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Is Jean Senebier an Archaeologist?

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Abstract Jean Senebier: A Critical Exploration of Geneva's Antiquities - This manuscript presents an in-depth analysis of Jean Senebier's seminal work on the antiquities of Geneva. Senebier, a notable figure in the late 18th century, initiated a year-long scholarly discourse with his *Essay on Geneva*, first introduced in the *Geneva Journal* in 1788 and continuing through mid-1791. This study examines multiple manuscript versions of Senebier's essay, preserved in the *Bibliothèque de Genève*, and includes a meticulously transcribed annex of the original program. Senebier's exploration offers a multifaceted perspective on Geneva's historical artifacts, encompassing an array of elements from architectural structures to medieval fortifications. His methodological approach, grounded in extensive research of books and manuscripts, involved rigorous comparative analysis and consultations with contemporary scholars. Senebier's work, distinguished by his critical evaluation and incorporation of iconography, also involved direct on-site explorations. Although following Jean de la Corbière, recognized as Geneva's first proto-archaeologist, Senebier's distinctive critical methodology aligns him closely with both historians and proto-archaeologists of his time in Geneva. This manuscript underscores Senebier's significant contribution to the historiography and archaeology of Geneva's antiquities.

Index Terms Jean Senebier, archaeology, walls, Geneva, history, iconography, Saint-Pierre

I. Introduction

The article examines Jean Senebier's endeavor to explore the antiquities of Geneva. In 1788, he released the program for an examination of Geneva in the *Geneva Journal*, continuing its publication until mid-1791. Multiple manuscript versions of this inquiry are housed in the Library of Geneva, with the transcribed program provided in the appendix. Senebier comprehensively addresses all aspects of the city's antiquities, encompassing monuments and medieval fortifications. Employing an extensive array of works and sources, he meticulously cross-references his findings. Seeking insights from numerous scholars, utilizing iconography, and conducting on-site visits, Senebier, while following in the footsteps of Jean de la Corbière, the first Genevan proto-archaeologist, distinguishes himself through his critical approach. Consequently, he aligns with the lineage of historians and proto-archaeologists of Geneva.

Jean Senebier, Minister of the Holy Gospel and Librarian of the Republic of Geneva, unveiled his comprehensive engagement with the city's history in 1779 by publishing the *Catalog of manuscripts preserved in the Library of the City and Republic of Geneva*¹. Following this, in 1786, he delved into a *Literary History of Geneva* across three volumes, comprising a biographical dictionary of Geneva's writers, scholars, and artists, preceded by an "Essay on the usefulness of the literary history of a country for its inhabitants" [1], [2].

Building upon these foundational works, Senebier directed his attention towards the expansive subject of Geneva's history, offering a unique perspective. In his introductory remarks, he outlined his distinctive approach, contemplating the diverse dimensions of city history:

"There are different ways of narrating the history of a city. One can depict its civil, military, and literary events, providing a portrayal of its inhabitants in their interactions with each other and neighboring regions. Alternatively, one can document monuments erected over time, explore their founders, and uncover a country's existence, revealing titles of nobility, antiquity, and simplicity. Another approach involves seeking proof for historical accounts, examining the material aspects of the city, such as its enclosures, streets, public buildings, and antiquities from various eras, including the Middle Ages and coins. In my proposal, I aim to present the material story of Geneva, tracing its enclosures, detailing its streets, public structures, and all elements intertwined with its ancient history, including remnants of antiquity and the Middle Ages³."

This narrative unfolded serially, commencing on December 6, 1788, in the *Journal de Genève*. Spanning 22 installments until June 11, 1791, the *Bibliothèque de Genève* [3] houses annotated copies of the *Journal de Genève* containing the *Essay on Geneva*, along with autograph drafts and edits, providing four distinct states of the [4].

Within the Essay on Geneva, Senebier initiates his exploration with the three sequential enclosures of Geneva, discussing the Gondebaud, Marcossey, and Reformers' enclosures. Expressing his intentions, he admits:

"After outlining the successive expansions of Geneva, it seemed natural to delve into the streets, buildings, and antiquities. However, contemplating it further, I found it fitting to initially focus on the ancient Fauxbouds destroyed in 1534, resurrecting Medieval monuments only faintly remembered today⁶."

Following this roadmap, Senebier methodically addresses various facets, including the faubourg, church, and priory of Saint-Victor, faubourg de Rive, faubourg, church, and gate of Saint-Léger, and the Faubourg de la Corraterie, accompanied by numerous digressions on related subjects. Subsequently, he shifts his attention to Geneva *intra muros*, commencing with the church of Saint-Pierre. Here, he meticulously presents historical accounts, details of the architecture, and digressions on bishops, canons, and ecclesiastical manuscripts.

On June 11, 1791, Senebier concludes his presentation on Saint-Pierre in the *Journal de Genève*, acknowledging the unfinished state of his Essay, which was planned to encompass other churches, the town hall, streets, houses, the Rhône, the Arve, and the Island. Notably, the *Journal de Genève* faced a decline in subscribers, and Senebier announced its discontinuation on June 6, 1791.

Eighteen months later, with the transformation of the Republic of Geneva in the wake of the fall of the oligarchic government, Senebier emigrated to Rolle with his family, returning in 1800 after the turmoil had subsided.

The unfinished work by Jean Senebier holds enduring significance and prompts reflection on various aspects, considering both historical and contemporary perspectives:

II. Historical Documentation

Rich Documentation

Senebier's work is characterized by its rich documentation and extensive readings, providing a comprehensive view of Geneva's history. [5]

Critical Engagement

Senebier's critical spirit is evident in his revisiting of historical problems, questioning local historiography, and scrutinizing various facets of Geneva's past. This approach adds depth to his historical contributions.

III. Collaboration and Correspondence

Collaborative Endeavors

Senebier's engagement with correspondents, seeking advice and observations from local and foreign friends, underscores the collaborative nature of historical research in the 18th century.

Diverse Perspectives

The inclusion of insights from various correspondents enriches the historical narrative, providing diverse perspectives

on Geneva's history.

IV. Fieldwork and Observations

Iconographic Documents

Senebier's use of iconographic documents and firsthand observations in the field, including examinations of architectural remains, reflects a commitment to providing a holistic understanding of Geneva's past.

Archaeological Exploration

Senebier's forays into the field, exploring remnants like the tower and gate of the Mint and the old Pont d'Arve, contribute to the early foundations of archaeological exploration in Geneva.

V. Legacy and Predecessors

Acknowledgment of Predecessors: Senebier's acknowledgment of Jean de La Corbière as a predecessor and proto-archaeologist highlights the continuity of historical inquiry. La Corbière's influence on Senebier's work underscores the collaborative and evolving nature of historical research.

VI. Contemporary Reflection

Unfinished Narrative

The incomplete nature of Senebier's work invites contemporary scholars to reflect on the challenges and circumstances that led to its cessation. It serves as a reminder of the socio-political context of 18th-century Geneva, marked by changes in governance and shifting intellectual landscapes.

Historiographer Context

Senebier's work can be understood within the broader historiographical context of the Enlightenment, offering insights into the intellectual currents of his time.

VII. Educational Value

Teaching and Research

Senebier's incomplete work, dated 1779, holds immense educational value, particularly for scholars, historians, and archaeologists delving into the rich history of Geneva. This historical artifact serves as a valuable resource, shedding light on the events, perspectives, and methodologies prevalent in the 18th century.

From a teaching perspective, Senebier's work offers a unique opportunity for educators to incorporate primary historical sources into their curriculum. Students can engage directly with the writings of the past, gaining insights into the challenges, perspectives, and approaches of scholars from the 18th century. Analyzing Senebier's work can provide a bridge between the historical context of Geneva and the methodologies employed by scholars of that era.

Moreover, researchers can find inspiration in Senebier's work to explore specific aspects of Geneva's history. Unfinished as it may be, the document opens avenues for inquiry,

encouraging scholars to investigate the gaps in Senebier's narrative and potentially contribute new perspectives or insights.

The historical significance of Senebier's work extends beyond the content itself. It offers a glimpse into the intellectual environment of 18th-century scholarship, reflecting the academic trends, research priorities, and writing styles of that period. Scholars can explore the evolution of historical methodologies and the challenges faced by researchers during this time.

In addition, Senebier's work provides a foundation for comparative studies, allowing scholars to juxtapose 18th-century historical scholarship with contemporary approaches. This comparative analysis can enrich our understanding of the development of historical methodologies and shed light on the continuity or evolution of certain research practices.

In conclusion, Senebier's unfinished work, with its historical context and scholarly insights, serves as a valuable educational asset. It not only contributes to our understanding of Geneva's history but also facilitates teaching and research by connecting present-day audiences with the intellectual endeavors of the 18th century.

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