Episode Book

EPISODE #5580

Before the Word Spy Existed: Venice's Intelligence Machine

PUBLISHED	26 September 2026 at 20:40 UTC
DURATION	29:02
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/venice-early-intelligence-service/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:37 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Long before anyone used the words "intelligence service," Venice built one. Historian Ioanna Iordanou argues the Republic ran a centrally organised state intelligence apparatus with a corporate-style bureaucracy, a centralised secret archive, a standing spy network, and a dedicated counterintelligence body — centuries before the First World War, where the textbooks usually start the story. This episode walks through the machinery: the Council of Ten, the Cancelleria Secreta, the bailo in Constantinople, the gazeta sold for a small copper coin at the Rialto, and the market in secrets where you traded a raccordo for a supplica. Then it zooms out to the ancient world to ask whether any of this was actually new.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel's got a whole thing this week about Venice. And I want to read you the line that made me sit up. He says Venice had a whole apparatus that was integral to maintaining its status as a naval superpower, and he wants to know how it worked, exactly, long before anybody used the words intelligence service.



Herman

Long before the discipline had a name.



Corn

Right. He's asking four things, near as I can tell. How did Venice collect, organise and manage intelligence before the concept existed. What did the apparatus actually look like in practice. Whether there was any ancient equivalent of counterintelligence. And how the wider world of intelligence operated back when nobody called it that.



Herman

That's a lot of question for one prompt.



Corn

He also flags that we've talked before about professional intelligence being a modern development, and about the forebears that predate the modern state. So he's picking up that thread and pulling it somewhere specific.



Herman

And the answer is going to annoy a lot of people who date this stuff to the First World War.



Corn

Because the world's first centrally organised state intelligence service wasn't modern at all. It was early modern Venice.



Herman

Fourteen hundreds. Fifteen hundreds. With an archive, a bureaucracy, a spy network and a dedicated counterintelligence body. Which is not what the textbook says.



Corn

So where do we start.



Herman

With the textbook, and why it's wrong. The orthodoxy for most of the twentieth century was that systematised intelligence is a modern political phenomenon. You get the professional services, the standing bureaucracies, the doctrine, and you date the whole thing to the First World War and after. Before that you had espionage, sure, but you had it the way you had weather. Ad hoc. Personal. Deniable.



Corn

And the person who broke that open is Ioanna Iordanou at Oxford Brookes.



Herman

She argues, flatly, that Venice developed one of the earliest centrally organised state intelligence services in world history. Not a network of friends doing favours. A service. With a corporate-like bureaucracy, a centralised archive, a standing spy network, and a dedicated counterintelligence body. Her line is that contrary to the orthodoxy that sees systematised intelligence as a modern political phenomenon, this was developed in early modern Venice.



Corn

Corporate-like is the word I want to sit on. That's not an accident. Venice ran this thing the way it ran a trading house.



Herman

And that's the second half of the thesis. She says Venice did not just systematise intelligence. It commodified it. Information was a thing with a price, a market, and a filing system.



Corn

So the arc for today. First the machinery, how it collected and organised. Then what the machinery was for, which is sea power and trade. Then counterintelligence, which is Daniel's specific question. And then we zoom all the way out to the ancient world and ask whether any of this was actually new.



Herman

Starting with the machinery.



Corn

The machinery, per Iordanou, runs on three channels. Political, commercial, personal. The political channel is the formal stuff. The Senate, the Collegio, the Council of Ten, and the ambassadors. The commercial channel is a maze of merchants' letters and reports, which she calls a pre-modern data bank. And the personal channel is individuals of every rank, named or anonymous, reporting on anything that touches state security.



Herman

The clever part isn't the three channels. It's that they overlap. You can cross-check a merchant's letter against an ambassador's dispatch against a denunciation from a barber. Information gets evaluated through the process of comparison. That's an all-source fusion model running in the fifteen hundreds.



Corn

Which is the answer to the first half of Daniel's question. That's how you manage intelligence before the word exists. You build redundancy into the collection and let the contradictions sort themselves.



Herman

Now the Council of Ten.



Corn

Your favourite.



Herman

Created in thirteen ten by Doge Pietro Gradenigo as a temporary body to investigate the Tiepolo conspiracy. Powers made permanent in fourteen fifty-five. Ten patrician magistrates, elected by the Great Council, one-year terms.



Corn

And then the anti-corruption design, which is where it gets interesting.



Herman

No two members of the same family could serve simultaneously. No successive re-election. And the three capi, the heads, served one month at a time and were forbidden to leave the Ducal Palace during their tenure.



Corn

They couldn't leave the building.



Herman

Couldn't leave the building. You can't take a bribe you can't go to collect.



Corn

That's not a security measure. That's a procurement policy.



Herman

By fourteen fifty-seven the Ten had almost unlimited authority. Diplomacy, intelligence, military affairs, legal matters, law enforcement. By the late fifteen hundreds they are, functionally, Venice's spy chiefs, running the city's intelligence network.



Corn

Edward Muir's description is the one to keep. Secret funds, a system of anonymous informers, police powers, and a broad jurisdictional mandate over matters of state security.



Herman

Every one of those four things is a line item in a modern agency's charter.



Corn

Then the archive. Because a service that collects and forgets is just gossip with a budget.



Herman

The Cancelleria Secreta. The Secret Chancellery. Established fourteen oh two. Official archive of the Republic's state secrets. Nicknamed cor status nostri. The heart of our state.



Corn

Housed in the Ducal Palace, and the security was such that even the Doge couldn't enter unaccompanied.



Herman

Eight to a hundred secretaries, sworn to secrecy, copying and archiving ambassadors' dispatches daily. The earliest surviving collection of dispatches dates from fourteen seventy-seven, and the whole thing gets systematised through the sixteen hundreds.



Corn

Here's the detail I want to hand to Daniel. For the post of archive guard, only illiterate candidates were considered.



Herman

So they couldn't read the secrets.



Corn

You hire a man specifically because the documents are inert to him.



Herman

And that's not a Venetian invention, incidentally. We'll come back to it, but the Greco-Roman world did the same thing. Illiterate civil servants inside the intelligence apparatus, for exactly this reason.



Corn

Which means somebody in the fifteen hundreds and somebody in the third century BC independently arrived at the same conclusion about human curiosity.



Herman

That it's cheaper to hire around it than to train against it.



Corn

Now the bailo.



Herman

Venice's permanent representative in Constantinople. Not a visiting envoy. A resident, heading an established colony of Venetian traders. And his correspondence with Venice is overflowing with information of political and economic weight.



Corn

And in fourteen ninety-one he was expelled from Constantinople, accused of spying.



Herman

He was.



Corn

Two words. That's the whole review.



Herman

The bailo is the clearest case of the ambassador as quasi-official spy. He's a diplomat with a trade colony attached, which means he has a legitimate reason to be in the room and a legitimate reason to be writing home constantly. The intelligence rides along inside the diplomacy.



Corn

And then the relazione. The end-of-mission report.



Herman

Before departing, an ambassador was granted access to the Secreta to read his predecessors' dispatches. Then on return he delivered a relazione, a final report, which was deposited back into the Secreta.



Corn

So the archive isn't passive. It's a briefing tool. You inherit the institutional memory of everyone who held the post before you.



Herman

And the relazioni contained classified material on enemies and allies, which made them highly sought after by foreign ambassadors and by local patricians. A chronic leak vector, in her words.



Corn

The most valuable document in the building is the one everybody wants to read and nobody's supposed to.



Herman

Now the press.



Corn

The gazeta.



Herman

From fifteen sixty-three, Venice officially informed its citizens on matters of merchant interest, chiefly the Ottoman rivalry, through a small monthly news publication. The gazeta de la novità. Named after the small copper coin, the gazeta, that you bought it with.



Corn

A halfpennyworth of news, sold at the Rialto. And that's where the word gazette comes from.



Herman

A state that publishes a news sheet is a state that has decided information is infrastructure.



Corn

And it's selling it. Which brings us to the Rialto, and this is the part I think Daniel will like most.



Herman

The Rialto was the financial centre of the early modern world. Somewhat like an early modern Wall Street.



Corn

News moved markets. In fifteen oh one, word arrives of the Portuguese spice route via the Cape of Good Hope, and Venice's pepper price skyrockets within four days.



Herman

Four days.



Corn

And when reports come in of the corsair Kamali seizing Venetian galleys, maritime insurance rates go from one and a half percent to ten percent.



Herman

That's the market pricing risk in real time off a rumour that may or may not be true. Which is precisely why you need the three channels. Because the price moves either way, and the only edge is knowing faster and truer than the next man.



Corn

Shakespeare's line, what news on the Rialto, is not a joke about gossip. It's a description of an information market.



Herman

And the market had a formal mechanism for buying and selling. The supplica and the raccordo.



Corn

Explain.



Herman

A supplica is a request for a favour. A job, citizenship, a patent, a salary increase. A raccordo is a revelation of a secret, or an invention, that benefits the state. You pair them. You bring the Ten a secret and ask for something in return. And the Ten were always eager to purchase weighty information.



Corn

By fifteen seventy-nine the state was cataloguing and archiving these. It built a filing system for the offers it received.



Herman

Which is the commodification thesis in one sentence. There's a buyer, there's a seller, there's a price, and there's a record of the transaction.



Corn

Casanova.



Herman

Banished from Venice in seventeen sixty-three. From London he volunteers intelligence to the Inquisitors. He offers a red cotton-dyeing process, and then his real breakthrough, he exposes an illegal Armenian printing house in Trieste that's competing with Venice's.



Corn

And the Inquisitors revoked his banishment.



Herman

They did.



Corn

For a printing press.



Herman

And note what kind of intelligence it was. Commercial, not political. That's the continuum. For Venice the two were never separate categories.



Corn

So that's the machinery. Collection, organisation, archive, market. What was it for.



Herman

Sea power and trade, and the two are the same thing.



Corn

Venice controls the most strategic trade routes in the Mediterranean and into Europe. Silk, spices out of India and Egypt, and the link between Germany and the Mediterranean. And it sits midway between the Ottoman and Spanish empires, which makes it the crossroads of diplomacy whether it wants to be or not.



Herman

Intelligence isn't a separate function of that position. It's how the position is maintained. You hold the crossroads, you have to know what's coming down all four roads.



Corn

And the espionage wasn't primarily military. State-initiated clandestine missions reported on textile, cannon, mirror and porcelain production techniques. To steal a march on competitors.



Herman

Industrial espionage as a core state function. This is the part that surprises people. We think of intelligence as military, and Venice treated the workshop as a target of equal value to the fleet.



Corn

Which means the counterintelligence side has to protect the workshop too. And that's where the artisan laws come in.



Herman

Specialist craftsmen in strategic industries were forbidden by law to emigrate. Shipbuilding, glass, silk. Disobedience could bring civil and criminal sanctions, including death.



Corn

Glassmakers. As early as twelve seventy-one, any glassmaker setting up a workshop outside the city faced a fine. By twelve ninety-five, expulsion from the guild.



Herman

Silk-weavers. By the thirteen seventies, emigration banned under threat of a year's imprisonment plus a fine.



Corn

So this is intellectual property law before intellectual property exists. The asset isn't the design, it's the hands.



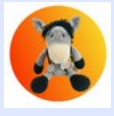
Herman

And the enforcement was real. Fifteen seventy-two, the bailo reports a renegade shipbuilder, Nicolò Frassidono, in the Ottoman Arsenal, producing replicas of the quinqueremis designed by the Venetian naval architect Vettor Fausto.



Corn

The Ottomans rebuilding their navy after Lepanto.



Herman

After Lepanto, yes. And they're doing it by copying Venetian hull design with a Venetian defector running the yard. That's the nightmare scenario the emigration bans were written for.



Corn

And a century later, sixteen seventy-three, the agent Antonio Bortoluzzi reports from Genoa that five Muranese glassmakers have relocated there to plant a new Murano. And he volunteers to repatriate them.



Herman

Plant a new Murano. That's the phrasing in the report. They weren't stealing a technique, they were transplanting an industry.



Corn

And in fourteen seventy-four Venice becomes the first European state to grant patents.



Herman

Monopolistic exploitation plus licences of service. Which is the same regime from the other direction. You can't leave with the knowledge, but if you stay, the state will give you a legal monopoly on it.



Corn

Carrot and stick, and the stick is a fine and the carrot is a patent.



Herman

Now, who actually did the spying. And the line Iordanou uses is that there was spying, rather than spies.



Corn

Meaning there wasn't a profession. There was a function, and it was filled by whoever was best placed.



Herman

Recruited from every social rank, based on skills and the task. Ambassadors as quasi-official spies, reporting in cipher. Merchants as perfect undercover agents, because a merchant travelling with goods has a reason to be anywhere.



Corn

Andrea Gritti.



Herman

The future Doge. A resident merchant in Constantinople in fourteen ninety-six. He codes intelligence in commercial lingo. He reports that he is in prison for debt but will be released in June.



Corn

Meaning.



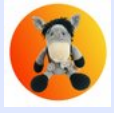
Herman

Meaning the Turkish fleet will sail that month.



Corn

He's writing a credit problem and it's a naval movement order.



Herman

And the Jewish merchant Caim Saruch, spying inside the Sublime Porte, devises his own cipher, which the state approves. Ottomans are drugs. Army is caravan. Artillery is mirrors.



Corn

A whole vocabulary built out of trade goods.



Herman

Then there's Laura Troilo, the courtesan. She hides a witness, Girolamo Amadi, behind her bed, so he can overhear the state secretary Antonio Landi and Giovanni Battista Trevisan plotting, in Latin, to leak state secrets to the Duke of Mantua.



Corn

Behind the bed.



Herman

Both denouncers were handsomely rewarded.



Corn

I want to note that the plotters chose Latin as their security measure and it didn't hold.



Herman

Because the person in the room wasn't the threat. The person behind the furniture was.



Corn

Clergy and Jews as operatives.



Herman

Relative immunity. The clergy from social respect, Jewish merchants and doctors from the lack of it. Leon Abravanel, a Jewish doctor and astrologer in Naples, is sent to Constantinople in fifteen hundred to extract information from the Sultan's astrologer.



Corn

Astrologer to astrologer.



Herman

Professional courtesy as a cover story.



Corn

Then the mundane ones. Lawyers and notaries with access to clients' private affairs, leaking to the Spanish and French ambassadors to pad their pockets. Apothecaries with distinguished clientele. Barber shops as gossip hubs. Travellers, soldiers, refugees.



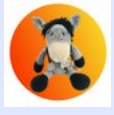
Herman

And banished criminals. Which is where the human cost lands.



Corn

Giovanni Antonio Barata.



Herman

A banished felon turned secret agent. Sent to Constantinople in fifteen seventy-one with a handmade cipher, merchant-style letters, and invisible ink. Venice relocates his wife and children to Bergamo with a monthly stipend while he's away. And when he's beheaded in Constantinople nearly a year later, his widow receives a permanent yearly pension.



Corn

So the state kept its side of the bargain.



Herman

It did. That's the part I keep turning over. The system was cold and transactional, and it also paid a dead man's widow for the rest of her life.



Corn

And the terminology tells you how they thought about it. Your own spies were confidenti. An enemy's informant was a spia, a spione, and by the early sixteen hundreds that word had picked up negative connotations.



Herman

We have two words because they needed two words. Ours and theirs.



Corn

Tommaso Garzoni, fifteen eighty-seven.



Herman

He defines spies as the sort of people that, in secret, follow armies and enter cities, exploring the affairs of enemies and reporting them back to their own people. And even if the profession is infamous, and if found they are hung by the neck, these people are essential, as History and practice have shown.



Corn

Essential, as history and practice have shown. That's a defence of the profession written in the fifteen hundreds and it would work in a policy paper today.



Herman

Now counterintelligence, which is Daniel's specific question, and the answer is yes, and it's formal.



Corn

The State Inquisitors.



Herman

Inquisitori di Stato, fifteen thirty-nine. A tribunal of three judges chosen from the Council of Ten, dealing with threats to state security. And here's the detail that settles the question. Their original title was the Inquisitors against the Disclosures of Secrets.



Corn

The name is the job description.



Herman

They were given equal authority to the entire Council of Ten. They could try and convict for treason independently of their parent body. They were tasked explicitly with counterintelligence and the supervision and protection of state secrets.



Corn

That's a dedicated counterintelligence body. In fifteen thirty-nine.



Herman

And they built a large network of spies and informants, in Venice and abroad. Their confidenti reported on foreign ambassadors, immigrants, gamblers, potential impostors, troublemakers, foreign armies. Iordanou says they played the role of a modern-day Big Brother. Nothing and nobody escaped the ears and eyes of their spies.



Corn

And they could run secret trials with a low standard of proof, which she notes bears strong similarities to the Roman Inquisition, established three years later.



Herman

Three years later. Fifteen forty-two.



Corn

So the counterintelligence tribunal predates the Inquisition it resembles.



Herman

It does.



Corn

Now the lion's mouths, because this is where the myth and the reality split.



Herman

The Bocche di Leone. Stone lion-mouth post-boxes placed around the city for anonymous denunciations of suspected illegal activity. They appear in the late fifteen hundreds. Before that, denunciations were left in churches, on the stairs of public buildings, on officials' doorsteps.



Corn

And by fifteen forty-two a denunciation needed three witnesses to be considered.



Herman

Which is the myth-versus-reality beat. Mark Twain and later observers saw the lion's mouths as symbols of an oppressive, spying autocracy. In reality the reports were examined and only credible ones investigated.



Corn

So it's not a tip line that swallows everything. It's a tip line with a triage step.



Herman

And that triage is itself a counterintelligence function. A state drowning in false denunciations can't act on the true ones.



Corn

The obsession with secrecy, and then the limits of it.



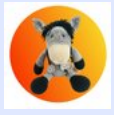
Herman

Fourteen eighty-one, the Council of Ten bars all Venetian government officials from making contact with ambassadors or foreigners. Revealing official secrets could bring the death penalty. Officials in the Senate, the Collegio and the Secret Councils were forbidden by law to speak to foreign ambassadors in private, penalty one thousand ducats. Foreign embassies were deliberately located on the periphery of the city, away from the centre.



Corn

And yet.



Herman

And yet secrecy was also an illusion. Venice is a water-locked city of about a hundred and fifty thousand people in the mid fifteen hundreds, with one of the highest literacy rates in Europe and no court to confine information. When the Senate convenes, two hundred and fifty senators and two hundred nobles have access. And their servants and gondoliers are thirsty for gossip and its rewards.



Corn

The gondoliers.



Herman

And the illegitimate offspring of noblemen were especially prone to leaking. The broglio, the patricians' public networking gathering outside the Ducal Palace, was under close surveillance precisely because foreign ambassadors mingled there.



Corn

You can ban an official from speaking to an ambassador. You can't ban his gondolier from speaking to the ambassador's gondolier.



Herman

Fifteen forty-two, the scandal. Venetian officials leak state secrets to the French ambassador. A delegation demands the culprits, and the ambassador's men violently assault them. Crowds march on the French embassy. The area is ringed with armed guards for two days. The government acts swiftly, in the record's words, to appease the mayhem of the public.



Corn

The secrecy state has a public order problem the moment the secrecy fails.



Herman

Which is where the Myth of Venice comes in, and this is the philosophical layer. The Myth held that public laws and private acts served the common good, producing social harmony. Hence La Serenissima. The most serene.



Corn

Secrecy becomes the emblem of that harmony.



Herman

Any sign of conflict is deemed dangerous and concealed. And the state co-opts ordinary Venetians, including politically excluded commoners, into surveillance, giving them state protection and a dose of pride in their civic loyalty. Iordanou suggests this may be a proto-modern form of patriotism.



Corn

The lion's mouths aren't just a snitch line. They're a civic participation mechanism.



Herman

Jacob Burckhardt's line is the one to end that thought on. No state, indeed, has ever exercised a greater moral influence over its subjects, whether abroad or at home.



Corn

Now zoom out, because Daniel asked how the wider world of intelligence worked before anyone used the word.



Herman

The oldest known classified document is a report by a spy disguised as a diplomatic envoy at the court of King Hammurabi, who dies around seventeen fifty BC.



Corn

Disguised as a diplomatic envoy.



Herman

The cover story is as old as the job. Ancient Egypt had a developed secret service. Espionage shows up in the Iliad, in the Bible, in the Amarna letters. It's prevalent across the Greco-Roman world.



Corn

Here's the parallel I flagged earlier.



Herman

Spies in the Greco-Roman world sometimes employed illiterate subjects in civil services. A deliberate security measure. Exactly what Venice did with the archive guards.



Corn

Two civilisations, two millennia apart, same workaround.



Herman

Then the theory. Sun Tzu's The Art of War and the Indian Arthashastra both advance the thesis that intelligence is central to war and peace. Sun Tzu gives five types of spies. Local, meaning citizen informants. Inward, meaning recruited double agents. Converted, meaning defectors turned. Doomed, meaning expendable fabricators spreading disinformation as a decoy for counterintelligence. And surviving, meaning the ones who come back with accurate intelligence.



Corn

Doomed is the one that stops you. He's naming a category of agent whose function is to be caught and killed.



Herman

To be believed while doing it. It's a counterintelligence weapon disguised as a spy.



Corn

Medieval Europe.



Herman

Excelled at counter-subversion through the Catholic inquisitions. Centrally organised mass interrogations and detailed record-keeping. Which is the institutional ancestor of the Venetian Inquisitors, three years before the Roman one.



Corn

The Renaissance shift is the resident ambassador.



Herman

Italian city-states install resident ambassadors in foreign capitals to collect intelligence. That's the institutional innovation, and Venice is the one that perfects and systematises it.



Corn

Daniel's question, was there an ancient equivalent of counterintelligence, gets a clean answer. Yes. The State Inquisitors, fifteen thirty-nine, explicitly tasked with protecting state secrets, with the authority to try and convict for treason on their own.



Herman

He has the paperwork rather than the thing. A manual, a receipt, a wiring diagram.



Corn

Sorry, what?



Hilbert

The dehumidifier was broken for eleven years. Nobody would sign for a new one because the old one was still on the asset register.



Corn

Go on.



Hilbert

I worked nights as an archivist for a regional water authority. Flood reports and land dispute records going back to the seventeen hundreds. Cataloguing. I've read more about drainage than any man should.



Herman

And the Secret Chancellery.



Hilbert

It's the only archive I've ever been jealous of. Eighty to a hundred sworn secretaries. A Doge who can't get in without an escort. My reading room had a bucket in the corner when it rained and a mouse I named after the section head.



Corn

The comparison isn't flattering.



Hilbert

The supplica and the raccordo. You find a flaw, you report it, you get paid or you get a favour. That's a bug bounty. The spies aren't the innovation. Any city has spies. The marketplace is the innovation. Somebody sat down and decided what a secret was worth and wrote the offer in a ledger.



Herman

By fifteen seventy-nine they were cataloguing them.



Hilbert

They were cataloguing them. My great-grandmother was a glassmaker's daughter from Murano. She went to London in the early nineteen hundreds.



Corn

Which would have been illegal.



Hilbert

Under the old laws, yes. Fine, then expulsion from the guild. I've got her paperwork somewhere. She signed it with a cross.



Herman

The law that banned glassmakers from leaving wasn't abstract at all. It was aimed at a family exactly like hers.



Hilbert

She went anyway, and the industry went with her. That's what Bortoluzzi was reporting in Genoa. Five of them, and a new Murano.



Corn

The state spent three centuries trying to hold the hands in place and the hands kept walking.



Herman

That's the tension the whole apparatus runs on. The state needs the knowledge to stay put and the person needs to move. You can build the archive, the cipher, the lion's mouth, the pension for the widow, and none of it changes the fact that a glassmaker's daughter can buy a passage to London.



Corn

The state's answer was to make staying worth more than leaving. The patent, the monopoly, the licence of service.



Herman

Which is a much more modern-looking solution than the fine.



Corn

Here's the thing I keep coming back to. If Venice has a centrally organised intelligence service, a counterintelligence tribunal, a secret archive and a commodified information market by the fifteen hundreds, then the conventional story that intelligence services are a modern invention is just wrong.



Herman

The questions it raises aren't historical. How do you organise collection. How do you protect a secret. How do you balance security against openness. Modern services are still arguing about all three.



Corn

The Venetians had a hundred and fifty thousand people, a lagoon and a filing system. And they were running the same argument.



Herman

If you take one thing from this, take the commodification. Venice didn't invent spying. It invented the market for it.



Corn

The market outlived the republic.



Herman

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've got a moment, a review helps other people find the show.



Corn

We'll be back soon.