The Origins of Patent Examination in the Venetian Republic

Stefania Fusco
Visiting Assistant Professor at DePaul University College of Law
Transatlantic Technology Law Forum Research Fellow at Stanford Law School
stefaniafusco.jsd@gmail.com

Ted Sichelman
Professor of Law at University of San Diego School of Law
tsichelman@sandiego.edu

The Venetian Republic is widely recognized as adopting the first formal patent system in its Patent Act of 1474. Legal scholars have generally assumed that after the passage of the Act, the patent examination process adhered to the requirements and process set forth in the Act. In this article, using original documents from the Venetian State Archives, we show that the examination process often deviated substantially from the provisions in the Patent Act. We posit that this misunderstanding has stemmed from the apparent fact that no legal scholar has yet to examine the original archival documents, instead relying upon the writings of historians and political scientists, who have typically failed to understand the legal nuances of the Venetian patent system. Here, we present a detailed account of how Venetian and foreign inventors applied for patents, how the examination process worked, and the specific requirements needed to be met in practice to secure a Venetian patent. An accurate description of this process is important to fully understanding the reasons behind the adoption of the first patent system in the world, as well as its effects.