

# The Private Political Archives of the Venetian Patriciate – Storing, Retrieving and Recordkeeping in the Fifteenth-Eighteenth Centuries

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*This article describes the birth and development of the political archives that Venetian patrician families kept in their private palaces for the use of the Republic's officeholders. It will shed light on the different uses made of public documents as well as on the different approaches to recordkeeping, from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. These archives, shared by all family members and transmitted from generation to generation, eventually became extremely voluminous partly because copies from documents in public registries were made and kept, but also because new types of analytical documents based on data extracted from the public record were introduced. Until the eighteenth century, when rational retrieval systems began to be introduced, the documents were kept in "buste" (containers) and extracted as and when needed by the officeholder.*

The Venetian archives were already well-established at the time of the Republic. Thousands of public records produced by different councils and magistrates were stored in the Chancery or in various offices in the Doge's Palace, St. Mark's church and around the Rialto area.<sup>1</sup> Less well known were (and are) the private political archives of the Venetian patrician families: a mass of documents kept for the use of the Republic's officeholders in Venetian "studioli" inside private palaces. This article describes the generation and development of these archives in an attempt to shed light on various uses of public records and different approaches to recordkeeping in Venice from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries.

Until the Quattrocento, most patrician families kept in their houses, as well as the usual devotional or classical books, a chronicle of Venice – an item which was to provide fertile ground for archival data management. The chronicle functioned as a

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sort of political database, as the text, arranged according to events occurring during each Doge's reign, allowed the insertion of various lists of officeholders, histories of patrician families, Doge's electors, donors to the Republic's Navy at times of war, prices and so on.<sup>2</sup>

The Venetian conquest of the Mainland during the fifteenth century seems to have encouraged a general movement of political documents, including the chronicle, from the patrician library to the study (or 'studiolo', a small office or 'cabinet' near the library), transforming it into a form of a private family archive.<sup>3</sup> The new empire (along with the maritime one, established in 1204, after the conquest of Constantinople) required the Republican officeholders to undertake rigorous preparation for their roles. They were expected to serve in different offices (such as administrators of mainland cities or of islands in the Aegean Sea, construction supervisors, tax revenue officials, judges, ambassadors, military men, etc.) for a short time (six months to two years), and shortly after their election were given a month of preparation in order to settle their affairs and study the pertinent public records.<sup>4</sup> The requirement to study official documents was the basis of Venetian political culture, as the ducal archives were considered the most reliable source, and therefore a cornerstone for good administration. Naturally, even earlier, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (the ducal Chancery was officially created only in 1268),<sup>5</sup> it was necessary to rely upon public records, yet we do not detect any particular desire to copy documents or construct private archives at home. This attitude can be explained firstly by the fact that no real recordkeeping office was developed until the mid-thirteenth century, and secondly, because many of the patrician administrators in the maritime Republic belonged to the merchant class, and as such, had their own sources of information and excellent knowledge of all Mediterranean colonies, bastions and cities.

The Venetian archival 'revolution' starts then at the second half of the fifteenth century. Two factors could have propelled the birth and development of the private archive. First, with the empire's growing administration (around 830 offices) and a quick turnover in office holders,<sup>6</sup> along with the mass flow of information and the consequent growth in documentary production, especially of a secret nature,<sup>7</sup> neither the small Chancery rooms of the Doge's Palace nor other magistrates' offices were able to host all elected officeholders seeking to prepare for their next term of office.<sup>8</sup> A temporary solution was found in borrowing documents from the Chancery or in the introduction of a second copy of relevant registers chained to wooden desks, similar to those in medieval libraries, and open for public consultation.<sup>9</sup>

The second factor was the price revolution in paper production. In the new empire the growth of documentary production was such that with the introduction of the printing press in Venice in the mid-fifteenth century and the State's insistence on good quality of paper for the printing press (repeated in the 1537 Senate Act)<sup>10</sup>, the paper market (including that for paper of poor quality) flourished. Evidence shows that towards the end of the fifteenth century the cost of writing paper was already reduced by half: for example in 1479 the cost of a writing paper ream was seven lire - by 1499 it was just four lire.<sup>11</sup>

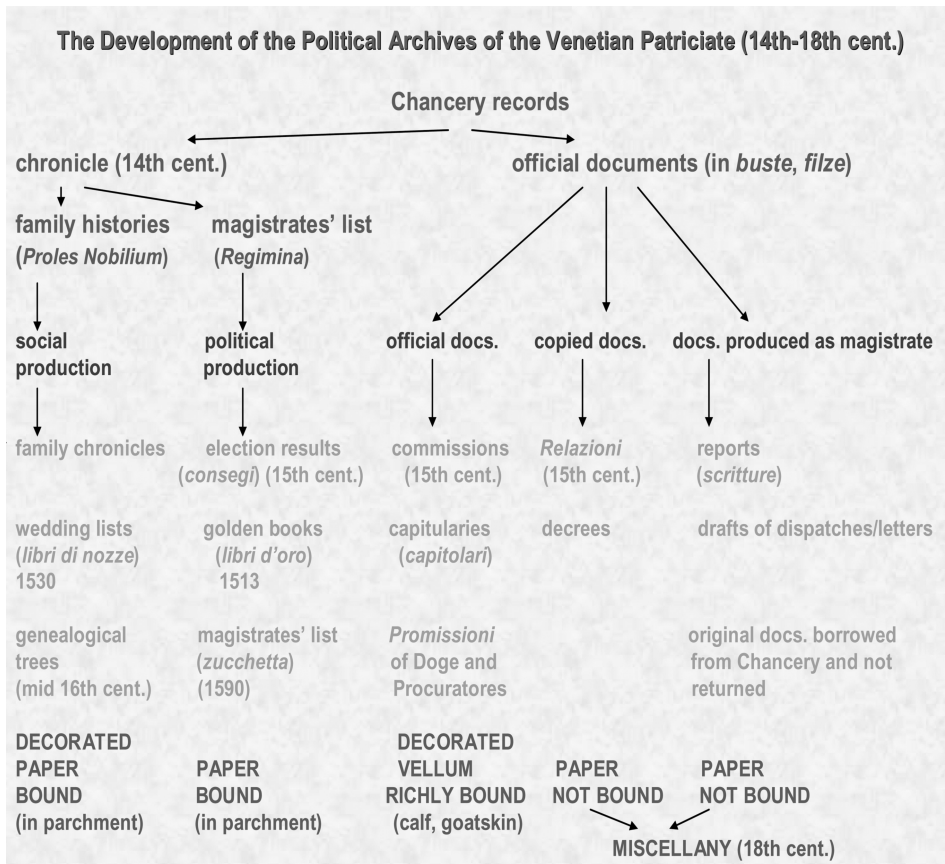
The availability of such cheap paper thus supplied an ample resource for the generation or duplication of information. The Venetian patricians sent scribes to copy from State documents all information necessary for their future office and kept the copies in their studies at home. They would also borrow documents with the approval of the Chancery should they have to leave on a diplomatic mission.<sup>12</sup> Scribes could also analyse the data in existing public documents in new ways in order to produce new interpretations and therefore new documents too. With time, the patrician private political archives, shared by all family members and transmitted from generation to generation, became voluminous. Turning to the structure and development of the private political archives of the Venetian patriciate, what we are talking about comprises a total of around 30–40,000 volumes (each containing 100–150 documents), now found mostly in public libraries and State archives in the Veneto and around the world. To date, although this large volume of records has been organised in line with archival criteria in the repositories in which they are held, they have not been subject to systematic top-down historical analysis: this is a preliminary attempt to do so. The chart below suggests a model of intellectual arrangement. Of course not all patrician families owned all of the types of archives included, but the chart is intended to offer a representation of the general evolution of these archives, and to look into the types of records and their interrelationships.

The chart (Figure 1) indicates that all information gathered into the private and political archive was derived from government records and that the copies of both the chronicle and the official documents originated in the Ducal Chancery. At the next level down come two different sets of resources generated from 1) the chronicle (on the left), and 2) official documents from the Chancery or other magistracies (on the right).

From the chronicle two categories of sources were drawn which, towards the end of the fifteenth century, developed into independent autonomous genres. The first has to do with the social aspect of Venetian political life, such as the stories of patrician families, wedding lists (naturally each matrimonial arrangement was carefully weighed in its political context), and genealogical trees. The second category related to election procedures, such as previous election results that may shed light on lobbies inside the ruling elite, lists of members of the Great Council identifying candidates and their branch of family, or a combination of the two, and a list of government offices from which one could tell which office was due for replacement.<sup>13</sup>

The official documents in the family archives can be divided into three different groups: firstly official documents such as commissions to city governors or military generals, capitularies (administrative or legislative ordinances), or *Promissioni* (oaths of allegiance) of high-ranking magistrates such as the Procurator of St Mark's or the Doge; secondly copies of documents from the Ducal Chancery such as ambassadorial or governors' *Relazioni* (reports) and various decrees; and thirdly documents produced by the magistrate himself during the course of duty: dispatches, letters, reports, etc.

Initially all documents (except for solemn nominations)<sup>14</sup> were kept in separate sheets, folded in 16° (sexto decimo) with the docket inscribed on the outer surface of



**Figure 1** The development of the political archives of the Venetian patriate, 14th–18th centuries

the folded sheet (as was the Ducal Chancery practice).<sup>15</sup> When an officeholder had to travel outside Venice for administrative reasons documents were often numbered and placed in a special cloth bag or small bookcase for their protection.<sup>16</sup> Yet this practice, largely used from fifteenth- to mid-seventeenth centuries, revealed its disadvantages as a mass of documents accumulated on the study's shelves without any apparent rational retrieval system. It was at this point that patricians began looking for storage and retrieval systems: sorting the documents, drawing up inventories, and using different systems of recordkeeping (alphabetical or according to subject matter), thus treating documents according to their relevance. Those frequently used remained in separate sheets; the ones less relevant were placed in “buste” or containers, and those of historical importance were bound into miscellaneous volumes.

The case of the Bollani family's documents may be used as an example.<sup>17</sup> Two manuscripts, now part of the Manin (ex Amedeo Svajer collection) in the Communal Library at Udine, contain a number of documents from the second half of the

sixteenth century. No indication exists as to their owner, yet if we look carefully at the documents, we can deduce that the first deals mainly with Udine and the Friuli area with records dated to 1556, and that the second manuscript has mainly documents pertinent to Brescia up to 1559. The city governor of Udine until 1556 and successively of Brescia was the patrician Domenico Bollani (1513–1579).

However, a closer look at the documents reveals their generation at three different periods. The first relates to Domenico's grandfather, also named Domenico, who died in 1504, and who held among other offices governorship of Udine and of Brescia. The second period relates to Domenico's father, Francesco, who also acted as governor of some mainland cities, such as Feltre, and who left documents, mainly on military subjects. Those documents copied on Bollani's orders constitute the third layer of documents.

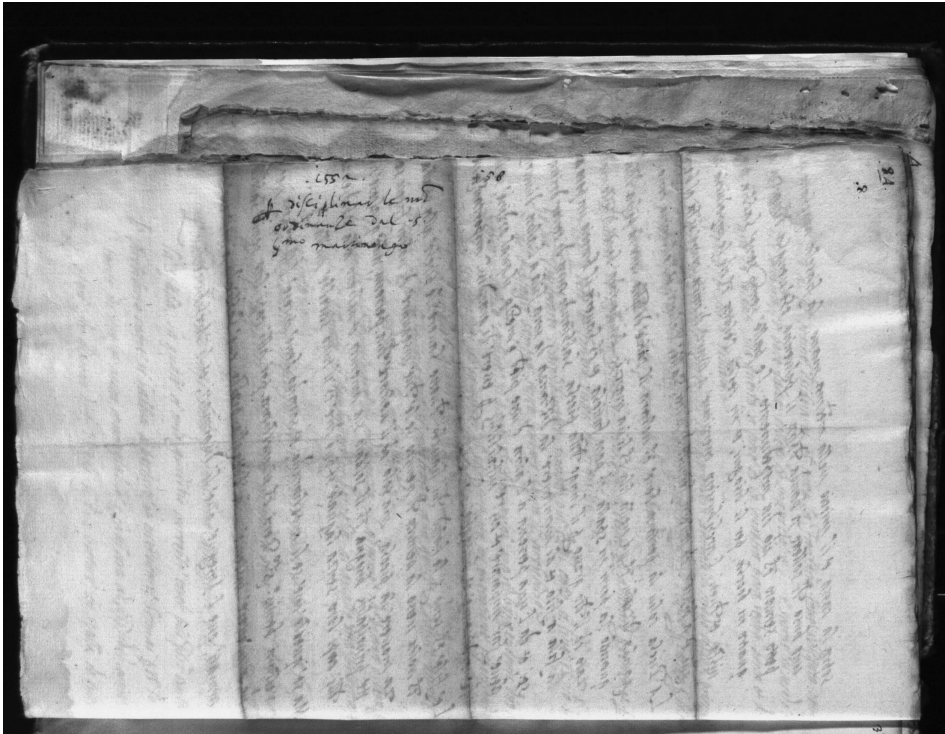
When he reached the age of twenty-five Bollani entered the political arena. His career was to be similar to that of his ancestors, as a governor of mainland cities. But before being elected to these important offices, he made quite a *cursus honorum* in other Venetian councils: he served as the Senate's counsellor on mainland governance (*savio di terraferma*) and as a member of the Council of Ten. During these terms of office, Bollani made arrangements to have copied from the Secret Chancery a number of documents that he considered vital to his future appointments, mostly from the years 1543–1551.

In addition to these documents the archives preserves documents generated during Bollani's term as governor in Udine, especially concerning the reform of the court of justice (he had a degree in law from the University of Padua), the arming of ten Venetian galleys, his dealings with the 1556 bubonic plague in the city, the construction of a new arch to Udine castle and of a number of fortifications in the area. The same pattern was reiterated when Bollani became governor of Brescia.

After his death, all the documents were still kept in the family archives, each carefully folded with the docket inscribed on the outer side of the document. The presence of a double set of serial numbers on the dockets demonstrates that someone subsequently used them, although in a different context and order (Figure 2). The documents then were still considered relevant to the governmental activity of successive generations. However, sometime towards the end of the seventeenth century, more than a hundred years after the initial generation of the documents, someone decided they had become devoid of political pertinence. They were then sorted into two different subject areas: Udine and Brescia, and bound into volumes, each with its own index. Thus the volumes had become of historical value and were probably moved to the library area, where they could contribute to the family's history and renown.

If we take into account that during the course of four hundred years (the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries), a huge mass of documents and volumes was piling up in the family's archives, it is logical to expect that some sort of a retrieval system or recordkeeping practice should have been in use. Depending on the quantity of archives it seems that some families divided the documents into family and political documents keeping the two in separate places,<sup>18</sup> while others kept them together.<sup>19</sup>





**Figure 2** Docket of the document “1552. Per disciplinar le nuove ordinanze del Ser Girolamo Martinengo.” Biblioteca Civica ‘V. Joppi’, Udine, Ms. Manin 13 (ex Svajer 18), *Decreti e scritture militari*, c. 81

Patricians were indeed aware of government archival practices and put some of them to use, such as the docket system, yet we cannot detect any dominant retrieval system in the various family archives. Perhaps the disorder that seems to characterize the recordkeeping system of the different magistracies and especially the Ducal Chancery, or the need for flexibility due to the inter-generational use in the private arena, generated different archival practices (Figures 3 and 4).

The basis of the Ducal Chancery recordkeeping system was organisation according to the record creator, e.g., the magistracy or council. Inside each of these offices, records were classified according to the office’s practices and functions. Only then was the chronological sorting element applied. Such a system was in practice not appropriate for the family political archives, as the potential organizational principle would have been that of the records’ relevance to the family members’ careers. In general we may detect two retrieval systems created in the course of the eighteenth century: a thematic retrieval system and a catalogue-based one. The thematic retrieval system identifies the most important topics of the Venetian administration and arranges them in an alphabetical order: *Arsenale* (Arsenal), *Banco Giro* (Credit Bank), *Baili* (ambassadors to the Sultan), *Beni incolti e boschi* (uncultivated terrains and forests), *biade* (fodder),



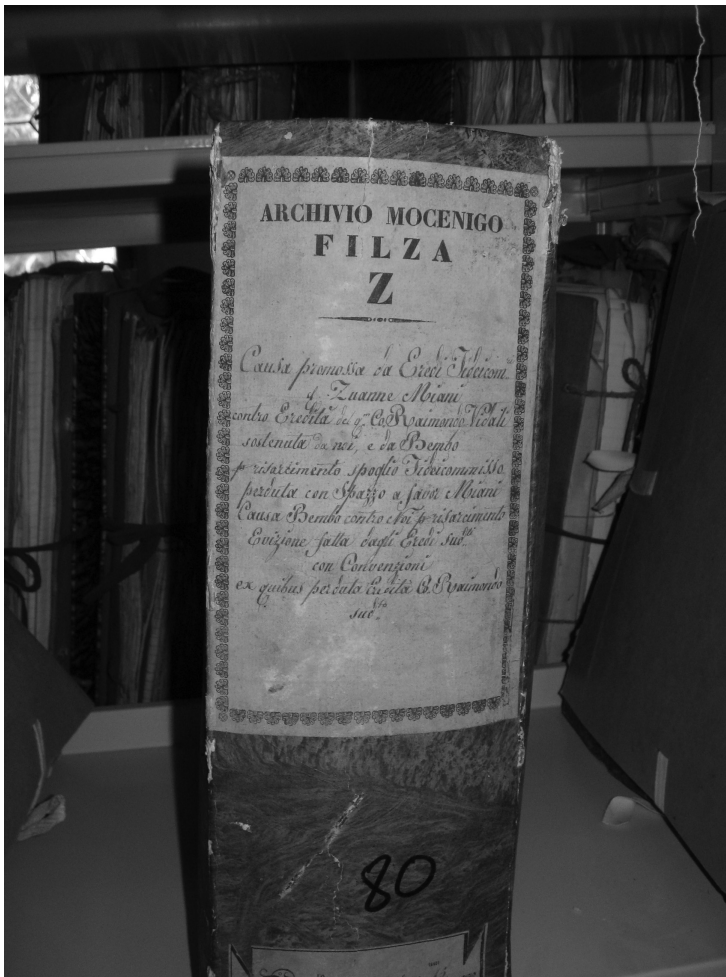
**Figure 3** 'Busta' of the Contarini del Zaffo archives, today in the State archives, Venice. Each 'busta' contains registries, notebooks or separate sheets, sometimes folded



**Figure 4** Another example of a 'busta' of the Gradenigo di rio Marin archives, today kept in the State archives, Venice

*bilancio* (budget), up to *Zecca* (mint). Each letter had a container (“busta”) assigned to it, in which all relative themes which begin with the letter were classified, naturally distinguishing one topic from the other. This system revealed its practical usefulness because of its flexibility: any generation could add documents, and any member of the family might temporarily extract the documents he needs.<sup>20</sup>

The catalogue-based system drew largely on library practices. One of its promoters was Giuseppe Maria Foppa, a register clerk, who in the second half of the eighteenth century organized at least eight family archives.<sup>21</sup> The Foppa system did not physically sort the documents, or remove them from their bindings, instead allowing



**Figure 5** An example of retrieval system in the Mocenigo di San State archives, today in the State archives, Venice. Each ‘busta’ is marked with a letter (here ‘Z’) and contents by fascicules (referring here to family documents). The archives inventory describes with details the contents of each document



them to remain as they were found: as registers, notebooks, containers, booklets, paper fascicules and undisturbed bundles of documents. Furthermore, it indexed each bound unit or bundle (with a sort of a table of contents), and then copied it into a catalogue, assigning every volume with a benchmark – a choice based on a topographical distribution of the volumes: A1, A2 etc. to Z1, Z2 and, if necessary AA1, AA2 or AAA, BBB and so on (Figure 5). Thus the criteria for arrangement was the format, as in a library, and if possible, an alphabetic analytical index was added at the end of the catalogue.

What results today is a large quantity of unsorted volumes stored in different libraries and archives: this material is clearly neither codicological nor strictly archival in nature. It can neither be treated or catalogued simply as a literary manuscript, nor can it be treated as if it were part of a State archival system. Moreover the Venetian practice of absorbing extinct families' archives into a parent family's one simply complicated matters further. The outcome of such a system is that any attempt to arrange these archival fonds by original record creator would entirely misrepresent, or indeed distort, their nature: a more relevant criterion would be to reflect the way in which these documents were actually *used* over the centuries. These findings offer fertile ground for some new thinking about the private political archives of the Venetian patriciate in order to find a solution to the challenges attending their arrangement and description.

## Notes

- [1] Salmini, "Buildings, Furnishing, Access and Use," 93–108.
- [2] On the Venetian chronicle and its political use of data, see Raines, "Alle origini dell'archivio politico del patriziato," 5–57. Today we can estimate roughly 100–120 chronicles in public and private collections. If we calculate the number of patrician families (*casate*) at around 140, we may conclude that a great number of the large patrician families possessed a chronicle. On the number of patrician families see Raines, "Cooptazione, aggregazione e presenza al Maggior Consiglio," 305–354.
- [3] Some evidence for the existence of 14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> century documents in the private archives, apart from the Bollani documents (see below), is in Biblioteca del Museo Correr, Venice (hereafter BMC), *Cod. Cicogna 3475*, a collection of *Ducali* (ducal instructions) sent to various officeholders.
- [4] After long practice, never expressed in any law, the Council of Ten issued in June 1605 a decree which permitted the appointed ambassadors to have copies of various documents from the Secret Chancery. De Vivo, "Le armi dell'ambasciatore," 192.
- [5] In the mid-thirteenth century the *parva cancelleria* already existed, an archive deprived of any clearly-defined recordkeeping system. Other magistrates kept archives too. The July 15, 1268 decree which established the office of the Great Chancellor, thus officially creating the Chancery, kept only records of the most important state councils as well as diplomatic documents. Pedani Fabris, "*Veneta auctoritate notarius*," 96.
- [6] On the proliferation of mainland officeholders, Finlay, *Politics in Renaissance Venice*, 37–43; Del Torre, *Venezia e la terraferma*, 217–234. On those of the maritime Republic: O'Connell, *Men of Empire*, 39–56.
- [7] In fact, the creation of the Secret Chancery in 1402 coincides with the mainland conquest and the need to keep secret records apart from other sections. Archivio di Stato, Venezia (hereafter

ASVe), *Maggior Consiglio, Deliberazioni (Leone)*, reg. 21, c. 125r, decree from April 23, 1402. On the lack of an effective arrangement and retrieval system for Chancery clerks and the consequent archival disorder in the Chancery offices from the 1570s until the second half of the seventeenth century, Zannini, *Burocrazia e burocrati*, 126–127. A number of attempts was made by the Republic to reform the Ducal archives: in the 1630s with the division of documents between *Corti* and *Rettori*, in order to divide diplomatic material and that coming from Mainland governors; the 1669 De Negri-Nani index of the Secret Chancery; the 1662 enormous work of *compilazione leggi* (index of laws by argument).

- [8] Some evidences of patricians copying directly from State documents: Marino Sanudo in ASVe, *Collegio, Notatorio*, copy of Sanudo (1291–1442); Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venezia (hereafter BNM), Cod. Marc. It. VII, 375 (=8954), Marin Sanudo, *Fogli volanti in gran parte autogr.*, cc. 43–58: “Note varie da registri dell’archivio di stato, ecc. (autogr.)”; Marco Barbaro in his work *Cronaca dei Procuratori di S. Marco* in Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Cod. Foscarini CCXI, no. 6175, stated in the preface that he had found it difficult to trace in the Chancery ancient documents regarding the Procurators of St. Mark; Pietro Bembo, as well as Andrea Morosini, upon election to the office of official historiographer were allowed access to all documents produced by the Senate and the Council of Ten. For Bembo see: ASVe, *Consiglio dei Dieci, Notatorio*, reg. 8, c. 165, “Decreto dei Capi del Consiglio dei Dieci col quale è concessa al Bembo la lettura dei documenti ufficiali”, December 18, 1530 (published in Lagomaggiore, “L’Istoria Viniziana,” 335, doc. III); For Morosini, von Reumont, *Della diplomazia italiana*, 320–322: Morosini’s election and 322–325: Morosini’s report on the Secret Archives’ situation; Baschet, *Les Archives de Venise*, 170, citing from ASVe, *Council of Ten*, decree from April 21, 1600. See also ASVe, *Inquisitori di Stato*, b. 924: “Note on Senators who consulted documents in the Secret Chancery in the month of September 1698,” quoted in Salmi, “Buildings, Furnishing, Access and Use,” 107. One may also consider that by the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Somaschi Fathers (a charitable religious congregation of priests and brothers, founded in Italy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century) took it on itself to educate patricians, providing a political curriculum derived from copies coming either directly from the public archives through patricians, or from the private political archives. Barzani, *Gli affanni dell’erudizione*, 85–111.
- [9] See a sixteenth-century decree ordering the constitution of two, then three, copies of the Segretario alle Voci registries, with each destined to be conserved in a different place, yet all available for public consultation. The original text is in ASVe, *Segretario alle Voci*, “Universi.” Serie moderna, reg. 5, c.1, quoted in Salmi, “Buildings, Furnishing, Access and Use,” 101. Yet, the Council of Ten pointed out in 1639 that many Venetians and foreigners were allowed to consult election registries and even “mark on them whatever they pleased.” ASVe, *Compilazione leggi*, b. 108, c. 119r, July 15, 1639. The Avogaria di Comun’s (State Attorney) offices too, witnessed quite an assault of patricians eager to extract data on births and weddings. The situation was so chaotic that registries were borrowed and sometimes never returned. A 1643 decree put a stop to this abuse. ASVe, *Avogaria di Comun*, reg. 17, c. 81. Raines, *L’invention du mythe aristocratique*, 462–463.
- [10] Brown, *The Venetian Printing Press*, 209–210.
- [11] Mattozzi, “Le cartiere nello Stato veneziano,” 118–120.
- [12] See the borrowing list of registries and documents from the Chancery, drawn up by the Great Chancellor Andrea Franceschi in the first half of the sixteenth century, in Salmi, “Buildings, Furnishing, access and Use,” 107. See also BNM, Cod. Marc. It. VII, 1118 (=8850), Documenti della cancelleria segreta, copie di documenti ad uso di Marco Contarini amb. Vienna, 1742, sec. XVIII, c. 2: “Copia da levarsi nella Cancelleria Segreta, e da restituirsi al ritorno” (with a clerk certification of the restitution upon returning from the mission); ASVe, *Provveditori, Sopraprovveditori e Collegio alle pompe*, “Inventario di ciò che portavano seco i Rettori ed altri ... (1686–1792).”

- [13] On these consulting tools and their role in Venetian politics, see Raines, "Office Seeking," 137–194.
- [14] Contrary to the archival concept linking documents' importance and record durability, already expressed in 1291 by the Great Council, which decreed that all important public acts should be written on parchment, the private documents involving nominations (Ducal commissions, Doge's Promissioni), written on parchment up until the eighteenth century, were the expression of an opposite belief, i.e. that: longevity of the material and its prohibitive cost rendered the document a sort of importance. On the 1291 decree, Lanfranchi, "Prefazione," in Favaro, *Cassiere della Bolla ducale*, LXXIX.
- [15] The Venetian docket appears, it seems, toward the thirteenth century. It was mainly used in the case of testaments or bequeath of property to convents. With the growing mass of documents, the Venetian secretaries adopted this useful practice that transformed the document into a quick-reference tool. They inscribed date and content title onto the outer folded part, and gained time by avoiding unfolding the document and reading its contents. For samples of thirteenth-century dockets, see ASVe, *Giudici di Petizion*, frammenti antichi, b. 1, docket inserted between c. 5 and 6; ASVe, *Monastero di San Zaccaria*, b. 28, n. 24b.
- [16] Although a bag used for the family archives, sometimes kept mingled with the political material in the patrician study, see the case of the Pesaro family archives, with a small bag bearing a label sewn on the fabric, noting reference code and the bag's contents: "Bag number 37, exchange of properties, receipts for administrative bills for three fields." See Salmini, "Buildings, Furnishing, Access and Use," 99. Such bags were equally used to transport material during travels.
- [17] See a detailed study of the Bollani case in Raines, "L'archivio familiare," 5–38.
- [18] See for example the Manin archives, divided into family papers, now in the Udine State Archives, and political records currently in the "Vincenzo Joppi" Comunal Library; or the division made between the political papers of the Procurator of Saint Mark, Angelo Morosini (1639–1693) (ASVe, *Procuratori di Ultra*, Commissarie, b. 203, fasc. 1, 1r n.n.: "Manuscritti di materie Pubbliche et altre"), and his other papers (*ibid.*, pacco n. 1: "Inventario delle scritture di ragione del q.m N.H. m. Anzolo Moresini Cav.r e Proc.r esistenti in un Casson bislongo, tre Casse, et due Forzieri pntate nell'Off.o Ecc.mo . . . .")
- [19] The Lippomano family archives, at present part of the Querini Stampalia Foundation library in Venice, are a case in point, where private and political material were kept together. See Raines "Public or private records? The family archives of the Venetian patriciate in fifteenth-eighteenth centuries," forthcoming in *Arquivos de família, séculos XIII-XIX: que presente, que futuro?*
- [20] See for example, the Priuli archives within the Manin collection in the Vincenzo Joppi Comunal Library in Udine (manuscripts nos. 1000–1074).
- [21] Foppa, *Memorie storiche*. Cfr. Zorzi, *La Libreria*, 334–335, 339, 341, 345, 347, 519, 520–522, 524, 525. Foppa organized the archives of the following families: Bernardo in calle delle Rasse; Capello in San Giovanni Laterano; Foscolo di San Vidal; Michiel di Santi Apostoli; Mocenigo di San Samuele; Venier ai Gesuiti; Astori in Campiello Sansoni; Corner della Ca' Grande di San Maurizio. Presumably also the Contarini "de' Scrigni" di San Trovaso. Schiavon, *L'archivio politico*.

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