



Administration, Histoire politique

Controlling the Archives: The Requisition, Removal, and Return of the Vatican Archives during the Age of Napoleon

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IN **NAPOLEONICA. LA REVUE** 2013/2 N° 17 , PAGES 66 TO 74

PUBLISHER **LA FONDATION NAPOLÉON**

DOI 10.3917/napo.132.0066

Uploaded: 10/06/2013

Article available online at

<https://shs.cairn.info/journal-napoleonica-la-revue-2013-2-page-66?lang=en>



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ABSTRACT

Before Napoleon Bonaparte came to power, the Revolutionary French Government took interest in developing a systematic method of preserving records and documents of the new nation. In time, Napoleon would come to power and attempt to control all of the archives in Europe by consolidating them in Paris. This paper deals mainly with his seizure of the Vatican archives. Interestingly enough, this seizure of Vatican manuscripts began as early as his first campaign in Italy in 1796, well before Napoleon was in a position to concentrate all of his conquered lands' archives in Paris.

RÉSUMÉ

Avant que Bonaparte n'accède au pouvoir, le Gouvernement français révolutionnaire réfléchissait à développer une méthode systématique de préservation des enregistrements et des documents de la nation. Puis Napoléon prendra le pouvoir et tentera de contrôler les archives en Europe en les concentrant à Paris. Cette étude porte principalement de la saisie des archives du Vatican organisée par Bonaparte. Curieusement, cette prise de manuscrits du Vatican a commencé dès sa première campagne d'Italie en 1796, bien avant que Napoléon ne soit en mesure de concentrer toutes les archives de ses terres conquises à Paris.

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Before Napoleon Bonaparte came to power, the Revolutionary French Government took interest in developing a systematic method of preserving records and documents of the new nation. In time, Napoleon would come to power and attempt to control all of the archives in Europe by consolidating them in Paris. This paper deals mainly with his seizure of the Vatican archives. Interestingly enough, this seizure of Vatican manuscripts began as early as his first campaign in Italy in 1796, well before he was in a position to concentrate all of his conquered lands' archives in Paris.

In Royal France there was no modern archive system. The King of France had a treasury of charters and parliamentary records; the Church, the monasteries and the communes had their deeds and charters as well; and all guarded them jealously.¹ But when the Revolution came, the Constitutional Assembly wanted to ensure that the official acts of the government were recorded and preserved. On 29th, the Assembly devoted one chapter, composed of six articles, on the regulations of its archives.²

The Assembly elected an archivist, Armand-Gaston Camus, on 4th August, to lead the archive effort. He was a talented lawyer who earlier served as a deputy of Paris.³ Within a month, he developed a provisional plan for the organization of the archives. Capitalizing on his initial work, the Assembly issued the first decree, on 19th May, 1790, naming a commission charged with preparing the work of organizing the archives in a definitive manner.⁴ The final project was presented to the assembly and with the third vote on 12th September, 1790, the decree was adopted which called for the orderly organization of the Assembly's records.⁵

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¹ Henri Bordier, *Les Archives de la France, ou histoire des archives de L'empire, des archives des ministères, des départements, des communes, des hôpitaux, des greffes, des notaires, etc. contenant l'inventaire d'une partie de ces dépôts*, Paris : Dumoulin, 1855, p. 1.

² *Id.*, p. 2.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*, p. 3.

⁵ *Id.*, p. 4. Raymond J. Maras, "Napoleon's Quest for a Super-Archival Center in Paris", in *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1750-1850: Selected Papers 1994*, Tallahassee: Florida State University, 1994, p. 567.

Archive administration and a functioning system improved with a consular decree on 28th May, 1800, which separated the Legislative branch from control of the archives, resulting in a distinct “National Archives.”⁶ Another improvement was Napoleon’s decree of 23rd July, 1800 naming Citizen Camus custodian of the National Archives.⁷ But Camus died on 2nd November, 1804 at 74 years old and Pierre Claude François Daunou succeeded him.⁸ Daunou, born in 1761 in Boulogne-sur-Mer, entered the Oratorian order because of his father’s wishes. He left the order when it was suppressed and later, in September of 1792, the department of Pas-de-Calais nominated him as deputy to the National Convention.⁹

Daunou would play an integral role in the requisition, removal, and return of the Vatican Archives to and from Paris. In fact, he had an early hand in acquiring manuscripts from Rome in 1798. Already by the Armistice with the King of Sardinia, the armistice at Bologna and the Treaty of Tolentino, Bonaparte required the conquered Italian states and the Vatican to send hundreds of manuscripts and *incunabula* to Paris.¹⁰ In the 23 June, 1796 armistice in Bologna with the Holy See for a suspension of hostilities, article eight stated: “the Pope shall deliver to the French Republic one hundred pictures, busts, vases or statues at the choice of the commissioners who shall be sent to Rome, among which articles shall be particularly included the bronze bust of Junius Brutus and that in marble of Marcus Brutus, the two placed upon the capitol, and five hundred manuscripts at the choice of the same commissioners.”¹¹ The confiscations, which included the manuscripts from the conquered lands, arrived in Paris in different convoys. The historian of the Directory’s coups d’état, Albert Meynier, estimated the total number of crates from the First Italian Campaign to be 640 – mostly Roman. The arrival of the first convoy in Paris was the cause for a two-day civil festival 27-28th July, 1798 with a parade and program published for this event with the title “*Festivals of Liberty and the triumphal entry of the sciences and arts collected in Italy: Program.*”¹² Following the festivities, the manuscripts from the Vatican were deposited in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*.¹³

Following the 19th February, 1798 Treaty of Tolentino, the Directory sent Daunou to Rome to help administer the acquisitions. He chose many precious works to be sent back to Paris, including

⁶ Maras, “Napoleon’s Quest”, *cit.*, p. 567.

⁷ Bordier, *Les Archives de la France*, *cit.*, p. 13.

⁸ *Id.*, p. 15.

⁹ Firmin Didot Frères, *Nouvelle Biographie Générale depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu’à nos jours*, Paris : Firmin Didot, 1855, XIII, p. 186.

¹⁰ Maras, “Napoleon’s Quest”, *cit.*, p. 569.

¹¹ Frank Maloy Anderson, *The Constitutions and other Select Documents Illustrative of the History of France 1789-1907*, Minneapolis: H. W. Wilson, 1904, p. 256. From Jules De Clercq, *Recueil des traités de la France*. Paris : A. Durand et Pedone-Lauriel, I (1880), pp. 276-277.

¹² AN, F¹⁷ 1279, dossier 8, “Fête de la liberté et entrée triomphale...” as quoted in Maras, “Napoleon’s Quest”, *cit.*, pp. 569-70.

¹³ Maras, “Napoleon’s Quest”, *cit.*, p. 570.

the *Codex Vaticanus* (an ancient Septuagint Bible), and a famous work of Virgil, no. 1631. These ancient manuscripts were sent on their way to Paris on 24th July, 1799, with other works purchased from the private library of Pope Pius VI.¹⁴

Only a mere six months after Napoleon Bonaparte became Emperor, he named Daunou as the successor of Camus, who died in November of 1804, to head the National Archives. One of the first acts by decree which Napoleon put into effect as Emperor was to rename the National Archives, the “Archives of the Empire.”¹⁵ Napoleon had a vision of organizing all of the history and art of Europe, by collecting the best paintings and putting them in the Louvre and the finest manuscripts in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*.¹⁶ His vision called for all of the archives of European capitals to be collected into a central archive that he ordered by decree on 21st March, 1812, to be built in Paris on the left side of the Seine where Daunou would collect them.¹⁷ But until the great *Palais des Archives* was complete, the documents and archives from Piedmont, Spain, Germany, Austria, and Italy would be sent to the Hotel Soubise in Paris.¹⁸

Napoleon had Rome occupied in 1808. Two French generals organized the occupation and commanded the territory, which was annexed to France by the decree of 17 May, 1809. General Sextius A. F. Miollis was the governor of Rome as well as president of the governing council; the general of the gendarmerie, in charge of security was Étienne Radet.¹⁹ Upon hearing of his excommunication by Pope Pius VII, Napoleon sent orders to Miollis: “You should arrest, even in the pope’s establishment, all those who plot against public order and the safety of the army.”²⁰ Radet, misunderstanding the orders from Napoleon, arrested the Pope on 6th July, 1809 and thus began Pope Pius VII’s captivity until the Restoration.²¹ By the end of the year on 18th December, the emperor ordered Miollis to send the Papal archives to Paris. Miollis seized over ten depositories. Radet was charged with selecting the artistic and manuscript collections and with the packing and transportation by armed guards of the land convoys.²²

In less than two months, the first convoy departed in February 1810, and the majority of convoys followed until February 1811. The last one departed in 1813. These wagons loaded with

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Bordier, *Les Archives de la France*, *cit.*, p. 16. The decree was issued on 28 January, 1805.

¹⁶ Owen Chadwick, *Catholicism and History. The Opening of the Vatican Archives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 14.

¹⁷ Bordier, *Les Archives de la France*, *cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Alphonse Honoré Taillandier, *Documents Biographiques sur P.C.F. Daunou*, Paris : Firmin Didot, 1847, p. 231.

¹⁹ Maras, “Napoleon’s Quest”, *cit.*, p. 573.

²⁰ Edward Elton Young Hales, *Napoleon and the Pope*, London: Doubleday, 1961, p. 116.

²¹ *Id.*, pp. 117-18.

²² Maras, “Napoleon’s Quest”, *cit.*, p. 573.

crates of documents and archival treasures moved along the dirt roads to Turin and then over the Mont-Cenis pass to their final destination at Hotel Soubise. During the journeys, eight crates fell into a ditch near Susa, and two wagons were lost during a flood at Borgo San Donnino. In June of 1810, Daunou asked the Papal archivist, Gaetano Marini, who accompanied the archives to Paris, why some particular documents were missing. Marini, who spent much time protecting the archives during the revolutionary government in Rome, confessed that he hid the missing documents before leaving. The documents were retrieved and hence the eighth-century *Liber Diurnus*, then thought to be the ancient formula to admit the pope to his office, the priceless collection of 78 gold-sealed bulls dating back to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa in 1164, and the important records of the Council of Trent were sent to the Hotel Soubise. In all 3,239 crates reached their new home and relatively few were lost during the journey. Daunou and his team counted the acquisitions and recorded that they had 102,435 registers, volumes or bundles. They neglected to request the records of the reigning Pope Pius VII, which were buried in the Vatican gardens and not retrieved for almost fifty years.²³ The cost of the transport of the 1,800,956 pounds of chests and documents was 620,000 francs as estimated by Daunou.²⁴

At Soubise Daunou went to work organizing the archive by arranging the documents and cataloguing them. If he had been able to complete the project, the rearrangement would have been excellent. But Daunou lost control of the project before he finished re-cataloguing the papal archives, and thus the rearrangement simply made the whole collection quite disorganized. The Vatican archive thus lost the integrity of the old piecemeal system of organization, without acquiring a completely new organizational structure. But this was not the fault of Daunou. Although he was anticlerical and against everything papal, he was an honourableman and tried to the best of his ability to maintain and organize the archives while keeping them safe. He was however quite willing to allow scholars access to the previously inaccessible papers, and even to allow high ranking officials to borrow them although some papers never returned. Overall, the Vatican archives did not suffer much in Paris. The biggest loss was during their return.²⁵

When Napoleon was finally defeated and the allies entered Paris on 31st March, 1814, the new authorities, only three weeks later, ordered that the Vatican archives be returned to Rome.²⁶

²³ Chadwick, *Catholicism and History*, cit., pp. 14-15.

²⁴ Bordier, *Les Archives de la France*, cit., p. 20. The costs were estimated at 179,936 Fr. 73 from Turin to Paris and 440,063 Fr. 27 from Rome to Turin.

²⁵ Chadwick, *Catholicism and History*, cit., p. 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

However, the costs would be prohibitive. After a cost of 620,000 francs to move the archives to Paris, the price of the return would be even higher, due to the financial crisis. Neither the Pope nor the King of France had that amount of money to spend on the project.²⁷ Nevertheless, a convoy was sent in May 1814 with the most important materials the Vatican needed and wanted to coincide with the return of Pope Pius VII who was released from captivity in France. The convoy included objects needed for ceremonies, and things from the Pope's private chapel. Also included in the wagon train was a mitre given by the Queen of Etruria, and a tiara presented by Napoleon at his coronation.²⁸ The restored royal government of France did agree to give the new papal archivist Marino Marini (Gaetano's nephew) 60000,00 francs to transport the archives back to Rome. Marino knew it would not be enough and asked for an additional 40000,00 francs to get the process of returning the archives at least started. The French government advised Marino to cull out all of the useless papers and sell them in order to pay for the transport of the rest.²⁹

However, Napoleon's return from Elba and the 100 days interrupted the return of the archives. Napoleon's officials even found time in the weeks before Waterloo to stop the process and replace Daunou as head of the archives.³⁰ Gaetano Marini, the famous historian, papal archivist and uncle to Marino Marini died in Paris on 17th May, 1815, a month before Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo.³¹ Marino Marini was in Paris from June 1814 until November 1815 where he continuously worked to organize and prepare the archives for transport.³² The tedious work in preparing the archive for transport was resumed after the interruption leading up to Waterloo. He had pre-printed receipts made in French to record the register, number, collection, designation, weight, and observations of the items to be sent.³³ He also had a French carpenter make the initial 900 special crates for the archives, with an additional eight smaller cases out of cedar for the special manuscripts from Rome and Bologna, just as they were received, for a cost of 14,781 Francs 80 centimes.³⁴ The initial shipment was contracted to Mr Larcher Becquenmis to send 620 crates of archives from Paris to Rome at a cost of 42,241 Francs. The 60,000 francs from the French government would pay for this, the construction of the crates, the taxes, customs, and tolls and other

²⁷ Bordier, *Les Archives de la France*, cit., p. 20.

²⁸ Chadwick, *Catholicism and History*, cit., p. 15.

²⁹ Archivio Vaticano, *Segreteria di Stato*, Anno 1816, Rubrica 67, (fasc. 2), p. 2.

³⁰ Chadwick, *Catholicism and History*, cit., p. 16.

³¹ Firmin Didot Frères, *Nouvelle Biographie Générale depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris : Firmin Didot, 1863, XXXIII, p. 785.

³² Archivio Vaticano, *Segreteria di Stato*, Anno 1816, Rubrica 67, (fasc. 1), pp. 108-109.

³³ Archivio Vaticano, *Segreteria di Stato*, Anno 1816, Rubrica 67, (fasc. 3), pp. 99-107.

³⁴ *Id.*, (fasc. 2), p. 15.

expenses.³⁵ The total cost of this first convoy, including making the 900 crates, was 73,085 Franc 16 Centimes.³⁶ The shipment departed in October and contained what the Vatican wanted immediately: part of the private archives, the Propaganda of the Secretariat of Briefs, part of the Inquisition archive, and the Congregation of the Council. When Marino Marini heard that the cargo was in danger because the armed escort was stirring up the people as they passed, he went after them and caught up just as one of the crates fell into the Taro River and was damaged. He joined the escort back to Rome.³⁷ The first wagons with archival material arrived back in Rome in December 1815.³⁸

With the 60,000 francs spent on the first convoy, Marino Marini, who initially opposed the idea of selling some of the documents, changed his mind. He even expanded the proposal to burn the archive of 'the Bishops and Regulars', some of the Penitentiary and Rota, and all the remaining archives of the Inquisition. In June 1816, Cardinal Consalvi asked all of his departments in Rome to check if they had papers in Paris which they thought 'useless,' and thus could cut the costs of their return. Almost all the departments preferred to get their documents back. One congregation warned that the bundles labelled 'useless' should not necessarily be considered so, since they placed that label on important bundles with the intention of deceiving the French. Four minor congregations stated they lost no papers. However, the new agent in Paris, Count Ginnasi, who replaced Marino Marini, was selling archival documents by weight.³⁹

It took over a year before the next convoy would depart. In late 1816, a convoy of 174 crates went to Rome by sea through the port of Marseilles, to avoid the more expensive land route. Later a second convoy of 200 crates, a third of 153 crates, and a fourth with 42 moved to Rome over land. Some were damaged particularly while fording streams. In addition some volumes were lost and thus Cardinal Consalvi, not happy with the situation, dispatched Marino Marini back to Paris to fix the problem.⁴⁰

The agents in Paris sent 999 crates in July 1817 by sea from La Havre with the majority on the brig *Neptune*, while they sent another 259 crates over land to Rome. Seventeen of the crates in the

³⁵ *Id.*, pp. 15-21.

³⁶ *Id.*, pp. 20-21.

³⁷ Chadwick, *Catholicism and History*, *cit.*, p. 16.

³⁸ <http://www.archiviosegreto.vaticano.va/en/archivio/note-storiche/> consulted in August 2013.

³⁹ Chadwick, *Catholicism and History*, *cit.*, pp. 16-17.

⁴⁰ *Id.*, p. 17.

hold of the *Neptune* were water-damaged before being unloaded at Rome's port of Civitavecchia. The last land convoy did not arrive in Rome until December 1817.⁴¹

The Vatican archives were sent to Paris in 3,239 crates and returned in about 2,450. This number for the return does however include crates that were to be delivered to Bologna and other Roman archives not considered part of the Vatican archives.⁴² In all about one-fourth to one-third of the archival materials that went to Paris never returned to the Vatican. The greatest loss was not during their confiscation but during their return because of the lack of funds. They were moved to Paris under armed escort and the transport was paid for by the taxpayers of the Napoleonic Empire at a cost of 620,000 francs. They were returned to the Vatican along roads and ports with many customs and tolls, using haphazard private contracts, at a cost to France of less than a tenth of the initial costs (to move them to Paris), supplemented by tens of thousands of francs from the Holy See.⁴³

Fragments from the Vatican archives could occasionally be bought in Paris bookshops until the late nineteenth century. Thirteen Lateran volumes are now located at the library of Trinity College, Dublin, and the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris acquired groups of documents concerning the canonization of saints, an Inquisition register, and other similar materials.⁴⁴

Some of the documents that would have been transported with the archives to Paris and back include: the 1223 *Regula Bullata* establishing the Franciscan Order, the 1250 letter from the caliph Umar al-Murtada to Innocent IV during the 5th Crusade, the 1521 Edict of Worms by Charles V against Martin Luther, the 1603 brief from Clement VII to the Incas written in the Quechua language, the 1650 letter on silk from the last Ming Empress to Innocent X, Alexander VI's *Inter cetera* bull of 1493 dividing the new world between Spain and Portugal, and the 1616-1633 records of the trial of Galileo Galilei.⁴⁵ Interestingly enough the Galileo documents were stolen by the Comte de Blacas while in Paris and eventually returned to the Vatican archives by his wife in 1843 after his death.⁴⁶ A whole host of other similar interesting documents are also included in the list.

The French efforts to make the archives available to the public may have provided the catalyst to open the archives to the world. However, the incompleteness of the French project set back the

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.* Archivio Vaticano, *Segreteria di Stato*, Anno 1816, Rubrica 67, (fasc. 2), p. 6. Chadwick puts the number of chests returned at about 2,200. I used his listed numbers for the shipments (1,827) plus the 620 (see Archive document Rubrica 67, fasc. 2) from the October 1815 shipment to get a total of 2,447 or (about 2,450).

⁴³ Chadwick, *Catholicism and History*, cit., p. 17.

⁴⁴ *Id.*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ *Lux in Arcana: The Vatican Secret Archives reveals itself*; Catalogue of the exhibition at the Capitoline Museums, Rome, 29 February – 9 September, 2012, Rome: Palombi Editore, 2012, pp. 22, 24-26, 35.

⁴⁶ Chadwick, *Catholicism and History*, cit., p. 21.

organization of the archives for several decades. In 1881, Pope Leo XIII opened the doors of the *Archivio Segreto Vaticano* to all scholars worldwide.⁴⁷ The Vatican Archive remains open today and welcomes researchers, but one cannot help but wonder about the fate and contents of all the documents lost during the requisition, removal to France, and return during the Age of Napoleon.

⁴⁷ <http://www.archiviosegreto.vaticano.va/en/archivio/note-storiche/> consulted in August 2013.