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Muriel LE ROUX, Sébastien RICHEZ (eds.)
& Eugène VAILLÉ

A Concise History of the French Post Office

From Its Origins to the Present Time

PETER LANG

History of Post Offices and Communications

Exchanges and Territories

This edition is the first synthesis published in English, dealing with the general history of the postal services or the Post Office, in France, from the origins to the present time gathering different studies. Two early books written by one of the first historian of the postal Ancient Regime and promotor of the French postal museum in Paris, Eugène Vaillé, had already founded a large part of the French historiography about the postal issue: *Histoire des postes françaises jusqu'à la Révolution* (1946), and *Histoire des postes françaises depuis la Révolution* (1947). A recent collective work, directed by Muriel Le Roux, historian at the CNRS and Sébastien Richez, historian at the *Comité pour l'histoire de La Poste*, studies the contemporary history of this French administration, transformed in a public company in 1991: *Brève histoire de la Poste en France depuis 1945* (P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2016).

These texts have been translated by Kenneth Berry for Vaillé, and Georgina Banfield for those edited by Le Roux and Richez.

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Eugène Vaillé (1875-1959) was the first academic historian of the French Post Office, in the middle of the 20th century, and the first curator or the French postal museum.

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P.I.E. Peter Lang

Bruxelles · Bern · Berlin · New York · Oxford · Wien

History of Post Offices and Communications

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Foreword

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First Part

The History of the French Postal Service to the Revolution

Eugène Vaillé

Translation: Ken Berry

Introduction

Closely connected to everyday life as a regular aspect of all sorts of human relationships – be they economical, intellectual or emotional, national or international – the Post Office[1] today appears to be one of our most normal social achievements; we can scarcely imagine the precious contribution to human development it has made since its origin by assuring written communication between individuals.

Regardless of the material used to transcribe the messages it bore – clay, wax, papyrus, parchment, or paper – the Post Office connected people, set the way for exchanges, expanded connectivity, circulated ideas, confirmed contracts, transmitted orders, and contributed in multifaceted ways to improving social well-being.

Despite the importance of this role, however, postal history – at least in France – is not well known. A few specialised studies have managed to give us an imperfect image of this history; some of these works, not lacking in imagination, are already sorely out-dated, and other more recent ones are incomplete or inexact. If more general historical accounts discuss the mail service, they usually only mention the famous edict of Luxies near Doullens attributed to Louis XI, which apparently (as we shall see) is the work of a 17th century counterfeiter.

Many hours spent in the Library of the Postal Ministry and especially our research in archival collections in Paris and the provinces have allowed us to clarify several obscure moments in postal history and highlight the trajectory of its evolution. The present work is a summary of work we have done on a topic of which portions are still unpublished. If we have not always given our sources, so as not to burden this presentation, we would like to assure our readers once and for all that our opinions as well as new facts that we interpret in the following pages are based on solid references and authentic documents, even when they may disagree with commonly held opinions.

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[1] Editor's Note: The expression post office means the place of the postal services and Post Office indicates all the institution.

The Earliest Postal Service and the Gallo-Roman Mail

In the absence of written documents, we are compelled to settle for inferences in order to find the origin of the earliest form of postal service. There is support for the notion that if the mail, defined as the occasional carrying of messages before any permanent and regulated organisation, is not as old as the earliest eras of humankind, it does go back at least as far as that unspecific period long ago that saw the beginnings of social life as we know it. Communication between clans and tribes was necessary and the oral transmission of ideas – "by word of mouth" or "de bouche" as it was put in Old French – by intermediaries over long distances must have preceded writing. Thus, as soon as there was an authoritative organisation responsible for the interests of a group, it was possible to give instructions, receive opinions, and send out orders. The Peruvian *quippous*, the *wampuns* of the Iroquois, and the Australian "*stick messages*" all prove that communication was possible even without writing. But from the moment that ideas were written down, the communicative exchange from which the concept of postal service as we know it today was born. "When mankind advanced beyond a purely material existence," write Jacques De Morvan, "people felt the need to record their thoughts in order to communicate them through intelligible signs to others." This centuries-old discovery not only assured the transmission of thought not only through the distance that separated letter writers in the same period but also through time by allowing new generations to profit from the material experience of their predecessors.

Besides writing, postal carriage supposed a social organisation that integrated a person into a group, clan, or tribe and required exchanges from person to person or from one location to another, conditioned by reciprocal, individual, or collective needs or interests. There also had to be more or less developed modalities of communication between correspondents – paths, trails, or roads allowing for travel where messengers could perform their duties as artisans of communication. The earliest contacts were most likely incited by political needs, especially the defence of the group. Individual concerns probably followed the general preoccupation not only with the clan's safety but also with its provisions: the exchange of goods would have created economic routes early on that guaranteed a

necessarily intermittent, slow, precarious but real connection between zones of productivity and consumption. Findings from archaeological digs lead us to believe that since prehistoric times, the amber, salt, and iron routes evidence relationships between different ethnic groups. Is it also possible to conclude the existence of written relationships? Perhaps a risky assumption, but the possibility is not improbable.

Limiting our investigation to the Celts, without going back to the older populations that occupied ancient Gaul before them, it has been proven that well before Caesar's conquest, all conditions were present that would suggest that they had developed a method of transportation and exchange that would not have excluded correspondence. First, there were widely dispersed peoples of the same race with a common ancestry who shared the same language; although they were often enemies, some were united by binding political agreements. Then came knowledge of writing and the appearance of new trade routes, the tin route, and the great road from Marseille to the Seine through the Rhone valley and the Eduen lands (*le pays éduen*). Finally, a relatively dense network of roads was developed, "the natural routes of Gaul," writes Albert Grenier, "[…] that must always have served to the help people communicate." Furthermore, the Celts invented certain types of vehicles that would have been used on these roads.

Thus, if we cannot conclude with certainty that a systematic and regular organisation for the purposes of correspondence existed, we may at least consider it probable. Caesar himself, at the time of the conquest of Gaul when the Roman *cursus publicus* had not yet been created, mentions that there was a relay messenger service over long distances that ensures the transmission of important news, allowing counsel that had been issued at Orléans to be received the same day in the Auvergne.

It was not until the time of Augustus that Rome was to form a similar organisation. Once it became integrated into the administrative system of Rome's power, Gaul profited from the Emperor's measures and their establishment whose goal, according to Suetonius, was to maintain centralised power amid the actions and events that took place in the provinces that were the farthest from Rome.

The system whose origin Herodotus attributes to Cyrus was put in place, a concept that Louis XI later revived in France. Youths and later horses and vehicles were assigned to outposts located a short distance from each other along military roads and give the task of carrying letters and messages from one post to another in the least amount of time. State mail was the only type of mail to originate in the Roman Empire; transporting private correspondence was never a concern of public powers. To this end,

military roads were lined with two types of establishments – *mutationes*, where the relay horses that were needed to ensure rapid transportation were kept, and *mansiones*, which were not only stables but also stores with stocks of food and other products that were necessary for the needs of travellers and official couriers. The latter carried a document called an *evectio*, which later became a *diploma* or *tractoria* that authorised them to act as public couriers and use the staged posts as resting places; they also carried a restricted list of what they were allowed to take from the stores for themselves and their entourage for a limited period.

This organisation was reserved exclusively for military roads. As a result, although we are now unable to recreate the complete network, we at least have specific indications about some of the itineraries that were used. The oldest documents probably date from the 1st or 2nd century A.D., scarcely half a century after Augustus's reform. These are the four silver goblets referred to as the Apollinarian vases or the Vicarello goblets: engraved on their exterior, with some variations, is the itinerary with the names of the Roman stations from Cadiz to the *Aquae Apollinares* north of Rome, showing us the Gallo-Roman outposts from the Pyrenees to the Alps, through the regions surrounding Narbonne and Lyon. This information was specified and completed sometime later in Peutinger's table, Antoninus's itinerary, and the itinerary from Bordeaux to Jerusalem. All contemporary references to the postal routes of ancient Gaul are found in these few documents. They are the basis of many local projects, and archaeological finds have uncovered the vestiges of many Roman buildings along these routes whose purpose is unclear more often than not. Nevertheless, some of these constructions have been identified specifically enough to attribute their function to routed mail. This is the case in the Loir-et-Cher of the villa Thésée, the remains of a what was probably a post house, the *castellum* of Anse-sur-Saône, which Camille Jullian describes as a "citadel-village or postal fortress"; other examples are found in Tournus, Saint-Laurent-sur-Othain, Senon (northwest of Verdun), and the Lesser Saint Bernard.

Horses were not the only means of transportation used on the postal routes; one also finds different means of transportation at the post stations, such as four-wheeled carts and light two-wheeled vehicles, whose construction, size, and weight were scrupulously regulated according to their purpose. Two types of service were offered on the Roman road: one at high speed, which the Theodosian Code called the *velox cursus*, for the urgent transportation of individuals and goods, and the other slower one that Naudet refers to as the "heavy course" a messenger service with appropriate vehicles for transport.

Installation costs of the early postal routes and the upkeep of their stations was originally not subsidised by the State. The service (*angoria*) was imposed on towns that were on the trajectory of military roads and so were required to provide horses and vehicles within the area of their administrative district, under the surveillance of imperial clerks. There were two types of horses – *veredi* for the main roads and *paraveredi* for side roads, but these functions were controversial.

Only later under Nerva was responsibility partially assumed by the State and this was probably for a rather short time.

The epigraphy of the period confirms that the staff at the stations employed for the transportation of correspondence as well as the cartage of people and goods was the same in Gaul as in other parts of the Empire. While the prefect of the *praetorium* was theoretically responsible for supervising the *cursus publicus* throughout the empire as part of his general duties, the *curiosi* assured that orders from a superior authority were carried out on site, that service was run smoothly, and that circulation certificates were authentic. The regional organisation in each province or sometimes even for several provinces was composed of a prefect of transportation (*prefectus vehiculorum*) who did not transfer his functions to the provincial governor and the *curiosi* until 326, the result of one of Constantine's appointments. We learn from an inscription that in the middle of the 3rd century, Mussius Emilianus was the prefect of transportation for the three Gallic provinces – the Lyonnaise, the Narbonnaise, and Aquitaine. Belgium, which was ordinarily included in these three provinces instead of the Narbonnaise, was considered a different postal territory along with the two Germanies; its prefect was Maximus Demetrianus.

A director, successively called *praepositus*, *manceps*, or even *stator* (as he is called in an inscription referring to that position in Grenoble), was in charge of the stations, and the staff under his orders was an important *familia* whose maintenance was incumbent on the State. Finally, to assure the transportation of correspondence and official orders, there was a large body of *tanellarii* – couriers who, according to another inscription, joined forces in the Narbonnais to form a guild (*collegium salutare*) whose role was to ensure a tomb and funeral rites for each of its members.

Thus, the organisation of the *cursus publicus* was regulated in detail and, although it satisfied the State's needs, it was as a rule of no assistance to public service. With the promise of remuneration, it was certainly possible to recruit the *tabellari*, but the uncertainty of their departures was a hindrance to their irregular use by individuals who only had what we might call "occasional mail" at their disposal. However, there must

have been many such "special occasions" judging from the abundance of private letters, especially by Church Fathers, that were exchanged during the Gallo-Roman period. But speed could not be an imperative. It took three months for a letter from Brittany to reach Rome, relying on the kindness of a friend or neighbour. Those rich enough to be able to afford the luxury of a personal *tabellarius* were few; furthermore, and that person could only travel in certain seasons. From Aquitania to Campania (in the example given by Mr. Gorce),[1] the messenger usually set out in early spring and began his return during the summer in order to be home before the grape harvest; this would have limited his trips to once a year. It was less expensive to seek the service of the *tabellari* of the major public administrations or those of rich individuals when their itinerary permitted. This possibility was rare, however, and one could not expect or count on it for any sort of regular exchange.

[1] Gorce, Denys, *Les voyages. L'hospitalité dans l'Antiquité et le port des lettres dans le monde chrétien des IV^e^ et V^e^ siècles*, (Paris: A. Picard, 1925) 293 p.

Postal Service in The Middle Ages

What remained of the institution of government mail in Roman Gaul after the invasions? Little or nothing, unless we count the service that was required of towns, namely to provide horses, work which must have continued into feudal times, since medieval lords often reaped the financial benefit of this responsibility. If, however, postal relations were interrupted by the current political situation, the same persistent needs would have led to the creation of new organisations that were capable of ensuring an exchange of correspondence that would satisfy the political, administrative, economic, and social needs of the time, and possibly even individual interests.

Freedom of movement on the road was the major characteristic of transportation in this period. Rights of domain did not yet exist, nor did the property rights of nobles on channels on thoroughfares of communication and the middle ages were even farther from the institution of a privilege that favoured one or several users. Anyone could style himself a carrier and practice this profession without restrictions – whether it be the transportation of individuals, goods, or correspondence.

For this reason, private enterprises that were created for their own communication needs by the major religious communities, universities – especially the university of Paris – bodies of provincial towns, and even guilds thrived and developed alongside the State organisation that ensured service for the royal court.

The King's Mail – It was the government's duty to ensure the sovereign's relations with all parts of his kingdom, even the most remote, and occasionally with his envoys abroad; letters patent was the only means of reaching someone when the king could not delegate a gentleman of his court. Charlemagne had exercised this service and, according to Taboethius, had three postal routes formed that joined Italy, Germany, and Spain. One of Louis the Debonnair's chapter houses complained in 815 that there were insufficient means of transportation appointed to the king's service and foreign embassies.

These methods were rather primitive. For a long time correspondence was entrusted to foot messengers, but as royal power developed, the growing breadth of its needs made necessary the constitution of a special

corps of horsemen of the Royal Stables whose number constantly grew as the number of foot messengers diminished.

If in 1350, records show the presence at court of thirteen messengers, the inventory of King Charles VI's household in 1330 only mentions eight of them, who were paid eighteen *deniers* a day on the days they were dispatched. In 1421 only two of them remained. By contrast, the number of horsemen increased from twelve in 1239 to at least fifty in 1383, not including the horsemen of the Queen and of the King's sons.

Placed under the orders of the Grand Squire of France (*Grand Ecuyer de France*), the horsemen, aside from receiving a stipend which in 1346 was 6 *sols* per day, were fed at court when they were in service and received compensations for their clothing, their fare and travel accidents such as the loss of a horse, which was rather frequent. In the absence of relays along the roads, they would sometimes run their mount to death during urgent missions and enjoyed the right of requisition of private horses to replace their exhausted or dead mount, in order to continue on their way. This right gave rise to so many abuses on their part that the sovereigns repeatedly had to impose regulations.

Saint Louis forbade that "anyone on our land take a horse against the will of him to whom the horse belongs, unless it serves our need." An ordinance in 1318 permitted the seizing of a horse only if the horseman could not find one to rent. In any case, it was a heavy burden for the inhabitants of the kingdom, so much so that numerous communities, notably Paris in 1342, were exempted from it as well as merchants taking part in fairs in Champagne and Brie in 1344 and 1349. From then on, no more ordinances conferring privileges either to individuals, communities or corporations were issued without this provision which had become a term of art, in effect only displacing the victims of these abuses.

Beside the horsemen, the heralds, gentlemen and secretaries also served as cabinet courier. Louis XI 's accounts from before the reform of the royal mail repeatedly mention specific expenses for the transportation of sealed letters carried out by court dignitaries, clerks, or friends of the king, whom we know he trusted fully. In the same way, noblemen had their own messengers at their service. Starting in the 12th century, the Duke of Brittany had horsemen "bearing the arms of the duke" as did the Duke of Burgundy in 1279. Initiatives by Philippe Le Hardi and Jean Sans Peur (1363 and 1419) contain numerous references to missions entrusted to such members of their staff. However, these were noblemen's practices. In addition to the royal power and princes with State responsibility, only powerful guilds and religious or lay communities could withstand the

considerable expense of a private mail service, of which the oldest was most likely the clerical mail.

The Clerical Mail – A charter issued by Clotaire III granting the convent of Corbie near Amiens the ability to have messengers carry its merchandises is mentioned as early as the 7th century, but it was mostly the influence of religious orders during the Middle Ages which gave momentum to the use of permanent messengers. By creating houses for their orders in regions that were sometimes remote, the monasteries and their public prosecutors took on a governmental aspect. As convents of their obedience developed farther from the mother house, they had to maintain in constant contact with them to transmit orders, instructions, and reports, and receive notices from them. This is how the Benedictines of Cluny as well as the Cistercians of Citeaux, founded toward the end of the 10th century or the beginning of the 11th and having expanded considerably in most European countries, maintained messengers for their interactions with their abbeys in Spain, Switzerland, Germany or Italy.

We find ample proof of these missions, ordinarily carried out by a lay brother who received, in accordance with the statutes of the order, board and lodging in the abbeys as well as a small remuneration in the scrolls (*rotulae*). Scholars have noted their palaeographic importance, but it the scrolls also bear postal characteristics: a scroll consists of a sheet of parchment containing a circular announcement from the mother house, addressed to the abbeys entitled to vote, who, upon receiving it, each acknowledge receipt of the orders or information. The length of the parchment would grow depending on the greater or lesser number of convents where it was sent. Sheets of news were appended to the original text, connected to the sheet above by thin strips of the same parchment slipped through incisions made in the two sheets where they overlapped. Content consisted at times of accounting or spiritual instructions, other times of obituaries of notables. The scroll of San Vital is characteristic of this process. It informs all the convents of the order of its abbot's death on the 16th of the calends of October (16 September). The messenger brought back from his visits a roll of correspondence measurable in meters. This scroll – or what remains of it – since it is incomplete – is 25 cm wide and 8.50 meters long, which amounts to 19 meters of correspondence written on both sides. Not taking into account the lacuna, it comprises two hundred and six responses. Having left Souvigny in Normandy, the messenger visited the houses of the order of this province and those of Champagne and Flanders. He crossed over into England twice to the same end and covered approximately one thousand leagues. At each halt he gathered not only the acknowledgement of receipt of the mournful

news he carried but also the eulogy of the deceased, sometimes in prose and sometimes in verse. The text contains in particular a poem attributed to Heloise who, inside the abbey of our Lady of Argenteuil, lamented Abelard's fate and probably her own misfortune as well.

The system of *rotula* was still in use in the 15th century and may constitute the earliest example of a modern postal option, the letter with acknowledgement of receipt. One must recognise that the sender was not in a hurry to receive this notice, since the messenger carrying out such a mission was ordinarily gone for months at a time. At least the responses came in the convenient form of a thin volume so as to not overburden the carrier.

The university messengers – A private initiative of the University of Paris led to their establishment. In what period did this take place? It is impossible to determine precisely, but the university itself dates its inception very far back. In a historical factum published in its own defence in the middle of the 17th century, the University locates the origin of the postal service that it created out of necessity: "for it is certain that from the first century of [the University's] founding, Paris was filled with masters and scholars from all Christendom. French, Spanish, Italian, Greek, Latin, German, Saxon, Danish, Irish, English, Scottish, and others came from everywhere, drawn by the liberality of Charlemagne and later Charles the Bald. Since no contact or ordinary correspondence between France and these peoples existed, men had to be sent for that purpose to the principal cities outside and within the kingdom in diverse places to alert parents to the needs their dependents might have."

Considering that at the time, the University resolutely asserted that it had been created by Charlemagne, it might also insist that its messengers had been vested with responsibilities since that time. This claim was exaggerated, despite the credence Louis XIII gave it in 1610. The University suspected the disbelief of others, and when postal contractors during a legal dispute requested it to produce documentary proof of its concession for the messenger service, it responded that it was unable to do so, since such proof had been lost along with that of its own creation. However, it went on to say – not without a certain irony – that if the original document of the Salic law, the first letters of nobility of the most illustrious Houses of France, or the founding act of the Twelve Peers were ever found, it should come as no surprise if the titles of the university were found among the lot.

At least, the University was correct in maintaining that its first messengers had been instituted to insure a liaison between students and

their families. These messengers were of two kinds: the great and lesser messengers. The former did not travel, they were akin to "correspondents" and were of service in Paris to scholars from the diocese they represented as their parents would have been, had they been present. The minor messengers, also called *flying messengers*, travelled regularly to maintain communications between students and their families.

As early as 7 February 1297, Philippe the Fair granted his protection by letters of safeguard to the masters, scholars and messengers of the Universities of Paris and Orléans. This is the first written mention of these messengers, whose privileges the university was soon to consecrate in documentary form. The messengers belonged to the College of the Arts, one of the four colleges of the University, which gathered three-quarters of the academic population; each of its four Nations – France, Normandy, Picardy and England (replaced by Germany during the Hundred Years War) – appointed the messengers of the dioceses included in the territory under their authority. The fundamental role of these messengers was to "carry letters, money, equipage and luggage for masters and scholars, as stated by the University in one of its requests, with the possibility of extending these services to the public in the cities and other places of their establishment…given the common right of people to use the occasion of one man's journey to write friends and send whatever one wished to correspondents, if the messenger agreed…who was quite likely to be a university messenger, since at the time they were established, neither public nor ordinary officers of the kings or the communities were available." This was exact.

No one disputed the rights of the University messengers in the Middle Ages, freedom of circulation being the rule, all the more so since their participation made it possible for the public to dispatch correspondence that no other enterprise could deliver. Thus, a right was created in their favour, through the recognition the university received from royal power. A document in 1641 described the right bestowed in the university as intended "to serve all kinds of persons without prejudice in the foundation of their office, the right to dispatch on regular days, to keep open offices, to carry letters, parcels, money, proceedings and investigations and in general anything entrusted to them by the public, regardless of one's station, and even to transport travellers." The University also obtained exemptions, franchises, and immunities for its messengers, successively granted to the regents and scholars, and to its officers and henchmen. These privileges were not insignificant, including an exemption from tallages, tithe aids, the salt tax, impositions, city tolls, taxes on wine, loans and other subsidies, watches, gate keeping, the housing of servicemen, exemptions from the

contribution to the "joyous event" (*joyeux avènement*), and from all public obligations, whether municipal or civil, consulate, tutelage, guardianship, sludge commissionership, etc. These exemptions attracted candidates as much if not more than the proceeds of the office, since a commissioner, ordinarily the provost of Paris, being designated as defender and exclusive judge, with power of appeal to parliament, of disputes involving messengers. The number of applicants became such that the University, which at the origin of this institution distributed offices for derisory sums, four *sols parisis* by way of commission, and one or two crowns to the benefit of the brotherhood under the patronage of saint Charlemagne, began selling and leasing them. We will come across them again later.

City Messengers – Early on the municipal body needed an agent of communication who was capable of carrying notices of decisions emanating from the administration or the police to the concerned parties. His responsibilities were both those of a bailiff and a town-crier. He was called the *Huche* in Montferrand, the *Message* in Narbonne and Cuxas d'Aude, and simply the messenger in numerous other places. His functions were secondarily postal, but the expression remained even after a special transport of correspondence was instituted, and the messenger continued to serve exclusively communal functions under that name in some localities. Thus, some are found in Narbonne and the Comtat Venaissin in the 16th and 17th centuries who, like diocese messengers, had no postal attributes. What appears likely is that this agent originally fulfilled the double task of ensuring that orders emanating from the municipal body were carried out and delivering its mail; the difference only came about with the development of communications between the inhabitants of one place and people in other areas. The appointment of this staff was claimed by the community when the road was free and was either voted by the people's assembly or resulted from a spontaneous decision of the communal authority. Sometimes, however, it was a royal concession included in the city's privileges, while in important cities particularly, private initiative also played a part, the messenger choosing his occupation himself as he would any other profession. He was the person the community went to before the establishment of a titular holder of the function. The accounting ledgers of the provostry of Paris for 1202-1203 refer to expenses for the transport of letters and messages, and the oldest known register of the tithe for Paris in 1292 under Philippe the Fair mentions the existence of thirteen messengers subject to the tithe. Eleven of them worked for the public service the other two exercised their functions respectively in the service of Queen Marguerite, and of the Count of Artois. Their fees varied from 12 *deniers* to 36 *sols*. Later, in February 1297, the account ledgers

of Montferrand attribute 67 s. and 6 d. to the "robbes" of the *Huche* and of the messenger. Mention of the latter is found in the privileges of some localities: Grenade in 1350, Puisserguier in 1353, Grasse in 1355, Marvejols in 1366, among others. The end of the 14th century seems to mark the passage from the stage of the occasional use of a private messenger established in the locality to exercise a trade to the institution of a permanent and official municipal agent remunerated for the task and departing on fixed days. In 1384 the Capitouls of Toulouse had at their disposal a messenger for Paris, and from then on these municipal officers, who are mentioned in the communal archives, grow in number. They are found in Dijon in 1423, in Amiens in 1424, in Reims in 1429, in Orléans in 1432, which does not mean that they did not exist before. In those years they were called foot messengers or horsemen depending on the individual case, but with no mention of a specific route to be served. They most likely went wherever they were dispatched. The first instances of appointments to a specific route in the documents we were able to consult do not appear until 1508 for the route from Lyon to Paris, in 1522 for the route from Monbrison to Paris, and in 1549 from Toulouse to Lyon and Toulouse to Bordeaux. The messenger's fee was provided either by the community in the form of wages, or by the recipient of merchandise. It was calculated per errand or else as a tax levied on the inhabitants of the town. In 1487 the municipal territory of Amiens grants him a single "robe" of livery but housed him in 1488, and in 1497 allotted him a bonus of 40 *sols*.

Other couriers – A few special organisations must be added to these messenger services. Some wealthy individuals – Jacques Coeur, for instance – had private couriers; some prosperous lords held the right to a courier, because of the recognition between a vassal and his overlord and the extent of their land. Such was the case, for instance, of the barony of Milly whose proprietor still exercised this right in the 18h century; some corporation, like the haberdashers (whom du Cange cites), had a courier State agency, the court of accounts for instance, used one as well, as did foreign brotherhoods, for the most part Swiss or Italian. The merchants of Florence and the shopkeepers of St. Gallen had similarly organised direct services with Lyon, with the fairs of Champagne and even with Avignon, especially during the popes' stays. The number of messengers on the roads in the Middle Ages, was therefore considerable, and these messengers already provided an important activity.

Post and Courier Services from Louis XI to Henri III

The King's Mail – Until now the pace of delivery could not have been very rapid. The foot messenger was hampered by his own fatigue, just as the horseman was by the exhaustion of his mount. Both would have needed to break their course in order to rest, thus delaying the service. Dismayed by these difficulties that disrupted the efficiency of his affairs, Louis XI put an end to the single horseback couriers in the King's service and instituted a relay system.

Louis XI is considered as the founder of the postal service in France. But let us be clear on this point. If we are considering the royal mail as the service that carried royal correspondence, then that merit (if there is any) must go to the first king of France who needed to convey his orders. If, however, we are referring to letter mail, this service, as we shall see, was only constituted later on. Louis XI inaugurated the equestrian mail, a system of relay transportation that made it possible for its own agents and letters to arrive at their goal in the shortest possible time. The post station that furnished a fresh mount in exchange for a tired horse allowed the king's envoy to continue on to his destination without halting, since the length of the trajectory was not limited by one horse's exhaustion. If the king found that it was not indispensable to send one of his own horsemen, the letter that was entrusted to its bearer, who was referred to as a "horseman bearing the king's mail" ("*chevaucheur tenant la poste pour le roi*"), would pass through different hands until it reached the end of the postal route.

A document attributed to Louis XI, written in Luxies near Doullens on 19 June 1464, is considered as the instrument that created this institution; it contains a wealth of information that is disproportional to the usual doubts that surround innovations of this magnitude. Every detail is perhaps too well accounted for by tradition. Despite the hesitation with which the compiler of the decrees of the kings of France published a text whose original version was nowhere to be found, the original decree was undisputed until 1937 when Gaston Zeller used linguistic evidence to prove its inauthenticity: many of the words used in the document were linguistic anachronisms. We have appended professional historical arguments to this proof, since at that time in postal history, the descriptions

attributed to the "great courier masters of France" and the "masters of horses in the king's service" were no longer applicable. Furthermore, the travel segments of four to four leagues were not in practice until the 17th century, and finally, the date 1464 for the inauguration of the service conflicts with Comines's Statement referring to the creation of the service by letters patent prescribed by Charles VIII on 27 January 1487 and the appointment of Robert Paon. According to the document, Louis XI chose this man in 1479 to supervise the performance of the new service under the title of *Contrôleur Général des Chevaucheurs de l'Écurie du Roi* (Controller General of the Horsemen of the King's Stable), with an allocation that was far less that what was necessary to carry out his duties. Finally, there is no trace in the documents of the creation of postal routes until 1479. So many changes in so little time confirm the theory of the inauthenticity of the edict. The edict was also unknown to the earliest authors of postal history, especially to Jean Chenu who in 1620 in his book of the *Offices de France* and again in 1635 in a later edition mentions the service Louis XI established without referring to the underlying document, although he does mention several other edicts. To our knowledge, the edict of 1464 was published for the first time in 1660 in a collection of postal documents printed in Paris by Nicolas Bessin; its pagination appears to have been modified by the insertion of the new document while the book was in press. The author and the beneficiary of the arrangements that were inserted could well be the superintendent at the time, Jérôme de Nouveau, who was seeking reimbursement at that time for taxes imposed on him; to avoid the exaction, Nouveau had to establish his credentials as a commensal of the king's household.

Although it was not until later on, Louis XI was incontestably the creator of the State postal or relay mail service. There is a reference in an old anecdote about the preacher Olivier Maillard, who was known for his independent thinking and sharp tongue. Having boldly spoken his mind about some of Louis XI's acts, he received the king's envoy who conveyed to Maillard that if he persisted, he would be drowned in the river. "Tell your Majesty," he replied to the envoy, "that he may do so because he is the king, but assure him that I shall arrive in heaven by that waterway sooner than he ever will on earth with his postal horses."

Robert Paon set up the first postal routes in the king's service. Initially these were not only permanent routes but also channels of communication that were created as political needs arose, only to disappear later when these needs ended. Nonetheless, a network was gradually formed. One if its receipts dated 14 December 1480 was signed by several horsemen who served at the postal relays between Bordeaux and Burgundy "in order to