

CENTRAL ASIA AS A CENTER OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS IN ANCIENT TIMES.

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Annotation: This article analyzes the role of Central Asia, which from ancient times served as a key hub in the development of political, diplomatic, and cultural relations between the East and the West. It examines the early state structures that emerged in the region — Sogdiana, Bactria, Khwarazm, and the Kushan Empire — and their diplomatic relations with neighboring territories and major empires, based on historical sources. The study highlights the formation and expansion of the Great Silk Road as the main factor that transformed the region into a center of international diplomacy. Additionally, it explores the diplomatic policies of ancient Turkic states in their relations with China, India, Iran, and Byzantium, the activities of envoys, and the impact of interstate negotiations on regional stability. The article reveals the historical role of Central Asia as a crossroads of civilizations and provides a scholarly analysis of the formation and development of the region’s diplomatic traditions.

Keywords: Central Asia, ancient diplomacy, diplomatic relations, Sogdiana, Bactria, Khwarazm, Kushan Empire, Great Silk Road, international relations, ancient Turkic states, Chinese diplomacy, intercivilizational dialogue, historical diplomatic traditions.

The history of diplomatic relations among the ancient states of Central Asia remains one of the least studied fields. The main reason for this problem is the extreme scarcity of research dedicated to the topic. Although its primary objective is not the study of diplomacy, B. A. Litvinsky briefly touches upon this issue in several chapters of his work *“The History of the Tajik People.”* However, the absence of other systematic research makes it difficult to explore the matter comprehensively.

To address this gap, relying on Greco-Roman sources would be the most appropriate approach, since although these sources discuss the issue only partially, they still allow us to study diplomatic relations across different historical periods.

As early as the first half of the first millennium BCE, the *Avesta* contains information about the emergence of diplomatic relations. Agreements and military confrontations among tribes of that time are reflected as core aspects of the activities of the god Mithra.

In one of the oldest parts of the *Avesta* — the *Mihr Yasht* (Hymn to Mithra) — the supreme deity Ahura Mazda addresses the prophet Spitama Zarathustra with the following words: *“A land is corrupted by those who do not keep their word. Such a person is worse than the deeds of a hundred wicked men. Keep the promise you gave to Spitama. Do not believe the lies of others. Trust in a truthful and righteous person.”* (translated by I. Steblin-Kamensky). The *Avesta* also contains other accounts regarding relations among tribes under the guidance of the god Mithra.¹

Relations between the peoples of Central Asia and Media and Assyria date back to the 9th century BCE. Beginning in the 9th century BCE, migration of Iranian tribes into the territory of present-day Iran started through the Caucasus and Central Asia. In these regions, they formed several tribal unions. The earliest of these was Parsua in the northwestern part of Iran, and another was the Median state in the southwestern regions of Iran.

¹ Ртвеладзе Э. Цивилизации, государства, культуры Центральной Азии. Ташкент. 2005. -С.109.

The first ruler of Media was a figure known as Deioces, while the most prosperous period of the state corresponds to the reign of Cyaxares (625–585 BCE). During Cyaxares' rule, parts of Assyria, northern Mesopotamia, Hyrcania, Parthia, Areia, and possibly parts of Sogdiana and southern Central Asia were conquered.

According to Ctesias of Cnidus, he also subjugated Bactria; however, this information is doubtful. More reliably, the border of the Indian kingdom during that period reached the northeastern side of the Amu Darya, where the Medes encountered Saka tribes.

Ctesias also reports that during the reign of Astyages — identified with Kiaksar (Cyaxares) — the Parthians rebelled and separated from Media. The Saka, led by Queen Zarina, came to the aid of the Parthians. After several years of conflict between the Medes and the Parthians, the struggle concluded with an agreement that recognized the Parthians' nominal dependence on Media, although in practice the Parthians retained control over their territories.²

Thus, this agreement was the earliest known treaty related to the history of Central Asia in the late 7th and early 6th centuries BCE.

Ctesias, however, provides a somewhat different account. According to him, after the death of her husband Kidrey, Zarina married Mermer, the ruler of Parthia. Following this, the Parthians, led by Striang, rose in rebellion against the Medes. In the ensuing battle, Zarina was wounded and taken prisoner. Yet Striang forgave her. Later, Mermer defeated Striang's forces and captured him, deciding to execute him. But Zarina not only freed the captives, she also killed Mermer. Afterward, Zarina concluded a peace treaty with the Medes concerning friendship. Under this treaty, she granted them the province of Parthia.

These accounts demonstrate that international relations existed in Central Asia even before the rise of the Achaemenids, particularly in the 7th–6th centuries BCE.³

From the second half of the 6th century BCE, the western regions of Central Asia became part of the Achaemenid Empire. During the reign of Cyrus II (559–530 BCE), his initial campaigns resulted in the conquest of Bactria, Parthia, Sogdiana, Margiana, and Khwarazm, making him the founder of the empire. The expansion of Achaemenid borders toward the northeast led to conflict with the powerful Saka–Massagetae confederation. For this reason, in the final years of his reign, Cyrus II decided to launch a campaign against the Saka–Massagetae dwelling along the lower reaches of the Syr Darya and Amu Darya in order to secure the safety of his frontiers. According to Herodotus, before the campaign, Cyrus II and Queen Tomyris exchanged verbal diplomatic messages.

In this pre-war diplomatic exchange, Cyrus proposed marriage to Tomyris. However, Tomyris foresaw his deceit and rejected the offer. Afterward, Cyrus II crossed the Araxes (Amu Darya) and began military operations.

In response to these actions, Tomyris sent a message urging Cyrus to halt the campaign, return to his land, and leave the Massagetae in peace. She also proposed that if he refused to follow this advice, he should withdraw his army by a three-day march so that she could cross the river with her troops and engage the Persians in battle on equal terms. This proposal was discussed at the Persian court, and on the advice of Croesus, king of Lydia and adviser to Cyrus, it was decided to cross the river. At this point, Cyrus employed a military stratagem.

Cyrus's plan worked. Sparganiz, the son of Tomyris, defeated the small Persian detachment left behind and, together with his men, celebrated with the spoils. Under the influence of wine, Sparganiz and the Massagetae fell asleep and were captured.

² Ртвеладзе Э. Цивилизации, государства, культуры Центральной Азии. Ташкент. 2005. -С.109.

³ Ртвеладзе Э. Цивилизации, государства, культуры Центральной Азии. Ташкент. 2005. -С.110.

These cunning actions of Cyrus forced Tomyris to send a second special diplomatic mission to him. In this message, Tomyris demanded the return of her son and the withdrawal of the Persians from Massagetae territory: “If you do not do what I have said, I swear by the Sun god that I will give you your fill of blood.”⁴

The subsequent events show that Cyrus II did not heed Tomyris’s warning, and Sparganiz, unable to bear the shame, took his own life.

In the brutal battle that followed, the Massagetae emerged victorious, and Cyrus II along with much of his army was slain. When the warriors returned from the battlefield with his severed head, Tomyris placed it into a wineskin filled with blood. Many years later, Cambyses brought the remains of Cyrus II to a special mausoleum in Pasargadae and had him buried there.

From these accounts, we may conclude that during the Achaemenid period, diplomatic relations among Central Asian tribes and tribal unions were unstable and largely oral in nature. The reason for this was the absence of a written script among the Saka–Massagetae. Apparently, the individuals responsible for diplomacy were required to memorize and deliver messages orally.

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⁴ Ртвеладзе Э. Цивилизации, государства, культуры Центральной Азии. Ташкент. 2005. –С.110.