

**Costa-Gomes, Rita (Ed.). *A Portuguese Abbot in Renaissance Florence: The Letter Collection of Gomes Eanes (1415-1463)*.
Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2017, 579 pp.
ISBN 978-8822265166.**

Maria de Lurdes Rosa¹

Dom Gomes Eanes (d. 1459), a Portuguese ecclesiastic figure who distinguished himself in many different ways throughout his long career, divided between Portugal and Rome, was someone to whom “everyone wrote.” The recent edition of the surviving part of his collection of letters, which we now briefly present, has the appeal of a fourteenth-century “Wikileaks”: kings, princes, merchants, noblewomen, ecclesiastical colleagues, and many others, all wrote to the powerful abbot with multiple requests—ranging from seeking his advice to lobbying for favorable appointments—making pleas for intercessions, giving orders, or simply requesting news about the distant fatherland. The letters survived (not all of them, but the 550 included in this edition have remained) in the course of a troubled history that the editor has carefully reconstructed, and are now available for the first time in a remarkable new edition, which is much more than a simple transcription of the documents.

The book opens with an archival and historical introduction, which successively addresses the biography of Gomes Eanes, the nature of the edited collection and a set of topics relating to “letters and letter writing”; and it closes with the presentation of the editorial criteria. This section is followed by the edited documents, chronologically ordered and endowed with a “regesta” containing a series of archival and editorial indications (reporting only the complete editions of each letter). The documents are annotated critically and informatively, providing useful details about people, places, and the main circumstances surrounding each of the missives. A first appendix lists the non-epistolary documents present in the collection, containing the same elements of information that were provided for the edited letters; and a second appendix lists the authors/senders of the letters. The book also has a “general index,” containing the names of the people, places, and institutions mentioned, as well as a generous number of thematic entries.

¹ Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Instituto de Estudos Medievais (IEM-FCSH NOVA). Universidade Católica Portuguesa, O Centro de Estudos de História Religiosa, CEHR – UCP. Lisboa, Portugal. *Email:* mlrosa@fcsh.unl.pt

The simple description given above makes it possible to immediately understand the importance of this book, largely arising from its three main aspects.

Firstly, the availability of the documents, in the rigorous form that has been followed in their presentation, is in itself an important gain, so that any use that is made of them by scholars in the future will inevitably and forever be indebted to the efforts of Rita Costa-Gomes.

Secondly, her work makes it clear that the editing of documents is neither a technical enterprise that can be performed through recourse to the classical operations of historical criticism, nor a largely paleographic form of transcription. Without wishing to show any disregard for the activities that have just been mentioned, the truth is that the technical apparatus with which they have been surrounded since the nineteenth century, and on which their disciplinary legitimacy has been founded, has only too frequently served to camouflage the lack of any in-depth study on the central issue of documentary transmission, the archival history of materials, and, finally, the social construction of information, which begins at the very moment that it is produced, and then undergoes a process of continuous mutation.

Thirdly, the study of this “social construction of information”, analyzed in the introductory section entitled “The Letter Collection”, seems to me one of the most relevant features of the present work, both in terms of the perspective that shapes it and the results that it obtains. The text in question explains the process whereby the letters that Dom Gomes received during his years of service at the Florentine Badia (1420-1441) have been transmitted and transformed since those faraway times until today. The following lines will refer in particular to this part of the book, leaving the exploration of the potential of the documentary material to the academic community. This option has to do with the assessment that we believe should be made of the study of documentary transmission/transformation, and which outweighs even the historical richness of the documents transcribed. By taking these aspects into consideration, this same richness can in fact be analyzed in terms of what we might describe as the “difficult integrality” of historical documents, especially those brought to us from older times (although it would be illusory to think that even the most recent documents are themselves immune to this condition). This integrality is said to be difficult because it requires discovering, describing, explaining, and then taking into account, in the use of “contents,” all the flaws, gaps, cuts, and transformations created by the passage of time. Conservation itself, at the time when information and/or documents are produced, is an act that includes choices; and transmission, over the centuries, creates new forms of documentary reality. In this sense, while the documents are presented here chronologically,

the introductory study contradicts any idea of the “historical naturalness” of this option, and it would be good if the more “naturalistic” medievalists, however committed they may be to the “exploration of documentary wealth,” did not skip these complex pages in order to understand and, above all, to explain to eventual students, the absolute need to read them. The multiple forms of organization to which the documents have been subjected make it extremely difficult to reconstruct the entire set as it would have been put together by the Abbot Dom Gomes during “the period under study.” Nonetheless, they all end up belonging to that group of letters, and they most certainly condition our knowledge of that period.

In this edition, and in order to carry out her task of transcribing and editing the letters, Rita Costa-Gomes chose to focus on making a technical analysis of the vicissitudes of the set of documents, concentrating on the essential details and not embarking on a discussion of the umpteenth variant of each letter, its numbering, and the history of its binding and unbinding. In this way, she adopted a social and cultural approach to the construction and mutation of the “artefact” that is comprised by the “letters of the Abbot Dom Gomes.” Let us, then, take a closer look at the process that the author followed.

From the very beginning, Rita Costa-Gomes forced herself to discuss concepts. In following the definition proposed by one of the greatest specialists in the type of documents in question, Giles Constable, she opted to describe the set of documents as a “letter collection” and not as “correspondence,” due to the fact that, on the one hand, it consists mainly of the letters that were received by the abbot, and, on the other hand, it also contains letters that were written both before and after Dom Gomes’s stay at the Florentine abbey. These facts lead to a further typological fine-tuning, which is of great importance in terms of the options taken. Among the three possible types of “letter collections” defined by Constable—“archival (or casual),” “didactic,” or “literary” (or planned)—Rita Costa-Gomes opts for the first, without hesitation, a move that is at the root of all the research that follows (“If this is a letter collection of an archival nature, then we must understand the characteristics, delimitation and purposes of such an archive” [22]). Once this point has been established, we embark on a long analytical journey that stretches from 1415 to the present day, and in which the author seeks to identify and isolate the different socio-cultural contexts determining the successive mutations to which the set of documents has been subjected over the years.

The first context is, obviously, that of Dom Gomes’s government of the *Badia*, when he kept and collected the letters that he received and used them for various purposes (pp. 22-23). The author's information about this first period is scant (we will return to this point

later). The second context occurred after Dom Gomes's departure from the abbey, since he did not take the letters with him—a detail that underlines the institutional nature of the documentation and which has, in fact, been largely obscured by the use of terms such as "correspondence" for the genre and "private archive" for the documentary framework (Martin and Ivana Elbl). This second context, which was marked by the criteria of the letters' administrative utility and legal value, would later be followed by a third context in which the transformations to the collection were gradually subordinated to "multiple cultural objectives and practices" (p. 24). Over time, the letters served as both a memorial and a testimony to the continuity of the monastery and were used, above all, to elaborate a narrative of its re-foundation under the active governance of Dom Gomes. This process was, however, far from being linear in nature: "these different functions evolved over time and shaped the making of the collection itself, a process marked by discontinuity and rupture" (p. 24). The third context, already forming part of this great discontinuous line that thereafter continued to characterize the treatment that was given to the collection, began with the (re)foundational moment in the seventeenth century. This context arose from the new practices of historical writing about the Benedictine Order that had already been noted in previous decades. On the one hand, there was a pride in the origins, and the construction of re-foundational narratives, centered on the order's characters, institutions and exemplary moments; on the other hand, there was the requirement for a documentary rigor that led to the creation of archival collections of documents. It was in this "cultural context of the archival renaissance"—the new writing of Benedictine history, linked to St. Maur and a group of Italian abbeys—that the letters acquired "new intertextual meanings" in addition to serving pragmatic purposes (pp. 27-28).

This third context, which spanned almost two centuries, is fundamental to the way in which the documents under study have arrived at the present day. Indeed, it was in the collection's central period—between 1650 and 1754—that the letters were bound in two large factitious codices, which were documented for the first time in the inventory of the abbey's archive, completed in 1754 under the guidance of Pier Luigi Galletti. This operation, about which, unfortunately, very little is known, was followed by further changes over the subsequent centuries. Despite the unknowns, and after taking due precautions, the author tried to reconstruct the criteria that governed the organization of the volumes. From the very outset, the letters were distinguished from one another by the status of their senders (kings, secular lords, etc., in Tome I, currently housed at the Biblioteca Laurenziana; popes and other ecclesiastic figures, in Tome II, currently housed at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di

Firenze). The senders were ordered hierarchically, and, within each category, the letters were then placed in chronological order, although there are several gaps arising from the lack of chronological elements dating for many of them. In fact, this form of organization, which is difficult to date, is only visible in the codex of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, which maintains characteristics that are closer to the original documents (pp. 29-30). Despite all the unknowns, it is possible to characterize the final product. Far beyond the convenience that this organization had for the handling of the documents and the benefits that it offered in terms of their conservation, "by putting together these materials, the archivists of the Badia Fiorentina generated an order, and imposed a logic on the textual corpus. Their model, as the surviving titles of the codices clearly attest, was that of the 'epistolarium' or 'book of letters' organized around one single individual." (p. 31). The monks thus produced "a true 'book of letters,'" in which the letters received by Dom Gomes "in the new form of a miscellaneous codex of letters, [...] became a textual continuum in which individual voices could be located and followed, for months and sometimes years, through a succession of missives conveniently ordered by the author" (p. 31).

Ironically, this transformation turned out to be inappropriate when the world began to change, shortly afterwards. The context that we have just mentioned came to an abrupt end, a situation that extended to the whole of Europe, in different ways, but with the same rationale: the extinction of the old regime as a result of the liberal revolutions that took place in the various countries. As is known, this process proved to be particularly complicated in the Italian case, and the consequences were drastic for the centuries-old archives and libraries of the religious orders. It is important to emphasize the complete upheaval suffered by the documents and books stored in them. The logic of archives ceased to be endogenous, organic, and institutional, and was now imposed from the outside in keeping with the principles of the new social and political order, which ranged from the sale of the confiscated property to the creation of national museums, archives, and libraries, places where the old documents were stripped of their natural life and became "historical." In this context, Dom Gomes's documents underwent yet another transformation, being involuntarily enhanced through their contemporary binding in beautiful and carefully prepared codices of a solemn appearance: "By fashioning codices suggesting the prestigious form of an 'epistolarium,' the monk-archivists of the Badia had created by the end of the 1700s a new and valuable artifact that could easily become a commodity at the time of the de-accession of monastic libraries and archives that took place in Italy in the 1800s" (p. 32).

The penultimate episode in the long odyssey followed by these letters began when the monastic libraries were disbanded and their contents scattered in the nineteenth century, finally ending in the historiographic use of the documents until their presentation in this new edition. For circumstantial reasons—which, nonetheless, were commonly experienced by the many libraries and archives of the institutions of the old regime—the codices were separated at the time of their dispersal. The second volume entered the Italian state collections after 1866-1867, while the first volume had already been diverted two decades earlier, as a result of a probable theft or illicit sale, to a private collection in England, where it was divided into two volumes. Repurchased by the Italian state in 1884, it was incorporated into the Biblioteca Laurenziana. Here, in 1968, due to a technical decision aimed both at their conservation and an attempt to return them to their original state, the documents were unbound and have been preserved as such (pp. 32-33). The whole set has long been known to historians, having been the subject of several studies and a partial catalog; all of this contemporary historiography is also outlined in the introduction to the book by Rita Costa-Gomes.

Let us end with some brief suggestions for a closer look at the question of the “content of form,” that beautiful expression of New Philology, a study area that would certainly appreciate the research carried out into this collection. Such suggestions can only constitute a tribute to the excellence of what was done in Rita Costa-Gomes’s text, which has just been summarized.

It is clear that the main conclusions to be drawn from the codicological, paleographic, and custodial history of the letter collection are naturally limited by the extremely troubled history of the grouping together and later division of this set of documents. But it is also certain that the studies already made by E. Borges Nunes, A. D. Sousa Costa, Martin and Ivana Elbl (this one only partial), and Rita Costa-Gomes herself, have resulted in the gathering together of a large amount of information, while also formulating hypotheses that would be fundamental for making an overall comparative analysis. In the labyrinth of their minutiae, these studies appear to suggest that continuing along this path will largely bear fruit when a joint examination is made of the sets of documents that currently exist, and which, furthermore, make use of some highly sophisticated technical means.

We believe that this is a question worth returning to, as it may be useful for the examination of certain aspects that have been less studied until now, such as the way in which

the letters were originally accumulated and managed by Dom Gomes, or the less clear phases of the transformations undergone by the set of documents. In a hopefully not too distant future, the analysis of the actual documents themselves (especially "the margins," also an important consideration for New Philology) could be similarly resumed in a joint project, which would then bring together all the valid studies thereof, and which would take the notes made in the margins into account (something that this edition has, quite legitimately, chosen to exclude [p. 31, note 66]). It should be noted (marginally) that even without the incorporation of this broader scope, it would have been useful to include some images of the manuscripts. It would also have been particularly interesting to systematically survey the old call numbers, and compare them, as well as to establish a table of correspondences between the paginations and call numbers defined as most relevant through an in-depth study and the chronological ordering of the edition.

In terms of a more direct analysis of the "contents of the form," one aspect to be further investigated would be the archival nature of the collection. As has already been noted, Rita Costa-Gomes starts from Giles Constable's definition of "letter collections," considering the one that she has edited to be "archival." There is some confusion regarding the use of concepts such as "collection" and "archive," which seems to derive from the American practice of conserving "archival collections" in libraries. In fact, an abbot's letters would hardly be a "collection"—if we wish to use here the traditional distinction between an archive and a collection (the former is innate, organic, and independent of the accumulator's will, while the latter is deliberate). While this is debatable in certain contexts, it has the merit of preventing us from considering Dom Gomes, albeit somewhat anachronistically, as a "letter collector" (even if an "archival" one). These documents, which do in fact appear to have been kept along with others that are more "purely administrative," were most certainly just part of a larger set, namely the abbey's archive. Hence the fact that they naturally remained at the abbey when Dom Gomes himself left the institution. Perhaps they would be placed next to other collections amassed by the abbey's managers, classified in the best possible way for the subsequent retrieval of their information. The great interest in the letter collection's transformation into a memorial and historical testimony, from the seventeenth century onwards, should not preclude the study of the uses that were made of such documents before this, either by Dom Gomes or by the successive abbots and monks. It would therefore also be interesting to broaden the research undertaken into the organization of monastic archives to include a study of the constitution of documentary "processes" and the creation of instruments for the retrieval of information, which Dom Gomes must surely

have had in order to be able to manage hundreds of letters; or the transformation of archives through the elaboration of “cartularies,” as well as other practices adopted for the organization of monastic archives. For a later period, it would be important to study the transformations that took place in monastic and civil archivist procedures from the seventeenth century onwards, which are generally less well known than the advances that were made in historical criticism and the editing of sources. Finally, it would be worthwhile to investigate the effects of the archival proposals that were made during the period of the Enlightenment, with its “classificatory mania,” the rapid destruction of previously existing organizations, classified as archaic, and thus the beginning of a process of disqualification of pre-modern knowledge, both of which were happily continued by the new disciplines and practices of conservation and public availability that were pursued in the nineteenth century.

The new “social history of the archive and archival practices” provides several methods and examples for conducting this type of work. The assumption of the “authorial nature” of archivists (Patrick Geary has studied this question for medieval Europe, but it is frequent in other epochs) is now an accepted fact and has given rise to a wide field of studies. Rita Costa-Gomes’s book opens up some attractive clues pointing in this direction and, as far as we are concerned, does not close them, but instead offers us a most stimulating new beginning.