In the seventeenth century why did some rulers and in the case of Russia the patriarch also, receive elaborately designed and painted letters from the English king and others not? Did the decoration relate to the content of the message, that is, to the text of the letter? Was the design richer and more colorful, the gold highlighting more abundant if it enhanced a request for gifts or privileges; or was the design on a letterhead simply secular ornamental decoration, what since the nineteenth century has been labeled decorative art? Was it in recognition of the importance of the title of the recipient, or was the design to consciously reflect the grandeur of the Crown of the sender, to relay a signal of power and opulence? Or was it solely to embellish a letter presented as a familial gift to a brother in the family of Christian monarchy as the salutations would imply?

Decoration

The practice of decorating documents sent to particular heads of state and not others raises a number of questions about the purpose of the limning and its connection with the meaning of the text. The answer to these questions can be found in looking closely at the collection of English royal letters in the Russian archives, described in the Introduction. That collection enables us to examine the art work that decorated the king’s correspondence for almost a century and consider the purpose it served in the world of diplomacy and commercial expansion. The letters of the early Stuart period, and particularly those of Charles I from 1631 to 1648, reflect the early modern theory of magnificence best described by the late fifteenth-century Neapolitan humanist Giuniano Maio who was interested in the idea of magnificence and in its effect on the viewer. His reformulation of the Aristotelian idea as “the beautiful appearance of a thing that has been embellished, arousing admiration in the person who sees it” aptly describes both the liming on the letters and the anticipated response from the recipient. Maio attributed that response to “work [that] is well executed and in its sumptuous grandeur.”

Long before James ascended the throne in 1603 England had embarked on the building of a vast commercial empire and, in fits and starts, constructing a more modern state to oversee it, much of which would be realized by the end of the seventeenth century. Changes were apparent in the office of the principal secretary of state even before the death of Queen Elizabeth some of which were introduced by Robert Cecil, later first earl of Salisbury, who held that office from June 1596 until his death in 1612. Concerned that there be established rules and regulations for English affairs, Cecil, as Sir Edward Coke had done in his *Fourth Institute* for the law courts and legal offices, wrote a tract entitled “The State and Dignity of a Secretarie of Estates Place with the Care and Peril thereof.” Cecil’s tract in describing that office was part of the literary genre of the period and perhaps found its inspiration in a similar piece, the “Discourse Touching the Office of Principal Secretary of State, etc.” written by Nicholas Faunt in 1592.2

Faunt had served Sir Francis Walsingham when he was secretary to Elizabeth and then became clerk of the signet under James. Faunt’s discourse is a practical, detailed description of the type of record and log book to be kept by the administrative clerks. The detail it provides, albeit brief, is precisely what makes this the most important extant explanation of the work of the clerks in the secretary’s office. The key to understanding the reason for decorating royal letters lies in Faunt’s explanation of the special handling of those places that could grant privileges and immunities from customs and taxes to English merchants. He advised keeping one entry book for treaty records, one for current negotiations, and another “touching the intercourse with Denmark, Sweden, Muscovia and Russia, Turkey, Barbury, and the Levant, and especially the Hanse towns, that insist so much upon ancient privileges and immunities.” Faunt’s list of places able to negotiate these customs and taxes corresponds to a great degree with the list of places to receive limned letters named in the royal patent to Edward Norgate. (The story of Norgate’s credentials and work will be found in Chapter 4.) In other words, decorated letters were sent only to countries that gave trading privileges and where customs and taxes on imports could be negotiated. (Coincidentally, several were countries that did not use a Latin alphabet.) James’s earlier marriage to Anne of Denmark had already resolved the matter of Sound tolls by the time James had succeeded to the English throne.

Through the decorated letters, the royal emblems, and the titles and closings the English king represented himself to Eastern rulers. The decoration, magnificent in itself, “well executed” and heavily gilded, was meant to show

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2 Faunt’s tract is printed in *EHR* 20 (1905), pp. 499–508. Regarding Cecil’s tract, see *CSPD 1623–1625*, p. 546.