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EXPLORATOIRES, SPIE AND CURSOIRES IN LATE MEDIEVAL DALMATIAN TOWNS*

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines the roles of exploratores, spie and cursores – covert scouts, spies and couriers – documented in the sources of the late medieval Dalmatian towns. Although medieval espionage remains still under-researched, recent scholarship allows for situating Dalmatian cases within a broader medieval espionage framework, particularly in relation to Italian city-states' practices. Using mostly case studies from the towns of Trogir, Split, Šibenik and Dubrovnik, the article demonstrates how local and regional power-holders deployed spies to gather critical information during military or factional conflicts in Croatia and Dalmatia and to track external threats, such as advancing Ottoman armies in the 15th century. Unlike some Italian cities, in which we can trace institutionalized espionage, Dalmatian towns relied mostly on ad hoc measures and temporary councils for security, reflecting their own sociopolitical landscape and priorities.*

KEYWORDS: *exploratores, spie, cursores, late medieval Dalmatian towns, medieval espionage, medieval military intelligence, medieval Italian communes.*

ESPLORATORI, SPIE E CORRIERI NELLE CITTÀ DALMATE DEL TARDO MEDIOEVO

SOMMARIO: *Questo articolo esamina i ruoli di exploratores, spie e cursores – esploratori, spie e corrieri – documentati nelle fonti delle città dalmate del tardo medioevo. Sebbene l'attività di spionaggio medievale rimane poco studiata, la recente letteratura consente di collocare i casi dalmati all'interno di un più ampio quadro di spionaggio medievale, in particolare in relazione alle pratiche delle città-stato italiane. Attraverso studi di caso su Traù (Trogir), Spalato (Split), Sebenico (Šibenik) e Ragusa (Dubrovnik), l'articolo mostra come i detentori del potere locale e regionale dispiegassero spie per raccogliere informazioni cruciali durante conflitti militari o faziosi in Croazia e Dalmazia e per monitorare minacce esterne, come l'avanzata degli eserciti ottomani nel XV secolo. A differenza di alcune città italiane, nelle quali si possono osservare strutture di spionaggio istituzionalizzate, le città dalmate facevano affidamento principalmente su misure ad hoc e consigli temporanei per garantire la sicurezza, rispecchiando il proprio contesto sociopolitico e le priorità locali.*

PAROLE CHIAVE: *exploratores, spie, cursores, le città dalmate del tardo medioevo, spionaggio medievale, intelligence militare medievale, i comuni medievali italiani.*

* Abbreviations used: Dazd (State Archive in Zadar), Dadu (State Archive in Dubrovnik), Nas (Archbishop's Archive in Split), Asan (Archivio di Stato di Ancona), Asbo (Archivio di Stato di Bologna), Asfi (Archivio di Stato di Firenze). This research was primarily funded by the Croatian Science Foundation under the individual research mobility project *Political Culture in a Comparative Context: Late Medieval Dalmatian Cities and Italian Communes* (MOBODL-12-2023-1385). The research was also conducted within the research project *Communities, Communication, and Social Networks in the Croatian Middle Ages and Early Modern Times* project (380-01-02-23-40 – COMNET), financed by the European Union and the NextGenerationEU programme, at the Croatian Institute of History.

Introduction

Whilst reading the communal expenditure records of the Dalmatian towns of Trogir (*Tragurium*, *Traù*) and Split (*Spaletum*, *Spalato*) from the 14th and 15th centuries a certain generic phrase caught my attention – *in seruitium communis*. The phrase was accompanied by entries regarding payments to unspecified individuals for equally unspecified «services» rendered to the commune of Trogir in August of 1416¹, and to the commune of Split in April of 1353². This generic and indefinite phrase intrigued me to try to understand their real background – and that led me to the topic of medieval espionage and the activity of individuals titled as *exploratores*, *spie* or *cursores* in the late medieval sources. This topic hasn't received a substantial attention from scholars, and the scarce but highly valuable literature on medieval espionage, especially regarding the Italian communes, will serve to elucidate the historiographical framework inside which this paper will be positioned. From that starting point, we will consider various examples of individuals from the late medieval Dalmatian sources who acted as scouts, spies or messengers in behalf of their communes. This will be done also in relation to chosen data from Italian cities such as Venice, Bologna, Ancona and Florence – as to «cut into» the possibilities of a comparative approach for a better understanding of the intricacies of medieval espionage in the late medieval Dalmatian towns.

Medieval Intelligence in Context

The agency of designated individuals responsible for collecting critical intelligence for their communities or political leaders, involving essentially espionage, has for long been a neglected field of medieval history. However, recent studies over the past few decades have highlighted the critical importance of information flow and spying activities across antiquity, the medieval period, and early modern history³. The

¹ Cfr. «*Detis pro certis expensis in seruitium comunis factis ducatos auri sex*». Dazd, fondo Trogir, busta 66, fasc. 3, fol. 4v; I. Majnarić; A. Bećir, *Introitus et exitus communium mediaevalium Adriatici orientalis. Vol. I. Spalatum et Tragurium*, Croatian Institute of History and State Archive of Zadar, Zagreb and Zadar, 2024, 364.

² Cfr. «*Item diede a vno fante che ando in seruitio del comune ...*». I. Majnarić, A. Bećir, *Introitus et exitus communium mediaevalium Adriatici orientalis. Vol. I. Spalatum et Tragurium*, cit., p. 188; Dazd, fondo Split, busta 1, vol. 3, fasc. 3, fol. 12v.

³ Cfr. P. Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia*, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 2016; E. Loss, *Officium Spiarum. Spionaggio e gestione delle informazioni a Bologna* (secoli XIII-XIV), Viella, Roma, 2020; Filippo de Vivo, *Information and Communication in*

inherent secrecy and discretion essential to effective intelligence work rendered operatives permanently suspect and potentially dangerous, as they operated both metaphorically and literally in the shadows and within spheres of uncertainty⁴. Under such volatile conditions, loyalty, alongside resourcefulness, was the foremost quality sought in spies, informants, confidants, and often than not also in couriers and messengers tasked with delivering vital, confidential, and often perilous information, whether orally or in written form⁵.

Venice. Rethinking Early Modern Politics, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007; Emrah Safa Gürkan, *Laying Hands on Arcana Imperii. Venetian Baili as spymasters in Sixteenth Century Istanbul*, in P. Maddrell, C. Moran, I. Iordanou, M. Stout, R. Dearlove (ed.), *Spy Chiefs. Vol. II. Intelligence Leaders in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia*, Georgetown University Press, Georgetown, 2018, pp. 67-96; I. Iordanou, *Venice's Secret Service. Organizing Intelligence in the Renaissance*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019; M. Ebben, L. Sicking, Introduction, in M. Ebben, L. Sicking (ed.), *Beyond Ambassadors. Consuls, Missionaries, and Spies in Premodern Diplomacy*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2021, pp. 1-16; J. Watkins, *Premodern Non-State Agency: The Theoretical, Historical, and Legal Challenge*, in M. Ebben; L. Sicking (ed.), *Beyond Ambassadors. Consuls, Missionaries, and Spies in Premodern Diplomacy*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2021, pp. 20-37; J. B. Santamaria, *Secrets, Diplomats and Spies in Late Medieval France and in the Burgundian State: Parallel Practices and Undercover operations*, in M. Ebben; L. Sicking (ed.), *Beyond Ambassadors. Consuls, Missionaries, and Spies in Premodern Diplomacy*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2021, pp. 159-184; I. Iordanou, *The Secret Service of Venice: Intelligence organisation in the sixteenth century*, «Journal of Intelligence History», 21, 3 (2022), pp. 251-267; J. Titterton, *Medieval Warfare. Trickery and Cunning in the Central Middle Ages*, The Boydell Press, Martlesham, 2022, pp. 27-52; I. Iordanou, *The Invisible Trade. Commoners and Convicts as Early Modern Venice's Spies*, in S. Bowd, S. Cockram, J. Gagne (ed.), *Shadow Agents of Renaissance War. Suffering, Supporting, and Supplying Conflict in Italy and Beyond*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2023, pp. 227-250; N. Austin, B. Rankov, *Exploratio. Military and Political Intelligence in the Roman World from the Second Punic War to the Battle of Adrianople*, London, Routledge, 1995; F. Titone, *Gaining Political Recognition in Western Europe, 1200-1600*, in F. Titone (ed.), *Disciplined Dissent in Western Europe, 1200-1600. Political Action between Submission and Defiance*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2022, p. 15.

⁴ About the importance of secrecy cfr. V. M. Catanzariti, *Il segreto e le sue forme: legittimazione, disciplinamento, pratiche*, in J. Chiffolleau, E. Hubert, R. Mucciarelli (ed.), *La necessità del segreto. Indagini sullo spazio politico nell'Italia medievale ed oltre*, Viella, Roma, 2018, pp. 371-383. About the negative perception of spies cfr.: B. Pio, *Spie e delatori nei pensiero politico del tardo Medioevo*, in M. G. Muzzarelli (ed.), *Riferire all'autorità. Denuncia e delazione tra Medioevo ed Eta moderna*, Viella, Roma, 2020, pp. 205-219.

⁵ Cfr. P. Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia* cit., pp. 11-15; E. Loss, *Officium Spiarum. Spionaggio e gestione delle informazioni a Bologna (secoli XIII-XIV)* cit., 103 and *passim*. For the transmission of oral or written messages cfr. D. E. Queller, *The Office of Ambassador in the Middle Ages*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1967, p. 14.

Important political, military or economic decisions were based to a large extent on information obtained through the agency of spies⁶. However, there was always a probability that the information was false or simply just outdated and therefore devoid of its former significance – which could have led to a political or military failure⁷. The speed in which information travelled presented another issue, and important decisions had to be made with a narrow understanding of the situation at hand⁸.

Certain medieval Italian communes, for example, have had some kind of organizational capacity for creating and maintaining spy-networks since the first half of the 13th century. Formal institutions which were entrusted to deal with these issues came to fruit in the second half of the 13th century (as with the *officium spiarum* in Bologna), or at the beginning of the 14th century (as with the *Consiglio dei Dieci* in Venice)⁹. The social and political conflicts between the noblemen and the *popolo* corporations during the second half of the 13th century called for a more attentive security approach¹⁰. We can single out also

⁶ Cfr. J. Alban; C. Allmand, *Spies and Spying in the Fourteenth Century*, in C. Allmand (ed.), *War, Literature and Politics in the Late Middle Ages*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1976, pp. 73-74.

⁷ Cfr. E. Loss, *Officium Spiarum. Spionaggio e gestione delle informazioni a Bologna* (secoli XIII-XIV) cit., pp. 112-114; N. Austin; B. Rankov, *Exploratio. Military and Political Intelligence in the Roman World from the Second Punic War to the Battle of Adrianople* cit., pp. 66-67, 86; J. Alban; C. Almand, *Spies and Spying in the Fourteenth Century* cit., pp. 100-101.

⁸ N. Austin; B. Rankov, *Exploratio. Military and Political Intelligence in the Roman World from the Second Punic War to the Battle of Adrianople* cit., p. 104; D. E. Queller, *The Office of Ambassador in the Middle Ages*, pp. 26-27; P. Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies: Anatomy of the Pre-Modern World*, Oneworld Publications, Oxford, 2003, pp. 14, 39-40; F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. II, Harper and Row, New York, 1972, 773-776 and *passim*; F. de Vivo, *The composite world of early modern information*, «European Review of History», 30, 4 (2023), pp. 647, 652-653.

⁹ Cfr. P. Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia* cit., E. Loss, *Officium Spiarum. Spionaggio e gestione delle informazioni a Bologna* (secoli XIII-XIV) cit.

¹⁰ Out of the vast literature on the social and political processes in the Italian communes during the 13th and 14th centuries cfr.: L. Tanzini (ed.), *Il comune medievale. Istituzioni e conflitti politici (secoli XII-XIV)*, CLUEB, Bologna, 2022; P. Grillo, *La falsa inimicizia. Guelfi e ghibellini nell'Italia del Duecento*, Salerno Editrice, Roma, 2018; A. Gamberini, *The Clash of Legitimacies: The State-Building Process in Late Medieval Lombardy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018; P. Lantschner, *The Logic of Political Conflict in Medieval Cities. Italy and the Southern Low Countries 1370-1440*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015; G. Milani, *I comuni italiani. Secoli XII-XIV*, Editori Laterza, Roma, 2005; P. J. Jones, *The Italian City-State. From Commune to Signoria*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997; L. Martines, *Political Violence in the Thirteenth Century*, in L. Martines (ed.), *Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian Cities, 1200-1500*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1972, pp. 331-353.

the authority of the Florentine *Dieci di balia* for dispatching *cursores et exploratores* from the middle of the 14th century, or the *ufficiale sopra le spie* or *soprastante alle spie* in Pisa between 1297 and 1345¹¹. The Florentine government eventually established the *Otto di guardia* as a temporary «police» commission with the objective of suppressing the Ciompi revolt (1378-1382). This commission became a permanent council with an expanding jurisdiction for criminal prosecution¹².

One of the oldest mentions of *spias* (spies) in Italy are attested in the financial records of Siena, or more precisely in the *Libri di Biccherna* between 1229 and 1231¹³. But it seems how the usage of the term *spia* is traceable perhaps even before, that is at least from 1169, and a provision of the anti-imperial Lombard League in which they discouraged anyone from being a «*spia vel guida ad dampnum nostre partis*»¹⁴. The very term *spia* is medieval, and Paolo Preto views it as a word of germanic origin¹⁵. The second most frequent term used for covert intelligence operatives or military scouts is the *explorator* – used continually from the Roman times. However, the Roman *exploratores* and *procuratores* were used as military scouts, while the *speculatores* represented special operatives who conducted actions behind enemy lines or during a battle or a siege¹⁶. It should be noted also that the intelligence activity remained for a long time an *ad hoc* enterprise in the Roman world, and how the so-called *frumentarii* who acted originally as couriers and messengers for the Roman power structures developed in time into a «secret service»¹⁷. Continuity of the Roman terminology is attested also, for

¹¹ P. Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia* cit., p. 25.

¹² R. Stern, *Contrary Commonwealth: The Theme of Exile in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982, p. 100; N. Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories* (trans. L. F. Banfield and H. C. Mansfield), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1988, pp. 113-115. For more detail on the historical context of 1378 in Florence cfr. G. Brucker, *Florentine politics and society, 1343-1378*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1962, pp. 297-387; J. M. Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus in Florentine Electoral Politics, 1280-1400*, The University of South Carolina, Columbia, 1982, pp. 175-178.

¹³ E. Loss, *Officium Spiarum. Spionaggio e gestione delle informazioni a Bologna (secoli XIII-XIV)* cit., p. 15.

¹⁴ G. Milani, *L'esclusione dal Comune. Conflitti e bandi politici a Bologna e in altre città italiane tra XII e XIV secolo*, Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, Roma, 2003, p. 18.

¹⁵ P. Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia* cit., p. 42.

¹⁶ Extensively about this see N. Austin and B. Rankov, *Exploratio. Military and Political Intelligence in the Roman World from the Second Punic War to the Battle of Adrianople* cit., pp. 10-11 and *passim*.

¹⁷ N. Austin and B. Rankov, *Exploratio. Military and Political Intelligence in the Roman World from the Second Punic War to the Battle of Adrianople* cit., pp. 136-137.

example, in the chronicle *Gesta Francorum* which tells the story of the First Crusade (1095-1099). Besides the *exploratores*, *speculatores* and *procuratores*, the chronicle also mentions various *cursores*, *praecursores*, *delatores*, *excubatores* or *praecurrentes* employed either by the crusade lords or the Islamic leaders¹⁸.

Among other aspects, the case of Bologna provides useful insight into the terminology, especially in the case of the records of the *Officium buletarum et presentationum populi et comunis Bononie* – the institution which basically replaced the controversial *officium spiarum* after 1357¹⁹. As its name suggests, this office was tasked with surveilling the city income and expenditure, and with recording foreigners who were entering the city on a daily basis. For example, the title of an expenditure chapter starting from July of 1388 in the margin literally reads: «*solutiones facte per dictum ser Francischum officialem predictum in curerriis, cabalariis, spiis etc*»²⁰. At the beginning of another expenditure chapter in one of the subsequent registers from 1380, similar terms are used, namely «*solutiones facte ... cursoribus, cabalariis et exploratoribus*»²¹. It is therefore evident how in the Bolognese practice terms such as *cursores* or *curerrii*, *cabalarii*, *spie* and *exploratores* were perceived within the same «category». In the case of Ancona, we can observe the practice of choosing a few *cabalarii* in the Great council with a salary and obligations in the service of Ancona during times of war or in direct anticipation. They were to be skilled and able horseriders – ready to ride day and night when needed²². Anonymus Anconitan *exploratores* are also attested in the sources, as in September of 1392, when they were to be sent «*ad illas partes et loca, quas eis videbitur ad sentiendum cuncta possibilis*»²³. And this was

¹⁸ S. B. Edgington, *Espionage and Military Intelligence during the First Crusade, 1095-1099*, in S. John and N. Morton (ed.), *Crusading and Warfare in the Middle Ages. Realities and Representations. Essays in Honour of John France*, Routledge, London, 2016, pp. 75-87.

¹⁹ E. Loss, *Officium Spiarum. Spionaggio e gestione delle informazioni a Bologna (secoli XIII-XIV)* cit., p. 68. About the political and social struggles in Bologna during which this office was established and functioned cfr. S. R. Blanshei, *Politics and Justice in Late Medieval Bologna*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2010; G. Milani, *L'esclusione dal Comune. Conflitti e bandi politici a Bologna e in altre città italiane tra XII e XIV secolo* cit.; G. Milani, *From One Conflict to Another (13th-14th Centuries)*, in S. R. Blanshei (ed.), *A Companion to Medieval and Renaissance Bologna*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2018.

²⁰ Cfr. Asbo, *Ufficio delle bollette e presentazioni dei forestieri, Libri delle bollette (1379-1400)*, busta 1, reg. II, fol. 30.

²¹ Cfr.: Asbo, fondo *Ufficio delle bollette e presentazioni dei forestieri. Libri delle bollette (1379-1400)*, busta 1, reg. IV, fol. 20.

²² Asan, fondo *Consigli*, reg. 45, fol. 49; reg. 46, fol. 113v-114, 146; reg. 47, fol. 53.

²³ Asan, fondo *Consigli*, reg. 51, fol. 153v.

also the case in December 1412, when the Great council of Ancona decided to give freedom of movement (*salvusconductus*) to any *explorator* in service of Ancona for their own safety²⁴.

It seems how in practice the terms *explorator* and *spia* acted basically as synonyms, which is observable from the Florentine expenditure records. For example, payments were exacted to a Ricco Vannis from Pistoia, that is to a «*nuntio et exploratori ... pro explorandis et referendis nouis*», between September and November of 1343²⁵. During another occasion from October of 1344, friars Bartolo and Christophano were given money to spend «*pro salario exploratore et nuntio et custode*»²⁶. On the other hand, the same kind of entries written in Italian and almost in the same period make use of the term *spia*, as with the cases of Guiglelmo Martini from Sicilia who was «*messo a spia ... per spiare et rapportare nouelle*» from October of 1348, and a Stefano Arringhi from Florence as a «*spia mandato ... alle parti di Romagna a spiare*», from July of 1350²⁷. The case of Florence provides us with some well documented individuals, such as the city herald and poet Antonio Pucci, or bell ringer Giovanni Paoli – who were in reality so much more. They acted as spies (*exploratores*), messengers or even formal representatives and negotiators in the name of the Florentine government²⁸. Their obvious skills made them into very important social «fixers» notwithstanding their formal occupations or titles.

Besides the terms for operatives, the activity of spying or inquiring into a certain matter is also frequently used in the sources, and the used phrases being for example *pro novis sciendis*, *novis habendis*, *novis inquirendis*, in Bologna and other cities, and *per spiare et*

²⁴ Cfr. «*faciendi saluosconductus quibuscunque exploratoribus per dictos dominos conducendis et deputandis pro negotio comunis prefati*», Asan, fondo Consigli, reg. 53, fol. 51.

²⁵ Asfi, fondo Camera del comune, serie Camarlinghi. Uscita, busta 1, fol. 7v, 17; busta 2, fol. 39v.

²⁶ Asfi, fondo Camera del comune, serie Camarlinghi. Uscita, busta 7, fol. 189. On churchmen being regularly delegated to espionage activities in Florence until the 14th century cfr. P. Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia* cit., p. 25.

²⁷ Asfi, fondo Camera del comune, serie Scrivani di Camera. Uscita, busta 2, fol. 28v; busta 10, fol. 26.

²⁸ W. Caferro, *Shadow Bureaucrats and Breacracy in Trecento Florence*, in S. Bowd, S. Cockram and J. Gagne (ed.), *Shadow Agents of Renaissance War. Suffering, Supporting, and Supplying Conflict in Italy and Beyond*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2023, 123–146. About Florentine city heralds and their role as «information superhighways» in the 14th and 15th centuries cfr. Stephen J. Milner, *Fanno bandire, notificare, et expressamente comandare: Town Criers and the Information Economy of Renaissance Florence*, «I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance», 16, 1 (2013), pp. 107-151.

rapportare nouvelle or *pro explorandis et referendis nouis* in the above mentioned Florentine cases, or in the Venetian case as *per* (*so-prav*) *veder* or *per saper de inimici*²⁹. In the deliberations of the Venetian Council of Ten from the 14th century, one can observe the practice of appointing special *inquisitores* from the ranks of the patriciate with the task to investigate certain matters in the name of the Ten (*debeant inquirere et investigare*)³⁰. The customary ambiguity of tasks delegated to operatives is also evident with the *inquisitores* of the Ten. Namely, in an example from 1329, the *inquisitores* were tasked to parley with a certain Nicoletto, as they saw fit for the public good (*sicut eis videbitur pro bono comunis*)³¹. The usage of phrases as *pro bono comunis* or *pro bono statu comunis* (or *ciuitatis*) was frequent in the Italian cities, which is also attested in the sources of the late medieval Dalmatian cities. In that sense, to be able to uphold the public order or safety from internal or external threats, one had to employ spies³².

Since the flow of information, and the means of its transfer and validation, represent in fact the core of any intelligence activity, it

²⁹ E. Loss, *Officium Spiarum. Spionaggio e gestione delle informazioni a Bologna* (secoli XIII-XIV) cit., pp. 27, 139; P. Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia* cit., p. 43. Furthermore, as Peter Burke has underlined, in the early modern times «there was spying rather than spies», and therefore an important focus should be put on the activity itself. Cfr. P. Burke, *Early Modern Venice as a Centre of information and Communication*, in J. Martin and D. Romano (ed.), *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297–1797*, John Hopkins University, Baltimore, 2000, p. 393.

³⁰ Cfr. «*quod inquisitores de X debeant inquirere et investigare hoc factum ...*». F. Zago (ed.), *Consiglio dei Dieci. Deliberazioni Miste. Registri III-IV (1325-1335)*, Comitato Pubblicazione delle fonti relative alla storia di Venetia, 1968, p. 50, doc. 130. Cfr. «*quod inquisitores de decem debeant per sacramentum exquirere et examinare ser Petrum Polo de Hanareglo si unquam participavit ... cum Francisco Paulo, ban-nito nostro*». F. Zago (ed.), *Consiglio dei Dieci. Deliberazioni Miste. Registri I-II (1310-1325)*, Comitato Pubblicazione delle fonti relative alla storia di Venetia, 1962, p. 146, doc. 402. In time *inquisitores* were tasked to investigate crimes in Venice, to confine and question potential suspects. Cfr. «*Quod Benedictus de Placencia ... debeat personaliter detineri et inquisitores huius consilii ipsum super facto dicte cedule et contentum in ea examinent ...*». F. Zago (ed.), *Consiglio dei Dieci. Deliberazioni Miste. Registri V (1348-1363)*, Comitato Pubblicazione delle fonti relative alla storia di Venetia, 1993, p. 39, doc. 79.

³¹ F. Zago (ed.), *Consiglio dei Dieci. Deliberazioni Miste. Registri III-IV (1325-1335)*, p. 170, doc. 503.

³² About the «*pro bono comunis*» or «*pro bono statu ciuitatis*» in Italian cities cfr. W. M. Bowsky, *The Anatomy of Rebellion in Fourteenth-Century Siena: from Comune to Signory?*, In Lauro Martines (ed.), *Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian Cities, 1200-1500*, Los Angeles, 1972, pp. 229-272. For the Dalmatian case cfr. T. Popić; A. Bećir, *Acta et reformationes consiliorum civitatis Tragurii (saec. XIII-XIV)*, Croatian Institute of History, Zagreb, 2022, pp. 46-50.

shouldn't surprise us at all that messengers or couriers have evolved primarily into a «secret service» in the Roman era. As we know, medieval societies were in essence primarily oral societies and most of the crucial and vital information were exchanged orally. In that sense, the importance of couriers should be evaluated appropriately, as Filippo de Vivo has mentioned recently³³. Having all the aforementioned remarks on mind, in the continuation we will concentrate our attention on *exploratores*, *spie* and *cursores* in the late medieval Dalmatian sources within the context of a «military intelligence».

Spies and «Military Intelligence» in late Medieval Dalmatia and Croatia

Besides the terms *exploratores*, *spie* or *cursores*, we can also find in the sources of the late medieval Dalmatian cities phrases indicating the activity of spying or scouting, among others, like *causa sciendi*³⁴, *ad uidendum*³⁵, *ad explorandum causam*³⁶, *ad explorandum de nouis factis*³⁷, *per spione*³⁸, or *demittendo ... cursores ... pro inuestigando*³⁹. In a Venetian dispatch regarding matters in the city of Šibenik (*Sibenicum*, *Sebenico*) from 1413, we can observe the phrase *ad sentiendum de novis*⁴⁰. In another Venetian letter concerning the potential arrival of a hostile Hungarian army in Croatia from 1344, we can see the phrase *in mittendo exploratores pro inquisicione*⁴¹. It should be noted

³³ F. de Vivo, *The composite world of early modern information* cit., p. 650. Also cfr. F. de Vivo, *Microhistories of long-distance information: space, movement and agency in the early modern news*, «Past & Present», 242 (2019), pp. 179-180. Cfr. also: F. de Vivo, *How to read Venetian Relazioni*, «Renaissance and Reformation» 34 (2011), pp. 25-59; F. De Vivo, *Walking in Sixteenth-Century Venice: mobilizing the early modern city*, «I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance» 19 (2016), pp. 115-141; F. de Vivo, *Microhistories of long-distance information: space, movement and agency in the early modern news*, «Past & Present», 242 (2019), pp. 179-180.

³⁴ Dazd, fondo Split, busta. 1, vol. 3, fasc. 1, fol. 8v.

³⁵ Dazd, fondo Split, busta 1, vol. 3, fasc. 2, fol. 9.

³⁶ M. Kostrenčić (ed.), *Codex diplomaticus regni Croatiae, Dalmatiae et Slavoniae*, vol. XVI, Jugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1976, Zagreb, doc. 167, p. 195.

³⁷ Dazd, fondo Split, busta 1, vol. 3, fasc. 1, fol. 8.

³⁸ Dazd, fondo Split, busta 1, vol. 3, fasc. 3, fol. 11, 13v.

³⁹ Dadu, fondo *Consilium rogatorum* (1415-1418), vol. I, fol. 30.

⁴⁰ Š. Ljubić (ed.), *Listine o odnošajih izmedju južnoga Slavenstva i Mletačke Republike*, vol. VII, Jugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts, Zagreb, 1882, p. 93.

⁴¹ E. Demo (ed.), *Venezia-Senato. Deliberazioni Miste. Registro XXII (1344-1345)*, Istituto Veneto di Scienze ed Arti, Venice, doc. 376, p. 183; Š. Ljubić (ed.), *Listine o odnošajih izmedju južnoga Slavenstva i Mletačke Republike*, vol. II, Jugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts, Zagreb, 1870, p. 223.

that these phrases are generic and they are attested often in the sources of the Italian communes. From the latter material it is clear that these kinds of phrases denoted the activity of spying, scouting or reconnaissance for «news».

It seems that one of the oldest mentions of the term *spia* in the late medieval Dalmatian sources can be found in a letter of the Venetian count of Trogir directed to the Venetian count of Šibenik from the year 1326⁴². The Trogir count tells his «colleague» and count of Šibenik how lord Nelipić, count of Knin, and his ally Juraj Mihovilović intend to send spies (*mittent suas spias*) as to see if the Babonići counts in Slavonia would be able to fend off the royal army on their own (*causa videndi si ipsi Sclauī erant quod possent contra Vngaros*), or if they would need military assistance. In the aftermath the royal army succeeded in seizing the key Babonići stronghold of Stjencičnjak in 1327, but all further incursions into Croatia proved to be unsuccessful and the reconsolidation of the royal rule was postponed until cca 1350⁴³, or in the case of the Dalmatian towns until 1358 and the Zadar Peace Treaty⁴⁴.

Another example of the mention of *spie* comes from the Trogir statutory provision which regulated the activity of the «council of twenty» (*consilium a viginti*), which was to tackle with security issues regarding the relations with the Croatian and Bosnian lords, and the Hungarian King at the time. Although the provision is not clearly dated, from its content it seems most probable that the council was established between 1322 and 1324⁴⁵. The council of twenty was thus authorized to autonomously dispatch «*ambaxiatores, nuncios et spias et litteras*», and also to give responses to «*ambaxiatoribus, nunciis et litteris*» directed to the count and commune of Trogir⁴⁶. However, the council

⁴² Nas, Ivan Lučić written legacy, vol. 542, fol. 207-208; Lučić, *Memorie*, pp. 187-188.

⁴³ On this cfr. T. Popić and A. Bećir, *Acta et reformationes consiliorum civitatis Tragurii*, pp. 51-54; D. Karbić, *Šubići Bribirski do gubitka nasljedne banske časti (1322.)*, «Zbornik Odsjeka za povijesne znanosti Zavoda za povijesne i društvene znanosti HAZU», 22 (2004), pp. 23-25; M. Ančić, *Dva teksta iz sredine 14. stoljeća. Prilog poznavanju društvenoga znanja Hrvatskoga kraljevstva*, «Starohrvatska prosvjeta», 40 (2013), pp. 166-167, 181-182.

⁴⁴ Cfr. I. Majnarić, *Plemstvo zadarskog zaleđa u XIV. i XV. stoljeću*, University of Zadar, Zadar, pp. 30-32. About the Zadar Peace Treaty of 1358 cfr. a recent book of proceedings: M. Ančić and A. Nekić, *Zadarski mir: prekretnica anžuvinskog doba*, University of Zadar, Zadar, 2022.

⁴⁵ In more detail about this cfr. A. Bećir; T. Popić, *Acta et reformationes consiliorum civitatis Tragurii*, pp. 50-51.

⁴⁶ Cfr. the provision of the Trogir statute: I. Strohal, *Statut i reformacije grada Trogira*, Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts, Zagreb, 1915, p. 42.

was intended to last *donec durabunt iste novitates*, and therefore it didn't become a permanent institution as there is no more trace of it after the 1320s⁴⁷.

Both examples demonstrate how the usage of spies was crucial for obtaining relevant situational knowledge before deciding on a delicate political or military course of action. It seems, as it will be shown in the subsequent text, that most of the preserved mentions of spies in the late medieval Dalmatian and Croatian sources depict them with the task of spying an enemy army or presence, its numbers, capacities, movements and the level of immediate threat they represent⁴⁸. The expenditure records of Split and Trogir offer additional and useful examples of this.

We can recount in the Split expenditure records how the city authorities sent «servants» (*famulos*) and *exploratores* to the surrounding area and hinterland of Split, namely to the fortress of Klis in May of 1346. They were tasked to investigate new events regarding conflicts between Mladen III of Klis, and John, son of the abovementioned and by now late lord Nelipić of Knin, and their opposing forces⁴⁹. The identities of these individuals remain unknown, and it is possible only to mention how they were to receive around 3 or 4 solidi per day's work, or bread and wine within that price. In 1349, after the death of Mladen III, the Split city authorities sent an *explorator* to discover the whereabouts of a Hungarian army, and for that

⁴⁷ It should also be mentioned how a provision of the Split statute from 1312 regulated the activity of the *consilium credentie* (secret council), which had the authority to send ambassadors or do any other special tasks delegated to it by the Great Council – that is to the 25 members of this council with a mandate up to one year. By the statute, the council was authorized to conduct actions up to 20 pounds (*libri*) of expenditure, which meant also dispatching ambassadors especially when it was not convenient to wait for the Great council to assemble and elect an eligible person. Although the statutory provision doesn't expressly mention *spie* or *exploratores*, judging by its jurisdiction and utmost similarity to the Trogir *consilium a viginti*, there should be no doubt that they conducted that kind of activity. Cfr. A. Cvitanić, *Statut grada Splita*, Književni krug, Split, 1998, pp. 400-403.

⁴⁸ Also about the use of spies in medieval military contexts cfr. Y. Noah Harari, *Special Operations in the Age of Chivalry, 1100–1550*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2007.

⁴⁹ Cfr. «Item dederunt vni famulo qui iuit Cliscium ad explorandum de nouis factis comiti Mladino per comitem Iohannem, solidos IIII. ... Item dederunt duobus hominibus qui fuerunt Cliscii pro explorando de hoste, solidos X, paruulos VIII». Dazd, fondo Split, kut. 1, svezak 3, sv. 1, fol. 8. Also cfr. «Item dederunt vni famulo qui iuit Cliscium causa explorandi, solidos II, paruulos VIII. ... Item dederunt pro pane et vino dato illis qui fuerunt Cliscii ad explorandum, solidos IIII, paruulos XI». Dazd, fondo Split, busta 1, vol. 3, fasc. 1, fol. 8v.

he was to receive 8 solidi⁵⁰. The number of solidi depended of course on the distance which was to be traversed, and surely to the gravity of the task at hand⁵¹. Since Klis is in the immediate vicinity of Split, there seemed to be no reason to pay more than 4 solidi. On the other hand, the spy from 1349 was paid 8 solidi, which means that he was to travel at least twice the distance. However, despite that he was still to remain geographically close to Split.

In a few other notes about spies from April of 1353, we see also how individuals were sent to the surrounding areas as the Poljica county and the Visoch (Viseć) fortress, and also to the more far away Cetina county⁵². The city authorities gave 15 solidi (or grossi in Italian) to two *spioni* who were sent to Cetina, and one *homo* separately to Poljica⁵³. Similarly the Venetian count of Šibenik, Petrus Zacharia, was authorised by Venice in March of 1413, to spend up to 100 pounds for spies and «envoys» (*pro mittendo exploratores et nuntios*), in the context of the Venetian-Hungarian war over Dalmatia (1409-1420)⁵⁴. In the context of that war we can also mention the appointment of the captains of war in Trogir in November of 1419, and how they were authorised by the Trogir city council to dispatch *spionos et alios nuncios* at communal expense, but albeit with the knowledge of the council⁵⁵. The practice of sending either spies or envoys mostly to surrounding and neighboring areas was not uncommon at all in the medieval world. As a matter of fact, in most cases the information gathering process concerned matters, events and affairs in a local or regional context.

Keeping up with the chronological sequence, it is possible to further more single out examples of *spie* being dispatched by the

⁵⁰ Cfr. «Item soluerunt vni exploratori qui iuit ad uidendum ubi erat exercitus Vngarorum, solidos VIII parvorum». Dazd fondo Split, busta 1, vol. 3, fasc. 2, fol. 9.

⁵¹ Cfr. E. Loss, *Officium Spiarum. Spionaggio e gestione delle informazioni a Bologna* (secoli XIII-XIV) cit., pp. 137.

⁵² Cfr. «Item diedi a vno che fue mandato in Poliča per spione et a vno altro che fue mandato alla guardia di Visochi, grossi XI». Dazd, fondo Split, busta 1, vol. 3, fasc. 3, fol. 13v.

⁵³ Cfr. «Item diede a du spioni che foro in Ceptina et a vno homo che fue in Poliča, grossi XV». Dazd, fondo Split, busta 1, vol. 3, fasc. 3, fol. 15.

⁵⁴ Cfr. «Quod concedatur nobili viro ser Petro Zacharia rectori et gubernatori Sibinici, quod pro mittendo exploratores et nuntios ad sentiendum de novis pro utilitate et comodo agendorum nostrorum possit expendere usque libras centum parvorum de pecunia nostri communis». Š. Ljubić, *Listine, Listine o odnošajih između južnoga Slavenstva i Mletačke Republike*, vol. VII cit., p. 93. About this war see in much greater detail: M. Šunjić, *Dalmacija u XV vijeku*, Svjetlost, Sarajevo, 1967, pp. 44-66.

⁵⁵ Cfr. «in capitaneos qui habeant libertatem faciendi guerram ... habeant libertatem mittendi spionos et alios nuncios ad expensas communis». OIL, Ivan Lučić written legacy, vol. 535, fol. 125-125v; T. Popić, A. Bećir, *Acta et reformationes consiliorum civitatis Tragurii* cit., doc. 118, p. 252.

Dubrovnik (*Ragusium*) city authorities to keep track of certain security matters. Namely, in May of 1367, the authorities have decided to keep sending spies continuously (*mittere continue spias*) to the city of Ston where the Dubrovnik military forces were stationed together with some Dubrovnik noblemen, as to maintain the security of the city together with the count, captain and corporals of Ston⁵⁶. Dubrovnik territorial possessions in Ston and the peninsula of Pelješac were customarily under threat of the Bosnian or Serbian warlords in the hinterland of Dubrovnik⁵⁷. The second example tackles the context of the first incursions of Ottoman forces beyond Bosnia and into Dalmatia and Croatia in 1414/1415. The most powerful Bosnian duke at the time, Hrvoje Vukčić Hrvatinić, ended up proscribed as a traitor by King Sigismund for attacking the lands of another Bosnian duke, Sandalj Hranić Kosača in 1413. Hrvoje used the help of Ottoman troops to sustain his positions against the king's forces until his death in 1416⁵⁸. In that sense we can trace a decision of the Dubrovnik Senate (*consilium rogatorum*) from December 1415, by which all denizens were obliged to bring their possessions into fortifications as Ston or Dubrovnik itself due to the appearance of Ottoman forces. Besides that, the council decided also to keep sending spies and couriers wherever and on an everyday basis (*demittendo circumquaque cursores dietim*) as to keep a track on the movement of the Ottoman army (*pro inuestigando processus Turchorum*)⁵⁹. Spies were also dispatched by the Trogir authorities in February of 1417 to confirm news about the presence of Ottoman forces – about which we know only indirectly from the historical work of the 17th century Dalmatian historian Ivan Lučić – Lucius⁶⁰.

⁵⁶ Cfr. «*cum comite, capitanei et caporales tocius gentis de Stagno et de Punta, ad faciendum bonam custodiam ad custodiendum Stagnum cum Punta ... et debeatis mittere continue spias ad exercitum propter habere nova de exercitu, que nova vos scribetis Ragusium*». J. Gelčić (ed.), *Monumenta Ragusina*, vol. IV, Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts, Zagreb, 1882, pp. 88-89.

⁵⁷ Cfr. B. Krekić, *Dubrovnik in the 14th and 15th centuries: A City between East and West*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1972, pp. 46-49.

⁵⁸ F. Šišić, *Vojvoda Hrvoje Vukčić Hrvatinić i njegovo doba* (1350. – 1416.), Matica hrvatska, Zagreb, 1902.

⁵⁹ Cfr. «*In margine: pro nouitatibus turchorum // Prima pars est quod propter has nouitates Turchorum notificetur per terras nouas quod quilibet debeat reducere res de valore quas habent ad fortilitia Stagnum uel Ragusium et demittendo circumquaque cursores dietim pro inuestigando processus Turchorum et in reliquis super-sedendo pro nunc. Captum per XXI, contra VII*». Dadu, *Consilium Rogatorum* (1415-1418), vol. I, fol. 30.

⁶⁰ Cfr. «*... l'anno seguente capitando auuiso che li Turchi scorreuano nelli paesi vicini, furono fi 25. febraro 1417. espediti spie per la certezza*». I. Lučić, *Memorie storiche di Tragurio ora detto Trav*, Stefano Curti, Venezia, 1673, p. 427.

The movement of the Turks are also attested in the Trogir communal expenditure records in July of 1416, when the city authorities gifted the Trogir Franciscans and Dominicans for church processions made due *ob deuictionem Turcorum*⁶¹.

As a matter of fact, it was precisely the Ottoman military factor which continuously contributed to the increase of spy activities and the development of spy networks and a latent state of diplomatic and intelligence war between Venice and the Ottomans, especially later on in the 16th century⁶². This also exercised a direct influence on the Dalmatian cities as we can single out a further examples from the second half of the 15th century. In a document from May of 1474, we see how Venice decided to send 300 Greek stradioti to the Šibenik city district, according to a plea from Šibenik. The stradioti were tasked to protect the district from various looters in the hinterland. Besides that, Venice also decided to employ three spies (*tres exploratores sive excubitores vel caballarii*) to track these looters in the Šibenik district and to inform the Šibenik count of their movements⁶³. In another document from January of 1478, we see how a representative of Venice warned the pope of news coming from their spies in Bosnia and Croatia (*ex Bossina autem per diversos exploratores et ex Crovatia*), that the Ottomans are assembling an army and moving with great strength in the region⁶⁴. In this context we can also take into consideration the example of a known and suspected spy, namely that of a Dubrovnik citizen Jakov de Bena. The Venetians had their doubts that he was a Turkish spy since he received great payments from them, and therefore they were planning his arrest and interrogation – as it is visible in a Venetian document from October of 1470⁶⁵.

⁶¹ Dazd, fondo Trogir, busta 66, fasc. 3.

F. de Vivo, *Microhistories of long-distance information: space, movement and agency in the early modern news*, «Past & Present», 242 (2019), pp. 179-180.

⁶² Cfr. I. Iordanou, *The Secret Service of Venice: Intelligence organisation in the sixteenth century*, Journal of «Intelligence History», 251-267; E. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople. Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the early modern Mediterranean*, John Hopkins University, Baltimore, 2006, pp. 62, 70-72, 111.

⁶³ D. Salihović (ed.), *Razni spomenici koji se odnose na povijest srednjovjekovne Hrvatske i okolnih krajeva. Svezak prvi. Jedanaesti svezak Listina Šime Ljubića. Od godine 1469. do godine 1490.*, State Archive in Zadar, Zadar, 2022, doc. 144, pp. 315-316.

⁶⁴ D. Salihović, *Jedanaesti svezak Listina Šime Ljubića* cit., doc. 212, pp. 454.

⁶⁵ Cfr. «Cum Iacobus de Bena Raguseus, qui habet filium suum apud Teucrum, et habet etiam a dicto Teucro premia valde magna, habeatur valde suspectus quod sit explorator Teucri». Salihović, *Jedanaesti svezak Listina Šime Ljubića* cit., doc. 49, pp. 122.

The same Jakov de Bena had, in fact, acted as a Turkish representative in July of 1465, when he proposed a peace treaty between Venice and the Ottomans⁶⁶. Therefore he acted as an intermediate, or in contemporary jargon as a social «fixer» which was always a precarious and potentially dangerous position – as attested from his case. Mentions of *exploratores* in Dubrovnik's service are also vivid in other documents of Dubrovnik provenance from the second half of the 15th century⁶⁷.

A Suspicious Courier and «Dangerous» Letters – Case Study in Espionage

In this part of the text, we shall briefly consider a set of microscopic events happening immediately after the Venetian seizure of the city of Trogir on the 22nd of June 1420, in the context of the previously mentioned Hungarian-Venetian War. This is designed to serve as a specific and situational example of the usage of *cursores* to deliver sensitive information, and to basically act as spies.

Namely, the ruling group in Trogir proved to be unwilling to surrender the city to Venice, as they had tight connections with the Hungarian side and their positions of power were clearly endangered by Venice. The main (secular at least) figure in the city at the time was the Trogir nobleman Michael (*Micacius*) de Vitturi, who was described by Venetian chroniclers as the «lord of Trogir», the «lieutenant of the King of Hungary» or as the «former count (of Trogir)»⁶⁸. Besides him, another staunch supporter of the Hungarian king Sigismund was the Trogir bishop and catholic cardinal, Simon de Dominis from the island of Rab. The two of them, together with some of their (unnamed) retainers and supporters escaped the night before the surrender of the city

⁶⁶ Listine, X, doc. 337, pp. 326-327, doc. 328, pp. 327-328. In the context of the Ottoman factor being the crucial security threat to the Dalmatian cities from the 1460s onward, it is also convenient to compare the security situation in Split at the end of the 15th century and at the beginning of the 16th century in: L. Sadovski-Kornprobst, *Protecting a Dalmatian Town: Security Measures in Venetian Split (1480-1550)*, «Reti Medievali Rivista», 24, 2 (2023), pp. 1-34.

⁶⁷ Cfr.: V. Makušev, *Monumenta historica slavorum meridionalium vicinorumque populum e tabulariis et bibliothecis Italicis*. Ancona – Bononia – Florentia, vol. I, Tipografija Varšavskago Učebnago Okruga, 98, 104.

⁶⁸ Cfr. «*Michatio che era stà fatto Signor de Traù ... lo Gouvernador del Re d'Ongharia nominato Michazo*». I. Lučić, *Memorie storiche di Trav*, p. 425. Cfr. «... *comitis olim Michacii rebellis*». Cfr.: Š. Ljubić, *Listine o odnošajih između južnoga Slavenstva i Mletačke Republike*, vol. VIII, Jugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1886, p. 34.

materialized⁶⁹. However, that was not even nearly the end of their stories, especially in the case of Michael de Vitturi, who continued with subversive actions and «guerrilla» tactics as to disrupt the consolidation of Venetian rule. He was conducting his actions from the hinterland under the control of Ivaniš Nelipčić, the count of Cetina and vassal of the Hungarian king. Also, it was reported how he had various «arrangements» (*tractatibus*) with individuals in Trogir and Split, which also surrendered to Venice a few days after Trogir. These dealings were evidently aimed against Venetian rule⁷⁰.

Therefore, exactly in this context we find out about an uncovered conspiracy in Trogir and Split in the summer of 1421, which was directly connected to Michael and his following. Thankfully, we can trace the sequence of events regarding an unnamed courier from Knin with a certain letter smuggled into Trogir. In the immediate period after the Venetians entered the city, they introduced extraordinary measures as to keep a close watch on all letters and people entering or exiting the city. However, the Venetian mercenaries were foreigners with no knowledge of the community and therefore they couldn't keep track of the situation which enabled the courier to enter the city⁷¹.

⁶⁹ *In extenso* about the events in Trogir during the Hungarian-Venetian war cfr. A. Bećir, *Uspostava mletačke vlasti u Trogiru 1420. godine – između «lokalne» dinamike i «globalnih» procesa*, in I. Benyovsky Latin, F. Celio Cega, L. Paraman (ed.), *Pod sjenom krila: Trogirska komuna za vrijeme venecijanske uprave 1420. – 1797*, Croatian Institute of History and City Museum of Trogir, Zagreb and Trogir, 2024, pp. 1-41.

⁷⁰ Cfr. A. Bećir, *Uspostava mletačke vlasti u Trogiru 1420. godine* cit., p. 23; Š. Ljubić, *Listine o odnošajih između južnoga Slavenstva i Mletačke Republike*, vol. VIII cit., pp. 105-106.

⁷¹ About these measures cfr. I. Lučić, *Memorie storiche di Trav* cit., p. 434. These were the usual measures employed for suppressing the influence of the political exiles as in the Italian cities. Cfr. C. Shaw, *The Politics of Exile in Renaissance Italy* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 143-163. Additionally about the practice of political exile cfr. F. Ricciardeli, *The Politics of Exclusion in Early Renaissance Florence*, Brepols, Turnhout. 2007, pp. 8-12 and *passim*; S. F. Baxendale, *Exile in Practice: The Alberti Family In and Out of Florence, 1401-1428*, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 44 (1991), pp. 720-56; A. Brown, *Insiders and Outsiders – The Changing Boundaries of Exile*, in W. J. Connell (ed.), *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002, pp. 337-384; J. Heers, *Parties and Political Life in the Medieval West*, New Holland Publishing, Amsterdam – New York – Oxford, 1977, pp. 177-197. About the need to control the flow of information cfr. C. D. Liddy, *Cultures of Surveillance in Late Medieval English Towns. The Monitoring of Speech and the Fear of Revolt*, in J. Firnhaber-Baker and D. Schoenaers (ed.), *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt*, London, Routledge, 2017, pp. 311-329. Cfr. also: G. Naegle, *Revolts and wars, corporations and leagues. Remembering and communicating urban uprisings in the medieval Empire*, in J. Firnhaber-Baker and D. Schoenaers (ed.), *The Routledge history*

A Trogir nobleman Nicholas, son of Doctrina de Vitturi, in fact dispatched the courier, but the latter was discovered and apprehended under the orders of the provisional count of Trogir and Venetian confidante, the Zadar (*Iader, Zara*) nobleman Simon Detrico. Under interrogation, the courier confessed how he was tasked to deliver the letter to the unnamed wife of the aforementioned Nicholas, son of Doctrina. However, when she received this letter she forwarded it to Jacob, son of Nicholas de Sobota, and the cousin of Nicholas and the very Michael de Vitturi. Besides that, this courier described how he had a two-hour conversation with a certain Blasius in his house – which evidently makes him far more than just a simple «courier» or messenger. Based on these revelations, the count Simon ordered the confiscation of this letter from Jacob, and it was reported how «this letter contained many a suspicious things» (*in qua litera multa continebantur suspecta*). Unfortunately, a copy of this letter has not been preserved to this day. Venice subsequently ordered the apprehension and confinement of a group of Trogir noblemen into Venice, on the 27th of July of 1421⁷². Another similar conspiracy was uncovered in July of 1424, during the peak of Michael's subversive actions, when Venice ordered the arrest and confinement of a select group of Trogir and Split noblemen⁷³.

On the other hand we can mention another letter with «suspicious» content. Namely, in August of 1417 the Venetians intercepted a letter, which contains the plan of Ivaniš Nelipčić, the unofficial Croatian Ban, and the bishop of Zagreb (Eberhard), to secretly take over Šibenik, a city which surrendered to Venice previously in 1412. Their plan was to use a secret passage near the Franciscan monastery, enter the city and then open the gates for a detachment of 700 men that would be waiting for them and chanting throughout the city «*viva lo imperador*» (the latter being Sigismund as the actual *rex Romanorum*). However, since Venice disrupted this plan, nothing of the sort materialized⁷⁴. Sources allow for a rather thorough reconstruction of the events at the beginning of the 15th century, but for this occasion we only singled out the latter cases and their role in the

handbook of medieval revolt, 2017, p. 248; J. Dumolyn and J. Haemers, *A Bad Chicken was Brooding: Subversive Speech in Late Medieval Flanders*, «Past & Present», 214 (2012), pp. 46-47.

⁷² Š. Ljubić, *Listine o odnošajih između južnoga Slavenstva i Mletačke Republike*, vol. VIII cit., p. 106.

⁷³ Š. Ljubić, *Listine o odnošajih između južnoga Slavenstva i Mletačke Republike*, vol. VIII cit., p. 276.

⁷⁴ Š. Ljubić, *Listine o odnošajih između južnoga Slavenstva i Mletačke Republike*, vol. VII cit., doc. 164, pp. 236-237. Cfr. M. Šunjić, *Dalmacija u XV vijeku* cit., p. 77.

transmission and dispatch of vital information between different political and social entities. The courier in the first case acted exactly as a spy would and that meant that he couldn't be just anyone – but his identity remains unknown to us⁷⁵.

For a better understanding of all the intricacies and possible barriers operatives could have encountered, especially when taking land routes instead of the naval ones, we can briefly take into consideration an ironic report from Andrea Badoero, acting Venetian ambassador in England (1509-1515), in which he explains all his perils while traveling from Venice to England to the succeeding ambassador, Sebastiano Giustiniano. His onerous, exhausting and dangerous journey from Venice to London lasted around 26 days, during which he had to hide his true identity under the orders of the Signoria and the Council of Ten. In that sense, he had to travel as a commoner with only a few pairs of clothing, and he had to pose as a Scotsman, Englishman and at one point as a Croat in the service of The Holy Roman Emperor. Among other setbacks, at one occasion he fell on the ground together with his horse while traveling during the night and received an injury on his leg which made his journey subsequently even more complicated. His task was basically to persuade England to make war against France, as to ease the position in which Venice found itself at the beginning of the War of the Cambrai League⁷⁶. Taking into consideration the manner in which he supposedly travelled – like a mere spy of low social status, and not as a Venetian patrician – we see how the difference between a spy and an official ambassador could have been a relative and situational one. The spies and ambassadors were basically operatives and fixers, who operated on different levels and each of them within their own regard and with different techniques⁷⁷.

⁷⁵ The need for keeping the identity of confidants a secret (*custodes luctuum quem in secreta debemus retinere*) is also attested with spies tasked with observing funerals in Orvieto, as to see who was mourning too emotionally and report them for violating the sumptuary laws directed against such excessive displays of emotions in public. A significant proportion of these spies, *nota bene*, were women who were employed not just to spy on funerals, but also to spy on military activities in the neighboring areas. C. Lansing, *Passion and Order: Restraint of Grief in the Medieval Italian Communes*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2008, pp. 60-61.

⁷⁶ R. Brown, *Four Years at the Court of Henry VIII*, vol. I, Stewart and Murray, London, 1854, pp. 63-66.

⁷⁷ About the fluidity of their roles in the medieval context cfr. the contributions in: M. Ebben and L. Sicking (ed.), *Beyond Ambassadors. Consuls, Missionaries, and Spies in Premodern Diplomacy*, cit.; S. Bowd, S. Cockram and J. Gagne (ed.), *Shadow Agents of Renaissance War. Suffering, Supporting, and Supplying Conflict in Italy and Beyond* cit.; D. Szechi (ed.), *The Dangerous Trade. Spies, Spymasters and the Making of Europe*, Dundee University Press, Dundee, 2010.

However, official ambassadors and envoys are a topic for an altogether different discussion.

Conclusion

This article considered preserved and uncovered mentions of *exploratores*, *spie* and *cursores* in the late medieval Dalmatian towns within the historiographical *status quo* regarding medieval spy activities. These mentions were subsequently juxtaposed with chosen data on similar examples from chosen Italian cities, such as Venice, Bologna, Florence and Ancona. We may observe the predominance of spies tasked with obtaining military intelligence and to spy out the movement of armies and forces in the town districts or in the deeper hinterland of the Dalmatian towns. The terminology used for denoting spies in the Dalmatian towns and in the Croatian *regnum* was basically identical to the one used in the medieval West, with its origins in the discourse of the Roman era. The proper medieval term *spia* is traceable in the Dalmatian sources from the beginning of the 14th century, but it could have been in use already from the 13th century. The operational dimension of intelligence gathering activities was entrusted, by local or regional power-holders, to most often anonymous individuals on an *ad hoc* basis, depending on the needs of the situation.

There were no distinct and long-lasting institutions in the Dalmatian towns which would exist solely to gather intelligence and to uphold internal security, as the Venetian *Consiglio dei Dieci*, Bolognese *Officium spiarum* or Florentine *Otto di guardia* all did in their own ways for example. Most often this kind of authority was allocated to situationally established security «committees» *pro bono statu ciuitatis* – which were made out of a few or a dozen of the most important noblemen in the city together with the governing count or podesta. These «privy councils» were always temporary and they lasted until the resolution of the security issue at hand, as was mentioned in the case of Trogir and Split. In that sense, we should focus on the narrow social clusters of power on the local level as to understand the dynamics behind the employment of spies. The temporary committees represented just formalized manifestations of already existing power relations, in which a narrow group of people made the most important decisions. The Dalmatian towns were not so socially complex as most of their counterparts in central or north Italy, and the existing normative infrastructure of political institutions proved to be sufficient enough, together with the temporary committees, for dispatching

exploratores, *spie* or *cursores* and resolving sensitive security matters – and all that *in seruitium comunis*. However, future research on additional late medieval Dalmatian sources is necessary for developing a comprehensive understanding of the activity of espionage. In that regard, this article serves primarily to probe this extremely important topic in the context of late medieval Dalmatia and Croatia.