

Reviews

Ekaterina Nechaeva, *Embassies – Negotiations – Gifts: Systems of East Roman Diplomacy in Late Antiquity*. *Geographica historica*, Bd 30. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2014, 306 pages. ISBN 9783515106320.

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The aim of Nechaeva's book is "to examine the phenomenon of Late Roman diplomacy, its formation and operation as a whole system during the Late Antique period." (15) A special focus of her analysis lies on "the structure of the diplomacy system, how it worked and its semantics and patterns of development." (15) In her introduction (15–21) Nechaeva limits the scope of her work to the Roman East and the middle of the 4th to the late 6th century. Besides she gives an overview of the most important sources. The book *De Ceremoniis* that was composed in the 10th century under the byzantine emperor Constantine Porphyrogenetos is a valuable source for diplomatic practices that is mentioned by the author. While Nechaeva stresses the insights that can be gained from it, she does not mention the problems that are connected with it. While we often rely on the book of ceremonies as our only source of information for otherwise unknown events, its largely compilatory character brings with it some challenges. The central question here is whether the information about diplomatic behaviour and practice provided are a reflection of the time of its compilation – the 10th century – or of the times the described events supposedly took place. We can often just not tell with certainty to which time certain information belong.¹

After her brief introduction the author deals with the "Mechanisms of diplomacy" (23–66). She describes the most important structures of the Late Antique state and rightly points out that decision-making and the regulation of diplomacy were largely controlled by the emperor. While the whole apparatus of offices was there to serve the emperor in his task of ruling the empire, it could still influence him in his decision-making. Moreover, Nechaeva highlights the court ceremonial and protocol that "regulated nearly every normative diplomatic action" (66). While it is sure that there were certain rules that worked as guidelines for the reception of embassies, the passages Nechaeva cites as evidence of a meticulous ceremonial could refer not to the 6th, but to the 10th century when *De Ceremoniis* was composed. Moreover, it is highly possible that those rules represented an ideal that

¹ Modern science has typically attributed chapters 84–95 to Petros Patrikios, a writer, diplomat and *magister officiorum* under Justinian who lived in the 6th century, cf. MOFATT/TALL 2012, xxiv. While such an attribution is named by the book of ceremonies itself only for the chapters 84 and 85 it does not solve the question whether the byzantine collectors of the 10th century somehow distorted the information they derived from the account of Petros. Even if this question could be answered we would still face the possibility that Petros himself did not provide a fully objective description of the ceremonies and diplomatic activities in question. Besides that, Nechaeva misses to address the aim that *De Ceremoniis* was supposedly composed for: to exalt the emperor and putting him at the head of politics. S. for example WOODROW 2001. To *De Ceremoniis* as a source for Late Antiquity and its problems cf. also PFEILSCHIFTER 2013, 87–89 who concludes that it is not suitable to acquire much knowledge about the ceremonies of the 4th to 6th century.

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was always desirable, but not always attainable.² Another thesis of Nechaeva must be questioned, too. She states that every reception of a foreign embassy in Constantinople was regulated by a distinctive protocol, “which differed depending on the status of the received mission and the place of the nation which it represented in the Roman hierarchy of its neighbours” (66). Two major objections can be proposed against this assumption. First, we have no evidence for any set Roman hierarchy of foreign nations and rulers. How could there have been any such hierarchy, considering the ever-changing nature and intensity of the threat certain nations posed to Constantinople? Second, Nechaeva reaches this conclusion by analysing just three different embassies that were indeed handled differently by the Romans, but this can not be attributed to certain court protocol. Rather it was the result of diplomatic and political tact of the respective *magister officiorum* who was responsible for the reception of diplomats.

The second chapter (69–116) „Diplomatic negotiation“ deals with the parties and agents that were involved in diplomatic interchange and with the purposes of embassies. She highlights that direct communication between rulers that can be found mainly in the 4th century changed to mediated communication. If the emperor happened to meet barbarians directly, those meetings were organized as a favour of the ruler to the foreign envoys while they were put in an inferior position. Nechaeva then proposes a distinction of embassies into “block-“ and single embassies. The essence of the so-called “block-system” was, that important negotiations were usually held in more than one session. After one side (A) had sent envoys and proposed their demands or problems, the other side (B) reacted by sending envoys on their own, that also started negotiations. If the questions remained unsettled, another delegation was sent back by the first side (A) to the other side (B). Here in my eyes Nechaeva misses the ad hoc character of ancient diplomacy. The “block-system” was not a consciously implemented aspect of ancient diplomatic communication, but a result of the inability of both sides to come to terms at just one meeting. The small decision-making ability of the envoys might as well have added to such a development.

The third chapter (117–162) deals with “Embassy structure and personnel”. Nechaeva points out that the rank and dignity of an envoy was of great importance. Embassies to important states like Persia were always of the highest rank while those led to other barbarians were of lower rank. To improve an ambassador’s dignity, the emperor could appoint him *illustris* immediately on his departure. Nechaeva also deals with the various diplomatic personnel like the chief envoys, their companions and interpreters. Another part of the chapter deals with the voyage of the envoy and the logistics. She concludes that embassies were often risky and incalculable adventures.³

The fourth chapter analyses “Gifts in the diplomatic

practice of Late Antiquity” (163–205). Nechaeva distinguishes gifts that were given from ruler to ruler and personal gifts from and for diplomats. She then provides a comprehensive overview of all gifts attested in our sources that the Romans gave and received from the 4th to the 6th century. It is extremely helpful that the evidence for every gift is also provided in the appendix (243–251), which is one of the biggest benefits of the study. Nechaeva concludes that gifts were an important part of Late Antique diplomacy and their exchange functioned along a universally accepted etiquette. Moreover, the Romans often used them not just as tokens of friendship and hospitality, but to show their dominance over other people.

The fifth and last chapter finally deals with “*Insignia* in the diplomatic practice of Late Antiquity” (207–235). Nechaeva first discusses the ambiguous nature of insignia. While they were symbols of power, they also represented the dependence of the recipient from the emperor and confirmed his subordinate position. She then provides an overview of all insignia attested in the surviving sources. As for the gifts Nechaeva provides an overview of the sources for insignia in the appendix (252–253), too. Different compositions and material were indicative of the rank and status of the recipient in the eyes of Constantinople.

In her conclusion she sums up the results of her study. Nechaeva concludes, that Eastern Roman Diplomacy was a system of communication between the roman emperor and other people and their rulers. Diplomacy changed from being a direct negotiation between sovereigns before Late Antiquity towards a more complex communication based on protocol and ceremony that was exerted by intermediaries.

All in all, Nechaeva has provided a comprehensive overview of the diplomacy of the Eastern Roman Empire from the 4th to the 6th century, that deals with all important aspects of the topic. Despite some missing source criticism, it is particularly useful as a hand- and sourcebook that enables scholars to dig deeper into certain aspects regarding the diplomacy of the Eastern Roman Empire in Late Antiquity. Especially the collection of sources for gifts and insignia and their overview in the appendix make this volume highly usable. Hopefully it will be deployed extensively by researchers on the topic.

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² Cf. BERGER 2001, 73–88, who shows that the descriptions of imperial and ecclesiastical processions provided by the book of ceremonies represent ideals and not fixed regulations.

³ This could at least to some degree be attributed to our source material: in general, the authors were interested in exceptional events. Moreover, authors like Priscus or Olympiodor who participated in embassies personally might have exaggerated the events they witnessed.