and the renaissance of the kingdom of France in the wake of Charles VII's defeat of the English in 1453.

The book is a history of the Crusades written between 1472 to 1474. Mamerot was secretary to Louis de Laval, who bestowed on him an income by appointing him canon of the Collegiate Church of St Stephen in Troyes, in 1472. He seems to have accompanied his protector wherever he went.

Mamerot was a translator and compiler rather than an author in the modern sense and, as such, perfectly embodies the figure of the professional writer in the late Middle Ages.

The chapter of St Stephen had been founded in 1157 by Henry I, Count of Champagne, known as Henry the Liberal. In Mamerot's time, it was among the richest and most powerful of the realm, with an exceptional large number of canons: 72. Moreover, it was frequently at odds with the bishop and the cathedral chapter over matters of precedence, independence, and revenues.

The archives show that Mamerot had the use of a canon's residence

near the church, and that he attended most of the annual meetings of the chapter, at least until 1477. But he probably did not live all year in Troyes, since Louis de Laval was re-

placed as Governor of Champagne in 1473. Moreover, Mamerot notes that he finished *Les Passages* at Vierzon on 19 April 1474.

The canon's residence was sold on 13 August 1478, the date at which all trace of Mamerot is lost in the archives of Troyes. He may have returned to his master or simply have died soon afterwards; *Les Passages* was his last work.

In 1458, Mamerot translated the universal chronicle written in Latin by Martin de Troppau for Louis de Laval, giving it the title *Chroniques martiniennes*. A further anonymous text brought the chronicle up to 1424. This was not, in fact, a translation so much as a complete rewrite. Mamerot "completed" Troppau's text with extracts — some of them very long — from a variety of sources, including the books of the Old Testament, histories from classical antiquity, and medieval chronicles.

The latter included the *Histoire de la destruction de Troie* (*The Story of the Destruction of Troy*) after the Latin work by Guido delle Colonne and the *Alexandreis* by Walter of Châtillon, a work commissioned by Henry the Liberal of Champagne that recounts the adventures of Alexander the Great in a manner part-epic, part-historical chronicle.

By the time Mamerot began writing *Les Passages* the crusades were a distant memory. He demonstrates considerable discrimination and independence of judgement, comparing sources and discussing their content, and sometimes recording his own conclusions.

Mamerot's narrative follows a relatively simple chronological line. He begins with the fictive expedition supposedly led by Charlemagne to the Holy Land to rescue Jerusalem from the Saracens.

The story goes that Charlemagne was asked to undertake this Crusade by the Byzantine Emperor Constantine V and his son, the future Leo IV.

Mamerot cannot have given the least credibility to this myth. Jerusalem was conquered by the Arabs in 638, while Constantine V reigned from 741 to 775. Yet, in *Les Passages*, he clearly favoured the myth over historical truth.

There are other surprising choices among the events that Mamerot included in the chronicle. The internal history of the Latin states is given scant treatment, and no mention at all is made of the Fifth Crusade, no doubt because no French

knights took part in it. He similarly fails to mention the fall of Acre and of the last Christian holdings in the Holy Land (1291).

His account of the conquest of the Byzantine Empire is confined to the capture of Constantinople. Mamerot does not cite the creation of the Frankish principalities in Greece, despite the fact that French knights — and notably those from Champagne — were prominent in their conquest.

The efforts to organise new expeditions after the fall of Jerusalem are passed over, until Charles VI's rather insignificant campaign on behalf of Genoa. The only justification for the inclusion of this minor episode is the fact that Louis de Laval became governor of Genoa several decades after that campaign.

Mamerot's objective seems to be that of recounting the great trans-Mediterranean expeditions by the French knights and barons (and by extension, those of other western European countries), and not that of writing a story of the Crusader states.

Les Passages bears witness to the interest of the French aristocracy in a period of history by then relatively remote, although still present in the form of prose *chansons de geste* and chronicles. But it also shows us the way in which a contemporary author worked, compromising with his sources, and with the need to place the martial deeds of his patron, and the aristocratic ideology to which that master subscribed, in the foreground, but nevertheless maintaining a crucial distance.

Sébastien Mamerot is not the most faithful historian of the Crusades. The chroniclers who were present, such as Willam of Tyre, Geoffrey of Villehardouin, Robert of Clary, and John of Joinville, give a more reliable account of the events they relate. But, though they pretended to objectivity, they no less than Mamerot were restricted in their outlook and ideology: theirs was a time when the critical theory of history had not yet come into being.

Les Passages affords the pleasure of dwelling on some of the most beautiful images created in the late flowering of French Gothic illumination, just before the Renaissance overthrew the conventions that had governed their making.

Thierry Delcourt is the chief librarian and director of the department of manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Les Passages d'Outremer. A Chronicle of the Crusades (Sébastien Mamerot); Masanes, Dr Fabrice Masanes and Thierry Delcourt (Taschen, £100; 978-3-8365-0555-0).