Summary

Camillo Cattaneo was not among the most prominent figures in 17th-century diplomatic circles; nevertheless, his activities extended to the major centres of power of the time, where he moved with remarkable skill. He was born in Castiglione delle Stiviere, the capital of the small Gonzaga state wedged between the Duchy of Mantua and the Republic of Venice, into a wealthy family that steered him towards a career in the church. Thanks to his remarkable abilities and excellent communication skills, he immediately won the favour of the lord of the fiefdom, Francesco Gonzaga. Cattaneo was first appointed parish priest of Solferino and then abbot of the collegiate church in Castiglione. However, he was unable to devote himself to his pastoral duties for long, as he was sent as Gonzaga's agent to various noble courts. It was precisely Cattaneo's long stay at the imperial court in Prague, where he served first as Gonzaga's special agent and then resident representative from 1604 to 1611, that gave him the opportunity to meet and, in many cases, befriend the leading figures of his time, thanks to whose support he was able to successfully defend his lord's interests.

Francesco Gonzaga possessed exceptional social capital in the form of close relationships with members of the Habsburg family. From a young age, he had built his career at the imperial court of Rudolf II, and it was in Prague in 1598 that he married Bibiana, a member of the Moravian noble family of the Pernsteins. This marriage further strengthened Gonzaga's position within the Habsburg dynastic network, as Bibiana and her family enjoyed the special favour of Empress Maria, sister of King Philip II of Spain. It was therefore no surprise that in 1610 Rudolf II appointed the Italian nobleman as his permanent ambassador to Madrid, where Gonzaga was to remain until the emperor's death in 1612. In the meantime, Camillo Cattaneo acted as his representative at the imperial court in Prague.

Most of Camillo Cattaneo's correspondence, preserved in the State Archives in Mantua, dates from this two-year period. In his letters, he describes in detail the proceedings of the Prague Diet, the last major political event at which Rudolf II was able to fully display his imperial majesty. Even more interesting are Cattaneo's reports concerning the period of the Passau army's invasion, with whose support Rudolf II sought to consolidate his position in the Kingdom of Bohemia, punish the leaders of the Protestant opposition who had forced him to issue the Letter of Majesty on religious freedom in 1609, and install his nephew Leopold V as his successor to the Bohemian and imperial thrones. With this final move, Rudolf II sought to strike a blow against his hated brother Matthias, who had taken up arms against him in 1607 and 1608 and stripped him of his rule over the Kingdom of Hungary, the Austrian lands and the Margraviate of Moravia.

Camillo Botturi, Pavel Marek (a cura di): Declino e caduta di un imperatore. La corte imperiale di Rodolfo II attraverso la corrispondenza di Camillo Cattaneo, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing 2026 (Online-Schriften des DHI Rom. Neue Reihe | Pubblicazioni online del DHI Roma. Nuova serie, vol. 13). https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.1780

The invasion by the Passau army thus represented the final phase of the fratricidal conflict within the Habsburg dynasty, the so-called *Bruderzwist*, a phase which the emperor himself had initiated but in which the Hungarian King Matthias ultimately prevailed. In the spring of 1611, Matthias drove the Passau troops out of Bohemia and seized the crown of St Wenceslas. Although Rudolf II remained emperor, he found himself in complete social and political isolation, a state that persisted until his death in January 1612.

Camillo Cattaneo presents himself as an attentive observer of the turbulent events of his time. The picture of the imperial court he offers us is in itself immensely valuable and interesting, as it presents this institution to us uncensored and gives us the opportunity to look, without illusions, behind the façade of courtly *dissimulatio honesta*. We thus learn a whole range of remarkable and sometimes rather salacious details about the leading figures of the era, be it Emperor Rudolf II, Archduke Leopold V, Spanish ambassador Baltasar de Zúñiga, president of the Privy Council Johann Anton Barvitius or the archbishop of Prague Karl von Lamberg. Cattaneo naturally devotes considerable space to Francesco Gonzaga's relatives as well, particularly the family of his sister-in-law Polyxena of Pernstein and the high chancellor of the Kingdom of Bohemia, her husband, Zdenko Adalbert Popel of Lobkowitz.

The richness of Cattaneo's letters also lies in the fact that they offer us an opportunity to reflect on the problems and challenges faced by Francesco Gonzaga, whether they were ceremonial conflicts he had to deal with during his diplomatic missions in Rome and Madrid, or the peasant uprisings that shook his small state south of Lake Garda. Thanks to Cattaneo, we learn of his patron's financial difficulties, of his futile efforts to persuade Polyxena of Pernstein to repay her debts (presumably the unpaid portion of the dowry of Gonzaga's wife, Bibiana) and of his even more futile attempts to persuade Emperor Rudolf II to provide him with sufficient funds for his diplomatic mission to Spain.

The content of the correspondence between Camillo Cattaneo and Francesco Gonzaga and his family is so varied that we decided it deserved a critical edition, which we present to readers in this volume. We believe that Cattaneo's intelligent and witty letters may be of use to historians engaged in a wide range of research topics and employing various methodological approaches in their work. The correspondence presented here will certainly be of interest to specialists in court history, diplomatic history, new political history and cultural history in the broader sense.