Prudence and Experience: Ambassadors and Political Culture in Early Modern Italy

Daniela Frigo
Università degli Studi di Trieste
Trieste, Italy

Translated by John Watkins
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, Minnesota

The diffusion of ambassadors and the increased range and significance of their work are fundamental aspects of modern diplomacy.[1] International relations do not coincide entirely with diplomatic theory and practice, since they involve different kinds of interactions. Nevertheless, the development of stable diplomatic relations has characterized Europe from the sixteenth century, in a context marked, as scholars have noted, by certain profound changes in political life and culture: the weakening of universal powers; the rupture of European religious unity; the beginning of European colonization in the New World; the differentiation of politics and government from morality and religion; and the formation of a "system" of interconnected states. Later on, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the full affirmation of the principle of sovereignty as a constitutive element of the state and the definition of international law strengthened the idea of a distinctiveness in international relations and foreign affairs that profoundly altered the ambassador's functions and conduct.

Numerous recent studies have revised the interpretive approach to international relations in accordance with actual power dynamics during the *ancien régime* by addressing dynastic relationships, relations among European aristocracies, ties of patronage and client networks at court, and supernational ties of loyalty. The historiographic revision of the concept of the modern state and of its development has in turn influenced the history of diplomacy, which many authors are now trying to reconstruct more precisely by analyzing actors, contexts, choices, and events. As scholars have noted, diplomacy did not exist in the sense of an abstract institution, with its own rules and juridical norms, organized according to the same forms in

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the different European states. No diplomacy existed that might be understood as an "institution evolving according to its own laws."[2] Rather, what is clear from the sixteenth century on is the relevance that diplomacy assumed in the political practice of states, and the resulting consciousness about the importance of ambassadors. What was central to relations among states was not a sphere of formalized actions ("diplomacy") but a "role," or an "office": that of ambassador.

Instead of writing about diplomacy as a specific sector of statecraft, early modern authors focused on the ambassador's moral profile and duties. Until the late seventeenth century, writings about ambassadorship were primarily works on political ethics and education in a "role." For this reason, they shared many precepts and recommendations with works on the education of the prince, the minister, and the secretary. This genre offered case histories of situations, duties, behaviors, and qualities of the "good ambassador," but always within the tradition of the ethical *institutio*. This tradition, which developed from the Renaissance on, drew both on the values of the nobility and the court and on a discourse of individual abilities and prudence. Only from the eighteenth century on can we find in these works a systematic reflection on the functions, characteristics, rights, and juridical status of diplomatic envoys, which led to the dissemination of the general and abstract term *diplomacy*, in place of the many names used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to designate an ambassador's actions and duties.

From this perspective, even the question of the origins of modern diplomacy—glimpsed from time to time in Louis XI's statecraft, in fifteenth-century Italy, or in the expansion of French diplomacy under Louis XIV—appears less relevant.[3] In more recent studies, other questions and topics for investigation have emerged instead: the relations between European states as a total effect of practices, customs, and rules; the various arenas of foreign relations (dynastic, military, economic, religious) and their corresponding uses of agents with different areas of competence (courtiers, clerics, consuls, agents, military officials); the daily life of ambassadors and the material conditions of their work (voyages, correspondences, entourages, lodgings, and immunities).

Today the ambassador is viewed as one of the central figures of modern politics. Ever since humanism, ambassadors have been the recipients of precepts, practical advice, and ethical standards; they have served as able interpreters of the politics of their time, as authors of the instruments of negotiation, as architects of information networks between states, and as "narrators" of the *status Europae*. But these different roles have taken diverse forms at diverse times: during the Renaissance, a view of the ambassador as an interpreter of honor and of the reputations of republics and courts appeared alongside the humanistic concept of him as an *orator* steeped in ethical and philosophical values.[4] From the late sixteenth century, political and juridical literature drew on customs and established practices to distinguish between the "extraordinary" ambassador, who appeared at a complimentary occasion or represented a sovereign in the most important dynastic ceremonies, and the "residential" ambassador, who managed the continuity of relations between states and the flow of information. The resident was later assigned more complex and extensive tasks.[5] During the seventeenth century, in the aftermath of the breakdown of the *respublica christiana*, the office of the ambassador fragmented into a spectrum of functions and images: the "honest spy" deciphering political secrets, the negotiator, the informer, the consummate interpreter of courtly civility. The numerous works *de legato et legationibus* published during the seventeenth century present varying profiles of the diplomatic career, and, as a consequence, suggest equally varying programs for the diplomat's education: while a humanist spirit persists, with its emphasis on the moral virtues, a more systematic view emerges of the work of ambassadors and of juridical prerogatives, especially in relation to the duties of the permanent embassies, now spread throughout Europe. Finally in the eighteenth century, the technical and juridical profiles were fully developed and interwoven with emerging codes of modern international law.

Since I am unable to cover such complex developments in a few pages, I will focus on three thematic and chronological stages: the profile of ambassadors in Italian practice during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; the virtues and responsibilities of the "good ambassador" as an aspect of courtly political culture; and the education (*institutio*) of the ambassador between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both in political literature and in the experience of actual diplomatic service.

Humanistic culture and the primacy of *negozi*

During the fifteenth century, diplomacy proved effective in dealing with crises and exceptional situations. The procedures for conducting ambassadorial business were determined according to problems at hand and often fell outside the bounds of customary practices inherited from the Middle Ages. Between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, for example, the relationship between the internal government of the state and diplomatic activity remained uncertain. On the Italian peninsula, the employment of ambassadors was especially useful to regimes supported by a still fragile consensus. Seignories and dynasties alike discovered in the game of reciprocal recognitions and support, of alliances and ties of friendship, an effective instrument for defending and legitimizing their dominion. In certain cases, the play of European alliances contributed directly to the consolidation or to the deterioration of fragile seignorial regimes. Diplomatic missions and interference from other European powers, for example, played an important role in internal political struggles during the opening phase of Lorenzo de' Medici's regime and even contributed to its eventual oligarchical turn.[6]

For seignories and principalities emerging from the struggle among territorial powers that characterized the late Middle Ages, commissioning and accrediting ambassadors sometimes worked as a means to perpetuate conflicts and to impose one's presence and judgments on others' courts. For that reason, when the first resident ambassadors appeared, they were not always met with favor. In 1464, for example, Louis XI expressed his disappointment with the Milanese demand to keep a permanent envoy at his court. He considered it a sign "of mistrust rather than of love." French practice differed from that of the Italian states, and Louis preferred temporary agents "who came and went and did not remain."[7]

In quattrocento Italy, new dynasties were especially prone to make extensive use of ambassadors and envoys to establish political "friendships" (*amicizie*) that reinforced their own power, as in the case of the Sforza, regarded by historians as the first dynasty to accredit a resident ambassador, Nicolò Tranchedini, to Florence.[8] This was also the case with the Medici, who had just risen to power with the support of Charles V when they initiated a series of diplomatic contacts to establish the recognition of their authority, which still lacked full support from part of the Florentine civic aristocracy.[9] As Heinz Schilling has shown, this same strategy proved valuable to the German territorial states after the Peace of Westphalia: extending territorial sovereignty to the field of foreign policy, this treaty marked in many states of the empire the beginning of frenetic diplomatic activity fashioned to reinforce the power of individual dynasties and to heighten their international prestige.[10]

Between the Middle Ages and the early modern period, agents with more disparate titles began to move across the stage of diplomatic exchanges between the Italian states: ambassadors, envoys, legates, emissaries, *nunzi*, couriers, procurators, informants, and servants.[11] As Bernard Du Rosier makes clear in his *Ambaxiator Brevilogus*, one of the first manuals written for ambassadors, *ambassador* was a new term: "Ambaxiatorum nomen modernum est."[12] Yet in spite of this lexical novelty, the apparent newness of this figure should not be exaggerated. The ambassador still carried an indefinite, variable commission, which tended to be confused with that of civil and religious emissaries to whom more disparate duties were entrusted. The same Du Rosier seems to confirm this indistinctness of function in his chapter "De causis mittenti ambaxiatores," which points to the promotion of the Christian faith as the primary reason for employing ambassadors. He draws no distinction between pontifical envoys and those of secular princes. More generally, Du Rosier includes a series of actions and purposes that would not be understood from the sixteenth century on as specific to the work of ambassadors, but which pertained rather to the *missi regi*—the commissioners, or really "missionaries"—who were involved with politics *tout court*. For this reason, Du Rosier concludes that the office of the ambassador touches on anything that benefits republics, principalities, ecclesiastical and secular powers, or lands and cities.[13]

Du Rosier offers a vague image of the ambassador invested with duties, prerogatives, and tasks that would later be distributed among different kinds of agents. But his image was nevertheless true to actual fifteenth- and sixteenth-century practice. The case of the Gonzaga, for example, illustrates the ample range of roles and functions that characterized ambassadorial practice during this period. It also demonstrates how the same lexical novelty observed by Du Rosier might have come into being. The Mantuan envoys originally acted as agents serving the private and dynastic needs of their lords. Until the middle of the sixteenth century, they were typically designated by the terms "orators" (*oratore*), "secretaries" (*segretari*), "gentlemen" (*gentiluomini*), and "agents" (*agenti*). *Oratore* was the most commonly used term in the financial records of 1554, while in those of 1577, the Gonzagas' representatives are listed as *Signori Ambasciatori*.[14] During the fifteenth century, the Gonzagas' extensive military assistance to other states, such as Milan and Venice, had showcased their envoys' capacity for negotiation as well as their scrupulousness in accounting. The envoys were dispatched all around Italy to perform a variety of clerical and fiduciary tasks related to military activity. From the early sixteenth century, but especially from the time of Frederico II (1519–1540), the envoys' duties diversified in relation to the expansion of the court, to the growing complexity of diplomatic ceremonies, and to the pressing need for political information. The ambassador was thus expected, often in the course of the same mission, to play the roles of negotiator, *oratore* in dynastic ceremonies, commercial agent, counsel-at-law, solicitor of affairs, procurer of goods and merchandise for the court, correspondent with other courts, informer, and arbiter of others' quarrels.[15]

Chancellors, secretaries, couriers, military emissaries, *nunzi*, procurators, agents, informers, correspondents, merchants, and clerics crowded the stage of relations among many centers of republican and seignorial power. At first, the ambassador was only one of many functionaries that the new sovereigns used to establish and reinforce their dominion. He was the figure to whom they delegated the sphere of relations with other powers. His responsibilities included the exchange of information, the passage of men and goods, the maintenance of friendships, the weaving of matrimonial alliances, the drafting of alliances and accords, the quest for financial and military assistance in times of war, and the resolution of international controversies. Only gradually, and often as the result of various contingencies, did the figure of the resident ambassador emerge from this welter of protagonists handling relations between states as a central diplomatic player.

In trying to answer the questions of what ambassadors were and what they did in the early modern period, we have to consider the nature of power in general and the specifics of individual political contexts. Ermolao Barbaro, for example, contrasted the relationship between the representative of a republic and the magistrates to whom he was accountable for his actions with the more informal bonds between an ambassador and a prince. The latter relationship was based on personal ties and loyalties. As scholars have noted, election to an ambassadorship in a republic constituted an often unavoidable stage in the *cursus honorum* for each patrician, for whom duties of governing at home alternated with the responsibilities of serving abroad. Torquato Tasso pointed out in his famous dialogue *Il Messaggiero* that the more absolute power characteristic of princes passed on to their ambassadors, while ambassadors of cities and republics had more limited authority. In accordance with the original meaning of the term *nuntius* as "speaking letter," republican ambassadors could not deviate from the letter of their instructions.[16] The difference between absolute fidelity to received instructions and freedom to interpret them was one of the most frequently discussed topics in the literature. The first works on ambassadorship often listed fidelity to one's commission as a criterion for judging not only the success of a mission but the conduct, and thus the value, of an ambassador himself. But in a period of emerging powers and evolving associations and alliances, when armed intervention continually threatened to resolve internal conflicts and the constant specter of betrayal haunted allies, the loyalty of the diplomatic envoy was often a controversial question.[17] The famous example of Ermolao Barbaro during his mission to Milan in 1488 is a case in point. Some of his rash declarations earned him a rebuke from the Serenissima, and his father Zaccaria was compelled to excuse his son before the seignory. When the Venetian humanist returned home, he took the event as the starting point for one of the first works on the role of the ambassador. Barbaro conceived *De officio legati* as a justification for his own work, which he continued to insist had been fully proper. To reinforce this conviction, Barbaro argued from the beginning that total obedience to received instructions was the "universal and fundamental rule for carrying out the work of an ambassador."[18]

Noble and courtly culture: "The grammar of honor"

Francesco Guicciardini warned in one of his pithy *Ricordi* of the impossibility of "giving an ambassador such precise instructions so as to direct him in every particular."[19] Guicciardini argued that in order to ensure the success of a mission an ambassador needed room for discretion. When matters went beyond the guidelines provided by the political literature, and given the sheer impossibility of controlling an ambassador's every move, princes and republics had to trust that their envoys would be able to carry out their assignments prudently. Selecting an ambassador suited to a particular mission thus became a fundamental aspect of a prince's political acumen. As Guicciardini aptly put it, "Just as one can tell whether a crossbow is good or not by the arrow that it shoots, so the quality of princes is shown by the quality of the men that they send out."[20]

In the Italian seignories, the chancellery officers were primarily responsible for carrying out most missions and attending to foreign affairs.[21] Faithful reporting was necessary, since envoys often had to settle delicate and difficult questions of a private or dynastic nature. In the instructions and correspondence of the period, the term most often used to refer to an ambassador's activity was *negozio*, a generic term indicating any matter, of whatever nature, entrusted to an envoy. *Negozi* included acquiring goods and merchandise; engaging artists and literati; looking for works of art or volumes for courtly collections and libraries; negotiating agreements for the supply of grain and other commodities and deals for releasing outlaws; issuing safe-conducts; and regulating waters. A *negozio* might also be a secret negotiation that led to a military accord, to a change of alliance, to a supply of arms, or to financial assistance. Finally, *negozi* included negotiations over questions of ceremony and diplomatic incidents that disturbed relations between states.

The discretion needed for diplomatic tasks called for men of culture, courtiers, counselors, clerics, legal experts, and representatives of aristocratic families. The diplomat had to be connected in some way to the prince and to the dynasty by ties of subjection, but also had to be endowed with expertise and political *savoir faire* suited to the carrying out of an ambassadorial assignment. Above all, princes sought men who shared not only with them, but also with the ministers and ambassadors of other sovereigns, a political culture and lifestyle. The ideal diplomat shared with other members of the ruling elite the same aristocratic and courtly *koine*.[22] Humanist and juridical education, aptitude for conversation, the knowledge of etiquette and the norms of urbane behavior, traveling experience, familiarity with courts, knowledge of European cities and countries, ties of kinship with other noble European houses, and not least, the financial means to cope with unforeseen expenses — these qualities made men with considerable experience at court ideal candidates for diplomatic assignments.

At the dawn of modern diplomacy, then, the education and training of the "good ambassador" were not framed in the same terms that were to be used later in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The ability to select faithful men (*fideles*) for diplomatic assignments was taken to be a sign of "good rule," part of the capacity for judging and wisely distinguishing among men that political authors recognized as an essential virtue of "the good prince." At Italian Renaissance courts, diplomatic tasks were frequently entrusted to literati, clerics, men of culture, and even artists. Baldassar Castiglione was the most famous example of the man of letters as an ambassador, but there were many other examples.[23]

In time, the occasional commissions that dynasties entrusted to members of particular noble families developed into such bonds of trust that the households themselves acquired a kind of "monopoly" on diplomatic work. Nevertheless, the bond between princes and ambassadors retained a personal character, and its fundamental element was reciprocal trust. Principalities lacked clear governing principles, a set way of doing things, and their diplomatic machinery, like other offices of state, rested on thin and revocable threads characterized by fidelity on one side and princely "grace" on the other.[24]

This consonance between courtly, aristocratic culture and the qualities and characteristics of the ambassador lasted until the end of the *ancien régime*. In addition to political virtues and savvy, therefore, the ambassador needed to show a mastery of aristocratic lifestyle and customs, and a sense of "what was fit" for a variety of circumstances. Even the Venetian tradition, marked by pragmatism and concreteness, cited benevolence, magnificence, generosity, and prudence as the primary qualities of an ambassador. Other assets included a well-stocked pantry and well-set table, "more plentiful than lavish," and clothing suited to ambassadorial dignity.[25] The aristocracy had a cosmopolitan character, so that enlisting its members as ambassadors assured privileged access to the workings of European courts and to the labyrinth of family relationships typical of noble and courtly life.

The ambassador even had to be a psychologist, observing human behavior in order to assess the general character of associates and the passing humors of the moment. Such sensitivity provided clues for deciphering court politics. Manuals for ambassadors that combined reflections on the role with more general remarks about life at court stressed the importance of discerning the fundamental personality traits and behaviors of interlocutors and of unmasking appearances to reveal the true substance of things.[26] In 1691, for example, the Mantuan chancellery reminded an envoy to the imperial court that a fundamental duty of any ambassador was "investigating the secrets, intentions, and characteristics of the court where he served in order to foresee the stratagems of others and to carry out his own work with greater security."[27] But the ambassador also needed to be on guard against the "investigations" of others. When asked to reveal the intentions of his own prince, for example, the ambassador had to be suspicious of confidences and wary of oaths, however ornamented with rhetoric.

The dynamics of power, the games of honor, the arts of feigning and concealing, and the language and manners of courtly life thus marked the character of interstate relations throughout the *ancien régime*.[28] Gasparo Bragaccia called the ambassador's vocation "most noble" not only because it was directed toward the noble end of peace but because the true object of his labor was "the utility and honor of his Prince." For this author, ambassadorship signified "homage, respect, and esteem." Princes valued these qualities highly, since the "sovereign who is not esteemed is secure neither in his life nor in his state."[29] In the second half of the century, another Italian essayist, Carlo Maria Carafa, distinguished between *legate* and *ambassador*, describing the ambassador as being especially entrusted with commissions involving points of honor—that pairing of "honor and utility" characteristic of discourses about the court.[30]

Immersed in the many roles of courtly life; moving in the labyrinths of royal palaces and chancelleries; conversing with princes and ministers;

knowing the manners of the worldly men; discerning characters, dispositions, and weaknesses of interlocutors; revealing and dissimulating—ambassadors epitomized the quality and the manners of courtly society and of courtly Europe, called by Lucien Bély, with respect to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "the society of princes."[31]

Prudence and experience: The *institutio* of the ambassador

In the vast corpus of texts about and depictions of ambassadors that proliferated in Europe between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, some chronological stages can be identified. In an essay on this topic, Maurizio Bazzoli has proposed a reconsideration of this literary genre according to three distinct periods. The first runs from 1435, the date of Bernard Du Rosier's *Ambaxiator Brevilogus*, until 1625, when Grotius's *De jure belli ac pacis* appeared. This period witnessed treatises outlining the rules and workings of diplomacy, the privileges of the ambassador, and the rules governing his deportment. The second phase, from 1625 to the First World War, formalized a professional code of conduct for the ambassador. By reinforcing a technical and juridical system, this period marked the emergence of current international law. Finally, since the First World War, the development of communications and closer economic ties between states has created a global network in which nearly every concern or problem is now relevant to diplomacy. In the meantime, techno-juridical issues have come to dominate writing about the functions of the envoy.[32]

Until the very end of the sixteenth century, however, the most widely diffused profile of the ambassador rested firmly in a harmonious ideal universe, "which found nourishment within the theological architecture of Christianity, in the symbiotic union of political virtue and worldly courtesy, of literary experiences and classical values, of Aristotelian method and Platonic influences."[33] The ambassador's education was gained through practice, through the same channels of political *institutio* that formed princes and members of the ruling elite. Politics, declared Bragaccia, was a science more proper to the ambassador than to other magistrates of the republic, since he was entrusted with "all the business pertaining to the state, its security, grandeur, reputation, glory, and majesty."[34]

Until the seventeenth century, the *speculum principum* tradition provided precepts and directions useful to the prince and to his close counselors, ministers, and ambassadors.[35] The rupture between this tradition and the seventeenth-century doctrine of the interests of state was less sharp than has been thought.[36] Even when the concept of reason of state (*ragione di stato*) became the prevailing theory, "the art of governing" was not replaced all at once by a "science" of the state, but gradually transformed itself by preserving some old discursive traditions inside a modern language.[37]

It is thus difficult to trace in these first printed works a specific *institutio* for ambassadors. Du Rosier's long list of talents and virtues indispensable to the formation of "a good ambassador," which coincide with the political and ethical principles of his time, reappears in many other works up to the beginning of the seventeenth century.[38] As Bazzoli has stressed, "the ideal of perfection that circulated in cinquecento courts" might suit many figures, from the courtier to the prince, from the minister to the secretary.[39] Humanism, law, knowledge of states, experience — to these fundamental qualifications, the ambassador had to join, from the sixteenth century on, a profound knowledge of the court.[40]

References to prudence as the principal ambassadorial virtue remained constant in writing on this theme and in instructions and diplomatic correspondence. Prudence encompassed considerations of timing, shrewd choices of means and circumstances, facility in feigning, skill in grasping favorable occasions, promptness in responding, circuitousness in handling situations that might prove difficult to manage. In the seventeenth century, on the other hand, appeals to humanist values of peace and friendship among sovereigns became less common. Tasso's sixteenth-century *Il Messaggero*, the mature result of humanist reflection, portrays the ambassador as "a weaver of friendship" [tessitore dell'amicizia] among princes. But the seventeenth-century work of Antonio de Vera portrays the ambassador as a mediator or conciliator in princely affairs, but with his own power to unite or divide princes by directing them toward peace or war.[41]

Seventeenth-century writings treated prudence more realistically. This virtue underwent a kind of "political reduction," since writers increasingly treated it more as a "technical function of the interests of state."[42] Prudence declined as a decisive skill in orchestrating a negotiation and in fostering "confidence," a practice both personal and political when communicating the *arcana principum*.[43] At the end of the century, Abraham de Wicquefort clearly demonstrated how the notion of prudence had evolved from being considered a virtue to being considered in terms of a "politics of prudence." The jurist wrote that prudence consisted above all in the ability to elude the snares and deceptions of others, in avoiding, in other words, being deceived.[44]

On the other hand, greater emphasis was placed on fidelity: loyalty and obedience to received orders appeared to some writers as the primary quality of a good ambassador. For Carafa, fidelity was even more vital than prudence, since it ensured the sovereign a perfect fulfillment of his political designs and, as it were, rendered the ambassador an authentic protagonist in the government of a state.[45] By entitling one of his chapters "Della Fede, che lealmente deve l'Ambasciatore serbare al suo Principe" [On the faith by which the ambassador is obliged loyally to serve his prince], Bragaccia underscores the importance of the question. In his discussion, fidelty becomes so important that its absence renders useless all the other qualities that an ambassador might possess, since, in many circumstances the security of the state depended on the ambassador's loyalty.[46]

The primary discursive shift in late-seventeenth-century writing about ambassadors lay in diplomacy's full integration into the techniques and instruments of statecraft, with a decisive separation from morality. Still underground and never openly stated, the lessons of Machiavelli seemed to have been assimilated by this point in time. According to de Vera, "in politics, it is quite hard to decide what is and is not just and honest," and it was not always easy to combine efficiency and honesty in governing a state.[47] Political espionage, ferreting out at any cost information on which the security of the state might depend, lying as an ambassadorial strategy, feigning as an efficient way of managing a negotiation—all these devices struck Carafa and other seventeenth-century authors as morally acceptable if they were done for an "honest and useful" purpose.[48] Within the more elastic parameters of the doctrine of reason of state, the actions and the moral standing of the ambassador underwent an obvious shift. Espionage, for example, or using clandestine means to obtain information were not actions valued in themselves but in relation to their utility for the diplomatic mission and for the state that the ambassador represented.

In the seventeenth century, *arcana*, *secreta*, and "interests of states" constituted a new idiom of politics and diplomacy. By the end of the sixteenth century, the proliferation of news and official reports (*relazioni*) about states, events, and courts—as well as the multiplication of ways and means for finding out this kind of news—signaled the emergence of a new perception of Europe as a system of tightly interconnected states. The formation of a "system of states" not only intensified and regularized the relations between them but also introduced expectations, balances, alliances, and counter-alliances that forced all the players to take account of every minor event and every novelty (*novità*) that appeared on the European scene. The perception by princes and statesmen that they were part of a diplomatic system correspondingly transformed and strengthened the role of the ambassador. If a princeley society founded on honor and reputation depended on a network of highly informed and eloquent representatives, the modern ambassador came to be distinguished from his medieval precursors by being expected to perform his tasks aided by intelligence and a sophisticated transmission of information.[49]

The system of resident diplomacy established an effective instrument for gathering and disseminating information. It made the envoy's first duty that of gleaning knowledge about all aspects of sovereigns and foreign states. In time, discussions of political designs, military projects, and questions more properly dynastic were framed in light of descriptions of a country as a whole including its social and economic character. Ambassadors reported on demographics, assets, resources, commerce, administrative systems, and other aspects of the countries they visited. The term that best expresses this information-gathering role of the envoy is "intelligence" (*intelligenza*). Reading documentary letters to ambassadors, one frequently finds admonitions directing the ambassador to probe into the *arcana* of princes and states.

The proliferation of treatises and writings dedicated to the role of the ambassador demonstrates the importance of this figure in seventeenth-century politics. Such writings addressed legal problems, the extent of the envoy's jurisdiction, immunities, and the norms of *jus gentium*.[50] They also outlined the contents of the diplomat's "toolbox" (*cassetta degli attrezzi*) and the instruments and procedures for carrying out a diplomatic assignment: expeditions, correspondences, letters, credentials, couriers, ciphers, *relazioni*, archives, seals, and so forth. Finally, these writings also take up problems involved with establishing the material conditions of a permanent embassy: internal jurisdictions, organization of the entourage, expectations about attire, and accounting.

One vital section of these treatises addresses the ambassador's political education and the specific expertise required to carry out diplomatic duties effectively. On this theme, Bragaccia's *L'ambasciatore* poses first the question of the prince's selection of the envoy. An ambassador's skill and excellence ought to be evaluated according to the circumstances of a specific mission. For ecclesiastical negotiations, it is best to send a theologian; for legal ones, a jurist. In political affairs, it is best to select a man versed in political philosophy. For ordering affairs of state according to the law, someone who knows Justinian would be best. But in countries whose legal systems are not based on Roman law, it would be best to send learned men who know their Aristotle.[51]

The ambassador ought also to possess skills that complement his representational diplomatic role. These include eloquence and rhetoric, arts necessary for persuading interlocutors and for carrying negotiations to a good conclusion. For this reason, Bragaccia calls ambassadors *oratori*.[52] But eloquence has to be used well, tailored to fit a specific negotiation. In political questions, for instance, it is useless to employ pompous rhetoric, and it is absolutely destructive to speak too long, which prevents one from getting down to particulars. But the ambassador should also not be too brief, which risks not making the case in point fully understood. In more solemn situations, on the other hand, it is good to spend a few more words and to speak with a certain gravity. The same principle applies when an ambassador addresses a republican assembly, or a royal council, or when he has to move a sovereign to peace, or to a just war, to request protection, or to congratulate a prince at his accession. In all these cases, as Bragaccia summarizes, the ambassador can "speak with amplification and with those colors that the arts of eloquence teach."[53]

While rhetoric was an integral part of an older humanist education, the seventeenth century added a new expectation that scientific and mathematical knowledge should support the duties of the envoy. Bragaccia saw geometry and arithmetic as fundamental. Geometry was useful for determining borders, and arithmetic for practical observations of states, cities, and fortresses. Mathematics was useful in every negotiation for discussing alliances, laws, subsidies, financial assistance, and other administrative issues. It was even useful, as Bragaccia suggests, for the management of the embassy itself, which, like every other household (*oikos*), had to be governed according to Aristotelian economic rules.[54]

The fundamental form of knowledge for diplomatic practice, however, was always history, the sole discipline capable of preserving the experience of others and making it available as a collection of cases, examples, and precepts to guide the ambassador's work. If prudence was the fruit of experience, how could it be acquired without history? In posing this question, Bragaccia exposed the impossibility of one person embracing the vastness and diversity of human experience. In light of this limitation, history provided a warehouse for lessons accumulated over the course of time: "Our life is so short that it is almost useless, and the recollection of past things is so feeble that it is easily lost, or at least cannot serve experience, without the assistance of written memoirs, which is the same thing as history."[55]

Courts, information, observations of states, questions of peace and war, alliances, dynastic marriages, commercial and fiscal matters, legal controversies, religious conflicts — by the middle of the seventeenth century, the work of the resident ambassador seemed to include every aspect of relations between states. At the bottom of the more professional and technical character of the ambassador's work was a change in the *ars politica*. The qualities and virtues described in prior literature, including prudence, were not lost, but were recuperated as instruments and styles of deportment necessary for the training of an ambassador. As de Vera insisted in his *El Enbaxador*, an ambassador acquired his skills through multiple experiences, by frequenting courts, studying civil science and history, practicing eloquence, and acquiring knowledge specific to assignments entrusted to him.[56]

Practical experience thus complemented the advice and instructions provided in the treatises. Ambassadors received a hands-on education at court, in service to the prince, through contact with foreign ministers, and through their participation in controversies and ceremonies. Envoys frequently had a young man at their side, maybe a son or a nephew, who learned the craft directly on the spot. In the absence of a codified educational program, preparation for assignments came about through family tradition or opportunities for apprenticeship. Experience itself allowed young men to refine necessary aptitudes and abilities.[57]

Ambassadors and early modern political culture

Diplomatic practice made many contributions to early modern political culture, but three strike me as especially important. The first is the consonance between the education of ambassadors and the diplomatic doctrines of their time — including reason of state that guides modern ambassadorial conduct — which they helped to establish. Secondly, diplomacy reflected European aristocratic society, with its values and codes of honor, its taste for forms and appearances and sense of hierarchy and ranks. Sovereigns, ambassadors, courtiers, and nobles spoke the same language, used the same "grammar of life." Thus diplomatic ceremony — to which recent historiography has justly paid close attention — can reveal the nature and forms of interstate relations. As a solemn and public expression of international hierarchy, ceremony reflects its changes and transformations. We may observe in the continual adjustment of ceremonial norms and in their frequent "rupture" the underlying conflicts that animate ceremonial forms, the constant seesawing of honors that accompanied the transformation of power relations among states.

Until the end of the eighteenth century, the marriage between the *ars legationis* and political virtues, between the ambassdor’s professional conduct and good manners, remained strong.[58] During the Enlightenment, the development of international law defined the ambassador’s functions in more technical terms and stipulated that interests of state should be the primary consideration of international relations. But even then, aspects of classical education reappeared in profiles of the good ambassador.[59] Writing in the latter half of the eighteenth century, Alfonso Longo still cited Castiglione’s *Cortegiano* as the perfect synthesis of the characteristics of the good ambassador. And the same year, Carlo Luigi Caissotti, one of the great reformers of the Piedmontese state, identified prudence, circumspection, fidelity, and honesty as the ambassador’s fundamental qualities.[60]

In short, the primacy of individual virtue was reaffirmed in the eighteenth century, and with it, the superiority of the role, or the office, of the ambassador over the institutional forms of diplomacy. Educated in aristocratic virtues and values, dedicated to prudence, instructed in *politesse*, familiar with the life of court, and comfortable in civil conversations, yet also an advocate for states and dynasties, knowledgeable in the *arcana* of princes, interpreter of the reasons of state, and always straddling the subtle boundary between war and peace—the ambassador exercized one of the most complex and significant political functions of the *ancien régime*.

To further illuminate the role of ambassadors as architects and protagonists of early modern culture, scholars would do well to explore how ambassadorial travels contributed to the foundation of artistic, antiquary, and scientific collections, and how the contact of ambassadors with various kinds of artists impacted the transmission of culture. Historians could also examine how ambassadors’ researches into states, territories, cities, and boundaries contributed to the emergence of modern geographic education.

As Bragaccia underscored, sovereigns were conscious that information and knowledge furnished by their ambassadors could made them better rulers. A precise knowledge of other states was necessary for princes to manage their own states. Sovereigns gained insight from their ambassadors’ experiences into the variety and mutability of human affairs.[61] The accumulation of information concerning the political and social composition of European countries is certainly one of the most important legacies bequeathed to modern political culture by the labors and reflections of early modern ambassadors.

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Notes

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1 Together with the monopoly of military and coercive force and the creation of bureaucratic machineries, many historians have seen diplomacy as one of the features characteristic of the modern state. See Federico Chabod, "Esiste uno Stato del Rinascimento?" in *Scritti sul Rinascimento* (Torino: Einaudi, 1967), 593–604. For an overview of the historiography on the subject, see Humphrey C. Butters, "Historiography on the Renaissance State," in *Il Rinascimento italiano e l'Europa*, vol. 1, *Storia e storiografia*, ed. Marcello Fantoni (Vicenza: Colla, 2005), 121–50.

2 Paolo Margaroli, *Diplomazia e stati rinascimentali: Le ambascerie sforzesche fino alla conslusione della Lega italica (1450–1455)* (Firenze: Nuova Italia, 1992), 7. This and all other translations of sources into English are my own.

3 Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (London: J. Cape, 1955).

4 Douglas Biow, *Doctors, Ambassadors, Secretaries: Humanism and Professions in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

5 See Pedro Cardim, "Embaixadores e representatantes diplomáticos da Coroa portuguesa no século XVII," *Cultura: Revista de história e teoria das ideias* 15 (2002): 47–86.

6 Riccardo Fubini, "La figura politica dell' ambasciatore negli sviluppi dei regimi oligarchici quattrocenteschi," in *Forme e tecniche del potere nella città (secoli XIV–XVII)*, ed. Sergio Bertelli (Perugia: Università di Perugia, 80), 33. See also Riccardo Fubini, *Italia Quattrocentesca: Politica e diplomazia nell'età di Lorenzo il Magnifico* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1994).

7 Cited in Paolo Prodi, *Diplomazia del Cinquecento: Istituzioni e prassi* (Bologna: Patron, 1963), 54.

8 Margaroli, *Diplomazia e stati rinascimentali*, 27–30. This was also the case for Ferrara, where an envoy of the Sforza served on a quasi-permanent basis. But Margaroli notes that this was not a true example of "resident" commission, but consisted rather of a series of short visits paid from time to time according to the political necessities of the moment.

9 Alessandra Contini, "Aspects of Medicean Diplomacy in the Sixteenth Century," in *Politics and Diplomacy in Early Modern Italy: The Structure of Diplomatic Practice, 1450–1800*, ed. Daniela Frigo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 49–94.

10 Heinz Schilling, *Höfe und Allianzen: Deutschland, 1648–1763* (Berlin: Siedler, 1989).

11 Franca Leverotti, *Diplomazia e governo dello stato: I "famigli cavalcanti" di Francesco Sforza, 1450–1466* (Pisa: Gisem-Ets, 1992).

12 Bernard Du Rosier, *Ambaxiator Brevilogus*, in *De Legatis et Legationibus Tractatus varii*, ed. Vladimir E. Hrabar (Dorpat: Mattieseniano, 1905), 4.

13 Ibid., 6–7.

14 Aldo De Maddalena, *Le finanze del ducato di Mantova all'epoca di Guglielmo Gonzaga* (Milano: Cisalpina, 1961), 116.

15 See Clifford M. Brown and Anna Maria Lorenzoni, "Isabella d'Este e Giorgio Brognolo nell'anno 1496," *Atti e Memorie dell'Accademia Virgiliana di Mantova* 41 (1973): 99: "One of the duties typical of orators, ambassadors, and other such figures was precisely that of attending to their lords' private needs."

16 Torquato Tasso, *Il Messaggiero*, in *Dialoghi*, ed. Ettore Mazzali (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), 71: "Sì come la podestà de' prencipi è più assoluta che quella delle repubbliche, così la transfondono più assolutamente ne gli ambasciatori i prencipi che non fanno le repubbliche."

17 Lucien Bély, "La place de l'étranger dans les conspirations," in *Complots et conjurations dans l'Europe moderne*, ed. Yves-Marie Bercé and Elena Fasano Guarini (Roma: École française de Rome, 1996), 393–410.

18 Bruno Figliuolo, *Il diplomatico e il trattatista: Ermolao Barbaro ambasciatore della Serenissima* (Napoli: Guida, 1999), 79.

19 Francesco Guicciardini, *Ricordi* (Milano: Rizzzoli, 1977), 182.

20 Ibid., 164.

21 During the fifteenth century, the Gonzagas' chancellery secretaries were employed above all in situations requiring a full knowledge of affairs and of the political will of the *marchese*. See Isabella Lazzarini, *Fra un principe e altri stati: Relazioni di potere e forme di servizio a Mantova nell'età di Ludovico Gonzaga* (Roma: Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, 1996), 204–5. For the Este of Ferrara, see Marco Folin, *Rinascimento estense: Politica, cultura, istituzioni di un antico stato italiano* (Bari: Laterza, 2001), 150–56.

22 Wise princes employed the most important *cavalieri* and lords for ambassadorial tasks as a sign of respect toward the prince who received them and to render the mission itself more effective. See Gasparo Bragaccia, *L'ambasciatore. Opera divisa in libri sei. Nella quale si hanno avvertimenti Politici, & Morali per gli Ambasciatori, & intorno quelle cose, che sogliono accadere all'Ambasciarie. Utilissima alla Gioventù, così di Republica, come di Corte, che pretenda di salire per questa più breve via à gli honori, et principali dignità. Tratta dalla Pratica, confermata dalla Civile, e Morale, & coll'Historia illustrata* (facsimile of the 1626 Bolzetta edition; Roma: Vecchiarelli, 1989), 32. Further citations are to *L'ambasciatore*.

23 Daniela Frigo and Anna M. Mortari, "Nobilitá, diplomazia e cerimoniale alla corte di Mantova," in *La Corte di Mantova nell'etá di Andrea Mantegna, 1450–1550*, ed. Cesare Mozzarelli et al. (Roma: Bulzoni, 1997), 125–43.

24 For further discussion in a broader framework, see Antonio M. Hespanha, *La gracia del derecho: Economia de la cultura en la edad moderna* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, 1993), 61–84.

25 *Informazione dell'offitio dell'ambasciatore di Marino de Cavalli il vecchio, 1550*, ed. Tommaso Bertelè (Firenze: Olschki, 1935), 59.

26 See Donald E. Queller, "How to Succeed as an Ambassador: A Sixteenth-Century Venetian Document," *Studia Gratiana* 15 (1972): 655–71.

27 Archivio di Stato di Mantova, Archivio Gonzaga, MS b. 427, fol. 26r.

28 Jon R. Snyder, "Appunti sulla politica e l'estetica della dissimulazione tra Cinque e Seicento," *Cheiron* 22 (1994): 23–43.

29 Bragaccia, *L'ambasciatore*, 36 and 22 respectively.

30 Carlo Maria Carafa, *L'ambasciatore politico cristiano* (Mazzarino, 1690), 5.

31 Lucien Bély, *La société des princes, XVIe–XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

32 Maurizio Bazzoli, "Ragion di Stato e interesse degli stati: La trattatistica

sull'ambasciatore dal XV al XVIII secolo," in *Stagioni e teorie della società internazionale* (Milano: Edizioni universitarie di lettere, economia, diritto, 2005), 267–312.

33 Ibid., 286.

34 Bragaccia, *L'ambasciatore*, 37.

35 *Specula principum*, ed. Angela De Benedictis (Frankfurt am Main: Klosterman, 1999).

36 Maurizio Viroli, *Dalla politica alla Ragion di stato: La scienza del governo tra XIII e XVII secolo* (Roma: Donzelli, 1994).

37 Michel Senellart, *Les arts de gouverner: Du regimen médiéval au concept de gouvernement* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), 46.

38 According to Du Rosier, the ambassador needed to be "upright, humble, modest, temperate, discrete, benevolent, honest, sober, just, pious, generous, prudent, given to mirth, magnificent, sweet in word and spirit, patient, and benign" (*Ambaxiator Brevilogus*, 5).

39 Maurizio Bazzoli, "Doveri dell'ambasciatore e ordine internazionale nell' *Enbaxador* (1620) di Juan Antonio de Vera," in *Stagioni e teorie*, 226.

40 See *"Familia" del principe e famiglia aristocratica*, ed. Cesare Mozzarelli, 2 vols. (Roma: Bulzoni, 1988); Cesare Mozzarelli, "Onore, utile, principe, stato," in *La Corte e il "Cortegiano*," vol. 2, *Un modello europeo*, ed. Adriano Prosperi (Roma: Bulzoni, 1980), 241–53.

41 Tasso, *Il Messagero*, 62; Juan Antonio de Vera y Figueroa, *El Enbaxador*, 2 vols. in 1 (Sevilla, 1620), 1:15.

42 Bazzoli, "Ragion di stato," 287.

43 On this important concept, see Vittorio Dini, "Il segreto tra 'privato' e 'pubblico': Origini e trasformazioni di una categoria del pensiero politico e giuridico moderno," *Filosofia politica* 8 (1994): 375–93.

44 Bazzoli, "Ragion di Stato," 288. See also Bazzoli, "L'ideologia dell'ambasciatore nel tardo Seicento: 'L'Ambassadeur et ses fonctions' di Abraham de Wicquefort," in *Stagioni e teorie*, 245–66.

45 Carafa, *L'ambasciatore*, 16–19.

46 Bragaccia, *L'ambasciatore*, 542.

47 De Vera, *El Enbaxador*, 1:77.

48 Carafa, *L'ambasciatore*, 58–61.

49 *L'informazione politica in Italia (secoli XVI–XVIII)*, ed. Elena Fasano Guarini and Mario Rosa (Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 2001).

50 Daniela Frigo, "Ambasciatori, ambasciate e immunitá diplomatiche nella letteratura politica italiana (secc. XVI–XVIII)," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome: Italie et Méditerranée* 119.1 (2007): 31–50.

51 Bragaccia, *L'ambasciatore*, 118.

52 Ibid., 123.

53 Ibid., 131.

54 Ibid., 132.

55 Ibid., 147.

56 De Vera, *El Enbaxador*, 1:64.

57 For an interesting case of an ambassador's education in the early eighteenth century, see Renzo Sabbatini, *L'occhio dell'ambasciatore: L'Europa delle guerre di successione nell'autobiografia dell' inviato lucchese a Vienna* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2006), 29–109.

58 François Waquet, "Alle origini delle teorie contemporanee della diplomazia e della negoziazione? François de Calliéres e la sua *Manière de Négocier avec les souverains* (1716)," *Rivista Storica Italiana* 116 (2004): 767–93.

59 For further discussion of classicism as a "grammar" common to the European elite throughout the early modern period, see the fundamental studies of Amedeo Quondam, "*La virtù dipinta: Noterelle (e divagazioni) guazziane intorno a Classicismo e 'Institutio' in Antico Regime*," in *Stefano Guazzo e la Civil conversazione*, ed. Giorgio Patrizi (Roma: Bulzoni, 1990), 227–395; and *"Questo povero Cortegiano": Castiglione, il libro, la storia* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2000).

60 Daniela Frigo, *Principe, ambasciatori e "jus gentium": L'amministrazione della politica estera nel Piemonte del Settecento* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1991), 223–24.

61 Bragaccia, *L'ambasciatore*, 25.