The Role of the Ambassador and the use of Ciphers

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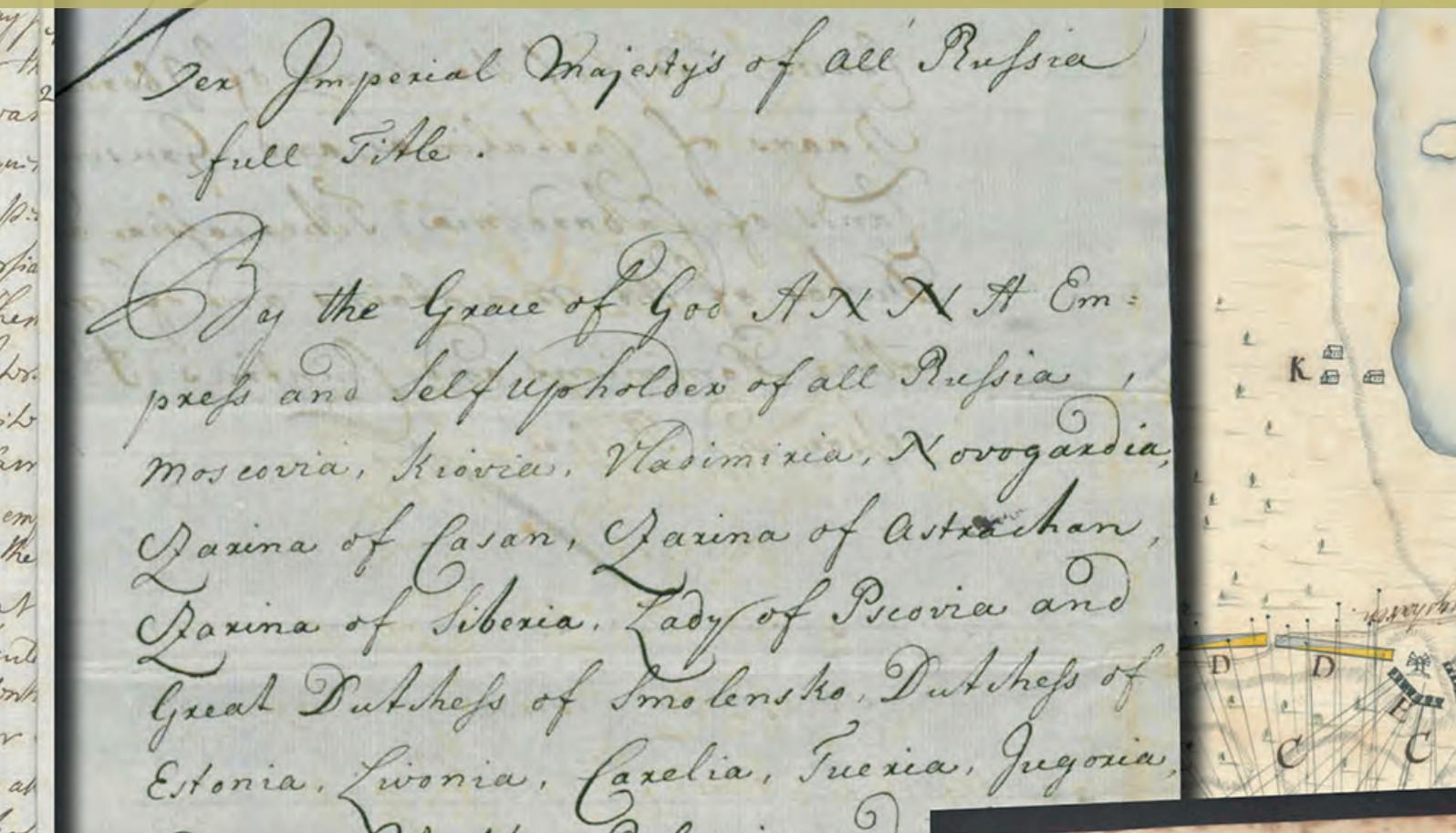
At the end of the fifteenth century Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, stated that 'the worth of a prince was seen in the men he sent to represent him abroad'; this opinion was no less current in Tudor England.[1] The choices a king made when appointing his diplomats was taken as an indication of what sort of prince he was: it could tell another court whether he was learned, interested in cultural trends, philosophically skilled, linguistically adept, pious or militarily capable. Consequently, ambassadors' actions and qualities were read for evidence of what the king or queen from whom he had been sent thought and was. Sir Francis Thynne, who wrote the first English treatise on the role of the ambassador in 1576, therefore recommended that the men chosen to be ambassadors should be 'learned, well born, free, no bond-man, of good credit in respect of his honesty, of good estimation in respect of his calling... wise, valiant, circumspect, furnished with divers Languages, eloquent of quick capacitie, of ready deliverance, liberall, comly of person, tall of stature, and... adorned with all vertues required'.[2]

In order to be credible, ambassadors needed to be able to claim political intimacy with the king or queen. An ambassador was his monarch's proxy, and was assumed to be someone who would articulate the same values as, and who was trusted by, his prince. He was expected to interact with the political and social elites of another nation, and needed the requisite prestige and social skills. Political intimacy could take various forms: potential ambassadors could be the monarch's relatives, councillors, or senior members of the monarch's household or administration, or they could be high-ranking clergymen. Thynne's treatise on ambassadors suggested that an ambassador should be 'of good calling, and estimation in his Countrie before

hee be sent'.[3] Nicholas Carew was deemed suitable for diplomatic service due to his close friendship with Henry VIII.[4] Ambassadors who lacked a heavyweight political identity at home often found their missions actively hindered, regardless of their actual ability. John Man, the last Elizabethan resident ambassador in Spain was neither a courtier nor a knight and as a man of 'low position and small merits', he was scorned and disregarded, despite the numerous qualifications that brought him the post.[5]

As the monarch's representatives, ambassadors had to defend his or her honour and reputation. At its most basic, this meant behaving in a civilised, courteous manner. Preserving the international standing of their monarch meant that ambassadors noted any slight that might suggest inequality or a lack of reciprocity between the two nations and ambassadors defended their place in the order of precedence of ambassadors at court banquets, festivals, audiences and negotiations. Thus Thomas Smith, an Elizabethan resident in France, insisted that the English ambassadors should be given precedence over those from Spain in 1565.[6] The monarch's honour also needed to be maintained in other areas. Much informal diplomatic contact occurred in social situations such as hunting or dinner – ambassadors had to be able to entertain courtiers and other diplomats in a sufficient manner. Often diplomats' letters include brief accounts of such activities.[7] Another way in which ambassadors were supposed to defend their monarch's reputation was by trying to get damaging printed material about them suppressed and anyone who preached slanderously about them punished. Henry VIII's ambassadors in Spain and France complained that preachers and friars were slandering the English king

in 1539,[8] while in 1568 Elizabeth's tried to suppress a book which contained unflattering accounts of her father and mother.[9]

Ambassadors had to explain royal policy to foreign princes and were expected to deliver complex, eloquent orations with good rhetorical flourish. The Henrician diplomats Edward Foxe, Cuthbert Tunstall and Richard Pace, all appear to have been chosen as ambassadors at least in part on the basis of their reputations as persuasive and proficient speakers. Any speech given and the response received were then meant to be recorded and relayed back to England; they are frequently found in the state papers. For instance two accounts of Christopher Parkins's mission to the Emperor and German princes give an overview of the audiences he attended, what he said and the responses he received.[10] Sometimes the ambassador was given the text of the speech he was expected to deliver, but more often his official instructions just contained specific points to address and the exact form of the oration was left to him to devise. On important matters, the government sometimes sent books that the ambassadors could use as source material.[11] Often, ambassadors were chosen because they possessed the requisite skills to articulate a particular policy: in 1534, Thomas Cranmer thought Nicholas Heath was qualified to accompany an embassy to the German princes as he knew 'no man in England [who] can defende' the King's cause better.[12] In the 1530s, using clerics with knowledge of civil law, canon law and theology was a useful way to ensure that Henry's break with Rome and subsequent religious manoeuvres could be adequately defended abroad.[13]

Latin, the international language of diplomacy, was essential to any English diplomat, as English was virtually unknown on the continent. Knowledge of at least one of the main European vernaculars was also important. Often, they could not get staff who had sufficient linguistic proficiency. Thomas Thirlby found his French insufficient in 1538, while in 1555 John Mason had to request a francophone secretary as he was finding it difficult to get his business carried out at the Emperor's court.[14] Fluency in European languages was essential because of the social functions and informal aspects of diplomacy that these incorporated: friendly relations could only truly be maintained with courtiers and other ambassadors if regular conversations could be had. As a result, the state papers relating to foreign affairs are not just in English, but many are in Latin, French, Italian and other European languages.

Tudor ambassadors fell into two main categories: 'special' ambassadors sent on specific, largely honorific missions and those appointed to serve on a residential basis at a foreign court, often for years at a time. Special ambassadors were often sent to represent a monarch at a specific ceremonial occasion. Those chosen were usually men of high social status such as dukes, earls or bishops. Such embassies were usually of short duration and were often lavish affairs. Thomas Ratcliffe, Earl of Sussex remarked upon the honourable treatment he had received while on special embassy in August 1567.[15] Special ambassadors were often sent to conclude a peace with a foreign nation. Thus William Cecil and Nicholas Wotton headed a delegation into Scotland to negotiate the Treaty of Edinburgh, which secured the removal of French troops from Scotland in 1560.[16] They could also be used to offer English arbitration between two warring nations. Andrew Dudley's mission to the Holy Roman Emperor,

Charles V, in 1552–1553 was intended to secure English mediation between the Emperor and the French King, Henry II.[17] Special embassies often involved dynastic affairs, such as marriage negotiations, for example Nicholas Wotton and Richard Berdenegotiated the terms of Henry VIII's marriage with Anne of Cleves. The death of one king and the accession of another was announced by special ambassadors, as technically the resident ambassadors in place needed new credentials and the personal amity between the two princes needed affirming.[18] Lower key missions included William Somerset, 3rd Earl of Worcester, attending the christening of a French princess in Elizabeth I's place in February 1573.[19]

English diplomacy in the fifteenth century had revolved around a series of special embassies. In 1505, Henry VII had introduced a resident ambassador, John Stile, to Spain; under the direction of Henry VIII's chief minister, Cardinal Wolsey, England's diplomatic network of residents was extended to include Venice, France and the Empire by the end of the 1520s. With this shift to permanent diplomacy, personal closeness to the monarch or high social status was no longer sufficient qualification for service. Skills in languages, eloquence, administration and a humanistic education became increasingly prized in the diplomatic corps. In addition, as England's diplomatic contacts extended northwards into Muscovy and eastwards into the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the sixteenth century, experienced travellers who understood the customs of these nations became a potential pool from which to draw new diplomatic blood.

Resident ambassadors were expected to gather information about the politics of the host court and international events; their reports back to England are full of such affairs. In critical moments in England's international relations, the information ambassadors relayed from the continent could prove critical in gauging how to formulate foreign policy.[20] Edmund Harvel, Henry VIII's resident in Venice frequently relayed news of the wars in Italy and the movements of the Ottoman army.[21] Ambassadors noted who arrived at court and if they brought messages with them.[22] They reported rumours about military events, for instance Henry Norris relayed news of the religious wars in France[23] while Edward Barton reported on events in the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe.[24] It was not always easy or even possible for ambassadors to come by accurate information and some ambassadors' reports merely relay court gossip. Ambassadors were not unaware of the limits of the intelligence they passed on: in April 1538 Francis Bryan, ambassador to Francis I, worried that if he reported everything he heard he would relay falsehoods.[25] As a result, a number of Tudor ambassadors either already had established information networks on the continent, or developed them during their embassy.[26] In addition, the crown had royal agents, such as Christopher Mont, an expert on German affairs, who could liaise with accredited ambassadors and provide specialist information.

Information was currency, meaning that ambassadors were expected to have news to trade in return if they were to function effectively. In order to fulfil this need, letters from the principal secretary relay news of English politics, such as events at court, rebellions and major developments in parliament. Despite this, ambassadors were not always kept well informed of events in England, either because letters went astray, or because the principal secretaries were too busy with other, more pressing business, to write. Hence the

English residents in Madrid, Thomas Chamberlain, and his successor Thomas Challoner both complained that they knew less of events in England than others at the Spanish court in Madrid in 1561 and 1562 respectively.[27] If an English ambassador was not as up to date as his fellow courtiers about the affairs of his home country, this could not but undermine the validity of his position as an authority on English affairs and raise questions about why he was so poorly informed. This was probably why some Tudor ambassadors had agents in London, who could oversee their domestic business and keep them independently informed of developments.[28]

Ambassadors would often send a full letter to the principal secretary, which would be accompanied by a briefer letter summarising the most important points for the monarch. They often noted when they had last written and when they had last received correspondence from England, so that any missing letters or instructions could be identified. Ambassadors also kept copies of the correspondence they sent back to England. John Mason's letter book, for example, is now in the National Archives.[29] Unfortunately, not all of these are still extant and only some have made their way into the National Archives or the British Library. To aid ambassadors in their task, they appointed secretaries. Some of these secretaries went on to careers as ambassadors in their own right. For example, John Mason, later resident ambassador to the Emperor, served as Thomas Wyatt's secretary in the 1530s. Certainly ambassadors' households performed an informal role in the diplomatic corps as the training ground of the diplomats of the future.

Ambassadors were expected to undertake a wide range of further duties. Some embassies negotiated trading privileges for English merchants — this was the main focus of English interest in diplomacy with Muscovy in Elizabeth's reign.[30] Dealing with mercantile disputes was a common feature in many resident embassies too and frequently occupied Thomas Chamberlain's attention in the Low Countries.[31] Ambassadors' duties extended beyond matters of trade. Henry Cobham, when sent to Spain in 1575, was mandated to safeguard English merchants from undue interference from the Spanish Inquisition,[32] while Philip Hoby, as Master of the Ordnance, was an ideal candidate to acquire military supplies from the Empire in the late 1540s.

Ciphers

Thomas Wriothesley commented in 1539 that ambassadors used cipher if 'thinges be eyther very good or very bad'.[33] Ciphers were used to encode sensitive material that could endanger the course of English diplomacy if more widely known. This was necessary as the postal routes were far from secure and diplomatic correspondence was seized by foreign powers relatively frequently. Ciphering was time consuming and was greeted with enthusiasm neither by the diplomats who had to encode their reports, nor by those who had to decipher the messages at home. Richard Morison was in good company in complaining that he would rather do any drudgery than cipher.[34] William Cecil, the principal secretary receiving Morison's reports from Germany, also found ciphering and deciphering burdensome.[35] As a result, it was far from unusual for ambassadors to only encrypt part of their letters.[36]

Some ciphers were relatively simple letter substitutions, while some substituted numbers for letters words and certain proper nouns. Others merely

involved the substitution of certain key words and names with others. Indeed a wide range of types of cipher can be found in a collection of Tudor ciphers in the National Archives, arranged by the name of the ambassador or agent who used them.[37] Many Tudor ciphers used a polygraphic alphabet, combined with a substitution system for common words and important places and names as well as a large number of null symbols or letters. Good examples include those used in France by Thomas Hoby from March 1566,[38] Valentine Dale from March 1573[39] and Anthony Paulet in 1577.[40] The cipher of royal agent Thomas Gresham, recognising how stock phrases could be used to help decode encrypted messages, even had a symbol for the standard greeting to the Privy Council.[41] Back in London, the principal secretaries kept the cipher key safe in the secretariat.

Considerable thought was put into developing new ciphers. Those doing so appear to have read the early modern cryptographic theories of figures such as Trithemius, Baptista della Porta and Blaise de Vingere, which is clear from the forms the ciphers took.[42] Yet these tracts were printed and available to all of Europe, which limited their utility. In 1601, the suggestion was even made not to use complicated ciphers involving symbols, because this too easily identified the missive as something secret and worth attention. Letters written using the common letterforms of Christendom were less suspicious and if nonsensical, more likely to be identified as a strange, unknown northern language than as an encoded message. Instead a simple shift cipher was suggested, with the addition that vowels be replaced.[43] As this instance suggests, the main techniques for encrypting messages were well known to the diplomatic personnel of other European states,

meaning that the effectiveness of English ciphers remains questionable.

NOTES

[1] For Francesco Guicciardini's paraphrase of Ludovico Sforza, see F. Guicciardini, *Guicciardini's Ricordi: The Counsels and Reflections of Francesco Guicciardini,* ed. G. R. Berridge (Leicester, 2000), p. 85.

[2] F. Thynne, *The Perfect Ambassadour treating of the antiquitie, priveledges, and behaviour of men belonging to that function* (London, 1652), ff. 18v-19r.

[3] F. Thynne, *Perfect Ambassador*, ch. 11. 51 of Henry VIII's 112 ambassadors were gentlemen or nobles. L. MacMahon, 'The Ambassadors of Henry VIII, the Personnel of English Diplomacy, 1500–1550', Unpublished Ph.D. (Kent, 2000), pp. 116-7.

[4] *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts relating to English affairs, existing in the Archives and Collections of Venice, and in otherLlibraries of Northern Italy*, 1202–[1675], ed. Rawdon Brown, Vol. 3: 1520–6, pp. 97-8.

[5] *Calendar of Letters, Despatches, and State Papers relating to the Negotiations between England and Spain preserved in the Archives at Simancas and elsewhere,* 1485–1603, Vol. 14: 1558–76, no. 337. Man's instructions can be found at *Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Elizabeth, 1558–1589,* (Eds J Stevenson, Allan James Crosby, Arthur John Butler, Sophie Crawford Lomas, Richard Bruce Wernham), London, 1863–1950, Vol. 8: 1566–68, no. 112. The State Papers Foreign series for the Tudor period are included in *State Papers Online*, Part II.

[6] *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign: Elizabeth* (see note 5 above), 1564–5, no. 1161.

[7] For an example of the sociability of diplomacy see *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign: Elizabeth* (see note 5 above), Vol. 9: 1569–71, no. 1589.

[8] *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, J.S. Brewer, J. Gairdner, R. H. Brodie and A. C. Wood, eds, London, 1864–1932, XIV, Part I, nos 92 and 227.

[9] *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign: Elizabeth* (see note 5 above), Vol. 8: 1566–8, no. 2193.

[10] The National Archives (TNA), SP 80/1, ff. 142-5, 146-151r.

[11] See for example *Letters and Papers* (see note 8 above), Vol. 9: 1535, no. 213.5

[12] *Letters and Papers* (see note 8 above), Vol. 7, no. 20.

[13] The King's spiritual advisors had been frequently used in early Tudor diplomacy: 42% of Henrician resident ambassadors were clerics according to MacMahon, 'The Ambassadors of Henry VIII …' (see note 3 above) pp. 74-9. With the introduction of Protestantism to England under Edward VI and Elizabeth I, protestant pastoral demands of bishops and the hostility of Catholic powers to receiving Protestant clerics as ambassadors effectively cut off this source of potential ambassadors for Elizabeth.

[14] *Letters and Papers* (see note 8 above), XIII, Part I, 977; *Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Mary, 1553–1558,* (W B Turnbull), London, 1861, no. 227.

[15] TNA, SP 9/244A/3 (Germany), nos. 20, 21.

[16] *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign: Elizabeth* (see note 5 above), Vol. 3: 1560–1, no. 134.

[17] Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Edward VI, 1547–1553, (W B Turnbull), London, 1861, no. 599.

[18] *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign: Edward VI,* (see note 17 above), nos 4, 5.

[19] *Calendar of State Papers Foreign: Elizabeth* (see note 5 above), Vol. 10: 1572–4, no. 755.

[20] *Letters and Papers*, (see note 8 above), XV, no. 662.

[21] See for example *Letters and Papers* (see note 8 above), XXI, Part II, nos 163, 507, 603.

[22] *Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Elizabeth,* (see note 5 above), Vol 10: 1572–4, no. 1072.

[23] *Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Elizabeth* (see note 5 above), Vol. 9: 1569–71, nos 456, 464.

[24] *Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Elizabeth* (see note 5 above), Vol. 1: Jan.-Jul. 1589, June 12 and 27. Barton to Walsingham.

[25] *Letters and Papers,* (see note 8 above), XIII, I, no. 842.

[26] See for example *Letters and Papers,* (see note 8 above), V, no. 65ii.

[27] *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign: Elizabeth* (see note 5 above), >Vol. 4: 1561–1562, nos. 355, 1018.

[28] See for example S. Brigden (ed.), 'The letters of Richard Scudamore to Sir Philip Hoby, September 1549 to March 1555', *Camden Miscellany XXX, Camden 4th Series*, xxxix (1990).

[29] TNA, SP 68/9A.

[30] *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign: Elizabeth* (see note 5 above), Vol. 8: 1566–8, no. 2272; *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign: Elizabeth, 1575–7*, no. 127.

[31] *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign: Edward VI* (see note 17 above), no. 463.

[32] *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign: Elizabeth* (see note 5 above), Vol. 11: 1575–77, no. 199.

[33] *Letters and Papers* (see note 8 above), XIV, I, no. 321.

[34] *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign: Edward VI* (see note 17 above), no. 274.

[35] *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign, Edward VI* (see note 5 above), no. 308.

[36] See for example *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign, Mary I* (see note 14 above), no. 187; *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign, Elizabeth* (see note 5 above), Vol. III, 1560–1, no. 345.

[37] TNA, SP 106/1-3 and SP 106/1, ff. 21v-22r (no. 4B). Mr Biondi's cipher in Italy also has a key for deciphering the code.

[38] TNA SP106/1, f. 135 (no. 53).

[39] TNA SP106/1, f. 76 (no. 29).

[40] TNA SP106/1, f. 85v-86r (no. 32).

[41] TNA, SP106/1, f. 131 (no. 50A).

[42] For more explicit evidence see TNA, SP 106/2, f. 150 (no. 143).

[43] TNA, SP 106/2, f. 150 (no. 143).

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An ambassador is a diplomatic representative that attends international meetings, banquets and parties and acts as a figurehead for their country of origin. Ambassadors are also known as diplomats, a more general term describing those that work in a foreign country while retaining citizenship in their home country. Each task is carried out in a diplomatic manner that's engineered to meet the needs of the ambassador's home country while maintaining a positive relationship with that country. One of the primary responsibilities of an ambassador is to notify their home country of economic and political developments in the host nation. They write formal reports in order to communicate foreign development, especially in the area of trade policies. The use of media especially as regards public diplomacy has fostered the role of the diplomat in breaking down cultural barriers between its policy officers and the specified public. (Gilboa,2000,No. 3). This thereby creates a political atmosphere for better functioning. Despite all this major impact of communication and technology, there has been major changes that as served to displace the roles of the modern diplomat. Melissen confirms this by saying that, "the position of a diplomat is related to the sovereignty of a state which as a result of globalization as thrown into questions the via