A perfect visual image of the Renaissance scholar-diplomat exists in Hans Holbein’s famous painting, *The Ambassadors*. A portrait of two French ambassadors in 1533, it situates the proud figures among a plethora of objects representing the latest in intellectual life: globes, quadrants, and books by Martin Luther. In addition to the ambassadors, the artist intended to represent knowledge itself: proud, dominant, terrestrial. However, the triumphant image is not without ambiguity, for across the bottom of the painting lies the elongated and distorted image of a human skull: a reminder of death.\(^1\)

That Holbein would choose ambassadors to represent human knowledge should not be surprising. These were men who traveled Europe carrying manuscripts as well as new ideas. The height of cosmopolitanism, they crossed cultural and linguistic borders with ease. And yet, the universal nature of the diplomatic enterprise was counterweighted by the specific task of an ambassador summed up by a fifteenth century Venetian: “to do, say, advise, and think whatever may best serve the preservation and aggrandizement of his own state.”\(^2\) The ambassador had to be concerned with both universals and particulars, with abstract knowledge and with the contingencies of politics at the same time. That such divergent concerns required two distinct identities is clear in the case of Claude de Seyssel. This chapter examines how he presented himself as both a humanist scholar and a noble counselor-diplomat, and argues that a study of his diplomatic language indicates a deliberate effort on his part to keep these identities distinct.

The variety of discourses used by Claude de Seyssel in his roles as scholar and diplomat indicates two main cultural contexts for diplomatic...

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practice in the Renaissance state: the warrior aristocrat and the Renaissance humanist. Within the culture of early sixteenth-century France a tension existed between these two. The nobles, not yet courtiers, often kept scholars at a social distance. However, the emerging territorial state increasingly used scholars armed with eloquence to present them to their own subjects as much as to foreign courts. Thus there was a blending of the old role and the new. The noble warrior could increasingly serve his lord in war through the collection, control, and persuasive delivery of information. Seyssel was a member of this new group of scholar-diplomats who communicated political information to the public as a Renaissance orator, but communicated with his peers directly in the tone of political realism, a discourse particularly well-suited to both the demands of military intelligence and the sociological configuration of a community engaged in the exercise of political power.

The Diplomatic Career in Context

The practice of diplomacy was known in antiquity, and its primary characteristics had changed little by the early sixteenth century. Then as now, the main purposes of the ambassador were to negotiate and to spy. As early as 1350 B.C.E., the office of royal messenger in ancient Egypt carried great esteem and required both military and clerical training. The connection between military and diplomatic functions continued in ancient Greece, when generals sometimes acted as ambassadors; even Spartan kings sometimes served as diplomats.3

The practice of diplomacy has always been tied to noble status. In Italy, where a system of resident ambassadors developed in the fifteenth century, noble or patrician status was a prerequisite for an ambassador or oratore.4 Even in Florence, the Machiavelli family’s exclusion from the ranks of the ottimati meant that Niccolò would be passed over for

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