Everyone working on medieval letters might be familiar with a certain kind of professional irritation aroused by some of them, leaving you with a vague feeling of a deeper sense of meaning hovering over the printed page. Usually, this phenomenon creates the impulse to inquire further. Sometimes it is aroused by the letter’s defiance of rules of the dictamen.¹ The letter I want to introduce to you today is one of these curious cases. Taking it as a case study, this paper aims at showing how a misfit between theoretical demands and epistolary practice can trigger further investigation into a matter, eventually leading to insights that might have been missed otherwise.

Let me begin with a contemporary description of the disputed papal election between Victor IV and Alexander III in September 1159:

“[Cardinal Octavian of Monticelli] snatched a secretly prepared mantle [...] and threw it with such great haste onto his [...] shoulders that the upper part of the garment licked the floor, with the fringes clinging to his neck. Thus covered, he ran to the papal throne [...] proclaiming the name of Victor [IV] for himself [...]. A wondrous sight! Nor lacking a clear omen of future truth [...] that this ascent would sometime be turned into ruin for him, just as the reversed position of the cloak proved. [...] He was led right up to the palace, accompanied by these few
priests, through whose infamy he sought to [...] attack the altar of the blessed Peter with continual sacrileges. [...]”

The passage cited appears like a piece of Alexandrine contemporary polemics – but it is not. It is taken from Quam utilis apud principes, a letter by the Norman bishop Arnulf of Lisieux, written at a time when Alexander III had recently been recognised as legitimate pope in France and England. Surprisingly, Quam utilis is not known as a propagandistic polemic but as a document aiming at the exculpation of two cardinal-legates commissioned to secure Western support for Alexander III. Those had issued a dispensation for the premature marriage between the royal offspring of the kings of England and France which had hazarded Alexander’s backing at the French court. After news of the royal marriage had been made public in the middle of November 1160, Arnulf of Lisieux, acting as official advocate of Alexandrine claims at the Angevin court, sent Quam utilis to the curia to pour oil on troubled water.

However, only one half of the letter was dedicated to the justification of the legate’s decision. The other half dealt with the description of the schismatic twin election and its protagonists. This contradicted the requirement of the modus epistolaris listed by Giles Constable and summarised by Sidonius Apollinaris in the 5th century by the dictum that “single subjects are dealt with in single letters.” Medieval dictatores had taken it up as a generic characteristic emphasizing that “the letter should always be a specific request rather than a narrative or exposition”.

Citation
Arnulf of Lisieux had probably studied the *ars dictaminis* in Italy and was renowned as a man of letters. His reputation rested on a diatribe against Anacletus II and his chief supporter in 1133. During his eventful career as Norman bishop and confidant to King Henry II he added 141 private and official letters to his oeuvre. A first epistolary *libellus* was compiled between 1144 and 1166 and extended to a second redaction by Arnulf himself some years later. Scholars can resort to Frank Barlow’s excellent critical edition and an English translation by Carolyn Poling Schriber.

Considering Arnulf of Lisieux’s command of the rules of the *dictamen*, the disregard of the traditional postulate of thematic unity in *Quam utilis* is astounding. My hypothesis is that the lack of thematic unity reflects different evolutionary contexts (time of origin, audience) of the letter’s two parts as indicated by the polemic style of the election report and anachronisms in its thematic focus.

The first phase of the papal schism was marked by the papal candidates’ struggle for supremacy in the Western kingdoms. In the end, Víctor IV was recognised by a council held at Pavia between 5th and 12th February 1160. The English Church decided to support Alexander III at a summer synod in London. Upon their recommendation king Henry II recognised him in July 1160 at an Anglo-French synod in Beauvais.

In these days the denunciation of the opposing party had been a natural subject of propaganda on both sides. Arnulf of Lisieux himself commented upon the events at the papal election in *Quanta tempestate*, a written statement read out in his absence at the Synod of London. In it the Norman objectively recapitulated the dubious legal
proceedings and moral falsities of Victor IV. The aim was to confute his suitability for the papal office – a strategy well-tried in his diatribe against Anacletus II.\textsuperscript{15}

From April 1160 onwards, as a reaction to the controversial Council of Pavia and its convocation by Victor’s prominent favourer, the German Emperor Fredrick I, Alexander and his curia adopted a propagandistic line marked by a decided anti-imperialism. A prominent example is a letter written by Alexander’s cardinals known by the incipit \textit{Moerore simul}.\textsuperscript{16} Arnulf of Lisieux was bid to change his propagandistic strategies along these lines and did so in his official London manifesto. Curiously, though, he followed a different line in \textit{Quam utilis} which Moritz Meyer rather unconvincingly interpreted as confirmative reply to the cardinals’ encyclical.\textsuperscript{17} Although parallels from \textit{Moerore simul} prove that the Norman knew the document, these are few and could be accounted for as adoptions from some common source of early Alexandrine propaganda. Moreover, Arnulf does vary the focus too freely to simply signal agreement.\textsuperscript{18} Most importantly, his only critical reference to the Emperor is the common-place interpretation of a recent military setback at the gates of Milan in June 1160 as divine admonition.\textsuperscript{19} If Arnulf wanted to illustrate conformity, why not pick up this key aspect of Alexander’s post-Pavian propaganda?

The polemic description of the Victorine party in \textit{Quam utilis} thus either reflects an earlier, pre-Pavian stage of Alexandrine propaganda or must have emphasized different points deliberately. In any case, the reference to the advance of the Milanese against the imperial troops shows that the polemical passage must have been written before the events of November 1160. Indeed, I want to follow Schriber’s observation that the
detailed election report “seems more appropriately addressed to those who had not participated in the events”\textsuperscript{20}, especially as Arnulf himself declared that he was “not able to gaze upon these things with [his] own eyes, but [that] truth reached [him] by a valid report, from those who saw it.”\textsuperscript{21}

Is this a reference to \textit{Moerore simul} as an eyewitness report directed at its very authors? But if the report-passage was not addressed to the Alexandrine cardinals, who were its original addressees? Actually, clues in the letter hint at recipients outside the Alexandrine curia.

Rather than resorting to legal and moral patterns of argumentation, \textit{Quam utilis} focuses on the vilification of Victor and his electors, fittingly allocating a ‘cardinal sin’ to each of them.\textsuperscript{22} Thereby Arnulf intended to counter Victor’s claim that his election had conformed to the electoral principle of saniority, having been put forward by the three men as \textit{sanior pars}, the sounder part of the College of Cardinals.\textsuperscript{23} Yet the full pungency of Arnulf’s polemic prose is flung at the senior among them: cardinal-bishop Imar of Tusculum who by consecrating Victor IV at Farfa on 4\textsuperscript{th} October 1159 had turned a legal problem of electoral procedure into a full-flung schism. Arnulf’s caustic caricature of the old man shows the Norman at his propagandistic best\textsuperscript{24}:

\begin{quote}
„For was not he who led them in age and rank [...] accustomed to observe an hour of rest and lunch, considered another Epicurus by everyone, negligent of everything except [...] a longed-for success that a favorable omen predicted? Which is true to such an extent that, [...] he alone departed too early from the election because the hour of lunch had arrived, [and he feared that] a gluttonous
\end{quote}
judge might be cheated by his own hunger and [his] empty stomach might begin to grumble against neglecting hands. “25

This goes beyond legal resentments against Imar’s role as schismatic consecrator. Imar was no dark horse in England. He had travelled the kingdom as papal legate in the 1140s and Arnulf could refer to him as “unius episcopi, ipsiusque quem nostis”26 in Quanta tempestate. In highlighting the voracity of the cardinal-bishop, Arnulf probably embroidered a personal foible to make the criticism more authentic. Otherwise, the accusation of the cardinal sin gluttony (gula) would appear rather exotic.

But with Alexandrine propaganda spread selectively and the attack against Imar of Tusculum directed at an English audience, what was Arnulf’s motivation to write and send the election report in the first place?

Quam utilis is passed down in two versions. They might hint at a possible motive. The first redaction manuscripts attribute it to the English prelates Gilbert Foliot, bishop of Hereford, William of Norwich and Hilary of Chichester.27 The second redaction names the Alexandrine cardinals as recipients.28 Barlow assumed that the document circulated in two versions and that, due to its accessibility, the ‘English’ version was included into the early collection whereas the original letter sent to the curia was incorporated into the second redaction later on.29

Anyway, the document’s tradition attests to a favourite strategy in Arnulf’s political repertoire: approaching persons of special influence to channel information or sway the decision of the English episcopate. In 1164, at the outbreak of the Becket conflict, Arnulf was to suggest a similar tactic to Henry II in order to overcome episcopal
opposition to the Constitutions of Clarendon. Among the men of confidence then were
two familiar names: Gilbert Foliot and Hilary of Chichester!  
I think that there was a similar motive behind Arnulf’s election polemic. As in his
*Invectiva*, his polemics had always been modelled to furnish fellow campaigners with
effective arguments, to encourage or to persuade them. Why not in this case?
Supposing that the account from *Quam utilis* was first directed at English addressees
sometime around June 1160 this explains the anachronistic content of Alexandrine
propaganda, the distinct reference to the well-known Imar of Tusculum and Arnulf’s
reluctance in criticizing Frederick I. After all, the Emperor had stood in close diplomatic
contact with the English king after the disputed election and even more so in the weeks
of political indecision in England following the Council of Pavia.  
That means that instead of a case of one letter turned into two, as suggested by
Barlow, we are confronted with two letters turned into one. The textual link between
the polemic and the apologetic parts of the letter strongly suggests that the election
account was incorporated into *Quam utilis* as a rhetorical device to contrast Victor’s
schismatic cardinals with their upright Alexandrine counterparts acting in France and
England:

“[…] since that side [i.e. the Victorine party] has been judged upon the quality of
the business and the merits of persons, it is pleasing to me to turn my eyes and
mind to the other side. [I prefer] to contemplate the works of those who elected
Alexander […] and to give thanks to Him who conferred prudence and virtue on
their holy society […]”
As we learn from the correspondence of archbishop Theobald of Canterbury the English Church, isolated from continental information about the schism, was desperate for news on the eve of the London Synod. Arnulf who had been officially instructed by Alexander to act on the English king and episcopate as a “missionary and herald of truth” did nothing but his job in bridging this gap.

Summing up, the avoidance of captious details of current Alexandrine propaganda, the direct appeal to the English bishops and inner-textual time references suggest that the first part of *Quam utilis* was originally a separate document designed to offer advance information to chosen members of the English episcopate and strengthen them for the discussions with their fellow bishops at the forthcoming Synod of London. We can only guess at the original addressee’s identity, but Arnulf’s strategic practice points at an audience which might have included or even consisted of those influential church dignitaries to whom he addressed *Quam utilis* later on.

While there are still some riddles to be solved concerning the curious case of Arnulf of Lisieux’s letter, I hope this paper could illustrate how a deviation from rules of the *ars dictaminis* can paradoxically help to sharpen our view on an underestimated – and intriguing - piece of epistolary literature.


Ibid. (Constable), 20.


Sermons and poetry have come down to us, too, Arnulf’s most popular homily being the *Sermo ab Arnulpho Lexoviensis in concilio turonense habitus*, in: Ioannes Dominicus Mansi (ed.), *Sacrorum consiliorum nova et amplissima collectio*. Paris 1903 (Reprint Graz 1961), 1167–1176. His poetry has been edited by Ewald Köngsen (ed.), *Die Gedichte Arnulfs von Lisieux († 1184)*. Heidelberg 2002.

Arnulf started the compilation at the instigation of a friend. See the letter of dedication to Giles de la Perche, archdeacon of Rouen: *Arnulfus Lexoviensis*, Ep. 1, in: Barlow, Letters [as note 2], 1–2. Details on the first collection: ibid., lxxii. When Peter of Pavia, bishop of Meaux, asked for a copy of the first redaction in 1171-1173, Arnulf sent him a provisional copy of the second version possibly identical with Vat. Lat. 6024 (cf. ibid., lxxiii, lxxii-1xxiii and Schriber, Letter collections [as note 2]). In an accompanying letter to Peter Arnulf divulges his decision to have the material re-edited under his supervision: *Arnulfus Lexoviensis*, Ep. 82, in: Barlow, Letters [as note 2], 136. The first textual tradition
of the completed second edition would be MS Paris, BN, lat, 14763. Cf. ibid., lxxiv–lxxxii. A third, posthumous collection by the Augustinian prior Guy of Southwick added singular letters from the Norman’s last years to the older corpus in 1184. This is MS Oxford, St. John’s College, 126.

10 Barlow, Letters and Schriber, Letter collections [both as note 2].


14 Arnulfus Lexoviensis, Ep. 28, in: Barlow, Letters [as note 2], 38–43.


18 For example, the cardinals’ detailed accusations against Victor’s elector Guy of Crema are discarded.


20 Schriber, Letter collections [as note 2], 61. For Barlow’s arguments for an attribution to the cardinals see Barlow, Letters [as note 2], xl, lxxviii, n. 1.


22 These were Guy of Crema, cardinal-priest of St Calixtus who was to be the future anti-pope Paschalis III, John of Mercone, cardinal-priest of St Silvester and St Martin and cardinal-bishop Imar of Tusculum.

23 See Victor’s encyclical Ex quo contra honorem, in: Waitz / Simson, Gesta Friderici [as note 13]. The principle was laid down in Nr. 24, in: Paul Fabre / Louis Duchesne (eds), Le Liber Censuum de l’Église Romaine. (Bibliothèque des Écoles


Translation cited: Arnulfus Lexoviensis, 1.22, in: Schriber, Letter Collections [as note 2], 62. Original passage: „Nunquid enim is, qui inter eos etate precedebat et ordine, Tusculanum loquor, horam quietis et prandii solitus obseruare, Epicurus alter reputabatur ab omnibus, omnium neglegens, nisi alicuius forte quod oblata sperati prouentus auspiciatio preuenerit? Quod adeo aeverum est, ut, ceteris laborantibus, solus premature, sicut dicitur, ab electione discesserit, quoniam hora prandii uidebatur instare, ne auidus desiderio suo fraudaretur exactor, et inania aduersus negligentes manus inciperent uiscera murmurare.“ (Arnulfus Lexoviensis, Ep. 29, in: Barlow, Letters [as note 2], 44f)


„Ad Gisl’ Lond’ et Hyl’ Citest’ et Wll’ Norwic’ episcopos Anglie“ is the address found in the manuscript closest to the archetype if the first edition: MS Turin B.N., D, iv, 32, cited from Barlow, Letters [as note 2], 43, n. 5.

The first occurrence is found in MS Paris, B.N. lat., 14763.

Cf. Barlow, Letters [as note 2], lviii, n. 1.


32 Translation cited: Arnulfus Lexoviensis, 1.22, in Schriber, Letter Collections [as note 2], 64f. Original passage: “Hac igitur parte de qualitate negotii et personarum meritis estimate, oicundum michi est ad partem alteram oculos animumque convertere, et opus eorum, qui elegerunt, per singulas partes toto mentis gaudio contemplari, eique referre gratias, qui sancto collegio [eorum/]uestro prudentiam contulit et uirtutum, quo et serpents declinare maliciam et grassantis superbike [ualuerunt/]ualuistis reprellere prauitatem." (Arnulfus Lexoviensis, Ep. 29, in: Barlow, Letters [as note 2], 46)


34 XVII., in: Bouquet / Delisle / Brial, Recueil, 15 [as note 17], 760: „Volumus quidem te apud eundem Regem et episcopos, atque adjacentes personas, quasi quemdam apostolum et nuncium veritatis in illis partibus experiri; circumpositos quoque et vicinos episcopos, et tam ecclesiasticas quam saeculares personas, noibles praecipue ac potentes, ad hoc ipsum efficaci studio et omni diligentia exhorteris.”