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978-0-521-03247-6 - The Military Organization of a Renaissance State: Venice c.
1400 to 1617

M. E. Mallett and J. R. Hale

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: the European context 1400–1525

‘It is said that the Venetians in all those places which they are recovering are painting a lion of St Mark which has in its hand a sword rather than a book, from which it seems that they have learnt to their cost that study and books are not sufficient to defend states.’ So wrote Machiavelli from Verona on 7 December 1509 as he watched Venice gradually recover from the shattering blow of Agnadello. His assessment of 1509 as a turning point in Venetian military thinking matches a central theme of this book, but the nature and the implications of that turning point are here perceived in very different terms from those which Machiavelli had in mind. The idea that it was only in 1509 that Venice was forced to consider seriously the military implications of defence of a land empire and to involve itself directly in that defence rather than relying on hired mercenaries is denied by the whole experience of the fifteenth century. Similarly Machiavelli’s implication here, more clearly stated elsewhere in his writings, that not just Venice but Italy as a whole had been shocked into a tardy awareness of oltramontane military developments by the thunder of the French guns and the measured tramp of Swiss infantry squares is a view which has to be questioned.

The army which Charles VIII led over the Alps in 1494, with its experienced and permanent heavy cavalry companies, its large contingent of confident and disciplined Swiss pikemen, and its train of horse-drawn guns, was well known to acute Italian observers. It was the product of experiences, experiments and developments in which Italian states and Italian soldiers had shared. It was neither a unique force nor necessarily an irresistible one, but rather an uneasy compromise between various competing trends which had dominated European fifteenth-century military development.

The most significant of these trends was that towards permanent, standing forces. The origins of this development lay not in the famous *ordonnances* of Charles VII of 1439 and 1445, but in the whole trend away from feudal military obligations towards paid, contractual service which had been initiated in the thirteenth century and dramatically accelerated during the course of the Hundred Years’ War. The *compagnies d’ordonnance* of Charles VII had their forebears in the similar permanent arrangements created by Charles V in the 1360s and 1370s, and in the permanent forces

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[More information](#)*Part I: c. 1400 to 1508*

organized by England for the defence of Normandy in the 1420s. They were perhaps crucially conditioned by the presence and example of veteran Piedmontese companies and captains in Charles' army in the 1420s and 1430s. Certainly Italy, and particularly Milan and Venice, was accustomed to the presence of standing forces contracted to the states from the end of the fourteenth century. What was unique about the French *ordonnances* was the determination to standardize the size of the cavalry companies and to forbid the recruiting of troops by unauthorized captains. These developments came more slowly and more informally in Italy. In the second half of the fifteenth century the French and Italian examples were followed by Charles the Bold of Burgundy in his army ordinances of 1468–76, and in a less structured way by Ferdinand and Isabella in their creation of permanent forces for the reduction of the last Moorish enclaves in Granada. In England the relative invulnerability of the state and the limitations of its fiscal structure discouraged the English kings from attempting to maintain more than token standing forces, while in Germany the ambitions of the emperors, and particularly Maximilian, to follow suit were frustrated by lack of central control and fiscal organization. Thus, in the 1470s Louis XI could call on a more or less permanent force of 4000 lances, Charles the Bold was organizing a standing army of 1250 lances and supporting companies of light cavalry and infantry, and Galeazzo Maria Sforza of Milan had 42,000 troops on his books, of which about half could be described as permanent effectives.

The emphasis of these arrangements was on permanent heavy cavalry forces. The value of such cavalry might seem to have been placed in doubt by some of the battles of the fourteenth century, but in the fifteenth century improved armour, greater discipline and new fighting techniques gave the lances a further lease of life. Thus the highly developed expertise of such troops and the potential problems and costs of emergency recruiting of them meant that they continued to receive priority in the permanent armies. But this should not blind us to a growing awareness of the potential role and value of infantry forces. The success of the English archers in the battles of the Hundred Years' War lay behind the inclusion in Charles VII's reforms of provision for a select militia force of *francs archers*, while the growing reputation of the Swiss pike squares led to attempts both to imitate them and to monopolize their services. By the later years of the century, despite the provision of infantry contingents in its arrangements for standing forces, France relied on employing Swiss infantry to maintain a balance in its armies. While there was undoubtedly a growing concern about maintaining, and indeed increasing, a national element in the standing armies of the day, the need for troops with special skills and the growth in size of the infantry element in armies were consolidating the role of the foreign mercenary.

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[More information](#)*Introduction: the European context 1400–1525*

Alongside the growing emphasis on trained infantry went a concern to exploit the new possibilities of gunpowder. The siege trains which had contributed so much to ensuring French success in driving the English from their fortified enclaves in France in the later stages of the Hundred Years' War became a feature of all armies. Indeed it was soon apparent that fortification techniques were adapting rapidly to the new situation, and guns became as important a feature of the defence of cities as in their assault. The size of artillery trains accompanying the armies of the late fifteenth century was no indication of the number of guns in use or of the number of gunners required by that time. The 400 guns lost by Charles the Bold in his defeat by the Swiss at Morat were only a small part of the total artillery resources of the Burgundian state. At the same time attention was shifting from an emphasis on the size and hitting power of guns to a concern for their mobility. This was not so much an attempt to increase their role in battle, which still remained negligible, as to ensure rapid deployment and perhaps decisive advantage in siege warfare.

More important to the fortunes of battle by this time was the extent to which large contingents of infantry were being equipped with handguns. Such forces were a key factor in the Spanish conquest of Granada, and here, as in many other aspects of military innovation, the Italian states played an important part. The handgun and the arquebus were rapidly replacing the crossbow as the main shot weapon of European infantry.

The implications of some of these developments for the broader problems of control, recruiting, provisioning and cost of armies were also particularly apparent in Italy. The political and institutional sophistication of the Italian states quickly responded to the new needs; military bureaucracies emerged to cope with the problems of organization and supply created by the standing forces; fiscal resources were harnessed to pay the costs; the peasant economy and peasant manpower were exploited to provide provisions, billets and pioneers. By the 1480s half the income of the French crown was committed to the new permanent military needs, and the same was probably true of most western European states with the exception of England.

The French invasions of Italy in and after 1494 and the release of Spanish military energies after the conquest of Granada in 1492 hastened these developments. The context of the Italian Wars in which large French and Spanish, and to a lesser extent Imperial, expeditionary forces were committed to confrontation on distant and foreign ground and for great imperial and economic prizes led to a temporary phase in which the warfare of attrition and manoeuvre inherited by the fifteenth century from the Middle Ages gave way to a search for the decisive blow. Collaboration between arms reached new levels of sophistication in the conditions of continuous warfare and constant confrontation, and the armies themselves

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Part I: c. 1400 to 1508*

grew to a maximum size for reasonable manoeuvrability – about 30,000. The proportion of infantry in these armies steadily increased from about half in the army of Charles VIII in 1494 to about four-fifths by the time of Pavia in 1525. This accounted for the growth in the size of the armies and for the disproportionate rise in the level of battle casualties, as the infantry were usually less well protected than the armoured knights. It also revolutionized tactics and ultimately contributed to the slowing down of the tempo of warfare which became apparent after 1530. War assumed a fury and frightfulness which was undoubtedly novel but which was at the same time a passing phase; the characteristics of the military organization of this period of wars were more deep-rooted and justify the contention that the so-called Military Revolution of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries cannot be viewed in isolation from the developments of the previous two centuries.

In all these developments Italian leaders and Italian troops played their part although increasingly rarely as an independent force, except in the case of Venice. Thus the Italians who have caught the eye of historians are those who served France or Spain, and contributed significantly to the innovations and developments which emerged from that dynamic confrontation. Men like Fabrizio and Prospero Colonna, the Marquis of Pescara, Gianjacopo Trivulzio, Alfonso d'Este, Giovanni de' Medici, and even Cesare Borgia, have a secure place in the military annals of the period. The army of Venice, which provided the bulk of the Italian forces at Fornovo in 1495, fought unaided at Agnadello in 1509, and remained the only large, independent Italian force in the 1520s, has left fewer and more ambiguous memories. Yet, in terms of the long-term developments of military organization and the relationship between a Renaissance army and the state which created, nurtured and employed it, that army has much to tell us.

This book, which explores two centuries of that development and that relationship, falls naturally into two parts. Prior to 1509 Venice had fought foreign powers, not unsuccessfully, on a number of occasions. Hungarians, Germans, even the French at Fornovo and above all the Turks had been confronted. But the emphasis and the contextual framework of Venetian military development had been primarily Italian. From the first major expansion of the Terraferma state in 1404–5 until the crisis of the League of Cambrai in 1509 Venice had concentrated its military energies on the spasmodic opportunities for territorial gains in Italy and the consolidation of those gains. Its attitudes were by no means consistently aggressive and imperialist, but its military stance was one of preparedness for opportunistic advance. Large forces of permanent cavalry and mechanisms for the rapid recruitment and deployment of armies took precedence over investment in permanent defences. Constantly fluctuating levels of military expenditure

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the European context 1400–1525*

and oscillation between policies of greed and caution led to an erratic development of the essential substructures of military financing and organization.

But in and after 1509 the realities of a new world were imposed on Venice; a world in which the overwhelming foreign predominance in Italy and the growing threat to the Venetian empire overseas from the Turks placed restraints on and dictated the course of Venetian military policy. Once the Terraferma state had been largely recovered after Agnadello the emphasis in Italy shifted entirely to defence. In accordance with the general European trends the size of the permanent cavalry force was dramatically reduced, and money was poured into the preparation of fortifications and garrison points. The new demands of large-scale galley warfare in terms of the concentration of infantry and guns for service at sea, and the fortification of the empire *da Mar*, became increasing burdens on fiscal and manpower resources. A considerable proportion of the revenue from the Terraferma state, which had in the fifteenth century been largely devoted to maintaining a flexible and mobile military presence in Italy, was now diverted to the confrontation with the Turks. Military institutions became increasingly fixed, military responses increasingly predictable. Venice, the most effective military power in fifteenth-century Italy, became a second-rate military power in sixteenth-century Europe, capable of defending its independence but acquiring its further moments of military glory only in its ability to mobilize for and check the onslaught of the Ottoman Empire.

The following works are of value in establishing the European context for Venetian military developments in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries: M. Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford, 1976); J. F. Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (Amsterdam, 1977); the chapters by J. R. Hale on war in the *New Cambridge Modern History*, vols i and ii (Cambridge, 1957 and 1958); A. Corvisier, *Armées et sociétés en Europe de 1494 à 1789* (Paris, 1976); R. Puddu, *Eserciti e monarchie nazionali nei secoli XV e XVI* (Florence, 1975); M. A. Vale, *War and Chivalry* (London, 1981); P. Contamine, *Guerre, état et société à la fin du moyen âge: étude sur les armées des rois de France, 1337–1494* (Paris, 1972); R. A. Newhall, *Muster and Review: A Problem of English Military Administration, 1420–40* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940); C. Brusten, *L'armée bourguignonne de 1465 à 1468* (Brussels, 1953); R. Vaughan, *Charles the Bold* (London, 1973); P. Pieri, *Il Rinascimento e la crisi militare italiana* (Turin, 1952); G. Parker, 'The "Military Revolution", 1560–1660 – a myth?', *Journal of Modern History*, xlviii (1976) 195–214; P. Stewart, 'The soldier, the bureaucrat and fiscal records in the army of Ferdinand and Isabella', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, xlix (1969) 281–92; M. L. Lenzi,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Part I: c. 1400 to 1508

‘Fanti e cavalieri nelle prime guerre d’ Italia (1494–1527)’, *Ricerche storiche*,
vii–viii (1977–8) 7–92, 359–415.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

The beginnings of Venetian expansion

The rapid creation of a Terraferma state by Venice in the first three decades of the fifteenth century gives an impression of a new orientation of Venetian policy which is very misleading. The appearance of the Lion of St Mark, the symbol of Venetian authority, on city walls and town halls from the banks of the Adda in the west to the Isonzo in the east, and from the foothills of the Alps to the Po, seemed a dramatic extension of the power and influence of the lagoon republic. There were many at the time, and have been since, who spoke of Venetian imperialism shifting its emphasis sharply from east to west in the face of an irresistible Turkish advance and a consequent decline of Levantine commercial interests. But this is to exaggerate both the power of the Turks in the early fifteenth century and their impact on eastern Mediterranean trade, and the novelty of Venice's interest in the Italian mainland. Direct rule replaced covert economic and diplomatic influence as the method of Venice's role in northern Italy in the early fifteenth century, but the innovations were institutional rather than political, and particularly were they apparent in military institutions. The creation of a standing force to protect the newly acquired state was the real novelty of the period; the involvement which led to that development has to be traced back much further.¹

Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Venice had kept a careful watch on affairs in northern Italy. While involvement in those affairs had been mainly of a diplomatic nature, there had been a series of military flashpoints when Venice committed itself to armed intervention on a considerable scale. There was also a growing commitment after 1340 to the control of a hinterland which extended north through Treviso to the foothills.

¹ For the main outlines of the history of Venetian expansion and military involvement in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, see S. Romanin, *Storia documentata della repubblica di Venezia* (Venice, 10 vols., 1853–61), vols. ii–iii; H. Kretschmayr, *Geschichte von Venedig* (Gotha, 3 vols., 1921), vols. i–ii; R. Cessi, *Storia della repubblica di Venezia* (2nd ed., Milan, 2 vols., 1968) vol. i; R. Cessi, *Politica ed economia di Venezia nel Trecento* (Rome, 1952); D. S. Chambers, *The Imperial Age of Venice, 1380–1580* (London, 1970) 54–5; F. C. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore, 1973) 58–65, 172–201; J. E. Law, 'Rapporti di Venezia con le provincie di Terraferma', in *Componenti storici-artistiche e culturali a Venezia nei secoli XIII e XIV* (Venice, Ateneo Veneto, 1981) 78–85.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Part I: c. 1400 to 1508*

The origins of this Italian policy have to be sought in the second half of the thirteenth century. Prior to that the image of Venice, isolated and invulnerable in its lagoon, thriving on the rich profits of eastern Mediterranean trade and content to sell to all who came to it from the west without having to concern itself with the problems of distribution, can be largely sustained. The domination in the east achieved at the time of the Fourth Crusade and the extreme fragmentation of the political scene in northern and central Italy continued to make this position viable. But after the 1240s the situation began to change. The emergence of the Genoese as effective and dangerous commercial rivals after their restoration of the Byzantine emperors in 1361, and the growing economic tensions in Europe associated with the end of the great boom of the high Middle Ages, began to put pressure on the Venetian commercial system. Profits began to decline and Venetian merchants turned to active exploitation of Italian and ultramontane markets in order to compensate. The opening up of the direct galley voyages to northern Europe, a concern for the security of trade routes over the Alps, and a determination to win control over the markets of Lombardy were all part of this new orientation.² At the same time Venetian commercial interests began to diversify and a monopoly of the bulk trades of the Adriatic and the distribution of commodities like grain and salt began to figure as significant Venetian economic interests alongside the traditional preoccupation with spices and Levantine luxury goods. But this emerging Venetian interest in controlling routes and markets in northern Italy encountered a new tendency towards political consolidation in that area. The activities of Ezzelino da Romano, and of the Este family in Ferrara, inevitably restricted the ease with which Venice could carry through the new policy of peaceful economic exploitation, and added a political dimension to the confrontation.³ One of the earliest Venetian military ventures on the mainland was the dispatch of an army under Marco Badoer in 1256 to liberate Padua from the control of Ezzelino.⁴

This convergence between economic and political realities strengthened through the fourteenth century. Venice, as far as possible, tried to resolve the dilemma by peaceful means. War was always seen as a last resort which

² G. Luzzatto, *Storia economica di Venezia dall' XI al XVI secolo* (Venice, 1961) 35–139; Lane, *Venice*, 22–86; F. C. Lane, *Venice and History* (Baltimore, 1966), particularly the essays 'Fleets and fairs' and 'Venetian merchant galleys, 1306–34'; R. Marozzo della Rocca and A. Lombardo, *Documenti del commercio veneziano nei secoli XI–XIII*, ii (Turin, 1940). See also M. Knapton, 'Venezia e Treviso nel Trecento: proposte per una ricerca sul primo dominio veneziano a Treviso', in *Tommaso da Modena e il suo tempo* (Treviso, 1980) 44–5 and for a very full bibliography on the whole question of Venetian relations with the Terraferma in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

³ Lane, *Venice*, 56–65; R. Cessi, *La repubblica di Venezia e il problema adriatico* (Naples, 1953) 57–83; E. Sestan, 'La politica veneziana nel Duecento', *ASI*, cxxxv (1977) 295–331.

⁴ Sestan, 322.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The beginnings of Venetian expansion*

was not only costly but also immensely damaging to the free flow of trade. Venetian policy concentrated on containing the growth of the signorial states on the Italian mainland by carefully arranged alliances and by subversion. Economic embargoes and diplomatic pressure were the preferred weapons, combined with a willingness to extend direct control over the immediate hinterland of the lagoon, to achieve both political security and a certain area of economic latitude. But as the political pressure increased, and particularly as the danger emerged of anti-Venetian alliances between the states on either side of that narrow hinterland, so Venice was forced to consider military intervention even to survive.

If the need for a permanent military commitment emerged very slowly on the Italian mainland, such a commitment was apparent much earlier in the empire overseas. The events surrounding the Fourth Crusade gave Venice control not only of three-eighths of the Byzantine empire, but also of Zara and the Dalmatian coastline captured by the crusaders before the final expedition to Constantinople itself. The key points that now required permanent defensive arrangements included Negroponte, Modon and Coron in the south-eastern corner of the Morea, Crete, and a growing number of bases on the eastern shore of the Adriatic.⁵ In Crete the problem was solved for the time being by the establishment of Venetian feudatories on the island with an obligation to produce troops when called upon, but throughout the empire small permanent garrisons began to appear.⁶ For the most part the men recruited came from the empire itself, but even during the thirteenth century there was some recruitment of Italian leaders and Italian men for service in the garrisons.⁷ In the second half of the thirteenth century Venice was also engaged in the gradual subjugation of Istria in order to secure complete control of the northern Adriatic. This was carried out by a series of amphibious operations controlled by Venetian galley captains and largely involving the use of men from Venice and the lagoon. In the 1280s Trieste and Capo d'Istria were subdued and their defensive walls pulled down.⁸ This very early commitment to military enterprises and to permanent military defence has to be seen as a factor in the surprisingly mature Venetian responses to military problems which will be a major theme of this book.

⁵ F. Thiriet, *La Romanie vénétienne au moyen âge*, Bibliothèque des Ecoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 193 (Paris, 1959) 63–140; S. Borsari, *Studi sulle colonie veneziane in Romania nel XIII secolo* (Naples, 1966); *Venezia e il Levante fino al secolo XV*, ed. A. Pertusi (Florence, 1973), vol. i.

⁶ S. Borsari, *Il dominio veneziano a Creta nel XIII secolo* (Naples, 1963) 27–9; in 1301 the Cretan feudatories agreed to provide troops for the Venetian fleet (Predelli, i, 14).

⁷ For the employment of Tiberto Brandolini in Albania in the thirteenth century, see A. Brandolini, *I Brandolini da Bagnacavallo* (Venice, 1942) 31; for contracts for the employment of mercenaries in the empire in the early fourteenth century, see Predelli, ii, 62–3, 94, 125, 159.

⁸ A. Tamaro, *La Vénétie julienne et la Dalmatie* (Rome, 1918) i, 272ff.

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[More information](#)*Part I: c. 1400 to 1508*

Meanwhile on the Italian mainland control of the Po as a key means of access to the markets of central Lombardy and as the first stage of the route to France was one of the first priorities in Venice's expanding outlook westwards. In 1240 a Venetian army led by the doge attacked Ferrara and achieved a temporary dominance over the city.⁹ By the end of the thirteenth century Venice had established a fort at the mouth of the Po at Marcamò and had brought Ferrara itself under a degree of economic tutelage. The succession crisis which followed the death of Azzo d'Este in 1308 seemed to offer to Venice a chance of tightening this hold. Fresco, the illegitimate son of Azzo, sought to establish himself as lord of Ferrara by seeking Venetian assistance and offering in return further facilities for control of the Po. A force of Venetian volunteers and militia was sent under Niccolò Querini to occupy Castel Tedaldo and place Fresco in control of Ferrara. But the legitimate D'Este claimant, Francesco, countered this move by an appeal to the pope, who, as overlord of the city, placed Venice under an interdict and sent papal troops to drive out the Venetians. The struggle dragged on for over a year until finally the Venetians were evicted from Castel Tedaldo and withdrew. The wider implications of the interdict for Venetian commerce were probably more influential in bringing about this result than actual military pressure, and it seems that the Venetian military commitment was never large. The troops employed were mostly raised within the lagoon area and commanded by Venetians, with the exception of one or two Dalmatian contingents like that of Count Doimo da Veglia. The episode brought home to Venice some of the problems raised by physical intervention on the Italian mainland, particularly when the interests of the pope were involved, and no doubt served to restrain any rapid development of tendencies in that direction.¹⁰

A revolt in Zara in 1311 led to a more effective display of military strength. A Venetian army was landed from the sea with a significant proportion of foreign mercenaries, including the Majorcan leader Dalmazio de' Banoli, but overall command was still in the hands of Venetian nobles. It succeeded in beating off a Hungarian attempt to relieve Zara and finally forced the city to surrender in 1312. Dalmazio de' Banoli was not only one of the first condottieri employed by Venice, but presaged the behaviour of some of his more distinguished successors by attempting to betray his employers and desert to the Hungarians. However, it seems unlikely that, although his treacherous conduct attracted a good deal of attention from the chroniclers, his example had any significant bearing on the development of

⁹ Sestan, 321.

¹⁰ On the war of Ferrara, see Romanin, iii, 11–26; Lane, *Venice*, 62–4; G. Soranzo, *La Guerra fra Venezia e la Santa Sede per il dominio di Ferrara* (Città di Castello, 1905). See also P. Sambin, 'Le relazioni tra Venezia, Padova e Verona all'inizio del secolo XIV', *Atti Ist. Ven.*, n.s. iii (1952–3) 205.