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ARTICLE

Venetian Control of Information Flows with Constantinople and the Soft Power of a Renaissance State

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Abstract

The ability to control international flows of information constitutes one of the core elements of the soft power of any modern state aspiring to exercise some level of regional or global hegemony. This phenomenon has been previously examined by those who study long-distance communications mainly in the context of the nineteenth-century telegraph or the twentieth-century broadcast. However, inquiries focusing on the analogous historical role performed by the postal service during the early modern era are much more scarce. Building upon this premise, this study examines the strategic advantages gained by the Republic of Venice through its control of the mail exchange between Europe and the Middle East – a de facto postal monopoly established during the sixteenth century. Venice deliberately subsidized this service in order to prevent the rise of potential competition. Despite the substantial cost, this was seen as an effective investment through which the republic gained a set of tangible strategic advantages. In particular, it helped to extend Venice's relevance on the European political scene long past the point when its traditional political, economic, and naval–military power was already fading away.

I

Ever since the Canadian political economist Harold A. Innis published his book *Empire and communications* in 1950, media historians have been scrutinizing the space-binding ability of various communication technologies. The focus of such studies has mainly been on the political potential of media not only to assert governability and territorial and cultural integrity of individual states, but also to foster the economic interests of empires – in the sense not only of traditional states but also of those created by various national and

transnational corporate entities.[1] Altogether, the effort of an empire to annihilate space by time – or, as Fernand Braudel would put it, to overcome the tyranny of distance – and thus affirm control over information flows, has been rightfully recognized as one of the core aspects of what the political scientist Joseph S. Nye aptly defined as soft power.[2]

However, most studies dedicated to this problem have focused on electronic media and telecommunications, in particular on the telegraph and the cable, broadcast, and ultimately electronic networks. In their zeal, historians of communications have thus far almost completely ignored the pedestrian and mounted postal networks that defined long-distance information exchange during the early modern era and dominated it for several centuries. 'That historians have paid so little attention to the posted letter is particularly startling, given its ubiquity as a historical source', noted Richard R. John in his recent comprehensive historiography of such efforts, while challenging their anachronistic accounts, which are often heavily burdened by presentism.[3]

Yet, as early as 1947, Pierre Sardella had recognized in the Republic of Venice 'the most important information agency of the nascent modern world'.[4] Building upon Sardella's research, Braudel in his monumental opus on material civilization and capitalism included isochronic lines demonstrating the increasing speed with which the contemporary communication networks diffused information from Venice from the early sixteenth century onwards.[5] The city's leading position among the early modern centres of information has been further reiterated in more recent studies, mainly in light of the concepts of the early modern communications revolutions and the rise of the information society and news networks.[6]

[1] See James W. Carey, 'Technology and ideology: the case of the telegraph', *Prospects*, 8 (1983), pp. 303–25; Tom Standage, *The Victorian internet: the remarkable story of the telegraph and the nineteenth century's on-line pioneers* (New York, NY, 1998); Dwayne R. Winseck and Robert M. Pike, *Communication and empire: media, markets, and globalization, 1860–1930* (Durham, NC, 2007); Bernard Finn and Daqing Yang, eds., *Communications under the seas: the evolving cable network and its implications* (Cambridge, MA, 2009); Richard R. John, *Network nation: inventing American telecommunications* (Cambridge, MA, 2010); and Roland Wenzlhuemer, *Connecting the nineteenth-century world: the telegraph and globalization* (Cambridge, 2013).

[2] Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to lead: the changing nature of American power* (New York, NY, 1990); and Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and capitalism, 15th–18th century* (3 vols., New York, NY, 1982–4), III, p. 325.

[3] Richard R. John, 'Debating new media: rewriting communications history', *Technology and Culture*, 64, no. 2 (2023), pp. 308–58, at p. 339.

[4] Pierre Sardella, *Nouvelles et spéculations a Venise au début du XVIe siècle* (Paris, 1948), p. 10.

[5] Braudel, *Civilization and capitalism*, I, pp. 426–7.

[6] On the central position of Venice, see Peter Burke, 'Early modern Venice as a center of information and communication', in John Martin and Dennis Romano, eds., *Venice reconsidered: the history and civilization of an Italian city-state, 1297–1797* (Baltimore, MD, 2000), pp. 389–419; Mario Infelise, 'Roman avvisi: information and politics in the seventeenth century', in Gianvittorio Signorotto and Maria Antonietta Visceglia, eds., *Court and politics in papal Rome, 1492–1700* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 212–28, at p. 213; and Filippo de Vivo, *Information and communication in Venice: rethinking early modern politics* (Oxford, 2009). On the concepts of the communications revolutions, the emergence of news networks, and the information society, see Wolfgang Behringer, 'Communications revolutions: a historiographical concept', *German History*, 24, no. 3 (2006), pp. 333–74; Joad Raymond and

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Among other factors, Venice's fame as an important communication hub stemmed from the fact that it controlled the flows of intelligence between the Levant and the Ponent – the East and West. As this study will illustrate, practically all contemporary European powers felt compelled to have their own diplomatic envoys or agents in Venice in order to tap into the wealth of information circulating through the city's formal and informal networks.[7] Indeed, the extent to which the popes of Rome, the Spanish and Austrian Habsburgs, the French kings, the Medici rulers of Florence, and the Fugger commercial firm in Augsburg depended on the information obtained through Venice has been very well documented.[8] All these players were particularly anxious to learn some of the deep secrets conveyed through the complex networks of Venetian spies operating within Ottoman circles. After all, the Republic of Venice was recognized as the first modern state with an organized intelligence service, and its school of cryptography, brought to life by relentless attempts to intercept mail, enjoyed an almost mythical status.[9] Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that the flow of intelligence mediated by Venice was far from unidirectional. To the same extent that the European powers depended upon the republic for information about Ottoman and even Persian affairs, the Sublime Porte relied upon the office of the Venetian envoy (*bailo*) in Constantinople for dependable news about developments within Christendom.[10]

Noah Moxham, *News networks in early modern Europe* (Leiden, 2016); and Paul M. Dover, *The information revolution in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2021).

[7] On the formal and informal news networks in Venice, see Elizabeth Horodowich, 'The gossiping tongue: oral networks, public life and political culture in early modern Venice', *Renaissance Studies*, 19, no. 1 (2005), pp. 22–45; de Vivo, *Information and communication in Venice*; and Juraj Kittler, 'The normative role of public opinion in the republican experience of Renaissance Venice', *Communication and the Public*, 1, no. 1 (2016), pp. 110–24.

[8] See Giovanni Hassiotis, 'Venezia a informazione sui Turchi per gli Spagnoli nel sec. XVI', in Hans-Georg Beck, Manousos Manousacas, and Agostino Pertusi, eds., *Venezia centro di mediazione tra Oriente e Occidente (secoli xv-xvi), aspetti e problemi*, vol. I (Florence, 1977), pp. 117–36; Hans J. Kissling, 'Venezia come centro di informazioni sui Turchi', in ibid., pp. 97–110; Robert Mantran, 'Venise, centre d'informations sur les Turks', in ibid., pp. 111–16; Mario Infelise, 'From merchant's letters to handwritten political *avvisi*: notes on the origins of public information', in Francisco Bethencourt and Florike Egmond, eds., *Cultural exchange in early modern Europe*, vol. III, *Correspondence and cultural exchange in Europe, 1400–1700* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 33–52, at pp. 36–8; Johann Petitjean, 'The papal network: how the Roman curia was informed about south-eastern Europe, the Ottoman Empire and the Mediterranean (1645–1669)', in Raymond and Moxham, eds., *News networks*, pp. 178–92; Nikolaus Schobesberger, 'Mapping the Fuggerzeitungen: the geographical issues of an information network', in ibid., pp. 216–40; Sheila Barker, '"Secret and uncertain": a history of *avvisi* at the court of the Medici grand dukes', in ibid., pp. 716–38.

[9] Bruno Simon, 'Lobby et réseau d'espionnage vénitiens à Constantinople au milieu du XVI^{e} siècle', in Roger Mettam and Charles Giry-Deloison, eds., *Patronages et clientélismes, 1550–1750 (France, Angleterre, Espagne, Italie)* (Lille, 1995), pp. 207–16; Paolo Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia. Spionaggio e controspionaggio al tempo della Serenissima* (Milan, 1994); Ioanna Iordanou, *Venice's secret service: organising intelligence in the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2019); and Paolo Bonavoglia, 'The ciphers of the Republic of Venice, an overview', *Cryptologia*, 46, no. 4 (2022), pp. 323–46.

[10] On the Ottoman reliance on news from Venice, see Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia*, p. 88; and Infelise, 'From merchant's letters', p. 38. On intelligence about Persia, see Chiara Palazzo, 'The

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While intelligence conveyed through such complex networks was originally transmitted by various parallel yet diverse channels – often intentionally dispatched in multiple copies in order to ensure delivery – during the sixteenth century its flow was gradually streamlined and regularized, thanks to the unprecedented success of the postal line connecting Venice and Constantinople. The first to point out this dynamic was Eric R. Dursteler in an essay aptly titled 'Power and information: the Venetian postal system in the early modern eastern Mediterranean, 1573–1645'.[11] The author argued that, as of the sixteenth century, the republic 'attained a near monopoly over the transportation of communications between Europe and the Ottoman Empire, and that this dominance was an integral part of the city's broader political and diplomatic objectives'.[12] This allowed the Signoria to dominate and manipulate the information flows, which, in its merchant-driven, cost–benefit mindset, became 'an acceptable price to pay for continuing political relevance'. Dursteler concluded that the study of the ways in which the Venetians monopolized long-distance communications with the Middle East 'is a revealing example of the nexus between power and information in the early modern Mediterranean'.[13]

My goal in this study is to elaborate upon the premise established by Dursteler through what could be seen as a chronological prequel and further expansion of postal geographies analysed in his study. I will begin by outlining the genesis of the Venetian postal connection with Constantinople, before analysing its gradual development. I will then consider the growing dependence of the European powers upon the republic's service in the course of the long sixteenth century, focusing on financial aspects of the operation, as well as its gradual extension to Syria and modern-day Lebanon. My analysis relies on two landmark postal contracts that survive among the records of the Venetian Senate, supplemented by an array of information gathered from government documents, accounting books of the Venetian envoys, their diplomatic correspondence and final reports (*relazioni*), occasional sources such as the testimonial written by one of the key postal administrators, Mariano Bolizza, and a printed contemporary postal guide that helps to shed light on some technical aspects of courier operations.[14]

Venetian news network in the early sixteenth century: the battle of Chaldiran', in Raymond and Moxham, eds., *News networks*, pp. 849–69; and Ahmad Guliyev, 'Venice's knowledge of the *Qizilbash:* the importance of the role of the Venetian baili in intelligence-gathering on the Safavids', *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 75, no. 1 (2022), pp. 79–97.

[11] Eric R. Dursteler, 'Power and information: the Venetian postal system in the early modern eastern Mediterranean, 1573–1645', in Diogo Ramada Curto, Eric R. Dursteler, Julius Kirshner, and Francesca Trivellato, eds., *From Florence to the Mediterranean: studies in honor of Anthony Molho* (Florence, 2009), pp. 601–23.

[12] Ibid., p. 601.

[13] Ibid., p. 623.

[14] I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to the pioneering work of the Italian amateur postal historian Luciano De Zanche, in memoriam, who explored many of the pivotal archival sources related to this subject in his book *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia. Dispacci di stato e lettere di mercanti dal basso Medioevo alla caduta della Serenissima* (Prato, 2000).

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II

In the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade, which culminated with the sack of Constantinople in 1204, Venetians became co-rulers of the city. Even after the restoration of Byzantine rule in 1261, their community continued to number at least ten thousand souls, and its size remained more or less stable during the following centuries.[15] Its viability naturally depended on reliable communication channels with the motherland.

The earliest-known mail exchange between Constantinople and Venice, mentioned in the tenth century, was facilitated by ships.[16] However, in the fourteenth century we see the first indications that the letters between the Venetian *bailo* in Constantinople and the mother city were dispatched in two copies: one was entrusted to the crews of Venetian ships, while the other was usually sent via an overland courier who crossed the Balkans on foot. Once he reached the Adriatic coast, the mail was picked up and carried by ships bound for Venice. The fortified coastal ports of Ragusa (Dubrovnik), Corfu, and ultimately Cattaro (Kotor) were used in different periods as the switching terminals between the overland and seabound portions of the passage.[17]

This dynamic is illustrated by the earliest surviving dispatch of the *bailo* Matteo Venier, sent from Constantinople in 1354 in two copies: one by ship and the other overland. In spite of the increasing challenges faced by couriers travelling overland, Venier assured the Signoria that it was necessary 'to write all the time' in order to keep his homeland informed about the developments in the Byzantine metropolis, whose breathing space was rapidly shrinking due to Ottoman territorial expansion.[18] Venier's overland epistolary exchange with Constantinople was, in all likelihood, managed through Ragusa, which in the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade (1202–4) became a tributary state of Venice. The activities of Ragusan pedestrian couriers are attested to by numerous expedition contracts preserved in the local notarial archives, all signed between 1320 and the end of the Venetian domination in 1358.[19] They reveal at least twenty-eight one-off contracted trips executed by fourteen different carriers who ventured all the way to Thessaloniki or Constantinople. Some

[15] Horatio F. Brown, 'The Venetians and the Venetian quarter in Constantinople to the close of the twelfth century', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 40, no. 1 (1920), pp. 68–88, at p. 85; and Eric R. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: nation, identity, and coexistence in the early modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, MD, 2006), p. 23.

[16] See Deliberation of the Great Council, 12 Aug. 1274, in Roberto Cessi, ed., *Deliberazioni del Maggior Consiglio di Venezia* (3 vols., Bologna, 1970), II, doc. 79, p. 64.

[17] De Zanche, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, pp. 46–7.

[18] Venier to the doge, 6 Aug. 1354, Constantinople, Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV), Senato, Dispacci, Dispacci antichi di ambasciatori, Rettori ed altre cariche e lettere antiche, busta 1, doc. 6.

[19] Velimir Sokol, 'Pojava kurira-profesionalaca u Dubrovačkoj Republici' ('The emergence of professional couriers in the Republic of Dubrovnik'), *Arhiv PTT* (Belgrade), 13 (1968), pp. 5–85; Velimir Sokol, 'Neka pitanja u vezi s obavljanjem profesionalne kurirske službe u Dubrovačkoj Republici' ('Some questions regarding the performance of a professional courier service in the Republic of Dubrovnik'), *Arhiv PTT* (Belgrade), 14 (1968), pp. 193–230; and Bariša Krekić, 'Courier traffic between Dubrovnik, Constantinople and Thessalonika in the first half of the fourteenth century', in Bariša Krekić, ed., *Dubrovnik, Italy and the Balkans in the late middle ages* (London, 1980), essay 11, pp. 1–8.

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were carrying letters on behalf of the Venetian government, but most of them worked for local Italian merchants and bankers.[20]

According to Krekić, a courier journey between Ragusa and Constantinople, a distance of about 1,200 kilometres, could take up to thirty days. After reaching his destination, the courier was expected to wait for the reply for anywhere between four and eight days. If the recipient in Constantinople required more time to answer, the carrier was entitled to receive a daily allowance to cover his living expenses. On average, couriers were paid 20–24 Byzantine perperi (about 10–12 ducats) for a return trip.[21] By any measure, this was a substantial sum of money at the time, when the top clerks of leading commercial companies were earning between 30 and 40 ducats a year, although, in all likelihood, most of it was consumed by travel expenses.[22] These are important details because they constituted the basic operational framework that can be clearly discerned in the later postal charters from the sixteenth century – the earliest documents regulating sustained operations of pedestrian mail carriers in the Balkans that have survived in their entirety.

There is very little direct evidence attesting to the movements of couriers between Venice and Constantinople during the fifteenth century. Ragusa extricated itself from Venetian domination in 1358, and the heavily fortified naval base in Corfu gradually took over as the pivotal port where mail was switched between the seaborne and landbound carriers. Every Venetian ship leaving or entering the Adriatic had to stop at Corfu, and the strategic significance of the island was reflected in the fact that it hosted the seat of the *provveditore generale da mar* – the supreme commander of the republic's fleet during peacetime.[23]

In 1470, the chronicler Domenico Malipiero used the term *posta* for the first time in the context of the mail exchange with Constantinople, when he noted that a postal courier (*messo a posta*) had arrived in Venice with letters from the Venetian *bailo* of Negroponte, Paolo Erizzo.[24] From then on, the term 'postal boats' (*per barche spazate a posta* or *per grippo a posta*) appears with increasing frequency in official communications with Constantinople.[25] The existence of the naval postal line connecting Venice with Corfu, which also serviced the republic's coastal cities scattered through Istria, Dalmatia, and Albania, was

[20] Krekić, 'Courier traffic', pp. 3–6; see also Juraj Kittler, 'Capitalism and communications: the rise of commercial courier networks in the context of the Champagne fairs', *Capitalism: A Journal of History and Economics*, 4, no. 1 (2023), pp. 109–52, at p. 136.

[21] Krekić, 'Courier traffic', pp. 3–4. For the exchange rate, see Frederic C. Lane and Reinhold C. Mueller, *Money and banking in medieval and Renaissance Venice* (Baltimore, MD, 1985), pp. 285, 298.

[22] Compare Federigo Melis, *Aspetti della vita economica medieval. Studi nell'Archivio Datini di Prato* (Siena, 1962), pp. 315–16. I use ducats and florins interchangeably here, as the coins were of roughly the same value.

[23] Benjamin Arbel, 'Venice's maritime empire in the early modern period', in Eric R. Dursteler, ed., *A companion to Venetian history, 1400–1797* (Leiden, 2013), pp. 125–253, at pp. 151–3.

[24] Domenico Malipiero, *Annali veneti dell'anno 1457 al 1500* (Florence, 1843), p. 55.

[25] Ibid., pp. 108, 339.

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subsequently mentioned by another chronicler, Girolamo Priuli, who in 1500 reported the arrival of letters from Zadar delivered by postal boats.[26]

The movements of postal vessels must have been carefully synchronized with the movements of the overland couriers. There are some indications that they were dispatched at regular intervals and that they connected Venice not only with Constantinople but also with its other naval bases throughout Morea. For example, the formula *per uno messo spaciato per terra* ('by a messenger dispatched by land') was repeatedly mentioned in the correspondence of Bartolomeo Minio, a military liaison stationed in Nauplion (Nafplion) between 1479 and 1483.[27] However, in one of the dispatches, Minio mentioned that he had to hire an extraordinary courier (*messo proprio*), which would implicitly confirm the existence of ordinary carriers – ones who were following a relatively fixed schedule.[28] Similarly, the dispatches sent from Constantinople to Venice in the 1480s by the *bailo* Pietro Bembo and his secretary Giovanni Dario repeatedly referred to various pedestrian couriers (*fante*, *choriero*, or *messo*) either commissioned by their office in Pera or dispatched by the expatriate merchant community to carry mail all the way to the naval base in Corfu.[29]

The landbound part of the postal connection between Constantinople and Venice underwent a significant period of trial during the Second Ottoman–Venetian War (1499–1503). During its prelude, the Venetian *bailo* in Constantinople was ousted to Corfu. In his absence, the leadership of the Venetian community was informally taken over by the wealthy grain merchant Andrea Gritti, who continued sending intelligence letters to the Signoria, using regular commercial jargon as a code, which allowed his dispatches to blend together with merchant letters.[30] However, between 1498 and 1499, several Venetian couriers were found dead or intercepted by the Ottoman authorities and condemned to impalement.[31] Finally, Gritti himself was arrested for espionage and was held prisoner for two and a half years.[32]

After the war ended in 1503, the Venetian merchant community in Constantinople soon settled back into its old grooves. There are several indications that Ragusa briefly became the pivotal point of Venetian postal

[26] Girolamo Priuli, *I diarii di Girolamo Priuli (Aa. 1494–1512)*, ed. Arturo Segre (4 vols., Città di Castello and Bologna, 1912–41), II, p. 17.

[27] Biblioteca del Museo Correr, Venice (BMC), Codici Cicogna, MS 2653 ('Dispacci a Senato e ad altri di Sier Bortolomeo Minio').

[28] Marco Minio to the doge, 10 Feb. 1480, Nauplion, BMC, Codici Cicogna, MS 2653, fo. 3r.

[29] See letters dated 8 Mar. 1484, 14 July 1484, and 31 Mar. 1487, Constantinople-Pera, ASV, Senato, Dispacci, Dispacci degli Ambasciatori e Residenti, Costantinopoli (D-DAR-C), filza 1-A, fascicolo 1, fo. 3r; fascicolo 2, fo. 43r; and fascicolo 3, fo. 39r.

[30] The entire story as narrated by Sanudo is in Patricia H. Labalme and Laura Sanguineti White, *Venice, città excelentissima: selections from the Renaissance diaries of Marin Sanudo* (Baltimore, MD, 2008), pp. 232–5; see also Iordanou, *Venice's secret service*, p. 173.

[31] Marin Sanudo, *I diarii di Marino Sanuto (MCCCCXCVI–MDXXXIII) dall'autografo marciano, ital. cl. VII, codd. CDXIX–CDLXXVII*, ed. Rinaldo Fulin (58 vols., Venice, 1879–1902), II, cols. 101 (5 Nov. 1498), 542 (22 Mar. 1499), and 1128 (24 Aug. 1499).

[32] Labalme and Sanguineti White, *Venice, città excelentissima*, pp. 234–5.

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operations again.[33] For example, the accounting book of the *bailo* Piero Bragadin, who was in charge of the office in Pera between 1524 and 1526, reveals at least thirty-one couriers dispatched between Constantinople and Ragusa, where the mail was handled by the local Venetian consul.[34] Overall, the records indicate that, out of the total of 150,000 aspers (c. 2,800 ducats) that Bragadin spent during his twenty-month tenure as the Venetian *bailo*, he used 18,000 aspers (c. 330 ducats) to pay for couriers.[35] His office therefore spent an average of about 200 ducats per year on couriers, which is an important yardstick that will help to assess the evolution of postal expenses during the remaining portion of the sixteenth century.

III

The earliest-known long-term postal contract related to the connection between Venice and Constantinople was signed in 1535 between the Signoria and Trifon Drago, the head of a prominent family in Venetian-dominated Kotor.[36] In essence, it formalized the scheme upon which the mail exchange between Venice and Constantinople had likely already been operating as of the fifteenth century. It likewise established the Montenegrin port of Kotor as a new pivotal postal node facilitating the exchange of mail between the seaborne and landbound portions of the bifurcated postal line.

Drago acted as an independent contractor whose role was to supply the Venetian authorities with pedestrian couriers carrying mail across the Balkans, and at the same time to provide two or three postal brigantines needed to secure the naval connection between Venice and Kotor. He reported to the office of the Venetian rector, who represented the republic's interest in Kotor, and acted as the local postmaster, which means that he received, sorted, and forwarded mail in both directions between Venice and Constantinople.[37]

In exchange for his service, Drago received 20 ducats for each overland expedition during the six summer months between March and September, and 25 ducats during the remaining six winter months. We do not know how much of this money he kept for himself, and how much went to the couriers to cover their travel expenses. The original cohort consisted of six men with local toponymical surnames such as Spigliari (Špiljari), Podgoriza (Podgorica), or Drazeniza (Draženica), who were described as 'experienced,

[33] Alvise Gritti to Andrea Gritti, 4 Dec. 1525, Constantinople-Pera, ASV, Senato, D-DAR-C, filza 1-A, fascicolo 5, fo. 1r. For more on Ragusa as the pivotal Venetian postal node in the 1510s, see Chiara Palazzo, 'Venetian news network', pp. 849–69.

[34] ASV, Senato, Archivi Propri degli Ambasciatori, Costantinopoli (APA-C), filza 1, fascicoli 1 and 2.

[35] De Zanche, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, pp. 46–7, 92. For the exchange rate between Ottoman aspers and Venetian ducats, see Federigo Melis, *Documenti per la storia economica dei secoli XIII–XVI* (Florence, 1972), pp. 448–9.

[36] Senate resolution, 28 Jan. 1535, ASV, Senato, Deliberazioni, Mar (D-M), registro 23, fos. 79r–80r.

[37] Ibid, fo. 79r.

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trustworthy, and physically well equipped'.[38] Each of them was to receive a retainer of nine Venetian lire of the *piccoli* a month from the rector in Kotor, which was slightly less than 1.5 ducats.[39] Additionally, Drago had four more names of couriers up his sleeve, to be used as a reserve force if necessary.[40] Their main obligation was 'to carry with maximum speed' the letters between Venice and Constantinople entrusted to them by the Signoria 'without any additional income'.[41]

This last statement suggests that the cost of each expedition was fully covered by the Signoria and that the couriers were prohibited from earning extra income by charging additional postage on private letters. The surviving documentation likewise implies that there was an agreed maximum duration of the journey, allowing for seasonal adjustments, although the actual number of days was not further specified. After reaching the *bailo*'s residence in Pera, couriers were mandated to wait at least fifteen days, in order to give his office and the expatriate merchant community enough time to write replies. During such periods of waiting, they were entitled to receive an unspecified daily allowance.[42]

IV

Venice's commercial and military power reached its apex in the late 1400s and began to gradually decline during the sixteenth century as a result of the Ottoman expansion in the eastern Mediterranean (the loss of Negroponte in 1470 and the battle of Zonchio in 1499), the Portuguese circumnavigation of Africa in 1498 and its impact on the spice trade, and ultimately the long-lasting effect on the republic's political psyche of the humiliating defeat at Agnadello in 1509.[43] Yet it is not an exaggeration to claim that Venice remained a significant player in the European geopolitical context, thanks to its enduring control of the information flow to and from the Middle East. Indeed, the Venetian postal line with Constantinople continued serving as the main channel of long-distance communication between the West and East up until the mid-eighteenth century, when its position was gradually superseded by the Habsburg imperial posts of Vienna.[44]

'There is no news from the Levant if not by the way of Venice' was a popular contemporary dictum attributed to the French king François I (r. 1515–47).[45]

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., fo. 79r–v.

[40] Ibid., fo. 80r.

[41] Ibid., fo. 79v.

[42] Ibid.

[43] See Frederic C. Lane, *Venice: a maritime republic* (Baltimore, MD, 1973), pp. 241–9; and Maria Fusaro, *Political economies of empire in the early modern Mediterranean: the decline of Venice and the rise of England, 1450–1700* (Cambridge, 2015), p. viii.

[44] In the 1750s, the *bailo* Francesco Foscari was still dispatching his own couriers towards Kotor, although he increasingly relied upon the Habsburg imperial couriers; see Filippo Maria Paladini, ed., *Francesco Foscari. Dispacci da Costantinopoli, 1757–1762* (Venice, 2007).

[45] Cited by Bruno Crevato-Selvaggi in his introductory essay, 'La posta, Venezia, l'informazione', to Júlia Benavent and Miriam Bucuré, eds., *Epistolario inédito entre Ruggero de Tassis y el Cardenal Granvelle (1536–1565)* (Prato, 2017), p. 18.

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And the Signoria never hesitated to use this asset in order to ingratiate itself with the powerful of this world or to repay their favours. Its leverage was particularly strong with regard to the papal court and the Habsburgs (especially the Spanish line), who both struggled to establish their own permanent diplomatic missions in Constantinople.[46] For example, in 1555 the *bailo* Antonio Erizzo included a bundle of letters written by visiting envoys of Emperor Charles V to the Sublime Porte in his diplomatic package addressed to the doge. 'I did not want to deny them this service', the *bailo* explained in his accompanying letter, 'because I see these ambassadors have an urgency and no other way to expedite this message, and they assure me that His Majesty will be obliged to Your Serenity for this service.' Erizzo suggested that the mail should be handed to the local agent of the imperial posts in Venice, who would expeditiously forward it to the emperor.[47]

After a decade or two of improvisation, in 1541 the office of the imperial postmaster in Venice was formally established and occupied by Ruggero de Tassis – a member of the legendary Thurn und Taxis postal family. He was endowed with extensive powers aimed at restructuring the imperial posts in Venice in order to make them more compatible with other postal lines interconnecting the vast Habsburg domains.[48] In 1557, after the death of the secretary of the Spanish embassy in Venice (Charles V had abdicated and divided the empire the year before), de Tassis was also put in charge of compiling the handwritten newsletters (*avvisi*) from Constantinople that circulated abundantly through Venice. We know about this temporary assignment mainly because he never missed making copies for his patron in Brussels, Cardinal de Granvelle, the most influential minister representing the interests of Philip II in the Spanish Netherlands.[49]

The European obsession with Middle Eastern politics was obviously kindled by fear of the Ottoman forces, who were relentlessly advancing westwards. At the same time, such information had significant economic value, since some of the critical commodities, mainly spices and cotton, were imported to Europe predominantly through the ports of Syria and Egypt.[50] Additionally, after the collapse of Mamluk rule in Egypt in 1517, the Holy Land was under Ottoman domination and the Roman popes never gave up upon the idea of yet another great crusade that would extricate the biblical sites from

[46] Johann Petitjean, 'Processus et procédures de diffusion de l'information sur la guerre turque en Italie (fin XVI^{e}–début XVII^{e} siècle)', in François Brizay, ed., *Les formes de l'échange. Communiquer, diffuser, informer, de l'antiquité au XVIIIe siècle* (Rennes, 2012), pp. 319–34, at pp. 321–2.

[47] Erizzo to the doge, 31 July 1555, Constantinople-Pera, ASV, Senato, D-DAR-C, filza 1-A, fos. 142r–143v.

[48] Bonaventura Foppolo, 'La parabola del ramo veneziano dei Tasso da Cornello a Venezia', in Tarcisio Bottani, ed., *I Tasso e le poste d'Europa* (Bergamo, 2012), pp. 27–48, at pp. 28–9.

[49] De Tassis to de Granvelle, 12 Feb. 1557, Venice, in Benavent and Bucuré, eds., *Epistolario inédito*, doc. 69, p. 153.

[50] For more, see Anastasia Stouraiti, *War, communication, and the politics of culture in early modern Venice* (Cambridge, 2023), p. 20.

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Muslim rule.[51] In this context, Braudel pointed out that Venice 'often used her notorious intelligence service as a weapon to alarm the rest of Christendom and to sustain the psychosis of the Turkish peril', in order to further its own political and economic interests.[52]

The fact that the republic served as the gatekeeper of the information flow between the East and West was likely the main reason why key European courts kept their embassies and established their postal offices in Venice. We have already seen this in the case of the Habsburgs, but the same dynamic can be discerned for the papal curia, which repeatedly tried to extricate itself not only from the republic's control of its nuncio's mail by establishing its own postal connection with Venice (which it finally did after a fierce diplomatic struggle between 1566 and 1568), but also from its dependency on Venice for news from Constantinople. This was a much more difficult objective to achieve, and collecting and forwarding the news from the Middle East therefore remained among the nuncio's chief duties.[53] 'You will be vigilant in gathering and supplying His Holiness with all information regarding the city of Venice and its territories, but especially the *avvisi* coming from the Levant and all other parts of the world, which are abundant there', mandated Pope Gregory XIII in 1573 to his newly appointed nuncio in Venice, Giambattista Castagna.[54]

Diplomatic envoys were usually granted access to the official *avvisi* from Constantinople, supplied by the office of the Venetian *bailo* in Pera, during their morning audiences with the Collegio – the steering committee of the Senate, presided over by the doge.[55] Here, they were routinely given the opportunity to obtain either a verbatim copy or a summary (*sommario*) of a lengthy news report, compiled by the secret chancery.[56] At times of growing tensions, when official channels were blocked, there was always a talkative nobleman or merchant in the Rialto willing to share the contents of freshly arrived official dispatches or private letters sent by the Venetian merchants in Constantinople. The papal nuncio Filippo Archinto justified including such semi-official information in a dispatch of 1555:

> The news reports from Constantinople included [in this dispatch] are from private sources, supplied by a friend of mine, because the Signoria has not

[51] Bruce Masters, 'Egypt and Syria under the Ottomans', in Maribel Fierro, ed., *The new Cambridge history of Islam*, vol. II, *The western Islamic world, eleventh to eighteenth centuries* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 411–35.

[52] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II* (2 vols., Berkeley, CA, 1995; orig. French edn 1966), II, p. 1081.

[53] Petitjean, 'The papal network', p. 184; and Juraj Kittler, 'Renaissance postal wars: the fight over the lucrative mail connection between Rome and Venice', in B. Crevato-Selvaggi, ed., *The proceedings of the 2nd International Congress of Postal Historians in Prato, Italy, 23–25 June, 2022* (Prato, 2024), pp. 65–94.

[54] Instructions to the new nuncio in Venice, Giambattista Castagna, 18 June 1573, Rome, in Adriana Buffardi, ed., *Nunziature di Venezia*, vol. XI (Rome, 1972), doc. 1, pp. 43–6.

[55] On the role of the Collegio, see de Vivo, *Information and communication in Venice*, pp. 37–9; Johann Petitjean, 'Compilation des nouvelles et écriture de l'actualité à Venise au XVIe siècle', *Hypothèses*, 13, no. 1 (2010), pp. 73–82, at pp. 75–9; and Petitjean, 'The papal network', p. 180.

[56] Examples of the surviving summaries of the *bailos*' reports compiled by the secret chancery between 1510 and 1615 are in ASV, Avvisi, buste 6–10.

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> published its own [*avvisi*] since they were not yet read in the Senate, but as far as I hear from those who know, their content is not that much different from what I have here.[57]

During the reigns of popes who were openly hostile to Venice, such as Pius V (1566–72), the nuncio had much more limited access to the officially compiled intelligence reports, and private persons treated him with suspicion. In such cases, the papal envoy could only signal the arrival of the postal boats to Venice in his letters to the chancery in Rome. The pope subsequently inquired about the content of the most recent *avvisi* from Constantinople when he received the Venetian ambassador, who – it was well known – was always well supplied by the Signoria with transcripts of all important newsletters because the renowned Company of Venetian Couriers operated a weekly postal connection with Rome on behalf of the republic.[58] 'I have now confirmed that just a few moments ago the frigate from Kotor arrived and it is believed that it carries letters from Constantinople', reported the nuncio Giovanni Antonio Facchinetti in one of his dispatches in 1570. 'I will inquire tomorrow and will let His Holiness know what is going on, so that you can ask the Venetian ambassador for more details.'[59]

This dispatch came at the outbreak of the Fourth Ottoman–Venetian War, fought between 1570 and 1573 over the control of Cyprus, and the Ducal Palace was preparing for an open confrontation. 'The *bailo* expedites [couriers] more frequently than usually in order to provide intelligence', reported Facchinetti, adding that the Signoria required its representative in Constantinople to keep supplying it with frequent *avvisi* so that it could assess whether the Ottomans were really getting ready for an offensive, in order 'to have enough time to start preparing the crews of its galleys and other necessary things'.[60]

V

During the Fourth Ottoman–Venetian War, the Ottoman naval blockade of the Montenegrin and Albanian coastal cities, as well as hostile attitudes on the part of the Ragusans, who depended on the sultan's good will, caused frequent disruptions of the postal route through Kotor.[61] The Ottoman forces or their

[57] Archinto to Carafa, 14 Sept. 1555, Venice, in Daniele Santarelli, *La nunziatura di Venezia sotto il papato di Paolo IV. La corrispondenza di Filippo Archinto e Antonio Trivulzio, 1555–1557* (Rome, 2010), doc. 6, pp. 50–2.

[58] It was the first known mounted postal line in Europe with a fixed weekly schedule; see Senate resolution, 4 Feb. 1541, ASV, Senato, Deliberazioni, Terra, registro 31, fos. 115r–116v.

[59] Facchinetti to Bonelli, 6 July 1570, Venice, in Aldo Stella, ed., *Nunziature di Venezia*, vol. IX (Rome, 1972), doc. 212, p. 301.

[60] Facchinetti to Bonelli, 17 Jan. 1568, Venice, in Aldo Stella, ed., *Nunziature di Venezia*, vol. VIII (Rome, 1963), doc. 191, pp. 337–9.

[61] Final report (*relazione*) by the rector of Kotor, Zaccaria Salamon, 20 July 1573, ASV, Collegio, Relazioni Finali di Ambasciatori e Pubblici Rappresentanti, busta 65, fascicolo 'Relatione del Clarissimo Messer Zaccaria Salamon, fù provveditor a Cattaro', fo. 2r.

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proxies, the local Albanian brigands, at some point blocked the entire coast all the way north to Stagno (Ston), meaning that the mail had to be carried from Kotor overland, bypassing Ragusa, to the next secure Venetian port, in Curzola (Korčula).[62] Such disturbances were seen as an opportunity by several other players. In the 1570s, both the Polish and the French royal postal services, as well as the duke of Ferrara, attempted to create their own connections with Constantinople, bypassing the Venetian postal monopoly.

In 1570, the Polish ambassador to the Sublime Porte invited the *bailo* Marcantonio Barbaro to try out an alternative overland postal route between Constantinople and Krakow. After reaching the Polish royal seat, mail from Constantinople was supposed to be forwarded through Vienna by the existing postal connection between Krakow and Venice, established in 1558.[63] Barbaro informed the doge that the Polish ambassador suggested 'that always when Your Serenity needs to write to me, the letters can be sent to Poland, and that he will find a way and means to send them to me in a fast and secure way'.[64]

There is not enough evidence to assess to what extent the postal route between Krakow and Constantinople was operationalized, although it is very unlikely that the Venetians ever relied upon its services because – despite frequent disruptions – the line between Venice, Kotor, and Constantinople remained open. Barbaro therefore politely declined the offer, trying to avoid offending the Polish ambassador in order to keep the door open.[65] In any case, the idea was short-lived because, in 1572, after the death of King Sigismund II Augustus, who had significant personal interests on the peninsula through his Milanese mother, Bona Sforza, the Polish royal post terminated its connection with Italy through Venice.[66] The position of Krakow as the main postal hub in central Europe was subsequently taken over by Habsburg Vienna.[67]

The high reputation enjoyed by the Venetian postal connection with Constantinople was a key factor that in 1561 led the French royal post to establish a shared connection between Lyon and Venice. This strategic move enabled the French king to maintain reliable contacts with his ambassadors not only in Constantinople but also in Rome, through the Company of Venetian Couriers.[68] Despite this, the French were simultaneously trying to

[62] Returning *bailo* Soranzo to the doge, 17 Aug. 1566, Ragusa, ASV, Senato, D-DAR-C, filza 1, doc. 52, fo. 265r.

[63] De Tassis to de Granvelle, 24 Jan. 1559, Venice, in Benavent and Bucuré, eds., *Epistolario inédito*, doc. 103, p. 198; and Danuta Quirini-Poplawska, *Sebastiano Montelupi, toscano, mercante e maestro della Posta Reale a Cracovia* (Prato, 1989).

[64] Barbaro to the doge, 18 June 1570, Constantinople-Pera, ASV, Senato, D-DAR-C, filza 5, doc. 30, fo. 148r–v.

[65] Ibid., fo. 148v.

[66] Quirini-Poplawska, *Sebastiano Montelupi*, pp. 43–9.

[67] Ottavio Codogno, *Nuovo itinerario delle poste per tutto il mondo* (Milan, 1616), pp. 122–3, 195–6.

[68] Proposal presented by the French ambassador in Venice, François de Noailles, c. 1561, ASV, Compagnia dei Corrieri, Seconda Serie, busta 34, fos. 9r–10v, 13r–14v; and Senate resolution, 24 May 1561, ASV, Senato, Deliberazioni, Secreti, registro 72, fo. 75v.

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establish independent channels of communication – in particular with the Sublime Porte.[69] The main reason for this was the fact that handling the royal mail gave the Venetians an opportunity to intercept diplomatic communications between the French and Ottoman courts that were very sensitive due to the relentless pursuit of military and political alliances between the two powers during the sixteenth century.[70]

It is therefore not surprising that, in the wake of Venice's loss of Cyprus to the Ottomans in 1571, the French crown seized the opportunity and started negotiating a series of separate agreements with the Sublime Porte. The French king dispatched François de Noailles, the bishop of Dax and his outgoing ambassador in Venice, as his new envoy to Constantinople. Part of de Noailles's strategy was to establish an alternative postal line through Ragusa, in order to avoid Venetian tampering with French diplomatic mail. Subsequently, the papal nuncio in Venice, Giambattista Castagna, reported on 12 August 1573 that the first French postal courier from Constantinople reached Venice 'with such a speed that it was deemed extreme'.[71]

In his next dispatch, the nuncio confirmed his previous observations, describing the frequent arrival of couriers servicing the new French postal route with Constantinople as 'an extraordinary thing never used before'. This development obviously caught the attention of the secretive Council of Ten in Venice, which started investigating the efforts to undermine the republic's postal hegemony in the Middle East. Castagna saw de Noailles's hand behind all of this, describing him as a man 'who put everything together in an instant, suggesting that work on some important treaty is underway'.[72]

The project was short-lived, but the French court continued looking with suspicion at Venetian authorities who handled its correspondence. This was especially because, during the plague outbreak of 1575–7, the Provveditori alla Sanità (the public health office in Venice) began systematically opening and disinfecting mail, in particular letters arriving from the Middle East. This experience created a precedent, and Venetian authorities continued using it as an excuse to screen private as well as diplomatic mail.[73] In essence, while the Republic of Venice did not have an officially designated 'black chamber' in which the mail was surveilled by the government, the office of the Provveditori alla Sanità ably replaced such an institution under the pretext of sanitary measures.[74] In 1587, the French ambassador in Constantinople, Jacques Savary, openly challenged this practice with the Venetian *bailo* and

[69] De Tassis to de Granvelle, 22 Dec. 1560, Venice, in Benavent and Bucuré, eds., *Epistolario inédito*, doc. 134, p. 236. For more on the French crown's attempts to establish a postal connection with Constantinople, see E. John B. Allen, *Post and courier service in the diplomacy of early modern Europe* (The Hague, 1972), pp. 85–7.

[70] De Lamar Jensen, 'The Ottoman Turks in sixteenth century French diplomacy', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 16, no. 4 (1985), pp. 451–70, at pp. 462–3.

[71] Castagna to Galli, 12 Aug. 1573, Venice, in Buffardi, ed., *Nunziature di Venezia*, XI, doc. 15, pp. 64–6.

[72] Castagna to Galli, 22 Aug. 1573, Venice, in ibid., doc. 17, pp. 67–9.

[73] De Zanche, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, p. 104.

[74] Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia*, p. 293; and Iordanou, *Venice's secret service*, pp. 132–3.

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suggested, with overt irony, that from now on his king would start sending his letters unsealed, to make it easier for the Venetian authorities to read them.[75]

Separately from the French, the duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II d'Este, was trying to cut his own deal with the Ottomans in the 1570s. He attempted to secure the unexpectedly vacated Polish-Lithuanian throne after the recently crowned Polish king, Henri de Valois, secretly left the country in 1574 in order to claim the French crown.[76] To keep Poland outside the Ottoman–Hungarian conflict was one of the primary objectives of the Polish electors, and this required the establishment of a secure communication channel between Ferrara and Constantinople. In May 1575 the papal chancery informed its nuncio Castagna in a coded dispatch that, according to a knowledgeable source, the duke of Ferrara had 'already secured the support of the sultan in his quest for the Polish throne, which was confirmed to him by a dispatch from there [Constantinople]'.

The papal secretary of state, Tolomeo Galli, therefore tasked the nuncio in Venice with using his connections to verify the information and to see by what means the duke was able to establish a communication channel with the Sublime Porte.[77] Castagna excluded any possible involvement of the French, Habsburg, or Venetian postal systems and speculated that either it must have been Polish couriers operating between Constantinople and Krakow or – more likely – the messages were carried overland on the old courier road between Constantinople and Ragusa, and from there were picked up by a boat that landed in the delta of the Po river on territory under the duke's control.[78] In any case, neither the d'Este court in Ferrara nor the French or Polish attempt to organize courier connections with Constantinople had any lasting effect, and the Venetians continued to enjoy an almost absolute monopoly on the long-distance communication between Europe and the Middle East during the subsequent two centuries.[79]

VI

In the aftermath of the Fourth Ottoman–Venetian War, Kotor strengthened its position as the western terminal of the Balkan overland crossing but, in the meantime, the Drago family involvement with the Venetian courier services had petered out for unknown reasons. Hieronymo Zaguri, whose family had previously helped Venice to maintain its control over Kotor, oversaw the service during the following five years, but even he renounced the contract, again for unknown reasons.[80] In 1578, the Venetian Senate therefore issued a new decree that put the postal route between Venice and Constantinople in the hands of yet another prominent family from Kotor, that of Giovanni Bolizza

[75] Dursteler, 'Power and influence', pp. 618–20.

[76] Castagna to Galli, 28 Aug. 1574 and 18 Sept. 1574, Venice, in Buffardi, ed., *Nunziature di Venezia*, XI, doc. 169, pp. 246–8, and doc. 176, pp. 253–4.

[77] Galli to Castagna, 21 May 1575, Rome, in ibid., doc. 365, p. 273.

[78] Castagna to Galli, 28 May 1575, Venice, in ibid., doc. 270, pp. 376–9.

[79] De Zanche, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, pp. 117–19.

[80] *Dizionario storico-portatile di tutte le venete patrizie famiglie* (Venice, 1780), p. 161.

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and his brothers. They had previously supervised the networks of Venetian spies in Dalmatia and the Balkans, which included the interception of letters to and from the Middle East dispatched by various international players through Ragusa in order to bypass the Venetian surveillance mechanism.[81]

The choice of the Bolizza family proved fortuitous since, under its management, the Balkan connection reached its full potential, becoming one of the most important postal lines in Europe.[82] The operational framework outlined in the new 1578 postal contract followed almost verbatim the one signed in 1535 with the Drago family, but it contained precious additional information. For example, couriers were now sent out in pairs as a rule – a practice informally introduced during the previous decades. Despite the strong inflationary trends typical for the last decades of the sixteenth century, the overall cost of the service actually slightly decreased.[83] Instead of 20 or 25 ducats paid previously to the Drago family for each expedition, depending upon the season, the new arrangements set the cost at 20 or 25 thalers respectively, which was a denomination approximately 3 per cent less valuable than the Venetian ducat.[84] Elsewhere, we learn that each pair actually received 15 thalers to cover expenses incurred during summer journeys and 20 for those in the winter, while the remaining 5 thalers ended up in the pockets of the Bolizza brothers as a premium for organizing the service.[85]

The summer itinerary between Kotor and Constantinople was originally divided into eighteen daily stages, while the seaborne part of the passage was up to the mercy of the weather and added at least another ten to fourteen days to the overall duration of the journey (Figure 1).[86] After the completion of each round trip, the Montenegrin couriers returned to their family farms and had to be summoned when their next turn came.[87] The rector in Kotor and the *bailo* in Constantinople were able to offer individual carriers extra rewards through an *avantaggio* contract if they needed to speed up a particular delivery.[88] But the new arrangement also contained a system of scaled deductions that applied if the carriers missed their delivery deadlines.[89]

[81] Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia*, pp. 240–3, 250, 253, 295–6, 310.

[82] Senate resolution, 19 Dec. 1578, and contract with Bolizza, ASV, Senato, D-M, registro 44, fos. 94v–96v.

[83] Douglas Fisher, 'The price revolution: a monetary interpretation', *Journal of Economic History*, 49, no. 4 (1989), pp. 883–902.

[84] ASV, Senato, D-M, registro 44, fos. 94v–95r. One Venetian ducat was worth 124 soldi, while one thaler was worth 120 soldi.

[85] Mariano Bolizza, 'Relatione et descrittione del sangiacato de Scuttari', in F. Lenormant, ed., *Turcs et Monténégrins* (Paris, 1866), p. 320. The original is in Biblioteca nazionale Marciana, Venice, Manoscritti italiani, classe IV, no. 176 (=5879).

[86] Bolizza, 'Relatione et descrittione', p. 321; and De Zanche, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, p. 25, n. 18.

[87] Senate resolution, 19 Dec. 1578, ASV, Senato, D-M, registro 44, fo. 95r; and Bolizza, 'Relatione et descrittione', pp. 295, 320.

[88] Senate resolution, 19 Dec. 1578, ASV, Senato, D-M, registro 44, fo. 95r.

[89] Bragadin to the doge, 10 Dec. 1604, Kotor, ASV, Senato, Dispacci, Dispacci dei Rettori, Dalmazia (D-DR-D), busta 3, searchable by date.

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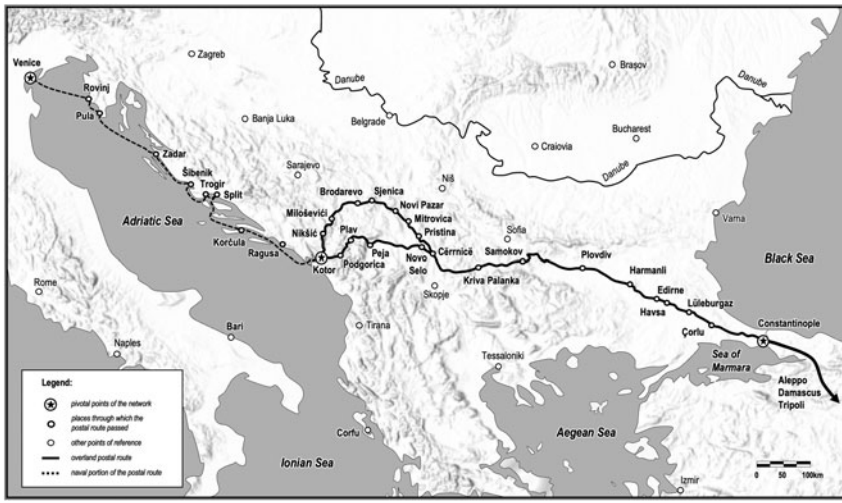

Figure 1. The Venetian postal connection with Constantinople under Bolizza family management in the early seventeenth century. The alternative overland route through the tribal territories of the Pliesivci and Droniaci (Nikšić) clans, and then through Brodarevo, Novi Pazar, Mitrovica, and Pristina, was developed in the aftermath of a 1602–4 revolt that put the region of Podgorica in turmoil. It extended the overall duration of the journey from eighteen to twenty-two days. From Constantinople, the mail was carried further overland in order to reach merchant communities in today's Syria (Aleppo and Damascus) and Lebanon (Tripoli). Sources: for the sea route, see Codogno, *Nuovo itinerario*, p. 237; for the overland route see Bolizza, 'Relatione et descrittione', fo. 35r. See also de Zanche, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, p. 22; and Antal Molnár, 'A forgotten bridgehead between Rome, Venice, and the Ottoman Empire: Cattaro and the Balkan missions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *Hungarian Historical Review*, 3, no. 3 (2014), pp. 494–528, at p. 502.

As with the postal contract with the Drago family, Giovanni Bolizza and his brothers were expected to organize a small fleet of boats to move mail between Kotor and Venice. However, while in 1535 the Drago family was required to equip only two to three frigates or brigantines for this purpose, in 1578 the Bolizza brothers were mandated to maintain four postal boats. Every fully armed vessel was to have a crew of eight rowers, who were each paid 4 ducats per round trip.[90] Ultimately, the contract with the Bolizza family included an annual sum of about 50 ducats allocated for the payments of tributes that were 'ordinarily given to the three counts of Montenegro, Turkish vassals, whose men accompany couriers through their territories in order to increase the security of their journey'.[91]

[90] Senate resolution, 19 Dec. 1578, ASV, Senato, D-M, registro 44, fo. 94v.
[91] Ibid., fo. 95r.

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VII

In Constantinople, the *bailo*'s compound in Pera also served as the Venetian postal office.[92] The gathering, sorting, and disbursing of mail was likely an ungrateful task, since one of the *baili* pleaded with the doge in 1588 to be freed from this burden, complaining that it was 'certainly the greatest bother to me, as I hear continual arguments from the merchants about this matter'.[93] While waiting for their expeditions, the Montenegrin couriers stayed in a secluded garden house that was part of the *bailo*'s residence; this was a precautionary measure in case they picked up a contagious disease during their travels. Indeed, the five exhausted couriers who reached Kotor in 1604 reported that 'the plague progresses rapidly in Constantinople, even at the residence of signor *bailo* where two couriers have already died, and one of his staff members is infected'.[94]

Early plague warnings such as this were an additional benefit that the Signoria drew from the postal connection with Constantinople, since they enabled the authorities in Venice to mobilize a system of sanitary measures before the disease reached the city.[95] Even when the plague was not imminent, after the postal frigates from Kotor landed at one of the quays in the St Mark basin facing the Ducal Palace, all mail from the Middle East was routinely inspected and treated with disinfectants at the nearby office of the Provveditori alla Sanità in Terra Nuova. The presence of a secretary from the secret ducal chancery was required in order to open the wooden box marked by a capital letter 'S' that stood for Signoria, in which the bags of mail – sealed in waxed canvas to protect them from sea humidity – were transported from Kotor.[96] Only after the ducal correspondence had been read in the governing councils were the letters addressed to other diplomatic representations, as well as to private parties in Venice, dispensed at the office of the *bollatore ducale* in the Ducal Palace, which was also in charge of collecting mail departing for Constantinople.[97]

The overland portion of the route between Kotor and Constantinople (see Figure 1) was described in detail in the 1614 report authored by one of the members of the Bolizza family.[98] On their way, the couriers probably also carried letters to other places in the Balkans, despite the fact that the 1535 contract explicitly forbade them to collect any additional postage for such mail.[99] However, Dursteler argues that this measure was never strictly observed.[100] For example, the earliest surviving (1616) version of a famous postal guide

[92] For more on the couriers' social position see Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople*, pp. 25–6; Dursteler, 'Power and influence', p. 611; and Bolizza, 'Relatione et descrittione', pp. 295 and 320.

[93] Cited in Dursteler, 'Power and influence', p. 610.

[94] Bragadin to the doge, 12 Oct. 1604, Kotor, ASV, Senato, D-DR-D, busta 3, by date.

[95] Bragadin to the doge, 21 Sept. 1604, Kotor, in ibid., busta 3, by date.

[96] Da Mollin to the doge, 8 Nov. 1602, Kotor, in ibid., busta 1, by date. On the usage of waxed canvas, see Senate resolution, 19 Dec. 1578, ASV, Senato, D-M, registro 44, fo. 94v.

[97] Codogno, *Nuovo itinerario*, p. 286.

[98] Bolizza, 'Relatione et descrittione', p. 321.

[99] Senate resolution, 28 Jan. 1535, ASV, Senato, D-M, registro 23, fo. 79v.

[100] Dursteler, 'Power and influence', pp. 606, 610–11.

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authored by Ottavio Codogno recommended that from Venice one could send mail not only to a series of destinations along the main postal route but likewise to several remote places in Morea such as Patras, Mistra, or Corinth.[101]

This suggests the existence of yet another, secondary network of local mail carriers operating within the Balkans, who may have been tied to the network of caravanserais in which the Montenegrin couriers likely stayed overnight. The main postal route had no shortage of such establishments and several of them were described by Hans Dernschwam, who used their services during his 1553–5 journey to and from Constantinople.[102] On his return, Dernschwam actually ran into one of the couriers carrying Venetian mail, who was walking with a stick 'in the manner of simple peasants or Wallachs'. He was accompanied by an Arnaut (a generic name for ethnic Albanian soldiers), who was likely a hired armed guide.[103]

During the sea passage to and from Kotor, the Venetian postal brigantines had to drop anchor in several ports along the Dalmatian and Istrian coast, where they gathered and disbursed the official government mail. Again, there are some indications that their crew members also handled private letters in order to earn additional income, although this was prohibited by the official regulations.[104] In this context, Codogno's 1616 postal guide suggests that the postal brigantines informally serviced ports in Senj, Zadar, Sibenik, Split, locations in Morlacco (Bosnia), and Ragusa.[105] Since this was a clandestine activity, the sailors were forced to hide illegally transported letters from the authorities, which became a problem when the Venetian authorities wanted to systematically disinfect all mail arriving from the East. Therefore, in order to encourage the crews of the postal frigates to declare the contraband, this practice was finally legalized in 1620.[106]

VIII

After the Ottoman takeover of the Mamluk empire in 1517, mail from the Venetian commercial enclaves operating in the territories historically known as Soria (Syria), which includes modern-day Lebanon, also started to flow through the *bailo*'s office in Constantinople. Venetian merchants were concentrated mainly in Damascus, Aleppo, and the port of Tripoli; during the sixteenth century, the three cities in turn hosted the republic's consulate that organized expeditions of couriers carrying mail to Venice.[107] After they

[101] Codogno, *Nuovo itinerario*, p. 237.

[102] Franz Babinger, ed., *Hans Dernschwam's Tagebuch. Einer Reise nach Konstantinopel und Kleinasien, 1553–1555* (Berlin, 1923), p. 23 (18 Aug. 1553).

[103] Ibid., p. 242 (5 July 1555). For more on the term Arnaut, see Noel Malcolm, *Rebels, believers, survivors: studies in the history of the Albanians* (Oxford, 2020), p. 135.

[104] Senate resolution, 14 Mar. 1620, ASV, Provveditori e Sporaprovveditori alla Sanità, Atti (PSS-A), registro 3, fo. 107r.

[105] Codogno, *Nuovo itinerario*, p. 237.

[106] Senate resolution, 14 Mar. 1620, ASV, PSS-A, registro 3, fo. 107r–v.

[107] Guglielmo Berchet, *Relazioni dei consoli veneti nella Siria* (Turin, 1866), pp. 11–12, 18–19, 55; and Lane, *Venice*, p. 186.

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reached Constantinople, the bags of mail from Syria were taken to the *bailo*'s office in Pera and from there were dispatched through the usual overland passage to Kotor and subsequently by boat to Venice.[108] However, the mail from Syria was kept separate from the letters collected in Constantinople, since its transfer was financed from a different consular budget.[109] That budget was known as *cottimo* and was synonymous with a special tax imposed on imports from particular trading regions, through which the republic financed its corresponding consulates abroad.[110]

De Zanche pointed out that the registers of letters kept by the *bailo* Alessandro Contarini between 1545 and 1547 contain the records of dozens of letters sent from his office in Pera to the Venetian merchant communities in Damascus, Aleppo, and Tripoli, some reaching even Alexandria or Cyprus.[111] For example, before leaving for an extended sojourn in Adrianople (Edirne) in December 1546 to follow the sultan's court, Contarini instructed his vice-*bailo* Giovanni Priuli, who was temporarily put in charge of the office in Pera, to keep forwarding to him 'all of your mail as well as the letters of our merchants, and those coming from Syria, so that I can from time to time expedite them for Venice'.[112]

The existence of the overland postal connection with Syria was further discussed in a memo sent by Contarini from Adrianople with instructions for Priuli the following month. 'Today at noon I received letters from Venice, among them also many for our merchants as well as those addressed to Your Magnificence, which I am sending with this courier', wrote Contarini. 'After you receive them, distribute them immediately to whom they are addressed, as usual.' In the next sentence, he recommended that the vice-*bailo* 'should expedite a courier to Aleppo with those [letters] addressed to our merchants that are recorded just below the list of letters addressed to our merchants in Pera'.[113]

In 1548, a Senate decree mandated the consul in Aleppo to send couriers to Constantinople four times a year at a cost of 10 ducats per courier, implying that each expedition may have involved several carriers. Similarly, the consul was to dispatch regional messengers ten times a year carrying mail between various Venetian merchant enclaves operating in the territories under his jurisdiction within Syria. In this case, the cost of each dispatch was limited to 2 ducats.[114]

The frequency of mail expeditions from Syria was obviously mainly limited by their significant cost, but there were other issues at play as well. While it

[108] Éric Vallet, *Marchands vénitiens en Syrie à la fin du XVe siècle* (Paris, 1999), pp. 165–85.

[109] See Barbarigo to the doge, 18 Mar. 1575, Constantinople-Pera, ASV, Senato, D-DAR-C, filza 12, doc. 2, fo. 13r; and Bragadin to the doge, 21 Sept. 1604, Kotor, ASV, Senato, D-DR-D, busta 3, by date.

[110] ASV, Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia, serie I, registro 947, fos. 144v–145r (23 Nov. 1548).

[111] ASV, Senato, APA-C, filza 1, fascicolo 3bis; see also De Zanche, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, pp. 52–3, n. 14.

[112] Contarini to Priuli, 26 Dec. 1546, Adrianople, ASV, Senato, APA-C, filza 1, fascicolo 3bis, fo. 82v.

[113] Contarini to Priuli, 9 Jan. 1547, Adrianople, in ibid., fos. 82r–83v.

[114] ASV, Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia, serie I, registro 947, fos. 144v–145r (23 Nov. 1548).

was in the best interest of the sedentary merchants operating out of Venice to receive frequent reports from the factors representing their interests in Syria, it was likewise in the best interest of their local factors to limit the means by which their principals in Venice could control their actions. Such inherent tension is captured in the countless deliberations of the Senate and the Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia, the Venetian board of trade, which oversaw the consulate in Syria.[115] In any case, the merchant houses stationed in Venice dominated this debate and under their pressure the frequency of annual mail expeditions increased in a matter of a few years. During the 1560s, the Senate resolutions routinely talk about monthly expeditions of mail between Syria and Constantinople financed through the *cottimo*, in addition to private courier dispatches funded by individual merchants or their associations.[116]

It is true that, during the sixteenth century, Venetian trade in Syria was in steady decline and the system of annual state galleys dispatched to the eastern Mediterranean was breaking down.[117] Nevertheless, in the 1590s there were still sixteen expatriate Venetian firms, mainly with offices in Aleppo, whose annual volume of trade amounted to 2 million ducats.[118] Yet, in 1593, the outgoing consul in Syria, Tommaso Contarini, complained that the *cottimo* tax was barely able to cover the 7,000 ducats that he spent on couriers during his three-year tenure, or over 2,300 ducats annually – about half of his consular budget.[119] This meant that the monthly expenditure on couriers amounted to almost 200 ducats, covering the entire journey from Syria to Venice.[120] In 1596, Contarini's successor, Alessandro Malipiero, similarly ranked three items among the highest expenses of the consulate in Syria: salaries of the consular staff; gifts and bribes paid to Ottoman officials; and the cost of couriers.[121]

IX

The mid-1540s brought the first indications that couriers operating between Kotor and Constantinople had to be sent out in pairs, a practice that was to become a staple feature in forthcoming decades. The original reason may have been their personal security, but increasingly it would have been the exponentially growing volumes of transported mail.[122] Subsequently, we can

[115] See a series of Senate deliberations in ibid., registro 24.

[116] Senate deliberation, 2 Nov. 1596, ASV, Senato, D-M, registro 56, fo. 128r.

[117] The last annual fleet of state galleys to Alexandria was sent in 1564, while the last fleet to Syria sailed in 1570; see Lane, *Venice*, pp. 348–52.

[118] Final reports (*relazioni*) by two outgoing consuls in Syria, Tommaso Contarini (1593) and Alessandro Malipiero (1596), in Berchet, *Relazioni dei consoli veneti*, pp. 77, 80.

[119] Final report by the outgoing consul in Syria, Tommaso Contarini (1593), in ibid., p. 77.

[120] Barbarigo to the doge, 18 Mar. 1575, Constantinople-Pera, ASV, Senato, D-DAR-C, filza 12, doc. 2, fo. 13r; Bragadin to the doge, 21 Sept. 1604, Kotor, ASV, Senato, D-DR-D, busta 3, by date.

[121] Final report by the outgoing consul in Syria, Alessandro Malipiero (1596), in Berchet, *Relazioni dei consoli veneti*, p. 81.

[122] Contarini to the Venetian rector in Kotor, 19 Dec. 1546, Constantinople-Pera, ASV, Senato, APA-C, filza 1, fascicolo 3bis, fo. 81r–v.

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sense the earliest signals that the system was stretched too thin, since there were not enough experienced carriers to support it.

In 1562, the *bailo* Daniele Barbarigo complained that the rector in Kotor had sent him *due mude di Rodi*, which was likely a disparaging reference to two pairs of couriers who were too weak to endure the entire journey and had to return to their home base. The third pair, who finally made it to Constantinople, had no time to rest after reaching the *bailo*'s residence but had to embark on the return journey almost immediately because there was no one else left to carry mail back to Kotor.[123] Such concerns were echoed in a 1566 dispatch sent by the *bailo* Giacomo Soranzo: 'I am not able to find another courier for any money, neither it is possible to send many letters that need to be expedited on behalf of the merchants in Syria and Alexandria.'[124]

The postal connection was collapsing under the weight of its own success, and funding its operations became increasingly difficult. This, at least, was the conclusion of a detailed analysis aimed at the financial reform of the office in Constantinople, undertaken in 1569 by the *bailo* Marcantonio Barbaro.[125] Its author concluded that the income from the *cottimo* tax was far too low to cover even the basic expenses of his office, not including the couriers. He therefore argued that the merchant community should be required to contribute towards the financial cost of the postal service that was essential for its own prosperity. His proposal conveyed the most comprehensive image thus far about the service's overall cost over the two-year period of an average *bailo*'s tenure (*bailaggio*). 'If we consider only two expeditions a month, each worth 20 ducats, this adds 960 ducats of expense to the *bailo*'s office', asserted Barbaro. The service of the frigates moving the mail between Kotor and Venice roughly doubled the cost, increasing it to 2,000 ducats. The daily allowance provided to the couriers during their stay in Constantinople, as well as the seamen's biscuits given to the brigantine crews in Venice, each added another 500 ducats to the overall expenditures incurred during an average *bailaggio*, bringing the total to 3,000 ducats.[126]

Barbaro calculated that, while for the needs of his own office a single pair of couriers would be sufficient, 'the high volume of merchants' letters requires to expedite often four or six men at once, which doubles or triples the expense'. In his estimation, this added at least another 1,000 ducats, bringing the total cost of the postal connection between Venice and Constantinople to 4,000 ducats per *bailaggio* or 2,000 ducats annually by the end of the 1560s.[127] This was almost a tenfold increase compared to the 200 ducats spent on couriers in the mid-1520s by the *bailo* Piero Bragadin, and a steep increase from the 1,400 ducats reported by the *bailo* Marino Cavalli just a decade earlier.[128] However, to this sum must be added the expenses that the

[123] Barbarigo to the doge, 23 Sept. 1562, Constantinople-Pera, ASV, Senato, D-DAR-C, filza 3-C, doc. 76, fo. 227r.

[124] Soranzo to the doge, 3 Aug. 1566, Constantinople-Pera, ibid., filza 1, fo. 229r.

[125] Barbaro to the doge, 8 Jan. 1569, Constantinople-Pera, in ibid., filza 3, fos. 363r–364v.

[126] Ibid., fo. 364r.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Dursteler, 'Power and influence', p. 615.

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republic incurred on the separate postal line with Syria. In 1587, the Signoria's annual expenditure on the two postal connections with the Middle East was assessed at the enormous sum of 5,705 ducats.[129]

X

In order to protect its postal hegemony in the Levant, the Signoria continued to heavily subsidize the couriers who carried not only letters of the Venetian merchants and the diplomatic mail of the rest of Europe, but also increasing quantities of private correspondence sent by non-Venetian subjects. This assertion is implied in a series of dispatches sent in 1625 by the *bailo* Giorgio Giustiniani to the Senate, who raised the issue with the expatriate Venetian merchant community and suggested that the easiest way to balance the budget of his office would be by charging postage to the foreign nationals for letters carried by the Venetian posts to and from Constantinople:

> Those living in Pera (*Peroti*), Jews, Florentines, and everyone send more letters than our people. I believe that we could reduce this cost … by them paying Your Lordships for the portion and weight of their letters, [and in this way] more than half the expenses would be covered.[130]

Giustiniani's proposal insinuated that over half of the mail carried by the couriers between Constantinople and Kotor was sent by foreign nationals, which further explains why demands on the service grew so dramatically. While the earliest surviving contract from 1535 required the Drago family to equip two or three mail frigates sailing between Venice and Kotor, in 1578 the number was increased to four, and in 1616 there were five boats with forty sailors employed full time in this service.[131] Similarly, the number of couriers walking the postal route between Kotor and Constantinople was growing every decade. An operation that started in 1535 with just 10 men by 1614 employed a cohort of 150 couriers working in pairs.[132]

The original signatory of the postal contract with Venice, Giovanni Bolizza, died in 1604, but his family continued managing the service during the following century.[133] Due to the Bolizzas' religious zeal, that service also became an essential tool used by the papal office of the Propaganda Fide for missionary work, in its attempt to keep Christianity alive in the Balkans under Ottoman rule.[134] It is noteworthy to point out in this context that, by the beginning of the seventeenth century, the officials administering the postal connection

[129] Ibid.

[130] Giustinian to the Senate, 27 Aug. 1625, Constantinople-Pera, in ibid., p. 616. The original document is no longer consultable owing to its physical deterioration.

[131] De Zanche, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, pp. 25–6.

[132] Bolizza, 'Relatione et descrittione', p. 320.

[133] Bragadin to the doge, 4 Dec. 1604, Kotor, ASV, Senato, D-DR-D, busta 3, by date.

[134] Antal Molnár, 'A forgotten bridgehead between Rome, Venice, and the Ottoman Empire: Cattaro and the Balkan missions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *Hungarian Historical Review*, 3, no. 3 (2014), pp. 494–528.

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between Venice and Constantinople increasingly framed it as 'public service' – although this meant mainly service to the government.[135]

At the same time, the fact that the Signoria continued to subsidize the mail transfer and provided the service for free to the rest of Europe secured it continuous control over the flow of information between the West and the East. In 1640 the outgoing *bailo* Alvise Contarini extolled the strategic role of this long-distance communication line, framing it as a lynchpin of Venetian diplomatic undertakings in the international arena: 'It is obvious that Your Excellencies control all affairs of Constantinople through the control of its mail, which our ancestors – aware of the importance of our interests with that court – always dreamed about and desired.' For all of this, he added, the Signoria 'should be grateful to Cavaliere Bolizza from Kotor, because nobody can hold a candle to his services provided in those parts of the world'.[136]

XI

In a very explicit way, Contarini's bold statement further validates the assertion made by Dursteler, who claimed that the monopolization of mail exchange with Constantinople was a deliberate political strategy, a calculated investment through which the Republic of Venice secured for itself a set of sizeable political and economic advantages. It likewise reveals the large degree to which early modern states already had a clear grasp of the strategic value of long-distance communications. In the case of Venice, such comprehensive control over the information flows between the Levant and the Ponent clearly helped to extend the republic's political and diplomatic relevance on the international stage long after the loss of its naval authority on the seas, its military dominance on Italian soil, and ultimately its economic status.

As the savio grande Antonio Loredan put it shortly after the traumatizing debacle at Agnadello in 1509, the Venetian ruling elites firmly believed that, in order to keep safeguarding the interests of the republic, hard power or 'the strength of soldiery or walls' was not enough; they also had to use the soft power of 'simulation or reward … to quell this enemy by mildness and that one by menaces; to search out the secrets of the world, sending one's mind in an instant to every single part of it'.[137] Traditionally, historians have been acutely aware of this propensity, conveyed in countless government documents, as well as in intelligence dispatches, preserved in the Venetian archives and elsewhere. However, while students of history remained mostly distracted by the message, focusing on the contents of the epistolary exchange, the technical and material means by which it was transmitted were left largely unnoticed. This despite the fact that it was Marshall McLuhan who

[135] Da Mollin to the doge, 8 Nov. 1602, Kotor, ASV, Senato, D-DR-D, busta 1, by date.

[136] See 'Relazione di Alvise Contarini 1640', in Nicolò Barozzi and Guglielmo Berchet, eds., *Le relazioni degli stati europei lette al Senato dagli ambasciatori veneziani in secolo decimosettimo, Turchia*, vol. I, part 1 (Venice, 1871), pp. 321–434, at p. 431.

[137] Reported in a letter by Luigi Da Porto, 1 Oct. 1509, in David Chambers and Brian Pullan, eds., *Venice: a documentary history, 1450–1630* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 268–71, at p. 271.

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admonished us many years ago that the medium may at times be at least as important as the message itself.[138]

It is, indeed, almost inexplicable to see how little attention has so far been dedicated to the channels through which the early modern world communicated, in this case to the networks of pedestrian – and later also mounted – postal couriers.[139] Even in Italy, a country that is seen as the birthplace of Western public postal systems, postal history remains a discipline kept alive mainly by local and regional amateur historians, many of whom are also stamp and postal paraphernalia collectors. There is inherently nothing wrong with that, but they are neither formally trained historians nor communication scholars and as such are not aware of the cutting-edge debates within the scholarly communities with which their research overlaps. Likewise, the scholarly communities are often unaware of their important work and their potential contributions to those debates.[140]

This predicament may already be slowly changing. During the past decade, both media scholars and communication historians have repeatedly called for a material turn or an emphasis on materiality of information, centred on political economies, techniques and technologies, physical spaces, and geographies.[141] This applies equally to the challenges posed by new media and to those presented by old-fashioned technologies, and a focus on postal histories and the role performed by postal services during the early modern period may become one of the most consequential results of this trend.[142] It was Wolfgang Behringer who notably labelled the rise of the postal network as the first stepping stone in a long line of communications revolutions that ushered in modernity.[143] If such a new ontological approach were fully embraced by historians, the early modern postal network would be seen not only as an instrument used by an empire to convey political intelligence, advance long-distance trade, conduct espionage and surveillance, or foster state-building – the dynamics addressed by this article – but also as one promoting literacy and the rise of the republics of letters and knowledge networks, as well

[138] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media: the extensions of man* (New York, NY, 1964), pp. 7–23.

[139] For a few exceptions, see Mark Brayshay, *Land travel and communications in Tudor and Stuart England: achieving a joined-up realm* (Liverpool, 2014); Kittler, 'Capitalism and communications'; and Rachel Midura, *Postal intelligence: the Tassis family and communications revolution in early modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY, in press).

[140] Among the most prolific and respected postal historians in Italy are Tarcisio Bottani, Bruno Caizzi, Adriano Cattani, Aldo Cecchi, Bruno Crevato-Selvaggi, Luciano De Zanche, Clemente Fedele, Bonaventura Foppolo, Giorgio Migliavacca, Franco Rigo, Armando Serra, Paolo Vollmeier, and Luigi Weiss.

[141] For example, see Jeremy Packer and Stephen B. Crofts Wiley, *Communication matters: materialist approaches to media, mobility, and networks* (New York, NY, 2012); John Nerone, 'Introduction: the history of paper and public space', *Media History*, 21, no. 1 (2015), pp. 1–7; Filippo de Vivo, 'Microhistories of long-distance information: space, movement and agency in the early modern news', *Past & Present*, 242, no. 14 (2019), pp. 179–214, at pp. 181, 187; and John, 'Debating new media', pp. 326–31.

[142] See John, 'Debating new media', p. 339.

[143] Behringer, 'Communications revolutions', p. 372.

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as improvements in transportation infrastructure that ultimately resulted in dramatic changes to personal mobility during this period.

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