

5. His Majesty's agent

Count Lagnasco arrived in The Hague in July 1716, but he had certainly been communicating with Dutch agents, banks and merchants before that. Unfortunately, no documents have survived that can inform us how he initially established contact with his correspondents. Lagnasco's passport, issued on 19 May 1716 in Danzig (Gdańsk) and signed by both Augustus the Strong and General Field Marshal Flemming, states that the Count "travelled to Holland [in order to take care of] certain duties".⁷¹ Besides acquiring art for Augustus the Strong, Lagnasco also inquired about the negotiations concerning the ongoing Great Northern War, and investigated the prospects of acquiring warships for the king. On a more personal level, he also went to the Netherlands to wrap up the estate of his mother-in-law, who had died in 1715.⁷² But why did Augustus the Strong send Lagnasco to Holland? What made him a suitable agent for this undertaking?

In their study *Double Agents. Cultural and Political Brokerage in Early Modern Europe*, Marika Keblusek and Badeloch Vera Noldus argue that: "the term 'agent' should be interpreted as referring to a function rather than a profession [...]", i.e., being an "agent" was not a person's main profession, but rather a duty assumed for a set period of time. In order to "become" an agent, a person had to satisfy the following preconditions: 1. The ability to construct (personal) networks, 2. Possess the social skills and knowledge to maintain these networks, 3. The ability to effortlessly switch between political and scholarly networks, and 4. Be willing to accept compensation in the form of personal advantages and reciprocity rather than money.⁷³

Lagnasco thoroughly fulfilled these four requirements. He had gained diplomatic experience while participating in the negotiations involving the retrieval of the Polish crown in 1709 (to which Saxony had to renounce its claim) after the Treaty of Altranstädt 1706), and he had represented Saxony during the Peace of Utrecht 1713 along with Gottlob Friedrich von Gersdorff (1680–1751) and Georg

Graf von Werthern (1663–1721), a task that was assigned “to only the most experienced ministers in state affairs [...]”.⁷⁴ Earlier diplomatic missions had taken him to The Hague and Rome. Lagnasco had an extensive international network of diplomats, politicians and traders to draw upon. Although we do not know anything about his schooling, it is very likely that he followed a classical education. Through his service at the Saxon court, he was acquainted with the king's love for porcelain, and had knowledge of the fine arts. Finally, both through the time he served in Holland and his personal connection to the country through his wife, the daughter of a Dutch general, he was surely acquainted with the Dutch way of life, the art market and Dutch merchants in general.

5.1 War correspondence

Since Lagnasco's assignment to the Netherlands was also of political nature, the majority of the correspondence with the king describes diplomatic issues. Due to the complex nature of the prevailing political climate in 1716, a short overview is given here. The Great Northern War had already been raging for 16 years when Lagnasco arrived in The Hague in 1716. A tripartite alliance between the Russian Tsardom, led by Tsar Peter I of Russia (1672–1725), Denmark-Norway (ruled by Frederick IV, 1671–1730) and Saxony-Poland-Lithuania under Augustus the Strong, attacked Sweden (ruled by Charles XII, 1682–1718), challenging the Swedish Empire's predominance in the Baltic Sea. After leaving the alliance in 1700 and 1706 respectively, Denmark-Norway and Saxony-Poland-Lithuania rejoined the coalition in 1709, when Charles XII of Sweden's army was defeated at the Battle of Poltava. The House of Hanover (George I of Great Britain, 1660–1727) and Brandenburg-Prussia (Frederick William I, 1688–1740) joined the alliance in 1715. When Lagnasco arrived in The Hague in July 1716, the Swedish army had already been severely weakened by the Russian troops. Fearing Russian hegemony in the Baltic Sea, the allies Denmark-Norway and Saxony-Poland-Lithuania distrusted the Tsar, suspecting that he might try to negotiate a separate peace agreement with Charles XII.

Lagnasco's letters from around this time deal with the planned acquisition of warships, and include information about the prices of several vessels, and how to have them properly equipped. The reason for this large-scale purchase was the planned invasion of Sweden by the allies, a reaction to Charles XII's failed invasion of Norway between March and July 1716. An attack on Sweden had actually been discussed since at least February 1716, but Charles XII's unsuccessful attempt had encouraged the alliance to retaliate. By September 1716, an army of Prussian, Danish, Russian, British and Dutch troops and 67 warships were concentrated in the Danish territory of Zealand, primed for the invasion of Schonen.

By the time Lagnasco wrote his letters, the preparations for this invasion were well underway.⁷⁵

Another important event Lagnasco refers to is the arrest of Georg Heinrich von Görtz (1668–1719) and Stanisław Poniatowski (1676–1762), both political advisors to Charles XII. Stanisław Poniatowski was a Polish diplomat who, in 1716, was in the service of both Sweden as well as Augustus' rival for the Polish throne, Stanisław Leszczyński (1677–1766). Poniatowski served as governor of Palatine-Zweibrücken, which then belonged to Sweden through personal union, and travelled regularly through Europe on diplomatic missions.

Georg Heinrich von Görtz⁷⁶ was a well-known authority to his contemporaries. Although neither a Swedish subject nor an official minister, Charles XII had given him power over state affairs and finances by 1714. He had been a driving force behind the plan to negotiate a separate peace agreement with Russia after the latter's unexpected withdrawal from the invasion of Sweden. His reputation for craftiness is also mentioned in one of Lagnasco's letters: "Göriz [*sic!*] has been back for a few days; he even talks of setting up home here. There is enough evidence to suggest that he will be able to stay here for some time, as it allows him to better continue his secret intrigues".⁷⁷

Görtz and Poniatowski were arrested on 22 February 1717, an event Lagnasco describes at length in a letter the following day.⁷⁸ Both diplomats had been in The Hague since 10 February, when the Swedish diplomat Carl Gyllenborg (1679–1746) was arrested in London. Gyllenborg had allegedly collaborated in England with the Jacobites, who themselves had ambitions to restore the House of Stuart to the throne. Görtz had also been negotiating with the Jacobites, hoping to receive financial backing for Charles XII in exchange for the latter's support in overthrowing the British king.⁷⁹ Görtz and Gyllenborg's compromising letters were confiscated in Norway, and confirmed the Swedish-Jacobite conspiracy.⁸⁰ After arresting Gyllenborg, the English demanded that the Dutch apprehend Görtz as well.

On the day of their arrest, Görtz and Poniatowski attempted to flee via Amsterdam and Utrecht to the Holy Roman Empire, but were taken prisoner by a certain Mr. Fleermann:

"This Fleermann appealed to the magistrate [of Arnheim] for permission to arrest Goerz", after the former "[...] had left Amsterdam with Poniatowski half an hour before the guard came to search his quarters [...]. Seeking cover, Goerz had taken another name, the same as his secretary who was with him, but that did not prevent Fleermann from recognising him."⁸¹

As demonstrated by both of the extracts above, the later phase of the Great Northern War was dominated more by political scheming than by military planning. From these detailed accounts, which make up the bulk of Lagnasco's letters, we understand that his political duties were as important as his mission

to acquire porcelain. In previous letters about his trip to the Netherlands, the Count would only briefly, if at all, touch upon political issues. That Lagnasco's stay in the Netherlands was as much for political as for commercial reasons needs to be recognised as well.

5.2 Porcelain acquisitions

While keeping abreast of political developments, Lagnasco was also attending to Augustus the Strong's instructions to acquire artworks. It is unlikely that Lagnasco knew that the king wanted the objects to furnish the Dutch Palace. Nevertheless, in his letters he repeatedly offers suggestions on how they could be used as ornamentation, such as a number of garnitures, which would "wonderfully decorate a great hall".⁸²

After his arrival in the Netherlands around 4 July 1716, he immediately set about acquiring objects according to Augustus the Strong's wishes. From several documents we understand that the king particularly desired large pieces.⁸³ He ordered Lagnasco to inquire with the potters in Delft about the possibility of having large vases made especially for him. Unfortunately this plan came to naught: new kilns would have to be built to fire objects of these proportions, which was prohibitively expensive: "Regarding the vases from Delft, Your Majesty will already have seen from my letter of 28 July⁸⁴ that I found the price they demanded so exorbitant that I did not find it fitting to give any response without Your Majesty's consent".⁸⁵ Lagnasco then suggests inquiring with the potters in Rouen instead: "Besides here, they also produce them in Rouen, whence I have written already, but I am still awaiting an answer. I have been assured that they will not be quite as fine as those from Delft, though of a much more modest price, but will have the same effect".⁸⁶ However, the idea of having large vases produced in Rouen did not succeed either. The potters in Rouen would also have to build new kilns: "Nobody wants to engage in making vases of the height that you desire, and it is likewise impossible to have a new kiln built quickly. For this one needs space, which they absolutely do not have. A kiln costs more than a thousand Francs".⁸⁷ A specification appended to a letter from the correspondents David Laurent and Henry Bauldry mentions the maximum possible height of "2 feet and 1/2, which are 2 feet 9 thumbs in Holland",⁸⁸ i.e., about 70 to 80 centimetres, which apparently was not tall enough for Augustus the Strong.

While two large purchases of porcelain were made in the Netherlands for Augustus the Strong, we can only be certain of Lagnasco's direct involvement in the first one, which was organised between July 1716 and March 1717 with the help of Egidius van den Bempden (1667–1737) (fig. 8). From the exchange of letters, we learn that Lagnasco's duties involved inspecting the porcelain offered



Fig. 8. Portrait of Egidius van den Bempden, by Jacob Houbraken after Jan Wandelaar, 1719–1737.

both by dealers and private sellers, and selecting the objects he deemed suitable for His Majesty.

The financial aspects such as billing, payments and transactions, however, were left to Van den Bempden, an Amsterdam *koopman* (merchant) and silk wholesaler from Italy and the Levant. Van den Bempden was a member of one of the city's wealthy patrician merchant families. At the time he conducted business with Lagnasco, he was the director of the *Sociëteit van Suriname* (Society of Suriname), thus directly involved in the West Indies Trade, as well as *bewindhebber* (director) of the VOC, a position that led to his promotion to *Eerste en Presideerende Directeur* (President-in-Office) in 1719. He was also *burgemeester* (mayor) of Amsterdam from 1719.⁸⁹ More relevant is that in 1713, he was appointed as one of the four commissioners of the *Amsterdamsche Wisselbank* (Bank of Amsterdam) who supervised the bank's accountants and employees.⁹⁰

This first purchase acquired with the help of Van den Bempden is well documented. It left Amsterdam on 6 March 1717, as stated in Lagnasco's letter of the day before: "[...] all acquisitions will leave [...] tomorrow".⁹¹ In the same letter, he asks the king to send any final instructions before he left the Netherlands: "I am waiting to leave here [...] Your Majesty could, perhaps, still give me some orders to execute before my departure".⁹² Unfortunately, there are no letters from Lagnasco after March 1717, which is why his role in the second porcelain purchase is unclear. This acquisition, arranged between May 1717 and April 1718, is less well recorded, although several letters from the main players, the dealers Madame and Monsieur Jean St. Martin, still exist.

The second porcelain purchase was finalised around April 1718. However, the dating here is more uncertain than that of the first acquisition. Firstly, with the exception of a single letter from Vienna dated March 1718, no correspondence by Lagnasco has survived from March 1717 onwards.⁹³ We can only assume from the St. Martin's letters that the court issued instructions and asked questions. Unlike the documents relating to the first purchase, there are fewer specifications listing the acquired objects, and although the St. Martins regularly provided information about some of the costs, the overall handling of the second porcelain trade is somewhat obscured. However, a specification dated 20 June 1718 states that 1209 lacquer works and porcelain that "come from Holland" were taken to the "Royal Palace in Alt-Dresden" (the Dutch Palace) on 20 June 1718.⁹⁴ The emphasis on the provenance, the close proximity of the St. Martins' last letter (8 April 1718), and the date of the specification indicate that it is a list of objects purchased with the help of the St. Martin couple.

Although it might be assumed from the overall extent of the communication between Saxony and the Netherlands that Lagnasco stayed in The Hague until 1718 to personally oversee the purchases, the surviving letters suggest that he

had already left the Netherlands in the spring of 1717.⁹⁵ Organising the purchases was therefore left to either his secretary, Monsieur François de Perozat, or his wife, Countess Lagnasco. The Countess' involvement is confirmed in a letter from Madame St. Martin dated 29 May 1717, in which she complains about two lost letters: "I am upset and surprised [...] that Monsieur le Conte did not receive the two letters that I had the honour to write in The Hague, and which I brought and delivered to the Countess to put in her package [...]"⁹⁶ Madame St. Martin also writes that she would present her purchases to the Countess for inspection before sending them to Saxony.⁹⁷ Moreover, one of the last letters from Jean St. Martin is directly addressed to "Madame".⁹⁸