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## Notes on the Origins and Evolution of the Diplomatic Mission

**D**IPLOMACY HAS A civilizational standing, and agreed practices common to diverse political entities. It flourishes best in conditions of political fragmentation, where there is a measure of autonomy in the conduct of external affairs, and common norms exist. Diplomacy was founded out of necessity and based on common sense and reciprocity. Watson is right to comment that “We should be impressed by what seems permanent in diplomacy.”<sup>1</sup> We find rough similarities in the evolution of diplomacy, namely, the despatch of emissaries of high social standing, provision of immunity to envoys, and the ornamentation of practice with rituals and ceremonies.

Prehistorical diplomacy, sometimes referred to as the anthropological stage in the evolution of diplomacy, is shrouded by speculation, but is also characterized by prodigious optimism. This assumed “state of nature” points to a measure of rational calculation and a desire to cooperate with others. The reverse may, indeed, also be inferred. The decline of diplomacy is an indication of human failure, if not of a civilizational crisis.

In the midst of historical turmoil, or a golden age, the principal actor of diplomacy—the ambassador, envoy, or herald—endures. Their existential predicament never changes as they constantly remain dependent on the ruling class. For a very long time preoccupation with diplomacy required courage, a quality not naturally associated with diplomats. Diplomats were confronted by hazards on various fronts—the whims and vagaries of their sovereigns, the risks encountered during their travels, and the vicissitudes awaiting them in foreign countries. The safety of

diplomats, despite all their immunity and privileges, was precarious at best. This continues to be the case.

Diplomacy was neither a feature of all human civilizations nor a pre-conceived idea. Although, we have no conclusive evidence about the origins of ancient diplomacy, the circumstances of its beginnings were quite harsh. The relations between alien tribes, usually accompanied by rituals and taboos, reveal a recurrent design, that of sending emissaries in periods of war and peace. Diplomatic practices evolved out of necessity, sanctioned by custom and religion and fortified by reciprocity.<sup>2</sup> Magic and religious sanctity augmented the belief that heralds possessed a supernatural power that it would be fatal to violate.<sup>3</sup> It was found both practical and necessary to have emissaries whose lives had to be protected.

Throughout history emissaries were men of high social standing, a fact that facilitated their task of mediation, but did not protect them from the hardships of their occupation. From the very beginning, certain human qualities were associated with the diplomatic character—caution, fair judgment, politeness in facing the more powerful, and the ability to handle delicate social and political situations. In these imagined diplomatic encounters of the past, diplomatic envoys were quite limited in their capacity to influence the basic circumstances of their mission, and they must have relied on a strong feeling of self-identity as well as on an intuitive understanding of the other side.

The immunity that allowed diplomatic missions to be accomplished originated in a universal bond, that of a religious sanction. But the safety of the diplomat, even given the existence of this sanction, could be violated. Diplomats were vulnerable to punishment, imprisonment, or even execution. They were also considered to be strangers who had to undergo ritual purification before being permitted to perform their mission.<sup>4</sup>

The controversy about the origin of diplomacy reached a culminating point with the introduction of the diplomatic tradition of the Ancient Near East. Whether the Amarna and Mari archives constitute evidence of a well-developed diplomatic practice preceded by many centuries, but also leading to the classical period of Greece and Rome, is of less importance for understanding the role of diplomatic practitioners. It seems that they carried out a similar repertoire of actions. Diplomacy, however, throughout all ages and regions, is still assessed, measured, and evaluated by Western standards. This, of course, does not negate the achievements of the ancient Near Eastern kingdoms. Diplomacy is not a strictly Western phenomenon. Evidently, wherever civilization blossomed, diplomacy flourished, though European diplomacy was the most developed and the most influential.

The problem of dating and interpreting historical events and ancient texts is still a formidable one, and the evaluation of the diplomacy of the ancient Near Eastern ranges from one that was sophisticated and efficient to one that was rudimentary and crude.<sup>5</sup> What we know about the diplomats of the ancient Near East is based on about 50 documents (out of 350) dating from the mid-fourteenth century B.C., found at Tel Al-Amarna, Egypt, in 1887. The later discovery of the Royal archive of Mari dating from the first half of the eighteenth century B.C., testifies to the continuity of the same diplomatic tradition.<sup>6</sup> Correspondents with Egypt in the Amarna letters are Mittani, Hatti, Assyria, and Babylonia. The letters were written on clay tablets in cuneiform script. The language of most of the letters is Akkadian, the presumed *lingua franca* of that period.

A diplomatic envoy of the Mari and the Amarna periods may have been well qualified, and was usually of a high standing in court. He had, first and foremost, to survive the battle of gladiators in conditions of uncertainty and risk. There is no conclusive evidence to indicate that messengers carried a formal document recognized by all parties to safeguard their journey to the country of their mission. Ambassadorial activity was hazardous, and escort troops were frequently needed against attack. Envoys traveled together as a group; their companions could have been soldiers or fellow messengers. Envoys did not escape imprisonment, and the possibility of being kidnapped or even assassinated. Even if the custom of hospitality existed, not every kingdom was in full control of its territory.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between allied rulers was perceived as one of kinship, fraternity, or subordination, which could affect the attitude toward envoys. Courtesy and respect were reflected in the envoy's reception, escort, and timely dismissal. Permission to leave was at the discretion of the host king, a privilege that allowed for the possibility of exerting pressure on or intimidating the envoy.<sup>8</sup>

It is not clear to what extent envoys were free to fulfill their tasks. They could be invited to important state functions, but envoys of hostile kingdoms could also be kept outside the city gates. In the case of allied powers, envoys were put up in a designated residence, and the host king provided for their daily needs. The envoy's functions may look familiar to us—to report on political conditions, gather information on military affairs, and arrange for the exchange of gifts and royal visits.<sup>9</sup>

There is no evidence for a permanent residence in the ancient Near East. Even when envoys stayed for a long period of time, their appointment was for a specific purpose, conveying strictly the message of their sovereign. Nonetheless, there is evidence of instances, including the

important case of a delegation to Hammurabi, the Babylonian king, where it was left to the discretion of the envoys to work out the details of a possible agreement. In the absence of valid norms, however, the rise and fall of the diplomacy of the ancient Near East rested on the exact interpretation of reciprocal acts and impressions understood only by their ad-hoc terms.



The diplomatic traditions of the two ancient empires of India and China, which were in a regular contact with other civilizations, are presented almost as a digression in the history of diplomacy. The diplomacy of India flourished in the fourth century B.C. Kautilya, counselor to King Chandragupta, was almost a contemporary of Aristotle, and it would seem that his notorious *Arthashastra* was composed following Alexander's invasion of India.<sup>10</sup> Diplomacy is presented as the inherent art of government, where crafty diplomats labored in contentious fronts among sixteen nations (Mahajanapadas). Envoys, usually appointed for ad-hoc missions, could have full power to negotiate. The rank of an ambassador (*duta*) was given to a select few, and those who were closest to the king.<sup>11</sup> The stratagems of Indian diplomacy were judged by the results they produced, where the best guarantee for a treaty was the king's good faith.

Indian envoys appear to have been accorded the broadest repertoire possible. It could have ranged from the clandestine and treacherous, to the *dharma*, the moral code of righteousness and duty.<sup>12</sup> Indian diplomacy tended toward realpolitik. Beyond maintaining alliances, gathering information, and transmitting the views of kings, envoys were required to threaten, appease, or exert pressure, sow dissention, incite a revolt against a warring king, and be a divisive force in court.

Indian emissaries were instructed to prepare themselves, mentally and physically, for their mission, and reflect on their likely diplomatic presentation and maneuvers. An envoy has to be precise in the delivery of his message, regardless of the reaction to its content. He was immune, in principle, as he was merely repeating the words of his master, but he had to be on his guard against various dangers and be prepared to escape. Indeed, he was required to be permanently cautious, avoid women and drink, and sleep alone. Being subject to clandestine practices and the violation of the law, the envoy's precarious situation was inherent in Indian diplomacy.

Chinese ancient diplomacy was a secluded and self-creating domain. The Empire was regarded as the center of the world, the rest being left to the Barbarian quarters. It was an ethnocentric dichotomy that has impeded the integration of China into international politics.

Chinese diplomacy flourished when the country was not unified, between the eighth and the third centuries B.C.<sup>13</sup> The Chinese emissary had to accommodate himself into a tight and ritualistic world, full of violence and mistrust, where his safety was precarious and his obedience to the emperor was absolute. It seems also, that his social status was quite low. The plight of a foreign envoy was even worse. Barbarians were ranked as no more than unequal vassals, and had to go through the humiliating Kowtow ceremony.

Despite imperial whims and restriction, Chinese envoys played an essential role as emissaries between warring Chinese states, conveying their masters' orders, but doing so on a temporary basis and with no permanent residency.



Ancient Greece was the battleground of internal stasis and rivalry for hegemony. However, the Greeks shared a common culture that allowed diplomacy to be conducted among equals, albeit with a manifest ethnocentric identity. Greek diplomacy was conducted publicly, and internal dissensions and inflammatory rhetoric were an integral part of its repertoire, while alliances and external commitments were not always abiding. Pan-Hellenic institutions and religious festivities played a restrictive role, and constituted a forum for consultation.<sup>14</sup> By most accounts, Greek diplomacy is not considered to be highly developed, particularly, in the formal aspects of the diplomatic practice. The institution of the *proxenia* should be evaluated differently. The *proxenos* may be regarded as playing one of the most innovative roles in the evolution of diplomacy.

Diplomatic emissaries in ancient Greece are denoted by a variety of terms—*kerykes* (heralds), *presbeis* (envoys), and *angeloi* (messengers). None of the three ranks was concerned only with diplomacy.<sup>15</sup> The *kerykes*, the designated descendents of the wily and mischievous Hermes, were the most established in Greek tradition and their status was sanctified by religious ceremonies. The *kerykes* were the closest to having a diplomatic immunity, but there is evidence that Greek envoys were arrested, and in rare cases, even murdered.

*Kerykes* were men of high standing chosen also for their eloquence and force of persuasion, which was essential. The presentation of a case before a city-state assembly is magnificently described by Thucydides, who placed the Greek emissary between the Scylla of the assembly's temperament and the Charybdis of his own rhetorical skills.<sup>16</sup>

Greek embassies usually consisted of between three and ten members, and were of short duration. Traditionally they were hosted by their *proxenos* or stayed at an inn. The mission of envoys was closely scrutinized

by the *polis* authority, particularly in the case of Athens, and usually had simple instructions. They presented and concluded what had been already decided on by assemblies and councils. Thus, envoys were left with little flexibility in their deliberations, and were either rewarded modestly for their diplomatic achievement or penalized in the case of a failure. They were also obliged to submit an expense account. Nonetheless, public distinction was reward enough, and a valued prize for those who were also politicians. Diplomatic missions were very politicized, and could result in fierce disputes. A notable case was the Athenian embassy to the Macedonian court, which included Demosthenes and his rival Aeschines.<sup>17</sup>

The institution of *proxenia* was a Hellenistic invention made possible by the cultural affinity among the Greeks. The role of the *proxenos*, the representative of a different *polis* than his native one, was extremely complicated. The *proxenia* was an appointment reserved for leading political figures, but it could be obtained as a family inheritance, thus making it a diplomatic role with a certain permanency.<sup>18</sup>

With no official standing in his *polis*, and serving as a host to foreign envoys, the loyalty of the *proxenos* became questionable. Particularly in turbulent times, which involved fierce factional struggles, the *proxenos* was vulnerable to attacks or suspected of being a potential fifth columnist.<sup>19</sup> This delicate position required the *proxenos* to possess extraordinary diplomatic and oratorical skills. This was, indeed, the case with the *proxenoi* of fame—the Athenians Demosthenes, Nicias, and Alcibiades, and the Thebean poet Pindar. The *proxenia* brought mixed blessings; it involved fame and influence, but it was incriminatory and bore no direct financial rewards.



Historians of diplomacy tend to underestimate the achievements of Roman diplomacy. Nicolson claims that the Romans failed owing to their “political masterfulness,” and Campbell refers to an “unstructured and unsystematic” conduct of diplomacy.<sup>20</sup> It is true that Roman diplomacy was that of the hegemon. But it was also based on Roman dignity and good faith (*Fides Romana*), and a belief in the legal sanctity of contracts. Military dominance was balanced by senatorial political subtlety, and occasionally by the diplomatic pragmatism of proconsuls in the provinces.

The Roman legal tradition laid the foundation for well-defined and applicable international concepts and ideas. The *ius gentium* and the *ius naturalis* were of immense influence on Western political thought, particularly on the laws of war and peace and the universality of international

laws. The rules of *pacta servanda sunt*, *amicitia*, *foedus*, and *societas* are still with us.

Roman diplomacy during the era of the Republic was conducted by *legates*, observed formally by the *fetiales* and controlled by the Senate. The *fetiales*, a priestly college, presided over diplomatic rituals and ceremonies, kept diplomatic records and interpreted them if needed. The *fetiales* had lost the importance bestowed on them in the early days of the Republic, though they sometimes accompanied *legates*, as was the case with Scipio's delegation to Carthage.<sup>21</sup> Roman *legates* (also *nuntii* or *orators*) were appointed by the Senate from among the patricians, who were supposed to act in accordance with Roman virtues. Acting on an ad hoc basis, *legates* had relative *auctoritas* for diplomatic initiative, however, on returning they reported to the Senate, the ultimate authority in foreign affairs.

In principle, Rome preserved the immunity of diplomatic envoys, but the universality of this practice is questionable. Roman delegations were escorted by a substantial force, particularly in times of war.<sup>22</sup> The *ius gentium* provided qualified immunity for foreign envoys, but they had to go through a humiliating reception until they were heard by the Senate.<sup>23</sup> When envoys were viewed unfavorably, they were relegated to the status of *speculatores* (spies) and escorted from Rome under armed guard.



Medieval Byzantium was the discontinuous replica of Western Europe. Erected, presumably, on similar pillars—Roman tradition, classical culture and Christianity—it faced an utterly different historical fate. For all its splendor and intricacies, and the outstanding ability of its diplomats to bridge the gap between appearances and reality, Byzantium survived precariously for over a millennium (ca. 330–1453). Byzantium was a Christian realm surrounded by many enemies with different beliefs and substantial military power—Persians, Huns, Arabs, Goths, Bulgars, Hungarians, Pechanges, and eventually Turks, who destroyed the Empire. The Byzantine *Oikoumene*, whose imagined borders included the entire civilized world and whose inhabitants professed Orthodox Christianity, inherited the insecurities of the *Limes Romanus*. In reality, its influence extended to the eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, Russia, and Italy, and ultimately exerted enduring influence by merging the diplomatic traditions of West and East that were adopted by the city-states of Italy.<sup>24</sup>

Facing enemies on two fronts and aware of the limited resources of the Empire, Byzantine diplomacy was imaginative and defensive, but not passive. It acquired a justifiable reputation for treachery and deception,

but Byzantine diplomats were masters of their craft. Byzantine diplomatic protocol displayed the supremacy of the Empire, manipulating the dual images of Constantinople as the Second Rome, and the notion that the Emperor was the divinely appointed father of all men. Byzantine diplomats adhered to the strategy of the indirect approach, incorporating delays with avoidance of the unnecessary resort to force. To that end, they employed elaborate methods of gathering information, which was supplied to embassies, and enabled a flexible and prompt response to new developments. In addition, the Byzantine system of bribery bought allegiance and submission by granting honorific titles, and making calculated and timely marriages.<sup>25</sup>

Byzantium was, perhaps, the first to institutionalize the training of diplomatic envoys. The Emperor directed the Empire's diplomacy with the assistance of a relatively small number of officials. Byzantine diplomats, recruited and carefully trained, employed their diplomatic functions to the full in order to propagate the grandeur and invincibility of the Empire. They were instructed to gather information, report on the strength and weakness of tribes and Barbarian courts, negotiate, but also to honor local customs and manners. In this case, linguistic competence was of the utmost importance. The conduct of diplomacy was assumed to be coordinated with the various fiscal, ecclesiastical and military agencies.<sup>26</sup>

Byzantine diplomacy reached its apex of rituals and ceremonies in an attempt to solidify the Emperor's projection of wealth, strength, and benevolent virtues. Byzantium inherited the Roman tradition in its attitude to foreign envoys. They were accommodated in a special residence, and kept under constant surveillance that amounted to virtual captivity. Envoys were escorted by a special staff of *scrinium Barbarorum* (the office of the Barbarians), which was directed by the *logothete* who was also responsible for the supervision of the imperial diplomatic envoys.<sup>27</sup>



Historians of the Middle Ages agree that at that time diplomacy was in decline and notoriously inconsistent, and that without Venice the continuity of diplomacy would have been disrupted.<sup>28</sup> Notwithstanding this criticism, certain considerations should be taken into account. European society had to adapt itself to harsh material circumstances, and to appalling means of communication. Latin Christendom regarded itself to be one *Respublica Christiana*, but the complicated feudal system allowed principals, provinces, cities, and the Church, but also noblemen and *condottieri*, to send out emissaries and take part in a diversified network of diplomacy. Obviously, diplomatic practice was not clear cut. As



a matter of fact, there was no defined *droit d'ambassade* until the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>29</sup>

During the Middle Ages envoys struggled with the perilous environment, being a target for robbery, and the abuse of their privileges. Resistance to undertaking diplomatic mission is understandable, because of the sacrifice in time and money and the hazards of travel. A considerable lapse of time occurred between the decision to send an envoy and his departure, largely owing to such circumstances.<sup>30</sup> Princes and noblemen became the main protectors of their emissaries, providing them with letters of safe conduct and letters of introduction. If necessary, they resorted to the practice of taking hostages during envoys' missions, threatening reprisals to anyone injuring their own emissaries. The Papal *nuntius* was also safeguarded by the *privilegium clericale*, which exempted him from the King's criminal jurisdiction.<sup>31</sup> But diplomats remained vulnerable, and a measure of courage was a prerequisite for undertaking a diplomatic mission.

An envoy was known as a *Legatus*, and sometimes a *nuntius* or *missus*, and was usually chosen from among the nobility or clergymen. By the late Middle Ages a distinction had been made between three diplomatic classes—the *nuntius*, the *procurator*, and the ambassador or orator. According to Bernard de Rosier, the provost of Toulouse, who summed up the ambassadorial practice of the Middle Ages toward the beginning of the fifteenth century, it is apparent that the term *ambassador* was in use in Italy as early as in the thirteenth century.<sup>32</sup> The revival of Roman law brought back the term *procurator*, a legal representative with *ad hoc plena potestas* to negotiate. It was a role that was not completely defined, and allowed room for maneuvering, though it carried the risk that any failure would be attributed to the *procurator* personally.<sup>33</sup> The rising conception of personal representation, where the diplomat personified his sovereign, opened the door for precedence quarrels that were to haunt European diplomacy until the end of the eighteenth century.

By the mid-fourteenth century a distinction between *ambaxador* and regular envoys had been introduced in Venice. The Papacy called envoys who were not cardinals *legates*, or *nuntius*, as is the case to this day.<sup>34</sup> Diplomacy flourished under the authority of the Church already in the eleventh century. The clergy constituted an abundant source of expert diplomatic emissaries for the Papacy, and were in the service of all the other principals.



Under the influence of Byzantium, the Republic of Venice had an extensive impact on the diplomatic patterns adopted by the city-states of Italy,

and the rest of Europe. The Venetian *Relazioni* preserved for posterity the history of a unique and refined diplomatic system. The Venetian practice of registering all diplomatic transactions is quite exemplary; not only regular diplomatic dispatches were recorded, but also a full account of Venetian missions (883–1797) and the deliberations of the political body concerning their envoys.<sup>35</sup>

Venice exemplifies a notorious case of a tightly controlled diplomatic system, with all its benefits and disadvantages. Indeed, a considerable part of Venetian legislation was concerned with ambassadors, and the attempt to limit the expenses of diplomatic missions. Nonetheless, Venetian diplomacy was impressive in many ways, and its practitioners were admired for their high standards and their devotion to the Republic.<sup>36</sup>

The diplomatic service of Venice, as appropriate to a society immersed in the life of commerce, developed an admirable talent for collecting information based on well-situated posts across the Mediterranean and the Levant. According to Ermolao Barbaro in the *De Officio Legati*, the Venetian diplomats served their city-state, “to advise and think whatever may best serve the preservation and aggrandizement” of Venice.<sup>37</sup> Diplomatic missions were entrusted to officers who were selected with the utmost care, usually from among educated and talented noblemen. During his mission, a Venetian envoy was governed by rigorous measures. He was denied the company of his wife, was instructed not to share his opinion beyond governmental circles, and denied the privilege of receiving gifts from a foreign sovereign. Under this austere style of life, with its modest financial reward against heavy expenses, Venetian citizens were reluctant to be diplomats. The difficulty of filling ambassadorial offices became a serious impediment that necessitated the imposition of penalties on noblemen who declined to serve as ambassadors.<sup>38</sup>

Venetian ambassadors labored under the strict and careful instruction of the state. They were also advised by the dispatches of other diplomatic envoys, and by newsletters (*Avvisi*) that kept them in touch with Venetian affairs. Their first task on returning was to provide a comprehensive account of their mission, which was submitted to the College of the *Signory* and the Senate.



The resident embassy, the master institution of diplomacy, in the words of Martin Wight, was by all accounts a Western innovation.<sup>39</sup> From the late Renaissance the diplomatic mission flourished under European hegemony. The main stages in this development were the disintegration of Medieval Christendom, the rise of the sovereign state, and the beginning of European international society.

Residential embassies emerged among the Italian city-states between the Peace of Lodi (1454) and the end of the fifteenth century, and hence the practice was adopted by states north of Italy. There is no agreement as to the exact date of the first permanent embassy, but this is, perhaps, an obsession with origins. Nicodemo da Pontremoli, the resident ambassador of Milan at Florence for seventeen years (1450–1467), is frequently considered to have been the first resident ambassador. Although it is evident that envoys under Francesco Sforza, the Duke of Milan, were active in this period, resident embassies may have begun earlier. But Mattingly writes that as a result of the length and the distinction of his mission, Nicodemo deserves to be remembered as the first resident ambassador.<sup>40</sup>

The beginning of resident embassies was a defining moment in the history of diplomacy. Diplomatic practice acquired new possibilities and the ambassadorial horizon was dramatically expanded. The ambassador was now in the best position to gather information, represent his sovereign, and study the intentions of other countries. The refinement of the diplomatic mission resulted in a significant increase in the ambassadorial workload. The beginning of residence also ushered in an obsession with secrecy and the fear of spying. The moral duty of the ambassador and his loyalty acquired new significance.<sup>41</sup>

In the two centuries between the Peace of Lodi and the Peace of Westphalia, the ways and means of diplomacy gradually changed. Collective embassies, with ambassadors of equal ranks, and “circular” ones, ceased to exist. Taking oaths to observe a treaty, or taking hostages to guarantee its observance, gradually disappeared. After surviving the religious wars of the seventeenth century, diplomacy became hierarchical and more secretive. It was France under the Bourbons that emerged with the largest number of expert ambassadors, with French becoming the *lingua franca* of diplomacy. Matters of precedence and prestige marred relations among the European sovereigns, and only in 1815 was the diplomatic hierarchy established with the Vienna Règlement. But the aristocratic composition of diplomacy lasted until the First World War.<sup>42</sup>