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Brill's Companion to War in the Ancient Iranian Empires

Edited by

John Hyland
Khodadad Rezakhani



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Cover illustration: Battle between Khusrow Parviz and the rebellious Wahram Chobin, from the *Book of Kings (Shahnameh)* by Ferdowsi. Chester Beatty Library, Per. 270.189.

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available online at <https://catalog.loc.gov>
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024033601>

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 2452-1493

ISBN 978-90-04-70821-1 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-71077-1 (e-book)

DOI 10.1163/9789004710771

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Parthia, Rome, and the Horizons of Ancient Diplomacy

Jake Nabel

The concept of diplomacy as a distinct sphere of social activity is modern, not ancient, and the boundaries of the concept have been drawn in a way that reflects the power arrangements of the current age. According to Ernest Satow's standard handbook, diplomacy is 'the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states'.¹ Though it aimed at universal applicability, this definition was a product of its time. It grew out of, and was tailored to, the Westphalian system of European nation-states that dominated world politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Iver Neumann points out, moreover, Satow's formulation is prescriptive as much as descriptive: it tells the reader what diplomacy *should be*, not simply what it is.² Yet the normative aspect of the definition has been concealed by its widespread adoption among political scientists, the general public, and professional diplomats themselves. Whether in the ministry or on the street, Satow's understanding of diplomacy is the dominant one today.³

Ancient historians should engage with this theory of diplomacy, and they should contribute to recent efforts among political scientists to rethink it. Over the past two decades, scholars of international relations have challenged conventional definitions of diplomacy as Eurocentric, historically contingent, and unable to account for the increasing importance of non-state actors such as transnational firms, non-governmental organisations, international institutions, and diasporic ethnic or religious groups.⁴ Scholars of antiquity,

1 Satow and Roberts (2018) xxix, 3. The phrase has been part of Satow's text since its first edition was published in 1917.

2 Neumann (2012) 1–2.

3 Echoes of Satow in political science literature and practitioner's manuals include Nicolson (1939) 14–16; Morgenthau (1948) 105, 419; Plischke (1973) 332–33; Watson (1982) 1; Hamilton and Langhorne (2010) 1; Berridge (2015) 1–3. The continued prevalence of the view is underlined in Constantinou and Sharp (2016) 16.

4 Jönsson and Hall (2005); Sharp (2009); Pigman (2010) 3–4; Neumann (2012); McConnell et al. (2012); Opondo (2016); Kuus (2018); Balzacq et al. (2020a); Pannier (2020) 25–27. A different but related critique of the conventional definition is Der Derian (1987).

for their part, have increasingly drawn on frameworks from political science to analyse ancient interstate relations, but the theoretical literature on diplomacy remains largely untapped.⁵ Ancient history can play a more prominent role in diplomacy's paradigm shift. Political scientists care about diplomacy's ancient past: they look for ways to overcome the Greco-centrism of available treatments, and they have arguably been more proactive in undertaking cross-cultural comparative histories of ancient diplomacy than have antiquity's siloed specialists.⁶ As the study of diplomacy decouples from its conventional pairing with the nation-state, the political formations of the ancient world – useful precisely because antiquity was *not* an era of nations – can provide alternate models that are good to think with. As Neumann puts it, 'debates about diplomacy's future stand to gain from an awareness of diplomacy's pasts'.⁷

Parthian foreign relations with Rome are fertile ground for a theoretically oriented history of ancient diplomacy, because the subject shows both the utility and the limitations of conventional views of diplomacy as a state-bound form of communication. Some aspects of Parthian-Roman high politics can be fruitfully analysed as diplomacy in Satow's sense, with the caveat that empires and nations are different political formations. Summits, treaties, and the exchange of letters and ambassadors all accord well with conventional definitions. Other modes of interaction, however, do not, and these show the limits of a state-based approach. Into this category fall sub-state relations with Parthian and Roman dependencies; the employment of non-state agents for diplomatic missions; and the cross-border movement of dynasts outside the remit of the reigning king or emperor. The span of the Parthian-Roman relationship from

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- 5 Aissaoui (2020); Mari and Wendt (2022); and Andres (2022) 19–28 are the rare studies to bring diplomatic theory to bear on ancient cases. Other discussions employ political science theory, but do not interrogate the concept of diplomacy. Low (2007) and Hall (2007) offer theoretically informed accounts of interstate politics in Archaic and Classical Greece. Eckstein (2006) (2008) and Overtoom (2020) draw on the neorealism of theorist Kenneth Waltz (1979) in studies of Roman and Parthian imperialism, respectively; Wang (2011) offers a similar perspective on pre- and early modern China. For a critique of the realist tradition in ancient Mediterranean history, see Lendon (2002); Hyland (2018) challenges the 'balancing' paradigm in Greco-Persian relations. Burton (2011) also treats Roman imperialism, but through the theoretical lens of constructivism rather than realism. For the ancient Near East, see Cohen (1996) 246; Cohen and Westbrook (2000); Cohen (2001); Podany (2010).
- 6 Jönsson and Hall (2005) 136–43; Neumann (2012) 20–33; Sofer (2013) 1–8; Balzacq et al. (2020b) 2–6. Raymond Cohen's work has spurred the incorporation of ancient Near Eastern case studies into the political science literature on diplomacy: see above, n. 5.
- 7 Neumann (2012) 4.

the first century BCE to the third CE offers numerous examples of both types of engagement.

The following discussion therefore assesses the role of the state in the conduct of Parthian-Roman high politics, delineating not only its involvement in diplomacy, but also its absence, circumvention, or irrelevance. Narrative political histories of Parthian-Roman interstate affairs can be found elsewhere, and there are numerous treatments of the relative prevalence of war and peace.⁸ But the nature of diplomacy is assumed in those works; here, it is the issue. The projection of state-centric theorisations of diplomacy onto Parthia and Rome can homogenise and elide diverse features of their interaction, confining the reconstruction of foreign affairs to what the modern analyst expects to see.⁹ A fuller accounting of these divergences will lead to a more complete view of Parthian-Roman interstate politics. The point, in the end, is not simply to write better histories of pre-modern diplomacy, but to recognise that the study of antiquity and modern theorising are interrelated endeavours.¹⁰ Political scientists have begun to use the remote past to destabilise the theoretical assumptions of the present. Ancient historians should join them.

1 Theory and Evidence

Satow's definition assumes the existence of multiple sovereign states as a precondition for diplomacy. Satow was concerned with nations, but empires are also states, and they are moreover a type of political formation with a much older history.¹¹ It is therefore common to speak of diplomacy as a tool of empires, including ancient ones.¹² Indeed, diplomacy's existence in pre-modern states

8 Recent years have seen a profusion of narrative treatments of Parthian high politics: see van Kooten (2015) 508–85; Harl (2016); Schlude (2020); Fabian (2020) 209–17; Curtis and Magub (2020); Canepa (2020) 291–94; Ellerbrock (2021) 22–70. Overtoom (2020) and Olbrycht (2021) treat the early Arsacid period. Edwell (2020) begins with the tail end of Arsacid rule in Iran; Edwell (2008) covers the history of the Roman-Parthian frontier with a local focus. Shayegan (2011) covers Parthian and Sasanian ideology with a view towards engagement with Rome. Older treatments include Debevoise (1938); Ziegler (1964); Schippmann (1980); Bivar (1983); Dąbrowa (1983); Wolski (1993). On diplomacy and war, see Campbell (1993); Overtoom (2016); Schlude and Rubin (2017b); Schlude (2020).

9 Cf. Skaff (2012) 8–9, a related critique of studies of Sino-Turkic diplomacy under China's Sui and Tang dynasties.

10 Morley (2004) 6; Lawson (2018) 76.

11 Colás (2007) 3–4; Burbank and Cooper (2010) 1–3, 8–11; see also Morrison (2001) 2.

12 Sinopoli (1994) 163, 167; Black (2010) 18; Burbank and Cooper (2010) 53, 341 ('interempire diplomacy'); MacKenzie (2016).

is proof, for some, that its modern institutional apparatus – foreign ministries, permanent embassies, professionalised agents – is an incidental feature of diplomatic exchange rather than an essential one. Despite Henry Kissinger's view that 'empires have no interest in operating within an international system; they aspire to *be* the international system', there is ample evidence for diplomatic communication between two or more empires, and between empires and other kinds of polities.¹³

Satow's precondition of independence is more problematic for ancient historians, however, because this is a complex variable in imperial environments. The post-Westphalian world order regards nation-states as both sovereign and unitary, and qualified to conduct diplomacy by virtue of those attributes.¹⁴ That logic imposes at least notional order and coherence on the modern international environment. Sovereignty within and among empires, by contrast, is 'shared out, layered, overlapping', and thus harder to parse.¹⁵ Ancient empires could subsume various types of political formations, including tribes, city-states, and kingdoms. The incorporation of these units into imperial structures was a fitful, unsystematic, and ambiguous process that could leave the question of local autonomy unclear to contemporaries, to say nothing of modern scholars. Subject communities might even celebrate empires as the bestowers and guarantors of freedom, and such discourses have to be taken seriously even if not at face value.¹⁶ In the context of Parthian-Roman relations, an additional complication is the contested nature of the polities along the Euphrates frontier. While some scholars have described Hatra, for example, as a city precariously balanced between the orbits of the two empires, Albert de Jong locates it firmly within the Parthian sphere.¹⁷ If diplomacy requires sovereignty but sovereignty is ambiguous, diplomacy becomes difficult to assess.

The intractability of this problem is evident in the conviction among some ancient historians that diplomacy could take place *within* empires as part of routine communications between central authorities and their provincial subjects. 'The modern understanding of diplomacy tends to assume that it is primarily a means for conducting relations between *sovereign* states. This is not an assumption shared with the ancient world', Claude Eilers writes of the Roman

13 Kissinger (1994) 21, emphasis in the original.

14 Nathan (2002) 2–3; Jayasuriya (2005); Pigman (2010) 19–21; Neumann (2012) 41–42.

15 Quotation from Burbank and Cooper (2010) 17; see also Subrahmanyam (2001) 43; Benton (2010) 2–9; Khatchadourian (2016) 22–23.

16 Ma (2018) 279–80.

17 de Jong (2013) 148–53; cf. Anderson (2017) 142–44.

case.¹⁸ The statement implies that the Romans (alone or together with other ancient peoples) defined diplomacy in a different way than moderns do. But they did not define it at all: they had no word for it, no professionals dedicated to its practice, and no concept of it as a distinct area of social life. It is true that the Romans could interface with both domestic subjects and sovereign foreigners through the same category of persons, namely *legati* and *presbeutai* – a significant dynamic, to be sure, and one that Rome shared with Parthia.¹⁹ But the broader implications of the ancient practice remain unclear. Should modern theories of diplomacy accommodate intra-state communication? Can diplomacy overlap with internal administration?²⁰ Why is sovereignty considered essential to modern notions of diplomacy if it was incidental to the Roman iteration? The ambiguous nature of sovereignty in and among ancient empires defies tidy explanation. But grappling with this ambiguity can help ancient historians go beyond mere description of the *legatio* and the *presbeia* and contribute to interdisciplinary discussions about diplomacy on the level of theory.

Attention to diplomacy's modern theoretical vocabulary (and not just ancient terminology) is especially incumbent on students of Parthian-Roman relations, because a lack of evidence hinders reconstruction of the relevant concepts and institutions on the Arsacid side. Nearly all of the sources for foreign relations between the two empires are Roman. This lopsided evidentiary foundation does not only mean that the events of high politics are presented solely from the Roman perspective, though that problem would be substantial enough on its own. It also means that the Parthian way of thinking about diplomatic activity is obscure. There is virtually no evidence for who served as ambassadors, to whom they reported, how much agency they had, what languages they spoke, and what sort of interlocutor they saw in the Romans. The Arsacids and those close to them may have followed Hellenistic precedents, especially during their empire's formative centuries. In a rare piece of Roman documentary evidence for the reception of a Parthian envoy, for instance, a Roman governor commands that the Parthian be offered *xenia*, using the Greek

18 Eilers (2009b) 1, emphasis in the original. See also Campbell (2001) 3; Torregaray Pagola (2016) 116–17.

19 The Greek inscription known as the 'Letter of Ardawān/Artabanus II to Susa' records that a citizen of that city – a Parthian subject territory – undertook embassies to the Arsacid king (line 7: *presbeiai*). For the text, see De Rossi (2004) 121 no. 218; Merkelbach and Stauber (2005) 86 no. 407; Hackl et al. (2010) 2.486; Rougement (2012) 25 no. 3; for recent discussions of the inscription, see Gregoratti (2012) 130–32; Wiesehöfer (2015) 339; Olbrycht (2017) 7–8, 14–15.

20 Thus Eck (2009) 193.

term for diplomatic hospitality in a Latin letter.²¹ But was *xenia* the operative concept for the envoy himself, especially in an era when the Greek language was falling into disuse in Parthian territory? Conclusive evidence is lacking.²² In short, while the application of modern theory runs the risk of analysing ancient diplomacy in terms foreign to its practitioners, such anachronism can be salutary, since it does not allow Roman norms to be the baseline for the discussion.

Roman evidence dominates the study of the topic, then, but the material has major shortcomings for the issues diplomatic theorists and historians investigate. Most of the relevant passages come from historiographical texts in Greek or Latin whose purpose was to tell true tales about the past for edification, moral instruction, and pleasure. The job of the historian was *not*, however, the systematic exposition of political institutions or the literal reproduction of documents, except where these considerations were essential to the narrative.²³ Whereas historians of the Bronze Age can study epistolary correspondence among the rulers of the Eastern Mediterranean interstate system – a body of evidence that directly reflects the content, mediums, and norms of diplomatic communication at the highest level – students of Parthian-Roman relations have no such opportunity.²⁴ Royal letters, treaty texts, field reports, dispatches to the central government: all once existed but are now only haphazardly preserved in the impressionistic summaries of historians whose fundamental concerns were literary, not documentary.

The meager evidence for diplomatic practice is due to the vagaries of survival, but as for theory, there never was any to begin with. 'Explicit theorizing was not a Roman characteristic' even in the realm of political thought, where the Romans preferred moral and didactic exposition to the abstract thinking of the Greeks.²⁵ But the Greeks came no closer than the Romans to formulating a

21 *P Dura* 60 B (c. 208 CE), line 7; for discussion, see Chaumont (1987); Iovine (2023) 207–17.

22 Cf. Lenfant (2022) on *xenia* in earlier Greco-Persian relations. For the decline of the Greek language in Parthia from the first century CE onward, see Wiesehöfer (2015) 339. On the Arsacid relationship to Greek culture more generally, see Wolski (1983); Dąbrowa (2011); Olbrycht (2017); Messina and Versluys (2022).

23 On the instructional aims of Greek and Roman historians, see, e.g., Chaplin (2000); Nicolai (2007) 13–14; Turpin (2008); Stadter (2009) 459–70; Roller (2018) 17–23. Where descriptions of political institutions are included, they are often written by outsiders and for outsiders, e.g., Polybius' account of the Roman 'constitution' (Polyb. 6.2–18; cf. Pelling (2007) 244–50). On the use of documents, see Marincola (1997) 103–105; Rhodes (2007).

24 On the epistolary evidence for Bronze Age diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean, see Cohen and Westbrook (2000); Liverani (2001); Lafont (2001); Mynářová (2008); Podany (2010).

25 Quotation from Wiedemann (2000) 517.

concept of diplomacy that was distinct from other areas of social life. Figures like Thucydides, Aeschines, and Demosthenes were not ‘thinkers of diplomacy’, even if their texts have proven useful to political scientists who are.²⁶ Delineating the role of a *presbeutēs* or a *legatus* is not the same as delineating a concept of diplomacy. The inhabitants of the ancient Mediterranean did the former, but not the latter. As with economic history, theoretical and comparative work on ancient diplomacy requires the importation of modern categories alien to the ancient peoples under consideration.

The study of Parthian-Roman diplomacy does, however, have one major anchor in the ancient evidence, and that is the Roman recognition of Parthia as a political unit similar to itself in size, power, and form. Recent work in political science shows how diplomacy gives its practitioners a new understanding of themselves by bringing them face to face with an Other beyond their borders and beyond their experience; the job of the diplomat is ‘to mediate estrangement, while retaining separateness’.²⁷ This dynamic was a key facet of Parthian-Roman relations. The literature on the Roman configuration of Parthia as its own cultural antithesis is vast, and deservedly so: no other foreign power took up so much space in the Roman imagination.²⁸ But while expressions of prejudice and xenophobia were many, so too were acknowledgements of coequality, even if some authors were ‘careful not to concede full parity’.²⁹ The geographer Strabo encapsulates this tendency when he calls the Parthians *antipaloi*, a word that signifies an evenly matched opponent or antagonist.³⁰ Before Parthia, Rome had no peer in the world, no one to hold a mirror to its empire or bring its exceptionalism into question. The Arsacids challenged Rome’s imperial solipsism. Once it became clear that war would not make either side go away, diplomacy was essential for finding a *modus vivendi* but also for articulating a new imperial identity in the face of a counterpart. The absence of evidence allows little insight into this process on the Parthian side,

26 Quotation from Constantinou and Sharp (2016) 14 on Aeschines and Demosthenes. Some ancient historians see indications that the Greeks theorised interstate relations: see Lendon (2006); Hall (2007) 85. But diplomacy as a discrete realm of activity makes no appearance in Greek political thought.

27 Quotation from Constantinou (2013) 142, discussing Der Derian (1987) and Sharp (2009). See also Kuus (2017) 86–87.

28 Key studies include Sonnabend (1986); Lerouge (2007); Shayegan (2011) 332–40; Schneider (2012); Wiesehöfer and Müller (2017); Alidoust (2020).

29 Quotation from Syme (1958) 530, discussing the representation of Parthia in the Roman historian Tacitus.

30 Strabo 11.9.2. For similar expressions, see Vell. Pat. 2.101.2; Plin. *HN* 5.88; Joseph. *AJ* 18.46; Tac. *Ann.* 2.56.1; 2.60.4, 12.10.2, 15.13.2; Cass. Dio 40.14.3; Hdn. 4.10.2.

but the Roman sources are ample testimony: Rome's self-conception changed through interaction with Parthia, and through diplomatic interaction not least.

Despite the profound differences between empires and nations, then, the mutual engagement of Parthia and Rome as coherent political units justifies the application of a diplomatic framework to their interactions. Within both empires, of course, myriad forms and degrees of sovereignty existed. Provincial integration into Arsacid or Roman imperial structures was not a binary matter, and diffuse notions of territoriality meant that the political landscape of the Euphrates frontier was complex, shifting, and ambiguously demarcated. Yet the Parthian-Roman relationship was not simply a kaleidoscopic jumble of greater and lesser political units colliding or coexisting in haphazard fashion. Both sides leveraged centralised state power to make war on each other, but also to represent, mediate, and negotiate in their own interests. Despite the differential forms that states took in the ancient world, then, conceptions of diplomacy as a state-bound form of communication therefore have considerable explanatory power – though also considerable limitations.

2 State-Bound Forms

Three features of Parthian-Roman interaction are reconcilable with the state-centric framework around which the modern concept of diplomacy is built. These are the direct exchange of letters and messengers between central governments that claimed sovereign power; summits at strategic and symbolic meeting sites; and treaties. The Roman sources are reliable evidence that these instruments were in regular use for the duration of the Parthian-Roman relationship. They are *not* reliable evidence for how the Parthians understood them, though in some cases extrapolation from Near Eastern sources may offer insight.

Parthian and Roman leaders exchanged letters and messengers from their first encounters to their last. The main terms for envoys were *legatus* in Latin and *presbeutēs* in Greek. The Parthian word was *frēštag* (cf. Middle Persian *frēstag*), but it is unattested before the Sasanian period.³¹ It is unclear which of these languages predominated in Parthian-Roman interaction, and in what proportion. Greek may have been a lingua franca, since elites in both empires were well versed in it.³² On the other hand, reliable evidence from Late Antiquity (though still Roman and literary) shows formal support for Greek/Middle

31 For attestations, see Gignoux (1972) 61 n. 89; Durkin-Meisterernst (2004) 85, 159–61.

32 On the Arsacids and the Greek language, see Wiesehöfer (2000); Olbrycht (2014).

Persian bilingualism through interpreters, translations, and cross-referenced documents.³³ Yet the late Sasanian period may not reflect the practice of the Arsacids, who stood closer to Iran's Hellenistic past. One source mentions that an Arsacid visitor to Rome in 66 CE required public translation, presumably into Latin. But from what source language, Parthian or Greek? Scholars do not agree.³⁴ The lack of consensus on such points shows the limitations of the evidence on even basic questions of Parthian-Roman communication.

Although messengers were used to conduct diplomacy, they were not quite diplomats, at least not in the modern sense. They did not reside in Ctesiphon or Rome on a permanent basis. Their work was not part of a dedicated institution. And their business was more often to execute policy than to craft it.³⁵ To take one example from 63 CE, Tacitus describes the arrival in Rome of Parthian *legati*, which is the usual Latin word for ambassadors or envoys. These agents spoke with the emperor Nero, but only to deliver 'the instructions of King Vologases [= Walgaš I, the Arsacid king of kings of Parthia] and a letter along the same lines'.³⁶ The message was thus conveyed in both oral and written form, but the Arsacid king controlled the content in both cases. Moreover, when the emperor rejected the proposed conditions, he sent the representatives back to Parthia with a counter-offer. They could not, it seems, respond to it on their own initiative.³⁷ Romans were sent to the Arsacid kings under similar parameters.³⁸ Additional information about the meetings between messengers and sovereigns might clarify the scope of the former to exercise agency, but the brief descriptions in Classical historiography fall short in this regard. As far as the sources show, messengers were conduits for Parthian-Roman diplomacy rather than its practitioners.

Even if their room to maneuver was limited, however, messengers held great importance in matters of interstate recognition, legitimation, and community. It mattered where a messenger was sent, because to receive one was to be

33 Dignas and Winter (2007) 119–51; Lee (2008) 108–11; and Morley (this volume).

34 See Suet. *Ner.* 13.2 on Tiridates' public speech at Rome. Peretz (2006) 465–66 favours Parthian as the language of Tiridates' original utterance; Millar (1988) 373 is non-committal on Parthian or Greek.

35 On the relative agency (or lack thereof) of the ancient ambassador, see Giovannini (2007) 96–97; Torregaray Pagola (2013) 243; Ager (2017) 294, 296.

36 Tac. *Ann.* 15.24–5; quotation from 15.24.1: *legati Parthorum mandata regis Vologaesis litterasque in eandem formam attulere*. For discussion, see Ziethen (1994) 182.

37 Tac. *Ann.* 15.25.3. Most evidence for Parthian embassies comes from historians like Tacitus, but see above, n. 21, for a rare documentary reference (albeit still in a Roman source).

38 See, e.g., Lucullus' dispatch of messengers to Frahād/Phraates III in 69/8 BCE: Plut. *Luc.* 30.1; App. *Mith.* 87; Cass. Dio 36.3.1–2.

recognised as a source of political authority and sovereign power. The sensitivity of rulers to such matters is well illustrated in a statement that Cassius Dio attributes to Augustus' advisor Maecenas:

Moreover, in other respects too, it seems to me that you would be arranging things in the best way if you brought before the Senate the embassies that come from enemies and from allied kings and peoples. For it is honourable and important that the deliberative body appear to be in charge of all these [embassies], and that there appear to be many opponents to those of them who act unjustly.³⁹

The opinion is offered as part of a debate about whether and to what extent Augustus should steer Rome away from a Republican form of government and towards an autocratic one (and how to opt for the latter without seeming to). But it is a powerful comment on how the reception of diplomatic messengers contributed to the maintenance of sovereign power both in actuality and in appearance. During the Republic, the Senate had control over foreign policy and was therefore the institution that heard foreign embassies. Maecenas argues that this custom must be preserved if Augustus wishes to treat the Senate correctly, even if his regime is appropriating the actual power to answer such delegations. Dio is probably using Maecenas to lament the lapse of this practice in his own time, but in earlier periods the senatorial sentiment mattered, not least when the envoys in question were Parthian.⁴⁰ After Vespasian won the emperorship in the civil war of 69 CE, for example, the Parthian envoys who came to congratulate him were forwarded on to the Senate.⁴¹ The way that Rome received foreign embassies showed what kind of polity it was; the empire and its self-sustaining fictions took shape through interaction with the outside world, especially Parthia.

39 Cass. Dio 52.31.1: καὶ μέντοι καὶ τὰλλα ὧδ' ἂν μοι δοκεῖς ἄριστα διατάξαι, ἂν πρῶτον μὲν τὰς πρεσβείας τὰς τε παρὰ τῶν πολεμίων καὶ τὰς παρὰ τῶν ἐνσπόνδων καὶ βασιλέων καὶ δῆμων ἀφικνουμένας ἐς τὸ συνέδριον ἐσάγῃς (τά τε γὰρ ἄλλα καὶ σεμνὸν καὶ ἀξιόλογόν ἐστι τό τε τὴν βουλὴν πάντων κυρίαν δοκεῖν εἶναι, καὶ τὸ πολλοὺς τοὺς ἀντιπάλους τοῖς ἀγνωμονοῦσιν αὐτῶν φαίνεσθαι); cf. Cass. Dio 53.21.6.

40 For the passage as a comment on diplomatic reception in Dio's time, see Millar (1988) 348–49; Sidebottom (2007) 6–7. Talbert (1984) 423 discusses how the emperor benefitted from consultation of the Senate on diplomatic business. On Maecenas as a mouthpiece for Dio's views, see Burden-Strevens (2020) 19 n. 72, 270–74. On the 'constitutional debate' between Agrippa and Maecenas, see also Fomin (2016).

41 Tac. *Hist.* 4.51; cf. Suet. *Vesp.* 6.4.

The absence of evidence makes it impossible to know whether such a dynamic prevailed within the Arsacid Empire as well, though one statement from an early Sasanian king offers at least a suggestion that it did. After his seizure of the throne in 293 CE, the ruler Narseh erected a monument at the site of Paikuli with inscriptions in Middle Persian and Parthian. In a concluding passage, the ruler boasts that ‘whoever came to our court himself or sent messengers, gifts, letters, and hostages as promises of loyalty to our court, he received fame and other kinds of things’.⁴² The referents of this phrase are unspecified, but the text has just rehearsed a long list of dignitaries, some of whom were clearly part of the Sasanian Empire, and others – including ‘Caesar and the Romans’ – who were not.⁴³ If the status of the senders is ambiguous, however, it is clear that the king celebrates messengers because of the power of recognition. Narseh’s accession rested on internal *and* external acknowledgement of his kingship, and the importance of Rome as the Sasanian Empire’s most important interlocutor explains why the western empire merits such a prominent mention. How well these Sasanian ideas reflect Arsacid precedents must remain an open question, but the composition of a Paikuli text in Parthian – a language that remained ‘a major means of communication for Sasanian royalty’ in the third century CE – suggests at least some continuity in this area.⁴⁴

A more direct venue of interaction between Parthia and Rome was the summit. Contemporary diplomatic handbooks distinguish between routine diplomacy conducted via intermediaries and summit diplomacy, a face-to-face meeting between the political leaders whom the diplomats ordinarily serve.⁴⁵ Such conferences could take place between Parthian and Roman rulers at the highest levels of power, up to and including the kings and emperors themselves. The highest profile meetings were between Gaius Caesar and

42 NPi 94 = Skjærvø (1983) 1.73, 2.130: *W MNW BNPŠE OL BBA ZY LNE YATWN ’yny’ phys[tky] W d’sny W npyky W np’(k) p[t]st[w](k’n?) OL BBA ZY [LNE ŠDRWN- OLE ? hws?]* *hwbyhy W CBW ZY AHRN gwnky YHSNNt*. I lightly adapt Skjærvø’s translation. The Middle Persian text is quoted; the Parthian version of this section is almost entirely lost. Note that the discovery of new blocks of the Paikuli inscription has led to several addenda to, and proposed emendations of, Skjærvø’s text: see Cereti and Terribili (2014); Cereti et al. (2019); Cereti (2021).

43 NPi 91–93. On the relationship of the dignitaries mentioned in these sections to the Sasanian Empire, see Skjærvø (1983) 2.120; Weber and Wiesehofer (2010) 119–21.

44 Quotation from Gyselen (2016) 61. The fragmentary state of the Middle Persian and Parthian texts makes comparison difficult, but the correspondence seems, in general, close; see Cereti and Terribili (2014) 348.

45 Berridge (2015) 184–96; Dunn and Lock-Pullan (2016).

Frahātak/Phraataces in 2 BCE;⁴⁶ Lucius Vitellius and Ardawān/Artabanus II in c.36/7 CE;⁴⁷ Corbulo and Tirdād/Tiridates in 63 CE;⁴⁸ Nero and Tirdād in 66 CE;⁴⁹ and perhaps Caracalla and Ardawān/Artabanus IV, though the historicity of this last episode is doubtful.⁵⁰ The participants were kings and emperors, members of the ruling dynasty, or else political figures close to the top ranks. Their meetings were bilateral, because no third party was big or powerful enough to merit a seat at the table.

While the exclusively Roman evidence permits only a skewed view of what transpired at summits between imperial leaders, it seems that such events fostered a sense of coequality and equilibrium. That is not to say that they brought about peace, necessarily, although some scholars maintain that relations were less violent in the first century CE when most summits took place.⁵¹ Rather, personal interaction helped Parthians and Romans accept the power of the other as a permanent fact, an embedded feature of the interstate environment instead of an obstacle to be overcome. The eyewitness account of the Roman author Velleius Paterculus, for instance, describes the summit of 2 BCE with awe at the communion of such mighty dignitaries:

This spectacle of the Roman army standing on one side and the Parthian on the other as the two most eminent heads of empires and of men met – an exceedingly brilliant and memorable sight – it was my luck to witness during the beginning of my military service when I was a tribune.⁵²

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- 46 Vell. Pat. 2.101; Cass. Dio 55.10a.4; cf. Plin. *HN* 6.141; Plut. *Mor.* 207e. Strabo 1.1.17 may also refer to Gaius' campaign; see Drijvers (1998) 290.
- 47 Joseph. *AJ* 18.96, 101–105; Suet. *Calig.* 14.3; *Vit.* 2.4; Cass. Dio 59.27.2–3. On the date, see Dąbrowa (1983) 107.
- 48 Tac. *Ann.* 15.27–31; Cass. Dio 62.23; discussion in Ziethen (1994) 183–85. Cass. Dio 62.22.2–3 also mentions an earlier conference on the Euphrates river between Corbulo and Monaeses.
- 49 The only substantive account of the so-called 'Golden Day' is Cass. Dio 63.1–8; shorter references in Suet. *Ner.* 13; Tac. *Ann.* 16.23.2–24.1; Plin. *HN* 30.17. For an effort to reconstruct this event from the Parthian perspective, see Nabel (2019c).
- 50 Herodian 4.10–11 has Caracalla meeting Ardawān/Artabanus in Parthia after the Arsacid king agreed to marry the Roman emperor to his daughter. But the whole episode seems to be fabricated out of whole cloth. Dio (78.1.1) writes that Caracalla was unsuccessful in his request to marry Ardawan's daughter, and nowhere else is Herodian's account corroborated. For discussion, see Timpe (1967); Zimmermann (1999) 210; Huber and Hartmann (2006) 504.
- 51 For this view, see, e.g., Campbell (1993) 220–34; Schlude (2020) 92–155.
- 52 Vell. Pat. 2.101.2–3: *Quod spectaculum stantis ex diverso hinc Romani, illinc Parthorum exercitus, cum duo inter se eminentissima imperiorum et hominum coirent capita, perquam clarum et memorabile sub initia stipendiorum meorum tribuno militum mihi visere contigit.*

To judge by Velleius' testimony, the summit was a ceremonious meeting of partners in world rule, not a grudging standoff between inimical rivals. The event he attended was staged on the Euphrates, moreover, as were other Parthian-Roman summits. These collaborative acts of demarcation made the river a symbolic border for many decades, though the reality was more complicated.⁵³ Even if the arrangements they formalised were already substantively resolved before the conferences took place – a question that the available evidence cannot answer – summits reconciled Parthia and Rome to the other's existence and reshaped how the interstate environment was understood on both sides of the Euphrates.

Finally, Parthia and Rome concluded treaties. The operative terms are *foedus* in Latin and *spondai* in Greek, though the Romans could also describe less formal agreements as *amicitia* ('friendship') or *societas* ('association'). While contemporaneous Arsacid sources preserve no correspondents, the Parthian word *pādxšīr* is known from later texts, and it may have been the Middle Iranian term of art.⁵⁴ The obscurity of the Parthian terminology could be attributable to the non-survival of Iranian textual sources, but it might also reveal a more substantive divergence between Parthian and Roman conceptions of what treaties were and how they operated. Oral agreements with external peoples played a role in Roman foreign relations, but many Roman *foedera* were written down, and copies were deposited in public buildings. In some cases, the texts were even publicly displayed.⁵⁵ But the Parthians shared in the predominately oral culture of pre-Islamic Iran in which religious, literary, and even political matters belonged to the realm of the spoken word, not the written one.⁵⁶ For Roman-Sasanian relations in Late Antiquity, Greco-Roman historiography offers much more ample evidence for the scribal practices behind treaties, and for the Persian side as well as the Roman: when the two sides drew up a treaty in 561/2 CE, for instance, separate translations in Greek and Middle Persian were commissioned, cross-checked, copied, sealed, and ratified.⁵⁷ The

53 On the Euphrates as a symbolic frontier, see Wheeler (2007) 235–36.

54 For *pādxšīr*, see ŠKZ 35 = Huyse (1999) 48. But note that the passage is describing Sasanian scribal protocol, not an agreement with a foreign state, and the ŠKZ's Greek equivalent of *pādxšīr* is not *spondai*; cf. Perikhanian (1983) 662 n. 4.

55 On the inscription and deposition of Roman *foedera*, see Meyer (2004) 95–97; Gladhill (2016) 1–68; but cf. Wheeler (2002) 289 on oral agreements. Cic. *Balb.* 53 speaks of a publicly displayed treaty.

56 On orality in pre-Islamic Iran and its impact on extant Parthian evidence, see Boyce (1983); Shayegan (2012) 73–108; Wiesehöfer (2020) 477–78.

57 The key primary source for the treaty of 561/2 CE is Menander Protector fr. 6.1. On official bilingualism in Roman-Sasanian relations, see the literature cited above, n. 33.

Arsacids may have employed such procedures in the negotiation of treaties with Rome, but there is no direct evidence that they did so. Roman sources contain numerous allusions to treaties, but details are few. Even the Roman understanding of their terms is obscure, to say nothing of how they may have looked through Parthian eyes.

In the absence of detailed source material, modern assumptions about treaties have sometimes filled in the gaps. The classic study is that of Karl-Heinz Ziegler, whose narrative of Parthian-Roman political history had treaties at its centre. On his reckoning, Parthia and Rome struck nine or ten formal agreements over the course of their relationship.⁵⁸ For Ziegler, these instruments laid the foundations for a system of international law between sovereign states that would develop still further when the Sasanians came to power. But his emphasis on the normative and regulatory power of treaties has struck some as overly legalistic and schematic, and the complete absence of reliable texts for these agreements allowed for ample interpretive license of their force and scope.⁵⁹ The summary descriptions in the literary sources suggest that Parthian-Roman treaties could delimit territory, provide for mutual defence, apportion suzerainty over local rulers, and restore captured people or property. But attempts to explain Parthian and Roman behaviour on the putative basis of treaties (or their lapses) have foundered, because the specifics regarding their terms, duration, and other matters do not survive. While the Parthians and Romans certainly made treaties and saw them as a component of their relations, an evidentiary gap precludes access to these instruments, and modern legalistic frameworks cannot bridge the distance.

Messengers, summits, and treaties were all modes of Parthian-Roman engagement that are commensurable with state-centric theorisations of diplomacy. Parthia and Rome were sprawling, diffuse, heterogeneous empires with a level of integration and state institutionalism that fell far short of modern norms. Moreover, the frontier between them was a variegated patchwork of dependencies, and questions of territoriality and sovereignty were ambiguous and contested. But direct and indirect communication between Parthian and Roman rulers solidified and demarcated, at least conceptually, the empires that they governed. Through these media, Parthia and Rome gained a clearer

58 Ziegler (1964) 19–32 (Sulla, a questionable case; Lucullus; Pompey), 48–50, 54–57 (Augustus), 58–64 (Tiberius/Germanicus; Vitellius), 73–77 (Nero), 114–15 (Marcus Aurelius), 132 (Severus), 134 (Macrinus). For the Republican period, see also Keaveney (1981); Keaveney (1982).

59 For this critique of Ziegler, see Wheeler (2002) 290, an ‘extreme case for the non-existence of a *foedus Parthicum* before 218’.

sense of the other – and themselves – as political units that existed in counterpoise, though not necessarily in peace. Major issues of recognition, sovereignty, and legitimacy were at stake in the sending and receiving of embassies, while summits and treaties allowed the two sides to engage as singular entities rather than motley conglomerations of greater and lesser territories. If the first centuries CE were characterised by a ‘division of the world’ between Parthia and Rome, state-oriented diplomacy helped draw the fault lines, and it helped define the centres of gravity in the east and west.⁶⁰

3 Non-State Forms

Other modes of interaction in Parthian-Roman high politics cannot, however, be satisfactorily explained by state-bound conceptions of diplomacy. Many scholars have explored the porousness and permeability of the Euphrates frontier in recent studies of religion, trade, and visual culture, and few today would argue that political borders severely limited trans-imperial flows in these areas of social life.⁶¹ Because of its traditional state-centric orientation, however, diplomacy has been largely untouched by such analysis. A more capacious understanding of diplomacy’s relationship to state structures can better explain key dynamics. Given the ancient empire’s light footprint in comparison with modern nations, Parthian-Roman relations must be surveyed for state-adjacent modes of foreign affairs that do not adhere to contemporary ideas about diplomacy’s limits.

One such mode of engagement was what political scientists call ‘sub-state diplomacy’, a practice that shows the stark divergence between ancient and modern notions of territorial sovereignty. For students of the modern world, sub-state diplomacy is a way to interpret how ‘central governments have gradually lost their monopoly on external activity’ to regional and municipal authorities as transnational networks densify through globalisation.⁶² But the idea is also well-suited to the ancient world, when central governments had no discrete concept of diplomacy and therefore no drive to monopolise it. Sowing

60 The phrase ‘division of the world’ (*divisio orbis*) is from Justin’s epitome of Pompeius Trogus (41.11).

61 On religion, see Boyce and Grenet (1991) 197–490; Dirven (1999); Herman (2012). Trade: Young (2001) 123–68; Graf (2018); Gregoratti (2019). Visual culture: Hauser (2014); Dirven (2016); Anderson (2017). High-resolution studies of local cities and kingdoms further illustrate the fluidity of the frontier zone: see Sommer (2005); Marciak (2014); Luther (2015); Kaizer (2017).

62 Quotation from Puybureau and Takam Talom (2020) 167.

division was a ubiquitous technique of conquest and territorial annexation when ancient empires were on the march, of course. But even in systems with a more or less stable status quo, regional dependencies of larger imperial structures could and did maintain relations with foreign states. Such channels ran parallel or even in opposition to the diplomatic networks of the empires to which they belonged.

One example involving especially far-flung communication comes from the mid-first century CE, when the Romans under Nero received an embassy from the Hyrcanians, a people who lived on the southeastern shores of the Black Sea. The political organisation of Hyrcania is not well understood, but it had been a Parthian dependency from the earliest days of the empire, and in 60 CE it was in revolt.⁶³ Its rebellion coincided with a Parthian-Roman conflict over Armenia, and coordination between Hyrcania and Rome was probably a matter of military expedience first and foremost. The shape of the embassy, however, went beyond the bare minimum of communication: the Hyrcanian messengers asked for an alliance not from Corbulo, the Roman commander in the Armenian theatre, but from Nero himself. Upon their return to the east, Corbulo gave them a military escort that helped see them home safely.⁶⁴ The resolution of their rebellion against Arsacid rule is unclear, as is the outcome of their embassy.

The meagre evidence mires the Hyrcanian episode in obscurity to begin with, but the confusion is compounded by the unstated application of conflicting frameworks for the study of ancient diplomacy. For Werner Schur, the embassy indicated that Hyrcania had become a sovereign and independent state; others disagree and prefer the view that it remained subordinate to the Arsacid Empire.⁶⁵ The debate is illustrative, though not only in the way that its participants intended. Its source of contention was not just the status of Hyrcania (for which there is, at present, no meaningful evidence beyond Tacitus), but rather incompatible ideas about diplomacy. For Schur, a

63 Tacitus is the sole Roman source for the embassy (*Ann.* 14.25.2; cf. 13.37.5, 15.1.1, 15.2.4), and he mentions it during his narrative of events in 60 CE. On the chronology, see Wheeler (1997) 391–92.

64 *Tac. Ann.* 14.25.2. Tacitus says that Corbulo conducted the Hyrcanians to the shores of the Red Sea and that they avoided Parthian territory on the way home (*dato praesidio ad litora maris rubri deduxit, unde vitatis Parthorum finibus patrias in sedes remeavere*), but the geography does not make sense, and a textual corruption has been suspected. For discussions of this problem, see Woodcock (1939) 114; Wellesley (1955) 136–37; Bivar (1983) 83; Potter (1991) 287 n. 40; Heil (1997) 87 n. 8; Olbrycht (1998) 181–82.

65 Schur (1923) 17–21; for criticisms of the view, see Dąbrowa (1984) 146; Schottky (1991) 120; Heil (1997) 87–89; Olbrycht (1998) 182–83.

diplomatic exchange like the one between the Hyrcanians and Nero implied sovereign power and its interstate recognition; for his opponents, diplomatic contact with the outside world was compatible with dependent status. Disagreements, then, are fuelled by conflicting theorisations of diplomacy every bit as much as divergent interpretations of the evidence. Grappling with sub-state diplomacy in the abstract might not resolve this debate, but it would at least clarify the operating assumptions of the scholars on either side.

Sub-state diplomacy emerges as a theme again in an inscription that points to a second mode of state-adjacent diplomacy: the delegation of embassies to intermediaries otherwise unconnected to the upper tiers of Parthian and Roman administration. The text is in Palmyrene Aramaic and dates to 17–19 CE or not long thereafter.⁶⁶ The stone is fragmentary and poorly preserved, but it seems clear enough that the text commemorates a Palmyrene named Alexander who undertook a mission for Germanicus Julius Caesar, the adopted son of the Roman emperor Tiberius.⁶⁷ The details of Alexander's assignment are not recorded, but his destinations apparently are: the assignment took him to Emesa, a Syrian kingdom to the west of Palmyra, and to Mesene/Characene, a Parthian dependency on the Persian Gulf in southern Mesopotamia.⁶⁸ The fragmentary text leaves much unclear, and even if it were intact, questions would probably remain. In what capacity did Germanicus send Alexander to these places? What was his business? Why him? Still, his travel to Mesene, a place far beyond Rome's eastern frontiers, has led many scholars to label the endeavour a diplomatic mission or an embassy.⁶⁹

The text may attest, therefore, another case of sub-state diplomacy, but with the added dimension that diplomacy piggybacked on Palmyra's trans-imperial commercial networks and political influence. Alexander's mission ran parallel

66 *PAT* 2754 = Cantineau (1931) 139 no. 18 = De Rossi (2004) 87 no. 146; English translation in Matthews (1984) 164.

67 Line 3: '... previously(?), and Germanicus sent him' ([...] *h lqdmyn wšdrh grmnqs*). Germanicus spent his final years in the Roman east and died there in 19 CE. He may have visited Palmyra, but there is no unequivocal evidence that he did so, and the city is absent from Tacitus' account of his eastern command (*Ann.* 2.53–72). See further Richmond (1963) 44; Kaizer (2002) 37; Sommer (2018) 68–70; Damon and Palazzolo (2019) 202.

68 Line 4 of the inscription mentions Mesene (Aramaic *myšny*['']), apparently under the rule of one Orbazes ('rbz), otherwise unknown; see Schuol (2000) 322–23. Line 5 as restored by Cantineau refers to a king [*šm*]*šgrm* = Samsigeramus II, an Emesene ruler, but the *PAT* edition leaves the name unrestored. On Samsigeramus and his dynasty, see Millar (1993) 302; Ball (2000) 34–36.

69 Matthews (1984) 164; Dirven (1999) 19–20; Young (2001) 130; Smith (2013) 24; Grout (2016) 218. More cautious is Kaizer (2002) 37, who stresses that the nature of Alexander's business is not specified.

to diplomatic exchanges between Germanicus and the Arsacid king Ardawān/Artabanus II. Tacitus writes of what must have been a nearly contemporaneous exchange of messages between the rulers in 18 CE, and a cordial one at that.⁷⁰ There was no tension, it seems, in maintaining diplomatic contacts at both imperial and local levels. Moreover, by leveraging Palmyrene aid to communicate with the rulers of Mesene, Rome was not only tolerating but *utilising* a political formation whose networks penetrated deep into the Parthian west. Those networks were to no small degree commercial, as the ‘caravan inscriptions’ of Palmyra show; these (mostly dedicatory) texts attest a well-trafficked corridor of Palmyrene trade between Syria and southern Mesopotamia that flourished in the first two centuries CE.⁷¹ But Palmyra was an empire-straddling *political* power no less than a commercial one. The same Palmyrenes who captained interstate trade could hold political offices in southern Mesopotamia and be no less Palmyrene for it. One served as a ‘satrap of the Thilouanians [a community in modern day Bahrain] for Meherdates, king of Spasinou Charax.’⁷² Other titles depend on epigraphic restorations, but another Palmyrene may have been an *archōn* in Phorath, a settlement not far from Spasinou Charax, while a third was *archōn* of Mesene.⁷³ In a different case, a Palmyrene who was active in the Parthian town of Vologesias was invested with *dynasteia*. The fragmentary text leaves unclear whether he wielded this power in Palmyra, Vologesias, both, or in the space between them; but the ambiguity itself reveals the diffuse and wide-ranging political authority of the caravan trade leaders.⁷⁴ Finally, yet another inscription celebrates a Palmyrene who, apparently on his own initiative, undertook an embassy to the king of Elam, another Parthian dependency.⁷⁵ While many details have fallen out of the record in these

70 Tac. *Ann.* 2.58. For the political background to the passage, see Olbrycht (2016) 622; Schlude (2020) 125–26.

71 See Gawlikowski (1994) 32–33, who delineates a corpus of thirty-four Palmyrene inscriptions that pertain to trade; Yon (2002) 263–64, table 11 adds one more. For further background on this corpus as a source for Palmyrene commerce, see Young (2001) 123–68; Grout (2016) 214–16; Andrade (2018) 4–6; Graf (2018) 483–86; Gregoratti (2020) 464.

72 PAT 1374 = *Inv.* 10.38 (131 CE), Greek text, lines 3–5: σατρά- | [π]ην θιλουανῶν Μερδάτου | βασιλέως (Σ)πασίνου Χάρακος. A corresponding term is not preserved in the Aramaic text.

73 *Archōn* of Phorath: PAT 1412 = *Inv.* 10.112 (140 CE), Greek text, lines 2–4: [ἀρχοντα] | [Φορ]αθῶν τῆς περ[ὶ] Σπασίνου] | [Χά]ρακα. The Aramaic equivalent of the title does not survive in the Aramaic, though the toponym Mesene (line 2: *m*(?)*yśn*) does appear. *Archōn* of Mesene: De Rossi (2004) 90 no. 151 (89–188 CE), line 2: τὸν ἀρχ[οντα Μ]αισ[η]νῶν.

74 PAT 1062 (145 CE), Greek text, section B, line 2. For discussion, see Kaizer (2002) 63–64, 150–51; Yon (2002) 110; Gregoratti (2015b) 143–47.

75 PAT 1414 = *Inv.* 10.114 (138 CE), Greek text, lines 7–9: π[ρεσβεύσαντα] αὐθαιρέτως | [πρὸς Ὁρώδην τὸν Β]ασιλέα τῆς Αἰλ[υ-] | [μήνης] (= Elymais). Cf. line 13 of the Greek, where the

lacunary inscriptions, there is enough to say that Palmyrene merchants operating in Parthian territory were not relegated to the margins to eke out a paltry trade. The leaders of the caravans were powerful trans-imperial agents who might even have wielded more political power east of the frontier than they did west of it. When Rome freerode on such networks in order to open relations with Parthian client kingdoms, it not only condoned but in fact took advantage of the interstate diplomatic networks that one of its own dependencies had cultivated, which were in some ways more robust and efficacious than anything the Roman imperial government itself could manage.

A final state-adjacent form of Parthian-Roman diplomacy came from the circulation of royal dynasts between imperial centres. In contrast to other ancient dynasties, the ruling families of Parthia and Rome did not intermarry.⁷⁶ But other sorts of peregrinations were possible. There are no unambiguous cases of Roman dynasts at the Arsacid court, though some tried to reach it, and other types of Roman elites could seek refuge there.⁷⁷ Arsacids at the courts of Roman emperors, on the other hand, are securely attested. The Arsacid residents of the Julio-Claudian period are the most numerous group,⁷⁸ but members of the Armenian branch of the Arsacid family lived (and died) in Rome

full name of Elymais is preserved, and also lines 7–8 of the Aramaic: [.....] *bšwšn* | [.....] *wrwd mlk*. For discussion, see Potts (1999) 401.

- 76 Caracalla's idiosyncratic plan to marry the daughter of the Parthian king Ardawān/Artabanus IV is one possible exception, but the story may be completely unhistorical; see above, n. 50. One marriage produced through diplomacy was the union of Frahād/Phraates IV and Thea Musa, on whom see Bigwood (2004); Huber and Hartmann (2006). But the only literary source for the episode is Josephus (*AJ* 18.39–43), and he calls Musa an Italian concubine (παῖδιςκη); there is no indication that she was connected by kinship to the Julio-Claudian family. On intermarriage, see Mathisen (2009) for Roman Late Antiquity, and Dąbrowa (2018); Madreiter and Hartmann (2021) for Parthian practices.
- 77 Parthia harboured two false Neros (sources and literature in Nabel (2019a) 619 n. 83), but no real Julio-Claudians, though Nero allegedly thought of fleeing there (*Suet. Ner.* 47.2). Cassius Dio says that Macrinus dispatched his son Diadumenian to the Parthian court in the face of rebellion, though the child was intercepted and assassinated en route. Other sources make no mention of this, however (*Cass. Dio* 79.39–40; cf. *SHA Macr.* 10.3–6; *Diad.* 9.4; *Herodian* 5.4.12). Some members of the senatorial class went to the Arsacid court, or tried to, during the civil wars of the Late Republic; see Nabel (2019b) 329–30 for cases and sources. In 32 CE, one Rubrius Fabatus was arrested en route to Parthia (*Tac. Ann.* 6.14.2). The grounds for detention may have been Augustus' travel ban on senators, but Fabatus' rank is unknown; see Woodman (2017) 146–47; Damon and Palazzolo (2019) 194.
- 78 Sources are tabulated in Nabel (2017) 11, tables 1–2. For the background on these figures, see Dąbrowa (1987); Wiesehöfer (2010); Strothman (2012); Gregoratti (2015a). They are usually discussed under the heading of Roman hostageship, on which see Allen (2006); see Strothmann (2012) 91–92 n.36; Wheeler (2016) 193 n.157; and Nabel (2017) 46–65 for the argument that the Parthians would have understood their circulation as a matter of political fosterage.

during the Antonine period,⁷⁹ and Septimius Severus was joined on his second Parthian expedition by a brother of the reigning Arsacid king.⁸⁰ Additional glimpses survive of Parthian nobility in Roman military service, and the circulation of soldiers can be demonstrated at other social levels as well.⁸¹ But it was the cross-border movement of royalty that brought dignitaries from the very highest levels of Parthian imperial power to the heart of Rome – and sometimes saw them return in the opposite direction, as well.

These exchanges are often analysed under the label of ‘diplomacy’, but if they indeed belong to that sphere, they demonstrate the inadequacy of defining this concept in state-centric terms. The unit at the centre of the circulation of Arsacids was the dynasty, not the state, and the Arsacid family is a banner example of the principle that dynasties need not be coterminous with the states that they rule. Reigning kings tend to be closely associated with state sovereignty, of course, to the extent that a king may also be called a ‘sovereign’. But kings are also the managers of ruling families that must walk a fine line between intergenerational reproduction on the one hand and dynastic stability on the other: too few dynasts forebodes extinction, while too many in one place runs the risk of internecine conflict.⁸² Arsacid residence in Rome offered relief from some of these pressures, but it also meant that the dynasty became internationalised; Arsacids could live outside of the Parthian state’s territory and play no formal part in its administration. This development meant that conflicts for the Arsacid kingship could play out on both sides of the Euphrates, in Rome no less than in Parthia. Moreover, there is no evidence that the Arsacids in the west fulfilled any of the functions of a modern diplomat for the reigning kings in Parthia. So far as the sources reveal, they were not in contact with the king himself; they did not represent him or his interests to

79 For Armenian Arsacids at Rome during the Antonine period, see *CIG* 3.6559 = *IG* 14.1472 = *OGIS* 382, a funerary inscription set up by ‘Aurelius Pacorus, king of Greater Armenia’ for his brother Merithates. According to most scholars, this Pakōr/Pacorus was the Armenian Arsacid deposed in 164 CE as part of Lucius Verus’ Parthian campaign (Fronto, *Ep. ad Verum imp.* 2.16 = van den Hout (1988) 126); for discussion, see Vinogradov (1992) 20; Ricci (1996) 581–83; van den Hout (1999) 302; Gnoli (2007) 71–74; de Jong (1997) 315 n. 14; Schottky (2010) 209–12; Frasson (2016) 170–71 n. 38.

80 Cass. Dio 75.9.3; discussion in Hartmann (2009).

81 For high-ranking Parthians in Roman service, see esp. *CIL* 3.8746 = *ILS* 2532 (the epitaph of one Tirdād/Tiridates, perhaps the son of a pretender to the Arsacid throne); and Tac. *Ann.* 6.37.3 on Ornospadēs. The Roman army had several units that were dubbed ‘Parthian’, though it is not clear how well the label describes the geographic origin or ethnicity of the troops that belonged to them. On these units, see Wheeler (2016) and (2017). On the persistence of such cross-border military service into the Sasanian period, see Heil (2006).

82 Duindam (2016) 88.

the Roman emperor; and they held no Parthian administrative post or office. If this was diplomacy, it was a variety that transcended the state and centred instead on the political unit of the dynasty.

The residence of Arsacids at Rome also facilitated and developed a final form of Roman sub-state diplomacy with Parthia: the embassy of the Parthian nobility. This was a group of elite Parthian clans that supported Arsacid supremacy but wielded considerable power of its own accord.⁸³ If the reigning Arsacid king could manipulate his dynasty by sending his family members to live at Rome, the Parthian nobles could do the same thing by bringing them back – a feat they achieved several times over the course of the first century CE. The key to their success was direct appeal to the Roman emperor, though their embassies could be received before the Senate as well.⁸⁴ Such incidents appropriated the channels of diplomacy that were otherwise the prerogative of the Arsacid king, whose grasp on Parthian sovereignty would be shaken through these collaborations among recalcitrant nobles, the Roman branch of the Arsacid family, and the Roman emperor himself. And though the resulting wars usually saw the reigning Arsacid reassert his power, such exchanges make one feature of the Parthian-Roman relationship abundantly clear: Parthia and Rome did not interact, even in the realm of diplomacy, as monolithic and unitary states. As the Arsacid family spilled over the Euphrates frontier, Parthian nobles could make their own use of diplomatic engagement to intervene – with the Roman emperor's help – in the conflicts that produced their empire's king of kings.

If Parthian-Roman diplomacy was partly the prerogative of centralised imperial authorities, then, it was also the domain of agents who variously partnered with, circumvented, or simply ignored those authorities. Local subjects, commercial chieftains, dynasts, noblemen – all skirted the formal structures of the state to bend diplomatic activity to their own ends. The composite, distributed nature of imperial sovereignty meant that neither Parthian nor Roman rulers could monopolise interstate communication, even when high politics were at stake; moreover, they may never have attempted or even thought to do

83 On the Parthian nobility, see Ziethen (1994) 178–80; Hauser (2005) 193–94; Dąbrowa (2013); Fabian (2020) 223–25; Ellerbrock (2021) 83. On the continuity of these families into the Sasanian period, see Pourshariati (2008).

84 There are four cases. For Vonones (c.8 CE), see *Mon. Anc.* 33; Joseph. *AJ* 18.46; Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.1. Frahād/Phraates (35 CE): Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2; Cass. Dio 58.26.2. Tirdād/Tiridates (35/6 CE): Tac. *Ann.* 6.32.2–3; Cass. Dio 58.26.2. Mihrdād/Meherdates (49 CE): Tac. *Ann.* 11.10.4, 12.10–11 (a passage in which Parthian ambassadors address the emperor and the Senate).

so. Diplomacy was the business of the state, but also of those who operated in parallel, in tandem, or in opposition to it.

4 Conclusion

Parthian-Roman relations show the broad applicability of the Satow model, but they reveal its shortcomings as well. The prominence of embassies, summits, and treaties demonstrates that the intimate relationship between diplomacy and state structures is not a unique feature of modern Europe. Such exchanges played a formative role in defining and locating sovereignty in Rome and Parthia, and they promoted a view of an interstate system populated by comparable imperial units. But sub-state diplomacy, cross-border intermediaries, and trans-imperial dynasts show the robust impact of diplomatic exchanges beyond the purview of imperial governments. Central authorities were variously uninterested, unable, or unwilling to suppress these forms of interaction, and in some cases they may even have promoted them. The period calls for a theorisation of diplomacy that accounts for the role of the state, but also a host of sub-state actors whose foreign horizons were not constrained by their membership in larger imperial structures.

The interplay between these two factors means that Parthian-Roman relations, far from being an arid curiosity of the past, are a salutary challenge for the future. Ancient history's failure to conform to modern theorisations of diplomacy is an opportunity, not a dead end. As the predominance of the nation-state in modern analyses of diplomacy erodes, the pre-modern world can show where the practice has been before, and perhaps where it is going next. Parthia and Rome may be far removed in time from the current era, but their relationship was governed by modes of interstate engagement whose divergence from modern norms makes them valuable resources for a world in which the nation is losing its monopoly over diplomatic activity. Ancient comparanda are useful in breaking the stranglehold of modern Europe over the analysis of high politics among states, and the inherently intercultural and comparative venture of Roman-Iranian relations is especially instructive in this regard.

But if political scientists can benefit from mining the past to understand the present, historians should be prepared to think in the opposite direction. Scholars of ancient diplomacy should contribute to trans-historical theorisations of the concept, improving the study of diplomacy in the abstract as well as in the temporal contexts of their expertise. All too often, historians of antiquity tacitly adopt the state-centric model without an explicit declaration

of their theoretical orientations. An undertheorised 'diplomacy' is then used to explain the past, when instead the past could be used to support a better theorisation of diplomacy. Recent work in political science has shown that these two goals are interrelated, and scholars of international relations have begun to meet the challenge by expanding their purview deeper back in time. Ancient historians should work forward to meet them.⁸⁵

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85 I thank John Hyland and Khodadad Rezakhani for their editorial guidance, and Peter Katzenstein for critical discussion and bibliography. Translations are my own except where otherwise indicated.

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