Chapter 8

Dialogus miraculorum: The Initial Source of Inspiration for Johannes Gobi the Younger’s Scala coeli?

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Jacques Berlioz has already addressed the use of Cistercian exempla by the mendicant friars in his study of the first part (The Gift of fear) of Stephen of Bourbon’s vast compilation the Tractatus de diversis materiis praedicabilibus (Treaty on different matters worthy of a sermon, also known as The Book of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit) produced between 1250 and 1261.¹ This study points to a small number (five in total) of explicit borrowings from Hélinand of Froidmont, the Collectaneum Clarevallense and a local Exordium; it also uncovers two interesting parallels with the Collectio exemplorum Cisterciensis and the Exordium magnum Cisterciense. Two oral Cistercian sources should also be added: Philip of Montmirail, founder of seven monasteries and an “old monk encountered in Clairvaux.” Caesarius of Heisterbach is never mentioned in Stephen of Bourbon’s collection which comprises around three thousand exempla. The number of references is very small, even though they suggest that the Dominicans had a good knowledge of the Cistercians. Indeed, Stephen of Bourbon visited several of the white monks’ monasteries (including Clairvaux) as part of his journeys as a preacher and inquisitor.

It is therefore pertinent to investigate by which other means Caesarius of Heisterbach’s exempla were circulated and how they may have found their way into mendicants’ collections. Elisa Brilli addressed this question in relation to the Alphabetum narrationum by the Dominican Arnold of Liège (or of Seraing). In the present article, a later Dominican work – Johannes Gobi the Younger’s Scala coeli – will be studied.

Johannes Gobi the Younger, a Dominican friar from the South of France, was the author of two widely circulated works. The first, a dialogue between himself, at the time prior of the convent of Alès, and a ghost named Gui de Corvo, a citizen of that town, was written around 1323. This unusual dialogue, revised at the end of the fourteenth century, achieved considerable popularity; it was preserved in more than a hundred manuscripts, was translated into almost every European language before the end of the fifteenth century and was later available in print. Johannes Gobi’s second work, Scala coeli, is better known now, but in the Middle Ages it was less popular. It was written in the royal convent of St Maximin in 1327–1330, when Johannes Gobi was a lector there. His uncle, Johannes Gobi the Elder, was prior of this prestigious convent from 1304 to 1328.

Historians of the Dominican Order Quétif and Échard believe that Johannes Gobi the Younger died around 1350, when the Black Death was raging in Europe. The Scala coeli is a vast collection of around a thousand exempla divided into 122 rubrics following the alphabetical order from Abstinentia to Usura. In the intellectual landscape of the beginning of the fourteenth century Johannes Gobi the Younger occupies an intermediary position. In his first work, he integrates Thomist theology but presents it in dialogue form, using simple and expressive vocabulary and vivid imagery. In his Scala coeli, Johannes Gobi places the rubrics in the alphabetical order. It was a relatively new technique, invented by the English Franciscans at the end of the thirteenth century and introduced on the Continent by a fellow Dominican Arnold of Liège in his Alphabetum narrationum. In his exemplum compilation, Johannes Gobi demonstrates a strong taste for systematic shortening of stories, which, however, does not prevent him from occasionally inserting allegorical exegesis (also known as moralisation), as yet little used in this type of writing, as well as a number of long passages reminiscent of romances such as Le Roman des Sept Sages de Rome (in the rubric Femina – woman) and Jean Maillart’s Le Roman du comte d’Anjou. Several of the plotlines of the latter are summarized in the rubric Elemosina, dedicated to the giving of the alms.

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