After Byzantium, the next step in our historical journey is Renaissance Italy. Harold Nicolson indicated this continuity by saying ‘it was the Byzantines who taught diplomacy to Venice; it was the Venetians who set the pattern for the Italian cites, for France and Spain, and eventually for all Europe.’

Time-wise, there is a sequence in our narrative on the evolution of diplomacy. The Byzantine Empire ended in 1453, at the time when Renaissance diplomacy started its golden age, with the 1454 Peace of Lodi, among Italian city states. But, in parallel to the long existence of the Byzantine Empire, there have been many developments in Europe (the Middle Ages) which are important for the understanding of the emergence of Renaissance diplomacy and subsequent developments.

One of the main diplomatic developments in the Middle Ages was ‘Papal Diplomacy’. The Vatican’s main objective was to keep doctrinal control over Europe, and to suppress any actions aimed at challenging the role of the Roman Catholic Church. Papal diplomacy used a variety of diplomatic tools, such as negotiation, treaty-making, alliances, and arbitration, also developing considerable expertise in espionage, subversion, and conspiracy.

In addition to its theological and doctrinal interests, the Roman Catholic Church had complete control over the ‘information technology’ of the day. One of the main reasons, was its choice of technology for the exchange of information. As Deibert describes, the decision by the church to adopt parchment (over papyrus) favoured the spread of the papal-monastic network throughout Western Europe for three main reasons. First, unlike papyrus, which was grown almost
exclusively in the Egyptian Nile delta region, parchment was ideally suited to the
decentralised agrarian-rural monastic network, because individual monasteries
could remain self-sufficient, manufacturing parchment from the skins of their
own livestock. Second, the collapse of the Roman Empire and its trading system
resulted in the near-total disappearance of papyrus from Western Europe.
Parchment thus became the dominant medium of communication, and, however
inadvertently, the Roman Catholic monastic order became its chief supplier.
Finally, and perhaps most importantly, very few people were literate during the
Middle Ages. The norm for Western Europeans, for whom much of life was
violent and chaotic, was the spoken word, thus further reinforcing the church's
monopoly on the written word.

The relationship between parchment and the power of the Roman Catholic
Church is a clear illustration where the mode of communication favoured the
interests of the church. Indeed, the clergy became the sole custodians and
suppliers of written information, which had a significant impact on its share of
power. The church's monopoly over language and the written word provided it
with an advantage in the diplomatic scene of the Middle Ages. The missions of
other players, such as the Frankish State, represented by Charlemagne, had to
have at least one clergyman, because they were the only literate individuals of
that age. This made it possible for the church to be completely informed and to
strongly influence the diplomatic developments of the Middle Ages.
Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* became a visual trademark of diplomacy. The painting also illustrates the atmosphere of the era of the early 16th century very well. Painted in London in 1533, the life-size double portrait shows Jean de Dinteville, once the French ambassador to the court of Henry VIII of England, with fellow diplomat Georges de Selve, Bishop of Lavaur. The complexity of marriage negotiations in 16th century dynastic rule was at the heart of foreign affairs, and forms the background for this painting. Francis I had sent two ambassadors to persuade the King of England not to divorce Catherine of Aragon. They – like others – were unsuccessful, and history took its course, with divorce, marriage to Anne Boleyn, and the creation of the Anglican Church, independent of the Vatican.

Between the two ambassadors is a display with two shelves of objects with strong symbolic meaning. The lower shelf has earthly symbols, including a globe, a merchant’s calculus book, a lute with a broken string, and a Lutheran hymn book. These items represent earthly interests, and the disorderly disputes that accompany them. The two ambassadors should overcome these earthly conflicts and elevate society to the upper shelf that symbolize a stable heavenly order, represented by tools of the science of astronomy, evoking the optimism of the Renaissance era. Here we the have elements of both the Renaissance and science. The function of diplomats is to bridge these two ‘shelves’ – the earthly and heavenly ones. Although they relied on science and the power of human creativity, the presence of a skull in the painting is a reminder that pride in human knowledge and the power it gives, can be perilously vain.
The invention of the printing press had a considerable impact on all functions of society, including diplomacy. The church’s dominance through parchment-based writing was challenged. The church’s participation in diplomacy gradually started to ebb away. Clergymen no longer held a monopoly on literacy. No longer were they an indispensable part of every diplomatic mission.

The speed of delivery did not change substantially until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Through an analysis of the transport of mail from Paris to Venice in the period between 1500 and 1750, the famous French historian Fernand Braudel showed that there was no fundamental change in the speed of the transfer of mail during this period. To quote Paul Valery, ‘Napoleon moved no faster than Julius Caesar’. After Napoleon, various transport and communication devices (e.g. the railway, the telegraph) started to shrink space and to speed up time.
An ambassador is an honest gentleman sent to lie abroad for the good of his country.

By Henry Wotton (1604)

This is a familiar quote written by Sir Henry Wotton, the envoy of the English king to Venice. The quote survived its era through its ‘pun’ whereby ‘lie’ meant both lying abroad: residing or staying somewhere, and lying: not telling the truth.

The problem was that the Wotton’s pun was lost in translation from English to Latin, and the translation removed the double entendre, using only the meaning ‘to deceive’. This famous quote almost ended Wotton’s career. His quote was used in Latin by the Catholic author Sciopplius to show how devious were protestant diplomats and the protestant cause in general (Sir Wotton was a protestant, and he represented James I, an English king of the protestant religion). Sir Wotton managed to save his career, and remained in the service of James I after this incident.

Sir Wotton’s quote explains a common (mis) perception of diplomacy which remains relevant in our own time. It also shows the power of double meanings in diplomacy.
How did the world look in the 15th century? If we use modern terminology, it was a world in transition.

The medieval world was at its end. The plague of the 14th century exhausted European society. The Catholic Church was losing its power, due to the Great Schism (1378–1417). The traditional legitimisation of the Holy Roman Emperor as the leader of Christendom started disappearing, leaving a space for the later emergence of the Reformation and later on, nation States.

The Ottomans were arriving to a weakened Europe. In 1453 Constantinople had fallen and the Ottomans controlled most of the areas south of the Danube River by the end of the 15th century. Spain was emerging as a new power after completing the Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula in 1492. In cultural life, the Renaissance celebrated antique knowledge and literature. The invention of the printing press in 1450 opened new possibilities for dissemination of knowledge.
When?

1350 – 1494 Italian Renaissance Diplomacy

1454 – 1494 Golden Age of Italian Renaissance Diplomacy (1454 Treaty of Lodi)

16th Century Dissemination of diplomatic practice from Italy to the rest of Europe

The beginnings of modern diplomacy, as we know it today, are often attributed to the Renaissance diplomacy that emerged among Italian city states in the 15th century. As we have realised during our journey, the early elements of diplomacy can be traced back to Amarna diplomacy (archives, envoys), Ancient Greece (early public diplomacy) and Byzantium (early ministries of foreign affairs). The first full diplomatic system appeared in the Italian city states in the 15th century. It consisted of permanent diplomatic missions and a nascent ministry of foreign affairs built around diplomatic achieves.
Where?

Where?
The Italian Renaissance diplomacy scene consisted of many small city states and five major ones. The Papal State, with Rome as its capital, was located in central Italy, while the southern part was occupied by the Kingdom of Naples. The north was dominated by the city states, with their strong manufacturing industry and trading, and including the Republic of Venice, the Dutchy of Milan and the Republic of Florence.

The emergence of Renaissance diplomacy is usually associated with two main characteristics of relations among Italian city states: the lack of a hegemonic power, and a strong interest in cooperating and solving problems through peaceful means. Italian city states were too weak to impose themselves on their neighbours. Their armed forces consisted of mercenaries who were mainly interested in earning money and surviving. The Italian city states could not rely on them. The balance of power, or better, weakness, created the ideal space for diplomacy. The only political tool (the rules of Italian city states) they had was the diplomatic ‘combinations’, described in the Italian word ‘combinazioni’, that has survived until our time. The system was officially codified by the 1454 Peace of Lodi, which lasted till 1494, when Italy was invaded by France.

The development of Renaissance diplomacy was possibly due to a geo-strategic ‘lull’ in European affairs during the 14th and 15th centuries. The Italian city states were left on their own to sort out their problems. This situation changed after the French intervention in 1494, which is considered to be the end of Italian Renaissance diplomacy. After 1494, Italian politics were influenced by emerging powers, mainly France and the Habsburg Empire.
Italian diplomats were often bankers and traders. Italian Renaissance diplomacy was commercially driven. Among diplomats there were also well-known names such as Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio in the 14th century, and Machiavelli and Guicciardini in the early 16th century.

Venice had a very elaborate code of conduct for diplomats. After every return from their missions, envoys were obliged to give all gifts they had received, to the state. They were not allowed to accept titles at foreign courts. They were not allowed to take their wives on mission, because of the fear that they (the wives) might reveal state secrets.

After the end of the golden age of Renaissance diplomacy (1494) and with the growing need for diplomatic skills in the other European states, Italian diplomats became ‘diplomatic mercenaries’. They were also conveyors of skills and knowledge from Italian Renaissance diplomacy to the emerging modern European diplomacy.
How?

Modern diplomacy in its embryonic phase

How?

First resident ambassador (1450) – “sweet Nicodemus” Milan’s envoy in Florence.

Structure

Early Ministry of Foreign Affairs (developed around diplomatic archives)

Centrality of Diplomatic Reporting
It is widely accepted in diplomatic history that the first permanent diplomatic mission was established in 1450, representing the Duke of Milan to Cosimo de’ Medici. The first envoy was Nicodemus di Pontromoli, known as ‘sweet Nicodemus’ in Genoa. The main task of resident ambassadors was to gather information and develop relations. ‘In a world without newspapers, where information was avidly awaited back home, they became indispensable intelligence gatherers, reporting on the arrival of cargoes, the situation at court, the state of an alliance, military preparations, the atmosphere in the market, political gossip, and diplomatic to-and-fro’.

Diplomatic reporting was the key tool for communication between diplomatic missions and capital. Ambassadors were busy writing reports. Some of them dispatched one report every day. Many reports contained gossip about prominent personalities and life in the cities where ambassadors served.

Back in the capital, new ministries of foreign affairs started emerging, first as archives of reports received from ambassadors abroad and, later on, as a more sophisticated system for collating and analysing information, and coordination of diplomatic actions. Even then they had a problem with information overload. Venice was the most advanced state in developing reporting techniques. Besides daily reports, ambassadors had a duty to prepare special reports, called ‘relazzioni’, which provided a strategic overview of the relationship between Venice and the country where the ambassador served. At the end of the mission, within 15 days of return to Venice, each envoy was supposed to deliver a speech at a ceremonial session of Signoria. This speech should include detailed information about the situation in the state where was on mission, and after the session, the text of the speech was given to the grand chancellor, who included it in the secret archive of diplomatic documents. A Venetian official explained the reason for archiving these documents: ‘That way, documents will be saved forever and reading of it could be useful to enlighten our present rulers and these who will come in the position in future’.

Cipher protection for diplomatic messages was also first used during the Renaissance.
Renaissance diplomats enjoyed diplomatic privileges and immunities. The person, premises and communications of diplomats were protected by diplomatic immunities.

Renaissance diplomacy also inherited aspects of elaborate Byzantine ceremonies. Every detail of diplomatic protocol was negotiated. Among the long list of negotiated ceremonial questions, Harold Nicholson mentions: ‘At what exact stage in the proceedings should the ambassador remove or replace his hat?’

During this period of slow and undeveloped transportation and communications, diplomats were among the few with the privilege of travelling to remote places and bringing back information about these places. Diplomats played an important role in the transfer and spread of knowledge and information. Diplomats of the early Renaissance were often involved in exchanging knowledge, mainly related to the Greek manuscripts and classics. In some cases, they were involved in early ‘science diplomacy’ especially involving countries that were expanding their colonial exploration, such as Spain and Portugal. The French ambassador to Portugal, Jean Nicot (1559-1961), sent lemon and banana trees, as well as indigo imported from Asia, back to Paris. His colleagues in Madrid reported home about the Spanish spice trade.
The Italian city states, mainly Venice, adopted many Byzantine diplomatic techniques, including: deception, bribery, hypocrisy, and espionage. These became the trademarks of Renaissance diplomacy.

Louis XI was very critical about public meetings. He wrote to his envoys: ‘if you think these issues can be solved at large meetings…. If somewhere many people are together, they are all the time very proud, they are asking a lot and they would be shame to admit they need something’.

On lying, he advised his ambassadors: ‘Foreign envoys, they are lying you! Lie to them more!’
Marriage was frequently used to strengthen coalitions among states. The most famous example of the importance of marriage diplomacy was the divorce of English King Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon. This involved complex diplomacy. In the end, since he could not get permission from the Pope for divorce, Henry VIII established the Anglican church, divorced Catharine of Aragon, and married Anne Boleyn. Most geo-strategic relations were centered around negotiations on marriages between main players (Spain, France, England).
Diplomacy also became a popular topic for academics and writers. A series of books and manuals were published describing the special qualities of diplomats; the techniques of persuasion; how to conduct negotiations. Machiavelli's *The Prince* remains one of the most frequently-quoted books on politics and diplomacy to this day.

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<th>How?</th>
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<td><strong>Diplomatic training and manuals</strong></td>
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Public diplomacy became prominent in Renaissance Italy. The main focus of public diplomacy was on the political and business elite, but it also involved the general public. Till today, public diplomacy remains important, with more-or-less the same mission it had in Renaissance Italy of ‘winning the hearts and minds’ of the foreign populations. Culture played a very important role in public diplomacy in Renaissance diplomacy.

We inherited a recognition of the high relevance of information from Renaissance diplomacy. Information was important for politics based on *combinazioni*. Rulers and diplomats needed almost real-time information in order to readjust their tactics. Information was the key diplomatic currency. In the diplomatic archives of Italian city states, one can find many exchanges in which both capital and envoy complain about the lack of enough information. Harold Nicolson quoted Mauroceno, Venetian envoy to France in 1505, who mentions a complaint from another Venetian, Signory: ‘it was very well for Signory to complain that he (Maureceno) was never first with the news, since they themselves took no trouble to send him items of gossip that he could exchange for other information in Paris’.

Italian city states realised that diplomacy is a process. It requires gradual personal attention and lobbying.
Renaissance diplomacy represents the most decisive phase in the history of diplomacy for two reasons. First, it catalysed the implementation of previous developments in diplomacy, started from the Ancient East civilisations – such as information gathering, treaties, privileges, protocol – and put them into the format of a coherent diplomatic system.

Second, it provided a bridge towards subsequent developments in diplomacy, up to our modern times. Even today, many elements of Renaissance diplomacy can be found in modern diplomacy, diplomatic tactics, the organisation of diplomatic services, and other areas of diplomacy.

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1 Harold Nicolson, The Evolution of Diplomatic Method (p. 14)