

# SER MATTEO DI BILIOOTTO AND FLORENTINE DIPLOMACY IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

William Caferro

Ser Matteo di Biliotto's public career coincided with noteworthy events in Florence. The twenty-four year period (1290-1314) during which Matteo was politically active saw the rise and fall of Dante's civic career, the establishment of the black Guelf regime, the transfer of the papacy to Avignon and the descent of the Roman Emperor Henry VII ('Dante's Henry') into Italy. Biliotti served in key positions, including as prior in 1304, 1307-8, 1310, 1311-12 and as ambassador from 1309 to 1314<sup>1</sup>.

As Manila Soffici has argued, ser Matteo's career presents a case study of the 'prestige,' 'power' and 'versality' of the notarial profession in early *Trecento* Florence. In his role as public official and drafter of private documents, Matteo served as a 'cultural operator' ('operatore culturale') at a time of significant geographic, political and economic shifts in the city<sup>2</sup>. Of Matteo's

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ser Matteo di Biliotto notaio. Imbreviature, I*, edited by Manila Soffici and Franek Sznura, Florence, SISMEL, 2002, pp. XVI-XVIII. See also: *Ser Matteo di Biliotto notaio, Imbreviature. II. registro (anni 1300-1314)*, edited by M. Soffici, Firenze, SISMEL, 2016. Henceforth the two volumes will be quoted in abbreviated form: *Matteo di Biliotto, I*, and *Matteo di Biliotto, II*. All unpublished documents cited in these notes are intended to come from the State Archives of Florence.

<sup>2</sup> MANILA SOFFICI, *Un notaio nella Firenze del primo Trecento. Il caso di ser Matteo di Biliotto tra professione privata, corporazioni cittadine, politica e diplomazia*, «Scrineum Rivista», 11, 2014, pp. 157-215, [09/20]: <<https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/scrineum/article/view/8819>>; *I notai fiorentini dell'età di Dante. Biagio Boccadibue (1298-1314)* edited by Laura De Angelis, Elisabetta Gigli, Franek Sznura, Pisa, Giardini, 1978-1986. On notaries, see FRANEK SZNURA, *Per la storia del notariato fiorentino: i più antichi elenchi superstiti dei giudici e dei notai fiorentini (anni 1291 e 1338)* in *Tra libri e carte. Studi in onore di Luciana Mosci*, edited by Teresa de Robertis and Giancarlo Savino, Florence, Franco Cesati, 1998, pp. 437-515.

political activities, his embassies are particularly interesting. Biliotto represented Florence in Avignon in 1309 just after Pope Clement V arrived there at beginning of the so-called Babylonian Captivity of the Church. He traveled to numerous cities on business relating to Emperor Henry VII's arrival in Italy, including to Asti (October 1310), San Miniato (October 1311), Lucca (August 1312); Faenza, Bologna and Siena (February, 1313) and Naples (February 1314)<sup>3</sup>.

The complex world of Italian diplomacy has only recently begun to receive the scholarly attention it deserves. Studies by Riccardo Fubini, Daniela Frigo, Isabella Lazzarini, among others, have moved the discourse beyond the parameters famously set by Garrett Mattingly's seminal study (*Renaissance Diplomacy*) back in 1955<sup>4</sup>. The scholars have examined more closely issues relating to language, culture, power, ritual practice, and have traced the emergence of a more structured Italian diplomatic 'system' by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries<sup>5</sup>. The temporal focus has largely been on those later centuries. The literature for fourteenth century Italy is more limited and, unfortunately, scholars of the period have not always been in direct conversation with each other. As Patrick Gilli has eloquently pointed out, studies of the century, and the earlier period have, owing to limited documentary evidence, focused on institutional regulations taken from extant communal codes. These provide 'a minimum normative framework' («un cadre normatif a minima») for understanding communal practice as well as the 'ideology' («une parure

---

<sup>3</sup> Matteo di Biliotto, I, pp. XVI-XVIII; *Acta Henrici VII romanorum imperatoris et monumenta quaedam alia suorum temporum historiam*, edited by Francesco Bonaini, Florence, Cellini, 1877, pp. 50, 51, 160, 208, 213, 223, 225.

<sup>4</sup> GARRETT MATTINGLY, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, New York, Cosimo Classics, 1955; RICCARDO FUBINI, *La figura politica dell'ambasciatore negli sviluppi dei regimi oligarchici quattrocenteschi*, in *Forme e tecniche del potere nella città (secolo XIV-XVII)*, Perugia, Tipografia Guerra, 1979-1980, pp. 33-59 and ID., *L'istituzione diplomatica e la figura dell'ambasciatore nel XV secolo (in particolare riferimento a Firenze)* in *L'Italia alla fine del Medioevo. I caratteri originali nel quadro europeo*, edited by Francesco Salvestrini, Florence, Firenze University Press, 2006, pp. 333-354; ISABELLA LAZZARINI, *Communication and Conflict Italian Diplomacy in the Early Renaissance, 1350-1520*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016; *Politics and Diplomacy in Early Modern Italy. The Structure of Diplomatic Practice, 1450-1800*, edited by Daniela Frigo, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009. See also MICHAEL MALLETT, *Ambassadors and Their Audiences in Renaissance Italy*, «Renaissance Studies: Journal of the Society for Renaissance Studies», VIII, 3, 1994, pp. 229-224.

<sup>5</sup> I. LAZZARINI, *Communication and Conflict* cit., pp. 27-28, 57, 75-79, 95, 197-206.

idéologique») that undergirded them. But they say little about actual daily practice, which was far more nuanced<sup>6</sup>. Studies devoted specifically to *Trecento* Florence have examined the rhetoric of ‘liberty’, the role of non-state actors and the precocious involvement of humanists in diplomacy.<sup>7</sup> Investigation for the period during which Ser Biliotti was active are still more limited on account of lack of Florentine communal statutes before 1322<sup>8</sup>. Robert Davidsohn pointed also to a basic methodological problem: the study of the period lacks clear connection to state developments, which have always been at the heart of the study of diplomacy<sup>9</sup>.

The present essay seeks to contextualize ser Matteo’s career as ambassador in terms of actual practice during the age of Dante and compare it with actual practice during the age of Boccaccio and Petrarch in 1349-1351, for which a great deal of documentation has survived. The aim is to emphasize the crucial and still largely unexplored role of Guelf city leagues or *taglie* in communal diplomacy and the concurrence of official embassies with unofficial covert forms of information gathering<sup>10</sup>. The city leagues are singularly important because they were the basic means through which Florence conducted foreign policy, in close coordination with a *fraternitas* of Guelf allies.

1. The basic outlines of Ser Matteo’s diplomatic career are familiar to students of *Trecento* and even *Duecento* politics. In his brief portrait of the pro-

---

<sup>6</sup> PATRICK GILLI, *Ambassades et ambassadeurs dans la législation statutaire italienne (XIIIe-XIVe siècle)*, in *De L’Ambassadeur. Les écrits relatifs à l’ambassadeur et à l’art de négocier du Moyen Âge au début du XIXe siècle*, edited by Stefano Andretta, Stéphane Péquignot and Jean-Claude Waquet, Rome, École française de Rome, 2015, and ID., *La fonction d’ambassadeurs dans les traités juridiques italiens du XVe siècle: l’impossible représentation*, «Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome Moyen Âge», 121, 1, 2009, pp. 173-187.

<sup>7</sup> NICOLAI RUBINSTEIN, *Florence and the Despots: Some Aspects of Florentine Diplomacy in the Fourteenth Century*, «Transactions of the Royal Historical Society», 2, 1952, pp. 21-45; WILLIAM CAFERRO, *John Hawkwood: An English Mercenary in Fourteenth Century Italy*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006; PATRICK GILLI, *Il discorso politico fiorentino nel Rinascimento e l’umanesimo civile*, in *Firenze e la Toscana. Genesi e trasformazioni di uno stato (XIV-XIX secolo)*, edited by Jean Boutier, Sandro Landi, Olivier Rouchon, Firenze, Mandragora, 2010, pp. 255-271.

<sup>8</sup> *Statuti della repubblica Fiorentina*, edited by Giuliano Pinto, Francesco Salvestrini, Andrea Zorzi, Florence, Olschki, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> ROBERT DAVIDSOHN, *Storia di Firenze: I primordi della civiltà fiorentina, impulsi interni, influssi esterni e cultura politica*, IV, part 1, Florence, Sansoni, 1977, p. 258.

<sup>10</sup> WILLIAM CAFERRO, *The Visconti War and Boccaccio’s Florentine Public Service in Context, 1351-1353*, «Heliotropia», 15, 2018, pp. 169-181.

fession, Daniel Waley stressed the impressive mobility of the men. He relayed the itinerary of a Perugian ambassador, who in 1260 traveled to Assisi, Siena, Lucca, Fabriano, Città di Castello and Orvieto all in the same year<sup>11</sup>. Florentine documents describe ser Biliotto as *oratore*, the term applied to diplomats that, as Robert Davidsohn points out, came into widespread use in the *Trecento*. Davidsohn also notes that notaries were frequently employed by the city for embassies, but were most often accompanied by more distinguished citizens and thus played a secondary role, recording transactions. Nevertheless, the notary, both alone and together with other citizens, was a staple of *Trecento* diplomacy. Ambassadors were generally restricted to two missions a year, a limit that was intended to protect their personal livelihoods, as embassies were financially burdensome<sup>12</sup>. The famous Florentine diarist Donato Velluti's stated the issue plainly in the middle of the century, when he sought release from an embassy in March 1350 on the grounds that he wanted to stay at home to tend his business and family<sup>13</sup>.

Biliotto's embassies were of the highest political importance, and it is not hyperbole to say that he and his fellow ambassadors served as the public face of the black Guelf regime. Ser Matteo's trip to Pope Clement V in Avignon not only coincided with the transfer of the church there, but involved important negotiations relating to the interdict that had been placed on Florence back in 1307<sup>14</sup>. In September 1309, when ser Matteo departed on his mission, Florence held a feast for the papal legate. Ser Matteo's embassy to San Miniato (1311) involved two of the most notable leaders of the Black regime: Ugolino Marabottino de Tornaquinci and Pazzino de' Pazzi<sup>15</sup>. Ugolino met with representatives of Emperor Henry VII already in July 1309, before the monarch's descent into Italy, and would, as we shall see, remain involved as ambassador throughout the emperor's stay<sup>16</sup>. Pazzino dei Pazzi, a

---

<sup>11</sup> DANIEL WALEY, *The Italian City Republics*, London and New York, Routledge, 1988, pp. 93-99.

<sup>12</sup> R. DAVIDSOHN, *Storia di Firenze* cit., pp. 257-258.

<sup>13</sup> *La cronica domestica di Messer Donato Velluti*, edited by Isidoro del Lungo and Guglielmo Volpi, Florence, Sansoni, 1914, pp. 193-196.

<sup>14</sup> GIOVANNI VILLANI, *Nuova Cronica*, edited by Giuseppe Porta, 3 voll., Parma, Guanda, 1990-91, II, p. 116.

<sup>15</sup> After the banishment of Dante, the government was, according to Villani, in the hands of Corso Donati, Rosso della Tosa, messer Pazzino de Pazzi, Betto Brunelleschi (ivi, p. 135).

<sup>16</sup> Ivi, p. 136.

hero at the battle of Montaperti, was a popular, charismatic leader of the black Guelf regime. His murder in January 1312, touched off a revolt among *popolo* who loved him.

It is possible, however, to gain a sense of the broader context of ser Matteo's diplomatic missions from an extant budget that has survived for the summer months of 1303 (August/September). It was published by Alessandro Gherardi in the nineteenth century, but has unfortunately remained largely unintegrated into the scholarly discourse, particularly in the Anglophone academy<sup>17</sup>. The budget is from the *Camera del comune*, the main office that handled Florentine fiscal affairs. It coincides with the start of the black Guelf government, in particular the immediate aftermath of the famous attack by the exiled white Guelfs and the Ubaldini clan, in which Dante participated, aimed at overthrowing the fledgling regime. The antagonists engaged in battle at Pulicciano, a town in the upper Mugello, north of Borgo San Lorenzo. The white Guelf captain was Scarpetta degli Ordelaffi, with whom Dante had stayed briefly in 1303 as secretary<sup>18</sup>.

The budget forcefully affirms the importance of notaries as diplomats during the black Guelf regime. The names of the men appear with great frequency in the document, which shows that they traveled both alone and together with other officials. A notary, ser Arrigho Rocchi, represented Florence alone at the town Empoli for a full forty-three days. On 9 August 1303, Florence paid another notary, ser Duti di Maghinardo, for embassies to the Maremma for fourteen days and to the city of Gubbio for fifteen days. The notary ser Tieri di Federigo da Capraia was sent on embassy to Volterra for six days, to the Guidi counts in the Casentino for twelve days, to the city of Lucca for five days, to Città di Castello for twelve days and to Prato for two days<sup>19</sup>.

---

<sup>17</sup> ALESSANDRO GHERARDI, *L'antica camera del comune di Firenze e un quaderno d'uscita de' suoi camarlinghi dell'anno 1303*, «Archivio Storico Italiano», XVI, 1885, pp. 313-361; *Statuti della Repubblica Fiorentina* cit., I, pp. 16, 17; F. SZNURA, *Per la storia del notariato fiorentino* cit., pp. 437-515; LORENZO TANZINI, *Il più antico ordinamento della Camera del Comune di Firenze: le "Provviszioni Canonizzate" del 1289*, «Annali di Storia di Firenze», 2006, pp. 139-150.

<sup>18</sup> DINO COMPAGNI, *Chronicle of Florence*, edited and translated by Daniel E. Bornstein, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986, pp. 57-58. See VIERI MAZZONI-ALESSANDRO MONTI, *Il libro dell'imposta di Montaccianico*, Firenze, Aska, 2013; VIERI MAZZONI, *La ripresa delle lotte di fazione a Firenze tra due e trecento e la guerra di Montaccianico*, in *Tra Montaccianico e Firenze: gli Ubaldini e la città*, edited by Alessandro Monti and Elisa Pruno, Oxford, Archaeopress Archaeology, 2015, pp. 36-50.

<sup>19</sup> A. GHERARDI, *L'antica camera del comune* cit., p. 327.

Clearly, Florence did not abide by the restriction that ambassadors should go on only two embassies a year. Indeed, it may in fact have been the case that notaries went more often than other officials owing not only to their literary and rhetorical skills, but because, as salaried officials, their service did not, as with citizens of higher social and economic standing such as international merchants, take them away from businesses that required constant attention and travel over long distances. This is not to say that notaries did not pay a financial price. Public service restricted the time available to draw up private documents for which they were paid, and Ser Matteo's private business decreased during his years in public service.

In any case, the role of notaries in embassies was, according to the surviving budget, significant. Like ser Matteo, the notary/ambassador at the dawn of the black Guelf regime in 1303 met with important people. Florence sent the notary, ser Rustichello di Bernardo in August to Lucca, Orvieto and then to Ancona, where he negotiated directly with the famous marquis Azzo VIII d'Este of Ferrara, whom Dante accused of killing his 'step' father Obizzo (*Inferno* XII 111-112) and of buying his wife, Beatrice, from King Charles II as 'corsairs' do with 'female slaves' (*Purgatorio* XX 79-81)<sup>20</sup>. Meanwhile, the notary ser Simone di Manetto traveled to Siena along with the well-known jurist Giovanni Rustichelli and then to Lucca with another noted jurist Baldo d'Aguglione, who helped draft the famous Florentine Ordinances of Justice in 1282, and was denounced by Dino Compagni in his chronicle for helping destroy the city and mentioned by Dante in *Purgatorio* XII 104-8 and *Paradiso* XVI 52-57<sup>21</sup>. On 23 September, the notaries ser Dutì Maghinardi (mentioned above) and ser Maso di Bencivenni went on embassy with Rosso della Tosa, an infamous figure in the black Guelf regime, known for his violent nature and whom Dino Compagni accused of attempting to make himself a Lombard-like lord in Florence<sup>22</sup>. The budget of 1303 shows that Florence even employed non-traditional men as ambassadors, including two *umiliati* monks sent to Padua to notify messer Giovanni da Codiponte that he had been elected captain of the people in Florence.

The budget also provides important financial data that is otherwise scarce for the period. The wages for notaries on embassy was not set at a fixed rate.

---

<sup>20</sup> TREVOR DEAN, *The Sovereign as Pirate: Charles II of Anjou and the Marriage of His Daughter*, 1304, «The English Historical Review», 111, 441, April 1996, pp. 350-356.

<sup>21</sup> D. COMPAGNI, *Chronicle of Florence* cit., pp. 54, 57.

<sup>22</sup> Ivi, p. 63

They fluctuated. Ser Tieri di Federigo da Capraia, for example, earned 30 soldi a day for his embassies, while ser Rustichello earned 30 soldi a day for his trip to Orvieto and 40 soldi a day for his embassy to Lucca. Ser Arrigho Rocchi earned 50 soldi a day for representing Florence at the town Empoli. Robert Davidsohn and Alessandro Gherardi have argued that pay rates of ambassadors varied according to the size of the entourages (*comitive*) with which they traveled, which in turn depended on the social status of the ambassador. Knights and nobles typically traveled with four horses and earned 50 soldi a day, while notaries and most other ambassadors traveled with three horses and were paid 40 lire a day; those with two horses received 30 soldi a day<sup>23</sup>. Ambassadors' salaries did not depend on the distance they traveled, which was not a factor in determining the wage.

For this reason, the variations in daily wages of the notaries cited above are curious because the men presumably shared the same social status. Additional factors clearly affected the assessment of wage rates. Later Florentine statutes allowed that ambassadors who consulted with 'special dignitaries' such as the pope or emperor would receive higher wages. But this does not explain the evidence for 1303. Indeed, ser Arrigho earned the highest rate (50 soldi a day) for a trip to Empoli, a seemingly minor destination, while ser Rustichello earned the lowest rate (30 soldi a day) for a trip to Orvieto, a far more substantial place<sup>24</sup>. As we shall see below, the answer likely relates to the fact that ser Arrigho's trip to Empoli involved discussions relating to Florence's participation in a Guelf league (*taglia*) that was headquartered in Empoli, which explains also ser Arrigho's prolonged forty-three day stay there. The leagues (*taglie*) were the foundation of Florentine diplomacy and embassies to them were as important as those to popes and monarchs, and indeed served often as a prelude to such grand embassies, done in coordination with allies.

In any case, it is important to point out that the deployment of ambassadors coincided directly with the deployment by Florence of a network of covert information gatherers. Espionage, by Florence and all Italian communes, is well known. But the budget of 1303 shows that already at this early date, communal practice was routinized, systematic and carefully coordinated with official

---

<sup>23</sup> A. GHERARDI, *L'antica camera del comune* cit., p. 329; R. DAVIDSOHN, *Storia di Firenze* cit., IV, part I, pp. 257-258. See now WILLIAM CAFERRO *Petrarch's War: Florence and the Black Death in Context*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 163-164.

<sup>24</sup> A. GHERARDI, *L'antica camera del comune* cit., pp. 327-329.

embassies<sup>25</sup>. The covert operators were alternately referred to in the document as *messi*, *nunti*, *esploratori* and *spie*. It is not entirely clear whether the terms, which are used interchangeably, were synonyms or signified slightly different responsibilities<sup>26</sup>. The men were in all cases sent out explicitly 'to investigate news of the enemies' («pro explorandis nova inimicorum»). Alessandro Gherardi was impressed by the number of citations of such men in the budget of 1303, which suggested to him an extensive spy network. Florence sent out 10-11 spies out each day over two months. Overall, Gherardi counted 155 citations in a budget that was only forty-five pages long. The numbers suggest not only the importance of espionage, but also the paranoia of the black Guelf regime.

Notaries figure prominently in this subterranean workforce, which also included citizens of high status as well as those of lower standing. The former included prominent citizens, the latter included a tailor (*sarto*) and a shoemaker (*calzolaio*). The covert operatives received a lump sum rather than a set daily wage like ambassadors. It is unclear what *comitive* spies traveled with or whether indeed they had them. The job was, like that of ambassador, short term. And among those listed as *messo e esploratore* was Maso di messer Ruggerino Minerbetti, a prominent official of the black Guelf government, who had travelled with Dante on embassy to the pope in Rome in 1302, but had returned home just before the fateful sentence of exile was imposed on the poet and the white Guelfs<sup>27</sup>. Dino Compagni denounced Maso as *falso popolano*, pointing to a character trait (*falso*) that perhaps commended him for his covert work. The 'information gatherers' also included the prominent noblemen Neri di Peste Buondelmonti and Neri Aldobrandini. The most intriguing spy was Neri Granbugiardo, whose surname Gherardi believes was a sobriquet for his unique personal quality that suited the job<sup>28</sup>.

The activities of explorers and spies was supervised by a separate office, with its own notary, ser Palmieri di Francesco da Certaldo, who served for three months, from 25 April to 25 July 1303, and who also served as notary for the captain of war<sup>29</sup>. The budget shows that Florence spent approximately

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, pp. 329-330.

<sup>26</sup> W. CAFERRO, *Petrarch's War* cit., pp. 163-164.

<sup>27</sup> A. GHERARDI, *L'antica camera del comune* cit., p. 330; GIULANO MILANI, *Dante politico fiorentino*, «Reti Medievali Rivista», 18, 1, 2017, p. 44, [09/20]: <<http://www.rmojs.unina.it/index.php/rm/article/view/5153>>.

<sup>28</sup> A. GHERARDI, *L'antica camera del comune* cit., p. 330.

<sup>29</sup> Ivi, p. 340.

380 lire for espionage for August/September 1303, which was a fourth of what it spent (1421 lire) for official embassies. Given the frequent recourse to both, we may conclude that ambassadors received much higher wages than spies. The total expenditure on information gathering (ambassadors and spies) was nevertheless dwarfed by expenditure on soldiers, which was ten times greater (13,748) and was by far the largest expense for Florence at this time<sup>30</sup>.

2. A critical and much overlooked aspect of Florentine diplomacy throughout the career of ser Matteo di Biliotto and the *Trecento* more generally is the reliance of Florence on Guelf leagues (*taglia*). The leagues were agreements (*societates*, *lige*, *compagnie*) made among city-states for mutual defense against a common enemy. The term *taglia* refers specifically to the number of troops (usually cavalrymen) that each member pledged for a joint army. The agreements were for a set number of years, most typically five; participants held regular meetings (*parlamenti*) at an appointed headquarters, and chose a common captain general. The league tradition ran deep on the peninsula, and scholarly discussions usually begin with the famous Lombard league of 1167 (and its subsequent incarnations) that opposed the German Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (d. 1190)<sup>31</sup>.

Florence's recourse to *taglie* was nevertheless frequent, indeed so much so that it is difficult to find a single year when one was not in force. Robert Davidsohn has spoken of 'a Tuscan league tradition' that developed after the battle of Benevento (1266) and the arrival in Italy of Charles of Anjou, who became king of Sicily and deeply influenced Florentine affairs<sup>32</sup>. Dante himself served as ambassador to a league meeting at San Gimignano in 1300, which involved discussion of the choice of a captain for the joint army<sup>33</sup>.

---

<sup>30</sup> Ivi, pp. 349-50.

<sup>31</sup> There were later versions of the league in 1185 and 1197 and a revival in 1226. GIANLUCA RACCAGNI, *The Lombard League, 1167-1225*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010; RENATO BORDONE, *I comuni italiani nella prima lega Lombarda: confronto di modelli istituzionali in un'esperienza politica-diplomatica*, «Fortrage und Forschungen», 33, 1987, pp. 45-61; D. WALEY, *The Italian City Republics* cit., pp. 92-93.

<sup>32</sup> R. DAVIDSOHN, *Storia di Firenze* cit., IV, part I, p. 406; GIUSEPPE CANESTRINI, *Documenti per servire alla storia della milizia Italiana dal XIII secolo al XVI*, «Archivio Storico Italiano», I, 15, 1851, pp. XLVII-XLVIII.

<sup>33</sup> *Codice diplomatico dantesco*, edited by Teresa De Robertis, Giuliano Milani, Laura Regnicoli e Stefano Zamponi, in *Nuova Edizione Commentata delle Opere di Dante*, VII, *Opere di dub-*

The importance of the *taglie* as a vehicle by which Florence conducted its diplomacy has been obscured by scholarly emphasis on their military and 'national' meaning. The great Italian military historian Giuseppe Canestrini, writing during the *Risorgimento* era, stressed the precocious 'pan-Italian national spirit' of the great Lombard league of 1167 that opposed the German Emperor Frederick I, a spirit that would reach its fullest expression in the nineteenth century with the reunification of Italy<sup>34</sup>. In addition, Canestrini argued that the leagues encouraged the use of mercenary soldiers, who were employed for joint armies, and, owing to prolonged service, became detached from an individual employer and formed into bands of men, companies of adventure (*compagnie di ventura*), private armies that were the very antithesis of a 'national' citizen army that is the basic prerequisite for the foundation of a national state. In a pioneering article in 1920, Lamberto Naldini made the point forcefully with respect to Florence and Tuscan Guelf leagues of the late thirteenth century and early fourteenth century, which concern us here. He called them «una forma precorritrice delle compagnie di ventura»<sup>35</sup>. Naldini's assessment was adopted by the English military historians Daniel Waley and Michael Mallett, who argued that the leagues hastened the end of the citizen armies that Machiavelli had admired and so forcefully sought to reinvigorate<sup>36</sup>.

For all the attention to the military implications of the city-leagues, it is important to stress that they were a basic feature of *Trecento* diplomacy, which cannot be understood without careful consideration of them. The leagues served as a focal point of negotiations and the formulation of joint inter-city policy that was relayed to potential allies and enemies<sup>37</sup>. Daniel Waley implicitly un-

---

*bia attribuzione e altri documenti danteschi*, III, Rome, Salerno, 2016, p. 177, n. 117; G. MILANI, *Dante politico fiorentino* cit., pp. 28-29.

<sup>34</sup> G. CANESTRINI, *Documenti* cit., pp. LVI, XLVII-LVIII.

<sup>35</sup> LAMBERTO NALDINI, *La 'tallia militum societatis tallie Tuscie' nella seconda metà del sec. XIII*, «Archivio Storico Italiano», LXXVIII, 1920, p. 77.

<sup>36</sup> MICHAEL MALLET, *Mercenaries and their Masters. Warfare in Renaissance Italy*, Barnsley, Pen & Sword Military, 2009, pp. 13-15; DANIEL WALEY, *The Army of the Florentine Republic from the Twelfth to the Fourteenth Century*, in *Florentine Studies*, edited by Nicolai Rubinstein, London, Faber & Faber, 1968.

<sup>37</sup> For attempts at a diplomatic understanding of the leagues for the later *trecento* see DANIEL MEREDITH BUENO DE MESQUITA, *Giangualeazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan (1351-1402)*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1941, p. 70. Bueno de Mesquita believed the leagues were employed cynically by Giangualeazzo Visconti to exploit and isolate states he sought to conquer. For their role in Tuscany and Italy more generally, see WILLIAM CAFERRO, *Mercenary*

derstood the importance of the league for Florence when he described the period from 1270 to 1305 as one in which league involvement rendered the Florentine army less «the expression of the city's power» and more part of the «wide framework of Guelf military policy»<sup>38</sup>. The same must be said about Florentine diplomacy. Extant *Capitoli* records which relay the terms of the leagues make clear that they were open ended in nature-continually seeking new adherents and adjusting to changing political and military circumstances. It is this protean quality that has contributed to the scholarly misunderstanding. It is difficult to know precisely where one *taglia* began and another ended.

For the purposes here, however, ser Matteo di Biliotto's career as a diplomat was intrinsically linked with leagues. Florence joined a *taglia* in March 1310 for five years to defend against Emperor Henry VII. The league had a combined force of 4,000 cavalry, shared by the participants – Bologna, Florence, Lucca, Siena and Volterra. The league was, however, revised as Henry slowly advanced upon Rome. Surviving Florentine dispatches highlight the critical role of the members, particularly the cities of Lucca and Siena, who, with Florence, formed the core of the league. The three worked closely together on common strategy at joint 'parliaments' of ambassadors held at league headquarters at Castelfiorentino. The cities coordinated appeals to powerful potential allies, particularly to the king of Naples and the pope, both seen as critical for communal defense<sup>39</sup>. Indeed, in a letter to Pope Clement V in April 1311, Florence spoke of the *tallia et societatis* as «inter comunia societatis Tuscie et Bononie», implying that there was a separate Tuscan society/league within the league that included Bologna<sup>40</sup>. Ambassadors of Lucca, Siena and Florence assembled together and often presented their cases jointly.

---

*Companies and the Decline of Siena*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, pp. 99-100, 168, 173, 212; ID., *John Hawkwood. English Mercenary* cit., pp. 93, 94, 127, 336-37, 365, 369.

<sup>38</sup> D. WALEY, *The Army of the Florentine Republic* cit., p. 98; William Bowsky, looking at the period from the middle late thirteenth to middle of fourteenth century from the vantage of the commune of Siena, saw few years when a league, large or small, was not in force (WILLIAM M. BOWSKY, *Italian Diplomatic History. A Case for the Smaller Commune*, in *Order and Innovation in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Joseph Strayer* edited by William Chester Jordan, Bruce McNab and Teofilo Ruiz, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 64).

<sup>39</sup> There are 10 letters from 11 September to 18 November 1311. *Acta Henrici VII romanorum imperatoris* cit., vol. 2, pp. 26, 31, 33, 35, 40, 46-47, 60, 61, 62-63, 66. See also Ivi, pp. 95-96, 98, 216-217.

<sup>40</sup> Ivi, pp. 17-18, quote p. 17.

Extant letters to Pope Clement V and to King Robert reveal much about league aims. In a dispatch dated 1 April 1311 to King Robert of Naples, Florence announced a renewed commitment among league participants to hire Filippo, prince of Achaia and Taranto, the brother of King Robert of Naples, as league captain<sup>41</sup>. On the same day, Florence wrote to its ambassadors at the papal curia to relay the terms *taglia* to the pope and then wrote separately to Filippo to request his services<sup>42</sup>. Florence wrote two letters to its ambassadors Lapo de' Bardi and ser Giovanni Benedetti in Naples (April 1, 2) to instruct them to emphasize that the league represented the mutual interests of Florence and all its allies, who sought collectively to 'defend the province of Tuscany' and ultimately 'all of Italy' against the threat of the German emperor. The letter highlights Henry's foreign, *ultramontane* nature, as someone external to the peninsula. The letters also relay league strategy for negotiating the terms of Filippo's hire. The ambassadors were to try to get him to agree to serve the league with a *comitiva* of 600 knights and 500 infantrymen. If necessary, however, they were permitted to raise the offer to 800 knights and 500 infantrymen, which included a cavalry contingent led by Catalan mercenary Diego di Rat, who was a prominent soldier, already in the employ of the league<sup>43</sup>. According to Giovanni Villani, by June 1311, the Tuscan league included Florence, Bologna, Siena, Lucca, Pistoia, Volterra and others smaller Tuscan towns<sup>44</sup>. The attempts to hire Filippo ultimately failed, and Diego di Rat was made captain general instead with 400 Catalan cavalrymen<sup>45</sup>. League ambassadors continued to meet regularly at Castelfiorentino.

Given all the adjustments and renegotiations, it is difficult to know the final terms of the *taglia*. But what is clear is that Florentine diplomacy was mediated through the league, such that, to paraphrase Daniel Waley, Florentine foreign relations were not just an expression of Florentine policy, but of wider Guelf policy<sup>46</sup>. Ambassadorial dispatches use the language of liberty and refer to Tuscan allies also as 'brothers' and their arrangement as a 'brotherhood' (*fraternitas*) aimed at mutual 'security and liberty'<sup>47</sup>.

---

<sup>41</sup> Ivi, pp. 19-20.

<sup>42</sup> Ivi, p. 42.

<sup>43</sup> Ivi, pp. 21-22.

<sup>44</sup> G. VILLANI, *Nuova Cronica* cit., vol. 2, p. 136.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem. Acta Henrici VII romanorum imperatoris* cit, vol. 2, pp. 42, 47-49.

<sup>46</sup> Ivi, p. 38

<sup>47</sup> Ivi, p. 35, 43, 44.

When ser Matteo di Biliotto worked as an ambassador, it was on league business. His trip to San Miniato in October 1311 is noteworthy in this regard. The town, just north of league headquarters at Castelfiorentino, was a focal point of league concern. It represented a key locus of defense against Emperor Henry VII, when he arrived in Genoa that month. San Miniato lay on the via Francigena, the great medieval highway that connected France to Rome, and was at the intersection of a network of roads between Florence, Lucca, Pisa and Siena. The allies expressed great concern about the fate of San Miniato throughout Henry's offensive<sup>48</sup>.

Ser Matteo's career as an ambassador is indeed best understood in terms of increasing league concern about Emperor Henry, as he made his way toward Rome. Biliotti's embassy on behalf of Florence to San Miniato in October 1311 was preceded by several other Florentine embassies including by the notary ser Bernardo Rozini in April and messer Pazzino Pazzi in October, whom Ser Matteo soon joined<sup>49</sup>. On 14 October 1311 Florence sent a circular letter to its allies requesting that they prepare league forces and have Gerardo Visdomini, captain of the army at Bologna, go to San Miniato<sup>50</sup>. Ser Matteo arrived three days later accompanied by Gerardo Tornaquici and Ceppo degli Agli, both prominent citizens of knightly status – the latter involved in league business since 1304<sup>51</sup>. Gerardo's brother Ugolino, soon joined the group and together with *oratores* from Lucca and Siena arranged for the defense of the San Miniato, making sure that roads from the Romagna and Pisa were secure. They also discussed the activities of exiles aided by Pisa, who were causing trouble in San Miniato and impeding the activities of merchants<sup>52</sup>.

The negotiations continued<sup>53</sup>. The league tried to hire Guido della Torre, the former ruler of Milan, deposed during Henry's journey and also requested troops from Cremona<sup>54</sup>. Florence wrote again to its ambassadors at San Miniato on 8 November 1311 to encourage them to transfer men-at-arms from

---

<sup>48</sup> This is particularly apparent in letters from April to December 1311. Ivi, pp. 47, 49-50, 50-51, 55, 59-60, 78.

<sup>49</sup> Ivi, pp. 46, 47, 49-50

<sup>50</sup> Ivi, p. 48.

<sup>51</sup> Ivi, pp. 49-50.

<sup>52</sup> Ivi, pp. 50-51.

<sup>53</sup> Ivi, p. 33.

<sup>54</sup> Ivi, p. 64.

Lucca to Bologna, which lacked funds to pay them<sup>55</sup>. League members discussed again their desire to hire of Filippo, prince of Achaia and Taranto and pondered the possibility of appealing to the king of Aragon for help as well as securing roads near Lucca, Sarzana and Pietrasanta<sup>56</sup>. There was continued concern about 'exiles and Ghibellines' who entered San Miniato and the overall difficulties securing the town<sup>57</sup>. The allies sent troops and ambassadors (Ugolino Tornaquinci) to San Miniato again in May 1312<sup>58</sup>.

Meanwhile, Ser Matteo's other embassies were also related to league business. Biliotto visited league member Lucca in August 1312<sup>59</sup>, Bologna in February 1313<sup>60</sup>, and Siena later that month<sup>61</sup>. The letter Biliotto received from Florence while in Lucca contains the familiar language of brotherhood, referring to other league members as *fratres* and urging continued coordinated action<sup>62</sup>. Discussions focused on maintenance of the league army. In a dispatch to Siena dated 20 October 1312, Florence described the *tallia* of troops as having grown now to 2,000 cavalrymen and 8,000 infantrymen and urged the Sieneese to send still more men 'without delay'. The recipients of the letter were the ambassadors, Ugolino Tornaquinci and Bandino de Rossi, who had been with Biliotto in San Miniato a year earlier, and Giovanni Rustichelli, who played a leading role in league related diplomacy from the outset of the black Guelf regime and about whom we shall speak more below. In any case, it appears that Florence rotated ambassadors among the league cities during Henry VII's descent into Italy, and Ugolino Tornaquinci participated often in those embassies<sup>63</sup>.

---

<sup>55</sup> Ivi, p. 25.

<sup>56</sup> Ivi, pp. 59-60.

<sup>57</sup> Ivi, pp. 198-199.

<sup>58</sup> Ivi, p. 98.

<sup>59</sup> Ivi, pp. 160-161.

<sup>60</sup> Ivi, pp. 213-214.

<sup>61</sup> The negotiations that Biliotto undertook in Naples were mediated through a league related to a truce in the on-going hostilities with Pisa that was the consequence of Henry VII's descent (ivi, pp. 223-226).

<sup>62</sup> Ivi, pp. 160-161.

<sup>63</sup> Ivi, p. 231.

3. The letters to Ser Matteo also reveal the important economic dimension to the leagues and, more generally, the fundamental connection between war and economy. League members feared that Henry VII's presence in Genoa would hinder their access to the sea, which was critical for trade. Florence wrote to the king of France to ask that he protect their merchants in his country<sup>64</sup>. Ser Matteo's first embassy to Asti on 14 October 1310 involved negotiations relating to the theft of cloth and detention of merchants representing the Bardi, Peruzzi, Antella and Dietisalvi firms. Ser Matteo went directly to Henry VII to seek redress<sup>65</sup>. Biliotto's embassy to Bologna in February 1313, which lasted for the first half of the month, centered on the payment by Florence, Lucca and Siena of a subsidy of 16,000 florins for troops from King Robert of Naples and negotiation of free passage of *victualia et frumenta* without the usual toll and taxes (*pedaggi, gabelle*) among league cities<sup>66</sup>. The right of free passage of goods was a common feature of the *taglie*, often written directly into the articles of confederation. The *taglia* of 1306 (Florence, Lucca and Siena) granted participants exemption from all tolls (*pedaggi, dogane*) on goods traded among them<sup>67</sup>. Ser Matteo's embassy to Siena in February 1313 aimed at continuing efforts to raise funds to pay for troops, appealing directly to the Siennese and to the Acciaiuoli, Bardi and Peruzzi firms<sup>68</sup>.

The evidence makes clear the close relationship between the leagues, the Florentine government and the great Florentine merchant banks with regard to paying for the war. Indeed, Florence's letter to league member Bologna on 14 November 1311 (to ambassadors Gerardo Visdomini and Bivigliano Manetti) shows that the Acciaiuoli firm advanced the league 1000 florins to pay the monthly salary of troops in Bologna<sup>69</sup>. It was thus likely no coincidence that Florence chose Lapo de' Bardi, a managing partner of the great Bardi firm, as one of its ambassadors to King Robert of Naples, whose alliance the league desperately sought.

---

<sup>64</sup> *Capitoli*, Registri, 43, fols. 224r-225v; R. DAVIDSOHN, *Storia di Firenze* cit., IV, part I, pp. 474-476.

<sup>65</sup> *Acta Henrici VII romanorum imperatoris* cit., vol. 2, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> Ser Matteo in Bologna on 3 February 1313, *ivi*, pp. 207-208; *ivi*, pp. 213-4. There in 22 February 1313, *ivi*, pp. 223-224.

<sup>67</sup> R. DAVIDSOHN, *Storia di Firenze* cit., IV, part I, p. 407.

<sup>68</sup> *Acta Henrici VII romanorum imperatoris* cit., pp. 225-226.

<sup>69</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 63-64.

It is important to stress again the degree to which Florence was involved in leagues. The *taglia* that opposed Emperor Henry VII was not, as some portray it, an anxious response to a grave and present threat. It was in fact part of a long, continuous tradition that was already in place well before Henry VII decided to enter Italy. *Taglie* represented the military/diplomatic status quo in Tuscany since the arrival of Charles of Anjou in Italy more than half a century earlier. And there was a striking consistency in the composition of the leagues. The core participants throughout the years remained Florence, Lucca and Siena. The communes argued and disagreed among themselves, particularly with respect to their share of troops. But they also worked together, and often with other smaller Tuscan communes. The *taglia* of 1281/2, highlighted by Lamberto Naldini, was contracted for ten years by Florence, Lucca and Siena and included also Pistoia, Prato and Volterra<sup>70</sup>. The terms changed over time, but the renewed agreement in 1295 still had as its main members Florence, Lucca and Siena<sup>71</sup>. The league meeting that Dante attended at San Gimignano in 1300 included Florence, Lucca, Siena, Pistoia, Poggibonsi, Prato, San Miniato, San Gimignano, and Colle Val d'Elsa and maintained a force of 753 cavalrymen<sup>72</sup>. The *rinnovazione* of that league in 1302 had a cavalry force of 800 men and an infantry force of 20,000 men<sup>73</sup>.

The basic aim of the leagues was always to oppose enemies and they always had an important economic dimension to them. League rules invariably included the elimination tolls among the participants and rules regarding the treatment of rebels and exiles. The *taglia* in 1282 was designed to oppose Pisa, then at war with Genoa<sup>74</sup>. The league of 1302 opposed Pistoia and took as its captain, Malatestino Malatesta of Rimini with 500 cavalry and 7,000 infantry<sup>75</sup>. King Robert of Naples captained the league in 1305, before his elevation to the throne, when he was the duke of Calabria. A year later Moruello Malaspina, Dante's patron, captained the league, which was headquartered in Prato, with Florence, Lucca and Siena, Volterra, Prato and Colle di Valdel-

---

<sup>70</sup> In 1281/1282 the distribution of cavalry was Florence 166 *militi*, Lucca 118 *militi*, Siena 103 *militi* (L. NALDINI, *La 'tallia militum societatis tallie Tuscie'* cit., p. 107).

<sup>71</sup> Ivi, p. 98.

<sup>72</sup> FRANCESCO BONAINI, *Della parte guelfa in Firenze*, «Giornale storico degli archivi toscani», II, disp. 4, 1858, pp. 257-289.

<sup>73</sup> L. NALDINI, *La 'tallia militum societatis tallie Tuscie'* cit., p. 100.

<sup>74</sup> Ivi, pp. 82-84, 91.

<sup>75</sup> Ivi, p. 105.

sa as members<sup>76</sup>. The league continued into 1309 and served as the model for *taglia* that was enacted when Henry VII prepared his descent into Italy<sup>77</sup>.

It is Florentine participation in league diplomacy that links the embassies in the extant *Camera del comune* budget of 1303 at the start of the Black regime with those of Ser Matteo during the descent of Henry VII from 1310 to 1313. The jurist Giovanni Rustichelli served as an ambassador to the *taglia* of 1303, traveling to its headquarters at Empoli. He likewise served as ambassador to the *taglia* in 1312, traveling to league member Siena in October<sup>78</sup>. Similarly, the notary ser Rustichello di Bernardo served as ambassador to both leagues, and did another notary ser Ristoro Bencivenni<sup>79</sup>. There is in short evidence of continuity, although it is not clear if their prior service commended the men for their later service.

As was the case during Henry's descent into Italy, Florentine ambassadors shuttled among league members, fashioning joint policy. And, indeed, it may well be a measure of the importance of league related diplomacy that those men who traveled to participating cities received higher pay. When the notary ser Arrigo went in August and September to league headquarters at Empoli he earned 50 soldi a day, the highest rate for a notary, which, as we have seen, was typically 30 soldi a day<sup>80</sup>. And when the notary ser Rocchi went on embassy on 21 September to Franceschino Malaspina of Mulazzo (a cousin of Moroello Malaspina), during his elevation to captain of the *taglia*, he too received the highest wage of 50 soldi a day<sup>81</sup>.

4. The assertions remain tentative at this point and require more research into what are admittedly scarce sources. But the *taglie* were clearly critical to Florentine diplomacy in era of Dante, as too was espionage – a still more hazy practice that is, by its very nature, difficult to isolate. A clearer view of both is, however, available for the era of Petrarch and Boccaccio (1349-51), i.e., the

---

<sup>76</sup> R. DAVIDSOHN, *Storia di Firenze* cit., IV, part I, p. 407; L. NALDINI, *La 'tallia militum societatis tallie Tuscie'* cit., p. 105; D. WALEY, *The Army of the Florentine Republic* cit., p. 99.

<sup>77</sup> G. VILLANI, *Nuova Cronica* cit., vol. 2, p. 136.

<sup>78</sup> *Acta Henrici VII romanorum imperatoris* cit., vol. 2, p. 168; A. GHERARDI, *L'antica camera del comune* cit., p. 328.

<sup>79</sup> *Acta Henrici VII romanorum imperatoris* cit., vol 2, p. 8.

<sup>80</sup> A. GHERARDI, *L'antica camera del comune* cit., p. 328.

<sup>81</sup> According to Naldini he was league commander in 1296 and again in 1304 (L. NALDINI, *La 'tallia militum societatis tallie Tuscie'* cit., p. 105).

years when the former returned to his native Italy, the latter to his native Florence and the two poets met (1350) and began their famous friendship<sup>82</sup>. The documentation includes not only ambassadorial letters, but a complete set of *Camera del comune* budgets and *balie* registers, which record the acts of *ad hoc* committees allowed special power in times of crisis and war to oversee daily preparations, including the hire of soldiers, ambassadors and other workers.

The political/military situation in Florence in 1349-1351 was not dissimilar to what it had been during years of the black Guelf regime and the arrival of Emperor Henry VII. Florence was at odds with neighboring states; it battled magnates in the countryside, most notably the Ubaldini clan in the upper Mugello (with whom Dante had fought against the city at the start of his exile), and it feared the advent of a foreign ruler into Italy, King Louis I of Hungary, who came to fight in the civil war in Naples, as well as the machinations of an indigenous 'tyrant' Giovanni Visconti, the archbishop of Milan, who purchased Bologna in 1350 and threatened Tuscany. As earlier, Florence joined a league with allies. The league contracted in 1349 was intended, like that occasioned by Henry VII in 1310, to last for five years<sup>83</sup>. Like its earlier incarnation, the league was fashioned upon an earlier one, the *taglia* of 1347, which is directly referenced in the articles of association of 1349<sup>84</sup>. The continuity is noteworthy here because the league of 1347 and 1349 were separated by the Black Death (1348), which famously transformed the city and the peninsula. But the substance of the two *taglie* remained strikingly similar, as did the language and the responsibilities of participants. The number of troops required of each was, however, reduced on account of the contagion. Siena was again a member, along with Perugia, Arezzo and Bologna. Lucca, no longer independent but a part of Ghibelline Pisa, did not participate. The league again stated, as at the time of Henry VII, the desire for 'liberty' for the 'province of Tuscany,' which also applied to 'all Guelfs of Italy' and ultimately 'all those who joined the league'<sup>85</sup>.

<sup>82</sup> W. CAFERRO, *Petrarch's War* cit.; ID., *The Visconti War* cit., pp. 161-178.

<sup>83</sup> *Capitoli*, Registri, 27, fols. 46r-49v; DEMETRIO MARZI, *La Cancelleria della Repubblica fiorentina con gli elenchi dei suoi cancellieri e registri e con le lettere della prima metà del sec. XVI dettate dai cancellieri in lingua volgare*, Rocca San Casciano, Cappelli, 1909, pp. 653-654.

<sup>84</sup> *Capitoli*, Registri, 12, fols. 40r-44r.

<sup>85</sup> «Pro pacifico statu et libertate totius provincie Tuscie» and «ad fortificationem, augmentationem statum pacificum totius partis guelfe Ytalie» (*Capitoli*, Registri, 27, fol. 46r); D. MARZI, *La cancelleria* cit., pp. 697-698.

The league of 1349 remained in force through 1350, with adjustments and the now familiar attempts to find additional adherents. League ambassadors met regularly at Arezzo, which served as headquarters. When Giovanni Visconti purchased Bologna (October 1350) and advanced into Tuscany in 1351, a new league agreement was drawn up, for which the 1349 agreement served as the basis<sup>86</sup>. The league of 1351 is dated as both 6 September 1351 and 14 December 1351 in the Florentine *Capitoli* records, reinforcing its open nature noted above<sup>87</sup>. The pro-liberty rhetoric is the same as earlier, but the new agreement mentions archbishop of Milan by name and compares his behavior to that of a tyrant and a viper – the latter the symbol of the Visconti family – that sought to devour and extinguish all Guelfs<sup>88</sup>. League members sent out ambassadors to seek support among northern lords of Verona, Padua and Ferrara, who were also threatened by Visconti expansion. Among those sent out on embassy was Giovanni Boccaccio in August 1351, who sought support for the league «ad partes Romagna et Lombardie» for 33 days<sup>89</sup>. As was the case during the descent of Henry VII, Florence and league members were especially eager to ally with the pope, the protector of Guelfs and formerly the nominal overlord of Bologna.

The crucial role of *taglia* in Florentine diplomacy is again readily apparent. Meanwhile, extant budgets and *balia* records from 1349-1351 show, as earlier, that notaries played an important role, both singly and together with other citizens, as ambassadors. The notary ser Francisco Vanni Mucci went alone to Lombardy for seventeen days in January 1351 to seek additional league adherents, while ser Francisco Bernardi went to Siena together with the prominent citizen Bernardo Ardinghelli to confer on league business<sup>90</sup>. Notaries appear more likely at this time to have accompanied other officials than in 1303, but there was no precise norm. As earlier, ambassadors shuttled among league members and these embassies often involved Florence's most important citizens<sup>91</sup>. Florence sent two knights, Arnaldo Altoviti and Loysius Gianfigli-

---

<sup>86</sup> G. CANESTRINI, *Documenti* cit., p. XLVIII; The league of 1349 refers to the one of 1347 (*Capitoli*, Registri, 27, fol. 41r), and the one for 1351 refers both to 1347 and 1349 (ivi, fol. 54r).

<sup>87</sup> Ivi, fol. 54r, 62r-69v.

<sup>88</sup> Ivi, fol. 66r.

<sup>89</sup> *Balie*, 7bis, fol. 18r; W. CAFERRO, *The Visconti War* cit., pp. 169-181.

<sup>90</sup> *Balie*, 7bis, fols. 1r-1v; *Camera del comune*, Camarlenghi uscita, 79, fol. 656v.

<sup>91</sup> D. MARZI, *La cancelleria della repubblica Fiorentina* cit., pp. 663-664.

azzi, to represent the city at league headquarters in Arezzo in February 1350 and five men, including a knight and two ‘magnates’ to Arezzo during the height of fear of the Visconti threat in the summer of 1351<sup>92</sup>. Diplomatic activity reached a peak in August 1351, when Boccaccio set out on his embassy. Visconti armies were then besieging Scarperia, just north of Florence. The city sent numerous embassies to league members, at Arezzo, Siena and Perugia, including the famously reluctant ambassador Donato Velluti, who went to Perugia and Siena with four other prominent Florentines<sup>93</sup>.

As it was during the years of ser Matteo di Biliotto’s service, league related diplomacy had a strong economic dimension. San Miniato was again a focal point of discussion. Extant letters complain about the now familiar misdeeds of exiles aided by Ghibelline Pisa<sup>94</sup>. The letters tell of difficulties at Pulicciano, the site of the battle against the white Guelfs in 1303, where Florentine exiles also assembled<sup>95</sup>. Leagues members agreed to put an end to all ‘reprisals’ (*rappresaglie*) – the practice of a city holding another liable for the debts and misdeed of merchants elsewhere – among participants for the duration of the *taglia*. The league also required participants to return each other’s exiles. Florence and Siena worked out an additional deal to stop *sbanditi* from interfering with trade and other activities in their respective *contadi*<sup>96</sup>.

Finally, the budgets and *balia* records flesh out the covert operations and ‘information gathering’ that accompanied regular Florentine embassies. Indeed, the documentary evidence from 1349-1351 confirms that of 1303, making clear that Florence coordinated its official embassies with the ‘unofficial’ activities of a cadre of communal spies<sup>97</sup>. The importance of spying and the careful organization of the workforce emerge from the extant *balie* records. Two registers, *Balie* 7bis and *Balie* 10, have survived for period from November 1350 to November 1351 and show that, as in ser Matteo’s day, the terms *nuntii*, *messi*, *esploratori*, and *spie* are used interchangeably. But the *balie* records indicate that the term *spia* or spy referred to a more permanent official, who received a monthly wage, while *esploratore* or explorer referred to a temporary

---

<sup>92</sup> AGOSTINO PEPOLI, *Documenti storici del secolo XIV, estratti dal R. Archivio di Stato Fiorentino*, Bologna, Forni, 1976, pp. 373-374.

<sup>93</sup> *Camera del comune*, Camarlenghi uscita, 81, fol. 578r.

<sup>94</sup> D. MARZI, *La cancelleria della repubblica Fiorentina* cit., pp. 665-667.

<sup>95</sup> *Ivi*, p. 667.

<sup>96</sup> *Ivi*, p. 654.

<sup>97</sup> W. CAFERRO, *The Visconti War* cit., pp. 174-175.

official, who received a lump sum. *Nuntii* and *messi* appear to be generic terms for the other two.

The men were tasked, as earlier, with ‘investigating news’ («investigando nova») and finding out the secrets of the enemy<sup>98</sup>. They were sent out alongside formal ambassadors to the same locations and sometimes still further afield. A close reading of Boccaccio’s mission to Lombardy and the Romagna in August 1351 shows that it coincided with the selection of two *nuntii*, Tommaso Bartoli and Rosselino, who also went to Lombardy, but surreptitiously<sup>99</sup>. Similarly, in January 1351, as Florence began preparations for war against Visconti, the city sent out two sets of men who appear in consecutive pages of the *Balie 7bis* register. The first were the official ambassadors to represent the city and the next were ‘explorers’ to seek out secrets. Zenobio Antilla and other Florentine citizens went on official embassy, while Buongiovanni Buoni went as *nuntio* directly to the papal army in Bologna to spy, and two days later he was accompanied by two more *nuntii*, Giovanni Scardassa and Nernio Cambi<sup>100</sup>.

The process was regularly repeated. In early September 1351, Florence elected a new set of ambassadors in conjunction with a corresponding set of short term spies (*nuntii*). Both traveled to Lombardy, the Romagna, Avignon, Naples, the Abruzzi and elsewhere<sup>101</sup>. It is not clear how long the *nuntii* served, who they traveled with and what the criteria was for their selection and pay. Unlike formal ambassadors, they received a flat rate for their services.

The detailed documentary evidence also exposes a curious trend. In addition to the use of notaries and citizens of substance as ambassadors, Florence also employed a wider variety of men. In April 1349, the stonemason Stefano Pucci served as an ambassador to the Mugello and in August 1350, four musicians – Pagno Bertini, Ghetino Ture (*tubatori*), Brunello Durante (*trombetta*) and Betto Vanucci (*nacherino*) – went on embassy to Prato. The musicians were part of the civic troupe maintained by Florence to play at civic festivals. Most spectacularly, however, Florence also employed servants of the priors, including the cook of the Signoria and the bellringers of the palace of the priors, as ambassadors to go on often long-distance journeys. In Au-

<sup>98</sup> W. CAFERRO, *Petrarch's War* cit., pp. 168-172.

<sup>99</sup> *Balie*, 7bis, fol. 8v.

<sup>100</sup> *Ivi*, fols. 1v- 2r, 6r.

<sup>101</sup> *Ivi*, fols. 7v-9r.

gust 1349, the bellringer Giovanni Paoli went on embassy to Hungary for 104 days (!), then to the papal court at Avignon for 40 more days and then to Milan. The cook of Signoria, Chambino Gianini, went as ambassador to Hungary in August 1349 and then to Bolzano for 71 days<sup>102</sup>.

A similarly surprising pattern is evident with respect to the short-term *nuntii* who spied out enemy secrets. In 1350-51 the group included the above mentioned civic musicians as well as the famous vernacular poet Antonio Pucci, who was then a town crier<sup>103</sup>. Pucci was accompanied (in 1352) in his deeds of espionage by Paganuccio Peconi, who is listed on *camera del comune* budgets in 1350 as an infantryman and later as 'an explorer,' who was sent to spy in the Romagna in December 1352<sup>104</sup>.

The employment of such men likely reflects the impact of the Black Death and the resulting shortage of labor. Lack of adequate documentary evidence for the earlier period prevents any comprehensive comparison – although Florence did, as noted above, use *umiliati* monks as envoys in 1303. Nevertheless, it is abundantly clear that there was in the *Trecento*, as Patrick Gilli suspected, a substantial difference between actual practice and normative institutional rules for diplomacy and information gathering. The gap is, however, greater than anticipated.

Such evidence lends additional weight to the assertion that *Trecento* diplomacy was, as current scholars argue, 'polycentric' in nature, involving a variety of actors. At the same time, it renders more difficult efforts to trace a single line of development. There was to be sure continuity with regard to use of notaries as ambassadors and their function as 'cultural operators,' a role that grew greater with the advent of humanism. And there was, above all, continuity with respect to the role of leagues through which Florence at the start and in the middle of the *Trecento* conducted its diplomacy alongside its allies. The relationship between covert, spying activities and official league diplomacy remains, however, an open question that needs to be addressed by subsequent scholars.

---

<sup>102</sup> W. CAFERRO, *Petrarch's War* cit., pp. 168-172.

<sup>103</sup> *Balie*, 9, fol. 5r.

<sup>104</sup> *Ivi*, fol. 1r.