ROMAN PERSPECTIVES ON GREEK DIPLOMACY

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The conceptual clash: Greek diplomacy of compromise and Roman iustum bellum

The world of diplomacy, ancient or modern, is one that is naturally prone to the problems of culture clash. International diplomacy is the meeting-place of disparate cultures, and not infrequently serves as a sort of unarmed battleground of cultural concepts. Honest misunderstandings lead to sincere mutual bafflement. But diplomacy is also a field of manipulation, of perception, and of posturing. The genuine clash of cultures also provides ample opportunities for choosing to misunderstand: for choosing to regard a remark or action as an insult when no insult was intended, or for choosing to disregard the clearest deliberate affront, all according to the expediency of the moment. Greek and Roman diplomatic conflicts should not be seen as all purely of one type or the other: either genuine misunderstandings or cynical exploitations of cultural differences. Both responses no doubt played a role in the history of the interaction of the two peoples, and it is not always easy or possible to say whether a particular instance of diplomatic friction between Greeks and Romans constituted one or the other (or both at once). One of the most inauspicious diplomatic moments in Hellenistic history was the ill-fated Rhodian attempt to mediate a peaceful solution to the 3rd Macedonian War. So far apart (apparently) were Roman and Rhodian expectations and understandings of the behaviour appropriate to the occasion, and so obscure and contradictory are our sources, that when scholars contemplate the chilling Roman response to the Rhodian offer, they are able to interpret that response either as honest outrage or as a false front, a facade of insulted anger that served as a pretext for punishing Rhodes on other grounds.1

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By the time of the Rhodian debacle in 168, the Greek world had a long history of the diplomacy of compromise and of third party intervention in disputes. There is little need to summarize that history here, as it is a well-documented one, and may be taken for granted. In this context, it suffices simply to draw attention to the centuries of experience the Greeks had with the techniques of arbitration, mediation, and facilitated negotiation. By the Hellenistic period, this experience had culminated in sophisticated methodologies that one would like to think demonstrate a touching faith in the superior efficacy of diplomacy rather than war as a means to settling international conflict. In reality, of course, the Greeks very often failed to live up to their own model, rejecting offers of mediation or refusing to abide by the judgement of an arbitrator.

As for the Romans, on the other hand, while they were not entirely unacquainted with the notion of adjudicated settlement of disputes, it is safe to say that the idea of third party settlement of international conflict was not something they truly had any familiarity with until they encountered it amongst the Greeks. The Romans had their own take on international relations, and their own set of well-developed concepts and Third Party Mediation”, *Historia* (1988), 414–444; S.L. Ager, “Rhodes: the Rise and Fall of a Neutral Diplomat”, *Historia* 40 (1991), 10–41; V. Gabrielsen, “Rhodes and Rome after the Third Macedonian War”, in P. Bilde et al. (eds.), *Centre and Periphery in the Hellenistic World* (Aarhus, 1993), 132–161.

