Political and Social Aspects of Godparenthood in Early Modern Venice: Spiritual Kinship and Patrician Society

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Abstract

In late medieval and early modern Europe, baptism was the object of confrontation between civil society and the Church. This article will outline the involvement of the Venetian government from the early sixteenth century. This legislation, aimed to shape the practice of godparenthood among Venetian patricians in both Venice and its empire, will be examined until the mid-seventeenth century. In particular, the article will highlight the transformations in the networks established by Venetian nobles throughout the sixteenth century. At the same time, it will focus on the political use of spiritual kinship in the electoral and governorship contexts, and explain how it was a useful way to improve diplomatic relations between states.

Keywords

Godparenthood – early modern Venice – patrician class – Venetian rettori – patronage networks

Introduction

Considered as a fundamental rite of passage in Christian society, baptism acted as a second ritual birth, conferring social value onto a biological event. But it also created a peculiar relationship between its protagonists: a spiritual bond
connected the biological parents, newborn, and godparents. Baptism was so strong in terms of identity that Christianity recognized itself as the community of the baptized. Originally, baptism consisted of a confession of faith by an adult; later it turned into a ceremony aimed at purifying the infants and ensuring their entry into society. Between late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, the habit of choosing the baby's sponsors outside the parental couple spread and ecclesiastical hierarchies repeatedly regulated spiritual kinship throughout the Middle Ages.

In the sixteenth century, a period of religious ferment and reform, baptism increasingly became a political question because of the growing interest shown by lay authorities in this rite and its effects. No major changes happened in Europe before the Reformation and Council of Trent, yet an evident divergence took place from that century onward. Luther and Calvin tried to change the theological and social aspects of baptism, but with little success. The contrast between Catholic and Protestant views on baptism was in the number of godparents allowed: the previous customs survived thanks to the Reformation, whereas the Council of Trent decisions dramatically affected the Catholic practice.

In the late Middle Ages and early modern period, godparenthood became the core of confrontation between its religious connotation and the instrumental uses promoted by society. The latter found spiritual kinship to be a valuable means of expanding the relationship networks of family groups.


4 Alfani and Gourdon, Spiritual kinship, 2, 10–12, 16.

5 Bossy believed instead that “compaternitas” was not used to establish new patronage ties, but to strengthen previous friendship bonds, see John Bossy, Christianity in the West, 1400–1700 (Oxford, 1985), 16; however, the word “amicitia” in this European context had the meaning of close interdependency and political bonds, as explained by Maurice Aymard, “Amicizia e convivialità” in La vita privata dal Rinascimento all’illuminismo, eds. Philippe Ariès and Roger Chartier (Rome, 1987), 357–392; Jonathan Dewald, Aristocratic experience and the origins of modern culture. France, 1570–1715 (Berkeley, 1993), 104–106; Eva Österberg, Friendship and love, ethics and politics. Studies in Medieval and Early Modern history (Budapest, 2010),
Church considered godparents instead as tutors with the task of aiding the Christian education of the child. In reality, they were hardly ever committed to this responsibility. Furthermore, the Church intervened in some specific contexts to mitigate local interpretations long before the Council of Trent. For instance, the Florence synod in 1517–1518 prescribed a maximum of three spiritual kin. Nevertheless, the Florentines seldom adhered to this rule, for it contravened their customs.

The juxtaposition was usually resolved in favor of society, which bent godparenthood to its objectives and gave life to a kaleidoscopic corpus of baptismal practices that endured until the Council of Trent set a new paradigm. The Catholic hierarchies decreed the reduction of spiritual kin to only one or, at best, one per each sex. In the short term, this caused an upward shift in the choice of godparents made by members of lower social strata, while upper-class members preferred to invite their peers as godfathers and godmothers. In the long term, the most significant development was the reorientation of godparents’ selection within the families themselves. This shift manifested in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Anyway, Klapisch-Zuber already concluded from her work on Tuscany that spiritual kinship served in the case of the governing elite to create webs of patronage: see Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, “Parenti, amici, vicini: il territorio urbano d’una famiglia mercantile nel XV secolo,” Quaderni Storici 33 (1976): 972. Alfani and Gourdon, Spiritual kinship, 4.


Late medieval and early modern society regarded spiritual kinship as an excellent instrument to create or strengthen relationship networks due to the features it possessed before the Trent reform. The two most noteworthy characteristics were correlated: first, it allowed relational strategies to develop founded upon the coexistence of socially heterogeneous godparents. Second, the relationship established was weak, as the obligations for godparents were smaller than those expected from other kinds of bonds, for instance, consanguinity. So godparenthood had atypical characteristics, but in this anomaly lay its potential as a means of social alliance: it offered the possibility of establishing ties with people belonging both to lower and upper classes without eliciting social disapproval.11

In late medieval and early modern Europe, ecclesiastical and lay authorities attempted to curb the non-sacred elements associated with baptism. In particular, town ruling classes and the Church wanted to regulate excessive baptismal pomp with regard to banquets and gifts. However, prohibitions remained unattended. If ecclesiastical and lay authorities had the same goal, the motivations were different. The latter complained about the risk of pauperization; the former desired to wipe the profane traits and preserve baptism strictly as a rite of entrance into the Christian community.12

The Venetian context was affected by these sets of problems as well, which manifested in the conflicting interests fostered by Church and lay society.13 However, Venice seems to present another set of problems, as its ruling class not only legislated in the matter of luxurious baptisms, but also tried to define the socio-relational character of spiritual kinship. These legal constraints set by the ruling class of the Republic aimed at reducing the options in selecting godparents. As this article will prove, the Venetian elites tried to tame the potential of godparenthood as a social tool due to the concerns for its exploitation for political purposes.

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11 Alfani, Fathers, 193–208.


Patrician Godparents, Social Capital, and Political Networks

We can grasp the importance of godparenthood relationships by taking into account the concept of social capital. This is described as a set of moral resources, identified in relations of trust, collaboration, and mutual aids, which facilitates cooperation between individuals and groups. Social capital takes the shape of both vertical and horizontal networks and formal ties, like blood-relations, and informal ones, such as friendship links. The flexibility of spiritual kinship made it a valuable means in this regard: it could override social gaps, but also strengthen peer-group ties. It could integrate pre-existing bonds, like friendship and neighborly relations, but also generate new links to consolidate over time.

But in what contexts did godparents prove to be useful? We’ll examine one meaningful moment in the family life, the last will and testament. When it was time to make arrangements for the afterlife, Venetian patricians usually thought about their spiritual kin. In April 1526, the noble Alvise Cocco assigned twenty ducats in his will to his compare (spiritual kin) Giovanni da Feltre, an employee in a financial office of the Republic. It was an indication of love and gratitude for Giovanni’s loyal service. In the 1570 addition to his will, Alvise Vitturi forgave a fifty ducats debt towards his peer, Nicolò Priuli. They were both patricians and also related by spiritual kinship ties.

But godparents played a key role in some patrician last wills, that of commissarii (executors). These had the delicate task of managing the estate of the deceased, so a careful selection was necessary. Many people entrusted this job to the Procurators of St. Mark, the second most important and prestigious political office in Venice. This prominence probably developed during the middle of the thirteenth century. But godparents were also occasionally selected

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17 Ibid., 193, fo. 43.
for this role as well: Agostino Tiepolo, son of Nicolò, chose his spiritual kin Francesco Corner, another Venetian noble, as one of his five executors in 1568. In 1564, Bernardo Priuli, son of Francesco, nominated his wife Paola, a certain Lancillotto Sabioni, and the patrician Pietro Marcello, who was also the godparent of his child.19

Alvise Dandolo went even further: he designated as executor Marcantonio Balbi, a “very dear friend and godparent.”20 But he also indicated Marcantonio as the sole heir after his mother’s death, on the condition that no legitimate child was born before his death. His resolve originated from the absence of a descendent who could perpetuate the bloodline. Alvise Dandolo valued his friendship with Marcantonio Balbi so much that he also gave two thousand ducats to Elleneta Balbi, daughter of Marcantonio, for her marriage. She was indeed the fioza (goddaughter) of Alvise Dandolo. The testator had some cousins belonging to a different patrician house, but Alvise refused to assign them any share of his estate because they were on bad terms.

Alvise Dandolo’s case was rather exceptional, but it reflected the extent to which godfatherhood relations could reach. Cases such as the one of Nicolò Moro of Antonio were more common: in April 1557, he selected as executors his spiritual kin Giovanni Trevisan and Giovanni Alberto Garzoni. Even though the two patricians did not receive a share in the testator’s estate, Nicolò Moro gifted two hundred ducats to his peers “as a token of love.”21 But testators belonging to other social strata also sought patrician executors with whom they shared spiritual kin relationships.

In his third testament, the famous humanist printer Aldo Manuzio nominated as executors his compari, the nobles Daniele Renier and Domenico Pizzamano. The changes he made in terms of executors from the first to the third testament show a meaningful shift. At first, he relied on the horizontal ties built with his work colleagues and neighbors. But the relationship network changed over time in a vertical sense, suggesting he established relevant friendship and patronage relations and fully integrated into Venetian society.22 So choosing the noblemen Renier and Pizzamano, among other executors, was not a mere coincidence.
The social capital accumulated through spiritual kinship could transform into political bonds. That is why the Venetian ruling class intervened with some specific prohibitions directed at Venetian noble families. But this hostility disappeared when there was a chance to improve international relations from which the Republic would also benefit. The case of Antonio Surian proves this: he had his son baptized in December 1524 in Brescia, where he was one of the governors. There were two foreign diplomats among the many godparents, the ambassadors of the Duchy of Milan and the Spanish viceroy.23

Was it likewise possible for patricians, on diplomatic missions on behalf of the Republic, to establish similar relations during their embassies? And what was the meaning of these connections created abroad as delegates of the Venetian Signoria? Giovanni Badoer, ambassador at the Hungarian court, agreed in August 1503 to become one of the godfathers of king Ladislaò's daughter “in the name of our Lordship.”24 Probably the very same Giovanni Badoer was also the protagonist of a similar event in 1520 while on a diplomatic mission at the French court.

He agreed to be the godfather of the new-born royal daughter and the Venetian Senate approved this.25 The senators expressed a great deal of enthusiasm when they heard the news because a new alliance with France had just been born. They considered the invitation by the French king and queen as a symbol of love toward the Republic. In their opinion, the decision of “linking each other through this spiritual bond as well” strengthened the union.26 The satisfaction that political alliance and religious ties between the two states overlapped echoed in the letters between the Senate and ambassador even after the baptism.27

European rulers made extensive use of spiritual kinship to improve diplomatic relations. Examples of such political exploitation are not limited to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they date back to the Trecento.28 Historians have highlighted the desire of European dynasties to celebrate the birth of a new family member with luxurious festivities as a demonstration of power,
but also to use this moment to reinforce the bond between the ruling family and the territory. That is what happened when the Habsburg dynasty stressed its connection with the city of Ghent at the baptism of the future Charles V.\(^{29}\) However, the contribution of godparenthood as a diplomatic instrument is not explored enough.

Some instances emphasize how, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, rulers considered spiritual kinship as a fundamental part of their political strategies. This is shown in the diplomatic relations involving Louis XI, Lorenzo de’ Medici, and Galeazzo Sforza in the late Quattrocento.\(^{30}\) Even baptisms of prominent individuals, although not belonging to the ruling class, could be exploited to improve diplomatic relations between states, as in the case of the Florentine banker Filippo Strozzi. His firstborn’s baptism helped to enhance the relationship between the ruling houses of Florence and Aragon.\(^{31}\)

Examining a peculiar episode can explain the meaning of these instances and the Venetian government’s motivation in promoting their representatives as godfathers of remarkable foreigners. In a message sent to Venice by the governors in Brescia we learn about Michael Gaismair’s case. He was the military leader of the Peasants’ Revolt in Tyrol and Salzburg and, in 1526, he was in Brescia. He had fled from the Austrian territories and was now trying to enter the service of Venice. In December, his wife gave birth in the Lombard city and Michael invited the Venetian governors to be godfathers, but they declined the offer.

In the lagoon, the government complained about this choice: if they had accepted the offer to be Michael’s spiritual kin, he would have become a faithful subject of Venice.\(^{32}\) This disagreement summarizes the political use of godparenthood. In particular, it shows how Venetian legates were pressured to become spiritual kin of rulers to foster better relations between states or international figures. It was a source of prestige for any patrician to forge this kind of relationship. However, as shown in the last example, the Brescia governors didn’t believe they would have benefited from closer bonds with this figure.


The members of the *Collegio* believed instead that Gaismair’s loyalty had to be improved in that way.

Unlike what happened with Michail Gaismair, the Venetian aristocracy found it useful to forge ties of godparenthood with other military commanders that the Republic employed to lead its army. At the aforementioned baptism of the son of Antonio Surian, governor of Brescia, there were other godfathers besides the two diplomats.33 There were some important military leaders, such as the captain of the Venetian troops and the captain of the Venetian infantry. The desire to build such connections was mutual, for military commanders invited Venetian patricians to be godfathers as well.

For instance, count Mercurio Bua, leader of the *stradiotti* (Albanian light cavalrymen), had his illegitimate son baptized in the Venetian church of Santa Maria Formosa in April 1517.34 Among the godfathers, which included other army commanders, at least two Venetian noblemen were present: Alvise da Canal, son of Luca and Marco da Pesaro, son of Girolamo, and other nobles whose names are unknown.35 Bartolomeo d’Alviano, another general of the Venetian army and protagonist of the Italian Wars’ early phases, was the *compere* of Giorgio Emo, an important nobleman.36

The Dalla Rovere family combined both military leadership and rule of territory as lords of Urbino. So, it is not surprising that godparenthood relations with Venetian patricians were established twice in the first half of the sixteenth century. On both occasions, the Della Rovere dukes were in fact commanders of the Venetian army. Francesco Maria I Della Rovere chose as godfathers for his daughter, baptized in Verona in January 1526, the *Provveditore Generale* – an office with military duties – Pietro da Pesaro, and the city governors, Pietro Vitturi and Giovanni Badoer.37 The Urbino duke chose the godfathers from the highest hierarchies of the Venetian aristocracy.

In spring 1549, Guidobaldo II Della Rovere invited the Venetian *Signoria* to send a representative to Urbino as godfather for his new-born son. The Senate commissioned Giacomo Soranzo – at the beginning of his significant political career – to congratulate the Duke and Duchess, hold the baby at the baptismal font, and bring a gift in the name of the Republic.38 The purpose was to

33 *Diaries*, vol. 37, col. 345.
34 On this cavalry unit see Michael E. Mallett and John R. Hale, *The Military Organization of a Renaissance State. Venice c. 1400 to 1617* (Cambridge, 1984), 449.
underline the paternal love felt toward the Della Rovere house, but also benevolence to the Pope, as he was one of the Duchess’s kin. The Senate even stated, in the instructions to Soranzo, that the Republic considered the son of the Duke of Urbino as its own.39 Venice took advantage of the episode to further bind the Della Rovere family’s loyalty in a moment of political and diplomatic uncertainties.40

This framework of political and patronage relations consolidated by spiritual kinship ties becomes more nuanced when a foreign diplomat, on a mission in the Venetian territories, was invited as godfather by a patrician. This is what occurred in March 1592 with the Transylvanian ambassador, who became the compare of Zuan Battista Zeno.41 What was the underlying intention? To still reinforce the links between states or, rather, to consolidate the international orientation of the patrician family? In any case, the Republic promoted the use of godparenthood for specific political and diplomatic aims, but it wasn’t always able to compel Venetian nobles as they sought to exploit these relational possibilities as well.

Regulating Spiritual Kinship Ties in the Lagoon

From the early sixteenth century onward, the Council of Ten and Senate attempted to impose their views on spiritual kinship on the rest of the patrician class and Venetian society.42 At first, the Ten focused on regulating the options concerning godfathers and godmothers for Venetian nobles. Then the Senate established further rules addressed to all Venetian social strata. The starting point of this process dates back to August 1505, when the Council of Ten observed that the custom of summoning their peers as godparents had spread among the patricians. Invitations were followed by the offerings of banquets and gifts “only for the purpose of binding or making use of them.”43

39 Giacomo Soranzo’s appointment, the description of the gift, and embassy’s instructions to Urbino are in ASVe, Segretario alle voci, Elezioni in Senato, 1, fo. 35 v.; Senato, Deliberazioni, Terra, Registri (hereafter Senato Terra), 36, fos. 88 r., 90 v., 96 v.–97 r., 108 r.–109 r., 114 v.–115 r.

40 As outlined by Elena Bonora, Aspettando l’imperatore. Principi italiani tra il papa e Carlo V (Turin, 2014).

41 Archivio Storico del Patriarcato, Venice (hereafter ASPV), Parrocchia dei Santissimi XII Apostoli, Registri dei Battesimi, b. 3, fo. 213.


43 “[....] solum a fine de obbligarseli controlla servirse de quelli,” ASVe, Consiglio di Dieci, Deliberazioni, Miste (hereafter Dieci, Miste), Filze, 17, fo. 143. Translation is mine.
The government forbade this practice and established punishments for both fathers and would-be godfathers. In addition, it ordered the urban clergy and non-noble spiritual kin to denounce any transgressors. The ban was justified by the fact that spiritual kinship prevented marriage between the respective families. However, the reference to this bond as a suitable means to ensure the godparents’ loyalty suggests something else. The Ten strengthened the interdiction in June 1522, when they extended it to Venetian noblewomen. These could no longer be invited as godmothers by other patricians because the Ten recognized they were acting as proxies for their husbands and male relatives.44

Some contemporary Venetian nobles understood these two measures through a precise perspective: Girolamo Priuli recognized that spiritual kinship created a great bond of friendship.45 Marcantonio Michiel pointed out without pretense or naïveté that “through these means, the vote-riggings in the Great Council are increased.”46 When connecting patrician families, spiritual kinship was considered fit in promoting the multi-faceted informal practices of soliciting votes, a fundamental part of the republican political system. The spectrum of the phenomenon fluctuated between a moderate form of appealing addressed to friends and kin (the so-called broglio honesto), and actual corruption.47

The Venetian nobility exploited spiritual kinship, as a creator or consolidator of interfamily ties, to achieve its political and electoral aims. Such intermingling of social, political, and religious aspects was the focal point of the Council of Ten’s intervention in the early sixteenth century. This involvement is the starting point of a deeper reflection on how the Venetian government and patrician class understood godparenthood.48 These laws show that Venetian

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44 ASVe, Dieci, Miste, Registri, 45, fo. 102 v.
48 There are only a few studies focused on godparenthood in Venice: Jean-Francois Chauvard, “Ancora che siano invitati molti comparí al Battesimo.” Parrainage et discipline tridentine à Venise (XVIe siècle), in Baptiser. Pratique sacramentelle, pratique sociale (XVIe–XXe siècles), eds. Guido Alfani, Philippe Castagnetti, and Vincent Gourdon (Saint-Etienne, 2009), 341–368; idem, “Madrine, commari e levatrici. Donne e parentela spirituale a Venezia nella seconda metà del Cinquecento,” in Spazi, poteri, diritti delle donne a Venezia in età
patricians aimed at strengthening intra-class ties by choosing godfathers and godmothers from their own ranks.

Looking for proof of this trend in the early sixteenth century is difficult due to the scarcity of ecclesiastical and governmental sources; few Avogaria di Comune registries and ecclesiastical baptism registries have records from as early as 1506.49 These provide incomplete information regarding godparents.50 Only from the 1540s onwards a few baptism registries regularly recorded the godparents’ identities. Other more informal sources are instead very relevant for understanding the use of spiritual kinship promoted by Venetian nobles, such as diaries and family archives.51

In particular, Marin Sanudo’s diaries offer valuable evidence. The diarist was the protagonist of two episodes that confirm the framework described by the Council of Ten. In March 1499, Marin Sanudo went to the church of S. Pantaleone to become the spiritual kin of his colleague, the nobleman Faustino Barbo. The other godparents were Giacomo Dolfin, son of Pietro, another nobleman, and Gasparo Dalla Vedova, Zorzi Negro, and Giovanni Battista Vielmi.52 In May 1500, the diarist similarly noted:

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49 In 1506, the Council of Ten issued a law compelling all noble families to notify the Avogaria di Comune of any new male childbirth. The purpose was the authentication of the noble ascendency. The law was followed by the establishment of the so-called “Libro d’Oro.” This provision fits into a broader policy promoted by the ruling elite to grant uniformity within the patrician class and provide ultimate juridical distinction on a social basis. See Chojnacki, Women, 63–65.

50 It’s the case of the following registers: ASVe, Avogaria di Comun, 37, 42, where only in a few instances the names of spiritual kin are recorded in the first half of the century; the same applies to ASPV, Parrocchia di Santi Ermagora e Fortunato di Venezia, Battesimi, matrimoni e morti di nobili dati in nota all’Avogaria di Comun, 1; Parrocchia di San Cristoforo di Venezia, già Parrocchia di San Marziale, Battesimi, matrimoni e morti di nobili dati in nota all’Avogaria di Comun, 1; Parrocchia di Santi Geremia e Lucia di Venezia, Registri dei battesimi, 1.


And today I baptized [held at the baptismal font] a daughter of the nobleman Leonardo Mocenigo, a colleague of mine. The godfathers were Francesco Zenaro, and three our notaries: Marco Rizzo, Giovanni Battista Vielmi, and Nicolò Aurelio and some others.\(^{53}\)

In both cases, the patricians who invited Marin Sanudo as godparent held the same political office as the diarist, that of Savio agli Ordini, an office with advisory and executive duties, between 1499 and 1501.\(^ {54}\) The establishment of a bond of spiritual kinship reinforced the working relationship, which also included Giacomo Dolfin. All other godparents were members of the cittadini originari class, the social body from which the Venetian government appointed its bureaucrats.\(^ {55}\) Venetian citizens who administered the republic were in fact one of the groups from which the nobility chose their spiritual relatives.\(^ {56}\)

Besides Sanudo’s diaries, we can find further evidence about the pre-Tridentine period from Venetian family archives. In particular, we can study the choices made by one branch of the Valier noble family regarding godparents in the first half of the Cinquecento. The Valier da san Pantalon was not a powerful or prestigious family group in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Only in the second half of the seventeenth century did some of its members hold important political offices.\(^ {57}\) Francesco, son of Piero Valier, had five children between 1519 and 1528. Among them, Maria had a child in 1544 and Pietro had three children between 1545 and 1550.

Numbers, names, and the social status of Francesco Valier’s spiritual kin are indicated in four out of five baptisms: seven santoli (godparents) are recorded


\(^{54}\) Guglielmo Berchet, Prefazione a i Diarii di Marino Sanudo (Venice, 1903), 46.


\(^{56}\) This is a conclusion supported also from the many instances of godparenthood ties presented in the chronicle by the Freschi family, as pointed out by Casini, Cittadini, 54–55. Francesco Gennaro was the Senate’s secretary, while Marco Rizzo, Giovanni Battista di Vielmi and Nicolò Aurelio were notaries at the service of the Republic. Gasparo Della Vedova and Giorgio Negro were secretaries too.

\(^{57}\) See ASVE, Miscellanea Codici, Storia Veneta (hereafter Barbaro), 23, fo. 176.
in the first, five in the second and third, and four in the fifth one. Francesco Valier selected a heterogeneous group of spiritual kin, vertically stretching inside Venetian society and including notable figures from outside the lagoon. Out of twenty-one godparents, seven were members of the Ducal chancery, that is one Cancelliere Grande, two secretaries of the Council of Ten, three scribes at the Grains’ office and one scribe at the Cazude office. There were then three doctors; two lawyers; two nobles from Vicenza and Udine; two grain brokers and two grain merchants; one flute player and two additional figures whose social class is not clear, but who probably came from outside the lagoon.

Francesco’s network touched both the top and bottom of the chancery. It also comprised people employed in honorable professions and trades. The network extended outside Venice as well by including some mainland notables. In 1544, Maria, daughter of Francesco Valier, chose nine spiritual kin: two of them were members of the chancery, that is a secretary of the Council of Ten and a scribe at the Grains’ office; one Venetian patrician, Marco Antonio Barbaro, son of Francesco; two lawyers, one of whom was patrician, Camillo Trevisan; one nobleman from Treviso; one merchant and, finally, one more godfather and godmother whose status is unknown.

Pietro, son of Francesco Valier, had three children between 1545 and 1550, whose godparents are recorded in the first and third baptisms. Pietro’s first daughter was baptized earlier than originally planned due to her poor health, which prevented them from “doing the proper solemnity in the church and inviting the godparents we wished.” There were indeed only two godparents, a member of the Garzoni noble house and a Venetian citizen from the Dardani family. The third son of Pietro had nine godfathers and godmothers: one doctor; one scribe at the Grains’ office; two Flemings, one of whom was a jewelry merchant. Then he had one patrician godfather, Giovanni Minio, and

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58 Santolo is a Venetian word for godfather, see G. Boerio, Dizionario del dialetto veneziano (Venice, 1867), 600; santola means godmother.
59 Those appointed to the Cazude office had the main task to collect taxes in Venice, but it wasn’t as much prestigious as other financial offices.
60 ASVe, Archivio Tiepolo, Primo Versamento, 65, file n. 9, unfoliated (hereafter Tiepolo), Nota de adi 8 febraro 1539; Nota de adi 2 febraro del 1522; Nota de adi 3 avosto 1524; Nota de adi 17 aprile del anno 1528.
61 Tiepolo, Nota de adi 25 luo del ano 1544. Marcantonio Barbaro was one of the most important Venetian patricians in the second half of the sixteenth century. See Deborah Howard, Venice Disputed: Marc’Antonio Barbaro and Venetian Architecture, 1530–1600 (New Haven, 2011).
62 “[...] ne si poté far la debita solenità di portarla in giesa ne poter far venire li compari che se desiderava”; Tiepolo, Nota de adi 19 avosto del anno 1545. Translation is mine.
finally four patrician godmothers, from the Diedo, Baseggio, Giustignan, and Da Ponte Venetian houses.63

The most sensible variation in the groups chosen by Maria and Pietro Valier, compared to that of their father Francesco, lies in the presence of numerous Venetian noblemen and noblewomen. The networks that emerged from the Valier family baptisms show us the impact of the laws of the Ten. In particular, Francesco Valier did not invite any patricians as godparents. His son and daughter did the opposite. Was this an individual choice or a symptom that the power of the prohibitions of 1505 and 1522 had diminished? The baptism registry from the parish of S. Antonino confirms that in the late 1540s, 1550s, and early 1560s other noblemen disregarded the Council of Ten’s prohibitions: the Contarini, da Leze, Donà, Premarin, Soranzo, Corner, Moro, and Malipiero families connected through godparenthood.64

The Council of Trent decrees affected spiritual kinship and changed local baptismal customs. However, a few years before the end of the Council, the Venetian Senate intervened in October 1562 in the matter of baptismal ceremonies. New regulation on luxury consumption determined, among other things, that the highest number of godparents at baptisms had to be six.65 The law addressed all Venetian social classes and repeated the unlawfulness of spiritual kinship ties between Venetian nobles. The difference between the limit set by the Senate and the one conceived at the Council of Trent, a godparent for each sex, is meaningful.

The Senate didn’t interfere in the social strategies pursued through spiritual kinship as much as the Council of Trent. Anyway, this number of godparents was inferior to the several recorded in the Valier family archives. The following legislation from the first half of the seventeenth century onward insisted on limiting the number of godparents. In August 1621, the Senate complained about the excesses committed during baptisms, wishing for more moderation. A new limit was set at twelve godparents.66 But in September 1644 the same council raised the limit to twenty and, finally, in March 1653, to thirty godfathers and godmothers.67

This confirms the presence of high numbers of spiritual kin, which seems to have been a Venetian peculiarity and the core of local customs, even long after the Council of Trent. This survival should not however be framed as an

63 Ibid., Nota de adi 30 marzo del ano 1550.
64 ASPV, Parrocchia di Sant’Antonin, Registri dei battesimi, 1 (hereafter Sant’Antonin), fos. 49 r., 52 v., 61 r.
65 Senato Terra, 44, fo. 89 r.
66 Ibid., 91, fos. 157 r.–v.
67 Ibid., 129, fos. 5 v.–6 r., and 146, fo. 64 r.
expression of the political tensions between Venice and the Roman Church, which saw its climax in the Interdict. It rather testifies to the strength of traditions, which change slowly and that neither ecclesiastical nor secular authorities could alter, despite their efforts. For instance, the Patriarch Lorenzo Priuli visited the parish of S. Pietro in Castello in 1591 and complained that too many godparents were recorded in the baptism registries, prescribing more adherence to the Trent rules. It is worth noting that this was no ordinary parish, but the cathedral of the Venetian patriarchal see.

The Impact of the Trent Decrees: Family Networks and Social Groups

The parish of S. Antonino is one of the few observation points from which to investigate the shift in godparents’ networks in the mid-sixteenth century. Starting from the bottom of the Venetian social hierarchy, patricians were often invited as godparents for the children of commoners. The opposite rarely occurred. Before and after the publication of the Trent decrees, Venetian nobles created spiritual kinship ties with jewelers, hairdressers, leather workers, dressmakers, manufacturers of tableware, boat pilots, shoemakers, boat builders, wine carriers, furriers, fruit retailers, painters, carpenters, and hatters living in the parish of S. Antonino. Spiritual kinship relationships were also established with the arsenalotti, the workers employed in the Venetian Arsenal.

It is not surprising that nobles did not often choose commoners as godparents, but rather the opposite. However, we might wonder to what degree the patrician families living in one parish acted as godparents for local commoners. Some lineages of the Moro, Foscarini, Dolfin, and Michiel noble families had their children baptized in the church of S. Antonino and participated in local commoners’ baptisms. But acting as godparents in the baptisms of

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68 On this, see Filippo de Vivo, Information and Communication in Venice. Rethinking Early Modern Politics (Oxford, 2007).
69 On the political relevance of customs in the Republic of Venice, see Claudio Povolo, The Emergence of Tradition. Essays in Legal Anthropology (XVI–XVIII Centuries) (Venice, 2015).
70 Chauvard, Ancora che siano invitati, 347.
71 Sant’Antonin, fos. 43 r., 49 r., 49 v., 57 v., 58 r., 62 r., 66 v., 67 r., 69 v., 70 v., 71 v., 73 r.
72 On Arsenal workers see Robert C. Davis, Shipbuilders of the Venetian arsenal: workers and workplace in the preindustrial city (Baltimore, 1991). For some examples of spiritual kinship ties created between patricians and calafati and marangoni, who were some of the many Arsenal workers, see Sant’Antonin, fos. 50 r., 58 v., 64 r., 52 r.
commoners living in the same parish did not occur frequently: it happened only once or twice per family over about two decades. 73 This occurred regardless of the political importance of the noble house. In particular, the Michiel family members recorded in this baptismal register were prominent members of the Venetian government. 74

Venetian nobles were then interested in forging spiritual kinship ties within their parish, but only occasionally. The status of spiritual kin mattered more than just belonging to the same neighborhood. That is why people employed in honorable professions – i.e. not manual ones – were more often invited by patricians as godparents: doctors, surgeons, and also lawyers and clergymen make their appearance in the neighborhood of S. Antonino, even if the Trent decrees reduced the number of godparents. 75 One Venetian social class that suffered most from the intervention of the authorities were the Venetian citizens employed in the ducale chancelleria.

Before the Council of Trent, they were probably the most present in patrician family networks. Some evidence in this regard has already been offered: among the twenty-one godparents selected by Francesco Valier, one third were employed in the chancery. Marin Sanudo became the godfather of his colleagues’ children together with many secretaries and notaries at the service of the Republic between the late 1490s and early 1500s. Besides, numerous notaries, clerks, and secretaries were invited by patricians who had their children baptized in the church of S. Antonino. The opposite happened too: Leonardo di Cavalli was a notary employed at the Auditori Nuovi office and he invited as godfathers the nobles Carlo Corner in July 1562 and Giovanni Francesco da Mosto in November 1563. 76

In the years after the Council of Trent, the relationships established between patricians and chancery members became more sporadic. In the parish of S. Antonino, only Andrea Frizier, secretary of the Council of Ten, is recorded as the godfather of a newborn patrician. 77 The same occurred in other Venetian

73 For baptisms involving nobles from those families as godparents for commoners see ibid., fos. 43 r., 58 r., 62 v., 63 r., 65 v., 67 r.
74 For an outline of these families see Barbaro, 19, fos. 293, 551; 21, fos. 99, 269.
76 For Leonardo di Cavalli’s case see Sant’Antonin, fos. 61 r., 63 v.; for other instances of spiritual kinship ties between Venetian nobles and members of the Ducal chancelleria see ibid., fos. 40 v., 49 r., 54 r., 56 v., 62 r.
77 Ibid., fo. 73 r.
parishes: in S. Margherita, S. Marina, S. Sofia, and Santissimi XII Apostoli, patricians invited only high-profile secretaries, almost always from the Council of Ten, and even one Cancellier Grande, as godfathers.78 So these Venetian citizens employed in less prestigious offices and councils, before being invited as godfathers of noble offspring, now had to make careers for themselves.

Building the complete framework of godparenthood relations from baptismal registries is difficult because the social condition of godparents is not specified in many entries. However, sometimes the second name allows us to speculate whether they were Venetian citizens: for example, Scipione Ziliol and Girolamo Sara became the godparents of the son of Marcantonio Falier. Since the Ziliol family was one of the native-born citizens’ houses, it’s fair to assume that Scipione was one of them too.79 On the other hand, the use of a peculiar title, as the one of eccellente (excellent), suggests that participants belonged to the upper social strata.

Venetian nobles are instead usually addressed as magnifico or clarissimo. These titles mirrored the individuals’ social standing, and a precise scale of values determined them, including holding or having held political offices and old age.80 This social – and legally defined – group is the class that became the most present in patrician godparenthood networks following the Council of Trent. In the mid-sixteenth century, patricians chose their peers as spiritual kin within a broad range of potential godparents, but this was not more common than other options. Venetian citizens and non-Venetian elites, the most prestigious alternatives, were equally present.

The framework of the connections created was very heterogeneous, and this feature was indeed one peculiarity of godparenthood. The 1562 law passed by the Senate did not oppose it, as the political bodies tried instead to prevent some excesses. On the contrary, the Trent decrees affected networks by pushing Venetian nobles to select their peers as compari. Evidence of the transition triggered in the mid-1560s can be found once again in family archives.

78 ASPV, Parrocchia di Santa Margherita, Registri dei Battesimi, b. 1, unnumbered, 04.05.1566; Parrocchia di Santa Marina, Registri dei Battesimi (hereafter Santa Marina), b. 1, fo. 37; Parrocchia di Santa Sofia, Registri dei Battesimi e Matrimoni, b. 1, unnumbered 04.09.1570; Registri dei Battesimi, b. 2, unnumbered, 20.03.1579; Parrocchia dei Santissimi XII Apostoli, Registri dei Battesimi (hereafter XII Apostoli), b. 1, fo. 49; b. 2, fo. 76.

79 ASVE, Avogaria di Comun, 37, reg. 9, unnumbered, A di 29 decembrio 1550. The social status of Scipione Ziliol is outlined in MCV, ms. Provenienze Diverse, 4/5, fo. 144 bis.

80 In November 1576, the Council of Ten established that modest titles during council sessions had to be used, for Venetian nobles called each other clarissimo, preclarissimo, and illustissimo, rather than sticking to messer or magnifico messer. See ASVE, Consiglio di Dieci, Deliberazioni, Comuni, Registri, 32, fos. 174 v.–175 r.; the problem had already been faced in November 1464, see Dieci, Miste, Registri, 16, fo. 179 v.
Girolamo Foscari belonged to the *San Simon Piccolo* branch, which was quite relevant between the mid-fifteenth and mid-sixteenth century, counting one cardinal and one *Procuratore di San Marco*. Pietro, Girolamo’s father, even hosted the French king Henry IV in his palace in 1574.81

Girolamo had six children between December 1560 and October 1574. The first two baptisms took place before the Council’s end, the third in November 1564, coinciding with the promulgation of the Trent decrees, and the last three in 1567, 1570, and 1574. The choices made in the first baptisms are very different than the later ones. There were thirteen and eleven godfathers in the first two baptisms, but from a total of twenty-four spiritual kin there were only two Venetian nobles, Giulio Contarini and Giovanni Malipiero. The others included Marcantonio di Franceschi, secretary of the Ten, count Ercole da San Bonifacio from Verona, another foreign noble, and two Venetian citizens.82

There were only two godparents at a ceremony held in November 1564, a clergyman and a member of an important Lombard aristocratic family, Nicolò Calino.83 In the last three baptisms, eleven, nine, and four godfathers are respectively recorded. Out of twenty-four spiritual kin, fourteen were Venetian nobles, more than half. In particular, three of them belonged to the Badoer and two to the Dolfin family. The others were mainly native-born citizens and non-Venetians.84 The divergence caused by the Council of Trent is self-evident, but it can also be grasped from baptismal registries. Despite some gaps in the S. Antonino first registry, it’s possible to calculate the patrician presence in the Venetian nobles’ networks established through godparenthood.

Twelve baptisms of noble offspring are recorded between 1541 and 1552; five more between 1560 and 1562. Out of a total of forty-two spiritual kin, there were eight patricians (19%), seven Ducal chancery members (16.7%), including three secretaries of the Ten, three clergymen (7.1%), and another twenty-four godparents.85 This is in line with the evidence gathered so far for the period before the Council of Trent. Data from other parishes prove that, in the following decades, the percentage of Venetian noblemen invited as godparents became much more consistent. We’ll consider four examples: the parishes of S. Marina in the Castello district, S. Barnaba in the Dorsoduro district, and S. Sofia and Santissimi XII Apostoli in the Cannaregio district.

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81 Barbaro, 19, fo. 513.
82 ASVe, Archivio proprio Gradenigo da rio Marin, 103, file n. 18, unnumbered, *Questi furono li compari che teneno a’ battesimo Marco mio figliuolo [...]; Natività di Helena mia figliola*.
83 Ibid., 1564 Adi [...] novembre.
84 Ibid., 1567 adi 31 ottobre; 1570 adi 31 ottobre; 1574 adi 17 ottobre.
85 Sant’Antonin, fos. 40 v., 43 r., 44 r., 45 r., 47 r., 49 r., 51 r., 52 v., 54 r., 55 r., 56 v., 61 r.–v.
There were forty-five baptisms of noble offspring between 1570 and 1584 recorded in the parish of S. Marina. Out of seventy-one godparents invited by patrician parents, twenty-five (35.2%) belonged to the ruling class of the Republic.86 In S. Sofia, seventy-two baptisms are recorded between November 1564 and June 1577. Among the eighty-one godparents, twenty-five (30.9%) were Venetian nobles.87 These two registries alone point out a significant increase. But the percentage was even higher in S. Barnaba and Santissimi XII Apostoli: in the former, forty-four out of 101 godparents recorded for sixty-three baptisms between November 1564 and September 1584 were Venetian nobles (44.4%); in the latter, eighty-six patricians acted as godparents out of 164 spiritual kin recorded in 116 baptisms between 1571 and 1592 (52.4%).88

The ratio of Venetian nobles within godparenthood networks increased significantly in the decades following Trent, more than doubling in some parishes. This is conclusive proof that an upward shift in the choice of godfathers and godmothers took place inside the Venetian nobility as well. The process manifested in the strengthening of ties within the same class; those nobles who decided to comply with the governmental ban kept inviting Venetian citizens employed in the Ducal chancery, people engaged in honorable professions, and non-Venetian elites to serve as godparents. In any case, the prohibitions issued by the Council of Ten and Senate didn’t amount to a real obstacle for those patricians who wanted their peers as spiritual kin.

86 Santa Marina, b. 1, fos. 8–10, 13–17, 20–21, 23–31, 34, 36–38, 40, 42–43, 46, 48, 50, 53, 56, 64, 70; b. 2, fos. 22–23.

87 ASPV, Parrocchia di Santa Sofia, Registri dei Battesimi e Matrimoni, b. 1, 27.11.1564, 26.06.1565, 14.08.1565, 27.12.1565, 04.03.1566, 27.12.1565, 04.03.1566, 11.04.1566, 26.08.1566, 17.10.1566, 12.11.1566, 30.06.1567, 14.08.1567, 21.09.1567, 29.03.1568, 20.05.1568, 09.06.1568, 21.06.1568, 07.08.1568, 30.10.1568, 26.12.1568, 21.03.1569, 21.05.1569, 19.07.1569, 09.11.1569, 04.09.1570, 05.09.1570, 10.10.1570, 19.01.1571, 31.05.1571; Registri dei Battesimi, b. 1, unnumbered, 29.12.1571, 05.05.1572, 29.07.1573, 26.09.1573, 04.02.1574, 04.03.1575, 11.07.1575, 14.08.1575, 18.10.1577, plus one entry undated; b. 2, 16.06.1577, 27.06.1577, 08.02.1578, 07.06.1578, 20.03.1579, 21.03.1579, 11.06.1579, 03.01.1580, 19.03.1580, 21.06.1580, 03.10.1580, 18.01.1581, 24.12.1581, 19.02.1582, 26.02.1582, 23.11.1582, 18.02.1583, 19.03.1583, 19.06.1583, 14.05.1584, 09.10.1584.

Spiritual Kinship in the Mainland and Maritime Venetian Empire

In early March 1566, excellent news reached the civic council of Udine. The Venetian rettore wanted the representatives of that community to baptize his newborn daughter, that is, to hold her at the baptismal font. The ceremony took place in Udine's main church, where the seven city deputies, together with four other representatives of the town institutions, became the spiritual kin of the Venetian nobleman Francesco Duodo.89 The Venetian Senate greeted the news that the French royals invited the Venetian ambassador to serve as godparent in 1520 with joy, and the Udine civic council celebrated for the same reasons: political and religious ties overlapped. The difference was that, in the latter case, this union was illegal.

The intervention of the Venetian political bodies did not stop at the Venetian context but also targeted the rettori sent to the mainland and maritime dominion. In May 1545, the Senate circumscribed the social pool of spiritual kin for these patricians. Venetian governors and other representatives of the Republic, as well as the members of their courts and families, could not directly or via proxy become the godparent of anyone's children during their term of service. Similarly, no member of the local community could invite the governors and anyone from their courts and families as godparents.90 So, this law explicitly aimed at preventing patronage networks between these two parties: Venetian governors and their entourage on one side and local community members on the other.

Analogous problems arose outside the Republic of St. Mark as well. For instance, in the fifteenth century, many Florentine officials instituted spiritual kinship ties with their subjects, both with individuals and sometimes with whole towns through the presence of the city's deputies. However, the famous Florentine writer and statesman Brunetto Latini already advised against this usage back in the thirteenth century. He stated that Florence's governors should not maintain or create friendship ties with the ruled.91 Two centuries later, in 1456, Florence forbade its governors from acting as godfathers.

89 Biblioteca civica “V. Joppi,” Udine, Archivum Civitatis Utini, Annales, 56, fos. 237 r., 240 r.
90 Senato Terra, 34, fo. 48 r.
in the communities they administered in order to prevent corruption and malfeasance.92

However, framing the issue of the relations between subject communities and representatives of authority, especially in the case of republics, to the sole problem of corruption or the private interest of the governor does not reflect the complexity of the role of rettori as a connecting element between the center and the periphery. These links were broadly exploited for political purposes. For instance, in eighteenth-century Bergamo, spiritual kinship ties were even institutionalized. In the ceremonies for baptizing the governors’ children, the actual godparents were other Venetian patricians with public tasks, so they complied with the technicalities set by laws. But assistenti (aides) were members of the local community, equally recorded in the local ceremonial book.

Whether they were deputies of local governing bodies, abbots, or aristocrats, their role during the baptismal ceremony represented the religious – and political – bond established between the governor and the community. These connections established with Venetian governors played a meaningful role inside republican councils. In the later centuries of the Most Serene Republic, local communities assigned the official task of promoting and representing the city interest in Venice to a Venetian noble family. In this way, godparenthood links formally blended with patronage ones. Both parties sought the establishment of these kinds of relations, which were publicly acknowledged.93

In the sixteenth century, Venetian governors and local communities from the dominion probably shared the same idea of spiritual kinship as a useful instrument to ease their complicated relationship. Patricians were torn between enforcing the orders given by the Republic and not antagonizing their subjects. Local communities didn’t want an intrusive governor but one who respected the status quo. Venetian rettori – but Florentine as well – had then the difficult role of mediating between the center and periphery of the Republic, while local aristocracies, who had political and economic power, emphasized the autonomy of their civic institutions.94

The Republic’s ruling class tried to limit godparenthood bonds between Venetian governors and the local community, even if the patronage relations

inherent to spiritual kinship improved the cohesion between Venice and its subject cities. However, the Senate tried to offer some alternatives in July 1644, when it restricted once again the options for Venetian governors whenever they had a child during their governorship. They could invite as *compari* “their colleagues, treasurers, castle governors or other Venetian representatives, who are present there, and besides the militia governors, members of the court and chancellors as they wish.”95 The law again excluded community members and representatives from acting as godparents for Venetian patricians on political duty outside Venice.

The archival sources from between 1545 and 1644 offer some insights: first of all, *rettori* disregarded the ban on acting as godparents during their time in office. But the 1644 law probably normalized a well-known situation: Venetians holding political office outside Venice were more likely to invite other patricians or people employed by the Republic as godparents. This is the picture that emerges from some mainland cities in the second half of the sixteenth century, such as Brescia and Padua. The Venetian nobles who had a child in those cities invited primarily their peers or the wives of their peers together with castle or militia governors.96 Aristocrats serving in the Venetian army, such as Pio Enea Obizzi, *Collaterale Generale*, also established godparenthood ties with Venetian nobles on the mainland.97

What about the maritime empire, where Venetian territories were fragmentary or even isolated? Was there a similar pattern? Or were the different political and social contexts impacted by the choices made by Venetian governors? The evidence from one of the largest and most populated cities in Venetian Dalmatia, Zadar, will allow for comparison. There was more than one patrician sent from Venice to rule the city and its district: one count, one captain, one treasurer, and one castle keeper until 1609.98 Who did they choose as

95  “[…] li loro Colleghi, Camerlenghi, Castellani o altri Rappresentanti Veneti, che si trovarono ivi; et inoltre li Governator della militia, Curiali, Cancellieri a loro beneplacito,” Senato Terra, 128, fo. 242 r.; translation is mine. The Senate approved another law in 1653 that repeated the restrictions without any relevant distinction, see *ibid.*, 146, fos. 71 v–72 r.
godfathers, their colleagues or people in the service of the Republic? Members of the local nobility?99 Or people belonging to other social classes?

In the years between 1569 and 1579, there were ten baptisms of Venetian noble offspring. These included the children of other magistrates, such as the superintendents of the cavalry in Dalmatia, and naval captains. Of a total of twenty-one godparents, sixteen were fellow noblemen or noblewomen. The remaining were two Zadar nobles from the Tetrico family, the wife of the soldier governor, and two more women whose social standing is not explicit.100 Even if patricians overwhelmingly favored their peers, they were interested in fostering better relations with their subjects, including the Zadar noble families Fanfogna, Britannico, Civalello, Bartolacci, Begna, Grisogono, Ferra, Nassi, and Tetrico, for whom they acted as godparents.101

The picture is quite different in a smaller city with less social stratification, like Omiš, south-east of the more important Split and facing the island of Brač. There was only one Venetian governor, the provveditore, and this political marginality is also reflected in godparenthood networks. Between 1588 and 1600, the local baptism registry records only three baptized children of Venetian patricians. Among the godparents there was the chancellor, who was a member of the court, and another member of a local society with a political-administrative position; the social status of the others is not specified.102

On the other hand, the Venetian governors of Omiš and their families and court members seemed to be more sensibly involved in the life of the local community. The sons and daughters of provveditori occasionally became the spiritual kin of local people.103 But even more so, it was the Venetian chancellors and their wives who weaved deep relationship networks within the Omiš community and with the governors’ families.104 The presence of Venetian nobles considerably influenced the godparenthood choices of rettori, and this factor depended on the political relevance of the governed city.

Even though the 1644 law presented a range of possibilities that reflected practices already in place, the Senate aimed to reinforce the ban on patronage ties between governors and ruled communities. But the discrepancy between the Senate’s fears and the actual choices made by Venetian rettori can

100 Državni arhiv u Zadru, Zadar, HR-DAZD-378, 1500, fos. 7, 9, 23, 40, 47, 82, 112, 115, 133, 142.
101 Ibid., fos. 17, 19, 22, 28, 29, 34, 45, 58, 65, 89, 95, 97, 111, 119, 122, 123, 134, 137.
102 Ibid., 706, fos. 2 v., 11 r., 34 v.
103 Ibid., fos. 2 v., 11 r., 34 v.
104 Ibid., fos. 5 r., 7 v., 8 r., 9 r., 9 v., 10 r., 10 v., 11 r., 12 r., 12 v., 13 r., 13 v., 15 r., 16 v., 17 v., 18 v., 20 r., 21 r., 22 r., 24 r., 25 r., 26 r.
be framed as a conscious strategy by the patricians, one consistent with what they were doing back in the lagoon. Even before the Council of Trent, Venetian nobles invited their peers to create or strengthen bonds beneficial to the electoral contest. The Senate pushed for patricians to invite their colleagues as godfathers when they held office as rectors. But once governorships were over, the patricians had to return to the political arena in Venice.

We can then assume that they connected with their peers when they were outside the lagoon to secure mutual political support for the following elections. This does not mean that Venetian nobles neglected to cultivate relations with the communities they administered, not only through spiritual kinship but also thanks to marriage and property ownership, for instance.105 But godparenthood did not prevent voting for spiritual kin in the elections, unlike marriage. The patrician families who held positions in the relevant mainland and maritime cities of the Republic had plenty of opportunities to build links with their fellows. In this way, they also increased the political divide with the lower ranks of the aristocracy. The latter aimed in fact at minor regiments, where the presence of other Venetian nobles was scarcer.

Conclusions

Many recent investigations have insisted on the value of baptism for establishing social relationships in Europe.106 This article fits into this historiographical trend in a different regard. First, it further highlights the importance of spiritual kin in everyday life by showing their presence in last wills, as beneficiaries, and as executors. But, more importantly, this study explores in depth the political importance of godparenthood ties for Venetian nobles and how the Republic dealt with it. The laws issued had both a qualitative and quantitative character and aimed at influencing godparenthood in Venice as much as outside it, during the patricians' fulfilment of political offices.

The situation in Venice presents both elements of continuity and uniqueness. The latter is the exploitation for electoral purposes of godparenthood ties between patricians, to which the political organs of the Republic were strongly opposed. This analysis proved how much the Venetian nobility respected or violated this ban during the sixteenth century. The most evident element of continuity with what has already been observed by historiography is the upward shift in the choice of godparents. Quantitative data from some Venetian parish records and family archives confirms that the rate of presence of Venetian noblemen increased significantly in the decades following the Council of Trent. This happened at the expense of other Venetian social groups, in particular low-level members of the Ducal chancery.

The examination of the relationships between governors and subject communities shows more nuanced results. The prohibition on weaving ties of godparenthood between them existed in other realities, such as Florence. But the peculiarities of the Venetian republican system led, in its last centuries, to institutionalized forms of representation of the interests of the subject communities at the centers of power. The subject communities, like the one of Bergamo, chose patrician families to fill this role and created close ties with them, also through spiritual kinship. In addition, this investigation explored the choices made by Venetian governors in the maritime and mainland Empire, highlighting how the political relevance of the ruled city directly influenced the networks that could be built.

Finally, this article has presented on several occasions data on female participation in noble baptisms, but without addressing the subject. The scholar Francesco Sansovino’s writing on baptisms in Venice in the early 1580s helps us reflect on the topic. He stated that only midwives participated in the ceremonies and that there were no godmothers. Laws, baptismal registers, and family sources show otherwise, at least until the Council of Trent. But after this time, what Sansovino says is actually supported by the data. So, the Trent decrees impacted not only on the political and social aspect of the networks created in Venice through godparenthood, but also on gender relations by excluding women from participating in what was an important rite of passage for Venetian noble society.

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107 Francesco Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare descritta in XIII libri* (Venice, 1581), 149–150.
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