

1911 Encyclopædia Britannica, Volume 1 — Ambassador

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AMBASSADOR (also EMBASSADOR, the form sometimes still used in America; from the Fr. *ambassadeur*, with which compare Ital. *ambasciatore* and Span. *embajador*, all variants of the Med. Lat. *ambasciator*, *ambassiator*, *ambasator*, &c., derived from Med. Lat. *ambasciare* or *ambactiare*, “to go on a mission, to do or say anything in another’s name,” from Lat. *ambactus*,^[1] a vassal or servant; see Du Cange, *Glossarium*, s.v. *ambasciare*), a public minister of the first rank, accredited and sent by the head of a sovereign state as his personal representative to negotiate with a foreign government, and to watch over the interests of his own nation abroad. The power thus conferred is defined in the credentials or letters of credence of which the ambassador is the bearer, and in the instructions under the sign-manual delivered to him. The credentials consist of a sealed letter addressed by the sovereign whom the ambassador represents to the sovereign to whom he is accredited, and they embody a general assurance that the sovereign by whom the ambassador is sent will confirm whatever is done by the ambassador in his name. In Great Britain letters of credence are under the royal sign-manual, and are not countersigned by a minister. Ambassadors are distinguished as *ordinary* and *extraordinary*, which implied originally the difference between a permanent mission and one appointed to conduct a particular negotiation. The style of *ambassador extraordinary* is, however, now often given to a minister accredited to a court for an indefinite time and implies a somewhat more dignified rank.

By the protocol of the 19th of March 1815, afterwards embodied in the treaty of Vienna (1815) and confirmed by an instrument signed by the five great powers at Aix-la-Chapelle on the 21st of November 1818, it was finally determined that “ambassadors and papal legates and nuncios alone have a representative character,” *i.e.* in the most exalted and peculiar sense, as representing the person of the sovereign, or the head of a republic, as well as the state to which they belong. It follows that only states enjoying “royal honours,” *i.e.* empires, kingdoms, grand duchies, the great republics (*e.g.* France, Switzerland, the United States of America) and the Holy See, have the right to send or to receive ambassadors. By custom it has moreover been established that, as a general rule, only the greater “royal states” are represented by ambassadors, and then only when these are accredited to states esteemed, for one reason or another, to be of equal rank. Thus the promotion of the Japanese legations in Europe and the United States to the rank of embassies, and the corresponding change in the representation of the various powers at Tokio, marked in 1905 the definite recognition of Japan as a great power. To this rule the United States of America long remained an exception, and was content, in accordance with the tradition of republican simplicity, to be represented abroad only by ministers of the second rank. The subordinate position given to the representatives of so great a power, however, inevitably led to many inconveniences, and in 1893 an act of Congress empowered the president to accredit ambassadors to the great powers.

The distinction between an ambassador and ministers of the second rank is one rather of rank and dignity than of power or functions. His special immunities he shares with other diplomatic representatives of all classes. The peculiar privilege which he claims of free access to the sovereign has, in common practice, been reduced to the right of being received on presenting his credentials in public or private audience by the sovereign in person, it being obviously against public policy that a foreign representative should negotiate with the ruler otherwise than through his responsible ministers. In Great Britain the sovereign, when granting an audience to a foreign ambassador, is always attended by one or more ministers, and the same is usual in other states.

An ambassador, however, unless specially armed with plenary authority, cannot decide any questions beyond his instructions without reference to his government. Thus Lord Londonderry (Lord Stewart), who represented Great Britain at the conferences of Troppau in 1820 and Laibach in 1821, had not the same standing as the plenipotentiaries of the other powers present, and efforts were even made to exclude him from some of the more important discussions in consequence, not on the ground of inferior rank but of defective powers.

Socially, the position of an ambassador is one of great dignity. The pomp and magnificence which in earlier days characterized his progresses and his “entries” are indeed no

longer observed. He is received, however, by the sovereign to whom he is accredited with elaborate state, of which every detail is minutely regulated, and ranks, as representing his own sovereign, next to the princes of the blood in the court where he resides. The controversies that once raged as to the order of precedence of the various ambassadors accredited to any one court were settled by the treaties already mentioned, it being decided that they should rank in order of seniority according to the date of the presentation of their credentials. In Roman Catholic countries, however—as in France before the abrogation of the concordat,—the position of *doyen* (dean) of the diplomatic body is given by courtesy to the nuncio of the pope.

The special immunities and privileges enjoyed by ambassadors are dealt with in the articles [EXTERRITORIALITY](#) and [DIPLOMACY](#). See also the latter for the history of the subject.

The most authoritative modern hand-book on the subject is Charles de Martens, *Manuel diplomatique* (Paris, 1822; new ed., 1868). See also Henry Wheaton, *Hist. of the Law of Nations* (New York, 1845); L. Oppenheim, *International Law* (London, 1905); and the list of books attached to the article [DIPLOMACY](#).

([W. A. P.](#))

1. ↑ *Ambactus* is explained by Festus (*Paulus Diaconus ex Festo*, ed. C. O. Müller) as a Gallic word used by Ennius and meaning *servus*. Caesar (*De Bello Gallico*, vi. 15) says of the Gallic

equites, “atque eorum ut quisque est genere copiisque amplissimus, plurimos circum se ambactos clientesque habent.” Accepting the Celtic origin of the word, it has been connected with the Welsh *amaeth*, a tiller of the ground. A Teutonic origin has been suggested in the Old High Ger. *ambaht*, a retainer, which appears in a Scandinavian word *amboht*, bondwoman or maid, in the *Ormulum* (c. 1200).

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