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***Ambasciatori: Diplomazia e politica
nella Venezia del Rinascimento.***

By Guillaume Alonge

Rome: Donzelli, 2019

Reviewed by: Wouter Wagemakers



Ambasciatori: Diplomazia e politica nella Venezia del Rinascimento. By Guillaume Alonge. Rome: Donzelli, 2019. ISBN 978-88-6843-885-2. x + 276 pp. €30.

A crucial trading hub connecting all wind directions of Europe and the Orient, the city of Venice was also a strategic node of diplomacy and deceit for the great powers of Europe at the height of the Italian Wars (1494-1559). This was particularly true for the French monarchy during the reign of King François I (r.1515-1547), as Guillaume Alonge demonstrates in his excellent study about the resident ambassadors of France to the Republic of Venice.

According to Alonge, Venice became François I's chief place of operations for plotting and executing plans to maintain and expand the king's hold on Italian duchies and principalities, and for trying to frustrate the efforts of his archenemy Charles V of Habsburg, the Holy Roman Emperor, in achieving hegemony over the Italian peninsula. In *Ambasciatori*, the author discusses this overarching thesis mainly via the activities and relations of the French diplomatic mission in Venice, and particularly those of its resident ambassadors. The latter are thus the real subjects of his study, as its title rightly emphasises, even if their tasks and objectives carried over far beyond their interactions with the Venetian government itself. For them, Venice was also a strategic post for initiating contact with potential allies in their fight against the Habsburgs, such as other Italian states, the protestant German princes, and the Ottoman court in Istanbul; and for creating havoc and funding insurrections in territories held under Habsburg control. Because of his keen eye for these geopolitical games at play, Alonge's book could be read as a companion of sorts to Elena Bonora's superb study, *Aspettando l'imperatore: Principi italiani tra il papa e Carlo V* (2014), which took as its focus the Italian princes and cardinals who conspired against the pope during the same period in order to establish an Italy united by the Holy Roman Emperor. Unlike the geographical range of Bonora's book, however, Alonge keeps his focus mostly in one place while expanding his scope to the minutiae of everyday life for his subjects, including the ways in which these ambassadors tried to integrate within Venetian society and cultivate relations with those who might provide information or further their cause.

Alonge unfolds his thesis in six chapters, preceded by an introduction which sketches the historical context of the world his protagonists had to navigate. These chapters are ordered both chronologically and thematically, highlighting the different

aspects of the tasks and activities these agents pursued on behalf of the French crown or out of their own interests and enjoyment. Since almost all of these men had been recruited from within the personal network of the king's sister Marguerite d'Angoulême, Queen of Navarre, they not only had similar backgrounds but also shared political and religious ideas that informed their choices in building coalitions. Like their benefactress, the Italian and French prelates and aristocrats who served François I in Venice stood for a politics of religious moderation and tolerance in accordance with the ideas of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, the figurehead of French evangelism. This mentality also created opportunities in seeking unexpected collaborations with partners that others at the French court deemed unacceptable, particularly the rapprochement of the Sultan. Yet because of the continually shifting power dynamics at court—and sometimes simply for other reasons—these plans did not always come to fruition.

The first chapter of the book discusses the years of François I's first resident ambassador in Venice: Ludovico di Canossa, the bishop of Bayeux and a Verona native. Canossa entered François I's entourage after the closing of the Concordat of Bologna of 1516 and became his most trusted diplomat and political strategist in Italy, pursuing a strongly anti-Habsburg coalition in alignment with the strategies conceived by Florimond Robertet and the Du Bellay clan at the French court. The author carefully reconstructs Canossa's network of contacts and the ever-shifting political realities he had to face head-on. While the bishop's endeavours would culminate in the League of Cognac of 1526, these eventually proved unsuccessful, and a disillusioned Canossa would devote himself in the last years of his life to an agenda of religious reform—his way of turning political failure into spiritual renewal.

In the second chapter the author discusses the fallout of the disbanded League of Cognac after Canossa's retirement in 1528 and the efforts by French ambassadors Jean de Langeac (1528-1529) and his successor Lazare de Baïf (1529-1534) to restore the French alliance with the pope against Charles V. At the same time, however, the realisation grew that their best chance for this was in having the Ottomans serve as a counterweight to the growing power of the Holy Roman Empire. As the author makes clear, the frequency and nature of their diplomatic relations with Suleiman the Magnificent depended on the influence and standing of the Du Bellay faction and Marguerite de Navarre at the French court, since the opposing faction led by cardinal Antoine Duprat and Anne de Montmorency followed a conciliatory approach towards the Habsburgs while being staunchly orthodox in their reaction to Protestantism. Baïf, especially, invested in his

contacts with close ties to the Sultan, including the three bastard sons of Doge Andrea Gritti who lived in Constantinople, and Antonio Rincón, a Catalan rebel with extraordinary strategic and military acumen who had gained the trust of the Sultan. Meanwhile, in Venice Langeac and Baif largely followed the same path Canossa had set out before, immersing themselves in humanist and heterodox circles and using the cultural world to gain access to Venice's political elite.

Chapter three focuses more emphatically on the French embassy as a physical presence in the city and on the interactions of the French diplomatic mission with the Republic of Venice, both on a state and local level. Officially, the embassy was the residence for the ambassador in his capacity to represent the French king in his communications with the Venetian government. Informally, the embassy functioned as the headquarters for information gathering about matters both pertaining to Venice and other states, and issues regarding the church. This sometimes led to clashes with the local authorities over territorial integrity, the inviolability of the diplomatic mission (which did not exist yet at the time), and relations between France and Venice, which became particularly tense after a spy ring reaching far into the Venetian bureaucratic apparatus came to light in 1542, run by the French ambassador Guillaume Pellicier (1540-1542).

In chapter four the author zooms in on the cultural activities of François I's ambassadors in Venice as translators and collectors of ancient Greek and Hebrew texts, and explains that their interest in, particularly, the philology of patristic texts was related to their evangelistic sensibilities and agenda. The city of Venice was the most important gateway for the dispersion of heterodox texts from the East to the Italian peninsula and beyond, and Alonge convincingly suggests a link between these activities and the *milieu* of Marguerite de Navarre in France. These activities helped the ambassadors on the one hand to integrate in local humanist circles, and on the other it served the needs of the evangelistic reform circles back home to strive for a more moderate response to the criticisms raised by Luther and others at the Church of Rome.

Chapters five and six discuss the later years of François I's reign, from the second half of the 1530s until the king's death in 1547. During this time several attempts were made to destabilise the Holy Roman Empire through a variety of actions (including orchestrating popular insurrections in Florence and Genua, which failed), and to reinforce the diplomatic ties with the Ottomans. Masterminding these initiatives was Giovan Gioacchino da Passano, who was not *de facto* an ambassador to France in Venice—

although he acted as interim when needed—but was at the centre of an Italian-wide network of spies and informers, and the most important liaison in France’s communications with Rincón. However, after the assassination of the latter by imperial hitmen in 1541, and the discovery of Pellicier’s spies in the Venetian chancellery in 1542, the role of the French in Venice had largely played out, and François I’s last ambassadors in Venice had been more isolated and kept a lower profile.

Alonge’s monograph impresses in its pairing of diplomatic, political, and religious history, and for the clarity of its overarching argument. However, this reader would have liked that some of the events discussed in his book central to his argument had received a more focused, in-depth discussion instead of a rather cursorily treatment across chapters and themes. For instance, the exposure of Pellicier’s spy ring in 1542, the so-called Cavazza affair, caused a major crisis in the relationship with the Republic of Venice, and led to a cooling of relations in the years following, but the extent of the damage to Venice and the reasons why France could no longer be trusted remain largely unclear. (For more context, see: Ioanna Iordanou, *Venice’s Secret Service: Organizing Intelligence in the Renaissance*, 2019, 66–68.) One would also have been interested to read more about moments of interaction between the French ambassadors and the Spanish diplomatic mission in Venice, if they transpired and how, which is something that remains unexplored. Overall, the author is quite convincing in demonstrating the interconnected realms of diplomacy, politics, and heterodox religious thought. Here and there, though, one wonders if he does not read too much into someone’s personal beliefs, such as in the case of architect Sebastiano Serlio who, according to Alonge, “shared similar spiritual sensibilities” with Marguerite de Navarre (108), for which there is simply no evidence. A final point of criticism, which is no fault of the author and directed at the publisher, is that this book lacks a separate bibliography, which makes it tedious in retracing previously cited sources.

Notwithstanding these minor comments, Alonge’s book is rich in its discussion of newly discovered primary archival and printed sources, and a very rewarding read. One can only hope that this book will be translated into English so as to receive the much larger audience it thoroughly deserves.

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