Carriers in the Low Countries

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ABSTRACT

English

Carriers in the Low Countries
The early-modern Low Countries were dense with carrier networks, both complementary and competing. They were the main interchange between Maritime Western and Continental Central Europe as well as being the northern terminus of the international postal services run by the Tassis family from Brussels through France to Spain, and through Germany to Italy.

Italiano

Corrieri nei Paesi Bassi I Paesi Bassi nella prima età moderna furono pieni di reti di corrieri, complementari e concorrenti fra loro. Erano il principale mezzo d'interscambio fra l'Europa occidentale marittima e quella centro-continentale, così come il terminale settentrionale dei servizi postali internazionali dei Tasso da Bruxelles verso Francia e Spagna, nonché Germania e Italia.

Deutsch

Die Post in den Niederlanden

In den Niederlanden bestand in der frühen Neuzeit ein dichtes Netz an Postverbindungen, die teilweise einander ergänzten, teilweise miteinander konkurrierten. Über sie erfolgte der Austausch zwischen den westeuropäischen Küstenregionen und dem Inneren des Kontinents. Zugleich lag hier der nördlichste Punkt der internationalen Taxispost: Brüssel war der Ausgangspunkt der Linien nach Frankreich und Spanien einerseits und nach Deutschland und Italien andererseits.

CONTRIBUTO

Inglese

The first thing I should provide is a disclaimer that I am not strictly a historian of posts. My scholarly investigations have focused primarily on other aspects of communication, and in particular on a man called Richard Verstegan (I will come back to him later) and on the news press of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. It was from this angle that I became aware of the importance of gaining some knowledge of postal communication.

This was partly because of the coverage of the posts in the newspaper press. The mere fact that a courier had travelled through could itself be news. To give just one example, on 13 August 1667 the Brussels gazette, the *Relations véritables*, carried a report from Vienna according to which:

> The courier that had been sent to Sweden and had returned last Monday, two days ago left for the Court of the Elector of Brandenburg, and another was sent the same day to the States of Holland. It is said that a league has been agreed between His Imperial Highness, the King of Denmark, the States of the United Provinces, and some Princes of the Empire [. . .]. Two couriers from Turkey arrived one after another, without it being possible to know for what purpose. A courier from Poland passed through, going to Rome, it is said to ask the Pope for dispensation for a marriage.

These 'couriers' were not the ordinary post riders with a regular weekly schedule, but the 'extraordinaries' sent by means of the posting infrastructure on special business that would tolerate no delay. The visible – and audible –movement of urgent messages was a symptom of the deeper currents of statecraft, to be diagnosed by those with the wisdom to know what to make of them, or the temerity to guess. I emphasize audible, because it was a matter of friction in the Low Countries just who had the legal authority to blow a post horn. Decrees and proclamations issued in the 16th century specified first that the watch was obliged to open city gates to postal riders blowing their horns, so as not to inconvenience them and hold up the mail (a decree issued in response to a Tassis complaint that they had been doing exactly this). A later proclamation went on to specify that only riders duly licensed by the master of the posts should be allowed to blow horns to have gates opened, and that the watch should check their insignia to ensure that they were genuinely entitled to do so. In any case, the passing of postal messengers, however swift, was not normally silent.

In the early 20th century, G. K. Chesterton wrote a short story, 'The Invisible Man', in which his fictional detective, Father Brown, unmasks a killer whose presence at the scene of the crime had passed unnoticed. He was the postman carrying mail to the luxury block of flats where the murder took place, and he was so much part of the furniture that his presence went entirely unremarked. Chesterton was making a social point about the upper classes taking the people who provided their luxuries for granted (and elsewhere, in writing about a taxi accident in which he had been involved, he did not exempt himself from this charge), so the plausibility of postal invisibility in the 20th century need not really concern us. Certainly in the 17th century it would seem to have been impossible for a postman to pass unnoticed.

The reports quoted a moment ago from the *Relations véritables* were not in any way unusual, but only extraordinary couriers were routinely given this treatment in the press. The regular or ordinary posts are only mentioned in the newspapers when some disruption made them newsworthy. More fundamentally, however, the newspaper press only became possible when there was a regular postal timetable that made the receipt of news predictably regular. With very few exceptions such as public proclamations or oral reports, the news that was printed had come by post. The post, in Axel Oxenstierna's formulation, was the mother of the newspaper. This is dependence is reflected in many of the names of newspapers in the period: the *Courier véritable*, the *Postillon ordinaire*, the *Extraordinarisse Post---tijdinghen*, the *Wochentliche Ordinari---Post---Zeitung*, the *Ordinari Post Tijdener* and so forth.

The backbone of this system of international posts was, of course, the Tassis postal service, providing weekly carriage between Italy and the Low Countries, and regular but less frequent carriage between the Low Countries and Spain. Brussels was a key interchange between the services carrying messages to and from London, Paris, and Madrid, and those carrying messages to and from Rome, Venice and Vienna. The best---known guide to the regular international post services managed under the auspices of the Tassis dynasty is the *Nuovo itinerario delle poste*, compiled by Ottavio Codogno, deputy postmaster general of the state of Milan. A study of this book by Clemente Fedele, Marco Gerosa and Armando Serra came out just two years ago from the Museo dei Tasso e della Storia Postale, under the title *Europa Postale*. Here, I will just say that Codogno's work, first published in Milan in 1608, remained in print for over sixty years. The last edition that I know of (not counting the 1980 facsimile reprint) was published in Venice in 1676, and more than one edition is available on Google Books, courtesy of the libraries of Munich and Lyon, among others. In 1682 it was superseded by Giuseppe Miselli's *Burattino veridico*, which recycled what was still useful in Codogno and updated what was obsolete. This too went through several editions, several of which are available on Google Books.

But to return to Codogno, the system he described was the system he worked in: that of the international Tassis posts. In this system, Brussels was not only a key interchange, but also a northern near---terminus. I mapped the routes for postal delivery that Codogno describes while collaborating with the News Networks in Early Modern Europe research group, led by Joad

Raymond, and as you can see from the resulting chart, Brussels is a vital node on the network but on the geographical periphery of the system. Codogno explained that services between Brussels and Antwerp were frequent – 'so to say, hourly' – but also that the wars in the Low Countries meant that there were no ordinary posts to the United Provinces. There was, however, a way around this difficulty. Beyond the northern confines of the ordinary public posts, letters could be forwarded through Antwerp's merchant carrier networks:

> Should you wish to write to the States of Holland, that is to Merue [changed in later editions to 'The Hague'], Dordrecht, Haarlem, Helepoch [changed in later editions to 'Rotterdam'], Delft, Leiden, Holland [which is where all these cities are anyway], Amsterdam, Utrecht, Gelre, Zutphen, Arnhem and Nijmegen, or further to Lübeck, Rostock, Wismar, Stralsund and Novgorod, do so by way of the merchants of Antwerp. Similarly, should you wish to write to England, it is suitable to do so by the merchants of Antwerp or of Brussels, who will correspond with those of London.

Codogno was a little vague on Dutch geography and toponymy, but here he was going beyond his own expertise to outline the services provided not by the ordinary posts of the Tassis networks, but by the 'merchant carriers' of Antwerp.

Supplementing Codogno with English and German sources gives us a more rounded picture of the range of services available, extending into Central Europe and along the Baltic coast. One of the main sources used for this has been a 1576 book called *The Post of the World* by an Englishman of Dutch descent, Richard Rowlands or Richard Verstegan, who would later be both a news writer in Antwerp and one of the earliest identifiable newspaper journalists. But do not think that the Tassis posts and the merchant carriers complemented one another hand---in---glove. There was bitter rivalry between them, the Tassis insisting over a century of litigation that the merchant carriers infringed their monopoly on the public posts, while the merchant carriers insisted in their turn that the Tassis posts infringed upon their customary rights of carriage. Matters reached a head in 1659 with full---scale civil disturbances in Antwerp.

This was not the only instance of such contention in the Low Countries, although it was certainly the most extreme. Throughout the later 17th century and into the 18th century, the merchants of the rival cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam lobbied and litigated over preferential organisation of postal deliveries from Hamburg and from London. The merchants of each city wanted to get the news first, or at the very least at the same time as their rival. The decree that postal messengers, when entering a city, should go straight to the post office without first visiting any private house probably reflects the willingness of certain merchants to pay extra to have their post first, rather than the untimely sociability of postmen wanting to see their friends. Apart from speed, there was also the consideration of confidentiality: merchants did not like other people, even postmasters, knowing just where they were getting letters from.

Nor was Antwerp by any means the only city to license carriers of its own. Almost every major city in the Low Countries did so. I will touch on the example of Ghent at the end of my talk. In the late 16th and early 17th century, the city of Amsterdam licensed carriers to Antwerp, Cologne, Hamburg, Rouen, Groningen, and elsewhere. Some of these licences may well formalise or regularise longstanding practices. On a slightly later timescale, the city of Dordrecht licensed carriers to Rotterdam, to Antwerp, to Breda, to Amsterdam and to Brussels, as well as barge services to Bergen op Zoom, Delft, The Hague, and elsewhere. Around 1600 the city of Rotterdam had packet and passenger services by barge to over a dozen towns and cities, including Amsterdam, Breda, Haarlem, 's---Hertogenbosch, Utrecht, and later also to Antwerp and Mechelen. In the Southern Netherlands the barge system was less extensive, but there was regular carriage by water on the lines Antwerp–Brussels, Antwerp– Ghent, and Ghent–Bruges. Although a few of these services were already running when Codogno was writing, it is understandable that he says nothing about them. They are, however, mentioned by Miselli late in the century. There is a modern study of the whole barge system, arguing that it was an important element in the precocious development of a capitalist economy in the Dutch Republic. The geography of the Low Countries, and the nature of their overseas links, meant that it was natural for carriage to be often by water as well as by land, and for there to be structural points of hand---over between the two.

Besides merchant carriers and licensed barges, a third service complementing the Tassis posts on some routes, but competing with them on others, came into existence in the later 17th century: the diligences, sometimes also known as coaches, which by the late 18th century looked very much like the stagecoaches familiar from Westerns. Here the Tassis case that their monopoly was being infringed was weaker, as the decrees establishing the monopoly said nothing about carrying passengers, and diligences were more likely to carry parcels than letters. As time went by, however, legal steps had to be taken to ensure that they did not compete for the carriage of letters — although with loopholes through which they almost literally drove a coach---and---six.

A late---18th---century postal map of the Austrian Netherlands, produced by Jean---Bapiste de Bouge, geographer to the Duchy of Guelders, uses symbols to indicate the availability of different services providing carriage of letters and passengers. In Antwerp, for example, there was a postal relay, a post office, a barge service and a diligence service, each marked on the map with a particular symbol — a post horn, a sealed letter, a boat, and a coach wheel. In Lier the little star over the post horn indicates that the postmastership was vacant (an updated version of this map was published annually from 1783 to 1789), while in Hulst the little hat over the post horn indicates that the post office was part of the Dutch service. There were also distinct symbols for post offices run by the imperial post service (a rather sketchy double--- headed eagle), and for the French post service (a fleur de lys), and details about payment. This is the situation on the eve of Revolution, but it is the first attempt to chart out the various services visually in any detail (there were earlier maps just of the postal services). How the situation depicted in the 1780s relates to the system described in 17th---century books and documents is open to further research.

Codogno had not had newspaper editors in mind when he wrote his guide to the postal services: he lists those for whom he was writing as secretaries, religious, and merchants. And it is, in particular, to a religious who was also a secretary that I will now turn, backing up a century and more to 1618. Damiaan Pletz was a young Capuchin friar who served as secretary to the provincial of the Flemish province of his order. In 1618 or 1619 he drew up a list of all the carrying connections that could be used to communicate between the various Capuchin houses in the Flemish province. For the most part these were licensed carriers, but he also listed the regular posts (between Antwerp and Cologne, for example), as well as poulterers and yeastmen who would carry messages on their regular rounds of the countryside collecting eggs and poultry or delivering fresh yeast for brewing and baking. Another partial source, listing only those carriers with services from Ghent, can be found in an almanac printed in Ghent for the year 1636. Frequencies again varied from fortnightly (to Hondschoote), through weekly (to Paris, to London), to two or three times per week (to most towns in Flanders), and even daily (to Bruges, to Brussels and to Antwerp). Sometimes alternatives were available – for Cambrai 'follow the carrier to Lille, or the postmaster' – but most carriers on the list were licensed by the city of Ghent or by the cities they were carrying to, and they could be found in particular inns at particular times. These, however, provided the local links to an international system, based in Brussels. The carrier for Brussels would leave the Bont Peert (an inn behind the church of St Nicholas) at 8 each morning. Once in Brussels, a letter could continue on by post to Germany, Vienna, Augsburg, Prague, Italy, and Spain (on a Tuesday), or to Luxembourg, the Palatinate or Trier (on a Saturday), or to Lorraine or Burgundy (on a Sunday).

The Tassis postal service could deliver letters to major centres across Europe, and even to other continents. The national and local services with which it was sometimes in competition were also a vital complement, giving the post a reach not just to major cities but also into the localities. The friction between the Tassis and their local rivals (whether in the Low Countries, the Habsburg Hereditary Lands, or the Swiss cantons) was due to contact and overlap, without which there would not have been a truly European service, accessible to a broad population in the localities.