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Edited by Zak Eastop and Kate Foy



Editor's note

This issue of the MEMSA Journal is my first in post as Journal Officer, working alongside Kate Foy. The articles in this issue originally appeared as papers at the 2021 MEMSA summer conference, held online and organised around the theme 'Crossing Borders, Contesting Boundaries'.

The conference embodied its theme, crossing many national and cultural borders, with the authors who feature in this issue brought together by an unexpected opportunity arising from the continued presence of the COVID-19 pandemic: the temporary shift to online formats. While lockdowns, stay at home orders, and social-distancing rules made gathering together physically impossible, scholars from across the world were able to reach across borders virtually, contesting the boundaries of old-school academia. The pandemic knew no international frontiers, breaking cultural, religious, moral, political, and indeed corporeal boundaries as it spread from person to person, and place to place. Yet, while the pandemic was unquestionably awful in innumerable ways – a dark cloud hanging over 2020 and 2021 – this journal stands as evidence of a silver lining: this is a publication that could never exist as it does without the new possibilities for international academic exchange that arose under quarantine.

Four of the five authors in this volume are based at institutions outside the UK. As a quintet, their articles bear witness not just to the ever changing and increasingly globalised post-pandemic *academe*, but also, in their subject matter, to the constantly shifting frontiers of the premodern world, be these geographical, social, corporeal, or spiritual, in a European context or beyond. They demonstrate that many of the debates we take to be modern have long reaching roots in the past, be these international trade and territory disputes, the role of women in the creative cultures and economies, or the division between the body and soul.

It is my hope, as editor of the MEMSA Journal, to continue to publish this sort of work: championing young academics by providing them with a friendly and supportive arena to try out new ideas, contest old disciplinary boundaries, and gain publications. I hope to keep growing the journal over the coming year, continuing the move towards an online, open-access, format that complements our current print cycle. I also look forward hugely to meeting, receiving, and (hopefully!) publishing the papers from the delegates at this coming summer's conference. My thanks to the authors in this volume for their time and hard work writing and editing. I would also like to offer my sincere thanks to the team of experts who acted as peer-reviewers this year. It's a really exciting time to be running a journal that offers, from my privileged vantage point, a reassuring reminder of the dazzling vibrancy of medieval and early modern studies.

Zak Eastop – Journal Officer

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Crossing Political Borders: Notes on Trans-European and Trans-Mediterranean Diplomatic Encounters in the Duchy of Milan (XV Century).¹

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The focus of this contribution is on the Duchy of Milan and its trans-European and trans-Mediterranean connections during the second half of fifteenth century, a time when a long-standing tradition of cultural encounters and diplomatic negotiations among Italian principalities and the wider world extended considerably. In those occurrences, objects, animals, and artisans moved from one place to another and were exchanged purposefully: the giving and receiving of such goods constituted a significant element in the formation of cross-cultural connections among political actors that were divided by a multiplicity of borders.

In the international scenario of Milanese diplomacy, gift-giving could be seen as an effective tool that propagated connections: gifts acted as bridges to interconnect different cultures. However, these considerations require caution in their proceedings, also considering that the field of investigation is the non-neutral one of diplomacy and its context is the complex construction of ducal powers. Thus, the aim of the present case studies is to summon the role of diplomatic gifts as vehicles that could lead to the crossing of geographical, political, cultural, and religious borders that divided the Duchy from its most distant (on multiple levels) interlocutors: the far Moscow, the near Buda, and the Muslim powers.

Keywords *Renaissance diplomacy; cross-cultural connections; material culture; gift giving; diplomatic gifts; Sforza family; fifteenth-century Milan.*

A wider world: late medieval permeable borders

The “idea” of Middle Ages is associated with many well-rooted misunderstandings: among them, the significant one that long-distance expeditions and interactions between remote States began only in the Early Modern Age. Research studies of global history have rarely focused on the centuries before the sixteenth, despite travelling in the Middle Ages was common and distant countries were connected through land and maritime routes. Indeed, recent inquiries have

¹ This paper is a selected elaboration of the broad subject of the author’s PhD project on diplomatic interactions and gift-giving between the Duchy of Milan and the main European and Mediterranean powers, conducted under the supervision of Professor Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, who is to be thanked together with Beatrice Del Bo, Federico Del Tredici, Isabella Lazzarini and Folco Vaglianti for their kind guidance, generous advice, and crucial help.

emphasised the fact that the medieval millennium was characterised by ‘diversity and connectivity’ rather than isolation and motionless. It is necessary, therefore, ‘in a present-day context of rapid transformation, [...] to rethink and expand what “global” has meant in the past and might mean in the future’². According to this perspective, since the focus of the present contribution is on the Duchy of Milan (located in the northern Italian peninsula and held by the family Sforza from 1450 to 1499), and its trans-European and trans-Mediterranean connections, instead of referring to a global framework it should be preferable to consider a “wider world”. Notably it was from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that a long-standing tradition (dating back to Roman and Greek times) of cultural encounters, political negotiations and diplomatic interconnections between Italian principalities and that wider world extended considerably: the broadening pertained both to the Near East and the culture of Islam, as well as to the Far East and to the Baltic Area³. Furthermore, not only the second half of the fifteenth century attested such widening, but it also witnessed complex negotiations, political uncertainty and shifting alliances in that international scene.

Eventually, those upheavals proved to be decisive for state growth and for the consolidation of political borders, but the linear territorial boundaries which emerged did not necessarily correspond to linear social and cultural borders between States⁴. Frontiers could, thus, be perceived as geographical limitations or military borders and not necessary as boundaries among different countries. Significantly, ‘political frontiers were not lines but zones or regions’⁵. During the late Middle Ages, a vibrant network of exchanges spread throughout Europe, connecting cities, courts, and cultures that were different and distant from many points of view, both geographical, cultural, linguistic, political, social, and not least geographically⁶. Because of that shifting nature, a

² C. Holmes and N. Standen, ‘Introduction: Towards a Global Middle Ages’, in ‘The Global Middle Ages’, *Past & Present*, ed. by C. Holmes and N. Standen, 238 (2018), 1-44 (3, 6).

³ On diplomatic encounters between Italian principalities and Eastern powers in the second half of the fifteenth century, see Elizabeth Horodowich, ‘The Wider World: Foreigners, Travels, and Geography’, in *Italian Renaissance Diplomacy: A Sourcebook*, ed. by M. Azzolini and I. Lazzarini (Durham: Institute of Medieval and Early Modern Studies, Durham University; Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2017), 190-213. See also Daniel Goffman, ‘Negotiating with the Renaissance State: The Ottoman Empire and the New Diplomacy’, in *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire*, ed. by V. Aksan and D. Goffman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 61-74. For a useful historiographical overview, see Francesca Trivellato, ‘Renaissance Italy and the Muslim Mediterranean in Recent Historical Work’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 82 (2010), 127-155.

⁴ On the process of state-building of Italian principalities, see *The Italian Renaissance State*, ed. by A. Gamberini and I. Lazzarini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). On medieval borders in general, see *Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices*, ed. by D. Abulafia and N. Berend (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); and *Frontiers in the Middle Ages: Proceedings of the third European Congress of Medieval studies (Jyväskylä, 10-14 June 2003)*, ed. by Outi Merisalo (Louvain-la-Neuve: Fédération Internationale des Instituts d’Études Médiévales, 2006).

⁵ Nora Berend, ‘Preface’, in *Medieval Frontiers*, ed. by D. Abulafia and N. Berend, xii. On the lines of research into frontier zones see, for example, *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands, 700-1700*, ed. by D. Power and N. Standen (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).

⁶ For a further investigation, see Ingrid Baumgärtner, ‘Winds and Continents: Concepts for structuring the World and its Parts’, in *Maps and Travel in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period: Knowledge, Imagination, and Visual Culture*, ed. by I. Baumgärtner, N.B.A. Debby, and K. Kogman-Appel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019); John Darwin, *After Tamerlane*:

great variety of borders characterised the mid-fifteenth century; borders in which social and cultural units overlapped and which allowed contacts and exchanges across those frontiers⁷.

Hence, more than obstacles, late-Quattrocento borders seemed to have been bridges or, at least, permeable zones that could provide connection rather than division⁸. Actually, the idea of permeable boundary is an established notion for geographers, historians, and theorists of cartography: differentiating space always means connecting it; and any border, in any time, however impassable, has two sides, being at once a barrier and a portal. Nevertheless, Italian *long Quattrocento*⁹ was very peculiar in this sense because the expansion of diplomatic networks led to an overcoming of the border zones in a broader sense. Diplomatic connections, such as that between Milan and Moscow, were created for the first time; and dialogues that had been abandoned for long time, such as that between Milan and the Muslim powers, were resumed with renewed energy.

In those diplomatic occurrences, objects, animals, and artisans moved from one place to another and were exchanged purposefully: namely, the giving and receiving of such goods constituted a crucial element in the formation of trans-European and trans-Mediterranean connections. As so, the items exchanged not only acted as cultural intermediaries, but they also contributed to alter the mental horizons of those who were involved in the encounters. Indeed, ‘the circulation of objects in the late Quattrocento initiated new ways of contact between individuals, giving rise to new associations and new interests’¹⁰. However, these considerations require caution in their proceedings; and an even more significant caution considering that the field of investigation of this research is the non-neutral one of diplomacy and its context is the complex construction of powers in the Duchy of Milan.

Aspects of power and diplomacy in mid-fifteenth century Milan

In the fragmented framework of late medieval Italian peninsula, diplomacy can be considered as a flexible political activity characterised by the interaction and procession of a wide range of

The Global History of Empire since 1405 (London: Allen Lane, 2007); Charles H. Parker, *Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age: 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); *Renaissance? Perceptions of Continuity and Discontinuity in Europe, c. 1300-c.1500*, ed. by A. Lee, P. Peporte and H. Schitker (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010).

⁷ John Watts, *The Making of Politics: Europe 1300-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 287.

⁸ Giles Constable, ‘Frontiers in the Middle Ages’, in *Frontiers in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Outi Merisalo, 7-8.

⁹ For this conventional period, which is applied to the centuries ranging from the end of the Fourteenth to the beginning of the Sixteenth, see Daniela Frigo, *Prudence and Experience: Ambassadors and Political Culture in Early Modern Italy*, in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 38 (2008), and, especially, Isabella Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict: Italian Diplomacy in the early Renaissance, 1350-1520* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Leah R. Clark, *Collecting Art in the Italian Renaissance Court: objects and exchanges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.

dynamics intimately connected to political and cultural transformations of authority¹¹. Those transitions, such as ongoing processes of territorial expansion, institutional change, and conflicts, profoundly marked the mosaic of political entities which constituted Italy in the middle of the Quattrocento¹². Within the new ways of answering the urgent political needs, diplomatic practice increasingly developed a broad array of significant solutions¹³. Hence, it was namely cultural identity, social mobility, and languages of power, rather than a common institution, that provided a sort of unity to the fragmented political space. Furthermore, the emerging system of Italian polities was subjected and interconnected both to Western and Eastern Europe: the constellation of polities was closely related by dynastic links and economic, commercial, and political interests to a broad scenario¹⁴. In this perspective, late medieval diplomacy is increasingly being seen as a practice that enabled the engagement of Europeans and non-Europeans in ‘formal and informal, state and non-state contexts, through the elaboration of common languages, shared practices of communication, and political cultures’¹⁵. Eventually, among other notable features, it was the development of a capillary diplomatic network that enabled the Dukes of Milan to become prominent in the European and Mediterranean scenario¹⁶.

Standing at the foothills of the Alps and on the crossroads of the Po Valley, Milan was paramount in the context of international relations. The connection was provided by close ties, both thanks to Milanese international commercial vocation, and because of its foreign policy sougning for solid allies¹⁷. Despite being authoritarian dukes, with a strong hold on their domain, the Sforza (who held the Duchy from 1450 to 1499) suffered from a dangerous lack of internal legitimacy and external recognition since, until the very end of the century, they ruled without any imperial investiture. In consequence, the dukes significantly needed to reinforce the prestige of

¹¹ For a useful and extensive overview on Italian Renaissance diplomacy, see Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict*. See also *Diplomatie et ‘relations internationales’ au Moyen Âge (IXe – XVe siècle)*, ed. by J.M. Moeglin and S. Péquignot (Paris: PUF, 2017).

¹² On the mosaic of Italian polities becoming a system of powers in the mid-fifteenth century, see at least Isabella Lazzarini, *L’Italia degli Stati territoriali, secoli XIII-XV* (Rome; Bari: Laterza, 2013); *Origini dello Stato: processi di formazione statale in Italia fra Medioevo ed età moderna*, ed. by Giorgio Chittolini and others (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994); and Giovanni Pillinini, *Il sistema degli stati italiani, 1454-1494* (Venice: Libreria Universitaria, 1970).

¹³ M. Azzolini and I. Lazzarini, ‘Introduction’, in *Italian Renaissance Diplomacy*, ed. by M. Azzolini and I. Lazzarini, 4.

¹⁴ Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict*, 22.

¹⁵ Azzolini and Lazzarini, ‘Introduction’, 1.

¹⁶ For an outline on fifteenth-century Milanese diplomacy, see Francesco Senatore, *Uno mundo de carta. Forme e strutture della diplomazia sforzesca* (Naples: Liguori, 1998). See also Lydia Cerioni, *La diplomazia sforzesca nella seconda metà del Quattrocento e i suoi cifrari segreti*, 2 vols (Rome: Il Centro di Ricerca, 1970); Paolo Margaroli, *Diplomazia e stati rinascimentali. Le ambascerie sforzesche fino alla conclusione della Lega Italica, 1450-1455* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1992). See also the introduction of the authors to *Dispatches with related documents of Milanese ambassadors in France and in Burgundy*, ed. by P. Kendall and V. Ilardi, 2 vols (Athens OH: University Press, 1971-1972); ed. by V. Ilardi, 1 vol (Dekalb IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981).

¹⁷ See, for instance, *Artigianato e lusso: manifatture preziose alle origini del made in Italy* (with English text opposite), ed. by Maria Pia Bortolotti (Milan: Skira, 2013). See also Evelyn Welch, *Art and Authority in Renaissance Milan* (London: Yale University Press, 1997).

their State. Indeed, the title of duke of Milan was entrusted to Gian Galeazzo Visconti in 1395 by the emperor, but that designation excluded the possibility of succession by female line. Despite that, when the Visconti dynasty expired on the death of Filippo Maria in 1447, the Duchy itself was not eradicated but remained integral to the *dominio*: Milanese people had, therefore, the authority to elect their own duke independently of the emperor¹⁸. Subsequently, after three years of Republic and a military siege which followed the death of Filippo Maria, in 1450 Milanese citizens handed over the title to his only natural daughter, Bianca Maria, and her husband Francesco Sforza¹⁹. Nonetheless, Francesco had taken the dukedom by force, and he ruled without any imperial investiture. Indeed, until 1494, the Sforza dukes did not receive official recognition as lords of Milan from their overlord, the Holy Roman Empire. Therefore, after the conquest of the Duchy and the pacification of the Peninsula with the establishment of the Italian League in 1455, Francesco Sforza naturally aimed at building an efficient network of permanent informants. He had become the advocate of the balance of powers across Italian territories, exploiting the diplomatic tool of alliances in an unscrupulous and clever way; and he required the maintenance of a considerable control on communication circuits²⁰. Within a few years, the renewed diplomatic practice arranged by the duke became well organised, structured, and extensive, remaining, concurrently, a significant adaptable activity, where informal solutions were still resorted: Milanese diplomacy succeeded in elaborating a common political language and shaping a geography of interacting identities and powers in a space that was at the same time politically fragmented and culturally connected.²¹

Thereafter, especially from 1460s, the opening of the Milanese diplomatic ground to the rest of Europe came as a complementary feature of such a process²². Credentials letters and instructions were given to the chosen ambassador before leaving for his destination, where, following an often-perilous journey, he settled for a variable period, which tended to lengthen

¹⁸ Federico del Tredici, 'Lombardy under the Visconti and the Sforza', in *The Italian Renaissance State*, ed. by A. Gamberini and I. Lazzarini, 156-76. See also Jane Black, 'Double duchy: the Sforza dukes and the other Lombard title', in *Europa e Italia. Studi in onore di Giorgio Chittolini. Europe and Italy. Studies in honour of Giorgio Chittolini* (Florence: Reti Medievali E-book, Firenze University Press, 2011), 15-27.

¹⁹ See Alessandro Colombo, 'L'ingresso di Francesco Sforza in Milano e l'inizio di un nuovo principato', *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, 32 (1905), 80-101; 297-344. On the main aspects related to ducal power in fifteenth-century Milan, see Jane Black, *Absolutism in Renaissance Milan: plenitude of power under the Visconti and the Sforza, 1329-1535* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁰ Senatore, *Uno mundo de carta*, 43. See also Riccardo Fubini, *Italia quattrocentesca: politica e diplomazia nell'età di Lorenzo il Magnifico* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1994).

²¹ For a geographical outline of Italian diplomacy, see Isabella Lazzarini, 'Multilayered networks: the political geography of Italian diplomacy in the early Renaissance (1350-1520 ca.)' in *Comunicación política y diplomacia en la Baja Edad Media*, ed. By N. V. Montes and H. Vasconcelos Vilar (Évora: Publicações do Cidehus, 2019).

²² Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict*, 18.

more and more towards the fifteenth century²³. There, he presented himself to the governor and the civil authorities to conduct the necessary negotiations: general hearings, individual meetings, public and private social occasions; and he wrote to the Sforza dukes of everything notable²⁴. Thus, a multitude of information of all sorts reached Milanese chancellery, which oversaw the organisation of a significant number of diplomatic writings according to specific criteria²⁵. Such frequent and extensive diplomatic activity is nowadays highlighted by the considerable surviving documentary *corpus* that is still preserved in the State Archive of Milan. These documents have a heterogeneous nature and (if properly questioned) they can illuminate on the multiple patterns according to which the gifts exchanged throughout diplomatic negotiations could convey both material and immaterial crossing of boundaries.

Diplomatic gifts between history and anthropology

The network of symbols and practices that distinguished princely courts saw in magnificence and in appearance some of its expressive form: ruling a court was a matter of representation and the dukes of Milan invested heavily in the role played by material culture²⁶. Thus, diplomatic encounters were marked by a vast array of precious objects, technical artifacts, works of art, and rich fabrics²⁷. Despite that, diplomatic gifts were not a fundamental element in European diplomacy of the fifteenth century: their presence in diplomatic interactions was intermittent and, often, seen as suspicious²⁸. Admittedly, the use of gifts was part of the rules of the diplomatic game which were not dictated by pre-established norms, but rather by patterns linked to social practices characterised by multiple uses, meanings, codes, and languages, where the boundaries between

²³ Isabella Lazzarini, 'Il gesto diplomatico fra comunicazione politica, grammatica delle emozioni, linguaggio delle scritture (Italia, XV secolo)', in *Gesto-immagine. Tra antico e moderno. Riflessioni sulla comunicazione non-verbale. Giornata di studio (Isernia, 18 aprile 2007)*, ed. by M. Salvadori and M. Baggio, (Rome: Quasar, 2009), 75-94. On these topics see also, John K. Hyde, 'The Role of Diplomatic Correspondence and Reporting: News and Chronicles', in *Literacy and its Uses: Studies on Late Medieval Italy*, ed. by Daniel P. Waley (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 217-60; Isabella Lazzarini, 'The Conduct of the Embassy', in *Italian Renaissance Diplomacy*, ed. by M. Azzolini and I. Lazzarini, 42-7; and *Politics and Diplomacy in Early Modern Italy: The Structure of Diplomatic Practice, 1450-1800*, ed. by Daniela Frigo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²⁴ Lazzarini, 'Il gesto diplomatico', 77.

²⁵ See again Senatore, *Uno mundo de carta*, 251-354 and Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict*, 69-120. See also Vincent Ilardi, *Studies in Italian Renaissance Diplomatic History* (London: Variorum, 1986).

²⁶ On appearance and luxury cloths, see the recent Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, *Le regole del lusso. Apparenza e vita quotidiana dal Medioevo all'età moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2020) and Richard Barber, *Magnificence and Princely Splendour in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020); see also Ulinka Rublack, *Dressing Up: Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For a more specific focus on Milan, see Folco Vaglienti, 'Tudicare secundum faciem. Regulating Personal Appearance in fifteenth-century Milan', in *Artigianato e lusso*, ed. by Maria Pia Bortolotti, 9-27; and Paola Venturelli, *La moda alla corte degli Sforza. Leonardo da Vinci tra creatività e tecnica* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, 2020).

²⁷ T. McCall and S. Roberts, 'Art and the Material Culture of Diplomacy', in *Italian Renaissance Diplomacy*, ed. by M. Azzolini and I. Lazzarini, 214-33.

²⁸ Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict*, 240-41, 254-58.

people and goods were very fluid: they were ‘constructions of social transactions’, therefore their meanings and implications were negotiated by the actors connected by them²⁹.

Considerably, ever since Marcel Mauss’ seminal essay, those intriguing processes of social association provided by gifts’ exchanges fascinated both anthropologists and historians³⁰. Accordingly, the gift was conceived as the founding moment of social progress and, moreover, it freed society from the isolation generated by conflict and created culture, making contacts and communications possible. The main features of what can be significantly intended as a diplomatic gift, hence, can be considered connectivity, versatility, and ambivalence³¹. Gifts created a network between all those involved in the exchange, relying on a repertoire of cultural forms to define and redefine the nature of relationships and identities: only rarely diplomatic gifts ‘moved around on a perfect horizontal plane’, since ‘for most of the time, they travelled up and down complex hierarchical ladders’³². Besides, since donating was not a free act, it undergone a long series of dynamics and an intrinsic polysemy marked the concept of gift and the bonds it created among the donor, the intermediary, and the recipient, generating a great variety of responses according to

²⁹ Gadi Algazi, ‘Doing things with gifts’, in *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange*, ed. by G. Algazi, V. Groebner and B. Jussen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 9-27 (10). See also Giuseppe Albertoni, *L’elefante di Carlo Magno: il desiderio di un imperatore* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2020), 53.

³⁰ Marcel Mauss, ‘Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques’, *L’Année Sociologique*, 1 (1923), 30-186. For some relevant anthropological studies, see at least Alain Caillé, *Anthropologie du don: le thiers paradigme* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2000); *Gift Giving: A Research Anthology*, ed. by C. Otnes and R.F. Beltramini (Bowling Green OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996); Jacque T. Godbout, *Le langage du don* (Montréal: Fides, 1996); Harry Liebersohn, *The Return of the Gift: European History of a Global Idea* (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and *The Question of the Gift: Essays Across Disciplines*, ed. by Mark Osteen (London; New York: Routledge, 2002). Moreover, Duby was one of the first medieval historians to reprise Mauss’ theory, see Georges Duby, *Guerriers et paysans, VII^e-XII^e siècle. Premier essor de l’économie européenne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 60-9. For other medieval approaches, see at least Arnoud J. Bijsterveld, ‘The Medieval Gift as Agent of Social Bonding and Political Power: A Comparative Approach’, in *Medieval transformations: texts, power and gifts in context*, ed. by E. Cohen and M.B. De Jong (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2001), 123-56; Amedeo de Vincentiis, ‘Le don impossible. Biographes du roi et biographes du pape entre Naples et Rome (1444-1455)’, in *Humanistes, clercs et laïcs dans l’Italie du XIII^e au début du XVI^e siècle*, ed. by C. Caby and R.M. Dessi (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 319-66; Valentin Groebner, *Liquid Assets, Dangerous Gifts: Presents and Politics at the end of the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Lars Kjær, *The Medieval Gift and the Classical Tradition: Ideals and the Practice of Generosity in Medieval England, 1100-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); and Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Lastly, on diplomatic gifts, see again McCall and Roberts, ‘Art and the Material Culture of Diplomacy’ and Clark, *Collecting Art*; see also ‘The Art of Embassy’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 20 (2016); ‘Gift and Tribute in Early Modern Diplomacy: Afro-Eurasian Perspective’, *Diplomatica. A Journal of Diplomacy and Society*, 2 (2020); *Global Gifts. The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*, ed. by Z. Biedermann, A. Gerritsen and G. Riello (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); *The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. by W. Davies and P. Fouracre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Ludovic Nys, ‘Diplomazie collaterali. Scambi di doni tra i Visconti e i conti di Hainaut, Olanda e Zelanda della casa di Baviera (1373-1399)’, *Artes. Periodico annuale di storia delle arti*, 15 (2010-2014), 7-23; and Sean Roberts, ‘Luxury, Technology, and the Diplomatic Gift’, in *Luxury and the Ethics of Greed in Early Modern Italy*, ed. by Catherine Kovesi (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 215-36.

³¹ Janet Nelson, ‘The Role of the Gift in Early Medieval Diplomatic Relations’, in *Le relazioni internazionali nell’Alto Medioevo, settimana di studio della Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull’Alto Medioevo (Spoleto 8-12 aprile 2010)* (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull’Alto Medioevo, 2011), 225-53.

³² Z. Biedermann, A. Gerritsen and G. Riello, ‘Introduction’, in *Global Gifts*, ed. by Z. Biedermann, A. Gerritsen and G. Riello, 1-33 (26).

the interests of the different political interlocutors³³. Therefore, despite being intermittently used, owing to their flexibility, diplomatic gifts played a relevant role in the formation and consolidation of trans-Mediterranean and trans-European connections: in diplomatic practice they occupied an almost central place, rather than a peripheral.

In the process of diplomatic negotiations, the right gift could ‘make the difference between success and failure’: they were powerful tools that acted and spoke on behalf of their lords³⁴. As so, it existed a significant connection between gifts and personal networks of both the rulers and the individual agents; a connection that was also related to the manufacturing production systems and to the needs of local promotion³⁵. Indeed, practices of representation and furtherance were a crucial part of giving; and that especially in the Milanese case, animated mainly by the necessity to seek for a legitimating consent and to convey a specific propaganda of the dukes’ power and of Lombard manufacturing excellences. As a result, the dynamics underlying the exchanges of diplomatic gifts of the Dukes of the Sforza family were significantly nuanced. Hence, in the international scenario of Milanese diplomacy, gift-giving could be seen as an effective tool that propagated connections between actors which were divided by cultural languages and political borders: they acted as bridges to interconnect different cultures. Thus, the aim of the following case studies is to summon the role of diplomatic gifts as vehicles that could lead to the crossing of geographical, political, and cultural borders that divided the Duchy from its most distant (on multiple levels) interlocutors.

Beyond the Alps: the far Moscow and the near Buda

Geographic distance did not necessarily mean more difficult diplomatic relations and less widespread exchanges of goods. In this perspective, despite being almost 3.000 km away, the Sforza dukes had a significant approach with the Grand Principality of Moscow since the middle of the century³⁶. The pressing need in that time was to cope with the Turkish conquest of the

³³ Algazi, ‘Doing things with gifts’, 16. The focus here is on material gifts, rather than on agents, but it is important to notice that the role of the ambassador was not circumscribed solely to his mission, since it commonly intersected with cultural and artistic activities: agents had a dynamic interconnection with the objects they carried with them. It is in this perspective that it has been used the notion of ‘double agency’; see *Double Agents: Cultural and Political Brokerage in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by M. Keblusek and B.V. Noldus (Leiden: Brill, 2011). See also Daniela Frigo, ‘Prudence and Experience: Ambassadors and Political Culture in Early Modern Italy’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 38 (2008), 15-34; and N. Um and L.R. Clark, ‘Introduction. The Art of Embassy: Situating Objects and Images in the Early Modern Diplomatic Encounter’, in ‘The Art of Embassy’, 3-18.

³⁴ McCall and Roberts, ‘Art and the Material Culture of Diplomacy’, 214.

³⁵ Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict*, 254-58.

³⁶ Archivio di Stato di Milano, Carteggio Visconteo-Sforzesco, Serie Potenze Estere (from now, abbreviated as ASMi, PE), b. 640, b. 647. See also Horodowich, ‘The Wider World’, 202; Gino Barbieri, *Milano e Mosca nella politica del Rinascimento* (Bari: Adriatica, 1957); and Evelyn Welch, ‘Between Italy and Moscow: Cultural Crossroads and the Culture of Exchange’, in *Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe*, iv: *Forging European Identities, 1400-1700*, ed. by Robert Muchembled, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 59-99.

Byzantine Empire and with its consequences on the international scenario. Francesco Sforza's political dreams was to create a powerful balance within the Christian States of Eastern Europe, first and foremost with the growing Russia which had, then, the same need. At that time, Russian trading centres were linked to the Baltic area and Milanese purchased Russian products through German intermediaries, therefore that trans-European route was rarely used, and diplomatic contacts depended entirely on entrepreneurial individuals rather than on a co-ordinated policy³⁷. Nevertheless, the efforts of contacts between Francesco Sforza and Grand Duke Ivan III succeeded in establishing a formal link that crossed geographical distance and many cultural borders.

Eventually, that connection was significantly enhanced in 1476 by Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza (eldest son and heir of Francesco), who sent the first official diplomatic mission to the Grand Duchy: it was entrusted to *El Bianco* ('The White'), a master of falconry, who had instructions to bring as a gift some peregrine falcons and 'tre peze, una de brochato seu pano doro, l'altra de zetononino rosso, l'altra de Damaschino morello'³⁸. As a counter-gift, ten years later, Ivan III sent an ambassador of Greek origin, Giorgio Percamota, to Milan with credential letters with golden seals, and with eighty sable coats, some falcons, a bow and quiver, a dagger, a walrus tusk, and even some live sables directly from Russia. The list of these diplomatic gifts is reported in a summary of the Russian ambassador's account at the court of Milan which can be considered one of the earliest Italian descriptions of Russia and which treasures precious information about the distant, mostly unknown, and culturally different lands of the Grand Duchy³⁹. Therefore, the formal contacts established at the dawn of the Turkish threat in the following years were fostered and the exchanges of diplomatic gifts created a major movement of specialised craftsmen, animals, and luxury goods that led to a flourish commercial market⁴⁰. Moreover, the exchanges were eased by Aristotele Fioravanti, an Italian architect who worked both for the Sforzas and for Ivan III. In the decade in which he lived in Moscow, there was a constant circulation of precious textiles and weapons from Milan, and furs and falcons from Moscow⁴¹. Again, in the last decade of the century,

³⁷ Welch, 'Between Italy and Moscow', 60-66. See also Janet Martin, *Treasure of the Land of Darkness: The Fur Trade and its Significance for Medieval Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

³⁸ ASMi, Reg. Missive, n. 125, ff. 249.-250 Notes about that mission can be found also in ASMi, Reg. Duc. n. 214, ff. 170v. – 172 v, *Nota et continentia de le cose et signore de Rossia*.

³⁹ *Ibidem*. The original document was written in Italian, but for English translations see R.M. Croskey and E.C. Ronquist, 'George Trakhaniot's Description of Russia in 1486', *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, 17 (1990), 55-64; and Horodowich, 'The Wider World', 204-207. On diplomatic gift-giving in Russia, see Robert M. Croskey, *Muscovite Diplomatic Practice in the Reign of Ivan III* (New York: Garland, 1978).

⁴⁰ See the letters in ASMi, PE, b. 640 and ASMi, Registro Ducale (from now, abbreviated as Reg. Duc.), n. 5.

⁴¹ ASMi, Reg. Missive, n. 125, ff. 249 – 250. On Aristotele Fioravanti's works in Russia, see Luca Beltrami, 'Artisti italiani a Mosca al servizio di Ivan III', *Atti della Società piemontese di archeologia e belle arti*, 10 (1921), 217-25; and Carlo Canetta, 'Aristotele da Bologna. Notizie inedite tratte dall'Archivio di Stato di Milano', *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, 9 (1882), pp. 672-97. See also, Welch, 'Between Italy and Moscow', 71-80 for his works at the Kremlin.

specialised craftsmen and ambassadors with material gifts continued to travel to one court to the other⁴². As a result, even if those cross-cultural encounters depended heavily on individuals, they succeeded in creating an unusually effective and longstanding connection. Despite the geographical distance, contacts between Milan and Moscow increased towards the second half of the fifteenth century thanks to a sort of common view. Both the Sforza dukes and Ivan III were determined to expand their own rule by bringing the fragmented territories of the Duchy and of the Grand Duchy, respectively, under their jurisdiction, to protect their enlarged borders, and to impress foreign visitors with the magnificence of their courts⁴³. Considering the physical, cultural, and religious distances separating Milan and Moscow, they were connected by similar intents: the desire for further connections was military as well as political and commercial; and it was fostered by diplomatic gifts. Hence, Milan and Moscow began to speak a shared cultural language and that facilitated the crossing of borders more than geographical proximity could have done.

The threat of the Turks, the demand for internal and external consolidation, and the construction of an image of magnificence were significant shared needs also between Milan and the Kingdom of Hungary: the two polities were geographically relatively close, however they had reasonably different commercial interests. Besides, Hungarian kings had political interests in the Peninsula: in this case, the main border to be crossed was not the geographical or cultural one, but the political and military. Indeed, a first-hand correspondence was started and made frequent from the last years of 1450s⁴⁴: on one hand, the Hungarian king Mathias Corvinus requested the intervention of Milan (and of the European rulers) in the wars against the Turks; on the other, Francesco Sforza was interested in being constantly informed but without exposing himself more than he should. Eventually, with the lessening of the contrast against the Ottomans at the end of 1460s, a sort of precarious balance was established in the Mediterranean basin and in Eastern Europe, which allowed a change in the relations between the two courts: ambassadors began to increasingly travel from Milan to Buda, and vice versa, especially after the marriage of king Matthias to Beatrice of Naples. It was a moment in which the changing alliances of the Peninsula and the contrasting political urgencies brought the Sforza dukes and king Matthias to be military enemies. Whereas the king of Hungary had significant matters in the Peninsula, both political and cultural⁴⁵, the Sforza did not have peculiar purposes in Hungary, but they needed to secure the borders of

⁴² ASMí, PE, b. 640, b. 644 and ASMí, Reg. Duc., n. 214, f. 213.

⁴³ Welch, 'Between Italy and Moscow', 63.

⁴⁴ ASMí, Reg. Missive, n. 38, f. 299v. and ASMí, PE, b. 642, b. 645, b. 650. See also *Magyar Diplomáciai Emlékek Mátyása király korából*, ed. by I. Nagy and A. Nyáry, vol. I (Budapest: M. Tud. Akad. Könyvkiadó-Hivatalában, 1875).

⁴⁵ See the essays in *Lombardia e Ungheria nell'età dell'Umanesimo e del Rinascimento. Rapporti culturali e artistici dall'età di Sigismondo all'invasione turca (1387–1526)*, special number of *Arte Lombarda*, 139 (2003). See also Jolan Balogh, *Adatok Milano és Magyarország kulturális kapcsolatainak történetéhez / Contributi alla storia delle relazioni d'arte e di cultura tra Milano e*

their dukedom (especially against Venice). Therefore, whether they were allied or rivals, the frequent coming and going of ambassadors between Milan and Buda resulted in a constant circulation of craftsmen and hunting horses, rather than material gifts. That is testified, for example, by the duke's recommendation to the Milanese jeweller Donato Della Porta who moved to Buda and Matthias' request to send architects from Milan to which Galeazzo Maria Sforza replied by sending six of them⁴⁶. Moreover, this happened at a time when Milan and Hungary were in rival coalitions. Indeed, the Lombard artistic, cultural, and architectural influence on Mathias' court was strong and the presence of Milanese craftsmen in Buda prompted the beginning of a circulation of luxury items and diplomatic gifts from the 1480s. Thus, in 1485 an embassy from Milan brought to Buda 'brazza LX de brocato d'oro parte rizo et parte damaschino' and a painting depicting a Madonna⁴⁷. After years of changing alliances and travelling craftsmen, a new dialogue was made possible by diplomatic gifts: on one hand brocades, sculptures, and (especially) illuminated manuscripts were sent from Milan; on the other hand, from Buda came mainly Hungarian goldsmith's art, including a golden crown, brooches with diamonds and pearls and a 'frontiera di perle all'ongaresca'⁴⁸. Diplomatic exchanges, hence, could cross also the boundaries built by international alliances and could put into contact opponent political actors: they guaranteed the maintenance of a balance in the relations between the Sforza dukes and king Mathias, even when they found themselves in enemy alliances. If in the case of Russia gift-giving were fostered by political needs, in the case of Hungary it was the cultural aspirations of king Matthias and the demand for promotion of the Lombard manufacturing excellences that built a connection through diplomatic gifts that could cross not only the geographical distances, but also the political and military boundaries.

Beyond the Sea: the distant Muslim powers

The previous cases are referred to political entities which were separated from Milan by geographical or political borders; however, they shared a similar cultural language, a sort of chivalric imaginary. Nevertheless, when the Sforza entered diplomatic negotiations with political actors who spoke a different cultural language, things changed, and gift-giving became less flexible. As regards international politics and trade, Milan was oriented towards mainland Europe and was

l'Ungheria (Budavari: Budavari Tudományos Társaság, 1928); and *Italy and Hungary: Humanism and Art in the Early Renaissance*, ed. by P. Farbaky and L.A. Waldman (Florence: Villa I Tatti, 2011).

⁴⁶ ASMi, Reg. Missive, n. 71, f. 255 and f. 270. See also Balogh, *Adatok Milano*, 54-5.

⁴⁷ ASMi, PE, b. 642, 1485, April 13.

⁴⁸ Ivi, 1489, October 21. Other information on diplomatic gifts in the last decades of the fifteenth century can be found in ASMi, PE, b. 642, b. 645, b. 650; in Archivio di Stato di Modena, Archivio Segreto Estense (from now abbreviated as ASMo, ASE), Carteggio Ambasciatori, Milano, bb. 3-6; and in Balogh, *Adatok Milano*.

less linked to the *Levant* when confronted to the close Venice⁴⁹. Yet, the control on the port of Genoa and the direct connection to the one of Ancona (Francesco Sforza's homeland) on the Adriatic Sea made the dukes more interested in the Mediterranean dynamics than it is usually thought: Milan was the centre of an important overland and oversea axe and, therefore, got in contact with the Levant⁵⁰. And, once again, diplomatic gifts facilitated a connection with the Muslim territories, which were distant in space as well as in culture, politics, and institution.

Indeed, in the Eastern world gift-giving in diplomacy was almost mandatory: interactions with Muslim powers required more substantial signs of respect and praise and were intended both to favour relationships and to represent at its best the courtly culture of the donors in front of different and distant cultures⁵¹. Notably, the first contacts between Francesco Sforza and the Caliph of Tunis began in 1452: Tunis, at that moment, had to face the pirate actions of the Venetians on its coasts and had to feel the close pressure of the Ottomans. The Ottomans, who, in fact, in the following year, conquered Constantinople. The Caliph, therefore, sent one of his ambassadors to Milan, which was also at war with Venice, to present his tributes to the neo-duke Francesco: among these gifts there were two horses with their harnesses, hunting dogs and falcons⁵². Hence, it consisted of gifts of animals that had both a high cost of purchase and a high cost in their maintenance. But there is more: the horses – and those of North Africa, as well as the Turkish ones, were considered true thoroughbreds – responded to a common knightly imaginary, which was evidently shared also with political actors who professed a different religion. This symbolic imagery conveyed a specific image of power, a sort of *status symbol*, that appealed to the military power of both the donor country and the recipient one: possession of superior animals had its own intrinsic value and courts competed with one to the other for ownership of the finest animals⁵³. Moreover, horses were exhibited during ceremonial processions and highly

⁴⁹ For diplomatic gifts between the Republic of Venice and the Ottomans, see, at least, Luca Molà, 'Material Diplomacy: Venetian Luxury Gifts for the Ottoman Empire in the Late Renaissance', in *Global Gifts. The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*, ed. by Z. Biedermann, A. Gerritsen and G. Riello, 56-87.

⁵⁰ See, at least, Geo Pistarino, 'La politica sforzesca nel Mediterraneo orientale', in *Gli Sforza a Milano e in Lombardia e i loro rapporti con gli stati italiani ed europei (1450-1535)*, *Convegno Internazionale (Milano, 18-21 maggio 1981)*, (Milano: Cisalpino-Goliardica, 1982), 335-68.

⁵¹ Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict*, p. 258. See also, Isabella Lazzarini, 'Écrire à l'autre. Échanges diplomatiques et réseaux informatifs entre les cours italiennes et l'Orient au bas Moyen Âge (XIV^e-XV^e siècle)', in *La Correspondance entre souverains, princes et cites-états. Rédaction, transmission, modalités d'archivage et ambassades. Approches croisées entre l'Orient musulman, l'Occident latin et Byzance (XIII^e-début XV^e s.)*, ed. by D. Aigle and S. Péquignot (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 165-94.

⁵² ASMi, PE, b. 649, 1452, April.

⁵³ In general, for the diplomatic gift of horses, see Magdalena Bayreuther, 'Pferde in der Diplomatie der frühen Neuzeit', in *Materielle Grundlagen der Diplomatie: Schenken, Sammeln und Verhandeln in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, ed. by M. Häberlein and C. Jeggle (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2013), 227-256. On the exchange of horses between Italian peninsula and Muslim powers, see Antonia Gatward Cevizli, 'Portraits, Turbans and Cuirasses. Material Exchange between Mantua and the Ottomans at the End of the Fifteenth Century', in *Global Gifts*, 34-55 (38-42). For other studies on diplomatic gifts within the Muslim powers, see Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Practising Diplomacy in the Mamluk Sultanate. Gifts and Material Culture in the Medieval Islamic World* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016); and Roberts, 'Luxury, Technology, and the Diplomatic Gift'.

representative parades and must have been a welcome gift to the Sforza. Milanese dukes – indeed, like any other courtly prince of the time – enjoyed jousting and tournaments, as well as hunting trips: the ducal hunt, subjected to a meticulous chivalric code of good manners, in fact contributed to an ostentation of the luxury of the family. Also, it often became an instrument of diplomatic and political relations, allowing the Sforza dukes to arise to the same rank as kings of ancient tradition – such as the English and the French – who had made of hunting their main pastime⁵⁴. The ducal family and their guests enjoyed hunting with dogs and falcons in the parks of their ducal residences. Those preserves generally included the existence of a menagerie for exotic animals, which could not be missing in any princely court worthy of that name.

And in fact, in the embassy of April 1452, also a lion and a camel came from Tunis which, probably, ended up in the menagerie of the Milanese castle or in one of the other residences of the duchy with hunting reserves. Again, not only did the exotic animals have a high economic value for the donor, who had to capture or buy them, and the recipient, who had to preserve them and find someone able to take care of them; but they were also charged with symbols, which conveyed chivalric or even royal ideals⁵⁵. But the Caliph not only donated horses and exotic animals to Francesco Sforza, he also tried to appeal to the duke's stomach: among the other gifts that the caliph sent to Francesco, in fact, there were also dates. Indeed, the ducal family and its court were greedy for sugared food, sweets, and exotic foods that was generally bought through the Genoese port. The gifts from Tunis, therefore, not only managed to bring the two powers closer but were an implicit recognition of the position held by Sforza, who was given the honour of a treatment worthy, in every sense, of a king.

To these tributes, Francesco responded with an equally luxurious series of gifts, the choice of which was carefully considered. Among them, there were falcons, sparrows, and hunting birds with their supplies, fifty pairs of golden gloves, eleven white armour plates and the same number

⁵⁴ In general, for animals involved in hunting and processions, see, *A Cultural History of Animals in the Medieval Age*, ed. by B. Resl (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2007): especially the essays by An Smets and Baudouin Van Den Abeele, 'Medieval Hunting', 59-80; and Lisa J. Kiser, 'Animals in Medieval Sports, Entertainment, and Menageries', 103-126. See also, R. Barber and J. Barker, *Tournaments: Jousts, Chivalry and Pageants in the Middle Ages* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989); *Formare alle professioni: la cultura militare tra passato e presente*, ed. by M. Ferrari and F. Ledda (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2011); Carroll Gillmor, 'Practical Chivalry: The Training of Horses for Tournaments and Warfare', *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, 13 (1992), 7-29. For Milanese hunting and sports, see Sergio Giuntini, 'Sports under Visconti and Sforza Rule. Ball, Games and Hunting for the Milanese Nobility', in *Artigianato e lusso*, ed. by M.P. Bortolotti, 166-191; Mario Borsa, *La caccia nel milanese dalle origini ai giorni nostri* (Milan: Hoepli, 1924), 149-215; and Folco Vaglianti, 'Cacce e parchi ducali sul Ticino', in *Vigerano e i territori circostanti alla fine del Medioevo*, ed. by G. Chittolini (Milan: Unicopli, 1997), 185-260.

⁵⁵ For the symbols hidden behind animals, see Michel Pastoureaux, *Une histoire symbolique du Moyen Âge occidental* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2004). For the gift of exotic animals, see at least Thierry Buquet, 'Aspects matériels du don d'animaux exotiques dans les échanges diplomatiques', in *Culture matérielle et contacts diplomatiques entre l'Occident latin, Byzance et l'Orient islamique (XIe–XVIe siècle)*, ed. by F. Bauden (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 177-202; and Albertoni, 'L'elefante'.

of armours covered in green damask, two metallic girdles and a sword⁵⁶. Armour and weapons from a Christian prince were indeed exceptional at that period, but they were emblematic objects of the eminent Lombard luxury manufacturers. In fact, already from the end of the Thirteenth century in Milan there was a flourishing production of arms and armours and throughout the fifteenth century Milanese workshops could boast an unparalleled primacy in the manufacture, production and trade of war and parade armours, as they were able to satisfy the widest variety of requests coming from the courts of all Europe, first of all from the French and German ones, whose princes were among the main buyers of the production of Milanese arms and armours⁵⁷. Considered at the same time one of the strategic productions of the duchy, a citizen pride, an important source of income and a technological eminence, the art of blacksmiths and that of swordsmen were not only highly regarded by the Sforza dukes, but also protected with decrees aimed at avoiding the transfer abroad of masters and workshops. These were the most purchased Milanese products in international markets and the diplomatic gifts that the Sforza dukes used most likely to send to foreign rulers. It was a way to pay homage to the Caliph of Tunis with one of the most desirable products for princely courts of the entire Fifteenth century. At the same time, it was a significant device to promote the most prominent and most profitable of Milanese manufactures on the North African market.

Likewise, in September 1476, the sultan of Egypt also paid homage to Galeazzo Maria Sforza – who had become duke of Milan ten years earlier at the death of his father Francesco – with an embassy⁵⁸. In a similar way, this embassy was intended in an anti-Venetian perspective, and it was entrusted to an ambassador of Egyptian origin who had seven Italians in his entourage, as service personnel and interpreters. The valuable gifts delivered during the encounter still encompassed horses and falcons, but also boxes of sugar, balsams, musk and essences from both Egypt and the Near East⁵⁹: they were exotic products that the Milanese merchants bought in the main commercial hubs and in great demand at court both for their practical use and for the exoticism and exclusivity they brought with them. Among the gifts for Galeazzo there were also African civet furs and silk drapes. They were, therefore, all products massively desired and

⁵⁶ ASMi, PE, b. 649, 1452, April.

⁵⁷ There is an extensive historiography about these matters, see at least Silvio Leydi, 'Suiting Up Armies. Armoures in Milan from the Viscontis up to the Spanish Rule', in *Artigianato e lusso*, ed. by M.P. Bortolotti, 112-129; also, for a brief outline of Milanese urban market, see Evelyn Welch, 'Art at Court and the Wider Urban Market: the case of Milan, 1470-1500', in *Economia e arte: secc. XIII - XVIII. Atti della "trentatreesima settimana di studi" 30 aprile - 4 maggio 2000*, ed. by S. Cavaciocchi (Bagno a Ripoli: Le Monnier, 2002), 627-634.

⁵⁸ For Mamluk diplomacy, see again Behrens-Abouseif, *Practising Diplomacy and Mamluk Cairo: a crossroads for embassies. Studies in diplomacy and diplomatics*, ed. by F. Bauden and M. Dekkiche (Boston; Leiden: Brill, 2019).

⁵⁹ ASMi, PE, b. 649, 1476, October 4. The document states: 'certe robbe, cioè doi zibetti e capre, et certe casse cum acque odorifere et altre zentileze de Levante'. On this embassy, see also Paolo Ghinzoni, 'Un ambasciadore del soldano d'Egitto alla Corte milanese nel 1476', *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, 2 (1875), 155-78.

appreciated for the luxury consumption of the Sforza court, especially by Duke Galeazzo who invested considerably in sumptuous robes and commissioned both the production of them from Milanese shops and the purchase on international markets.

Those gifts, therefore, were suited to convey an image of power and wealth of both the donor and the recipient country, showing the power of their own manufactures and businesses that could acquire highly demanded and very expensive goods. At the same time, the circulation and exchange of these gifts, rich in economic and symbolic values, made it possible to create bridges between political cultures that were distant from a political point of view, and also from a cultural, religious, linguistic, and geographical one.

Communicating with diplomatic gifts: between material and immaterial values

Indeed, diplomatic gifts were characterised by a multiplicity of values: material and immaterial, economical, and symbolic. It was, notably, their connective value that made such gifts paramount. Therefore, not only the circulation of diplomatic gifts fostered the crossing of borders built by political or military alliances, cultural and religious differences; but also, the dynamics according to which diplomatic gifts circulated were likewise influenced by how the political aspirations of the foreign rulers came to combine with those of the Sforza dukes. The relationships between giver, receiver and the gift can be fully understood only when considering the complex networks of interconnections that they were part of and that ‘extended beyond their immediate location’⁶⁰: there is the macro-level of oversea and overland interactions, the level of the relations between two States and two rulers, and the micro-level of individuals.

The different Sforza dukes, indeed, adopted precise diplomatic choices, which corresponded to a different exploitation of magnificence to pursue their own political objectives, thus embracing a distinct political language towards diplomatic gifts. Besides, they were not only used to seal alliances, as is usually thought, but rather they were exploited by the Sforza to seek legitimacy, to promote Milanese manufactures, and to convey an image of power, and magnificence. In the entangled plots of circulation of diplomatic gifts, the diplomatic choices of the Sforza dukes highlight in an original way the existence of a common symbolic and political language that made it possible to approach different and distant territorial realities, creating a sort of preferential channel between people who ‘belonged to a shared cultural community, which did not necessarily correspond to the political one’⁶¹. Therefore, at a time when most of the territorial realities were proceeding towards processes of nationalization and internal consolidation,

⁶⁰ Biedermann, Gerritsen and Riello, ‘Introduction’, 20.

⁶¹ Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict*, 259.

diplomatic gifts evolved into ‘agents’ of cross-cultural communication and their mobility allowed the crossing of a great variety of borders and boundaries⁶².

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⁶² Um and Clark, ‘Introduction’, 4. For the perspective about the agency of things, see *The Biography of the Object in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. by R.J.M. Olson, P.L. Reilly and R. Shepherd (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Bill Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2001), 1-22; Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008); *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in cultural perspective*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and *Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, ed. by Lorraine Daston (New York: Zone, 2008).