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2 Exotic gifts and learned envoys. Sixth-century cultural diplomacy on the move

2.1 Introduction

Diplomacy has always been a fundamental part of the relationship between different political entities, but its study has been deeply influenced by the academic disciplines that have examined it. Broadly speaking, the history of diplomacy may be divided into two chronological sections, the ancient and medieval period on the one hand, and the modern period on the other, ranging from the Renaissance until the present day.[1] This division is relevant not only as far as chronology is concerned but also with regard to methodology, since there has been surprisingly little exchange of ideas and approaches between the research related to ancient and modern diplomacy.[2] Academic disciplines focussing on international relations, foreign policy analysis and diplomatic history are primarily interested in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A few studies reach as far as the Peace of Westphalia or even the fifteenth century, but ancient and medieval societies are for the most part almost entirely neglected.[3]

Researchers focussing on modern states usually trace the diplomatic activity back to a theoretical model or a recurring pattern of initiatives, which leads to a better understanding of the aims of both the governments and the envoys themselves. In contrast, the study of premodern diplomacy mostly relies on a traditional text-based approach by considering almost exclusively the written sources relating to an embassy or its outcome, which are examined by using the traditional tools of ancient and medieval history, such as source criticism, philological analysis or prosopography.[4] Even

1 See the historical overview by *Black*, A History (2010). This traditional approach has been adopted – among others – in influential works by *Nicolson*, Diplomacy (1939), and *Kissinger*, Diplomacy (1994). A recent, notable exception is represented by *Malchow*, History (2020).

2 Few meaningful attempts have been made to bridge this gap, usually by international relations scholars. See e.g. *de Carvalho/Costa Lopez/Leira* (Eds.), Routledge Handbook (2021). In spite of these recent efforts, the "eternal divide" (*Lawson*, The Eternal Divide [2012]) between history – especially of the ancient and medieval world – and international relations still hampers attempts to achieve a fruitful cooperation between these disciplines.

3 See e.g., *Faucher*, Cultural Diplomacy (2016), according to whom the earliest cases of cultural diplomacy may be found in the seventeenth century, entirely ignoring the classical and medieval period.

4 The perspective of international relations scholars is summarised by *de Carvalho/Costa Lopez/Leira* (Eds.), Routledge Handbook (2021), 4: "historians engage with historical topics, select and interpret sources, and write histories in the context of conversations that, while may at some level resonate

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the birth of the so-called New Diplomatic History has not overly changed this situation, since it has merely encouraged scholars to take into account those historical approaches developed during the last decades (e.g. the linguistic turn, material culture, or gender studies).[5] Certainly, recent attempts to shift the focus to non-verbal communication, diplomatic gifts and rituals are beginning to offer new insights.[6] However, scholars continue to ignore the theoretical framework that is commonly used to analyse modern diplomacy, simply because it falls outside the traditional boundaries of ancient and medieval history. This paper attempts to bridge this gap and understand how far the concept of cultural diplomacy may be used to better understand sixth-century embassies and diplomatic gifts.

Before analysing this topic in more detail, some further preliminary notes are necessary to define "diplomacy" and "cultural "diplomacy". Nowadays, the term "diplomacy" is often used to refer to international relations in the late antique world,[7] although some scholars argue that it should preferably be applied only to relations between modern states.[8] It is true that some features of today's diplomatic activity were present during late Antiquity – suffice it to think of the papal apocrisary in Constantinople, who was similar to a modern ambassador –, yet these coincidences cannot overshadow the differences between modern diplomatic practice and the customs of ancient and medieval societies, where it is often difficult to find political entities that may be considered as states.[9] Major tools, procedures, and customs that form the basis of the modern idea of diplomacy have been elaborated mainly by European states over the last five centuries.[10] For instance, the gradual professionalisation of ambassadors, who came to be understood as representatives of a state and not of a single ruler, together with the formalisation of credentials, the establishment of permanent embassies, and the creation of public offices exclusively aimed at managing relations with other states, are primarily modern innovations. However, even if the

with IR concerns, are still disciplinary-specific". For an introduction to late antique diplomatic practice, see *Gillett*, Envoys (2003), and *Becker/Drocourt* (Eds.), Ambassadeurs (2012).

5 *Watkins*, Toward a New Diplomatic History (2008).

6 See e.g. *Becker*, Verbal and Nonverbal Diplomatic Communication (2018), *Nechaeva*, Embassies (2014), and *Pohl*, Ritualized Encounters (2013).

7 Cf. e.g. *Chrysos*, Byzantine Diplomacy (1992), *Lee*, Abduction (2009), and *Brown*, "Charismatic" Goods (2018).

8 *Le Jan*, Les relations (2011), 13: "Le terme 'diplomatique' est apparu au XVII^{e} siècle et s'appliquait aux relations entre États, assurées par des missions confiées à des ambassadeurs ou des 'envoyés en mission'"; see also *Gillett*, Envoys (2003), 5.

9 Cf. e.g. *Moeglin*, Existe-t-il un ordre diplomatique (2011): the Middle Ages witnessed the gradual professionalisation of ambassadors, but they remained dilettantes. *Becker*, From Hegemony (2020), 30, writes about proto-diplomatic careers. Some historians consider the Roman Empire as a state, see e.g. *Flaig*, Den Kaiser (2019), 39–51 (with bibliography).

10 See *Black*, A History (2010), especially 43–45 (with bibliography). One can only study (modern) diplomacy from the fifteenth/sixteenth century onwards.

concepts of "state" and "diplomacy" are ill-suited to ancient and medieval societies, it does not follow that the methodological approaches developed by other disciplines cannot be borrowed to study the late antique world, especially since this is standard practice with regard to other topics. Let us think, for instance, of Marcel Mauss's theories of reciprocity and gift exchange, which are commonly applied to the late antique and medieval world, although based on early twentieth-century Polynesia.[11] If anthropology and sociology can contribute to the study of late Antiquity, there is no reason why we should neglect international relations and diplomatic history.

In ancient and modern societies, diplomacy, as Blockley puts it, includes both "direct communication, state to state" and "the art of managing the intercourse and adjusting the relations of states by negotiations".[12] In this paper, I will focus on specific aspects of the latter definition of diplomacy, since I will examine some initiatives sharing meaningful similarities with a political strategy commonly defined as cultural diplomacy.[13] First of all, however, it is necessary to outline the main features of cultural diplomacy. According to Goff, "cultural diplomacy springs from two premises: first, that good relations can take root in the fertile ground of understanding and respect. [. . .] Second, cultural diplomacy rests on the assumption that art, language, and education are among the most significant entry points into a culture".[14] Nowadays, the focus of cultural diplomacy is mostly on facilitating mutual understanding and offsetting stereotypes, and its efforts are often aimed at reaching as many individuals as possible.[15] In a mass society deeply influenced by newspapers, television, and social media, convincing public opinion with regard to a given topic is of paramount importance. However, cultural diplomacy was, and still is, mainly aimed at the elites or the ruling class in societies where public opinion matters little.

When turning from the addressees to the actors of cultural diplomacy, it is important to distinguish between cultural diplomats and private philanthropists. The for-

11 *Mauss*, Essai (1925). See e.g. *Curta*, Merovingian and Carolingian Gift Giving (2006) with bibliography, *Nechaeva*, Embassies (2014), 163–165, and *Kustermans*, Gift-Giving (2021).

12 *Blockley*, East Roman Foreign Policy (1992), 1. Scholars of diplomatic activity have always been reluctant to systematically theorise its essential components (unlike those of international relations), see *Jönsson*, Theorising Diplomacy (2012).

13 For a brief history of the concept of cultural diplomacy, see *Faucher*, Cultural Diplomacy (2016), 375–378. A summary of cultural diplomacy in the contemporary academic and diplomatic world is offered by *Isernia/Lamonica* in Cultural Diplomacy (2016). See also *Gienow-Hecht/Donfried*, The Model (2010).

14 *Goff*, Cultural Diplomacy (2013), 419–420. Of course, the exact meaning of "culture" becomes crucial when dealing with cultural diplomacy, but the decades-long debate concerning this term cannot be summarised in a footnote. An acceptable working definition of culture is one offered by a practitioner of cultural diplomacy, namely *Arndt* in The First Resort (2005), xviii: "the complex of factors of mind and values which define a country or group, especially those factors transmitted by the processes of intellect, i.e., by ideas".

15 It is not always easy to distinguish between cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy, but the latter is often considered a subdivision of the former, see *Cull*, Public Diplomacy (2008), 33.

mer always act on a ruler's or government's behalf, usually knowingly but sometimes unknowingly, whereas the latter aim to foster their own agenda.[16] Although there are borderline cases, an initiative of cultural diplomacy usually requires that those travelling to foreign countries, whether welcoming foreign envoys or preparing an embassy, act on behalf of their government or sovereign, either in an official or unofficial capacity.

At the heart of every diplomatic initiative, be it a traditional negotiation or an attempt to win over the hearts and minds of a neighbouring nation, there is always a political goal, which ultimately consists in advancing the interests of a nation or ruler. There are different ways to achieve this purpose, yet – to quote Morgenthau – they "can be reduced to one of three basic types. A political policy seeks either to keep power, to increase power, or to demonstrate power".[17] As the next pages will show, sixth-century cultural diplomacy was often employed to achieve these goals.[18]

2.2 Two clocks to the Burgundians

After this theoretical introduction, it is now time to address late antique cultural diplomacy. The first case study concerns an embassy sent around 507 by Theoderic, king of the Ostrogoths, to Gundobad, king of the Burgundians.[19] Before his envoys left Ravenna, Theoderic sent a letter to Boethius, the famous philosopher, asking him to prepare a water-clock and a sundial to be sent to Gundobad as diplomatic gifts. The Burgundian king had heard of these clocks from his ambassadors and had requested them from Theoderic, who willingly obliged him. The opening of the letter is worth reading in full:

> I should not reject requests made by neighbouring kings to please their vanity, since a small expenditure can often purchase more than great riches. For sweetness and pleasure many times produce what weapons fail to do. May it then serve the state, even when I seem to play. For it is for this reason that I am looking for toys, to achieve a serious purpose by their means.[20]

16 *Arndt*, The First Resort (2005), xviii: "cultural diplomacy can only be said to take place when formal diplomats, serving national governments, try [. . .] to advance national interests". See also *Ang/Raj Isar/Mar*, Cultural Diplomacy (2015).

17 *Morgenthau*, Politics (1948), 21. For a recent conceptual analysis of power in international relations, see *Baldwin*, Power (2016).

18 A history of cultural diplomacy from Antiquity to the present-day is still a major desideratum. A very brief outline (up to the French Revolution) can be found in *Arndt*, The First Resort (2005), 1–10.

19 For a general introduction to this embassy, see *Shanzer*, Two Clocks (1997).

20 Cassiodorus, Variae 1.45.1. Trans. *Barnish*, 20; original, Ed. *Fridh*: *Spernenda non sunt quae a vicinis regibus praesumptionis gratia postulantur, dum plerumque res parvae plus praevalent praestare quam magnae possunt optinere divitiae. Frequenter enim quod arma explere nequeunt, oblectamenta suavita-*

This document was actually written by Cassiodorus, a member of the senatorial aristocracy who worked at the court of Ravenna for more than thirty years and was often entrusted with the drafting of letters. It undoubtedly expressed concepts that were approved by the king.[21] Cassiodorus, and therefore Theoderic, comes very close to a modern conceptualisation of cultural diplomacy, showing that the underlying ideas of this approach to international relations were already present in sixth-century political communication. The juxtaposition of weapons and pleasure is especially interesting since, at the heart of cultural diplomacy, there is the attempt to pursue a foreign policy goal through attraction and not coercion.[22] Equally meaningful is the king's reference to his willingness to "play" and "look for toys", as it indicates that gifts and cultural exchanges were considered a crucial part of diplomatic activity. Of course, this has been true for centuries, but what matters here is that Cassiodorus does not merely report a case of gift-giving with diplomatic undertones. Rather, he also makes an attempt at theorising this practice.

Most undertakings of cultural diplomacy have both short- and long-term purposes. The former are usually connected with the initiative itself and have a limited scope. For instance, if the US embassy sponsored an exhibition of American art in Russia during the Cold War, the immediate aim was to allow Soviet citizens to better understand American art. However, there is usually a long-term objective as well, which cannot be fully appreciated if we are unaware of the historical background underpinning each initiative. Sticking to the aforementioned example, the US embassy aimed to counter Soviet propaganda and stress the positive aspects of the American way of life. This may have led some members of the Russian intelligentsia – or even the government – to adopt a less hostile stance towards the US, an objective that could have become quite relevant (for instance) in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Short- and long-term objectives can be found in Theoderic's letter as well. The king

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tis imponunt. Sit ergo pro re publica et cum ludere videmur. Nam ideo voluptuosa quaerimus, ut per ipsa seria compleamus.

21 The *Variae* have moved to the forefront of scholarly debate on sixth-century Italy during the last few decades. The traditional thesis proposes that this letter collection was published before 540 (without significant alterations) to serve as an epistolary model and to bear witness to the political importance assumed by rhetoric and style during the Ostrogothic kingdom. This claim has been challenged by *Bjornlie*, Politics (2013), who argues that the *Variae* was instead carefully edited (altering several documents) and published during Cassiodorus's stay in Constantinople in order to favour his return to the political fray in either Byzantium or Ravenna. Any changes that the letters underwent during the editorial process undoubtedly deserve the utmost attention, but Bjornlie's reconstruction has been met with considerable scepticism – see the reviews by *Wiemer* (2013), and *Heather* (2016) – since it does not take into due consideration what Cassiodorus writes in the preface of his work, namely that he was writing in order to provide future public servants with an epistolary model. Bjornlie's endeavours also overlook the true significance of Cassiodorus's conversion, which put an end to any desire to return to his previous life, as clearly shown by his religious works – and argued by *Cristini*, Oblivio (2022). For a more balanced account of Cassiodorus's aims, see *Giardina*, Cassiodoro (2006).

22 *Goff*, Cultural Diplomacy (2013), 420.

writes that "by obtaining and enjoying these pleasures, the Burgundians will experience a wonder which to me is a common-place".[23] The water-clock and the sun-dial are used to demonstrate the superiority of the Ostrogoths and inspire awe. This concept is clearly expressed at the end of the letter as well. When the Burgundians "have turned from their amazement", Theoderic remarks, "they will not dare to think themselves the equals of us, among whom, as they know, sages have thought up such devices".[24] To achieve this goal, it was paramount to rely on men like Boethius, who were willing and able to act as cultural diplomats, even if they did not take part in the embassy itself.

Theoderic was not interested in a mere display of wealth and technological prowess, however. In 507, the Franks were organising a military campaign against the Visigoths, who were allies of the Ostrogoths, and the Burgundians seemed willing to side with Clovis, even though Gundobad's son had married Theoderic's daughter.[25] Therefore, the Ostrogothic king tried to convince the Burgundians not to cast in their lot with his enemies. To this end, he organised both traditional embassies – attested by other letters – and an initiative of cultural diplomacy, in the hope of contributing to the wider success of his political strategy.[26] In this case, cultural diplomacy was aimed at keeping power – to use Morgenthau's conceptual model –, since Theoderic was trying to uphold the *status quo* in Gaul in the hope that retaining the loyalty of Gundobad may have dissuaded Clovis from declaring war upon the Visigoths.

2.3 Visiting philosophers and doctors at the court of Chosroes

In late Antiquity, learned envoys were as important for the success of an embassy as precious gifts, perhaps even more so, as indicated by several instances of embassies sent from the eastern Roman Empire to Persia. Sometime after 532, Emperor Justinian dispatched an envoy named Areobindus and a Syrian doctor named Uranius to the court of Chosroes.[27] Our only source about this embassy, namely the historian Agathias, was not on friendly terms with Uranius, whom he describes as a braggart, a

23 Cassiodorus, Variae 1.45.2. Trans. *Barnish*, 20 (modified); original, Ed. *Fridh*: *quatenus impetratis delectationibus perfruendo, quod nobis cottidianum, illis videatur esse miraculum*.

24 Cassiodorus, Variae 1.45.12. Trans. *Barnish*, 23; original, Ed. *Fridh*: *quando fuerint ab stupore conversi, non audebunt se aequales nobis dicere, apud quos sciunt sapientes talia cogitasse*.

25 See most recently *Stadermann*, Restitutio (2020), 8–21.

26 Theoderic sent embassies to the Visigoths, Burgundians, Franks, and three other Northern peoples to avert the outbreak of the war. See Cassiodorus, Variae 3.1–4.

27 See PLRE 3. Ed. *Martindale*, 110 (Areobindus 3) and 1393 (Uranius). On doctors acting as diplomats, see *Blockley*, Doctors (1980).

drunkard, and a buffoon. This portrait might not be entirely honest, however, since the doctor was chosen to be part of an important embassy and managed to charm Chosroes, who was impressed by his knowledge of philosophy.[28] Agathias remarks that this was "the victory of ignorance among the ignorant",[29] yet he is forced to admit – with a tint of envy – that the Persian king "gave Uranius a huge sum of money, made him dine at his own table and accorded him the unprecedented honour of passing the cup to him. He swore on many occasions that he had never before seen his equal".[30] The aftermath of this embassy is noteworthy. Agathias reports that "when Uranius returned home Chosroes sent him the most delightful letters, in which he showed him all the respect of a disciple for his master. [. . .] Uranius managed, by dint of singing the praises of the barbarian king, to convince the general public with his portrayal of him as a man of learning".[31]

This episode is a case study of cultural diplomacy working both ways. Justinian decided to appoint a famous doctor who was well versed in the teachings of Aristotle and the Sceptics as his envoy, since he knew that Chosroes was deeply interested in both medicine and philosophy.[32] His strategy went according to plan, since the Persian king was fascinated by his learned guest. Agathias does not write whether or not this circumstance influenced the outcome of the embassy favourably, but it may well have done, since relations between the Persians and the Empire remained peaceful until 540. However, it is also possible that Chosroes purposely went out of his way to please and impress Uranius, undertaking his own initiative of cultural diplomacy that later proved to be highly successful.

Not unlike Theoderic's embassy to Gundobad, the diplomatic mission undertaken by Uranius had short- and long-term objectives. To clarify the latter, it is necessary to dwell briefly on another episode that occurred a few years earlier. Around 529, Justinian closed the Athenian Neoplatonic Academy, or at least prohibited some of its leading philosophers from teaching.[33] Seven of them decided to go to Persia, where they

28 See *Cameron*, Agathias (1970), 104–105 and 122; *Frendo*, Agathias (2004).

29 Agathias, Historiae 2.30.1. Trans. *Frendo*; original, Ed. *Keydell*: οὐκ εἰδὼς ἐν οὐκ εἰδόσιν ἐνίκα, with an allusion to Plato, Gorgias 459b.

30 Agathias, Historiae 2.30.2–3. Trans. *Frendo* (modified); original, Ed. *Keydell*: χρημάτων τέ οἱ δωρήσασθαι πλῆθος καὶ κοινῆς μεταδοῦναι τραπέζης καὶ ἀπάρ ξασθαι φιλοτησίας, οὔπω τοῦτο ἐπ' ἄλλῳ τῳ γεγενημένον, ἐπόμνυσθαί τε πολλάκις ἢ μὴν οὐπώποτε τοιόνδε ἄνδρα ἑωρακέναι. καίτοι πρότερον ἀρίστους ὡς ἀληθῶς ἐτεθέατο φιλοσόφους, ἐνθένδε ὡς αὐτὸν ἀφικομένους.

31 Agathias, Historiae 2.32.2–3. Trans. *Frendo* (modified); original, Ed. *Keydell*: τοιγάρτοι καὶ ἐνταῦθά οἱ ἐπανελ θόντι γράμματά τε κεχαρισμένα ἔστελλε καὶ διδασκάλῳ ἐχρῆτο. (. . .) τῷ πολλάκις ὑμνεῖν τὸν βάρβαρον καὶ δι' ἐπαίνου ποιεῖσθαι αὐτὸς δή που κατὰ τὸ μᾶλλον ἔπεισε τοὺς πολλούς, ὡς εἴη σφόδρα πεπαιδευμένος.

32 Agathias, Historiae 2.29.9, implies that it was Areobindus, Justinian's official envoy, who decided to bring Uranius with him, but it is unlikely that the choice of the envoys was reached without the emperor's approval.

33 See the seminal paper by *Cameron*, The Last Days (1969); more recently, see *Hartmann*, Geist (2002).

were warmly welcomed by Chosroes, but soon realised that he was not the philosopher-king he claimed to be and decided to return to the Empire. Chosroes inserted a clause into the treaty he was about to sign with Justinian, to the effect that the philosophers should be allowed to live in peace without being forced to convert to Christianity. Agathias reports that the Persian king made the observance of the treaty, the so-called "Eternal Peace", conditional on the implementation of this clause.[34]

Against this background, Uranius's embassy acquires a new significance. Justinian was eager to stress the fact that philosophy was held in high esteem at Constantinople, and possibly reassure Chosroes that he was complying with the provisions of the treaty. At the same time, the Persian king aimed to show that he was indeed a wise and learned man, since the hasty departure from Persia of the seven Neoplatonic philosophers who had previously found refuge there might have harmed his reputation of being a philosopher-king. To use Morgenthau's conceptual model again, the embassy served both Justinian and Chosroes to demonstrate power, which is represented in this case by their respect towards philosophy and its practitioners. This was a long-term objective of paramount importance, as it could guarantee the mutual observance of the Eternal Peace. Moreover, as Justinian showed an alarming inclination towards invading neighbouring kingdoms in the mid-530s, Chosroes deemed it advisable to be portrayed as a civilised, wise king, rather than as a violent barbarian.

A similar episode involving a doctor occurred a decade later. Procopius of Caesarea reports that a physician named Tribunus had cured Chosroes of a severe illness, and the king insisted that Justinian allow the doctor to stay with him for a year when the Persians began the negotiations for reaching a truce in 545. The emperor promptly obliged him and Chosroes was so satisfied with Tribunus's services that he granted the release of more than three thousand East Roman prisoners.[35] While in Persia, Tribunus reportedly convinced Chosroes to found a hospital.[36]

Once again, a doctor acted as a cultural diplomat and undertook a goodwill mission. However, the main focus of Tribunus's embassy is not philosophy, but medical knowledge, which Chosroes much appreciated. This allowed Justinian to stress the excellence of East Roman physicians and secure the release of many prisoners. Procopius's narrative is too short to determine whether the emperor had instructed Tribunus to ask for such a reward, but it may well have been that Chosroes was trying to win over Tribunus as he had done with Uranius, since willingness to honour a skilled physician was considered a mark of wisdom. This display of cultural diplomacy, not

34 Agathias, Historiae 2.30–31. See *Nechaeva*, Seven Hellenes (2017).

35 Procopius of Caesarea, Bellum Persicum 2.28.8–11, Bellum Gothicum 4.10.11–16. Ed. *Dewing*/*Kaldellis*. See also *Blockley*, Doctors (1980), 96, and PLRE 3. Ed. *Martindale*, 1342 (Tribunus 2).

36 *Blockley*, Doctors (1980), 96, considers this information as certain, but Pseudo-Zacharias, Historia Ecclesiastica 12.7. Ed. *Greatrex*, 455, is not unequivocal since the initiative was seemingly taken following the advice of several doctors. Although Tribunus may well have been one of them, it remains uncertain.

unlike the one recounted by Agathias above, enabled both Chosroes and Justinian to demonstrate their power, consisting of either knowledge or the ability to appreciate its importance and reward its practitioners.

2.4 Relics and poems between Gaul and Constantinople

A further case study of two-way cultural diplomacy is represented by an embassy that emperor Justin II dispatched to Gaul during the first years of his reign, carrying a fragment of the True Cross.[37] According to Gregory of Tours, the relic had been requested by Radegund, a Thuringian princess who had married the Frankish king Chlotar I before becoming a nun, later founding an abbey at Poitiers.[38] Radegund possibly acted on behalf of Chlotar's heir, Sigebert, who took advantage of her contacts with the court of Constantinople. Justin II and his wife Sophia obligingly sent the relic to Gaul and, a few months later, received a learned Latin poem written by Venantius Fortunatus as a token of gratitude.[39]

These gifts conveyed messages that went well beyond the objects themselves. The Empire showed that he controlled Jerusalem and the most important relic of the whole Christian world, thereby stressing its hegemony over the post-Roman kingdoms. At the same time, the Franks indicated that Gaul still hosted learned men who were able to write elaborate Latin poems. The accession of Justin II in 565 was celebrated by a Latin panegyric written by Corippus, confirming the high esteem in which Latin poetry was held at the court of Constantinople.[40] A few years later, the emperor undoubtedly appreciated a poem thanking him by reporting that all regions of Gaul were singing his praises and that even far-away Britain had gladly joined the chorus.[41] Winning fame was the short-term purpose of the emperor and he was suc-

37 Another fragment was sent to Rome, see *Brennan*, The Relic (2021).

38 See Gregory of Tours, Historiae 9.40. Ed. *Krusch*: *postquam Maroveus episcopatum urbis adeptus est, acceptis epistulis Sygiberthi regis, pro fide ac devotione Radegundis beata in partibus Orientis clericos distinat pro dominicae crucis ligno ac sanctorum apostolorum ceterorumque martyrum reliquiis. Qui euntes detulerunt haec pignora.* A later but more detailed account is offered by Baudonivia, De Vita Sanctae Radegundis 2.16. Ed. *Krusch*, 388–389. On Radegund, see *Pietri/Heijmans*, Prosopographie (2013), 1569–1584, especially 1575–1576 (the cross may have arrived at Poitiers in 568/569), as well as *Huber-Rebenich*, Prinzessin Radegunde (2009).

39 Venantius Fortunatus, Carminum Appendix 2. Ed. *Leo*. On Venantius's relationship with Sigebert and Radegund, see *Brennan*, The Career (1985), 59–63.

40 See *Smolak*, "Accept a Roman Song" (2019).

41 Venantius Fortunatus, Carminum Appendix 2.27–32. Ed. *Leo*. See also vv. 45–46, indicating that the whole world sung the emperor's praises: *Haec tua laus, princeps, cum sole cucurrit in orbe / quo genus est hominum huc tuus intrat honor*.

cessful, since the arrival of a fragment of the True Cross in Gaul was bound to spark much interest and increase the prestige of Constantinople.

However, cultural diplomacy usually had long-term goals as well, and this case is no exception. The Empire was facing a difficult situation when Justin II ascended the throne. Italy was still reeling from the devastations of the Gothic War, the Lombards loomed over its northern regions, the Avars threatened the Balkans, a fragile peace treaty with Persia could be violated at any time, and Africa had just been pacified.[42] Moreover, Justinian had embraced a form of Aphthartodocetism in his final years, thereby becoming heretic in the eyes of many western bishops.[43] Constantinople desperately needed allies, and the Franks may have proved willing to defend Italy or fight against the Lombards. Interestingly, Radegund dispatched her envoys to Constantinople only after receiving a message from Sigebert. As Widdowson and Esders have convincingly argued, the relic request was part of current Frankish-imperial diplomatic relations.[44] Justin hoped to increase his power – to borrow Morgenthau's conceptual model – by emphasizing that he could gift precious relics to his allies.[45]

On the other hand, Sigebert was busy consolidating his kingdom in the 560s. He married a Visigothic princess, repelled the attacks of the Avars, and occupied part of the territories ruled by his brothers.[46] It would have been unsurprising if he had taken advantage of Radegund's fame to open negotiations with Constantinople.[47] Venantius Fortunatus was close to Sigebert, thus he possibly wrote the poem to Justin II on behalf of both Radegund and the king. Cultural diplomacy was paramount for Sige-

42 For an overview of the history of the Empire under Justin II, see *Whitby*, The Successors (2000), 86–94.

43 See *Capizzi*, Giustiniano (1994), 143–149, and most recently *Roggo*, The Deposition (2019). Justinian's theological decisions were harshly criticised by Nicetius of Trier, see Epistolae Austrasicae 7. Ed. *Gundlach*.

44 *Widdowson*, Merovingian Partitions (2009), 13–14; *Esders*, Avenger (2014), 34–37. See also *Brennan*, The Relic (2021).

45 See *Brennan*, The Relic (2021), 71: "It was a diplomacy that sought to influence and attract rather than coerce, negotiate or bargain. From a position of cultural dominance the emperor was able to bestow spiritual and artistic treasures in Gaul". Brennan sketches an accurate definition of late antique cultural diplomacy, but he does not take advantage of the theoretical framework offered by international relations studies for his analysis. See also *Esders*, Gallic Politics (2016), 436–437: the relics of saint Polyeuctus were transferred from Constantinople to Metz, the Austrasian capital, around the same time, possibly reaching Gaul together with the relics of the True Cross.

46 *James*, The Franks (1988), 169–174. See also *Esders*, Avenger (2014).

47 *Esders*, The Merovingians (2020), 353. It is likely that Radegund's first embassy carried the poem *De Excidio Thoringiae* (Venantius Fortunatus, Carminum Appendix 1. Ed. *Leo*) to Constantinople, a poem ostensibly written by the abbess herself and addressed to her cousin. Regardless of its actual authorship (Venantius probably wrote it, see *Wasyl*, An Aggrieved Heroine [2015]), the poem showed the culture of Sigebert's subjects, who were able to achieve a proficiency in Latin comparable to that of Corippus. It was possibly aimed at showing that Radegund deserved to receive the relic of the True Cross, see *Huber-Rebenich*, Prinzessin Radegunde (2009), 240–244.

bert, since he had to compete with his brothers for hegemony over Gaul. If he showed Justin II that he had poets capable of writing in faultless Latin at his service, he might be able to sway his support. Of course, this gift exchange was not enough to cause a major shift in foreign policy, but it could nevertheless pave the way towards making subsequent embassies or negotiations more effective.[48]

2.5 Sixth-century mobility of knowledge and cultural exchange

In all the case studies examined so far, the mobility of envoys and knowledge has played a role of paramount importance, which will now be assessed in more detail. Cassiodorus reports an episode of knowledge mobility involving two products of late antique technology – notably, he also relates that the clocks were sent to the Burgundians together with those who could operate them (*cum magistris rerum*).[49] Gundobad was interested not only in the objects themselves, but also in the expertise necessary for maintaining them, which would enable him to build other clocks. In contrast, the embassies of Uranius and Tribunus witnessed a mobility of pure knowledge, consisting first in philosophy and then in the medical sciences. If Tribunus did indeed contribute to the founding of a hospital in Persia, then the cultural exchange between Justinian and Chosroes bore fruit in less than a year. However, the embassy still does not lose its significance even if the hospital was established a few years later, since Tribunus surely shared his experience and skills with the Persian physicians he encountered.

With Radegund and Justin II, we face a different form of knowledge mobility, involving reliquaries and literature. Taking the latter as a starting point, it is likely that Venantius's poems were circulated at Constantinople (or at least within the court), thus contributing to the exchange of language and ideas between Latin poets living in Gaul and the imperial capital. The movements of manuscripts are famously challenging to track down, especially in the early Middle Ages, but the dispatch of books or poems, together with the movement of embassies, might explain the striking analogies that are sometimes found between the works of authors from different regions, who might have otherwise had few occasions to know each other's works.[50] Regard-

48 Interestingly, Sigebert sent an embassy to Constantinople in 571, and obtained what he had asked according to Gregory of Tours, Historiae 4.40. Ed. *Krusch*.

49 Cassiodorus, Variae 1.45.2.

50 See e.g. *Cameron*, The Early Religious Policies (1976), 61, who puts forward the hypothesis that the members of Radegund's first embassy may have brought a copy of Corippus's panegyric to Gaul, which subsequently influenced Venantius's poetry. Another meaningful case of intertextual relations is represented by *Appendix Maximiani* 3 (celebrating Theodahad), which clearly imitates *Anthologia*

ing the reliquary, we do not know exactly what it looked like. However, the one donated by Justin II to the pope in the same period still survives, and its iconography was carefully conceived to express both the orthodoxy of the emperor and the legitimacy of his power.[51] By sending the reliquary to Rome, Justin II allowed the goldsmiths of the former imperial capital to admire and imitate it, thereby spreading the ideological messages conveyed by imperial munificence.

Mobility did not apply only to learned envoys and inanimate objects but also to the transport of exotic animals.[52] Often used as diplomatic gifts, the dispatch of elephants, giraffes, and tigers was another form of knowledge mobility, one that allowed common people and court members to see animals mentioned either by ancient authors or in the Bible. Embassies facilitated the circulation of knowledge between the leading members of different communities, thereby making cultural exchange more effective. Their mobility thus contributed to the shaping of an elite transnational culture shared by all the major political players in the post-Roman world.

2.6 Conclusion

Sixth-century international relations can – and indeed should – be analysed using the theoretical framework of cultural diplomacy. Ancient rulers and writers were familiar with a pragmatic approach to the fundamental aspects of cultural diplomacy, and they even attempted to theorise it, as Cassiodorus demonstrates. In late Antiquity, it was fully understood that an aspect of an embassy's importance consisted in the ability to excite the admiration of foreign rulers and dignitaries. Both diplomatic gifts and envoys were chosen with this goal in mind.

However, approaching the study of ancient and medieval history through the lens of cultural diplomacy presents the historian with at least three other promising future developments that cannot be ignored here. Firstly, cultural diplomacy can be used to differentiate between state-driven cultural exchange and other, perhaps less formalised, forms of knowledge transfer. This perspective may be particularly relevant for scholars dealing with cross-cultural communication or the intermingling of political and religious ideas. Secondly, cultural diplomacy enables us to understand what aspects of late antique culture really mattered. This kind of diplomatic initiative relies on attraction, not coercion. Studying successful episodes of cultural diplomacy

Latina 215 R = 206 SB (celebrating Hilderic). It is likely that the latter text reached Italy together with the embassies that followed Hilderic's accession to the throne, and subsequently inspired an Italian author who was writing a panegyrical poem for Theodahad. On the relationship between these poems, see *Mastandrea*, Un elogio (2003).

51 *Brennan*, The Relic (2021), 52–58.

52 See *Nechaeva*, Embassies (2014), 198–204, and e.g. *Gatier*, Des giraffes (1996), for a case study.

can point out what objects, animals or disciplines were esteemed or looked for in a given historical context. Thirdly, cultural diplomacy indicates that the choice of an envoy or diplomatic gift was part of a broader political communication strategy, often connected with previous embassies. Therefore, the nature of the gifts as well as the skills of the envoys can shed light on the long-term goals of the embassies. These are usually overshadowed by their short-term objectives, which are often the only ones clearly discernible during the negotiations. However, they can prove to be more beneficial in understanding the foreign policy of a ruler.

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