CHAPTER 7

Diplomatic Mobility and Persuasion between Rome and the West (I–II AD)¹

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1 Introduction

Part of Augustus’ discourse in the Res Gestae reviews the numerous legatio-nes-embassies he received. Their mention served to mark the borders of the empire and to highlight its vastness.² Yet, from the viewpoint of what could be considered as Rome’s international relations, a new phase was actually set during which the intensity of diplomacy between Rome and the various communities it was related to (as a result of territorial expansion), as well as Rome’s control over her boundaries, considerably decreased. The peak of diplomatic exchange had been reached in the Republican period in the second century BC. It noticeably declined from the first century BC onwards. Within the empire, once the conquest was completed, political communication with Rome was arranged differently. This, at any rate, is the viewpoint of modern historiography which makes a clear distinction between diplomacy, as a tool of external relations between sovereign states on the one hand, and political communication, intended at shaping internal relationships within a state on the other.³ However, from a Roman point of view, at least in terms of wording, the situation did not change much as Romans did not differentiate between diplomacy and political communication: to them it invariably consisted of the dispatch of a legatio, a mission.⁴ This approach, closer to modern considerations

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³ The term ‘political communication’ referring to the internal diplomacy in the Roman empire has been extracted from A. Gillett, Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West 411–533 (Cambridge 2003).
of the transnational nature of external relations whereby the internal and external policy of a state do not differ, should nonetheless be qualified. Such a differentiation did not actually apply within the Roman empire. This might lead us to question the existence of a genuine external policy in Rome and possibly to consider the term ‘policy’ itself quite anachronistic.

Apart from these preliminary considerations of terminology, what is undeniable is that since the war against Pyrrhus, and even more so since the Second Punic War, a new pattern of diplomatic mobility can be detected in the Mediterranean. It is linked to the rise of Rome’s centrality. All those communities wishing to negotiate or ratify their submission to Rome began to send embassies to the city. It generated a constant flow that over time came to alter the capacity to receive within the city itself. The flow was constant and regular from the second century BC onwards. It amplified the previous movement taking place in the theatres of conquest, when the Roman general redirected the embassies sent to him to the central point from which the military campaign was organized—usually his camp. These lesser movements established in the area of conquest were replaced by a larger flow aimed at the city of Rome. Thus Rome organized diplomatic mobility, attracting a large number of embassies in February, the month appointed by the Senate for their reception during the Republic. In all likelihood the official date of February, established already in the lex Gabinia, had an impact on the travelling arrangements of ambassadors, who sometimes had to face a long journey, in order to reach the city in time. Under the empire, the reception procedure was altered since the main objective of the legationes was to be received by the princeps. Dates were therefore altered and concentrated in the summer and autumn. The location of the reception was no longer strictly limited to the city of Rome, but to wherever the princeps happened to be. However, the pattern of diplomatic mobility in imperial times continued to be aimed largely at the city of Rome.

Nevertheless, the mobility of people concerned with political communication and diplomacy did clearly decrease from the late first century BC onwards. Rome sent out hardly any envoys and limited itself to receiving legationes from cities and provinces. G. Souris observed on the basis of attestations in the epigraphic sources that the embassies cluster in the early stages of the Principate,