

Letters in Late Medieval Franciscan Observant Chronicles: Communication, Narrative, and Reform¹

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to discuss the many functions of the letters in several late medieval Franciscan Observant chronicles. Through a comparative analysis of several chronicles originating from early sixteenth century Observant circles, I illustrate the main uses of letters in historical narratives, from their heavy presence and function as vehicles of information to a quasi-absence thereof. The integration of letters in chronicles contributes to the understanding of ideas of accuracy in a late medieval narrative: while chronicles that embed a smaller number of letters may raise questions about their reliability, those that include or simply mention a substantial number of letters appear to have aimed at providing a more precise account of events. In light of this diversity of usage, a question arises: what motivated certain chroniclers to prioritize the accuracy of information conveyed through letters, and conversely, why did other chroniclers favor a narrative discourse uninterrupted by epistolary documents? In the first part of the paper, I discuss several key features of epistolography in chronicle writing. Then, I move to the main areas in which we see letters at work: network formation, communication, decision making, moral instruction, transmission of knowledge, narrative, and character building. Finally, I examine how chronicles can be used to reveal new features of medieval epistolography.

Keywords: Chronicles, Epistolography, Franciscans, Observance, Networks, Narratives.

Introduction

For centuries, written communication in epistolary form played a key role in shaping the Franciscan identity and spreading its ideas across distant provinces.² Given their ease of circulation, versatility of form, and rich content, letters found multiple uses in areas like the enforcement of administrative regulations or the transmission

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² On Franciscan letters and identity see for instance ERICKSON, Carolly. The Fourteenth-Century Franciscans and Their Critics. In *Franciscan Studies*, 1976, Vol. 36, pp. 108 – 147. <https://doi.org/10.1353/frc.1976.0016> and PELLEGRINI, Letizia - VIALLET, Ludovic. Between christianitas and Europe: Giovanni of Capestrano as an historical issue. In *Franciscan Studies*, 2017, roč 75, pp. 5 – 26. <https://doi.org/10.1353/frc.2017.0001>

of moral-theological instruction.³ It should come as no surprise, then, that letters frequently surfaced in reports on Franciscan life, particularly the medieval chronicles. Letters display an array of individuals like popes, rulers, bishops, or charismatic preachers who conveyed their decisions and instructions.

The aim of this research is to shed light on the many functions of the letters in the writings of Franciscan Observant chroniclers. Through a comparative analysis of several chronicles originating from early sixteenth-century Observant circles, I illustrate the main uses of letters in historical narratives, from their heavy presence and function as vehicles of information to a quasi-absence thereof. The integration of letters in chronicles contributes to the understanding of ideas of accuracy in a late medieval narrative. While chronicles that embed a smaller number of letters may raise questions about their reliability, those that include or simply mention a substantial number of letters appear to have aimed at providing a precise account of events. In light of this diversity of usage, two questions arise: what motivated certain chroniclers to prioritize the accuracy of information conveyed through letters, and conversely, why did other chroniclers favor a narrative discourse uninterrupted by epistolary documents?

The focus here will be on two Franciscan Observant chronicles composed at the beginning of the sixteenth century: Nicholas Glassberger's *Chronica Ordinis Minorum Observantium* and the still unedited Michael of Carinthia's *Chronica fratrum minorum de observancia provincie Bohemie*. The two chronicles belonged to a corpus of late medieval Observant chronicles that, among other texts, also included narratives penned by authors like Bernardino Aquilano (1420 -1503), Mariano da Firenze (c. 1477-1523), Ablauff (d. 1528), or John of Komorowo (c. 1470 -1536). All these authors were partisans in the sometimes fierce disputes that pitted the Observants against other factions, be they Conventual Franciscans or members of other groups like the Hussites.⁴ Nicholas Glassberger (d. 1508), who entered the Franciscan Order in 1472 and completed his historical narrative during his stay in the Observant residence in Nuremberg, presents a highly positive vision of the Observant progress in the region together with an account of the Franciscan origins.⁵ Glassberger wrote his *Chronica* upon the commission of Bartholomeus Wyer, the guardian of the Nuremberg Franciscan convent.⁶ Like other Franciscan chronicles, it was later supplemented with accounts that reached the year 1580 and provided one of the main sources of information for Luke Wadding's *Annales Minorum*

³ On the factuality and moralization of letters see CAMMAROSANO, Paolo. Lettere fittizie e lettere autentiche nel medioevo italiano (secoli XII-XIV). In BARTOLI, Elisabetta - HØGEL, Christian (eds.). *Medieval Letters between Fiction and Document*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2015, pp. 63 - 72. <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.USML-EB.5.105113>; On moralization see also ANGELINI, Roberto. Powerful Women in the Epistles of Hildebert of Lavardin. In BARTOLI - HØGEL, *Medieval Letters*, pp. 167 - 179. <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.USML-EB.5.105120>

⁴ HUIBERS, Anne. 'Observance' as Paradigm in Mendicant and Monastic Order Chronicles. In MIXSON, James - ROEST, Bert (eds.). *A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond*. Leiden : Brill, 2015, pp. 111 - 146. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004297524_006

⁵ NYHUS, Paul. The Franciscans in South Germany 1400 - 1530 Reform and Revolution. *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 1975, p. 65. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1006321>

⁶ HUIBERS, 'Observance' as Paradigm, p. 122.

(1625-1654). The other chronicler of interest here, Michael of Carinthia (d. 1534), finished his chronicle about Czech Franciscan Observance in Olomouc in the year 1523.⁷ He added a further level of information accuracy by bringing into his composition a substantial amount of legal material highlighting the legitimacy of Observant actions in Bohemia and Moravia. Together with other documents, the letters embedded in the two chronicles mirrored the developments in the religious and administrative affairs of the Observant communities in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a period generally regarded as critical to the Church's centralizing tendencies.⁸ Indeed, in the first half of the fifteenth century, the intense efforts at reform had long-lasting effects on both the society and the monastic orders, especially in Italy. In the second half of the fifteenth century, the reform ideas articulated and cultivated in the Italian milieu began to enter Hungary and Croatia and shortly they were introduced in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. However, despite its growing influence, the Observance *sub vicariis* promoted by figures like Bernardino of Siena and John Capistrano was not the only movement that claimed reforming ideas. Often, the Observants were confronted by moderate reformists who adhered to the administration *sub ministris*. Faced with a constant need for justification and self-definition, the Observance turned to the extensive cultivation of documents and official texts, including letters.⁹

A few words are in order about the Observant chronicles and about letters in general. By and large, the focus of these historical accounts was on the beginnings of the Franciscan Observance and its consolidation beyond the Alps after its beginnings in Italy.¹⁰ While the Order chronicles covered several centuries of history, they were constrained in their treatment of their material because they had to aim for the moral edification of a monastic Observant audience. Glassberger's and Michael's chronicles were thus conceived as both descriptive as well as prescriptive models of virtue practice in various contexts of monastic life. This double intention to simultaneously display information and teach surfaced in the careful assembling of selected anecdotal evidence, archival documents, reports on events, and genealogies.¹¹ Yet, despite sharing similarities in terms of structure and subject matter, the Franciscan Observant chronicles also held distinctive traits. Some, like the historical narrative of the Observance by Bernardino Aquilano, glorified the influential personalities and illustrative episodes that served as the impetus for the establish-

⁷ In this paper I use the transcription from the edition of this chronicle under preparation by Antonín Kalous.

⁸ ROEST, Bert. The Observance and the Confrontation with Early Protestantism. In MIXSON - ROEST, *A Companion to Observant*, pp. 285 - 308. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004297524_012; ZARRI, Gabriella. Ecclesiastical Institutions and Religious Life in the Observant Century. In MIXSON - ROEST, *A Companion to Observant*, p. 26. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004297524_003

⁹ VIALLET, Ludovic. The Name of God, the Name of Saints, the Name of the Order: Reflections on the 'Franciscan' Identity during the Observant Period. In ROEST, Bert - UPHOFF, Johanneke (eds.). *Religious Orders and Religious Identity Formation, ca. 1420 - 1620*. Leiden : Brill, pp. 173 - 174.

¹⁰ HUIJBERS, 'Observance' as Paradigm, p. 119; ZARRI, Ecclesiastical Institutions, p. 58.

¹¹ MORE, Alison. Dynamics of Regulation, Innovation, and Invention. In MIXSON - ROEST, *A Companion to Observant Reform*, p. 91. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004297524_005

ment of the Order.¹² This hagiographical tendency was later revived in other texts as well, like Michael of Carinthia's chronicle, where John Capistrano served as a blueprint for modeling other *vicarii* of the Observance.¹³ Not only were hagiographical perspectives common in chronicles, but they also reflected aspects of monastic education, learning, or institutional administration. The chronicles then reflect the situation in the fifteenth century, when the Franciscans became known for their involvement not only in church administration but also in local communities and their education.¹⁴ On the other hand, one has to keep in mind that, by no means, Glassberger's and Michael's chronicles were the depositories of most letters. Other accounts of Observant realities, like Petr of Mladoňovice's reports on the trials of Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague, included numerous letters. Still, the texts under discussion here remain unique examples of letter usage in the Observant chronicle writing.

The Observant chronicles present further significant differences in terms of length, narrative techniques, and content. Glassberger recounts in detail the early days of the Franciscan Order and the circumstances that led to the rise of the Observance. In extended sections, like Saint Francis' life, he achieves a high degree of narrative consistency, where documents such as letters reinforce the flow of the composition.¹⁵ Michael of Carinthia follows a different course: he downplays the continuous storyline from the origins to the present time of the congregation and instead is more concerned with laying out the legal framework (including those in epistolary form) upon which the Observance was founded and outlining the succession of vicarii who shaped the history of the order. In his turn, unlike Glassberger and Michael, Bernardino Aquilano appears most interested in integrating episodes and events into a broader framework of Franciscan history. As Clare Lappin noted, his chronicle rather had the character of a memoir, which overlooked the importance of original documents like letters or norms.¹⁶

Thus, even on a cursory examination, it appears that the use of epistolary communication in writing the history of the Observance varied. The presence of letters is pervasive in Glassberger's and Michael of Carinthia's chronicles, whereas it is marginal in Bernardino Aquilano.¹⁷ Especially Glassberger and Michael of Carinthia reflect the epistolary output related to the activities of the tenacious efforts of *vicarii* who were prominent in the dissemination of the Observance in Bohemia like Bernardino of Siena, John Capistrano, or Gabriel of Verona. Their own

¹² On the chronicle see LAPPIN, Clare. *The mirror of the observance: image, ideal and identity in Franciscan observant literature, c.1368 - 1517*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2000, pp. 64 - 65.

¹³ On the hagiographical tendencies of Observant chronicles see also SEDDA, Filippo. *Compendium chronicarum: una storia perduta?* In *Studi francescani*, 2017, Vol. 114, pp. 295 - 312; LAPPIN, *The Mirror of the Observance*, pp. 67 - 68.

¹⁴ NYHUS, *The Franciscans in South Germany*, pp. 1 - 47

¹⁵ NICHOLAS GLASSBERGER. *Chronica fratris Nicolai Glassberger ordinis minorum observantium*. Rome : Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi), 1887.

¹⁶ LAPPIN, *The mirror of the Observance*, pp. 64 - 68 which also points to Mariano da Firenze's hagiographic approach to chronicle writing.

¹⁷ On the uses of letters in historical narratives in general see BAINTON, Henry. *Epistolary Documents in High-Medieval History-Writing*. In *Interfaces: A Journal of Medieval European Literature*, 2017, Vol. 4, p. 7.

epistolary production during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was substantial, matching in size that of chronicles and hagiographies.¹⁸ Through their letters, we see prominent Observant Franciscans actively engaged with the communities they visited, both in Italy and beyond the Alps, as well as with the higher echelons of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

By combining different generic strands like genealogy and biography, these Observant chronicles recounted long missions, miracles, lives of clerics, or events, occurring from the years of St. Francis' activity until the sixteenth century. The early decades of the sixteenth century, the time when Michael of Carinthia and Nicholas Glassberger wrote their chronicles, coincided with a period when the tensions between Observants and other groups, although reduced in intensity in some parts of Europe, largely continued undisturbed, as suggested by the conflicts with the Conventuals in Hungary. The chronicles of Glassberger and Michael of Carinthia sought to construct a comprehensive narrative of the Order, in terms of both chronology and the Church's policies, doctrines, and customs. They told the story of a dynamic and multifaceted monastic life in Bohemia modeled by Observant factions with different outlooks.¹⁹ They also reflected a new system that arose in the second half of the fifteenth century in which a regional inspector or *visitor regiminis* promoted a stricter way of life than was prevalent in the previous period.²⁰ Since the system was intended to give autonomy to towns while keeping them under the control of a provincial minister, it required extensive correspondence in the form of letters.

A widespread genre, chronicles have been the subject of examination for both their narrative structures and sources.²¹ Scholars have commonly delved into the biographies and chronologies of events inserted in chronicles, as well as their interconnections, which frequently draw from similar documentary sources or pre-existing narratives. Among the sources of information found in many chronicles, letters provide insights into the types of information used by the author and offer a window into the design of the narrative. The extensive presence of letters in numerous chronicles opens up the opportunity to investigate the relationships between these two categories, including how they influenced one another. These relationships reveal the significance of letters in medieval chronicle writing and of chronicles as a source for information about medieval letter-writing. Such embedded letters have only recently begun to attract attention in the scholarship on medieval historiography, primarily for their historical details. Notably, Henry Bainton's study discussed letters as narrative intertexts of twelfth-century English chronicles, whereas Chris-

¹⁸ On the extent of Franciscan letter writing see GÁL, Gedeon – MISKULY, Jason – BONMANN, Ottokar. A Provisional Calendar of St. John Capistran's Correspondence. In *Franciscan Studies*, 1989, Vol. 49, pp. 255 – 345. <https://doi.org/10.1353/frc.1989.0010>

¹⁹ HLAVÁČEK, Petr. Bohemian Franciscans Between Orthodoxy and Nonconformity at the Turn of the Middle Ages. In *The Bohemian Reformation and Religious Practice*, 2002, Vol. 5, pp. 167 – 189.

²⁰ VIALLET, Ludovic. *Colette of Corbie and the Franciscan Reforms: The observantia in the First Half of the Fifteenth Century*. In MUELLER, Joan – WARREN, Nancy (eds.). *A Companion to Colette of Corbie*. Leiden : Brill, 2016, pp. 81 – 82. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004309845_006

²¹ LAPPIN, *The Mirror of the Observance*, pp. 64 – 79.

tian Høgel's and Elisabetta Bartoli's edited volume from 2015 treat letters as important documentary sources for chronicles across Medieval Europe.²²

A study on epistolarity embedded in chronicles must also take into consideration the definition of letters, for if it is quite clear what a medieval chronicle was, we cannot say the same about medieval letters. Whether preserved in extensive epistolary collections or incorporated in other compositions, medieval epistolography displays the image of a versatile genre. Scholars emphasized their diversity of forms and sizes; there were indeed many types of letters, brief or short, fictional or real, standardized or tailored to a specific occasion. The terms used for medieval letters, *litterae* or *epistulae*,²³ denoted multiple speech acts such as requests, consolations, advice, proclamations, debates, etc. The various interpretations of epistolary discourse in medieval contexts prompt the question of what makes a document a letter. Due to the large number of letters and the contexts in which they can be found, a definitive answer to this question remains difficult.

Historians have long identified epistolography as a key area for understanding a range of social phenomena, such as religious and popular festivals or interactions between religious groups with different identity.²⁴ While this holds true for most historical periods, it is especially so for the later Middle Ages, a time period from which we have a high number of letters.²⁵ These letters help us retrace both personal intentions as well as the social-historical backdrop of important late medieval phenomena like the reform in Franciscan contexts.

Letter-use in chronicles was a widespread practice that went beyond Franciscan circles.²⁶ In chronicles dedicated to the monastic history of other orders, letters appear equally often. As noted by Anne Huijbers, the chronicle of the Dominican author, Thomas of Siena, composed in the 1390s, incorporated letters that have not been preserved elsewhere.²⁷ Thomas included many letters with hagiographical or official character that justified the position of the Observant Dominicans. Other Dominican chronicles, like Taegius' *Chronica maior*, were compilations of information from other chroniclers and included papal bulls, letters, proclamations, and confirmations.²⁸ The examination of letters found in medieval chronicles is moti-

²² BAINTON, Epistolary documents, pp. 2 - 3; HØGEL - BARTOLI, *Medieval Letters: Between Fiction and Document*, pp. 3 - 25.

²³ On the alternate uses of *litterae* and *epistola* see BAINTON, Epistolary Documents, p. 7.

²⁴ See for instance, LOHMER, Christian. Letters in Frutolf's Chronicle: Entertainment, Information, Authenticity. In *Mittelalter. Interdisziplinäre Forschung und Rezeptionsgeschichte*, 2013, Vol. 10, pp. 1 - 3.

²⁵ On the high epistolographic production of the late Middle Ages see the special issues of POSTER, Carol (ed.). *Disputatio: An International Transdisciplinary Journal of the Later Middle Ages*. 1996, Vol. 1, pp. 12 - 29 (Special issue: *The Late Medieval Epistle*), with an exhaustive bibliography concerning the late Middle Ages, and of CAMARGO, Martin (ed.). *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*. 2001, Vol. 19, pp. 135 - 268 (Special Issue: *The Waning of Medieval Ars Dictaminis*). <https://doi.org/10.1353/rht.2001.0016>

²⁶ The recent edited volume on medieval epistolography highlighted the use of letters during the Middle Ages in local or royal chronicles. HØGEL - BARTOLI, *Medieval Letters Between Fiction and Document*, pp. 1 - 8.

²⁷ HUIJBERS, Anne. *Zealots for Souls: Dominican Narratives of Self-Understanding during Observant Reforms, c. 1388-1517*. Berlin : De Gruyter, 2018, p. 65.

²⁸ HUIJBERS, *Zealots for Souls*, pp. 35 - 59.

vated by further factors. They provide valuable information about the epistolary agents (the senders, the addressees and the broader audiences) as well as the historical circumstances (decision-making processes or the course of events stretching over long periods of time). Letters offer unique perspectives into the day-to-day lives of individuals associated with specific groups like the Observants, which can be difficult to grasp from other sources. In the following, I will look at how letters shaped chronicles in general, for letters punctuated the development of the Observant congregation by determining core practices or aspects such as network formation, communication, and written culture. Conversely, in the final part of the paper, I will briefly consider the question of how the two contemporary Observant chronicles by Nicholas Glassberger and Michael of Carinthia might give us clues about developments occurring in medieval epistolography.

Uses of letters in chronicles

As already suggested, with regard to the use of letters, the Observant chronicles of Glassberger and Michael of Carinthia present several distinctive features. First, they reveal a variety of epistolary mentions: letters could be simply mentioned in episodic accounts,²⁹ sometimes together with their *incipit* or only with brief summaries attached.³⁰ In such instances, letters were combined with other epistolary sources of information or were integrated into the narrative as informative intertexts.³¹ In addition to these fleeting references, we also find letters cited in full which were not simply additions to the narrative but were meant as self-standing units justifying or illustrating previous factual information.³² While less in Michael of Carinthia's chronicle, Glassberger's account relies on long letters that cover several pages to describe events or motivate decisions. Even more, in certain cases, the chronicler provides a full epistolary exchange between the people involved.³³ The exchange of letters reflecting the dispute between Pope Alexander V (1339–1410) and Humbert, Bishop of Basel, over the perceived problematic presence of Franciscans in the city,³⁴ provides first-hand information in unabbreviated form. In general, such letters cited in full are extensive and include, besides the chronicler's brief notes

²⁹ E.g. MICHAEL OF CARINTHIA, *Chronica*, 24: Idem papa anno Domini 1456 die 14 Aprilis ad supplicacionem fratri Angeli supradicti, concessit, quod vicarii provinciales ultra et cismontani habeant omnimodam et eandem auctoritatem et potestatem absolvendi a quibuscunque casibus reservatis sedis apostolice sive per ius commune sive per quascunque extravagantes vel per apostolicas *litteras* generales vel particulares seu locales.

³⁰ E.g. MICHAEL OF CARINTHIA, *Chronica*, 34: *Epistula incipit: Volens mihi commissorum saluti, quo ad speculationem*. Sub hac autem provisione et post promulgacionem bulle Eugenii concedentis vicarios citra et ultramontanos, nonnulli observantes et plures remanserunt sub regimine ministrorum.

³¹ E.g. GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 286: Quoniam, teste Prospero in quadam *epistola*, «terminos patrum transgredi reipublicae censetur esse dispendium», et per Sapientem dicitur: Ubi non est sepes, diripietur possessio; idcirco infrascripta statuta et memorialia reverendissimus pater Generalis de consensu totius generalis capituli provide condere decrevit et de facto statuit et ordinavit.

³² BAINTON, "Epistolary documents," p. 11.

³³ E.g. GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 80–81: a letter sent by Iohannes, *cardinalis et Ordinis protector* to Albert, *minister Alamaniae*, on the protection of the Order of St. Clare.

³⁴ On this dispute see BAILEY, Michael. Religious Poverty, Mendicancy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages. In *Church History*, 2003, Vol. 72, pp. 466 – 467. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700100319>

on their circumstances of production or delivery, epistolary markers like initial address, final salutation, or direct speech revealing interaction.³⁵

Second, in terms of their techniques, the differences in the cultivation of epistolary discourse in the narratives of Franciscan Observance indicate that the use of letters required technical skills like abbreviation and the use of literary or religious norms. Concomitantly, both Glassberger and Michael selected the events or biographies to develop in their chronicles. Michael of Carinthia treated extensively the mid-fifteenth-century *vicariates* of Bernardino of Siena, John Capistrano, or Gabriel of Verona whereas other issues received only limited attention.³⁶ In his turn, Glassberger treated in detail several centuries of Observant history with a focus on institutional affairs. Given the limitations and individual approaches of Observant chronicle writing, the authors were expected to reconcile and incorporate auxiliary documents, from foundational acts and papal bulls to treatises, in order to maintain the cohesion of their narratives.³⁷

Third, the use of letters in the chronicles reflected their approach to sources. As members of well-established Observant communities in Nuremberg or Olomouc, both Glassberger and Michael of Carinthia utilized earlier chronicles and archives. This practice of assembling diverse documentary sources, including letters, was rooted in the belief that medieval chronicles in general and the Franciscan ones in particular served as encyclopedic texts and compilations.³⁸ Subtended by a goal of attaining not only information but also wisdom, the chronicles of religious orders were viewed as supplements of sacred religious history in monastic circles.³⁹ Certain chroniclers described their works as compilations reflecting a desire to study history as a way of understanding divine plans.⁴⁰ Chronicles took advantage of this encyclopedic form to impart their moral message. In their prologues, both Nicholas Glassberger and Michael of Carinthia put forth their commitment to gather and amalgamate historical materials pertaining to the order. Glassberger's chronicle is introduced by a dedicatory preface containing a letter exchange in which Bartholomaeus Wyer asked him for a collection of materials on Franciscan history, and the latter responded in another letter.⁴¹ Glassberger answered by associating letters and

³⁵ E.g. GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 80-81: initial address: *Iohannes, miseratione divina sancti Nicolai in carcere Tulliano diaconus Cardinalis, religioso viro in Christo dilecto fratri N., Ministro Fratrum Ordinis Minorum in administratione Alamanniae Superioris, salutem in Domino.*

³⁶ The depiction of the vicariates of Bernardino of Siena and John Capistrano takes many pages and often acquires hagiographical nuances like in MICHAEL OF CARINTHIA, *Chronicle*, ff. 33-43. Others, like the sixth vicarius, Anthonius de Falco, receive only a brief treatment (MICHAEL OF CARINTHIA, *Chronicle*, 74).

³⁷ On the narrative coherence of Franciscan chronicles see for instance LAPPIN, *The Mirror of Observance*, p. 69, 74, 77, 79.

³⁸ On chronicles as compilations see ROEST, Bert. Compilation as theme and praxis in Franciscan universal Chronicles. In *Pre-Modern Encyclopaedic Texts*, Leiden : Brill, pp. 213 - 225.

³⁹ ROEST, Compilation as theme and praxis, p. 223.

⁴⁰ ROEST, Compilation as theme and praxis, p. 220

⁴¹ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 1 - 3.

a compilatory-moral outlook.⁴² In a similar way, Michael of Carinthia explains his approach as grounded in collecting various documentary materials and information.⁴³

However, the use of additional documents in the narrative was not universally accepted, since, as mentioned, Bernardino Aquilano took a different approach and rather valued a continuous narrative unbroken by the inclusion of other official records.⁴⁴ It is not far-fetched to say that, in the rich tapestry of Observant chronicles, the choice for heavy letter usage served as a gauge of the authors' pursuit of factual accuracy. We notice a profusion of references to letters exchanged between individuals and high-ranking clerics. The work of Nicholas Glassberger is replete with references to letters, as evidenced by the approximately 400 instances of "litterae" and around 30 of "epistulae" throughout his composition. This trend is mirrored in the writings of Michael of Carynthia, who also utilized letters extensively (although less than Glassberger), with approximately 200 instances of "litterae" and 15 of "epistulae." This use of letters reflects a shift from the preceding Observant chronicle of Bernardino Aquilano who employed letters far less frequently. By and large, letters functioned as vehicles of authenticity and provided an easy path for the authors to report events or turns of fate. In the following, the task is to zoom into these general functions and unpack the questions of when and why these chroniclers made such extensive use of letters and how the appeal to epistolography shaped various facets of the chronicles, from network formation and communication to mediation and authority, and from moral instruction to narrative, and character development.

Networks, communication, and mediation

To begin with some of the most important functions, the letters in the chronicles of Glassberger and Michael offer a glimpse into the Franciscans' social networks and communication practices in late medieval Central Europe.⁴⁵ They provide tangible evidence of the friars' close-knit relationships in regional contexts, facilitating the exchange of information and ideas. By connecting friars living in different regions, letters were essential in the formation of regional and urban networks throughout Central Europe.⁴⁶ This was a crucial aspect in the development of the Observance, and the large collections of letters, such as papal correspondence, be

⁴² GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 3: Verum attendens, quod debent qui proficere velint in scriptis ecclesiasticis, ad morum dumtaxat aedificationem editis, non nitorem forensis eloquentiae neque rhetoricae florem disciplinae, sed rectas quaerere regulas bene vivendi, cunctatione amota, tuae iussionis praesidio fultus, manum operi admovi, et quae meo profectui e diversis libris et locis accepta, sive meo tempore gesta, in schedulis annotaveram, intra unius opusculi angarium coarctata conscripsi.

⁴³ MICHAEL OF CARINTHIA, *Chronica*, f. 8: Ex quo colligi potest, patres nostri non inconsulte nec precipitanter inceperunt observanciam et familiam nostram, sed valde consulte ac matura deliberacione prehabita.

⁴⁴ LAPPIN, *The Mirror of Observance*, pp. 64 - 70.

⁴⁵ Many scholars have highlighted the importance of letters in unraveling the intricacies of medieval social groups. See for instance, YSEBAERT, Walter. Medieval letter-collections as a mirror of circles of friendship? The example of Stephen of Tournai, 1128 - 1203. In *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 2005, Vol. 83, pp. 285 - 300. <https://doi.org/10.3406/rbph.2005.4923>

⁴⁶ On the Franciscan networks see for instance ROEST, Bert. Franciscan School Networks, c. 1460-1650: A Provisional Sketch. In ROEST, Bert. *Franciscan Learning, Preaching and Mission c. 1220-1650*. Leiden : Brill, 2014, pp. 132 - 196. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004280731_007

they bull, breve, and letter, or John Capistrano's epistles, attest to the wide reach and impact of these networks.

The epistolary references present in the Franciscan chronicles echoed an administrative culture emerging at the intersection of individuals, epistolary literary canons, and community requirements of public devotion. They deploy epistolary formulae reflecting ecclesiastical or political authority, as well as many references to intermediaries like ambassadors, envoys, couriers, or heralds.⁴⁷ Glassberger's chronicle reflects the epistolary role in network operations in the letters received by the Salzburg community, which draw attention to the management of loyalty networks through carefully crafted correspondence that helps groups come together.⁴⁸ Similarly, the chronicles paint the picture of asymmetric social networks dominated by hierarchy, with an unequal distribution of power. The chronicle informs us of many such cases, like one from 1255, for instance, when a Franciscan, frater Iordanus, showed his obedience and loyalty by means of letters.⁴⁹

The networks of loyalty uncovered by the letters in the chronicles of both Nicholas Glassberger and Michael of Carinthia further point to the practices of communication and negotiation conducted within Franciscan circles. The high frequency of letters in the two chronicles strongly suggests that epistolary communication moved to the forefront of the Observance's modes of knowledge exchange. Ludovic Viallet has argued in favor of an intricate system of communication that was central to the Observance, with epistolary and preaching activities coordinated by influential figures like John Capistrano and Jacobus of Marchia.⁵⁰ Also, Viallet underscored the link between preaching activities like those of John Capistrano in Central Europe (1451-1456) and the performative skills of Bernardino of Siena (1380-1444),

⁴⁷ E.g. MICHAEL OF CARINTHIA, *Chronica*, 103 (on an embassy in 1471), 123 (an embassy from 1479) and GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 245 (an embassy from 1414).

⁴⁸ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 26: Eodem anno Domini 1222, videlicet frater Caesarius, Minister Theutoniae, tot iam fratres tam clericos quam laicos ad Ordinem receperat, quod fratribus de civitatibus vicinis primum capitulum provinciale in Wormatia celebravit. Et quia locus, in quo fratres recepti erant, arctus erat, nec ad celebrandum et praedicandum multitudini aptus, habito consilio domini Episcopi et Canonicorum, ad celebrandum et praedicandum in maiori ecclesia convenerunt, Canonici in unum chorum sese coarctantibus, alterum chorum fratribus reliquerunt. Fratre vero Missam celebrante et choro contra chorum certatim cantante, divinum officium cum magna solemnitate peregerunt. De hoc capitulo misit frater Caesarius duos fratres cum litteris pro fratribus, qui erant in Salisburgo, qui ad capitulum non venerant, ut, si vellent, ad ipsum venirent.

⁴⁹ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 41: Et surgens cum omni humilitate, flexis genibus, fratri Iordano litteras suae obedientiae ostendit et praesentavit. Frater vero Iordanus misit (ipsum) in domum Erfordiensem, ut ibi mandatum suum exspectaret. Et post tres hebdomadas frater Iordanus misit ei litteras, ut ibidem esset Guardianus. Quas reverenter suscipiens ait: « Et quid est quod fecit mihi pater noster? » Frater, vero Iordanus de humilitate fratris Nicolai ita confusus erat, ut ipsum vix cernere posset et infra sex hebdomadas venire Erfordiam non auderet.

⁵⁰ VIALLET, Ludovic. Des mendiants après les mendiants L'insertion des communautés franciscaines réformées dans l'espace urbain germanique au XVe siècle. In *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome - Moyen Âge*, 2012, Vol. 1, pp. 1 - 18. <https://doi.org/10.4000/mefrm.199>

thereby illuminating the connections between the written and the spoken word as well as their role in enhancing the visual and the miraculous.⁵¹

It is therefore arguable that the heavy presence of letters underscored the continuity between ideas and actions in the social practices of communication in the Observant Franciscan tradition. On the one hand, the need for maintaining effective channels of communication was driven by the dynamics of the relations between higher ecclesiastical echelons and local communities.⁵² On the other hand, increased communication responded to the fragmentation in the Observant movement and to the differences in understanding monastic life that led to the establishment and efforts of general vicars.⁵³ Both Michael's and Nicholas Glassberger's chronicles point to epistolary communication as a major factor in bridging distant communities and spreading Observant reform beyond Italy, including the Czech lands.⁵⁴ The chroniclers' letters reveal how, in the circulation of reform ideas across large territories, epistolary communication was intertwined with other means of public communication like preaching, rituals, and displays of piety.

Many examples of chronicle letter exchanges pertain to the communication of decisions. A typical instance of communicating authority emerged in the exchange between Johann Gneip, Provincial Minister of the Conventuals of Upper Germany, and John of Rokycana, the Hussite theologian (1396–1471).⁵⁵ Yet, occasionally, epistolary communication was not carried out exclusively within ecclesiastical circles but also with political authorities, as shown in a lengthy letter (1453) from Glassberger's chronicle.⁵⁶

By and large, since over time their convents became centers of power and sway in local communities, the Franciscans began to employ written correspondence to mediate and settle local disagreements. The two chronicles of Michael of Carin-

⁵¹ VIALLET, Ludovic. Prêcher « à l'italienne » hors d'Italie: Jean de Capistran en Europe centrale (1451-1456). In *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome - Moyen Âge*, 2019, Vol. 4, p. 131. <https://doi.org/10.4000/cei.5946>; Viallet argues that the language used in communication among the Franciscan Observant groups was carefully crafted to align with the goals of the movement in terms of local consolidation. For example, the group favored the term „locus“ to signal their regional growth in towns or villages. Other terms used in the epistolary communication reflected the intention to control the discourse pertaining to the reform projects in pursuit of the idea of a Common Good (Bonum commune) as well as typical Observant concerns such as poverty ideals, defense of cities, provision of aid during times of hardship, and sacrality of space.

⁵² On the dynamics of the relations between towns and ecclesiastical institutions see BERENGO, Marino. *L'Europa delle città: il volto della società urbana europea tra Medioevo ed età moderna*. Turin : Einaudi, 1999.

⁵³ ROEST, Bert. "The Observance and the Confrontation with Early Protestantism." In MIXSON - ROEST, A *Companion to Observant Reform*, p. 292.

⁵⁴ On the spread of Franciscan reforms see MEYER, Frédéric - VIALLET Ludovic (eds.). *Identités franciscaines à l'âge des Réformes*. Clermont-Ferrand : Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2005.

⁵⁵ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 340: Frater Iohannes, de Austria ad Moravian profectus, multos Hussitarum ab errore revocavit et erexit monasteria in Brunna et Olomutio, et recepit litteras Iohannis de Rokycana haeretici, cui respondit tam litteris quam tractatibus; sed quia obstinatus erat, eum corrigere non potuit.

⁵⁶ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 344 (1452): Scripserunt tunc ad negotium Fratrum de Observantia dominus Fridericus imperator et plurimi principes et Praelati ipsi Summo Pontifici litteras; e quibus dominus Aeneas Sylvius, Episcopus Senensis imperialisque secretarius, sequentes litteras ad Dominicum, Cardinalem Firmanum, Protectorem Ordinis Minorum, dedit.

thia and Nicholas Glassberger hold abundant evidence of strife, both inside and between members of religious orders and the local populace.⁵⁷ Letters described disagreements and their final settlement, thereby showing how frequently these conflicts attained a canonical form and were handled through correspondence.

Authority and decision making

As media of communication, letters served not only to relay information but embody the power dynamics and decision-making processes affecting the Franciscan Observance. The chroniclers had unfettered access to the rich store of information in monastic archives, which included records of privileges, rights, and property deliberations. Within the narratives, letters, like other normative sources (e.g., decrees or legislation), punctuated institutional means of addressing conflicts such as decisions, procedures, or committees. Letters seeking to establish the discipline within the order abounded, like in a case from 1443 confirming the position of the Observants in the church according to the decisions of Pope Eugenius IV.⁵⁸ Likewise, In Michael of Carinthia's chronicle, decisions, whether political or ecclesiastical, also arrived via letters, which shows the importance placed on record-keeping and the tangible representations of power in the Observant milieu.⁵⁹

The predilection for declarations of authority among Observant chroniclers is evident in the utilization of the decretal letters (*epistolae decretales*), which often offered formal answers to questions of canon law or church discipline posed by lower-ranking members of the clergy.⁶⁰ The chronicles suggested that papal letters

⁵⁷ Letters came to be used to communicate information about a conflict (*scandalum*) involving Observants. GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 346, (1453): Et quoniam tua dignatio veritati favere ac divertere scandala pro sua virili consuevit, praesumpsi hoc tibi scribere. Intelliges ex his litteris Caesaris animum, eis utile censeo provideri. Frater Iohannes homo Dei est, populi Germaniae quasi prophetam eum habent. Posset, cum vellet, elevato digito, magnam turbam facere.

⁵⁸ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 308-309, referring to the year 1443. Subsequently, John Capistrano receives similar letters (GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 309): Consimiles *litteras* dedit fratri Iohanni de Capistrano super Fratres ultramontanos, in observantia regulari viventis. Hanc provisionem et institutionem confirmavit dominus Eugenius Papa IV. eodem anno in kalendis Augusti litteris Apostolicis, quae incipiunt: «Fratrum Ordinis Minorum in vinea Domini Sabaoth Altissimo iugiter famulantium».

⁵⁹ MICHAEL OF CARINTHIA, *Chronica*, 79 (the letter is dated to 1461, the vicariate of Ludovic of Vicenza). Cf. a similar use in GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 304 on events in 1439: Institutus fuit sanctus Bernardinus ex dispositione domini Eugenii Papae a Ministro Generali totius Ordinis, fratre Gulielmo de Casali, Vicarius Generalis super omnes Fratres de Observantia, per totam Italiam constitutos; quam institutionem confirmavit dominus Eugenius Papa litteris Apostolicis. Requisitus autem tandem a Ministro Generali, ut resignaret *litteras* Apostolicas, quas habebat, ne posset in regimine observantiae a quoquam impediti, humiliter resignavit *litteras* et sigillum domino Papae Romae.

⁶⁰ E.g. GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 354, referring to the year 1456: quod decretum Fratres ultramontani servant cum Bulla sacri concilii, et postmodum Martinus V approbavit per suas authenticas *litteras* Apostolicas. Deinde, sacrum concilium Basileense, dum sub obedientia Eugenii consistebat, idem decretum confirmavit et sanctissimus Martinus V, et Eugenius idem decretum confirmans per speciales *litteras* suas, extendit et ampliavit ac de novo instituit decretum, sub quo vivimus et vivere intendimus, Domino concedente et vestra Sanctitate iustissima annuente, tamquam melius informata, in perpetua observantia regulari, quam Altissimo vovimus, et vota emissa usque ad mortem et sanguinis effusionem intendimus fideliter observare. Another example of uses of papal letters is in Glassberger, 368, Eodem etiam anno, decimo Kalendas Aprilis, innovavit, approbavit et confirmavit dominus Papa Calixtus *litteras* suorum praedecessorum, videlicet domini Nicolai Papae Y. et domini Eugenii IV, su-

were used as documentary supplements to ordination decrees to resolve disagreements between Observants and Conventuals.⁶¹ Such letters were typical of the papal regulatory approach and did not leave room for many modulations. For a long time, especially between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries, papal decretals functioned as principal sources of legislation. Papal letters had implications for canon law in general and could be deployed as decisions to papal judges, verdicts, or simply comments on theological debates. A letter dated to 1485 in Glassberger's chronicle exhibits how the papal authority in the provinces was predicated upon the use of epistolary discourse:

Nos enim, si licentiam huiusmodi per vos concedi contigerit, ut praefertur, domibus et Guardianis ac Fratribus, in eis pro tempore degentibus, omnibus et singulis privilegiis, immunitatibus, libertatibus, a Romanis Pontificibus, nostris praedecessoribus, praefato Ordini concessis, et quibus illae personae secundum regulae puritatem huiusmodi uti, potiri et gaudere possint ac poterint, quomodolibet in futurum potiantur, gaudeant et utantur, auctoritate nostra Apostolica tenore praesentium specialis dono gratiae indulgimus, non obstante felicis recordationis Bonifacii Papae VIII, Calixti III nec non et Pauli II ac Sixti IV, Romanorum Pontificum, praedecessorum nostrorum, et aliis Constitutionibus **et ordinationibus ac litteris Apostolicis sub quavis verborum forma**, quibus earum tenores, etiamsi de eis earumque totis tenoribus specialis, specifica et expressa mentio habenda foret praesentibus, pro expressis habentes, illis alias in suo robore permansuris, quoad praemissa specialiter et expresse derogamus, statutisque et consuetudinibus dicti Ordinis iuramento.⁶²

Additionally, the attempt to ground the information into formal authority was co-extensive with the increase in the frequency of letters in the guise of tokens of legitimacy necessary in moments of crisis. Glassberger's chronicle illustrates this relation with frequent instances of sending and receiving letters which consolidated choices on the Observant viewpoint and moral authority.⁶³ Even more often than Glassberger's chronicle, Michael of Carinthia's text relies on letters in order to point to the authority of Observant personalities. The beginnings of the Observant vicariate are telling. Michael emphasizes that the first Observant *vicarius*, Bernardino of Siena, began his administration with a letter and a papal bull that established his

per audientia confessionum a Fratribus Mendicantibus editas, et damnavit errores circa hoc per quosdam assertos, in Bulla. On the production and consumption of papal communication see ALTHOFF, Gerd. Framing Papal Communication in the Central Middle Ages. In *Journal of Medieval History*, 2018, Vol. 44, pp. 251 – 260. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2018.1467535>

⁶¹ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 418 – 419.

⁶² GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 493.

⁶³ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, pp. 418 – 419 (1466): nosque, ipsorum praedecessorum nostrorum vestigia imitati, eisdem Fratribus de Observantia nuncupatis, ne loca Conventualium, aut monasteria monialium eorum curae subiecta recipere, neque ut illa a cura ipsorum Conventualium auferantur, tentare aut privatis personis persuadere praesumerent, sub excommunicationis latae sententiae poena prohibuerimus, prout in nostris ac eorundem praedecessorum nostrorum litteris plenius continetur.

legitimacy⁶⁴ and highlights clues about the chronicler's portrayal of authority with the help of epistolary discourse: a summary of the letter's contents (informat quosdam scrupulosos de paupertate servanda presertim edificiorum et conventuum iam receptorum et de paramentis et clenodiis recipiendis) and the letter's *incipit*. In the same manner, but in a different context, Michael further introduced the contents of Eugene's letters and summarized the essential regulations for the Observance.⁶⁵

Decisions, whether political or ecclesiastical, also arrived via letters, which shows the importance placed on record-keeping and the tangible representations of power in the Observant milieu.⁶⁶ Alongside papal and ecclesiastical texts, the chronicles also included *imperial* letters encapsulating ideas of political power. The integration of imperial letters demonstrates the similar ways in which ideas of authority, either ecclesiastical or political, were communicated, as in an example involving *Frater Helias, Minister Syriae* in 1249:

Frater autem Helias videns se confusum et tantam humilitatem non ferens, iterum ad imperatorem Ecclesiae rebellem se contulit, fugiendo a facie Summi Pontificis; quem ipse imperator recipiens, omnibus suis amicis et fidelibus **imperialibus litteris** tamquam personam propriam commendavit, sicque ad consilium Ecclesiae rebellis imperatoris vocatus et ab eo promotus, ei adhaesit. Papa igitur haec audiens, Heliam anathematis vinculo et sententia excommunicationis innodavit.⁶⁷

This variety of examples points to the two chroniclers' propensity for letters in comparison with other chroniclers like Aquilano. Although the use of such seems widespread, unlike in other similar texts, here the authors showed a distinct preference for written documentation over oral traditions. This emphasis marked a shift towards documentary kinds of evidence justifying the origins and distribution of the Observance.

⁶⁴ MICHAEL OF CARINTHIA, *Chronica*, f. 33: Fuit igitur primus vicarius generalis cismontanus Assisii electus anno Domini MCCCCXL frater Bernhardinus de Senis nunc cathalogo ascriptus. Licet prius, ut dictum est, ex dispositione Eugenii quarti fuerat institutus vicarius generalis super omnes fratres observantes in Italia per Guilhelmum de Cazali generalem ordinis ministrum. Hic per tres annos officium vicariatus gloriose gubernavit. Scripsit epistolam universis fratribus de observancia sub suo regimine degentibus, in qua informat quosdam scrupulosos de paupertate servanda presertim edificiorum et conventuum iam receptorum et de paramentis et clenodiis recipiendis. Epistula incipit: Volens mihi commissorum saluti, quo ad speculationem.

⁶⁵ MICHAEL OF CARINTHIA, *Chronica*, f. 75: Pro nostra ad sanctum Franciscum (bull of Pope Eugene); and f. 76 Circa regularis observancie professores etc. (bull of Pope Eugene).

⁶⁶ MICHAEL OF CARINTHIA, *Chronica*, 79. Cf. Glassberger, *Chronica*, 304 on events in 1439: Eodem anno institutus fuit sanctus Bernardinus ex dispositione domini Eugenii Papae a Ministro Generali totius Ordinis, fratre Gulielmo de Casali, Vicarius Generalis super omnes Fratres de Observantia, per totam Italiam constitutus; quam institutionem confirmavit dominus Eugenius Papa *litteris* Apostolicis.

⁶⁷ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 67, about events in the year 1246. See also Glassberger on the negotiations with the Byzantine Emperor John, year 1254, *Chronica*, 73, Missus est frater Iohannes de Parma a domino Innocentio IV. ad Iohannem, imperatorem Graecorum, et Manuelem, Patriarcham Constantinopolitanum, ut tractaret cum eis de Graecia Romanae Ecclesiae unienda, cum *litteris* multae recommendationis.

Moral instruction

Despite the prevalence of decretal letters that emphasized declarations of authority, other epistles took a divergent path, forgoing legal terminology or decisional tones in favor of a focus on spiritual reflections and moral examples. Papal letters combined the display of authority with direct actions aimed at combating widespread practices like sorcery.⁶⁸

The differences between the Franciscans and other local communities were not merely approached in legal terms but also with an eye to their moral grounds.⁶⁹ A lengthy letter describes a schism in colorful terms and is presented as if from Satan (*Litterae Satanae ad Iohannem Dominici, 1407*): *Haec epistola hic est posita, ut sciatur, quomodo schisma ab aliquibus nutriebatur.*⁷⁰ Whether as cover letters to sermons or to papal bulls, such letters were intended to teach the monastic audience of the chronicles and provide an appropriate space for the defense of the Franciscan doctrine of poverty and charity. For instance, Michael of Carinthia portrayed Bernardino of Siena as conveying his teachings through a letter from 1440,⁷¹ while letters also reinforced moral views with older theological principles, like when citing Augustine's epistles, which Glassberger occasionally mentions.⁷²

In the same category of moral instruction, we can also include the consolatory letters,⁷³ like one from 1226, the year of Saint Francis' death⁷⁴ and another saint by Saint Clara (*epistolas consolatorias et instructivas*).⁷⁵ Moreover, Glassberger used consolatory letters in the story of Saint Elizabeth, daughter of the King of Hungary, also

⁶⁸ A papal letter from 1249 recorded an attempt of a sorceress (pythonissa) to deceive authorities, GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 16-17: Fuit eodem tempore ultra mare pythonissa quaedam, quae, quia multa vera, antequam evenirent, praedicebat, in ideomate gentis suae veridica dicebatur. Haec dixit fratribus, qui cum sancto Francisco erant: «Redite, redite, quia absentia fratris Francisci Ordo turbatur, scinditur et dissipatur». Hoc verum inventum est. Nam frater Philippus Longus, qui erat visitator Dominarum Pauperum, contra voluntatem sancti Francisci, qui humilitate magis quam indicii potestate adversa vincere volebat, litteras Sedis Apostolicae, quibus turbatores ipsarum excommunicare poterat, impetrarat.

⁶⁹ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 217: Hi errores damnati sunt tamquam falsi, scandalosi, praesumptuosi et piarum aurium offensivi. Unde istorum et aliorum errorum occasione dictorum Iohannis de Montesono et suorum sequacium fuerunt Praedicatores Parisius ab Universitate exclusi, ut notat Gerson in *epistola* ad studentem collegii Navarrae.

⁷⁰ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 251.

⁷¹ MICHAEL OF CARINTHIA, *Chronica*, f. 33: Scripsit epistolam universis fratribus de observancia sub suo regimine degentibus, in qua informat quosdam scrupulosos de paupertate servanda presertim edificiorum et conventuum iam receptorum et de paramentis et clenodiis recipiendis. Epistula incipit: Volens mihi commissorum saluti, quo ad speculacionem. Sub hac autem provisione et post promulgacionem bulle Eugenii concedentis vicarios citra et ultramontanos, nonnulli observantes et plures remanserunt sub regimine ministrorum.

⁷² GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 159: Fiat inter nos quod scribit beatus Augustinus in fine Epistolae ad Pascentium Arianum dicens: «Abstineamus nos a convitiis, ne tempus inaniter expendamus et ad illud quod agitur inter nos, potius advertamus». Haec Augustinus. Quae si curabimus servare, curabit Deus nos perseverare. Cf. Glassberger, *Chronica*, 176: Hoc etiam patet per illud quod dicit Augustinus in *Epistola* ad Glorium et Eleusium et reliquos Donatistas, ubi de concilio Papae et collegii Cardinalium scribit dicens sic [...].

⁷³ See also ROSELLO-MARTINEZ, Sacramento. Memorial de Agravios: Letters of Grievances as Documents in Fifteenth-Century Castilian Historiography. In HØGEL - BARTOLI, *Medieval Letters between Fiction and Document*, p. 459. <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.USML-EB.5.105139>

⁷⁴ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 43.

⁷⁵ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 58.

for moral purposes. In 1224, before her death and after a life dedicated to the poor, Francis sent her a consolatory letter praising her effort to deal with the poor. Such examples of moralizing letters point to the authors' intention to use epistolarity as a vehicle of not only social prestige but also of spiritual messages and insights.⁷⁶

Transmission of knowledge

The examination of the letters within chronicles affords us the opportunity not only to examine their functionality as written accounts of phenomena like networks, communication, or authority but also to trace the dissemination of various kinds of information in Observant circles.⁷⁷ It was common for letters to preface information⁷⁸ or to mention miracles pertaining to Saint Francis.⁷⁹ However, more often, letters also served as a way of displaying the spread of theological knowledge among the members of the order. Glassberger listed a lengthy letter that clarified a series of theological doubts arising among the Franciscans by citing illustrative biblical material:

Volens mihi commissorum saluti quoad speculationem veritatis et in omnibus iuxta possibilitatem providere, notum facio, quod per fratrem Nicolaum de Auximo eiusdem Ordinis, ac quondam Vicarium locorum devotorum Provinciae sancti Angeli et nunc eorundem locorum Commissarium reverendissimi patris Generalis, de mandato eiusdem ac de voluntate domini nostri Papae, ut patet per **litteras** reverendissimi patris Generalis, factae fuerunt quaedam declarationes, quae nulla disputatione et examinatione et ponderositate examinatae fuerunt per reverendissimum patrem Generalem et per venerabilem fratrem Iohannem de Capistrano et alios multos et etiam per me, quae sunt huiusmodi, videlicet: In primis, quod Fratres Minores non tenentur ex eorum professione ad alia consilia vel praecepta evangelica ultra alios Christianos praeter illa, quae in regula specialiter et expresse ponuntur praecipiendo, vel inhibendo, vel sub aequipollentibus verbis, nominatim a Clemente V in sua declaratione expressis, ut patet in primo dictae declarationis Clementis, et declaratione Nicolai III et Martini V. Et propterea Fratres non tenentur ad illud evangelicum: *Nihil tuleritis in via*.⁸⁰

Narrative and time

⁷⁶ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 33.

⁷⁷ On letters as a source of information, see YSEBAERT, Walter. Medieval Letters and Letter Collections as Historical Sources: Methodological Questions, Reflections, and Research Perspectives (Sixth-Fifteenth Centuries). In *Studi Medievali*, 2009, 16, pp. 3 - 4. <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.USML-EB.5.105112>

⁷⁸ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 318, on events in 1447: capellae ipsius hospitalis reformatione *per traditionem litterarum* et registorum desuper confectorum perpetuis temporibus auctoritate Diocesani et potestate eis specialiter concessa transtulerunt et converterunt.

⁷⁹ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 58, on events in the year 1237. Cf. ibidem: Scripsit etiam eo tempore *litteras* Episcopo Olomucensi in Moravia in provincia Bohemiae, qui oppositum praedicando rationibus nisus fuerat ostendere, quod beatus Franciscus non deberet cum cruce in manu depingi, cum non sit crucifixus.

⁸⁰ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 302, on events in the year 1440.

The presence of letters in chronicles sheds further light on the underlying narrative composition and chronology of the Observant chronicles. Like many historical narratives, the chronicles of Glassberger and Michael of Carinthia employed a variety of narrative devices to describe the dynamics of historical change: conflicts and agreements, war and concord, etc. In particular, the extensive use of letters emphasized the role of long-distance embassies in the Observant life and, by extension, their efforts to cover large territories. For instance, Glassberger often made mention of letters that he had never examined since he did not have access to the papal curia. It is plausible that these epistolary references were meant to provide veracity to the chronicle.⁸¹

Similar to other non-narrative documents, letters could either interrupt the narrative flow of the chronicles by introducing new voices other than the narrator's or generate narrative cohesion by adding necessary information that glued together disparate accounts. As narrative devices, letters allowed the author to slide back or advance in the narrative time as they recalled or announced other matters of interest for the course of the narrative. Letters were added to other foundational elements meant to clarify the workings and essence of ecclesiastical authority, like genealogies, biographies, and lists of deeds of the *vicarii*.⁸² By ordering their material and information along basic temporal structures of meaning (distant past, recent past, yearly developments), both Glassberger and Michael asserted a distinct Observant chronology. They constructed a time that highlighted a series of moments of the past, e.g., the activity of St. Francis, Bernardino of Siena, and John Capistrano. Such moments revealed the origins of the order as well as the changes in the communities they focused on, particularly those of late medieval Central Europe, where distinct groups began to voice their theological perspectives.

As key narrative devices, letters operated as a constant driving force in the chronicles, offering supplementary evidence to bolster the arguments within the stories. Letters could push forward a report of events, as in the case of John Capistrano's experience in Austria.⁸³ They often punctuated precise moments in time (e.g., the following month, this year, etc.) together with a change of course in the deployment of the events.⁸⁴ Other times the letters took center stage, as when the moment of the letter's delivery became an event in itself (Eodem tempore post festum Purificationis beatae Mariae, hieme asperius saeviente, **delatae sunt litterae** ad venerabilem patrem Nicolaum Caroli).⁸⁵ Letters were also integrated in the story line of other episodes too, as in an example from 1457, which mentioned the events surrounding

⁸¹ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 463: Sed postquam rumor ad aures regum et principum et ceterorum, praesertim ducis Mediolanensis, pervenisset, litteras et ambasias ad ipsum sanctissimum dominum Papam in favorem sacrae Observantiae miserunt, quarum consideratione a proposito revocatus (the letter is dated to 1477).

⁸² In Michael of Carinthia, a text divided according to the deeds of *vicarii*, letters are associated with most *vicarii*: e.g. the vicariates of years 1447, 1455, 1461, 1469, 1472, 1481, 1487, 1490, 1493, etc.

⁸³ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 331.

⁸⁴ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 320, on events from 1448: Sequenti mense venerunt litterae ad consulum Norimbergensem a Friderico, rege Romanorum, mandante, ut omnes adhaerent obedientiae domini Nicolai Papae V, concilio Basileensi cum suo pontifice relicto.

⁸⁵ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 323.

the conflicts with the Ottoman Turks.⁸⁶ And, even more often than in Glassberger's text, letters added information to the narrative of Michael of Carinthia, especially in conjunction to Capistrano's efforts to gather the Christian forces against the Ottomans in a crusade.⁸⁷

Character building

Finally, as core units in the two chronicles, letters served as building blocks in both chronicles by developing features pertaining to the protagonists and introducing new characters in the text. Several major characters, such as the local vicars depicted as knowledgeable experts, owe much of their narrative development to the presence of epistolary discourse:

Et quia domina religiosa et Deo devota erat, quippe quae singulis noctibus cum principe surgebat ad orandum horas canonicas ritu Ecclesiae Romanae, princeps ipse eius sancto desiderio satisfacit, missisque **nuntiis et litteris** ad Provinciam Turoniae, adduci fecit Heidelbergam quatuor Fratres de Observantia.⁸⁸

The chroniclers' portrayal of personalities like Bernardino of Siena and John Capistrano as promoters of the Observance gained nuances via the many allusions to their epistolography. Their portrayal as letter-writers in the chronicles echoed the extensive use of letters in the construction of Saint Francis' saintly character as a letter writer.⁸⁹ Their portrayal as letter-writers was also consistent with reality. Bernardino of Siena's letter from 1440, with which he began his vicariate and which was introduced in the debut of Michael's chronicle, signals the dynamics of private and public power against the background of the Observant reform and other devotional practices.⁹⁰ His letters singled out his agency as an Observant hero involved in the religious reforms and turbulences of the fifteenth century. Similarly, in his numerous letters, Capistrano promoted facets of his personality, like his political involvement on the international scene or his opposition to the Hussites. Capistrano's letter from 1444, preserved in Michael of Carinthia's chronicle, provides a snapshot of fifteenth-century European politics in which concerns of canonical

⁸⁶ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 372.

⁸⁷ MICHAEL OF CARINTHIA, *Chronicle*, 64.

⁸⁸ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 283. Cf. Glassberger, *Chronica*, 212: Anno Domini 1375 obiit Romae Gregorius Papa XI, et celebratis eius exsequiis solemniter, domini Cardinales tunc Romae existentes metu, ut aiebant, Romanorum petentium, eligi Romanum vel Italicum, elegerunt die XVIII Aprilis dominum Bartholomaeum, Archiepiscopum Barenssem, qui fuit in die sancto Paschae coronatus et vocatus Urbanus VI, et domino Carolo Romanorum imperatori Bohemorumque regi, ceterisque principibus Christianis *litteris* et *nuntiis* eorundem.

⁸⁹ GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 12. Cf. On St. Francis, GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 73, on the year 1254: Frater Iohannes de Parma, Minister Generalis, multiplicatis *litteris* praecepit fratri Thomae de Celano, ut vitam beati Francisci, quae antiqua Legenda dicitur, perficeret [...].

⁹⁰ MICHAEL OF CARINTHIA, *Chronica*, f. 33.

nature are mentioned together with historical events like the Fall of Constantinople or other events in the Italian peninsula.⁹¹

Both Glassberger's and Michael's chronicles reveal Capistrano's contribution to the development of the Observance and his cultivation of a distinct Observant way of life. Several letters in the chronicles highlight the occasional opposition to his actions, as groups and individuals regularly defined themselves in relation to Capistrano's strict ideas.⁹² His extensive outlook as an educator and leader of the Observance, emerging from his own epistolography, appears also in the letters listed in the chronicles, thereby pointing to an increased role of letters in the narrative of events in the chronicle.⁹³

Chronicles and epistolography

If the presence of letters in chronicles displays a range of compositional features and social practices, how does letter usage differ from the standard uses in medieval written culture? To a large extent, the letters included in the two chronicles confirm the recent scholarly opinions on medieval letters about the importance of epistolary distribution, reception, and production. Research in medieval epistolography has shown that letters were flexible, diverse, and multi-layered sources.⁹⁴ Medieval letters revealed circumstantial information on the authors' education, their friendships or patronage relations, and the social interactions and networks of authors. As Walter Ysaebert noted, they were integrated into wider and pre-existing systems of communication that involved tensions between literary and informational registers, between their public and private character, or between their oral and scriptural aspects.⁹⁵

By focusing on the letters in the chronicles, we can grasp several additional nuances of medieval epistolography. First, the chronicles tell us that letters played significant roles in events with consequences for regional religious affairs. Letters held proofs of long- or short-term strategies about the Observant reform in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries⁹⁶ and were also instrumental as testimonies in sanctification processes:

Eodem anno suscepit dominus Wenceslaus, rex Romanorum et Bohemiae, in protectionem monasterium Ordinis sanctae Clarae in Norimberga, prae-

⁹¹ MICHAEL OF CARINTHIA, *Chronicle*, 40.

⁹² Both authors speak constantly about dissensions inside the Order, Glassberger, *Chronica*, 82, 91, 229, etc and Michael of Carinthia, *Chronica*, f. 28, 101, 116, etc.

⁹³ In GLASSBERGER, *Chronica*, 342. Capistrano is depicted as letter-writer in many instances. We find several long letters penned by him, fully reproduced such as one from 1456: *Scriptis pro ea re ad eundem Pontificem venerabilis pater Iohannes de Capistrano litteras, ex quibus sunt sequentia: Nostrae observantiae zelator ille ferventissimus. Letters accompanied Capistrano until his last days, Glassberger, Chronicle, 371.*

⁹⁴ See YSEBAERT, *Medieval Letters and Letter Collections*, p. 32.

⁹⁵ YSEBAERT, *Medieval Letters and Letter Collections*, p. 10

⁹⁶ GLASSBERGER, *Chronicle*, 198.

cupiens suis iudicibus, ut abstinerent ab exactionibus et gravaminibus dicti monasterii; quod **litteris suis sancivit**.⁹⁷

Second, the two chronicles unveiled the marked didacticism of medieval epistolography in teaching ideas of Christian perfection or framing treatises on canonical or moral issues. As indicated above, many letters approached life in the monastic communities with their overarching moral ideals of poverty and charity. Third, as signs encoded in processes of communicating authority, letters had a pronounced functional purpose. They either dealt with the administration of the Observance in various regions and towns across Europe or documented specific instances of conveying and summarizing important information. Fourth, as noted above, medieval letters proved to be a privileged modality of communication through intense negotiation and mediation meant to generate concord that heralded reform:

Qui Guardianus et Fratres hoc facere nolebant et **litteras** tam Pauli Papae II. pro concordia editas, quam Sixti Papae IV. super inhibitione et alias eis concessas in medium producebant, asserentes, reformationem et visitationem vigore praedictae Bullae dictis Episcopo et collegis Abbatibus directae, quae praedictis litteris ab eis exhibitis sufficienter non derogabat, fieri non debere nec posse.⁹⁸

And finally, as shown above, the chronicles reveal how medieval letters functioned in association with other official declarations, which they enforced and thereby became tokens of higher authorities. Examples of letters associated with decisions,⁹⁹ privileges or indulgences that supported papal positions,¹⁰⁰ seals of power,¹⁰¹ or other papal documents like the *Brevia*¹⁰² are abundant in both chronicles.

⁹⁷ GLASSBERGER, *Chronicle*, 221. Cf. GLASSBERGER, *Chronicle*, 304: Eodem anno institutus fuit sanctus Bernardinus ex dispositione domini Eugenii Papae a Ministro Generali totius Ordinis, fratre Gulielmo de Casali, Vicarius Generalis super omnes Fratres de Observantia, per totam Italiam constitutos; quam institutionem confirmavit dominus Eugenius Papa *litteris* Apostolicis.

⁹⁸ GLASSBERGER, *Chronicle*, 472.

⁹⁹ GLASSBERGER, *Chronicle*, 171: Ad quae omnia duximus respondendum, quod dicti omnes processus, *assertiones et litterae*, et omnia et singula, quae per dictum Iohannem in praedictis et circa praedicta gesta seu attentata fuisse dicuntur, fuerunt et sunt nulli et nulla et nullius valoris et momenti, rationibus infrascriptis.

¹⁰⁰ GLASSBERGER, *Chronicle*, 422: Per haec autem *privilegiis vel litteris*, Generali vel Conventualibus, seu Vicariis et Fratribus de Observantia praedictis per Eugenium et Pium praefatos et alios Romanos Pontifices, praedecessores nostros, concessis, non intendimus alias in aliquo derogare, nisi in quantum supradictis contrairent.

¹⁰¹ GLASSBERGER, *Chronicle*, 304: Gulielmus de Casalis gave up his seal together with the letters: Eodem anno institutus fuit sanctus Bernardinus ex dispositione domini Eugenii Papae a Ministro Generali totius Ordinis, fratre Gulielmo de Casali, Vicarius Generalis super omnes Fratres de Observantia, per totam Italiam constitutos; quam institutionem confirmavit dominus Eugenius Papa *litteris* Apostolicis. Requisitus autem tandem a Ministro Generali, ut resignaret *litteras* Apostolicas, quas habebat, ne posset in regimine observantiae a quoquam impediri, humiliter resignavit litteras et sigillum domino Papae Romae.

¹⁰² GLASSBERGER, *Chronicle*, 405: Superioribus temporibus ad supplicationem tam fratris Alphonsi de Holano quam aliorum quorundam vestri Ordinis professorum persuadentium nobis, ita expedire ad factum conversionis populorum insularum Canariae, *varias Apostolicas litteras ac Brevia* diversorum tenorum concessimus, prout in illis plenius continetur.

Conclusion

The study of letters in medieval chronicles offers a window into the communication practices of the past. The letters embedded in the chronicles of Glassberger and Michael of Carinthia echo a culture of epistolarity in which networks, knowledge, moral teachings, and attempts at reaching consensus were negotiated within groups or with individuals who shared similar goals of consolidating the Observance. To be sure, the texts under investigation were not the only Observant accounts to make use of letters. However, Glassberger and Michael point to an epistolary culture prevalent among the Franciscan Observants in Central European provinces that come under their investigation, as letters appear to play a crucial role in forming and strengthening social and spiritual bonds.

The use of letters in chronicles offers insights not only into Franciscan communication practices but also into other areas like the administration of the order's affairs or narrative composition. The letters indicate that written regulations and norms became highly valued in the second half of the fifteenth century. Many local Observant congregations came to be administered through written norms conveyed in epistolary form. The widespread circulation and exchange of letters within marginal communities spanning across distant provinces testifies to their role in communication and decision-making. Thus, the narrative of the development of the Observance cannot be separated from the processes of communication that were central to its formation. As Franciscans were prolific letter-writers who cultivated communication within local or trans-regional networks, it becomes clear that letters impacted the rise and dissemination of the Observance beyond Italy.

In addition to providing a valuable source of information, letters in the Franciscan chronicles also contribute to our global understanding of chronicles and epistolography as medieval genres. Letters played a role in organizing and displaying information in chronicles. As pervasive compositional elements, letters offer an illustration of the complexity of Franciscan Observant chronicles, which combined multiple forms and goals and were far from a linear narrative. Their heavy presence suggests that the chroniclers took full advantage of the possibilities of letters, as they display both orality and literacy, formal and informal practices, literature and administration.

More often than not, the use of letters in chronicles points to the instrumentalization of epistolary discourse in the later decades of the fifteenth century. Both Glassberger and Michael of Carinthia wrote at a time when the Observance was reaffirming its intellectual and administrative position in the lives of towns and villages in Central European provinces. They offer evidence for mediation or decision-making processes involving not only the papacy but also local authorities. The analysis of the two chronicles strongly suggests that the letters mirrored the Observant chroniclers' specific outlook and design. On the one hand, the heavy use of letters in Nicholas Glassberger's and Michael of Carinthia's chronicles reveals the authors' intention to display narratives with a higher degree of information accuracy. On the other hand, they came in contrast with other earlier Observant chronicles like those of Bernardino Aquilano or Mariano da Firenze who both used epistolary mentions or citations much less rarely and placed more emphasis on the

narrative flow. All these authors deployed different narrative compositional scenarios of Observant history. The variations in the use of the epistolary intertext, which depended on their historical and cultural context, point to the role of letters as a differentiating feature among Franciscan narratives.

Along these lines, letters offer evidence of their functions in both fragmenting and ensuring the coherence of a narrative. This paper presented several scenarios of epistolary intertext in the Franciscan chronicles, from Glassberger's extensive use of letters in many contexts that provide coherence to his narrative to Michael of Carinthia's use of letters to indicate authority which creates points of fracture in the chronicle, and to Bernardino Aquilano's quasi-absence of epistolary references. All in all, these chronicles argue in favor of a typical Observant narrative genre with significant variations that depend on the historical context and the goals of the authors.

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SUMMARY

This article examines the use of letters embedded in several late medieval Franciscan Observant chronicles. The author conducts a comparative analysis of two chronicles dating from the early sixteenth century, Nicholas Glassberger's *Chronica Ordinis Minorum Observantium* and Michael of Carinthia's *Chronica fratrum minorum de observancia provincie Bohemie*, to illustrate how letters were utilized in historical narratives. The two chronicles are prime examples of how letters served various functions, as they could be heavily featured to provide information about ongoing situations or they could be quasi-absent from the narrative. By analyzing how letters were integrated into Observant chronicles, the article provides insights into understanding the changing ideas of reliability and authoritative sources within late medieval historical writing traditions.

Furthermore, the integration of letters into chronicles contributes to understanding the ideas of accuracy cultivated in late medieval narratives. Chronicles with more letters appear to aim for a more precise report of events, while those with fewer letters may raise questions about reliability. Arguably, one of the main motivations of chroniclers like Glassberger and Michael was to prioritize the accuracy of their reporting through letters. They contrasted with chroniclers like Bernardino Aquilano who favored an uninterrupted narrative style and rather focused on portrayals of individual Observant personalities.

Letters fulfilled many roles, both in the compositional structure and the factual background of the texts. They reveal complex Franciscan social networks and practices of regional communication that facilitate information exchange and idea sharing. They show hierarchical networks dominated by charismatic leaders like John of Capistrano or Bernardino of Siena. Letters also indicate the importance of epistolary communication for coordinating the dissemination of Observant reform beyond the boundaries of its place of origin, Italy. Many letters communicated decisions or negotiated disputes within the Order itself or with external groups and power brokers. They served to instruct new Observant communities morally or theologically. They often transmitted historical knowledge among Franciscans and addressed difficult theological questions.

In terms of composition, letters shaped chronicle narratives and chronologies. They could advance the story by relaying new information or pause the narrative by introducing new voices and approaches other than the author. The letters in Glassberger's and Michael's chronicles often indicated precise moments in time and changes in events so that the reader could easily navigate the reports presented in the texts. They also added nuances to the narrative characters, especially those St. Francis and prominent reformers like Bernardino of Siena and John Capistrano often portrayed through their letter-writing.

Chronicles display a high level of diversity both in epistolary types and functions. Glassberger relies heavily on letters that maintain narrative coherence. Michael uses letters more

to indicate the role of the ecclesiastic authorities in shaping new Observant communities. Such variations depended on historical context and authorial intentions, pointing to letters as prime differentiators among Franciscan narratives.

The types of letters used by the Observant chronicles also illuminate other aspects of Observant history as the article examines many letters as objects of power demonstrating ecclesiastical or political authority. Decretal letters especially reinforced declarations through formal responses to legal or moral issues, while many epistles accompanied decisions both within the Church and with regional authorities. Along these lines, epistolography indicates the efforts put into mediating conflicts through extensive negotiation. Finally, the letters of Glassberger and Michael of Carinthia reflect a significant shift towards the use of documentary evidence in the writing of Observant history, as they were often combined with other types of official papers or regulations.

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