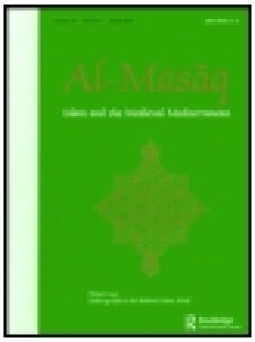

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Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/calm20

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To cite this article: Alessandro Rizzo (2020): The Significance of the Written Word in European–Mamlūk Diplomatic Missions, Al-Masāq, DOI: 10.1080/09503110.2020.1842090

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2020.1842090

Published online: 06 Dec 2020.

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AL-MASĀQ
https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2020.1842090

The Significance of the Written Word in European–Mamlūk Diplomatic Missions*

Alessandro Rizzo

ABSTRACT
The article addresses the use of the written language in relations between European states and the Mamlūk sultanate (Egypt-Syria, 1250–1517), focusing on chancery sources relating to diplomatic missions to Cairo. In the first part, the author presents an overview of the documents that marked the various stages of embassies to the sultan's court (authorities' instructions, cover letters, safe-conducts, Mamlūk chancery documents, etc.). By analysing the nature of these sources, the article aims to show their utility for the purpose of diplomatic interaction. In the second part, the study focuses on the significance of the written language, examining in particular the relationship between the rhetoric of the diplomatic discourse and its actual usefulness. In dealing with some specific aspects of the chancery instruments (commercial clauses, religious issues), the article highlights the active force of the written word in keeping diplomatic dialogue alive despite all the possible differences or contrasts.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 15 May 2020
Accepted 15 October 2020

KEYWORDS
Diplomacy; Mamlūks; Florence; Venice; Crown of Aragon; Chancery documents

Introduction

The gradual increase in the production of documents by the administrations of several European states between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period has aroused significant historiographical interest over the last two decades.[1] From different perspectives, scholars have examined the characteristics of the elaborate writing systems with which the governments of monarchies and republics organised their domestic and foreign policy.[2] A practice of government based on the increasing use of the written word – and its physical media – made possible a more efficient gathering, communication and conservation of political information. The analysis of such a range of

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*This work was supported by Wallonie-Bruxelles International (WBI-World Postdoctoral Fellowship) and carried out at the Institució Milá i Fontanals (CSIC, Barcelona), in collaboration with the project *Movimiento y movilidad en el Mediterráneo medieval. Personas, términos y conceptos* (PGC2018-094502-B-I00).

[1] Isabella Lazzarini, "Materiali per una didattica delle scritture pubbliche di cancelleria nell'Italia del Quattrocento", *Scrineum Rivista* 2 (2004): 1–85; Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell: 2013), pp. 46–82; Isabella Lazzarini, "De la 'Révolution scripturaire' à la fin du moyen âge: Pratiques documentaires et analyses historiographiques en Italie", in *Le Moyen Âge dans le texte*, ed. Benoît Grévin and Aude Mairey (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2016), pp. 277–94.

[2] *Inter alia*: Filippo de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Stephane Péquignot, *Au nom du roi: Pratique diplomatique et pouvoir durant le règne de Jacques II d'Aragon (1291–1327)* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2009); *Écritures grises : Les instruments de travail des administrations (XII^e^–XVII^e^ s.)*, ed. Arnaud Fossier, Johann Petitjean and Clémence Revest (Paris: Écoles des chartes, 2019).

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documents would have been impossible without keen, renewed interest in the history and functions of European archives.[3]

The research has dealt with both the documents used in the internal processes of government and the instruments issued by state chanceries to communicate with foreign powers.[4] Works of the latter kind, which this article deals with, fall within the area of research known as “Diplomatic Studies”. For a long time, the study of diplomatic relations has attached greater importance to written documents than to other tools and evidence of communication. The examination of chancery sources, however, was traditionally restricted to a relatively limited range of aspects in comparison with those that scholars now consider interesting – or rather essential – for the purposes of research.[5] Indeed, the interest that was focused mainly on the content of the documents has rarely been matched by similar consideration of their function within the wider range of diplomatic writings, or their relationship with other forms of communication (oral, exchange of gifts, ceremonial, etc.).[6] The reassessment of the multiple languages of diplomacy is one of the main aims pursued by the recent historiographical trend known as New Diplomatic History. Its research deals with the various types of diplomatic dialogue by considering their symbolic and practical implications, as they were attributed and perceived by the various diplomatic actors.[7]

While such an “holistic” approach is increasingly being adopted nowadays by scholars studying the European context, it is hardly found at all in works concerning diplomatic practice in the medieval Islamic world.[8] A crucial role in discouraging research in this respect has long been played by the traditional perception of the scant conservation of documents in the archives of Muslim states. In fact, this paradigm has influenced both the study of diplomatic documents – on which this article focuses – and the analysis of other methods of communication, often attested and described by chancery texts. The supposed “lack of sources” has been explained over the years by giving a variety of reasons. This historiographical narrative has only been questioned very recently, and also denied in some respects.[9] Indeed, scholars have shed new light on the functions and the wealth – in terms of both quantity and quality – of archive material in the medieval Islamic world.[10] At the same time, they have re-evaluated other forms of the conservation of documents, such as those kept in European archives or those that were transcribed in chancery manuals or chronicles, thus paving the way for further studies.[11] Of the various periods of Islamic history that have stimulated researchers' current curiosity in this respect, the Mamlūk sultanate (Egypt-Syria, 1250–1517) is one of the most significant. Far from having exhausted the information potential of its diplomatic documents, interest in Mamlūk diplomacy continues to raise questions and new prospects for analysis.[12]

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[3] Paul Marcus Dover, “Deciphering the Diplomatic Archives of Fifteenth-Century Italy”, *Archival Science* 7 (2007): 297–316; Gian Maria Varanini, “Public Written Records”, in *The Italian Renaissance State*, ed. Andrea Gamberini and Isabella Lazzarini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2012), pp. 385–404; Filippo de Vivo, Andrea Guidi and Alessandro Silvestri, “Archival Transformations in Early Modern European History”, *European History Quarterly* 46 (2016): 421–34.

[4] See *supra* notes 1-3 and Isabella Lazzarini, *Communication and Conflict: Italian Diplomacy in the Early Renaissance, 1350–1520* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); *Ambassades et ambassadeurs en Europe (XV^e^–XVII^e^ siècles): Pratiques, écritures, savoirs*, ed. Jean-Louis Fournel and Matteo Residori (Genève: Droz, 2020).

[5] *Diplomatique médiévale*, ed. Olivier Guyotjeannin, Jacques Pycke and Benoît-Michel Tock (Turnhout: Brepols, 1992).

[6] John Watkins, “Toward a New Diplomatic History of Medieval and Early Modern Europe”, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38/1 (2008): 1–14

[7] https://newdiplomatichistory.org/.

[8] Here I just mention a few remarkable exceptions: Pascal Buresi and Hicham El Aallaoui, *Governing the Empire: Provincial Administration in the Almohad Caliphate (1224–1269): Critical Edition, Translation, and Study of Manuscript 4752 of the Ḥasaniyya Library in Rabat Containing 77 Taqādīm (“Appointments”)* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Cihan Yüksel Muslu, *The Ottomans and the Mamluks: Imperial Diplomacy and Warfare in the Islamic World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014). For works that collect, for comparative purposes, papers on both European and Islamic states: *Les relations diplomatiques au moyen âge : Formes et enjeux*, ed. Société des historiens médiévistes de l’Enseignement supérieur public (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2010) ; *La correspondance entre souverains, princes et cités-états: Approches croisées entre l’Orient musulman, l’Occident latin et Byzance (XIII^e^–début XVI^e^ siècle)*, ed. Denise Aigle and Stéphane Péquignot (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

[9] Frédéric Bauden, “Du destin des archives en Islam : Analyse des données et éléments de réponse”, in Denise Aigle and Stéphane Péquignot, *La correspondance entre souverains, princes et cités-état* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013) pp. 27–49.

[10] Tamer el-Leithy, “Living Documents, Dying Archives: Towards a Historical Anthropology of Medieval Arabic Archives”, *Al-Qantara* 32/2 (2011): 389–434; Konrad Hirschler, “From Archive to Archival Practices: Rethinking the Preservation of

The documents pertaining to the diplomatic relations between the Mamlūks and European powers are undoubtedly among those that deserve to be studied in greater depth. The majority of studies of these exchanges have focused on trade, often offering notable analyses of commercial dynamics.[13] However, these works have only marginally addressed the issue of diplomatic dialogue and documents. Moreover, studies focusing on specific Mamlūk documents from a "philological" and diplomatic perspective are still few in number. The best scientific results in this field have been achieved by studies that have investigated the documents' extrinsic and intrinsic features, not simply describing them. These aspects are rightly considered to be vehicles for different kinds of verbal and non-verbal messages that were used jointly in the context of diplomatic communication.[14] In some cases, these analyses accompany new editions of documents, but the majority of the existing publications date back several decades, and no longer meet the scientific requirements of current research.[15] Today, the original Mamlūk instruments addressed to European powers are kept in the old capitals of these states (Archives of Barcelona, Florence, Venice, Ragusa/Dubrovnik).[16] Written in Arabic, they are in the form of scrolls composed of sheets of oriental paper pasted together.

Acknowledging the scant attention paid to diplomatic tools by studies focusing on trade, and the shortage of works that place individual documents in a wider context of writings, this article first presents an overview of the written instruments that set the

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Mamluk Administrative Documents", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136/1 (2016): 1–28; *idem*, "Document Reuse in Medieval Arabic Manuscripts", Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies *Bulletin* 3/1 (2017): 33–44.

[11] Frédéric Bauden, "Mamluk Diplomatics: The Present State of Research", in *Mamlūk Cairo: A Crossroad for Embassies*, ed. Frédéric Bauden and Malika Dekkiche (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 1–104.

[12] Donald P. Little, "The Use of Documents for the Study of Mamluk History", *Mamlūk Studies Review* 1 (1997): 1–13; Frédéric Bauden, "Mamluk Era Documentary Studies: The State of the Art", *Mamluk Studies Review* 9 (2005): 15–60; Lucian Reinfandt, "Mamlūk Documentary Studies", in *Ubi sumus? Quo vademus? Mamluk Studies – State of Art*, ed. Stephan Conermann (Göttingen: VR Unipress, 2013), pp. 285–310; Frédéric Bauden and Malika Dekkiche, *Mamlūk Cairo* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

[13] To mention just a few titles: Damien Coulon, *Barcelone et le grand commerce d'Orient au moyen âge : Un siècle de relations avec l'Égypte et la Syrie-Palestine (ca. 1330 – ca. 1430)* (Madrid-Barcelona: Casa de Velázquez, 2004); Francisco Apellániz, *Pouvoir et finance en Méditerranée pré-moderne: Le deuxième État Mamelouk et le commerce de épices (1382–1517)* (Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2009); Georg Christ, *Trading Conflicts : Venetian Merchants and Mamluk Officials in Late Medieval Alexandria* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[14] Frédéric Bauden, "Ikhwāniyyāt Letters in the Mamluk Period: A Document (Muṭāla'a) Issued by al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh's Chancery and a Contribution to Mamluk Diplomatics", in *Egypt and Syria under Mamluk Rule*, ed. Amalia Levanoni, forthcoming; Gladys Frantz-Murphy, "Negotiating the Last Mamluk-Venetian Commercial Decree (1516–7)", in Frédéric Bauden and Malika Dekkiche, *Mamlūk Cairo* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2019), pp. 741–81; Donald S. Richards, *Mamluk Administrative Documents from St Catherine's Monastery* (Louvain: Peeters, 2011); Malika Dekkiche, "Correspondence between Mamluks and Timurids in the Fifteenth Century: Study of an Unpublished Source (BnF.ms.ar. 4440)", *Eurasian Studies* 11 (2013): 131–60.

[15] Bauden, "Mamluk Diplomatics".

[16] Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Documenti Algeri, Egitto, Marocco; Libri Commemoriali. Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Orientali; Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Diplomatico, Varie IV; Državni Arhiv u Dubrovniku. Archivo General de la Corona de Aragón, Diversos y Colecciones, Cartas árabes.

tempo for the European embassies to Mamlūk Cairo. Taking this perspective, the focus extends to Western diplomatic sources. This “revisiting” of the written words of diplomacy aims to define the diplomatic nature of its instruments by taking a comparative approach. The piece focuses in particular on three states that established diplomatic relations with the sultanate: the Crown of Aragon, the Republic of Venice and the Republic of Florence. In fact, the documents left by these powers are considerably more numerous than in other cases (i.e. Ragusa, Genoa), for which the shortage of preserved documents would make a significant overview impossible. While I am aware that each government had its own specific characteristics with regard to the reasons for and the forms of interaction, an overall analysis of the sources reveals significant common aspects in the use of the written word. The purpose of this article is to highlight these aspects through the analysis of the documents that constituted the ambassadors’ “itinerant archive”, in the three best-documented cases mentioned above.

The sources will be reviewed taking into account both the instruments issued by the European chanceries and given to the emissaries, and the documents handed to Western ambassadors by the Mamlūk authorities in Egypt. This kind of approach, following the course of the mission, sets out to look at the two sides of the dialogue. The way in which the written words of diplomacy fulfilled their purpose within a sequence of texts – an essential framework on which the entire mission was based – will thus be investigated. In part two, their theoretical value will be analysed in the light of some specific issues.

The role of the word in the documents marking the stages of the embassy

Since Durkheim, sociology has shown that communication in its symbolic, gestural and verbal manifestations is an absolute condition for social life. In the context of European–Mamlūk diplomacy, considered as a social activity, the written word acted together with other languages, performing multiple essential functions, from the initial steps to the ultimate aims of diplomatic mediation.[17] The word of the documents was first and foremost the tool by which the objectives of the mission were formulated and attested, but it was also a fundamental negotiating instrument during the embassy. Moreover, the written word also constituted the final diplomatic goal of the embassies to Cairo. European ambassadors went to the sultan’s court in order to obtain written documents to certify the results of the agreements. Without these documents, the stipulations had no legal force. Depending on their function, these sources differed in their diplomatic characteristics. Considering the whole set of these instruments, it could be said, paraphrasing Francesco Senatore, that the entire embassy constituted in itself a “world of paper”.[18]

“Written words” at the beginning of the embassy

The documents determining the official start of the mission were the written instructions given by the authorities to their envoys and the cover letters addressed to the Mamlūk authorities. The instructions developed as a distinct diplomatic instrument from the fourteenth century onwards in European chanceries.[19] The directives were often drafted in the form of letters that were handed to the diplomats before they left for Egypt, after they had been copied in the registers of the state chancery. However, if from the perspective of the single embassy, the instructions and the cover letters signalled the beginning of the mission, chronologically these instruments could be preceded by other kinds of documents. For example, missions could be organised upon receipt of a letter from Cairo. European letters frequently refer to these documents.[20] Furthermore, embassies were sometimes organised on the basis of written requests that were submitted to the sultan. This is the case with the document drafted by a group of prominent Florentine traders in November 1487. The merchants presented the requests to the city authorities in order to solicit commercial rights from the Mamlūk sovereign.[21] These petitions were one of the reasons for Luigi della Stufa's embassy to Cairo in 1488–1489.[22]

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[17] For a theoretical study on the features of diplomacy as relational practice relying on different kinds of language, see Christer Jönsson and Martin Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

[18] Francesco Senatore, *Uno mundo de carta: Forme e strutture della diplomazia sforzesca* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 1998).

Broadening the perspective, another document that could be closely related to the organisation of the embassy was, in many cases, the papal letter authorising the Christian authority to send emissaries to Egypt. In the early years of its exchanges with the sultanate, the Crown of Aragon particularly depended on papal blessing and permission.[23] The letter from Rome represented an important form of legitimation for ambassadors' journeys.

Returning to the letter of instructions, in general but also simpler terms, this document is often defined as the means by which the government informed its diplomats of the objectives and the conduct of the embassy. For the historian, however, the instructions may be far more than a list of orders given to the emissaries. Indeed, this instrument attested to the appointment of an ordinary citizen as the official spokesman of a European government, certifying the diplomatic relevance of his journey to Egypt. In that period, the ambassador's authority usually extended only to the temporal and spatial context of the embassy. Once it was over, his duties and responsibilities as a diplomat ceased to exist. From a juridical point of view, the written word of the instructions was fundamental in assigning and acknowledging his task. At the same time, the letter served a more practical purpose: accompanying the emissary for the entire journey, it reminded him of his role and his obligations, outlining the scope of the embassy, its content and its limits.

Focusing now on its content, the letter of instructions reflects all the complexity of the diplomatic word. The directives aimed to illustrate as clearly as possible the goals of the mission, but at the same time this document could embody the "malleable nature" of diplomacy. This ductility is clearly evident in the letter given by the Florentine government to its ambassadors Carlo Federighi and Felice Brancacci in 1422, on the occasion of the first diplomatic contacts between the Republic of Florence and the Mamlūk sultanate.[24] At that time, the government of the Tuscan city had no experience of diplomatic exchanges with the Mamlūks. This lack of experience is evident in the instructions issued on 14 June 1422 for the two envoys. Through the *Nota et informatione* (Note and information), the Florentine authorities recommended that their officials gather information during their journey about the best way to negotiate with the sultan. For the purpose of this article, it is interesting to point out that these uncertainties also concerned the words that the emissaries should use in diplomatic mediation.[25] In this case, the written word of the letter acted as a tool that opened up the possibility of other words. Here, the almost paradoxical balance emerges between the accuracy of the written order given by the *Signoria*[26] and the uncertainty over the actual words that should be used by Federighi and Brancacci. This apparent anomaly is significant if we consider that the essential goal of the mission was the establishment of diplomatic and commercial relations with the sultan. For this purpose, the government attempted to avoid any and all possible errors by giving the ambassadors exceptional freedom of choice. The oral word was thus able to adapt to the circumstances. Once again, the only means of legitimising this adaptability was the written word of the instructions.

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[19] Isabella Lazzarini, "The Preparatory Work: From Choice to Instructions", in *Italian Renaissance Diplomacy: A Sourcebook*, ed. Monica Azzolini and Isabella Lazzarini (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2017), pp. 11–16, esp. 11–12.

[20] To cite just one example, by the letter dated 18 November 1307, King James II of Aragon (r. 1291–1327) informs the Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn (r. 1293–1294, 1299–1309, 1310–1341) that he has received his letter, delivered by the ambassador Matheu Zacaria: "Fem saber per aquesta carta nostra que avem reebuda ab pagament e ab alegria la carta vostra quens avets trames novelament per ma del honrat Matheu Zacaria" (Ángeles Masiá de Ros, *La Corona de Aragón y los estados del Norte de África: Política de Jaime II y Alfonso IV en Egipto, Ifriquía y Tremecén* [Barcelona: Instituto Español de Estudios Mediterráneos, 1951], p. 300).

[21] Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF), Diplomatico Cartaceo, Riformagioni Atti Pubblici, 1487/11/27; Alessandro Rizzo, "Le lys et le lion: Diplomatie et échanges entre Florence et le sultanat mamelouk (début XV^{e}-début XVI^{e} s.)", PhD Thesis, volumes I–III, University of Liège and University of Aix-Marseille, 2017, II: 297–8.

[22] Patrizia Meli, "Firenze di fronte al mondo islamico: Documenti su due ambasciate (1487–1489)", *Annali di Storia di Firenze* 4 (2009): 243–73; Rizzo, *Le Lys et le Lion*, I: 122–54.

[23] Masiá de Ros, *La Corona de Aragón*, 72–153.

The hesitancy in the letter given to Federighi and Brancacci is even more remarkable if this document is compared with other instructions, such as those communicated some months earlier (23 December 1421) to the Venetian ambassadors Bernardo Loredan and Lorenzo Capello by the doge Tommaso Mocenigo (r. 1414–1423).[27] The Venetian document includes expressions referring to the history of diplomatic friendship between the *Serenissima* and the Mamlūks. In this case, the written word sets out in detail Loredan and Capello's duties, leaving little room for personal initiative. Although the two embassies are very close in time, their diplomatic conditions are significantly different. In both cases, however, the written word of the instructions best adapts to the purpose of the mission. On the one hand, the Venetian embassy aims to recalibrate some aspects of a dialogue consolidated for many decades. In order to obtain the renewal of the old stipulations and the granting of new rights, the ambassadors – and with them, their oral communication and the written instructions on which their embassy is based – must appear resolute and firm. In contrast, the Florentine letter of instructions bears witness to the establishment of a completely new relationship, clearly reflecting all the unpredictability that this implied. For this reason, the diplomatic word had to be flexible enough to adjust to the new situation. The later history of Florentine–Mamlūk exchanges demonstrates that this initial strategy was effective.[28]

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[24] ASF, Signori, Legazioni e Commissarie, reg. 7, fols 1r–3r.

[25] Rizzo, "Le lys et le lion", II : 269–70.

[26] The *Signoria* was the government of the Republic of Florence, composed of nine *Priori delle Arti* and the *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia*.

[27] *Diplomatarium Veneto–Levantinum sive Acta et Diplomata Res Venetas Graecas atque Levantis. a. 1351–1454*, ed. Riccardo Predelli and George M. Thomas (Venice: Venetiis-Sumptibus Societatis, 1899), pp. 332–40.

[28] Rizzo, "Le lys et le lion".

Cover letters

As the document defining the main stages and instruments of the embassy, the letter of instructions always referred to other texts that were essential in diplomatic dialogue. The letter might thus mention instruments such as the cover letters that the ambassadors had to take with them and the final documents they had to request from the sultan. As mentioned, the drafting of these letters – together with the instructions – represented the first step of the embassy.

The purpose of the cover letters was to provide the foreign authorities with confirmation and authorisation of the emissary's task.[29] Moreover, this document gave official weight to the words that the ambassador had to pronounce. In the letter dated 17 September 1356, addressed by King Peter IV of Aragon (r. 1336–1387) to the sultan al-Nāṣir Ḥasan (r. 1347–1351; 1354--1361) on behalf of the ambassador Ferrer de Manresa, the European sovereign communicated to his interlocutor that the words of his emissary were worthy of belief because they would be uttered as if they had been spoken by the king himself.[30] In this case, the written word of the letter validates the emissary's spoken words, eliminating the difference between the sovereign and his spokesman. Cover letters could also be addressed to other Mamlūk authorities. For example, the Florentine Giovenco della Stufa, a galley captain and ambassador, travelled to Alexandria in 1445 with three letters, one for the sultan, another for the *nāʾib* of Alexandria and a third for the *nāẓir al-khāṣṣ*.[31] The *nāʾib* was the sultan's representative in the port city and he was usually the first Mamlūk authority that the ambassadors met.[32] The *nāẓir al-khāṣṣ* was the officer in charge of the *dīwān al-khāṣṣ*, the office that collected the taxes levied on trade.[33] In this case, the Florentine authorities, like Peter IV of Aragon (r. 1336–1387) several decades before, invited the sultan to listen to their envoy's words as if they were their own. Authorising the ambassador's office and words, the cover letter also had the function of protecting him from possible abuses.

Cover letters could also be written for new consuls or for merchants who normally had a privileged relationship with the government. In June 1384, Peter IV of Aragon ordered his chancery to write two letters on behalf of the citizen of Barcelona, Bernardo de Gualbes, elected the new Catalan consul in place of Simon Reya, whose dismissal was demanded. These documents were addressed to the sultan al-Ẓāhir Barqūq (r. 1382–1399) and to the governor of Alexandria. On the same occasion, another letter was written to the caliph and to the main judges asking them to intercede with the sultan on behalf of the new consul.[34] In a certain sense, by asking them to intervene directly in the dialogue with the sultan, the king of Aragon made them the ambassadors of his words as well.

By comparing the written word of the instructions with that of the cover letters, we can see that the two documents played a symmetrical role. In the first case, the word confirmed the ambassador in his capacity with regard to his government, while in the second case it authorised him as an emissary to the Mamlūk authorities. Furthermore, in both cases, these two documents officially certified the importance of the ambassador's task, but at the same time they reminded him of his subordination to the government that sent him, as well as the respect he owed to the sultan and the Mamlūk officials who received him.

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[29] Péquignot, *Au nom du roi*, 32–4.

[30] Amada López de Meneses, "Correspondencia de Pedro el Ceremonioso con la soldania de Babilonia", *Cuadernos de Historia de España* 29–30 (1959): 293–337, p. 300.

[31] ASF, Signori, Carteggio, missive, I cancelleria, vol. 36, fols. 102v–103v.

[32] Ahmad ʿAbd Al-Rāziq, "Les gouverneurs d'Alexandrie au temps de Mamlūks", *Annales Islamologiques* 18 (1982): 123–69.

[33] Bernadette Martel-Thoumian, *Les civils et l'administration dans l'état militaire mamlūk (IX ⍰–XV⍰ siècles)* (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1991), p. 51.

[34] López de Meneses, "Correspondencia de Pedro el Ceremonioso", 329–30.

Mamlūk safe-conducts for the ambassadors

Once foreign ambassadors had reached Alexandria and handed the cover letters to the *nāʾib*, the governor usually sent couriers to Cairo in order to inform the sultan of their arrival.[35] Thus informed, the Mamlūk sovereign ordered the drafting of documents allowing the ambassadors to travel to the capital of the sultanate. Only after obtaining the sultan's safe-conduct could the emissaries leave Alexandria. Once again, it can be seen that the written word was essential at every stage of the embassy. In theory at least, their safety was guaranteed on their journey through Egypt to Cairo.

In general terms, the sultan could grant safety (*amān*) to foreigners through different kinds of documents. On the basis of the distinction proposed by al-Qalqashandī (d. 1418), author of the most detailed Mamlūk chancery manual, this office could issue general safe-conducts (*amān ʿāmm*) or specific safe-conducts (*amān khāṣṣ*).[36] The first category included documents such as truces or decrees, which generally ensured freedom of movement for European merchants and pilgrims.[37] The second kind covered, among others, the safe-conducts issued for ambassadors. Unfortunately, not one specific safe-conduct has survived. This can be explained by the fact that the ambassadors probably did not bring them back to Europe because their use was limited to the period and the place of their mission. There was therefore no need to conserve these documents or copies of them in European chanceries. In contrast, the general safe-conducts had broader validity.

Testimonies to safe-conducts issued to envoys can be found in other sources, such as travel journals or letters of instructions. As mentioned above, the governor of Alexandria had the task of sending letters and messengers to Cairo in order to request the sultan's *amān* for emissaries.[38] This was not always the case, however. In the instructions given to Domenico Trevisan, the Venetian government informed him that he would find the safe-conduct ready in the city of Candia in Crete or at another stage of his journey.[39]

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[35] Aḥmad b. ʿAbdallāh al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā fī ṣināʿat al-inshāʾ*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Rasūl Ibrāhīm, 14 volumes (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Amīriyya, 1913–1919, ²1963), IV: 58–9.

[36] Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā*, XIII: 321–51.

[37] Alessandro Rizzo, "Travelling and Trading through Mamluk Territory: Chancery Documents Guaranteeing Mobility to Christian Merchants", in *History and Society during the Mamluk Period (1250–1517)*, ed. Bethany Walker and Abdelkader Al-Ghouz [Mamluk Studies,volume III] (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, forthcoming 2021).

[38] This was the case, for example, with the above-mentioned Brancacci and Federighi's embassy to the Sultan Barsbāy, in 1422. The two ambassadors waited for several days in Alexandria, before receiving the authorisation to travel to Cairo. Felice Brancacci, *Diario di Felice Brancacci ambasciatore con Carlo Federighi al Cairo per il Comune di Firenze*, ed. Dante Catellacci, *Archivio Storico Italiano* 4/8 (1881): 157–88, p. 168.

[39] *Le voyage d'Outremer de Jean Thenaud suivi de La relation de l'Ambassade de Domenico Trevisan auprès du Soudan d'Egypte*, ed. Charles Schefer (Paris, 1884; Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1971), p. 237.

Letters addressed to the sultan

Once they had arrived in Cairo, the ambassadors began negotiations with the sultan and his officials. At the first audience with the sovereign, the emissaries presented him with the letters issued by their governments. This document usually gave a brief explanation of the reasons for, and the goals of, the embassy. It could also act as a cover letter, when the latter was not presented as a separate document. The letter, as the central pivot of the diplomatic documents, generally referred to other texts too. It often mentioned the letters previously exchanged between the European government and the sultanate. In some cases, there is even a summary of previous documents, as in the letter sent by Peter IV of Aragon to al-Ashraf Shaʿbān (r. 1363–1376) on 20 June 1366.[40] These words recalled and attested to the history of friendly relations between the diplomatic interlocutors. The letter addressed to the sultan could also be accompanied by a document specifying the various requests in detail.[41] Paradoxically, the initial reception at the court in Cairo, during which the diplomatic documents were presented to the sultan, was also the moment of greatest silence for the ambassadors. Indeed, at the first meeting, spoken communication between the sultan and the emissaries was usually kept to a minimum.[42] In this respect, in the documented relationships between European states and the sultanate, the written word, together with other forms of diplomatic communication (ceremonial, exchange of gifts, etc.), took precedence, chronologically at least, over the spoken word. Only after reading the documents would the Mamlūk sovereign initiate the dialogue.

Ambassadors’ letters and journals

In addition to the documents that the emissaries dispatched and received, ambassadors or other members of their delegation wrote first-hand accounts of their journey. These texts usually took two forms, travel journals and letters. The latter were usually transcribed in registers known as *copialettere*. Unfortunately, not all the documents produced during European–Mamlūk embassies have survived, and it may be assumed that Western diplomats to Cairo wrote far more than what has been preserved.

The journals are extraordinarily valuable witnesses because they provide information that is hardly ever found in other sources, such as the details concerning the material aspects of the mission or the emissaries’ psychological reactions. From a diplomatic point of view, these texts also had a practical use because data were recorded in them that were used later for the final report to the authorities.

In order to show the multiplicity of values and purposes of the envoys’ writings, it is interesting to focus on a particularly significant case. In 1511, the Italian humanist Peter Martyr d’Anghiera published an account of his journey to Egypt, made some years earlier as an ambassador to the Mamlūk Sultan Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 1501–1516) on behalf of the Spanish monarchy.[43] In the prologue, he wrote to the archbishop of Toledo, Francisco Jiménez, to whom the work is dedicated, that the text concerning his diplomatic mission "had long stood in a corner like a stale sausage or a salted fish, with garlic and herbs, that is suitable only for a rustic stomach".[44] Peter therefore explained that he had to polish the text at the request of King Ferdinand II of Aragon (r. 1479–1516), who had asked him to show him his notes. In the introduction, the author also reveals to Francisco Jiménez that, while travelling, he was in the habit of writing down noteworthy facts and he explains that, in the case of his mission to Egypt, his work of memory and writing was helped by three letters that he had written to Queen Isabella I of Castile (r. 1474–1504) and King Ferdinand during his journey.

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[40] López de Meneses, “Correspondencia de Pedro el Ceremonioso”, 307–8.

[41] It is the case, for example, with the requests drafted by the Florentine chancery and delivered to Luigi della Stufa in 1488 (ASF, Diplomatico, Cartaceo, 1488, Riformagioni Atti Pubblici, fols 1r–5r).

[42] Brancacci, *Diario*, 172; *Ambasciata straordinaria al sultano d’Egitto (1489–1490)*, ed. Franco Rossi (Venice: Il Comitato Editore, 1988), p. 107.

This specific testimony to the creation of the written word in the context of diplomatic relations is significant because it sheds light on its various *raisons d'être*. By following the stages in which Peter's account was formed, it can be observed that, on one level, this word corresponded to the essential human need to record and memorise.[45] On another, recording the facts could be useful for the correspondence addressed to the king and queen. The three letters are related to diplomats' practice of regularly providing their governments with information about how the negotiations were going.[46] On a third level, the purpose of writing a travel journal – more or less elegantly – was to inform the authorities in greater detail about the envoy's journey, in its diplomatic, geographical, cultural and military aspects.[47] The interest in and the need to know exactly how the embassy ended could also lead – as in the case of Peter's journal – to the recovering and reworking of the written word many years later. In this way, as the food metaphor effectively shows, "stale words" could come back to life, converting simple notes into useful tools for political and diplomatic purposes.

Like Peter Martyr, ambassadors used to write letters to the authorities that had sent them to Egypt. Through these documents, diplomats recounted how their negotiations were going, but also the problems that they had to deal with.[48] Emissaries' journals and letters often reveal a certain intolerance of Muslims, aspects that are never visible in the official documents issued by Mamlūk and European chanceries. Ambassadors' letters were drafted for a wide range of addresses. On the occasion of the Venetian embassy to Egypt in 1489–1490, the ambassador Pietro Diedo (and Giovanni Borghi, after Diedo's death) wrote a large number of messages, copies of which are conserved in a register in the Archives of Venice.[49] This collection includes documents that were sent to the *Consiglio dei Pregadi* (the Senate of Venice), to Venetian consuls and merchants in Egypt and Syria, and to Mamlūk officers such as Taghrī Birdī, the sultan's official interpreter.[50] The entire set of these written words helped to guide, more or less effectively, the negotiations and their outcome.

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[43] Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, *Una embajada de los Reyes Catolicos a Egipto*, ed. Luis García y García (Valladolid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1947); Raul Álvarez-Moreno, *Una embajada española al Egipto de principios del siglos XVI: La 'legatio babilónica de Pedro Martír de Anglería': Estudio y edición trilingüe anotada en latín, español y árabe* (Madrid: Instituto Egipcio de Estudios Islámicos, 2013).

[44] Martire d'Anghiera, *Una embajada*, 18.

[45] Concerning in particular the issue of memory and the use of the written word in the Middle Ages, see, for example, *Charters and the Use of the Written Word in Medieval Society*, ed. Karl Heidecker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000); Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[46] Senatore, *Uno mundo de carta*, 184.

[47] Jean Richard, *Les récits de voyages et de pèlerinages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981).

[48] To cite just one example, Luigi Della Stufa, obtained a commercial decree from the Sultan Qāʾitbāy (r. 1468–1496) on 31 October 1489. Two weeks later he wrote to Lorenzo de Medici to inform him about all the mistreatment that he suffered in Egypt. The decree is kept in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Orientali, 455 A, r. A (Laur. A). The letter was published in Meli, "Firenze di fronte al mondo islamico", 265–6.

[49] Rossi, *Ambasciata straordinaria*.

The conclusion of the mission: documents issued by the Mamlūk chancery and the envoys' final report

Upon the conclusion of the negotiations, the chancery in Cairo issued documents attesting their results. The various kinds of agreements were usually reached after a complex stage of mediation in which the chief officials of the Mamlūk administration acted as intermediaries between the ambassadors and the sultan. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the diplomatic documents needed to be translated into Arabic (the European letters) or from it (the Mamlūk documents). These translations could be done either in Mamlūk territory or in Europe, depending on the degree of knowledge of Arabic at the European chanceries.[51] The translation was evidently a filter that could to a varying degree decisively affect the content of the documents in linguistic and cultural terms.[52]

The diplomatic nature of these instruments was closely related to the reasons for the exchanges. Since this article does not analyse these different sources – already examined in other studies[53] – I intend here only to discuss their general nature in relation to the circumstances determining the exchanges.

Throughout history, diplomatic intermediation between European states and Cairo had various purposes. Depending on the circumstances, they concerned military, religious, political or commercial issues. In general terms, it is possible to identify two main historical phases. In the first period of the sultanate (1250–1291), marked by wars of conquest in Syria and Palestine, the written agreements concluded between Mamlūks and Christians were in the majority of cases *hudan* (sing. *hudna*), armistices. The *hudna* was primarily a military document negotiated through bilateral undertakings that usually led to the drafting of reciprocal oaths. These oaths were then registered and signed in the final version of the treaty.[54] In the second phase (1291–1517), characterised by more peaceful relations, diplomatic contact concerned commercial matters, with a few exceptions. During this period, the Cairo chancery usually resorted to *mukātabāt* (letters) and *marāsīm* (decrees) in order to establish and communicate the conditions of trade. These instruments, listing the various clauses, were sent to the European governments and to the Mamlūk authorities.[55]

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[50] John Wansbrough, "A Mamluk Ambassador to Venice", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 26/3 (1963): 503–30.

[51] For example, the letter and the decree issued by the Mamlūk chancery for the Florentines in September 1422 were translated in Alexandria by the Cypriot translator Tommaso Cardo from Nicosia (ASF, Diplomatico, cartaceo, 1422/09/22, Riformagioni Atti Pubblici 1r–4r). In contrast, at the chancery of the Crown of Aragon there were secretaries who were able to translate the Arabic: Daniel Potthast, "Translations of Arabic Diplomatic Letters in the Aragonese Chancery", in *Dasselbe mit anderen Worten? Sprache, Übersetzung und Sprachwissenschaft*, ed. Peter Schrijver and Peter Arnold Mumm (Bremen: Hempen Verlag, 2015), pp. 166–86.

[52] Benjamin Kedar, "Religion in Catholic-Muslim Correspondence and Treaties", in *Diplomatics in the Eastern Mediterranean 1000–1500*, ed. Alexander Beihammer, Maria Parani and Chris Schabel (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 407–21; *Translators, Interpreters, and Cultural Negotiators: Mediating and Communicating Power from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era*, ed. Federico Federici and Dario Tessicini (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Toby Osborne and Joan-Pau Rubiés, "Introduction: Diplomacy and Cultural Translation in the Early Modern World", *Journal of Early Modern History* 20 (2016): 313–30.

[53] Alessandro Rizzo, "Three Mamluk Letters Concerning the Florentine Trade in Egypt and Syria: A New Interpretation", in *Mamlūk Cairo*, ed. Frédéric Bauden and Malika Dekkiche (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 782–97; Alessandro Rizzo, "L'ambassade florentine de 1422 et l'établissement des relations commerciales avec les Mamelouks: Les premiers documents", in *Guerre et paix en Méditerranée médiévale*, ed. Élisabeth Malamut and Mohamed Ouerfelli (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, *forthcoming* 2021).

[54] Peter M. Holt, *Early Mamluk Diplomacy (1260–1290): Treaties of Baybars and Qalawūn with Christian Rulers* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Michael Köhler, *Alliances and Treaties between Frankish and Muslim Rulers in the Middle East* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

Once the official documents had been obtained from the chancery in Cairo, the ambassadors returned to Europe. The last stage of their diplomatic mission was the drafting of the final report that they were required to present to the members of their governments, which had the function of informing the authorities about the outcome of the embassy.[56] The report usually also recounted the various stages of the journey to Cairo, allowing governments to evaluate whether all the requirements contained in the letter of instructions had been met.[57] Together with the travel journals, these documents also provided information about political, military, religious and cultural aspects of the Mamlūk state. Submission of the reports and the journals brought the mission to an end, and also completed the "documentary circle", which had begun with the instructions. The last act of the written word corresponded also to the ambassador leaving office.

The "power of resistance" of the diplomatic word

After examining the network of documents employed in European–Mamlūk embassies, it is now time to investigate some theoretical aspects related to the use of their written language. In this analysis, the focus will be placed on the "traditional" issue of the relationship between the rhetoric of the diplomatic discourse and its actual use and usefulness.

In reference to the form of contemporary diplomatic language, scholars and diplomats have stressed that one of its essential characteristics is ambiguity.[58] Beneath the superficial layer of rhetoric, this feature, characterising both the oral and the written discourse, would perform a pragmatic function. By allowing for a variety of interpretations, ambiguity gives diplomatic language a certain degree of flexibility. Thus, the stipulations are never completely closed, but somehow always open to reinterpretation.[59] This flexibility would decrease the potential for conflict between states.

Examining now the diplomatic sources for relations between the Christian powers and the Mamlūks, it can be seen that the language of these documents appears to be quite clear and unequivocal. The truces, the letters and the decrees attesting to the final stipulations leave very little room for polysemy or possible misunderstandings. As seen in the instructions given to the Florentine emissaries Federighi and Brancacci, it was rather the spoken word that could be characterised as being more versatile. The adaptability of spoken diplomatic language was a strategic tool in pursuit of a final written word that would attest as clearly as possible to the agreed arrangements.

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[55] Gladys Frantz-Murphy, "Identity and Security in the Mediterranean World ca. AD 640–ca. 1517", in *Proceedings of the Twenty-Fifth International Congress of Papyrology*, ed. Traianos Gagos and Adam Hyatt (Ann Arbor, MI: Scholarly Publishing Office, 2010), pp. 253–64.

[56] Donald E. Queller, "The Development of Ambassadorial Relazioni", in *Renaissance Venice*, ed. John Rigby Hale (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), pp. 174–96; Isabella Lazzarini, "The Final Report", in *Italian Renaissance Diplomacy: A Sourcebook*, ed. Monica Azzolini and Isabella Lazzarini (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2017), pp. 57–72, esp. 58.

[57] See, for example, the final reports presented by Carlo Federighi and Felice Brancacci: ASF, Signori e Relazioni di Oratori Fiorentini, n. 2, fol. 109r–v.

[58] Constanze Villar, *Le discours diplomatique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006).

[59] Guy de Lacharrière, *La politique juridique extérieure* (Paris: Economica, 1983), pp. 89–104.

Another aspect associated with the rhetoric of diplomatic language is the abundance of recurrent and repetitive formulae. What one sees in the Mamlūk documents issued for their European interlocutors is that the recurrence of expressions and clauses is far from being a feature that impoverished or devalued their content. On the contrary, the similarity of the clauses often strengthened their legal force. During diplomatic negotiations, it happened that Western emissaries demanded rights similar to those granted to other European communities. This is evidenced, for example, by the fact that commercial documents often refer to the conditions regulating trade between Venice and the sultanate. It is a fact that Venetian exchanges in the Mediterranean at that time were an effective model for many states. For example, the Republic of Florence requested rights similar to those granted to the Venetians for its traders on several occasions.[60] The fact that the written words of the decrees reproduced exactly those in documents issued for other communities was a guarantee of effectiveness. Similar or even identical clauses were more reliable than new ones. The recurrence of the written word reflected equality of treatment.

Moreover, on the basis of the classical principle of *brevitas*, the clarity and success of the diplomatic word was usually associated with a certain degree of conciseness.[61] For this reason, in the instructions given to Domenico Trevisan, the members of the Venetian government ordered him to request "decrees in Arabic, and not too long, because long ones are not very effective".[62]

The search for clarity in the exposition of the written agreements did not mean that their content was always respected. Quite often, in fact, clauses in the documents were contravened. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that, throughout the history of Mamlūk-European exchanges, decrees condemned these kinds of infringement. Evidently, the perpetration of this harassment was less important than the maintenance of the exchanges. At the same time, the word attesting to the diplomatic ties between the Mamlūks and European states was always stronger than the possible infringement of the rules.

A case effectively illustrating the power and the "resistance" of the diplomatic word is the correspondence between the Crown of Aragon and the Mamlūks concerning the relics of Saint Barbara. For decades, kings including James II and Peter IV wrote to the sultans to request the body of the saint. The Mamlūk sovereigns usually responded amicably to the Aragonese envoys and letters but rarely did they grant the requests.[63] What is interesting to note is that non-compliance never precluded the maintenance of dialogue and commercial relations between the parties. On the contrary, the letters exchanged between the Mamlūks and the Crown of Aragon constituted the essential tool by which the relationship remained intact. In such a scenario, the fact that the relics were not sent was secondary to the written words exchanged between the parties. Demands for the release of Christian prisoners were met with a similar response. Paradoxically, for diplomatic purposes, an unfulfilled promise written on paper was more important than any possible silence. As long as the word endured, the relationship was guaranteed.

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[60] John Wansbrough, "Venice and Florence in the Mamluk Commercial Privileges", in *Bulletin of Oriental and African Studies* 28/3 (1965): 483–523; Cristian Caselli, "Strategies for Transcultural Trade Relations: Florentine Attempts to Reproduce the Venetian Commercial System in the Mamluk Empire (First Half of the 15th Century)", in *Union in Separation: Diasporic Groups and Identities in the Eastern Mediterranean (1100–1800)*, ed. Georg Christ, Franz-Julius Morche, Roberto Zaugg, Wolfgang Kaiser, Stefan Burkhardt and Alexander D. Beihammer (Rome: Viella, 2015), pp. 267–84; Rizzo, "Three Mamluk Letters", 788.

[61] Ilaria Taddei, "La lettre d'instruction à Florence, XIVe–XVe siècles: La dynamique de l'échange diplomatique", in *Politique par correspondance: Les usages politiques de la lettre en Italie (XIVe–XVIIIe siècle)*, ed. Jean Boutier, Sandro Landi and Olivier Rouchon (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009), pp. 81–108, esp. 94.

[62] "Comandamenti in arabo et non longi, perche non sono i longi di tanta efficacia", Schefer, *Voyage d'Outremer*, 246.

[63] Johannes Vincke, "Die Gesandtschaften der aragonischen Könige und die Reliquien der heiligen Barbara", *Historisches Jahrbuch* 60 (1940): 115–23; López de Meneses, "Correspondencia de Pedro el Ceremonioso"; *idem*, "Pedro el Ceremonosio y las reliquias de Santa Bárbara", *Estudios de la Edad Media de la Corona de Aragón* 7 (1962): 299–357.

However, it should be noted that diplomatic correspondence concerning a religious issue such as the body of Saint Barbara cannot simply be reduced to a ruse aimed at maintaining economic activities. Significantly, for instance, the kings of Aragon were often identified – in the chancery documents – as the protectors of Christians in the Middle East, both pilgrims and residents.[64] This role was significant at an international level, allowing, for example, the king to act as the intermediary between the pope and the sultan. In fact, pontiffs rarely dealt directly with Muslim sovereigns, even if they were interested in the protection of Christians in Mamlūk territory. The repeated requests for the saint's body or the release of European prisoners thus became an instrument by which the Crown of Aragon could legitimise its power, presenting itself as the defender of the Christian community.[65] In this context, the written word of the chancery documents was crucial because it corroborated the king's role. For these purposes, the fact that the sultan's promises were not always kept was irrelevant.

Representation of interreligious diplomatic dialogue in the documents

The previous paragraph explored some crucial implications of the written word in the documents characterising the European–Mamlūk embassies, often going beyond its literal meaning. Conversely, I would now like to show that, in other cases, it is only the literal meaning of their content that deserves to be reassessed. In both cases, the language of the sources cannot be interpreted simply as "rhetorical". The content of the documents in fact played an essential function in the representation of the relationship. In particular, I shall examine here the way in which the Mamlūks conceived and depicted the religious difference between the sultanate and the European powers.[66]

In this respect, it should first be noted that a significant difference can be observed between the official documents and the "more intimate" texts, such as ambassadors' letters and travel journals. The truces, letters and decrees stressed the friendship and dialogue between the Muslim sultan and the Christian authorities. Furthermore, both parties were depicted as perfect models and defenders of their respective religious communities. In contrast, texts written by envoys, as outlined above, often bring to light misunderstandings and conflicts between members of Western delegations and local Muslims. Historians have long tended to consider the second set of sources to more closely represent reality. At the same time, the chancery documents have often been interpreted more as formal instruments, useful for political and commercial purposes rather than as valuable testimonies in themselves. This attitude can be found in many studies dealing with commercial relations between the sultanate and European powers, which often address the issue of diplomatic dialogue and sources in passing.[67] Moreover, the majority of these publications describe the political interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims by referring to the traditional paradigm of the *dār al-Islām* (abode of Islam) and the *dār al-ḥarb* (abode of the war). This explanatory model, usually based on a simplistic interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, considers peace between the parties – and the consequent *dār al-ṣulḥ* (abode of the peace) – as a mere temporary suspension of a "natural" state of war.[68] From this perspective, commercial exchanges would represent a kind of realistic compromise that is never fully compatible with the legal principles. For this reason, sources such as travel journals, which sometimes describe the difficulty of dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims, were considered to be more reliable than documents stressing diplomatic friendship between the parties.

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[64] *Los documentos árabes diplomáticos del Archivo de la corona de Aragón*, ed. Maximiliano Alarcón y Santón and Ramon Garcia de Linares (Madrid: Publicaciones de las escuelas de Estudios arabes de Madrid y Granada, 1940), pp. 358, 360.

[65] In al-Ashraf Shaʿbān's (r. 764–78/1363–77) letter to Peter IV dated 1 January 1374, the king is described as "the custodian of Christianity, the guardian of Jesus' people, treasure of Christ's law" (López de Meneses, "Correspondencia de Pedro el Ceremonioso", 317).

[66] Here I focus on this specific aspect, as a significant example, deferring to my future research a similar analysis for other aspects of the exchanges.

The narrative of the *diyār* has recently been questioned by scholars who have re-examined both the juridical sources and the practical conduct of diplomacy. These studies, countering several oversimplifications that affected research into Islamic international relations, have shown the complex nature of the solutions adopted between Muslims and non-Muslims in different historical and geographical contexts.[69]

This historiographical ferment also affects the study of the documents drafted by the Mamlūk chancery. In the past, scholars usually resorted to legal texts to illustrate the management of diplomatic relations, almost completely neglecting the content of the diplomatic sources. In a remarkable about-turn, the chancery documents have now been reassessed, and are regarded as essential sources for studying the conduct and representation of diplomacy.[70] In this regard, insufficient emphasis has been placed on the fact that they represented the only written texts by which the Mamlūk government could communicate with the Christian authorities. European diplomats in fact had no access to other kinds of works, such as Islamic legal texts. An analysis of the words of these sources is therefore crucial to understanding how the sultanate represented and legitimised its interreligious relations.

Concerning the theoretical principles underlying the management of the interaction, it can be seen that expressions such as *dār al-Islām*, *dār al-ḥarb* or *dār al-ṣulḥ* never appear in the diplomatic documents. The territories of both sides are usually defined as a *mamlaka* (kingdom) or *bilād* (country) and these categories usually refer to their rulers rather than to their religion.[71] The Christian identity of the Western rulers is specified when it is a question of issues concerning religion (for example the management of the pilgrimages to the Holy Land). In other cases, we find the term *firanj* (Frank),[72] for a general identification, or specific expressions like *raʿiyyat malik arākūn* (the subjects of the King of Aragon),[73] *jamāʿat al-flūrintīn* (the community of the Florentines),[74] among others. Furthermore, the terms *ḥarb* and *jihād* appear only rarely in the Mamlūk documents and they are never used to refer to the relationship between the contracting parties; they always concern third parties, such as, for example, the Mongols.[75] In the letters and decrees concerning commercial matters issued by the Mamlūk chancery after the fall of Acre (1291), there is hardly ever any reference to war or armed conflict. These documents seem to take for granted a state of peace between the parties, usually without even needing to mention it.

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[67] Eliyahu Ashtor, *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Legacy Library, 1983); Coulon, *Barcelone et le grand commerce d'Orient*; Apellániz, *Pouvoir et finance*; Christ, *Trading Conflicts*.

[68] In this regard, the way Bernard Lewis characterised the relations that Islam established with non-Muslim powers is very significant, i.e. "a morally necessary, legally and religiously obligatory state of war, until the final and inevitable triumph of Islam over unbelief". Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 73.

[69] Ahmed al-Dawoody, *The Islamic Law of War: Justifications and Regulations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Asma Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); *International Relations and Islam: Diverse Perspectives*, ed. Nassef Manabilang Adiong (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013); *Dār al-islām / dār al-ḥarb. Territories, People, Identities*, ed. Giovanna Calasso and Giuliano Lancioni (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Sarah Albrecht, *Dār al Islām Revisited* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). For a specific case, see Roser Salicrú i Lluch, "El sultanato Nazarí en el occidente cristiano bajomedieval una aproximación a través de las relaciones político-diplomáticas", in *Historia de Andalucía: VII Coloquio "¿Qué es Andalucía? Una revisión histórica desde el Medievalismo"*, ed. Antonio Malpica Cuello, Rafael Gerardo Peinado Santaella and Adela Fábregas García, volumes I–II (Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2010), I: 63–80.

[70] Malika Dekkiche, "Mamluk Diplomacy: The Present State of Research", in Dekkiche, *Mamlūk Cairo*, ed. Frédéric Bauden and Malika (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 105–82.

Returning to the issue of the discrepancy between ambassadors' texts and official documents when representing the religious relationship, it is evident that this difference does not make one set of sources more reliable than the other. This divergence simply reflects a different perspective. On the one hand, the envoys' letters and travel journals describe the vicissitudes of the negotiations, with all their successes and difficulties, but also their effects on the ambassadors' psyche. On the other, the chancery instruments are testimony to the strength of the diplomatic dialogue, which was capable of overcoming all kinds of contrasts and impasses.

The content of the diplomatic sources as regards the representation of the interaction is just an example of how their texts deserve to be reassessed as meaningful by historical research that addresses theoretical aspects, as is the case with the dialogue between Muslim and Christian interlocutors.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that European–Mamlūk embassies were organised and carried out by means of a precise and well-structured system of documents. No significant differences have been noted regarding the function and diplomatic nature of the instruments used in the missions sent to Cairo by the three states studied. At the same time, their form did not differ from that characterising the documents generally employed in diplomatic interaction with other European states. The same types of written tools thus proved remarkably effective for communication with the Mamlūks, by responding to the various needs of the embassies: instructing ambassadors, communicating with Mamlūk authorities, informing European governments about the evolution of the negotiations, etc. Throughout the history of the sultanate, the persistence of the forms and formulae of these documents guaranteed the stability of diplomatic relations themselves. Furthermore, it has been found that not only the external features, but also the content of these instruments played an essential role in this respect. Indeed, as a form of diplomatic communication, the written word probably represented its most solid and resistant instrument, so resistant and necessary that its existence was sometimes more diplomatically important than its reliability. I have noted this aspect when examining the commercial clauses condemning abuses, and in the correspondence over the relics of Saint Barbara.

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[71] The term *mamlaka* appears, for instance, in a truce concluded between al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn and Michael VIII Palaeologus in 680/1281 (al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā*, XIV: 72–8; Holt, *Early Mamluk Diplomacy*, 118–28); in the letter sent by al-Nāṣir Muḥammad to James II in 1315 (Alarcón y Santón and Garcia de Linares, *Documentos árabes diplomáticos*, 360–2). The term *bilād* appears, for instance, in the decree issued by Qāʾitbāy in 1489 in favour of Florentine trade (John Wansbrough, "A Mamluk Commercial Treaty Concluded with the Republic of Florence 894/1489", in *Documents from Islamic Chanceries*, ed. Samuel M. Stern (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 39–79; Rizzo, "Le lys et le lion", II: 51–95).

[72] For example, in the truce concluded between Qalāwūn and the Republic of Genoa in 1290 (Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir, *Tashrīf al-ayyām wa-l-ʿuṣūr fi sīrat al-Malik al-Mansūr*, ed. Murād Kāmil (Cairo: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa wa-al-Irshād al-Qawmī, 1961), pp. 166–9; Peter M. Holt, "Qalawun's Treaty with Genoa in 1290", *Der Islam* 57 (1980): 101–8).

[73] Reginaldo Ruíz Orsatti, "Tratado de paz entre Alfonso V de Aragòn y el sultan de Egipto, al-Mālik al-Ašraf Barsbāy", *Al-Andalus* 4 (1936–1939): 333–89.

[74] Rizzo, "Le lys et le lion", II.

[75] Alarcón y Santón and Garcia de Linares, *Documentos árabes diplomáticos*, 345.

Diplomacy between the sultanate and European powers was based on that persistence of the diplomatic word and its forms, up until the last years of the Mamlūk regime. This is clearly demonstrated by the last agreement concluded between the sultanate and the Republic of Venice. With the *Serenissima*, the Mamlūk government had spoken the language of diplomacy since its earliest days (the first decree issued for Venetian merchants dates back to 1254).[76] Although by the early sixteenth century the fate of European–Mamlūk relations was clearly jeopardised by – among other things – Ottoman military might and the new Atlantic trade routes, in 1517 Venice negotiated and obtained the issuing of a decree by the last sultan, Ṭūmān Bāy (r. 1516–1517).[77] In the final and most difficult period of its history, the sultanate proved itself still capable of resorting to the written language of diplomacy to preserve this firm relationship.

Examination of the features and content of the documents characterising the various phases of the embassy has shown above all that these instruments were not mere rhetorical tools, devoid of real historical interest. On the contrary, the written diplomatic word was extremely relevant as truly communicative language, as I have shown for the representation of the interreligious relationship. This aspect is also one of the most relevant in distinguishing the "written words" of Mamlūk–European dialogue from those characterising relations between European powers. Re-evaluating the traditional historiographical interpretation of that "peculiarity" – compared with the exchanges among Christian states – I have shown that religious difference was never used to justify conflicts. On the contrary, when the documents dealt with issues such as requests for relics or European pilgrims' travels to Palestine, affiliation to a different religion was rather exploited – at least theoretically – as an ulterior reason for dialogue. At the same time, the diplomatic use of this cultural dissimilarity should not be overestimated or misinterpreted, as has so often been done in the past by scholars who have oversimplified the content of non-diplomatic sources. As a significant example of these misconceptions, I have shown that the identification of the respective rulers' territories and subjects almost never referred to the religious affiliation of the parties. In order to reassess these and other aspects, a re-examination of the written words of European-Mamlūk diplomacy proves essential. The "new diplomatic historian" has the task of restoring the significance of this form of dialogue, by highlighting its various implications rather than leaving it in a corner like “stale food”.

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[76] *Urkunden zur älteren Handels- und Staatsgeschichte der Republik Venedig*, ed. Gottlieb L. F. Tafel and Georg M. Thomas (Vienna: Kaiserlich-königlichen Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1856), II: 483–9.

[77] Frantz-Murphy, "Negotiating".

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