

Postcards from Renaissance Rome.
The papal court of Nicholas V from the letters of Florentine ambassadors
(mid XV century)

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Abstract

The article aims to trace the phase of peace talks which held in Rome from autumn 1453 to spring 1454 in order to stop the war between Italian States. The point of view is the Florentine one through the letters of the ambassadors Bernardo Giugni and Giannozzo Pitti. Known but still unpublished, their correspondence gives a lot of information about the diplomatic agents and the Pope Nicholas V who hosted the meeting. Through an almost daily approach, Giugni and Pitti let scholars better understand not only the negotiations, but also the personality of the protagonists, their words thanks to the use of the direct speech and the relations between them. A sort of look to the precedents of the Peace of Lodi from an inside point of view. The outcome is a picture with many details not adequately highlighted so far.

Keywords: Rome. Florence. Renaissance. Diplomacy.

1. Introduction

The history of diplomacy of the late Middle Ages is a field of study closely interconnected with issues related to the formation of the Italian Renaissance States which, in a process of mutual recognition and legitimization developed between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, made substantial changes to diplomatic practice (Lazzarini, 2016a). However, the road to a state system in political equilibrium was long and bumpy and only in the mid-fifteenth century the long wars of the previous decades were reassembled by the peace of Lodi in 1454, stipulated by the Duchy of Milan and the Republic of Venice, and the Lega Italica in 1455 (Soranzo, 1924; Cessi, 1942-1943; Ilardi, 1986; Fubini, 1994). The establishment of a system of multiple states, divided into five major political formations around which gravitated a pulverization of secondary powers, encompassed the geopolitical order of the Italian peninsula on the basis not only of geographical proximity, but also of shared subjective perceptions of proximity and government vision. Belonging to a specific political block also ensured the legitimate mutual recognition, in an equal or subordinate position (Cengarle-Somaini, 2016).

The institutional dynamism of the fifteenth-century Italian States needed, to make mutual communications easier and encourage diplomatic dialogue, not only to develop an effective, structured and adapted relational network to changing circumstances, but also to train specific skills both in terms of agents of negotiation and the organization of public records. This process of developing new models of diplomatic communication was followed by the elaboration of a new political language, flexible and complex at the same time, whose evolution can only be said to have been accomplished at the beginning of the sixteenth century (Lazzarini, 2007; Lazzarini, 2016b; Lazzarini, 2021; Dover, 2022).

Taking into account the multiform political aspect of Italy in the fifteenth century, the article aims to examine a specific case study to reduce the previous theoretical assumptions to the concrete reality of the early Renaissance diplomacy. I refer to the negotiations conducted in Rome between the autumn of 1453 and the spring of 1454 by the ambassadors of the major Italian states (Milan, Venice, Florence and Naples) to put an end to the war that opposed them in two fighting blocks: the Republic of Florence and the Duchy of Milan against the Kingdom of Naples and the Republic of Venice. Francesco Sforza, the condottiero who became Duke of Milan in 1450 and Alfonso V of Aragon, king of Naples since 1443, were the two personalities who, on the one hand, had brought a reversal in the traditional alliances between the major powers of the peninsula, and on the other hand - because of the particularity of the exercise of their power (the lack of recognition by the Emperor Frederick III of Habsburg for the Sforza, the articulated system of kingdoms overlooking the western Mediterranean for Alfonso V) - were the political novelty to take carefully under control.

The mediation to arrive at the peace treaty was led by Pope Nicholas V who, apparently, desired the end of hostilities to organize the crusade against the Ottomans in order to reconquer Constantinople (Runciman, 1965; Nicolle-Turnbull-Haldon, 2007).

The six months of Roman diplomatic talks did not bring any definitive result, achieved only a few weeks after the end of the Rome congress, but constitute - from the point of view of the history of diplomacy - an important observatory, especially through the correspondence of negotiators with their governments. Only the correspondence of the Milanese and Florentine ambassadors has come down to us; the first ones have been published (Battioni, 2013; Briasco-Mazzon, 2019; Briasco-Grieco, 2022), the second ones are still unpublished, kept in the State Archives of Florence. The letters of the two Florentine diplomats, Bernardo Giugni and Giannozzo Pitti, provide detailed information not only on the ongoing negotiations, but above all on the characters of the Curia, beginning with Pope Nicholas V, allowing historians to enter into the daily peace talks, the papal ceremonial and the intrigues of the Curia. Their words will therefore accompany the development of my article.

2. The source

The correspondence of the Florentine ambassadors in Rome between October 1453 and March 1454 consists of 44 letters that Bernardo Giugni and Giannozzo Pitti sent to the government of Florence almost daily (Zaccaria, 2001; Böninger, 2015). The State Archives of Florence keeps the register of letters gathered by the notary Piero di Carlo del Viva in the fund Signori, Dieci di Balìa, Otto di Pratica, legazioni e commissarie, missive e responsive 62; these are contemporary copies in excellent condition, which I intend to continue to work on and then publish. The diplomatic letter, in fact, was the main tool to promote the circulation of information and the vector of a homogeneous language suitable to support relational and political strategies that, in mid-fifteenth century Italy, were progressively building a systemic statehood (Covini-Figliuolo-Lazzarini-Senatore, 2008).

The lords of the Italian States whose envoys took part in the Roman negotiations were perfectly aware of the importance of managing the news, in particular Cosimo de' Medici and Francesco Sforza, the latter, above all, able to model the need for the control of the information circuit inherited from his past as a condottiero in a centralized diplomacy under the managerial profile, but practiced by a large network of envoys (Ferente, 2009: 108; Lazzarini, 2015: 47; Tanzini, 2022: 57). The Florentine ambassadors, therefore, were required constant updates, elaborated in a narrative that also gave reason for the gestures of the interlocutors, with frequent use of direct speech in order to report, in the most objective way, the development of the talks without any superstructure by the senders.

The great interest of the letters of Bernardo Giugni and Giannozzo Pitti is, if we want to believe in their objectivity, also the opportunity to read the words spoken by Pope Nicholas V, by the other ambassadors present in Rome in 1453-1454, by the cardinals with whom the two diplomatic agents related. But the correspondence also testifies to the incompleteness of Florentine diplomacy in the mid-fifteenth century, still polycentric from the organizational point of view, not structured in a network of professional representatives and without a long-term vision, but supported only by needs of occasion (Taddei, 2009). Until the sixteenth century, in fact, it was difficult to identify, at least as far as Florence was concerned, the trend towards permanent representation, regardless of the formation of a professional diplomatic corps (Fletcher, 2015; Volpini, 2022).

The close connection between quickly transmitted information and political action is another very evident element in the correspondence of Giugni and Pitti; there is a strong controversy between the question of news coming from Florence and the difficulties of ensuring the expected answers from the two envoys, often accused of not respecting the instructions of the Florentine government in relation to the daily updates. The stakes were certainly very high, especially for Cosimo de' Medici, whose hegemony was based on consensus from below, on the control of the republican institutions put in place in the least visible way possible, and on the need, in a period of exhausting war, not to excessively increase the burden of taxation (Rubinstein, 1966; Heers, 2008; Tanzini, 2022).

The awareness of the two ambassadors of not always being considered up to expectations is probably the reason why the notary Piero del Viva, on behalf of Bernardo Giugni, wrote a copy of the correspondence and added, at the end of each letter, the shipping method and often also the name of the carrier. Although both ambassadors were close to the Medici regime, it is clear that they wanted to protect their good reputation and not provide elements that could cast doubt on both their abilities and loyalty to the Florentine government.

The technical character of the correspondence is the reason why the two authors do not report information about the city of Rome, nor about its inhabitants and even details related to everyday life in the capital of the Church State. The focus is on the Pope, the Curia, the other ambassadors, the talks that were taking place in an uninterrupted manner, and the hope placed in the mediation of Nicholas V. The "postcards" of the title are therefore snapshots of the characters with whom Bernardo Giugni and Giannozzo Pitti related; the description of their personalities is, in my opinion, one of the most interesting parts of the whole source.

3. The Pope

The peace negotiations that Nicholas V had wanted to take place in Rome were the last of his attempts to end the war between the major Italian powers. The judgment of his contemporaries on the political action of the Pope is not uniform. The friend and fellow student, the Florentine Giannozzo Manetti who wrote the biography of Nicholas V, doesn't believe that peace occupied a prominent place in the mind of the pontiff (Manetti, 1999). He probably wasn't wrong. The endemic conflict and the continuous opposition between the Italian States allowed the Church not only to obtain a role of mediation between the different instances, but also to maintain an absolute autonomy which wasn't threatened by external influences, committed to protecting their political and territorial integrity.

The humanist Bartolomeo Platina, writing about twenty years after the death of Nicholas V, described him as «justice lover, peace maker and protector» («amator iustitiae, pacis auctor et conservator») (Platina, 1913-1932, p. 339). The contradictory description of the personality of Nicholas V is not surprising. His government strengthened papal spiritual and temporal authority, increased the number of cardinals, passed the last stages of the Western Schism, consolidated the finances of the Church. On every occasion he wanted to show the greatness of the Church, both politically and ceremonially (Miglio, 2016). In this perspective, the peace of Italy could be the corollary of a government action of considerable success, not the primary purpose of the pontifical politics.

The letters of Bernardo Giugni and Giannozzo Pitti are therefore of great importance in understanding more clearly the personality and intentions of Nicholas V at a turning point in Italian politics. The two Florentine ambassadors had frequent contacts with the Pope - as well as the other representatives who were in Rome between the autumn of 1453 and the spring of 1454 - and reported their impressions to the government of Florence in great detail. What is most striking is the ill health of Nicholas V, very frequently forced to suspend negotiations because of the attacks of gout he suffered, or to receive guests in his rooms, even lying in bed (letters nn. 1, 12, 14, 18, 28, 31, 41).

It is evident that the Pope's illness and the related periods of stalemate in the peace talks could not only serve to extol the harshness of the negotiating confrontation, but also to allow the pontiff to elaborate and develop the strategy to propose to the diplomatic agents. Because Nicholas V had not only ordered the Italian States to send representatives to Rome, but had developed a project of mediation between the opposing positions articulated on different levels. The first of these consisted in personally conducting the negotiations by receiving separately the ambassadors of the struggling powers. The hope was, perhaps, to be able to find elements of agreement and then get to the drafting of a treaty (Toews, 1968). The second level, in the event that the first did not achieve positive results, provided for the proposal of a renewed territorial structure of the Italian States that Nicholas V himself would present to diplomats and that - by meeting as much as possible the demands of each State in struggle - would constitute the new geopolitical structure of Italy.

Precisely this second level was put in place by the Pope, after having personally noted the difficulty of reaching a compromise. The idea took shape not only as a redefinition of the boundaries of the States, but also as a commitment by all the contenders to subscribe to a general connection of which the Church State would also be part. Without claiming to be the guarantee of a lasting peace, the treaty would still give the signatory powers reciprocal control to prevent misalignments in terms of power relations and new conflicts (letter no. 16).

For Nicholas V, the achievement of the result on the basis of the guidelines he elaborated would also have meant the definitive consolidation of papal authority in terms of political and diplomatic mediation and could also have relaunched the Church's action in continental questions to attract around the Pope the necessary consent to the organization of the crusade against the Turks. Thus, uniting Western Christianity against an external danger and putting a brake on the intra-European war potential.

The efforts of Nicholas V, of the Florentine and the Milanese ambassadors did not reach the goal, despite six months of continuous negotiations and the desire for peace that - beyond formal attitudes - came from all the States in conflict. However, the period of negotiations bore fruit a few weeks after the conclusion of the Congress of Rome, when, on 9 April 1454, Milan and Venice signed a bilateral peace in Lodi (Cessi, 1942-1943; Ilardi, 1986). The disappointment of the pontiff for the failure to reach the treaty under his supervision if on the one hand it did not affect the authority of papal mediation, on the other it was due not to a weakness of negotiation of Nicholas V, but above all to the private interests of many members of the College of Cardinals and the difficulty of relating to the opposing personalities of all the agents involved.

4. Cardinals, ambassadors, merchants

From the correspondence of Bernardo Giugni and Giannozzo Pitti interesting information emerge about all the parties involved in the Roman negotiations. It should not be forgotten, in fact, that Renaissance diplomacy was not practiced by specialized personnel, but by a multitude of actors and agents from different contexts, with different

cultural backgrounds, with different political roles and often hybridized by polycentric assignments, sometimes selected for actual past experience, at other times for specific cultural skills that made them suitable for a complex relational context (Tremml-Werner - Goetz, 2019; Valeri, 2020).

The college of cardinals, in this already structurally composite framework, constituted a separate group, a sort of "polyfocal" set (I am using the definition coined and applied to the archaeological field by R. Hodges, 2015) in which the different cores of political power and family interests dialogued with difficulties both among themselves and with wider instances. On the other hand, it is also to be considered the importance that the "red hat" had for the major Renaissance families. In the ruling classes of the fifteenth century it was a well-established practice to assign a member of the family to the ecclesiastical career and support his accession to the cardinalate. Participating in ecclesiastical politics from within was not only a necessity from the point of view of the exercise of power, but also the most accredited form of recognition of that same power and, consequently, of its legitimacy (Pellegrini, 2017).

The absence of a cardinal belonging to the Medici family was for many decades one of the reasons for the weakness of the Florentine hegemonic family and the confirmation of the ambiguity of the Medici position within the Italian political circuit. However, even in the period preceding the rise of Cosimo de' Medici the request of a native cardinal remained unheard of at the papal court, despite the proximity to the Florentine government of some members of the college of cardinals and the close link between Pope Eugene IV and Florence (Chambers, 2015; Boschetto, 2012; Plebani, 2012; Plebani, 2021). This is the main reason why the Florentine diplomatic representation in Rome could only count on the political support of the cardinals who claimed to be allies of Florence. However, faced with particularly complicated situations or with an uncertain outcome such as the peace talks of the mid-fifteenth century, they didn't hesitate to have a non-linear and unreliable behavior (letter no. 39).

The two Florentine ambassadors give us, in this sense, concrete examples, based on the daily life of their visits and which highlight the difficulty of action within the Curia, in particular at a time when the personal and family interests of the cardinals were not only politically polarized, but also defended at any price, including the misalignment towards the action of the Pope. This is the case, for example, of Latino Orsini, a powerful cardinal of the Roman baronial clan whose possessions in the Kingdom of Naples were the reason for the alliance with Alfonso V of Aragon. To Bernardo Giugni and Giannozzo Pitti, Orsini stated unambiguously that he would not support any peace project that went against Aragonese interests and that could endanger the territories, revenues and relational balance of the Orsini in southern Italy. Even at the cost of resorting to arms if Alfonso had been opposed by his French rival, René d'Anjou (also known as roi René), pretender to the throne of Naples and ally of Florence (letter no. 12).

Equally an enemy of both the Florentines and the pontifical projects was the cardinal of Venice, Pietro Barbo (future Pope Paul II), also close to Alfonso of Aragon probably only as executor of the political instructions of Venetian government, without any personal or family interest. Allies of Florence, however, were the Iberian Cardinal Juan de Carvajal and the Bishop of Perugia Iacopo Vagnucci to whom the two diplomats referred to receive confidential information and updates on the talks between the Pope and the curial (letter no. 5).

The relations between Bernardo Giugni and Giannozzo Pitti and the ambassadors of the other Italian States were equally ambiguous, complicated by the convoluted strategies of diplomacy put in place especially by the Venetians, conveyed by mutual suspicions and substantial distrust in the possibility that the Roman negotiations would achieve a positive result. From the correspondence of the two Florentine envoys it is also evident how the diplomatic action had a strongly polycentric shape, with the official ambassadors sometimes rejected in a marginal position by unofficial diplomatic agents. It was the case, for example, of the Neapolitans Marino Caracciolo and Michele Riccio who were prevented from carrying out their task because of the presence in Rome of Íñigo de Guevara, Count of Ariano, close collaborator of King Alfonso of Aragon and his military commander. Only with him, in fact, the Pope had a talk, deliberately ignoring the two envoys formally accredited to Rome (letter no. 3).

The personality of the other diplomatic agents is described by the Florentines with attention to detail; the Venetians (Orsatto Giustinian and Cristoforo Moro) were verbally aggressive, had a tendency to lie and threats, were not interested in finding an agreement, rejected the mediation proposals of Nicholas V. It was evident that they carried out the orders received from the Venetian government, but their behavior - very disrespectful of the pontiff himself - further complicated an already compromised picture (letter no. 16). It was certainly not an unusual situation, given the stakes, but certainly the interlocutors showed neither the will to dialogue in a constructive manner, nor confidence in the papal mediation.

A less precise description is dedicated to the Milanese ambassadors, Sceva de Curte and Giacomo Trivulzio, whose diplomatic action Giugni and Pitti had received instructions to follow at every stage of the difficult negotiations. In the desire expressed by the Florentine government to adapt to the negotiating methods of the Milanese it is to be seen the recognition of a diplomatic structure already consolidated, less occasional and more accustomed to the

long residency. In this sense, the position of Bernardo Giugni and Giannozzo Pitti was the weakest, both because the Florentine State was the one that had the most to lose from the failure of the peace negotiations and for the internal political situation. The authority of Cosimo de' Medici, in fact, was informal, based on consensus from below and consolidated by the control of the apparatus of government implemented through electoral manipulations, but without any official legitimacy (Rubinstein, 1966).

Despite the presence of the Aragonese troops on the Florentine territory and the heavy taxation imposed to support the expenses of the mercenary armies, Cosimo de' Medici was not at all convinced of the opportunity to conclude a peace that, considering the progress of the Roman talks, didn't have the qualifications to be decisive. The Italian States, in fact, did not seem ready to make a system and to give rise to a political solidity that would give them autonomy and strength to oppose foreign pressures (French, in particular).

The Medici, for their part, needed exceptional circumstances (such as the ongoing war) to justify the extraordinary government measures, put in place in derogation to the normal functioning of the Florentine institutions and offering to Cosimo and his family (the sons Giovanni and Piero in these years) the motivation for the total control of the Florentine government.

For these reasons, it was essential that Giugni and Pitti on the one hand play their negotiating role, also benefiting from the collaboration of their fellow citizens present in Rome in the semester October 1453-March 1454 (Roberto Martelli, above all, the powerful director of the Roman branch of the Banco Medici) (De Roover, 1963), while on the other hand, it was also necessary for them to keep under control the large community of Florentine merchants living in Rome to avoid leaks or manipulation of information.

The relations between economic operators and agents of diplomacy have been thoroughly analyzed by scholars. Both categories were field operatives and related to each other, but while the ambassadors had privileged access to the top levels of political power, merchants moved with greater agility because of the better knowledge of the places and networks of information they built thanks to their profession (Lazzarini, 2014 and 2016c; Scarton, 2022).

However, in order to successfully exercise the trade, peace was necessary and the Florentine merchants resident in Rome in the mid-fifteenth century hoped that the meetings between the ambassadors of the States at war would also reach a conclusion favourable to economic interests. It is for this reason that the news circulated in an uncontrolled manner and on more than one occasion the information that the Florentine operators sent and received did not have a reliable foundation. The question, however, could not be underestimated, also because the Pope himself had been informed of rumors that, in January 1454, considered already signed the peace treaty while the diplomatic agents were still negotiating. Nicholas V urged Bernardo Giugni and Giannozzo Pitti to solve the problem that, as it turned out from the investigation conducted by the two ambassadors, had arisen during a dinner between merchants (letter no. 22).

5. Conclusions

The Peace of Lodi was signed by the Duchy of Milan and the Republic of Venice a few weeks after the apparently unsuccessful conclusion of the Congress of Rome and, in the following months, extended to the other Italian States to finally achieve a general connection. Although those months of intense negotiations have been studied in depth by several generations of scholars, the analysis of diplomatic correspondence can still reserve some surprises.

In the case of the correspondence of the Florentine ambassadors, beyond their almost secondary role compared to their Milanese and Venetian counterparts, what is of great interest is the daily narration of their Roman experience. The minute detail of the story was a specific request of the Florentine government, the impressions on the protagonists of the talks, the description of the different personalities, the frequent use of direct speech are, instead, the literary tool to send detailed reports to draw a clear picture of the ongoing discussions and their protagonists.

What is missing is any description of the city of Rome that remains totally in the background, but it is obvious that - given the delicacy of the situation - Bernardo Giugni and Giannozzo Pitti had neither interest nor time to visit the capital of the Church State. Their work was not particularly appreciated by the Florentine government, which held them responsible for leaks of information, incorrect management of negotiations, difficulties in sending mail that, in some cases, had caused delays in the exchange of letters.

All this, as I have already pointed out, is evidence of a diplomatic apparatus still immature in terms of organization and management that, in the mid-fifteenth century, had not yet acquired full operational efficiency. It will take a few more decades before the transition to a premodern diplomacy in Florence could be considered accomplished and the embassies became at the same time a proof of stable relational networks and the legitimacy of the emanating authority.

6. References

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