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Concerning a Capitulary

Abstract: Agostino Carli Rubbi knew the Milanese cultural world and the first literary exploits of Cesare Beccaria’s grandson. He certainly knew Andrea Mustoxidi, who was one of the first to gain access to the old Venetian archives and was also a habitué of Manzoni’s home during the first few years of the composition of I Promessi Sposi. It was just in this period that Carli Rubbi repeatedly wrote to the Austrian authorities, asking them to return the documents which had been taken from Venice and sent to the Biblioteca Brera in Milan, where Gaetano Cattaneo, another important collaborator of Manzoni’s, worked. Among these documents there was also the so-called capitolare of the State Inquisitors, the judiciary magistracy whose archives he was working on reorganising. Between November and December of 1820 he was repeatedly authorised to be absent from work. It is therefore plausible that he could have secretly travelled to Milan to be in contact with Manzoni.

Keywords: Andrea Mustoxidi; Biblioteca Brera; Cesare Beccaria; Gaetano Cattaneo; State Inquisitors; Venice and Milan

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C. Povolo, The Novelist and the Archivist: Fiction and History in Alessandro Manzoni’s The Betrothed © Claudio Povolo 2014
Some journeys Agostino Carli Rubbi might have taken

The historical, social and political conditions during the years between 1815 and 1825, when the Venetian archives were being moved to the Frari, give additional support to the theory advanced at the beginning of this book. Agostino Carli Rubbi emerges from this particular setting as one of the personages who most attracts our attention, but also – it must be said – our suspicion. At a particularly sensitive moment in the reorganisation and cataloguing of the archives of the Serenissima, this man, with his difficult personality and violent temper, played a leading role. After years spent in a vain pursuit of a position and a distinguished social position, he was convinced that the position offered to him by Luigi Bossi was an occasion not to be missed, one that would at last allow him to demonstrate abilities, which until then he had never been able to fully realise.

It was perhaps inevitable that he would meet Jacopo Chiodo along the way, who had a decidedly different view of what his professional responsibilities should be. The ensuing conflict between the two developed during the unstable years between 1818 and 1822, a turning point in the history of the Venetian archives, a period in which Rubbi enjoyed a considerable amount of freedom and independence over the material conserved in San Teodooro. He was perhaps the only person who possessed such a degree of uncontrolled access to these papers.

More a literary dilettante than a true man-of-letters, Carli Rubbi was in close contact with intellectual circles of Lombardy and the Veneto. It is unlikely that he met Alessandro Manzoni before 1819 or 1820: there were more than 30 years of age difference between the two, and Carli Rubbi had left Milan during the 1770s, perhaps never to return. However, he would most certainly have heard of Manzoni, who was at that time becoming famous for his literary work. Not only did they have common acquaintances such as Cesare Beccaria and Andrea Mustoxidi, prominent figures in Lombardy’s social and cultural circles, but the controversy surrounding Manzoni’s play Il conte di Carmagnola must have surely been familiar to him. This work had aroused powerful feelings of nostalgia and regret over the demise of the Venetian Republic, political sentiments that he would have found himself in agreement.

Carli Rubbi and Jacopo Chiodo, in spite of their deep-seated rivalry, were united by a fervent devotion to the myth of the Serenissima, a patriotic myth that was once again attracting support and interest after