

## GOTHIC SCRIPT AND HUMANISTIC FASHION IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ORADEA: THE PALAEOGRAPHY OF JOHN VITÉZ'S *BOOK OF LETTERS* (VIENNA, ÖNB, COD. 431)

---

ADRIAN PAPAHAĞI\*

**Abstract** Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. 431 transmits letters written by John Vitéz, bishop of Oradea (1445–1465), collected in this city – and possibly copied – by the canon Paul of Iwanich, in 1451. The paper studies the palaeography of the manuscript's opening pages, which display the attempt to abandon late Gothic angularity in favour of the rounded aspect of humanistic minuscule, in order to meet the taste of the book's author and sponsor. However, the scribe does not manage to write an *antiqua*, and thus the book remains a Gothic product with humanistic aspirations.

**Keywords** John Vitéz; Oradea; humanistic; Gothic; manuscript; palaeography.

Renaissance humanism was born from the idiosyncratic literary and artistic tastes of a handful of Florentines, and travelled North, throughout Gothic Europe, as a fashion spreading from scholar to scholar.<sup>1</sup> It caught at times, but sometimes remained an isolated phenomenon; it coexisted with, yet never completely replaced the dominant spirit of late-medieval Gothic Europe.

---

\* *Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca.* [adrian.papahagi@lett.ubbcluj.ro](mailto:adrian.papahagi@lett.ubbcluj.ro)

The present research was supported through a grant from the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research and Innovation, CNCS-UEFISCDI (project PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-1795). Many thanks to Mag. Friedrich Simader, curator of manuscripts at the National Library of Austria for granting me access to the manuscript, and to Mr. Raoul Weiss and Mrs. Judit Lauf-Nobili for helping me obtain a copy of Iván Boronkai's edition of Vitéz's works from the National Széchényi Library in Budapest.

<sup>1</sup> On humanistic script, see B. L. Ullman, *The Origin and Development of Humanistic Script* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1960).

Humanism reached our part of the world by the mid-fifteenth century thanks to one identifiable figure in particular – John Vitéz of Zredna, prothonotary of the Hungarian royal chancery, private secretary of the Transylvanian voivode John of Hunedoara (Hunyadi), bishop of Oradea (Nagyvárad in Hungarian, Großwardein in German) between 1445 and 1465, and archbishop of Esztergom from 1465 until his death, in 1472. During the two decades spent as bishop of Oradea, “Vitéz created the first centre of humanism in the Kingdom of Hungary”, as Zsigmond Jakó showed in an influential study.<sup>2</sup> I shall not dwell on Vitéz’s contribution to the birth of humanism in Hungary, a well documented cultural phenomenon, which has been celebrated in numerous ways – most recently through a large-scale exhibition at the Széchényi National Library of Hungary, in 2008.<sup>3</sup> It is well known that the bishop of Oradea was an avid book collector, a competent philologist, as his numerous annotations demonstrate, and a skilled writer of humanistic letters and speeches. Only a fraction of his rich library can still be identified, but the surviving books are illustrative of the prelate’s humanistic interests.<sup>4</sup>

Among these books, Vienna, ÖNB Cod. 431 contains some of Vitéz’s own works,<sup>5</sup> a series of seventy-eight letters written since his consecration as bishop of Oradea in 1445, and collected between January and December 1451 by the canon Paul of Iwanich.<sup>6</sup> The manuscript was regarded as “the first literary product of

---

<sup>2</sup> Zsigmond Jakó, “Oradea în istoria bibliotecilor noastre medievale” (Oradea in the History of Our Medieval Libraries), *Philobiblon transilvan* (Bucharest: Kriterion, 1977), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Ferenc Földesi, ed., *A Star in the Raven’s Shadow. János Vitéz and the Beginnings of Humanism in Hungary* (Budapest: National Széchényi Library, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Klára Csapodi-Gárdonyi, *Die Bibliothek des Johannes Vitéz* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984). See also her previous study, “Die Bibliothek des Erzbischofs Johannes Vitéz”, *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* 48 (1973): 441–447, and the pioneering investigations by Vilmos Fraknói, “Vitéz János könyvtára” (János Vitéz’s Library), *Magyar Könyvszemle* 3 (1878): 1–21, 79–91, 190–201.

<sup>5</sup> For the complete works, see Iohannes Vitéz de Zredna, *Opera quae supersunt*, ed. Iván Boronkai (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Franz Unterkircher, *Die datierten Handschriften der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek von 1451 bis 1500 (Katalog der datierten Handschriften in lateinischer Schrift in Österreich 3)* (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1974), 21, fig. 14; Csapodi-Gárdonyi, *Die Bibliothek...*, no. 50, fig. 33; *Matthias Corvinus und die Bildung der Renaissance. Handschriften aus der Bibliothek und dem Umkreis des Matthias Corvinus aus dem Bestand der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek: Katalog einer Ausstellung der Handschriften- und Inkunabelsammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek 27. Mai–26. Oktober 1994*, ed. Ernst Gamillscheg and Brigitte Mersich, with Otto Mazal (Vienna: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, 1994), no. 8, fig. 43; *A Star in the Raven’s Shadow...*, no. 34, figs 46–47, 76.

Hungarian humanism related to the chancery”,<sup>7</sup> and has been the object of much critical attention, most recently and comprehensively by Edina Zsupán.<sup>8</sup> Its editor, Iván Boronkai, believes that the Vienna manuscript is “most likely the original copy” of Vitéz’s epistles,<sup>9</sup> and various scholars consider that “Paulus de Iwanich” is not only the editor, but also the scribe of the epistolary collection.<sup>10</sup> At any rate, as Zsupán has shown, the frequent annotations by Vitéz himself, in addition to Paul’s own notes, suggest that the bishop of Oradea “was supervising the scribe’s work”.<sup>11</sup>

It is precisely the scribe’s work that the present study intends to assess through a palaeographical examination of the opening pages in Cod. 431. Such an investigation has never been undertaken, despite the remarkable features of the book’s palaeography; for the most part, scholars have been interested in the contents of the epistolary collection, and analysis has confined itself to matters of style, rhetoric, language and composition. One may however attempt to extend to palaeography what Edina Zsupán wrote concerning the style of this “strange literary work, born at the junction of two ages – humanistic in its conception and in its spirit, but preserving in its language the stylistic tradition of medieval chanceries”.<sup>12</sup>

A quick glance at existing facsimiles suffices to notice that the palaeography of Cod. 431 deserves more attention than it has received so far. One may agree with Csapodi-Gárdonyi’s cursory remark that Vitéz’s codices copied in Oradea display “Gothic and humanistic scripts, as well as transitional forms between the two”, but this does not address the nature of these scripts, and of their coexistence.<sup>13</sup> Other opinions are more questionable. Thus, Mersich’s statement that the manuscript was copied in a “*humanistica* with Gothic elements”, adopted by Zsupán in her two studies, does not stand up to scrutiny.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup> János Horváth, *Az irodalmi műveltség megoszlása: Magyar humanizmus* (The Diffusion of Literacy: Hungarian Humanism) (Budapest: Magyar Szemle Társaság, 1935), 69, quoted by Edina Zsupán, “János Vitéz’s Book of Letters. Prologue”, *A Star in the Raven’s Shadow...*, 123.

<sup>8</sup> Edina Zsupán, “János Vitéz’s Book of Letters. Prologue”, *A Star in the Raven’s Shadow...*, 117–139; “Vitéz János *Leveleskönyve*, ÖNB, Cod. 431” (János Vitéz’s *Book of Letters*, ÖNB, Cod. 431), *Erdély Reneszánsza I. A 2008. október 8-11. között tartott konferencia előadásai* (The Renaissance in Transylvania vol. I. Proceedings of the conference on 8–11 October 2008), ed. Csilla Gábor, Katalin Luffy, Gábor Sipos (Cluj: EME, 2009), 16–25.

<sup>9</sup> In Iohannes Vitéz, *Opera*, ed. Boronkai, 13: “höchstwahrscheinlich das Original exemplar”.

<sup>10</sup> Unterkircher, *Die datierten Handschriften...*, 21; Mersich, in *Matthias Corvinus und die Bildung der Renaissance...*, 49.

<sup>11</sup> Zsupán, “Vitéz János *Leveleskönyve...*”, 20.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Csapodi-Gárdonyi, *Die Bibliothek...*, 68: “gotische und humanistische Schriftarten, sowie Übergangsformen zwischen beiden”.

<sup>14</sup> Mersich, in *Matthias Corvinus und die Bildung der Renaissance...*, 49: “Humanistica mit gotischen Elementen”; Zsupán, “János Vitéz’s *Book of Letters...*”, 182; Zsupán, “Vitéz János *Leveleskönyve...*”, 19.

Actually, scholars have so far overlooked one salient feature of the manuscript. As can be seen in fig. II, the scribe crossed out the first page of the manuscript (fol. 1r), left its verso blank, and started from scratch on fol. 2r (Fig. III) using a different, more rounded script. One can only suppose that the sponsor (Iwanich or Vitéz himself), or perhaps the scribe (Iwanich or someone working for him) was unhappy with the angular aspect of the first attempt, and decided to give it another try, thus hoping to come closer to the newly acquired taste of the learned circles in Oradea. The result is by no means humanistic minuscule: it tends towards *Gothico-antiqua*, but remains essentially Gothic.<sup>15</sup> As Albert Derolez wrote, “one may probably suppose that Gothico-Antiqua was normally the result of the inability of the scribe to write full Antiqua: the latter constituted such an archaism that many scribes could not succeed in freeing themselves entirely from Gothic features or shapes.”<sup>16</sup>

Humanistic script was a “definite break with the Gothic tradition”, as Armando Petrucci wrote,<sup>17</sup> but “the total *mimesis* of Caroline script never happened”, as Stefano Zamponi showed in a recent study.<sup>18</sup> Thus, breaking away from Gothic habits acquired most likely in the chancery rather than in a *scriptorium* was no easy task for Vitéz’s scribe, although his attempt shows that he was a skilled man, capable of producing different scripts with a great degree of care and consistency. Despite his good will, he remains tributary to “the dominant Gothic aesthetic”, and only achieves a more rounded form, still haunted by the “remnants of Gothic angularity”.<sup>19</sup> After all, as Armando Petrucci well noted, humanistic minuscule is “a typical elite script”, employed mainly in luxury books, and based on scholarly culture and perfect knowledge of classical Latin; this script “was not

---

<sup>15</sup> Giorgio Batelli uses “*Gothico-humanistique* pour la gothique qui révèle une influence plus ou moins marquée de l’humanistique” – G. Batelli, “Nomenclature des écritures humanistiques”, in *Nomenclature des écritures livresques du IX<sup>e</sup> au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Premier colloque international de paléographie latine, Paris, 28–30 avril 1953* (Paris: CNRS, 1954), 38.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Derolez, *The Palaeography of Gothic Manuscript Books from the Twelfth to the Early Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 179.

<sup>17</sup> Armando Petrucci, “Anticamente moderni e modernamente antichi”, in *Libri, scrittura e pubblico nel Rinascimento: Guida storica e critica*, ed. Armando Petrucci (Bari: Laterza, 1979), 29: “decisa rottura con la tradizione gotica”.

<sup>18</sup> Stefano Zamponi, “Aspetti della tradizione gotica nella *littera antiqua*”, in *Palaeography, Manuscript Illumination and Humanism in Renaissance Italy: Studies in Memory of A. C. de la Mare*, ed. Robert Black, Jill Krayer and Laura Nuvoloni (London: The Warburg Institute, 2016), 107: “L’asseverata mimesi totale non si realizzo mai”.

<sup>19</sup> Derolez, *The Palaeography...*, 177.

normally taught in schools, but was reproduced exclusively through the imitation of ancient Caroline models, or of contemporary models".<sup>20</sup>

Paul of Iwanich or his scribe was obviously not yet able to imitate this elite script. As can be seen, the scribe set out to copy the text in a pointed and angular book script that hesitated between looped and loopless ascenders of *b* (figs I.2-3), *h* (figs I.6-7), and *l* (fig. I.31), being thus a *semihybrida formata* according to Albert Derolez's terminology.<sup>21</sup> If it were not for a few words (*hincinde*, l. 9, *angulis*, l. 10, fig. I.31, *habendas*, l. 14, fig. I.32), whose tall letters have loops, one could call the script *hybrida formata*. The aspect of the script is pointed and angular (cf. *angulis*, fig. I.31), with fractured letter forms (*r*, fig. I.9, *v*, fig. I.19) almost announcing the *fractura* fashion of the German imperial chancery. However, ascenders do not have spurs, as in the case of *fractura*.<sup>22</sup>

*Hybrida* is a vexed term, as so much else in the nomenclature of Gothic scripts. Despite several attempts and pleas by important scholars, there reigns no consensus about what Gothic scripts should be called.<sup>23</sup> Kirchner, Foerster, Gasparri, and Lieftinck in his early years simply called this type of script *bastarda*.<sup>24</sup> Jacques Stiennon calls it *cursiva formata* or *bastarda*, and Karin Schneider refers to *hybrida*

<sup>20</sup> Armando Petrucci, *Breve storia della scrittura latina* (Rome: Bagatto Libri, 1992), 175: "una tipica scrittura d'élite"; "non era normalmente insegnata nelle scuole, ma si riproduceva esclusivamente per imitazione dei modelli antichi in carolina o di modelli contemporanei".

<sup>21</sup> Derolez, *The Palaeography...*, 163–169.

<sup>22</sup> Bernhard Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. D. Ó Cróinín and D. Ganz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 140; Otto Mazal, *Buchkunst der Gotik* (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1975), 44–45; Derolez, *The Palaeography...*, 169–171 and figs 111, 150 in particular.

<sup>23</sup> See especially T. J. Brown, "Names of Scripts: A Plea to All Mediaevalists", in *A Palaeographer's View: The Selected Writings of Julian Brown*, ed. J. Bately, M. P. Brown, and Jane Roberts (London, New York: Harvey Miller, 1993), 39–45, figs 1–44; Françoise Gasparri, "Pour une terminologie des écritures latines: doctrines et méthodes", *Codices manuscripti* 2 (1976): 16–25; Françoise Gasparri, "La terminologie des écritures. Rapport présenté à la table ronde 'Nomenclature et Terminologie'", *Paläographie 1981: Colloquium des Comité International de Paléographie, München, 15–18 September 1981. Referate*, ed. Gabriel Silagi (Munich: Arbeo-Gesellschaft, 1982), 31–37.

<sup>24</sup> G. I. Lieftinck, "Pour une nomenclature de l'écriture livresque de la période dite gothique", in *Nomenclature des écritures livresques du IX<sup>e</sup> au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Premier colloque international de paléographie latine, Paris, 28–30 avril 1953* (Paris: CNRS, 1954), 32: "À la place de la *textualis* vient la *bastarda*, la nouvelle lettre des livres, avec des éléments cursifs fixes, mais sans boucles"; Joachim Kirchner, *Scriptura gothica libraria a saeculo XII usque ad finem medii aevi LXXXVII imaginibus illustrata* (Munich and Vienna: Oldenbourg, 1966), figs 62, 65; Hans Foerster, *Abriss der lateinischen Paläographie* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1981), figs 33–34; Françoise Gasparri, *Introduction à l'histoire de l'écriture* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1994), 111–112.

as “loopless *bastarda*” (“schleifenlose Bastarda”).<sup>25</sup> Lieftinck later introduced the term *hybrida*, which Obbema defines simply as a “mengschrift” combining one-compartment *a* and the long descenders of *f* and straight *s* of *littera cursiva* with the straight ascenders of *b*, *h*, *k*, and *l* of the *littera textualis*.<sup>26</sup>

One can note the dominant letter forms of the scribe’s first attempt: cursive, one-compartment *a* with very faint spikes (fig. I.1), an angular uncial *d* (fig. I.4), the flat-topped, spiked *Rücken-g*, characteristic for Northern *hybrida* scripts (fig. I.5), the pointed descenders of *f*, *p* (fig. I.8) and straight *s* (fig. I.18) – the latter having the dagger shape characteristic for *bastarda* and some *hybrida* scripts –, and the cursive *b*-shaped round *s* in final positions (fig. I.17). Shading occurs in capitals *Q* (I. 14, fig. I. 23) and *T* (I. 14).

The ductus favours angularity and broken forms, especially visible in the shapes of *d*, *r* and *v*. The page looks neat and elegant, displaying a highly legible text, with very few abbreviations – but this was obviously not good enough for the humanistic taste of the bishop of Oradea. The first page was crossed out, but fortunately the bifolium containing it was not eliminated, which gives one the rare occasion to watch the scribe’s versatility in adapting his hand to new demands.

As already said, the scribe’s intention was perhaps to write on fol. 2r something resembling an *antiqua*, but it was obviously a form he had never practised. The major humanistic features are all absent.<sup>27</sup> The scribe still uses the Tironian *et* (7, in the rubric, I. 4), round Gothic *s* in final positions, although no longer in the cursive *b*-shape (fig. I. 24) and sometimes tending towards straight *s* in final position (see *hiis*, I. 28, fig. I. 35), *v* in initial positions, although he renounces the broken shape (fig. I.26), and round uncial *d* (fig. I.12), rather than the straight half-uncial *d* of the *antiqua*. Fusions and ligatures are frequent – cf. *be* (fig. I.32) and *ci* (fig. I. 28), and *or* with a round *r* (fig. I.27) in all positions – cf. *ordine* (I. 17) or *autor* (I. 18). The *i lunga* is still present, and forms the typical Gothic *y/ij* (figs I.22/29); however, *i*’s are never dotted, not even as *y/ij*. The vowel *ae/æ* does not replace Gothic *e*, as is the case in humanistic manuscripts, and therefore one finds only such spellings as *Prefatio* (I. 1), *eque* (I. 11), *que* (I. 25), *facte* (I. 25) etc. Other spellings rebuked by humanists, such as *michi* (I. 19), *apercius*, *pocius* (I. 11), *sacius* (I. 29), are still present. If the second attempt had followed humanistic habits, one would also

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Stiennon, *Paléographie du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1991), 139–141; Karin Schneider, *Paläographie und Handschriftenkunde für Germanisten: Eine Einführung* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1999), 71–74, fig. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Lieftinck, G. I. *Manuscripts datés conservés dans les Pays-Bas, Tome I: Les manuscrits d’origine étrangère (816-c. 1550)* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1964), xiv–xvii; Pieter Obbema, “De opkomst van een nieuw schrifttype: de littera hybrida”, *De middeleeuwen in handen: Over de boekcultuur in de late middeleeuwen* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1996), 69.

<sup>27</sup> See Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography*, 146.

have expected less abbreviations, but the scribe introduced abbreviated forms even where the words had been written in full in the discarded draft (*e. g. Per*, l. 3, *patre*, l. 7, *epistule*, l. 8).

What the scribe achieves is a rounded Gothic textual script, with a visible chancery pedigree, that renounces loops and cursive letter forms, such as the one-compartment *a* (cf. figs l.1/10). Most letters, such as *d* and *g*, lose their angularity (figs. l.4/12, l.5/13), although *b* retains it (figs l.2/11). The extremely long and pointed descenders of *p*, and straight *s* are abandoned in favour of shorter, blunt descenders, but they still extend slightly below the baseline (figs. l.8/15, l.18/25). The limbs of *h* are hooked and extend below the baseline, as is customary in Gothic script, and contrary to *antiqua* morphology (fig. l.14). Finally, letter shading is abandoned (fig. l. 30).

To conclude, the Vienna copy of Vitéz's letters, produced in 1451 in Oradea, discloses how a scribe worked in Central Europe, inside a Gothic chancery tradition, but also striving to emulate the new humanistic fashion adopted by his sponsor. We can actually watch him abandon his elegant, yet highly angular and pointed *semihybrida formata* to adopt a more rounded script that tends towards the *antiqua*, but retains all the features of Gothic textual script.<sup>28</sup> The first two pages of Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. 431 are thus a rare and precious witness of the difficult birth of humanistic taste within a dominantly Gothic tradition.

---

<sup>28</sup> This happened only in Oradea, under Vitéz's eyes; the copy of Vitéz's letters in Prague is a purely late Gothic product (Archiv Pražského hradu, Knihovna Metropolitní kapituly u sv. Víta, MS G.20). Many thanks to Mag. Tomáš Zubec from the Archive of the Prague Castle for sending me a picture of this manuscript.



Fig. 1. Individual letter forms and words in Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. 431, fols 1r/2r.



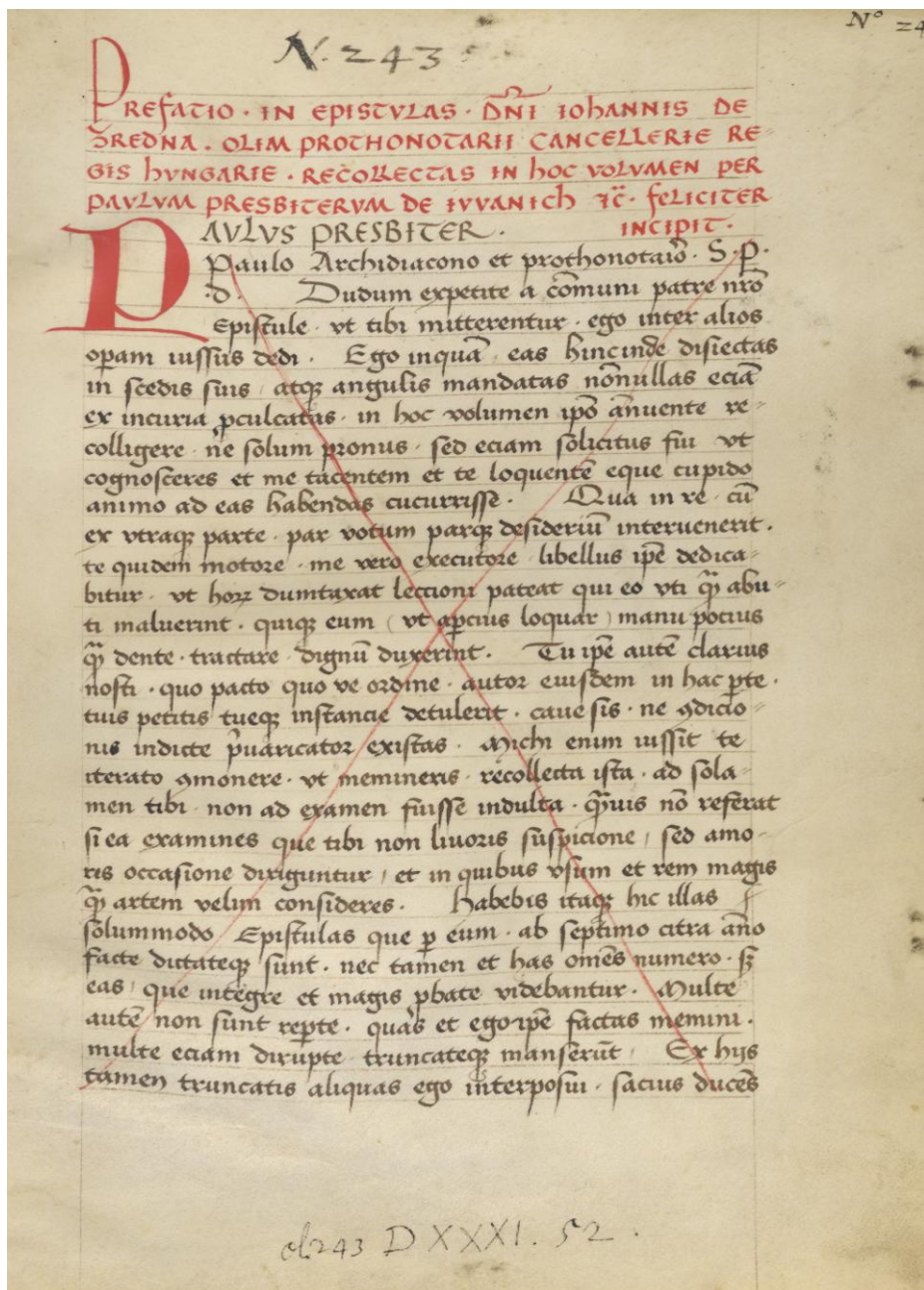


Fig. II. © Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. 431, fol. 1r.

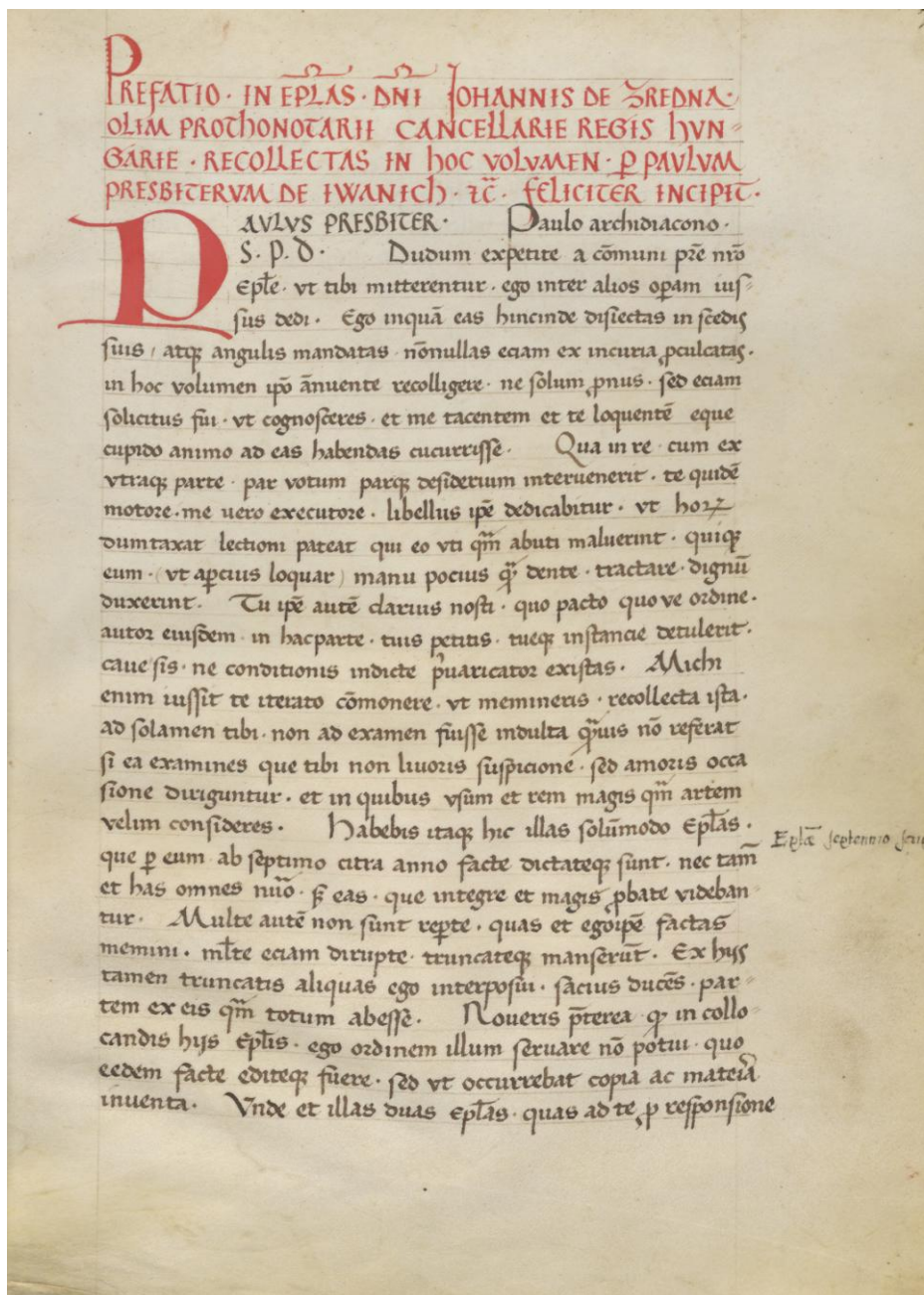


Fig. III. © Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. 431, fol. 2r.