

Cambridge University Press

0521813492 - Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411-533

Andrew Gillett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Chapter 1*EMBASSIES AND POLITICAL
COMMUNICATION IN THE
POST-IMPERIAL WEST

INTRODUCTION

Embassies were ubiquitous, constant, and crucial during the break-up of the late Roman West and the establishment of the first medieval kingdoms in the fifth and early sixth centuries. The conduct of political communication through formal conventions was a shaping force in this period of change, more frequent if less obvious than warfare. This study examines the literary monuments for the envoys who carried out the task of communication. Their story brings to the fore new aspects of political processes in the late and post-imperial world. Late antique embassies present uninterrupted continuations of Greco-Roman public oratory and administration, functioning in new and complex circumstances. The patterns of communication traced by envoys reveal a wide range of participants in political affairs. Envoys had long been the voice of cities and provinces to imperial authorities; in late antiquity, municipal envoys spoke not only of taxation and civic honours, but also of war and peace. Envoys now became also, as one himself put it, the ‘voice of kings’: with the rise of a multiplicity of states, rulers required forms of representation not needed by emperors in earlier centuries.¹ Many constituents of the western polities employed envoys as their instruments, participating in classical conventions of communication which remained common to all regions and all parts of society in the West, long past the fragmentation of political boundaries. Rewards accrued to those who successfully undertook embassies, either on palatine service or for local communities. Their missions moulded both the grand and the local politics of the late antique West.

Embassies were important cumulatively. Regularity and ubiquity of political communication, constantly sustaining relations among the gamut of participants in public life, characterise the role of embassies in the politics of the West. Sources, however, often present narratives of embassies

¹ Senarius, *Epitaph*, line 4.

Cambridge University Press

0521813492 - Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411–533

Andrew Gillett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Envoys and Political Communication, 411–533*

as dramatic and pivotal moments; so too do many modern studies, which incorporate embassies into their accounts and analyses of political events. It is not usually acknowledged that the relatively few embassies attested by our sources represent only a small fraction of the constant flow of legations in the period, and that embassies were so common an event as to be generally ignored by contemporary authors. As a result, specific embassies which appear in the sources are often misinterpreted by modern commentators by being presented as outstanding; modest events are turned into decisive moments of history. Such reconstructions wrongly interpret the specific case; but they also misconstrue the general functioning of political processes and communication in the period. A ‘diplomatic history’ of the fragmentation of the Roman West would be profoundly revealing, but the materials available are very inadequate for the task. The same envoy cited above, a court servant of Theoderic king of Italy, states that he himself undertook twenty-five legations for the king; narrative sources do not record this many embassies for the whole of Theoderic’s reign, though more embassies are attested to and from the Ostrogothic court than any other western centre of power.² Not only is there a lack of anything like a representative record of the number of embassies exchanged, but the nature of the available sources does not lend itself to a reconstruction of political events. Most western texts which mention legations were not intended as records of the issues negotiated, but as eulogistic monuments to the individuals who carried out the onerous task of the embassy.

This study seeks to turn this emphasis to an advantage, by focusing not on ‘diplomacy’ but on its agent, the envoy. The sources foreground the political and social patterns which determined the conduct of legations, rather than the issues of negotiation. Examining these patterns offers valuable insight into the role of communication in the unravelling of imperial authority in the West, a role traditionally overshadowed by communication’s counterpart, military force.³ Because many of the sources are formally eulogistic, they are examined in the chapters below as much through literary as historical analysis, in order to reveal the ways in which the undertaking of embassies fulfilled social functions.

² Senarius, *Epitaph*, line 9.

³ For the identification of communication as a new field of research in late antique and medieval history, see Marco Mostert (ed.), *New Approaches to Medieval Communication* (Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy 1; Turnhout, 1999), esp. 15–37, 193–297; Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, AD 300–900* (Cambridge, 2001), esp. 15–19. The study of political communication is a complement, not an alternative, to the study of warfare; cf. the salutary comments of Bernard S. Bachrach, *Early Carolingian Warfare: Prelude to Empire* (Philadelphia, 2001), ix.

Cambridge University Press

0521813492 - Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411-533

Andrew Gillett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Envoys and political communication*

Embassies and envoys were important during the fragmentation of the West because disunity gives rise not only to conflict but also to communication. Throughout antiquity, relations among the Mediterranean states and neighbouring powers had been managed by peaceful communications and alliances as well as by warfare. For several centuries, when the entire Mediterranean basin was subject to the Roman empire, formerly independent regions interacted politically with each other only little, looking primarily towards their common master, the emperor or his provincial representatives. In the fifth century AD, however, the western half of the empire was divided into several autonomous regions under the control of monarchs, the barbarian kingdoms.⁴ The political unity of the empire was replaced by a multiplicity of powers, and constant political interaction again became necessary throughout these former parts of the empire. Political communication and negotiation were the inevitable products of the break-up of the empire, and were fundamental to the nature of the barbarian kingdoms and of the Roman empire in the fifth and early sixth centuries.

Relations between the fifth-century states were undertaken in a variety of ways, some continuing classical practices unchanged, others products of their time. The empire and the kingdoms established formal alliances which, to the extent that they can be understood from the limited sources, resemble the truces, defensive and offensive alliances, and 'friendships' of the Greek states and the Roman republic.⁵ Hostages, as in classical antiquity, were held in order to facilitate cultural and political ties as much as to provide sureties.⁶ Pseudo-familial ties, including both marriage alliances among royalty and military and civilian elites, and 'adoption-in-arms' of one ruler by another, were a new development in imperial foreign affairs, influenced or imported by the influx of barbarian aristocracies. The function of these alliances, however, was appreciated by Romans, not least because of traditional Mediterranean practices of aristocratic marriage ties

⁴ Despite its pejorative overtones and Romanocentric perspective, I find 'barbarian' the most convenient label for these states; it has the virtue of being a contemporary term. The designations 'successor' and 'post-Roman states' are only superficially more neutral; they imply a break and new start which down-plays the cultural and other continuities from imperial to early medieval times. 'Post-imperial', restricting discontinuity to the form of overarching political structure, is more appropriate. 'Germanic' is quite misleading; see Michael Kulikowski, 'Nation versus Army: A Necessary Contrast?' in Andrew Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Studies in the Early Middle Ages 4; Turnhout, 2002), 69–70 n. 2.

⁵ For overviews of recent work on *foedera*, see Walter Pohl (ed.), *Kingdoms of the Empire: The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity* (The Transformation of the Roman World 1; Leiden, 1997), with papers by Pohl, Wirth, Heather, and especially Chrysos.

⁶ David Braund, *Rome and the Friendly King: The Character of the Client Kingship* (London 1984), 12–16; A. D. Lee, 'The Role of Hostages in Roman Diplomacy with Sasanian Persia', *Historia* 40 (1991), 366–74.

Cambridge University Press

0521813492 - Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411–533

Andrew Gillett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Envoys and Political Communication, 411–533*

and adoption, and the ancient concept of ‘kinship diplomacy’, in which ties were established between cities or states through the manufacture of common descent from prominent historical peoples.⁷ Baptismal sponsorship constituted a new, Christian form of kinship diplomacy which was to have a vigorous continuity throughout the Middle Ages.⁸

The most basic instrument in all forms of contact, however, was the envoy, the individual who acted as an authority’s representative, and so as the vehicle for communication. Even formal, diplomatic letters were of secondary importance to the envoys who bore them as their credentials and as overtures to their speeches. The political shifts of the fifth century rode upon the pronouncements and persuasions of countless, largely unrecorded representatives dispatched by emperors, kings, generals, bishops, cities, and provincial councils. Examining these individuals reveals how embassies shaped the framework of events during the fifth century, and how the demands of communication and negotiation among the western powers were impressed upon their careers as court officials, clergy, or provincial magnates.

Embassies were *legationes* in Latin, *πρεσβείαι* in classical Greek; envoys *legati* (also, by the mid-sixth century, *legatarii*) or *πρέσβεις*. Each term had also a wider range of meanings.⁹ There was, however, no classical term equivalent to the familiar modern word ‘diplomacy’, although the word has classical origins.¹⁰ Formalised management of relations among authorities was so ubiquitous a feature of classical and late antique civilisation

⁷ Ekkehard Weber, ‘Die trojanische Abstammung der Römer als politisches Argument’, in Eckart Olshausen and Hildegard Biller (eds.), *Antike Diplomatie* (Wege der Forschung 462; Darmstadt, 1979), 239–55; C. P. Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA, 1999); Andrew Erskine, *Troy between Greece and Rome: Local Tradition and Imperial Power* (New York, 2001), esp. 256 (on the Trojan origins of the Franks).

⁸ Joseph H. Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship: Ritual Sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ithaca, 1998), 205–28 on sponsorship by emperors and kings of other rulers. A somewhat different example: Nikephorus, *Short History*, ed. and trans. Cyril Mango (Corpus fontium historiae Byzantinae 13; Washington, DC, 1990), 1x: under the direction of the emperor Heraclius, Constantinopolitan nobles sponsor their visiting ‘Hunnic’ counterparts.

⁹ I.e. *legati* (literally, ‘the ones sent or appointed’) was a standard term for military commanders during the Roman republic and early empire; *legationes* and *legatarii* were also used for legacies and heirs. On the adoption of *legatus* as the term for envoys (replacing the early republican, and partly religious, term *orator*): Jerzy Linderski, ‘Ambassadors Go to Rome’, in E. Frézouls and A. Jacquemin (eds.), *Les Relations internationales* (Paris, 1995), 457–66. The original sense of *πρέσβεις* as ‘seniors’ or ‘elders of a council’ was retained in late antiquity, and applied also to Christian presbyters.

A Gothic term for ‘embassy’ is shown by the glosses for *πρεσβεία* and the verb *πρεσβεύειν* in the New Testament: *airus* and *airinon*, cognate with modern English ‘errand’; the sense is closer to the Latin than the Greek (*airus* also glosses *ἄγγελος* in its root sense of ‘messenger’); Luke xiv. 32, xix. 14; Corinthians v. 20; Ephesians vi. 20 in *Die Gotische Bibel*, ed. Wilhelm Streitberg, 1 2nd edn, II 3rd edn (Heidelberg, 1919; repr. Heidelberg, 1960).

¹⁰ On ‘diplomacy’, see e.g. Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy*, 17–18.

Cambridge University Press

0521813492 - Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411-533

Andrew Gillett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Envoys and political communication*

that no one context for the deployment of these skills was distinguished with a separate title. The individual envoy's talents in communication were a part of his *paideia*, his exertions in undertaking an embassy one aspect of *negotium*; relations between states or other authorities constituted one facet of *res publica*.

The modern word 'diplomacy' has several connotations which are anachronistic or misleading in the context of this study. It can mean the instruments of the modern system of international relations which originated in the high-medieval contact between Venice and Byzantium, developed in France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and further evolved under the aegis of the League of Nations and United Nations in the twentieth century. These instruments and conventions include foreign policy formulated by centralised national governments, bureaucratic control of foreign affairs, permanent overseas consulates, career diplomats, international conventions, and diplomatic recognition as an exclusive acknowledgement of sovereignty. Many of these aspects of modern diplomacy have counterparts in the ancient and medieval world, but none was institutionalised as they are in the modern world. 'Diplomacy' can also mean, more generally, 'warfare by other means' (reversing Clausewitz's dictum): not a cynical statement but an accurate summary of the deployment by states of non-combatant means to achieve security or hegemony, a constant and intrinsic complement to actual military engagement. Diplomacy, in this sense, is strategic; it embraces for example payment of subsidies to client polities, or involvement in the domestic politics of another state in order to support an allied regime. It also includes the exploitation by states of the potential of their military force as leverage for negotiating their aims.¹¹

Many of the embassies examined below set out to achieve 'diplomatic' purposes in this latter sense; the negotiations of the Gothic king of Italy, Theoderic, with the eastern emperors to achieve recognition of his rule, and with other western kings to prevent armed conflict, are examples. But for other legations, the implications of our term 'diplomacy' as the conduct of state-to-state relationships are inappropriate. Some of the most interesting embassies of which we have record, particularly in saints' *Vitae*, were dispatched not from heads of state but from local communities such as provincial cities. Their aims were to negotiate with authorities on

¹¹ For the interrelationship between warfare and these types of diplomacy, see e.g. Hugh Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe AD 350-425* (Oxford, 1996), 175-98; John Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204* (London, 1999), 36-9, 277-9. The observations of Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century AD to the Third* (Baltimore and London, 1976), e.g. 1-5, remain instructive, even if his thesis of a 'grand strategy' is not accepted.

Cambridge University Press

0521813492 - Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411–533

Andrew Gillett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Envoys and Political Communication, 411–533*

behalf of their citizens; by and large, such provincial bodies had no military counterpart to their supplications. Other levels of public authority such as bishops, generals, and senior officials, barred from participation in modern diplomacy by the concept of national sovereignty, also dispatched and received embassies on important political issues. There is no differentiation in vocabulary between ‘internal’ embassies, such as provincial legations to government magistrates, and communications between heads of state; indeed, some of the most dramatic and detailed accounts of embassies describe ‘internal’ rather than ‘foreign’ embassies. The conventions which governed these ‘internal’ embassies also determined legations between rulers; as discussed below, these conventions directly continued Roman administrative practices. In order to avoid the distracting modern associations of the word ‘diplomacy’, that term is avoided here, as much as possible, in favour of the phrase ‘political communication’.¹² This term should be taken to encompass formal contact between parties of various levels of authority concerning public matters. It too imposes on ancient sources a terminology reflecting modern interests, but it has this virtue at least, that it avoids referring implicitly to an established set of concepts which are anachronistic to the period being studied.

The temporal limits of this study are the years 411 and 533, beginning with the establishment of the first barbarian kingdoms in the West, those of the Vandals, Alans, and Sueves in Spain; and ending with the commencement of Justinian’s wars in North Africa, Italy, and Spain. These dates delineate a distinct phase of the history of the western Mediterranean which, for the purposes of this study, had two salient characteristics. On the one hand, continuity of Roman cultural and administrative patterns provided the modes of political communication: embassies, audiences, declamations, and letters. On the other hand, this was a period of incremental political change as first parts, then all of the West passed under the government of new monarchies, reaching a brief period of equipoise before Justinian’s brusque intrusion. The frequent lurches in political boundaries generated new causes for contact and new combinations of parties in communication. Envoys were special actors in the politics of this time. Embassies and political communication were important in the post-Justinianic West also, as the many references to legations

¹² By the same token, the term ‘envoy’ is to be preferred to ‘ambassador’; both are representatives dispatched by a principal, but conventionally ‘ambassador’ refers to a permanent resident in the recipient’s realm, rather than an agent travelling between parties; *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1989), I, 382 s.v. ‘ambassador’ § 2; v, 316 s.v. ‘envoy 2’. The institution of ambassadorial residence arguably originates in late antiquity with papal *apocrisarii* at Constantinople (see below, chapter 6 at nn. 208–12), but this was the exception rather than the rule. ‘Envoy’ more closely approximates the terms *legatus* and *πρέσβυς*.

Cambridge University Press

0521813492 - Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411-533

Andrew Gillett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Envoys and political communication*

in the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours and the *Chronicle* of Fredegar demonstrate; evidence from the later sixth century is drawn upon below for comparative purposes.¹³ But the envoys of the Merovingian period travelled between relatively stable political blocs.¹⁴ Their predecessors in the long fifth century grappled with traditional tools in situations of recurrent novelty.

The geographic scope of this study is the former western provinces and Constantinople. It is not a study of ‘Constantinople *and* the West’; it is a central characteristic of the period that political communication was multilateral, not radiating from one imperial centre. The former western provinces, though divided among a multiplicity of states, shared with each other and with the east Roman empire a common history and culture which included, among other things, uniform practices of political communication. In an important sense, negotiations among the various states, including the eastern imperial court, were not foreign relations but the internal negotiations of a cultural and diplomatic bloc.¹⁵

Political communication throughout this bloc was conducted within a variety of contexts, both geopolitical and social. To modern eyes, these contexts include both foreign relations and internal governmental administration, but those distinctions do not necessarily hold fast for the period of transition between empire and kingdoms. It is useful to sketch the major routes of communication discussed in the following chapters. At the highest level of administration and formality, the courts of the two halves of the late Roman empire communicated through formal channels including embassies, in order to maintain the complex relationship between two centres representing one authority. As the western provinces, and finally Italy, came under the rule of multiple kings, the role of the western emperor in this relationship was assumed by the barbarian courts, especially that of the kingdom of Italy; the propaganda of the Ostrogothic king Theoderic refers to *utraeque res publicae*, East and West.¹⁶

A second venerable and formal channel of communication was that between the Roman empire and the empire of Iran, which the Romans referred to as Persia, ruled and reinvigorated by the Sassanian dynasty since the early third century. Throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, the forms by which relations between the two ‘superpowers’ were conducted evolved, developing more elaborate diplomatic concepts and

¹³ On Gregory and Fredegar: below, chapter 6.

¹⁴ Notwithstanding the internal divisions of the Merovingian kingdom into *Teilreiche*: Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450–751* (London, 1994), 54–5, 60–3, 88–101.

¹⁵ Cf. Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993), 6 on the Byzantine and Islamic ‘commonwealths’.

¹⁶ Cass., *Variarum* 1, 1.4; cf. Maximianus (below, n. 82): *geminum . . . regnum*.

Cambridge University Press

0521813492 - Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411–533

Andrew Gillett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Envoys and Political Communication, 411–533*

procedures.¹⁷ Rome's dealings with Persia affected political relationships and diplomatic practice in the West; the appeal of the Ostrogoths, besieged in Italy by Belisarius in the late 530s, to the shah Chosroes I for help is only the most dramatic example.¹⁸

With the fragmentation of the western provinces and establishment of smaller, autonomous kingdoms, established routes of internal communication, from imperial centre to provinces, were superseded by multilateral relations between imperial and royal courts – multilateral, because not only did the imperial courts and their senior civil and military magistrates in the provinces conduct relations with each of the new states, but each new kingdom negotiated with its peers also. To call these states 'foreign' to the empire is misleading: all parties recognised the cultural, political, and demographic continuities shared by the imperial East and the post-imperial West, and though the ruling elites of each kingdom were distinguished – by Romans – with barbarian labels, this did not preclude administrative and social ties operating across the nominal borders.¹⁹

The imperial government had always needed to attend to relations with barbarian groups outside its borders. During the course of the fifth century, the rise to power of the Hunnic khanate made dealings with European barbarians high priority. Contacts with the Huns were characterised by extreme sensitivity to the niceties of diplomatic procedure.²⁰ Again, patterns of communication were not restricted to contact between the two imperial courts and the Hun leadership; apart from the semi-independent relations with the Huns conducted by the *magister militum* Aetius, the Huns were also involved in a complex network of alliances and conflicts with the rulers of the new western kingdoms. In 451, Attila turned his attention from the imperial provinces in the Balkans towards the West; later writers record his pretexts of war as an alliance with the Vandals in North Africa, a quarrel with the Goths of Toulouse, involvement in factional disputes within the Frankish nobility in northern Gaul, and a claim to marriage with the Theodosian dynasty.²¹ The western kingdoms were constantly in contact not only with each other and with the imperial court, but also with groups outside former imperial territories. In the collection of the official correspondence which he had

¹⁷ R. C. Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius* (ARCA Classical and Medieval Texts, Papers and Monographs 30; Leeds, 1992).

¹⁸ Procopius, *Wars* II, 2.1–11, 14.11; VI, 22.17–20. Cf. the hyperbole of Sid. Ap., *Ep.* VII, 9.5, *Carm.* 45–54.

¹⁹ The interrelationship between 'Roman' and 'barbarian' identities (and populations) in this period is a topic of valuable if controversial debate; see Patrick Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489–554* (Cambridge, 1997); and the papers in Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity*.

²⁰ E.g. B. Croke, 'Anatolius and Nomus, Envoys to Attila', *Byzantinoslavica* 42 (1981), 159–70.

²¹ Jordanes, *Get.*, 184–6; Priscus, *Fr.*, 20–1.

Cambridge University Press

0521813492 - Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411-533

Andrew Gillett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Envoys and political communication*

written for the Ostrogothic rulers of Italy, Cassiodorus prominently displays diplomatic letters to rulers, giving pride of place equally to eastern emperors, kings governing former imperial provinces, and rulers beyond imperial boundaries.²²

Warfare constituted a specific venue for foreign diplomacy. In late antiquity as before, generals in the field possessed a certain latitude in dealing with enemy powers. Few battles were fought to extinction; after a demonstration of resources and an initial trial of strength, commanders were in a position to negotiate a settlement, to establish a truce and perhaps the framework for a permanent agreement. This authority was an important element in the foreign relations of the fifth century, when military engagements were sometimes resolved by permanent settlement of barbarian groups on Roman soil. The activities of generals represent an extension of imperial authority in foreign affairs.

Within the empire, the Christian church employed means to communicate between its major and peripheral centres, and with secular authorities, derived from the conventions of civic embassies. Bishops regularly dispatched envoys to communicate with other ecclesiastical and secular authorities; the only extant set of instructions to envoys written under the later Roman empire are those of Pope Hormisdas to clerics sent to the emperor Anastasius in 515 and 519.²³ The role of embassies within the Church itself and between the Church and secular rulers is a complex issue which is not treated in full here; it calls for a separate study. Here may it suffice to note that these points of contact, too, comprise what contemporaries called *legationes* and *negotium*. Very likely, some of the twenty-five embassies declared by Theoderic's envoy, mentioned above, consisted of journeys to the bishops of Rome and perhaps to Constantinople in order to resolve Church schisms, alongside the representations to hostile western kings which the same envoy certainly undertook.²⁴

Of all the contexts within which political communication operated, it is most important for this study to stress the domestic: the many aspects of late Roman society and government which were regulated by negotiations conducted through envoys according to recognised conventions. Imperial provinces were administered not only through centralised bureaucratic machinery, but also by constant interchange between provincial cities and their imperial or royal rulers. Provincial approaches to the imperial court always retained the forms of foreign embassies. The Senate of

²² See chapter 5, below.

²³ *Collectio Avellana*, 116 (with *Collectio Avellana*, 115, 116a, 116b); 158 (= Hormisdas, *Indiculi* of 515, 519). John Matthews, 'Gesandtschaft', trans. R. Werner-Reis, *Reallexicon für Antike und Christentum* x (Stuttgart, 1977), 675–84. See below, chapter 6, pp. 227–30.

²⁴ Below, chapter 5.

Cambridge University Press

0521813492 - Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411–533

Andrew Gillett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Envoys and Political Communication, 411–533*

Rome, too, dispatched formal legations to the emperors. ‘Such embassies, undertaken by leading citizens on behalf of their communities, are among the best-attested civic functions of Roman society.’²⁵ The civil administration of the empire has been viewed as ‘a diplomatic system’, and the constant traffic of petitions and rescripts between the provinces and the court as ‘internal embassies’, equivalent to the empire’s communications with other nations.²⁶

In the fifth century, the internal diplomacy of provincial administration became the interstate communication of the western kingdoms. Provincial bodies now played a role in negotiating the major political and military changes of the period, alongside imperial and royal courts, generals in the field, and ecclesiastical networks. In antiquity and the Middle Ages, communication with foreign powers was not the exclusive right of governments. The following description of the later Middle Ages well outlines the situation in late antiquity:

The right of embassy was not spoken of in theory or regarded in practice as diplomatic representation, a symbolic attribute of sovereignty. It was a method of formal, privileged communication among the members of a hierarchically ordered society, and its exercise could be admitted or denied according to the relations of the parties concerned and the nature of the business at hand.²⁷

When the barbarian monarchs assumed control of the West, most administrative structures and patterns of authority remained intact. New centres of authority were superimposed over late Roman society without displacing the existing network of communication. Provincial communities negotiated not only with their barbarian rulers but also, as before, with imperial authorities; provincial bishops under non-Catholic kings appealed to the bishop of Rome to settle schisms within the orthodox church. Following the paths and practices of traditional provincial embassies, the negotiations of these bodies were as important to the political development of the fifth century as the actions of monarchs.

Emperors and kings wielded immense authority, and foreign policies, like internal ones, may often have reflected the personal outlook of individual monarchs. The *rapprochement* of Theodosius I with the Goths in the Balkans, Marcian’s avoidance of war with the Vandals, and Justinian’s aggression towards the same barbarians, were all policies divergent from those of their immediate predecessors, described by contemporary

²⁵ John Matthews, ‘Roman Life and Society’, in John Boardman *et al.* (eds.), *The Oxford History of the Classical World* (Oxford, 1986), 754.

²⁶ Fergus Millar, ‘Government and Diplomacy in the Roman Empire during the First Three Centuries’, *International History Review* 10 (1988), 352–7.

²⁷ Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Boston, 1955; repr. New York, 1988), 23.