

Back to the Origins of European Territorial Unification
The Network of Postal Roads (15th – 19th Century)

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1. Presentation of “Istituto di Studi Storici Postali” (ISSP)

The Institute for postal historic studies is concerned with the study of postal history. Postal history is the survey of the organised communications, insofar as the material point of view is concerned. Our Institute for postal historic studies has been an international reference point for all people and scholars concerned in this kind of studies since its foundation in 1982, in Prato.

The purposes of our Institute are the cultural development, improvement and diffusion of the postal history through publications, courses, seminars, exhibitions and other cultural meetings. In this way we try to reach a deeper involvement of the Universities and to suggest research lines to the most competent collectors.

Our Institute is placed in Prato, Tuscany, in the old Palazzo Datini, former residence of Francesco Datini, the famous «merchant of Prato» who died in 1410. His archive is kept in the palace and is the most important archive in the world as far as the economic history in the Middle Ages is concerned.

We have published many books regarding postal and communication history. Our latest volume, *COMMUNICATION AND ITS LINES – Telegraphy in the 19th century among economy, politics and technology*, is written in Italian and in English and contains the proceedings of an international Symposium held in Prato on September, 20, 2002.

2. Our project

Last summer we prepared a wide project idea. The title was:

*Back to the Origins of European Territorial Unification
The Network of Postal Roads (15th –19th Century)*

This is what we would like to submit to you today.

2.1. Postal history and history of Europe

The history of the physical unification of Europe is also written in the evolution of postal roads, whose network spreads through the continent. The project we are describing here is based on the study and the reconstruction of the main roads all over Europe.

At the beginning, in the 15th century, most of the network of postal roads was placed in the western part of the continent, but it slowly spread over the areas beyond the river Elbe: in 19th century it uniformly crossed the whole territory from the Atlantic to Ural mountains.

2.2. End of XV century/mid XIX century

The project covers the period between the end of 15th century and the starting of the railway era, i.e. mid 19th century, because that very invention deeply modified the way of distributing mail. Everywhere, between 18th and 19th centuries, postal administration became more and more centred and a public service started which had similar aspects in every country. This service became more and more democratic: sending mail became an available service for everyone.

As a matter of fact, 19th century saw the final modernisation of the whole communication system; the introduction of a public postal service – and the following extension of postal rights to everyone – is a key point

of this process. Methods and techniques of building roads were modified, the use of vapour revolutionised the world of transports, telegraph dramatically reduced the time needed to transmit information, postal service was completely changed. The idea of mobility was deeply modified, together with the effects on the economic and social life of the most developed countries.

All this was based on the knowledge that the postal service was increasing its importance, so that it finally was included inside the public monopoly of the States – even if the States sometimes left some space for free enterprise, nevertheless the basic principle was never put into discussion. The organisation of postal service was increased, its staff was stepped up and managers were considered first-level figures inside the single States and participated to political-diplomatic negotiations in which postal agreements covered a main role.

2.3. Revolution in roads

Historians agree in identifying in mid-18th century the main change in road history. After centuries of stagnation a real road revolution took place, in a contest which also considered roads as a clear means of political reforms. Roads were in fact perfect to intensify the exchange of ideas, goods and people.

In the age we are considering it is the same idea of road that changed from a rough concept to a better shaped track with clearer functions and technological aspects. Road classification became more rational and more hierarchical, and from this new hierarchy came the duty to maintain them practicable. The organisation of public transport became better and better (till then, in fact, this kind of transport had been disconnected and irregular, with a quality that was much worse than that of private transport). Roads were now given more attention through a new and more precise legislation and the setting of offices to control the works. That is, the State intervention increased and became systematic; this led to the first road traffic codes. Therefore, commercial activities intensified, agreements increased and exchanges were fostered by the reduction of customs charges and by economic policies characterised by freedom of trade.

New roads were opened, instead of rebuilding old tracks or partially mending them – an old habit, particularly when a king visited the region or borders were moved for dynastic reasons or after some war. These new roads were built in a reduced amount of time, just the opposite of the past times, when it took decades to finish work. Maintenance became a habit, periodical mending was abandoned. Results were clearly visible and consisted of the evolution of the road structure in the Countries, with more and more improvements during the Napoleonic era and in the following century.

2.4. Technology

Dramatic technological improvements took place. First of all, there was the passage from transport by pack-animal to transport by carriage. Transport means were heavier, therefore roads and bridges had to be stronger, with constant and frequent maintenance: where maintenance was not constantly carried on by the responsible bodies, nature did not wait to regain what man had stolen her. The best roads, usually the King's roads, were also fitted with parapets and side banks.

Just a word on two of the most important engineers who, between the end of 18th and the beginning of 19th century, conceived a new method of paving roads, which allowed a suitable drainage without excessive

convexities that could jeopardise the balance. The first was the French Trésaguet, who had studied at the famous school Ponts et Chaussées. The second was the English MacAdam, who enhanced Trésaguet's method in such a way that, for example, as far as 50 years ago a type of paving was still called "macadàm" (in Italy at least).

2.5. The organisation of travels

Historians of many countries are involved in the scientific study of the organisation and the procedures of a travel on postal roads. Studying the history of the realisation of postal network means also analysing how this network was managed, particularly as regards all the infrastructures scattered along the roads – first of all post houses and any other place where horses could be changed and travellers could refresh. These infrastructures are significant both from the architectural point of view and because of their position in every corner of the European continent; their role is important in the adoption of similar procedures and even of a common language. Historians are also interested in the economic aspects.

On the contrary, a comparative analysis has been neglected. Therefore the reconstruction of the network on a European basis allows a comparison of very different experiences inside the same environment, which nevertheless find very important common points in the organisation of travels.

Isolated inns were poorly supplied, therefore everything cost a lot of money. Buildings were often only poor two-storey, dirty and shabby houses. On the first floor there was a dining room, whereas sleeping rooms were on the second floor, where people had to sleep all together without any facilities (for instance, a bathroom). Rooms were cold because roofs were often leaking and there were draughts everywhere. Everyday people quarrelled with landlords, who were usually greedy with bills. Post houses where horses were changed were also refreshment and sleeping places and were regularly placed over the road network. They had different dimensions, still they had to be visible from the road, therefore there were big signals to indicate the places and a huge writing on post houses front.

2.6. Aims of the project

The project's main aim is to draft a digital map reporting a historical view of the various European postal roads: with the help of a suitable software the user, with proper questions, could correctly reconstruct road tracks.

The project is based on the network analysis, which is being more and more trusted by historians after having been used by other groups of scholars. The version of network analysis used for this study will consider different subjects, because in our experience this is the best way to work. It is not necessary to say that this analysis is most convenient for the study of space organisation, where transport and communications have a fundamental role; it also allows a global perception of space itself.

In other words, the aim of the project consists of a diachronic analysis of global organisation of space.

The originality of the idea stands in its utmost result, that is the possibility to look at the whole European network in its progressive evolution. Digitising all the data relating to postal roads is particularly interesting because of its many levels of exploitation – scientific, cultural and didactic.

Informatics allows a step-by-step reconstruction of the European postal road network and also gives newer and more innovative results than those obtained until now.

The needed software must be flexible, versatile and easy to use. It must also be able to set up complex maps with a huge amount of data.

Apart from the map, we foresee the creation of an internet site and the publication of a DVD containing diachronic routes, which enlighten places and roads, but also the related architectures, costumes, objects and music.

2.7. Sources

Data are obviously collected not only from historical maps but also from traditional sources, i.e. from specialised literature up to archives. This part of the research is not particularly difficult in itself, it is nevertheless complicated because sources are scattered all over European libraries and must be uniformly considered even if they are extremely different.

Most important are also postal guides, which were published all over Europe and report every single route with extreme precision.

We previously spoke about a DVD containing a postal map of Europe through the centuries: how can we “build” this DVD? Many are the postal maps and guides, from 16th to 19th century, that must be controlled, in order to trace itineraries. Itineraries are usually found with distances written in “posts” from one place to another.

Many similar maps have to be prepared, in order to show this network and its implementations through the centuries, up to the 19th century. Sometimes postal guides contain drawn maps, especially in the second part of the concerned period.

With a multimedial map, clicking on a post station or on a road, information relating on that point will appear.

For example:

- Exact place of the station
- Photo of its remains
- Proclamations and postal laws concerning it
- Photos of postillions
- Photos of mail boxes
- Royal patents, as the one relating to post services given to Cristoforo de Taxis on July, 11, 1562
- Etc. etc.

3. Agenda and foreseen budget

How can a project like this be financed?

For example, we can consider European projects. Usually these projects are only partly financed, and once the call for proposal is open there are only two months to submit the project, which therefore must be almost ready.

The best for us is the programme Culture 2000.

Culture 2000 does not finance projects entirely, but contributes with a quote of 50% to the realisation of the projects prepared by the associated partners from different European Countries.

Our goal is the submission of the project within 2005 and to end it in 2006, with at least four co-organisers.

4. Partnership

When we submitted our project, many were the interested institutions, but most of them had financial problems. Yet we are convinced of the validity of our project, therefore we want to submit it in the next call for proposal.

Let's only remember two basic points:

- the sum you agree to finance will be requested only if the EU approves the project
- part of this sum can be given with services and personnel

Of course, the project can also start without EU financing and with only a few information, and can be implemented as human, cultural and financial resources are found.

Of course, this project can also consider telegraphic lines, because the telegraphic network is the technological implementation of postal roads.

The participants to the project are all members of EU and associated countries. Yet our project is really European. Every country in the European continent is welcome.

If you are interested, we can organise a meeting next spring in Prato.

There we could discuss all the aspects in an exhaustive way. Our Institute can willingly contribute with organisation and documents.

So, welcome to everyone.