ON VISITING THE BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE: THE ROUGH GUIDE
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Before you go (these suggestions apply to most manuscript libraries):

- Figure out what you want to see and prioritize; you’ll almost always find that you run out of time, unless you have the luxury of living nearby or being on a yearlong fellowship.
- Get a letter of introduction, or better, two—one from a dissertation supervisor (if applicable) and one from the department chair, stating that you are a student/faculty member in the relevant department, need to make use of manuscript collections for your doctoral (or other) research, and are, as one of mine put it, “a fit and proper person” to be allowed to handle manuscripts (admittedly, this was a letter from a Brit). Make sure the letters are on letterhead, but the language (English, French, etc.) does not seem to matter. A photo ID from your university can also be helpful in establishing bona fides.
- Make sure the library(ies) you plan to use are open when you plan to go. European libraries tend to observe more religious holidays, and at more length, than American libraries do. Many libraries now have websites that will help with this information (though the Bibliothèque Nationale [BN] website is rather slow and a bit hard to navigate).
- For the BN specifically, figure out which branch you need. This will probably be Richelieu, which has nearly all the medieval manuscripts, but you might also need Arsenal (the call number will tell you if it is Arsenal). Note that these have different opening hours and observe different holidays.
If you plan to use a computer to take notes (strongly recommended, especially if you plan to do any extensive transcription, and most big libraries accommodate this easily), be sure you have a plug adapter for the country you are visiting (France, England, and, I think, Italy are all different—most computer stores will sell a set that will take you most places). Do, however, have paper and pencil (see below) for backup or to draw things that you can’t enter in the computer.

Remember that MS libraries pretty much universally forbid the use of anything but pencil, for obvious reasons, so supply yourself with these and do not make them cranky by taking pens in by mistake. (Usually you’ll be able to buy or, at worst, borrow a pencil on site, especially at big libraries.)

If you will be looking at Latin MSS, get a copy of A. Cappelli’s Dizionario di abbreviature latine ed italiane—nearly all Latin MSS (and not a few vernacular ones, of course) use abbreviations extensively and it will spare you time and aggravation to have Cappelli at hand.

If you plan to use any especially rare or highly decorated MSS, it is a good idea to write or e-mail ahead to arrange this (and, in fact, to make sure that it is even possible). At the BN, also, they are very sticky about letting you see actual MSS if there is a microfilm in existence, so contacting them ahead and/or having a strong rationale for needing the original is important.

ARRIVING AT THE BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE:

These directions are particularly intended for those whose French is limited or rusty. You can probably get by if necessary without any French beyond “bonjour,” “merci,” and “au revoir,” but it may involve a certain amount of hand-waving. If your French is excellent, you probably don’t really need this instruction, but since the system
is, so to speak, Byzantine, it can't hurt to know what to expect. In my experience, the staff at the BN are nice people, used to dealing with foreigners, and generally forgiving of those with limited French who are polite and aware of their own limitations. They will try to work with you to make things clear and only occasionally will you get someone who seems impatient with your slowness.

Very briefly, what you will do is present yourself and your credentials at the service des lecteurs [reader services], get a reader's card, pay for it, and go upstairs to the salle des manuscrits [manuscripts room] where you will be given a place at one of the long tables and a plaque with the place number, which will allow you to order up manuscripts from the back of the room. This, however, makes the whole thing sound infinitely simpler than in fact it is. For details, see below.

• The entrance to the library is off the Rue de Richelieu, across from a small, pretty park with a fountain. When you enter, you will see a security gate on your right (new since Sept. 11, I think). You set your bag(s) on the table and open them, then walk through the gate. The inspection is usually extremely cursory. You then proceed into the courtyard and the main entrance will be to your right, up a small flight of steps.

• Once in the main entry hall, look to your right and you will see the service des lecteurs up a small set of steps at the right-hand end of the central hall. Go in and take a seat in the area designated for the Bibliothèque Nationale. Note that here and at the caisses [cashiers] there are separate areas for the BN and CARAN, the national archives; for medieval MSS, you always want the BN: There are several desks that deal with readers for the BN and one will come and get you from your seat (or wave to you if it is the nearest).

• In your "interview," which will take place in French but is mostly very straightforward, you will
say who you are, produce the papers to prove it (bring your passport as well as letters), and explain what MSS you need to use (detail usually not required, though it's not a bad idea to have a short list of the most important, which you will have made ahead of time anyway) and why. (e.g.: "I am studying medieval preachers and wish to look at certain manuscripts containing sermons.") You will be asked how many days you would like your card to run (2 days for €4.50, 15 for €30.00, etc.); if you are there for only a handful of days you can get a series of 2-day cards. They will enter your information into a computer and then send you across the office (further in) to a person who will take your photo and make you a reader's card.

With your reader's card in hand, you then go all the way back across the entry hall, past the door where you came in, and just before the big stairway go left to find the caisses (cashiers). Note that the far right-hand one (as you face them) is for CARAN only, so you need one of the two on the left. Here you can pay by cash or credit card for your carte du lecteur.

- Having paid, you go up the big stairway right behind you, doubling around for the second half and at the top go across to your right to enter the salle des manuscrits. Note: you probably want to arrive early, around 9:00 AM, on your first day, because the manuscripts room sometimes fills up and latecomers have to wait outside for a desk. This varies by season, so after the first day you'll have a sense of what time you need to get there. If you are too late for a seat on a given day, however, do not despair; there's a table outside the salle where you can sit and wait, and in my experience as a latecomer it doesn't usually take too long for room to open up.

Now it gets complicated. Once you've been through it a couple
of times, it feels quite natural, but there are all sorts of little rules that you would never know. They’re probably written down somewhere, but if so, it’s in French, and I think this is the hardest kind of thing to follow in a foreign language.

Some of these rules include:

- Just inside the salle des manuscrits, hand your reader’s card to the person at the front desk. This person will keep your card and give you a small key to a locker just outside the manuscripts room (you’ll see them as you come in), where you should place all coats, bags, etc., bringing back in with you only your computer, pencils, and any papers you need. (If you have a large coat or a wet umbrella, these can be left at the vestiaire [coatroom] on the ground floor, just inside the front doors of the library.)

- When you return, the front desk will give you a green (usually) or blue plastic plaque with a number on it, as well as a light-blue card for sortie temporaire [temporary exit, i.e., any exits before you leave for the day with your papers, etc.]. The desk attendant may ask if you have a preference about where to sit. Just say “non, merci,” [“no, thanks”] until and unless you do.

  You take your things to your “place” (the seat numbers corresponding to the plaque numbers are at the back of each desk, on the backsplash as it were). Here it should be noted that there are special “reserved” desks; if you know you will be using a “reserve” manuscript (basically, those particularly subject to theft, I believe), request a reserve desk. You can go back to change places if you end up needing a reserve manuscript and you didn’t realize; they will let you know. Also, the manuscript catalogues, if you want to use them, are on the right-hand side of the room as you enter, roughly halfway down the room. You can take a volume to your desk—or at least, no one has
even spoken sharply to me about this—but there is also space to consult them at the shelves.

- Having set your things down, you take your green/blue plaque and the number(s) of the first MSS you want to see to the far back of the hall; this is where you order manuscripts or microfilms (see below), writing the call number on a white request slip (these are all over the salle). You can request up to three at one time, and up to five in the course of one day.

- Before putting in your order, check the card catalogue at far left of the back desk to see if there is a microfilm. If there is, you will usually have to use it, even if you already own a copy of this microfilm and are the world expert on the manuscript. After looking at the microfilm, if you make your case, you will probably be allowed to see the real thing.

- If there is a microfilm, you will have to order that and look at it using one of the microfilm readers (you can leave your things at your original place unless you would rather not). To do this, you will fill out a form giving the microfilm number and noting that it is a microfilm, and giving your place number in the salle, your name and address, and the date, and hand it in with your green/blue plaque. They will hand you an orange plaque in exchange for your green one and tell you which film reader to go to (brush up on your French numerals, or get them to write it down) and you go there to wait for the film—or, if you have also ordered actual manuscripts, back to your regular place. It’s up to you; both manuscripts and microfilms will be left at your assigned place(s) if you are not there.

- Once you have looked at the microfilm, you can apply to the président, the person who staffs the bureau central [main desk] in the middle of the salle, to request permission to see the original. This
person will want you to explain in detail why you must see the original, will take down all details, and will then go to look at the manuscript and make a decision; you go back to your place to wait. Good reasons for wanting to see the manuscript itself seem to include: microfilm does not include the folios you need (only works, of course, if it’s not completely filmed); you need to look at *manchettes* [marginalia] that are not clear in the film; you are preparing an edition of the text; you need to see images, which often don’t come through well on microfilm; etc.

- If there is no microfilm, which in my experience is the more common occurrence, the procedure is exactly the same, except that you will go back to your own place and wait for the manuscript there. It takes between 10 and 25 minutes (usually toward the 10 side) to get your material.

- Once you have your manuscript you can get set up at your desk and work happily with no one bothering you for hours and hours. They are not fidgety about manuscripts here, and unless you are doing something outrageous like scratching the page, breaking the binding, or grubbing sweaty paws all over the text, usually no one will give you any trouble about how you handle the manuscripts (this varies between libraries and some are picky about your not touching anything but the edge of the page, not trying to look at the gutters, etc.). Obviously, however, you want to be careful with the manuscripts (a lot of them are rather fragile), and every so often someone does get a fierce rebuke for some sort of handling error.

- Most desks have some kind of book support already on them, whether a *tapis* [a sort of velvet roll] or a *pupitre* [a bookstand]. If you want a type you do not have,
you can take it from an unoccupied desk; if none are to be seen, you can ask at the bureau central, but there is occasionally a shortage of pupitres. The bureau central can also supply serpentins [velvet snakes for holding down pages].

The walls of the salle are lined with reference works, from other library catalogues to the Patrologia Latina, dictionaries, particularly important journals for manuscript study, and so on. These are in the BN-Opaline online catalogue, which lists them as libre accès [free access]; the numbering system in the salle is, as far as I can tell, completely without rhyme or reason, but there is a little map that is some help. You can take these volumes down yourself and use them at your desk; there are stepstools and a moving staircase if you need something from a high shelf.

If you want to leave to use the bathroom, get a coffee (30 Euro cents from the machine downstairs—around to the right of the main stair as you descend—not at all bad for machine coffee; there are also juice and snack machines at the other end of the hall beside the service des lecteurs and the bathrooms are downstairs from there), go to lunch, etc., you have to leave your things behind. This is perfectly safe, even for computers, to the best of my knowledge. (I have never had nor heard of any problems, though you probably don’t want to leave a wallet or passport or something small like that). Take your light-blue paper card, leaving the orange plaque and the manuscript (closed) on your desk and show the card as you leave—waving it in the direction of the front-desk person is usually fine. Wave it again when you come back in.

Theoretically, there is no fetching of manuscripts between 12:20 PM and 1:30 PM, but this doesn’t always seem to be observed. You might want to keep it in mind, however. Also, they will deliver a
manuscript to your place when you are not there, unless it is a rare one, so you can order something and then go to get lunch and it will be there when you return.

• When you are finished with a manuscript, you can either hand it in for good or set it aside using the *mis de coté* form (light yellow). If you will want it the next day or even later the same day this is very helpful since there is no wait—you fill out a dark-yellow *mis-de-coté* request form and they just take it off the *mis-de-coté* shelf and hand it to you. You can set one manuscript aside in this way and order another, then go back to the former. There is a limit on *mis-de-coté* of eight days, and you can set more than one thing aside.

• When you are ready to leave for the day (they will ring a bell at 5:45), even if you are setting something aside you will hand in your orange plaque at the back desk and get the green/blue one back. You will then have to gather up your things and take them to the *bureau central*. (You may have to wait a minute here if the *président* is off doing other things, but he or she will reappear fairly quickly.) The *président* will look at your belongings, make sure that you are not absconding with any manuscript leaves, etc., and give you a white *sortie définitive* card. YOU CAN’T TAKE YOUR THINGS OUT WITHOUT CONSULTING THE *PRÉSIDENT*!

• You then go to the front desk, give them your white *sortie* card (and the blue one as well, though it’s not clear whether they really care about this) and your green/blue plaque. You will come back for your reader’s card after collecting your things from the locker; when you hand in the key, they will return the card.

So, the short version:

• Get reader’s card from main office downstairs;
• Go upstairs to the *salle des manuscrits*, hand in reader’s card, get locker key, blue temporary exit card, and green plaque;
• Go back out into hall, put things in locker;
• Go back into the salle, get set up at assigned place;
• Check for microfilm and fill out request card, handing in green plaque in exchange for orange one;
• Use MS(S) or microfilm at desk/microfilm reader;
• If leaving temporarily, take light blue card to show to front desk, but leave belongings behind (except e.g. wallet);
• Return MS(S) and either set it/them aside (using yellow form) or say you have finished with it/them;
• Order more MS(S) if you like;
• At end of day, return or set aside MSS and orange plaque, get green plaque back;
• Show belongings to président, get white exit card;
• Hand in plaque and card to front desk, collect things from locker;
• Return locker key and get reader’s card back.

What could be simpler?

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