Courts and rulers in pre-modern times, when reliable means of personal identification hardly existed, could not always verify whether a visitor from abroad claiming to be the envoy of a foreign sovereign was a genuine envoy or a swindler. Similarly, it was not always easy to determine if such a visitor – or for that matter one’s own returning ambassador – had loyally followed instructions or if he had overstepped the limits of his authority. Here I should like to examine three early modern envoys involved in the dangerous business of maintaining contact between Western Europe and Persia with the aim (or perhaps one should say, in the hope) of establishing a military alliance against the Ottoman Empire. The secrecy required by their missions, coupled with some of their personality traits and the practical problems posed by long-distance travel, made it particularly difficult for some courts at the time (and for certain modern scholars) to determine if and to what extent these men actually were who they claimed to be and did what they were supposed to do. A related issue is that of credibility, that is, the factors which led a ruler and his court to consider a certain person suitable and reliable enough to be sent on a mission or to be acknowledged as a foreign envoy and seriously listened to.

Ludovico da Bologna

The biographies of the three envoys discussed below typify most (if not all) of the problems involved. The first is the Italian Franciscan, Ludovico da Bologna (fl. 1454–1479), well known to historians of the period. Ludovico aroused suspicion at a very early stage of his diplomatic career, that is, during his journey through Europe in 1460–1461 in the company of an ever-increasing number of ‘Oriental ambassadors’, namely, two
Georgian envoys who arrived with him in Vienna from the ‘East’ in October 1460; the Emperor of Trebizond’s envoy, Michele Alighieri, who joined Ludovico a few weeks later in Italy; ambassadors of Uzun Hasan and of a Muslim lord from Cilicia, who also became part of the delegation in Italy shortly after Alighieri; and finally a delegate of none other than Prester John, who did not fail to amaze the contemporary public and to evoke the scepticism of modern scholars. Interestingly, this proliferation of ambassadors has created more problems for modern scholars than it did for Ludovico’s contemporaries (in particular, an often-cited article by Anthony Bryer has done considerable damage by persuading historians to regard Ludovico in a very unfavourable light). Some degree of scepticism clearly existed in Rome when Ludovico returned there in 1461 after ‘touring’ Italy, France and Burgundy but we have no precise information about the reasons behind those doubts.

Indeed, while Ludovico was away together with his ‘Oriental envoys’, rumours began to spread at the Papal court: the Pope was informed that Ludovico was a ‘liar’ and that the ambassadors were carrying false credentials and were simply in pursuit of money. The behaviour of Ludovico, who had introduced himself in France as the Patriarch of Antioch against the Pope’s explicit instructions and had granted dispensations while crossing Hungary and Germany, reinforced these suspicions. Certainly, Ludovico seems to have had problems in following orders: the most blatant (or at least the best-known) episode of insubordination is his illegal consecration in Venice as Patriarch of Antioch (1461), but also noteworthy are his first two journeys, allegedly to India and Ethiopia, during which he almost certainly travelled to Georgia and perhaps to Persia instead. He could also be a difficult partner to work with for fellow ambassadors: in 1474 he may have sabotaged (although modern scholars are not in agreement about this) the mission to the Levant of the Burgundian envoy, Anselme Adournes, in 1475 he suddenly parted company with Ambrogio Contarini, the Venetian ambassador to the ruler of Persia, Uzun Hasan Āq Qoyunlu (r. 1453–1478), and on the same occasion he may have devised a way to force the latter’s envoy to return to his master. Dissimulation in Ludovico’s case could be the result of his diplomatic activities, which necessarily required secrecy and exceptions to rules, as for instance the permission to travel in disguise and on horseback, actions not permitted to a Franciscan under normal circumstances. At the same time he seems to have had a certain personal propensity towards secrecy as well, one that may have gone beyond the limits of what his duties required. Occasionally (perhaps more often than we actually know