

International Law in Antiquity

David J. Bederman



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Contents

	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page xi
	<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xiii
	<i>Maps</i>	xiv
1	A methodological introduction: this study and its limitations	1
	<i>Times and places</i>	2
	<i>Comparison and relativism</i>	4
	<i>Sources, process, and doctrines</i>	6
	<i>Texts and sources</i>	8
	<i>The modern critique of ancient international law</i>	11
2	State relations in ancient civilizations	16
	<i>The concepts of State and State system and their relevance to antiquity</i>	16
	<i>The ancient Near East: Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt</i>	21
	<i>Sumer and Mesopotamia</i>	22
	<i>The great Near Eastern empires, 1400–1150 BCE</i>	24
	<i>Syria and Palestine, 966–700 BCE</i>	28
	<i>The Greek city-States, 500–338 BCE</i>	31
	<i>Rome and its competitors, 358–168 BCE</i>	41
3	Religion and the sources of a law of nations in antiquity	48
	<i>The metaphysics of ancient international law</i>	51
	<i>Good faith and breaking faith</i>	51
	<i>Four fragments</i>	54
	<i>Religion</i>	59
	<i>Nationalism and universalism</i>	59
	<i>Making and breaking oaths</i>	61
	<i>Ritual and custom</i>	73
	<i>Reason and rhetoric</i>	79
	<i>Conclusion</i>	85

4	Making friends: diplomats and foreign visitors in ancient times	88
	<i>The reception and protection of diplomats and embassies</i>	88
	Some general concepts	88
	The formalities of diplomacy	95
	Privileges and immunities of diplomats	106
	<i>The status and protection of alien visitors</i>	120
	Agreements: <i>xenoi</i> , <i>asylia</i> , <i>isopoliteia</i> , and <i>symbola</i>	124
	The <i>proxenia</i> institution	130
	Western Mediterranean analogues	134
	<i>Ritualized friendship in an ancient law of nations</i>	135
5	Making faith: treaty practices amongst ancient peoples	137
	<i>Beginnings of the ancient treaty tradition in the Near East</i>	137
	General suppositions and the earliest texts	137
	The Babylonians, Hittites, and Assyrians	141
	The Egyptians and the treaty with the Hittites of 1280 BCE	146
	Ancient Israelite practice	150
	<i>The Greek city-States</i>	154
	Terminology and types of treaties	154
	The nature of Greek treaty-making	171
	<i>Western Mediterranean departures in treaty-making</i>	183
	Patterns of treaty-making by Western Mediterranean cultures	183
	Formalities and enforcement of Roman treaties	194
	<i>Ancient treaty-making: enforcement, sophistication, tradition, and universality</i>	202
6	Making war: the commencement and conduct of hostilities in ancient times	207
	<i>Declarations of war</i>	208
	Justifications for commencing hostilities	208
	The rituals for starting a war and the legal consequences of an outbreak of hostilities	227
	<i>Laws of war</i>	242
	Restraint in warfare	242
	Immunities in warfare	249
	After the war	260
	<i>Managing conflict in antiquity</i>	263
7	Civilization and community in the ancient mind	267
	<i>Topical bibliography</i>	281
	<i>Index</i>	303

1 A methodological introduction: this study and its limitations

This is a study of the intellectual origins of international law. This volume combines techniques of intellectual history and historiography in order to account for the earliest developments in the sources, processes and doctrines of the law of nations. This combination of methods is not only essential for considering the earliest formation of ideas of international law, but also for beginning an understanding of the manner in which those ideas have been received by modern publicists and the extent to which they have been recognized in the modern practice of States.

My book will thus critically examine what has become an article of faith in our discipline: that international law is a unique product of the modern, rational mind. I argue here that it is not. While this volume charts the intellectual impact of the idea of ancient international law, it purposefully ignores the appreciation of this subject by historians, political scientists and internationalists. My study, moreover, confines itself to the single inquiry of whether the ancient mind could and did conceive of a rule of law for international relations. I certainly do not attempt to argue or suggest here that modern principles or doctrines of international law can be traced to antiquity. Nor do I pronounce judgment on the exact manner in which the ancient tradition of international law was received in early-Modern Europe or after. These inquiries must be left for later research and discussion. I confront here, therefore, an ancient law of nations on its own terms. By doing so, I am making a start on a broader vision of the intellectual origins of our discipline.

Intellectual history is, after all, the story of ideas. International law, even when considered as an historical subject, is typically conceived as a collection of rules motivated by international relations. Rarely is it viewed as a cogent theory of State relations. One thrust of this book will test such a theory against the historical circumstances of the ancient world. In

order to do this, my study accepts the notion that international law is impossible without a system of multiple States, each conscious of its own sovereignty and the choice between relations being premised on order or on anarchy.¹

Times and places

As a consequence of these conceptual limitations, this volume will be limited to three general periods of antiquity. They are (1) the ancient Near East including the periods subsuming the Sumerian city-States, the great empires of Egypt, Babylon, Assyria and the Hittites (1400–1150 BCE), and a later, brief period focusing on the nations of Israel and their Syrian neighbors (966–700 BCE); (2) the Greek city-States from 500–338 BCE; and (3) the wider Mediterranean during the period of Roman contact with Carthage, Macedon, Ptolemaic Egypt, and the Seleucid Empire (358–168 BCE). I am mindful, of course, that the temporal and geographical scope of this study is huge. But it is not insuperable. I have chosen with care the times and places in antiquity for review; in each one there is an undisputed, and authentic, system of States in place. The evidence for this proposition will be detailed in Chapter 2.

By the same token, I do acknowledge that there is some arbitrariness in the dates and localities selected for research in this book. As Professor Wolfgang Preiser wrote in his recent abstract of the history of international law in antiquity:

We accept that writers of history of international law must . . . be allowed to apply the intellectual principle of order called categorization by period which is utilized by all historians, irrespective of specialization, when they perceive their task to be the comprehension respectively of an uninterrupted flow of events. It is regrettable that a living process should be thus divided into chronological and locational sections; yet, taking our limited powers of absorption into consideration, it cannot be avoided.²

This defense of historiographic method is especially pertinent in my study, attempting (as it does) to trace the patterns of State practice amongst different peoples and State organizations at very different times in antiquity.

¹ See Vilho Harle, *Ideas of Social Order in the Ancient World* 91–100, 165–68, 171–74 (1998); Georg Schwarzenberger, *International Law in Early English Practice*, BYIL 52, 52 (1948).

² Wolfgang Preiser, *History of the Law of Nations: Basic Questions and Principles*, in 7 *Encyclopedia of Public International Law* 126, 131 (Rudolph Bernhardt ed. 1984).

It is precisely because I believe that there is an essential unity in the nature of State behavior in ancient times that I am willing to adopt this comparative approach for this study. My selection of times and places for in-depth analysis has a very important aspect. The “uninterrupted flow of events” in ancient times in the Near East and Mediterranean meant that the traditions of statecraft that were developed at an early time by the Sumerian city-States and their Akkadian conquerors, and reformulated by the Assyrians and Hittites, were transmitted to later cultures through the Egyptians and Israelites and Phoenicians, and thence to Greece, Carthage, and Rome.

It is for this reason that I do not survey the great international law traditions of India and China in this book. The literature available on the political cultures and international societies of ancient India (from the post-Vedic period until 150 BCE)³ and the Eastern Chou and Warring States Periods in China (770–221 BCE)⁴ is large and of generally high quality.

³ For general treatises, see, e.g., Chacko, *India's Contribution to the Field of International Law Concepts*, 93 RCADI 117 (1958–I); Chacko, *International Law in India*, 1 Indian JIL 184, 589 (1960–61); 2 *ibid.* at 48 (1962); Hiralal Chatterjee, *International Law and Inter-State Relations in Ancient India* (1958); Nawaz, *The Law of Nations in Ancient India*, 6 Indian BIA 172 (1957); Pavithran, *International Law in Ancient India*, 5 Eastern JIL 220, 307 (1974); 6 *ibid.* at 8, 102, 235, 284 (1975); Nagendra Singh, *History of the Law of Nations – Regional Developments: South and South-East Asia*, in 7 *Encyclopedia of Public International Law* 237 (Rudolph Bernhardt ed. 1984); Nagendra Singh, *India and International Law* (1969); S. V. Viswanatha, *International Law in Ancient India* (1925). For considerations of the general theory of international relations in ancient India, see C. H. Alexandrowicz, *Kautilyan Principles and the Law of Nations*, 41 BYIL 301 (1965); Derett, *The Maintenance of Peace in the Hindu World: Practice and Theory*, 7 Indian YBIA 361 (1958); Mahadevan, *Kautilya on the Sanctity of Pacts*, 5 Indian YBIA 342 (1956); Modelski, *Kautilya: Foreign Policy and International System in the Ancient Hindu World*, 58 *American Political Science Review* 549 (1964); Ved P. Nanda, *International Law in Ancient Hindu India*, in *The Influence of Religion on the Development of International Law* 51 (Mark W. Janis ed. 1991); Pavithran, *Kautilya's Arthasastra*, 7 Eastern JIL 193, 243 (1976); 8 *ibid.* at 16 (1977); Ruben, *Inter-State Relations in Ancient India and Kautilya's Arthasastra*, 4 Indian YBIA 137 (1955); Sastri, *International Law and Relations in Ancient India*, 1 Indian YBIA 97 (1952); Nagendra Singh, *The Machinery and Method for Conduct of Inter-State Relations in Ancient India*, in *International Law at a Time of Perplexity: Essays in Honor of Shabtai Rosenne* 845 (Yoram Dinstein ed. 1989). For reviews of specific doctrinal issues, see Armour, *Customs of Warfare in Ancient India*, 8 *Grotius Society Transactions* 71 (1922); Bedi, *The Concept of Alliances in Ancient India*, 17 Indian JIL 354 (1977); Palaniswami, *Diplomacy of the Ancient Tamils*, 10 Eastern JIL 17 (1978); Palaniswami, *International Law (War) of the Ancient Tamils*, 8 Eastern JIL 41 (1977); Pavithran, *Diplomacy in Kautilya's Arthasastra*, 8 Eastern JIL 163, 245 (1977); Poulouse, *State Succession in Ancient India*, 10 Indian JIL 175 (1970); L. Rocher, *The “Ambassador” in Ancient India*, 7 Indian YBIA 344 (1958).

⁴ See, e.g., Britton, *Chinese Interstate Intercourse Before 700 BC*, 29 AJIL 616 (1935); Shih-Tsai Chen, *The Equality of States in Ancient China*, 35 AJIL 641 (1941); Frederick Tse-Shyang Chen, *The Confucian View of World Order*, in *The Influence of Religion on the*

Nevertheless, there is simply no historical evidence to suggest that there was any substantial diplomatic contact between Indian and Chinese cultures, nor between these great Asian international systems and those of the Near East and Mediterranean. This is surprising in view of the extensive economic and religious contacts between all of these culture centers in the ancient world. Without that essential element of contact and continuity, I believe it prudent to exclude from the wider consideration of this volume Indian and Chinese contributions to the development of international law.⁵

I am mindful, of course, that this decision exposes me to the criticism directed against much modern international law scholarship: that it ignores or perverts non-European, non-Western traditions of international relations. I actually concur with this critique. But there is the obvious point that ancient cultures (whether from the Near East or Greco-Roman tradition) should not be enlisted for some modern historiographic conflict between East and West, developed versus developing worlds. I certainly make no claim here of historic continuity between the ancient and modern worlds, and absolutely eschew the notion that “modern,” “Western” doctrines of international law derive any extra legitimacy by being traced back to ancient sources – assuming such could be proved (which I seriously doubt).

Comparison and relativism

Even so, that leaves a significant question about the propriety (and, indeed, even the intellectual legitimacy) of the kind of comparative study of ancient international law I wish to undertake here. I take as a starting-

Footnote 4 (cont.)

Development of International Law 31 (Mark W. Janis ed. 1991); Te-hsu Ch'eng, *International Law in Early China* (1122–249 BC), 11 *Chinese Social and Political Science Review* 38, 251 (1927); Iriye, *The Principles of International Law in View of Confucian Doctrine*, 120 *RCADI* 1 (1967–I); W. A. P. Martin, *Traces of International Law in Ancient China*, 14 *International Review* 63 (1883); Shigeki Miyazaki, *History of the Law of Nations – Regional Developments: Far East*, in 7 *Encyclopedia of Public International Law* 215 (Rudolph Bernhardt ed. 1984); Richard Louis Walker, *The Multi-State System of Ancient China* (1953).

⁵ For much the same reasons, I also excluded considerations of African State systems and the international relations of the Byzantine empire. For more on these, see T. O. Elias, *History of the Law of Nations – Regional Developments: Africa*, in 7 *Encyclopedia of Public International Law* 205 (Rudolph Bernhardt ed. 1984); T. O. Elias, *Africa and the Development of International Law* (1972); A. K. Mensah-Brown, *Notes on International Law and Pre-Colonial Legal History of Modern Ghana*, in *African Legal History* 107 (UNITAR 1975); Stephen Verosta, *International Law in Europe and Western Asia Between 100 and 650 AD*, 113 *RCADI* 484 (1964–III).

point for this caveat Professor Preiser's exegesis on comparative international legal history, which is worth quoting at length:

General legal history is, for good reasons, concerned with all legal developments of the past, regardless of where or when they appeared, and also of whether or not they prevailed over the longer term. The history of international law has no reason for proceeding otherwise . . . The historian of international law, for his part, will see his task in gaining command over the international legal developments of the period in question and placing them in their correct context . . . The comparative law approach as such is nothing new for the history of international law . . . However, until now the comparison has been restricted almost entirely to different epochs in the history of European international law. Once research into the unexplored areas of international law has advanced sufficiently far to banish the danger of premature generalizations, this approach will be able to draw on an abundance of new and in part no doubt fascinating and exotic material. We may hope to see the appearance of new questions and answers . . . The ultimate aim of all conceivable comparative work in the area of the history of international law is not the comparison of individual phenomena, whatever their intrinsic importance, but the comparison of entire epochs. This means comparing above all those periods of time for which the claim can be made . . . for the existence of a legally ordered inter-State system which on its own merits persisted over a long period of time alongside the mere use of force. Put differently, what is here at issue is a comparative examination of independently developed, functional international legal orders which helped influence the legal character of their respective eras.⁶

Putting aside the attractions of "exotic material," and the extraordinary intellectual hazard of treating any subject as "different" or "other" than established norms (a common thrust of the Orientalism of the nineteenth century), Preiser offers an intelligible methodology for my project. The validity of any comparative exercise in studying ancient international law depends on the selection of historical evidence concerning authentic State systems and placing it in its "correct context," to use Professor Preiser's words, while taking care to avoid "premature generalizations." "Correct context" means, I would suppose, that statements made about notional rules of State conduct in international relations are weighed against the available historical record of State behavior in antiquity. It is not enough, of course, that States may have *said* that they observed a particular rule of international law. It is quite another matter to see whether they, in fact, did so. My survey will attempt, wherever possible, to ascertain the actual observance of these norms of State conduct.

⁶ Preiser, *supra* note 2, at 128–29.

Likewise, taking care to avoid “premature generalizations” is in large part a matter of reminding oneself, as Professor Shabtai Rosenne has observed, that while “there is a marked similarity in the problems that have been faced [in different State systems], and in the solutions reached . . . they start from different underlying premisses and different general philosophies of law and the place of the law in the social system.”⁷ One cannot be misled by supposed similarities in “detailed rules of law”⁸ developed in State systems separated by great time and distance.

This study scrupulously avoids any such conclusion that there was a single, cohesive body of international law rules recognized by all States in antiquity. Such an assertion would be folly, based (as it must be) on the same ruinous reasoning that compels some writers to suggest that modern doctrines of international law can trace their lineage directly back to ancient times. The point I am making here is, at once, more subtle and more consequential. This study will seek to understand not whether there was a common set of rules of State behavior in antiquity, but whether there was a common *idea* or *tradition* that international relations were to be based on the rule of law.

Sources, process, and doctrines

The organizing principle of this book will be to examine whether an ancient law of nations had the paradigmatic attributes of modern international law. I believe that it did not. Yet, that does not make the law of nations in antiquity any less relevant or worthy of study. We conceive of international law today as a network of sources, processes, and doctrines, forming a web of obligation, though without explicit sanction. The ancient mind, I will suggest here, could not distinguish the process elements of rules for State behavior from the sources of those obligations or their content.⁹ For that reason alone, ancient international law was a primitive legal system, as that concept was understood and defined by Sir Henry Maine.¹⁰

⁷ Shabtai Rosenne, *The Influence of Judaism on the Development of International Law*, 5 *Netherlands ILR* 119, 121 (1958). ⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* 89–96 (1961).

¹⁰ See Sir Henry Maine, *Ancient Law* (1861) (1986 ed.); Sir Henry Maine, *International Law* 13 (1894). Other writers have developed the notion of international law as a primitive legal system: see Michael Barkun, *Law Without Sanctions: Order in Primitive Societies and the World Community* (1968); E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Law of Primitive Man* 331 (1954); Roger D. Masters, *World Politics as a Primitive Political System*, 16 *World Politics* 595 (1964); Yoram Dinstein, *International Law as a Primitive Legal System*, 19 *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics* 1 (1986).

The initial place to test that hypothesis is not, as some have supposed,¹¹ to examine the manifestations of international law doctrines in the ancient documents and materials. Instead, I take as my point of departure a comprehension of the sources of international legal obligation in antiquity. These will be very carefully considered in Chapter 3. What I hope to make clear is that other primitive aspects have been wrongly attributed to an ancient law of nations. For example, the sources of standards for State behavior were not, as has been supposed, exclusively religious. Reason and experience mattered in ancient international relations, just as today. To understand the sources of rules of State relations is the first step in comprehending whether those rules had content, whether they were perceived as being legitimate, and how they were given sanction.

Likewise, the doctrinal norms of international antiquity, though small in number, were broad in importance and capable of eliciting certainty and security of expectation. This will be shown for a range of restraints on State behavior, including (1) the conduct of embassies, immunities granted to envoys, and protections afforded to foreigners; (2) the sanctity given to treaties and alliances; and (3) the constraints of a nation declaring war and the limits on the actual conduct of hostilities.

These doctrines have been selected with the view of capturing the broadest spectrum of normative values in State relations. The reception, treatment, and functions of ambassadors (for example) implicated an essential inquiry: the capacity of the ancient State in placing its relations with its neighbors on a footing of friendship. A corollary of this problem was the ability of ancient States to develop statuses and relationships that would eliminate particularism. Likewise, the negotiation, ratification, enforcement, and termination of treaties was a vital aspect of ancient State relations. Some scholars (following an Austinian view of law)¹² have suggested that the only basis of a law of nations in antiquity was the positive act of one State making faith with another. Review of this assertion will be a consistent theme of this study.¹³ But there is also the narrower

¹¹ This would be my single, methodological criticism of the pioneering works on this subject written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As with any study of this sort, one must acknowledge that one is standing on the shoulders of giants. In my case, the leviathans are Coleman Phillipson's two-volume work, *The International Law and Custom of Ancient Greece and Rome*, published in 1911, the first two books of F. Laurent's earlier, multi-volume set, *Histoire de droit des gens* (1850–70), and Michael Rostovtseff, *International Relations in the Ancient World* in *The History and Nature of International Relations* (E. Walsh ed. 1922).

¹² See John Austin, *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined* 127, 141–42 (1832) (H. L. A. Hart ed. 1954).

¹³ See Chapter 2, pp. 31–41 below; Chapter 3, pp. 51–59 below; and Chapter 5.

question of the manner in which the ancient mind was competent to interpret and enforce rules of State behavior contained in written agreements. Lastly, there is a recognition that armed conflict was a constant reality of international life in ancient times, as today. The conditions under which nations believed they had rights under international law, rights that had to be vindicated by the declaration of war against another nation, were significant choices made by ancient States. In the same fashion, the exercise of restraint in making war was surely one of the most important manifestations of the rule of law in ancient State relations.

Each of these doctrinal fields was the subject of at least some consideration by each of the civilizations studied in this volume.¹⁴ As they are discussed in turn – diplomacy and friendship in Chapter 4, treaty-making in Chapter 5, and the initiation and conduct of war in Chapter 6 – it is important to remember that the emphasis of these chapters will not be merely to catalogue instances where ancient States apparently recognized these doctrinal features of an ancient law of nations. Instead, the object is to establish recurrent patterns of thinking and practice concerning these doctrines. This is what I intend in explicating a tradition of international law in antiquity.

Texts and sources

Intellectual history is largely a matter of close textual analysis. Such a study is, of course, only as good as the texts it relies upon. It is no surprise, therefore, that the greatest challenge for fashioning an intellectual history of international law in antiquity is the sparsity of the historical record. In researching this study I recognize that only fragments of that record, containing only limited memorializations of State practice, have found their way to the present. Some of those extant texts, one must

¹⁴ The practice of international arbitration amongst the Greek city-States has been a popular subject of scholarly attention for many years. See, e.g., V. Bérard, *De arbitrio inter liberas Graecorum civitates* (1894); Victor Martin, *La Vie internationale dans la Grèce des cités* (1940) (reprinted 1979); A. Raeder, *L'Arbitrage international chez les Hellènes* (1912); J. H. Ralston, *International Arbitration from Athens to Locarno* (1929); Michel Revon, *L'Arbitrage international* 62–105 (1892); M. N. Tod, *International Arbitration Amongst the Greeks* (1913); W. L. Westermann, *International Arbitration in Antiquity*, 2 *Classical Journal* 197 (1906–07). Nevertheless, arbitration does not appear to have been practiced to any great degree in the ancient Near East or by the Romans and their rivals. See Louise E. Matthaëi, *The Place of Arbitration and Mediation in Ancient Systems of International Ethics*, 2 *Classical Quarterly* 241 (1908). For that reason, arbitration – which could have been a putative element of third-party settlement of international disputes based on a rule of law – will not be considered in this book.

realize, have been degraded in transmission to the point that they are nearly useless for historical inquiry.

It is worth remembering, though, that today's record of customary international law, the uncoded practice of States, is also incomplete, and there continue today to be strong methodological problems in piecing together a complete picture of State practice. The problem today is not, of course, the historical distance of events, but, rather, the difficulty in determining which examples of modern practice are relevant, and which are not. The problem with antiquity is that the modern researcher is unaided by any contemporary treatment of the subject of rules governing State behavior in ancient times. We know, for example, that there were a few texts written in Greek and Latin (including those by Aristotle, Demetrius of Phaleron, and Varro) on subjects of statecraft that subsumed matters involved in the law of nations, such as rules for declaring war and the conduct of embassies.¹⁵ None of these texts survived to the present day, and we have no reliable information from other classical writers as to the contents of these treatises. Our situation is aptly described by H. B. Leech in an essay he wrote in 1877:

If, in the centuries to come, the special treatises upon modern Public Law were to disappear, and the student of European civilisation in the nineteenth century should be obliged to have recourse to purely historical works for light on this subject, he would find there but scanty information upon the principles and working of the present International Code. This is our position with regard to the Public Law of ancient times.¹⁶

While there is a paucity of systematic treatments of the subject of the law of nations in antiquity, our task has been made easier by notable advances in classical historiography. The first among these has been in more sophisticated treatments and understandings of the literary evidence that does survive from ancient times. Greater refinement in Biblical scholarship¹⁷ and the handling of epic or archaic texts (whether from Sumer or from early Greece)¹⁸ have allowed for more certainty in dating the historical events narrated in these writings, as has strong archeological evidence.

¹⁵ See H. B. Leech, *An Essay on Ancient International Law* 22–23 (1877), for a consideration of these texts. See also Sir Frank Adcock and D. J. Mosley, *Diplomacy in Ancient Greece* 183–85 (1975). ¹⁶ Leech, *supra* note 15, at 60.

¹⁷ See Prosper Weil, *Le Judaïsme et le développement du droit international*, 151 RCADI 253, 266–72 (1976–III).

¹⁸ See Michael Gagarin, *Early Greek Law* 20 (1986) (“[M]ost scholars now feel that the [epic poems of Homer] do reflect fairly accurately Greek society during the century or so preceding their final composition”); 1 Phillipson, *supra* note 11, at ix.

This study takes exceptional care with its treatment of classical literary evidence bearing on State practices and rules of State conduct in international affairs. I suppose the preeminent caution exercised in this book is the refusal to regard any single piece of literary evidence (standing alone) as being dispositive of any proposition concerning broader patterns of practice by ancient States. Aside from that vital methodological caveat, I have appreciated a number of standard approaches to literary texts, developed by historians and philologists after long years of study.

One of these is the recognition that not all classical historians, and the histories they relate, are to be treated equally.¹⁹ In the Greek historical canon,²⁰ the history of Thucydides (460–400 BCE) remains preeminent in its fidelity to historical truth. The history of Herodotus (c. 480–430 BCE), though criticized for many lapses, has at least been praised for its literary presentation. The works of Xenophon (411–362 BCE) and the later Polybius (c. 198–144 BCE) are also highly regarded. On the other hand, the histories of such writers as Diodorus Siculus (Diodorus of Sicily) (fl. 60–30 BCE) are not so well respected, being largely a pastiche of other commentators. Among the Latin histories, that of Livy is regarded as among the best (despite charges that he was writing to pander to Augustan political values); the later writings of Tacitus are somewhat less esteemed.²¹ Likewise, there are many works of statecraft, biography, and political philosophy written in Greek and Latin, all of divergent probative value.

The second tactic I adopt in this study is the careful cross-reading of literary texts. Not only do I attempt to ascertain the internal coherence and integrity of all literary sources used in this study,²² I have tried to ensure the accuracy of historical evidence of State practice by relating the information found in these texts to the available archeological evidence, the most important of which are inscriptions of significant State decrees, treaties, proclamations, and other newsworthy events. The increased availability of this inscription evidence, particularly from earlier periods of

¹⁹ See generally, Adcock and Mosley, *supra* note 15, at 123–27.

²⁰ See generally, John Bagnell Bury, *The Ancient Greek Historians* (1909); Charles Norris Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History* (1929); A. W. Gomme, *The Greek Attitude to Poetry and History* (1954); J. E. Powell, *The History of Herodotus* (1939).

²¹ See Alan Watson, *International Law in Archaic Rome: War and Religion* xii–xiii and n. 5 (1993).

²² Wherever possible, all Latin and Greek sources are cited to the authoritative Loeb Classical Library Editions. I will also provide a pin-point page cite to the volume of the relevant work and also a standard indication of the passage from which the extract is drawn. I will follow the apparent convention of referring to the specific document or fragment by name, and then including the book number (in Roman numerics), followed by the section and line (or passage) numbers.

ancient Near Eastern history, is the most signal development of the new historiography on ancient statecraft.²³ And while this inscription evidence must also be used with care, in view of possible textual corruption or political bias of the authority erecting the inscription,²⁴ it serves as a ready way to confirm or deny the conclusions drawn from other sources.

Throughout most of this book, I try to let ancient writers and texts speak for themselves. Although Chapter 2 – which provides an abbreviated precis of ancient State relations – is deliberately devoid of ancient voices, Chapter 3 is structured around four textual fragments, which I use to explicate the nature of international obligation in ancient times. The remaining chapters, although heavily-laden with examples (and citations to yet more) of State practice in antiquity, also feature deep analysis of significant “canonical” texts – whether Homeric epics regarding envoys (in Chapter 4), the Egyptian–Hittite Treaty of 1280 BCE and the Punic–Macedonian Treaty of 215 BCE (in Chapter 5), or the Melian Dialogue (in Chapter 6). I do see these texts (whether literary or inscription material) as the primary sources of a law of nations in antiquity.

The nature of sources on ancient State relations thus represents the single most important conditioning factor for this study. One could, I suppose, despair of the poverty of the historical record, the unreliability of texts, and the uncertainty in any conclusions reached. My approach in this study is, instead, to embrace the doubt in this intellectual exercise and to proceed with well-accepted historiographic methods.

The modern critique of ancient international law

That leaves one very important point to be considered. That is the charge that ancient international law, like all ancient law, is primitive, and it is only in the recognition of its primeval character that serious scholarship can be undertaken in international legal history of this period. This notion, already mentioned in this Introduction,²⁵ not only demands that this study consider the sources, process, and doctrines of ancient international law, it also fundamentally challenges the idea that there even could have been a respect for a rule of law in international relations in ancient times.

The study of a law of nations in antiquity suffers, in essence, from a

²³ See Georges Ténékidès, *Droit international et communautés fédérales dans la Grèce des cités*, 90 RCADI 469, 478–85 (1956–II).

²⁴ See Adcock and Mosley, *supra* note 15, at 123.

²⁵ See *supra* note 10 and accompanying text.

double blight. First, there is the perception that *all* law in ancient times was primitive. Ancient law was formalistic,²⁶ dominated by fictions,²⁷ had a limited range of legal norms,²⁸ and was based solely on religious sanction.²⁹ In short, it lacked the essential characteristics of a modern, rational jurisprudence. Although this critique has been largely disproved by modern scholarship that has either emphasized new, empirical research,³⁰ or has adopted an anthropological attitude of moral relativism in legal relations,³¹ it remains a potent school of thought. If all of this was not enough, there is the second, and as yet largely unquestioned, belief that international law, even today, is a primitive legal order.³²

The confluence of these two intellectual forces has meant that the study of ancient international law has had, of late, few advocates. Those doing serious scholarship on ancient legal systems have evinced little interest in exploring such an abstract area as legal restraints on inter-State relations. The attitude of legal historians towards ancient international law has thus been one of indifference.

Alas, the same cannot be said of contemporary international law publicists writing on the subject of a law of nations in antiquity. Indeed, one can say that the opinion of a majority of modern international lawyers is that ancient States were incapable of observing a law governing their international relations. Consider the views of a few leading publicists. In Lassa Oppenheim's well-respected manual on international law, he noted that: "International law as a law between sovereign and equal states based on the common consent of those states is a product of modern Christian civilization, and may be said to be about four hundred years old."³³ Modern writers have insisted that ancient States did not possess a notion of sovereignty³⁴ and that there was no sense of universal community,³⁵

²⁶ See 1 Sir Paul Vinogradoff, *Outlines of Historical Jurisprudence* 364 (1920).

²⁷ See Maine, *supra* note 10, at 25. ²⁸ See Hoebel, *supra* note 10, at 286–87.

²⁹ See *ibid.* at 258, 268–74. ³⁰ See, e.g., A. S. Diamond, *Primitive Law Past and Present* (1971).

³¹ See Lyons, Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence, 86 *Ethics* 107, 109 (1975–76) ("[A]n act is right if, and only if, it accords with the norms of the group"). For elaborations of this in the context of international law, see Friedrich V. Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms and Decisions* 252–53 (1989); Fernando Tesón, *Humanitarian Intervention: An Inquiry into Law and Morality* 36 (1988).

³² See Dinstein, *supra* note 10. See the sources cited at *supra* note 10.

³³ 1 Lassa Oppenheim, *International Law* 68 (Hersch Lauterpacht 7th ed. 1948).

³⁴ See, e.g., James Brierly, *The Basis of Obligation in International Law and other Papers* 20 (Hersch Lauterpacht and H. Waldock eds. 1958) (1977 reprint); C. Vergé, Introduction to G. F. de Martens, *Précis du droit des gens moderne* viii (Paris 1864).

³⁵ See, e.g., 1 James Kent, *Commentaries on American Law* 4 (5th American ed. 1844); 2 Laurent, *supra* note 11, at 190; 3 *ibid.* at 117; Malcolm Shaw, *International Law* 14 (2nd ed. 1986); Enrico Besta, *Il Diritto Internazionale nel Mondo Antico*, 2 *Comunicazione e studi dell' Istituto di Diritto Internazionale e Straniero dell' Università di Milano* 9, 10 (1946).

and without these two elements the idea of international law in antiquity was a nullity. Other writers have emphasized putative features of an ancient law of nations that one would instantly recognize as being somehow associated with any “primitive” legal system: the emphasis on religious (and not legal) sanctions,³⁶ the inability to develop consistent, customary rules of State conduct,³⁷ and the belief that there could never be a condition of peace between ancient States.³⁸

This modern critique of the intellectual soundness of referring to a law of nations in antiquity has served many purposes. One, of course, is to provide an acceptable story for the emergence of international law, not only as a cluster of legal doctrines, but also as a learned study. The inability of some modern scholars to perceive an international law prior to its Grotian origins has been discussed elsewhere,³⁹ and need not be repeated here. There is also a reproach here, which I readily credit, that antiquarian pursuits in tracing international law doctrines to some origin shrouded in the mists of time, is a silly and (ultimately) distracting exercise. The strong reaction that contemporary publicists have held to the idea of international law in antiquity may, in part, be explained as a reaction to those earlier writers who “inordinately extoll[ed] antiquity to the disadvantage of the modern age.”⁴⁰ Even worse, there were those who attempted to use ancient authorities in the pursuit of some instrumental historiography, particularly those who were advancing strong, Eurocentric characteristics for modern doctrines.⁴¹

In large part, this entire study is structured as a response to the detractors of an ancient law of nations. Starting with first principles, I examine in Chapter 2 the notion of sovereignty within ancient States and the existence of authentic systems of States in antiquity. Chapter 3, on the sources of obligation in ancient international law, answers those who argue that ancient international law was fatally infected by religion as the basis of sanction. When I examine (in Chapter 4) the ways in which diplomats were protected from interference, and foreigners screened from reprisals, one object is to see how ancient States were able to overcome ethnic and

³⁶ See A. W. Heffter, *Das Europäische Völkerrecht der Gegenwart* 12 (F. H. Geffcken ed. Berlin 1881); Vergé, *supra* note 34, at 60.

³⁷ See 3 A. Maury, *Histoire des religions de la Grèce antique* 401–02 (Paris 1859).

³⁸ See Francois Guizot, *L'église et la société chrétiennes en 1861*, at 101 (Paris 1861).

³⁹ See David W. Kennedy, Primitive Legal Scholarship, 27 *Harvard International Law Journal* 1 (1986); Preiser, *supra* note 2, at 127.

⁴⁰ 2 Phillipson, *supra* note 11, at 166. See also Leech, *supra* note 15, at 4.

⁴¹ See Nawaz, *supra* note 3, at 173; Rostovtseff, *supra* note 11, at 32–33; Hans-Ulrich Scupin, History of the Law of Nations: Ancient Times to 1648, in 7 *Encyclopedia of Public International Law* 132, 132–33 (Rudolph Bernhardt ed. 1984).

cultural particularism and achieve conditions of peace. In making positive acts of faith (the subject of Chapter 5), were not ancient States also testing the strength of international legal obligation? And, finally, in examining the classical restraints on the initiation and conduct of hostilities in Chapter 6, I believe that we move closer to an appreciation of the ancient mind's understanding of humanity and universality in State relations.

For these reasons, it is with some reluctance I have titled this book as a treatment of *international law* in antiquity, and not of an ancient *law of nations*. As the reader may well be aware, "international law" is itself a relative neologism, an outgrowth of nineteenth-century legal positivism as applied to international relations.⁴² It may not even be the preferred term-of-art today to describe international relations under a rule of law. But "international law" connotes a number of intertwined ideas: (1) a conceptual framework of States, State sovereignty, sovereign equality, and consent in an international legal order; (2) a recognition of the techniques of government, modes of statecraft, and the scale of interactions characteristic of the current international system; and (3) a sense that States are not the only actors (or subjects) of the international system, and that individuals, collectivities of States, and transnational businesses may also have international rights and duties. Because of these proper connotations, "international law" may not consistently convey the sense of international relations in antiquity.

Of course, I also understand that no measure of care in diction or terminology can inoculate me from the criticism that this project suffers from a false essentialism of equating modern (if not current) concepts to events transpiring two to three millennia ago. But I can see no alternative but to refer here to "States," "sovereignty," "treaties," "custom," and the like. But (as I have already indicated), I try also to let ancient people speak in their own voice, and to make sense of what the ancient mind conceived as its expression for these ideas.

Why bother, one may still wonder, with the idea of international law in antiquity? The exercise attempted in this study is more than what Professor Jan Verzijl caricatured as a fatal intellectual attraction:

And what legal historian would be able to escape the rare charm emanating from . . . the treasures in the Assyro-Babylonian hall of the British Museum where one

⁴² See Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* 296 (Burns and Hart eds. 1970); Marc W. Janis, *Jeremy Bentham and the Fashioning of "International Law,"* 78 AJIL 405 (1984).

can read, albeit only from the explanatory labels, of frontier treaties and arbitrations, ambassadors and territorial cessions from those long flown centuries? Or who would not smile at perusing the narratives of the . . . water-clock, occasionally closed by a thumb during the hearing of evidence, which was used in arbitral proceedings between the city states of ancient Hellas with the object of imposing silence on all too long-winded lawyers? . . . However, have not all those individual roads of the law of nations appeared to be blind alleys?⁴³

This study perhaps is about traversing blind alleys and about opening some doors of historical and legal inquiry. But it is also about closing some avenues of discussion. In investigating our understanding of the origins of modern international law, I am compelled to accept the ancient law of nations on its own terms, knowing that “[t]he ancient world is distant in time and hence the analyst is not drawn into the emotion-laden game of cheering for the good guys and booing the villains.”⁴⁴ This approach accords nicely with the supposed moral neutrality of international law. It also allows me to question how we now conceive of international law. That means examining the essential components of State systems and the sources, process, and doctrines for constructive interaction between sovereigns. Antiquity is a good place to begin such a study.

⁴³ 1 Jan H. W. Verzijl, *International Law in Historical Perspective* 403–04 (1968).

⁴⁴ Barry S. Strauss and Josiah Ober, *The Anatomy of Error: Ancient Military Disasters and Their Lessons for Modern Strategists* 8 (1990).