

B O O K R E V I E W S

BEYOND AMBASSADORS. CONSULS, MISSIONARIES, AND SPIES IN PREMODERN DIPLOMACY, ed. by Maurits Ebben and Louis Sicking (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2021), pp. 223; ISBN: 978-90-04-43884-2*GUIDO VAN MEERSBERGEN*<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3150-5891>

University of Warwick

Over the last twenty-odd years, diplomatic history has decisively moved away from an exclusive focus on sovereign states and their official diplomatic representatives and embraced the plural cast of characters that shaped the culture and practice of relations between political entities. *Beyond Ambassadors* fully embodies this trend, by exploring the crucial roles played by consuls, missionaries, and spies in late medieval and early modern diplomatic representation, negotiation, and intelligence gathering. Its case studies covering the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries challenge the now widely contested primacy of the Westphalian model and offer a welcome illustration of continuities across the medieval-to-early-modern divide. They also underline the deeply entangled nature of commercial, religious, and dynastic politics, together with the overlapping networks of actors and resources each drew on, often involving individuals who operated across multiple areas and juggled multiple aims and loyalties. As the editors explain in their introduction, the volume's 'non-state actor-oriented approach' (p. 3) thus takes a further step in questioning traditional distinctions between formal and informal diplomacy and professional and non-professional diplomats.

If the volume's introduction does not necessarily seek to break new ground, John Watkins's stimulating chapter which follows takes on the task of posing several penetrating questions. Presented as an urgent call for historians to engage with International Relations theory, Watkins' critique of recent developments in New Diplomatic History takes aim at what he sees as its lack of analytical rigour and failure to give due attention to premodern politics and 'the lineages of the modern state system' (p. 23). Asking whether 'the turn from state affairs to diplomatic processes [has] gone too far?' (p. 22), Watkins urges us to clarify our concepts of diplomacy and return to 'theorizing the nature of the premodern state' (p. 34) and the role of non-state agency in the functioning of 'international order and international justice' (p. 28).

Though essential questions in their own right, they do not reflect on the extent to which such a return to the state also carries with it a return to the Eurocentrism which New Diplomatic History has begun to challenge. Because *Beyond Ambassadors* does not address the issue of what diplomacy means when approached through a global lens, its European focus remains largely unproblematised.

Though the degree to which the contributors engage in the kind of theorization advocated by Watkins varies, several overarching observations do emerge from the seven case studies that complete the book. In examining theoretical literature on the ambassador, Dante Fedele convincingly demonstrates that premodern theorists were both well aware of the plurality of diplomatic actors and disagreed on whether lower-ranking envoys should enjoy the same legal protection enjoyed by ambassadors. One group of key actors whose status remained ambiguous were the consuls. Whilst usually not considered diplomats, consuls did perform important diplomatic duties and, as Maurits Ebben shows, were often ideally placed to influence the foreign policy of their home state. Ebben's detailed analysis of the activities of seventeenth-century Dutch consuls in Spain illustrates just how much the diplomacy of the States-General both relied on and was shaped by the commercial interest groups it sought to represent and support. It follows Louis Sicking's equally fine-grained reconstruction of the *vittes*, or permanent merchant colonies of the Zuiderzee towns of the late medieval Hanse on the Scania peninsula in southwest Sweden. Focusing on the role of the *Vogt* (the 'Hanseatic equivalent of Mediterranean consuls' (p. 83)), Sicking contributes significant insights to our understanding of the institutional development of long-distance trade and the related phenomenon of extra-territoriality.

The final four chapters highlight the central importance of missionaries and spies. Jacques Paviot revisits the thirteenth-century French and Papal embassies to the Mongols undertaken by mendicant friars, who acted not as formal ambassadors but as messengers who played vital roles in relaying information back to Europe. Felicia Roşu's fascinating discussion of the Jesuit Antonio Possevino's career between missionary activity and international politics, in turn, emphasises not just the fundamental role of religion in early modern diplomacy but also the relative autonomy and multiple loyalties of individuals like Possevino. The latter observation applies even more to the White brothers studied by Alan Marshall. His chapter traces the Irish brothers' move from military contracting to espionage in the service of England, France, and Spain as a means to illuminate the process by which intelligence became a prized commodity on the international market. Following Jean-Baptiste Santamaria's essay on espionage in late medieval France and Burgundy, which reminds us that spying had always been an integral (and largely accepted) part of diplomacy, Marshall provides a captivating account of the professionalisation of the practice by the 1650s.

Drawing on research in a wide array of languages, *Beyond Ambassadors* presents a rich offering of excellent scholarship. It adds to the growing literature on the vital contributions of non-state actors to premodern diplomacy. Together with other recent studies of the integral roles of women and non-European actors, it positively enriches our understanding of the diverse world of diplomatic culture and practice.

Guido van Meersbergen (PhD) – assistant professor in Early Modern Global History at the University of Warwick. His research focuses on early modern diplomacy, travel, ethnography, empire, and the Dutch and English East India Companies. He is the author of *Ethnography and Encounter: The Dutch and English in Seventeenth-Century South Asia* (Brill: 2022), and co-editor of *Trading Companies and Travel Knowledge in the Early Modern World* (Routledge: 2022) and the special issue ‘Gift and Tribute in Early Modern Diplomacy: Afro-Eurasian Perspectives’ (*Diplomatica* 2.2: 2020); e-mail: g.van-meersbergen@warwick.ac.uk