

## MORE ON JOHN CAPISTRAN'S CORRESPONDENCE: A REPORT ON AN OPEN FORUM

### PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Since John Capistran is among the most relevant figures of the fifteenth century, not only for the Franciscan Order but more generally for political and religious life (in a century in which saying “political-religious life” is like saying “life”), the very substantial corpus of his correspondence has a long history as well as a long historiography. The approximately seven hundred letters he sent or received beginning in 1418 until his death in 1456, were discovered and studied one at a time over the centuries, for quite different reasons and with different aims.

Certainly the gradual process of discovering and studying these documents is marked by some milestones. For example, there is the celebration of his canonization process in 1623 (during which the written works by the saint and written testimonies about him were also investigated), as well as the works of the so-called Capistran Commission.<sup>1</sup> This commission was a team established in 1952 in Rome by the leadership of the Franciscan Order (namely by General Minister S epinsky), which was located first in Grottaferrata, College of *Quaracchi*, then in the *Antonianum*, and was managed by friars Ottokar Bonmann and Paulis B edruno.<sup>2</sup>

The research archive of Capistrano materials that is housed at the Franciscan Institute at St. Bonaventure University was brought together through the efforts of Gedeon G al, OFM. Gedeon had been heading up work on the critical

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<sup>1</sup> About the history and the works made by the Commission see the anonymous booklet *La commissione capistraniana* (pro manoscritto) (Rome: Scuola tip. Pax et Bonum, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> The latter was soon replaced by Lucian Luszczki, who had just published his dissertation on John Capistran's sermons.

edition of the theological and philosophical writings of William of Ockham at the Institute. His interest in John Capistran came from the fact that he was a member of the Hungarian Franciscan Province of St. John Capistran. The greater part of the material came from the research files of Ottokar Bonmann who died before being able to start any actual editing work for an edition of Capistran. Knowing of Bonmann's work Gedeon asked Conrad Harkins, O.F.M., then director of the Franciscan Institute, to request that Bonmann's research be shipped to the Institute from Rome where it was being stored. Also while Conrad was on sabbatical in Italy, Gedeon asked him to photocopy the manuscript of Capistran's letters copied in the 1600s by Antonio Sessa of Palermo that resides in the library of the Basilica di Santa Maria in Aracoeli in Rome. That being done the copies were sent to the Franciscan Institute and joined with the Bonmann materials to form the archive. It is a heritage that deserves to be retrieved by scholars, in order to accomplish the work according to modern criteria, where accomplish means to create a final edition.

Bonmann was very familiar with the earlier research on these letters and his work reinforces the fact that the edition was an obstacle course. This is the case not only because scholars' sensibilities regarding these kinds of documents changed throughout the centuries, previously viewed as a relic of a saint or an attestation of his sainthood, and – more recently – as a precious source about European history in the first half of the fifteenth century. Despite scholarly interest in the correspondence, it remains unpublished.

In fact, the first to have the intention to publish all of the correspondence was Lucas Wadding, who received some materials about these letters at St. Isidore College in Rome, but he could not complete his project although he mentions it in his *Annales Minorum*.<sup>3</sup> After Wadding many scholars tried to work on the same project but using criteria that – in several cases – are no longer helpful because their methods are out-of-date.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Annales Minorum*, ad annum 1449, nr. 11, vol. XII: 30.

For example, as we will soon see, collections such as those provided by Antonio Sessa in the seventeenth or by Atanasio Masci in the eighteenth century, are inspired by hagiographical criteria or, at least, not philological criteria. All of these collections were acquired by the Capistran Commission and then (when the Commission finished its duty) by Ottokar Bonmann who wrote an article<sup>4</sup> on the subject in which he explains both the characteristics (or perhaps better, the limits) of these collections, and the work having to do with Capistran's correspondence in order to produce an edition that is reliable and quite correct, even if not critical.

### 1. FIRST STEP: OUTLINE THE SITUATION ABOUT JOHN CAPISTRAN'S CORRESPONDENCE

In order to approach the matter of John Capistran's correspondence, it is important first to outline the nature of these works and the context in which they were conceived. Of course, as two very important works published by Aniceto Chiappini<sup>5</sup> show us, to begin the research one must start with the archive of St. Francis convent in Capestrano, which preserved the most ancient manuscripts as well as some original manuscripts of the letters; it was the last will of John Capistran himself that his books and archive would return to his former convent in Abruzzo.

At present, but also in the middle of the last century – some of those ancient papers were damaged by humidity and so they were (and are) almost illegible. Other letters preserved as copies, unlike the originals, are lost. And so a single copy (which might or might not be ancient and correct) is the only way we have access to the text. On the other hand, for other letters which are believed to be more relevant, there are many copies and editions even if not critical: for this reason a critical edition is needed.

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<sup>4</sup> Ottokar Bonmann, "L'epistolario di S. Giovanni da Capestrano nel corso dei secoli," *Studi Francescani* 53 (1956): 275-98.

<sup>5</sup> See *infra*, p. 190, note 7.

To clarify briefly, the history of research about Capistran's correspondence over the centuries can be divided into two main parts.

### 1) The redaction of catalogues

This kind of research only started in the nineteenth century and was provided by Atanasio Masci, Aniceto Chiappini, Odon Bölcskey and finally, John Hofer.

**Atanasio Masci** (O.F.M., 1878-1949) listed and hand-copied about one hundred seventy letters. He was only looking for the letters written by John Capistran (excluding the letters written to him), and even among these he makes a choice. Moreover, he didn't see the manuscript collections that he declares to be his sources: for these reasons Bonmann judged such a work to be negligible and its possible printed edition to be a disaster for research.<sup>6</sup>

**Aniceto Chiappini** (O.F.M.) published two basic works about Capestrano's library and John Capistran's works between 1923 and 1927,<sup>7</sup> in which he provided a careful description of manuscripts and single texts on parchment. He reports, already at the beginning of the century, that some texts are illegible and identifies 484 letters in Capestrano's library, 160 of which were written by John Capistran.

**Odon Bölcskey**, a Hungarian Cistercian monk (1897-1958), arranged (on the basis of Chiappini's results and so reproducing and sometimes correcting his mistakes) the most important printed catalogue of Capistran's works in three volumes, the third of which lists the letters, including those from the years (1451-1456) in which John Capistran managed his mission in Eastern Europe (that is, the letters that

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<sup>6</sup> Masci's manuscript is preserved in the library of St. Francis Convent in Capestrano.

<sup>7</sup> Aniceto Chiappini, *La produzione letteraria di S. Giovanni da Capestrano*, Gubbio 1927 (first published in *Miscellanea franciscana* 24-27 (1924-1927); Idem, *Reliquie letterarie capistranesi (Storia, codici, carte, documenti)*, L'Aquila 1927 (already published in *Bollettino della R. Deputazione abruzzese di storia patria* 24-27 (1924-1927).

Chiappini did not know or include in his list).<sup>8</sup> His work was published in 1923-1924, and includes five hundred sixty letters in chronological order. This is the first and most complete printed catalogue of Capistran's correspondence.

**John Hofer**, well-known as a biographer of John Capistran, left unfinished a handwritten catalogue of the letters which amount to six hundred eleven items (including – for the first time in Italy – the letters against Hussites from the European mission, and excluding the standard letters, so-called *litterae confraternitatis*). Hofer, always in touch with Bonmann, was a not Franciscan (he was Redemptorist) but at his death his own order decided to donate his work about Capistran's correspondence to the central public record office of the Friars Minor in Rome.

## 2) The transcription of the letters

Some works are now the source for a new printed edition of the letters and were made in order to respond to very different issues and in a very different period (and therefore representing different cultural perspectives on the research). The people involved in this field are: Alexander de Ritiis (fifteenth century), Lucas Wadding (seventeenth century), Antonio Sessa (seventeenth century) and finally Ottokar Bonmann.

**Alexander de Ritiis** (second half of the fifteenth century), a friar from L'Aquila, copied in the manuscript of his *Chronicle of the Friars Minor*, about fifty letters, paying attention essentially to the struggle between Conventual and Observant friars in the Order, which was a real struggle in its time and of which he knew personally. He used the original manuscripts in Capestrano and also texts that are now lost for which his copy is the only extant source. His *Chronicle* was partially edited by Aniceto Chiappini, unfortunately though without attention to the letters.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Odon Bölcskey, *Capistránói Szent Janos*, Székesfehérvár, 1923-1924, vol. III: 362-448.

<sup>9</sup> Aniceto Chiappini, "De vita et scriptis fr. Alexandri de Ritiis," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 20 (1927): 314-35, 563-74; 21 (1928): 86-103, 285-303, 552-79.

**Lucas Wadding**, in his classic masterpiece *Annales Minorum*, in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth volumes, authored an edition of one hundred sixty letters from the Vatican and Capistran originals; this is the main printed source for Capistran's correspondence.

**The so-called *Liber epistolarum* collection**,<sup>10</sup> completed in 1623, in the context of collecting witnesses during the canonization process. This collection chooses one hundred letters basically regarding the relationships between John Capistran and ecclesiastical and political hierarchies, in order to prove his orthodoxy and appreciation from popes, cardinals, king, princes and so on. For this reason the letters are collected in a hierarchical order. For some letters this work is the only copy (because a third of them were unpublished and are now lost). The most important manuscript was discovered in the seventeenth century by a Hungarian scholar Ferdinand Tadra, which provided an edition of seventeen letters.<sup>11</sup> This is the well-known manuscript *Rome, National Library, 2468 (ex Gesuiti 339)*, but we have now six manuscripts of the same collection.

**Antonio Sessa** from Palermo in 1680 was commissioned by the leadership of the Order to do an *Opera omnia sancti Iohannis a Capistrano* (the so-called *Collectio Aracoelitana*, after the name of the Franciscan church of St. Mary at the Aracoeli in Rome) in view of the upcoming canonization. In fact, the canonization occurred ten years later (1690) without the completed work which occupied Sessa for twenty-five years. Therefore, in his manuscript, we also find about two hundred letters, ordered by their theological content.

Finally **Ottokar Bonmann** studied and catalogued all of the letters known, sent and received by John Capistran for many years, while keeping in touch with Hofer. This includes the letters discovered in northeastern Europe (especially

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<sup>10</sup> The full title of the collection is: *Epistolae Sumorum Pontificorum, Cardinalium, Episcoporum, Presbyterorum, Regum, Principum aliorumque personarum missae ad beatum Joannem de Capestrano Ordinis Minorum*.

<sup>11</sup> F. Tadra, "K pobytu Jana Kapistrana v zemích českých, in *Věstník, Sitzungsberichte der kgl. Böhmschen, Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften: Klasse für Philosophie u. Geschichte*, Jahrgang 1889, Prague, 1890.

those linked to the Hussite issue), by scholars from Hungary and the Czech Republic who produced new lists of letters and several editions. Thus, the most advanced point of the research concerning the correspondence available to produce an edition is now contained in four boxes of the "Bonmann Archive," arranged after his death, contained in the Friedsam Memorial Library at St. Bonaventure University.

Boxes 18, 12a and 12b contain information about each letter (an envelop for each): box 18 contains the letters of the so called Italian period (from 1418 to May 30, 1451); box 12a the letters from May 19, 1451 to May 17, 1455; and box 12b the letters from May 18, 1455 to October 23, 1456. Finally, box 5 contains envelopes with: 1) some preparatory materials for a whole edition of the correspondence, that is indexes, synopses with other catalogues and so on; 2) many envelopes about letters of which the text is "still to be procured"; 3) letters which state "further studies needed" 4) the series of the "letters of confraternity," that is a kind of institutional source that Chiappini does not count among the correspondence.

## **2. BONMANN'S HERITAGE AT ST. BONAVENTURE UNIVERSITY (NEW YORK)**

After Bonmann's death that archive – and also this very important heritage – was studied by Gedeon Gál and Jason Miskuly who provided a useful instrument namely, the *Provisional Calendar* published in *Franciscan Studies*.<sup>12</sup> They extracted from Bonmann's research about each letter only the date (time and place), the sender and the recipient, the register, and information about the manuscript or – when possible – the bibliographical reference for the edition. In the envelopes of Bonmann there are, moreover some notes that – understandably – Gál and Miskuly omit, since their intention was both to emphasize Bonmann's studies and to

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<sup>12</sup> Gedeon Gál and Jason Miskuly, "A Provisional Calendar of St. John Capistran's Correspondence," *Franciscan Studies* 49 (1989): 255-345; 50 (1990): 321-403; 52 (1992): 283-327.

do this by producing an agile, suggestive, and up-to-date *repertorium* (which includes the letters that have not survived, the contents of which are conjectured on the basis of the letters that mention them).

In recent years Jacques Dalarun reopened the question of Bonmann's archive, and he, together with Ludovic Viallet, studied the situation of Bonmann's archive in St. Bonaventure's Friedsam Memorial Library. Ludovic Viallet provided a first inventory, which is both cursory and useful, of the contents of the twenty-four boxes in which the materials are now preserved.<sup>13</sup> As both Jacques Dalarun and Ludovic Viallet have shown, Capistrano's correspondence and Bonmann's papers deserve further study, and scholars need to study the correspondence as a whole. To reach this goal we can neither ignore the past results nor trust them too fully.

### 3. HOW TO WORK ON CAPISTRANO'S CORRESPONDENCE: SOME PROBLEMS

First of all, if one reads just the short register of each letter provided by Gál and Miskuly, paying attention to the topics and to the names of senders and recipients, one would immediately realize that we are – with regard to the first half of the fifteenth century – at the storm center. But registers even if scrupulous, are not documents, and one needs to read each letter in its entirety. Moreover, since each letter is a part of a larger *corpus*, in order to know the relationships in which John Capistran was involved it is thus necessary that one read each and every letter in the correct chronological order, published in a homogeneous form.

Just to reach this result one must address some real questions and problems.

*To define: What is a letter?* Not by chance this is the title of an unfinished article by Bonmann. Can we call a "letter"

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<sup>13</sup> Ludovic Viallet, "Note sur les Archives d'Ottokar Bonmann (The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University)," *Franciscan Studies* 65 (2007): 419-27.



a text, the transcription of which takes more than 250 typed pages? Must we treat as a "letter" a text that looks like a *tractatus* in the form of a letter? And again, must we treat as "letters" documents written by a standard formula for institutional reasons (e.g., the case of the so called *litterae confraternitatis* that Bonmann also left unclassified in box # 5, as a matter to think about).

*About the edition:* for the letter preserved just in one copy we have to conjecture in order to solve past mistakes; and for the (few) letters for which we still have quite a good (that is legible) original, we have to use the original (even if we have one or more copies). But how can we deal with the previously published letters, e.g. in *Bullarium Franciscanum* or in *Annales Minorum*, or in single contribution by scholars in an uncritical edition? Maybe it would be better to check the edition and evaluate on a case-by-case basis, the kind of work done by the editor; Bonmann already did this kind of work for each letter (about ninety out of six hundred) but even for these few letters his work remains unfinished as he only produced a comparison between various sources, but neither an *apparatus* nor an edition. Not a single letter was properly "edited" by Bonmann and prepared for publication! Moreover at that time, Bonmann worked for himself and not for future scholars, he used signs that he does not explain, and therefore, by using his work to save time we run the risk of making mistakes.

To sum up, the research that Bonmann did on each letter (as for dates, recipients, sources and bibliography) is a very good starting point for the hoped-for edition, and the *provisional calendar* by Gál and Miskuly help us to fix the correct number and the correct chronological sequence of the letters; their work can also be a very useful starting point.

#### **4. HOW TO WORK ON CAPISTRAN'S CORRESPONDENCE: A NEW "CAPISTRAN PROJECT"**

First of all, studying Bonmann's papers it is necessary to decide which letters to study, that is, excluding all of the let-

ters for which we have at present neither original nor manuscript copies and the existence and contents of which are conjectured on the basis of other letters that are still preserved in some form. Perhaps it would be better also to exclude (at least initially) the letters which are undated, and to treat in a special way the so-called *letters* that are not actually letters. For example, when John Capistran addresses, as vicar of the *cismontani* Observants, the declaration of Francis's *Rule* arranged according to the twelve chapters of the Rule itself, he wrote a text that cannot be considered a letter but a "work" in itself, although it has the form of a letter to the friars. And actually before beginning the text of the *Constitutiones* he writes a "real" letter to the friars. In cases like this I propose to distinguish the two kind of texts that are in the same letter and to publish just the letter to the friars as a *proemium* to the work which is, as it were, an attachment.

In a second step, we have to solve the methodological questions posed above others that might be discovered in the course of research, and to establish the respective criteria.

Third, it is necessary to provide a current description of all the manuscripts (especially as to content) that provide texts of the letters, namely: the codex in Capestrano; the fifteenth century manuscripts by Alexander de Ritiis (now in the public record office in L'Aquila, ms. S 73, and also *S 108* which contains some texts about the canonization process of Bernardino da Siena selected and copied by the same De Ritiis); the "Aracoelitana collection" by Antonio Sessa; the codex produced for the canonization process (now in Rome, National Library, Gesuiti 339), and finally the very last manuscript copy of the letters provided by Atanasio Masci.

A task yet to be done is to list the letters copied into these manuscripts, the letters listed in the catalogs, and thus to produce a table of agreement between our own edition and the catalogs, the manuscripts, and the Gál-Miskuly calendar. Only at that point will it be possible to move towards any kind of edition of each letter and also look for bibliographical references in order to produce historical footnotes.

A word about our final goal: it is not to do the *optimum*, but a good edition (as they say, "the better is the enemy of good"). Even if we could provide scholars with only a print-

ed edition of each letter that is known and preserved, this would be helpful to research on the fifteenth century. Our final result cannot be a critical edition in the proper sense of the word as it would take too many years, and a goal like this runs the risk of threatening our ability to reach a result. There are too many problems regarding the letters. This was the experience of every scholar who approached the task (although with the best intentions and very good staying power and ability), and we cannot be so overconfident as to ignore it. We realized, with a first glance to the *mare magnum* of Bonmann's archive, that we had to downsize former expectations. What is important is something like this: if someone needs to read Capistran's correspondence printed and collected in a volume, he or she could do it using indexes and (for each letter) a register in English, the list of the manuscripts, the main bibliography, and some historical footnotes about places, persons, circumstances and related documents. I myself would have liked to have had such an instrument for my own research. However, this instrument is presently lacking, and so I have decided to try to create it, of course with the hope that I will find colleagues and scholars ready to share in a task that, in Bonmann's own words, is too much for a single life.

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