



German
Historical
Institute
London

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Review of Crawford Matthews, *Anglo-Prussian Relations 1701–1713:
The Reciprocal Production of Status through Ceremony, Diplomacy,
and War*

by Christine Roll

German Historical Institute London Bulletin
Vol. XLVII, No. 1 (May 2025), 90–95

ISSN 0269-8552 (print)
ISSN 3049-9135 (online)
<https://doi.org/10.25360/01-2025-00034>

CRAWFORD MATTHEWS, *Anglo-Prussian Relations 1701–1713: The Reciprocal Production of Status through Ceremony, Diplomacy, and War*, Routledge Research in Early Modern History (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), 326 pp. ISBN 978 1 032 30263 8. £135.00

Elector Frederick III of Brandenburg had set his sights on the royal crown long before he was able to place it on his head himself in Königsberg in January 1701 and henceforth go by the name of King Frederick I in Prussia. The value of the crown as a symbol of sovereignty and the arduous negotiations en route to its acquisition by Frederick are well known to researchers, at least since the numerous publications to mark the tercentenary of the coronation. However, historians have long overlooked the fact that acquiring the crown still did not mean that Frederick's royal status was recognized by European royalty—which is surprising, as people at Frederick's court knew only too well that it was not enough to be crowned king, but that one had to be sure of being 'recognized *pro rege*'.¹ It was a matter of being treated as a king in the ceremonial of European monarchs and thus having one's dignity confirmed. Historians have only been able to grasp contemporary knowledge since the cultural turn, as the tools to analyse symbolic communication in diplomatic ceremonial have only been developed in the last twenty-five years. In this new light, there has been, in recent years, renewed interest in the early modern history of Prussia in particular. The monograph presented here belongs in this research context. It deals with the steps taken by Frederick and his officials to assert his new royal dignity and status as a sovereign potentate, as well as with the important role played by English actors in this process.

Against the background of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–13/14), Matthews shows how the ceremonial and military

Translated by Marielle Sutherland (GHIL).

¹ Memorandum by Rüdiger von Ilgen of 11 Nov. 1701, quoted here from Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, 'Honores regii: Die Königswürde im zeremoniellen Zeichensystem der Frühen Neuzeit', in Johannes Kunisch (ed.), *Dreihundert Jahre Preußische Königskronung: Eine Tagungsdokumentation* (Berlin, 2002), 1–26, at 23, n. 71.

cooperation between the courts in Berlin and London functioned in the period from 1701 to the Peace of Utrecht in 1713. The English side was repeatedly prepared to meet Frederick's demands for the granting of royal privileges (*honores regii*) in diplomatic ceremonial, and in return they could count on his troops: in other words, they were willing 'to use ceremonial concessions to facilitate greater military cooperation' (p. 147). However, as Matthews emphatically demonstrates, things were far more complex than simply 'troops in exchange for ceremonial'. In particular, some of the English diplomats involved utilized both Frederick's striving for recognition of his rank and their relationships with the Berlin court to secure their own promotions, above all Thomas Wentworth, who was the third Baron Raby and, from 1711, Earl of Strafford.

The book consists of four case studies (as the author himself calls them), each about fifty pages long. They are preceded by a detailed introduction and a separate chapter in which Anglo-Prussian relations and the question of Prussia's status are comprehensively placed in the context of ceremonial, rank, and diplomacy in the period from the Peace of Westphalia to the Peace of Utrecht. The book concludes with a ten-page summary chapter, followed by a detailed bibliography of archival and printed sources as well as research literature.

Of course, the author's achievements can only be given cursory recognition here. Matthews rightly sees Prussia's rise in status as part of the process by which the hierarchical order of the old European princely society was reshaped into a system of equal subjects under international law. Only as king did one count as a sovereign in both orders, and only potentates with royal privileges had the right to send and receive ambassadors, that is, noble envoys of the highest rank, who were fully entitled to represent their ruler. Consequently, as Matthews lucidly explains at the outset, Frederick had to ensure that his ambassadors received ceremonial treatment with royal privileges. These privileges were particularly visible upon the ambassador's entry, during his audience, and by where he was seated at court festivities attended by foreign monarchs. The same applied in reverse: it was also imperative to provide recognized royal ceremonial for the reception of ambassadors at the Berlin court. The important role played by English actors in this process of 'status production' is already clear from chapter

two, in which Matthews demonstrates in detail that the various European princely actors were less willing to fulfil Frederick's ceremonial demands than England was, for different reasons in each case. This was true both before and after the acquisition of the royal crown.

The story that Matthews then tells in his four case studies can be summarized as follows. When it came to the question of where the Prussian king should send his first ambassador, the choice soon fell on London. An important reason for this was that London was not only a hub of European diplomacy, but also – and directly linked to this – the newspaper market was flourishing there, meaning that news of the recognition of Frederick's status was likely to spread rapidly. Ezechiel von Spanheim, who was purposely elevated to the nobility in the run-up to his appointment as ambassador, represented the Prussian king at Queen Anne's court from 1702 until his death in 1710. On the express orders of the English master of ceremonies, Charles Lodowick Cottrell, he received full royal privileges, from his entry – with thirty-seven carriages and sixty-one-gun salutes – to the defrayment of expenses, a welcoming audience, and festivities. Spanheim did not attend Anne's coronation, though, as he feared the planned seating arrangements would diminish his status. The ambassadors and envoys of other crowns, however, did not necessarily follow the English in their acquiescence to these demands.

The next step chronologically and the second case study concerns the introduction of a royal ceremonial for the reception of ambassadors and envoys in Berlin, which was done by adopting the Danish ceremonial in 1702/3. Here, too, it was English actors who cooperated as 'diplomatic partner[s]' (p. 89), observed the new ceremonial, and thus provided the model for other monarchs. Thomas Wentworth (Baron Raby) was promoted from envoy to extraordinary envoy, and finally to ambassador in 1706, always in conjunction with Frederick's promises to send further troops to Marlborough's army (whose military glory also increased as a result). It is fascinating to read Matthews' microscopic analysis of how the English court played 'poker' with Frederick: with his hopes for Raby's appointment as ambassador, with his willingness to remain in the alliance, and through strategies of mutual withholding of ceremonial 'so that they may be kept firm by the hopes of it' (p. 157), as Marlborough put it.

However, Matthews shows in his third case study – a reassessment of the Raby Crisis in the context of Anglo-Prussian court factions – that the end result of this game was not always to the immediate satisfaction of the actors on either side. In 1706, Raby's dismissal was imminent, as was Spanheim's dismissal from London, which would have probably spelled the end of their personal careers. Here again, we see what an actor-centred perspective can achieve if it stays focused on the context – in this case, on the types of assets held by both sides: troops, and ceremonial concessions. Neither court could afford such a diplomatic crisis.

The fourth and last case study focuses on Frederick I's efforts to turn his city of residence, Berlin, from a 'proto diplomatic hub' (p. 183) into a 'Landscape of Monarchical Magnificence' (p. 215) via the later *Dreikönigstreffen* held in Berlin and Potsdam in July 1709. This personal meeting of three monarchs in the context of the Great Northern War (1700–21) is generally considered to have been largely fruitless in political terms but is well known thanks to its idealized representation in the oil painting by Samuel Theodor Gericke (1709; several versions exist). It shows Frederick Augustus II of Saxony – since 1706, no longer King of Poland – alongside Frederick IV of Denmark and Frederick I of Prussia in friendship, unity, and royal equality. However, Frederick's expectations that the visit of these crowned heads would confirm his royal status were only partially fulfilled, as the two royal guests placed their own strict limits on the ceremonial. The English ambassador Baron Raby once more played a decisive role, to the extent that Matthews refers to a 'meeting of four monarchs' (p. 225). Raby attended the ceremonial meetings frequently enough for his 'ambassadorial presence' (p. 225) to embody the British recognition of royal dignity, thus lending a certain glamour to the court. He also organized a luncheon at his residence, a '*locus tertius*', as Matthews has ascertained from the writings of the Prussian master of ceremonies, Johann von Besser (p. 231). Frederick I was also a guest here, so he did not have to concede precedence, but neither could he assert equal status on his part. Raby seized his opportunity: as ambassador to the Queen – who wanted to keep the Prussian King in the Grand Alliance and, as guarantor of the Peace of Altranstädt (1706), did not want to lose him to the anti-Swedish alliance in the Northern

War—Raby was able to do his sovereign a great service. ‘This was a unique opportunity, for his rank as ambassador and social status as baron and peer of the realm gave him a level of access and influence that others, such as the Dutch and Russian envoys, could only dream of’ (p. 233). Questions of rank at table were circumvented by drawing lots for seats. Nevertheless, Frederick and his wife were seated in the most prestigious seats at the oval table, which was conducive to the king’s ‘status production’ in the long run. Above all, however, Anglo-Prussian relations had once again proved extremely beneficial to both sides. Soon, in 1711, Raby was elevated to Earl of Strafford and appointed British ambassador in Utrecht, with explicit reference to his services in the relationship with the Prussian court.

This clever and methodologically stimulating book is one of the first accounts to demonstrate how bilateral relations can be presented in an exciting way, not in terms of institutional and structural history, but from an actor-centred perspective, and without losing sight of the relevant structures and institutions. Like the ambassadors, the masters of ceremonies on both sides—Cottrell in London and Besser in Berlin—are also revealed to have been more than mere officials making sure that everything went off without a hitch; instead, as Matthews shows, they used their knowledge and networks in such a way that the programmes not only ran smoothly but also benefited them personally. Matthews’ interpretation of the Raby Crisis and the *Dreikönigstreffen* certainly sets a new benchmark. In addition, there are numerous new and interesting individual findings, which, presented in beautifully narrated episodes, make for an exciting read.

In view of the high quality of the text, however, it is regrettable that apparently little thought was given to the reading public in the production of the book. It is certainly not made for bibliophiles. For example, if readers need to look something up again—and it is not only reviewers who may need to do so—they will have difficulty finding their way around: the pages are very densely printed, and the running heads are identical on both odd and even pages. The notes are neither at the bottom of each page (as is the case in the original dissertation on which the book is based) nor all at the end of the volume, but are placed at the end of each chapter. This is awkward, and also means that literature that appears in each chapter is also cited

in full in the notes to each chapter (for example, Stollberg-Rilinger's essay on the courtly public sphere is cited four times: on p. 24, n. 32; p. 67, n. 8; p. 124–5, n. 12; and p. 175, n. 225). This is confusing, and takes up unnecessary space. Moreover, the notes are often not very informative, since they contain only short titles and page numbers. For example, Besser's exciting, broad-ranging writings, from which Matthews quotes repeatedly and to great effect, are referred to in the notes only as 'Besser, *Schriften*, 2, 236–238' (for example), without telling us what manner of text is being cited. The same applies to the excellent sources Matthews employs from Cottrell's papers. What are we to understand by 'Rousham, MC-7'? What kind of document is it, what type of source? In general, it is often not clear what one can expect to find on the pages of the work cited: a confirmation of the author's statement, a primary source, an example, a discussion? This is particularly regrettable in note 49 on page 276, which contains an important discussion of new research questions.

Notwithstanding, I would still unreservedly advise readers not to be deterred by the book's unwieldy presentation, as the study is utterly convincing. It is knowledgeable and innovative, it is based on an incredibly broad body of literature, and it offers many new insights from archival sources. Crawford Matthews has a broad vision and is as curious as he is theoretically and methodologically reflective. The result is an exceptionally refreshing text, and I would like to see more from this promising young author.

CHRISTINE ROLL holds the chair of early modern history at RWTH Aachen University. She has worked extensively on the cultural history of diplomacy, the role of the Holy Roman Empire in Europe during the first half of the sixteenth century, early modern perceptions of Russia, and the historical significance of the period around 1800. Her publications include *Epochenjahr 1806? Das Ende des Alten Reiches in zeitgenössischen Perspektiven und Deutungen* (ed. with Matthias Schnettger, 2008), and *Berichten als kommunikative Herausforderung: Europäische Gesandtenberichte der Frühen Neuzeit in praxeologischer Perspektive* (ed. with Thomas Dorfner and Thomas Kirchner, 2021).