Henning Trüper

Topography
of a Method

Historische Wissensforschung

herausgegeben von

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Henning Trüper

Topography of a Method

François Louis Ganshof
and the Writing of History

Mohr Siebeck

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Finally, the sixth section of Part II draws on "Primacy of the Historical. On a Few Snippets of Text with a View to Witnessing, Scholarship and Political Experience". *History of Political Thought* 32 (2011), no. 1: 97–123.

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Princeton, July 2014   Henning Trüper

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Introduction

The Domain of Prüm

Les textes, sans doute : mais tous les textes.
L. Febvre[1]

Breaking, entering, exiting

In February 1960, the Belgian medievalist François Louis Ganshof[2] wrote a letter[3] to his French colleague Charles-Edmond Perrin,[4] professor of medieval history at the Sorbonne, in order to legitimise an act of breaking and entering. In 1947, at the *Journées franco-belges* – a periodical convention of French and Belgian historians – Perrin had delivered a lecture on the manorial organisation of the Abbey of Prüm.[5] With properties scattered all over the Frankish realm, Prüm (nowadays located in the far west of Germany), had quickly become one of the most significant monasteries in Western Europe after its foundation in 721. In the late 1940s, Ganshof had begun to conduct extensive research on the land holdings of early medieval abbeys, in the hope of identifying the legal and institutional forms connected with this kind of property[6]

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[1] Febvre 1952 [1933]: 27.

[2] For biographical information about Ganshof (1895–1980), see, in particular, the obituaries by Verhulst 1980b; Van Caenegem 1980 (with bibliography); Van Caenegem 1981; Milis 1981; Lewis, Lopez, Lyon 1981; see also the dictionary entries: Van Caenegem 1987; Verhulst 1988ff.; Van Caenegem 1991; Murray 1999; Heirbaut, Masferrer 2005; Van Caenegem has published further articles that contain personal memories: Van Caenegem 2006a, 2006b; and Bryce Lyon has done the same (Lyon 2007).

[3] Ganshof to Perrin, 10–02–1960, in: Nalatenschap François Louis Ganshof, Ghent University Library, manuscript collection, HS III 86 [henceforth: NL Ganshof], doos 181, envelope "Domaines belges de Prüm – correspondance", in envelope "Gesch[iedkundige] Kr[itiek] 1960–61 II Prüm III (aanvullende documentatie)". The bulk of the correspondence Ganshof-Perrin is located in NL Ganshof, doos 61, envelope "C.-E. Perrin".

[4] For Perrin (1887–1974), see Marot 1974a; Leclant 1999–2001: 1131f.

[5] In NL Ganshof, doos 21, envelope "Journées franco-belges d'histoire – Paris 1947" there are several small sheets of lecture notes that Ganshof took during Perrin's presentation and that imply the latter's lines of argument only cursorily, but indicate the importance Ganshof attached to the matter, since he rarely kept such notes.

[6] Ganshof's interest in the organisation of the manors of Frankish abbeys, in the context of his general concern for medieval terminologies of social and legal status, stretches back

so crucial for all notions of unfreedom, feudalism and the emergence of state-hood in European history. In turning his attention to Prüm, he had strayed into Perrin's field of research.[7] Shortly after the lecture in 1947, Ganshof had cautiously signalled his intent by sending his French colleague a set of his own research notes about a particular estate of Prüm in the Ardennes on pre-sent-day Belgian territory. Perrin's response to this letter, if it was ever writ-ten, remains elusive.

In the letter of February 1960, Ganshof averred that back in 1947 Perrin had declared his intention not to publish further work on the "Belgian" do-main of Prüm and that there would be "no inconvenience at all if somebody else concerned himself with this subject". Ganshof added that he had now, thirteen years after Perrin's lecture, developed a concrete plan to publish an article on the manorial organisation of Prüm. This article was to be based on the seminar sessions he intended to devote to the abbey over the course of the spring semester at Ghent University. He believed, however, that it was his duty to ask Perrin for confirmation of his "authorisation" from thirteen years ago. He promised to include references to Perrin's talk at the *Journées fran-co-belges* from memory where appropriate and finished the letter with news regarding a mutual friend.

Perrin answered after a delay of ten days,[8] already a possible sign of disfa-vour at a time when letters from Belgium to Paris normally arrived a mere day after having been posted. He vaguely excused himself by referring to a debilitating fatigue that had resulted from an attack of otherwise benign in-fluenza. Then he went on to describe his "surprise" at Ganshof's request. He disclaimed any recollection of ever renouncing the topic. Nonetheless, he declared, he felt obliged to trust Ganshof's memory, although he regretted not having been informed earlier of the matter. The previous summer, his contin-uing involvement with Prüm had led him to reconsider the question of the Ardennes domains. At that time, he had been writing an article, in which for various reasons he had eventually settled on a different Prüm topic.[9] Yet again, he had excluded the "domain of the Belgian Ardennes" ("domaine de l'Ardenne belge"), as it displayed "totally deviant forms". However, in the article, which was already in press, he had announced his intent to devote a further paper to the Ardennes estates of Prüm; and he had promised this text to the editor of the *Annales de l'Est*. Now, Perrin concluded, he would have to refrain from publishing this piece, since Ganshof certainly envisaged a study of much wider scope. He, Perrin, would wait and see whether there

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into the very beginnings of his career in the 1920s; see Ganshof 1922. Only after 1945 did manorial organisation become a prime interest to him, see Ganshof 1946b, Ganshof 1948a.

[7] Perrin's major contribution had been, at the time of the correspondence, Perrin 1935.

[8] Perrin to Ganshof, 20–02–1960, as in n. 3.

[9] Perrin 1960.

would be space for some little miscellany of his own after the publication of Ganshof's work. He returned Ganshof's research notes from 1947.

These first two letters negotiated property rights for a specific research topic. Ganshof had intruded into a senior colleague's apparently abandoned domain. He was uncertain of his colleague's plans for the domain in question, and this colleague was both a powerful figure in French academia and an academic schoolmate, a fellow student of the same master, the late Ferdinand Lot.[10] Hence, Ganshof saw fit to seek reassurance that conflict would not arise from his thematic re-orientation. Perrin, however, did not actually want to give up the topic. He expressed his disapproval but suggested a compromise: he would wait for Ganshof's article to appear and only then come forward with his own research. No doubt Ganshof could have graciously accepted this proposal and thus enabled both scholars to pursue their research interests. Yet, the situation was not to be resolved in so pragmatic a manner.

Ganshof's reply, dated four days after Perrin's letter, opened a short exchange in which the two scholars attempted to outdo one another in modesty.[11] Ganshof began by thanking Perrin for his message. He expressed his regret at his colleague's unfavourable state of health, and his relief that so far that year he and his family at their Brussels home had mostly been spared from coming down with the cold. As for the "domains of Prüm located in Belgium" ("domaines de Prüm situés en Belgique") he observed that his and Perrin's memories failed to coincide. Still, this was insignificant, for it was excellent news that Perrin had not, after all, ceased to explore the subject matter further. Ganshof insisted that he had learned everything in the field from his French colleague and that the latter was vastly more competent to study the domain of Prüm. The only acceptable conclusion was that it fell to Ganshof to renounce further work on the topic. Therefore, he forwarded, once again, the research notes about "the domains of Prüm in the Belgian Ardennes" ("les domaines de Prüm dans l'Ardenne belge"). He also insisted that he did not consider his renunciation a sacrifice. During the preceding weeks his seminar had already begun to take a different direction since he had recently turned towards the numerous interpretive problems arising from the sources of the Abbey of Saint-Bertin in French Flanders. He promised to grant Perrin access to the results of his seminar exercises about Prüm – as soon as he would have concluded his discussion of the subject – and to a series of photographic reproductions of cartographic materials concerning the region in question, which he had acquired some time before. Once again, Ganshof emphasised how sincerely delighted he was about Perrin's continuing interest in the Prüm topic. In a separate paragraph, he moved beyond the deferential exchange, reacting to Perrin's statement about the "deviant forms"

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[10] For Lot (1866–1952), see Perrin 1968.
[11] Ganshof to Perrin, 24–02–1960, as in n. 3.

of the Ardennes domains, claiming that he held "analogous" beliefs and that the situation was similar for Saint-Bertin and the rest of Northern Gaul.

Perrin did not reply for over a month. When he did,[12] he started out with an apology for the delay, which was still the consequence to the fatigue that had plagued him since his influenza in February. He then rejected Ganshof's offer to abandon research on Prüm. Ganshof had entered the domain in good faith. His documentation of the geographical situation was more readily accessible to himself than it would be to Perrin; and the seminar had doubtless advanced too far, meanwhile, for Ganshof to abandon the topic once again. Furthermore, Perrin insisted that he had only intended to study a single aspect of the Ardennes holdings of Prüm, namely the "fragmentation of the manse" (by which he meant the phenomenon that a manse, the minimal tenement of land, was ascribed to more than a single tenant). However, such a limited scope would not satisfy the need for a "general study". Moreover, the compromise he had suggested in his earlier letter was ill conceived, since Ganshof's expected analysis would certainly not stand in need of any complementary work. Finally, beyond matters of mere politeness, there was a further reason for renouncing the topic: the Ardennes domains of Prüm had posed a conundrum with which Perrin had struggled in vain for years and which had eventually come to discourage him so deeply as to make him feel that he had better lay down his pen for good. He concluded by informing Ganshof that a doctoral student of the "Ecole des Chartes" had recently failed to provide a satisfactory account of the altogether extraordinary problems that beset the manorial organisation of Saint-Bertin; further, that he would keep Ganshof's research notes at the latter's disposal in case he might need them.

Ganshof's reply, a dignified week later, marked his final renunciation of the topic.[13] In his opening remarks, he deplored Perrin's health troubles, adding that he was also still suffering from a certain fatigue in consequence of a short attack of influenza several weeks before. He regretted Perrin's renunciation of further research about the Ardennes domains of Prüm and insisted that Perrin's study certainly would have had a much wider scope than his own intended work. As a consequence of the earlier letters, Ganshof had interrupted his work on Prüm and focused on Saint-Bertin instead. Thus, "the terrain remains free". If Perrin changed his mind, the cartographic material would continue to be at his disposal. Then, Ganshof commented briefly on his new research on Saint-Bertin, which in his opinion suggested a solution to Perrin's conundrum. In conclusion, he asked his French colleague to keep the research notes about Prüm, since he already possessed a copy.

The latter part of the correspondence still took the form of a negotiation. Only now it was not a scholarly property claim that was at stake, but rather a

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[12] Perrin to Ganshof, 30–03–1960, as in n. 3.
[13] Ganshof to Perrin, 06–04–1960, as in n. 3.

claim of an ethical nature. The exchange was now about questions of renunciation and sacrifice, duty, virtue and self-denial, or "self-effacement", as Ganshof actually put it in the last letter. In a convoluted, very concrete and situational manner, both scholars demonstrated their own compliance with norms, a compliance that was also about status, holding sway, superiority in virtue, and veiled resentment. The exchange was ethical not merely in a dull sense of moral pedantry, but also in one that concerned the constitution of sociability, by way of the enactment of full scholarly *personae* with affects, ulterior motives and a certain propensity to play. The ridiculous elements of the exchange – for instance the circumstantial belabouring of a peripheral domain, or the notion that a mere head-cold would prevent these obsessive letter-writers from mailing a timely reply – were probably not lost on either correspondent. Accordingly, the negotiation encompassed reiterated efforts to surmount the disagreement on property and conduct something of an actual debate about the manorial organisation of Prüm and Saint-Bertin. This matter was placed at the end of each message, respectively, so that the underlying rhetorical structure was that of a move beyond the terrain of scholarly property and personal virtue. When the exchange wound down, the initial objective of the negotiation had transformed itself into its direct opposite: instead of property, it now concerned self-induced expropriation. In this respect, the letters were extremely efficient: both historians discontinued their work on the Ardennes domains of Prüm.

The exchange involved a variety of types of text, from the sources of medieval manorial organisation to Ganshof's research notes, the articles both scholars hoped to write, other people's published research, and finally the letters themselves. This plurality of textual forms was bound up with the situational instability of the ethics that marked the letters. The exchange between Ganshof and Perrin was not limited to the framework of polite correspondence among academic peers, but involved other forms of writing, not least the notes Ganshof had mailed, unsolicitedly, already in 1947, or the photographic documentation he proposed to share with Perrin. The dynamics of the exchange are curiously dependent on the written form and on the temporal intervals and delays that were imposed by the technologies of print and publication on the one hand and of the transport of letters by mail on the other. Both authors relied on such technical aspects as resources for generating meaning: the letters were typewritten, thus deprived of the sign of affection that was, at the time, the writing of letters by hand; and the intervals were used to undermine the affable discourse the textual genre otherwise demanded. Given the multiple meanings generated by textual form and writing practice, the distinctness of the different kinds of text involved was not trivial in character. For instance, letters or notes were not simply ancillary types of writing that would have served to generate passages of text then to be copied into scholarly publications. The semantic intricacy of the letters as

a particular kind of text and the demonstration they contain, of the entanglement of different kinds of text in historical writing, constitute an actual problem worthy of investigation. For, in spite of the obvious interrelatedness, the nature of the mutual relations in question remains obscure. Or, in other words, the relevance of such documents as Ganshof's and Perrin's five letters from 1960 for the history of historical writing is far from obvious.

Ethics-epistemology blur

In pursuit of this problem, it seems reasonable to begin by asking the question as to what the letters are actually documents of. To begin with, the letters are traces of a specific pattern of the social organisation of scholarship. Ganshof's and Perrin's 1960 correspondence was concerned with a domain of history, a small portion of "terrain" on which they hoped to produce results. The underlying notion of property was primarily ethical. It rested on the dutiful recognition of merit and authority, and on respect for the slow nature of scholarly work: a domain was still to be regarded as one's own even when it had lain fallow for thirteen years. Hence, Ganshof was eager to reassure his senior colleague of the high esteem in which he held his work. Not that Perrin would have been in any particular need of such reassurance; rather, Ganshof sought to demonstrate his allegiance to the ethics of scholarly work.[14] These ethics were quotidian, a matter of rather banal imperatives, veritable rules of thumb that stood in little need of explicit discussion. Presumably, there was some ironic and even hostile innuendo between the lines, since Ganshof and Perrin had a distanced and sometimes troubled personal relationship.[15] Nonetheless, this did not undermine the deeply ingrained ethical recognition of the property claims involved. The exchange was one of skilled technicians of ethical judgement in scholarly matters. It was part of the craft of being a historian; a practical, intuitive and – with Polanyi – tacit knowledge, a "knowing how" to handle such matters as conflicts over thematic domains.[16] This knowledge comprised a wide variety of ethical notions such as legitimacy and illegitimacy, norms and deviations, precepts and affects, duties and ends, virtues and vices. These notions constituted the crucial point at which the social organisation of scholarship established its particularity by way of setting rules of its own. As the example of the thematic domain indicates,

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[14] Pioneering work on the role of ethics for scientific practice has been carried out in particular by Schaffer, Shapin 1985; Biagioli 1993; Kohler 1994; Shapin 1994; Herzig 2005. More recently, the problem has also received attention as regards the history of the humanities, see especially Tollebeek 2008; see also below Part I: Inhabiting the necropolis.

[15] For a discussion of these tensions, see below, Part III: Exchange of letters.

[16] Polanyi 1958.

these rules also provided the point of entry through which social organisation informed the epistemic work, the production of scholarly knowledge. Regardless of its functionality and importance, however, the ethics of scholarship formed merely a muddled ensemble of the mostly implicit, without theoretical stringency and overarching principles; it was even to a considerable extent situational, that is to say, responsive to the requirements of highly specific contexts.

Perrin's letters illustrate this responsiveness with particular clarity. In his first reply, one of the reasons for the reluctance with which he announced his renunciation was that he had already conceived of a complete article about the Ardennes domain of Prüm. In his second reply, however, he claimed that he would never be able to write the article in question. Whether his understanding of his own abilities had undergone an authentic reversal was immaterial. His contradictory reasons fit seamlessly into the exchange of ethical reassurances Ganshof had opened. The situation at the time of Perrin's second reply had changed; Ganshof had altered the object of the negotiation by also offering to renounce work on the issue; in this way, the exchange took place in a frame of interaction[17] that was provided by quotidian ethics and more precisely by recourse to a shared goal: renunciation of work on the Ardennes domains of Prüm. This goal could be formulated only in terms that depended on the frame in question; the very act of renunciation was ethical in nature.

The frame, however, was makeshift; it drew not only on an understanding of scholarly practice, but also on an understanding of the application of the norms present in this practice to the study of the holdings of the Abbey of Prüm. The ethical exchange of the letters required an epistemic object – an object about which knowledge was produced, maintained and justified – to which it could attach itself. The resulting interlacing of the ethical and the epistemic had two consequences. Firstly, it set apart a specific pattern of ethical language that was *directed* at the production of scholarly knowledge. Indeed, the particularity of scholarly ethics was in part generated by its dependence on objects of scholarly knowledge such as the domain of Prüm. Secondly, the overlap of the ethical and the epistemic imposed a condition of semantic over-determination on the discursive patterns with which the objects of scholarship were addressed. Everything in the letters that pertained to scholarly knowledge and the way in which it emerged from its objects of reference *also* had ethical significance.

Quotidian ethics were intimately connected to the means available for the description of human agency. Therefore, they were also pertinent for the ways in which one described agency and its exercise in the historical past. This kind of transfer of quotidian scholarly ethical language into the descrip-

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[17] With reference to Goffman 1986 [1974].

tion of a historical object is a key motive of the letters. The notion of a the-
matic domain in Ganshof's and Perrin's exchange was indispensable for de-
scribing the objects as well as the procedures of historical research and the
normative language applying to the latter. From both scholars' perspective, as
the letters suggest, history was split up in allotments of ground, granted by
the consensus of the discipline, and in accordance with capacity, experience
and other scholarly virtues that had been acquired over the course of a career.
This becomes clear in the passage where Perrin informs Ganshof about the
failure of the hapless graduate, at the *Ecole des Chartes*, to disentangle the
problems related to the domain of Saint-Bertin. The regrettable young man
had produced "some honest pages" about the issue, but he had "neither the
training nor the maturity" necessary for tackling the treacherous terrain.
"Honesty", "training" and "maturity" were virtue concepts, in a broad sense
that includes Aristotelian *arete*, a biographically acquired excellence at some-
thing.[18] Especially "training" referred specifically to the world of scholarly
education. "Maturity" could be both a matter of academic prowess and of
general life experience. "Honesty", by contrast, was primarily a general ethi-
cal virtue; and arguably Perrin applied it not to the young scholar but to his
writing precisely because otherwise it would have been unspecific to scholar-
ship. In any case, the domain of the domain of Saint-Bertin could not be con-
stituted by such a tainted, unjustified effort.

Conversely, the epistemological implications of the notion of a thematic
domain were crucial for the ethical content of the letter exchange. Both Perrin
and Ganshof insisted that only one of them could occupy the contested
ground. They both agreed on the general features a study of the domain of
Prüm would have to display. Such a study would exhaust the sources and
solve all problems that arose from them. It would state everything, or at least
nearly everything, that could be reasonably asserted about the facts. Given
their training and maturity, their results could not possibly differ significant-
ly, so that the work of one of them would by necessity be redundant. Thus, in
his second response, Perrin retracted the proposal that he might write about
the Ardennes estates of Prüm after Ganshof would have explored the subject,
and he did so in revealing terms: the short note he had had in mind earlier
would have been *complementary*. But the assumption that such complemen-
tary work would still be necessary after Ganshof would have exhausted the
terrain was, from their mutual perspective, ultimately absurd.

This perspective becomes particularly astonishing if one takes into account
the scholars' actual exchange of opinions on the subject matter of the

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[18] Regarding the question of the possibility of the cultural study of ethics, see Fassin
2012b, in which in particular the problem of subjectivation by way of morality – as ana-
lysed by tools that derive as much from Aristotle as from Foucault – is emphasised as a
central concern.

Ardennes holdings of Prüm. Perrin's problem with these domains, as he put it in his second reply, was roughly the following: the "polyptych" of Prüm – a register of land possessions of the abbey written in the late 9th century – almost systematically ascribed one manse – a minimal tenement of land – to one tenant. Only the Ardennes estates contained manses occupied by more than one tenant. According to Perrin, the systematic manorial organisation of Prüm was more "archaic" than the developmental stage represented in the polyptych of the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés near Paris, which was considered the paradigmatic text of this kind.[19] In the polyptych of Saint-Germain, as in the Ardennes domains of Prüm, the manses were "fragmented", that is to say, assigned to more than one tenant. Yet, while in Saint-Germain the fragmentation was general and appeared systematic, in Prüm, even in the Ardennes estates, the fragmentation did not follow any apparent system; it occurred only in some manses in some domains. In his letter, Perrin spoke of this twofold lack of system as a "double contradiction". In his reply, Ganshof accepted Perrin's findings as a problem, but sketched a solution that did not regard the irregular Prüm manses as the result of the fragmentation process of the manse. On the contrary, the irregularity of these manses ought to be considered, Ganshof suggested, as a sign that the process of "amansement", the formation of a manorial organisation as founded on manses, had not yet been *concluded* in the Ardennes hinterland when the polyptych of Prüm was originally composed.[20] Thus, Ganshof and Perrin held diametrically opposed ideas about explaining the puzzle of the Ardennes domains of Prüm.

Both scholars, however, drew on a shared understanding of the polyptychs that was informed by beliefs about the relative generality of the meanings of medieval institutional language. These beliefs derived from convictions about the unchanging nature of statehood. However, to what extent, in the 9th century, a notion like "manse" was normative or descriptive, precise or improvised, is not self-evident. It remains difficult to answer the questions as to what extent the polyptychs of this period aimed to provide exhaustive lists of the possessions of the abbeys, to what extent they were a functional tool in the practical administration of the domains, and to what extent they were instances of writing traditions without, perhaps, a rigid claim to mirroring social and economic reality.[21] Yet, while it would be naïve to presume that

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[19] For the polyptychs, the older literature is discussed in Fossier 1978. See further Devroey 1993. German historians classify the Prüm polyptych as an "Urbar", but in form, content and age it is similar to the typically West Frankish polyptychs: Schwab 1983. See further Willwersch 1989; Kuchenbuch 1978; Nolden 1993.

[20] The problem was later taken up again by Morimoto 1995.

[21] These questions are part of a wider repertoire of present-day criticisms of older medievalist literature, which is most comprehensively put forward in Reynolds 1994.

Perrin or Ganshof were unaware of these and similar quandaries, in practice –
as the letters reveal – both historians privileged a reading of the polyptychs as
mere lists of possessions that accomplished precise and exhaustive registra-
tion. In their eyes, the texts were evidence of a rather unified legal under-
standing of manorial organisation, and such elements of the texts as did not
fit the systematic scheme were taken as indications of historical change.
Hence Perrin's "fragmentation" and Ganshof's "amansement": a specific
historical process had to be postulated to explain the irregularities in the pol-
yptychs.

The notion of the thematic domain entailed exploitation by an individual
scholar; therefore, it entailed a specific understanding of authorship in com-
bination with a notion of scholarly property. The underlying assumption
clearly was that the exercise of historical reason would ultimately yield the
same results, regardless of which individual author wrote them up. The prin-
ciple of individuation was property, and claims to property rested on a notion
of the scholar's ethical integrity and authority. Ganshof's and Perrin's shared
understanding of epistemic work therefore required terms that belonged to
their everyday scholarly ethics. The patterns that existed, both in practice and
in talking about practice, for the framing of the acquisition of scholarly
knowledge, on the one hand, and the ethical regimentation of the scholar, on
the other, were thus blurred. The changing relations of scholarly knowledge
with the chequered normativity of scholarly ethics have provided one of the
main inroads for the historicisation of scientific knowledge itself, the pursuit
of "historical epistemology"[22] in terms of concrete scholarly practice. An
influential model for studying the historically diverse and changing forms of
producing, ordering, and justifying knowledge has been provided by Lorraine
Daston's and Peter Galison's work on the 19th-century fortunes of "objectivi-
ty".[23] Ensuing debates, drawing on a Foucaultian notion of the care for and
government of self,[24] as well as on an Aristotelian understanding of virtue,
have laid particular stress on the social generation of dispositions as a source
of subjectivation, of the "presentation of self",[25] of the formation of ethical
personae.[26] This tendency entails conceiving of relations between the ethical
and the epistemic in terms of a stable conceptual interpenetration that argua-
bly has come to unsettle the very distinction between these two spheres. Yet,

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[22] On the development of the uses of the term, see Rheinberger 2010.

[23] Daston, Galison 2007; crucial contributions to the development of the overall argu-
ment were Chandler, Davidson, Harootunian 1991, Daston 1992 and 1995. For the disci-
plinary uses and meanings of "objectivity" in historical writing, it remains very worthwhile
to recur to Novick 1988 and Tollebeek 1990.

[24] As laid out in Foucault 1984, here introduction; and Foucault 2008 [1982–83].

[25] In Erving Goffman's classical phrase, see Goffman 1990 [1959].

[26] For this notion, see Daston, Sibum 2003 and Daston, Galison 2007: ch. 4. See also
Shapin 2008.

at the level of the interpretation and explanation of textual detail, where rela-
tions between the ethical and the epistemic are adrift, the distinctness of the
ethical and the epistemic often appears manifest. Certainly, among scholars
and intellectuals the late modern period over, the Humean sense that the dis-
tinction between norm and assertion, value and description, morality and
knowledge is inevitable and categorical has been deeply ingrained. This sense
has continued to impact methodological writings as well as to interfere with
the practical consequences of related patterns of discourse. The domain of
Prüm was not supposed to be a moral object after all.

  The terminology of "blurring" here proposed responds to this problem. A
distinction between the exchange of ethical motives and epistemological
pursuits appears palpable in Ganshof's and Perrin's letters on the domain of
Prüm. Implicitly, the two scholars embraced such a distinction whenever they
moved beyond their ethical negotiation in order to discuss the factual prob-
lems raised by the polyptych of Prüm. In this movement, repeated throughout
the latter part of the correspondence, an ethical pattern of speech – as con-
nected to property and renunciation – was relinquished. Admittedly, at first
glance, this very movement also yields itself to interpretation in ethical terms.
The primary negotiation entailed an ethical self that was prone to appearing
as the carrier of a specific self-interest, a moral vanity, which in turn could be
seen as requiring further abnegation. Structurally, the abnegation of self, as
conducted by a self, entailed an infinitely regressive structure. In order to
protect scholarly ethics from the intellectual indignity of such regression, it
was necessary to be able to drop out of ethical discourse altogether. Such an
ability entailed a temporal framing of contexts of meaning. Time and again,
ethical discourse reached its limits and broke down or was suspended.[27] In
the Ganshof-Perrin letters, this limitation of the ethical was provided by the
change of focus to matters regarding the production of knowledge that were
intermittently understood as ethically non-descript. It is worth adding that the
specific landscape of patterns of discourse and practice that made possible the
dynamism of blur and distinction was a historical phenomenon in which more
general and more local components mingled. The concrete and transient man-
ifestations of the normative in historical writing constitute a problematic of
historical epistemology of which the letters are – clearly, impressively – doc-
uments. This problematic is a prime target the present study pursues.

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  [27] Indirectly, such a reading of the ethical exchange in the letters corresponds with the
model of ethical deliberation suggested by Zigon 2007.

Time

However, the diagnosis of intermittent and transitory meanings at the heart of the idiom in question suggests that the study of historical writing as epistemic practice also needs to pursue a second target, which becomes faintly visible in the temporality underlying the blurring of the ethical and the epistemic. The letters, on closer scrutiny, contain a subtle exchange between the two scholars regarding the question of how one ought to refer to the disputed Prüm estates. Ganshof had started out with a relatively brief formula when he referred to "the 'Belgian' domain of Prüm". Perrin, however, failed to accept this phrasing and opted instead for "domain of the Belgian Ardennes". In his second letter, Ganshof first clarified his former meaning when he referred to "the domains of Prüm situated in Belgium" and then adopted Perrin's formulation, which remained the phrase of choice in the ensuing letters. The absence of unequivocal, or even vaguely defined, medieval boundaries in the area made it difficult to refer to the locations in question. The two historians could simply have opted for a geographical circumscription, but the Ardennes mountains were for their taste too imprecise a location for indicating the domains in question. "Belgium" or "Belgian" had to enter the appellation somewhere, or so it seems. Thus, the term was shifted around uneasily until Ganshof yielded to Perrin's phrase.

The unease involved stemmed from the anachronistic quality the phrase inevitably assumed. In his first letter, Ganshof used "Belgian" only in quotation marks, thus indicating that he employed an improper, *uneigentlich* mode of discourse. This unimposing detail points to a key aspect of the body of practical knowledge informing Ganshof's (and similarly Perrin's) historical writing: knowledge about how to and how not to talk about history; and about when and how make compromises between proper and improper historical discourse. Both Ganshof and Perrin deployed deep-seated and shared modes of constituting what one might call "historical time". This concept presupposes that "history" is not a term simply referring to the past as a whole; not everything past is subsumed under the concept of history.[28] Among the common modern requirements for ascribing historicity (the quality of being historical), especially the condition of not being merely an event of nature that does not impact human society, is noteworthy. Similarly the relatively strict conditions that apply against interpreting the historical in super-natural, miraculous and religious terms constitute a potent criterion for exclusion of

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[28] For the opposition of natural time and historical time, see Ricoeur 1983–1985; Pomian 1984; Koselleck 2000b.

certain cultural constructs from historicity.[29] Most importantly, perhaps, historicity is predicated under a condition of significance. A fragment of the past that is admitted into the sphere of the historical is required to stand in a semiotic relation – of reference or indexicality – to other things historical. In this way, the historical is always meaningful, and since the meaning in question requires either objects of reference or causal relations (as in indexical signs), historical time is intimately bound up with what one might call an ontology of history. This entails a manner by which scholars of history are able to circumscribe a particular range of kinds of entity and individuals of these kinds that are (or may become) objects of historical knowledge.

Customary determinations of what belongs in the ontology of the historical do not add up to a consistent and stable ensemble. Historicisation has a history of its own, which certainly communicates with, but does not belong into, the historical *epistemology* of historical writing, quite simply because it is concerned with problems of historical *ontology*.[30] For Perrin and Ganshof, the notion that one could determine the manorial regime of an abbey such as Prüm with a certain degree of exactitude and in detail, by means of paying attention to the topographical conditions, meant expanding the scope of the historical. As a result of this expansion, the actual land that had formerly not been an object of historical knowledge took on significance for the explanation of the institutional forms of medieval rural society.[31] Historical time, as it appeared in this type of expansive movement, was an ever-developing cluster of notions about the ascription, or the denial, of historicity. It constituted a temporal order, a particular way of establishing the historical as a criterion of classification in the manifold of the past. François Hartog has introduced the formula "regimes of historicity" in order to capture the plurality of ways in which such temporal ordering is applied across cultural and historical distinctions.[32] Ganshof's and Perrin's unease in finding a proper label for their object of Prüm research indicates that such regimes make themselves felt not only on the level of the very large-scale cultural forms that Hartog discusses, but also on the level of minute detail of historical writing. It remains unclear what is, in "regimes of historicity", the place of the makeshift technical solutions, the working routines and situational decisions alike, through which the temporal order of historical time is actually established and maintained. Perrin's and Ganshof's uncomfortable deployment of anachronistic geograph-

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[29] It is in particular Dipesh Chakrabarty's work that has shown the nexus of historicity, ontology and exclusion, see Chakrabarty 2007. Davis 2008 pursues the exclusiveness of historical time explicitly with a focus on periodisation and the medieval-modern divide.

[30] Following Hacking 2002.

[31] Central for this expansion was Bloch's work on the rural landscape of the *ancien régime* (Bloch 1976 [1931]); moreover Perrin's own work on Lorraine (Perrin 1935).

[32] Hartog 2003; see also Hartog 1996.

ical appellations marks the presence of an imperfection of historicisation; for, "Belgium", the constructed nation *par excellence*, was barred from making claims to any plausible relation of signification that would have connected it to the domain of Prüm. The rejection of anachronistic prefigurations of nationhood was one of the prime interventions into the customs for ascribing historicity with which mid-20th-century historical scholarship marked its critical departure from earlier and contemporary uncritical practice. Yet, through interventions of this kind the cohesion of historical time as a nexus of signification became questionable.

Reinhart Koselleck, in response to discussions in interwar-period philosophies of history, has laid particular stress on the notion that the foremost event in the history of historicity, albeit with mixed consequences, was the 18th-century creation of a secular unity of historical time from a preceding plural universe of historicities that had existed in a more or less palpable religious conception of mundane time.[33] Ganshof's and Perrin's anachronistic unease concerning the "Belgian" domains of Prüm was a symptom of the constraint on historical time to be one and only one, and to comprise everything historical. It was the pursuit of the unity of historical time that prompted scholarly historicisation to rely on its expansionist potential almost without reservations. The Ardennes villages in dispute had clearly existed as settlements of some kind in the Frankish period. Yet, the traditional tools of historicisation did not yield any information that would have allowed going beyond the mere repetition of a few obscure names listed in the polyptych whose reference to still-existing places was questionable even where it was linguistically plausible.

Frank Ankersmit has described a mode of the sensory or phenomenal experience of pastness that, according to him, provides a foundation for modern European historicity. This mode of experience is closely tied up with the aesthetic notion of the sublime, for it tends to generate an experience of the vastness of what has passed as provided by its battered remains, and of the narrow limits of our knowledge, and the proportionate immensity of our ignorance, thereof.[34] Conversely, this also means that the experience in question is inevitably entangled with a standing practice of the production of knowledge about specific domains of past objects; a practice that establishes the actual hold of historical experience on historicity in the first place.

As had become common among researchers in the history of medieval agriculture by 1960, Ganshof and Perrin both relied on means of ostentation and

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[33] See Koselleck 1979b and Koselleck 1975a. Koselleck's argument responded to Heidegger 2001 [1927], esp. §§ 72–77 and Löwith 1949. On the problematic of the unity of history see, further, Trüper 2014.

[34] Ankersmit 2005. See also still Bann 1984: ch. 1, for a discussion of how "loss" informed early 19th-century aesthetics of history.

visualisation – photography, cartography – that in a modest way signalled a set of convictions about the uses of sensory experience in historicisation. Perrin's second reply specified that Ganshof's notes concerned "the identification and the surface" of the Prüm domain of "Vilance" or "Villance". On the grounds of this remark, it is possible to identify a stack of notes in Ganshof's papers from which those sent to Perrin were probably extracted.[35] The notes show that Ganshof was very concerned with identifying the place names given in the respective section of the polyptych and with calculating their size in hectares, drawing on the available resources: place-name dictionaries, maps, repertories of ancient measures, and other polyptychs. Moreover, the notes contain precise excerpts of research literature, for instance of Perrin's previous work on Prüm. The overall effort of this written research aimed at the reconciliation of visible and tangible space with the names listed in the polyptych. The aesthetics of historical experience were clearly present in the arid and sober historical realism that informed Ganshof's and Perrin's work. After all, the objects from which an experience was technically generated were real fields in a real landscape[36] and endowed with the quality of the sublime in light of the vastness of the time span that had elapsed since the Early Middle Ages. This research agenda took up notions Lucien Febvre had expressed in his famous 1933 inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France*:

A human geography was born; it attracted the attention of young men who were quickly won over to real and concrete studies, studies that seemed to introduce, into the sombre monotony of the lecture hall, the sky and the waters, the villages and the woods, the entirety of living nature.[37]

Historical research henceforth was to engage in "the penetrating observation of sites" and the "examination of the imprints the dogged labour of generations has left on the humanised land", and not merely in the study of texts.

And yet, the suggested identity of the presumptive objects of reference of the names in the polyptych with the objects that were yielded by the visual experience of "the land" remained conjectural and philologically elusive. Historical experience failed to shoulder the burden with which, implicitly, it had been laden. It could not provide access to the past reality of the Middle Ages. Therefore, it did not confirm the unity of historical time as comprising, in equal manner, the agricultural domain of Prüm in the Middle Ages and the scholarly domain of Prüm, as an object of research in 1960. The scholarly

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[35] NL Ganshof, box 181, envelope "Gesch[iedkundige] Kr[itiek] 1960–61. II. Prüm I", carnet "P. 2".

[36] Arguably a variant of the spatial "situating" of the production of knowledge, of stressing its interconnectedness with actual places. For this, see the contributions in Ophir, Shapin, Schaffer 1991; moreover Rheinberger, Hagner, Wahrig-Schmidt 1997; Naylor 2005; Jacob 2007.

[37] Febvre 1952 [1933]: 18.

work of Ganshof and Perrin was not in any immediately obvious way continuous with the toil of the "generations" in the fields.

The letters are documents of a variety of temporal and correlate ontological notions, and the more or less covert references to historical experience indicate that these notions do not form a unified and homogenous whole. Historical experience entails the presence of a distinct order of temporality that focuses more on the present time in which scholarly work is conducted and that remains separated from the ontological domain within which historicity is ascribed. The contiguity of the time of scholarly work with historical time proper appears suspended; that is to say, the domain of entities – of material and abstract objects, of agents, actions, and events – that is constituted by the time of scholarly work does not coincide with that of historical time. The practice of writing history inevitably produces temporalities at least in the dual, if not in the plural. The blurring of the ethical and the epistemic, as a process, primarily appears to fall into the time of scholarly work rather than historical time. Therefore, the very question about the place of normative language in the practical production of historical knowledge requires taking into account the setting up of temporalities in historical writing. The interrelations of these temporalities and the underlying ontological matters constitute the second overarching problematic the current study pursues.

The writtenness of history

This second problematic, that of the "times of historical writing",[38] also cannot stand on its own. The temporal orders it thematises are, on closer scrutiny, epiphenomena of writing practice; they are secondary to the technical work of writing and the culturally established frames of textual genre. As for historical time, its setting up, through scholarly work, did not merely require those textual forms of narrative organisation that underpinned the positing of historical processes such as the fragmentation of the manse or the process of amansement. The work of historicisation was also carried out by means of actual text-making in its many guises. The small-scale information that went into describing, say, the domain of Prüm was embedded in writing practices such as note-taking. Historical time, highly constructed and shot through with signification, depended on the labour of writing. The same was the case for the time of scholarly work, with its present time of phenomenal experience. This present time was that of the workings of the mind. Therefore, it also

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[38] Echoing, or rather twisting the meaning of, Koselleck's formula "Die Zeiten der Geschichtsschreibung", see Koselleck 2000b, in which the time that is necessary to do scholarly work is remarkably not mentioned, or rather subsumed under the *topos* of standpoint.

applied to Ganshof's and Perrin's ethical and epistemic intentions and decisions. These were rendered, in the letters, as if they had unfolded in simultaneity to the progress of script on paper, a pretence that contrasted with the intervals of postal correspondence to such an extent that the two scholars exploited the contrast for surplus meaning. It was a feature of the letter as a particular genre of text to be expressive of a credible immediate present of the mind. Traditionally linked to the movement of the pen on paper, this genre characteristic carried over into typewritten correspondence, which, even when dictated, retained the immediacy of subjective expression. This resilience was the result of features that belonged to writing practice; in the case of letters, technical change did not fundamentally alter the powerful textual form. The writtenness of the temporal orders – whose workings can be glimpsed in the letters – has numerous points of touch with Derrida's arguments as to the fallaciousness of pursuing phenomenal presence in text.[39] The letters, moreover, serve as a document of the very specific forms in which individual practices and genres of writing inform the historical administering of different temporalities. Accordingly, and tentatively beyond Derrida (and others),[40] it is not simply writing as such that needs to be taken into account. The letters document, on the contrary, that it is the idiosyncrasy and plurality within the overall practice of writing that is the most pertinent problem for understanding the actual writtenness of history.

The chief rhetorical contrivance of Lucien Febvre's inaugural address at the *Collège de France* consisted in the repeated attack on what he regarded as the key precept of 19th-century French methodological doctrine, the ubiquitous slogan and pernicious commonplace: "L'histoire se fait avec des textes." Febvre returned to this phrase again and again. He ascribed its authorship to Fustel de Coulanges, the pioneer of "critical" and "methodical" historical writing in France. Actually, however, the phrase had been popularised, and brought into a form that was already almost Febvre's, by Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos in their *Introduction aux Etudes Historiques* from 1898, the handbook that defined the terms of most francophone debate on historical method in the early 20th century. Clearly, Febvre was provoked by the aggressive banality of the phrase, its ostentatious conviction that what it expressed bore expression only because of the enduring presence of such stupidity in historical scholarship that even the simplest notions of good practice continued to be ignored. Febvre sought to turn this inherent arrogance of the precept against itself. He attacked it as an unthinking inanity that unintentionally, stupidly had itself lost track of the objective (*objet*) of history as an

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[39] As especially put forward in Derrida 1967a; see also below Part IV.

[40] I am thinking here primarily of the notion of "writing" as spelt out in de Certeau 1975: Introduction, as a "discourse of separation" that primarily functions to generate the "otherness" of an object of knowledge, for instance, the dead.

epistemic pursuit of research questions and defined history merely by reference to its "material"; and only one kind of material, at that. A large portion of his speech subsequently focused on opening historical research to all the textual materials available and to all other possible evidence to boot ("*tous les textes*", and "*pas rien que les textes*"[41]). Langlois and Seignobos had seen it coming; they had altered the traditional phrasing and replaced *textes* with *documents* (all kinds of remnants or relics of the past),[42] but then had geared their methodology so exclusively towards written sources that they were indeed the prime, if unnamed, target of Febvre's polemical verdict. The reading that the phrase defined historical writing in terms of its source material was shared by all participants of the methodological discourse of strict, objective and critical history that, proudly or indigantly, carried Fustel's decree as its device. The lucidity of the sentence stood unquestioned.

Still, the translation is thorny; it gets caught, and painfully so, on every single word. *L'histoire*: "history", no doubt (that is to say, in no contextually possible reading just "story", let alone "joke"), and in the singular, with the definite article, so that clearly this is not about the writing of historical explanations in the plural, but about historical explanation as a whole, and as a whole that is determined by the wholeness of the object it seeks to explain – history as the past, or as knowledge of the past: no difference. Febvre, when he claims that the phrase defines history by its material and not by its explanatory pursuit, accepts the singular and the underlying ambiguity that confuses *explanans* and *explanandum*. His criticism thus borders on self-defeat. *Se fait*: "is done", or "made" (is undertaken, not: is finished); but is history (derived from a Greek verb, after all, and not a noun) a doing of something, or its product? Does the present tense indicate momentary and passing, or permanent validity of the assertion? Who is the agent of the doing in question, why is such an agent not named, and does the reflexive form indicate that history, after all, does itself, produces itself? Is the form better translated as "ought to be done"? If so, whence the normativity? *Avec*: "with"; but in what sense precisely: based on, with the help of, or about? Is the instrumentality that is indicated exclusive, or are there other means of doing history? Or is history done, or does it do itself, simply in the company of something? And *des textes*: "texts" or, possibly, "kinds of text" (under generous omission of the basic lack of clarity that beset the concept in 1933 as much as it besets it today). The article is indeterminate either way, so there is an element of arbitrariness involved. Why is Febvre even so sure the phrase refers to the "material", the sources "with" which history is "done"? An unsuspecting reader might be induced to think that the texts with which history is undertaken are

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[41] Febvre, 1952 [1934]: 27 (emphasis in original).

[42] The opening sentence of the first chapter of Langlois, Seignobos 1992 [1898] reads "L'histoire se fait avec des documents."

actually the texts historical writing itself inevitably generates. Even granted that Febvre's understanding is the more plausible one – which the context he criticises certainly confirms – he might still have marvelled at a methodological discourse that disposed of no means whatsoever for addressing its own reliance on textuality, its pervasive writtenness.

In general, Febvre's failure even to notice that he found himself under the cover of a veritable barrage of semantic obscurity was symptomatic. The ways in which historians and theorists of history talked and wrote about historical writing have most consistently excluded even the attempt of generating terms in which to discuss problems of textuality and writing practice. As a consequence, it remains unclear with what kinds of texts history is done; of what this doing actually consists; what kind of agency it entails; to what extent it is governed by, or even accessible to, normativity; what is the right tense in which to address these issues (the present of permanence, or the past of historicity?); what, if any, is the nature of the unity that underlies historical writing; and what kind of object it actually addresses (the past, or texts?). This is the problematic of the writtenness of history, which is the third target the present study pursues.

Since the problem of normativity in the production of historical knowledge and the problem of the times of historical writing appear to be bound up with the set of questions that belongs to the problem of the writtenness of history, it might even seem tempting to try and fuse the three problems into a single one. Indeed, as I have sought to show *avec* (with the help, or perhaps merely in the company, of) the Ganshof-Perrin letters from 1960, it appears possible to develop the problems from one another. However, fine fault lines persist between them. It is doubtful that the problems of the normative and the temporal orders of historical knowledge can be reduced to the problem of writing only because writing as practice interfered with these orders and because the only available sources happen to be written. For this reason, I prefer to desist from to fusing the three problematics into a single one. Nonetheless, the question as to the writtenness of history is relatively the most comprehensive one, and the nexus in which it finds itself with regard to the other two problems will be a guiding theme of the study.

Topography of a method

This threefold line-up of questions and problems might be regarded as resulting from the attempt to concretise the meaning of "practice" in the history of historical writing. Attention to "practice" – quotidian work, routines, implicit components of epistemic processes – has in the past much furthered discussions in the history of science. The production of scientific knowledge became recognisable as an intricate and messy situational affair, defying a gen-