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## Ranke and the Venetian Document Market

Ugo Tucci

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# Ranke and the Venetian Document Market

BY UGO TUCCI

The personality of Leopold von Ranke as historian and teacher cannot be summed up from a study of his method of critical evaluation of historical sources, although the influence that his method had on the historiography of the last century—an influence sometimes annoyingly exaggerated in his less able imitators—exceeds that of all his other ideas. A very important role in the development of his *Quellenkritik* must certainly be assigned to his education in the techniques of classical philology and also to the perplexity aroused by his reading of Francesco Guicciardini and Paolo Giovio. Their works, once they were compared with original contemporary evidence, appeared to be based on secondary sources and were hence barely reliable. I am convinced, however, that Ranke's method came to full maturation because of the particular conditions in the archives and the libraries of the time, as well as the opportunities for access to Venetian documents, whose distinctive features immediately appeared to him the most likely to satisfy his need to know *wie es eigentlich gewesen*.

Ranke's opinion on these privileged sources was shared by other historians who were particularly appreciative of ambassadors' reports. As is well known, Ranke viewed those reports as direct contacts with the men who were politically involved, that is, with the small circle of responsible protagonists in the life of the Venetian states. He had known of those reports when he was in Germany. Later, he went to Vienna, where he expected to find the entire Venetian archive. He was not planning to use it in research limited to the history of Venice, but thought of it rather as securing an undiscovered history of Europe. The abundance of diplomatic documents in the archive and the data it provided substantiated Ranke's developing concept of what is important for the historian whose task binds him to "that part of life that is preserved in writing".



In Vienna he did not find the archives of the Republic, but was able to examine many other Venetian materials of various origins. He was hampered in his handling of documents by the numerous restrictions of one sort or another, even though his work had the support of Clemens von Metternich and Friedrich von Gentz. In order to complete his researches, he felt that it was necessary to go to Venice and Rome, for otherwise the picture that he was putting together would be too fragmentary. In Venice he found very good working conditions at the Marciana Library, but infinite limitations at the recently established State Archives, which had not yet organized and still lacked an inventory. Furthermore, scholars there were denied many documents on the grounds that secrets might be exposed or that state security or the honor of the ruling house might be threatened, any of which would have incurred heavy criminal penalties. There was a pervasive climate of mistrust, especially in contacts with foreigners. After the episodes of public violence and looting during the democratic period and after the embezzlements and requisitions that had occurred repeatedly during the French and Austrian domination, the archivists sought to reveal as rarely as possible the treasures entrusted to them, so that they might better protect them in case of emergency. The Austrian government gave Ranke a very generous authorization, which excluded only the reports for the period after the French Revolution. It did, however, stipulate that all the copies and notes he made be certified by the director.

All these precautions and pettinesses, however, were absolutely useless. In contrast to the restrictions applied in the public archives, numerous private owners opened their doors readily to historical research. Also, in Rome, in Venice, and to some extent in other places, a market for manuscripts flourished undisturbed. It should be noted as well that already, by 1713, some of the most secret *relazioni* (ambassadorial reports) had been sold openly in Rome. Before the fall of the Republic in 1797, others had quietly been published.

Venice was by tradition an important center of the antiquarian trade in books, prints, and manuscripts. It had flourished since the first part of the eighteenth century, thanks to the great scholarly reawakening that in Venice was directed primarily towards local history. There were numerous bookshops, frequented both by the city's nobility and by foreigners who used them as places to meet and converse. The book market also drew the attention of government au-

thorities, who had acquired in 1794 a part of the very rich collection left by the bookseller Amadeus Schweyer, because they feared that amongst his holdings there might be secret manuscripts. It was a market richer than that of any other Italian city in that it was nourished and replenished locally by materials which represented an exceptionally flourishing cultural tradition.

The abundance of material became massive after the fall of the Republic. The archives of many old offices were for all intents and purposes deserted and those items that at first glance seemed the most precious were removed piecemeal, either in good or bad faith, under the pretext of keeping them safe from being looted by the mob. Where new offices took over from old ones, many documents that were considered cumbersome or useless were sent to be pulped or sold. It had happened in the same way in France at the time of the Revolution, when public archives disposed of enormous quantities of *vieux papiers*.

An even more outstanding quantity arrived on the antiquarian market after the suppression of the ecclesiastical corporations that had been ordered by the Napoleonic government. Also at that time, chronicles, histories, and very rare manuscripts were rescued from requisition by the religious establishment, and only in part did they return to their original site at the time of the Restoration. Many had been dispersed in secret sales of separate documents during the time when religious communities, destitute of every resource, were seeking the means to survive. Official figures offer only a general estimate of the size of the displacement, without giving any idea of the historical or antiquarian value of the individual specimens that were disposed of so hastily. The library of the Convent of San Michele in Murano alone had at least 2300 manuscripts and an uncertain number of books. A part of that collection was sent to Rome and the rest was, in so far as was possible, hidden or sold. The thirty thousand volumes of the library of the religious corporation, the Somaschi, at the Salute, were sold to a bookdealer. But, before the delivery the friars took away the more valuable items and divided them among themselves, while the other books and manuscripts ended up in the hands of fishmongers and spice vendors. All this is without taking into account the fact that, when the Republic fell, the library of the Convent of San Giorgio Maggiore was ravaged by people who went by boat in order to loot its precious collections.

Private archives and libraries were not expropriated, but they too contributed to the antiquarian market. Wars, misfortunes, bankruptcies, real estate taxes, ordinary and special levies, and a style of life out of proportion with income, signaled the rapid ruin of many noble families. In straitened circumstances, they put up for sale everything that they could, particularly books and manuscripts—for these things rendered no income, yet required personnel and space that could no longer be provided. It should be kept in mind that with the fall of the Republic many manuscripts had in some way lost their value for their owners since they had been preserved, as Ranke informs us, both as memoirs and as instructional material for the young members of the family who were preparing to serve in the highest levels of the State. Ranke gained access to quite a few of these family archives, but “an infinitely greater number” escaped him through their having been destroyed in the catastrophic fall of the Republic and in the years that followed. There is ample testimony concerning the vicissitudes of the libraries and collections of documents belonging to the noble Venetian families.

If we look at the matter from a purely economic point of view, setting aside the cultural implications, we could say that the amount of material on the market was quite in excess of demand. Numerous booksellers governed the market. The catalogues that they published periodically give us a measure of the value of the material put up for sale. It was generally regretted that the buyers were for the most part foreigners, who by their purchases were tragically despoiling Venice of her treasures for their own benefit. But it would have been difficult

FACING PAGE: Manuscript 106, opening page. *Relazione di Francia di m. Marin Giustinian 1535*. A nineteenth-century copy made by a scribe in the Venetian archives for Leopold von Ranke. 9 pp. 36.5 x 24 cm. Unbound, certified extracts bearing the seal of “Archivio di San Theodoro”. Used by Ranke in his *Französische Geschichte*.

One of the oldest extant Venetian ambassador's reports, this *relazione* was read before the Venetian Senate after Giustinian returned from a three-year-and-four-month tour of duty as ambassador to France. King of France, Francis I, had been an erratic and vacillating sovereign, who had been captured in battle in 1525 and was imprisoned for a time in Spain. During Giustinian's tenure as ambassador, however, Francis appeared more resolute in that he ended the toleration of French protestants and instituted the royal lectures, which became the basis for the famed Collège de France.

106  
Relazione di Francia di e M<sup>e</sup> e Marin Jantierian 1535.

Com. 17.

Il Re prese di primiera l'onore della deliberatione (del Re di Francia) giuramento, et d'accordo, non poter  
mede di altri usaggi succedere per via degli drenti dell'or, o dell'altro di Clemente Pont. et  
questo per altro per manifeste motivi, ha tenuto Cesare per via della Negozia di Francia, et  
questo de Rege di Navarra di Navarra in Ambrosia et altri volti et non poter condurre Cesare  
ad alcuna cond. se ben Cesare gli drenti sempre buona parola, ma noi l'ha tenuto di que  
gli drenti come mi ha detto l'Orator Cesare med<sup>o</sup> non poter satisfar a S. M<sup>te</sup> X<sup>ta</sup>  
allora per la fede data al Duca di Silesia, ma quando quello stato fuve nella man  
gli fratelli girava, non contento di questo il Re X<sup>to</sup> perchi gli popoli che gli drenti par  
te si conuene alle minacce, della quali publicarunt si parlava, e non operando ancor con  
questo d'ironia ai fatti si cantant che non sono mai venuti a guerra aperta, et si ope  
ramente che ognuno l'ha conosciuto, e con quella opinione fece l'abboccamento di otto  
negli con Clemente Pont. qual vedendo loro che Cesare stava fermo nella sua deliberatione  
non conchiusero il movimento della Armi in Germania sotto protetto di voler metter il Du  
ca di Vittemberg in corso, nel quale se l'Orator non avesse posto la mano con il mezzo di  
Cesare, il quale ad improviso, et con gran quietezza senza saputa del Re X<sup>to</sup> con la resti  
tutione del Ducato di Vittemberg fece la pace tutte quelle parti venivano in Italia, sotto  
il favor secreto de Clemente. Questo fatto fu agitato ancora dal legato defunto di quel gran  
maestro, li quali sempre contra operando alla guerra di Ferdinando la missione del danaro  
in Germania, il che fu ancora causa della pace, et nel med<sup>o</sup> tempo deliberorno fare il  
partamento fra il Re, et il Turco, et perche andando la Corte a Massilia venne l'Orator  
di Barbarossa a trovar il Re X<sup>to</sup> al Puy, et dopo l'abboccamento venne un'altro Orator  
del Turco a chiestellorant si conchiusero la intelligenza con il Turco, et in Barbarossa  
la quale due operatione come furono fatte per metter Cesare in tale necessita che fuve costretto  
to satisfar ad esso Re X<sup>to</sup>, con S. M<sup>te</sup> ha conosciuto che lo fece maggior di quel che era  
partito allora Franzi<sup>o</sup> videt de Cesare volte l'animo a concordar, et confermar gli animi di  
tutti i Principi Germani; et allora fece il matrimonio della figliola del Re di Navarra  
nel primogenito nel Duca di Navarra, si conchiuse il Duca di Bavaria, il Duca di Vittemberg



to place goods of such a particular nature with a predominately local clientele in a city that was both demographically and economically in full decline, with numerous houses abandoned and in ruins and with the quality of life vastly reduced. The new rich were not so interested in old papers, but preferred either to deal in the real estate market, which was flooded with offerings of land and buildings from the patrimony of the suppressed religious orders, or to invest in paintings, statuary, or antique artifacts—objects that could be put on display as a mark of their rising status. But in this area the market was already very active before the fall of the Republic. Entire libraries and archives were often sold together with the accompanying paintings, antiques, and orientalia. A substantial number of items were retailed not only in bookshops but on little stands all over the city, where they were displayed together with prints and other things. The relatively modest prices attracted a heterogeneous clientele of scholars, collectors, dilettanti, and the curious. Ranke himself, though he was often worried by his scant economic means, was in a position to make very large acquisitions of manuscripts which in other times would have been beyond the expectations of a university professor.

Greater circulation and accessibility introduced a taste for the antiquarian book and manuscript in a public that never before had had a chance to know them well. Thus, the circle of collectors expanded noticeably to include (besides the usual churchmen) doctors, civil servants, butchers, and other merchants of new wealth. Many of them were bibliophiles, and they looked for incunabula, Aldines, sixteenth-century editions, language texts, first editions, and erotica. In their hunt for manuscripts, they were attracted by those that were beautifully illuminated and decorated, or those that contained chronicles, *relazioni*, diaries, memoirs, treatises, literary or philosophical works—texts, in sum, of a certain completeness—as well as autographs of illustrious people. They were not interested in the gray administrative and judicial papers, contracts, wills and the like that, instead, were sold by weight as wrapping paper.

Historical research is indebted to these keen lovers of books and manuscripts for the preservation of a patrimony that otherwise would have been lost. But, unfortunately, their collecting passions often degenerated into a mania that drove them to extend their searches to public libraries and archives. Hence, the market was replenished by thefts carried out by librarians and by scholars themselves, who

were aided by the insufficient surveillance and also by the difficulty of exercising adequate control over the newly acquired materials. Among those who performed such culpable deeds, let us remember Baron Pietro Custodi, who published a large collection of classical writers in political economics, and Guglielmo Libri, author of a highly acclaimed *Histoire des sciences mathématiques en Italie*, who stole with impunity in France and in Italy. It was he who put together the famous collection that was later acquired in good faith by Lord Ashburnham, who in turn passed it on to the governments of England, France, and Italy for their libraries.

Ranke was not a bibliophile and, if we find some Aldines in his library at Syracuse University, it is because he acquired them, when he happened upon them, for their content rather than for the quality of the edition. And he certainly did not steal manuscripts from the libraries or public archives where he worked, because (apart from his moral integrity), as a historian who based his writings on new and original documents, he had every interest in seeing that they remained where he had cited them as being. He made his first acquisition of Venetian *relazioni* in Gotha and, in 1829 in Padua, he bought about one hundred more at a cost of a Prussian thaler each. He purchased other books and manuscripts in Florence and still others (of which there still survives a list in the Venetian State Archives) he acquired just before returning home. The greater part of the Venetian manuscripts were obtained from Abbot Daniele Francesconi, a former professor of law and later librarian at the University of Padua, who was a discerning bibliophile, more casual and ingenuous than avidly business-like. In particular, Ranke bought from him the manuscripts from the library of Da Ponte, which form the essential core of the Syracuse University collection.

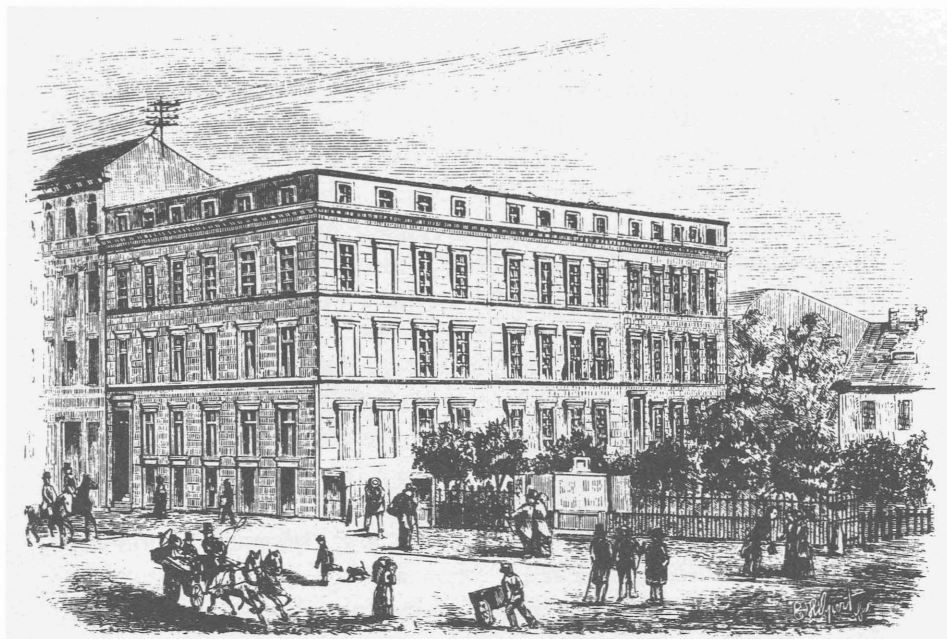
It is not easy to establish whether in his purchases Ranke was driven by precise choices or by market opportunities. However, when the list of manuscripts that he bought is examined and compared with that of the copies made by him in the State Archives, it is apparent that the determining factor was the offering of the market, within a fairly well defined range of preferences. Essentially, he bought chronicles and *relazioni*. As for the other papers, however diverse they may seem to be, one can trace a connection of interests. In these purchases Ranke did not especially have in mind a history of Venice. We know, in fact, that he considered the material that he

took back to Berlin insufficient for the undertaking of such an endeavor.

There are numerous chronicles that Ranke particularly valued because they offered him a basic order of the events, recorded around the time in which they took place, and because they were especially useful for the centuries preceding the sixteenth, for which the historian heretofore had not had diplomatic sources at his disposal. For a scholar like Ranke, who saw in the history of the states the determining action of the international political situation rather than of the internal forces, an interest in the chronicles was certainly not limited to the history of Venice. But a great deal of the material was of a different nature, the most important being the dispatches and *relazioni* from diplomatic representatives. These not only cast light on the international relations of the Republic of Venice, but also on the internal affairs of various states, with descriptions of their rulers, ministers, and resources.

In Rome, consultation with numerous family collections left Ranke with a multitude of impressions and rewarded him with a deeper understanding of specific problems, though without necessarily enabling him to enlarge his vision. The *relazioni* of the Venetian ambassadors at the pontifical court inspired him with the courage to write a complete history of the popes, for they afforded him a vast amount of new information "drawn from direct observations which were no longer obtainable after the death of the observers", and therefore, in his opinion, not to be found elsewhere. Although the collection preserved in the Republic's archives was incomplete, Ranke succeeded, nevertheless, in putting together a series of events with only occasional gaps, by adding materials from the imperial archives in Vienna, from other collections, and from what he could find in the antiquarian market. He was convinced that he could not have attempted such a work without this material.

Nobody would want to believe that Ranke was induced to confront "the period in which the political and religious power of the papacy rises again, rejuvenates, is profoundly modified, progresses and decays" simply because of the availability of the forty-eight Venetian *relazioni* about Rome. But the choice of a topic such as *Die Venezianer in Morea* appears directly bound to the opportunity of access to such a specific nucleus of documents as these. We know how this work was received with little favor by critics because of its servile



Leopold von Ranke's apartment and library were on the second floor of this building, 24a Luisenstrasse, Berlin. From the engraving by E. Hilpert.

subordination to such sources, and how a similar reaction was set in motion about his studies on the Spanish monarchy.

Of course, it would not have been easy to ignore the suggestion of completeness and accuracy offered by those sources. They presented a clear and immediate narrative plot and expanded upon the actions and sentiments of the people involved in such a way that one could effectively identify with them. There was no reason to doubt the direct observations of these skillful government officials. In the era when Ranke made his trip to the south (1827–31), it was generally believed that the action of social forces was less important than the performance of those men who were influential and had the responsibility of power and whose personalities, in point of fact, left their imprint on both national life and international affairs. Actually, these official observations perfectly satisfied the exigencies of historical research, which was directed by instinct to the State and therefore to the governments that best represented it. For indeed, recent upheavals had brought about certain political positions that needed support in the lessons of history. Also, the crises of many of the old institu-



tions (crises that were menacing despite the restoration) led to the thought that a historical cycle was ending. This situation was particularly true in Venice, where a foreign domination with a radical change in structures and priorities succeeded an aristocratic government that nobody thought could ever be exhumed. Now, these institutions could be the object of a complete historical analysis aimed at discovering their essence and mechanisms. There was no historiographic interest in extending the research to the masses, for it was the very time in which the processes of democratization were beginning and showed their most worrisome aspects. Moreover, new economic structures and forms of social relations that were bound up with the industrial revolution were in the process of determining a cleaner break between the initiatives of a restricted governing group and the working classes who were instrumental to its endeavors. The *relazioni*, dealing as they did with politics and diplomacy, represented history in its dynamic element, while life in the broad strata of the population appeared static and hence less rewarding for anyone wishing to follow its development and record it. And it would not have been an easy task anyway. Mass trends were not documented in writing, and records of social and economic conditions were dispersed in an infinite number of documents amassed in public archives, for the most part unexplored and inaccessible, or neglected by the families responsible for them, or, as we have seen, rejected by the antiquarian market.

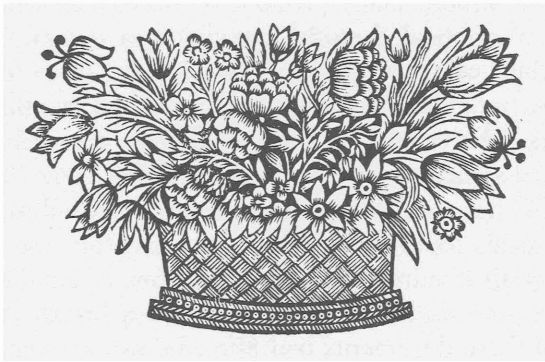
It has been written that the pervasive political character of nineteenth-century historiography was the price that it has had to pay for the progress achieved through scientific research tools and rigorous methods. One must take into account also the belief that the whole truth was thought to reside in the authenticity of documentation. We are sure that his visit to the immense and practically untouched deposits of the Venetian State Archives, described in *Die Verschwörung gegen Venedig im Jahre 1618*, must have given Ranke the feeling that, once the restrictions were dispensed with, the historian would be able to find there precise answers to all his questions. Certainly, the fact that an incomparably greater number of documents was available than in the past was a very effective stimulus to revise the traditional historiography. The enthusiasm for the discovered documents was so high towards the end of the century, when the paths of research had already been amply trodden, that works

like that of Vladimir Lamansky, which appeared on the market with the intriguing title of *Secret d'État de Venise* (1884), found a good reception.

Since, for the reasons mentioned before, the public archives were of relatively little use, they did not transmit all their documentary richness. Therefore, private collections and the antiquarian market became extremely important for research—the market perhaps more than the collections, which were not always opened to researchers. Because of the continuous and copious flow of supplies from various sources—private, religious, and, as we have seen, also public—the quantity of manuscripts that the antiquarian Venetian market offered was outstanding and the choice, vast. It was not difficult to find there the very same material that gruff ‘custodes rerum secretarum’ withheld from view at the State Archives (for example, the *relazioni* of ambassadors, which, made precious by literary ambitions and by the elegance of political rhetoric, circulated in several copies from the time of their compilation). Nor was it difficult to find the dispatches by the same diplomatic representatives, or by military or naval authorities, who often kept the first draft for themselves. Generally speaking, documents were not unrelated, but came in somewhat organic groups that were complete as to a specific subject, whether literary, historical, legal, or, as was most often the case—especially in those materials coming from the collections of families that had for centuries constituted the governing class—political. And a notable portion of these documents had filtered down through the years, selected because of a certain recognized or attributed value that rendered them most choice indeed.

I believe I am stating the truth when I say that, until public collections were opened up and made to be convenient, the antiquarian market offered the greatest contribution to historic research. Ranke revealed it in the choice of his topics, in his preference for certain lines of inquiry, in the structure of his narrative, in his enthusiasm for the details, and in the space that he devoted to critical observations on the sources. Ranke’s evolution towards more concrete and detailed historical work would certainly have run a different course if he had not been favored by the easy availability of Venetian documents, with their distinctive characteristics. According to Theodor Wiedemann’s *Erläuterungen*, Ranke constantly used those documents that he had carried with him to Berlin, even when he was not work-

ing on Venetian history. Without their help, Ranke's method of writing history based on documents contemporary to the action would have been perhaps less innovative and the imprint of his strong personality as a historian, less lively.



ABOVE: Tailpiece from Nicolaus Schaten's *Annalium Paderbornensium*, volume 1 (Neuhusii: Sumptibus Christophori Negelii . . . , 1693), from the library of Leopold von Ranke, at Syracuse University, which holds the only copy recorded in North America.