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A Psalter from Maillezais at Maynooth

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A Psalter from Maillezais at Maynooth

Abstract

A Psalter from the third quarter of the fifteenth century is preserved in the collections of St Patrick's College now housed in the Russell Library at Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland. The psalter was evidently made in a Benedictine monastery in south-west France, probably Poitou. One particular saint occurs in both the calendar and the litany. St Rigomer, though little known elsewhere, was specially venerated at Maillezais in the marshes of bas-Poitou, where the abbey, founded c.1000, was provided with incoming funds from pilgrims by the transfer there of the saint's relics c.1020, and they were given a place of special importance in the chapel to the south of the main altar. The monks at Maillezais had a good library of which there is a catalogue from the end of the twelfth century. Of the small number of these books that still survive one is identified as a Maillezais book because it includes a mention of St Rigomer. It is extremely likely that the psalter now at Maynooth came from Maillezais. This journey cannot have been direct. Maillezais suffered heavily in the Hundred Years War and the French Wars of Religion and the books from the monks' library were probably dispersed in the 1560s. What happened to the psalter between this time and when it arrived in Maynooth probably in the first half of the eighteenth century is moot, but we can now be reasonably certain of its place of origin as well as knowing where it is housed now.

Keywords

Maillezais, Maynooth, Benedictine, Psalter, Manuscript, Library, St Rigomer, Scaliger, Manuscript studies, Russell Library, Ireland, St Patrick's College

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A Psalter from Maillezais at Maynooth

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IN MAYNOOTH (COUNTY KILDARE, Ireland), the Russell Library houses the manuscript collection of St. Patrick's College, founded in 1795. RB36 is a psalter preceded by a calendar indicating the dates for celebrating particular saints. From the evidence of script and decoration, Peter J. Lucas and Angela M. Lucas dated the making of the manuscript to the third quarter of the fifteenth century.¹ From this evidence plus that of the saints named in the calendar, they posited that the manuscript came from south or southwest France and showed strong associations with the Poitou area. The many references to St. Benedict of Nursia (his feast day 21 March; the translation of his relics to St. Benoit-sur-Loire [Fleury] 11 July; the octave of his translation 18 July; and others on 4 December, another date for his *translatio* in French tradition; and 29 December, his *relevatio*) indicate that the manuscript was made in a Benedictine monastery.

Among the saints indicated for veneration, Lucas and Lucas drew attention to St. Rigomer (missionary in Poitou s.vi; feast day, 24 August), a rarely

¹ See Peter J. Lucas and Angela M. Lucas, *The Medieval Manuscripts at Maynooth: Explorations in the Unknown* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2014), 97–102.

FIGURE 1. Maynooth, Russell Library (from the collections of St Patrick's College), RB36, folio 4v, showing St. Rigomer's name in the calendar at 24 August. Photographed by Celia Keogh (Russell Library). Reproduced by permission of the Librarian, Maynooth University, from the collections of St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.

mentioned saint named in the calendar (fol. 4v, l. 26) and also found in the litany (fol. 173v, l. 12); see figures 1 and 2. Reviewing their book, François Dolbeau noted that St. Rigomer is particularly venerated at a Benedictine monastery situated west of Niort, just over what is now the Poitou regional

FIGURE 2. Maynooth, Russell Library (from the collections of St. Patrick's College), RB36, folio 173v, showing St. Rigomer's name in the litany. Photographed by Celia Keogh (Russell Library). Reproduced by permission of the Librarian, Maynooth University, from the collections of St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.

border: Maillezais, in *le marais Poitevin* (Poitou marshes).² The abbey of St. Pierre at Maillezais was founded at the end of the tenth century at the instigation of Emma of Blois, wife of Guillaume IV Fier-à-Bras, count of Poitou.

2 François Dolbeau, "Catalogues de manuscrits latins: Inventaire hagiographique (trente-troisième série)," *Analecta Bollandiana* 134 (2016): 160–61.

FIGURE 3. Maillezais, 2017, St. Rigomer's chapel to the south of the main altar. Photographed by the authors.

To begin with, the monastery was largely dependent on funds granted by their son, Guillaume V le Grand (d. 1030), but the transfer from Le Mans of the relics of St. Rigomer between 1015 and 1025 led to the establishment of the monastery as a center of pilgrimage, with an accompanying flow of incoming funds. Although hardly known in other centers of pilgrimage, in Maillezais St. Rigomer was accorded priority status, with his chapel to the south of the main altar in a position recognized as one appropriate for the principal focus for pilgrims (fig. 3).

The monks at Maillezais were provided with a well-stocked library, as shown by a catalog from the end of the twelfth century,³ which lists ninety-four items. It was not a vibrant center of intellectual activity and apparently had no external school, but the monks had plenty to sustain and enhance their spiritual development, including works by Ambrose, Augustine, Bede, Gregory the Great, Hilary of Poitiers, Isidore, Jerome and Venantius Fortunatus (also of Poitiers), and various hagiographical works, as well as the Bible and some patristic material conducive to the *lectio divina*.⁴

There are four manuscripts now identified as corresponding to entries in the catalog from the end of the twelfth century.⁵ They retain indications of cupboard placements that match those in the catalog: Leiden, Rijksuniversiteitsbibliotheek, BPL 108 and 111, Scaliger 38, and Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale lat. 4892. Three more are listed by Genton as apparently showing Maillezais provenance, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale lat. 964 (s.xv/xvi), lat. 5019 (s.xiii), and lat. 9435 (s.xi^{ex}). The first is assigned to Maillezais on the grounds that it includes the dedications of the churches in the diocese of Maillezais (it became a bishopric in 1317) and the arms of one of the bishops of Maillezais, Jacques or Henri I d'Escoubleau (1543–60, 1572–1615).⁶ The second is assigned on the grounds that it records a visit to Maillezais by the king of France, Philippe IV le Bel, in 1272. The third, a missal, was described by Abbé Victor Leroquais as a “missel de l'abbaye de Maillezais”:

Le sanctoral est celui d'une abbaye bénédictine du Poitou; la mention de saint Rigomer (fol. 224v^o) indique clairement qu'il s'agit de

3 See Hervé Genton, “La bibliothèque de Maillezais à la fin du XII^e siècle,” in *L'abbaye de Maillezais: Des moines du marais aux soldats huguenots*, ed. Cécile Treffort and Mathias Tranchant (Rennes: Presses Universitaires, 2005), 79–110.

4 Lucien-Jean Bord, *Maillezais: Histoire d'une abbaye et d'un évêché* (Paris: Geuthner, 2007), 4, 60–61, 76, and see fig. 6 on p. 68 and pl. 8 between pp. 126–27; Marie-Thérèse Camus, “Imaginer l'abbatiale romane de Maillezais,” in Treffort and Tranchant, *L'abbaye de Maillezais*, 253–73 at 261.

5 Genton, “La bibliothèque de Maillezais,” 84–86.

6 On this manuscript, see Éric Palazzo, “Le pontifical-collectaire de Maillezais (Paris, BNF, ms. lat. 964),” in Treffort and Tranchant, *L'abbaye de Maillezais*, 111–20.

Saint-Pierre de Maillezais, qui depuis l'an 1010, possédait les reliques de ce saint.⁷

Evidently, specific mention of St. Rigomer in a book with Poitou connections provides a reliable means of identifying a manuscript as coming from Maillezais.

On the basis of reference to St. Rigomer, the origin of the psalter at Maynooth in Maillezais becomes extremely probable. What kind of book was it, and what was it for? It is a relatively small book (157 × 110 mm), so it was certainly not for display. Reading was one of the requirements of the Benedictine Rule, and provision was made for borrowing. Each year on the first Monday of Lent, a selection of books was laid out on a carpet, and the number of books corresponded to the number of people in the community. A list from Cluny dating from the mid-eleventh century cites sixty-four books and their recipients, ranging from Augustine's *De Trinitate* for Gualo to a psalter for the less learned Stephen.⁸ The psalter at Maynooth may be such a book intended for someone like the earlier Stephen.

Many monasteries in France continued to function normally through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, some putting up new buildings in the early eighteenth century, until they were suppressed during the French Revolution toward the end of that century. An example is St. Savin-sur-Gartempe just to the east of Poitiers. The story of Maillezais, in bas-Poitou, is completely different. In order to try to work out the possible history of our psalter, it is necessary to review briefly the series of events and disasters that befell the abbey.⁹

7 Abbé Victor Leroquais, *Les Sacramentaires et les Missels Manuscrits des Bibliothèques Publiques* 1, no. 81 (1924): 184–85. “A missal from Maillezais abbey”: “The sanctorale is that of a Benedictine monastery in Poitou; the mention of St Rigomer indicates without ambiguity that we are dealing with St Pierre of Maillezais, which possessed the relics of this saint since 1010.”

8 For details, see Peter J. Lucas, “Borrowing and Reference: Access to Libraries in the Late Middle Ages,” *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland*, vol. 1, ed. Elisabeth Leedham-Green and Teresa Webber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 242–62 at 243.

9 This information is condensed from Bord, *Maillezais*; Charles Arnaud, *Histoire de Maillezais: depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à nos jours* (Niort: Robin, 1840); Abbé Lacurie, *Maillezais*:

Following the marriage of Guillaume Fier-à-Bras's great-great-granddaughter, the heiress Eleanor of Aquitaine,¹⁰ to Henry II, king of England, in Poitiers in 1152, the territory in which Maillezais was situated became part of the Angevin empire, and so its ownership was disputed by the king of France. This dispute was centered in southwest France because King John lost Normandy to the French in 1204. Following the defeat and capture of the French king Jean II near Poitiers in 1356, the treaty of Brétigny (ratified at Calais 1360) confirmed the English king's right to Poitou, the Saintonge, and La Rochelle. Meanwhile, the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453), started by Edward III's claim to the French throne, rumbled on.

A rearrangement of dioceses by Pope John XXII divided what was considered the over-large diocese of Poitiers and made Maillezais into a bishopric, the last abbot becoming the first bishop in 1317.¹¹ In the fifteenth century, when it was found necessary to fortify the site against attack, walls were thickened and ditches dug.¹² Nevertheless, in the second half of the fifteenth century, bishops appointed to Maillezais did not reside there. Despite some rebuilding in the Renaissance style carried out under Geoffroy d'Estissac (1518–43),¹³ these improvements had a short life, as the Wars of Religion soon began in France. In 1562 the Edict of St. Germain formally recognized French Protestantism, and in the same year a Calvinist troop attacked Maillezais and destroyed the choir. In 1573 the abbey was still occupied by troops, and the religious had to find shelter in the surrounding hamlets. In 1587 Agrippa d'Aubigné made Maillezais into a Protestant fortress, the chief of several in a cordon around La Rochelle, which was a Protestant stronghold. He stayed as governor for thirty years. In 1621 when Henri II d'Escoubleau succeeded in recovering the seat of his bishopric, the

Histoire de l'abbaye de Maillezais depuis sa fondation jusqu'à nos jours (Fontenay-le-Comte: Fillon, 1852).

10 For a pedigree of the counts of Poitou, see Bord, *Maillezais*, 27.

11 For a map showing the new diocese, see Bord, *Maillezais*, 120.

12 For a plan of these defenses, see Bord, *Maillezais*, 133 (fig. 13).

13 For a drawing showing a reconstruction of the Renaissance-style rood-screen, see Bord, *Maillezais*, 155 (fig. 14).

monks were still scattered in the surrounding hamlets and the bishop did not reside in the abbey. Just ten years later the see was transferred to nearby Fontenay-le-Comte, but the town did not want it, and in 1648 the bishopric was moved again, this time to La Rochelle, now under Catholic control. At the same time, the monks were secularized, so that was the formal end of the Benedictine monastery. There followed a period of one and a half centuries when the site was used principally as a source of building materials, and it was sold in 1791. Acquired by the local authority in 1997, the *département de la Vendée* now conserves the ruins, which still provide an impressive and fascinating vista for the visitor.

No library could survive this wave of successive depredations. Steps were taken to sell ecclesiastical assets during the 1560s, and the goods sold may have included books. Of the four manuscripts thought to be from Maillezais by virtue of their indicated cupboard placements matching those in the catalog of s.xii^{ex}, at least one passed through the hands of Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540–1609), a French scholar from Agen who studied at Bordeaux and spent much time in Poitou before being invited to spend the last sixteen years of his life in Leiden. Evidently, books from Maillezais were available to be acquired in the 1560s by interested scholars in the area. It seems reasonable to suppose that probably all of Maillezais's books were dispersed at this time.

The psalter at Maynooth contains a number written at the top right-hand corner of the first leaf, "N° 440," and a personal mark "L(with a swirl/flourish)e." These marks have so far defied identification, but they are consistent with the fact that the manuscript had a life after Maillezais. While its history during the period of up to three hundred years (ca. 1560–ca. 1850) before it came to Maynooth in the first half of the nineteenth century is moot, we can now be reasonably certain of where it started out as well as knowing where it ended up. And it is a positive step to be able to add another manuscript to the small number known to have survived from Maillezais.

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