

## THE REPUBLIC OF VENICE POSTS



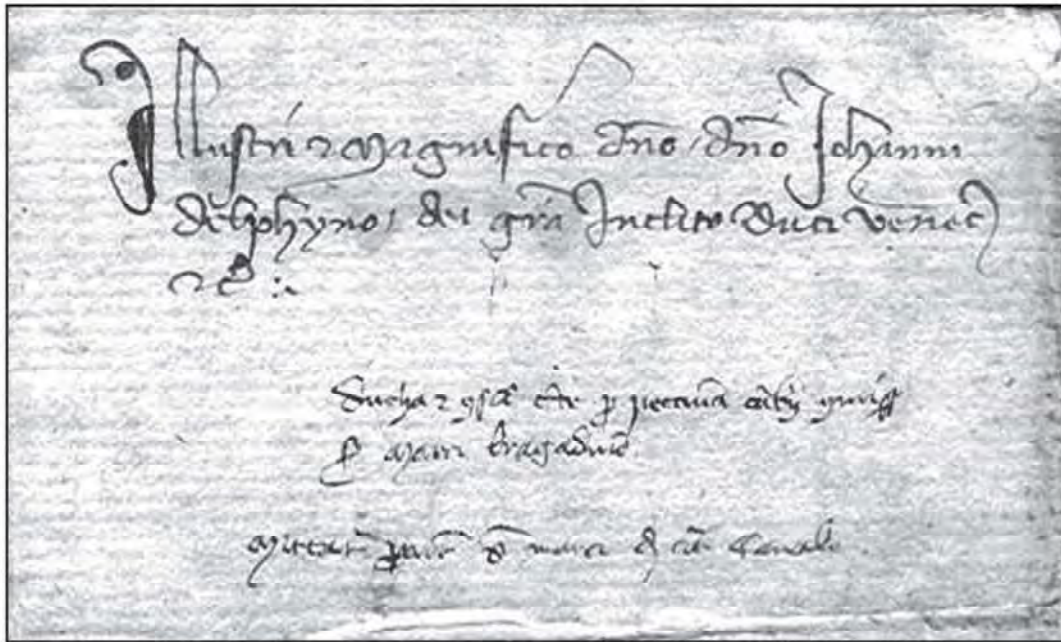
One would have thought that a State which had utilized postal systems for hundred of years, for example the Padua couriers "Fraglia Padovani" of 1158 or "Compagnia dei Corrieri Bergamaschi di Bergamo" of 1305, of whom in 1442 32 of them transferred their business to Venice, would not have been too difficult to collect and study its postal history. Alas this is not the case, it is a complex affair which includes fifty or more courier companies; it does not include a complete documentary history into which one can delve; - being private postal services, the tendency was to ignore state regulations and do what was best for business; in addition the State grew more corrupt as the years went by and Venice went into decline. Even the recent publication of "Repubblica di Venezia" by Paolo Vollmeier, a work in two volumes following thirty years of study, and from which I have drawn heavily for this article, leaves many questions unanswered. To add to these difficulties is the biggest factor of all, that in the mid-1930s there appeared the first forgery, followed by an explosion of them which came onto the market in the 1950s, all reputedly from the hand of one clever forger and well-known postal historian: forgeries which fooled and still do many serious collectors. A classic case that some readers might recall was the collection of Venetian mail formed by the late Dr. Cecil Teall, FSPH, which when offered for sale to Robbie Lowe was found to be 97% fake material.

Of the material on the market available to collectors, most stems from a few family business archives such as the Lazzara correspondence of Padova; Palazzolo of Verona; Menz of Bolzano; Colloredo of Colloredo (Udine); the correspondence of Blasio Dolfino when Venetian Consul at Alexandria; the Baldesi Brothers, Bonetti and Parise archives of Venice, together with a mass of material lifted from the Venetian State Archives, a good proportion of which came onto the market with forged handstamps as mentioned above. In general, letters of the 1300s are very scarce, particularly those written before 1350. Letters of the 1400s are a little easier than the 1500s; the 1600s are not too difficult. Venice's great trading enterprises with the Levant means that mail can be found to and from Venice to Constantinople, Tripoli, Beirut, Smyrna, Damascus,

Aleppo, Jaffa, Armenia, Cairo and Alexandria, as well as Venetian possessions such as Cyprus, Morea (southern Greece), Crete, Ionian Islands and many Dalmatian towns.

In a letter of 1470 from Constantinople I have seen a reference to Cathay, so it could be that a China letter exists somewhere. These letters are sometimes political, rarely personal, although having said that, whilst the majority are commercial, being all commercial families the odd snippet of family news does appear from time to time upon the page; occasionally one is fortunate enough to find a letter of historical importance. As an illustration of Venice's strong mail connection with the Levant, Doge Pietro Candiani (959-976) issued a decree prohibiting Venetian merchants from carrying letters from Lombardy or Germany to Constantinople (*nothing personal, just business*).

In the beginning mail was carried by either the Princes' (State) post or the Merchants' Post. A little later in some towns there developed two forms of delivery, the "Corrieri" (carriers) and "Cavallerie" (post riders). In some of the bigger towns, such as Bergamo, Verona and Padova, as well as Venice, there were also foreign couriers working and by 1708 there were thirty of them. Nearly all the courier companies had an office, with a "massaro" (postmaster) at the Rialto. Here also the post boats from Padua and Portogruaro arrived and off-loaded their mail. In 1783 all the offices transferred to Corte Barozzi, San Marco. Just to add a few more ingredients to the pot, in decrees of 1707 and 1716 it states that mail delivered to Venice from villas (our country house estates) away from towns by boatmen (no doubt from the famous villas along the River Brenta owned by rich Venetian families) or poulterers or other people with no official room at the Rialto post office will be seen by a Massaro who will pay them the proper rate. He will then pay the "Dispensieri" (exchequer) the 'Dazio' (tax) and collect the total amount from the addressee. Just to confuse the issue a little more, in addition to the various couriers of internal mail, there were at least 14 foreign posts with offices in Venice.

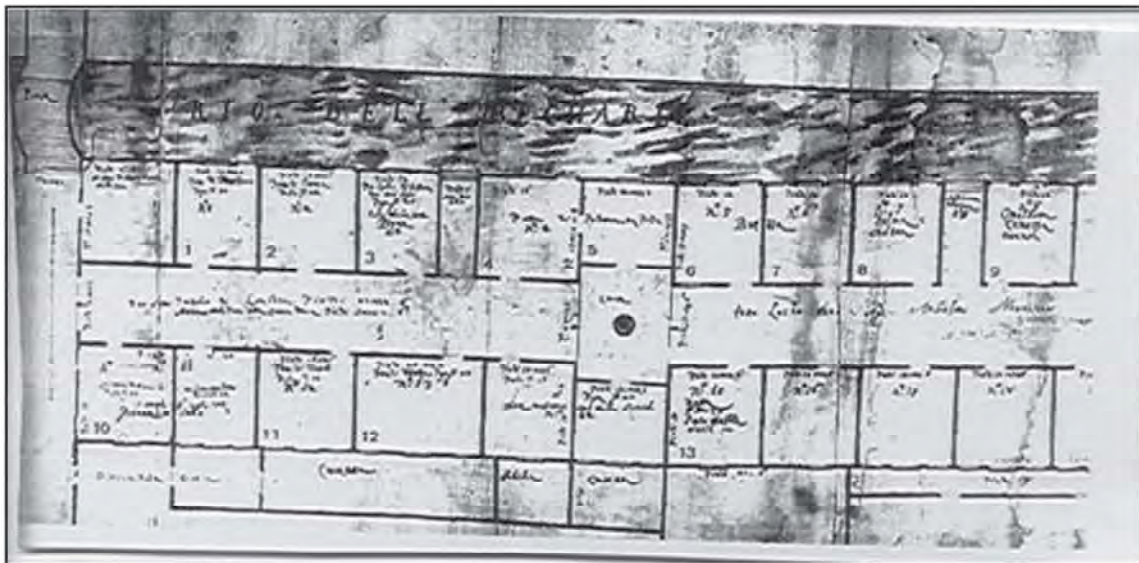


Letter to Doge Giovanni Dolfin (1356-1361) at Venice from his Counsellor, Duke & Governor of the Isle of Crete, Mariano Germani.

**The Rome Post:** 1533 (stated) the Pope gave a concession, although in 1035 the Corrieri della Serenissima commenced a regular postal service between Venice and Rome - 42 staging posts - reconfirmed by successive Popes despite periodic wars and excommunications of Venice. The company carried the mails of the Kingdom of Naples, Sicily and Malta, as well as organizing a staffetta to carry mail via Otranto to Corfu.

In 1662 the first known tariff was published, although there probably had been earlier published tariffs, and by 1783 the service was carrying 1000+ letters each way every trip.

For letters of 1/2 foglio or quarto -	5 soldi
" " " 1 foglio -	6 soldi
" " with wrapper -	7 soldi
" every packet of 1 oz. -	18 soldi



16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> Century plan which shows the various "cavallerie" offices at the Rialto. 1. Bassano office; 2. Verona; 3. Piove; 4-5 Padova; 6-7 Brescia; 8. Palma; 9. Conegliano; 10. Udine; 11. Treviso; 12. Vicenza; 13. Motta; Uderzo, Porto Buffole, Sacile & Pordenone



Other foreign posts were those of Modena (1618); Mantova (1590); Tuscany; Genova and Trento.

(acqua - water) was issued during subsequent years by successive finance officials.

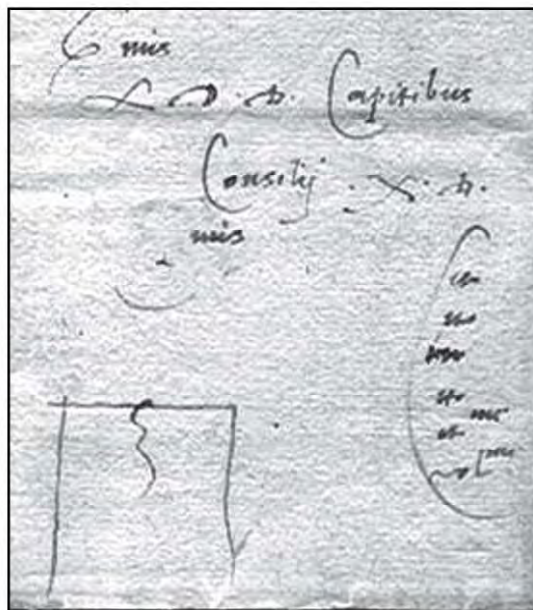
From the outset the Venetian mails were run by private enterprise. Courier companies were set up to cover specific routes, mostly from provincial towns to and from Venice. However, this did not stop the State from exercising control, issuing regulations and setting tariffs for the carriage of mail and goods, such as the 1586 decree for Brescia or the 1593 for Friuli. The Justices also had a certain amount of control over the posts for their particular town. The price to be paid for the concessions was that Official mail to and from Venice was carried without charge to the state. In addition other recipients of "free" mail were:-

- Archbishops
- Mayors
- Town Captains
- The Judiciary
- Town Vicars
- Regional Justices
- Municipal Mail

provided their letters were official and not personal. The only exception being Magistrates who were allowed to write to their families on the mainland.

In 1604 a tax of 4 soldi was imposed on mail addressed to every Magistrate, Government office, Electoral College and Councils, the latter of which the '10', '30' and '100' are well-known, in an endeavour to raise funds for waterway improvements on the Rivers Brenta and Musan and a printed form of postal stationery sheet head 'A' 'Q'

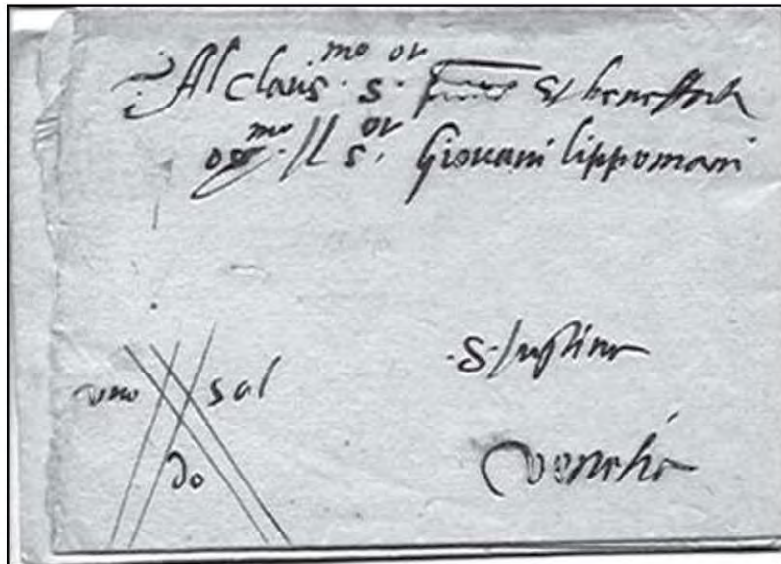
**The 1 soldo "Dazio" or letter tax:** First proposed in 1625 but not introduced until 1701, a "Dazio" or a letter tax of 1 soldo was imposed on every simple letter, or 3 soldi if over 1 oz, and a decree published to that effect. A contract was offered to collect the tax for 30,000 ducats and although several companies took it up, all failed. In 1730 Antonio Bisson took up the contract for five years but by the end of 1732 his operation had failed. In 1734 the Compagnia dei Corrieri Veneti took in hand part of the contract and in 1761 the remainder and continued so until 1794 when Corticelli got the contract to carry mail and collect the tax. This tax was not charged on mail to and from government departments. Other exemptions were letters in transit for the State going to foreign countries, maritime letters that left or arrived by merchant ship, religious institutions such as the Capuccini, and Riformati (university lecturers). The terms of the decree were somewhat ambiguous, misconstrued, even ignored, so that several further decrees were necessary in subsequent years to reaffirm the situation. Mention was also made of the need for a device to confirm payment of the dazio and in 1713 the first handstamp appeared. There was resistance against the "Dazio" and in 1794 foreign countries with Post Offices in Venice were declared exempt from collecting the tax. It also should be noted that there were two other companies in Venice dealing with foreign mail at that time - the Compagnia dei Corrieri della Serenissima Signoria which was Venetian and had to collect the tax; the other was the Posta Estere which did not.



1516 letter to President of the Ducal Council at Venice sent by Icaro Pascualico, Mayor & Captain of Vicenza. Bears four manuscript "Citos", a "Citissime" and a "Volando", together with a "forchetta" - the sign of the gibbet

**Manuscript & Postal Markings:** Letters from the 1300s and 1400s available to collectors were carried either by the Princes' Post or Merchants' Post and these can be found with a variety of manuscript markings and annotations which were often more personal than postal. Most carry on the reverse the date of arrival and often as to when the letter was answered, a note most useful to the postal historian. Other markings on the address panel that can be found are "Cito" (haste) either singly or in a vertical column with as many as two to eight. For even greater emphasis on haste, I have seen examples of two columns of Citos, followed by a "Citisimo" and rarely a "Volando" (flying). To further speed a letter, the triangular "staffetta" sign taking the form of a stirrup to indicate the letter should go by mounted courier can occasionally be found. Again, these can be found in multiples emphasizing no time is to be lost. A writer taking the

chance that the courier might be literate might write "staffetta" in full on the address panel. Other marks include the "forchetta" or gallows sign to serve as a warning for interference; the initials "d.d.", Latin 'detur', indicating that the letter should be placed only in the hands of the addressee; single initials at the bottom of the address panel so that the addressee knows who has written the letter without opening it. Then there are the words for 'paid' - "Franca", "porto" or "posta pagata" and their various abbreviations. Very occasionally one finds written a double St. Andrew's cross, which can also signify "paid", with the additional annotation such as "uno soldo" or "un bajoccho". This is known as a "Condannate" letter and is where the writer is saying to the courier that the addressee will give him a reward or tip for quick safe delivery of his letter in the amount shown.



1566 letter from Bologna to Giovanni Lippomani at San Justina, Venice seeking news

**Types of Mail - Paid:** In the 1500s the first postal marking to be used was a red crayon horizontal line drawn on the address panel to signify postage had been paid. In the early 1700s a decree was published forbidding the use of the straight line and that a small circle should be made in its place. However, as with many Venetian decrees, this instruction was ignored or flouted and the horizontal line continued to be used for many years. The words "Franca" or "Pagata" (paid) can also be found in full or abbreviated, either on their own or in conjunction with the red line or circle; often they are qualified by the addition of "di tutto" (all) or to an intermediate town, i.e. "fca.p.Palma" (paid as far as Palma) where the letter was to be transferred to another courier company's route.

**Registered mail** is recognized by the annotation "Notato

in Libro" (recorded) and more often than not is found applied to 'tramessi' letters.

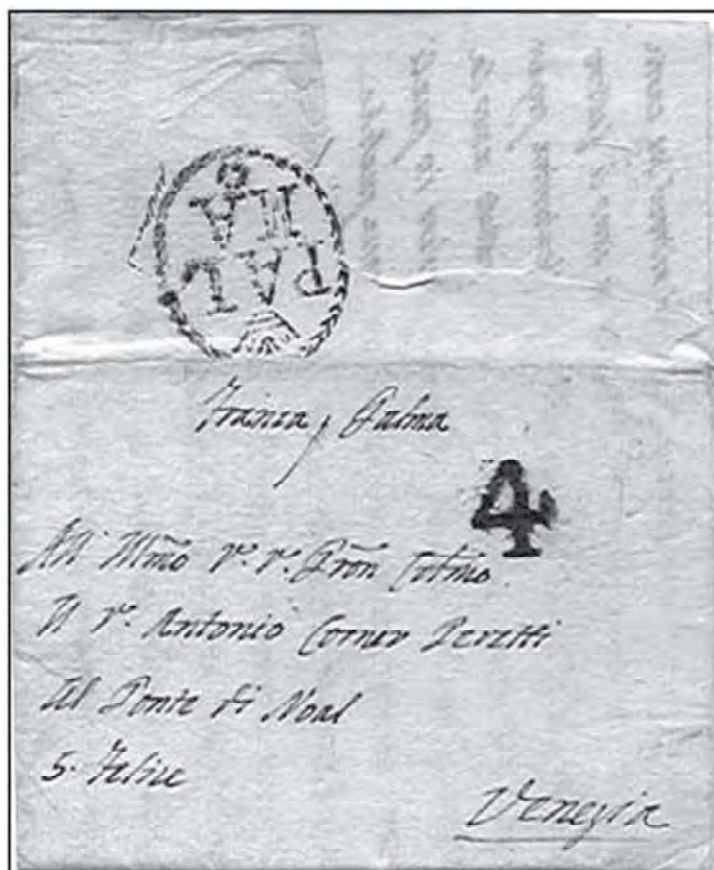
**"Tramessi"** are letters which accompany valuables or goods and for which there was a tariff of charges published for each company. If the item was relatively small it could be sent by courier, larger items went by the carrier (procaccio). The description of the item was written on the address panel, such as "a roll of legal papers"; "a bag containing a stated quantity of gold or silver coin"; "a box"; or more mundane items such as "bolts of cloth", "a brace of pheasants".

The view is held by Paolo Vollmeier, C. Fedele and others that the red crayon St. Andrew's cross found on such letters signifies that the goods have been handed over to

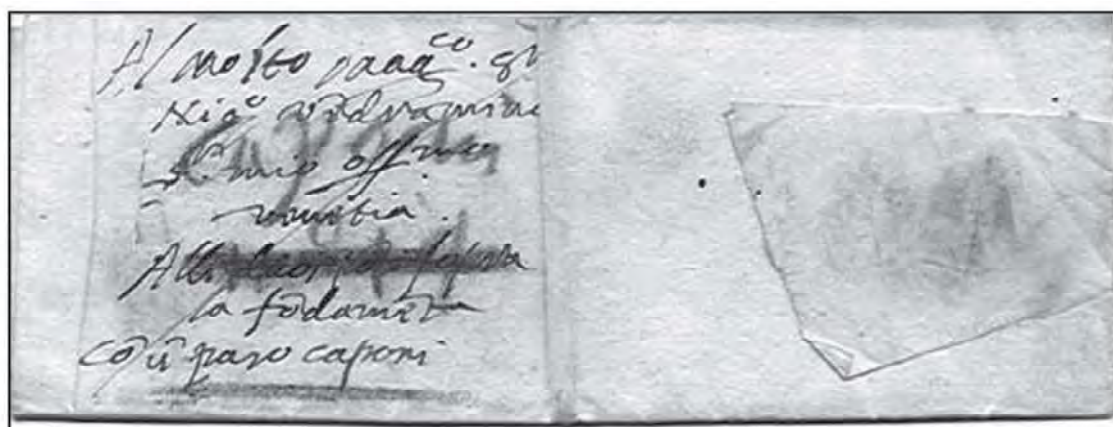
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the addressee - which is a reasonable assumption - and not that postage has been paid as is the usual purpose of the sign. However, in my own collection only 50% of the tramessi items have a cross, the others do not, which

leads me to think that either a lot of merchandise was never delivered or staff were lackadaisical about marking letters. Of course, the sign could mean something entirely different.



1786 Letter from the inland Istrian town of Pinguente to Venice, sent through the post town of Capodistria. Annotated 'Franca p. Palma'. There transferred to the Udine-Venice route and charged '4' soldi (3s. postage + 1s tax) on arrival for the second leg of the journey.



1597 Letter to Venice stating the writer will pay his debt at harvest time, in the meantime is sending a peacock. Obviously the latter he could not catch for there is an endorsement that the letter is accompanied by a pair of capons

For every trip couriers had to list, usually on a printed form called a "Polizza Di Viaggi" the different types of letter he was given to carry. These would be listed as, for example:-

Lettere Bianche	- Unpaid Letters
Piegghi di Once	- Letters 1 oz. or over
Lettere per Estere	- Foreign Letters
Lettere di Strada	- Way Letters
Lettere Franche	- Paid Letters
Lettere Tramessi	- Letters accompanying goods
Lettere Pubbliche	- Local government or state mail

**Unpaid Letters** had to bear the amount to be paid by the addressee, usually 4 soldi (3 soldi postage + 1 soldo tax), in manuscript or handstamp. In 1759 a decree stated that these handstamps should be applied in red ink; but this order like so many others was rarely adhered to.

**Way Letters:** The handstamp "Lettera Stradale" should have been applied on arrival at destination together with the charge.

**Piegghi di Once:** For letters or packets of 1oz. or more, the 'Dazio' had to be paid on dispatch.

**Foreign Letters:** Letters from Venetian Post Offices (not foreign post offices in Venice) to places abroad had to pay the 'Dazio' on dispatch. Letters usually sent with postage unpaid, although occasionally one can find an endorsement that part of the journey has been paid for, in particular the journey Venice-Trento on mail to northern Europe one sees the annotation 'pgta. p. Trento' plus a manuscript '4'.

**Official Letters:** These were carried free up to a certain bulk weight which varied according to a printed table for various towns. In general, the head offices were allocated the greater weight.; for example:-

Bergamo, Vicenza, Udine, etc.	- up to 1 lb.
Capo D'Istria, Cividale, Asoslo	- up to ½ lb
Bassano, Belluno	- up to 4 oz.
Conegliano, Orderzo, Motta, etc	- up to 2 oz.

Above that weight official letters were classified as "Fuori Peso" (outside the weight limit) and had to be paid for as normal correspondence but the charge did not include the 1 soldo 'Dazio'. On the reverse of these letters one finds a manuscript note of the provenance or town handstamp, but there are exceptions. On the obverse, an ink 'O', sometimes with a horizontal line across it.

**Mail Delivery:** Most mail was dispatched and received twice a week, few had a daily service such as Padova. In 1794 an agreement was made between Girolamo Corticelli & Co.'s courier company for all of the state and Antonio Broggi who would deliver mail in Venice, collect the charges due and hand over the proceeds weekly to the courier company.

**Mail Collection:** In Venice a series of Receiving Houses had been set up called "*posti*", "*caselli*" or "*stanze*" (Lit. 'posts', 'little houses' or 'rooms') where mail could be handed in to be taken to the main post office, including mail for abroad, and for which there was a charge of 1 soldo. In 1784 because of irregularities in the payment of the 'Dazio', the state intervened and regularized the situation by establishing 22 collecting points spread throughout the city.

**Handstamps:** The first were introduced in 1713 and served to certify that the 'Dazio' had been paid. Known as "*Leoncini*" (little lions) they comprised unframed circular abbreviations such as '*VEN. P. BRES.*' (Venezia Per Brescia) with the lion of St. Mark in the centre. (*looks more like the lamb on the East Surrey Regimental badge*). They are known to have been applied on arrival; whatever, all are rare.

A 1724 decree stated that many letters were arriving from the mainland with the red crayon mark but without the 'Dazio' being paid. A new but similar handstamp was then introduced with the initials '*P.D.C.*' instead of the lion (*Pagata di Dazio al Corriera or 'Proveditor di Commun'* - it is not certain. Brescia introduced its own small circular handstamp with the legend '*SS.L.F.D.B.*' (Serenissima Signoria Lettera Franca Dazio Brescia). Other mute oval types showing a grille were introduced and then in 1783 with the Corticelli contract, laurel-leaved circular handstamps showing the lion of St. Mark and the initials '*C.F.C.*', '*C.F.C.V.*', or '*T.F./G.E.C./C.*' were used. (*Compagnia Fra Corrieri; Compagnia Fra Corrieri Veneti; Tutto Franco/Girolamo Corticelli E Compagnia*)

**Postal Provenance Handstamps:** Introduced in 1758 there were a series of single or double circular handstamps containing the name of the town on two lines; later fleurons or other decorations were introduced at the top and bottom of the lettering. Then there were a series of larger circle handstamps where the legend was surmounted by a crown, followed by a series which showed an underscored moleca of St. Mark. As ever there were exceptions such as the circular framed '*P.a.*' of Padova and the double circle '*Posta di Venetia*' with '*Cs*' back to back in the centre believed applied by the Posta Di Verona in Venice on 'tramessi' to Verona. All, as stated before, were heavily forged.

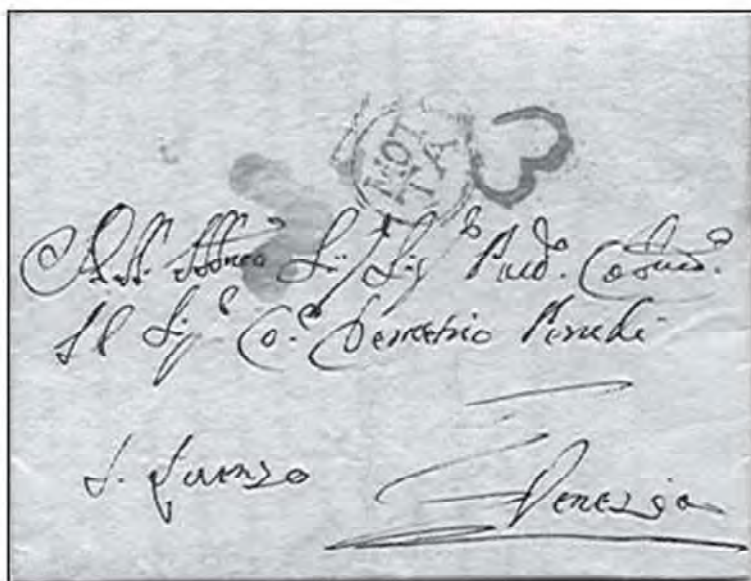
Rates are another story too long to contemplate here and for which you are referred to the bibliography.

L. R. H.

#### Bibliography:

"Porto e Dazio delle lettere nella Repubblica di Venezia" - Adriano Cattani

"Repubblica di Venezia" - Paolo Vollmeier.



1762 Letter to the parish of San Lorenzo, Venice bearing the rare circular handstamp of MOTTA, recorded used 1762-1770.