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MONTSERRAT FERRER

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Departament de Filologia Catalana | Institut d'Estudis Medievals

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Angelo Monforte's Letter to Peter of Aragon and the Early Dissemination of Decembrio's Translation of Curtius Rufus

MONTSERRAT FERRER

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

ABSTRACT: This note establishes that in 1438 Angelo Monforte, count of Campobasso, sent to Prince Peter of Aragon a copy of Pier Candido Decembrio's Italian version of Curtius Rufus, thus documenting the transmission of Decembrio's work from Milan to Naples. This copy could have been the source of Alfonso de Liñán's translation into Spanish of Decembrio's text.

KEYWORDS: Angelo Monforte; Pier Candido Decembrio; Peter of Aragon (1405-38); Curtius Rufus's *History of Alexander*.

Manuscript 6564 at the Biblioteca Nacional de España (BNE) includes one of the extant copies of Pier Candido Decembrio's Italian translation of Curtius Rufus's *History of Alexander* completed in 1438 (Pade 1998). At the end of the [manuscript](#), following the colophon (fol. 273v–74r), a Latin letter signed by “Angelus comes Campobascensis” and addressed to a prince (“illusterrissimo principi et excellentissimo domino Infanti Petro”) was transcribed by the same scribe who copied Decembrio's translation. In the missive, wishing to please his addressee, the count of Campobasso accounts for his gift of the long-sought copy of Curtius Rufus's *History of Alexander*, which he has finally found in Milan, elegantly translated into Italian.

The text of the letter is as follows:

Illustrissimo principi¹ et excellentissimo domino Infanti Petro A[ragonum], S[icilie] et cetera.

Ut votis paream dignitatis tue, princeps illustrissime, qua nichil michi aut iocundius aut graciosus in hac vita esse potest, ecce quod tota mente concupiveras, fidelissime offero tue claritatis libros scilicet historie elegantissime Quinti Curcii *De gestis Alexandri Magni*, quos fortuna quadam aspiranti frustra diu perquisitos in Mediolanensi urbe tandem repperi, nuperrime traductos² in maternam linguam ad inclitum eius urbis ducem. Habes igitur, princeps illustrissime, non solum opus exoptatum, verum etiam ornate, eleganter traductum dignumque conspectu claritatis tue, quod perpetuum fidei et amoris inse mei servet monumentum et me animo tuo plerumque refferat ut opto. Vale, princeps prestantissime, quem nobiscum diutissime felicissimeque conservet qui mundo imperat.

Dignitatis tue fidelissimus Angelus comes Campobascensis

Another copy of this letter is preserved at the end of [Madrid, BNE, MS 7565](#) (fol. 170v), which includes the Castilian translation of Curtius Rufus's text attributed to Alfonso de Liñán and rendered from Decembrio's Italian version.³ In addition to the letter, MS 7565 includes several marginal annotations that can also be found in MS 6564.

The author of the letter must be Angelo Monforte Gambatesa, fourth count of Campobasso (in the Kingdom of Naples) and father of Cola di Monforte. Both Angelo and his brother Carlo were *condottieri*, mercenary captains, commanding troops at the service of Alfonso the Magnanimous during the conquest of Naples. Angelo Monforte arranged the marriage of his son Cola with Altobella di Sangro, niece of the duke of Milan, Francesco Sforza, before his death in 1450 (Storti 2011).⁴

¹ MS: principo.

² MS: traducto.

³ Monforte's letter was transcribed in Fernández González 2017, 423. The editor, however, was not able to identify the letter's author nor its addressee.

⁴ Francesco Sforza married Bianca Maria Visconti, illegitimate daughter of

Prince Peter, to whom both the letter and the book are addressed, must be Peter of Aragon (1405–38), Alfonso the Magnanimous's younger brother. Peter of Aragon was duke of Noto and viceroy of Sicily, and fought during the conquest of Naples, first in the 1420s, and once again between 1435 and 1438. In 1435 the city of Gaeta fell to his troops, a military action that paved the way for the conquest of Naples. He died on October 17, 1438 during the siege of Naples (Soldevila 1963, 664, 670–71, 682). The circumstances surrounding Prince Peter's death at Naples are recounted in a letter of October 20, 1438, written from Naples by the Barcelona ambassadors and addressed to the town councillors (Madurell Marimón 1963, 203). Therefore, Angelo's letter must have been written prior to this date.

Prince Peter and Angelo Monforte were both in Naples leading military action under the command of Alfonso the Magnanimous. They must have met at several court ceremonies and doubtless got on familiar terms.⁵ The count of Campobasso bequeathed a book in Italian to Prince Peter, a fact that informs us that Peter was well acquainted with the language after his long sojourn in Italy in his brother's company. Manuscript 6564 may not be the original copy presented to Peter, for this manuscript copy was produced at a later stage and remains incomplete (all capitals, for which space was reserved, are missing).⁶ Count Campobasso would not have presented an unfinished copy, nor would he have bequeathed a book in Italian, had Prince Peter not commanded the language.

Pier Candido Decembrio completed his Italian translation of Curtius Rufus's *History of Alexander* in April 1438. Prince Peter died six months later. In the intervening time Angelo Monforte obtained a copy of Decembrio's version, which he bequeathed to Peter. Circulation of Decembrio's version was, therefore, rather speedy. Shortly afterwards Count

Filippo Maria Visconti, duke of Milan, who died in 1447.

⁵ See, for example, the poem describing how Angelo Monforte dedicated an *oratio* to King Alfonso at a banquet in Iacono 2016. Further references to Angelo Monforte in the entourage of King Alfonso can be found in Ryder 1990.

⁶ A capital was going to open the *Comparazione* (fol. 1r), each of the ten books of the *Life of Alexander*, and every fragment that was interpolated to fill lacunae in the original text. The Italian manuscript contains many corrections.

Campobasso acquired it in Milan (hometown of the dedicatee of part of the original work, Filippo Maria Visconti) and dispatched it to Prince Peter.⁷ At a time when Decembrio's translation was still a literary novelty, a copy of the text relocated to Naples, where Prince Peter lived. No Italian copies of Curtius Rufus's *Life of Alexander* are recorded in the Neapolitan library of King Alfonso (De Marinis 1947–52), but we now know that Prince Peter (who was with the king in the city) received one.

Peter died shortly afterwards, in October 1438. We do not know what came of his possessions, but given that Angelo Monforte's letter is found in a manuscript copy of the Castilian translation by Aragon-born Alfonso de Liñán's (MS 7565), it is not unreasonable to think that the copy presented to Peter (or a copy of this copy) was the source text of the Castilian version preserved in MS 7565. It is also likely that the letter had been copied as a proof of its source.⁸ Even if an exact date is missing from the Castilian text, it must have been written before 1468, when Alfonso de Liñán died.

The manuscript copy of Curtius Rufus bequeathed to Prince Peter by Angelo Monforte is a good example of how classical and humanistic works circulating in Italy made their way to, and enjoyed a rapid dissemination in, the Crown of Aragon during the reign of Alfonso the Magnanimous. Personal contacts with noblemen such as Angelo Monforte within the court contributed to such a speedy circulation. In the case of Curtius Rufus we can now trace the itinerary followed by the book.

Decades later Angelo Monforte's letter to Prince Peter was incorporated into a lengthy sixteenth-century compilation of Latin letters to and from Pier Candido Decembrio, arranged in nine books ([Valladolid](#),

⁷ Written to fill in the missing chapters from his own version of Curtius Rufus's *History of Alexander*, Pier Candido Decembrio penned a *Comparazione di Cesare imperatore et Alexandre re di Macelonia*, which was also dedicated to Filippo Maria, duke of Milan. For a summary of the circulation of the text in Catalan and Castilian and of Decembrio's Italian translation of Curtius Rufus, see Ferrer, forthcoming.

⁸ Nonetheless, the making of the Castilian version copied in MS 7565 is more complex than that: the manuscript includes several opening chapters extracted from Plutarch that do not feature in the Italian manuscript 6564; see Ferrer, forthcoming.

[Biblioteca Universitaria, MS 325](#), copied in Milan).⁹ Book seven includes Monforte's letter with the heading "P. Candidus sub nomine Angeli comitis Campobascensis illustri principi et infanti Petro Aragonum" (fol. 54r), as if the missive had been written by Decembrio on behalf of the count Campobasso. The text of the letter is indeed the same, and helps us confirm the identity of the addressee as discussed above. The reason why the letter is attributed to Decembrio may lie in the document's provenance, which is included in the manuscript featuring Decembrio's translation of the *History of Alexander*. Whether Decembrio himself had a hand in the distribution of his version or not remains an issue clouded by uncertainty.

⁹ On the location where the copy was made, see Martinelli 2009, 114.

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