

THE ACADEMIE MONTMOR

Paris 1653 – 1664

Dr Robert A. Hatch

Situated at 79, rue du Temple (rue Sainte-Avoye), the Hôtel de Montmor was an important site of scientific activity during the years 1653-1664. There, in the course of a decade, a small circle of friends came to identify itself as a scientific academy boasting some 30 members, a constitution, admission criteria, rules, and a working agenda. By one tradition, the private patronage of H-L Habert de Montmor (c.1600-1679) was the 'birthplace' of state-sponsored science.

While the origins the Montmor group remain obscure, the role of 'Montmor le Riche' as private patron clearly began in the 1630s. But there is little evidence of a 'Montmor group' at the Hôtel before May 1653 when Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) began to lodge on the second floor. The group that gathered here signaled the first beginnings of the Académie Montmor. It likely drew members from the defunct assemblies of Marin Mersenne (1588-1648) and Jacques Le Pailleur (d.1654).

Core members of the Gassendi Circle (1653-1655) were mathematicians and medical men. In addition to Gassendi and Montmor, the group likely included Ismaël Boulliau (1605-1694), Charles du Bosc (d. 1659), Pierre Carcavi (c.1603-1684), Claude Clerselier (1614-1686?), Gérard Desargues (1593-1662), Guy Patin (1601-1672), Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), Pierre Petit (1594?-1677), Abraham du Prat (1616-1660), G-P de Roberval (1602-1675), J-R de Segrais (1624-1701), and perhaps Jean Chapelain (1595-1674). Early visitors included Michel de Marolles (1600-1681) and Balthazar de Monconys (1615-1665).

But the if 'Académie Montmoriennne' (1657-1664) grew by stages, the critical phase was underway by December 1657. At the request of Montmor, Samuel Sorbière (1615-1670) and Abraham du Prat drafted a short constitution consisting of nine Rules (see Sorbière to Hobbes, 1 February 1658; See Below). The goal of the nascent academy was clear knowledge of nature not a 'parade of wit over useless subtleties.' Meetings would have a moderator, weekly topics, pre-circulated

papers, and discussion guidelines. Importantly, admission and attendance would be regulated.

With these Rules, the small group that once surrounded Gassendi slowly transformed itself into a semi-private Académie. But even in death Gassendi's spirit was invoked to 'reign in our Assemblée' in order that a 'true method of philosophizing' be followed. Weekly meetings (Fridays, then Tuesdays) were attended by an illustrious assembly including Secretaries of State, Cordons Bleus, and Parliamentarians. Sorbière boasted it would be difficult to compose a comparable group anywhere.

But personal bickering and doctrinal disputes soon disrupted the meetings. In December 1658 a legendary clash occurred between Montmor and Roberval, ostensibly over a doctrine of Descartes. The dispute stymied activity for eight months. If the problem was a tendency to speechify, the solution was to emphasize experiment. After the summer of 1659, meetings resumed more or less weekly for almost five years. In June 1664, Huygens pronounced the academy had 'ended forever' (Huygens to Moray, 12 June 1664).

Documentary evidence concerning weekly meetings, membership, and discussion topics is scarce. But old problems clearly accompanied continued formalization. Two examples must suffice. In the summer of 1661 Montmor's wife fell ill, and as a consequence, no meetings were held for three months (Chapelain to Huet, 17 September 1661). Throughout its existence the Académie remained a semi-private assembly not a public institution; if its patron suffered so did its members. But 'membership' clearly took new meaning during these years. Close reading of correspondence during the period shows subtle shifts of reference, as early mention of 'nos amis' and 'nos autres habiles' change to more formal reports on topics and group activities. Comportment was a constant concern. By 1658 membership in the Académie Montmor (access, attendance, participation) had achieved greater regularity. Organizational leaders of the group included Sorbière and Abraham du Prat, while behind the scenes Jean Chapelain was a constant promoter.

Although little is known of specific discussion topics, a general picture has emerged. As we have seen, there was concern to avoid the 'vain exercise of the mind on useless subtleties; rather, one should always propose the clearest knowledge of the works of God and the advancement of the conveniences of life, in the arts and sciences that best serve to establish them.' Contemporary correspondence shows that discourses were read and discussed, and that the tenor of meetings was sometimes shrill.

Although medical and physical demonstration is often discussed, we know little about the experiments that were made or how they were performed. Topics of record include Rohault's experiments with the magnet; Thévenot's presentation of his tubes; P-D Huet's discourse on shattering 'glass drops' brought from Germany (Huet, *Mémoires*); Huygens' work with the air pump; Pierre Guisony's work on vegetation, and Pecquet's dissections. Specific discussion topics include Chapelain's announcement of Huygens' discoveries (pendulum clock; Saturn's moon Titan; Saturn's Rings), and formal exchanges on such topics as the science of motion, rarefaction and condensation, and the limits of natural knowledge and sources of error. Foreign correspondence was read and discussed at the close of each session.

The Hôtel Montmor represents in microcosm a critical transition in the organization of science. Yet, while several members of the group--the 'Montmoriens dissidents'-- called for royal patronage, it would be a mistake to see the Académie Montmor as the 'birthplace' of the Académie royale. If an impetus for royal favor was felt in France, it likely came from the Royal Society of London (1662), and it is likely that questions of ancestry--or at least family resemblance--point clearly to the French civil service.

Robert A. Hatch©

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