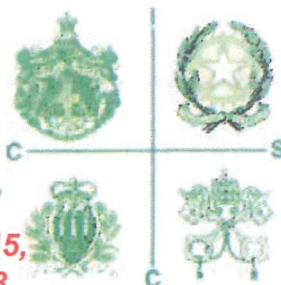


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Francesca Brunet, *«Per essere quest'ufficio la chiave dell'Italia e Germania...» La famiglia Taxis Bordogna e le comunicazioni postali nell'area di Trento e Bolzano (Sec. XVI-XVIII)*.

[The Taxis Bordogna Family and the Postal Communications in the Trento and Bolzano areas (from 1500s to 1700s)], in Italian and German. 256 (A4) pages, replete with colour & black and white illustrations, Cornello 2018, Tassis Museum; available from: virginstamps@gmail.com

PREFACE BY CLEMENTE FEDELE

With this book, Francesca Brunet opens a new chapter in postal history. More than sixty years have elapsed since the 1955 publication in Germany of Taxis-Bordogna and Riedel's historical study of the Bordogna Tassis in Trent. This family managed the imperial postal service as a fief from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, principally along the axis of the Adige river between the County of Tyrol and the Prince Bishopric of Trent.

Some things had changed in the meantime, namely, the age of defence of the national monopolies had formally ended, with its numerous essays written in the legal-historical mode and sharing a common narrative style. In fact, all of them began with a mythical ancient period distinguished by the presumed splendor of the *cursus publicus*, which was wiped out by the medieval crisis, and then recovered in a state form destined to give life to the great state administrations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Judged from today's viewpoint, we see that this postal history has been built on dubious foundations. This stems from two main causes: a)- a tradition of Germanic legal studies between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries under the term *Postgeschichte* later cultivated by learned postal officials, and b)- the revival of the subject in the twentieth century by antiquarian circles. New and young researchers have only recently begun to approach the history of communications and information, investigating the work of ambassadors and the origins of the periodical press; fields where the relationship between communications and distance covered in

real-time are most evident. Setting out on these new paths without the guidance of one's tutors requires courage and creativity. Most laudable is the author's choice to extend her study of postal themes from the Bordogna Tassis (or Taxis) to the modern age, thanks to sources from a variety of archives.

By necessity, many aspects of research delved into the role of the postal service over the long term. In addition to diplomacy and proto-journalism, we must widen the horizon of technical history of postal communications before entering into epistolography, imperial geography, the dawning of public opinion, the upsurge of pre-postal carriers, the nature of the main highways called "postal" roads and last but not least, the rapport of the Tassis postal enterprise with the prince bishopric of Trent.

The fundamental cause for the connection between these and various other forms of knowledge tied to the technological function identified with the neologism "post" - an important innovation of the late medieval period - a true invention - which attracts little attention and its role has rarely been purposefully considered. Furthermore, we encounter in scientific settings: the somewhat unconscious tendency to apply to the term "post" or "posts" encountered in old documents the modern meaning of the term with its lengthy 1900s reminiscences.

However the definition of "post office" in the early modern sense has little to do with the homonym of today. Although understandable, this approach is superficial and hinders the comprehension of a network which, in the fifteenth century and beyond, commercialised - *watch the term!* - high-

speed conveyance, ensuring the efficient delivery of written messages in real time.

From the historiographic perspective, it is an over-simplification to apply the label of the founders of the post as it functions today to the Tassis. Only the passing of centuries and the transfer to state administration - resulting in the demise of the Tassis epoch - followed by additional reforms which brought about the contemporary



models, now indebted to digital technologies for a further reincarnation.

We must keep in mind that the communicational meaning of the term “post” stems from a Renaissance innovation between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the Visconti and Sforza governments created and financed the postal technology for the first time. The innovative postal way facilitated the delivery of mail across long distances more efficiently than the “courier service” (*servizio corrieri*) with its foot messengers who delivered messages to their destination. This system was integrated with (but never fully substituted by) the systematic deployment of postal couriers at newly introduced postal stations, where designated staff swiftly handed over the small mailbag to a carrier assigned to the specified leg of a given postal route.

These “mounted postal couriers” (*cavallari alle poste*) quickly forwarded the mailbag. Subsequently, postal routes familiarization had a positive impact on “night and day” speed of delivery, thus the innovative mode of uninterrupted journeys would expedite postal conveyance to unprecedented levels. The nocturnal stop-over of state couriers that characterized “by day” (*a giornata*) travel was discontinued.

Comparative lexicography shows how the neologism “post” swiftly found its way across other languages around the year 1500, accompanying the technology of postal high-speed beyond the Alps. The mode was onerous, but indispensable to the state to cope with emergencies or assist in military operations. From the end of the fifteenth-century, the French adopted the expression *poste* and the same word was used in the sixteenth-century across the Channel before the English claimed the form *post*, which had already been present in German lands with slight variations in every other language. The term “post” accomplished a true migratory journey, reinforced by its semantic value, repeated and always defended as synonymous with royal or national public service. As a result the term “post” became a metonymical asset.

At the twilight of the fourteenth-century we notice that from Milan and its surroundings the first postal cavalcade (couriers on a trotting horse) began to appear state-wide. A faster technique developed during the second half of the fifteenth century by using galloping horses that were changed at each station; this new mode was labeled *staffetta* (estafette). The bewildered public could not believe their eyes and associated the new mode with flying (*volando*).

The moment when such a fantastic innovation was perfected has not been documented, however, evidence may be hiding somewhere in the Sforza's

archives. By the end of the 1470s, we see frequent references to estafettes. The date of birth of this innovation gains greater relevance when we realize that the speed of the new mode was not surpassed until the advent of train and telegraph in the 1800s.

The power of harnessing steam for travel and the mystery of long-distance transmission along electric wires would displace dependence on horses, but the postal service overcame the structural crisis by taking on new life in the growing volume of letters, envelopes, and money (and - later on - parcels).

In short, one can say that the first “mounted postal couriers” (*cavallari alle poste*) were paid for one or more deliveries a day of the dispatches of their lord or client. As a consequence, a number of operators resided near the designated roads. In due course a specific postal station was leased exclusively to a postmaster by official title, usually an innkeeper, who rented fresh horses to ride to the next stage at rates directly related to speed: trotting or galloping. To travel by post required the assistance of a guide on horseback, the “postillion”, who showed travelers the road, and at the end of his service, returned the animals to their base.

During the 1530s the growing volume of mail entrusted by third parties, including powerful personages, who had a serious appetite for postal speed gave rise to another great innovation called *posta lettere* featuring a spectrum of urban services that, thanks to fixed rates and a calendar of “post-days” (*giorni di posta*) transmitted mail collected from a multiplicity of clients, aiding and expanding the connection between faraway places. This, in turn, spawned postal “*ordinarios*”, an in-demand mode facilitating real time communications, at set prices, based on well scheduled arrival and return journeys. These were coordinated by a rotary model, now called “return courier” (*giro di posta*), which gave the addressee sufficient time to respond to the letters he received.

At that point, the postal service was structured in two branches: a post horse service with its stations with adequate stables, and a “chancellery” or letter post; therefore the infrastructures providing the change of horses on most postal arteries, were also found along the Brenner route, adding it to the major highways of the early modern age.

Based on known chronology, as early as the 1520s, this road became an integral part of imperial postal geography. Marin Sanudo noted in his diary that in 1522, Venice authorized imperial stations within its borders along the road between

Trent and Castelnuovo di Verona on the way to Milan and Mantua. From Mantua, the route used by “mounted postal couriers” went on to Bologna and Rome. Francesco Guicciardini, governor of Modena, referred to it in a letter to the Pope in 1523, writing: “an imperial mounted courier came to establish posts [postal stations] to Mantua.”

Both Venice and Rome saw the regular presence of a Habsburg ambassador who necessitated efficient postal communications. Letters arriving from Innsbruck left the Brenner route at Trent, proceeding on the Sugana Valley route until they reached the lagoon city.

Postal history has long led the way in focusing on the message-letter in the context of its travel, with particular focus on the timing and rhythm of transmission, as well as economic and material aspects. Indeed, there existed a long series of directives for those handling mail intimating special attention to the handwritten marks and address that the covers bore externally; opening the letter to examine the contents was forbidden. The approach reflected new principles regarding public trust, or the sacrosanct inviolability of sealed written communication entrusted to the postal service, thus banning the medieval examination of the sealed message on arrival and departure on the part of civic authority carried out by officers of the *Ufficio delle Bollette* (Duty Bill Office). The modern age brought about the principle of confidentiality in postal matters, and if the state for security reasons or pretexts tampers with the correspondence of others, it must do so secretly, or only in particular moments of heightened tensions.

The specific postal approach to letters, in some ways, integrates both historiography and literature: the former privileges the information gleaned from the text. It is important to pay attention in sociolinguistic terms to the way material forms were structured and evolved. The way a sender or secretary wrote the message on paper always had something to reveal; in fact, one must examine the address and even the aesthetic connection between the writer and the blank pages, in addition to investigating the format of the address and the typology of the envelope. The formal etiquette expressed by every epistolary act corresponds to the creation of meanings. In this regard, a curator or researcher of correspondence must always remember the paratextual elements, thanks to which the piece of paper received, or perhaps not sent, is transformed into a powerful object or scenographical item called the “letter.” Rules and guidance for the etiquette of letter-

writing inspired numerous printed manuals.

An additional Italian pride is the publishing of books of letters into the vulgate which responded to the needs of the upper and middle classes, who emulated the modes and styles of relating at a distance that were in use by powerful people and their allies, informants and emissaries. It soon becomes clear that other elements made the genre attractive. Pietro Aretino revisited his Letters in print in 1538, having foreseen the psychological, mundane, social and literary values of the new opportunities for communication provided by the postal service.

It is with reason that the history of literature attributes the success of books of letters to causes surrounding the epistolary genre. On the other hand, postal history nowadays tends to highlight that as much as the telematic revolution influences modern times culture, a rather similar development occurred in the sixteenth century, when letter post firmly established itself as an increasingly successful and popular communicational medium. An analysis of the postal poetics remains to be carried out, keeping in mind one drawback: the scanty attention paid by scholars of the last five centuries to the role of the technology that inspired the growing popularity of epistolary practices. It is not surprising that among humanists there is inadequate interest for technological or economic themes. It looks like another instance of unnoticed revolution.

It is worthwhile to wrap up this cursory foray with a revealing postal anecdote related to the Council of Trent, so magnificently cited by the author of this book. During the Council letters were transmitted “*post haste*” at a very high frequency (twice a week) from Trent to Bologna providing the crucial connection with the Bologna-Ancona-Rome route.

The flow of messages by post determined the pace of work, and in 1546 the Venetian ambassador wrote that he had heard the conciliar fathers saying that “the Holy Spirit comes from Rome to this Council by estafette, when in the past it came from Heaven.” Also the French representative recommended that the Council be given more freedom, in order to contradict rumors that “the Holy Spirit comes from Rome in a mail valise.” Venetian theologian Paolo Sarpi took cue from this comment in his *History of the Council of Trent* (1619), to which the Jesuit Cardinal Pietro Sforza Pallavicini responded with an ample treatise based on the theory of postality in his own *History of the Tridentine Council* (1656).

Clemente Fedele