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POWER AND INFORMATION:
THE VENETIAN POSTAL SYSTEM
IN THE EARLY MODERN EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

During the early modern era, Venice was famed among contemporaries as an information clearinghouse, particularly on matters relating to the Ottoman Empire. Francis I stated, «nothing true comes from Constantinople, save by way of Venice», a view echoed by Süleyman the Magnificent, who said the Venetians could «find out what the fish are doing at the bottom of the sea».¹ More recent scholarship has supported this anecdotal view: Pierre Sardella, in his pioneering work, described Venice as «the most important information agency» of the early modern world. Other studies have characterized Venice as «the leading center of information and communication in Europe», and «the nerve center of a vast network of communication».² If scholars have now shown that early modern Europe possessed a number of other major and minor information centers, and that from 1550 to 1650 Rome may have rivaled

Abbreviations (all archival sources are located in the Archivio di stato di Venezia (ASV) unless otherwise indicated): APC (Archivi propri-Costantinopoli), BAC (Bailo a Costantinopoli), CapiX-Lett (Capi del consiglio di dieci-Lettere di ambasciatori), CollRel (Collegio-Relazioni), DonàR (Donà delle Rose; Museo Correr-Venice), InqStat (Inquisitori di Stato), IT VII (MS. Italiano, classe VII; Biblioteca Marciana-Venice), RubriCST (Rubricarii di Costantinopoli), SDC (Senato Dispacci-Costantinopoli), SDCop (Senato Dispacci-Copie Moderne), SDelC (Senato Deliberazioni-Costantinopoli), SMar (Senato-Mar), VSM (V Savi alla mercanzia).

¹ L. KINROSS, *The Ottoman Centuries*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1977, pp. 175, 197; P. COLES, *The Ottoman Impact on Europe*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1968, pp. 133-134.

² P. SARDELLA, *Nouvelles et spéculations à Venise au début du XVI^e siècle*, Paris, Librairie Armand Colin, 1949, p. 10; R. QUATREFAGES, *La Perception gouvernementale espagnole de l'alliance franco-turque au XVI^e siècle*, «Revue internationale d'histoire militaire», LVIII, 1987, p. 74; P. BURKE, *Early Modern Venice as a Center of Information and Communication*, in *Venice Reconsidered*, eds. John Martin and Dennis Romano, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, pp. 389-390. Also B. SIMON, *I rappresentanti diplomatici veneziani a Costantinopoli*, in *Venezia e i turchi: Scontri e confronti di due civiltà*, Milan, Electa editrice, 1985, p. 65; A. VENTURA, *Introduction*, in *Relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al senato*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1976, p. I: VIII.

Venice at least in terms of the circulation of political information,³ none have questioned Venice's dominance in news from the Porte.⁴

While Venice's domination of the flow of information to and from early modern Constantinople is unquestioned, the means and motivation for this are more obscure. This lacuna mirrors a broader one identified by Wolfgang Behringer, who has argued that although scholars have done significant work on many facets of early modern communication history – the history of the book, the rise of broadsheets, the republic of letters – they have often ignored the mechanisms and political implications of the transmission of information.⁵ In this paper I will argue that for a time during the early modern period, Venice 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. In the changed political and economic realities of the early modern Mediterranean, in which Venice became an increasingly «marginal polity»,⁶ the Venetian Signoria invested significant resources to ensure its control over the information flow between Ottoman and European lands as a means to protect Venice's political standing in the Porte and in Europe, and, to a lesser degree, to defend its economic position. During the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth centuries, Venice's postal couriers provided the only regular, reliable mail service between the Ottoman Empire and Europe, and as a result they carried a majority of all commercial, diplomatic and personal correspondence to and from Constantinople.⁷ Venice's capacity to monopolize and manipulate

³ P. BURKE, *Rome as a Center of Information and communication for the Catholic World, 1550-1650*, in *From Rome to Eternity: Catholicism and the Arts in Italy, ca. 1550-1650*, eds. P.M. Jones and T. Worcester, Leiden, Brill, 2002, pp. 253-269; F. BETHENCOURT and F. EGMOND, *Introduction*, in *Correspondence and Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe, 1400-1700*, eds. F. Bethencourt and F. Egmond, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 29-30.

⁴ H.J. KISSLING, *Venezia come centro di informazioni sui Turchi*, in *Venezia, centro di mediazione tra oriente e occidente (secoli XV-XVI): aspetti e problemi*, eds. H.-G. Beck, Manoussos Manoussacas and Agostino Pertusi, Florence, Leo S. Olschki editore, 1977; R. MANTRAN, *Venise, centre d'informations sur les Turcs*, in *ibid.*

⁵ W. BEHRINGER, *Introduction: Communication in Historiography*, «German History», XXVI, 2006, pp. 332.

⁶ W. MCNEILL, *Venice: The Hinge of Europe, 1081-1797*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 123.

⁷ On Venice's mail service to Constantinople, the most important work is L. DE ZANCHE, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia: Dispacci di Stato e lettere di mercanti dal Basso Medioevo alla caduta della Serenissima*, «Quaderni di storia postale», XXV, 2000. On Venetian postal history more generally, see A. CATTANI, *Storia delle comunicazioni postali veneziane – prima puntata*, «Bollettino prefilatelico e storico-postale», XXXIII, 1983, pp. 130-138; B. CAIZZI, *Dalla posta dei re alla posta di tutti: territorio e comunicazioni in Italia dal XVI secolo all'unità*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 1993, pp. 211-262.

the flow of information was a key element in maintaining its neutrality, but also its relevance.

Reasonably frequent mail service between Venice and Constantinople had been in place since the Byzantine era, perhaps dating to even before 1000.⁸ In the early modern eastern Mediterranean, Venice's remained the only regular service from Constantinople to Europe, indeed a popular 1611 treatise on mail routes directs official and private correspondents to simplify their task and send their letters to the Ottoman capital via Venice.⁹ This advice seems to have been followed, as all ambassadors, merchants, renegades, and other residents of the Ottoman capital who wanted reliable communication with the West generally depended on the Venetian post. It was not uncommon in this period for ambassadors throughout Europe to rely on courier services other than their own, indeed in Spain both the Venetians and French depended on Philip II's network of couriers overseen by the Taxis family.¹⁰ In Constantinople, however, the French, the Dutch, and the English were almost entirely dependent on Venice for their communications. Writing about the English ambassador, one Venetian diplomat observed that «the sustenance of his negotiations in the Levant is due to the commodity which Your Lordship so courteously concedes to him, of sending letters to Venice and Aleppo, without which he could not negotiate». In general, from Lepanto to the war of Candia, the same could be said for most European diplomats resident in Constantinople.¹¹

Ottoman correspondence was also occasionally carried by Venetian couriers. Important official communications from the sultan or other government figures to European rulers were at times carried personally by a *çavus*, or military messenger, but these were exceptional occurrences: the sixteenth century saw the greatest number of *çavus* travel to Venice, but these numbered less than one per year.¹² It was much more common for official Ottoman correspondence to be bundled with the letters of European diplomats and carried by Venetian couriers.¹³ Communications to government figures within the em-

⁸ M. BLOCH, *Feudal Society*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1961, p. 1: 64; A. CATTANI, *Storia delle comunicazioni postali veneziane*, pp. 137-138; L. DE ZANCHE, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, pp. 9-10.

⁹ OTTAVIO CODOGNO, *Nuovo itinerario delle poste per tutto il Mondo*, Venice, Lucio Spineda, 1620, pp. 300, 352-353.

¹⁰ G. PARKER, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998, pp. 48-50; E.J.B. ALLEN, *Post and Courier Service in the Diplomacy of Early Modern Europe*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1972, pp. 38, 87.

¹¹ SDC, b. 66, cc. 197r-198r, 12 July 1608, Ottaviano Bon to Senate.

¹² M.P. PEDANI, *In nome del gran signore: Inviati ottomani a Venezia dalla caduta di Costantinopoli alla guerra di Candia*, Venice, Deputazione editrice, 1994.

¹³ T. DE GONTAUT BIRON, *Ambassade en Turquie de Jean de Gontaut Biron Baron de Salignac*,

pire were carried by a variety of official couriers, including the *ulak*, or state couriers, who functioned from at least the time of Mehmed II. The carrying of official internal communications was generally sporadic and occurred more on an as-needed rather than a regularly scheduled basis until the later seventeenth century, however.¹⁴ And not surprisingly, mail service varied from region to region. In the Balkans, for instance, service in the sixteenth century was unreliable, but over the course of the next century it became increasingly organized and regularized.¹⁵ Venice occasionally, reluctantly supplemented Ottoman couriers: In 1613, for example, the grand vizier requested that two extraordinary Venetian couriers be sent with his letters to Cattaro and Spalato (modern Kotor and Split). The bailo agreed to do so, but was afterward chastised by the Senate for taking responsibility for the safe delivery of Ottoman mail.¹⁶ Conversely, Bailo Alvise Contarini once received a letter via the *corrier turco* from Zara, but this was exceptional.¹⁷ Fewer options existed for private, unofficial mail within the Ottoman Empire, which in this period had «no regulated postal system». Merchants and others could, for a payment, occasionally send their correspondence via official couriers; carrier pigeon was another option.¹⁸

At times there were other alternatives available for information to and from Constantinople. Merchant ships were an option, though not always predictable or reliable. Codogno recommends sending mail to Constantinople via Venice, but offers a route from Otranto to Cattaro through the Aegean as an alternative.¹⁹ There were occasional «mailboat[s] from Ferrara», and letters could also sporadically be sent through Ancona. The Republic of Ragusa (Du-

1605 à 1610, Paris, Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1888-1889, pp. 2: 392-393; J.E. MATUZ, *Transmission of Directives from the Center to the Periphery in the Ottoman State from the Beginning until the Seventeenth Century*, in *Decision Making in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. C.E. Farah, Kirkland, Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1993, p. 20.

¹⁴ C. HEYWOOD, *The Ottoman Menzilhane and Ulak System in Rumeli in the Eighteenth Century*, in *Social and Economic History of Turkey (1071-1920)*, eds. O. Okyar and H. Inalcik, Ankara, Meteksan Limited Sirketi, 1980, p. 55.

¹⁵ J. MATUZ, *Transmission of Directives from the Center to the Periphery in the Ottoman State*, pp. 20-23; M. LJILJAK, *The Bosnia-Herzegovinan Postal System During the Turkish Administration*, «Postal History Journal», L, 1978, p. 20.

¹⁶ SDelC, b. 12, 5 Sept. 1613, Senate to Bailo; SDC, b. 105, c. 721r, Feb. 1627 (MV), Sebastian Venier to Senate. See also, S. FAROQHI, *Before 1600: Ottoman Attitudes Towards Merchants from Latin Christendom*, «Turcica», XXXIV, 2002, p. 85.

¹⁷ IT VII 1086 (8523), c. 267r, 22 Oct. 1638, Alvise Contarini to Senate.

¹⁸ B. BRAUDE, *Venture and Faith in the Commercial Life of the Ottoman Balkans, 1500-1650*, «International History Review», VII, 1985, p. 528.

¹⁹ O. CODOGNO, *Nuovo itinerario*, pp. 426-427.

brovnik) maintained a regular and quite reliable mail service to and from Constantinople which was utilized at various times by the French and other correspondents with the West who wanted to break their reliance on Venice. For a time Jewish inhabitants of Constantinople sent their letters by way of Ragusa, because they «desir[ed] to [...] send their letters without the knowledge of» Venice. The Venetians also occasionally sent mail via Ragusa when their couriers were not able to circulate.²⁰ It was also possible at times to send correspondence with the Holy Roman ambassador's couriers overland via Vienna or via the Greek islands to southern Italy and then on to Spain. Just as often, however, imperial correspondence traveled via Venice.²¹

In contrast to the unpredictable and irregular communication options available in the eastern Mediterranean, the Venetian mail service was popular because of its regularity and reliability. The mail departed every other week from both Venice and Constantinople.²² Occasionally the couriers, or *portalettere*, would be held back several days at the request of other ambassadors or merchants so they could prepare responses to urgent letters received in the most recent post. In other cases, they might finance an extraordinary courier at their own expense when they had communications that needed to be sent before the next official mailing. But in general, Venetian officials tried to limit these disruptions to the regular service.

The time it took for correspondence to travel between Venice and Constantinople depended on a wide range of factors including weather, winds, road conditions, political disturbances and disease. Normally it took about fifteen days to carry the mail overland from Constantinople to Cattaro, and approximately the same time to go by sea from there to Venice. Bruno Simon found that Marino Cavalli's mid-sixteenth century dispatches took on average one month to travel from Venice to Constantinople, which matches Braudel's estimate of thirty-four days: the fastest letter arrived in twenty-five days, the

²⁰ InqStat, b. 417, 23 Feb. 1633 (MV); InqStat, b. 148, 4, 16 May 1589, Inquisitors of State to Bailo; SDC, b. 20, cc. 385rv, 28 Dec. 1584, Gianfrancesco Morosini to Senate; InqStat, b. 417, 3 May 1636; IT VII 1086 (8523), cc. 233r-234v, 23 Sept 1638, Alvise Contarini to Senate. On Ragusa's mail, see A. DI VITTORIO, *Un gran nodo postale tra oriente e occidente in età moderna: la Repubblica di Ragusa*, «Quaderni di storia postale», XI, 1988.

²¹ B. SIMON, *Les Dépêches de Marin Cavalli bayle a Constantinople (1558-1560)*, Paris, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, p. 1: 293; H.F. BROWN, *Studies in the History of Venice*, London, John Murray, 1907, p. 32; G.K. HASSIOTIS, *Venezia e i domini veneziani tramite di informazioni sui turchi per gli spagnoli nel sec. XVI*, in *Venezia, centro di mediazione tra oriente e occidente (secoli XV-XVI): aspetti e problemi*, eds. H.-G. Beck, Manoussous Manoussacas and Agostino Pertusi, Florence, Leo S. Olschki editore, 1977, pp. 1: 123-124; R. WURTH, *Österreichs Post im Osmanischen Reich – Die orientalische Post*, «Österreichische Postgeschichte», XVI, 1993, p. 59.

²² B. SIMON, *Les Dépêches de Marin Cavalli*, p. 1: 3; E. ALLEN, *Post and Courier Service*, p. 38.

longest in forty-three.²³ In one instance, a letter was carried from Cattaro to Constantinople in four days, though this was truly exceptional, «there being no memory of any ordinary mailing going so quickly».²⁴ Generally, however, between sending a letter and receiving a response a correspondent would have to count on, at the very minimum, a two month turn around. Long by modern standards, to be sure, but quite efficient in early modern terms, certainly in comparison to other options available in the region, and particularly considering that a letter and its response from India might take up to two years.²⁵

In Constantinople, letters had to be delivered the evening before the couriers' departure to the Venetian embassy's chancellery in the Vigne di Pera outside Galata, where all foreign embassies were located by 1600. The secretaries of the chancellery sorted the letters and joined them into *plicchi*, or parcels, containing a number of different letters. The mail was then loaded into sacks which the couriers carried; official correspondence was placed in a bag marked with a large 'S' to ensure it received special treatment. Venice's mail system was point to point: couriers were not allowed to accept any mail on the road, though the numerous denunciations of the practice indicate that this occurred with some frequency.²⁶ Nonofficial correspondence dwarfed official: several accounts refer to merchant correspondence spilling over into two, three, even four bags, which often caused problems due to frequent courier shortages.²⁷

²³ B. SIMON, *Les Dépêches de Marin Cavalli*, p. 1: 293; F. BRAUDEL, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, New York, Harper, 1972, p. 1: 362. Īnalcik reports that messengers traveled from Galata to Ragusa in ten days; Krekić puts the time between Constantinople and Ragusa at twenty-four days in the fourteenth century, and twenty days in the sixteenth century. Īnalcik's estimate is low probably because it is based on the times of horse-couriers, not foot-couriers. H. ĪNALCIK, *The Ottoman State: Economy and Society, 1300-1600*, in *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire: 1300-1600*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 1: 242; B. KREKIĆ, "Courier Traffic Between Dubrovnik, Constantinople and Thessalonika in the First Half of the Fourteenth Century", in *Dubrovnik, Italy and the Balkans in the Late Middle Ages*, London, Variorum, 1980, p. 11.

²⁴ Provveditore Generale in Dalmazia e Albania (ASV), b. 452, 13 July 1637, Alvise Mocenigo in Zara to Senate.

²⁵ J.W. O'MALLEY, *The First Jesuits*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993, pp. 62-63. News in early modern Japan traveled at an even faster pace: couriers covered 50 miles (85 KM) per day, significantly faster than the approximately 35 miles (55 KM) that Venice's couriers traveled daily. K. MORIYA, *Urban Networks and Information Networks*, in *Tokugawa Japan: The Social and Economic Antecedents of Modern Japan*, eds. Chie Nakane and Shinzaburō Oishi, Tokyo, University of Tokyo Press, 1990, pp. 108-111.

²⁶ O. CODOGNO, *Nuovo itinerario*, pp. 386-387; SDC, b. 53, cc. 234rv, 30 May 1601, Agostino Nani to Senate; *Ibid.*, b. 53, c. 236r, 7 July 1602, Agostino Nani to Senate; BAC, b. 344, 18 Dec. 1623; SDC, b. 28, c. 106r, 9 Oct. 1588, Giovanni Moro to Senate.

²⁷ SDC, b. 28, c. 321r, 19 Dec. 1588 (MV), Giovanni Moro to Senate; SDC, b. 39, c. 586v, 30 July 1594, Marco Venier to Senate.

Mail from Constantinople to Venice followed several different routes. The most often used and most reliable went overland by foot from Constantinople to Cattaro, and thence via dedicated mail frigate to Venice; mail from Venice to the Ottoman capital followed the reverse route. According to Ottavio Codogno's guide to mail routes, it was 500 miles (800 KM) from Venice to Cattaro, and 655 (1050 KM) from Cattaro to Constantinople. This last section of the trip passed through «many mountains, & rivers», including «the mountains of Cattaro, the Baiona river, [...] the Emi mountains, the Nissava [Nišava], Sucova, Ischia, Niso, Mariza [Maritsa], & other rivers», on to the Golden Horn.²⁸ In addition to this main route, at times duplicate letters were also sent on a much longer overland path to and from Venice via Vienna, whence they were forwarded by the Venetian resident at the imperial court. This precaution was in no way redundant as correspondents often had to rely on these duplicates when originals were lost, confiscated, or destroyed.²⁹ Additionally, at times a third copy might be sent, particularly if a merchant ship were departing, perhaps via Candia, to the ships of the gulf fleet sailing for Venice.

The most important nexus of the primary mail route between Constantinople and Venice was the town of Cattaro, where the overland route from the Ottoman capital terminated. Located inside a protected coastal inlet, about sixty kilometers south of Ragusa, Cattaro was ideally situated with its easy access to the Adriatic Sea, and its proximity to Montenegro, where most couriers lived and were recruited. Cattaro had drifted in and out of the Venetian orbit for centuries, becoming definitely ensconced in the *stato da mar* in 1420. With a population slightly above 1000, the town was administered by a patrician rector sent from Venice, and ensuring the smooth movement of the mail was «among the principal duties of this office».³⁰ Upon its arrival in Cattaro from either Venice or Constantinople, the mail was carefully sorted. Letters bound for Constantinople, Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt were transferred to a man who carried them to Montenegro, where they were turned over to an appropriate number of couriers. Mail bound for Venice, on the other hand, was given to an influential Cattaro noble family, the Bolizza, who loaded the mail

²⁸ O. CODOGNO, *Nuovo itinerario*, p. 317.

²⁹ SDC, b. 25, c. 3r, 1 Mar 1587, Lorenzo Bernardo to Senate. On the Venice-Vienna route, see O. CODOGNO, *Nuovo itinerario*, p. 388.

³⁰ CollRel, b. 65, c. 3r, *Relatione di Francesco Contarini*; CollRel, b. 62, tome II, c. 45r, *Relatione di Benetto Erizzo*. On Cattaro and the *stato da mar*, see G. COZZI and M. KNAPTON, *La Repubblica di Venezia nell'età moderna: dalla guerra di Chioggia al 1517*, Turin, UTET, 1986, pp. 195-201; G. COZZI, *Repubblica di Venezia e stati italiani*, Turin, Einaudi, 1982, pp. 227-261; G. VALENTINI, *Appunti sul regime degli insediamenti veneti in Albania nel secolo XIV e XV*, «Studi veneziani», VIII, 1966, pp. 217-219.

into chests and forwarded it to Venice on one of five or six frigates they retained expressly for this purpose.³¹ For well over a century the Bolizza played a central role in ensuring the safe transport of Venice's correspondence with Constantinople. The first mention is of a Zuane Bolizza in 1538, and following Lepanto, the family was awarded an exclusive contract; indeed, family heads were often ascribed the office of vice-proveditor of Cattaro in acknowledgment of the significance of their services.³² Prior to the Bolizza family assuming this responsibility, letters were usually carried to and from Cattaro on the ships of the *capitano di golfo*.³³

Venice was quite effective in maintaining this biweekly schedule, but delays occasionally occurred: for example, Bailo Marino Cavalli once went seven weeks without a letter. This was exceptional, however, caused by the death of the doge and the election of his successor, which interrupted the normal rhythm of correspondence.³⁴ The tardiness of dispatches from Constantinople could be a source of consternation in Venice; in 1612 when Bailo Cristoforo Venier's letters were long overdue, the Senate assumed the worst, and prepared to send an extraordinary envoy to Constantinople to investigate. Just as the envoy was about to set sail, letters from Constantinople arrived, and the mission was called off, though the bailo was reminded in the Senate's next dispatch that «we desire that [your letters] arrive on time».³⁵ Such reprimands were not uncommon, and several baili felt it necessary to defend themselves against accusations regarding their handling of the public correspondence, which was almost always caused not by their negligence, but by a breakdown in some aspect of the postal network.³⁶

³¹ CollRel, b. 65, c. 101, *Relatione di Catharo dell'Ilmo Sr Zaccaria Soranzo; ibid.*, c. iv, *Relatione del Nobiluomo Zuan Francesco Delfin ritornato di Rettore et Proveditore di Cattaro*; O. CODOGNO, *Nuovo itinerario*, pp. 386-387; L. DE ZANCHE, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, pp. 53-54.

³² Capi del Consiglio dei X, Lettere di Rettori: Cattaro, 1500-1601 (ASV), b. 275, 99, 8 May 1538, Melchior Michael to Capi dei X; P. PRETO, *I servizi segreti*, pp. 296, 310; S. GLIUBICH, *Dizionario biografico degli uomini illustri della Dalmazia*, Vienna, Rod. Lochner, 1856; reprint Bologna, Arnaldo Forni editore, 1974, p. 45; *Senato Mar Minute*, b. 120, 2 Sept. 1592, Zuanne Lippomano to Senate; SDC, b. 90, c. 33r, 27 May 1620, Giorgio Giustinian near Budua to Senate; L. DE ZANCHE, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, p. 53.

³³ SMar, reg. 69, c. 90r, 17 June 1610; SMar, reg. 93, cc. 94rv, 12 July 1635. B. SIMON, *Les Dépêches de Marin Cavalli*, p. 1: 293.

³⁴ Other interruptions to Cavalli's correspondence in 1560 were from 18 Jan. to 15 Mar., and 15 Mar. to 4 May. B. SIMON, *Les Dépêches de Marin Cavalli*, pp. 1: 295-298. Ottaviano Bon reported going two months without seeing a letter. APC, b. 10, c. 163r, 4 Nov. 1607, Ottaviano Bon to Senate.

³⁵ SDeIC, b. 12, 4 Dec. 1612, in Pregadi; SDeIC, b. 12, 15 Jan. 1612 (MV), Senate to Bailo. SDeIC, b. 12, 7 Dec. 1612, in Pregadi. See also, Segreteria di Stato-Venezia (Archivio Segreto Vaticano), r. 33, c. 110v, 26 Aug. 1598, Monsignore Gratiani to Cardinal Aldobrandino.

³⁶ SDC, b. 39, c. 563r, 24 July 1594, Marco Venier to Senate.

Besides exceptional occurrences such as the death of a doge, or other acts of God, there were many obstacles that might interrupt the regular and timely flow of communications between Venice and the Porte. Among these were the normal vicissitudes of the roads that the couriers traveled. These ran the gamut from poor weather, to marauding Ottoman soldiers traveling to the front, to highway robbers, to men sent by the grand vizier to intercept the couriers, to accidents as simple as stepping on a nail, which led to the demise of one *portalettere*. One courier, a Muslim from Macedonia, was even hung as a spy.³⁷ Couriers were routinely stopped and the mail opened by thieves hoping to find cash, jewels, pearls, and other precious objects that correspondents often hid in letters. This was a recurring problem, and the baili issued repeated orders that such objects not be sent in the post, upon pain of a 500 ducat fine.³⁸ The reasons were clear: if it became known, or even simply believed, that valuables were carried by Venice's couriers, they «would no longer be able to appear on the roads without being ransacked and killed». This did not stop merchants, and even the French ambassador, from sending valuables through the mails, however. Even when not carrying jewels, the couriers were often stopped and the mail sacks cut open by thieves who thought that the seal of Saint Mark, used to mark all official correspondence, was made of silver, though it was in fact only common lead. The couriers were also easy targets for individuals who wanted to use them as leverage to collect debts, real or perceived, as in the case of two Ottomans who stole several sacks of letters in retaliation for a credit they had with a Venetian merchant, and who threatened to continue doing the same until their debt was satisfied.³⁹

While the most consistently dangerous section that the mail traveled was between Constantinople and Cattaro, once the letters arrived in the Adriatic

³⁷ SDC, b. 16, cc. 224r-225v, 29 Oct. 1582 Gianfrancesco Morosini to Senate; SDC, b. 53, cc. 234rv, 30 May 1601, Agostino Nani to Senate; also SDC, b. 54, c. 213r, 26 Jan. 1601 (MV), Agostino Nani to Senate; SDelC, b. 12, 19 Dec. 1613, Senate to Bailo; see the 30 November 1565 letter from Vettore Bragadin, intercepted at that time, which is in the Topkapı Archive in Istanbul, C. VILLAIN-GANDOSI, *Les depeches chifrees de Vettore Bragadin, Bail de Constantinople (12 juillet 1564-15 juin 1566)*, «Turcica», I-II, 1978, p. 64; BAC, b. 369, 27 Aug. 1640, *Testamento di Vuesca Issovich*; SDC, b. 40, cc. 300v-301v, 26 Nov. 1594, Marco Venier to Senate.

³⁸ SDC, b. 31, c. 417v, 4 Aug. 1590, Girolamo Lippomano to Senate; BAC, b. 276, reg. 394, cc. 42v-43r, 6 Apr. 1609; SDelC, b. 11, 30 Jan. 1608 (MV), Senate to Simone Contarini and Ottaviano Bon; BAC, b. 344, 18 Dec. 1623.

³⁹ SDC, b. 15, cc. 215v-216v, 28 Oct. 1581, Paolo Contarini to Senate; SDC, b. 54, c. 213r, 26 Jan. 1601 (MV), Agostino Nani to Senate; SDCop, reg. 15, cc. 67, 16 Sept. 1619, Agostino Nani to Senate. On crime on early modern Ottoman roads, see S. FAROQHI, *Coping with the State: Political Conflict and Crime in the Ottoman Empire, 1550-1720*, Istanbul, Editions Isis, 1995; K. BARKEY, *Bandits and Bureaucrats: The Ottoman Route to State Centralization*, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 1994.

coastal town, they were not yet entirely safe. The constantly changing weather conditions at sea, especially during the winter, as well as the capriciousness of winds could significantly effect the mail frigates' transit time. Equally threatening were human obstacles such as corsairs, but especially the Uskoks of Senj, who preyed among the islands and inlets of the Adriatic coast.⁴⁰

In response to the almost predictable mistreatment that the couriers received on the road, the baili regularly appeared in the Ottoman divan to protest, to petition for their release, and to obtain punishment against those who interfered with their movements. Sometimes the interference came from high Ottoman officials: in 1605 the Sancakbey of Iskender had several couriers stopped and beaten, and their mail sacks thrown into a river. In response, the Senate ordered the bailo to look into potential alternate routes, and to inform the grand vizier «how prejudicial is the interruption of the transportation of the letters and the notices to joint commerce and the quiet and consolation of subjects on both sides».⁴¹ Indeed, it seems that towns along the mail route were eager for the Venetians to continue to pass through their lands. In one case, when problems arose in the Sancakbey of Herzegovina, local officials wrote to Venice to request that the couriers continue to pass through their town.⁴² The baili's appeals usually resulted in at least temporary ameliorations of the situation, but interruptions of the mail remained an ongoing, time-consuming issue.

Indeed, the baili frequently complained about the burden of administering and protecting the postal service which, because of the amount of mail that circulated through the chancellery, could be significant. In 1588 Giovanni Moro went so far as to ask to be freed from this «pain, which is certainly the greatest bother to me, as I hear continual arguments from the merchants about this matter». Usually these complaints were related to tardy mail delivery.⁴³

Besides unpredictable weather and the threat of corsairs, institutional factors also disrupted the mail's circulation. There were many complaints, for instance, about the linchpins of the whole Venetian Mediterranean postal network, the Bolizza family. It was alleged that their frigates called at ports all

⁴⁰ SDeLC, b. 13, 24 Aug. 1617, Senate to Bailo. On the Uskoks, see Alberto Tenenti, *Piracy and the Decline of Venice, 1580-1615*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967, pp. 3-15; G.E. ROTHENBERG, *Venice and the Uskoks of Senj: 1537-1618*, «Journal of Modern History», XXXIII, 1961, pp. 148-156; C.W. BRACEWELL, *The Uskoks of Senj: Piracy, Banditry, and Holy War in the Sixteenth-Century Adriatic*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1992.

⁴¹ SDeLC, b. 11, 11 Aug. 1605, Senate to Bailo.

⁴² Provveditore Generale in Dalmazia e Albania (ASV), b. 452, 2 June 1637, Alvise Mocenigo in Zara to Senate.

⁴³ BAC, b. 263, reg. 372, cc. 85v-86v, May-June 1581; SDC, b. 28, c. 321r, 19 Dec. 1588 (MV), Giovanni Moro to Senate.

along the Dalmatian coast on their way to Venice for «personal business», and that they sent couriers on more circuitous routes to Constantinople for the same reasons.⁴⁴ There is also evidence that the Bolizza were not solely in Venetian employ and dealt with letters sent by non-Venetian correspondents on the side. These actions of course could slow the delivery of important letters significantly. In addition, one of the rector's of Cattaro charged with overseeing the mail system alleged that the Bolizza overcharged Venice for their services, and that any number of subjects could do the work more quickly and inexpensively. Despite such complaints, the Bolizza's contract was repeatedly renewed, and indeed some officials defended them.⁴⁵

Most interruptions in the mail's regularity, however, arose from the challenges of maintaining and administering sufficient numbers of *portalettere*. Venice's postal couriers were almost always Ottoman subjects from the region of Montenegro. Since Byzantine times, Venice, but also other regional powers, had relied on the Montenegrins as their primary couriers.⁴⁶ As one informant observed «though they are poor and of very low condition and live rustically, they are all, however, robust and strong youths, well disposed to carry out their charge and resolute in defending themselves in their journeys».⁴⁷ During the early modern period, Venice's couriers came entirely from two regions of Montenegro, Katun and Ljubotin, in Cattaro's hinterland.⁴⁸ Occasionally, Venetian officials would experiment with couriers from other regions, such as several «Moors» from Macedonia that Marco Venier used when he was shorthanded, though this did not work particularly well as both were killed on the road.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ SDC, b. 69, c. 585v, 18 Aug. 1610, Simone Contarini to Senate. Venice was not opposed to the frigates carrying merchandise in addition to letters: in 1590 Elia de Bernardo and the other patrons of the mail ships were given permission to carry salted meat and cheeses without customs. VSM-I, reg. 138, cc. 130v-131r, 9 Feb. 1590 (MV). Codogno also mentions that Venice's mail frigates sailed with «mail and merchandise». O. CODOGNO, *Nuovo itinerario*, pp. 386-387.

⁴⁵ CollRel, b. 65, cc. 4v-5v, *Relazione di Cattaro per Paris Malipiero*; SMar, reg. 93, cc. 94rv, 12 July 1635; Acta Sanctae Mariae Maioris (Dubrovnik State Archives), b. 467/1, 30, 13 July 1594, Michiel Bolizza in Cattaro to Bartolomeo Borgiani.

⁴⁶ V. SOKOL, *Jedan svremeni izvještaj o Crnogorcima u kurirskoj službi Venecije u 17. vijeku*, «PTT Arhiv», VII, 1961, p. 57; A. CATTANI, *Storia delle comunicazioni postali veneziane*, pp. 137-138.

⁴⁷ E. DALLEGGIO D'ALESSIO, *Relazione dello stato della cristianità di Pera e Costantinopoli* [...], Constantinople, Edizioni Rizzo & Son, 1925, pp. 29-30.

⁴⁸ MARIANO BOLIZZA, *Relazione et descrizione del sangiacato di Scuttari*, 25 May 1614, in *Turcs et Monténégrins*, ed. F. Lenormant, Paris, Librairie Académique, 1866, pp. 289-295. For an English translation with modern place-names, see R. ELSIE, *Early Albania: A Reader of Historical Texts 11th-17th Centuries*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003.

⁴⁹ SDC, b. 40, cc. 300v-301v, 26 Nov. 1594, Marco Venier to Senate. Also, SDeC, b. 13, n.d., Marcantonio Borisi to Senate.

The Senate in 1556 set the wages of the couriers at 250 aspers annually, plus occasional bonuses for rapid delivery of particularly important communiqués, and men who served over a long period might hope to obtain a small pension.⁵⁰ A 1614 report indicates that head couriers' pay depended on distance and season: for the traditional Kuç route they received fifteen thalers per summer journey and twenty in the winter. On the slightly longer new route that passed through Herzegovina a head courier received twenty thalers per journey in the summer and 25 in the winter.⁵¹ When in Constantinople between trips, the couriers lived within the embassy complex, though in a separate house which was quite spartan. They were fed while in residence, including a roast lamb every Sunday.⁵² In addition to their mail duties, individual couriers also worked in the bailate as cooks' helpers or in other minor support positions, and they comprised the largest contingent of the honor guard dressed in livery that accompanied the baili on ceremonial occasions.⁵³

Despite the benefits of the position, the baili had a recurring problem maintaining a sufficient contingent of couriers.⁵⁴ In February 1592, for example, Matteo Zane reported having to hold back the regular dispatches because of a courier shortage, and two weeks later he had to resort to the less than desirable solution of sending the mail with an Ottoman janissary, thus «committing an important matter to one who cannot be trusted».⁵⁵ Ideally, the baili would have a pool of from sixty to eighty, and perhaps as high as 150, couriers to draw on. At any given time, twenty would be on the road to Cattaro, twenty traveling to Constantinople, and twenty each in the terminal cities of the land route awaiting additional dispatches.⁵⁶ While this may have been the preferred situation, in practice the baili usually had to rely on much smal-

⁵⁰ *Compilazioni delle leggi* (ASV), b. 157, 347-349, 27 June 1556; DonàR, b. 148, c. 140r, *Summa generale de tutta la spesa, et il particolare di essa fatta per tutti li Clmi Baili da Constantinople* [...]; B. SIMON, *Les Dépêches de Marin Cavalli*, p. 2: 81, n. 148; *Lettere di rettori-Cattaro* (ASV), b. 275, 132, 25 July 1567, Alvise Minotto to X.

⁵¹ BOLIZZA, *Relatione et descrizione del sangiacato di Scuttari*, p. 320.

⁵² SDC, b. 61, c. 275v, 23 July 1605, Ottaviano Bon to Senate; L. DE ZANCHE, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, p. 89.

⁵³ BAC, b. 369, 25 Oct. 1647; SDCop, reg. 17, cc. 80-89, 7 Dec. 1621, Giorgio Giustinian to Senate.

⁵⁴ The same problem was common on the Venice-Rome route; F. GIANNETTO, *Il Servizio di posta veneziano nella Roma di Paolo IV secondo i dispacci di Bernardo Navagero (1555-1558)*, «Clio», XXVI, 1990, p. 124.

⁵⁵ SDC, b. 36, c. 469r, 13 Feb. 1592 (MV), Matteo Zane to Senate; *ibid.*, c. 492r, 26 Feb. 1592 (MV), Matteo Zane to Senate.

⁵⁶ T. BIRON, *Ambassade en Turquie*, pp. 2: 392-393; M. BOLIZZA, *Relatione et descrizione del sangiacato di Scuttari*, p. 295; E. DALLEGGIO D'ALESSIO, *Relatione dello stato della cristianità*, pp. 29-30; CollRel, b. 65, c. 10r, *Relatione di Catharo dell'Ilmo Sr Zaccaria Soranzo*.

ler numbers. One of the causes for this was the plague and other infectious diseases which were rampant on early modern roads. Illness often wreaked havoc among the couriers: almost every plague season, the baili would isolate them from the rest of the household to prevent the spread of disease.⁵⁷ This was not surprising given the nature of their work, traveling through areas where the plague might have broken out, frequenting inns, caravanserais, and other public locales. Couriers were aware of these dangers, and when rumors of outbreaks reached them, they often fled the embassy secretly and returned to their homes, or, if they heard the news on the road, they abandoned the mail and returned to Montenegro, further reducing the already depleted number of couriers.⁵⁸ There was also some pressure on both the baili and the rectors of Cattaro to reduce the number of couriers so as to control the burgeoning mail costs, and this policy often produced shortages as well.⁵⁹

These shortages could lead to problems on the road for the couriers, as they often traveled in groups of less than the ideal twenty, sometimes as few as eight, four, or even two.⁶⁰ The couriers traveled in groups for security: as one contemporary described «there are always four or five couriers who walk 200 or 300 steps ahead to look over the trail; thus if they fear some sinister misfortune, immediately two come back to warn the troop, which promptly buries the packet, or hides it in a place to preserve it».⁶¹ When traveling in lesser numbers the couriers ran greater risks along the already dangerous routes they traversed: for example, one courier left a sick comrade on the road and tried to continue on himself, and alone became easy prey to bandits who killed him.⁶² Another difficulty arose from couriers choosing to travel alone: *portalelettere* were supposed to travel at least in tandem, one *capo* accompanied by one *fante*. However, *capi* occasionally abandoned their *fanti* and carried the mail themselves, in part to avoid dividing their salary, in part because with a full contingent of couriers there were less assignments.⁶³

⁵⁷ APC, b. 10, cc. 163rv 4 Nov. 1607, Ottaviano Bon to Senate; *ibid.*, cc. 182rv, 8 Jan. 1607 (MV); BAC, b. 268, reg. 381, cc. 112v-113r, 15 Nov. 1593.

⁵⁸ SDC, b. 53, cc. 329v-393r, 1 July 1601, Agostino Nani to Senate; *ibid.*, c. 421r, 13 Aug. 1601.

⁵⁹ SDC, b. 90, c. 315r, 9 Feb. 1620 (MV), Giorgio Giustinian to Senate.

⁶⁰ E. DALLEGGIO D'ALESSIO, *Relazione dello stato della cristianità*, pp. 29-30; SDC, b. 40, c. 308r, 29 Nov. 1594, Marco Venier to Senate. On courier shortages, see *ibid.*, 300v-301v, 26 Nov. 1594; SDC, b. 53, c. 421r, 13 Aug. 1601, Agostino Nani to Senate.

⁶¹ T. BIRON, *Ambassade en Turquie*, pp. 2: 392-393.

⁶² SDC, b. 57, c. 28r, 7 Mar. 1603, Francesco Contarini to Senate.

⁶³ SDC, b. 40, c. 308r, 29 Nov. 1594, Marco Venier to Senate; SDC, b. 74, cc. 236v-237r, 29 Jan. 1612 (MV), Cristoforo Valier to Senate; CollRel, b. 65, c. 3r, *Relazione di Francesco Contarini da Cattaro*.

The fact that the couriers were Ottoman subjects also created difficulties. The baili faced a recurring controversy due to the couriers' failure to pay the *harac* required of all non-Muslim subjects of the sultan; indeed, in 1623 several couriers were imprisoned by the grand vizier over their tax debts. The vizier intimated that the baili encouraged the couriers not to pay the *harac*, but Bailo Giorgio Giustinian considered this simply a pretext to try to force Venice to cover the cost, whose dependence on the Montenegrin couriers was widely known. The situation was delicate: while Venice wanted to avoid at all costs paying this additional expense, there was the danger that having been «terrified» by this experience, the couriers would no longer be willing to continue in Venice's service.⁶⁴

An equally important issue associated with the couriers' political status was the questionable jurisdiction of the baili over them as Ottoman subjects. As Giustinian observed, «it was not a small thing to obtain [the Ottomans'] agreement and cooperation that the bailo may exercise [justice] over their subjects while they are in our house and in our service». This fine balance is illustrated by an incident in which a courier scuffled with a servant of the French ambassador. The Montenegrins wanted to retaliate «for their honor and that of their nation», but Giustinian, «well aware of their ferocity and impetuousness», convinced them to leave the matter to him. However, «the pride and barbarity of these couriers», as the bailo reported, compelled them to attack the Frenchman. A serious incident between the Venetian and French nations was barely avoided, and only after Giustinian had the responsible couriers beaten publicly in front of the French embassy by the Ottoman janissaries assigned to him for his protection. Despite this public and uncompromising resolution of the matter, Giustinian feared that other problems would follow, because of «two firm opinions» that the couriers held:

first, that Your Serenity in the mail service is not able to find anyone but [the Montenegrins], which constrains the baili to tolerate them in all things. The other is, that since they are Turkish subjects, these same baili cannot in any manner punish them, because it would not be permitted by the Turks. With these assumptions many among them do whatever they please [which causes] not a little travail for the baili.⁶⁵

Intimidation was key to maintaining control over the couriers. The baili regularly threatened to discontinue Venice's relationship with the Montene-

⁶⁴ RubriCST, b. 14, c. 18r, 1 Apr. 1623, Giorgio Giustinian to Senate; APC, b. 18, cc. 16: 33v-34r, 4 Mar 1623, Giorgio Giustinian to Senate.

⁶⁵ SDCop, reg. 17, cc. 80-89, 7 Dec. 1621, Giorgio Giustinian to Senate; L. DE ZANCHE, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, pp. 38-39.

grins, and to give the responsibility to others «who with insistence begged for it». In another case, Giustinian condemned one «delinquent» courier to the galleys. As «a Turkish subject», the bailo could not have the man imprisoned on a Venetian ship, but instead he sent the courier to the *kapudanpaşa* (chief admiral of the Ottoman fleet), who had him placed in chains on one of his own galleys. A few days following this cooperation between Venetian and Ottoman officials, Giustinian had the man released, because his intent was not to give a harsh «punishment», but to apply a «brake» to the couriers' disruptive activities.⁶⁶ While actions such as these might mitigate short-term issues, in the long term the problem of jurisdiction continued to fester.

A 1638 solution proposed to resolve the couriers' political status by enticing them to emigrate with their families to Cattaro. In return, the couriers would receive free housing in a quarter of the town set aside specifically for them. By doing this, the Bolizza argued, the couriers would become Venetian subjects, and would be effectively removed from Ottoman jurisdiction. Their «faithfulness» would increase, and a ready supply of couriers would be close at hand. This in turn would shorten the turnaround of the mail, «by two or three days», since much valuable time was lost sending word or the mail itself to the hills of Montenegro upon its arrival, and again when couriers stopped to visit their families on their return trip from Constantinople, with the attendant loss of time. Resettling the couriers would also benefit Venice during times of war, when the Montenegrins were expressly forbidden by the Porte to serve Venice, on pain of death to them and their families. While the plan seemed feasible, the Venetians were ultimately able to convince only twelve couriers and their families to relocate to Cattaro.⁶⁷

As this overview suggests, Venice was strongly committed to and invested significant resources in maintaining its mail service to Constantinople. In the 1550s, Marino Cavalli estimated that this cost Venice 1400 ducats annually; by 1587 expenses had quadrupled to 5705 ducats.⁶⁸ This recurring expense represented a significant portion of the baili's budget: in 1575, for example, costs for the couriers ranged from 25 to 30 percent of the Venetian embassy's total ex-

⁶⁶ SDCop, reg. 17, cc. 80-89, 7 Dec. 1621, Giorgio Giustinian to Senate. See also, SDC, b. 17, cc. 140rv, 29 Apr. 1583, Gianfrancesco Morosini to Senate.

⁶⁷ IT VII 1086 (8523), cc. 423v-425v, 25 Dec. 1638, *Capitolo contenuto in lettera del Cavaliere Bolizza di Cattaro*.

⁶⁸ B. SIMON, *Les Dépêches de Marin Cavalli*, p. 1: 293; *Bilanci generali della repubblica di Venezia*, serie seconda, vol. I, tomo I, Venice, R. commissione per la pubblicazione dei documenti finanziari della repubblica di Venezia 1912, pp. 352-353. Also CollRel, b. 66, c. 31, *Libro dell'Entrata, et della Spesa di raggion Publica nelle Camere, et Regimenti della Provintia di Dalmatia et Albania [...] l'anno 1642...*

penses.⁶⁹ This cost was covered almost entirely by public funds provided by the Signoria, despite the fact that the system served both Venetians and non-Venetians throughout the Levant. Many baili complained about the heavy expense the mail represented for their budgets, and like Marino Cavalli, argued that since the «Perots, Jews, Florentines, and everyone send more letters than our people, I believe that we could reduce this cost in the same way that Rome's was reduced, by them paying Your Lordship for the portion and weight of their letters, [and in this way] more than half the expenses would be covered». ⁷⁰ Notwithstanding such calls for reform, and the fact that Venice charged dearly for the use of its mail services in the Italian peninsula,⁷¹ the Senate considered the high costs for the Venice-Constantinople mail justifiable, and implemented no changes.

The reason for the Signoria's willingness to expend such extensive resources is clear: the Venetian mail monopoly was crucial to defending Venice's commercial position and enhancing its political status in the region, all while jealously safeguarding the city's neutrality. The four disastrous Veneto-Ottoman wars from 1453 to 1573, and the near cataclysm of Cambrai in 1509 had all made Venice painfully aware that, as one patrician stated «el mondo è mutado», and that the city's position vis-à-vis other Mediterranean and European states had changed permanently. The acceptance of this reality led Venice to pursue aggressively a realpolitik policy of neutrality, a balancing act between the French, the Habsburgs, and most importantly, the Ottomans.⁷² As Guicciardini observed, the first decades of the sixteenth century taught the Venetians that «knowing well the art of defense» was better «than engaging the enemy in battle». ⁷³ The trauma of a century of warfare with the sul-

⁶⁹ L. DE ZANCHE, *Tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, p. 93.

⁷⁰ B. SIMON, *Les Dépêches de Marin Cavalli*, p. 1: 293; SDCop, reg. 19, cc. 148-49, 27 Aug. 1625, Giorgio Giustinian to Senate.

⁷¹ M. SCADUTO, *La corrispondenza dei primi Gesuiti e le poste italiane*, «Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu», XIX, 1950, p. 246.

⁷² E.G. GLEASON, *Confronting New Realities: Venice and the Peace of Bologna, 1530*, in *Venice Reconsidered*, eds. J. Martin and D. Romano, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, pp. 169-170; A. FABRIS, *Artisinat et culture: Recherches sur la production vénitienne et le marché ottoman au XVI^e siècle*, «Arab Historical Review for Ottoman Studies», III-IV, 1991, p. 60; Girolamo Aleandro to Pietro Carnesecchi, 1 Jan. 1534, in *Nunziature di Venezia*, ed. F. Gaeta, Rome, Istituto storico italiano per l'età moderna e contemporanea, 1958, p. 1: 150.

⁷³ W. MCNEILL, *Venice: The Hinge of Europe*, pp. 125-126; *Dizionario biografico italiano*, s.v. *Giovanni Correr*, by A. Baiocchi, pp. 29: 493-497; R. FINLAY, *Fabius Maximus in Venice: Doge Andrea Gritti, the War of Cambrai, and the Rise of Habsburg Hegemony, 1509-1530*, «Renaissance Quarterly», LIII, 2000, pp. 990-996, 1025-1026; C. COCO and F. MANZONETTO, *Baili veneziani alla sublime porta: storia e caratteristiche dell'ambasciata veneta a Costantinopoli*, Venice, Stamperia di Venezia, 1985, p. 9; P. PRETO, *Venezia e i turchi*, Florence, Sansoni, 1975, p. 28; F. GILBERT, *The Pope, His Banker*,

tans made it patently clear to Venice's rulers that in dealing with the Ottomans, they would have to rely primarily on a strong network of defensive fortifications, combined with soft-power, nonmilitary means to maintain and defend the city's remaining holdings in the eastern Mediterranean.⁷⁴ As Stanley Chojnacki has written, after 1530 «Venetian foreign policy became increasingly concerned with appearances and the strategic manipulation of information».⁷⁵

The result of this strategic shift was a series of institutional innovations, reforms and adaptations implemented over the course of the sixteenth century which all were intended to ensure the preservation of the peace with the Ottomans. These changes included the 1506 creation of the V Savi alla Mercanzia charged specifically with nurturing Levantine commerce, and the 1556 archival reorganization which created the *Senato Costantinopoli* subsection of the Senate's voluminous papers in order to collect and organize the increasing quantities of Ottoman-related documents that Venice was generating. Only Papal affairs were deemed sufficiently important to warrant a similar separate archival series, the *Roma ordinaria*, subsequently established in 1560.⁷⁶ In addition, over the course of the sixteenth century Venice significantly expanded its diplomatic presence in the Ottoman capital, particularly after the wars of 1537-1540 and 1570-1573, which cemented in the minds of the city's rulers the wisdom of the policy of preserving the peace «through diplomacy, and every other means».⁷⁷ This expansion included ever-increasing financial investments in the Ottoman mission, careful attention to the selection of baili and ambassadors for service in the Porte, assigning more diplomatic support personnel to assist the baili in Constantinople, greatly expanding the numbers of Venetian dragomans, and establishing an *in situ* language school to train loyal interpreters.⁷⁸ The preservation and maintenance of the

and Venice, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980, pp. 116-117; W. ZELE, *Aspetti delle legazioni ottomane nei Diarii di Marino Sanudo*, «Studi veneziani», n.s. XVIII, 1989, p. 259.

⁷⁴ J.R. HALE and M. MALLET, *The Military Organization of a Renaissance State: Venice c. 1400-1617*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 429-460.

⁷⁵ S. CHOJNACKI, *Identity and Ideology in Renaissance Venice: The Third Serrata*, in *Venice Reconsidered*, eds. J. Martin and D. Romano, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, p. 263; J.C. DAVIS, *Pursuit of Power: Venetian Ambassadors' Reports on Spain, Turkey, and France in the Age of Philip II, 1560-1600*, New York, Harper, 1970, p. 67.

⁷⁶ M. BORGHERINI-SCARABELLIN, *Il Magistrato dei Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia dalla istituzione alla caduta della repubblica*, Venice, R. deputazione di storia, 1925; A. DA MOSTO, *L'Archivio di Stato di Venezia*, Rome, Biblioteca d'arte editrice, 1937, p. 1: 38.

⁷⁷ ANDREA VALERIO, *Historia della Guerra di Candia di Andrea Valerio Senatore Veneto*, Venice, Paolo Baglioni, 1679, p. 2.

⁷⁸ E. DURSTELER, *The Bailo in Constantinople: Crisis and Career in Venice's Early Modern Diplomatic Corps*, «Mediterranean Historical Review», XVI, 2001, pp. 1-25; F. LUCCHETTA, *La scuola dei 'giovani di lingua' veneti nei secoli XVI e XVII*, «Quaderni di studi arabi», VII, 1989, pp. 19-40.

Venetian mail monopoly in Constantinople beginning in the mid-sixteenth century was an essential pillar of this policy as well. At the core of all of these changes was the attempt to obtain, catalog, analyze, and control the dissemination of all pertinent information on the Ottoman Empire.

The mail monopoly was one of Venice's chief sources of information in the Ottoman capital, and the control of the flow of news helped Venice to sustain its position in the Porte and more generally its political relevance. As Alvise Contarini put it, Venice was «*padron* of all negotiations in Constantinople through its control of the mail». ⁷⁹ Users of the postal services widely suspected that the Venetians examined the contents of mail entrusted to them, suspicions which were entirely well founded. Indeed, to a certain extent inspecting the contents of all mail that passed through the *bailate* was viewed as «a legitimate right of the bailo». ⁸⁰ Thus, the embassy's secretaries regularly opened the mail of other ambassadors, churchmen, Jews, renegades, merchants – in short, anyone who might be suspected of passing along information about Venice's affairs, or indeed any information that might be of interest to the Signoria. ⁸¹ In 1612, Bailo Cristoforo Valier, even complained that there was so much mail passing through the embassy that it «hindered a systematic opening» of all the letters. ⁸²

An incident of 1586 is revealing of one of the techniques the Venetians used to gain access to correspondence. The French ambassador in Constantinople, Jacques Savary, sarcastically reported that he was going to «advise his King that in the future he should send his letters [...] [already] opened to remove the responsibility from the Venetian ministers of health of doing so», because he was certain that «someone under the pretext of public health was reading his letters». When letters arrived in both Venice and Constantinople, they were often opened and perfumed by Venetian officials to cleanse them of any traces of plague, and it was not uncommon for prying eyes to take advantage of this process to peruse the contents. ⁸³ A Jesuit father in Tripoli, Giovanbattista Eliano, alluded to the same when he wrote to Aquaviva in 1581:

⁷⁹ *Relazione di Alvise Contarini*, in *Le Relazioni degli stati europei [...] nel secolo decimosettimo, Turchia*, eds. N. Barozzi and G. Berchet, Venice, P. Nartovich, 1871-1872, p. 1: 431.

⁸⁰ G. HASSIOTIS, *Venezia e i domini veneziani tramite di informazioni sui Turchi*, p. 1: 122.

⁸¹ See, for example, CapiXlett, b. 7, 99, 8 Sept. 1612, Cristoforo Valier to X; also InqStat, b. 417, 23 Feb. 1633 (MV); CapiXlett, b. 3, 139-144, 11 May 1568, Jacopo Soranzo to X. InqStat, b. 417, 1631-1632, contains a series of encrypted letters discussing the opening of a letter from the Holy Roman Emperor that passed through the Chancellery. For a similar situation in another geographical context, see J. DAVIS, *Pursuit of Power*, p. 8.

⁸² P. PRETO, *I servizi segreti*, p. 295.

⁸³ SDC, b. 23, cc. 150r-157v, 7 Apr. 1586, Lorenzo Bernardo to Senate.

«we are amazed that our packet [of letters] [...] was not received sealed as we sent it. We will ensure in the future that our packets are forwarded from Venice to Rome by Father Preposito dell'Humiltà [the head of the Jesuits there], and this way there will be no problems». Eliano's proposal indicates the degree to which the Jesuits relied on the Venetian post: he proposed to use Jesuit resources to forward mail once it has arrived in Venice, but had no suggestion on how the Jesuits could free themselves from the Venetian monopoly on transporting mail from the Levant to Europe.⁸⁴

Violations such as these were a source of irritation for ambassadors and others who used the Venetian post. While English ambassadors expressed occasional frustrations,⁸⁵ the French seem to have been particularly galled by the need to rely on Venetian graces in transporting their mail. French officials resorted to sending extraordinary couriers occasionally, via Ragusa, but this was not a long-term solution.⁸⁶ To free themselves from the Venetian yoke, French ambassadors repeatedly proposed initiating their own mail service that would use Ragusa as a way station for carrying French correspondence to Paris via Ancona and Rome, thus bypassing the Venetians entirely.⁸⁷ Their royal commissions also enjoined the ambassadors to break France's dependence on the Venetian mail system.⁸⁸ The first meaningful attempt to implement such a plan occurred in 1602, as part of the general reorganization of the royal post within the kingdom, when the French ambassadors in Venice and Constantinople joined with Jewish and Ragusan merchants to set up an alternate mail route through Ragusa to Ancona, with the costs divided between all participants.⁸⁹ To this end, a French gentleman was dispatched to Ragusa to expedite the mail between Venice and Constantinople. Venetian authorities were eager to counter this initiative and to protect their mail monopoly. Bailo Ago-

⁸⁴ S. KURI, *Monumenta Proximi-Orientis*, Palestine - Liban - Syrie - Mésopotame, Rome, Institutum historicum Societatis Iesu, 1989, pp. 1: 264-266; M. SCADUTO, *La corrispondenza dei primi Gesuiti*, p. 249.

⁸⁵ State Papers Foreign, Turkey (Public Record Office, London), 97/15, cc. 80v-81r, 12 Mar 1630, Wyche to Dorchester.

⁸⁶ A. BOPPE (ed.), *Journal et correspondance de Gédoyne "Le Turc" consul de France à Alep, 1623-1625*, Paris, Typographie Plon-Nourrit et C^{ie}, 1909, pp. 53-54.

⁸⁷ G. TONGAS, *Les relations de la France avec l'Empire Ottoman durant la première moitié du XVII^e siècle et l'Ambassade à Constantinople de Philippe de Harlay, Comte de Césy (1619-1640)*, Toulouse, Imprimerie F. Boisseau, 1942, pp. 259-260. On early modern French postal organization in general, see É. ALLEN, *Post and Courier Service*, pp. 74-89.

⁸⁸ Manuscrits Français (Bibliothèque Nationale), 7904, cc. 82v-83r, *Instructions pour Mr le Baron de Salagnac pour l'ambassade de Turquie*, 26 July 1604.

⁸⁹ C. RAHN PHILLIPS and P.J.D. KULISHECK, *Communication and Transportation*, in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, ed. P.F. Grendler, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999, p. 2: 55.

stino Nani recommended that Venetian ships not stop in Ragusa or do anything to assist the French, as «it would be very prejudicial to facilitate in any way for this French ambassador the delivery of his notices». Nani's policy succeeded, as within a month, the difficulties of instituting such a system had caused the French to retreat from the idea, and by the following January they were once again relying entirely on Venice's mail service.⁹⁰ The French tried again in 1609 and 1632 to institute a postal system using Jews in Ragusa to forward the mail, but both attempts came to naught.⁹¹

In addition to the espionage possibilities, Venice's mail monopoly also allowed it to control to a degree the flow of information into and about Constantinople, which helped it preserve its reputation as the most accurate source in the Porte for information on European matters, a celebrity which the city's leaders actively cultivated. As long as the Venetian postal system was the only regular service between Europe and the Ottoman Empire, and as long as other ambassadors had no choice but to use it, the baili were able to manipulate the delivery of correspondence to the benefit of Venetian interests. We get some sense of how this functioned from the observations of a French secretary resident in Constantinople:

the Venetians send messengers to Christianity two times a month at their expense, but they charge us dearly for this courtesy, because they often retard the departure of our letters and at their discretion hold in their embassy those that come from France in their packets, to profit from and take advantage of the news that comes from Christianity and to make more valuable that which they are first to present. [...] it is necessary to be at their mercy and to make it appear that we are greatly obliged to them.⁹²

It was standard practice for Venice's secretaries to hold all bundles of mail addressed to other ambassadors and individuals for several days in the chancellery. This gave the baili ample time, the day after the mail pouches arrived, to forward a summary written in Turkish to the grand vizier of the news sent by the Venetian Senate, as well as any additional information gleaned from surreptitious examinations of the correspondence of other ambassadors. Venetian ambassadors in Rome provided a similar biweekly brief to the Holy Father about developments in the Ottoman Empire, based on their own dis-

⁹⁰ SDC, b. 18, cc. 298v-299r, 27 Dec. 1583, Gianfrancesco Morosini to Senate; SDeIC, b. 9, 12 May 1597; SDC, b. 52, c. 408r, 20 Feb. 1600 (MV), Agostino Nani to Senate; SDC, b. 55, cc. 180rv, 21 June 1602, Agostino Nani to Senate; SDC, b. 54, c. 201r, Jan. 1601 (MV), Agostino Nani to Senate.

⁹¹ T. BIRON, *Ambassade en Turquie*, p. 2: 271.

⁹² A. BOPPE, *Journal et correspondance de Gédoyen "Le Turc" consul de France*, pp. 61-62.

patches from Venice, which regularly contained summaries of correspondence from Constantinople.⁹³ Indeed, an anonymous Venetian treatise on diplomacy instructed its patrician readers on the crucial need of controlling the flow of information, since the most prestigious and effective ambassador «is always the first to give news of good things».⁹⁴ By holding back newly arrived mail, the baili were able always to be the first to communicate important notices from the West to Ottoman officials, something which greatly irritated fellow diplomats, and by their own admission, put them at a distinct disadvantage.⁹⁵ This also permitted Venetian officials to put their own political spin on bad news before it reached the sultans' ears.

On the other side of the equation, by slowing the forwarding of mail, Venice could ensure that it controlled news departing Constantinople as well. This was almost certainly the case in 1623, when letters from Constantinople were given to the French ambassador in Venice several hours after French couriers had departed for France, which meant that the dispatches would have to wait in Venice fifteen days before the next departure. This would, of course, allow the Venetian ambassador in France to be up-to-date on Ottoman affairs well before his hosts or any of his fellow ambassadors.⁹⁶ As the French ambassador in Constantinople, the Comte de Marcheville, complained, the Venetians «do not hand over the packets either here or [in Venice] except as it pleases them, customarily one or two months after they have been given theirs, and after they have done as they pleased with the news, and so the Turks have little regard for us and think that we do not have the means to deliver ourselves from this subjugation».⁹⁷ Despite these complaints and numerous attempts to free themselves from the Venetian information stranglehold, the French, along with the Dutch and English, remained at the mercy of Venice for regular, reliable communications.

This reliance also gave the baili a potentially potent bargaining chip to use in negotiations. In discussing with the English ambassador, who had the right to collect duties on Venetian goods transported on English ships, Bailo Otta-

⁹³ Senato Dispacci Roma, b. 40, cc. 2rv, 6 Sept 1597, Giovanni Dolfin to Senate, and *passim*; also Senato Dispacci Roma, b. 42, c. 8v, 6 Sept 1598, Giovanni Mocenigo to Senate.

⁹⁴ D. QUELLER, *How to Succeed as an Ambassador: A Sixteenth Century Venetian Document*, «Studia Gratiana», XV, 1972, pp. 657-671. See similar advice in R.L. FERRING, *The Accomplished Ambassador by Christopher Varsevicius and Its Relation to Sixteenth Century Political Writings with a Translation of the Treatise from Latin*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Notre Dame University, 1959, p. 132.

⁹⁵ B. SIMON, *I rappresentanti diplomatici veneziani*, p. 65.

⁹⁶ A. BOPPE, *Journal et correspondance de Gédoyen "Le Turc" consul de France*, pp. 24-25.

⁹⁷ G. TONGAS, *Les relations de la France avec l'Empire Ottoman*, pp. 259-260; A. BOPPE, *Journal et correspondance de Gédoyen "Le Turc" consul de France*, p. 86.

viano Bon made sure to mention that English negotiations in Levant were greatly dependent on the Venetian mail, «without which he could not negotiate».⁹⁸ In another instance, when Jewish merchants refused to advance funds to the bailo, he proposed keeping back their mail as leverage in the negotiations, and when several Jewish merchants refused to pay duties on goods from Venice, the bailo withheld their mail to force the issue.⁹⁹ So dependent were the Jews in Constantinople on the Venetian postal service at times, that they requested to be informed when official letters were being sent to Venice on a Saturday, so that they could get their letters to the chancellery beforehand and avoid breaking their Sabbath. In 1596, they also appointed a Veronese Jew to both deliver and pick up their mail from the Venetian chancellery.¹⁰⁰

Venice's attempts to manipulate the flow of communications to and from Constantinople coincided with a growing demand within the Porte for up-to-date and accurate information on Europe in the service of the empire's political, economic, and military objectives. Contrary to the common view that Muslims and Ottomans harbored little curiosity about the West until the late eighteenth century,¹⁰¹ the ruling elite of the Ottoman Empire went to significant lengths to collect information about Europe from a variety of sources. These included Jews, renegades, Ottoman vassal states, spies, envoys, provincial officials, dragomans: European diplomats too were an essential link in this information gathering system, and none were more important than Venice's ambassadors and baili. The fact that the «Ottoman information gathering network» was often not as effective as some European systems, made Venetian information all the more attractive in the Porte.¹⁰²

Scholars have described the early modern expansion of technologies for both the production and the dissemination of information and the attendant «rise of information-fed bureaucracies», as representing «a new regime of information and communication» and a «communications revolution».¹⁰³ Many

⁹⁸ SDC, b. 66, cc. 197r-198r, 12 July 1608, Ottaviano Bon to Senate.

⁹⁹ BAC, b. 339, 39, n.d.; SDCop, reg. 19, cc. 148-49, 27 Aug. 1625, Giorgio Giustinian to Senate.

¹⁰⁰ BAC, b. 269, reg. 382, c. 270v, 17 Oct. 1596; SDeLC, b. 5, 5 Jan. 1583 (MV) Senate to Bailo.

¹⁰¹ B. LEWIS, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, New York, Norton, 1982.

¹⁰² G. ÁGOSTON, *Information, ideology, and limits of imperial policy: Ottoman grand strategy in the context of Ottoman-Habsburg rivalry*, in *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire*, eds. V.H. Aksan and D. Goffman, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 78-92; G. ÁGOSTON, *Információszerzés és kémkedés az Oszmán Birodalomban a 15-17. században*, in *Információáramlás a magyar és török végvári rendszerben*, eds. T. Petercsák and M. Berecz, Eger, Heves Megyei Múzeum, 1999, p. 129.

¹⁰³ K.J. BANKS, *Chasing Empire across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713-1763*, Montreal-Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003, p. 10; P. BURKE, *Early*

early modern polities tried to manage and control this mushrooming growth in information to serve their own political ends, none more so than the Republic of Venice.¹⁰⁴ In the Venetian cost-benefit analyses, the burden and expenses of dominating and manipulating the flow of information between Constantinople and the West was an acceptable price to pay for continuing political relevance. Monopolizing the mail service was an integral part of Venice's diplomatic and political strategies in the changed early modern Mediterranean world. By routinely opening the letters they forwarded, Venetian officials were able to keep a finger on the pulse of the Porte. By holding back letters so that they could be the first to break news from Europe in Constantinople, the baili were often able to diffuse difficult situations, and enhance their prestige at a time when militarily and politically they were being eclipsed by other European powers. By manipulating the mails, Venice was also able to influence the spread of information about the Ottomans throughout Europe. The desired result of this often costly policy was that the Venetian bailo in the sixteenth and into the seventeenth centuries was «always the best informed European in the Ottoman capital».¹⁰⁵ Venice's information monopoly endowed it with a unique position of power in the Porte which directly benefited its policies and status there. Particularly in an era in which the city no longer possessed a significant military counter to its powerful neighbor, diplomacy and the manipulation of information were two of its most important tools in preserving the city's hard-earned neutrality while also maintaining its relevance. Venice's control of the flow of information, then, is a revealing example of the nexus between power and information in the early modern Mediterranean.

Modern Venice as a Center of Information and Communication, p. 389; W. BEHRINGER, *Communications Revolutions: A Historiographical Concept*, «German History», XXIV, 2006, pp. 333-374.

¹⁰⁴ On similar attempts by the papacy and Spain, see F. GIANNETTO, *Il Servizio di posta veneziano nella Roma di Paolo IV*, pp. 126-131; G. PARKER, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, pp. 48-50. For early modern Europe more generally, see B. DOLLEY and S.A. BARON (eds.), *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe*, London, Routledge, 2001.

¹⁰⁵ G. HASSIOTIS, *Venezia e i domini veneziani tramite di informazioni sui Turchi*, p. 1: 122.