

The Expansion of Diplomatics as a Discipline

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Abstract: The author discusses the origins of diplomatics as a distant intellectual discipline in the second half of the seventeenth century. With the strong influence of classical philology and positiveness, diplomatics became more refined and specialized. The field created a structure which is formed by certain steps to be taken in the study and analysis of a document according to a taxonomy. He concludes by examining diplomatics in the 1950s when the field, though rooted in the analysis of ancient documents, tests the borderlines between documentary analysis and historical research.

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THE FOLLOWING ARTICLE CONCERNS certain stages in the development of medieval diplomacy, from its establishment as a discipline in and of itself to the diverse paths which it has taken. These paths have been sometimes arduous but always stimulating, and ever-faithful to the initial program of the field.¹

In the history of diplomacy, as elsewhere, the quest for its origins is deceptive. For more than a century, a number of studies have produced documents which are curious and complex. They show that people of the Middle Ages were conducting the study of diplomacy without knowing it but that their critical instinct was nevertheless sharp.² One can rediscover diplomacy elsewhere without much effort. If one understands “diplomats” to be an ensemble of scholarly knowledge and rules applied to the critical examination of written acts, intended to test their authenticity or sincerity, one can, not surprisingly, find diplomacy applied in more or less pragmatic fashion, even theorized, by the legislators and by the practitioners in the course of their activities, as far back as antiquity.³ To take just one example among the most savory, the bishop Geoffroy of Amiens, in 1105, knew how to change the minds of his audience by energetically rubbing a fraudulent act against his clothing in order to prove that it was of a recent vintage and “made up.” He did this even before criticizing its unconventional use of the seal.⁴

But it is a well-known fact that diplomacy as a distinct discipline achieved its own purpose, method, and scientific ambition in the second half of the seventeenth century. Centered around the name and work of Mabillon, diplomacy defined its principle tools at the time. These tools were to be used on a limited corpus of works, essentially the deeds issued by princes in the high Middle Ages, rarely dating beyond the end of the twelfth century. The objective was to establish a solid foundation for the critique (*discrimen veri ac falsi*) of historical documents which were being subjected to a biased historiography, especially that of the Counter Reformation in France by the absolute monarchy, and in the Empire by the defense of privileges for principalities, cities, or monasteries.

With Mabillon, diplomacy, which in his time was a simple adjective designating the object (*res diplomatica*) of a fundamentally historian approach, was intended, in good Cartesian fashion, to “never accept any item as true unless it was known to be, to divide each problem into as many elements as possible, and to make a full accounting and general review.”⁵ It established a method (a surefire way of crying “Land!” in the troubled waters stirred by *bella diplomatica*) and committed itself to a body of references which would enable the testing of a document and each of its elements, one after the other. These tests included the examination of physical media, the writing, the language, and the succession

¹See Olivier Guyotjeannin, Jacques Pycke, and Benoît-Michel Tock, *Diplomatique médiévale*, 2nd printing (Turnhout, 1995) (*L'atelier du médiéviste*, 1).

²These documents, the number of which increases in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, concern, above all, the critique of the fraudulent, where a Roman influence, disseminated by judges and delegates, among others, seems important. But, in the same period, the development of bodies for the elaboration and conservation of written documents, being chancelleries as well as treasuries for charters, provoked an explosion of growth in a specialized lexicon for designating acts, seals, etc.

³It is again necessary to underline that the studies of the “history of diplomacy” are often distorted in their use of language, confusing the critique of authenticity (which appears the most often in the medieval proceedings which, precisely, have left us the most numerous examples) with the critique of sincerity.

⁴Laurent Morelle, “Un ‘grégorien’ au miroir de ses chartes: Geoffroy, évêque d’Amiens (1104–15),” in *À propos des acts d’évêques, Hommage à Lucie Fossier*, compiled by Michel Parisse (Nancy, 1991), 177–218, 205.

⁵It is the generation following Mabillon which, more strongly influenced by classifying systems, made the name of the discipline out of this word.

of formulas, precisely delineated as *parties du discours*. It was a fundamentally analytical process, isolating each of the characteristics of the document to scrutinize it alongside established references. This yielded a collection of research which was actively pursued in all regions of the Republic of letters, and which allowed for the breaking down of barriers, while the medieval historical critique still depended on observations found in a single medieval *fonds*, or in certain types universally disseminated, such as pontifical letters.

The hopes of Mabillon were to be met and surpassed by the validity and continuity of the undertaking. But we must insist on the fact that diplomatics is founded on the dissection of the document, and on documents which are rare and prestigious. In three centuries, extensions have been produced almost continually without any strong interruption.

The first extension was in the “professional” use of diplomatics: “practical diplomatics,” as the ancestor of *archivistique*, caught on with more vigor during the second half of the eighteenth century, by vulgarising the body of knowledge of *feudistes* and their successors. Beyond the question of diplomatics in its current sense, there was the question of paleography (just as it had been with Mabillon), and also the question of the principles of documentary analysis. Above all, the ensemble of archival documents were considered—manorial records and precepts, and accounts as well as summons. But no one tried to study the evolution of documents through time according to diplomatics, as was done for acts *stricto sensu*.

In the nineteenth century, strongly influenced by classical philology, and then by the historiography of the positivist era (even more positivist than positivism itself), diplomatics became, to the contrary, more specialized and aimed more at the refinement of its methods (of the critique as well as the edition of documents), restraining its field (with the divorce from documentary paleography being consummated), like a bird tying its own wings, at the moment where the concept of “auxiliary” if not “ancillary” sciences was established.⁶ The diplomatist had as his objective the construction of a building site for historical material that had been rigorously edited, dated, and critiqued. He implemented a negative type of critique, if one can call it that, revealing falsifications, separating the wheat from the chaff, and also the straw (the formulary) from the grain (indisputable facts); or to take another metaphor which has had its moment of glory, to destroy the outer crust of the formula, within which the mineral of the data remains captive if it is not reached by the expert intervention of the diplomatist.

It was during this period that the field of diplomatics created a structure divided into different parts, which form certain steps of the study and analysis of the document—according to a taxonomy still in use and largely operative—independent of the specialized branches for certain types of acts or authors (including royal diplomatics, pontifical diplomatics, diplomatics for private acts, etc.):

- The study of the form of acts delineates observations relating to the act as it was produced according to its external characteristics (the chosen physical medium, form, and layout, writing and graphic embellishment) and internal characteristics (language, vocabulary, and rhetorical embellishment, style, and the appearance of the act of

⁶Olivier Guyotjeannin, “L’érudition transfigurée,” in *Passés récomposés: champs et chantiers de l’histoire*, under the direction of Jean Boutier and Dominique Julia (Paris, 1995), 152–62 (*Autrement*, série *Mutations*, 150–151).

editing); parts of the discourse which at a general level are fairly common and even universal—to everyone, it is necessary to tell who makes what for whom, why, where, when, and how—reshaping the place, the importance, and the expression of the diverse elements.

- The study of the tradition seeks to determine all the links of the chain which lead from the original (such as it exists or has existed) to the state in which the document has arrived to us (copy, a simple mention...); consequently, it poses general questions about the concept of the original, the draft, the minutes, and studies the evolution of different forms of copying as practiced (cartularies, registers of the chancellery, archival inventories, etc.).
- The study of the “genesis” attempts to establish the details of the steps through which the act has passed before arriving at its form of original, at the same time first and perfect in a diplomatics sense: this leads very quickly to the study of the mechanisms of decision-making and, moreover, of transcribing: formation, organization, supervision, prosopography of the creators of the acts, and recourse to formularies.
- The critique of the false, always refined, uses the resource of observations built upon preceding observations.
- What is more, the study of the systems of dating and their conversion into a contemporary system (technical chronology), and the diplomatic shutter of sigillography (diffusion, methods of use, and the credibility of seals and bulls) have formed two appendices of general diplomatics, which has not ruled out a more independent development of these disciplines which make written acts one of their sources (the mastery and perception of time, and the iconography and semiotics of the seal).⁷

Since essentially the 1950s, diplomatics has been, once again, part of a conquest for new fields, without abandoning its original ambitions (critique of the false, study of tradition and edition, etc.) nor without the growth of its corpus of references. To be brief, one could distinguish, in this new stage, two different orientations. These are derived, in the final analysis, from the same fundamental axiom: the document is not only a reservoir of data, it is in itself a source. In its form, its structure, and its typology, as captured throughout the duration, and precisely in the degree of its deviation or conformity with analogous documents, the “document” is the “monument.”⁸

The first orientation, which is today the most fertile and quickly imitated, exemplified in the work of Heinrich Fichtenau and his disciples in Vienna, could be considered “qualitative.”⁹ One could try to summarize the founding postulates in the following phrases: the act is a mirror of power and society, formulas also provide their type of information, and fraudulent acts are evidence which is truer than nature in the age of the fraud. To take a few examples: it is useful to critique the fraudulent and not take it at face value,

⁷See, as an example, the very illuminating studies of Brigitte Bedos-Rezak brought together in *Form and Order in Medieval France* (Aldershot, 1993).

⁸[translator's note: the original text here reads “le ‘document’ est ‘monument.’ ”] The old play on words of medieval scribes (with a juridical backdrop being “the document is a witness” [le document est un témoin]) has been strongly reprised in the title of the entry of Jacques Le Goff, “Documento/monumento” in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, vol. V (Torino, 1978), 38–48.

⁹Fichtenau's groundbreaking work was devoted to the study of preambles. See Heinrich Fichtenau, *Arten: Späntantike und Mittelalter im Spiegel von Urkundenformeln* (Graz, 1957) (M.I.O.G., Ergänzungsband XVIII). In the area of external features, and, more precisely, the signs which adorn the act ([chrismon], cross, monograms, etc.) see *Graphische Symbole in mittelalterliche Urkunden: Beiträge zur diplomatischen Semiotik*, edited by Peter Ruck (Sigmaringen, 1996) (Historische Hilfswissenschaften, 3).

to know that a certain bishop since a certain date called himself bishop "not by his own merit but by the sole divine mercy;" this could be a tradition in the diplomatics sense and not a true trace of humility; but as a series, the corpus of these testimonies allows one to see when, in such a diocese, there was an inflection of the titular (for example, with the adoption of the ideals of the Gregorian reform). To see, in the seventh century, "formulas of pertinence" accompanying the mention of a rural domain, ceded "with all its dependencies, court, buildings, utensils, flock, garden, mills, male and female slaves," is not an indication of the richness of the merovingian countries; here, too, an old tradition is at work and the *diplomate* of the nineteenth century knew how to challenge it; but his successor would put these formulas into a series, see how they evolve, and how a minor inflection can translate, indirectly, a change in the country. In its renewed research, the study of "propaganda" in the largest sense of the word has taken the lion's share of attention: a titulary, one has said, or also a preamble or a date can translate an ambition or the alignment with another power, to deliver a political message or a "vision of the world."

But, according to certain scholars and to limit this point to some examples, such research has also been able to address itself to cultural history in its traditional¹⁰ sense and, also, to historical anthropology (in its study of the relationship of written and oral).¹¹ Among these works, the most recent and remarkable have been inspired with the lucidity of socio-linguistic methodology and semiotics.¹² Faced with a blank surface, the writer must confront a challenge which is always present: to create a valid and irreproachable document, relying on the repertoire of formulas, of knowledge, and of words, entirely established or obligatory, to translate and fix a unique and new reality; this is baggage and a reaction, which the finished product, in its embellishment but also in its failures and excuses, hesitations and imperfections, will reveal as it pulls back the curtain on society.

The process is expanding and has gone beyond being a simple process. It has weaknesses in its very force: through the centuries, the material of interest to diplomatics has decreased in quality as it increases in quantity. One can readily sense this: as a society commits more to writing (the passage into this for the west was in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries), the document loses, globally, its symbolic weight. Diplomatics continues to work best in certain rare types, which, for example, for the king of France at the end of the fourteenth century would be a few charters of nobilization and coat of arms, out of thousands of writs of the administration of the time. The stereotype and the norm gain in expression and presentation. The notary in the south of France in the seventh century could perpetuate the ceremonies of token exchanges, his minutes no longer having the heavy significance of certain parchments, where the Roman notary of the beginning of the twelfth century could play with the formula and lexical innovations in an attempt to present an

¹⁰See Robert-Henri Bautier, "Chancellerie et culture au Moyen Âge," in *Cancelleria e cultura nel Medio Evo* (Congrès international de diplomatique, Stuttgart, 1985, Vatican, 1990), 1–75 reproduced in Bautier, *Chartes, sceaux et chancelleries* (Paris, 1990) vol. I, 47–121 (*Mémoires et documents de l'Ecole des chartes*); Charles Vulliez, "L'apprentissage de la rédaction des documents diplomatiques à travers l' 'ars dictaminis' français (et spécialement ligérien) du XIIe siècle," *Cancelleria e cultura nel Medio Evo*, 77–95.

¹¹See M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1993).

¹²For the richness of Catalan documentation, see the studies of Michel Zimmermann, which will appear in his forthcoming thesis, *Écrire et lire en Catalogne du IXe au XIIe siècle*. As one example of Zimmermann's contributions, see his article "Glose, tautologie ou inventaire? L'énumération descriptive dans la documentation catalane Odu Xe au XIIe siècle," in *Cahiers de linguistique hispanique médiévale*, no. 14–15 (1989–1990): 309–38.

urban country undergoing a full disruption.¹³ Clement XI could still inundate Christianity with bulls, but one will not find, in either their writing or their formula, the richness of secondary information that one would find in the pontifical privileges from the middle of the eleventh century, where the changing of the canon rules and the appearance of new signs reflected the new energy of the Reformation. It is no longer an optical illusion, due to the uneven interest of specialists of these periods. It is true that those who are interested in the high Middle Ages, with its poor and damaged documentation, must use all that is available. It is worth making this sort of effort, but it is reasonable to think that the older document offers considerable added value to the diplomatist.

More modestly, this evolution has led (or ought to lead) diplomatists to double the effort of their *pointilliste* and analytical examination of the parts of the text and intent of the document, as defined by Mabillon. Having a global and synthetic significance, the study of the document and its formula (understood here to be the functional ensemble of formulas) is meant to include, along with the evolution of the most significant parts of the text and intent of the document (formulas of invocation, titularies, preambles, terms which announce the decision, etc.), the character of the various features within a document, since it indicates complex evolution, phenomena of imitations, and reappropriations of models. On the other hand, comparative diplomatics searches for the source of document form, as is evidenced by the multiplying studies of the question of influence exerted by pontifical acts upon the production of other medieval chancelleries.¹⁴

An inverse and symmetrical assertion applies to the second extension, “quantitative” diplomatics, which aligns itself with developments in economic and social history. This postulates that the methods of diplomatics, initially founded on sovereign acts of an historical époque, are universally applicable, not only to the ensemble of acts (in German *Urkunden*), but also to all the larger documentation within archives (in German *Akten*). Documents of domanial administration and judicial registers, tax rolls and surveys, accounts, and even old archival inventories could be analyzed in the same way as the *brevets* of the king of France or the bishops’ *pancartae*. Diplomatics has renewed itself along with *archivistique*. The process is no less full of promise. One can aspire to discern, with more rigor, the birth and modalities of diffusion of new documentary types (new means of facilitating power and recording memories), and to also discern the adaptations brought into a new region or milieu. There have been successes along these lines regarding domanial administrative records, rentals, and manorial records,¹⁵ and even more recently, with *catasti*.¹⁶ An immense area of study awaits those who are interested in *comptabilités*, an overpowering type of document which came to maturation in France in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. This type of document is, without a doubt, one of the most important

¹³Two situations have been illuminated respectively by Jean-Loup Delmas, “Introduction à Archives départementales de l’Aveyron” in *Répertoire numérique de la sous-série 3 E* (Rodez, 1981), and by Étienne Hubert, *Espace urbain et habitat à Rome du Xe siècle à la fin du XIIIe siècle* (Rome, 1990) (*Collection de l’Ecole française de Rome*, 135).

¹⁴This is a question which can be read, in the ambience of “Kulturkamp,” as a question of imitation by the pontifical act of the imperial Ottonian act, and, today, as that of a radiation of very pontifical formulas over a number of non-Roman creators of text. This question constituted the ambitious program of the colloquium of the Commission internationale de diplomatique, held in Heidelberg in September 1996.

¹⁵See the thesis of Gabriel Fournier, *Essai sur les origines du terrier en Basse-Auvergne* (thèse) [complémentaire de lettres] (Paris, 1962); and the brief but penetrating synthesis of Robert Fossier, *Polyptyques et censiers* (Turnhout, 1978) (*Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental*, 28).

¹⁶Archives départementales du Tarn, *Compoix et cadastres du Tarn (XIVe – XIXe siècle)* (Albi, 1992).

and newest challenges in understanding the progress of "administration," of power, and of the power of the written word. But in this area, studies remain partial and few.

The "qualitative" and "quantitative" extensions of diplomatics suggest that there has been no great effort to determine where diplomatics leaves off and historical research begins in the analysis of the written word. They also suggest that the debate over what constitutes an "auxiliary science" is being passed over. This should certainly not dissuade scholars from reflecting on the status and ambitions of diplomatics.¹⁷ Because, after all, at precisely the moment when new forms of writing and historical reflections were being born, the very foundation of diplomatics of Mabillon was already waning in some of the principles of its defined methods.

To dream of an extension in space and time for the further development of diplomatics is not the least seductive of its considerations. This endeavor ought to distinguish what is and what is no longer exportable, taking into consideration the place of the written word in a given society. Therein rests, without a doubt, the secret of the brilliant breakthroughs of *archivistique* and diplomatics, at newer junctures, in the studies of antiquity, in both the Near East and the "classical" understanding of antiquity;¹⁸ and also in the older but no less successful introduction, with arms and baggage, of medieval French diplomatics into a Japanese domain.¹⁹ These societies produce, in effect, a documentation which is voluminous enough to authorize comparisons and serializations, and rare enough so that each document possesses a potential for multiple dimensions of information.

Applied to other eras, diplomatics ought to reformulate its line of inquiry. In its practice, it delivers, incontestably, a well-tested methodology which has established a corpus of formulas, and revealed habits and models which have conditioned the production of documentation. But if diplomatics seeks to make "monuments" of history out of these documents, then it will not be able to deliver solutions that are complete. Assuredly, the relative role of its various branches will find itself being modified. The study of the parts of the text and intent of the document risks a mere attention to nomenclature, leaning on a critique of a hypothetical falsification; the history of signs of validation, which is undoubtedly useful, would be more that of the validation than of the sign; as for the study of genesis, historians have long taken this upon themselves in their studies of administrative and political history. But the revolutionary calendar has just been masterfully studied, as a system which is revealed by acts and archival documents;²⁰ perhaps the study of language and style are holding, in reserve, several surprises;²¹ the research pattern of inquiry for the study of tradition has begun with this formidable question: "Where is the original?" This calls for responses and not only in the practice of editions. The reach

¹⁷See Peter Rück, ed., *Mabillons Spur* (Marburg-an-der-Lahn, 1992).

¹⁸For the side of *archivistique*, see Elio Lodolini, "Gli archivi di tavolette di argilla nell'antico Vicino Oriente (3200 a.C.–50 d.C.)" in *Rassegna degli Archivi di Stato*, XXXVI-3 (September–December 1976), 707–43 and six illustrations (as a consideration of *archivistique* by archeologists); *La mémoire perdue: à la recherche des archives oubliées, publiques et privées, de la Rome antique*, under the direction of Claude Nicolet (Paris, 1994) (*Histoire ancienne et moderne*, 30) (questions posed by the historian about the history of archives). For the diplomatics side, a good illustration is in the works of Dominique Charpin, *Archives familiales et propriété privée en Babylonie ancienne, étude sur les documents de 'Tell Sifr'* (Geneva-Paris, 1980) (*Hautes études orientales*, 12).

¹⁹Frédéric Jouon des Longrais, *Âge de Kamakura, sources (1150-1330): archives, chartes japonais (Monjo)* (Paris, Tokyo, 1950).

²⁰M. Meinzer, *Der französische Revolutionskalender (1792–1805): Planung, Durchführung und Scheitern einer politischen Zeitrechnung* (Munich, 1992) (*Ancien Régime, Aufklärung und Revolution*, 20).

²¹Gérard Cornu, *Linguistique juridique* (Paris, 1990) (*Domat, Droit privé*).

would go beyond the latest developments of medieval diplomatics, in the study of the written word, in the conditions of the production of documents, and in the mixture of tradition and innovation which characterize it. These developments open the way to renewed curiosities, taking into account all of the phenomena which are tied to the diversification of communications and their media.²²

²²Bruno Delmas, "Révolution industrielle et mutation administrative: l'innovation dans l'administration française au XIXe siècle," *Histoire, économie et société*, 4e année, no. 2 (2e trimestre 1985), 205-31.

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