Communication and Conflict: Italian Diplomacy in the Early Renaissance, 1350-1520

Review Number: 1978
Publish date: Thursday, 25 August, 2016
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ISBN: 9780198727415
Date of Publication: 2015
Price: £65.00
Pages: 336pp.
Publisher: Oxford University Press
Publisher url: https://global.oup.com/academic/product/communication-and-conflict-9780198727415
Place of Publication: Oxford
Reviewer: Catherine Fletcher

In 1372 Renatus Malbecco, a Milanese ambassador, arrived in Avignon for a meeting with Pope Gregory XI. His embassy was evidently unwelcome: he was ‘received with insults’ and promptly sent away. An observing diplomat recounted this event in a couple of terse lines. A little over a century later it was the turn of Ludovico il Moro of Milan to dismiss a visiting envoy. This time, however, the equivalent observer narrated the events in dramatic form, describing the speech, movements and manners of the participants described for a neighbouring prince (p. 152). The language of diplomacy had become richer, its description thicker, its nuances more telling.

These linguistic changes lie at the heart of Lazzarini’s book, which explores developments in Italian diplomacy over a long 15th century, taking in the period of the Papal move to Avignon, the subsequent Conciliar era, and the aftermath of the conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Her ambitious monograph aims to find an alternative to narratives of diplomacy focused on the development of resident embassies in this period (and in particular to the variants of that narrative linking permanent diplomacy to the ‘rise of the modern state’). It explores instead other chronologies and changes, most importantly as they relate to text, language, narration and their nuances.

This is a richly-documented contribution to the now not-so-new ‘new diplomatic history’, which has sought for some 20 years to situate practices of diplomacy in their social and cultural context. Studies in this field have probed issues such as the personnel of diplomacy, its symbolic world, its gifts and exchanges, using a range of methods often influenced by broader trends in social and cultural history. Scholars of literature, meanwhile, particularly in the Anglophone world, have explored the significance of changes in diplomacy to early modern writing and the importance of ‘diplomatic moments’ (in which literary protagonists negotiate) in early modern texts. (The term ‘diplomatic moment’ comes from Timothy Hampton’s 2006 article.(1))

Lazzarini’s book will be of interest to researchers in both fields, and is a substantial contribution, too, to the lively new history of communication, archives and letters in the late medieval and early modern world.

Behind Lazzarini’s shift in emphasis is a desire to highlight the complexity of developments in diplomacy. It
reminded me of Mary Beard’s recent interview in the *Guardian*: ‘What is the role of an academic, no matter what they’re teaching, within political debate? It has to be that they make issues more complicated’. Diplomatic history may not be a matter of contentious political debate, but Lazzarini’s is certainly a far more complex image of diplomacy and its ‘polygenesis’ than the old textbook version, and she explains skilfully how and why the origins of diplomatic practices and institutions are complicated. Part one, ‘The framework’, explains the context, with chapters outlining the political geography, the trajectories of change and the nature of the sources for diplomacy. In part, the sheer number of protagonists on the Italian peninsula (the geographical focus for the book) made for complexity. Early in the period, at least, these included subject cities and feudal lords as well as the large and small states – from Florence and Venice, to Siena and Monferrato, to Naples and Sicily. The Italian scale of the study brings with it methodological challenges (the Avignon papacy, which was important in ceremonial developments at the papal court, is marginal here; so is the Imperial court, though the Holy Roman Emperor was overlord of much of north-central Italy). The emphasis, moreover, is on the commonalities and norms of diplomacy on the peninsula, and not on the differences between states. Given that diplomacy is by its nature an inter-state system and relies on those norms, this is reasonable enough, but readers would do well to keep the differences (large state, small state, republic, principality) at the back of their mind. Although there was a trend for ambassadors to reside longer in a given post, this was not, Lazzarini argues, a ‘linear and general progression’ (p. 37): Italian states still employed other actors, including merchants to carry out diplomatic roles. The papacy had its own categories of diplomat, whose roles became more and more akin to those of their secular counterparts, at least in the late 1400s.

Diplomacy, in Lazzarini’s view, became over the course of the 15th century ‘an all-consuming political activity capable of elaborating innovative languages of power and resistance’ (p. 6) and the real strength of this book is in its close attention to the forms and language of diplomatic sources. Here it will be valuable reading not only for scholars of diplomacy per se but for anyone using diplomatic texts who wants to understand how their genres, shifts and conventions. In part two, three chapters explore the topics of information, negotiation and communication. As diplomacy developed, Lazzarini argues, the quantity and quality of its paperwork expanded (although its preservation today is inconsistent). Narrative became more important. Diplomacy ‘increasingly became an ideal scenario for anecdotes and tales, as well as a setting for contemporary historical writing’ (p. 57). This was not without its problems. On the one hand, diplomatic letters became better structured and more organised, their reception and reading before an audience was formalised; rulers aspired to be better and better informed. On the other hand, by the later 15th century the sheer quantity of available information threatened ‘political paralysis’ (p. 75). How much could be trusted? The possibilities for manipulation, interception and falsification might not surprise a reader of modern thrillers but they worried Renaissance rulers. Lorenzo de’ Medici of Florence sought to control communication channels, hoping to enhance his city’s power by including and excluding other actors from political dialogue. Diplomats derived their information from networks: ambassadorial networks, informers and clients. The process of information-gathering was complex; the ‘obsession with secrecy’ and ‘manipulations’ further complicated matters (p. 79). Over the course of the century ambassadors increasingly began to ‘reason’ (p. 95), providing analysis of events to their masters, as well as simply informing. Their letters provide proof of that process, and of the transition to a new style of working.

Part three of the book explores diplomacy as a practice, beginning in chapter seven with an exploration of the range of people who might serve as diplomatic agents (accredited ambassadors; then occasional envoys: clergy, captains, artists, scientists and merchants; princesses and royal spouses). Chapter eight explores forms, actions and rituals of diplomacy: by comparison to the detailed analysis of language this seems at times cursory in relation to the signs of dress and gesture, and to visual imagery (or lack of it). The ceremonial world and its tiny, sometimes subliminal signals were important. This a field extensively explored in recent years thanks to the emphasis on symbolic communication (primarily in German scholarship), and there is more to be said here (though, to be fair, a summary treatment is perhaps inevitable given the book’s focus is elsewhere). Chapter nine, on spaces of diplomacy, makes the important point that it is only towards the end of the 15th century that authors of diplomatic texts become attentive to the spaces in
which ambassadors’ activities were taking place, an observation that dovetails with the increasingly precise rules about locations for diplomatic activity set down in works such as the *De Oratoribus Romanae Curiae* of papal master-of-ceremonies Paride Grassi.

Part four, ‘Diplomacy as a political language and a cultural process’, presents the culmination of Lazzarini’s argument. Chapter ten, on the forms of diplomatic communication, revisits earlier themes and sites for analysis with a new emphasis on their role as ‘communication codes’. It takes up issues such as ambassadors’ use of orality and writing, pointing out that given the ease of altering the content of letters and dispatches, ‘the safest way to get a plausible version of the events was indeed to entrust someone to report orally what had happened’ (p. 197). The most intriguing aspect of the argument here, though, concerns language and the changing rhetorics of diplomacy. Lazzarini proposes that over the course of the long Quattrocento diplomatic letters changed. They were organised differently, and this expressed ‘a new way of dealing with and thinking about politics’ (p. 204, and I note in this line the word politics: the argument here goes beyond diplomacy). Ambassadors’ letters began to contain more ‘supplementary information’ and more ‘reasoning’ (*rasonamenti*) about the events they reported (p. 206). Their focus became wider: partly because the range of events considered to be of political interest became wider, and partly so as to make for an enjoyable read. With this broader range of observation greater attention to emotion emerged. Ambassadors would report on ‘signs, gestures, and words conveying emotional reactions and interior thoughts’ (p. 216). By the end of the century a diplomat was expected to ‘advise’ and ‘reason’, both of which were new dimensions of his role. Lazzarini’s case for this change over time in the practice of diplomacy is thoroughly convincing.

One of the many strengths of this book is the number of possibilities it raises for future research on the history of diplomacy. In particular I was struck by the scope for a detailed study employing the techniques of corpus linguistics to add some quantitative analysis to the study of language presented here. Italian diplomacy is unusual in that its participants spoke a common language: it would be fascinating to use the new digital tools to explore the nuances of how their words shifted through the centuries. The study prompts some other questions too. This is, primarily, a book about how diplomacy worked and not about the times it did not. There is more to say about the exceptions and the failures of diplomacy, how and why they happened. I wondered too about some other troubles. Like most jokes, the one about ambassadors ‘lying abroad’ for their country works because there is a little bit of truth to it. I wanted to know more about diplomatic simulation and dissimulation, about the manipulation of language: there is a sense in this book that language can be problematic, that text means trouble. We might usefully ask the questions: how, why and when? And then there’s God (or the lack of him). The secular tone of diplomacy and its practitioners as described here will not greatly surprise scholars in this field, but the presences and absences of religion from diplomatic language – and what they might tell us about politics and religion before the Reformation and in relation to Catholic reform – is another issue on which this book should prompt reflection. Returning to literature and its ‘diplomatic moments’, there will be questions too about how this shifting style of diplomatic writing connects to modes of literary production: do we see more ‘reasoning’, too, in the theatre, or in the changing histories of Renaissance Italy?

In 2002, when as an MA student I first began working on early 16th-century diplomacy, the recent historiography of the topic was sparse. A glance at Lazzarini’s bibliography reveals the vast expansion of research in the field over the past decade and a half, both in Italy and beyond, and the wealth of new perspectives on this topic. Among that work, *Communication and Conflict* is a wonderful and thought-provoking book: it should be essential reading in and beyond the community of scholars working on this topic.

**Notes**


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[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/151706