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[Preface to] The Origins of Roman Christian Diplomacy: Constantius II and John Chrysostom as Innovators

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Preface

A diverse but vivid audience engaged my imagination as I composed this book: colleagues in other fields like anthropology, linguistics, mathematics, modern history, political science, and so on; the many intelligent people that I chat with at auto repair waiting rooms, coffee shops, tailgates, funerals, and wedding receptions; book clubs and church/mosque/synagogue groups; my administrators; confident left and right wing editorialists; and family members. In the United States we live in an odd but not unwelcome cultural moment where the (tenured) professor, a relatively well-paid member of society who spends time writing on “academic” topics, anxiously ponders: one, the desire to reach past the dozen readers in a well-defined field; and two, the necessity of public outreach for survival of that field. Accordingly, I have made a concerted effort not only to make recondite material accessible but also to make it attractive to my curious and educated fellow humans. Not that I pretend to have successfully solved the problem often called, somewhat superciliously, “responsible popularizing” in the contemporary academy, but rather, I am defending what some will condemn as the breezy style of the learned essayists of the Anglo-American tradition.

This essayist strategy forces me to turn to my specialist colleagues and deliver a brief defense. I am aware from decades of reading academic referee reports that you are passionate about defending the dignity of your field, the virtues of recent scientific progress, and the careers of those who excel therein. I understand and welcome your dissatisfaction at having an outsider skim the cream, often sloppily, from your vat to make a crowd-pleasing cheese, one that leaves a cloying aftertaste in your mouth. I can only hope that someone from each subfield will pay this book the compliment of attacking the many distortions and lacunae required for the accessible, synthetic style of this book. I am speaking of African studies, Byzantine studies, ethnic studies, frontier studies, Gothic studies, historiography (Ammianus, cultural historians, diplomatic historians, ecclesiastical historians, intellectual historians), Iranian studies, patristics, Syriac studies, theology, and each area’s subfields in archaeology, epigraphy, history, numismatics, and philology. I made an effort to read as widely as possible in your fields in the hope that this synthetic book might bring more attention to your work, work that I believe passionately deserves a much broader audience. And I took on the voice of an expert lecturer, not to pretend to lofty expertise, but rather, to avoid the tedium of a relentlessly

cautious academese – “it is perhaps plausible to guess . . . ,” “apparently . . . ,” “perhaps one could conjecture . . . ,” and so on.

I have indulged in discussions of method throughout the book. Once again, the practitioners of many well-developed fields of modern academic theory will be dismayed by the “reductionist” approach I take. My defense here is twofold: one, my graduate education occurred in the 1980s amid enormous enthusiasm for, and formal attention to, theoretical musings on method, in which I participated fervently; and two, this book’s analyses were self-consciously constructed to heed theoretical teachings while retaining accessible language and brevity. Let me try to explain this with an example.

The productive recent focus on embodiment in the study of antiquity, among many others, nourished this book. Though most of this work has been directed toward illumination of gender and toward a healthy antidote to the somewhat hidden but surprisingly prevalent ingredient of mind-body or spirit-body duality in human tradition,¹ I made the effort to apply this theoretical approach to ancient history. Many students of antiquity will spend a satisfying 10 minutes at a conference discussing the challenges of traveling from Austin, Texas, to Berkeley, California. Not many things bring more awareness to the body than bloodshot eyes, cricked necks, aching lumbar regions, cramped knees, and throbbing feet. In this book I frequently tried to extend the reader’s attention from lofty thoughts of Roman diplomatic theory to the challenges of traveling from Antioch to Ethiopia – that is, to the corporeal demands of thirst, hunger, and heat as well as the tangible requirements of shelter and transport. This focus on the physical extends to frequent considerations of material remains and all their ramifications for how embodied life was lived, especially on the eastern fringes of the Roman world. One reader’s low tolerance for perceived tediousness will with any luck be balanced by another reader’s appreciation for understanding the embodied world of late Roman diplomacy.

With this apology humbly delivered, I turn to the content of the topic at hand. The study of Roman diplomacy begins from the truism that the high Roman Empire communicated with its neighbors through military threat and violence, until the 3rd century CE brought Rome its first military equals, Goths and Sasanids, and the 4th century introduced disasters like the Gothic victory at Adrianople and frequent defeats due to superior Hunnic cavalry. Realizing that military might could be used more effectively in a framework of diplomacy, the Romans gradually developed a diplomatic machine that reached its tangible climax with the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII’s published works, the *De administrando imperio* and *De caeremoniis*, describing the elaborate workings of a mature, professional state diplomacy. From these 10th-century classics, through early-modern treatises,² to the present,³ the practical necessity of diplomatic training based on past experience has kept the topic front and center. Though I could enter into a complex discussion of how the above wide array of modern academic fields has stunted a discussion of the role of Christianity in the development of Western diplomacy, I would rather let the inherent interest of the topic speak for itself.

Finally, I would like to publicly thank the many people who have knowingly or unknowingly supported this work. I can sincerely and emphatically say that none of these people should share in any of the criticisms or blame for failings that inevitably will follow publication. I have enjoyed the support of my colleagues on the University of Richmond Faculty Research Committee, the Gloria Wills foundation, the library at Dumbarton Oaks, and the amazing University of Richmond Interlibrary Loan Department. My students, both at the University of Richmond and at the Ukrainian Catholic University, have been a constant inspiration and stimulus to me over the years. Thanks need to go to *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* for allowing me to reuse significant parts of my article published there in Chapter 3.⁴ Innumerable colleagues were involved in conversations, criticisms, and suggestions in the writing of this book, but I reserve the place of honor for one central figure. As a professional classicist, I came to the late antique world on my own 25 years ago and suffered all the misfortunes that an academic orphan deserves. But through it all, Susan Harvey has believed in me, supported me, and pushed me onward. I owe a special debt of gratitude also to my editor, Michael Greenwood, who likewise stuck with me through delays caused by my often turbulent life. Last of all, but most important, I have been blessed with more supportive families than any single person could deserve: to the Harts, the Kims, and the Stevensons, no less the peculiar families of my fishing companions and classics department colleagues, you all have my deepest gratitude and love.

Notes

- 1 My perception is that the opposition of intellectual/spiritual to body does not originate with Plato and only infest the West. Readers familiar with the Buddhist, Hindu, Manichaeic, and Mazdaic traditions of late antiquity will be aware that the East also participated in this very human tendency. Orientalist instincts may often be at work here, as critiqued in, for instance, E. Slingerland, *Mind and Body in Early China: Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism* (Oxford, 2019).
- 2 Bernard du Rosier, *Ambaxiatorum brevilogus* (1436), Ermolao Barbaro, *De officio legati* (ca. 1500), Etienne Dolet, *De officio legati*, and *De immunitate legatorum* (1541), and Conrad Braun, *De legationibus* (1548).
- 3 A. Becker, 2015, continues to refine the sociological conceptions surrounding Roman changes in diplomacy.
- 4 W. Stevenson, "Exiling Bishops: The Policy of Constantius II," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 68 (2014) 7–27. © 2014 Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Trustees for Harvard University. Originally published in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 68, edited by Margaret Mullett.