CHAPTER 2

Badgering for Books
Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini and Leonardo Bruni's Translation of Aristotle's Politics

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Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, the Sienese humanist who reigned as Pope Pius II (1458–1464) has been called “the apostle of German humanism.”¹ This is, of course, an oversimplification. Italian humanism, like Italian jurisprudence,² crossed the Alps by many routes. One of these routes passed through Basel at the time of the church council that met there from 1431 until it moved to Lausanne in 1448. The role of the Council of Basel as a book market is important for the diffusion not just of conciliarist books, with their challenge to papal sovereignty, but for the copying and distribution of legal and literary texts.³ Aeneas was present in Basel for an extended period, serving the council and its pope, Felix V, as a secretary, before entering the service of Frederick III, the Hapsburg king of the Romans. While in Basel, he developed ties to prelates and men of letters, some of whom remained his correspondents after he departed.⁴ When Aeneas joined the imperial chancery, he found himself in a much less congenial environment with few intellectual peers and uncomfortable living conditions. He complained about this at length in his letters. Some of these complaints found their way into his work On the Miseries of Courtiers.⁵

² On the reception of Italian legal manuscripts in the North, see (among others) Emanuele Casamassima, Iter Germanicum, Codices operum Bartoli a Saxoferrato recensiti, vol. 1 (Florence: Olschki, 1971).
⁵ Enee Silvii Piccolominei Epistolarium seculare: complectens De duobus amantibus, De naturis equorum, De curialium miseriis, ed. Adrianus van Heck (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2007), 393–421 no. 166, De curialium miseriis. See also Keith Sidwell, “Aeneas Sylvius
In this context, Aeneas was at first less like an apostle than a voice crying in the wilderness. Only gradually would he and other men of letters bring the new learning of Italy to the North.⁶

Even if we do not take his plaints at face value, we can trace in Aeneas’ letters a desire to secure books not easily available in Germany. His efforts to badger for books needs to be examined to determine how readily humanistic texts reached the lands north of the Alps in the 1440s. Our special focus will be Aeneas’ effort to secure a copy of Leonardo Bruni’s translation of Aristotle’s *Politics*. Aeneas has left us a trail of letters that document his efforts to obtain books, especially the *Politics*, while he was employed in the imperial chancery.

Bruni’s was not the first such translation of Aristotle’s *Politics*. William of Moerbeke, a Dominican friar, had done one in the thirteenth century (ca. 1260).⁷ There was, however, a strong desire for a newer and more accurate Latin version. Some writers believe Bruni was asked in 1433 by Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, the uncle of King Henry VI of England, to undertake a new translation. Bruni’s own dissatisfaction with the style and accuracy of Moerbeke’s version certainly entered into his decision to undertake this labor. When the task was completed in 1437, however, it was dedicated to Eugenius IV, the reigning pope. Eugenius’ copy was delivered via Flavio Biondo, another leading humanist, who was serving in the papal chancery at that time.⁸ (Vespasiano Bisticci attributed the change in dedication of the translation to Bruni’s dissatisfaction with the response of John Tiptoft, earl of Worcester, to the gift of a copy. This is a confusion of the Duke of Gloucester with the earl.)⁹

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