The Intercity Origins of Diplomacy: Consuls, Empires, and the Sea

Halvard Leira
Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Oslo, Norway
hl@nupi.no

Benjamin de Carvalho
Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Oslo, Norway
bdc@nupi.no

Abstract

City diplomacy is a fairly new topic in the study of diplomacy, and, many would argue, a fairly recent empirical phenomenon. A counterpoint to this could be to reference how the alleged origin of diplomacy in Greek antiquity was city-centered, as were the earliest forms of Renaissance diplomacy in Italy. In this essay we want to probe the connections between cities and diplomacy through problematizing what has counted as diplomacy. Our starting point is that cities have always mattered to what we could analytically refer to as diplomatic practice. Being conscious of the conceptual ambiguities, we are thus not starting from a specific definition of "city diplomacy," but from a conviction that cities have mattered and continue to matter to the practice of diplomacy.

Keywords

Introduction

City diplomacy is a fairly new topic in the study of diplomacy, and, many would argue, a fairly recent empirical phenomenon. A counterpoint to this could be to reference how the alleged origin of diplomacy in Greek antiquity

was city-centered, as were the earliest forms of Renaissance diplomacy in Italy. Cities continued to be key diplomatic players in the Holy Roman Empire and around the Mediterranean well into the 18th and 19th centuries, and they are obviously once again partaking in diplomatic activities. One could thus write the history of city diplomacy as a "fall and rise" narrative. While there is some traction to be found in such a narrative, we believe it to be too simplistic. Digging deeper, in this essay we want to probe the connections between cities and diplomacy through problematizing what has counted as diplomacy. Our starting point is that cities have always mattered to what we could analytically refer to as diplomatic practice. However, when diplomacy was first coined as a practice-concept in the late 18th century, a sharpening focus on princes, principalities and politics led to an elision of a whole host of other actors, arenas, and activities, including cities and what went on in and between them. Being conscious of the conceptual ambiguities, we are thus not starting from a specific definition of "city diplomacy," but from a conviction that cities have mattered and continue to matter to the practice of diplomacy and that our understanding of both past and current diplomacy will be enhanced by incorporating cities as both cites and actors.

To ground the argument, we start with a brief section on ways of understanding diplomacy. This is followed by a longer section where we explore some of the ways in which cities have mattered and continue to matter in and for diplomacy, with a particular emphasis on the early modern period and trade relations, before we wrap up in the conclusion.

Diplomacy Defined?

Diplomacy is a tricky term to define, since it is both an analytical and a practical concept. As a practical concept – in modern Europe, at least – it emerged nominally during the Enlightenment, subsuming among other things practices such as negotiations and titles like ambassador, and was quickly and widely adopted as a label for bilateral relations between political entities and their representatives.[1] By the middle of the 19th century, it already encompassed multilateral relations, and through the rest of 19th century and into the 20th century it was steadily expanded to include other actors and arenas. This expansion was partly practically driven, by actors claiming their activities as diplomatic, party analytically driven, by researchers considering a broadening

---

1   Leira, H. "A Conceptual History of Diplomacy." In *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy,* eds. C.M. Constantinou, P. Kerr, and P. Sharp (London: SAGE, 2016), 28–38.

field of actors and activities as diplomatic. In the remainder of this essay, as we explore the role of cities in "diplomacy" in the centuries before 1800, we will necessarily stick with an analytical understanding.

We nevertheless need to spend a little more time with the conceptual framework, since the emergence of diplomacy as a practical concept had two immediate and interrelated consequences for how we have considered what came before that conceptual congealment. First, the conceptual emergence of one specific cover-all term for state-to-state (or principal-to-principal) relations took place in conjunction with a number of other conceptual shifts.[2] In the sphere of international affairs, these conceptual shifts implied, among other things, growing state-centrism, hierarchical rankings and masculinization (in that women were largely excluded from the limited diplomatic functions they had carried out before ca. 1800). The overall effect was an emerging world where hierarchically ranked states, represented by men, were considered the central actors. Second, this rapidly naturalized world was projected analytically backwards. When diplomats and historians (and later International Relations scholars) looked to the world before the latter part of the 18th century, they saw a coherent diplomacy (even if no such term had existed at the time) and they considered this diplomacy to be more or less similar to the one they observed as the 19th and 20th century norm.

One implication of this retrofitting of a history of "diplomacy" was an exclusion of all actors who were not states or state-like, and an almost teleological reading of developmental processes leading to the society of states. For our specific purpose here, this meant that the only cities worthy of inclusion in the alleged history of diplomacy were city-states: the Greek city-states of antiquity and the Italian city-states of the Renaissance. In the Greek case the similarity has probably been significantly overstated, in the Italian case the significance of the cities *as cities* has probably been understated.

In sum, the state-centrism of diplomacy, which was largely a product of its conceptual development in modern Europe, led to a forgetting of cities which were not functionally states. As we explore below, cities have been important for what became known as diplomacy in many other ways as well, remaining so to this day. Permanent resident diplomacy is almost unthinkable without cities, and the activities of cities were both a model for and key content of what became diplomacy. Read backwards and analytically, diplomacy can be conceived largely without cities. Read forwards and in light of ongoing practices, cities are key to much of that which became known as diplomacy.

---

2   Koselleck, R. *Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

Cities and/in Diplomacy

Traditional diplomatic history, looking for precursors to the diplomacy of the 19th and 20th centuries, fastened on the shift to permanent embassies in Italy in the Renaissance.[3] Since we are not limiting our search in the same way, this break is primarily of interest in how it highlights cities as senders, receivers, and arenas of diplomacy.

States and empires have tended to receive the most attention in accounts of large-scale political change and diplomatic relations, with cities retaining a subaltern role, often limited, during the early modern period, to the Hanseatic League or the Holy Roman Empire. Yet a growing literature has made the case for cities being more than passive "venues" or sites for international relations. On the contrary, it has been argued, not only have cities been key actors, but relations between them – intercity diplomacy – have been central in the development of global international relations. Historian Wim Blockmans, for instance, has focused on the continuous importance of cities beyond the Middle Ages,[4] and together with Charles Tilly he has focused on the importance of cities for the formation of national states in Europe.[5] Conversely, Saskia Sassen has focused on the extent to which many of the political innovations which we have tended to associate with the modern state were in fact city innovations which were subsequently transposed to the state level.[6]

In this section, exploring the role of cities in the development of diplomacy, we will first look at cities as senders and receivers of representatives for merchant purposes (often called consuls), then we will discuss cities as nodes in intra- and inter-imperial networks of politics, trade and plunder and finally we will explore cities as the arenas of diplomatic activity.

Cities and Consuls

While the cities of Italy were clearly political actors, their first interest was trade. And while politics can be played by roving bands, trade has a tendency to cluster in and around cities. This should lead us to ask how the Italian cities, and

---

3   Mattingly, G. *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955); Queller, D.E. *The Office of Ambassador in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

4   Blockmans, W. "Voracious States and Obstructing Cities: An Aspect of State Formation in Preindustrial Europe" *Theory and Society* 18 (5) (1989), 733–55.

5   Tilly, C., and W. Blockmans. *Cities and The Rise of States in Europe, A.D. 1000 To 1800* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

6   Sassen, S. *Territory, Authority, Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

other cities for that matter, were used to handle issues of trade crossing political boundaries. The answers to this go back at least to the 11th century, when growing Mediterranean trade led the merchant cities of the Mediterranean, their merchants, and the host ports (typically in the Muslim Levant) to experiment with ways of organizing traders and trade.[7] The solution was the institution which we have come to know as the consular institution. Consuls were the permanent resident intermediaries between host cities and merchants, with rights of internal jurisdiction in their community of traders and obligations of external control vis-à-vis host authorities. While many of these consuls were not under any sort of formal control from home cities, others clearly reported back to leadership in their cities of origin on a wide range of issues.

At roughly the same time, the Hanseatic league of Northern German cities employed a similar system of aldermen in their factories across Northern Europe, and we know of parallel institutions in the Indian Ocean. In later renderings of diplomacy as state-to-state activity, the consular institution was read out of the equation, viewed as a parallel path and considered a late add-on to diplomatic services.[8] For the cities heavily involved in setting up what became known as permanent diplomacy, like Venice and Genoa, it nevertheless seems inconceivable that the consular example did not factor into the equation. And it bears mentioning that consular interaction remained city-based well into the 17th century, when growing royal aspirations led to attempts to bring consular interaction into the states' governing apparatus. And even at this point, consuls continued to do their work in cities, and to mix commercial and political tasks. The importance of trade and consular networks furthermore extended beyond the exemplary. When first setting up diplomacy, the city-based families and networks of long-distance traders were in many instances central for the provision of actual ambassadors.[9]

At any rate, and for our present purposes, the most important element of the early spread of consuls is the extent to which it broadens the scope of early modern diplomatic relations and focuses our attention on the relations between different cities and ports rather than inter-capital relations. As G.R. Berridge has made the case with respect to English consuls in the Ottoman empire, "The English consuls ... had unusually important responsibilities. Not

---

7   Steensgaard, N. "Consuls and Nations in the Levant from 1570–1650." *Scandiavian Economic History Review* 15 (1) (1967), 13–55; Leira, H., and I.B. Neumann. "The Many Past Lives of the Consul." In *Consular Affairs and Diplomacy*, eds. J. Melissen and A.M. Fernandez (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2011), 225–46.

8   Platt, D.C.M. *The Cinderella Service. British Consuls since 1825* (London: Longman, 1971).

9   Fletcher, C, and J.M. DeSilva. "Italian Ambassadorial Networks in Early Modern Europe – An Introduction." *Journal of Early Modern History* 14 (6) (2010), 505–12.

only were they the representatives to the local authorities of the English factors settled at these ports, especially on questions concerning their capitulatory rights, but also magistrates and mediators in their communities."[10]

The formalities surrounding the appointment of these consuls to different ports would vary between empires and change over time. English consuls, for instance, were initially merchants who were given the right to charge a small "consulage" duty on goods moving throguh their ports in order to supplement their income and only later appointed by London and salaried by trade companies.[11] The centralization of appointments did not necessarily mean that the consular service came under centralized control. In fact, the institution continued to operate on a semi-formalized basis until the 19th century. As a case in point, in spite of having been established in only three Levantine factories during the early 17th century, "a fluctuating but expanding number of smaller posts also came to be scattered throughout the Ottoman Empire."[12] As the responsibility for these consuls were transferred to the civil list with the disbanding of the Levant Company in 1825, no less than 33 consular officers were found in 22 different locations. While 13 of these had been centrally appointed, they had proceeded to appoint new ones in 11 other locations. It was remarked that there were probably "various Agents and Sub-Agents" left in addition to this.

The importance of cities in various networks thus stretched beyond the Renaissance, beyond the Mediterranean and beyond trade. In the Mediterranean, Venice and Genoa remained hubs in political and mercantile networks until the late 18th century, as did Ragusa. Across the Mediterranean, the cities of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli, although formally subordinated to the Ottoman empire, were operating as independent hubs of networks of violence, bringing in prizes and exporting slaves. These cities also received representatives from the European states, formally called consuls but carrying out a mix of what we would today refer to as diplomatic and consular tasks.

Early Modern Empires and the Sea

Broadening the gaze when exploring early modern diplomacy is even more important when considering recent literature on early modern empires which emphasizes how these empires were reminiscent of networks of power bases.

---

10   Berridge, G.R. *British Diplomacy in Turkey, 1583 to the Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 75.
11   Ibid., 76–77.
12   Ibid., 78.

Early modern empires typically relied heavily on seaborne power for trade, warfare, and governance, and this limited their reach beyond distant shorelines. These empires, then, to borrow from Klein and Mackethun could best be described as connected networks of "maritime contact zones."[13] The term "thalassocracy" has hitherto largely been reserved for the Dutch and Portuguese empires in the modern period.[14] Nevertheless, in terms of the challenge the sea posed to the governance of distant lands – or ports – and the extent to which their continuous connection relied mostly on sea lanes, it is not a stretch to argue that most European colonial empires of the early modern period had clear elements of a thalassocracy – a state with primarily maritime realms, an empire at sea, or a seaborne empire. Many early modern empires, then, both those with bases in Europe and those with bases in Asia, could be understood as thalassocracies, as port-based systems.[15]

This in turn had implications for the type of governance one could expect to establish beyond European shores. These empires governed through agents or "middlemen" which to varying degrees were tied to the metropole.[16] Orders and reports were transmitted by ship, and much of the daily governance of imperial dominions happened on the basis of delegated authority. The type of governance which ensued would vary geographically and according to dependencies, but in general there was just as little centralized control over overseas territories as there was control over the multitude of ports and access points. And, although models of imperial rule tend to assume that trade with imperial dominions took place largely with the metropole, in accordance with European edicts and laws, the reality was much different.[17] Trade between "peripheries" thrived just as much as trade with other European powers. This led to a need for representation of some sort, and the consular service being much less formalized that formal embassies or envoys allowed for semi-formalized diplomatic relations in the most important ports. If one takes into account the importance of consuls

---

13   Klein, B., and G. Mackethun, eds. *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

14   Strootman, R. "Introduction: Maritime Empires in World History." In *Empires of the Sea*, eds. R. Strootman, F. van den Eijnde, and R. van Wijk (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 1–38.

15   See the discussion in de Carvalho, B., and H. Leira, eds. *The Sea and International Relations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

16   Nexon, D.H., and T. Wright. "What's at Stake in the American Empire Debate?" *American Political Science Review* 101 (2) (2007), 253–71; Motyl, A.J. *Revolutions, Nations, Empires: Conceptual Limits and Theoretical Possibilities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Motyl, A.J. *Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse, and Revival of Empires* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

17   Mulich, J. *In a Sea of Empires. Networks and Crossings in the Revolutionary Caribbean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

not just for facilitating trade, but also in terms of forging links between different parts of imperial peripheries and different European capitals, the importance of diplomacy in this formative phase of global relations becomes all the more important, especially since these numerous ports did not develop uniformly, nor, eventually, necessarily as part of the same state.

The picture which emerges from this is one in which diplomatic relations in the form of intercity ties between trading factories are broader in both scope and number than if we solely focus on direct relations with European capitals. It follows from this that the workings of the international system during the early modern period functioned in a more integrated fashion that we have hitherto assumed, and that diplomacy broadly defined played a larger role in everyday early modern international relations.

Thalassocracies also illustrate how inter-imperial interaction would be city-based, and how there was not necessarily a strict boundary between how relations were conducted between units and what was formally within units. The most obvious example of this concerns the relations within the Holy Roman Empire, which have over the last decades increasingly been described as diplomatic.[18] Among the key players here, also with their own independent relations with other polities within and outside of the empire were the free cities, like Hamburg, engaging not only in commercial matters, but actively seeking political protection and safeguarding their status and prestige, while themselves acting as a stage where diplomatic intrigue could play itself out.[19]

Cities as Diplomatic Sites

The Hamburg example finally brings us to cities as the arenas of diplomacy. The much earlier example of Byzantine diplomacy demonstrates the importance of the city as arena for diplomacy even before the advent of permanent representation. When receiving emissaries from various tributary, allied, or competing polities, the Byzantine hosts would use the city and its palaces as an elaborate stage-prop, designed so as to overawe the guests and demonstrate the superiority of Byzantium.[20] When, resident embassies emerged in the 15th

---

18   Windler, C. "Afterword: From Social Status to Sovereignty – Practices of Foreign Relations from the Renaissance to the *Sattelzeit*." In *Practices of Diplomacy in the Early Modern World c. 1410–1800,* eds. T.A. Sowerby and J. Hennings (Milton Park: Routledge, 2017), 254–65.

19   Lindemann, M. *Liaisons Dangereuses. Sex, Law, and Diplomacy in the Age of Frederick the Great* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

20   Neumann, I.B. "Sublime Diplomacy: Byzantine, Early Modern, Contemporary." *Millennium* 34 (3) (2006), 865–88.

and 16th centuries, they were clearly a phenomenon of cities, sent by cities and residing in cities.

The thalassocracies mentioned above also illustrate the importance of cities as sites. Even though relations between such entities could formally be between principals as heads of territories, the "action" (so to speak) often took place in the ports. One example of this can be found in the relationship between France, the United Kingdom and Denmark during the wars of the 18th century, where Denmark was in most instances neutral.[21] Formally, diplomatic relations were conducted in the capitals, between the resident ambassadors and the kings' ministers. A lot of the "everyday diplomacy" nevertheless took place in Norwegian ports. To avoid recapture, French privateers would typically bring in prizes captured in the North Sea to Norwegian ports. In these ports one could then find not only prize-courts with French and Norwegian participation, but also French consuls engaging in the undercover outfitting of privateers, prisoner-of-war exchanges carried out between French and English consuls and Norwegian-born consuls for the warring powers trying to protect Norwegian interests in times of war.

Even with the establishment of court societies, in the 17th century, the diplomats continued to live and worked in cities. And while the relationship between ambassadors and princes could take place at court, the interactions within the corps diplomatique and between the members of corps diplomatique and the local elites would typically take place in the palais and the salons of the cities. To this day, the petty practices of diplomatic immunity, such as in the refusal to pay parking tickets, play themselves out in the relations between diplomats and local city authorities.

Conclusion

The conceptual congealment in the latter 18th century of several different practices, actors and places into "diplomacy," brought with it an almost immediate forgetting of what had come before. If we eschew state-centric teleology, it is easy to see that what we now think of as diplomacy grew partly (and slowly) out of inter-city networks from the 11th century onwards. City-to-city

---

21   This paragraph builds on Leira, H., and B. de Carvalho. "Privateers of the North Sea: At Worlds End. French Privateers in Norwegian Waters." In *Mercenaries, Pirates, Bandits and Empires. Private Violence in Historical Context,* eds. A. Colás and B. Mabee (London/New York: Hurst/Columbia, 2010), 55–82. We use "Denmark" here as shorthand for the Copenhagen-centered polity which included Norway, the duchies of Sleswig and Holstein, Atlantic islands, and overseas colonial holdings.

(or "intercity"; as well as city-to-state) relations continued to matter even after 1800 but were then more often than not relegated to "consular" status. Throughout, cities have remained the central physical arenas for diplomatic interaction. An account of diplomacy which is based on inter-polity interaction, rather than a predetermined essence of diplomacy, drawn from state-to-state political interaction, is incomplete if it does not include cities.

Acknowledgements