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Elite persistence in medieval Venice after the Black Death

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Abstract

This paper studies the effect that the plague in 1348 had on the structure of power in Venice. Using data from “The Rulers of Venice, 1332-1524” dataset, we conceptualize the Venetian structure of power as a two-mode network where relevant political houses are associated with the offices their members were elected. We find that, after the shock of the Black Death, the major houses were able to cling to power and even increase their importance.

Keywords: Political elite; Economic elite; Black Death; Venice.

JEL Codes: N43; C45; D71.

1. Introduction

In January 1348, a strong earthquake struck Venice. Apart from the material damage caused, which was indeed quite extensive, the earthquake impressed its contemporaries with the message of doom that it seemed to announce. The latter seemed even reinforced by the famine that had struck north-eastern Italy the previous year (Tenenti, 1997). Referring to a passage of the Gospel of Luke,¹ earthquakes, and famines were considered to be anticipatory events of revolutions, wars, and plagues. The prophecy did not take long to come true and a few weeks later, the Black Death landed in the lagoon.² Within a few months, the plague killed between 40 and 60 per cent of the city population (Mueller, 1979) with tremendous effects on the entire social, economic, political, and cultural fabric of the city.

The pandemic was a seminal event in the history of Venice as well as in the entire European continent. The Black Death gave impetus for a period of a high-wage economy (Allen, 2001), the improvement of general living conditions (Fouquet and Broadberry, 2015), the mitigation of economic inequalities (Scheidel, 2017; Alfani, 2021), and the push for the creation of more robust institutions (Dincecco, 2015; Johnson and Koyama, 2017). These elements, combined, favored the European take-off from other advanced areas of the globe. In the same way, the different reception of these inputs by the various regions contributed to exacerbating the structural differences within the continent. In other words, the Black Death can be considered one of the main triggers for the Great and Little Divergence (Pamuk, 2007; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012; de Pleijt and van Zanden, 2013; Frankopan, 2015).

Often, the Black Death, as well as many other exogenous crises, is seen as a kind of ‘Great Leveller’, a shock so strong and prevailing that it is capable, on its own, of bringing about greater social equity and material equality. Recent studies have shown how the situation is much more complex and nuanced (van Bavel and Scheffer, 2021). In the Italian case, it is true that in the medium- and long-term, Pestilence contributed to an increase in urban real wages (Pamuk, 2007; Fochesato, 2018) and a substantial redistribution of material wealth (Alfani and Ammannati, 2017). Nevertheless, this was not necessarily accompanied by greater social equity. The great wave of political dissent, particularly widespread among the popular strata who were denied greater political rights despite their novel economic standing (Cohn, 2006),

¹ Luke 21: 8-11.

² Official sources date the arrival of the plague in the lagoon to March 1348 (Bergdolt, 1997: 77), but it is far more likely that the disease had already begun to claim its first victims towards the end of January (Mueller, 1979: 71).

seems to suggest that the elites emerged from the plague with the same strength and grip on the social fabric as in the previous period. But was this really the case? What effects did the plague have on the top of the social pyramid and the internal balance of the elites? Was there a reshuffling of the balance within the ruling class? Did the ruling groups before the Black Death manage to keep the helm of the state? Did the reshuffling of the socioeconomic balance succeed in reshuffling the political balance? By analysing data on the elections for all the main government seats, it will be possible to understand how the elites reacted to the upheavals caused by the pandemic wave and whether there were structural changes in the architecture of Venetian power due to the plague.

The Venetian case is particularly interesting for the study of an economic and political elite. At the time in which the city of Saint Mark was one of the main urban centres of Europe and one of the most advanced economies on the entire continent. When the Black Death touched Venice, the city had just completed a process of formalising its elites. With the Great Council Lockout of 1297, Venice had established which houses³ were entitled to the rank of nobility and were ultimately given the task of governing. The plague of 1348 is therefore an important test of the stability of the new order and allows us to analyse the internal balances within the ruling group and the extent to which these were changeable.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 gives some details on the political history of medieval Venice, while section 3 introduces the data and methods. In section 4 the results are presented. Section 5 concludes.

2. Venetian political history

Between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Venetian institutional structure was characterised by two important and parallel phenomena. On the one hand, after the centralising tendencies of the early Middle Ages, the local elites slowly weakened the figure of the *Doge* in favour of collegial forms of power. On the other hand, the same local elites increasingly favoured the rise of the Great Council, the patrician assembly, to the *Concio*, the assembly that brought together all the free men of the city (Azzara, 2000).

³ In this paper we prefer the use of the term ‘house’ (which translates Italian *casata*) to ‘family’ (*famiglia*) because we want to indicate all family units belonging to the same lineage and which, besides sharing the same surname, share the same aspirations and political strategies.

The patriciate, constituted by houses whose wealth came from mercantile activity, assumed a central role in the management of the state leaving (at best) other segments of the population with purely operational bureaucratic roles. The economic development of the thirteenth century, particularly intense after the Fourth Crusade which guaranteed Venice the basis for its commercial empire in the eastern Mediterranean, led to the rise of new houses active in the mercantile trade (Chojnacki, 1973). The demands of the latter to see their social rise accompanied by institutional recognition were met at the end of the century, in 1297, after numerous attempts, with what is known as the Great Council Lockout (*Serrata del Maggior Consiglio*).⁴ The mechanism for recruiting the nobility was renewed and reformulated and, despite its name, the Lockout led to an increase in the members of the Great Council (Lane, 1973). The Lockout did not represent a definitive break, and, in the following decades, there were further aggregations (Chojnacki, 1973, 2001). On the eve of the plague in 1348, the Venetian elite seemed to be well stabilised even if the process was not entirely painless, as witnessed by the conspiracies of Marino Bocco in 1300 and of Baiamonte Tiepolo in 1310, which we can consider as ‘aftershocks’ in reaction to the crystallisation of the new system (Rosch, 2000).

3. Data and method

To study the familial political power in Venice, we use data from the Rulers of Venice database (Kohl, Mozzato and O’Connell, 2005) that report information regarding the name of the person elected, the family he belongs to, the office, and the date he was elected. Based on this data, we decided to focus on what kind of political offices every house was able to obtain. The basic idea is that the greater the influence and the affluence of a family unit, the greater the number of offices it was able to obtain for its members and the better the standing of those offices.

However, while it is easy to calculate the number of seats occupied by a given family in a given period, establishing the prestige of a specific seat is a much less trivial exercise (especially for those of medium to low importance). Within the Venetian system, a predetermined *cursus honorum* for the members of the aristocracy was not in place (Zannini, 1996). The ascent up the institutional pyramid could follow the most diverse paths and timescales, depending on the

⁴ It is interesting to note that the pressures became even stronger at a time when, at the end of the thirteenth century, a phase of economic stagnation began. The families that had in the meantime grown rich sought to accelerate their entry into politics to counterbalance the lack of commercial gains with the bounty that could be obtained from public office (Rösch, 2002).

financial capacity and the network of alliances that a family could deploy. It is certain that no young patrician, having turned 21 and therefore having just entered the arena of city politics, could aspire to the most prestigious seats. However, it is also true that many intermediate stages made of positions of lesser prestige were bypassed if the familial capital (in terms of wealth but also in terms of social ties) was harnessed.⁵

If political paths were characterized by a lack of fixed stages, how can we create a hierarchy of the various political offices? To solve this problem, we propose a classification system that reflects the three major steps that a patrician had to face in the course of his career.⁶ The first was an election to one of the magistracies elected by the Great Council. Members of any lineage could aspire to these basic and often badly paid offices. These were numerous and the family support needed to be elected, given the large electoral base, was limited. The second was an election to one of the magistracies elected by the Senate. These offices were more coveted and many of them were reserved for the most distinguished members of the patriciate. In addition to personal merit, given the much more limited voting base, the influence of a family and its ability to attract support for one of its members was crucial. While every family could get one of its members to pass the first step, passing the second one was for a much smaller and more exclusive group of houses. The third and final step was the election to one of the highest offices in the Republic. These positions were reserved for the most prominent members of the patriciate and those who could guarantee not only a solid curriculum but also the most robust support base. Thus, the classification system we propose groups all the offices into three categories reflecting these three steps (Table 1).

⁵ One might argue that an analysis based on houses is too general and that each family was not a granite unit but was divided into various branches (in Venice generally referred to by the name of the parish in which the main residence palace was located), and each of these, in turn, could be composed of different lines. This is certainly true. However, it should be emphasised that it is only from the fifteenth century that we have a significant budding of new family branches. Moreover, in the political sphere, the house always remained the excellent and basic point of reference for the organisation of the strategies to be adopted (Finlay, 1980, pp. 80-85; Raines, 2003, p. 24).

⁶ For a more complete and precise description of Venetian institutional architecture, see Da Mosto (1937) and Lane (1973).

Table 1 – Classification of Venetian political offices.

Offices		
I	II	III
<i>Doge</i>	<i>Provveditori</i>	<i>Giudici di Palazzo</i>
<i>Consiglieri ducali</i>	<i>Inquisitori</i>	<i>Podestà</i>
<i>Capi dei 40</i>	<i>Soprintendenti</i>	<i>Rettori</i>
<i>Savi al Consiglio</i>	<i>Sindici</i>	<i>Savi</i>
<i>Savi agli Ordini</i>	<i>Esecutori</i>	<i>Ufficiali</i>
<i>Procuratori di San Marco</i>	<i>Revisori</i>	<i>Consiglieri</i>
<i>Consiglio dei X</i>	<i>Ambasciatori</i>	<i>Camerlenghi</i>
<i>Avogadori di Comun</i>	<i>Consoli</i>	
<i>Members of the Quarantia</i>	<i>Baili</i>	
	<i>Capitano (del Golfo, di Terra, di Guerra)</i>	

Notes: Class I indicates the most important offices, Class II those of middle rank, Class III those of minor importance.

In Class I, the one that identifies the highest and most important offices, we have included all the offices that made up the Full College (*Pien Collegio*), the main executive body of the Republic. Among these, we find the *Doge*, i.e., the head of state, his councillors, and those bodies that acted as ministries of the interior (*Savi al Consiglio*) and commerce (*Savi agli Ordini*). To them, we add the Procurators of Saint Mark, the only life office in the Venetian order besides that of the Doge, the members of the Council of Ten (*Consiglio dei X*, i.e. the secret services of the Republic), the Venetian state attorneys (*Avogadori di Comun*), and all the members of the supreme court of the state (*Quarantia*). In Class II, which comprises the intermediate judiciaries, we have included all offices that were elected by the upper chamber of the state, the *Pregadi* (later Senate). These include both civil offices, such as *provveditori* and inquisitors, and diplomatic offices, such as ambassadors and consuls. The *baili*, the representatives of Venice in the eastern Mediterranean, similar in function and prestige to ambassadors, also belonged to this class. In addition, we included the main military command posts, i.e., *capitani*. Class III, the lowest, consists of all the offices that were elected by the lower chamber, the Great Council. Here we have the members of the civil courts of the city (*Giudici di Palazzo*), *podestà* and *rettori*, which are the Venetian officials in charge of governing the subject cities and villages, and all the minor magistrates in charge of supervising the judicial, economic and civil activities of the state.

To study the effects of the Black Death on Venetian political power, we decided to compare the occupation of offices by the various Venetian noble houses in the ten years preceding the plague (January 1338 - December 1347) to that in the five years following the pandemic

(September 1349 - August 1353). The choice to analyse the power structure over time intervals of several years and not by comparing just two sample years, one before and one after the plague, stems from the desire to have a picture as complete as possible of the pyramid of power in the city of Saint Mark. Elections to the various offices were diluted through time and the duration of offices was highly unequal (from a few months to several years). The political turnover, therefore, needed a relatively long time to come to fruition. The choice of comparing the ten years before the plague with the five years after the plague follows a logic of uniformity. Despite the very different lengths of time, the two samples compare the elections to an entirely similar number of offices, 251 for the pre-plague period versus 231 for the post-plague period. In addition, we faced a lack of data for the period after 1353. In the choice between working on similar periods but with a very different number of observations, and working on samples that are quite different in time but identify the same power pyramid, we chose to take the second path.

Based on this data, we create two bi-mode binary networks (one before and the other after the plague) where each family is associated with the office one of its members was elected. Original networks are valued since more members of the same family can be elected to the same office. However, since bi-mode network statistics best apply to binary networks, we dichotomize them. The variable of interest is the house's degree centrality defined as the rate of participation that is the number of offices a family is associated with, before and after the plague (De Nooy et al. 2018). This statistic measures the power of a family defined as its capacity to control the largest number of offices. Its comparison before and after the plague describes is a measure of the stability (or lack of it) of the network as a consequence of this shock.

4. Results

Table 2 gives some network statistics before and after the plague for all offices and each class. The number of houses increases across the board, as well as the number of links. The number of offices decreases overall, but with different dynamics: the lowest class declines, the intermediate remains constant and the highest increases slightly. However, the houses centrality degree is quite stable for all classes and the lowest one, but not for classes 1 and 2, which show a large increase. The average slightly increases across all classes.

Tab. 2 - Network statistics

	All classes		Class 3		Class 2		Class 1	
	Before the plague	After the plague	Before the plague	After the plague	Before the plague	After the plague	Before the plague	After the plague
Houses	102	171	97	166	54	77	36	124
Houses degree = 1	26	27	24	24	18	35	28	58
Houses average degree	11	13	9	10	3	4	1	2
Offices	244	228	204	184	37	37	3	7
Links	1,105	2,254	904	1704	157	272	44	278

In Table 3 the ten highest degree centralities for all classes before and after the plague are shown. The first seven houses with the highest degrees before the plague are among those with the highest ranks after the Black Death. For example, Morosinis were first before and second after the plague, showing remarkable stability in their importance. Giustinians, Grandenigos, Faliers and Dandolos lose some ranks but firmly remain among the first ten houses. Contarinis and Loredans ascend to the podium. While the three lowest-ranking houses exit from the top ten, they are replaced by other houses that place themselves in the middle-to-low ranks. We should also note that on average the degree is higher after the plague. This may happen because, as seen in Table 2, there is a larger number of offices and houses after the plague. A picture of overall stability with some inevitable churning emerges from this analysis.

Table 3 - Degree centralities (all classes)

Before the plague		After the plague	
House	Degree	House	Degree
Morosini	66	Contarini	85
Giustinian	61	Morosini	69
Gradenigo	51	Loredan	67
Falier	43	Giustinian	62
Contarini	37	Venier	55
Loredan	37	Falier	54
Dandolo	34	Querini	48
Foscarini	33	Corner	45
Bragadin	31	Dandolo	45
Soranzo	29	Gradenigo	45

Looking more in detail at the classes (Table 4), among the houses highlighted above, Contarinis improve in all the classes after the shock. We can see the relative decline of some houses across the board (i.e., Morosinis, Giustinians, Loredans). Some houses appear only in the lowest-class offices (Corners, Bragadins) together with others that, although held higher offices, lost their ground after the plague (Dandolos, Soranzos, Balbos, Molins, Arimondos). Class 1 shows the same degree centrality for most of the houses (2), after the plague this indicator is somehow more variable. After the plague, the Lion family appears highly ranked in class 1, although it makes no appearance in other classes and the general ranking. The results of this table reinforce the stability in the network of ruling houses and their ability to cope with an external shock.

Selectorate theory (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003; Quiron Flores, 2018) provides some insights into these patterns. The selectorate (S) is a subset of a country's residents with the

institutional prerogatives to choose the country's political leadership. The winning coalition (W) is a subset of the selectorate of sufficient size whose support provides the leadership with political power over the residents of the country. The winning coalition provides leaders with the political authority to raise taxes and allocate government funds. The winning coalition is rarely of the same size as the selectorate: it is smaller but often minimal. The variable W/S can represent a continuum of political regimes spanning from autocracy to democracy.

Leaders keep the support of members of the winning coalition by providing a mixture of both private and public goods. The resources to fund them come from the taxation of the whole population. Change in leadership may arise from a challenger, but there is the so-called "incumbency advantage". The incumbent leader has a set of well-known supporters who receive a stream of public and private goods; therefore, she simply needs to credibly continue providing benefits to their current supporters to hold on to office. The challenger can only promise goods to potential supporters, who could be any members of the winning coalition. Although the size of the winning coalition is common knowledge and independent of leadership, it is not known which selectorate members will be included in a new coalition under the challenger. Therefore, current members of the winning coalition trade-off a secure stream of goods with the incumbent ruler by joining a new coalition. Once the leader and his supporters have committed to an exchange of goods for political support, coalition members have few incentives to support a challenger and replace the leader.⁷ In our case, the challenge to the *status quo* does not come from within the selectorate but from an exogenous shock. Yet, the houses making up the winning coalition, although they lost key actors playing a role in the network of alliances, substituted them with remaining and new members. In this way, the ruling houses kept and even expanded their role, leaving other members of the selectorate on the sidelines of power. They kept choosing the *Doge* and obtained benefits from the government they selected.

⁷ For a more general account on how economists view these decision-making problems, see Acemoglu and Robinson (2006; 2008).

Table 4 - Degree centralities per class

Class 3				Class 2				Class 1			
Before the plague		After the plague		Before the plague		After the plague		Before the plague		After the plague	
House	Degree	House	Degree	House	Degree	House	Degree	House	Degree	House	Degree
Morosini	54	Contarini	64	Morosini	10	Giustinian	17	Cocco	2	Loredan	7
Giustinian	52	Morosini	55	Dolfen	8	Contarini	15	Contarini	2	Contarini	6
Gradenigo	42	Loredan	46	Contarini	7	Falier	14	Dandolo	2	Falier	6
Falier	38	Venier	43	Giustinian	7	Loredan	14	Giustinian	2	Lion	6
Loredan	29	Giustinian	40	Gradenigo	7	Gradenigo	11	Gradenigo	2	Morosini	6
Contarini	28	Querini	38	Loredan	7	Dandolo	9	Molin	2	Corner	5
Foscarini	28	Falier	34	Soranzo	6	Morosini	8	Morosini	2	Foscarini	5
Bragadin	27	Trevisan	34	Dandolo	5	Venier	8	Soranzo	2	Giustinian	5
Dandolo	27	Corner	33	Zorzi	5	Zorzi	8	Arimondo	1	Gradenigo	5
Corner	22	Dandolo	32	Falier	4	Bembo	7	Barbo	1	Michiel	5

Moreover, the resilience of some houses to effectively cling to power may have been reinforced by the lower mortality rate experienced by the houses enrolled in the nobility with the 1297 Lockout compared to those that were aggregated later (Raines, 2003). Among them, there are Badoer, Barozzi, Baseggio, Bembo, Bragadin, Contarini, Corner, Dandolo, Dolfín, Falier, Giustinian, Gradenigo, Memmo, Michiel, Morosini, Querini, Sanudo, Soranzo, Tiepolo, Zane, Zen, Zorzi, which are considered the founders of Venice, and consistently appear in our tables.

5. Conclusions

We have shown how, despite the strong systemic shock represented by the Black Death, the structure of Venetian political power remains overall unchanged. The houses that occupied the main ganglia of power before the pandemic continued to occupy the top positions even after, leaving houses with less political and economic capital in subordinate positions. There are certainly internal changes of relative positions within the pyramid of power, but these are processes that we might consider physiological.

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