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Digital Resource Reviews / Comptes rendus sur les ressources numériques

Kohl, Benjamin G., Andrea Mozzato, and Monique O’Connell, gen. eds.
The Rulers of Venice, 1332–1524. Database.

New York: American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), 2013. Accessed 20 September 2020. rulersofvenice.org.

Who staffed the bureaucracy of late medieval Venice and how were elections to offices recorded? These are seemingly simple and straightforward questions, but their answers require archival skills and interpretive sophistication to overcome the complexities of a premodern bureaucracy and the amounts of records it produced, which are now housed in the Venetian State Archive. This task is greatly facilitated by the project *The Rulers of Venice, 1332–1524*—the fruit of collaboration between Benjamin Kohl, Andrea Mozzato, and Monique O’Connell, historians with considerable knowledge of the Venetian political organization, structure, and institutions. The core of the project is a database that contains more than seventy thousand records on the six hundred offices of the Venetian administration and the names of thousands of patricians who were appointed as officers. The database consists of material from diverse magistracies, primarily the records from the registers of the *Segretario Alle Voci*, a notary of the ducal chancery, combined with those of the *Consiglio dei Dieci* (Council of Ten), the *Senato* (Senate), and other manuscript or published sources. The records of the database cover offices held in the city of Venice and across the state’s mainland and overseas dominions. The vision of late medieval Venice as an imperial state informs the structure of the database.

The Rulers of Venice, 1332–1524 was long in the making, and its history encapsulates the trajectory of digital publications and the subsequent development of the digital humanities. A few words will illustrate this story. In the early 2000s, when the project was conceived, an electronic edition of the registers of the *Segretario Alle Voci* and a database were planned in CD-ROM, which was still deemed a proper form of publication. Nevertheless, the rapid development of the web quickly rendered CD-ROMs obsolete and redirected the project’s initial design. Finally, the database was first published online in 2009 using the FileMaker software before taking its current form, following a major shift in 2012 with the introduction of the open-source, standards-based

MySQL database. Now the project is hosted at the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS). One of the challenges the advance of the digital humanities has posed for historians is the need to rethink and reconceptualize the “archive.” In this view, the Rulers of Venice is not merely an electronic version of data extracted from archival sources instead of a traditional edition of documents; it is a new archive with new organizing principles. It unifies sources that past archival practices, with different priorities, had kept separate, and amends the original inconsistencies by adding material, cross references, and annotations.

The interface is simple and accessible. Four basic fields can help users navigate through the database, including “source,” “office,” “office holder,” and “date.” Research can be refined with the use of drop-down menus within each field. Even an elementary research can yield interesting results. Some examples are worth mentioning. For instance, by using the office name drop-down menu, researchers are presented with the wide range of titles the Venetian state used for its offices. By choosing the title of “Rettore” (rector), users can typically find the places of the Venetian territory in the Mediterranean or the mainland where *rettori* exercised their duties. This is well known by researchers who are familiar with the Venetian hierarchies of offices, but the data collected here instantly give an overall picture of the hierarchy across the Venetian state. In addition, users can get unexpected results by searching for “Savi” (advisors), as the database returns a wealth of information on their duties. For those researchers with a penchant for unmediated access to archival research, high-resolution images of the original folios of the nine registers of the Segretario Alle Voci are available, thus preserving something of the taste of the archive (*goût de l'archive*), to borrow Arlette Farge’s words, and maintaining a sense of interactivity.¹

For more sophisticated queries, additional criteria can be used to include data on the office holder’s father and grandfather, or pledgers. Serving as a pledger for relatives and friends normally suggests bonds with the office holder, and a careful analysis of the data returned might elucidate alliances between individuals, families, or groups, and their ability to influence elections. Although it is perhaps difficult to generalize on the basis of existing documentation, thanks to the database hypotheses can be tested and tentative conclusions

1. Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

drawn that otherwise would have been impossible. From a different perspective, the database can support enquiries into the political culture of the Venetian patriciate as well. In this view, one might wonder whether a shift in scribal practice might have reflected a shift in political culture, as for instance with the registration of the name of the father of the elected noble, which was generally absent from the registers of the fourteenth century but regularly recorded in those of the fifteenth. How can gaps in the documentation of the inner councils of government, such as the ducal councilors, be explained? Can missing records be explained merely as accidental, or was it a measure to impose silence over certain political conflicts that marred Venice's republican self-perception?

The database offers a wealth of fascinating material for reconstituting the organization and hierarchies of offices in late medieval Venice, deciphering allegiances between families and members of the nobility or local ties across the Venetian territories and unearthing tensions between public and private interests. O'Connell's work on Venice's Mediterranean colonies exemplifies this use of the database.² Other types of historical research can also be fruitfully pursued. In the last decades, the so-called "archival turn" has prompted historians to turn their attention to the history of archives. Users of the database might get valuable insights into the culture of scribal practice, taxonomies and classification, and the authority of state record-keeping. For instance, a promising line of enquiry might include how scribal practices shaped the patrician subject through the use of nicknames or the requirement of personal writing in refusing or accepting an office, which was generally standardized in the early modern period but was absent in the late Middle Ages.

Problems, lacunae, and discrepancies inherent in the documentation on which the database was built have been addressed with diverse solutions. One of these discrepancies has to do with registers that contained different data on office elections. Some recorded only elections, others recorded those nobles who entered office. The compilers of the database have sought to amend this inconsistency by adding information, when available, from other published sources. Annotations such as "intravit," "electus: took office," or "electus: did not take office" have been added after the name of the office. For consistency, spelling variations of surnames, places, and offices have been standardized

2. Monique O'Connell, *Men of Empire: Power and Negotiation in Venice's Maritime State* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

into Italian. The project also includes four interactive maps of the Venetian parish system and Venice's territories, which provide quick access to all records associated with parishes, cities, and regions. Essays by Benjamin G. Kohl, Andrea Mozzato, Monique O'Connell, and Claudia Salmini highlight technical difficulties and interpretive possibilities, and greatly enhance users' familiarization with the database.

The Rulers of Venice is a project that has much to offer and can variously serve the scholarly community. At a basic level, historians of Venice now have a handy tool for tracking down persons, offices, career paths, and places within the republic's administration system, which otherwise would require access to the Venetian Archive. The database can serve as the basis for sophisticated investigations into the political and institutional history of medieval Venice or its political culture. More broadly, historians with an interest in histories of the archive will also find invaluable material. Finally, its user-friendly interface makes it useful in the classroom. I have used it in seminars to familiarize students with the formation of historical questions and hypotheses. If in the last decades political and institutional histories have lost their erstwhile prominence, by broadening the scope of enquiry projects such as the Rulers of Venice can reinvigorate interest in these fields of historical research. A future expansion into later periods would be more than welcome.

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Parker, Deborah, gen. ed.

World of Dante. Other.

Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, 1996. Accessed 13 June 2020.

worldofdante.org.

The World of Dante web resource for Dante studies is an excellent and easy-to-navigate tool for both teachers and students, and its search/concordance is useful for scholars. Initiated in 1996, the site has been aiding the classroom for almost a quarter of a century. The general editor, Deborah Parker (professor of Italian, University of Virginia) has been assisted by three co-directors, John Unsworth